

HEBREW POETRY: JOB, PSALMS, ECCLESIASTES, AND SONG OF SONGS

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

The Hebrew Scriptures were a major inspiration for later poetry. Here, we'll take a look at some of the more famous and influential poems. The translations here are all taken from the King James Bible. Translating poetry is trickier than translating prose, in large part because the *sound* of the language matters so much (and so, if you're interested in particular poem, I'd encourage you to look at other translations as well). When reading this poems, I'd like you to focus on:

- **Imagery:** What are the central images of the poem? What sort of sensory language (sight, hearing, taste, etc.) is used to describe them.
- **Voice and Diction:** Who is the "voice" of the poem (is it God? Someone else?)? What kind of language is used? Is it super formal? Commanding? Loving? Does the diction change over the course of the poem?
- **Metaphor and Simile:** Poems often compare one thing to something else. Keep an eye out for this. What *sorts* of comparisons are used?
- **Theme:** What does the poem aim to convey to the reader? This can be tough to determine!
- **Meter and Rhyme.** Hebrew poetry had neither regular meter nor rhyme. However, the King James Bible (written around the time of Shakespeare) often uses a rhythm close to "iambic pentameter" (10-syllable lines with alternating stressed and unstressed syllables). How does this make the poems "sound"?

We'll be doing an activity in which I'll ask you to compose an imitation or interpretation of one of the poems.

SONG OF HANNAH (SAMUEL 1, CH. 2)

Background: Hannah is the mother of the prophet Samuel. She has had problems getting pregnant (a big deal, especially since her husband's other wife had children). Here, she ties her struggles to those of humans more generally.

And Hannah prayed and said:

"My heart rejoices in the Lord; my strength is exalted in the Lord. I smile at my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation.

No one is holy like the Lord, for there is none besides You, nor is there any rock like our God.

Talk no more so very proudly; let no arrogance come from your mouth, for the Lord is the God of knowledge; and by Him actions are weighed.

The bows of the mighty men are broken, and those who stumbled are girded with strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, and the hungry have ceased to hunger. Even the barren has borne seven, and she who has many children has become feeble.

The Lord kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and lifts up. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the beggar from the ash heap, to set them among princes and make them inherit the throne of glory.

For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and He has set the world upon them. He will guard the feet of His saints, but the wicked shall be silent in darkness.

For by strength no man shall prevail. The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken in pieces; from heaven He will thunder against them. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth. "He will give strength to His king, and exalt the strength of His anointed."

THE BOOK OF JOB (CH 38)

Background: The Book of Job tells the story of a good man named Job who all sorts of bad stuff happens to. Job complains to God about this: asking "Why did all this stuff happen to me?" Here is part of God's answer, when it finally comes.

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said,

Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me.

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.

Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it?

Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof;

When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as if it had issued out of the womb?

When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddlingband for it,

And brake up for it my decreed place, and set bars and doors,

And said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed?

Hast thou commanded the morning since thy days; and caused the dayspring to know his place;

That it might take hold of the ends of the earth, that the wicked might be shaken out of it?

It is turned as clay to the seal; and they stand as a garment.

And from the wicked their light is withholden, and the high arm shall be broken.

Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? or hast thou walked in the search of the depth?

Have the gates of death been opened unto thee? or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?

Hast thou perceived the breadth of the earth? declare if thou knowest it all.

Where is the way where light dwelleth? and as for darkness, where is the place thereof,

That thou shouldest take it to the bound thereof, and that thou shouldest know the paths to the house thereof?

THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Background: The book of Psalms is collection of prayers and poems attributed to King **David**, though modern scholarship assigns them to multiple authors (over hundreds of years). The psalms are often incorporated into Jewish and Christian worship.

Psalms 1. 1 Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.

And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.

The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.

Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish.

Psalms 23. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Psalms 137. By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.

If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.

Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof.

O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.

Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.

ECCLESIASTES (CH 3)

Background: Ecclesiastes reflects on the limitations of human life, and the inevitability of death. Scholars think it is likely to have been written later than many of the other books, and its authors may have been influenced by Persian and/or Greek ideas and philosophies.

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which 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 cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

A time to rend, 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 of war, and a time of peace.

What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?

have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it.

He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.

I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life.

SONG OF SOLOMON

Background: This among the most famous “love” poems of the Hebrew Scriptures. Like many later religious poems (such as Rumi in the Muslim tradition), the object of “love” can be interpreted either as another person or as metaphor for love of God.

Canticle 1.

[1] The song of songs, which is Solomon's.

[2] Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine.

[3] Because of the savour of thy good ointments thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the virgins love thee.

[4] Draw me, we will run after thee: the king hath brought me into his chambers: we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine: the upright love thee.

[5] I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon.

[6] Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.

[7] Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon: for why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of thy companions?

[8] If thou know not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents.

[9] I have compared thee, O my love, to a company of horses in Pharaoh's chariots.

[10] Thy cheeks are comely with rows of jewels, thy neck with chains of gold.

[11] We will make thee borders of gold with studs of silver.

[12] While the king sitteth at his table, my spikenard sendeth forth the smell thereof.

[13] A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts.

[14] My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of En-gedi.

[15] Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes.

[16] Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant: also our bed is green.

[17] The beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters of fir.

Canticle 7.

[1] How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, O prince's daughter! the joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning workman.

[2] Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor: thy belly is like an heap of wheat set about with lilies.

[3] Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins.

[4] Thy neck is as a tower of ivory; thine eyes like the fishpools in Heshbon, by the gate of Bath-rabbim: thy nose is as the tower of Lebanon which looketh toward Damascus.

[5] Thine head upon thee is like Carmel, and the hair of thine head like purple; the king is held in the galleries.

[6] How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights!

[7] This thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to clusters of grapes.

[8] I said, I will go up to the palm tree, I will take hold of the boughs thereof: now also thy breasts shall be as clusters of the vine, and the smell of thy nose like apples;

[9] And the roof of thy mouth like the best wine for my beloved, that goeth down sweetly, causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak.

[10] I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me.

[11] Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field; let us lodge in the villages.

[12] Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth: there will I give thee my loves.

[13] The mandrakes give a smell, and at our gates are all manner of pleasant fruits, new and old, which I have laid up for thee, O my beloved.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Choose ONE poem (or one section of a longer poem). Now, either:

1. Write a detailed interpretation/analysis of the poem using each of the elements of poetry described at the beginning of this document. I'd encourage you to look up MULTIPLE translations of the poem you've chosen. This should show your knowledge of other course material re: the Torah and Hebrew Scriptures.
2. Write a modern “imitation” using your own words, images, metaphors, etc. Try to make your poem roughly as long as the original, and to capture some of the same themes and ideas. Now, write a paragraph or two on why/how you used course material to help shape your poem.