

The Writings: a Brief Introduction

I. Introduction

We have already dealt with two of the three divisions of the Hebrew Canon: the Torah and the Prophets. Now we come to the final section, the **Writings** (*Kethuvim*). The canon for this portion of the Hebrew Bible would remain open till **around 100 CE**. Still, most of these books would have been read as important religious literature long before they came to hold the status of scripture.

We will look at the Writings in three main categories. First we will look at **the songs of Israel**. Several of the books we have already discussed *contain* at least a few songs, but none of them are collections of songs. The book of Genesis, for example, contains songs such as the song of Moses (Genesis 15:1—18) and the song of Miriam (Genesis 15:21). Three of the books included in the Writings, however, are **collections of songs**. The book of *Psalms* is a collection of 150 songs used in worship. The *Song of Songs* (also called the *Song of Solomon* and *Canticles*) is a collection of love poems; and *Lamentations* is a collection of laments over the fall of Jerusalem.

After looking at the songs, we will examine **Israel's wisdom tradition**, including the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. **Proverbs and Ecclesiastes** express short observations about life and give advice on how to live. The book of **Job** offers its observations about life in the form of poetic dialogue between the main character (Job) and several visitors. **Job and Ecclesiastes** also contain poems that examine the meaning of life.

The **third** section in this lecture will cover the **narrative books** found among the Writings: *Chronicles*, *Ezra*, *Nehemiah*, *Ruth*, *Esther*, and *Daniel*. Most of these books provide important information on the time after the return of the exiled community from Babylon, though the books of Chronicles discuss the earlier period covered in the books of Samuel and Kings that we studied earlier.

Take a few minutes to look at the [chart showing the categories of material in the *Kethuvim*](#) on the History and Literature of the Bible web site. You can find a link to this chart from the [lecture outlines page](#).

II. The Songs of Israel

A. Introduction to the Songs of Israel

Psalms, Song of Songs, and Lamentations are collections of songs or poems. **We will focus on the book of Psalms** and deal only briefly with the Song of Songs and Lamentations.

B. The Book of Psalms

1. Introduction to the Psalms

The book of Psalms—often called the *psalter*—is a collection of **150 poems** or songs, most of which were probably **used in** Israel's **formal worship** of the LORD. It would be difficult to overstate the significance of this book in the history of either Judaism or Christianity. For both communities this collection of poems has been perhaps the single most influential force in the development of worship practices.

2. The Biblical Text: Poems as Worship

Many of the psalms may have been associated with worship practices in the Jerusalem temple (or perhaps other worship centers such as the temple at Arad or the sanctuary at Shechem before the centralization of the sacrificial system brought about under the reign of Josiah). Others reflect a later period. Psalm 137, for example, speaks of conditions in the Babylonian exile. The collection was compiled into its present form during the post-exilic period.

While the compiler of this collection provided guidance on how to use the psalms, introducing many with such phrases as “A song of ascents” (see Psalm 125, for example), some of the psalms contain clear hints of how they were originally used in worship apart from such guidance. **Psalm 136**, for example, **may have been sung antiphonally**. Every other line repeats the statement, “His steadfast love [*hesed*] endures forever.” This line may have been the congregation's response to the other lines read by the priest. **Psalm 124** contains a suggestion (124:1b) that most of this song **may have been recited** orally by the congregation.

a) **Types of Psalms**

While the book of Psalms exhibits a tremendous variety among the sacred songs, we can analyze this variety in terms of *types* of psalms based in part on the role each psalm has played in both Jewish and Christian worship. **Two of the most common types of Psalms are *laments* and *songs of praise*, but many other types are also found.**

(1) **Laments**

Most of the psalms are *laments*—sometimes called *songs of complaint*. They are **poetic prayers that present the distress** of either an individual or the community **over some dire situation**.

Laments usually include several *characteristic sections*. (1) First, they lament the crisis (or express a complaint about it). The singer tells God of her or his suffering and anguish. (2) The singer then makes a petition, asking God to relieve the distress. (3) Often, but not always, the singer also expresses confidence in God's kindness and mercy and promises to praise God for the deliverance that will surely come.

(a) **Personal Laments**

About one third of the psalms are *personal laments*. That is, they express distress using the **first person *singular***: "I". This "I" may represent a single individual, but in some cases it is clear that the singer represents the larger community. Still, since the song is expressed in the first person *singular*, presenting the lament *as though* it were a lament of a single person, these songs are called "personal" laments.

Psalm 13 is a good example of a personal lament. The first two verses express the complaint.

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Verses 3 and 4 then state the request.

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,

and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

The final two verses express confidence that the LORD will respond favorably.

But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Psalm 22, which begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is also a personal lament. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34) both say that Jesus of Nazareth used these same words while he was being executed on a Roman cross. Was he quoting the beginning of this lament with the expectation that his hearers would remember it?

(b) Communal Laments

There are a few communal laments in the book of Psalms. These are similar to the individual laments, but speak on behalf of the community and are written using the **first person plural**: "We".

The expression of confidence found in many individual laments is noticeably absent in the communal laments. Rather than the expression of confidence, we sometimes find reminders to God of the LORD's earlier acts of grace or deliverance.

