

The Writings of Israel in the Biblical Story¹

The books known as the Writings in the Jewish tradition stand in the final position in the Hebrew Bible, after the Law and the Prophets. In the Writings the Psalter is in first position, followed by the four books that belong to the Wisdom tradition plus Ruth – Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes – concluding with Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. But when the Greek translations of the biblical books were brought together into one collection (the Septuagint), the Writings were rearranged into what seems to be a mostly chronological and/or authorial order, to which then our English Bibles fell heir. Thus, in the current arrangement, only five of these books remain together, even though the traditional Jewish order has much to commend it.

These diverse books play an important role in the biblical story. For here, in a variety of forms, you find inspired human responses to the words and deeds of God that are recorded in the Law and the Prophets. Thus, even though many instructional moments appear in the psalms, for the most part they are prayers addressed to God, with the primary traditions in the biblical story (the promises, the exodus, the giving of the law, etc.) as the bedrock foundation from which these prayers are made – and thereafter recited and sung in the believing community. So one of the things you will regularly want to look for as you read the psalms are the various moments that echo the biblical story – both the revelation of God and his character, and the story of Israel. The same is true of Lamentations, which we have placed in this section so that you will read it in light of what is here said about the book of Psalms.

The Wisdom tradition, on the other hand, is quite different. These are writings whose authors or compilers are wrestling with many of the issues found in the wisdom traditions of *other* cultures. Thus, even though their content assumes Israel's God and story as the basis for their reflections, their method is very similar to what one finds in these other traditions. By and large, Wisdom concentrates on human conduct in society before God. And the assumed reader is "my son," which could refer, of course, to the teacher's own progeny or student but could also refer to anyone in the next generation who needs this instruction.

What makes the biblical books essentially different from the other traditions is their fundamental assumption that "the fear of the LORD [Yahweh] is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov 1:7 and throughout). While this is said less often in the two books that belong to the "speculative" Wisdom tradition (Job and Ecclesiastes), God and his story are nonetheless foundational for their wrestling with the larger questions of life – how to understand the undeserved suffering of the innocent (Job) and how one should live the brief span of years (mere "vapor," as it were) God has given (Ecclesiastes). And at the heart of both of these books is the reminder that true wisdom has to do with the fear of God (Job 28:28; Eccl 12:13-14).

The "odd book out" in all of this is Song of Songs, which does not even mention God and which reflects the Wisdom tradition in a much more specialized way. Nonetheless, even here, where the emphasis is on the delight of monogamous love and human sexuality, the presupposition of the story of Genesis 1-2, where God created man and woman to be precisely like this in their married relationships.

Thus, rather than wonder why God would have included books that speak to us "from our own level," as it were, you can find wonder precisely in the fact that he did so. The delight of these books is that they constantly remind us that God's love and faithfulness, which lie at the heart of the story, demand responses of various kinds from his people – the rich variety of these books both eliciting and guiding your own responses to this love and faithfulness.

1. Fee and Stuart. *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI. 2002.