Psalms and Wisdom Literature: An Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

This study is intended to be an introduction to the five books of the Bible grouped together in the Old Testament of English translations of the Bible after the Law and historical books (Genesis to Esther) and before the books of the Prophets (Isaiah to Malachi). The five books in the order in which they are placed are:

- Job
- Psalms
- Proverbs
- Ecclesiastes
- Song of Songs

The books deserve to be grouped together since they are clearly different in character from the other parts of the Old Testament (with the possible exception of Lamentations, which was placed together with them in the Hebrew Bible but is placed after Jeremiah in English translations because its authorship is traditionally attributed to the prophet), but they really comprise books of two different major genres:

a) Poetry – the Psalms are a collection of poems or songs.

b) Wisdom – Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes belong within this genre.

Having identified these two genres, however, it must be said that the division is not as absolute as it may appear, for a number of reasons:

- There is some debate as to which category Song of Songs should be placed in – is it a poetic song or an example of “lyric wisdom” (see the section on Song of Songs for further discussion).
- A number of psalms can be classified as “wisdom psalms” (see the section on Psalms for more detail).
- Proverbs and sections of Ecclesiastes and Job are written in poetry.

In addition it is important to realise that the literary genres called wisdom and poetry are by no means restricted to these five books. As we shall see, these genres are found throughout the Old Testament (and even in the New Testament). Still, it is within these five books that poetry and wisdom are concentrated in the Old Testament, and this section serves a distinct purpose within the canon of Scripture.

In summary, I will argue that these books serve two important purposes:

- Commentary on the Old Testament narrative
  Together with Lamentations and the Prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve Minor prophets (Hosea to Malachi) they serve as a break from and a commentary upon the narrative backbone that runs through the Old Testament. The other Old Testament books (Genesis to Esther and the book of Daniel) are predominantly narrative, telling an unfolding story of God’s relationship with mankind and especially with Israel. These books sit alongside that narrative and give us insights into its significance and into the spiritual life of the people.

- Insight into everyday life and experience
  Whereas the narrative books focus on big events, nations and major characters, these poetic and wisdom books give us insights into the feelings and experience of individuals. In some cases (primarily David and possibly also Solomon) the insights are into the life of characters who figure significantly in the narrative, but in others the author is unknown or relative insignificant in historical terms. Where the narrative books focus on God’s actions in the history of Israel and the surrounding nations, these books focus on the response of God’s people to Him. They primarily record the words of people about God, including praise and despair, questions and struggles. They are an insight into the heart of the faithful people within Israel. If we did not have these books we would struggle to know what it was like to live a life of faith in God as one of His people.

Before considering each book in turn we must first briefly consider the two major genres of wisdom and poetry that comprise these books.
**POETRY IN THE HEBREW BIBLE**

The place of poetry in the Old Testament

According to Grant Osborne: “Poetry is ... a device that cuts across other genres, being a major rhetorical technique in wisdom and prophetic literature”.1 Poetry is found in three places within the Old Testament:

- **Poetic Books** – three whole books are entirely comprised of poetry or songs: Psalms, Song of Songs and Lamentations.
- **Narrative books** – songs and poems are found within the narrative books, for example: Genesis 49 (Jacob’s blessing); Exodus 15:1-18 (the song of Moses and Miriam); Deuteronomy 32 (Moses’ song), 33 (Moses’ blessing of the tribes); Judges 5 (Deborah’s song); 1 Samuel 2:1-10 (Hannah’s prayer) ; 1 Kings 12:16 (Israel’s answer to Rehoboam); 2 Kings 19:21-34 (Isaiah’s prophecy to Hezekiah).
- **Prophetic books** – some of the prophetic books are entirely or almost entirely written in poetry (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah) while others contain lengthy portions of poetry (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, Zechariah).

There are a number of types of poetry in the Old Testament, including war songs giving praise to God for giving victory (e.g. Exodus 15:1-18; Judges 5) and love songs (Song of Songs), but the psalm is the predominant form. The book of Psalms contains a number of different kinds of psalms, which will be considered in the section on Psalms. Grant Osborne writes about the importance of poetry in the national life of Israel:2

Semitic poetry had its origins in the religious life of the people, both corporate and individual. Prose was inadequate to express the deep yearnings of the soul, and poetry as an emotional, deep expression of faith and worship became a necessity. The many types of religious need called for different types of hymns. Hebrew poetry was not recreational but was functional in the life of the nation and its relationship with Yahweh. Poetry had a worship function in mediating between the people and God and a sermonic function in reminding the people of their responsibilities before God. The Psalms, for instance, were not peripheral as hymns often are today but were a focal point of the service both in temple and in synagogue. It is not without reason that prophetic utterances from God were so frequently given in poetic form. Not only were they more easily remembered, but they were also more emotive and powerful in their message.

For this reason he can claim that “theology is central to biblical poetry”.3 Poetry expresses truth in a way that other genres cannot. Robert Alter writes:4

|Poetry, working through a system of complex linkages of sound, image, word, rhythm, syntax, theme, idea, is an instrument for conveying densely patterned meanings, and sometimes contradictory meanings, that are not readily conveyable through other kinds of discourse.|

**Literary features of Hebrew poetry**

In most modern English translations of the Bible poetry has been identified by indentation of the text. Within Hebrew poetry there are four main features that can be identified and which are important in interpreting the poem:

1. **Metrical Patterns** – the rhythm of the poem or song. Identifying this depends on knowledge of Hebrew and phonetics. Scholars divide over whether to base the metrical structure on stress or syllable counts. The metrical structure is more important in considering how the poem should be read aloud rather than how it should be understood, hence readers who are not Hebrew scholars should not worry greatly about it.

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1 Osborne, 1991, p.174
2 Osborne, 1991, p.181
3 Osborne, 1991, p.186
4 Robert Alter quoted in Villanueva, 2010, p.75
2. **Parallelism** – Hebrew poetry is marked by parallels of grammar and language. The traditional approach (after Bishop Robert Lowth in 1750) sees 3 basic types of parallels:
   a. **Synonymous** – repeat with little or no added meaning (e.g. Isaiah 53:5; Proverbs 3:14).
   b. **Synthetic (or “step”)** – the second line adds meaning to the first. This type is far more common than synonymous parallelism. It includes “climactic parallelism”, in which several units build the thought to a climax (e.g. Psalm 8:3-4; 29:1).
   c. **Antithetical** – the second line is contrasted with the first (e.g. Proverbs 3:1). In some cases the second line still adds clarification and so can fall under synthetic parallelism too (e.g. Psalm 20:7; Proverbs 1:7). Another form of antithetical parallelism is “introverted parallelism”, where two lines contrast with two others, often in a chiastic pattern (e.g. Psalm 30:8-10).

More recently, some scholars have questioned this approach, claiming that “synonymous parallelism” is not found in Hebrew poetry and that the second line always adds meaning in some sense, if only by clarifying the first. Some cases of parallelism (especially synonymous parallels) are incomplete, with one element from the first line missing from the second (e.g. Psalm 24:1) and more often than not in these cases what is called the “ballast variant” occurs, as the missing element is compensated for by the addition of a further thought (e.g. Psalm 18:17).

3. **Poetic language** – Hebrew poetry uses a number of characteristic literary devices. Some of these can be identified in the English translation, whilst others are only evident in the Hebrew:
   a. **Chiasm** – this device, which is also found in many New Testament passages, reverses words or ideas in successive parallel sections forming a symmetrical “mirror image”. Consider, for example, Isaiah 6:10:
      
      A  make the heart of this people calloused  
      B  make their ears dull  
      C   And close their eyes  
      C’  Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
      B’  hear with their ears,  
      A’  understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed
   b. **Paronomasia** – play on words (e.g. Isaiah 5:7, the words for “justice” and “bloodshed” differ by one letter in Hebrew, as do the words for “righteousness” and “weeping”).
   c. **Alliteration** – lines beginning with the same letter of the alphabet (e.g. Psalm 119, each line within each strophe begins with the same Hebrew letter).
   d. **Acrostics** – each line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (e.g. Psalm 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; Lamentations 3).
   e. **Assonance** – similar sounding words (e.g. Jeremiah 1:11-12, the words for “almond branch” and “watching over” differ by one vowel sound in the Hebrew).

4. **Imagery** – the use of figurative language is characteristic of poetry in many languages and is important to realise if we are to avoid mistakes in interpreting the meaning of poetry. Images are found in two forms:
   a. **Similes** – an illustrative image introduced with the word “like” (e.g. Job 30:8; Psalm 1:3-4; 31:12; Proverbs 11:12; Isaiah 1:30).
   b. **Metaphors** – use of an illustrative image without the word “like” (e.g. Psalm 19:1-2; Amos 4:1). God is metaphorically depicted as an enthroned king, a shepherd, a warrior, a charioteer, a father, a shepherd, a rock, a refreshing pool etc.
WISDOM LITERATURE

What is “wisdom”?
Wisdom is popularly thought of as the ability to use knowledge effectively and skillfully in making decisions with positive consequences. Although this definition is included in the biblical concept of wisdom, it misses a fundamental principle in wisdom as defined in Scripture, which is its basis in a reverential relationship with God. Wisdom is always the exercise of godly reason and understanding in the face of, and with trust in, what God is doing in our time. Grant Osborne writes that, “Its goal is to use properly God’s creation and to enjoy life in the present under his care”.3 Wisdom is a vital skill for life and a necessary complement to Torah (“instruction” or, more commonly but perhaps misleadingly, “law”). The Law of Moses contains many commandments, but it can never cover every possible situation or decision that needs to be made. The only way to face every aspect of life with faithfulness to God is to develop wisdom. Wisdom, in a sense, fills in the gaps between the Law, or perhaps we should say it guides the choices of the God-fearing person within the limits prescribed by the Law. Since, as Graeme Goldsworthy points out, wisdom “is virtually synonymous with righteousness ... righteousness is seen to be far more than ethical conformity”6. We need wisdom if we are to live our lives wholly for God.

The place of wisdom in the Old Testament
Wisdom sayings are found in numerous places in the Old Testament:
- Samson’s verse riddle (Judges 14:12ff.)
- Proverbs are found in narrative and prophetic books – David to Saul (1 Samuel 24:13); Ahab to Ben-hadad (1 Kings 20:11); Jeremiah 31:29 and Ezekiel 18:2 (a “joke” about a bad situation for parents but a worse one for children).
- Jotham’s fable (Judges 9:8-15) and Joash’s variant (2 Chronicles 25:18).
- The parables of Nathan (2 Samuel 12:1ff.) and woman of Tekoa (2 Samuel 14:4ff.)
- Allegories in Ezekiel (chapters 16, 17 and 23), Isaiah (28:23ff.) and Jeremiah (18:1ff.)
- Some Psalms are wisdom psalms – especially when the psalmist turns from addressing God to teaching or warning his fellow men (e.g. Psalms 1, 37 and 127) or to grappling with disturbing questions (e.g. Psalms 49 and 73).

Although wisdom clearly predates the written books themselves, it was in the reign of Solomon that wisdom literature reached its zenith. Much of Proverbs is attributed directly to Solomon, and Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs are directly or indirectly associated with him. Derek Kidner connects this flowering of wisdom literature in the 10th Century BC to the stimulus of Solomon’s reign with increased travel, trade, exchange of ideas, prosperity, leisure and arts.7 Solomon himself was gifted by God with wisdom and 1 Kings 3 and 2 Chronicles 1 tell how he chose wisdom as a gift from God in preference to riches or fame. God’s response was to grant him all three. Sadly Solomon squandered his wisdom in the later part of his reign, but his influence still had a major impact on the development of wisdom in Israel. The example of Solomon is a reminder that wisdom is practical skill (he wanted wisdom to be able to lead and given effectively according to 2 Chronicles 1:10) and that wisdom must be used constantly in a context of reverent relationship with God if it is to be effective.

In addition to the presence of wisdom sayings, wise people are also mentioned in narrative books:
- Professional counsellors like rivals Ahithophel and Hushai served in the royal court (2 Samuel 15:12-17:23)
- Local wise people existed in Israelite society – Jonadab (2 Samuel 13:3); wise woman of Tekoa (2 Samuel 14), city of Abel (2 Samuel 20:18).
- Four wise men are named in 1 Kings 4:31, but their wisdom was surpassed by Solomon, who had a divine gift of wisdom.

5 Osborne, 1991, p.191
6 Goldsworthy, 2000, p.189
7 Kidner 1985, p.14-15
An office of wise man was recognised alongside prophets and priests (Jeremiah 18:18).
The class of “wise men” came under criticism in the late years of the kingdom from the prophets Isaiah (44:25) and, most notably, Jeremiah (8:9). Some have interpreted these comments in the Prophets as an attack on the very concept of “wisdom” and the “wise”. They suggest that the prophets believed in revelation from God whereas the wise men (and the wisdom books) were simply presenting a concept of life without direct intervention from God in ignorance of concepts like covenant which were central to narrative and prophetic books. This suggestion creates a false dichotomy between revelation and wisdom and tears the Old Testament apart. The fact that Isaiah and Jeremiah criticised the people who held the office of “wise man” in their day does not mean that they were in conflict with the earlier wisdom writings any more than their attacks on false prophets in their day negates the authority of the earlier prophets (or even of their own ministries). They were speaking in a time when the “wise men” were blind to what God was doing and therefore misleading the people. Wisdom, properly understood, is no less a revelation from God than prophecy. Although prophecy may be thought of as “special revelation”, as God spoke directly to His people, wisdom is a form of “general revelation” based on the nature of the universe as created and ruled by God.

As mentioned in the introduction above, wisdom literature together with Psalms and Song of Songs, serves as a pause in the narrative flow of the Old Testament and an opportunity to reflect on the significance of the flow of God’s story for our lives in the here and now. Derek Kidner captures this reality powerfully in relation to the three main wisdom books:8

There comes a point in the Old Testament when the pilgrim is free to stop and take a long look round. He has had a well-marked path to follow, and still it stretches on ahead. But now he must relate it to the world at large, to the scene spread out on every side: from what lies right at his feet (shrewdly pointed out in Proverbs) to what is barely visible at the horizon – the dark riddle of how the world is governed (the book of Job) and how it should be valued (Ecclesiastes).

What is wisdom literature?
The wisdom books of the Old Testament are Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Some scholars also add Song of Songs to the list. As noted above, however, wisdom also appears elsewhere in the Old Testament, and it should also be noted that many parts of the New Testament can also be thought of as “wisdom”. For example, the parables of Jesus and much of His teaching in discourses can be thought of as wisdom sayings (e.g. beatitudes, teaching by questions, use of provocative imagery) and some commentators classify James as a wisdom book (certainly it has an interest in wisdom, according to James 1:5 and its style bears significant similarities to Old Testament wisdom literature). The genre of “wisdom literature” can, therefore, refer to the books listed above, but it can also embrace a wide variety of sub-genres found throughout Scripture:

1. The proverb – this is “a brief statement of universally accepted truth formulated in such a way as to be memorable”.9 The Hebrew word mashal normally translated as “proverb” may mean either “like” (i.e. a descriptive saying) or “rule” (i.e. a potent saying), and it is used more widely in the Old Testament to describe allegory (Ezekiel 17:1-10), aphorisms (Ecclesiastes 9:17-10:20), popular sayings (Jeremiah 23:28), discourse (Numbers 23:7, 18) and similitudes (1 Samuel 10:11). Proverbs per se offer:
   - Instruction (e.g. Proverbs 22:17-24:22)
   - Admonition or prohibition (e.g. Proverbs 8:24-31, 33)
   - Exhortation or counsel (e.g. Proverbs 22:28)

They do this through a variety of literary techniques:10
   - Synonymous parallels use similarities or analogies to make their point (e.g. Proverbs 22:22-27)
   - Antithetical parallels use contrasts to make their point (e.g. Proverbs 11:1-31)
   - Factual, experiential or instructional statements (e.g. Proverbs 17:27)

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8 Kidner, 1985, p.11
9 Osborne, 1991, p.195
10 See Atkinson, 1996, p.26ff. for a longer discussion of how various proverbs function
2. **The saying** – sayings are similar to proverbs, but not so developed in form or universal in their application. Sayings can be divided into two types:
   a. **Experiential sayings** describe actual situations but remain open to clarification – they are observations of what sometimes happens, not fixed rules (e.g. Proverbs 11:24; 17:28)
   b. **Didactic sayings** are less general and intend to teach a particular value (e.g. Proverbs 14:31).
Sayings are often collected into general discussions or instruction on a topic, for example in Proverbs 1-9 where the wise man is contrasted with the fool and righteousness with evil, or in the book of Ecclesiastes.

3. **The discourse or instruction** – a longer argument for the importance and nature of wisdom, generally addressed to “my son”. This is the dominant form of Proverbs chapter 1 to 9, which contains several such discourses, and is also found in Proverbs 22:17-23:14.

4. **The numerical saying** – these often enigmatic sayings take the form, “there are n things ..., n+1 that ...”, where n is either three (four times in Proverbs 30) or six (in Proverbs 6:16-19). It is not always immediately obvious how the resulting lists are connected, but it seems likely that the intention is to emphasise that everything in creation is orderly, even if it does not initially seem so.

5. **The admonition** – a command to action or a prohibition normally followed by a motivation statement telling hearers why they should listen to it (e.g. Proverbs 9:9; 22:24-25). In other cases no motivation is stated (e.g. Proverbs 20:18) or it is implicit (e.g. Proverbs 24:17-18; 25:21-22).

6. **The wisdom hymn** – these include two major themes: the glorification of wisdom and thanksgiving to God as Creator and Redeemer. They are found in the wisdom psalms and in poetic sections of the wisdom books (notably Job 5:9-16; 9:5-12; 12:13-25; 26:5-14; 28; Proverbs 8).

7. **The dialogue** – discussion or debate between two people. This is the primary subgenre of Job, which is structured around a series of dialogues between Job, his friends and God. It is also found in Proverbs 1:11-14, 22-23; 5:12-14; 7:14-20; 8:4-36.

8. **The confession** – autobiographical material describing the problems faced by the wise person as an example for others. Ecclesiastes is a prime example, but Job 29-31; 40:4-5; 42:1-6 and Proverbs 4:3-9; 24:3—34 can also be categorised as confessions.

9. **The beatitude** – a statement promising blessing for certain actions (e.g. Psalm 1:1; 112:1; Proverbs 3:13; 8:32-34; 14:21; 16:20; 19:18; 20:7; 28:14; Ecclesiastes 10:17).

10. **The riddle** – riddles only found in their pure form in Scripture within the story of Samson (Judges 14:10-18), but may underlie numerical proverbs such as Proverbs 6:16-19 and 30:15-31.

11. **The allegory** – although it is used in the prophetic books, allegory is found explicitly in the Old Testament wisdom literature only twice: in Proverbs 5:15-23 about adultery and marriage and in Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 about old age and death.

12. **The wisdom list** – these appear in Job 28; 36:27-37; 38; 40-41; Psalm 104; 148.

