

What Is Biblical Wisdom?

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R. C. SPROUL

What Is Biblical Wisdom?

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Chapter One

Introduction to Wisdom

As a college student, I majored in the academic discipline of philosophy. On the first day, in the very first philosophy course that I took, the professor wrote the word *philosophy* on the board. He then broke it down into its etymological derivation. *Philosophy* comes from the Greek, and of course, the Greeks are usually seen as the founding fathers of Western philosophy—first with the pre-Socratic philosophers; then with Socrates himself; followed by Plato, Aristotle, and others.

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The word *philosophy* combines two important Greek words: the first part of the word comes from the Greek *phileō*, which means “to love.” We are familiar with this word in the English language because we all know the meaning of the city of Philadelphia—the city of brotherly love.

Some may also be familiar with this word from Jesus’ conversation with Peter in John 21, where Jesus repeatedly asks Peter, “Do you love me?” (vv. 15–17). In this exchange, the New Testament uses two different words that are both translated by the English word *love*. The first is *agapē*, which is the spiritual love, the zenith of love, the kind of love that God sheds abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. And there is also *philia*, which is used for brotherly love and affection. This is the word that was joined here to the word *philosophy*.

The second part of the word *philosophy* comes from another Greek word, *sophia*, which is the word for “wisdom.” When you combine these words, *philia* and *sophia*, the simple meaning of the term *philosophy* is “the love of wisdom.” This intrigued me as a college student in my first course in the study of philosophy because I naturally assumed that by studying philosophy I would learn all about wisdom in a practical sense.

However, I soon discovered that Greek philosophy, for example, focused on abstract, weighty questions in metaphysics (the study of ultimate being) and epistemology (the study of the process by which human beings learn). It is true that historically in the discipline of philosophy, one of its subdivisions is ethics—particularly, the science of normative ethics, which is the study of imperatives on how one ought to live. And normative ethics was certainly a concern of the ancient Greeks.

Socrates was convinced that proper conduct, or right living, is intimately connected with right knowledge. That is, for a person to behave in a courageous manner, he must first understand what courage is and what courage means. So, Socrates was convinced that philosophy was not just an unrelated, impractical, abstract discipline of human speculation but very much concerned with concrete daily living. He was concerned about the decadence of Greek civilization in his day, and he saw that the Greek culture was in the process of disintegration because it had lost its moral foundation.

It's amazing how many parallels there are between the Greece of Socrates' day and America of today. So many of the same crises are being visited. But despite Socrates'

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concern for ethics, Plato's penetrating research into the idea of the good, and Aristotle's full volume on the science of ethics, when we think of philosophy today, for the most part we think of the other areas—the speculative investigation into metaphysics and epistemology.

When we come to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, we see a completely different emphasis on the pursuit of wisdom among the Jews compared to the Greeks. When we speak of the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, we're referring to the group of books that includes Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Job. The Wisdom Literature was understood as a special kind of literature among the Jewish people in the ancient world. There are obvious differences between the dramatic narrative of Job, the love song of the Song of Solomon, the prayers of the Psalter, and the aphorisms of Proverbs; nevertheless, a single motif carries through this entire body of literature that we call wisdom.

It has been said of Greek philosophy that the assertion that there is one God who is sovereign over all creation was a very late development in the pursuit of philosophy among the ancient Greeks, that it was, in a sense, the conclusion of their philosophy rather than something that was

manifested early on in their search for truth. By contrast, for the Jew with his sacred Scriptures, the very first line of the Old Testament says, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). There is no attempt on the first page of Genesis to offer any argument, reason, or proof for the existence of God. It simply starts with the statement about the God who is God over all creation. Monotheism isn’t the end of the trail as it was for the Greeks; it’s at the very beginning of the sacred writings of the Jews.

