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1

INTRODUCTION

The Old Testament books considered in this volume contain some of the most potent literature of human history, and the ideas they treat are among the most cogent that the human heart has entertained.

These books are not historically oriented. In fact, with the exception of the Psalms, they are relatively devoid of historical allusions. But while they do not reflect upon historical events, they are alive with the spirit of history. They grasp for and grapple with those essential concepts that set the Hebrew faith apart from that of its neighbors and ensure its survival in a pantheistic, power-greedy world.

Reflecting the essential theology of the Pentateuch, these books in general do not seek to convey directly God's word to man, as do the Prophets (e.g., "thus says the Lord"), but they entertain the questions that arise in the presence of the divine imperative. In part, the spokesmen in these five books speak for man to God (esp. in Job and many of the psalms), in contrast to the Prophets, who normally speak for God to man. Yet the book of Ecclesiastes is more a human monologue than a dialogue between man and God, whereas the Song of Songs is even more anthropocentric.

Moreover, they breathe a certain universality. The problem of suffering, the conscience marred by sin, the transience of human life, and the passionate love of woman and man, to mention only a few of the matters dealt with in these books, cut across national and ethnic lines to include all of the human race. The spokesmen in these books formulate

questions that have lain in man's subconscious mind, often without his having had courage to bring them to the surface.

The courageous spirit of Job, Ecclesiastes, and many of the psalms, therefore, is another characteristic of this literature. It is marked frequently by a mood of challenge and skepticism, saying things that are rooted deeply in man's being. These books focus on man's reflections on God and His response rather than on God's search for man.

Yet the divine Spirit hovers over man's effort to understand, to figure out his world, to fathom the meaning of his relationship to God. The theological orientation toward creation in wisdom literature is not coincidental. For to unravel the meaning of human life will lead one all the way back to its beginning. The individual and personal nature of the books that we undertake to study is evidence of the attention given in the Old Testament to the importance of the individual to God. He began the race with an individual, and His love continues to be applied personally as well as corporately. One might read the Pentateuch and see only a faint shadow of himself reflected there. The historical books may overwhelm him with facts and events. The Prophets, by some mere chance, may pass him by with their deep convictions and concerns about their own societies and world. But the poetic books will find him wherever he is.

THE POETIC BOOKS

The five books known as the Poetic Books are found in the third division of the Hebrew Bible, which is called the "Writings," or *Kethubim*.[1] The Greek language has given this division the title *Hagiographa* (sacred writings). The term "Poetic Books" obviously points to the poetic nature of the contents, even though Ecclesiastes is included and is written in an elevated prosaic style that only at times has a metrical pattern (e.g., 11:7–12:8).

The Masoretes of the Medieval Age grouped Job, Proverbs, and Psalms together by giving a special system of poetic accentuation to these three books, mnemonically called "The Book of Truth" because in Hebrew the first letter of each of these books taken together spelled

1. The Hebrew Bible has these three divisions: I. Torah (Pentateuch); II. Prophets, including (A.) Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) and (B.) Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve Prophets); and III. Writings

'emeth (truth). The other two books of the five, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, were included in a special sub-group of the Writings called the *Five Megilloth* ("scrolls"), namely, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. The purpose of this grouping was liturgical, for each book was read at an important Jewish festival, a practice that continues to this day.

The order of the Five Megilloth follows the order of the festivals to which they are assigned: Song of Songs (Passover), Ruth (Pentecost), Lamentations (Fast of the Ninth of Ab, commemorating the destruction of both Temples), Ecclesiastes (Feast of Tabernacles), and Esther (Purim). The reading of the Song of Songs during the Passover celebration alludes to the spiritual interpretation of the book that was normative in ancient Judaism, and that emphasized the love between the Lord and Israel. Since the Passover commemorated the formalization of that special relationship, the Song seemed appropriate. The reading of the book of Ecclesiastes on the Festival of Tabernacles, however, seems inconsistent with the great joy of that feast. On this matter Victor Reichert remarks:

> The juxtaposition of piety and scepticism, irreconcilable as they may appear, seems to belong to the whole paradox of the Jewish mind. Faith and Reason write one upon the other in the palimpsest of our past. Perhaps it was to strike the balance of sanity that the Fathers of the Synagogue chose the recital of Ecclesiastes, with its melancholy refrain *Vanity of vanities, all is vanity*, on the Festival of Tabernacles when the Jew is commanded to rejoice. At all events, it is hard to escape the judgment that the major emphasis of Jewish thinking has indeed been that of setting our shoulders joyously to the world's wheel. That we have spared ourselves some unhappiness by, beforehand, slipping the Book of Ecclesiastes beneath our arm, seems likewise true.[2]

The Greek Septuagint placed all the poetic books after the historical writings and before the Prophets in the following order: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Job. The Latin Vulgate set Job at the head of the list rather than at the end, thus giving an order that the English versions have followed. This order evidently was dictated

2. Victor E. Reichert and A. Cohen, "Ecclesiastes," *The Five Megilloth*, The Soncino Books of the Bible (London: Soncino, 1952), 105.

by chronological considerations. Since Job was considered to have lived in the patriarchal times, the book of Job would precede Psalms, which was written largely by David several centuries after the Patriarchal Age. The last three books follow the Psalms by virtue of their association with David's son Solomon. Thus Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs have been grouped together as a Solomonic collection.

