

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Judah from the 4th to the 3rd century BC

The last years of Persian rule of Judah (400-331)

Artaxerxes II ruled the Persian Empire from 404 to 359BC. Sparta, having defeated Athens in the Peloponnesian War (431-404), mounted a number of expeditions to liberate the Greek cities from Persian rule. The Spartan navy, however, was destroyed at Cnidus in 394BC, thereby giving the Persians mastery of the Aegean. In 386BC Artaxerxes II established direct rule over the Greek cities of Asia Minor.

However, in 404BC Artaxerxes lost Egypt, and under the reigns of Hakoris (392–380) and his successors Egypt led a political offensive in the Eastern Mediterranean. Persian expeditions against Egypt in 385–383BC and 374BC were unsuccessful, and during the same period there were continuous rebellions in Anatolia. There were also wars against the mountain tribes of Armenia and Iran. In 366BC the satraps of Anatolia revolted. Due to internal divisions the revolt was put down. In the last year of his rule Artaxerxes made one last, and equally unsuccessful, attempt to conquer Egypt. However, when his reign ended, the authority of the Persian king had been restored over most of the empire.

A number of assassinations followed the death of Artaxerxes II in 359BC. His son, Artaxerxes III (359–338), emerged triumphant, having killed most of his relatives. Persia suffered a new defeat at the hands of Egypt in 351–350BC. The Phoenician cities revolted the following year. In 345 Sidon had to surrender to the Persian fleet. In 343, the Persian army won a victory in Egypt. Thus, around 340, the Persian Empire recovered the territorial boundaries of 480. Despite the revolts, the central power had succeeded in maintaining Persian domination. Even in Asia Minor the regions formerly left in the hands of more or less submissive dynasties had been transformed into satrapies in their own right.

Darius III (336–330BC) was the last king of the Achaemenid Empire of Persia. In 334BC, Alexander the Great began his invasion of the Persian Empire and subsequently defeated the Persians in a number of battles before looting and destroying the capital Persepolis in 331BC. This marked the beginning of Greek control of the Empire.

We have no evidence of any effects of the above events on the tiny province of Judah.

The Book of Proverbs

Though the Book of Proverbs as we now have it was published probably in the last years of Persian rule, it is a collection of wise sayings, some of which are as old as Israel itself. The oldest sections of the Book of Proverbs are the collections found in Section 2 (Proverbs 10:1 - 22:16) and Section 4 (Proverbs 25:1 - 29:27).

Most of these ‘wise sayings’ are simply that: they state a value that sheds light on behaviour that is considered appropriate in a particular area of personal or social activity. Some, but only a relatively small number, of these ‘wise sayings’ can be categorised as ‘proverbs’. While a proverb is drawn from experience, and makes obvious sense, the lesson it presents is not found in its literal meaning.

It is meant to capture our attention and get us to reflect on our own lives and draw wise conclusions that go beyond the literal sense of the saying. Let us look at two examples from our own culture. We say ‘a stitch in time saves nine’. The point being made is important whether or not we are occupied in sewing. Similarly with ‘it is better to light a candle than to curse the dark’. We are not being advised to run out and buy candles! Proverbs state the obvious, but we know to delve beneath the surface meaning, confident that there is a lesson there for us.

We will find some proverbs in this book, but the lesson presented in most of the one-liners lies in its literal meaning. Examples of sayings that can strictly be called proverbs can be found in Proverbs 1:17; 6:27-28; 10:5, 10; 13:7; 14:4 and 16:26. The essential characteristic is the evident need to seek an application beyond the surface meaning contained in the words (compare 1Kings 20:11; Jeremiah 31:29; Ezekiel 18:2).

Of course, we are reading a book that is the product of literary activity. We should not be surprised to find that brief and memorable one-liners from the oral tradition are sometimes expanded by scribes eager to direct the student’s attention to consider a specific application of the wisdom contained in the saying or proverb. They did this by adding one or two sentences to motivate learning and to draw out consequences of heeding or disregarding the lesson.

As the tribes of Israel moved beyond subsistence farming, formed a state and built up the complex systems needed to manage a state and to relate to surrounding states in a way that worked to their own advantage, many skills had to be acquired. Statesmen, military commanders, and public servants, can make foolish decisions. They can make wise decisions. Israel needed people who had successfully applied their intelligence to learn from their experience how best to make decisions that benefited the nation. In matters of administration and diplomacy, Israel drew on the experience of older cultures.

Many of the ‘wise sayings’ collected in the Book of Proverbs focus on teaching keen young men who were aspiring to a career in government or administration, and many of these sayings were influenced by the experience of cultures that were much older than Israel, cultures such as Assyria and Babylonia, but especially Egypt. We see examples of this among the wise sayings and proverbs in the collections found in sections 2 and 4, but especially in Sections 1 (Proverbs 1:1 - 9:18) and 3 (Proverbs 22:17 - 24:34). The same could be said of the Appendices (Chapters 30-31). The origin of these sayings is literary. They function as manuals for the instruction especially of the young. They are not statements that briefly indicate a value. They instruct a pupil, telling him what to do and what not to do to have a successful career for himself, as well as to make a contribution to his community.

William McKane in his *Proverbs* (in the Old Testament Library Series, SCM Press 1970) examines examples of instruction from Egypt (pages 51-150), examples of instruction from Assyria and Babylonia (pages 151-182) and examples of Assyrian and Babylonian proverbs (pages 183-208). One of these is an instruction manual from the middle of the 3rd millennium. Ptahotep, the chief minister to the Pharaoh, sets out rules of diplomacy and administration for his son whom he is grooming to succeed him (see pages 51-75).

Another is an Egyptian instruction manual from Amenemope (pages 102-110), probably composed during the late New Kingdom (1300–1075) when Israel was a tribal agrarian confederacy, before the period of the monarchy. McKane (page 373) suggests that the authors of Proverbs 22:17 - 24:34 were influenced by Amenemope, as does, among others, Dermot Cox OFM in his *Proverbs* (Michael Glazier, 1982, page 189).

So far we have been focusing on sayings and instructions that are based on experience, whether it be the ancient experience of everyday life the origins of which are lost in the mists of time, or more recent experience that came with the development of the city-state and interaction with foreign nations. The vast bulk of the material found in the Book of Proverbs has its basis in these experiences. Some of the sayings and instruction, however, are based on faith in God and in the religious traditions of Israel.

