

Introduction to the Poetic and Wisdom Literature

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Poetry is pervasive in the Hebrew Bible—the only books in the Old Testament without any poetry are Leviticus, Ruth, Esther, Haggai, and Malachi (although 1 Kings and Nehemiah could perhaps be added to this list). In order to be a competent reader of Scripture, one must have some understanding of the nature and conventions of Old Testament poetry: What is it? How does it work? Who wrote it?

Even in English it is not always a simple matter to distinguish poetry from prose. Often the reader is simply guided by the layout of the text: in poetry, each line of poetry has its own line of text; in prose, there are no special line breaks. No such convention can be seen in our oldest biblical Hebrew manuscripts, and only with the work of the medieval Jewish scribes were biblical texts presented in a manner that distinguishes prose and poetry.

“Poets” in Ancient Israel?

If the boundary between prose and poetry is sometimes difficult to discern, so too are the traces of poets in the archaeological record of ancient Israel. While the nations of Israel and Judah had functioning bureaucracies and civil servants as well as a temple complex that required administration and accounts, little explicit evidence remains for the education of the people who filled these positions or for the milieu in which they would have matured and flourished. There is enough to know there was a literate scribal class, but not enough to say how they became such.

In biblical literature, the concerns of poetry and scribes come together. In addition to the Psalms, the biblical Wisdom Books are also books of poetry, and the poets and sages who were responsible for them belonged to that scribal class (e.g., see Prov. 25:1). Even if the extrabiblical record of their activity is minimal, their contribution to the writings that became the Scripture of Israel is immense. Wherever poetry is found in the Bible, one finds literary reflection in the service of worship and godly living.

What Is Hebrew “Poetry”?

Poetry is commonly recognized by lines exhibiting rhythm and rhyme, readily exemplified by nursery rhymes: even the simple “one, two, buckle my shoe” demonstrates both aspects. This brief snippet exhibits rhythm (*óne, twó, [pause] búckle my shóe*), terseness, assonance (the resemblance of the vowel sounds in “one” and “buckle”, and “two” and “shoe”), and rhyme—and this sort of wordcraft can also be seen in the work of the ancient Hebrew poets. Apart from rhyme, conventions such as terse expression, freedom in word order, and an absence of typical prose particles also distinguish biblical Hebrew poetry from prose.

One prominent feature of biblical poetry not found in English poems is that of the “seconding sequence”; that is, a line of Hebrew poetry generally has two parts. The poet’s art allows

the relationship between those parts to be crafted in manifold ways. Here is Psalm 19:1:

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

Hashamayim mesapperim kevod 'El
Uma'aseh yadaw maggid haraqia'

In the opening of Psalm 19, *the heavens* in the first part finds an echo in *the sky above* in the second part; likewise, *declare* parallels *proclaims*, and *the glory of God* partners *his handiwork*. With nearly one-to-one correspondence, it is obvious why such poetic parallelism has often been called “synonymous”—one of three such categories, the others being “antithetical,” where the second part provides the opposite to the first part (e.g., “A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother,” Prov. 10:1), and “synthetic,” where the two parts of the line do not display either of these kinds of semantic relationship.

Assigning a line of poetry to one of these simple categories represents only a first small step in discerning the poet’s art. This “parallel” structure offers the poet a surprisingly rich framework for artistic development: the poet is not simply saying the same thing twice in slightly different terms. The parallel line structure provided Hebrew poets with a means of exploiting similarity and difference on the levels of *sound*, *syntax*, and *semantics* to achieve an artistically compelling expression of their vision. Unfortunately, of these three elements, the first two (sound and syntax) usually do not survive translation. In the Hebrew of Psalm 19:1, both parts of the line are roughly eleven/twelve syllables, with three stresses in the first part, and four in the second. Syntactically, they form a very neat “envelope” structure, of the a-b-c/c'-b'-a' pattern: subject-verb-object/object-verb-subject. Such symmetry already begins to express the totality of the poet’s vision.

