

Designation	Culture / Date	Description	Forms / Examples / Significance
Mesopotamian Standard Wisdom²			
Proverb Collections (28)	Sumerian (mid-3 rd millennium BCE)	Best collections are from the Old Babylonian period. Texts were used 800 years after composition to train scribes who did not know Sumerian. Three text types: full compositions, school tablets, excerpts. Practical and scribal court wisdom. Collections ordered by subject matter.	Precepts, maxims, apothegms, adages, bywords, taunts, compliments, and wishes/greetings; also short tales parables, and poems. Two forms in the Bible: precepts (re: moral conduct), and maxims (re: practical side of life). E.g., “Tell a lie, then tell the truth, it will be counted as a lie.”
The Instructions of Shuruppak	Classical Sumerian period (ca. 2500 BCE) Old Babylonian (ca. 1800 BCE)	Shurappak’s poetic instructions were the path to wisdom and blessings. Random arrangement within overall structure. Central theme: contrast between chaotic foolishness and the ordered society produced by wise living, found in the wisdom of Utu (god of justice). Old Babylonian revisions added contrasts.	Structure: introduction, frame story, first instruction list, frame story, second instruction list, frame story, third instruction list, conclusion. Three types of sayings: prohibitions (“do not . . .”), positive commands (“you shall not . . .”), conventional proverbs.
The Instructions of Urninurta	Sumerian	Describes the divine election of Urninurta (1923–1896 BCE) as king and then provides a religious treatise on retributive theology.	
The Counsels of Wisdom	Akkadian	Included in collections of instructional admonitions. Contains 150 lines of topically organized maxims. Topics include legal advice, proper and improper speech, choosing companions, sex and marriage, kindness to the needy, conduct in friendships, and religious piety.	Each section of the text is introduced with a lead instruction, e.g., “Do not frequent a law court. Do not loiter where there is a dispute.” This lead instruction is followed by a list of related maxims, e.g., “Do not return evil to the man who disputes with you.”
Advice to a Prince	Akkadian, probably to a Babylonian king (1000–700 BCE)	Admonished the future king to practice justice, heed the counsel of his advisers, and protect the rights of citizens in the cities of Sippar, Nippur, and Babylon. Warned that the oppression of these cities would anger the gods, who would then abandon the temples and the king.	Mimic the casuistic forms of omen literature, “[If] the king does not heed justice, [then] his people will be thrown into chaos, and his land will be devastated.”
Mesopotamian Speculative Wisdom³			
The Dialogue of Šube’awilum and His Father	Sumerian original, Akkadian, Hittite translations (Composed ca. 2000 BCE)	A pessimistic appraisal of life in the form of a dialogue. The problem identified as death itself and its implications.	Refrain: “Rules were formulated by Enki, regulations were laid down at the command of the gods, from days of old there has been vanity.” The vanity of human existence is lamented because life is “but the twinkling of an eye” and death is “the lot of mankind.”
A Man and His God—the “Sumerian Job”	Sumerian	A poetic monologue. The earliest Mesopotamian text to explore the problem of pious suffering. The protagonist proclaims his innocence but most of his monologue is a penitential lament that leads to restoration and healing by the god.	Structure: praise—lament—restoration—praise, similar to biblical thanksgiving psalms. Unlike Job, the resolution was reached when the sufferer embraced conservative orthodoxy, “Never has a sinless child been born,” and confessed his sins committed in ignorance: “I, the young man, shall publicly declare my sins before you!”
Dialogue between a Man and His God	Akkadian, dated to Old Babylonian	Conversation of a suffering man with his god. The original editor interpreted the sufferer as a Job-like “righteous sufferer.”	The god admonishes: “Your disease is under control, let your heart not be despondent . . . You must never, till the end of time, forget your god, your creator, now that you are favored.” The sufferer concludes, “May your servant’s supplication reach your heart.”

