

*How can a mortal be just before God? If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand. . . . He snatches away; who can stop him? Who will say to him, "What are you doing?" God will not turn back his anger. . . . How then can I answer him, choosing my words with him? Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him; I must appeal for mercy to my accuser. If I summoned him and he answered me, I do not believe that he would listen to my voice. For he crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause; he will not let me get my breath, but fills me with bitterness. (Job 9:2-3, 12-18)*

*For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth? So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them? (Ecclesiastes 3:19-22)*

*Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned. (Song of Solomon 8:6-7)*

In the previous chapter we examined the wisdom teachings of the book of Proverbs, which embodies the traditional moral worldview that dominated much of ancient Israelite society. In this chapter we will look at several books that raise questions about this traditional system. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to a review of Job and Ecclesiastes, two books that pose serious challenges to the view of reality that is presupposed in the book of Proverbs. The latter part of the chapter examines a book that stands on the periphery of the wisdom tradition, the Song of Solomon. Though it does not deal explicitly with wisdom themes, the celebration of love that fills the Song of Solomon can be read as a vivid example of Ecclesiastes' call to find enjoyment in the simple pleasures of life.

## THE BOOK OF JOB

From a literary standpoint, the book of Job is the most celebrated book in the Hebrew Bible. Many people have called it one of the greatest works of literature ever produced. Like all great literature, the book of Job combines a deft literary touch with profound reflections on some of the fundamental questions of human existence. Both the literary styling and the ideas of the book are sophisticated and open to a variety of interpretations. This complexity has made the book a fruitful field for scholarly study.

The book of Job offers few clues as to when or where it was written. At the narrative level, the story appears to be set in the land of Edom (southeast of Judah) in the period prior to the rise of Israel as a people. But this setting, like the characters, is a literary fiction. From beginning to end

the story bears the marks of a legend or fable, as evidenced by the book's idealized portrait of Job prior to his losses (1:1-5); the inclusion of scenes from Yahweh's heavenly throne room (1:6-12; 2:1-6); the improbability of Job losing all of his possessions and family members in a single day (1:13-19); the voice of Yahweh resounding from a whirlwind (38:1—41:34); and many similar scenes. Only the most conservative scholars would argue that Job was a historical person who actually experienced the events reported in the book that bears his name. Most believe that the book was written during the exilic or postexilic period when the people of Judah were struggling with questions about the suffering that they had experienced at the hands of the Babylonians and/or the failure of the prophets' predictions of a glorious future after their return from exile. The style and content of the book suggest that the author was a highly skilled member of the elite class of Judah who was dissatisfied with the kind of wisdom teaching that appears in the book of Proverbs. Nothing else is known about the origins of the book.

### EXERCISE 125

Read Job 1:1—2:10; 42:10-17. What is Job like, according to these verses? Why does Yahweh allow him to experience the loss of everything that he has? What do you see as the message of these chapters?

The book of Job combines two very different types of material. The opening and closing sections of the book (1:1—2:13; 42:7-17) follow the standard format of a story and are written in prose. The central part of the book (3:1—42:6) consists of a series of poetic speeches by Job and four friends (and later, Yahweh), interspersed with brief narrative comments that do little more than indicate the identity of the speaker. Scholars have noted a number of contradictions between the narrative chapters and the speeches that make up the core of the book. The difference is especially visible in the character of Job, who accepts his losses patiently in the narrative sections but complains bitterly about his fate in the poetic chapters. The happy ending of the book also seems to undermine much of what Job has said in the poetic chapters (see

below). Most scholars believe that the author took a traditional story about a hero named Job (mentioned briefly in Ezekiel 14:14, 20) and adapted it for his own purposes, adding a series of poetic speeches that gave the account a substantially different message than earlier versions of the story. Modern writers do the same thing when they create fictionalized narratives about King Arthur or various biblical characters. The final product is based on tradition but reflects the author's own creative genius and ideas.

