

From Garden to Exile to Garden Again

An Old Testament Survey: A Literary Approach

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Introduction: The Garden

In the summer of 2005, many dreams came true for my wife Ming and me. We saw our household's influence in our neighborhood expand. After five years of living in our neighborhood, which is a lower-income, higher crime area, we saw God open up so many opportunities we couldn't even take them all. We helped a non-profit organization get a \$15,000 grant to get musical equipment and a brand new video projector to in the community center across the street. Ming, Leslie (our housemate), and Eric (a social worker at a community center across the street) got a \$20,000 grant to build a community garden in the vacant lot next door. We watched this vacant lot, which was full of weeds and trash that people just dumped there, turn into a beautiful garden. The grant money helped us pay young people in our neighborhood to work on the garden. As a result, we got closer to many people. People were interested, so we helped start a monthly neighborhood meeting, a monthly crime watch meeting, a weekly women's bible study, a weekly youth bible study, a weekly family games night, a weekly family movie night, a weekly African dance and drums class. But it was the garden next door that set the context for all of this beautiful relationship.

God is building a garden. Or, rather, I should say that He is rebuilding a garden. He is turning the vacant lot-like chaos of this world, which has been overlooked and abused by human beings, into the garden He originally intended. He has set forth Jesus of Nazareth as the one true human being, the Truly Human Being, who is human the way God fully intended humanity to be, as the gardener. He is the person Adam was meant to be. In the person of Jesus, God Himself is setting all things to rights, and reclaiming this world as His very own garden. And He is calling us all back from exile.

The Big Theme of Beginnings: In God's Garden, With God's Command

This is perhaps the largest, greatest theme in the Old Testament. God began the world in a garden. He commissioned human beings to be partners with Him to spread the garden over the whole world. Also, He gave us a command for us to reflect on, to internalize, and repeat to others. And now these themes are found at the start of each of the three sections of the Old Testament:

- The Teaching (or Torah)
- The Prophets (or Nevi'im)
- The Writings (or Ketuvim)

I believe it is important to follow the Jewish arrangement of the Old Testament books. The reason will be clear as you study the table, below:

Moses (Torah)	Prophets (Nevi'im)	Writings (Ketuvim)
Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)	Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Treisar (the Twelve Prophets)	Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Megillot (Ruth, Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther), Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles
<p>Beginning: Garden & Command</p> <p>‘The LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat, but from the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...’ (Gen.2:16 – 17)</p>	<p>Beginning: Garden & Command</p> <p>‘Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them... This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night...’ (Josh.1:8)</p>	<p>Beginning: Garden & Command</p> <p>‘But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither...’ (Ps.1:2 – 3)</p>

We can see a pattern here in the canonical shape of the Old Testament literature. In the beginning of the Torah, in the Garden of Eden, God gave a command for humanity to honor and remember. After Moses gives the Torah, or ‘the Teaching’¹, begins the Nevi'im, the Prophets. In the first book of the Nevi'im, Joshua, the character Joshua read the Torah and meditated on it constantly (Josh.1:8). As a result of this deep study of the Torah, Joshua is portrayed as the great wise man reflecting on the Torah. He reflects on what was given before. And Joshua begins the second section of the Old Testament called The Prophets, or the Nevi'im. Interestingly enough, at least in this ordering, when the third section of the Old Testament, the Ketuvim, starts, we find Psalm 1, which praises the person who meditates on God's Torah constantly. That person is wise. We always reflect on what was given before. John Sailhamer calls these ‘compositional seams’ linking and holding together books of the Bible.²

¹ Also unfortunately called ‘the Law’ through the Latin translation ‘lex,’ although this title tends to emphasize the ‘commands’ and not the narrative and poetic portions

² John Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Zondervan, 1995)

The Big Theme of Endings: Back to the Garden, Sin Cut Away, Hearts Changed

Furthermore, the endings of each major section of the Old Testament shows us the big theme of endings:

- The Torah (‘Moses’) begins with the garden land (Gen.1 – 2) and ends with the prediction of exile and the hope of restoration (Dt.27 – 33).
- The Nevi’im (‘the Prophets’) begins with the garden land in Joshua but ends with the reality of exile and the hope for restoration in Ezekiel.
- The Ketuvim (‘the Writings’) begins with a motif of the garden land (the ‘well watered tree’ of Psalm 1) but ends with the reality of exile and the hope for restoration at the end of Chronicles. This is one way the entire Old Testament arrangement demonstrates having been intentionally ordered.

Not only does the beginning of each of the three main sections begin with the garden land and wisdom reflecting on God’s word, but the ending points to a restoration of that ideal.

