

## THEOLOGY CLASSES · OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES II

# Lecture 20: The Writings, Hebrew Poetry, and the Book of Praises

Dr. Keith Essex · The Master's Seminary · 91 minutes

### BEFORE YOU WATCH

This session crosses from the Prophets into the Writings, the final third of the Hebrew canon. Dr. Essex first maps the collection, three poetic books, five festival scrolls, three closing prose works, and names its burden: what the righteous do between the promise given and the promise fulfilled. Then comes a working introduction to Hebrew poetry, delivered with self-deprecating humor from a confessed prose man, and the opening of the Psalms. Listen for why the Hebrew title Praises fits the book better than Psalms, and for what the arrangement of authors quietly insists: you can never get away from David.

### STUDY SHEET: THE LECTURE, SECTION BY SECTION

#### 01 The shape of the Writings: three, five, three

The Jewish canon's third division is easy to hold: it opens with the three great poetic works, Psalms, Job, and Proverbs, and closes with three prose works, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah counted as one book, and Chronicles. Jesus could name the whole division by its first book, the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44). Between the bookends sit five shorter works, the Megilloth or five scrolls, read at Israel's assemblies by the second-temple era: Song of Songs at Passover, Ruth at the Feast of Weeks amid the grain harvest, Lamentations at the late-summer remembrance of Jerusalem's destruction in 586 BC, Ecclesiastes at Tabernacles, the feast of greatest rejoicing, with its call to rejoice in all one's labor, and Esther at Purim, the feast born from the book itself. This course takes up Psalms, Job, Proverbs, the three middle scrolls, and Daniel, the rest having been covered in the previous course.

#### 02 What the godly do while they wait

The Prophets ended with a command: wait, trust, until the Lord's restoration comes. The Writings answer the question that command raises: what does waiting and trusting look like? The saint learns to praise and give thanks while depending on God in the circumstances of life; learns that God knows what he is doing whatever hardships come; and learns that the Creator who will one day make new heavens and a new earth gives wisdom now for living in a fallen world by his moral order. The Writings are continuing revelation for those living between the promise given and the promise fulfilled, which is why, Essex notes, they speak so directly to believers today, who occupy the same position.

### 03 From corporate Israel to the individual

The Torah and the Prophets deal overwhelmingly with corporate Israel: the nation promised to Abraham, formed at Sinai, judged by covenant curse, awaiting corporate restoration; the righteous individual in a wicked generation shares the judgment, and the wicked individual in a righteous generation enjoys the blessing, so the individual, as it were, gets lost. The Writings turn the lens: their theme is human life in relation to God with emphasis on the individual godly man. Hence the pattern of prayer and praise (Psalms, but also Job's end, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles), insight into God's work in the world, lessons drawn from the created order, and models of devotion: the excellent woman of Proverbs 31 finds her one narrative embodiment in Ruth, the only other place the word is so used; Haman plays the fool of Proverbs; Daniel is the wise man beside foolish kings; and Chronicles presents David and Solomon in their goodness as examples, warts recorded elsewhere, a caution for the Sunday-school teacher whose pupils will one day read Samuel.

### 04 Poetry before the Psalms

Israel sang long before the Psalter: Exodus 15 celebrates in song what Exodus 14 narrates, and Judges 5 sings what Judges 4 reports. Essex sets the Jael accounts side by side: chapter 4 gives the facts, the peg, the hammer, the temple, while chapter 5 lingers over the scene from angle after angle, blessed among women is Jael, between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay. That difference, reporting versus lingering, is the difference between prose and poetry, and the prophets' oracular poetry has been echoing it all course long. Essex confesses his own prose-man's resistance, no singing in hospital rooms, please, before granting cheerfully: praise the Lord, I did not write the Bible.

### 05 Is there Hebrew poetry at all?

Hebrew has no word for poetry; prose and poetry are Greek and Western categories, and in recent decades Kugel of Yale has led a challenge: since the devices appear in Hebrew prose too, perhaps there is only a continuum of style. Essex declines the nihilism: the text itself names songs and lamentations, as Amos 8:10 pairs the two terms, I will turn your songs into lamentations; the lament is the funeral dirge, and the song the rejoicing that follows deliverance, with a whole vocabulary of singing, rejoicing, and thanksgiving around them. Some portions of the Old Testament are simply more poetic than others; and the lyrics of Israel's songs survive while the music is gone, so that any modern musician who sets a psalm must, like Isaac Watts, rearrange to sing it.

