**Contrasting Types of Old Testament Literature**

Adapted from Homer Heater, Dallas Theological Seminary

**I. Contrasts Between the Historic, Poetic, and Prophetic Books**

***Historical Books* *Poetical Books* , *Prophetical Books***

Past Present Future

What the People *Did* What the People *Felt* What the People *Should* Do

National Individual National & Individual

Actions Axioms Alarms

War history Worship Helps Warning & Hopes

Soldiers Sages Servants

Records General Revelation Special Revelation

Many ANE Parallels Many ANE Parallels Few ANE Parallels

(ANE = Ancient Near East)

(Now, how can we explain the middle column above?)

**II. Distinguishing Between Wisdom and Poetic Literature**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Wisdom** | **Poetic** |
| Concerns content of writing | Concerns style of writing |
| Content = Principles to live by | Style = repetition of thought |
| Appeals to one’s logic | Appeals to one’s total being (including emotions) |
| Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes | Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Song, Lamentations |
| The smaller category (subset) | The larger grouping |

See also Roy B. Zuck, “A Theology of Wisdom Books and the Song of Songs,”   
in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, 208-9.

**III. Contrasts Between the Wisdom Books**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Job** | **Proverbs** | **Ecclesiastes** |
| Wrestles with issues | Presents issues as resolved | Questions issues altogether |
| Debates with others | Declarations and commands | Debates with self |
| Incomprehensible | Black and white | Gray |
| Question of justice | Question of success | Question of purpose |
| Some exceptions to retribution | No exceptions to retribution | Many exceptions to retribution |
| Wicked generally die early | Wicked always die early | All die |
| Skeptical | Practical | Skeptical |
| Negative | Positive | Negative |
| Wealth removed | Wealth attained | Wealth questioned |
| Righteousness brings submission | Righteousness brings wisdom | Righteousness brings freedom |
| Wickedness brings judgment | Wickedness brings foolishness | Wickedness brings frustration |
| Why fear God? | Fear God | Why fear God? |
| What good is life? | How to have a good life | What good is life? |
| “Is the world well managed?” | “A life well managed” | “Is life worth living?”[[1]](#footnote-1) |

**IV. Overview of the Poetic Books**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | ***Job*** | ***Psalms*** | ***Proverbs*** | ***Ecclesiastes*** | ***Song of Songs*** |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *The problem…* | suffering | trials | conduct | the chief good | perverted love |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *The solution…* | sovereignty | praise | obey | fear God | growth in marriage |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Christ…* | suffered | prayed | behaved perfectly | reverenced the Father | is love |

1. Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 10, 56, 90. See the review of this book by Roy B. Zuck in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (April-June 1987): 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)