

Course Study Guide

OT222 *Proverbs-Psalms: Singing the Sounds of Real Life*

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Updated 2014



Our Daily Bread
Christian University

Lesson 1 Study Guide

OT222 *Proverbs-Psalms: Singing the Sounds of Real Life*

Proverbs: Living in the Fear of the Lord

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Objectives

Proverbs 1:1-6 tells us why these wise sayings were recorded in the book. They tell us how a wise person responds to life's realities. They also challenge and strengthen the reader's own mind by stating their lessons in proverbial form so we have to discover their wisdom through meditation.

When you complete this lesson, "Proverbs: Living in the Fear of the Lord," you should be able to:

- Explain the background and process of writing and gathering the proverbs.
- Explain how a wise person relates to God.
- Discover how Proverbs "works" to deepen and sharpen the reader's mind.
- Be better equipped to live a wise life.

Scripture Reading

Read the Book of Proverbs.

Transcript

Course Title: Proverbs-Psalms: Singing the Sounds of Real Life

Lesson One: Proverbs: Living in the Fear of the Lord

I. Introduction

The book of Proverbs is perhaps the book in the Bible most famous—best known to most of us—for its wisdom sayings. Wisdom is the ability to make the right choices in life. It has nothing to do with IQ or academic skill or achievement. It has very little to do with experience or the ability to speak well or any other sort of skill. It is primarily the ability to make the right choices. Of course, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. That theme Proverbs emphasizes for us.

II. Hebrew Poetry

Proverbs is an anthology, or a collection, of many great materials of various sorts. There are relatively long poems in Proverbs that talk about what wisdom is and how important it is to attain it. There are poems about specific topics, like the way that an ant can be an example to a human of steady hard work, or the concluding poem in the book of Proverbs of how important it is to choose a spouse (that major decision in life should never be undertaken lightly and should always be undertaken with the long-term in view).

But there are also some very short sayings; indeed, most of the book is made up of short statements. These are typically what we call poetic couplets. Sometimes a couplet will be synonymous; that is, it will state something and then state it again in a different wording. We call that a synonymous couplet. Very often in Proverbs, there will be a statement made and then its contrast. “This is good, but that is bad.” That is antithetical parallelism. There is also a kind that one sees in Proverbs, as well as in all Hebrew poetry, that we call synthetic. The first part of an idea is stated, and then the concluding part is given in the second half of the couplet. Proverbs, in particular, has the highest proportion of antithetical parallelism of any poetry in the Bible. It is a thoroughly poetical book and its poetry is heavily antithetical, so when you read Proverbs, you regularly expect to find statements like, “This, on the one hand, is the right thing to do; that, on the other hand, is the wrong thing to do.”

III. Structure of the Book

A. Right Choices (1:1-9:18)

Proverbs has a relatively simple structure, but that structure is informative to us. In chapters 1-9, we see a list of statements and relatively long poems about the importance of seeking wisdom. Nine chapters are dedicated to arguing, in an eloquent, poetic format, for how important it is that each of us should try to develop the ability to make the right choices in

life. You know, life is full of choices; and in a way, you can say life is choices. Everything we do involves choice making: when to get up in the morning after the alarm rings; what clothes to wear; what to eat for breakfast; when to leave for work or school or whatever; where to park; who to talk to; what notes to take in class; what work to begin with on the desk or at the plant; how to talk to people, what to say to them; when to take a break for lunch, if that is an option, and so on.

We are making choices all the time. Many of them are routine; many of them are patterned. But we are constantly making choices. We should realize that we are also making, or renewing and repeating, the major choices of life: What will our lives center on? What will be the big issues for us? What will, after we have lived our life, be the product of it? Who will we have cared about? How will we have treated others? What will people say about us in retrospect, in terms of the choices we have made? And, of course, in all of this by far the most important choice is: Have you decided to live for God? Do you belong to the Lord? That is the biggest choice of all. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

B. Wise Choices (10:1-22:16)

After those first nine chapters, in which the emphasis is on the importance of being a wise person, of making wise choices, of getting wisdom, then the Proverbs of Solomon come. These are in chapters 10-22, which is the biggest single block of the book. As far as we can tell from what we are told about Solomon elsewhere in the Bible, Solomon did not make up every one of the hundreds of proverbs in chapters 10-22. He made up many of them, others he collected, some he may have modified and rewritten. It is the same for any writer—nobody comes up with every new idea, every new concept, every word different, every sentence unique. Everyone who writes or composes is building upon what has been available to him or her from the past. Solomon was very creative with his wisdom and did produce a lot of the proverbs himself, so we have this very long section of material, the heart part of the book of Proverbs, called Proverbs of Solomon.

C. Words of the Wise (22:17-24:34)

Then, interestingly, we have a section of material in part of chapter 22, to near the end of chapter 24, that is titled in the book simply Words of the Wise. Presumably, these words are from other sources than Solomon, and he or someone else caused them to be collected. At the end of chapter 24, there are more Words of the Wise, the book of Proverbs tells us. This, again, must have been some separate collection added in, as the book of Proverbs was taking shape under God's direction.

D. More Proverbs of Solomon (25:1-29:27)

In chapters 25-29, we then come back to a section of material called More Proverbs of Solomon. So perhaps, at some later point, after much of the book was put together, Solomon had gained yet more insight and had composed more proverbs and had gathered others that he put along with those he composed.

E. The Sayings of Agur and Lemuel (30:1-31:9)

Interestingly, we then have in chapters 30 and 31 two units of material that are titled in the book, The Words of Agur and The Words of Lemuel. Now, these individuals are called kings, King Agur and King Lemuel. No one named Agur and no one named Lemuel was ever a king of Israel or Judah. In fact, what we believe we have here are the writings of Arab kings. Imagine that: God taking wisdom from Arab kings (undoubtedly causing Solomon or someone else to select from it) and putting it into the Scripture because He saw that it was good, proper, and it contained wise material, and it was worthy of inclusion.

F. Marrying Well (31:10-31)

Proverbs comes to an end with that wonderful acrostic poem going right through the alphabet on the advantages of marrying well. But not marrying well the way we use the term in modern times to mean marrying someone with money, but marrying well in terms of marrying a person who fears the Lord and embodies the characteristics of a wise person as taught in the book of Proverbs. So that is the outline. It is not all from Solomon. It is from a mixture of various individuals and sources, but Solomon's work and collective skill dominate the book.

IV. Fifteen Themes

Now, more particularly, what are the kinds of things we find in Proverbs? If there are hundreds and hundreds of them in short couplet form and then dozens in longer poetic form, what are the themes? Well, it turns out that there are at least fifteen major themes in the book. Six of these are really predominant in terms of the sheer number of proverbs, the amount of space devoted to them.

A. Nature of Wisdom

The first of these six, that we might call the big themes in the book or the major themes, is the nature of wisdom itself. It is not always natural or easy or automatic for people to think of how important it is to be wise. Wisdom is a thing you work on. Wisdom is a thing you even spend time agonizing over. Wisdom requires creative thought and study; it requires an effort to master. So in particular, chapters 1-9, as we have noted, are about the nature of wisdom and the importance of seeking it. That is a big theme, and certainly that idea is not limited to chapters 1-9. Wisdom is just simply important in its nature. The fact that you have to make choices in life and you need to make godly choices is one of the big issues in the book.

B. Wisdom Opposed to Folly

The second big issue is that of wisdom as opposed to folly. Now it is important to appreciate the fact that in the same way that wisdom, as we understand it in Proverbs, does not mean exactly what the English word wisdom might lead us to think of (in other words, it is right choice making, godly choice making, as opposed to some kind of intelligence or knowledge

gained from experience). Likewise, folly is not what we might think the English word used to translate the Hebrew term actually indicates. Folly is more like rebellion. The opposite of wisdom, making the right choices, is not caring enough to make right choices at all—not trying, not investing one’s self in viewing life as constantly offering opportunities to go one way or another. You know, large numbers of people do live this way. They do not set out to pattern their lives in fulfillment of God’s Word and fulfillment of what He has revealed as the right way to live. They just sort of go along and live doing what feels right, or what seems good at the time, or what is fun, or what looks enjoyable, or looks like it might give some form of pleasure. That is what folly is. It is not some sort of idiocy or wild craziness. It is just making the mistake of not trying to live wisely. It is a rebellion against the need to do the whole thing.

