

Why the Bible Began 8

Why the Bible Began 8--Proverbs

- “...Instead of focusing on elites, the book [of Proverbs] democratizes wisdom, making it available to all who wish to be wise. Its publication grows out of the insight that a people can be resilient and flourish only when all its members behave wisely, act nobly, and treat each other with honor and deference. **By identifying its author as King Solomon, the book’s superscript (1:1) makes these proverbs the secret to this ruler’s success,** especially now that the power and prosperity of his legendary reign were unattainable... **Proverbs...brings teaching/torah to home and hearth, with the mother as a primary source. The emphasis on the home is woven into Proverbs’ persistent claim that choosing the right wife is crucial to a man’s success...**This work...assigns women a leading role in the acquisition of wisdom.

Having begun with a young man’s relation to his parental home, **the book ends with an encomium to a strong woman [‘A Woman of Valor,’ in Hebrew ‘Ayshet Chiel’]...It measures her worth not by her procreative and maternal abilities, but by her business savvy and administrative skill...**The poem begins: ‘Who shall find a “Woman of Might/Valor? She is far more precious than jewels...” (Proverbs 31:10), an adaptation of “Man of Might/ Valor,” a traditional title of distinction for warriors and noblemen [remember Boaz’ honorific on marrying Ruth]. It continues, ‘...She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching/torah of generosity (chesed) is on her tongue.’ (Proverbs 31:26)...By using such language, and by bringing her priceless life into the limelight, **this culmination to the book honors her contributions next to that of both warriors and scholars, and thereby participates in the creation of the new post-defeat culture...** [423-425]

Ecclesiastes

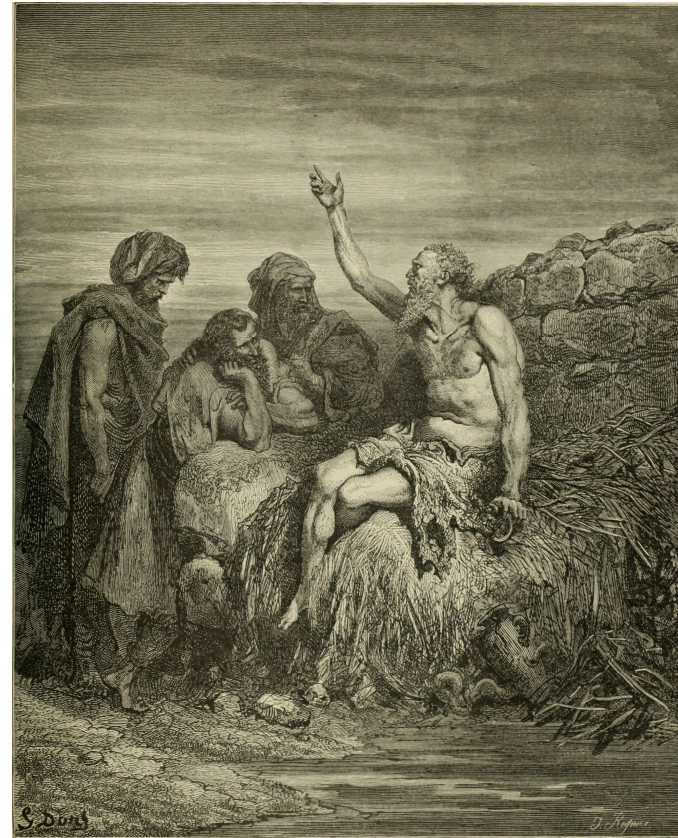
- “Ecclesiastes is a strange biblical book. The first line ascribes its contents to a ‘son of David, king in Jerusalem,’ and perhaps we are to identify him as the wise and wealthy Solomon. ***Its Hebrew name, Kohelet, resembles the Hebrew word for ‘congregation’ (kahal), similarly the title Ecclesiastes derives from the Greek word for ‘assembly’ (ecclesia). While both suggest a sage who teaches an assembly or preaches to a congregation, his message undermines the Bible’s mainstream teachings with its unrelenting skepticism.***” [426-427]. [The identified author is] a skeptic sage [who cannot affirm what others teach, namely that doing good and being wise paves a path to success and security. None of Kohelet’s core claims echo the exhortations of Moses or the admonitions of the prophets; in fact, Israel is never mentioned, nor is Yhwh’s name. Instead, ***this book celebrates a freethinker who ventures beyond established boundaries. Its hero is one who ponders existence with brutal honesty, questions conventional wisdom, and persists in a search for meaning.***

[A characteristic remark of Kohelet is, ***‘So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me. All is a vapor and a chasing after wind.’*** (Ecclesiastes 2:15-17). A concluding remark praises his achievement, his commitment to truth, and his contributions as a teacher of ‘the people.’”

