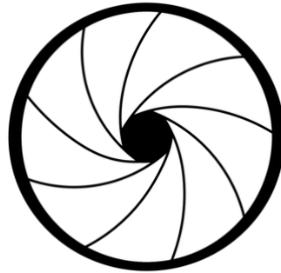


**Literature and Liturgy**  
*God's Truth in Performance*



by

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## Performance in the Ancient World

The literary contributions of the ancient Israelites are beyond compare. From Genesis to the Prophets, they give us a glimpse into the rich life of the Hebrews among the ANE.

The Writings (Heb. *Ketuvim*) give us a glimpse into the *response* of the people to the revelation of God. The Writings are inspired Scripture, but they are inspired in a very different way. While Torah gives us the basis of worship, and the Prophets show us the correction and revelation of God's word and will along the way, the Writings offer us insight into the *how* of their worship. The faithful among the Israelites represented their faith, engage in communal creation and celebration of the revelation of YHWH.

1. *The Writings are not necessarily historical.* They may contain historical facts or allusions, but they are not written as histories.
2. *The creative expression runs the gambit of human experiences.* Reading some of the psalms, it becomes pretty clear that the authors are willing to

### Genre within the Writings

#### Poetry/Song

By far, the most common genre found in the Writings is poetry. While all Biblical Hebrew demonstrates some poetic features, the Writings emphasize poetic styles.

#### Psalms

A psalm (Heb. *mizmor*) is a song written specifically for praise, but the book itself is known in the Hebrew canon as “the book of praises” (Heb. *sefer tehillim*). They formed a vital component of the liturgical life of the Hebrews who worshiped YHWH, and as such, they were a unifying force in their society at large. Daniel Levitin described the function of music in the life of a community.

The songs, sung at the same time and place every year (in the case of seasonal or holiday songs), or at gatherings commemorating similar events (funerals, weddings, births) bind these events together in a common theme, in a common set of beliefs about the nature of life. The music acts as a powerful retrieval cue for these memories precisely because it is associated with these and only these times and places.<sup>1</sup>

While music has this cultural significance on its own, religious hymnody represents a society's “conversation with its god.”<sup>2</sup> The psalms provide snapshots of this conversation

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel J. Levitin, *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 2008), 191.

<sup>2</sup> John L. Foster, trans., *Hymns, Prayers, and Songs: An Anthology of Ancient Egyptian Lyric Poetry*, Susan Tower Hollis, trans. WAW 8 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995), 1–2.

throughout the history of the Hebrew culture. As a result, Psalms is the most substantial book in the entire Hebrew Scriptures. It spans 150 separate compositions from a number of periods of Israel's history.<sup>3</sup> The earliest psalm is probably the "Psalm of Moses" (Psalm 90, to be distinguished from the Song of Moses in Exodus 15). Among the latest psalms are those written in the exilic period, such as Psalm 137 which laments the fall of Jerusalem and the capture of the people. Most of the psalms have no explicit information about the date of their composition, so some such as Psalm 127 could speak to the reconstruction of the temple during the postexilic period.

"Unless the Lord builds the house,  
those who build it labor in vain.  
"Unless the Lord watches over the city,  
the watchman stays awake in vain."

*Egyptian Hymns.* There are psalms and hymns in virtually every ANE culture. Over the long course of Egyptian history, many hymns were sung for centuries. Some of the Egyptian hymns date from the Old Kingdom and were inscribed in the pyramids of rulers from the fifth and sixth dynasties.<sup>4</sup> They were already a thousand years old when David composed his first psalm.

O Nut, spread yourself out over your son, the Osiris king Pepi  
That you may conceal him from Seth.  
Protect him, O Nut, he who comes to you;  
May you conceal your son, who comes to you indeed,  
May you protect this Great One.<sup>5</sup>

*Sumerian Temple Hymns and Songs.* The Sumerian culture, which preceded the Babylonians and the Assyrians, had a rich musical tradition. Not only are a number of hymns known to us, but we even know the author of them. Enheduanna was the daughter of the Sumerian king Sargon of Agade and the high priestess of the cult of Inanna. We have forty-two hymns written by Enheduanna. Here, for example, is a passage from her "Hymn to Kesh Temple of Ninhursag."

Your divine patron is the Sovereign before whom all keep Silent;  
She is the all-powerful Mother of the Heavens.  
When Ninhursag speaks, the heavens shake.  
When she opens her mouth, thunder roars.  
Ninhursag has built a shining temple at Kesh.

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<sup>3</sup> The number of psalms varies in the textual traditions. At one point, what we call Psalms 9 and 10 were combined in some manuscripts, and in others, an additional psalm appears.

<sup>4</sup> Foster, *Hymns, Prayers, and Songs*, 2–3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 19. Pepi II was a sixth dynasty king who reigned either 2284–2247 BCE or 2216–2184 BCE.

