Introductions

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Abstract

This issue contains papers delivered over a period of five years at the annual International Jewish-Christian Bible Week held at Haus Ohrbeck, Osnabrück, Germany. Each year during the opening evening I offered a ten-minute introduction to the texts that we would be studying. This article includes the introductions to each of the five sets of texts that were studied: Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), 2015; Psalms 107–118, 2016; Mishlei (Proverbs), 2017; selected passages marking the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Week, 2018; Psalms 119–134, 2019. They include general overviews of specific passages, and sometimes questions that might be addressed in the daily study groups that are held during the Week. Each was intended, according to the nature of the texts, to provide a welcome to the more than one hundred participants attending the Week and establish something of the unique character of the programme of textual study and interfaith dialogue.

Keywords: biblical hermeneutics, Jewish-Christian dialogue, Kohelet/Ecclesiastes, Mishlei/Proverbs, Psalms, rabbinic exegesis

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Each year, on the opening evening of the International Jewish-Christian Bible Week I give a short, perhaps ten minutes, introduction to the texts that we are about to study. It is also a tradition of many decades that I deliver the sermon during the Shabbat morning service at the end of the Week. The former can be prepared in advance and is aimed at easing people into the topic and its texts, perhaps raising questions people might like to explore in the study groups. However, the Shabbat sermon is composed during the Week, usually in a café during the Thursday afternoon conference outing to a local place of interest. It is an opportunity to reflect on issues that have arisen during the course of our studies as a community together, or to clarify personal insights I have gained into the text. For this issue, the collected introductions offer a brief overview of the texts covered during this five-year period, and the sermons appear at the end in the section called ‘Epilogues’.

Bible Week 2015, Kohelet/Ecclesiastes

The Book of Kohelet is paradoxical in a number of ways. At the level of detailed study, it is complex and often hard to grasp, yet its general tone is surprisingly familiar and modern so that it seems particularly accessible. The vocabulary suggests that the author belongs to a mercantile society where success is measured in material terms. He speaks of *yitron*, 'advantage' or 'profit'; *amal*, 'labour' or the 'reward for labour'; *inyan*, 'business'; *kesef*, 'money'; *kisharon*, 'success'; *osher*, 'riches'; *chesron*, 'lack' or 'deficit'. This is the language of our own society. Yet precisely this commercial view of life raises questions for Kohelet, as for ourselves, about the meaning and purpose of life, and hence the question: 'What profit does a man gain for all his labour under the sun?'

Kohelet sets about examining the things that people value as of ultimate worth or significance – wealth, wisdom, love – but notes in each case their limitations. Even religion comes under examination, but Kohelet's relationship with God is pragmatic and formal: do your duty and do not risk getting God upset, for example by making vows that you do not keep. He even paraphrases the law in Deuteronomy 23:22: 'When you vow a vow to the Lord your God, do not delay to pay it, for the Lord your God will surely seek it from you'. Kohelet quotes the verse but inserts after the warning, 'do not delay to pay it', the words very foreign to Deuteronomy: 'God does not take pleasure in fools!' (5:3). Kohelet uses the term '*elohim*' for God throughout and not the tetragrammaton, and indeed there is no reference to Israel's spiritual destiny. For him, religion is about manners rather than morals. Nevertheless, morals are to be found – Kohelet observes the suffering of the poor, but his is no prophetic voice ringing out condemnation of those who oppress them. Rather, their sufferings become part of his intellectual exploration of the different and painful experiences of life.

In some places one can detect a systematic approach to his thinking. He begins with observation: '*ra'iti*', 'I saw'. He may then draw on knowledge from conventional wisdom or his own understanding: '*yadati*', 'I know'. He may add further observations, and then come to some sort of interim conclusion: '*amarti ani b'libi*', 'I said in my heart. . .'. Yet even with such signposts it is not at all clear what his final thought might be on the particular subject. Perhaps this is the result of poor editing or gaps in the materials available, and yet one is always left with the tantalising feeling that some satisfactory conclusion could be found if only one could break open his system.

Perhaps some help can be obtained from the end of the book where the editor has allowed himself to make a judgement on Kohelet's life

and career. In 12:9–10, we are told that more than Kohelet was a sage (*hacham*), in addition he taught knowledge (*da'at*) to the people, and *izzen* (either listened intensely himself or caused others to hear), *v'hikker* (researched), and *tikken* (gathered, perhaps arranged in order) many proverbs. Kohelet sought to find *divrei hefetz*, 'desirable, acceptable, perhaps consoling words', but also to write directly *divrei emet*, 'words of truth'. Each of these categories would benefit from further clarification and may offer clues to the text of the book itself.

