

# INTRODUCTION TO OT POETIC/WISDOM LITERATURE

## I. Poetry

- A. Etymology: “Poem” from the Greek, ποιειν *poi-ein*, “to do, make, compose”
- B. Defined: “the best words in the best order”

“rhythmical composition, sometimes rhymed, in language more imaginative than ordinary speech”

### FORM

—in regard to form, poetry may be distinguished from prose in the degree of stylistic elements used

—in Hebrew poetry, there will be a greater concentration of parallelism, rhythm, and style than in Hebrew prose

“...verbal composition, imaginative and concrete in matter, and emotional and rhythmic in form”

### CONTENT

—in regard to content and message, poetry may generally be distinguished from prose as the heart vs. the head

—it has long been felt (Longinus, III a.d.) that “poetry is a form of discourse that expresses powerful or profound human emotions and feelings” (Peterson & Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, p. 8). The classical Greeks felt poetry was “the divine release of the soul;” inspiration was involved.

Wordsworth in his “Preface” to his *Lyrical Ballads* says “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”

“...artistry with words in which the properties of language, especially its sounds, are exploited for aesthetic purposes.” —Anderson in *TOTC on Job*

## II. Semitic Poetry

- A. Ancient: it is supposed from the study of ancient literature that poetry is actually an older form than prose, perhaps because it was easier to teach and because its content was easier to remember
- B. Intertestamental era: “Ecclesiasticus” (180 b.c.) and “The Wisdom of Solomon” (50 b.c.) are examples of non-biblical poetic literature
- C. The NT has relatively little poetry compared to the OT

1. Basically patterned after the OT models
2. Examples
  - a. the Gospels
    - 1) John 1:1-3 before historical narrative
    - 2) songs of praise, (esp. in the cultured Luke);
    - 3) significantly, PARALLELISMS in Jesus' sayings
      - (a) Synonymous- Mt. 10:24
      - (b) Antithetic -Luke 6:41
      - (c) Synthetic - Luke 9:23,24; Mt. 6:7

b. Blocks in James and Revelation

James 1:9,10      3:5-10 5:1-5  
 Revelation 4:9-10 11:17-18      15:3,4 21:4 = Ψ 116

c. Occasionally, Paul

- (2) Rom. 8:31-37; 11:33-36
- (3) Christian hymns: Eph. 5:14, I Tim. 3:16, phps. Phil. 2:6-11
- (4) aphorisms of pagan poets: I Cor. 15:33, Acts 17:28, Titus 1:12

III. OT Poetry: the OT as great literature

A. Poetry in the Bible?!

The vividness and emotion of poetry are designed to make an impression upon the soul, as well as upon the mind, aiding in the memory of the message.

"In poetry man expresses his deepest and highest thought and emotions. In its imagery and swelling rhythm he sings of his love, his adoration, his pain, his sorrow, and his hope. It would be strange indeed if the Bible, which lays bare the very heart of man and of God, should not also be a book containing sublime poetry." –Philip Johnson in *WBE*, p. 1377

B. Two basic categories

1. Lyric: Psalms, Canticles, (and Lamentations)

2. Didactic: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes

Lyrical poetry is found in the form of the song (ryv1 *shir*), while didactic poetry is generally conveyed by the proverb (lv6m6 *mashal*) or the drama of Job.

3. The Masoretes held to only three basic poetic books: **Job, Proverbs, and Psalms**. Taking the first letter of the first word of each book, the mnemonic "truth" (tm3a8 *'emeth*) was used as a general rubric.

Job	Bwy a
Proverbs	Lv m
Psalms	,ylyh T

For these three books the Massoretes developed special poetic accents for public readings.

C. A rediscovered genre

Surprisingly, Western scholars were unaware until as recently as 200 years ago that much of what we call the OT “Writings” was composed in poetic form.

1. Reasons for the oversight

- a. The focus of the study of sacred Scripture was on its content, not its form
- b. Scholars, familiar with Western poetry, were unfamiliar with the fluid, and often undefined structure of Hebrew poetry
- c. Footnote: when modern “scholarship” finally recognized the poetic form, it was alleged that the Hebrew culture of David's day was too primitive to communicate in a stylized form. Ctr. the data from Ras Shamra, ca. 1500 b.c.

2. Setback of not recognizing the Bible as poetry

a. Hermeneutical

—figures of speech: are they literal or poetic?

—parallelisms that can be self-interpreting (e.g., Ps. 111:5 is grammatically parallel, but not apparently semantically parallel without closer study; see *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 30-31).

