

# Dictionary

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# OF THE Old Testament

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# Wisdom, Poetry & Writings

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# A

**ACCUSER.** See SATAN.

**ANTHROPOLOGY.** See WISDOM THEOLOGY.

## ACROSTIC

*Acrostic* is the term commonly applied to a composition in verse in which the initial letters of successive lines or stanzas are intentionally chosen either to outline a deliberate message (e.g., “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior” [*ichthys*, “fish”] in *Sib. Or.* 8:218-250) or to observe a traditional downward sequence of letters of the alphabet (e.g., from *’ālep* to *tāw* in Ps 145). *Acrostic* can also specify the design itself, an artistic technique employed by biblical writers in poems of various genres. As a technique, it demonstrates that biblical Hebrew poetry has its disciplines, accenting the perennial tension in religious expression between freedom and constraint; although \*parallelism may be biblical poetry’s chief characteristic, in poems that follow this design, acrostic is the chief constraint. Nevertheless, most will agree with Muilenburg (103): “What is notable about this ancient poetry is that such an artificial contrivance does not stand in the way of producing literature of a high order, in which the emotions find full expression and the language bodies forth the intensity and passion of the poet.”

Acrostic is both a creative technique of biblical Hebrew poetry and the broad label for a limited number of carefully crafted canonical poems that, in a variety of ways, effectively employ this technique. The acrostic technique provides a precise design for the poet, facilitating a recital of verse capable of captivating the audience and enabling the listener to follow the movement of the poem from beginning to end. In compositions such as Psalm 119 and Lamentations 3 the listener detects the acrostic pattern effortlessly—a definite appeal is made to the

ear. But an acrostic composition, which presupposes not only the invention of the Hebrew *alef-bet* but also a literate milieu, was intended for appreciation in written form, whereby appeal is made to the eye.

1. The Hebrew *Alef-Bet*
2. Types and Canonical Examples
3. Function

### 1. The Hebrew *Alef-Bet*.

Several suggestions have been offered to account for the derivation of this technique. One straightforward explanation is that the form arose indigenously in the literate milieu set off by the alphabetic revolution as creative writers developed techniques consistent with their own form of writing.

Mesopotamian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics antedate the simplification and reduction of graphemes that took place with the introduction of Semitic alphabets (the earliest nonalphabetic examples are message acrostics; the parade example is The Babylonian Theodicy [*COS* 1.154:492-95]). From writing systems of hundreds of signs, the alphabetic revolution produced systems of less than thirty consonantal signs, easily memorized in a basic order. The Semitic alphabets originated with Proto-Canaanite (eighteenth-seventeenth centuries BC) and continued with Phoenician writing. From the Phoenician system, the Paleo-Hebrew script (c. 800 BC) was developed. Even though the Hebrew language did not adopt the familiar Aramaic script until after the Babylonian exile, the basic Northwest Semitic order is already found in Ugaritic cuneiform (fourteenth century BC).

This revolution affected all aspects of society, affording new opportunities for literary expression in three areas highlighted by A. Demsky

(364): (1) the organization of information and the placing of objects in their proper alphabetic (or numerical) order; (2) the expression of the mysterious and magical or a reference to the divine (cf. Rev 1:8; 22:13); (3) aesthetics as expressed in writing alphabetic acrostic poetry.

Consequently, the earlier view that biblical acrostic technique was imported from the Hellenistic environment no longer prevails. The Greek alphabetic writing system itself developed from the Phoenician system, and in the absence of extensive evidence in Phoenician poetry, it cannot be supposed that alphabetic acrostics came to the Greeks from the Phoenicians (Craigie, 130). Alphabetic acrostic poetry probably developed indigenously in the literatures of both languages. Furthermore, the discoveries of Ugaritic alphabet texts (*KTU* 7.5) and beginner's exercise tablets in Proto-Canaanite script demonstrate that the alphabet was thought of abstractly; that is, scribes familiar with the alphabet taught a basic order of letters to their pupils, leading to the literate milieu in which alphabetic acrostic poetry was composed. That this state of affairs existed in ancient Hebrew society suggests that an early indigenous development provides the broad context within which to appreciate the design and function of canonical acrostic poetry.