It is also helpful to realise that wisdom literature is generally written in poetry, and so other literary features of Hebrew poetry are to be found within them, including:

- Acrostics (e.g. Proverbs 31:10-31)
- Alliteration (e.g. Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)
- Similes and metaphors (e.g. Job 32:19; Song of Songs 4:1-6)

**The theology of the wisdom literature**

Old Testament wisdom literature has four major characteristics:
1) **Practical orientation**

There is a concern for the passing on of the wisdom of the past to the young. Wisdom literature centres on proper etiquette and speech (Proverbs 29:20), self-control (25:28), family relationships (10:1), material wealth (11:4). It also asks deep questions like why the righteous suffer (Job), why the evil prosper (Psalms 49; 73) and what purpose life has (Ecclesiastes). Major topics discussed, according to Derek Kidner, include God and man, wisdom, the fool, the sluggard, the friend, words, the family, life and death. Grant Osborne writes that:

*Since wisdom writings deal so constantly with the pragmatic side of life, it is easy to misuse them to support an earth-centered lifestyle. Yet this very aspect makes wisdom literature so valuable for the modern Christian who seeks a relevant religion.*

Wisdom literature calls us to surrender every aspect of life to scrutiny and “it sees God’s wisdom expressed and echoed everywhere – except where man, the rebel, has presumed to disagree and to disrupt the pattern”. It is man’s sin that causes wisdom not always to triumph, and sin at its heart is the rejection of God and His ways. This realisation prepares us for the second great theme of wisdom literature.

2) **Dependence on God**

The other major focus of wisdom literature which must be held in balance with its practical orientation if we are to avoid the “earth-centred lifestyle” Osborne mentions is its call to dependence upon God. According to Derek Kidner, “it is this that keeps the shrewdness of Proverbs from slipping into mere self-interest, the perplexity of Job from mutiny, and the disillusion of Ecclesiastes from final despair.” The God-centred focus of wisdom is seen in three ways in the wisdom literature:

a. **Wisdom is founded on reverence for God** – The foundational principle of wisdom is the “fear of the Lord” combined with the injunction to “turn away from evil” (Job 1:1; 28:28; Proverbs 3:7; 8:13; 16:6). “The fear of the Lord” is the milieu or sphere within which true wisdom is attainable. In fact, the precept that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” is found in differing forms in all of the wisdom and poetic books with the exception of Song of Songs: Job 28:28; Psalms 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; Ecclesiastes 12:13. It is vital to remember in reading wisdom literature that this attitude of reverence for God is foundational to wisdom in all its forms and in its application to all of life. As Derek Kidner writes:

‘the fear of the Lord’ – that filial reverence which the Old Testament expounds from first to last – is not a mere beginner’s step to wisdom, to be left behind, but the prerequisite of every right attitude. Only so will the world be seen the right way up, and life begin to reveal its intended pattern”

b. **Wisdom connects daily experiences with the centrality of God’s covenant** – although God’s covenant with Israel is never explicitly mentioned in the wisdom books it is the implied background to all that they teach about practical living. Wisdom complements the covenant rather than denying or challenging it. In fact, wisdom is identified with Torah or instruction (e.g. Proverbs 3:1-12; 4:4-5) and the wisdom psalms make the link with God’s Torah explicit (e.g. Psalms 1 and 119). Wisdom literature reminds us that God’s presence cannot be confined to the prophetic and priestly spheres of life – it embraces every aspect of daily existence.

c. **Wisdom is personified as an extension of God** – Proverbs presents wisdom as a craftsman with God in Creation (Proverbs 8:29-30), a female teacher inviting students to learn from her at the gates of the city (1:20-21; 8:1-36), and a hostess inviting people to her banquet (9:1-12). This is in contrast with the adulteress (2:16-19; 7:6-27) and the foolish hostess (9:13-18).

3) **Indirect authority**

Wisdom literature assumes divine authority rather than explicitly stating it (as in the Prophets). Wisdom has authority because:

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11 Osborne, 1991, p.191
12 Kidner, 1985, p.12
13 Kidner, 1985, p.17
14 Osborne, 1991, p.193
15 Kidner, 1985, p.19
• God made things this way and fear of Him is foundational
• Tradition has passed these truths on (the image of the father teaching his son)
• Experience shows that they work in practice.
Derek Kidner writes about the kind of authority the wisdom books possess:16 in the Wisdom books the tone of voice and even the speakers have changed. The blunt ‘Thou shalt’ or ‘shalt not’ of the Law, and the urgent ‘Thus saith the LORD’ of the Prophets, are joined now by the cooler comments of the learner. Where the bulk of the Old Testament calls us simply to obey and to believe, this part of it … summons us to think hard as well as humbly; to keep our eyes open, to use our conscience and our common sense, and not to shirk the most disturbing questions.

4) Creation theology
Wisdom literature urges us to take our proper place in the cosmos as God has created it. It reminds us that God has created an orderly and rational world, as Derek Kidner points out:17 this demand for thought presupposes a world that answers to thought. Not, to be sure, one which we can hope to master with our finite minds; but that is our limitation, not the world’s.
Wisdom, therefore, “has to do with a right perception and understanding of reality”.18 There are two major aspects to this theology of creation:

a. The principle of retribution governs the universe – all people will answer to God (Proverbs 10:27; 11:21; 12:21; 13:25). Even when the wicked prosper this is only temporary until God’s judgement (Psalm 73:18-20, 27; Ecclesiastes 12:14).
b. Divine justice is defended – both Job and Ecclesiastes deal with the central problem of Wisdom literature, the problem of evil and the suffering of the innocent. The ultimate answer of both books is that we are unable to comprehend the divine order.
Wisdom literature, then, provides a constant reminder of God’s creatorship and serves as a corrective against extremes of pietism which tend to withdraw from the world or godless secularism. Both of these tendencies are a threat to Christians today, and wisdom literature can help us maintain a healthy view of “ordinary life” and abolish the divide between sacred and secular. Derek Kidner writes:19 The presence of this kind of material in Scripture invites the man of God to study his whole environment, not simply that part of it which bears directly on the covenant or on morality... So he is taking God’s creatorship as seriously as his redemption, and is giving due weight to the solidarity between ‘all parts of his dominion’, material and immaterial, measuring all alike by the single concept of wisdom – from the universe itself down to the behaviour of a colony of ants, or of a child or a courting couple, or of a buyer and seller doing business.

Guidelines for interpreting wisdom literature
Fee and Stuart identify three ways in which wisdom books have frequently been misused:20

1) Reading the books only in part and so missing the overall message – For example, what does Ecclesiastes 3:2 mean in the context of the book? Is it a truthful statement about God’s sovereignty and therefore a guide for our attitude to life or a cynical statement about the futility of life without God which should therefore be rejected? If the books are not read in their entirety it may be possible to take statements out of context and apply them in a literalistic way without realising that they are only one aspect of the truth or that wisdom is needed to decide when to apply the statement. For example, Proverbs 10:22 in isolation could appear to suggest that the godly person will always have health, wealth and prosperity. This verse need to be balanced with verses like Proverbs 17:5 and 18:23 and with the message of Job, which shows that righteous people can suffer unjustly.

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16 Kidner, 1985, p.11
17 Kidner, 1985, p.12
18 Goldsworthy, 2000, p.186
19 Kidner, 1985, p.14
20 Fee and Stuart, 1993, p.207
2) Misunderstanding wisdom terms and categories, as well as styles and literary modes — e.g. in Proverbs 14:7 misunderstanding the meaning of “fool” (someone who rejects God’s perspective on life rather than someone of low intelligence or limited education) and of “staying away” (not seeking instruction or advice from him rather than totally avoiding him).

3) Failure to follow lines of argument — For example, Job 15:20 (spoken by Eliphaz) as God’s truth and so concluding that wicked people are always unhappy, without reading Job 17:1-16 where Job himself actually refutes Eliphaz’s argument, revealing it to be false. There is a danger in failing to ask who is speaking and whether their words are approved that we may actually end up applying what the book as a whole condemns.

The following principles may help towards a more faithful interpretation and application of wisdom literature:

1. Note the form of the wisdom saying
   Is it a proverb or a longer didactic saying? Is it allegorical? If it is a dialogue or imagined speech, is it presented as correct or incorrect? In the case of individual proverbs be sure to read parallel sayings together. For example, reading only the first half of Proverbs 13:24 may lead to harsh discipline of children, but the second half is a necessary corrective that shows discipline must be done because of love and then done carefully.

2. Ask whether the immediate context is important
   It is in some sections of Proverbs, namely chapters 1-9 and 30-31, but not in most other parts of the book, which contain collections of sayings. Because there is no logical argument or narrative connecting the bulk of proverbs in the book of Proverbs, sayings on a similar theme can then be collected together and cross-referenced to build a more complete picture of the wisdom of Proverbs on that theme. In Job and Ecclesiastes, context is vitally important, as the ultimate meaning of the book is only clear from a reading of the whole.

3. Determine whether hyperbole is present
   Given the fact that wisdom literature is written as poetry, it is necessary to look out for statements that deliberately exaggerate or generalise the truth being presented. For example, does Proverbs 3:9-10 promise prosperity to all who are faithful to God? How does this compare with Proverbs 23:4-5 with its warnings about striving to get rich and the transience of wealth? Does Proverbs 22:26-27 prohibit all borrowing, such as mortgages? Grant Osborne warns that, “Wisdom sayings are written in order to be remembered, and so they tend to be pithy statements that prefer rhetorical skill to accuracy”.

4. Get behind the meaning of culturally bound imagery
   Since many wisdom sayings depend on ancient customs, the universal principle underlying obscure passages must be identified and applied to comparable situations today for us to accurately and relevantly apply the truth. For example, Proverbs 11:1 teaches honest business practices even if weights and scales are no longer used and the truth of Proverbs 25:24 about marriage still applies even if we no longer have flat roofs.

5. Remember that wisdom sayings require wisdom to be used effectively
   This is perhaps the most important principle in applying wisdom literature. Knowing a lot of wisdom sayings does not make a person wise. Wisdom, as we have seen, is an attitude to life that flows from a proper respect for and surrender to God. When a person approaches every aspect of life with that attitude, wisdom sayings become powerful and effective tools to be applied to real dilemmas. Solomon knew and recorded many wisdom sayings, but when his heart turned away from God he made foolish decisions, failing to apply the wisdom contained in the sayings. Wisdom sayings are not intended to be a universal guide as to how to act in any specific situation. They are intended to provoke us to careful consideration of the possible outcomes of...
the choices we might make. So, we should not be surprised to find proverbs that appear to conflict with one another. A classic example is the adjacent sayings in Proverbs 26:4-5. Are we to answer a fool according to his folly or not? The answer depends on our specific situation. We need to use godly wisdom to decide what is appropriate, aware that the consequence may either be that we become a fool (if we answer when we should not) or that he is allowed to think that he is wise (if we don’t answer when we should). Presumably in this instance the correct action depends on our judgement about how the “fool” is likely to respond. Is he open to hearing what we will say? The environment must also be considered – for example, who else is there and what influence will their presence have on him? This is the kind of wisdom a Christian needs constantly as they decide when to share with non-believers about their faith – sometimes it is appropriate, but in other circumstances it may be unhelpful. A comparison with familiar English proverbs may be helpful in illustrating this need for discernment further. Consider the proverbs “Many hands make light work” and “Too many cooks spoil the broth”. Both contain truth and yet they say opposite things. Which is appropriate depends on the task at hand and who the proposed helpers are.

6. Read the wisdom literature as a whole

The three books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes complement one another and add together to provide a more complete understanding of wisdom than they do alone. This will be discussed further as we look at Job and Ecclesiastes, but it is important to realise that the largely positive and almost idealistic outlook of Proverbs is balanced by the gloomy perspective of much of Ecclesiastes and the raw brutality of Job’s story. If any of the three parts were missing, biblical wisdom would be like a stool with two legs – unstable and treacherous. In the words of Graeme Goldsworthy:22

*All three books complement one another in encouraging the believer to use mind and faculties to try to understand life in God’s universe, but also in rebuking the arrogance of those who would claim to have it all together.*

Christ the “wisdom of God”

One other comment on a Christian understanding of wisdom is important. As with all of the Old Testament, the wisdom literature finds its fulfillment in Christ. This is not so immediately obvious as it may be in the narrative books, whose story leads inevitably to the need for a Messiah and provides patterns which He can fulfill (e.g. sacrifice / kingship), the books of Torah, whose instruction reveals the nature of sin and whose priestly and sacrificial systems provide the template for the Messiah’s redemption of God’s people, or the Psalms and prophets, which include messianic prophecies. Christ, however, is described by Paul as the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30). He was the fulfillment of wisdom in the sense that He lived the perfectly wise life (He was aware of living according to wisdom – see Matthew 11:19) and He confounded worldly wisdom through His divine foolishness (God’s wisdom appears foolish in sinful human eyes). He came to exemplify wisdom but also to make it possible for the failure of human sinfulness which wisdom accentuates to be healed and for a God-centred approach to all of life to be restored in those who follow Him. All wisdom is found in Him (Colossians 2:3), and so for the Christian the desire for wisdom cannot be separated from a desire to know Christ more and to grow in Him.

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22 Goldsworthy, 2000, p.186
**PSALMS**

**The significance of the book of Psalms**

Psalms is perhaps the best known and best loved book of the Old Testament among Christians. It has had a unique impact on public Christian worship, with some traditions singing only psalms, many liturgies including readings from psalms and many popular hymns and choruses being paraphrases of the psalms. The Psalms have also proven popular in private devotional use by Christians and in pastoral situations where they lend themselves to being read to those who are suffering, afraid or bereaved. The relevance of the book to Christians is because of the way in which they express feelings, from despair to elation, in powerful and dynamic language. The theology of this book is one of worship and a truly biblical concept of worship which embraces all of life. Grant Osborne summarises the book’s message as follows:  

*Primarily, the Psalms center upon worship and prayer; they demonstrate better than any other biblical genre Israel’s God-consciousness. They make no actual theological statements, but their very God-centeredness is highly theological. Every area of life is related to God, and he is seen as sovereign over all.*

Although each psalm has its own mood, structure and message, across the book as a whole there are two major theological themes that emerge:

a. **God’s sovereignty and His faithfulness to His covenant promise to His people**

   God’s *hesed*, or covenant faithfulness, is a major theme of the book (the word appears around 130 times). This is closely related to the theme of the king, which emerges repeatedly in the “royal psalms” scattered throughout the book as well as the psalms of covenant renewal, two psalms that celebrate the covenant of God with David and the psalms that recount the history of Israel and God’s actions on their behalf.

b. **The ethical responsibility of God’s people as they connect faith in Him with everyday life**

   The psalms cover the full range of emotion and feeling towards God from anger and despair to elation and jubilation. Throughout it all, however, there is an awareness of the reality of sin, both of others (especially in the laments) and of the psalmist (in the penitential psalms), and of the goodness of God’s law and the benefits of living in obedience to Him (especially evident in the wisdom and didactic psalms). The psalms present ethical guidance in four major ways according to Gordon Wenham: by contrasting the righteous and the wicked (as in *psalm 1*), by upholding the standards of the Decalogue (Ten Commandments), by reminding that God is the sovereign judge, and by encouraging the reader to imitate God.24

**Dating and authorship**

Psalms is a collection of poems or songs by various authors. It is possible, therefore, to consider the date of each individual psalm, which will depend on a consideration of its authorship and language (see the section on “Psalm titles” for consideration of authorship), but it is also possible to consider the date in which the book was collected together in the form in which we now have it. Given that some psalms (e.g. Psalm 137) are clearly based in the period of the Exile there can be little doubt that the book as a whole was edited together in the period after the return from Exile, that is after 537 BC.

**Types of Psalms**

Different scholars have proposed various ways of categorising the psalms. German scholar Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) identified five types: hymns, community laments, individual thanksgiving songs, individual spiritual laments, and poems of mixed types (including enthronement psalms, victory songs, processional hymns, Zion

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23 Osborne, 1991, p.186
songs, enthronement songs). He attempted to explain the place of each of these types in Israel’s communal, public Temple worship, which he called their *Sitz-im-Leben* (“original life-setting”). More recent studies have focused less on trying to place every psalm in a specific context in Israel’s public worship, recognising that the psalms also had a role for individuals in their expression of faith.

Walter Brueggemann suggests a simpler categorisation into three types:
1. Psalms of *orientation* (including psalms of creation, Torah, wisdom, retribution, and well-being)
2. Psalms of *disorientation* (including personal and communal laments)
3. Psalms of a *new orientation* (including psalms of individual and communal Thanksgiving, royal and enthronement psalms, psalms of confidence, and hymns of praise).

Claus Westermann classified psalms based on the extremes of praise and lament:
1) *Praise* – these correspond to Gunkel’s hymns and thanksgiving songs and are subdivided into two forms:
   a. Descriptive praise – celebrating God’s acts in the present and His being.
   b. Declarative praise – praising God for specific acts. These can be either individual or communal.
2) *Laments* – crying out to God either as an individual or a community because of an enemy.
3) *Lament and praise* – in these psalms the enemy is more peripheral and the focus is more on the psalmist and his God. There is a cycle moving from prayer to praise. The turning point is usually a direct word (salvation oracle) from God which promises His protection, victory and blessing.
4) *Other types* – including enthronement psalms (Psalms 47, 93, 96-99), wisdom psalms (Psalms 1, 10, 12, 15, 19, 32, 34, 36, 37, 49, 50, 52, 53, 73, 78, 82, 91, 92, 94, 111, 119, 127, 128, 139), songs of Zion (Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87), a triumphal hymn (Psalm 68), creation praise (Psalms 8, 104, 139) and psalms of penitence (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143).

These different systems illustrate something of the complexity of trying to categorise 150 songs. The following categorisation is largely taken from Grant Osborne and Fee and Stuart.25 It must be remembered that these categories are not mutually exclusive and any psalm may fit into more than one.

1. **Laments or complaint psalms**

   The lament is the most common type of psalm and expresses distress about a current situation as well as asking God for help. Laments can be either:
   a. **Individual** – Psalms 3; 5-7; 13; 17; 22; 25-28; 31; 38-40; 42; 43; 51; 54-57; 69-71; 120; 139; 142
   b. **Corporate** – Psalms 9; 12; 44; 58; 60; 74; 79; 80; 94; 137

   Laments, therefore, contain three characters: God, the self or community, and the other (the enemy). They often follow the following structure, although few have all of these elements in this order:
   i. Address to God (often with a confession of faith) and cry for help
   ii. Reference to God’s past mighty acts
   iii. Description of the distress (concern with the opponents, the psalmist, and God), often in highly figurative language and sometimes taking the form of a complaint against God.
   iv. Confession of trust (confidence)
   v. Petition for God to hear, to deliver, and to vindicate the psalmist, defeating his enemies
   vi. A confession of sin or affirmation of innocence
   vii. Vow or pledge of praise

   It is important to note that although laments by definition express distress, almost without exception they also contain expressions of trust or confidence in God. In fact, when reading lament psalms it is important to notice the movement of mood the psalm captures. Most commonly this will be a movement from lament to praise and the psalm will contain a turning point which scholars often call the “sudden change of mood”. In contrast with this normal move from lament to praise, other laments contain an alternation between lament and praise (Psalms 31, 35, 59, 71), Psalm 12 moves from lament to praise and then back to lament again and,

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assuming that Psalms 9 and 10 were originally one song (for which there is strong textual support\textsuperscript{26}), this one psalm moves from praise to lament. Uniquely among the laments, Psalm 88 contains no movement at all – it is purely lament from start to finish and it does not even include a direct plea for help. This range of types of movement and no movement shows the diversity of life’s experiences and of God’s actions. Often he delivers, resulting in praise, but sometimes He does not. There is no dishonesty in the portrayal of life in these psalms of lament. Laments are also found on David’s lips outside the book of Psalms, once for Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:17-27) and once for Abner (2 Samuel 3:33-34).

