

Songs Wisdom and Poetry

PSALMS

First of all Psalms is a Christian name for this collection of 150 songs which are found in our Old Testament. The Hebrew title says *tehillim* which means, "Praises"

These songs of adoration, thanksgiving, confession and supplication were Israel's response to God's active presence in their history. Whether the mood was elation or sorrow, bewilderment or confidence, these songs were intended as anthems to the glory of God.

ISRAEL THE WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY

From the outset, Israel was a covenant community, whose primary bond of unity was the worship of God. Notice how important that idea was from the beginning of kingship.

David, as one of his first acts, brought into the city of Jerusalem the ark, an emblem of God's presence. He wanted to build a temple to the glory of God where the people might worship, but the honour of doing so was forbidden by the prophet Nathan.

It would be Solomon, David's son who would be allowed to do so by God.

There is tremendous emphasis on the idea and importance of a central place of worship.

After the division of Israel into north and south, after Solomon's death, Jeroboam 1st of northern Israel found it necessary to build pilgrimage shrines in his own territory at Dan and Bethel.

The history of Israel shows that the fundamental reality, through all the social changes and historical vicissitudes, was that Israel was a worshipping Community.

THE ONE AND THE MANY

This is a just to confuse you bit. When you read the Psalms they seem to be intensely personal. That is because they tend to use the first person singular rather a lot. This is somewhat misleading because, as I have just said, these Psalms were community based.

So when you read "I" in a Psalm, try to remember that this should say "we" then you won't go too far wrong.

This is where you give me quizzical looks.

These Psalms are community products and were used by the entire congregation. Israel at the time when such songs were composed had no real sense of individual personal identity in worship.

However for those of you who like your theology a little tidier than that, it is also possible that that the "I" is singular and that you have just hit on is in fact singular, but that the person reciting the psalm is the king. The king, don't forget in this advanced ethnic society, represented the people as a whole.

So for example Psalm 22:1 which begins "My god, my God, why hast thou forsaken me" is in fact a royal lament, said by the king in time of trouble.

While we are considering this Psalm could I point out a stylistic feature of Royal Laments and that is that you include the "thank you bit" as you are making the lament.

It is a little bit like putting in an order to a company and finishing your letter with the words "Thanking you in anticipation.

Look at the contrast between verses 21 and 22.

Save me from the mouth of the lion,

My afflicted soul from the horns of the wild oxen

Then

I will tell of thy name to my brethren

In the midst of the congregation I will praise thee.

Here beginneth the thank you section!

TWO MORE RULE THINGS

PSALM EVENTS

How historical are the events that the Psalms talk about.

Once upon a time we thought that each Psalm related to a specific historical event. Psalm 23 seemed a good one to attribute to a moment in King David's life... Lord is my shepherd... riches... dwelling in the sanctuary of God. These days since the work of Herman Gunkell, Sigmund Mowinckel, Helmer Ringgren and others we think that it is almost impossible to detect an historical moment when the psalm originated. Having said that I would want to make perhaps one exception Psalm 137 which begins "By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered thee O Zion" That I think has to come from the years immediately after the transportation of Jews into Babylon round the year 586BC. The rest are so general in nature that scholars are very reluctant to venture a precise date.

IMAGERY

There is a great deal of stereotyped language in the Psalms.

This can be most easily seen in the psalms of lamentation where clearly the author is in trouble.

Psalm 69

Save me Lord for the waters have come up to my neck

I sink in the deep mire where there is no foothold

Believe it or not this psalm was not the one reserved for People who get stuck in rivers.

Floods, water, being swallowed up, enemies, the pit which closes its mouth over me are all stereotyped phrases used by the psalmist for a life threatening situation. But it is not possible from the precise nature of the language to determine what that situation was.

In reality I suspect it was up to the leader of the congregation to choose from the list of laments, one which represented the mood of the people who were in trouble. So the same Psalm could be used over and over again in the worship.

