Chapter Six
The Writings

Introduction

Following the Torah (Instruction) and the Nevi’im (the Former and Latter Prophets), we arrive at the third major division of the Hebrew Bible known as the Ketuvim or the Writings. They are a wide-ranging collection of literary works in various genres, including sacred poetry, practical philosophy or wisdom, paradoxical or speculative wisdom, history, erotic poetry, short stories, personal narratives, apocalyptic literature, and more.

For the most part, the texts in this section of the Bible were among the last to be canonized, and they were generally authored later than the texts in the two earlier sections of the Tanakh. There is some older, pre-exilic material in the Writings, in Psalms and Proverbs most notably, but the books collected in this section are predominately from the period following the captivity and Babylonian Exile. (The Exile is the period stretching from 587 BCE, when Jerusalem is destroyed and its inhabitants deported, to 538 BCE, when Cyrus the Emperor of Persia, following his invasion and capture of Babylon, frees the people of Judah and allows them to return to Jerusalem.)

We know that these texts are, for the most part, later for a few different reasons. One clue to their dating has to do with setting and historical context. The histories of Ezra and Nehemiah, for instance, are explicitly set in the Second Temple Period, following the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, in the era of Persian domination (from about 538 to 332 BCE) but before Alexander the Great of Macedonia (336-323 BCE) conquers Judah/Judea. The books of Esther and Daniel take place in the Persian court. Another important clue revolves around the treatment of various themes. For instance, the erotic nature of the poetry in “Song of Songs” is not consistent with earlier Hebrew poetry, just as Koheleth’s ironic and often detached approach to wisdom is not found in earlier Hebrew literature. The book of Ruth’s careful treatment of questions about marrying outside one’s own family, nation, or tribe appears to reflect a major issue of debate and concern in Judah during the middle of the 5th-century BCE, the 400’s (see Alter, Strong as Death xiii-xiv). Compare, for example, the very different but equally engaged treatment of intermarriage in Ezra 9 and 10.

One of the most important clues to dating biblical texts is linguistic. Like all languages, ancient Hebrew changed continuously through time. Scholars believe that the gap
separating the authorship of certain parts of Genesis and many of the texts collected in the Writings is more than four centuries (see Alter, Strong as Death xiv). English translations often smooth out or erase these linguistic differences across time, so it can be hard to judge from our translations alone. Nonetheless, scholars of Hebrew and other Near Eastern ancient languages can readily tell the difference, just as twenty-first century college students will immediately know that the King James Version of the Bible (1604-1611) is much older than the New International Version (last revised in 2011) by about four centuries.

Although scholars have examined these texts in a variety of ways, literary critics and translators such as Robert Alter in The Art of Biblical Poetry (1985, 2011) have revealed how the formal features of these texts—their genres, arrangements of words, rhythms and repetitions, unique choice of words and idioms, use of metaphor or other forms of figurative language, use of narrative, and so on—are central to understanding what these texts are saying and how they generate their meanings.

Another important way of approaching the Writings as a group is to see them as meditative reflection on the dramatically changed circumstances surrounding Jewish life and society following the return from Exile. There is an attempt to capture and preserve the ancient traditions, history, customs, and beliefs of the Israelites—a project that may have begun in earnest during the captivity in Babylon or perhaps even a little earlier with the rediscovery of the “the book of the law” (2 Kings 22:8) during the reign of King Josiah. But there is also struggle throughout many of the books to understand the suffering of God’s chosen people from a new angle or in a new light. While Deuteronomy and the Prophets often see misery, failure, and suffering as the direct consequence of sin and disobedience, the texts collected in the Writings often take a more complex view of the meaning of suffering and prosperity, inclusion and exclusion, holiness and dominance. And this view foreshadows in several respects that later teachings of Jesus, collected in the four gospels of the Christian New Testament.

The Writings are divided, according to Jewish tradition, into three sections.

The Three Poetic Books

These are three very distinctive, relatively long books of poetry. The poetry in each differs considerably, however, and the beginning and end of the Book of Job appear in the form of prose narrative.
• Psalms: An anthology of sacred poetry and songs

• Proverbs: A collection of aphorisms, practical philosophy, and wisdom

• Job: A long poem, which is also a story, a debate, a premier example of Near Eastern wisdom literature, and a theological examination of the nature, morality, and justice of God in light of human pain and suffering

The Megillot, or the Five Festival Scrolls

These five books of the Bible are each associated with a specific religious festival, and they are read in synagogues on designated holidays throughout the course of the Jewish religious year.

