

# Biblical Poetry: Ecclesiastes, Psalms and Song of Songs

## Lecture 21 Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-21>

### *Overview*

After a detailed explanation of the requirements for the paper assignment, Professor Hayes turns to the Writings - the third section of the Bible - and considers a recent approach to the study of the Bible, called canonical criticism. The books in this section of the Bible explore various questions associated with suffering and evil. An example is the book of Ecclesiastes which constitutes a second attack on the optimism and piety of conventional religious thinking. The lecture concludes with a discussion of a number of Psalms, their genre, purpose, and language.

### *1. Remarks for Final Paper*

- [1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* Okay, so having studied Job, we've seen that the Bible is not a book with a single uniform style and message. It's an anthology of diverse works that may have different, conflicting points of view. So the conventional religious piety of Proverbs, the firm belief in a system of divine reward and punishment, that's so important to the Deuteronomist — this is challenged by the Book of Job. Job concludes that there is no justice — not in this world, not in any other world. Nevertheless, Job feels that he is not excused from the task of righteous living. And it's a wonderful and fortuitous fact of history that Jewish sages chose to include all of these dissonant voices in the canon of the Hebrew Bible without, for the most part, striving to reconcile the conflicts.
- [2] I mention this because I hope it will help you in writing your final paper. Careful exegesis of the biblical text — which is part of your task in these papers (I'll come back in a minute to the other part of your task) — careful exegesis of the biblical text requires you to set aside your presuppositions and to attend to the many, complex and often conflicting details of the text.
- [3] Some of the other presuppositions that you need to set aside when you write this paper are presuppositions that I mentioned at the very outset of the course, but it might be wise to mention a few of them again.
- [4] The first is, and I hope you've seen by now, that the Bible is not a set of stories about saints or pious people who always say and do what is right or exemplary. Even the Bible's heroes are human, they're not superhuman. Their behavior can be confused, it can be immoral; and if we try to vindicate biblical characters merely because their names appear in the Bible, we can miss the moral dilemma that's being set out by the writer. We can miss the psychological complexity of the stories. So when you do these papers, put yourself in the place of the character. In other words, humanize them. Think of them as acting in ways you might act. Think about their likely feelings, their likely motivations as human beings.
- [5] Secondly, remember that the Bible isn't a manual of religion. It's not a book of systematic theology. It doesn't set out certain dogmas about God, and you need to be careful not to impose upon the Bible, theological ideas and beliefs that arose centuries after the bulk of the Bible was written — for example, a belief in a heaven and a hell as a system of reward or punishment, or the belief in a God that doesn't change his mind. The character Yahweh in the Bible changes his mind; it's just a fact of the text.
- [6] If we wish to understand the Bible on its own terms and in its own context, then we have to be prepared to find ideas in it that may conflict with later theological notions that we hold dear. Don't assume you're going to agree with the

Bible. Don't assume that the Bible will agree with itself.

- [7] So then, coming to your paper assignments — You've been asked, in the final paper assignment, to develop an interpretation of a passage, and the task of interpretation for the purposes of this class is not excavative. In other words, you're not asked to analyze sources or to account for how the text reached its final form, right? Source criticism.
- [8] You're to look at the final form of the text and give a plausible reading that makes the best sense that you can out of the details. Whether you like the meaning or not, whether you agree with the meaning or not, try to argue from the evidence in the text itself. So you're going to be doing what you're probably quite accustomed to doing in an English class. You're going to study the text's language, its vocabulary, its structure, its style, all of the clues. Look at the immediate context, the larger context, the way vocabulary is used elsewhere in the Bible, similar vocabulary, anything that might shed light on the passage's meaning or a character's motivation, and then you're going to weigh the evidence and present your reading.
- [9] As in an English class, you'll want to minimize any external assumptions that you bring to the text, anything that's not supported by the text. Often the text will be truly ambiguous, precisely because there are gaps of information or there are hints that pull in two different directions at times. That's part of the great artistry of the biblical text. That's what makes it so interpretable.
- [10] If that happens, then you may want to present various, dueling interpretations, various plausible interpretations of the passage based on the evidence in the text and say: these sorts of things would lead one to suppose that this is going on; but on the other hand, these textual clues lead to the following plausible interpretation of what's going on.
- [11] You'll find that the task of interpretation is easier if you keep in mind the following point: Not all statements in the Bible are equal. When a story is being told, information conveyed by the narrator is reliable. Speech attributed to God is reliable. The words of individual characters are not necessarily reliable. Characters can be wrong, they can be

misguided, they have limited perspectives and sometimes the narrator hints as much. But the voice of the narrator is privileged and that's part of the game we play when we read works of literature; we accept facts that are established by the narrator as facts that guide our interpretation.

