

had the Torah to guide them. So the priests were not only intermediaries between the people and God, they taught what the Torah had to say about living a holy life in relationship to a holy God (Lev 10:10–11; see the “Holiness Code” in Lev 17–26).

Prophets had a different perspective on life with God. The prophets (the **Former Prophets** and **Latter Prophets** of the Hebrew Bible: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the **Book of the Twelve** for Christian Bibles) prized the covenant relationship God established with his people and covenant values, such as a single-minded devotion to the LORD—and only the LORD—and social justice that comes from a love of others. Prophets are sometimes regarded as covenant lawyers for the LORD, pressing charges against the LORD’s people when they fail to uphold their promises. Unlike priests, the prophet’s source of information was not Torah, but direct revelation via dreams, visions, or some other means by which God would communicate a message. Consequently, a prophet would stand and say, “The LORD says,” “The LORD has spoken,” or “Hear the LORD’s word” (e.g., see the various forms in Isa 1:2, 1:10, 3:16, 7:3, 8:1, 8:11).

Sages bring a third perspective to what it means to live with the LORD, a viewpoint that prizes wisdom. In the Hebrew Bible, the term *hokmah*, most often translated as “wise” or “wisdom,” is used in two ways—the first is helpful for understanding the second. First, writers use the term *hokmah* to describe people who are highly skilled at some task. As an example, Ezekiel describes the city-state of Tyre as a magnificent ship (Ezek 27:4–8), with nobles of other cities rowing the boat and Sidon’s own “skilled men” (NIV, NRSV) serving as the helmsmen (CEB) or pilots (KJV). Behind the key term “skilled” stands *hokmah*, shown here by two translations of verse 8 that use the word “wise”: “Thy wise [*hokmah*] men, O Tyrus, that were in thee, were thy pilots” (KJV) and “Your own wise [*hokmah*] men were in you as your helmsmen” (CEB). So we see that *hokmah* may denote the idea of a high degree of skill or ability at a particular task. We find the same use of *hokmah* in Jeremiah 9 as the LORD weeps for Israel and issues a proclamation: “Summon the women who mourn, let them come; send for the best trained, let them come” (9:17). What the LORD wants are those who are good at crying and singing sad songs—those who are so exceptional they have turned professional and are paid to cry and sing at a funerals. Our key word stands behind the last phrase that describes these women: “best trained.” In other translations, this phrase is translated as “the most skillful of them” (NIV) and “the skilled women” (RSV, NRSV). Literally, however, the text reads “send for the wise [*hokmah*] women, let them come.” Again, this use of *hokmah* denotes a group of people who are especially good and/or well trained at a specific task.

This use and meaning of the term *hokmah* is helpful for understanding its abstract use in wisdom literature. If *hokmah* means special skill or expertise at one task, then *hokmah* for sages means skill and expertise for all of life—for living well. So, the one to whom the LORD provides wisdom will learn to live life at its best:

Then you will understand righteousness and justice,
as well as integrity, every good course.
Wisdom will enter your mind,
and knowledge will fill you with delight.

Discretion will guard you;
 understanding will protect you.
 Wisdom will rescue you from the evil path,
 from people who twist their words. (Prov 2:9–12)

Or, picturing wisdom as a woman (a feature to which we will return), Proverbs describes the great gain to be had in finding this wisdom/woman:

Her profit is better than silver,
 and her gain better than gold.
 Her value exceeds pearls;
 all you desire can't compare with her.
 In her right hand is a long life;
 in her left are wealth and honor.
 Her ways are pleasant;
 all her paths are peaceful.
 She is a tree of life to those who embrace her;
 those who hold her tight are happy. (3:14–18)

For the sages, wisdom is nothing less than a recovery of the tree of life (Prov 3:18), lost in Genesis 3. Not so that sages will live forever, but so they know how to live life to its fullest potential—to genuinely live in all they do, day after day.

Priests find their perspective on life from the Torah, prophets look to the covenants and direct revelation from God, and sages learn wisdom from different resources. First, notice the shared element in the following verses from the Book of Ecclesiastes (NRSV). What practice or source brings this writer wisdom?

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God. (2:24)

I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. (3:10)

Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well. (3:16)

Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them. (4:1)

Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person's envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind. (4:4)

Again, I saw vanity under the sun . . . (4:7)

I saw all the living who, moving about under the sun, follow that youth who replaced the king . . . (4:15)

There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt . . . (5:13)

This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. (5:18; see also 6:1, 7:15)

I expect that you can see how this writer gains knowledge: the first source of wisdom for sages is what they see in life (or what they experience) and their reflection on what they see, so that they understand or learn from it. In this way, the sages build a body of information about what is advisable or best to do in the most practical of circumstances. Thus, the older sages become, the more they know about how to live life to its fullest.

A second source of wisdom is the collected observations and teachings about life accumulated by previous sages, now handed down from one generation to the next. The Book of Proverbs is a compilation of such wisdom, collected and now made available to others so they can read, study, and gain from what past generations of sages have seen and learned about how life works. So it comes as no surprise when we read the Book of Job, we find Job's friends supporting their claims by appealing first to what they have seen and second to the traditional knowledge of the sages (e.g., 8:8–10, 15:9–10, 15:17–19). Consequently, Eliphaz (one of the friends) tells Job,

Appeal based on Source One:

As I have seen, those who plow iniquity
and sow trouble reap the same. (4:8 NRSV)

Appeal based on Source Two:

What do you know that we do not know?
What do you understand that is not clear to us?
The gray-haired and the aged are on our side,
those older than your father. (15:9–10 NRSV)

And a little later, Eliphaz appeals to both sources of wisdom together:

I will show you; listen to me;
what I have seen I will declare—
what sages have told,
and their ancestors have not hidden, (15:17–18 NRSV)

Thus, wisdom comes from our own careful observations (investigation, research) and from the accumulated wisdom of previous generations.

The significance of recognizing these two sources of wisdom is tremendous. By its nature, wisdom is both intergenerational and international in scope. Anyone, at any time and any place on earth, can develop wisdom. And, in fact, civilizations from the ancient Far East to those of the New West, and all points between, have developed their own unique wisdom traditions flavored with the exotic or homespun nature of their roots. God's wisdom for learning how to live day-to-day life well and how to live life to its fullest is not the property of Israel alone. It is available to anyone and everyone who is willing to open their eyes to see, and open their minds to reflect on what they see and learn from it (similar to claims made in the New Testament; see Rom 1:19–25).

So, we find wisdom in ancient Chinese proverbs:

- ~ A book holds a house of gold.
- ~ To know the road ahead, ask those coming back.

Proverbs attributed to Confucius:

- ~ By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest;
- Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.
- ~ If you think in terms of a year, plant a seed;
- if in terms of ten years, plant trees;
- if in terms of 100 years, teach the people.

