

# The Bible Is Meditation Literature

The Bible is ancient Jewish literature that is artistically designed to interpret itself and encourages a lifetime of rereading and reflection.

The Bible is a collection of ancient Jewish literature, written and designed according to a unique set of literary conventions, often called poetics (from the Greek word *poiesis*, “work or style of craftsmanship”). The unique poetics of biblical literature were developed within ancient Israel’s unique history over the course of 1,500 years.

Psalm 1:1-3 (NASB95) A B A’ 1 How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in his law he meditates day and night. 3 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; and in whatever he does, he prospers.

Meditation literature is a style of literature that is intentionally dense and not simple to process or make sense of. It is designed to not be fully understood on the first reading, or even the 50th reading. Rather, it requires years of consistent rereading, so that the meaning of each part only makes sense in light of the whole.

- Because it was designed as a collection, each part was crafted with an eye toward what comes later, precisely to anticipate and foreshadow themes and ideas that will be taken up later in the story. Conversely, later stories are designed to imitate and recall themes and ideas from earlier. Every part of the collection assumes a thorough knowledge of all the other parts.
- Biblical literature, in all of its styles, has a poetic design. It uses narrative, symmetry, creative repetition, wordplay, metaphors, and symbols to communicate its message. Biblical literature employs an “economy of style” and “the art of reticence” (Robert Alter) that forces the reader to work for understanding.
- The collection was created by generations of scribes with a high degree of literary sophistication. Every little detail is packed with meaning and significance. It was designed to be slowly read and re-read over the course of a lifetime.

# The Bible Is Wisdom Literature

All of the diverse literary styles in the Bible reveal God’s wisdom and invite us into a journey of character transformation.

In the Hebrew Bible, wisdom literature describes how these texts are aimed at character formation, shaping a kind of human who sees the world a certain way and acts accordingly.

Wisdom is about know-how, a skill-based knowledge. And in its widest sense, it is about how to be human. Wisdom is practical know-how for craftsmanship.

<p>1 Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2 “See, I have called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. 3 I have filled him with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all kinds of craftsmanship, 4 to make artistic designs for work in gold, in silver, and in bronze, 5 and in the cutting of stones for settings, and in the carving of wood, that he may work in all kinds of craftsmanship.”</p> <p>Exodus 31:1-5 (NASB95)</p>	<p>13 Now King Solomon sent and brought Hiram from Tyre. 14 He was a widow’s son from the tribe of Naphtali, and his father was a man of Tyre, a worker in bronze; and he was filled with wisdom and understanding and knowledge for doing any work in bronze. So he came to King Solomon and performed all his work.</p> <p>1 Kings 7:13-14 (NASB95)</p>
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Wisdom is practical know-how and discernment for leadership and making right decisions.

*Now Joshua the son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him; and the sons of Israel listened to him and did as the LORD had commanded Moses.*

Deuteronomy 34:9 (NASB95)

Wisdom is practical know-how for making wise, right decisions that shape the life of a community.

5 See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. 6 So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. Deuteronomy 4:5-6 (NASB95)

7 "Now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, yet I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. 8 Your servant is in the midst of your people which you have chosen, a great people who are too many to be numbered or counted. 9 So give your servant an understanding heart to judge your people, to discern between good and bad. For who is able to judge this great people of yours?"

10 It was good in the eyes of the LORD that Solomon had asked this thing. 11 God said to him, "Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself long life, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself discernment to understand justice, 12 behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you."  
1 Kings 3:7-12 (NASB95)

The Adam and Eve story is all about who gets to define true wisdom about how to be human, and folly is defined as rejecting God's wisdom and defining what is good and bad by our own limited understanding.

The book of Proverbs takes up the Eden narrative and universalizes its implications. Every human is an Adam/Eve, facing their own moral decisions at their own trees of testing, and the question is about how to find eternal life and avoid the folly that leads to death.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.  
Proverbs 1:7 (NASB95)

7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil. 8 It will be healing to your body and refreshment to your bones.

Proverbs 3:7-8 (NASB95)

13 How blessed is the man who finds wisdom and the man who gains understanding.

14 For her profit is better than the profit of silver, and her gain better than fine gold.

15 She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire compares with her.

16 Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor.

17 Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace.

18 She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, and fortunate are all who hold her fast.

Proverbs 3:13-18 (NASB95)

Jesus and the apostles spoke of the Scriptures as literature that reveals God's wisdom to his people. In other words, it is literature that is meant to form our character and moral imagination by telling us a story about all reality.

In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

Matthew 7:12 (NASB95)

24 Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock.

26 Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.

Matthew 7:24-27 (NASB95)

### Paul: Wisdom that leads to rescue through trust in the Messiah Jesus

Now these things happened to them [the wilderness generation] as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages met together.

1 Corinthians 10:11 (NASB95)

For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Romans 15:4 (NASB95)

14 You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, 15 and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Messiah Jesus. 16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in what is right; 17 so that God's people may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:14-17 (NASB95)

Wisdom literature is a meta-category that encompasses the entire Bible. It's all about the human quest and need for wisdom, the ability to discern between what is good and bad.