C. Righteous Versus Wicked

Another theme is that of the righteous versus the wicked. Now this is, of course, related to wisdom and folly, but the emphasis of Proverbs is not just that you sort of get ahead by doing the right kinds of things or fall behind by doing the wrong sorts of things. But rather, these choices that one makes in life really are moral choices; they are morals. Now that is an important concept and one that, in our culture, is underemphasized, if not neglected almost entirely. We live in an age in which people are quite willing to ignore morality. Statements are made like, “You cannot legislate morality.” So from the point of view of a citizen or government or law, morality is a non-issue. Actually, all you ever do legislate is morality. All laws are under the category of morality. It is just a society’s decision about what is right and wrong. But many people will say that anything to do with personal morality is purely personal. There is no sense of public morality, no sense that it is important for an individual to live a life in concert with others, in recognition of others, with concern for others; and certainly in our society there is very little practical interest in living for God. But the Bible places wisdom squarely in the moral camp; we ought to be moral people. Our failings in life as a group of people, as an individual, as a society, are not primarily psychological or political or economic. They are primarily moral. That is where the big crisis is. Until and unless we think about moral issues, we really do miss wisdom. To be righteous is to be wise; to be wicked is to be foolish.

D. Power of Speech

A fourth important theme of the six major ones is the theme of speech. There is an awful lot in Proverbs about the power of speech: to do harm or to do good. If one uses one’s ability with words to encourage, to support, to perhaps reduce tension, one is doing a wise thing. If, on the other hand, one uses one’s ability to speak to hurt people, to insult them, to discourage them, and so on, one is doing what is foolish. We often underestimate the power of speech, but it is really what most of us work with. Even those people who are involved in working with their hands are usually also using their tongues to get things done or to coordinate or cooperate or whatever. In a family, what generally makes the difference is how you speak to one another. There is a way to disagree in all sorts of circumstances in life that can actually reduce tension, but we all know that there is a way to disagree that can raise it.

E. Family Issues

The family is an additional theme. The family is very important in the book of Proverbs—how to get along with one’s spouse, how to get along with children, how children should relate to parents, how parents should relate to children. One interesting instance of this is the statement in Proverbs that “the person who spares the rod hates his child.” Proverbs are generalizations. They are true generalizations and intended to be generalizations. And so, that proverb would never have been interpreted by anybody in ancient times, in Solomon’s day, to mean you should be sure to whip your children constantly. But rather, if a parent does not discipline adequately, so that his child is brought up to be a decent and responsible and respectful child who behaves properly and is not an annoyance and a problem and source of trouble to others, the parent actually does not love that child. The parent has done the equivalent of hating his own child. People who love their kids keep them in line for the sake of their children, for the sake of their family, for the sake of their community. But it is just one example. There are many relationships in the families that Proverbs addresses.

F. Importance of Work

A sixth major topic of the book is the topic of work. Proverbs stresses the importance of not being lazy, of diligence. The section of Proverbs that deals with the example of the ant and begins, “Go to the ant you sluggard . . .,” is trying to get the person inclined to laziness to see how important even something as simple as an insect in nature places the significance of being wise enough to be diligent, hard working, and steady before one. There are also other features about work, about the way that work must be done intelligently. You just do not do things for their own sake, about how hard work is a benefit to a society and to individuals and has its own reward. Proverbs does not ask that we work hard just out of sheer cussedness, as if not doing something the easy way is the issue, but rather Proverbs wants us to work hard on things and in ways that are productive.

G. Nine Less-Frequent Themes

In addition, there are nine other issues in the book. These are also significant, important, prominent themes. They just do not get quite as much space as the first six that we have talked about. One of them is the topic of the rich versus the poor or poverty versus wealth. Proverbs regards it, as all of us do, as not desirable for a person to be poor if he can do anything about it. If you can do anything about it, you should be someone who tries not to be so poor that you have to be dependent on others. Proverbs also recognizes that people are poor involuntarily and urges that the rest of us pay attention and help them to the extent we can.

Another theme is that of industry and planning. One might say this refers to business and business decisions, sometimes personal decisions that relate to one’s being an efficient individual in commerce or in the family or in the community or whatever.

The topic of pride versus humility is significant in the book. It is very dangerous to be proud. It almost always skews a person's life in the wrong direction, whereas humility is invariably the best, the safest, the wisest course. It is a course that pleases God. It is the course that His servants set as an example for us.

Friends and neighbors are a topic in the book—how to get along with them, how to be a good neighbor, the sorts of things that one says and does, the ways one approaches a difficult individual, and how you can change things by going the extra mile with people who are not easy to get along with. Bosses and employees are also a theme. It is usually worded in our English translations as masters and servants, but it is about employers and their employees—about workers and the people who are their bosses and how they should relate to one another, how they should treat one another, what their responsibilities are. The theme of government is significant. It is worded with vocabulary like kings and rulers, but relationship to the government is very important and we need to appreciate the fact that this is what human beings do as proper citizens.

Attitudes are big in the book of Proverbs—hopes and fears and joys and sorrows, how they are to be manifested, what their proper manifestations are in various circumstances. Anger and its dangers is another theme in the book. You know it is not sinful to be angry. God is angry more often than any other figure in the Bible and also in the book of Proverbs. So it is not a sin to be angry, but anger can lead to sin. It never does with God, but it sure can with us. So how to deal with anger, how to assuage it, how to address it when it comes at you from others, is quite a significant theme in the book.

Finally, of the fifteen that constitute the major themes, the prominent themes in the book, there is the theme of the fear of the Lord. It is not mentioned constantly in the book. It is not that every chapter tells you to be sure to fear the Lord, but it is there so frequently and it is such an important theme qualitatively that it really makes a tremendous emphasis and undergirds the whole purpose of the book. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

V. Usefulness of Proverbs

A. Target Audience: Young People

What use can Proverbs be put to? There are many. Let me highlight a couple. First of all, the book is written specifically toward an audience of young people. We ought to be using it in that way. Parents should be using it in their homes. At the dinner table, every once in a while I will pull out the Bible and just pick a Proverb at random and ask my children what it means. Proverbs are worded in what is called a laconic style—so terse, so brief as to be a little bit tricky to figure out. That is purposeful. A proverb, in a way, is kind of a puzzle. You are supposed to have to concentrate on it and think about it; and as you do that, it gets in your mind.

It is a little like the English proverb, “A stitch in time saves nine.” We could say that a whole different way. We could say there are certain kinds of circumstances in which it is necessary to

act immediately, or to intervene soon so as to prevent damage from increasing or difficulties from becoming multiplied further down the line of the progress of the situation. But that is an awful lot to say compared to “a stitch in time saves nine.”

The English proverb is much easier to remember. It comes to mind quickly; it does the job once you know what it means. Someone may have to explain it to you, but once you get it, it is the easier thing to remember and has greater impact than the much more complicated way of expressing it. So it is with Proverbs. They are powerful, if they are learned and if they are explained and memorized and made a part of one’s thinking.

B. Predominant Message: Train Young People

Then secondly, we really ought to be using these to train young people. They ought to be used in schools and churches, youth groups, parents of teenagers, because here is a book of the Bible written especially for that audience. Not that everybody does not learn from it—it is never too late to learn what you should have learned; it is never too late to be reminded of what was valuable for you to learn even years ago. But here is a book that God has designed to help young people know what it is to live properly as citizens of this world, and that is a tremendous asset and one we should be making use of. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and Proverbs helps us get it.

Discussion Questions

What does the phrase “the fear of the Lord” really mean? Why is the fear of the Lord the beginning of wisdom?

How might the book of Proverbs be useful in training young people?

Choose one of the proverbs and explain how it can be applied today.

Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:

Stedman, Ray C. *Adventuring Through the Bible: A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*. 2nd ed. Discovery House Publishers: 2012.
Read Chapter 26: “What Life Is All About” (Proverbs)

Philip Yancey Devotional Life Advice - Proverbs 4

“Listen, my sons, to a father’s instruction; pay attention and gain understanding. . . . Do not set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evil men” (Prov. 4:1, 14).

The happy days of Solomon’s reign did not last. In a pointed editorial aside, the author of 1 Kings notes that after building the temple Solomon spent twice as much time and energy on the construction of his own palace (7:1). He proved unable to control his extravagant appetite in any area: wealth, power, romance, political intrigue. He seemed obsessed with a desire to outdo anyone who had ever lived, and gradually his devotion to God slipped away. First Kings gives this summation of Solomon’s days, “So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done” (11:6).