Psalm 44 provides a clear example of the communal lament. Verses 1—8 invite God to remember past acts of deliverance. Verses 9—22 then give an extended complaint, and verses 23—26 present the request. Notice that there is no statement of confidence at the end. **Psalm 79** is also a communal lament, but it does not include the reminders of past help.

Read **Psalm 79** thinking of the author as speaking on behalf of the community of exiled Judeans in Babylon. Can you sense the author's longing for deliverance?

(2) Songs of Praise (Thanksgiving, Hymns)

So many of the Psalms are songs of Praise—poems that affirm God’s character or actions—that only the personal lament is more common. Some songs of praise give thanks to God for particular acts of deliverance, and for that reason are sometimes called *songs of thanksgiving*. Other songs of praise are more general, not referring to any particular past divine acts. These are often called simply *hymns* or *doxologies*.

(a) Songs of Thanksgiving

A psalm of thanksgiving can be viewed as the opposite of a lament. It expresses thanks for one or more of God’s acts of deliverance. Most thanksgiving psalms are songs of *individual* thanksgiving, expressing gratitude for God having rescued the psalmist from some very present danger. A few others, however, are communal, giving thanks for the God has protected the community.

Look at **Psalm 138** as an example of an *individual* song of thanksgiving.¹ There are very few *communal* songs of thanksgiving. **Psalm 124** provides one of the few examples.²

(b) Hymns (Doxologies)

Some songs of praise do not focus on thanksgiving, though they may include a brief mention of it. Rather than thanking God for an act of intervention in the life of the psalmist, **a hymn or doxology extols something about the character of God.** **Psalm 113** provides a good simple example. Note especially verses 5—8:

Who is like the LORD our God,
who is seated on high,
who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?
He raises the poor from the dust,
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,

¹ What does the comment “before the gods” in verse one imply about the when Psalm 138 might have been composed? Notice the *henotheistic* perspective of the comment.

² Notice the hint of memorized repetition in communal worship incorporated in verse 1b of Psalm 124.

to make them sit with princes,
with the princes of his people.
He gives the barren woman a home,
making her the joyous mother of children.
Praise the LORD!

Psalm 150, the final song in the collection, is also a clear example of a doxology.

(3) **Other Types** of Psalms

Besides laments and songs of praise, few types of psalms occur in great enough numbers to warrant discussion as a separate category in this very basic introduction. Attempts are often made to place virtually all of the psalms into one category or another, though, using names like *wisdom psalms*, *royal psalms*, *liturgical psalms*, and *songs of Zion*, but **many of the poems found in the psalter fit more than one of these categories.**

b) **Psalms as Unique Poems**

Many of the psalms overlap the boundaries of the categories normally used to discuss them. It is helpful to remember that **each psalm is a unique composition**, creating a unique mood and reflecting the experience of a particular worshipper or worshiping community in a way that is at least in some respects different from every other poem.

Psalm 100 is one of the most famous psalms. What type of psalm is it? Read it and see if you can tell.

3. **Alienation and Reconciliation in the Psalms**

The psalms represent a very wide array of historical contexts and personal experiences. For this reason, they treat a wide variety of themes. I discuss only two here. A full study of the Psalms would demand much more.

a) **Alienation**

Especially in the laments, the singer expresses her or his sense of **alienation** from God. Usually the singer's distress is linked to God in one way or another (See

22:15). Often the singer expresses frustration over God's slowness to deliver. The singer feels isolated, alienated from God.

Sometimes the alienation is linked to a particular failure on the part of the singer (as in **25:11**); **sometimes it is linked to the pressure of enemies** who go unnamed (**Psalm 3**). Regardless of the source of the alienation, however, the singer recognizes that **only God can bring the needed reconciliation** (See below).

A common image used to depict the alienation of the singer from God or from the community **is the descent into Sheol**. Literally meaning the "pit", Sheol was the abode of the dead. Unlike later Jewish and Christian thought, which would develop the idea of separate fates after death for the good and the evil, at the time of the writing of many of the psalms, most Hebrew writers assumed that all people went to Sheol after death, to carry on a shadowy existence separated from the meaningful relationships of life. Still, the Psalms were written over a very long period of time, and ideas about what happens after death certainly could have developed during that time.

In the psalms the **singer uses the images of death and Sheol to emphasize the extreme extent of the alienation from God** that she or he feels (**88:3—7**). **Another image** commonly used to emphasize the extent of alienation from God **is the waters of chaos (69:1—2)**.

b) Reconciliation

The cure for alienation is **reconciliation**. Reconciliation (whether with God or with the worshiping community) is often the goal of the songs dealing with alienation, even if the reconciliation is not clearly spelled out in the psalm itself. In fact, **the reconciliation is usually not expressed**, but merely assumed. **There are a few places, though, where it is expressed clearly**, as in **Psalm 30:1—3**.

When the reconciliation is made explicit, the singer often uses language of "going up" to speak of it. Often the singer speaks of "going up to" or "being in" Jerusalem for worship (122:1—2, 4), or "coming up" from Sheol (30:3). The temple is often used as a symbol of reconciliation and harmony with God.

While most first person singular psalms move within the tension between alienation and reconciliation, some emphasize only one side of this tension. **Psalm 23**, for example—**perhaps the most famous of the psalms—focuses exclusively on harmony with God**, not on alienation, though in verse 4 there is at least an acknowledgment of the threat of alienation.

