

Road Trip: Journey Into the Bible

Midweek Part 3: How to Read the Old Testament Wisdom and Poetic Books

I. What are the Wisdom and Poetic Books?

The Wisdom and Poetic Books of the Old Testament consist of the Old Testament books of: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes (Wisdom Books), and Psalms, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations (Poetic Books). These books communicate a desire to live wisely through the 'fear of the Lord' and to express various emotions to God when dealing with life's circumstances.

II. Overview of the Wisdom and Poetic Books

Book Overviews and Themes:

1. Proverbs

- A collection of wise sayings and instructions for living a godly life. Primarily during the reign of Solomon (10th century BC). The writing is traditionally attributed to Solomon, with contributions from other sages. Themes include pursuing wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, the fear of the Lord, and fleeing from folly.

2. Job

- A poetic dialogue exploring the nature of suffering, divine justice, and human faith. Possibly as early as the 6th century BC, though the exact date is uncertain. The author is unknown, and the themes include divine sovereignty and the wrestling of human suffering and sin, along with the meaning of divine justice and righteousness.

3. Ecclesiastes

- Reflections on the meaning of life, the futility of human endeavors, and the importance of fearing God. Traditionally attributed to Qoheleth (the Teacher), often identified with Solomon, likely in the 10th century BC. Themes include grappling with the apparent meaningless of life and human endeavors without God.

4. Psalms

- A collection of songs, prayers, and hymns expressing a wide range of human emotions and experiences. Spanning many centuries, from the time of David (10th century BC) to the post-exilic period. The authors vary, from David, Asaph, the sons of Korah, Solomon, and others. Themes include worship, expressions of faith, lament and thanksgiving, vindication against enemies, and acknowledgement of God's kingship.

5. Song of Solomon (Song of Songs)

- Lyrical poems celebrating love, beauty, and marital affection. Traditionally attributed to Solomon, likely during his reign in the 10th century BC. Themes include a celebration of love, specifically romantic love, marital affection, and beauty.

6. Lamentations

- Poetic laments mourning the destruction of Jerusalem and reflecting on suffering and hope. Traditionally attributed to Jeremiah, possibly after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Themes include mourning and grief, and hope in God's faithfulness despite suffering and loss.

III. The Genres of Biblical Wisdom and Poetry

A. The Genre of Wisdom

Hebrew Wisdom literature includes books like Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and parts of Psalms, Song of Songs, and Lamentations. There are essentially two types of wisdom literature in the Old Testament:

1. The first and most prevalent type is didactic or practical wisdom. The book of Proverbs is the most representative example of this practical instruction. Didactic wisdom consists of wise sayings or popular proverbs that advocate all sorts of prudential habits, skills, and virtues (e.g., Prov. 21:23; 22:3; 23:22). These utilitarian lessons were aimed at developing moral character, personal success and happiness, safety, and well-being.
2. The second type of Old Testament wisdom is that found in Ecclesiastes and to some extent Job. The genre is usually categorized as philosophical, speculative, or even pessimistic wisdom. This strand of wisdom tradition is critical, reflective, and questioning as it delves into the deeper and more vexing issues confronting humankind. The skepticism characteristic of this speculative and philosophical literature portrays most vividly the emptiness and folly of the search for insight and understanding apart from God (Eccl. 1:1–18; 12:12–14).

Wisdom Literature in the Hebrew Bible deals with several topics:

1. **Instruction** (As in the book of Proverbs): Wise sayings of practical instructions aimed at regulating daily life. For instruction, wisdom is the ability to make godly choices in life. You achieve this goal by applying God's truth to your life, so that your choices will indeed be godly. Wisdom begins with the Lord: "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom", therefore God is the source of all wisdom, and for humans to have access to that wisdom, we need to have a relationship with God characterized by a "fear", or "reverence" toward God and His truth.
2. **Theodicy** (As in the book of Job): Addresses the reality of pain, suffering, and death in the world in relationship to God's holiness and justice. In particular, it addresses why bad things happen to good people and how this fits with the belief in a just and wise God. For example, in Job, Job's friends offer various explanations for his suffering, but the book ultimately challenges simplistic views and highlights the mystery of God's ways.
3. **The Retribution Principle** (As in some Psalms, Job and Lamentations): The idea that divine retribution is based on the merits (or demerits) of human behavior. This principle would conclude that good behavior is rewarded with blessings and prosperity, while bad behavior leads to suffering and calamity. This view is challenged in Hebrew Wisdom because in the world it appears that the righteous are the ones who are suffering and defeated, while the wicked are prosperous and victorious.