- [12] So it was with the story of Job. The narrator established, as a fact of the story, that Job is perfectly righteous. That's in the narrator's voice in the prose introduction. He states it explicitly; he bolsters his statement by attributing the same assertion to God. And the narrator also establishes as a fact of the story that Job is afflicted with horrendous suffering that he didn't deserve. It's not a punishment for sin. And then he leaves the characters to struggle with the implications.
- [13] Job's friends cling to the idea that God rewards and God punishes and so anyone who suffers must have sinned. We, as readers, know that they are wrong because of the narrative facts established at the beginning of the story. Job takes the other route. He knows, as we do, that he is innocent, that he is not being punished for sin and therefore he concludes that God doesn't punish and reward at all — and that's a radical idea. That God punishes the wicked and rewards the good in this life, even if a little delayed sometimes is a fundamental idea in much of the Bible that we have studied so far. It's going to get weaker in some of the books we'll be looking at. But Job denies this idea and in doing so, he arrives at a radical moral conclusion. The truly righteous man is righteous for its own sake even if his righteousness brings him nothing but suffering and pain in this life or in any other. Remember that at the end of the book the narrator has God state that Job is the one who has spoken rightly and not his friends.
- [14] So be sure to consider [this] point of view in your interpretation. You wouldn't want to go in and just lift something out of Bildad's mouth and say this is what the Bible thinks, right? Taking a verse right out of context that way. Don't assume that every character in the Bible is reliable, look to the surrounding framework as you evaluate their deeds, and their actions, and their speech, and their views.
- [15] Finally, don't be surprised if after carefully looking at all of those things a passage remains

ambiguous. Again, in those cases you might want to detail the features that would support interpretation A, the features that would support interpretation B, or you might plump for one interpretation over the other. That's the first part of your task. It will help you enormously — if you do that right, it will help you enormously (and by "right" I mean thoroughly, I don't mean "correct") — I mean "right" in the sense that if you do it well and thoroughly then it will help you enormously in the second part of your task, which is to analyze a Jewish and a Christian, (and a Christian, not or; a Jewish and a Christian) interpretation of the passage particularly of whatever key ambiguous point you might have found in it, and try to understand how they are a reading of the text, a genuine effort to deal with, to grapple with, probably the very points of ambiguity that you yourself found when you really delved into the text.

[16] And as much as their answers may not be answers that you would come up with, they are still genuine readings of the exact issues that bugged you when you analyzed the text closely. Try to give an account of that. What is it that this interpretation chooses to develop as it presents its interpretation? What is it suppressing? What is this interpretation suppressing? What is it picking up on and developing? You'll be sensitive to those things because you will have invested the time yourself in appreciating how complex the passage is.

[17] So do understand that you need to do all of those things for any of the four questions. Develop your own interpretation; analyze a Jewish and a Christian interpretation of the same passage, okay?

## 2. *The Problem of Dating; Canonical Criticism*

[18] Now, there is debate among scholars over the date of the Book of Job, as well as some of the other books of the Ketuvim. Ketuvim is a Hebrew word that simply means writings, and it's the label or the name that we use to refer now to the third section of the Bible. So we've talked about Torah, Neviim or prophets, and now we're moving into the Writings or we have already really moved into the Writings, the third section of the Bible.

[19] Most scholars would concur that many of these books contain older material, but that the books reached their final form, their final written form, only later, in the post-exilic period. Now, if these books contain material that predates the exile, is it legitimate for us to speak of them and study them as a response to the national calamities, particularly the destruction and defeat and exile, 587/586.

[20] In answer to this question, we'll consider a relatively recent approach to the study of the Bible. It's an approach known as canonical criticism. Canonical criticism grew out of a dissatisfaction with the scholarly focus on original historical meanings to the exclusion of a consideration of the function or meaning of biblical texts for believing communities in various times and places — a dissatisfaction with the focus on original context and original meaning to the exclusion of any interest in how the text would have served a given community at a later time, a community for which it was canonical. At what point did these stories and sources suddenly become canonical and have authority for communities? And when they did, how were they read and understood and interpreted?

[21] So the historical, critical method was always primarily interested in what was really said and done by the original, biblical contributors. Canonical criticism assumes that biblical texts were generated, transmitted, reworked, and preserved in communities for whom they were authoritative, and that biblical criticism should include study of how these texts functioned in the believing communities that received and cherished them.

[22] So emphasis is on the final received form of the text. [There's] much less interest in how it got to be what it is; more interest in what it is now rather than the stages in its development. There's a greater interest and emphasis in canonical criticism on the function of that final form of the text in the first communities to receive it and on the processes of adaptation by which that community and later communities would re-signify earlier tradition to function authoritatively in a new situation.

[23] So a canonical critic might ask, for example: what meaning, authority, or value did a biblical writer seek in a tradition or story when he employed it in the final form of his text? What

meaning, authority, or value would a community, would his community have found in it, and what meanings and values would later communities find in it when that text became canonical for them? How did they re-signify it to be meaningful for them? Why did religious communities accept what they did as canonical rather than setting certain things aside? Why was something chosen as canonical and meaningful for them when it came from an earlier time?

Now, Qohelet may mean preacher and that's why the Greek translation [is] Ecclesiastes, which means preacher (it's hard to know): "one who assembles or gathers others." But tradition attributes the work to David's son Solomon, known for his wisdom. This attribution is fictive. The writer speaks of kings reigning before him. That implies there were many. But more important there are linguistic and literary features that suggest a later, probably or perhaps, a fourth-century date.

