

Ben Best, co-host

Welcome to *defragmenting*, a podcast of Cairn University promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity. Do you know someone who would benefit from this podcast? Please share this episode with them and leave us a review.

Ben Best, co-host

What if the 11 books of the Hebrew Scriptures called the Writings sat around a table and talked with one another? That's the premise of *Voices of the Sages: Old Testament Wisdom in Dialogue* by Old Testament scholar and Cairn University Professor Emeritus Dr. Bryan Toews. He describes the writings "as a conversation-creating collection, whose arrangement prompts readers to see meaningful connections between them."

Ben Best, co-host

In this episode, he joins Dr. Keith Plummer to discuss how these books speak to one another, their common theological themes, and how they contribute to the unified story of Scripture that culminates in Christ. *Voices of the Sages* helps readers to see how the Bible fits together and exemplifies what we mean by promoting biblical integrity. Let's join their conversation now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Today I'm pleased to be joined in studio by a friend and colleague, Dr. Brian Toews, Professor Emeritus of Cairn University, where he taught Bible and theology for more than 3 decades. In addition to that, he has served as our provost, the director of the Center for University Studies, and the director of our honors program for many years. Dr. Toews is an Old Testament scholar with an expertise in biblical wisdom literature and the Hebrew Bible's writings. He joins me today to talk about one of his latest books, *Voices of the Sages: Old Testament Wisdom in Dialogue*, published by McGann Publishing House. Brian, welcome to *Defragmenting*, and thank you for taking time to talk.

Dr. Brian Toews

Thank you for the invitation, and I'm looking forward to our conversation.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Me too. I've been looking for some time.

Dr. Brian Toews

Yep.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Before we get into the details of the book, I wanted to ask you a broader question because I'm always intrigued by the factors that have led people to their various interests and areas of expertise. And it's obvious from reading the book that you have a profound love for the Hebrew Scriptures and great facility in them. And I'm sure there were a number of factors and people who contributed to that. But I was really curious as to what were some of them that led to that in you?

Dr. Brian Toews

Well, when I first became a Christian, practically the very first thing that I did, I had a kind of an overnight Christian transformation. And the very first thing I did was pull off this Bible off my shelf that I hadn't read in years. I think my dad gave it to me. So, I have just been intrigued and interested and wanting to understand as much of Scripture as I possibly could and help it shape my life. So I graduated from UCLA with a degree in linguistics and went to seminary and took as much Hebrew and Greek as I could. I figured I was going into the pastorate, so I'd be teaching predominantly from the New Testament. So I did an MDiv in Old Testament because just sort of balance things out. I figured that, you know, there's going to be a lot of New Testament in my future, but so I better strengthen the side of the Old Testament. And so I did that, and then I got hooked and decided to do a PhD in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures and wrote a dissertation on the Book of Daniel.

Dr. Brian Toews

And my linguistic interests were still there all the way through. And so my dissertation is a linguistic

analysis of Daniel's grammar. And the kind of thing that I was interested in was discourse grammar, that is, how linguistic features work on the text level, not the sentence or word level. And so, one of the books that interested me after I finished my dissertation was John Sailhamer's *Old Testament Theology*. He went through the same program I did at UCLA, uh, wrote a dissertation on the Psalter, and he was working in what he called text linguistics. So I found someone after I graduated that was an evangelical. Um, in fact, he was kid in my dad's youth group way back when. So there's all these connections. And so I just read Sailhamer as much as I could, because he was, at that time, the only one I really found that was looking at how Scripture works beyond just the book level. And so he talked about the canon in terms of contextuality, that is, how books work together with other books. And for me, that was a real interest of mine because it put the, it put the linguistic analysis beyond the chapter, beyond the book, but actually to a larger context of the sections of the canon.

Dr. Brian Toews

And so the one comment that really got me interested in sort of started my thinking about all of this is the comment that he made about the Book of Ruth and its connection with the Book of Proverbs. Well, that started me thinking, well, what about the other connections in the writings or the Ketuvim and how those books might fit together and what might be the collective, quote unquote, theology of the writings? And so that was way back when in 1995, '96, '97. And so I've been editing recently some of my old, uh, ETS papers, because they were a mess. And for those who aren't familiar with those, uh, initials, ETS stands for

Dr. Brian Toews

Evangelical Theological Society.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Okay.

