How to read the Bible

Reading Poetry

Job, Psalms, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes

Why is poetry important?

The first question we should probably address in any course on the Bible is: why read it at all? Why should some 2000 year old collection of writings (which go back three and a half thousand years) from the Middle East be worth any of our time in 21st century Austalia?

The answer is simple: we have had an encounter with the risen Christ—we are Christians. And the founding Christians, who saw Christ face-to-face told us, in no uncertain terms, that Scripture—the Bible—was incredibly useful for us.
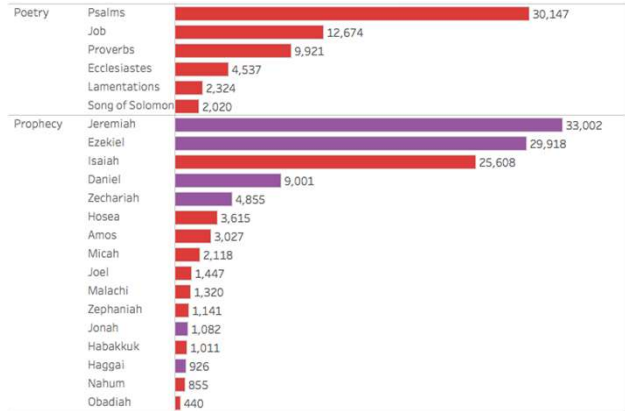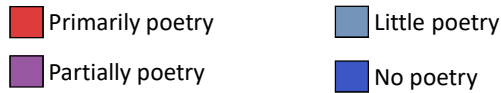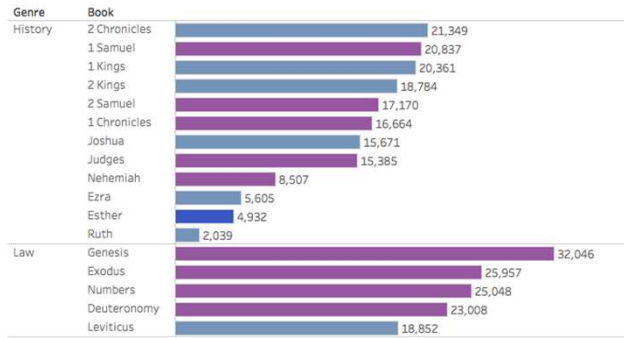
Poetry is common in Scripture!
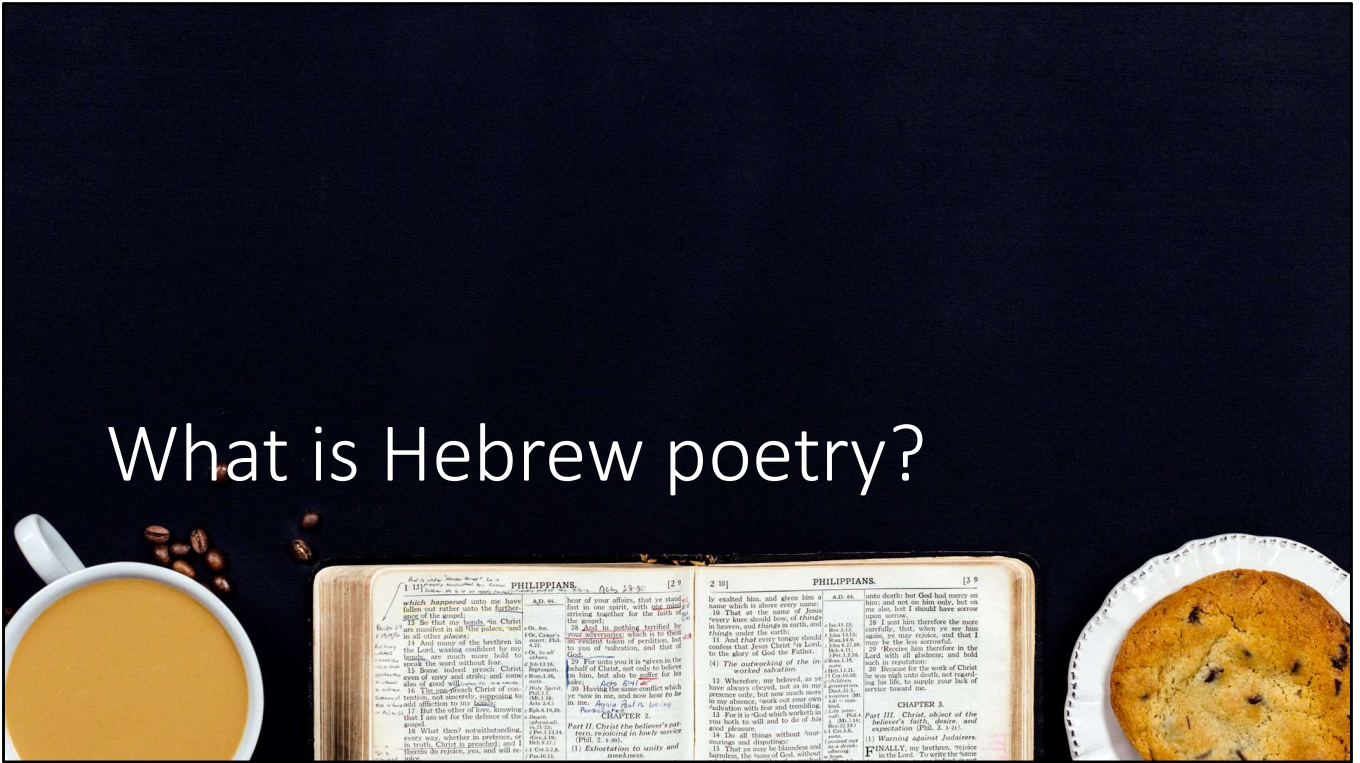
Genesis 1:27:

