

The Testimony of Poets and Sages

Leader's Guide

by

Ross West

This *Leader's Guide* provides suggestions for guiding a group study of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* by W. H. Bellinger, Jr. The book is available from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., by calling **1-800-568-1248** or by visiting our on-line bookstore at **www.helwys.com/online.html**

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Introducing the Leader's Guide

This *Leader's Guide* provides suggestions for guiding a group study of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* by W. H. Bellinger, Jr. This book is a guide to understanding the Psalms and Wisdom Literature. The book is available from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., by calling this toll-free number: 1-800-568-1248.

How the Leader's Guide Can Help You

These teaching suggestions are intended to provide you with step-by-step ideas for helping the group understand, think about, and personalize the content of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*. Too, the suggestions in this *Leader's Guide* are intended to save time in preparation.

The teaching suggestions for each study session are sequenced and numbered so you can follow them step-by-step. When followed step-by-step, the suggestions will help you lead the group through the chapters in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*. If you choose to adapt the suggestions, rearrange them, skip some, or let them stir your creative juices to develop other suggestions, you'll find them helpful when used in those ways, too.

What These Study Sessions Can Be Like

Imagine your study group in an informal setting, either in a classroom at church or in someone's living room. Everyone in the group feels free to make comments, ask questions, and share personal insights about their lives and their faith. That's the kind of setting in which these teaching suggestions for *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* will have their most natural use.

These teaching suggestions provide guidance for leading a nine-session study of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*. (If time for additional sessions is available and the interest is also present, consider expanding the sessions on Job and Ecclesiastes to two sessions each instead of one.) Each study session is envisioned to be about fifty to sixty minutes long. If participants in your group engage freely in discussion (uh, talk a lot!) and you are concerned about "covering all the material," don't worry. Remember that we can sometimes help people learn more by teaching less. Connecting with significant ideas by talking about them can be a key part of the learning process.

The suggestions in this *Leader's Guide* follow the pattern of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* and thus provide a survey of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. If your study group wishes to extend the study and devote more time to particular passages of Scripture or particular issues, fine, of course! You may find it best, however, to use this study as a survey of these Bible books prior to digging into one of them more deeply.

Resources You'll Need to Lead This Study

The basic resources you'll need to lead this study include a copy of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*, a Bible, and this *Leader's Guide*. A chalkboard or other large writing surface will also be helpful, though not essential. For small group work, providing the assignments in written form will likely be helpful, though also not essential.

Beyond these basics, the study mainly depends on the personal insights and willingness to discuss them that you and your fellow participants bring to it.

How to Help Study Group Participants Get the Most Out of the Study

As you lead the study of Psalms and Wisdom Literature, try to develop an atmosphere of informality, friendliness, and mutual support that will encourage individual discussion and personal sharing. Here are some suggestions about how to make this happen:

- If possible, distribute the book *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* to group members prior to the first session.
- Be prepared to listen at least as much as you talk!
- Be willing to share your own personal pilgrimage so that others will more readily share theirs.
- Set up the meeting room in an informal way—with chairs in a circle or semi-circle, perhaps around a table.
- Agree on a beginning and ending time for the sessions, and stick to it.
- Encourage participants to enter into an agreement with one another to attend faithfully, prepare for each session, offer support to one another, and keep any confidences that are shared.
- Suggest that participants use one of these translations of the Bible: the New Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, the Contemporary English Version, or the New American Standard Version.

If possible, stay at least a session ahead of the group in your preparation. Also, if different leaders are leading various sessions, be sure those arrangements are made at least one session ahead—preferably more. Planning ahead may enable you to find ways of involving participants more in the study, perhaps by making some assignments in advance.

How Study Group Participants Can Get the Most Out of the Study

Your fellow study group members will get the most out of the study if, prior to the each session, they read the passage of Scripture for that session as well as the appropriate book chapter. As they read, perhaps they will also want to jot down questions and comments for class discussion. They'll certainly want to think about the meaning and personal relevance of the information.

Best wishes to you and your fellow study group participants!

Session One

Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible

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Overview: This study session deals with chapter one, “Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible,” in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* and focuses on an introduction to the psalms.

