



TaNaK / Old Testament

Transcript

Introduction

00:00-02:48

If you open a Protestant Christian Bible and look at the table of contents, you'll notice the first three quarters is a collection called the Old Testament. If you look at the list of books, you'll see it's made up of 39 smaller works that are grouped into four main sections. The first five are called the Pentateuch, followed by the historical books, then the poetic books, and finally the books of the prophets. Now, that seems simple enough, but actually it's more complicated and way more interesting.

This arrangement of the books in a single volume called the Old Testament is a later Christian tradition that developed after Jesus and the apostles. In ancient Jewish tradition, these works were all on separate scrolls and were conceived of as a unified, three-part collection called TaNaK. It's a Hebrew acronym for Torah, which means "instruction," Nevi'im, which means "prophets," and Ketuvim, which means "writings."

The TaNaK has the same books as the Protestant Old Testament, but they're arranged differently. The Torah corresponds to the Pentateuch, but the Prophets consists of four historical narrative books and then the 15 works named after specific prophets. After this comes the Writings, a diverse collection of poetic and narrative texts.

Now, this three-part design is really, really old. It's referred to in ancient Jewish texts like the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Wisdom of Ben Sirach—even Jesus of Nazareth mentioned it. And that's because this three-part shape is woven into the compositional design of the scrolls themselves. If you pay attention, you'll discover that every scroll has been coordinated by means of cross-references that link each work into the larger three-part collection.

So who put all these scrolls together? It was a long process. Some of the famous contributors are named, like Moses or David, but most of the authors remain anonymous.

mous. In the Bible, they're simply called "scribes" or "the prophets." These scrolls took shape throughout Israel's history, as generations of prophetic scribes collected earlier stories and poems, integrated them into larger compositions, and then eventually shaped all this material into the unified library of scrolls, the TaNaK.

It's clear from texts in the Psalms and Prophets that these prophetic scribes believed that God's Spirit was guiding this whole process so that, through these human words, God speaks to his people. That's why they treasured these texts, studying and composing them into a unified collection. We don't know when precisely this process was finished, but it was somewhere in the last centuries before the time of Jesus.

In its final shape, the TaNaK offers a prophetic interpretation of Israel's history that claims to reveal God's purposes to rescue the whole world. And while we can't do justice to the whole collection in one video, it's helpful to get an overview of what these scrolls are all about.

The Torah

02:49-06:53

The Torah begins with God creating and blessing a great piece of real estate: our very good world. And God entrusts it to a creature that reflects the divine image, "human," or in Hebrew, *adam*. God appoints humanity to rule the world as kings and queens of creation. And the question is whether they will trust God's wisdom to discern good and evil or seize autonomy and define good and evil for themselves.

But there's another creature with the humans, a mysterious snake. It's in rebellion against the creator, and it dupes the humans to foolishly rebel against God's generosity. As a result, humanity is separated from its divine source of life and exiled from a garden of blessing to die in a dangerous wilderness.

From there, humanity keeps spreading and redefining good and evil, and things go downhill fast. They build cities plagued by violence and oppression, all leading to the foundation of a city called Babylon, where people exalt themselves to the place of God.

And now the basic plot conflict of the whole Bible is set: God wants to bless his world and rule it through humans, but now humans are the problem. They're under the influence of evil, they're stupid and shortsighted and headed for self-destruction. And this is all a set up for God's solution: We need a new kind of human. And so God promises that a new human will come, who won't give into the snake. In fact, he'll crush it and be crushed by it.

From here, the story traces the promise lineage to a man and woman, Abraham and Sarah. God entrusts them with the same divine blessing given to humanity on page one, and so they leave Babylon to a new garden-like land that God promises to give his family.

What follows is the story of Abraham's family: three generations, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, followed by 12 sons. And our hopes are high, until we read their very dysfunctional and destructive family story. They lie, cheat, nearly kill each other—not to mention the sex scandals. But what did you expect after the garden story? They're humans! Eventually Abraham's family ends up exiled down in Egypt.

All these failures of Abraham's family form a dark background for the handful of bright moments in the story. God stays committed to these people; he even makes them an eternal promise, called a covenant, that he will rescue and bless all humanity through them. How, exactly, isn't clear, but Abraham's family is at its best when they stop their selfish scheming and trust God's promise with radical faith.

From here, the family grows. They end up enslaved in Egypt, and we're introduced to the Torah's other main character, Moses. God raises him up to rescue the Israelites and bring them to a mountain where they're all invited into a covenant relationship with God.

They're given 613 terms of the relationship, guidelines for becoming new kinds of humans who will faithfully represent God to the world. And Moses brokers this whole deal because he's awesome. He's the ultimate prophet who speaks God's word to Israel. He's a priest who represents them before God. And he's even called a king, Israel's leader and deliverer in time of need.

But as the Torah progresses, the Israelites fail big time. They violate the covenant, and even Moses rebels against God. In fact, the Torah ends with Moses predicting that Israel's failure will continue as they go back into the promised land, and they're going to end up in exile once again.

