

BBS#13 • The Poetical Books

bride. In doing so, it presents God's perspective on married love - and provides a picture of the love of Christ for His Church.

This Song of songs is a series of lyric poems on the theme of love between man and woman. The setting is pastoral: the poems are full of images from the countryside. The time, appropriately, is spring. They are full of the passion and delight of human love.

NUMBER - AND IDENTITY - OF CHARACTERS

Some see the poems as a drama with 2 characters: bride and royal bridegroom; some say 3: Solomon, the girl, and her shepherd lover. Others regard the poems as a series of songs sung during the week-long wedding-feast, (as in Syria today). Jews and Christians alike have seen them as allegories - of God's love for Israel; of Christ's love for His bride the Church.

TESTS

Test #1: The Five Poetical Books (Complete from the options at left)

OPTIONS:	BOOK:	DESCRIPTION:
Job		Futility of temporal pursuits
Psalms		Suffering and God's sovereignty
Proverbs		God's marriage manual
Ecclesiastes		Praise in public worship
Song of Solomon		Wisdom; skill for living

Test #2: Overview Summary (Fill in the blanks)

REVIEW: The Poetical Books fall into three major _____ of poetry within which the poets used a number of different literary _____ to communicate God's message.

Test #3: Parallelism (Fill in the blanks)

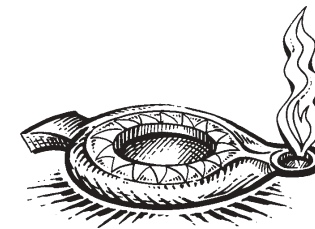
REVIEW: Rather than matching sounds, a Hebrew poet was more concerned with _____, a technique called "parallelism."

BASIC BIBLE STUDY

An Introductory Guide To Understanding The Scriptures

PART THIRTEEN

The Poetical Books



"Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet,
and a light unto my path"
PSALM 119:105

Poetry is a song of the soul. **Wherever great civilizations have existed, poetry has been written, and the poetry of Israel is among the finest.** The psalms of David and the proverbs of Solomon stand up well when compared with any body of poetry ever written.

**THE POETICAL BOOKS
(AND WISDOM LITERATURE)
(Job - Song of Solomon)**



I. Review:

Remember: there are three kinds of books in the Old Testament: Historical, Poetical, and Prophetical. **Five Poetical Books** follow the first seventeen Historical Books. It must be remembered that while these books comprise the major poetical section of the Scriptures, examples of poetry appear in the historical and prophetical sections also (e.g. **Exodus 15, Judges 5, 1 Samuel 2, Isaiah 12, Lamentations**).

THE THREE KINDS OF BOOKS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

<u>Historical</u>	<u>Poetical</u>	<u>Prophetical</u>
Genesis	Job	Isaiah
Exodus	Psalms	Jeremiah
Leviticus	Proverbs	Lamentations
Numbers	Ecclesiastes	Ezekiel
Deuteronomy	Song of Solomon	Daniel
Joshua		Hosea
Judges		Joel
Ruth		Amos
1 Samuel		Obadiah
2 Samuel		Jonah
1 Kings		Micah
2 Kings		Nahum
1 Chronicles		Habakkuk
2 Chronicles		Zephaniah
Ezra		Haggai
Nehemiah		Zechariah
Esther		Malachi

The theme of Ecclesiastes is singularly 'modern.' The book simply observes life 'in the round' and draws the logical conclusions. This is life "under the sun"; life as man sees it.

LIFE WITHOUT GOD

The author imposes no preconceptions. **Life as man lives it, without God, is futile, meaningless, purposeless, empty.** It is a bleak picture. Nature and history go round in circles: there is nothing new. Add up the profit and loss of human life and you are better off dead. Life is unfair; work is pointless; pleasure fails to satisfy; good living and wise thinking are rendered futile by death. "Be realistic", says the book. "If life without God is the whole story, see it for what it is. Don't pretend. Don't bury your head in the sand. This is the truth about life."