We must keep in mind as we approach the study of these books that the present order of the biblical books does not necessarily carry the authority of divine inspiration. Divine inspiration applies to content only. Rather, the order is the work of various editors in the history of transmission, as the varying arrangements of the versions and manuscripts testify.

Three of the five Poetic Books constitute the wisdom literature of the Old Testament: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. While most of the book of Psalms and possibly the Song of Songs cannot be strictly classified as "wisdom" in the technical sense, they certainly have affinities with it. As our subsequent discussion will show, several of the psalms may be classified as wisdom psalms, and the Song of Songs shares the didactic nature of wisdom literature as well as its literary form (i.e., a song). Therefore, we are no more inaccurate referring to this collection of five books as "wisdom literature" than we are by attributing to it the title "Poetic Books." Indeed the bulk of the material truly belongs in the category of wisdom. Thus we may better understand all these books in the context of the wisdom movement and literature in ancient Israel and the Near East.

WISDOM AS A PERSONAL DYNAMIC

Biblical wisdom was a dynamic in ancient Israel that operated in three dimensions: the personal, universal, and literary. The personal dimension was characterized by both theological and practical categories. The universal dimension dealt with the ultimate categories of theology, explaining wisdom as an attribute of God Himself. The literary dimension was merely the vehicle of the wisdom movement, inscripturating the propositions and precepts of wisdom for posterity. We shall further explain this three-dimensional nature of wisdom.

In Personal Skills

An examination of those passages in the Old Testament that use the noun "wisdom" (*hochmāh*) and the adjective "wise" (*hāchām*) reveals that

they were used even in reference to practical arts and skills. These terms were applied to those artisans who designed and constructed the Tabernacle: Bezalel, the architect of the Tabernacle (Ex. 35:30–36:1), the craftsmen who made Aaron's priestly garments (Ex. 28:3), and the women weavers (Ex. 35:25–26). Of Bezalel and Oholiab it is said that the Lord "filled them with skill [lit., *hochmāh* of heart] to perform every work of an engraver and of a designer and of an embroiderer" (Ex. 35:35). The application of these terms to the practical arts is even broader than the Tabernacle narrative. Goldsmiths (Jer. 10:9), sailors (Ps. 107:27; Ezek. 27:8), women skilled in lamentation (Jer. 9:17), magicians and soothsayers (Gen. 41:8; Isa. 44:25), and military strategists and statesmen (Isa. 10:13; 29:14; Jer. 49:7) share these terms to designate their particular skills. Moreover, wisdom is closely associated with the musical arts in 1 Kings 4:32, for the product of God's gift of wisdom to Solomon included songs as well as proverbs.

In Personal Philosophy

Yet this use of the terms "wisdom" and "wise" does not get to the heart of the personal dimension of wisdom. The nature of language is to develop a broad spectrum of meaning for a single word, and the above examples illustrate the use of our terms for the technical arts and skills without actually opening up the essential meaning of wisdom as it is used in the wisdom literature of the Bible. As one reads through that material, one quickly recognizes that wisdom was a *personal life dynamic* that enabled one to assimilate, sort, and categorize the elements and issues of life so as to provide a meaningful synthesis. Its wide span encompasses the struggle of a righteous man to understand his suffering and the limp efforts of a lazy man to overcome his sloth. We might begin with examples out of Proverbs regarding the basic relationships within the family unit, which are frequently the subject of this literature, both from the standpoint of the parents' responsibility to their children (Prov. 13:22, 24; 22:6) and the children's to their parents (1:8–9; 15:5). The stability of the family is further assured by admonitions that highly esteem marriage (12:4; 19:14; 31:10–31) and warn against adultery and sexual promiscuity (5:1–14).

Yet the scope of wisdom reaches outside the family unit to regulate personal and social behavior that builds a stable and productive community. Moral virtues such as self-discipline (10:17; 13:13), temperate speech (10:19; 11:12), and honesty (15:27; 16:11), and vices

such as slander (10:18; 19:5), envy (23:17–18), and gluttony (23:1–3), are subjects of wisdom's regulatory function. The scope broadens to include advice for the people's relationship to the king (25:67) and the king's to the people (14:28; 25:4–5), and justice in the courts (24:23). This list could be greatly extended.