However, semantics—the meanings of words—are observable in translation. Of course, complete overlap of the meanings of words cannot be sustained across languages, so there is still an advantage to those who can enjoy the poetry in its original setting. While the simple matches across the parts of this first line of Psalm 19 were noted above, there is yet more to be observed. The a:a' pair (“heavens” and “sky above”) are not precise synonyms. “Heavens” is the more generic term, and occurs well over four hundred times in the Old Testament; by contrast, “sky above” (Hb. *raqia'*) occurs only seventeen times, and nine of those are in the creation account of Genesis 1. Even in this apparently simple development, which exploits the seconding pattern of the parallel line structure, the poet moves from the more generic assertion in the first part to the more specific in the second to display God’s glory in his creative acts (“handiwork”). (Confirmation of this allusion to creation comes in Ps. 19:4, which partners “earth” and “world” so that Ps. 19:1 and Ps. 19:4 together allude to the “heavens and earth” of Gen. 1:1.) Something similar could be noted of the verbs: “declare” (Hb. *mesapperim*) refers to the simple act of rehearsal or recounting; “proclaim” (Hb. *maggid*) on the other hand brings the nuance of announcement, of revelation, of news. This invitation to savor the wonder of creation’s wordless confession of the glories of God (Ps. 19:1–4a), then, forms a profound counterpart to the famous reflection on the verbal expressions of the will of the Lord found in the law (Ps. 19:7–11).

Many lines of Hebrew verse do not offer *this* kind of parallel correspondence, however. Sometimes simple grammatical dependency binds the parts together (e.g., Ps. 19:3), or the first part asks a question that the second part answers (Ps. 19:12). Sometimes there is a narrative development (Ps. 19:5, 13), sometimes an escalation or intensification of terms (Ps. 19:1, 10). These few examples are drawn from a single psalm with fairly regular features; surveying the entire poetic corpus would add a

myriad of possibilities. Consistently, however, the art and craft of the Bible's poems offers an invitation to read slowly, to have one's vision broadened, one's perception deepened—or, as it was put above, to see literary reflection in the service of worship and godly living.

Where Is Poetry Found in the Old Testament?

Poetry is pervasive throughout the Old Testament, in spite of the fact there is no word in biblical Hebrew for "poem." The medieval Jewish scholars responsible for the accentuation of the Hebrew text of the Bible used a distinct notation for Psalms, Job, and Proverbs (their order in the Hebrew Bible) that marked these books as "poetic." However, as figure 4.1 shows, Hebrew terms may refer to a particular kind of poem, and thus illustrate their wide diffusion. As this simple (and partial) list demonstrates, poetry is at home in every part of Israelite life.

Songs and prayers of praise and lament most naturally cluster in the book of Psalms, although they can be found elsewhere in the Old Testament as well (e.g., 2 Samuel 22 [and Psalm 18]; 1 Chronicles 16; Habakkuk 3). There is considerable overlap here, with some of the "epic poetry" found in the Pentateuch (e.g., Genesis 49; Exodus 15; Deuteronomy 32; 33) and beyond (Judges 5). Wisdom and "song" often come together (e.g., Ps. 49:4), and the parallel structure of the Hebrew poetic line was a perfect vehicle for proverbial sayings (Proverbs 10–31). Likewise, the dialogues of the book of Job (Job 3–41) are formed entirely in poetry. The book of Lamentations contains a collection of *qinah* poems, whose acrostic structure also forges a connection to a "wisdom" form of composition. The term *massa'* points to a connection with the Hebrew prophets, whose oracles were normally delivered in verse form. The greater part of Isaiah–Malachi is written in poetry: while definitions of a "prophet" may vary, the writing prophets at any rate may at least be said to be poets.

Fig. 4.1 Hebrew Terms for Types of Poems

Category	Hebrew Term	Meaning
General	<i>shir</i>	song
	<i>tehillah</i>	prayer, song of praise
	<i>zamid/zimrah</i>	song
	<i>qinah</i>	lament, dirge, with a grieving content
wisdom sayings	<i>mashal</i>	proverb
	<i>khidah</i>	riddle
prophetic poetry	<i>massa'</i>	oracular utterance, "burden"

What Is Hebrew "Wisdom"?

Hebrew "wisdom" is readily recognized but difficult to define. Some choose simply to define "wisdom" by the literature that best represents it, so that it becomes a list of books. Since wisdom concerns are scattered widely throughout the Bible, this approach is unhelpfully restrictive. Others choose to define "wisdom" as an outlook, almost a philosophy of life. But different "wisdom" writers have differing emphases, so this approach seems too fragmentary. Further, the wisdom writings are of varied character themselves: there is the instructional or proverbial wisdom of Proverbs (basic instructions in how to live), the contemplative wisdom of Job and Ecclesiastes (pondering the perplexing side of life), and the lyric wisdom of the Song of Solomon (a story celebrating one of God's best gifts). What the books and outlooks have in common, however, is a keen interest in the way the world works, humanity's place within it, and how all this operates under God's creative, sovereign care. Biblical "wisdom," then, might be defined as *skill in the art of godly living, or more fully, that orientation which allows one to live in harmonious accord with God's ordering of the world*. And "Wisdom Literature" consists of those writings that reflect on or inform that orientation.