In Egyptian wisdom literature the stability and continuity of the state relies on respect for divinely established order. In Israel wisdom is seen as a gift of YHWH. The aim of wisdom is to live a good, productive life. The people of ancient Israel knew that such a life has its source in God, the Creator, and has as its goal a life of communion with God, a communion experienced in nature, in communal living whether in the country or the city, and in the events of daily life.

The oldest sections of the Book of Proverbs draw on ancient oral tradition. They also incorporate sayings drawn from the experience of the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah in their efforts to build more complex urban communities (such as Samaria and Jerusalem) and to manage their relationships with surrounding nations, economically and politically.

Though the Book of Proverbs looks back to Solomon, it is likely that we should look to the eighth century BC for the beginnings of the literary activity that produced it. It is probably in the northern kingdom of Israel that the nucleus of the Book of Deuteronomy took shape. Perhaps it was there also that the first list of sayings (Section 2) was assembled, as well as the instructions contained in Section 3.

When Samaria was captured in 721BC, this material along with the scrolls of Amos and Hosea came to Jerusalem with the refugees and stimulated writing among the scribes of Judah (witness the scrolls of Micah and Isaiah ben Amoz). The king at the time was Hezekiah. Section 4 claims to have been assembled by his scribes. The process of editing, re-interpreting and updating the Book of Proverbs probably continued down to the 4th century. Section 1 (chapters 1-9) appears to be the work of the final editors.

As is seen also in Ecclesiastes, what was considered wise behaviour in earlier times was inadequate in the changed circumstances of post-exilic Judah. The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and the end of the monarchy, called much of traditional wisdom into question.

Ecclesiastes

This is a penetrating reflection on the nature of true wisdom. In accepting it as inspired, Jews and Christians challenge us to listen for the Spirit of God breathing through the words of someone who introduces his work with the phrase: ‘The words of Qohelet’. The word Qohelet derives from the Hebrew word for the assembly, *qāhāl*. Qohelet wishes to remain anonymous, for when we are listening to Qohelet reflecting on wisdom, we are expected to reflect on our own experiences as member of God’s chosen people, assembled for worship and communion. In the Greek Version, ‘Qohelet’ is translated ‘*Ecclēsiastēs*’ [a member of the *ekklesia*] – hence the traditional title of the book.

Like the Hebrew word for wisdom, *hokmāh*, and its Greek equivalent, *sophia*, Qohelet is, grammatically, a feminine form. Is this because he wants us to see Qohelet as a personification of wisdom, or does he also want us to listen to a woman’s perspective as a counter to the traditional association of wisdom with the public (and therefore male) sphere of fame, power, wealth and success? However, from the outset an important complication is introduced: Qohelet is described as ‘the son of David, king in Jerusalem’ (Ecclesiastes 1:1). As we listen to the reflections of Qohelet, we are to have before our mind’s eye (or sitting on stage, if you see this as a drama), the man whom traditional wisdom has presented as renowned above all others for his wisdom: King Solomon (see also the Book of Proverbs above).

Solomon is the exemplar of all the benefits that flow from wisdom as traditionally understood: he was renowned for his power, wealth, and the astonishing success of all that he undertook. We know we are listening to Qohelet, but through her reflections we are listening to Solomon reflecting back over his life and we are challenged to ask ourselves what did all Solomon’s fame come to? Solomon’s united kingdom collapsed at his death. His son inherited Judah but the northern kingdom broke away. Ecclesiastes was composed in post-exilic Judah, a tiny fraction of the Judah conquered by the Babylonian army in 597.

The temple in which we are assembling was reconstructed from the rubble of Solomon’s glorious temple, destroyed in 587. What became of his ‘success’ as a builder, of his power and wealth? How wise was he? The author is challenging much of the traditional understanding of wisdom. How could he do this in a more dramatic way than by having the great Solomon centre stage, recognising his failure and questioning the wisdom that was attributed to him?

In asking us to listen to Qohelet, and at the same time to hear the words as coming from Solomon, the author is asking a lot of us. At times he uses Qohelet to present his own position; at other times he presents what we might expect Solomon to have said, only to go on to demonstrate the error contained in the words. At times he holds up a point of view so that we will see how ridiculous it is; at other times he undercuts our prejudices with a statement that shocks, perturbs, and challenges us (as much today as it did his contemporaries). We must constantly be on the look out for irony and paradox. His critique of traditional wisdom is subtle in its way of questioning and undermining ways of thinking that were part of the accepted understanding of the time.

It is probably because Ecclesiastes challenged much of what was accepted as traditional wisdom, that not all first century AD Rabbis considered it worthy of a place among their sacred books. However, it was accepted as inspired by the Rabbis at Jamnia (c. 90AD). Traditionally Ecclesiastes is read at the Festival of Tabernacles (Sukkot). We will return to examine the significance of this connection shortly.

Before we examine some of the key elements in the critique of wisdom offered by the author of Ecclesiastes, let us look at the political, social and economic environment at the time. There are no historical references in the text, but the kind of Hebrew used, especially the influence of Aramaic, the presence of Persian loan words, and the absence of signs of Greek influence, point to its being composed some time during the period 450-350BC. This places it after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and before Palestine, along with the rest of the Persian Empire, was conquered by Alexander the Great.

It took a long time for post-exilic Judah to recover from the devastation of Judah and Jerusalem in the early decades of the sixth century, and the depopulation that ensued. When some of the exiles returned home from Babylon, beginning in 539, they found it well nigh impossible to get the country functioning again. Post-exilic Judah was considerably smaller than pre-exilic Judah, trade and commerce were practically non-existent, and they had to struggle to meet the tax imposed on them by their Persian overlords.

It was only towards the middle of the following century (the period of Nehemiah and Ezra) that things started to improve. However, economically Judah was in a very different situation from the subsistence agrarian economy that was the life of their ancestors – a life supported by traditional ‘wisdom’ that encapsulated maxims for the conduct of human life and affairs.

Ecclesiastes fits generally among the works of Israel that comprise what is customarily called ‘Wisdom Literature’. However, while the presence and action of God in the life of the community is central to our author’s thinking, he is convinced that this presence and action are entirely mysterious and utterly beyond human comprehension. He begins his reflections, therefore, from observation of human behaviour and not from God’s revealed will. He could see that much that traditionally went under the name of ‘wisdom’ was out-dated and provided little guidance in the changed environment within which he and his contemporaries had to work out their lives.

