

On matters of sex, what kind of “textual orientation” does the wisdom literature provide?

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From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

The wisdom literature is perhaps the most open-ended yet thoroughly didactic corpus of the Old Testament. Even the books themselves are remarkably diverse: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. They are the product of centuries of accumulated wisdom and insight, the result of sustained inquiries into the nature of reality, its anomalies as well as its regularities, for the purpose of figuring out how we are to lead our lives in “righteousness, justice, and equity” (Prov 1:3b). In their quest for wisdom, the sages were not reluctant to extend their investigations beyond the particularities of their faith. They, in fact, borrowed from the wisdom of surrounding cultures, adapting it and transforming it. Case in point: Proverbs 22:17-23:11 is actually an adaptation of the Egyptian “Instructions of Amen-em-ope” (ca. 1100 BCE). The biblical sages were convinced that all truth came from God, even truth at odds with itself.

The diversity of approaches espoused in the wisdom literature is the result of the sages’ struggle with the wisdom of the past (tradition) and the truth of present experience. Job, for example, resists the wisdom of his friends, who have sold their souls to a rigidified tradition, for the sake of the truth he knows from his own experience, namely, that he remains righteous before God and neighbor, despite all evidence to the contrary. The sage behind Ecclesiastes quotes traditional sayings and then contradicts them with his own experience-based insights. In short, within biblical wisdom itself there resides a generative tension between tradition and experience. Neither can be dismissed.

Although the wisdom books do not specifically address contemporary concerns about sexual identity and conduct, specifically homosexuality, they may provide a helpful “textual orientation” for gaining insight into such matters.

Proverbs is a collection of collections of didactic sayings, from extended lectures to pithy apothegms, brought together in self-correcting ways. The search for wisdom, according to Proverbs, is a dynamic enterprise, one based on observation and study in which no final word concludes, once and for all, the quest for understanding. As testimony to this, Proverbs bears its own self-critique, indicated in part by the myriad incompatible sayings it contains (see, for example, Prov 26:4-5). The book describes wisdom as both contextual and dynamic. Wisdom is a “pathway,” and a pathway is formed by the passage of many feet.

As for appropriate sexual conduct, the book of Proverbs is unequivocal on at least one matter, sexual fidelity. Proverbs calls people to spousal fidelity not through the language of law or sanction, but through the language of pleasure and blessing:

*Drink water from your own cistern,
flowing water from your own well.
Should your springs be scattered abroad,
streams of water in the streets?
Let them be for yourself alone,
and not for sharing with strangers.
Let your fountain be blessed,
and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
May her breasts satisfy you at all times,
may you be intoxicated always by her love. (5:15-20)*

Within the marital context of lifelong commitment, sex is deemed a gift to be enjoyed by both partners. (Sex as the means of procreation is not mentioned in these texts.) Those who break the covenant of marriage through adultery are deemed “strange” and are to be avoided at all costs (2:16-19; 5:3-6; 6:24-29, 32, 35; 7:6-25). (The phrase translated as “loose woman” in the NRSV is better translated as “strange woman.”) If one could reduce Proverbs’ view of sexual fidelity to a motto, it would be “Adultery is dangerous.” It is dangerous not because it incurs the wrath of God – nowhere does Proverbs cite the Seventh Commandment (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18) – but because adultery is a betrayal, one that results in confusion, mistrust, anger, vengeance, and even violence. Whereas adultery is dangerous, fidelity is delightful and life-sustaining!

Neither Job nor Ecclesiastes espouses a sexual ethics. But they do broach larger issues that relate to the topic. **Job** is demonized by his friends and family;

he is found to be morally anomalous and physically repugnant (19:15-17). His friends impugn him with all manner of moral perversion (22:5-11), to which Job proclaims his innocence by taking an oath of moral purity that includes sexual fidelity (31:1-40, see vv. 9-12). Before he reaches that climactic point, however, Job struggles mightily with who he is in the wake of both his sense of being godforsaken and the “friendly fire” of his accusers: “I am blameless; I do not know myself; I loathe my life” (9:21).

*My relatives and my close friends have failed me;
the guests in my house have forgotten me;
my serving girls count me as a stranger;
I have become an alien in their eyes. (19:14-15)*

Whereas Proverbs castigates the “strange woman” for her marital betrayal and sexual promiscuity, relegating her beyond the bounds of normative conduct, the central character of the book of Job is himself the quintessential “stranger.” Condemned by his friends, who accuse him of “doing away with the fear of God” (15:4a), Job insists that “I have understanding as well as you” (12:3). Job finds

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from his own experience a repository of truth, a truth that his friends and family cannot accept, namely, that he is innocent. Indeed, it is Job’s growing realization of his innocence, his persistence in righteousness, that ultimately renders his friends speechless. Job has become a hopeless, irredeemable alien to them.

The resolution of Job’s plight is found in God’s answer, which reveals a world full of strangeness. God proudly points out exotic creatures from the margins, from ostriches to

onagers, a wild kingdom unaffected by human norms and influence yet legitimated and cared for by God. Though Job is decentered in this strange world, God shows him to be in solidarity with the wild animals in their fierce freedom, dignity, and dependence upon God. God cares for the stranger, whether animal or human. Whereas Job once lamented that he had become a “brother of jackals, and a companion of ostriches” (30:29), God shows him that he is actually in good company! Job has found himself sharing company with strange beasts, with the denizens of the margins, shunned by the human community yet dignified and sustained by God.

For **Ecclesiastes**, wisdom remains out of reach: “That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?” (7:24). Despite his concerted efforts of inquiry, the “Teacher” (aka Qoheleth) comes to the realization that God’s purposes

are ultimately inscrutable. Both world and God remain impenetrable to mortal eyes. Life is full of uncertainties; it is ephemeral and futile (NRSV “vanity”; Hebrew *hebel*), and even the most meticulous planning cannot anticipate, much less control what may come next. For all the ingenuity and power exercised by human beings, there are some things that cannot be changed:

Consider the work of God;

who can make straight what he has made crooked?

Eccl 7:13 (cf. 1:15)

Qoheleth’s theological rationale is clear:

I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him (3:14).

What appears “crooked” to us may not be to God. God makes the “crooked” as well as the “straight,” and all attempts to straighten “what God has made crooked” will only meet in failure and frustration, so Qoheleth confesses.

Qoheleth does not provide specific examples about what constitutes “crookedness,” but he is specific about how to live amid the “crooked” and the “straight,” and that is to cultivate a life of acceptance and gratitude for life’s simple joys, fleeting though they may be, including a good meal, moments of warmth and intimacy (4:11; 9:9), and enjoyment in one’s work (2:24-26; 3:12-14, 22; 5:18-29; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9-10). In short, what truly makes life worth living need not be discerned by extensive inquiry and meticulous planning. It may be right in front of our nose, and everything else, including our anxieties over sexuality, pale in comparison.