

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

Read the Bible in a Year Challenge

Week 31

Monday	Ecclesiastes 10-12	Psalm 22	Colossians 3
Tuesday	Song of Songs 1-3	Psalm 23	Colossians 4
Wednesday	Song of Songs 4-6	Psalm 24	1 Thessalonians 1
Thursday	Song of Songs 7-8	Psalm 25	1 Thessalonians 2
Friday	Isaiah 1-3	Psalm 26	1 Thessalonians 3
Saturday	Isaiah 4-6	Psalm 27	1 Thessalonians 4

Sunday: *Enjoy the lessons from Scripture as they are read aloud in Sunday worship. The Bible study summary for each Sunday of the year is found as a separate document on the parish website, under “Adult Education, Bible Study”.*

The Ecclesiastes readings:

1. See the study summary for week 30 for an introduction to Ecclesiastes.
2. The beginning of ch. 10 is included in the section in which the author teaches that the events of life are unpredictable. The narrative continues (at v. 16) with a change in theme, that one may not know the evil which may befall himself.
 - a. This theme is developed (in ch. 11), that one may not know the good which may happen.
 - i. In other words, living life as a series of choices on the basis of what evil or good may be *predicted* is vanity.
 - ii. The unknowability of evil and good to come bespeaks a belief that “what will happen will happen”. This form of fatalism is common in ancient Near Eastern thinking, and diminishes the value of free will.
3. The book concludes with an extended poem on enjoyment, youth and old age (11.7-12.14) and an epilogue (12.9-14)
 - a. The poem serves as a balance to the opening poem found at 1.2-11.
 - b. The author singles out his advice to enjoyment and adds a seventh and final expression: Life is sweet and to be rejoiced in while one has the power to enjoy it. As an incentive to this enjoyment, one must ever be aware that old age and death lie ahead.
 - c. The epilogue adds six verses, to make the 105 verses of 6.10-12.8 into the 111 verses required by the numerical scheme described in the study summary for week 30.
 - i. The verses are stated as those of an editor approving the teaching of the author, Qoheleth.

The Song of Songs readings:

1. The Song of Songs is known in Roman Catholic bibles as the Canticle of Canticles. The title reflects idiomatic Hebrew, as a superlative (*i.e.*, “the greatest of songs”).

- a. No consensus exists regarding the dating of this book. Much of it is thought to be post-exilic (and thus not written “by Solomon”), but individual poems may be of earlier composition.
- b. No consensus exists regarding the structure (or, indeed, even the poetic unity) of the composition.
 - i. The book has been characterized as a dialogue between Solomon and the Shulammitte woman. This understanding of the book, as a wooing, and as an expression of intimacy, has predominated.
 1. St. Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) popularized the “transcendental” view of the book (first elaborated by Origen, the early Christian theologian [d. 253]) as describing the intimacy between God in Jesus Christ, and His bride, the Church.
 - a. Bernard’s interpretation was not in itself new, however. Both the Church and the synagogue have consistently viewed the book as a depiction of the love of the Lord for His Church or the love of the LORD for His people.
 - i. The rabbinic view is consistent with theology of covenant and marriage between the LORD and Israel (*see, e.g.,* Hosea 1-3; Isaiah 62.5). Rabbinic targums (commentaries) treated the book as an allegory on the history of Israel.
 2. The main speaker in the poems is the woman (*i.e.,* the Church), who speaks of yearning for her lover. The man is depicted both as a shepherd (1.7) and king (14; 12).
 - a. Whether the love dialogue is between Church and God or the individual soul and God, the basic insight of the book is that human love cannot be viewed apart from divine love.
 - i. Modern criticism has tended to focus on the sexual imagery in the poems.
2. From the perspective of literary style, the poems are rich in imagery of fruitfulness and blessing, accompanied by a “make believe” character of narrative in which characters are transposed.
 - a. Israel in fact resisted the divinization of sexuality characteristic of cultic practices in the ancient Near East (*e.g.,* in the cults of Tammuz-Ishtar or Aphrodite), for the LORD (and the Lord) has no female consort.
 - i. Nonetheless, human sexual love is accepted in Jewish and Christian theology as a good bestowed by God. This good is good insofar as the boundaries set by God’s commands are observed, and insofar as mutuality and fidelity (as between the LORD and Israel, and between the Lord and His Church) are present and honored.
3. While there is no discernible outline to the book, the course of the dialogue flows as follows:
 - a. Introduction: 1.1-6.
 - b. Dialogue between lovers: 1.7-2.7.
 - c. Reminiscence: 2.8-17, and loss and discovery: (3.1-5).
 - d. Solomon’s wedding procession: 3.6-11.
 - e. Dialogue between lovers: 4.1-5.1.
 - f. Dialogue between the woman and her daughters (5.2-6.3).
 - g. Dialogue between lovers: 6.4-12.
 - h. A concluding dialogue and appendices: 7.1-8.14.

