STUDIES IN THE

OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
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OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

The Writings

I. Introduction

The Writings form the third and final section of the Hebrew Bible, also referred as *Tanakh*[1]. It is the most varied of all the divisions of the canon. The books span the widest historical timeframe, utilize the most varied forms of literary genre, and focus on a host of diverse topics.

II. The Order of the Books

The Writings also evidence the most variation in the order of its books. Over the centuries, the books included in the Writings have increased and decreased based on numerous factors, including methods of preservation and storage as well as liturgical necessities of the Jewish community. After the development of the codex, book order became increasingly solidified into what is now the traditional book order of the Hebrew scriptures.

There is evidence attesting a broad continuity in book order that had developed by the time of Christ. In fact, a number of Jesus' statements shed light on the formation and general order of the books in the Writings.

A. *First Book*

During his interaction with the two men on the Emmaus road, Jesus instructs them regarding the "words which I spoke to you while I was still with you." The words were concerning the fulfillment of "all things which are written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). This three-fold division of the OT scriptures is curious, since Jesus does not refer to the final section as "Writings," but rather simply mentions the Psalms. The explanation, however, is rather straightforward. Not only does the book of Psalms comprise the single largest book in the Writings, but it also is

[1] *Tanakh* is actually an acronym based on the initial letter of three major divisions of the Hebrew canon:

T[orah]	Law
N[ebi'im]	Prophets
K[etubim]	Writings

most consistently placed first in order. It is most likely that Jesus used Psalms as a representative of all the books in Writings because it was the first book of that division, just as John the Baptist used Isaiah as a representative of all the prophets, since Isaiah was most consistently placed first in the division of the prophets (Mark 1:2).

B. ***Last Book***

In Matthew 23:35 and Luke 11:51, Jesus condemns the nation of Israel for their perpetual hardheartedness. In a blasting statement, he announces,

> Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous bloodshed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the sons of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar (Matt 23:34-35).

Here, the Lord uses a particular literary device called *merismus* to make a broad sweep of human history. To do this, he references the first and last prophet to be killed in the OT scriptures. The first, he notes, is Abel, who was killed in Genesis 4 by his brother Cain. Thus, Jesus is beginning with the first book of the Hebrew Bible.

The last prophet he notes is Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whose murder is recorded in 2 Chronicles 24:20-22. If Abel's death is referenced because of its location in the first book of Jesus' OT, then it most likely means that Zechariah's death was referenced because of its location in the *last* book of his OT. This order fits with the traditional book order of the writings in *Tanakh*.

C. ***Traditional Order***

As for the remaining books in the Writings, manuscript evidence suggests a varied list of books included in this final section. Josephus, for instance, specifies only three books in the Writings, given that he describes them as "hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life." This would naturally include the Psalms, Proverbs, and Job, yet is unclear if he also included Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes as well.

What is clear is that a number of books from the Writings were found to be placed alongside their counterparts in the division of the Prophets, most likely because of their close historical and thematic ties. For instance, Ruth is frequently found with Judges in the Prophets because of their similar settings, and Lamentations is listed with Jeremiah based on authorship.

Eventually, though, these books were separated from their prophetic counterparts because of their regular use in Israel's liturgical calendar. The Megilloth ("five scrolls") comprises the five books which are read during the time of Israel's five feasts:

MONTH	LITURGICAL EVENT	BOOK
1st	Passover	Song of Solomon
3rd	Pentecost	Ruth
5th	Ninth of Ab	Lamentations
7th	Feast of Tabernacles	Ecclesiastes
12th	Feast of Purim	Esther

In the modern *Tanakh*, which represents the traditional book order of the Jewish canon, the Megilloth sits in the center of the Writings, flanked on each side by three books:

THE WRITINGS

Poetic	Megilloth	Narrative
Psalms	Ruth	Daniel
Job	Song of Songs	Ezra/Nehemiah
Proverbs	Ecclesiastes	Chronicles
	Lamentations	
	Esther	

III. **The Style of the Books**

A. ***Hebrew Poetry***

Hebrew poetry is not restricted to the Writings. It can be found scattered throughout the Torah and the Former Prophets, and of course the majority of the Latter Prophets were composed in prophetic poetry, with only a minor portion occurring in prose. But with the beginning of the Writings, there is a sudden and obvious shift from prophetic prose/poetry into the concentrated poetry of the Psalms, Job, and Proverbs.

While poetry in English and other western languages relies heavily on meter and aural rhyme, Hebrew poetry is marked by a different set of devices that differentiate it from narrative prose. The goal of the interpreter, it must be remembered, is to understand the content and theological message of the poetry and how the various poetic devices utilized by the authors contribute to that message. The inattentive interpreter can easily get side-tracked analyzing the formal aspects of the poetry, such as rhythm and form, and lose sight of the message of the poetry.

