Class: God and the Old Testament (Wisdom Books, and Prophets)

Objective- *The Class objective is to get a deeper understanding of scripture, particularly an understanding of the Wisdom Books and Prophetic books of the Old Testament. Students should be able to walk away identifying key themes in these parts of the bible as well as an understanding of how God was present in those books.*

KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

1. Wisdom – Saint Thomas Aquinas defined wisdom as right judgement in accord with eternal law. In other words, Wisdom is seeing things the way God sees them.

2. The Book of Job – A book of wisdom within the Old Testament that teaches that pain and suffering are a mystery of divine wisdom.

3. Psalms – A collection of songs of praise that speak into the relationship between God and his creation.

4. Proverbs – A collection of maxims that intend of connecting teaching practical advice to the wisdom of God.

5. Ecclesiastes – A book of the Old Testament that teaches on the pursuit of wisdom being noble, but encourages a more noble pursuit trusting and putting faith in God.

6. Songs of Songs or Songs of Solomon – A book of the old testament that is a love letter to God from his creation.

7. Book of Wisdom – A book in the Old Testament originally written in Greek. It melds the ancient Israelite understanding of Wisdom with Greek philosophical understanding of Wisdom.

8. Sirach – A book of the Old Testament that reemphasizes that which is covered in all the other wisdom books, but also speaks into how God is the ultimate source of Wisdom and offers spiritual ways to tap into that wisdom.

9. Prophet – An individual picked by God to relay God's message to God's people. A prophet preached God's word to the people, and relayed the people's actions and responses back to God.

10. Minor Prophetic Books – These are the shorter books detailing the dealings of prophets within a shorter narrative form, these prophets are – Amos, Hosea, Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Obadiah, Joel, Jonah.

11. Major Prophetic Books – These are the longer books detailing the more extensive works of the prophets. These prophets are – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel

12. Messianic Prophecies – The prophetic books speak of various descriptions of a messiah to come. Each of the depictions and descriptions of that messianic coming is a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ fulfilling those prophecies.

Old Testament Prophets' Timeline

AUDIENCE COLOR KEY: green=Israel; blue=Judah; pink=Exiles in Babylon; tan=misc. nations

note: exact dates approximate as many reputable sources vary, though general history and timeline valid.

Prophet	Audience	Kings who ruled at the same time	Approximate Dates, all BC	Historical happenings at the time of the prophet, plus comments on the content of their books
Historical setting: After division of the kingdom into Israel and Judah, recorded in 1 Kings 12 - 2 Kings 17				
Elijah	Israel	Ahab, Ahaziah, Joram	870-845	Kingdom split about 930, all sinful kings in Israel through Israel's history, kings a mixture of good and bad in Judah.
Elisha	Israel	Joram, Jehu, Jehoahaz	845-800	Disciple of Elijah. Preaches to a sinful people who worshipped idols, not Jehovah God. Some individual (e.g. Naaman) success, no national repentance.
Jonah	Nineveh	Jeroboam II	760-753	Jonah first a prophet of victory to Israel; then called to preach to Nineveh capital of Assyria, a violent and cruel enemy. Finally obeys and Nineveh repents, though it doesn't last.
Amos	Israel	Jeroboam II	765-754	Israel powerful and complacent, pagan worship, neglect of the poor, calls for justice. Resotoration after judgement promised which is a pattern in many prophets.
Hosea	Israel	Jeroboam II	758-725	Though his message is of love and forgiveness, Israel does not repent, continues in spiritual decline. Though materially proposperous and religiously active, Israel goes into capvitiy in 722, conquered by Assyria.
Historical setting: Israel conquered by Assyria, prophecies now warning Judah, recorded 2 Kings 18-2 Kings 25				
Additional history of Judah primarily in 1-2 Chronicles; fall of Jerusalem and edict to return in 2 Chron. 36				
Isaiah	Judah	Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah,Manasseh	760-673	Begins preaching to Judah before Israel falls. Assyria threatens but does not conquer Judah. Book reflects God's eternal view.
Micah	Judah	Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh	738-698	Preaches same time as Isaiah, warns of judgement if no repentance. Defines what God requires in Micah 6:8.
Nahum	Nineveh	Manasseh, Amon, Josiah	658-615	Assyian repentance under Jonah doesn't last. Final destruction of Assyria/Nineveh by Babylonians.
Zephaniah	Judah	Josiah	640-609	Last revival in Judah under Josiah, but not enough.
Habakkuk	Judah	Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin	608-598	Babylon conquered Assyria; Judah in process of its downfall. Questions why God uses pagan nations for His purposes.
Jeremiah	Judah	Manasseh, Amon, Josiah, Jehahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah	650-582	Messages not in order. Records the last days of Judah, the prior series of deportations before final destruction in 587 BC. Wrote at the same time as Ezekiel and Daniel who were deported early on. Writes Lamentations after fall of Judah.
Obediah	Edom	uncertain	?	Judgement of Edom. Date not certain, message timeless. Do not rejoice over or take advantage of the fall of others.
Historical setting: Babylon conquers Judah, a series of deportations, final destruction 607 BC, recorded in 2 Kings 24, 25				
Ezekiel	Exiles in Babylon	Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, in Judah; Babylonian rulers there	620-570	Under captivity, God continues speaking to his people; obedience still required, he was a priest and spoke to the people in Babylon. Also numerous future, end-time prophecies.
Daniel	Exiles in Babylon	Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah in Judah; Babylonian rulers there	620-540	One of the earliest deported to Babylon, lived there during the destruction, deportation, and return of the people. His prophecies span human history.
Historical setting: Israel allowed to return & rebuild, recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah, captives who stayed in Esther				
Joel	Judah	Governor Zerubbabel?	?	Date not certain, message timeless. Restoration promised.
Haggai	Judah	Governor Zerubbabel	520	Returned to the land, Temple rebuilding stalled, preached priory of finishing God's work. Preached with Zechariah.
Zechariah	Judah	Governor Zerubbabel	522-509	Messages, challenges to complete the tasks of God.
Malachi	Judah	not certain, perhaps some overlap with Nehemiah	435	People back in the land, Temple rebuilt. The people persisted in sin. Challenges to repent. Blessings for obedience.
After these books 400 "Silent years" No written word from God, but God at work in history preparing for the Messiah.				