But this is not (like so many modern writings) all cynicism and despair. God can inject joy into every aspect of living: from food and work to home and marriage (**2:24-26; 3:10-15; 5:18-20; 9:7-10**). **He intended man to find ultimate satisfaction not in life but in Him.**



The wise man dies like the fool, it is true, but wisdom is still good and right (**2:13**). And God will judge the just and the wicked (**3:17**). Enjoy life, not as an Epicurean ("eat, drink, for tomorrow we die"), but as a man of God, because you depend on Him for life and for enjoyment (**3:13; 5:19**). An empty, futile existence is not inevitable: remember God while you are still young (**12:1**); fear Him and keep His commandments (**12:13**).

THE TITLE

"Ecclesiastes" is the Greek translation of Qoheleth - "The Preacher" or "The Speaker." This seems to point to the author's official title rather than his name. It is most likely a pseudonym for Solomon, who was "son of David, king in Jerusalem" (**1:1,12**) and the embodiment of wisdom. What man was better qualified to pronounce on life, having tasted it to the full - both under God and without Him?

**5. SONG OF SOLOMON:
GOD'S MARRIAGE MANUAL**

The Song of Solomon is God's marriage manual. This 'dramatic poetry' pictures the intimate love relationship between Solomon and his Shulammitte

THE TWO MAIN TECHNIQUES ARE:

1. **Parallelism**
2. **Figures of speech**

English poetry is usually characterised by metre and rhyme - but neither of these features occur regularly in Hebrew poetry. Scholars have debated extensively over the question of metre in Hebrew poetry. Their inability to come to a consensus on the issue points to the absence of a recognized metre in the Bible's poetry. Occasionally rhyme occurs in some poetic verses, but this is rare.

A closer modern equivalent of Hebrew poetry would be the measured oratory of, for instance, a Winston Churchill:

**We shall fight on the beaches,
We shall fight on the landing grounds,
We shall fight in the fields and in the streets**

- in which **Reiteration** (or other devices) and **Rhythm** join to make a passage doubly memorable and impressive.

REITERATION

Reiteration was a favourite Canaanite technique, and is also a mark of some of the earliest biblical poetry.

"... To Sisera a prey of divers colours,
a prey of divers colours of needlework,
of divers colours of needlework on both sides,
meet for the necks of them that take the spoil?" (**Judges 5:30**).

RHYTHM

The rhythm, though tighter than this in the original, is a flexible matter of stresses, or beats, not of fixed numbers of syllables. **Most often there will be three stresses to a line, matched by another three in the following line which pairs with it to form a couplet.** But this pattern may be varied by an occasional longer or shorter couplet, or by a triplet, in the same passage; or again the predominating rhythm may be of couplets in which a three-beat line is answered by another of two beats:

"How are the mighty fallen

God loves and protects the righteous. The wicked are subject to his wrath. If they flourish, it is only for a short time: they are heading straight for death and destruction. **Proverbs 10:3,6-7,11,20-21,24-25,27-32; 11:3-11,17-21,23,28,30-31; 12:2-3,5-7,10,12-13,21,26,28; 13:5-6,9,21-22,25; 14:9,11,14,19,32; 15:6,8-9,26,28-29; 16:8,12-13; 17:13,15; 18:5; 20:7; 21:3,7-8,10,12,18,26-27; 24:15-16; 25:26; 28:1,12,28; 29:2,6-7,16,27.**

3. Words and the tongue

Proverbs places tremendous stress on the power of words and speech, for good and for ill. What we say, and how we react to what others say - advice, or rebuke, or gossip, or tempting suggestions - betrays what we are (cf. **Matthew 12:34-37**). The tongue is an incalculable force: it takes a wise man to master it (cf. also **James 3**). The proverbs below are full of sound advice and timely warning. **Proverbs 10:18-21,31-32; 11:9,11-14; 12:6,14,17-19,22; 13:2-3; 14:5,25; 15:1-2,4,23; 16:1,23-24,27-28; 17:4,7,27; 18:4,6,13,20-21; 19:5,9; 20:19; 21:6,23; 22:10; 25:11,15,23,27; 26:20-28; 27:2; 28:23; 29:20.**

4. The family

Fads and fashions change, but the basic structure of family life, its joys and sorrows, remain constant.

There are still unfaithful husbands, and wives who bicker and nag their husbands out of existence. There are still children from good homes who 'go off the rails.' Proverbs' wise advice on the things that make for a happy and stable home-life, and the things that undermine it, is as sound today as ever.