2. **Hymns or praise songs**

Osborne suggests that these psalms are “the nearest to pure worship of any type of biblical poetry. They are not the product of sorrow or need but directly celebrate the joy of worshiping Yahweh”.\textsuperscript{27} Although his statement helps to define what the hymns are, we may take issue with his definition of “pure worship” which does not appear to do justice to the biblical understanding of worship as embracing all of life. Nearly all hymns follow the same structure:

i. Calling upon Yahweh
ii. A call to worship
iii. A motivation clause praising Yahweh and giving the reason for worship, often centring on God’s attributes and deeds
iv. A conclusion repeating the call to praise and often including a series of blessings

Fee and Stuart identify three distinct types of hymns depending on their reason for praising God:

- Praising Him as Creator (Psalms 8; 19; 104; 148)
- Praising Him as protector and benefactor of Israel (Psalms 66; 100; 111; 114; 149)
- Praising Him as Lord of history (Psalms 33; 103; 113; 117; 145-147), sometimes going into great detail in recounting Israel’s great salvation events (Psalms 78; 105-106; 135-136).

Hymns were sung during significant times for the people:

- After military triumphs (Psalm 68)
- During pilgrimages to the Temple (Psalms 84; 87).
- The “Songs of Ascent” (Psalms 120-134) are of special note in this respect, as they are marked out as a distinct group by their title. The ascent in question is generally believed to be the upward journey to the city of Jerusalem either when pilgrims visited the Temple for the great festivals or when exiles returned to the city from Persia.
- Harvest celebrations and festivals – three groups of psalms, known as Hallel\textsuperscript{28} are particularly noteworthy in this regard:
  
  - The *Egyptian Hallel* (113-118) develops thoughts from God’s compassion for the oppressed (113) to His redemptive power (114) and help to Israel (115) to Israel’s praise and thanks to Yahweh (116-118) and were – used during the major festivals, especially the Passover. The Passover meal was eaten between Psalm 114 and Psalm 115. The hymn sung by Jesus and His disciples probably came from these psalms (Mark 14:26).
  - The *Great Hallel* consists of Psalms 120-136 or 135-136 (i.e. either including the Songs of Ascent or not) and was also used during annual festivals.
  - The *Final (Concluding) Hallel* (Psalms 146-150) formed part of daily prayers in the synagogues after the Temple was destroyed in AD 70.

3. **Thanksgiving Hymns**

These are more specific than hymns as they thank God for His answers to specific prayers and often pledge their future faith in and worship to God. They can be either:

\textsuperscript{26} The psalms form one psalm in the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint, when put together they form an acrostic psalm with stanzas beginning with successive Hebrew letters, and they contain repeated words and the phrase “in times of trouble”.
\textsuperscript{27} Osborne, 1991, p.183
\textsuperscript{28} Hallel means “praise”, as in “Hallelujah”
4. **Songs of celebration and affirmation**

Songs that celebrate God’s covenant relationship with the king and the nation. These can be subdivided into several categories:

a. **Psalms of covenant renewal** (50; 81) – probably sung at an annual covenant renewal ceremony

b. **Davidic covenant psalms** (89; 132) – celebrate God’s choice of David and expect the Messiah

c. **Royal psalms** – psalms which centre on the king. These have messianic significance but also deep significance for the nation at that time:
   - Coronation psalms (2; 72; 101; 110) – celebrating the coronation of a king with his oaths before Yahweh and receiving of the people’s homage
   - Enthronement psalms (24; 29; 47; 93; 95-99) – possibly used in an annual ceremony celebrating kingship
   - Lament (89; 144)
   - Thanksgiving for victory (18; 118)
   - War preparation (20; 27)
   - Royal wedding (45)

   d. **Songs of Zion** – praising God for His gift of Jerusalem and His protection of the city (46; 48; 76; 87; 125; other psalms may be included in a broader classification including 15; 24; 84; 122)

5. **Wisdom and Didactic Psalms**

These psalms parallel Proverbs in their celebration of wisdom as God’s gift to His people and its connection to the inscripturated Word and Torah (1; 36; 37; 49; 73; 119; 127; 128; 133). They overlap with psalms of praise and lament. As in proverbs, the way of the righteous is contrasted with the wicked (1; 49; 73) and the faithful are promised prosperity (1; 112; 119; 127; 128).

6. **Imprecatory Psalms**

These are usually lament psalms where the writer’s bitterness and desire for vindication are especially prominent commonly using hyperbolic language (12; 35; 52; 57-59; 69-70; 83; 109; 137; 140). Psalm 137:8-9 is a classic, even shocking, example of the forceful language of these psalms.

7. **Salvation history psalms**

These songs recount the history of God’s covenant relationship with Israel (78; 105; 106; 135; 136).

8. **Penitential psalms**

I have included these psalms in a separate category because of their focus on the expression of repentance and request for forgiveness. The psalms of penitence are Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143.

**Psalm titles**

It is difficult to know when the titles that are found with many psalms became attached to them, whether by the original author or later editors. The titles include several types of information:
1) **Association with a group or person (103 psalms)**

These psalm titles include the names of individuals or groups of people, prefaced by the Hebrew word le. In the NIV this is normally translated “Of”, implying authorship by the named person(s). That certainly could be one meaning, but it is also possible to translate it “for”, “belonging to” or “concerning” – i.e. these may be psalms dedicated to or written about the person(s) mentioned. This is generally most debated with psalms connected to David, Solomon and Moses, partly because some scholars deny that psalms could have been written and preserved from their period of history and partly because these are the figures in Israel’s history who are perhaps most likely to have psalms dedicated to them.

a. **David** – the titles of 73 psalms refer to David. Of these, 13 are directly associated with events in David’s life (see below). As discussed above, these 73 psalms may be dedicated to David, written by him or about him. Traditionally these psalms have been accepted as compositions by David. In favour of Davidic authorship are the following points:

- David was a very able poet (2 Sam 23:1) and musician (Amos 6:5; cf. 1 Samuel 16:15-23; 18:10; 2 Samuel 1:17-27; 3:33-34; 23:1-7), making it perfectly plausible that he wrote both words and music for these psalms.
- David established the guilds of singers and musicians who would later serve in the temple (1 Chronicles 6:31-32; 15:16, 27; 25:1-31; 2 Chronicles 29:25-26; cf. Nehemiah 12:45-47). It seems highly likely that he would have written psalms for these groups to perform in the Temple worship.

b. **Asaph** – this man, who is linked to 12 psalms (50, 73-83), was one of David’s choirmasters and a descendant of Gershon, son of Levi (cf. 1 Chronicles 6:39; 15:17; 2 Chronicles 5:12). Psalm 50 is separate from the other Asaphite Psalms, possibly because its theme fits closely with Psalms 48-49.

c. **The sons of Korah** – 10 psalms (42, 45-49, 84, 85, 87, 88) are linked to this group of descendants of Kohath, son of Levi, who served in the temple as musicians (1 Chronicles 6:22).

d. **Jeduthun** – three psalms (39, 62, 77) are connected with this Levite who was appointed by David to be the director of music at the temple together with Heman and Asaph (1 Chronicles 16:41-42; 25:1, 6; 2 Chronicles 5:12).

e. **Solomon** – is linked to two psalms (72, 127).

f. **Heman the Ezrahite** – linked to one psalm (88), this man may either have been a sage (cf. 1 Kings 4:31) or a leading singer of the family of Kohath, son of Levi (1 Chronicles 6:16, 33, 39, 43-44; 15:17, 19; 16:41-42; 25:1, 4-6; 2 Chronicles 5:12; 35:15).

g. **Ethan the Ezrahite** – appears in the heading of one psalm (89). Ethan, who served as a counsellor of Solomon (1 Kings 4:31) was a descendent of Merari, son of Levi and is sometimes identified as the same person as Jeduthun or as a descendent of Jeduthun. One difficulty with this identification is that 1 Chronicles 2:6 describes Ethan as being from the tribe of Judah. Some scholars explain this by suggesting that Levites were brought into the lineage of Judah.

h. **Moses** – is linked to one psalm (90)

2) **Background or historical information (14 psalms)**

a. **Thirteen psalms are related to events in David’s life**

- Psalm 3: “When he fled from his son Absalom.”
- Psalm 7: “A shiggaion of David, which he sang to the LORD concerning Cush, a Benjamite.”
- Psalm 18: “He sang to the LORD the words of this song when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul.”
- Psalm 34: “When he pretended to be insane before Abimelech, who drove him away, and he left.”
- Psalm 51: “When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.”
- Psalm 52: “When Doeg the Edomite had gone to Saul and told him: ‘David has gone to the house of Ahimelech.’”

b. **Four additional psalms**

- Psalm 2: “In the day of my distress I called upon the LORD, and he answered me.”
- Psalm 4: “Answer me when I call to you, O mighty one.”
- Psalm 10: “Why, O LORD, do you stand far off?”
- Psalm 11: “Why, O LORD, do you make me dwell in emptiness, and hide me in darkness?”
• Psalm 54: "When the Ziphites had gone to Saul and said, 'Is not David hiding among us?'
• Psalm 56: "When the Philistines had seized him in Gath."
• Psalm 57: "When he had fled from Saul into the cave."
• Psalm 59: "When Saul had sent men to watch David's house in order to kill him."
• Psalm 60: "When he fought Aram Naharaim and Aram Zobah, and when Joab returned and struck down twelve thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt."
• Psalm 63: "When he was in the Desert of Judah."
• Psalm 142: "When he was in the cave."

b. One psalm is associated with the dedication of the temple (either the Temple built by Solomon or the rebuilt Temple after the return from Exile)
• Psalm 30: "For the dedication of the temple."

3) Musical or liturgical information
a. "For the director of music" (lamenasseah) – this phrase appears in the headings of 55 psalms (and also in Habakkuk 3:19). It is probably a musical addition, marking the psalm to be part of Temple worship or to be recited by the leader of the choir. It appears in Psalms 4-6, 8-9, 11-14, 18-22, 31, 36, 39-42, 44-47, 49, 51-62, 64-70, 75-77, 80-81, 84-85, 88, 109 and 139-40.

b. Instruments – several psalms carry a notation on the instruments to be used in accompanying the choir.
• "With stringed instruments" (i.e. harp and lyre) – seven psalms (4, 6, 54, 55, 61, 67, 76). For background see 1 Chronicles 23:5; 25:1, 3, 6; Psalms 33:2; 43:4; 71:22.
• "For flutes" – one psalm (5). The meaning is uncertain.

c. Tunes – a number of psalm headings may specify tunes to be used:
• "To the tune of 'The Death of the Son'" (Psalm 9)
• "To the tune of 'The Doe of the Morning'" (Psalm 22)
• "To the tune of 'Lilies'" (Psalms 45, 69)
• "To the tune 'The Lilies of the Covenant'" (Psalms 60, 80)
• "To the tune 'A Dove on Distant Oaks'" (Psalm 56)
• "To the tune of 'Do Not Destroy'" (Psalms 57-59, 75)

d. Selah – this word occurs 71 times in the Psalms, particularly in the first three books. It was probably a musical marker, although its exact significance is unclear.

e. Other terms – several other terms are found in psalm headings. In each case the meaning is uncertain:
• "According to alamoth" (Psalm 46) – may signify a female choir, a band of maidens playing tambourines (68:25), or a musical term for a high musical setting (soprano)
• "According to sheminith" (Psalms 6, 12 and 1 Chronicles 15:21) – may denote the manner of singing or musical accompaniment ("octave") or possibly an instrument with eight strings (the word is related to the Hebrew word for "eight").
• "According to gittith" (Psalms 8, 81, 84) – may refer to a Gittite lyre, a festival song (associated with the wine press), or a musical term
• "According to mahalath" (Psalm 53) – the word is related to the Hebrew for "sick" and it is suggested that this psalm may have been a prayer from a sick person
• "According to mahalath leannoth" (Psalm 88) – may denote the instruments (possibly flutes) or a tune

4) Literary categories
a. "A psalm" (mizmor) – found in the headings of 57 psalms (3-6, 8, 9, 12, 13, 15, 19-24, 29-31, 38-41, 47-51, 62-68, 73, 75-77, 79, 80, 82-85, 87, 88, 92, 98, 100, 101, 108-110, 139-141, 143). A mizmor is a religious song accompanied by musical instruments.

b. Shiggaion (Psalm 7) – the meaning is uncertain. It could be a musical term or a literary designation, such as a psalm of lamentation or a psalm with irregular literary features.

c. Miktam (Psalms 16, 56-60) – the meaning is unknown. Many explanations have been offered, e.g. a golden psalm, a private prayer, an epigram, an atonement psalm, an inscription.
d. **Maskil** (Psalms 32, 42, 44, 45, 52-55, 74, 78, 88, 89, 142) – the meaning is uncertain, but possibly signifies a psalm intended to teach.

e. **Song (shir)** – more than 30 times in the title of the psalms (Psalms 18, 30, 45, 46, 48, 65-69, 75, 76, 83, 87, 88, 92, 108, 120-134 – the Songs of Ascent). Some of these have the word combined with other words. A song is a general category of poetry.

f. **“Psalm of praise” (tehillah)** – found only in Psalm 145, although the word tehillah came ultimately to be the Hebrew designation for the whole book of Psalms (tehillim).

g. **A prayer** (Psalms 17, 86, 90, 102, 142) – these psalms are all laments.

5) **Designations of usage or type of psalm**

a. **“A petition”** (Psalms 38, 70) – may be a challenge to memorise the psalm or a call to God to remember

b. **“For teaching”** (Psalm 60) – it has been suggested that the rhythm of this psalm may have been used to teach David’s fighting men how to move in time with one another.

c. **“For the Sabbath”** (Psalm 92)

d. **“For giving thanks”** (Psalm 100)

**Structure**

David Howard writes that until recently, “The Psalter was understood to have been the hymnbook of Second Temple Judaism, and it was not read in the same way as most other canonical books, i.e. with a coherent structure and message.”29 Because the book was taken to be little more than a collection of psalms (akin to a modern hymnbook) it was assumed that there was little or no structure within it. This approach has a great deal of validity, and it is indeed possible and fruitful to read each psalm as a whole and discover its message and meaning. A careful reading of the book of Psalms will, however, reveal that there is at least some structure to it. To begin with, the book is actually composed of five books of psalms:

- **Book I** – Psalms 1-41
- **Book II** – Psalms 42-72
- **Book III** – Psalms 73-89
- **Book IV** – Psalms 90-106
- **Book V** – Psalms 107-150

Howard continues to say that:30

*Today, however, a shift has taken place, and the prevailing interest in Psalms studies has to do with questions about the composition, editorial unity and overall message of the Psalter as a book, a literary and canonical entity that coheres with respect to its structure and message.*

At the outset of this study of Psalms we mentioned the two predominant theological themes that unite the message of this book: God’s sovereignty and faithfulness to His covenant and the ethical duty of His people. There are, of course, other themes that can be traced through the book and that are equally part of its message, if not so central to it. In the remainder of this section we will consider some aspects of the structure of Psalms.

David Howard helpfully distinguishes between two levels at which the book’s structure can be studied:31

a) **Microstructural** – looking for connections among smaller groupings of psalms, especially adjacent ones or those connected with the same individual or group of people. Smaller collections of psalms within the book include:

1. **The first Davidic Collection** (Psalms 3-41)
2. **The First Korahite Collection** (Psalms 42-49)
3. **The Second Davidic Collection** (Psalms 51-70)
4. **The Asaphite Collection** (Psalms 73-83)
5. **The Second Korahite Collection** (Psalms 84-88)

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29 Howard, 2005, p.24
30 Howard, 2005, p.24
31 Howard, 2005, p.24
6. The Third Davidic Collection (Psalms 108-11)
7. The Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113-118)
8. The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134)
9. The Fourth Davidic Collection (Psalms 138-145)
10. The Final Hallel (Psalms 146-150)

Each of these collections can be studied as a literary unit with an aim to discovering their unifying themes and message. In addition it would be possible to consider collections of psalms with similar themes (e.g. the Songs of Zion or the Wisdom Psalms).

b) Macrostructural – this approach looks for overarching patterns and themes throughout the book as a whole. Using this approach, for example, it is noted that there is a greater concentration of Davidic psalms in the earlier sections of the book and that the first half of the book contains a predominance of laments, especially individual laments, compared to a greater frequency of praise in the second half, especially corporate hymns. Two findings of macrostructural studies of Psalms are particularly worthy of note:

- **Wisdom and Royal-Covenantal Frames** – Gerald Wilson identifies two major “frames” in Psalms:
  a. A Royal Covenantal Frame – he notes that Psalms 2, 72, 89 and 144 are all royal psalms and that they occupy positions at the beginning of Book I and the end of Books II, III and V (assuming that the Final Hallel is somewhat separate from the rest of Book V).
  b. A final Wisdom Frame – he notes that Psalms 1, 73, 90, 107 and 145, that is the first Psalms of Books I, III, IV and V plus the final psalm of Book V proper, are all wisdom psalms.

Wilson claims that the Wisdom frame takes precedence over the Royal Covenantal frame and that “trust in the power of human kings and kingship is ultimately given up, and hope rests on Yhwh, who rules forever, and who alone is able to save”. In other words, he claims that Psalms is ultimately a wisdom book containing Yahweh’s instruction and emphasising His enduring kingship as contrasted with the failing Davidic kingship. According to this theory Books I-III focus on the apparent failure of the Davidic covenant and Book IV (90-106) is a new beginning with a focus on Yahweh’s kingship.

- **Messianic themes** – the kingship is an important theme in Psalms, as evidenced by the number of royal and enthronement psalms. A number of royal psalms, however, have traditionally been understood by Christians, and indeed quoted in the New Testament, as having a messianic significance – that is to point to a greater fulfilment in Christ (these psalms are listed below in the section on “Interpreting the Psalms”). David C Mitchell argues that when the book is read as a whole “the messianic theme is central to the purpose of the collection.” He argues that the key to understanding the book of Psalms is not found in reading it within the historic period in which it the psalms were written, but in looking beyond historical periods to eschatological (end times) hope.

