

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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SESSION TEN POETRY AND WRITINGS

1. Job

Suffering and the Sovereignty of God

Reading: Job 1:1-2:13; 4:1, 5:17-18; 8:1, 3-7; 11:1, 7-9, 13-15; 19:1, 7, 23-27; 32:1-7; 34:5-9; 31:35-37; 38:1-7; 42:1-10

2. Psalms

Praise in Public Worship

Reading: Psalms 19:1-11, 14; 122:1-9; 74:1-3, 10-11, 22-23; 51:1-3, 7-12; 34:1-14, 19-22

3. Proverbs and Song of Songs

Wisdom for Living

Reading: Proverbs 1:1, 7; 3:5-6, 11-12; 6:6-8, 16-22; 8:10-11; 10:7-10; 14:31-32; 15:1-4; 16:18; 11:22; 31:30; Song of Songs 1:1, 4c-8, 2:1-2, 16-17; 4:1-7; 5:10-16; 6:1-3, 7:6-9a; 8:7, 13-14

4. Ecclesiastes

The Futility of Temporal Pursuits

Reading: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 3:1-15; 4:7-11; 5:8-12; 7:1-6; 9:1-6; 12:1-8, 10-14

Discussion questions:

How does Job help us to consider the problem of suffering in the world?

In what ways should Psalms be used in public and personal worship today?

1. Job

Suffering and the Sovereignty of God

Reading: Job 1:1-2:13; 4:1, 5:17-18; 8:1, 3-7; 11:1, 7-9, 13-15; 19:1, 7, 23-27; 32:1-7; 34:5-9; 31:35-37; 38:1-7; 42:1-10

It is fairly easy to spot poetry in our Bibles because of the layout of the text. Some of the prophets contain poetry but Psalms, Song of Songs and Job are the three most notable poetic books. Poetry is a special way of writing and is rarely spontaneous. It takes more time to compose but the beauty of the words is able to touch us in a special way. Poetry is easier to remember than prose, especially when set to music. Traditional English poetry relies on the devices of rhyme, rhythm and repetition. Repetition can take different forms. A similar idea might be repeated in different ways in consecutive lines. Words or phrases can be repeated or included in a chorus or refrain. Letter sounds can be repeated by alliteration or vowel sounds can be repeated by assonance. Sound is important to poetry so, to gain the full effect, poetry is best read out loud. Hebrew poetry is very different from English poetry.

In Hebrew poetry the most important device is a form of repetition known as 'parallelism'. This can be used for emphasis, for balance or to enable a choir or congregation to respond. Through synonymous parallelism, an idea can be developed using the same or similar words, to reinforce one idea. Through antithetic parallelism a theme can be developed with contrasting or opposite ideas. In synthetic parallelism, two ideas can be held together, the second being built on the first. Hebrew poetry uses a number of other devices, including acrostics (where the poetry is based on the alphabet) but rhythm, repetition and parallelism, of the sort that we may link with great oratory are the most important features of Hebrew poetry.

Job is a poetical book with a prose prologue. It has been described as an artistic masterpiece. It addresses the question of the relationship between suffering and a God who is believed to be righteous and good. It is a discussion of what happens when moral theory and reality meet.

In simple terms the book of Job explores the question, 'how can God be both good and sovereign in the light of the suffering of the innocent and the prospering of the wicked? Or to express it more simply, 'why do bad things happen to good people?' Job is a good man, committed to God, yet circumstances overwhelm him and prolonged suffering follows loss of possessions and family. The theory that such suffering would only come upon a wicked man is tested and proved to be wrong.

The three friends ('comforters') represent three common interpretations and their words are part of Job's testing, not God's answer. Eliphaz regards the most important thing as God-given experience rightly understood and thinks that though the righteous suffer they never come to an untimely end and while the unrighteous prosper they do so with a dread of calamity. Bildad venerates tradition believing that it will provide the answers. Zophar says that Job's suffering is proof of his sinfulness and that repentance is his only hope. Their silent sympathy was rather better than their well-meaning but insensitive words (2:13). Elihu's angry tirade produces more heat than light. In all, the book of Job shows that their views represent a shallow and incomplete observation of life.