In many ways the Persian Empire was considerably more enlightened than either the Assyrian or Babylonian. It was also much better organised. The satraps and the provincial governors were encouraged to support local religious and other customs, and to develop a network of commerce between the various districts that spread from the Indus River in the East to Ethiopia in the West. Grants of property were bestowed on individuals, who, in exchange, were responsible for collecting taxes. These grants were not automatically handed on from father to son, but were given by the governor to whoever was judged better at raising taxes. Smart property owners sub-divided their properties and extracted tax from their tenant farmers. It doesn’t take much imagination to recognise that the system was wide open to exploitation.

It offered opportunities, but was fraught with considerable risks. It is the arbitrariness of the system, and the volatility of an economy which was much more dependent on inter-provincial commerce, that accounts for much of the advice contained in this Book. It also accounts for why we moderns find its ‘wisdom’ much more congenial than a lot of the traditional ‘wisdom’ of which our author is critical.

A picture of the social situation in the middle of the fifth century is provided by the following text from the Book of Nehemiah:

There were also those who said, “We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine.” And there were those who said, “We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king’s tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others.”

– Nehemiah 5:3-5

As Choon-Leong Seow puts it in his commentary on Ecclesiastes in the Anchor Bible Series (Doubleday 1997, page 34):

The economic environment favoured the political elite and the most influential entrepreneurs. In consequence, the gap between the rich and the dependent classes widened.

The prevailing insecurity and the difficulty of being economically self-sufficient in the new commercial environment that depended on the variability of inter-province trade, encouraged a mentality that fostered striving to have more, but never feeling secure, and so never being satisfied with what one had. There was a tendency for those who ‘made it’ to criticise the poor as being responsible for their condition. The legal system favoured the prosperous, so that justice was elusive. Greed and ambition flourished. People had to be careful in what they criticised, as reports got back to those who exercised power in the land. There was a prevailing fear of the arbitrary powers wielded by the rulers.

The author is well aware of the complexities and ambiguities of the human condition. We will notice him supporting values only to add the rider that we should not expect that following these values will lead to success. He offers guidelines, fully aware that they won’t always help.

Behind everything we hear as we listen to Qohelet is an assumption that is prevalent throughout the Older Testament: namely, that God controls nature and history. The tradition inherited by the author saw happenings that were judged to be good as expressions of God’s blessing, and happenings that were judged to be bad as expressions of God’s disapproval and punishment. Though he questions some of this, he states over and over that we humans have no control over what happens. God does it all.

The author is aware of the responsibility of human beings for bringing about the suffering that we experience. He is critical of the greedy landowners, and, generally, of those who wield power in the land. He also recognises that his readers are free to welcome or to neglect the joy that God is offering them. However, it never occurs to him to doubt that it is God, and God alone, who determines everything that happens in this world.

Our author takes it for granted that death is the end of life, the end of communion with God. There is no place in his thinking for reward or punishment beyond the grave. If the righteous are not rewarded in this life, they are never rewarded. If the unrighteous are not punished in this life, they never have to suffer the consequences of their behaviour. Again and again he portrays death as the ultimate leveller. Though he finds it an incomprehensible mystery that God would will the finality of death, he accepts it as a fact, and sees that it calls into question much of traditional teaching, which asserts that good is rewarded and evil punished.

Qohelet's (Solomon's) opening words are 'Vanity of vanities, says Qohelet, vanity of vanities! All is vanity' (Ecclesiastes 1:2). This is one pole of the paradox. The other is that everything is 'a gift of God' (5:19). In his meditation on Ecclesiastes entitled '*Reason for Being*' (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1990, page 47), Jacques Ellul quotes Georges Bernanos:

In order to prepare to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in everything that deceives.

Qohelet will lead us to place our hope in God, but she first requires of us that we face up to the fact that much of what traditional wisdom looked on as a sign of God's blessing is not what it is claimed to be, and we are unwise to chase after power, wealth, success or fame in our undertakings, thinking we can find meaning in them. Solomon didn't, and Qohelet tells us that we won't either. The list ('power', 'wealth', 'success in our undertakings') should prepare us modern readers to expect that the reflections we hear in Ecclesiastes might well have something to say to us, not only to its contemporaries.

In Ecclesiastes we hear the word 'vanity' 27 times. The Hebrew is *hebel*. The image is of a wisp of smoke: there one minute, gone the next. It is no accident that this is the name given 'Abel' in the Genesis story. His sacrifice is accepted by God. He seems a better man than his brother Cain, but he quickly disappears from the story, leaving no trace (see Genesis 4:2-8). The author of Ecclesiastes, however, is not just commenting on the passing nature of things. He is challenging us to face up to the reality of the human condition in which there is no consistency between the expectations we have in regard to our actions and the actual outcomes we experience. If we work from the premise that God is just, we can make no sense of this. It violates logic. It is absurd.

One consequence of this is that it is foolish to find meaning in our lives from power, wealth or success. Everything 'under the sun' (Ecclesiastes 1:3), everything other than the transcendent and necessarily incomprehensible God, is as fleeting, unpredictable and unreliable as a puff of smoke. Apart from God everything we experience is, in and of itself, insubstantial and deceptive, a pretence, an illusion. This is true of piety, even of righteousness, and of much that goes under the name of 'wisdom'. 'All is vanity' (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Everything has its place if we see it as a gift of God. If, however, we look to anything other than God to find meaning in our lives we lack wisdom. Ecclesiastes doesn't just make this claim, it challenges us to look at our own experience, honestly and without evasion, to see for ourselves that it is so.

Solomon is a symbol of power:

He does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is powerful, and who can say to him, "What are you doing?"

– Ecclesiastes 8:3-4

Yet he has to admit:

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.

– Ecclesiastes 2:18-19

Power is fragile. Lose the land to another and you lose your power (see Ecclesiastes 5:9). What would Solomon say if he could see the depressed state of his kingdom reduced to a tiny province in the trans-Euphrates satrapy of the Persian Empire, part of a system that is inherently corrupt:

If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter; for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.

– Ecclesiastes 5:8

With power comes fame, but fame, like perfume, quickly evaporates (see Ecclesiastes 7:1).

All we have to do is to look at Solomon to see that

money makes all things possible.