## 2. Types and Canonical Examples.

Canonical examples of alphabetic sequence acrostics are found throughout the OT; there are none in the NT. The canonical examples include Psalms 9; 10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; 145; Proverbs 31:10-31; Lamentations 1—4 (cf. 11QPs<sup>a</sup> 21-22, which shows that Sir 51:13-30 [Heb] is an alphabetic acrostic poem; Nah 1:2-8 will not be discussed in this volume). Though limited in number, significant dissimilarities between the canonical acrostics display the considerable versatility of the biblical writers.

### 2.1. Complete Alphabetic.

2.1.1. *One Letter per Line.* Psalm 145 is a \*hymn of praise to God the king (cf. Ps 111). Apart from a missing *nûn* line, the complete *alef-bet* appears in successive bicola. Without inserting the *nûn* line, forty-four cola (including the final monocolon) make up the poem, suggesting that the omission was intentional. Most manuscripts of the MT do not have it, but one Hebrew manuscript, supported by the LXX, Syriac and 11QPs<sup>a</sup>, does offer a *nûn* line nearly identical to

the *šādē* (*šdq*) line, except that it begins with *n'nn* (“[The LORD] is faithful,” Niphal of *'mn* [cf. Ps 145:17 MT]). This justifies its classification as a complete alphabetic acrostic.

Proverbs 31:10-31, praising the noble wife, is part of the “Sayings of \*Lemuel” (Prov 31:1-31). Although renowned for its complete acrostic structure, it is also noteworthy for its arrangement in two halves (Prov 31:10-20 [*'ālep-kāp*]) with thirty-six bicola, two tricola (Prov. 31:15 [*wāw*]; Prov 31:30 [*šim*]) and a chiasmic quatrain (Prov. 31:19-20 [*yôd-kāp*]).

2.1.2. *One Letter per Half-line.* Psalm 111 is a hymn of \*thanksgiving; Psalm 112, a wisdom psalm, is closely modeled after it, elaborating specifically on Psalm 111:10. Vocabulary and expressions are borrowed from it to depict the blessings enjoyed by the one who fears the Lord. Both psalms begin with *halēlû yāh*, followed by cola each beginning with a new letter of the *alef-bet*. Parallelism of bicola and tricola, \*chiasmus, \*inclusio and word pairs contribute to the skillful composition.

2.1.3. *Stanzaic.* Psalm 37 is a \*wisdom poem. The alphabetic sequence is followed, but a new acrostic letter begins only the first line of each stanza. The basic unit has two bicola, but *hêt* has six (three bicola [Ps 37:14-15]) and *nûn* has five (two lines [Ps 37:25-26]). The sequence is obscured slightly by a preposition at *'ayin* (*lē'ôlām* [Ps 37:28b]) and a conjunction at *tāw* (*ûtēšū'at* [Ps 37:39]).

Psalm 119, a massive didactic wisdom poem, is a repeating stanzaic acrostic. Each of the twenty-two consonants of the *alef-bet* is represented eight times at line-initial position, forming eight-line stanzas. The number of lines corresponds to eight synonyms, distributed throughout the poem, which exalt Torah (cf. Pss 1; 19; 42): *tôrâ* (“Torah” [25x]), *dābār* (“word” [24x]), *mšpāfîm* (“rulings” [23x]), *'ēdūt* (“laws” [23x]), *mišwâ* (“commandment” [22x]), *huqîm* (“statutes” [21x]), *piqqûdîm* (“charges” [21x]) and *'imrâ* (“sayings” [19x]). These synonyms are distributed throughout 176 lines (with eighteen tricola); in six stanzas all eight terms occur together, and no one stanza contains less than six.

