

Week 12: The Poetry of the Psalms

What Kind of Poetry are the Psalms?

In their helpful book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart say the following about the Psalms as poetry:

“Perhaps the most important thing to remember in reading or interpreting the Psalms should also be the most obvious: They are poems-musical poems.”¹

On the other hand, literary scholar James Kugel in his book *The Great Poems of the Bible* says the following:

“I don’t particularly like to talk about compositions like the psalms or prayers or prophetic speeches as poems, since this word is in any case likely to summon up a host of associations inappropriate to these texts. They are really not very much like what we think of as poetry in the mainstream Western tradition.”²

Fee and Stuart argue that recognizing the Psalms as poems is one of the most important things we need to do to understand them and Kugel says they are so unlike poems that we should probably not even use that word to describe them. Both scholars are pointing us to something that is helpful for us to keep in mind when looking at the Psalms. There are several ways in which the Psalms are wonderful examples of poetry, but it is a poetry that differs from other poetry in important ways.

They are poetic in that they are literary compositions using figurative language as well as conventional forms, and structures to convey their meaning. They do not work like letters, prose narratives, or other direct language. But they are also different from what we usually think of as poetry in a couple important ways as well. The forms, and structures are somewhat different and often so is the way the figurative language is used.

It might be helpful to think about English poetry to highlight the similarities and the contrasts. English poetry, like most poetry in the Western tradition, is characterized by forms that emphasize meter, rhyme. In the best poets these elements all work together along with the ideas and images conveyed by the words. Let’s briefly look at how this works.

Robert Frost: Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.	(A)
His house is in the village though;	(A)
He will not see me stopping here	(B)
To watch his woods fill up with snow.	(A)
My little horse must think it queer	(B)
To stop without a farmhouse near	(B)
Between the woods and frozen lake	(C)
The darkest evening of the year...	(A)

¹ Fee, Gordon D., and Douglass Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1993), 189.

² Kugel, James. *The Great Poems of the Bible: A Reader’s Companion with New Translations* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 9.

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In this example, there is a distinct and repeated pattern of sounds at the end of the line (which I have indicated with the capital letters). If you look closely, you will also notice that each line has 8 syllables that alternate in their stress when you read them. When you read this poem out loud the words mimic the clip-clop rhythm of the horse.

Western poems frequently have conventional forms related to the organization of these rhyming and metrical patterns. Even when there is no end-rhyme, English poetry often draws heavily upon meter and sound.

Alfred Lord Tennyson: The Princess: Come Down O' Maid

...Sweeter thy voice, but every sound is sweet;
Myriads of rivulets hurrying thro' the lawn,
The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

The meter is that each line has ten syllables that alternate unstressed/stressed (iambic pentameter). But notice how Tennyson stacks the “s” and “m” sounds (alliteration) to connect the rhythm of the meter to the imagery he is using. The poet is focusing our attention on the sounds and then uses the language to allow us to hear the buzzing of the bees.

English poetry and most of that in the Western tradition is as much about the relationship of sounds and rhythms as it is the images the words convey. Although Hebrew poetry does use these techniques occasionally, it is not characteristic in the way it is in English. The metrical forms in the Psalms are not as intricate and they rely less on the patterns of sounds as they do on the patterns of ideas. Hebrew poetry is organized more about rhythms of thoughts than the rhythm of sounds.

Hebrew poetry, especially that of the Psalms also differs from our poetry in a couple of other ways. Our poetry tends to emphasize creativity and uniqueness, whereas the Psalms are more inclined to repetition and commonality in form. Our poetry tends to express itself in flowery language, whereas the Psalms tend to emphasize terseness and subtlety. English poetry is often either very reflective and metaphysical or very observational and anti-metaphysical. There is really no such division in the psalms because there is no concept of the physical world or the experiences of humanity being somehow a different reality than the spiritual world. Everything in the Psalms is connected to some relationship with God.

Where the Psalms and English or Western poetry are similar, however, is that they use figurative language in a way that allows them to communicate not only facts or observations but attitudes, affections, and emotions. This is the essence and magic of poetry. It is probably why the earliest literature we have from almost every culture is poetry. A skilled poet can pack a lot more meaning into a line and more powerfully than can be done with prose.

For example, suppose we wanted to communicate the burdens and worries that kings must face. We could describe the stress related to his responsibilities, the threats from rivals, and all the other concerns. We might mention how challenging and demanding those burdens are and how it is difficult for a man in that situation to sleep at night. Shakespeare, however, can communicate all of that and more with eight words saying, “*Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.*” Similarly, when David is surrounded by enemies and desires God to protect him, rather than detail all of the truths about God’s

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love, power, and devotion which he desires to draw upon, he is able to communicate all those things and more with just 16 words, *“Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings,”*.

We have in the Psalms a body of literature that is poetry but poetry that works differently than what we might usually expect. They sometimes appear to be simple and unsophisticated but as we look closer, we see that they are nuanced and powerful. The comparison and linkages of ideas they contain point us to a depth that requires both studied observation and quiet meditation to fully appreciate. Literary scholar Robert Alter captures it well saying,

“The Psalms are of course poems written out of deep and often passionate faith. What I am proposing is that the poetic medium made it possible to articulate the emotional freight, the moral consequences, the altered perception of the world that flowed from this monotheistic belief, in compact verbal structures that could in some instances seem simplicity itself.”³

Let’s look at how some of this works in the Psalms.