The Isaiah readings:

1. From as early as the first century, teachers in the Church have considered that Isaiah, the book, probably reflects more than one writer. Consensus exists that chs. 1-39 represent one writer, chs. 40-55 a second, and chs. 56-66 a third.
 - a. Chs. 1-39 are often referred to as “First Isaiah,” “Proto-Isaiah,” or “Isaiah of Jerusalem,” and are earliest, written to the people prior to the fall of Jerusalem and the beginning of the exile in Babylon.
 - b. Chs. 40-55 are referred to as “Second Isaiah” or “Deutero-Isaiah”. Rarely the term “Isaiah of Babylon” will appear, but this is not favored. These chapters speak more to a people in exile.
 - c. Chs. 56-66 are referred to as “Third Isaiah” or “Trito-Isaiah,” and are written to a people coming out of exile.

2. For purposes of this introduction, comments will be restricted to First Isaiah. The authentic words of the prophet himself are thought to be represented mainly in chs. 1-11, with the balance of the book representing what others have written about what Isaiah taught and wrote.
 - a. Isaiah stands more in the Jerusalem or Zion traditions of ancient Judaism. He makes no reference to Moses, Sinai, or the covenant, but speaks of the promises made to David’s dynasty.
 - i. Therefore, some of God’s promises are to occur in the future (2.2-4; 8.23-9.6; 11.1-9).

3. Isaiah identifies himself as called “in the year King Uzziah died” (6.1). This dates composition to 742 B.C. The prophet exercised his ministry in and around Jerusalem, during an era when the kingdom was under constant threat from Assyrian power. The latest that Isaiah’s oracles may be dated 701 B.C.
 - a. Isaiah is the first of the classical “book” prophets, *i.e.*, those who wrote their oracles, as opposed to acting them out (*e.g.*, as in the case of Elijah in 1 Kgs.)
 - b. The overarching teaching of Isaiah is concerned with the holiness and kingly power of God.
 - i. Ethical teachings, therefore, are given with relation to who God is. For example, oppression of the lowly is an offense to God’s holiness.
 - ii. All lies within God’s power, including all nations. Those who threaten Israel do so by virtue of being used as instruments of the LORD. (*See, e.g.*, 5.26-29; 7.18-19; 10.5-6.)
 1. Therefore, for Judah to seek to separate her fate from that of the unified kingdom, or of Israel proper, is folly.
 - iii. To trust in the LORD’s help and protection is faith. To fail to do so is the lack of faith (7.9b; 8.17; 28.16-17; 30.1-5, 15; 31.1-3).
 1. The cardinal sin is pride, the opposite of faith (*see, e.g.*, 2.11-12; 3.16; 5.15-16).
 - a. For this sin, the LORD will bring punishment upon His people (3.1-4.1; 5.26-29; 6.11-13; 9.7-20).
 - i. Punishment, however, is “medicinal”. It brings forth restoration, and the people may thus hope (1.21-26).