While these principles and regulations describe the horizontal scale of ancient Israelite life, wisdom admonished her patrons on the vertical aspect of their lives as well. The Lord's sovereign will was uppermost in the world, and the individual was the object of His careful guidance:

> The mind of man plans his way,
> But the Lord directs his steps.
>
> (Prov. 16:9)

> Many are the plans in a man's heart,
> But the counsel of the Lord, it will stand.
>
> (Prov. 19:21)

Human ingenuity has its place, but only God can assure success in life:

> Commit your works to the Lord,
> And your plans will be established.
>
> (Prov. 16:3)

> Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
> And do not lean on your own understanding.
> In all your ways acknowledge Him,
> And He will make your paths straight.
>
> (Prov. 3:5–6)

Indeed, the undergirding notion of the wisdom-controlled life is the "fear of the Lord." It is a phrase that has layers of meaning. The ground layer may be understood as a *personal attitude* or *disposition* toward the Lord, illustrated by the analogy of one's fear of the king:

> My son, fear the Lord and the king;
> Do not associate with those who are given to change;
> For their calamity will rise suddenly,
> And who knows the ruin that comes from both of them?
> (Prov. 24:21–22)

At the risk of confusing the issue by modern use (or abuse) of theological terminology, the "fear of the Lord" denotes piety in the most positive sense of the word, a spiritual disposition that may be described as a proper relationship to God and one's neighbor. It is wisdom's comprehensive term for religion.[3]

A second layer, not unrelated to the first, is that of moral virtue or appropriate behavior. Job is described in these terms as one who was "blameless, upright, fearing God, and *turning away from evil*" (Job 1:1, emphasis added; cf. also Prov. 8:13). "Fearing God" and "turning away from evil" are parallel expressions, the second expanding on the first. The book of Proverbs, as seen above, provides ample proof that moral virtues are an important part of the personal portrait of one who feared the Lord. Admittedly the revelation at Sinai is not consciously wisdom's mode of communicating the will of God, but the theological/moral principles of the books of Proverbs and Job are those of the Decalogue, which calls for sexual purity, honor of parents, integrity toward one's neighbor, and so on.[4]

A third layer intermeshes with the second. The knowledge of human frailty and divine strength is endemic to the fear of the Lord (Prov. 3:5–7). It is a balanced perspective on God and man.

It would not be inaccurate to say that comprehensively the fear of the Lord is a worldview that attempts to synthesize the elements of human life and work. It is an "educational standard" (compare our objective standard of research) that gives balance to the individual as he relates both to his world and God.

Henri Blocher contends that all three wisdom books as they have come to us are a witness to the theological premise that the fear of the Lord is the principle of wisdom. The "fear of the Lord" forms a literary

3. Bernard Bamberger, "Fear and Love of God in the Old Testament," HUCA 6 (1929): 43–47.

4. Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 64.

inclusion in Proverbs, for the book opens with the statement that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7a), and concludes with the portrait of the virtuous woman who personifies the fear of the Lord (31:30). Moreover, the author of Job begins the book by describing his hero as the paragon of wisdom in terms of his fear of the Lord (1:1) and underscores that character portrait with God's affirmation at the end of the poem on wisdom (chap. 28, note v. 28). Likewise Ecclesiastes' assessment of human responsibility is to "fear God and keep His commandments" (Eccles. 12:13).[5]

WISDOM AS A UNIVERSAL DYNAMIC

In addition to being a personal dynamic, wisdom is also a universal dynamic. This second dimension of wisdom is readily seen in Proverbs 8:22–31. Some scholars believe that this passage presents wisdom as a hypostasis, having an existence distinct from God though expressing His nature, much like wisdom in the apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon* (Wisd. of Sol. 1:6–7; 6:12–24; 7:1–8:18) or the Logos in John's gospel. The critical word is *qānāh* (Prov. 8:22), which generally means "to acquire," or "to possess," but in fewer instances has the sense of "create" (Deut. 32:6; Ps. 139:13). The sense of "possess" is preferable in the context because the Lord is the Creator and wisdom is merely present with Him prior to and during His work of creation.[6]

It is my opinion that Solomon seeks to personify a divine attribute. Yet, in this way he asserts that wisdom is an emanation of the divine life, much as one would understand love to be an emanation of the life of God. Whereas law and prophecy admonished Israel to turn to *God* for life, wisdom personified admonished individuals to turn to *her* and receive life. This further supports the view that wisdom was a symbol of a divine attribute. The Hebrew mind would not entertain a dualism between *God* as source-of-life versus *wisdom* as source-of-life. The effect of this argument is to connect wisdom both to God and to the created world in a way that unites God, people, and the world in an inseverable bond.

God addressed Israel through the law by commandment and precept,

5. Henri Blocher, "The Fear of the Lord as the 'Principle' of Wisdom," *The Tyndale Bulletin* 28 (1977): 3–4.

6. R. B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 71–72.

through the prophets by His word, and through the sages by wisdom. As a principle of revelation, wisdom was the "rationale of the cosmos,"[7] imparting understanding to mankind. Without it the world and human life would be devoid of meaning. 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.

While redemptive history is not a conscious rubric of wisdom literature in the Bible, the sovereign control of God in the universe nevertheless lies behind the literature, and this inevitably involves history, for God is the originator of the dynamic force that moves history and nature (Job 9:4; 11:6; 12:13; 32:8; 37:16; Prov. 2:6; 8:22–31). This implicit concept came to fruition in the Wisdom of Solomon where wisdom is depicted as the driving force of history (Wisd. of Sol. 10–19). So critical is God's revelation through wisdom that the individual's posture toward her determines his destiny (Prov. 8:32–36). Just as in the Pentateuch one's response to the law, or in the Prophets one's response to the prophetic word, so in wisdom literature one's response to wisdom, the medium of divine revelation, determines one's happiness and well-being.

