INTRODUCTION TO THE POETIC BOOKS

Introduction

• The “poetic” section in the Scriptures encompasses 5 or 6 OT books:
  § 5 Books Classification ~ Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon
  § 6 Books Classification ~ The book of Lamentations is included with the above 5.

• Of the 39 books in the OT, only 5 do not contain any poetry. Of the remaining books, about 1/3 of the OT is poetic. These 5/6 books are mainly poetic.

• Unlike the law or narrative sections of the OT, these poetic books do not move the OT narrative of the nation of Israel forward, but serve as “a hinge which links the past of the historical books to the future of the prophetic books.”
  § The poetical/wisdom books delve into the critical questions of life: God, pain and suffering, wisdom, the purpose of life, etc...

I. Hebrew Poetry

• Hebrew poetry is marked by two significant features: a rhythm of thought and a rhythm of sound.

  A. Rhythm of Thought ~ Parallelism

  • Hebrew poetry doesn’t use rhymes, but uses a “rhythm of thought” in that ideas are placed side-by-side to each other—this is referred to as parallelism.
  § The are several main forms of parallelism in Hebrew poetry:

  1. Synonymous Parallelism

  • One line is followed by a second line with equivalent meaning (Psa 1:2; 7:16; 15:1; 19:1; 49:1; 51:3; Prov 9:10; 16:18, 28; 19:29):

  Psalm 19:1
  The heavens declare the glory of God;
  The skies proclaim the work of His hands.

  2. Antithetical Parallelism

  • The first and second lines state opposite comments (Psa 1:6; Prov 10:1, 2, 4, 7):

  Proverbs 10:1
  A wise son makes a father glad,
  But a foolish son is a grief to his mother.

1 Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, Talk Thru the Bible (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1983), 139.
3. Synthetical Parallelism

• *The second line further develops the idea of the first* (Psa 3:4; 29:1; 95:3; Eccl 11:1):

  \[ \text{Psalm 29:1} \]
  
  Ascribe to the *Lord*, O heavenly beings,
  ascribe to the *Lord* glory and strength.

4. Emblematic Parallelism

• One of the parallel lines uses a figure of speech to illuminate the main point of the other line (Psa 42:1; 103:13):

  \[ \text{Psalm 42:1} \]
  
  As the *deer* pants for *the water brooks*,
  So my *soul* pants for *You, O God*.

B. Rhythm of Sound

• Another feature of Hebrew poetry is a “rhythm of sound.” In other words, similar sounds are used, through different mnemonic devices such as acrostic, alliteration, or assonance.

  1. Acrostic

• *Acrostic* is a mnemonic device that matches the first letter of each verse to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (Psa 9, 10, 24, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145; Prov 31:10–31; Lam 1, 2, 3, 4).

  • In Psalm 119, the entire Hebrew alphabet is used and therefore, there are 22 sections within the psalm.
  • Each section contains 8 verses, and each verse begins with the corresponding letter from the Hebrew alphabet.
  • This continues until all 22 letters have been used.

  2. Alliteration

• *Alliteration* is using the same Hebrew letter in combinations with words/phrases within a verse.

  • *Psalm 122:6* ~ 6Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! "May they be secure who love you!*
  • The Hebrew words *pray* (sha’al) and *peace* (shalom) both begin with the same Hebrew letter י

  3. Assonance

• *Assonance* is using words that rhyme (sound the same).

  • *Psalm 119:29* ~ 29Put false ways far from me and graciously teach me your law!

  4. Paronomasia

• *Paronomasia* is a play on the sound and meaning of words.
Isaiah 5:7 ~ For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!

5. Onomatopoeia

- **Onomatopoeia** is a word that sounds like it’s definition (i.e. “grumble”).

Psalm 81:7 ~ In distress you called, and I delivered you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder; I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Selah

- The word for “thunder” is *ra'am*… it sounds like thunder.

6. Inclusion

- **Inclusion** is the repetition of key words or phrases at the end of a psalm that were used at the beginning of the psalm (Psa 12:1 & 8);

Psalm 118:1 ~ Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!

Psalm 118:29 ~ Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!

II. Hebrew Wisdom

A. The Use of *Hokmah*

- A survey of the OT’s use of the Hebrew word for wisdom (*hokmah*) reveals the following summary.