– Ecclesiastes 10:19

The trouble is that if we are driven by the desire for wealth we are never satisfied:

The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity.

– Ecclesiastes 5:10

If we are unwise enough to think we can find meaning in wealth, we haven't the wisdom to see our way to break the cycle and free ourselves from our obsession. We are wealthy, so we spend, we consume, and so have to keep acquiring to feed our need. Riches can be 'lost in a bad venture' (5:14). Furthermore:

As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands.

– Ecclesiastes 5:15

I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.

– Ecclesiastes 2:20-21

We might recall Jesus' warning:

What will it profit you if you gain the whole world but forfeit your life?

– Matthew 16:26

Ecclesiastes demands that we work. Our ability to do so is a gift from God:

I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.

– Ecclesiastes 3:10

Our work gives pleasure to God (see 9:7). So Qohelet insists:

All your hand finds to do with the strength you have, do it.

– Ecclesiastes 9:10

Yet work does not, in and of itself, give meaning to our lives. How passing were the great building achievements of Solomon! If we want our lives to have meaning we have to look elsewhere.

Again and again Qohelet tells us to accept whatever joy God chooses to give us, and make the best of God's gifts. All we have is the present moment. The past has gone. The future does not exist. It is good to seek what is better, so long as we recognise that this, too, is unreliable. As we have already noted, she warns people against the insatiable desire for more, a desire that gets in the road of enjoying the present moment. She also warns us not to be too greedy. In the complex and arbitrary world in which we live, there is little we can change, and whatever changes we do make can never guarantee success.

Look for happiness but know that it cannot provide what our restless hearts are searching for. Throughout Ecclesiastes Qohelet is focusing on our profound longing (if I may use Jesus' words) to 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10).

God has set the desire for eternity in human hearts.

– Ecclesiastes 3:11

In light of the author's understanding of the finality of death it is important to remember that by 'eternity' ('*ôlām*') he means 'indefinite duration', 'everlasting'. We want to be, to know, to love and be loved. We want to be in communion with God, the source of all life. Qohelet wants this for us, but is adamant in warning us not to try to satisfy our desire in all the wrong places, in what is '*hebel*' ('vanity'). She calls us to do good, so long as we don't expect doing good to lead to a good outcome. God's ways are not our ways. We will never comprehend God or what God is doing in our world. The text just quoted continues:

Human beings cannot succeed in discovering that which God accomplishes.

– Ecclesiastes 3:11

We can surely learn from Qohelet's insistence that we live in the present moment. We are not saying (nor is Qohelet) that the present moment exists in isolation. It emerges from the past, and in turn affects the future, though in both cases we cannot know how. How much suffering comes from our getting locked into the past, and being paralysed by fear of the future. We would be wise to bear suffering as best we can, but not to let the clouds totally cover our sky.

There are possibilities for joy: accept them with gratitude, and enjoy them to the full. The key is to stop putting ourselves in the centre of the frame. Qohelet would have been perfectly at home with another saying of Jesus: ‘strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness’ (Matthew 6:33).

The author of Ecclesiastes challenges much of what in his day was considered ‘wisdom’ (*hokmāh*). He challenged it because it lacked realism and was too dogmatic. He saw wisdom as a human activity, and so necessarily limited. He acknowledges the benefits of genuine wisdom. The heart of a truly wise person helps him; the heart of a fool brings harm (see Ecclesiastes 10:2-3). People are impressed by the words of a wise person (see Ecclesiastes 10:12). Wisdom has more power to save a city than does military might (Ecclesiastes 9:14-15). It has greater effect than the ranting of a ruler among fools (see Ecclesiastes 9:17). Wisdom is a gift from God (see Ecclesiastes 2:26).

While acknowledging the importance and value of wisdom, the author of Ecclesiastes is conscious of its essential limitations. He continually warns us against basing our lives on what we inherit from the past without checking it against the facts of experience. In today’s terms he insisted that wisdom be evidence-based, and not lose its connection with knowledge (*da’at*):

The advantage of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to the one who possesses it.

– Ecclesiastes 7:12

Wisdom that does not fit with actual experience is ‘vanity’. Furthermore we should not expect human wisdom to bring happiness or to satisfy our search for meaning (see 2:19, 21). How much harm is caused by our clinging to traditions that claim wisdom, but that do not apply to our lives. This is even more true in the rapidly changing modern world. A new situation demands new reflection. Sure, we have a lot to learn from the past, but we must learn to check it against the facts.

It is significant that ‘God’ is mentioned 40 times in Ecclesiastes; always *’Elōhîm*; never *YHWH*. The author wants his thought to stand independently of specifically Jewish considerations. He is insistent that we cannot know God, and so we must not use God as a short cut to truth. In the words of Solomon:

YHWH has said that he would dwell in thick darkness.

– 1 Kings 8:12

Basic to everything Qohelet says about God is that everything that happens is done by God:

In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, so that human beings may not find out anything that will come after them.

– Ecclesiastes 7:14

I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.

– Ecclesiastes 8:17

Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything.

– Ecclesiastes 11:5

This does not mean that we should sit on our hands and wait for God to act. As the well-known poem of Ecclesiastes 3:1-11 says so eloquently: there is a time for doing everything (there is no time for doing nothing!). God does everything, but God chooses to do things through us. If we do nothing we cannot see what God is doing. We must act, so long as we do not expect that what we are doing will have results. We cannot be certain of God's will beforehand. We may be doing something that will have no good results, for God may not be acting through us. It is wisdom to learn from our mistakes. It is wisdom to be open to God's gift. It is wisdom to know that what God does is good and beautiful. It is wisdom to be on the lookout for what is good and beautiful. Above all we are to 'listen'. That way there is a chance that we may perform what Qohelet calls:

the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with.

– Ecclesiastes 3:10

We can learn from Qohelet's words not to be too confident in our ability to inquire into the divine. No matter how refined and tested our concepts are, and this applies especially to our concepts of God, they are only our concepts. There is no place for pride and arrogance. Let us pursue learning to the best of our ability, but let us hold our conclusions lightly, always ready to have them corrected or refined.

God is not a 'cause', such that creation is an 'effect' existing outside of God. God is the Transcendent One. In the words of Teilhard de Chardin, God is the heart and the beyond of everything. These are not the words of the author of Ecclesiastes, but they are consistent with his thinking.

