

# Job and Ecclesiastes as (postmodern?) wisdom in revolt

## Authors:

Leon A. Roper<sup>1</sup>  
Alphonso Groenewald<sup>1</sup>

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Old Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, South Africa

## Note:

Leon A. Roper is a research associate of Prof. Alphonso Groenewald, Department of Old Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria. The article represents a reworked version of aspects from the MPhil thesis (University of Cambridge) of Leon A. Roper.

## Correspondence to:

Alphonso Groenewald

## Email:

alphonso.groenewald@up.ac.za

## Postal address:

Private Bag X20, Hatfield 0028, South Africa

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This article will be concerned with the question whether the books of Job and Ecclesiastes can be viewed as (postmodern) wisdom in revolt or not. Three questions underlie this title: firstly, are the books of Job and Ecclesiastes wisdom books? Secondly, if so, is their wisdom revolutionary in nature? And thirdly, are there any similarities between the thoughts of Job and Ecclesiastes on the one hand and that of postmodern thinkers on the other hand? It will be argued that there are various similarities to be cited between the ideas of the ancient wisdom writers of Job and Ecclesiastes and more recent postmodern thinkers. This does not, however, necessarily justify a postmodern tag for the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, but points to a similarity in thought development between the ancient societies of Job and Ecclesiastes and the present-day societies. Such similarities are viewed as a clear indication of the meaningful role which Old Testament wisdom, or wisdom in revolt for that matter, can play in current intellectual and theological debates.

## Introduction

The title of this article suggests that it will be concerned with the question whether the books of Job and Ecclesiastes can be viewed as postmodern wisdom in revolt or not. When the title is, however, examined more closely, it becomes clear that there are really three questions underlying it: firstly, can the books of Job and Ecclesiastes be viewed as wisdom books? Secondly, if they are considered to be wisdom books, is their wisdom revolutionary in nature? And thirdly, are there any similarities between the thoughts of Job and Ecclesiastes on the one hand and that of postmodern thinkers on the other hand? In this article an attempt will be made to shed some light on these three questions, starting off with the question about the wisdom classification of the books under discussion.

## Wisdom?

Although most scholars accept that the wisdom corpus of the Old Testament mainly consists of the books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes as well as a few wisdom Psalms (Saur 2012:9–10),<sup>1</sup> not all scholars are in agreement over the fact that Job and Ecclesiastes can be classified as 'wisdom' (Clines 1989:ix). Scholars like Volz (1921:1–2), Westermann (1978:27–39),<sup>2</sup> Weiser (1959:9–11), Richter (1959:16–20),<sup>3</sup> and Pope (1973:xxiii–xxxiii),<sup>4</sup> have, for instance, strongly questioned the wisdom character of the book of Job, mainly on the basis of the lack of instruction and proverbial material they find in the book. Scholars have also questioned the wisdom character of the book of Ecclesiastes.<sup>5</sup> In the light of this scepticism about the wisdom character of the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, it has become necessary to once again consider the relation of each of these books to the general wisdom tradition of their time.

## Job

Dell (1991:63–88) argues that the book of Job does not display much evidence of mainline wisdom form, content and context.<sup>6</sup> She substantiates her argument by comparing the book of Job to traditional forms, contexts and ideas to be found in the other mainstream Israelite wisdom writings namely Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon and some 'wisdom' Psalms.

1.Although, according to Crenshaw (2010:8), 'it may seem that the scope of Israelite wisdom is beyond dispute, that is not the case.'

2.Westermann (1978:29) argued that the literary genre of Job is a dramatisation of a lament.

3.Richter (1959:131) characterises the genre of Job as that of a judicial process. The all-pervasive basis of the drama of Job is the genres taken from law.

4.According to Pope (1973:xxxi) 'there is no single classification appropriate to the literary form of the Book of Job. It shares something of the characteristics of all the literary forms that have been ascribed to it, but it is impossible to classify it exclusively as didactic, dramatic, epic, or anything else.'

5.See Crenshaw (1987:23–28); Murphy ([1981] 1988:xxvi–xxxii) and Whybray (1989:5–7). According to Bartholomew (2009:61) 'part of the problem with interpreting Ecclesiastes is that there is no consensus about its genre.'

6.With regard to Dell's interpretation, see Volgger (2007:39–44).