In terms of genre, they differ from each other widely, but they each serve liturgical purposes, and all remind believers of their devotion and commitment to Yahweh or the LORD alone. The Megillot is a diverse anthology of literary texts within the even larger and more diverse anthology of texts that make up the Ketuvim.

• The Song of Songs: A collection of often erotic love poems. It is associated with Passover, the holiday commemorating the Israelites’ escape from slavery in Egypt.

• Ruth: A beautiful love story about a Moabite widow, set during the time of the Judges. It is associated with Shavuot or The Feast of Weeks, which celebrates the wheat harvest.

• Lamentations: A cycle of five sorrowful poems about Jerusalem’s destruction. It is associated with the fasting day known as Tisha B’Av, a day of mourning.

• Ecclesiastes: A book of philosophical exploration and often paradoxical wisdom. It is associated with Sukkot, which is also known as the Feast of Booths or Feast of Tabernacles, a seven-day autumn agricultural festival that memorializes the wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land and the Lord’s protection and providence in that time.

• Esther: A story of Jewish survival and deliverance during the Persian Empire. It is associated with Purim, a holiday of feasting and rejoicing that remembers the deliverance of the Jews from Haman, who planned their genocidal extermination.
**Other Books**

These three books do not have a literary or liturgical commonality. In fact, they are ordered, arranged, and categorized differently by different faith traditions. They were, however, all authored relatively late in the history of the Hebrew books of the Bible.

Daniel and Ezra each contain large sections of text written in Aramaic, the language spoken by most Jews during and following the Babylonian captivity. It later became the dominant lingua franca throughout the Persian Empire. Biblical Hebrew became afterwards primarily a liturgical and theological and literary language, as opposed to the language of everyday speech or official business. Hebrew and Aramaic are related, part of the same linguistic family. Scholars generally agree that Aramaic would have been the language primarily spoken by Jesus. The presence of Aramaic, then, is a clear marker of the books within the Hebrew canon written relatively late.

- **Daniel**: A dual genre text that combines a series of stories about Daniel’s feats in Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylonian court with an apocalypse, also called a revelation, that provides a mystical and highly symbolic vision of the end times. (See also the “Apocalypse” chapter.)

- **Ezra-Nehemiah**: A narrative of the efforts of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah to build a new Temple and to restore a purified Jewish faith community in Jerusalem, following the Babylonian captivity and exile. (A single book in the Hebrew Bible, Ezra-Nehemiah was divided into two separate books in the Christian canon and moved to the section of historical books.)

- **Chronicles (First and Second Chronicles)**: A Priestly re-telling of the Deuteronomistic history (see the “Former Prophets” chapter), providing a biblical narrative stretching from Adam to the Persian Emperor Cyrus’s edict allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple.

**Psalms**

The Book of Psalms is an anthology of 150 religious songs or poems. In the Torah, the LORD speaks to his people in the form of the law or teachings, and in the Prophets, the LORD speaks to humanity through the oracles of his inspired and chosen representatives.
In the Psalms, however, the direction of the communication is reversed, and we hear humanity speaking to God.

Some of the psalms may date to the earliest years of the monarchy, and some psalms may have even been composed prior to the establishment of the monarchy. Of these, almost half (73) have been attributed to or associated with David, often as “A Psalm of David” (Ps. 3:1, NRSV, for example). Nevertheless, as Robert Alter has pointed out, the Hebrew preposition here is ambiguous, and it might mean or suggest not only “of” or “by” but also “for,” “belonging to,” or “in the manner of” (Alter, Psalms, p. 8n1).

Some psalms are attributed to Solomon, and some would have been written in the period of the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Others are clearly from the period of Exile, most famously perhaps Psalm 137, which begins “By the rivers of Babylon— / there we sat down and there we wept / when we remembered Zion” (Ps. 137:1). And others date from the post-Exilic, Second Temple period, when the Psalms were likely assembled and edited as a single book in the fourth or fifth century BCE.

In other words, the individual psalms that make up the book were composed over a period spanning more than five centuries.

The anthology itself is actually five separate sections:

1. Psalms 1-41
2. Psalms 42-72
3. Psalms 73-89
4. Psalms 90-106
5. Psalms 107-150

Each of these sub-divisions, except for Psalm 150, which concludes the fifth book, ends with a brief doxology that is not part of the psalm itself but is a concluding blessing or marker of the editorial divisions.

