“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 recognize 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 recognize 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 is 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. 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 is interesting because the ordering of the lectionary can often parallel things which are not so much about mere succession, it is more about recognizing the ways that certain books are juxtaposed with each other.

Alongside that we need to recognize the differences between Hebrew and common Christian ways of ordering the Bible. Within the New Testament we have certain allusions to orderings of the Biblical books. For instance, when we read the story of Matthew, at the very beginning it alludes to Genesis and at the very end alludes to 2 Chronicles: the final verse of the Old Testament and 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: that is a reference to Genesis and then a reference to the book of 2 Chronicles. This 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 and ends in 2 Chronicles.

Alongside that it is 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 in the book of the Prophets there was a specific body of material that was bound together as a single book: the Book of the Twelve. So Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi are all one book: we think of those as separate books, but they can be read as a single book. And so that is another aspect of order that we can deduce from the Bible, but that is fairly thin; there is not a awful lot that we can say about that.

Theologically, however, we can think of other ways of ordering the books. So within Hebrew orderings generally what you have is the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Law is Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; and then the Prophets are Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and then the Book of the Twelve; and then the Writings are Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles. And so it begins with Genesis and ends in Chronicles and there are three bodies of material within it.

There is a body material that is the fundamental Law and the biblical history associated with that. Then there is the Prophets which is the supportive document for the body of the Law, and then the Writings, another supportive document. 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 Hazony argues that we should include Judges, Samuel, and Kings 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.

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, 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 center 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 is a helpful way of arranging the books of the Bible.

I do not think that is the order that I would prefer for the Old Testament, and I think there has been a lot of good work done on this by James Jordan and Peter Leithart that I found really helpful. When we talk about the Old Testament, our order is Genesis to Malachi, and that ordering is essentially biblical history, followed by Wisdom literature, then the Prophets. So you have Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles—Ezra, 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, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and 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 Hextateuch, which is the Pentateuch plus Joshua: that is the very beginning, and that is 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. 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 is the prologue, in certain respects. Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, and then you have Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs—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 is also associated with the body of material that you find in the Wisdom literature. The Wisdom literature is Kingly literature, and so that is the Kingly literature to go along with the Priestly literature of the Hextateuch.

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, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, 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, and Nehemiah are treated as a single book in three different sections, and Kings and Samuel of course are single books, and they are later divided in two, and then Jeremiah and Lamentations are treated as a single book in two stages. And then the Book of the Twelve is a single book as well. So that leads to 22 books.

As we generally count, we have 66 books in the Protestant Bible; that is 39 in the Old Testament, 27 in the New. Some have compared that to the book of Isaiah, which is deeply anachronistic because there were no chapters until fairly later on with Archbishop Stephen Langton, which does not take place until the 13th century. And then we do not have verses until the 1550s and 60s in the current form that we have them, with Robert Estienne. So when we are 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 those bodies of revelation are historical bodies of revelation as well because their Kingly material is also associated with a certain form of revelation in the Wisdom literature. There is the historical body and then alongside that there is a certain body of revelation that comes with that, with the core history.

In the first body we have the basic history of Israel, it is leading up to the book of the Judges, and the body of material that 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-Nehemiah, it is the Prophetic literature.

This is also associated in Jordan's argument with the three first and the three original animals of the cherubim. The ox is the priestly animal that is associated with the high priest, and the ox is the books of the Hextateuch, or the Pentateuch plus Joshua. Then the lion is the Kingly animal. That is associated with the books of the Kings. And then you have the eagle which is the prophetic, farsighted, flying creature that is associated with the heavens, that is the Prophetic body of material. And that is 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 further questions about 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. So beginning with the ox, the priestly book, that is the book of Matthew, which associates Christ with Moses in particular. Then we have the book of Mark in which Christ is associated with the lion, with the king. He is a royal figure in the book of Mark in a far more pronounced way. He moves to and fro in a straight way all the time, and there is a speed and rapidity, it is a book of action and power.

The book of Luke is a prophetic book, Christ is the peripatetic prophet who moves from place to place, he journeys, and he is one who expands the ministry far more to include Gentiles and others. It is also a book that is a lot more attentive to themes of prayer. Now, when we get to the book of John, it is the book that is associated with the Incarnation: it is a book of the man, it is the book that presents Christ as the fulfillment the final face of the cherubim, it is the book that leads to the full revelation of Christ as the new Adam, and the glorified one.

As we look through the rest of the New Testament books there is the book of Acts, which is naturally associated with the book of Luke, although it comes in the next cycle as it were; you have the books of the Gospels, and then Acts comes as the next phase. And so it is 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 is a book and its sequel, but they are very closely connected to each other.

Then you have the literature of Paul, the Pauline gospels. Those follow in some ways, some of their ordering follows from each other. So for instance, it is natural that the book of Romans would follow after the end of Acts. 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.

The books of Paul—Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews (arguably)—those are the next body of literature, and those were associated more with Luke in many ways. The book of James is arguably more associated with Matthew. It is 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 center of the book of Mark. Then we also have an association with Peter and Mark within 1 Peter, so it is natural that those should be associated in some way. And then, of course, you have the Johannine literature that comes after that. Jude is in many respects a condensation of the book of 2 Peter. And then 1 John, 2 John, 3 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 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 and 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. And we have certain elements of the book that are alluded to. The woman who has had five husbands, the one who she is with is not her husband, etc.—that is associated with the different heads of the kingdoms of the Beast. And those sorts of things are interesting, and if you read the work of Warren Gage he does a lot in the John-Revelation Project on the relationship within the Johannine corpus between John's Gospel and John's apocalypse.

And so what we have in the New Testament is Matthew, a priestly book associated with Christ as the new Moses. Then the book of Mark, Christ as the new David; the Book of Luke, Christ as the new prophet, maybe associated with Elijah-Elisha. Allusions to Elijah and Elisha are very prominent within that book. And then in John's Gospel, Christ is the one who is the Incarnate One. And then the books after that, the book of Acts is associated with Luke, books of Paul are associated with Luke, the book of James is associated with Matthew particularly, the book of Jude and 1 and 2 Peter are associated with Mark, 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, and if we are going to read these things alongside each other we need to recognize that. For instance, if you are 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 is 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. And so I do not believe that the ordering of the books is arbitrary.

Now we have this when we are thinking about other forms of canon. If we are 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 had not determined whether he was going to write a full series before he had 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. 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 is 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 books.

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. There are seven celestial bodies so Jupiter, Mars, and the Sun—I think—then the Moon, Mercury, Venus, and Saturn. So Saturn is *The Last Battle;* Jupiter is *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; Mars of warfare, *Prince Caspian;* the Sun is associated with *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader;* and then *The Silver Chair* was associated with the Moon, naturally, and 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 could have similar arguments about 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 are thinking about Scripture, there is a benefit to be found in a number of different orderings. But when we recognize 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 particular affinities with other books, that they tend to gravitate to other books, or have some relationship, it makes sense for us to connect them, 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—is a very modern artifact. When we think about the order of the books there are natural ways of ordering them—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 do not 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 emphasize 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 are 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.