Learning Activities

1. As participants arrive, have the following questions displayed on a chalkboard or large sheet of paper, or printed on individual pieces of paper placed in each chair. Encourage early arrivals to begin talking about their responses.

- a. How many psalms are in the Book of Psalms?
- b. What purpose did the psalms serve in the life of Israel in biblical times?
- c. Which psalm do you recall hearing or reading more than any other?
- d. What is your favorite psalm?

2. When the suggested time to begin arrives, encourage discussion of these questions for a couple of minutes. Then share the first sentence in chapter 1 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*, “The book of Psalms is the most read and used of all the books in the Old Testament.” Ask the group why they think this statement is so. Then invite responses to the questions in step 1. Be prepared to share answers yourself as needed. [Possible answers: a. 150; b. the hymnal for worship; c. and d. Personal opinions. For many the answer to both *c* and *d* will be Psalm 23.]

3. Suggest that one way to enrich one’s understanding of and appreciation for the psalms is to pay attention to some factors about the structure of the psalms. Point out that the first chapter of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* identifies five of these factors—the title of the book, the books within the book of Psalms, the superscriptions, the collections within Psalms, and the poetic nature of the psalms.

- *The title.* Share the information on pages 1-2 about the title of the book of Psalms.
- *The books within Psalms.* Invite participants to turn to these psalms and place a marker at each psalm so they can refer to them readily: Psalms 1,42,73,90,107. Note that each of these

psalms begins a new “book” in the Psalter, from Book I to Book V. Invite different participants to read these verses while the remainder of the group listens for what they have in common: 41:13; 72:18-20; 89:52; 106:48; 150. Receive reports, and be sure participants see that each book concludes with a word of thanksgiving to God. Note that Psalm 150 does double-duty as a conclusion to the whole book as well as to Book V. Ask participants why they think there are five books in the Psalms (likely to correspond to the five books of the Law, the Pentateuch).

- *The superscriptions.* Call attention to an additional element in the organization of the Psalms—the superscriptions. Ask participants to scan through the Psalms and to note the information given between the number of the psalm and the first verse. Invite volunteers to read this information aloud while the group listens for the different sorts of information given. Refer, for example, to Psalms 3, 4, 5, 6, 18, 30, 42, 44, 50, 57, 59, 72, 73, 89, 90, 92, 102, 120. Refer to the three elements often included in the superscriptions (see *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*, 3): liturgical collections, technical terms related to worship, and historical notes. For superscriptions about liturgical collections, refer to Psalms 37, 72, 73, 87, and 89. For superscriptions about technical terms related to worship, refer to Psalms 4, 5, and 45. For superscriptions about historical notes, refer to Psalms 18, 59.
- *The collections.* Refer the group to page 4 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*. Note the various collections. Refer to the superscriptions of some of the psalms within each collection to help the group see why the collection is so named. For example, for the Davidic Collections, refer to Psalms 3, 4, 5, and 6, noting that each is “A Psalm of David.” Share the author’s comments on page 4 about the meaning of the Hebrew term translated “of.” Refer the group to psalms within each collection. Note that the names of the collections arise in several cases from the superscriptions (Korahite, Asaphite, and Songs of Ascents). The Elohistic Psalter gets its name from the Hebrew word used for God that is used in these psalms.
- *Parallelism in Hebrew poetry.* Ask, When we say that poetry rhymes, what do we generally mean? (rhymes in sound) Point out that Hebrew poetry does not rhyme in sound but in sense. This rhyming in sense is called parallelism. Share the information on page 6 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* about the three kinds of parallelism. Refer to the verses mentioned. Then ask the group to work together in pairs to identify the kind of parallelism in these verses: 1:1; 1:6; 2:4;

15:1; 19:1; 23:6; 32:10; 40:1; 90:6. Here's the key:
Synonymous—2:4; 15:1; 19:1; Antithetic—1:6; 32:10; 90:6;
Stair-step—1:1; 23:6; 27:6; 40:1.

4. Refer to the author's suggestions on page 6 that psalms are "poetic prayers" and "*pilgrimage songs of faith*." Note that much of the richness of faith and of life in general gets expressed in music—in the songs that we sing and hear sung. For the Hebrews, the psalms provided this rich expression of their faith as they experienced, lived it, and prayed it. As we read and study the psalms, we are able to appreciate the faith out of which they arose, and we are also led to experience and express our own faith in greater depth.