Wilson’s suggestion of two predominant “frames” within Psalms is helpful and helps us to identify the fact that there are these two major themes, which tie in to the two theological emphases identified above: the royal covenantal frame relates to the theme of God’s sovereignty and the wisdom frame to the theme of mankind’s ethical responsibility. It also helps us to recognise that Psalms 1 and 2 sit together at the beginning of the book as a kind of introduction to it, encompassing both of the great frames and theological themes (this is further confirmed by a realisation that beatitudes, or promises of blessing, frame these two psalms; see 1:1 and 2:12) and that the Final Hallel (Psalms 146-150) sits separately at the end of the book as a conclusion. Where Wilson’s theory falls down, however, is in missing the point made by Mitchell, that the messianic theme and eschatological hope are highly significant in the book as a whole. We can modify Wilson’s theory by accepting that the book shows a decline in confidence in the Davidic dynasty, which is inevitable given the facts of history as the Davidic kings grew more immoral and less powerful and their reign finally ended with the Exile, but that this is offset by not only confidence in God’s kingship but a strong hope for a future Davidic king who would restore his dynasty in keeping with God’s covenant with David. Messianic psalms are found in all five of the books and this hope continues even into Psalm 132, one of the two Davidic covenant psalms (together with Psalm 89), which speaks confidently about a “horn” (meaning a strong king) that God will make to grow for David (Psalm 132:17).

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32 Gerald H Wilson quoted in Howard, 2005, p.25
33 David C Mitchell quoted in Howard, 2005, p.25
Given the above, and recognising that there are many microstructural elements within the book, we can propose the following broad structure for the book of Psalms:

**Psalms 1-2**  
Introduction and key to interpretation – God’s blessing through Wisdom and Kingship

**Psalms 3-41**  
Book I proper

**Psalms 42-72**  
Book II

**Psalms 73-89**  
Book III

**Psalms 90-106**  
Book IV

**Psalms 107-145**  
Book V proper

**Psalms 146-150**  
Conclusion (the Final Hallel) – Praise the LORD

**Interpretation and application**

The Psalms are beloved by Christians, but they can be difficult to interpret. Grant Osborne writes that:  

> It has rightly been pointed out that no portion of Scripture is more widely read than the psalms. In pocket versions of the New Testament the psalms are often appended, and in most worship services they are still sung or chanted regularly. The extent to which the psalter is quoted in the New Testament shows its importance in the life of the early church. Yet the psalms are not easily understood. The parallelism and metrical patterns are often difficult to unlock, and the unwary reader can read far more into the parallel statements than the context actually warrants. Moreover, many (like lament or imprecatory psalms) seem to be inapplicable at first glance. In addition, scholars and pastors often overexegete the imagery or metaphors in Hebrew poetry and give it more theological weight than they should.

Some Psalms are immediately accessible to the Christian (e.g. Psalm 23), and so tend to be read, preached upon and quoted most frequently, but others are less so. The psalms can be challenging because:

- Some appear to be entirely miserable or negative – can these psalms be used in church services or just in personal prayer?
- Some psalms major on the history of Israel and God’s blessings to them – how is this relevant for Christians?
- Many psalms praise the earthly king – this made sense in a theocratic monarchy, but how does it relate to people living in a modern secular democracy?
- Some statements in the psalms are distasteful or offensive – the imprecatory psalms, with their call for vengeance, can be tough going for Christians who are committed to loving their enemies. Perhaps most notorious and offensive of all is the desire for Babylonian infants to be dashed against rocks expressed in Psalm 137:8-9).

The following guidelines are intended to help the reader to understand the psalms more fully:

1. **Remember that the psalms are the words of people, not of God**

   Please do not misunderstand me on this point. I maintain firmly that the prayers, as with all Scripture, are God’s word and are authoritative and beneficial for us (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17). It is important, however, to distinguish between those parts of Scripture where God’s words to human beings are recorded (e.g. directly in the Law and Prophets and where the Gospels record Christ’s words and indirectly in the Epistles), those parts where an account of God’s actions in history are recorded (i.e. narrative books) and the psalms, where the words of God’s people to and about Him are recorded. Fee and Stuart warn that:

   > The problem with interpreting the Psalms arises primarily from their nature – what they are. Because the Bible is God’s Word, most Christians automatically assume that all it contains are words from God to people. Thus many fail to recognize that the Bible also contains words spoken to God or about God, and that these words, too, are God’s Word.

   The Psalms, therefore, are not intended primarily to teach doctrine or morality (as statements, commands or narratives may), but to express ourselves to God and to consider His ways. The most appropriate usage of

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34 Osborne, 1991, p.174-5  
35 Fee and Stuart, 1993, p.187
psalms will be for us to reflect on God and life and to learn more effectively how to pray and sing praise to Him. Fee and Stuart list three basic uses of the psalms:36

i. A guide to worship – helping us to express ourselves to God
ii. A guide to honest relationship with God – instruction through example rather than proposition
iii. A reminder of the importance of reflection and meditation upon God’s actions and our experiences

2. Remember that the psalms are poetry
Because the psalms are poetry it is important to remember the nature of Hebrew poetry and to consider what bearing this has on how the psalm is to be understood. Consider, for example:
• Note the patterns of stanzas in the psalm – this may be indicated by thought development (e.g. Psalm 31), stylistic changes (e.g. Psalm 30), chiasm, alliteration, acrostics (e.g. Psalm 119).
• Group parallel lines together and consider both parts – they convey one truth (e.g. don’t try to distinguish in Psalm 19:1 between what the heavens and the skies do).
• Study the figurative language and don’t read it literally – metaphorical language must be read for its intent (e.g. does Psalm 23 mean we should act like sheep or that we should not live in cities?) Because so much of the language is figurative, “Word studies are not as determinative in the Psalms as they are in the New Testament Epistles, and meaning is derived more by the whole than by the parts.”37

3. Consider the type of psalm
An understanding of which type of psalm this is will help you towards interpreting it, especially considering the structural elements within the psalm. It will also be very helpful in considering how this psalm could be used in your personal devotions or the public worship of your church or fellowship. Laments, for example, can provide encouragement and patterns for prayer for the believer whether they are:
• Ill (Psalms 6; 13; 31; 38-39; 88; 102)
• Beset by enemies (Psalms 3; 9-10; 13; 35; 52-57; 62; 69; 86; 109; 120; 139)
• Aware of sin (Psalms 25; 38-39; 41; 51).

The laments can remind us of:
a. The need for balance in prayer – even though they are written from a position of distress, they include praise of God and expressions of trust as well as requests
b. The importance of honesty in prayer – the laments tell it like it is. They are a wonderful reminder that we can be absolutely honest before God – in fact we must be. Dishonest prayer is not true prayer at all. The Psalms remind us that God is able and willing to listen to the full range of our emotions.

Perhaps the most difficult psalms for the Christian to relate to are the Imprecatory Psalms, which express anger towards enemies, but even these psalms contain valuable lessons for the Christian. They force us to realise that it is better to express anger to God than to harbour it in our hearts, allowing it to turn to bitterness. Having said this, these psalms are still likely to cause difficulties for us. Three observations may help us to understand them in their context:
• “Hatred” in Hebrew can be to reject or refuse to tolerate – it does not always mean to despise.
• The psalmist is always expressing true emotions, but these are not always necessarily what God would want them to feel – they are the words of people to God not advice about how we should feel.
• Psalm 137:8-9m the most notorious of all imprecatory psalms, calls for God to judge according to His covenant curses (Deuteronomy 28:53-57; 32:25 speak of the total annihilation of the enemies of God’s people including their families). Most importantly, this prayer recognises what we too must recognise, that vengeance is God’s (see Deuteronomy 32:35). Rather than taking this action himself the psalmist is referring the case and his feelings about it to God, the ultimate judge.

36 Fee and Stuart, 1993, p.205
37 Osborne, 1991, p.175
4. **Consider the historical background of the psalm**

Where the psalm’s title gives an indication of its historical setting (i.e. generally within David’s life) it will often be highly fruitful to look at the relevant passages in the narrative books. Reading the psalm and the narrative account together will enrich both and give you a wonderful insight into the emotions and faith of David at these points in his life.

5. **Consider both the individual and corporate significance of the psalm**

Almost all psalms have both an individual significance (they are products of the experience and perspective of an individual author in a particular situation) and a corporate significance (their place in the life and worship of Israel as a nation). Both belong together, and a consideration of both will lead us to a greater appreciation of the message of the psalm. We should then consider how this psalm applies both to me as an individual and to my church or fellowship as a group of God’s people, remembering, of course, that it may apply differently to the Church than to Israel.

6. **Consider how the person and work of Christ modifies the theology of the Psalm**

This point is applicable to any reading of the Old Testament, but in light of the apparent greater accessibility and applicability of Psalms to the Christian it is particularly important to emphasise it here. Although God and His character are unchanging, and so we can directly apply what we learn about Him from psalms, His way of relationship to Christians is not identical to His relationship with Israel. Both before and after Christ the basis of relationship with God has always been faith, but the knowledge we have about God and the means through which our faith is expressed are different. When the psalms, for example, speak about sacrifice we need to remember that Christ fulfilled the Old Testament system of sacrifice and that is death was the one sacrifice for our sins. Likewise, although the psalms celebrate the earthly city of Jerusalem, our hope is in the unshakeable city of God, the Heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrew 12:22-24), the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21), which is the Church. Graeme Goldsworthy emphasises the need to read the psalms through the lens of Christ: 38

> If they speak to us of God, they must speak to us of the God who has finally revealed himself in Jesus Christ.  
> If they speak to us of sinners, they speak to us of those who are outside of Christ.  
> If they speak of the judgment of God, they speak to us of the curse of the law that Christ suffered for his people on the cross.  
> If they speak to us of the faithful, the godly, or the righteous, they speak to us first of Christ, and only then of those who are redeemed in Christ.

One specific example is worthy of note at this point. In Psalm 51:11 David prays that God will not remove His Holy Spirit from him. This is not an appropriate prayer for the Christian. The Old Testament function of the Spirit was to anoint people for special service for God, most especially prophets, priests and kings. David’s prayer that the Spirit will not be removed from him is a plea that he will be allowed to continue as king. In the New Testament, after Pentecost, the Spirit makes His home in the lives of believers. He takes up permanent residence within us, leading us and empowering us to live for God. God will not remove Him from us.

7. **Consider whether this psalm has a messianic significance**

Between three (Psalms 2, 72 and 110) and 13 psalms (adding Psalms 8, 16, 22, 40, 45, 69, 89, 102, 109 and 132) have traditionally been understood as messianic (in part or the whole) and it is important to recognise this. In considering how these psalms refer to and were fulfilled by Christ it is also important to remember that they also had significance in the life of the author at the time of writing and in the national life of Israel. It is a wise principle to study the historical meaning of the psalm before considering its prophetic meaning. Jamie Grant argues that in addition to the prophecies of the messianic psalms, the royal psalms speak of Christ in a more subtle way, by painting a picture of a king who is tangibly human yet an example of faithful obedience (since royal psalms are set alongside wisdom psalms, e.g. Psalms 1 and 2) and who intercedes on behalf of God’s people. 39 Christ, the sinless man who intercedes for us, is the ultimate fulfillment of this ideal.

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38 Goldsworthy, 2000, p.200  
39 Grant, 2005, p.117
8. **Consider whether and how the psalm is quoted in the New Testament**

It is always worthwhile consulting a commentary or conducting a search to see if the psalm is quoted in the New Testament. Sometimes these quotations will give you new insights into the meaning of the psalm. It is, however, important to ask whether the quotation is meant to indicate the psalm was pointing to a New Testament reality (as is the case with true messianic psalms), whether the New testament writer is drawing on a theological truth taught by the psalm or whether the psalm’s language is simply being borrowed as part of an argument that is not directly related to the psalm’s meaning.

9. **Study the psalm as a whole before drawing conclusions**

Thought flow is critical to the meaning of a psalm and it is often dangerous to take individual verses or statements out of context as universal principles. An approach to the psalm as a whole is particularly important given the frequent use of figurative and hyperbolic language and the fact that the psalms are songs. They are musical poems intended to appeal to the mind through the emotions. They don’t convey propositional truth but they should move us. It is dangerous to establish doctrine purely on a statement in a Psalm. For example, what does Psalm 51:5 teach about the nature of “original sin”? In reality the psalmist is simply trying to emphasise his own sinfulness and we cannot necessarily imply from this verse that conception is sinful or that sin is present from conception.

10. **Consider the psalm in the context of the whole book**

As with Wisdom literature, individual statements must be read in the context of the Psalms as a whole. Some psalms depict the positive side of the life of faith (e.g. Psalm 1), while others depict the negative side (e.g. Psalm 39). Ridderbos and Craigie warn that “The Psalms as a whole reflect a fully rounded wisdom on the nature of human life in relation to God, whereas the individual Psalms may contain only a part of the larger picture”.40 A theology of the Psalms can only be established by considering the book as a whole. It is particularly helpful to realise that the first two psalms serve as an introduction, establishing that blessing is to be found in faithful obedience to God’s instruction (Psalm 1) and in a certain hope in Him and His messianic king even in the midst of a world of confusion (Psalm 2). Likewise, the conclusion of the book (Psalms 146-150) tell us where any journey through the book should lead us to: a place of unbridled praise of God. Bearing these beginning and end points in mind we can look for other elements within the book’s structure as well.

In studying a psalm in the context of the whole book there are two approaches that may be helpful:41

a) **Thematic comparison** – identify the main themes in the psalm and then compare with other psalms that contain the same theme. This allows a more complete picture of the message of the book of Psalms on this theme. Examples may be a comparison of the psalms that praise God as Creator (Psalms 8, 19, 104, 148) or the penitential psalms (Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143).

b) **Contrast of voices** – it may be instructive in studying an individual psalm to consider how its voice conflicts with other voices from the psalms. A dialogue or debate between the different psalms can be imagined. This approach will be highly relevant where the emphases of different psalms seem to conflict with one another.

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41 I am indebted to David Firth here (2005, p.171ff.; 2010, p.94ff.), although I avoid his technical names for the approaches, which are “thematic modelling” and “intratextual dialogue”.
PROVERBS

Dating and authorship
In the past arguments were made for a date in the 3rd Century BC on the basis of: assumed Greek influence in the personification of Wisdom (chapters 1:9), a theory that instruction passages had evolved over time from pithy sayings via two-lined sayings, and a claim that this kind of literature became popular only after the prophets had stopped speaking. More recent scholarship, however, has noted the book’s links to the wisdom of surrounding nations of Egypt and Phoenicia. It is now generally accepted that the whole book is pre-exilic in its structure – that is it was compiled some time before the Exile of Judah to Babylon in 586 BC.

As we shall see, the book of proverbs contains sections attributed to different authors. The largest portions are attributed to Solomon, and there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of this claim. According to 1 Kings 4:32 Solomon compiled 3000 proverbs, and it seems likely that the collections in this book bearing his name are part of this collected wisdom. Solomon lived and reigned in the 10th Century BC. Two other portions of the book are attributed to named authors: chapter 30 to Agur and chapter 31 to Lemuel. Some comments are made about these men in the sections below commenting on these chapters. It is not possible to date either of these individuals with any certainty.

Structure
The basic structure of this book is clear from the text itself. In the following outline I have described the different sections that comprise the book as separate books.

Prologue (1:1-7) The Purpose of Proverbs
Book 1 (1:8-9:18) Instructions of Parents
Book 2 (10:1-22:16) Solomon’s Proverbs, part 1
Book 3 (22:17-24:22) Sayings of the Wise
Book 5 (Ch 25-29) Solomon’s Proverbs, part 2
Book 6 (Ch 30) Sayings of Agur
Book 7 (Ch 31) Sayings of Lemuel

Prologue (1:1-7) – The Purpose of Proverbs
This brief prologue to the book opens with a reference to Solomon (1:1). It is clear from reading the book that only some of the proverbs are attributed to Solomon, but his mention here may indicate that this prologue was originally part of a shorter book containing only Solomon’s proverbs or may be intended as a tribute to Solomon as the “father of wisdom literature”. Certainly Solomon’s proverbs constitute a major part of the book.

The remainder of the prologue explains the purpose of Proverbs (1:2-6), which is to help people to attain wisdom and discipline and an understanding of insightful words. It is worth noting that wisdom is not found in simply knowing these sayings but is a skill that is developed through reflection upon them, which entails discipline and insight. The call is for the reader to listen and obtain guidance as to how to understand four kinds of wisdom sayings: proverbs, parables, sayings and riddles (v6). Most essentially of all, the prologue states clearly at the very outset of the book that wisdom rests on the foundation of the fear of the Lord (1:7).
Tremper Longman notes the fact that the prologue is addressed generally to all who seek wisdom and instruction. This is helpful in view of the fact that the rest of the book (explicitly in chapters 1-9 and implicitly in the collections of proverbs that follow) is addressed more specifically to young men. The prologue, in Longman’s view, “broadens the audience to include ... the entire covenant community.”

**Book 1 (1:8-9:18) – Instructions of Parents**

This section of Proverbs is a collection of up to 17 separate discourses on wisdom which, “typically have a call to listen before presenting advice and encouraging obedience by the description of benefits as well as negative consequences for neglecting the advice.” These discourses are generally the instructions of parents to a young man. It is worth noticing that the first place for learning wisdom is in the home (1:8; 4:3; 6:20) and that this involves both parents. This was true in Israel and it ought to be true for Christians. Those who are parents would do well to recognise this responsibility and not abdicate it to someone else – whether the school, the media, or even children’s and youth ministries in the church! Derek Kidner writes that, “truth is to be learnt first at home, instilled there with firmness and affection as lessons for the mind and training for the character.”

Within this section the predominant metaphor is of two paths on which we may walk: the path of folly leading to death and the path of wisdom leading to life. Two major threats to the integrity of the young man are identified:

a) **Negative peer pressure on youth** (1:10-19)


We are called to live a life of faithful dependence upon God with a readiness to walk in the straight paths He will prepare (3:5-6). God is the giver of wisdom (2:6), and His wisdom was foundational to creation (3:19-20; 8:22-31) – hence the world works in keeping with God’s wisdom. Wisdom is, therefore, greatly to be prized (chapter 4). The ultimate goal is that wisdom might be internalised (2:10), so that we able to recognise the right path (2:9) and will be protected and guarded, rescued from the ways of wicked men (2:11-12).

Wisdom is personified as a woman who cries out to be heard (1:20-33; 8:1-21) and who has built a firm house into which she invites us to come (9:1-6). She is contrasted with “the woman Folly” (9:13), a temptress who leads people to destruction (9:13-18). The vivid description of the personification of Wisdom has led to speculation that an angelic being is being described or even that this is a description of Christ. These interpretations, however, depend on too literal a reading of this figurative language, and it appears that what is intended is simply a poetic description of one attribute of God’s character. We may, however, accept with Derek Kidner that the language used may serve a purpose with the benefit of a view from the New Testament in preparing our expectations for the ultimate incarnational personification of God’s wisdom in the person of Christ.