WISDOM AS A LITERARY DYNAMIC

The three wisdom books of the Old Testament (Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes), the wisdom elements of the Psalms,[8] and other wisdom fragments distributed throughout the Old Testament testify to the importance of the wisdom movement in ancient Israel. The literary legacy is as rich in its variety of genres as prophetic literature. In the Old Testament the term *māshāl* is used rather broadly to include a proverb, riddle, or longer composition involving comparisons and analogies. The term itself comes from the verb that means "to be like, compare."

Wisdom Genres

More specifically the literary form of the *proverb* was a favorite genre of wisdom literature. It was short and pithy, its effectiveness depending in part upon the concise, witty manner of expressing an idea or truth.

7. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament,* trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 2:89.

8. See p. 160 (on wisdom psalms).

It provided the mind with an easily accessible entry into the truth expressed. With only a few words one might recall a truth that could effervesce and effect a change of mind or attitude in a given situation:

> A good name is to be more desired than great riches,
> Favor is better than silver and gold.
> (Prov. 22:1)

This proverb might raise to a level of consciousness a truth that could otherwise be smothered in circumstances where one's action easily endangered one's reputation. Thus one would be diverted from a wrong course. Moreover, the terms of comparison—great riches, silver and gold—further highlight the precious value of one's reputation. Thus both mental accessibility and the impact of the literary form contribute to the effectiveness of the proverb.

The *riddle* was the more enigmatic form of wisdom literature. Its method was to disguise an idea so that the hearers might be confused or challenged to search for its meaning. Samson used this form with the Philistines (Judg. 14:14), and the Queen of Sheba came to investigate the degree of Solomon's wisdom by testing him with riddles (1 Kings 10:1). Proverbs 1:6 equates riddle and proverb, but no riddle of the classical type found in Judges 14:14 has survived in biblical wisdom literature. Yet Crenshaw makes the interesting suggestion that disintegrated riddles lie behind some of the proverbs.[9]

One clear example of *allegory* can be seen in Ecclesiastes 12:1–7, where old age is described, at least in part, as a deteriorating estate. Elsewhere in the Old Testament the allegory is found in Judges 9:8–15 and Ezekiel 17:2–10.

The *dialogue* is represented *par excellence* by the book of Job. Elsewhere in canonical wisdom literature, however, dialogue is not prominent.

Ecclesiastes 1:12–2:16 takes the form of an *autobiographical narrative* in which the narrator relates his own personal experience.

The *prophetic address* twice becomes the literary form of wisdom's message in Proverbs (1:20–33; 8:1–36). She speaks through the lips

9. In this regard, James L. Crenshaw, "Wisdom," *Old Testament Wisdom*, ed. John H. Hayes (San Antonio: Trinity Univ., 1974), 242, draws attention to Proverbs 5:1–6, 15–23; 6:23–24; 16:15; 20:27; 23:27, 29–35; 25:2–3; 27:20. See his helpful discussion of wisdom genres on pp. 229–62.

of the prophetess. As already suggested, this implies that wisdom and prophecy were not basically antagonistic.

The Addressees of Wisdom

Since wisdom literature was addressed to the individual rather than to corporate society, national interests fell into the background. In this respect the literature is quite different from the Law and the Prophets. Because of this aspect of wisdom, history was not one of the foci of the canonical wisdom writers, although we should not assume that they had no interest in history. Their concern for the past was more philosophical than historical—how does one view the past? They had little concern for writing about historical events. Thus, while the corporate concern of wisdom was in no way primary, it was nevertheless served by pointing the individual in the direction of the good life, which in the long run contributed to the good society.

One of the purposes of wisdom literature was to instruct the young on how to achieve the good life and serve the social order well. In Proverbs the addressees were often the upper-class youth who were potential future leaders. Ecclesiastes addressed itself to the issues that were of concern to the upper class as well—the futility of wealth and pleasure, yet their proper use for life's enjoyment. So the teachers had the responsibility of transferring to their students the moral and cultured life, which involved manners before royalty, personal honor, morality, and many other matters. They sought to equip them for decision making and a life of responsible leadership.

Yet wisdom was not limited to the upper class. The book of Job, whose main character is wealthy and a leader in his community, nevertheless deals with timeless issues that cut across social structures. Injustice knows no class boundaries. Unmerited suffering is nondiscriminatory.

Ecclesiastes lamented the social oppression of that age, a matter that anyone, indiscriminate of social boundaries, could identify with. The book of Proverbs issued folk proverbs and moral instruction that encompassed the shared experience and concern of people in general. The practicality of wisdom literature in the Old Testament leads us to believe that the common people were attracted to it, even though the wisdom activities of the royal court may have had an elite character not accessible to the commoner. We are left with the impression that Solomon's court was buzzing with wisdom activity (1 Kings 4:29–34). In fact, his reputation for wisdom was the one thing that attracted the

Queen of Sheba to make her state visit (1 Kings 10:1–9). Her reaction to what she observed prompted her to speak of the privilege of those who were permanent members of the court: "How blessed are your men, how blessed are these your servants who stand before you continually and hear your wisdom" (1 Kings 10:8).

