

Poetry & Wisdom

The rhythms and creativity of Hebrew heart and mind

HEBREW POETRY

Vehicle of faith

Like the peoples of most ancient cultures, the Hebrews prized the medium of poetry as a means of expression with its capacity to stir and communicate the human spirit, with its ability to capture and preserve personal, national and religious memories and experiences. Little remains of secular Hebrew poetry (cf Num 21:17-18), but all main events like harvest, marriage and funerals had their songs (cf 2 Sam 18:33). The Hebrews have always been a music loving people and their songs were nearly always accompanied by instruments. Their reputation for singing certainly impressed their Babylonian captors (Ps 137:3). But it is with poetry as a means for spiritual expression that we enter the Hebrew treasure house. The prophet, the psalmist and the philosopher each took the natural rhythms of the Hebrew language and created masterpieces of literature that became breathtaking vehicles of faith.

Hebrew poetry is addressed to the mind through the heart, with the result that it is intentionally emotive. The words are intended to appeal to the emotions, evoking feelings rather than propositional thinking. They seek to stimulate an active response rather than merely provide an understanding of the facts. Understanding this should ensure that we handle Hebrew poetry gently, not trying to press the text too hard for special meanings in every word and phrase. We must recognise that many questions remain about the technical aspects of the development and structure of Hebrew poetry, which should warn against dogmatism.

Rhyming pictures

Rhythm is at the very roots of the Hebrew language, so it very naturally expresses itself in poetry. It is the rhythm that gives the basic shape to Hebrew poetry. The 'metre' as we understand it is absent from Hebrew poetry, there is instead a variable rhythm that scans by accents and stresses alone, not unlike 'sprung rhythm' developed by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

In Hebrew poetry it is the 'ideas' rather than the words that rhyme. Its genius is in the imagery that it uses. Its writers search heaven, earth and human experience to find the colours with which to work. Apart from metaphor they use simile, alliteration, anaphora (the repetition of a word or phrase in successive lines, e.g. Judg 5:19, 27) and the acrostic (cf Psalm 119).

The acrostic, which follows the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, presents a highly disciplined structure and artificial style that controls and directs the mind and emotions so they can begin to communicate intense joy or grief which it may be felt is beyond communication. It encourages and conveys the sense of com-



pleteness in expression. It has as much to do with the eye as to do with the ear; conveying an idea, not merely a feeling. It has a cleansing and releasing role in giving total expression, yet at the same time in curbing spontaneity it gives control and dignity. It also aids the memory.

The rhythm, the balances, the relationship between the parts and the overall structure are the identifying and distinguishing features of Hebrew poetry. The most common feature is 'parallelism', of which there are three types:

- **Synonymous parallelism** (e.g. Ps 55:6; 59:1; 104; Isa 44:2). This brings emphasis through *repetition*; where subsequent lines repeat or reinforce the sense of the first line.
- **Antithetical parallelism** (e.g. Ps 1:6; 55:12-13; Hos 7:14). This brings emphasis through *contrast*; where subsequent lines stand in antithesis to the thought in the first line.
- **Synthetic parallelism** (e.g. Ps 45:1; Obad 21). This brings emphasis through *detail*; where subsequent lines add to the first by providing more information.

It has been well said of Hebrew poetry that 'so long as humans breathe, its eternal lines will form the litany of the praying heart ... The strings it touches are the strings of the harp of God ... Its object is the God of heaven and earth, its source is a heart hungry for him, its theme is a personal encounter with him'.

PSALMS

Songs of praise

The Psalms (Heb *tehillim* lit. 'songs of praise') are literature of immense importance. They mirror all the ideals of the spiritual person and their desire for communion with God. They give expression to Israel's faith in the broadest sense, not simply a reflection upon personal religious experience.

Each psalm had a distinct function in Israel's life, with the intended purpose of drawing together the worshipper and God. They were used primarily as aids to worship, being sung, probably by professional singers, as the sacrifices were brought into the Temple. Yet they were also widely used in Hebrew life beyond the Temple.

As we read the psalms today the people's words to God all those centuries ago become God's words to us.

Ancient hymnbook

In its present form the Psalter has been rightly called 'the hymnbook of the second temple', because its use there most certainly led to its present structure. However, this is in no way to suggest that most of the psalms come from the Exile or later, the evidence is quite to the contrary.



The actual phenomena of the psalms as an expression of worship can be found from the earliest periods of Israel's history:

- Moses and Miriam (Exodus 15)
- Deborah (Judges 5)
- Hannah (1 Samuel 2)
- the prophets (cf Hosea 6; Isaiah 2; Habakkuk 3)

Neither is the concept of psalms found among the Hebrews alone, the style has been illustrated in archaeological finds from Babylon and Canaan.