Yet, although Solomon ultimately failed to please God, he did use his enormous talent for much good. In the arts, he created many fine works, among them several books of biblical literature. Inspired by God’s supernatural gift of wisdom, he composed 1,005 songs and 3,000 proverbs—many of which are collected in this book.

This representative chapter captures the pattern of the book of Proverbs: A wise old man, surrounded by eager young admirers, coyly unveils to them the secrets of his life. (A modern parallel: Millions of Americans will buy the latest how-to book by a famous sports figure or business executive—maybe it will help me achieve that same kind of success, they think.) Before revealing his secrets, however, the author of Proverbs wants to get one thing straight. The wisdom he is teaching cannot be reduced to a series of “Don’t do this; do that” rules. There is no formula for “one-minute wisdom”; true wisdom demands a lifelong quest. The rewards of such a life, however, will repay any sacrifice, “though it cost all you have.”

As the author contrasts “the path of the righteous” with “the way of the wicked,” one cannot help wondering how Solomon might have fared if he had consistently followed his own advice. Now, his time passing, he could only hope to convey that hard-bitten wisdom to future generations.

Life Question: Do people today pursue “wisdom” with as much desire and energy? Where do people in modern times pursue “wisdom”?

Glossary

Antithetical Parallelism — The lines of a verse express a contrast, and the second line is usually introduced with “but” (Pr 10:1).

Climactic Parallelism — One or more elements from the first line are repeated in the second line, and the parallelism comes to a conclusion or a climax at the end of the verse (Ps 29:1).

Emblematic Parallelism — A specific kind of synonymous parallelism in which one line contains a simile or metaphor (Ps 103:13).

Laconic Style — Using or involving a minimal amount of words; concise to the point of being difficult to understand without explanation.

Poetry — More than one-third of the Old Testament is written in poetic form. A feature that appears continually in Hebrew poetry is parallelism. A poetic line usually consists of two members or parts, which in one way or another run parallel to each other and correspond with each other.

Proverb — (Hebrew *mashal*) - A saying, usually brief, stating a truth or making a point in a memorable way. A mashal can be (1) a mocking saying or taunt (Dt 28:37; 1Sa 10:12); (2) a discourse (Job 27:1; Nu 23:7); (3) “instruction” (Pr 1:1-19); (4) “wisdom speech” (Pr 1:20-33), and (5) brief words of warning or instruction (1Ki 4:32; Pr 1:1). Proverbs were intended to be semi-puzzles, thus requiring careful thought to “solve” and thus forcing the learner to understand the principles thoroughly.

Synonymous Parallelism — The expression of the first line is repeated by the second in different words (Ps 2:3).

Synthetic Parallelism — The second line develops or completes the thought in a way that could not be determined from the first line (Ps 1:2).

Quiz

1. According to Dr. Stuart, the statement that “the person who spares the rod hates his child” demonstrates that the proverbs are:
 - A. Generalizations
 - B. Exaggerations
 - C. Illustrations
 - D. Rationalizations
2. Most of the book of Proverbs consists of:
 - A. Relatively long poems
 - B. Very long poems
 - C. Harmonious parallelism
 - D. Antithetical parallelism
3. What is a synonymous couplet?
 - A. When something is stated, and then its contrast is stated
 - B. When something is repeated word-for-word
 - C. When something is stated, and then stated again in different words
 - D. None of the above
4. Proverbs depicts this creature as the epitome of diligence and hard work:
 - A. Bee
 - B. Ant
 - C. Beaver
 - D. Squirrel
5. The book of Proverbs contains the writings of:
 - A. Solomon
 - B. Lemuel
 - C. Unnamed “wise” ones
 - D. All of the above
6. The book of Proverbs is best known for its:
 - A. Prophetic sayings
 - B. Wisdom sayings
 - C. Historical commentary
 - D. Apocalyptic overtones
7. The book of Proverbs was written specifically for:
 - A. Wise people
 - B. Foolish people
 - C. Young people
 - D. Older people

8. The first nine chapters of Proverbs are dedicated to the importance of seeking:
 - A. Success
 - B. Wisdom
 - C. Righteousness
 - D. A good reputation
9. Undergirding the purpose of the book of Proverbs is the theme that the fear of the Lord is:
 - A. The beginning of wisdom
 - B. The beginning of knowledge
 - C. Much to be dreaded
 - D. An end in itself
10. Which of the following is **not** a predominant theme found in the book of Proverbs?
 - A. The righteous versus the wicked
 - B. The power of speech
 - C. The coming of judgment upon Israel
 - D. The importance of work

Answers: 1. A 2. D 3. C 4. B 5. D 6. B 7. C 8. B 9. A 10. C

Lesson 2 Study Guide

OT222 *Proverbs-Psalms: Singing the Sounds of Real Life*

Psalms: Ancient Prayers for Modern People

Updated 2014



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Objectives

This book of songs and prayers demonstrates how godly people process life's daily routines. The psalmists' life events were normal. What sets them apart are their super-normal responses to normal life. The heart and mind that seeks to worship God in any circumstance is expressed in these ancient poems.

When you complete this lesson, "Psalms: Ancient Prayers for Modern People," you should be able to:

- Discuss the process of composing, collecting, and preserving the psalms.
- Identify basic types of psalms found in the book.
- Read the psalms with increased awareness of their structure and meaning.
- Develop your own ability to express your life's "songs" to God.

Scripture Reading

Read Psalms 1-75.

Transcript

Course Title: Proverbs-Psalms: Singing the Sounds of Real Life

Lesson Two: Psalms: Ancient Prayers for Modern People

I. Introduction

Perhaps the most popular book in the Old Testament is the book of Psalms. It seems that almost everybody loves the Psalms. In all cultures, at all times, people have turned to the Psalms for comfort, for encouragement, for delight, to help them express themselves to God as they have turned to Him in prayer. One reason for this is that the Psalms contain not only God's Word to us, but in a certain sense our words to God. The Psalms are all His Word. They are all His inspiration, but they are intended to be used by us to express to Him the things that are of concern. It turns out that in ancient Israel, the Psalms were used exactly this way. They were used by people and groups, who had one kind of thing or another that they wanted to get across to the Lord.

In other words, the Psalms are kind of samples or examples or perhaps guidelines that help a worshiper express to God what is on his or her mind. The Psalms constitute a big book; there is no Bible book bigger than the Psalter with its 150 psalms. You get some short ones, but you get some massive ones, like Psalm 119, far and away the longest chapter in the Bible. But it is not so much the length of a psalm. It is not so much where it is found in the groupings that are called books within the Psalter (those five books). It is not so much the individual vocabulary or the like. And it is certainly not the tunes, even though we know that every psalm was sung. We know that every psalm was a musical poem; it must have had a tune. We just cannot recover them now. What really is important about the psalms are their categories. If you know the categories, if you know the types of psalms, then you can employ them as they were intended to be employed.

Before we go into those categories, I do want to say something that is related to all of the categories. The Psalms are intended to be as all-purpose as possible. We can tell that from the way that they are written. The Psalms have an outlook that everybody is supposed to be able to identify with. If you have got a circumstance, there is supposed to be a psalm there to help you. If you have an interest, there is something in the Psalms to channel your interest, as God wants it channeled. We must think of the Psalms as all-purpose. This, I think, is one of the reasons that they have had such popularity at so many times and places. So many different people can unite around their love of the Psalms.

II. Ten Types of Psalms

A. Lament Psalms

The ten types of psalms, when understood, are really useful. The first of these types and most frequent in the Psalter is what we call the lament psalms. A lament is a type of prayer that is

prayed when one is in a situation of trial or trouble, and when one is seeking a way out, when one is seeking deliverance. Let's look at the structure of the laments. We can take the time to do this and should because the laments actually constitute about seventy of the Psalms. They are far and away the most frequent types in the Psalter. One might say that there are seventy chapters in the Bible devoted to helping people through their suffering.

There are six ingredients in a typical lament psalm: (a) There is the address, in other words, God's name is always invoked, "O Lord" or "O my God." You are not just praying out there, somewhere, to some sort of cosmic noodle soup; you are praying to the Lord, someone who knows you and loves you, and whom you presumably know as your Lord and Savior.