Or wisdom from the insights of Ben Franklin in *Poor Richard's Almanack* (see Figure 14.2):

- ~ Diligence is the mother of good luck.
- ~ Wish not so much to live long, as live well.
- ~ If you would not be forgotten as soon as you are dead and rotten, either write things worth reading or do things worth writing.
- ~ Up, sluggard, and waste not life; in the grave will be sleep enough.
- ~ Beware of little expenses, a small leak will sink a great ship.
- ~ One today is worth two tomorrows.
- ~ Fish and visitors stink after three days.



Figure 14.1. Bronze Figure of Confucius

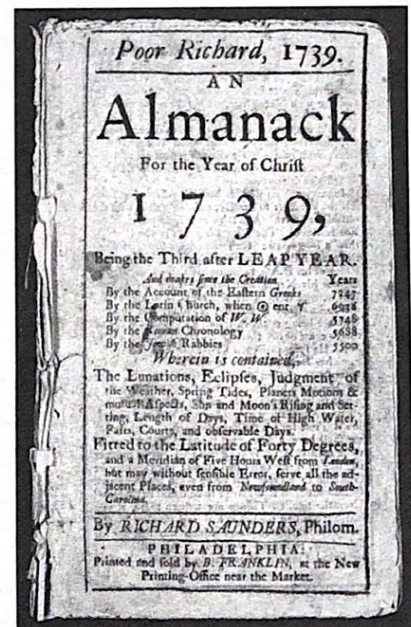


Figure 14.2. *Poor Richard's Almanack*

Thus, from Israel to Egypt, the ancient Near East to the Far East, and Confucius to Ben Franklin, by its nature, wisdom is an international enterprise.

The universal character of wisdom raises important questions: So, what is the difference between *Poor Richard's Almanack* or ancient Chinese proverbs and what we find in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible? How does Israelite wisdom differ from other wisdom traditions? Or, to restate the question one more time: How does Old Testament wisdom literature differ from what we can buy at any bookstore today that claims to teach us how to live a better life?

For Proverbs, the answer, in a single word, is *Yahweh*—the LORD. Biblical wisdom texts stress that the beginning of wisdom—perhaps also claiming the very heart of wisdom—is a proper relationship with the LORD. The Book of Proverbs begins with these words:

Wisdom begins with the fear of the LORD,
but fools despise wisdom and instruction. (1:7)

The conclusion of chapters 1–9 restates the claim:

The beginning of wisdom is fear of the LORD;
the knowledge of the holy one is understanding. (9:10)

Unfortunately, the phrase “fear of the LORD” invites serious misunderstanding, as if wisdom begins with being afraid of God. In fact, the phrase does suggest fear as in proper respect for God, but it does not mean terror or being afraid. For the sages, “fear of the LORD” denotes the right type of relationship with the LORD, defined by the second half of 9:10 as “knowing” the Holy One—an expression of close intimacy.

So, for Israel’s wisdom tradition, wisdom begins with, and has at its very core, a proper relationship with God, a relationship of respect and close intimacy: “the fear of the LORD.” And for Israel’s sages, this changes everything. Now, their observations are not theologically neutral, but theologically charged as investigations of life and the world as created and ordered by God, all so that we learn how life works best (see Prov 8:22–36). Therefore, instruction in wisdom is essentially and ultimately about our relationship with God. The study of how we may best live—in the day-to-day, ordinary events of life—is really a study of how a person lives with God in God’s world. This is a perspective quite different from the priest’s Torah, the prophet’s direct revelation, and other wisdom traditions around the world, past or present.

We have already mentioned the primary wisdom texts: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. In addition to these, scholars detect strong wisdom influence in other texts—such as the Joseph story (Gen 37–48), some psalms (see Ps 19, 119). We take this as a prompt to explain that priests, prophets, and sages were not opponents in determining *the correct* approach to life with God. Instead, they understood and accepted the need for more than one way to think about faith. In fact, some prophets (e.g., Jeremiah, Ezekiel) were also priests. So, rather than rivals, these three different ways of understanding life with God are mutually supportive of one another, because all three are needed for a full-bodied understanding of how to live today and tomorrow (and the

next day) with the LORD. Priests lead us through holiness to close proximity and worship of the LORD, prophets refuse to let us live entitled lives without concern for the un-entitled throughout the world, and the sages teach us how to live our everyday lives with wisdom.

Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs is the foundational wisdom text to which Job and Ecclesiastes respond. Excluding its introduction (1:1–7) and conclusion (31:10–31), Proverbs develops the idea of wisdom in its two parts: chapters 1–9 and 10–31. Chapters 1–9 present three intertwined themes: the importance of wisdom (it is life!), wisdom as a path that one walks (not a destination to which one arrives and stops), and the necessity to choose wisdom (not to make a clear choice is to choose folly). With this appeal for wisdom finished and the reader led to choose the more difficult path of a wise life, Proverbs 10–31 then present the content of wisdom—what wisdom looks like in the details of life.

The forms or genres of these two halves also differ. In Proverbs 1–9, the writer or editor makes use of longer genres: ten father–son speeches (e.g., 1:8–19, 2:1–22); and four interludes, presenting the speech of wisdom personified as a woman (1:20–33, 8:1–36, 9:1–6) or giving a tribute to this woman (3:13–20). These different genres work together to develop the three themes mentioned above, ultimately convincing the young man (the primary intended audience of the book; see 1:4) to choose wisdom as a way of life. One other feature, difficult to miss in chapters 1–9, is the presence of many different women in relationship to the young man: his mother (1:8, 6:20), his wife (present or future, 5:15–19), any woman other than his wife (2:16–19; 5:3–14, 20; 6:24–35; 7:5–23), folly personified as a woman (9:13–18), and woman wisdom (1:20–33, 3:13–20, 8:1–36, 9:1–6). Why so many women? It seems that the writer recognizes what is on the mind of his intended audience more than anything else: young men think about women! So these women vie for the young man's attention in something of a soap opera within Proverbs 1–9. His mother (and father) with woman wisdom urge the son to listen to them rather than to the sly, provocative words of the "other" woman who wants him (sexually), but who will destroy him. Instead, he should find his sexual fulfillment in his wife. In fact, these chapters ultimately urge the young man to marry woman wisdom (see 3:13–18, and 7:14 with its language of marriage, e.g., "sister," meaning wife). Once understood—choosing the path of wisdom via marrying the personification of wisdom—the conclusion of the book makes better sense: the ode to the wife and mother in the *acrostic* of Proverbs 31:10–31 is an ode to woman wisdom. Within a book that nowhere else specifically addresses women, it seems odd to conclude the book with a speech that is aimed at women. Instead, read with Proverbs 1–9, we see that these verses present a final reminder to the young man of the blessings to be found in making woman wisdom his wife—a superwoman who never sleeps and will never stop blessing his life (see 31:15, 18, 27).

The second half of the book, Proverbs 10–31, uses, almost exclusively, the genre of the proverb—typically a two-line saying in which we find the meaning or primary idea in the relationship of the two lines. For example, Proverbs 10:2 reads:

The treasure of the wicked won't profit them,
but righteousness rescues people from death.