Read **Psalm 23**. Even if you are not accustomed to reading the Bible, you may find this text to be familiar. In what context have you heard it read?

C. Songs in the Festival Scrolls (*Megillot*)

Five of the books included in the Writings are called the *Megillot*, or (Festival) Scrolls: Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther. Each of these books was associated with one of five special *commemoration days*. **Ruth** was read at **Shavuot** (the Feast of Weeks, the harvest festival also called **Pentecost**). The **Song of Songs** was read at **Passover**—possibly because of the allegorical interpretation of that book which developed over time, a topic which will be addressed when we discuss the Song of Songs below. **Ecclesiastes** was read at **Sukkot** (the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, a Fall agricultural festival of thanksgiving which also commemorates the time of wandering in the wilderness). **Lamentations**, a collection of laments over the defeat of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, was read at the **fast of the ninth of Ab/Av** (July-August), the day that commemorated that catastrophe. **Esther** was read at **Purim** (also called the Festival of Lots) since it explains the origin of that festival celebrating the deliverance of the Jewish people from Persian assault.

I will deal briefly with the **Song of Songs** and **Lamentations** at this point since only these two are collections of songs. We will discuss Ruth, Ecclesiastes, and Esther later, when we discuss the wisdom literature and the narrative books in the Writings (*Kethuvim*).

1. Song of Songs (Song of Solomon, Canticles)

The Song of Songs is also called the Song of *Solomon* or simply, *Canticles* (**See 1:1**). The book is literally a Song of Songs, a long song made up of many (perhaps as many as thirty-one) shorter songs. The book is a collection of **love poetry**, some of which is rather explicit and shocking to many pious modern readers. For that reason, **many choose to interpret the book allegorically** (as have their predecessors for many centuries). **Jewish readers** often see the book as symbolic of God's relationship with his bride, Israel. **Christian readers** frequently read it as symbolic of Christ's love for his bride, the church. Both of these symbols, though, seem far removed as one reads the songs which move back and forth

between male and female perspectives on the very natural love between man and woman.

Some of the songs are **monologues**—one partner (either male or female) speaks either to or about her or his beloved (2:16-17). Others are **dialogues**, depicting a conversation between two lovers (1:15-17). Still others are **descriptions** of the lover's body through metaphors (4:1—5; 5:11—16; 7:1—6).

While the passion in these love poems is strong, it is never obscene—though the Bible has been banned from the children's section of some public libraries because of the Song of Songs. Both male and female singers express openly their passion and affection for one another. **There is no sense of shame**, for example, as one female singer sings about her lover to the other women of Jerusalem (5:16).

The attitude toward human sexuality expressed in this material is **consistent with** the first creation story in Genesis and **the wider biblical perspective in general**. There is no sense in which one lover is subordinate to the other. **Physical love is mutual and caring as images of passion are mixed with images of family and friendship**. The man says, "How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride!" (4:10) and the woman says "This is my beloved and this is my friend" (5:16).

2. Lamentations

The book of Lamentations is a small collection of five **poems lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians** in 587 BCE. (See 2 Kings 25:8—12.) The poems were incorporated into the annual remembrance of that awful event which was observed on **the ninth day of the month of Ab** (the 5th month of the Hebrew calendar).

Traditionally the book was thought to have been written by Jeremiah because of a statement found in 2 Chronicles 35:25:

Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah, and all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Josiah in their laments to this day.

That lament composed by Jeremiah was a lament for *Josiah*, though, not a lament for *Jerusalem* like the ones in the book of Lamentations. It is more likely that the book of Lamentations is a collection of poems by several different poets.

The first four chapters are acrostics, with one line for each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The last chapter has the same number of lines as

there are letters of the alphabet, but the lines do not begin with the successive letters of the alphabet.³

In Hebrew, **chapters 1, 2, and 4 follow the typical rhythmic pattern of a (Hebrew) funeral dirge**, with 3 beats followed by 2. **The third chapter** gives a first-person account of the sadness of the people and **ponders the meaning of the disaster**. **Parts of chapter 2** are also written in the first person, and some think these **may come from an eyewitness account** of the siege (**2:11—12, 20—21**).

The poems express the strong emotion of a community of people who have witnessed the death of their loved ones and had their own lives completely devastated—an expression of emotion which is a natural part of the grieving process. **A healthy grief**, though, also **tries to make sense of what has happened**. The book of Lamentations does this by proposing that the disaster is the LORD's punishment of the people for their lack of faithfulness.

The songs emphasize the people's suffering, God's apparent abandonment of Zion, and the hope that one day God will rebuild a repentant nation.

The book of Zechariah (in the Scroll of the Twelve, one of the minor prophets) gives evidence that the fast on the **ninth of Ab** had taken place since Jerusalem fell. Zechariah was probably written around **520—518 BCE** (shortly after the rebuilding of the temple was completed). See Zechariah 7:2—5.

D. Summary and Conclusions on the Collections of Songs

The songs in the Hebrew Bible are tremendously diverse. From laments to passionate songs of love they express the vibrant life of God's people.

We have discussed three books (Psalms, Song of Songs, and Lamentations) while focusing on only one of them, the book of **Psalms**—a collection of 150 religious songs, most of which were probably used in the worship ceremonies in the Jerusalem temple, though some may have been used in other major worship centers before the centralization of the sacrificial system. We discussed laments and songs of praise as major *types* of psalms as well as the importance of treating each psalm on its own terms.