(b) Then there is the complaint: we call this by its standard, typical, traditional name, but it is really the section of the psalm that describes what trouble you are in, your misery, your suffering. Now interestingly, the complaint section of these lament psalms is virtually always one of four types of situations. (1) The most frequent is being surrounded by enemies who are about to kill you. (2) The second-most frequent is being trapped somehow, maybe in a pit or in a deep, watery miry clay. (3) The third is being very sick, terribly sick, so that you are feverish and your body aches and you are miserable and your throat burns. (4) The fourth is the process of dying, sometimes even drifting down to hell metaphorically.

The problems in the complaint sections of the laments never include family problems, never include finances, and never include difficulty with the tax authorities—the equivalent of the IRS. They never include homework; they never include job difficulties and conflicts. But that is not because they do not cover those. It is because the psalmists tried to pick a few themes that, in their minds, stood for being really miserable, really suffering. The most common one, for example, is being surrounded by enemies about to kill you. This is not the case of you are just caught in warfare, but this is the whole world hates you. All kinds of people have come around you and they are laughing at you, and mocking you, and insulting you, and are just about to kill you to rid the earth of you, who are, to them, scum. That is the kind of thing, the kind of picture one gets in a lament psalm.

Why? Because that is the most common thing we experience in life? No, because these are intended to be sample complaints. In effect, the psalmist is saying, "You fill in at this spot what your problem really is." If your problem is financial, if your problem is a matter of your family, if your problem is social, if your problem is some psychological thing, you fill it in. We will put in an instance in the psalm, but you understand in your own mind that this is just a trigger for you whatever the difficulty is. And so, those four kinds of complaints—surrounded by enemies, confinement, sickness, death—stand for whatever your problem really is. The psalms are all-purpose in that way.

The psalmists have tried in those complaint sections to give instances that really are bad. What you do not want is a psalm that you go to for comfort—to pray to the Lord—that has as its complaint the fact that your hip joints may ache a bit on rainy days. That is not going to help you if you have got a more serious problem. We say, "You cannot out-complain the psalmist."

The psalmist lists extreme kinds of circumstances: horrible confinements, terrible illnesses, actually dying, and being surrounded by a world of enemies that just hate you. It lists those in order to give you the sense that your misery, whatever it is, is understood; the psalm is at least as miserable in its complaint section as your particular problem.

(c) We have the address, the complaint, but then comes an expression of trust. In these psalms God may be trusted. He has proved Himself faithful in the past, and He can be trusted now to deliver. (d) Then comes the actual plea for deliverance—very briefly, perhaps nothing more than just “save me, O Lord.” (e) Then there is some kind of statement of assurance; sometimes this may even have been said by a third party. When people sang these psalms as musical prayers in the temple, it is quite possible that one of the temple singers or priests actually gave the word of assurance. (f) Then there is some kind of a word of praise that typically finishes off these psalms.

Now the order may not always be as we have described it, the elements may be reversed in some way, and there may be repetition of elements throughout a given psalm. But one can see this frequent lament type illustrated in Psalm 3: “O Lord (that is the address), how many are my foes (the complaint)! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, ‘God will not deliver him (there is the picture of enemies mocking and hating him and reviling him).’”

Then comes the statement of trust: “But you are a shield around me, O Lord” (This can even be translated in the original, “You are my benefactor, my protector.”) “You bestow glory on me and lift up my head.” Then the plea for deliverance, “To the Lord I cry aloud. He answers me from His holy hill.” A word of assurance, “I lie down and sleep. I wake again because the Lord sustains me. I will not fear tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side.” Another deliverance plea: “Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God. Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked.” Is this because the psalmist likes to see people get hurt? No, because in the spirit of the psalm, the enemies stand for whatever the psalmist’s problems are. So we can say, “Crush those problems; get rid of them for me please, O Lord.”

Then, finally, the element of praise: “From the Lord comes deliverance. Your blessing is on your people.” Or as it can also be translated, “May your blessing be on your people.” Notice the balance in a prayer like that—it is not all petition; you are not just asking. You are also expressing trust and assurance, and you are also praising God for who He is and for His faithfulness to you in the past and presumably in the future. That is one type of psalm, the lament, and knowing what it stands for helps make it all the more useful to us. Now we realize that when one sees a psalm that is like that (and you can spot them very easily by their structure and their themes), one knows that here is comfort in whatever kind of suffering or trial, major or minor, may come your way. Naturally, one wants to use the psalm appropriately. You would not choose to read a lament typically at a wedding! And you would not choose to use an individual lament when it is a group concern; rather, you will pick one of the corporate laments.

B. Thanksgiving Psalms

A second type of psalm is the thanksgiving psalm. These psalms are prayed after one has gotten out of the kind of misery described in the lament psalm. Their purpose is to thank God for deliverance. The deliverance now has come, and you are no longer in the misery; you are out, so you pray a thanksgiving psalm. These have a characteristic structure of first, (a) an introduction, an intention to give thanks to God, then (b) the misery is described, then (c) the appeal that was given to God, then (d) the actual rescue (these are all in the past tense because the rescue has come), then finally (e) a testimonial of gratitude to God for delivering you (sometimes that testimonial takes the form of a promise to worship).

The most basic thing any believer can do is worship God. The most basic thing a person who is grateful to God can do is to give God worship, to declare His greatness; to praise Him—the essence of worship. We have a couple dozen of those psalms—the thanksgiving psalms in the Psalter. They are completely appropriate for the individual or group situation where people are thankful for something that has gone well. Again, the miseries in these psalms are of the four basic types that we talked about in connection with the laments. The miseries are usually either enemies or confinement or illness or death, standing for whatever you are actually in that was hard for you.

C. Hymns

A third type of psalm is the hymn. We think of a hymn as meaning something we sing out of a hymnbook in church. But the more technical meaning of the word, as we use it in connection with Psalms, is a song of praise to God, which is specially directed to God as a psalm of praise to Him. There are three types of these for the most part: (a) one type is praising God as Creator, so we call these Creator hymns; their purpose is to glorify God for being the Creator of all. (b) A second type is called an Israel hymn. These are the types of psalms that praise God for creating a people and for protecting that people throughout their long lineage. (c) A final type is called history hymns. These are psalms that use as their basic theme the fact that God has been watching over history.

You know, in a lot of religions of the world, the gods and goddesses are not closely related to history. They just sort of exist, and what happens in history is not too closely related to your religion. But biblical faith is a very historical faith. God is at work in the world at all times. We might not be able to discern it (most of the time we can barely figure it out well in hindsight), but God is at work and that is what the history hymns emphasize.

Now, there is a structure to these types of psalms as well, and it is very simple. You can remember it by the initials SRR: (a) there is a summons to praise, then (b) a reason to praise (or in fact a long list of reasons sometimes), and then (c) a recapitulation. So the summons may be as simple as “let us praise the Lord,” and then the reasons are usually introduced by “for” or “because”; and they constitute the heart of the psalm. And then finally comes a recapitulation, which may be as simple as “praise the Lord.”

D. Enthronement Psalms

A fourth category is enthronement psalms. Enthronement psalms are psalms that speak of the way that God is King. Of course, Israel had an earthly king and they knew all about kings; every nation in their day had a king. God is “the” King over all. God is on the throne, and He is on the eternal throne, the heavenly throne. His throne is above all earthly thrones. So these psalms emphasize this: God enthroned as King. And one way or another, they will almost always mention the word “throne” in some part of the psalm or another. Again, they are descriptive praises of God. The essence of praise, the essence of worship, is to declare God’s greatness. That is what we do when we worship. We declare God’s greatness. A psalm like this, an enthronement psalm, certainly does it.

E. Royal Psalms

Another category is the royal psalm. These psalms were used to focus the attention of the people on God’s good gift of government. The king is, of course, the person mentioned most in a royal psalm. These are psalms for prayers of protection. They are psalms of gratitude that God has allowed the king to lead the people in good ways. As a royal psalm unfolds, one sees that it is not just some sort of idolizing of the human king. It is always thanks to God for the way that God benefited the king, or prayer to God for the king and that God will help the king—recognizing that the king alone, the human leader of government, can never do what is necessary on his own.

