Hebrew Poetic and Wisdom Literature

I. Introduction

A. Hebrew poetry is unlike its classical and modern counterparts as it has no distinctive scheme of accentuation, meter, or rhythm to differentiate it from prose.

B. Poetry comprises about 1/3 of the Hebrew Old Testament.

C. Wisdom books are usually poetic, but are classified as wisdom literature because they constitute the "skill of living" which is applying wisdom to daily living.

D. Wisdom seeks to teach practical moral principles for behavior or prompts the reader to logically investigate the problems associated with the human existence.

II. Poetry and Wisdom in the Ancient Near East

A. Israel was the beneficiary of a long and well-developed literary tradition in the ancient Near East.

B. Israelite poetry was influenced by the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Canaanite cultures.

C. Israelite wisdom literature demonstrates influence from the Edomites, Egyptians, Arabians and Babylonians.

D. Though influenced by surrounding cultures, Hebrew poetry and literature has an important fundamental difference: the acknowledgement of only one God, Yahweh.

III. Literary Character of Hebrew Poetry

A. Hebrew poetry has three types of rhythm: rhythm of sound, rhythm of thought, and rhythm of form. The two most distinctive features are rhythm of sound and rhythm of thought.

B. Rhythm of Thought

1. This is the balancing of ideas in a structured or systematic form. The chief vehicle of conveying this rhythm in Hebrew poetry is through the use of parallelism.

2. Parallelism is the symmetrical arrangement of parallel lines of about the same length in which meaning, grammar, syntax, form, and stress balance and reinforce one another.

3. Types of Parallelism:
   a. Synonymous - The second line repeats much the same idea as the first line.
   b. Developmental - The second line develops further the idea of the first line.
   c. Illustrative - The first line conveys the idea and the second illustrates it with an example or symbol.
   d. Contrastive - The first line is contrasted with the second.
   e. Formal - Two lines or phrases are joined solely by metric considerations.
C. Rhythm of Sound

1. This is the regular pattern of stressed or unstressed syllables in lines of Hebrew poetry. It can also be the repetition of sounds through literary devices like alliteration or assonance.

2. Types of Rhythm of Sound
   
a. Acrostic Poem - is a verse in which the initial letters of consecutive lines of a stanza form an alphabet, word, or phrase. It is generally used as a memory device.

b. Alliteration - the consonance of sounds at the beginning of words or syllables.

c. Assonance - is the rhythm of sound using the correspondence of vowel sounds, often at the end of words.

d. Paronomasia - word play which consisted of the repetition of words similar in sound, but not necessarily in meaning, used to heighten the intended impact of the message.

e. Onomatopoeia - the use of words that sound like what they describe.

f. Ellipsis - the omission of a word or words that would complete a given parallel construction.

g. Inclusio - a special form of the repetition common in Hebrew poetry where the poet returns to where he began by repeating keywords and phrases.

C. Rhythm of Form

1. There is not in Hebrew poetry the artistic rhythm of form which appears in the classical poetry of Greece and Rome, but it amply makes up for this by its fresh and graceful naturalness.

2. Types of Rhythm of Form
   
a. Meter - is the basic rhythmic structure of a verse or lines in verse. The exact nature of meter in Hebrew poetry is still ill-defined. The two major methods of gauging meter are counting the stressed and accented syllables in line pairs and counting the total number of syllables in the two lines of poetry.

b. Strophe - a group of verses that form a distinct unit within a poem. This is not readily discernable in Hebrew poetry.

IV. Life Situation and Genre

A. Hebrew poetry was a response to all facets of reality that the Israelites faced and was shaped by an intense faith in Yahweh and an inherent desire to celebrate human existence.

B. Hebrew poetry was musical in nature and was intended to be sung or chanted to the accompaniment of musical instruments.
C. Hebrew poetic genres:

1. historical anthologies
2. victory songs
3. curses
4. taunt songs
5. funeral dirges and eulogies
6. hymns
7. songs of trust
8. wisdom songs
9. royal songs
10. thanksgiving poems
11. laments
12. songs of litigation
13. love poems
14. wedding songs
15. predictive poetry

V. The Idea of Wisdom

A. Definition

1. The idea of wisdom stems from the need for people to cope with the reality of human existence and that the experience of this coping can be taught to the succeeding generations.

2. Hebrew wisdom was characterized by the concept of "the fear of the Lord". Wisdom and the knowledge of God were inseparable.

3. Wisdom reflects a practical aspect in the Old Testament as well as philosophical and intellectual connotations.

4. Wisdom in the Old Testament is basically the very practical art of being prudent, sensible, and skillfully insightful so that one might prosper and have good success in life. One must learn to do what is right, just, and fair.
B. The Form of Wisdom

1. There are two genres of wisdom in the Old Testament.
   a. Practical or Didactic Wisdom - wise sayings or proverbs that advocate all sorts of prudent habits, skills, and virtues aimed at developing moral character, personal success, happiness and well-being.
   b. Philosophical or Speculative Wisdom - critical, reflective, and questioning thought that delves into the deeper and more vexing issues confronting humankind.

2. Wisdom Speech Forms
   a. Proverb - basic unit of Hebrew wisdom. It is a popular saying expressing certain observed regularities in the external world of nature or in human behavior
   b. Parable - a warning speech
   c. Precept - authoritative instruction or regulation for behavior based on the rules and values and religious tenets of society.
   d. Riddle - a puzzling question stated as a problem calling for mental acumen to solve it
   e. Fable - a brief story embracing a moral truth using people, animals, or inanimate objects as characters.

C. The Practice of Wisdom

1. Hebrew wisdom teaches there are two paths in life: the way of the righteous or the way of the wicked.
2. As such, true wisdom is a lifestyle where ones attitude, character, and behavior is rooted in "the fear of the Lord."

D. The Person of Wisdom

1. In the Old Testament, the ultimate person of wisdom is Yahweh.
2. The expression "the fear of the Lord" conveys the relationship of Hebrew wisdom and Yahweh. He is the source of all wisdom.

VI. The Content of Wisdom

A. Theodicy - a major discussion of Hebrew wisdom is theodicy. Theodicy is the discussion of the reality of pain, suffering, and death in the world in relationship to God's holiness and justice.

B. The Retribution Principle - divine retribution based on the merits of human behavior is a common theme in the poetic and wisdom literature of the Old Testament. It is based on the blessings and curses of the Mosaic covenant.
C. Instruction - Didactic wisdom literature is essentially practical social commentary based on the ethical demands of Hebrew law.