

# VI

## Types of Old Testament Literature

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### NARRATIVES

Narrative is the major form of literature in the OT, although several other forms are also used. Since much of the OT involves persons and events within the context of history, it is to be expected that narrative would be used to communicate this information. Old Testament narrative can be divided into three major types: genealogies, epic poetry, and historical prose narrative.

#### *Genealogies*

Biblical genealogies are something more than mere listings of names and family groups. Genealogies are so placed in the OT as to become a framework for the historical narrative surrounding them. The four major genealogies in Genesis give clear indication of their purpose to link together family groups to emphasize the unfolding of God's scheme of redemption to be realized through the Hebrew people. Ten generations from Adam to Noah are given (ch. 5), thus giving coherence to the course of human history from creation to the flood. Ten generations are given from Shem, the son of Noah, to Abram (ch. 11), thus bringing the reader at once to the beginning of God's

communication with and direction of his special covenant people. To further this purpose, the genealogies of Isaac, the son of Abraham (25:19-26), and of Jacob, son of Isaac (35:22b-29), are given. Even the minor genealogies in Genesis fit into the historical framework of the book. The genealogies of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, sons of Noah (ch. 10), are given for the express purpose of indicating how men were dispersed over the face of the earth after the flood. The genealogies of Ishmael (25:12-18) and Esau (ch. 36) serve a double function. They show God's loyalty to Abraham, even in regard to the noncovenant people, and they give the necessary background of two tribes of people who figure prominently in their contacts with the Hebrew people.

The book of Chronicles also shows the historical purpose behind the genealogies. Chapters 1-3 move quickly through the families from Adam to David. Chapter 4 gives the tribe of Judah, followed by the rest of the sons of Jacob (chs. 5-8). From chapter 9 forward, the Davidic covenant is kept in the forefront. Hence, the genealogies in Chronicles emphasize the unfolding of the messianic covenant through the family of David.

### *Epic Poetry*

The book of Genesis is sprinkled with brief epic poems which fix the mind of the reader on certain important events or persons. These epic poems, like the genealogies, do not interrupt the historical narrative, but rather enhance it. These poems in Genesis take one of the earliest covenant forms, emphasizing the blessing of obedience or the curse of disobedience. Curses are pronounced upon the serpent, the woman, and the ground as a result of sin entering the human family (3:14-19). A curse is placed upon Lamech for the sin of murder (4:23-24) and upon Canaan for the sin of his father (9:25-27). Blessings are pronounced upon Abraham (14:19-20), Jacob (25:23; 27:27b-29), and Esau (27:39-40). A mixture of blessings and curses is pronounced upon the Patriarchs, the sons of Jacob (49:2-27).

Other parts of the Pentateuch employ epic psalms to

enhance the historical record. The deliverance from Egypt and the Egyptian armies is celebrated in Exodus 15:1-18. The Book of the Wars of the Lord is quoted in Numbers 21:14b-15 to enhance the Israelites' journey through the territory of the Amorites. The Israelites sang a brief praise hymn to celebrate God's giving them water in the desert (Num. 21:17b-18), and a ballad concerning Heshbon is also recorded (Num. 21:27b-30). The Balaam oracles (Num. 23:7b-10, 18b-24; 24:3b-9, 15b-24) are familiar to every Bible reader. The book of Deuteronomy records the song (32:143) and the blessing of Moses (33:2-29) to the people of Israel. A number of psalms within the book of Psalms also follow the form of epic narrative (e.g., 68, 78, 105, 106). These generally begin a historical retrospect with God's promise made to Abraham, or they begin with the exodus.

The Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings), according to the Hebrew classification, also contain epic poems. The celebration of the sun's standing still (Josh. 10:12-13), the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5:2-31), Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving for a child (1 Sam. 2:1-10), and David's laments over Jonathan and Saul (2 Sam. 1:19-27) and over Abner (2 Sam. 3:33b-34a) all celebrate momentous occasions. So it is with David's thanksgiving psalm (2 Sam. 22 = Ps. 18) after God had given him rest from all his enemies, and David's "last words" (2 Sam. 23:1b-7). Isaiah's oracle of doom against Assyria (2 Kings 19:21b-28) and the liturgy made up of parts of Psalms 96, 105, and 106 to celebrate David's bringing the ark to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 16:8-36) complete the epic poetry.

### *Historical Prose Narrative*

The history recorded in the OT does not claim to be complete, but it is selective in nature. Only that which is necessary to show God's dealings with man in the working out of the scheme of redemption is included. For this reason, a disproportionate amount of space is given to various events and periods of history. Genesis, even by the most conservative estimate, covers more history than all the

rest of the Bible combined. Yet, even within this book, a disproportionate amount of space is given to the events recorded. Twenty generations are covered in chapters 1–11, but only four generations are covered in chapters 12–50. It is obvious that the intent of the book is primarily to tell us of the Abrahamic covenant and its working in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the Patriarchs.

By contrast, Exodus covers only one year of history, centered mainly around the giving of the law and the instructions for and erection of the tabernacle. Numbers takes us through the forty-year period of the wilderness wandering. Joshua and Judges carry the reader from the conquest of Canaan to the beginning of the monarchy, comprising a period of several hundred years. First and Second Samuel take us through the careers of Samuel, Saul, and David (ca. 1050–970 B.C.), and 1 and 2 Kings continue the history through the career of Solomon, the period of the divided kingdom, and the period of Judah alone after the exile of North Israel (ca. 970–587 B.C.). Esther and parts of Daniel and Ezekiel give the history of the exile. Ezra and Nehemiah recount the work of restoration after the return from exile (ca. 457–433 B.C.). First and Second Chronicles give the history from David's career to the return from exile, repeating much of what is in Samuel and Kings, but giving special emphasis to the southern kingdom.

Almost every book in the OT includes some historical notations, but those given above are basically the ones which contain the bulk of OT history. Some brief historical narratives are found in prophetic books not mentioned above, but this material is comparatively negligible.

## LEGAL FORMS

### *Covenant Forms*

The discovery of Hittite legal codes which come from the same general period as Israel's national beginnings has added to our understanding of covenant forms in the OT. While the OT does not follow the Hittite forms precisely, traces of these forms can be found. There are six close

comparisons which can be made between the Hittite suzerainty treaty and God's covenant with Israel. God employs familiar forms to communicate his will to man.

In these covenants there is (1) a *preamble*, in which the author of the covenant is identified (cf. Exod. 19:3; Josh. 24:2). This is followed by (2) a *historical prologue*, which recounts the past favors of the sovereign to his subjects (cf. Exod. 19:4; Josh. 24:2b-13). Next comes (3) the *stipulations*, with detailed obligations imposed upon and accepted by the subjects (cf. Exod. 20-23; Josh. 24:14-15). Provision is then made for (4) *deposit* in the temple and *periodic reading* of the covenant terms (cf. Exod. 25:21; 31:18; Deut. 10:1-5; 31:9-13). In the Hittite covenants (5) a list of the gods is given as *witnesses* to the covenant. This is not to be expected in a monotheistic society. Israel witnesses against herself (cf. Exod. 19:8; 24:3, 7; Josh. 24:16-28). Finally, there is (6) a list of *curses and blessings* to be suffered or enjoyed as a result of disobedience or obedience (cf. Deut. 27-28). Prophets, priests, sages, and singers keep calling Israel back to a covenant which has so frequently been forgotten.