Estes (2005:17) supports Dell's claim when he suggests that Job, as a piece of literature, is unique in its form and does not seem to fit into any single genre. This book is an astonishing mixture of almost every kind of literature in the Old Testament: It combines proverbs, hymns, laments, nature poems, legal rhetoric, and other literary forms 'into a unified composition that has no precise equal' (Estes 2005:17). LaSor (1996) understands the book as follows:

So important, in fact, is this book's genre that it must not be fit into any preconceived mold. It does weep with complaint, argue with disputation, teach with didactic authority, excite with comedy, sting with irony, and relate human experience with epic majesty. But above all, Job is unique – the literary gift of an inspired genius. (p. 487)

With regard to form, Dell (1991:64–68) points out that the book of Job does not contain a predominance of mainline wisdom forms such as proverbs, onomastica or lists, 'autobiographical narratives', didactic elements and hymns to wisdom. She thus maintains that much of the material in other 'wisdom' books either varies considerably from what is to be found in Job or does not appear in Job at all. On the basis of this observation Dell (1991:72) concludes that the book of Job cannot be characterised as 'wisdom' in terms of the major forms used in the book. Other authors such as Crenshaw (1995:481–482) and Von Rad (1970:267–292), however, disagree with this conclusion and claim that the book of Job consists of sufficient wisdom forms to be classified as 'wisdom'. Crenshaw (2010:10), for example, argues that an important wisdom literary form to be found in Job is the *disputation* or *dialogue* which normally includes a mythological introduction and conclusion, a dialogue part and a divine resolution. He points out that all three these formal features are to be found in the book of Job as well as in comparable Babylonian discussions of the problem of undeserved suffering such as *The Babylonian Theodicy*. Von Rad (1970:58–60) again argues that Job can be regarded as wisdom literature on the basis of the four 'long didactic poems' to be found in the speeches of the friends, the dialogue character of most of the book and the didactic character of the narrative parts.

In terms of content, Dell (1991:73–83) also points to some discrepancies between the ideas of Job and those of the other wisdom books. She questions whether the book can be seen as strictly 'wisdom' in its content in the same sense as the other wisdom books. This conclusion is reached by comparing the message of Job to six prominent themes found in the other wisdom books, namely, (1) order in the world, (2) the ambiguity of events and of the meaning of life, (3) punishment and reward, (4) life as the supreme good, (5) confidence in wisdom and (6) personification of wisdom. Dell (1991:83) is of the opinion that Job clearly provides a critique of the wisdom exercise by either reworking these themes or strongly opposing them. This leads her to conclude that the book of Job questions the wisdom tradition to such an extent that it breaks outside its bounds. Again there are, however, a number of authors who do not agree with this conclusion and who argue that, although the content of the book of Job may in many ways differ from that of other 'wisdom'

books, the book can still be regarded as 'wisdom literature'.<sup>7</sup> Murphy (1996:33–34), for instance, classifies the book of Job as 'wisdom' on the basis of the identification of the following six wisdom themes that correspond with themes in the other wisdom books, namely, (1) a preoccupation with creation, (2) the importance of the name or memory, (3) life as onerous (4) the traditions of the fathers, (5) personification of wisdom and (6) the problem of retribution. Clines (1989) concludes that:

even though the Book of Job dissents from the leading theological statement of Proverbs ... it more than earns its place beside it within the corpus of 'wisdom' literature for its implicit instruction on how to live rightly when suffering. (p. ixii)

With regard to context, Dell (1991:83–88) continues to point out significant differences between the book of Job and the other mainstream wisdom books. She for instance, points to the fact that, in terms of authorship, the book of Job contains no traditional attribution to any well-known wise person such as Solomon as is the case with Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Wisdom of Solomon. This lack of identification with any traditional wisdom school paired with the above mentioned critique of the wisdom tradition, leads Dell (1991:87) to conclude that Job is very much on the edge of the wisdom context. Although this 'outsider-position' of the book of Job is thoroughly acknowledged by most scholars, authors like Clines (1989), maintains:

Even though there may be no common social background for the books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, it is still instructive to compare them theologically, since intellectually they are closer to one another than to any other books of the Hebrew Bible. (p. ix)

In concluding on the wisdom classification of the book of Job, we want to agree with Dell (1991:87–88) who argues that, in terms of a narrow definition, the book of Job fails as a 'wisdom' text, but, in terms of a broader definition, it is essential to include the book in the wisdom literature of Israel.<sup>8</sup> This inclusion in the broad sense of the word is pleaded on the grounds of the realisation that the book of Job springs from the same intellectual and spiritual quest as the other wisdom books.

## Ecclesiastes

Although there generally seems to be less doubt amongst scholars about the wisdom character of the book of Ecclesiastes, scholars like Whybray (1989:5–7) and Murphy (1988:129) have also raised some questions about the wisdom classification of this book.<sup>9</sup> Whybray (1989:7–12) maintains that it cannot be argued convincingly that Qoheleth (the

7. See, for example, Saur (2012:76) who infers as follows: 'An zahlreichen Stellen lässt sich erkennen, dass die Reden des Hiobbuches auf die weisheitliche Grundform des Spruches zurückgreifen.'