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

First chapter of our Hebrew bible contains poetry.

Map of poetry in OT

OT Word Count by Genre and Book

Genre	Book	
History	2 Chronicles	21,349
	1 Samuel	20,837
	1 Kings	20,361
	2 Kings	18,784
	2 Samuel	17,170
	1 Chronicles	16,664
	Joshua	15,671
	Judges	15,385
	Nehemiah	8,507
	Ezra	5,605
	Esther	4,932
	Ruth	2,039
Law	Genesis	32,046
	Exodus	25,957
	Numbers	25,048
	Deuteronomy	23,008
	Leviticus	18,852

Poetry	Psalms	30,147
	Job	12,674
	Proverbs	9,921
	Ecclesiastes	4,537
	Lamentations	2,324
	Song of Solomon	2,020
Prophecy	Jeremiah	33,002
	Ezekiel	29,918
	Isaiah	25,608
	Daniel	9,001
	Zechariah	4,855
	Hosea	3,615
	Amos	3,027
	Micah	2,118
	Joel	1,447
	Malachi	1,320
	Zephaniah	1,141
	Jonah	1,082
	Habakkuk	1,011
	Haggai	926
	Nahum	855
	Obadiah	440

- ■ Primarily poetry
- ■ Partially poetry
- ■ Little poetry
- ■ No poetry

What is Hebrew poetry?

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Differences from prose: 1)

- Metric (i.e. rhythmic patterns)
  - Number of syllables
  - Alliteration (same starting sound)
  - Acrostic (start with each letter of the Hebrew alphabet)
  - Etc.
- However!
  - Metrical patterns only visible in original language, not translation
  - Made visible in translation via layout (lines & stanzas)