Dr. Brian Toews

I've been editing those and I've seen all the seeds of my thought going back all the way to 1998. And so I've been on this journey of trying to look at the writings or the Ketuvim as a holistic, meaningful collection. This is why your podcast *Defragmenting* to me is so apropos, because we tend to look at these books and the writings on their own. But the question that I was asking was, well, What if we look at this as a whole and see if there's any kind of coherence, some sort of connecting tissue that holds it together in the same way we think about the Torah, right? Or the Pentateuch. They hold together. Now they have a chronological connection, but nonetheless, and the same thing with the prophets, the former and latter prophets. And so that was, that was the big question. How do all these things cohere?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, that's clear throughout the book. And I too, as I was reading the book, I thought this is very fitting for *Defragmenting*. Also, there was another connection. I had Jon Sailhamer as one of my profs when I did my MDiv at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. And I remember his work was so new to me and some of the things that he was bringing out. Now, you've mentioned the writings, you mentioned the Tanakh and the Ketuvim, but let's start back because for Christians, we're familiar with speaking of the Old and the New Testaments. But for Jewish people, their Scripture, the Hebrew Scriptures that we would say that was the Old Testament, they divide that into 3 sections, 2 of which you've mentioned. Would you just take a moment to talk about what those are and what each of those sections consists of? And then we'll move to the writings, which is what you're focusing on.

Dr. Brian Toews

Sure. So, the traditional Hebrew canonical arrangement is 3 sections: Law, Prophets, Writings, or Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim. And there are hints that this three-part division is fairly early. The prologue to *Sirach* has a reference to the Law, the Prophets, and the other books. So there seems to be some good evidence that long before the Christian era began, that the Jewish people, the believers, had this canon and they had divided it into three parts. Some people think that Jesus' statement in Luke 24, "the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms" is kind of a hint or nod to this three-part division. It might be. So the Law is the story. It's a narrative from basically creation to Moses outside

the Promised Land where he dies. Which is really an odd way to end a story. Yeah, right. Kind of tragic, almost. So that's the, that's the Torah or the law. And then the next section is the prophets. And we, we traditionally divide them into former prophets and latter prophets. The former prophets is the great conquest of Joshua taking the land, but it ends with Judah in exile. Their kings dead, and with a flicker of hope at the end.

Dr. Brian Toews

So it's interesting how both the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets end with exile, Moses and Judah's, the Kingdom of Judah's. After that, you have the Latter Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the 12 minor prophets. And they are like commentaries on the former prophets, in particular the exile. So the Four Prophets deal with what happened, why did God allow this exile to take place, and if there's anything in the future. So the third and final section are the Writings. And on the surface, it looks like a haphazard collection of various, various books. And some of the books in the writings we're familiar with because our English canon is divided into 4 parts. Let's see if I can get this right. You have Pentateuch, you have history, you have wisdom, and then you have prophets at the end.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews

So in the writings, you start with Chronicles, which is an interesting way to start a collection. We're used to thinking about Chronicles right up against the Book of Kings.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews

But the writings begin with Chronicles, then the Book of Psalms, then Job, then Proverbs, then Ruth. Like I mentioned before, Ruth and Proverbs are juxtaposed with each other. Ruth and the Song of Songs are juxtaposed with each other, which creates an interesting question, right? We're used to reading Ruth at the end of the Book of Judges, which makes good sense in and of itself.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews

But Ruth up against the Book of Proverbs raises all kinds of different questions. So Song of Songs is followed by Ecclesiastes. The song is the best song. Ecclesiastes is the worst, right? You have sort of those kinds of things. Ecclesiastes is followed by Lamentations. And here the writings take a bit of a turn toward national or historical content. So Lamentations is the lament over the fall of Judah and Jerusalem and the temple. It's followed up with the Book of Esther. So Esther in our Bible is part of the historical books. Esther in the Writings is sandwiched between Lamentations and Daniel. So there's all kinds of interesting connections between Esther and Daniel, which is definitely worth exploring. And then Daniel is followed up with the last book in the Writings, Ezra and Nehemiah. So the Jewish Bible ends with Nehemiah 13, which is a complete disaster. It's a horrible way to end a book because all the promises that the children of Israel made in Nehemiah 10 about reaffirming the covenant and living before God rightly is completely blown up in Nehemiah 13. And the biggest issue is their intermarriages with idolaters.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Right.

Dr. Brian Toews

And kind of the climactic statement is you're doing exactly what Solomon did when his heart was turned away by foreign women who worshiped other gods. So the writings end on kind of a really bad note.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews
And it's like, period. And your mouth is sort of left open. You know, it's like going to the movies and seeing an ending that is not very satisfying, kind of depressing. And you just wonder what just happened.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Right. Or a chord with no resolution.

Dr. Brian Toews
Exactly.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah.

Dr. Brian Toews
So the first half of the writings is strongly wisdom-oriented, and the second half of the writings is strongly national, historical, Kingdom of Judah. And so by putting all of these books together, I have tried to thread these two sections together and look at them holistically.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah, that's helpful. As I was reading, a question came to my mind, and in some of what you just answered, this comes up as well. Some of these juxtapositions seem to be intentional in terms of how the Hebrew Scriptures order the books. Do you think that there is anything that we lose in terms of our traditional ordering of the books as opposed to the Hebrew Bible. And that raises another question that I don't want to necessarily get into, but what is the role of inspiration with respect to canonization in terms of ordering? Any thoughts that you might have about that?

