
THE WRITINGS:

- Last section of the OT in its Jewish order
- Assortment of different sort of books from different background
- All connected with the 2nd Temple period (Persian & Greek empires)
- GK & English Bible spreads them among the other books

Wisdom

Psalms

Proverbs

Job

Megillot (the scrolls)

Song of Songs

Ruth

Lamentations

Ecclesiastes

Esther

Histories

Daniel

Ezra

Nehemiah

Chronicles

OUTLINE

- Story:

- Ezra-Nehemiah (div in 3rd Cent)
- Chronicles
- Ruth
- Esther

- Worship:

- Psalms
- Lamentations

- Wisdom:

- Proverbs
 - Song of Songs
 - Job
 - Ecclesiastes
 - Daniel
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HOW THE WRITINGS ARE DESIGNED TO TRANSFORM

1. They set our lives not in the context of a set of beliefs but in the context of a story, and of some smaller stories, too. They also encourage us to tell our stories.
 2. They see us in a relationship with God – a relationship of praise, protest, trust, repentance, and testimony. They encourage us to say what we feel.
 3. They set our thinking in the context of an argument. They encourage us to face questions. They thus rescue us from the limitations of what we believe already.
 4. They are there to help the people of God live concretely, worshipfully, wisely, and hopefully.
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EZRA-NEHEMIAH

- Relate a series of episodes from the story of Judah from 539-445
 - The books combine:
 - Stories about events that took place
 - First-person memoirs of Ezra & Nehemiah
 - Official Documents
 - Lists of People
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EZRA 1-6

- Begins with Cyrus's takeover of Babylon in 539 B.C.
 - He encouraged Judahites who had been taken off there (or rather, their children and grandchildren) to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.
 - They did clean up its site and start the rebuilding work but they were put off by the opposition of other local peoples.
 - In Darius's reign they resumed the work and completed it between 520 and 516 B.C. with prods from Haggai and Zechariah.
 - The accounts of opposition in 4:6-23 relate to the later time of Xerxes and Artaxerxes—the book has collected together stories about opposition.
 - Lamentations tells of how people in Jerusalem had been praying through the period up to Cyrus's day, and the stories in Daniel tell of the situation of Judahites in Babylon.
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EZRA 7-10

- During the reign of Artaxerxes
 - In 458 B.C. he commissioned a learned Judahite called Ezra to take a scroll of the Torah and see that its rules were implemented in Jerusalem and Judah.
 - Note that Ezra had nothing to do with the original return from the exile—his family had stayed in Babylon so he had nothing to do with the rebuilding of the temple. His concern was the purifying of the community.
 - Esther tells another story about the Judahite community in Susa, one of the key Persian cities, in the slightly earlier time of Xerxes.
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NEHEMIAH 1-7

- Like Ezra 7-10, Neh 1-7 jumps on to the twentieth year of Artaxerxes, 445 B.C., when he agreed to commission one of his palace staff in Susa to go and organize the rebuilding of the Jerusalem city walls, which were apparently still in ruins as a result of the Babylonian destruction in 587 B.C.
 - Evidently Nehemiah's family, too, had not taken the chance to return to Judah.
 - Some of the wrongs Malachi protests about in Jerusalem parallel the kind of thing Ezra and Nehemiah take action about, and Malachi likely dates in this general period.
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NUMBERS 8-13

- Ezra and Nehemiah are now together in Jerusalem, evidently at some later date in Artaxerxes' reign.
 - They are working together at the rebuilding of the community on the basis of the Torah and the building up of the population of the city itself.
 - Two strong leaders with different skills working together towards a common goal
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LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM EZRA-NEHEMIAH

- Insights on the way God can work through and with a political superpower
 - The Importance of Prayer (Ezra 9 & Nehemiah 1, 9)
 - The Wonder and Worries of Rebuilding and Reforming
 - Communication/Organisation/Delegation/Adaptation
 - Dealing with Opposition
 - *Good Leadership Book: Hand Me Another Brick* by Swindoll
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MARRIAGE IN EZRA-NEHEMIAH

