CHAPTER

# 13 A Legacy of Israel

## Wisdom Literature and Psalms

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**Timeline**

**950 B.C.E.** Approximate date of the building of Solomon's Temple
**586 B.C.E.** Destruction of Solomon's Temple
**515 B.C.E.** Completion of the Second Temple
**332 B.C.E.** Alexander conquers Palestine and Greek influence floods the region
**200 B.C.E.** Wisdom books and the book of Psalms approach their final form

**Chapter Outline**

**I.** The Wisdom Literature
**II.** Psalms: Israel Sings Its Faith



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## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The books known as Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and the Song of Songs do not fit easily into the Old Testament story. These poetic books offer another way to look at and proclaim faith, which is significantly different from the chronological storytelling that characterizes much of the Old Testament. The wisdom tradition often addresses issues of daily living, with little or no reference to the record of Israel's covenant with God in the past. The individual poems in the book of Psalms likely reflect a major component of Israel's worship tradition, but we find them now in a literary collection with little evidence of when, where, and how they were used in ancient times. Some of these books have enjoyed enormous popularity throughout Christian tradition, perhaps because of their apparently timeless quality.

## THE WISDOM LITERATURE

Israel contributed many things to the world, and its modern descendants (the Jews) are still making invaluable contributions to human society. Of all of its literature, the most admired must be the words of its wise teachings and the songs of its singers. Its proverbs and metaphors spice the speech of many lands. Its greatest literary masterpiece, the book of Job, ponders some of life's deepest mysteries. Its psalms reflect the full range of human emotion, from abject misery to ecstatic praise. Its love songs, the explicitness of which challenges both Jewish and Christian interpreters alike, sing of the "way of a man with a maiden" (Prov. 30:19). Because all these literary types use poetry as the medium of expression, they will be studied together.

### Wise Ones and Their Work[1]

Wisdom was a product of the people, rooted in the experiences of life and representing the distillation of those experiences. Two of its most important characteristics were that (1) it originated in and was nurtured by the family or tribe and (2) its earliest forms were oral. Its origins are lost in the mists of time, but logic would dictate that it began when leaders began to use their experiences in life to teach the young.

**WISDOM IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST.** Long before the inhabitants of Israel appeared in history as a separate people, there was a wisdom tradition among the people of the Fertile Crescent. Among the Sumerians, scribes used proverbs, in Sumerian and Akkadian, both as a teaching device and as a means of learning a second language. The theme of the righteous sufferer was known in the area long before the book of Job was written. A Babylonian work, *The Dialogue about Human Misery* (1000 B.C.E.), had echoes of ideas found in both Job and Ecclesiastes.

In Egypt, wisdom literature was commonly used to train young people in morals and to ensure competent work in the court of the king. Especially important is "The Instruction of Amen-em-opet," which many scholars believe influenced Proverbs 22:17–24:22. That Solomon had an Egyptian princess as his chief wife had led to the suggestion that Egyptian wisdom influence entered Israel through Solomon's court.

**WISDOM IN ISRAEL.** Israelite **wisdom** undoubtedly had its oral stage. Later, however, it seems to have taken on a more formal structure. References to the wisdom of Solomon (1 Kings 4:29–34) probably were reinforced by the fact that (1) following the tradition of the Egyptians, he established schools of wisdom and (2) because the Israelites viewed prosperity as evidence of God's blessing and with it, the evidence of wisdom, they equated great wealth with great wisdom.

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As Solomon's prosperity was unquestioned, it would have enhanced any reputation he gained as a wise man. Further evidence of wisdom schools connected to the royal court might be deduced from the reference to the "men of Hezekiah" (Prov. 25:1), who were said to have collected "proverbs of Solomon." Generally, it is agreed that the earliest reference to the "wise" as officials of the religious establishment is found in Jeremiah 18:18. Two books whose English names are often confused, Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Bible and Ecclesiasticus from the Alexandrian Canon, seem to have been schoolbooks. Both are classified as wisdom books.

But wisdom knows no political or national boundaries. This was true especially when those boundaries did not act as barriers to travel, as they do today. Israel's wisdom was part of the larger pool of wisdom of the Near East. The book of Proverbs is a good illustration of this fact. In addition to collections of Israelite wisdom, it contains other materials that had been brought to Israel from other countries. For example, Proverbs 22:17–24:22 has thirty sections similar to "The Instruction of Amen-em-opet." There are numerous parallels between the two texts, suggesting that the Hebrew writer knew the Egyptian text. This would not be unlikely, as Solomon had close relations with Egypt. His scholars, who were concerned with collecting and developing Israelite literature, were undoubtedly influenced by others.[2]

Other examples can be found in Proverbs 30–31. The former is said to have been "the words of Agur son of Jakeh of Massa" (30:1), while the chapter is attributed to "Lemuel, king of Massa" (31:1). Massa was not in Israelite territory but was located in northwestern Arabia (Gen. 25:14).

Wisdom teachings were of two types. Practical wisdom was concerned with the problems of everyday living. The form of this wisdom was such that much of it was easily taught. Easily remembered literary forms—such as proverbs, fables, and short poetic discourses on some human problem—could be committed to memory. The proverb was a short, easily remembered saying that contained one main point. It could take the form of a comparison or a contrast. The fable (such as Jotham's fable in Judg. 9:7–15) was a story that had a moral, usually giving human characteristics to plants or animals. The short poetic discourses actually were just longer proverbs, still designed to make one main point. This kind of wisdom took a simple and orthodox view of life.

In the post-Exilic period, the wise men became the schoolmen in Israel. Perhaps the most famous was Ben Sirach, whose teachings were collected in the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Ben Sirach. Practical wisdom was the chief concern of the schoolmen.[3]

Wisdom of a different kind was found in Ecclesiastes (not to be confused with the Wisdom of Ben Sirach) and the book of Job. These books belong to the realm of philosophical, or speculative, wisdom. They were extended discussions involving many of the deepest questions that confront human beings as they try to live in the world. They challenged many of the most widely held ideas of the time. They questioned things that most people would never dare to question. For them, life was far from simple. Indeed, they posed many unanswerable questions and challenged many traditional values.

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## Proverbs

Proverbs contains a diverse collection of orthodox wisdom. Life was viewed in a very simple manner—the man who followed wisdom would prosper, while the man who ignored wisdom would fail. The first was wise; the second was the fool—there was no middle ground.[4]

**THE PURPOSE OF WISDOM (PROV. 1:1–7).** Solomon's place in the wisdom movement is indicated in Proverbs 1:1, in which the whole book was credited to him, even though later parts of the book clearly indicate that he was not the author of all the proverbs. Because Solomon was the most famous of all of Israel's wise men, he was looked upon as the father of Israelite wisdom.

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The purpose of the book of Proverbs is stated in 1:2–6. Three groups of people are mentioned—those who needed "wisdom and instruction," those who needed "words of insight," and those who received "instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity" (1:2–3). The simple needed shrewdness, and youths needed "knowledge and prudence" (1:4). The wise person needed to "gain in learning" and to acquire skill to understand proverbs, figures of speech, and the words and riddles of the wise (1:5–6). The section ends with the following theme:

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

**1. *Child, listen to your elders (Prov. 1:8–19).*** A father pleaded with his son to turn a deaf ear to bad companions. He warned him to avoid their ways. Because violence breeds violence, if he followed the way of robbery, violence, and bloodshed, he would be setting a trap for himself.

**2. *Wisdom's sermon to the simple (Prov. 1:20–33).*** Wisdom, pictured as a female, went into the busy places of the city in the role of a prophetess. Her sermon was addressed to the simple—those lacking wisdom. If the simple did not accept her leadership, when calamity came she would mock them. When judgment fell, she would ignore their pleas for help.

**3. *Child, listen to wisdom (Prov. 2:1–22).*** The father called on his son to actively seek wisdom, because it came from the LORD. Because the LORD was the source, wisdom had great benefits for those who lived by it. To follow the path of integrity and justice was to be led by the LORD. Increased understanding of righteousness and justice would result. The ability to make right decisions would help the wise son to avoid evil men and evil ways. Most of all, he would avoid immoral women who would lead him to the grave.

**4. *Child, let the LORD lead you (Prov. 3:1–35).*** Loyalty and faithfulness characterized the good life. Loyalty to the LORD was supreme. To trust and follow the LORD was the simplest and best way of life. The wise understood that the LORD's correction was motivated by love. This, in turn, made life pleasant and meaningful. Because the LORD's people were safe, regardless of the disaster, fear was removed from life.

One should live in peace with one's neighbors, doing whatever was promised promptly. One should not be contentious, nor should one be jealous of evil people. They would come to a bad end.

**5. *Child, get wisdom and insight (Prov. 4:1–27).*** The father's father had handed down to him the principle that the supreme aim of life was to develop wisdom. With it, one could have protection and great honor. Because with wisdom one learned to avoid the pitfalls of life, the wise person lived a long life. To follow the wicked was to be led astray. Thus, they should be avoided because doing wickedness was their passion.

The road the righteous traveled got lighter, but the road of the wicked led into darkness. The life lived with care and planning, and characterized by truth and honesty, could be lived without shame.

**6. *Child, beware of that wild woman (Prov. 5:1–23).*** One of the most vivid passages in Proverbs contains the warning against consorting with an adulteress. Her smooth and seductive speech sounded sweet, but it led to death. The best thing to do was to keep as far away as possible, as she could only bring ruin.

Instead, a man should "drink water" from his own well and love the wife of his youth. The LORD's eyes were on men, so the wicked man could not escape the consequences of his sin.

**7. *Child, remember four important things (Prov. 6:1–19).*** (1) A man should be careful about giving security for another person's debt (6:1–5). (2) The diligence of the ant in its work should be an example to the lazy man (6:6–11). (3) A man should beware of a wicked man's

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## The Literary Structure of Proverbs

The book of Proverbs has a somewhat unfortunate name, because this title describes only a portion of its contents. The first nine chapters of this book are not composed of proverbial sayings, but are a series of extended poems (for a summary of the contents of these poems, see the following pages). The poems are addressed to "my son," which is indicative of the patriarchal nature of ancient Israelite culture. Some recent translations have used the gender-neutral term *my child* in an attempt to make the book of Proverbs more relevant to a modern culture that values the education of all children, male and female. The purpose of these poems is to portray two ways of life, wisdom and folly. Eventually, these two ways coalesce into two personified female figures, Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly. Each of these women calls out to young men to follow her and to enter her house (Proverbs 9). Wisdom is portrayed as the foundational principle of creation in Proverbs 8 and as a noble teacher of humanity in Proverbs 9. Folly is portrayed as an immoral woman who entices young men with wicked temptations in Proverbs 9. This series of poems establishes the setting for the main body of the book.

Those who choose correctly and enter wisdom's house are prepared to hear the wise sayings that make up most of the remainder of the book in Proverbs 10–29. These proverbial sayings are presented in collections introduced by superscriptions in 10:1, 22:17, and 25:1. This literary design has encouraged some to suppose that the book of Proverbs might have formed a kind of curriculum for an ancient Israelite school system and that Lady Wisdom's house is the school itself.[5] There is not ample evidence to prove such a position, but this idea is consistent with the structure and character of the book of Proverbs.

The last two chapters of Proverbs are somewhat more difficult to characterize. They are composed of a mixture of poems and proverbial sayings taken from foreign sources. It is difficult to say much more than that they form an appendix to the collection and indicate that the Israelite wisdom tradition was in conversation with the wisdom traditions of other cultures. The poem to a "worthy woman" or "capable wife" in Proverbs 31:10–31 may be perceived as a fitting end to the book. The young man addressed as "my son" in Proverbs 1–9, who has learned the wisdom contained in Proverbs 10–29, is now prepared to move into responsible adult life, and finding a suitable mate is a vital next step. As a parent, this person would then return to the beginning of the book to address his own son.

The book of Proverbs is a good place to introduce the ancient Jewish practice called *gematria*. Because Hebrew does not have separate symbols for numerals, the letters of the alphabet are used as numeric symbols. The first letter stands for 1, the second for 2, and so on. Because combinations of letters can be used, the eleventh letter is the symbol for 20, the twelfth for 30, the nineteenth for 100, the twentieth for 200, and so on. When the values of the letters within any word are added, a numeric value for the word is attained. The names in the superscriptions of Proverbs may be playing with this system of numbers. The names Solomon, David, and Israel in 1:1 have a combined gematria value of 930. This appears to be the number of lines of poetry in the entire book. Likewise, the section of proverbial sayings in 10:1–22:16, which has only the name "Solomon" in the heading, seems to contain 375 lines of poetry, which is the gematria value for Solomon.[6] This sort of numerical pattern shows up in at least two other places in Proverbs, which makes the pattern look more than coincidental. A word of caution is in order here. This idea has nothing to do with the fraudulent "Bible Codes" phenomenon that became popular in the 1990s. Nor are these patterns any kind of mysterious proof of the Bible's divine origins. If these patterns exist, they would not have been difficult for the human compilers of the book to construct. What these patterns do demonstrate is a quantitative approach to constructing the book of Proverbs that matches its view of life as a fairly straightforward equation in which wisdom leads to blessing and success while foolishness leads to failure.

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words and ways that are the recipe for disaster. (4) The final warning was a numbers proverb using seven examples of disgusting things that the LORD hated:

haughty eyes, a lying tongue
 and hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked plans,
 feet that hurry to run to evil,
a lying witness who testifies falsely,
 and one who sows discord in a family. (6:17–19)

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**8.** ***Child, wisdom will keep you safe from wicked women (Prov. 6:20–35).*** A man who listened to the wisdom of his parents would be able to avoid loose women. The adulteress was even more dangerous than a harlot, because a harlot would only take a man's money, while an adulteress could cause him to lose his life. A jealous husband would not take payment to soothe his anger. Instead, in his rage, he would take a man's life.

**9.** ***Child, let's talk some more about wicked women (Prov. 7:1–27).*** Wisdom could keep a man from trouble involving the wife of another. The father told of a personal observation. He saw a naive young man passing the house of an adulterous woman. She came up to him, kissed him boldly, and told him that she had plenty of delicious food, a waiting bed, and an absent husband:

With much seductive speech she persuades him;
 with her smooth talk she compels him.
Right away he follows her,
 and goes like an ox to the slaughter,
 or bounds like a stag toward the trap
 until an arrow pierces its entrails.
He is like a bird rushing into the snare,
 not knowing it will cost him his life. (7:21–23)

**10.** ***Wisdom's sermon to humanity (8:1–36).*** Wisdom stood at the city gates addressing the passersby. She spoke of her value to humankind (8:1–11); the high position she held in the affairs of life (8:12–16); the rewards that came to those who sought her (8:17–21); and her role in Creation as the first created thing and the companion to God in Creation (8:22–31). The prudent person would eagerly seek wisdom (8:32–36).

**11.** ***The two ways: The wise and the foolish (Prov. 9:1–18).*** To the ancients, prosperity was a sign of the LORD's blessing. Wisdom thus was pictured as having a beautiful house, vast flocks from which to choose animals for sacrifice, and an overflowing table to which she could invite those who lacked her blessings (9:1–6). There follows verses that compare the most foolish of the foolish with the wise person. The prize for the most foolish of all went to the scoffer who thought he knew something but actually knew nothing. Rebuking a scoffer only made the situation worse, but rebuking a wise person only made him wiser. The wise knew that fear of the LORD was the real beginning of wisdom (9:7–12). Listening to the foolish woman led to death (9:13–18).

**The "Proverbs of Solomon" (Prov. 10:1–22:16).** This section entitled "**Proverbs** of Solomon" (10:1) is made up exclusively of what modern comedians call *one-liners*: not in the sense that they are jokes, but in the sense that their message is contained in one line of Hebrew (two lines in the English translation). These short, pointed sayings each contain a simple truth designed to tell any person who hears them some lesson about how to live in relation to others. They are strung together like beads, each one different; yet, each one is concerned with how to live a good life in human society.

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## Lady Wisdom

In the poems that begin the book of Proverbs, a parent is speaking to a child, often describing wisdom as something to be sought and prized. In Proverbs 8 and 9 a character named Wisdom suddenly appears and begins to speak in a feminine voice. After she describes herself in a way very much like what is found in the first seven chapters, in Proverbs 8:22, Wisdom claims to have been with God in the beginning, assisting God in the creation of the world. She is the first thing created by God and she places herself in the creative process, right down to the creation of human beings in 8:31. Beginning with 8:32, Wisdom speaks to human beings in a parental voice, urging them to listen and follow her instructions.

The poems in Proverbs 9 move in a somewhat different direction. The poem in 9:1–5 describes Wisdom as a woman who has built a house and invites young people to come in and dine with her and gain insight. This Lady Wisdom character stands in contrast to another woman who is portrayed in 9:13–18. Sometimes referred to as Lady Folly, this woman also invites young people into her house, but she is described in a way that likens her to a prostitute who entices those passing by her house to their destruction.

Theologians have debated how to understand this **Lady Wisdom.** Is she merely a metaphorical figure, a literary device used by the writers of these poems to portray wisdom as a virtue? Could she be a reflection of an Israelite goddess, who may have been understood as a consort of YHWH at one time? As Israelite religion moved toward a more strict monotheism, the appearance of such a goddess in the biblical text would have been suppressed so that only vestiges like Proverbs 8 and 9 might have remained.

The possibility of such a figure suggests an interesting way to look at other biblical passages, such as the first-person-plural speech of God in Genesis 1:26 and the presentation of "the Word" or *Logos* that was with God in the beginning, according to John 1 in the New Testament. Too little evidence remains to answer such questions with any certainty. Lady Wisdom will probably always remain an enigma within the Old Testament.

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That these are called the "Proverbs of Solomon" did not necessarily mean that Solomon spoke all of them. They probably were from many lands and many sources. The belief that Solomon collected proverbs and was noted for his wisdom made it natural that his name would be attached to such collections.

Because it would have been difficult to do so, no attempt was made to put these proverbs in any logical order. Although antithetical **parallelism** is the dominant form, other forms were also used. Of those that are antithetical, some examples of the contrasts made are as follows:

### THE WISE AND THE FOOLISH:

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

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**THE PROUD AND THE HUMBLE:**

*It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor*
*than to divide the spoil among the proud. (16:19)*

**THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE WICKED:**

*The righteous have enough to satisfy the appetite,*
*but the belly of the wicked is empty. (13:25)*

**GOOD WIVES AND BAD WIVES:**

*A good wife is the crown of her husband,*
*but she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones. (12:4)*

**TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD:**

*A truthful witness saves lives,*
*but one who utters lies is a betrayer. (14:25)*

Other proverbs are of a synonymous nature or used formal parallelism:

Honest balances and scales are the LORD's:
all the weights in the bag are his work (16:11).
In the light of the king's face there is life,
and his favor is like the clouds that bring the spring rain. (16:15)

**The Book of Thirty Sayings (Prov. 22:17–24:22).**[7] This probably was a teacher's book of instructions to a pupil about some of life's important relationships. By reading it, the pupil could learn what was "right and true." Then he could give a "true answer" to whomever questioned him (22:17–21). Although some of its admonitions follow the one-line pattern of the previous section, for the most part they cover several lines. For instance, there were instructions on eating with a ruler (23:1–3); how to discipline children (23:13–14); the inevitable warning about wicked women (23:26–28); a rather long warning about excessive wine drinking (23:29–35); and a warning to "fear the LORD and the king" (24:21–22). One piece of advice was repeated twice, the second time being somewhat longer than the first (22:28):

Do not remove the ancient landmark
or encroach on the fields of orphans,
for their redeemer is strong;
he will plead their cause against you. (23:10–11)

The sayings of the wise ended with an appendix that contained condemnation for showing favoritism in judgment (24:23–25); a word on getting ready for work (24:27); a warning against bearing false witness and acting with spite (24:28–29); and a description of the lazy man (24:30–34).

**More "Proverbs of Solomon" (25:1–29:27).** This section, like 10:1–22:16, was composed mostly of individual one-line (Hebrew) sayings. The title suggests that King Hezekiah's time was a time

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when the interest in wisdom was blossoming, because these were said to be Solomonic proverbs collected by "the men of Hezekiah" (25:1). After two longer sections on the power of the king (25:2–7) and one on conduct in court (25:8–10), there follows a mixture of proverbs using *comparison:*

***Like clouds and wind without rain***
***is one who boasts of a gift never given. (25:14)***

and *contrasts:*

***Better to be poor and walk with integrity***
***than to be crooked in one's ways even though rich. (28:6)***

as well as *other poetic forms:*

***If the king judges the poor with equity,***
***his throne will be established forever. (29:14)***

**The Words of Agur (Prov. 30:1–33).** This chapter is made up of two types of material. Verses 1–9 were presented as a conversation. "The man" (30:1), who may have been Agur, told two men named Ithiel and Ucal that he had seen no evidence of God (30:2–4). He, in turn, was told that God's every word was true and that God protects those "who take refuge in him" (30:5). In 30:6–9, a speaker considers life's highest gifts as being food and truth.