F. Psalms of Zion

Yet another category is that of the psalms of Zion. These are psalms that can have a hymn format—they can be in the summons, reasons, and recapitulation format—but they are characterized more by their content than any particular format. They talk about Zion, about Jerusalem. Their theme fits with that of the book of Deuteronomy, and many parts of the former and latter prophets in the Old Testament, that describe how good it is that God has dwelt with His people and made Himself close to them, how Zion, the name of the mountain at the center of Jerusalem, was a place where God allowed the Israelites to build a temple as a symbol of His presence among them, and how He caused His name—that is, His authority, His affective presence—to be with them. Zion is a revered place in the Bible. It is very important. That is where everybody came three times a year to worship, and it is what becomes, in the writings of the prophets, increasingly a symbol of not only God’s presence on earth, but of God’s eternal presence. The theme of Zion ends up having tremendous importance in the New Testament; it is Jerusalem that symbolizes heaven eventually in the Scriptures.

G. Wisdom Psalms

Wisdom psalms are yet another category. The wisdom psalms have a kind of simple structure. It is described as this or that, “x” or “y”: Will you go in this direction or will you go in that direction? Wisdom is the making of right choices: Will you make right choices that please God

and show you are a righteous person, or will you make wrong choices that displease God and show that your heart is really in the direction of evil or wickedness? In the case of the wisdom psalms, there are certain categories one can observe. Contrast between the righteous and the wicked is emphasized; conduct in life is important as a theme; the fear of the Lord is usually mentioned. Comparisons and warnings may be present because those are ways to show the options, the choices.

Many of the wisdom psalms are acrostic; that is, they go through successive letters of the alphabet as starting points for the given verses. Sometimes one will see the wording, “better than”: “This is better than that or to be preferred to that.” Sometimes the wording “my son” or “my child” will be in there because that is the way that teachers addressed learners in Bible times. The teacher was often called “father” and the learner called “child.” It would work that way in the family, but even the school kids called their teachers “father,” and the teachers called the students “son” or “child.” Also, often enough the psalm will use the word “blessed.” “Blessed is the person who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers,” says Psalm 1, which is a wisdom psalm. “On the other hand, his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night.”

H. Trust Psalms

Another category is that of a trust psalm. You know, most of you who know any psalms at all know the Twenty-third Psalm, and that is a trust psalm. It is a psalm in which (a) the first part of the psalm describes trusting God as a faithful shepherd, and then (b) the second part describes trusting God as a faithful host. In the first part of the psalm, you can trust Him because He is going to take good care of you, His sheep. In the second part, when you go to God’s house, He feeds you well. He protects you against any harm that might come your way—your enemies—and you have abundance, so much so that you want to stay there forever. “I am going to stay in the Lord’s house forever.”

I. Liturgy Psalms

Liturgies are another category. This is a little bit of a catchall category because liturgy simply means, “wording that may be used in worship.” But we believe that in certain kinds of worship settings, liturgies like Psalm 15 or Psalm 68 or Psalm 82 were employed to emphasize one part of the service or another, one truth within the process of the worship service or life at the temple.

J. Torah Psalms

A final category is that of the Torah psalm. There are not many of these, but it just happens that Psalm 119, the really big psalm in the Psalter, is a Torah psalm. Torah is a Hebrew word that means “the Law,” the Mosaic Law, the covenant Law. These psalms emphasize the importance of knowing God’s revealed truth. You want to know the Word of God, and they praise the benefits of knowing the Word—how valuable it is for you, and how important it is that you know it in order to please God.

III. Conclusion

These are the ten basic types. If you know them, you can use them. You will sense them if you are aware of the categories as you read through the Psalter. You will employ them in your own prayer life as you should and as you are encouraged to do by the way that they are written. You will use them in worship and benefit from them in that context. They are all written to be both God's Word to us and as an encouragement to us to be our words to God as well.

Discussion Questions

Share a testimony of how the book of Psalms (or a particular psalm) has impacted you.

How could an understanding of the ten basic psalm types benefit a person's devotional life?

Based on the ten psalm types, compose a brief psalm (be sure to identify the type).

Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:

Stedman, Ray C. *Adventuring Through the Bible: A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*. 2nd ed. Discovery House Publishers: 2012.
Read Chapter 25: “Songs of a Sincere Heart” (Psalms)

Philip Yancey Devotional True Confession - Psalm 51

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions” (Ps. 51:1).

This poem of remembrance may well be the most impressive outcome of David’s sordid affair with Bathsheba. It is one thing for a king to confess a moral lapse in private to a prophet. It is quite another for him to compose a detailed account of that confession that could be sung throughout the land!

All nations have heroes, but Israel may be alone in making epic literature about its greatest hero’s failings. This eloquent psalm, possibly used in worship services as a guide for confession, shows that Israel ultimately remembered David more for his devotion to God than for his political achievements.

Step by step, the psalm takes the reader (or singer) through the stages of repentance. It describes the constant mental replays—“Oh, if only I had a chance to do it over”—the gnawing guilt, the shame, and finally the hope for a new beginning that springs from true repentance.

David lived under Old Testament law, which prescribed a harsh punishment for his crimes: death by stoning. But in a remarkable way this psalm transcends the rigid formulas of law and reveals the true nature of sin as a broken relationship with God. “Against you, you only, have I sinned,” David cried out. He could see that no ritual sacrifices or religious ceremonies would cause his guilt to vanish; the sacrifices God wanted were “a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart.” Those, David had.

In the midst of his prayer, David looks for possible good that might come out of his tragedy, and sees a glimmer of light. He prays for God to use his experience as a moral lesson for others. Perhaps, by reading his story of sin, they might avoid the same pitfalls, or by reading his confession they might gain hope in forgiveness. David’s prayer was fully answered and is his greatest legacy as king. The best king of Israel fell the farthest. But neither he, nor anyone, can fall beyond the reach of God’s love and forgiveness.

Life Question: Would you lose respect for a leader if he or she admitted failures as openly as David did?

Glossary

Hymn — (from Greek *hymnos*; hymn, ode, song of praise) - The term hymn is usually used to designate a song of praise that glorifies God as God (Ps 8; 19; 29; 33).

Liturgy — The word is employed (1) in a general sense with reference to any of the prescribed rites or body of rites prescribed for public worship; (2) in a specific sense with reference to the formularies used at the celebration of the Holy Communion, the eucharistic office being commonly referred to as the liturgy.

Psalms — (Greek: *songs*) - This book is a five-part collection of 150 laments, hymns, prayers of confession, and psalms of thanksgiving, trust, and complaint, dating from the period of the twelve-tribe confederacy to the postexilic period (c. 1400-400 B.C.).

Psalter — The book of Psalms; also, a collection of psalms for liturgical or devotional use.

Zion — An ancient name attached to different sites within Jerusalem in various periods of the city's history. In the Old Testament, Zion can refer to the Jebusite fortress taken by David (2Sa 5:7, 9), the temple mount proper (Ps 9:11; 132:13), and the entire city of Jerusalem (Ps 69:35; 48:1).

Quiz

1. A typical lament psalm does **not** usually include this element:
 - A. A word of praise
 - B. An expression of trust
 - C. A plea for deliverance
 - D. An account of deliverance from the situation of lament
2. Psalm 119, which emphasizes the importance of knowing God's revealed truth, is:
 - A. A psalm of Zion
 - B. A Torah psalm
 - C. A wisdom psalm
 - D. A liturgy psalm
3. The longest of all the psalms is Psalm:
 - A. 19
 - B. 100
 - C. 119
 - D. 150
4. The most common type of psalm is:
 - A. A lament psalm
 - B. A thanksgiving psalm
 - C. A hymn
 - D. An enthronement psalm
5. The three common types of hymns found in the book of Psalms include all but:
 - A. Battle hymns
 - B. History hymns
 - C. Israel hymns
 - D. Creator hymns
6. The well-known Twenty-third Psalm fits in the category of:
 - A. A thanksgiving psalm
 - B. A royal psalm
 - C. A trust psalm
 - D. A hymn
7. These psalms speak of the way that God is King:
 - A. Royal psalms
 - B. Psalms of Zion
 - C. Liturgy psalms
 - D. Enthronement psalms

8. To get the most benefit from a particular psalm, you need to know:
 - A. Which of the five “books” of the Psalter it comes from
 - B. Whether or not it was a musical psalm
 - C. What type or category of psalm it is
 - D. All of the above
9. What makes the book of Psalms so popular among readers?
 - A. The Psalms are God’s Word to us.
 - B. The Psalms help us express what we’re feeling back to God.
 - C. With ten types of psalms in the book of Psalms, there’s a psalm to help you with almost any situation you might be experiencing.
 - D. All of the above
10. Why does the complaint section of a lament psalm virtually always contain situations of horrible confinements, terrible illnesses, the process of dying, or being surrounded by violent enemies?
 - A. Because these are the most common sufferings
 - B. To give you the sense that your misery, no matter what it is, is understood
 - C. To make you feel guilty for your complaint
 - D. To show you how much worse things really could be

Answers: 1. D 2. B 3. C 4. A 5. A 6. C 7. D 8. C 9. D 10. B

Lesson 3 Study Guide

OT222 *Proverbs-Psalms: Singing the Sounds of Real Life*

Developing Old Testament Study Skills

Updated 2014



Our Daily Bread
Christian University

Objectives

The Old Testament is an ancient and complex document – especially to a modern reader. While many of its statements make sense with a cursory reading, we realize that a careful study process allows the reader to discover how to read with greater insight and accuracy. This lesson introduces you to the disciplines of exegesis and hermeneutics to help you read the Old Testament more productively. You will also survey eight critical methods Bible scholars use to increase the accuracy of their interpretation efforts.

