

## **Bible intro: Writings handout**

“The Writings” (in Hebrew, *Ketuvim*) is the term used to describe all the Old Testament books that don’t fit easily into other categories (like “Torah,” “Historical Books,” or “Prophets”). There is some ambiguity about how to categorize some of the books, but these are the ones Jewish scholars generally put into that category.

### **Psalms**

The Book of Psalms has a very special place in the Old Testament, and it is in a class by itself. Known as the “hymn book” of Israel, it contains material primarily intended to be used as part of worship. The date of the book as presently constituted is thought to be no later than the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, but many of the individual Psalms are much older than that. Some are ascribed to King David, but many are ascribed to others, or have no ascription at all. There are many different kinds of poetry present in the book, but what’s most important to know is that Psalms is one of the best reflections of the religious spirit of the Old Testament. The book has become a primary influence in shaping and forming our own Christian faith and worship.

### **Wisdom Literature**

“Wisdom” was a philosophy that flourished in the ancient Near East for centuries. It was particularly significant in Israel after the exile (fifth and fourth centuries BC). There are three major examples of “wisdom literature” in our Bible, and portions of some other books reflect this approach as well. The general idea is the importance of “common sense” in following God. The goal of the religious person is to seek “wisdom,” and in finding wisdom, one finds God.

### **Proverbs**

This book is a compendium of moral and religious instruction, mostly in the form of “proverbs” or wise sayings. The sayings are attributed to Solomon, no doubt because of his reputation for wisdom; but scholars believe that the book in its present form comes from the post-exilic period (though likely incorporating much older material).

### **Ecclesiastes**

This book contains the reflections of an unnamed philosopher known only as “The Preacher.” It can appear rather cynical, with a theme something like “We can’t ever understand what God does, so we must just accept it.” A deeper reading helps us to see that it is really about understanding that the world, with all its vicissitudes, is ultimately in God’s hand, and God can be trusted.

### **Job**

The theme here is in some ways similar to that of Ecclesiastes, but with a very different kind of approach—that of a story. Job is a good and righteous man who is suddenly afflicted with great tragedy. His friends try to explain his misfortune, to little avail. But the final answer is that God has his own reasons for allowing these things to happen, and Job has no right (and no ability) to understand God’s purposes or reasons; he must simply accept what comes from

God's hand. The book is the Bible's most extensive (though not only) answer to "why bad things happen to good people."

## Poetry

### The Song of Solomon

Also known as "Song of Songs," this book is really a lengthy love poem. There seems to be almost a complete lack of any religious theme. At least three approaches have been made to this book by Christians: (1) Some see it as an allegory which says, in effect, that God's love is as passionate and powerful as the love between husband and wife; (2) Some see it as an affirmation of the goodness of sexuality in God's creation; (3) Some see it through the lens of "wisdom literature" and suggest that its purpose is to show how the normal human relationship between husband and wife is, like every other aspect of life, the arena in which we live out God's purpose for us.

### Lamentations

Sometimes classed with the prophets because of its association with Jeremiah, Lamentations is really a series of poems "lamenting" the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. It is unlikely that the book was written by Jeremiah; though it is sometimes referred to as "The Lamentations of Jeremiah" and it appears right after Jeremiah in our Bible, the original Hebrew title does not contain any reference to Jeremiah and does not appear next to Jeremiah in order. One theory is that it was written for use in liturgical commemorations of the destruction of the Temple.

## Other writings

### Ruth

One might think of Ruth as a sort of novella, set in the period of the judges, but written in the Persian period (ca. 4<sup>th</sup> century BC). It is the story of Ruth, a woman of Moab who, when her Israelite husband died, remained the loyal companion of her mother-in-law Naomi. Her words to Naomi are often quoted: "Entreat me not to leave you. . . . Where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God." The story is used elsewhere in Scripture to make the point that God's love encompasses all peoples, not just the Israelites. Ruth the Moabitess became the ancestor of King David and of Jesus Christ, so she is a Gentile who plays a key role in the salvation of Israel and the Gentiles.

### Esther

One of the oddest books in the Old Testament in that it never even mentions God or any discernible religious theme, Esther was possibly written during the Greek period though it is set in the time of the Persians. Esther was a Jewish woman who was married to the Persian King Ahasuerus. When some in the kingdom conspire to mistreat the Jews, Esther intervenes and saves them. It provides the background for the Jewish festival of Purim.

### Ezra and Nehemiah

We mentioned these two books when discussed the history of Israel, but they aren't really "historical books." In the Hebrew Bible, they were a single book; apparently, they were first separated by Christians, and some later Jewish scholars began to separate them as well. Their

theme is the reconstruction of Jewish religious and civil life after the return to Palestine from Babylon. Nehemiah was the governor of Israel, and Ezra was the religious leader.

### **1-2 Chronicles**

The books of Chronicles cover much of the same stories of Israel's history as do 1-2 Kings, but with important supplementary material and a much more obviously theological intent. Written after the return from exile, the Chronicler is attempting to re-tell the history of Israel in light of what had happened. Some have described it as a kind of *midrash*, or commentary and interpretation, of the history provided in 1-2 Kings, using both 1-2 Kings (which are older books) and other material about Israel's history that has been lost to us. There seems to be a literary connection between Chronicles and Ezra/Nehemiah; possibly the Chronicler had a hand in shaping the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

### **Daniel**

Daniel is considered by the Jews as among the writings, but we discussed this book when we talked about the Prophets—another example of how different traditions and different scholars have different ideas about how to classify some of the OT books.