During the time of Hezekiah, the Judean court was quite alive with wisdom activity as well, for this king was the benefactor who gave inducement to his "men" (evidently a technical term that refers to scholastics; cf. "your men" in the above passage) to collect and edit the Solomonic proverbs (Prov. 25:1).

In view of the emphasis upon marriage, the home, child rearing, and domestic stability and responsibility, it is quite conceivable that wisdom was popularly employed in the family as part of the home educational process.

Life Setting of Wisdom

With the development of form criticism in the last century came an interest in the real-life situation out of which certain genres of literature arose. This method provided both a way to understand the literature better and to peer through literary peepholes into the sociological structure of the society. From our discussion above, it would naturally follow that the life situation of wisdom was diverse. Granted that the court was at times the place where wisdom thought was sustained and nurtured, wisdom was still not limited to royal circles. We would infer from the down-to-earth nature of wisdom and its interest in the family that the home was one of the life situations where proverbial wisdom was born and nurtured.

The Scribe

It is believed by some scholars that in the monarchical period the "scribe" was an official in the king's court. That he was a very important person is verified by the following texts: 2 Samuel 8:17; 20:25; 2 Kings 12:10; 18:18; 1 Chronicles 27:32; Jeremiah 36:12; 37:15. Quite obviously in a world where the art of writing was not generally shared by all, those who could read and write had vistas of opportunity open to them that were not available to those without those skills. Thus in the monarchical period it is quite possible that scribes and wise men were very closely associated and were sometimes identical. During the postexilic era the scribes were definitely the teachers of wisdom.

WISDOM, LAW, AND PROPHECY

As a religious phenomenon, wisdom belonged, along with law and prophecy, to the mainstream of religious life. And while the three constituted, for the most part, the total religious experience of ancient Israel, wisdom nevertheless distinguished itself in ways that were not characteristic of law and prophecy.

Prophecy, despite its prominent differences to the law, was not basically a countermovement to law, but rather it reawakened Israel's consciousness to God's covenant demands laid out in the law of Moses. Its impact on Israel is incalculable, and ironically its greatest failure, that is, to turn Israel and Judah away from idolatry and thus avert the historical disasters of 722 and 586 B.C., became its greatest success, especially in regards to Judah. The prophets were there to reassure and comfort the devastated and dispersed people, and the unparalleled return to Palestine in the late sixth century was underwritten by Judah's spiritual return to the Lord. A repentant people recognized at last that the prophets were right. But as for the great historical success, witnessed by the restoration of Judah, prophecy did not last to see Judah's political independence restored. As that era approached,[10] the prophetic voice was no longer heard (1 Macc. 4:46). Yet after the disquieting lull, the momentum that the prophets had imparted to religious experience revived in the form of apocalyptic messages.

The role of wisdom as compared to prophecy has been much discussed. Some scholars infer from Jeremiah 8:8–9 that the prophets came into conflict with wisdom when it attempted to supersede the word of the Lord.[11] They certainly had strong words of condemnation for the sacrificial system when people and priest insisted that sacrifice possessed an intrinsic redemptive value (cf. Isa. 1:10–15; 28:7; Jer. 2:8; 7:22; Hos. 4:4–6; 5:1; Amos 7:10–11; Mic. 6:6–8; Mal. 1:6–2:17). Yet the fact

10. After the return to Judah, which was made possible by the decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C. (Ezra 1:1–4), Palestine was controlled by the Persians, Greeks, and Seleucids in succession, and only in 142 B.C. did the Maccabees succeed in restoring the country to an independent state. That brief period of independence terminated when the Romans took control in 63 B.C.

11. Johannes Lindblom, "Wisdom in the Old Testament Prophets," WIANE, 195–96. McKane takes strong exception to the opinion that the prophets and wise men lived in accord. Rather he urges that their basic presuppositions were so different as to arouse stiff antagonism between the two groups. See esp. pp. 126–30.

that the prophets attributed wisdom to the Lord (Isa. 28:23–29; Jer. 10:12) and shared its stylistic features (such as the use of the proverb—Isa. 49:24; Jer. 13:12; 15:12; 23:28; 31:29; Ezek. 16:44; 18:2—and common vocabulary[12]) would sustain the position that the prophets did not wholly reject wisdom.

The congenial spirit of wisdom toward prophecy can be seen in Proverbs 8 where wisdom is personified as a prophetess who calls out her message in the city gates. The poem blends the functions of wisdom and prophecy,[13] federating their concerns for truth, justice, and righteousness, and depicts them jointly authorizing kings to reign. Having established the joint function of prophecy and wisdom in the providential maintenance of the world (vv. 4–21), the poem then turns to creation and, by virtue of wisdom's assumption of the prophetic role, associates prophecy, like wisdom, with creation.

Law, which had its institutional structure interrupted by the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C., was a more pervasive phenomenon than prophecy, for it regulated every facet of Israelite life. Even a temporary cessation of priestly functions could not break its hold on the religious life of the ancient Israelites. Most likely the oral law had already begun to take shape prior to 586,[14] and its ongoing development made room for the establishment of the synagogue in the exilic period. The oral law had the effect of extending the influence of the written law in that it regulated the minute details of daily life. Wisdom moved in a similar direction. While it provided broad theological/philosophical categories for understanding life and its issues (sometimes called *higher wisdom*), it also offered advice for the development of personal behavior, social protocol, and ethical standards (sometimes called *lower wisdom*).