### 06 Lowth's parallelism: the rhythm of thought

Modern study begins with Robert Lowth in the eighteenth century, who worked from Psalms and Proverbs, poetry from beginning to end, and named the basic structure parallelism: a second line echoing, opposing, or completing the first. Synonymous parallelism: the heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands, each element matched; the first line is the sketch, said Essex, and the second adds the color, two lines together giving a fuller picture than either alone. Antithetical parallelism, Proverbs' native mode: a wise son makes a father glad, but a foolish son is a grief to his mother, the contrast of wise and foolish carried by contrasted parents who together are the parental authority. Synthetic parallelism, once Lowth's catch-all: the second line adds or completes, as in, I cry aloud to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy mountain, the answer and its place added to the cry.

## 07 Emblematic, formal, and the limits of the system

Two further categories: emblematic, where a figure carries the thought, as the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for you, O God, the hot, thirsty deer at the stream picturing the soul's desire; and formal parallelism, as in, But as for me, I have installed my King upon Zion, my holy hill, where no neat scheme of matched elements applies, which, Essex notes wryly, is the scholars' way of saying we cannot figure it out. The category exposes the system's limits: Lowth is worth following at the start, but his formula cannot explain every bicolon and tricolon, and Watson's handbook is the place to see the field's current synthesis, commended, with a word to the wise, to anyone choosing a poetic passage for an exegesis paper.

## 08 What makes poetry poetry

Following Landy's response to Kugel: prose assumes sequential time, poetry an air of timelessness; prose keeps narrator, subject, and reader distinct, poetry expresses feeling so the reader enters the experience, which is precisely why the Psalms were given to be sung by people whose experiences matched them; prose handles everyday life, poetry the liminal moments above it; prose relates things by nearness in time and space, poetry by likeness and difference; and poetry is terse where prose expands, an economy of language, three words where a preacher would use thirty. Hence the practical warning: translating narrative is half the exegesis; translating poetry, with fewer words but far more packed into them, leaves the exegesis barely begun.

## 09 The rhythm of sound

Alongside the rhythm of thought runs a rhythm of sound, visible only in Hebrew: the acrostic, lines or stanzas beginning with successive letters of the alphabet, as in Psalm 119 and Proverbs 31, from which we largely learn how Israel ordered its letters; alliteration, as in Psalm 122:6, sha'alu shelom Yerushalaim, pray for the peace of Jerusalem, audible even in English; assonance, matching vowel sounds at line ends, as in Psalm 119:29, though never as regular as English rhyme; paronomasia, wordplay, as in Isaiah 5's vineyard song, he looked for justice, mishpat, but behold bloodshed, mishpach; onomatopoeia, words sounding their sense, thunder as ra'am, and the hoofbeats of Judges 5:22; and inclusio, the repeated frame, as Psalm 118 opens and closes with give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his lovingkindness is everlasting. A third area, meter, remains debated: some, including Dr. Barrick in modified form, hold that a metrical stress pattern underlies Hebrew poetry, though it resists full definition.

## 10 Praises, not Psalms

The Psalter is the longest book of Scripture, and unlike Jeremiah, the longest from one author in one generation, it is an anthology: many authors across the whole Old Testament era. The Hebrew title is Praises; our title comes from the Septuagint's word for songs accompanied by plucked strings. The Greek names the form; the Hebrew names the content and the destination, for the book ends in a crescendo of praise, the last five psalms, and Psalm 150's final doxology, let everything that has breath praise the Lord, and even the laments characteristically end in a vow or declaration of praise. Essex's cheerful preference: had he directed the hand of history, the chapel announcement would be, turn to Praise 100.

## 11 The authors and the lamed of ascription

About ninety of the 150 psalms carry ascriptions: seventy-three of David, roughly half the book; one of Moses (Psalm 90, from the wilderness era around 1410 BC); two of Solomon; twelve of Asaph; ten of the sons of Korah; one each of Heman and Ethan. The Hebrew lamed prefix could in theory mean of, to, or for, and scholars debate whether it claims authorship; Essex tests the alternatives against Psalm 3's heading, a psalm of David when he fled from Absalom his son, and its opening, O Lord, how my adversaries have increased: a psalm written for David before he fled strains belief, and the natural sense is from David in that situation. The superscriptions, third-person and probably added as the collection formed, reflect author, occasion, or directions for the musicians.