These closing words are attributed to an 'editor' by conventional scholarly and indeed traditional opinion. But personally, I wonder if this is actually the case. Kohelet began the book speaking of himself in the first person, 'I Kohelet was king over Israel' (1:12), but he probably adopted this persona, as King Solomon, for the sake of the book itself, and he drops it after the first few chapters. He ends the book with the way our bodies fail us towards the end of life, until finally 'the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it' (12:7). Then comes this editorial voice speaking about his life and achievement in the third person. I would not put it past Kohelet to have himself adopted this editorial role as well in order to write his own obituary and conclude his book himself. By so doing, he could actually assert at least once in his lifetime his own limited control over reality.

Certainly, the ending feels like an attempt to pre-empt any doubts or questions about the validity or significance of Kohelet's teachings, an ambivalence that was to be matched by the rabbis of a much later generation.

I would like to end on a slightly less serious note. One of the great mysteries of the book is in the title given to the author. Clearly, *kahal* has something to do with assemblies, large gatherings of people. This leads to questions and assumptions about which circle Kohelet might have been addressing. Martin Luther translated his title as 'the preacher', presumably envisaging some sort of religious assembly. In my library I have a book entitled *The Musings of the Old Professor*, which would locate Kohelet in some kind of academic context, addressing classrooms of students. I have my own proposal, based on his sense of weariness at the unchanging nature of the world. There is nothing new under the sun. 'What was is what will be, and what was done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. There may be something about which one says – see, this is new, but it has already been in ages before ours. There is simply no memory of former things, and even of things that come afterwards, there will be no memory of them for those who come after' (1:9–11). Such sentiments can only come from one source, someone whose lifetime has been spent in endless committee meetings

regurgitating the same arguments, reaching the same conclusions and then repeating the exercise sometime later when the previous decisions have been forgotten. On this basis I would suggest that in his lifetime he was a minor civil servant in some royal administration, and propose translating the name Kohelet as 'The Chairman'!

Bible Week 2016, Psalms 107–118

Every Psalm is a riddle passed down to us from a very different language, culture and civilisation. Each raises its own questions and may need its own unique approach as we try to find answers.

Psalm 107 praises God for rescuing people from a variety of life-threatening situations. Already twenty years ago Professor John Jarick, who lectured here last year, tried to find a pattern to the structure based on verse 3.¹ God gathered them from 'the East and the West, from the North and from the Sea'. But what is 'the sea' doing in the spot where we would expect to read 'South'? Some amend '*yam*', 'sea', to '*yamin*', 'right hand', and hence translate as 'South'. Perhaps, this week, we can find a better solution.

Psalm 108 is largely an amalgam of verses drawn from Psalm 58:8–12 and Psalm 60:7–14. Why? And how might this affect the meaning of all three Psalms?

Psalm 109 is notorious as one of the so-called 'imprecatory' Psalms, where the Psalmist curses his enemies. As a result, a number of rather self-righteous commentaries can be found along the lines: 'What is a nasty Psalm like this doing in a nice book like the Book of Psalms?' To which come defensive apologetics suggesting that it is OK to get angry and let off steam. Sadly, all these opinions seemingly arise because the commentators have read the Psalm in translation. The Hebrew suggests a very different reading so that we ourselves experience the pain of a victim of prejudice and hatred.

Psalm 110 is also the victim of a mistaken translation of the opening words, resulting in an enormous weight of messianic, theological interpretation. It is also a very difficult Psalm to understand, but such obscurities, of course, can be quite useful where messianic speculations are concerned.

Psalms 111 and 112 seem to be a matching pair. Both are alphabetic, share much vocabulary and compare the qualities of God and of the righteous individual.

Psalms 113–118 are known in Jewish tradition as the Egyptian Hallel, or simply the Hallel. They are read in synagogue on festival occasions and

at home during the Passover Seder service. But this usage presents at least two problems. Firstly, because they are linked together liturgically, it may be difficult to consider them apart, yet each has its individual theme and agenda which deserve separate treatment. The other problem, perhaps especially for Jews, is the way the liturgical context has stamped its own priorities on these Psalms. Especially the way they are chanted or sung emphasises particular phrases, which may distort the internal structure of the Psalm itself. So, we may have to do some unlearning in order to do each of them justice. For example, how do we solve the riddle posed by verse 1 of Psalm 115? What happens if we separate out the different voices in Psalm 118?