- Strong Teaching against marrying “foreigners” (Ezra 9-10, Nehemiah 10:30, 13:25-26)
 - The “set apart” Jewish community would have ceased to exist
 - There would have been no Israel
 - No Messiah...No Jesus
 - Note that the story does not concern foreign women like Ruth who became worshipers of Yahweh. It concerns women who kept their ethnic and religious identity.
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1-2 CHRONICLES

- Chronicles is Prequel to Ezra-Nehemiah or Ezra-Nehemiah was the Sequel to Chronicles
 - First verses of Ezra are the same as the last verses of Chronicles
 - Chronicles is a retelling of Judah's story designed to encourage them.
 - Much of it is word-for-word the same as Samuel-Kings; the author started from Samuel-Kings and produced a revised version of its story, sometimes omitting things, sometimes adding things, sometimes rewriting things.
 - It is a new version of the story because the people are in that new situation and need a new message from God, and the Holy Spirit inspires the writing of a new version of the story.
 - The presence of two versions in Scripture compares with the presence of four versions of the Jesus story in the NT. A rich story can be told in several ways in different contexts.
 - We don't know who wrote it, but it is a more coherent composition than Ezra-Nehemiah. It does not just bring together a collection of separate pieces.
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THEMES IN CHRONICLES

- The theme of worship is part of a stress on God being with people. He is not involved in Judah's national life as he had been before the downfall of the state but He is with them in the present not absent, nor do they simply have to look to the future.
 - The Levites are key figures, and they are music leaders. Chronicles emphasises prayer, joy and praise—in life as well as in the temple.
 - It stresses God's might, God's justice, God's word, and God's grace—with the expected response of purity, trust, and obedience.
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KEYS TO CHRONICLES

- **It is Contextual.** Why should God want to inspire another version of the story in Samuel-Kings?
 - The differences from Samuel-Kings reflect Chronicles' distinctive context in the Second Temple period when the faith is under pressure and God seems inactive. Samuel-Kings tells the story of the time of the kings in a way that shows people how they had gone wrong, which fits the context of the exile. They needed to face these facts. Chronicles tells the story in a way that encourages people, which fits the context after the exile, when they need such encouragement.
 - In telling the story, it does not always try to be literally accurate, but dresses the figures of history in the costumes of its own day, to make the links clear to the people's own day.
 - **It is a Narrative:** It does not (overtly) tell its own story but retells the old, old story and abbreviates it (e.g., omitting the story of Ephraim and the human interest stories) or expands it (e.g., in the information on David's plans for the temple building). It portrays David rather more positively than 2 Samuel, like Hebrews 11 talking about OT characters.
 - The way the first Christians kept rewriting the Gospel story (Mark, then Matthew and Luke, then John, according to the traditional view) takes up the assumption that an important story needs repeated retelling and gains from repeated retelling.
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ESTHER

- Esther tells of how a Judahite girl gets drafted into the Persian king's harem in Susa and is thus in a position to get the king to halt a plan by one of his senior ministers to eliminate the her people.
 - Most likely written in the Persian period in Persia (or perhaps the Greek period), but it is anonymous.
 - Retold at the Festival of Purim each March
 - “based-on-fact” version of an event
 - added spice: 23 meter high gallows; 6 month beauty treatment
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ESTHER & ANTI-SEMITISM

- It's the biblical discussion of anti-Semitism.
 - often fuelled by Christian talk about the Jews being Jesus' murderers.
 - Esther is an account of a failed attempt at genocide that is typological of the Jewish people's experience. (Exiles, 70AD, WWII, Present day)
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ESTHER & GOD

