

Old Testament Poetry
Dr. Brett Dutton (2/26/26)

I. **Scope**: appears in all sections of the Hebrew Canon, but it is central in Psalms, Lamentations, and Song of Songs, and most of Job

A. *Torah*

- 1) Genesis 2:23 (Adam, after Eve was created)
- 2) Song of the Sea (Exod. 15:1-18)
- 3) The Oracles of Balaam (Num. 23:7-10, 18-24. 24:3-9, 15-19)
- 4) Song of Moses (Deut. 32)

B. Prophets

- 1) Song of Deborah (Judges 5)
- 2) Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10)
- 3) Prayer of Habakkuk (Hab. 3)

II. **Parallelism**

A. Identification

- 1) recognized by Robert Lowth in 1753 in *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*
 - until Lowth's designation, Hebrew poetry was thought to be nothing more than an expressive, indefinable mess
 - Lowth's ground-breaking description brought some much-needed clarity
 - he suggested that instead of rhyming with sounds, the Hebrews rhymed with thoughts
- 2) Definition—the echoing of thought, positively or negatively, in successive lines of poetry

B. Types

- 1) Synonymous—the second line repeats the idea of the first line (the most common type)

Where can I go from your **Spirit**?
Where can I flee from your **presence**? (Ps. 139:7)

O God, do not keep silent;
Be not quiet, O God, be not still. (Ps. 83:1)

The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I **fear**?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be **afraid**? (Ps. 27:1)

- 2) Antithetic—repetition involving contrasting ideas (usually used the word “but”)

For evil men will be **cut off**,
But those who hope in the LORD will **inherit the land**. (Ps. 37:9)

For the **LORD watches over** the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will **perish**. (Ps. 1:6)

- 3) Symbolic—uses a metaphor or simile to convey a repeated idea (a subset of Synonymous?)

As a father has compassion on his children,
So the LORD has compassion on those who fear him. (Ps.103:11-13)

4. Synthetic—the second line specifies the result of the initial action, advancing the idea

¹I waited patiently for the Lord;

And He inclined to me and heard my cry.

²He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay,

And He set my feet upon a rock, making my footsteps firm.

³He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God;

Many will see and fear

And will trust in the Lord. (Psalm 40:1-3)

⁵Come and see the works of God,

Who is awesome in His deeds toward the sons of men.

⁶He turned the sea into dry land;

They passed through the river on foot;

There let us rejoice in Him! (Psalm 66:5-6)

D. Other Characteristics

1. Word pairs

-“thousand” and “ten thousand” (Ps. 91:7)

-“unfailing love” and “compassion” (Ps. 51:1)

-“transgressions” and “sins” (Ps. 32:1)

-“hand” and “right hand” (Ps. 21:8)

-“righteousness” and “justice” (Ps. 89:14)

2. Number sequences (Ps. 62:12)

Once God has spoken;

Twice I have heard this:

That power belongs to God. (Psalm 62:11)

3. Acrostic (Ps. 119; 9-10) (see attached sheet)

4. Anthropomorphism—human characteristics given to non-human things

-“all the trees of the field will clap their hands” (Isaiah 55:12)

-“The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands” (Psalm 19:1)

E. Possible Functions in Israel (Note: It is *very* difficult to discern how psalms were used in Israel.)

1. Personal Expressions to God or for God

O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly;

My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, (Psalm 63:1)

2. Music of the Temple: the Temple was most likely used to commemorate or celebrate great events, and many psalms include specific musical notes (see Psalm 4, 5, 6, 12, etc.)

3. Music used in corporate worship (see Psalm 30—“at the dedication of the house”)

III. Interpreting the Psalms

A. Question: “How do these words spoken to God function as a Word from God to us?”

B. Observations

- 1) The psalms are poetry and are, by nature, created to express emotion, not doctrine.
-To attempt to develop a systematic theology based on a psalm robs it of its very nature.
- 2) The psalms use highly expressive language (simile, metaphor, hyperbole) in their descriptions that the authors intended to be interpreted figuratively.
-enemies spew swords from their lips (59:7)
-mountains skip like rams (114:4)
-God is described as a shield, rock, shepherd, warrior, father
-ex. “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”
- 3) Hermeneutical Principles
 - a) Since poems were composed as a unit, approach each poem as a literary unit.
 - b) Realize that at their core, the psalms are by individuals to God and about God.
 - c) Understand that most of the psalms are personal expressions or prayers. They are the “human response to the divine encounter.” (Dillard and Longman, 227)