The idea, then, unexpressed but present in the relationship of the lines, is that righteousness does profit—and the wise person will acquire righteousness. Beyond this instruction in reading proverbs, two other features of the genre require our attention.

First, by nature, a proverb is an expression of general truth—not an absolute guarantee. In other words, a proverb is true only in certain circumstances, not all circumstances. The easiest proof of this claim is found in Proverbs 26:4–5. The first proverb instructs us:

Don't answer fools according to their folly,
or you will become like them yourself.

The idea is clear enough: if you talk like a fool or engage a fool on his or her level, you will become just like a fool. The second proverb also instructs us:

Answer fools according to their folly,
or they will deem themselves wise.

So what are we supposed to do? Now we are told that we should answer a fool according to his or her folly. Which proverb is true? Both—wisdom does not lay in memorizing and quoting each proverb, but knowing when each is true and appropriate to use. Any fool can spout proverbs (and many do), but when and how they use proverbs may be useless. As Proverbs 26:7 says, “As legs dangle from a disabled person, so does a proverb in the mouth of fools.” Or worse, fools may cause damage with their advice: “Like a thorny bush in the hand of a drunk, so is a proverb in the mouth of fools” (26:9). Not only will fools hurt themselves, they may also hurt other people with their misapplication of a proverb. These short sayings are not one size fits all, but require a context in which they are true; outside of that context, they may not be true at all. For example, Proverbs 22:6 reads, “Train children in the way they should go; when they grow old, they won't depart from it.” Great harm has been caused by the misuse of this simple proverb, causing good parents to feel guilty for the bad choices made by their children. Yes, it is generally true that good training will result in a good outcome, but not always. Children, especially grown children, are free to make their own choices—and sometimes, no amount of good training will prevent a child going their own way. Proverbs 22:6, like all other proverbs, makes no guarantee. We need wisdom to know when this proverb should be spoken and when it should not be mentioned.

A second feature of proverbs, crucial for our reading, is recognition that some proverbs give instruction about how things should be (“do this” or “don't do that,” a *prescriptive proverb*), and other proverbs do nothing more than describe the world as it is (“so deal with it,” a *descriptive proverb*). For example, Proverbs 17:8 describes rather than prescribes: “A bribe seems magical in the eyes of those who give it, granting success to all who use it” (see also 17:23, 21:14). It is a fact of life that bribes work, but this proverb does not suggest we should offer bribes. Rather, this is the way the world works—so deal with it. On the other hand, Proverbs 15:27 gives us instruction:

"Those who acquire things unjustly gain trouble for their house, but those who hate bribes will live." Here we learn that bribes cause trouble, so the wise person will refuse to take a bribe so that they may live fully or genuinely (as opposed to choosing a living death).

Of course, this second feature of proverbs raises a further need for wisdom—to know when a proverb merely describes reality and when a proverb prescribes what a wise person should do. Sometimes it is easy to know that a proverb describes the world: "People plan their path, but the LORD secures their steps" (16:9). So we should—and do—make plans, but we should also know that we cannot be certain of success, because God may or may not support and secure the plans we make. Then again, maybe this proverb does give us direction: make our plans, but rely on the LORD. Deciding between descriptive and prescriptive readings is not so easy; we really do need wisdom as we read.

We have already mentioned the international nature of wisdom, so it should be no surprise that ancient Near Eastern civilizations had sages and wisdom literature similar to what we find in Proverbs. Lessons from a teacher to a student (similar to Prov 1–9) are present in the instruction texts from Phahhotep, Merikare, Amenemhet, Ani, and Amenemope—each of which contains instructions from a teacher, high official, or even a Pharaoh to a student. Many of these and other wisdom texts include proverbs similar to the contents of Proverbs 10–31. Most important for the study of Proverbs is the "Instruction of Amenemope." Close similarities between this Egyptian text and Proverbs 22:17–24:22 have been recognized since the discovery and translation of "Amenemope" in the early twentieth century, raising questions about whether the much older Egyptian text had any direct influence on Proverbs. Recently, Michael Fox presented an elaborate and intricate study that demonstrates the writer of Proverbs 22:17–24:22 used "Amenemope" (some parallels identified in Fox's work are presented below; all translations by Fox):¹

Fox demonstrates that the commonality between the texts is uncanny and can only be explained by the writer of Proverbs having the text of "Amenemope" before him as he wrote. As a closing note to Proverbs, other Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts similar to Job and Ecclesiastes also exist: "Dialogue of a Man with His Soul" and "Song of the Harper" (both from Egypt); and "Proverbs," "The Babylonian Theodicy," and "A Dialogue of Pessimism" (all Mesopotamian). Unlike "Amenemope," however, none of these texts appear to have any direct influence on Israelite wisdom literature.

Job

Proverbs attempts to build a wise life, and, in the process, makes many promises or assurances that a wise life is the best life. The other two biblical wisdom books offer a challenge and critique of Proverbs' claims, refining the observations of the sages. In fact, we could label each of these books as "texts in conversation" with one another.

¹Michael Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, in *Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries* 18B (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 757–760.

CITATIONS FROM THE "INSTRUCTION OF AMENEMOPE"	CITATIONS FROM PROVERBS 22:17–24:22
Give you ears, that you may hear the things that are said;	Incline your ear and hear my words, (22:17b)
apply your heart to interpret them.	and direct your heart to my knowledge (22:17c)
They will be a mooring post for your tongue	that they may all be secure on your lips. (22:18b)
Look to these thirty chapters:	Have I not written for you [thirty] (22:20a)
to return an (oral) response to one who says it, to bring back a (written) message to the one who sends it.	to teach you the truest of words, to give answer to those who send you. (22:21)
Beware of robbing the lowly,	Do not rob a lowly man because he is lowly, (22:22a)
of oppressing the weak	and do not oppress the poor man at the gate. (22:22b)
but the Moon declares his crime.	For Yahweh will strive on their behalf, and will steal away the life of those who steal from them. (22:23)
Do not join quarrel with the hot mouthed man, or assail him by words.	Do not consort with an ill-tempered man, lest you learn his ways and get yourself snared. (22:24–25)
Do not consort with the heated man, or approach him for conversation,	
Do not share a portion with the heated man or consort with a contentious man.	
Do not displace the stone on the boundary of the fields.	Do not encroach on the ancient boundary, which your ancestors made. (22:28)
Beware of encroaching on the boundaries of the fields,	
As for the scribe skilled in his office, he will be found worthy to be a courtier.	Have you seen a man adept in his work? He will stand before kings. He will not stand before the lowly. (22:29bc)
Do not eat food before an official,	When you sit to dine with an official, (23:1a)
Look at the bowl that is before you,	look carefully at what is before you, (23:1b)
If you become sated by that which is chewed deceitfully (?)	Do no desire his delicacies, for they are deceitful bread. (23:3)