Many of the psalms play specific liturgical roles in Jewish and later Christian services. Many are explicitly musical and provide detailed information about how they are to be performed and with which instruments.

Two essential ways of analyzing and understanding the psalms are literary: (1) examining and understanding how the elements of ancient Hebrew poetry shape the meaning and
expression of the psalms, (2) discerning the genre or kind of psalm and then using an understanding of the genre's purpose to help guide an interpretation of the psalm.

Biblical Poetry

Ancient Hebrew poetry works according to different rules and uses different forms, patterns, and structures than poetry in English. It lacks rhyme, for example, and it does not use a regular meter, as English poetry often does (think iambic pentameter) or as classical Greek or Latin poetry do.

Instead, the most distinctive feature of biblical Hebrew poetry is parallelism. Parallelism is the pairing or balancing of lines or phrases by structuring those lines or phrases in grammatically similar ways. Most poetic lines are composed of two (sometimes three) balanced segments or versets. The balance is often loose. Often the second segment is shorter than the first.

In his Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews (first published in Latin in 1753, translated into English in 1787), the University of Oxford professor Robert Lowth focused on parallelism as a key structural feature of Hebrew poetry. He identified three basic kinds of parallelism:

- **Synonymous Parallelism**, in which the second segment echoes the first one. For example:

  dogs are all around me;
  a company of evildoers encircles me.

  (Ps. 22:16)

  The meaning of the second line is similar to or synonymous with the first. The second verset helps to reinforce or to explain the first verset.

- **Antithetical Parallelism**, in which the second lines contrasts with the first one. For example,

  for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
  but the way of the wicked will perish.

  (Ps. 1:6)
The second line focuses on the opposite of the first verset. It sets up a sharp contrast or comparison. Proverbs is filled with this type of parallelism.

**Synthetic Parallelism**, in which the second or third segment completes or syntactically finishes the thought of the first or the first and second lines. It is a less common kind of parallelism, and it often called synthetic or formal parallelism. For example, take a look at this verse, from Psalm 93:

More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters,
more majestic than the waves of the sea,
majestic on high is the LORD!

(Ps. 93:4)

In this verse, the first line or phrase articulates an initial idea or image (something vaguely “more” than the sound of “mighty waters), while the second line or verset adds to complement or expands on this idea (a still vague something that is “more” than even the ocean’s waves). But in the third line, the idea or statement is completed with the very last word of the line (ah, it is the LORD who is “more majestic” than even these awe-inspiring natural phenomena).

In the late twentieth century, two biblical scholars from the United States, James Kugel and Robert Alter, began to revise, refine, and expand our understanding of biblical parallelism. Kugel shows, for example, that perfect symmetry is not always required for parallelism.

Alter examines the various nuanced and subtle ways that the repetition in parallelism is never ever a simple reproduction of the same thing: it was always a repetition with a key difference. For instance, the second verset might be an intensification of the first line, or the second line might be a realization of the true meaning of the idea of introduced in the first line. The second verset might be a description of the first in the form of a metaphor or an epithet. Sometimes the first line in a general term, and the second line is specific. Sometimes it is the other way around. The relationship between the two lines might be synonymous, but the second line adds a new element. The second line might be a complementary completion of the first, or it might be a description of the consequences that ensue from the first. To mention just one more example, sometimes the second half of the parallelism is a surprising reversal or turn away from the idea in the first.
In other words, Alter helps us to understand the work that the second line does. It is never simple repetition, but always a change—sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic—in the meaning from the first to the second line. As you read, try to identify not only the existence of parallelisms, but also the purpose or function of the parallelism. How does the second line in the parallelism change or modify the meaning or idea in the first line?

The Types or Genres of Psalms

The German Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) was among the first biblical scholars to note that there were distinct types of psalms. He identified five main genres:

1. **Hymns, songs of praise.** See Psalm 8, for example.

2. **Individual Laments, songs of supplication, complaint, grief, or sorrow.** See Psalm 22, for example.

3. **Songs of Thanksgiving.** See Psalm 30, for example.

4. **Communal Laments, in which the nation or the people cries out, and the emphasizes is on a plural “we” instead of a singular “I.”** See Psalm 74, for example.

5. **Royal Psalms, which remember and celebrate David and the Davidic kings.** See Psalm 72, for example.

