



Psalms

Wisdom Psalms

Wisdom psalms constitute one of the more distinctive kinds of psalms in the Psalter. These are: 1, 14, 37, 73, 91, 112, 119, and 128. They are psalms that reflect on wisdom, on the fate of the righteous and the wicked, and on the Law. They are distinguished by their reflective, meditative tone, and their didactic character.

What is Wisdom?

At the outset, it may be well to say something about wisdom as a category. The wisdom books in the Bible (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth, Job, and the deuterocanonical books of Ben Sira or Ecclesiasticus, and the Wisdom of Solomon) are so called because the word “wisdom” occurs frequently in them. They are distinctive in the Bible because they contain very little narrative. (The framework of the Book of Job is the main exception). The wisdom books in the Hebrew Bible pay no explicit attention to the story of Israel or the Law of Moses.

The wisdom psalms also pay a good deal of attention to the Law, and this is usually considered an indication of a relatively late date. The archetypal wisdom material is found in the Book of Proverbs. That book contains two kinds of material: collections of proverbs in chapters 10–31 and longer instructions in chapters 1–9.

The proverbs are pithy observations, or sometimes take the form of imperatives. They are mostly concerned with practical wisdom, even such mundane matters as table manners. The instructions are more theological. Proverbs stands in a long tradition of Near Eastern instructional material that dates to the third millennium BCE and is especially strong in Egypt. Wisdom writings are thought to have originated in the training of scribes for service at the royal court.

Psalm 1

Our first example of a wisdom psalm is the first psalm of the psalter, Psalm 1. This psalm declares happy those who do not follow the advice of the wicked but delight in the law of the Lord. The word translated “law” is the Hebrew torah. This word is commonly used to designate the Torah or Law of Moses, which corresponds to the Pentateuch in our Bibles. But the word torah also has a broader meaning. It can be used for the instruction of priests, on technical matters of temple worship. In the context of wisdom literature, it basically means “instruction.”

For example Prov 3:1, “my son, do not forget my teaching,” uses the Hebrew word torah. In Psalm 1, then, the “law of the Lord” is really the instruction of the Lord, or even “the way of the Lord.” It does not necessarily refer to the Law of Moses, although such a reference is also possible. Even if it does refer to the Law of Moses, the psalmist is not concerned with the details of the commandments but rather with an attitude of reverence to the Law as the articulation of a way of life.

The main point of Psalm 1 is to assure the reader that those who follow “the way of the Lord” will prosper and that the wicked will be blown away like chaff. This is a typical contention of the wisdom writings, and its truth is far from self-evident. In fact, the psalmist, and other wisdom writers, are constantly troubled by the fact that the wicked often seem to prosper, and the righteous seem to suffer. Psalm 1 does not stop to argue the point, but lays down its assertions about the success of the righteous as an article of faith, to be maintained regardless of evidence.

The fact that this psalm is placed at the beginning of the Psalter is significant. It sets the tone for the Psalter as a whole. Some scholars argue that the Psalter had become a book of instruction in the late Second Temple period. The evidence for this is the placement of Psalm 1 and the recurrence of wisdom psalms throughout the collection. Whether this necessarily true determines the way all the psalms were read is doubtful, however. Many were still used in worship, as they are to the present day. But the wisdom psalms point to another use of the Psalter as devotional literature, and object of meditation.

Psalm 14

Psalm 14 defines the wise as those who seek after God. The fools say in their heart “there is no God.” There do not seem to have been many atheists in antiquity. Most people seem to have taken some kind of divine control of the universe for granted. But this does not mean that everyone paid attention to the will of God, and of course non-Jews paid no attention to the God of Israel. Here again the Psalmist insists that the fools “will be in great terror, for God is with the company of the righteous.” In this case, however, the psalm ends with a prayer:

O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice, Israel will be glad. (Psalm 14:7).

The prayer is a tacit admission that retribution is something one hopes for, not something that is always given in experience.

Psalm 37

Perhaps the most famous reflection on the respective fates of the righteous and the wicked comes in Psalm 37. Characteristically, the Psalmist begins by assuring his listeners that the wicked will soon fade like grass. He urges people to be patient: “be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him” (Psalm 37:7). The most striking comment in the psalm, however, comes in verse 25:

I have been young, and now am old

yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken

or their children begging bread.

It is difficult to avoid thinking that he should have gotten out more. Anyone who has never seen a righteous person impoverished has not seen much of society.

In fairness to the Psalmist, the point is not that the righteous are never poor. He surely knew that that was not the case. Rather, he makes two arguments. One is the argument for patience. Trust in God, and things will improve. This kind of trusting attitude is innate to the religious mentality. It is one of the most basic aspects of faith.

The second argument is that the little that the righteous person has is better than the abundance of the wicked. This suggests that people can, to a degree, control their fate by their attitude. It is possible to find contentment in little, and abundance is no guarantee of happiness. This hardly amounts to a solution to the problem of poverty, but it is a way of making the best of a situation. Notably, the Psalmist tells the reader to “refrain from anger,” because it only leads to evil (verse 8). This attitude is very different from that of the prophets, who saw a place for righteous anger. It is very much in accordance with the conservative mentality of the wisdom tradition.

