

# Solomon - Wisdom Literature of the Ancient NE

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- Last week, we discussed the history of the Ancient Near East leading up to David and Solomon, and the political and cultural landscape that allowed the little kingdom of Israel to thrive.
- This week, I'd like to spend some time with you reading other wisdom literature from the Ancient Near East, literature that is similar to what Solomon wrote, but also different.

## What is “Wisdom Literature”?

- Wisdom literature is a type of ancient writing that tries to answer one big practical question: “How should a person live well in the world?”
- Instead of telling a nation’s history (like Genesis–Kings) or delivering direct prophetic oracles (“Thus says the LORD”), wisdom texts focus on formation—shaping character, judgment, and habits for everyday life.
- Across Israel and the wider ancient Near East, it often comes in a few recognizable forms:
  - **Proverbs / maxims:** short, memorable sayings (“A soft answer turns away wrath...”).
  - **Instructions:** longer “teacher-to-student” or “father-to-son” counsel.
  - **Dialogues / disputes:** staged conversations that test ideas.
  - **Reflections on meaning:** meditation on life’s instability, limits, and mortality.
- It’s called “wisdom” because the central aim is **chokmah** (חכמה - Hebrew “wisdom”)—not just knowledge, but **skillful living**:
  - knowing what matters,
  - reading situations well,
  - choosing the right action at the right time,
  - and becoming the kind of person whose life is ordered toward the good.
- Think of it as **moral and practical craftsmanship**—the art of living.
- Something I want you to consider as we read these texts is the “theological center” of the content. We want to see how these other wisdom writings of the Ancient Near East compare with Solomon’s writings.

## Instruction of Amenemope

- Instruction of Amenemope (ah **MEN** eh **MOH** peh) is a classic “instruction” text with **strong parallels** to **Proverbs 22:17–24:22**, a section often called the “Words/Sayings of the Wise.” Some scholars even suspect that Solomon (or whoever actually wrote that part of Proverbs) was influenced by this text.
- It was composed in Ancient Egypt, most likely during the Ramesside Period (ca. 1300–1075 BCE). It contains thirty chapters of advice for successful living, ostensibly written by the scribe Amenemope son of Kanakht as a legacy for his son.
- Instruction of Amenemope reflects on the inner qualities, attitudes, and behaviors required for a happy life in the face of increasingly difficult social and economic circumstances. It is widely regarded as one of the masterpieces of ancient near-eastern wisdom literature.

- Source: [https://www.maat.sofiatopia.org/amen\\_em\\_apt.htm](https://www.maat.sofiatopia.org/amen_em_apt.htm)
- A quick note as we read these texts: You will see places where there are brackets or parentheses around words. Those indicate places where text in the original manuscript or tablet is missing or unreadable, but the translators have provided suggested words to help the English make more sense. You can just read the bracketed words as if they are part of the text.

## Reading 1

### Chapter 1:

Give your ears, hear the sayings,  
 give your heart to understand them.  
 It is good to put them in your heart, (but)  
 woe to him who neglects them!  
 Let them rest in the casket of your belly,  
 may they be bolted in your heart.  
 When there rises a whirlwind of words,  
 they will be a mooring-post for your tongue.

If You make your life with these in your heart,  
 You will find it a success.  
 You will find my words a storehouse for life,  
 (and) your body will be well upon earth.

### Proverbs 22:17-21

- <sup>17</sup> Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise,  
 and apply your heart to my knowledge,  
<sup>18</sup> for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you,  
 if all of them are ready on your lips.  
<sup>19</sup> That your trust may be in the LORD,  
 I have made them known to you today, even to you.  
<sup>20</sup> Have I not written for you thirty sayings  
 of counsel and knowledge,  
<sup>21</sup> to make you know what is right and true,  
 that you may give a true answer to those who sent you?

### Discussion Questions

- What “classroom signals” do you hear in both openings?
- What’s each author trying to produce in the student—what’s the end goal?
- Where do you already see a theological difference *even before* specific moral commands?

## Reading 2

### Chapter 2:

Beware of robbing a poor wretch,  
 of attacking a cripple.  
 Do not stretch out your hand to touch an old man,  
 nor [snatch (at) the word of] a great one.

Do not let yourself be sent on a wicked errand,  
nor be friends with him who does it.  
Do not raise an outcry against one who attacks You,  
nor return him an answer yourself.  
He who does evil, the shore rejects him,  
its floodwater carries him away,  
the north wind comes down to end his hour,  
it mingles with the thunderstorm, (and)  
the storm cloud is tall,  
the crocodiles are vicious.  
You heated man, how are You now?  
He cries out, his voice reaches heaven.  
It is the Moon who declares his crime.  
Steer, (so that) we may ferry the wicked (over),  
(as) we do not act like his kind!  
Lift him up, give him your hand,  
commit him (in) the hands of the god.  
Fill his belly with bread of your own,  
that he be sated and see.