In its final form the book of Psalms is made up of five books, with the divisions almost certainly intended to parallel the five books of the Torah:

- Book 1 1 - 41
- Book 2 42 - 72
- Book 3 73 - 89
- Book 4 90 - 106
- Book 5 107 - 150

Each of the books concludes with a doxology, with Psalm 1 and Psalm 150 forming the introduction and conclusion to the Psalter as a whole.

However, those who have made a close study of the text and the structure of the Psalms notice interesting details and detect earlier collections and editions behind the present one. Some interesting points to note are:

- almost half (73) of the psalms have the ascription 'of David'. This may not mean that David actually wrote all those ascribed to him, but rather may indicate their use during royal rituals or that it has been written 'after the style of David', or even dedicated to his memory. Nevertheless we know that David was both a master musician and poet (1 Sam 16:18; 2 Sam 1:17-27). It is also possible that psalms like 16, 51-60, 69, 109-110, 139 etc. are directly from his hand;
- in whole or in part some psalms occur in more than one place (cf especially Psalm 14 and Psalm 53);
- some psalms are grouped according to whether they use 'Yahweh' or 'Elohim' in their references to God;
- the fact that Moses and Solomon are mentioned in some of the titles reminds us that sacred music was important in both the Tabernacle and the first Temple;
- the prominence of the king in so many psalms shows that the period of the monarchy must have been the central period for the writing and the use of the psalms.

It would appear that originally there were three main groupings of the psalms:

- Psalms 2 - 41 Davidic psalms (using `Yahweh`);

- Psalms 42 - 83 Korah, Asaph, David (using 'Elohim') plus 84 - 89 (using 'Yahweh')
- Psalms 90 - 150 mainly anonymous (using 'Yahweh') divided into sub-clusters:
 - 93 - 100 Divine kingship
 - 113 - 118 Egyptian Hallel (Passover)
 - 120 - 134 Songs of Ascents
 - 146 - 150 Hallelujah psalms

These were then divided into five books (to harmonise with the Torah); doxologies were placed at the appropriate places and Psalms 1 and 150 placed to preface and conclude the whole work.

Types of psalms

Even the most cursory study of the psalms reveals an enormous variety in style, structure, form and focus, in many cases scattered quite randomly throughout the work as a whole. Much work has been done to try and identify the different types by asking questions like:

- What was the worship situation from which they sprang?
- What thoughts and moods do the different psalms have in common?
- What are the recurring features of style, form and imagery?

These important questions have led scholars to classify psalms into 'types', which is a great help in trying to study them. Obviously not everyone agrees upon exactly how some of the psalms are to be classified, and different names have been given to some of the categories. Nonetheless, the following list of categories is widely accepted:

Lament

These psalms make up the largest group in the Psalter (more than 60); they include both individual and corporate laments:

- individual - e.g. 3, 22, 31, 35, 39, 42, 57-59, etc
- corporate - e.g. 12, 44, 80, 94, 137, etc

In them an individual or group express their sufferings, struggles and disappointments to the Lord. They enable a person 'to be angry and sin not', voicing their anger and frustration to the Lord.

The typical components of a psalm of lament are:

- **Plea**
 - Address to God
 - Complaint
 - Petition
 - Motivations for God to act



- Imprecation
- **Praise**
 - Assurance of being heard
 - Payment of vows
 - Doxology and praise

Two lament psalms stand out:

- Psalm 88 is the darkest Psalm - its last word in Hebrew is 'darkness'. There is no response from God and consequently there is no move from plea to praise;
- Psalm 109 is the most vindictive Psalm with a sustained attack on the Psalmist's opponents.

These two psalms, in particular, are 'limit' psalms. They speak to the most extreme situations humanity experiences. Psalm 88 is, in fact, an act of supreme faith in that the Psalmist continues to address their plight to Yahweh even though he does not answer and seemingly will never answer as the Psalmist remains in darkness.

Thanksgiving

These psalms are used in circumstances quite opposite to those of the lament, responding to good situations with thanks for faithfulness, protection and benefit. They help the worshipper to express gratitude:

- Individual - 18, 30, 32, 34, 40, 66, 92, 116, 118, 138;
- Corporate - 65, 67, 75, 107, 124, 136.

Praise

These psalms refer to previous misery or joy but they centre upon God for who he is; for his greatness and his love for the earth and his people:

- Creator - 8, 19, 104, 148;
- Protector - 66, 100, 111, 114, 149;
- Lord of history - 33, 103, 113, 117, 145-147.

Salvation

These psalms review God's saving work in history among his people, especially in the events of the Exodus and Covenant making (78, 105, 106, 135, 136).

