

Intro to the Poetic and Wisdom Books

The poetical Books of the Old Testament include **Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon**. Traditionally, these five books have also been known as **Wisdom Literature** because of their emphasis on understanding and attaining wisdom for all areas of life, including our relationships with God and with one another. But Hebrew poetry and wisdom literature is all over the Bible.

- a. **Poetry in the Hebrew** world (*Psalms and Song of Solomon* in particular) was different from what we think of when we hear the word *poetry*. Modern poetry is characterized by rhyme schemes and balance. Hebrew poetry was characterized more by parallel thought connected through stanzas. Hebrew poetry may be written more in what we would consider sing-song style today.

Psalms is named after the Greek word *psalmos*, which means “song.” The songs and prayers found in this book were used by the Hebrew people to express their relationship with God. They cover a whole range of human emotions from joy to anger, and from hope to despair. Some claim to be written by (or about) David, but others were written by different poets over a period of centuries. Many of the psalms were written for use in group (communal) worship, while others were likely written as private prayers but also were used in worship. Psalms includes songs of praise to God the Creator; songs of sorrow and anger (laments); prayers of confession; prayers of thanksgiving; hymns to celebrate the crowning of kings; and prayers celebrating God’s Law and Wisdom.

- b. **Wisdom literature** (*Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* primarily) explores important questions about life and gives advice for practical living, especially in community with others. These writings make it clear that true wisdom is a gift that “comes from the LORD,” who gives helpful advice to everyone who obeys God’s Law. These verses summarize two important understandings of wisdom found in the Hebrew Scriptures. First, true wisdom comes from God (Proverbs 2:6-7). Second, God offers wisdom and guidance for daily life (Proverbs 6:23).

These poetry and wisdom books tell us who God is and how a believer can live in such a way as to honor God with their lives. Solomon’s, (and other’s), short sayings in Proverbs show us the ways to live for God.

Answer these questions:

1. List the poetical books of the Old Testament.
2. Why are the poetical books of the Old Testament historically known as “Wisdom Literature”?
3. Is Hebrew poetry and wisdom literature ONLY found in the Old Testament? What are some examples in the New Testament?
4. What are the poetical books in the Old Testament?
5. How is Hebrew poetry different than what we know today as “poetry”?
6. What does the word “Psalm” mean and what are some characteristics of the Psalms as we know them in the Bible?
7. What are the wisdom books in the Old Testament?
8. What are the characteristics of the Wisdom literature in the Bible?