In addition to these five primary genres, there are several other kinds or types of psalms that can be identified throughout the Book of Psalms. Some of these other genres include:

- **Wisdom Psalms, or psalms of teaching and instruction.** See Psalms 1 or 37 and 39, for example.

- **Enthronement Psalms, which acknowledge the LORD as king.** See Psalm 29, for example.

- **Communal Songs of Thanksgiving, in which the “we” expresses gratitude for deliverance.** See Psalm 74, for example.

- **Psalms of Blessing and Cursing.** See the end of Psalm 137, for example.
• Liturgical Psalms. See Psalm 24, for example.

• Psalms that are hard to classify in terms of a genre because they appear to be composed of various genres.

As you read each of the assigned Psalms for this class, try to identify the genre or kind of psalm it is. And also ask yourself: What is the purpose or function of this psalm? Why is it being sung?

**Proverbs**

The second book within the Writings is a collection of wise sayings, or as Alter points out, “Proverbs is not merely an anthology but an anthology of anthologies” (*Wisdom Books* 183). There are six distinct units within the Book of Proverbs:

1. Chapters 1-9
2. Chapters 10-22:16
4. 24:23-24:34, a fragmentary section that stops after just eleven verses
5. Chapters 25-29
6. Chapters 30-31, a series of four appendices

The Book of Proverbs, like the Psalms, was composed over the course of centuries by various authors, though Solomon is traditionally associated not only with specific collections of proverbs but with the genre in general.

Proverbs offers not so much mystical insight as it does practical wisdom about how to go about living one’s daily life. The wisdom of Proverbs is often very common-sense instruction that might apply equally to Israelites and followers of the LORD and to non-believers or people from other cultures or nations.

On the other hand, even its practical form, the wisdom of Proverbs is closely associated with the LORD. In Chapter 8, Wisdom is personified as the LORD’s creation, “the first of his acts of long ago” (Prov. 8:22), while Chapter 1 begins the anthology by telling readers where wisdom begins: “The fear of is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7).
Proverbs concludes with an alphabetical acrostic, in which each verse begins with a letter from the Hebrew alphabet in order, about the qualities of a “capable wife” (Prov. 31:10, NRSV; Alter translates this phrase as “worthy woman”)—the ABC’s of being or becoming the ideal woman or wife. While Proverbs seems to have a lot to say about cheating or unkind spouses, it also memorably personifies Wisdom as female.

Job

The Book of Job is one of the most distinctive and original books of the Hebrew Bible. It opens by telling of a righteous man named Job who lived in the land of Uz, which may be Edom or perhaps a legendary land in the east. Either way, Job is not an Israelite, which emphasizes the universalizing themes of the book. In the prose frame or introduction (chapters 1-2) to the Book of Job, God meets with the sons of God or a heavenly council (see Ps. 82) as well as the Adversary (hasatan in Hebrew), who suggests that Job’s faithfulness is merely a transactional response to the Lord’s blessings and prosperity. They agree to allow Job to be tested, and Job loses nearly everything and suffers a painful skin disease. During this test, Job remains virtuous, though he laments his fate.

What follows in chapters 4-27 are three cycles of speeches in which Job’s three friends – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar – debate and discuss the cause and meaning of Job’s suffering. They insist that in a way consistent with Deuteronomistic theory that Job’s suffering is punishment for sin and disobedience. Job maintains his innocence throughout these discussions. Later (chapters 32-37), following the apparent exhaustion of Job and his companions, a new (perhaps satirical) character named Elihu appears to reiterate with great confidence the arguments previously made about Job’s sins.

Then, quite dramatically, from out of whirlwind, God answers Job and his friends. Yet this answer doesn’t seem in any sort of direct manner explain or justify Job’s suffering. Instead, the LORD speaks in rhetorical questions that emphasize the power and sovereignty of God and the magnificence and beauty and violence of His creation. Job’s response is to “repent in dust and ashes” (42:6). The book ends with a prose conclusion in which Job’s material well-being is restored and doubled, and the LORD blesses Job more than he had before the test.

Although the story is often seen as a theodicy (a justification or explanation of God’s ways to humans, a reconciling of the fact of evil with a belief in divine goodness), many readers find it an unsatisfying explanation of how God’s divine goodness can co-exist with inexplicable or seemingly unjustified evil. Other interpretations have emphasized Job’s
righteousness or moral example (see Ezek. 14:12-20) or the ways that Job serves as a model for all readers to endure and to accept suffering with patience and faith (see Jas. 5:10-11). Some commentators have noted that there is no clear or satisfactory ethical or moral view articulated in the Book of Job. Instead, for some, the poetry of Job is about the supernatural power of God and the sublime magnificence of his creation, while others has emphasized the mystery and wonder at the heart of Job – a book of questions without (clear, apparent, recognizable) answers.