- It is an expression of the way God often works in history. It makes no reference to God, Israel, or prayer, yet its silence speaks loudly.
 - It compares and contrasts with the story of Israel in the days of Joseph and Moses. In Moses' day God visibly intervened, but God's acts are not usually visible. Even in the Joseph story, eventually God's involvement is explicitly mentioned, but not in Esther.
 - It illustrates the themes of wisdom expressed in Proverbs, and the characters embody wisdom and folly.
 - Esther encourages Jewish people to take responsibility for their destiny in the conviction that God is at work behind coincidences and chance.
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ESTHER & POWER

- It's not about what should happen but about what does happen.
 - It's not what you know that counts, but who you know.
 - The males have power—or do they? The king turns out to have no power over Vashti, and the men assume that her action will encourage rebellion among the other wives in Persia. Esther turns out to have power in another sense, by using the system rather than defying the system.
 - The fact that women have usually had to survive and exercise power out of a position of structural weakness makes a woman an appropriate image for the position of the Judahite people in the Dispersion.
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ESTHER AS A COMEDY

- It shows how if you want to survive you'd better learn to laugh.
 - Encourages the Jews to cope with adversity by laughing at their foes and at themselves.
 - Humor runs through the story:
 - Vashti and Esther as sex objects, the six-month banquet, the 23 meter high gallows, the year preparation for entering the harem, Haman's ending up honoring Mordecai, the king's assumption that Haman is raping Esther when he is actually begging her for mercy, the fact that the only people in danger are those who attack the Jews and 75,000 do. And in that connection, the ultimate irony is that the Jews let themselves be drawn into the massacre they had managed to escape.
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RUTH

- The Book of Ruth is anonymous and we don't know when it was written.
 - Its location among the Writings points to its having been written in the Second Temple period, when the question of relations with people such as the Moabites was a lively one (see Ezra-Nehemiah).
 - Its closing with a genealogy leading up to David suggests it is a basically historical story; it would be foolish to give David a Moabite great grandmother if this idea was fiction.
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WHAT KIND OF STORY IS IT?

- **Jewish:** It's about how David acquired his great grandmother; and like Esther, it's one of the Five Scrolls used at different occasions each year in the Jewish calendar (Pentecost). Some aspects would be obscure to other cultures (the details of the redeemer obligation, the shoe ritual).
 - **Female:** It's about how to survive as women in a man's world. One facet of this aspect is the way Ruth propositions Boaz—or rather proposes to Boaz, as she is surely not just offering him a one-night stand. But it's risky plan. She is taking the initiative in the relationship in a way that contrasts with cultural norms.
 - **Intertextual:** It resonates with other stories such as Tamar (Gen 38) and the Moabite women in Numbers 25, as well as Ezra-Nehemiah. We come to understand each text by comparing and contrasting them. Proverbs 31 has painted a portrait of a powerful or resourceful woman (Prov 31:11); only Ruth in Scripture is actually described in terms of that phrase in Proverbs. Her action in leaving her family and committing herself to Naomi and to Yahweh is like Abraham's. The portrait of life in Bethlehem (the care taken of some vulnerable women and a relative's willingness to marry a widow) bears comparison with the expectations of the Torah.
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WHAT KIND OF STORY IS IT?

- **Encouraging:** It's about God's involvement in some ordinary people's ordinary lives: a woman whose life falls apart, a woman who finds a new family, a man who finds a wife. It reminds us that everyone has their story to tell and their genealogy to find
 - **Hopeful:** It begins with a reference to the period of the judges, and the Book of Judges is characterised by unsavoury accounts of how life works out in that time, especially for women.
 - **Edifying:** A rabbinic comment asks how it is designed to be useful when it doesn't concern itself with classic Jewish themes such as cleanness and taboo, and answers that its significance lies in its exposition of the nature of hesed.
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RUTH & *HESED*