Celebration

These psalms are of several different types:

- **Covenant renewal** - they give worship guidelines for renewal with



- particular emphasis on the Sinai covenant (cf 50, 81);
- **Davidic covenant** - they praise the importance of God's choice of the house of David; they have a messianic theme (cf 89, 132);
- **Royal psalms** - they focus on kingship, the picture they give is an ideal pattern for a reigning king to follow, while at the same time give a prophetic picture of the Messiah (2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, 144);
- **Enthronement psalms** - they celebrate the enthronement of the king, perhaps even of Yahweh himself (24, 29, 47, 93, 95-99);
- **Songs of Zion** - they focus upon Jerusalem, the centre of Hebrew society, they have a new covenant perspective (46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122).

Wisdom

These psalms are similar to Proverbs in that the merits of wisdom are extolled. Note that Proverbs 8 is in fact a psalm (36, 37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128, 133).

Confidence

These psalms centre attention upon the fact that God can be trusted in times of despair, there is praise for God's goodness and care, declarations that God delights in those who trust in him (11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 91, 121, 125, 131).

Studying the psalms

The psalms are frequently misunderstood and consequently misused. Studying the psalms is not easy:

- they are rarely collected into any logical arrangement
- they are written from a different cultural perspective
- they are frequently filled with negativism
- they speak of blessing solely in terms of historical Israel
- they present moral problems in calling down God's wrath

There are key points of focus when studying a psalm:

- **Identify its structure and form**, the basic shape which it shares with other psalms of similar type; understanding the structure enables you to follow what is happening throughout.
- **Identify patterns within the psalm**, the arrangement or repetition of certain words or sounds, any play on words.
- **Remember to read the psalm as a whole**, it is a literary unit, to tear out verses will lead to errors in interpretation.
- **Remember that psalms were to be sung**, they build upon doctrine, frequently reflect upon doctrine, but they are not doctrinal statements and so must not be misused in that way.

One of the problems of interpretation is the failure to recognise that psalms are spoken 'to God' or 'about God' rather than 'from God to the people'. The words about God become the word of God to us:



- they give us guides to worship, a framework within which to express our thoughts and feelings; a model for times of joy, sorrow, success, failure, hope or regret;
- they show us how we can relate honestly to God; they give instruction in how to be open about our feelings; they destroy pious religious camouflage;
- they help us to reflect and meditate upon God's ways, and what he has done for us, providing a platform from which we can commune with him;
- they affirm that life in God is not free from distress;
- they frequently speak with prophetic voice (cf Mark 12:36; Acts 2:30-31).

SONG OF SONGS

A strange jewel

The Hebrew title proclaims that this is 'the very best of songs'. The Song stands as the first roll of the Megilloth and is read during the feast of Passover. Rabbi Akiba said of the song, 'the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Hollies'.

The book presents us with many problems, not least its erotic nature. Traditionally these problems have been overcome by emphasising Solomon as its author and stressing allegorical methods of interpretation. In the past Jewish men under the age of 30 years old have been forbidden to study the Song, on the grounds that their immaturity would cloud their understanding! The question of authorship is an open one as the references to Solomon are more general than particular and the opening statement may well be a form of dedication (1:1).

The Song is an interweaving of dialogue and soliloquy. The other voices and responses that intrude are probably being quoted by the lovers rather than spoken by the third parties directly. The power of the Song's poetry lies in its intense expression of passion and in the rich imagery it employs. It creates a strong pastoral atmosphere with many references to plants and animals, leading many to believe it was written in northern Israel. However, the geographical references in fact show a knowledge of the whole of Palestine.

Riddle in understanding

What the Song presents are detailed erotic lyrics, no strong religious themes and no clear plot. How it is to be interpreted is something of a riddle. There have been broadly three approaches:

Picture

To treat the Song as an allegory or type has been the classical approach of both the Jewish and Christian interpreter, as it most swiftly deals with the most obvious difficulties that the text presents. Both rabbi and church father were quick to see it as a picture of God's dealings with his people (Israel/Church)



through history. Some mediaevalists saw references to the virgin Mary in the Shulammitte. There was strong resistance to any literal interpretation of the text (e.g. the 'two breasts' were seen as the 'two testaments'!).

Some writers, seeking to avoid the excesses of allegory, preserve a literal approach but see a higher spiritual meaning behind it. There are said to be Arabian love poems with secret meanings behind the text, the Song is said to be similar. Many evangelicals have been drawn to interpret the Song in this manner. Scripture frequently speaks of Yahweh's relationship with Israel in marriage metaphors; the Church is clearly the 'Bride of Christ', but with all the detail that the Song gives there are few clues to make allegorical or typical interpretation convincing.