The **Song of Songs** is a collection of love poems that most traditional Jewish and Christian readers understand allegorically. A more straightforward reading sees them as celebrations of the love between a woman and a man.

³ Acrostics are found in other books of the Hebrew Bible as well. See Psalm 119, for example.

Lamentations is a small collection of five poems mourning the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 (586) BCE.

Songs and other forms of poetry often express a society's most profound emotions. They can also prove somewhat difficult to understand for readers many centuries removed from their original contexts. Still, while the images these poems present may elude many modern readers, the reader who is willing to let the emotion of the poetry speak will hear a profound and moving voice.

III. The Wisdom Literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job)

The books of **Proverbs**, **Ecclesiastes**, and **Job** are a part of what has become known as the *wisdom literature*. Like the other books that we have been studying lately, they form a part of the section of the Tanak known as the *Writings* (*Kethuvim*).

The wisdom books are grouped together in neither the Jewish nor Christian canon, but they warrant discussion as a group because they have a **style** and a central concern which are different from other books of the Bible. **Proverbs and Ecclesiastes** contain short comments about life and instructions on wise living. **Job** contains poetic dialogues between the main character (Job) and several other characters—dialogues which focus on justice and the role of suffering. Both **Ecclesiastes and Job** offer poetic reflections on the nature and meaning of life.

Characteristic	Books that Show that Characteristic
Proverbs	Proverbs and Ecclesiastes
Poetic Dialogues	Job
Poetic Reflections on Life	Ecclesiastes and Job

In the wisdom literature **the focus on wise living and the meaning of life replaces the concern with covenant** found in the other books we have studied. **The wisdom books provide a very practical look at order in human society. They also reflect in a more speculative way on that order**, asking questions like, “Is there any real order to human existence?” “How can there be meaning to life, if we all die?” “Why do the innocent suffer?” “Is there justice, or is life arbitrary?”

While the other books we have studied are directly concerned with the question of God's involvement with the created order and with Israel, **the wisdom**

books seem unconcerned with the question of God's involvement except as it directly impacts the issue of the meaning, purpose, and order of human existence.⁴

A. Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is filled with **short, pithy statements about wise living** (often contrasting wise living with foolish living). After a nine-chapter poetic prologue on the value of wisdom, the book is a long collection of such statements. The following texts illustrate the flavor of the proverbs:

A **wise** child makes a glad father, but a **foolish** child is a mother's grief (10:1).

A **child who gathers in summer is prudent, but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame** (10:5).

A **false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but an accurate weight is his delight** (11:1).

While **Ecclesiastes and Job question the traditional wisdom**—especially the deuteronomistic assumption that life goes well for the faithful and poorly for the wicked, **the book of Proverbs reflects the traditional wisdom.**

The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked (**10:3**).

This book is a collection of the accumulated cultural wisdom of Israel from its earliest times to the time of its compiler.⁵ Rather than question the value of the accepted norms, it emphasized the good they can bring. The proverbs are intended

For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity;
to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young— (**1:2—4**).

⁴ The book of Job assumes that God *is* involved in human affairs, but presents God's involvement as sometimes incomprehensible.

⁵ There is debate over the "social location" of the tradition. That is, we cannot be sure

The clear assumption of the compiler is that reverence for the Lord is fundamental to all true wisdom.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction (1:7).

B. Job

The book of Job provides a strikingly different approach to the issue of wisdom. The book presents a poetic narrative whose **central theme** is the possibility of *disinterested piety*—serving God simply because it is one’s duty, with no intention of getting anything from God in exchange.

Job—the central character of the book—is described as “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1). When the Accuser (Hebrew: *ha-satan*, not “Satan”) comes to talk with God, God asks him if he has noticed Job.⁶ The Accuser questions the legitimacy of Job’s faithfulness, saying that he is faithful only because God has blessed him. God agrees to let the Accuser test Job, who then loses his flocks, his servants, and children, yet remains faithful to God. Job then loses even his own health.

Representing a view often called *retributive justice* (“You get what you deserve”), Job’s friends try to convince him that he must have sinned. Otherwise, why would God be allowing these things to happen to him? Job obstinately insists that he has done nothing wrong. His story challenges the assumption that blessing follows directly from obedience to God. Sometimes, good people do suffer for no apparent reason. Why does God allow this to happen?

In the end Job is not told why the innocent suffer. In stead, he is told that his perspective is too small. Speaking from a whirlwind (38:1) God questions Job: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” (38:4). Humbled by God’s questioning Job ceases challenging God’s justice. A prose epilogue (42: 7—17) states that Job’s fortune was returned to him twofold in the end.

The overall effect of the book is a frank acknowledgment that life does not always seem fair. The innocent do often suffer, and the wicked do continue without punishment, but in the end, the true worshiper serves God not to get blessings, but because God alone has the perspective necessary to know what is just.

⁶ While English translations sometimes have the name “Satan” in Job 1:6 and the other places that refer to the Accuser, the Hebrew texts reads *ha-satan* rather than *satan*. The presence of the article (*ha-*) indicates that the word is being used as a title, not a personal name. Here *ha-satan* is not the presented as the enemy of God, but as a being to whom God grants permission to test Job’s devotion.