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Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi —the “Babylonian Job”	Akkadian, Kassite period (14 th -12 th c BCE)	A four-tablet poetic monologue, entitled “I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom.” Begins and ends with praise for the god Marduk. The chief protagonist was a prosperous man who appealed to the gods when he lost his post, wealth, family, and health. While suffering, he praised Marduk, who eventually answered, and his demons were expelled.	The protagonist’s name, Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan, means “May Esagil [Marduk’s temple] declare the righteous pure,” and embodies the text’s theology. The structure is praise—lament—restoration—praise, which parallels closely the biblical thanksgiving psalms, such as Ps 34.
The Babylonian Theodicy	Babylonian (12 th and 11 th c BCE)	Author was chief scholar of kings Nebuchadnezzar I and Adad-apla-iddina. A dialogue between a human sufferer and a sage. Openly challenged the retributive orthodoxy of Mesopotamia.	In the form of an acrostic poem, whose twenty-seven 11-line stanzas spell out, “I Saggil-kinam-ubbib, the incantation priest, am adorant of the god and the king.” Thematically and generically close to the book of Job.
The Dialogue of Pessimism	(1 st millennium BCE)	A dialogue between a master and slave. By means of a sarcastic discussion they conclude that life’s activities are pure vanity. In successive rounds, the master announces his intention to engage in an activity, the wise slave concurs, the master decides not to take the action, and the slave responds with words of agreement.	The text’s impiety is striking. When the master decides not to sacrifice to the gods, the slave responds, “Do not sacrifice, sir, do not sacrifice. You can teach your god to run after you like a dog.” Believed to be a mix of both serious philosophy and humorous sarcasm. Obvious similarities with Qoheleth but differ in conclusions.

Other Mesopotamian Wisdom Texts

A Sumerian Riddle Collection	Sumerian	The Hebrew term “riddle” (chidā) appears in a list of wisdom speech forms along with proverbs, sayings, and parables. Valued as tests of intellectual ability.	Provides hints of what Hebrew riddles were like, since no Hebrew corpus of wisdom riddles is preserved. Some proverbs have riddle-like qualities (e.g., Prv 11.22).
Contest Literature	Sumerian Akkadian	In contest/dispute poems the disputants in the texts could be animals, plants, or inanimate objects. Sumerian exemplars explicitly refer to the royal courts, where these provided entertainment on festive occasions.	The form of these fables was as follows: (1) a mythological introduction providing the origins of the disputants; (2) the dispute between the contestants; and (3) a judgment scene where the gods pronounced the victor.
Sumerian School Dialogues	Sumerian	A distinct wisdom genre providing entertainment. They satirically pitted experienced older scribes against younger scribes, and poked fun at both the younger scribes and at the educational establishment.	
The Sumerian Farmer’s Almanac	Nippur	Purportedly written by the god Ninurta. Provided a one-year calendar of farming operations.	Summarized agricultural wisdom probably for didactic purposes. Comparable to the Israelite Gezer Calendar.