I would like to end with a bit more detailed discussion of Psalm 117. Since it is the shortest Psalm, and indeed the shortest chapter in the entire Hebrew Bible, it may tend to be overlooked. But browsing the internet I discovered that Martin Luther devoted a thirty-six-page pamphlet to it, so I feel challenged to offer a few comments of my own.

The opening verse is quite clear, a call to all the nations to praise God: *'hal'lu et Adonai kol-goyyim'*. Some Christian websites see it as a universal call to all nations to worship God, and even as a specific invitation to undertake missionary activity. Following conventional translations, the second verse explains why this should be so; because God's mercy, *hesed*, is great towards us. 'Us' presumably refers to Israel as the source of the authorship of this Psalm. Hence one interpretation, that the nations witnessing God's evident love for Israel are moved to praise God, and indeed wish to have a share in that divine *hesed* as well, alongside Israel.

This appeal to the nations to praise God is not unique to this Psalm. According to Psalm 98, God has revealed His righteousness in the sight of the nations . . . all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. So, all the earth is invited to shout praises to God, to sing and play before God (98:3–6). So if this Psalm is truly universalistic, it is quite legitimate to read 'all the nations', *'kol goyyim'*, in verse 1 as actually including Israel. Israel is also called a *'goy'*, a nation, sometimes positively (a holy nation in Leviticus 19:1) but also negatively, 'a sinful nation' (Isaiah 1:4). By this logic, *'alenu'*, 'upon us', in verse 2 suggests that God's *hesed* does indeed rest upon all the nations, of which Israel is but one small component. On this reading, the Psalm becomes truly universal.

But verse 2 also contains an example of a common literary device in biblical poetry, where a fixed phrase, like 'heaven and earth', is split into two, the words divided between the first and second part of the sentence. Here we have the key words *'hesed'* and *'emet'*, 'truth'. They were paired in Exodus 34:6 to express the 'faithful love and loyalty' that God displays to Israel as a partner in the covenant. Here they are split between the two

halves of verse 2. But what does *hesed* mean in this verse when used with the verb '*gavar al*', to be powerful? The literal meaning is 'God's *hesed* is great over us or upon us', rather than the conventional translation, 'God's *hesed* is great towards us'. The same phrase occurs elsewhere in Psalm 103. 'As high as the heavens over the earth, so great is His *hesed* upon those who fear Him' (103:11). But *gavar al* is also used to mean 'to overwhelm', as in 2 Samuel 11:23, 'For the men were more powerful than us' or 'overwhelmed us'. So, the sentence could mean that *hesed*, God's demanding love, is too overpowering for us, Israel alone, to bear. That is why the Psalmist may have felt compelled to call upon the nations to join us in praising God, so as to share the burden of that enormous responsibility. That would be a very different way of reading the universal call of the Psalm.

I offer this as an unlikely but nevertheless possible reading of the Psalm. At the very least, such a reading would remind us of the overwhelming nature of a relationship with God, a relationship that we tend to tame, domesticate and sentimentalise. So let us, as usual, take the Hebrew text seriously, question the choices made by those who make translations, and allow even such familiar Psalms still to surprise and challenge us.

Bible Week 2017, Mishlei/The Book of Proverbs

The Book of Proverbs, Hebrew name Mishlei, is an intriguing mixture of materials. It has an overall organising structure with opening exhortations to follow the path of wisdom and avoid the path of folly, and a postscript. But the bulk of the book consists of a variety of anthologies of proverbs, or, as they are sometimes characterised, miniature parables. They cover many different aspects of life, seemingly arranged at random. There are attempts to find some patterns underlying them. However, perhaps this randomness is meant to model the accidental nature of life itself, whereby the chance bits of advice or wisdom that we accumulate may prove helpful at certain times.

The book is customarily grouped with Ecclesiastes and Job as examples of 'wisdom literature'. All three are located in the third division of the Hebrew Bible, *Ketuvim*, 'Writings'. This would classify them, in rabbinic thought, as human compositions, inspired by the '*ruach ha-kodesh*', the 'holy spirit', but not examples of direct divine revelation.

The book is credited to King Solomon, which must go some way to explaining why it was included in the Hebrew Bible. But can we learn something more from within the book itself to explain why it was thought to be necessary to include it in the biblical library?