Lines not Sentences

We saw that the rhythm of Hebrew poetry doesn’t come from the organization of syllables and sounds but it does have a rhythm. The rhythm is established through a pattern of ideas. Identifying those ideas are important and the first thing to keep in mind is that unlike letters and prose narratives, it is not sentences that primarily convey these meanings. Rather, they are organized into lines and each line is divided into two or more parts, called stichs (pronounced sticks). For example, the following is one line, composed of two stichs from Psalm 46,

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

The bulk of the meaning is carried by the relationship of the stichs to the line. Each stich contributes a perspective to the idea contained in the line.⁴ Meaning and emphasis are drawn out through the relationship between the stichs.⁵ This patterning is often called parallelism because the parts are setup next to one another.

Probably the most practically helpful thing you can learn in this lesson is how the main forms of parallelism work. We are going to look at six main types of parallelism that you will find in the Psalms. In each of these types of parallelism the second part often adds to or emphasizes something in the first part. These structures are helpful because if one part (or stych) is difficult to understand you can often figure out the point the psalmist intends by looking at the parallel part. Together they will bring clarity or force to the idea that is being considered or emphasized.

³ Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 113.

⁴ The rhythm when spoken or sung is therefore not based upon the stress of syllables but the emphasis on certain words.

⁵ Hebrew poetry also uses a lot of wordplay but since that is less apparent in the translations, we are not going to cover that in this lesson. Anyone who wants to learn more about Hebrew poetry can let me know and I will suggest some resources for you depending upon what you are interested in.

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Parallelism

Synonymous Parallelism

Synonymous parallelism is the repetition in the second part of what has already been expressed in the first part. The two parts communicate the same idea in different words. These often work like a 1-2 punch. Here are a few examples...

Psalm 18:4

⁴The cords of death encompassed me;
the torrents of destruction assailed me;

Psalm 103:10

He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

Psalm 135:4

For the LORD has chosen Jacob for himself,
Israel as his own possession.

Antithetic (Contrasting) Parallelism

Antithetic or contrasting parallelism is when the second part contrasts with the first part. Again, there is a 1-2 punch effect. Here are a few examples...

Psalm 1:6

for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Psalm 34:10

The young lions suffer want and hunger;
but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

Psalm 62:4(b)

They bless with their mouths,
but inwardly they curse.

Climactic Parallelism

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Climactic parallelism is when the poet builds a climactic effect by a subsequent repetition of elements from one part to the next. You can think of it like a poetic staircase that brings the emphasis from one level to another. Here are few examples:

Psalm 29:1

- ¹ Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

Psalm 93:3

- ³ The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
the floods have lifted up their voice;
the floods lift up their roaring.

Psalm 96:1-2(a)

- Oh sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth!
² sing to the LORD, bless his name;

Emblematic Parallelism

Emblematic parallelism is when one part is a direct statement connected to the other part by a simile or metaphor. Often, the simile or metaphor is an illustration of the direct statement. These can be synthetic or antithetic and so are a type of compound parallel.

Psalm 31:12

- I have been forgotten like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.

Psalm 38:4

- For my iniquities have gone over my head;
like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me.

Psalm 42:1

- ¹ As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.

Inverted Parallelism

To invert is to turn something upside down. Unlike the other types we have looked at which involve two concepts side by side, inverted parallelism is more like a mirror effect. There are two types I am going to introduce. The first, called chiasm is a popular literary device in most aural cultures and can be found

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not only in Hebrew poetry but throughout the Old and New Testament. The second is called inclusio or envelope structure.

Chiasm

The words chiasm and chiastic come from the name of the Greek letter chi which looks very much like an X in English. If you picture an X and then draw a straight-line right through the middle you get what looks like a reflection and that is basically what this kind of parallel is. There is a pattern that gets repeated in reverse reflecting back upon itself. These patterns can be very compressed or over wide sections of material. For example, when Jesus says, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." He is using a chiastic structure and the entire book of Jude is organized this way.

Psalm 16:8-11

- ⁸ I have set the LORD always before me;
because he is **at my right hand**, I shall not be shaken. (A)
- ⁹ Therefore my **heart is glad**, and my **whole being rejoices**; (B)
my **flesh also dwells secure**. (C)
- ¹⁰ For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, (D)
or let your holy one **see corruption**. (C)
- ¹¹ You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is **fullness of joy**; (B)
at **your right hand** are pleasures forevermore. (A)

Envelope (Inclusio)

An envelope structure is where a repeated idea is at the beginning and end of a section forming a type of envelope (or sandwich). Unlike the chiasm, there isn't necessarily a pattern to the parts within (although there may be).

Examples include Psalm 150 that begins and ends with the book-ends of "Praise the Lord!" and Psalm 118 that begins and ends with "Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!"

The do not, however, need to be at the start and end of an entire psalm. Psalm 119 begins with one...

- Blessed are those whose **way is blameless**,
who **walk in the law of the LORD!**
- ² Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
who seek him with their whole heart,
- ³ who also **do no wrong**,
but **walk in his ways!**

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Synthetic Parallelism

Synthetic parallelism is when lines are put in parallel, but the ideas are not neatly balanced. Often, they are expansions of an idea rather than a true parallel. An example of this can be found in Psalm 148.

Psalm 148:7-10

Praise the LORD from the earth,
you great sea creatures and all deeps,
8 fire and hail, snow and mist,
stormy wind fulfilling his word!

9 Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!

10 Beasts and all livestock,
creeping things and flying birds!