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Introduction to the Books of Wisdom

This group of books joined together under the heading of Wisdom Literature is quite varied. The five proto-canonical books are: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (or Qoheleth) and Song of Songs (or Canticle of Canticles) and the other two writings are Wisdom and Ben Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus).

- The Book of **Job** needs to be given special attention, as it struggles with finding answers to the problem of undeserved suffering.
- The **Psalms** were written by the poets of God's people over a period of a thousand years. The 150 Psalms in the Jewish Bible were collected for worship in the Temple built by the exiles who began to trickle back to Jerusalem after 538 BCE.
- **Proverbs** sought to provide guidelines on what to do and not to do, and confidently summed up the way to wisdom as 'fear of the Lord'.
- The Book of **Ecclesiastes** (or Qoheleth) is surely the most sceptical book in the Bible; it has its doubts whether it has any basis in human experience.
- **Song of Songs** (or Canticle of Canticles). It is a collection of love songs and wedding poems, with here and there vivid descriptions of the bride's beauty. These poems were taken as allegorically describing Yahweh's love for Israel as a beloved bride!
- The Book of the **Wisdom of Solomon**, a deutero-canonical book, is known only in Greek. It is perhaps the last book of the Old Testament to be written (1st century BCE), although its authorship was credited to Solomon. The main interest of the book is to reassure the Jewish community living in Egypt that keeping their faith is worthwhile despite the hardships in a pagan land.
- **Sirach** (or Ecclesiasticus) is with its 51 chapters the longest of the wisdom books. It is a mixture of proverbs and lengthy essays on themes such as use of speech, self-control, evil friends, the value of work, death, sickness, etc. Above all, Sirach stresses the ethical aspects of everyday life. He exalts the role of law and fear of the Lord as true wisdom.

Job

Job wrestles with the question of suffering and God's goodness.

"Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

The Book of Job

The Book of Job needs to be given special attention, as it struggles with finding answers to the problem of undeserved suffering. Why do bad things happen to good people – and how does a good person cope with what has happened to them. It was generally believed that God *always* rewards the just and punishes the wicked (the *"law of retribution")*, but here is Job, an upright man, whose suffering contradicts this belief. How to solve this dilemma?

Job and his "friends" argue with one another about what has happened and how Job responds. They urge him to admit his guilt, or at least his pride, even that he must have sinned unwittingly. Job has to admit at the end that God's wisdom is beyond human wisdom and incomprehensible. There is an exchange between Job and God, who appears to Job in a whirlwind. The happy ending of the book, telling how Job was restored to his former fortunes (and much more) must have made it more palatable and acceptable to the people!