For Qohelet, God is, first and foremost, one who 'gives' (an expression she uses 15 times). In encouraging us to enjoy the simple things of life, she states:

It is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

– Ecclesiastes 3:13 (see 2:24)

God for Qohelet is judge, in the sense that it is God who dispenses justice – God, not the instruments of the corrupt system that they are experiencing in Judah. We need God's judgment if we are to find justice.

Follow the inclination of your heart and the desire of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment.

– Ecclesiastes 11:9

Qohelet's key advice is for us to 'fear God':

Though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they stand in fear before him, but it will not be well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days like a shadow, because they do not stand in fear before God.

– Ecclesiastes 8:12-13 (see 5:7).

To ‘fear God’ is traditional language for approaching God with utter seriousness, knowing that God is the Transcendent Other on whom we completely depend. It is our relationship with the incomprehensible God that alone gives us reality and meaning. We are alive because God is breathing his life-breath into us. In the words of Genesis:

YHWH God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

– Genesis 2:7

The author of Ecclesiastes ends his work encouraging us to ‘remember the Creator’ before the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity.

– Ecclesiastes 12:7-8

Finally, a comment on the appropriateness of the tradition of reading Ecclesiastes during the Festival of Sukkot. By living in makeshift shelters (sukkot), the people re-live the experience of their ancestors as they journeyed through the wilderness from slavery in Egypt to the promised Land, protected only by God. There is no other security. There are no other solid foundations.

Ellul (page 46) writes of the essential link between Qohelet and Sukkot:

What book speaks more eloquently of this fragility, challenges everything, requires we examine our conscience, sweeps away all our rock-solid certainties? It leaves us alone with our precarious destiny, stripped bare to experience the only genuine security: the security offered by the sovereign Master of history.

The Book of Esther

Like the stories in the Book of Daniel, Esther is perhaps best described as a ‘court tale’. It is set in Susa, in the court of Xerxes I, king of Persia (486-465BC). A Jew living in Susa, far from the land of Judah, rises to be prime minister of the realm, second only to the king (echoes of Joseph in Egypt). This is because of the heroic actions of his relative, Esther, who becomes queen of Persia and intervenes to save her people from an anti-Jewish pogrom. It is possible that the events of one such pogrom form the historical basis for this story.

It is a story to demonstrate that there need be no contradiction between being a faithful Jew and being a good citizen in a foreign land. We can find this idea being encouraged by the prophet Jeremiah in a letter written to the exiles in Babylon:

Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to YHWH on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare ... For surely I know the plans I have for you, says YHWH, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

– Jeremiah 29:4-7,11

The story of Esther is making the point that it is by being faithful to one's Jewish traditions that one can best support a foreign state.

Good stories seem to gather additions. In the version found in the Greek Septuagint, the story draws also on the way God intervened through Moses to save his people from slavery in Egypt. God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and declared:

"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then YHWH said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians."

– Exodus 3:6-8

God is not mentioned in the Hebrew text of the Book of Esther, and the only Jewish religious practice mentioned is fasting (see Esther 4:16). It is possibly the 'secular' nature of the text that accounts for its slow acceptance by Jews among their inspired texts. God's presence and protective care for his people, however, can be seen in the sub-text of the Book: it is mediated through human agents who live the covenant by the way they are ready to lay down their lives for the Jewish community. God may be hidden but God is actively present in history, assuring the salvation of his people. The Greek Additions do mention God and include prayer.

The names of the main characters point to the eastern origins of the story. 'Mordecai' echoes 'Marduk', the principal god in Babylon's pantheon. 'Esther' echoes 'Ishtar', the principal female deity celebrated in the fertility and burial rites of Babylon. 'Haman' echoes 'Humman', an Elamite god.

The Book is explicitly linked to the Jewish festival of Purim (see Esther chapter 9), and, since Purim is not found in the Torah, it provides a 'historical' setting for it. The origins of the festival are lost in the mists of history, but it may have arisen as a way of Jews celebrating the Persian New Year Festival. Another reason for Jewish reluctance to accept Esther among its inspired books may be that the Rabbis were hesitant to include a text that was linked to a festival that allowed excessive drinking (see Talmud, Megilla 7b). The festival 'Purim' gets its name from the 'lots' (*pūr*) cast by Haman to determine the propitious day for the pogrom (Esther 3:7; 9:24).

As is the way with religious festivals Purim picked up other connections in the course of its history, notably the celebration of the death of the Syrian general, Nicanor, at the hands of Judas the Maccabee in 160BC (see 2Maccabees 15:1-37). Like other Jewish festivals it is celebrated at the full moon. The fourteenth day of Adar (March) is called 'Mordecai's Day', for reasons that become clear as the story develops. The thirteenth is 'Nicanor's Day'. Purim celebrates Jewish identity and the conviction that Judaism will survive, whatever the circumstances.

The presence in the text of a number of Persian loan words, and the absence of any signs of Greek influence, point to the Book having its origins in the East in the fourth century BC. Some scholars suggest that it reflects the situation in Judah during the struggles between the Greek generals consequent upon the death of Alexander the Great. This would place it in the final decades of the fourth century BC.

Like the Book of Daniel, it attracted additions over the years. A lot of extra material can be found in the Aramaic Versions (which, however, are from the 8th century AD). There are two distinct Greek Versions: One of these Versions (Version A) is considerably shorter and appears to be a translation from a Hebrew Version that differs from that found in the official Masoretic Text, which is translated (rather freely) in the Septuagint Version. Because Jerome did not find these Additions in the Hebrew Text he removed them from their position in the Septuagint and placed them as an appendix at the end of his translation.

These additions consist in Mordecai's dream, which the Septuagint puts at the beginning. It sets the scene for the events of the story. The interpretation of the dream is placed at the end. Other additions, which appear to have been composed in Greek, purport to give the text of letters sent out by king Xerxes. They are located in the appropriate place of the story. Another addition inserts prayers offered by Mordecai and Esther. These, too, are found in the appropriate place. This is the case, too, for an addition that gives a highly dramatic account of Esther's appearance before the king. The effect of these additions is to increase the dramatic appeal of the story. Their primary affect, however, is to strengthen the book's religious character.

The early years of Greek rule (331-301BC)

Affairs in Judah were not immediately affected by the change of government of the empire. Alexander the Great did not interfere with the organisation of the Persian Empire which he inherited.