- The word *hesed* plays a key role in the book, illustrating *hesed* at work without always saying it.
 - Common translations: steadfast love, devotion, faithfulness, favor, kindness, love, loyalty, or mercy.
 - The word denotes an extraordinary act of self-giving, the nearest word to Greek *agapē*.
 - It can refer to an extraordinary act of generosity, graciousness or mercy that one person shows to another when they are under no obligation to do so - there is no prior relationship between the parties. (3:10)
 - It can also refer to an extraordinary act of self-giving, loyalty or mercy that one person shows to another when they are already in relationship with them. (1:8 & 2:20)
 - *Hesed* is also translated “covenant love,” and it does sometimes link with covenants. But it can exist outside of any covenant relationship. **It is a love based loyalty that goes beyond anything that a covenant would demand.**
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PSALMS

150 Example of How to Talk to God

“I read five psalms every day — that teaches me how to get along with God. Then I read a chapter of Proverbs every day and that teaches me how to get along with my fellow man.”

—Billy Graham

5 BOOKS WITHIN THE BOOK

- Before Psalms 1, 42, 73, 90, and 107 are the headings “Book One,” etc., and at the end of Psalms 41, 72, 89, 106 are some blessings, amens, and hallelujahs.
 - In 5 books, the Torah told Israel about what God had done and about the way of life that should be lived based on that fact. In five more, the Psalter told people how God was involved with them now, how to respond in worship to what God had done and does, how to urge him to do it again.
 - The Psalms teach not by telling but by showing. They speak from God by showing us how to speak to God.
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SUBSECTIONS WITHIN THE BOOKS WITHIN THE BOOK

- David Psalms 3-41, 51-72 (except 10, 33)
 - Korah Psalms 42-49
 - Asaph Psalms 50, 73-83 (though it's odd that 50 is separate)
 - Korah Psalms 84-85, 87-88 (though it's odd that 86 is an isolated David psalm)
 - Kingship Psalms 93, 95-99
 - Hallelujah Psalms 105-107
 - The Egyptian Hallel, used at Passover 113-118 (113-4 before meal, 115-8 after – see Mk 14:26)
 - Psalms of Ascents, used on pilgrimage or in procession 120-134
 - The Great Hallel, also used at Passover 135-36
 - David Psalms 138-145
 - Hallel Psalms 146-150
 - Note also the Elohim Psalms 42-83
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OTHER GROUPING

- **Orientation**—human life consists in satisfied seasons of well-being that evoke overtures of gratitude for the constancy of blessing. These are the psalms which seem to overflow with expressions about joy, celebration, goodness, coherence, and the reliability of God, his creation, and God’s governing law.
 - **Disorientation**—life is also filled with seasons of anguish because of hurt, alienation, self-pity, and hatred. These psalms are found most typically in “complaint songs,” the form of which matches the ragged, painful disarray (Their shape permits extravagance, hyperbole, and abrasiveness).
 - **New Orientation**—Human life consists in turns of surprise when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God, when joy breaks through the despair. Where there has only been darkness, now there is light. These psalms never state that the new situation was “natural,” easy, or obvious.
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PSALMS AS POETRY

- A poem uses its poetic form to probe deeper into human experience than ordinary speech or writing is usually able to do, to pull back a veil and allow the hearer or reader to sense other dimensions.
 - Parallelism: They say something from one angle and then repeat it from a slightly different one:
 - The most important things we want to say remain just a little beyond even our best words. The reader is invited to follow both perspectives and to see the larger, unspoken truth looming up behind
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PSALMS AS A PRAYER BOOK

EX: PSALMS 22 & 28

- **Invocation of God** (“My God, my God”).
 - **Protest:** “I/we”: how things are for me/us (“I am a worm, not a human being”)
 - “They”: what they are doing to us (“All who see me mock me”)
 - “You”: how you are neglecting us (“Why have you abandoned me?”)
 - **Recollection of God’s deeds in the past:** painful but hopeful (“Our ancestors trusted in you, and you rescued them”)
 - **Confession of trust** (“Yahweh is my strength and my shield”)
 - **The actual prayer:** “Listen to me” (“Don’t be deaf towards me”)
 - “Deliver me” (“Save my life from the sword”)
 - “Put down my oppressors” (“Render their wages to them”))
 - The balance of protest and prayer in psalms is thus the opposite to that typical of Christian prayers. The psalms spend a lot of time telling God what the situation is; they assume God can work out what to do.
 - **Promise to come back with praise when God has acted** (“In the midst of the congregation I will praise you”)
 - **Transition to actual praise** (“You who are in awe of Yahweh, praise him”)
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MISCTHOUGHTS PSALMS