Who wrote this book?

Jewish rabbis ascribed the book of Job to Moses. Few people today would associate this book of Job with Moses, but there is no other suggested author of the book. Many scholars would suggest that there are a range of authors and that the story of Job told at the beginning (Job 1-2) and at the end (Job 42) is an ancient story that has been added to over time.

What kind of book is it?

Most people would say that Job is part of the Wisdom tradition, which contains books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, provides wise teachings and sayings by which you can live your life. Job has these, but they are woven into a bigger more complex whole. Indeed, the book appears to be responding to a very particular question. By and large, the wisdom tradition assumed that "good people" would receive a just reward. Job seems to be countering this assumption with reflections of its own.

The themes of the book

Many would say that the theme of the Book of Job is suffering. Alternatively, you might describe it as being a book about God's sovereignty in light of suffering or of Job's faithful obedience in the light of suffering – or even of Job's faithful obedience in the midst of immense trial. While these points are all valid, there are four other themes to consider.

The first is the need for Scripture. We see in Job how Scripture manifests itself within many of Job's monologues; for example, Job prays for God to care for him (Job 7:17– 19), how he asks for forgiveness of his sins (Job 7:20-21), for a mediator that will show God sympathises with him (Job 9:32–35) and for imputed righteousness (Job 9:2). The second theme to consider is how Job seeks to present God as right and man's wisdom is insufficient. He reveals the complexity of God and man's inability to understand his ways (Job 34:10). The book of Job shows us just how limited man's knowledge truly is, and how we in our own power do not possess the resources, insight, or skill-set to understand God.

The third theme is that the Book of Job exists to reveal God's sovereignty over disaster, and goodness in the midst of affliction. God is not only right in what he does, but he is also good. This theme is important because it reveals the righteousness of God in that he is completely justified in all he allows to take place in heaven and on earth. The Book of Job advocates for a good God. And the fourth theme is the total supremacy of God. Many interpret the book by thinking that Satan has had his way – awarding him equal power to God. By observing the dialogue between God and Satan throughout the book, however, it is easy to see who is truly in control.

Liturgical Note

In the Missal, excerpts from the Book of Job are read in September on weekdays of Week 26 (Year 2). It is also read on Sundays in February (Week 5) and in June (Week 12, Year B) - once to meditate on the mystery of suffering when Job asks the big question of what man's life on earth is worth (Job 7:1-4, 6-7) and once, in the Lord's first speech to Job to remind him that he must bow to the creator's wisdom (Job 38:1,8-11).

How is the book structured?

1-2	Prologue
3-31	the Dialogue
3-14	the first series of discourses
15-21	the second series of discourses
22-27	the third series of discourses
28	a hymn in praise of Wisdom
29	conclusion of the Dialogue
32-37	the speeches of Elihu
38:1-42:6	the speeches of the Lord
42:8-17	Epilogue

What is God saying?

Despite its focus on challenges and sufferings, the book of Job speaks a message of great hope to the world. We live in a world longing for comfort and hope, and such hope is found in the sovereign God who sees, who is good, and who is faithful.

Psalms

The Book of Psalms gives us the prayers and hymns of both personal and public worship.

"O God, you search me and you know me. All my ways lie open to your gaze. When I walk or lie down, you go before me: ever the maker and keeper of my days" (Psalm 139:1-3).
This beautiful Psalm is used in the CJM rendition of the Bernadette Farrell song "O God You Search Me". (You can listen to this youtube.com/watch?v=rbiaN2v-GwE.)

The Book of Psalms

The *Book of Psalms* contains prayers and hymns for both private and public worship. Though there are many examples of personal and pious prayers throughout the Old Testament, special place must, all the same, be given to *the Psalms*.

There are altogether 150 Psalms in the book of that name. They are not all of the same type, though all or most of them were probably meant to be sung or accompanied by music. Some psalms are full of joy and praise of God's goodness and others are sorrowful and show a spirit of contrition. Some are occasioned by sickness or bad fortune in life and others were used at weddings or other joyous occasions. Taken as a unity, they all clearly show Israel's great depth of faith and great confidence in Yahweh, even the psalms of great sorrow and lamentation.