Table 14.1. "Amenemope" and Proverbs 22:17–24:22

In the Book of Job, we meet a man who is the ultimate sage, Mr. Wisdom. Job is a man of honesty and absolute integrity, with a character defined by his fear of God and avoidance of evil; and, just as Proverbs assures us, Job's life prospers as befits a man of wisdom (Job 1:1–5). At least, until the day the LORD and the satan (a member of the LORD's royal court, not the "devil" or "Satan" we find in the New Testament)² make two wagers: the first wager is about how Job will

²A common error for Christians reading the Old Testament is to assume a word used in the Old Testament has the same definition as the same word found in the New Testament. To be specific, we assume "the satan" in Job 1–2 is the same "Satan" (devil) we find in the in the New Testament. Words, however, change meaning over time, which is precisely what has happened

respond if all his goods—both possessions and children—are taken away (1:6–22); the second wager, a continuation of the first—taking away Job's health (2:1–10). What will Job do if there is no reward for a wise life? In other words, is it possible for a person to “fear God” (live in proper relationship) if there is no reward? Will a person serve God for nothing—no blessing, no reward ... nothing? The Lord says *yes, Job will still serve me*; the satan says *no, no one will serve you under those conditions*. This is the wager and *the question* that has been set up by the writer.

The issue of the book is not the cause of suffering. We already know the answer to why Job suffers from chapter 1 and 2: God causes it (see God's admission in Job 2:3). In addition, everyone in the book believes God is responsible for Job's suffering. No one argues otherwise. Of course, Job and his friends know nothing of the heavenly wager, so they spend much of their time arguing over who suffers and why. The friends, in an effort to help Job, persistently make three points: first, the wicked suffer to the degree that they are wicked (e.g., 4:7–9, 15:20–35, 18:5–21, 20:4–29), second you (Job) are suffering intensely, therefore you must be terribly wicked (e.g., 8:3–4, 11:5–6, 22:4–11; see also 5:17–26), and third, confess your sin to God and God will forgive you and restore all your blessings (e.g., 8:5–7, 11:13–17, 22:21–28).

Job, however, knows that their initial claim is false; he has observed the wicked prospering and the righteous suffering on many occasions (e.g., 21:7–21). Job also knows that he has not committed any sin so terrible that he deserves such horrible suffering (9:21–22, 10:2–7, 16:15–17, 23:11–12, 31:5–34). So he refuses to compromise his integrity and do what the friends suggest, just so he can get his stuff back (27:1–6). He is confused, however, by God's actions and God's failure to uphold what Proverbs taught about the system of merit: do good, get good; or do bad, get bad. Job believes the same principles of wisdom that his friends spout, but he sees that God is not upholding the system the way he believes it should work. Consequently, Job calls for a trial, a court case in which God is the defendant for what has happened to Job (e.g., 9:14–20, 32–35; 13:3, 18–22; 16:18–22; 19:23–27), even though Job knows that any trial against God is futile and he will be crushed by God's words (e.g., 9:14–22).

Eventually, God does show up and speak to Job, overwhelming him, just as Job had predicted. The LORD challenges Job in two speeches. The first asks over and over what Job knows and what Job can do, with the conclusion that Job doesn't know much about the world and he can do even less (38:1–40:2). In the second speech (40:4–41:34), the LORD challenges Job to try being God and see how well he can handle the work, especially how well he would deal with the strongest of mortal beasts—the behemoth (possibly a hippopotamus)—and the fearsome fire-breathing and fire-spouting dragon that represents the many chaotic forces constantly at odds with the LORD's good creation (see Isa 27:1, 51:9; Ps 74:13–14, 104:26). Since Job cannot handle either

with the term “the satan.” Read the following Old Testament texts in a good study Bible and you will discover that the term “satan” is used to describe an angel sent by God to delay Balaam (Num 22:22, 32), a human sent by God to punish Solomon (1 Kgs 11:14, 23), and, apparently, another angel working in God's employ, so that the term “satan” and “God” become interchangeable (1 Chron 21:1 and 2 Sam 24:1). Thus, it seems much more likely that “the satan” that comes into God's presence is not the New Testament devil, but a servant of God responsible for watching the world and bringing charges against those who rebel.

beast, his charges against the LORD—and his innuendo that he could do a better job than the LORD—are all set aside. The world may not work as Job would like, the promises of Proverbs (and Deuteronomy) may not be as absolute as he wants, but he cannot change the limits of what wisdom will bring to a person's life.

The epilogue of the book finds the LORD correcting Job's friends and sending them to Job for sacrifice and prayer (42:7–9). Then the LORD restores Job's fortunes—twice as much as he had before (42:10, 12), including ten more children—not his first children, *and children are hardly replaceable parts* (42:13–15). The original question of the book has been answered: yes, it is possible for a person to serve God, even when they are not blessed at all. However, what such a life looks like is far different than our Sunday school image of a saint who serves God. And though the book presents something of a happily-ever-after conclusion, the reader may wonder if that is possible for Job now, knowing that he could lose it all again for no particular reason.

Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes also challenges the world constructed by the Book of Proverbs with its own claim that all human work and effort is nothing more than chasing the wind; no human effort gains any lasting benefit, because, sooner or later, we all die. Many readings of Ecclesiastes, however, are far more pessimistic than the book itself—perhaps because they do not get past the first two chapters of the book. Here, Qoheleth (the name the writer gives himself in 1:1, 2, 12; 7:27; 12:8, 9, 10) conducts the “Royal Experiment” by testing the things that humans often chase in an effort to give meaning to their lives. Over and over again, Qoheleth concludes that these things do not work because they do not last: acquiring knowledge (1:16–17), pleasure (2:1–3), great building projects (2:4–7), money (2:8), sex (2:8b), the limited benefit of wisdom (2:12–17), and working to leave something to the next generation (2:18–23). All of these—and more—are just chasing the wind, and Qoheleth is right! Look through the list; then and now, these are the things humans try to get (or do) in order to give life meaning. But they don't work. No wonder people regard Qoheleth as a pessimist—he tells the truth. Just take his challenge and hold whatever you may be chasing up to the sun and ask, “Does this last? Does it really give life lasting value or meaning?”

After the Royal Experiment, Qoheleth does begin to rebuild, but only after scraping away all the pretenders. He begins with a new view of time (Eccl 3): all time belongs to God and is equally beautiful. And throughout the book, beginning in the Royal Experiment, Qoheleth returns over and over again to the same basic ideas: “There's nothing better for human beings than to eat, drink, and experience pleasure in their hard work. I also saw that this is from God's hand . . .” (2:24; see also 2:10, 3:12–13, 3:22, 5:18–20, 8:15, and 9:7–10). The first step to meaningful life (not the only or last step), where we must begin, is to learn how to enjoy the simple things we do every day: enjoy our food, our drink, and our work. The enjoyment of these things is God's gift to us. Qoheleth urges us to quit deferring happiness until a later point in life (“I'll be happy when _____;” *you fill in the blank*). If we put it off, we will never be happy. And we also need to stop looking back to the good old days, back when we remember we were happy, but probably

weren't any happier then than we are now (7:10). We either learn to be happy now with God's simple gifts, or we will never learn to be happy.