Another thing good in the heart of the god:  
to pause before speaking.

### **Proverbs 22:22-23**

<sup>22</sup> Do not rob the poor, because he is poor,  
or crush the afflicted at the gate,  
<sup>23</sup> for the LORD will plead their cause  
and rob of life those who rob them.

### **Proverbs 23:10-11**

<sup>10</sup> Do not move an ancient landmark  
or enter the fields of the fatherless,  
<sup>11</sup> for their Redeemer is strong;  
he will plead their cause against you.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Both forbid exploiting the poor—what reasons does each give (explicitly or implicitly)?
- What does each text assume about how justice is enforced?
- In Proverbs 23:10–11, what extra “Israelite” texture shows up?

## **Reading 3**

### **Chapter 10:**

Do not force yourself to salute the heated man,  
for then You injure your own heart.  
Do not say “Greetings!” to him falsely,  
while there is terror in your belly.  
Do not speak falsely to a man,

the god abhors it!

Do not sever your heart from your tongue, (so)  
that all your strivings may succeed.  
You will be weighty before the others,  
and secure in the hand of the god.

God hates the falsifier of words.  
He greatly abhors he who quarrels in the belly.

### **Proverbs 22:24–25**

<sup>24</sup> Make no friendship with a man given to anger,  
nor go with a wrathful man,

<sup>25</sup> lest you learn his ways  
and entangle yourself in a snare.

### **Discussion Questions**

- **What exactly is the danger in both texts—what happens if you keep company with an angry person?**
- **What does this tell us about “wisdom” in both cultures—private spirituality or social skill?**
- **Where do you see the deeper difference despite the near-identical advice?**

### **Reading 4 (skip if needed)**

#### **Proverbs 22:26-23:9**

<sup>26</sup> Be not one of those who give pledges,  
who put up security for debts.

<sup>27</sup> If you have nothing with which to pay,  
why should your bed be taken from under you?

<sup>28</sup> Do not move the ancient landmark  
that your fathers have set.

<sup>29</sup> Do you see a man skillful in his work?  
He will stand before kings;  
he will not stand before obscure men.

**23** When you sit down to eat with a ruler,

observe carefully what is before you,

<sup>2</sup> and put a knife to your throat  
if you are given to appetite.

<sup>3</sup> Do not desire his delicacies,  
for they are deceptive food.

<sup>4</sup> Do not toil to acquire wealth;  
be discerning enough to desist.

<sup>5</sup> When your eyes light on it, it is gone,  
for suddenly it sprouts wings,  
flying like an eagle toward heaven.

<sup>6</sup> Do not eat the bread of a man who is stingy;  
do not desire his delicacies,

<sup>7</sup> for he is like one who is inwardly calculating.  
“Eat and drink!” he says to you,

but his heart is not with you.

<sup>8</sup> You will vomit up the morsels that you have eaten,  
and waste your pleasant words.

<sup>9</sup> Do not speak in the hearing of a fool,  
for he will despise the good sense of your words.

## Discussion Questions:

- What major themes cluster in this section, and how do they build a worldview?
- What's distinctively "Proverbs" about its vision of a good life compared to the ANE texts?
- Where do you still hear the shared "international wisdom tradition," even with those differences?

## Dialogue of Pessimism

- The **Dialogue of Pessimism** is a short **Akkadian wisdom text** (often dated around **the time of Solomon**) written as a back-and-forth between a master and his slave. It is broken into "strophes," a group of lines that have a repeating cycle.
- In each strophe, the master proposes a course of action (going to a banquet, getting married, offering a sacrifice, public service, etc.), the slave provides persuasive reasons to do it, then the master immediately changes his mind—and the slave gives equally persuasive reasons not to.
- The effect is a sharp, sometimes comic, meditation on the instability of human plans and the difficulty of finding a definitive "best" course of action, which is why it's frequently compared to the mood and themes of Ecclesiastes.

**Source:** <https://www.gatewaystobabylon.com/myths/texts/classic/dialoguepessimism.htm>

**Scholarly Source:** <https://www.ebl.lmu.de/corpus/L/2/4/SB/->

## Reading 1

### II - BANQUET

Slave, listen to me!

Here I am, master, here I am!

Quickly! Fetch me water for my hands, I want to dine!

Dine, master, dine! A good meal relaxes the mind! [It is good to eat] the meal of his god. To wash one's hand  
passes the time!

O well, slave, I will not dine!

Do not dine, master, do not dine! To eat only when one is hungry, to drink only when one is thirsty is best for man!

### VII - LOVEMAKING

Slave, listen to me!

Here I am, master, here I am!

I want to make love to a woman.

Make love, master, make love! The man who makes love to a woman forgets sorrow and fear!

O well, slave, I do not want to make love to a woman!