- [24] So I propose that we adopt this approach for many of the books in this third section of the Bible. We look at the Bible through the eyes of the post-exilic community, for whom they were canonical — at least in part. We won't do this for everything but I'm going to be coming back to this approach many times in the last few lectures, because in this way it becomes possible for us to understand these books as a response to the national history. Not in their genesis or origin (they weren't written necessarily as responses to the national history — some of them may even pre-date the exile) but in the fact that they were adopted or cherished as meaningful by the post-exilic community.
- [25] So whatever the circumstances of their origin and final redaction might have been, many of the books of the ketuvim, of the Writings, eventually would serve the post-exilic community as a prism through which to view Israel's history.
- [26] Interestingly, many of the books in this section of the Bible explore questions of suffering and evil, and challenge some of the ideas that we've seen as more fundamental in the Torah and in the Prophets. They explore the very questions that are raised by the events of Israel's history, and so they were appropriated by the community in its quest for meaning in the midst of suffering.

### 3. *The Book of Ecclesiastes*

- [27] Let's turn to the Book of Ecclesiastes or Qohelet. The Hebrew name is Qohelet, Ecclesiastes. It's a second attack on the optimism and piety of conventional religion. The book is mostly in the first person. There's a third-person introduction and a little epilogue. The introduction reads "The words of Qohelet, Son of David, King in Jerusalem."

- [28] So, as such, the work can be understood as a post-destruction and a post-exilic work. It was available to Israelites who were struggling to make sense of their history and their God, even though no reference is made to that history at all. In fact, God is not referred to by his personal Israelite name Yahweh in the book at all; he's only referred to with the general term Elohim.
- [29] The prominent tone of the book is one of alienated cynicism and a weary melancholy; it's the prominent tone. The theme that's repeated throughout is the idea of the emptiness of human effort. All is vanity, which means futile, it's all for naught. Qohelet 1:1: "Utter futility! — said Kohelet — / Utter futility! all is futile! / What real value is there for a man / In all the gains he makes beneath the sun? / One generation goes, another comes, / But the earth remains the same forever." and in verse 9, "Only that shall happen / Which has happened, / Only that occur / Which has occurred; / There is nothing new / Beneath the sun!" [See Note 1]
- [30] The endless repeated cycles of the natural world, the rising and setting of the sun and moon, the ebb and flow of the tides — this leads the speaker to the conclusion that nothing is permanent. All is fleeting, change constantly. We don't find in Qohelet the linear view of time or the sense of progress in history that scholars rightly or wrongly associate with the Hebrew Bible.

- [31] We find here instead the cyclic view of time which scholars, again rightly or wrongly, associate with myth. There are also the endlessly repeated cycles of the human world: birth and death, breaking down and building up, weeping and laughter, love and hate, killing and healing. In one of the most famous passages from this book, Qohelet expresses the

idea that everything has its season or time with the consequence that the effort of humans to alter or affect anything is meaningless.

[32] I'm going to be reading from the RSV translation, and in fact, many of the things I'll be reading today will be from the RSV, Revised Standard Version, because I think many of these passages will be familiar to you, and I'd rather read versions that will catch your ears as familiar, than the more accurate translations of the Jewish Publications Society, but which may not ring that familiar note for you.

So this is the RSV translation. But notice how in context it has a very different meaning from the meaning that's been granted it by folk singers [3:1-11]:

[33] For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;  
a time to rend, and a time to sow;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace.

[34] Switching now to the JPS translation, "What value, then, can the man of affairs get from what he earns? I have observed the business that God gave man to be concerned with: He brings everything to pass precisely at its time;" In other words, everything comes to pass and returns in endless cycles, we add nothing by

our efforts. It's not quite the comforting passage that it's often quoted to be.

[35] So the writer has tried everything in his search for something that's permanent and not evanescent. Physical pleasure, he says, is unsatisfying. It's transient. Wealth just brings anxiety. Wisdom is better than power, but even knowledge brings great pain. 1:17 and 18: "And so I set my mind to appraise wisdom and to appraise madness and folly. And I learned — that this, too, was pursuit of wind: For as wisdom grows, vexation grows; / To increase learning is to increase heartache" (Don't believe him!) Even if we concede that wisdom is superior to ignorance, we must still face the fact that ultimately death obliterates everything. Death is the great equalizer.

[36] Qohelet 2:13-17:

I found that  
Wisdom is superior to folly  
As light is superior to darkness;  
A wise man has his eyes in his head,  
Whereas a fool walks in darkness.

But I also realize that the same fate awaits them both. So I reflected: "The fate of the fool is also destined for me; to what advantage, then, have I been wise?" And I came to the conclusion that that too was futile, because the wise man, just like the fool, is not remembered forever; for, as the succeeding days roll by, both are forgotten. Alas, the wise man dies, just like the fool! And so I loathed life, For I was distressed by all that goes on under the sun, because everything is futile and pursuit of wind.

[37] So even more explicitly than Job, Ecclesiastes attacks the principle of divine providence or distributive justice. There's no principle of reward or punishment; the wicked prosper while the innocent suffer. Even the principle of delayed punishment which is so important to the Deuteronomistic historian is attacked as unjust.