The book of Job shows that God does not abandon his servant in his time of trouble. Despite human sinfulness, weakness and ignorance, Job is a relatively pure and upright man, even in times of testing and distress. Nevertheless, Job persistently calls for an audience with God and thinks of what he would like to ask God. God is clearly willing to communicate with Job, as his friend and not his enemy, but in their encounter it turns out to be God who is asking the questions. Job's questions largely remain unanswered and the reason for suffering remains a mystery but 'God is recognisably the faithful, righteous Lord whose ways, while they are past finding out, are to be trusted to the end. Job does not have to conclude, like one of the Babylonian sufferers, that what is evil on earth may be counted good in heaven; nor is there any question of placating God with gifts; still less of throwing in one's hand and renouncing him' (Kidner).

2. Psalms

Praise in Public Worship

Reading: Psalms 19:1-11, 14; 122:1-9; 74:1-3, 10-11, 22-23; 51:1-3, 7-12; 34:1-14, 19-22

The book of Psalms (or Psalter) is in effect a hymn-book and a prayer-book to which ordinary people can relate for Psalms can be applied to the life of the modern-day believer, covering a whole range of human emotions, both positive and negative. The Psalms are poetry that was intended to be spoken or sung or shouted. They give us a pattern of how to address God, not over-familiar and yet in a relationship of love and trust. They are intended to be used in public worship and are a pattern.

In the Psalms,

‘poetry is put to work, to be the way to heaven’s door in worship or in teaching, furnishing inspired words for public festivals and royal occasions, and for the individual who might come to confess his sins, or plead for healing, or rejoice over some deliverance or revelation’ (Kidner).

Tradition has usually divided the Psalms into five books (1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150), the last Psalm in each part being a doxology, a song of praise to the God of glory. It seems that David wrote more than half the Psalms for 73 of them bear his name and, as well as these, the New Testament attributes Psalm 2 and Psalm 95 to him and it is likely that he also wrote some of the others. Solomon wrote some Psalms (72, 127); the sons of Korah, a character who appears in Numbers, wrote 10 Psalms and the sons of Asaph wrote 12 Psalms. Many of the others are anonymous.

Many of the Psalms come in groups that seem to fit together. Psalms 22-24 give us a picture of a saviour, a shepherd and a sovereign. Psalms 42-49 were written by the sons of Korah. Psalms 73-83 were written by the sons of Asaph. ‘God is King’ is the theme of Psalms 96-99, while Psalms 113-118 are the *hallel* Psalms sung at Passover. Psalms 120-134 are the ‘songs of ascents’ for pilgrims going up to Jerusalem and Psalms 146-150 are the ‘hallelujah Psalms’.

If the books of the prophets are a record of God’s speaking to Israel, the Psalms are a record of Israel’s response to God. Sometimes the Psalms contain profoundly personal experiences and yet, as is the case with the best of this kind of writing, this is put in a general way so that it is usable by all. The very best of all from the experiences of a man or woman of God reflects or foreshadows Jesus but, very clearly, not all experience does. In the Psalms, therefore, the highest of human virtue is a shadow of the reality that is found and known in Jesus Christ.

The Psalms can be grouped into five main types. These are hymns (in praise of God’s character and deeds), Royal Psalms (marking some special occasion in the monarch’s life), community laments (arising out of some national disaster), individual laments and individual thanksgivings.

