

## KETUBIM

### THE WRITINGS—IN STORIES, SAYINGS, AND SONGS

The third major division of the Hebrew Scriptures is known as the “Ketubim” or “the Hagiographa” or simply “the Writings.” It is a group of a dozen miscellaneous books:



**POETRY** – *Psalms, Proverbs, Job*

**FESTIVAL SCROLLS** – *Song of Songs . . . . . to be read at Passover*  
– *Ruth . . . . . at Pentecost*  
– *Lamentations . . . . . at the Fall of Jerusalem*  
– *Ecclesiastes . . . . . at Tabernacles*  
– *Esther . . . . . at Purim*

**PROPHECY** – *Daniel*

**HISTORY** – *Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles*

### HEBREW POETRY

The chief characteristics of Hebrew poetry are its rhythmic sound and progression of thoughts. Its poetic verbal techniques include:

- alliteration - Several words begin with the same sound.
- assonance - Several words contain the same vowel sound.
- paronomasia - There is a play on similar-sounding words.
- onomatopoeia - Words sound like what they describe.

Each verse of Hebrew poetry contains two or more lines (also called stichs or cola) which develop a parallel progression of thoughts:

- synonymous - The second line repeats the thought of the first line.
- antithetic - The second line contrasts the thought of the first.
- synthetic - The second line adds to the thought of the first.

### WISDOM LITERATURE

In the ancient Near East the “wise man” was often an advisor in the royal courts, and later a teacher in the schools for upper-class youth. Initially the teachings of the Wise were in the form of short proverbs. Later the concept of Wisdom was personified as a divine quality apart from humanity, a force which gave form to creation.

The Israelite Wisdom tradition is marked by its anthropocentric outlook. It is based on reason, not on the events of history. And it is directed toward the individual, not the cultic community.

### APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

“Apocalyptic” is the name given to an unusual, nearly bizarre style of Jewish literature written primarily from 200 BCE to 200 CE. It was the underground literature of persecuted Jews and Christians who were suffering under pagan rulers.

### CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Bedtime stories and fairy tales, family and play-ground songs, proverbs and maxims--all are some of the memories we may remember from when we were children. They may have had a way of influencing our outlook on life as adults.

What are some of the stories, songs, and wise sayings you remember from your childhood?

Have these been positive, enriching experiences?

Or have they been somewhat negative or even detrimental?

Such writings are essentially dualistic (they picture the universe as a battle ground for the power of good and evil) and eschatological (they emphasize the end of time when God destroys his enemies and saves his followers). Affairs in the heavenly realm are paralleled by events on the earth.

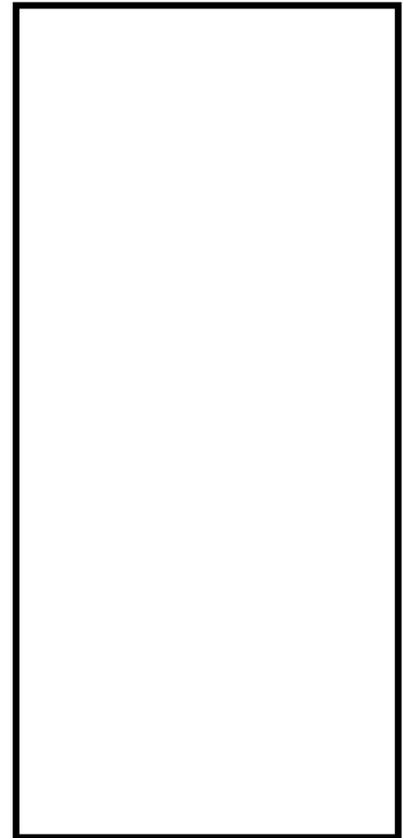
This highly colorful literature usually includes such features as visions, pseudonymity, a messiah figure, angels and demons, animal symbolism, numerology, predicted woes, and the influence of the stars and other heavenly bodies.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WRITINGS**

Both the Pentateuch and the Prophets have a noticeable historical character. Not only do they relate historical narratives, but they were obviously conditioned by historical events. Their theme centers on how God deals with people in history.

However, the Writings are less obviously historical. Of course they were shaped by the history of the times in which they were composed and they include numerous narratives. But they are slanted toward showing how people respond to God, rather than toward how events are played out in history.

Modern readers can appreciate the poetic, literary, and visionary impact of the Writings, and we can use them in varying degrees to express our own longings and hopes.





**DEPRESSION**

The emotions expressed in the laments bear a striking similarity to the symptoms of clinical depression.

A feeling of unalleviated sadness, inability to sleep or make decisions, a loss of interest in eating or sex, and a preoccupation with suicide—these are some indicators of this illness which affects over 10% of the population.

Although only 25% may seek treatment, yet over 80% can be treated effectively.

Who are the people who suffer from this no-fault bio-chemical brain disease?

How can they best be treated? Where can we go for help?

How can members of a worshipping community support those who suffer from depression?

The original authors of few if any of the psalms are known, for the superscriptions were not added until the psalms were collected, and they do not necessarily indicate authorship. Many were composed by the priests or by individuals for use in worship.

Because they were written over a period of 700 years, the psalms reflect a variety of religious emotions and types of devotion. Only 150 of the thousands of psalms which had been written were finally selected and adapted for use in connection with the worship at the Second Temple and in the synagogues of later Judaism. This final collection, which was made around 400-200 BCE and which includes several smaller collections, was divided into five books, each of which concludes with a doxology.

**A. Book One (Psalms 1-41)**

- 1. *Davidic psalms (3-41)*

**B. Book Two (Psalms 42-72)**

- 1. *Korahite psalms (42-49)*
- 2. *Davidic psalms (51-72)*

Psalms 42-83 comprise the Elohist psalter.

**C. Book Three (Psalms 73-89)**

- 1. *Asaph psalms (50, 73-83)*
- 2. *Korahite psalms (84-85, 87-88)*

Additional Davidic psalms are found throughout the collection.