In the present version of the story, the narrative framework provides the interpretive context for the speeches in the poetic chapters. The book opens with a short prologue that introduces Job as a living model of the Deuteronomic worldview that infuses the book of Proverbs. Job is scrupulously righteous and faithful to God, and he enjoys vast wealth and a happy family as a result. When Yahweh expresses his pleasure at the righteous behavior of Job, a character called the Satan insists that this is not surprising, since Yahweh is actually bribing Job to be good by showering him with material blessings (1:9-11; 2:4-5).



Fig. 38.2. William Blake, *Satan Before God*

This Satan (a title that means “the accuser” or “the adversary”) is not the devil of later Jewish and Christian tradition, but a heavenly being who appears in Yahweh’s court along with the other “sons of God” (1:6), an unusual term that perhaps refers to members of Yahweh’s heavenly council.

The suggestion that Job might be serving Yahweh out of less than pure motives highlights a problem that is inherent to Deuteronomic theology. Doesn’t the promise of earthly rewards encourage people to obey Yahweh out of a selfish desire to receive the benefits that he offers? Wouldn’t it be better if humans served Yahweh without regard for personal gain? Or is this beyond the capacity of humans? Is it possible for a person to remain loyal to Yahweh even when this loyalty brings no apparent rewards? The book of Job is devoted to an exploration of these questions.

At the instigation of the Satan, Yahweh sets up a test that he believes will reveal the purity of Job’s motives. He allows the Satan to take away everything that Yahweh has given to Job and to strike his body with a hideous skin disease. From Job’s vantage point, this goes against everything that the Deuteronomic theology has taught him. Though he is perfectly righteous, he is experiencing the curses that are supposed to fall upon the wicked. Yet Job remains faithful to Yahweh, accepting everything that has happened to him and reaffirming his devotion to the deity (2:9-10). His reaction to his suffering proves the Satan wrong: humans are indeed capable of remaining loyal to Yahweh in the absence of any reward.

In its original form, the story probably ended with Job being commended by Yahweh and receiving back double for everything that had been taken from him, as in the closing verses of the book (42:10-17). This version of the story affirms the validity of the Deuteronomic theology, since the narrative ends with the righteous Job once again enjoying the material blessings of Yahweh. The message seems to be that the sufferings that righteous men and women experience from time to time are not violations of the Deuteronomic worldview, but rather tests by which Yahweh proves the faithfulness of his servants. The character of Job serves as a model for the way Yahweh’s followers should respond to these circumstances, namely, with patience and unwavering loyalty.

## EXERCISE 126

Read Job 6:1-30; 8:1—9:35; 15:1—16:21; 27:1-23; 38:1-21; 40:1-14; 42:1-6. What explanations do Job’s friends give for his sufferings? What is Job’s view of his situation? How does Yahweh respond?

The speeches that fill the central part of the book are less optimistic about the way life works. Like the narrative chapters, they raise important questions about the Deuteronomic worldview, but their criticism is more profound and sustained. Where the narrative chapters tie up everything in a neat package by the end of the story, the speech chapters are more open-ended, leaving the reader with serious questions about the validity of the Deuteronomic explanation of human experience.

The challenge to the Deuteronomic worldview comes from three directions. The first, evident in the speeches of Job’s friends, is somewhat subtle and ironic; the second, found in some of Job’s speeches, is more blatant; the third, seen in Yahweh’s speeches, questions the very foundations of Deuteronomic thought.