**Books 2 (10:1-22:16) and 5 (Ch 25-29) – Solomon’s Proverbs**

These two collections of Solomon’s proverbs contain 375 sayings. These are usually short and pithy one line sayings containing six or seven Hebrew words (“usually three strong beats answered by another three”). Exceptions cover several lines (e.g. 25:20; 25:21-22; 26:18-19; 26:24-25; 27:10; 27:15-16) or a whole paragraph (27:23-27). The order is apparently random except for a few collections on similar themes (e.g. 10:18-21 on the use of words; 16:12-15 and 25:2-7 on kings; 26:13-16 on the sluggard; 26:20-28 on mischief making).

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42 Longman, 2010, p.104
43 Longman, 2010, p.103
44 Kidner, 1985, p.20
45 Kidner, 1985, p.23
46 Kidner, 1985, p.25
47 Some scholars dispute this and claim that units can be identified on the basis of repetitions of themes, words or sounds, but the lack of consensus even among those scholars who believe in this level of structure suggests either that it does not genuinely exist, or will elude the modern reader.
It has been suggested that the original wise sayings consisted of just three words (for example, see David’s words to Saul in 1 Samuel 24:23), but that the proverbs of Solomon add a second line to amplify the meaning of the first (e.g. 21:10) or to sharpen it by contrast (e.g. 12:6). In other words, these proverbs are parallel statements containing either synthetic or antithetical parallelism. The proverbs generally see merit rewarded and lapses penalised (e.g. 13:25), apparently in this life, with some exceptions like 13:23. They are written in poetic language and include some beautiful and powerful similes (e.g. 11:22; 25:13; 26:22; 25:15). In general the proverbs challenge the reader to compare the “now” with the consequence (23:29-35; 13:11; 5:4; 19:20). They provoke an attitude of thoughtful reflection.

Chapters 25-29 are separate from the longer collection of Solomon’s proverbs in 10:1-22:16. This shorter collection was edited by Hezekiah’s men and has some distinctive features:

- There is a greater tendency in for groupings of proverbs on similar theme (e.g. kings in 26:2-7; fools in 26:1-12; sluggards in 26:13-16; mischief-makers in 26:17-28).
- More of the proverbs run to an extra line or a second or third verse (e.g. 25:13, 20; 25:8-10, 21-22; 26:24-26) and one short poem (27:23-27).
- There is a marked emphasis (especially in chapters 28-29) on rulers and people with influence in a society (e.g. 25:26; 28:2; 29:8, 18).


These collections have a different tone from Solomon’s proverbs. They are more personal, directive and impassioned, with “Dos” and (more often) “Don’ts” as opposed to the impassionate statements of principles in Solomon’s proverbs. Many of the same themes are found here as in other parts of the book (e.g. mercy to the poor, wise friendships, financial prudence, firmness with children, hard work, sexual purity) but there are also some special emphases, notably:

- Quiet trust instead of fretfulness (23:17-18; 24:19ff.) – this is similar to Psalm 37.
- Generous compassion extending even to strangers and enemies (24:11-12, 17, 29).

It is worth noting that this section of Proverbs bears a similarity to an Egyptian document called the Instruction of Amenemope, dated some time in the period 1580-1100 BC. That document contains instructions to a son about proper conduct and is arranged into 30 sections. Allen Ross writes about the relationship between the two documents:48

Although the two collections are not identical, they are similar enough to attest direct influence. General knowledge of wisdom sayings across the ancient Near East as well as specific interchange between Egypt and Solomon’s court make a literary connection likely. Because of the dates involved, it is unlikely that Amenemope borrowed from Solomon. Similar teachings in the Pentateuch might suggest a greater antiquity for biblical wisdom sayings, but there is insufficient material to draw a firm conclusion. Many ancient laws, sayings, songs, poetic couplets, and proverbs found their way into inspired Scripture. Inspiration does not exclude the divine use of existing material; but in Scripture it takes on a new force, a higher meaning, and becomes authoritative.

The connection with Egyptian wisdom is perhaps not unexpected given the fact that 1 Kings 4:30 likens Solomon’s wisdom to the wisdom of the people of the east and Egypt. Despite the relationship between these two wisdom documents, it is worth realising that the connection is loose, based on the use of 30 sections and some shared interests, but that this section of Proverbs uses own its order and has a largely different emphasis.49

Book 6 (Ch 30) – Sayings of Agur

It seems likely that Agur was an Ishmaelite man from Massa (this is the name of a tribe of Ishmael according to Genesis 25:14, and became the name of a region in northern Arabia – this identification of Agur depends on

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48 Allen Ross, 2001

49 See Kidner, 1985, p.44
reading 30:1 as “son of Jakeh of Massa” rather than “son of Jakeh – an oracle”, as suggested in the NIV footnotes). It has been suggested that he was possibly a convert to the religion of Israel, but it is also possible that this is an example of the borrowing of wisdom from a man who did not worship Yahweh in the recognition that all truth is God’s truth (in the same way that Paul could quote pagan philosophers when their words were true and supported his argument). Some critical scholars argue that Agur’s words stop at verse 4, that he was an unbeliever or agnostic and that the rest of the chapter is a response to him, but this seems to have little basis in the text (there is no division at v4, and it seems that v2-3 are ironic).

This chapter bears some similarities to Job: verse 4 echoes says Job 38:18, saying “Tell me if you know!” and the word Eloah is used for God in verse 5 (it is used 41 times in Job and also in the Arabic language). A distinctive feature of Agur’s sayings is his groups of four things (v15, 18, 21, 24, 29; also in v11-14 there is a list of four things without the usual introduction). Most of these have a crescendo introduction (“three things ... four”, v15, 18, 21, 29). This pattern is familiar elsewhere in Scripture: Job 5:19; Proverbs 6:16-19; Amos 1-2. Some of these sayings have a moral and others apparently do not.

**Book 7 (Ch 31) – Sayings of Lemuel**

If the suggested reading of 30:1 as a reference to Massa in Arabia is correct, then Lemuel was also from Massa – in fact he was its king. It is debatable whether all of chapter 31 represents the words of Lemuel, taught to him by his mother, or whether his contribution ends at verse 9 and verses 10 to 31 are from a different pen. The interpretation of the chapter does not depend on the authorship. The chapter as a whole exemplifies the combination of instruction (v1-9; compared with chapters 1-9 and 22:17-24:34) and observation (v10-31; compared with Solomon’s proverbs) that characterises the whole book. The first section (v1-9) comprises instructions on how to be a good king which may still prove useful for politicians today with some cultural translation.

Verses 10-31 are an alphabetic acrostic poem about the ideal wife. Acrostics also found in Psalms (four in the first book and four in the fifth book, most notably Psalm 119) and four in Lamentations 1-4. This poem may seem daunting given the high standard it sets, but its picture is beautiful and is certainly an ideal for any wife to aspire and a good guide for a man seeking a spouse. It is worth noting how powerful, influential and productive this wife is. She is no powerless and servile subordinate, but a dynamic and resourceful partner. She is highly involved in the managing of the affairs of the home and the instruction of the children (v26-28), and the reputation of her husband depends at least in part upon her role as his wife (v23). The poem, and therefore the book, climaxes with a reference to the fear of the Lord (v30), making a neat parallel to the statement at the beginning of the book that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (1:7).

**The Message of Proverbs**

Proverbs is perhaps the most readily accessible of the wisdom books. It is highly practical and its relevance to life today is often clear. Fee and Stuart write about the content and purpose of the book:50

As a generalization, it is useful to note that Proverbs teaches what might be called ‘old fashioned basic values’. No parent wants his or her child to grow up unhappy, disappointed, lonely, socially rejected, in trouble with the law, immoral, inept, or broke. It is neither selfish nor unrealistic for a parent to wish a child a reasonable level of success in life – including social acceptance, freedom from want, and moral uprightness. Proverbs provides a collection of pithy, advisory statements designed to do just that. There is no guarantee, of course, that a life will always go well for a young person. What proverbs does say is that, all things being equal, there are basic attitudes and patterns of behavior that will help a person grow into responsible adulthood.

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50 Fee and Stuart, 1993, p.216-217
The concerns of this book for right behaviour are highly relevant to modern society, and we discover that the results of folly are just as great a problem for modern families and communities as they were when the book was written. According to Proverbs, folly includes:

- Violent crime (1:10-19; 4:14-19)
- Careless promising or pledging (6:1-5)
- Laziness (6:7-11)
- Malicious dishonesty (6:12-15)

In response, we are urged to the same actions that will build strong families and communities today:

- Care for the poor (2:22, 27)
- Respect government (23:1-3; 24:21-22)
- Discipline children (23:13-14)
- Be moderate in consumption of alcohol (23:19-21, 29-35)
- Take care of our parents (23:22-25)

Specifically religious language is rare in Proverbs (although see 1:7; 3:5-12; 15:3, 8-9, 11; 16:1-9; 22:9, 23; 24:18, 21 etc.) but, as we have already said in the introduction to wisdom literature, this does not imply that the wisdom being presented is godless. In fact, it teaches us that:51  

*Not everything in life has to be strictly religious to be godly. Indeed, Proverbs can help serve as a corrective to the extremist tendency to spiritualize everything, as if there were something wrong with the basic, material, physical world.*

**Interpretation and application**

Despite the accessibility of Proverbs, there are a number of potential difficulties with interpreting and applying this book:

- **The presence of conflicting proverbs** (even adjacent to one another, as in 26:4-5)
  As discussed in the earlier introduction to wisdom literature, this simply highlights the fact that proverbs are not generalised statements of how to act in every situation, but guidelines to considering possible courses of action and their likely consequences. Discernment and judgement is needed to know how to apply their truth into specific situations.

- **The presence of generalisations**
  Generalisations about rewards for the righteous and punishment for the wicked are not to be taken blindly, but may provoke a response of cry for justice.52 Perhaps this is even part of the book’s intention. Derek Kidner argues that the book speaks of the “nine-tenths of life”53 that is predictable and leaves the irregularities to other wisdom books (i.e. Job and Ecclesiastes). Furthermore, Proverbs itself is not entirely devoid of recognition of difficulties of life in this world (e.g. 20:24).

- **Some proverbs seem obvious**
  Some of the proverbs have been accused of being little more than platitudes or tautologies (self-evident sayings). For example, 12:17 seems to simply state the obvious. We should not be too quick to assume that there is no meaning to these proverbs – perhaps 12:17 is telling us more than we realise, warning us against “yes men” or guiding as to how to decide between two witnesses based on their character – but we should also heed Derek Kidner’s warning:54

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51 Fee and Stuart, 1993, p.217
52 See Kidner, 1985, p.27
53 Kidner, 1985, p.36
54 Kidner, 1985, p.27
The very things that, we feel, should go without saying may, if left unsaid, go by default. They may be self-evident to us by now, only because at some stage they were dinned into our reluctant ears with small regard for novelty.

Also, describing how things normally work is essential to understanding our world and recognising the principles of wisdom behind it.

- **Some proverbs can seem mercenary**

Some proverbs seem to advise nothing but self-interest (e.g. 27:12; 11:17) and some may even seem morally dubious (is 21:14 really advising bribery?). It must be noted, however, that some proverbs are simply describing the way things are rather than advising how we should act and that there are repeated references to the LORD throughout the book, even in the collections of Solomon’s proverbs (see 16:1-9), and the very foundation of wisdom begins with Him. No action that is in disobedience to God’s revealed will can possibly be wise according to the very foundation principle of wisdom.

The key to a proper interpretation of Proverbs is a correct understanding of the nature of the proverb. Proverbs are short and pithy, and this creates a problem in that, “The briefer a statement is, the less likely it is to be totally precise and universally applicable”.

In the Hebrew proverbs often contain vocabulary or rhythm and sound qualities that aid memorisation, like English proverbs such as “a stitch in time saves nine” or “look before you leap”. Proverbs are not legal guarantees from God but general guidelines as to a wise way to approach the issue. As such.

*Hebrew proverbs ... must be understood reasonably and taken on their own terms. They do not state everything about a truth but they point toward it. They are, taken literally, often technically inexact. But as learnable guidelines for the shaping of selected behavior, they are unsurpassed.*

Grant Osborne warns that:

*Most important, we dare not read more into the proverbial statement than is there. By their very nature they are generalized statements, intended to give advice rather than to establish rigid codes by which God works.*

Some additional examples may help to clarify this truth:

- **Proverbs 6:20** – this verse should not be taken to mean that parents must be obeyed by people of every age whatever they command. Obedience to God must come first and parents should only be obeyed when their commands are honouring to Him and genuinely in the best interests of the child.

- **Proverbs 6:27-29** – these verses are not literally about fire, and they are not warning against any physical contact with another man’s wife, but they do powerfully express the dangers of adultery.

- **Proverbs 16:3** – this is not a universal promise. Success depends on God’s definition and we must ask what it means to commit our plans to God?

Bearing this in mind, and without repeating the guidelines for interpretation found in the section introducing wisdom literature, the following principles summarise key points in how proverbs should be applied:

1. Proverbs are poetry – get behind the meaning of figurative language and translate it to your cultural context
2. Proverbs are worded to be memorable, not theoretically precise
3. Proverbs are intensely practical, not abstract and theoretical
4. Proverbs must be read as a collection – compare proverbs on similar themes
5. Proverbs do not support selfish living but aim to stretch us outside the confines of our own perspective
6. Proverbs are not universal guarantees from God, but poetic guidelines for wise decision making
7. Proverbs give good advice for some aspects of life, but are not comprehensive
8. Proverbs must never be applied without the bedrock principle of the fear of the Lord

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55 Fee and Stuart, 1993, p.217
56 Fee and Stuart, 1993, p.218
57 Osborne, 1991, p.195
ECCLESIASTES

Authorship and date
Traditionally this book has been accepted as written by Solomon, as suggested by the very first verse, “The words of the Teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem”. The book is often called Qohelet(h) by biblical scholars, since this is the Hebrew word translated “Teacher” by the NIV in 1:1. It literally means an “assembler” of people and may (as suggested in the NIV footnotes) refer to an official position with the function of leading the assembly of Israel to worship God or to be taught as opposed to a formal teaching office. The brief introduction (1:1) and conclusion (12:9-14) to the book are not presented as written by “the Teacher” but by a commentator on his words.

There are a number of possibilities as to how this book came to be:

- The whole book was written by Solomon as a reflection on what he learned through the years when his heart had turned away from God (1 Kings 11).
- Qoheleth (who could be Solomon or perhaps someone using his persona) wrote the main body of the book as an expression of the futility he found in life, but the introduction and conclusion were added by a later author who addresses his son (12:12) about Qoheleth.
- The main body of the book is a collection of shorter discourses on life, some entirely negative and some with glimmers of hope, written by one or more authors (of whom Solomon could have been one). These shorter pieces were gathered together by a later editor who added the introduction and conclusion.
- The book was written as a whole some time after Solomon to present an imagined view of Solomon’s experience of life and to comment upon it.

The first view has some difficulties as it assumes that Solomon finally turned back to the Lord before his death, although there is no record of this in the Scriptures. It also assumes that Solomon wrote the introduction and conclusion in the third person, which seems unlikely. The fourth view seems unlikely as it is difficult to imagine why anyone would have written such a long discourse in Solomon’s persona to add such a short addition in another voice. The second and third options, therefore, seem to do the greatest justice to the book. If the book was written by Solomon, then the date for the core of the book must be in the middle 10th Century BC during Solomon’s reign. It is impossible to date the introduction and conclusion.

Outline
1:1 Introduction – these are the words of Qoheleth
1:2 Opening bookend of Qoheleth’s words – everything is hebel
1:3-12:7 The words of Qoheleth *
12:8 Closing bookend of Qoheleth’s words – everything is hebel
12:9-14 Conclusion – Qoheleth commended and fear of God recommended

* Various attempts have been made to identify a structure to the main body of the book from 1:3-12:7, but it is generally accepted that this section consists of various observations about the nature of life and recommendations arising from what is observed and reflection upon its meaning (or lack of meaning).

The Meaning of Hebel
The Hebrew word hebel is key to understanding the bulk of this book. It is translated “meaningless” in the NIV (“vanity” in the KJV and ESV) and appears more than 30 times, including four times in the opening bookend (1:2) and three times in the closing bookend (12:8). The word means literally a breath or vapor, and by extension something that is transient or without substance. It can, therefore, mean something that is pointless, futile,
fruitless and empty. Meaningless is a reasonable translation, but given the richness of the word and its importance in the book it is worth bearing in mind the depth of its meaning as you read.

**Purpose**

If we accept that the book has two authors (Qoheleth in 1:2-12:8 and an unnamed author of the introduction and conclusion) we must ask what was the intended purpose of the conclusion (12:9-14) and how it relates to Qoheleth’s treatise. The conclusion can be understood in one of two ways:

a) **As a correction to Qoheleth**

Some commentators argue that the conclusion was added as a corrective to the hopeless and godless view of life advanced by Qoheleth. If this is true, then the bulk of the book can be read simply as a treatise on what life would be like if God was not directly involved in the affairs of mankind (note that Qoheleth never suggests atheism – there is no doubt that God exists; the question is whether or not He is involved).

b) **As a summary of Qoheleth**

This view, which I find more convincing, argues that although the conclusion is the most explicitly God-focused and clearly orthodox part of the book, the author does not seem to present it as a corrective to the rest of the book. In fact, in 12:9-10 he praises Qoheleth’s wisdom and actions, saying that “what he wrote was upright and true”, and in 12:11-12 he describes the powerful; impact and divine origin of wisdom, apparently including what has preceded in this book. The sense is that 12:13-14 is added not as a corrective, but as a summary of the book’s message. The idea of the conclusion serving as a corrective also fails to do justice to the glimpses of hope that are found scattered throughout the bulk of the book, and especially to the challenge of 12:1ff. to “Remember your creator in the days of your youth”.

If the conclusion serves as a summary rather than a corrective to Qoheleth’s treatise, then Qoheleth’s words can then be understood in one of two ways:

1. **A debate within himself** – between the meaninglessness reality that he observes and what he believes to be true concerning God’s involvement in life. If this is correct then we have here a deeply personal insight into the struggle of one man with the harsh realities of life. The struggle often seems to be lost as he acknowledges the apparent dark futility of life, but glimmers of light shine through. In this case the conclusion serves to set the framework for reading the struggle. It confirms what we know to be the ultimate truth – a reality we can cling to when we face our own struggles with life.

2. **A carefully reasoned argument** – challenging the person who denies God’s involvement in life. Qoheleth is writing deliberately to expose the pointlessness of life without God. His bookends should not be seen as an expression of his own view on life but as an indictment of the godless view he has exposed. We should constantly find ourselves saying as we read, “But there must be more than this!” Qoheleth’s intention is to provoke us into acknowledging the necessity for God and 12:1ff. is an appeal to remember this as soon as possible, while we are still young. In this case the conclusion serves as a faithful summary of the logical conclusion to draw from the argument – that life finds true meaning only when surrendered to God.

Whichever of these possibilities is accepted, in reading the words of Qoheleth it will be vital to distinguish between the meaninglessness he discovered through his selfish and indulgent pursuit of pleasure, money and even wisdom (the major theme of his treatise) and the ultimate meaning and purpose that life has when God is remembered and fear of Him becomes the underpinning principle of life. It will be possible to identify principles of wisdom within 1:2-12:8 but individual statements in this section will be treated with care – they should not be universally applied without considering their purpose in the book as whole. If they are part of Qoheleth’s reflections on godless living then they cannot be taken as guidance for the believer! In general, statements from Qoheleth should only become the basis for our belief or actions if they are in keeping with the conclusion and affirmed elsewhere in Scripture.