The Books of Chronicles

Many earlier scholars worked on the hypothesis that it was the Chronicler who edited the scrolls of Ezra and Nehemiah. Scholars today tend to see the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah as being among the sources used by the Chronicler. H. G. M. Williamson, in his book, *Israel in the Books of Chronicles* (Cambridge University Press, 1977) speaks for an increasing number of scholars, when, after comparing the style of the Books of Chronicles and the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah for over twenty pages, he concludes (pasge 59):

The evidence from style now available does not compel us to accept that these books [Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah] are the work of a single author.

As part of the attempt to encourage a sense of identity in Judah, the Chronicler set out to re-write their history, focusing on Israel as a worshipping community, and so on the Torah and the temple.

The Hebrew title is *dibrē hayyāmīm* (see 1Chronicles 27:24 and Nehemiah 12:23). This is a phrase that is found 32 times in the Books of Kings (see also Esther 10:2; 6:1). In the Hebrew Bible the two books of Chronicles are listed at the end of the Writings. Scholars today tend to the opinion that the Chronicler produced his work after the composition of Ezra and Nehemiah, which he uses as a source. As to the date of the text of Chronicles as we now have it, Gary N. Knoppers (1Chronicles, Anchor Bible Series 2004, page 116) joins a number of modern scholars who opt for sometime in the late fourth century or early third century BC, though some scholars suggest that scribes may have continued to work on the text into the second century.

After a prologue which traces moves quickly from Adam to the twelve tribes (chapters 1-10), the Chronicler covers the ‘history’ of Israel from the reign of David (c.1000BC) to the promise of a new beginning with the edict of Cyrus (538BC) permitting the exiles in Babylon to return to Judah. Much of the Chronicler’s work is a re-presentation (often copied word for word) of the ‘history’ as found in the Books of Samuel and Kings.

To discover the particular perspective of the Chronicler it is necessary to examine what he chooses to omit and to add. From his omissions it becomes clear that he wants to present King David as the ideal king. Chronicles does not speak of Samuel or Saul (except to record Saul’s death in order to introduce David). It omits references to David’s sins, except for the census, which cast a shadow over David’s dynasty (see 1Chronicles 21). It omits any reference to Absalom, Amnon and Adonijah, and has the throne passing peacefully from David to Solomon. Though it recognises a remnant of the true Israel in the areas occupied by the northern tribes, and though it hopes for a restoration of the whole of Israel (see 2Chronicles 31 and 34:33), the focus is on Judah, including neighbouring Benjamin, and on the ‘house of David’. It speaks of the people of Judah as ‘Israel’ (see 2Chronicles 10:17, 11:3, 12:1, 6). It does the same for the people of the Northern kingdom (see 2Chronicles 10:16, 18-19; 11:13). Note the telling comment: ‘Israel has remained in rebellion against the house of David until today’(2Chronicles 10:19). The criticism of having ‘abandoned YHWH’ is levelled alike against people in the northern kingdom (see 2Chronicles 13:11) and people in Judah (2Chronicles 28:6). It repeats the criticisms levelled by the Deuteronomists against many of the kings of Judah. This helps to demonstrate that Judah is sustained, not by human merit, but by God’s fidelity to his covenant with David (see 2Samuel 7:11-16; 1Chronicles 17:11-14; 2Chronicles 21:7).

After the exile, Judah was ruled by a governor appointed from Persia. The people of Judah no longer saw themselves as a political kingdom, but as a worshipping community. The high priest was the key figure in the internal life of Judah, and the temple became the centre of Jewish commercial and social life, as well as the centre for cult. Like the Deuteronomists the Chronicler still hopes for a restoration of the Davidic dynasty. He quotes 2Samuel 7:3 where God promises he will establish the throne of David’s son forever (see 1Chronicles 17:12) and he continues the Davidic genealogy beyond Zerubbabel in 1Chronicles 3. However, with no signs of an imminent restoration, the Chronicler places his hopes in the cult as it had been reformed and consolidated in the middle of the fifth century under Ezra and Nehemiah.

In what the Chronicler adds to the Deuteronomists’ account it is clear that he wants to provide a tradition that traces the cult of his day back to David. He sets out also to provide proper credentials for those exercising various ministries in the temple, especially the Levites. He sees the renewed cult, centred in the temple, as fulfilling God’s will, and as providing an inspiration and a guide to Jewish communities throughout the world. This last point is important for the Chronicler. At a time when pressure was being exerted to resist syncretism and assimilation by promoting an exclusive view of Israel, the Chronicler tried to redress the balance. Worshipping God in a way that was faithful to the prescriptions of the cult was essential, but Judah must not exclude those who had a rightful claim to participate.

In his presentation of the ‘history’ of Judah the Chronicler set out to demonstrate that a faithful nucleus does not exclude others, and that all the children of Israel will be welcomed into the community should they choose to return.

In the Tanak Chronicles is positioned last of the Writings. Its final words underline the link between the Writings and the Prophets, and point to the Genesis account of creation at the beginning of the Torah:

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in fulfillment of the word of YHWH spoken by Jeremiah, YHWH stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom and also declared in a written edict: “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: YHWH, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may YHWH his God be with him! Let him go up.”

– 2Chronicles 36:22-23

Judah ruled from Egypt (third century BC)

After the death of Alexander in 323BC there was fighting among his generals. In 304 Ptolemy I Soter gained control of Egypt, which he ruled till 285. Asia Minor, Syria, Babylonia, Media and Persia were ruled by another of Alexander’s generals, Seleucus I Nicator. They fought over Palestine, wedged between the Arabian desert and the Mediterranean, and the only land bridge to Egypt. In 301 Ptolemy I emerged victorious from the battle of Ipsos, with the result that throughout the third century Judah was ruled from Egypt. Alexandria joined Babylon as a growing centre for Judaism outside Judah. The Ptolemies followed a policy of Hellenization, inculcating Greek customs in the political, social, cultural, economic and religious life of the conquered peoples, including the Jews of Judah.

Greek influence in Judah was much more aggressive than had been the case with Persia. There is evidence of Greek trade in the area as early as the seventh century. However, once Judah became part of the Greek Kingdom of Egypt (‘Judea’ is a Greek adaptation of ‘Judah’), the Jews found themselves struggling to remain faithful to the Torah while being attracted to take advantage of the benefits that flowed from being part of the Greek (Hellenist) culture.