To seize the moment, "decide to be happy now" is the only commandment issued in the Book of Ecclesiastes:

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. . . . Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. (9:7, 9 NRSV)

And the book concludes, "So this is the end of the matter, all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments because this is what everyone must do" (12:13). Perhaps we should recall that the only commandment the book gives is to be happy with God's smallest gifts. So, if we refuse the happiness God gives us here and now, God will judge us for our refusal (12:14).

The Lyrical Literature

The Song of Songs and Lamentations

Every culture has its songs—whether deep in the Amazon, in the cotton fields of the old South, the streets of Detroit, or among the people of ancient Israel. Music provides a unique medium for us to express our greatest joys and our deepest sorrows, but also to convey our values. We speak what we believe to be true and provide encouragement for members of the community, and nothing speaks to the heart like a song. So it should not surprise us when we find various collections of songs in the Old Testament. We find a collection of love songs, the Song of Songs, though we may be startled by the inclusion of such songs in the Bible. On the other end of the spectrum, we discover a book of lament, or profound grief, that follows after Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem—the Book of Lamentations. In our final chapter, we will also see what we expect in a Bible, the Book of Psalms—a collection of religious songs that mirrors (somewhat) what we find in our church hymnal: hymns of praise to God, songs that teach lessons, and songs of trust and confidence in God's provision and presence. With this map of the landscape of Israel's music, we set out on our final trek into the Old Testament. As we visit each of these texts, each section of this chapter will function as a travel guide that provides some basic information, a list of things to watch for as you read, and tips to enrich your personal exploration.

The Song of Songs

Despite an apparent connection to Solomon, the Song of Songs (which means, "Greatest Song") is not likely to have come from this king. Late in the book, the writer or editor sharply criticizes Solomon as a man who knows nothing about true love between one man and one woman (8:11–12; recall Solomon's many political marriages, 1 Kgs 11:1–4). Consequently, the initial reference may be irony, a dedication to Solomon—or any number of different possibilities. Later

references to his name in the book may be a way of talking about “Prince Charming”—a king who sweeps a woman off her feet.

Though many attempt to read the Greatest Song as something of a narrative that begins with courtship or dating and concludes with marriage and the consummation of the marriage, the book refuses to be so easily tamed. Love-making is part of, or alluded to, in many of the songs—including the opening lines, “Oh, your loving is sweeter than wine” (1:2) and “My king has brought me into his chambers” (1:4). The book reads better as a simple collection of love songs, songs that celebrate every aspect of intimacy.

Several themes recur in the songs, themes that are common to love songs in many different cultures. Consider the following themes from the Greatest Song and compare them to your own favorite love songs.³ First, is aesthetic appreciation—a phrase that denotes physical compliments and flirting based on physical characteristics. We should take note here: while physical attraction has existed since the first man and woman saw each other (Gen 2:23) and attraction exists in every culture, the language of attraction differs from one culture to another and from one century to another.

The opening song features a duet between a man and a woman, a woman who is self-conscious about the way she looks (1:5–7; unlike today, a dark complexion was a sign of lower working-class at that time, not upper-class who were protected from the sun), and a man who believes she is beautiful (1:8–11; though we might not compare our date to a horse). Elsewhere, we find a unique form of love poetry all about physical attraction: the *wasf*, in which a person describes their love from head to toe or toe to head—or more often, from one part of the body to another part which is of greatest interest. In 4:1–8, a man describes a woman, concluding with her breasts; other *wasfs* of a woman occur in 6:4–10 and 7:1–5. A woman also describes her man in 5:9–6:3, with her greatest interest falling on his smell (5:13), his strength (5:14–15), and last of all, his sweet words (5:16). Physical attraction and compliments are a part of most, if not every culture. But step back a moment and ask yourself what these people looked like. Superstars? The person from the cover of the latest fashion magazine? Perhaps, but it is much more likely that they looked like you and me. What we hear in these poems/songs is the language of love, and when a person is falling or has fallen in love with someone, they tend to see that person like no one else does. They don’t understand why others don’t see the same qualities.

A second theme in the love songs of the Greatest Song is the intense desire to be together—alone—and the anguish of separation, along with anxiety over all the things that just keep getting in the lovers’ way when all they want is to be together. We see her concern early in the book. She worries about how she will be able to find him (1:7–8) and about the little foxes (whatever they may be) that keep ruining things (2:8–17). We hear about the frustration of not finding one’s lover (3:1–4) and the desire to be able to act on impulses in public spaces (8:1–4).

Third, affective depiction moves well beyond physical compliments. Compliments are innocent enough to give and rejection is easy to take. Affective depiction, however, describes what

³See Carey Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 47–132.

the other person is doing to the first: "You have captured my heart, my sister, my bride! You have captured my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one strand from your necklace" (4:9; see also 4:10–5:1). Now the man has put himself at risk; if she should dismiss his words, the pain will be much greater than the dismissal of a physical compliment (e.g., "you look nice today"). But if a relationship is to grow greater in intimacy, one or both parties will have to risk themselves at some point (see also 5:1–8, 2:37, and 6:5).

Finally, a fourth theme in the Greatest Song is the power of love:

Set me as a seal over your heart,
 as a seal upon your arm,
 for love is as strong as death,
 passionate love unrelenting as the grave.
 Its darts are darts of fire—
 divine flame!
 Rushing waters can't quench love;
 rivers can't wash it away.
 If someone gave
 all his estate in exchange for love,
 he would be laughed at to utter shame. (8:6–7; see also 2:7, 3:5, 5:8, 8:4)

Love is inescapable when it comes, so strong a person cannot get away, and nothing can put out the flames of love. These four themes—innocent flirtation, the desire to be alone, the description of what a person's lover is doing to her or him, and the power of love—are not all that the Greatest Song has to say, but they are a place to start when reading this beautiful book.

Lamentations

The Book of Lamentations follows after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and is a collection of five songs that lament or grieve the situation in the city. The most significant literary feature of these songs is the use of an acrostic pattern. For example, each verse in chapter 1 begins with the next consecutive letter in the Hebrew alphabet—twenty-two verses for the twenty-two letters of the alphabet (e.g., in English, verse 1 would begin with an A, verse 2 with B, verse three with C, and so forth). Chapter 2 repeats this pattern, while chapter 3 intensifies the acrostic with three lines for each letter. Chapter 4 uses the earlier pattern from chapters 1 and 2, and chapter 5 has the same number of lines (twenty-two), but does not follow the alphabet. The purpose of the acrostic pattern in Lamentations is not entirely clear, especially since an acrostic is only visible to a reader, not so much one who only listens. Perhaps the idea is to express full and complete grief—from A to Z, or maybe the pattern is an aid for memorization (in addition to other possible purposes).

