



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES V

WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

Lesson 1 Commentary Wisdom Literature
Lesson 2 Questions Psalms 1 (1-41)

INTRODUCTION TO WISDOM LITERATURE

I. IN THE ANCIENT EAST

In the countries and with the people of these early civilizations, wisdom literature existed from the earliest period of writing. Proverbs and fables began among the Sumerians, and later, poems on human suffering developed, some quite similar to the Book of Job. Egypt produced wisdom literature of every type in all periods of its history.

Great archeological discoveries have been found in Canaan at Ras Shamra. Such writing ignored national boundaries for it sought answers to human problems, to the meaning of life, and to a successful way of life. It was the sign of a good education. It was thought to be a source of successful lives or the secret of happiness; yet, when this failed, we find some pessimism added to the positive wisdom. Fallen human nature cannot find happiness without God.

Israel's wisdom literature stemmed from this early development and includes some of it, such as the words of "Agur" and of "Lemuel" in Proverbs, both of which came from a tribe in northern Arabia named Massa, included in the list of Ishmael's descendants (Genesis 25:13).

Wisdom literature is not narrative, unless the case of Job is considered; it is often in poetic form and is a teaching, a sharing of maxims, of wise living and solutions to life's experiences and problems. It has a confidence and a dependability based on the world's patterns and existence. Wisdom depended on language, on ideas and words that express them, words that both damage and heal. In all its forms wisdom expresses order, discipline and self-control.

Death and life are in the power of the tongue;
And they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.
(Proverbs 18:21)

A soft answer turns away wrath:
But grievous words stir up anger.
(Proverbs 15:1)

II. IN ISRAEL

Five books of the Old Testament are called "Wisdom" books: Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (or Qoheleth), Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach), and Wisdom. Somewhat unfitting, Psalms and the Song of Songs are grouped here. Some wisdom style is found in parts of Tobit and Baruch.

The latest of these books, Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom, also touched on the great themes of the Old Testament: Law, Covenant, Election, and Salvation. These wisdom books show no attention to the fortunes of their nation; only to the individual and his destiny. As Israel moves through its history, its wisdom literature becomes more affected by revelation. Real wisdom is found in the fear of God, according to the Bible's wisdom literature. It is a kind of religious humanism.

Sirach has a presentiment of "the four last things" but does not express it clearly. Plato's philosophy, rooted in Grecian civilization, arrived at the doctrine of an immortal soul. So we find in the Book of Wisdom that "God made human beings to be imperishable" (Wisdom 2:23).

The oldest form of wisdom literature in Israel was "Mashal" (a short proverb). Through the years Mashal developed into parable, allegory, argument, discourse. Its most literary development is the Book of Job or the Book of Wisdom. These forms were used to train children, to educate the young, and to emphasize a point in speaking or writing. Find a verse in Wisdom that will be a help in raising children. When and/or how can you use it?

"Wisdom" was a privilege of the educated classes. Sages and scribes appear at the court and in the temple or synagogue. Three circles emerged finally: priests, sages and prophets. In later Israel, these too merged and developed into the Scribe in Jesus' time: a teacher of the Law. All this teaching prepared for Wisdom Incarnate: Jesus.

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QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 2
Psalms 1 (1-41)

Day 1 Read the introductory commentary to Wisdom Literature.
What enlightened or impressed you?

Day 2

- a. Read Psalm 1. What is the difference between the one who is like a tree and the one like chaff?
- b. Read Psalm 3. How does David react to his adversaries? What line in this Psalm helps you?
- c. Read Psalm 4. What is your response to verse 4? What verse is good to use at bedtime?

Day 3 Read Psalm 8, Matthew 21:15-16, & Hebrews 2:1-8.

- a. What is evident for this lesson in Our Lord's words in Matthew 21:16?
- b. (1) Read Psalm 11, Genesis 19:24, and Matthew 20:22. What does "the foundation" mean?

(2) In our society, what are the "pillars"?

(3) What do verses 6 and 7 of Psalm 11 predict?
- c. Read Psalm 12.
 - (1) How is the psalmist encouraging himself?

 - (2) Quote verses that also encourage us.
- d. Read Psalm 13. Compare Psalm 13's prayer with that of Psalm 12.

Day 4 Penitential Psalms

- a. Read Psalm 6.
 - (1) What is the cause of the psalmist's distress in section I (verses 2-4)?

(2) In sections II-III (verses 7-11)?
- b. Read Psalm 15. List the qualities of one who "shall dwell on your holy mountain."
- c. Read Psalm 16. What verse prophesies an important event in Jesus' life?
- d. Read Acts 2:25-31, Acts 13:32-37. What are the Apostles teaching here about our belief about Jesus?

Day 5 Messianic Psalms

- a. Read Psalm 22. What is the clear prophecy about Jesus' Passion?
- b. (1) Read Psalm 24. What feast of the Church does this Psalm prophesy?

(2) Read Psalm 23. What does this most popular of the Psalms say to you?

Day 6

- a. Read Psalm 2. How is it Messianic?
- b. Read Psalm 25. What three verses are "an act of contrition"?
- c. Read Psalm 95. This Psalm of praise and thanksgiving opens the daily Divine Office of the Church. How does line 11b refer to an Israelite generation? to our generation?