**D. Book Four (Psalms 90-106)**

**E. Book Five (Psalms 107-150)**

- 1. *Hallelujah psalms (111-112, 146-150)*
  - a. *the Egyptian Hallel (113-118)*
  - b. *the Great Hallel (135-36)*
- 2. *Pilgrim psalms (120-134)*

The “orphan psalms” are concentrated in Books Four and Five.

**FROM DESPAIR TO DELIGHT**

The psalter contains a variety of ways in which the people of Israel could address their God. The most basic form is the lament, which gives expression to the elemental human experience of anguish and grief. Classic laments proceed through several emotional stages:

- address, - an appeal to the Lord (*Yahweh*) or to God (*Elohim*)
- complaint, - emotional description of the problem
- petition, - payer for deliverance
- motivation, - argument for why the prayer should be answered
- assurance, - confidence that the petitioner will receive relief
- vow, and - promise to offer sacrificial praise
- thanksgiving - gratitude for anticipated deliverance

This shape reflects not only the flow of Israel’s history but also the real experiences of individuals and families.

At the other extreme are the hymns of praise which exult in the sheer goodness and generosity of God. Between those poles are numerous other forms adapted to the various cultic needs of the worshipping community.

## DIFFERENT SONGS FOR DIFFERENT OCCASIONS

The psalms may be classified in different categories. If the cry of distress expressed in the laments is the poetic expression of a “primal scream” of pain when things go wrong, then psalms of thanksgiving and hymns of praise are the natural reaction when things are put right again.

Communal Laments – (11) (43) 44 (60) 74 79 80 83 (90)

Personal Laments – 3 4 5 6 7 (11) 13 17 22 25 26 27a 28 31 35 38 39  
42-43 51 (52) 54 55 56 57 59 61 63 64 69 70 71 86 88 102 109  
120 130 140 141 142 143

Hymns – 8 19 (29) 33 34 46 47 48 65 68 76 (84) 87 93 96 97 98 99  
100 103 104 111 113 114 115 117 135 136 145 146 147 148 149  
150

Communal Thanks – 67 24

Personal Thanks – (13) 30 32 66 92 116 118 138

Royal Psalms – 2 18 20 21 (29) 45 72 101 110 132

Wisdom Poetry – 1 37 49 73 112 127 128 133 139

Pilgrim Songs – 122 134

Liturgies – 2 12 14 15 20 24 41 50 53 (60) 71 75 81 82 85 (91) 100  
110 115 119 121 126 133 136

Mixed Poems – 9-10 36 40 58 77 78 89 90 94 107 108 119 123 129  
131 137 139 144

Personal Trust – 16 23 27b 62 (91) 121

## POETIC RESPONSES TO GOD

The book of Psalms is unique in that it does not describe the way in which God deals with his people as much as it gives voice to the way those people respond to their God. Often poets’ thoughts are expressed in vivid images and symbols. Such metaphors open up one’s imagination to experience the world in new and striking patterns.

Modern readers may still find this engrossing selection useful in order for us to practice the kind of language which enables us to place ourselves in the presence of God. The variety of poetic expression is wide enough to accommodate every emotion and situation. Because the psalms grew out of the experience of the worshiping community, they may still be most effective when we pray them in corporate worship. But they also lend themselves to personal devotion and prayer, especially in times of profound distress or surprising joy.





The first cycle of dialogues contains three parts:

- 1 – The friend’s accusation,
- 2 – Job’s response,
- 3 – and his complaint against God.

The second and third cycles are shorter, with only an accusation and a response.

Furthermore, the third cycle seems incomplete, as though there were no more to say.

The book of Job is part of Israel’s wisdom tradition. It focuses on the problem of evil in the world: “Why does God permit a righteous person to suffer?” The author never answers that question directly. The book rejects the traditional solution, namely, that suffering is a punishment for sin, and it does not even attempt to try to defend God’s actions.

Job’s three friends offer the standard solutions of the sages, but these are repeatedly refuted. The bombastic retort of a fourth friend exaggerates the inability of conventional wisdom to deal with the issue that God does not seem to be just or fair.

Instead, the poet pictures Job’s personal encounter with God in a way which suggests that ultimately God’s actions are truly incomprehensible. People cannot find that peace which overcomes human troubles until they place their own insignificance completely under God’s control and do not even dare to presume to question God’s motives or actions.

In its present, form the main poetic dialogue, which dramatizes the tragedy of the human predicament, is bracketed by a prose legend, which asserts the sovereignty of God.

*Prologue: Yahweh allows the Satan to afflict Job (1:1-2:13)*

*A. The Dialogue between Job and His Friends*

1. *Job’s Complaint: life is miserable (3:1-26)*
2. *First Cycle*
  - a. *Eliphaz: the good prosper; the bad suffer (4:1-5:27, 6:1-30, 7:1-21)*
  - b. *Bildad: repent, and God will restore you (8:1-22, 9:1-35, 10:1-22)*
  - c. *Zophar: humans cannot understand God (11:1-20, 12:1-13:17, \ 13:18-14:22)*
3. *Second Cycle*
  - a. *Eliphaz: complainers must be guilty of something (15:1-35, 16:1-17:16)*
  - b. *Bildad: God does indeed punish the wicked (18:1-21, 19:1-29)*
  - c. *Zophar: the wicked are the ones who always suffer (20:1-29,21:1-34)*
4. *Third Cycle*
  - a. *Eliphaz: God abases the proud (22:1-30, 23:1-17, 24:1-25)*
  - b. *Bildad: no human can be innocent (25:1-6, 26:1-14, 27:1-23)*
5. *Poem on the Inaccessibility of Wisdom (28:1-28)*
6. *Job’s conclusion: an oath and a challenge (29:1-31:40)*

*B. The Speeches of Elihu*

1. *First: listen to God and be chastened (32:6-33:33)*
2. *Second: God is good to those who are good (34:1-37)*
3. *Third: the world is too large for comprehension (35:1-16)*
4. *Fourth: God is almighty and just (36:1-37:24)*

*C. The Speeches of Yahweh and Job’s Submission*

1. *First: look at the universe! (38:1-39:30, 40:1-5)*
2. *Second: look at Behemoth & Leviathan! (40:6-41:34, 42:1-6)*

*Epilogue: Yahweh restores Job’s fortunes (42:7-17)*

## ANCIENT ORIGINS

Job is an anonymous book. Its narrative is set in the time of the Patriarchs. But on the basis of its literary form and theological ideas biblical scholars suggest that it was written in its final form around 600-300 BCE.