*The Five Festival Scrolls*

The *Megillot*, or the Five Festival Scrolls, are an anthology of diverse literary texts, within the even more diverse anthology that is The Writings, within the larger collection of books that make up the Hebrew Bible. As noted above, each of these books is associated with a specific Jewish holiday.

For example, The Song of Songs is associated with Passover, which commemorates the Israelites escape from slavery in Egypt. The Song of Songs is a collection of sensual poems about love. The poems are surprisingly direct in their description of the body, sexuality, love, and passion. Yet they are also saturated with delicate and tasteful figurative language. There appears to be no mention of God or orthodox teaching, which has made some readers and commentators hesitate. The poems are sometimes read allegorically, as a figurative description of God’s relationship with his people on earth. The poems may be seen as wedding songs, and thus as a celebration of marriage and erotic human love. It is possible as well to read these texts as simply entertaining and well-written poems about sensuality and love, intend to please and engage readers, with no larger cosmic meaning or frame.

Ruth is a nearly perfect love story about a Moabite widow’s devotion to her mother-in-law and her eventual acceptance into the community of Israelites through her marriage to Boaz. Like the Book of Job, it expresses an inclusionary, universalizing social message by making a non-Israelite the protagonist. Like The Song of Songs, it emphasizes human love and human relationships, while the work or presence of God appears to be less conspicuous.

The Books of Lamentations is a cycle of five sorrowful poems about Jerusalem’s destruction. The authorship of this book is traditionally credited to the prophet Jeremiah, though there is no clear evidence that he wrote these poems.
A book of philosophical exploration and questioning, Ecclesiastes is sometimes seen as a book of anti-wisdom or paradoxical wisdom because of the various ways that it challenges or tests conventional wisdom. The author-persona, Qohelet, sees vanity or futility or “mere breath” (1:2) in all human endeavors – pleasure, work, wealth, virtue, and so on. The epilogue to Ecclesiastes teaches us, nevertheless, that one should simply fear and obey God (12:13), though this orthodox teaching at the end of the book appears to be both an editorial addition as well as a non-sequitur conclusion detached from the questions and explorations that precede it.

The final book among the Festival Scrolls is Esther. A story of Jewish survival during the Persian Empire, it recounts Esther and Mordecai’s clever and faithful attempts to save the Jews from the evil villain Haman, who had plotted their genocidal extermination. It depicts Jewish society in diaspora, in a scattering of the population in the wake of the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles that resulted in migrations and relocations and resettlements that fundamentally changed the nature of the Jewish community apart from Jerusalem and the Promised Land of Israel. The story is powerfully entertaining, full of humor, danger, and drama. It is a story of great heroism – both Esther’s and Mordecai’s. Stylistically, the Book of Esther uses powerful, ironic, and surprising reversals – Haman is executed on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai (7:10), for example – which may hint at God’s unseen role in human affairs or may celebrate the overturning of hierarchies, in which the lowly become powerful and the powerful are brought low.

**The Other Books of the Ketuvim**

One of the most famous books in this group is Daniel. Please see the next chapter on the “Apocalypse” genre for a discussion of Daniel’s form and genre as well as some interpretive guidance and historical context.

Ezra-Nehemiah is a single book in the Hebrew Bible, and it narrates the efforts of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah to rebuild the Temple as part of a program to restore a purified Jewish faith community in Jerusalem in the generations immediately following the Babylonian captivity and exile. Within the Christian canon, this book is separated into two book, Ezra and Nehemiah, and located among the historical books.

Also classified among the historical books, and not The Writings, in the Christian ordering of the texts of the Hebrew Bible, is Chronicles (or First and Second Chronicles). Chronicles is a Priestly re-telling of the Deuteronomistic history (see the “Former Prophets” chapter). It supplies an orthodox biblical narrative that begins with Adam and
Eve and concludes with the Persian Emperor Cyrus, who allows the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their Temple.

**Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion**

1. Identify two or three instances of parallelism in one of the psalms. What is the effect or impact of parallelism on this verse or the psalm as a whole? How exactly does it change or add to the meaning of the verse or psalm? Explain.