Moses (Torah)	Prophets (Nevi'im)	Writings (Ketuvim)
Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)	Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Treisar (the Twelve Prophets)	Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Megillot (Ruth, Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther), Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles
End: Back to the Garden, Sin Cut Away, Hearts Changed	End: Back to the Garden, Sin Cut Away, Hearts Changed	End: Back to the Garden, Sin Cut Away, Hearts Changed
God will restore Israel from exile (Dt.30 – 34)	God will restore Israel from exile (Isa.40 – 66; Jer.31 – 50, Ezk.34 – 40; Mic.7; Zech.9 – 14; Mal.4)	God is restoring Israel from exile (2 Chr.36)
God will change hearts (Dt.30:6)	God will give His Spirit to change hearts (Isa.59:21; Jer.31:31 – 34, Ezk.11:19; 36:26 – 37:14, Joel 2:28 – 29; Mic.7:19)	God will give His Spirit to change hearts (Ps.51:9 – 10; Prov.1:23; 2:10; 3:3; 6:21; 7:3)

This arrangement suggests why Jesus could so easily refer to ‘Moses, the Prophets, and the Writings’ (Lk.24:27, 44) as a story pointing beyond itself, crying out for resolution, a resolution

he accomplished. Jesus himself, in his humanity, stepped into the place of Israel, and cut sin away from his own humanity (Col.2:12; Rom.2:28 – 29) through his long and faithful obedience to the Father (Rom.8:3 – 4). He put to death that ‘old self’ of ours (Rom.6:6; 7:14 – 25), and raised up for us a new humanity, so he could share his Spirit with us (Rom.8:5 – 11).

In fact, these themes would appear even if we ordered the books of the Writings in other ways that other parts of the Jewish community did, so in any case, the ordering of each major section (Torah, Prophets, Writings) contains a theological message in itself. See Appendix A, below.

Thus, the final structure of the entire Old Testament gives the appearance of being intentionally ordered. It looks ahead to God’s restoration of humanity back to the garden. How? And with whose help? This gives rise to another major theme of the Old Testament, God’s personal action through the Messiah, the Heir of David. He is the one who will restore a humanity that has become corrupted and alienated from God back to God. He will solve the problem of human nature. And we will live in God’s garden once again!

Appendix A: Two Other Jewish Arrangements of the Old Testament Books

There is some variation in Jewish opinion on how to order the books of the Writings. The ordering I explore – and prefer – is the order found in most common printed versions of the Hebrew Bible today. Historically, this particular order of the books derives from manuscripts written by the Jews of Ashkenaz (medieval Germany). That order is: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the five Megillot scrolls (Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther), Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. I prefer this ordering because the pattern it reflects has a precedent in the Old Testament: Namely, after ‘the Teaching’ comes the ‘wise man’ who meditates on it.

In Tiberian Masoretic codices including the Aleppo Codex and the Leningrad Codex, and often in old Spanish manuscripts as well, the order of the Writings (Ketuvim) is as follows: Chronicles, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations of Jeremiah, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah. This means Chronicles is first among the Writings (Ketuvim), and Ezra-Nehemiah is last. Yet the pattern still holds and is rather striking.

- Chronicles begins with the name ‘Adam,’ certainly connoting the garden and probably ‘wisdom’ in the sense that he was the first recipient of God’s wise commands.
- Ezra-Nehemiah, which emphasizes the return of Israel to the land, while still enslaved to foreign powers, and crying out to God for deliverance, ‘Behold, we are slaves today, and as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, behold we are slaves in it; its abundant produce is for kings whom You have set over us because of our sins’ (Neh.9:36 – 37). But despite these cries, the Israelites continue to break the covenant laws, and not give God their whole hearts (Neh.13:23 – 31). This means that Israel is still failing and needs that ‘heart change’ (Dt.30:6; Jer.31:31 – 34; Ezk.26 – 36) even more.

The Babylonian Talmud (Bava Batra 14b – 15a), a commentary written by Jews in Babylon, arranges the Writings (Ketuvim) as follows: Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations of Jeremiah, Daniel, Esther, Ezra, Chronicles. With the exception of Job, that reflects the chronological order of when the books are believed to have been written, according to Jewish tradition.

- Ruth celebrates the marriage of Ruth and Boaz in the garden land, as Ruth is welcomed into the garden land. Their descendant will be King David (Ruth 4:16 – 22). Therefore, Ruth seems to serve as a reminder of Adam and Eve in the original garden, and introduces King David as related to the promised hero-king prophesied in Genesis 3:14 – 15 and 49:8 – 12.
- Chronicles ends with an invitation to the Jews in exile from King Cyrus of Persia to return to the garden land, and renew the worship of God at the Temple in Jerusalem.