The second part of the chapter opens with a series of statements beginning "There are those who." These include those who cursed their fathers (30:11), who were "pure in their own eyes" (30:12), who were proud (30:13), and who were greedy (30:14).

There followed a series of "numbers proverbs" that sound like the formula in the oracles of the prophet Amos: "for three transgressions and for four" (Amos 1:3ff.). Most of them use the *three–four* formula, although one (30:15–16) uses two, three, and four, while another lists only four things that "are small but they are exceedingly wise" (30:24). Three shorter proverbs are mixed in with the numbers proverbs.

**The Words of Lemuel (Prov. 31:1–31).** This chapter contains a mother's advice to her son (31:1–9) and the Old Testament's highest tribute to a woman—the description of the good wife (31:10–31). The first part is about a queen's advice to her son on how to rule wisely. The tribute to the ideal wife pictured her as being of good reputation, diligent in her work, prudent in her decisions, concerned for her family, compassionate toward the needy, wise in speech, and honored by her family.

The book of Proverbs would be followed in later Judaism by other books that imitated it somewhat. The most famous of these were the Wisdom of Solomon and The Wisdom of Ben Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus. Proverbs was orthodox in theology and practical in its view of life.

## Job: When Orthodoxy Fails

Job represents the struggle of a person who had accepted orthodox answers to all of life's questions but found them useless when the bottom fell out of his world. To compound his problem, his friends still gave him the same old answers, never hearing the entirely new set of questions Job was raising. Discussions of the theological problems raised by human suffering are sometimes called **theodicy**.

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**Who Wrote Job, and When Was It Written?** The traditional interpreters of Job have viewed the book as the work of a single author, but in recent years the emphasis has been on the book as a composite work. The story of the suffering righteous man is found in other literatures, and, indeed, the story of Job may well have originated outside of Israel, possibly in Edom. That the story is an old one is shown by Ezekiel 14:14, 20, where he speaks of "Noah, Daniel, and Job" as great, righteous men of the past.

Those who see the book as a composite take one of three positions: (1) The author of the poetic section wrote the prose section also, using older traditions that were common in the Near East; (2) the poetic discourse is the older part, the narrative being added later; or (3) the older prose story of Job was used by the author to introduce his own struggles about one of life's most

## The Literary Structure of Job

The book of Job and its structure are discussed at length in the main body of this chapter, so only a summary is necessary here. The first two chapters of the book of Job and the final eleven verses of the last chapter form a fairly simple narrative framework around a long, complex epic poem. Regardless of the possibility that these two elements might have had independent histories of development, they form a unified work in the canonical book of Job.[8]

The first two chapters of Job transport the reader to the scene of the heavenly council. The reader's observation of the two conversations between God and the Accuser provide knowledge that the participants in the story—Job, his wife, and his friends—do not have. The reader is aware of the heavenly wager that lurks in the background of this story and should inform every line of the poetic dialogue, but the characters see only Job's misery and their own assumptions about it.

There is a growing understanding within biblical scholarship that the form of a literary work and its content reflect each other. Job 3–27 is a series of poetic speech cycles that is almost painfully precise and methodical. Job and his three friends speak in turn: Job-Eliphaz-Job- Bildad-Job-Zophar-Job-Eliphaz-Job-Bildad-Job-Zophar-Job-Eliphaz-Job-Bildad-Job. The pattern breaks only with the missing third speech of Zophar. The worldview known as **Retribution Theology**, which Job's friends present in response to his complaint, is also painfully precise and methodical. This view perceives all human events as God's reward or punishment for human obedience or disobedience. This position is as impressively logical and coherent as the speeches of Job's friends. At the same time, it is as heavy and oppressive to a suffering human being as their endless speeches are to Job. But Job perseveres, and the book of Job breaks form just as Job breaks through the barrier of Retribution Theology to confront God in 29–31. The speech of the fourth friend, Elihu, in 32–37 may be understood in a couple of different ways. Is it the last gasp of Retribution Theology or a reverential way of introducing the direct speech of God? It may also be possible to accept that it is both of these.

The book of Job reaches its climax and then its resolution in the Divine speeches of 38–42. The carefully constructed piety of the friends is demolished. Job is both praised by God and put in his place. Finally, Job decides to leave behind his posture of mourning and continue his life in faithfulness. The report of the restoration of his family and possessions at the end of the book reflects the enumeration of these aspects of his life at the beginning. What seems to be at stake in the book of Job is the freedom of God. A God who rewards human obedience and punishes disobedience is merely a mechanistic responder to human behavior. God breaks free of this constraint in Job, but we are left with questions about whether such a free God is reliable or capricious.

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perplexing problems, namely, the suffering of the righteous. This seems to be the most logical of the three positions outlined here.

What we seem to have is an ancient folk tale about a good and patient man named Job. Although it possibly originated in Edom at an early time, it became a part of Israelite tradition. Just before or during the Babylonian Exile, an Israelite wisdom writer used the old story to introduce a poetic masterpiece in which he examines the problem of a righteous man's relationship to God in the context of great physical and emotional suffering. Either the author of the poetic discourse or someone who wished to make the book seem more orthodox added the ending from the old folktale.

Chapter 28, a discourse on wisdom, and the Elihu speeches (Chapters 32–37) add little to the overall arguments of the book and thus seem not to have been part of the original work. The Elihu speeches could have been added later by the original author after further reflection on the problem.

**Some Things One Needs to Know for Help in Understanding Job.** Some basic ideas common in early Israel form the background of Job. Certain basic assumptions had been made in theology: (1) God was just and gave justice to humankind. (2) This life was all there was. When people died, they went to Sheol, the abode of the dead. There was no life after death with rewards and punishments. (3) If justice was to be done, it had to be done in this life.

These assumptions led to certain conclusions: (1) The good person prospered, while the wicked person failed. (2) Sickness was a sign that a person had sinned. It was a part of God's judgment on sinners. These views of orthodox religion formed the basis of the arguments in the book of Job.

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## THE BOOK

**1. *Job, the righteous man: The prose story (Job 1:1–2:13).*** According to the old tradition, Job was an extremely wealthy man from the land of Uz. No one really knows where Uz was, although it could have been in Edom. He had seven sons, three daughters, and vast herds of livestock. He was a faithful worshiper of God (Elohim) (1:1–5).

But such bliss was not to continue. **Satan** (as in Zech. 3:2, he is *the satan,* literally "the Adversary") challenged the LORD (YHWH) about Job, accusing him of giving Job special protection. The LORD agreed to let Satan do what he wanted to Job, but he was not to touch Job's body (1:6–12). Disaster after disaster struck Job, causing him to lose all his children, as well as his livestock. But through it all, Job did not criticize God in the least (1:13–22).

Satan appeared before the LORD again. The LORD proudly reminded him that Job was still faithful. Satan replied that every man had his limits, including Job. Satan argued that when the LORD permitted Job to be afflicted personally, Job would break under the pressure and would curse the LORD. The LORD took up the challenge. Satan was permitted to do anything to Job except kill him (2:1–6).

Job's troubles intensified. He was covered with painful sores from head to foot. He sat on an ash heap and used a piece of pottery to scrape the tops off his sores. His wife urged him to curse God and die in order to end his misery, but Job refused. Then, three friends came to see him. When they saw him, they began to wail and to mourn over his condition. Then they sat and looked at him for seven days without uttering a single word (2:7–13).

This prose version of the story of Job pictured Satan as having easy access to the heavenly realms. He came when the "sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD" (1:6). In later theology, Satan was in violent opposition to the LORD, not someone who could come to visit whenever he decided to do so.

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Job's wife's advice to curse God and die revealed that there was no developed doctrine of life after death at that time. The dead all went to Sheol (the grave), so this life was the only life there was. There was a kind of existence after death, but the only thing that could disturb it was when (1) a body was not properly buried or (2) a person had been murdered and his death was unavenged.[9]

**2.** ***Job, the frustrated sufferer: The poetic discourse (Job 3:1–42:6).*** This section of Job was cast in the form of a dialogue between Job and his three friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. There are three cycles or sets of speeches, except that the third cycle was incomplete.

**a.** ***Job's complaint (3:1–26).*** In contrast to Job's refusal to complain in the prose story, the poetic version began with Job cursing the day he was born. In an extended example of synonymous parallelism, Job piles up phrase after phrase to say what was said in 3:2:

> Let the day perish in which I was born
> and the night that said,
> "A man-child is conceived."

Had he died at birth, he would have gone to the grave, where he would "be lying down and quiet" (3:13). Sheol was where "the wicked cease from troubling" (3:17), for "the small and the great are there, and the slaves are free from their masters" (3:19). But God had hedged Job in so that he had trouble, not peace and quiet (3:26).

**b.** ***The debate: Round one (Job 4:1–14:22)***

**1.** ***Eliphaz:*** The man who has visions (4:1–5:27). The core of the argument of Job's friends was found in the first Eliphaz speech:

> Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?
> Or where were the upright cut off?
> As I have seen, those who plow iniquity
> and sow trouble reap the same.
> By the breath of God they perish,
> and by the blast of his anger they are consumed. (4:7–9)

For his friends, Job's sickness was clear evidence of his sinfulness. Why else should he be suffering if he had not sinned? Eliphaz's authority for his opinion was that he had a vision in the night that told him that God did not even trust his angels, much less mortal man, who was "born to trouble as the sparks fly upward" (4:1–5:7).

What Job needed was to seek God and to commit himself to Him. Although God had afflicted Job, with the proper attitude Job could be healed. Then he would have the traditional blessings of peace, prosperity, a large family, and a long life (5:8–27).

Perhaps the most distinctive mark of the argument of Eliphaz was his view of God. God did not trust anyone, even the most devout worshipers. God was just waiting for one of his creatures to do wrong so that He could destroy the wrongdoer.

**2.** ***Job to Eliphaz: Round one (6:1–7:21).*** Ignoring Eliphaz's charges, Job complained that God had become his enemy, filling him with arrows and lining up all sorts of terrors against him. All Job wanted was for God to crush him so that he would be out of his misery (6:1–13).

As for his friends, they were like wet-weather springs that had promised cool water all yearlong but had dried up when the hot days of summer came. He had not asked any of them for money. If they could teach him anything, he was willing to listen. Instead of being honest, they were talking nonsense. They did not know the difference between right and wrong (6:14–30).

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Because life for him was so trying and tedious, he decided that there was no need to be reluctant to say how he felt:

Therefore I will not restrain my mouth;
I will speak in the anguish of my spirit;
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. (7:11)

When he sought comfort, he got terror. He had terrifying dreams. He was tired of living under such circumstances. But his God would not even leave him alone to swallow his spittle. God was using him for "target practice" (7:20, TEV). Soon he would die, and then God would not be able to find him because he would be in the grave (7:1–21).

3. ***Bildad, the traditionalist (8:1–22).*** Bildad vigorously defended the justice of God. He suggested that Job's suffering was caused by the sins of Job's children. All that Job had to do, if he were "pure and upright" (8:6), was to seek God and everything would be fine (8:1–7). Anyone who knew the teachings of the fathers (as Job surely did) would realize the truth of what Bildad was saying. The law of God was that the bad men were destroyed and the good men prospered. If Job followed that philosophy, happiness would be his (8:8–22).
4. ***Job to Bildad: Round one (9:10–10:22).*** Job would not argue about God's power and ability to do what He chose. No man could stand up against God and hope to win. Even if a man were innocent, God could take that man's words and condemn him. Job questioned a basic tenet of orthodox religion, because he had begun to doubt that God really was just:

It is all one; therefore I say,
he destroys both the blameless and the wicked.
. . .
The earth is given into the hand of the wicked;
he covers the eyes of its judges—
if it is not he, who then is it? (9:22, 24)

Job's days were passing swiftly. With them, his hope of receiving justice was also passing. He and God were in separate realms, and there was no mediator who could bridge the gap between them (9:1–35).

He was tired of living. Ignoring Bildad, he spoke to God. God had made him. Now was God going to destroy him? He was sure that God had a purpose in making him, but now life was so confusing. He could not win for losing. Because he had to live, he just wanted to be left alone so that he could possibly have a little comfort before he died (10:1–22).

5. ***Zophar, God's right-hand man (11:1–20).*** Zophar was tired of Job's nonsense. If Job would just listen, Zophar would give him God's point of view about his problems. God knew all things, but Job knew very little. Job just needed to get rid of his sin, and everything would be all right.
6. ***Job to Zophar: Round one (12:1–14:22).*** Job was tired of the advice of his friends:

No doubt you are the people,
and wisdom will die with you.
But I have understanding as well as you;
I am not inferior to you.
Who does not know such things as these? (12:2–3)

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Anyone could see that his condition had been brought on by the LORD. Anyone knew that when God decided to do something, there was no way to stop Him (12:1–25). Their defense of God was self-serving. They lied for God, hoping that their sins would be overlooked. But that would not work. They could not deceive God by their actions (13:1–12).

Job therefore would speak his mind even if it cost him his life. He fully expected God to kill him for being so bold, but that would not stop him. He had prepared his case. He only wanted two concessions from God: (1) that God would hear him and (2) that God would not terrify him while he was speaking (13:13–22).

Job then presented his case to God. He wanted to know why God had ignored him and attacked him as though he were an enemy. As one's time on earth was brief, why was he not allowed to enjoy it? If a tree was cut down, it could sprout again. Not so with man. If man had a hope of life after death, it would make life's misery bearable. This yearning for life after death represented a reaching out for what later became accepted teaching in Judaism and Christianity. When life was seen to be unjust, the doctrine of the justice of God demanded a future life in which God's justice could be carried out fully. The only other choice was to declare God unjust, an idea both Judaism and Christianity rejected.

But even as Job reached out for the hope of a future life, he turned back in despair. The situation was hopeless. This life was all there was (13:23–14:22).

**c.** ***The debate: Round two (Job 15:1–21:34)***

1. ***Eliphaz speaks again (15:1–35).*** Job's failure to agree with his friends led to increasingly sharp words being flung at him. Eliphaz charged him with undermining religion by assuming that he knew more than his friends, the elders, and even God (15:1–14). Eliphaz returned to his theme of a God who did not trust anybody:

God puts no trust even in his holy ones,
    and the heavens are not clean in his sight;
how much less one who is abominable and corrupt,
    one who drinks iniquity like water! (15:15–16)

He then proceeded to tell Job what his fate as a wicked man would be. Because such a person had defied God Himself, he would suffer great pain and terror. His wealth would melt away, and destruction would come to him (15:17–35).

2. ***Job lambasts his friends and questions God (16:1–17:16).*** Job's patience with the carping of his friends wore out. They were "miserable comforters" who would sing a different tune if they were in Job's place. Everybody was against him, especially God. God had worn him out, dried him up, and "gnashed His teeth" at him. He was at ease before, yet God had attacked him, even though he had done violence to no one and had been innocent (16:1–17).

Job 16:18–17:2 represents one of the low places in the book of Job. The afflicted man cried out for the earth not to cover his blood when he died.[10] His unburied blood, which carried his life, would cry out to be avenged. This was a plea for justice to be done. God knew that Job deserved justice even though his friends scorned him. But death was closing in on him, and justice had not been done. His friends, so sure of their own wisdom, really did not have a wise man among them (17:3–14). Added to their insults was his lack of hope of recovery:

Where then is my hope?
    Who will see my hope?
Will I go down to the bars of Sheol?
    Shall we descend together into the dust? (17:15–16)

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3. ***Bildad plays the same record again (18:1–21).*** Bildad added little to what had been said.
4. ***Job reaches the bottom (19:1–29).*** Continuing his rebuke of his friends, Job pointed out that even if he had sinned, it had been a personal fault, not a public one. God had put him "in the wrong" (19:6), stripped him of everything, and loosed the Divine troops against Job. As if that were not enough, even his closest friends and relatives now shunned him, including his wife. He pleaded with his friends:

> Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends,
> for the hand of God has touched me!
> Why do you, like God, pursue me,
> never satisfied with my flesh? (19:21–22)

Job wanted his words to be written in a permanent record. He was confident that one would come who would prove him right. The "redeemer" of whom he spoke (19:25) would be the one who cleared his name. To biblical people, one's honor and reputation was of supreme importance. Job desired that his name be cleared above all, and somehow he believed God would see that justice was done. At the lowest point, there came a glimmer of hope, another instance of reaching out to the later doctrine of life after death.

5. ***Zophar knows the answer (20:1–29).*** Zophar was insulted by what Job had said. He knew how to reply, however, because he was one of those persons who always had an answer even if he did not know the question. He proceeded to lecture Job on the fate of the wicked according to traditional wisdom. No matter how he prospered, it would only be temporary. God would wash him away in the flood of Divine wrath.
6. ***Job replies to Zophar (21:1–34).*** Job replied that his quarrel was not with them. After all, look what had happened to him. Some of the evil men he knew were prospering, while he, a righteous man, was suffering. With this argument, Job went completely counter to traditional teaching. Just as his friends had overstated their case to prove him wrong, Job now overstated the case the other way. His so-called friends were just liars.

**d.** ***The debate: Round three (Job 22:1–27:23).*** The third cycle of speeches is incomplete. Perhaps the text was scrambled over the years. In part of one speech assigned to Job, he sounds like Zophar.

1. ***Eliphaz gets nasty (22:1–30).*** Eliphaz began to level wild charges against Job. According to him, there was no end to Job's sins. He had oppressed his brothers, starved the hungry, and oppressed widows and orphans. His only hope lay in turning to God before it was too late. He could only be delivered if his hands were clean.
2. ***Job searches for God (23:1–24:25).*** Ignoring Eliphaz's charges, Job complained of his inability to find God. He believed God would give him a fair hearing if he could only get a chance to lay his case before God. But no matter how much Job sought Him, God could not be found. The terrifying thing, however, was that God knew where Job was. He could do to Job whatever He chose, and no one could stop Him (23:1–17).

Job 24:18–25 sounds more like the arguments of Zophar than of Job, because it argued that the wicked were punished, in contrast to the arguments just stated, that sinners escaped their just punishment.

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3. ***Bildad contrasts God and humanity (25:1–6).*** In a short speech, Bildad spoke of God's rule over "a mortal, who is a maggot, and a human being, who is a worm!" (25:6).
4. ***Job replies to Bildad (26:1–4).*** In an abbreviated reply, Job lambasted Bildad for his arrogant attitude toward him.
5. ***The continuation of Bildad's speech on God and humanity (26:5–14).*** This section was part of Bildad's third speech, as it continued to speak of God's rule over the universe. Its theme was God's mastery of the created order of things.
6. ***Job ends his part of the debate (27:1–12).*** To the end, Job defended his point of view, yielding nothing to his friends. He wished that those who opposed him would get the punishment they deserved.
7. ***Zophar again? (27:13–23).*** In another speech that sounded like Zophar's bombastic style, the debate was ended. He spoke as God's supposed authority on the fate of the wicked, which he described in loving detail.

**e.** ***The wisdom poem (Job 28:1–18).*** This poem, which separates the speech cycles from Job's final statement of his innocence, would fit well into the book of Proverbs. Its theme is the value of wisdom. Men dug deep into the earth for minerals and precious metals (28:1–11). Wisdom, however, could not be found in the depths of the earth, nor could it be bought with humankind's most precious material possessions. Nothing could compare with it in value. Only God knew where wisdom could be found. It was present in Creation; its worth had been tested and proven. God declared:

Truly the fear of the LORD, that is wisdom
and to depart from evil is understanding. (28:28)

**f.** ***Job presents his case (Job 29:1–31:40).*** Job's final argument fell into three divisions: (1) his past prosperity, (2) his present problems, and (3) his code of conduct.

Looking back over his life, Job yearned for the good days he had enjoyed. His family had surrounded him, his flocks had prospered, and he had had an honored place in the community (29:1–10). He had been known in the community for his kindness and generosity toward the poor and oppressed. He had been praised by those around him. They had come to him for advice because he was a leader among those who knew him (29:11–25).

But things had changed. He was ridiculed by the people who formed the very lowest levels of society, people whom once he would not have trusted to care for his flocks. Now they spat on him, made him the butt of their ridicule, and harassed him at every turn. He was in pain—both in body and in spirit—for God had cast him down into the dirt (30:1–19).

Turning to God, Job charged God with treating him cruelly and refusing to listen to Job's pleas. Job's skin had turned black and fallen away. He mourned his fate (30:20–31).