Parents and children: **Proverbs 10:1; 13:1,24; 17:21,25; 19:13,18,27; 20:11; 22:6,15; 23:13-16,19-28; 28:7,24; 29:15,17; 30:11,17.**

Wives: **Proverbs 12:4; 18:22; 19:13-14; 21:9,19; 25:24; 31:10-31.**

(The main advice to husbands comes in the earlier section, e.g. **chapter 5**).

**5. Laziness and hard work**

Proverbs contains a good many sketches of the lazy man, too idle to begin a job, too slack to see it through, yawning his way through life until it is too late, and poverty and hunger are on him. There is nothing to commend slackness, but in all toil there is profit. **Proverbs 10:4-5,26; 12:11,24,27; 13:4; 14:23; 15:19; 18:9; 19:15,24; 20:4,13; 21:25; 22:13; 24:30-34; 26:13-16; 28:19.**

7. Sayings of King Lemuel (31:1-9);
8. and an acrostic poem on the Perfect Wife (31:10-31).

Solomon's name appears in the title, and he is the author/compiler of the two longest collections (10:1-22:16; chs 25-29). Solomon was a man of outstanding wisdom (1 Kings 3; 4:29-34) and his court became an international centre for the exchange of learning (cf. 1 Kings 4:32-34). It is interesting to note that King Hezekiah organized some of the editorial work (25:1): he reigned 250 years after Solomon. The book as we have it was finalized, at the latest, by Ben Sira's time (180 BC).

From chapter 10 on, Proverbs is best digested a few sayings at a time. It may also be a help to study them under themes. This way we can weigh one saying against another, and get an idea of the general teaching on a particular topic. It is important to bear in mind that proverbs are by nature 'generalizations.' They state what is generally, not invariably, true. The writers do not deny that there are exceptions. But exceptions are not within the scope of proverbial sayings. For instance, Proverbs states that those who live by God's standards will prosper in the world. This is generally the truth. But it is not an unqualified 'promise.' Job - and above all the life of Jesus - show the other side of the coin.

THEMES IN PROVERBS

1. Wisdom and folly - the wise man and the fool

This is the main strand of the whole book, the subject of the first 9 chapters. The sayings point the contrast between wisdom - living by God's standards, keeping to what is right, and folly - man wilfully going his own way. Wisdom leads to life and all that is good; folly is a mere half-life that ends in death. The verses listed below detail the wise course of action in many different circumstances. They outline the wise man's character, in contrast to the life and character of the 'fool', who shuts his mind to God and reason. **Proverbs 10:8,13-14,23; 12:1,15-16,23; 13:14-16,20; 14:1,3,7-8,15-18,24,33; 15:5,7,14,20-21; 16:16,21-23; 17:10,12,16,24,28; 18:2,6-7,15; 19:25,29; 21:22; 22:3; 23:9; 24:3-7,13-14; 26:1,3-12; 27:12,22; 28:26; 29:8-9,11.**

2. The righteous and the wicked

The wise man, on Proverbs' definition of wisdom, will be righteous. The gullible fool is always teetering on the edge of evil. It is more than likely he will end up among the wicked. The proverbs below describe the righteous life - the life of integrity - and the blessing it brings to the individual and the community.

in the midst of the battle!" (2 Samuel 1:25).

This last rhythm, with its touch of fading or drooping, is often used for taunts or laments (as in the book of Lamentations), and this has suggested the name Qinah (lament) for it, although its use is not confined to such themes.

However, Parallelism and Figures of Speech are the main techniques commonly used in Bible poetry.



1. PARALLELISM: The matching of ideas

Definition:

Rather than matching sounds, a Hebrew poet was more concerned with matching ideas, a technique called "parallelism."

Parallelism (in contrast to our own poetry) is almost the hallmark of biblical poetry: the echoing of the thought of one line of verse in a second line which is its partner.

"Hath he said, and shall He not do it? or hath He spoken, and shall He not make it good?" (Numbers 23:19)

Parallelism has a dignity and spaciousness which 1. allows time for the thought to make its effect on the hearer, and often 2. also the opportunity to present more than one facet of a matter:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (Isaiah 55:8).

Bishop Lowth, whose lectures on Hebrew poetry in 1741 first intro-

duced the name 'parallelism' for this poetic style, pointed out that this structure, based as it is on meaning, **survives translation into the prose of any language with remarkably little loss, unlike the poetry that relies on complex metre or a special vocabulary.**



The essence of this poetry is that it has great matters to convey forcibly to people of all kinds. It is therefore unselfconscious, and remarkably free from artificialities of language.