[38] In Qohelet 8:10b to 14,

And here's another frustration: the fact that the sentence imposed for evil deeds is not executed swiftly, which is why men are

emboldened to do evil — the fact that a sinner may do evil a hundred times and his [punishment] still be delayed... sometimes an upright man is requited according to the conduct of the scoundrel; and sometimes the scoundrel is requited according to the conduct of the upright. I say all that is frustration.

[39] In a more famous passage, chapter 9:11-12,

I have further observed under the sun that  
The race is not won by the swift,  
Nor the battle by the valiant;  
Nor is bread won by the wise,  
Nor wealth by the intelligent,  
Nor favor by the learned.  
For the time of mischance comes to all.  
And a man cannot even know his time.

[40] Again, a passage which is often used as a comforting exhortation — the race is not won by the swift and so on — is here actually in context a lament of the great injustice of the way things occur.

[41] But really for Qohelet it is the inexorable fact of death that makes life entirely meaningless, and that is in fact the starting point of modern schools of existentialist philosophy. Death is the bottom line; he rejects the idea of any life after death.

[42] Chapter 9:2-6:

“For the same fate is in store for all: for the righteous, and for the wicked; for the good and pure, and for the impure; for him who sacrifices, and for him who does not; for him who is pleasing, and for him who is displeasing; and for him who swears, and for him who shuns oaths. That is the sad thing about all that goes on under the sun: that the same fate is in store for all. ...For he who is reckoned among the living has something to look forward to...since the living know they will die.” [That was ironic.] “But the dead know nothing; they have no more recompense, for even the memory of them has died. Their loves, their hates, their jealousies have long since perished; and they have no more share till

the end of time and all that goes on under the sun.”

[43] Nevertheless, despite all of this despair and cynicism, there is a positive note in Qohelet. The writer, after all, doesn't recommend nihilism or suicide, despite the lack of purpose or meaning in life, and in fact he does quite the opposite. He states that every life does have its moments of happiness and these one should seize while one can.

[44] Qohelet 9:7-10,

Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy; for your action was long ago approved by God. Let your clothes always be freshly washed and your head never lack ointment. Enjoy happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun — all your fleeting days. For that alone is what you can get out of life and out of the means you acquire under the sun. Whatever it is in your power to do, do with all your might. For there is no action, no reasoning, no learning, no wisdom in Sheol, where you are going.

[45] Again, Sheol refers to this shadowy place beneath the soil, that the shades of the dead just inhabit. It's an ancient notion in Israel. It's not connected with the idea of a reward or a punishment after death.

[46] A similar exhortation is in Qohelet 5:17, “Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life which God has given him, for this is his lot,” [RSV translation, 5:18]. Or 3:13: “...whenever a man does eat and drink and get enjoyment out of all his wealth, it is a gift of God.”

[47] We have to be sure not to delude ourselves. There is no grand plan, there's no absolute value or meaning to our toil, Qohelet says. There's no life in the hereafter that we are working towards. Here he seems to be polemicizing, I think, against a belief in the afterlife, or reward or punishment, that was taking root at this time in some parts of the Jewish community under the influence of Greek thought.

[48] But one can still find happiness and love, and with these, one should be content. Striving after anything more is a striving after wind that leaves one frustrated and weary, and bitter. Accept the reality of death and then enjoy what you can in the short time you have. Indeed, it's precisely the reality of death that makes life precious. Whatever it is in your power to do, do with all your might because you have only this one brief chance. Eternal, unlimited life with endless opportunities to act would make any one act meaningless. So given the fact of death and the limitations that it places upon us, taking pleasure in the ordinary activities and labors of life becomes not meaningless, but meaningful.

[49] Qohelet is an unusual, if not subversive book, and its inclusion in the canon was apparently a matter of some controversy. Its controversial character is reflected in the pious editorial postscript that appears at the end of the book. At the very end, chapter 12, verses 11-13 we read the following,

The sayings of the wise are like goads, like nails fixed in prodding sticks. They were given by one Shepherd. A further word: Against them, my son, be warned! The making of many books is without limit / And much study is a wearying of the flesh. The sum of the matter, when all is said and done: Revere God and observe His commandments! For this applies to all mankind: that God will call every creature to account for everything unknown, be it good or bad.

[50] To fear God and obey his commandments because he will reward the good and punish the evil is simply not the message of the Book of Qohelet and it's very likely (in my view; people will disagree) but it's very likely that this line comes from a later hand, which was disturbed by the theme of Qohelet's preaching.

[51] So we have juxtaposed then two responses to the suffering and pain in the world, and specifically the tragedy that befell Israel. One, an assertion of God's providence and justice, urging obedience, and the other an assertion of the lack of justice and providence in the world, preaching simple existential pleasures as a source of life's meaning, and the frustration of trying to make sense out of what has happened. The richness of the Hebrew Bible derives

precisely from its placement together of radically diverse points of view like these.

#### 4. *Introduction to the Book of Psalms*

[52] I'm going to turn now to the Book of Psalms, which we will probably not quite finish today. But the Book of Psalms contains the principle collection of religious lyric poetry in the Bible. It consists of 150 poems, most of which are prayers addressed to God.