### *Casuistic (Case) Laws*

Casuistic laws are introduced by a conditional clause beginning with the word "if," "when," or "whoever." Frequently there is a statement of a general principle followed by subsidiary circumstances which pertain to it. In such cases, it is best to begin the general principle with the word "when," "whoever," etc. (Heb. *ki*), and the subsidiary clauses with the word, "if" (Heb. *'im*), as is done in the RSV (cf. Exod. 21:1-6, 7-11, 18-19, 20-21, 22-25, 26-27, 28-32).

The subsidiary clauses give the case law the specific limitations intended by the lawgiver. Frequently the Hebrew word *mishpatim* (judgments, ordinances) is used to refer to these laws. Many interpreters believe that casuistic laws were customary laws which were found in varied forms throughout the ancient world, as many parallels would seem to indicate. Additional examples of casuistic law can be found in Exodus 22 and 23.

*Apodictic Laws*

These laws may take one of three forms. (1) They may be given in direct command, as in the decalogue (Exod. 20:1-17); (2) they may take the curse form (Deut. 27:15-26); or (3) they may take the participial form (Exod. 21:12-17). In the participial form, the subject is stated in the form of a Hebrew participle (translated as a relative clause) placed at the beginning for emphasis. The participle is followed by its object which is in turn followed by the penalty. In some cases the principal clause may be followed by subordinate clauses which further clarify or limit the law (cf. Exod. 21:1-14).

These varied law forms are not divided into neat categories in the OT. Rather they are interspersed throughout the law of Moses and the forms interchange freely. There is no reason to think that one form of law is any more binding than another.

## PROPHETIC ORACLES

*Hope Oracles*

Almost all the prophetic books (preexilic, exilic, and postexilic) contain oracles of hope for the future. These are so numerous as to preclude the possibility of enumerating all of them in this chapter. A few of the more forceful ones must suffice. The prophets found it necessary to condemn the sins of the people and to warn of coming calamity, but they also held out hope for the righteous and the penitent. Amos holds out little hope for the nation, but he does show that God makes a distinction between the righteous and the sinner (9:8) and that there is always hope for the righteous (9:9-10). Hosea expresses more hope than does Amos. In beautiful poetry, he pictures God as the husband who arranges a new betrothal with his bride, Israel, who has become unfaithful to him (2:14-23). God himself provides a fivefold bride price because Israel is helpless to restore herself. The book ends on this same happy note, indicating the exercise of God's free grace in taking the penitent people back to himself (ch. 14). Throughout the preexilic

prophets this attitude is manifested, except in Jonah, who unfortunately did not share God's lovingkindness and, therefore, could not rejoice over the repentance of the Ninevites (Jonah 4:1-4).

Sometimes this hope for the future extends beyond the future involved in the restoration of the righteous remnant from exile. This restoration often becomes a type of a greater worldwide restoration which includes people of all nations. God's Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh (Joel 2:28-32), God's word will go forth from Jerusalem to all people (Micah 4:1-3 = Isa. 2:1-4), there will be a perfect ruler who judges with righteousness and equity (Isa. 11:1-5), all of which will result in salvation and a harmonious society (Isa. 11:6-9). The booth of David will be restored (Amos 9:11-15), and a Davidic descendant will rule over all God's people (Hos. 3:5; Jer. 30:9; 50:4-5; Ezek. 34:24). A careful check of the NT references to these and other OT passages will reveal that the ultimate fulfillment of these ideas was in and through Jesus Christ and his kingdom on earth, the church.

### *Doom Oracles*

Sometimes the prophets refer to calamities of the past as prefiguring the greater coming calamity of the exile of the nation (cf. Amos 4:6-11). This historical retrospect may go back to the distant past. For instance, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is alluded to by Isaiah (3:9), Jeremiah (23:14), and Ezekiel (16:44-50). Since the sins of God's people in the present era are similar to those of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Israel and Judah must also suffer destruction (Isa. 1:9; Amos 4:11). Frequently, the prophets predict the doom of the nation (whether Israel or Judah) (e.g., Amos 2:4-5; 3:11-15; 4:1-3; 5:5, 27; 7:17; Hos. 1:4-5; 8:10; 9:3; 11:5, 7). The frequency of such predictions indicated in the above references is characteristic of the pre-exilic prophets. Amos goes so far as to say that there will be no restoration of North Israel as a nation (5:2; 8:14).

Occasionally these predictions of exile are extended to include a still greater eschatological day of the Lord when

he will take vengeance upon the whole world. It is clear from Joel's use of the expression "the day of the Lord" that there is a development of the meaning of this expression in his book. The locust plague which he so vividly describes is used as a warning of a coming day of vengeance against the covenant people (1:15; 2:1-2, 11). A fourth passage (2:28-32; cf. 3:1-2) is transitional in that it contains a mixture of hope and doom. Devastation is coming upon Jerusalem, but there shall be those that escape. And when God restores the fortunes of his people, Jerusalem will be exalted. This prepares the way for the final use of the expression "the day of the Lord" (3:14), in which the nations are judged and condemned for their sins, and Jerusalem is delivered and glorified. The whole context of this final scene in Joel and its interpretation in the NT (Acts 2:17-21) indicate that the symbolism is ultimately fulfilled in the rejection of the Jewish nation by the Lord and the coming in of the worldwide spiritual kingdom, the church.

It is not uncommon for the prophets to pronounce doom upon Gentile nations (cf. Amos 1:3-2:3; Isa. 13-23; Jer. 46-51). It is not always easy to determine whether these predictions are meant to be fulfilled historically or eschatologically, or both.

Frequently the prophets lament the evil which they have predicted. Amos, who is sometimes erroneously described as the stern prophet of God's judgments, laments the fall of the nation of Israel (5:1-2). Micah laments the coming destruction of Judah (7:1-7) and then indicates the confession which the nation ought to make (7:8-10), with the promise of deliverance if they will repent (7:11-17). Jeremiah seems to have been the most sensitive of the prophets (cf. 8:18-19, 21-22; 9:1). The fact that the prophets predicted what they themselves did not wish to happen indicates that they were speaking the will of God.

### *The Covenant Lawsuit*

A popular method of communication used by the preexilic prophets is based on the law courts of their day. Since court was often held in the gates of the cities, the people had



opportunity to see the judicial system in action. They would, therefore, readily understand the meaning implied in the use of this device by the prophets. In the covenant lawsuit, God serves the double function of judge and plaintiff (accuser), and the nation is the defendant. A clear example of this figure is found in Micah 6:1-8. God charges the people with ingratitude for the saving acts of the Lord (vss. 3-5). The people respond by declaring that their sacrifices and offerings have been made in abundance and asking what more they could do to please God (vss. 6-7). God answers that the requirements are simple: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (vs. 8). Verses 9-16 may be the enumeration of Israel's sins and the pronouncement of the sentence, although some interpreters do not believe that the figure of the covenant lawsuit extends to these verses. Other clear examples of the covenant lawsuit are found in Isaiah 1:2-9; 3:13-15; Micah 1:2-7; and Hosea 4:1-3.