In gravity and literary quality, nothing compares to the artistic achievement of \*Lamentations (as a whole, it is larger than Ps 119). Chapters 1 and 2 are stanzaic acrostics; the initial word of each stanza begins with an acrostic

letter from *ʾālep* to *tāw* (cf. Ps 37). There are three bicola per stanza, except for *zayin* (chap. 1), a quatrain. Chapter 4 displays the same acrostic pattern, only this time each stanza consists of two bicola. Chapter 3 is the unique central section. Now the initial acrostic consonant appears at the beginning of each line. This intensification in the design of chapter 3 indicates the high point of the book (cf. Lam 3:22-24 MT [*hêt*]), fading again in chapter 4 and disappearing entirely in chapter 5 (nonalphabetic). Exploring external parallelism between the five distinct poems, J. Renkema (379) suggests that by the external parallelism of their language and content, identical letter stanzas form song responses enabling the reader to visualize the parallel (responsive) design of the whole.

**2.2. Incomplete Alphabetic.** Two individual psalms “of David,” Psalm 25 (a \*lament) and Psalm 34 (a hymn of thanksgiving), unique omit the *wāw* line and, in addition to the *pê* line within the poem, include a second *pê* line after *tāw*. Thus, a total of twenty-two lines is maintained, and each psalm expresses a concluding concern for corporate redemption (*pādā*). What is more, this convention makes *lāmed* the middle letter; hence, *ʾālep-lāmed-pê*—the three consonants in the name of the first letter of the *alef-bet*—are found at the beginning, middle and end of the series. The resulting verbal root means “learn” (cf. Prov 22:25 MT). The reader is hereby exhorted to learn the insights that the psalmist passed on (cf. Ps 51:15 MT).

Considered conjointly, Psalms 9 and 10 are individual laments that form an uneven, partially obscured acrostic from *ʾālep* to *tāw*. Psalm 9 ends with *kāp*; however, *dālet* is missing (Ps 9:7 MT). Psalm 10 is less complete, containing a broken sequence from *lāmed* to *tāw*: *mēm*, *nūn* and *sāmek* are missing (Ps 10:2-6 MT), as is *šādē* (Ps 10:10 MT). Noting the interrelation of the themes, commentators suggest an interpretation on two levels: (1) the level of the initial texts; (2) the unity. There is precedent in a few Hebrew manuscripts and the LXX, which treat them as a literary unity.

**2.3. Irregularities of Alphabetic Arrangement.** Psalms 9–10 share an irregularity with Lamentations 2–4: *pê* comes before *ʾayin*. In 1962 N. K. Gottwald (24) labeled this “a curious and unexpected disturbance of alphabetic order.” Although the evidence weighed against this transposed *pê-ʾayin* order, he prudently re-

frained from dismissing it as sloppy editing. Instead, he suggested that the thrice-occurring order was the “normal” order; the *ʾayin-pê* order of chapter 1 was the more likely scribal slip. Evidence arrived in 1977 with the discovery of the Izbet Sartah ostrakon (c. 1200 BC), a beginner’s exercise tablet in Proto-Canaanite script containing an alphabet of twenty-two letters with *ʾay in* and *pê* transposed. Triple abecedaries in Hebrew script from Kuntillet Ajrud (early eighth century BC) provided corroborating evidence. That these are no child’s error becomes evident when one considers the biblical acrostics. The *pê-ʾayin* order, then, represents a secondary Israelite scribal tradition of ordering the letters.

**2.4. Nonalphabetic Acrostics.** In a nonalphabetic acrostic the number of lines matches the number of consonants in the alphabet. Such poems of twenty-two lines do not appear coincidental; rather, they suggest that the alphabetic sequence offered a suitable design numerically as well as linguistically. This has been demonstrated by D. N. Freedman, whose methodology for counting syllables and stress indicates that the range of deviation and abnormality perceived in the canonical examples of biblical acrostic was a deliberate or intended element. Moreover, nonalphabetic acrostics indicate that poets increasingly sought freedom from the constraint of the alphabet by deliberately designing poems with a total number of syllables equal to the total number of lines in half-line, one-line and double-line alphabetic acrostics. The following poems build on this basic foundation of twenty-two lines: Psalms 33; 38; 94; 103; Proverbs 2; 5; 8:1-11, 12-21, 22-31, 32-35; 9:1-18; Lamentations 5.