Principles to Interpreting Hebrew Wisdom

When reading wisdom there are some things we need to remember in order to interpret the Bible well and to rightly apply it to our lives.

1. Wisdom literature deals in generalities, not always specifics (The wicked suffer, the righteous prosper)
2. Wisdom literature, especially proverbs, should be read as principles, not promises (if you work hard you'll succeed or be rich; train up a child in the way they should go...)
3. Ancient wisdom literature is diverse (There are different forms: instruction, poetic, etc.)
4. We need to understand the terms and categories of Hebrew wisdom (example: 'fool' in Hebrew doesn't mean intellectually deficient, but an unbeliever who refuses wise Godly instruction)
5. We need to read wisdom literature as a whole, in its context, not just in bits and pieces (What is the whole argument of Job or Ecclesiastes? Who is making the argument, and what is the conclusion of the matter?)
6. Remember that all wisdom is fulfilled and embodied in Christ.

B. The Genre of Hebrew Poetry

Hebrew poetry is a special style of writing in the Old Testament. It uses unique forms and techniques to express thoughts, emotions, and spiritual truths. Unlike the rhyming poetry (words that sound alike) that we often see in English, Hebrew poetry is characterized by parallelism (matching, repeating or contrasting ideas in lines or couplets), vivid imagery, and a focus on emotion and meaning.

Examples of Hebrew Poetry:

- **Parallelism:** The repeating or contrasting of ideas in lines or couplets.
 - Psalm 19:1 *"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."*
 - Psalm 103:3 *"Who forgives all your sins; and heals all your diseases."*
 - Psalm 37:9 *"For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land."*
 - Proverbs 10:1 *"A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son brings grief to his mother."*
- **Repetition:** Emphasizes important themes or ideas by repeating words or phrases.
 - Psalm 136 - The phrase "His love endures forever" is repeated in every verse.
- **Acrostic:** Uses the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet to begin each line or stanza.
 - Psalm 119 - Each section starts with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.
 - Lamentations 3:1-66 - Each verse begins with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet.
- **Figurative Language:**
 - Metaphors: Direct comparisons, implying that one thing is another.
 - Psalm 23:1 - "The Lord is my shepherd."
 - Similes: Comparisons using "like" or "as."
 - Psalm 1:3 - "He is like a tree planted by streams of water."
 - Hyperbole: Exaggeration for emphasis.
 - Psalm 6:6 - "I flood my bed with weeping."
 - Personification: Giving human characteristics to inanimate objects or abstract ideas.
 - Psalm 98:8 - "Let the rivers clap their hands."
- **Imagery:** Vivid descriptive language that appeals to the senses to create mental pictures.
 - Psalm 42:1 - "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God."

Principles to Interpreting Hebrew Poetry

1. Look for the Parallelism: Pay attention to repeated ideas or contrasting thoughts. This is key to understanding the message. Example: In Psalm 1:1-2, notice how the "way of the wicked" contrasts with "the law of the Lord."
2. Consider the Imagery: Hebrew poetry uses vivid images and metaphors. Try to visualize what the text is describing. Example: In Psalm 23, imagine the shepherd leading the sheep beside still waters.
3. Understand the Context: Know the historical and cultural background to better grasp the meaning. Example: When reading Lamentations, understand the context of the destruction of Jerusalem.
4. Look for the Main Message: Focus on the central truth or lesson being conveyed. Hebrew poetry often aims to teach, inspire, or comfort. Example: Proverbs 3:5-6 encourages trust in God's guidance.
5. Apply to Today: Think about how the message can relate to your life and faith today. Example: Reflect on Psalm 23:1 and consider how God is your shepherd, providing and guiding you through life's challenges.

IV. Principals for Reading and Interpreting Wisdom and Poetic Literature Books

How to Read Proverbs

The purpose of the book of Proverbs is to be a collection of the wisdom of ancient Israel to offer both instruction and example of godly living. The text is presented as the teaching of a father to his son. The wisdom compiled in the book functioned to shape character and promote virtue in keeping with the commandments of Moses. More specifically, the purpose of the book is stated in the prologue to the wisdom collections and may be summarized as a lifestyle of knowing wisdom and instruction and learning the fear of the Lord (1:2-7).

A proverb is a brief, particular expression of a truth, often seen as short observations, encouragements, or prohibitions that share simple, practical advice. The proverbs are phrased in a catchy way, so as to be memorable. Consider the English proverb “Look before you leap.” Also in Proverbs we’re presented with the idea of the ‘**two paths of wisdom**’: The path of the righteous, and wicked, the “wise and the ‘fool.’ Also we see **the personification of wisdom** as the wholesome Lady Wisdom and the adulteress Madam Folly.