Psalm 73

Psalm 73 is exceptional in the Psalter insofar as it admits the problem:

I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

They have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.

They are not in trouble as others are,

They are not plagued like other people. (Psalm 73:3-5)

They are also characterized by their disregard for God: “They ask, how can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?” (Psalm 73:11). Consequently, the Psalmist was embittered, and “like a brute beast.” He claims to have overcome his doubts when: “I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.”

In part, at least, his transformation is a matter of trust in the presence of God:

I am continually with you; you hold my right hand,

you guide me with your counsel (Psalm 73:23-24).

He even expresses the hope, atypical of the Psalms, that “afterward you will receive me in glory.” It is not that he actually witnesses the discomfiture of the wicked, but the aggravation of their apparent success is outweighed by the satisfaction that comes from the presence of God:

For me it is good to be near God;

I have made the Lord God my refuge (Psalm 73:28).

The Torah, the Law

Some of the other wisdom psalms are less concerned with retribution and are meditations on the torah of the Lord, in the spirit of Psalm 1. Psalms 19 and 119 refer specifically to precepts and commandments, and so it is likely that in these cases the torah of the Lord is the Torah of Moses. Nonetheless, these psalms are not concerned with the details of the commandments, but rather with the idea of Torah, which is comparable to the idea of Wisdom.

The older Hebrew wisdom tradition in Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes paid no explicit attention to the Torah of Moses. This changed in the second century BCE. Ben Sira (Sirach), chapter 24, is a long poem singing the praises of Wisdom, personified as a female, in the tradition of Proverbs chapter 8. Unlike Proverbs, however, Ben Sira says that Wisdom found a home in Jerusalem in the Jewish tradition. It goes on to say: “all this is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob” (Sir 24:23).

The Book of Ben Sira remains a wisdom book nonetheless, in the tradition of Proverbs. It does not engage in systematic exegesis of the Torah of Moses. The identification of Wisdom and Torah in chapter 24 is an acknowledgement of the importance of the Torah, and of the fact that wisdom can also be found in the Torah of Moses. To a great degree, however, this acknowledgement is iconic, in the sense that it reveres the Torah without examining it in any detail. This is similar to the attitude to the Torah that we find in Psalms 19 and 119.

It is significant that Psalm 19 does not begin with the history of Israel, but with an appeal to nature:

The heavens are telling the glory of God

And the firmament proclaims his handiwork (Psalm 19:1).

The recourse to nature as the revelation of God is typical of the hymns of the Psalter (see especially Psalm 8). When the law of the Lord is introduced in verse 7, one thinks initially of the law of nature, and indeed the implication is that the law of nature and the law of Moses are one and the same, a point made explicitly by the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who lived in the time of Christ. (See the beginning of his treatise “On the creation of the world”). The remainder of the psalm speaks of the law in rather general terms. It is perfect, sure, right, clear, pure. At no point, however, does the Psalmist stop to consider what the law of the Lord actually requires.

This iconic veneration of the Torah/Law continues in Psalm 119, the longest psalm in the Psalter at 176 verses. The Psalmist protests:

I find my delight in your commandments, because I love them.

I revere your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes (vs. 48).

But he never cites the details of any of these commandments. Rather, he keeps mentioning the law as a kind of mantra. It symbolizes a way of life. It is “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). But the details need not concern us in this context.

Wisdom and Generosity

Psalm 112 is exceptional in associating the wise with a particular virtue, in this case generosity. The psalm accords with the usual assumption that wealth and riches are in the houses of the righteous. But that is not an end in itself. Rather, the righteous:

Rise in the darkness as a light for the upright

They are gracious, merciful, and righteous.

It is well with those who deal generously and lend,

Who conduct their affairs with justice (Psalm 112:4-5).

In late Second Temple Judaism, the Hebrew word for justice, *tzedakah*, came to mean “almsgiving.” Psalm 112 is in accordance with this association of justice and almsgiving, and that is probably an indication of a late date.

Psalm 128 also places the emphasis on the fruits of wisdom. In this case the Psalmist speaks of “the fear of the Lord,” which is said to be the beginning of wisdom in Prov 9:19. The fear of the Lord means a religious attitude, whereby one acknowledges one’s dependence on a higher power. Psalm 128 speaks of the blessings that follow from the fear of the Lord not in terms of wealth but rather in terms of family: your children will be like olive shoots around your table, and you will see your children’s children.

The Use of Wisdom Psalms

The wisdom psalms differ from other parts of the Psalter, insofar as they were not designed for cultic use. They are rather didactic material, and they give the Psalter a didactic character. At the same time, they make the point that study is a form of worship, and they testify to the growing importance of the Torah for Jewish religious life.

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511

www.yalebiblestudy.org