- “[There is a note] that someone added to the end of the book [in a successful attempt, one must assume, to make its skepticism acceptable in the biblical corpus]: ‘When all is said and done, the end of the matter is this: fear God and keep his commandments. This is all there is for humans. God will bring every act to judgment, everything that is hidden, whether it is good or evil.’ (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). ***This final summation seeks to subvert Kohelet’s entire disquisition, affirming a system of divine justice that the sage had valiantly called into question. But the editor’s effort was hardly successful. Kohelet’s doubts still loom large, and readers through the ages have rightly taken them seriously.*** Moreover, this work stands next to others in a [third] section of the canon (the Writings), that challenges the system.” [428-430]

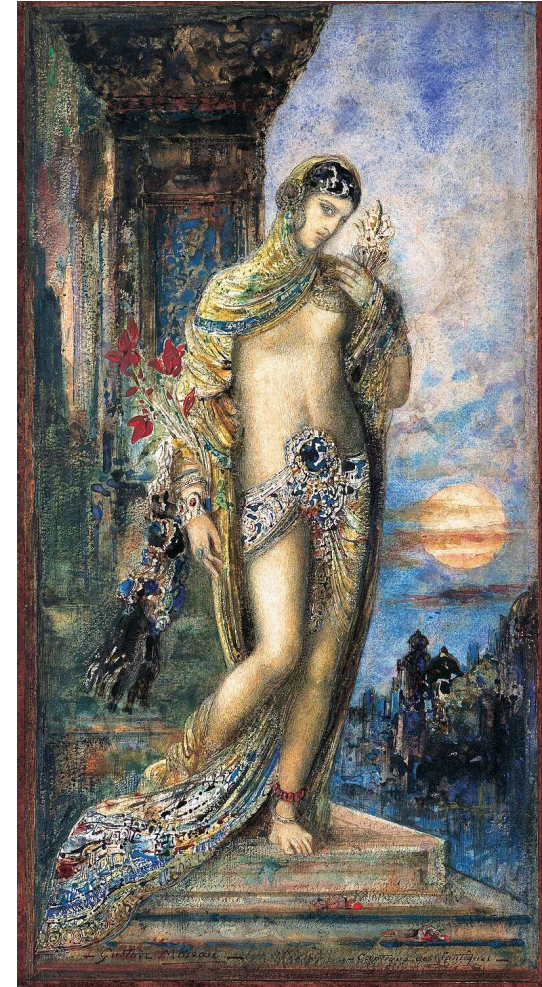
Job

- [In contrast to Kohelet, a rich, old man who wonders whether there is any deeper meaning to life's pleasures and wonders] "Job...is one who loses it all at his prime and is left to lie on an ash heap, scraping his rotting skin with potsherds...**Doubt descends to unprecedented depths in this lengthy work.** Its forty-two chapters interrogate divine justice...[In the end the deity's words] are...unexpected. Far from objecting to Job's impudence, he chastises the three others [his 'friends'] for spouting off conventional tropes from biblical theology: '...For you have not spoken to me what is right, as my servant Job has.' (Job 42: 7-8)...**While Job's friends are said to have spoken folly, Job's discourses are commended—even though they indict the deity and repeatedly deny some of the Bible's most foundational teachings.** The conclusion leaves the audience uncertain as to [the] outcome of this face-off between Yhwh and Job, yet **one thing is clear: Job's courage to challenge divine justice with both rage and defiance, meets with divine approval.** His searing protests, which span most of this lengthy book, are more acceptable to the deity than the praise of divine justice that the friends piously rehearse." [430, 432-433]
- A strong current of skepticism and protest courses through the Bible, and it appears especially in the Writings...As some of the latest books in the canon, they force their readers into a challenging dialogue with earlier works. **They defend the reader's right to argue—with the text, with the tradition, and even with the deity.** In so doing, they validate, and give voice to, those who struggle with the perennial problem of theodicy that arose from the new covenantal order...Through both dialogues and disputation, and in protest as much as in assent, **the Bible embodies a model of cohesion that does NOT depend on uniformity...The new national identity that emerged in the post-defeat period was a volitional voluntarist one...it was inspired by questions and fostered through conversations. The biblical scribes built questioning into the system.** [433-434]
- Picture source: Wikipedia. Gustave Dore, "Job and His Friends", [Bildad, Eliphaz, Zophar]; an illustration for La Grande Bible de Tours, a French 1843 translation of the Latin Vulgate.



