

WISDOM PSALMS

OVERVIEW

Wisdom psalms are identified as such because of their similarity to the genre of wisdom literature found in Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. This similarity includes similarity in literary devices as well as content.¹

Wisdom literature in general tends to contrast the life choices made by those who reject God (e.g. the foolish or the wicked) with those who embrace God's rule (the wise or righteous).

The result of living wisely is God's blessing, in contrast with the judgment the fool experiences.

- Examples include: 1, 10, 12, 15, 19, 32, 34, 36, 37, 49, 50, 52, 53, 73, 78, 82, 91, 92, 94, 111, 112, 119, 127, 128, 139.
- General format
There is no general format for these kinds of psalms. They may extol God's attributes,² his creation³ or his law.⁴ They may express skepticism.⁵ Regardless of the content, however, the goal of the psalmist is to argue for the superiority of God and his ways.
- Types of wisdom psalms include:
 - Wisdom (general)
 - Psalms of the Law
- Some psalms have elements of more than one genre.⁶
- The importance of getting wisdom
 - *Hakam*, and related terms, appear over 300 times in the OT.
Hakam means to live life skillfully.
 - Wisdom has to do with living life consistent with God's covenants.
 - Wisdom literature is very focused on the 'here and now' – the completeness and beauty of a life lived under the covenant obligations, in dependence upon God.
 - A key concept in wisdom literature is the, 'fear of the Lord.'
 - This concept doesn't first appear in wisdom literature. Earlier scripture makes it clear that 'fear of YHWH' is the appropriate response to trust in the Lord (Gen.22:12; 42:18; Job 1:1, 8-9; 2:3; Ex.1:15-21; 14:31; 20:20; Lev.19:14,32; 25:17; Deut.4:10).
 - The fear of YHWH has to be learned (Deut.4:10; 14:23; 17:19; 31:12-13; Ps.34:11)
 - Those who fear YHWH:
 - Turn from evil (Ec.3:11,14; 5:7; 8:12; 12:13; Ps.34:11,14; Job 1:1,8; 2:3; 28:28) even to hate evil (Prov.3:7; 16:16).
 - Obey through trust in God's promises (Gen.22).
 - Hear, learn and respond to God's word (Deut.4:10; 8:6; Ps.19:7-14; 112:1; 119:33-38, 57-64).

¹ R. E. Murphy identifies wisdom literature through recognition of stylistic forms (e.g. the use of the terms 'blessed, 'better'; 'my son'; numeric sayings {e.g. "three, yes even four"}); acrostic forms (Ps.119); simple comparisons and instruction format. Also, the content may identify a wisdom psalm (e.g. contrasts between evil and good; discussion of the two paths; discussion of retribution; practical ideas concerning personal conduct; study of the Torah or the significance of 'the fear of the Lord'. For these and other thoughts about wisdom literature see, Thomas, M. E. JETS 29/1 (March 1986) pp.15-24.

² Psalm 139

³ Psalm 19

⁴ Psalms 1, 19, 119

⁵ Psalm 73

⁶ Psalm 1 has elements of general wisdom psalms and also psalms of the Law; Psalms 12, 32, 36, 52, 53, have elements of lament as well as wisdom; Psalms 15, 19, 50, 78, 111, 139 have elements of praise and wisdom; Psalms 34, 91, 92 have elements of thanksgiving and wisdom; Psalm 139 seems to have elements of praise, wisdom & lament (i.e. imprecation & repentance).

- Love, cleave to, serve & praise God (Deut.10:12-13; 13:5; 10:20; 13:4-5; Ps.22:22-23; 34:7,9; 25:12,14; 33:18)
- The outcome of having fear of YHWH is to:
 - Get wisdom (Prov.1:7,29; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; 15:33) from the God who created in wisdom (Prov.3:19-20; 8:22-31).
 - Get God's favor (Prov. 10:27; 22:4; 14:26; 19:23; Ps. 33:18; 103:13; 147:11)
 - Get life (Prov.13:14; 14:27; 19:23; Ecc.12:13 *kol ha adam* the wholeness of man).