- Psalm 119 is a glorious extended meditation on the same theme, with the alphabetical backbone of the poem (each set of eight verses begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet, a remarkable poetic feat in itself) making its own point about the word of God. The very script in which it is written can bring God's order to human life.
 - C. S. Lewis hailed Psalm 119 as the finest poem ever written
 - Good Books on the Psalms:
 - Long Obedience in the Same Direction by Eugene Peterson
 - Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
 - Why the Psalms Matter by NT Wright
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WHY THE PSALMS MATTER

BY NT WRIGHT

- **Time:** linear in biblical thought yet dynamic and complex. The past is brought into the present pointing us toward a future. (Passover/Exodus/Communion) Psalm 89 is a good example of this.
 - **Space:** there is an overlap between sacred space and human space – the overlap/interlocking of heaven and earth. (Creation, Tabernacle, Temple, Jesus, in the Spirit through the Church) Psalm 139 is a good example.
 - **Matter:** the goodness of Creation and the theme of “glory.” Glory has to do with human’s imaging God to the world of matter. God’s glory, then, is first of all God’s own presence and power that is then shared with God’s people as they reflect God to Creation. Psalm 72, 96, and 98 are good examples.
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LAMENTATIONS

- Lamentations' five poems each have 22 verses (66 in chapter 3); there are 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and in chapters 1—4 each verse begins with a different letter. They thus express sorrow from A to Z
 - Its background is the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of people from Judah—presumably the destruction of 587 B.C.
 - It is the surviving community's prayers in the years after that event. We know that the community had fast days in that connection (see e.g., Zech 8:19) and we can imagine it using these prayers on those occasions. The Jewish community still uses them on the Ninth of Av (August) in this way.
 - *Good Book: The Hidden Face of God: Finding the Missing Door to the Father Through Lament* by Michael Card
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SOME NOTES ON LAMENTATIONS

- Lam 1: The leadership has been deported; here ordinary people are mourning the city's fate. They accept responsibility for what has happened (contrast e.g., Ps 89). The prayer keeps noting that Ms. Zion has no comforter—in due course Isaiah 40:1-2 will respond to this fact.
 - Lam 2: The motif of Yahweh's anger is prominent, reflecting the experience of being on the receiving end. It indicates that Yahweh has all the passion of a person; Yahweh is not a cold judge. Note the situation's horror (vv. 11-12); also the disproving of a faith-conviction (v. 15; cf. Ps 48:2).
 - Lam 3: Now a man speaks; cf. Psalms and Jeremiah (with first, second, and third person verbs). Hope has gone (vv. 16-18); remembering is painful (vv. 19-21a). Then there is an astonishing reversal (v. 21b); Yahweh's other passions make hope possible (vv. 22-30). Yahweh is angry only unwillingly (v. 33 - the central line). Literally, it doesn't come from his heart. These facts make an appeal for repentance possible (vv. 40-42); there is the possibility of forgiveness.
 - Lam 4: If Lamentations 3 was the highpoint, the poems now revert to pained, concrete description. Yahweh has not kept his commitment to David and to Zion (v. 20; contrast Ps 132).
 - Lam 5: The least concrete of the poems, and the one most like a psalm. Lamentations turns out to be linear—it takes us to the end of its journey. But it is an unsatisfactory end (v. 22). The story is still incomplete.
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“But where can wisdom be found?
Where does understanding dwell?

-Job 28:12

PROVERBS, JOB, ECCLESIASTES, AND SONG OF SONGS

How to learn from life.

