

Lecture 20: Ketuvim, Wisdom Literature and Psalms

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Ketuvim, part three of the Hebrew Bible, an overview:

- Literally “Writings”; also called Hagiographa (*hagios* sacred + *grapha* writings)
- There is no single thread that binds the eleven books in this collection;
 - ♦ The Ketuvim are subdivided by ancient Jews:
 - ★ Psalms, Proverbs, Job;
 - ★ Five Scrolls: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther;
 - ★ Everything else: Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Daniel.
 - ♦ The Christian canons are four-part, not three-part, and do not have *Ketuvim*; they have:
 - ★ Law (or Torah, not our concern at the moment);
 - ★ Historical books, which include: Ruth [an appendix to Judges], Chronicles [known as *Paraleipomena*, “the left-overs,” “the things omitted”], Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther;
 - ★ Wisdom literature: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs;
 - ★ Prophecy: which includes Lamentations [an appendix to Jeremiah], Daniel.
 - ♦ The relationship between the Jewish and Christian arrangements is much debated. Christian bibles also contain many books not found in the Jewish Hebrew Bible.

The presence of three of the *Ketuvim* books in the Bible is particularly problematic: Job, Ecclesiastes or Qohelet (see next lecture), and Song of Songs.

Song of Songs: A collection of love poems sung by him to her and her to him:

- While authorship is ascribed to Solomon in its first verse and by traditionalists, MBS argues that while the book may contain ancient material, there is no evidence that Solomon wrote it. Dated by MBS to the 4th or 3rd centuries BCE.
 - ♦ What is a collection of erotic poems doing in the Hebrew Bible? Indeed, some ancient rabbis were uneasy about the book’s inclusion in the canon.
 - ♦ Allegory (male = God; woman = Israel) for both Jews and Christians; liturgical use; wedding song.

Other bits to Ketuvim that we won’t have time to pursue:

- Ruth: A short tale about the virtues of family loyalty and commitment. Set during the period of the Judges (see verse 1:1). Traditionalists ascribe authorship to Samuel (whom they also credit with composing Judges and Samuel). MBS is not able to identify an author, and the book is very tentatively dated to the 5th century BCE.
 - ♦ Notable features: (1) The book ends with a genealogy which asserts that David descended from Ruth. (2) The book has no qualms with Ruth being a Moabite and marrying an Israelite; Deut. 23:4-9 prohibits the “admission” of Moabites into the Israelite people. In contrast Ezra and Nehemiah rail against marriage with Moabites.

- Lamentations: Laments the destruction of the First Temple in 586/7 BCE. Graphic portrayal of the aftermath of the destruction. The Israelites brought the destruction upon themselves because of sin; God, not the Babylonians, is the agent of punishment.
 - ♦ “The eternal lament for all Jewish catastrophes, past, present, and future.” (S.J.D. Cohen)
- Esther: Set in the Persian diaspora. The book is read by traditionalists as a historical account of a near-genocide that was foiled by a Jewish woman, Esther. The book very much wants its reader to believe that it was produced in Persia, but for MBS, it has all the hallmarks of legend and etiology (to explain the origins of the festival of Purim).
 - ♦ Notable features: (1) No mention of God or religious observance; (2) Esther marries the king, a non-Jew.
- Chronicles: Much of Chronicles is a retelling and reworking of Samuel and Kings. The book begins with nine chapters of genealogical tables, from Adam through Saul. There is almost no narrative in these chapters which, significantly, omit mention of the Exodus, revelation at Sinai, and the conquest of Canaan. Pivotal to Chronicles are the Davidic covenant and the Temple cult.
 - ♦ Likely composed during the 4th century BCE. Traditionalists ascribe authorship to Ezra (and for a long time MBS did as well), but scholars are now more skeptical of this idea.
- Ezra-Nehemiah: A “continuation” of Chronicles; the book begins with the proclamation of Cyrus calling for the Judean exiles to return and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Ezra arrives on the scene almost one century later, in 458. The books narrate the resettlement of the Judeans, the rebuilding of the Temple and the wall around Jerusalem (and their attendant trials and tribulations), and ritual instruction.