1. *Rhythm of Though — Parallelism*

If rhyme is the "prototypical" (or even stereotypical) device of western poetry, then parallelism is the rhyming of Hebrew poetry. As Watson writes in his authoritative volume on Hebrew poetry, "Parallelism is universally recognized as *the* characteristic feature of biblical Hebrew poetry."[2] He goes on to note, however, that it has been unduly "exalted" to that position based on a general lack of careful study into its essential nature.

At its core, Watson writes, parallelism inherently involves the concept of symmetry and relationship. Or, in the words of Futato, "Parallelism is a relationship of correspondence between the cola of a poetic line."[3] It is the relationship that one line of poetry has with one or more subsequent lines. These relationships occur both on a

[2] Wildred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (London: T&T Clark, 2001), 114.

[3] Mark D. Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007), 33.

semantic level as well as a grammatical. The former can be readily discerned post-translation. The latter, on the other hand, is rarely perceived once the poetry is translated into another language, especially if the receptor language lacks a corresponding gender system.

a) Synonymous Parallelism

When the thought of the first line is restated in the second line using synonymous terms:

Psalm 18:5	
a	The cords of Sheol surrounded me
b	The snares of death confronted me

b) Specifying Parallelism

When the second line specifies a preceding general statement:

Psalm 5:12	
a	For it is you who blesses the righteous man, O Yahweh
b	You surround him with favors as with a shield

c) Complementary Parallelism

When the second line of a poetic couplet complements the first line in some way:

Psalm 8:6	
a	You make him to rule over the works of your hands
b	You have put all things under his feet

Or, when the two poetic lines describe complementary actions:

Psalm 4:5	
a	Offer the sacrifices of righteousness
b	And trust in Yahweh

d) Explanatory Parallelism

When the second line gives an explanation or reason for what is stated in the previous line:

Psalm 4:8	
a	In peace I will both lie down and sleep
b	For you alone, O Yahweh, make me to dwell in safety

e) Progressive Parallelism

When the second line makes a logical and/or temporal advance on the previous line:

Psalm 2:5	
a	Then he will speak to them in his anger
b	And terrify them in his fury

f) Comparative Parallelism

When the second line completes a comparative statement:

Psalm 4:7	
a	You have put gladness in my heart
b	More then when their grain and new wine abound

g) Contrastive Parallelism

When the second line makes a statement that contrasts with the first:

Proverbs 12:15	
a	The way of a fool is right in his own eyes
b	But a wise man is he who listens to counsel

2. *Rhythm of Sound*

While it lacks meter in its strictest sense, Hebrew poetry makes use of sound-based rhythmic devices to add emphasis and make rhetorical impact. Some of these devices are discerned only in the original language, which means that using a good commentary will help the inquisitive Bible student explore the depths of Hebrew poetry at a greater level than they can in their English Bibles.

a) Acrostic

When the first letter of each line (or stanza) follows a certain sequence, such as alphabetic (Pss 9, 10, 24, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145; Prov 31:10-31; Lam 1, 2, 3, 4). The function of the acrostic as a whole is to aid in memorization.

b) Alliteration

When the same consonant recurs within a unit of verse, the function of which is to bind together the components of "line, strophe, stanza, or poem,"[4] aid in memorization, and focus the reader's attention on the details of the imagery.

[4] Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 227.

Psalm 122:6

***Sh**a'alu **sh**^{e}lom **y**^{e}rushalaim*
***Y**ishlayu 'ohabaykh*

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
May they prosper who love you!

c) Assonance

When there is a series of words containing a distinctive vowel-sound or certain vowel-sounds in a specific sequence. The purpose of its use is to link component parts of the poem together and catch the listener's attention.

Psalm 1:1

***Ash**rey h**a'ish ash**er*

Blessed is the man who...

d) Paranomasia

A type of wordplay where two (or more) words are deliberately used based on how similar they sound to each other (Ps 15:3; Job 29:16; Prov 10:16). The function of this device is many: (1) to amuse and sustain interest; (2) to assist composition; (3) to lend authenticity; (4) to link a poem or its parts; (5) to denote reversal; (6) to show appearance can be deceptive; (7) to equate two things; (8) to assist in memorization.

e) Onomatopoeia

The use of a word which mimics or imitates another sound (Job 39:24-25; Ps 140:4; Song 1:2; 2:12). Hebrew authors used it to heighten imagery by "lending substance to the bare words by making them sound like the event they describe."[5]

f) Inclusion

The envelopment of a poem or stanza using a repeated word or phrase (Pss 103:1, 22; 118:1, 29). In this way, the poem is set within a frame that provides a thematic lens through which the reader may interpret the text.