12. Ibid., 197–204. Cf. these passages where the Lord is presented as the originator of wisdom: Job 9:4; 11:6; 12:13; 32:8; 37:16; Proverbs 2:6; 8:22–31.

13. Compare this joint function with Hosea 12:13 where Israel's existence is attributed to the work of prophecy.

14. See Deuteronomy 1:5, where "Moses undertook to expound this law"; that may establish the interpretative precedent. Thus the Levitical interpretation of the law, which accompanied Ezra's reading of it in 444 B.C., although sometimes considered the beginning of the oral law, would likely be only evidence that such a function was normative. Ezra's implicit endorsement of this interpretative tradition may have lent greater authority to the oral law.

Without imposing a wisdom character upon the creation narrative of Genesis 1, we can see the triune paradigm of wisdom spelled out in Genesis 1:26–27. First, it is *theological*, relating mankind to His Creator: "Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." So we should not be surprised that the "fear of the Lord" is the theological cornerstone of biblical wisdom. Second, it is *ecological*, involving the human race in an inseverable relationship to the natural order: "and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." Third, it is *sociological*, for it commits human beings to interpersonal relationships: "male and female He created them." In effect, wisdom, like law but unlike prophecy, sought to develop a comprehensive system of thought and behavior, reaching into every facet of life. We should not think, however, that the two operated on parallel tracks without intersecting (cf. Prov. 6:21–22 and 7:3 to Deut. 6:4–9). Wisdom drew from law, and quite likely law drew from wisdom. They were not mutually exclusive. Perhaps their kindred spirits are best illustrated by the fact that by the time of Jesus ben Sirach the two had become companions.

In a sense, wisdom supplemented the law and cultic practice. It sought to do what the cult could not do—to instruct in those ways with which the Temple and priests were not greatly concerned. Some scholars have described the earliest form of Israelite wisdom, or "old wisdom" as it is sometimes called, as purely secular. William McKane, representing this position, has argued that the wise man was a statesman, or official, and that his "counsel" was not religious at all. He viewed the life situation as the court and old wisdom as entirely secular.[15] Although the sphere of operation of wisdom may seem noncultic, we must agree with von Rad that the basic element of wisdom even in preexilic times was the "fear of God." A purely secular character for wisdom would seem out of keeping with a society where the secular and the sacred were so closely intertwined. Even though the Temple and priestly order did not likely spawn the wisdom movement, it is not very likely either that they were opposed to it. The emphasis within the

15. William McKane, *Prophets and Wise Men* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1965), 53. See also Claus Westermann, *What Does the Old Testament Say About God?* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979), 99–100 and Walter Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline,* trans. David E. Green (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978), 155–66.

wisdom books upon keeping the commandments and faithfulness to God and the law would suggest a supportive role for wisdom in relation to the religious institution.[16]

It is doubtful that wisdom as a religious phenomenon was ever intended to stand alone. It undergirded the law, supporting its ethical and juridical principles, while it shared the concerns of the prophets for truth, justice, and righteousness. That is not to suggest, however, that there were no creative tensions or diversity of emphases between wisdom and its religious counterparts.

HEBREW POETRY

The Hebrew language has an intrinsic musical quality that naturally supports poetic expression. It is basically a language of verbs and nouns, and these are the building blocks for Hebrew poetry. Although there are no strict rules of rhyme and meter,[17] the language depends largely upon stress or accent for its rhythmic quality. Theodore H. Robinson has observed:

> The immense strength of its accent gives it a rhythmic movement which we miss in languages which have a slighter stress. The paucity of adjectives adds to the dignity and impressiveness of the style, and the absence of a large stock of abstract terms leads the poet to use imagery and metaphor in its place.[18]

Since the discovery of the Ugaritic texts in 1929 and subsequent years, lively discussion of the poetry of Ugarit and of the Old Testament has taken place. The landmark lectures of Bishop Robert Lowth on Hebrew poetry in 1753 showed *parallelism* to be the primary feature of Hebrew poetry. Lowth identified three types of parallelism: *synonymous, antithetic,* and *synthetic.*[19] In recent years, based in part upon Ugaritic

16. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 1:433–34. Cf. also R. B. Y. Scott, "Priesthood, Prophecy, Wisdom, and the Knowledge of God," JBL 80 (1961): 1–15, who proposes that there is evidence for a certain mingling of the functions of prophet, priest, and sage, and that there was a common element in their teaching.

17. There is presently no scholarly consensus on the prominence of strict meter in Hebrew poetry.

18. Theodore H. Robinson, *The Poetry of the Old Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1947), 25.

19. Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trans. G. Gregory, vol. 1, lect. 3 (1787; repr., New York: Garland, 1971), 68–69.

studies, there seems to be developing a scholarly consensus that this scheme was too simplistic. We must speak in terms of both *syntactic* (word order) and *semantic* (word meaning) parallelism. Syntactic parallelism is more difficult to represent in English because the word order is often difficult to render in translation in an intelligible way. Semantic parallelism is easier to illustrate.