Wisdom Literature

- Common designation for those biblical books that focus on “wisdom” (skill, insight; Heb. *hokhmah*).
- Similar texts found in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and elsewhere.
 - ♦ Proverbs 22:17-24:22 “The Words of the Wise” draws from some version of The Instruction of Amenemope (an Egyptian wisdom text).
- Generally lacks references to Israelite history, covenant, law, ritual, other distinctive themes of Israelite religion. *Elohim* normally used instead of YHWH in Job and Qohelet.

Standard/Positive (Proverbs) vs. Speculative/Negative Wisdom Texts (Job, Qohelet) (Kugel uses the term “orthodox” rather than “standard” here).

Book of Proverbs:

- Introduction (1-9) + several collections of sayings, with extended poems and other forms interspersed (10-22:16; 22:17-24:22; 24:23-24; 25-29; 30-31)
- Sample proverbs:
 - ♦ “Hatred stirs up strife/But love covers up all faults.” (Prov 10:12)

- ♦ “As a dog returns to his vomit/So a dullard repeats his folly.” (Prov 26:11).
- ♦ “A soft answer turns away wrath/But a harsh word stirs up anger.” (Prov 15:1).
- ♦ “Like a gold ring in the snout of a pig/Is a beautiful woman bereft of sense.” (Prov 11:22).
- ♦ “A friend is devoted at all times; A brother is born to share adversity.” (Prov 17:17)
- Collected by and for the royal court (Prov 25:1) “These too are the proverbs of Solomon, which the men of King Hezekiah of Judah copied.”

The main message: the wise prosper, fools suffer.

- The wise person (*hakham*) uses prudence and good judgment to make everyday decisions and lives a prosperous life as a result.
- The fool lacks wisdom and his life comes to ruin.
- Topics: greed, proper speech, generosity, diligence, humility, anger, many more.
- Reward/Punishment:
 - ♦ Right living is its own reward and unethical living its own punishment:
 - ★ “Better is a little with righteousness than a large income with injustice.” (Prov 16:8)
 - ★ “The righteousness of the blameless man smooths his way/But the wicked man is felled by his wickedness.” (Prov 11:5)
 - ★ “He who digs a pit will fall in it/ And whoever rolls a stone, it will roll back on him.” (Prov 26:27)
 - ♦ But there also many other expected blessings – long life, children, “good name” after death, others – and curses, e.g.:
 - ★ “The eye that mocks a father/ And disdains the homage due a mother/The ravens of the brook will gouge it out/Young eagles will devour it.” (Prov 30:17)
- This is not exactly the same as the doctrine of divine providence that is found throughout the Bible; the two views are assimilated in many passages such as 1:7 “The beginning of wisdom is fear of the LORD.”

Psalms.

Psalms (the book of Psalms is sometimes called the Psalter): anthology of hymns and prayers to God.

All the Psalms are to or about God.

Traditional view: David is the author of the Psalms; many Psalms bear the ascription “To David” – some ambiguity in what that means.

MBS: Psalms range in date from early (pre-Davidic? Psalm 29 with its numerous Ugaritic echoes; Kugel) to exilic (Psalm 137; discussed by Kugel) to late (Hellenistic? Psalm 119 and others).

Two basic types of Psalms: hymns of praise (including thank you) and prayers (please);

- Wide variety of types propounded by H. Gunkel (Kugel).