As a climax to his speeches, Job set forth his code of conduct. It has been described as "the code of an Old Testament gentleman."[11] Except for the first, each common breach of conduct in society was introduced by the formula "If I have . . ." followed by a sort of self-curse: "Let {me} . . ." with the appropriate punishment. (1) He had not looked on a virgin with lust in his heart (31:1–4). (2) He had not lied, nor had he coveted the possessions of others (31:5–8). (3) He had not committed adultery (31:9–12). (4) He had been sensitive to the needs and rights of his servants (31:13–15). (5) He had seen to the needs of the less fortunate (31:16–23). (6) He had not put his trust in wealth, nor had he worshiped the sun or the moon (31:24–28). (7) He had not gloated over

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another man's ruin, failed to be kind to strangers, or sinned any secret sins (31:29–34). If an indictment against him were written down, he would carry it to God as a prince wore a crown (31:35–37). Finally, he had taken care of his land (31:38–40).

**g.** ***The Elihu speeches (32:1–37:24).*** A new character appears, Elihu by name, who makes four speeches. They reveal a brash young man who possesses more wind than wisdom. The speeches are ignored, both by the previous characters in the drama and by the LORD, who addresses Job following the Elihu speeches. This has led to suggestions that (1) these speeches are not a part of the original arguments and (2) Elihu is not a real person, but a disguise "adopted by Satan to press his case for the last time."[12] In any case, he plows ahead with such an outpouring of verbiage that Job and his friends could not answer even if they had wished to do so. Perhaps the passage that captures the flavor of Elihu's speech better than any other is 36:1–4, in which he concluded:

I have something to say on God's behalf.
    I bring my knowledge from far away,
and ascribe righteousness to my Maker.
    For truly my words are not false;
    one who is perfect in knowledge is with you.

**h.** ***The divine speeches (38:1–41:44).*** God spoke from the whirlwind, chiding Job for questioning divine wisdom. Then followed a series of divine test questions on the mysteries of nature. Beginning with Creation, they were concerned with various aspects of Creation and the natural order, but especially with water in nature (38:1–38). Then the questions turned to Job's knowledge of animal life, ranging from wild animals to domestic animals, such as the horse. The answer to all of the questions was "Only God knows these things." Job admitted his ignorance and vowed to speak no more (38:39–40:5).

God was not through with his speech, however. Job was challenged to use his power to bring down all the proud men of the earth. Then God would acknowledge Job's power and wisdom (40:6–14).

The Divine speeches were concluded by the description of two legendary animals—Behemoth, an exaggerated description of the hippopotamus, and Leviathan, a legendary creature of the sea and rivers that was modeled on the crocodile (40:15–41:34).

**i.** ***Job's final speech (42:1–6).*** Job has been powerfully affected by the Divine encounter in 38–41. The words of his final speech are the key to a proper understanding of the book, but they have often been translated in odd ways. One must keep in mind that both the beginning of the book of Job in 1:1 and the end in 42:8 have evaluated Job as upright and blameless. Whatever Job says must fit into that context. In 42:3 he says something like this:

Therefore I have declared and I have not understood,
    acts too wonderful for me and I did not know.

Job acknowledges his inability to understand the ways of God, and now he has to decide what to do next. What Job says in 42:5–6 is very difficult to render in English. A rough approximation is:

By hearing of an ear I have heard you,
    And now my eye has seen you.
Therefore, I reject and refuse
    concerning dust and ashes.

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This text is often translated in a way that indicates that Job is repenting. But the book of Job makes it clear that Job has nothing for which to repent. As the translation above shows, what Job does decide is to turn away from or leave behind his posture of mourning in the dust, where he has been sitting since 2:8.

**The Traditional Ending of the Story (42:7–17).** The unorthodox ending of the poetic portions of Job was too much for the traditionalists. To bring it in line with orthodoxy, the ending of the older story was added. In it, Job's friends had to have him sacrifice for them because they had misrepresented God.

As for Job himself, his health and wealth were restored. His family, who had shunned him in his illness, now gathered to comfort him once the ordeal was over. He lived a long life, accumulated twice as many animals as before his illness, and once again had the perfect number of children: seven sons and three daughters.

**Job: A Summary.** Job has long been regarded as one of the great literary masterpieces of all time. The question with which it deals still intrigues and baffles thoughtful people of our age—the problem of human suffering, and, more specifically, the suffering of righteous or innocent people. The problem is crucial, especially in the context of the belief in a just and all-wise God. Job really did not solve the problem. Instead, Job's vision of God changed his focus from his own problems to faith in a personal God. The air of mystery surrounding Job and the problem with which the book deals remain. Perhaps that is part of the reason the book is still so fascinating.

## Ecclesiastes: Skeptical Wisdom

Ecclesiastes illustrates how far some Jewish thinkers had strayed from orthodox theology in the post-Exilic period. Except for occasional orthodox corrections, the book voiced the skeptical, pessimistic feelings of a man who had tried everything but had found nothing satisfying or meaningful in which to invest his life. The main speaker in the book was "the Preacher, the son of David, King in Jerusalem" (1:1). "Preacher" is but one possible translation of the Hebrew title **Qoheleth.** It was used to refer to a schoolmaster, or one who was in charge of an assembly of people.

The reference to the son of David, King in Jerusalem, has led to Solomon's being identified as the author of Ecclesiastes. In reality, Solomon's relation to this book probably was the same as Ruth's relation to the book of Ruth—that is, he was the main character portrayed by the book rather than the author. The language and thought of the book suggest that it was post-Exilic in origin. Like Proverbs, it probably was used as a textbook.

**Vanity of Vanities (Eccl. 1:1–2:26).** "**Vanity** of vanities! All is vanity" (1:2). With these words, the writer of Ecclesiastes gives his opinion of the world and life in it. Nothing was lasting—nothing was of real value. Although he was not an atheist (one who denied the existence of God), he was a deist, one who believed in God but who thought that God had little or nothing to do with what went on in the world.

The Preacher had tried many things. He had tried work, but he concluded that it was for nothing. The world was going in circles. Life had no purpose.

What has been is what will be,
    and what has been done is what will be done;
    there is nothing new under the sun. (1:9)

So, work did not satisfy him (1:2–11).

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## The Literary Structure of Ecclesiastes

Attempts to determine a sense of literary unity and coherence in the book of Ecclesiastes have been frustrating. Many readers have largely given up and declared it to be just a loose collection of wisdom materials. Ecclesiastes does contain a wide variety of literary units. There are stories, poems, proverbs, and more. Is there a way to look at the book as a whole?

Some readers have observed that Ecclesiastes has a deliberate prologue (1:1) and epilogue (12:9–14) that frame the rest of the book. This is a helpful starting point because it shows that Ecclesiastes is a self-consciously literary work. The prologue and epilogue are spoken by a narrator who introduces the character called the Teacher, who speaks the main body of the book. Just inside the prologue and epilogue, in 1:2 and 12:8, is the Teacher's most poignant and identifiable saying. The *NRSV* has followed the King James tradition in translating it as "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." In contemporary English this saying has lost much of its force because we tend to associate *vanity* merely with pride in personal appearance and no longer with a lack of meaning. A translation like "Meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless" is not as grammatically precise, but it may more accurately reflect the sense of the statement. The word that appears three times in this saying occurs about thirty times in Ecclesiastes out of only about seventy total occurrences in the entire Old Testament. Ecclesiastes is a desperate search for meaning. Thus, it should be no surprise that it runs here and there in this search, its parts linked together by this word and the purpose of the search.

Ecclesiastes 1:2 is the beginning of a long poem in 1:2–11 that poses the problem that the entire book addresses. Ecclesiastes then follows the life of the Teacher in a pattern of observation and conclusion. These conclusions typically return to the problem of lack of meaning (see 4:16, 6:9, etc.). In chapter 2 the Teacher talks about his early life and education, and in chapter 12 he reflects upon the end of his life. Although the Teacher never seems to discover the key to life's meaning, for which he searches throughout his life, it is important to recognize that he continues to search unfailingly until his death. The epilogue is actually an epitaph. This one who never relented in his quest for meaning is remembered and celebrated as a wise person (12:9).

Next, he tried wisdom. He acquired great wisdom, but it too was emptiness, for "he who increases knowledge increases sorrow" (1:2–18). Pleasure was tested without restraint, but it, too, proved to be worthless (2:1–11). When he considered wisdom and folly, he realized that both the wise man and the fool died with no lasting memory of their accomplishments or failures (2:12–16). When he realized that what a man gained in this life had to be left to someone else to enjoy, he was led to despair (2:17–23). So he concluded:

> There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink,
>     and find enjoyment in their toil. . . .
> For to the one who pleases Him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy. (2:24, 26)

The latter verse sounds more like the voice of orthodoxy speaking.

*"For everything there is a season" (Eccl. 3:1–15).* These famous lines, a setting out of opposites to stress the paradoxical nature of life, represented a view of history that was strange to the rest of the Old Testament. The general Old Testament view was that history had a beginning and it will have an end. It was moving toward a goal under the expert direction of God.

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A philosophy of history that saturated the book of Ecclesiastes—history moving in circles, having no purpose or goal—was clearly expressed in 3:1–15. This view, held in common by the Greeks and a number of Eastern religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.) is not a Hebrew conception of history. This seems to suggest that Ecclesiastes was influenced by the Hellenistic culture that saturated the Near East following the conquests of Alexander the Great (3:1–8).

Although God had given people a sense of time as past and future, they were not given the ability to look at life as a whole. Their hope lay in taking life as it came while doing their best (3:9–15).

**The Question of Justice (Eccl. 3:16–4:4).** As far as justice was concerned, it too was a matter of chance. Wickedness triumphed just as often as righteousness did. Humankind had no advantage over the animals. The oppressed cried out, but no one comforted them. Power was behind the oppressors. As a result, the dead were better off than the living. The unborn were even more fortunate, because they had not had to experience life.

**The Futility of Working Alone (Eccl. 4:5–16).** People worked out of a sense of rivalry with others. It was better to work with someone to have the protection that a partner could give. It was better to be young, poor, and wise than to be an old and foolish ruler. Being a hero was also just temporary, because heroes were soon forgotten.

**Do Not Fool Around with God (Eccl. 5:1–7).** The Preacher warned that a person should avoid calling God's attention to himself. God should be obeyed without question. If one could not keep a vow, it would be better not to make it. Silence was better than chatter that might make God angry.

**Life Had Problems (Eccl. 5:8–6:12).** If the government oppressed people, they had no hope for justice, because every official was protected by the one above him (5:8). Kings and the rich had money, but life was not a bed of roses for the rich. More riches meant that one was responsible for more people. The rich lost sleep worrying about money, while the laborer slept peacefully. If people saved money, they could lose it and leave the world as they came into it—with nothing. The best thing to do was to accept what God gave and not worry about it (5:10–20).

There was no justice in the Preacher's way of looking at life. People could be wealthy and lose it all. They could have large families and long lives and still be disgraced by not having a proper burial. If people could not be happy with the way they lived, they would have been better off not to have been born. The best thing to do was to take what one saw rather than to desire the unseen thing. Things were already predetermined, so there was no profit in arguing about it (6:1–12).

**Thinking About Life (Eccl. 7:1–8:1).** Life's end was more important than its beginning. Mourning was better than joy, and sorrow was better than laughter. Only a fool laughed. The wise rebuked the fool. Wisdom was the best guarantee that people would keep what they had. The key to life was moderation. Wisdom had shown the Preacher that "wickedness is folly and that foolishness is madness" (7:25). But the worst of all things was woman. A very few men could be trusted, but no woman was worthy of trust.

**Watch Out for the Ruler (Eccl. 8:2–9).** The only safe thing to do in regard to rulers was to stay out of their way. If people were wise enough, they could make the right choices about what to do and when to do it. Unfortunately, no one had that kind of wisdom.

**There Is No Justice in Life (Eccl. 8:10–9:12).** The wicked prospered as though they were righteous. There was no way the Preacher could understand the ways of God. Even those wise persons who claimed to know God's ways really did not know them. The Preacher had decided that the wise and righteous were controlled by God, however (8:10–9:1).

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The righteous and the wicked suffered the same fate. A sinner was just as well off as a saint. Of course, where there was life, there was hope. While one was living, he should enjoy life with his wife. He should do what he did with diligence, for there would be no chance to do anything once he went to the grave. His time would end before he knew it (9:2–12).

**Wisdom and Foolishness (Eccl. 9:13–10:20).** This section contains a number of illustrations about wisdom and foolishness. According to the Preacher, a little wisdom would go a long way, but a little foolishness would cancel out the effects of a great deal of wisdom. Foolishness was especially bad when it infected those who had power.

**The Actions of the Wise (Eccl. 11:1–6).** A man wise in business spreads his investments around. One who always worried about the weather would never reap a crop. That was just the risk of living.

**Advice to the Young (Eccl. 11:7–12:8).** Long life should be appreciated, but such a life had dark days. A young man should relish his youth, but he should still remember that he had to account to God for it. For that reason, he should take God into account in his youth before the problems of age and death overtook him.

**The End of It All (Eccl. 12:9–14).** Another person summarized the Preacher's life. He had taught what he had discovered about life with honest conviction. A final word was given to students:

> Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness to the flesh. (12:12)

A final orthodox word was added:

> Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. (12:13)

**What about Ecclesiastes?** Ecclesiastes revealed that not all post-Exilic Jews were orthodox in their view of God. The writer of Ecclesiastes believed in God. For him, however, God was not actively involved in the everyday events of life—or, if He was, one could not discover how. The writer did not accept the orthodox view that righteousness was always rewarded with blessing and that sin was always punished.

## PSALMS: ISRAEL SINGS ITS FAITH

Any complete discussion of Israel's poets and singers would involve every book in the Old Testament. A major portion of the materials in the books of the prophets was in poetic form. Jeremiah and Nahum, especially, excelled as poets. The historical works abound in poetic passages. Two notable examples of such passages are the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5) and David's lament over Jonathan and Saul (2 Sam. 1:19–27). As has been indicated previously, the wisdom materials made extensive use of poetic forms.

There was a reason for this extensive use of poetry. Poetry was much more easily remembered than prose. Putting words into a rhythmic pattern provided an additional device for aiding the memory of a people who had to depend on it as the most common method of preserving and passing along traditions they valued. The words plus the rhythm were easier to commit to memory, just as the words sung to a tune are easier to remember than words alone.

Two books in the Old Testament were devoted exclusively to preserving Israel's greatest poetry. One of them—the Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs—deals with what we would call a secular theme—human love—and, more specifically, love between a man and a woman.

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It should be pointed out that, to the Israelite, this was not a secular theme. All of life and its relationships were the concern of the LORD of Israel, a biblical view that somehow has been lost over the centuries.

The second book, the Psalms, represented Israelite worship, both on the personal and on the community level. In it, all areas of life were touched on, from going to war to praising God. In it were placed poems expressing the full range of Israelite feelings, from their most violent expressions of hatred to their most joyous sense of praise for God's blessings.

## The Song of Songs

This book has long been a source of uneasiness for Judaism and for the Christian church. It does not mention God anywhere. This failure has caused its place in the canon to be debated more than that of any other Old Testament book. Judaism and Christianity both solved the problem by interpreting it allegorically. For Jews, the "husband" was the LORD and Israel was his "bride." For Christians, Jesus was the "husband" and the church was the "bride." Song of Songs is one of the five "Festival Scrolls" in Jewish tradition, a collection discussed further in the next chapter. It is not easy to find a place for this book in a discussion of the Old Testament. Like the book of Psalms, its qualities as poetry seem to override any historical or thematic concerns.

**THE NATURE OF THE BOOK.** In reality, the book was a collection of love songs celebrating the joys of physical lovemaking. Its lesson was that sex was God's gift to humankind. Like all such gifts, it could be used properly or abused. But even though some abused it, this did not lessen its value or beauty.

The poems cover a wide span of years. They were brought together in their present arrangement in the post-Exilic period. Solomon was not only noted for his wisdom, but also seemed to enjoy a reputation for his way with women. He was reputed to have had 700 wives and 300 concubines (slave wives) (1 Kings 11:3). Thus, this book, like Proverbs, was attributed to him. The collector and arranger of the poems thought of Solomon as one of the main characters.

**INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BOOK.** There are two basic interpretations of the characters in the book. Some hold that there were two characters: Solomon and the maiden. Others argue that three characters were involved: Solomon, the maiden, and her hometown boyfriend. For the purpose of this discussion, it will be assumed that only two characters were involved.

### A SURVEY OF THE BOOK

**The Bride Is Prepared for Her Lover (Song 1:1–6).** Before a bride was brought to her husband for the first time, she was carefully bathed and perfumed for the occasion. The poet has skillfully caught the thoughts of the bride as she approaches the time when she will first be brought to the groom. As she was anointed with oils, she anticipated his kisses. Her manner had charmed the maidens who waited on her (1:2–4).

She looked at herself. She was tanned by the sun. She wondered if this would make her less attractive. For this reason, she explained why she was so dark—she had been forced by her brothers to work in the vineyards.

**The Bride and the Groom Together (Song 1:7–2:5).** She asked where he was. He answered in a teasing manner that because she did not know, he was following the flock. He praised her beauty, comparing her to "a mare in Pharaoh's chariots!" (1:9). She in turn praised him. He was like "a

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## The Literary Structure of Song of Songs

Interpretation of the Song of Songs has gone in two very different directions, as the discussion in the main body of this textbook indicates. This choice can have significant influence on the understanding of the structure of the book. Although many readers decide to read the Song of Songs as an allegory, the book seems to be best understood as erotic poetry. Is it just a random collection of love poems, or is there a plot? Does the structure of the book relate to the subject matter? These are questions to keep at the center of a discussion of literary structure.[13]

The Song of Songs can be divided into seven sections. The differences between these divisions and those used in the main body of this textbook and in other schemes indicate the difficulty of determining a definite sense of structure in this book. Three of the seven sections proposed here—the first, second, and sixth—end with the repeated refrain in 2:7, 3:5, and 8:4, " . . . do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready." These seven parts of the Song are:

| | |
|---|---|
| 1:2–2:7 | The initial encounter of the two lovers |
| 2:8–3:5 | The struggle of the two lovers to be together |
| 3:6–4:5 | The wedding procession and praise of the bride |
| 4:6–5:16 | The sexual union and praise of the groom |
| 6:1–7:6 | The woman and the man take on royal identity |
| 7:7–8:4 | The man and woman express their desire to be together |
| 8:5–8:14 | A closing encounter between the lovers |

This structure proposes a sense of balance between corresponding parts from the outside in, first and last, second and sixth, and third and fifth. This type of literary structure is called a *chiasm*. Such a pattern highlights the central part of the book. Within this central part of the book, 4:6–5:16, the intensity of the sexual encounter is highlighted in 5:4–5, the central lines of the poem.

If the descriptions of each section above are accurate, then there seems to be a sense of development in the book. The individual love poems work together to tell a love story. The lack of any definite identity assigned to the lovers may invite an allegorical reading, as the history of interpretation of this book shows. It may also invite the association of these unnamed characters with those in other stories. In the Hebrew Bible, the Song of Songs has been placed just after the book of Ruth. This may be pure coincidence or the result of other forces, but it may show a desire on the part of some who shaped the canon to associate the lovers in the Song of Songs with Ruth and Boaz. Is the artful ambiguity of a work such as this intended to invite such playful reading?

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cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of En-gedi" (1:14), an oasis on the Dead Sea. His next compliment was more appropriate for modern ears:

> Ah, you are beautiful, my love,
>     ah, you are beautiful;
>     your eyes are like doves.
> Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved,
>     truly lovely. (1:15–16)

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Compliments continued to pass back and forth between the lovers as he brought her to the banqueting house and fed her the finest delicacies (2:1–5).

**The Bride's Memories of Love (Song 2:6–17).** She remembered their lovemaking and longed for him to wake up from his sleep. She thought of how he had come to her and how he had used such beautiful words to woo her in that springtime season:

> Arise, my love, my fair one,
> and come away;
> for now the winter is past,
> the rain is over and gone.
> The flowers appear on the earth;
> the time of singing has come,
> and the voice of the turtledove
> is heard in our land. (2:10–12)

With these memories she rested, assured of his love for her.

**The Bride Has a Bad Dream (Song 3:1–5).** She dreamed that he had gone. She went out to search for him. She had just asked the watchman if he had seen her lover when she found him. She took him home so that he would be safe with her.

**The King's Wedding Procession (Song 3:6–11).** The king was borne to the wedding on the shoulders of servants in an elaborate litter or palanquin, preceded by sixty soldiers in battle dress as an honor guard.

