

Is there Meaning to be Found in the Ordering of the Books of the Bible?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 October 2018

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Welcome back. Today's question is, do you think there is meaning to be found in the ordering of the books of the Bible? This is a fun one. At the outset we should recognise that we have not been given a set order of the books of the Bible by divine inspiration.

This is something that we have to establish for ourselves. However, the ordering of the books of the Bible is not an arbitrary consideration. And many orderings have been suggested with different degrees of merit, and I'll talk through a few of these.

But when we're thinking about this question, we need to recognise that certain books do have relations to each other. They do hang in a specific relationship that helps us to understand how they relate to each other.

And their internal meaning can often be illuminated by the way that they relate to the other books around them. Now, when we think about ordering, we think in terms of the table of contents at the beginning of our Bibles.

And we think of the Bible as a single volume with all the books of the Bible held between two covers. But that's a very modern way of engaging with the Bible. For most of the Bible's history, it has not been engaged with in that way.

[1 : 06] And so the ordering of the books of the Bible can be determined by other considerations as well. Reading within the lectionary would be a far more powerful consideration for the ordering of the biblical books than the table of contents of the Bible.

And that's interesting because the ordering of the lectionary can often parallel things which are not, it's not so much about mere succession, it's about parallel and recognising the ways that certain books are juxtaposed with each other.

Now, alongside that, we need to recognise the differences between Hebrew and common Christian ways of ordering the Bible. Within the New Testament, we have certain allusions to orderings of the Bible, biblical books.

For instance, when we read the story of Matthew, at the very beginning it alludes to Genesis, at the very end it alludes to 2 Chronicles, the final verse of the Old Testament and then the first verse of the Old Testament.

And those things are significant because it helps us to understand when we get to Matthew 23, the reference to the blood slain from Abel to Zechariah.

[2 : 13] And that's a reference to Genesis and then a reference to the book of 2 Chronicles. And that gives us a sense that the implicit ordering of the books of the Old Testament within the book of Matthew is one that starts with Genesis, ends in 2 Chronicles.

Alongside that, it's worth considering the reference, for instance, in Acts 7, when Stephen in his sermon refers to the book of the prophets.

Again, that suggests that the book of the prophets, there was a specific body of material that was bound together as a single book. And this is the book of the 12.

So, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, all one book. And we think of those as separate books, but they can be read as a single book.

And so that's another aspect of order that we can deduce from the Bible. But that's fairly thin. There's not a lot that we can say about that. Theologically, however, we can think of other ways of ordering the books.

[3 : 17] So, within Hebrew orderings, generally what you have is the law, the prophets, the writings. The law is Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. And then the prophets are Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and then the book of the 12.

And then the writings, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles. And so it begins with Genesis, ends in Chronicles.

And there are three bodies of material within it. There's a body of material that's the fundamental law and the history, biblical history associated with that. Then there's the prophets, which is a supportive document for the body of the law.

And then the writings, another supportive document. Now, in his recent book, The Philosophy of the Hebrew Scriptures, which I'm planning to review and hopefully we'll get to in the next few days, Yoram Hazoni argues that we should include in the fundamental body of the law, rather than thinking merely in terms of the law, we should have Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.

And so nine books, the central one being Deuteronomy. Then you have the prophets and then the writings as two supportive bodies of material alongside that. But the central body of material is the biblical history, which is given in those nine books, Genesis to Kings.

[4 : 48] And that supportive body of material involves three key texts, big texts, and then a number of supportive texts. So in the prophets, you have Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel as the key texts, the big texts.

And then in the writings, you have Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and then you have the five scrolls, and then you have Daniel and Ezra and Nehemiah chronicles.

And that order is, again, one that has certain arguments going for it. There is a certain natural pattern to it. The nine books with Deuteronomy in the centre, and then the two other bodies of supportive literature, as those supporting the hands of Moses, as it were, in the battle against the Amalekites, and each one of those having three core texts at the heart, and then a supportive body of literature along with those.