8. In this regard Schmid (1966:185–186) infers as follows: 'Unsere Untersuchung hat immer wieder gezeigt, wie unpräzis und offen der Begriff „Weisheit“ ist ... Weisheitliches Denken äußert sich in den verschiedensten Literaturformen ... Daß das Hiobbuch wesentlich mitgeprägt ist von weisheitlichen Gedanken, kann nicht verleugnet werden.'

9. Murphy (1988:129, 131) comments as follows: 'The designation of the proper literary genre of the book of Ecclesiastes still escapes us ... In conclusion, one may say that no single genre, even diatribe, is adequate as a characterization of Qoheleth's book. This seems due to the fact that it is the publication of his teachings, which would have embraced many different genres of writing.' Cf. also Whybray (1989:7): 'The book is also marked by a degree of abstraction which is not to be found in the earlier wisdom books.'

writer of Ecclesiastes) was a 'wisdom writer' in the sense that he belonged to an exclusive guild of 'wise men' which had preserved its corporate identity throughout the centuries since the time of the early Judean monarchy. He prefers to speak of an 'intellectual tradition' in Israel and argues that the placing of Ecclesiastes within the narrow confines of a 'wisdom tradition' may prove to be a false move which conduces to a misunderstanding of Ecclesiastes's position in the history of thought. Whybray (1989:8) consequently regards Qoheleth as an independent thinker who provides a critical examination, not just of a distinct 'wisdom tradition', but of his own native religious tradition, enshrined in the Jewish scriptures.

However, for authors like Dell (1991:143), Ecclesiastes can be viewed as standing closer to the mainstream wisdom tradition than a book like Job, especially in terms of form and social setting. Dell (1991:139) points to the predominance of wisdom forms in Ecclesiastes, even though they are used in an unorthodox way. She identifies three principal smaller genres in the book which all correspond with traditional wisdom forms. The first main smaller genre identified by Dell (1991:139) is that of the wisdom saying which abounds, for example, in Chapter 7 and 9:17–10:1 (cf. also Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2004:480–483). Here the author is thought to utilise a traditional wisdom form of which he then shows the shortcomings by a remark of his own. Secondly the author employs the smaller genre of instruction in, for example, Chapter 7:13–14. According to Dell (1991:139–140) these instruction passages tend to follow traditional wisdom forms. The third identified smaller genre of reflection is, however, not characteristic of traditional wisdom forms but is thought to incorporate within it certain sub-genres from the wisdom tradition such as sayings or proverbs (e.g. 2:14, 4:5–6), rhetorical questions (e.g. 2:2, 12, 15, 19, 22, 25) and quotations (e.g. 4:5–6, 5:3). Loader (1979:130) is of the opinion that Qoheleth takes over these general wisdom forms in order to serve his own purpose namely to criticise the content of the general wisdom (cf. also Krüger 2000:32–39). The thought of Ecclesiastes is indisputably polar ('patterns of tension created by the counter-position of two elements to one another') (Loader 1979:1). Thus we have talk and silence, toil and joy, et cetera. These contrasts in thought, which are scattered throughout the book, are constitutive of the structure. Thus, although Ecclesiastes may not stand very close to the general wisdom tradition in terms of content, it certainly does display solidarity with this tradition in terms of forms and types (Loader 1979:116).

This closeness to the mainstream wisdom tradition is furthermore evident from the superscription with which Chapter 1 begins. The introduction 'words of ...' is also found in other wisdom writings such as Proverbs 22:17, 30:1 and 31:1 and is, according to Dell (1991:144–145),<sup>10</sup> similar to introductions in Egyptian instructions such as the *Instruction of Ptahhotep*.<sup>11</sup> Ecclesiastes's claim to Solomonic authorship

10. See also Crenshaw (1987:56) and Murphy (1988:132).

11. The instruction of Ptahhotep begins: 'The instruction of the Mayor and Vizier Ptahhotep, under the majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt: Izezi, living forever and ever' (Pritchard 1950:412).

is certainly a further indication of its closeness to the general wisdom tradition (Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2004:139–142). The introduction of Qoheleth as the 'son of David, king in Jerusalem' (1:1) is in accordance with the tradition echoed in Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon to ascribe wisdom books to Solomon (Murphy 1992:1–2). It can be concluded that these markers certainly suggest a development within an undeniable wisdom context (Dell 1991:145).