There are some guidelines that will help us read Proverbs better:

1. Proverbs are often parabolic (i.e., figurative, pointing beyond themselves).
2. Proverbs are intensely practical, not theoretically theological.
3. Proverbs are worded to be memorable, not technically precise.
4. Proverbs are not designed to support selfish behavior — just the opposite!
5. Proverbs strongly reflecting ancient culture and readers may need a sensible “translation” so as not to lose their meaning.
6. Proverbs are not legal guarantees from God but poetic guidelines for with favorable outcomes
7. Proverbs may use highly specific language, exaggeration, or any of a variety of literary techniques to make their point.
8. Proverbs give good advice for wise approaches to certain aspects of life but they do not state everything about a truth however they point to it.
9. Wrongly used, proverbs may justify a crass, materialistic lifestyle. Rightly used, proverbs will provide practical advice for daily living.

How to Read Psalms

Psalms are a collection of inspired Hebrew prayers and poems. The psalms contain words spoken to God and about God. These words help us express ourselves to God and to consider His ways. They were used liturgically in ancient Israel, and are an extensive and diverse group of writings, which cover an array of styles, topics, authors, purposes, and feelings.

The language of Hebrew poetry is intentionally emotive, they are intended to evoke feelings rather than teach doctrine (though they do contain and reflect doctrine). The vocabulary of poetry is purposefully metaphorical. It is therefore important to look for the intent of the metaphor, and not to take the metaphor too literally.

Types of Psalms:

1. **Laments:** These express struggle, suffering, or disappointment to the Lord. (Ps 3, 12, 44, 42, 139, etc.)
2. **Thanksgiving:** These express joy to the Lord. (Ps 18, 30, 40, 65, 66, 118, 136, etc.)
3. **Praise:** These center on praise to God as creator, protector, etc. Ps 8, 19, 66, 100, 111, 145-147, etc.)
4. **Salvation History:** Review the history of God’s saving works (Ps 78, 105, 106, 135, 136, etc.)
5. **Royal Psalms:** Of Kingship and enthronement (Ps 2, 18, 20, 24, 47 50, 81, 87, 110 etc.);
6. **Wisdom Psalms:** Explore themes of morality and righteousness (Ps 36, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128, 133 etc.)
7. **Songs of Trust:** Centers on the trustworthiness of God (Ps 11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 91, 121, 125, 131, etc.).
8. **Imprecatory Psalms:** Psalms that calls for calamity, destruction, or judgment on ones enemies. Elements of imprecation may be found in parts of Psalms 3, 12, 35, 58, 59, 69, 70, 83, 109, 137 and 140. They use hyperbolic language to honestly express anger. The challenge is applying these Psalms in light of Jesus and His teaching of ‘loving our enemies.’

How to Read Job

When one thinks of Job, the topic of suffering usually comes us. “The trials of Job” or “the patience of Job” are sayings we will often hear even in our modern world. However the book of Job isn’t just about Job’s suffering but the question of “why” behind the suffering and the search for wisdom as it relates to the justice of God. The book of Job offers a biblical perspective on suffering (to be distinguished from offering an explanation of suffering). The plot of the book teaches that human ‘wisdom’ is totally inadequate, but God’s wisdom is unfathomably deep. Those looking to Job for answers of the reasons for suffering will often times come away disappointed.

1. The purpose of the book is to explore God’s justice, especially in regards the suffering of the righteous.
2. Notice Satan (in a ‘heavenly courtroom’ scene) implies that Job is only following God because God has blessed him, and if God were to cut off Job’s blessings then he would stop from following Him.
3. The calamities that follow cause Job’s friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, and later Elihu) to assume that Job had sinned because of what has happened to him, however, Job maintains his innocence.
4. The majority of the book revolves around three rounds of speeches from these friends concerning Job who present their case from conventional wisdom’ (that Job deserved his suffering), believing they understand the ways of God in the world.
5. Finally, it’s God who plays the ultimate role in the story.
6. In the end the tables are completely turned: the question of where wisdom is found is answered by silencing all human voices that would insist that God must explain himself to them. Here, God simply calls human wisdom into account, powerfully demonstrating over and over again from creation—both its origins and his care for it—that wisdom lies with him alone.
7. The book ends with God pronouncing his verdict in favor of Job over against his friends, and God blessed and restored Job with a double portion of everything.

How to Read Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is the ponderings of a Wisdom teacher who wrestles with life’s realities; what is to be gained by achieving wealth or wisdom when in the end death claims both rich and poor, wise and foolish; and how these realities relate to the fear of God. Ecclesiastes teaches that the only hope of enduring the present is to fear and obey God (12:13–14).