Psalm 19, ‘The heavens declare the glory of the Lord, the skies proclaim the work of his hands’ (v. 1), is a hymn in praise of God’s character. The Royal Psalms include the experiences that David had as King. Some of these look forward to the Messiah who will be king in the line of David. All the lament Psalms follow a five-fold pattern – they begin with a cry, a complaint and a confession of trust and continue with a petition before concluding with a promise to praise God when deliverance comes. Psalm 74, ‘Why have you rejected us for ever, O God? Why does your anger smoulder against the sheep of your pasture?’ (v. 1), is a community lament, while Psalm 51, ‘Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions’ (v. 1) is an individual lament. An example of an individual Psalm of thanksgiving is Psalm 34, ‘I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips’ (v. 1).

3. Proverbs and Song of Songs

Wisdom for Living

Reading: Proverbs 1:1, 7; 3:5-6, 11-12; 6:6-8, 16-22; 8:10-11; 10:7-10; 14:31-32; 15:1-4; 16:18; 11:22; 31:30; Song of Songs 1:1, 4c-8, 2:1-2, 16-17; 4:1-7; 5:10-16; 6:1-3, 7:6-9a; 8:7, 13-14

Proverbs are generally pithy statements in a parallel form and the book of Proverbs is a gathering of several collections of these sayings, probably from the era of Israel's first kings. Several of these are part of everyday conversation but not all proverbial sayings come from the Bible. 1 Kings 4:32-34 tells us that Solomon spoke 3000 proverbs and that he wrote 1005 songs. His part in the book of Proverbs and the Songs of Songs is not entirely clear. King Hezekiah, who lived 250 years after Solomon, collected many of Solomon's unwritten proverbs together and these are included in the book of Proverbs.

The book of Proverbs has a general introduction (Proverbs 1-9) and a poem about the perfect wife (Proverbs 31:10-31). The rest is six collections of sayings that are generally true. The main themes are the wise man and the fool (10:7-10); the righteous and the wicked (14:31-32); words and the tongue (15:1-4); the family; laziness and hard work (6:6-8).

There are about 900 proverbs in the book of Proverbs. Some of these seem to be little more than common sense. The book tells the reader how to make the most of life and not to waste it. The starting point of the Proverbs is that the 'fear of the Lord' is the essence of all true wisdom. Folly (or the lack of wisdom) is not due to slowness of learning or lack of education but neglect of God. The principles of God's teaching are applied to the whole of life. The book of Proverbs presents the reader with choices. God can give us wisdom through other people, more experienced in life than we are. Proverbs contains many references to family relationships. Many of them are presented as a father's advice to his son. Both Wisdom and Folly are symbolically presented as women. In general terms the proverbs are true but they should not be treated as promises for specific circumstances. The proverbs are guidelines but not guarantees.

'Song of Songs' is a strange title for a book (often it is wrongly named 'Song of Solomon') but it really means 'the Greatest Song' rather in the way that we use King of kings to mean the greatest king. Song of Songs is a series of poems that clearly celebrates the beauty and wonder of human love. There is a frank and open delight in physical attraction. This not only affirms the marriage relationship between man and woman but is also an analogy of the love between man and woman and the love between God and his people. The opening of the Song of Songs may imply either that Solomon wrote it or that it is about him. One theory is that Solomon wrote a song for all his wives and concubines but this, the greatest song, is the song that he wrote for the one person that God intended for him.

The problem in interpretation is to identify who is speaking. The paragraph headings in the modern translations are interpretative and not part of the original text. Some scholars feel that there are only two speakers (the lover and the beloved). Others feel that there are three speakers (Solomon, the Shulamite maiden and the shepherd). Another interpretation (followed by the headings in the NIV) is that there are three main characters, Solomon, a Shulamite woman and a group of friends ('the daughters of Jerusalem').

In this last view, King Solomon had let his vineyard out to a family, a mother, two sons, a grown up daughter and her little sister. The boys, who were probably half-brothers (see 1:6) to the older daughter made their sister work hard so that she became sunburned (1:5), an undesirable quality at the time. One day, the daughter met a handsome stranger but did not know it was Solomon. She took him for a shepherd and asked where he tended his flocks. Not revealing his true identity, he evaded answering, speaking loving words to her and promising her gifts in the future. He won her heart and left with the promise that one day he would come back. She dreamed of him until he returned, disclosing his true identity and making her his bride.