Unlike psalmody, wisdom does not have an exclusive relationship with poetry. There are wisdom strands throughout the Old

Testament. The “court” stories of Joseph, Esther, and Daniel, for example, all might be said to be “embodied” wisdom. The special connection with the court of Solomon (see esp. 1 Kings 3:1–28; 4:29–34) is well known, and Solomon may be seen as the “patron” of wisdom in the Old Testament (see Prov. 1:1; 10:1; 25:1; Song 1:1; and by implication Eccles. 1:1). Unlike Job and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes’ unique content is communicated in a distinctive style that often defies a simple prose/poetry categorization. By contrast, the lyrical lines of the Song of Solomon’s expressions of love are clearly poetic, but its content stands slightly apart from that typical of the “wisdom” books. Some psalms are devoted to “wisdom” themes (e.g., Psalms 37; 49; 73) and show how keeping the law in joyful response to God’s goodness (e.g., Psalms 1; 19; 119) is the epitome of wise living.

Contexts for Wisdom and Poetry

Given the preceding discussion, the social setting of wisdom writing would by definition be among those of the literate class, and this in turn suggests a setting within the social elite. It is no surprise, then, that wisdom literature finds a strong connection to the royal court, or that the hymnic poetry of the Psalms (associated with David, Jerusalem, and the temple) likewise has pronounced royal overtones. On the other hand, many of the proverbs do not require high-status origins; rather, they more naturally can be thought of as “folk wisdom,” which places their social milieu within the home or clan. It is helpful to distinguish here between wisdom *writing*, which requires scribal education, and wisdom more generally, which could be found at any level of society.

Poetic conventions and wisdom reflections were not unique to Israel in the ancient Near East. The discovery of the Ugaritic texts, found at modern Ras Shamra on the coast of Syria in 1929 and fully deciphered by the end of 1930, revealed a poetic

literature dating to the second half of the second millennium BC whose diction shared much with the poetry of the Hebrew Bible. Their discovery stimulated renewed study of biblical Hebrew poetry. The literary remains of Israel’s neighbors have also provided striking parallels to the wisdom literature. Egyptian “instruction” literature evokes strong resonances with Proverbs, the best-known being that of *The Instruction of Amenemope* (c. thirteenth century BC), which has marked similarities to Proverbs 22:17–24:22. Cuneiform texts from Mesopotamia stretching back into the third millennium BC wrestle with the problem of the “righteous sufferer” in a manner comparable to the book of Job. There are also points of contact with Aramaic wisdom literature, and parallels may even be drawn with later Greek writings. Some students of the Scriptures are bothered by the parallels with extrabiblical literature. What sense does it make to speak in terms of “inspiration,” when much of Psalm 104, for example, seems to be shared with Egyptian hymnody? Or when the struggles of Job are paralleled in part by Mesopotamian “righteous sufferer” stories? Here it must be remembered that inspiration is not simply a matter of forms, motifs, or structures, but of *content* that uses various existing forms in a way that accurately reveals the true and living God and his will for his people.

Two advantages in particular are gained by noting such extrabiblical parallels. (1) They demonstrate that the Bible’s inspired authors both *inhabit* and *challenge* their contemporary cultural milieu. The questions of ancient Israelites about life were not so very different from the questions of ancient Egyptians, or Sumerians, or Syrians. To that extent, these cross-connections illustrate the degree to which ancient Israel participated in the wider culture of the ancient Near East. Israel and Judah are sometimes portrayed as if they were a “backwater,” tucked away in a corner of their world, but such literary parallels show their high level of

cultural integration. (2) On the other hand, the writers of biblical wisdom were no mere imitators, producing derivative echoes of their cosmopolitan neighbors. In terms of *scope*, *originality*, and *profundity*, the biblical writings remain unrivaled. Indeed, one of the small mysteries about them—Job, Psalms, and Proverbs in particular—is just why they are written on such a grand scale. In terms of range and depth of vision, they far transcend their non-biblical parallels, their outlook reflecting the greatness of the God who informs and indeed shapes them. Awareness of the distinctive contours of biblical poetry and wisdom sharpens our understanding of the insights and concerns of Israel's poets and sages.