1. *Job’s friends.* Job’s friends seek to make sense of his experience with the aid of a classic Deuteronomic view



Fig. 38.3. William Blake, *Job Rebuked by His Friends*

of reality. Though the narrative says that they came to Job to “console and comfort him” (2:11), their words are anything but consoling. From their Deuteronomic standpoint, Job’s sufferings are a mark of divine displeasure. Again and again they assert that Job must have done something horrible to offend Yahweh, since a righteous deity would not inflict such terrible sufferings upon a righteous man. In their more generous moments, they suggest that Job might have forgotten about some deed by which he or a member of his family might have provoked Yahweh to anger. They urge Job to search his memory and uncover the fatal offense so that he can confess his sins to Yahweh and seek his forgiveness. In their less charitable moments, they accuse Job of willfully hiding his sins until Yahweh at last afflicted him with suffering in order to pressure him to repent. Job’s only hope now is to confess his hidden sins and that Yahweh will forgive him before it is too late.

From a literary standpoint, the content of these speeches is deeply ironic, since the reader knows that the accusations leveled by Job’s friends are untrue. The opening chapters state clearly that Job is a righteous man who is suffering through no fault of his own. In fact, Job comes across as more righteous than Yahweh, who does not hesitate to treat Job as a human guinea pig in a heavenly experiment designed to prove his point to the Satan. Taken as a whole, the narrative suggests that Job’s friends are wrong on two counts: Yahweh does not always treat people as their actions deserve, and human sufferings are not invariably a sign of divine displeasure. Both of these points represent a frontal attack on traditional Deuteronomic thinking.

2. *Job’s speeches.* Job’s speeches exhibit all of the emotions that one might expect from a person who has suffered such monumental losses in such a short time. At first he is simply consumed with grief, lamenting the day he was born and asking God to take his life. When his friends begin to raise questions about his conduct, his language shifts to angry self-defense. Again and again he protests his innocence, arguing that he has done nothing to offend the deity, either unknowingly or in secret. If anyone is to blame, he says, it is Yahweh. While his friends cling to their belief in the righteousness of God, Job argues that the deity has acted unjustly and abused

his power by sending suffering upon a righteous man while ignoring the guilt of people who deserve to be punished. The regular use of the impersonal titles “God”



Fig. 38.4. William Blake, *Job’s Despair*

and “the Almighty” in place of the personal name Yahweh reinforces this image of a powerful but distant deity. Several times Job calls on “the Almighty” to come down from heaven and explain his actions. Finally, he takes a solemn oath inviting the deity to evaluate his actions and to inflict various punishments upon him if he has indeed sinned (31:1-40). Clearly Job is confident that Yahweh will find no legitimate basis for acting against him.

Like the speeches of his friends, Job’s words overflow with irony. Unlike the reader, Job can only guess at the reasons for his suffering, but his guesses are more accurate than he knows. His assessment of his own conduct is correct according to the opening chapter, and his accusations of divine injustice are closer to the truth than are the speeches of his friends who are intent on defending the righteousness of Yahweh. The reader knows that there is in fact a purpose behind Job’s sufferings, but that purpose cannot be deduced from a traditional Deuteronomic theology. From a Deuteronomic standpoint, Yahweh’s actions do appear to be unfair and unjust. Thus Job’s speeches shift the focus of the accusation from Job to Yahweh. Yahweh is on trial in the book of Job as much as Job himself.

3. *Yahweh’s speeches.* The sudden appearance of Yahweh’s voice out of a whirlwind in chapter 38 contrasts

sharply with the deity's silence throughout the preceding thirty-five chapters when Job and his friends were arguing over the reasons for Job's sufferings. Yahweh has clearly been listening to their conversation, since he is aware of Job's accusations against him. Yet when he finally decides



Fig. 38.5. William Blake, *The Lord Answering Job out of the Whirlwind*

to speak, it is not to explain why he has allowed so much pain to fall upon Job and his family. Instead, he assaults Job with a barrage of questions highlighting the vast gulf that exists between his supernatural power and knowledge and Job's puny humanity. Again and again he emphasizes the amount of power that is required to create and direct the universe and the amount of knowledge that he possesses as its maker. Job, by contrast, understands none of these things. Who is he to challenge his maker?