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Qoheleth’s Theology and Philosophy

From the words of Qoheleth (1:2-12:8) we learn that God is the Creator (12:1) and that He is sovereign over every aspect of existence and over every life (7:29; 11:5; 12:7). Ultimately He will judge every person – there will be a final giving of account (12:9, also implied in 11:13). Qoheleth’s view of God’s sovereign power 3:11-14 is of particular importance as it expresses a belief that God’s will is worked out in time even if human beings are unable to fathom its depths and that the correct response of human beings is to fear (revere) Him. This knowledge about God is set against the background of a meaningless human existence when He is not remembered.

This despairing view of life is depicted in terms of a ceaseless round of generations (1:2-11), a fruitless search for meaning in pleasure, creativity and work (1:12-2:24), a deterministic, almost fatalistic, view of life’s inevitabilities (3:1-8), the realities of rule, oppression and injustice (3:16-17; 4:1-3; 8; 10), and ultimately the universality and apparent finality of death (2:16; 5:15-16; 9). Against these causes of despair there are simple pleasures to be experienced in life. Seven times Qoheleth recommends the enjoyment of life (2:24-26; 3:12-14, 22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 9:7-10; 11:7-10). R.N. Whybray points out that these statements are made with increasing force (from a general comment to a direct and compelling recommendation) and argues that they form an important leitmotiv throughout the book.59 Read outside the context of the whole book these verses may seem to imply that we should simply seek pleasure while we can. Such a reading would lead to a life of hedonism (seeking pleasure) akin to the rich fool of Luke 12:13-21 who decided to “eat drink and be merry”. A careful reading of these verses shows, however, that God is consistently presented as the giver of these pleasures (9:7-9), and a reading within the context of the whole book shows that its message is actually a challenge to hedonism as it reminds us that ultimate purpose does exist in life, but only when God is remembered (12:1) and feared (12:13). For this reason, and in contrast to the common perception, Whybray describes Qoheleth as a “preacher of joy”.

Qoheleth’s philosophy of life, then, does involve living simply in the present with a healthy enjoyment of what has been given to us, but I will argue that it draws us inevitably to a greater purpose that modifies, gives meaning to and overarches this simple life – the reality that we must remember our Creator (12:1). The conclusion then draws us to the natural conclusion, that fear of God is life’s true purpose.

The challenge of the Conclusion

The book of Ecclesiastes finds its fulfillment in 12:9-14. Qoheleth is praised for his wisdom and his instruction of the people (v9a). His proverbs and writings are commended for their wisdom and truthfulness (v9b-10), for their forceful impact like goads (v11a) and their divine origin (v11b). There is a warning about considering anything in addition to them and the degree to which study can weary to body (v12). This is not an injunction against education or writing of books, but rather a warning of the danger that additional learning can lead us away from the most foundational knowledge of all – the core duty of humankind. We would do well to remember this in an age when education is increasingly accessible and knowledge is ever increasingly. Then in v13-14 we are reminded of what that most basic reality is: to fear God and keep His commandments. We are to do so because “this is the whole duty of man...” (NIV), or rather literally “this is every man...” (i.e. this is the very reason for mankind’s existence), remembering that God will ultimately judge. The reality of final and total judgement transforms the very nature of existence and brings significance to every moment and every choice we make. Life does have purpose, and it is to know and obey our Creator! These closing verses are a fitting conclusion to the book and place Ecclesiastes firmly in the orthodox setting of biblical Wisdom Literature with its universal claim that fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.

59 Whybray, 1982, p.188ff.
**JOB**

**Date**

The book itself does not include any historical reference-points. Suggested dates have ranged from around 2000 BC (the time of Abraham) to the 1st Century BC. Most modern scholars place the book within a century or two before or after the Exile of Judah to Babylon (which occurred around 586 BC). Arguments for a date after the Exile include the indications of influence from the Aramaic language in the Hebrew (Aramaic was the most widely spoken language in the Persian Empire) and various claims about which parts of the Old Testament had an influence upon or were influenced by Job. Arguments for an earlier date also draw on linguistics, pointing to the use of various early forms of Hebrew, and claims about its content, pointing to other texts from before 1000 BC that discuss similar themes, albeit with different theological convictions. Ultimately we may never know what date is correct, but we do not need to worry as the content does not depend on the date and we have good support for the acceptance of the book as Scripture from quotations from it and allusions to it in the New Testament (Romans 11:35 alludes to Job 41:11; 1 Corinthians 3:19 quotes Job 5:13; 1 Corinthians 4:5 alludes to Job 12:22; 2 Thessalonians 2:8 alludes to Job 4:9; Hebrews 12:5 alludes to Job 5:17; James 5:11 refers to the example of Job).

**Setting**

Job is said to live in the land of Uz (1:1). We cannot be certain where this is, but it certainly seems that Job is not an Israelite, and neither are his three friends (2:11). In fact, Elihu (32:2) appears to be the only Israelite character in the book. It has been suggested that the setting is Arabia and that at least one of Job’s friends came from Edom (Teman was a grandson of Esau, son of Eliphaz, and one of Job’s friends was Eliphas the Temanite). We cannot be certain about the location, but it is interesting that we have in the Hebrew Bible a book that presents a non-Israelite as the ultimate example of godliness and non-Israelites who possess such significant knowledge of Yahweh.

**Structure**

The unusual structure of the book, prose – poetry – prose, has led some scholars to claim that the narrative and the poem started life apart and that poem was inserted into an earlier narrative which was either rewritten by the poem’s author or left unchanged. Several lines of argument have been presented in favour of this possibility:

- Linguistic differences between the poem and the narrative sections, such as the appearance of influence from Aramaic in the poem and the fact that the poetic dialogue speaks of God almost exclusively as Shaddai (Almighty), El and Eloah, whereas the narrative uses Elohim and Yahweh (“the LORD”). This difference in use of names is not, however, absolute, as Job speaks of Yahweh in 12:9, and would be consistent with the difference between an Israelite narrator and non-Israelite Job and friends.
- That Job seems defiant in the poem but capitulates so readily in chapter 42. This does insufficient justice to the power of his encounter with God to transform his attitude.
- That the narrative epilogue’s restoration of Job seems to contradict the poem’s argument against a simple equation of righteousness with reward. As I will argue later, however, this is an over-simplification of the message of the epilogue.

This claim that the narrative started life separate from the poem does not, therefore, find any solid support in the text. Nor is there any evidence of the existence of manuscripts of the story without the poem. We cannot deny, however, the possibility that “an ancient folk tale was picked up and woven into this masterly epic poem”. As with the question of dating, we must conclude that it is impossible to tell how the structure of the book reached its final form, but the impact of the book as we have it and its place as inspired Scripture is not dependent on knowing (there is no reason why a divinely inspired author could not have retold an earlier story as the setting for the poem).

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60 Atkinson, 1991, p.16
1. **PROLOGUE (Ch 1-2) [prose]**
   a. Job described (1:1-5)
   b. Job’s first testing (1:6-22)
   c. Job’s second testing (2:1-10)
   d. Job’s three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar) introduced (2:11-13)

2. **CENTRAL POEM (3:1-42:6) ‡**
   a. Job’s lament (Ch 3)
   b. Job’s three rounds of dialogue with his “comforters” (Ch 4-27)
      
      **Round 1:**
      i. Job speaks (Ch 3)
      ii. Eliphaz replies (Ch 4-5)
      iii. Job responds (Ch6-7)
      iv. Bildad replies (Ch 8)
      v. Job responds (Ch 9-10)
      vi. Zophar replies (Ch 11)
      
      **Round 2:**
      i. Job speaks (Ch 12-14)
      ii. Eliphaz replies (Ch 15)
      iii. Job responds (Ch 16-17)
      iv. Bildad replies (Ch 18)
      v. Job responds (Ch 19)
      vi. Zophar replies (Ch 20)
      
      **Round 3:**
      i. Job speaks (Ch 21)
      ii. Eliphaz replies (Ch 22)
      iii. Job responds (Ch 23-24)
      iv. Bildad replies (Ch 25)
      v. Job responds (Ch 26-27) *
   c. INTERLUDE: A Wisdom Poem (Ch 28) ‡
   d. Job’s discourse continued (Ch 29-31)
   e. Elihu’s discourse (Ch 32-37)
   f. The LORD answers Job out of the storm (Ch 38-41)
   g. Job replies to the LORD (44:1-6)

3. **EPILOGUE (42:7-17) – Job vindicated and restored [prose]**

   ‡ This central section accounts for the vast majority of the book and is entirely poetic although there are a number of different voices within it. It has been described as a drama or a courtroom dialogue, but the best way to describe it would appear to be as a poem in different voices.

   *Note: the absence of a third speech from Zophar, the brevity of Bildad’s third speech (Chapter 25 has only six verses), the unusual length of Job’s continuous speech in chapters 26-31 and the fact that some of Chapter 27 sounds unlike Job (it seems to agree with the viewpoint of the friends that wickedness always leads to judgement in this life) have led to numerous suggestions that the text has become jumbled at this point and that some words attributed to Job actually belong to Zophar (and possibly Bildad). Whilst it seems likely to me that there has been some confusion of the text it would be unwise to be dogmatic about where this has occurred and it does not alter the overall message of the book.

   † It is generally accepted that Chapter 28 does not represent the words of Job (its tone is peaceful and restful in contrast to Job’s passion and frustration in the surrounding chapters) but is an insertion by the author of a wisdom poem that acts as a breather between the preceding dialogue and Job’s continued discourse in chapters 29 to 31. The poem is widely acknowledged as a masterpiece and, interestingly, contains the motif statement of the
beginning of wisdom with fear of the Lord (v28 – compare with. Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; Ecclesiastes 12:13). This chapter seems to function as a comment on the dialogue that has preceded it and a pause before the continued discourse that follows. In particular, the last verse (v28) provides a judgement on Job as a wise man since it’s definition of wisdom and understanding equates with the description of Job in 1:1 (he feared God and shunned evil). The author is leaving us in no doubt that it is Job, and not his “comforters”, who is in the right in the prolonged debate that has run through chapters 4 to 27.

Prose Prologue (Ch 1-2)
The prologue tells us the story of Job, a “blameless and upright” man who “feared God and shunned evil” (1:1) and who was so rich that he was “the greatest man among all the people of the east” (1:3). “In other words, he is the epitome of the wise person in Proverbs”.61 We learn that his children did not follow his example – they were indulgent and almost certainly sinful, and Job is concerned for their spiritual well-being (1:5).

The story then cuts to the presence of the LORD. The angels present themselves to Him, including “Satan”. We must pause here to consider what this means as it is often puzzling for Christians to think of Satan in the presence of God, especially given the New Testament’s description of Him as an enemy of God. The Hebrew of this passage uses “Satan” not as name but as a common noun (also in Psalm 109:6b; Zechariah 3:1-2 – compare this with 1 Chronicles 21:1 which is the sole appearance of “Satan” as a proper name in the Old Testament) – i.e. “the satan” or “the adversary”. The idea is of a trial with the accuser or prosecutor. Whether we are to understand this “satan” as the devil, the enemy of God, or whether this is an un-fallen angel with a particular role in God’s court, is open to debate, although the fact that he is singled out from the other angels and that he appears to question God (1:9-11) suggests that this is indeed the devil. In either case it is important to notice that it is the satan, and not God, who does harm to Job and his family, but equally that his power to harm is strictly limited by God. God gives permission to Satan – this seems not to be an exceptional situation but the normal pattern of His government of the universe. We see the same principle in God’s permission to Satan to test Peter (Luke 22:32-32) and to afflict Christ Himself (Luke 22:53 – “This is your hour”). There is no suggestion of a dualistic reality behind the universe – God (and good) in constant warfare with an equally powerful Satan (and evil). God alone is sovereign, and nothing happens that He does not permit to happen. Derek Kidner writes:62

Where we might wish to argue that omnipotence ought to have stamped out evil at its first appearance, God’s chosen way was not to crush it out of hand but to wrestle with it; and to do so in weakness rather than in strength, through men more often than through miracles, and through costly permissions rather than through flat refusals. Putting the matter in our own terms we might say that he is resolved to overcome it in fair combat, not by veto but by hard-won victory

We might question whether Kidner is correct to say that God “chose” this path – it may be better to say that this was the way that was in keeping with His character. In reality, however, the fact is that according to Scripture God permits evil but that He has a plan to ultimately overcome it and that His plan cannot be thwarted. Job’s story, as we shall see, serves as a miniature retelling of the story of redemption and restoration, although Job suffers unjustly, as the opening verses made abundantly clear, whereas Adam and Eve suffered justly for their disobedience.

God presents Job as an example of a righteous servant (1:8), but Satan questions whether his obedience is simply a response to God’s blessings (1:9-11). The satan has permission to take everything away from Job but not to harm him (1:12). The satan uses this permission ruthlessly, and in quick succession four messengers come to Job with terrible news (1:13-19). Job responds with a mixture of mourning and worship (1:20-21) and we are told that he did not sin in his response (1:22).

Again the angels come before God and again God presents Job to the satan as an exemplary servant especially given his integrity in the face of suffering (2:1-3). The satan suggests that the situation would change if God

61 Longman,2010, p.115
62 Kidner, 1985, p.59
allowed his own body to be afflicted, and God gives permission although still with the limit that he cannot kill Job (2:4-6). Job is afflicted with sores and even his wife (whether from despair and love for him, anger at God or faithless hardness we cannot say) suggests he should give up his faith and embrace death, but still Job does not sin (2:9-10). At this point we are introduced to three friends of Job who come with the intention of sympathizing and comforting him (2:11). When they see him, however, it seems that they are unable to speak because of their shock at his appearance and so they simply sit with him in silence for seven days and nights (2:12-13).

We have already mentioned the suggestion that the prologue did not originally belong with the poem that follows from 3:1 onwards, but the prologue does serve an important function in the book. David Atkinson, following Edgar Jones, highlights the following five points from the prologue that are necessary to understanding the book.63

- It makes it absolutely clear that Job’s suffering is despite his righteousness and not because of sin – therefore we know that not all suffering is a direct result of the individual’s sin.
- It leaves no room for the idea that Job is being disciplined because of sin, which his friends will later suggest. We are equipped to assess the words of his friends in light of this knowledge.
- It prepares us to understand that suffering can lead into a deeper experience of and relationship with God.
- It sets the problem of suffering in a wider context of relationship with God – the real question is how we can trust God in the face of suffering, not why there is suffering in the world.
- It opens our minds to realise that human experience can actually serve God’s greater purposes for his world.

The Dialogue (3:1-42:6)

1. Job’s “comforters”

After their week long silent vigil with Job, we have a dialogue between job and his three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. Given the fact that the phrase “Job’s comforters” has entered into common usage in our culture, we need to be sure that we do not misunderstand these men as they appear in the book. They are not presented as:

- **Hypocrites gloating over Job** – they appear to have been genuine friends of Job with a true concern for his suffering (2:11-13).
- **Hermits offering false doctrines** – the New Testament quotes words of Eliphaz as authoritative Scripture (Job 5:13 is quoted in 1 Corinthians 3:19 and Job 5:17 is very similar to Proverbs 3:11-12 and Hebrews 12:5), and much of what they say about God can be affirmed by any believer in God (there is one God, He is all-powerful but also wholly just and the rewarder of the penitent and teachable – see 5:18).
- **Fools with empty arguments** – their reasoning is largely in keeping with the warnings of the Law (especially Deuteronomy), the wisdom of Proverbs and the morality of the Prophets.

Yet they are condemned by Job as “miserable comforters” (16:2) and charged by God with foolishness and slander for not speaking about Him “what is right, as my servant Job has” (42:7-9). So, what is the error of these men?

Some scholars conclude that the book is attacking an older school of wisdom, presumably represented in the book of Proverbs and taught by these men, which tried to tie the universe too neatly into predictable patterns. This view neglects both the less certain aspects of Proverbs and the fact that the basic error of these men is not so much that they say is false but that they misapply the truth they did understand and had left other aspects of truth out of the equation. Their minds are closed to any possibility that does not fit with their presuppositions about God and how He ought to work. Derek Kidner writes:64

> if the book is attacking anything its target is not the familiar doctrines of other Scriptures, such as God’s justice and benevolence, his care for the righteous and punishment of the wicked, or the general law that one sows what one reaps. Rather, it attacks the arrogance of pontificating about the application of these truths, and of thereby misrepresenting God and misjudging one’s fellow men. To put it more positively, the book shows … how small a

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63 Atkinson, 1991, p.32
64 Kidner, 1985, p.61
part of the situation is the fragment that we see; how much of what we do see we ignore or distort through preconceptions; and how unwise it is to extrapolate from our elementary grasp of truth.

These men are so convinced that suffering must be a punishment for (or purging from) sin that, despite Job’s protestations of innocence, they progressively accuse Job of sin:

- Initially they suggest relatively gently that Job needs to repent for some hidden sin (5:17-18; 8:5; 11:13-15)
- Later they sternly rebuke Job for his speech, which they judge to be sinful (15:5-6) and demeaning to them (18:2-3; 20:3)
- Finally they concoct a list of fictitious sins that Job had allegedly committed (22:4-11)

All the time they repeatedly present an idealistic view of the world where the righteous always prosper and the unrighteous go in need despite Job’s evidence to the contrary (he insists, in 21:7-21, that the wicked sometimes prosper and, in 24:2-12, that the innocent are often exploited and while their oppressors go unpunished). They also go beyond biblical truth in their descriptions of God:

- They extend from the biblical principle of God’s holiness to present a caricature of Him as one who will not trust His angels and finds fault with the heavens (15:15; 25:5)
- As a result of this view of God they go beyond the psalmist’s wonder at God’s interest in humanity (Psalm 8:4) to claim that God despises mankind and sees them as little more than maggots and worms (15:16; 25:6)

It is as if they have understood the holiness and “otherness” of God and therefore the littleness of man, but have not understood the equally important truths of the love of God and the dignity of humankind as created in His image. They have an imbalanced theology. As is so often the case, partial truth is more dangerous than outright error.