If one then has to answer the question whether the books of Job and Ecclesiastes can be regarded as wisdom literature, it can be agreed with Schmid (1966:196) who criticises a too exclusive view of wisdom (cf. also Weeks 2010:1–7). Schmid (1966:198–201) stresses the diversity of forms to be found within wisdom literature and thus argues that the notion of 'wisdom literature' is a very inexact and 'open' concept. He consequently suggests that, in order to classify a piece of work as wisdom or not, the focus should not be on a specific genre but on the question whether the specific writing is characterised by wisdom thought or not. In the light of this suggestion, the books of Job and Ecclesiastes can thus not be excluded from the wisdom corpus because a certain form does not appear in them or because they deal with an individual rather than a general problem. In this regard we agree with Clines (1989:ixi) who sees the three 'wisdom' books of the Bible namely Job, Ecclesiastes and Proverbs as engaged in a dialogue with one another. These books are all viewed as 'wisdom books' because of their common concern to make sense of human behaviour and destiny and to justify the ways of God. They represent an intellectual tradition in Israel, appealing neither to divine revelation, religious interpretations of Israel's history nor to the experience of the divine in the cult, but to everyday experience, observation and logic. They, according to Dell (2006:415), 'appear to spring from the same mainspring of ideas as the wisdom quest, but it is true that they are very much wisdom plus self-critique.'

## Wisdom in revolt?

If it is accepted that the books of Job and Ecclesiastes can be regarded as wisdom books, the question that now needs to be considered is whether the wisdom to be found in these books can be regarded as revolutionary. The question that thus needs to be asked is: If the wisdom books of the Old Testament are believed to be in dialogue with one another, does this necessarily mean that they agree with one another?

Although some scholars like Blank (1962:857–858) have argued that the books of Job and Ecclesiastes do not differ much from traditional wisdom, many others have pointed to the revolutionary character of these books (e.g. Loader 1979:130; Dell 1991:146–147; Gese 1982:161–169; Lauha 1978:14–20; Saur 2012:120; Schmid 1966:196–201; Schmid 2012:154–155, 190–191; Von Rad 1970:306–308; Witte 2007a:432, 2007b:459).<sup>12</sup> For these scholars it is clear that

12. According to Witte (2007b:459) 'das Kohelethbuch ... setzt sich kritisch mit der traditionellen Weisheit auseinander, wobei es selbst auf deren sprachliche Formen zurückgreift'. Cf. also Schmid (2012:191): 'In its discussion with contemporary wisdom teaching as attested especially in Proverbs 1–9, Qohelet emphasizes the problems and limitations of human wisdom: it can be an aid to a happy life, but not a guarantee.'



the books of Job and Ecclesiastes provide a critique of the traditional wisdom stance in Israel as found in the book of Proverbs.<sup>13</sup> This critique has been termed by scholars like Scott (1971:136)<sup>14</sup> and Von Rad (1970:306–308) as ‘wisdom in revolt’.<sup>15</sup> They are of the opinion that there is no single wisdom doctrine in the Old Testament and that the wisdom of Job and Ecclesiastes can indeed be viewed as an answer to, or correction of, the ‘older’ wisdom of, for example, Proverbs.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, scholars like Schmid (1966:196–201) identified a definite development in the wisdom tradition of Israel. In this developmental process the books of Job and Ecclesiastes are regarded as part of the later crisis that arose in the Israelite wisdom tradition in reaction to the systematisation of wisdom. Schmid (1966:144–201) provides an extensive account of these developmental phases in Israelite as well as Egyptian (1966:17–84) and Mesopotamian wisdom (1966:85–143) and argues that the old Near Eastern wisdom has developed through at least three stages.

The initial stage in the wisdom development is described as one where the relevance of time and context for the correct conduct is important. Examples from this stage can, according to Schmid (1966:144–155), be found in the oldest Israelite wisdom as expressed in texts such as Proverbs 10–29. In these texts humankind is encouraged to integrate into the fixed order of God by doing the appropriate deeds at the appropriate time. In response to these deeds God was believed to have provided the doer with the appropriate retribution for his or her deed. A connection was thus simply drawn between deeds and the retribution of God as a consequence of such deeds.

The second stage in the development of wisdom, as proposed by Schmid (1966:161–164), is that of systematisation. During this stage a loss of relevance of time and context is thought to have set in which consequently led to the unconditional application of certain principles (like retribution) to all contexts. This implies that the sequence was reversed so that a suffering person was uncritically identified as a sinner and a prosperous person in the same way as a righteous person. Loader (1979:121) proposes that the theological system of Proverbs 1–9 provides us with a good example of this stage in the proposed development of wisdom. He also believes that further traces of this developmental phase can be found in older portions of the book of Proverbs such as Proverbs 10–15. In these passages humanity is time and again divided into categories such as the righteous and the unrighteous and the wise and the foolish. Wisdom consequently becomes a

moral quality and the connection of deed and consequence becomes a connection of result and attitude. The best example of this stage is, however, according to Lauha (1955:186), to be found with Job’s friends who try to force the systematic doctrine of retribution into reality.

Schmid (1966:173) believes that it was in reaction to this systematisation that a crisis arose in wisdom circles which consequently gave rise to the third phase of wisdom. This third phase is characterised by a protest against the loss of relevance of time and context. It is into this protest phase of Israelite wisdom that authors such as Schmid (1966:173–196) and Loader (1979:120–123) place the books of Job and Ecclesiastes. It is believed that these books protest against the systematisation of the doctrine of retribution that knows no relativity of deed and time.