Do not make love, master, do not make love! Woman is a real pitfall, a hole, a ditch, Woman is a sharp iron dagger  
that cuts a man's throat!

## XI - CONCLUSION

Slave, listen to me!

Here I am, master, here I am!

What then is good? To have my neck and yours broken, Or to be thrown into the river, is that good?

Who is so tall as to ascend to heaven? Who is so broad as to encompass the entire world?

O well, slave, I will kill you and send you first!

Yes, but my master would certainly not survive me for three days!...

### Discussion Questions:

- **What is happening here?** What is the author trying to convey?
- **What changed between the first “Yes, do it” and the reversal—did the *world* change, or just the *justification*?**
- **Which voice feels “wiser” in the Dialogue—the master, the slave, or the Dialogue itself? Why?**
- **What picture of reality (and of the divine) is implied here: a world with stable moral order, or a world where outcomes are opaque and arguments can always be flipped?**
- **Rhetorical feel:** Is this satire, nihilism, humility, or something else?

## Ecclesiastes 2:1–11

<sup>2</sup>I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself.” But behold, this also was vanity. <sup>2</sup>I said of laughter, “It is mad,” and of pleasure, “What use is it?” <sup>3</sup>I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. <sup>4</sup>I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. <sup>5</sup>I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. <sup>6</sup>I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. <sup>7</sup>I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. <sup>8</sup>I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.

<sup>9</sup>So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. <sup>10</sup>And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. <sup>11</sup>Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

### Discussion

- **Does the Dialogue assume a predictable moral order you can rely on? How does that compare to Solomon’s posture?**
- **Solomon tries pleasure/projects seriously—how is his “experiment” similar to the Dialogue’s “Let’s do X / let’s not do X” rhythm?**
- **Where does Solomon go beyond the Dialogue?** In other words, what is the deeper reason Ecclesiastes gives for dissatisfaction (e.g., “what is gained,” what lasts, what remains) that the Dialogue only hints at through reversals?
- **Compare the emotional tone:** Is Ecclesiastes cynical, amused, grief-stricken, analytical, or something else? How does that tone match (or differ from) the Dialogue’s irony—especially in the conclusion?

## Ecclesiastes 9:4–10

<sup>4</sup>But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. <sup>5</sup>For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. <sup>6</sup>Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.

<sup>7</sup>Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

<sup>8</sup>Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.

<sup>9</sup>Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. <sup>10</sup>Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.

## Discussion Questions

- **Both texts face the same constraint—death and limited control. What response does Solomon recommend, and how does that response differ from the Dialogue’s conclusion?**
- **Look back at Banquet and Lovemaking:** In the Dialogue, those acts become reversible and arguable; in Eccl 9, they’re commended as gifts to receive. What does that difference suggest about what “wisdom” is for in each work?
- **What does each text assume about where meaning comes from?**
- **The “so what?” comparison is the payoff:** Put them side-by-side and ask:

## Counsels of Wisdom

- Counsels of Wisdom is a short Babylonian (Akkadian) wisdom “instruction” text—essentially a collection of compact moral exhortations (often in two-line maxims) aimed at forming good judgment and behavior. It is especially written in contexts relevant to scribes and administrators.
- It covers themes we will recognize immediately from Proverbs—controlling your speech, avoiding quarrels, dealing in fairness and justice, generosity to the vulnerable, personal restraint, and practical social wisdom.
- However, it does this within an explicitly Mesopotamian religious worldview, with references to one’s personal god and Shamash as a divine guarantor of justice who “repays” good and evil.

Source: <https://www.ebl.lmu.de/corpus/L/2/3/SB/>

## Reading 1

### Counsels of Wisdom, Lines 22-31

Do not converse [with] a gossipy person,  
Do not go consult [with] an idler who has no work to do.  
With the best of intentions you will adopt their way of thinking,  
You will let your own work slack off and you will go off your pathway,  
You will play false to your own wiser and disciplined thinking.

Hold your tongue, watch what you say,  
A gentleman’s pride should be the high esteem of your speech.  
Insolence (and) abuse should be abhorrent to you,

Talk of nothing demeaning, no untrue report.  
The gossipy person is despicable.

### **Prov 15:1–4**

- <sup>1</sup> A soft answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger.
- <sup>2</sup> The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,  
but the mouths of fools pour out folly.
- <sup>3</sup> The eyes of the LORD are in every place,  
keeping watch on the evil and the good.
- <sup>4</sup> A gentle tongue is a tree of life,  
but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.

### **Prov 13:3**

- <sup>3</sup> Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life;  
he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.

### **Prov 10:19–21**

- <sup>19</sup> When words are many, transgression is not lacking,  
but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.
- <sup>20</sup> The tongue of the righteous is choice silver;  
the heart of the wicked is of little worth.
- <sup>21</sup> The lips of the righteous feed many,  
but fools die for lack of sense.