WISDOM PSALMS

- Examples include: 1, 10, 12, 15, 32, 34,⁷ 36, 37, 49, 50, 52, 53, 73, 78, 82, 91, 92, 94, 111, 112, 127, 128, 139.

- **Psalm 37**

Situation of the psalmist

- Written by David
- How to succeed against evil without resorting to evil.

Structure of the psalm

- The structure is less obvious than some psalms; it appears to be a collection of proverbs organized around the problem of evil and God's retributive justice.
- It is organized as an alphabetic acrostic of 22 strophes (i.e. lines).⁸
- It begins (vv. 1-6) and ends (vv.34-40) with the encouragement to hope in Yahweh's deliverance.
- The middle section reminds us of God's eventual retributive justice (vv.7-11 & 27-33) and the contrast between the wicked and righteous (vv.12-26).

How to succeed amongst ungodly people

- The ungodly can knock us for a loop (Ps.73)
 - They do pretty well for themselves (v.1,7,16,35)
 - They scheme against the weak (v.14)
 - They try to destroy the godly (v.12,14,32)
- Don't
 - Envy (v.1, 16) b/c they will pass (v.2)
 - Fret (v.1,8)
 - Be persistently angry (v.8)
- Do:
 - Place yourself in God's hands (v.3,5,7,23,28,33,34)
 - Delight yourself in God (v.4)
 - Do good where you are (v.3,21,27)
 - Absorb yourself in God's truth and let it guide your words & deeds (vv.30-31)

PSALMS OF THE LAW

- Examples include: 1, 19, 119.

- **Psalm 19**

Situation of the psalmist

- Written by David
- Three motifs are seen: creation, wisdom and prayer for forgiveness/acceptance

Structure of the psalm

- vv. 1-6 Praise for Creation – the name *EI* predominates
- vv.7-11 Praise for the Law – the name *YHWH* predominates
- vv.12-14 Prayerful Contemplation

Analysis of the psalm

19:1 The heavens are telling ¹ of the glory of God; And their expanse	The universe extols God and shows his creative activity. In Hebrew this has the form of an ABCC'B'A' chiasm Heavens declare the glory
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

⁷ This is the only wisdom psalm associated with a particular event, David feigning insanity before Ambimelech.

⁸ There are 22 letters in the Hebrew *aleph-bet*

is declaring the work of His hands.	handiwork proclaims the sky ¹ 'are telling' an ongoing revelation; 'keep on telling'...'keep on declaring'
2 Day to day pours forth ¹ speech, And night to night reveals knowledge.	Circadian rhythms provide knowledge/wisdom. Day to day...night to night – communicating constancy. ¹ lit. 'bubbles forth'
3 There is no speech, nor are there words; Their voice is not heard.	They don't use words as such...
4 Their voice ¹ has gone out through all the earth, And their utterances to the end of the world. In them ¹ He has placed a tent for the sun,	...yet their 'voice' goes out to the whole earth. ¹ <i>qawwam</i> – 'their line' from the MT could be <i>qolam</i> – 'their voice' as evidenced by the LXX and Peshitta...thus, it more closely parallels 'speech' & 'voice' Romans 1:20 God has pitched a tent in the heavens for the sun. (metaphor) ¹ 'the heavens (c.f. v.1)
5 Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber; ¹ It rejoices as a strong man to run his course.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it's like a bridegroom emerging from his chamber (metaphor for joy & sunrise) ¹ from the bridal chamber <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it rejoices like a champion (warrior) taking on his challenge (personification and metaphor)
6 Its rising is from one end of the heavens, And its circuit to the other end of them; And there is nothing hidden from its heat.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it makes its circuit and everything is affected by it.
7 The law ¹ of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.	YHWH The Torah of Yaweh is perfect, certain, right & pure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • restoring the soul • making wise ¹ <i>torah</i> (law); <i>dabar</i> (word); <i>mispatim</i> (laws); <i>edot</i> (statutes); <i>miswah</i> (commands); <i>huqqim</i> (decrees); <i>piqudim</i> (precepts); <i>'imrah</i> (word/promise) are used synonymously in many passages dealing with the law.
8 The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. ¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • making the heart rejoice • enlightening the eyes ¹ discernment/insight Ps.13:3 seems to use the expression to speak of insight.
9 The fear of the LORD ¹ is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD ¹ are true; they are righteous altogether.	The fear of Yahweh is clean...enduring forever. This seems to concern ones response to God's revelation; on the other hand declaring that it endures forever indicates instead that it is God's self-revelation, which continually evokes <i>yir'ah</i> (fear) The judgments of Yahweh are true...altogether righteous. ¹ VanGemenen takes these expressions to be additional synonyms for the words of God; if so the psalmist makes a shift from the denotative meaning of revelation to the connotative meaning – that revelation is evocative of judgment and reverent submission.
10 They are more desirable than gold,	This revelation of Yahweh is priceless & sweet.