Poetic and wisdom literature tends to resist a straightforward chronological setting. Rightly understanding the Bible's histories and prophetic literature depends to an extent on taking their historical context into account; such is not normally the case for Israel's hymns and wisdom. Evidence from the ancient Near East demonstrates that hymnic and wisdom writings are among the most ancient of literary deposits, and likewise some of the Bible's poetic compositions may be among its oldest. But it is also clear that throughout the histories of Israel and Judah, Hebrew poets and sages were at work—from earliest days, on past the canonical compositions, up through the Hellenistic period in the post-canonical books of *Sirach* and *Wisdom of Solomon* and beyond. Their writings often defy a precise historical setting. To take one example at random, a saying like "Whoever plans to do evil will be called a schemer" (Prov. 24:8) requires no precise historical context, nor do we have the evidence to give it one. While particular poems and prayers (e.g., Psalm 137) may be tied to a given historical circumstance, such cases remain the exception.

Unifying Themes

Each of the books included in this overarching introduction has distinctive content. Still, in these poetic strands of the Bible,

whether inclined toward wisdom or hymnody, there are a number of themes that surface repeatedly. Only a few of the most prominent are discussed here.

The *fear of the Lord* provides a pervasive orientation throughout the Psalms and Wisdom Books. The phrase, or one like it, appears about sixty times in these books, but its significance goes beyond its simple frequency. It also sets the framework in which wise living takes place. So in the book of Job it becomes the leading question of the outer frame of the book (Job 1:9). It nearly brackets the entire collection of the Psalms: the first injunction in the Psalms directs rulers to "serve the LORD with fear" (Ps. 2:11), while to fear the Lord gives one pleasure (Ps. 145:19). Proverbs is permeated with this outlook: not only is "the fear of the LORD . . . the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7), but so too it is "a fountain of life" (Prov. 14:27). Even the apparently skeptical Ecclesiastes joins in, since whatever else may happen, "God is the one you must fear" (Eccles. 5:7; see 8:12; 12:13).

The *limits of human wisdom* form the natural counterpart to the fear of God. To be sure, there is something about "wisdom" that implies a depth of understanding, in particular of how God has ordered the world and how to live in accord with that divine ordering. The characterization of Solomon's wisdom as being that of a proto-natural scientist (1 Kings 4:33) points in this direction and sheds light on the nature lesson the Lord gave Job (esp. in Job 38–39). This already implies limits to human wisdom, however, and the two strands (fear of God; human limitations) come together powerfully in Job 28. Again this outlook also informs Ecclesiastes. The several "who knows?" texts point in this direction (e.g., Eccles. 3:21; 6:12), as does the reflection on oath taking (Eccles. 5:2). Contrary to modern secular humanist claims, this is no denigration of human dignity: it is rather

to recognize the context in which human freedom is most fully realized (cf. Psalm 8; also Pss. 16:1–11; 108:1–6; etc.).

This literature reflects on *the righteous and the wicked in relation to God*. This is an ancient problem (see Gen. 18:23), and lies at the heart of the first psalm's evocative portrait of the nature and prospects of the "righteous" contrasting with the fate of the "wicked" (Ps. 1:5–6), a contrast worked out in a sustained way in Psalms 37 and 73. The bulk of the dialogues of Job turn on rightly assessing Job's character and how this places him in relationship to God. Many proverbs observe the behavior of the righteous and wicked, and the outcomes their actions bring; such reflections are especially dense in Proverbs 10–12, as the collection of axioms gets under way following the book's extended introduction. As the psalmist of Psalm 73 and the "Preacher" (*Qoheleth* in Ecclesiastes) noted, the simple correlation of God's rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked does not always seem to hold (see Eccles. 7:15), and so a question of justice is raised, and with it the problem of evil—one of the deepest mysteries faced by people of faith.

This leads in turn to the way in which these books *grapple with suffering*. Naturally, interest here gravitates to the book of Job. Interpreters differ over just what solution the book offers, but there can be little doubt that a resolution is achieved in the presence of the Creator, the only place where the meaning of human suffering can be understood. But beyond this, many psalms voice a lament ("lament" providing the largest single category of psalm "type") that gives voice to this crisis before God (e.g., Psalms 3; 4; 6; 10; 13). Even the only subliminally theological Song of Solomon expresses not only the delights of love satisfied but the agonies of love unfulfilled (e.g., Song 5:6–8; cf. 8:6–7).

Given that the thread of life before God is woven through each of these books, a further common theme is *the nature of*

true piety. The interest of the book of Job in this question was already seen above: is it possible to worship God with integrity (cf. Satan's question in Job 1:9)? One of the designs of the narrative is to answer this question in the affirmative. Again, virtually the whole of the Psalter quite naturally sings of worship with integrity (e.g., Psalms 25; 26; 31; 84).