When you complete this lesson, “Developing Old Testament Study Skills,” you should be able to:

- Explain why a careful study of the Old Testament is worth the effort it requires.
- Define, explain, and apply the disciplines of hermeneutics and exegesis to your Old Testament study.
- Define, explain, and apply eight critical disciplines to your Old Testament study.
- Begin to further develop your skills in accurately interpreting the Old Testament text.

Scripture Reading

Read Psalms 76-150.

Transcript

Course Title: Proverbs-Psalms: Singing the Sounds of Real Life

Lesson Three: Developing Old Testament Study Skills

I. Introduction to Understanding the Old Testament

Scripture promises the one seeking wisdom and understanding that he or she “will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Pr 2:5-6). If one really wants to properly respond to the Bible message, one must know how to interpret it. Certainly many of the spiritual truths of the Old Testament can be ascertained through just a cursory reading of the text, but systematic study can yield far greater benefits. While it is true that in-depth Bible study will take more time and effort, there are principles and methodologies that can serve as guides for making the whole process quicker, easier, and more productive.

A. Hermeneutics

Correctly interpreting and understanding the Old Testament can be an arduous, often puzzling, but intrinsically rewarding experience. Deciding to begin doing in-depth Bible studies may seem intimidating at first, but a knowledge of the art and science of hermeneutics should prove useful. The Greek verb *hermeneuein* means “to explain, interpret” or “translate,” while the noun *hermeneia* means “interpretation” or “translation.” Using the verb, Luke informs his readers that Jesus “explained” to the two disciples on the Emmaus road what the Scriptures said about Him (Lk 24:27). Hermeneutics attempts to help us comprehend what a message—written, oral, or visual—is endeavoring to communicate.

If the goal of hermeneutics is the correct understanding of communication, then we need to learn what precepts and methods will be appropriate to the task. Hermeneutics provides various rules and techniques for acquiring a more complete understanding of the biblical text. To avoid interpretation that is arbitrary, erroneous, or that simply suits personal whim, readers may need to appeal to rules or principles for guidance. When one consciously sets out to discover and employ such principles, one investigates hermeneutics. However, hermeneutics is both a science and an art. There are rules, principles, methods, and tactics associated with biblical interpretation, but no mechanical system of rules will ever help one fully understand all the implications or nuances of any given text; that is where the art of interpretation enters in.

Questions related to biblical hermeneutics can often be difficult to answer and there may be various ways to go about answering them; but there should be agreement on one aspect of biblical hermeneutics according to Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart: “A text cannot mean what it never meant. Or to put that in a positive way, the true meaning of the biblical text for us is

what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken” (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982, p. 27). In other words, the interpreter must always keep in mind that the text under consideration is more than a piece of literature; it is the Word of God.

B. Exegesis

Exegesis is a normal activity in which all of us engage on a daily basis, even if we don’t call it by that name. Whenever we hear an oral statement or read a written one and seek to understand what has been said, we are engaging in exegesis. The term “exegesis” itself comes from the Greek word *exegeomai*, which basically means “to lead out of.” When applied to texts, it denotes the “reading out” of the meaning. The noun, therefore, can refer to interpretation or explanation. Thus whenever we read a text or hear a statement that we seek to understand and interpret, we are involved in exegesis.

The goal of biblical exegesis is to reach an informed understanding of the text under consideration. This is different from saying that the exegete seeks to determine the meaning of the text. The fact is there are various nuances of any text’s meaning and different types of exegesis can address these different aspects. For this reason, the exegete can never hope to present the exegesis of a passage as if it were the final word. Rather, one does an exegesis of a passage in which a coherent, informed interpretation is presented, based on one’s encounter with and investigation of that text at a given point in time. Exegesis does not allow one to master the text so much as it enables one to enter into it.

C. Relationship of Hermeneutics to Exegesis

According to Walter C. Kaiser in *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, the relationship between hermeneutics and exegesis is as follows: Hermeneutics seeks to describe the general and special principles and rules that are useful in approaching the biblical text. Exegesis seeks to identify the single truth-intention of individual phrases, clauses, and sentences as they make up the thoughts of paragraphs, sections, and ultimately, entire books. Accordingly, hermeneutics may be regarded as the theory that guides exegesis; exegesis may be understood to be the practice of and the set of procedures for uncovering the author’s (or editor’s) intended meaning (p. 47).

In other words, hermeneutics stands in the same relationship to exegesis as the rule book stands to the game. The rule book is written in terms of reflection, analysis, and experience. The game is played by concrete actualization of the rules. Rules are not the game, but the game is meaningless without rules. Hermeneutics proper is not exegesis, but exegesis is applied hermeneutics.

II. Biblical Interpretation

Interpretation is an activity in which a reader or hearer seeks to gain the shareable verbal meanings that an author or speaker has sought to transmit by linguistic signs. Not every meaning in an author's mind can be conveyed by language. As E. D. Hirsch has put it, "An author's verbal meaning is limited by linguistic possibilities but is determined by his actualizing and specifying some of those possibilities. Correspondingly, the verbal meaning that an interpreter construes is determined by his act of will, limited by those same possibilities" (Hirsch, p. 47).

The chance that an interpreter will succeed in grasping an author's verbal meaning is greatly enhanced by the limitations of possible meanings that have been imposed upon words by cultural norms and conventions. A linguistic symbol can represent an identical meaning for two persons because the range of what it can mean has been limited by convention. Of course, words often have several meanings, but the association a word has with other words in its context does much to indicate the unambiguous meaning that the author intended it to have at a certain place in his or her writing. Nevertheless, the interpreter always has to keep in mind there is some degree of speculation associated with the meaning of the communication he or she wants to grasp. In constructing a text whose author cannot be consulted, a claim to validity in interpretation can never have more than a high degree of probability.

Yet the more willing an interpreter is to submit the proposed construction of a text to the scrutiny of others who have also worked hard to understand it, the higher will be the probability of achieving a consensus regarding the meaning its author wanted to transmit. The greatest difficulty to overcome in the interpretation of texts is the famous "hermeneutical circle," which refers to the path a thought takes as it attempts to find meaning.

Methodologically, it refers to the procedure that an interpreter follows as he or she turns from the parts of a sentence to the sentence as a whole and then, quite literally, from the whole back to the parts. Descriptively, the circle refers to that profound interrelationship that the words of a sentence have with the paragraph as a whole, and so on outward to the work as a unity, and then finally expanding to include all the elements contingent upon an adequate understanding of the text at hand—in short, the interrelationship of text and context, context and text.

To be sure, if all facets of a text were equally capable of being made into "evidence" to support several different ways of construing a text, then the hermeneutical circle could never be broken, and interpreters would waste their time discussing which view was correct. But as Hirsch points out, "... not all traits are genre-dependent ... and not everything in verbal understanding is variable. Understanding is difficult, but not impossible" (p. 77). So discussion with a fellow interpreter about how a text should be construed is indispensable, precisely because another mind is able to bring one to see some of those relatively few invariable traits in a text that will fit only one interpretation of it. Therefore, validity in interpretation is possible as a matter of high probability, albeit not absolute certainty, and this makes the interpretation of biblical texts as worthy a pursuit of knowledge as that of any other field where only high probability, rather than absolute certainty, is attainable.

III. Procedures of Interpretation

The exegetical method of research is the process by which a text is systematically explained. The text itself is regarded as a concrete expression from “sender” to “receiver.” Since the sender and receiver are both now absent, the exegete must attempt to reconstruct this relationship through the text alone.