It is significant that in both the Hebrew and Greek canons, Job follows immediately after Proverbs. While Proverbs simply represents the best of the common wisdom, **Job questions the commitment to strict retribution that common wisdom assumes**. Job claims that without knowledge of God's intentions (which are never completely knowable), no strict theory of retribution can be adequate.

C. Ecclesiastes

Like Song of Songs and Lamentations (which we discussed earlier) **Ecclesiastes** is one of the *Megillot* and is grouped with the *Megillot* in the Hebrew canon (following Lamentations). It **was read at Sukkot** (the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths, a Fall agricultural festival of thanksgiving which also commemorates the period of wandering in the wilderness). Ecclesiastes is the only wisdom book among the *Megillot*.

The book was probably written in the **second century BCE**, though there is some debate around the dating.

While **traditionally attributed to Solomon**, the book makes no direct claim to be edited or directly authored by him. The speaker is identified as *Qohelet*, a name whose meaning is unclear, but which is probably related to the verb for "assemble" though it is often translated as "Preacher," or sometimes "Teacher" (See 1:1).⁷

Read the following texts and think about the focus of Ecclesiastes:

1:2—11

Vanity of vanities, says Qohelet,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
What do people gain from all the toil
at which they toil under the sun?
A generation goes, and a generation comes,
but the earth remains forever.
The sun rises and the sun goes down,
and hurries to the place where it rises.

⁷ Even if Qohelet is not taken to be Solomon, the book remains pseudonymous if it was written in the second century BCE since it is clearly attributed to a son of David. The opening verse attributes it to *Qohelet, the son of David, king of Jerusalem*.

The wind blows to the south,
and goes around to the north;
round and round goes the wind,
and on its circuits the wind returns.
All streams run to the sea,
but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow,
there they continue to flow.
All things are wearisome,
more than one can express;
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
or the ear filled with hearing.
What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there a thing of which it is said,
“See, this is new”?
It has already been,
in the ages before us.
The people of long ago are not remembered,
nor will there be any remembrance of the people yet to come
by those who come after them.

2:11

Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

After this amazingly frank admission of the seeming meaninglessness of human existence, Qohelet asserts that there is, nonetheless, an order to the workings of the world.

3:1—8

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh
a time to mourn, and a time to dance. . .

3:10—11

I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Qohelet assumes that there *is* an order to the workings of the world, but concludes that humans cannot have the perspective necessary to understand that order (they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end).

9:11

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all.

There may be a cosmic order, but there is also *chance*, Qohelet asserts, and that indeterminacy thwarts any strict theory of retribution.

IV. The Narrative Books and the Persian Period

(Chronicles, Ezra/Nehemiah, Ruth, and Esther)

A. Introduction

The remaining books in the section of the Tanak called the Writings, represent three distinct types of *narratives*. The two books of **Chronicles** as well as **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** are *historical* narratives (often called **the Chronicler's History**); **Ruth** and **Esther** are short stories about courageous women; and **Daniel** is an apocalypse (a term which will be defined later).

We have already studied the pre-exilic period, so I will focus my comments about history here on the post-exilic period—the period following the return from captivity in Babylon, the era discussed by Ezra and Nehemiah.

The long period from the return of the exiles till the birth of Jesus of Nazareth may be divided into two distinct sections: **The Persian Period** and **the Hellenistic Age**. Here we will deal only with the Persian period.⁸

B. **The Chronicler's History** (Chronicles, Ezra/Nehemiah)

The books now called 1 & 2 Chronicles were originally a single work. Similarly, Ezra and Nehemiah appear as separate books in the Christian Bible, but may have originated as a single work, though Ezra contains some first person narratives from the perspective of Ezra (See Ezra 7:27—29, for example) and Nehemiah contains some narratives in the first person from the perspective of Nehemiah (See Nehemiah 1:1). Ezra begins where Chronicles ends—with the decree of Cyrus freeing the Jews from Babylon. Because these four books share a great deal in terms of both style and historical perspective, they are often discussed collectively as *The Chronicler's History*, and it is possible that their final form was produced by a single author.⁹

1. **Overview**

The books of **Chronicles** retell the history of Israel from Saul to the Exile (basically the same history recounted in the books of Samuel and Kings), but introduce that history with a genealogy which connects it with creation. **Ezra and Nehemiah** tell the story of the people after the return from exile which began in **538 BCE**. Together Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah tell the story of God's people beginning with creation (but moving quickly to the time of Saul and David after a nine-chapter-long collection of genealogies) and ending with the establishment of the province of Judea under religious leadership as a component of the Persian Empire. Many scholars today see this material as either the work of a single author or the work of a school of writers sharing a similar perspective. The author, whether a single person or a group of people, is often called 'the **Chronicler**', and the work as a whole is called 'the **Chronicler's History**.'

⁸ I discuss the Hellenistic Period in the next chapter, "[Israel in the Hellenistic Age](#)."

⁹ Some parts of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are written from a first-person perspective, others are not. See the third-person reference to Ezra, for example, in Ezra 7:6 and the one to Nehemiah in Nehemiah 8:9.

