

# Biblical Poetry and Wisdom Literature I

Overview of Hebrew poetry; The *Ketuvim* or “Writings”; the “Song of Songs”; introduction to wisdom literature; Proverbs

Song of Solomon 1; Proverbs 1–9.

## Overview of Hebrew poetry

- **Much Old Testament scripture is poetic**
  - The Book of Psalms, obviously
  - Other parts of the *Ketuvim* or “Writings,” such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon
  - Much of the Latter Prophets
  - Even passages in the *Torah* such as Jacob’s Blessing (Genesis 49), Moses Song (Exodus 15), David’s Lament over Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1)
- **What is poetry?**
  - **Concentrated language**
    - Maximum of thought in a minimum of words
  - **Creative and evocative use of language**
    - Different diction (word choice), use of words to mean more than usual
    - Unusual syntactical structure
    - Distinctive in both **form** and **content** (more below)
- **Effects of Poetry**
  - Requires the reader to slow down, think about and interpret the material
  - Stirs deep feelings, emotional and spiritual

## Formal Features of Hebrew Poetry

### Structure of Individual Psalms

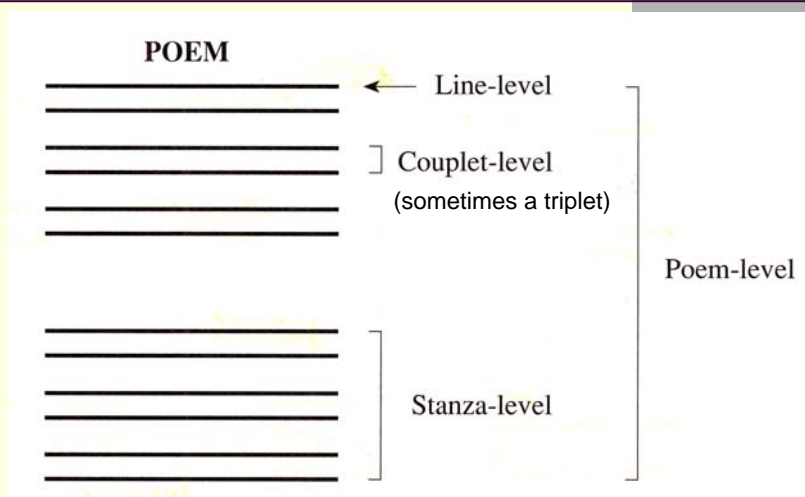
- *Much of the formal or "shape" of OT poetry is not evident in translation*
- Line level
  - Alliteration (repetition of initial consonants sounds in a line), paronomasia (verbal puns on similar sounding words), rhythm or patterns of stress (but not necessarily meter)
- "Verse" level
  - Most English verses consist of a **couplet** (bicolon) or sometimes a **triplet** (tricolon)
    - This is seen in some extent in translation, especially in study Bibles (in the KJV look for the colon (:))
    - Bicola and tricola are important for **parallelism**, and important content feature of OT poetry
- Stanza (or strophe) level
  - Group of couplets that constitute a sense unit, equivalent to a paragraph or pericope
- Poem level
  - Sometimes a scheme binds together an entire Psalm
  - Notable is the **acrostic**, where each verse begins with a certain letter
    - Psalms 34 and 119

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## Lines, Couplets, Stanzas, and Poems



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## Content Features of Hebrew Poetry

### Literary Features (particularly apparent in Psalms)

- **Compression**—large amount of thought into the least number of words
- **Creative and evocative use of language**
- **Parallelism**—correspondence in the ideas expressed in two or more successive lines
  - **Synonymous parallelism** (sense of A-line repeated in B-line)
    - *Why do the heathen rage,  
and the people imagine a vain thing? (Ps. 2:1)*
  - **Antithetical parallelism** (sense of A-line contrasted in B-line)
    - *For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous:  
but the way of the ungodly shall perish (Ps. 1:6)*
  - **Synthetic or climactic parallelism** (sense of A-line built upon in B-line)
    - *Give unto the LORD, O ye mighty,  
give unto the LORD glory and strength. (Ps. 29:1)*
    - *I glory in plainness,  
I glory in truth  
I glory in my Jesus  
for he hath redeemed my soul from hell (2 Nephi 33:6)*
- **Parallelism is important because, unlike rhythm and meter, figures of thought can be translated into another language!**