In the end, Job receives no answer to his questions about the reason for his sufferings. All he can do is admit how foolish he has been to question the conduct of such a mighty deity (42:1-6; see also 40:3-5). The message is clear: humans are incapable of understanding why things happen as they do, including why humans suffer. The

point is reinforced by Yahweh's surprising insistence that Job has spoken more rightly about him than his friends, who have incurred the deity's wrath with their attempts to make sense of Job's sufferings through the lens of traditional Deuteronomic theology (42:7-9). The author's rejection of Deuteronomic thinking could hardly be clearer.

Thus the book of Job offers a very different understanding of reality than the book of Proverbs. Where Proverbs insists that certain forms of conduct invariably lead to certain outcomes, Job argues that the ways of Yahweh are ultimately beyond human comprehension. Even the most devout servants of Yahweh experience sufferings for reasons that are known only to the deity. Those who claim that there is a consistent relationship between proper conduct and material success are misleading the people whom they hope to instruct. Humans should honor and obey Yahweh because he is an awesome deity who deserves their service, not because they might benefit from doing so. This is the true meaning of the proverbial expression that associates wisdom with the fear of Yahweh (Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Micah 6:9).

## ECCLESIASTES

The book of Ecclesiastes claims to present the wise observations of an old man who reigned in Jerusalem as king of Israel (1:1, 12). The opening verse suggests that the author is King Solomon ("the son of David, king in Jerusalem"), who was renowned for his wisdom (see chapter 37). This impression is reinforced by a passage in chapter 2 that speaks repeatedly of the narrator's vast wealth, which also agrees with the biblical portrait of Solomon (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11; compare 1 Kings 3:20-28). Nonetheless, only the



Fig. 38.6. “So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all its vanity and a chasing after wind” (Ecclesiastes 1:14).

most conservative scholars take these references seriously. Elsewhere in the book the author speaks as a subject of the king (8:2-5; 10:4-7, 16-17, 20) who is aware of the abuses perpetrated by the wealthy and powerful but is unable to do anything to stop them (4:1; 5:8; 8:9). In addition, the Hebrew style of the book is clearly postexilic, which rules out authorship by Solomon or any other king. The depiction of the author as a king of Israel in the opening chapters of the book appears to be a literary device designed to allow the author to explore the extreme case of his thesis, just as we witnessed in the book of Job.

So when and by whom was the book written? Many of the ideas in Ecclesiastes have parallels in Greek philosophy, a fact that has led most scholars to favor a date in the fourth or third century B.C.E. when Palestine was under Greek rule. The Hebrew text calls the author *Qoheleth* (rendered as *Ecclesiastes* in the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible),

a term that is often translated as “preacher” or “teacher” (1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10). The meaning of the term is uncertain, though it comes from a Hebrew verb that means “to assemble” or “to gather.” Some scholars have suggested that the term identifies the author as the head of a wisdom school who “gathered” students around him to learn, while others have speculated that it refers to his activity of “assembling” and reflecting on wise sayings that led eventually to the production of this book. All agree that the author was a member of the Jerusalem elite who was thoroughly familiar with the wisdom traditions of Israel. This fact, together with several verses that seem to offer advice to young men (9:7-10; 11:9; 12:1), has led most scholars to conclude that the book was written by a teacher who instructed young aristocrats in a form of wisdom that involved critical reflection on the traditional teaching that underlies the book of Proverbs. Apparently his unorthodox teachings attracted both supporters and critics, since the book contains later editorial additions that praise the author (12:9-10), along with sayings that attempt to give the book a more orthodox tone (12:11-14).

### EXERCISE 127

Read Ecclesiastes 1:1—3:22; 6:1-12; 8:14—9:12; 12:1-8. What is the author's view of the human attempt to find meaning in life? Why does he hold this view? What kind of conduct does he recommend?