**The Groom Describes The Bride (Song 4:1–5:1).** This was a twofold description: what the bride looked like to the groom (4:1–8) and how she had devastated his heart (4:9–15). Although the groom's description of the bride's features might not suit a modern maid, they were the highest compliments he could give a girl of his time. Her eyes were like doves (4:1); her hair was "like a flock of goats" (4:1); her neck was "like the tower of David" (4:4); her breasts were "like two fawns" of a gazelle (4:5). In short, there was no flaw in her (4:7). She had so captured him that she was like a garden of the most fragrant flowers and spices (4:9–15). The thoughts of her caused him to call her to him (4:16–5:1).

**The Bride Has Another Dream (Song 5:2–6:3).** In her dream, the bride heard her lover call at her door in the night. She ran to open it, but when she did he was gone. When she went to look for him, she was attacked by the city's watchmen (5:2–8).

Her dream changed. She was describing her lover to the women of Jerusalem. He was tall, dark, and rugged. They asked her where he had gone. She answered that he had "gone down to his garden, . . . to pasture his flock in the gardens, and to gather lilies" (6:2). The "garden" probably was an exaggerated description of the open pasture lands (5:9–6:3).

**The Groom Describes the Bride (Song 6:4–10).** Using many of the same terms found in 4:1–7, the groom described the bride. Of all his wives, she was the only perfect one. Even the other wives in the harem praised her beauty.

**An Invitation to Dance (Song 6:11–7:9).** She visited the garden where the fruit and nut trees blossomed. The next thing she knew, she was in her lover's chariot (6:11–12). Then she was invited to dance (6:13). Her dance evoked the poetry in the soul of her lover as once again he tried to describe her charms (7:1–9).

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**The Bride Invites the Groom to a Garden Meeting (Song 7:10–13).** The bride invites the groom into the garden, where she will give herself to him. There grew the mandrake, a fruit believed to promote fertility (see Gen. 30:14–15).

**A Poem in Anticipation of the Wedding (Song 8:1–4).** This poem reflected the protected status of women. Strange men were not permitted to have any dealings with them. The bride-to-be wished that her lover was like a brother. Then he would have access to her in her tent as a member of the family.

**Please Be Faithful to Me (Song 8:5–12).** Here are some of the Song's most famous lines as she pleads for him to be faithful to her:

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is as strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a raging flame.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If one offered for love
all the wealth of his house,
it would be utterly scorned. (8:6–7)

**A Final Call (Song 8:13–14).** The lovers call to each other as the book ends.

## The Book of Psalms

No other book in the Old Testament is better known than Psalms, because no other Old Testament book mirrors human emotions better than Psalms. There are **psalms** for times of meditation, psalms for times of despair, psalms for times of worship, and psalms for times of joy. Unlike other Old Testament literature—that described what had happened to Israel, that contained messages to Israel from the LORD through the prophets, or that was the distilled wisdom of society—the psalms were Israel's expression of feelings to God. They were primarily messages *to* God, not messages *from* God. As a result, they run the gamut of human emotions.

**WHO WROTE THE PSALMS, AND WHEN WERE THEY WRITTEN?** There are no simple answers to these questions. David, called the *Psalmist* in Jewish and Christian traditions, undoubtedly wrote some of the psalms. But even the book itself—if the introductory comments found in some of the psalms are to be taken literally—indicates that David did not write all the psalms. Many names are attached to the psalms by the earliest commentators on psalms—those men who attached titles to individual psalms many years after they were written. Thus, the names of Asaph (Ps. 73–83), the sons of Korah (84, 85, 87), Heman the Ezrahite (88), Ethan the Ezrahite (89), and Moses (90) were attached to the psalms.[15] Many psalms have no one's name attached to them.

In reality, the book of Psalms was more like a modern church hymnal in that it was a collection of songs that came into existence over a long span of time. A church hymnal today may have hymns whose words date back to the early Christian centuries, while at the same time having hymns that were written especially for that edition of the hymnal. In the Psalms, for example,

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## The Literary Structure of Psalms

The tendency within both academic and general reading of the Psalms has been to look at them as individual poems. During the past couple of centuries, scholars have assigned individual psalms to categories, such as lament or hymn. They have then attempted to link each psalm with an original setting for its composition and performance. General readers have selected favorite psalms to use as a part of their prayer and their devotional lives. What both of these approaches have neglected is that Psalms is a book. Taking this idea seriously raises some important questions. Does the book of Psalms have an overall design? Does it do anything as a book beyond what the individual poems do? Perhaps more practically, when I read Psalm 22, should it matter that it sits between Psalms 21 and 23, or would Psalm 22 mean the same thing if it happened to be Psalm 100?

The book of Psalms is organized into five books. These books are marked off by the doxologies that appear at the ends of Psalms 41, 72, 89, and 106. This has led some readers to look for some parallel to the Torah. Although there appears to be no sense of detailed correspondence between the two, a common idea has emerged that the book of Psalms does reflect Israel's story. Book I (1–41) and Book II (42–72) focus on David and the great royal traditions of the Davidic dynasty. This section ends with the grand Psalm 72, whose title associates it with Solomon. It may be more appropriate to say that from a literary perspective it is Solomon's voice that speaks in Psalm 72 and brings the golden age of Israel to a close. Book III (73–89) appears to reflect the Exile. It begins with a psalm that contemplates the prosperity of the wicked and ends with one that laments inconsolably the collapse of Israel's monarchy. The end of the human monarchy is emphasized further by a sequence of psalms (93, 95–97, 99), which emphasize the phrase "YHWH is King." Book IV (90–106) and Book V (107–150) exemplify Israel's praise and worship of God and seem to be particularly associated with the Second Temple period. Toward the end of the book, the sequence of Songs of Ascents in 120–134 carries the reader up to Jerusalem. The "Hallelujah" Psalms become more frequent, building to a crescendo of praise in 146–150.

The overall movement of the book of Psalms seems to be from a concentration on lament psalms, which are most common in Books I and II, to hymns of praise, which are most prevalent in Books IV and V. Individual poems and small groups of poems, especially those found at the beginning and end of the five books, play a role in developing the overall plot of the book of Psalms.[14]

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Psalm 29 was "a Yahwistic adaptation of an older Canaanite hymn to the storm god Baal"[16]—that is, the Israelites liked the hymn so much that they removed Baal's name and inserted the personal name of the God of Israel. Psalm 29 in its original form went back to at least the fourteenth century B.C.E. Similar adjustments are made in songs today when words to popular tunes are changed to give them a religious meaning. On the other hand, psalms such as Psalm 137 reflect an Exilic background, and some psalms probably even came from the post-Exilic period.

Within the book of Psalms, there is other evidence that the psalms come from different periods in Israel's history. The book, for example, had five divisions, corresponding to the five books of the Torah, or Law (1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, and 107–150). Each of the divisions has its own benediction. Psalm 1 serves as an introduction to the whole book and Psalm 150 serves as the benediction for the whole book. Book II (42–72) ends with the statement that "the prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended" (72:20). There are some psalms in other sections that are titled "a psalm of David," but it is generally agreed that most of the psalms that might have come from David are in Chapters 1–72 and most likely in Chapters 1–41.

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The title "a psalm of David," furthermore, does not necessarily mean Davidic authorship. The Hebrew language allows it to be translated as "in the style of David," or "to David"—that is, "dedicated to David." These and similar titles indicate that there were several smaller sections of psalms before the final edition that we know as the book of Psalms.

Other evidence of such collections is duplications in the book of Psalms, the most notable of these being Psalms 14 and 53. They are identical for all practical purposes, except for their references to God. Psalm 14 refers to God as *Yahweh* (the LORD), while Psalm 53 uses *Elohim* (God). This must have been a popular psalm that was known in different parts of the country. Because the psalms were collected at local worship centers (shrines), this psalm got into two different collections. When the book was put together, the two collections were merged, ignoring the fact that they contained duplicate psalms. To conclude, David is called the Psalmist, but the psalms actually came from different periods of Israelite history. Before the present book of Psalms, there were a number of smaller collections. Sometime in the post-Exilic period, these were merged into the larger collection we call the book of Psalms.

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**THE STUDY OF PSALMS.** Studies of the book of Psalms have changed much in the past seventy-five years. Archaeological discoveries, especially of Canaanite materials, have opened up new avenues of study. Whereas seventy-five years ago the tendency was to date the psalms late in Israelite history, now the trend is for a much earlier dating. Many words and phrases in the poems that once were obscure now have been clarified by the discoveries at Ugarit. It has become common in the study of the biblical psalms to look for these parallel words and ideas.

The most influential work in the recent study of the book of Psalms was that of Hermann Gunkel, a German scholar of the Old Testament. Before Gunkel's time, each psalm was studied individually. Scholars tried to discover its historical setting by connecting it to some person or event in Israelite history. Because the book of Psalms contains few historical references, scholars based their interpretations more on guesswork than on evidence. Gunkel, however, developed an important new methodological approach. He concluded that the psalms had to be looked at in the light of their association with Israelite worship services. By looking at the literary form of the individual psalms, he discovered that they could be separated into types. He concluded that there were five major types into which more than two-thirds of the psalms would fit. There were five other subtypes that would accommodate the rest of the psalms. Gunkel said that each psalm had a specific setting in life—that is, it was used in a particular form of worship service. Thus, when a person who had been ill and had recovered wanted to offer a sacrifice to show gratitude, he did not compose a psalm. There were already psalms for that purpose. Or, when a psalm such as a hymn was composed, it followed a rather fixed pattern, so all hymns shared certain basic characteristics.

Although there have been modifications of Gunkel's classifications, they still are accepted today as the basis for most modern studies of the psalms. For that reason—and because the length of the book of Psalms makes a comment on every psalm somewhat difficult—selected psalms following Gunkel's classes will be studied as examples of all the psalms.[17]

**Hymns of Praise.** The key word for the hymns was **Hallelujah**, which means "praise the LORD." It is one of the few Hebrew words that, when transliterated, comes into English virtually unchanged. **Hymns of Praise** usually had three basic parts: (1) a call to praise God, (2) the reason for praising God, and (3) a renewed call to praise God. Other than individual laments, the hymn of praise was the largest of Gunkel's classes.[18]

There were two subclasses of the hymn: Songs of Zion (46, 48, 76, 87), which were hymns praising Jerusalem; and Enthronement Psalms (47, 93, 97, 87), which were used in connection

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with the crowning of the king. This latter group was called *New Year's Psalms* by Sigmund Mowinckel, a Scandinavian scholar. Mowinckel argued that the Hebrews, in pre-Exilic times, had a New Year's festival in which the king portrayed the role of God in Creation. Psalms 47, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, and 100 were used, according to Mowinckel, as part of such a festival because they contain the phrase "the LORD reigns" (47:7).[19]

**Communal Laments.** These were prayers of petition to God to bring deliverance to the community in times of such disasters as war, famine, or epidemic. The **laments** usually contained (1) a cry to God for help, (2) a description of the situation that brought on the appeal, (3) a prayer for deliverance, and (4) sometimes an oracle from a prophet or an expression of confidence that the LORD would answer. Not all these elements were always present, nor did they necessarily follow the same order.[20]

**Individual Laments.** The laments of the individual had the same basic form as communal laments. They were used in services in which individuals asked God to deliver them from personal disaster. This was the largest class.[21]

Because laments contained an expression of confidence that the LORD would answer the plea of the sufferer, a subclass of the individual lament was the Psalms of Confidence. Psalms 4, 11, 16, 23, 27:1–6, 62, and 131 made up this subclass.

**Individual Songs of Thanksgiving.** These hymns were used by an individual to praise the LORD for deliverance from trouble. They had (1) an introduction; (2) a narration that told of his trouble, his cry to God, and his deliverance; (3) an acknowledgment of his deliverance; and (4) an announcement of an offering of thanks.[22]

**The Royal Psalms.** These psalms were used for special occasions in the religious services for the king. No major activity could be carried out by the king without the proper religious ceremony. Later, when Israel had no king, these psalms began to be interpreted as applying to God's anointed king of the future, the Messiah.[23]

**The Other Psalms.** Not all psalms could be fitted into the five major classes. There were five other classes: (1) Songs of Pilgrimage (84, 122); (2) Community Songs of Thanksgiving (67, 124); (3) Wisdom Poetry (1, 37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128); (4) two types of liturgies—Torah Liturgies (15, 24, 121, 134) and Prophetic Liturgies (12, 14, 50, 53, 75, 81, 82, 85, 91, 95, 132); and (5) Mixed Poems, the largest group outside the major classes. These psalms often combined characteristics of the major classes (9–10, 36, 40, 77, 78, 89, 90, 94, 107, 108, 119, 123, 129, 137, 144).

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**A LOOK AT SELECTED PSALMS.** Because of space limitations, only representative psalms from each category will be studied.

**Psalm 1 (a Wisdom Psalm).** This psalm seems to have been written to introduce the book of Psalms. Its theme is "the two ways." The psalm tells what the righteous man is (1:1), what he does (1:2), and what he is like (1:3). In contrast, the wicked are like wheat husks that can be blown away by the wind (1:4). They cannot endure the judgment (1:5), for

> the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
> but the way of the wicked will perish. (1:6)

**Psalm 8 (a Hymn on the Glory of the LORD and the Dignity of Humanity).** Although not opening with a call to praise as was typical of the hymns, Psalm 8 does open with praise to the LORD (8:1). The greatness of the LORD's presence can be seen in the heavenly bodies (8:2–3). They make

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the psalmist consider humankind, whom the LORD had made as the crown of Creation. Humankind had been given dominion or authority over all other creatures—whether the land animals, the birds of the air, or the sea creatures (8:4–8). The psalm closes with a repeat of the psalmist's praise of the LORD.

**Psalm 117 (a Short Hymn).** The shortest psalm is a classic example of a hymn. The call to praise begins with "Hallelujah," literally "praise to Yah(weh)." Verse 2 gives the reason for praising the LORD:

> For great is his steadfast love toward us;
> and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.

The renewed call to praise, "Hallelujah," ends the psalm.

**Psalm 74 (a Communal Lament).** The condition that gave rise to this psalm was an attack on the Temple. As a lament, it begins with a complaint to God. God had cast off His people. The congregation of Israel had been forgotten, because the Temple, God's dwelling place in Zion, was destroyed (74:1–3).

The psalmist described how the enemy destroyed the Temple woodwork and burned the Temple. There was no prophet to give a word from the LORD (74:4–9). He asked how long Israel had to endure the scoffing of the enemy (74:10–11).

It was not a lack of ability that had caused God not to deliver Israel from the enemy. God had created the heavens and the earth, had defeated the great sea monster Leviathan, had set the heavenly bodies in place, and had established the seasons (74:12–17).

God's honor needed to be defended:

> Rise up, O God, plead your cause;
> remember how the impious scoff at you all day long.
> Do not forget the clamor of your foes,
> the uproar of your adversaries that goes up continually. (74:22–23)

When God punished His foes for their scoffing, Israel's enemies would be destroyed. Thus, two needs could be met by one activity.

**Psalm 22 (an Individual Lament).** The largest class of the psalms was the individual lament. The opening words of this lament are familiar to Christians because, according to Matthew and Mark, they were quoted by Jesus on the cross (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). The opening cry (22:1–2) is that God had forsaken the sufferer. Instead of an account of his own condition, the psalmist recalled God's activity on behalf of the fathers (22:3–5). He had a low opinion of himself, for he said, "I am a worm, and not human." Men mocked and scorned him. They also scoffed at God for not delivering him (22:6–8).

He recalled that he had depended on God from birth. For this reason, he still called on God. His enemies were like raging bulls. He was weak from illness, his strength was all gone, his mouth felt dry, and death seemed near. This encouraged his enemies to encircle him like a pack of vicious dogs, ready to snap and bite him, exposing his bones (22:9–18).

From the depths of despair, he moved upward toward assurance that God would hear him. He repeated his cry for help (22:19–21) and promised that he would praise God to his brethren. He exhorted those near him to stand in awe of the LORD. The LORD would hear the cry of the afflicted.

Addressing God again, he pledged to praise Him in the assembly (22:25–26). The remainder of the psalm was an expression of confidence in God. This type of ending, although not present in all laments, frequently did appear (22:27–31).

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**Psalm 23 (a Psalm of Confidence).** The Psalms of Confidence grew out of the individual laments. This, the most famous of the psalms, is often referred to as the *Shepherd Psalm.* The figure of the shepherd does introduce the psalm, but there are two other figures in the psalm—the guide and the host.

The psalmist thought of the LORD as a shepherd to lead his flock to the best pastures, where there was tender grass and plenty of water (23:1–3a). The LORD was like a guide who led the traveler through the deep, dark ravines so common in the Palestinian hill country. There lurked thieves and wild animals ready to pounce on the unsuspecting traveler. The guide carried both a heavy stick and a weighted club to defend the one he was guiding. The traveler could proceed with assurance that the guide would protect him (23:3b–4).

The LORD was like a Bedouin sheik who took in a man fleeing from his enemies. The law of hospitality in the Near East, especially among the nomadic and seminomadic groups, was to take in a stranger, give him the best food, and protect him at the cost of the host's own life, if necessary.[24] The practice of anointing the guest's head with oil was an act of hospitality, as was the filling of the cup to overflowing. As the servants of the host would serve the stranger, so goodness and mercy followed the one blessed by the LORD throughout his days (23:5–6).

**Psalm 51 (an Individual Lament).** This is perhaps the most famous of the individual laments. Early Jewish interpreters connected it with David's seduction of Bathsheba and the child born from that act. Its appeal, however, like that of the psalms in general, is that it mirrors the inner conflict of any moral person who has committed a grievous sin of immorality. It contains a varied vocabulary to describe sin and repentance.

Verses 1 and 2 contain a plea for forgiveness based on God's "mercy," "steadfast love," and "abundant mercy." Sin was described in a threefold manner as "transgression" (or rebellion), "sin" (which basically means failing to come up to the accepted standard), and "iniquity" (meaning moral distortion). God's forgiveness also was described as a threefold action: blotting out or erasing; washing thoroughly; and cleansing in a ceremonial sense (52:1–2).

The psalmist had a deep sense of guilt. He felt that he had sinned against God and that the troubles he had been enduring were just punishment for his failures (51:3–5). He asked God to teach him wisdom. The cleansing he desired was both outward cleansing in a ceremonial act and inward cleansing through repentance and forgiveness. He wanted a sense of inner joy. This could only come with the assurance of sins forgiven (51:6–9).

He pleaded with God to create a clean heart within him, for God to keep him in His presence, and for God to restore him to the joy of the salvation that was God's (51:10–12). If these things were done, he promised to proclaim God's ways to sinners (51:13–14). Unlike other psalms in which animal sacrifices were offered, this one speaks of "a broken and a contrite heart" as the sacrifice most acceptable to God (51:15–17). A later addition by a priestly hand tried to bring it back to priestly orthodoxy by mentioning "burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings" (51:18–19).

**Psalm 32 (an Individual Song of Thanksgiving).** This psalm, like others of its class, was used in a service to offer thanks to the LORD when one had recovered from a serious illness. After speaking about the blessedness of being forgiven for his sins, the psalmist described how his sense of guilt made him physically ill, so that his "strength was dried up like the heat of summer" (32:3–4). But he had confessed his sins, and his happiness was restored (32:5). He would recommend that the godly pray to the LORD.

An oracle, probably spoken by a Temple prophet, interrupted the psalmist:

I will teach you and instruct you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you. (32:8)

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He was not to be like the horse or mule that had to be controlled with "bit and bridle" in order to obey (32:9).

The psalm closes with a call for joy because of the love that the LORD had given to those who trusted Him (32:10–11).

**Psalm 116 (an Individual Song of Thanksgiving).**[25] This psalm, more clearly than most, gives directions for worship. The individual had been healed of a devastating illness. He came to the Temple to make a sacrifice of thanksgiving. The service opened with an address to the other worshipers in which he described what had happened to him (116:1–4). Praise to the LORD followed because the LORD had delivered him from almost certain death (116:5–11).

Next, the offerings were made. They were introduced by the question, "What shall I return to the LORD for all His bounty to me?" Then followed the drink offering. The cup containing the wine was lifted to the LORD while he recited his vows and commitment (116:12–16). Then the animal sacrifice was made with the proper comments (116:17–19). The service ended with the shout, "Hallelujah!"

**Psalm 45 (a Royal Psalm).** This was a psalm for a royal wedding. It was sung by the court minstrel to celebrate the happy event that was about to take place. First, the singer addressed the king, using exaggerated language to describe him. In verses 6 and 7, especially, there appears the kind of language that led later interpreters to see this as a messianic psalm, particularly in those days when Israel had no king. The king was told that his "divine throne" would "endure forever and ever" (45:1–9).