Another feature of Lamentations to watch for is the various voices that speak in the book. In chapter 1, an outside observer (1:1–9, 10–11, 17) and Jerusalem, personified as a woman, speak (1:9e, 11e–16, 18–22); in chapter 2, the only speaker is an observer, who weeps at what he sees in Jerusalem (2:1–22). Jerusalem and/or the nation personified speak in chapter 3 (in the singular,

3:1–36; in the plural, 3:37–45). An inside observer and participant during the fall of Jerusalem speaks in chapter 4 (in third person, 4:1–16; in first person, 4:17–20; and either third person or first person in 4:21–22). Finally, in chapter 5, an observer comes years after the fall, describes what he sees, and begs for the LORD's return (5:1–22, see especially 5:20).

Those who speak understand that the LORD has brought destruction and exile (1:5, 14; 2:1–9; 4:11, 16) because of the sins of the city/nation (1:5, 18–19; 2:14; 5:7). They say that what has happened is just or fair, but it is enough. The speakers urge the LORD to bring an end to the suffering (3:22–33, 40–66; 4:6–9; 5:1–18, 19–22) and to restore the city and people. But there is little hope in the songs. The only complete statement of hope comes in the middle of the book, a passage that has become somewhat famous:

Certainly the faithfulness of the LORD hasn't ended;
 certainly God's compassion isn't through!
 They are renewed every morning. Great is your faithfulness.
 I think: The LORD is my portion! Therefore, I'll wait for him.

The LORD is good to those who hope in him, to the person who seeks him.
 It's good to wait in silence for the LORD's deliverance. (3:22–26)

And yet, everything that surrounds these verses drowns out and drains these words of life. So much so that, at the end of the book, the writer is still waiting and wondering if God will ever return to help:

Why do you forget us continually;
 why do you abandon us for such a long time?
 Return us, LORD, to yourself. Please let us return!
 Give us new days, like those ago—
 unless you have completely rejected us,
 or have become too angry with us. (5:20–22)

The poet believes that the LORD reigns, now and forever (5:19), but he does not know if the King will ever bring his people back—not to Jerusalem, but to himself.

Conclusions

This has been a chapter of extremes: from the assured claims of Proverbs to the challenge of Ecclesiastes and Job, and from the beautiful lyrics of love poetry in Song of Songs to the heartbroken cries of lament over death and destruction in Lamentations. The Book of Job reminds us that not everything works out as simply as it may seem in Proverbs (though, to be fair, Proverbs would remind us that the nature of a proverb is general truth, not an absolute guarantee). Nonetheless, real life begins as simply as Qoheleth claims, learning to enjoy the little things of life—here and now—not there and later. With the interaction and conversation of these three books, wisdom continues to learn and grow as it observes, tests, modifies, and then tries again.

The lyrical literature of the Song of Songs and Lamentations brings God into our greatest joys and deepest moments of grief. Or maybe it's not that we move God into these times of life, but that we bring our lives fully into God's presence—including our greatest joys and our deepest sorrows. Oddly enough, through these books and the Wisdom Literature, we recognize that life with God is not only what we do at church or at worship; life with God means *all of our life* with God: in day-to-day life and worship, joy and sorrow, good times and bad times. This is the level of intimacy God wants, the same intimacy God enjoyed with creation before things went so terribly wrong (Gen 1–2).



psalms and the **God Who Saves**

A Song That Never Ends

Songs are a powerful medium, windows into our lives and artists that shapes our souls. With a poet's words the music chisels our hearts, forming us according to the values of what we sing. Consider songs that you have not sung or heard for years; if you allow yourself, you would likely remember and begin singing the words. The union of music and words has a way of getting inside us, whether under our skin—those songs we cannot stand or get out of our mind—or deep inside our heart, where they not only have the staying power of a lifetime but slowly mold us into who we are or will become.¹

Little wonder that the Bible makes full use of this tool, not only to provide the songs or prayers we will need during the course of our lives, but to transform us into people of faith, people who walk with the LORD. In the previous chapter, we saw two extremes—the poetic language of passionate human love (Song of Songs) and the cry of profound grief over Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem (Lamentations). In this chapter, we turn to the longest book in the English Bible, in terms of both chapters and pages: the Book of Psalms. This book also includes extremes—the extreme of passionate praise for God (e.g., Pss 92–99) and unflinching protest over God's failure, not only to stop the Babylonians from destroying Jerusalem (e.g., Ps 89), but to sustain individuals in the presence of chaos (e.g., Pss 42–43, 88). This book includes hymns that invite us into the presence of God (e.g., Pss 1,

¹The title of this chapter plays upon Norman Martin's song written for children, "This Is the Song That Never Ends" (1988).

15



READING ASSIGNMENTS

PSALMS 117, 30, 13

PSALMS 136, 78, 104–105,
29, 150

KEY TERMS

Antiphonal: a song sung with call and response or back and forth between one person or group and another person or group

Doxology: praise of God, typically a short exclamation in praise of God's greatness

Karst Topography: landscape formed by the dissolving of rocks such as limestone, creating underground streams and caverns

Parallelism: a term that helps to describe the relationship of one line of Hebrew poetry to the next, e.g., synonymous parallelism (the second line repeats the idea of the first to emphasize or nuance the first line)

Psalmist: the writer of a psalm

Psalter: a book that contains psalms, often used as an alternate term for the Book of Psalms

Ugarit: an ancient kingdom on the Mediterranean coast (ca. 1400 BCE, now Ras Shamra)

Ugaritic: the language of Ugarit; a large number of Ugaritic texts have been recovered, giving insight to ancient Palestine and Baal worship.

121–131) and songs that send us out in praise of the God who saves (e.g., Pss 146–150). And while we're not looking, the Book of Psalms transforms us with its words and images, chipping away doubt and trust in ourselves, and remaking us into the image of God.

In this chapter, we introduce several entry points to the study of Psalms:

- basic information about the book itself, helpful for getting started
- a quick guide to the different forms or types of psalms we find in the book
- a primer on Hebrew poetry and what is oddly called “parallelism”
- an overview of what happens when we read the Book of Psalms *as a book* and discover a message that surpasses the sum of its individual parts
- and finally, brief consideration of Egyptian and Canaanite hymns written to Aten (the Sun Disk) and Baal, and what role these hymns might play in reading Psalms.

We have, then, taken on a challenging final chapter. But I am confident that if you have come with me this far, you can go a bit further.