SO WHERE WERE THE PSALMS USED?

When I first studied theology it used to be the norm to say that the psalms were the hymnbook of the Jews worshipping in the second temple.

On the other hand orthodox Jews would say that the psalms were the creation of King David.

In reality I believe that the truth of the matter lies somewhere between those two poles.

The Psalms were not written by one man

The style is far too varied and at least Psalm 137 must be dated many years after King David's death.

The psalms are what I would call cultic literature.

They are the folk praises of Israel

Many of them are very ancient indeed – possibly as early as David – but not written by him.

I believe that they were used in the first temple and certainly they centred on the personality of the king.

They would have been used at royal coronations

Or indeed royal weddings.

Look for a moment at Psalm 45

WHAT ARE THE MAIN TYPES OF PSALMS?

The Psalms reflect the worship of the nation

There are Hymns of Praise

Easiest to see this type in Psalm 117 The choirboy's delight, for it is the shortest Psalm in the collection

It is in three parts A Introduction Praise the Lord all nations

Extol him all peoples

B main section, motive for praise

For his steadfast love towards us

And the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever.

C Conclusion and recapitulation

Praise the Lord.

Now these Psalms all fall into that sort of structure

Among them are the very distinctive Kingship Psalms, where God is extolled as a king

In this type you are looking for phrases such as The Lord is king

Or The Lord reigns

Go for the Venite Psalm 95

Verse 3 For the Lord is a great God

And a great king above all Gods

Psalm 95 you see is one of a block of Psalms from about Psalm 93 –99 where God is acknowledged as a king.

Then there are Laments when the people or the king are in distress

We have already looked at Psalm 22 which I think is one of the best examples of this type of Psalm.

But another is Psalm 44.

To the choirmaster. A Maskil of the Sons of Korah.

Invocation

We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what deeds thou didst perform in their days, in the days of old:

2 thou with thy own hand didst drive out the nations, but them thou didst plant; thou didst afflict the peoples, but them thou didst set free;

3 for not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm give them victory; but thy right hand, and thy arm, and the light of thy countenance; for thou didst delight in them.

4 Thou art my King and my God, who ordainest victories for Jacob.

5 Through thee we push down our foes; through thy name we tread down our assailants.

6 For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me.

7 But thou hast saved us from our foes, and hast put to confusion those who hate us.

8 In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to thy name for ever. Selah

Complaint

9 Yet thou hast cast us off and abased us, and hast not gone out with our armies.

10 Thou hast made us turn back from the foe; and our enemies have gotten spoil.

11 Thou hast made us like sheep for slaughter, and hast scattered us among the nations.

12 Thou hast sold thy people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them.

13 Thou hast made us the taunt of our neighbours, the derision and scorn of those about us.

14 Thou hast made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples.

15 All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face,

16 at the words of the taunters and revilers, at the sight of the enemy and the avenger.

Confession

17 All this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten thee, or been false to thy covenant.

18 Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from thy way,

19 that thou shouldst have broken us in the place of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness.

Petition to God

20 If we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread forth our hands to a strange god,
21 would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart.
22 Nay, for thy sake we are slain all the day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.
23 Rouse thyself! Why sleepest thou, O Lord? Awake! Do not cast us off for ever!
24 Why dost thou hide thy face? Why dost thou forget our affliction and oppression?
25 For our soul is bowed down to the dust; our body cleaves to the ground.
26 Rise up, come to our help! Deliver us for the sake of thy steadfast love

FESTIVALS ARE FOUND IN Ps 118

WISDOM PSALMS

These psalms are much later than the others and they are from a completely different source of information. The wisdom writers we shall hear more about in a moment, but they were also responsible for some Psalms. They appear to be grounded in Israelite Law and often they refer to the commandments. I am not always convinced that these are the commandments of the Torah – the Mitzvah. I think it sometimes becomes a very general word endorsing right or good conduct.