Dr. Brian Toews
Yeah, I think that what happens is when you take a book like Ruth and read it at the end of Judges, it highlights certain aspects of the Book of Ruth. That is, Judges is about judges who were Spirit empowered by God to save Israel.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews
And they were men, obviously, except for, well, Deborah. And what happens in the Book of Ruth as an appendix, you might say, to the Book of Judges, it raises the significance of Boaz.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews
So how many times in church have you heard Boaz is the kinsman redeemer? Yeah, right. And part of that is the juxtaposition of Judges and its male judges, 1 and 2 Samuel with David as the anointed king and ruling king. And then you have Ruth in between. So of course, Boaz is going to be highlighted as the main character.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews
But if you look at the Book of Ruth, the main character is actually Naomi. Mm. And the kinsman redeemer is actually Obed. And Ruth is the catalyst that redeems Naomi. And so when you put Ruth in

the context of Proverbs, well, Proverbs has Lady Wisdom at the beginning, and then it has the Excellent Woman at the end. And then you turn the page and you read the Book of Ruth, and Naomi and Ruth become the main characters in the story, and it's followed by the Song of Songs. In the Song of Songs, the woman has the most verses. She is the most prominent voice in the Song of Songs. So all of a sudden what happens is features that in our Protestant version of the Bible get sort of put on the back burner. Now you put Ruth in the context of the writings, features that were in the background come to the foreground. So I don't know if we lose anything other than it creates a different set of glasses, you might say, to read these books. And I think that's the big issue here.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, that was eye-opening for me to consider Ruth and Esther as instantiations of wisdom. Yeah, that was very helpful. You say that you consider the Writings the forgotten stepchild of the Hebrew Bible.

Dr. Brian Toews

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Why do you say that, and why do you think that is?

Dr. Brian Toews

Just in terms of the number of books written and published on the Writings, there's only a handful.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews

The book that I wrote, *Voices of the Sages*, I don't know if there's another book out there like that. Whereas how many books are out there on the Torah, the theology of the Torah, right? The teachings of the Torah. And the same thing with the prophets, right? You just have so many books published on Joshua through Kings or Isaiah and the other prophets. It's just like a flood. You know, we're part of the Evangelical Theological Society. And, you know, we get in the mail these catalogs from these Christian publishers. And that's all it is from the Old Testament. Old Testament theology, Torah, law, prophets. When's the last time you saw a book on the writings in those catalogs? Or we go to those conferences and they have those big book distributors right out there. So my book, I think, is a unique contribution. Greg Goswell, who's a professor down in Australia, He's written quite a bit on Ketuvim canon issues. So he's one that has done some work. Timothy Stone has published a couple of works on it. So there's just a, there's just a handful. So no one really takes the Ketuvim seriously as a coherent unit.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah.

Dr. Brian Toews

because the perspective the perspective out there is that it's a loose, disconnected—

Dr. Keith Plummer

It's kind of scattershot.

Dr. Brian Toews

Exactly.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah.

Dr. Brian Toews

Fragmented, fragmented pieces of Scripture.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You say in the book that "I propose that the writings are a conversation-creating collection. The juxtaposition of the books forces readers to make connections between them, generating more insight. Those connections are here represented as conversations between books. *Voices of the Sages* personifies the text in the writings as sages who dialogue and argue about related topics within their pages."

Dr. Brian Toews

Yeah. Well, that's really well said.

Dr. Keith Plummer

And what you do in the book is you show how it is on various themes, they are in conversation with each other, and sometimes in surprising ways. For example, one of the things that I was struck by was how it is that in Proverbs, you get the impression that wisdom is— you either have it or you don't.

Dr. Brian Toews

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Keith Plummer

But then in other books of the writings, it's clear, like in the case of someone like Solomon,

Dr. Brian Toews

Yep.

Dr. Keith Plummer

He's the wisest man and his life ends in folly. And these two books aren't presenting wisdom and folly in that bifurcated way..

Dr. Brian Toews

Well, for years, like I said, I started on this journey in the late '90s trying to figure out the writings. And for years, the predominant question in conversation was, what is the order? What is the right order of the writings and how should we look at it? Because there's basically two major orders that are out there. One is the rabbinic order and the other is the Masoretic text order, and they're slightly different. So, you know, for years I was interested in this issue of order and Silhamer's idea of contextuality primarily was how the books relate to each other in serial order.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews

And there's all kinds of really great things You put Esther up against Daniel, Esther doesn't look that great.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews

You put Esther up against Ruth, Esther looks a lot better because Esther does what Ruth does. Ruth's birth of Obed is the key to the redemption of Naomi.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews

Esther's plans and schemes with Ahasuerus ends up redeeming and saving the Jews. They're both these central catalysts that end up bringing about redemption. So at some point I thought to myself,

this— these arguments about serial order and which order is the right one, which order is the wrong one, I hit a dead end. And so it must be 10+ years ago, I, I started thinking about the books not in serial order like a line, but in a circle. And that's why I use this image of the text as sages sitting around a table. And they're— oh, of course they're going to have conversations with their buddy next to them, but they're also going to have conversations across the table.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah.