Story

It makes sense to try and find a narrative behind the text, some have even argued that it was originally a dramatic presentation. A number of possible structures have emerged:

- some see simply two characters: the lover and his beloved Shulammitte expressing their love to one another;
- some see three characters: the Shulammitte being wooed by Solomon the king, but despite his efforts to win her she remains faithful to her shepherd lover;
- some give a twist to the end of this story, arguing that the shepherd lover is in fact none other than Solomon incognito, resting on one of his royal estates in the north, who falls in love with the Shulammitte. At the critical moment he reveals to her his true identity and takes her to the palace in Jerusalem, but she is restless to be with him back amid the pastures again;
- some see behind the text the historical events surrounding Abishag the Shunammite, king David's concubine (1 Kgs 1:3), who is alleged to have refused Solomon's advances in favour of her shepherd lover

However interesting any of the above reconstructions may be, none of them are certain. The idea of a drama falls down on our inability to identify a clear plot, and the lack of evidence for dramatic literature among the Semites as a whole.

Poems

An increasing number of interpreters have seen the Song as a collection of poems rather than a clear narrative, sometimes with several authors. However all the evidence suggests that the Song is the work of one hand:

- some have looked for the source of the Song in the pagan fertility rites of Canaan;
- some have seen them as a collection of 'nuptial songs' used during the traditional week-long marriage feast of the ancient near east.



The poems of the Song convey the sense of being intimate reflections of a lover's diary; a mixture of remembered dialogue and reflecting soliloquy. The impressionistic structure would explain the absence of plot or story, and the presence of the disturbing dream reflections (3:1-5; 5:2-9). Here we have a picture of human love on its highest plane. The Song stands alongside books like Lamentations (with its picture of the horror of human grief), and Ecclesiastes (with its searching, questioning mind). Their presence illustrates the completeness of scripture in touching the fullness of human experience, and the discovery of God at the heart of everything. Human sexual love is one of the perfect gifts of God, and as scripture itself witnesses it speaks of a 'profound mystery' (not allegory), which 'refers to Christ and the Church' (Eph 5:32). Human love has its source in divine love, and it is towards that which all its beautiful experiences point. As E.J.Young put it so well:

Not only does it speak of the purity of human love, but by its very inclusion in the canon it reminds us of a love that is purer than our own.

LAMENTATIONS

Heart cry

The Hebrew *'eka'* is the heart-breaking cry at the centre of every lament, 'How!' Part of the Megilloth, it is read annually on the day of mourning over the destruction of the Temple in 587.

Traditionally the author has been said to be Jeremiah, as there is a similarity of temperament and style between his prophecies and the laments. While some may well be from the pen of this great prophet, there are strong suggestions that the book contains the work of several hands with different styles and viewpoints being detected. What is possible is that all the laments are by eyewitnesses of the tragedy of 587, during or soon after the events.

Lament poems

The first four of the five chapters are structured as acrostic poems. That highly artificial structure that allows the cleansing of a complete confession and control upon overwhelming emotion. The rhythm of these first four chapters is that of the *'qînâ'*, the classic momentum of Hebrew lament (cf 2 Sam 1:19-27; Amos 5:2). It is composed of short sobbing lines, in which it deliberately speaks of events prior to the disaster in glowing terms to heighten and sharpen the sense of the immediate tragedy (cf 4:1-2; 2 Sam 1:19;23):

- **Chapter 3** is written as an individual lament rather than a funeral dirge, but while its style is individual its intention is to express national despair. This lament takes us to the climax of the book with an affirmation that God will hear the cry (3:19-66). This chapter may well come from the pen of Jeremiah.
- **Chapter 5** is written in neither the *'qînâ'* rhythm nor in acrostic structure and may stand slightly further away from the events of 587 than the others, being

slightly reflective in mood. In style it is much more like a psalm of communal lament (cf Psalm 44, 80).

Prophecy fulfilled

These laments are in a sense a watershed, they bear witness to the fulfilment of the prophetic word that proclaimed God's judgment in the absence of repentance. The laments continue the prophetic message, seeing God's righteousness being vindicated amidst the trauma (1:18). What has happened is no coincidence, but the fruit of disobedience. Even when God is chided the people recognise their guilt (2:14). It is recognised the tragedy was avoidable. However, out of the ashes hope is beginning to take shape; its form is not clear but its existence is rooted in the character of God, who is faithful and covenant-keeping (3:19-39). He has disciplined but he is good (3:25-30).

It has been well said that these laments bring together three great strands of Hebrew thought:

- **prophecy:** disaster is the fruit of rebellion, repentance means hope;
- **wisdom:** a willingness to reflect on God's mysteries, especially that of suffering;
- **priesthood:** especially seen in the liturgical form of the poems.