Any historical investigation into the meaning of a text must necessarily involve several tasks. The first task of the exegete is to examine the content of the text under investigation. The exegete must determine what the writer said by investigating: (a) The actual words of the author (textual criticism), (b) the meaning of those words (lexical data), and (c) the relation of those words to each other (grammar/syntax).

Then the exegete must try to determine why the writer said what he or she said. This includes: (a) examining the literary context; i.e., why he or she stated it where he or she did in the passage, and (b) the historical context; i.e., understanding the words in light of the background and culture of the author and his or her audience. In summary, by being sensitive to the meaning of the words of a passage or book in the context of its literary and historical setting, the exegete can attempt to recover the original message of the author.

Literary context is what most people mean when they talk about reading something in its context. Essentially, literary context means that words only have meaning in sentences, and for the most part biblical sentences only have meaning in relation to preceding and succeeding sentences. This means it is extremely important to determine the genre of the literature under consideration. In contemporary literature, biography will be read differently from mystery and drama differently from limerick. The type of literature affects how that writing will be approached and interpreted. This applies equally to the Old Testament. Prophecy is a different genre from proverbial literature. The interpreter must identify the genre of what he or she is trying to interpret and discover as much as possible about that genre. This latter endeavor is approached through a wide variety of critical methodologies, which will be surveyed later on in this lesson.

The historical context, which will differ from book to book, has to do with several things: the time and culture of the author and his or her readers—that is, the geographic, topographical, and political factors that are relevant to the author’s setting—and the occasion of the book, letter, psalm, prophetic oracle, or other genre. The most important question of historical context, however, has to do with the occasion and purpose of each biblical book and/or of its various parts. Here one wants to have an idea of what was going on in Israel that called forth such a document, or what the situation of the author was that caused him to write it. Again, this will vary from book to book, but can usually be found (when it can be found) within the book itself.

IV. Critical Methodologies

In the balance of this lesson, we will be discussing the various ways of addressing the questions and problems modern students and interpreters encounter when exegeting the biblical text. The variety of methods to be discussed merely attests to the richness and diversity of the biblical

documents, and these methods should be seen as complementary. No single way of approaching a text should be seen as exhausting the meaning of a passage, but rather as a way of dealing with one particular facet of a passage.

Each of these approaches is treated as a type of “criticism.” Criticism is a comprehensive term, embodying a number of techniques employed in the study of (among other things) written documents in order to establish, as far as possible, their original text, the literary categories to which they pertain, style, authorship, date, purpose, and so forth. Biblical criticism embraces various critical disciplines, notably textual criticism, literary criticism, form criticism, rhetorical criticism, redaction criticism, historical criticism, structural analysis, and canonical criticism.

A. Textual Criticism

The function of textual criticism is the restoration of the original wording of a document when alterations have been introduced (deliberately or inadvertently) in the course of copying and recopying the document by hand through the centuries. If the biblical autograph or original document was still available, scribal errors could be corrected by reference to it. But as the biblical autographs have long since disappeared, and the surviving copies differ from one another here and there, the original wording may be determined only by a careful comparative study of the copies. The main types of scribal errors have to do with accidental errors of the eye and ear, and have been categorized as follows:

1. **Confusion of Similar Letters.** A frequent cause of variant reading in Old Testament manuscripts and versions is the existence of several Hebrew letters of similar appearance. Here distinction has to be made between the archaic Canaanite script used in preexilic times and the later Aramaic square script. Evidence shows that the letters most susceptible to confusion in the Old Testament transmission history were resh/dalet, he/heth, and waw/yod, though other letters such as beth/kaph, were also misread.
2. **Transposition of Letters.** This scribal error—technically known as “metathesis”—sometimes produces awkward readings as in Psalm 49:11, where the traditional text has “their inward thoughts;” the Septuagint, Peshitta, Targum, and Vulgate, however, all presume the reading “their tombs,” which fits the context much better and is normally adopted by modern commentaries and translations (RSV, NEB, JB, NIV).
3. **Incorrect Word Division.** In manuscripts of continuous script, it is understandable that words can sometimes be divided differently to yield conflicting readings. This is apparently what happened in Jeremiah 23:33, where the Masoretic text reads “what burden” but the Septuagint and Vulgate have divided the words as “you are the burden.”
4. **Haplography.** This is the name of an error in manuscript copying in which a syllable, word, or line is omitted by accidental oversight because of the identity or similarity of adjacent material (opposite of dittography).

5. Dittography. This is the phenomenon of writing twice what should only have been written once. It is the opposite of haplography. A dittograph is an example of erroneous repetition.

6. Confusion of Similar-sounding Words. In addition to the errors of the eye (ocular), other mistakes are best explained as errors of the ear (aural). Two words particularly vulnerable to this kind of confusion were the Hebrew words *lo'*, “not,” and *lo*, “his/its.”

7. Deliberate Scribal Intervention. Sometimes there was a deliberate alteration of the text for purposes of clarification, correction, and apologetic.

Once the interpreter has reached a decision about the wording of the passage under consideration, another set of questions arises that has to do with the literary context of the passage. This encompasses the field of literary criticism.

B. Literary Criticism

Literary criticism is a term that means different things to different people. However, it has three major definitions according to its historical, technical, and contemporary usage. It may refer either to (1) a particular approach to the analysis of Scripture that appeared in systematic form in the nineteenth century (often called source criticism) and which, considerably refined, is still practiced today (2) that investigation of a text that seeks to explicate the intention of the author through a detailed analysis of the component elements and structure of the text itself; or, quite broadly, to (3) any undertaking which attempts to understand biblical literature simply as literature, often in a manner paralleling the interests and methods of contemporary literary critics.

Such matters as the location of the passage within a larger literary unit and how it functions within this larger unit are often crucial in interpreting a passage. Since most of the biblical documents were originally written to be read aloud, this becomes a most important consideration, for this required ancient authors to be intentional and careful in how they composed and structured documents.

C. Form Criticism

If literary criticism deals with how the passage relates to its larger literary unit, form criticism is more narrowly concerned with the passage itself. The father of form criticism was Hermann Gunkel, a German Old Testament scholar best known for his study of the Psalms. Form criticism seeks to recover the shorter oral compositions from which the Bible's written sources supposedly derived. The Bible contains a rich diversity of literary forms and genres and many of these already existed prior to their actual appearance in the biblical text. For this reason, questions of the original setting of particular literary forms and genres are also crucial as one attempts to determine the “life situation” of a passage. Thus, Gunkel and his disciples claimed that the original setting of most of the psalms was the temple in Jerusalem.

Eventually, Old Testament form criticism began to focus more on the literary types of the present written text rather than on the Bible's oral pre-stages, with special attention being given to the literary form or genre of the passage—a parable, a prophetic oracle, a hymn, and so forth. Attention to these questions has arisen because of the recognition that form and the meaning are directly related; one reads a poem one way, a piece of prose another.

D. Rhetorical Criticism

Rhetorical criticism is a term adopted in 1968 by the late Old Testament scholar James Muilenburg to denote a methodological approach to Scripture designed to supplement that of form criticism. Its task, he suggested, is to exhibit the structural patterns employed in the fashioning of a literary unit, whether prose or poetry, and to discern the various devices (such as parallelism, anaphora, etc.) by which the predications of the composition were formulated and ordered into a united whole (“Form Criticism and Beyond,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 88 [March 1969], pp. 1-18). Questions of composition and structure are also dealt with here, as well as questions relating to the rhetorical style and mood of the passage.

E. Redaction Criticism

Redaction criticism is best defined as the attempt to lay bare the theological perspectives of a biblical writer by analyzing the editorial (redactional) and compositional techniques and interpretations employed in shaping and framing the written and/or oral traditions at hand (see Luke 1:1-4). As used in biblical exegesis, redaction criticism refers to that stage of interpretation whose primary focus is the final written form or composition of a passage. It pertains to the final stage of the tradition, as it were, that has become crystallized in written form and asks what the author or final editor intended to say through the passage in its final form. Redaction criticism presupposes the insights and perspectives of textual criticism and form criticism.

Both redaction criticism and canonical criticism, by calling special attention to the final literary form of the biblical text, provide useful perspectives for the interpreter interested in the theological message of the biblical writings or the final canonical viewpoint as it has come to be expressed and formulated by the author or editor.

