

## “Hidden Wisdom”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden  
for FUMC Grand Junction, Sunday, Jan. 17, 2021

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ  
website: <https://www.fumcgj.org/sermons/>

*Scripture Text:* Wisdom 3:1-6, 9 [NRSV]  
Ecclesiasticus / Sirach 1:14-20 [NRSV]

### OPENING

The focus today is on the two books of the Apocrypha that continue the wisdom tradition that we find in our Bibles. Those books are The Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus, also known as The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach or, more simply, Sirach.

In order to help us more fully appreciate these particular books, I want to offer a little teaching on the genre of Biblical “wisdom literature” in general. For this, I am relying heavily on material from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*, NRSV (New York: Oxford Univ Press, 2001), [721-22 HEBREW BIBLE].

### SERMON THOUGHTS – WISDOM LITERATURE

- “Wisdom literature” in the Bible refers to 5 specific books; in Biblical order, they are
  1. Job
  2. Psalms
  3. Proverbs
  4. Ecclesiastes

### 5. The Song of Songs (\*brief observation on Hebrew vs. English title\*)

The name “wisdom literature” is very recent in terms of Biblical study, going back only to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

By the term, Biblical scholars are referring to “works that do not focus on the nation of Israel, ... its great historical memories, ..., on the Temple and Jerusalem, and on the covenant...” [*Ibid.*] between God, the Hebrew people, and the land of Israel as central themes.

Rather, “wisdom literature” reflects on matters of universal human experience and concern. Looking back at the list of Biblical books I just went over, one can see that.

To be a bit more precise, though, in that list we really have two books – Psalms and The Song of Songs – that deal with their subject matter in a highly poetical style and three other books that look a whole lot more like prose literature: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.

Even these three books are remarkably different in how they address their wisdom concerns:

- Proverbs offers chapter upon chapter of assertions of the conventional wisdom of the day that human beings “reap what they sow”, to borrow from the New Testament! That is, if you sow to sin, folly, and foolishness, you will reap miserable consequences and a short life.

- Job, of course, critiques that conventional wisdom of the day and asserts that the righteous are NOT protected from suffering by their lifestyle and, in fact, suffer unjustly.
- And Ecclesiastes says all of this is a bunch of “hoey” (\*a sophisticated Biblical term!\*) and we’re wasting our time debating it. Nothing in life has any meaning; it’s all just toiling in vain. We all meet the same end: death. So, we might as well try to eek out what little pleasure we can while we draw breath. And even THAT is meaningless! (\*Sounds a lot like COVID days to me! 😊\*)

How this ties into the sermon today is that the two apocryphal books that we just heard selections from are more consistent with Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, than they are with Psalms and The Song of Songs.

### TO THE SCRIPTURES: The Book of Wisdom (or The Wisdom of Solomon)

The introduction to this book in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* states, “The Wisdom of Solomon was written as a message of encouragement and exhortation for Jews living somewhere in the Diaspora...during the Graeco-Roman era.” [*Ibid.*, 70 APOCRYPHA] (\*Expound briefly on why: because of the Hellenizing pressures of being Jewish in the larger Graeco-Roman world, away from the center of Judaism, Jerusalem.\*)

Although the book is attributed to King Solomon in the title – because of its style and references – it addresses subjects far in the future relative to Solomon’s lifetime. It is very likely written by a Hellenistic Jew, roughly in the time of Jesus, but not in Palestine – more likely in the area of Alexandria in northern Egypt.

The book consists of three major sections [*Ibid.*, 70-1 APOCRYPHA]:

1. Ch.’s 1-6 contrast the lives of the just and the wicked, with the expected eschatological ends of the two groups.
2. Ch.’s 7-10 celebrate the figure of divine Sophia, the feminine personification of Wisdom. This compares closely with the content of the first 10 chapters of the book of Proverbs, hence the traditional ties to Solomon.
3. Ch.’s 11-19 provide a review of Jewish history, pointing out how the conventional wisdom played out in Jewish life and history.

To give you a feel for it, it is a book about the length of 1 Corinthians in the New Testament. And just as it would be difficult to pick one passage from 1 Corinthians to summarize its content, one passage from the Book of Wisdom doesn’t do that, either. So, I chose a passage that has wide usage in Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox worship, and which shows up in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*.