For next session: Read chapter two, "Reading the Psalms," in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*.

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Session Two

Reading the Psalms

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Overview: This study session deals with chapter two, “Reading the Psalms,” in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* and focuses on help participants can receive from others who have studied the psalms in depth.

Learning Activities

1. Ask what participants do if they are planning an automobile trip to a place they’ve never been (get a map, ask directions). Point out that others before us have studied the Psalms in detail and are thus able to offer guidance as we study them ourselves. This chapter considers what they have found and suggests how their guidance can help.

2. *The study of types of psalms—the form-critical approach.* Point out that hymnals often arrange hymns by certain types, meaning their content and suggested uses in worship. (You could show how the hymnal your church uses does this.) The form-critical approach to the study of the Psalms uses a similar method. The pioneer of this approach to studying the Psalms (Hermann Gunkel) identified five major types of psalms. Refer the group to these types as listed on pages 9-10 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*. If the class contains as many as five people, you could assign each type to a person, a pair, or a small group to lead in reporting on each type, including referring to the Scripture passages listed. Or you could lead the group through these types yourself. Then lead the group through reviewing the seven minor types of psalms this scholar identified, including reviewing at least one of the psalms in each type.

3. Point out that another student of the Psalms (Claus Westermann) simplified the previous scholar’s system of classification by suggesting that the psalms fall into two major types—plea and praise.

4. Refer to the author’s classification of the Psalms on pages 13-14 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*. Point out that that the author basically follows Gunkel’s types, learns from Westermann, and also adds other features to help in understanding. Ask the group to identify the two major categories (hymns, laments). Ask what they correspond to in

Westermann's classification (praise, pleas). Suggest that envisioning a worship experience in ancient Israel might help in understanding the Psalms. Ask someone to read aloud 1 Kings 8:1-13, which pictures the special worship service at which the Temple was dedicated. Then lead the group to read one psalm from each category and to identify words, phrases, or ideas that suggest why the psalm is in the category indicated. In studying the hymns, save the "general" category until after you have dealt with the other categories. In addition, omit Psalms 1, 2, 13, 23, 26, 30, 37, 98, 117, and 137 from study at this point, since the next session will deal with these psalms.

5. Note that another scholar (Sigmund Mowinckel) followed Gunkel's lead but emphasized the idea of the place of the Psalms in worship, especially in the Temple. He sought to identify the particular worship experiences in which specific psalms would be used. Ask someone to read aloud Psalm 105:1-5 while the group listens and looks for the actions of worship. Follow the same pattern with Psalm 100. Then refer the group to Psalm 95. Point out that Psalm 95 can be considered a combination of a song of praise and a sermon. Ask someone to read aloud Psalm 95, and suggest that the group listen for when the sermon begins (95:7b).

6. Review briefly the reasons mentioned on page 17 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* that trying to find the historical situation behind the psalms is no longer considered as useful an approach as these just studied (not possible to find specific historical connections).

7. *The literary approach.* Point out that in addition to the study of the types of psalms, understanding the various factors in what the author calls "the literary approach" (*The Testimony of Poets and Sages*, 18) is also helpful. Point out that poetic parallelism, which the group studied in the first session, is one of these factors. Ask the group to recall the three different kinds of parallelism. Page 20 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* provides four questions that can help "lead to a deeper encounter with the psalm." Use these questions and the author's comments about specific psalms on pages 21-23 to lead the group in studying Psalms 21, 100, 13, and 101.

8. *A canonical approach.* Suggest that another helpful approach to studying the Psalms is to consider factors being emphasized when the book of Psalms was being put together. Note that Psalms is part of that group of Old Testament books

known as The Writings, which did not take final form until after the Exile—much later, in some cases. Summarize from the information on pages 24-25 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* these factors being emphasized in ancient Israel during that time.

9. Point out that many consider that the order of the Psalms is purposeful rather than random. Thus, the psalm just before and just after the psalm being studied may help in understanding the psalm on which one is focusing.