Some portions—such as the Prologue and Epilogue, the Elihu speeches, and the Wisdom poem—may have been written by someone other than the main poet of the Dialogues. Many of the themes and legends in Job go back as far as 2000 BCE and have close affinities with the wisdom traditions of the Babylonians, the Hittites, and the Egyptians. In fact, the characters in the book are all non-Israelite Edomites.

The book includes a variety of literary forms, such as lyrics, epics, dramas, hymns, laments, thanksgivings, oaths, confessions, and theophanies. All of these have been adapted with considerable artistic skill by the poet who composed Job.

## CATHARSIS FOR EVIL

The unsurpassed poetic power of this book continues to impress modern men and women who have experienced some of the unfairness of life and who have suffered unjustly. Although Job never fully resolves the problem of evil in the world, it functions in a cathartic fashion which allows us as sympathetic readers to express the full range of frustration and anger.

In effect it enables us to work through our rage and grief and then move into a more realistic life posture in which we can recognize the limitations of human existence and which allows us to live more comfortably in a random universe.

### WHY EVIL?

Rabbi Harold Kushner's famous book on the problem of evil was titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, not

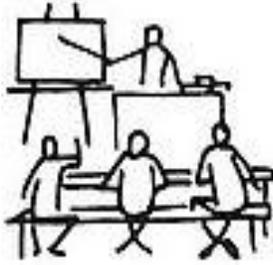
*Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

Is there a difference?



## PROVERBS

### LOTS OF GOOD ADVICE



#### A MIDDLE CLASS BIAS

The advice in the book of Proverbs is largely given from and for middle-class people. It is directed toward those who want to do well in life and improve their social and economic status.

Is this a realistic or healthy perspective?

How does a middle-class bias affect the way we read the Bible?

How does it affect the way we view the world?

Would our interpretations of Scripture and our values for living change if we saw them from a lower-class perspective?

The book of Proverbs is made up of several collections of proverbs and poems; many originated before the Exile and some possibly before 1000 BCE. In its present form it was compiled and edited after the Exile, probably after 400 but before 200 BCE.

The book is a compendium of practical instructions for teaching upper class youth and their elders the wisdom which leads to a satisfying life. The proverbs may have been rooted in more ancient traditions of the family or clan, or they may have been a product of the royal courts or even of scribal schools.

The wisdom in Proverbs is not unlike the wisdom traditions of other ancient cultures. Canaanite, Babylonian, Assyrian, and especially Egyptian traditions—such as the “Instruction of Amenemopet”—influenced the Israelite wisdom literature (cf. Prov. 22:17-23:11). It is hard to determine how ancient some of the materials may be.

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#### *Title Page and Motto (1:1-7)*

#### A. *Discourses and Poems in Praise of Wisdom*

1. *Ten Discourses with Poems (1:8-33, 2:1-22, 3:1-20, 3:21-35, 4:1-9, 4:10-19, 4:20-27, 5:1-6:19, 6:20-35, 7:1-27)*
2. *A Speech of Wisdom Personified (8:1-36)*
3. *A Poem about Wisdom and Folly (9:1-18)*

#### B. *First Collection of Solomon's Proverbs*

1. *Primarily antithetic couplets (10:1-15:33)*
2. *Primarily synonymous couplets (16:1-22:16)*

#### C. *Thirty Sayings of the Wise*

1. *Preface (22:17-21)*
2. *Precepts One to Ten (22:22-23:11)*
3. *Precepts Eleven to Thirty (23:12-24:22)*
4. *Additional Sayings of the Wise (24:23-34)*

#### D. *Second Collection of Solomon's Proverbs*

1. *Mostly synonymous and synthetic couplets (25:1-27:22)*
2. *A Poem about Grazing (27:23-37)*
3. *Mostly antithetic couplets (28:1-29:27)*

#### E. *Four Appendices*

1. *The Words of Agur (30:1-9)*
  2. *Assorted proverbs (30:10-33)*
  3. *The Words of King Lemuel's Mother (31:1-9)*
  4. *Acrostic Poem on the Ideal Housewife (31:10-31)*
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#### THE GROWTH OF WISDOM

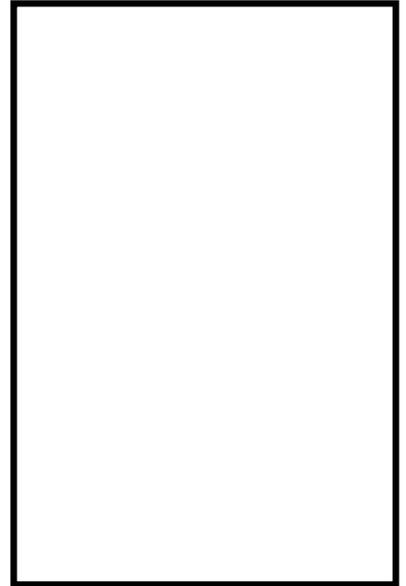
Short one-line proverbs which teach individual success seem to be the oldest. These are either statements which are somewhat enigmatic and stimulate thought and which are open to more than one application, or they are admonitions which give clear practical advice. Next come those teachings which are concerned with community life; then developed those which promote religious morality. Finally longer passages of instructional material were composed.

