

By Scripture

Alone

Supplemental

Materials -

Wisdom

Literature

Psalms (January 4)

Reading Psalms

The shepherd's weathered hand gently worked the strings of the harp. He created a sequence of harmonious tones that ascended and descended the rolling Judean hills. Poetry flowed from his lips like a meadow spring, recounting the day's experiences and offering heavenward thanks.

The shepherd boy David learned to play and sing in just such a setting, while watching his father's flocks of sheep or goats. The Lord made David a warrior-poet and a prophet who united the tribes of Israel as a harmonious kingdom. His collection of songs accompanied by the harp is the basis of the Psalter, one of the most beloved books of the Bible.

Collection, Arrangement, and Date

The Psalter is a collection of collections and represents the final stage in a process that spanned centuries. It was put into its final form by the postexilic temple personnel, who completed it probably in the third century BC. As such, it served as the prayer book for the second temple and for use in the synagogues.

In its final edition, the Psalter contained 150 psalms. It was divided into five Books, and each was provided with an appropriate concluding doxology. The first two of these Books were probably preexilic. The division of the remaining psalms into three Books was possibly in imitation of the five books of Moses. In spite of this five-book division, the Psalter was clearly thought of as a whole, with an introduction (Psalms 1-2) and a conclusion (Psalms 146-150).

Psalm Types

Analysis of content has given rise to a classification that has proven useful for study of the Psalms. The main types that can be identified are: (1) prayers of the individual; (2) praise from the individual for God's saving help; (3) prayers of the community; (4) praise from the community for God's saving help; (5) confessions of confidence in the Lord; (6) hymns in praise of God's majesty and virtues; (7) hymns celebrating God's universal reign; (8) songs of Zion, the city of God; (9) royal psalms – by, for, or concerning the king, the Lord's anointed; (10) pilgrimage songs; (11) liturgical songs; and (12) didactic (instructional) songs.

Of all these psalm types, the prayers (both of the individual and of the community) are the most complex. On the whole, these psalms represent the conventions of the court, the psalmist(s) presenting their case before the heavenly King/Judge. When beset by wicked adversaries, the petitioner describes his situation, pleads his innocence, lodges accusation against his adversaries, and appeals for deliverance and judicial redress. When suffering at the hands of God (that is, when God is his adversary), he confesses his guilt and pleads for mercy.

Blessings for Readers

The Israelites used two different names for the Psalms as a collection of holy writings: *tepillot* ("prayers") and *tehillim* ("praises"). These are the chief uses of the Psalms in all ages. The Psalms have a way of connecting with the daily concerns of our lives and guiding us in heartfelt prayer and worship. For these reasons, they remain the most devotional portion of Scripture and the inspiration for hymnals and prayer books.

A third important use for the Psalms is instruction. They teach so much about the blessings and challenges of walking in the Lord's ways. They constantly point forward to the appearance of Jesus for our salvation. New Testament interpreters saw the life and words of David as foretastes and prophecies of the Son of David, the Messiah.

Proverbs (March 3)

Reading Proverbs

Clinking bits of silver, shouting merchants, and bleating herds distract a young man as he passes through the streets of Jerusalem. He pauses to wonder at the piles of goods on display, bartered wildly by shoppers and shopkeepers. At the corner, he catches a whiff of myrrh and cinnamon from where a sultry woman caresses the doorframe of her house. She winks and smiles. From the city gate, the young man hears the voice of one calling, “The Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2:6).

Above the clamor of Jerusalem’s streets, King Solomon could see and reflect on the temptations of his subjects – temptations to which he himself succumbed. He saw clearly the need for instruction, for wisdom that parents could pass on to their children and teachers could share with their students. The book of Proverbs is the result of Solomon’s God-given wisdom, experience, and concern.

Authors

Although the book begins with a title ascribing the proverbs to Solomon, it is clear from later chapters that he was not the only author of the book. Most of the book, however, is closely linked with Solomon. A group of wise men or scribes compiled most of the proverbs as editors and added chapters 25-29 to the earlier collections. The book also contains a short prologue and a longer epilogue which may have been added to the other materials. The emphasis on the “fear of the Lord” throughout the book ties the various segments together.

Wisdom Literature

The Jews sometimes speak of the Old Testament as the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Included within the third division are Psalms and wisdom materials such as Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. These wisdom books are associated with a class of people called “wise men” or “sages” who are listed with priests and prophets as an important force in Israelite society. Some of their writings, like Proverbs, were optimistic, as they showed the young how to behave in order to live prosperous and happy lives. Other materials, such as Job and Ecclesiastes, were more pessimistic as they wrestled with difficult philosophical and theological questions such as the problem of evil and the prosperity of the wicked. Both viewpoints – the optimistic and the pessimistic – are also found in the literature of other nations in the ancient Near East.