### *Prophetic Intercession*

The prophets sometimes successfully interceded on behalf of their people (cf. Amos 7:1-6). However, though Jeremiah prayed earnestly for his people (13:17; 17:16; 18:20), God eventually told him to quit praying for them because they were hopelessly doomed (7:16; 11:14; 14:11-12). Amos also was told that the doom of Israel was certainly coming (7:7-9; 8:2). The important thing is that the prophets cared enough to intercede on behalf of the people whom God had chosen for his own.

### *Biography and Autobiography*

Several portions of the prophetic books contain information about the prophets and events in their lives. Some are in poetry and some in prose. Some are written in the first person (autobiography) and some in the third (biography). Of course it is possible that a prophet wrote about himself in the third person, but usually when the third person is used it was probably written by the prophet's secretary or disciple, as when Baruch wrote of Jeremiah.

The varied types of material found in the prophetic books need not be taken as evidence of diverse authorship of the books. Variety of form indicates skill on the part of the prophets in communicating the messages received from God, and in some cases it indicates changing circumstances within the nation or suggests that the prophet is addressing different elements within his audience.

### PSALMODY IN ISRAEL

In addition to those psalms included in the section above on narratives, there are also some psalms to be found in the Prophets which will not be enumerated here. The vast majority of the psalms in the OT are to be found in the book of Psalms, comprising in our English Bible 150 separate psalms written and collected over a period extending possibly from 1000 to 300 B.C. Though scholars are not in agreement as to how the psalms should be classified, there are four major types which are generally recognized by all interpreters.

#### *Praise and Thanksgiving Psalms*

The lines of demarcation between psalms of praise and those of thanksgiving are not easily drawn, but it can be generally established that the latter usually reflect a recent deliverance. Because of the great similarity between these two types, they will be discussed together. While the following literary characteristics of these two types of psalms are not always clearly manifested, frequently several of these characteristics can be noted.

There will usually be an *announcement* of the praise or thanks. This may take the form of an *invitation* to Israel, the world, or the heavenly host to praise God; or the psalm may simply begin with an *ascription* of praise to God. In other cases, the psalm may begin with a *prayer* for God to protect Israel or with an *exhortation* to Israel to trust in God.

In the body of these psalms God is praised for his general works of *creation* and *providence* and sometimes specifically for certain *historical evidences* of his goodness to Israel.

Sometimes a *motive* for praising God is indicated by the word "for," although at other times the motive is more subtly expressed.

If the psalm has a *formal conclusion*, it may take one of three forms: (1) resume the opening line, (2) repeat the thought of the opening verse, or (3) add a brief prayer as a plea for God's continual blessings to be upon Israel. In a psalm of thanksgiving the psalmist may bid bystanders join him in praise, announce his intention to pay his vows, or exhort his fellow worshipers to trust in God's deliverance. The following are good examples of praise and thanksgiving psalms: 8, 33, 104-106, and 136.

There are also some specialized psalms which belong in the category of praise and thanksgiving psalms. There is a group of enthronement psalms which emphasize the fact that God is king of the universe (93, 95-99). Another special category involves psalms which emphasize that God has put his name in Zion (e.g., 24, 46-48, 84, 87, 122). Some psalm interpreters put these two groups in separate categories and designate them *enthronement psalms* and *psalms of Zion*, respectively.

### *Psalms of Lament and Petition*

These psalms comprise the largest single category of psalms in the Psalter, with psalms of praise and thanksgiving forming the second largest category. There are two, possibly three, major types of these psalms. *Psalms of innocence* are those in which no guilt is confessed or felt by the author. *Psalms of penitence* are those in which sin is acknowledged as a cause of the calamity. There is a large group of *psalms of confidence* which seem to have come from the same kind of distressing circumstances as the other two categories. In this last category the psalmist's faith and trust are so strong as to preclude the element of lament.

A psalm of lament contains a description of the distress or danger which the psalmist and/or the nation is suffering. This lament is often stated in hyperbolic and/or emblematic language. Some of these psalms do not contain a lament, but they all contain a petition to God, except that

*psalms of confidence* may only imply the petition. There may be a statement of the *motivation* which should prompt God to answer the petition. Three statements of motivation recur frequently in these psalms. The psalmist may appeal to God to uphold God's own reputation, suggesting that if Israel is not delivered from her enemies the nations will mock the name of God (cf. 42:3b, 10b). Or the psalmist may say, "If I die, there will be one less worshiper," for ancient Israel did not understand that God can be praised in the afterlife (cf. 6:5; 88:10-12). Or, in the third place, the psalmist may say, "I have repented, so God should forgive" (cf. 39:7-9; 51:3, 16-17). Sometimes the psalmist *promises* to do certain things if God will grant deliverance. He may promise to praise God (51:15; 69:30; 35:28), to offer a sacrifice (54:6-7), or to pay a vow (22:25).

Occasionally the psalmist prays for the destruction of his enemies. So frequent is this element that some interpreters designate a special category of *imprecatory psalms*. Often it can be determined that the psalmist is not praying for personal vengeance but is only asking God to vindicate his own name or the nation Israel as his covenant people. Perhaps the strongest imprecation is found in Psalm 109:6-19. The Christian should follow the example of Christ, who prayed for his enemies (Luke 23:34) and taught his disciples to do the same (Matt. 5:43-48).

In most psalms of lament and petition there is a great expression of trust in God. These psalms, therefore, were not uttered out of a lack of faith, but they are appeals to God to manifest his covenant loyalty anew on behalf of his people in their present crisis. These psalms vividly contrast human weakness and divine strength.

A good example of a public declaration of innocence is Psalm 44, and Psalm 26 is a good example of a personal declaration of innocence. The frustration of the psalmist is greater in a psalm of innocence because it is more difficult to account for the calamity than it would be if his sin or the sin of the nation were the clear cause of the trouble. The frustration may be greater in a personal psalm of innocence than in a community psalm of innocence because in the former

case there is no one else to share the sense of alienation from God or the worshipping community. Examples of psalms of penitence are Psalms 38 and 51. Examples of psalms of confidence are Psalms 23 and 139.

### *Didactic Psalms*

These are psalms which, in the main, are not directed to God as praise or prayer, but to men for the purpose of edification. Some of the topics included in these psalms are the following : (1) the knowledge (cf. 19, 119) and fear (cf. 112, 128) of the Lord, coupled with obedience; (2) a contrast between the righteous and the wicked (1, 14); (3) trust in God (49, 91); (4) justice in society (52,82), and (5) brotherhood among men (127, 133).