According to Loader (1979:121–122) the answer of the book of Job to the systematisation of the doctrine of retribution is that wisdom is a relative affair. This implies that when suffering follows the disturbing of God’s order, wisdom can explain it without any problems. When suffering, however, occurs in circumstances inexplicable to the traditional dogma of retribution it becomes problematic (cf. Müllner 2006:52–53). Loader (1979:122) thus believes that the book of Job has no objection to a connection of a right deed and a good consequence, and a wrong deed and a bad consequence, but the protest comes when a correct deed is followed by a bad consequence and the systematised wisdom forces the doctrine into declaring a guiltless person guilty in order to save the system.

The book protests against such a systemisation through the presentation of the case of the suffering character, Job.<sup>17</sup> Through the experiences of the character Job, it is illustrated just how problematic the systemisation of the doctrine of retribution can be: by adhering to this doctrine the friends labelled a man who is described by God as ‘a perfect and upright man who fears God and stays away from evil’ (Job 1:8) as a dreadful sinner on the basis of his unfortunate circumstances. Such an application of the doctrine of retribution is refuted by God when he declares in the epilogue that the friends have not spoken the truth about him as his servant Job did (Job 42:7). Through this ‘judgement’ as well as through the divine speeches (Job 38–41) the author clearly revolts against the idea of a specific moral order in the world. The correspondence between people’s circumstances and their piety is rejected whilst it is demonstrated that the moral order of the universe is a matter of divine design which is not accessible to human comprehension (Clines 1989:xxxviii–xxxix, xivi–xivii).

Authors like Von Rad (1970:301), Whybray (1989:8), Fox (1989:118–119), Spangenberg (1993:11) and Estes (2005:282) point out that Ecclesiastes also clearly reacts against the systemised wisdom. Here it is, however, done in quite a

13. See in this regard Müllner (2007:77): ‘Die kognitive Diskrepanz zwischen Tradition und Erfahrung macht eine Reflexion nötig, die über die Inhalte hinaus das Wissen selbst thematisiert.’

14. Also Gillmayr-Bucher (2007:161): ‘Die Grenzen zwischen dem Sicherem und dem Alles-in-Frage-Stellenden werden nicht streng gezogen und die Gegensätze nicht eindeutig verteilt. Veilmehr erscheint alles von verschiedenen Seiten in Frage gestellt. Dieser Eindruck wird vor allem dadurch radikalisiert, dass selbst die Erzählstimme im Spiel der Möglichkeiten keine Ausnahme bildet. Die Zweifel werden narrativ dargestellt, es werden immer mehr Personen herangezogen, die in den Dialog einstimmen und einen Aspekt einbringen.’

15. See also Perdue (1991:260–273) and Enns (2011:122).

16. With regard to the book of Ecclesiastes Saur (2012:120) comments as follows: ‘Kohelet erscheint damit als ein antiker Dekonstruktivist. Denjenigen, die meinen, mit großen erklärenden Systematiken die Welt in den Griff bekommen zu müssen, hält er seine Beobachtungen entgegen: Es ist alles flüchtig und nichts hat Bestand.’

17. In this regard Seidl (2007:15) remarks, ‘weil weite Züge des Buches überdeutlich ideologiekritisch und dogmenskeptisch ausgerichtet sind und überliefertes Dogma und Tradition nicht zum theologischen Tabu erklären.’

different way: elements of general wisdom are taken over only to be torn apart again upon which idiosyncratic conclusions are drawn. This reaction is furthermore emphasised by the sense of relativity portrayed throughout the book, a relativity which is communicated through the writer's arguments that wisdom and wise deeds only hold relative advantages for the practitioner thereof (Loader 1979:122). These advantages are relative to certain circumstances and to God's incomprehensible deeds.

Just as in the rest of the crisis wisdom literature, the doctrine of retribution also plays an important role in the protest of the book of Ecclesiastes, but yet again in a slightly different way. Loader (1979:122–123) points out that in the extra-biblical crisis literature the protesting wisdom was never able to conquer the systematised wisdom, but in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes the doctrine of retribution is conquered. In Job the dogma of retribution is denied through the judgement of God in the epilogue and the relative connection between deed and consequence is left in peace. The dogma thus looses and the tension is discharged in favour of the protesting wisdom. In Ecclesiastes the doctrine of retribution is also combated and beaten, but in a more distinct way: not only is the doctrine of retribution in the sphere of the righteous sufferer annihilated, but also all human endeavours at success. The crisis in wisdom in this book thus does not result in the tension being discharged in favour of the protesting wisdom but instead in the continuation of tension. It is therefore not surprising that Qoheleth persists to proclaim the vanity of *all* human endeavours. Loader (1979:123) rightly remarks in this regard that for Qoheleth, life and the works of God cannot be explained in terms of certain wisdom structures. God is the unknown and distant one (Ec 3:11; 8:17) with whom humans cannot speak freely (Ec 5:1) and who does what he wants in terms of life and death (Ec 3:2–8), prosperity (Ec 5:18) and misery (Ec 5:12) and who does not require humans in terms of a particular order (Ec 2:14; 9:2–3). Spangenberg (1993:11) concludes in this regard that Qoheleth's own experiences and observations lead him to proclaim that there are no guaranteed outcomes in human life and thus lead him to revolt against the systemised wisdom.