Hymns of Praise:

- Overwhelming sense of trust in God, of God's reality and presence, not only in the temple but also in the life of the Psalmist (Kugel)
- Psalm 23 (trans. KJV) ¹The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. ²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. ³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his names sake. ⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. ⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.
- Psalm 146: ¹Hallelujah. Praise the LORD, O my soul! ²I will praise the LORD all my life, sing hymns to my God while I exist. ³Put not your trust in the great, in mortal man who cannot save. ⁴His breath departs; he returns to the dust; on that day his plans come to nothing. ⁵Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the LORD his God, ⁶maker of heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; ⁷who secures justice for those who are wronged, gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free; ⁸The LORD restores sight to the blind; the LORD makes those who are bent stand straight; the LORD loves the righteous; ⁹The LORD watches over the stranger; He gives courage to the orphan and widow, but makes the path of the wicked tortuous. ¹⁰The LORD shall reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Hallelujah.

Psalms of Lament (prayers):

- God the Creator can do anything, even deliver the pray-er from death. Hence the passion and pathos of psalms of lament
- Psalm 79: A psalm of Asaph. ¹O God, heathens have entered Your domain, defiled Your holy temple, and turned Jerusalem into ruins. ²They have left Your servants' corpses as food for the fowl of heaven, and the flesh of Your faithful for the wild beasts. ³Their blood was shed like water around Jerusalem, with none to bury them. ⁴We have become the butt of our neighbors, the scorn and derision of those around us. ⁵How long, O LORD, will You be angry forever, will Your indignation blaze like fire? ⁶Pour out Your fury on the nations that do not know You, upon the kingdoms that do not invoke Your name, ⁷for they have devoured Jacob and desolated his home. ⁸Do not hold our former iniquities against us; let Your compassion come swiftly toward us, for we have sunk very low. ⁹Help us, O God, our deliverer, for the sake of the glory of Your name. Save us and forgive our sin, for the sake of Your name. ¹⁰Let the nations not say, "Where is their God?" Before our eyes let it be known among the nations that You avenge the spilled blood of Your servants. ¹¹Let the groans of the prisoners reach You; relieve those condemned to death, as befits Your great strength. ¹²Pay back our neighbors sevenfold for the abuse they have flung at You, O LORD. ¹³Then we, Your people, the flock You shepherd, shall glorify You forever; for all time we shall tell Your praises.

Common image: kingship of God, God enthroned, God above all other gods (82)

Bible has two good examples of the use of pre-existing psalm-like texts:

- Hannah, mother of Samuel, in 1 Samuel 2 (at the central shrine):
¹My heart exults in the LORD; I have triumphed through the LORD. I gloat over my enemies; I rejoice in Your deliverance. ²There is no holy one like the LORD, Truly, there is none beside You; There is no rock like our God. ³Talk no more with lofty pride, Let no arrogance cross your lips! For the LORD is an all knowing God; By Him actions are measured. ⁴The bows of the mighty are broken, And the faltering are girded with strength. ⁵Men once sated must hire out for bread; Men once hungry hunger no more. While the barren woman bears seven, The mother of many is forlorn. ⁶The LORD deals death and gives life, Casts down into Sheol and raises up. ⁷The LORD makes poor and makes rich; He casts down, He also lifts high. ⁸He raises the poor from the dust, Lifts up the needy from the dunghill, Setting them with nobles, Granting them seats of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's; He has set the world upon them. ⁹He guards the steps of His faithful, But the wicked perish in darkness— For not by strength shall man prevail.

¹⁰The foes of the LORD shall be shattered; He will thunder against them in the heavens. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth. He will give power to His king, And triumph to His anointed one.

- Jonah from the belly of the fish in Jonah 2 (Psalms are becoming fixed prayers, phenomenon discussed by Kugel)

Book of Psalms became a prayer book:

- When the Psalms were gathered into a single book [we don't know when that happened] many of them were thought to have originated in specific historical circumstances, and headings were added to make these circumstances clear (e.g. 3: "when David fled from before Absalom his son,"; 51: "when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had had intercourse with Bathsheba");
- Pious Jews and Christians recite the Psalms and don't care about their real or imagined original setting. (Is this a problem? Kugel thinks so.)