### *Royal Psalms*

These psalms are grouped together, not because they form a separate literary group, but because they have to do with the subject of the king. They may be written in the form of a praise hymn, a psalm of thanksgiving, a didactic psalm, or a psalm of lament and petition. These psalms may involve God's unconditional promise to David of a continuing dynasty (cf. 2 Sam. 7:14-16; Pss. 132, 89). The king is God's anointed son whom God himself inducts into office (Ps. 2). The king functions as a priest before God (Ps. 110) in that he offers sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise to God on behalf of the nation (cf. 2 Sam. 6:14; 1 Kings 8:62-64; 9:25). The king's personal prayers and sacrifices are important as evidence of his loyalty to God (Ps. 20), and he is expected to rejoice in the Lord and not in himself (Ps. 21). The throne of the king is characterized by equity and righteousness (Ps. 45), for he is to be endowed with and to execute God's righteousness and justice (Ps.72). The king promises to faithfully execute righteousness and justice (Ps. 101). David is the example *par excellence* of one who was loyal to God and who thus achieved amazing success (Ps. 18).

There are six important ways in which the Davidic king serves as a type of Christ, just as the nation Israel serves as a type of the church. (1) The king and Christ are God's

anointed (Ps. 2:1-2; Acts 4:25-26); (2), God's Son (Ps. 2:7; Heb. 1:5; 5:5-6; Acts 13:33); (3) they both perform priestly functions (Ps. 110:4; Heb. 5:5-6); (4) they are expected to rule with righteousness and justice (Ps. 45:6-7; Heb. 1:8-9); (5) they are promised success (Ps. 110:5-7; Luke 1:46-55); and (6) they are promised an eternal kingdom (Ps. 89:28-37; Luke 1:32-33). The movement from the type to the antitype is always from the imperfect to the perfect. No Davidic king ever perfectly accomplished his mission, but Christ is the perfect mediator between God and man. Much of the messianic material found in the Psalms is understandably in connection with the Davidic king.

## WISDOM LITERATURE

### *Proverbs*

While it is true that there are proverbs in the OT outside the book of Proverbs, the discussion here will be confined to that book. The principles discussed here, however, would apply to other proverbs as well. The Hebrew word *māshāl*, translated "proverb," can carry any one of three basic meanings: (1) a likeness or comparison, (2) a rule or standard of behavior, or (3) a riddle or, more particularly, the setting forth of God's mysterious unseen world order to which man must conform. The English word "proverbs" can be defined as short, pithy sayings in common use. They may include epigrams (short, cryptic, witty sayings, frequently involving antithesis), aphorisms (short, concise statements of principles), or maxims (precepts or rules of conduct). It can readily be seen that the English word "proverb" does not in all respects correspond to the Hebrew word *māshāl*, although this is the best English equivalent available.

The serious student who expects to be an effective teacher of the word will find a knowledge of the Hebrew language very helpful here. The non-Hebrew student should make use of commentaries that treat the Hebrew text. A close study of the introduction to the book of Proverbs (1:2-6) will yield a good understanding of what the book

proposes to do. The writer or collector intends that his readers shall know wisdom (Heb. *chokhmâh* = Grk. *sophia* = intellectual instruction) and instruction (Heb. *mûsar* = Grk. *paideian* = a balanced education, self-discipline) (vs. 2a). The student is expected to discern (*hâbîn*) the sayings of understanding (Heb. *bînâh* = Grk. *phronēsis* = practical application of wisdom) (vs. 2b). He is to receive instruction in wise behavior (Heb. *haskēl* = Grk. *noēsai* = to intellectually discern), namely, righteousness, justice, and equity (hence, this = Grk. *sunesis* = moral judgment) (vs. 3). Verse four employs synonymous parallelism, so that "simple" = "youth," and "knowledge" and "discretion" = "prudence." The simple person is one whose mind is not set so that it cannot be changed through instruction. The book, therefore, is for anyone who is still willing to learn. Verse five also employs synonymous parallelism, so that "wise man" = "man of understanding," and "increase in learning" = "acquire skill." Verse six is also synonymous parallelism, so that "proverb" = "words of the wise," and "figure" = "riddles." Hence, the book contains material which will enable the immature to so understand the words of the wise as to be able to apply these truths to daily living. "Proverb" in this book can be defined as "the word of the wise."

The book of Proverbs contains heterogeneous materials. Included are short, sentence proverbs without any context (comprising most of the book), brief poems (30:1-9; 31:1-9), a numerical poem (30:11-31), and an alphabetic poem on the worthy woman (31:10-31). The sentence proverbs are the most difficult to interpret since they have no context. There are three main classes of these short proverbs: (1) those which contrast the wise man with the fool, (2) those which contrast the righteous man with the wicked, and (3) those which emphasize man's relationship to God. These proverbs deal in generalizations and should not be interpreted as containing all truth in and of themselves. They may deal with only one item which contributes to financial success, social well-being, or fellowship with God. To make them mean more than they say is detrimental to their intent.

The authors of proverbs are fond of personification, so that Folly is personified (cf. 1:10-19; 4:14-17; ch. 5; ch. 7; 9:13-18) and contrasted with a personified Wisdom (cf. 1:20-33; 8:1-21; 9:1-6). The characteristics and fruits of the good life (chs. 2-3) are contrasted with the characteristics and fruits of folly (ch. 6). The relationship of this personified wisdom to creation is set forth (3:19-20; 8:22-31). Blessings are pronounced upon the one who learns good speech (10:11-14), beneficence (11:24-26), discipline (12:1, 15), and contentment (14:30). Warnings are issued to the sluggard (12:11), the arrogant (16:18), one who trusts his own conscience (14:12), and one who refuses discipline (15:5). These are just a few illustrations of the variety of wise sayings in the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs frequently employ emblematic parallelism by which everyday matters are compared with spiritual truths (cf. 25:3, 11-14, 18-20, 25-26, 28). They also make use of progressive parallelism whereby relative values are compared (cf. 25:24; 27:5; 28:6, 23). These proverbs follow a common pattern used by other Eastern peoples as well as by the Egyptians. They attempt to make the abstract spiritual truths relevant by communicating them in everyday language. Poetry aids the memory, and the memorization of many of these proverbs could be a worthwhile adventure.

### *Ecclesiastes*

The book of Ecclesiastes is written in the form of a soliloquy. The author often muses with himself in his effort to work out the problem of human happiness. Some of his statements, if isolated from their context, could lend themselves to pessimism or even skepticism. But the entire book needs to be interpreted in light of the conclusion which is stated in 12:9-14. After the author had weighed, studied, and arranged his material, he concluded that the only wise thing for man to do is to fear God and keep his commandments, for God will judge man on the basis of his deeds.

The primary difference between Ecclesiastes and an ordinary soliloquy is that "The Preacher" declares that he has actually experienced the things about which he



writes. However, it is quite obvious that his reflections on these experiences did not always yield the same conclusions. For instance, at one time he may declare that work and labor are a vanity and striving after wind (or vexation of spirit) (2:9-23), but again he may conclude that there is something good and rewarding in labor (2:24-26). These different conclusions do not indicate a contradiction in the book; rather it can be determined that the author came to realize that labor and toil are only valuable when a man lives to please God. This is the method by which a soliloquy must be interpreted. One must not analyze the parts so as to lose sight of the whole. This is true of all biblical interpretation, but especially of this kind of literature.