 4. The chapters encountered this week may be outlined as follows:
 - a. Inscription and the LORD’s complaint: 1.1-3.

- b. Jerusalem chastised (1.4-9), worship and justice linked (1.10-17), choosing to obey God (1.18-20).
- c. A purifying judgment (1.21-28) and how this relates to crime and punishment (1.29-31).
- d. Zion is the focus of future peace (2.2-4). God will judge (2.6-22).
- e. The people and leadership will disintegrate under judgment (3.1-12), and the leaders will be accused by God (3.13-15). The fate of the women is described in further detail (3.16-4.1).
- f. Jerusalem will be purified (4.2-6).
 - i. The ideal is represented in the “song of the LORD’s vineyard” (5.17), which is followed (by way of contrast) with a series of woes (5.8-24).
 - ii. Despite these woes, God stretches forth His hand to His people.
- g. In ch. 6 there begin the prophets memoirs. His call is described in terms of a theophany (a revelation of God).
 - i. The LORD is not depicted as a national deity, but as God over all the earth.
 - 1. Nonetheless, the hand of the LORD falls most heavily on His own people.
 - ii. God is depicted attended by seraphim. The name for these angelic being derives from the word for “fiery”.
 - 1. The angels veil their faces and “feet”. The latter term is a Hebraic euphemism (*cf.* 7.20) for private parts.
 - 2. Their cry of “Holy!” may reflect the liturgy of the Temple.

The psalms: N.B. *In The Bible Challenge the Psalter is read twice (once in each half year). We may all be led into new insights, particularly in focusing on praying each psalm (preferably aloud). See the summary for week 1 for a general introduction.*

1. *See* the study summaries for weeks 4 and 5.

The readings from Paul’s Letter to the Colossians:

1. *See* the study summary for week 30 for an introduction to Colossians, and a discussion of thematic content.

The readings from Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians:

1. This letter is thought to be the section of the N.T. first written (*ca.* A.D. 50). The letter was written from Corinth to the Christians in Thessalonica, occasioned by Timothy’s report that the Christians there were confused about certain elements of the faith, particularly about the fate of those who had died prior to the coming of Christ.
 - a. Paul had come to Thessalonica during the second missionary journey, accompanied by Silvanus and Timothy.
 - b. The fact of the primacy in time of writing of this letter (being not only the first part of the N.T. written, but pre-dating the first written Gospel by not less fourteen years) must be noted in light of the traditional teaching (particularly credal formulae, *e.g.*, 1.9-10; 4.14; 5.10) as significant evidence of the gospel in the time period between the death of Jesus in A.D. 30 and the appearance of N.T. writings.
 - i. 1 Thessalonians is the oldest extant Christian document!
2. The opening thanksgiving not only confirms Paul’s delight in the Thessalonians’ “... work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope” (v. 3), but also foreshadows the four major themes of the letter:

- a. The defense of Paul's integrity (2.1-3.10)
 - b. Persecution (3.1-5)
 - c. Proper moral conduct (4.1-12; 5.12-22), and
 - d. Christ's return (4.18-5.11).
3. Paul addresses the Thessalonians as the "church" (*ekklesia*). In secular Greek this word meant "assembly," a body of citizens summoned officially (*cf.* Acts 19.32, 39, 41).
- a. In the Greek version of the O.T. (the *Septuagint*), the word is used to refer to the people of Israel as assembled for the worship of the LORD (*see, e.g.,* Deut. 23.2-3; 31.30; 1 Sam 17.47; 1 Chr. 28. 8; Neh. 13.1).
 - i. Paul the Pharisee, who quotes the O.T. from the *Septuagint*, cannot thus be using this word without a conscious association of the Christians as the "people of God" being foremost.
 1. This reflects Paul's understanding of the predominantly Gentile Christians as now being of the new people of God.
 2. Paul then addresses the Thessalonians as "loved of God" (v. 4), reflecting the same understanding. (*Cf.* Deut. 32.15; Ps. 60.5; Isa. 44.2 for examples.)
4. The Thessalonians feared that believers who had died would not participate in the return of Jesus (which they expected was imminent).
- a. Paul introduces this problem, and then presents two arguments in response:
 - i. Jesus' resurrection is the guarantee of believers' resurrection. They will therefore be present at His return.
 - ii. God's Word makes it clear that believers will participate in the resurrection, whether they are dead or alive at the coming of Christ.
 - iii. This passage, along with others, speaks of those who are asleep. "Paradise" is differentiated from heaven or hell. At the resurrection, the faithful rise to heaven in body and in soul.