

# **Adult Catechism Class March 7, 2016**

## *The Poetical and Wisdom Books of the Old Testament*

### **Part 1: Scripture Readings:**

**Psalms 1: 1-3:** Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

**Proverbs 1:7:** The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

**Job 38: 1-7:** Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"

**Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8:** For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

### **Part 2: What are the Poetical and Wisdom Books of the Old Testament?**

In the Hebrew canon, these books are included in the "Writings". Poetry abounds in the Torah and the Prophets. Much of the Wisdom literature is written in poetic form. Wisdom is found throughout the Bible.

**The Psalms** are the hymn book and prayer book of the Second Temple, and continue to be used the same way by the Jewish community today. Traditionally the Psalms were ascribed to David, but also collections of psalms are credited to the sons of Korah, to Asaph, to Solomon, and even to Moses. There are also many types of Psalms, just as there are many types of hymns in our modern hymn books. There are songs of praise and thanksgiving, songs of ascent which were sung going up to the temple, royal psalms, prayers, laments and so on. The Psalms are one of the favorite books for Christians.

**Song of Solomon** is a collection of love poems, which are beautiful expressions of human love at best. They remind us that God is present in all of life.

**Lamentations** is a collection of poems of deep bitterness and grief over the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Babylonians in 586 BC. It is traditionally attributed to Jeremiah and is printed after the Prophecy of Jeremiah in most bibles.

Wisdom literature also takes on several different forms. Sometimes it is short sayings on how to cope with life. The theme is usually how virtue can triumph over wrong. Sometimes wisdom takes the form of riddles. Or wisdom can be reflections on the meaning of life or on the life of faith (philosophy).

The heart of wisdom literature is a theology of creation and life. God has made the world and everything in it. We can learn something about God and life by observing nature. Because God is in all of life, we are called to live joyfully as well as responsibly. A great deal of wisdom literature deals with how to live a

good life, that is, the life that God approves of.

**Proverbs** is a collection of sayings about how to live the good life. It also contains the great passage on the personification of wisdom as God's handmaid, delighting in the works of creation (8:22-31 and chapter 9).

**Ecclesiastes** reads almost like a diary of a spiritual journey. The author deals with ultimate questions of life and death, while talking about the routines of daily life. He reflects on what his life has meant from youth to old age, and how God has played a part in that life.

**Job** begins with the undeserved suffering of the patriarch Job and reflects on the meaning of suffering and God's relationship to one who suffers unjustly. Job suffers most because he refuses to deny his own integrity or the integrity of God.

**Part 3: The Psalms** Psalms is not really a book. It is a collection of 150 songs, prayers, poems and hymns gathered over a very long period of time. There are different types of psalms. Some tell stories. Some are songs of praise. Some are prayers of repentance. Each psalm has its own unique character but they are all deeply emotional and profoundly spiritual. The Psalms are not meant to be simply read, but to be prayed. They encompass the whole range of human emotions from sorrow, lament and depression to joy, praise and celebration.

The whole collection of psalms is often referred to as The Psalter. The compilers of the Psalms divided them into five books: 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106 and 107-150. The ancient Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint (LXX), numbered the Psalms differently than the Hebrew. St. Jerome's Latin translation, the Vulgate, followed the LXX numbering, yet most modern translations use the Hebrew numbering.

The ancient Israelites prayed the Psalms in the tabernacle and then in the Temple from the time of David down to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD. Since then the Jewish people have continued to pray the Psalms. The earliest Christians also prayed the Psalms (see Eph 5:19; Col 3:16) and the Psalms were incorporated into the Christian liturgies. The Psalms are still prayed by the Church daily in the Liturgy of the Hours. The 150 Psalms are the basis for the 150 Hail Marys of the Rosary (until the recent addition of the Luminous Mysteries), so that the Rosary has often been called the Little Psalter.

The Levites sung psalms in the Temple. Unfortunately, we do not know the melodies they used nor their methods of praying the Psalms. Yet it is likely that many of the Psalms were sung antiphonally, with one person leading a group in a call-and-response or with two groups of people responding to each other. Early Christian monks adopted these forms of antiphonal prayer of the Psalms. The contemporary Christian liturgy also uses an antiphonal psalm. Similarly, the Psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours are often spoken or chanted antiphonally with two "choirs." The Liturgy of the Hours adds a doxology, the "Glory to the Father...", at the end of each psalm.