2. Job

Job’s words are dominated by perplexity. He feels he is being attacked from two directions at once, by his “friends” and by God. He complains about:

a) Misjudgement by his friends – they are accusing him of suffering because he has sinned, but he is convinced that his suffering is undeserved. Kidner suggests that they want him to ask the question “What have I done?” whereas he is asking the question “What has God done? What has come over him?” Unsurprisingly, then, his responses to them are marked by hurt and despair (6:26; 19:21-22), sarcasm (12:2; 26:2-3), accusation (13:4a, 7b-8a), reproach (16:4-5), defiance (21:3) and utter contempt (21:34).

b) Unfair and inexplicable treatment by God – the most intense aspect of Job’s suffering was his inability to understand how the One who had been a friend and a guide to him through life’s dark times (29:2-4) could have turned on him so “ruthlessly” (30:21). He is convinced in his despair that God is directly responsible for every detail of his suffering (6:4; 7:20). His current suffering seems to make a mockery of his past blessings, as if God has been playing a cruel game with him all along (10:12-13). Where his “friends” had gone beyond Psalm 8 to suggest that God almost despises mankind (see above), Job parodies the psalm by suggesting that man is little more than an object of torture for God (7:17-18). He cries to God to answer but receives none (30:20). Despite all of this, however, Job never does what the satan was hoping for. He never turns his back on God or on righteousness. Strong as his words may be, they are constantly directed towards God. He consistently acknowledges God as the ultimate judge and desires to bring his case to Him. Job appears to move from an initial desire to be left alone by God (in chapters 3, 6-7) to a growing desire to face God and have an answer from Him:

- In chapter 9 he feels that God is beyond his ability to argue with (v3), that He might even pervert justice in His judgement of Job (v20b), and longs for a person who could arbitrate between him and God (v33).
- In chapter 13 he expresses his determination to give a defense of his life to God even if He kills him (v15).
- In chapter 23 he longs to be able to find God and present his case (v3-4), although God seems elusive (v8) and beyond reason (v13b-15a).

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65 Kidner, 1985, p.63
Yet Job’s words are not only of God as Judge. Out of his despair emerge some remarkable statements of faith in God that even seem to imply that his Judge will also be His Saviour. These statements have often been interpreted as messianic references to Christ, although the majority of scholars (including many evangelicals) reject this suggestion. Even if they are not read as explicitly messianic, the statements are still highly significant in what they say about Job’s understanding of God and do still point to Christ at least in the sense that they highlight a problem that finds its ultimate solution only in Christ – how the same God can be both holy Judge and faithful Redeemer:

- Job expresses confidence that God could free him from suffering by assigning him to death and then raise him again to be of service to Him once more (14:13-15).
- Job asserts that he had a witness and advocate in Heaven who would vouch for him, a friendly intercessor (16:19-21; note that the NIV’s rendering of v20 is disputed, but v19 still stands in testimony to Job’s faith).
- Job appeals to God to give him whatever it is he needs to pay to God (17:3).
- In the most majestic statement of all (unsurpassed in the Old Testament) Job says that his Redeemer lives and will stand upon the earth and that he will then see God with his own eyes in a body that has been raised from the dead (19:25-27). These verses contain several disputed translations which are worthy of mention (all are noted in the NIV footnotes):
  - “Redeemer” (v25) translates the Hebrew gōîl. It may also be translated “defender”, but Redeemer seems a fair translation given the rich heritage of the word. It is found in Leviticus 25:25 as a verb describing the action of the relative who was obligated to buy back land that was sold because of poverty so that it stayed within the inheritance of the family to which God had given it. It appears in Ruth as “kinsman-redeemer”, the role Boaz would fulfill for Naomi through Ruth. Given this background, it is remarkable for Job to speak as if he expects to find a gōîl who can redeem him. The Psalms (19:14; 78:35), Isaiah (41:14; 43:24; 44:6, 24; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7, 26; 54:5, 8; 59:20; 60:16; 63:16) and Jeremiah (50:34) speak of God as the Redeemer of His people, and the implication of this verse in Job would seem to point in the same direction – that the God who has struck and pursued him (19:21-22) will be his Redeemer.
  - “upon the earth” (v25) is a translation of a Hebrew phrase that literally means “upon dust”. Given the connection of dust with death (see Genesis 3:19), some scholars argue for the translation “upon my grave” (as per the NIV’s footnote). Kidner, however, argues that the use of the same phrase later in the book (41:33) indisputably to mean “upon the earth” supports that translation here.
  - “in my flesh” (v26) translates Hebrew words that literally translate as “from my flesh”. Some scholars, therefore, argue that Job is saying that he will see God “apart from my flesh” (again as per the NIV’s footnotes). Kidner, however, says that whereas the Hebrew word “from” when used alone can mean “apart from”, in every instance in the Old Testament when it is used with a verb for seeing it means “from” (e.g. Genesis 13:13; Job 36:25; Psalm 14:2). This strongly indicates that the correct translation here is “from my flesh” in the sense that Job will observe this from his physical body (the NIV’s “in my flesh” is an attempt at a more natural way of saying this in English) and that this is an assertion of belief in resurrection.

Even if the less dramatic alternatives for these disputed words are accepted the verses still constitute a remarkable expression of Job’s faith (notice his confidence – “I know”, v25) that he will be vindicated and will see God. Also, although I would strongly support the traditional understanding that Job is speaking here of bodily resurrection, there is at least confidence that his life will continue beyond the grave as it is he himself, not his descendents, who will see God (v27a). The prospect fills him with awe and longing (v27b).
3. Elihu

It is often suggested that chapters 32-37 are a later addition to the book for the following reasons:

- Elihu appears from nowhere and disappears again (he is not mentioned as are the other three “friends” in 2:11-13 or 42:7-9).
- It does not fit into the pattern of three rounds of dialogue.
- Job does not respond, nor does the LORD comment on Elihu in 42:7-9.
- Elihu’s language is different in style from the rest of the book in terms of vocabulary and a greater apparent influence from Aramaic.

Whatever the origin of this section, in the book as we have it Elihu’s discourse serves several purposes:

- It continues to build anticipation for the LORD’s reply. Elihu’s words promise much but deliver little. He does have some fresh insights into a positive dimension to suffering (33:14-22 sees suffering as a potential tool of God to draw the sufferer back to Him) but in general he adds little to what has already been said. As Kidner writes, Elihu “promises enlightenment but offers in the event little more than eloquence”. 66
- It serves in some ways to sum up a human response to all that has preceded in the debate between Job and his three “friends”. This serves as a contrast to God’s summation that follows.
- It emphasises the futility of continued arguments in the face of the LORD as it is completely ignored by the LORD – He doesn’t even condemn it as He does the words of Job’s other “friends”.
- The last of Elihu’s four speeches, in chapter 37, directs our attention once more to God, and his descriptions of God prepare the way for chapter 38 when the LORD appears on the scene. In fact, this chapter reintroduces the concept of Wisdom that chapter 28 had introduced. The final verse focuses on the central theme of wisdom literature, the fear of the Lord (37:24). David Atkinson describes Elihu’s speeches as: “a bridge in the book of Job, stretching from the inadequate theology of a detached God – a God of power, might, majesty and dominion but detached from human pain and experience – to the need for Wisdom”. 67 Atkinson argues that 37:24 is intended to encourage the reader towards the way of wisdom, living in correct relationship with God, while other commentators see it as a rebuke to Job, claiming that Job does not truly fear God since God is not apparently regarding him. In either case it is in interesting reminder of the fundamental principle of Wisdom, the fear of the Lord.

It is worth noting that Elihu is the only character in the book with an Israelite name and genealogy. Indeed he may even have shared a common ancestor with King David (assuming that the Ram mentioned in Job 32:2 is the same person as that of Ruth 4:19). Perhaps the purpose of this section is to challenge the Jewish reader of the book, and indeed in the fact that the righteous hero, Job, is apparently not an Israelite either. After seeing the error of the other non-Israelite friends (a Temanite, a Shuhiite and a Naamathite), the reader might expect that now there would come greater sense from this Israelite, albeit that he is young compared to the others (32:6-9). Surely a person from within God’s covenant people would have a greater insight into the person of Yahweh than the others. But these hopes are soon to be dashed when the LORD sweeps onto the scene in chapter 38 and bypasses Elihu to address Job directly. There is no room for nationalistic pride here – all four men who tried to explain Job’s predicament are confounded by the LORD’s wisdom and excluded from His encounter with faithful Job.

4. The LORD

The very fact that the LORD speaks to Job at all refutes one of Job’s complaints – that He will be forever elusive – but the manner of His response (the endless unanswerable questions and even the image of Him speaking from the storm) debunks Job’s expectation of boldly facing Him and pleading his case. The LORD’s answer is broken in two by a brief response from Job, long enough only to express his humility and realisation that he cannot respond to God’s questions (40:3-5). The LORD’s appeal is to His majestic sovereignty over creation – both the inanimate earth, sea and stars with the weather patterns (38:4-38) and the creatures that share the earth with mankind from the lions to the eagles (38:39-30) and even the formidable (and somewhat enigmatic) behemoth and leviathan (40:15-41:34). In the centre, around Job’s brief response, is the very heart of God’s response, the challenge “Will

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66 Kidner, 1985, p.70
67 Atkinson, 1991, p.135
the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!” and the challenge to Job to think about how he would even begin to exercise justice over mankind so that every sinful man was suitably humbled (40:8-14). If Job would be forced to run in terror when faced with the gargantuan behemoth and leviathan, how much more terrified should he be at the prospect of wrestling with the evil of human hearts and human society? The implication is clear: no one who lacks God’s power and majesty could begin to exercise His justice and therefore no created being, no person, can be God’s judge.

These words of God serve two purposes for Job (and, by extension, his “friends”):

a) They reveal that all along Job’s “friends” have missed the point
Where they thought they could provide insightful and incisive explanations of the workings of the Almighty, their comments have been little more than platitudes. They have failed to even approach an adequate description of God’s person or His ultimate sovereign justice. As Kidner writes, “Job and his friends have not only found the wrong answers; they have been asking the wrong questions”\(^6\). Yet, the tone with which the LORD brings His rebuke to Job is not harsh and condemnatory but firm and restorative (some have even suggested playful and ironic, as in 38:5, “Surely you know!”). There is the suggestion of a fatherly approach as the LORD tells Job to brace himself like a man (38:3; 40:7).

b) They lift Job’s vision from his own plight to the greater context of his existence
God’s picture of His creation lifts Job from his pile of ashes and pottery shards (2:8) to the outer reaches of the universe and the inner workings of the ecosystem. The world does not revolve around Job – there is so much more beyond his horizon. The centre-piece question about how Job would exercise God’s justice (40:8-13) serves to reinforce that there is a King of the Universe, that He is in charge and that His justice will not be perverted. It also reminds Job of his inability to rescue himself from his plight and implies that only God can be Job’s hope (40:14).

c) They provoke humility
God’s words are undoubtedly intended to bring Job to a greater understanding of his powerlessness (who is he to try to lecture God – how would he fare if charged with administering justice?) and to lead him to greater humility (as expressed in 40:4 and 42:6). All the philosophising of 35 chapters is reduced to the mere babbling of infants in the face of God’s greatness. God is not accountable to Job or his “friends” and He will not, and does not, offer any defence of Himself. He is the one who cannot be corrected and will not be held to account by His creatures. Although we may think that a defence of His actions from God’s lips would bring us greater satisfaction as we reach the conclusion of the book, it would actually undermine, rather than affirming, our trust in Him. A God who is accountable to us would not be our God but our servant. He would be someone open to our manipulations and dependent on our approval. Such a god could neither rule over us nor rescue us from ourselves!

d) They show Job that he does matter
This point may not be immediately obvious, and at first glance we may be forgiven for thinking that the LORD is lacking in compassion or concern. He does not explain, express sympathy with or even refer to Job’s suffering, but that is not to suggest that He is uninterested in Job. After all, here He is, the Sovereign over all creation, speaking directly to Job! Although the descriptions of creation emphasise His majesty and grandeur, the fact that He is speaking to Job reveals that, far from being merely a tiny, insignificant speck in a vast creation, Job has significance and that his Creator sees, knows and cares for him. His care is not expressed as Job may have expected, but it is undeniable nonetheless, and this is not the end of the story, either for Job or for God’s revelation of Himself, which extends to the cross and beyond it to us.

Job’s response to the LORD’s words (42:1-6) is as brief as his previous monologues had been lengthy and it is the only appropriate response a person could make to such a revelation of God’s person – one of abject humility and repentance. There is no attempt at self-justification and no pleading of his case (much anticipated in Job’s mind as that had been). There is simply the acknowledgement of his poverty of spirit and a heartfelt expression of repentance. When faced with the power and holiness of God, even righteous Job must repent, for he too is a

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\(^6\) Kidner, 1985, p.70
sinner in need of mercy, blameless and upright as he was (1:8). And if that was true of an exceptionally righteous man like Job, then what of us?

Prose Epilogue (42:7-17)
This section closes the book as it began, in prose and with Job restored back to the standing he had enjoyed at first. It has faced criticism for apparently descending to a confirmation of the worldview of Job’s “friends” as Job is restored, just as their theology predicted a righteous man should be, but there is much more to this section than simply the “happily ever after” of a fairytale.

- Job is vindicated and his “comforters” rebuked. They are condemned for their folly, required to offer sacrifices and dependent on Job’s intercession (what a powerful vindication for Job as the sore-ridden man prayed for them) for their forgiveness (42:7-9). There is no question that they were wrong and that Job, despite his suffering, was right. Bold and challenging as Job’s words often were, God does not rebuke him for them but rather acknowledges them as appropriate! God is not afraid of the blunt questions of an honest seeker, nor does He despise or condemn them, but He has no time for all the philosophising and theologising of the self-righteous and self-confident. He would rather the honesty of a struggling heart than the eloquence of a closed mind.

- The emphasis is not on Job’s prosperity after his suffering but on his vindication and the fact that he had, as he had determined to do (27:5), kept his integrity throughout his ordeal. It is His righteousness that shines through rather than his riches.

- There seems to be more than a hint in the wording of 42:10 (“After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD made him prosperous again”) that God’s restoration of Job’s material fortunes was dependent on his willingness to forgive those who had wronged him. This is the ultimate demonstration of the man’s character as grace is extended to those who a lesser man may have wanted to punish. Job’s extension of grace demonstrates that he has truly received God’s grace. The words of the Lord’s Prayer are prefigured here, with its principle that God’s forgiveness of our sins is dependent on our forgiveness of those who have sinned against us (Matthew 6:12). Even Job’s extended family, who suddenly appear on the scene with their comfort and condolences after the event, are included in the man’s generous embrace as he eats with them (42:11).

- Although the epilogue acknowledges God as the restorer of Job’s fortunes, it does not fudge the issue of God also being the one ultimately responsible for his misfortune (42:11, “all the trouble the LORD had brought upon him”). This epilogue does not demystify the issue of suffering. It does, however, uphold the principle of God’s ultimate restoration of all things in line with His perfect justice. For Job that happened in this life AND beyond. For some they will wait until the final judgement, but there can be no question that He will judge with perfect justice, for He has both the power and the wisdom to do so. And so James could point to Job (in a way that he could not if the epilogue had been omitted) and say: “You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy” (James 5:11).

Lessons from Job
This book teaches us vital lessons about our perspective on ourselves, on suffering and on God:

- **How we think of ourselves**
  God’s response to Job is a powerful challenge to us as we even begin to comprehend His greatness and our powerlessness. We have a constant tendency to think that the world revolves around us, either individually or as a species. In reality it is God’s world and He alone has power and authority to rule over it. We should be humbled by this realisation of God’s majesty, but also relieved that it removes from us the pressure of feeling that we have to figure everything out for ourselves. The reality is that we are not in control – there are many
things that are outside our power to control. We may despair when we realise this, but the understanding that God is in control should bring us confidence. We can say with the apostle Paul (Romans 11:33-36):

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! “Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?” “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?” For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.*

God does not need our advice – He has all wisdom and all knowledge and His ways are beyond our understanding – and He does not need anything we can give Him – all things come from Him and exist for His purpose. When we realise this it gives us a correct perspective on who we are. Most importantly it should lead us to realise that God calls us to be part of His purpose not because He needs something we can offer but simply because of His unmerited love for us. We deserve His wrath, but we have received His mercy. We are insignificant and unnecessary, yet we are loved and special in His plan. Our response should be the one that Paul urges upon us, to offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices to accomplish His will (Romans 12:1).

**How we view suffering**

The problem of suffering is perhaps the most challenging issue for Christians, and for people as a whole. Job gives us vital insights into the issue, although it does not provide the Bible’s final word on the subject. We must be careful not to generalise from Job’s story to every individual instance, but there are some principles that we can establish from this book. Firstly, Job assures us that suffering is not always the result of wrongdoing on our part – it is not necessarily a judgement from God. Job was innocent! H.H. Rowley has written.69

*By insisting that there is such a thing as innocent suffering the author of Job is bringing a message of the first importance to the sufferer. The hardest part of his suffering need not be the feeling that he is deserted by God, or the fear that all men may regard him as cast out from God’s presence. If his suffering may be innocent it may not spell isolation from God, and when he most needs the sustaining presence of God he may still have it.*

Secondly, the book tells us that there can be a purpose in our suffering. If there is no ultimate purpose in the world then human suffering is just a cruel farce – it is meaningless and nothing at all good can come out of it. When we realise, however that God is ultimately in control then we can believe that there is an ultimate purpose in every experience in life, however painful, pointless and hopeless it may seem. This is not a blasé statement or an attempt to say that God causes every aspect of our suffering, but it does mean that God, and God alone, can bring good out of even the worst of situations. HH Rowley again writes.70

*We may pause to note that the cause of Job’s suffering was more than the Satan’s insinuation against him. He was suffering to vindicate more than himself. He was vindicating God’s trust in Him. He was not so much abandoned by God as supremely honoured by God.*

The epistle to the Romans has something to say about this subject too. Paul says that we can boast in our sufferings because we have confidence in the hope of sharing in God’s glory and through our sufferings God can produce character in us (Romans 5:2-3). He claims that our present sufferings are not even worthy to be spoken of in the same breath as the glory in store for us (Romans 8:18) and assures us that “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). However difficult this promise might be to believe in the fire of suffering, it is a certain and sure promise and it allows for no exceptions – it is true that God works in every single situation (not that He causes every situation) and that He can bring good for us out of it (not that we are to think of it as good in itself). Without this hope life is meaningless, but with it even the worst of life’s trials are not wasted. Derek Kidner writes of this lesson from Job:71

*Job’s sufferings were in fact brought on him not by any lapse of faith but by his very blamelessness; and their long duration was serving heaven’s own secret purposes, including the completion of the test and the*

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69 H.H. Rowley, quoted in Kidner, 1985, p.58
70 H.H. Rowley, quoted in Kidner, 1985, p.58
71 Kidner, 1985, p.62
exhausting of the human arguments. This is not to say that his case should be seen as the key to all the others, or even to any others: simply that it lifts one corner of a curtain beyond which, at any time, there will lie factors of which we have no inkling.

