

Learning to Love the Psalms (IV) – POETIC FORMS OF THE PSALMS

I wasted time,
and now ^{time} waste me doth - King Richard

Why is there so much poetry in the Bible?

Poetry appeals more directly to the whole person than prose does. **Exodus 14:26-31 vs. Exodus 15:1-5**

It stimulates our imaginations, arouses our emotions, feeds our intellect and addresses our wills. More than this, poetry is pleasurable. Nevertheless, poetry is difficult to interpret. The psalms do not depend on rhyme or easily scanned rhythms. They depend more on **repetition** and **complex patterns** that are often varied or broken in the course of the poem.

The most single common characteristic of Hebrew poetry is repetition, usually called *parallelism*.

May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble!

May the name of the God of Jacob protect you! (Psalm 20:1)

A second major characteristic of Hebrew poetry is imagery. Psalm 23, Proverbs 8

Understanding Parallelism

In 1753 Lowth discovered the genius of Hebrew poetry, which called ***parallelism***. **THE STEREO IN YOUR BIBLE!!**

Parallelism refers to the correspondence which occurs between phrases of a poetic line.

O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger,
nor discipline me in your wrath.
Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing;
heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. (Psalm 6:1-2)

Why do the nations rage and the people plot in vain? (Psalm 2:1)

One complete parallelism we will call a *line*. Each line, so defined, will contain two, sometimes three, and rarely four or more *poetic phrases*. There are two phrases in Ps. 2:1, it is often called a *bicolon*. When three phrases, the line is referred to as a *tricolon*. [*monocola* (poetic lines with only one phrase)]. We will occasionally mark the first colon of a line as *A*; the second *B*; the third *C*, and so forth.

A = B the same thing twice, simply using different words (the traditional approach)

A, what's more B (The proper approach)

As we read the lines of Hebrew poetry carefully, we see that the second phrase is related in meaning to the first phrase. However—and this is important—it ***always*** carries forward the thought found in the first phrase in some way.

A = B 'Lord, do not punish me when you are angry with me,' (v. 1) and 'Help me, Lord, when I'm hurting (v. 2).

A, what's more B Rebuke to discipline, stepping beyond mere words to action. Progression!

Synonymous parallelism the first is echoed in the second, with a slight change of terms.

O LORD, how many are my foes!
Many are rising against me; (Psalm 3:1)

Antithetical parallelism the words of the first line are affirmed/expressed in the second, not by repetition of a similar thought, but by the denial of the opposite [antonyms instead of synonyms].

for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Psalm 1:6)

Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust,
who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after a lie! (Psalm 40:4)

For not in my bow do I trust,
nor can my sword save me.
But you have saved us from our foes
and have put to shame those who hate us. (Psalm 44:6-7)

A wise son makes a glad father,
but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother. (Proverbs 10:1)

Synthetic parallelism labels those lines in which the second phrase completes or supplements the first.

"As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill." (Psalm 2:6)

For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods. (Psalm 95:3)

Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker! (Psalm 95:6)

Climatic(Repetitive) parallelism

Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness. (Psalm 29:1-2)

Emblematic parallelism explicitly draws an analogy. In one of the phrase in an emblematic line will use a word of comparison (as, like) in order to bring together two thoughts.

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God. (Psalm 42:1, NIV)

Your tongue plots destruction,
like a sharp razor, you worker of deceit. (Psalm 52:2)

Ellipsis to bind two phrases more closely together economy of expression

You have put me in the depths of the pit,
in the regions dark and deep. (Psalm 88:6)

Inclusio gives a sense of closure, and imparts to the psalm a sense of unity, and sets the mood for the whole psalm.

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8:1)
O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8:8)

Save me, O God! (Psalm 69:1)
for God *will save* Zion (v. 35)

THE UNIVERSAL POETRY !!!

"it is well fitted by God's providence to invite 'all the earth' to 'sing the glory of his name.'"(D. Kidner)

Exercise in parallelism

Psalm 15

LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill? (v. 1)

1. character
2. speech
3. conduct
4. integrity
5. generosity/stewardship
- 6.

THE CENTER

One important form of Hebrew poetry is that a poem often has the critical verse or message in the middle of the poem rather than at the end (**chiasm**).

Psalm 23

Complex Forms and Artful Variations

Psalm 25, here, we find a rather complex form that reminds us that this poetry has been very carefully constructed and that we will need to study it carefully to appreciate it. Psalm 25 is an **acrostic**, which means that the lines (or sometimes verses or sections) of the psalm begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. *Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119 (the most polished example!), and 145 all use this form.* This complexity reminds us that the psalms were not dashed off but were very carefully constructed with great attention to detail. This alphabetical complexity is underscored by surprise variations in the form delightful surprise and to keep us on our toes in Psalm 25:1–21, for example, two letters of the alphabet are not used. Also, the last verse of the psalm seems to stand outside the acrostic structure, calling attention to itself and the urgency of its prayer, “Redeem Israel, O God, from all his troubles.”

Why did the psalmists follow an acrostic pattern?

- (1) It may be an artistic device used to add a certain beauty to the psalm, as rhyme does in our poetry.
- (2) It may indicate that the subject is being covered completely, from A to Z, as we might say. **Psalm 119**
- (3) The acrostic may have been a mnemonic device designed to assist the young in learning the psalms.

What is the theme that ties Psalm 25 together? _____ (vv. 4, 5, 8, 9, and 12).

Bible uses the words *shame* and *ashamed* once in v. 2 and twice in v. 3 (and also v. 20)

- “a painful emotion excited by a consciousness of guilt, disgrace or dishonor.” (Luke 9:26; Rom. 1:6)
- The unique biblical idea is that of being let down or disappointed or of having trusted in something that in the end proves unworthy of our trust.

“hope maketh not ashamed” (Rom. 5:5, KJV) “hope does not put us to shame” (ESV) (does not disappoint, NIV)

From the thought of his being abandoned by God to his settled confidence! How?

- God is _____, because “No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame” (v. 3).
- God is characterized by _____, because his paths are paths of truth (vv. 4-5).
- God is his _____ (v. 5). • God is _____ and _____ and has been “from of old” (v. 6).
- God is _____ and _____ (v. 8). • God is _____ and _____ in all his ways (v. 10).
- God is _____ (v. 11). • God is open with his people and freely _____ in them (v. 14).
- God is _____ (v. 16).
- God is _____ to rescue his people; therefore he is in whom they can take _____ (vv. 15, 20).

How to receive God’s blessing?