- b. Textual studies (see Mitchell Dahood's *Anchor Commentary on the Psalms* for his lists of poetic pairs as compared with Ugaritic parallelism, pp. xv-xliii, vol. I)

3. **Bishop Robert Lowth** (d. 1787) in his work of 1753, *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum*, pioneered this modern study, setting off further investigations.

D. PARALLELISM: the principal element in Hebrew poetry

1. Parallelism is the key element of OT poetry, although not always found as the exclusive element. The essence of parallelism is correspondence, generally between two lines of a couplet (Ps. 92:1) or occasionally three lines/cola (Ps. 100:1,2 is a tri-cola). Ps. 1:1 is an example of a mono-colon.

Parallelism is found in most other ancient Semitic cultures and in modern cultures like our own, but not as predominantly as it was used in the OT poets.

2. Main types of parallelism (basically following Lowth).  
Be sure to reference Bullock's two principle categories of **semantic** and **syntactic** parallelisms into which the following types may fall.

- a. **Synonymous**: the same thought is repeated in the two parallel verses (stichs or cola), but with synonymous words or thoughts; e.g., Psalms 36:5; 15:1; 25:4
- b. **Antithetic**: contrasting or completely opposite thoughts in the two verses of the couplet mutually illuminate each other; especially Proverbs  
e.g., Prov. 1:7; 10:1; 11:3; 27:6,7; Ps. 37:9
- c. **Synthetic**: the second member of the couplet explains/completes or adds something new to the first verse;  
e.g., Ps. 1:3; 19:8ff.; Prov. 3:5-7
- d. **Chiastic** (introverted parallelism): the 1st and 4th hemistich are parallel, as are the 2nd and 3rd hemistich. This form is generally used with one of the three types above.  
e.g., Prov. 23:15f.; 13:24; Ps. 51:3; 137:5,6

#### E. Other elements of Hebrew poetry

1. What's not there (with exceptions)
  - a. **Rhyme** (ctr. Job 10:8-11; 16:12)
  - b. **Meter** (=same number of syllables per "verse"); despite the historical fact that Philo and Josephus alleged that Moses wrote in meter, a claim that sought to put the Hebrew writings on a par with other great literatures, there is not one poem in the OT that has the same number of syllables throughout its verses (although there are isolated couplets in syllable meter, and there are numerous other couplets in tri-accented meter)

2. What is there:

- a. Special vocabulary: longer forms and smoother words replace their vulgar synonyms, e.g., 1vwna 'enosh rather than vya 'ish

Longer Prepositions: e.g., yNm for /m1  
lB5 for aO jra` for ;r3D3

- b. Slightly different grammar and syntax: long syllables instead of short (like longer pronominal suffixes), archaic forms, and elimination of certain parts of speech (e.g., definite object marker and the waw consecutive) for fluidity (cf. Ps. 112:12)

- c. Rhythm!

Poetry pretty well becomes prose once a composition's rhyme and rhythm are gone.

Man appreciates rhythm because it is built into him: his breathing, his pulsing heart, his imperceptible bio-rhythms, the seasons around him, the ocean waves, etc.

Rhythm in literature "...denotes that recurrence of accented and unaccented syllables in a regular order..."

Peterson/Richards define it as "a cadence, a contour ... perceptible as a distinct pattern capable of repetition and variation" and discuss rhythm's four elements of regularity, variation, grouping and hierarchy on p. 37ff. Rhythm is a broader category than meter, the latter showing more tightly designed, measurable patterns.

Forgetting the rhyme of the following poem, consider its rhythm as the tone alternates in this example of iambic poetry:

"With ravished ears  
The monarch hears,  
Assumes the gods,  
Affects the nods." –John Dryden

F. Content of OT (lyrical) poetry:

everything from hymns of worship to love songs (Cant.) and wedding songs (Ps. 45), and harvest songs (Ps. 65)

G. Other OT literary devices

1. Alliteration: initial sound of each word is similar  
e.g., Ps. 6:8; 27:17

2. Assonance: similar sounding words, esp. repetition of vowel sounds  
e.g., “the small, smelly smelt was smiling smoothly”  
cf. Isaiah 53:1-9 in English
3. Acrostics: each opening word of a distich (i.e., Bible verse) begins with the next consecutive letter (of the alphabet or other pattern)  
e.g., Psalms. 9, 34, 37, 119; Proverbs 31:10ff.
4. Puns (cf. the prophets Micah and Amos)

## WISDOM LITERATURE

"I directed my mind to know, to investigate, and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness." Eccl. 7:25

### IV. OT "Wisdom" defined and delimited

#### A. OT terms

1. חכמה *Chokmah* = personal wisdom; skill and dexterity
2. בינה *Bina* or תבונה *tevunah* = understanding