The Psalms express the delight of the Lord in his people and their delight in him. They show the deep love which exists between the two. The Psalms are both personal and communal. Their varied themes and concerns require us to change our attitudes of prayer to correspond with the particular psalm. St. Augustine taught that "if the psalm prays, pray. If it laments, lament. If it rejoices, rejoice. If it hopes, hope. If it fears, fear. For everything which is written here is a reflection of us." The Psalms mirror human emotions and simultaneously reveal God's heart for us. Some of the Psalms are prophetic and find their fulfillment in the life of Christ. For example, Ps 22 speaks of his Passion. The New Testament specifically links a few psalms to Christ (e.g. Acts 1:20, 13:33-35). The Psalms' Hebrew poetry does not contain rhyme and meter like English poetry. Rather, the poetry is built on parallelism in which a phrase is paired with a similar or contrasting idea for emphasis. Some psalms have an acrostic structure meaning that the words or phrases are in alphabetical order according to the Hebrew alphabet (e.g. Ps

119). The Psalms are the key to the spirituality of the Old Testament and they are an essential and permanent part of Christian prayer (CCC 2597).

***Part 4: The Song of Solomon:*** The Song of Songs is a mosaic of love poems which has a loosely defined plot. The original text does not include indications for each speaker, but most translations include notes naming the Bride and Groom characters based on the Hebrew pronouns used. Besides the Bride and Groom characters, there is a group of speakers often called the Friends or the Daughters of Jerusalem (1:5). The book is attributed or dedicated to Solomon (1:1), but we don't have enough evidence to support or deny his authorship. Song of Songs is similar to some Egyptian love poetry of the same era.

Song of Songs has a long history of interpretation. Some commentators, seeking the literal sense of the book, have explained it as a celebration of conjugal love in marriage. The traditional Jewish interpretation identifies the Groom as the Lord and the Bride as the people of Israel. Early Christian interpreters understood the Groom as Jesus and the Bride as the Church. Both traditions have also applied interpretations which regard the Bride as an individual believer's soul. St. Bernard and St. John of the Cross are among the Church's foremost interpreters of this book. Other passages in the Old and New Testaments compare God's relationship with his people to a marriage (Isa 54:6; Hos 2:16-20; John 3:29; Rev 21). Therefore, Song of Songs has often been read in the allegorical sense, which sees the Groom in the Song as fulfilled in the person of Christ.

The traditional interpretations of the book make more sense when the whole context of the Bible is taken into account. If we understand God's covenant with his people as a marriage covenant then it is easy to see God as Groom and his people as Bride.

Song of Songs can be a challenging read because there are many unusual words and proper nouns. It includes rare plants and spices along with unfamiliar place names. Yet the poetic imagery centers on young married love in ancient Israel. The man and the woman delight in one another's physical beauty and in the joys of conjugal love. The setting is in springtime at the royal court (6:8-9), in shepherds' fields (1:7-8) and in the royal gardens (5:1; 6:11). The Song is very sensual but delicately presented. It is not lustful since it does not reduce love to its sexual expression. Rather it extols the virtues of love, which is "stronger than death" and presents sex in the context of love of the whole person (8:6). The plot poses a difficulty because it is so inexact. It is no use searching for a straightforward story, but there are pieces of a story woven into the book. The climax is right around 5:1.

The book does not give us detailed history or theology, but if understood in the allegorical sense it reveals the passionate love of God for his people. Though he is a great and mighty king (1:4; 7:5), the Lord loves us ardently like a young Groom loves his Bride. The bridal imagery can be startling to us, but it simply shows the intensity of God's love. For all human love is a merely a dim reflection of God's perfect love.

***Part 5: Lamentations:*** Lamentations is a short poetic book of mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. Traditionally, Jeremiah has been considered the author of the book. The Hebrew sources do not mention his name, but the Greek text credits him at the beginning of the book. It is possible that this tradition arose because another biblical passage mentions that Jeremiah wrote a lament for King Josiah (2 Chr 35:25). The book is a

series of five poems. The first four are acrostic, meaning they are structured alphabetically according to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapters 1, 2 and 4 each contain 22 lines, corresponding to the alphabet, but chapter 3 is 66 lines since it has 3 lines for each letter. Chapter 5 is 22 lines, but it is not acrostic. Scholars have found similarities between Lamentations and other Ancient Near Eastern poems of lament.