No one has yet discovered a formula for unlocking the secret of Semitic rhythm. As Freedman notes, every poem seems to bear different marks (1977:90–112). Scholars are divided as to whether to grade the structures via stress or syllable counts. Both depend on a knowledge of Hebrew and of phonetics. Stressed units refer to the oral side of poetry and divide a line on the basis of the syllables p 225 the Hebrew reader stressed as he recited a verse. For instance, Psalm 103:10 divides along the following stresses:
Not on the basis of our sins/ does he deal/ with us,
Nor on the basis of our iniquities/ does he make payment/ against us.
(Author's translation)
Syllables are the basic units of speech, and many, like Freedman, believe they provide a more accurate and identifiable basis for structuring a poem. For instance, Psalm 113 has fourteen-syllable lines divided 7:7 and on occasion 8:6.
Yet not all poems are so easy to demarcate on the basis of either plan. There is simply too much variation, and each poem in Scripture must be studied on its own merits. The most we can say is that rhythm is one of the major identifying marks of Hebrew poetry. Using stress lines, scholars have divided psalms into 2:2, 3:2, 2:3 and many other patterns. Dividing by syllables has produced any number of patterns, with ten-, twelve- or fourteen-syllable lines. Moreover, strophes or verses are made up of two (as Ps 103:10) to five lines of parallel ideas. Within these there can be a myriad of forms, as the metric pattern and the parallelism are intertwined. In fact, many scholars believe that the two systems may represent stages in the development of Hebrew poetry. While this

remains speculative and unverifiable, the fact remains that the poet's choice of language depended to an extent on metrical considerations. At the same time, sound (including not only metrics but oral reading, alliteration, onomatopoeia and the like) was often determinative in the choice and clustering of words in the strophes of the poem (Gerstenberger 1985:413–16).

> Grant R. Osborne, , Rev. and expanded, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 224225.

Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. and expanded, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 224–225.

Psalm 119:1-32:

1 אַשְׁרֵי תְמִימֵי־דָרֶךְ הַהֹלְכִים בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה׃
2 אַשְׁרֵי נֹצְרֵי עֵדֹתָיו בְּכָל־לֵב יִדְרְשׁוּהוּ׃

...

8 אֶת־חֻקֶּיךָ אֶשְׁמֹר אַל־תַּעַזְבֵנִי עַד־מְאֹד׃
9 בַּמֶּה יְזַכֶּה־נַּעַר אֶת־אָרְחוֹ לִשְׁמֹר כִּדְבָרֶךָ׃
10 בְּכָל־לִבִּי דְרַשְׁתִּיךָ אַל־תַּשְׁגֵּנִי מִמִּצְוֹתֶיךָ׃

...

16 בְּחֻקֹּתֶיךָ אֶשְׁתַּעֲשָׁע לֹא אֶשְׁכַּח דְּבָרֶךָ׃
17 גְּמֹל עַל־עַבְדְּךָ אֶחְיֶה וְאֶשְׁמְרָה דְבָרֶךָ׃

...

24 גַּם־עֵדֹתֶיךָ שַׁעֲשֻׁעָי אַנְשֵׁי עֲצָתִי׃
25 דָּבְקָה לֶעָפָר נַפְשִׁי חַיֵּנִי כִּדְבָרֶךָ׃
26 דְּרָכַי סִפַּרְתִּי וַתַּעֲנֵנִי לַמְּדֵנִי חֻקֶּיךָ׃

...

32 דֶּרֶךְ־מִצְוֹתֶיךָ אָרוּץ כִּי תַרְחִיב לִבִּי׃

Note the first letters of each line (the right-most letters). This is in alphabetical order.

Differences from prose: 2)

- Parallelism
  - Subsequent lines repeat the idea of the first line, expanding on it in some way
- Example, Genesis 1:27:

    So God created man in his own image,
         in the image of God he created him;
         male and female he created them.

    וַיִּבְרָ֨א אֱלֹהִ֤ים ׀ אֶת־הָֽאָדָם֙ בְּצַלְמ֔וֹ בְּצֶ֥לֶם אֱלֹהִ֖ים בָּרָ֣א אֹת֑וֹ זָכָ֥ר וּנְקֵבָ֖ה בָּרָ֥א אֹתָֽם

  - 2ⁿᵈ line changes emphasis
  - 3ʳᵈ line provides more detail

Types of parallelism

1. Synonymous parallelism—no new idea

Example, Psalm 2:2:

> The kings of the earth set themselves,
>> and the rulers take counsel together,

- Line 1 introduces idea
- Line 2 repeats idea in new words
- NOTE: using new words always adds to the idea somehow, thus "set themselves" -> "take counsel"

Types of parallelism

2.   Step parallelism—adds to idea (most common form)
Example, Psalm 1:3:

He is like a tree planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.