### *Job*

The book of Job provides us with still a third type of wisdom literature. This book contains a prose prologue and epilogue and a poetic dialogue which constitutes the bulk of the book. Other ancient books of wisdom have been found which follow the same pattern. While it seems quite evident that Job was a historical character (cf. Ezek. 14:14, 20; James 5:11), it seems just as evident that the debate which he had with his fellow philosophers was not originally delivered in the beautiful poetry contained in the book. Apparently some skilled poet has taken the material which may have been handed down orally or in written form and has skillfully written the controversy in poetic style. This is the same thing that our song writers are constantly doing. We frequently sing hymns based on some narrative of the Bible, but the poet has restructured the material to compose a poem which says the same thing. Poetry captures and holds the attention so that the mind of the reader can be focused on the issue until its final conclusion.

One must not suppose that in such a dialogue everything that is said is true. Not everything that Job says is true (cf. 9:13-24 and 40:3-5; 42:1-6), nor is everything which the "friends" say false (cf. 4:17 with Rom. 3:1-26). The reader must pay close attention to three elements within the book if the dialogue is to be properly understood. He must notice

what God says about Job in the prologue (1-2) and epilogue (42:7-9), while at the same time not failing to consider what God says about Job in the Jehovah speeches which end the dialogue (chs. 38-41). These philosophers acknowledge that their conclusions were reached through human thought processes; therefore, their words must be weighed against divine truth (cf. 4:7-8; 5:27; 8:8-10; 12:1-2; 13:1-2; 15:7-10; 20:1-5; 26:14; 32:6, 10). Always, when one studies the Bible, he must ask: Who is speaking? An inspired person or an uninspired person? The necessity of so analyzing the material is much greater in a book like Job.

### THE FORM OF HEBREW POETRY

Since two-fifths of the OT is poetry, it is essential that the serious student study from a translation which writes the poetry as such. Unfortunately, the KJV does not do this. The ASV (1901) writes most of the poetry as poetry, but fails to do so with Ecclesiastes and the Prophets. The New American Standard Bible and the RSV, as well as most modern translations, write all of the poetry as poetry.

It is also essential that the student know something of the form of Hebrew poetry, which differs considerably from English poetry. Rhyme and rhythm are not major features of Hebrew poetry. The primary feature of Hebrew poetry is *parallelism*, which means a balanced thought pattern by which the thought of one line of poetry is compared with the thought of a succeeding line or lines. The most basic forms of Hebrew parallelism are given here.

#### *Internal Parallelism*

Internal parallelism involves the shortest possible unit, usually the comparison of only two lines of poetry. The three basic forms, with their subdivisions, are as follows. The examples are from the Psalms.

*Synonymous parallelism.* In this form the thought of the first line is repeated in other words in the second line. This form may be subdivided into two subforms. In *identical parallelism* the second line uses exact synonyms of key words in the first line:

The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof;  
the world, and they that dwell therein.

24:1

In *similar parallelism* the key terms in the two lines are not precisely synonymous, but the thoughts are similar:

Day unto day pours forth speech,  
and night unto night declares knowledge.

19:2

*Antithetic parallelism*. In this form the second line provides a contrast to the thought of the first line:

They will collapse and fall;  
but we shall rise and stand upright.

20:8

*Synthetic parallelism*. The second line adds something to the thought of the first line in synthetic parallelism. There are five basic subdivisions of synthetic parallelism:

(1) *Completion type*, which is largely a parallelism of rhythm rather than of sense:

Yet have I set my king  
upon Zion, my holy hill.

2:6

(2) *Comparison (or progressive) type*:

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

84:10

(3) *Reason type*, in which the second line provides a reason for the thought of the first line:

But there is forgiveness with thee,  
that thou mayest be feared.

130:4

(4) *Stairlike (or climactic)*, in which part of the preceding line is repeated in the succeeding line and is made the starting point for an additional idea:

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,  
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

29:1

(5) *Emblematic*, in which one part of the verse becomes a figure to enhance the thought of the other line:

For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those  
who fear him.

103:11

Any of the above forms may be written in *complete* or *incomplete* form. The example given above under *similar parallelism* involves complete parallelism because there is a corresponding key word or phrase in the second line to match every key word or phrase in the first line. "Day unto day" corresponds to "night unto night," and "pours forth speech" corresponds to "declares knowledge." The example given under *identical parallelism* involves incomplete parallelism. The phrase, "is the Lord's," is not repeated in the writing of the second line, but must be understood as applying to both lines. External parallelism may also involve either complete or incomplete parallelism.

A second variation of any of the above forms is that the lines may be written in *inverted* or *chiastic* form. The syntactical arrangement of the first line is reversed in the writing of the second line. Psalm 91:14 is a good example:

Because he cleaves to me in love (a), I will deliver him (b);  
I will protect him (b), because he knows my name (a).

"Because he cleaves to me in love" is equivalent to "because he knows my name," and "I will deliver him" is equivalent to "I will protect him." Thus, we have an a-b-b-a arrangement. This chiastic arrangement may apply to either internal or external parallelism.

### *External Parallelism*

External parallelism is an extension of internal parallelism in that pairs of parallel lines are combined to form a larger unit. There are three major subdivisions of external parallelism.

*Synonymous.* In this case, all four (or more) lines of poetry say the same thing in other words. This follows the a-b-c-d pattern:

The cords of death encompassed me,  
The torrents of perdition assailed me;  
The cords of Sheol entangled me,  
The snares of death confronted me.

Psalm 18:45

*Antithetic.* This may take one of two forms. (1) It may follow the a-b, a-b pattern in which the first two lines are synonymous and the third and fourth lines are synonymous, but the two sets of lines form a contrast:

Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more;  
Though you look well at his place, he will not be there.  
But the meek shall possess the land,  
And delight themselves in abundant prosperity.

37:10,11

(2) It may follow the a-c, b-d pattern in which the first and third lines correspond and the second and fourth lines correspond, but the a-c, b-d pattern forms a double contrast:

Though with thine own hand didst drive out the nations,  
but them thou didst plant;  
thou didst afflict the peoples,  
but them thou didst set free.

44:2

*Synthetic.* This may take more than one form. (1) It may follow the a-b-c-d pattern in which each succeeding line adds something to the thought of what precedes:

If we had forgotten the name of our God,  
or spread forth our hands to a strange god,  
would not God discover this?  
For he knows the secrets of the heart.

44:20,21

(2) It may follow the a-b-b-a pattern in which lines one and four are parallel and lines two and three are parallel.

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
Let my right hand wither!

Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,  
If I do not remember you.

