A Different Style of Writing for a Different Subject

Video Transcript

The wisdom books in the Old Testament represent a major shift in style from the Historical Books that precede them. They fall into the category of writing called wisdom literature, which was a popular form in the ancient Near East.

In Egypt, for example, we have works such as the Instruction of Ptahhotep from the 25th century BCE, and the Instruction of Amenemope, collected between the 11th and 6th centuries BCE. We also have examples from Sumer, like the Instructions of Shuruppak from the 25th century BCE, as well as from the Akkadian civilization, with works like Dialogue Between a Man and His God, written in the 17th century BCE.

Wisdom literature focuses on wisdom and virtue, but also on existential questions about the creator, humanity, creation, and the nature of evil and suffering. In the Old Testament, we have five books of wisdom literature — Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.

These five books of wisdom in the Bible take on different forms and writing styles than the Historical Books and Books of Law. These forms include short, memorable insights (as in the book of Proverbs), poetry or lyrical verse (as in Psalms), or a dialogue (as in the book of Job, where Job, Job’s friends, and God engage in a conversation that teaches and enlightens the reader).

The use of poetry and dialogue are particularly effective in wisdom literature because the books deal with ideas, themes, and questions that are abstract and often difficult to grasp. The writers are talking about concepts such as virtue, love, and the meaning of life.

These are often best understood with illustrations and imagery. They are ideas that need to be talked out in dialogue so that we can see them from multiple perspectives.
Perhaps not surprisingly, the wisdom books of the Old Testament also contain some of the most memorable stories and oft-memorized verses. This is likely due, in no small part, to the fact that they address big questions — questions about why good people suffer (Job), the futility of our earthly existence (Ecclesiastes), and our search for hope beyond death.

As you think about writing that has had an impact on you — history, fiction, poetry, songs, and movies — what part did the style or structure of the writing play? Why is it sometimes easier to understand big or abstract concepts when they are presented within a story or as illustrations?

About this transcript:
- Transcript title: A Different Style of Writing for a Different Subject
- Corresponding Lesson: Wisdom Literature
- Author and curator:
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