10. *A theological approach.* Suggest that an essential way for understanding the Psalms is to read them out of the experience of one's own life, allowing them to speak to our lives. Summarize Walter Brueggemann's categories of the psalms—psalms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation (see *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*, 27). Ask various people to read aloud Psalm 145 (orientation); 74 or 79 (disorientation); 30 or 107 (new orientation); while the group listens for answers to these questions: (a) Is this a psalm of orientation, disorientation, or new orientation? (b) What in the psalm resonates with your experience?

11. Emphasize that the Psalms help us find ways to relate our faith to our lives and to give words to what we feel as we do.

For next session: Read pages 31-38 of chapter three, "Prayer and Praise in the Psalms," in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*.

Session Three

Prayer and Praise in the Psalms—I

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Overview: This study session deals with chapter three, “Prayer and Praise in the Psalms,” in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* and focuses on psalms of plea.

Learning Activities

1. Invite participants to recall some of the elements for understanding the Psalms that were studied in the previous two sessions. State that this session will focus on studying the psalms of plea, using the information learned in the first two sessions.

2. *Psalm 13.* Encourage participants to turn to Psalm 13 in their Bibles. Then ask them to turn to page 13 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* and find where Psalm 13 is listed. Note that Psalm 13 is considered an individual lament. Point out on pages 31-32 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* the general structure of the laments—invocation, complaint, petition, conclusion. Ask someone to read Psalm 13 aloud, and ask the group to watch for this structure in the psalm. Lead the group to identify the verses that correspond to the structure. Select ideas from the author’s comments on this psalm on pages 32-34 to help participants interpret the psalm. Ask, How does this psalm speak to our own feelings of oppression by enemies and abandonment by God when things are not going well with us? How accurate is the picture? How do you suppose the psalmist was able to move from the concerns in verse 4 to the assurance in verse 5?

3. *Psalm 26.* Lead the group to study Psalm 26. Ask the group to watch for how the general structure of the lament appears in this psalm as someone reads Psalm 26 aloud. (Invocation, 26:1; complaint implied, 26:1, 4-10; petition, 26:10-11; conclusion, 26:3,11-12) Invite comments on the kind of problem the psalmist was facing. Ask: In what circumstances do God’s people face such problems today? Is it right to pray for vindication by God? How can we arrive at a conclusion similar to that of the psalmist?

4. *Psalm 137.* Invite the group to turn to Psalm 137. Then ask them to turn to pages 13-14 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* and find where Psalm 137 is listed (community lament).

Ask someone to read 137:1-3 aloud. Ask, What circumstances are depicted? (Exile to Babylon) Read aloud 137:4-9. Ask group members to listen for the emotions expressed. Invite responses. Continue the discussion by asking, How can we read this psalm appropriately in light of Jesus' teachings on love? (Instead of holding grudges, they prayed about them honestly before God.)

5. Ask the group whether they know of someone to whose needs one or more of these four psalms speaks. Invite comments. Lead the group to think of how the message of this psalm can be shared with such persons. Consider additional biblical insights that would be helpful. Then invite comments about situations in which the ideas in these psalms of plea were helpful to participants themselves. After comments, read one of the psalms as an act of group worship and encouragement.

For next session: Read pages 38-48 of chapter three, "Prayer and Praise in the Psalms," in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*.

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Session Four

Prayer and Praise in the Psalms—II

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Overview: This study session continues to deal with chapter three, “Prayer and Praise in the Psalms,” in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* and focuses on psalms of praise.

Learning Activities

1. Refer to the classification of psalms on pages 13-14 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*. Point out that this session will deal with hymns, the psalms of praise.
2. *Psalm 30*. Lead the group to turn now to the psalms of praise, specifically to a psalm of thanksgiving, Psalm 30. Ask the group to find Psalm 30 in the classification on pages 13-14 (individual thanksgivings). Share with the group the general structure of the psalms of thanksgiving—introduction, narrative, conclusion (*The Testimony of Poets and Sages*, 38). Invite three participants to read the psalm by sections—verses 1-5, 6-11, 12. Note in verse 3 the depth of the psalm writer’s problem. Ask participants to comment on personal applications of verse 5. Refer to verse 6 and ask what sort of experience is suggested (a surprising reversal of fortune, from being on top of the world to having the world fall apart). Ask: What did the psalmist do? (30:8-10) What did God do in response? (30:11) How did the psalmist respond? (30:12) Invite reflection by asking: What about this psalm troubles you? What image gives you the most positive feeling toward God?
3. *Psalm 117*. Refer the group to Psalm 117, the shortest psalm in the book of Psalms. Point out the structure of this psalm. Ask someone to read the psalm while the group looks for verses that portray the various parts of the structure. Ask, why should the Lord be praised, according to this psalm? (See verse 2.)
4. *Psalm 23*. Ask someone to read this psalm aloud. Ask, (a) What sort of experience had the psalmist had? (b) How are the experiences of this psalm related to worship in “the house of the Lord”? (c) To what extent do people today see this connection?