137:5,6

There is no definite method of *stanza arrangement* discernible in Hebrew poetry, although most of the more recent English translations leave a blank line where the translators felt that a stanza division was desirable. Recurring refrains often indicate the movement of thought in a poem, but these divisions do not always correspond to English or American stanza arrangement. Good examples of recurring refrains are Psalms 42:5, 11; 43:5; 46:7, 11; 49:12, 20; 59:6, 14; Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6; Isa. 9:12b, 17b, 21b; 10:4b.

There are several Hebrew *acrostics* or alphabetic poems in which each succeeding line, verse, or series of verses begins with the next succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The book of Lamentations is written in a series of acrostics. The familiar poem about the worthy woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 is also an acrostic, as are Psalms 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, and 145. The alphabetic arrangement is not discernible in translation, so the Hebrew student should consult the Hebrew text, and the non-Hebrew student should consult a good commentary based on the Hebrew text. In Psalms 9-10, 25, 35, and 37, every two verses begin with the next succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The intervening lines are neutral and may begin with any letter. In Psalms 111 and 112, each line of poetry (each half verse in English) begins with the next succeeding letter. In Psalm 119, each of the first eight verses begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, each of the second eight verses with the second letter, etc. Each English verse contains two lines of poetry, the first of which begins with the designated letter and the second of which is neutral.

There are two great values to be received by the student who understands Hebrew poetry. In the first place, he will learn not to be over technical in his interpretation of words used in poetic repetition for the sake of effect. In the second place, he will grasp the flow of thought much better through an understanding of the poetic form in use.

## APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

### *Characteristics*

A possible definition of apocalyptic literature is that it is a highly symbolic portrayal of coming destruction on the wicked world, which also promises triumph for the righteous. Within this general definition there are several specific characteristics.

**Mysterious.** Apocalyptic literature has a tendency to deal with the esoteric and mysterious. The secrets of God's intervention into human history are revealed, but usually only in a general way. Daniel saw some things in visions which he found extremely difficult to understand (cf. 7:15-22; 8:27; 12:6,8). The apostle John indicates that some things in the book of Revelation are hard to interpret (cf. 13:18; 17:9).

A significant difference between canonical and non-canonical apocalypses needs to be noted. Daniel is told to shut up the vision (8:26; 12:9) because the fulfillment is for the distant future, but the word *satham* (preserve), not *sathar* (hide, conceal) is used. In noncanonical apocalypses of the intertestamental period, the writer may claim that the angel commanded the original writer to conceal the material until a later time (2 Esdras 12:37), or the claim is made that the writings are concealed until the last age (2 Enoch 33:10-11). Perhaps it is because of this attempted imitation of the book of Daniel, involving a misunderstanding of Daniel, that John is told not to seal up his book (Rev. 22:10).

**Eschatological.** Apocalyptic literature involves eschatology, the doctrine of the last things and days. Old Testament eschatology may refer to the first coming of Christ (cf. Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:16-21) or the end of all things at his second coming (cf. Daniel 12). New Testament eschatology may refer to the inauguration of the "last days," at Christ's first coming (cf. Heb. 1:1-2; 2:1-4) or to the consummation of all things at his second coming (cf. 1 Pet. 1:3-5).

**In time of crisis.** Apocalyptic literature is written in a time of crisis. When men are disillusioned with the present world

situation, they long for some assurance that God's justice will eventually right the wrongs. The parts of the OT which can safely be designated as apocalyptic give evidence of the element of crisis. Daniel and Ezekiel were exiles in Babylon along with their fellow-Israelites, and it must have seemed to many that God's promises to David of an everlasting kingdom could not be realized. Zechariah lived in a time of great opposition to the reconstruction era following the Babylonian exile. It may have appeared to many faithful Jews that the temple would never be rebuilt. Joel pictures some great calamity which is coming on the Lord's people, possibly the Babylonian exile. Several noncanonical apocalypses were written during the time of Syrian corruption and persecution in the second pre-Christian century. The book of Revelation was written at the beginning of the outbreak of Roman persecution against the church.

**Epochal.** There is a tendency in apocalyptic literature to divide time into periods or epochs marked by divine intervention into human affairs. The rise and decline of empires is a major feature of the book of Daniel (chs. 2, 7). There is the 1,260-day period of Satanic persecution against the church, during which time the church witnesses for God while clothed in sackcloth (Rev. 11-12). This symbolizes the breaking of the persecuting power of Rome. It is evident that OT apocalyptic, especially the book of Daniel, greatly influenced the language of the book of Revelation.

**Symbolic.** There is a great deal of symbolism in apocalyptic literature. There is fondness for the symbolic use of numbers, especially three, four, six, seven, ten, twelve, and multiples of these. The great struggle is between God and Satan or between Christ and the antichrist. The strength and swiftness of animals and birds symbolize the great forces of evil or good which often meet in conflict. Wars between God's servants and the world power may be pictured in highly symbolic language (cf. Dan. 10; Rev. 12). Daniel's nondescript beast (ch. 7), representing his fourth world power, and Ezekiel's vision of wheels within wheels (ch. 1), along with the four living creatures, almost defy description. One needs to understand that proper interpretation of these



symbols often requires that the details be understood as serving no other purpose than to heighten the dramatic setting in which they are cast. The central truth is usually evident, but sometimes the particulars are extremely difficult to comprehend. It is obvious in all this symbolism that the primary lesson is that God's sovereignty will eventually triumph over the evil forces of Satan.

**Predictive.** The predictive element is paramount in apocalyptic literature. Daniel 2, 7, and 8 predict the successive rise and fall of the Medo-Persian, Macedonian (Grecian), and Roman empires.

### *Survey of Old Testament Apocalypses*

While there is a great deal of difference among interpreters as to whether certain passages are apocalyptic in style and nature, it is generally agreed that the following are to be classed as apocalyptic literature.

**Joel** portrays invading armies as a great locust plague devastating Judah, and the impending judgment awaiting the covenant people is designated as the day of the Lord (chs. 1-2). Then he pictures a worldwide judgment which destroys the ungodly nations and vindicates God's loyal people (ch. 3).

**Daniel** emphasizes the establishment of the kingdom of God during the time of the fourth world empire (chs. 2, 7). He describes a "little horn" from the Grecian Empire, which turns out to be the "abomination of desolation" which attempts to completely wipe out Judaism; but God intervenes on behalf of his people and overthrows the tyrant (8:8-14, 21-26). He also describes a "little horn" from the fourth world power which exalted himself against the saints until the Ancient of Days came and put an end to his power and gave the kingdom to the saints forever (7:7-22).

**Ezekiel** sees the glory of the Lord portrayed before his eyes in vivid symbolism (ch. 1). At a later time he sees the glory of the Lord removed from Jerusalem (chs. 10-11) as a symbol of the exile resulting from Judah's sins. The famous vision of the valley of dry bones signifies the restoration of Israel and Judah from captivity (ch. 37). In some distant

future time Gog, prince of Meshech and Tubal, is to be destroyed (chs. 38–39). The many interpretations of these symbols are treated in the respective commentaries. There are other apocalyptic pictures in Ezekiel, but these will suffice here.