HEBREW WISDOM

Truth to life

Wisdom is the theme and concept that weaves an important thread through the scriptures. Wisdom (Heb *ḥokmā*) is 'the skill and discipline of applying truth to the experience of life'. It is not merely abstract or theoretical but intensely practical. In the broadest sense it is 'the art of being successful'. The ability to form the correct plan in order to achieve the desired result. It is closely linked with, 'knowledge', 'understanding', 'insight' and 'prudence' (cf Prov 1:7; 12:8; Dan 2:21).

Wisdom in its complete sense belongs to God alone (Isa 31:2; Dan 2:20-23). Not only does he have the most complete knowledge about all things, but he alone can accomplish everything that he has on his mind. The whole universe and all it contains is the product of God's creative wisdom. His wisdom is inscrutable (Job 28:12-21), it is quite beyond human grasp apart from God's grace and loving willingness to reveal it to us (Job 28:23, 28). Even the human ability to distil and gain wisdom from experience, observation and reflection, is a gift from God, it is only his creative activity which makes it possible.



Facets of wisdom

There are a number of different facets to the jewel of biblical wisdom:

- **It is personal.** Wisdom only exists when a **person** thinks and acts according to the truth which has been learned through experience. The seat and focal point of wisdom is the heart; the whole person from the perspective of their choice, will and understanding (cf 1 Kgs 3:9, 12). It brings 'largeness of mind' (1 Kgs 4:29).
- **It is technical.** Wisdom is displayed in the skills and abilities of architects and craftsmen (Exod 31:3; Isa 40:20), navigators and shipwrights (Ezek 27:8-9) and professional mourners (Jer 9:17). It is the discipline of achieving practical results.
- **It is pastoral.** Wisdom is required of rulers and leaders with their responsibility to help others by their political and social decisions (cf Deut 34:9; 2 Sam 14:20; 1 Kgs 3:9 etc). The Messiah would have the title 'Wonderful Counsellor' (Isa 9:6) and would be anointed with the 'spirit of wisdom and understanding' (Isa 11:2). Wise leaders will formulate plans that will help others enjoy the best results from life.
- **It is speculative.** Wisdom is not theoretical, abstract and unrelated to experience, but it is speculative in the way that it reflects upon life, its meaning and its paradoxes. Such reflection is to draw practical conclusions and to display empirical results.

Wisdom is born from the intertwining of the spiritual and the practical. It has its roots in 'the fear of the Lord' (Prov 9:10) and extends to every fibre of life. It takes its insights from knowledge of God and applies it to everyday life.

Response to wisdom

The responsibility for having insights is obedience. This fact links wisdom with the prophetic dimension where a 'knowledge of God' is displayed by obedience (cf Hos 2:20; 4:1; 6:6 etc.). Wisdom is focused upon people and displayed in their behaviour. The wise person is able to learn from their experience and apply the truth discovered to new situations. Wisdom is not a commodity to be obtained (i.e. 'to get wisdom') but a quality to be cultivated (i.e. 'to become wise'). A person will only discover the true secrets of wisdom when their motivation is to honour God (cf Isa 5:21; 29:13-14). Wisdom is discovered through the experience of life and continues to mature within that environment, it is sharpened and finely honed by discussion, argument and experiment.

In scripture, the person who stands in contrast to 'the wise' is 'the fool'. Such a person is not a simpleton but an 'infidel'; an unbeliever who lives their life selfishly, indulgently, acknowledging no authority higher than themselves, someone who is 'wise in the own eyes' (Isa 5:21). The infidel may at times appear to have wisdom, but it has no root in the One who is wise, so it is foolishness. Without God wisdom is mere practical atheism, secular and materialistic, moving within a finite framework that is ultimately doomed.

The Wise

As Israel's history unfolded there appear to have been those who increasingly devoted themselves to the pursuit of wisdom, sharing their discoveries with the aim of making others wise also (e.g. Qohelet of Ecclesiastes). It is very likely that these men and women were charismatic figures who stood out by virtue of their exceptional gift (cf Judg 5:7; 2 Sam 14:2). By the time of the monarchy, and perhaps before, some were accorded official status and ministered alongside the prophet and priest (Jer 18:18; Job 34:2). They had major religious and social influence, formulating workable plans and prescribing advice for successful living, for those who came to them. Whether their status was official or charismatic many of the Wise appear to have gathered to themselves followers who sought to learn; they became a sort of 'guru' figure. They were accorded great respect from their pupils and took serious responsibility for them (note how the authors of the proverbs speak of 'my child' not 'my son').

The Wise used every means to communicate their insights: monologue, dialogue, pungent proverb, parable, allegory, riddle and countless metaphors. They used all the Hebrew poetic skills of parallelism, acrostic and alliteration. In all their practical teaching, whatever method they used, they always acknowledge that God is the fountain of all wisdom and that doing his will is the source of highest good.