5. *Psalm 98*. Invite participants to find the classification of Psalm 98 on page 13 and to note that all but one of the other psalms in this classification are grouped together. Ask the group to read this psalm silently and to identify the following:

- (1) why the Lord is to be praised;
- (2) how Israel is to praise the Lord;
- (3) who and what beyond Israel are to praise the Lord.

Receive reports. Discuss: What similar times could this psalm be used in our own private or corporate worship?

[Some suggested answers: (1) God has been victorious and has shown his steadfast love to Israel; (2) Israel is to sing to the Lord a new song, make joyful noise, sing praise with the lyre, trumpets, horn; (3) All the nations and all creation. Note the author's suggestion on page 43 about possible times Israel might have used this psalm in worship.]

6. *Psalm 2*. Refer the group to Psalm 2, and summarize the author's comments about the likely original usage of this psalm in crowning a new king in the Davidic line. Invite a volunteer to read Psalm 2 aloud while the group listens for ideas that would be appropriate for such an occasion. Ask the group: What questions would this psalm have helped the people answer as they heard it or later read it? (How do our king, our nation, and our God stack up in comparison to those of other peoples? What is to be the relation of the king to God? What should other nations do?)

7. *Psalm 37*. Note that Psalm 37 is a wisdom psalm, singing about wisdom that provides guidance for daily living. Ask the group to read this psalm silently, looking for ideas that seem especially applicable to their lives. Before receiving reports, ask which other Bible book this psalm reminds them of (it's a lot like Proverbs).

8. Invite participants to name words or phrases that express their feelings about the psalms.

For next session: Read chapter four, "What Is Wisdom?" in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*.

Session Five

What Is Wisdom?

Overview: This study session deals with chapter four, “What Is Wisdom?” in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* and focuses on the nature of wisdom in the Old Testament and in the ancient Near East.

Learning Activities

1. Give the following true-false quiz as a way of generating discussion and encouraging learning. Make it light; have fun. Perhaps ask people to work in pairs and agree on their answers. Ask participants to letter a piece of paper *a* through *f*. Read the statements and ask pairs to put “T” or “F” beside each letter:

- a. The books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes contain a type of literature known as wisdom literature.
- b. Only the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament contain wisdom literature or are related to the wisdom movement in Israel.
- c. As far as is known, only Israel and no other nations of the ancient Near East had wisdom literature.
- d. The idea of “wisdom” includes skill, intelligence, knowledge, and insight.
- e. Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes are alike in how they view wisdom.
- f. Solomon is related closely to the beginning of the wisdom movement in Israel.

2. Ask participants to work in pairs to scan chapter 4 in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* and try to find information to back up their answers. Participants are to jot down the page numbers beside the answers. Allow about nine minutes for this search. Ask participants to stand up when they’ve completed the assignment.

3. Review each of the statements, asking for page numbers in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* to back up the answers given. Add additional comments as each statement is reviewed.

- a. True (p. 49)

- b. False (p. 50) Point out from this page the various places in which wisdom is part of the Old Testament, including Joseph, Daniel, Solomon, and the wisdom psalms.
- c. False (p. 51) Note especially the Wisdom of Amenemope, from Egypt, that appears to be related in some way to Proverbs 22:17 to 24:22.
- d. True (p. 52) Add insights from the variety of meanings suggested.
- e. False (p. 54) Note that the wisdom in Job and Ecclesiastes is of a different sort from that in Proverbs. Proverbs takes more of a how-to approach based on traditional thinking. Job and Ecclesiastes challenge traditional thought and are not as certain that universally satisfactory answers are possible to achieve. Refer to the “Framework for Reading the Wisdom Books” on pages 57-58 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*. Point that Proverbs tends to suggest the things one can do to make life good, while Job and Ecclesiastes tend to suggest that there are limits to what one can do to make life good. In fact, Job and Ecclesiastes tend to suggest that human beings are limited in their ability to control life and even to understand it.
- f. True (pp. 55-56) Summarize the suggestions about Solomon’s role in the wisdom movement.