**Zechariah** describes the conflict between God's two anointed ones, the prince and the priest, and Satan and pictures the cleansing of the priest, which in turn symbolizes the cleansing of the nation (chs. 3–4). Later he sees God's four horsemen go out to patrol the earth to "set my Spirit at rest in the north country" so that the temple could be completed (ch. 6). Finally, after many conflicts, victory comes to the saints in the final judgment (ch. 14). Other apocalyptic pictures are also given in Zechariah.

Perhaps it would be well to include a brief resume of a noncanonical apocalypse in order to indicate how these works imitated and yet departed from the recognized authoritative scriptures. First Enoch was apparently written in the second or first pre-Christian century. In this book the fall of the angels brings on the judgment (ch. 1–5) because of the corruption brought about through the cohabitation of angels and human beings (chs. 6–8), which results in the flood (chs. 9–11). According to this work, it is not the fall of man (cf. Gen. 6) which brings on the flood, but it is the fall of angels. The idea of the cohabitation of angels with men involves a strange but popular interpretation of the Genesis declaration that the "sons of God" married the "daughters of men." According to 1 Enoch, Azazel, the chief watcher, is destroyed by the flood, but his offspring become demons in the air all about us (chs. 12–16). Enoch is allowed to view the deep valleys of the dead (chs. 17–36) and to see visions of a pre-existent Messiah, the Son of Man (chs. 37–71) who will judge the mighty rulers and deliver the oppressed. The degrees of punishment in the valleys of the dead, depending on how much meritorious atonement for their sins had taken place in this life, is out of keeping with biblical teaching, but the idea of a pre-existent Son of Man is in keeping with NT teaching.

## FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

While it is true that most of the Bible is written in direct, literal language, it also contains much figurative language. This is sometimes couched in very simple similes or metaphors, but at other times the figure is more extended. Sometimes symbolic language, which has a tendency to be mystical and esoteric, is also used. Great care needs to be exercised in the interpretation of figurative language in the Bible.

### *Extended Figures of Speech*

In addition to the simple figures of speech discussed in Chapter 1, the Bible sometimes employs more extended figures which frequently require greater care in interpretation.

**Similitudes and allegories.** A similitude (parable) is an extended simile, and an allegory is an extended metaphor. There are few similitudes in the OT. Those which do exist frequently contain a mixture of other types, which suggests that they could be better classified as fables or allegories. The classic OT parable or similitude is Nathan's parable of the little ewe lamb in 2 Samuel 12:1-6. This story vividly illustrates the fact that a parable can withhold the application of the essential truth until the crucial moment when the application will be most effective.

Allegories are more frequently found in the OT than are similitudes. In an allegory, several points of comparison are made instead of only one point of comparison which is made in a metaphor. Psalm 80:8-16 (cf. Isa. 5:1-7) describes Israel under the allegory of a vine. Proverbs 5:15-18 describes sexual purity under the allegory of a pure body of water in a cistern, well, or spring (cf. vss. 19-23). Ecclesiastes 12:3-7 describes old age as a gathering storm. Ezekiel 13:8-16 describes the activities of false prophets as being like one who builds a house and covers it with whitewash.

**Riddles and fables.** The word "riddle" in our English versions can be misleading. Sometimes this word is used in a general rather than a technical sense. For instance, the

“riddle” and “allegory” of Ezekiel 17:1-24 are better described technically as a fable. The “dark sayings” occasionally mentioned in the OT (Ps. 78:2; Prov. 1:6) are not necessarily, or usually, riddles in the technical sense, but are only figures that reflect the wisdom sayings of the day. A riddle, in the strictest sense, seems to have been told for the very purpose of taxing the ingenuity of the reader. The example of a riddle in the OT in Judges 14:14. The context of the entire chapter explains the riddle.

A fable is a fictitious story which teaches a moral lesson. Aesop’s Fables are probably the best examples. There are several fables in the OT, all of which are explained by the context (cf. Judg. 9:1-20; 2 Kings 14:9-10; Ezek. 17). Note that all of these involve times of stress when vividness of communication was highly desirable.

### *Numerology in the Old Testament*

**Graded numerical sequence.** This involves a sequential use of numbers in which any number may be used with the next highest number to form a climax. This has frequently been designated as the  $x/x + 1$  formula. Any series may be used. Those which in fact are used in the OT are the  $1/2$ ,  $2/3$ ,  $3/4$ ,  $5/6$ ,  $7/8$ , and  $1,000/10,000$  sequences. The two significant things in this sequential use of numbers are the title line and the list which follows. By comparing these two items, the  $x/x + 1$  sequence can be seen to fall into one of three patterns: (1) the second number is the only one to be considered in the listing, (2) the first number is the only one to be considered in the listing, or (3) neither numeral is to be taken literally.

Several examples of the first group are found in the OT. The list of items following the title line shows that the first numeral is included only for poetic effect to fill out the parallel structure. A good example of this first type is Proverbs 30:15b-16:

Three things are never satisfied;  
four never say, “Enough”:  
Sheol, the barren womb,

the earth, ever thirsty for water,

and the fire which never says, "Enough."

Since four things (Sheol, the barren womb, the earth, and fire) are listed, the number three has no numerical significance but is only used to provide a climax by means of poetic parallelism. Other examples of this use of sequential numbers are Proverbs 30:18-19, 21-23, 29-31; 6:16-19; and possibly Job 5:19-22.

While it is true that the second numeral is the one usually emphasized in the graded numerical sequence, it is possible for the first numeral to be taken literally and for the second to be used figuratively. Deuteronomy 17:6 says, "On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses he that is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness." It is obvious from the last clause that the statement means to say that two or more witnesses are required before the death penalty can be executed. The number three is not to be taken literally in this case.

Sometimes sequential numbers are used in a way that indicates that neither numeral is to be taken literally. In this case, the numerals provide merely a poetic device to indicate an indefinite number, usually a small number. This is the sense in which Amos refers to the "three transgressions of . . . , for four" of the nations which he has under consideration (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6). He mentions neither three nor four transgressions of any of the nations, but he is using this device to indicate their sin is continual. It is interesting that Amos accuses none of these nations of being idolaters, though he certainly could have. He intends only to refer to the kind of sin which man's conscience should condemn. Other examples which could be included in this category which indicate indefinite numbers are Judges 5:30; Ezra 10:13; 2 Kings 9:32; Jeremiah 36:23; 2 Kings 13:19; Ecclesiastes 11:2.

It seems likely that word-pairs which do not involve numerals may occasionally be used in a sense similar to the graded sequence numerical equation. This means that only one of the words in the word-pair is essential to the

discussion at hand and that the other word simply fills in the poetic parallelism. In these cases, words which were already established as word-pairs were used. Either of the words in the word-pair may be the one which is emphasized. Only the context can determine which.