### 3. Function.

Following Freedman, we see that the acrostic technique is a poetic constraint analogous to the familiar forms of English versification (couplets, quatrains, stanzas, sonnet, villanelle and sestina). Like these basic forms, the acrostic form provides the poet with a robust design suited to engage an audience attentive to the grouping and spacing of sounds. By means of technique, eye and ear are “charmed by the familiar, yet aroused and captivated by the unexpected” (Watson, 33). Yet acrostic is not merely ornamental; it is part of the communicative process. Put another way, what a poem says is the result of *how* it is said.

The following suggestions have been offered to explain the function of acrostic technique.

**3.1. Magic.** In his study of Lamentations, Gottwald (25) assessed this explanation sensibly: “By studying the magical ideas associated with language we may undoubtedly learn something about the origin of the alphabet and the acrostic, but any direct transfer to Lamentations is doubtful.” Indeed, there is no evidence that any of the biblical acrostics have a magical or occult purpose.

**3.2. Pedagogy.** The aforementioned poems share a didactic quality; alphabetic acrostics certainly were in use as didactic method, and they are closely associated with the wisdom tradition (cf. Prov 31:10-31; Sir 51:13-30). But the function of each poem must be understood on its own terms. To view Lamentations, for instance, as a device for practice in writing and the imitation of literary technique may miss the point, given the occasion and solemnity of its message. Besides, the more complex canonical acrostics suggest that they did not share the basic function of, say, *The New England Primer*, commended “for the more easy attaining the true reading of English.”

**3.3. Mnemonic Aid.** The mnemonic view also suggests that acrostics had a practical purpose. Again, the complex features of the canonical acrostics militate against it. Incompleteness (missing letters), alternate ordering, irregular patterning, intricacies of style (e.g., the *’ālep-lāmed-pē* pattern in Pss 25; 34) and even the sheer length of poems (e.g., Ps 119; Lam 1—5) point in a different direction.

**3.4. Display of Skill.** Once this design is chosen, poets are forced to use their skill in a special way. Thus, the interplay between structural constraint and creative expression may account for most of the deviations from the standard sequence. The technique displays the poet’s prowess; yet, this explanation too fails to explain why acrostic was chosen as a design for communication.

**3.5. Completeness.** Perhaps the most acceptable view is the one derived from that of Gottwald (28): “If the subject is to be exhausted, the alphabet alone can suffice to suggest and symbolize the totality striven after.” This solution, along with display of skill (see 3.4 above), best accounts for the biblical usage. An acrostic is complete, “from A to Z”; yet, an acrostic limits, providing closure, assuring the reader that enough has been said. Incapable of being comprehensible, the poet, by this design, can effec-

tively express the incomprehensible. Religious expression calls for liberty *with* discipline.

What is more, the alphabet belongs to a people, and language is an important aspect of a people’s identity. The alphabetic acrostic is the perfect form for expressing corporate praise and lament *coram Deo*. Its semantic import is corporate yet individual, cultural yet theological. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp (18) writes, “The poet has chosen language as his means of consolation and there is no better symbol of the power and potential of language than the alphabetic acrostic, modeled most likely on the simple abecedaries that were a commonplace in scribal schools. The alphabet stands, as well, as the paradigm symbol of culture and civilization in the ancient Near East, and thus its prominence in these poems profoundly reasserts the values of civilization and culture even in the face of utterly devastating and dehumanizing suffering.”

This attractive explanation of the acrostics of Lamentations can be extended profitably to other canonical examples.

See also HEBREW LANGUAGE; LAMENTATIONS 1: BOOK OF; LYRIC POETRY; POETICS, TERMINOLOGY OF; PROVERBS 1: BOOK OF; PSALMS 1: BOOK OF.