Dr. Brian Toews
And I thought to myself, you know what, this is a much more fruitful way to think about the writings and to see their connections. And it also explains, I think, why after the 12th century AD you have a proliferation of orders in the writings, because the books can almost be unmoored from their canonical place and you can have the books connected to other books. So I thought to myself, well, the history of the various orders of the writings sort of suggests it's kind of like a loose connection.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah. So there's a coherence, but it's not dependent upon the linear.

Dr. Brian Toews
Correct. And so that opened up all kinds of interesting things, like who would ever think that Lamentations and Job would have an intertextual conversation going on. And you don't get that because for— in our Protestant Bibles, Lamentations is a prophetic book after Jeremiah, and Job is a wisdom book, right? And never shall the two ever meet. But in the writings, you have the man, uh, the mighty man in Lamentations 3 you have so many similar statements in his complaint before God that are basically— they're allusions to the Book of Job. Well, that opens up all kinds of interesting things. It's that kind of reading that for me opened up the whole writings as really a fruitful discussion.

Dr. Keith Plummer
You say, and you've talked about wisdom already, but in the book you say "The subject of Voices of the Sages is wisdom, a highly applicational topic." So would you take a moment and tell us what is it to be wise biblically?

Dr. Brian Toews
Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer
And what are some of the ways, in addition to things that you've already laid out, that we see wisdom as a major theme? And maybe before you answer that, I'll just go on to something else you say. You say that "There are two major themes in the books and the writings: wisdom and the Davidic Kingdom." So let's start with wisdom, what it is, and how— what are some of the ways we see it emphasized in the writings? And then we maybe could go on and talk about the Davidic Kingdom as a theme in the writings.

Dr. Brian Toews
Yeah. So the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. That's, that's sort of how you get on the path. So one of the big conceptual ideas of wisdom in the Old and and in the New Testament is this idea that you're either walking on the path of wisdom or you're walking on the path of folly. And the path of wisdom is your life is in harmony with God's word, God's will, God's commandments. And so there's a— yeah, harmony is probably a really good word. What the writings do is they not just deal with sort of the fear of the Lord and walking aright and in harmony with his will. But a big part of wisdom is actually seeking the Lord. And this is— so the Chronicles begins the Ketuvim, and seeking the Lord or forsaking the Lord is a theme that runs all the way through the book of Chronicles. So Chronicles actually sort of gets the idea going. And the first thing that David does when he becomes king is he sought the Lord out and brought the Ark into Jerusalem. And that is compared to Saul, who did not seek the Lord.

Dr. Brian Toews

He sought a— he sought out a medium. The first thing that Solomon does when he becomes king, he seeks the Lord and asks for wisdom and then builds the temple. And this is the language of the Book of Proverbs as well. So wisdom is, you might say, it's aggressive, it's passionate. This is why I think the Song of Songs ties into wisdom in that it's a passionate pursuit of God. And David, both David and Solomon illustrate this passionate, passionate pursuit of God. So there's probably a better word than aggressive, but passionate sort of gets at the idea. Just as a footnote here, both in our Protestant Bibles and in the Ketuvim, the Song of Songs is in the neighborhood of other wisdom books. So the ultimate question is, what is the wisdom of the Book of Song, the Song of Songs? But I think something that ties into wisdom there is this idea of passionately pursuing until the end. The other books in the Ketuvim add this notion of suffering as the context of wisdom. Job suffers, Naomi suffers, David suffers, Jerusalem suffers, Daniel suffers, and on and on you go.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm.

Dr. Brian Toews

So there's something going on there, something contextual about you get yourself in a position of trouble and then who are you going to call, right? Who are you going to call upon when you're in a position of trouble? Do you try to sort of figure out in your own strength and your own wisdom, your own way, or do you stop and say, what is the path? What is the path that God wants me to go on? What is the, what is the right path here? How can I fear the Lord? How can I believe in the Lord? How can I trust the Lord? How can I seek the Lord in those kinds of contexts? And the larger context of the writings really is Israel in their post-exile. And one of the things that's stated in Nehemiah 9 is the Levites describe the post-exilic situation as distress. We are slaves in our own land, and those who have power over us take the produce of our land for themselves. So to me, that statement is huge because it describes the post-exilic situation not as this great moment, but the post-exile is a continuation, as it were, of Israel's exilic experience and their slavery to Babylon.

