THE
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PLACE

Telling the Old Testament Story of God

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SESSION 11

Poetic and Wisdom Literature

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SESSION 11

Poetic and Wisdom Literature

SESSION OVERVIEW

Biblical Poetry in the Psalms

Wisdom Literature

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- identify the main characteristic of biblical Hebrew poetry and its various forms.

- list and describe various types of Psalms.

- understand the historical context and purpose of Wisdom Literature.

- recognize the various forms of Wisdom Literature.

INTRODUCTION

In this session, the Poetic and Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament will be considered. Specifically we will discuss Hebrew poetry and the various types of psalms found in the Old Testament, as well as the various forms of Wisdom Literature.

BIBLICAL POETRY IN THE PSALMS

The original setting in which the Psalms were used was worship in the Jerusalem Temple. At first, the Psalms were likely used in the Temple services of the pre-exilic period. The Psalter (complete book of Psalms) did not receive its final form until the postexilic (second Temple) period. It was likely used for song and worship in this second Temple period. Consequently, Psalms has been referred to as the Hymnbook of the Second Temple. The second Temple refers to the Temple built after the exilic period, since the Babylonians had destroyed Solomon's Temple.

Later in the postexilic period, synagogue worship began to emerge. The many synagogues, local worship centers, became focal points of prayer and the interpretation of Scripture. Due to its use in the synagogue, Psalms also became known as the Prayer Book of the Synagogue.

THEMES

The first two psalms express the hallmarks of Jewish faith during the Second Temple period: the revelation of God's will through the Torah, and the hope of the Messiah who will inaugurate the kingdom of God.

Psalm 1 establishes an introductory focus on the Torah (the Law of the Lord). Under Ezra, in the postexilic period, the Torah became the central focus of Jewish life. Psalm 1 appears to reflect this postexilic emphasis on the Law.

Psalm 2 reflects the promise and expectation of the coming Messiah as the Son of God, who will rule the nations.

PARALLELISM

The major characteristics of poetry are rhyme and rhythm. Hebrew poetry is also characterized by some sense of meter; however, its main characteristic is called parallelism.

Synonymous Parallelism: One or more words or phrases in the lines of poetry are repeated in equal or identical terms. Examples:

(line 1) The waters saw thee, O God;
(line 2) The waters saw thee, they were seized with anguish. (Ps. 77:16)
(line 1) Listen to me, **O coastlands**
(line 2) and hearken, **you peoples from afar.**

(Notice how each phrase from the first line is repeated in the second line using different words.)

(line 1) The Lord called me **from the womb,**
(line 2) **from the body of my mother** he named my name.

(Notice how each phrase from the first line is repeated in the second line using different words. In this case, the first phrase of line 1 is repeated in the second phrase of line 2; and the second phrase of line 1 is repeated in the first phrase of line 2.) (Isaiah 49:1)

Antithetic Parallelism: One or more words or phrases in the lines of poetry are repeated in opposite terms. Examples:

(line 1) For the Lord knows the way of the **righteous,**
(line 2) but the way of the **wicked** will perish. (Ps 1:6)

(Notice the opposing terms: righteous vs. wicked.)

(line 1) A wise son brings joy to **his father;**
(line 2) but a foolish son grief to **his mother.** (Prov. 10:1)

(Notice the opposing terms: wise vs. foolish; rejoiceth vs. grief; father vs. mother.)

Synthetic Parallelism: A constructive parallelism is achieved by grammatical constructions. Synthetic parallelism is also described as one line of thought extending or completing the thought in a previous line. Examples:

(line 1) Whatever the Lord pleases he does,
(line 2) **in the** heaven and in the earth,
(line 3) **in the** seas, and in all the deeps. (Ps. 135:6)

(Notice the repetition of the prepositional phrase "in the . . .")

(line 1) The fool says in his heart,
(line 2) "**There is no God.**"

(Notice how the second line completes the thought of the first line.)

(line 1) The Lord looks down from heaven
(line 2) **upon the children of men.** (Ps. 14:1-2)

(Notice how the second line completes the thought of the first line.)

TYPES OF PSALMS

Consider the following types of psalms.

Salvation History Psalms: Psalms expressing the shared history of the believing community. These psalms reflect a confessional retelling of God's action with the people of Israel, within their history (i.e., Psalms 78; 105; 106).

Psalms of Lament (community and individual): Psalms expressing distress in times of need or anxiety. These psalms usually contain both a complaint and a confession of trust in God for deliverance. Included are praise in the midst of distress and anticipation of deliverance (i.e., community laments, Psalms 44; 80; individual laments, Psalms 22; 31).