Ptolemy’s son, Ptolemy II Philadelphos (285-246), developed Acco (just north of Haifa) as a Greek city and changed its name to Ptolemais (see 1Maccabees 5:15). Similarly, Beth-shan, close to the Jordan, on the eastern end of the valley of Esdraelon, which he renamed Scythopolis, and Rabbah, the capital city of ancient Ammon, which he renamed Philadelphia. In Idumea, bordering Judea on the south, he built the Hellenized towns of Marisa (see 1Maccabees 5:66) and Adora (see 1Maccabees 13:20). Similarly with Joppa, Askalon and Gaza on the Mediterranean coast to the west of Judea.

Some in Judea embraced Hellenism, wanting to be part of the prevailing Greek culture. Among these was the leading family of the Tobiads. Tobiah (probably descended from the Tobiah who opposed Nehemiah; see Nehemiah 2:10) was a land-owner and commander of a military garrison in Transjordan.

He married the sister of Onias II, high priest from c. 245-220. Hellenization brought new wealth to those who took advantage of it, and with wealth came a level of secularism, with the temptation to disregard the Torah. Others, including Onias II, determinedly resisted any attempt to water down the Jewish culture.

The third century was a period of considerable unrest in Judah. The rivalry between Egypt and Syria made Palestine a constant military corridor, there being no fewer than five drawn-out wars during the century (274-272; 260-252; 246-241; 221-217 and 201-198; see Cate, R. *A History of the Bible lands in the Interbiblical period* (Nashville: Broadman, 1989).

Writing in the second century BC, the author of the Book of Daniel includes references to a number of events that affected third century Judah. Daniel 11:5-20 speaks of the struggles between the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria and Asia Minor for the control of Palestine and Phoenicia. Daniel 11:5 refers to Ptolemy I Soter (323-285BC) and Seleucus I Nicator (312-280BC). Verse 6 refers to the marriage of Antiochus II Theos (261-246BC) and Berenice, the daughter of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-246BC). Berenice was subsequently murdered. Verses 7-9 recount the revenge of Ptolemy III Euergetes (246-221BC) for the death of his sister, Berenice, and his successful campaign against the kingdom of Seleucus II Callinicus (246-226BC). The Seleucid army retaliated by attacking Egypt (242-240BC), but was forced to withdraw (Daniel 11:9). Verses 10-19 focus on the reign of Antiochus III (223-187BC). In 217 he recaptured Seleucia, the port for Antioch in northern Syria. He swept through Palestine as far as Raphia on the border of Palestine and Egypt ('the fortress' of Daniel 11:10). There the army of Antiochus suffered a major defeat (verse 11), but the Egyptian army did not take advantage of its victory (verse 12).



The Book of Tobit

The Book of Tobit is perhaps best described as a short Jewish Romance (see Chapter Seven on the importance of story in the Bible). What it lacks in suspense, it makes up for in the realism of the characters: ordinary people who look to God and care for others. This does not protect them from suffering, but they continue to trust in God, and they do experience God's blessing. Tobit, a righteous and observant Jew living in Nineveh, the ancient capital of the Assyrian Empire, gives an account of his experiences. He is from Thisbe in Naphtali (Galilee), and was exiled along with many of his countrymen during the reign of the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser V (727-722BC). His mother (unnamed) and father, Tobiel, died when he was still a child and he was raised by his grandmother, Deborah. He married Hannah, who was also from Naphtali, and they had a son whom they named Tobiah.

God rewards Tobit by making him purchasing agent to the king. With a change of ruler, his fortunes change under Sennacherib (705-681), but he is again in favour during the reign of King Esar-haddon (681-669), thanks to the fact that his nephew Ahiqar is the king's chief financial minister. As a consequence of his persistence in burying the dead, Tobit loses his sight. His blindness is compounded by having to rely on the support of his wife, who challenges his whole reason for living. He sees no purpose in continuing, and in desperation prays to God to bring his life to an end.

There is a change of scene from Nineveh in Assyria to Ecbatana in Media, some 400ks east of Nineveh through the Zagros mountains. We are taken to the home of Raguel, who is living with his wife Edna, and daughter, Sarah. Sarah, too, is desperate, as she has been betrothed seven times, but each time her husband has died before consummating the marriage. She, too, prays for God to end her life. God answers both their prayers by sending to their aid Raphael, one of the seven who stand before the throne of God (see Tobit 4:16-17; 12:12-15, 19-20). He arrives under the guise of a man called Azariah.

Tobit remembers that he is owed money by Gabael who lives in Ráges, in the Elburz Mountains, south of the Caspian Sea. He sends his son, Tobiah, on the long journey to collect the debt, telling him to stay with Jews and not to marry anyone outside his tribe. Tobiah is accompanied by Azariah. Eventually Tobiah and Sarah meet and are married. They travel back to Nineveh, Tobit's sight is miraculously restored, and they all live 'happily ever after'.

Fragments of Tobit were discovered among the Qumran scrolls, one in Hebrew and four in Aramaic. Publication of these fragments has convinced most scholars that Tobit was originally written in either Hebrew or Aramaic, and that the closest Greek translation is that found in the fourth century Codex Sinaiticus, which is a century older than the other two major Codexes (Vaticanus and Alexandrinus). It is also 1,700 words longer. If the story was originally in Hebrew, the many Aramaic versions are an indication of its popularity.

Tobit was not included among the authoritative sacred books accepted by the Palestinian Jews. We can only surmise as to the reasons. The problem was not one of content. Tobit has as much right to be included as Jonah or Esther. Probably it was because it was judged to be not sufficiently ancient. It was written, it seems, sometime in the third century BC. Though the Book of Daniel , which was included among the Writings, was composed in the second century BC, it contained quite ancient stories, and purported to be about Daniel, an otherwise unknown prophet of the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century BC. Apart from the Book of Daniel, the most recent books included in the Palestinian canon are the Books of Chronicles composed about the year 300BC. While Tobit was not included in the official Jewish canon, it was part of the Jewish Greek Version (the Septuagint) and was inherited among the sacred writings by the Christians, though many of the early Christian writers, especially in the East, followed the Palestinian canon, and did not include it among the authorised sacred books.