B. ***Hebrew Wisdom***

One of the most unique features of the Writings is the inclusion of Wisdom Books. As with poetry, not every work included in the Writings is necessarily wisdom literature. Nevertheless, it is a theme and a genre that remains unique to this final section of the Hebrew canon.

[5] Ibid., 236.

1. The Meaning of Wisdom

Before we can proceed to discuss the wisdom literature in the Writings, we first need to develop an accurate concept of what wisdom means according to the OT. "Wisdom" translates the Hebrew term חָכְמָה [*ḥokmâ*], and it is used outside the OT wisdom books in the contexts of vocation and administration.

a) Vocational Skill

The term, for instance, refers to skill in executing technical work and craftsmanship such as metal and woodworking (Exod 35:30-36:7) and working with cloth (Exod 36:35), as well as in connection with the crafting of idols (Isa 40:20) and the work of professional mourners (Jer 9:17), and sailors (Ezek 27:8-9).

b) Administrative Skill

The term is also applied to the skillful employment of administrative responsibilities. Joseph is described as exhibiting skill in his administration over Egypt (Gen 41:33, 39), and Moses stressed the importance to appoint skilled tribal leaders (Deut 1:13, 15). David (2 Sam 14:20) and Solomon (1 Kgs 3:12; 4:29-34) both employed wisdom in their administrative duties, and it marked out Daniel and led to his elevated service in Babylon (Dan 5:11).

c) Basic Definition

In summary, the basic idea at the root of *ḥokmâ* [wisdom] is *the skill of being able to form and execute the correct plan to gain the desired results*. It denotes the idea of knowing a subject intimately, and having the technical skills to execute a desired plan and bring it to fruition.

But as with men like Solomon and others who demonstrated specific skills, i.e., wisdom, in certain areas, he also exhibited foolishness in others. Thus, the Bible teaches that wisdom goes beyond the personal skills of craftsmanship and statesmanship. Existential living is hypocritical, even if one is skilled in certain areas. We need a holistic wisdom, and the wisdom literature exists to teach us how to attain it.

d) Wisdom in the Wisdom Literature

When we turn to its use within the wisdom books, then, this essential definition takes on spiritual and moral dimensions. The term becomes a means of referring to *the skill of being able to learn and execute God's plan for life*.

Wisdom is Divine. God is the master planner. Everything he does has a plan, and it is a perfect plan. As such, everything he does is according to wisdom—skilled execution of his desired plan. Thus, for us to live wisely—according to God's plan for life—we must seek after wisdom from God. He is the true definition and source of wisdom and we cannot become skillful in living according to God's plan without wisdom from the divine planner (Prov 8:22-25).

Wisdom is the Source of Life. Because of this, man cannot live without wisdom (Prov 3:18). It is the control of emotional and physical life, and it dictates

the moral life (Prov 8:8-9). In the context of Israel's covenant life, wisdom is the means of experiencing everything promised in the covenant.

Wisdom is available to all who will hear. Ultimately, it is not God's responsibility if we do not have wisdom. Rather, it is the fault of the fool for not having wisdom because it is available to all (Prov 1:20-21). A wise man hears, takes it to heart, understands, and applies it to his heart. This same concept is repeated in the NT by James (1:9-11), which is why his epistle has been called "the Proverbs of the New Testament."

2. *Types of Wisdom Literature*

There are several types of wisdom literature found in the OT, each with their own unique features. Many come in the form of proverbial sayings—short, pithy statements designed to get the reader to think and contemplate the fundamental principle of wisdom at hand (e.g., Prov 10:1-29:27). Yet there are also longer, sermon-like writings aimed at giving moral exhortation (e.g., Prov 1:8-9:18). Finally, there are extended wisdom discourses, which comprise and span entire books (e.g., Job, Ecclesiastes). Not everything in these discourses is necessarily wise or intended to be understood as giving wisdom. Rather, when read in context, the book as a whole is a message of wisdom.

Scripture gives man an insight into heavenly wisdom, and Job is a prime example of this. His friends tried to give wisdom while not knowing the whole picture. They only had a human perspective, for they had no idea what happened in Job 1-2. Thus, the opening book of the Writings forms the unbreakable link between wisdom and Scripture through its emphasis on the wise man's love for and meditation on Torah. This same theme is reiterated at much greater length in Psalm 119.