- Line 1 introduces idea and metaphor
- Line 2 shows result: fruit
- Line 3 adds further effect: endurance
- Line 4 summarises meaning of metaphor

Types of parallelism

3. Antithetical parallelism—second line introduces a contrast

Example, Proverbs 1:7:

> The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
> fools despise wisdom and instruction.

- Line 1 introduces idea
- Line 2 presents a contrast, opposite, or complement

Differences from prose: 3)

- Poetic language has a high density of:
    1. Figures of speech—metaphor, simile, hyperbole, metonymy, anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, etc.
    2. Language tricks—paronomasia (puns), pleonasm (repetition), alliteration, acrostics, assonance (similar sound), rhetorical structures (rhetorical questions, chiasm, etc.)

- Example, Isaiah 5:7 (pleonasm):

    "He looked for justice [*mišpāṭ*], but saw bloodshed [*mispāḥ*];

    for righteousness [*ṣĕdāqâh*], but heard cries of distress [*ṣĕʿāqâh*]."

    —Grant R. Osborne, , Rev. and expanded, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 230.

- *Paronomasia:* This refers to the use or repetition of words that are similar in sound, but not necessarily in sense or meaning in order to achieve a certain effect. This can only be observed by those who can read the original Hebrew text. Psalm 96:10 reads, "For all the gods (kol-elohay) of the nations are idols (elilim). This latter word means *nothings*, or things of *naught*; so that we might render it, "The gods of the nations or imaginations."[28] (se*e also Ps. 22:16; Prov. 6:23).*
- *Pleonasm:* This involves the use of redundancy for the sake of emphasis. This may occur with the use of words or sentences. In Psalm 20:1 we are told, "May the Lord answer you in the day of trouble! May the name of the God of Jacob set you *securely* on high!" Here "name" appears to be redundant. It means *God Himself* and has more emphasis than if only the term "God" had been used.
- *Metonymy:* This occurs where one noun is used in place of another because of some relationship or type of resemblance that different objects might bear to one another (Ps. 5:9; 18:2; 57:9; 73:9).

Differences from prose: 4)

- Emotional focus
  - Psalms have different emotional categories
  - Proverbs focus on wise behaviour, but are not prescriptive
  - Job, Ecclesiastes and Lamentations wrestle with experience of suffering and evil
  - Song of Solomon glories in sexual love
  - Prophets express grief, desire for justice, hope, triumph, and despair
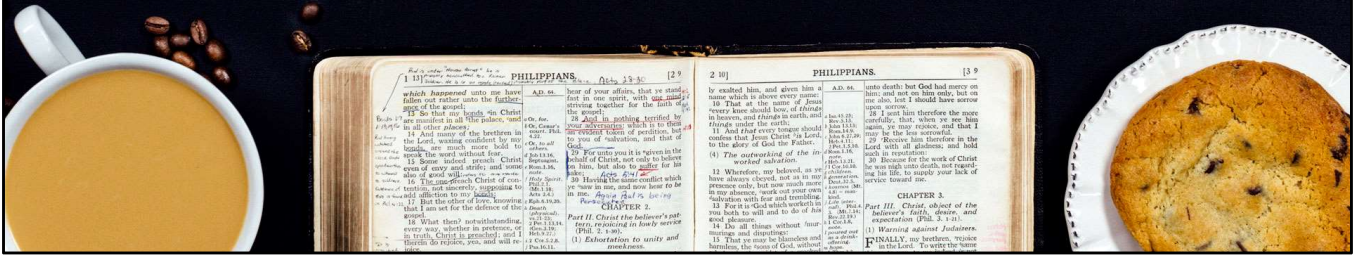
Biblical imagery
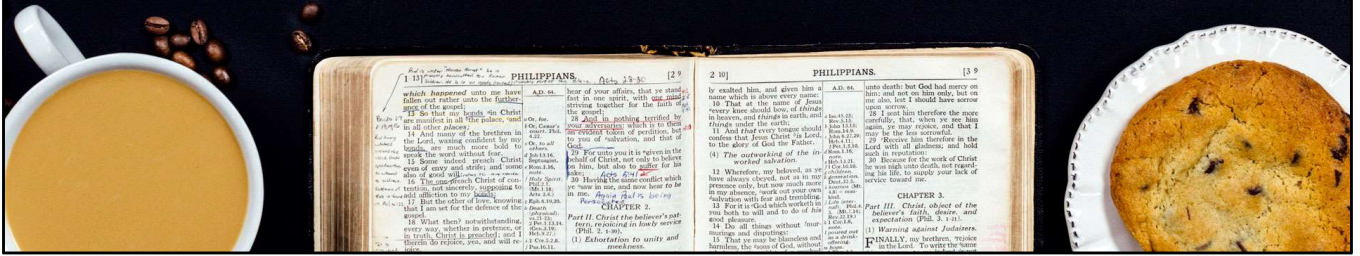
Does the Bible have special imagery?