#### B. Usage of **meaning** may vary according to historical context and cultural milieu, and according to theology of the particular book

##### 1. **Exodus**: artistic and technical skill in holy service

- a. Bezalel and Aholiab in constructing the Tabernacle have "wisdom, understanding, knowledge" from the Spirit of God (31:3)
- b. Skillful fashioners of the high priest's garments (28:3) and of Tabernacle fabrics (35:25)

##### 2. **Ecclesiastes**: intelligence and skill in personal and social affairs

Apart from the key conclusion to the book, wisdom in Ecclesiastes basically is not seen in relation to God's revelation, viz., no direct relation to "the fear of God." It is a secular wisdom for daily living. Secular wisdom does not mean speculative in the philosophical sense of the Greeks (I Cor. 1), for the Preacher's presuppositions about the origin of himself and creation were already illuminated by God's revelation of the Torah.

"The [Hebrews] were very practical and they 'thought with the eye.' Theirs was the intuitive type of mind. Their concern was not with the ultimate nature of reality, not with the Being of God—which they assumed—but with forms of His self-manifestation" (John Paterson in *The Wisdom of Israel*, p. 11).

His usage of "wisdom" is similar to our understanding of "common sense," and in that usage it was secular and a-religious. The message of life's frustrations in the search for meaning ("vanity, vanity") teaches that life, in and of itself, cannot give the secret of life's meaning.

True Wisdom is not found in life's experiences. The clue to life is found in the climax of the Preacher's message; here is an exhortation to follow the highest wisdom which must be theo-centric: "fear the Lord and obey Him," 12:13,14.

As one of the Preacher's many tested options for the meaning of life, a-religious wisdom by itself is a failure:

- a. Not a means of salvation - 1:18; 2:16

b. Ultimately, little appreciated by its beneficiaries – 9:17,18

3. The meaning of wisdom in the book of **Job** (Job himself: 12:2,12,13; friends: 11:6; 15:7,8) is largely the same as Ecclesiastes with the distinct exception of the pivotal chpt. 28, which is more akin to the religious meaning of wisdom as found in Proverbs - Job 28:12,28:

“And to man He said, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; And to depart from evil is understanding.’” Cf. 1:1.

4. **Proverbs**: true wisdom has religious connotations, as far as its source and its application; it is moral rectitude before God (“righteousness”)

a. Presupposition of true wisdom = *the fear of the Lord* - 1:7; 9:10

This theme of the wisdom of life being grounded in relation to God is the motif of the whole book of Proverbs as implied by the inclusio brackets of 1:7 and 31:30

b. The **OPPOSITE** of wisdom here is not ignorance, but **SIN** (viz., lawlessness; an anti-Torah heart) and folly - 15:20; 20:26; the personified (feminine) wisdom contrasted with the foolish sinner woman - chpts. 1-9

c. Divine wisdom leads to life - 13:14 cf. 14:27; 22:17-19. Ctr. lovers of death, Proverbs 8:36.

#### C. Summary definition of Wisdom

1. General: “reaching one's end by the use of the right means;” experience is the best teacher of wisdom, as long as our experience is conditioned by presuppositions from the Torah – Job 12:12; 15:10; Prov. 16:31

Wisdom in simplest terms is an attempt to interpret the facts of life and “to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the sum of things” - Eccl. 7:25

2. Biblical wisdom: **“application of divine truth to human experience” based upon the reverential trust of God**; hence, living according to God's master design for man the creature – Book of Proverbs; Job 28; select Psalms, e.g., 19, 37

“The secret of [wisdom] is expressed in the motto, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning’, or first principle, ‘of wisdom’. In one form or another this truth meets us in all the wisdom books, and it is this that keeps the shrewdness of Proverbs from slipping into mere self-interest, the perplexity of Job from mutiny, and the disillusion of Ecclesiastes from final despair” –Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes*, p. 17

#### V. Scope of Wisdom Literature

- A. The following, strictly speaking, are classified as belonging to the wisdom genre of the OT:

1. Job
  2. Psalms 19, 37, 104, 107, 147, 148 (a few other Psalms are also often suggested as qualifying, e.g., 1, 49, 73, 112, 119, 127)
  3. Proverbs
  4. Ecclesiastes
- B. Related wisdom literature
1. Intertestamental
    - a. Ecclesiasticus, ca. 190 B.C.
      - (1) Emphasis on the Law
      - (2) Wisdom emanates from God (24:3-5)
    - b. Wisdom of Solomon (ca. 50 b.c.)
      - (1) A popular theory is that this pseudepigraphal work was written to refute the teachings of Ecclesiastes (see Bullock's chart of comparison, p. 51)
      - (2) The book of James shows possible familiarity with this work
  2. Contemporary Middle Eastern Wisdom
 

From biblical and archaeological sources, it is plain that ancient cultures put a premium on wisdom/skill. Kaiser (*OT in Contemporary Preaching*, 117) suggests there was an [unorganized] international guild of wisemen.