SIX OF THE MOST COMMON FORMS OF PARALLELISM ARE:

1. Synonymous parallelism:

The ideas presented are similar.

"Shew me Thy ways, O LORD; teach me Thy paths" (**Psalm 25:4**)

2. Synthetic parallelism:

The second thought completes the first thought.

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want" (**Psalm 23:1**)

3. Antithetic parallelism:

The second thought contrasts with the first.

"For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish" (**Psalm 1:6**)

4. Emblematic parallelism:

The first line uses a figure of speech to illustrate the idea stated in the second line. "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God" (**Psalm 42:1**)

5. Climactic parallelism:

The second line repeats the first with the exception of the last word or words. "It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine" (**Proverbs 31:4**)

6. Formal parallelism: Both lines of poetry must exist for a complete thought.

"Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion" (**Psalm 2:6**)

3. PROVERBS: WISDOM, SKILL FOR LIVING

The purpose of proverbs is to impart wisdom, or "skill for living." More specifically, they highlight practical wisdom, discernment, self-discipline, and moral courage. This 'instructional poetry' is written in short, pithy maxims focusing on one's relationship to God and others - money, morals, speech, industry, honesty, etc. The message is that a life of wisdom and righteousness should preempt a life of foolishness and unrighteousness.

Proverbs is a book of wise sayings, schooling young men in wise and right living by the repetition of wise thoughts. It is wisdom distilled into short, sharp phrases, dramatic contrasts, and unforgettable scenes from life. It sets out what is right and what is wrong (not just a slick formula for success), because 'wisdom' in Proverbs is based on reverence for God and obedience to His laws.

THE FEAR OF GOD

That expression, "the fear of God," to which Ecclesiastes moves as its conclusion, is the starting-point of **Proverbs (1:7)** and the pivot of all the Wisdom literature (see **Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10**). Secular philosophy tends to measure everything by man, and comes to doubt whether wisdom is to be found at all. **With this motto the Old Testament turns the world the right way up – with God at its head, His wisdom the creative and ordering principle that runs through every part; and man, disciplined and taught by that wisdom, finding life and fulfilment in His perfect will.**

Proverbs applies the principles of God's teaching to the whole of life, to relationships, home, work, justice, decisions, attitudes, reactions, everything man does and says, and even thinks. God has taught what is best for man. Experience proves it.

DIVISION OF BOOK

The book divides into eight main sections:

1. an Introduction stating the purpose of the whole book (**1:1-7**);
2. Lessons on Wisdom (**1:8-9:18**);
3. Proverbs of Solomon (**10-22:16**);
4. Two Collections of Wise Sayings (**22:17-24:34**);
5. More of Solomon's Proverbs ['Hezekiah's Collection'] (**25-29**);
6. Sayings of Agur (**30**);

A UNIQUE PORTION ... PSALM 119

There are some outstanding peculiarities about **Psalm 119**.

(1) **The psalm is comprised of 22 parts, with each part beginning with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet (i.e. marked at the start of each section ... 'Aleph, Beth, Gimel ... Tau' etc.**

(2) **Every line or verse of each section begins with the Hebrew letter in the title of the section.**

(3) **With the exception of verses 84&122**, every verse in the psalm speaks of God's revelation of Himself to man, using one or other of 12 descriptive terms: 1. law, 2. testimony, 3. way, 4. commandment, 5. precept, 6. judgment, 7. word, 8. truth, 9. righteousness, 10. faithfulness, 11. statute, 12. name.

Dr. Andrew Bonar has remarked: "There may be something more than fancy in the remark, that Christ's name, 'the Alpha and Omega' - equivalent to declaring Him all that which every letter of the alphabet could express - He is not only first and last, but all between; **He is all** that revelation can express."

THE SONGS OF DEGREES

A set of 15 psalms (**120-134**) bear the title 'Songs of Degree' - and are, in their tone and subject-matter, hymns of uplift.' These 15 psalms have been the subject of much speculation. Some imagine they:

(1) refer to fifteen stages in the annual ascent to Jerusalem by the tribes in their pilgrimages to the holy city;

(2) were sung on the steps of the Temple (there will be 15 steps in the future temple (**Ezekiel 40:22&31**), although how many there were in Solomon's temple is a matter of uncertainty;

(3) refer to stages on the journey back to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity.