1. The Book of Psalms

The Hebrew title of the book of Psalms is *Sepher Tehillim*, the “Book of Praises,” a fitting title for a book that proclaims the LORD is “enthroned on the praises of Israel” (Ps 22:3) and invites all Israel and all the world to join together in praise of the God who saves (147:12, 148:1–14, 149:1–9, 150:6). The book of Psalms consists of five books (most likely to model the Torah) concluded by brief doxologies, such as at the end of Book I, “Bless the LORD, the God of Israel, from forever to forever! Amen and Amen!” (41:13). The first two psalms function as a prologue to the book, introducing key themes that will wind their way throughout the Psalter: Psalm 1 contains blessings for those who walk on the path of the righteous versus the failure and loss of the wicked, and Psalm 2, the victory of the LORD and his anointed one (the king) over every enemy that dares to stand against them. These themes—the righteous and the wicked, blessing and loss, the LORD’s king and his enemies, victory and defeat—run through the book of Psalms like a river. They are sometimes deep and slow, but, at other times, like mountain rapids speeding over the top of all obstacles, and at other times, a waterfall in which all assured results are up in the air and uncertain. The final five poems, in a similar way, lead

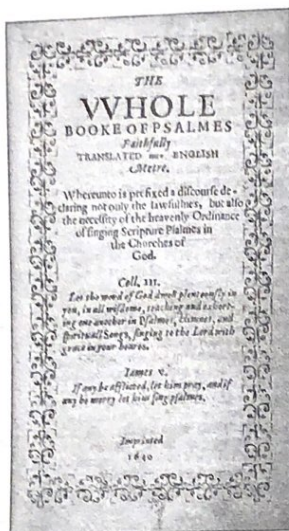


Figure 15.1. The Bay Psalm Book. (Printed in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1640. The first book printed in North America.)

the reader/singer out of the book on a trajectory of continued praise to a God determined to set or reset the world to the way it ought to be (Pss 145–150). The last of these psalms is a massive summons to praise the LORD with every instrument and every ounce of energy we may have.

2. Forms or Types of Psalms

Reading Psalms can be challenging because of the length of the book and because, after a short time of reading, the psalms begin to sound alike, as if we have already read the same psalm before—a dozen times. Most helpful to this sense of repetition is the recognition of forms or types

of psalms that follow specific patterns. In other words, our sense of repetition is well-founded; the poets use and reuse the same templates over and over again, but as artists who reuse forms in imaginative, creative ways. For example, the basic pattern for a hymn of praise consists of the following:

THE HYMN OF PRAISE	
<i>Pattern</i>	<i>Example: Psalm 117</i>
A summons to praise (that identifies who should praise)	¹ Praise the LORD, all you nations! Worship him, all you peoples!
Reasons to praise (articulate why those summoned should offer praise)	² Because God's faithful love toward us is strong, the LORD's faithfulness lasts forever!
Repetition of the summons to praise	Praise the LORD!

Table 15.1. The Hymn of Praise

The same pattern (with variation) recurs frequently in the Book of Psalms, especially in Books IV and V (see Pss 113, 135, 146–150).

Another common type of psalm is the thanksgiving song—a psalm sung when the LORD has answered a prayer and changed the psalmist's life or the nation's life. This song likely originated as part of a thanksgiving sacrifice:

THE SONG OF THANKSGIVING	
<i>Pattern</i>	<i>Example: Psalm 30</i>
An immediate, explosive expression of thanks	¹ I exalt you, LORD, because you pulled me up; you didn't let my enemies celebrate over me. ² LORD, my God, I cried to you for help, and you healed me. ³ LORD, you brought me up from the grave, brought me back to life from among those going down to the pit.
An invitation to others to join the song—to give thanks with the psalmist	⁴ You who are faithful to the LORD, sing praises to him; give thanks to his name! ⁵ His anger lasts for only a second, but his favor lasts a lifetime.

THE SONG OF THANKSGIVING	
Retelling the story of what happened, especially what God did to save (or help) the speaker	⁶When I was comfortable, I said, "I will never stumble." ⁷Because it pleased you, LORD, you made me a strong mountain. But then you hid your presence. I was terrified. ⁸I cried out to you, LORD. I begged my LORD for mercy: ⁹"What is to be gained by my spilled blood, by my going down into the pit? Does dust thank you? Does it proclaim your faithfulness? ¹⁰LORD, listen and have mercy on me! LORD, be my helper!" ¹¹You changed my mourning into dancing. You took off my funeral clothes and dressed me up in joy
Other expressions of thanks throughout the psalm	See vv. 5, 11
Consequence: Now I will/we will . . .	¹² so that my whole being might sing praises to you and never stop. LORD, my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Table 15.2. The Song of Thanksgiving

As with a hymn of praise, the basic elements of a thanksgiving song may appear in a different order as the poet uses and reuses the basic building blocks in new, imaginative ways. For other examples of thanksgiving songs see Psalms 91, 107, 124, 136, and 138.

The most popular form in the Book of Psalms is the lament—an odd, but nonetheless true fact about what we consider to be the Book of Praises, a form that appears sixty times in the 150 chapters. The lament is a prayer of need, an objection to what God is doing or not doing, sometimes a confession of wrongdoing (but not often), and almost always a passionate appeal to God for help:

THE PSALM OF LAMENT	
Pattern	Example: Psalm 13
Address to the LORD God	¹ How long will you forget me, LORD? Forever?
Description of trouble or need – Self or personal trouble – What others are doing to me – What God is or is not doing	How long will you hide your face from me? ² How long will I be left to my own wits, agony filling my heart? Daily? How long will my enemy keep defeating me?

Request for the LORD to act in specific ways (not just to help); addresses each aspect of the trouble or need (above)	³ Look at me! Answer me, LORD my God! Restore sight to my eyes!
Attempts to motivate the LORD into action	Otherwise, I'll sleep the sleep of death, ⁴ and my enemy will say, "I won!" My foes will rejoice over my downfall. ⁵ But I have trusted in your faithful love.
Statement of confidence or praise of the LORD	My heart will rejoice in your salvation. ⁶ Yes, I will sing to the LORD because he has been good to me.

Table 15.3. The Psalm of Lament (Sample)

Again, these basic building blocks will appear in various orders—and yet, each element is almost always present in a lament. If an element is missing, its absence is likely an important key to understanding the lament. For example, Psalm 88 lacks the final element of confidence or praise; it also lacks almost any sign of hope in God. This absence suggests a psalmist who is desperate—in great need—a poet without the confidence that the LORD will act on his or her behalf and only enough faith to remember whom to pray to for help.

Because of the large number of laments in Psalms (see Table 15.4), it is appropriate to study a second example of the form: Psalm 38. We begin with my own translation of the text, followed by a blank chart to help you identify the various elements of a lament psalm:²

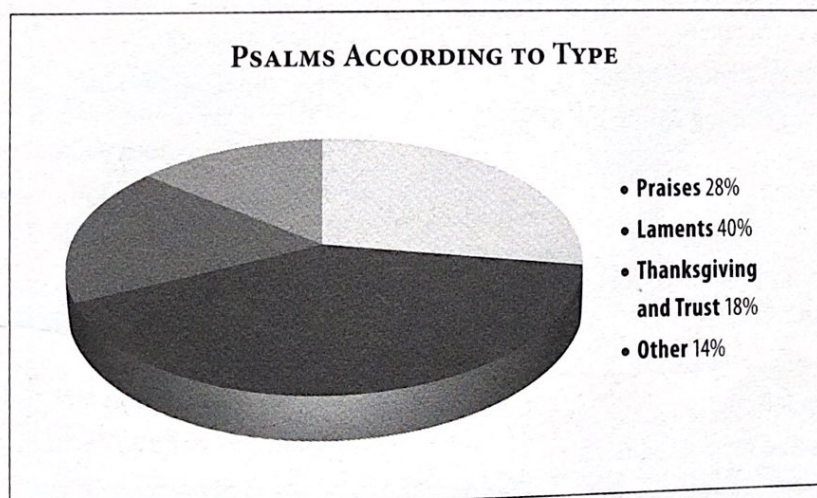


Figure 15.2. Percentage of Psalms according to Type

²Adapted from Glenn Pemberton, "Psalm 38," in *Timeless: Ancient Psalms for the Church Today, Vol. 1, In the Day of Distress*, ed., Mark Shipp (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2011), 273–275.

