

# Wisdom Literature



## Poetic Literature

What is parallelism?

## Psalms

What is the book of Psalms?

What is the significance of the arrangement of the five books of Psalms?

What different kinds of psalms do we find in the Psalter?

To read the book of Psalms well, you need to appreciate symbolic language (metaphor and simile) for what it is intended to evoke and then "translate" it into the reality it is pointing to.  
--Douglas Stuart

What are the three important theological themes of Psalms?

## Lamentations

Who wrote Lamentations and why?

## Song of Solomon

What was the sexual ethic of Baalism and how was it different from that of YHWH?

What is so theological about the Song of Solomon?

In order to break the hold of Baalism on the people, a very different interpretation of sexuality had to be asserted and taught and embraced.  
--George Schwab

What is the purpose of the Song?

## The Fear of the Lord

What does it mean to fear God?

Those who experience fear in [God's] presence know their rightful place in the universe. ... To fear Yahweh is to stand in a subservient position to him, to acknowledge one's dependence on him.  
--Tremper Longman III

What is the most important character quality in life?

## Proverbs

What are the two types of wisdom literature and what is the aim of each?

What is a proverb?

How does the father instruct his son in the first part of the book?

The wisdom [Proverbs] speaks of is the kind that must engage the whole man: not only his power to think straight, but his management of affairs, his sensitivity to people, his character and his morals; above all...his relation to God. For 'the fear of the Lord'...is not a mere beginner's step in 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.  
--Derek Kidner

What sort of knowledge do we find in Proverbs?

## Ecclesiastes

What does Qoheleth (the Teacher) consider meaningless?

What is Qoheleth really arguing against, and how does he present this argument in this book?

What is the answer to the secularist worldview and the meaninglessness it fosters?

In Ecclesiastes we have faced 'the appalling inference that nothing has meaning, nothing matters under the sun. It is then that we can hear, as the good news which it is, that *everything* matters-- "for God will bring every deed into judgment...".  
--Derek Kidner

## Job

What is the book of Job about?

The basic error of Job's friends is that they overestimate their grasp of the truth, misapply the truth they know, and close their minds to any facts that contradict what they assume.  
--Derek Kidner

What do the following characters say in the story of Job?

Satan:

Job:

Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, Elihu:

YHWH:

What is the purpose of the book and how is that purpose achieved?

[God's response] cuts us down to size, treating us not as philosophers but as children—limited in mind, puny in body—whose first and fundamental grasp of truth must be to know the difference between our place and God's, and to accept it. We may reflect that if, instead of this, we were offered a defence of our Creator's ways for our approval, it would simply imply that he was accountable to us, not we to him. And if, not being offered this, we were to demand it, we should be guilty of the arrogance of Adam.

--Derek Kidner

## Discussion Questions

Can you identify with Job in his suffering? Who or what have you lost? How have you been deeply wounded? In your pain, have you ever cried out, "Why me?" Have you ever sought to justify yourself before God? Why do you suppose that God responded to Job the way that he did? What lesson do you think we ought to learn from this story?

What is your favorite psalm? What psalm have you prayed when you did not know what else to pray? What psalm has given voice to your deepest anguish, fears, or disappointments? Are you emotionally honest with God? If you are not, how can the psalms help you to become so?

What is wisdom? How do you gain it? What sort of wisdom do you find in the Proverbs? Do you have a favorite proverb? What are some contemporary, American proverbs? How do these relate to the proverbs of Scripture? Have you ever reflected on the experience of your own life and come up with a proverb or maxim to live by?

Do you agree that a secular worldview inevitably leads to nihilism and a sense of meaninglessness? How is this meaninglessness reflected in popular culture? What makes life worth living? What is the Christian view of death, and how is it different from a secular view? How could God's judgment infuse life with meaning?

What is so appealing about Baal's view of sex? How is the view of sex presented in the Song of Solomon different from Baal's view? Which do you think would be more appealing to the common person back then? Which would be more appealing today? What, after all, is the big deal about sex? How would you craft a message that would make monogamy more appealing to our culture?

## Recommended Books

Walter Brueggemann | Praying the Psalms

Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart | How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth

Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart | How to Read the Bible Book by Book

Derek Kidner | The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes

C.S. Lewis | Reflections on the Psalms

Tremper Longman III & Peter Enns | Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings

## Job | Outline

**1-2 | prologue** | Then the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job?” (1:8a)

The story begins with the angels presenting themselves before YHWH, and Satan (literally, “the Satan”) is among them. God brags about Job, but Satan cynically responds that Job is only righteous because God has kept him from trouble. God allows Satan to go after Job and all that he has in order to test him, and Job famously loses all that he has, including his children. The game, as they say, is afoot.