It is the opinion of Dr. A. Bonar: "In the singular, degrees frequently designates the going up to a higher spot, e.g. the ascent of Bethoron, the ascent of Luhith, and in Ezra 7:9, the going up from Babylon. In the plural it is used for the steps of Solomon's throne, and in Ezekiel 40:26,31&34, for the steps of the temple-gates.

The use of [this word] for the degrees or steps of a dial has been fully illustrated by discoveries in Assyria, which prove that the sun-dial was a series of steps, or terraces, on which a pole cast its shadow. It would appear, therefore, that the name 'Song of the Steps' is a poetical one, designating psalms which specially suited the circumstances of those who go up to the Temple."

2. FIGURES OF SPEECH: Creating visual images

Definition:

Since the Hebrew poets wanted mental pictures to pop into the reader's mind, a prime consideration was creating visual images, which they accomplished with vivid "figures of speech."

Five of the most common figures of speech are:

1. Simile: a comparison between two unlike things.

"Keep me as **the apple of the eye**" (**Psalm 17:8**)

2. Metaphor: a comparison in which one thing is said to be another.

"The LORD is **my shepherd**" (**Psalm 23:1**)

3. Hyperbole: deliberate overstatement for the sake of emphasis.

"... All the night make I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears" (**Psalm 6:6**).

4. Rhetorical question: asking a question for the purpose of making a statement. "Who can utter the mighty acts of the LORD? who can shew forth all His praise?" (**Psalm 106:2**)

5. Personification: assigning the characteristics of a human to lifeless objects. "The sun **knoweth** his going down" (**Psalm 104:19**).

While there are other figures of speech, these are the most notable. The ones listed here, in particular, express the visual imagery to which the Hebrew poets were committed in order to cause mental pictures to pop into our minds.

If you can get away from the need to hear rhyme and rhythm, you can gain an appreciation for Hebrew poetry. These men were "wordsmiths" and "thoughtsmiths" who played with words and ideas, contrasting them, comparing them, completing them in ways that lifted them above mere prose.

III. Expansion: The Five Poetical Books

1. Job
2. Psalms
3. Proverbs
4. Ecclesiastes
5. Song of Solomon

1. JOB: SUFFERING AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Job is a very wealthy, godly man whose life fortunes are suddenly and dramatically reversed. He loses his health, his wealth, and his family and is plunged into profound suffering. The book presents, in 'dramatic poetry,' the internal struggles of Job, and a series of debates with three friends trying to gain a proper perspective on suffering and God's sovereignty. In the end, God reveals His majesty and power. Though Job's questions are never answered, he willingly submits to the sovereignty of God, and his fortunes are restored and doubled.

A UNIQUE BOOK AND ITS SETTING

The book of **Job** stands alone amongst the books of the Old Testament. It forms a part of the 'Wisdom' material (**Proverbs, Ecclesiastes**), but in form and theme it is unique. **No one knows who wrote it, or just when it was written, but the story is set in the days of the patriarchs.** Job is a wealthy and influential sheikh - wealthy in terms of flocks and herds rather than cash. Part of the year he is a man of the city; for the rest, on the move with his cattle. He belongs to the days before the priesthood and organized religion or to a region where these things were not needed. He reminds us very much of Abraham: a man of the east.

WHY DOES THE GOOD MAN SUFFER?

A prose prologue introduces the great debate between Job and his friends which the author records in magnificent poetry. The subject is as old as the hills and as modern as the space-age. If God is just and good, why does He let innocent people suffer? (Why the casual victims of war and terrorism? Why the child dying of cancer?) As a man Job is really good: about the best any man could ever hope to be. Yet calamity overwhelms him. Loss of possessions and family

WORDS OF VENGEANCE IN THE PSALMS

Christians reading the psalms come across a problem area ... the tendency of the psalmists to call down and spell out the most terrible vengeance. These are called 'Imprecatory Psalms.' We cannot simply discard these passages. They are part of God's word, alongside passages no one would question. Nor will it do to excuse the psalmists on the grounds that they did not possess the teaching of Christ, because they did possess the law. They knew as well as we do that no man is perfect by God's standards; and they were taught to behave in a loving way to others (**Leviticus 19:17&18**), even their enemies (**Exodus 23:4&5**). The law did not license retaliation, it set limits to it (an eye for an eye, and no more).