Several different voices are represented in the text. This fact can make Lamentations a bit confusing. The main voice that begins the book is the voice of the author, narrator or the prophet Jeremiah. But quickly, the voice of Jerusalem chimes in (1:9, 11-16). Then Jerusalem's enemies speak (2:15-16). Chapter 3 presents a different voice, the voice of a strong-man (geber in Hebrew) who seems to represent the nation of Judah. The main voice returns for the last two chapters.

The author truly "laments" the fate of Judah and Jerusalem. The Babylonians have come and destroyed the Temple and the city and taken the leaders of the people into exile. In the midst of this calamity, the author acknowledges the sins of Judah since he understands the tragic circumstances as God's just judgment upon the nation (1:8-9, 14). Yet the book holds out hope for Judah's future, for a return from exile and for judgment upon the nation's enemies. In the context of total desolation, prayers for vindication fill the book (1:21-22; 3:64-66). The last half of chapter 3 and the very end of chapter 5 are the most hopeful sections of the book. They illustrate the hope that the nation has in the Lord and in his power to redeem his people and punish their enemies.

The message of Lamentations is hard. It challenges us with the fact that there are tangible and painful consequences for our sin. Judah suffered exile because of its infidelity to its covenant relationship with the Lord. Yet the prayer of lament does not end in despair, but looks forward to the Lord's purposes for Judah's future, for vindication and restoration. The suffering is not permanent, but purgative. The Lord will bring his people back.

Lamentations is a prayer. It is a prayer of sorrow, a prayer of repentance, a prayer in time of suffering, a prayer for God's deliverance. The Jewish people suffered greatly at the time of the exile. The reader of Lamentations can try to identify with their sufferings and pray along with them. The book is read in Jewish liturgy to commemorate the destruction of the first and second Temples and in Christian liturgy for the Tenebrae services of Holy Week. Lamentations expresses the desperation of a suffering soul and a suffering people. This book not only helps us to understand the plight of the Jews at the time of the exile but it shows us how to bring our own sufferings to God in prayer.

**Part 6: Proverbs:** Proverbs 1. 1 attributes the book to King Solomon. At the beginning of his reign, God offered him any gift he might want. Solomon asked for wisdom to rule the people well (1 Kings 3. 5-14). God was so pleased that He said that He gave Solomon greater wisdom than anyone before or after. Of course there is semitic exaggeration here in regard to all future times. Attributing the whole book to Solomon is simply part of the common practice of those times, of using as a pen name, the name of a famous man. This was especially natural and even suitable since Solomon was, as we said, famed for his wisdom. Yet it is likely enough that some portions may date back to Solomon himself. There are within the book two special, large, Solomonic collections: 10. 1 to 22. 16 and 25. 1 to 29. 27. It is interesting to notice that the latter section has exactly 375 proverbs, which is the numerical value of the word Solomon. In

25. 1 we read that men of King Hezekiah (716-687 BC) transmitted that second group. Some think that the opening and closing poetic sections (1. 1. to 9. 18 and 31. 10-31) are late additions to the book.

In Chapter 1 of Proverbs, the Father exhorts his son to learn wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Fear of course does not mean slavish fear, but the kind of fear one has for His Father, a reverential fear, which includes love and sense of the Father's greatness. There are really two poles in our relation to God: one is love, closeness, warmth, the other is a sense of infinite majesty and greatness. He is infinite in all respects, so one cannot be excessive.

The fear that is the beginning of wisdom is the same kind of fear of which St. Paul later spoke in Phil 2. 12-13: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works [produces] in you both the will and the doing." This passage is often misunderstood, as if one should live in fear of hell. But that is not the case if read in context. First, "fear and trembling" is a stereotyped expression, which from much use, lost much of its force (In 2 Cor 7. 15 St. Paul says the Corinthians received Titus "with fear and trembling". But relations between them and Paul were very poor. It really means only "with respect." Cf. also Psalm 2. 11). More importantly the reason for this respect is that both in doing good and even in doing evil, the doer is using God's infinite power.

In verse 8 the text speaks of the Mother's teaching, as part of the parallelism. But it is not just parallelism: respect for the mother was also inculcated. Already in verse 11 warnings begin against running with sinners. Such men lie in wait for others. But they also harm themselves, for wisdom really tells us what is beneficial for our happiness both here and hereafter. So to go against wisdom, is to go against self-interest. The simple man (peti), that is the unintelligent, the credulous, who avoids wisdom and hates knowledge (da'ath - which also can mean obedience). They will eat the fruit of their way: that is, as we noted in the introduction, violations of wisdom bring automatic penalty, built into the nature of things. Then the foolish will call on God, but He will not answer: for the penalty is automatic. He will not break up that which follows from the very nature of things.