Songs of Thanksgiving (community and individual): Praise to God in response to an event of deliverance already experienced (i.e., community, Psalms 107; 124; individual, Psalms 92; 116).

Hymns of Praise: Praise to God in general terms for the majesty of God's being, for God's greatness and goodness as Creator and Lord of history. These often have a universal and cosmic dimension (i.e., Psalms 8; 19; 100; 114; 145).

Festival Songs and Liturgies: Songs sung at various festivals and liturgies used on special worship occasions. These include covenant renewal liturgies, enthronement psalms, and songs of Zion (i.e., Psalms 81; 46; 24; 95).

Songs of Trust and Meditation: Spiritual songs filled solely with the trust motif, characteristic of the latter part of a lament. Meditation psalms focus on such themes as wisdom or the Law of God (i.e., Psalms 23; 91; 37; 73).

WISDOM LITERATURE

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HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Every culture devotes itself in some way to the care and literary cultivation of its knowledge, which comes from experience. The classic example is that of a parent passing on to a child the wisdom she or he has accumulated through a lifetime of experiences. This is an elementary activity of the human mind. Its aim is averting harm and impairment of life from others. A person must know his or her way about in the world in order to hold his or her own in it.

Among the nations it has been a concern to pass on from generation to generation the gathered knowledge of the community. Ancient Israel also took part in the business of cultivating experiential knowledge. However, many of the most elementary experiences appeared quite different to Israel than to other nations. This is because Israel interpreted its experiences within a specific religious and spiritual context. The wisdom of ancient Israel comes to us with the biblical context.

For the most part, the Bible contains God's Word to us. That is, most texts involve God speaking to us. Some texts, however, reflect human expression. For instance, many psalms contain human expressions of praise, lament, or thanksgiving to God. Other biblical texts contain expressions of human reflection on life in general. Wisdom Literature is human reflection about life and how best to live it. Wisdom Literature in the Scriptures begins with the assumption that life is overseen by God. Thus, biblical wisdom begins with the "fear of the Lord," and the understanding that the wise are guided by God (Prov. 3:5-6; 16:3-9; 19:21).

For biblical wisdom, human experiences are best understood and interpreted in relation to God as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Therefore, the Wisdom Literature in the Bible might be called God's Word written in human experience. It is recognition that God's Word is permeated throughout the universe and in society (Rom. 1:20). It is recognition of God's revelation through nature and human reason. The sages of ancient Israel sought such divine wisdom, through the examination of and reflection on human experience.

PURPOSE OF WISDOM LITERATURE

Wisdom Literature serves at least two important functions:

- Instruction of the young

- General instruction for life

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The young were taught so they could achieve wellbeing and serve society. General instructions for the old, as well as the young, were given in order to help people get along in life. These included practical concerns such as advice regarding home, family, and social issues.

Wisdom Literature deals with the ongoing questions of living. For example:

- Job deals with the ever-present question of human suffering

- Ecclesiastes addresses the limitations of human life

- Song of Solomon deals with the major human issue of love between a man and a woman

- Proverbs addresses a number of familiar human concerns: raising children (13:24; 22:6); moral virtues such as self-discipline (10:17) and honesty (15:27; 16:11)

GENRES (FORMS) OF WISDOM LITERATURE

Following is a list of the various forms of Wisdom Literature.

Sentence, Proverb, or Saying: The basic form of wisdom expression is the sentence, proverb, or saying. Such sayings seek to state a general truth or insight in a succinct, interest-catching, sometimes witty form. Some short sentences can be described as admonitions, exhortations, and prohibitions. Example: Prov. 22:1.

Numerical Sayings: Numerical sayings bring together lists of events that possess similar characteristics. For example, "Three things are never satisfied; four never say, 'Enough'" (Prov. 30:15b; see also vv. 18, 21, 24, 29). Another example of a numerical saying can be found in Prov. 6:16-19.

Allegory: At least two allegorical passages appear in wisdom literature: Prov. 5:15-23 and Eccles. 12:1-6 (an allegory of old age/death).

Autobiography: The autobiographical form is used by the sage (teacher of wisdom) in order to offer learning drawn from long and varied experience. Part of Ecclesiastes and some passages in Proverbs adopt this form (see also Ps. 37:25; 35-36).

Dialogue: The dialogue form, popular throughout the Near East, is represented in the Old Testament only by Job. Job's dialogues are with his several friends, with his family, and with God.