As with the book of Job, Ecclesiastes is framed around the story of a man who claims to have done precisely what the book of Proverbs recommends, devoting his life to the pursuit of wisdom and the avoidance of folly (1:13, 17; 2:3, 12; 7:23-25; 8:16). According to Proverbs, this should have brought him a life of success and happiness. At one level, this goal was realized—the author claims to have possessed vast wealth and to have used this wealth to experience all of the pleasures that money could buy (2:1-10). At a deeper level, however, the author was profoundly disappointed by the results of his quest. Nothing that he experienced brought him lasting happiness. The search for wisdom produced only trouble and sorrow (1:18), since it made him more aware of the dark side of life—its inequities, its ambiguities, its ultimate unfairness.

His effort to find pleasure in material things likewise proved futile, since even his best experiences proved to be transitory, leaving no lasting effects. Contrary to the book of Proverbs, he came to regard the search for wisdom as “an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with” (1:13). Based on his experience, all human activity is simply “vanity and a chasing after wind” (1:14; 2:1, 15-17).

This emphasis on the vanity of human activity lies at the heart of the message of Ecclesiastes. The term *vanity* is used to sum up the author’s discovery that life seems to have no obvious goal or purpose. The book begins with a series of poetic reflections on the cyclical nature of the natural world, where everything that transpires is only a repetition of similar events from the past, producing no lasting change (1:2-11). From here the author turns to an examination of human experience, where he finds a similar pattern at work. No matter how hard people labor to improve their fortune in life, they cannot hold



Fig. 38.7. “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2).

on to what they have accumulated; in the end they must die and leave their possessions for others to enjoy and possibly squander (2:18-21; 4:4-7; 6:1-2). Regardless of how wise or famous a person might have been during life, one is eventually forgotten (2:16; 9:5-6, 13-16). Even kings and rulers make no lasting impact on the world (2:12; 4:13-16). Instead, life revolves in cycles like the seasons of nature, with an appropriate time for every type of activity (3:1-8).

But this is only part of the story. To an honest observer, life is patently unfair, full of evils and injustice. Those who hold power routinely abuse those below them and experience no evident consequences, while the oppressed are unable to find a way out of their sufferings (4:1; 5:8; 8:9). Those who possess riches are never satisfied with what they have, while the poor are unable to enjoy the good things of life (5:10-12; 6:3-9). Those who pursue wisdom are rendered unhappy by what they learn, while fools are able to laugh and enjoy themselves and even obtain positions of power (7:2-6; 10:5-6). Those who live wicked lives are honored by their neighbors, while the righteous often receive no reward for their devotion to God (8:10, 14). Chance seems to be the most important factor in determining how people fare in life (9:11-12). If there is any kind of divine plan or moral order guiding the universe, it lies beyond the ability of the wisest minds to figure out (6:12; 7:14, 23-24; 8:6-7, 16-17; 11:5-6). In the end, everyone meets the same fate in death, regardless of how they have behaved in this life (9:1-3).

Despite its rather bleak view of life, the purpose of Ecclesiastes is not to promote despair. The author admits that some of his observations and experiences caused him to hate life (2:17-18; 4:2-3), but he never mentions suicide as a possible alternative, as do similar Greek texts. Instead, he seeks to provide advice for living in such a dark and troubled world. Though he believes that traditional wisdom teaching has gone too far in its claims to discern a consistent moral order behind the universe, he is not ready to abandon it entirely. Several times he commends the value of wisdom (2:13-14; 7:5-6; 8:1; 9:16—10:2; 10:10, 12), and the book includes a number of wise sayings that would have been quite at home in the book of Proverbs (2:14; 4:5-6, 9-13; 5:3, 7, 12; 7:1-13, 19-21; 8:1; 9:17—10:4; 10:8—11:4). At one point the author even claims that wisdom is a gift from God (2:26), though

he also warns against being overly zealous in pursuing it (7:16). Even wisdom produces no lasting benefits and can lead to increased troubles for those who chase after it (1:17-18; 2:15-16; 6:8; 7:16).