### **Prov 21:23**

- <sup>23</sup> Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue  
keeps himself out of trouble.

### **Prov 18:21**

- <sup>21</sup> Death and life are in the power of the tongue,  
and those who love it will eat its fruits.

## **Discussion Questions**

- What do both texts think is the *danger* of careless speech—social harm, self-harm, or spiritual harm?
- How do they each define “self-control” in speech—avoid certain people, limit your words, or speak positively?
- What picture of the “wise person” emerges—what motivates them to guard their speech?

## **Reading 2**

### **Counsels of Wisdom, Lines 37-46**

When confronted with a dispute, avoid it, do not get involved.  
If it is a dispute with you, then put out the flame.  
A dispute is a wide-open ambush,  
A barrier of brush that conceals one’s opponent,  
It brings to mind what he forgot and accuses a man.

Do no evil to the man who disputes with you,  
Requite with good the one who does evil to you.  
Adhere to just treatment of your enemy,  
Let your demeanor be cheerful to your foe,  
Even if it is your ill-wisher, treat him generously.

### **Prov 17:14**

<sup>14</sup> The beginning of strife is like letting out water,  
so quit before the quarrel breaks out.

### **Prov 15:1**

<sup>1</sup> A soft answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger.

### **Prov 20:3**

<sup>3</sup> It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife,  
but every fool will be quarreling.

### **Prov 26:20**

<sup>20</sup> For lack of wood the fire goes out,  
and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.

## **Discussion Questions**

- **What do both texts assume about conflict—why is it so dangerous once it starts?**
- **What are the practical strategies each text gives for de-escalation?**
- **Where does Counsels go beyond these Proverbs verses—and what would Proverbs add if you widened the lens?**

## **Counsels of Wisdom, Lines A+8-A+16**

Take pity on the w[eak] (and) [he]lpless,  
Do not [...] the miserable, do not ho[ld] them in contempt.  
Do not condescend haughtily to them.  
One's god will be angry with him for that,  
It is displeasing to Shamash, he will requite him with evil.  
Give food to eat, beverage to drink,  
Aspire to what is right, provide for and honor.

One's god will be happy with him for that,  
It is pleasing to Shamash, he will requite him with favor.  
Do good deeds, always be obliging.

## **Proverbs 25:21–22**

<sup>21</sup> If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat,  
and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink,  
<sup>22</sup> for you will heap burning coals on his head,  
and the LORD will reward you.

## Proverbs 31:8–9

- <sup>8</sup> Open your mouth for the mute,  
for the rights of all who are destitute.
- <sup>9</sup> Open your mouth, judge righteously,  
defend the rights of the poor and needy.

## Proverbs 19:17

- <sup>17</sup> Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD,  
and he will repay him for his deed.

## Proverbs 22:22

- <sup>22</sup> Do not rob the poor, because he is poor,  
or crush the afflicted at the gate,

## Discussion Questions

- Both texts command generosity and justice—what *kinds* of people are in view, and what obligations do we have toward them?
- What is the logic of motivation—*why* do this? Compare the divine rationale.
- What’s similar in the ethics, and what’s different in the *theology of justice*?

## Closing Questions

- Where does each tradition locate the “anchor” of wisdom? Is it social order? elite etiquette? fear of the LORD? gratitude for gifts?
- What makes Proverbs’ moral vision feel more stable than Counsels/Amenemope? Who enforces justice? What happens when human courts fail?
- Which text is most honest about the limits of “wise living”—and why does that honesty matter? Do proverbs ever overpromise? Does Ecclesiastes correct that?
- The Dialogue shows that you can argue both sides of almost anything. What stops Proverbs/Ecclesiastes from becoming “rationalization” literature? What limits the tongue? what limits self-justification?
- What kind of “security” is on offer in each text—predictable outcomes, or something deeper? Is “security” material success? inner stability? being known/held by God?
- Compare the deity-language: “your god / Shamash repays” vs “the LORD.” What difference does that make for trust? Is the divine world fragmented or unified? personal or impersonal? knowable or opaque?
- What does Ecclesiastes add that Proverbs alone might leave vulnerable to overconfidence? Does Proverbs sometimes sound like “do X → get Y”? What does Ecclesiastes do with that?
- If you had to summarize the unique value of Solomon’s wisdom in one sentence, what would it be?

## Other ANE Wisdom Examples:

1. The Instructions of Shuruppak: <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section2/tr222.htm>

2. The Babylonian Theodicy: <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://ebl.lmu.de/corpus/L/3/4>
3. Ludlul Bel Nemeqi (The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer): <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/226/ludlul-bel-nemeqi/>
4. The Words of Ahiqar: <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/apa/apa40.htm>
5. The Tale of the Poor Man of Nippur: <https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section5/tr553.htm>