yes, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.	
11 Moreover, by them Thy servant is warned; ¹ In keeping them there is great reward.	¹ <i>z-h-r</i> could be <i>nizhar</i> – warned or illumined. They show me the way • Following them - great reward
12 Who can discern <i>his</i> errors? Acquit ¹ me of hidden <i>faults</i> .	¹ <i>n-q-h</i> could be an 'forgive' or 'exempt from punishment' • Without them – not able to see errors Forgive me for those things I do not see.
13 Also keep back Thy servant from presumptuous <i>sins</i> ; Let them not rule over me; Then I shall be blameless, ¹ And I shall be acquitted of great transgression. ²	¹ <i>etam</i> – a form of <i>t-m-m</i> , which is used to describe the Law, God and even humans (18:25b; 7:8; 15:2)...this doesn't mean moral perfection (v.8), it means not guilty under the conditions of the Law. ² the meaning of this is not clear (idolatry-adultery-some other sin against the Law?) Keep me from willful disobedience. • don't let my rebellion dominate my life If you forgive and guide me I will be blameless and exempt from punishment.
14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.	I trust my words and thoughts are acceptable to you – YHWH, my protection & goel

God's transforming revelation

- Revelation through El's creation – revelation without using words
 - The expanse of space continually tells how awesome, powerful, skillful and wise God is.
 - The ongoing circuit of the sun speaks volumes – joy, determination & impact
- Revelation through YHWH's Torah – revelation with words that are perfect, certain, right, pure, priceless & sweet.
 - It restores the inner man
 - It makes wise (Ps.119:130; Prov.21:11)
 - It brings joy (inner peace & tranquillity are manifest as joy)
 - It gives insight
 - It evokes fear
 - It evokes awareness of the truth of God's judgments
- Meditation upon the revelation of God
 - It warns me when I stray
 - It leads me to great reward
 - It shows me hidden errors
 - It drives me toward dependence (forgive & guide me)

GET WISDOM

- **We are foolish** Prov.5:22-23
There is within each of us a nature, an impulse, an intuition that is hostile to God and that left to ourselves we cannot do & do not even wish to do the right things.

- **Replacement**

Goals –

Perspectives –

Power -

- **By taking off**

- Sensuality (pleasure for its own sake) vs. Pleasure from godliness
- Acquisition (for stimulation/status/security) vs. God's provision
- Self-importance (because we're affirmation junkies) vs. God's approval

- **By putting on**

- Love
- Trust
- Truth

- Learn the fear of the Lord

Homework Assignment

- Read psalms⁹ 33, 89, 95, 111, 117, 122, 134, 139, 144
- Review the notes on Psalms of praise from the first week of class.

Prepare responses to the following for homework submission

- Identify as many subtypes of this genre (i.e. Psalm of Praise) as you can.
- Pick 2-3 attributes of God, meditate upon them for a day or two and compose a psalm of praise in the Hebrew style
- Name 3 things you could do (i.e. not make other people do) to make praising God an important part of your home group time (i.e. keep cultural sensitivity in mind).

⁹ As you read them pay attention to the poetic devices used.