2. The Chronicler's History versus Samuel & Kings

While the books of Chronicles cover essentially the same period of Israel's history as Samuel and Kings, they look at that history from a very different vantage point. While Second Kings could have been completed no earlier than 561 BCE (It includes a mention of Jehoiachin's release in Babylon, 2 Kings 25:27), Chronicles dates from the a point well into the postexilic period. Second Chronicles ends, and Ezra begins with the **Edict of Cyrus** (2 Chronicles 36:22—23; Ezra 1:1—4). **The driving question for the author of Kings** was, **“Why did this happen to us? Why has the LORD abandoned us to exile?”** and the answer seemed clear: **“Because of our unfaithfulness.”** **For the author of Chronicles the pressing question is a very different one: “What defines the people of Yahweh? What makes us a people?”** and the answer seemed equally clear: **“Proper worship of the LORD.”**

Because of the difference in the driving question, the story sounds quite different **in Chronicles. The Deuteronomistic Historian's emphasis on the nation's failure to honor Yahweh is gone. Key characters** such as David and Solomon **are more idealized** to create paradigms for the good leader. **The central concern of the Chronicler's history with defining the people of God carries on into the books of Ezra and Nehemiah,** which deal with the post-exilic period and the struggle to define the social and religious boundaries of the nation.

3. National Identity and the Prohibition against Foreign Marriages

A part of building a national and ethnic identity is the need to define the limits of society. Who is in, and who is out? In the post-exilic period this question became crucial as the people returning from exile encountered other Jews who had not gone into exile as well as other residents of the land who had never been Jews.

Both **Ezra and Nehemiah** forbade marriage to foreign women. They even **ordered Judean men to divorce their foreign wives and send them away with their children!**

The issue was not racial, but religious. Women classified as ‘foreign’ were those who had not converted to Judaism. They were *pagan* wives. It is lack of faith in the God of Israel which created a problem, **though the interpretation of the**

problem in Ezra does sometimes take on an ethnocentric tone (Ezra 9:1—2).¹⁰

While Israel had been a thriving nation, marriages to pagan women had not been a significant threat to the survival of the culture since the children could be easily incorporated into Jewish society.¹¹ Now, however, with the size of the Judean population significantly reduced and with the strong presence of other cultures, **mixed marriages meant the serious chance of losing the children to a different national and religious identity (See Nehemiah 13:23—24).**

Read **Malachi 3:13-16**. Did the prophet speak these words as a criticism of what Ezra and Nehemiah proposed? How should we read the relationship between Malachi's words and the commands of Ezra and Nehemiah?

C. A Brief History of the Persian Period

The historical narratives of the Former Prophets (which we studied earlier) end with the deportation to Babylon. The two books of **Chronicles** (which were originally *one* book in the Jewish canon) parallel this history, ending with the same event. The books of **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** continue **the chronicler's history**, telling of the events which occurred in the years after the return of the people to Judea.¹²

1. The Fall of Babylon

The Jewish people were allowed to return to their homeland after Babylon fell to the Persians (after Nabonidus took the Babylonian throne [by force] in 556 BCE and became involved in a project to reduce the power of the Marduk priesthood).

Cyrus the Great, who began as the king of Anshan in Persia, started to extend his territory around 550 BCE. He would eventually produce the **Persian Empire** covering all of Palestine and stretching nearly to modern-day India. He was an astute user of propaganda. When he took Babylon he claimed that the

¹⁰ While the motive for rejecting marriage to non-Judean women is stated in terms of the "abominations" of their religious practice (Ezra 9:1 and 9:10—11), note the phrase "the holy seed" in 9:2 as a reference to the procreative power of the Judean people.

¹¹ Though from the Deuteronomistic historian's perspective Solomon's foreign marriages certainly did bring the wrath of God (1 Kings 11).

¹² Notice the close verbal overlap between Second Chronicles 36:22—23 and Ezra 1:1—3.

Babylonian god, **Marduk** had called him to deliver Babylon from the hands of leaders who had abandoned proper worship of the Babylonian god.

There were, apparently, many foreign exiles in Babylon, not just the Jewish people. Cyrus allowed them to return to their homelands and even gave back the religious objects which the Babylonians had taken as booty. To the Jews he said that Yahweh had sent him to do this.

2. Return to the Promised Land

While Cyrus offered to let the people return to Judah in 538 BCE, **many**—perhaps for very practical reasons—**chose to stay in Babylon. Those who did return did not all return at once.** Many came back to Judah in several waves of migration.¹³

Some people did not have to return because they had never left. Judah had been devastated, but not everyone had been taken away into captivity. Many of the poorer people still lived in Judah.

Jeremiah estimates the number of deportees at 4,600 (Jeremiah 52:28—30). The Babylonians deported those people whom they considered potential sources of trouble. They left behind the less skilled poorer workers.

3. Defining Events in the Post-exilic Community

The rebuilding of the nation came about in *three clearly marked steps*. **First**, they rebuilt the temple. **Second**, the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt; and **third**, the Torah (either the whole Torah or the Priestly code) was read to the people and they embraced it as the guide for their lives and the constitution for their government.

a) Temple

As soon as the first wave of deportees returned, construction was begun on the temple. A foundation was laid, but the project was not completed. Work on the temple resumed around **520 BCE** under **Zerubbabel**, the Jewish prince who had been assigned as governor of Judea, which was now a province of the Persian

¹³Sheshbazzar led a group back to Judea in 538 BCE. In 522 BCE Zerubbabel and Joshua brought a second group. The rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem was completed after the return of this group. In 458 BCE Ezra led a group of Jews back to Judea and conducted a program of rededication to the principles expressed in the Mosaic Torah.