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**ADDITIONS TO ESTHER.** See ESTHER 4: ADDITIONS.

## AFTERLIFE

The OT books of wisdom, poetry and writings largely reflect the standard Israelite perspective that there is no meaningful existence beyond death. However, a few texts may indicate an emerging hope in some form of continued communion with God, which later developed into a belief in afterlife.

1. Traditional View of Death
2. Alternative Views of Afterlife?

### 1. Traditional View of Death.

For most of the OT, death leads to a shadowy, insubstantial existence in the underworld, called Sheol. There, all are reduced to somnolent inactivity, with no prospect of improvement or escape (Job 3:17-20; 7:9; 17:16 [despite Job's hypothetical wish in Job 14:13]). In particular, the underworld's denizens are cut off from Yahweh and can no longer offer praise or petition: "In death there is no memory of you; in Sheol who will praise you?" (Ps 6:5 [cf. Ps 88:5]). Thus persistence in Sheol is closer to "non-life" than afterlife (so Murphy, 102).

Many psalms assert that this life is the only forum for relationship with Yahweh. Psalm 116:15 boldly asserts that the rupture caused by death even affects Yahweh himself. However, a few texts imply that the underworld is not hidden from Yahweh (Job 26:6; Ps 139:8). Although these do not posit any meaningful contact with the dead, they may hint at alternative views, albeit faintly.

Poetry in psalms and wisdom is by nature evocative and elusive, and their references to death reveal as much about its emotional impact as its conceptualization. Death is portrayed variously—for example, as an enemy that ensnares its prey (Ps 18:6; 116:3) and an insatiable devourer of humans (Prov 1:20; 27:20). The laments often portray the psalmists' anguish when faced with death and are somewhat circumspect in naming Sheol directly, whereas the \*thanks-giving psalms convey the joy of deliverance from a no longer threatening underworld.

### 2. Alternative Views of Afterlife?

Alternative views of destiny after death emerge in other, nonpoetic texts (notably, resurrection in Is 26:19; Dan 12:2). The emergence of these

views is often dated well into the postexilic period for many reasons, including the possible influence of Persian dualism and the development of apocalyptic. Even if these views emerged earlier, they had little discernible influence on the postexilic prophetic and historical material.

A few poetic texts discussed below may also point toward alternative views, though scholars assess this variously. First, some argue that all or nearly all of these texts convey the traditional view, and that afterlife interpretations are posterior readings, sometimes discernible in early textual transmission (J. Goldingay on the Psalms [rightly critiquing M. Dahood's speculative approach] and R. E. Murphy on wisdom). Many others accept that at least some of the texts suggest a more positive prospect and must therefore be dated relatively late, in line with other such material. A third approach allows for the positive perspective without necessarily dating the texts late, since theological development is neither linear nor uniform. In any case, much of the poetic literature is very difficult to date accurately. P. S. Johnston, J. D. Levenson and others see a positive perspective in some of these texts.

**2.1. Psalms.** A few psalms may suggest some form of positive afterlife, and three in particular are frequently mentioned. Psalm 16 concludes forcefully: "For you will not abandon my life to Sheol. . . . You will show me the path of life . . . at your right hand pleasures endlessly [*nešah*]" (Ps 16:10-11). Given the psalmist's initial vulnerability, isolation and apparent opponents (vv. 1, 2, 4), this ending could be his defiant affirmation of divine preservation and of blessing in a prolonged earthly life. This would concord with the typical OT perspective, but the psalm may well move beyond it. Its predominantly confident mood might imply that avoiding Sheol is not just escaping immanent danger but is somehow avoiding permanent separation from Yahweh, and that the path of life somehow leads beyond it to continued enjoyment of God. If so, this experience is tantalizingly vague, without name, spatial location or any other details. But present confidence in and communion with God may lead to extended, if imprecise, hope.