According to the biblical record, Solomon was the composer, collector and editor of wisdom sayings (1 Kings 5:12; Ecclesiastes 12:9). His own wisdom was said to exceed that of ‘all the people of the East’ and the wisdom of Egypt (1 Kings 5:10). So, the Bible acknowledges the existence of international wisdom traditions, and the Book of Proverbs may actually quote an example with the words of the otherwise unknown King Lemuel in chapter 31:1. Historical studies attest to multiple borrowings within the Book of Proverbs itself from collections of similar materials from Egypt and Mesopotamia. Whether the studying or collecting of proverbs was confined to scribal schools or reflects domestic or village contexts, clearly these materials were a significant part of biblical Israel’s culture. Yet perhaps this, in itself, presented problems.

Firstly, to what extent might there have been concerns about the influence of these foreign cultural imports among those who wanted to defend the uniqueness of Israelite nationality and identity?

Secondly, how far did such materials represent an autonomous, human source of knowledge and values? How might they relate to the beliefs and teachings enshrined in the Sinai covenant with its laws governing daily life? Were the Israelites faced with questions about the respective authority of two different sources of ‘truth’, ‘empirical’ and ‘revealed’, like the drama played out today between ‘science’ and ‘religion’?

In terms of the first question, I am struck by the repeated use of the words ‘*zarah*’, ‘strange’, or ‘*nochriah*’, ‘foreign’, ‘alien’, to describe ‘dame folly’, the female opponent to ‘dame wisdom’, whether she is represented literally or metaphorically as a prostitute or adulterous woman. The negativity surrounding the two terms occurs also in warnings against giving loans to foreigners (Proverbs 20:16; 27:13). Notoriously, the term ‘*nochriah*’ occurs frequently in Ezra 9 and 10 with the demand to divorce the foreign wives that the local Israelite community had married during the period of the Babylonian exile. In the Book of Ruth, Ruth uses the term about herself, deliberately emphasising her foreignness to Boaz, and so forcing him to contradict such a negative value judgement and instead commend her for her loyalty to Naomi. Thus ‘folly’, as opposed to ‘wisdom’, is charged with a range of negative connotations, both misogynist and xenophobic. The biblical record is clearly opposed to the import of foreign deities. Did such concerns extend to the import of foreign teachings and values?

With regards to the second question, Michael V. Fox notes the critiques of wisdom teachers by prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Thus says the Eternal: 'Let not the wise man glorify in his wisdom nor a mighty man glorify in his might, nor a rich man in his wealth; but let him who glorifies glory in this: understanding and knowing Me'. (Jeremiah 9:22–23; c.f. 18:18)

Fox suggests that there was a felt need to assimilate the wisdom material to the covenantal system and points to the repeated linking of wisdom with the 'fear of the Lord'. He writes:

The Yahwistic reworking took four approaches. First of all, it made Yahweh, rather than only tradition and the teacher, the source of wisdom. Second, it identified 'fear of Yahweh' with wisdom, emphasizing the religiosity of wisdom. Third, it sought to make Yahweh independent of the world order and in control of man's fate. Finally, following on the assertion of Yahweh's independence and omnipotence, it called for trust in God.²

The tetragrammaton appears eighty-seven times in the Book of Proverbs, compared to thirty-two times in the Book of Job (all but two cases in the book's narrative prologue and epilogue), and not at all in Ecclesiastes. The phrase 'fear of the Lord' appears fourteen times in Proverbs and in some cases is strategically located. In 1:7 it comes as the climax to the introduction and as a kind of motto for the book: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; but the foolish despise wisdom and discipline'. In 9:10 it comes as the centre of the concentric structure which differentiates the wares on offer by wisdom and folly. 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and knowledge of the All-holy is understanding.'

But there are other features that indicate how wisdom is being deliberately incorporated into a divinely ordained programme. Most obvious is the role ascribed to wisdom as the blueprint consulted by God in the creation of the world (Proverbs 8:22–31).

Another phrase, 'the tree of life', appears four times in the book (Proverbs 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:40). It is used to refer not only to the quality of true wisdom, but to the value of other worthwhile characteristics of the good life.

However, it is difficult to hear the phrase 'tree of life' and not think immediately about the story of the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden lest they eat from the tree of life and live forever (Genesis 3:22). But the 'tree of life' is now understood to mean the quality of life that is available to people, if they follow the wisdom on offer to them through the fear of the Lord.