Empire. The high priest was **Joshua** and the prophets **Haggai** and **Zechariah** were also active. **The rebuilding of the Temple was completed by 515 BCE.**

At this point in time, Judaism was not yet centered primarily around the Torah. The temple still functioned as focus of the religious system. This situation would continue throughout the *second temple period* (the period of the temple built by the returned exiles between 520 and 515 BCE), until the temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.¹⁴

b) Defenses

After the temple was rebuilt, a problem arose. The temple brought economic growth and attracted attention to the area, but the city of Jerusalem was still unprotected. Its walls had been torn down, and had not yet been rebuilt.

Nehemiah—still in Babylon—became aware of the situation and requested that he be made the next governor of Judea and be allowed to rebuild the city (implicitly, that he be allowed to *refortify* it). (See Nehemiah 2:5ff.) The Persian Emperor (Artaxerxes I) granted his request and he began construction. His project stirred opposition from Judea's neighbors, especially Samaria (Nehemiah 4:1—7:5). **Sanballat**, then governor of Samaria, did not want a refortified Jerusalem to the south of his territory. The workers on the wall had to be armed for combat as they worked.

The literary evidence suggests that Nehemiah served two terms as governor of Judea. (His second administration is discussed in Nehemiah 13:1—31.) During his second administration he instituted religious reforms, removing inappropriate items from the Jerusalem temple and rectifying the temple finances (See 13:4—14).

c) Torah

Ezra led another phase of the rebuilding of the Jewish presence in Judea. (It is a *third* phase *if* the common reconstructed dating is correct. See '4' below.) **Nehemiah 8—10** narrates a ceremony of covenant renewal led by Ezra. The people recommitted themselves to their covenant with God after hearing Ezra read the Torah. Ezra's leadership was an important milestone on the journey to a faith centered on the Torah rather than the temple. That journey would be completed after the rebuilt temple was destroyed in 70 CE by the Romans.

¹⁴ After 70 CE many Jews would conclude that the temple could be replaced by devotion to the Torah focused in the synagogue and the schools (houses of study).

d) **Conclusion:** Temple, Walls, and Rededication to Torah as
Defining Events for National Identity

In the post-exilic period Judah was not a free nation, but a province of the vast Persian Empire. Rebuilding the temple and the city of Jerusalem, together with the people's recommitment to the Torah, helped the people reconstruct a sense of national identity.

4. **Dating of Ezra-Nehemiah**

The dating of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah presents some rather complex problems. **If we take the references within the two books as they now stand, then Ezra would have come to Jerusalem in 458 BCE and Nehemiah would have arrived later in 445 BCE.** This order seems problematic, **however**, since **it was Nehemiah who rebuilt the city walls** (see Nehemiah 2:17—20), **and when Ezra arrives they seem to already be built.** (See Ezra's prayer in Ezra 9:5—15, noting the comment about the walls in **9:9**. Compare Nehemiah 6:15—7:4). It seems unlikely that Ezra and Nehemiah were in Jerusalem at the same time for any extended period, since the two books record no interaction between them (besides a brief mention in Nehemiah 8:9 that they were both present at a gathering which the text states took place on the first day of the seventh month (see 7:73b and 8:2).

Scholars often 'solve' these problems by suggesting that Ezra came *after* Nehemiah, in about **398—397 BCE**. Not all historians agree, though, and we cannot at this time determine the dates of these events with precision.

5. **A New Government: "Heirocracy"**

When the exiles returned from Babylon, the Davidic monarchy was not reestablished. The government set up under Persian authority gave a prominent place to the High Priest, who now took on a double role, serving both as the chief priest and as the highest judicial officer. By the time of Jesus, the high priest would serve as the head of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court. Rule by the highest religious leader (hierocracy) was a common form of government in the regions conquered by the Persians.

6. **Limits of Our Knowledge of Judah in the Persian Period**

The Persian period is a time concerning which little literary evidence is available. Virtually all of our literary evidence for this period comes from the

Chronicler's history. Ezra and Nehemiah both give valuable information, but the historical data are sometimes unclear (See above under "Dating of Ezra-Nehemiah"). After the period covered by Ezra-Nehemiah there is practically no literary evidence until the early 2nd century BCE (in the Hellenistic period).

7. The Relationship of the books of Ruth and Esther to the Persian Period

Ruth *may* have been written in the Persian period, but it does not discuss the Persian Period. The story of the book of Esther is *set* in the Persian Period, but may have been written at a later time.

D. Ruth and Esther: Two More of the *Megillot*

While Ruth and Esther appear among the historical books in the Christian canon, they appear among the Writings in the Hebrew canon. They are two of five books grouped together as the Five Scrolls (the five *megillot*), forming a subgroup within the Writings. (See section II.C above for a brief explanation of the *megillot*.) Ruth was read at *Pentecost* (Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks), while Esther was read at *Purim*.

While **Ruth** is *set* in the time of the Judges (Ruth 1:1) many scholars date its *writing* to the Persian Period which we have just discussed, though there is no agreement on this point.¹⁵ Similarly, the book of **Esther** is *set* clearly in the Persian period, but may have been written later.