## 12 An Old Testament in miniature

The anthology's dating runs from Moses to the post-exilic era: Psalm 90 at the beginning of Scripture's composition, Psalm 137 by the rivers of Babylon in the exile, Psalm 126 when the Lord brought back the captive ones of Zion. So the Psalter spans the entire Old Testament period in song, just as Chronicles spans it in narrative from Adam to Cyrus's decree: the Writings open and close with an Old Testament in miniature, one sung, one told.

## 13 Five books, five doxologies

From the earliest manuscripts the Psalter divides into five books, plausibly echoing the five books of the Torah. Each ends in doxology: Psalm 41:13, blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting; Psalm 72:18 and 19, with the intriguing note of verse 20, the prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended, though Davidic psalms appear in every later book; Psalm 89:52; Psalm 106:48, with all the people saying Amen; and Psalm 150 crowning the whole. Either the collector arranged existing doxology-ending psalms as seams, or added the doxologies in arranging; either way the fivefold shape is deliberate, and its trajectory runs from Israel's praise to the praise of everything that has breath.

## 14 The arrangement by authorship

Reading the ascriptions across the five books yields a pattern. Book one: after the two anonymous opening psalms, thirty-seven of the remaining thirty-nine are Davidic, with Psalm 10 possibly the continuation of Psalm 9 and Psalm 33 anonymous. Book two begins with Levitical psalms of Korah and Asaph and ends with Solomon, enveloping a Davidic core (Psalms 51 to 71, all but three): Levites and king around David. Book three, dominated by Levitical psalms at both ends, still carries one Davidic psalm at its heart, Psalm 86. Book four opens with Moses (Psalm 90), then anonymous psalms bracketing two of David with one between. Book five runs anonymous, three Davidic after Psalm 107, the songs of ascent with Davidic psalms inside them, eight more of David, and the closing hallelujahs. The observation, prior to any interpretation: in the way the Psalter has been structured, you can never get away from David.

## 15 Psalms 1 and 2 as the doorway

The first two psalms come to us anonymous, though Acts 4:25 attributes Psalm 2 to David, information not drawn from the psalm's own text. They are almost universally received today as the introduction to the whole book, framed by blessing: Psalm 1 opens, blessed is the man, and Psalm 2 closes, how blessed are all who take refuge in him. What that doorway means for reading the Psalter as a book, an emphasis of the last generation of scholarship, is the next session's business.

### SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Psalm 1 · Psalm 2 · Psalm 3 · Psalm 19 · Psalm 42 · Psalm 90 · Psalm 118 · Psalm 126 · Psalm 137 · Psalm 150 · Judges 5 · Exodus 15 · Proverbs 10 · Luke 24

## KEY TERMS

**The Writings.** The third division of the Hebrew canon, Psalms through Chronicles: three poetic works, five festival scrolls, three closing prose works, named by its first book in Luke 24:44.

**The Megilloth.** The five scrolls read at Israel's assemblies: Song of Songs at Passover, Ruth at Weeks, Lamentations at the remembrance of 586 BC, Ecclesiastes at Tabernacles, Esther at Purim.

**Between promise and fulfillment.** The Writings' situation and burden: continuing revelation for the godly who wait and trust between the promise given in the Prophets and the promise fulfilled, the believer's own position today.

**The individual godly man.** The Writings' distinctive emphasis over against the Torah's and Prophets' corporate Israel: prayer and praise, wisdom, creation's lessons, and models of devotion for the righteous person living among the wicked.

**Parallelism.** Lowth's name for Hebrew poetry's basic structure, the rhythm of thought: a second line echoing (synonymous), opposing (antithetical), or completing (synthetic) the first, with emblematic and formal as further categories.

**Sketch and color.** Essex's picture of synonymous parallelism: the first line draws the outline, the second adds depth and color, the two together giving a fuller statement than either alone.

**Formal parallelism.** The category for lines that fit no matching scheme, as Psalm 2:6: in Essex's wry summary, the scholars' way of saying we cannot figure it out, and the proof that Lowth's system has limits.

**Terseness.** Poetry's economy of language, three words where prose uses thirty: the reason translating poetry leaves the exegesis barely begun, while translating narrative is half the work.