Dr. Brian Toews

So the whole situation or the whole context of the writing seems to be that we are slaves in our own land. We're being oppressed. But how should we walk? And that's kind of Ezra's role in the book of Ezra and Nehemiah, to build the people up according to the word of God. So they built the temple, they rebuilt the city. Now the people need to be rebuilt according to wisdom.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah.

Dr. Brian Toews

And so wisdom is not just sort of walking in harmony. It's not just passionate, but the context is suffering. And the other feature that I think is important, and this kind of ties to the Davidic kingdom idea, is that wisdom is connected to hope.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews

And there's a future there for the suffering people who are walking on God's path. That path actually leads to glory. And so the hope of the coming of the Davidic Kingdom, which is again introduced in 1 Chronicles 17, it's all over the Book of Proverbs— I'm sorry, the Book of Psalms. Proverbs is Solomonic. Ecclesiastes is maybe Solomonic. So there's all this David wisdom stuff throughout the writings. And I understand that as being part of their hope.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Okay.

Dr. Brian Toews

That the Kingdom of God is going to come. It's going to come through a seed of David. And so the question is, are you ready? Are you on the path? Because the path leads to David, this new David and his kingdom. And if you're on the path, you'll end up there with him.

Dr. Keith Plummer

2 things I want to point out. Number 1, one of the things that I really benefited from, from the book was, I think a lot of Christians struggle with, especially books like Chronicles, because we see it as just a historical, as just giving us historical knowledge, which it does. You're not saying that it doesn't. But even as what you were describing in terms of how Chronicles sets off this idea of seeking the Lord or forsaking the Lord, you're very helpful in and showing readers the theological themes of these writings.

Dr. Brian Toews

Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That I think can really help us when we're just looking at it as, well, this is just telling me what happened. So that is one thing. And another thing that I really appreciated that I wanted you to comment on is, as you talk about wisdom in the book, you also speak of it with respect to, you mentioned this idea of harmony. It's also harmony with God's creation. And you make much of creation in your book and how it is that the sages, the writings, are alluding to, reflecting on, assuming certain aspects of the opening chapters of Genesis. Would you, would you say something about that?

Dr. Brian Toews

Yeah. So I would say that, or I have said that wisdom theology is in essence creation theology. So the Book of Job is a great example of that. Job has these discussions with his friends. They go nowhere. You read 37 chapters of the book and it's like there's no resolution. And the question the reader has, well, what does God have to say about this? It's like you're waiting for God to come on the scene the whole the whole book. But you have to suffer through chapter after chapter of really difficult Hebrew poetry. And when God comes on the scene, it's like, I'm Creator. And it's, it's post-Eden language. That is the world that God describes as the creation and him as Creator. It's post-Eden. So there's floods and there's storms and there's these dangerous animals, and you have things in the creation post-Eden that are dangerous and frightful, and it looks like this is the way it shouldn't be. Lady Wisdom's probably— her great contribution is that she was the architect, as it were, side by side with the Lord in creation. Uh, the Book of Daniel, the visions are basically a replay of Genesis 1.

Dr. Brian Toews

Adam made in God's image to rule the earth, to rule and subdue it. Song of Songs is like a commentary on, "This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." That's one verse in Genesis 2, but the song elaborates and develops and comments on that over 8 chapters. Ecclesiastes opens up with his very unique take on a post-Eden creation. It's a cyclical creation going nowhere. So wisdom theology is creation theology. And so that's why I incorporated Genesis 1 through 4 all the way through. One of the surprising things that I learned way back when is that Abel's name is the word for vanity. So Abel is the poster child of the book of Ecclesiastes. So you have all these really interesting, interesting connections. So the creation account in Genesis 4 is a narrative and it's creation-themed, but it's also wisdom-themed. Like the two paths are laid out by the Lord in the garden. And the man and the woman in the garden, or the man, for example, chose to listen to the voice of his wife. And she saw the forbidden fruit as able to make one wise. So I think I say this in the book somewhere, but we call Genesis 3 the fall, whereas maybe better it should be called the folly.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Hmm. Yeah.

Dr. Brian Toews

Because they played the fool and they died, which is exactly what Proverbs teaches. You play the fool, you die. So way back when, in the late '90s, I also wrote a paper on Genesis 1 through 4 as the theological introduction to the Bible. And then I kept going on this wisdom study and they just came

together just really, really beautifully. Oh, so I have an eye when I read the writings to the creation aspects. Even Chronicles begins, the first word is Adam.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews
So, you know, if you're an informed biblical reader and you see the first word of the book is Adam, you're going to say, oh, the Adam of Genesis 1-4.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah.