G. Possible Contemporary Uses

- 1) In personal or corporate worship
- 2) To teach us that it is acceptable to be open and honest with God
- 3) As a way to reflect on God’s goodness to us in pleasant times
- 4) As a way to speak to God during unpleasant times. (see Psalm 13)

V. Old Testament Wisdom

A. Scope: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and some Psalms

B. Definitions of wisdom

- 1) the instruction of how to live a meaningful life based on experience and observation
- 2) the reflection upon the inequities of life when that instruction proves to be insufficient

C. Dates of wisdom literature

- wisdom literature has been detected in nearly all ancient cultures
- The earliest: The Egyptian Instructions of the Vizier Ptah-hotep, around 2450 BC
- this form of literature reached its height around the time of King Solomon of Israel (about 1000-900 BC)
- most of the wisdom material in the OT seems to have been written between 950 and 550 BC

D. Characteristics

- 1) Based in the “fear of the Lord” (Prov. 1:7)
- 2) Affirms that God created an orderly universe
- 3) Interested in pragmatism (What works? What has worked?)
- 4) Universal in scope
- 5) Anthropocentric (“man-centered”)
- 6) Essentially optimistic
- 7) Can be skeptical, but never doubts the existence of God or man's need to fear him

E. Sub-genres

- 1) Wisdom sayings (Proverbs 10-31)
 - a) short (usually only 2 lines)
 - b) meaning grasped quickly
 - c) easy to remember

2) Wisdom discourses

- a) longer than sayings (some can be several hundred lines long)
- b) can take several forms
 - i. poetry (Psalm 1, 37)
 - ii. dialogue (Job)
 - iii. monologue (Job)
 - iv. paragraph (Ecclesiastes)
 - v. narrative (Prov. 24:30-34)
- c) usually contemplate the mysteries and inequities of life

F. Principles for Interpretation

1. Try to avoid “absolutizing” wisdom sayings.

- proverbial sayings teach “probable truth, not absolute truth” (KBH, 315)
- the sayings illustrate what is likely to happen if an individual follows them
- there is no guarantee that the outcome will definitely occur
- In a “perfect world?” Yes, but sadly, we do not live in a “perfect world.”
- the sayings were not meant to be “iron-clad” guarantees or promises
- Ex: Proverbs 14:26—“He who fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge.”
- What about Job?
- Job’s friends “absolutized” proverbial wisdom and God was angry with them because they had not spoken of him “what is right” (Job 42:7)
- Job questioned the “absolute truth” of wisdom and God affirmed him (Job 42:7)
- most proverbs do not “deny that exceptions occur,” they “merely omit them from consideration” (KBH, 316)

2. Try to avoid isolating proverbial wisdom.

- remember, even individual proverbs have a literary context
- for example, Prov. 10-31 must be understood in light of Prov. 1-9
- Ex: “Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed.” (Prov. 16:3)
- this verse could be used out of context to teach that anything that is done, as long as it is committed to God, will have to succeed
- it is only in the larger context of Scripture as a whole that this verse makes sense

3. Contemporary language may be necessary for a clear understanding.

- many times, a contemporary reader or hearer will not be able to understand the social or historical context
- it may be necessary for the teacher/preacher to contextualize the proverb
- “Differing weights and differing measures—the Lord detests them both.” (Prov. 20:10)
- this is a proverb promoting honesty in business practices
- “charging two different prices for the same item is wrong”
- “Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.” (Prov. 25:24)
- “It’s better to live in a garage than in a spacious house with a woman you never should have married.” (FS, 202)
- Fee and Stuart suggest that this proverb is intended to advise people to be careful in the selection of a mate.
- A large part of hermeneutics is being creative and “translating” proverbs into modern language.

Aleph
 Bet
 Gimel
 Dalet
 Hey
 Waw
 Zayin
 Het
 Tet
 Yod
 Kaph
 Lamed
 Mem
 Nun
 Samekh
 Ayin
 Peh
 Tsade
 Qoph
 Resh
 Shin
 Taw