Enlil's sister, Aruru, mounts her ziggurat throne.<sup>6</sup>

The language of this hymn sounds a lot more like Job than Psalms. See, for example, Job 26:1–14 where Job declares the glory of his God in response to his supposed friend Bildad. The similarity should not go unnoticed. As will be noted below, Job is something of a liturgical narrative, something like a religious pageant that plays out many of the questions of theodicy in dramatic and poetic fashion.

### **Wisdom Literature**

Wisdom literature is also quite common in ANE cultures. These texts are compilations of concise bits of practical direction, which is often situational. Proverbs is obviously wisdom literature. The book is a compilation of sayings that have a number of parallels in the ANE world. The Egyptians had a long tradition of wisdom literature collections. For example, the teaching of Ptah-Hotep feature a discourse from the teacher (literally “father”) to his student (literally “child”), a formula employed in Proverbs (cf. 1:8). There are a number of parallel turns of phrase, indicating that at the very least the idioms were in common usage for quite some time in the region.

Ecclesiastes offers a different kind of wisdom literature,

### **Liturgical Narrative (Plays)**

There are three books of liturgical narratives in the Writings. They are characterized by specific instructions which resemble stage prompts. The lengthiest is the Book of Job, a sprawling dialogue with a number of speaking parts. The characters of Job speak at length, offering differing interpretations of Job's misfortunes, and then the book crescendos with the voice of YHWH out of a whirlwind. The other two are Song of Songs and Esther. These are much shorter pieces, but they still feature lengthy dialogue reflective of different periods. The Song of Songs is clearly meant to be performed, and Esther has a long tradition of being read out as a dramatic reading. (These latter two works are discussed below under the heading of “The Five Scrolls,” the canonical portion which includes them.)

One of the more interesting aspects of Job is the “negative confession,” which Job employs whenever challenged by one of his friends. They assert a possible explanation for his misfortune, and Job replies that he has done nothing to warrant his pain. This method is present in “the Declarations of Innocence” which appear in the Pyramid Texts of the Egyptian Old Kingdom.

I have not lied to anyone.

I have not stolen from my neighbors.

I have not committed sacrilege.

I have not sought divine knowledge.

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<sup>6</sup> Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 4th ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 2016), 290. There was a robust tradition of female authors in ancient Mesopotamia. Consider Charles Halton, ed., *Women's Writing of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Anthology of the Earliest Female Authors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

I have done no harm.

I have not over worked my slaves.

My name has not been reported to the divine patron of slaves.

I have not blasphemed against any member of the divine assembly.<sup>7</sup>

### The Five Scrolls

Five of the books in the Writings have been matched to festivals in the Hebrew liturgical calendar. They are collectively known as the *hameš megillôt* (the five great scrolls). It does not appear that the texts were original composed to serve this purpose, but they were recognized as inspired of God and incorporated into synagogue worship during the postexilic period.

Festival	Scroll	
Passover	Song of Songs	The celebration of the Exodus from Egypt ( )
Shavuot (Weeks)	Ruth	Presentation of the First Fruits at the Temple
Ninth of Av	Lamentations	Remembering the Fall of Jerusalem To Babylon
Sukkot	Ecclesiastes	The end of the summer harvest season
Purim	Esther	Salvation of the Jews from Persian massacre

### Song of Songs: Passover

The Song of Songs (abbreviated as Cant, because its Latin name is “Canticles”) is often minimized in Christian usage because of its sensual nature. In Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, however, its language was glossed and mimicked quite often by the *payyetanim* or “synagogue poets.”<sup>8</sup>

In [a video](#) I shared several years ago, I argued that the we read the Song of Songs incorrectly. We treat it either as *erotic literature* or as an *allegory* for Christ and the Church. Perhaps even more damaging, we view the distant and out of view Solomon (“my beloved,” Heb. *dôdî*) as an analogy to Christ. My personal take is that it is the woman (“my love,” *r’yaîf*), who is the chief singer of the song anyway, is speaking from the perspective of YHWH. She longs for her wayward spouse to return to her, loves him despite the fact that he has abandoned her, and she rejoices when he returns.

It is a mistake to view this book as revolving around sex and sexuality. That is not to say that it does not include boldly erotic poetry, because it does. It is important to understand, however, that the ANE culture generally was much more open about sexuality than the modern world. The modern Christian view of this area is colored by medieval biases

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<sup>7</sup> Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 234.

<sup>8</sup> Laura S. Lieber, *A Vocabulary of Desire: The Song of Songs in the Early Synagogue*. Brill Reference Library of Judaism 40 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 3–4.

## Ruth: Shavuot

The Book of Ruth is a narrative, an uncommon gene for the Writings. It is essentially propaganda for the Davidic dynasty. Why is it grouped in the Writings? The short answer is that the text is clearly set during the barley harvest, which is a celebration of the barley harvest. It was only reasonable to include it with the other vestal texts. This is not the only place it has been placed in the canon. Since the book opens with a declaration that the events occurred “in the days when the judges ruled the land”<sup>9</sup> (Ruth 1:1) and closes with a genealogical connection to David (Ruth 4:17), the editors of LXX placed Ruth between Judges and 1 Samuel in their Greek translation. This is where the book is placed in Christian canons, but Josephus may have combined Ruth with Judges in his accounting of the tripartite canon.<sup>10</sup> This could be because Josephus was using LXX or a proto-LXX Hebrew text in his ordering. In rabbinical canons, Ruth is generally placed first in the *Ketuvim*, before Psalms (*Baba Bathra* 14b).<sup>11</sup>

## Lamentations: Ninth of Av

According to the Talmud, the city of Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians on 9 Av, in the year 3175 (11 July 586 BCE). 2 Kings reports the date as 7 Av and Jeremiah as 10 Av (2 Kgs 25:8; Jer 52:12). As calamities compounded on and around this date through their history, the Jewish rabbis declared this date as a general lament.