An example of a broken word-pair in which the meaning is restricted to the second word can be illustrated by Proverbs 24:30-32. Verse 30 mentions both "field" and "vineyard," but verses 31-32 describe only a vineyard enclosed by a stone wall. Fields were marked by boundary stones (Deut. 19:14; 27:17; Prov. 22:28; 23:10), rather than being enclosed by stone walls; therefore, our passage is not describing a field. Since "field" and "vineyard" had already become word-pairs in the minds of the people (cf. Exod. 22:5; Num. 16:14; 20:17; 21:22; 1 Sam. 8:14), the word "field" can be used by the wise man to fill in the parallel structure, even though he had only a vineyard in mind.

In these broken-up word-pairs, the meaning may be restricted to the first word in the pair. Since "father" and "mother" were frequently used as word-pairs (cf. Prov. 19:26; 20:20; 23:22; 30:11, 17), these two words may be used in parallel structure when only one of the parents is meant. Both "father" and "mother" may be used in synonymous parallelism, in which case equal treatment is given to both parents (cf. Prov. 10:1; 15:20; 30:11, 17). But in some passages only the responsibility of the father in Israelite society is under consideration. Proverbs 4:3-4a says,

When I was a son with my father  
tender, the only one  
in the sight of my mother,  
he taught me, and said to me,

The singular pronouns used in 4a indicate that only the father is under consideration. The word "mother" is used only as a poetic device.

**Symbolic use of numbers.** While numerals are usually used in their literal sense in the OT, there is also evidence that

they may be used with a symbolic meaning which goes beyond their literal import. There is wide divergence of opinion on the part of OT interpreters in regard to symbolic language in general and symbolic numerology in particular. These views range all the way from those who deny that any symbolic material is found in the OT to those who tend to take almost everything symbolically. Systems of theology should not be based on some strange, symbolic interpretation of Scripture which ignores the literal import of most of its language. On the other hand, those passages which do lend themselves readily to a symbolic interpretation, especially where the literal meaning renders the passage unintelligible or contradictory, should not be neglected.

Symbolic use of numbers in the OT seems to be somewhat rare. Yet it does seem that the numbers three, four, seven, and ten stood as symbols of completeness or perfection. This, of course, does not mean that these numerals were not often used literally. The three annual festivals of Israel (Exod. 23:17), Balaam's blessing Israel three times (Num. 24:10), Elijah's pouring out water three times (1 Kings 18:34), the threefold betrothal in Hosea 2:19-20, the thrice-given "Holy, holy, holy" (Isa. 6:3), and the priestly benediction which repeated the name of God three times (Num. 6:24-26) all seem to follow the Babylonian and Egyptian patterns of the triad which stood for the superlative degree, completion, or perfection.

The number four frequently is used in connection with the four cardinal points of the compass to indicate the whole earth (cf. Ezek. 37:9; Dan. 7:2; Zech. 6:5).

The number seven gives the clearest evidence of having symbolic significance. The seventh day (Exod. 20:8-11), month (Lev. 23:24), and year (Exod. 23:10-11) were sacred to Israel. Ceremonial cleansing from touching a dead body (Num. 19:11; 12:14) or from leprosy (Lev. 13:4) lasted for seven days. A young animal could not be sacrificed until it was seven days old (Lev. 22:27). Balaam offered seven bullocks and seven rams upon seven altars (Num. 23:29). Israel was commanded to march around Jericho once each day for six days and seven times on the seventh day, at

which time the walls would fall down (Josh. 6). Zechariah 3:9 pictures a stone with seven eyes, which are interpreted as the eyes of the Lord which range through the whole earth (Zech. 4:10). On the Day of Atonement blood was sprinkled by the high priest seven times (Lev. 16:14), and the Feast of Weeks (Lev. 23:15) came seven weeks after the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread (Lev. 23:6). These and other considerations indicate that the number seven had a symbolic meaning beyond its literal import.

Since a decimal system of numeration prevailed generally in the ancient world of Israel's national era, it is most likely that the number ten also stood for completion since all other numbers are composed of the first ten. The fact that many numbers in the OT were rounded off to the nearest ten is too common knowledge to need elaboration here. The number ten also seems to be used in a symbolic sense on occasion. Jacob's wages were changed ten times (Gen. 31:7), there are ten plagues in Egypt (Exod. 7-11). The Law is summarized in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1-17), the Israelites tempted God ten times (Num. 14:22), Job said he was reproached ten times (Job 19:3). The dimensions of the ark in Noah's day (300 x 50 x 30 cubits, Gen. 6:15) and of the tabernacle (10 x 10 x 20 cubits) are given in multiples of ten. It seems, therefore, that God intended for the numbers three, four, seven, and ten to stand as symbols of completeness or perfection.

There is also some evidence that the number twelve, based on the twelve-month year, indicated completeness. When the tribe of Levi was chosen as the priestly tribe and thus given no specific inheritance in Canaan, the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, had tribes assigned to them (Num. 34:13-29). Apparently this was done to keep the number at twelve.

While there is considerable controversy in regard to the matter, it may be that the number forty is also sometimes used symbolically. The number recurs many times in the OT. The rains of the flood lasted forty days (Gen. 7:4, 12, 17) and Egyptian embalming required forty days (Gen. 50:3). Moses and Elijah fasted forty days



(Exod. 24:18; 1 Kings 19:8). The spies spent forty days in Canaan (Num. 13:25) and Goliath challenged the armies of Israel for forty days (1 Sam. 17:16). Forty stripes are exacted of certain criminals (Deut. 25:3). A forty-day period of purification was required of a woman after giving birth to a male child, and eighty days were required after giving birth to a female (Lev. 12:2-5). Judges mentions several periods of forty years or multiples of forty (cf. 3:11; 5:31; 8:28; 13:1). These and other possible examples indicate the fondness for the number forty.

Many scholars believe, with good reason, that the number forty stood as a symbol of a generation. It is believed by some that 1 Kings 6:1, which designates 480 years as the time between the Exodus and the building of the temple in the fourth year of Solomon, is not meant to be taken literally, but as representing twelve generations. Actually, twelve generations are given between these two events. First Kings 4:1-4 indicates that Zadok lived in the time of Solomon. First Chronicles 6:3-8 (Heb. 5:29-34) gives twelve generations from Amram, the father of Moses, to Zadok, who was serving as high priest at the time Solomon's temple was built. There were also twelve generations from Ahimaaz, son of Zadok, to Jehozadak, who was priest when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple and took Judah captive (1 Chron. 6:8-15; [Heb. 5:34-41]). There may have been a studied effort to work out the chronological pattern in poetically balanced form, just as Genesis 5 gives ten generations from Adam to Noah, and Genesis 11 gives ten generations from Shem to Abram. Matthew poetically balances his genealogical list to have fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the Babylonian captivity, and fourteen from the captivity to Christ (Matt. 1:17). A comparison of Matthew's genealogy with Luke's indicates that several generations were omitted from Matthew's list (cf. Luke 3:23-34). While this method of reckoning may seem very strange to us, it must have been common and acceptable in ancient days.

It is not necessary to assume that every number had a symbolic meaning in the OT or that the numbers three, four,

seven, ten, and twelve had a symbolic meaning every time they were used.

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