    - a. Biblical references to external reputations of wisdom: Edom (Obadiah 8); Tyre (Ezk. 27-28); Egypt (Gen. 41; Is. 19:11-15); Babylon (Is. 44; Jer. 50,51)
    - b. Archaeological sources
      - (1) Sumerian Proverbs (ca. 2000 b.c.)
      - (2) Egyptian: the *Wisdom of Amen-em-Opet* (*ANET*, pp.421-24; *ANE* I:237-43); some parallels to Proverbs 22ff. in content and especially in form:
      - (3) Assyrian: the *Story of Ahikar* (*ANET*, pp. 426-30; *ANE* I:245-49)

- (a) A wise man under Sennacharib ultimately vindicated
- (b) Found among the Elephantine papyri, a Jewish colony from ca. 400 b.c.

(4) Babylonian:

- (a) *I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom* (ANET pp. 434-37); some similarities to Eccl.
- (b) *Dialogue About Human Suffering* (ANET, pp. 438f.); sometimes called the Babylonian Job

3. Conclusion:

“In general, the biblical Wisdom Literature includes types of literature found in the ancient world [moral instructions, proverbs, hymns, dramatic dialogue and monologue], but expresses the unique biblical teaching of the fear of God, the chief end of man, and the triumph of the godly man over suffering and evil.” — R. Laird Harris in *WBE*, p. 1815

Paganism knew nothing of a sovereign and absolute will that is the cause of all (Kidner, *Wisdom...*, p. 13)

VI. Nature of OT Wisdom Literature

A. General distinctives

1. Message of universal appeal

DESIGN

Without suggesting a gnostic or pantheistic view, Bullock asserts that “...wisdom is an emanation of the divine life...” \*\*\* **“Wisdom is the all-pervasive presence of God that permeates the physical universe and human social order (Prov. 2:1-15; 8:22). It is God's communicative word written in nature and human experience”** (p. 25). This is depicted especially in the passages that personify wisdom as a divine attribute (Prov. 8).

Though cultic and national characteristics are manifest in wisdom literature, especially in the Psalms, the subject matters cut across ethnic and social boundaries to address issues common to all the descendants of Adam.

E.g.: suffering, guilt, transience and vanity of life, aspiration for God, physical love, justice, purpose of life, etc.

2. Focus on the individual

The individual man is the point of reference, whether as viewed in his own personal needs or in his interpersonal relations. Society is the beneficiary of many individuals walking in an orderly fashion in the fear of the Lord, but it is the individual that is addressed in this literature, not the conscience of society. The method of

wisdom was not to address Israel, but rather the smallest unit in Israel, thus giving wisdom its universal character instead of a national one.

Wisdom addresses both practical and theological dimensions for the individual.

- a. Personal needs: responsibility to God
  - (1) Self-understanding and understanding of God
  - (2) Technical skills, e.g., music, job skills
  
- b. Interpersonal affairs: responsibility to
  - (1) the family, the marriage
  - (2) the community (local, nation and king)

## B. Relation to other biblical literature

That the wise men within the covenant nation of Israel were a separate clerical class is indicated by passages like Ezk. 7:26 and Jer. 8:8-10 which contrast them to the other classes of priest and prophet. The OT class of wise men apparently developed by NT times into the scribes which later developed into another midrashic group of wise men called the “sopherim.”

Of course, all three groups worked together and were not in competition as the critics may suggest, because the message was ONE and the job was one.

The Torah was foundational for the Hebrews' way of thinking; it touched every aspect of their lives. The prophetic movement was a call to the return of obedience to the terms of the Torah, and in that sense was not supplemental to law but rather the outworking of the law's covenantal design.

Wisdom literature and the Torah, as expressions of the mind of God, both express a harmonious message, but with a different emphasis and perhaps from a different perspective. Wisdom lit., unlike the law and prophets, is quite **anthropocentric** — **it often speaks for man to God instead of vice-versa**. Also, it is more **philosophical** in approach than the historically oriented law and prophets.

Wisdom lit. can be considered to be more **supplemental** to Torah than Prophecy in terms of theological principles and ethical guidelines.