**The rhythm of sound.** Hebrew poetry's sound devices: acrostic, alliteration, assonance, paronomasia, onomatopoeia, and inclusio, with meter a debated further possibility.

**Praises.** The Hebrew title of the Psalter, naming its content and destination: a book, and even its laments, ending in praise, crowned by Psalm 150's summons to everything that has breath.

**The lamed of authorship.** The ascription prefix on some ninety psalms, best read as claiming authorship, as Psalm 3's heading and contents together show: from David when he fled from Absalom.

**Five books, five doxologies.** The Psalter's deliberate structure, echoing the Torah's five books, each closing in blessing, from Israel's Amen in the early books to universal praise in Psalm 150, with David woven through every book.

## COMPREHENSION CHECK: TWENTY-TWO QUESTIONS

1. What is the three-five-three shape of the Writings?

- A. Psalms, Job, and Proverbs; the five festival scrolls; and Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles
- B. Three histories, five prophets, three songs
- C. Three books of David, five of Solomon, three of Ezra
- D. Torah, Prophets, and Writings in miniature

2. Which scroll was read at Tabernacles, and why does it fit?

- A. Lamentations, mourning the temple's loss
- B. Ecclesiastes, with its call to rejoice in all one's labor, at the feast of greatest rejoicing after the full harvest
- C. Ruth, celebrating the grain harvest
- D. Esther, remembering deliverance

3. What question do the Writings answer, following the Prophets?
  - A. How Israel's history should be retold
  - B. When the day of the Lord will come
  - C. What waiting and trusting look like for the godly between the promise given and the promise fulfilled
  - D. How the canon was assembled
4. How do the Writings shift emphasis from the Torah and Prophets?
  - A. From poetry to prose
  - B. From promise to fulfillment
  - C. From Israel to the church
  - D. From corporate Israel to the individual godly man in relation to God
5. Where does the excellent woman of Proverbs 31 find her narrative embodiment?
  - A. In Ruth, the only other place the term is so used
  - B. In Esther before the king
  - C. In Hannah at Shiloh
  - D. In Abigail before David
6. What caution does Essex give about Chronicles' portraits of David and Solomon?
  - A. They contradict Samuel and Kings
  - B. They present the kings in their goodness as examples, so teachers must remember the warts recorded elsewhere
  - C. They were written to flatter the Persian court
  - D. They omit the temple entirely
7. What contrast do Judges 4 and 5 illustrate?
  - A. Northern and southern dialects
  - B. Two conflicting accounts of one battle
  - C. Prose reporting the facts versus poetry lingering over the scene from angle after angle
  - D. History versus allegory
8. How does Essex answer Kugel's claim that there is no Hebrew poetry?
  - A. By appealing to the Greek translators
  - B. By granting the claim for the Prophets only
  - C. By citing the church fathers
  - D. The text itself names songs and lamentations, as Amos 8:10 shows, so some portions are simply more poetic than others
9. In synonymous parallelism, what does the second line do, in Essex's image?
  - A. Adds color and depth to the first line's sketch, the two giving a fuller picture together
  - B. Corrects the first line's overstatement
  - C. Repeats the first line verbatim for emphasis
  - D. Translates the first line into common speech
10. Which book is the native home of antithetical parallelism, and why?
  - A. Psalms, because laments turn to praise
  - B. Proverbs, because its business is the contrast of the wise and the foolish
  - C. Job, because of the friends' debates
  - D. Ecclesiastes, because of its contradictions