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Egyptian Standard Wisdom²: The Instructions			
Instructions of Hardjedef	Old Kingdom (2650-2135 BCE, Dynasties 3-8)	The first of eight ancient wise men believed to have obtained immortality because of instructions they wrote. The author, son of Pharaoh Cheops, wrote advice to his son.	
The Instructions of Ptahhotep	Old Kingdom	The oldest complete exemplar of Egypt's instructional genre, in which an Old Kingdom vizier dispelled wisdom for his son. Framed by a prologue and epilogue. The prologue introduced the author and his intention to provide words of wisdom; the epilogue admonished the son to heed this wisdom.	The instructions consist of thirty-seven wisdom speeches, each introduced casuistically (e.g., "If you are a man who leads . . .") and containing a series of related commands (e.g., "Listen calmly to the speech of one who pleads") and wise statements (e.g., "Not all one pleads for can be granted, But a good hearing soothes the heart")
The Instructions of Merikare	First Intermediate Period (2135-2040 BCE, Dynasties 9-11)	Supposedly from Pharaoh Khety for his son, but likely the work of Merikare, the son, as a gift to honor his deceased father. A royal instruction, treatise on kingship.	Text arranged in sections of two, three, or four sentences joined by using various types of poetic parallelism. Imperative forms predominate. Concluding remarks on divine retribution and a hymn to the creator god.
Instructions of Amenemhet	Middle Kingdom (2040-1650 BCE, Dynasties 11-14)	Instructions warn that even close advisors to the king pose a threat to royalty. Since he was assassinated in a coup attempt, his instructions to his son Sesostris after the rebellion are pseudonymous and posthumous.	Contains a brief introduction, then Amenemhet gives his account of the coup and then advises Sesostris how to succeed while avoiding the same fate. Imperative forms predominate in the advice.
The Teaching of Dua-khety, or Satire on the Trades	Middle Kingdom	Dua-khety addressed his son Pepi, a young aristocrat who was preparing to train in a school for elite scribes. Often called "Satire on the Trades" because it humorously extols the advantages of a scribal career over the toil of alternative professions.	A sarcastic introduction is followed by conventional words of advice, composed to encourage devotion to a rigorous program of scribal education.
The Loyalist Instruction	Middle Kingdom	Partial text on a mortuary stela, reconstructed with Ramesside-era papyrus and fragmentary copies. The author was both a priest and a vizier to Pharaoh, perhaps Montuhotep, the historical vizier of Senwosret I.	First half of text encourages profound loyalty to the king ("Praise the king within your bodies . . . You should be free from disloyal action!"); the second half offers words of wisdom for success in the royal courts.
Papyrus Lansing	New Kingdom (1550-1080 BCE, Dynasties 18-20)	Ostensibly an "instruction in letter-writing" written by the royal scribe Nebmare-nakht for his apprentice. Praises the scribal profession and critiques other professions, and shames the student into diligent compliance.	Contains less standard instructions and more exhortations for his student to pursue a scribal education.
The Instructions of Any	New Kingdom	A new democratization of the genre, being composed by a middle-class scribe for a middle-class audience. Contains practical advice about marriage, the threat of strange women, religious piety, temperance with alcohol, establishment of a household, care for aged parents, and compassion for the poor.	Earlier conditional "if" clauses are replaced with positive and negative commands, where, "Do not . . ." predominates slightly. Concludes with a dialogue between Any and his son, which is actually a literary debate of father-son rhetoric, pedagogically composed to address other father-son and student-teacher relationships.
The Instructions of Amenemope	New Kingdom (Composed 12 th c BCE, copies into Late period)	A middle-class father instructs his son. Content differs from earlier periods in that he motivates his son through a concern for developing his inner qualities and virtues, rather than through promises of wealth and achievement. Shaped by two key themes: the contrast between the silent man of wisdom and the heated intemperate man, and the choice between honesty and duplicity.	Form differs from earlier periods: lines are related to each other through parallelism and other poetic devices and are arranged into thirty numbered "chapters," each containing ten to forty thematically related lines. Many negative commands, e.g., "Do not force yourself to greet a heated man, for then you injure your own heart." Known for apparent influence on Prv 22.17-23.14.

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Instructions of Ankhsheshonqy	Late Period (Composed 2 nd c BCE)	Demotic text purports to be a composition from the 22 nd Dynasty but composed centuries later. Author was a priest of Re who was unjustly accused in a plot against Pharaoh. Incarcerated, he was forced to fulfill the paternal duty to educate his son through a written text. Reflects foreign sources including Hellenistic influence.	One-lined prose with maxims arranged randomly or according to form. It is unusually long (several hundred maxims), includes instructions (“Do not be stingy,” 12.18), statements (“Good fortune turns away destruction by a great god,” 14.17), and proverbs (“The friend of a fool is a fool; the friend of a wise man is a wise man,” 13.6).
Papyrus Insinger	Late Period Papyrus, 1 st c CE, composition older.	Demotic text longer than the above. The maxims are basically a comparison between the pious wise man and the impious fool. The wise man understands and manages himself properly with respect to various areas of life including moderation and self-control, an influence from Hellenistic ideas. Also an emphasis on “fate.”	Arranged into numbered “instructions” (i.e., chapters), with topical headings describing the section. Reminiscent of standard retributive theology, but each chapter ends with a confession that wise living does not guarantee success—the first overt expression of pessimism in Egyptian instructions. Compare to Jewish Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon.