From a practical standpoint, Ecclesiastes' advice about how to live wisely in such a dark and troubled world can be summed up in two simple yet profound statements.

1. *Enjoy the simple pleasures of life.* People who attempt to make sense of life and understand the order of the universe are simply wasting their time and energy. That path leads only to frustration and trouble. The same is true for those who work hard to get ahead in life; they can never be satisfied with what they have. Instead of striving to gain things that are beyond their ability to achieve, humans should take pleasure in the simple gifts that God supplies every day: productive labor, good food and drink, a wife and family, fresh clothes, friendships, and similar experiences (2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 4:9-12; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:9). Those whom God has blessed with wealth and possessions may enjoy these as well, as long as they keep in mind that all of these things are ultimately vanity

(5:19—6:2). In the end, nothing can bring lasting happiness, but life will be easier if one learns to find enjoyment in the simple things of life instead of chasing after things that cannot ultimately satisfy or dwelling on the negative aspects of human existence.

2. *Remember God.* Like the other wisdom books, Ecclesiastes recognizes that humans are ultimately accountable to God for their conduct. Like Job, the author rejects the idea that humans can understand God's ways, including the Deuteronomic belief that the judgments of God can be discerned in the material events of life. But he still clings to the belief that God is a righteous judge who will reward the righteous and punish the wicked (2:26; 3:17; 7:17; 8:12-13; 11:9), unless these verses are later additions designed to tame the author's raw skepticism. How and when he envisioned this judgment taking place are unclear, since he clearly rejects any idea of an afterlife (3:19-21; 9:1-6). But he seems to agree with other wisdom teachers that life will turn out better for those who fear God and do their best to avoid incurring his displeasure (3:14; 5:1-7; 8:12-13).

Clearly the form of wisdom that we find in the book of Ecclesiastes has little in common with what we saw in Proverbs. Its view of the universe is closer to that of Job, though the author's emphasis on the vanity of human activities and his advice about finding enjoyment in the simple pleasures of life distinguish his book from others in the wisdom tradition. Apparently the wisdom tradition in ancient Israel was broad enough to include a variety of ideas about the deity's relation to the world of humans and the way in which people should live. Such formalized explorations of diverse viewpoints were probably limited to the wisdom schools that served the elites, while the illiterate masses continued to rely on traditional proverbial wisdom. Yet the sheer presence of these diverse books in the Hebrew canon indicates that the elites of ancient Israel felt no compulsion to adopt a uniform viewpoint on matters of vital importance to their faith.

## SONG OF SOLOMON

The book that Hebrew tradition identified as "the Song of Songs, which is Solomon's" (1:1) is a collection of erotic love poetry interspersed with snippets of first-person



Fig. 38.8. The book of Ecclesiastes encourages its readers to find pleasure in the simple things of life, such as family and good food.





Fig. 38.9. “Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead. . . . Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies” (Song 4:1, 5).

narrative material that give the illusion of a loose story line. In actuality, most scholars view the text as a collection of love poems from different times and places that has little or no narrative unity.

Within the Hebrew Bible, the Song of Solomon stands in a class of its own. Most textbooks treat it together with the wisdom material because of its repeated references to King Solomon (Song of Solomon 1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11-12), who was regarded as the “patron saint” of wisdom literature (see chapter 37). The book’s positive view of romantic and sexual love also has parallels in some of the wisdom materials (Proverbs 4:5-9; 5:15-19; 8:17-19; Ecclesiastes 9:9). Yet nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible do we find anything like the emotionally charged expressions of physical desire that permeate the Song of Solomon. The fact that many of these love poems were written from a woman’s point of view only adds to the uniqueness of the book. Apparently the prac-

tice of arranging marriages and placing strict controls on women’s sexuality in ancient Palestine did not preclude the development of literary forms that gave voice to the romantic and sexual longings that stirred the hearts and bodies of women and men alike. In fact, history shows that romantic poetry often flourishes most vividly in societies where sexual fulfillment is tightly regulated.