Psalm 49 is a wisdom reflection on the themes of piety, riches and death. It ponders the age-old question of the faithful suffering oppression from rich persecutors and offers two responses. The first, in vv. 7-9 (whatever the reading of v. 7a), is that human wealth is power-

less to prolong life and to ransom people from the pit, or underworld. This is then developed in vv. 10-14, which underline that these foolish rich end up in Sheol (again, regardless of the exact interpretation of the difficult v. 14). The psalmist's second response, in v. 15, is more succinct and more startling. God will ransom him from Sheol and will receive him. This presents a clear contrast between those whom riches cannot ransom from Sheol and the writer, whom God will ransom. Again, this could assume ransom from immediate, untimely death without asserting anything further. But that is neither stated nor even implied, and the psalm's reflective nature, the contrasting fates and the end of v. 15 together suggest a long-term alternative, however imprecise.

Psalm 73 is another wisdom psalm on the same theme. Here, a sanctuary experience brings insight into the total destruction of the arrogant wicked and the preservation of the upright. However, this contrast is less clearly associated with the psalmist's ultimate fate than in Psalm 49, and the psalm concludes (vv. 27-28) by juxtaposing the end of the godless with the continued present life of the godly. This probably sets the context for interpreting vv. 23-26, which affirm that he is guided continually, will be received "afterward" (*'aḥar*) with "honor" (*kābōd*) and despite human weakness will know God's strengthening "for the future" (*lē'ōlām*). All these terms could fit into a this-life perspective; however, their open-endedness could also reflect a nascent hope in some form of survival beyond death and certainly enabled such re-reading in later times.

A few psalms contain references to some form of divine record of names, notably "the book of the living" (Ps 69:28; cf. Ex 32:32-33; Is 4:3; Dan 12:2; Mal 3:16). Other books seem to record events (Ps 40:7; 56:8; 139:16; cf. Dan 7:10; 10:21). Some scholars trace the Israelite idea to Babylonian "tablets of destiny" or Persian registers, but the latter are religious and administrative parallels rather than necessary antecedents. The concept of divine records was developed in later Jewish literature and the NT, especially Revelation, in reference to postmortem judgment. Although some interpreters assume a similar understanding in the OT texts, neither their immediate contexts nor wider Israelite beliefs would support this. Given the importance of this life, and the further statements about the wicked

in Psalm 69, its author desires their early death. Other references to divine records can be interpreted similarly. So although the concept lends itself to afterlife reinterpretation, this probably is not its intent in the psalms.

**2.2. Job.** The book of Job has several references to a spirit world separate from the physical world. The opening chapters present a heavenly court (*see* Divine Council) with Yahweh, "the sons of God" and "the \*satan" (Job 1:6-7; 2:1). Job's so-called friends share this worldview, with Eliphaz doubting help for him from "the holy ones" (Job 5:1) and Elihu envisaging a mediating angel who can deliver humans from the pit (Job 33:23-28). Job himself longs for an umpire (*mōkīah* [Job 9:33]) who could force God to listen, and believes in a heavenly witness (*'ēd* [Job 16:19]) who will vouch for him. In this general context, the famous passage of Job 19:25-27 could refer to vindication in the nonmaterial world, and several of its terms could indicate a postmortem experience. In this case, Job has moved beyond traditional views on death to a new perspective.

However, the overall context suggests otherwise. Job still continues his legal argument after chapter 19: he wants to find God, present his case, be acquitted, be tested and emerge like gold (Job 23:3-10). His defiant summation still longs for fair judgment and a divine hearing (Job 31:6, 35). What Job "knows" in Job 19:25 affects neither this subsequent argumentation nor the closing chapters of the book, with Yahweh's creation-centered speeches, Job's humble responses and the this-worldly dénouement of chapter 42.

The immediate context of Job 19:25-27 also fails to support a profound new insight. After lambasting his friends and rehearsing his dilemma, Job longs for a permanent record of his words (Job 19:23-24). This could be a dated record to prove later that he had indeed maintained his innocence (cf. the record in Is 8:1) rather than a monument to survive his death. Further, the chapter concludes with a reference to punishment in this life (Job 19:28-29).