## **THE BEST OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE**

Proverbs' teachings are based on human experience which analyzes the created order and tries to discover a sensible way of living successfully. It is an optimistic assessment of human possibilities, and it assumes that wisdom or righteousness leads to life, while folly or wickedness leads to destruction.

Later, wisdom was subordinated to the religion of Yahweh. Wisdom was then viewed as a gift from God to be obtained only by those who practice humility before him. In some cases Wisdom became personified as a female force—the Greek term is Sophia—and treated as a divine quality which shapes the universe.

Modern readers will find many of the proverbs relevant and applicable to everyday life. More significantly, our attempt to discover an overarching approach to living, a reasonable system that gives an overall perspective to our existence, continues to appeal to contemporary inquiring minds.





## WORLD HUNGER

Famines plague the world today just as they did in the days of Ruth.

Is the problem a lack of food? A lack of arable land? Of distribution resources?

What can we do to help feed starving people?

Have you ever heard of a Christian lobbying group known as *Bread For The World*?

## RUTH

### NOMI'S STORY: FROM EMPTY TO FULL

The book of Ruth is an almost poetic short story, placed in an idyllic pastoral setting sometime after the judges and before the monarchy. It may be based on an historical saga, but in its present form it is a carefully written work of fiction, a novella, skillfully told in four balanced scenes.

The story abounds in irony: A plot based on famine is set in Bethlehem, which means "House of Bread." Although the story deals with the fate of an Israelite family, the heroine is an outsider, a Moabite girl.

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*Introduction: Naomi is bereft in a foreign land (1:1-5)*

*A. Scene One: on the Road to Bethlehem*

- 1. Orpah returns to Moab (1:6-14)*
- 2. Ruth remains with Naomi (1:15-18)*
- 3. Naomi tells the women that Yahweh has afflicted her (1:9-22)*

*B. Scene Two: in the Field of Boaz*

- 1. Naomi sends Ruth to glean (2:1-2)*
- 2. Boaz meets Ruth, invites her to glean, and blesses her (2:3-13)*
- 3. Boaz provides food and grain for Ruth (2:14-16)*
- 4. Ruth returns to Naomi (2:17-23)*

*C. Scene Three: at the Threshing Floor of Boaz*

- 1. Naomi sends Ruth to Boaz (3:1-5)*
- 2. Boaz finds Ruth sleeping by him, blesses her, and asks her to stay (3:6-13)*
- 3. Boaz provides food and grain for Ruth (3:14-15)*
- 4. Ruth returns to Naomi (3:16-18)*

*D. Scene Four: at the Gate of Bethlehem*

- 1. Naomi's next-of-kin decides not to buy her land (4:1-8)*
- 2. Boaz contracts to buy the land and marry Ruth (4:9-12)*
- 3. The women tell Naomi that Yahweh has blessed her (4:13-17)*

*Appendix: David's Genealogy (4:18-22)*

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## PROVIDENCE EVEN FOR FOREIGNERS

The appended genealogy and the stylistic similarities between Ruth and other narratives (such as the Succession Document in 2 Samuel 9-20 and the Joseph Saga in Genesis 37-50) suggest it was composed during the monarchy, perhaps not long after 950 BCE.

The story was told and retold to encourage people to follow the examples of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz, who trusted in God's providence even though it was hidden. The harvest Festival of Weeks or Pentecost would have been a natural setting for telling the story.

After the Exile, around 450-250 BCE, the Jewish people longed to restore the Davidic monarchy, and they renewed their interest in emphasizing the inclusive nature of Yahweh religion, in reaction to the restrictive policies of Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 13. This may have been the time when Ruth was added to the collection of the Writings

## A WELL-CRAFTED LOVE STORY

Some details can be confusing: Why did Ruth glean like a pauper if Naomi owned property? If Boaz was not Ruth's brother-in-law, why did the law of levirate marriage apply to him? Were Ruth and Boaz sexually intimate at the threshing floor? Where does the sandal-and-oath ritual come from?

Good stories are free to emphasize some features and to deemphasize others. In this case Naomi is the central character of the story. At the beginning she is empty: plagued by famine, living in foreign territory, bereft of her family. But at the end she is full: restored to her hometown, enjoying plenty of food and blessed with a new family. In fact, she is nursing her "son"!

Although the story does not spell out a trite moral, it shows how God works in the lives of his people. Modern readers can still identify with that theme, as we explore how divine blessings bring us to fullness in our own lives.



## SONG OF SONGS POEMS FOR PEOPLE IN LOVE



### SEX

The joyful, nearly care-free, attitude toward the sexual attraction between the lovers in the Song of Songs seems almost modern, maybe too modern.

Is the tone of these poems appropriate for responsible adults? For teenagers?

What place does such obvious sexual delight have in the total perspective of the Bible?

Why do some people try to dampen the delight of lovers?

Should we encourage such fantasy and mutual joy?

The Song of Songs, also called the Song of Solomon or Canticles, is a collection of sensual love poems celebrating the sexual attraction between a man and a woman. While some of the poems may date from the days of Solomon or the northern Kingdom of Israel, the edited anthology cannot have originated much earlier than the fifth century BCE in Jerusalem.

The poems are a fascinating assortment of boasts, teases, dreams, physical descriptions, travesties, and the like; all are frank and erotic in their tone. Many are in the form of a dialogue between the man, the woman, and a chorus of the “daughters of Jerusalem.” The images are vivid and exotic, intermixing the beauties of nature with the delights of love; they range between city life and countryside, between royal courtiers and peasant lovers, between nighttime dreams and daytime escapades.

The lyrics are strikingly similar to older Egyptian love songs and to Arabic *wasfs*, especially in the way they describe both the bodies of the lovers and also their longings during separation and their joys at being reunited. They may well have been sung at weddings.