Dr. Brian Toews
So already that kind of is brought into your reading and off you go.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah. The chronology is more than just telling you who begot whom. It's making those connections.

Dr. Brian Toews
Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Well, let's take a brief break here for a message, and then on the other side, we'll resume our conversation.

Ben Best, co-host
Do you desire a life with purpose? You're invited to Cairn University in Langhorne, Pennsylvania for an Experience Cairn Day this fall. Get a firsthand look at Cairn University where students learn in authentic Christian community and are disciplined by professors to live with purpose for a purpose. Choose an Experience Cairn Day on September 25th or November 6th, or schedule a personal visit anytime. Living with purpose starts now. And we're here to guide you. Register today at cairn.edu/purpose. That's c-a-i-r-n dot edu, slash purpose.

Dr. Keith Plummer
I am back speaking with Dr. Bryan Toews about his book, *Voices of the Sages: Old Testament Wisdom and Dialogue*. And before the break, we were talking about one of the major themes of the writings being wisdom and got a little bit into the Davidic Kingdom. Is there anything more that you think it would be helpful for us to consider about that theme, about how the Davidic Kingdom and the promises associated with it are related to the writings?

Dr. Brian Toews
Yeah. So like I mentioned, Chronicles begins the writings and David runs all the way through that. So the Chronicler only tells the story of the Davidic kingdom, unlike 1 and 2 Kings. So David's covenant is a huge part of the beginning of Chronicles. Even Solomon, when he dedicates the temple, hearkens back to God's promise that David would have a son who would build a temple. And Solomon has all this fulfillment language that he uses. And so Solomon isn't the guy. The Davidic house continues on. And like I mentioned before, it ends in disaster. The Lord tells Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7, listen, if you don't listen to me, if you don't seek me, if you forsake me, you and your house are going to pay the ultimate consequences of the covenant, which they do.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews
So there's a frightening statement in 2 Chronicles 36 that describes the people just before the exile. That is, the Lord brought his messengers over and over and over again, and the people refused to

listen. And this is the frightening statement: and there was no remedy. There's nothing else that God could do at that point. And so all the, as it were, promises of the covenant in terms of the curses come upon, come upon the people. So that's kind of a microcosm of both the wisdom element in the writings and the Davidic element.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews
Like I mentioned before, the Davidic promise runs through the writings such that Israel in their post-exile is, is hoping for a king to come. You can see this in the first chapters of the Book of Luke. Luke 1 and 2, when Jesus comes on the scene, he comes on the scene with Israel in their post-exile suffering under the Roman occupation. And Anna and Simeon, they get it right. They get the Lord gave them knowledge that Israel's redemption and Zacharias and Mary, Israel's redemption is right around the corner and it's all about Jesus. So you know, I can't get away from the fact that I know the New Testament.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah.

Dr. Brian Toews
So like I mentioned, the book of the Ketuvim ends with Solomon's folly at the end.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews
And what Israel is looking for is a Davidic son, a seed of David that's going to be wise.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah.

Dr. Brian Toews
And the implication, I think, is that he has to be perfectly wise. Because Adam, God's son, the king of the earth, he sinned one time and he's out. So whoever's going to come on the scene has to be a son of David. But he also has to embrace wisdom like the son is called in Proverbs 1-9. Listen, my son. Hear, my son. Listen, my son. Listen to my commandments. Walk in my ways. Love wisdom. Dot, dot, dot. He has to be that guy.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah.

Dr. Brian Toews
So there's a messianic anticipation that comes as you read the writings, and it's sprinkled with this idea of wisdom.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews
So this is why the Book of Ruth is so interesting. And again, this is a New Testament perspective, but Naomi is redeemed by Ruth's birth of Obed, and Obed means to serve. But you step back and look at the whole biblical story. It's a preview of what God does with Mary. God gives Mary conception so that Jesus is born to redeem Israel. And so the picture of the Book of Ruth is It's a gospel, is a gospel picture. This is what God does. He redeems his people and brings a servant to restore and to bless. And it's no accident that Ruth ends with the genealogy of David, which is really surprising, right? Because it's just a story about this woman who loses everything and gets a grandchild. Oh, no, no, no,

no, no. We have a Davidic genealogy. Genealogy at the end. There's something about David and the Davidic promise that is key to reading the book of Ruth. And again, like I mentioned before, Ruth is sandwiched between Proverbs and the Song. And it's a wisdom novella with David kind of at the center at the end of it.

Dr. Keith Plummer

So you, in various places, say some things that are illuminating about some familiar passages of Scripture. I would really commend this to people, because you're bound to find something that you hadn't thought about before. Now, a lot of us have heard about, say, the absence of the name of the Lord in the book of Esther.

Dr. Brian Toews

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Keith Plummer

What are some of the implications of that? What— you draw some of those out. What should we take from that?