3. *Characteristics of Wisdom Literature*

Four characteristics set wisdom literature apart:

e) Addresses the Individual

The wisdom literature is personal. It addresses the individual rather than the corporate entity. The Torah and the Prophets were written for the nation as a whole, but there is something uniquely personal and intimate about the wisdom literature. Proverbs shows the instructions of a wise father challenging his son to be wise. Job reveals the trials of a wise man. Ecclesiastes records the preaching of a wise man. The Psalms demonstrate the heart of a wise man.

f) Authority based on Moral Experience and Training Intelligence

The wisdom taught in these books is real and authentic. Its authority is based on knowing, seeing, and experiencing life. There is a cognitive dimension to wisdom, as seen in its extensive use with "knowledge" and "understanding." But there is an experience-based dimension as well, where wisdom increases through life experience and lessons learned. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes exemplify men who gave wisdom based on experience and insight to life.

g) Concern is for Everyday Life

The wisdom literature ultimate concerns itself with everyday life and practical reality. It is nearly void of discussions around the cult and organized religious matters and practices. Rather, it speaks to the everyday realities of life. Even in its instructions, its focus is practical even as it is moral. While the Torah approaches adultery, for instance, from a divine perspective—as an offense to God—the wisdom books approach it from a practical perspective—as a stupid endeavor. Both perspectives are true, yet they approach the subject from different angles.

h) Method is through Counsel and Instruction

The Torah approached morality from a covenant perspective. Israel's moral responsibility was outlined on prescriptive and prohibitive terms, and underscored with, "Thus says Yahweh." Wisdom literature approaches morality with gentle and instructive counsel. It shows consequences for actions, which is what the world defies at all costs. Thus wisdom literature delivers the reader from the perverse thinking of the world.

IV. **The Character of the Writings**

A. ***Theme***

The Torah was a story of Israel's failure to obey God. Despite their elect status and unparalleled appointments and unique relationship to Yahweh, it demonstrated their inability to obey the covenant both historically as well as prophetically. Both the Former and Latter Prophets testify to the fact that Israel failed continually throughout her history to obey God, and that this would continue to happen until the end of days.

In the Writings, however, the focus changes. Instead, it shows the godly person how to respond between the time of Israel's failure and the establishment of the kingdom at the end of days. The Prophets end with the instruction to cling to Yahweh and remember the law of Moses (Mal 4:4) and wait for the sun of righteousness to heal the nation and the land (Mal 4:2) until the kingdom is ushered in. The Writings follow with insight and direction about how the godly man did, should, and will cling to Yahweh and wait upon him until Messiah comes and the kingdom is established.

Thus, at its most basic level, the Writings all converge in their various genres (poetry, wisdom, narrative, etc.) to discuss the theme of *human life in relation to God*. Though they span from the beginning to the end of Israel's history, they are all lessons for the godly as they wait for the end of days.

B. ***Basic Characteristic***

Just as the wisdom literature focused on the individual, so the Writings as a whole carry this basic characteristic throughout. Even outside of the wisdom books, the individual emphasis is present. While Samuel and Kings present the kings of Judah—even David and Solomon—as failures, in Chronicles these kings become models. Likewise, in Ezra/Nehemiah, the prayers of individual men receive prominent attention as models of godly living.

C. ***Characteristics***

The Writings offer a number of characteristic features that make it distinct in the way it presents its overarching themes.

1. *Patterns for prayer and praise*

   Not only does the Writings contain the songbook of Israel's worship, but it offers through example patterns for how the godly prays and praises Yahweh in daily life. It explores the multifaceted reality of life lived in relationship to God and the prayers of men who have lived, prayed, and praised in both joy and heartache, who firmly trust in God as well as question his ways.

2. *Insight into God's work in the world*

   The Writings allow the godly person insight into how God works in the world. Job, for instance, invites the reader into a conversation between God and Satan that neither Job nor his friends were privileged to hear. Their words and actions are evaluated for the purpose of demonstrated how the godly man lives in light of what he isn't allowed to know.

   There is an increased emphasis on the providence of God in the Writings. While the Torah portrayed God as an actor and sovereign ruler in the world, the Writings show him as a God who acts in response to the prayers of his people. He is worshipped as sovereign (e.g., Psalms), but at times he seems wholly absent, yet nevertheless his fingerprints can be found in the providential outworking of events on behalf of his people (e.g., Esther, Ruth, Chronicles).

3. *Lessons drawn from God's creative order*

   The Writings point the godly person to the creation for insight. It highlights natural consequences based on the experiences and observations of life (e.g., Proverbs, Ecclesiastes).

4. *Responses of the godly to God's ways*

   The Writings show how the godly person responds to God and his ways (e.g., Psalms). Rather than giving commandments built on indicative statements, the Writings offer indicative statements which flow out of God's working within the life of man.

5. *Models of the devotion of God's people*

   The Writings offer model for the godly person to emulate. It gives the model of the man who fears God (e.g., Job). It offers the model of the wise man (e.g., Proverbs, Ecclesiastes). It reveals the model of a man who prays and praises God in the various circumstances of life (e.g., Psalms). It provides a model of the man who delights in the covenant union of marriage (e.g., Song of Songs). And it presents the models of good kings (e.g., Chronicles, Ezra/Nehemiah).