The Psalter is the treasury of Israel's hopes and fears, successes and failures, loves and hates. It is an anthology of poetry and, like all anthologies, has all sorts of different poems in it. People sometimes try to group the different kinds of poems together, as follows:

- Hymns – these begin with praise, describe something about God that causes this praise and ends with praise.
- Laments – there are both communal and individual laments. These lay out the reason for the lament and beg for God's help. Nearly all of these psalms end positively with a conviction that God really will help – the only exception being Psalm 88, which ends as miserably as it began.
- Royal Psalms – psalms focussed on the King of Israel.
- Thanksgiving Psalms – these give thanks for something that God has done (as opposed to hymns which are more general expressions of praise).

Who wrote this book?

Many of the psalms in the Psalter are ascribed to David at the start. However, the wide range of historical events referred to in the psalms raises questions about whether David could have written them all. Psalms seem to have been written throughout Israel's history inspired by the memory of King David, a great musician and person of faith.

Numbering of the psalms: The Greek Bible, followed by the Latin version and the Catholic liturgy, does not have the same numbering as the Hebrew Bible, which is followed by the majority of modern Bibles. When the numbering differs, the liturgy always has one figure lower (e.g. Ps 51(50), 51 in Hebrew, 50 in the liturgy).

What kind of book is it?

Scholars have tried to define the various literary genres of the psalms. This is important to understand them – and even more when we use them in prayer.

Liturgical notes

We use the psalms each time Mass is celebrated. A psalm is always used as a response to the First Reading, and many of the acclamations for the entrance and communion are verses from the psalms – and certain psalms are used in modern church music. For example, "The Lord is my Shepherd" Psalm 23 is often used in funeral liturgies.

Since apostolic times, the psalms have remained the staple of Christian community prayer, and we find them already used in the earliest liturgy recorded at Jerusalem (Acts 2:42); and in early liturgical documents such as the *Didache* and *Apostolic Constitutions* in Syria and *Apostolic Tradition* in Rome.

How is the book structured?

The Book of Psalms falls into five sections or books. Each of them ends with a *doxology* or hymn of praise to God (41:13; 72:20; 89:52; 106:48) with the last one ending with a whole Psalm doxology (Psalm 150). Some also argue that Psalms 1-2 act as an introduction to the whole book.

Book 1:1-41	mostly psalms of lament
Book 2:42-72	mostly psalms of lament
Book 3:73-89	equal mix of laments and other types of psalms
Book 4:90-106	contains more hymns and psalms of thanksgiving than laments
Book 5:107-150	this book contains more hymns and psalms of thanksgiving

In addition to the five big collections, there are a number of smaller collections (like the Psalms of Ascent 120-134). It is thought that these smaller collections were gathered together to make the larger collections that we now have. The beginning of the Psalter has more laments and the end more hymns and prayers of thanksgiving. The dead centre of the Psalter is Psalm 88, which is the only Psalm of complete despair. The corner is then turned and much more praise is to be found. It is possible that the Psalter intends to take the reader from lament to praise.

God's people speak to God

The psalms are prayers. While, in most of Scripture we're used to *God speaking to his people*, in the psalms *God's people speak to God***.**

Proverbs

Proverbs, Qoheleth, Sirach and The Wisdom of Solomon offer the proverbial statements and insights of the wise men.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7).

The Book of Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs gives us a good idea of the wisdom literature and the way in which it developed. Proverbs appears as a group of nine collections of sayings, differing in length, style and period. The earliest proverbs may very well go back to the time of Solomon (Chapters 10-22). Two collections (Chapters 30-31) are attributed to foreign wise men, which is an indication of the universalism of wisdom.

The Book is a collection of poems, longer teachings and very short sayings which communicate the wisdom of Ancient Israel. It contains wisdom of all sorts – from folk wisdom, which would have been relevant to everyone's life, to wisdom for people in the royal court. It is a complete smorgasbord of wise sayings to live by. The various literary forms are all means to teach and to impart knowledge to the young, providing answers to the questions of life and laying a firm moral foundation for upright living.

Throughout Proverbs, but especially in chapters 1-9, we find an extended definition of what wisdom is. This wisdom offers everyday advice to people from all sorts of backgrounds. The vast majority of the sayings show no particular connection with religion or faith, being merely a matter of deep good sense, but every now and then, they reveal the conviction that all wisdom comes from the Lord. They reflect a sharp, competitive, cynical, secular society, where compassion for the poor and unfortunate also has its place.

Who wrote this book?