### 1. Law

“In effect, wisdom, like law but unlike prophecy, sought to develop a comprehensive system of thought and behavior, reaching into every facet of life.”  
–Bullock, p. 31

Law regulated the patterns and some **details** of life (esp. religious life), whereas wisdom “...provided broad theological/philosophical **categories** for understanding life

and its issues (sometimes called *higher wisdom*), [and] it also offered advice for the development of personal behavior, social protocol, and ethical standards (sometimes called *lower wisdom*).” – p. 30.

## 2. Prophets

Interestingly, the prophets put a premium on biblical wisdom (Is. 28:23-9; 40; Jer. 10:12); and wisdom literature maintained a prophetic consciousness in calling men to repentance and obedience (Prov. 28:13). Note the personification of wisdom as a prophetess (Prov. 1:20ff.; 8:4-21).

One difference is that the size of the audiences of the two types of literature is generally different: **wisdom speaks to the soul while the prophets appealed to the social/national consciousness, the corporate soul.**

Kaiser says (*OTCP*, 119) that the Prophets were preachers of the Torah, and the Wisdom writers were teachers of the Torah. “Wisdom is the cure for one of the greatest diseases of religion—a lack of reality...”

## 3. NT Wisdom: James

The book of James is Hebrew/Christian wisdom literature in 1) its form (practical synagogue homily by a sage), 2) its style (graphic, proverbial observations about life), and 3) its content (technical use of word “wisdom” and emphasis on right behavior). Cf. James 1:5-8; 3:13-17

## C. Literary forms

Wisdom literature, strictly speaking, is commonly found in literary devices of short **proverbs** (IvM *mashal*, which usually is expressed by our English “proverb,” although it may have a broader meaning), **hymns** (e.g., Ps. 19), **dramatic dialogue** (Job), **allegory** (Eccl. 12:1-7), and **autobiographical narrative** (Eccl. 1:12-2:16).

## VII. Wisdom Theology

### A. Source material: special revelation and natural theology

**Natural theology**, enlightened by God's special revelation (Torah; except, perhaps in the case of Job, where other special revelation would have been crucial) and blessed by His leading (inspiration of Wisdom Lit.), played a major role in the conclusions of Wisdom theology. Self-consciousness, observation of God's creation (Prov. 30), and sanctified reason were all factors of developing a natural theology which broadened this dimension of the theology of the Torah.

These remarks should be qualified by emphasizing that the natural theology of the Wisdom Lit. was within the parameters of special revelation. Unenlightened natural theology would have led to a perverted knowledge of God and man, as witnessed from Israel's neighbors (polytheism, cheap view of human life, etc.). Note how the wisdom Psalm 19 shifts from natural revelation to special revelation.

## B. Doctrine of God

1. God is seen as the **Creator** (e.g., Ps. 104:24)
  - a. Sovereignty (Ps. 139; 145:15,16)
  - b. Transcendence (Ps. 24?)
2. God the Redeemer (Immanency)

Admittedly, the doctrine of redemption is given a very slight place in Wisdom Lit. The perspective of WL leads it to ask the existential questions of “why are we here?” (Eccl.) and “how shall we behave until we get there” (Job, Proverbs)? But the “there” is seldom addressed because both special revelation (Torah) and natural theology (observation and reason) gave little hint about the world to come.

With progressive revelation, the prophets did address the world to come because of their concern about ultimate justice in the face of unchecked wickedness. Hence the preponderance of eschatology in the Prophets where God is the Judge/Suzerain.

Yet there are references to God as Redeemer, or at least of man's need of spiritual redemption (e.g., Ps. 49:15; Job's appeal for an advocate with God, Job 9:33f. or his sense of need of final deliverance 19:25; Prov. 28:13,14).

## C. Doctrine of man

1. Accountability to God (Ps. 8)
  - a. Stewardship in living in the fear of God
  - b. Sure recompense for horizontal/vertical infidelity

Faithfulness/Lovingkindness— **ds3h3** —is required

2. Biblical humanism: theistic context vs. godless view of secular humanism

Man is the center-piece of God's creation and is therefore valuable in His eyes and supreme over the rest of creation. Note how Psalm 8 is rooted in the language of Genesis 1.

See Bullock's contrast of biblical humanism with secular humanism, p. 65f.

#### VIII. Emphases of the Wisdom/Poetic Books

“...the Psalms teach us how to worship; Proverbs, how to behave; Job, how to suffer, Song of Solomon, how to love; and Ecclesiastes, how to live. How? With realism and reverence, with humility and restraint, coolly and contentedly, in wisdom and in joy.” –J.I. Packer in *Christianity Today*, September 2015, p. 58.