4. Encourage the group to name as many answers as possible to this question: What need do people who live in a world of computers have for the wisdom literature of the Bible? Jot them down on a large piece of paper or a chalkboard. Encourage study of next week’s material on the book of Proverbs.

For next session: Read pages 59-68 of chapter five, “Proverbs: Wisdom for Full Living,” in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*.

Session Six

Proverbs: Wisdom for Full Living—I

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Overview: This study session deals with chapter five, “Proverbs: Wisdom for Full Living,” in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* and focuses on Proverbs 1:1—22:16.

Learning Activities

1. Remind the group that not just Israel but other cultures in the ancient Near East had wisdom literature, including proverbs. In fact, every culture has its proverbs. Ask the group to name some proverbs from American culture. (“Haste makes waste.” “The early bird gets the worm.” “A stitch in time saves nine.” “Waste not, want not.” “A penny saved is a penny earned.” “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”)

2. Ask the group to suggest definitions of proverbs. Refer as needed to these ideas from *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*: “They are compact and memorable sayings of practical instruction. They might be called a teaching sentence about living fully.” (p. 59) “...a brief, pungent teaching sentence. It offers concrete, cogent advice for living.” (p. 60)

3. Refer to the types of proverbs mentioned on page 59 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*. Read the proverbs that are examples of each type, and discuss how each proverb fits the type named. Point out, too, that the ideas about poetic parallelism discussed in the study of the Psalms also apply to Proverbs.

4. Summarize from pages 60-61 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* the author’s discussion of the relation of Solomon to the book of Proverbs.

5. Refer to this statement on page 62 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*: “It is important to remember that these sayings present tendencies or generalizations about full living. They are not to be read as an attempt to cover every detail of life.” Ask what this statement suggests about how we are to interpret a proverb. (This wisdom works generally and in ordinary circumstances. The fact that exceptions occur does not necessarily make the proverb null and void.)

6. Lead the group in reviewing the content of Proverbs by referring to the outline on page 62 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* and the comments on pages 63-71.

Suggest that 1:2-7 states the purpose of the book. Ask someone to read these verses and for the group to listen for the purpose, the intended audience, and the foundation of the wisdom in the book. (Purpose, 1:2-4; audience, 1:4-5; foundation, 1:7)

7. Point out that Proverbs 1—9 is different in nature from the rest of the book. It tends to hold together as a section. An additional feature is that wisdom is personified in these chapters. Ask, What do we mean by “personified.”? Read 1:20-33 as an example. Inquire, What features do you note about how wisdom is personified and about wisdom’s message? (personified as a woman; message is essential to successful life) Ask someone to read 8:22-36 to see a further description of the personification of wisdom as a woman. Point out that this personification continues in chapter 9, where wisdom is contrasted with folly. Read aloud 9:1-5 and 9:13-18. Ask the group to name contrasts in these pictures.

8. Point out that Proverbs 10:1 to 22:16 is a collection of proverbs on various subjects and with no extended treatment of subjects as exists in Proverbs 1—9. Assign a chapter in Proverbs 10—22 to each group of three people. Ask the group to read the passage aloud and to identify the five proverbs that seem the most meaningful, interesting, or unusual. Ask each group to read their selections to the entire group and to explain why they chose them.

For next session: Read pages 68-72 of chapter five, , “Proverbs: Wisdom for Full Living,” in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*.

Session Seven

Proverbs: Wisdom for Full Living—II

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Overview: This study session deals with chapter five, “Proverbs: Wisdom for Full Living,” in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* and focuses on Proverbs 22:17—31:31.

