PART FOUR

THE HOLY WRITINGS (HAGIOGRAPHA)

Characteristic of the section called the Writings is a huge range and variety of the material: hymns, confessions, laments, wisdom sentences, historical narratives and homiletic reflections on historical events. Equally diverse is the treatment of the themes of reward, punishment and forgiveness. This is especially true of the Psalms, a book which contains all the major themes and literary forms of the Hebrew Bible.

The themes of recompense and forgiveness are prominent in a number of psalms of different genres. In the wisdom poems on the other hand, emphasis is on the traditional belief that the righteous will prosper, while the wicked will ultimately perish (Pss 1; 37; 49; 73). Many psalms appeal to God to condemn his and Israel’s enemies and enforce justice on the earth (Pss 5; 7; 9/10; 58; 82). The more personal modes of confessions and lamentations are permeated by a profound consciousness of human sinfulness, which leads to a renewed appreciation of the need for divine mercy (Pss 32; 51). The question of God’s ultimate reason for forgiveness is examined in the historical meditations on Israel’s apostasy and of divine mercy (Pss 78; 106). The experience of forgiveness dictates the whole hymnal mode of Psalm 103.

The book of Proverbs, on the other hand, is the Bible’s most comprehensive and consistent advocate, of the natural law of recompense. The book of Job challenges this view. It describes Job’s intense struggle to come to terms with what he perceives as unjustly inflicted suffering. His misfortunes lead him to criticize God himself. In Qohelet this issue of recompense is presented in a different light. By questioning the value of prosperity in this world, Qohelet minimizes the significance of the difference fates of the righteous and the wicked. The book of Lamentations sees in the confession of guilt the true way out of despair—in this case Israel’s—because of the hope of forgiveness and consequent survival, which it brings.

The variety of themes and literary forms of the Writings make a corresponding variety of methods of analysis advizable. An internal holistic literary analysis seems to be the best approach to studying the Psalms. The book of Job the instructional part of the Proverbs, and the the Lamentations all call for an inner-textual approach. The couplets of the “wisdom” part of the Proverbs, on the other hand, require a distinctively individual treatment. Qohelet, which seems to be unified on the basis of the key statements, can be treated as a self contained whole.