One of the reasons the Jews did not feel constrained to give speculative arguments for the existence of God is that they were convinced that God had already quite ably done the job Himself: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). The question that concerned the Jew was not whether there is a God but rather *who* that God is. What is His name? What is His nature and character? And the whole of the Old Testament focuses on God’s self-disclosure—the unveiling of His character, His person, and His nature to His covenant people.

The body of literature that we find in the middle of the Old Testament called the Wisdom Literature affirms

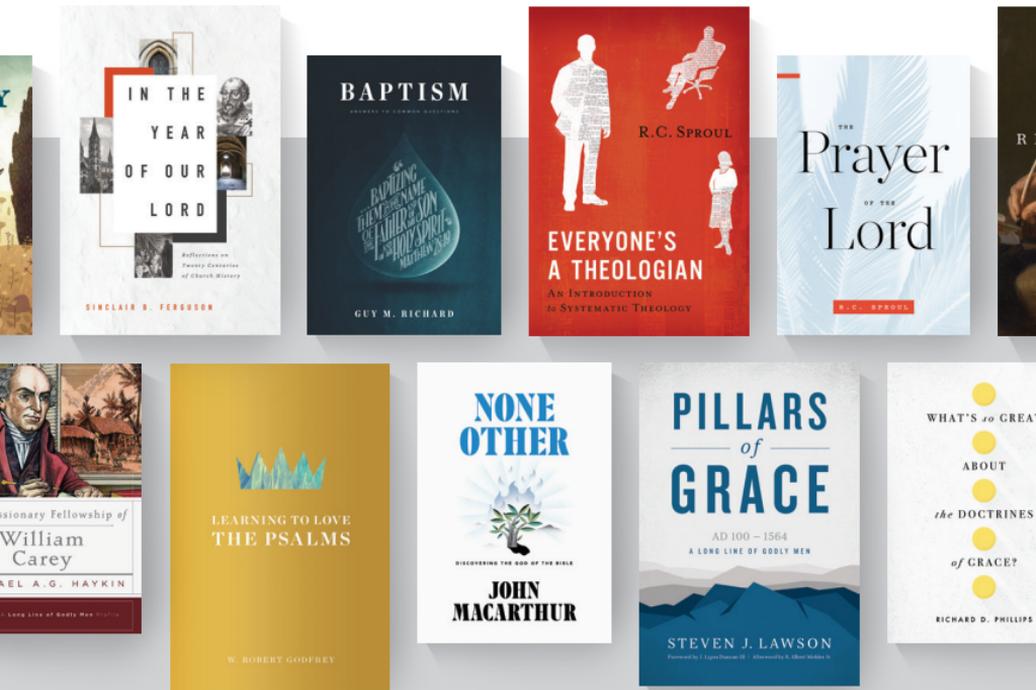
again and again that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps. 111:10; cf. Prov. 1:7; 9:10). For the Jew, wisdom meant an understanding, practically speaking, of how to live a life that is pleasing to God. It was the pursuit of godliness that was the central concern of the writers of Hebrew Wisdom Literature. And they say at the very beginning that the absolute, foundational, necessary condition for anyone to have true wisdom is that he must first possess and cultivate a fear of the Lord.

This fear is not the terror that a prisoner in a concentration camp experiences every time he hears the footsteps of his torturer. Martin Luther called it a filial fear. It’s the fear of a child who is in awe of his father and doesn’t want to do anything that would violate his father and disrupt their loving relationship. This fear consists of reverence, awe, and respect. When the wisdom writer says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, he is saying this: If we want to acquire actual wisdom, the absolute, essential starting point at which we begin and continue that quest is in a posture of reverence and adoration for God.

By contrast, David tells us that “the fool says in his heart, “There is no God”” (Ps. 14:1). Wisdom is constantly

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Who needs wisdom?

Wisdom isn't something only needed by the foolish and immature. All of us are called to grow in wisdom, for true wisdom has to do with pleasing the God who made us.

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul introduces the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. He shows that wisdom goes hand in hand with being godly, and he demonstrates the Bible's practical guidelines for a well-lived life that honors the Lord.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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