The reward of following wisdom is length of life. This often comes true literally. In the fourth commandment God had promised that those who honor Father and Mother would live long on the land. But even if that does not happen in the literal way, there is better reward in the next life.

Chapter 16, verse 18 says pride goes before a fall. God refuses His help to the one who is proud. In the Gospels, Jesus was wonderfully merciful to all kinds of sinners, except the Pharisees. The trouble was their pride. Pride implies that a man is God, since it implies that the good he does is own production by his own power. Actually, all the good one has and is and does is God's gift: 1 Cor 4. 7. The words of 1 Peter 5. 5 saying that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Chapter 18, verse 2 says a fool does not really want to understand, just to express his own opinion. Sometimes when a person seems to be listening, he is really not paying attention, is rather thinking ahead what reply he can make to go against what is being said. Verse 22 extols the value of a good wife-- in contrast to the strong words in the other direction in earlier parts of this book. The ideal wife is pictured in chapter 31. 10-31. 19. 14 repeats the idea: One can inherit material things from parents, but to find a prudent wife - that is a gift of the Lord.

Chapter 26, verses 3-5 give good advice for dealing with fools: Do not lower yourself in answering him, or you might become foolish too. Verses 4 and 5 seem to contradict, but can be understood to mean: Do not lower yourself-- but speak in words the fool can understand. In v. 14 a fool that repeats his folly is like a dog that returns to its vomit. Cf. 2 Peter 2. 22.

Chapter 28, verse 5 says that evil men do not understand moral rightness. When a person goes farther and farther into sinning, his ability to understand spiritual truths gets less and less; but if he lives strenuously according to faith - which says the things of this world are slight in comparison to spiritual things -- then his spiritual eyesight grows more and more.

**Part 7: Ecclesiastes:** Ecclesiastes is a Wisdom book that explores life from a pessimistic perspective. While Proverbs proposes salient points of wisdom to be followed, Ecclesiastes exposes the utter futility of human life without God. Qohelet (pronounced KO-HEL-ET), the author of Ecclesiastes, cries "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!" (1:2). Traditionally, Qohelet is identified with King Solomon as "son of David and king in Jerusalem," (1:1) but the book does not mention Solomon by name. Some scholars posit a much later date for the book because of certain linguistic features.

The book examines many issues, but the focus is on where human beings spend their energies. Qohelet rejects three goals which people regularly pursue: knowledge, money and pleasure. Each one is "vanity and a striving after wind" (1:14). While he acknowledges the usefulness of knowledge and wisdom (7:12), Qohelet rejects seeking them as vain (1:17). The accumulation of wisdom and knowledge is merely a human undertaking when what God really desires from us is obedience (12:13).

Work and money also play a central role in the book. Qohelet observes how people spend their days working and toiling, but never seem to gain from it. Everyone seems stuck in a useless pattern of striving. Even those who achieve material success often find that they don't get to enjoy the fruits of their labor (6:2). Qohelet's observations line up with the curse of toil that Adam received after the Fall (Gen 3:17).

While Qohelet's observations are somewhat despairing in tone, we are not meant to reject working or gaining wisdom (3:22; 10:10). Rather, through Ecclesiastes we realize the shortness of human life, the smallness of our work, the insignificance of our lives without God. Qohelet helps us understand that there are many pursuits in human life that are not worth investing our time and energy in. Rather, we should seek God and keep his commandments. For money, pleasure and knowledge are merely necessary things along the path of life, but God is the goal of the journey.

For Qohelet, it seems at first that money, pleasure and wisdom will produce human happiness. But he is continually surprised to find out that this is not always the case. It seems unjust, even evil, that a person could work hard all his life and never enjoy the results (6:2). Yet throughout Ecclesiastes, we come to realize that happiness is a gift from God, not something we can produce. Even the enjoyment of our own work is a gift. Ecclesiastes often uses the Hebrew word *hebel*, which is usually translated as "vanity." The word has many shades of meaning from "breath, wind, vapor" to "worthlessness, darkness, absurdity."

The book discusses the finality of death, which brings all earthly pursuits to a sudden halt. It is as if all the grand projects of man are simply cut off. No one can escape from death; it envelops the good and the wicked alike (9:2).