11. What does the category of formal parallelism reveal, per Essex?
  - A. That Lowth's original system was flawless
  - B. That such lines are later prose insertions
  - C. The limits of the system: some lines fit no matching scheme, and the label means we cannot figure it out
  - D. That meter replaces parallelism in such lines
12. Why does translating poetry leave the exegesis barely begun?
  - A. Poetic vocabulary is untranslatable
  - B. The manuscripts of poetry are poorly preserved
  - C. Poetry requires knowledge of the music
  - D. Poetry's terseness packs far more into fewer words, unlike narrative, where translation is half the exegesis
13. From what do we largely learn the order of the Hebrew alphabet?
  - A. The acrostic poems, such as Psalm 119 and Proverbs 31
  - B. The inscriptions of Hezekiah's tunnel
  - C. The Septuagint's transliterations
  - D. The Masoretic vowel system
14. What wordplay marks Isaiah's vineyard song?
  - A. Ra'am and raqia, thunder and firmament
  - B. Mishpat and mispach, justice and bloodshed
  - C. Shalom and Yerushalaim, peace and Jerusalem
  - D. Hevel and havel, breath and vanity
15. What is the Hebrew title of the Psalter, and what does it name?
  - A. Songs, naming the musical form
  - B. Prayers, naming the book's use
  - C. Praises, naming the content and destination: a book that ends, even in its laments, in praise
  - D. Ascents, naming the pilgrimage
16. How many psalms are ascribed to David, and what fraction of the book is that?
  - A. Ninety, three-fifths of the book
  - B. Fifty, one-third of the book
  - C. One hundred, two-thirds of the book
  - D. Seventy-three, roughly half the book
17. How does Essex argue the lamed of ascription claims authorship?
  - A. Psalm 3's heading and contents fit a psalm from David fleeing Absalom, not one written to or for him beforehand
  - B. The Septuagint always renders it by the genitive
  - C. The Talmud settles the question
  - D. No other preposition exists in Hebrew
18. In what sense is the Psalter an Old Testament in miniature?
  - A. It quotes every canonical book
  - B. Its psalms span the whole Old Testament era in song, from Moses to the post-exilic return, as Chronicles spans it in narrative
  - C. It summarizes the Torah's laws in verse
  - D. It was the first book translated to Greek

19. What marks the seam at the end of each of the Psalter's five books?
- A. A superscription naming the collector
  - B. An acrostic covering the alphabet
  - C. A doxology of blessing, from Israel's Amen to Psalm 150's universal praise
  - D. A psalm of Moses
20. What is intriguing about Psalm 72:20, the prayers of David are ended?
- A. It is the only verse naming Jesse
  - B. It closes the last Davidic psalm in the Psalter
  - C. It appears in the Septuagint only
  - D. Davidic psalms nonetheless appear in every later book of the Psalter
21. What does the authorship pattern across the five books show?
- A. In the Psalter's structure you can never get away from David: Davidic psalms appear in every book, often enveloped by Levites, Moses, or anonymous psalms
  - B. Each book has a single author
  - C. The Levites wrote the majority of the psalms
  - D. The anonymous psalms are all post-exilic
22. How are Psalms 1 and 2 received today, and what frames them?
- A. As the introduction to the whole book, framed by blessing: blessed is the man, and blessed are all who take refuge in him
  - B. As later additions to be read last
  - C. As a single psalm wrongly divided
  - D. As the conclusion misplaced by copyists

*Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 A · 2 B · 3 C · 4 D · 5 A · 6 B · 7 C · 8 D · 9 A · 10 B · 11 C · 12 D · 13 A · 14 B · 15 C · 16 D · 17 A · 18 B · 19 C · 20 D · 21 A · 22 A*

#### TALK IT OVER

1. The Writings answer what waiting and trusting look like between promise and fulfillment, the position believers still occupy. Which of the Writings has actually shaped your waiting, and which have you never really entered?
2. Essex jokes that he is a prose man who would rather not be sung to in a hospital bed, yet God gave a third of his word in poetry. Why might God choose poetry, with its lingering, likeness, and terseness, for so much of what he says to sufferers and worshipers?
3. The lament psalms characteristically end in a vow of praise. What would it mean for your own complaints to God to be shaped toward that ending without being rushed to it?
4. The Psalter never lets the reader get away from David, king, sinner, sufferer, singer. What does the persistence of David in Israel's praise book suggest about where the book means to fix our hope?
5. Chronicles gives David and Solomon as examples while Samuel and Kings record the warts, and Essex warns the Sunday-school teacher accordingly. How do you present biblical figures as models honestly, and what happens to faith when the warts surface unprepared?

#### ONE VERSE TO CARRY



## *Psalm 150:6*

### GO FURTHER

Read Psalm 19:1 to 6 and Proverbs 10:1 to 12 slowly, naming the parallelism in each line, then Judges 4:17 to 22 beside Judges 5:24 to 27 to feel prose become poetry. Read Psalms 1 and 2 as one doorway, and note the doxologies at Psalms 41, 72, 89, 106, and 150. Next session: reading the Psalter as a book, from the doorway of Psalms 1 and 2 through the story the five books tell.