Admittedly, the text of Job 19:25-27 is unclear in its detail; for instance, the NRSV uses several ambiguous terms or phrases ("at the last," "thus," "on my side," "not another") and has five translation-related footnotes. However, three features are clear. First, Job invokes his *gō'ēl*, traditionally the next-of-kin who redeems a fam-

ily member from slavery, unmortgages property, marries a childless widow and avenges a death (see Kinsman-Redeemer and Levirate). It is a fair assumption that the *gō'ēl* can also be legal advocate, despite lack of specific OT reference. Since Job previously longed for an advocate vis-à-vis God (Job 9:33; 16:19), and the outcome here is that he will see God (Job 19:26-27), his *gō'ēl* presumably is this advocate (hardly God himself, still less Job's personified cry, as some argue). Second, this *gō'ēl* will eventually arise to defend Job. The scenario envisaged is probably an earthly court, though the time frame is unclear: both "at the last" and references to skin and flesh are ambiguous. Third, the outcome is that Job sees God. He has longed for this since the onset of his troubles, and at last he will have the opportunity to present his case.

So there is bold faith here: not that Job will survive death, but that he will eventually meet God. This indeed happens at the end of the book, though with an unexpected outcome: instead of defiant self-justification by Job, there is humble contrition, and instead of condemnation by God, there is vindication. Although it interacts with an invisible world, the drama is completed within the visible one. A posited postmortem vindication in Job 19:25-27 does not fit this. Nevertheless, the textual difficulties of these verses could reflect an emergent belief of a positive afterlife among the text's transmitters and translators, and their interpretation of the text accordingly.

**2.3. Proverbs.** The book of Proverbs has much to say about life and death. This theme pervades chapters 1—9 and occurs in several of the pithy maxims. In particular, the foreign or foolish woman will lead the unwise son to death, Sheol and the *rēpā'im*, or "shades" (Prov 2:18; 5:5; 7:27; 9:18; there are also references to Sheol unrelated to human fate [Prov 1:12; 15:11; 27:20; 30:16]). However, in general the two options envisaged are this present life and the underworld, without the alternative of a blissful afterlife.

A few proverbs might imply an alternative. The snares of death can be averted by wise teaching, and Sheol by physical chastisement (Prov 13:14, 23:14), though the unspoken alternative is presumably this life. "The path of life leads upward to avoid Sheol below" (Prov 15:24), though again this could simply indicate the present life, as in the earlier contrast with the foreign woman's ways (Prov 5:5-6). More intriguing is Proverbs 12:28, where the path of righ-

teousness is life and "no death." But here the second half is awkward, reading literally, "and way of path not death": the nominal phrase (*derek nētibā*) has redundant repetition, and the negative *'al* does not normally precede nouns. Further, many Hebrew manuscripts give this term as *'el* ("unto"), while the versions follow this and read the line differently. Thus scholars often reconstruct with an antithetical parallelism as in other life-death proverbs—for example, "but the way of folly [*tō'ēbā*] leads to death" (see *BHS* note). Similar textual difficulties surround Proverbs 14:32, where "the righteous finds refuge in his death [*bēmōtō*]." Such refuge is not otherwise an OT concept and is more in line with later eschatology (cf. Wis 4:7-17); further, the LXX and Syriac read a more likely "in his integrity" (Heb *bētūmmō*), implying a simple mistake of metathesis. In summary, the few proverbs that suggest a positive afterlife are uncertain conceptually and/or textually. They hardly indicate a positive perspective, though the textual problems might testify to emerging afterlife beliefs in the early transmission period.

**2.4. The Megillot.** Ecclesiastes is the only OT book to contain significant reflection on death itself. The Pentateuch prescribes death as a penalty, the Historical Books record it as an event, and the psalms offer prayer against its untimely occurrence, but without significant reflection on the nature of death itself. By contrast, it has been well noted that Ecclesiastes has "the smell of the tomb about it," with three juxtaposed threads.