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#### *Title (1:1)*

1. *Opening Dialogue: two lovers (1:2-2:7)*
  2. *The lovers' pursuit of each other (2:8-3:5)*
  3. *Solomon's wedding: in the garden (3:6-5:1)*
  4. *The girl's dream of her absent lover (5:2-6:3)*
  5. *The boy's praise of his beloved's beauty (6:4-8:4)*
  6. *Closing dialogue: after the wedding (8:5-14)*
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### SENSUAL LYRICS WITH DELIGHT FOR TODAY

The sheer sensuality of these lyrics plus the fact that the Song does not mention God have made difficulties for the book's entrance into the canon and its subsequent interpretation. It has often been understood as an allegory of God's love for Israel or Christ's love for the church.

Some have tried to find a dramatic plot in which the king tries to seduce the maiden, who nevertheless remains true to her shepherd lover. Others have suggested that it originated in the context of Babylonian or Canaanite rituals which reenacted the marriage of a god and a goddess.

The poems' romantic images and the equality between the boy and girl make them equally appropriate for lower class peasants pretending to be highborn as for upper class sophisticates fantasizing themselves as peasant lovers.

The book's link with the name of Solomon places it within the sphere of wisdom literature, as a reflection on the mystery and joy of love between a man and a woman, whether or not in the relationship of marriage.

Modern readers can easily take pleasure in these most romantic poems—most of which are from the viewpoint of the woman—and enjoy their healthy and frank sensuality. We can celebrate sexual love as something desirable and beautiful in itself, without moralizing or otherwise qualifying the delight women and men take in each other.



# ECCLESILASTES

## UP-BEAT SKEPTICISM



### PHILOSOPHY

Many competing philosophies developed in the ancient world: Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Cynicism, and others.

Today's thoughtful men and women also enjoy a variety of approaches to living: Existentialism, Positivism, and Secular Humanism, for example.

What other modern philosophies and "ism's" are current today?

Are they helpful?

Are they compatible with religious beliefs?



Nothing conclusive can be learned about the author of Ecclesiastes from "Qoheleth," a pen name which is often mistranslated as "preacher." A better term might be "teacher," or even "philosopher." The book's late Hebrew language and its influence upon the apocryphal book of Sirach indicate that it was written around 300 to 200 BCE, probably in Jerusalem, although Alexandria and Mesopotamia have also been suggested.

Those passages in the book which seem more like orthodox glosses on its otherwise unorthodox opinions, such as Eccl. 3:17, 7:18b, 8:5, 8:12-13, 11:9b, and the Epilogue, especially 12:13b-14, may point to the work of a later editor.

Its ascription to the fabled wise and sensual King Solomon in chs. 1-2 (although his name is not in the text itself) and its use with the Feast of Tabernacles (which emphasized the keeping of the Law) may account for why this unconventional book was eventually included in the canon.

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*Title and Thesis (1:1 & 2)*

*Prologue (1:3-11)*

#### A. First Survey

*Introduction (1:12-18)*

1. *Pleasure (2:1-11)*
  2. *Wisdom (2:12-17)*
  3. *Work (2:18-23)*
- Conclusion (2:24-26)*

#### C. Third Survey

1. *"Good Life" (6:10-12)*

2. *Proverbs (7:1-8:1)*

3. *Justice (8:2-13)*

*Conclusion (8:14-15)*

#### B. Second Survey

1. *Time (3:1-15)*
  2. *Justice (3:16-4:3)*
  3. *Work (4:4-6)*
  4. *Worship (5:1-7)*
  5. *Riches (5:8-17)*
- Conclusion (5:18-20)*

#### D. Fourth Survey

*Introduction (8:16-17)*

1. *"Short Life" (9:1-12)*

2. *Wisdom & Proverbs (9:13-11:6)*

3. *Age (11:7-12:8)*  
*(12:9-10, 11-12, 13-14)*

*Epilogues /*

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### FROM VANITY TO OPTIMISM

Ecclesiastes contains a series of observations on nature, history, conventional wisdom, religion, pleasure, and the like. These are in the forms of:

- autobiographical reflections,
- generally valid observations, and
- admonitions to pupils,
- individual proverbs.

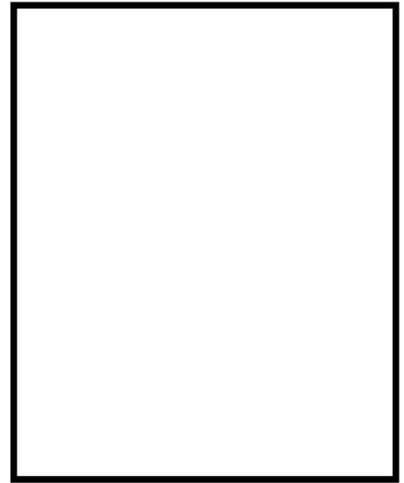
The book's unity does not come from any clear logical progression, although it seems to span its author's lifetime. The earlier chapters reflect the attitude of a young man; the later chapters offer the perspective of old age.

Both in its language and its attitude the book is a realistic and pragmatic corrective to the overly simplistic idea, often associated with Wisdom literature, that proper behavior will inevitably lead to success and divine blessing.

## **A HEALTHY KIND OF SKEPTICISM**

Qoheleth repeatedly maintains that we cannot find any sensible philosophy of life: “All is vanity, as empty as vapor...” But instead of leading to suicidal despair or hedonistic abandon, the author dares to propose an affirmative and guardedly optimistic style of living: “...so enjoy life as best as you can, especially by plying your trade.”

Thus its critical message and skeptical attitude can continue to resonate with modern readers when we deplore the inequities and imbalances in our society as well as in our personal lives. Also, for those caught up in the struggle to pursue professional success, as well as for those stuck in dreary employment on the job, Qoheleth’s suggestion that we can find satisfaction in our daily works sounds refreshing and encouraging.