The origins of the Song of Solomon are shrouded in mystery. The timeless ideas and language of the book offer few clues about when or by whom the book was written. The meaning of the reference to King Solomon in 1:1 is unclear, but few scholars take it seriously as evidence for authorship. Most view the book as a postexilic work due to the presence of a few words that have Persian or Greek roots, but these could have been added during the final editing of the book. In fact, the love poems on which the Song of Solomon is based could have been composed at virtually any time during the history of Palestine, and not necessarily within Yahwistic circles. Similar language is found in the love poetry of Mesopotamia and Egypt, including several poems that depict the love between a god and a goddess. The highly poetic language of the book would seem to demand an elite education, but even this presumption is hard to verify, since we have no popular love poetry from Palestine with which to compare it. Fortunately, the book is timeless enough to be understood and enjoyed by people who know nothing of its historical origins.

### EXERCISE 128

Read Song of Solomon 2:3-13; 3:1-5; 4:1-15; 5:2-16; 8:1-7. What images and feelings do these poems arouse in you as you read them? What does their inclusion in the Hebrew Bible tell you about the people who compiled the biblical canon?

The Song of Solomon is a complex work that strikes many first-time readers as disjointed and confusing. The book is framed around a series of poetic speeches by a woman and a man who are deeply in love with one another. The transition from one speaker to the other is not always clear, since the Hebrew text contains no markers to indicate which lines are being spoken by which

character. (The headings that are used in many contemporary translations to mark the identity of the speakers are not part of the original text.) Fortunately, the pronouns and poetic imagery are clear enough to identify the speaker in most cases.

Scholars disagree about whether the book has a coherent story line. Many view the book as a random collection of unrelated speeches that were compiled into their present form by a later editor with little or no regard for narrative unity. Others point to various features that suggest that the book was composed as a drama with the stage directions and character identifications missing. For example, the speeches of the two lovers are interrupted from time to time by the comments of an unnamed group that resembles the chorus in a Greek play (1:4; 5:9; 6:1, 13; 8:5, 8-9). The female speaker also turns aside several times to address a group called the “daughters of Jerusalem,” which may or may not be the same as the “chorus” (1:5; 2:7; 3:5; 3:10; 5:8, 16; 8:4; compare 3:11).



Fig. 38.10. He Qi's *The Song of Solomon* conveys the delight and desire the two lovers express for each other in the Song of Solomon.

Many scholars have claimed to discern a rough plotline in the book that centers on the attempts of a young man and woman to see or spend time with one another and the resultant success or failure of their actions (2:8-13; 3:1-4, 6-11; 5:1-7; 6:1-3, 11-12; 8:5). Scholars disagree over whether these isolated bits of narrative constitute a genuine plotline or are simply the illusory by-product of a random linkage of diverse materials. Whatever the original intention, these narrative fragments have enticed countless later readers to make sense of the poem by filling in the gaps between the various scenes.

From a literary standpoint, the most striking feature of the Song of Solomon is the mixture of figurative language and visual imagery that runs throughout the poem. Both of the lovers use long strings of metaphors and similes to describe the physical charms of their partner (4:1-7, 11-15; 5:10-16; 6:4-7; 7:1-7). Many of these comparisons sound bizarre to contemporary readers, but ancient audiences would have understood what they meant. Metaphorical imagery is also common in passages that describe the characters' passionate longing for one another, including several that speak of real or imagined sexual encounters (1:2-4, 12-17; 2:3-6; 3:1-4; 4:16—5:5; 7:8-13; 8:1-3). Some of the narrative fragments are so dense with poetic imagery that it can be hard to decide whether the story should be taken literally or figuratively (1:5-7; 2:8-15; 5:2-7; 6:11-12). Most of the imagery in the speeches is drawn from the world of agriculture, and the bulk of the action takes place in rural settings as well. Scholars disagree over whether this means that the poems actually originated in a rural context or whether that, too, is part of the literary imagery of the poem.