It would thus be fair to conclude that both the book of Job as well as the book of Ecclesiastes<sup>18</sup> can be viewed as 'wisdom in revolt'. Both these books revolt against the systematisation that became a characteristic of wisdom in Israel. The way in which they protest against this systematisation is, however, quite different: in the case of Job the revolt takes on the form of a personal account of the experiences of an undeserved sufferer whereas in Ecclesiastes this revolt manifests itself in the reusing of traditional wisdom forms and the questioning of the pursuit for the acquisition of wisdom or success. In both of these cases the rejection of the doctrine of retribution plays an important role. Loader (1979:123) points out that in the case of Job the author denies this doctrine any validity whilst accepting with acquiescence what cannot be understood. Ecclesiastes again reacts more vividly against this doctrine by denying all retribution and maintaining a tense conviction of vanity.

18.Cf. also Smith (2009:117): 'And from this basis, Ecclesiastes flips wisdom tradition on its head, by questioning this and many other observed life experiences.'

## Postmodern wisdom in revolt?

Now that it has been argued that the books of Job and Ecclesiastes can be regarded as 'wisdom in revolt', the last question that needs to be answered is whether this wisdom displays any similarities with postmodern thought. In this section an attempt will be made to answer this question by comparing ideas characteristic of both Job and Ecclesiastes to certain postmodern ideas. This will be done by describing a number of postmodern ideas upon which it will be shown how these ideas are thought to also manifest in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes. The result of such a comparison will ultimately serve to endorse Ecclesiastes's conclusion that 'there is nothing new under the sun' (Ec 1:9).

## A reactionary exercise

The similarity between the thought of Job and Ecclesiastes and postmodernists is already evident from the reactionary character of both the books Job and Ecclesiastes on the one hand and postmodernism on the other hand (Wiersinga 2000:84–89). Just as most Old Testament wisdom scholars would agree on the fact that Job and Ecclesiastes can be viewed as 'wisdom in revolt', most social scientists would agree that postmodernism can be viewed as 'modernism in revolt' (Gergen 1991:6–8; Hollinger 1994:169–177; Lyon 1994:4–7).<sup>19</sup> Rosen (1989:20) suggests in this regard that 'postmodernism is the enlightenment gone mad.' In both cases this reaction also seems to be the result of a systematisation or rigidity of a specific world view. Job and Ecclesiastes react against the systematisation of the doctrine of retribution and postmodernists against the systematisation of knowledge, truth and rationality of modernists (cf. also Smith 2009:13–14). Olthuis (1999:143) touches on this concern of postmodernists when he writes: 'While recognising the validity of modernist concerns, postmodernists believe modernism ends up over-emphasising to the point of absolutising.' Such systematisation is believed to have resulted in the modernist idea that something is either provable or it is false, dangerous and unethical. It is mainly against this idea, that objective truth, knowledge and rationality are more important than anything else, that postmodernists protest – a protest which in many instances seems to be similar to the protest of Job and Ecclesiastes.<sup>20</sup> We can agree with Kearney (2010:5) when he writes: 'No human can be absolutely sure about absolutes.'

## From optimism to disillusionment

It seems as if disillusionment has played an important role in the thought development of postmodernists and the authors of Job and Ecclesiastes alike.<sup>21</sup> Upon considering the

19. See also the following theologians: Counet (2000:87–100); Vanhoozer (2003:3–25) and Wiersinga (2000:97–102).

20. Wiersinga (2000:85) remarks as follows: '*Prediker onderscheidt zich van Spreuken door het erkennen van zijn ontwetendheid en door het bestaan te verdenken van een blijvende dubbelzinnigheid.*'