Dr. Brian Toews

Yeah. So when you take and read just about anything on the Book of Esther— so now we're going to take Esther sort of out of its canonical context and just study the book.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews

You read just about anything on the Book of Esther and the absence of God looks like an anomaly.

Ben Best, co-host

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews

It's like, well, this is a big surprise. What's going on? How do we figure it out? You put Esther back in the Ketuvim and the absence of God is the norm.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews

So in the Psalms, most of the laments are dealing with God's absence. Where are you, Lord? How long, O Lord? Where are your former lovingkindnesses, O Lord? It's like, where, how, why? And so David's been given these great promises. Well, now he's in deep trouble. And so where's the Lord and his loving kindnesses? You read Psalm 89, and the first 30-plus verses is all praising the Lord and giving thanks and exalting him for his loving kindness to David and how it's forever and eternal. And then you read the end of the Psalm 89, the Davidic kings are dead and the kingdom's in the dust and rubble of history. And the psalmist says, "Where are your former lovingkindnesses?" So such a juxtaposition of the eternal promise of God and his faithfulness and the fall of the kingdom. "Where are you, O Lord?" Job, same thing. Like I mentioned before, Job has to go through all these conversations. Where's God? Where's God in this whole story. And Daniel has the same situation. Where is the Lord when he's in Daniel's den? So as I looked at the writings, I thought to myself, what we're dealing with, with the Book of Esther, is what do you do when you have— when you're in trouble, like I mentioned before, and your perspective is that God is not there, right?

Dr. Brian Toews

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? So even Jesus himself on the cross experiences the absence of God, as it were, and cries out in David's language, you've completely abandoned me. And that, I think, is a real central piece of the writings in connection to the sufferings of God's people. So

when it comes to the Book of Esther, it's like, well, yeah, of course, of course it looks like God's not there because, as it were, the handwriting is on the wall. Israel is going to die. The Jews are going to die as a people on this date. It's over. And where's God? Yeah. So, so that kind of transformed my whole thinking about Esther and my whole thinking about the writings as a whole. And this theme of, this theme of God's absence is a central piece of the suffering piece. And, you know, when I used to teach this in class, I think this resonated with my students because of the fact that, right, life is full of challenges and tragedies and sufferings and disappointments. And, you know, you say your prayers and you just— it's a, it's a perspective or a feeling.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah.

Dr. Brian Toews
That God has not listening, doesn't care, and has abandoned you.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah.

Dr. Brian Toews
So I think that's a real sort of existential experience. That the writings tap into, and they help the faithful to get beyond that. Because, you know, most of the laments are the beginning— where are you, Lord? Why? How long? But they end up with praise the Lord, thank the Lord, I trust you, Lord, right? And so that's sort of where the writings want to get us to. You know, it's like Paul and Silas in the jail in Philippi, where I just can't imagine what a Roman jail was like, right? Horrible. But then they're singing praises to the Lord. You know, they got to that point in their sufferings and their afflictions. They got to that point that they could pray like David in the Psalms.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews
I thank you, Lord. I trust you, Lord. I believe you, Lord. I exalt you.

Dr. Keith Plummer
And the temptation that we have is when we read those laments to think that we should get from the beginning to the end in the time that it took to read the Psalm. And what you're bringing out in terms of this conversation between the writings is we're talking about something that is long and drawn out.

Dr. Brian Toews
Yeah, no, exactly. So Israel suffers, suffers in the post-exile. Jesus comes 400 years. Unfortunately, they did not take advantage of the day of their visitation, as Luke says. But you turn the page to the Book of Acts and Luke's telling the same story about the church, right? So Luke was just the beginning of what Jesus said and did, and Acts is the continuation of what Jesus is saying and doing through the church. And the church experiences taking up their cross just in the same way that Jesus did. So, you know, I think Acts is a kind of a model for what the church can experience between the first coming and the second coming. And so suffering, trial, oppression, difficulties, you know, however, however you want to sort of talk about that and explain that, that's the norm.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Mm-hmm.

Dr. Brian Toews
And I think that's also kind of counter to what Christians today expect from their relationship with God.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah.

Dr. Brian Toews

And so the norm in the writings is Naomi. She loses everything, right? It's Daniel and his three friends. Those are the stories that picture what the readership of the writings are going through. And so you read the Book of Lamentations and it's lament, it's lament, it's lament. And, you know, we work at Cairn University. Great is Thy Faithfulness is the center of the book.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Chapter 3. Yeah.

Dr. Brian Toews

So in the center of the Book of Lamentations, framed by all of this lament, you have this shining, these shining hopeful statements that of hope and God's His mercies and his faithfulness and his loving kindnesses are everlasting and they're new every morning. And you just sort of grab onto that.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Mm-hmm. It's almost like we don't want the other parts to exist. We don't want to see those other chapters. I just want that. And there is something certainly valuable to cling to there, but it is in the context of suffering.