- Imagery is culturally specific
  - E.g. slouch hat to represent Australian soldiers, meat pie to represent "dinki-di Aussies," etc.
- If we understand cultural images we can "decode" language, especially poetic language
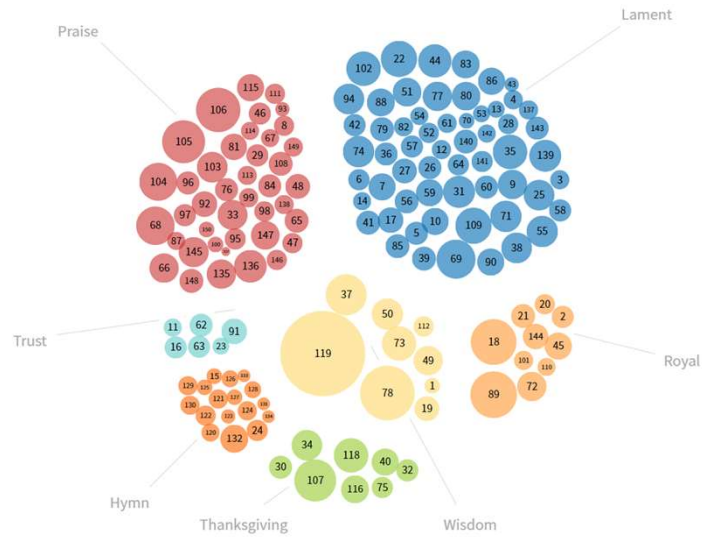- Does the Bible have it's own cultural images?
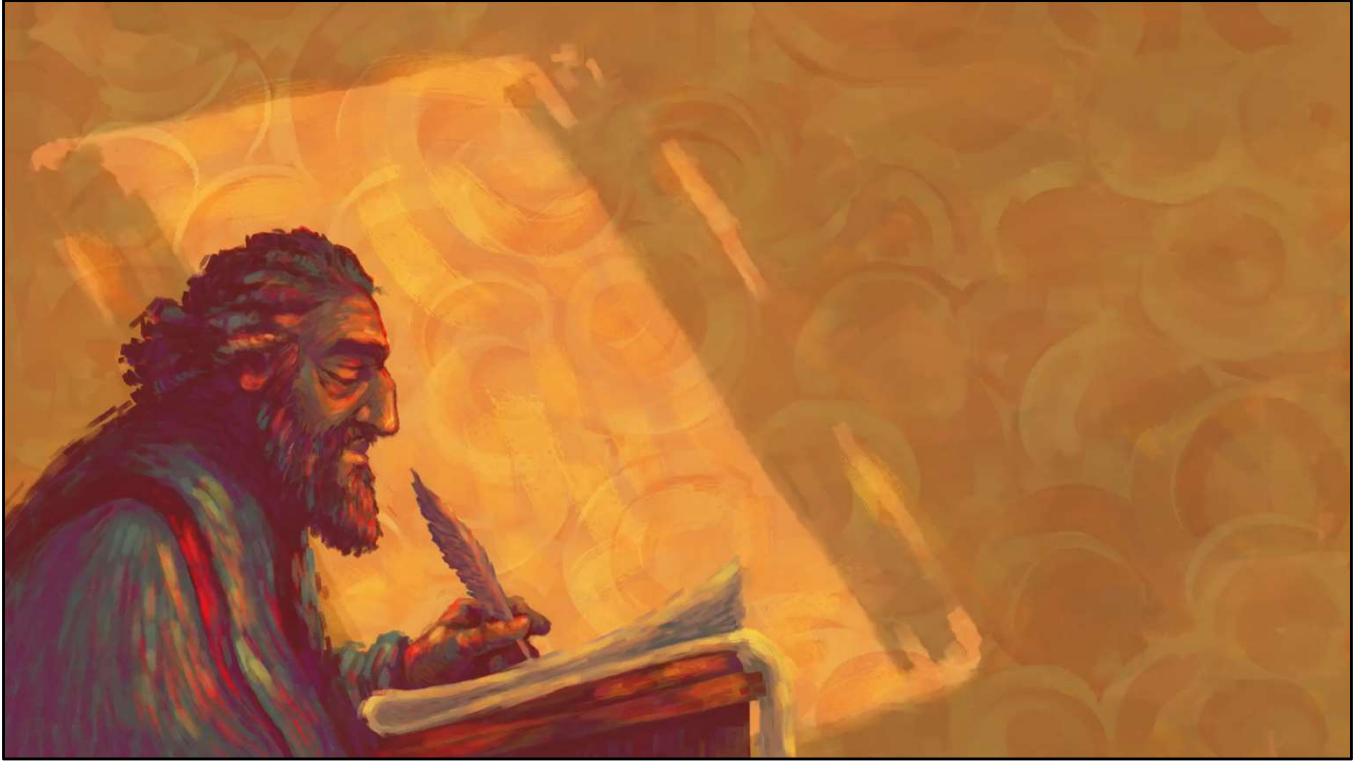
Understanding Psalms