**3, 6-7, 9-10, 12-14, 16-17, 19, 21, 23-24, 26-31, 40:3-5, 42:1-6 | job** | I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. (19:25)

Everything Job had has been taken from him, and his opening lines tell the depth of his anguish: “May the day of my birth perish....” All he really wants to do, at the beginning of the story, is die. As the story continues, Job becomes increasingly agitated by the empty platitudes and “health and wealth” type theology of his friends. They tell him that he suffers because of his sin, but he maintains that he is a righteous man. He also grows more agitated with God for bringing this suffering upon him, especially considering how careful he has been to live righteously. Job goes so far as to say that he would present his case to God’s face, if he could, and is confident he would receive a judgment in his favor! Job is certain of both his innocence and his righteousness. Job’s tone changes after the Lord speaks to him. His first reply to the Lord is short: “I am unworthy—how can I reply to you?” His second response is not much longer but is just as telling of what happens to a bitter man after God has confronted him: “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.... Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

**4-5, 15, 22 | eliphaz** | All his days the wicked man suffers torment. (15:20a)

Eliphaz begins his conversation with Job by encouraging him, but he ends it by creating a long list of false accusations against him. Eliphaz’s theology is fairly simple: God brings destruction on the wicked but gives prosperity to the righteous. Therefore, because God has brought destruction on Job (or so it would seem), Job is wicked.

One of the amazing features of Eliphaz’s statements is how he can speak remarkably beautiful theology (5:18) followed by remarkably terrible theology (5:19-26). But the argument is clear: Job is guilty of some unknown sin, and must repent in order to become prosperous again.

**8, 18, 25 | bildad** | The lamp of the wicked is snuffed out; the flame of his fire stops burning. (18:5)

Bildad starts like a house-on-fire, saying something you should never say to a grieving person (8:4). He continues to be extremely confrontational with Job, calling him wicked. Like Eliphaz, he often mixes good and bad theology.

**11,20 | zophar** | But the eyes of the wicked will fail, and escape will elude them; their hope will become a dying gasp. (11:20)

Zophar brings more of the same. His emphasis, particularly in chapter 20, is on the destiny of the wicked. The core theology of these three friends is this: God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked. The reverse then is also true: one who suffers must be wicked. Job, therefore, is wicked.

**32-37 | elihu** | He does not keep the wicked alive. (36:6a)

Elihu considers himself wise, but he only offers more of the same tired theology and empty platitudes of the other three. Elihu’s one development may be his picture of a harsh God primarily concerned with meting out justice on the earth.

**38-40:2, 40:6-41 | YHWH** | Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. (38:3 & 40:7)

The Lord riddles Job with a litany of dozens of questions related to Creation. They serve to show the bigness of God, and silence Job in his pride. The Lord then appeals to the two great creatures he has made—the behemoth and leviathan. He barely speaks of his own character, but instead relies on the Creation to testify to his greatness. He never answers Job’s charges, yet still Job gives way to him.

**42:7-17 | epilogue** | The Lord blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the first. (42:12a)

The test is over and Job has been humbled before God. The cynical Satan was wrong, and God blessed Job after his suffering more than he had before.

## Psalms | Outline

**1-41 | book one** | The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. (23:1)

The first book of the Psalter contains some of the most memorable psalms, including 1, 19, 22, and 23. David is the only author credited in the first book, with his name appearing in the subscript of 37 of the 41 psalms. The psalms of this book reflect the many and varied situations that David found himself in, including psalms written in the context of his conflicts with Saul (before he became king) and Absalom (near the end of his reign). What is most striking about these psalms is the depth of the emotional connection David had with YHWH and the freedom he felt to express himself fully to his God.

**42-72 | book two** | My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? (42:2)

A new author, or group of authors, emerges in the second book. Although David is still credited with authoring 17 of these psalms, the Sons of Korah wrote the first seven of the book.

One of the more interesting features of this book is the way it refers to God. These psalms deemphasize the use of the proper name, YHWH, and frequently use the more general name, Elohim. The English picks this up well, as most translations use “God” for Elohim, and “LORD” for YHWH. Because of this shift in name-usage, this book is often referred to as “The Elohist Psalter” and is given a later date of writing/editing. An interesting exercise that may shed some light on this subject would be to compare Psalms 53 and 14. They are nearly identical, except that YHWH has clearly been replaced in 14 with Elohim in 53.

**73-89 | book three** | You have renounced the covenant with your servant and have defiled his crown in the dust! (89:39)

Most of the psalms of this book were written by Asaph. Asaph was a Levitical choir leader who served under the leadership of David and Solomon. He is mentioned in 1 Chronicles 16:5, 2 Chronicles 5:12 and 29:30. But perhaps the most important psalm of this book, 89, was written by Ethan the Ezrahite. This psalm is important because it closes the first half of the Psalter, and it does so on a darkly negative note. Ethan laments that Israel has forsaken and been forsaken by YHWH. God has abandoned his servant, the king, who stands in the line of David.