Learning Activities

1. Ask the group to recall one thing they remember from last session’s study of Proverbs.
2. Refer to Proverbs 22:17 to 24:34 and note that this section contains two collections of proverbs. The first is in 22:17—24:22 and appears to have some relationship to an Egyptian collection. Refer to 22:29; 23:1-2; 24:15-16. Ask the group to compare 22:17 and 24:23. (Both are introductions to “sayings of the wise.”)
3. Note that 25:1 to 29:27 contains another collection of proverbs related to Solomon. Read 25:1. Also read 26:27; 29:14 to see the concern for moral living. Ask the group to scan this section silently to identify proverbs that attract their interest.
4. Refer to 30:1, which indicates that this verse marks the beginning of “the words of Agur.” Point out that a feature of this section is the numerical proverbs in 30:15-31. Read 30:18-20 as an example.
5. Ask someone to read aloud Proverbs 31:1-9, and point out the three main points of advice the author identifies on page 70 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*.
6. Refer to Proverbs 31:10-31, and point out that this poem is an acrostic, with each verse beginning in order with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Invite someone to read this passage aloud. The group is to listen for the various areas in which this “good wife” excels. Be sure to note that she excels in business and in the community as well as in the home.
7. Use the exercise on page 71 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*, either with the group as a whole or by assigning the proverbs to small groups of three-to-five participants. If you do the exercise together, you may wish to choose only one or two of the passages to work through.

For next session: Read chapter 6 in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*.

Session Eight

Job: Wisdom in Dialogue

NOTES

Overview: This study session deals with chapter six, “Job: Wisdom in Dialogue,” in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* and focuses on the book of Job.

Learning Activities

1. Ask the group to begin naming events in the story of Job before the three friends join him. Jot down these events on a chalkboard or large sheet of paper in the order in which these incidents are named. After everyone has told all they remember, encourage the group to scan Job 1—2 and to suggest the order in which the events actually come. Number the events in the correct order. Add important events that were omitted, and correct any errors of fact.
2. Summarize the remainder of the book of Job by referring to the following outline on pages 73-74 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*. Note that in Job 3, Job laments what has happened to him. Then Job 4—31 contains two full rounds and part of another of speeches by each of Job’s three friends, with Job responding after each has spoken. In Job 32, a new speaker, an “angry young man,” begins to speak, continuing through Job 37. In Job 38—41, God speaks out of the whirlwind, interrupted by only one brief, contrite word from Job.
3. Ask the group to name events that occurred at the end of the story of Job. Again, jot down these events on a chalkboard or large sheet of paper in the order in which these incidents are named. After everyone has told all they remember, encourage the group scan Job 42 and to suggest the order in which the events actually occurred. Number the events in the correct order. Add important events that were left out, and correct errors of fact.
4. Remind the group that the book of Job is a book of wisdom, but its approach is different from that of Proverbs. Job challenges the traditional view described in Proverbs.
5. Summarize the author’s comments about the composition, date, literary form, and setting of the book of Job.

6. Ask the group what the main problem Job and his friends had with the fact that he had suffered. (Their current orthodox theology taught that suffering came because of sin. Note that deuteronomic theology had taught that all who are faithful to God are blessed and that all sinners suffer. Current traditional theology had perverted this to say that all who suffer are sinners. Job as well as his friends believed this. Much of the conversation between Job and his friends can be likened to schoolchildren arguing in the schoolyard and saying “did too” and “did not” to each other.)

7. Point out that in the course of the argument with his three friends, Job began to show signs of growth; he began to focus not so much on the friends’ argument, but on the nature of God. Refer to Job 19:23-27, where Job expressed his desire for a “redeemer”—a go-between to plead his case with God. Job realized that his theology wasn’t working because it didn’t fit with the reality of his experience no matter how orthodox his theology was. Out of both desperation and hope, Job sought help.

8. Ask participants to turn to Job 38, the turning point of the book, in which God answers Job out of the whirlwind. Ask someone to read aloud Job 38:2-21. Ask the group to listen for the message of these verses. Invite responses after the reading. Ask how they think they might have felt had they been Job. Read 40:1-2 for God’s question and 40:3-5 for Job’s response. Note that God’s questioning continues in Job 40—41.

9. Invite two people who have the same Bible translations to read 42:2-6. One person is to read the statements in single quotes, which are quotations from God’s speeches, and the other is to read Job’s statements. Ask, Of what did Job repent? (Not of sin, but evidently, in light of Job 38—41, of the human arrogance that had led Job to think he knew all the answers. See *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*, 90.)