F. Historical Criticism

Historical criticism, when narrowly defined, deals with the historical setting of a document: the time and place in which it was written; its sources, if any; the events, dates, persons, and places mentioned or implied in the text; etc. Its goal is the writing of a chronological narrative of pertinent events, revealing where possible the nature and interconnection of the events themselves. The historical criticism of documents proceeds on the basis of two related assumptions or perspectives. These may be designated as the internal and external historical aspects of a document. The internal historical aspects of a document are related to the historical and cultural dimensions described or depicted in the texts. The external historical

aspects of a document are related to the historical, cultural, and biographical context in which the document was produced.

G. Structural Analysis

Structural analysis is a method of analyzing data that arose in several disciplines within the humanities and social sciences—most notably anthropology, sociology, and linguistics—as well as in the study of literature. Its name derives from its analysis of “deep structures” inherent in human cultures and language that remain constant despite immense diversity of “surface structures.” In literature, “deep structures” refer to the underlying functions, motives, and interactions among the main characters and objects in a narrative, and, most notably, the types of oppositions and their resolutions that develop as the text unfolds. “Surface structures” include plot, theme, motifs, and characterization; or in poetry, meter, rhyme, parallelism, and so on. Structural analysis deliberately ignores the historical background of a text and instead seeks to show universally recurring features in narratives from all cultures and eras. These features reveal a text’s most fundamental meaning, irrespective of its author’s conscious intention. In other words, for structuralists, meaning resides not in the largely irrecoverable mental processes of a text’s human author but in the actual words of the text itself.

H. Canonical Criticism

James A. Sanders coined the term “canonical criticism” (*Torah and Canon*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972) to denote a method of biblical criticism that operates subsequent to form and redaction criticism and seeks to determine the function of biblical texts in their historical contexts and investigates the nature of their authority. The essence of canonical criticism, as practiced by Sanders, lies in discerning the hermeneutics by which the ancient traditions were adapted for use in new contexts.

The term “canonical criticism” is also frequently applied to the approach to interpretation advocated by Brevard Childs (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979). With Sanders, Childs shares a broad definition of canon, a concern for the theological significance of the biblical texts, and a concern for the function of the biblical texts within the community of faith that preserved and treasured them. Contrary to Sanders, Childs does not seek to determine the hermeneutics employed in the canonical process. Rather, the stance developed by Childs focuses on the shape and function of the final canonical text. According to Childs, this final shape is of special significance because (1) it alone displays the full history of revelation witnessed to by Scripture; (2) in it the community has exercised its critical judgment on the received traditions and modified them accordingly; and (3) by showing how the texts were actualized by generations removed from the original event and composition of the writings, the canonical shape may provide a hermeneutical key as to how we may actualize the text in our day.

V. Conclusion: Analysis and Synthesis

The exegetical task may be said to fall into two fairly well-defined stages: analysis and synthesis. As the interpreter begins the task of exegesis, examining different aspects of the passage—whether they are literary, rhetorical, historical or whatever—will serve as a way of “breaking down” the passage into its component parts and problems and examining them as discrete units and issues. These separate analytic tasks will normally overlap, for each will inform the other.

As analysis takes place, the interpreter’s understanding of the passage will gradually increase and the groundwork will be laid for synthesis. Synthesis, here, means the process by which the interpreter again “puts together” the text. The task is now to relate the preliminary analytical investigations to each other, weighing the significance of each, and deciding how each one will contribute to the overall interpretation of the text at hand.

Discussion Questions

Read Genesis 15:1-6 in three different English Bible translations (or translations in your native language). The Blue Letter Bible Project website may help you with this. Then, construct a paraphrase of Genesis 15:1-6. You may want to consider using an interlinear Bible / Strong's Hebrew/Greek concordance to look up key words in the passage for clarification (as necessary).

What did you know about hermeneutics and exegesis prior to this lesson? What do you know about them now?

Careful study of the Old Testament requires a significant amount of time and effort. Is it worth it? Explain your answer.

Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:

Stedman, Ray C. *Adventuring Through the Bible: A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*. 2nd ed. Discovery House Publishers: 2012.
Read Chapter 2: “God Spoke in Times Past” (The Old Testament)

Philip Yancey Devotional **How to Read Proverbs - Proverbs 10**

“The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out” (Prov. 10:9).

Solomon had the ability to express his great wisdom in a very down-to-earth way. As a result, the book of Proverbs reads like a collection of folksy, commonsense advice. The practical guidance, intended to help you make your way in the world, skips from topic to topic. It comments on small issues as well as large: blabbermouthing, wearing out your welcome with neighbors, being unbearably cheerful too early in the morning.

Anybody can find exceptions to the generalities in Proverbs. For instance, Proverbs 10:4 says, “Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.” Yet farmers who work diligently may go hungry during a drought, and lazy dreamers sometimes hit the lottery jackpot. Proverbs simply tells how life works most of the time; it gives the rule, not the exceptions. Normally, people who are godly, moral, hardworking, and wise will succeed in life. Fools and scoffers, though they appear successful, will pay a long-term price for their lifestyles.

The advice in Proverbs usually takes the form of a brief, pungent one-liner, so the book requires a different kind of reading than others in the Bible. It’s hard to read several chapters in a row. The proverbs are meant to be taken in small doses, savored, digested, and gradually absorbed.

Many proverbs are written in a style called parallelism, a word that describes the tendency of Hebrew poetry to repeat a thought in a slightly different way. One form is “synonymous parallelism,” when the second half of the proverb underscores and embellishes the message of the first half (10:10). Another form is “antithetical parallelism,” in which a thought is followed by its opposite. In both kinds of parallelism, the trick is to compare each phrase with its pair in the other half of the proverb. For instance, in 10:4 “diligent hands” pairs with its opposite, “lazy hands,” and “bring wealth” is the opposite of “make a man poor.” Sometimes these comparisons bear subtle shades of meaning.

Life Question: Which of the proverbs in this chapter apply most directly to you?

Glossary

Critical — Operating with careful, reasoned judgment based on close scrutiny of the subject at hand

Form Criticism — The study of the history and function of the forms in which traditions or messages are communicated

Literary — Having to do with the process of creating and writing a document or part thereof

Oral — Having to do with the handing down of information, beliefs, and forms by word of mouth

Pericope — An extract or selection from a book or a document. It has been “cut around” and identified as a self-contained literary unit. The Bible contains many literary units or pericopes. To study a verse of Scripture without considering the larger literary unit from which it is taken removes the verse from its essential context.

Quiz

1. An historical investigation into the meaning of a biblical text would **not** involve the:
 - A. Actual words of the author
 - B. Meaning of those words
 - C. Nonverbal meaning of the text
 - D. Relation of the words to each other
2. Exegesis:
 - A. Is a normal activity that all people use on a daily basis
 - B. Should only be considered when all other avenues have been tried
 - C. Has no place in biblical studies
 - D. Is an activity best left to the experts
3. Haplography is the name of the error in manuscript copying in which:
 - A. A word is copied twice
 - B. A word is divided incorrectly
 - C. A syllable, word, or line is omitted
 - D. The transcriber assigns the wrong meaning to a word
4. James A. Sanders coined the expression:
 - A. Form criticism
 - B. Structural criticism
 - C. Redaction criticism
 - D. Canonical criticism
5. Rhetorical criticism was intended by its originator to supplement:
 - A. Historical criticism
 - B. Redaction criticism
 - C. Literary criticism
 - D. Form criticism
6. The father of form criticism was:
 - A. Hermann Gunkel
 - B. James Muilenburg
 - C. James Sanders
 - D. Brevard Childs
7. The Greek verb *hermeneuein* means to:
 - A. Explain
 - B. Interpret
 - C. Translate
 - D. All of the above

8. The most important question of historical context has to do with the:
 - A. Genre
 - B. Occasion and purpose of each biblical book and its various parts
 - C. Political factors
 - D. Geographic location
9. The primary function of textual criticism is:
 - A. Related to the literary context of the passage under investigation
 - B. To determine the *sitz im leben* of a passage
 - C. To lay bare the theological perspective of the biblical writer
 - D. To restore the original wording of a document
10. The primary task of rhetorical criticism is:
 - A. To exhibit the structural patterns employed in the fashioning of a literary unit
 - B. To establish the historical setting of a document
 - C. To analyze the “deep” structures inherent in human cultures
 - D. The method that operates subsequent to form and redaction criticisms

Answers: 1. C 2. A 3. C 4. D 5. D 6. A 7. D 8. B 9. D 10. A