The section I chose to be read in worship today comes from the first part of the book, Chapter 3, in is read to provide comfort to those grieving the death of a loved one.

Let's look more closely at that passage, Wisdom 3:1-6, 9.

(\*Some exposition of the passage.\*)

TO THE SCRIPTURES: (Ecclesiasticus) The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Eleazar, Son of Sirach (or, plainly, Sirach)

This book, about the length of the book of Ezekiel – considerably longer than The Wisdom of Solomon – is known by several titles of varying length depending upon how precisely one wants to identify the author. It is often simply regarded as Sirach or The Wisdom of Sirach.

And while this book was not regarded as sacred Scripture by the Jews, it was “highly regarded in rabbinic literature, even cited in the Talmud” [*Ibid.*, 100 APOCRYPHA], the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the centerpiece of Jewish cultural life [<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmud>].

It was, however, regarded as sacred Scripture by the early Church where, in Latin collections, it was called Ecclesiasticus, “the Church’s book”. The best scholarship puts the writing of “the Church’s book” around 180 BC – before the persecutions of Antiochus IV Epiphanes that led to the successful Maccabean revolt of 168-164 BC, something we’ll be exploring in greater detail next week.

In terms of its content, “Like the book of Proverbs, Sirach stresses characteristic wisdom teachings: prudent speech, wealth and poverty, honesty, diligence, choice of friends, sin and death, retribution,

and wisdom itself.” [*Ibid.*, 100 APOCRYPHA]

Sirach fully endorses the traditional wisdom teaching of the justice of divine retribution, Job and Ecclesiastes notwithstanding. That is, “God will reward all according to their [just] deserts” [*Ibid.*]. This is significant because of the late date for Sirach as compared to the much older Job and Ecclesiastes. One would expect there to be some development of thought and theology with the passage of time. But, Sirach represents the “conservative” theological voice at the time, something that held great value, obviously, if the book was named “the Church’s book”.

Related to the justice of divine retribution in Sirach, and of great interest to me, is that it does not point to “a future life with God” as the ultimate reward for living a righteous life OR for patient, faithful suffering. “Rather, all go to Sheol, the traditional abode of the dead.... This is the...[common] view of the Hebrew Bible, where immortality is understood only in terms of one’s ...[descendants] and good name” [*Ibid.*].

This is in *sharp contrast* to the theology of The Wisdom of Solomon that we just explored, where we are taught, “...the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God” [Wisdom 3:1] and “...the faithful will abide with Him in love” [Wisdom 3:9].

To wrap up here, I want to emphasize the high regard Sirach has for Wisdom, equating it as he does with the ultimate expression of Jewish devotion to God: *the fear of the LORD*. (\*Go back and look at the four places where this is done right at the start of the book: Sirach 1:14,16, 18, and 20.\*)

## CONCLUSION

There is so much more to be gained by closer readings of these two expressions of the Biblical wisdom tradition. We have at least one copy of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with The Apocrypha* in our Church library, and, no doubt, others can be obtained at the Public Library. Copies can be purchased at Barnes & Noble on the west side of town (or your favorite bookstore), and you can also go to [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com) and enter any of the apocryphal titles in the SEARCH bar using the NRSV and read them there.

I hope you'll spend a little time exploring these books and others in the week ahead, now that you have some orientation to them.

Let us pray...(\*Go into The Lord's Prayer at 9 AM, not at 11 AM.\*)

## CLOSING WORDS at END of BOTH SERVICES

Prayers for the coming week:

- For the peaceful Inauguration of the new Administration
- For peace across the country, given the extraordinary events leading up to it (the Inauguration), especially in light of the observance/celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr. this weekend and his commitment to nonviolence in his deeply impassioned demands for civil rights for all Americans, including the Black community.
- For the healing of the division in our community, state, and nation
- For all suffering in any way from the continuing pandemic and, especially, for those struggling with extreme forms of COVID
- Finally, in thanksgiving for the several vaccines available and for their speedy distribution around the world, not just here in the US

## BENEDICTION

From the book of Wisdom:

*3:1 ...the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them.*

*9 Those who trust in him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones, and he watches over his ...[chosen ones].*

Go in peace into the day and week ahead.