21. See also Müllner (2006:29): '*Der skeptische Zug sowohl des Ijobbuchs als auch des Buchs Kohelet etwa findet gerade unter jungen Leuten Resonanz. Auch die Infragestellung der großen Sicherheiten und eindeutige Entwürfe, wie sie in der Weisheitsliteratur über Strecken praktiziert wird, entspricht dem Lebensgefühl vieler Menschen der westlichen Welt.*'

ideas of influential postmodern thinkers such as Lyotard,<sup>22</sup> Derrida<sup>23</sup> and Levinas<sup>24</sup> it becomes clear that amongst these writers there is a definite disillusionment with the optimism often found amongst modernists. Modern optimism is normally thought to be expressed in beliefs that *the* truth could be discovered via 'systematic observation and rigorous reasoning' (Gergen 1991:29). According to Becvar and Becvar (1996:87) continuous progress toward a greater goal achieved by scientific means characterised the 'grand narrative' of modern society and the search for the essential, irreducible essence permeated modernist endeavours. This led to an optimism whereby it was trusted that we were progressing toward a greater good through the creation of ever more significant technological advances. It has, in fact, led to the belief that it is in the power of man to 'create the future of our dreams' (Gergen 1991:29). It is in such optimism that postmodern thinkers have lost their faith. These thinkers have been disillusioned by the failure, as they perceive it, of the modernist dream, in Descartes' words, to be 'masters and possessors of nature' (Olthuis 1999:141). Olthuis (1999) writes in this regard:

Confidence in science, faith in progress, belief in the gospel of rational enlightenment as the royal avenues to knowledge, security, and happiness – the fundamental tenets of modernism – have been severely tested, if not shattered. Despite tremendous, unparalleled advances in almost every field of human endeavor, we are running out of the basic stuffs necessary for life. (p. 141)

Olthuis (1999:141) is of the opinion that this disillusionment with modernism has been the result of the discovery by postmodern thinkers that the supposed necessary connection between reason, knowledge, science, freedom, peace and human happiness is a dangerous illusion. It is in the verbalisation of such a discovery that the echoes of the voices of Job and Ecclesiastes can clearly be heard. Do these books not similarly warn against the optimism of traditional Israelite wisdom as found in the book of Proverbs?<sup>25</sup> Is this warning not particularly targeted at the optimism of the doctrine of retribution, namely that people are able to live their lives successfully if only they are able to do the right thing at the right time? The author of Ecclesiastes's disillusionment with this optimism is clearly expressed when he writes: 'Moreover I saw here under the sun that, where justice ought to be, there was wickedness; and where righteousness ought to be, there was wickedness' (Ec 3:16).

## From causality to relativity

Postmodern thinkers like Gergen (1991:89–98) also tend to protest against the linear cause-and-effect thinking of most modernists. According to the modernist notion of causality any problem is explainable and solvable if only the cause thereof can be determined. Modernists thus understand the world to be deterministic and to operate according to

22. See, for example, Lyotard (1984, 1995). Cf. also Vanhoozer (2003:9f.).

23. See, for example, Derrida ([1978] 2007).

24. Compare for example Levinas (1987, 1996).

25. Smith (2009:127) states as follows: '[T]he wisdom of Qohelet is very postmodern, especially as the cynical wisdom of Ecclesiastes challenges the neat and the tidy world of that presented in the book of Proverbs and in conventional wisdom.'

law-like principles, the discovery of which will reveal some absolute truth about reality (Becvar & Becvar 1996:87). In the world of postmodernism such linear causality is questioned and multiple realities are accepted. Lyotard (1984) writes in this regard:

a postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. (p. 81)

Such a perspective tends to be holistic with an emphasis on the various processes and contexts that may give meaning to events instead of only on events in isolation. Attempts are made to transcend either/or dichotomies by acknowledging multiple factors that may simultaneously influence one another reciprocally. Such a world view is described by Becvar and Becvar (1996:11–12) as *theoretical relativity*. According to this concept it is realised that different realities or points of view can be equally valid at the same time. Embracing one theory does thus not require or imply the rejection of an opposite theory. Rather it is acknowledged that each theory has utility relative to a specific context. From the perspective of such a world view, judgements about what is good and bad or right and wrong are suspended and goodness and badness are considered relative to context.

This is precisely what Loader (1979:121–123) believes the 'new wisdom' of Job and Ecclesiastes is campaigning for: a judgement of people's morality, relative to their specific contexts – that the morality of people like Job is not judged on the basis of their social and economical status. In a plea similar to that of postmodern thinkers, these 'wisdom' writers ask for the acknowledgement that a similar consequence (like suffering) can be brought about by a variety of factors which are not always possible to isolate. They are arguing that everything in this world can *not* be explained according to a certain pre-established order and that the inexplicable and exceptional are thus a very real part of our existence which need to be acknowledged and accepted.<sup>26</sup> Suffering can thus not automatically be considered as the consequence of sin as Job's friends would argue. The experiences of these writers have led them to conclude that there is no fixed moral order in this world, as it is argued in Proverbs for instance. Qoheleth concludes in this regard, 'sometimes the just person gets what is due to the unjust and the unjust what is due to the just' (Ec. 8:14).