The Song of Songs

- “Rabbi Akiva [in the second century CE] not only defended [the inclusion of this book in the canon] but attributed to it a non plus ultra status: **‘All scripture is holy, but Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.’** [Mishnah Yadayim 3:5]...Yet whereas *the Jewish sage saw it as an allegory for the love between Israel and her God, what makes the Song perhaps the holiest of all books is its spirited salute to hallowed human love. The Song imagines a world in which the beloved’s body is sacred*, and the space of physical intimacy sacrosanct...Without partnerships between two, it is not realistic to expect a community of thousands to survive let alone thrive...**when couples come together as a collective people, something monumental emerges**...The Song of Songs...**shows, not tells, how people prosper in mutuality**. Time has also revealed its revolutionary ‘truth,’ with **its images of two equal partners rankling generations of patriarchal readers**...In their ability to claim and nurture each other, **the lovers model an I-Thou encounter that is foundational for a thriving community**...The Song rhapsodizes about a love that is not procreational...**The Song responds to loss and pain with a love defies death itself** [‘For love is as fierce as death’, Song of Songs 8:6].” [438-440]
- *Picture Source: Wikipedia. Song of Songs (Cantique des Cantiques) by Gustave Moreau, 1893*



Psalms

- “The Psalter [consisting of 150 Psalms]...is divided into five books, and this arrangement conveys a great deal. ***Just as Moses gave the nation the books of the Torah, so David gave the nation the five books of the Psalms. While the Torah is revealed to the nation, the Psalms may be understood as the voices of the nation responding to this revelation, responses that include not only praise but also petition and protest...***The Psalter not only grew as new psalms were added to it, but the individual psalms also evolved over time...***Scribes...nationalized the work by adding the name Israel throughout...They also arranged the chapters to juxtapose the individual’s plight with the collective experience of their people...However, they careful not to homogenize the contents and collapse the differences of the individual units.*** Mirroring a model of communal diversity, each psalm has a distinct voice while simultaneously being in dialogue with those that surround it...”[447]
- “We saw how the five poems from Lamentations provided the defeated community of Judah with a set of scripts for both grieving and grievances, and how the performance of these scripts cultivates a people of protest. Adding its own scripts to this repertoire of remonstrance, ***the five books of Psalms champion the cause of those who challenge the deity...***According to [the] Bible’s covenantal theology, collective suffering is the result of the nation’s sin....But ***[in Psalm 44:17-18, 22-24] the nation insists it has done nothing of merit this punishment. It is rather Yhwh who has failed to keep up his end of the agreement: ‘All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you, or been false to your covenant...Because of you we are being killed all day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Yhwh? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression.’ ...the legacy of the Psalms is as consequential for its cries of protests as for its more familiar words of comfort and praise.***” [449-450]

Esther

- “...*The book of Esther has a fairytale quality*, similar to that of ‘One Thousand and One Nights.’ *But* for all its lightness and many farcical features...*it depicts a twisted world, one in which an imperial power abuses women and its subjects for its own pleasure.* Its protagonist [Esther] cleverly orchestrates a dramatic reversal of misfortune, and in doing so, *she models survival strategies for the book’s readers. Surprisingly, these strategies have nothing to do with the deity, the covenant, the land, the temple, the confession of sin, and so on...Purim and the story of Esther both honor the freedom to be different and recognize the antipathy that this difference often elicits...*In this new imperial context [of Persia], Jewish otherness is perilous. This is a world in which the king on the throne is not one of their own and is easily susceptible to nefarious influence. *Diaspora without diplomacy is dangerous. For every Mordecai [who refuses to bow down to Haman, the Prime Minister], one needs an Esther—leaders who infiltrate the inner recesses of power and, with cool-headed efficiency, repair damage done by male egos...Like other biblical books, Esther affirms the primacy of peoplehood, but in contrast to others, it reduces peoplehood to the essentials.* By jettisoning theology, religious observance, life in the homeland, and many other principles that other biblical writings promote [*while illustrating other biblical principles, including fasting and feasting, shared laws, public reading of texts, women in leadership, repudiation of machismo, joining forces across borders, gift-giving, and feeding the poor*], its authors made room for a broader community,...even when not accompanied by a concomitant attachment to God, land and covenant...*Esther urges its readers to come to terms with the world as it is.*” [452, 458-459, 461-462]
- Painting Source: “The Arts: **Arthur Szyk [1894-1951] and his Book of Esther.**” www.hadassahmagazine.org.