While we are in the Garden of Eden, and in a speculative mode, why not go a step further? Why is the imagery of food so prominent in the

public offerings of both dame wisdom and dame folly (Proverbs 9)? With what act did human history as we actually experience it begin? When Eve looked at the ‘tree of the knowledge of good and evil’, she saw: ‘that the tree was good for food, and pleasing to the eye, and desirable for gaining wisdom’ (Genesis 3:6). So, she ate from it, and her eyes were opened, but opened to the reality of our human vulnerability. Could the Book of Proverbs be intended not just as an apologia for Eve’s behaviour, but the ultimate vindication of her act? After all, the last chapter of the Book of Proverbs is a celebration of the ideal woman: ‘Her mouth is open in wisdom, and on her tongue is the teaching of faithful love’ (31:26).³

Perhaps one reason for including the Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible was to justify the inclusion of foreign wisdom material within Israelite culture. But also it might serve to reconcile two sources of human knowledge and truth, the empirical and the revealed, by consciously and deliberately subsuming the former under the latter. Certainly, this would set us free to embrace all knowledge, from whatever its source, as ultimately a gift of God.

The early rabbinic sages may have felt the need to set the seal on this synthesis in the one context where theology is acted out in the public arena. With great ceremony, we take the scroll of the Torah out of the ark during the Shabbat morning service, parade it before the congregation and read from it. Among the texts that we chant is the verse from Proverbs 3:18:

It is a tree of life to those who grasp it and those who hold it are happy.

But the ‘tree of life’ mentioned in verse 18 refers back to verse 13 in the same chapter, where the subject is *hochmah* (wisdom). So, as we display the Torah scroll before the congregation, we affirm publicly that wisdom has been assimilated to and subsumed under Torah. It is Torah that is our true ‘tree of life’.

Bible Week 2018, 50th Anniversary

This year we wanted to maintain the usual structure of the Week, but also acknowledge this significant fiftieth anniversary. In the first Bible Week, certain passages were studied, so we thought it might be interesting to see how their interpretations and significance have changed in the intervening period. But this choice also reflects changes in the nature of the Bible Week itself since that beginning. At the time, we were still working in a conventional conference format with formal lectures throughout

the day given by lecturers who were accorded considerable authority. But the system gave little opportunity for the participants to have real discussions, either with the lecturer or among themselves. The pattern of morning study sessions, which are now part of the ethos of the Bible Week, belongs to a kind of democratisation of the programme, that only appeared gradually, and had to be fought for.

The texts reflected in large part the interests of the Christian organisers at the time and their curiosity about a Jewish response to them. Hence the opening chapters of Genesis, the theme of the 'suffering servant' in Isaiah and the Book of Jonah. I must have had some input because at the time at the beginning of my rabbinic studies these were the only passages about which I had anything at all to say! However, in those days it was a bit easier to bluff and offer a few scattered comments because the lectures were translated orally, sentence by sentence. That gave me time during the translation to think of something reasonably intelligent to say.

What the three passages had, and still have, in common is their importance in different ways in Jewish-Christian dialogue. The Genesis account is an important source for questions about the sin of the first human couple in disobeying God. While this is a fundamental issue in Christian thought, it has been far less significant for Jews and Judaism. It is important to remember that thanks to the remarkable ecumenical Christian commitment of Anneliese Debray, the director of the Hedwig Dransfeld Haus who initiated the Bible Week, we had both Catholic and Protestant lecturers and participants. This must have led to interesting internal Christian discussions, and considerable liturgical complications, which my limited German was not good enough to follow. With Genesis, we had a topic addressing a fundamental difference in viewpoint between Judaism and Christianity, one that could provide an interfaith challenge to this encounter with the Bible.

Perhaps even more challenging at the theological level, but also with serious socio-political consequences, was the question of the identity of the 'suffering servant' in Isaiah 52:13–53:12. Was this a prefiguration of the experience of Jesus? Certainly, such an interpretation could be supported if the chapter was taken in isolation. But Jewish exegesis tended to approach it within the broader context of chapters 40–55 and to recognise in other chapters about the 'servant' an image that could equally apply to the Jewish people as a whole.

The Book of Jonah seems on the surface more available to both faiths as a kind of universal parable that transcends denominational or ideological differences. But, at that time, some Christian Bible commentaries tended to view in the figure of Jonah a stereotypical Jew, particularistic and nationalistic, and even described as hating the rest of humanity.