And that's a helpful way of arranging the books of the Bible. I don't think that's the way that I would prefer for the Old Testament. And I think there's been a lot of good work done on this by James Jordan and Peter Lighthouse that I've found really helpful.

So when we talk about the Old Testament, our order is Genesis to Malachi. And that ordering has essentially biblical history, and then there's wisdom literature, and then there's the prophets.

[6 : 19] So you have Genesis, Exodus, Thephitics, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Eru, Samuel, Samuel, King, Kings, Chronicles, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, Esther, perhaps included there.

And then you have the wisdom literature, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon. And then you have the prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Abedai, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Havket, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

And those bodies of literature are three distinct sections. Now, James Jordan has suggested a different ordering, which is ordered according to the way that we see the order of divine history going, the order of revelation.

So at the very heart, you have the Hexateuch, which is the Pentateuch plus Joshua. That's the very beginning. And that's the priestly body of literature.

So we have Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua. And that body of material is priestly literature concerned with the sanctuary, the very basics, the beginnings, the origins, and with the law.

[7 : 25] And the law is very much a body of material that is concerned with do this, don't do that, the sacrificial system, these sorts of things. And then the next body of material is associated with the kings.

And so that begins in the book of Judges. Judges leads up to the story of the kings. It's the prologue in certain respects. Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, or not Chronicles, Kings.

And then you have, let's see, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs. And all of that belongs to the body of the kingly literature.

Now, the kings were associated with the rule of the land, with growth beyond the mere law into wisdom and movement from mere law to song.

And that movement is one that is associated with the history that leads from Judges to the end of kings. But it's also associated with the body of material that you find in the wisdom literature.

[8 : 29] The wisdom literature is kingly literature. And so that's the kingly literature to go along with the priestly literature of the Hexateuch. And then the prophetic literature is the next.

And that has at its heart Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel. Then the book of the Twelve, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, John, Mike, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Isaiah, and Malachi.

And then you have Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah. And the way that this body of material is ordered is such that it ends up being 22 books.

One for every letter of the Hebrew alphabet. That occurs in part because Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah are treated as a single book in three different sections.

Kings and Samuel, of course, are single books. They're only later divided into two. And then Jeremiah and Lamentations are treated as a single book in two stages.

[9 : 29] And this and then the book of the Twelve is a single book as well. So that leads to 22 books. So we generally count. We have 66 books in the Protestant Bible.

That's 39 in the Old Testament, 27 in the New. And some have compared that to the book of Isaiah, which is deeply anachronistic because there were no chapters until fairly late on with Archbishop Stephen Langton.

And that doesn't really take place until the 13th century. And then we don't have verses until the 1550s and 60s in the current form that we have them with Robert Estienne.

And so when we're looking at the Old Testament, there are different ways that you can cut things up. And that way of cutting things up is helpful in part because it divides into bodies of revelation.

And now those bodies of revelation are historical bodies of revelation as well, because the kingly material is also associated with a certain form of revelation in the wisdom literature.

[10 : 30] And so that period of time, there's the historical body. And then alongside that, there's something that comes a certain body of revelation that comes with that, with the core history.

And so in the first body, we have the basic history of Israel. It's leading up to the book of the Judges. And the body of material is associated with that in divine revelation of ethics, for instance, is the law.

And then the next body is the wisdom literature. And then in the next body, which has Chronicles and Ezra and Nehemiah, it's the priestly, or it's the prophetic literature.

This is also associated in Jordan's argument with the three original animals of the cherubim. The ox is the priestly animal that's associated with the high priest.

And the ox is the books of the Hexateuch, or the Pentateuch plus Joshua. Then the lion is the kingly animal. That's associated with the books of the kings.

[11 : 38] And then you have the eagle, which is the prophetic, far-sighted, flying creature that's associated with the heavens.

That's the prophetic body of material. And that's associated then with the third face of the cherubim. And then the final face of the cherubim, the man, is associated with the New Testament literature.

In the New Testament literature, we find the ordering of the books. Again, there are lots of different questions. There seem to be, first of all, the four Gospels, which present four fundamental patterns of witnessing to Christ's life, ministry, death and resurrection.