People like Andrew will know Psalm 119. And no way can this Psalm ever refer to more than one person. Here there is a very clear author who talks about himself and his experiences. He is a wisdom writer. Considering it is the longest Psalm in the collection, it is the most unspecific about Israelite affairs and history.

If you read the Psalm in Hebrew you will find that it is what is called an acrostic or alphabetic study. The Psalm has as many 8 line stanzas as there are letters in the Hebrew alphabet. It is an exceedingly clever construction, which is some justification for its lack of movement and interest in English.

Psalm 1 which introduces the entire collection and Psalm 19 are also examples of this literary form.

WISDOM LITERATURE PROPER

Wisdom literature of one sort or another is very ancient.

Some of the best examples of early wisdom come from Egypt

The sayings of Ptahotep 2350BC

The instruction of Merikare 2100BC

The Prophecy of Neferty 1990BC

The Tale of Sinuhe 1960 BC

About the time of the Old Testament character Jacob in the book of Genesis, Egyptian scribes were busy producing literature and some fascinating lists which we call Onomastica. They were literally lists of names of thing.

OLD TESTAMENT

If you look at traditional authors of the Old Testament. The tradition will tell you that the author of the Psalms was King David and the author of the wisdom literature was King Solomon.

I strongly suspect that this was because of his dealings with the Queen of Sheba, who, it is said was astounded by the wisdom of Solomon.

And partly because of a small report in 1 Kings 4:29

And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and largeness of mind like the sand on the seashore,

30 so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt.

31 For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was in all the nations round about.

32 He also uttered three thousand proverbs; and his songs were a thousand and five.

33 He spoke of trees, (**here come the Onomasica!**)from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall; he spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish.

34 And men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom.

I think there is no doubt that King Solomon was a very able man. I also think it is possible and I owe this point to Eric Heaton a former Bishop of Durham, that Solomon surrounded himself with a literary bureaucracy, who saw it as their task to collect, codify and pass on to future generations vast collections of traditional sayings, proverbs, riddles and Onomastica.

Once wars finish and prosperity and stability increase, culture and the wish to preserve a cultural heritage flourish. I think this is the case in the court of King Solomon.

There were scribes, learned men who undertook to preserve not only the history of the nation, but also the wisdom which had been enshrined in sayings, stories proverbs and the like.

So while I don't think Solomon was the author, I think the origins of Israelite wisdom writing comes from this period. There is also ample evidence in the writings of the prophets that the post of "Wise Man" existed up to the period of the Exile and that his was a position of importance at court, where he enjoyed influence and the privileges of courtiers, prophets and the like.

Once the Exile was over prophecy ceased but "Wise men" certainly persisted. You may want to call them advisors to the king, you may want to refer to them simply as scribes, but the wisdom tradition grew and flourished.

These men were an unseen army. They were, I think unconscious of their power and importance, but they changed Judaism as a religion for ever.

WRITINGS OF THE WISDOM SCHOOL

PROVERBS

This is perhaps the best known of all the wisdom books.

I find this an amazing book. There are at least five different wisdom traditions represented here. Whoever put the final work together was a great researcher.

In Chapter 10-22 he includes folk wisdom, much of it very ancient indeed. Some of it may be older than Solomon himself. But these are pithy two lined sayings lumped together in no particular order over 12 chapters. With a great economy of words we have here witty, perceptive comments and observations on how to get on in the world, or how not to get on. Little of this is religious and God is rarely mentioned.

Try these for size

The integrity of the upright guides them
But the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them.

The way of the fool is right in his own eyes
But the wise man listens to advice.

He who meddles in a quarrel not his own
is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears.

It is better to live in a corner of the housetop
than in a house shared with a contentious woman.

Immediately after this section of very ancient proverbs the final editor or the book writes this

Have I not written for you thirty sayings of admonition and knowledge?

21 to show you what is right and true, that you may give a true answer to those who sent you?