[53] In a very nice little essay on the Psalms, there's a woman, Margaret Anne Doody, who recounts a wonderful dialogue that takes place in Charlotte Bronte's novel, *Jane Eyre*. You have the ten-year-old Jane — she's a very honest, but mistreated child, and she's being interviewed by Brocklehurst, who is this very harsh schoolmaster. And Jane recounts the conversation like this:

“Do you read your Bible?”

“Sometimes.”

“With pleasure? Are you fond of it?”

“I like Revelation, and the Book of Daniel, and Genesis and Samuel and a little bit of Exodus, and some parts of Kings and Chronicles, and Job, and Jonah.”

“And the Psalms? I hope you like them?”

“No, sir.”

“No? Oh, shocking! I have a little boy, younger than you, who knows six Psalms by heart; and when you ask him which he would rather have, a gingerbread-nut to eat, or a verse of a Psalm to learn he says: ‘Oh! the verse of a Psalm! Angels sing psalms,’ says he; ‘I wish to be a little angel here below’; he then gets two nuts in recompense for his infant piety.”

“Psalms are not interesting,” I remarked.

“That proves you have a wicked heart.”  
[Doody 1994]

[54] Margaret Anne Doody has pointed out I think several interesting aspects to this dialogue. First, she points out the literary authority and

individual taste that's exhibited by Jane. She likes prophetic books with dramatic apocalyptic imagery. She likes Revelation and Daniel which we'll see soon is very dramatic and apocalyptic; and then she likes rich, narrative texts and histories — Genesis, Samuel, parts of Exodus (I can probably pick out which parts!) Kings, Chronicles and then she likes the stories of the trials of great survivors of tribulation like Jane herself — Job and Jonah.

[55] Brocklehurst is looking for evidence of her piety and instead he finds evidence of her distasteful love of drama and story, and imagery and suffering, and he's quite shocked. A pious child would naturally love the Psalms which in Brocklehurst's mind are the songs of angels; they teach humility and reverence and his own pious child knows how to recite the Psalms. Jane's not impressed. She obviously sees through the son's little game even if Brocklehurst doesn't, and she says Psalms aren't interesting, and he's mortified.

[56] Jane's lack of interest in the Psalms, her preference for what Doody calls the raw and the real, is proof of her wickedness. But Brocklehurst's perception of the Book of Psalms, which I think many people share, is not an entirely accurate one. If Jane were to look closely she would find plenty of emotion and drama and suffering in the Psalms as well.

[57] The title Psalms derives from the Greek, *psalmoi*. It denotes religious songs that are performed to musical accompaniment; the musical accompaniment of the psalterion. That's a stringed musical instrument. So they imagined that these were performed to this accompaniment, hence *psalmoi*. And it's the Septuagint's translation of the Hebrew *titlehillim*; the Hebrew title *tehillim* means "praises."

[58] The Psalms were only collected into a large anthology in the post-exilic period. We can be pretty sure of that — the fifth or the fourth century. But many, many — particularly those that are attributed to professional temple musical guilds — are thought to have been used in the temple service. Many of them date from very early pre-exilic times.

[59] The temple staff provided the Psalms with musical and liturgical notations. I don't mean

musical notes but I mean words indicating some sort of musical or liturgical use, and those are preserved for us in the text. We don't, for the most part, really know what they mean. They're technical. Some superscriptions and notes seem to be telling us the tune or the kind of musical accompaniment for the Psalm, whether it was on stringed instruments, or flutes.

[60] Most of the Psalms really tell us very little, however, about the time and circumstance of their composition. Several, it seems, were to be used at royal coronations which would mean that they were written when Davidic kings still ruled in Jerusalem. Psalm 45 is an example of a love song that's written in celebration of the king's marriage with a foreign bride, so this is also a pre-exilic date. So Psalm 45:11-18; this would have been sung probably at a royal wedding:

"Take heed, lass, and note,

incline your ear:

forget your people and your father's house,

and let the king be aroused by your beauty; since he is your lord, bow to him.

O Tyrian lass," [so she's from Tyre to the north],

"the wealthiest people will court your favor with gifts,

goods of all sorts.

The royal princess,

her dress embroidered with golden mountings

is led inside to the king;

maidens in her train, her companions,

are presented to you.

They are led in with joy and gladness;

they enter the palace of the king.

Your sons will succeed your ancestors;

you will appoint them princes throughout the land.

I commemorate your fame for all generations,

so peoples will praise you forever and ever.

[61] So clearly, some of the Psalms date to the period of the monarchy, and scholars divide the psalter into five main collections. Each of them concludes with a little doxology that indicates that it's the end of a section. So I've listed the sections down here — five books within the larger book of Psalms.

[62] The latest of these — they probably go somewhat in chronological order. So we think number five, for example, is probably the latest of the group because it's the one where the manuscripts that were found at Qumran show the greatest variation, which suggests that they continued fluid for some time before being finally fixed.