Next, the queen-to-be was addressed. She was told how fortunate she was to be marrying the king of Israel. She was to forget her people and submit to the king as her lord (45:10–12). As though he were the writer of the bridal column in the Jerusalem *Gazette,* the psalmist described the queen's bridal attire as she was led by her escort to the wedding chamber (45:12–15).

The psalm ended with a forecast that the king would be succeeded by sons more famous than their forefathers. Because of the illustrious sons born to him and his queen, the king's name would be remembered for many generations (45:16–17).

**Psalm 139 (an Individual Lament).** This great psalm reflects a more developed theology than some of the earlier poems. It falls into four stanzas of six verses each. The first stanza speaks of God's knowledge of the psalmist's everyday activities and thoughts. The psalmist was awed by the intimate knowledge of him that the LORD possessed (139:1–6).

In the second stanza, he spoke of God's all-pervading presence in the universe. No matter where he might go in the future, God would be there, even in the grave. This was a new idea (139:7–12).

In the third stanza, he spoke of God's knowledge of him before he was even born. God had seen his creation in the womb. God knew what he would be before he existed. The thoughts of God were beyond his comprehension (139:13–18).

In the fourth stanza (139:19–24), he turned to his enemies, who were also God's enemies. Because he was powerless to overcome them, he called on God, who had the power to do so. Then the idea struck him that his thoughts might not be appropriate. He closed with a plea:

> Search me, O God, and know my heart;
> test me, and know my thoughts.
> See if there is any wicked way in me,
> and lead me in the way everlasting. (139:23–24)

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**Special Groups of Psalms.** There are a number of psalm groupings and special psalms that need to be mentioned. One such group is Psalms 113–118. These psalms are still used today in the celebration of the Jewish feast of Passover. They are known as the *Egyptian Hallel*. Another such special group is Psalms 120–134. Each psalm in the group bears the title, *A Song of Ascents*. They were used in the great pilgrimage festivals. As devout Jews went up to Jerusalem, they sang these Songs of Ascents as they moved toward the Holy City.

Although they are not distinct groups, certain psalms have unique characteristics. Among these are the acrostics, the most famous of which is Psalm 119. It contains twenty-two sections or stanzas, each consisting of eight verses. All eight verses in a stanza begin with the same Hebrew letter, and all twenty-two stanzas begin with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet in alphabetical order. Certain psalms were antiphonal. They were written so that a leader spoke lines that told a story while a choir or the people answered with a refrain. Thus, in Psalm 136, the speaker told the story of the Exodus while the congregation or choir responded with the refrain "For His steadfast love endures forever." When the refrain is removed, the words of the leader tell the story.

**The Vengeance Psalms.** One of the major problems that face interpreters of the psalms are those psalms that express violent hatred of the nation or of the psalmist, which are also called **imprecatory psalms**. Psalm 137 is an example of such attitudes. After lamenting the conditions that the exiles had to endure, the psalm turns to a violent denunciation of the Babylonians. It ends with the bitter words

> O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
> Happy shall they be who pay you back for what you have done to us!
> Happy shall they be who take your little ones
> and dash them against the rock! (137:8–9)

One must admit that this attitude was a far cry from that expressed by a great teacher of a later time who said, "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:14). How does one deal with these psalms, and what value, if any, do they have? Certain things must be understood before these questions can be answered. In the background are certain ideas:

1. These psalms are grounded in ideas from the practice of blood vengeance. Blood vengeance was justice in its most primitive form. It arose at a time when there was no state to see that justice was done. Because of this lack of a neutral party to administer justice, the family or clan had that responsibility. The more specific responsibility fell upon the nearest kin of the person who had been wronged. Thus, if $A^1$ killed $B^1$, then $A^1$ could expect $B^2$ to try to avenge $B^1$. This avenger (or *redeemer*, as he was called) was judge, jury, and executioner. For example, see Gideon's revenge for the death of his brothers in Judges 8.
2. Closely allied with these ideas was the idea of corporate personality. The individual was so bound up with the group that whatever affected the individual affected the group.
3. The concept of covenant was also at work in these psalms. The LORD and Israel were bound together by a covenant. In that covenant relationship, the LORD became a part of Israel's "family," so to speak.
4. These psalms resound with belief in the justice of God. And the fact that justice had to come in this life led to the plea for God to destroy the enemy.

With these ideas in mind, the vengeance psalms reflect a condition in which Israel (or an individual) had been devastated by an enemy. There was no avenger who had survived the devastation or who had strength enough to see that justice was done. God, as Israel's covenant partner,

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was the only one left who could do this. Thus, basically, these rather brutal-sounding psalms really came from a people so brutalized that God was their only hope. So, in their primitive way, they cry for justice, just as oppressed groups still do today.

**SUMMARY OF THE PSALMS.** The psalms were the hymns of a people. They represent individual and group worship. For the most part, they reflect the kind of orthodox theology that the book of Proverbs and the friends of Job reflect: (1) God is just. (2) This life is all there is of real life. (3) Because God is just, the good will prosper and the wicked will suffer. Despite their simple view of life, the Psalms continue to speak to every generation, because they mirror the full range of human emotion.

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## Key Terms

Hallelujah, *326*
Hymns of Praise, *326*
Imprecatory Psalms, *331*
Lady Wisdom, *306*
Lament, *327*
Parallelism, *306*
Proverbs, *305*
Psalms, *324*
Qoheleth, *312*
Retribution Theology, *309*
Satan, *310*
Theodicy, *308*
Vanity, *317*
Wisdom, *301*

## Study Questions

1. How was Israelite wisdom related to the wisdom of other countries?
2. How did the Egyptian "Instruction of Amenemopet" influence the Israelite book of Proverbs?
3. What was the primary theme of the book of Proverbs?
4. How do Proverbs 1–9 and 10–31 differ?
5. What does Proverbs 31:10–31 tell us about the status of women in ancient Israel?
6. What is the evidence that the book of Job is the work of more than one author?
7. What are some of the common assumptions and beliefs that form the background of the book of Job?
8. What is the role of Satan in Job 1 and 2?
9. How does Job in Chapters 1 and 2 differ from Job in 3:1–42:6?
10. Who are Job's friends, and what are their basic arguments to Job?
11. What are Job's arguments to his friends? To God?
12. What do the Elihu speeches add to the book?
13. Describe the form and content of God's response to Job.
14. What conclusion does Job reach about his suffering?
15. Why is Ecclesiastes called *skeptical wisdom*?
16. What sort of philosophy of life does Ecclesiastes advocate?
17. What does Ecclesiastes tell us about the theological views of at least some Jews in post-Exilic times?
18. What might have been the purpose of the Song of Songs?
19. How has the Song of Songs most often been interpreted, and why?
20. Who are the characters in the Song of Songs?
21. What difference in the nature of the psalms helps to explain some of the attitudes they express?
22. What evidence suggests that the book of Psalms is a collection of songs produced over a long period of time?
23. How is the book of Psalms arranged, and how might it function as a book rather than just as a collection of individual poems?
24. What might the expression *psalm of David* mean?
25. What did Hermann Gunkel contribute to our understanding of the book of Psalms?
26. What are Gunkel's five major classes of psalms?
27. What might the nature of some of the psalms indicate about Israelite worship practices?
28. What underlying factors might help us to understand the ideas expressed in the vengeance psalms?
29. What are the various ways readers might understand the designation *Qoheleth*?

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## Endnotes

1. For an excellent short introduction to wisdom literature, see Roland E. Murphy, "Wisdom Literature and Psalms," in *Interpreting Biblical Texts* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 13–25. For a longer introduction, see James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction,* rev. and enl. (Louisville, KY: Westminster–John Knox Press, 1998).
2. Pritchard, *ANE,* 237–243.
3. An excellent work that thoroughly examines the development of schools both in Israel and in the rest of the Near East is James L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence* (New York: Doubleday, 1998). For a discussion of the law as "moral education," see Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Sage, Priest, and Prophet," in *Library of Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster–John Knox Press, 1995), 38ff.
4. For a superb introduction to and commentary on the first large section of the book of Proverbs, see Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2000). See particularly his description of the structure of this section as "ten lectures" (45–50).
5. See the discussion of this issue in James Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).
6. See Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes and Esther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. C. Eerdman, 1981), 50.
7. R. B. Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 24, suggests that this section was developed by an Egyptian-trained Hebrew scribe who copied what he remembered of "The Instruction of Amen-em-opet" and then supplemented it with other sayings to fill out the total of thirty.
8. Samuel Terrien, "The Book of Job: Introduction and Exegesis," *IB*, III, 877–902, is a comprehensive introduction to the book of Job.
9. John H. Tullock, *Blood Vengeance among the Israelites* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1966), 141ff.
10. See Genesis 4:10; Ezekiel 24:7.
11. I am indebted to the late J. Philip Hyatt of Vanderbilt University for this phrase.
12. David Noel Freedman, "Is It Possible to Understand the Book of Job?" *BR,* IV, 2 (April 1988), 29.
13. This discussion is indebted to an unpublished paper by Loren F. Bliese, "Literary Structure and Theology in the Song of Songs."
14. For a more detailed development of this kind of idea, see Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997).
15. The sons of Korah and Asaph were professional singing guilds connected with the Temple (1 Chron. 25).
16. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 175.
17. Gunkel's original work is now available in English translation. See Hermann Gunkel, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel*, trans. James D. Nogalski (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998). See especially his opening essay, "The Genres of the Psalms" (1–22).
18. It included Psalms 8, 19, 33, 65, 68, 96, 98, 100, 103, 104, 105, 111, 113, 114, 115, 117, 135, 136, and 145–150.
19. See Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship,* 2 vols., trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), esp. ch. 3.
20. Among the communal laments are Psalms 44, 48, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 106, and 125.
21. It included Psalms 3, 5, 6, 7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27:7–14, 28, 31, 35, 38, 39, 42–43, 51, 52, 54, 55, 56, 57, 61, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 139, 140, 141, 142, and 143.
22. Psalm 18 (a Royal Psalm as well), 30, 32, 41, 66, 92, 116, and 138.
23. They include Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 101, 110, and 132.
24. See the story of Abraham and the two men (Gen. 18:1–33). Also see the story of Lot's attempt to protect the same men (Gen. 19:1–11).
25. The idea for what follows in the discussion of this psalm came from H. J. Flanders, R. W. Crapps, and D. A. Smith, *The People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Old Testament,* 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1988), 412f.

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CHAPTER

# 14 The Time of Silence

## Judah in Eclipse

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**Timeline**

| | |
|---|---|
| 521 B.C.E. | Beginning of reign of Darius I in Persia |
| 465 B.C.E. | Beginning of the reign of Artaxerxes I |
| 332 B.C.E. | Alexander conquers most of the known world, including Palestine, and the Persian Empire comes to an end |
| 323 B.C.E. | Alexander dies and Palestine comes under the control of Ptolemy and his descendants |
| 198 B.C.E. | Antiochus III takes control of Palestine away from Ptolemy V |
| 175 B.C.E. | Antiochus IV continues the Seleucid rule of Palestine |
| 168 B.C.E. | Beginning of the Maccabean Revolt |
| 63 B.C.E. | Roman Emperor Pompey conquers Jerusalem |

**Chapter Outline**

I. The Historical Situation
II. The Festival Scrolls
III. The Maccabean Revolt
IV. Geographical and Canonical Boundaries and the Book of Daniel



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## CHAPTER SUMMARY

When we departed from the story line of Judah at the end of Chapter 9, it was a province on the eastern edge of the Persian Empire in the middle of the fifth century B.C.E. When the book of Nehemiah comes to an end, there are no internal sources for the continuation of this story. The chain of empires that ruled over Judah continued through the rise and fall of the Persian Empire and on to Greek rule over Palestine, which began with Alexander the Great and would prove to be the most influential in cultural terms. The historical records left behind by the Persian and Greek Empires offer evidence of only a general sense of the context within which Judah continued to develop. The emergence of new cultural forms and institutions in the second century B.C.E. allows only calculated guesses about what happened in this intervening period. Although events in Judah were important, most Jews at this time lived outside of Palestine, and "Diaspora" Judaism began to develop its own sense of identity. Many, if not most, of the biblical books went through their final stages of editing in this period, and may offer some indirect clues, but perhaps the most distinctive literary development was the emergence of stories about young people making their way in foreign contexts, such as Ruth, Esther, and Daniel. How to adjust to this way of being a people would prove to be a source of both great struggle and creativity.

## THE HISTORICAL SITUATION

The Greek writer **Herodotus** is often given the title "The Father of History," and this title might be understood in two ways. His massive work that he wrote during the middle to late fifth century is often called "The Histories." This work provides a presentation of approximately the first century of the Persian Empire, through the middle of the reign of Xerxes I. Herodotus was Greek, so his reporting on the Persian Empire is immediately suspect, and there are many reasons why his work would not come close to meeting the standards of modern history writing. He was probably no more or less a historian than the writers of the biblical books of Samuel and Kings. This should not be understood as a failure on his part. His reasons for writing, like those of the writers of Samuel and Kings, were different from the reasons that modern historians write. So, the notion of the writings of Herodotus as the first history and Herodotus as its "father" is a misunderstanding. On the other hand, the idea of using sources to produce a narrative of a long period of time, reasonably comprehensive in scope and depth, was a bold and creative idea. Other writers in his time and earlier may have done similar work that was simply ignored or lost. In this second sense, then, Herodotus is an important ancestor of those who consider themselves historians today. Of course, Herodotus is fortunate that his work was preserved, even if in somewhat edited form.

Much of what we think we know about the Near East in the fifth century must be derived from Herodotus' writings, and it is probably correct to think about much of the fifth and fourth centuries as a slow collision between Persia in the east and the developing Greek nation and empire in the west. The beginnings of this conflict have been recently popularized in the film *300*, which is a heavily embellished retelling of the battle of Thermopylae in 480 B.C.E. These two powers would push back and forth against each other for more than another century, and Palestine would always be an important crossroad in struggles between eastern and western powers. Things happened in Palestine between 400 and 200 B.C.E., but our knowledge has to be based largely on inferences from what we know about the general context and from what we know about Jewish life when it emerged from the shadows in the second century B.C.E.

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## Persia's Last Days

The Persian Empire continued to control Palestine for the all of the fifth century and the first half of the fourth. Persia was not without its troubles, however. From the time of Nehemiah on, Persia faced constant problems—first from an Egyptian revolt, then from the Greeks, and finally from the rulers of the western part of the empire. Nevertheless, the four great Kings of Persia—Darius I, Xerxes I, Artaxerxes I, and Artaxerxes II—reigned for a collective 140 years, and their empire would provide an important context for the development of the Bible and some of the stories within it.

The greatest difficulty came for Persia, however, during the reign of Darius III (Condomannus) (336–331 B.C.E.), when Philip of Macedon (359–336 B.C.E.) rose to power, and Macedonia gained control of the Greek states in 338 B.C.E. When Philip was assassinated in 336 B.C.E., that tragedy was not to Persia's advantage because it put Alexander, his son, on the throne of Macedonia.[1]

## The Campaigns of Alexander the Great

The young **Alexander** (356–323 B.C.E.) was a military genius. In 334 B.C.E., he invaded Asia Minor and quickly gained control of the entire area. At the battle of Issus (333 B.C.E.), he routed the main Persian army, even capturing Darius' wife and family. Moving down the Mediterranean coast, he quickly captured Phoenicia, except for Tyre and Palestine. He was well received by the Egyptians in 332 B.C.E., and from there he moved eastward until he reached the Indus River. In his wake, he left centers of Greek learning and culture, as he required his older soldiers to retire and live in the conquered lands. Because of the influence of Greek culture, over a period of several hundred years, the effects of Alexander's action changed the course of civilization. The province of Judah was caught up in this wave of cultural influence and would be permanently altered by it. The most significant artifact of this influence is the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures commonly known as the Septuagint.

## Ptolemies and Seleucids in Palestine

When Alexander died in 323 B.C.E., his empire was divided among four of his generals. **Ptolemy**, Macedonian Greek and founder of the last Egyptian dynasty, was given control of Palestine, while Syria was given to Seleucus.[2] For a century, the Ptolemies dominated Palestine. During that time, Egypt gained a large Jewish population. It has been estimated that 1 million Jews lived in Alexandria in the first century B.C.E. But Egyptian domination of Palestine came under direct challenge from the Seleucids when Antiochus the Great (223–187 B.C.E.) came to the **Seleucid** throne. After a number of battles, Antiochus prevailed in the battle of Panium (Baniyas), where the later city of Caesarea Philippi (of New Testament fame) was to be located.[3]

Although Antiochus the Great was generally welcomed by the Jewish people—especially as he gave special favors to the priests and other leaders—the positive relations between Jews in Palestine and Seleucid rulers ended when Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) came to the throne in 175 B.C.E. Antiochus Epiphanes was determined that all of his subjects worship Greek gods, speak the Greek language, and follow Greek customs. He infuriated many of the Jewish people by his actions, especially when he interfered in the selection of the High Priest. He threw out Onias III, the ruling High Priest, and sold the office to Onias' brother Jason. Before long, Menelaus, a priest who did not belong to the high-priestly family, paid Antiochus a bigger sum of money, and Antiochus deposed Jason in favor of Menelaus.

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The High Priest became the promoter of **Hellenization**—the adoption of Greek religion and culture. There followed a number of outrages by Antiochus against the Jewish people. Among other things, he forbade Jewish religious practices (including circumcision), set up an altar to the Greek god Zeus in the Temple, and sacrificed a hog on the altar. Those Jews who resisted him were slaughtered without mercy. When he ordered all Jews to sacrifice to Zeus, he provoked a revolt that would lead to Jewish independence for the first time in many centuries. What became known as the Maccabean Revolt will be described below, after an examination of some of the literature of the late Persian and early Greek periods.

## THE FESTIVAL SCROLLS

The third section of the Hebrew canon, the Writings, contains a sequence of five small books known as the *Megillot*, or Festival Scrolls. The Masoretic tradition presents these five in the order: Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther. The three poetic books in this group were treated in earlier chapters of this book because their form and subject matter make them fit better in those discussions. The story of the book of Ruth is set in the period of the Judges, but the telling of the story seems to fit the issues and concerns of the Persian period in Palestine. The book of Esther is set in the Persian court and the multiple forms in which this book exists address the Persian and Greek periods of Israel's story. The formative period for Diaspora Judaism, the fifth to third centuries, was likely also to be the source of the idea of establishing set readings for the festivals. The inability of Diaspora Jews to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem created the need to celebrate these festivals in other ways.

### The Book of Ruth

The setting for Ruth was the period of the Judges, which is probably the primary reason that the Christian tradition has placed it right after the book of Judges in all of its canons. A post-Exilic author composed a beautiful short story about Ruth, King David's great-grandmother, perhaps to confront the resistance to intermarriage expressed in other books, such as Ezra and Nehemiah. Ruth 4:7 reveals that the book was written at a time much later than its setting, when the writer must explain an obscure custom that was used "in former times."

#### The *Megilloth*

There is more than one festival calendar in the Bible and it seems to have taken some time before the list of festivals and the time of their celebration became fully standardized. Eventually, five major festivals were established and the five "Festival Scrolls" were assigned as synagogue readings for those dates.

| Festival | Scroll |
|---|---|
| *Shavuot* (The Festival of Weeks, called Pentecost in Greek) | Ruth |
| Passover | Song of Songs |
| *Sukkoth* (The Festival of Booths) | Ecclesiastes |
| Ninth of *Ab* | Lamentations |
| *Purim* | Esther |

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An Israelite woman named Naomi had traveled with her husband, Elimelech, to live in Moab during a time of famine in Israel. The opening of this story should sound quite familiar to those aware of biblical traditions. The great ancestors of Israel often traveled into foreign territory because of famines. As an opening line to a story, "There was a famine in the land," creates many narrative possibilities, including movement, danger, and foreignness. Elimelech died in Moab, leaving Naomi with two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Eventually, the sons married two Moabite women, Orphah and Ruth. Then the sons died, leaving the three widows with no way to preserve and continue their family line.

Naomi decided to return to Israel to live among her own people. The daughters-in-law were determined to go with her, but she tried to persuade them to return to their own people. Orphah did so, but Ruth insisted on going with Naomi:

> Do not press me to leave you
> or turn back from following you!
> Where you go, I will go;
> Where you lodge, I will lodge;
> your people shall be my people,
> and your God, my God. (1:16)

These words, often used as a bride's vow to her husband in a wedding ceremony, were addressed to a mother-in-law in the book of Ruth (1:6–18).