The same authors, however, could see in the attitude of the author of the book evidence of an 'almost Christian' expression of universalism and love. I could never understand how it was possible to separate the narrow-minded Jewish Jonah from the compassionate Jewish author of the same book. Presumably, as I was just beginning to understand in my own studies, so much of the literary subtlety and irony of the narrative was being overlooked in the interest of ideology. In teaching Jonah, even then, I felt comfortable in offering my own opinion.

So much for the past. Despite the passage of time, many of those same attitudes and issues remain today, but alongside many new approaches to the same biblical chapters. I would like to offer a question to each of the three passages which some of us might like to address during the course of the Week.

In the case of Genesis, the sentence 'Let *us* make man' (Genesis 1:26) raises the question: with whom is God speaking? There are many ways of understanding the word 'us' in this context, but a rabbinic midrash (based on Psalm 95:11) offers the following explanation. God is actually in debate with the angels who represent different qualities and aspects of God's concerns. So, the angel in charge of Kindness and Compassion (*hesed*) said, 'Let God create man, for he will perform acts of kindness'. But the angel concerned with Truth (*emet*) said, 'Let God not create man, for he will be full of deceit'. The angel in charge of Justice (*tsedeq*) said, 'Let God create man, for he will act with righteousness and justice'. But the angel in charge of Peace (*shalom*) said, 'Let God not create man, for he will be full of conflicts'. Nevertheless, God decided that it was worth the risk, that in the end our positive qualities would outweigh the negative ones, and God went ahead and created human beings.⁴ From today's perspective, with more evidence than ever before, it is quite clear that the earth could do perfectly well, and maybe considerably better, without the presence and interference of human beings. So, an interesting question remains, at least within the framework of these Genesis passages and our shared religious traditions: why did God want to create human beings at all?

The climactic servant passage continues to challenge in a variety of ways. A careful reading of chapters 40–55 of Isaiah recognises a significant division between chapters 40–48 and 49–55.⁵ In the former, the focus is on encouraging those in exile in Babylon with the hope of their return to their homeland; moreover, the city Babylon and its fate is addressed directly. But the latter chapters focus instead on Jerusalem/Zion, waiting to receive its returning children. Moreover, in the former chapters the servant is clearly identified as the exiled community in their collective identity. However, in the latter chapters a new distinctive identity and

role for the servant emerges as an individual within Israel, most forcefully with the passage in 49:6:

It is too little for you to be My servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel, I will also make you a light of nations, so that My salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

If we accept that these two sections of the book are consciously composed to provide a different perspective on Israel's situation and aspirations, it limits the quest for the identity of the 'suffering servant' to these latter chapters alone. Might we find further clues in the passages that we study as to who might be intended?

Jonah represents the logical extension of a familiar biblical motif. Some prophets, when summoned by God, were reluctant to accept the call. Moses pleaded his inability to communicate; Jeremiah said that he was only a '*naar*', which could mean he was only a youth, or, if he belonged to a prophetic training school, that he was only an apprentice and not yet 'ordained'. But Jonah represents another reaction, to run away as far as possible from the mission itself. Just to remind us, Abraham Ibn Ezra had the important insight that Jonah does not try to flee '*mippnei adonai*', physically from God's presence. The impossibility of this is made clear by the author of Psalm 139 verse 7 – '*anah mippanecha evrach*', 'where can I flee from your presence?'. Rather, Jonah runs '*mil-lifnei adonai*'. To stand '*lifnei adonai*' is what a prophet does, namely, to stand in the service of God. It is the mission that Jonah tries to flee from, not from God. But after Jonah's unsuccessful flight and the sojourn in the fish, and restoration to dry land, God nevertheless has to call him a second time with the almost identical words to do the same mission. Why? The rabbis said: 'a second time but not a third time', God gave up on using Jonah as a prophet! But I believe there is something in the text describing Jonah's behaviour that already shows why God had to do this. Perhaps what that might be is another question to address when we study the book this week.

I would like to close with two quotations from Friedemann W. Golka, a Bible scholar and friend, whose early death prevented him lecturing last year on the Book of Proverbs. In his study of Jonah, he notes the challenges to both Judaism and Christianity posed by the book:

The Book of Jonah and its interpretation reflect the common history of Jews and Christians. The argument about Jonah is at the same time the argument of two world religions about a common heritage. It is here that the strongest Christian anti-Judaism appears; it is here that the Jewish exegesis finds itself on the defensive. But it is here, too – after

Auschwitz – that Jewish and Christian interpretations seem to converge more than anywhere else. . . .