1. Skill in Technical Work

- Skilled craftsmen or tradesmen were considered to have wisdom:
  - Metal & woodworking (Exod 35:30–36:7)
  - Working with cloth (Exod 36:35)
  - Professional mourners (Jer 9:17)
  - Sailors (Ezek 27:8–9)

- Skilled musicians, either in composing music or performing music, were also considered to have wisdom:
  - Music composers (1 Kgs 4:31–32)
  - Music performers (Jer 9:17)

2. Skill in the Administration of State

- Another category of wise men included military strategists, statesmen, and those who could make judicial decisions.
  - Joseph (Gen 41:33, 39)
  - The Tribal Leaders (Deut 1:13, 15)
  - David (2 Sam 14:20)
B. The Basic Definition of Hokmah

- The Hebrew word for “wisdom” (hokmah) is defined as:
  - The skill of being able to form and execute the correct plan to gain the desired results.
  - “the capacity to understand and so have skill in living, implying adherence to a set standard”\(^2\)
  - “Reflected in OT wisdom is the teaching of a personal God who is holy and just and who expects those who know him to exhibit his character in the many practical affairs of life.”\(^3\)

- Hebrew wisdom was not viewed as being theoretical, but practical—God’s principles of right and wrong were to be lived out in daily life. In the wisdom literature, wisdom focuses on ethical and spiritual conduct.

C. Hokmah in the Wisdom Literature:

1. Wisdom is Divine

   - Proverbs 8:22–25 \(^\text{22v}\)
     - The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. 23Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. 24When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. 25Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth,

   - Wisdom is personified in these verses. Since wisdom was “at the beginning of his work,” wisdom is eternal since it belongs solely to God.

   - The source of wisdom is God, He who is holy, righteous, and just. Therefore, God alone must provide this wisdom for man (cf. 1 Cor 1:20).

2. Wisdom is the Source of Life

   - Proverbs 3:18 \(^\text{18}\)
     - She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed.

   - The “tree of life” is a symbol of the source of life (Gen 2:9). Like that tree, wisdom becomes the source of physical and spiritual life for the believer.

   - “Human beings regain that tree by humbling themselves and receiving words of eternal life by faith.”\(^4\)

   - Those who walk in the ways of wisdom will have a long and blessed life (v. 16).

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3. Wisdom is Moral

- **Proverbs 8:8–9** ~ All the words of my mouth are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them. They are all straight to him who understands, and right to those who find knowledge.

- All the virtues of wisdom reflect the perfect righteousness of God’s character… therefore, biblical wisdom is moral.

- There is nothing “twisted or crooked in them” for they come from the pure and truthful mind of God.

4. Wisdom is Available to all who will hear

- **Proverbs 1:20–21** ~ Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:

- Wisdom is found in the public places—in the street, in the markets… at the entrance of the city gates. This is emphasizing the truth that God’s wisdom is available to all who will heed it and follow it.

- Wisdom is not hidden or given to a selective few wise sages; it actually roams the streets looking for people to instruct.

D. The Types of Wisdom Literature

1. Proverbial Sayings

- **Proverbial sayings** are didactic, practical wisdom found in the book of Proverbs (e.g. Prov 10:1–29:27).

- **Proverbs 10:1** ~ The proverbs of Solomon. A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.

2. Moral Exhortations

- **Moral exhortations** are like those given by Solomon to his “son” (e.g. Prov 1:8–9:18). They are exhortations given for a number of various practical issues of life.

  - 1:8 ~ Don’t forsake your father’s teaching.
  - 1:10 ~ Don’t allow sinners to entice you.
  - 3:5–6 ~ Trust in the Lord with all your heart.
  - Chs. 5–6 ~ Exhortations to avoid adultery and the adulteress.

3. Extended Wisdom Discourse

- The book of Job and Ecclesiastes use *discourse* (*monological*—Ecl; *dialogical*—Job) to teach wisdom.