2. Try writing your own short stanza of poetry, using parallelism.

3. Identify the expression of two different emotions within one of the psalms. What is the relationship of these two emotions to each other? For example, is there a movement from one emotion to another? If so, where exactly does the shift or turn seem to happen? Or does the psalmist try to express two different emotions simultaneously? If so, how does the psalmist achieve this?

4. Identify two different kinds or genres of psalms or two different functions or purposes from among the ones you read. Does the psalm form seem better suited to one genre or one purpose than another? Explain.

5. Choose and discuss a selected Psalm and examine it carefully in the following ways:
   - How would you turn this into or tell this as a story?
   - How does it use parallelism?
   - How does it use figurative language?
   - What does it say? What does it do? What does it mean?
   - How does it use poetic or song form to say or do or mean what it intends?

6. Find two or three proverbs that make sense to you right now or that seem to be general wisdom (regardless of religion, culture, or historical period). Explain it as universal wisdom. For example, you might apply it or illustrate it with an example.

7. Find two or three proverbs that do not really make good sense anymore or seems specific to the Israelites (not any other culture or religion). Explain how it does not immediately seem to make good or common sense anymore. Does the proverb seem to reflect an ancient or culturally specific aspect of Middle Eastern society? Does it not actually work well in a modern or democratic society? Does it seem sexist, racist, or
prejudiced in some way? Could you illustrate with an example how the advice here is not actually practical or wise anymore, or in a different cultural context?

8. Does the wisdom in Proverbs strike you as secular and practical? Is it something that would apply to anyone regardless of culture or faith? Or is the wisdom here spiritual and religious, something specifically for followers of the LORD? Or both? Or neither exactly? Explain.

9. What themes do you see repeated in Proverbs?

10. What underlying formal features do you find repeated across the Proverbs?

11. What exactly is wisdom?

12. Examine the characters in the Book of Job carefully. What is Job the protagonist like? How about Satan (and who is he)? How would you describe the Lord in this book? What about the other characters: Job’s wife, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu? Who are they? What are they like? What and how do they think, reason, see the world? What are their motivations, their personalities and concerns?

13. Take a close look at the language and structure of Job. For example, how does the prose introduction and conclusion differ from the poetic middle parts? What are some of the differences between the two? Do the differences affect the meaning? Or, for example, take a look at the use of repetition (in anaphora or parallelisms or wherever you find repetition) or figurative language (metaphor, synecdoche) or allegory and symbolism?

14. Job is often considered a theodicy — that is, a justification or explanation of God’s ways to humans, a reconciling of the fact of evil with a belief in divine goodness. If you examine it as a theodicy, is it a satisfying or convincing one? Why or why not? Or could the theodicy label be a misinterpretation of the book?

15. What is the point of Job or its message? How are we to interpret this story? How would we know if we had arrived at the correct interpretation of this text or not?

16. As you read Ruth, pay attention to the structure or organization of the story. What is the genre of the book? Is it a romance?
17. Why make a non-Israelite the main character of Ruth? What do this story seem to say about cultural differences, especially the separation of the Israelites from non-Israelites?

18. Why is everything meaningless, according to the Book of Ecclesiastes (see 1.12ff.)?

19. Why isn’t wisdom a worthy goal? Or hard work or pleasure or wickedness?

20. What role does death play in Ecclesiastes?

21. How is Ecclesiastes different from Proverbs? Or from Job, which also meditates on injustice and limits?

22. How is Ecclesiastes different from everything else we’ve read this semester? It seems sometimes opposed to the Deuteronomistic theory of history. Do you see in Ecclesiastes a different or dissenting view of God and humanity?

23. What is scary or harrowing about the Book of Esther? What is delightful, entertaining, fun, or clever about the story?

24. What makes Esther seem fairy-tale-like? Why might some scholars think this story more like a piece of patriotic fiction than an historically accurate record of fact?

25. One critical approach to Esther has emphasized Esther’s role as a woman and heroine. For example, the critic Sidnie Ann White writes: “Her conduct throughout the story has been a masterpiece of feminine skill. From beginning to end, she does not make a misstep.... She is a model for the successful conduct of life in the often uncertain world of the Diaspora ... by accepting the reality of a subordinate position and learning to gain power by working within the structure rather than against it.” What do you think of White’s assessment of Esther as a heroine?

Works Cited and Further Reading