And there are three of those, which we call the synoptics, which are very similar in their position, their vantage point. And then John is quite distinct in different ways.

Now, Jordan argues that, again, we should take these in canonical order and that they are ordered according to the four faces of the cherubim or the four periods of divine revelation.

[12 : 44] So beginning with the ox, the priestly book, that's the book of Matthew, which associates Christ with Moses in particular. Then we have the book of Mark, which is associated, Christ is associated with the lion, with the king.

He's a royal figure in the book of Mark in a far more pronounced way. He moves to and fro, it's straightway all the time. And there's a speed and rapidity.

It's a book of action and power. And the book of Luke is a prophetic book. Christ is the peripatetic prophet who moves from place to place. He journeys and he's one who expands the ministry far more to include Gentiles and others.

It's also a book that is a lot more attentive to themes of prayer. Now, when we get to the book of John, the book of John is the book that's associated with the incarnation.

It's the book of the man. It's the book that presents Christ as the fulfillment, the final face of the cherubim. It's the book that leads to the full revelation of Christ as the new Adam and the glorified one.

[13 : 53] As we look through the rest of the New Testament books, there's the book of Acts, which is naturally associated with the book of Luke, although it comes in the next cycle, as it were.

So you have the books of the Gospels and then Acts comes as the next phase. And so it's natural that those should come in their original order.

And then Luke is divided from Acts by the book of John. And that division, I think, makes sense simply because you have the cycle of the Gospels. Then you have the next cycle of the church, even though Luke-Acts is a single book in many ways, a single book in two parts.

Or, no, it's a book and it's a sequel, but they're very closely connected to each other. Then you have the literature of Paul, the Pauline Gospels.

Those follow in some ways, it's natural, some of their ordering follows from each other. And so, for instance, it's natural that the book of Romans would follow after the end of Acts.

- [14 : 57] The book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome and then Romans comes next, as Paul addresses the Roman church. And he is addressing many of the issues that are live within the book of Acts.

The inclusion of Gentiles, these sorts of things. And so, the books of Paul, Romans, Corinthians, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews, arguably.

Those are the next body of literature. And those are associated more with Luke in many ways. And the books of James is arguably more associated with Matthew.

It's very similar to themes that we find in the Sermon on the Mount. Jude is associated with 2 Peter. So, Peter is associated with Mark. And Peter's witness is very much at the centre of the book of Mark.

And then we also have an association with Peter and Mark within, I think it's 1 Peter. So, it's natural that those should be associated in some way. And then, of course, you have the Johannine literature that comes after that.

- [16 : 05] Jude is, in many respects, a condensation of the book of 2 Peter. And then, John, John, John, Jude, Revelation.

Remove Jude, connect it with 2 Peter. And then, you have the order of those books leading to Revelation, which are the Johannine epistles, which correspond to the Johannine gospel.

Now, John's gospel introduces a number of themes that we find taken up within the book, in his epistles and also in the Apocalypse, in the book of Revelation.

In the book of Revelation, we see many of the themes that are mentioned in John's gospel. They are brought up in different ways. So, the theme of the bride.

Marriage themes are very prominent within that. Christ, the bridegroom at the very beginning, leading to the bride at the end. And then, we have Christ as the light at the very beginning. We have this certain elements of the book that are alluded to.

- [17 : 10] So, the woman who has had five husbands, the one who she is with is not her husband, etc. That's associated with the different heads of the kingdoms of the beast.

And those sorts of things are interesting. If you read the work of Warren Gage, he does a lot in the John Revelation project on the relationship between the Johannine corpus, between John's gospel and John's Apocalypse.

And so, what we have in the New Testament is books, a priestly book associated with Christ as the new Moses, principally then the book of Mark, Christ as the new David, the book of Luke, Christ as the new prophet, maybe Elijah and Elisha.

Elijah and Elisha are very prominent within that book, allusions to them. And then John's gospel, Christ as the one who brings in the incarnation. And then the books after that, the book of Acts is associated with Luke.