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# The Bible Is Communal Literature

The Bible was designed to be read and studied within a community that is learning to live by its story. The first instances of the writing of the Bible in the Bible are communal settings.

## Deliverance from the Amalekites

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven." Exodus 17:14

- Israel has experienced the great salvation event (deliverance from Egypt through the waters and deliverance from Amalekites in the valley). They are liberated from slavery in Egypt, and then they are brought to Mount Sinai, where God appears in person to invite them into a covenant relationship (Exod. 19-24).
- This covenant relationship remakes their identity from slaves into priestly representatives among the nations—a "kingdom of priests" (Exod. 19:4-6).
- They hear God give Moses the terms of the covenant (the ten commandments) as they are assembled at the foot of the mountain, and they affirm their commitment (Exod. 20).
- Moses writes up all the terms of the covenant and reads them aloud ("the LORD's words and laws" Exod. 24:3-4) and the people respond: "Everything the LORD has said, we will do."

3 Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!" 4 Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel.

Exodus 24:3-4 (NASB95)

## Instructions for Communal Literature

10 Then Moses commanded them, saying, "At the end of every seven years, at the time of the year of remission of debts, at the Feast of Booths, 11 when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which he will choose, you shall read aloud this Torah in front of all Israel in their hearing. 12 Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the immigrant who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful

to observe all the words of this law. 13 Their children, who have not known, will hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.”

Deuteronomy 31:10-13

*“The main form of publication in the ancient world was oral presentation. This is Moses’ method as well [in Deuteronomy 31]. He stores the tablets of the Decalogue in the Ark (Exod. 25:16, 21- 22; Deut. 10:1-2) and reads the Book of the Covenant to the people (Exod. 24:7), but he makes no arrangements for people to study them or the records of Israelite victories (Exod. 17:14; Num. 21:14). Although he says that the Teaching be written on the doorposts of homes, on city gates, on stone pillars on Mount Ebal ... he does not have copies made on parchment or papyrus, a form convenient for study. The written copy made in chapter 31 is to be stored and taken out periodically and read to the people. All of this points to the fact that even in Deuteronomy, the dissemination of the Teaching remains primarily oral, with teachers either reciting it from memory or reading aloud from the written text (see also 4:9-10; 6:7, 20- 25; 11:19; 30:14; cf. 32:7) ... Doubtless, in the First Temple period, the written text of Scripture was used primarily for preservation, copying and verification, memorization, and for reading to others.”*

Jeffrey H. Tigay, The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy, p. 500

This practice of communal reading and hearing of Scripture is carried on throughout Israel’s history, though it is largely unmentioned in the Bible.

- It’s described in the time of Joshua (Josh. 8)
- It’s described in the time of King Josiah (2 Kgs. 22-23)
- It’s described in the time of Ezra-Nehemiah after the exile (Neh. 8)

*“The public reading of the Teaching is part of the ‘democratic’ character of biblical religion, which addresses its teachings and demands to all its adherents, with few distinctions between priests and laity, and calls for universal education of the citizenry in law and religion. The entire people, and not only a spiritual, intellectual, or clerical elite, are God’s children and consecrated to Him. Hence, biblical religion is for the people as a whole.”*

Jeffrey H. Tigay, The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy, p. 501

*This aspect of biblical religion was expressed artistically at Dura-Europos in Syria, as perceived by E. J. Bickermann: “The sacred books of all other religions ... were ritual texts*

*to be used or recited by priests. In the Mithra temple at Dura, it is a Magian in his sacred dress who keeps the sacred scroll closed in his hand. [But] in the synagogue of Dura a Jewish layman, without any official office, is represented reading the open scroll" (Mentioned by Tigay, Deuteronomy, p. 501).*

This practice was foundational for the early messianic Jewish communities, as seen in the following examples from the New Testament.

- Jesus in Luke 4
- Paul and Barnabas in Pisidian-Antioch in Acts 13
- Paul's church networks:
  - 1 Thessalonians 5:27: "I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters."
  - Colossians 4:16: "After this letter has been read to y'all, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that y'all in turn read the letter from Laodicea."
  - 1 Timothy 4:13-14: "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching."

So for modern readers, the question is: Why do we need to continue this practice when we all have our own Bibles that we're able to read whenever we want to?

- Because all of our understandings of reality are influenced by our life experience and social location(s), and our understanding of texts is a subjective enterprise.
- In order to gain a more full understanding of the Scriptures, we need to engage the worldwide and historical community of God's people.
- We are all coming to the Scriptures with our own questions, crises, and cultural contexts that cause us to notice, be alarmed and confused by, and favor different parts of the Bible.
- We truly need a community of learning for both understanding and self-critique in our journey of understanding the Scriptures.

- Start with my local church and also with people who come from different backgrounds and traditions.
- Start by building a Bible study library: dictionaries, atlases, study Bibles, and commentaries.
- Start by learning about Church history and reading biblical studies from different times and places.