

The Poetical Books

One-third of the Hebrew Bible was written in poetry. In fact, there are only five Old Testament books that appear to have no poetry: Leviticus, Ruth, Ezra, Haggai, and Malachi. The five books now known as the poetical books serve as a hinge which links the past of the historical books to the future of the prophetic books. These books explore the experiential present and emphasize a lifestyle of godliness. Unlike the Pentateuch and twelve historical books, the poetical books do not advance the story of the nation Israel. Instead, they delve deeply into crucial questions about pain, God, wisdom, life, and love - all in the present tense.

The five poetical books illustrate three kinds of poetry:

1. lyric poetry - originally accompanied by music on the lyre, this poetry often has strong emotional elements (most of Psalms)
2. didactic poetry - teaches principles about life by means of maxims (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes)
3. dramatic poetry - dialogue in poetic form (Job, Song of Solomon).

There are also three books of wisdom within the poets: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. These books are denoted as such by the content, not the form. It is likely that there were schools of wisdom in Israel (see 1 Sam. 24:13; 1 Kin. 4:29-34). These wise men were practical observers of life who gave right answers in critical situations.

Job - Job was a righteous man who was suddenly embroiled in an intense ordeal of every kind of suffering. He went through three cycles of debate with his friends who insisted that his misfortune must have been caused by sin. When God finally revealed Himself in His majesty and power to Job, it became obvious that the real issue was not Job's suffering but God's sovereignty. Job's questions were never answered but he willingly submitted to the wisdom and righteousness of God.

Psalms - The five books of Psalms span the centuries from Moses to the postexilic period and cover the full range of human emotions and experiences. The wide variety of Psalms (lament, thanksgiving, praise, enthronement, pilgrimage, etc.) suited them for service as the temple song book for the people of Israel. The psalms were set to music and focused on worship.

Proverbs - The Book of Proverbs was designed to equip the reader in practical wisdom, discernment, discipline, and discretion. These maxims emphasize the development of skill in all the details of life so that beauty and righteousness will replace foolishness and evil as one walks in dependence upon God.

Ecclesiastes - The "preacher" of Ecclesiastes applied his great mind and considerable resources to the quest for purpose and satisfaction in life under the sun. He found that wisdom, wealth, works, pleasure, and power all led to futility and striving after wind. The problem was compounded by the injustices and uncertainties of life and apparent absurdity of death. The only source of ultimate meaning and fulfillment is God Himself. One should therefore acknowledge his inability to understand all the ways of God, trust and obey Him, and enjoy His gifts.

Song of Solomon - This beautiful song portrays the intimate love relationship between Solomon and his Shulamite bride. It magnifies the virtues of physical and emotional love in marriage.