In my previous post I pointed to the “Wisdom” literature of the Old Testament (usually said to comprise Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes), suggesting that this is a good time for all of us to ingest some wisdom from those who went before. The book of Ecclesiastes has long been my favorite in the Old Testament. It seems so modern in so many ways. Even though written over 2000 years ago, it considers ageless questions about what the *point* of it all is.

If you don’t know it, it’s worth reading; it won’t take long. If you do know it, it’s worth reading again. To provide some orientation to the overall theme of the book, here is what I say about it in my book The Bible: A Historical and Literary Introduction, (I begin with the final paragraph from the last post)

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.

Ecclesiastes

The book of Ecclesiastes is an example of “skeptical” wisdom, but it is a very different kind of book from Job. Here the dominant question is not about why the innocent suffer, or even about suffering at all, per se; it is about how to make sense of this world. We have seen that the writers of Proverbs – not to mention the historians, prophets, and poets we have read – seemed to understand the world. It made sense to them; there was a coherence to it, a logic to it, a divine purpose behind it all. But other people have never felt that way. For them, it is hard to understand why the world is the way it is, why things happen the way they do, why we should strive to be good – or even strive to be rich, or intelligent, or influential. What is the meaning of life? Why are we here? What will happen to us when we are gone? For anyone who refuses to settle for easy answers to these questions, the book of Ecclesiastes is a treasure trove. Here is an author who ...

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