The fascinating thing about that is that about the year 1100BC an Egyptian scribe called Amenemope had written a very famous work, which included 30 wise sayings.

It would be wonderful to report to you that our author of the book of Proverbs had simply lifted an Egyptian work and imported it into his own volume. In fact that isn't the case. Tantalisingly though he has clearly read Amenemope and he reproduces about half of the sayings of Amenemope in the book we now call Proverbs.

If you read the book of Proverbs very carefully you will notice that other collections of Proverbs have been included

Chapter 25 begins with the words

These are the Proverbs of Solomon, which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied. Yet another collection of wit, wisdom and perception

As a door turns on its hinges

So does the sluggard on his bed

For those of you who feel that our friend is somewhat chauvinist in his approach take heart, one of the four appendices to the book of Proverbs is "Ode to a good Wife" It is the sort of thing thoughtless men ask to be read at weddings and then spend the rest of their matrimonial existence regretting.

She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household

It's a good life men if you can get away with it.

I have said nothing about the early chapters of the book of Proverbs

Chapters 1-9 were perhaps the last part of the book to be written

I think the style of them relies heavily on a piece of writing from Assyria of unknown age, but known to scholars in a 5th century BC work. We call it The Sayings of Ahikar. It is a document written by a father with advice to his son. That is exactly the style of writing found in these first nine chapters of Proverbs.

Within these chapters is an explosive idea – so explosive that one hardly dares talk about it.

I'll come back to it in a minute.

But if you're bored with the next five minutes have a quick browse at Proverbs 8:22-31 and I don't accept any responsibility for what you will find there!

JOB

The wisdom writers were brave men "Boldly going where no man had gone before" They challenged the very core of Jewish thinking. "Trust in God and all will be well," said the scribes.

"Who are you kidding?" asks the author of the book of Job.

For those of you who don't know the book of Job it seems to be a story about a folk hero called Job.

He was a proverbial righteous man.

He becomes the object of a wager between God and Satan.

Satan claims that Job will curse God, if he is afflicted with illness, suffering and hardship.

God says "rubbish – try it if you like"

So Satan does.

Most of the rest of the book is about how Job is questioning about the cause of his innocent suffering.

His three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. Try somewhat unsuccessfully to convince Job that he must be suffering because he has committed sin against God. Job knows he hasn't and for some 28 chapters the arguments go on.

The trio is then joined by another man Elihu who also puts to Job reasons why he is suffering.

Finally in chapter 38 God speaks and delivers two magnificent speeches.
Job repents that he ever produced any sort of challenge to God.
Forgiveness is granted and Job's fortunes are restored.

This is junk
Even my explanation of it doesn't hang together. What happens to Satan?

We have heard an amazing book
There is at the base of it a jolly little story about a heavenly wager Job, Satan and God

There is also the ethical hot potato of why do innocent people have to endure illness and suffering.
That is the great discussion for something like 20 chapters.
If God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent (all powerful and all goodness)
Why is there suffering, why is there evil in the world.
In our secular society we can ask such questions.
But you must realize how dangerous such thoughts might be for an orthodox Jew.

And yet the author of the book of Job confronted the issue and he got away with it.

Now I am not claiming that this is the definitive answer, but I think I am on the right sort of lines
The book of Job is a literary pyramid, which we are used to viewing from above. What we fail to see is
the three dimensional aspect to the work.

ECCLESIASTES

Once again we have one of the brave men of theology. The author of the book of Ecclesiastes whom we
call Koheleth. (The preacher)
On the one hand I think the Eyore character is the most pessimistic writer in the whole of the Old
Testament.
At the best he is a realist
And at the worst he is an atheist.

I am quite prepared to be provocative on this one and be a sounding board, but my critics will line up and
the first question that comes my way is.
If he is what you say he is, how come the book got into the Old Testament?

The answer seems to me to be very simple
In chapter 1 verse 1 he says The words of the preacher, the Son of David, King in Jerusalem.