In his recent work Robert Alter presents a stimulating discussion of Hebrew poetry and emphasizes the idea that language tends to avoid true synonymity. He speaks in terms of *focusing*, by which the poet introduces a term in one line and then focuses more specifically on it in the next. Sometimes the effect is an intensification of meaning.[20]

We may speak of "units" or "terms" in Hebrew poetry, rather than of metrical feet. Each unit has one major stress, which normally falls on a verb, noun, or adjective, or some other major word in the thought structure that is to be emphasized. Whereas the major words will generally be obvious in English translation, that will not always be the case, nor will a smooth translation always permit placing the accented terms in the order of the Hebrew text (syntactic parallelism). Thus the units have to be determined on the basis of the Hebrew. In the translations below we indicate each thought-unit in hyphenated form. The end of a line (some prefer the term *verset* instead of line) is represented by the single diagonal and the end of a verse by the double diagonal.

Units combine to form a verse-member (sometimes called a "stich," from Greek *stichos*, "line") or a line (or verset), two units being the minimum number for constituting a line, and generally no more than three.[21] The lines then combine to form the larger component of Hebrew verse, called a *distich* if two lines are involved, and a *tristich* if three. Psalm 19:1–2 will illustrate this:

1.	The-heavens	are relating	the-glory-of-God;/
	and-the-firmament	is telling	the-work-of-his-hands.//
2.	Day-by-day	pours-out	speech,/
	and-night-by-night	declares	knowledge.//

(author's trans.)

20. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 3–26, 62–84.

21. Robinson, *Poetry of the Old Testament*, 25.

The individual units in the first line (stich) number three, with three corresponding units in the second line. The first unit, "the heavens," has a corresponding unit, "and the firmament," in the second line, as does each of the other units in line one. Further, since each of the units or terms in line one has a corresponding term in the second line, this parallelism is considered *complete*.[22] In addition, the parallelism operates within the same verse, or distich, and is termed *internal* parallelism. When the parallel thought set up in one distich has its corresponding components in a successive distich, it is called *external*. Since the larger verse is composed of two lines, it is called a distich. The three units of the two lines of verse 1 may be diagrammed as:

a	b	c
a´	b´	c´

However, this parallelism does not entirely do justice to the Hebrew parallelism, since in verse 1 "the-work-of-his-hands" comes first in Hebrew (i.e., "The work-of-his-hands is telling the firmament," which is ambiguous because "the firmament," not "the-work-of-his-hands," is the subject of the verb in the Hebrew line). While verse 2 more exactly renders the syntactic parallelism of the Hebrew line, verse 1b as rendered within the parenthesis shows the difficulty of reproducing the exact Hebrew order in translation, since following that order produces an ambiguous sentence.

Yet semantic parallelism is another matter. "The heavens" is a more general term (Gen. 1:1), whereas the parallel unit, "the firmament," is a more specific term for the expanse above the earth (Gen. 1:6–8). Similarly, "the glory of God" is a more general term, and "the work of his hands" a more specific one for the same idea. Although they are parallel, they are not strictly synonymous. Thus the parallelism has moved from the general to the specific (what Alter calls "focusing").

Within each unit of the above lines there is one stress (accent) that falls on the main idea, producing a rhythmical pattern of 3:3.

Our example from Psalm 19 has three units in each line, but the simplest kind of synonymous parallelism has two units in each. Jacob's blessing in Genesis 49 provides a good illustration:

22. George Buchanan Gray, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry* (1915; repr., New York: KTAV, 1972), 59.

I-will-divide-them in-Jacob,/
and-I-will-scatter-them in-Israel.//
(v. 7b, author's trans.)

This would be diagrammed as:

a b
a´ b´

The rhythmical pattern would be 2:2, which is also the simplest metrical pattern in Hebrew verse.

The semantic parallelism moves from the idea of "divide" in the first line and intensifies to "scatter" in the second. The parallel second terms ("in Jacob" and "in Israel") suggest different thoughts and associations. So semantic parallelism is not exact.

Gray has also pointed out that frequently synonymous parallelism is syntactically *incomplete*.[23] That is, not every unit in the first line has a corresponding unit in the parallel line. For example:

The-earth is-the-Lord's, and-the-fulness-thereof;/
the-world, and-they-that-dwell-therein.//
(Ps. 24:1 KJV)

The first and third terms of the first line have corresponding terms in the second line, but the second term ("is the Lord's") does not, which means that the parallelism is *incomplete* (even though the idea of "is the Lord's" is implicitly carried over into the second line). Although the sense of the Lord's possessing the earth is implied, formally it is not expressed in the second line. We would diagram this verse thus:

a b c
a´ c´

The rhythmical pattern is 3:2 (three terms in the first line and two in the second), and the larger member itself is a distich.