1. Ruth

This short book tells the story of **Ruth**, a Moabite woman who became the great grandmother of King **David**. It is a **story of redemption** that operates on two different levels. First, it is the story of two women who manage to secure the legal right of 'redemption' through *levirate marriage* (See Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Second, it is the story of the self-sacrificing love of Ruth that 'redeems' Naomi, her mother-in-law.

2. Esther

¹⁵ The *themes* of the book seem to fit the post-exilic era, but the language used may in fact be older. If the book does date from the post-exilic era, it provides a significant balance to Ezra-Nehemiah's comments on marriages to foreigners.

The name of God does not appear in the book of Esther a single time—unless the additions found in the Deuterocanon are considered. The Jewish Law, the covenant, prayer, and even dietary restrictions are also not mentioned.

The book was probably written to explain the origins of the festival of Purim, and it came to be used at that festival. It is set in the Persian Period, but its present form may have been written somewhat later in the Hellenistic Period, perhaps shortly before the Maccabean Revolt (before 167 BCE?).

The book relates the story of how the Jewish people in the Persian Empire move from a position of powerlessness to one of power. It **emphasizes loyalty to the Jewish community over loyalty to unjust ruling authorities**, and at least hints at the possibility that there could be a purpose or pattern behind the experience of the community.

a) **The Story**

The story begins with a scene in the court of the Persian Emperor **Ahasuerus (Xerxes I, 486—465 BCE)**. Queen **Vashti** has been summoned by the Emperor, who is slightly drunk, so that he can show her off to his friends. She refuses to come. This sets up beautifully the tension which will arise later in the story (Esther will be fearful of defying Persian legal custom). The Emperor's advisors become greatly disturbed at the disobedience of the queen. Why, if other women hear of this they'll also disobey their husbands, even the advisors themselves will have to put up with disobedient wives (1:13—18). **Note the heavily paternalistic perspective attributed to the Persians**. They counsel Ahasuerus to set Vashti aside and choose a new queen.

The search for a new queen begins almost immediately. At this point **Esther** comes onto the scene. She's a **Jewish orphan girl** who is **raised by her cousin Mordecai**. When the Emperor requests that all the beautiful maidens be gathered together so that he may choose a new queen, she is sent. Ahasuerus is very pleased with her and declares her the new queen (2:1—18), but she does not tell him that she is Jewish.

Ahasuerus later promoted a man named **Haman** to the position of his highest ranking official. **All the king's servants** at the gate **bowed down to Haman, except Mordecai, who** would not bow down to anyone because he **was Jewish (3:2—4)**. (This is one of the few possible hints at Jewish monotheism in the book.) **Haman** became so offended that he **decided to have all of the Jews killed**.

Haman and his associates cast the lot—the *Pur* (hence the name of the festival: *Purim*)—to determine the day for the massacre, and Haman went to King Ahasuerus to request permission. He accused the Jewish people of having their own laws and not obeying the laws of the king. Ahasuerus signed an edict saying that on the day which Haman had chosen the Jews would be killed.

When **Mordecai** discovered the plan, he **contacted Esther** in the palace and explained it to her, requesting that she speak with the king. She reminded him that anyone who entered the king's chamber without being called would be killed unless the king lifted his golden scepter to prevent it.

Read Esther 4:13—14. What would this text imply for later Jews facing persecution?

After three days of fasting, however, **she** went in and **invited the king and Haman to a banquet** later in the day. At that banquet she invited them to another one the next day. Finally at this second banquet **she made her request, that she and her people be spared from the king's enemy who had contrived to have them killed.** When asked who that enemy could be (the king did not know that Esther was Jewish), she said "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" (7:6).

Haman was hanged on a gallows he had ordered built for Mordecai and the king signed a second edict, this time giving the Jews permission to defend themselves from any armed guard that might attack them on the day of Haman's planned massacre. The Jewish people came out victorious, Esther was given the house of Haman, and Mordecai was made the king's top official.

b) Conclusion: Historicity and "Truth" in Esther

While **the historicity of Esther's story has been challenged** by modern scholars, the story does faithfully express a common element in the history of the Jewish people. They have been the targets of mass destruction several times, and **the story celebrates the deliverance that comes with placing loyalty to the community above loyalty to those in power.** In that sense, **whether "Esther" is history or fiction, the story is true.** Solidarity of the community can bring its own victory even in the face of disaster.

E. Historical Summary of the Persian Period

We have examined the history of the Jewish people in the Persian Period. **The Edict of Cyrus** (538 BCE) allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, rebuild their temple, and fortify Jerusalem. They rededicated themselves to their covenant with God and to following the Torah.

Evidence for the history of much of this period is scarce. **The Chronicler's history** provides one perspective on the early events of the Persian Period and the book of **Ruth** could have been written during that period, but gives little direct evidence. **Esther** may have been written later, perhaps in the Hellenistic Period, but it does give insight into Jewish life in the Persian Period. Both Ruth and Esther portray strong women who act heroically on behalf of others.

V. Summary and Conclusions about the Writings

The Writings constitute a diverse compilation of documents including collections of **songs**, **wisdom literature**, and **narrative** accounts of the Jewish people's heritage. These documents were accepted as canonical long after the Torah and the Prophets.