Because of the nature of Proverbs, we must not interpret it as prophecy or its statements about certain effects and results as promises. For instance, Proverbs 10:27 says that the years of the wicked are cut short, while the righteous live long and prosperous lives. The righteous have abundant food, but the wicked will go hungry. While such verses are generally true, there are enough exceptions to indicate that sometimes the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. Normally the righteous and the wicked receive their due on earth, but at other times reward and punishment lie beyond the grave.

Although Proverbs is more practical than theological, God’s work as Creator is especially highlighted. Twice God is called the Maker of the poor. He also directs the steps of man, and his eyes observe all his actions. God is sovereign over the kings of the earth, and all history moves forward under his control.

Blessings for Readers

As you read Proverbs, bear in mind the central theme of the book: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 1:7). Proverbs promises that you will not face life alone or without good counsel. When you face the practical dilemmas of life, the Lord is with you to establish your steps. Call on his name, and wisdom will answer. “You are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Ecclesiastes (May 31)

Reading Ecclesiastes

His whole body was filled with delight. The aroma was so good, so tempting, it merited a closer look. At the jar's edge, the scent overwhelmed him. He settled upon it and gorged himself with sticky sweetness. But then he could not pull away. Although he beat his wings until they buzzed, the ointment clung to him and drew him down to silence.

Similarly, Solomon's pursuits and experiences drew him down like a fly stuck in the proverbial ointment. Though he had greater wisdom than all and greater wealth than most, in the end he could not enjoy them. Ecclesiastes records how Solomon viewed life and its pleasures as a trap that brings deadly silence. Yet Solomon breaks this silence by calling out the "end of the matter" (Ecclesiastes 12:13), wisdom's abiding treasure: the fear of the Lord. He even anticipates the hope of the resurrection.

Author and Date

No time period or writer's name is mentioned in the book, but several passages strongly suggest that King Solomon is the author. On the other hand, the writer's title ("Teacher"), his unique style of Hebrew, and his attitude toward rulers may point to another person and a later period.

Purpose and Method

With his life largely behind him, the author takes stock of the world as he has experienced it between the horizons of birth and death – the latter a horizon beyond which man cannot see. The world is seen as being full of enigmas, the greatest of which is man himself.

As the author looks about at the human enterprise, he sees man in mad pursuit of one thing and then another – laboring as if he could master the world, lay bare its secrets, change its fundamental structures, break through the bounds of human limitations, and master his own destiny. He sees man vainly pursuing hopes and expectations that in reality are "meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

But faith teaches him that God has ordered all things according to his own purposes and that man's role is to accept these, including his own limitations, as God's appointments. Man, therefore, should be patient and enjoy life as God gives it. He should know his own limitations and not vex himself with unrealistic expectations. He should be prudent in everything, living carefully before God and the king, and above all, fearing God and keeping his commandments.

Life not centered on God is purposeless and meaningless. Without him, nothing else can satisfy. With him, all of life and his other good gifts are to be gratefully received and used and enjoyed to the full. The book presents the philosophical and theological reflections of a typical person, most of whose life was meaningless because he had not himself relied on God.

Blessings for Readers

Whereas much of Scripture describes life from the viewpoint of heaven, Ecclesiastes provides a very earthy, human perspective. The book connects powerfully with our frustrations and disappointments as well as our fears about life now and eternally. Despite all the sad points of wisdom and experiences, the book ends on a clear word of hope. In this way, Ecclesiastes illustrates the unconquerable good news of God's care and mercy. It affirms the meaningfulness of life's basics, the pleasure of youth and good health, honest work, the love of a faithful spouse, and the hope of eternal life with God.

Song of Songs (July 15)

Reading Song of Songs

Song of Songs begins with the highest note of passionate excitement, with the bride entering the king's chamber. This is not where the relationship between the main characters began. Song of Songs does not move in chronological order but cycles among the themes of courtship, wedding, and consummation. Much of the text describes the couple's longing for each other, which includes vivid imagery from God's creation and beautiful landmarks from throughout Israel and the nations Israel dominated during Solomon's reign.

Song of Songs is not mere erotic literature, as many critics argue. It wrestles with the tension between the beauty and sensuality of the human body and the wisdom of reserving the body for marriage and genuine love. For these reasons, Song of Songs fits naturally with Old Testament wisdom literature. Interpreters have long recognized allusions to the Lord's love for and governance of his people. The prophets regarded Israel as the Lord's bride, a theme that always describes God's gracious relationship with his people, who inherit his blessings. In this way, Song of Songs anticipates the New Testament teaching that the Church is Christ's beloved bride and family. He seals and purifies her through holy baptism and graciously governs her.