At the time of the barley harvest, the women arrived in Bethlehem, where Naomi's husband had rights to ancestral property. As a widow, Naomi had no rights to the property, because in reality she was part of the property rather than owner of it. Whoever got the property had to assume responsibility for Naomi and Ruth (1:19–22). Elimelech's property was to go to his nearest male relative. Boaz, a wealthy landowner in Bethlehem, was a relative of Elimelech, but there was another who was more closely related than Boaz. Naomi sent Ruth to the barley fields to glean scattered heads of grain left by the reapers for the poor, and Ruth happened to be gleaning in Boaz's field when he noticed her. When told who she was, he ordered that extra grain be scattered where she could find it. Calling her to him, Boaz told her to follow his reapers closely so that she would be safe, and he invited her to drink from the vessels of water his workers had prepared. When Ruth asked why she was so favored, she was told that it was because of her kindness to her mother-in-law, Naomi (2:1–14). After Ruth ate the midday meal with Boaz, she gathered a large amount of grain because of his generosity. When Naomi saw this and heard Ruth's report, she was pleased with what Boaz had done (2:15–23).

Naomi continued her efforts to find a new life for Ruth and for herself. She told Ruth to bathe, put on perfume, and change into her best clothes. Then she told her to go down to the threshing floor where Boaz was threshing grain. When Boaz had finished eating and had lain down to sleep, Ruth was to go up and lie at his feet, pulling his cover over her (3:1–5). Ruth did everything just as Naomi told her. When Boaz awoke to find her lying at his feet, he was surprised, and he asked Ruth's identity. Once he discovered who she was, they continued their conversation, and Ruth made a request of Boaz that may be understood as a proposal of marriage. This seems like a bold move for a young woman in a foreign place, but Boaz responded favorably. The next morning, the story reports that Boaz gave Ruth a specific amount of grain to take back to her mother-in-law, an act that looks like a signal being sent from Boaz to Naomi. Naomi and Boaz never appear together or speak to each other in the book of Ruth, but this is one of many elements in the story that make it appear that they were communicating "off the stage" (3:6–18).

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## The Literary Structure of Ruth

The book of Ruth is perhaps the most carefully crafted single story in the Old Testament. It begins as a family story, in the form of a genealogy, but is quickly interrupted by death. Elimelech dies, and his two sons die before they can produce heirs. The family loses the possibility of continuing its heritage. The resolution of this story will require implementation of the **levirate marriage** custom. This custom is described in a legal text in Deuteronomy 25:5–10 and is worked out in the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. The book of Ruth appears to be closely related to both of these texts. The levirate custom, which requires a man to marry his brother's widow if his brother produced no heirs before his death, is complicated in Ruth because both brothers have died.

Over the past few decades, interpreters of the book of Ruth have emphasized the role of a literary device known as a **chiasm**.[4] In a chiasm, elements from the beginning of the story match elements at the end. Likewise, elements on one side of the middle match those on the other. The second half of the structure is, therefore, a mirror image of the first half. In this way, the fourth chapter of the book of Ruth matches the first. In Ruth 1 death interrupts a genealogy, while in Ruth 4 a birth repairs and continues it. In Ruth 1 the relationship between Ruth and Naomi is negotiated, while in Ruth 4 the relationship between Ruth and Boaz is negotiated.

In the same way, Ruth 2 and Ruth 3 mirror one another. In each chapter, Naomi sends Ruth out to encounter Boaz. In Ruth 2 they meet during the day in a field. In Ruth 3 they meet at night at a threshing floor. Together, these two stories determine Ruth's sense of identity. At the end of each story, Ruth returns to Naomi with food as a sign that the meetings have gone well. Many delicate literary features enrich this structure, although some are obscured by the translation. The description of Boaz as "worthy" in 2:1 is matched by the description of Ruth as "worthy" in 3:11. The coming of Ruth under God's "wings" in 2:12 is reflected by Ruth's request to Boaz to spread his "wing" over her in 3:9. The book of Ruth is thus a love story in the middle surrounded by the story of a family struggling for continuity.

The book of Ruth connects itself to the failed story of the levirate marriage custom in Genesis 38 by referring to Tamar and her son Perez in 4:12 and by beginning the genealogy with Perez in 4:18. Along with the repair of this family and its genealogy, the book of Ruth also redeems the levirate custom, which had failed in Genesis 38, with a story of how it can function well, so well that it makes the birth of Israel's greatest king possible. The appearance of *David* as the final word in the book of Ruth places an exclamation point on the story.

There were complications, however. Boaz was not the nearest relative, so he had to get the right to inherit the property. He found the nearest relative at the town gate, where all legal transactions took place, and told him about the property. The man said he would claim the right of inheritance, but when he found that the two women went with the property, he changed his mind. Because he would have to marry Ruth, the first son born to her would be credited to her first husband and thus would have the right to inherit Ruth's first husband's property.[5] Boaz then claimed the right of inheritance, as he was next in line. He married Ruth and she gave birth to a son named Obed. The law relating to levirate marriage in Deuteronomy 25:5–10 speaks only of the responsibility of a man when his brother dies, leaving behind a childless widow. That specific resolution is not possible in the book of Ruth because no brothers are left for Ruth to marry, but the story eventually finds another way to fix the genealogy that is interrupted by death in the first chapter. The genealogy at the end of the book continues to follow

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the line of Obed. He became the grandfather of David, which means that Ruth was the great-grandmother of Israel's greatest king. One of the apparent points of the story was that the Jewish people could not be an exclusive group, because the great-grandmother of their greatest king was a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but a Moabite, an ethnic group that other texts, such as Deuteronomy 23:3, specifically banned from participation in the religious life of Israel.

## The Book of Esther

This book, set against the background of the Persian Kingdom in the middle of the fifth century B.C.E., presents one of the worlds of Diaspora Judaism and raises important questions about the role of the Jewish people in the world and seriously ponders their prospects for survival. God is not mentioned in the book, leaving the divine role in this struggle for survival largely up to the reader to interpret. Another purpose of the book of Esther seems to be to explain the origin of the Jewish feast of Purim.

According to the story, Ahasuerus (Xerxes I, 485–464 B.C.E.), king of Persia, had a banquet for his friends. When he asked his queen, Vashti, to appear before his guests, she refused. In retaliation, Ahasuerus deposed her as queen and set up a national search for a replacement (1:1–2:4). At this point, Esther, the heroine of the story, was introduced. She was a beautiful, young Jewish woman who had been raised by her elderly cousin, Mordecai. The book reports that Mordecai sat "in the king's gate" (2:19, 21; 5:13; 6:10), which implies that he was a government official, as the gate was the site of the government offices. This would explain how he found out about a plot against the king and why he did not have to bow to Haman, the prime minister.[6]

When the rough equivalent of a national beauty contest was conducted, Esther, who concealed her ethnic background, was chosen as the new queen. Not long afterward, Mordecai heard of a plot against the king and, through Esther, was able to warn Ahasuerus. The conspirators were punished but Mordecai was not rewarded, although his action was noted in the king's chronicles (2:5–23).

The villain of the story was Haman the Agagite, prime minister to Ahasuerus. Mordecai refused to bow to Haman when he went out the palace gate, so Haman decided to get rid of Mordecai. Because Haman hated the Jewish people, he decided to get rid of all the other Jews as well (3:1–6). Casting lots (*purim*) to determine the best time for getting rid of the Jews, Haman finally felt that the time was right to approach the king. Using persuasion and an enormous bribe, Haman convinced the king to decree that on a certain day, all Jews were to be killed. The king, of course, did not realize that these were Esther's people (3:7–15). When the decree was published, Mordecai immediately went into mourning, and when word reached Esther that Mordecai was in mourning, she sent to ask him why. Because she stayed in the king's harem, she would not have known of the decree. Mordecai sent Esther a copy of the decree, asking her to go to the king and request that he lift the death sentence against the Jewish people. She was reluctant, but she finally agreed to do so, even though it meant risking her life (4:1–17). When she went to the king, he granted her the privilege of speaking to him. She asked him to invite Haman to a dinner for the three of them, and the king granted her wish. Haman, sure that his moment of glory had arrived, rejoiced, until he happened to see Mordecai at the palace gate. He went home and ordered carpenters to build a gallows in his garden so that he could personally hang Mordecai (5:1–14).

Meanwhile, the king was having a sleepless night. While reading through the official records of his royal court, he saw the report of how Mordecai had saved his life. The next morning, when Haman arrived, he was asked what would be a proper reward for a man whom the king wanted to honor. Thinking that he was the one the king intended to honor, Haman suggested that such a man should be clad in the king's robes, put on the king's own horse, led through the streets of the capital,

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## The Literary Structure of Esther

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Like Ruth and Jonah, the book of Esther is probably best described as a short story. Unlike those other, shorter books, Esther does not exhibit a deliberate sense of overall design involving elements like chiasm and repeated motifs. One helpful way to understand a story is to look at the way the interactions between characters are presented, and Esther offers an excellent opportunity to examine this feature.

The primary scenes in the book of Esther involve interactions between the major characters, in pairs for most of the book and in groups of three at the end. These interactions are either in the form of conflict or collusion. The book opens with the portrayal of King Ahasuerus' banquet, which ends in conflict between the king and his wife, Queen Vashti. The next two major interactions are between Esther and the king. Esther has replaced Vashti. There are minor scenes in between these major interactions, which report briefly the meetings of Esther and of Mordecai, Esther's uncle, behind the scenes, in which Mordecai engineers Esther's entry into the palace and her revealing of the plot to assassinate the king. The next sequence introduces the character named Haman, and explains his conflict with Mordecai and the resulting interaction between Haman and the king, which produces the plan to annihilate the Jewish people. In the first three chapters, the narrator has introduced the major characters and, by reporting their interactions, has provided both the major conflict of the story and the means for its resolution.

The resolution is worked out in a sequence in Chapter 4 that pushes Mordecai further into the background while still allowing him to be a driving force in the story. Mordecai and Esther interact indirectly through a go-between. The focus of the story then shifts back to Esther's interaction with the king, which surrounds the discovery of Haman's plot to hang Mordecai. In the climactic sequence, Esther reveals Haman's plot to destroy the Jews in a scene involving the king, Haman, and Esther (7:1–10). A dramatic reversal takes place. As Haman replaces Mordecai on the gallows, Mordecai replaces Haman in the presence of Esther and the king (8:1–17).

The final two chapters of the book report the aftermath of the story and point toward the future, with the establishment of the festival of Purim as a celebration of the story. In the end, the story revolves around the revelation of evil plots. The plots to assassinate the king and to destroy the Jewish people are discovered by Mordecai, told to Esther by Mordecai, and revealed to the king by Esther. The gratitude of the king produced by the revelation of the first plot makes the demise of the second plot possible. The story has made its point: Courageous and honest behavior on the part of Jews living within a foreign empire will save them from destruction and even allow them to replace their enemies in positions of honor and prosperity.

The Hebrew text of the book of Esther described here is significantly different from the Greek version preserved in the Septuagint. The Greek version contains six additional elements. Aside from adding 150 verses to the book of Esther, these additions also contribute an increased religious tone to the book. Several of these elements are dreams or prayers. One of the oddities of the Hebrew version of Esther is that it never mentions God. This appears to have hampered, somewhat, Esther's inclusion in the Jewish canon. It seems reasonable to assume that the additions in the Greek story are a response to this concern. This situation reveals that the contents of some biblical books were still being negotiated even as the canon was being formed.

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## Esther

Esther is presented to the readers of the book bearing her name as a beautiful, young, Jewish woman living in the Persian Empire during the post-Exilic period. In the midst of a party, the Persian king, Ahasuerus, commanded his wife, Queen Vashti, to come and parade before his male friends so that they could observe her beauty. Vashti refused, so Ahasuerus removed her from the position of queen. To replace Vashti, the Persian royal court conducted a beauty contest. Esther won this contest and was made the new queen of Persia.

Esther's uncle, Mordecai, who had adopted her when her parents died, discovered a plot within the Persian court to assassinate King Ahasuerus. Mordecai informed Esther of the plot, and she told the king. As a result, the plot was thwarted, and the king was very grateful to Esther and Mordecai. Later, when Mordecai discovered another plot to exterminate the Jewish population of the empire, he again informed Esther. The villain of the story, Haman, also planned to execute Mordecai and had a large gallows built on which to hang him. Meanwhile, Esther was able to use her position of favor with the king to convince him of Haman's plot. The result was that Haman was exposed and was hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Eventually, all of those who were part of Haman's plan were killed.

Esther thus became a great hero in the Jewish tradition. The end of the book of Esther establishes a festival in honor of the memory of the deliverance of the Jews in Persia, thanks to Esther and Mordecai. The Festival of Purim is still celebrated within Jewish culture. The Hebrew version of the book of Esther does not mention God, and because of this there seems to have been some hesitation in accepting it within the canon. That the book provides the basis for this important festival and is read as part of the celebration was likely the major factor supporting its inclusion in the Hebrew canon.

and have it proclaimed that the man was being honored by the king. The king approved of this suggestion and, in an ironic turn, commanded Haman to have Mordecai honored in precisely this way. Haman followed the king's order, but went home dejected because of the failure of his plans (6:1–14).

The day of Haman's dinner with the king and queen came. Ahasuerus asked Esther what she wanted him to do. She revealed her background, and she pleaded for her own life, as well as for the lives of her people. When the king, who seemed to have problems with his memory, asked who had caused all the trouble, she pointed an accusing finger at Haman. In anger, the king left the room for the cool of the garden, while Haman fell at the queen's feet as she lay on the dining couch. When the king returned to the room, "Haman had thrown himself on the couch where Esther was reclining" (7:8), and the king interpreted what he saw as Haman's attempt to rape the queen. For his crimes, real and perceived, Haman was hanged on the gallows he had built for Mordecai (7:1–10).

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**FIGURE 14–1** The book of Esther and parts of the books of Daniel and Ezra tell stories set in the ancient kingdom of Persia. The capital of this empire was a city the Greeks called Persepolis, which is located in what is now the western part of Iran. These are the remains of a place called the Apanda, constructed in Persepolis by Kings Darius and Xerxes in the late sixth and early fifth centuries B.C.E.

Because he could not revoke his decree about the slaughter of the Jewish people, the king sent out another decree that gave them the right to defend themselves against anyone who might attack them (8:1–17). The Jewish people took it as an opportunity to rid themselves of their enemies throughout the kingdom. The tenth day of the month of Adar was designated the day for the celebration of the Feast of Purim, which would commemorate the event (9:1–32), and Mordecai replaced Haman as prime minister (10:1–3).

## Judaism and the Gentile World

The Exile reoriented Israel in many different ways. In the post-Exilic period, most Jewish people continued to live outside of Palestine, even after the Persians allowed them to return. Diaspora Jews lived in many places and among many cultures in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Asia Minor, and eventually Europe.[7] Two different, but related, sets of questions typically arose in these situations. The first had to do with the openness of Judaism to people who were not from a Jewish ethnic background. Two opinions developed on that subject. One said that the responsibility of the Jewish people was to be separate and distinct from the world around them, to be exclusively the people of God. Such people undoubtedly would have argued that the nations would be drawn to Israel's God if Israel was faithful in its commitment. This view has been designated as *particularism.* Others believed that Judaism should be fully open to others, and even that it was the responsibility of the Jewish people to include others. This missionary outlook encompassed all people and, as such, is known as *universalism.* This debate between these contrasting viewpoints plays a significant role in books like Esther, Ruth, and Jonah.

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This is not a debate only within Judaism, but one that arises within all religious communities at various times. It would remain an important debate among the Jewish people, and would arise again in later centuries, as indicated by the book of Daniel. Understanding what was probably the final book produced in the Old Testament will require a return to the continuing story of the Jewish people.

## THE MACCABEAN REVOLT

Before continuing with this part of the story of the Jewish people, it should be acknowledged that our primary sources of information about this era are the two books called 1 and 2 Maccabees. These books are included in certain Christian canons, and they are written from a perspective very sympathetic to the Maccabeans. In the first century of the Common Era, the Jewish "historian," Josephus, wrote about these events, but his primary source of information also appears to have been 1 and 2 Maccabees. So, we do not possess an account of these events that meets modern historical standards of objectivity and neutrality, and we can do little more than paraphrase what is found in these sources that we do have.

In 168 B.C.E., a representative of Antiochus went to the village of Modein to enforce the Hellenization decree. He called on a village leader, the priest Mattathias, to set the example by sacrificing to Zeus. Instead, Mattathias killed the king's officer, as well as one of his own people who had offered to make the sacrifice. Having done that, he fled into the Judean wilderness with his five sons.

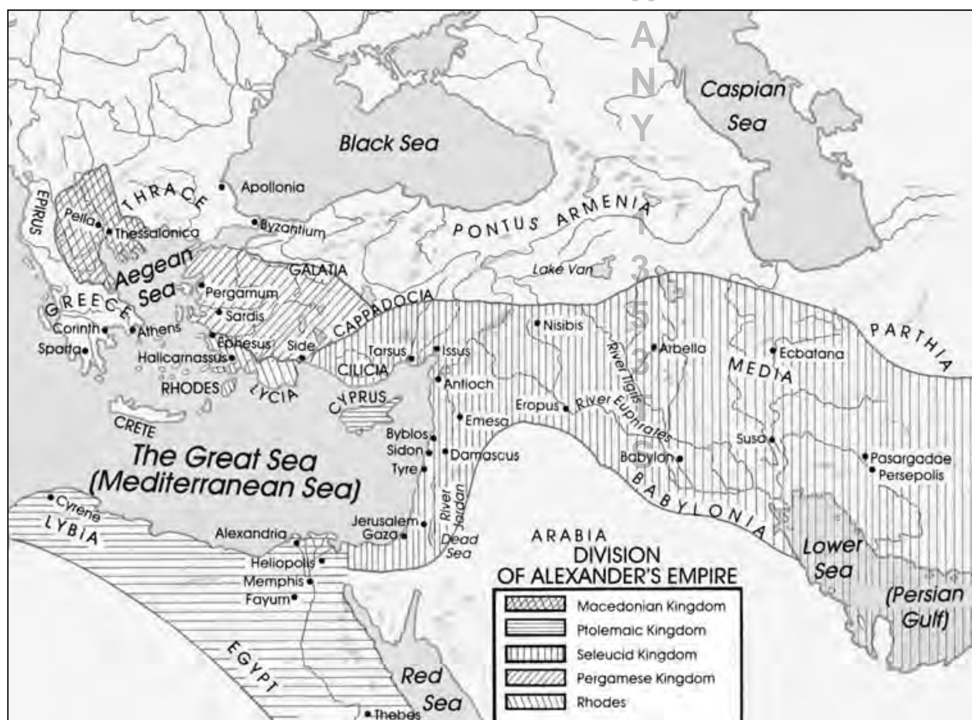


**FIGURE 14–2** Alexander's empire. Artwork by Margaret Jordan Brown from *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*. © 1990, courtesy of Mercer University Press.

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Mattathias soon died, but his son Judas Maccabeus became the leader of the revolt started by his father. Judas and his brothers were joined by a group of separatist Jews called the ***Hasidim***. Their revolt, commonly called the **Maccabean Revolt**, was so successful that by 165 B.C.E., they had recaptured Jerusalem. In December 165 B.C.E., the Temple was cleansed and rededicated to the worship of the LORD, an event commemorated by the Jewish festival of Hanukkah. Later, Judas was killed, and his brother Jonathan succeeded him. Jonathan recognized the power of the office of High Priest and took that office for himself in 150 B.C.E. Eight years later, Simon, another brother, led the Jewish people to independence from the Seleucids and founded the **Hasmonean** dynasty, which ruled Palestine until the Roman conquest in 63 B.C.E. This period of political independence, which lasted for about one century, became an important symbol for the Jewish people. For at least the next two centuries, calls for rebellion against Rome and actual attempts to throw off Roman rule would look back on the Heroic Maccabeans for inspiration, but no other effort would succeed like this one did. In fact, the most concerted of these latter efforts, the Jewish war against Rome in 66–70 C.E., would lead to the brutal Roman suppression that included the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

## GEOGRAPHICAL AND CANONICAL BOUNDARIES AND THE BOOK OF DANIEL

During the second century B.C.E., there were thriving Jewish communities in many places, including the one in Palestine from which the Maccabees emerged. In southern Egypt, the Persians established a Jewish military colony at Elephantine. This colony even had its own temple, in which regular sacrifices were offered. This group was somewhat unorthodox in its beliefs, assuming that God had a wife and including other gods in its worship practices. Even so, there seems to have been the observance of such traditional Jewish holidays as the Sabbath, Passover, and the Festival of Unleavened Bread, and contact was maintained with religious leaders in Jerusalem.[8] The Elephantine temple was destroyed by the Egyptians around 410 B.C.E., and the colony appealed to Jerusalem for help in rebuilding it. When no help came, they then appealed to Bagoas, the governor of Judah, and the sons of Sanballat, who ruled Samaria, and they got the help they requested. This colony was still in existence as late as 399 B.C.E.[9] The exiles who had stayed behind in Babylon also thrived, and their geographical location would become the setting for the book of Daniel.