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

1 אֲשֶׁר־י תְּמִימֵי־דְרֹךְ הִהְלָכִים בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה:
 2 אֲשֶׁר־י נִצְרֵי עֲדוֹתָיו בְּכָל־לֵב יִדְרְשׁוּהוּ:
 3 אֵף לֹא־פָעִלוּ^a עוֹלָה בְּדַרְכָּיו הִלְכוּ:
 4 אֶתְהָ צִנִּיתָה פִקְדֵיךָ לְשֹׁמֵר מֵאֵד:
 5 אַחֲלֵי יָכֵנוּ דַרְכֵי לְשֹׁמֵר חֻקֶיךָ:
 6 אֶז לֹא־אֲבוֹשׁ בְּהִבִּטִי אֶל־כָּל־מִצְוֹתֶיךָ:
 7 אֹודֶךָ בִּישָׁר לִבְבִי בְלִמְדֵי מִשְׁפָּטֶי צִדְקָךָ:
 8 אֶת־חֻקֶיךָ אֲשֹׁמֵר אֶל־תַּעֲזֹבֵנִי עַד־מֵאֵד:
 9 בְּמָה יִזְכֶּה־נַעַר אֶת־אַרְחוֹ לְשֹׁמֵר^a כְּדַבְּרֶךָ^b:
 10 בְּכָל־לִבִּי^a דִרְשָׁתֶיךָ אֶל־תִּשְׁגֵנִי מִמִּצְוֹתֶיךָ:
 11 בְּלִבִּי צִפְנֹתַי אִמְרֹתֶיךָ^a לְמַעַן לֹא אֶחְטֵא־לָךְ:
 12 בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה לְמִדְנֵי^a חֻקֶיךָ:
 13 בִשְׁפָתַי סִפְרֹתַי כָּל מִשְׁפָּטֶי־פִיךָ^a:
 14 בְּדֶרֶךְ עֲדוֹתֶיךָ שִׁשְׁתִּי כְעֵל^a כָּל־הוֹן:
 15 בְּפִקְדֵיךָ אֲשִׁיחָה וְאֲבִיטָה אַרְחֹתֶיךָ:
 16 בְּחֻקֹתֶיךָ^a אֲשִׁתַּעֲשֶׂע לֹא אֲשַׁכַּח דְּבָרֶךָ^b:
 17 גָּמַל עַל־עַבְדֶּךָ אַחִיָּה^a וְאֲשִׁמְרָה דְּבָרֶךָ^b:
 18 גַּל־עֵינַי וְאֲבִיטָה וְכָל־אֹתוֹת מִתּוֹרֹתֶיךָ:
 25 דְּבַקָּה לְעַפְרֹן נִפְשִׁי חֲיִנִי כְּדַבְּרֶךָ^a:
 26 דַּרְכֵי^a סִפְרֹתַי וְתַעֲנֵנִי לְמִדְנֵי חֻקֶיךָ:
 33 הוֹרֵנִי יְהוָה דֶּרֶךְ חֻקֶיךָ וְאַצְרֶנָּה עֶקֶב:
 34 הִבִּינֵנִי וְאַצְרֶנָּה תּוֹרֹתֶיךָ וְאֲשִׁמְרָנָה בְּכָל־לֵב:
 42 וְאַעֲנֶנָּה חֹרְפֵי^a דְּבָר־כִּי־בָטַחְתִּי^b בְּדַבְּרֶךָ^c:
 43 וְאַל־תִּצְלַל^a מִפִּי דְבַר־אֱמֶת^b עַד־מֵאֵד^b כִּי לְמִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ^c יִחְלַתִּי:
 49 זְכֹר־דְּבָרֶיךָ^a לְעַבְדֶּךָ^b עַל אֲשֶׁר יִחְלַתֵנִי^c:
 50 זֹאת נִחַמְתִּי^a בְּעַנְיִי כִי אִמְרֹתֶיךָ תִּיִתֵנִי:
 57 חֲלָקֵי יְהוָה אִמְרֹתַי לְשֹׁמֵר דְּבָרֶיךָ^a:
 58 חֲלִיתִי פָנֶיךָ בְּכָל־לֵב חֲנִיָּה^a כְּאִמְרֹתֶיךָ:
 64 חֲסִדֶּךָ יְהוָה מְלֵאָה הָאָרֶץ חֻקֶיךָ לְמִדְנֵי:
 65 טוֹב עֲשִׂיתָ עִם־עַבְדֶּךָ יְהוָה כְּדַבְּרֶךָ^a:
 66 טוֹב^a טַעַם וְדַעַת לְמִדְנֵי כִי בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ הֶאֱמַנְתִּי:
 73 יִדְּיָךְ עֲשׂוּנִי וְיִכּוֹנְנוּנִי הִבִּינֵנִי^a וְאַלְמִדָּה מִצְוֹתֶיךָ:
 74 יִרְאֶיךָ יִרְאוּנִי וְיִשְׁמְחוּ כִי לְדַבְּרֶךָ^a יִחְלַתִּי:
 81 כָּלְתָה לְתַשׁוּעַתֶּךָ^a נִפְשִׁי לְדַבְּרֶךָ^b יִחְלַתִּי:
 82 כָּלוּ עֵינַי לְאִמְרֹתֶיךָ לֹאֲמַר^a מִתִּי תִנְחַמְנִי:

Old Testament Prophecy
Dr. Brett Dutton (2/26/26)

I. Scope and Nature

A. 3 Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel

B. The Book of the Twelve

- the twelve Minor Prophets grouped together because of their brevity (Hosea-Malachi)
- the book of Daniel was originally contained in the Writings section, not the Latter Prophets
- the first half of Daniel is primarily narrative, which is unusual for prophetic literature
- latter half of Daniel has more in common with apocalyptic literature than it does with prophetic literature

C. Function

- they were interpreters and appliers of the *Torah*
- they drew out implications and applied them to the people
- Example: Hosea 4:1-2

¹*Listen to the word of the Lord, O sons of Israel,
For the Lord has a case against the inhabitants of the land,
Because there is no faithfulness or kindness
Or knowledge of God in the land.*

²*There is swearing, deception, murder, stealing and adultery.
They employ violence, so that bloodshed follows bloodshed.*

D. Definition of a “prophet”: one who spoke God’s message to God’s people at a time when they needed to know God’s will

- this definition focuses on speaking the word(s) of the Lord at a specific time for a specific purpose
- this allows for the gift of “prophecy” to still exist, although now, the emphasis is on the word of the Lord as it has already been spoken, rather than as a means of new revelation
- this highlights the difference between *revelation* (the uncovering of new truth) and *illumination* (the understanding and application of truth already disclosed)

E. Nature of OT Prophecy

1) “forth-telling” vs. “fore-telling”

-“Less than 2% of the OT prophecy is messianic. Less than 5% specifically describes the new covenant age. Less than 1% concerns events yet to come in our.”
(Fee and Stuart, p. 188)

-in other words, the overwhelming majority of prophecy (92%) was rooted in explaining historical, not future, events

-it is important to remember that most of the events the OT prophets predicted have ***already*** occurred

2) narrative vs. prophecy

-in the narrative materials, a description of the prophet is given, but not usually the message (Elijah, Elisha)

-most canonical prophetic books focus not on the prophet, but on his message

-in some cases, we have absolutely no idea about the background of a literary prophet

F. Reasons for the rise of prophets

- 1) limited time frame
 - the canonical prophets spoke during a unique, but brief, period
 - from 760 BC to 460 BC
- 2) social factors
 - a) pagan worship—primarily, but not limited to, the Canaanite god of fertility, Ba'al
 - b) social/ethical injustices—particularly during times of economic prosperity
 - c) tendency to depend upon government instead of the Lord—as centralized government grew, there was an inclination to trust in kings and military strength
 - d) deal with the rise of international dictators
 - as the first true, world-dominating powers began to appear, so did questions about how to interact with them
 - Assyria (911-609 BC)
 - Babylon (609-539 BC)
 - Persia (539-333 BC)
 - Greece (333-63 BC)
 - Rome (63 BC-324 AD)

II. Types of Prophetic Material (from KBH, pp. 292-302)

A. Warning of disaster

- this is the most common type of prophetic material
- it announces imminent or future disaster on either an individual or nation
- typically uses a messenger formula: “Thus says the Lord...”
- after an explanation of the problem(s) that brought the occasion for the message, the word “therefore” is commonly used
- on occasion, a call to the prophet is given (“Go and say”), followed by a call for the person/people to listen (“Hear this word of the Lord...”)
- this form almost always includes a prediction of a coming disaster (military defeat, plague, locust swarm, natural disaster, etc.)