Proverbs is traditionally associated with Solomon, who was David's successor and widely renowned for his great wisdom. There is no doubt that some of these originated with him or his court, but it seems likely that the book grew over time, accumulating wisdom from many different sources and people as well.

What kind of book is it?

This book is part of Wisdom literature – and most of its contents reveal wisdom for everyday life.

The theme of the book

Every person can have right relationships with God and others by following the timeless advice in Proverbs. Its many themes cover work, money, marriage, friendship, family life, perseverance, and pleasing God.

Liturgical note

Catholics use this book in the liturgy because it gives sound teaching and catechesis on how to live a faithful and responsible life as a member of the community of faith in society. The sublime passage on the relationship of Wisdom to God (Proverbs 8:22- 31) provides the first reading for the Solemnity of the Holy Trinity (Year C) in the Spring (just after Pentecost). We also hear readings from the Book of Proverbs on weekdays in the Autumn (Week 25, Year II) which tell us that the wilful wrong-doer is abhorrent to the Lord (Proverbs 3:27-34) in one reading; and begging the Lord to keep falsehood and lies away and asking to be granted only his share of bread to eat (Proverbs 30:5-9) in another.

How is the book structured?

1:1-9:18	essays on how to live a life shaped by wisdom
10:1-22:16	proverbs associated with Solomon
22:17-24:34	a collection of wise sayings
25:1-29:27	proverbs said to be by Solomon, copied during the time of Hezekiah
30:1-33	wise sayings by Agur
31:1-31	wise sayings by King Lemuel, including an ABC of what makes a capable wife.

One of the ways God spoke to us in the past

The Book of Proverbs is one of the "many ways" God spoke to us, leading us to his only Son Jesus.

Ecclesiastes

No one has ever challenged the book of Ecclesiastes' right to the title of the most sceptical book in the Bible. Ecclesiastes, also called Qoheleth (which means teacher), has a unified approach to the value of wisdom: pessimism.

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2).

The Book of Ecclesiastes (or Qoheleth)

This is a strange book. In his meandering and disorderly quest for meaning in life, the author repeatedly rejects all solutions based on traditional morality, not without a trace of cynicism and bitterness. He veers from one extreme to another; he seeks pleasure but realises that lasting satisfaction is unattainable; he searches for wisdom, but denies it any superiority to folly; at one moment he seems to reject the after-life (Ecclesiastes 3:19), at another he seems almost to accept it (Ecclesiastes 12:14). Struck by the futility of life, love, work and wealth, he remains dissatisfied, though he still accepts God as creator, ruler and the goal of human destiny.

The Book of Ecclesiastes poses the question of how to live with meaning. The author expresses the frustration that work, searching for answers and even seeking after pleasure bring little satisfaction and feel empty. Life has problems that are impossible to surmount or comprehend but can be worthwhile if you concentrate on every day joys: time spent with friends and family and in the worship of God.

Who wrote this book?

The author is identified in the book as the "teacher" and, while a few passages hint that the teacher might be a king (particularly Solomon), most scholars opt for the author being an unknown wise teacher from Judah.

What kind of book is it?

This book is part of Wisdom literature. It contains the distilled wisdom of what feels like an elderly and somewhat bad tempered teacher who has seen and experienced what he thinks is the pointlessness of life.

The theme of the book

The themes of Ecclesiastes include: morality (since it is pretty determined to remind us that we are going to die) and time (which is closely related to the theme of death – because death is pretty much running out of time). The themes also include folly and foolishness, suffering, life, consciousness, existence, wisdom and knowledge.

Liturgical Notes

The tone of Ecclesiastes precludes its frequent use in the Catholic liturgy. We find a reading from Ecclesiastes only once at Sunday Mass in August (18th Sunday, Year C) about what a man gains for all his toils. The reading begins with the familiar expression "Vanity of vanities, the Preacher says. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity!" The same reading is used in the weekday missal in the autumn in Week 25 (Year II).
Although it doesn't appear much in the lectionary, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 is often used for funeral masses. I'm including it here since it is such a well-known quote from the Bible:

> *For everything, there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die;*
> *a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;*
> *a time to kill, and a time to heal;*
> *a time to break down, and a time to build up;*
> *a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;*
> *a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace.*

(These words inspired the well-known song *Turn, turn, turn* by The Byrds, which you can listen to on youtube.com/watch?v=W4ga_M5Zdn4.)

How is the book structured?