Dr. Brian Toews
Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer

At the end of the book, in the afterword, You call it Reflections for Today because though you are presenting the writings as being in conversation with each other, you also say they have things to tell us. And you have begun to get into some of that, but tell us a little bit more about what the writings have to say to us. And maybe it's just continuation, continuing of what you just started talking about.

Dr. Brian Toews

Yeah, it really is. You know, I tried to boil down the book to 3 basic ideas. I like 3s. Every chapter has 3 themes of each book, and then there's 3 conversations. And so I figured I'd better continue that in the very end. And so the 3 ideas really are the ones that I just mentioned, is that God-fearers who are on the path, living in harmony with the Lord and his will and his ways and his word, suffering is going to be the norm of, you know, it may not be political oppression, could be health or financial or just, I mean, it's difficulties, trials and tribulations of various kinds. And that's the norm. And then the second point is in that context, the writings call us to seek the Lord. That is, don't do something foolish in the midst of your trials and tribulations, trying to fix your situation in an ungodly or worldly way. That would just exacerbate the situation because then you have to repent in the midst of your sufferings. So there's a, there's a way to walk with God in the midst of these trials and troubles. And then the third point is, like I mentioned before, the path of wisdom ends with being in God's presence.

Dr. Brian Toews

The Lord may remove some of the difficulties and troubles during our life, but then there's another one, right? And then the Lord can redeem us and deliver us from that. Then there's another one. But the notion of hope is such a powerful, a powerful idea in the writings and a powerful way to live in the world as we anticipate the Second Coming or our own death and our being ushered into the presence of the Lord. So The Psalter does this, does this really well. The climactic section of the Psalter are the so-called Songs of Ascents. And they were songs that the people of Israel would sing as they would send up to Jerusalem, because you always go up to Jerusalem. Psalms 120 through 134. But it's immediately preceded by Psalm 119, this huge mega Torah wisdom psalm. And the juxtaposition of Psalm 119 with the Song of Ascents, I think, is a central and important illustration of what the writings are doing. You get on the wisdom path, guess what? You get to walk up the hill and be with the Lord and his king in Zion. That's where the path ends. And the path is paved with all kinds of trials, troubles, and sufferings. But stay on the path, seek the Lord, walk in hope.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Hmm. You're an Old Testament scholar. You have immersed yourself in intense study of the Scriptures. I want you to say something about the audience that you had in mind for this book. I think it is a book that even someone who is coming from a position of theological scholarship can certainly benefit from. I would hate for anyone to hear us and think, oh, this is too much for me.

Dr. Brian Toews
Right.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Who is it that you had in mind when you wrote this?

Dr. Brian Toews
Yeah, the book is sort of a bringing together of what I've taught for 30 years here at Cairn University. So that's, it's like my, it's what I did, it's what I taught. And so our students come and they're biblically informed. And really, the book was written for biblically informed Christians who want to take sort of the bits and pieces of their knowledge of Scripture that are disconnected and bring them together into a coherent, meaningful whole that will be able to guide their lives. So I've had undergraduate students in mind. The book is, like you just said, it's used in seminaries. So for graduate students, I just was talking to a missionary couple and these who'd been on the field for years. And so they read the book and, you know, they aren't scholars, they aren't academicians, they're just biblically literate and informed Christians. And, you know, the book's not heavily footnoted. I intentionally took out certain hot terms, like I don't use the word canon. I did that intentionally because there's too much controversy about what that is. I don't even use the word intertextuality.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah, that was probably a good one

Dr. Brian Toews
because that, that is one that is all over the place. And so I intentionally did not use academic or scholarly or certain terms that would be sort of hot buttons in order to get my readership sort of into the game without being sidetracked by these controversies and issues. So that, that's really kind of my audience. Um, my wife, Dr. Brenda Mellon, she edited it for me, and she is not a theologian. She taught English here at Cairn University for years. And English literature. So she has a very much a practical perspective to her Christianity. And so I think that helped the writing and the tone, the language to make it really accessible to everybody.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah. Well, at one point in our correspondence, as I was reading through the book, I said to you that I was grateful for your study of the Old Testament and the labor that went into writing this book, because I was— I was profiting from it. So I would heartily recommend this to other believers, because I think it will help them understand, as you've said, the coherence, particularly of the writings, but you relate that to the rest of the Bible. And it is a book that is filled with a gospel hope as we do await the return of the the fully wise Davidic king. The book again is *Voices of the Sages: Old Testament Wisdom in Dialogue* by Dr. Brian Towes. And Brian, thank you so much for taking the time to talk about it with us.

Dr. Brian Toews
Thank you, Keith. It's been great.

Ben Best, co-host
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