[63] The second book, Book Two (so about halfway through the Psalms; the end of number 72) — Book Two concludes with this postscript: "The prayers of David, the Son of Jesse, are ended." So at one time the Davidic Psalms were thought to end there. Almost all of the Psalms in Book One are prefaced with the phrase to, or of, David. The particle in Hebrew can be ambiguous; probably "of David." To this old First Temple nucleus, you had other collections then gravitating.

[64] So, for example, all of the Psalms between 120 and 134, they all bear the same title: A Song of Ascents. They were songs that were probably sung by pilgrims on pilgrimage to Jerusalem because from any direction you go into Jerusalem, you have to go up, and so you go up to Jerusalem.

[65] Nevertheless, tradition attributes the entire book of Psalms to King David and that attribution stems from the fact that 73 of the 150 Psalms are explicitly said to be psalms of David. And David is also in the historical books said to be a man of musical talent. The superscriptions, however, are in many cases late additions. So perhaps the Psalms can only be said to be of David or Davidic if by that term we mean that they are the result of a royal patronage of poetry by the House of David in general.

[66] The biblical text itself lists other authors for some of the Psalms, so 72 is ascribed to Solomon. Number 90 is ascribed to Moses, others are ascribed to Assaf and the Sons of Korah. Korah is an ancestor of a priestly family. Some of them are clearly post-exilic.

Number 74 laments the destruction of the temple. Number 137 — "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept as we thought of Zion" is clearly from the perspective of the exile. So what we have is an anthology, an anthology of religious expressions deriving from many centuries of Israel's history. So despite the claim of religious tradition that the Psalms were penned by David, it's clear that they were not all penned by David.

[67] Some of the Psalms are oriented toward community worship. Some of them are oriented more to individual worship. But in ancient Israel there really isn't always a sharp distinction between the two. The ancient Israelite in the temple prayed to God as a member of a larger community bound by a covenant and not as a lone individual. So in the words of Psalm 34:3 we read, "Exalt the Lord with me, let us extol His name together." So there was a communal aspect to much worship.

##### 5. Themes and Formal Characteristics in the Book of Psalms

[68] A good deal of form critical work has been done on the book of Psalms. We haven't spent a lot of time on form criticism. It's another tool, another approach that is used in studying the text. But the pioneer in this area was a man named Herman Gunkel (I think I've mentioned him before). His work, particularly in the book of Psalms, was forwarded by Sigmund Mowinckel.

[69] Form critics look at the forms that are used in the construction of psalms, and they classify psalms according to their forms or their literary genre, if you will. And then they attempt to place these literary types or genres within the cultic setting or their Sitz im Leben: what would have been the circumstances under which such a psalm would have been written or performed. In general, the psalms can be categorized formally and thematically in a number of different ways and I've given you a handout which presents some broad classifications of form or genre [*the handout is attached to this transcript*]. I've actually collapsed many of the main forms into several broader groupings, but the very serious form critics will give you upwards of 13, 14, 15 or more different forms for the psalms, and as I say, I've grouped many of them together, as you see on the sheet.

[70] I'm going to go through each one of these and give you some examples and talk about some of the themes as well as the formal characteristics in the Psalms, so you'll see the variety that's contained in this anthology.

[71] First looking at some hymns of praise — these include creation hymns praising God as the creator of the natural world: psalms of thanksgiving and psalms of trust. These are really the largest category of psalms and probably are what give Brocklehurst the impression that he has. Many of them celebrate God's majesty, God's wisdom, his power, such as this creation hymn. This is 8 (and by the way, the numbers are just giving you some examples. This is not exhaustive. I didn't go through and put [down] every one of the 150 Psalms. But to give you an idea of an example of each category I'll be drawing from these numbers).

[72] So number 8:

O Lord, our Lord,

How majestic is Your name throughout the earth,

You who have covered the heavens with Your Splendor.

...When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,

the moon and stars that You set in place,

what is man that You have been mindful of him,

mortal man that You have taken note of him,

...and adorned him with glory and majesty;

You have made him master over Your handiwork,

laying the world at his feet,

sheep and oxen, all of them,

and wild beasts, too;

the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea,

whatever travels the paths of the seas.

O Lord our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth!

[73] It's a tiny little Psalm, Psalm 117, that's just two verses long [that] contains really all of the

classic formal elements of a Psalm of praise or thanksgiving. You have an opening invocation to worship, calling others to worship or praise God. Then you have a motive clause, which is giving the reason and then a recapitulation or a renewed call to praise. So all of Psalm 117 follows this form: "Praise the Lord all you nations, extol Him all you peoples." There's your invocation. "For great is His steadfast love toward us, the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever," there's your motive clause, "Hallelujah," Hallelu is a Hebrew imperative "praise Yah," short for Yahweh, God. So Hallelujah means "praise God." So it's a recapitulation of the call to praise, the imperative to praise God. It's a classic — tiny, little — but it has all of the elements of the form of a psalm of thanksgiving.

[74] Psalm 136 punctuates a recitation of God's great deeds, the creation, the Exodus, the conquest of the Promised Land and so on with the phrase, "His steadfast love is eternal." It's an excellent illustration of how Israel's praise is inspired by remembering what Yahweh has done in history.