B. Promise of salvation

- although it is usually not balanced with warnings of disaster, virtually every prophecy has some sort of good news of the coming rescue
- this includes restoration and renewal for individuals and nations
- see Amos 9:11-15; Isaiah 2:1-5; Micah 7:7-20

C. Woe speech

- uses the opening interjection “Woe to those/you who...”
- it is an adaptation of Israel’s funeral dirges
- see Micah 2:1-5

D. Funeral dirge

- a form in which the prophet speaks a funeral lament over the entire nation
- it is almost as if the nation has already “died” and is being prepared for burial
- see Amos 5:1-3 or Ezekiel 19:1-14

E. Hymn—a song or poem similar to a psalm

- see Isaiah 12:4-6 or Habakkuk 3

F. Lawsuit (ribh)

- from the world of Israel's legal proceedings, the prophet speaks of Israel as being accused of a crime against the Lord
- reference is made to elements such as a charge, witnesses, testimonies, and a verdict
- Yahweh is often portrayed as both the Prosecutor and Judge
- see Micah 6:1-5; Isaiah 1:2-3; Hosea 4:1-3)

G. Prophecies against foreign nations

- words spoken to Israel against their enemies
- see Amos 1-2; Habakkuk 2; Zechariah 9:1-8

H. Vision reports

- on several occasions, the Lord gave the prophet a vision that contained the message for Israel
- see Amos 7; Jeremiah 24; Zechariah 5:1-4; Ezekiel 1-3

I. Symbolic actions

- although not entirely unique to Jeremiah and Ezekiel (see Micah 1:8), the Lord called these two prophets to engage in "object lessons" to illustrate His word to Israel
- see Jeremiah 8, 13, 19, 24, 27, 32; Ezekiel 4-5, 12, 37

III. Principles for Interpreting

1) Above all else, determining the historical context in which the message of a prophet was delivered is of the utmost importance.

- the message of each prophet had to have some meaning for the original hearers
- if it did not, why would the prophet be speaking in the first place?
- why the prophet spoke is closely related to what the prophet had to say
- What about the reception? What would the original hearers have thought about the message?
- any study of OT prophecy should begin with a thorough examination of the historical events during that time frame

Now these are the words of the letter which Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the rest of the elders of the exile, the priests, the prophets and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon...For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:1, 11)

2) When attempting to find fulfillment in prophetic texts, begin with the historical setting of the text and work forward instead of beginning in the present day and working back to the time of prophet.

- "Most prophecies concern the age in which they were spoken, even those that predict events in the distant future." (KBH, 305)
- look first for fulfillment in the prophet's lifetime or shortly thereafter
- also, be aware that the prophecy might have a **double fulfillment**
- it might have an initial fulfillment in the OT and a second, fuller one in the NT

¹⁰Then the Lord spoke again to King Ahaz (through the prophet Isaiah), saying, ¹¹“Ask a sign for yourself from the Lord your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” ¹²But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, nor will I test the Lord!” ¹³Then he said, “Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. ¹⁵He will eat curds and honey at the time He knows enough to refuse evil and choose good. ¹⁶For before the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken.” (Isaiah 7:10-16)

- the meaning of this prophecy to King Ahaz of Judah is directly connected to the events of the Syro-Ephraimite War between Syria, Israel, Assyria, and Judah in 734-732 BC
- without understanding that war, this prophecy makes no sense
- and the prophecy had to have some kind of fulfillment in Ahaz' time for Isaiah to be considered a true prophet (see Deuteronomy 18:15-22)
- in addition to the fulfillment during the life of Ahaz, in his gospel, Matthew interpreted the prophecy to have an ultimate fulfillment in the birth of Jesus Christ (see 1:22-23)
- thus, there was one fulfillment in 732-722 BC and another one in 4-6 BC

3) Realize that specific fulfillment of prophecy is clearly seen only in retrospect.

- based upon Isaiah's messianic prophecies, no one fully and accurately understood what the Messiah would be like before He came
- in the same way no one can accurately predict the specific details of His second coming either
- we will only understand the details of a prophecy after it has been fulfilled!

4) Determine what the overall purpose of a prophecy is, instead of looking for fulfillment in every detail.

- What is the overarching theme of the prophet's message?
- hope, encouragement, warning, judgment, exhortation?
- What does the prophecy say about the nature of the Lord? Of humanity?

5) Unless the NT specifically states that Jesus fulfilled an OT prophecy, do not suggest new ways in which he did.

- the NT writers wrote and preached truth revealed to them and inspired by the Holy Spirit—we do not have that luxury
- this is the difference between inspiration/revelation and illumination
- and do not worry...there are plenty of these from which to choose!
- Examples: Matthew 1:15 // Hosea 11:1; Matthew 2:5-6 // Micah 5:1-2;
Mark 11:1 // Zechariah

0-[Isaiah 9:9; 1 Peter 2:7-8 // Isaiah 8:14