The work is ascribed to Solomon
I think scholars are unanimous in their view that the language and style of the work are far too late for it
to be a 10th century work. It is one of the later books of the Old Testament. The work is pseudonymous.
Sadly no one had either the authority or the courage to deny it a place in the collection of scriptures.
Had they done so, I think the collection would have been the poorer, because the work is magnificent in
its construction.

Vanity of vanities says the preacher
All is vanity.

He is just so miserable all the way through.

But a great thinker.

EXAMPLE

Every human being knows that many actions in life have appropriate moments.

A child doesn't ask for a rise in pocket money when his father has just opened a rather dodgy school report.

Don't take your football coupons on your wedding night.

The moment is not right

For the writer Koheleth as indeed for all wisdom writers they believed that the doctrine of the right time was an exact science. Every action in life no matter what it was had a right moment and a wrong moment. In chapter three of Koheleth he writes extensively about this in what is regarded as the book's most famous passage.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

2 a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

3 a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

5 a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

6 a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

7 a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

8 a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

His overriding philosophy though comes in the next few verses.

I have seen the business that God has given to the sons of men to be busy with.

11 He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

No matter what we do or say. It is not possible to know anything about God and not possible for a person to discern God's purposes. It is all vanity.

And for 12 chapters he explores theme after theme, idea after idea, but each time he comes, regrettably one feels to the view that all our cleverness, all our so called knowledge is vanity and that we are no nearer to knowing about God at the end of it all than we were at the beginning.

And his work does extend to the end of it all.

Chapter 12 is a wonderfully poetic image of man in old age, gradually failing and inevitably dying. And in this the author remarks "Vanity of vanities says the Preacher, all is vanity."

Needless to say, Koheleth, like other writers of the Old Testament does not believe in life after death.

NOW THE END REALLY IS AT HAND

Before we do

I want to go back to that explosive idea I mentioned earlier.

In Proverbs 8.

Wisdom is feminine noun. In chapters 1-9 of the book of Proverbs. The pronoun for wisdom is "She"

Also in these chapters the concept of Wisdom receives at the hand of the author what today would be called *an upgrade!*

In other words the concept of wisdom is personified.

Wisdom is talked about as if it were a woman

Eg Chapter 9:1

Wisdom has built her house; she has set up her seven pillars.

2 She has slaughtered her beasts, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table.

In chapter 8:22 onwards, another claim is made about this female figure of wisdom

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.

22 Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

That is an incredible claim. It is saying that the female wisdom was alongside God when he created the world.

Surely not – we must have it wrong.

Well no – read on

when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth,

30 then I was beside him, like a master workman; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always,

This is a terribly advanced piece of thinking. What is it saying about the fundamental Jewish idea of the oneness of God? “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one?”

It would not be illogical to assume that this idea was going to be wiped from the permanent memory of the Jews, or at least totally disregarded by future generations.

Incredibly though it wasn't. It was taken up and in two books which sadly didn't make it into the Hebrew Canon, the books of Ecclesiasticus or Jesus ben Sirach and a book called The Wisdom of Solomon, the idea of personification or hypostatisation is expanded even more.

There grew up among the more avant-garde Jews a belief that there was, alongside God at creation a ruling principle which Jews called wisdom. For some it was a separate being with a reality all of its own. It was the wisdom of God.

Now that was fine for the Jews.

As time went on and Jewish merged with Greek thinking.

The Greeks too had a rationale behind the universe – that which cause the earth to be as it was a fundamental sense of order and they called this Logos – reason.

That being alongside God at creation which the Jews called Sophia or wisdom gradually became the Logos of God.

And so we see the result of that transition. Not in the Old Testament, but in our New Testament thinking.

Greek

Translation

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2 He was in the beginning with God;

3 all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.

4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

The Hebrew wisdom produced a terribly important Christian concept about Jesus as the Word with God.