[75] Still other Psalms extol God in His role as Creator; 104 is another of those and we've already seen one, or as law giver, so there are various reasons to praise God: creation, his role in history, his giving of the law. A striking characteristic of this category of Psalms is the variety of metaphors that are used to describe God: King, shield, stronghold, rock, refuge, shelter, many more metaphors as well.

[76] The paradigmatic psalm of trust is contained in the 23rd Psalm. This is a Psalm that employs the metaphor of a shepherd to describe God guiding the individual in straight paths through a frightening valley. The speaker's trust creates a sense of tranquility even in the presence of enemies and here I'm going to use the RSV translation which will be more familiar to many of you.

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want;  
he makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of  
the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil;  
for thou art with me;  
thy rod and thy staff,  
they comfort me.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the  
presence of my enemies;  
thou anointest my head with oil, my cup  
overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow  
me  
all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord  
for ever.

[77] The short Psalm 131 is another psalm of trust that invokes the image of a mother and a child to express an even greater tranquility. Again, the RSV translation, “O God [Lord] my heart is not lifted up, / my eyes are not raised too high,” that’s a metaphor for arrogance in Hebrew. “I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. / But I have calmed and quieted my soul, / like a child quieted at its mother’s breast; / like a child that is quieted is my soul. / O Israel, hope in the Lord / from this time forth and for evermore.” [RSV]

[78] These and similar psalms contain some of the most personal depictions of biblical faith, of confidence or simple trust in God.

[79] The second category I’ve got listed there for you are psalms of divine kingship or royal psalms. These are not quite the same; they’re two distinct things. Enthronement or kingship psalms celebrate Yahweh as the enthroned ruler, the sovereign ruler of the heavens and as sovereign over foreign nations — so sovereign over nature, sovereign over the human world. And their descriptions of God employ the language and themes that are associated with deities of Ancient Near Eastern mythology, particularly, the language associated with Baal, the Canaanite storm god. Some even allude to the defeat of a sea monster as key to God’s role as creator and enthroned king. In Psalm 29, the assembly of the gods praises Yahweh for defeating the water monster. And although some psalms fully personify nature at the time

of creation, in others, the old Ancient Near Eastern combat creation myths are demythologized. So we see both of these tendencies within some of these psalms.

[80] So, for example, Psalm 93, “The Lord is King, He is robed in grandeur,” (most of these enthronement or divine kingship psalms will begin with “The Lord is King”):

The Lord is King,  
He is robed in grandeur;  
the Lord is robed,  
He is girded with strength.  
The world stands firm;  
it cannot be shaken.  
Your throne stands firm from of old;  
from eternity You have existed.  
The ocean sounds, O Lord,  
the ocean sounds its thunder,  
the ocean sounds its pounding.  
Above the thunder of the mighty waters,  
more majestic the than the breakers of the sea  
is the Lord, majestic on High.  
Your decrees are indeed enduring;  
holiness befits Your House,  
O Lord, for all times.

[81] See here, the mention of the sea, the ocean pounding, but it’s completely demythologized. It appears here as a natural entity and not a divine antagonist. By contrast there are psalms in which God is battling with the sea in the form of a monster.

[82] Royal psalms are psalms that praise God’s anointed King. Some scholars believe that these were coronation psalms. These would have been used at the time of the coronation of a Davidic King, for example. So Psalm 110, “Yahweh said to my lord,” my Lord now meaning the king:

“Yahweh said to my lord,  
“Sit at My right hand  
while I make your enemies your  
footstool.”

The Lord will stretch forth from Zion your mighty scepter;

hold sway over your enemies!

Your people come forward willingly on your day of battle.”

[I guess that’s what every king wishes for.]

“Your people come forward willingly on your day of battle

In majestic Holiness, from the womb,

from the dawn, yours was the dew of youth.

The Lord has sworn and will not relent,

‘You are a priest forever, a rightful king by My decree.’

The Lord is at your right hand.”

[Yahweh is at your right hand.]

“He crushes kings in the day of His anger.”

[83] But not all of the royal psalms were concerned primarily with military success or guaranteeing military success. Some seek to ensure that the king, the anointed king is bestowed with other qualities necessary for good stewardship. So we find in Psalm 72,

O God, endow the king with Your judgments,

the king’s son with Your righteousness;

that He may judge your people rightly,

Your lowly ones, justly.

...Let him champion the lowly among the people,

deliver the needy folk,

and crush those who wrong them.

Let them be like rain that falls on a mown field,

like a downpour of rain on the ground,

that the righteous may flourish in His time,

and well-being abound, till the moon is no more.

[84] A third category I’ve got listed for you are psalms of lament and petition and indebtedness, and these can be voiced in the plural (a communal supplication) or in the

voice of the individual. Although individual laments may open with an invocation to or praise of God, some launch immediately into a desperate plea for deliverance from some suffering or crisis. It’s often expressed metaphorically. Or they might launch into a plea for vengeance on one’s enemies. After presenting his complaint, the psalmist will usually confess his trust in God, then ask for help or forgiveness and conclude with a vow that he will praise God again.