## LAMENTATION

### FIVE FOR A FUNERAL



The book of Lamentations is a collection of five poems. The first four are acrostics, and they are written largely in the distinctive meter of a formal lament. The five independent elegies are not related logically, although they all convey a similar feeling. Their arrangement seems to be chiasmic, with the first and fifth more general in tone and the second and fourth more specific in description.

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A. *Funeral Song: The anguish of the desolated city (1:1-22)*

B. *Funeral Song: The destruction of the city by Yahweh (2:1-22)*

C. *Individual Lament: "Everyman's" suffering and hope (3:1-66)*

D. *Funeral Song: A survivor's account of the destruction (4:1-22)*

E. *Communal Lament: The people's prayer in a time of distress (5:1-22)*

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### DIRGES OVER JERUSALEM

One or more anonymous authors, almost certainly not the prophet Jeremiah, living in Palestine between 586 and 538 BCE wrote the five dirges collected in the book of Lamentations. All are emotion-filled reactions to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian armies in 586.

The poems probably circulated independently with other similar cultic expressions of grief and dejection. Later, in connection with the institutionalized annual fast on the 9th of Ab (July-August), they may have been collected in their present form.

### THE EXPRESSION OF GRIEF

The chief purpose of the laments was cathartic. That is, they gave the despairing survivors a chance to express their grief and dejection. For they were confronted with the seemingly inescapable conclusion either that Yahweh had been defeated by the gods of their enemies or that he had actually deserted his ancient people.

But the laments were not merely expressions of despair. They were also acts of confession. The survivors were expressing their belief that the catastrophe was a well-deserved punishment, an act of divine judgment. And in that confession lay the basis of the faith which dared to hope that the people's repentance would be matched by God's mercy. In fact, the entire collection is symmetrically centered on their conviction that God is good and merciful (3:25-27).

As we read these poems today, we can recognize our need to express grief, whether personal or communal. We understand that the trauma of our losses cannot be healed until we acknowledge it and share it openly.

### FUNERALS

Modern people often find it difficult to deal with death and dying.

Have our own funeral practices actually become part of the process of denying death?

How can a funeral service help us grieve, and cope with our loss?

What can we say to a bereaved person which will be truly helpful?

Which is better: burial or cremation?

What would you want to happen at your own funeral?

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The story of Esther is set in Persia under the rule of Ahasuerus (or Xerxes), who ruled from 486 to 465 BCE. Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai represent the people of Israel, while Haman, an Agagite or Amalekite, represents the traditional enemy of the Israelites.

- A. *Esther is chosen as queen when Ahasuerus rejects Vashti (1:1-2:23)*
- B. *Haman is elevated as a courtier and plots to destroy the Jews when Mordecai fails to honor him (3:1-4:17)*
- C. *Haman is defeated by Esther and replaced by Mordecai (5:1-9:19)*
- D. *The Feast of Purim is instituted (9:20-32 & 10:1-3)*

**A PERSIAN PERSPECTIVE**

Esther—written by a Jewish author, probably in the Diaspora in Babylon or Persia around 400-200 BCE—is in the form of an official Persian court chronicle, as though it was written by a Gentile scribe. Its numerous inaccuracies and improbabilities suggest it was meant to be read as a historical novel.

This may account for the facts that Esther contains no specifically religious teachings and that the name of God is deliberately avoided. Its characters display no real religious or moral conviction. The slaughter of the Jews' enemies is described with obvious delight, and the moral shortcomings of its hero and heroine are ignored.

The apocryphal *Additions to the Book of Esther*, first printed in the Septuagint, tried to remedy Esther's "shortcomings" by adding pious prayers and explanations to the story. Although both Jews and Christians objected to it, Esther was eventually included in the canon.

**CELEBRATING ETHNIC TRIUMPHS**

Esther is regularly read at the Feast of Purim, a fun-filled and sometimes noisy celebration on the 14th and 15th of Adar (February-March). The immediate purpose of the book is to give an account of the way this feast originated; for Purim is not listed in the Torah. Apparently it was originally a Babylonian festival which was later adopted and revised by the Jews.

The lack of specifically religious overtones and the willingness of Mordecai and Esther to join in the affairs of a non-Jewish culture suggest that the book could have served as a model for Jews living in the Diaspora. It indicated that they could participate in Gentile society without compromising their Jewishness.

A deeper purpose of the book is to celebrate the victory of the Jews over their enemies and to foster nationalistic feelings. In so doing, it underscores the sheer graciousness by which God elected the Israelites to be his chosen people. As modern readers we can still appreciate the urge to celebrate ethnic and national triumphs, and we can also debate whether a "secular" style of living is appropriate without some specifically "religious" orientation.

**THE HOLOCAUST**

Throughout history the Jewish people have been subjected to genocidal pogroms intended to destroy their culture and their race.

The murder of millions of Jews, as well as other "undesirables," during the Second World War is the most heinous example in modern times.

Why is their extermination called a "holocaust"?

Who bears responsibility?

How does this historical atrocity continue to shape world politics?

How does it impact modern ethical discourse?

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Daniel 1:1-2:4a and 8:1-12:13 are written in Hebrew, but 2:4b-7:28 is in Aramaic.

### **PUBLIC RELIGION**

Daniel and his friends are models of people who visibly practiced their religion in a hostile society.

Are people today still willing to be so public about their faith?

Are there times when we would do better to keep our faith more private?

Why is our religion one of the "forbidden topics" in polite society?

## **DANIEL**

### **INCREDIBLE LEGENDS AND DREAMS**

Outside of this book the Bible contains no historical information about Daniel, a legendary figure noted for his wisdom and faithfulness. Although the visions are written in the first-person, the entire book with its third-person tales was most probably composed and edited in Maccabean times around 165 BCE.

This was during the persecutions of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-163), the Seleucid ruler who tried to force Greek customs and religion upon the Jews. More specifically, Daniel was produced after the temple had been desecrated, but before the death of the Syrian king.