ECCLESIASTES

The philosopher

Qohelet was one of the Wise, a Hebrew philosopher who faced up those who came to enquire of him with the harsh realities and paradoxes of existence. He did this so that through them they might see life in its true perspective against the back cloth of God's inscrutable sovereignty.

Qohelet's writings are both exciting and difficult. Biblical scholars have drawn quite different conclusions about them. Some see them as unashamedly skeptical, only becoming acceptable as scripture due to later pious editing. Others see faith shining through the complete work. Nor is there agreement about authorship. Traditionally Solomon was viewed as the author, but others see in it the work of several hands. It is almost certainly the work of one hand, but unlikely that of Solomon (the language suggests a time later than Solomon). It is true that the personality of Solomon figures strongly at the beginning of the book, but it is not difficult to see that this is the technique of the author. He uses the figure of the king as a prop and illustration for his teaching. It has been helpfully observed that Qohelet 'begins by dressing up in the king's clothes but leaves enough of his own garments showing underneath to reveal his true identity'.



Subtle structure

Interpreting the book depends upon how one views its structure. This is not easy as the text has grown out of the subtle skills of the Hebrew teacher. It is probably impossible to resolve all the difficulties of the book, but it would appear that running through Qohelet's monologue there are two contrasting, and seemingly conflicting, strands of argument:

- **The skeptical and cynical strand.** This is the prominent overarching theme that views the world as a closed system (1:3-11). Here wisdom only discourages (1:2-8) and pleasure never satisfies (2:1-11). Death neutralises wisdom, levels good and bad alike, leaving human beings little different from animals (2:15-22; 3:18-21; 8:8-9:3). Life is filled with injustice (3:16), oppression and envy (4:1-5; 5:8-9), loneliness (4:7-8) and failure (4:13-16). Money only spawns more evil (5:10-17; 6:1-12). And so the argument continues.
- **The confident and believing strand.** This is the subtle undergirding theme, woven behind the first, not so easy to identify but inspiring faith. Here the observations flow with a quite different spirit and in a contrasting direction. Life is to be taken a day at a time (2:24-26), as God knows the whole plan and mystery of life (3:1-15), he is the judge of all (3:17) so glorify him in the ordinary things of life (3:22). Enjoy quietness (4:6), friendship (4:9-12), faith (5:1-7) and contentment (5:18-20). Exercise wisdom and submit to God's commands (8:1-7). And again the argument continues.

Meaning and meaninglessness

Qohelet's technique is brilliant. His purpose is to place in the hands of his hearers the key to the secret of living, but does so by means of exposing them to the harsh paradoxes of existence. He demands they face all the existential dilemmas: the myths of pleasure, wealth and long life, for what they are. He consistently shows that, in the face of death which comes to us all, the whole of life is quite 'meaningless'; this is the best translation of the traditional phrase 'vanity' (cf 1:2; 12:8). He speaks in this manner to deliberately disturb the minds of his hearers and to force them to think in a way they would not freely choose. However, Qohelet is no atheist, he recognises that behind everything there is God. Throughout his disturbing teaching he continually hints at this, but only at the conclusion of the book does he reveal all and proclaim the truth clearly:

"The end of the matter, all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole human duty. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil"
(12:13-14)

Qohelet feels the full weight of life's riddles and dilemmas, while he knows that the answer lies in God. God himself remains an inscrutable mystery in the way he moves within the world. This is not an easy book. For all that it points directly to God it is not a comforting book. It reminds us that life raises some hard questions that we must constantly feel the weight of. Nevertheless, it

proclaims that amid the most acid attacks that circumstances can launch against us God is there and is shaping our destiny.

Key words

- *hebel* - meaningless;
- *ḥēleq* - portion/lot;
- *‘āmāl* - toil/activity;
- *śimḥâ* - joy

Qohelet sees life as a portion that is allotted to us. In the face of life's ultimate meaninglessness, due to the inevitability of death, all we can do is 'eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil ... for this is our lot' (5:18)

Cynical wisdom

Ecclesiastes lacks much that is central elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures:

- There is no recital of God's saving acts;
- There is no mention of the exodus;
- God is never referred to as Yahweh;
- There is 'nothing new under the sun' (1:9).

The voice of Qoheleth, however, is not one of passionate protest against the futility of life; there is here none of the rage of the psalms of lament. Rather, his attitude is one of jaded resignation. 'Utterly absurd!' runs his refrain. 'Everything is absurd. Everything is wearisome.' These are the words of someone who has heard it all and has no appetite for more ... Not that Qoheleth is an atheist. He believes that life is to be received as a gift from God – but we cannot hope to make sense of it. The wise may make claims to knowledge but they do not impress him (8:16f.). Ecclesiastes provides a haven for those who continue to believe in God but are disillusioned or cynical or have lost interest. And Ecclesiastes' advice? Eat, drink and enjoy your toil! We may not be able to understand life, but we can relish it as our portion from God. Qoheleth does not claim that his advice makes any ultimate sense, for any such suggestion would, of course, be vanity. Nevertheless, this does provide a way of being in the midst of an incomprehensible world.