The books of Paul are associated with Luke. The book of James is associated with Matthew, particularly. The book of Jude and first and second Peter are associated with Mark.

- [18 : 33] And then the Johannine literature is associated with John. That then, I think, gives us a tidy ordering of the New Testament books. There are other ways that we can order it, of course.

That if we're going to read these things alongside each other, we need to recognize that there are, for instance, if you're climbing a spiral staircase, you can move successively, but at any point you are over previous points.

So that leads to an understanding where, for instance, you will read the books of Ezekiel and Daniel alongside the book of Revelation because these are very much related to each other.

Or you might read the books of the law alongside the book of Matthew. And you might read other books in certain correspondence, recognizing that books belong to each other.

And that's one of the things that the lectionary does very well. The lectionary provides its own ordering of the book that can be both successive, but also juxtaposing certain texts, recognizing that certain texts, certain books belong together and certain texts belong together and are mutually illuminating.

[19 : 42] And so I don't believe that the ordering of the books is arbitrary. Now, we have this when we're thinking about other forms of canon. If we're thinking about the ordering of the books of the Chronicles of Narnia, there are many different ways to argue for that.

Lewis arguably sat looser to that question than many others because he hadn't determined whether he was going to write a full series before he'd finished a couple of the books.

But what we have in the end is an ordering of books that is not arbitrary, arguably. And there is a lot of debate between people and publishing houses over whether it should be ordered according to internal chronology or according to publication order.

And I think a more interesting argument... Well, first of all, when we read the books, we see that at the very beginning, the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe introduces us to that world.

If you start off with the Magician's Nephew as the first book in the internal chronology, it's presumed that you already know much about the world. And for that very reason alone, the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe seems to be the most natural route into the book.

[20 : 54] Now, Michael Ward has written a very interesting book on the subject, Planet Narnia, that argues that the publication order makes sense because Lewis is basing this upon the order of the heavens, the seven celestial bodies.

So Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, I think, then the Moon, I'm trying to think this in terms of the books, Mercury, Venus and Saturn.

So Saturn is the last battle, Jupiter, the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Mars, or warfare, Prince Caspian, the Sun is associated with the voyage of the Dawn Treader, the Dawn, the Sun, and then the Silver Chair is associated with the Moon, naturally, darkness and night and going beneath the Earth and the themes of the Moon, Mercury, the Horse and His Boy, Venus, the Magician's Nephew, and then Saturn, the last battle.

And that is a way of ordering the books. We can have similar arguments about the ordering, the order in which you should watch the Star Wars films. Should you watch them in their chronological order or should you watch them in terms of their release order?

Or is there some other order you should follow? Now, when we're thinking about scripture, this ordering, there is a benefit to be found in a number of different orderings. But when we recognise the internal relationships between these texts, that these texts are not just isolated texts, but they do hang together in certain ways and certain books have affinities, a particular affinity for other books, that they tend to gravitate to other books or have some relationship, it makes sense for us to connect them.

[22 : 37] Even if the modern way of ordering the Bible, where you have all the books between two covers and you have a set order that's very much set in stone, that is a very modern artefact.

But when we think about the ordering of the books, there is a natural way of ordering them. And there are natural ways of ordering them and there are less natural ways of ordering them. I think that many of these ways can be used profitably alongside each other.

You don't have to just choose one. There are ways that you can benefit from reading them in different orders. I do not believe that we should emphasise so much the chronological reading. I think that there is a theological ordering to the reading of the books that makes more sense.

So for instance, if you're reading in chronological order, Job will come a lot earlier on. But Job naturally fits in with the wisdom literature and with the kingly literature. And so it belongs in its place, I think.

If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account. And I want to thank all of those who have supported these videos.

[23 : 42] It's really made a difference and it's a blessing to be able to produce these. And it's been that support that has made it possible. If people would be able to support more, I'd hope to provide transcripts for these in the future for people who would like to read them.

And Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow with a further video. God bless and thank you very much for listening.