But he has hope that God will fulfill his promise to rescue Israel. One day, he will cover for their failures; he'll heal their selfish hearts so they can truly love God and live. And then, Moses dies.

Now, the final sentences of the Torah scroll are surprising; they zoom forward in time. And we hear from the prophetic scribes who shaped the TaNaK. They reflect back on the story of Moses from their vantage point, and they tell us that never again in Israel's history did a prophet like Moses arise. "Man, I wish another prophet-priest-king like him would come along!"

The Nevi'im

06:53-09:43

And with that, we move into the Nevi'im. It has two subcollections. First, the Former Prophets: four narrative works about Israel's story in the promised land, told from the later perspective of the prophets. Things start great with Joshua's leadership. We're told he's successful because he's just like Moses. And he meditates on Scripture day and night. But eventually, even Joshua fails, beginning Israel's long and violent descent into self-destruction, just like Moses and the garden story anticipated.

These stories mostly focus on the failure of Israel's kings, prophets, and priests, how they lie, cheat, kill each other, and worship idols. It's basically a longer, bloodier replay of the ancestors' failures.

But there are some bright spots. God reaffirms his covenant promise to bless humanity through a new human. It will be a king from the line of David, and you get some stories about people like David or Solomon, who have moments like Abraham when they trust God. But it never lasts, and wouldn't you know it, the family of Abraham ends up right where they began: conquered and exiled in Babylon.

But remember, this whole story is being told from the later perspective of the prophets, and they know exile isn't the end. So they designed these stories of Israel's past as pointers to their future hope. When God does rescue his people out of Babylon, he'll send that new king who will be like Moses and David and Solomon were on their good days.

In fact, this is what the second part of the Nevi'im, the Latter Prophets, is all about. There are three large and twelve short works connected to specific prophets. And this design intentionally recalls the three-plus-twelve ancestors from Genesis, whose stories of failure contained the seeds of future hope. These prophetic scrolls are loaded with cross-references that link back into the narrative of the Torah and the Prophets, and they carry the story further.

The job of Israel's prophets was to be like Moses, to accuse the old Israel of failure and corruption and to warn them about the looming result, the great Day of the Lord, which ended with defeat and exile in Babylon. But the prophets also promised that God had a purpose, to purify his people and recreate a new Israel who would be faithful like Abraham was. They'll live in a new covenant relationship with God under the reign of that promised ruler, who's described as a new Moses but called by the name David. He will be the one to restore God's blessing to the entire world.

The conclusion of the Nevi'im is just like the Torah. There's a note from the TaNaK's prophetic scribes. They reflect back over the whole story so far, and they urge readers to anticipate the arrival of a new Moses-like prophet, who they call Elijah. He will announce the arrival of Israel's God to purify and save his people.

The Ketuvim

09:44-12:16

From here we move into the TaNaK's third and final subcollection, the Ketuvim, a diverse collection of scrolls. Each one has been designed to link back into the key themes from the Torah and Prophets and develop them further through an elaborate tapestry of cross-references.

For example, the Psalms scroll is introduced by two poems that are coordinated to the beginning of the Torah and the Prophets. In the first psalm, we meet "the righteous one," who's described as a new Joshua, a successful leader who meditates on the Scriptures. He's like the king promised by Moses, and he's like the eternal tree of life in the garden of Eden. Psalm 2 then identifies this figure. It's the promised King, the Son of God from the line of David who's going to defeat evil among the nations and restore God's blessing to the world. And the rest of the Psalms scroll teaches God's people how to pray as they wait for this future hope.

Then there are the wisdom scrolls that address some of the most difficult questions raised by the story of the Torah and the Prophets. So Proverbs sounds like Moses in the Torah: "Trust in God, be faithful and obedient, and you'll have peace and success." But then Ecclesiastes and Job reflect back on Israel's complicated history and say, "Yeah, we tried that, and it's not that simple." These three books carry on a profound conversation about what it means to live wisely in God's good and often confusing world.

Two of the last books of the TaNaK to be written make a crucial contribution. The Daniel scroll looks back over the long history of Israel's failure and suffering as a strange door of hope into a new future for the world. One day, that new human promised in the Torah and Prophets will arrive. He's going to be trampled by humanity's animal-like inclinations towards evil, but then God will vindicate him and raise him up to rule the world in divine power.

And finally, the scroll of Chronicles retells the entire story of the TaNaK, from the beginning up to Israel's return from exile. The author focuses on God's promise to David of a future king who will reunite God's people in a new Jerusalem and bring divine blessing to the nations. The final lines of the Chronicles scroll have been coordinated with key texts from all over the TaNaK. They keep alive the hope of an ultimate return from exile, pointing to the arrival of an Israelite "whose God is with him," that he may "go up" and restore the new Jerusalem. And that's how the story ends.

Conclusion

12:17-12:43

The TaNaK is a majestically and intentionally designed collection of ancient Hebrew scrolls. These diverse texts from all periods of Israel's history have been woven together as a unified story about God's covenant promise to Israel and to all humanity. They were made for a lifetime's worth of reading and reflection, as these remarkable human words offer a divine word of wisdom and future hope that still speaks today.