Yet he does not allow this revelling in life to lead to hedonism. We are invited to fear God and keep his commandments (12:13). Life is still to be lived and savoured in the context of obedience to the Torah – even if this seems to make no sense. This is deeply important. Ecclesiastes may be a voice from the margins but the function of the epilogue is to remove any doubt about its canonical context. 12:9-12 identifies it as wisdom literature and 12:13f. places it in relationship to the Torah. In the wisdom of God, this voice of resigned negativity finds its place in Israel's and then the Church's scriptures. It is



neither the only voice, of course, nor the most prominent; nevertheless, it is one that we must listen to carefully.¹

JOB

The godly sheik

In Job the issues speculated about by Qohelet are focussed more personally, discussed more fully and grounded even more firmly in God.

The book of Job is fascinating. The original story appears to be very ancient (possibly partly preserved in chapters 1-2 and 42:7-17), which at some later date, possibly between 600-400, has been cast into brilliant poetic form by a now anonymous genius, where the issues of 'wisdom theology' are skillfully worked out.

Job is a wealthy god fearing sheik from trans-Jordan; possibly Edom or Bashan. He was recognised as one of 'the Wise' (34:2). Suddenly (though the reader is allowed to know it is by Satanic involvement), he loses all his material possessions, his children, and is struck down by a loathsome disease (possibly elephantiasis or smallpox). Terrible though this was, in the light of popular theology it was seen as divine judgment upon some secret sin on Job's part. If 'God blesses the righteous and punishes the evil doer' there can be no other conclusion than that Job is a sinner. But Job knows that he is innocent. Nevertheless, he is cut off from the community and exiled to the dung heap outside the town. His whole theological world-view is destroyed.

Argument and trauma

Job is visited by his three eminent friends: Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, who were also among 'the Wise'. They sit in silent mourning for seven days, for in their eyes Job is as good as dead. The silence is broken by Job's agonising outburst, "Why?" (Ch 3). So begins the long cycles of heated discussion, which towards the end include the outspoken young man Elihu (Ch 32-37). Each speaker uses a different tack but all are agreed in their desire to encourage Job to confess his sin and cast himself upon God's mercy; traditional theology could come to no other conclusion. As Job protests his innocence they become incensed. What is revealed is that while traditional wisdom and theology contains truth it is also too narrow to account for all the paradoxes of life. When attempts are made to interpret every situation in life within its terms huge distortions of truth occur. The dialogues present us with the power of contemporary theology and its unwillingness to embrace the disturbing implications of truth. Though Job is innocent, contemporary wisdom is bound to condemn him.

¹ Lloyd K Pietersen, "Commentary: Ecclesiastes 1:2-11," *Third Way* 21.10 (December, 1998), 22.



Imagine the trauma for Job. Not just the physical pain, but cut off from society and now even his friends. All his life he has lived according to the neat pattern of contemporary wisdom, it has appeared to have worked and brought enormous blessing to him and to others. Suddenly, and for no reason at all, he is made to appear like an infidel. In other circumstances the words of Job's friends could appear very acceptable, here they are quite untrue, and have reduced God to a being who must move within a frame work which they have created. This is why God rejects them when he personally joins in the discussion (42:2)

Structure

Job has an overall narrative framework, but has an extended dialogue in its middle section:

- Exposition - the setting of the scene (1-2);
- Complication (3-41);
- Resolution (42).

Dialogue

The dialogue consists of three cycles of speeches: Job → Eliphaz → Job → Bildad → Job → Zophar. In the last cycle Bildad says very little and Zophar does not speak. They literally run out of words! Elihu appears at the end of the third cycle; he has four speeches in 32-37 and then disappears. Finally, Yahweh speaks in two speeches in 38-41.

Awesome sovereignty

Notice how God makes no attempt to answer all the questions and accusations that Job has made; he does not give his side of the argument. He simply declares his greatness and power. In the light of God's majesty Job's problems evaporate and peace settles upon him. He has no answers but he has been vindicated. The simple fact is that life is not fair. Things do not happen simply because God desires it. But behind everything God is, and he is sovereign and absolute and he can be trusted completely.

The book of Job does not try to answer the problem of suffering, instead it proclaims a God who is so great that no answer is required. In fact the human mind could not grasp the answers even if God chose to give them. God knows what he is doing and he is not open to question on the subject. In Job we see what real wisdom is. Worldly wisdom is logical but it is often wrong. True wisdom is built on God's sovereignty and righteousness.