Speculative Egyptian Wisdom³

The Complaints of Khakheperre-Sonb	First Intermediate Period or Middle Kingdom	Egyptian priest depicted his homeland in social disarray. Composed either during an orderly and prosperous phase (Middle Kingdom) as hyperbolic political criticisms or as an academic exercise that explored the tensions between order and chaos, or during troublesome First Intermediate Period.	E.g., “the land is in calamity, mourning in every place, towns and districts in woe, and everyone alike is wronged.”
The Admonitions of Ipuwer		A scribe explored the motif of social and political distress. May have provided political propaganda for an unnamed pharaoh, who would save Egypt from its social and political upheavals.	
The Harper’s Songs	Late Middle Kingdom into New Kingdom	Egyptians questioned the principles of ma’at in these monumental texts inscribed on the tomb walls or mortuary stelae of the deceased. The genre takes its name from the depictions of harpists that appear alongside the inscriptions. New Kingdom papyrus copies of Intef show influence on scribal tradition.	Pessimistic turn came when tomb inscription of King Intef (Middle Kingdom) cast doubt on the afterlife and satirized the traditional practice of tomb building. This cynicism influenced later Harper’s Songs from the New Kingdom, which either rejected Intef’s pessimism as impious or preserved its skepticism in diluted form.
The Dispute of a Man with His Ba		Harper’s Songs may have inspired this text that voices pessimism about the afterlife. Ba is roughly equivalent to “soul.” The protagonist longs for death because it offers relief from life’s inherent difficulties, but his ba disagrees, threatening to part ways with him at death.	Ba’s threat prompts the man’s eloquent speeches, which finally convince his ba that traditional views of a blessed afterlife are correct. However, this disputation text openly challenged the principle of ma’at and Egyptian optimism regarding the afterlife.

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West Semitic and Hittite Wisdom			
Ugaritic Wisdom	Ugarit	Primarily traditions borrowed from Mesopotamia: including copies of Šube'awilum (above), a fragmentary collection of admonitions (bilingual Akkadian and Hittite), several fragmentary collections of proverbs (bilingual Sumerian and Akkadian), and a pessimistic fragmentary text similar to Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi (above).	Native Ugaritic wisdom included mostly school texts and astronomical, magical, and professional literature, but nothing in the Ugaritic corpus stands generically close to biblical wisdom.
The Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar	Northern Syria? Earliest text 5 th c BCE, Upper Egypt	The papyrus includes two generic segments: a story that introduces the reader to Ahiqar and a collection of proverbs. Believed to be by two different authors; dialect of the proverbs is older than in the story. Language and religious outlook of maxims favor northern Syria context. Probably didactic material for those in the royal court. The combination of traits with Proverbs suggests that West Semitic wisdom was a tradition in its own right.	Combination of courtly scribal wisdom and popular folk wisdom. Fragmentary papyrus has sixty preserved sayings that are diverse in form and content, including formal proverbs, instructions, fables, and numerical sayings. Features are similar to the Hebrew Proverbs in numerous respects: instructions on discipline, numerical sayings, address to “my son,” wisdom personified as a female, contrast of the “righteous” with the wicked.
Hittite Instruction and Protocol Manuals		Hittite kings commonly published instruction manuals for those serving in various institutions of the empire. Among the most important Hittite instructions are those for princes and lords, for the royal guard, for border garrisons, for palace personnel, and for priests/temple officials.	Only one collection of Hittite sayings and wisdom parables has been discovered. The “instruction texts” are better attested, but are different from the Egyptian instructions. These are closer to civil and ceremonial laws than to the wisdom corpus per se.

¹ Chart consists of summarizations and quotations in tabular form of: Sparks, Kenton L., *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature*, 2005 Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., pp 56-83.

²“*Standard wisdom* refers to texts that optimistically assume predictable patterns in reality, so that wise followers of the pattern reap good results and those deviating from it face trouble, technically referred to as retributive theology.” (Sparks, p. 57)

³“*Speculative wisdom* refers to texts that either implicitly or explicitly questioned the validity of standard retributive wisdom.” (Sparks, p 57)