**BEAR IN MIND ... !**

Before we rush to condemn these passages as utterly 'unchristian', there are a few points worth bearing in mind.

1. The first concerns God's holiness. In emphasising God's love we tend today to be over-sentimental about rank evil. But the psalmists knew God as One "who was of purer eyes than to look on iniquity", who cannot countenance sin. And this is what motivates their call for vengeance on the wicked. God's own character - His good name - demands it.

2. The psalmists are realistic in recognizing that right cannot triumph without the actual overthrow of evil and punishment of wrong. We pray "Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done." But we are often horrified when the psalmists spell out what this means - perhaps because we are less in love with good, less opposed to evil than they were; or because many of us have never known real persecution for our faith; or because we value life more than right.

3. There is no question of the psalmists taking the law into their own hands: their thoughts of vengeance never carry over into wrong action. There is no 'Inquisition' initiated by them. Vengeance is always seen as God's province - and His alone.

CHRIST IN THE PSALMS

The primary meaning of the psalms is always to be sought first of all in their immediate, historical context. But this does not exhaust their significance. No one can read the psalms without becoming aware that certain psalms and individual verses have a deeper, future significance beyond the simple meaning of the words. The Messiah is not mentioned by name, but His figure is foreshadowed, as later generations of Jews came to realize. And the New Testament writers are quick to apply these verses to Jesus as the prophesied Messiah.

Some psalms, particularly the 'royal psalms' (of which **2,72,110** are the most striking) picture an ideal divine king/priest/judge never fully realized in any actual king of Israel. Only the Messiah combines these roles in the endless, universal reign of peace and justice envisaged by the psalmists.

Other psalms depict human suffering in terms which seem far-fetched in relation to ordinary experience, but which proved an extraordinarily accurate description of the actual sufferings of Christ. Under God's inspiration, the psalmists chose words and pictures which were to take on a significance they can hardly have dreamed of.

• **Psalm 22**, the psalm Jesus quoted as He hung on the cross (**verse 1, Matthew 27:4**), is the most amazing example. There are 31 prophecies in this psalm which were fulfilled by Christ. Compare **verse 16** with **John 20:25; verse 18** with **Mark 15:24**. (See also **Psalm 69:21** and **Matthew 27:34&48**).

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There are also many other verses in the psalms which New Testament writers apply to Jesus as the Christ:

- **Psalm 2:7**, "Thou art my Son", **Acts 13:33**;
- **Psalm 8:6**, "all things under His feet", **Hebrews 2:6-10**;
- **Psalm 16:10**, "For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell ...", **Acts 2:27; 13:35**;
- **Psalm 22:8**, "... let Him deliver him", **Matthew 27:43**;
- **Psalm 40:7&8**, "I delight to do Thy will", **Hebrews 10:7**;
- **Psalm 41:9**, "mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me", **John 13:18**;
- **Psalm 45:6**, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever", **Hebrews 1:8**;
- **Psalm 69:9**, "the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up", **John 2:17**;
- **Psalm 110:4**, "a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek", **Heb.7:17**;
- **Psalm 118:22**, "the stone which the builders refused ...", **Matthew 21:42**;
- **Psalm 118:26**, "Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the LORD", **Matthew 21:9**.

is followed by grim, prolonged physical suffering that shakes his faith to the depths.

IGNORANCE OF THE LARGER PICTURE

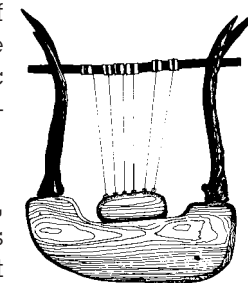
As they tussle with the problem, both Job and his friends are hampered by ignorance of the larger issue – the challenge of Satan that is related in the prologue of the book. According to 'orthodox theology' - the position championed by the three friends - prosperity was God's reward for good living; calamity His judgement on the sin of the individual. Generally speaking this held good. **But the friends reduced a general truth to a rigid, invariable rule.** If Job suffers, then he must be a wicked man. But Job knows this is untrue. So the argument goes back and forth, neither side shifting position, until they reach complete impasse, at which point God himself intervenes. He does not answer Job's questions. But, seeing God, Job is satisfied. If his friends' theology had been too narrow, his own concept of God had been too small.