Job as scapegoat

Job can be seen as a sustained critique of the scapegoating mechanism.²

- The speeches of the friends rehearse the traditional religious view of scapegoating. Job must have sinned.
- Job's wife poses the crucial question. Will he persist in his integrity (refuse the role of the scapegoat) or will he 'curse God' (an horrific crime) 'and die' (the lot of the scapegoat)? (2:9).
- Job persistently proclaims his innocence (scapegoats, by definition, cannot be innocent).
- Thus Job requires justice.
- The ultimate question Job thus poses is whether God is a divinity who demands sacrifice (the traditional religious view), or whether he is on the side of the victims.
- God has to answer this question in himself; Godself is put to the test by Satan under the guise of testing Job.
- Although God's speeches do not address the question of suffering, God finally declares himself on the side of the victim (and thus not a God who demands sacrifice). For Job, and not the friends (representing traditional religion), speaks truly about God (42:7).

PROVERBS

Working values

Proverbs stands in contrast to the speculative wisdom of Qohelet and Job which as we have seen reach out to the perimeters of experience and existence. Instead, the wisdom of Proverbs concentrates on practical attitudes. It teaches 'basic working values' in proverbial style. It does not deny that there may be very hard questions, but at the same time there are basic attitudes and patterns of behaviour which enable a person to live right. It does not stress the great prophetic themes of the rest of scripture (e.g. 'covenant'), but it has them as the back cloth. Here we see how they make Israel's common daily life distinctive. The proverbs contain very little overt religious language; godliness is to be expressed in the whole of life. The proverbs are 'covenant common sense'.

Practical faith

The proverb (Heb *mās*āl*) is a 'specially contrived saying' or 'figure of speech'. It is the brief and particular expression of a truth. Proverbs have real force and are easily memorable. They focus on particular truth in a particular way. They are skillfully shaped in order to impart knowledge in a way in which it will be re-

² For brilliant analyses of this mechanism and its exposure by biblical texts see R. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001) and S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006) 64–104.



tained, rather than to weave a philosophy that will impress. They stimulate images and use sounds that are pleasing to the ear.

Proverbs point out a wise approach in given situations for the purpose of achieving certain selected practical objectives. Proverbs must not be seen as some divine guarantee for success, they simply indicate what is most likely to happen if the suggested action is followed. They clearly recognise that in life, even with God, nothing is automatic. They need to be read against the broad backdrop of divine perspective. Neither do proverbs attempt to be a complete statement of truth relating to every situation for all time; to approach them as such is to misuse them. Proverbs are provocative guidelines: figurative, suggestive and euphemistic.

Proverbs are:

- **parabolic** - pointing beyond themselves
- **practical** - not theoretical
- **memorable** - not technically precise
- **social** - discouraging selfish behaviour
- **cultural** - need translating to be understood
- **guidelines** - not guarantees of blessing
- **specific** - not exhaustive in their treatment of truth
- **artistic** - use colour and even exaggeration to communicate

Proverbs constantly draw the contrast between the life of 'wisdom' (lived from divine perspective) and 'foolishness' (lived from the perspective of the infidel). Below are some examples:

Wisdom

Care for the poor (22:22)
Respect for leaders (23:1-3)
Discipline (23:13-14)
Moderation (23:19-21)
Respect for parents (23:22-25)

Foolishness

Violence (1:10-19)
Carelessness (6:1-5)
Laziness (6:6-11)
Dishonesty (6:12-15)
Impurity (2:16-19)

Structure

Proverbs consists of five collections:

- Proverbs of Solomon (1:1 - 22:16);
- Sayings of the Wise (22:17 - 24:34);
- More Proverbs of Solomon transcribed by officials of King Hezekiah (25 - 29);
- Sayings of Agur (30);
- Sayings of King Lemuel.



International character

Proverbs recognises that wisdom is not restricted to Israel. Eleven of the Sayings of the Wise derive from the *Instruction of Amenemope*, which originated in Egypt. Agur and Lemuel are non-Israelites.

QUESTIONS

1. What place should the Psalms play in the personal and corporate worship life of the new covenant community? Give clear reasons for your answer.
2. Compare and contrast 'wisdom' in the Hebrew scriptures with 'wisdom' which is the gift of the Spirit. Are they the same, similar or different? Should they operate in parallel, do they overlap, or is only one valid today?
3. In what ways can the church today appropriate the cynical wisdom of Qohelet?
4. To be a philosopher is to be a 'friend of wisdom'. Do you think this ought to be one way of describing a Christian? How do you think the biblical understanding of wisdom, as 'the practical application of truth', ought to shape the way Christians and their communities relate to people around them? What does the 'wise woman' or the 'man of wisdom' in the 21st century look like? Are any of them Christians? What kind of person ought a Christian be to be identified as one of them?

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