Psalm 38

A Song for David, for the memorial offering.

¹ O LORD,

not in your anger—rebuke me;
not in your wrath—correct me.

² Ah,³

your arrows have pierced me;
your hand has come down hard on me.

³ My flesh has no health
because of your indignation;
my bones have no wholeness
because of my sin.

⁴ Ah,

my iniquities have piled up over my head,
a burden too heavy for me.

⁵ My wounds fester and stink
because of my follies.

⁶ I am bent, stooped so low;
all day long—darkness—I walk.⁴

⁷ Ah,

my loins are filled with burning pain;
my flesh has no health.

⁸ I am numb, completely crushed;
I cry from the groaning within my heart.

⁹ O Master,

all my desire is known to you;
my sighing is not hidden from you.

¹⁰ My heart stutters;
my strength abandons me;
my sight even fails me.

¹¹ My friends and my companions
stand away from my affliction;

those close to me stand far away.

¹² Those seeking my life lay their traps,
those wanting to hurt me discuss destruction;
they plan deception all day long.

¹³ But I am like the deaf—who cannot hear,
like the mute—who cannot speak.

¹⁴ Indeed, I am like a person
who cannot hear;
and who has no response in my mouth.

¹⁵ Ah,

It is for you, O LORD, I wait;
It is you who will answer, O Master, my God.

¹⁶ Ah,

I said, “Only do not let them rejoice over me,
or when my feet stumble they will boast
against me.”

¹⁷ Ah,

I go on limping and limping,
my pain always the next step before me.

¹⁸ Ah,

I confess my iniquity,
I am troubled by my sin.

¹⁹ I have so many foes without cause;
so many who hate me for no reason.

²⁰ They repay evil for good;
they are my adversaries⁵
though I pursue what is good.

²¹ O LORD, do not abandon me!

O my God, do not be so far from me!

²² Hurry to my aid,
O Master, my Savior.

³Literally “for or because” (Heb. *ki*); the term, however, functions as a deep moan or cry throughout the psalm.

⁴Or, “I walk in darkness all day long.”

⁵Or, “They accuse me.”

Motivation:		
Confidence or Praise		

Table 15.4. A Psalm of Lament (Blank)

As you look over your work on Psalm 38, several questions are likely to arise. Be sure to include the following questions with your notes:

1. The psalmist has many complaints about his or her health. Is this language literal (he or she has these physical problems) or is this language metaphorical to describe how bad or difficult life has become? Which do you think it is? Why?
2. Who or what is the primary cause underlying the psalmist's trouble?
3. According to the psalmist, what is the solution to the problem(s)? What needs to happen?

Don't stop here. What other questions do you have from your study of Psalm 38?

3. Hebrew Poetry: The Wonder of Parallelism

A feature of the Psalms and Hebrew poetry that can improve the reading and understanding of these texts is called *parallelism* (perhaps the most boring name we could come up with). So all I can ask, as Stephen King writes in "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption,"—"If you've followed along this far, you might be willing to come a little further,"⁶ so maybe you can make it a few more pages. Parallelism is nothing more than the question of how lines of poetry relate to one another; and, of course, there are several types of parallelism, or ways in which lines may relate to each other. For example, in Psalm 117 (above), the first two lines feature *synonymous parallelism*—where two lines say the same thing with different words. So while "all you nations" and "all you peoples" may draw attention to slightly different ideas, the basic meaning is the same: "everyone." Awareness of this structure may help us understand some difficult texts. For example, Psalm 51:11 reads,

Please don't throw me out of your presence;
please don't take your holy spirit away from me.

This is another case of synonymous parallelism. The idea of "your presence" is roughly the same as "your holy spirit." In other words, this verse does not refer to the Holy Spirit of the New Testament, but simply to the presence of the LORD. See other examples of synonymous parallelism in Psalms 29:3, 33:9, 35:1, and 148:1.

⁶Stephen King, "Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption" in *Different Seasons* (New York: Viking Press, 1982), 99.

The Message of the Old Testament

Psalm 136

As you read Psalm 136, two very obvious literary features stand out. First, the repetition of the phrase "God's faithful love lasts forever." This is strong evidence as to how this psalm was most likely performed: one group or person would read the first line of each verse and another group would answer, "God's faithful love lasts forever." In other words, it would be **antiphonal**—a call and response performance. Second, based on the first feature, the theme of Psalm 136 is also very obvious: "God's faithful love lasts forever." After three opening verses that call people to give thanks to the *greatest God* (the meaning of "the God of all gods") and to the *greatest LORD* (the meaning of "Lord of all lords"), the poet sets the psalm's direction: "Give thanks to the only one who makes great wonders" (136:4a). The remainder of the psalm works out or identifies these great wonders that deserve our gratitude:

- Creation (136:5–9)
- Rescue from Egypt (136:10–15)
- Guidance through the wilderness and conquest of the Transjordan (136:16–22)
- Rescue from enemies (136:23–24)
- Provision of food (136:25)

Two additional features of the psalm merit special attention. First, note the shift that occurs between verse 22 and verse 23. Prior to verse 23, the writer speaks about Israel in the third person: what God has done for *them*. But beginning in verse 23, the writer changes to first person plural. Now, the poem is about what God has done for *us* by rescuing us from a recent humiliation (136:23–24). Second, the psalm tells a story, beginning with creation, followed by the rescue from slavery in Egypt, and then the conquest of the Transjordan—a massive sweep of events, all to conclude with a single line that gives thanks for food. As a result, it seems possible, even likely, that many Israelites would recite this psalm as a table prayer—a prayer we say before eating. But it is a table prayer that is remarkable in its recital of God's saving acts in the past and the present—now updated to give thanks for what God does *for us*.

Obviously, lines are not always synonymous; they can work together in other ways. Sometimes the first line will state an idea and the second line will advance the thought in some way: synthetic parallelism (and no, I did not make up these names). Of course, there are many different ways one line might build on the previous line. Sometimes one or more lines will make the prior idea more specific. In the case of Psalm 136, verses 8–9 advance the idea of verse 7 by making "great lights" more specific:

⁷Give thanks to the one who made the great lights. . . .

⁸The sun to rule the day. . . .

⁹The moon and stars to rule the night. . . .