To demonstrate how important, yet how ambiguous, rhythm is in Hebrew poetry, we may take the distinctive rhythm of the lament, called

23. Ibid.

qinah ("lament"), identified by both Lowth[24] and Karl Budde.[25] The book of Lamentations is a classical illustration of this rhythmical pattern, which has three stresses in the first line and two in the second (3:2). The falling pattern from three to two seemed appropriate for the tone of lamentation and mourning. Amos's dirge over Israel may illustrate:

She-has-fallen, she-will-not-rise again—/ The-virgin Israel.//
She-lies-neglected on her-land;/ There-is-none to-raise-her-up.//
(Amos 5:2)

While this verse illustrates the 3:2 rhythm in the first distich, it also illustrates the difficulty with this rhythmical pattern. In order to get the three stresses in the second distich, we have to allow a stress upon the preposition "on." Actually the second distich may be 2:2 rather than 3:2, although the first is clearly 3:2. There are even instances when the 3:2 rhythmical pattern is used to express joy and trust:

The-Lord-is my-light and-my-salvation;/
whom shall-I-fear?//
The-Lord-is the-strength-of my-life;/
of-whom shall-I-be-afraid?//
(Ps. 27:1 KJV)

The difficulty of forcing Hebrew poetry into a strict metrical system is hereby illustrated, and the strict identification of one rhythmical pattern with one emotional mood should be apparent as well.

The second type of parallelism that Lowth identified was *antithetic*. This means that the terms of the second part of the parallelism express the opposite, or contrary, idea:

For-the-Lord knoweth the-way-of the-righteous:/
but-the-way-of the-ungodly shall-perish.//
(Ps. 1:6 KJV)

24. Lowth, vol. 2, lect. 22, pp. 121–39.

25. Karl Budde, "Poetry [Hebrew]," *A Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner's, 1905–11), 4:2–13.

It will be noted that the life of the righteous is put in contrast with that of the wicked. The effect of this type of parallelism is contrast. The diagram would be:

a	b	c		d
		c´	b´	d´

The terms of the second line do not always follow the same order as those of the first. Here the second term of line one ("knoweth") has its corresponding term ("shall perish") at the end of line two (the English order does not, as here, always represent the Hebrew order of the terms).

The third type of parallelism that Lowth identified was *synthetic*. This has been the most disputed of the three. Some have claimed that this is simply a category into which all the examples that are not synonymous and antithetic can be grouped. The idea of synthetic parallelism, however, is that the thought of the first verse-member is extended by an additional term or terms in the second member. Psalm 1:2–3 may illustrate:

But-his-delight-is in-the-law-of-the-Lord;/
and-in-his-law doth-he-meditate day-and-night.//

And-he-shall-be-like-a-tree planted-by-the-rivers-of-water,/
that-bringeth-forth his-fruit in-his-season.//
(KJV)

In the first verse the idea of line one is extended in line two to describe the extent of his meditation ("day and night"), an idea not contained in the first line. In the second verse the description of the "tree" of the first line is given in the second line ("that bringeth forth his fruit in his season"), thus expanding the thought of line one.

One of the basic methods of deriving greater impact from the terms used is varying their position in the line. One such method is called *chiasm* (because when diagrammed it forms the points of the Greek "x," which is called *chi*). Proverbs 2:4 supplies a good example. We will need to restore the English terms to the Hebrew order.

If-thou-seekest-her as-silver,/
and-as-for-hid-treasures searchest-for-her//
(KJV)

Our diagram will be

a b
b´ a´

The variation of position in the second line highlights the great value of wisdom, which is spoken of here, by inverting the corresponding terms.

The line is the basic component of Hebrew verse (above the level of the individual units or terms), but there is evidence in some instances of a larger component, which may be called *stanza* or *strophe*. In the case of the alphabetic acrostic discussed below, each new letter suggests a new strophe. Sometimes a refrain may mark the end of one strophe and signal the beginning of a new. An example may be found in Psalms 42–43 where the same couplet punctuates the poem (42:5, 11; 43:5). Another illustration is Isaiah 9:7–10:4, where the recurring refrain points toward a strophic structure. Sometimes in the Psalms the term *selah* seems to break the poem into stanzas (e.g., Ps. 46), but this must not be taken too rigidly, for in other instances it does not seem to function like that. We can often appeal, moreover, to thought content, which sometimes provides the clue for dividing the psalm into strophes. Psalm 91, to illustrate, may fall into eight two-line stanzas, each being somewhat independent of its neighbors.[26]

Besides these features of Hebrew poetry, certain sound techniques are used to enhance the beauty and the impact of the words used. It is usually impossible to imitate these in an English translation, so we lose the beauty in the transfer from Hebrew to the receptor language. One such technique is *alliteration*, which is the use of the same or similar sounds at the beginning of words or syllables and in stressed positions. When the sound is consonantal, it is called *consonance*. Psalm 126:6, for example, uses the Hebrew letter *kaph* (similar to the German *ch*) in the first three terms of the line and three different sibilants in the next three terms (*s, sh,* and *z*).

Assonance, the other alliterative technique, employs the same or similar vowel (rather than consonant) sounds in accented positions. This may be seen, for example, in Ezekiel 27:27 as Ezekiel celebrates the fall of Tyre. The emotional tone of the verse is intensified by the repetition of the *ê* and *ai* sounds.

26. Robinson, *Poetry of the Old Testament*, 45.