Categories of Psalms

Common mistakes in Psalms

- Over-interpret images
  - Images are designed primarily to evoke emotions, not act as cyphers for something else (except in apocalyptic poetry)
  - Images are often factual, e.g. God's rescue of Israel from Egypt, Ps. 78
- Under-interpret images
  - Reading images literally leads to some very strange beliefs
- Misunderstand cultural context
  - Poetry, like prose, is embedded in the cultural context
  - For example, imprecatory psalms (e.g. Ps. 137) involve "trash talk"

Workshop

- Choose a short Psalm
  - Explain what category it is
  - Choose some verses and describe the type of parallelism
  - Find examples of figurative language and explain what it makes you feel
  - Explain the underlying truth that the Psalm is revealing

Understanding Proverbs
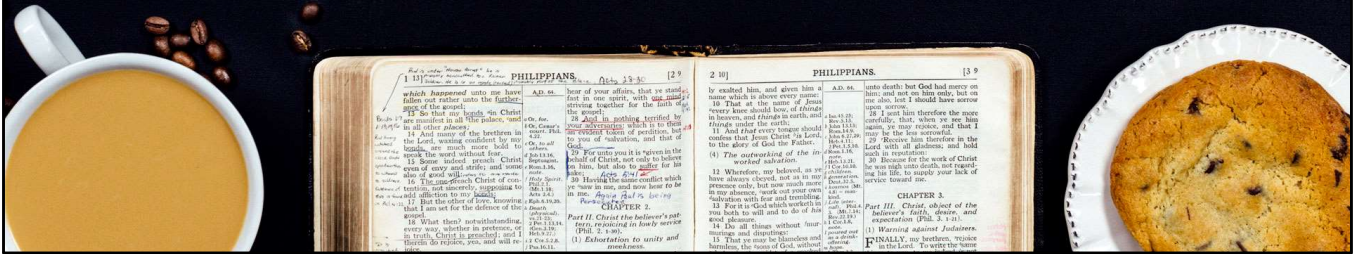
Purpose of Proverbs