The author is an observant Jew, probably living outside Palestine, and writing some time in the third century BC when the pressure to become part of the dominant Hellenistic culture was being experienced, but prior to the time of the Maccabees (see 13:11; 14:6-7). Because he is writing centuries after the time in which he has situated his story, we can excuse his historical and geographical errors. The tribe of Naphtali was taken into exile during the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (745-727BC), not Shalmaneser V (see Tobit 1:2). Sargon II succeeded Shalmaneser V, not Sennacherib (see Tobit 1:3-21). The distance from Rágés to Ecbatana is over 330ks, too far for a two-day journey (see Tobit 5:6). Tobiah and his companion leave Nineveh and head east. Their first stop is at the Tigris River (see Tobit 6:1-5). Yet Nineveh is east of the Tigris.

In Tobit there are echoes of the Joseph saga from Genesis. Tobit, like Joseph, was an exile (see Tobit 1:2-3; Genesis 41:42-43). Both rose to a position of eminence in a foreign land (see Tobit 1:13, 22; Genesis 41:42-43). Both suffered unjust opposition (see Tobit 1:19-20; Genesis 37:18-28; 39:7-20). Both experienced God's blessing and finally prospered (see Tobit 1:17; 4:16; Genesis 45:11; 47:12). There are echoes, too, of Isaac's quest for a bride, upon his father's insistence that he marry a person who shared his faith (see Tobit 1:9; 4:12-13; 6:10-12, 15; 7:10-12; 8:7; Genesis 24).

Tobit appears also to draw on folktales that abounded in the ancient world. There are stories that tell of a man being rewarded for giving a body an honourable burial. Other stories speak of the hazards of marrying a dangerous bride. Then there is the story of Ahiqar (a name we find in Tobit 14:10), a wise man and counsellor to the Assyrian kings whose life was in danger because of lies told about him to his nephew Nadin (see Tobit 1:21-22; 2:10; 11:18; 14:10).

God is portrayed in the romance as one who hears prayer, and who guides his people and is close to them, even when they are living outside Judah. God is a God of truth, justice and mercy. We are called to embrace these same virtues.

The Psalms

The Psalms come from every period of the history of the Israelite and Jewish people. Those that centre on the king (see Psalms 2, 18, 21, 45, 72, 110) come, at least in their basic form, from the pre-exilic period, the period of the kings. Likewise the psalms that are in praise of YHWH, when the temple was considered YHWH's abode (see Psalms 24, 29, 93). The same can be said of the psalms to Sion, the king's city (see Psalms 46, 48, 76). Other psalms reflect the period of the exile, and the restoration of the temple after the return (see Psalm 126). Some psalms show clear signs of editing. In general we should expect this, for the prayers were not meant as archive pieces, but would have been updated to make them more suitable for prayer as situations changed.

I am treating the Psalms here, because the collection of the 150 psalms appears to have taken place c. 200BC. The collection was made, it seems, to create a devotional prayer book for the people. Some of the psalms came from and were used in the public cult; others were of a more personal nature.

The title 'Psalms' is taken from the Greek Version (second century BC) in which the Book is entitled '*psalmoi*'. The Greek verb *psallein* means to pluck a stringed instrument with the fingers. Later it was used more generally for 'to make music' or 'to sing'. The Greek *psalterion* refers to a harp and *psalmos* to the plucking with the fingers, and later to the song plucked in this way.

The Hebrew equivalent of '*psalmos*' is *mizmôr* from the verb *zmr*: to sing to the accompaniment of music. Though the Hebrew text describes fifty-seven of the songs as *mizmôr*, the Book itself is given the name *tehillim*, 'songs of praise', because in most of the psalms praise of God is the fundamental attitude. The psalms also express longing, wonder, delight, thanksgiving and trust. The most prevalent theme is that of petition.

As already noted, some psalms celebrate the position of the king and Jerusalem and the temple in the life of the people. Though most of the psalms are addressed to God, some are not so much prayers as reflections on God's action in creation and in the history of the people of Israel, or on the meaning of life, or on the advantages of living in accordance with the covenant. They are still central to the Daily Prayer of the Christian community.

The Septuagint

The work of translating the Hebrew Bible into Greek began in the third century BC and continued through to the early decades of the first century BC. Not only did the work continue for over a century, and was therefore carried out by different translators, it also happened in different places (especially Alexandria and Jerusalem). The title 'Septuagint' is given to the body of early translations of the Hebrew Bible. The first books to be translated were the books of the Torah and the translation tends to be literal. In the case of other books the translation tends to be free. The title 'Septuagint' is based on a legend found in the (fictitious) *Letter of Aristeas*, which describes how seventy-two scholars were selected for the task. Each one produced his own translation, and, miraculously, all the translations turned out to be identical.

This was surely proof of divine inspiration, and could be used as an argument against those who were scandalized that people would dare to render God's inspired word in a language other than Hebrew! The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary has the following account:

The Epistle of Aristeas describes how a King Ptolemy, probably Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–247 B.C.E.), desiring to collect if possible all the books in the world, and having been informed by his librarian, Demetrius of Phalerum, that the royal library was lacking a copy of the laws of the Jews, sent a letter to Eleazar the high priest in Jerusalem (by the hand of the Aristeas and others) requesting six learned elders from each tribe to perform the translation ... On the arrival of the translators in Egypt, they are received immediately by the king, given the best accommodations and invited to a royal banquet. In due course, Demetrius conducts them to comfortable secluded quarters by the sea where they completed the work in 72 days—precisely as many as the number of the translators. The finished work is highly praised by the Alexandrian Jewish community and it was determined to be so final that a curse would be on any one who, by omission, transposition or addition, would change any part of it. The Egyptian king is impressed with the mind of the Lawgiver and comments on the divine origin of the Law. He dismisses the translators with gifts for themselves, for the High Priest, and with invitations to return.

One has to be careful when comparing the Septuagint to the standard Hebrew Massoretic text, the origins of which lie in the late first century AD, when the Rabbis set out to produce a standard text. Sometimes when the Septuagint and the Massoretic text differ we may be witnessing errors in translation, or the influence of Hellenism on anyone attempting to translate texts from one culture into another in a meaningful way. Sometimes the Masoretic text may point to a Hebrew manuscript that includes editorial elements that post-date the manuscripts used by the authors of the Septuagint as the basis of their translation. Maybe there never was what we could rightly call an 'original text' (see the comments in Chapter Six in relation to the task of 'Establishing the Text'). Sometimes, when the Hebrew and Greek texts differ, it is the Hebrew editors who are responsible for errors, not the Greek. Each difference needs to be assessed on its merits.