  - At times, Job uses debates with his three friends, as well as a series of debates with God. Through these debates, wisdom is understood both through the actions of God and Job’s responses.
III. The Wisdom Books

A. The Wisdom Psalms

- These psalms focus upon the merits of God’s wisdom and the practical life of righteousness (36, 37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128, 133).
- Four types of wisdom are found in the Psalms:
  1. *A proverb* (Psa 37; 127:1; 133:1)
  2. *A wisdom poem* (Psa 49)
  3. *A didactic teaching on the “fear of the Lord”* (Psa 25)
  4. *A psalm regarding doubt and struggles of faith* (Psa 73)

B. Job

- The book of Job—along with Ecclesiastes—deals primarily with *philosophical wisdom*. It asks the question, “Why?” Why is there suffering?
- Job deals specifically with the issue of suffering and the sovereignty of God.

C. Proverbs

- Proverbs applies wisdom to our daily lives so that the righteous man who fears the Lord will walk in His ways.
  - Contrasted with the *wise* man is the *foolish* man who lives contrary to the will of God and lacks wisdom, discernment, discretion, and discipline.

D. Ecclesiastes

- Ecclesiastes answers the question, “What is the true meaning of life?” The Preacher of Ecclesiastes sought to figure out life’s meaning and pursued wealth, pleasure, wisdom, works, and power.
  - He came to the conclusion that life is meaningless and vain apart from a right relationship with God.
  - The only source of meaning in life is God; He alone is the true source of satisfaction for mankind.

E. Song of Solomon

- Song of Solomon portrays the beauty of marital love, both in its physical and emotional aspects.
- Song of Solomon uses *dramatic poetry* which is dialogue in poetic form.
### IV. The Characteristics of Wisdom Literature

- There are 4 particular characteristics of the OT wisdom literature.

#### A. Addresses the Individual

- The wisdom literature is addressed primarily to the individual, not the nation. This is why the majority of the content in the wisdom literature deals with the daily issues of personal life.
- Wisdom literature hone\(s\) God’s truths down to the individual experience in life and how God’s people can live in a manner worthy of His name.

#### B. Authority is Moral Experience and Trained Intelligence

- OT wisdom, though not always expressing it, sees God behind all of life. For the Hebrew there was no sharp division between the sacred and secular. All of life was sacred.
  - Therefore, to say that the “authority” is “moral experience and trained intelligence” does not remove God’s authority behind the truth that is given.
- Biblical wisdom is gleaned from the *moral experience* of previous generations and the cause and effect relationships in life.

  - Prov 7:6–7
    
    ~ For at the window of my house I have looked out through my lattice, 7 and I have seen among the simple, I have perceived among the youths, a young man lacking sense,  
    
    Solomon appeals to his son on the basis of his own observations of this young foolish man. From his experience, he passes along this wisdom.

  - Prov 6:34–35
    
    ~ 34 For jealousy makes a man furious, and he will not spare when he takes revenge. 35 He will accept no compensation; he will refuse though you multiply gifts.
    
    From his moral experience, Solomon knows the *cause and effect* of adultery… it will cause a man to be furious and one who seeks revenge.

- Wisdom literature also comes by *trained intelligence* as one reflects the truths of life already found within God’s creation. Wisdom is gleaned from examining life and discovering God’s wisdom.
Proverbs 6:6 ~ Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.

- By observing the ant, one can glean wisdom—the wisdom of a disciplined life.

- It is concerned with learning enough to be able to choose the proper course of action for well being in life, often expressed metaphorically as the “two ways” or the “two paths” (cf. Psa 1).

C. Concern is the Workaday World

- Wisdom is concerned with the issues facing humanity in general, the typical and recurring aspects of life that face human beings on a daily basis.
  - Much of the rest of Scripture is concerned with those unique events in history in which God reveals himself.
- The goal of wisdom is to live in harmonious relationship with God, others, and the world.
- The focus is on interpersonal relationships, as well as reflective questions about the meaning of life and how to live it.

D. Method is Counsel and Instruction

- Wisdom literature communicates wisdom via counsel and instruction.

  Psalm 32:8 ~ I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

- Instruct (to impart knowledge) ~ Instruction is the impartation of God’s truth and knowledge. As one gleans more of God’s truth, they will have the potential to walk in wisdom.

- Counsel (to give advice to) ~ Counsel is to present a perspective, principle, or pathway of life that follows the Lord’s holiness.