1:1-2	introduction
1:3-2:26	the search for meaning
3:1-22	human futility
4:1-16	human oppressions
5:1-20	remember God is heaven
6:1-7:29	death comes to us all
8:1-17	the limits of human knowledge
9:1-12:14	finding hope in the reality of life

God is a mystery

God is a mystery, and we cannot solve a mystery; we can only enter into it. That seems to be the position in Ecclesiastes on the God question.

Songs of Solomon

The Song of Songs (The Songs of Solomon) is a series of love poems treasured as an analogy of God's love for his bride Israel.

"My beloved speaks and says to me: Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone" (Song of Songs 2:10-11).

The Book of the Songs of Solomon (also known as the Song of Songs)

This is a beautiful poem which celebrates human love in all its physical dimensions, with a realism which modern poets would not dismiss. It features the developing love of two young lovers, who talk to each other – but the woman also addresses her friends, the "daughters of Jerusalem".

The songs win a place in the Word of God as an energetic affirmation of the most basic of human relationships, a reflection and outpouring of God's own creative love. The text has a long history. It probably takes up old love songs sung on the wedding night of a couple; and it is a meditation on those prophetic texts which celebrate God's love for his people in the imagery of betrothal.

Who wrote this book?

The cycle of songs is attributed to Solomon, who is credited with composing 1005 songs (1 Kings 5:12) but traces of Aramaic and other linguistic usage leave no doubt that the songs date from after the return from exile. The great Rabbi Aqiba, in the early second century CE, saw the songs as an allegory of God's love for his people and his people's love for God.

What kind of book is it?

This book is a book of love poems, and maybe also an allegory of the relationship between God and his people.

The theme of the book

Most importantly, one of the broader themes of the Bible is God's love for his people. The second theme is of God's love in the context of marriage. In other words, really is a book of the joys of love.

Liturgical notes

This book may originally have been a liturgical re-enactment of the drama of new life that takes place each spring and which formed part of the other Near Eastern Semitic religions. The book was read in Israel during the spring festival of Passover.

In Catholic liturgy, the book has not found a comfortable niche, and it is prescribed for Mass only once on 21st December. However, several excerpts from the poems may be used at weddings and Masses for Religious Profession and the Consecration of Virgins, suitably expressing the joy and loving dedication of those events.

How is the book structured?

1:1	the title and description of the book
1:2-2:7	the lovers talk to each other and begin to describe their longing for each other
2:8-17	the woman hears the voice of her lover and declares her love for him
3:1-5	the woman tells her friends how she left her bed to go looking for her lover
3:6-11	a royal wedding procession is described
4:1-5:1	the man describes how beautiful his lover is
5:2-6:3	the woman again tells her friends how she went looking for her lover and they wonder where he has gone
6:4-12	the man describes, once more, the beauty of his lover
6:13-8:4	other observers (probably the daughters of Jerusalem) describe the woman's beauty
8:5-14	the brothers talk of their sister's beauty and she responds about her love for her love

God speaks to us

Each time God uses a song to speak to our hungry hearts, he reminds us that he's a lot bigger than our fears. The Book of the Song of Solomon gives us a biblical look at human love.

Wisdom

The Book of Wisdom (sometimes called the Wisdom of Solomon) is an exposition of the nature of wisdom according to an Alexandrian Jew.

"May God grant me to speak with judgement, and to have thoughts worthy of what I have received; for he is the guide even of wisdom and the corrector of the wise. For both we and our words are in his hand" (Wisdom 7:15-16).

The Book of Wisdom

This book falls into three parts. The first part (chapters 1-5) is addressed to the rulers of the world and emphasises the importance of wisdom for rulers, contrasting the ungodly rulers with the saints who would receive eternal life. The second part of the book (chapters 6-9) contains a speech attributed to King Solomon relating how important wisdom was throughout his life and the third part (chapters 10-19) contrasts the Egyptians and the Israelites, showing how important wisdom was to the history of Israel.

The Book of Wisdom maintains that wisdom dwelt with God from eternity and is given to humanity for its guidance. The worldly may reject wisdom but the humble will (and this is new) reap eternal life. We read "the souls of the virtuous are in the hands of God" (Wisdom 3:1).

Wisdom is an intangible quality, but Solomon describes it as if it were an actual person. Wisdom appears like a woman endowed with all the qualities, like a beloved. There is a list of three times seven attributes, the superlative of perfection. Her spirit is "intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, active, incisive, unsullied, lucid, invulnerable, beneficent, loving to man, steadfast, dependable, unperturbed, almighty, all-surveying, penetrating all intelligent, pure and most subtle . . ." (Wisdom 7:22-23). You can see in these attributes the relationship between Wisdom and God: "she is a reflection of the eternal light, untarnished mirror of God's active power, image of his goodness (Wisdom 7:26).