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## Musical Features of Hebrew Poetry

- **No ancient biblical music has survived**
  - David played on the harp as he sang . . .
  - **Selah**—enigmatic Hebrew term that may have been a musical direction
- In the post-biblical period scripture was frequently chanted, and system of marking the biblical text, called *cantillation*, developed to divide it into units, indicate stress or accent, and indicate musical line



wayyōmer `elōhīm yiqqāwū hammīyim

"And God said, "Let the waters be collected." (Gen 1:9) Vowel points in red, cantillations in green; *public domain image courtesy of the ever-popular Wikipedia!*

- **Audio clip:** *Psalm 18:1–5 chanted* (Yehezkel Hai El-Beg)

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## *Ketuvim*

- The **Ketuvim or writings** are distinguished from *Torah* (“Law,” namely Genesis–Deuteronomy) and *Nevi'im* (“Prophets,” both Former [DH] and the Later Prophets)
- The writings of this section were the **last to take shape**, starting **at some point after the exile and continuing as late as the first century B.C.**
- **Consists of diverse genres**
  - Songs and Prayers (Psalms)
  - Wisdom Literature (Proverbs, Job)
  - Apocalyptic Literature (Daniel—prophesied earlier, but the book as currently stands was revised and edited later)
  - **Chroniclers History** (1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah)
  - **Diverse material grouped together as “The Five Scrolls”**

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## The Five Scrolls

- A subset of the Ketuvim consisting of diverse materials
- Little in common with each other in form or content
  - A romantic short story (Ruth)
  - A collection of dirges (Lamentations)
  - **Love poetry (Song of Solomon)**
  - A Philosophical treatise (Ecclesiastes)
  - A historical novella (Esther)
- Represents some of ancient Israel’s most **reflective literature on the human condition**—stories and expositions on **love, loyalty, death, loss, and destiny**
  - Later practice had them read at the great festivals
    - *Ruth was read at Shavuot (Pentecost) because of its reference to the barley harvest*

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## The Song of Songs

- Hebrew title *Shir ha-Shirim*, **Song of Songs** (a superlative, meaning the best of songs)
  - Greek *Aisma aismatōn*, also “Song of Songs”
  - English title comes from verse 1
- **Purpose**
  - Secular love poem? Created goodness of physical intimacy, mutuality, egalitarian
  - Sacred marriage liturgy?
  - Religious allegory?
- **Scripture?**
  - Like Esther, it never mentions God!
  - Entered the Jewish canon late, only with allegorical interpretation (see below)
    - Although it has assumed a privileged place since
  - JST asserts that it is not inspired scripture
- **Allegorical interpretation**
  - YHWH’s love for Israel
  - Christ’s love for the Church

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## Simplified Structure of the Song of Songs

### A Series of Meetings

- **Characters**
  - Male Lover (M)
  - Female Lover (F)
  - Companions or Friends (C)
- **Title (1:1)**
- **The First Meeting (1:2–2:7)**
  - F (1:2–4a)
  - C (1:4b)
  - F (1:4c–7)
  - C (1:8)
  - M (1:9–11)
  - F (1:12–14)
  - M (1:15)
  - F (1:16)
  - M (1:17)
- F (2:1)
- M (2:2)
- F (2:3–7)
- The Second Meeting (2:8–3:5)
- The Third Meeting (3:6–5:1)
- The Fourth Meeting (5:2–6:3)
- The Fifth Meeting (6:4–8:4)
- **The Literary Climax (8:5–7)**
  - “Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for **love is as strong as death**; jealousy is as cruel as the grave . . . **Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it**”
- The Conclusion (8:8–14)

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## Alternate, More Topical Structure