In all of these places, questions constantly arose about how to live a faithful life as a Jewish person in the midst of other peoples and other cultures. We have seen such questions addressed in other books of the Old Testament, and the latest book in the whole collection, Daniel, continued to struggle with these issues.[10] This is the formative period for the various sects within Judaism, which are visible in the writings of Josephus and the New Testament, and exemplified by the Qumran community that produced and preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls.

### The Book(s) of Daniel

The name Daniel was well known in the Ancient Near East. An ancient, heroic figure with this name appears in various places in Canaanite literature.[11] Ezekiel mentioned someone named Daniel, along with Noah and Job:

> Even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it [Palestine], says the LORD God, they would save neither son nor daughter; they would save only their own lives by their righteousness. (14:20)

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It is uncertain whether this refers to the character Daniel who appears in the book of Daniel. Noah and Job are timeless, international figures, so it would make sense to understand Ezekiel's reference to Daniel as one to a similar kind of figure. It is more likely, therefore, that the book of Daniel takes this larger-than-life name for its hero. According to Daniel 1:1–7, Daniel was taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in 606 B.C.E. So he is a very specific character living in a very specific time and place. Still, for the writer and original readers of the book of Daniel, most likely living in the second century, Daniel was a hero of the distant past. Although the stories in the book were set against the background of the Babylonian Exile, as it stands now, evidence suggests that it was put in its present form during the persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes to encourage those who were under persecution. Just as the LORD delivered Daniel, he would deliver the righteous ones who were being persecuted by the tyrant Antiochus IV.

The book of Daniel was not included among the books of the prophets in the Jewish canon. Instead, it was placed within the Writings, the last group of books to be accepted as Scripture. At least eight fragmentary copies of the book of Daniel have been discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and some of the nonbiblical writings among the scrolls make references to Daniel. The variety found among the manuscripts themselves and the references seem to indicate that, at the same time, the book of Daniel had taken on the status of scripture and was still a fluid body of tradition.[12]

The book of Daniel is dynamic in many ways. It exists in more than one format. Like Esther, the Greek versions of the book of Daniel contain additional material not present in the Hebrew version. So, it is apparent that different communities preserved and understood the book in different ways. Even the "Hebrew" version of the book is not all in the Hebrew language. Daniel 2:4–7:28 is in Aramaic, the language the Jewish adopted in Babylon. Ezra is the only other book in the Bible that contains a significant amount of Aramaic, and much of that material consists of official documents of the Persian court, which would have been written in Aramaic. The discussion below will focus on the shorter, Hebrew/Aramaic version of the book. The second half of the book is also the clearest example in the Old Testament of the emerging form called **apocalyptic literature**. Some of the characteristic features of this kind of writing were identified earlier, in Chapter 10 of this book, because of the book of Isaiah (e.g., Isaiah 24–27) look like a very early form of this kind of writing.

**The Contents of the Book.** The book has two major divisions: (1) stories about Daniel and (2) apocalyptic visions of a brighter future for those under persecution.

**1.** ***Stories about Daniel (Dan. 1:1–6:28).*** The first story (1:1–21) concerns the captivity of Daniel and his three friends of the Jerusalem nobility. Each of the friends was given a Babylonian name. Daniel was called *Belteshazzar*, while the three friends were called *Shadrach*, *Meshach*, and *Abednego*. The king ordered that they were to be educated for three years for court service. As such, they were to be fed from the king's table. "But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with royal rations of food and wine" (1:8). Thus, he and his friends were resolved to be faithful to the laws of their Jewish faith.

When the servant brought them the rich food, they asked instead for vegetables, because there was no danger of violating Jewish dietary laws if they ate no meat or milk products. When the three years were up, the Jewish youths were as healthy as any others and much more wise. This indicated to those whom Antiochus was trying to force to follow Hellenistic customs that they could prosper, just like Daniel and his friends, if they were faithful to the law.

As in the story of Joseph, in which the Pharaoh's dreams were so important, the second story about Daniel concerns a dream of King Nebuchadnezzar (2:1–49). Nebuchadnezzar had a

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## The Literary Structure of Daniel

The book of Daniel falls into two halves in terms of form, content, and language. The first half of the book tells a series of stories about Daniel and three other young men who live under foreign rule in the Babylonian Empire. Daniel 7–12 takes the form of a series of visions reported by Daniel in first-person language.

The stories in Daniel 1–6 have several purposes. First, they introduce Daniel as a person who is divinely gifted to interpret dreams. Second, they establish a setting in the time of the Babylonian Empire for the activity of Daniel. Third, the portrayals of Daniel and his friends in the face of threats to their lives provide a model of faithfulness for readers living under imperial rule. This last is certainly the most important function of the stories on their own. After the Exile, the Jewish people were always subject to imperial power from Persia, Greece, or Rome. Thus, illustrations of how to live faithfully and successfully in such a context would have been of great value.

It is easy to assume that the language shift in the book corresponds to the shift in setting and content, but these two factors do not coincide precisely. The first six chapters of the book are stories that take place in Babylon, where Aramaic was the official language of the royal court, but the book starts off in Hebrew and does not switch to Aramaic until 2:4. The visions of Daniel begin in Chapter 7 and the language remains Aramaic until the end of that chapter, only returning to Hebrew at 8:1.

The three purposes listed above also function together, however, to provide a narrative framework for the visions in the second half of the book. Faithful Daniel, who survives wicked schemes and interprets the dreams of foreign kings, looks into the future to talk about Israel's continuing life under foreign domination. The visions of the future connect the time of Daniel with the time of the intended audience of the book.

Of course, there is significant debate concerning the origins of book of Daniel. Some readers see it as an actual historical portrayal of a young man in the Babylonian era having visions about the future. Others believe the book of Daniel was written during the later Greek period to which the visions seem to refer. This latter group would understand the stories as a literary device designed to grant authority to a perspective on the book's own present in the second century B.C.E. The understanding of the stories as a model of behavior in captivity and a narrative framework for the visions probably works with either view. From both perspectives, Daniel 12 looks toward the future and the promise of God's deliverance in the end.

dream his wisest men could not interpret. Daniel told him the dream had to do with things that would come to pass "in the latter days" (2:28). This emphasis on the last days of history is known as *eschatology* (2:1–30).

In Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he had seen a great image with a head of gold, "breasts and arms of silver," belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet "partly of iron and partly of clay" (2:33). The image was broken by a stone that became "a great mountain and filled the whole earth" (2:35). The image represented kingdoms that had dominated the Near East, beginning with that of Nebuchadnezzar. Others were the Medes, the Persians, and the empire of Alexander. But Alexander's kingdom, the one made of iron, was so divided that part of it was mixed with clay. It (the Seleucids and Ptolemies) would crumble. Then, the kingdom of God would emerge and replace all earthly kingdoms (2:31–45). Because of Daniel's success in interpreting the dream, he was given a place of honor in the king's court (2:46–49).

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The third story concerned Daniel's companions Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. When the king set up an idol and demanded that everyone worship it, the three young men refused. Nothing was said about where Daniel was when all this was going on. When the news of the Jews' refusal to worship reached the king, they were ordered to be thrown into a fiery furnace. When the king arrived to see what had happened to them, he saw not three but four, one of whom was like "a son of the gods" (3:25 NIV). It was a vision of assurance to those who were undergoing the fiery trials of persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes (3:1–30).

Next came the story of another dream of the king. He dreamed of a mighty tree that covered the earth; but, on God's orders, a heavenly being descended and cut down the tree. When Daniel was asked to interpret the dream, he told the king that he (the king) was the tree. He would suffer temporary insanity, during which he would act like an animal because he exalted himself above God. When a year had passed, the king suffered as Daniel said. Then, the king acknowledged the power of the Most High God (4:1–37). In this story, the apocalyptist was saying what Deutero–Isaiah had said many years before:

> By myself I have sworn,
> from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness
> a word that shall not return:
> "To me every knee shall bow,
> every tongue shall swear." (Isa. 45:23)

That even included the tyrant Antiochus, who called himself "God manifest" (Epiphanes). Chapter 5 tells the story of Belshazzar's feast. Belshazzar was the son and coregent of Nabonidus (he was called the son of Nebuchadnezzar in 5:2). Nabonidus was an amateur archaeologist who was more interested in old ruins than in the breakdown of his kingdom. While Belshazzar was having a wild drinking bout using sacred vessels from the Jerusalem Temple, he saw a message written on the wall: "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN." Daniel, when called to interpret them, explained that they pronounced Belshazzar's doom. His days were numbered, for he had been found lacking in leadership qualities. Now, his kingdom would be divided among the Medes and the Persians. According to the book of Daniel, the kingdom was taken by "Darius the Mede." According to Persian records, it was Cyrus. Darius, the Persian ruler, came to the throne after Cambyses (530–522 B.C.E.) in 522 B.C.E. (5:1–30).

The final story of Daniel is the most famous. Exalted to the position of *satrap*, or governor, of a province of the Persian Empire, Daniel was still the faithful worshiper of the LORD. His fellow governors persuaded the king to pass a decree that no one could pray to any god for thirty days. Only the king could be petitioned. Daniel ignored the edict and continued to worship three times a day, as was his custom. As a result, he was thrown to the lions.

The king realized what a mistake he had made and worried all night about Daniel. But in the morning, Daniel walked out of the lion's den unharmed. Those who had set the trap for him were fed to the lions.

The object of all these stories was to tell the people who were suffering under persecution that, just as the LORD had delivered Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, so they would be delivered. This was a common theme in apocalyptic literature—the delivery of the righteous from the fire of persecution and from the human animals who were trying to destroy them (6:1–28).

**2. *Daniel's visions (Dan. 7:1–12:13).*** In the visions recorded in Daniel, there was typical apocalypse. Unusual beasts, the use of numbers, and the view of the last days, including a messianic figure, were all common themes in such literature. Despite any persecution the saints might have

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been undergoing, the apocalyptic writer brought a message of hope whose theme was that God would win out over the forces of evil.

**a.** ***The four beasts from the sea (Dan. 7:1–28).*** In the first vision, four beasts arose out of the sea. For Jews, the sea was always a place of awe and mystery. It was a fearsome place, which had great monsters who swallowed up men who dared to venture out into it. It was not unusual for them to conceive of evil creatures coming from the sea. The beasts in the vision represented the strong empires of the time: the Babylonian; the Median, which lay east of the Mesopotamian region; the Persian; and finally, the Greek or Hellenistic empire of Alexander and his successors. The ten horns on the fourth beast represented the ten kings who followed Alexander. Because the horn was a symbol of power, the writer showed his contempt for Antiochus Epiphanes by referring to him as a little horn, a button with a big mouth "that spoke arrogantly" (7:20). But God ("the Ancient One," 7:22) would put an end to his persecution and his mouthings.

> The kingship and dominion
> and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven
> shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High;
> their kingdoms shall be an everlasting kingdom,
> and all dominion shall serve and obey them. (7:27)

**b.** ***The ram and the he-goat (Dan. 8:1–27).*** Daniel's next vision is that of a ram with ten horns that moved in every direction, defeating every beast it encountered. The ram was the Persian Empire, which owed much of its strength to an alliance with the Medes. Alexander (the he-goat) defeated the Medo–Persian Empire. At his death, four of his generals (the four horns) inherited his empire (8:22). Antiochus (a king of bold countenance, 8:23) persecuted the Jews. The 2300 "mornings and evenings" were three and one-half years of the period from the beginning of the Maccabean Revolt until the cleansing of the Temple in December 165 B.C.E.

**c.** ***The seventy weeks (Dan. 9:1–27).*** Numerology came into full play in this vision, along with the introduction of the angel Gabriel as the chief messenger for God. Daniel was pondering Jeremiah's prophecy of the seventy weeks "in the first year of Darius, the son of Ahasuerus . . . who became king over the realm of the Chaldeans" (9:1). This verse creates problems, as Persian records currently available show no knowledge of such a king. The Chaldeans, furthermore, were the Babylonians, not the Persians.

After a long prayer of repentance and confession, both of his sins and the sins of the people (9:3–19), Daniel was visited by the angel Gabriel. Gabriel's purpose was to reveal the meaning of the seventy weeks, which were explained as "seventy weeks of years," or 490 years. Unfortunately, the meaning of what was revealed to Daniel has not been passed on to us, either by written or oral tradition, making this passage one that has brought interpretations ranging from something less than sublime to the ridiculous. Seemingly, if the historical context is of any value, it referred to the period from the return (538 B.C.E.) to the Maccabean era (about 168 B.C.E.). It would end when one would come (the Messiah) who "desolates, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator" (9:27). Again, this seems to refer to Antiochus Epiphanes, who profaned the altar by sacrificing a hog on it. That this interpretation is widely disputed can be readily admitted. One can find all sorts of contrary interpretations, including some current best sellers, applying this to some future event. History is full of such interpretations (9:20–27).

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**d.** ***The last days (Dan. 10:1–12:13).*** A favorite theme of apocalyptists was the last days, when the LORD would bring an end to evil and usher in the Kingdom of God. It has always been tempting, especially in trying times, for Jewish and Christian interpreters to apply this passage to their own time. A notable example occurred in the 1840s, when a sincere preacher convinced thousands that the end would come in 1843. When it did not come, he changed the date to 1844. There were still many who believed him. But when the end still did not come, he died a disillusioned and broken man. This vision, like the others, seems best to be understood as referring to the events from 538 B.C.E. to the Maccabean period. References such as 11:31, "Forces from him (Antiochus Epiphanes) shall occupy and profane the temple and fortress. They shall abolish the regular burnt offering" seem to point to Antiochus and his atrocities against the Jews. For Daniel, this was the prelude to the coming of the Messiah who would deliver the righteous Jews. After a clear reference to a belief in life and death, with rewards and punishment (12:1–4), Daniel closed the veil, so that what came after was hidden from view.

## Key Terms

Alexander, *336*
Apocalyptic Literature, *346*
Chiasm, *339*
Hasmoneans, *345*
Hellenistic, *337*
Herodotus, *335*
Levirate Marriage, *339*
Maccabean Revolt, *345*
Ptolemies, *336*
Seleucids, *336*

## Study Questions

1. In what ways did the conquests of Alexander the Great influence subsequent history?
2. Identify Ptolemies, the Seleucids, Antiochus the Great, and Antiochus Epiphanes.
3. What were the causes of the Maccabean Revolt, who were its leaders, and what were its long-term effects on Jewish history?
4. Why was Elephantine an important location in Israelite history?
5. What position concerning Jewish ethnicity does the book of Esther support?
6. Why were the Greek additions to the book of Esther probably inserted into the book?
7. Why do some interpreters view the book of Ruth as a response the marriage policies in Ezra and Nehemiah?
8. What are the connections between the book of Ruth and the book of Judges?
9. What are the *Megilloth* and what is their purpose?
10. What were the viewpoints of the universalists and the particularists in post-Exilic Judaism? What conditions gave rise to these opposing views?
11. What are the most important purposes of the book of Daniel?
12. What are the two major divisions of the book of Daniel?
13. How is Antiochus Epiphanes symbolized in the book of Daniel?
14. Who were the Hasidim?

## Endnotes

1. For a good description of the life of Philip of Macedon and his significance for the history of ancient Greece, see A. R. Burn, "Historical summary of Greece," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Grand and Rachel Kitzinger (New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1988), 30–34.

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**2.** I am grateful to Professor Kathryn Larch of Pima County Community College for correcting my identification of Ptolemy.

**3.** For a concise survey of the Seleucid rule of Palestine, see Thomas Fischer, "Palestine, Administration of (Seleucid)," trans. Frederick H. Cryer, in *ABD*, vol. 5, 92–96.

**4.** See Stephen Bertman, "Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth," *JBL*, LXXXIV (1965), 165–168.

**5.** This was the law of the levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5–6).

**6.** Michael Heltzer, "Esther—Where Does Fiction Start and History End?" *BR,* VIII, I (February 1992), 29.

**7.** For a survey of these communities at the end of the Exilic period, see Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion*, vol. 2, 370–375.

**8.** For an excellent short discussion of this community, see J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster–John Knox Press, 2006), 496–497.

**9.** See Abraham Schalit and Lidia Matassa, "Elephantine" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 6, 311–314.

**10.** The religious, political, and social dynamics of this period are extremely complex. An attempt to untangle all of the forces and movements, which reveals this complexity, is in Abertz, *A History of Israelite Religion*, vol. 2, 534–597.

**11.** See "*The Tale of Aqhat*" in James B. Pritchard, *ANET*, 118–132.

**12.** See the detailed description of the evidence related to Daniel in Martin Abegg, Jr., et al., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: The Oldest Known Bible Translated for the First Time into English* (New York: HarperOne, 1999), 482–485.

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CHAPTER

# 15 Epilogue

## The Continuing Story

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### Timeline

| | |
|---|---|
| 63 B.C.E. | Romans conquered Jerusalem |
| 66 C.E. | Beginning of the Jewish war against Rome and the approximate time the Dead Sea Scrolls were hidden |
| 70 C.E. | Destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple |
| 100 C.E. | Approximate time of the closing of the Hebrew canon |

### Chapter Outline

I. Life in Jewish Communities
II. The Development of Sectarian Judaism
III. Literary Activity
IV. Judaism's Oral Tradition
V. A Closing Statement



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## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

By the first century B.C.E., all the books of the Hebrew canon and the Protestant Old Testament had reached their final form. Judaism was existing under the heavy political and economic influence of the Roman Empire and the continuing cultural influence of Greece. A great deal of literary activity was still occurring as existing books were being interpreted and translated into other languages. New books of great significance that did not make it into the narrower canon were being written. The process of shaping the canon was also taking place and continued into the first century C.E. Judaism thrived in Palestine, Babylon, Egypt, and other places. New groups formed within Judaism, including the early Christian movement. This sectarian environment would also influence the formation of the canon. In 70 C.E. the Romans attacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. This crisis was probably the final force that drove Judaism toward a finished, closed canon by the end of the first century C.E.

## LIFE IN JEWISH COMMUNITIES

The Old Testament story comes to its narrative conclusion at the end of the book of Nehemiah, and Daniel was probably the last book of the Protestant Old Testament to be written. There is some evidence that the number and order of the poems in the book of Psalms continued to vary into the first century B.C.E.[1] Despite what looks like the end of the production of the Bible from our vantage point, the persons living in Jewish communities at that time would not likely have perceived any kind of end. Jewish writers continued to produce works that followed in the lines of the sacred texts of the past. The great traditions of Israel's past—law, priesthood, monarchy, temple, prophecy, and wisdom—continued to survive in some ways, but they had adapted significantly and continued to evolve into new forms. The Maccabeans had put an end to the political and military influence of the Greek Empire, but its cultural influence would remain strong for centuries to come. The greatest impact can be seen in the production of a full Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures and the use of Greek as the original language of the sacred texts of Christianity. At the end of the Maccabean period the political, military, and economic influence of Rome would help shape Judaism.

Except for the freedom they gained during the Maccabean revolt, Palestinian Jews, as well as those outside of Palestine, were subject to foreign rulers. Most Jewish people, in fact, did not live in Palestine. The Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and Greek conquests of Palestine had the effect of scattering Jews all over the Middle East. Babylonia and Egypt in particular had large Jewish communities. The **Diaspora** character of Judaism would become a permanent condition.

Although Israel was no longer a nation, it was still a people, spread from Babylon to Alexandria to Rome, yet bound together by devotion for God, dedication to the study of God's teaching (Torah), and a longing for God's city, Jerusalem. No matter how far one lived from Jerusalem, every faithful Jewish person vowed to go there to worship at least once in his or her life. This love for Jerusalem is expressed in the words of a lonely poet during the Babylonian Exile:

> How could we sing the LORD's song
> in a foreign land?
> If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
> let my right hand wither!
> Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
> if I do not remember you,
> if I do not set Jerusalem
> above my highest joy. (Ps. 137:4–6)

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As a consequence of their loss of political independence, certain important changes took place in the Jewish community that had effects not only in Palestine, but also in the Jewish communities of the Diaspora. First, the High Priest increasingly assumed both religious and political roles in the Palestinian Jewish community, with his power in many ways extending to Jewish communities everywhere. An important step in this rise in political power came when Jonathan, the brother of Judas Maccabeus, combined the offices of political ruler and High Priest (circa 150 B.C.E.). Second, the oral traditions associated with prophecy and wisdom declined in significance as the written Torah gradually became the standard for both life and conduct. Because Torah basically means "teaching," the teacher or rabbi became a major force in Jewish life. More and more, the synagogue was where the teaching took place. While the Temple, located in Jerusalem, was Judaism's most sacred shrine, every Jewish community that had a minimum of ten Jewish men—a *minyan*—had a synagogue as the center of community life. Because the synagogue was an institution controlled by laypersons and the rabbi was a layperson rather than a priest the lay interpreters of the Torah became the most important influence in the lives of most Jewish people, wherever they lived. So, while the political power of the High Priest was increasing, the religious power of the priesthood as a group was decreasing.