## From generalisation to emphasis on difference

One of postmodern thinkers' strongest appeals is one for a move away from uncritical generalisations towards a focus on difference. This implies that generalisations free of time and context are regarded as problematic since what applies to one person or context is believed not necessarily to apply to another person or context. Lyotard (1984) exclaims in this regard:

26. See also Müllner (2006:32): 'in Hiob und Kohelet die umgekehrte Bewegung von einem traditionellen Ordnungsmodell zur Infragestellung aufweisbarer Systematik aufgrund von Erfahrung.'



We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience ... The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the difference and save the honor of the name. (pp. 81–82)

Lyotard (1984:81)<sup>27</sup> desires to wage war on totality because, in his view, it is the modernist's dream of developing an all-encompassing theory of the whole in order to establish unity, closure and control through scientific rationality, which has instead resulted in the ignoring of otherness and difference. Flax (1990:33) adds her voice to this protest against uncritical generalisations when she writes: 'In order to make the whole appear rational, the contradictory stories of others must be erased, devalued, suppressed.' It is such a suppression of difference in order to come to general, context-free conclusions that form the crux of postmodernists' critique of modernity (Olthuis 1999:141). It is also such a suppression of difference that seems to have formed the crux of the protest in Job and Ecclesiastes. As it was argued above, these writers wanted to bring it to their readers' attention that there might be exceptions to the rules proposed by the traditional wisdom of Proverbs. Although it might be true in some instances that good deeds will lead to rewards and bad deeds to punishment, it is also true that some righteous people may also suffer and some unrighteous people may prosper. Therefore the author of Job narrates a story of a righteous sufferer and the author of Ecclesiastes proclaims: 'In my futile existence I have seen it all, from the righteous perishing in their righteousness to the wicked growing old in wickedness' (Ec 7:15).

From the above comparison it becomes clear that there are undeniable similarities to be cited between the thoughts of Job and Ecclesiastes on the one hand and postmodernists on the other hand (Wiersinga 2000:84–89). It is clear that in both cases we can talk of a reactionary exercise which is the result of the systematisation of a specific optimistic world view. Both schools of thought furthermore campaign for a move away from certainty, control, cause-and-effect logic and generalisation. Instead, both schools emphasise the relativity of context, theory and cause and effect. This does not, however, necessarily justify a postmodern tag for the books of Job and Ecclesiastes, but certainly points to a similarity in thought development between the ancient societies of Job and Ecclesiastes and the present day societies of postmodernists. Such similarities can furthermore be viewed as pointing to the significant relevance of the ancient wisdom of Job and Ecclesiastes, also for the present day social and intellectual context. As Ecclesiastes puts it: 'What has happened will happen again, and what has been done will be done again' (Ec 1:9).

## Conclusion

In this article it has been argued that there is no single type of wisdom to be found in the Old Testament. It was shown how various points of view can be grouped together under the umbrella of 'wisdom literature,' almost in the same way as various theologies and philosophies are included in

27. See also Olthuis (1999:141).

the broad fields of theology and philosophy. In following this logic it was argued that, in spite of various differences in form, content and context with other 'wisdom books' such as Proverbs, the books of Job and Ecclesiastes can still legitimately be viewed as 'wisdom'.

This does not, however, mean that the books of Job and Ecclesiastes necessarily agree with the message of the other 'wisdom books.' In fact, it was demonstrated how the books of Job and Ecclesiastes can be viewed as rebelling against the systematisation of traditional 'wisdom.' It was argued that these books specifically voiced their protest against the doctrine of retribution, each one in a unique way: Job through the narrating of a tale of a righteous sufferer in conflict with his orthodox friends and Ecclesiastes through the reuse of traditional wisdom forms and the relativization of wisdom and all human endeavours.

In the last instance a comparison was drawn between the thought of Job and Ecclesiastes on the one hand and that of postmodern thinkers on the other hand. It was argued that there are various similarities to be cited between the ideas of the ancient wisdom writers of Job and Ecclesiastes and more recent postmodern thinkers. This argument was substantiated by referring to the reactionary character of both exercises and both schools' protest against optimism, cause-and-effect logic and generalisations. All this served to point to the similarities in thought development between the ancient intellectual spheres of Job and Ecclesiastes on the one hand and the modern day contexts of postmodern thinkers on the other hand. Such similarities were furthermore viewed as a clear indication of the meaningful role which Old Testament wisdom, or wisdom in revolt for that matter, can play in current intellectual debates because, 'whatever is, has been already, and whatever is to come, has been already' (Ec 3:15).

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## Authors' contributions

The concept article was submitted as part of an MPhil (Psychology of Religion) of L.A.R. (University of Cambridge). The article was expanded and reworked by L.A.R. (research associate A.G.) and A.G. (University of Pretoria).

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