Ecclesiastes is hard to stomach because it confronts us so sharply with the contradictions of life. Yet the hard truths which Ecclesiastes teaches lift our vision higher. While our daily work is important in a limited sense, Ecclesiastes focuses us on the ultimately important purposes of life: to love God and keep his commandments (12:13).

**Part 8: The Book of Job:** The Book of Job, named after its protagonist (apparently not an Israelite; cf. Ez 14:14, 20), is an exquisite dramatic treatment of the problem of the suffering of the innocent. The contents of the book, together with its artistic structure and elegant style, place it among the literary masterpieces of all time. This is a literary composition, and not a transcript of historical events and conversations.

The prologue (chaps. 1–2) provides the setting for Job’s testing. When challenged by the satan’s questioning of Job’s sincerity, the Lord gives leave for a series of catastrophes to afflict Job. Three friends come to console him. Job breaks out in complaint (chap. 3), and a cycle of speeches begins. Job’s friends insist that his plight can only be a punishment for personal wrongdoing and an invitation from God to repent. Job rejects their inadequate explanation and challenges God to respond (chaps. 3–31). A young bystander, Elihu, now delivers four speeches in support of the views of the three friends (chaps. 32–37). In response to Job’s plea that he be allowed to see God and hear directly the reason for his suffering, the Lord answers (38:1–42:6), not by explaining divine justice, but by cataloguing the wonders of creation. Job is apparently content with this, and, in an epilogue (42:7–17), the Lord restores Job’s fortune.

The author or authors of the book are unknown; it was probably composed some time between the seventh and fifth centuries B.C. Its literary pattern, with speeches, prologue and epilogue disposed according to a studied plan, indicates that the purpose of the writing is didactic. But the lessons that the book teaches are not transparent, and different interpretations of the divine speeches and of the final chapter are possible. The Book of Job does not definitively answer the problem of the suffering of the innocent, but challenges readers to come to their own understanding.

**Part 9: The Wisdom of Solomon:** The Book Wisdom does not name its author. The Septuagint titled the book, "The Wisdom of Solomon," but early Latin editions labelled it the "Book of Wisdom." The book was originally written in Greek by a Hellenistic Jew probably living in Alexandria in Egypt. The fact that it was written in Greek rules out the possibility that Solomon wrote it. Solomon's name is not mentioned in the book, but the author does impersonate him for rhetorical purposes (7-9). The book is written as one continuous argument rather than as abbreviated proverbs. The first section (1:1-6:21) discusses the nature of righteousness and its relation to man's eternal destiny.

The middle of the book praises and describes wisdom. In ch. 7-9 the author impersonates Solomon (though he does not name him) and describes his love of wisdom and his quest for it. The author personifies wisdom as a woman (7), similar to the Book of Proverbs. Ch. 9 presents Solomon's prayer for wisdom. Ch. 10 gives a synopsis of wisdom's "history" from Adam to the Exodus. The whole book is written in stylized Greek poetry which uses many Hebrew conventions and expressions. If the first half of the book can be said to outline the theory of wisdom, the second half of the book applies this theory to a case-study.

Ch. 11-19 describe the fates of the righteous and the wicked using the case history of the

Exodus. The section can be a little confusing because the author addresses it to God as a prayer and he uses no proper nouns to describe the Israelites and the Egyptians. Rather he uses them as illustrations for all righteous people, represented by Israel, and for all wicked people, represented by the Egyptians. He recounts the stories to show how the same events that served as curses to the wicked and became blessings to the righteous. For example, water became blood for the Egyptians, but water flowed from the rock for the Israelites (11:6-14). Manna fell from heaven on the righteous, but hailstorms fell on the wicked (16:16-29). The author digresses into an exposition of God's mercy toward the Gentile nations (11-12) and a mockery of pagan idol worship (13-15).

The message of the book is quite clear from the beginning. The author urges us to seek righteousness (1:1) and wisdom (1:6) because they are matters of life and death (1:12). By rejecting righteousness, the wicked reject life (2). By their actions, the righteous and the unrighteous gain different rewards (3). The author emphasizes that even if a righteous person dies young and childless, his life was worthwhile (4:1; 4:6). A couple times the author parodies the speech of the wicked, so the reader must carefully note when this occurs (2:1-20; 5:3-13). Like other biblical wisdom literature, the Book of Wisdom urges us to live according to God's word, to seek wisdom, to gain righteousness. Yet the author of Wisdom lived in a world in which the fullness of God's mercy had not yet been revealed. Only through the grace of Jesus' death and resurrection are we fully able to live up to the calling of God in the Book of Wisdom.