First, some verses present tranquil pictures of the natural rhythms of birth, old age and death (Eccles 3:2; 12:1-8) or extol the enjoyment of this life for its own sake and not just in reaction to death (e.g., Eccles 3:12-13). This perspective echoes the traditional Israelite approach to death. Second, and more markedly, there is repeated unease over death. Wise and fool, human and animal apparently die alike, without differentiation. This provokes both frustration with the present life and a focus on it alone (Eccles 2:17-18; 3:19-21): neither wealth nor reputation makes any difference at death (Eccles 5:15-16; 6:1-2); life is but a shadow with nothing certain beyond it, and mourning brings more insight than does celebration (Eccles 6:11; 7:2-4). Then, in a key passage, the sage asserts that death awaits all and obliterates all knowledge, passion and activity (Eccles 9:1-10). Third, there are oc-

casional tantalizing glimpses of divine judgment from both \*Qohelet and his epilogist (Eccl 3:17; 11:9; 12:14), though without specifying its time frame or providing further detail.

These three strands remain unintegrated. Many scholars stress the negative perspective of death as final, and certainly it is predominant in the book. Others note references to continued existence in Sheol, but this is not meaningful afterlife. Nevertheless, the references to judgment, whatever their origin, may hint at a future reckoning. Like a few psalms discussed above (see 2.1), they may reach beyond the present limits of life and faith toward some undefined further experience.

The other \*Megillot have little to add. Ruth and Esther are stories where death is simply recorded as an event. The Song of Songs brushes the theme only with its proverbial assertion that “love is strong [*’azzâ*] as death, passion fierce/hard [*qāšâ*] as Sheol” (Song 8:6); in other words, love is as irresistible as death is unavoidable. Lamentations is prompted by calamity, destruction and death but focuses on the emotions and faith of the survivor without commenting on the fate of the deceased. Together, these books illustrate well the traditional Hebrew focus on this life and its events and the general disinterest in any individual consciousness beyond death.

See also CHAOS AND DEATH.

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**AGUR.** See LEMUEL AND AGUR.

## AHASUERUS

Ahasuerus is the Persian king in the book of \*Esther. The name *’āḥašwērōš* is the Hebrew equivalent of the Persian *Khšayārshan*, which, for lack of consonantal equivalents, the Greeks rendered *Xerxēs*. The son of Darius I, Xerxes ruled the Persian Empire from 485 to 465 BC and was succeeded by his son Artaxerxes I. The LXX erroneously identified the king as Artaxerxes (for a full discussion of the king’s identity, see Paton, 51-54).

1. Xerxes in Classical Sources
2. Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther
3. Critical Challenges to the Biblical Depiction

### 1. Xerxes in Classical Sources.

Inscriptions provide little information about Xerxes, most of them having been heavily influenced by the inscriptions of his father, Darius I (Yamauchi, 188-89). Significant Greek sources include Ctesias’s unreliable *History of the Persians*, of which only fragments are preserved, and Aeschylus’s *Persians*, produced in 472 BC, just eight years after the defeat of the Persian fleet at Salamis. Since Aeschylus himself fought at Marathon and Salamis, the tragedy provides an eyewitness account presented, of course, with dramatic license. Some information may also be gleaned from Thucydides, but the Greek historian Herodotus is by far the most significant source of extrabiblical information about Xerxes, in terms of both quantity and quality.

Darius, having been defeated by the Greeks at Marathon, was preparing a larger army to continue his policy of expansion. The extreme taxation that these war preparations required incited his Egyptian subjects to revolt. In November of 486 BC Darius died, not yet having put down the rebellion. Xerxes, who had been recognized as the crown prince since 498 BC and had been groomed for the job by a little over a decade of service as the viceroy of Babylon, inherited the Egyptian problem, with the throne, at about the age of thirty-two. He turned his attention first, however, to the completion of his