

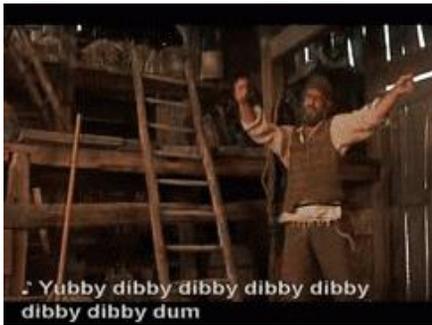
## Session 7: Poetry, Wisdom Literature and Prophecy

*You down with PWP?  
Yeah, you will be!*

*Let me be very clear: this week we are covering how to read about half the Bible. We just don't have time. So I'll be providing some quick primers but I highly recommend that you buy and read Fee & Stuart's How to read the Bible for all its worth for many, many more details.*

### Poetry

There is poetry in almost every book in the Old Testament. Jews were really musically inclined people, as we learned in the documentary film, *Fiddler on the Roof*.



The largest book of the Bible (Psalms) is a book of songs, after all! But how do you study a book of songs and poetry?

The biggest question is posed in Fee & Stuart: How do these words spoken to God function as a word from God to us?

First, we have to read them differently than narrative stories or imperatives (or rules for how to live). We have to exegete psalms/poetry differently.

If read correctly, we can read examples of how people – just like you and me – expressed themselves to God, in both good (thanksgiving) and bad times (lament), or be reassured of/praise God's faithfulness (trust, praise,) or learn something about history (salvation/history, royal and special event). Plus, we use Psalms in our modern worship! There are a lot of benefits to Biblical poetry (wisdom).

(Those are all different types of Psalms!)

Psalms, like songs now, focus on \_\_\_\_\_. Words in poetry shouldn't necessarily be taken at face value – they are often metaphorical, hyperbolic or extreme – but at the emotional meaning behind them. (See Ps 137.)

*“To read any of the Psalms well, you need to appreciate symbolic language (metaphor and simile) for what it is intended to evoke and then to “translate” it into the reality it is pointing to.” (Fee & Stuart)*

Psalms and Biblical poetry have certain forms. Some are acrostic (meaning each line/section starts with each letter of the alphabet, like Ps 119), and/or utilize parallelism.

### Parallelism in Poetry

Keep these three types of OT poetry in mind when reading Biblical poetry:

- **Synonymous Parallelism:** the second or subsequent lines repeat or reinforce the first line: *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands (Ps 19).*
- **Antithetical Parallelism:** the second or subsequent line contrasts the thought of the first: *They do not cry out to me from their hearts, but wail on their beds (Hos 7:14).*
- **Synthetic Parallelism:** the second or subsequent line adds to / expands on the first line: *“The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable – how much more so when brought with evil intent!” (Prov 21:21).*

With narratives and letters, we should read in chunks – whole story, whole passage, whole letter – we should read every song or poem in the Bible should be read in its integrity.

### Wisdom

Wisdom literature – Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes– is something that modern readers don't usually understand well. Not because of historical context or language, but because of the topic and how the topic is tackled.

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Let's start with the definition of Wisdom:

"Wisdom is the ability to make godly choices in life" (Fee & Stuart).

Understanding truth leads you to knowing the right choice to make. (See Jn 8:31-32).

The problems arise for modern readers when we approach wisdom literature like we do narrative or imperative and zoom in too close on just a couple of verses without considering the whole point of the book/passage/poem.

If we zoom in too much on Ecclesiastes or Job, for instance, we may actually quote the \_\_\_\_\_! Some parts of the books show people giving worldly wisdom through characters, the dudes in Job and the Teacher in Ecclesiastes, and then demonstrate how they are wrong! So you have to follow the argument by zooming out, to really understand wisdom rather than foolishness.

Misunderstandings of words can also cause confusion when reading Proverbs. Like 14:7, where we are told to "stay away from a fool, for you will not find knowledge on their lips" which is about telling us where knowledge (which leads to wisdom) is not to be found in people who don't follow God.

(If someone is "wise" who follows God's ways, then a "fool" is someone who doesn't. Fool doesn't mean mentally ill or joker. Wise doesn't mean sarcastic. Unfortunately.)