The Book of Jonah is an astonishing theological development. This is the type of post-exilic Jewish theology in whose tradition Jesus of Nazareth stands . . . This does not make the author of the Book of Jonah a ‘secret Christian’, but it identifies Jesus as a Jew who stands in the best tradition.⁶

But Friedemann’s remarks about the challenge of this common heritage must surely apply to all the texts that we have studied together over the past fifty years, and to all those we will continue to study together into the future.

Bible Week 2019, Psalms 119–134

The team decided last year not to include Psalm 119 as one of the texts for group study, largely because of its length. However, I decided to study it during the past year and use this opening session to indicate some of the challenges it poses, at least to me.

Psalm 119 is composed as an acrostic based on the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet from *alef* to *tav*. It has twenty-two stanzas of eight verses, each verse of the stanza beginning with the same letter of the alphabet. This adds up to 176 verses, which makes it the longest chapter in the Hebrew Bible. The overall theme is the celebration of Torah, and the commitment to study and to live fully by it. One building element is that each stanza contains at least five synonyms for biblical law: *huqqot*, statutes; *edut*, testimonies; *piqqudim*, precepts; *mitzvot*, commandments; and *mishpatim*, judgements. When one of these words does not appear in the stanza, then one of the others is used twice, so that each of these words appears between twenty-one and twenty-three times in the Psalm. One result is effectively to break down any distinction that may exist among these terms. In addition, the word Torah itself appears twenty-five times, God’s word, *davar*, occurs twenty-five times and God’s speech, *imrah*, nineteen times. The name of God comes twenty-four times. There is no doubt about the subject matter of the Psalm.

But the repetitiveness does not end there, and I found myself compulsively counting other recurring words. Twenty times the verb ‘*sh-m-r*’ is used to refer to ‘keeping’ God’s laws, and a further ten times the verb *n-tz-r* serves the same purpose. Twelve times the verb *a-h-v* proclaims the Psalmist’s love for God’s Torah. But the Psalmist has opponents, either called *zedim*, the arrogant, six times, or ‘*r’shayim*’, the ‘wicked’, six times. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the Psalmist insists seven times ‘*lo*

shachachti’, ‘I have not forgotten’, referring either to the Torah or to one of the other synonyms for it. On the contrary, nine times the Psalmist claims to rejoice in God’s Torah, using different forms of the verb *sh-a-a* and three times using the verb ‘*s-i-s*’. Twelve times the Psalmist speaks of walking in God’s way, *derech*; twelve times asks to learn, *l-m-d*, God’s Torah; and seven times speaks of ‘meditating’, *s-i-ach*, in it.

But alongside these expressions of confidence, the Psalmist also expresses fears of being taunted or put to shame by adversaries, while waiting and hoping for an answer from God. It is as if the sheer weight of all these words for Torah is meant to construct a physical wall around the Psalmist, a defence against attack from without and, perhaps, against doubts and uncertainty within. Finally, the most puzzling verb is one addressed to God, repeated nine times as an imperative, and seven time in other grammatical forms: it is ‘*hayyeni*’, perhaps ‘give me life’, or ‘sustain me in life’. But what exactly is this life to which he aspires so forcefully?

A recent literary approach to the Psalm is to view it as an example of ‘constrained writing’, whereby an author deliberately sets artificial limitations and then has to meet the artistic challenge of overcoming them.⁷ Some of the stanzas feel as though they were composed in a rather formal or mechanical way simply in order to include all the required words, but others come alive as they include personal information about the present or past situation of the Psalmist. For example, how the Psalmist has gone astray or been attacked or misrepresented by enemies, and now seeks to be restored to his place in the Torah. If the Psalm is the work of a single author, then these episodes might reflect different periods of a life, from youth to old age, a kind of spiritual diary. Nevertheless, although the different stanzas share the same vocabulary and also the same general beliefs and values, to me their diversity suggests the experience of different individuals. And this raises the possibility of at least some degree of multiple authorship. But what might be the circumstances that could produce it?