4. Ecclesiastes

The Futility of Temporal Pursuits

Reading: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11; 3:1-15; 5:8-12; 7:1-6; 9:1-6;
12:1-8, 10-14

Ecclesiastes is the Greek word for 'Qoheleth' (which could be translated 'teacher', 'preacher', 'speaker', 'philosopher'). It is an unusual book and often says the most outrageous things. While the author is not named, it is the work of 'the son of David, king in Jerusalem' (Ecclesiastes 1:1), who possessed unequalled wisdom (1:16), has indulged in every pleasure (2:1-3), has great wealth (2:8), has undertaken great building projects (2:4-6) and has made a fine collection of proverbs (12:9).

It is reasonable to conclude that this book is another work of King Solomon, writing neither as a young man in love with the girl in Song of Songs, nor as a middle aged man counselling his son not to fall into the same mistakes as his father in Proverbs, but as an old man reaching the end of his life, reflecting on what has gone before in a time of disappointment, disillusionment and hopelessness. The writer speaks as one who has tried all that the world has to offer – pleasure, power, prestige, popularity – and has not found satisfaction in any of them.

The style of the book is that of a person musing over a debate on the ultimate meaning of life. Like all good debates both sides of the argument are presented. Many of life's big questions are considered – what is life all about? Is life worth living? In Old Testament times this form of writing was much more familiar. In Ecclesiastes wrong ideas can be weighed against those that are good and true. The outline of the book is that the cycles of nature and history are constantly repeating themselves.

The book begins in a profoundly negative tone. "“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless”” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). On 28 occasions the writer uses the phrase 'under the sun'. Life 'under the sun' is the world seen from a wholly human standpoint, without God, and it turns out to be meaningless, purposeless, futile and empty. It is an understanding of life that limits everything to this earth and time in which death is the end of meaningful existence with no thought of any afterlife. Men come and go and though wisdom is better than folly, death is the end result for us all. The conclusion is that the oppressions of life are such that it is better to be dead or never to have been born.

There are also positive passages in the book. Whenever the writer brings God into his thinking he is able to be more positive, especially when he realises that everything that happens in the world happens at a time God chooses. Solomon urges his hearers, especially those who are young, to remember God. Perhaps this reflects the fact that he neglected God in his earlier life (after all Song of Songs makes no mention of God). He also urges his hearers to fear God, not least because he is going to ask us for an account of the life that he has given us. Furthermore, Solomon urges his hearers to obey God, whose laws are given for our good, not to spoil life but to enable us to make the best of it.

The way to live is to enjoy gifts that are from God. A long life is not valuable in itself unless it brings enjoyment. The wise man takes a serious outlook on matters of life and death, enjoys the good times and learns from the bad ones. No explanation can be found as to why the good sometimes die young and the wicked live to old age. Faith cannot resolve the problem of evil but hope asserts something that is beyond the immediate evidence of the world.

Death is inevitable. Wisdom without the fear of the Lord is of no value - it is meaningless. The young should rejoice in youth, always mindful of God who calls us all to account. We should all fear God, hold him in awe, and obey him. Ecclesiastes reduces everything the world has to offer to a mere breath, but this is done precisely because man was made for something bigger. It is the fear of God, the idea that God is at the head of all creation that invests the whole of life with meaning.

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NOTES

There is a bewildering array of books and commentaries on the Old Testament. Good non-technical commentaries, such as the *Bible Speaks Today Series* (IVP) or *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (IVP) are the best place to start. The *Welwyn Commentaries* (Evangelical Press) also have some interesting volumes on many of the Old Testament books but these are arranged under a specific title and not the name of the Old Testament book itself.

The idea of the Bird's Eye View of the Old Testament was inspired by:

Anders, M. E. (1990), *30 Days to Understanding the Bible*, Eastbourne, Kingsway