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:

To know wisdom and instruction,
　to understand words of insight,
to receive instruction in wise dealing,
　in righteousness, justice, and equity;
to give prudence to the simple,
　knowledge and discretion to the youth—
Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
　and the one who understands obtain guidance,

to understand a proverb and a saying,
　the words of the wise and their riddles.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
　fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Common mistakes in Proverbs

- Thinking a proverb is a rule
  - A proverb is merely a guide, the "best path," not a guaranteed win
  - Example, Proverbs 22:6:
    Train up a child in the way he should go;
      even when he is old he will not depart from it.

- Thinking a single proverb gives the big picture
  - Proverbs balance one another, they do not explain all options
  - Example, Proverbs 22:15:
    Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,
      but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.

Workshop

- Choose a Proverb (one verse) from chapter 22
    - What form of parallelism does it use?
    - How does the parallelism make the proverb stronger or more memorable?
    - What sort of figurative language does it use, and how does that work?
    - Is the content of the proverb always true?
    - What context is the proverb useful?
    - How has this proverb influenced our culture, and how should it?

Understanding Job, Eccl, Song
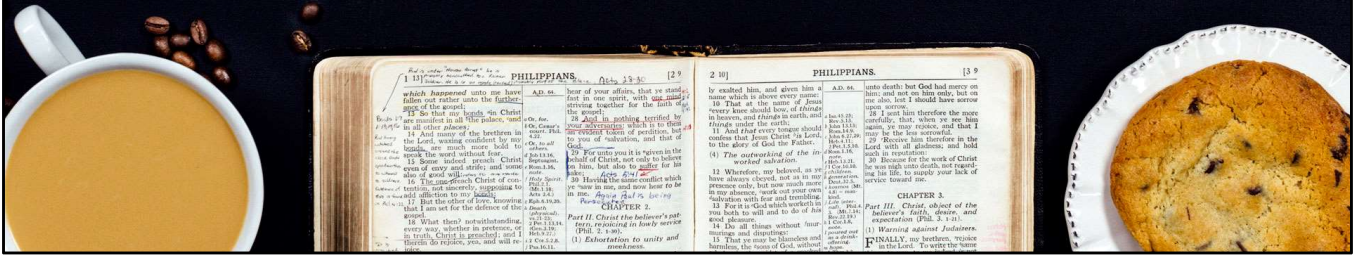
Understand the big picture

- What is the emotional situation the book is addressing?
    - Job: suffering of innocent people in the context of a just God
    - Ecclesiastes: purpose of life when good and evil are not rewarded
    - Song of Solomon: the physical joys of marital union
- How is the book structured to address this emotion?
- Where does the current passage fit into that?
- What feeling are the images intended to convey?
- Whose perspective is being expressed? (Poetry is very subjective)