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#### *A. The Legends of Daniel and His Friends*

- 1. the Choosing of Daniel and His Friends (1:1-21)*
- 2. Nebuchadnezzar's Dream (2:1-49)*
- 3. the Three Men in the Fiery Furnace (3:1-30)*  
*(the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men; between 3:23 & 3:24 in the LXX)*
- 4. Nebuchadnezzar's Madness (4:1-37)*
- 5. Belshazzar and the Handwriting on the Wall (5:1-31)*
- 6. Daniel in Darius' Den of Lions (6:1-28)*

#### *B. The Visions of Daniel*

- 1. the Vision of the Four Beasts and the Son of Man (7:1-28)*
  - 2. the Vision of the Ram and the He-Goat (8:1-27)*
  - 3. the Vision Interpreting Jeremiah's 70-Year Oracle (9:1-27)*
  - 4. the Vision of the Kingdoms of History (10:1-12:13)*  
*(Susanna and Bel & the Dragon; after 12:13 in the LXX)*
- 

### **LEGENDS OF FAITHFULNESS**

The stories about Daniel and his friends are set in Babylon during the time of the Exile. However many of the chronological and historical details mentioned in Daniel do not correspond to the actual conditions of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Thus the legends, which were probably first collected during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, are important not as history but as didactic literature. Their purpose was to encourage God's people to remain firm in their faith in spite of overwhelming opposition, perhaps even to adopt the kind of pious stance which would welcome martyrdom.

### **VISIONS OF THE FUTURE**

The visions, which contain many bizarre images and enigmatic symbols, were intended to show that God will vindicate his people and destroy their enemies at some future cataclysmic date.

Apocalyptic literature such as this was the literary product of the Jews during times of persecution. Because its message was put into the form of predictive prophecies which promised resurrection and vindication after death, it could encourage those who were living and suffering in the age of fulfillment.

## A CALL FOR COMMITMENT

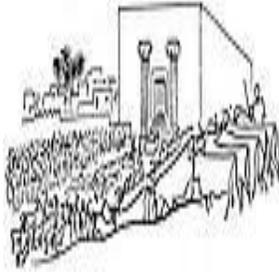
Modern sensibilities cringe at the thought of an author disguised as an ancient seer seeming to predict future events which had actually already occurred. But such a pseudonymous posture was really intended to identify the writing with a biblical tradition and to interpret and apply that tradition to a new age.

In a world in which it appeared that the forces of evil were threatening to destroy God's people, Daniel likely functioned as a call to commitment in the face of overwhelming opposition. To the degree that modern societies seem impersonal, threatening and impervious to change, a similar stance might prove to be a helpful way for us to cope with insanity.



# 1 & 2 CHRONICLES, EZRA & NEHEMIAH

## THE RISE AND FALL OF A KINGDOM, REVISED EDITION



### CHURCH MUSIC

Chronicles obviously values the liturgical rituals and ceremonies which enriched Israel's worship.

How vital is good music for worship today?

Should our music be traditional and classical, or more contemporary and popular?

Is it right for us to invest large sums of money in expensive organs and other instruments?

### DIVORCE

According to Ezra-Nehemiah, the Jewish men had to put away their foreign wives in order to preserve their national identity. Was this an equitable solution?

Under what circumstances are today's divorces fair or just?

Are our high divorce rates helpful or harmful for society?

What are some of the pressures which strain modern marriages to the breaking point?

Whether Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah were originally a single work cannot be decided clearly; these books were written sometime after 430 BCE, more probably after 300 or even later. The Chroniclers' school used and adapted several sources, omitting or expanding or rearranging them to suit its new purpose. These sources include:

- the canonical historical books, especially Samuel and Kings,
- other narrative writings, some of which are named,
- additional genealogies and lists,
- a formal defense of the post-exilic community, in Aramaic,
- the first-person memoirs of Ezra and of Nehemiah.

The books' interest in Israel's worship practices shows the influence of the Priestly school. It argues that the community at the second temple, presided over by Aaronide priests and by Levitical servers, is the legitimate successor of the Davidic dynasty.

### EDITORIAL BIASES

The viewpoint of the author-compiler can be seen in the direct speech of the prophets and leaders.

#### Prophetic Speeches

Nathan 1 Ch 17:1-15  
 Gad 1 Ch 21:9-12, 18  
 Shemaiah 2 Ch 11:2-4; 12:5-8  
 Azariah 2 Ch 15:1-7  
 Hanani 2 Ch 16:7-9  
 Miciah 2 Ch 18:12-24  
 Jehu 2 Ch 19:2-3  
 Jahaziel 2 Ch 20:14-17  
 Eliezer 2 Ch 20:37  
 Elijah 2 Ch 21:12-15  
 Zechariah 2 Ch 24:20-22; 26:5  
 anonymous 2 Ch 25:7-9,  
 2 Ch 25:16  
 Obed 2 Ch 28:9-11  
 Huldah 2 Ch 34:22-28  
 Jeremiah 2 Ch 35:25

#### Royal Speeches and Prayers

David 1 Ch 13:23; 15:12-13; 17:16-27;  
 22:6-16, 17-19; 28:2-10, 20-21;  
 29:1-5, 10-20  
 Solomon 2 Ch 6:12-42  
 Abijah 2 Ch 13:4-12  
 Asa 2 Ch 14:7, 11  
 Jehoshaphat 2 Ch 19:6-7, 9-11; 20:5-12, 20  
 Hezekiah 2 Ch 29:5-11, 31; 30:6-9, 18-19;  
 32:7-8...43  
 Josiah 2 Ch 35:3-6  
 Cyrus Ez 1:1-14  
 Darius Ez 6:1-12  
 Artaxerxes Ez 7:11-26  
 Ezra Ez 9:5-15; 10:10-11; Neh 9:6-37?  
 Nehemiah Neh 1:5-11; 2:20; 4:14; 5:6-1; 6:8;  
 8:9-10 [4:4; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:22, 31]