[85] We sometimes even see an acknowledgement of a divine response, perhaps a thank-you in advance. Psalm 13 has many of these features,

How long, O Lord; will You ignore me forever?

How long will You hide Your face from me?

How long will I have cares on my mind, grief in my heart all day?

How long will my enemy have the upper hand?

Look at me, answer me, O Lord, my God!

Restore the luster to my eyes,

lest I sleep the sleep of death;

lest my enemy say, “I have overcome him,”

my foes exult [when I totter.

But I trust in Your faithfulness,

My heart will exult] in Your deliverance.

I will sing to the Lord,

for He has been good to me.

[86] Psalm 55[:13-23] asks for deliverance from the treachery of a deceitful friend:

It is not an enemy who reviles me

— I could bear that;

it is not my foe who vaunts himself against me

— I could hide from him;

but it is you, my equal,

my companion, my friend;

sweet was our fellowship;

we walked together in God’s house.

Let Him incite death against them;  
may they go down alive into Sheol!  
For where they dwell,  
there evil is.  
...He harmed his ally,  
he broke his pact.  
his talk was smoother than butter,  
yet his mind was on war; his words were  
more soothing than oil,  
yet they were drawn swords.  
Cast your burden upon the Lord and He  
will sustain you;  
He will never let the righteous man  
collapse.

[87] Very personalized laments. Some laments are pleas for forgiveness of personal sins. This one is attributed in the psalm itself, [in] the superscription to the psalm; it's attributed to David after the prophet Nathan rebukes him for his illicit relationship with Bathsheba. Listen to the striking parallelism — you hear the poetic parallelism in this psalm, Psalm 51, again using the RSV translation:

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to Thy steadfast love;  
according to Thy abundant mercy blot out  
my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin!  
For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.  
Against thee, thee only, have I sinned,  
and done that which is evil in thy sight,  
so that thou art justified in thy sentence  
and blameless in thy judgment.  
...Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Cast me not away from thy presence, and  
take not thy Holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of thy salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

[88] The communal laments, a lot of these are individual, but communal laments, bewail Israel's misfortunes and urge God's vengeance upon Israel's oppressors, sometimes reminding God of his historic relationship with Israel and his covenantal obligations.

[89] Let me just finish by reading Psalm 74 as a case in point. It makes explicit reference to the destruction of the sanctuary so it's clearly post-exilic. And as a response to the catastrophe, it gives expression to despair and bewilderment and even anger that God has forgotten His obligations to Israel:

Why, O God, do You forever reject us,  
do You fume in anger at the flock that You tend?  
Remember the community You made  
Yours long ago,  
Your very own tribe that You redeemed,  
Mount Zion, where You dwell.  
Bestir Yourself because of the perpetual  
tumult,  
all the outrages of the enemy in the  
sanctuary.  
Your foes roar inside Your meeting place;  
they take their signs for true signs.  
It is like men wielding axes  
against a gnarled tree;  
with hatchet and pike  
they hacked away at its carved work.  
They made Your sanctuary go up in  
flames;  
they brought low in dishonor the dwelling  
place of Your presence.  
They resolved, "Let us destroy them  
altogether!"  
They burned all God's tabernacles in the  
land. No signs appear for us;  
there is no longer any prophet;  
no one among us who knows for how long.  
Till when, O God, ...will the enemy  
forever revile Your name?  
Why do You hold back Your hand, Your  
right hand?

Draw it out of Your bosom!

...Do not deliver Your dove to the wild  
beast;

do not ignore forever the band of Your  
lowly ones.

Look to the covenant!

...Rise, O God, champion Your cause;

[90] The psalmist is bewildered: why has this happened, why doesn't God act? There's no mention of Israel's sin; there's no indication that the destruction was just punishment. Psalm 44, which we'll start with next time, goes even further and states flatly that the people haven't sinned. It's God who's been faithless.

[91] [end of transcript]

[92] Notes

[93] 1. The JPS translation transliterates as Kohelet with a "K" rather than Qohelet. The "Q" is more accurate so I use that, but when citing the

JPS translation we need to keep the K — hence the discrepancy.

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[94] References

[95] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations have been quoted from "Tanakh: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text." Copyright (c) 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society. Single copies of the JPS biblical citations cited within the transcripts can be reproduced for personal and non-commercial uses only.

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[97] Doody, Margaret Anne. 1994. *The Infant Samuel and Infant Piety. Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. Buchmann, C. and Spiegel C. New York: Fawcett Columbine.

(Hayes, 2006)

### Psalms - Examples of Forms

1. Hymns of praise, trust or thanksgiving -- 8, 19, 23, 24, 46, 103, 104, 114, 115, 118, 131, 136, 139, 150;
2. Enthronement, Royal or Messianic Psalms -- 93, 96, 97, 98, 99; 2, 21, 45, 72, 110;
3. Psalms of Lament, Petition, and Indebtedness -- 22, 44, 55, 74, 78, 79, 80, 105, 106
4. Psalms of Blessing and Cursing -- 1, 109, 137
5. Psalms of Wisdom, Meditation and Instruction -- 32, 37, 49, 52, 73, 90, 112, 119, 128.

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