10. Note that Job never had his questions answered about why he was suffering. Suggest that Job seems to be like a child who has a problem and can’t find his parent. When the parent comes back, the child is so happy to see the parent that he forgets about his problem. With Job, when God came to him, Job found he didn’t have to have his questions answered, but rather he rested in the assurance that all would be well because God was with him.

11. Invite responses as to how participants feel the book of Job speaks to them.

For next session: Read chapter seven, “Ecclesiastes: Search for Meaning,” and the conclusion of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*.

NOTES

Session Nine

Ecclesiastes: Search for Meaning

Overview: This study session deals with chapter seven, “Ecclesiastes: Search for Meaning,” in *The Testimony of Poets and Sages* and focuses on the book of Ecclesiastes.

Learning Activities

1. Ask the group to name one idea or phrase they remember from the book of Ecclesiastes (likely it is “vanity of vanities, all is vanity”). Point out that like the book of Job, the book of Ecclesiastes is a maverick among wisdom literature. Ecclesiastes contains speculative wisdom and challenges tradition. The wisdom literature of the book of Proverbs tends to be positive, telling how to make everything work out well. Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, says that even when human beings try to make it work out well, it won’t necessarily do so. Some things in life are not subject to human control. Ecclesiastes serves as a corrective to a too-rosy view of life that tends to ignore parts of reality. Ecclesiastes provides wisdom about how to live in a world like that, where all the questions can’t be answered satisfactorily.

2. Summarize the author’s comments about the background of Ecclesiastes (*The Testimony of Poets and Sages*, 93-95) to guide in studying the title, authorship, and date of Ecclesiastes. You could ask the group to scan a section and then ask the group to summarize it. Review the sections on authorship and date together.

3. Refer to Ecclesiastes 1—2 and ask participants to answer these questions, either as you ask them or in small groups:
 - a. Read verses 2 and 14 and restate them as we might say them in everyday language. Compare translations of these verses.
 - b. What answer is anticipated to the question in verse 3?
 - c. What ideas is Ecclesiastes attempting to convey with the images in 1:4-11?
 - d. What human desires are behind 1:3-11?
 - e. What experiences have you had that resonate with these ideas?
 - f. Note in 1:17—2:11 the experiments the author of Ecclesiastes conducted to try to find meaning in his life (1:17, wisdom; 2:1-3, pleasure, laughter, wine; 2:4-8, possessions; 2:9, success, greatness, fame).

- g. Compare 1:17 and 2:12-13. How does Ecclesiastes see wisdom as compared to how the traditional teachers of wisdom saw it?
4. Ask someone to read aloud Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. Invite comments on the meaning of these verses. Refer to the author's comments about them on page 98 of *The Testimony of Poets and Sages*.
5. Refer the group also to Ecclesiastes 9:11-12. Ask what these verses suggest about human efforts and human control of life. (Results sometimes are out of the control of human beings.)
6. Note that Ecclesiastes is concerned with how to live in this kind of world. Lead the class to review several passages from which they may draw summary principles. Write these on a chalkboard or large piece of paper. You could assign these Scriptures to several small groups for study and reporting of the principles they see.
- a. 2:24-25; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18-19; 8:15; 9:7-10. (Be content with the basics of life.)
 - b. 4:6; 5:10-17; 6:7 (Beware of thinking money will bring meaning.)
 - c. 7:13-18 (Act in moderation in everything; don't go overboard on anything.)
 - d. 12:1, 11-14 (Live in reverence for God, beginning in your youth.)
7. Ask the group to evaluate these principles and to suggest what else they feel they need to live in a world that sometimes seems meaningless. (For example: God's grace as seen in Christ; the hope of the resurrection.)
8. Ask the group to imagine it is meeting to decide on the books that are to go in what we call the Old Testament. Some want to put Ecclesiastes and Job in the Bible, and others want to leave them out. Why should they be included? Why should they be omitted? (You could stage a debate over these questions by forming two groups in the class and asking them to think of reasons to include and exclude the books.)
9. Invite each person in the group to tell one of the most meaningful parts of this study of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. You could do this in pairs or small groups of three to five people each.