The book leaves much unsettled. **It is only in the New Testament that we approach a full answer to the problem.** As we look at Christ on the cross we see the suffering of the only really innocent Man. And we see a God who cares so much for us He is prepared to shoulder the burden of human sin and suffering. Yet the book of Job is not outdated. Even today, suffering men and women find that this book speaks to their need as no other book in the Bible.

2. PSALMS: PRAISE IN PUBLIC WORSHIP

Psalm means "book of praises." The Book of Psalms is a collection of 150 psalms that are used as a book of prayer and praise in public worship in the tabernacle, temple, and synagogues.

There are **three primary types of psalms: praise, thanksgiving, and lament.** King David writes almost half of them, while several different authors complete the rest.



FIVE BOOKS!

Psalms, the Old Testament hymnal, is a collection of five books:

- BOOK 1. **1-41**;
- BOOK 2. **42-72**;
- BOOK 3. **73-89**;
- BOOK 4. **90-106**;
- BOOK 5. **107-150**.

At the end of each section (e.g. **41:13**) the break is marked by a doxology (a formal ascription of praise to God); **Psalms 150** forming a doxology to the whole collection.

CLUES FROM THE TITLES

Within the five books the psalms are often grouped, according to common themes, a common purpose, or a common author/collector.



- Most of the psalms are prefaced by **a title or heading** which is later than the psalm itself but preserves very ancient Jewish tradition.
- Some name **the author or collector**, and relate to specific events in history.
- 73 psalms bear David's name - some, no doubt, dedicated to him as king; some collected by him; and a good many, surely, the work of his own pen (**1 Samuel 16:17-23** and **1 Chronicles 25:1-8** are not the only indications that the king

was a gifted poet and musician). Many other titles concern the musicians, instruments, musical settings, or indicate the type of psalm ('Maskil', 'Miktam'), although the meaning of many of the terms used are sometimes difficult to determine exactly.

CLASSIFYING THE PSALMS

There have been many attempts to classify the psalms, and they can be grouped in a number of ways - for example by theme. There are psalms which plead with God and psalms which praise Him; appeals for forgiveness, or the destruction of enemies; prayers for the king, or for the nation; 'wisdom psalms and psalms which probe life's problem areas; and psalms (such as **119**) which celebrate the greatness of God's law. Many psalms are a blend of several of these common themes. All are part of the religious life of Israel.

TIMELESS MESSAGE

The psalms express the whole range of human feeling and experience - from dark depression to exuberant joy. They are rooted in particular circumstances, yet they are timeless, and so among the best-loved, most read, parts of the Bible. In our modern age we are stirred by the same emotions, puzzled over the same fundamental problems of life, cry out in need, or worship, to the same God, as the psalmists of old. We find it easy to identify with them. And we find their sheer, dogged faith, the depth of their love for God, both a tonic and a rebuke.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF LITERATURE

Perhaps one of the most helpful ways of grouping the psalms is by the main literary types:

- Hymns, in praise of God's character and deeds (e.g. **Psalms 8, 19, 29, 100, 104, 148**).
- Community laments, arising out of some national disaster (**12, 44, 74, 80, 94, 137**).
- Royal psalms, originating in some special occasion in the life of the reigning king (**2, 18, 20, 45**).
- Individual laments (**3, 7, 13, 22, 31, 42, 51, 57, 71, 120, 139, 142**).
- Individual thanksgivings (**18, 30, 32, 34, 40, 66, 92, 116, 118, 138**).

It is very difficult to date individual psalms, or to discover just how and when they were collected and compiled, though the process began with David, if not before, and continued into the days after the exile. Manuscripts found at Qumran have shown that the whole collection as we have it must have been finalised some time before the Maccabean period (2nd century BC).

STUDYING THE PSALMS

In studying and interpreting the Psalms it is important to:

- (a) Look for the different categories of psalms and the elements within each category;
- (b) recognize that many figures of speech are included;
- (c) note the kinds of parallelisms in the verses;
- (d) study the historical background of the psalms, and
- (e) find the central idea or unifying message/thought in the psalm.