The theme is clear, stated at the outset and repeated at the conclusion to form a literary envelope for the whole book: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (1:2; 12:8 NRSV). The Hebrew term translated “vanity” has carried many connotations over the years: absurdity, frustration, futility, nonsense, emptiness, and meaningless. The core idea is that life is a ‘vapor’ – temporary and fleeting with much of life having no true value. The Teacher warns against a life caught in the pursuit of absurd and empty pleasures that have no lasting value. Life without God is meaningless—just pointless!

This book has been a traditionally difficult book to read because of its nature: It’s often seen as rambling, negative, self-contradictory, contradictory to the rest of the message of the Bible, and it’s seemingly hopeless conclusions.

Four realities dominate the overall perspective of The Teacher:

1. God is the single indisputable reality, the Creator of all and the one from whom all life comes.
2. God’s ways are not always, if ever, understandable
3. On the human side, nothing really makes sense (the way things should be are not the way they are)
4. The great equalizer is death, which happens to all, and once you’re dead that it!

The Teacher’s own point seems to be that, even if the only real certainty about this present life is the certainty of the grave, one should still live life as a gift from God, and in such a world, joy and satisfaction are to be found in living the journey of life without trying to be in control or to “make gain” of what is merely fleeting.

By this understanding of how the book teaches wisdom, the final part of the frame, Ecclesiastes 12:13 – 14, can be seen as concluding the book with a corrective, orthodox warning: Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

How to Read Song of Solomon (Song of Songs)

Song of Songs is a love poem of several episodes, celebrating the intimate love between a woman and a man. The expression “song of songs” means “the best song.” This is the most beautiful of all songs.

Song of Songs is an elegantly stated collection of poems celebrating the love shared between young lovers created in God’s image. They bask in each other’s beauty and in their ability to satisfy their need for physical love. Song of Songs pays homage to the wonder and majesty of monogamous sexual love when that love is intensely pursued with honor and faithfulness.

The opening reference of the book is to “Solomon’s Song of Songs,” which could refer to Solomon’s authorship or that the Song is written about or dedicated to Solomon. Many of the references to Solomon are in the third person, and it is more likely that the compiler of the Song was an admirer of the great king’s successes and supporter of the wisdom literary traditions.

Many interpreters throughout history have been uncomfortable with the explicit material found in the book. Some, both Jewish and Christian, have taken either a typological or allegorical approach. So this book is said to illustrate God’s covenant bond and intimate relationship with his people. Many Jewish interpreters have taken the Song as an allegory of the love between Yahweh and Israel, while Christian scholars have often accepted the book as praising the love between Christ and the church. But without the mention of God, it is doubtful whether any of this is the intended original message of Song of Songs.

Crucial for a good reading of the Song is to recognize that it comes to us basically in three voices: the woman, who plays the leading role throughout; the man, who especially celebrates the beauty of, and his love for, the woman; and the woman’s companions, called the “daughters of Jerusalem.”

How to Read Lamentations

A lament is a sad, agony-filled song often sung at funerals. The book of Lamentations is a collection of five laments that graphically and poetically express shock and deep pain over the destruction and devastation of Jerusalem after it fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC. In our English Bible, Lamentations is associated with Jeremiah, who is even identified as the author and is placed as part of the Major Prophets.

Lamentations is a tragic, mournful cry, expressing grief over the fall of Jerusalem and the associated rupture of covenant fellowship with Yahweh. Read close on the heels of Jeremiah, it serves as a vindication of Jeremiah’s message. Jerusalem ignored the warnings he spoke from Yahweh and now the temple is gone, the monarchy is gone, the city lies in ashes, and the people are scattered. Yet in keeping with the prophetic message, the poet of Lamentations will, in the midst of suffering, reaffirm the faithfulness of Yahweh and to pray for restoration.

Each of the five chapters in Lamentations is a separate poem. The opening lines of Lamentations capture the main point of the book: “How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!” (Lam. 1:1). Lamentations 1 describes the mournful weeping over destroyed Jerusalem.

1. Lamentations 1:1–22 First Lament: Zion Laments over Her Destruction
2. Lamentations 2:1–22 Second Lament: Zion’s Lament and Appeal: Calling out to Yahweh
3. Lamentations 3:1–66 Third Lament: Despair and Hope: Hope in Yahweh’s Covenant Faithfulness
4. Lamentations 4:1–22 Fourth Lament: Groping in the Streets: Present horrible Conditions in Jerusalem
5. Lamentations 5:1–22 Fifth Lament: The Remnant of Zion Weeps: A prayer for restoration