Thirdly, Job reassures us that it is OK to question God in times of trial. True faith does not prohibit questions, in fact it encourages them. Questions are not wrong so long as we direct ourselves to God for answers. In fact, we can go further and say that true faith is forged in the fire of trials. Certainly Peter’s hope for the suffering Christians he wrote to was that their faith would be refined, proved and purified through their experience (1 Peter 1:7). In the Old Testament the prophet Habakkuk parallels Job in his questioning of God and in the dramatic and awe-inspiring response he received. The opposite of true faith is not doubt (doubt can strengthen faith if it is worked through) but pride. Job had only glimpses of God’s goodness and faithfulness. He had inklings of the reality of resurrection and future hope, and we might wonder whether he would have seen these if not for his suffering. We have a much greater revelation from God. We understand that the ultimate mystery of suffering is found in the cross of Christ, where God Himself entered into our suffering in a purposeful way that would bring redemption for all those whose faith is in Him. Job did not have that insight. He could not conceive of a God who suffered with Him, less still of a God who would suffer for Him. In addition we have the words of Christ and His apostles – certain promises of His future return and our future glory – which were not available to Job. Although we stand at a great advantage in this respect, yet we still “see but a poor reflection as in a mirror” (1 Corinthians 13:12). As for Job, there are many aspects of God’s plan that remain veiled to us. We may have insight into His grand plan, but we will often struggle to see how our particular circumstances fit into it. God has not given us that kind of insight, and I doubt if we could cope with it – the burden would be too great for us to live with! We live by faith, not by sight, but we can have assurance, as Job increasingly had throughout his journey, that one day we will see our Judge and He will be our Redeemer. As we live on this journey we can question and cry out to Him – He can take it and He invites it. Even in the darkest times when we cannot even bring ourselves to speak, He will remain faithful to His purpose and His promises will not fail.

- How we speak of God

It has been suggested that the true theme of Job is “Who is wise?” or “Where is wisdom found?” with the only sufficient answer being God. Even Job’s wisdom, although he is the epitome of the wise man (see the comment above on 1:1), pales into significance and is revealed to be folly by comparison with God. Like all of Scripture this book is ultimately about God! God’s ways are accessible to mankind insofar as He has revealed them to us, but we can never claim to have fully comprehended His mind. There is a lesson in this book for anyone who would try to present an image of God that distorts the reality and brushes over the unpalatable realities of suffering. The book serves as a warning not to put God in a box or to speak as if we can explain His ways in their entirety. Job grasped this fact (see 13:7-9) and his three “friends” were guilty as charged (42:7-9). Partial truth is more dangerous than an open lie because it is more subtle and less easily discerned. Perhaps today the equivalent might be those distortions of the gospel that present it as a way to “health and wealth” (the so-called prosperity gospel) or even any proclamation of it that fails to emphasis the cost of following Christ and the inevitability of persecution, spiritual warfare and the internal struggle with sin. We need to speak of God’s justice as well as His love, His mercy as well as His glory, His righteousness as well as His grace, His faithfulness as well as His holiness.

I would argue that we also need to accept that there are loose ends in Scripture that we cannot always tie up neatly. God has not revealed everything to us, and we must be careful not to devise theological systems that pretend to explain His purposes and character entirely. There is much that Scripture does reveal, and we can be absolutely certain in what it says, but there are many questions that it does not answer and we must learn to live in the tension. Most importantly, even if we try to figure things out through a theological system, we must be careful not to make it a test of the orthodoxy of another believer. We must seek unity in the core of the gospel as revealed in Scripture and in our acceptance of it as the word of God and avoid breaking fellowship over secondary issues.
Conclusion
The book of Job is a fascinating combination of:

- **Questions** – about suffering, justice and God’s government of the universe. These receive no direct answer. In fact, if the books is intended to answer the question of suffering then it seems to fail miserably! God does not even comment on Job’s suffering at all!

- **Loose ends** – Job’s hope for resurrection and a Redeemer that receive no fulfillment in the book but seem to lead on to the New Testament.

- **Restoration** – Job is ultimately restored through his discovery of humility, repentance and faith. At the end of the book he is a man deeply shaped not only in fear of God but in the grace of God. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, then perhaps its completion is in the discovery that perfect love casts out fear. Job in 42:12-17 seems not only to be materially blessed more than in 1:1-7, but he is also free from the fear for his children that he once had and able to enjoy such a blessing from his children that his daughters shared in the inheritance with his sons. The story of Job’s children is an interesting one. We may note that whereas his restoration included a doubling of his animals he is only given the same number of children as he had at first. There is a clear indication of the individual responsibility of the children before God – his earlier children were judged by God for their own sinfulness, not as a test of Job – and of the value of human beings relative to livestock – both matter, but only animals can be the possession of a person, children are an inheritance.

So, as we live lives full of questions and loose ends we can trust in our Redeemer to restore us ultimately and to remain faithful to His promises to us.
SONG OF SONGS

Genre and usage
Song of Songs is included by some scholars as Wisdom Literature, and hence I have decided to comment briefly upon it here, although other scholars exclude it from this category. It is certainly a poetical book, and so bears some relationship to Psalms, but it may also be seen as “lyric wisdom”,72 that is wisdom in the form of a song. Tom Gledhill writes that,73 “it has been suggested that just as Job explores the riddle of suffering, and Ecclesiastes the riddle of existence, so the Song explores the riddle of love”. Interpretation of the Song of Songs, then, must follow similar principles to those suggested earlier for the book of Psalms. We should not be surprised to find that it contains word plays (which are generally lost in translation) and the repetition of ideas and phrases:

- The daughters of Jerusalem are addressed with the repeated refrain “Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires” in 2:7; 3:5; 8:4. This repetition must be noted, as it is clearly intended to teach the hearer something about the nature of love.
- Similar dream sequences are found in 3:1-5 and 5:2-8.
- There are a number of other repeated phrases: eyes likened to doves (1:15; 4:1), sprouting of blossoms (2:12; 6:11; 7:13), browsing among lilies (2:16; 4:5; 6:3), the day blowing and the shadows fleeing (2:17; 4:6), the neck likened to a tower (4:4; 7:5), breasts likened to fawns (4:5; 7:4), mountains of spices (4:6; 8:14).

The cultural distance between our modern Western world and the ancient Middle-Eastern context of this song will be obvious from a reading of passages such as 4:1-3 – ladies today are unlikely to consider it a compliment if their hair is likened to goats, their teeth to sheep and their temples to a pomegranate, although the reference to lips like scarlet ribbons makes the transition of time better. There are other challenges in translating this book from the Hebrew including the fact that it includes many words that are not found elsewhere in the Old Testament and that there are several places where the Hebrew appears to be deliberately ambiguous, perhaps including deliberate double entendres about sexual intimacy (for example 5:4-5, 14). Translators have to decide the degree to which they should maintain ambiguity in these passages and to which they should paraphrase imagery that clashes with our cultural expectations. The book will read quite differently in a more literal translation (e.g. the NIV or ESV) when compared with a more free paraphrase (e.g. the Message or the paraphrase included in Tom Gledhill’s commentary). In addition, there is the challenge of deciding who is speaking at different points in the book. In some places this is relatively easy given the use of male or female pronouns, but in others it is less clear. Modern translations such as the NIV place headings over sections to indicate who is speaking, but in some places (as the NIV footnote at 1:2 admits) there is uncertainty as to when voices change. Generally speaking, however, this uncertainty makes little difference to the overall message of the Song.

Despite our cultural distance and the book’s ambiguity we cannot fail to be impressed by the passion of the song and the effusive adoration expressed by the voices within it. There can be little doubt that it was meant to be sung as a celebration of love, beauty and intimacy”.74 Tom Gledhill suggests that:75

The Song found its early popularity within the social and religious life of ancient Israel. It was most probably sung as entertainment at local celebrations of the various harvest festivals, accompanied by dancing at a village wedding, sung as court entertainment at the royal palace in Jerusalem, or at happy family reunions or gatherings.

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72 According to Fee and Stuart (1993, p.211) who distinguish it from “proverbial” wisdom (Proverbs) and “speculative” wisdom (Ecclesiastes, Job).
73 Gledhill, 1994, p.35
74 Gledhill, 1994, p.19
75 Gledhill, 1994, p.19
Date and Authorship

There is a range of opinion as to when this book was written. Traditionally it has been attributed to Solomon, based on the title found in 1:1, although this title (as with the titles of the Psalms) may mean that the song is about Solomon or connected to him rather than written by him. Solomon is mentioned another six times in the book: 1:5 refers to his “tent curtains”, 3:7 and 9 refer to his “carriage”, 3:11 calls the daughters of Jerusalem to see him wearing his crown, and 8:11 and 12 refer to his vineyard and tribute given to him. The only one of these verses that implies a direct personal connection between Solomon and the woman is 8:12, but this may refer simply to the paying of tax on the woman’s vineyard rather than a voluntary giving of money within a loving relationship. Clearly, whenever the book was written, it is set in Solomon’s time.

In addition, the “king” is referred to in 1:4, 1:12 and 7:5. It appears that this “king” is loved by the woman, since she desires him to take her into his chambers (1:4), but this raises the question who the “king is”. There are three main possibilities:

- **“King”** is simply be a literary device referring to the woman’s opinion of her lover – his importance in her estimation is like that of a king. According to this view, the lover was either a shepherd but to her he was a king or he was neither literally a shepherd nor a king, and that these are both literary devices describing different aspects of the same man.
- There is a competition between the king (Solomon) and the shepherd for the affections of the same woman. This is known as the “shepherd hypothesis”. It suggests that Solomon makes advances on the woman but she consistently repels them and remains faithful to her husband, the shepherd.
- **Solomon is both** the king and the shepherd (given the fact that his father David was literally a shepherd). Although it is unwise to be dogmatic, my tendency is to see only two main characters in the love story – the woman and her lover, who is described both as king and shepherd. This is largely because the “shepherd hypothesis” requires a contrived reading of the book in which most of the words of the woman to be read as memories, flashbacks or imagined musings rather than dialogue that belongs with the adjacent words of the shepherd. Whether the lover is literally the king or not is harder to decide.

If Solomon wrote the Song we can date it to the middle of the 10th Century BC when he was king in Jerusalem, but if Solomon is not the author we have no other indication as to who wrote the book or exactly when it was written (many scholars suggest a date between the 5th and 3rd Centuries BC). It is possible that a later person wrote the entire book or gathered together a collection of earlier songs and either attributed the resulting Song to Solomon as author or connected it with him because it was set during his reign. Whatever date we assume has little bearing on the interpretation of the Song.

Structure

Although many commentators (especially those who follow the “shepherd hypothesis” – see below) have tried to identify a plot underlying the book, the range of proposed stories shows that it is impossible to do so with any certainty. This book is dramatic, but it does not appear to tell a progressive story. It simply celebrates the expression of love between a man and a woman. We should approach reading the book more as we would one of Shakespeare’s sonnets rather than his plays. Even amongst commentators who deny that there is a unifying plot there is significant variation over what the major movements of the Song are. For this reason I will not attempt to suggest a structure here.

Interpretation and application

There have been three major approaches to interpreting this book in the history of the church:

a) **An allegory** – The early church understood the book to be an allegory of the mystical love relationship between God or Christ and His people (verses such as 2:4, “He has taken me to the banqueting hall, and his banner over me is love”, will be familiar to many Christians from sermons or choruses). This view has also
been taught within Judaism, and remained common until relatively recently. One popular presentation of it is found in Watchman Nee’s 1965 book *The Song of Songs*. The allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs arose originally in a context in the early church where allegorical readings were being found for most of the Old Testament and was particularly influenced by comparison with allegorical love songs in the prophets (e.g. Isaiah 5:1-7; Hosea 2:2-15) which speak of Israel’s relationship with God. In addition this way of reading the book may have been a reaction against the overtly sexual nature of the book (many within the early church were heavily influenced by Greek thinking which, in contrast to Hebrew thought, tended to see sexuality as unclean, an influence that continues to affect the Church even today) and an attempt to deal with the lack of explicit references to God in the Song. Some allegorical interpretations have attempted to find a meaning for every detail of the song (e.g. the cooing of doves in 2:12 becomes the preaching of the apostles and the mountain of myrrh in 4:6 becomes Calvary 76), whilst others have considered it in more general terms.

b) **A dramatic love song** – Many scholars see the book as a drama, either of a maiden with her lover (who is described both as a rustic shepherd and as a king) or of three characters (the king trying to entice the maiden away from her lover the shepherd). The two-person view is more traditional. Within this view there is a range of opinion as to how the book was used within the life of Israel. Suggestions include informal usage in family gatherings, as a manual of instruction for young people, or in the festivals and religious rituals of Israel.

c) **A collection of love songs** – Most modern critical scholars see it as an unstructured collection of secular love songs (numbering between six and 42), perhaps modelled on praise hymns.

The allegorical reading of the book, although popular for much of history and often appealing to the Christian, is almost certainly a mis-interpretation. Whilst it is correct to think of Christ’s love for His people as the love of a husband for his bride (Ephesians 5:25) and Song of Songs can help us to consider the nature and depth of this love, there is little or no basis in the text of the Song itself for seeing its original intention as allegorical, and the New Testament never refers to the Song with reference to Christ. This is in contrast to the allegorical love songs in the Prophets which refer to God’s love for Israel, as in those passages the meaning is clearly stated. As Grenville Kent writes, “Genuine allegories ... usually announce themselves by details that clearly do not work literally and often give a clear, if brief, statement of their message”.77 I would contend that the second option above is by far the most credible, and that this is intended as a beautiful description of romantic love and its physical expression. It is intended to teach young people about the place for romantic love in life and that this aspect of life matters to God (hence its inclusion in the Bible) and is a valid expression of life within the context that God has given. Given this reading of the book, the following principles for use of Song of Songs may be helpful:

1) **Read it within the overall ethical context of the Bible**

The proper context for the sexuality described in the book is within monogamous, heterosexual marriage, which consummates and continues love between a man and a woman. This is clear from the overall context of the Old Testament which presents marriage as the only appropriate context for sexual activity. As Fee and Stuart write, “The attitude of the Song itself is the very antithesis of unfaithfulness, either before or after marriage”.78 The context of marriage is seen in the Song itself, with the repeated references to the bride in 4:8-5:1. It seems likely that the Song moves from the betrothed couple in chapters 1-3, to marriage in chapter 4 and consummation of the marriage in chapter 5. Another possible connection with the broader view of Scripture is suggested by Kent and others who suggest that elements of the Song imply a partial reversal of the curse sin brought into the world in Genesis 3.79 They suggest that this is a hint of God’s plan of redemption.

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76 If these examples do not convince the reader of the dangers of stretching allegorical interpretations I recommend a reading of Grenville Kent’s summary of historical suggestions for the significance of breasts in the Song which ranges from the twinned leadership of Moses and Aaron to the two ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Kent, 2010, p.126)!

77 Kent, 2000, p.126

78 Fee and Stuart, 1993, p.230

79 Kent, 2010, p.132 mentions the garden imagery in 4:12-16 and the contrast between 7:10 and Genesis 3:16
2) Be aware of the genre and usage

This is a song, full of poetic language, and the same principles mentioned for the interpretation of psalms also apply to interpreting this book. Song of Songs was most likely used in context of marriage ceremonies in ancient Israel. Perhaps today it could be used as part of a marriage preparation course or in Christian education of young people (advisably in a single sex context).

3) Recognise the values it teaches about romance and sex

The values of the Song challenge and correct wrong ideas about romantic love and sexuality in our modern culture and that have impacted the church throughout its history:

- **Wisdom embraces all of life, including sexuality** – There has been an unhelpful influence from Greek philosophy upon Christian thinking throughout history that has led to a view of sex as somehow unclean or even sinful. This influence underlies the development of chastity as the ideal for priests, monks and nuns. The Song of Songs, with its Hebrew wisdom, debunks this myth and shows us that sex, whilst not essential to a fulfilled and godly life, is not in conflict with godliness.

- **Romance and sexuality are good gifts from God** – This book is open about sexuality, but it is by no means vulgar or pornographic. Although God is not actually mentioned directly in the NIV text, His creatorship is implied in 7:1 and there is another allusion to Him, or perhaps more, in 8:6. There the NIV says that love “burns like a mighty flame”. The single Hebrew word represented by this phrase ends with the syllable yah, which is the first syllable of the name of God, Yahweh (generally translated “the LORD” in English versions). The NIV translators interpreted this to mean “mighty”, but their footnote acknowledges the alternative possibility that love is described as “the flame of the LORD”, and the ESV translators included this alternative in the main body of the text. If this alternative reading is accepted, then God does appear in the Song and He is acknowledged as the source of romantic love. Even if the alternative reading is not followed, the presence of this syllable is bound to have implied God’s name to the Jewish reader and so He is implicit as the origin of this love. Romantic love is a fire ignited by God Himself. The Song corrects the problem identified by Grenville Kent, that “Somehow God’s brand name has been removed from one of his most popular products”.

- **Romance and giving matter more in sexual activity than technique** – The Song is concerned not with sexual technique (as modern thinking appears to be) but with virtuous romance, which makes sexual activity meaningful. Some modern attempts to paraphrase the book which are overtly physical in their understanding of its imagery may have some validity (i.e. those images may imply physical sexual activity) but they miss the point that the book was given in poetic form for a reason – to emphasise the beauty and mystery of romantic love and its centrality to appropriate sexual activity. This book has the power to deliver the Christian from the tedious obsession of our prevailing culture with sexual techniques and the holy grail of perfect sex and to restore to us the joy of discovering our sexuality in the context for which God intended and to discover perfect intimacy according to God’s design. Grenville Kent also points out that the book shows that sex cannot be divorced from emotion – it is a giving of the whole self to the other (demonstrated by the use of the word “soul” in 3:1-4). In a society that has separated romance from sex we need to re-emphasise that sexual activity without loving commitment deeply damaging to the emotional health and wholeness of the person. It is a lie told with the body – it says “I love you and give myself to you” when the mind disagrees.

- **Sexuality and sexual union is a gift to both men and women** – The Song celebrates the intimacy of a man and woman in tender and warm language. It is worth noting that both male and female characters are depicted as sexual beings with healthy appreciation for one another and a mutual giving of each other – there is no male dominance here. Although our modern Western culture would agree with this point it has not always been so obvious in every culture.

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80 Kent, 2010, p.124
81 Kent, 2010, p.129f.
CONCLUSION

In this study I have attempted to introduce the reader to the five books that forms a hinge in the Old Testament between the law and narrative book and the prophets. These books are, as we have seen, at the same time some of the most loved in the Old Testament and also some of the most enigmatic. They are both some of the most accessible parts of the Hebrew Bible but also most open to misinterpretation. They include some of the most read portions of Scripture and some of the most neglected. They contain the greatest words of comfort for the believer and also the most troubling of ideas. In short they embrace all of life. They express the deepest anguish and the most exuberant praise. They celebrate the goodness of creation, pleasure and sex, but they also vividly depict the emptiness of life without God, the horrors of sin and the struggles of the faithful to comprehend how God is working in the darkness of suffering.

My intention has been to excite the Christian reader about these books and to provide helpful guidelines for how you can understand and apply their truth to your life. I am confident that in them you will find the way to a blessed life. My prayer is that as you read them you will learn to live a life that is founded in the fear of the Lord and that delights in His instruction, and that you will discover meaning and purpose in every aspect of your existence as you travel faith’s journey from surrender to God (Psalm 1) to the rapturous praise of His presence at journey’s end (Psalm 150) with all of the ups (praise) and downs (lament) you encounter along the way. May wisdom enter your heart (Proverbs 2:10) and praise adorn your lips (Psalm 40:3) as you walk the paths He prepares for you.

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