- Title (1:1)
- The Courtship (1:2–3:5)
  - Colloquy of bride and friends (1:2–8)
  - Colloquy of bridegroom, friends, and bride (1:9–2:7)
  - Springtime Rhapsody (2:8–17)
  - Love's dream (3:1–5)
- The Procession for the Marriage (3:6–11)
- The Consummation of the Marriage (4:1–5:1)
- The Honeymoon is Over (5:2–6:13)
  - Another dream (5:2–8)
  - Colloquy of Friends and bride (5:9–6:3)
  - Bride's matchless beauty (6:4–13)
- The Marriage Deepens (7:1–8:4)
- The Maturity of Love (8:5–14)

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## Wisdom Literature

- **Pedagogical or didactic purpose**
  - Sought to provide instruction to help individuals live moral and productive lives
  - Unlike the Torah or the prophetic books, wisdom does not claim to be divine revelation
    - May represent *human* efforts to master self, society, and environment
    - Nevertheless, this does not rule out that it is inspired!
- **Part of a larger Near Eastern tradition**
  - The great monarchies of Egypt and Mesopotamia required a class of bureaucrats to administer their states; one theory is that wisdom literature was **the product of sages who instructed court functionaries**
  - A competing theory is that wisdom literature **represents the tradition of clan and family practical experience at living**, even if it was collected and written down later at court
- **Types of wisdom**
  - **Nature**: discerning the order in God's creation and seeking to live in harmony with it
  - **Practical**: primarily sociological, how to live in a community
  - **Judicial**: how to decide disputes
  - **Theological or speculative**: God's role in upholding justice, **explain human suffering**

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## Proverbs

- **Míshlê Shlomoh** or “Proverbs of Solomon”
  - Attributed to him because of his reputation for wisdom and the 1 Kings 4:32 credits him with 3,000 proverbs and 1005 songs
- What is a proverb?
  - Like a maxim or aphorism, a proverb “is a **short, memorable saying that encapsulates a truth about life**” (Bandstra, 423)
  - In Hebrew they are also poetic, employing **parallelism** and often **alliteration**
    - Also the “**numerical sayings**” formula (x, x + 1 )
- The biblical book of Proverbs divides into two sections
  - **Prologue (1–9)**: poetic discourses on wisdom and how to obtain it
  - **Proverbs Proper, or “Proverbial Wisdom” (10–31)**: single sentence statements (in 2 or 3 lines) arranged in more-or-less random order
    - Frequently binary, contrasting values with their opposites

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## Wisdom Themes in Proverbs 1–9

- **Wisdom instruction**
  - Purpose of Proverbs (1:2–6)
  - Framed as instruction of parents to sons
- **Fear of YHWH**
  - “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: *but* fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (1:7)
- **Lady Wisdom** and **Mistress Folly**
  - Personifications of good and bad qualities
  - **Lady Wisdom** is almost a divine character, partner with YHWH (1:20–33; 8:1–36; 9:1–6)
  - **Mistress Folly** is a **seductress**, a fitting parallel to the prophetic image of spiritual unfaithfulness’ being equated with adultery
- **Creation Theology**
  - Wisdom was God’s tool in creation (see esp. 8:22–31)

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## Structure of Proverbs 1–9

### Poetic Discourses on Wisdom and How to Obtain it

- Title (1:1): The Proverbs of Solomon
- **Introduction (1:2–7)**
- On Violent Men (1:8–19)
- **Woman Wisdom (Lady Wisdom I; 1:20–33)**
- The Value of Wisdom (2:1–22)
- Admonition to Trust and Honor God (3:1–12)
- True Wealth (3:13–20)
- True Security (3:21–26)
- Wisdom in Relationships (3:27–35)
- **Parental Advice: Get Wisdom (4:1–9)**
- Admonition to Keep the Right Path: Avoid Violence (4:10–27)
- **The Strange Woman: Warning against Impurity and Infidelity (5:1–23; a loose woman vs. a wife)**
- Practical Admonitions (6:1–35)
  - Six things the Lord hates (6:16–19)
- **False Attractions of Adultery (7:1–27)**
- **The Gifts of Wisdom (Lady Wisdom II; 8:1–36)**
  - *Wisdom's Part in Creation (8:22–36)*
- **Wisdom's Feast (Lady Wisdom III; 9:1–6)**
- General Maxims (9:7–12)
- **Folly's Invitation and False Promise (Mistress Folly; 9:13–18)**