Author

Verse 1 appears to ascribe authorship to Solomon. Solomon is referred to seven times, and several verses speak of the "king," but whether he was the author remains an open question. Consistency of language, style, tone, perspective, and recurring refrains seems to argue for a single author. However, many who have doubted that the Song came from one pen, or even from one time or place, explain this consistency by ascribing all the Song's parts to a single literary tradition, since Near Eastern traditions were very careful to maintain stylistic uniformity.

Theme and Theology

In ancient Israel everything human came to expression in words: reverence, gratitude, anger, sorrow, suffering, trust, friendship, commitment, loyalty, hope, wisdom, moral outrage, repentance. In the Song, it is love that finds words – inspired words that disclose its exquisite charm and beauty as one of God's choicest gifts. The voice of love in the Song, like that of wisdom in Proverbs, is a woman's voice, suggesting that love and wisdom draw men powerfully with the subtlety and mystery of a woman's allurements.

The feminine voice speaks profoundly of love. She portrays its beauty and delights. She claims its exclusiveness and insists on the necessity of its pure spontaneity. She also proclaims its overwhelming power – it rivals that of the fearsome enemy, death; it burns with the intensity of a blazing fire; it is unquenchable even by the ocean depths. She affirms its preciousness: all a man's possessions cannot purchase it, nor (alternatively) should they be exchanged for it. She hints, without saying so explicitly, that it is a gift of the Lord to man. God intends that such love – grossly distorted and abused by both ancient and modern people – be a normal part of marital life in his good creation.

In this song of love the voice of the beloved is dominant. It is her experience of love, both as the one who loves and as the one who is loved, that is most clearly expressed. The Song begins with her wish for the lover's kiss and ends with her urgent invitation to him for love's intimacy.

Blessings for Readers

Song of Songs is not the first book people should study from the Old Testament. Nor is it the chief book for establishing Christian doctrine. Nonetheless, it is essential reading for God's people because life is more than precepts. God created us beautiful and passionate. To celebrate these blessings is to celebrate our Creator and his passionate love for us. As you read Song of Songs, consider this: if earthly love and life are so wondrous and stirring, how much more wonderful will eternal love and life be?

Job (August 19)

Reading Job

Stubs of pillars and walls interrupt the graceful arcs of hills throughout the Near East. At twilight, silhouettes of these ruins meld with the hills like permanent features of the landscape. But in truth, they testify that nothing here is permanent. All things and all people suffer decay in our sin-broken world. The life and world of every person ends in ashes, dust, and ruins.

The prophet Job sat in ashes and dust for seven days and considered the ruins of his once-great estate. Neither mourning nor the wisdom of his friends offered comfort. In fact, Job's friends accused him of bringing ruin upon himself and his family.

Author

Although most of the book consists of the words of Job and his counselors, Job himself was not the author. The unknown author probably had access to oral and/or written source materials from which, under divine inspiration, he composed the book that we now have. Of course the subject matter of the prologue had to be divinely revealed to him, since it contains information only God could know. While the author preserves much of the archaic and non-Israelite flavor in the language of Job and his friends, he also reveals his own style as a writer of wisdom literature. The literary structures and the quality of the rhetoric used display the author's literary genius.

Date

Two dates are involved: (1) the date of the man Job and his historical setting, and (2) the date of the inspired writer who composed the book. The latter could be dated anytime from the reign of Solomon to the exile. Job himself appears to have lived in the second millennium BC (2000-1000), and probably late in that millennium.

Theme and Message

The book provides a profound statement on the subject of theodicy (the justice of God in light of human suffering). But the manner in which the problem of theodicy is conceived and the solution offered (if it may be called that) is uniquely Israelite. In the speeches of chapters 3-37, we hear on the one hand the flawless logic but wounding thrusts of those who insisted that Job's suffering came from being guilty in the eyes of God, and on the other hand the writhing of soul of the righteous sufferer who struggles with the great enigma of a loving God who still allows evil.

In summary, the author's pastoral word to the godly sufferer is that his righteousness has such supreme value that God treasures it more than all. And the great adversary knows that if he is to thwart the purposes of God, he must assail the righteousness of man. At stake in the suffering of the truly godly is the outcome of the struggle in heaven between the great adversary and God, with the all-encompassing divine purpose in the balance. That the suffering of the righteous has a meaning and value commensurate with the titanic spiritual struggle of the ages.

Blessings for Readers

Despite Job's lack of understanding and inability to explain his suffering, he clings to his belief that God is still his Redeemer. The book of Job teaches that suffering is not simply God's judgment for sin (though it certainly can be that); suffering may be a trial permitted by God for our good or for the good of another. Most important, human suffering is part of God's redemptive plan for the salvation of all. Job trusts that a Mediator-Redeemer will justify him. And in the end, God leads Job to sincere repentance and renewed faith in his mercy.

As you study Job, pray for the patience, wisdom, and faith shown by this saint. No matter what you may suffer, confess your Redeemer and call on him. He will deliver you!