An article on the website *theTorah.com*. by Shalom Holtz builds on the work of Professor Avi Hurvitz who argues that the language of the Psalm is post-exilic.⁸ For example, the verb *d-r-sh*, to seek, in earlier biblical books, refers to seeking God directly – for example in Amos 5:4 ‘*dirshuni vih’yu*’, ‘seek Me and live!’. But within the Psalm the verb is directed instead at seeking God’s laws, *piqqudim* (vv. 45, 94), *huqqim* (v. 155). Holtz gives another example:

Whereas books like Deuteronomy speak of loving God (6:5, 11:1, 13), Psalm 119 speaks of loving God’s Torah and commandments (for example in verses 97, 113 and 119), and even ‘cleaving’ (*d-b-q*) to them

(v. 31; compare ‘cleaving to God’ in, for example, Deuteronomy 11:22, 30:20).

This leads Holtz to suggest that the Psalm anticipates rabbinic Judaism’s commitment to Talmud Torah, the study of Torah, as a mode of divine service and a path to God.

If this is indeed a transitional stage to a new basis of serving God, does the Psalm reveal something about how this might have come about? When I began studying the Psalm, it felt like a compilation of materials produced in something like a classroom situation. As if the teacher has given the identical assignment to twenty-two of his students or colleagues: ‘compose an eight-verse stanza about your love of God’s Torah, using all the words I have listed – but feel free to introduce some personal aspect as well. I will allocate to you the letter of the alphabet you are to use to introduce each verse’. That is to say that all the stanzas are about creating the shared ethos of a particular group or society, committed to their own way of understanding and relating to God through their direct engagement with Torah. Some among them identify themselves as belonging to ‘those who fear God’ (vv. 63, 74). The arrogant or wicked that they attack are those who have strayed from the Torah (vv. 52, 85, 126, 150). Their failure to teach or convince others of this path may be a source of regret for them: ‘My eyes run with rivers of tears because they do not observe Your Torah’ (v. 136). The schoolroom ethos may even be evoked:

I have more understanding than all of my teachers, because Your testimonies are my meditation.

I understand more than my elders, because I have kept Your precepts.
(vv. 99–100)

How might someone have gained entrance into such a society? The second stanza may reflect such a rite of passage. It includes a statement of personal commitment to God and Torah and the recital of a blessing, the only one in the entire Psalm. It begins in verse 9 by asking how a young man, *‘na’ar*, may lead a life of purity. Perhaps it refers here to the applicant himself, as the word *‘na’ar* may mean a disciple or apprentice (Jeremiah 1:6). Here, the verb *d-r-sh* is expressed, as in its earlier biblical usage, as seeking God directly. But subsequently throughout the Psalm, as noted above, it is used in the later way of seeking God’s Torah. Subsequently, the Psalmist refers to himself as *‘avadecha*, ‘Your servant’. It seems as if the speaker is reciting his personal commitment and qualifications for admittance to this Torah-based society.

If anyone during this week has other ideas about the Psalm, I would welcome hearing them. But let us end, as we enter this week of study,

much as this potential disciple might have done, with a question and a blessing.

- ⁹ How can a young man keep his way pure?
By guarding it according to Your word.
¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek You;
let me not wander from Your commandments!
¹¹ I have stored up Your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against You.
¹² Blessed are You, O LORD;
teach me Your statutes!
Baruch attah Adonai, lam'deni huqqekha.

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Notes

1. John Jarick, 'The Four Corners of Psalm 107', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59 (1997), 270–287.
2. Michael V. Fox, 'Aspects of the Religion of the Book of Proverbs', *Hebrew Union College Annual* 39 (1968), 55–69, here 65.
3. A similar 'rewriting' of a negative Genesis image is found in Song of Songs. Eve's desire will be towards her husband and he will rule over her (Genesis 3:16). But in Song of Songs 7:11 the independent heroine says: 'I am my beloved's and his desire is towards me'.
4. 'Kindness and truth met, justice and peace came together.' The midrash about the discussion of the angels can be found in Genesis Rabbah 8:5.
5. P. Wilcox and David Paton-Williams, 'The Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 42 (1988), 79–102. Among other things they note that, statistically, the name 'Jacob' occurs nineteen times, and Israel thirty-five times in 40–48, but respectively only three times and eight times in 49–55.
6. Friedemann W. Golka, 'Jonah', in *The Song of Songs and Jonah: Revelation of God* (International Theological Commentary) (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1988), 65–136, here 68, 127.
7. Scott M. Callahan, 'An Evaluation of Psalm 119 as Constrained Writing', *Hebrew Studies* 50 (2009), 121–134.
8. Professor Shalom Holtz, 'Seeking Torah, Seeking God: Psalm 119', <https://TheTorah.com/seeking-torah-god/>.