“Solomon wrote the Song of Songs in the springtime of youth, Proverbs with the wisdom of maturity, Ecclesiastes with the disillusion of old age”

-Rabbi Jonathan

Song of Songs Rabbah, the Rabbinic Commentary on the Song of Songs

PROVERBS

- It rubs our noses in truths that we wish we did not have to face.
 - It is instruction or discipline: which implies that it is not obtained without effort or pain.
 - It is insight: the capacity to be discerning and to look behind things.
 - It involves shrewdness: the characteristic of the snake (Gen 3), but a positive quality, too, in helping us live wisely.
 - It refers to knowledge: which means acknowledgment: not mere head-awareness of the truth but commitment to living by it.
 - It speaks of skill: a word that suggests “knowing the ropes,” being able to steer one’s way through life.
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JOB:

HOW WE LIVE WITH SUFFERING

- The book of Job is a piece of theological reflection in the form of a drama about a man who becomes the subject of debate in the heavenly court, and whose life then falls apart (chapters 1 – 2).
 - It centres on a dialog between him and three friends discussing appropriate reactions to an experience like his, and appropriate ways of understanding it (chapters 3 -27).
 - After a poem reflecting on the issues, and a final statement by Job (chapters 28 – 31), a latecomer storms in to make his contribution (chapters 32 – 37).
 - Then God appears and speaks (chapters 38-41).
 - Finally Job's life is restored (chapter 42).
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INSIGHTS FROM JOB

- Suffering is a test
 - Suffering comes as a consequence of our personal human sinfulness
 - Suffering challenges us to insist on facing God with the facts
 - Suffering is designed to encourage us to grow spiritually
 - There is no answer to the question about suffering even when there is one
 - Happily Ever After
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SONG OF SONGS

- **The Song gives expression to intrinsic human needs.** The need for loving recognition and acceptance: The woman describes herself as darkened by the sun, but pretty (1.5-6) – she is OK about herself because she is loved. She is only a common wild flower – but to him she is a lovely flower against the background of weeds (2.1-2). He is not an impressive tree compared with the giant redwoods – but as far as she is concerned, he provides shade and produces lovely fruit (2.3). They are just an ordinary couple, but their love turns them into a prince and a princess (3.6-11).
 - It opens with **shocking directness**: May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth (1.2)
 - It is not saying human beings should be like this, but just that we are, and readers had better own the fact.
 - The poems do not prioritise the physical over the relational, nor the relational over the physical. They assume that the two belong together, like body and spirit.
 - The presence of the Song in scripture implies that the kind of relationship it celebrates might be significant for people in general, not just for young people on their way to marriage.
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ECCLESIASTES

- Places side by side two ideas for consideration:
 - Biblical Teaching: wisdom teaching and of faith in God
 - Down-to-earth gloominess concerning how things are “under the sun”—“in real life”
 - It urges us not to hide from the emptiness of life “under the sun,” but to accept the challenge to believe nevertheless.
 - It forms a warning not to think we have the truth all buttoned-up, It issues a protest like that in Job against the over-simplified truths of Job’s comforters.
 - It constitutes Scripture’s permission to doubt. Biblical truth may sometimes seem full of holes, but we may still recognise that there are no better answers than the biblical ones.
 - Ecclesiastes is then like Job himself. The problem is not that Ecclesiastes is depressed—or if he is depressed, it is because he is facing facts. The book is about how to live with doubt.
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DANIEL

- Narrative Book. More than half of Daniel comprises a series of stories. They occupy most of chapters 2—7
 - Worship Book. Worship is a recurrent theme, especially in the stories.
 - Wisdom book. At the beginning of the book, the young men are introduced as men of insight, and through the stories they manifest that insight in a variety of ways.
 - Prophecy. In the Greek/English Bible the Book of Daniel appears among the Prophets, and Jesus refers to Daniel as a prophet (Mt 24:15)
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