The proverb is not telling you to stay away from unbelievers, but only that if you are looking for knowledge that leads to God (wisdom) you won't find it there. (The wisdom books are super interested in the readers finding knowledge and thus wisdom, so keep that context.)

The Proverbs are figures of speech, parables, and sayings. They are short, memorable expressions of truth. They don't have nuance and they don't give you rules for every situation. Like a memorable modern proverb, "look before you leap" doesn't tell to never act without planning.

All three wisdom books are different, but they may be understood better by reading through them in a way that helps understand how they all work together.

The common thread of wisdom are the questions, "What is a good life?" and "Is God just?"

According to the *Bible Project* (Wisdom Series, which is awesome!) the three books can be understood if we imagine them as characters in the same long conversation that the Bible writers are having about God's justice.



Proverbs is all about pursuing wisdom. The writer is optimistic and believes that if you exercise wisdom you will build a successful life.



Ecclesiastes seems to argue against the ideas of Proverbs, suggesting a more random outcome, regardless of living rightly. The Teacher is more like a critic who argues that wisdom won't lead to a better life and that everything is meaningless.



Job concludes the argument between Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, "is God just?" by having Job argue with a bunch of friends about whether or not Job was being punished. God literally ends the conversation.

So when reading the wisdom literature, we do well to remember that this is a completely different type of literature that requires additional work to understand rightly.

And remember to zoom out: Proverbs that don't make sense will be explained better when reading other Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and Job have to be read as a whole argument in order to understand the point.

## Prophecy

The majority of prophetic literature in the Bible is found in 16 books in the Old Testament:

- The **Major** (Latin: longer) Prophets (books) – Ezekiel, Daniel, Jeremiah, Isaiah
- The **Minor** (Latin: shorter) Prophets (books) – Hosea, Amos, Micah, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. These were put into one bigger book, Jews called “The Twelve.”)

These 16 books represent some of the hardest parts of the Bible to understand for modern Western readers for several reasons.

First, we misunderstand the definition of “prophecy.” We tend to think of prophecy as “telling the future,” specifically about Jesus, but that’s actually a very small part of the books:

- \_\_\_% are messianic prophecies
- \_\_\_% describes the New Covenant age (our covenant)
- \_\_\_% concern events that have yet to happen

When we approach the books for details on how to live now or what to look forward to in the future, we can get easily confused.

The definition of “prophet” is also a hindrance to understanding. In these books, and in the vast majority of references to “prophet” or “oracle” in the OT, the title refers to someone who “speaks for God.”

Of the hundreds of Old Testament prophets in the Bible, only 16 wrote down what they said. Most of the stories with prophets in them were concerns with what they did, not what they said. (Nathan, Elijah and Elisha are three big examples.)

Another issue we have in understanding these books is that we don’t understand the context of the speeches/oracles. We are so far removed in history that they don’t make a ton of sense to us unless we spend the time getting to know their audience’s situation.

To make things worse, the collections of oracles are in poetic form, are not in chronological order, and

don’t always say when one oracle starts or ends so they tend to run together.

So how do we read these books then?! Here’s how:

We need to keep in mind the function of prophecy in Israel. The prophets were covenant enforcement mediators. God announces his blessings or curses through them based on whether or not they kept their end of the covenant. They are the spokespersons for the covenant.

So in historical context, if a prophet is warning about curses (troubles) for Israel they are reminding Israel that they are in violation of the covenant and are under the penalty that they had agreed upon. And vice versa.

This is based on the Old Testament agreement between Israel and God, and the curses/blessings are corporate for Israel. Not necessarily for you and me. (And definitely not for America.)

(However, these blessings/curses demonstrate that God takes His covenants seriously, and while we are under a new covenant, we are still under *a* covenant and His expectations for our righteous living and serving only Him are pretty much the same.)

Prophets spoke for God by speaking the word that God gave them to speak. Sometimes this looks a lot like our modern gift of prophecy – having insight or knowledge supernaturally – or telling the future.

The prophet sometimes uses metaphor and language that seems hyperbolic and will sometimes do crazy things to get the attention of Israel (see Isaiah and Hosea.)

For these reasons, when we approach the Prophets, we need to get extra help. We can’t just jump in. We need to know what was happening at the time of the oracles, we need help understanding what some prophecies mean, and we need help to know where to start and stop.

Like we try to read whole books for epistles, or whole passages/stories for narratives, we should read whole oracles when reading the Prophets.

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