



# Unlocking the Bible (24)



## Praise the Lord O my soul: The Books of Experience

With Nehemiah and Esther we concluded the first set of books in the Old Testament, namely the Historical books. They cover roughly the story from Abraham (c 2000 BC) to David (c 1000 BC) to Malachi and the end of BC. The profile of that history is like the outline of a mountain: the first period up to David was ascending, reaching a mountain top with David, a "*man after God's own heart*". After that, it was downhill all the way as the nation turned away from God to idols and suffered Divine rebuke and punishment.

The next section, called the Books of Experience, ranging from Job to Song of Solomon, belong roughly to this 'mountain top' period with all its perplexity, joy and pitfalls. (The third section, the Prophets, belongs to that period when 'a fall' inevitably followed 'pride'. But more of that in due course. For now, let's take a look at the whole section before dealing with individual books in subsequent issues.

What characterises these books is that they are books of human experience. It is what happens to people. As such they are the thoughts of people and the expression of their feelings, whether of anger, confidence or confusion. In that sense they are not the "*Thus saith the Lord*" of the Prophets nor the instructions of God, as in History. These are the words of people in real situations. Yet, even through such diverse circumstances, those words convey intuitive Truth endorsed by God and acknowledged as being inspired. Nothing could be more convincing - and redeeming - than Job's "*I know that my Redeemer liveth.*" In technical terms these books are known as Wisdom Literature representing a distinctive kind of knowledge that comes from experiencing God in a special way.

As books of experience these are the parts of Scripture that we can easily identify with: they echo our situations; they describe experiences that are so common to humanity. Both Job and Psalms depict the confusion and questioning that arises when things go wrong. The Psalms offer words that express our feelings in a whole range of experiences, from "*why are you cast down o my soul*" to "*the Lord is my Shepherd*" and even to "*Bless the Lord O my soul*" And from the benefits of that experience there are scriptures here that capture the lessons learned from life, such as in Proverbs with its advice to "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not to your own understanding*" to the realisation in Ecclesiastes that, after all "*all is vanity*" but even so we should "*remember your Creator in the days of your youth.*" And what poetry could surpass the exquisite expression found in Song of Solomon?

The obvious lesson is that God can be found in experience; and such experiences of God through ordinary life situations is valid. But the sequence of books shows that while that discovery can be glorious it can also be potentially dangerous if we depend on the experience and forsake the Source.