Many modern readers wonder how such a frankly erotic book came to be included in the Hebrew canon. The history of the book is obscure, but its association with Solomon probably played a role in its acceptance. By the turn of the era, Jewish rabbis were reading the book as an allegorical reflection on the love that unites Israel and Yahweh, and Christians later developed a similar reading that identified the two lovers as Christ and the church. Not until the modern period did scholars rediscover the original meaning of the text.

If there is any overarching message to be found in the Song of Solomon, it lies in the poem's honest depictions of the joys and pains of romantic love and sexual desire.

Modern readers are often surprised to note that the book offers no judgment on the feelings and behaviors of the two lovers. Their deep attraction to one another, their joyous celebration of one another's bodies, and their repeated efforts to find satisfaction for their sexual desires are portrayed as perfectly normal aspects of human experience. Though the Torah does attempt to limit female sexual activity to marriage, the Hebrew Bible never portrays sex or bodily pleasure as inherently wrong or evil. The Western tradition of regarding the body as a channel of temptation and sin is rooted in Greek philosophical ideas. The Hebrew tradition, by contrast, views the body as an essential part of human identity (see chapter 13). Thus the Hebrew Bible views love and sex as inherently good, despite the aches and pains that they sometimes bring. Nowhere do we see this belief more clearly displayed than in the Song of Solomon.

In the end, the Song of Solomon is nothing more nor less than a celebration of the power of human love. The force that unites two lovers is so powerful and sacred that the prophets used it as a model for the covenant relationship between Yahweh and his people. In this book, however, it is the depth of human love that is regarded with awe and wonder. A famous passage near the end of the book (8:6-7) presents an eloquent reflection on the surpassing value and power of human love.

For love is strong as death,  
 passion fierce as the grave.  
 Its flashes are flashes of fire,  
 a raging flame.  
 Many waters cannot quench love,  
 neither can floods drown it.  
 If one offered for love  
 all the wealth of his house,  
 it would be utterly scorned.

## CONCLUSION

The books of Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon appear to have originated within the same elite circle of wisdom teachers that produced the book of Proverbs. Yet

they offer a markedly different view of life than we saw in Proverbs. Where Proverbs envisions the universe as a tidy place that operates according to a fixed moral system, Job and Ecclesiastes question the ability of humans to know whether such a moral order exists. Where Proverbs voices confidence that those who follow its teachings will do well in life, Job and Ecclesiastes are pessimistic about the presence of any link between human behavior and material success. Where Proverbs urges its readers to pursue wisdom above all else, Ecclesiastes sees the pursuit of wisdom as a waste of time. Where Proverbs counsels self-discipline and control of one's passions, Song of Solomon depicts two lovers giving free reign to their passionate love for one another.

This brief overview of the wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible highlights one of the most important and overlooked characteristics of the wisdom movement in ancient Palestine—its openness to diversity. By encouraging people to study the universe for themselves and draw their own conclusions about the way life operates, the wisdom teachers of ancient Palestine ensured that the religion of Yahwism would remain alive and open to new insights rather than hardening into a rigid system of adherence to a fixed set of religious ideas. To this day, Judaism, the formal successor of Yahwism, has never developed any creed or statement of faith that one must affirm in order to be a Jew. Instead, Jews are taught to develop their own understanding of life through reasoned reflection on their Scriptures, their traditions, and the world around them. For this they owe a debt of gratitude to the wisdom teachers who trained their ancestors to use their God-given minds to grapple seriously with the difficult questions surrounding human existence. Without them, both Judaism and Christianity might have developed into very different religions than we know today.

## EXERCISE 129

Think about people in your life whom you would regard as wise. What characteristics would you say they have in common? In what ways do they differ?