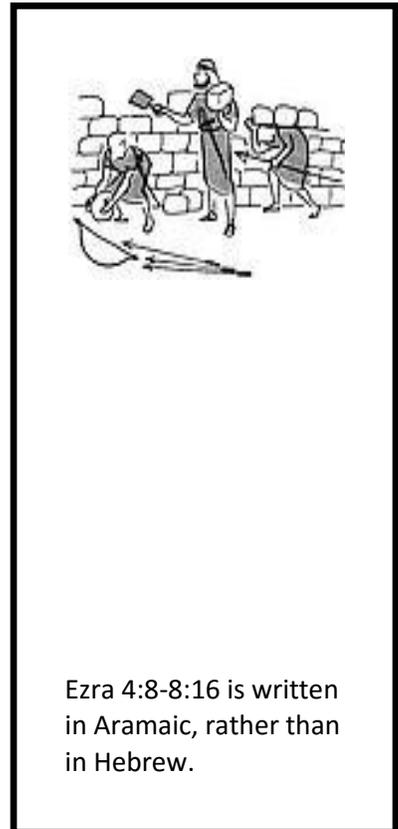
### TEMPLE PROPAGANDA

The Chronicler's history addressed the post-Exilic community of Jerusalem and Judea at a time when the Jewish people were insignificant politically and economically. Its purpose was to encourage that community by showing that its religion of the law, which was centered in the cultus of the second temple, was legitimate.

It shows that those who seek God are allowed to prosper, while those who forsake the worship of Yahweh at the temple are punished. However, those who repent can be restored.

Most prominent in these volumes are the worship practices established by David and Solomon, and then their reestablishment under Ezra and Nehemiah, together with their legal affirmations and reforms. Thus the kings of Northern Israel are largely ignored, and the Davidic kings of Southern Judah are evaluated primarily on the basis of their faithfulness to the worship of Yahweh at the temple in Jerusalem.

It is a bold move to interpret the fortunes of a national history in terms of loyalty to a single institution like the temple. To what degree such an interpretation, especially if developed in terms of a nation's worship habits, would be valid in a modern democratic society can surely be debated.



Ezra 4:8-8:16 is written in Aramaic, rather than in Hebrew.

#### A. Ancient Genealogies

1. *the Nations and the Patriarchs* (1 Chron. 1:1-2:2)
2. *Tribe of Judah* (2:3-3:24; 4:1-23)
3. *Simeon, Reuben, Gad, & Manasseh* (4:24-5:26)
4. *the Levites* (6:1-81)
5. *Issachar, Benjamin, Naphtalai, Manasseh, Epharaim, & Asher* (7:1-10)
6. *Tribe of Benjamin* (8:1-40; 9:35-44)
7. *Citizens of Jerusalem after the Exile* (9:1-34)

#### B. The Reign of King David

1. *David's Enthronement* (10:1-11:9)
2. *David's Mighty Men* (11:10-12:37)
3. *Bringing the Ark to Jerusalem* (12:38-16:43)
4. *David's Plans for the Temple* (17:1-27)
5. *Victories of David's Armies* (18:1-20:8)
6. *Temple Site and Materials* (21:1-22:19)
7. *Temple Workers and Leaders* (23:1-27:34)
8. *David's Final Instructions* (28:1-29:27)

#### C. The Reign of King Solomon

1. *Solomon's Dream and Plans* (2 Chron. 1:1-3:2)
2. *Description of the Temple* (3:3-5:1)
3. *Dedication of the Temple* (5:2-7:22)
4. *Solomon's Further Accomplishments* (8:1-9:31)

#### D. The Reigns of the Kings of Judah

1. *Rehoboam* (10:1-12:16)
  11. *Jotham* (27:1-9)
  2. *Abijah* (13:1-22)
  12. *Ahaz* (28:1-27)
  3. *Asa* (14:1-16:14)
  13. *Hezekiah* (29:1-32:33)
  4. *Jehoshaphat* (17:1-20:37)
  14. *Manasseh* (33:1-20)
  5. *Jehoram* (21:1-20)
  15. *Amon* (33:21-25)
  6. *Ahaziah* (22:1-9)
  16. *Josiah* (34:1-35:27)
  7. *Queen Athaliah* (22:10-17)
  17. *Jehoahaz* (36:1-4)
  8. *Joash* (24:1-27:23)
  18. *Jehoiakim* (36:5-8)
  9. *Amaziah* (25:1-28)
  19. *Jehoiachin* (36:9-10)
  10. *Uzziah* (26:1-23)
  20. *Zedekiah* (36:11-21)
- [Cyrus (36:22-23)]

#### E. The Return of the Exiles

(Ezra 1:1-2:67)

1. *Cyrus' Decree and Sheshbazzar's Return* /
2. *Reinstatement of Temple Worship* (2:68-3:13)
3. *Opposition of the Samaritans* (4:1-24)
4. *Completion and Dedication of the Temple* (5:1-6:22)

#### F. The Work of Ezra the Scribe

1. *Ezra's Return & Artaxerxes' Decree* (7:1-27)
2. *Exiles who Returned with Ezra* (7:27-8:36)
3. *Mixed Marriages Abolished* (9:1-15; 10:1-44)

#### G. The Administration of Nehemiah the Governor

2:20)

1. *Nehemiah's Return to Rebuild the Walls* (Neh.1:1-3)
2. *List of Builders* (3:1-33)
3. *Opposition of Sanballat* (4:1-7:5)
4. *List of Original Returnees* (7:6-73)
5. *Reading of the Law by Ezra* (8:1-9:37)
6. *Renewal of the Covenant* (9:38-10:39)

#### H. Appendices

1. *the Population of Jerusalem* (11:1-36) 26)
2. *Lists of Priests & Levites* (12:1-11, 12-21, 22-26)
3. *Dedication of City Walls* (12:27-43, 44-47; 13:1-3)
4. *Events in Nehemiah's 2<sup>nd</sup> Visit* (13:4-3)

