We are living in a time of virtually unparalleled crisis, and it is forcing us not only to cope with tragedy — either our own or that of so many millions of others — but also to make sense of it and figure it out. It is easy to come up with simple Pollyanna views that don’t take seriously the trauma, and to cite religious mantras that try to make it sound like it is all right, when in fact it is not. And the reality is, most people very much *don’t* want to go down the rabbit hole of deep reflection.

I certainly, absolutely, do not think this is a time for despair and complete despondency. But I do think it is a time for thoughtful reflection, on the state of the world, on our values and priorities as a human race, a nation, a locality, and individuals. Being in isolation for a couple of months can certainly provide us some opportunity to think about our world, our lives, our own goals and objectives, our sense of what we want to be doing with our lives (Is all the busy-ness really necessary and important to us? Do we really want to spend masses of time engaged in numbing and brainless “entertainment,” what would we really like to do with the hours we have in a week, when we are *not* forced into isolation?), and, well, the meaning of it all. Not just the meaning of all the pain and suffering, but the meaning of existence. Our existence.

The Bible is obviously a large and extraordinarily multi-faceted book. It is a book worth reading and reflecting on, whether or not one is personally a believer. I myself am no, but I cherish the Bible and am deeply moved by parts of it. And no part of it is more important in situations like this than those that reflect on the meaning of life. In particular there are the books in the Hebrew Bible that scholars have called “Wisdom” literature, the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, the last of which is my favorite, not just of the Wisdom books but of all the books of the Old Testament.

I want to do a couple of posts on Wisdom literature in general and the book of Ecclesiastes in particular, before returning to my thread on the Johannine writings and community. Here is how I explain the Wisdom literature broadly in my textbook, *The Bible: A Historical and Literary Introduction*.

Introduction to the Wisdom Literature

I can begin by providing a working definition of the books known collectively as “Wisdom.” These are books that focus on understanding the world and on how best to live, based on an intelligent assessment of life, rather than on divine revelation to Israel.

To understand the foci of these books, it might be useful to summarize some of the distinctive features of the historical and prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible (that is, virtually all the other books!) These feature, in broad terms, apply to books as wide ranging as Exodus, Joshua, 2 Samuel, Amos, and Ezekiel – in fact, just about all of the books we have considered so far (even, to a limited extent, the poetry and most of the short stories). These are some of the major concerns of all that (historical and prophetic) literature:

- God’s actions, both in the world generally and among his own people in particular
- The history of Israel as the people of God
- The covenant, or covenants, God has made with his people
- The Torah, or direction/instruction he has given them (through Moses)
- Divine revelation, where God reveals himself directly to chosen humans
- National concerns, that is, an intense interest in the people of Israel specifically
Communal orientation: it is the whole people of Israel, ultimately, who are of paramount concern, even if individuals are also important within that collective. We will see that the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes are very different from one another; but one thing that binds them together is that they lack almost completely these various concerns of the historical and prophetic writings. These books simply are not interested in God’s historical acts, the history of the people of Israel, the covenant God has made with them, the Torah – and all the rest. These books have a different orientation and focus, that include the following (these are broad generalizations, but they should serve to give the idea of how this literature differs from the other):

Universal needs, desires, and lives, rather than national. Here the nation of Israel, its history, its governance, its accomplishments, its missteps, and its punishments are not in view; the concern instead is with what it means to be human and with people in general, not just with the people of Israel.

Observation rather than revelation. The writer closely observes the world to see how it works, and he does not acquire his understanding from a divine revelation that has been given.

Individual rather than communal focus. The Wisdom literature focuses on the individual person, rather than his or her community. How can you, as an individual, understand the meaning of life or how to live it?

Multi-cultural rather than Israelite. Wisdom traditions can be found in many cultures, both ancient and modern – and in many instances these traditions are very similar to one another, cross-culturally; there is nothing specifically Israelite at the heart and core of the Wisdom Traditions of the Hebrew Bible (apart from the fact that even these books acknowledge the lordship of Yahweh; but there is little in them about Israel per se). Of the Wisdom books found in the Hebrew Bible, one, the book of Proverbs may be considered a representative of what we might call “positive wisdom.” This is the more typical form of wisdom, both within Judaism and cross-culturally. Positive wisdom attempts to describe the general orderliness of the world and to explain how people should live in accordance with it. Job and Ecclesiastes have a contrary emphasis, and can be labeled “skeptical wisdom.” These are writings that lament the world’s lack of order or the impossibility of understanding the world, and they try to explain how best to cope with life in light of this impossibility.

IN MY NEXT POST I will say a bit by way of introduction to the book of Ecclesiastes.