Workshop

- Choose a passage from Song of Solomon
  - Whose perspective is it from? What difference does that make?
  - What figurative language is being used? What does it refer to, and why those figures of speech? What do they make you imagine or feel?
  - How does this passage further the purpose of the Song (exploring the beauty of God's gift of marriage)?
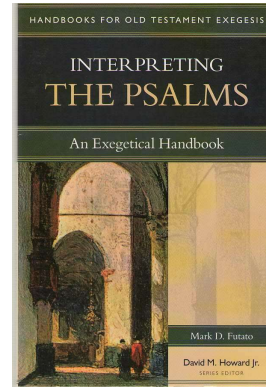
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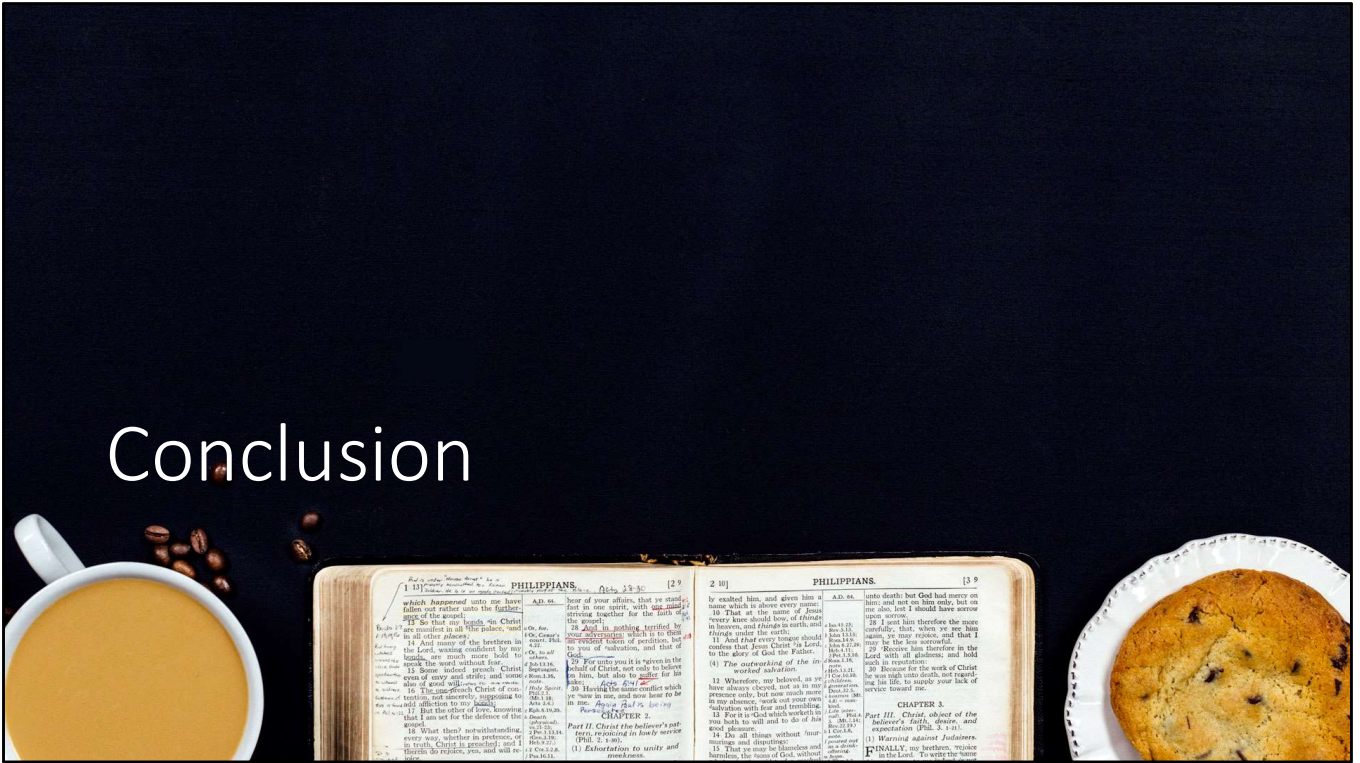
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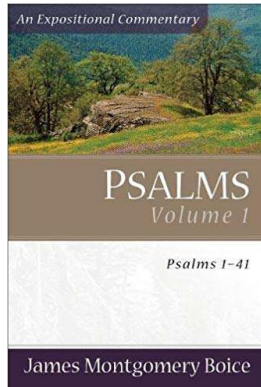
Psalms Volume 1 (Psalms 1-41),
James Montgomery Boice

Interpreting the Psalms: An
Exegetical Handbook,
Mark D. Futato

Biblical poetry is

- Figurative, subjective, emotional, imaginative
- Often factual, always "true"
- Fairly easily recognisable, even in translation (and very easy in Hebrew)
- Omnipresent in the Bible
- Used for teaching, worship, reflection