Conclusions: Nations, Nationalities and New Bibles 1

- “...According to [“The Development of the Jewish Bible,” by Bernard Levinson, in “What is Bible?”, eds. Karin Funsterbusch and Armin Lange, 2012] **a crucial difference exists between biblical and cuneiform literature [from ancient West Asia]: ‘In the ancient Near East, none of this material ever came together to form anything like a scripture**, either with its distinctive textual features, like the dense weave of inter-textual connections that hold the separate parts together, let alone with its distinctive ideological features, such as the truth claims it mounts, the extraordinary demands for adherence it requires from its audience to uphold the demands it seeks to place upon them, or the polemics it makes opposing competing ideologies.’ Levinson goes on to point out how **the Bible is unique in the ancient world for bringing together different and rival collections of law; integrating ritual, criminal, and civil matters; and embedding them in a larger narrative. The organization of the entire biblical corpus rejects not only historical verisimilitude but also generic consistency** (i.e., books are not grouped according to literary genre...[Levinson:] **‘The remarkable issue is not how the Bible developed but that it developed altogether.’**” [464-465]
- “The Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah...were **located not in the centers of ancient civilization (in Mesopotamia and Egypt), but on a land-bridge that connected these centers**. They and their neighbors in the region lived in the superpowers’ shadows, and **they were acutely aware of their precarious position in world affairs.**”[465]
- “What first ignited the biblical project was a vision that the populations of these two rival states could be one people. Working for the royal court in Jerusalem, **Judean scribes imagined a ‘United Monarchy’ that later split into two competing kingdoms. This was above all an affirmation of political unity.** Yet even if it was statist in agenda, this older work **inspired others—especially members of the recently conquered Northern kingdom—to think in terms of a nation that transcends the borders of its kingdoms. Diminishing the role of the throne, these circles composed counter-narratives, portraying a large family evolving into a diverse nation and existing for many generations before the establishment of the monarchy...**These scribes sought to **construct a robust and resilient national identity (‘peoplehood’) capable of withstanding military defeat and the encroachment of expansionist powers. Their effort is the earliest, and still one of the most breathtaking, of its kind, and throughout history, political communities have often imagined themselves as peoples and nations by looking to biblical Israel...**In the framework of an extensive prose narrative, **these ancient intellectuals [the scribes] sought to demonstrate how Israel became a people long before it established a kingdom. Although their narrative runs counter to what we know about Israel’s political evolution**, they wanted their audience to understand that—**via a national narrative and the laws embedded in it—a vanquished, exiled, and divided population can come together as a people** even when imperial domination prohibited political independence. [466-467]

Conclusions: Nations, Nationalities and New Bibles 2

- “...*These scribes asked themselves what it means to be a people.* Their responses to this foundational question—formulated in the widest array of genres: law, narrative, songs, laments, prophecies, wisdom, and love poetry—*charted important new territory in political philosophy...Generations of anonymous, counter-cultural thinkers pushed against the status quo and sought real, pragmatic truth that could sustain their communities in a world governed by foreign powers...*The scribes who contributed to this project were seeking to *fashion an unprecedented corporate identity capable of consolidating and mobilizing a subjugated, dispersed nation,* and the writings they produced have *inspired populations across the globe to form robust and resilient communities...*
 - [The author, Jacob L. Wright, speaking of himself, says] “as a Jew teaching in a Christian seminary [the Candler School of Theology at Emory University] I work with students in learning how to bring the Hebrew Bible to bear not only on their work in the parish but also on their engagement in the public sphere. *Many of our students are troubled by the growing scourge of Christian nationalism. ...To confront the challenge it poses, and to counter its simplistic use and cynical abuse of biblical texts,* we are committed to studying and communicating the
- Hebrew *Bible’s grand vision for a nation—one founded not on military might and ethnic purity, but on education and love of one’s neighbor.*” [467-468]
- “*Is the biblical model of peoplehood adaptable to the exigencies of modern secular democracies? Perhaps not.* But the task at hand is to *find new ways of bolstering a sense of kinship as the biblical authors did* in their time. Both then and now, *the most powerful means of creating community is to tell stories. At this moment of populist upheaval—fomented by cynical, corrupt leaders who deem themselves to be above the law—we need narrative that reflect the diversity of our communities, temper the hostility that often characterizes national discourses, and offer tangible reasons why we should cultivate affection for our laws.* As we create these narratives, *perhaps we still discover a unifying force* under whose aegis we will be able to face an otherwise frightening future...
 - New bibles...to be effective...must approximate the richness, complexity, and diversity of the Bible.. Above all, *these new bibles must stimulate reflection on what it means to be a people and inspire a sense of kinship, devotion to justice and love for neighbor.*[470-471]