Lists (Onomasticon—naming, list of names): A class of texts known as the list or onomasticon served to catalogue natural phenomenon, places, trades, flora and fauna, minerals, cities, etc. Such texts were found in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Israel. Such lists are seen in Job 38-39.

Polished Poetry: Israel's sages also produced what can only be described as polished literary poems (i.e., the poem on the ideal wife in Prov. 31:10-31 and the poem at Eccles. 3:1-8). In addition, didactic (teaching) poems can be found in Job and Proverbs (Job 27:13-23).

DUAL APPROACH OF BIBLICAL WISDOM MATERIAL

Biblical Wisdom Literature contains at least two approaches to wisdom:

Positive Strand of Tradition within Wisdom Literature: This approach represents a confident and trusting attitude toward the human ability to understand and master life. It reflects a positive assessment of the human capacity to understand the ways and will of God in the world. This approach affirms God has gifted humans with a mind and the ability to use it for understanding the experiences of life. Proverbs reflects this positive approach to wisdom.

Negative Strand of Tradition within Wisdom Literature: A strand of skeptical Wisdom Literature developed. This strand questioned traditional assumptions and laid siege to honored religious claims. It gave expression to the anguish of human existence and the torment of living with unanswered questions. This approach affirms God and the universe are too great to understand; God and His ways are too far beyond human comprehension. Job and Ecclesiastes reflect this negative approach to human wisdom.

Paradoxically, both of these strands of wisdom exist side by side in the Bible. That is because both are true: God has gifted humans with the capacity to think, reflect, and understand human experience. At the same time, there are limitations to human knowledge. These limitations lead us to the realization that we are finite creatures who must place our trust in and our dependence upon God for daily living.

APPLICATION

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1. Read Psalms 19; 22; 91; 105; and 116. Outline each psalm and identify the central theme or concern of each. Describe how you would categorize/label each psalm according to its content.

2. Creatively write your own psalm (just a few lines). Illustrate a form of parallelism in your psalm. Reflect any category of psalm you wish.

3. Scan through Proverbs and list at least 10 distinct themes/topics/issues addressed in the book. How would you describe the character and purpose of Proverbs?

4. Write in your journal. Include your reflections and insights from this session and from your reading and study. Select one genre of Wisdom Literature; read and reflect on examples of the genre you choose.

EXAM

1. The original setting in which the Psalms were used was the worship in the Jerusalem Temple.
    A. True
    B. False

2. The Psalter (complete book of Psalms) did not receive its final form until the postexilic (second Temple) period.
    A. True
    B. False

3. Psalm 1_____.
    A. Establishes the eternal reign of the line of David
    B. Establishes that God is creator of the earth
    C. Establishes an introductory focus on the Torah (i.e., the Law of the Lord)
    D. None of the above

4. Psalm 2 _____.
    A. Reminds the Israelites that they are to worship in Jerusalem and nowhere else
    B. Reflects the promise and expectation of the coming Messiah as the Son of God, who will rule the nations
    C. Both of the above
    D. None of the above

5. Which of the following is NOT a type of Hebrew parallelism?
    A. Synonymous parallelism
    B. Antithetic parallelism
    C. Synthetic parallelism
    D. Machinated parallelism

6. In antithetic parallelism, one or more words or phrases in the lines of poetry are repeated in opposite terms.
    A. True
    B. False

7. In synonymous parallelism, a "constructive" parallelism is achieved by grammatical constructions.
    A. True
    B. False

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8. Wisdom Literature in the Scriptures begins with the assumption that life is overseen by God.
    A. True
    B. False

9. Which of the following is a purpose of wisdom literature?
    A. Instructions on methods of worship
    B. Instructions on taking care of the land
    C. Instructions to the young
    D. Instructions on biblical interpretation

10. The basic form of wisdom expression is the sentence, proverb, or saying.
    A. True
    B. False

11. Numerical sayings bring together lists of events that possess completely different characteristics.
    A. True
    B. False

12. The dialogue form, popular throughout the Near East, is represented in the Old Testament only by Job.
    A. True
    B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Recall the postexilic focus on Law and apocalyptic hope discussed in session 10. Note how the first two psalms match that same postexilic emphasis. What might this imply regarding the final editing of the collection of Psalms?

2. What are the various types of Psalms? What is the difference between them? Can you give examples?

3. What are the historical context and the purpose of wisdom literature? What are some books of wisdom literature in the Old Testament?

4. What are the various forms of wisdom literature? Give examples of each from the Old Testament.