**90-106 | book four** | Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. (90:1)

The second half of the Psalter begins with a psalm attributed to Moses. “The mention of Moses returns the reader to a time in Israel’s history when the nation was led by only one king, Yahweh.” (Tucker, in Longman, 590) Where Psalm 89 concluded with the failure of the Davidic, human king, Psalm 90 picks up with the memory of a time when Israel’s king was YHWH, the one king who never failed. This book is considered the theological and editorial center of the Psalter because it reorients the reader to the kingship of YHWH with several enthronement psalms. This book was likely edited together around the time of the exile to Babylon, so a return to the theme of the reign of YHWH would have been crucial in keeping hope alive for the exiled Israelites.

**107-150 | book five** | Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever. (107:1)

The last book of the Psalter contains many of David’s psalms, as well as many that are not attributed to any author. The last five psalms, with their emphasis on praise, provide a fitting conclusion to the Psalter. Each of those psalms begins with the line, “Hallelu Yah,” which serves to remind us that, while honest expression of our emotions to God is always appropriate, the most fitting prayer is, and the last word should always be, “Hallelujah!”

## Proverbs | Outline

**1-9 | instruction** | The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline. (1:7)

The first nine chapters of Proverbs read like an instruction manual for life, written from a father to his son. The central theme or command of these instructions is to embrace wisdom. To this end, the father exhorts his son to reject violent men and the temptation to a violent life, as well as adultery and the adulterous woman. He returns over and over to the virtues of pursuing wisdom and the benefits of living wisely as opposed to the warnings against living foolishly.

In the last three chapters of this section the father personifies adultery and wisdom as two women, both of whom cry out for young men to heed their calls. The former, of course, leads to destruction, while the latter leads to life.

**10-22:16, 25-29 | wisdom** | A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. (15:1)

These two sections of the book comprise all the proverbs of King Solomon. These are the traditional proverbs, which are pithy sayings intended to give a brief, memorable picture of the truth. The proverbs of Solomon beautifully demonstrate the primary characteristic of Hebrew poetry: parallelism. This form of poetry contains just two (or sometimes three) lines. The second line will often amplify the first, or provide an additional insight. For example, "A quick-tempered man does foolish things, and a crafty man is hated." (14:17) More often, however, the second line will provide a counterpoint to the first. For example, "A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a mocker does not listen to rebuke." (13:1) Parallelism is found in most Hebrew poetry, including all of the wisdom books.

**22:17-24 | sayings** | An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips. (24:26)

Between the two sections of Solomon's proverbs is a two and a half chapter interlude of sayings gathered from other wise men. Scholars have found a great deal of similarity between this section and an older, Egyptian document called "Wisdom of Amenemope." Each document contains thirty sayings, and many scholars have postulated that the version we have in Proverbs is a Hebrew adaptation of the older, Egyptian document.

**30-31 | women** | A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. (31:10)

The last two chapters contain sayings from Agur and Lemuel, two people who were not Israelites, and who are historically unknown to us. Lemuel's words were taught to him by his mother, and the last half of his chapter are popularly known to us as "The Wife of Noble Character."

## Ecclesiastes | Outline

**1-8 | meaningless** | “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” (1:2)

The Teacher looks back on his full and productive life and declares that everything is meaningless. The first several chapters contain a long list of things that are meaningless, including wisdom, pleasure, work, ambition, and wealth. Again and again he returns to the theme, “A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work.” Nothing escapes the cynical commentary of the Teacher. There is only a brief interlude in which he declares that, because all is meaningless, all we have that is meaningful is God, and therefore we ought to stand in awe of him.

**9-12 | death** | This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. (9:3a)

Death is the common destiny of the righteous and the wicked, of men and animals. This harsh reality drives the Teacher to the heights of cynicism: “The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong...but time and chance happen to them all.” Death hovers over life with an intolerable weight and darkness that renders all of life, from the cynical perspective of the Teacher, meaningless.

But there is another who hovers over all of life, not as destiny but as Judge. And it is God’s coming judgment that, ironically, gives meaning and weight to our every word and deed. Where death deprives life of meaning, God’s impending judgment infuses life with meaning. Therefore, “fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”

## Song of Solomon | Outline

**1-8 | love** | Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. (8:7a)

Perhaps the most surprising book in the Bible, the Song of Solomon is a love poem full of romantic, and often erotic, imagery. It is not a book for the faint of heart, and many are shocked to find in Scripture such descriptive language of sex. But this book is ultimately about the love between a man and a woman, and it tells the story of their courtship and marriage, including dates, fights, and their wedding night.

## Lamentations | Outline

**1-5 | laments** | Woe to us, for we have sinned! (5:16b)

Jeremiah is traditionally recognized as the author of these five poems of lament. The first four poems are acrostics, and the last one is a prayer. These are poems of lament, mourning the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews. They serve as a poignant response to the prophets because they give a ground-level view of judgment, where the prophets offer us God’s view.