Two important developments grew out of this situation. First, a tradition of identifying and elevating two great rabbis in each generation developed, and interpretations of Torah taught by these two took on great authority. These pairs, called *zugoth*, often embodied a typical conservative vs. progressive approach to addressing contemporary life using ancient laws. This tradition culminated in the two great rabbis of the first century, Hillel and Shammai. Second, oral tradition came to have equal status with the written Torah. This was based on the belief that (1) it, like the written Torah, had its origins in the time of Moses, and (2) it has been passed along over the centuries by word of mouth until it came to be entrusted to the *zugoth,* the pair of great rabbis whose word was law for that day.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF SECTARIAN JUDAISM

This period also saw the rise of numerous parties within Judaism that were to have major roles in its future. Before the Maccabean Revolt, the Samaritans, a group whose origins are uncertain, but who may have been descendants of the inhabitants of the territory of the Northern Kingdom that Assyria had conquered in 722/721 B.C.E., became a distinct group. Assyria had brought in foreign colonists who intermarried with the poor Israelites left in the land. In the Babylonian conquests, the poor also were left in the land, while most of those in the leadership classes were carried into exile. Open hostility developed between those who remained in the land and the Jews who returned after the Babylonian Exile. The people of the land still looked upon themselves as true followers of the God of Israel, but the Jews who returned felt that those who had stayed in the land had a corrupted faith and that their mixed heritage disqualified them from being a part of Judaism. Eventually, the **Samaritans**—so named because Samaria was their chief city—built a temple on Mount Gerizim, one of the mountains that overlooks the site of Shechem, the old Israelite capital. Later, John Hyrcanus, the Hasmonean ruler, forcefully converted the Samaritans to his version of Judaism, destroyed their temple, and earned their undying enmity both for himself and the type of Judaism centered in Jerusalem.[2] The Samaritans apparently accepted only the Torah as Scripture and their written tradition persists today in the manuscript tradition known as the **Samaritan Pentateuch**.

The extremely orthodox **Hasidim**, who had supported the Maccabean Revolt in its beginnings, became disenchanted when the revolt became more of an attempt to gain political power

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than a struggle for freedom. It is likely, although not proven, that two political groups important to later Judaism, the Pharisees and the Essenes, had roots in this movement. The Pharisees were made up predominantly of laymen who wanted to interpret the law so that its meaning was clear to each generation. The Pharisees were the party that emphasized oral tradition and produced the great rabbis who were to dominate later Judaism. The Pharisees accepted the Pentateuch (Torah), the prophets (*Nebi'im*), and the Writings (*Kethubim*) as authoritative. Although they would have strongly affirmed their religious orthodoxy, they were in fact the religious liberals of their day, introducing into Judaism such ideas as the belief in the resurrection of the dead and the belief in angels.

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Josephus also mentions a **sect** he refers to as the **Essenes**, for whom he had great admiration because of their dedication to righteousness. There are very few references to this group elsewhere in ancient literature, and they provide very little information about the Essenes beyond what Josephus says. It is difficult to discuss this group without addressing the connections often made between them and the manuscripts called the Dead Sea Scrolls. The scrolls were clearly produced and preserved by a group that was not only dedicated to righteousness in the following of the law, but that also saw the religious establishment in Jerusalem as corrupt. The scrolls were discovered in caves near the northwestern corner of the Dead Sea, and archaeologists have also discovered near there the remains of a first-century settlement, known as **Qumran**. It is very common to connect these three pieces and to assume that the Essenes lived at Qumran and they produced and preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls. The case for this view is entirely circumstantial, but has been very influential.[3] Many interpreters believe the sect that produced the Dead Seas Scrolls withdrew from Jerusalem initially when Jonathan, the brother of Judas Maccabeus, seized the high priesthood (circa 150 B.C.E.). Frequent references are made in their literature to the "wicked priest." Whether or not this group corresponds to the Essenes, their literature provides important insight into the nature of sectarian groups, the conflicts among them, and the attitudes of some toward the institutionalized religion of Jerusalem. Their theology was similar to that of the Pharisees in many respects but had important differences. The Dead Sea Sect believed they were to prepare for the coming of the end of the age. Their literature was dominated by the idea that a great final struggle was approaching, a war between the "Sons of Light" (themselves) and the "Sons of Darkness" (all who opposed them). Everything they did was aimed at preparing for the day when God would intervene on their behalf and make them victorious over their enemies. Jonathan's attempt to combine the offices of High Priest and ruler was further carried out by the Hasmoneans, who ruled Palestine after the Maccabean Revolt gained freedom for the Jewish people in 142 B.C.E.

The priestly party, the Sadducees, dominated the political and economic life of Palestine the country but lost much of their religious influence over the common people. They were quite conservative religiously, accepting only the first five books of the Bible as Scripture—those books that describe the responsibilities of the priests. In contrast, because the prophets frequently attacked the priesthood, this would not have endeared them to the Sadducees. The Sadducees' political and economic power, as well as their religious views, led to a struggle between them and the Pharisees. This situation, in turn, led to severe persecution of the Pharisees during the days of Hasmonean rule.

Although there would be other parties and sectarian groups that would arise later within Judaism, these were the most important. Their existence illustrates that, as the Old Testament story closes, Judaism was not a unified religion in which everyone believed the same doctrines, nor did they interpret the scriptures or interact with the world in the same way. Instead, the Jewish people were composed of diverse groups, and their society and religion mirrored that diversity.

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## LITERARY ACTIVITY

As the period that produced the Old Testament came to a close, literary activity did not cease among religious people. Four major bodies of literature that extended the traditions of the Old Testament in various ways need to be examined briefly: the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the oral tradition of the Jews that eventually produced the Talmud.

### The Apocrypha

To speak of the **Apocrypha** as extrabiblical literature is not entirely accurate, because the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions accept these books as sacred Scripture. Because these books have been preserved only among Christian groups and within Christian manuscripts, it is often difficult to determine to what extent they had Jewish origins, and what their original language was. It is safe to say that all of the works included in the Apocrypha have Jewish origins that preceded Christianity, which will not be the case with the Pseudepigrapha. Books not included in the Jewish and Protestant canons, but that are in the Catholic and Orthodox canons, may be described in the following groups:

1. Additions to or extensions of biblical books

| *Apocryphal Book* | *Related Biblical Book* |
|---|---|
| The Letter of Jeremiah | Jeremiah |
| The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men | Daniel |
| Susanna | Daniel |
| Bel and the Dragon | Daniel |
| The Prayer of Manasseh | 2 Chronicles |
| The additions to Esther | Esther |

2. Apocalyptic literature—2 Esdras
3. Short stories or novellas focusing on Jewish piety—Tobit and Judith
4. Wisdom literature—The Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, and Baruch
5. Historical/Narrative books—1 and 2 Maccabees, 1 Esdras

The books that are additions to extensions of biblical books are varied. Of the books listed in this category, many address issues related to living wisely and righteously within the Diaspora.[4] The three additions to Daniel are in the Greek version of the book and they add to or extend the narrative tales found in the first half of Daniel. The additions to Esther are also in the Greek manuscripts of that book, and consist mostly of prayers spoken by the characters, a feature that seems to seek to remedy the difficulty caused by the lack of any mention of God in the Hebrew version of the book. The Letter of Jeremiah is independent of the book of Jeremiah, but it seems to use the idea of Jeremiah writing a letter to the exiles, as he did in Jeremiah 29, as a starting point for writing to them warning against the dangers of idol worship.

Clearly, 2 Esdras differs drastically from 1 Esdras in that it is an apocalypse. The introduction and conclusion show evidence of being the work of Christian editors, while the core of the book is from a Jewish writer. Although it wrestles with the problem of how a just God can permit such an evil world (as do some of the wisdom books), its emphasis on revelations, angels, and the final judgment puts it in the category of the apocalyptic.

Tobit and Judith are contrasting stories that illustrate the variety of ways of relating to the world in post-Exilic times. Tobit is a man who is unusually sensitive to the hurts of his fellow

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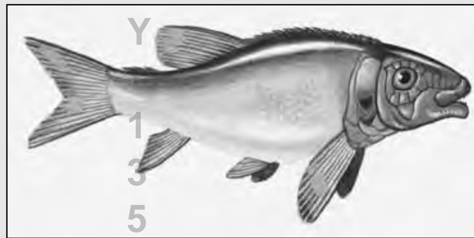
Jews. He even risks the wrath of the governing authorities because of his concern to see that the dead receive proper burial. After many reverses, including blindness, his faithful service to God is rewarded. Tobit's son, Tobias, carries out a mission for his father that secures the family's wealth, cures his father's blindness, and frees a beautiful woman from domination by a demon. The woman, Sarah, also becomes the wife of Tobias. The story of Judith, on the other hand, is not nearly so romantic. When her native city is surrounded by the Assyrian army, she follows God's guidance and uses her feminine wiles to cut off the head of the enemy general. The siege is lifted and the people are freed. Internal evidence within both books confirms that both Judith and Tobit are fictional characters.[5] The stories of these two characters have strong connections to the stories of Joseph, Daniel, and Esther. The question of how a faithful Jewish person should live in a complex world was still a difficult and important one.

The Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach are perhaps the most significant books in the Apocrypha. Had they come at an earlier time, they undoubtedly would have been included in the Hebrew canon. If handed portions from them to read, most modern Bible readers would likely assume they were biblical, perhaps from the book of Proverbs. The Wisdom of Solomon is from the Alexandrian Jewish community, probably from the first century B.C.E. It deals with the themes of the righteous and the wicked, immortality, the judgment of the wicked, and the importance of wisdom as the guide for life. In this book, wisdom takes on even more of the characteristics of a person than it does in earlier wisdom books. Chapters 10–12 illustrate how wisdom guided the great persons and events in Israel's history. The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, is the work of a Jewish schoolmaster who lived around 200 B.C.E. It sets out rules for getting along in this world.

### Tobias



The book of Tobit is found in the Apocrypha and tells the story of a Jewish family living in Assyria. Like Daniel and Esther, it is a story of faithful Jews in the Diaspora, which seems to assume the purpose of encouraging other Jews living in foreign settings. The story is told in the first-person voice of Tobit. He and his wife, Anna, live in Nineveh and their lives become difficult when Tobit becomes blind. The body of a murdered Jew had been discovered in the marketplace, and Tobit faithfully volunteers to bury him. Unclean from contact with a corpse, Tobit must sleep outdoors, where bird droppings fall into his eyes and destroy his eyesight.

Meanwhile, in another city, a young woman named Sarah is in a desperate situation because seven young men she had married had all died before her marriages to them were consummated. Like Tobit, Sarah prays for deliverance from her difficulties. God hears the prayers of both and sends the angel Raphael to help them.

Tobit sends his son, Tobias, on an errand to retrieve some money that he had left in trust in a distant city. Tobias undertakes this journey, with Raphael watching over him, and along the way he captures a large fish from the Tigris River. Raphael instructs him to keep some of the internal organs of the fish. While on the journey, Tobias also meets and marries Sarah. He then repels the demon who had killed Sarah's first seven husbands using the fish organs. Tobias eventually retrieves the money and returns home to his parents with Sarah, who is now his new wife. He again uses the fish organs, this time to heal his father's blindness. The angel Raphael is thus able to answer the prayers and solve the problems of two Jews in distant locations using the faithful action of young Tobias.

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Unlike the book of Proverbs, in which sayings are not grouped according to subject matter, Ecclesiasticus tends to group material in a topical arrangement.

Of the two historical works, 1 Maccabees is the more valuable as history. It begins with the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes (175 B.C.E.) and ends with the beginning of the reign of John Hyrcanus, the first Hasmonean ruler (135 B.C.E.). Its major concern is the Maccabean Revolt. 2 Maccabees is not an extension of 1 Maccabees, but an overlapping version of much of the same time period. In 2 Maccabees, a shorter time period is covered, and it is concerned primarily with the exploits of Judas Maccabeus. Its writer has a strong bias against the Hasmonean rulers.

1 Esdras is essentially a duplicate of the biblical books of 2 Chronicles 35:1–36:23, all of Ezra, and the part of Nehemiah that tells of Ezra reading the Torah out loud in Jerusalem (7:38–8:12). The only original part of the books is a delightful story of three guards in the palace of the Persian king who compete for a prize by giving answers to the question, "What one thing is strongest?" (1 Esd. 3:5). One argues for wine; the second for the king himself; and the third, who is identified as Zerubbabel, wins the argument and the prize by praising women and truth. As his reward, he is allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple (1 Esd. 4:61–63).

The earliest books in the Apocrypha come from the late third century B.C.E., while the latest are dated as late as the first century B.C.E. They came from a time when many changes were taking place in the Near East and did their part to encourage the faithful during unsettled days.

## The Pseudepigrapha

***Pseudepigrapha*** literally means "writings with false superscriptions." This is an informal collection of literature works, many of which have certain characteristics in common: (1) they "are often attributed to ideal figures in Israel's past"; (2) the writers claim to be the bearer of God's message; (3) they usually use Old Testament ideas and narratives as a starting point; and (4) they usually are dated in the period 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. The number of known pseudepigraphical writings is now in the hundreds.[6] These texts have typically been preserved and transmitted by Christian communities. Some of them likely have Jewish origins, but these are very difficult to ascertain.

None of the writings classified as pseudepigraphical is found in either of the major canons of Scripture. This does not mean that they are of no value. As evidence of the regard in which some were held, the New Testament book of Jude quotes the Assumption of Moses (Jude 8) and Enoch (Jude 13–14). Another pseudepigraphical work, The Psalms of Solomon, was included in one of the most important collections of biblical manuscripts.[7] Some of the other prominently mentioned writings are The Letter of Aristeas, The Book of Jubilees, The Martyrdom of Isaiah, 4 Maccabees, the Sybylline Oracles, the book of Enoch, 4 Ezra, The Apocalypse of Baruch, The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, The Life of Adam and Eve, and the Damascus Document. The major value of the Pseudepigrapha is that it shows the many currents of thought that were present at the end of the Old Testament era.

## The Dead Sea Scrolls

In 1947, a young goat herder's curiosity led to one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of all time. A Bedouin boy threw a rock into a hole in a cliff that overlooks the Dead Sea. When he heard the sound of something breaking, he climbed up the cliff to investigate. Inside the caves were clay jars filled with manuscripts.

Most of these manuscripts eventually would fall into the hands of biblical scholars, who recognized their great value. This led to an investigation of a number of other caves in the area and the excavation of a nearby ruin. The result of these investigations was the finding of a large

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number of manuscripts and manuscript fragments from almost every Old Testament book, as well as manuscripts of numerous religious writings. The latter finds furnished a wealth of new information about the Dead Sea Sect itself, a Jewish group that existed in the early part of the Christian era and about whom little was known previously. Qumran, the settlement where many think the scrolls were produced, was located on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. It existed from Maccabean times off and on until the Roman conquest of Palestine around 70 C.E.

The most famous biblical manuscript found at Qumran is commonly known as the *Great Isaiah Scroll*. It is at least 1000 years older than any previously known manuscript of Isaiah, yet its discovery led to no radical changes in the translations of the book of Isaiah. Of the nonbiblical manuscripts, the best known is The Manual of Discipline, a rulebook for the conduct of the members of the sect; The Thanksgiving Scroll, which contains songs similar to those in the book of Psalms; and The War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness, a book describing a great battle to take place between the community members (the Sons of Light) and the Kittim or Romans (the Sons of Darkness). The latter work illustrates the apocalyptic nature of the community. Another major manuscript, the Temple Scroll, was published for the first time in 1978.[8]

The Dead Sea Scrolls and the people who produced them are just another illustration of the diverse character of Judaism as this period comes to a close.

## JUDAISM'S ORAL TRADITION

The final body of literature we must mention is the growing oral tradition developed by the rabbinic interpreters of the Hebrew Scriptures. The aim of the great rabbis was to translate the principles in the Torah and the Prophets into rules for everyday living. Because of this felt need, a pair (*zugoth*) of outstanding rabbis, one representing the more orthodox or conservative viewpoint and one a more progressive approach, interpreted the Scriptures for the people of their day. As mentioned previously, they believed that this oral tradition extended all the way back to Moses, who, according to their view, received both an oral and a written Torah.

The time of the great rabbis began around 200 B.C.E. and would continue until 500 C.E. There were two types of oral literature: (1) *halakah,* or rules for living based on the interpretation of the legal portions of the Old Testament, and (2) *haggadah,* a more sermonic and illustrative kind of material that consisted of such things as fanciful expansions of the narrative parts of the Old Testament. It was designed to encourage the ordinary Jew to be diligent in observing *halakah.* By the end of the second century C.E., this material would be collected and organized into six divisions by the great rabbi Judah ha-Nasi. This was called **Mishnah**. Following this, a commentary on the Mishnah was developed that would be known as the *Gemara.* The Mishnah and the Gemara then joined to form the **Talmud**. There eventually were two Talmuds—a Palestinian and a Babylonian Talmud. One truly amazing thing about this was that each generation of rabbis memorized the interpretations of the previous generations, added their own interpretations, and passed them on to the succeeding generation. Nothing was preserved in writing until the fifth century C.E.! But these developments were only beginnings as the Old Testament story closes.

## A CLOSING STATEMENT

This version of the Old Testament story comes to an end. Perhaps it has opened a few eyes to the treasures of the Old Testament. If so, the telling has been worth it. It may even inspire some to look again at the story and to try to make it theirs so that they can experience the thrill of walking

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in the steps of its characters; experiencing their joys, sorrows, and frustrations; tasting their foods; and savoring some of the smells of that world. If so, that is even better. But this version closes with the hope that even those who may never look at it again will in some way be a bit richer than before because they came this way to listen to the story.

## Key Terms

Apocrypha, *356*
Diaspora, *353*
Essenes, *355*
Hasidim, *355*
Mishnah, *359*
Qumran, *355*
Pseudepigrapha, *358*
Samaritans, *354*
Samaritan Pentateuch, *355*
Sect, *355*
Talmud, *359*

## Study Questions

1. How were religious and political power merged in Israel in the second century B.C.E.?
2. Why were laypersons increasingly influential in religious matters in post-Exilic Jewish communities?
3. How were the Samaritans related to Judaism?
4. What were the distinct beliefs of the Pharisees?
5. Why is the Dead Sea Scrolls set identified as an apocalyptic group?
6. What does the increasing understanding of sectarian movements indicate about Judaism at the turn of the eras?
7. Why is it not completely accurate to speak of the Apocrypha as extrabiblical literature?
8. Briefly state the nature of the following books of the Apocrypha: (a) 1 Esdras; (b) 2 Esdras; (c) Tobit; (d) The Wisdom of Solomon; (e) Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach; (f) Maccabees.
9. Why does the Protestant Old Testament not include the books of the Apocrypha?
10. What illustrates the importance of the pseudepigraphical literature for Judaism and Christianity?
11. What do the Dead Sea Scrolls contribute to our knowledge of the Bible and first-century B.C.E. Judaism?
12. How did the Talmuds develop?
13. Define the terms *Diaspora, zugoth, Hasidim, Halakah, Haggadah, Mishna, Gemara, Talmud.*

## Endnotes

1. See the discussion of the various psalm fragments found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, especially the psalm scroll found in Cave 11, and what they reveal about the continuing development of the book of Psalms in William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 100–102.
2. R. J. Coggins, *Samaritans and Jews,* rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), is a good up-to-date discussion of the Samaritans and their relationship to the Jews. The Samaritan temple was destroyed circa 128 B.C.E.
3. See the careful description of the "Essene Hypothesis" and its strengths and weaknesses in Michael Wise et al., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 13–35.
4. See the discussion of these texts in George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah: A Historical and Literary Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 17–40.
5. Carey A. Moore, "The Case of the Pious Killer," *BR,* VI, 1 (February 1990), 26–36, discusses the reasons why Judith was not in the canon of the Old Testament.
6. James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha,* vols. 1 and 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983, 1985).
7. The Sinaiticus manuscripts.
8. Jacob Milgrom, "The Temple Scroll," *BA,* 41, 3 (1978), 105–120.

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