Who wrote this book?

The attribution to King Solomon is an attempt to cast over itself the mantle of the (allegedly) wisest man of all. The writer is clearly a Jew who has contact with Greek culture and is sympathetic towards it but wishes to uphold his own inheritance.

What kind of book is it?

This is Wisdom literature. The strong emphasis on wisdom and its importance, especially for rulers, is similar to other books from the wisdom tradition, like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The Jewish wisdom writers believed that wisdom is God-given so, if we follow our reason with humility, we will come to God.

The theme of the book

Most themes of wisdom run, as might be expected, all the way through the book.

Liturgical notes

This Book of Wisdom is read in the Liturgy during Week 32 (Year I) as we come to the end of the liturgical year leading up to Advent. It is also read on eight Sundays. Chapter 3 (on a martyr's death) also provides the reading for certain Martyrs; and chapter 2 (on the quest for Wisdom) for some Doctors of the Church. Since Wisdom is seen at work in a life well lived, and especially in the sick and suffering, this book provides readings for anointing of the sick and for funerals and All Souls' Day.

How is the book structured?

1-5 wisdom and human destiny
6-9 Solomon and the quest for wisdom
10-19 a meditation on the Exodus

Wisdom says to us today

Like Solomon, all must seek and pray for wisdom.

Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach)

Ecclesiasticus is a hymn to wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom. Duty to parents, care for the poor, prudence and common sense, mark one who would be wise. There is advice for parents, children, priests, women and on the place of all in God's scheme of things.

"A faithful friend is a sure shelter, whoever finds one has found a rare treasure" (Ecclesiasticus 6:14).

The Book of Ecclesiasticus

The name Ecclesiasticus seems to spring from the Church's frequent use of the work (*ekklesia* = church assembly). This book is also called Sirach or the Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach. A model grandson translated into Greek a book written by his grandfather. The temptations of Hellenism were great, and many young men will have been tempted to abandon their ancestral traditions. This book, which has an old-fashioned attraction because of its middle-class piety, seeks to show that faithfulness to the Law and its practices allows a man to gain true wisdom.

There is a fine hymn to the fear of God as "glory and pride, and happiness and a crown of joyfulness. . . ." (Ecclesiasticus 1:11-20). Wisdom was imparted to us at our mother's breasts: everyone is born with a grain of it. Lady Wisdom introduces her role in creation and in history (Ecclesiasticus 24). She is identified with the Law.

Who wrote this book?

The book is a translation by his grandson of a work written by Jesus ben Sirach carried out in Egypt in the 38th year of the reign of King Euergetes (170-117 BCE)

What kind of book is it?

Ecclesiasticus, also called the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, is a deuterocanonical biblical work (accepted in the Roman Catholic canon but non canonical for Jews and Protestants), an outstanding example of the wisdom genre of religious literature that was popular in the early Hellenistic period of Judaism.

The theme of the book

Like most other major wisdom books (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Wisdom of Solomon), Ecclesiasticus contains practical and moral rules and exhortations, frequently arranged according to subject matter—*e.g.,* hypocrisy, generosity, filial respect. Wisdom, personified as Sophia, or Lady Wisdom, delivers an extended discourse on her eternal relationship with God (Ecclesiasticus 24) and is identified with the Mosaic Law.

Liturgical notes

At Mass, Sirach is read five times on Sundays (including the Feast of the Holy Family on 1st January for its teaching on family life); and on weekdays 7 and 8 (Year 1) just before Lent begins much of the book is read giving people a good sense of the whole book. Its sage advice gives good instruction for the Christian way of life. The prayers provide five of the Canticles of Morning Prayer. It also gives one reading each for ordinations and for weddings.

How is the book structured?

1:24	the search, the source, the rewards, the beginning, and the quest for Wisdom and the discourse of Wisdom
25:1-42:14	practical advice
42:15-43:33	praise of the Creation
44-50	praise of the Ancestors of Old
51	Appendix

What we learn about God

The Book of Ecclesiasticus shows us what life apart from God looks like and the pathway to finding true joy and authentic happiness. It helps people grow spiritually by providing truth, training and teaching from the word of God.