There are not many laments over the destruction of a city in the ANE literary record, but there are some. The reason for the scarcity is simple. They are written by the losing side of a conflict, and unless that society experiences some kind of revival, the odds of their literature being preserved is minimal. The Sumerians had a tradition of lament, but while this tradition did include “City Laments,” one of which will be discussed below, these texts were probably not known at the time of Jerusalem’s fall. The Sumerian “Cultic Laments,” however, were copied well into the Hellenistic Period.<sup>12</sup>

The earliest City Lament is the Lament over Ur, which laments the the defeat of the last king of the Ur III Period, Ibbi-Sin (2004 BCE).<sup>13</sup>

On that day, I did not forsake my city,

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<sup>9</sup> All Scriptures quoted from *English Standard Version* (2017), unless otherwise noted.

<sup>10</sup> J. Andrew Dearman, “Putting Ruth in Her Place: Some Observations on Canonical Ordering and the History of the Book’s Interpretation.” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 27, no. 1 (2005): 63. Although he provides no canonical listing, Flavius Josephus placed the events of Ruth in the time of Eli, corresponding to the early section of 1 Samuel. Because he lists only twenty-two books, Dearman assumes Ruth is included with Judges and Lamentations with Jeremiah (*Antiquities*, 5.9.1-4).

<sup>11</sup> Dearman, “Putting Ruth in Her Place,” 62; Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, NAC 6 (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1999), 558. ProQuest Ebook.

<sup>12</sup> Nili Samet, *The Lament over the Destruction of Ur*. Mesopotamian Civilizations (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 2–3.

<sup>13</sup> Samet, *The Lament*, 5–6.

I did not neglect my land;  
 I shed my tears before An,  
 I myself made supplication before Enlil.  
 “Let not my city be destroyed!” I said to them.  
 “Let not its people perish!” I said to them.  
 But An would not change that word,  
 Enlil would not soothe my heart with that, “It is good; so be it.”<sup>14</sup>

The Hebrew Lamentation takes up the same kind of language, but there are two important distinctions. First, the Hebrew text employs a style of poetry that works extremely well in written Hebrew but would not be immediately apparent in spoken language. The text is in alphabet acrostics. Chapters 1-2 and 4 are twenty-two lines long, with each line beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3 then expands the idea, with three-line strophes beginning with the same letter. Here is the opening strophe of chapter 3:

*’anî hagaber ra’ah. ’anî bəšebet ’ebəratow*  
 I am the man having seen affliction under the rod of his wrath

*’owtî nahag wayola-ek ḥoše-ek wəlo’-’ôw*  
 [DO]me he has driven brought into darkness without light

*’a-ek bî yašūb yahafo-ek yadô. kal-hayôm*  
 Only against me, he has turned his hand all the day.

You can readily observe that the strophe uses a parallel structure. The three statements present the same basic sentiment. The author feels under judgment. The accumulative effect is to emphasize the sense of abandonment and desolation. While the acrostic pattern and parallel structure are sometimes used elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, this work takes it to the extreme.

Second, the Hebrew text reflects a clear expectation that YHWH will restore the city out of his love for the people. While the destruction is lamented, there is a trust in YHWH’s intent to chasten his people and then renew his covenant (Lam 3:22–33). This kind of hope is absent from the Sumerian laments. Instead, the inhabitants are to resolve to rebuild the city *in the hope* that the patron goddess Nanna will return and restore his presence.

O Nanna, the humble men who laid hold of your feet,  
 Have brought to you their lamentations over the silenced house,  
 their chanting before you.  
 May the black-headed people [Sumerians] who have been cast away from you  
 pay homage to you.  
 In your city that has been made into ruins, may a wailing be set up to you,

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<sup>14</sup> Lines 143–151. Samet, *The Lament*, 63.

O Nanna, may your restored city be resplendent before you.<sup>15</sup>

#### Ecclesiastes: Sukkot

The Book of Ecclesiastes is difficult to quantify. It is a cynical discourse, often including statements that do not make a whole lot of sense. The particular focus of the book is the idea of hopelessness or “vanity” in all human pursuits. The entire book is a contradiction,

### **Can We Develop Doctrine from the Writings?**

Probably more heresy has come from misinterpreting books in the Writings than any other section of Scripture. So much of the language is figurative and idiomatic, which can easily be misinterpreted.

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<sup>15</sup> Lines 419-423. Samet, *The Lament*, 77.



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