

Reading the Psalms & Proverbs

A Study in Hebrew Poetry

Week 1

Psalms 1-19, Proverbs 1-5

The Bible contains many different kinds of literature. There are historical books, record books and journals, letters, prophecy, poetry, and more. Furthermore, woven within the fabric of each general type of literature are sub-elements of other types. For example, Paul's letters often contain prophetic passages. Some writings are intended to inform the reader of important narrative events in the lives of God's people, other sections or entire books are didactic—that is, they are intended to teach spiritual truth. Some are written to comfort while others intend to warn and are a call to repentance.

As we begin our study of the Psalms and Proverbs we will find some of all of these elements within their writings. However, one form, or genre, of literature dominates these two collections: they are written in the style of Hebrew poetry. The Hebrew poet, like all poets, is a deliberate artist: he intentionally writes in a particular style out of his creative imagination. His writings are lyrical, easily memorized or put to music for singing. They are purposefully emotional, expressing the writer's feelings and moving the reader to an emotional response. The emotions call for action and move the reader, along with the poet, to respond in some way.

Read Psalm 1 as an example: what action does the psalmist inspire the reader to choose?

The Psalms, more than any other collection or book in the Bible, bring us into intimate communion with God and serve as a basis to express our deepest feelings. These may be feelings of joy, spontaneous praise to God, wonder and amazement at His creation, reflection upon His work on our behalf, anger toward His enemies and our enemies, the suffering of the righteous and the plight of the wicked.

Read Psalm 3: What is David's trial? What is God's promise? How did David respond?

The structure of the Psalms:

- 1) Hebrew parallelism: two lines or thoughts form a couplet, we may call them A and B
 - a) Synthetic parallelism—A expresses a thought and B completes or adds to it
 - b) Synonymous parallelism—A and B express the same basic thought
 - c) Antithetic parallelism—A expresses a thought and B contrasts with the opposite
- 2) Various Types of Psalms
 - a) Praise
 - b) Lament
 - c) Ballad
 - d) Imprecatory
 - e) Ascent
 - f) Messianic