

Lesson 3

The Unique Nature of Hebrew Poetry

Poetry is a form of writing that formulates a concentrated, imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through its meaning, sound, and rhythm. Its emotional content is expressed through a variety of techniques, from direct description to symbolism, including the use of metaphor and simile (*Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*, Britannica.com).

Hebrew poetry shares with its English counterpart the characteristics described above. Yet, Hebrew poetry accomplishes such by a very different style and structure.

The sentences or lines of Hebrew poetry are much shorter than prose. The lines often contain about six words, often divided into two groups, each of about three words (known as a bi-colon).

Parallel Ideas Versus Parallel Sounds

To get the most out of Hebrew poetry, one must understand that little or no effort is made to rhyme words or sounds, as is often, but not always the case in English poetry. This is potentially another evidence of a divine hand in their construction because if sound had been

rhymed in Hebrew, it would have been totally lost when translated into other languages.

“But the most familiar feature of Hebrew poetry arises from the balance between successive lines. This is called parallelism,” notes *The New International Dictionary of the Bible*. It elsewhere is described as the “echo effect,” where the poetic structure matches words, phrases, lines, and thought sequences. The poems often grow in specificity and intensity. Psalms use language to evoke a response from the reader.

What is “rhymed,” repeated, or rearranged in Hebrew poetry are thoughts. These parallel thoughts are expressed in similar grammar, similar sentence length, and similar vocabulary.

Simple Parallelism Example:

a	b	c
The Lord	has heard	my supplication
The Lord	will receive	my prayer

Psalm 6:9

In this very simple example, above, notice how the subject (*Lord*) is the same in each line and that the verbs (*heard*, *receives*) are nearly synonymous, as are the objects of the lines (*supplication*,

prayer). Be particularly aware in this example that “supplication” and “prayer” are expressions for the same act. When looking at more complex psalms, this also will be helpful. English readers often try to parse great differences between two lines of Hebrew poetry, when the real purpose is either to emphasize by repetition or to expand upon the same idea by the use of a different word or phrase.

Psalm 11:4

The LORD is in His holy temple,
The LORD'S throne is in heaven;
His eyes behold,
His eyelids test the sons of men.

Understanding the principle of parallelism, notice that God's “holy temple” becomes synonymous with “heaven.”

Repeated Words: Psalm 29

- v. 3 The VOICE of the Lord is upon the waters. . .
- v. 4 The VOICE of the Lord is powerful, the VOICE of the Lord is majestic
- v. 5 The VOICE of the Lord breaks the cedars. . .
- v. 7 The VOICE of the Lord hews out flames of fire
- v. 8 The VOICE of the Lord shakes the wilderness
- v. 9 The VOICE of the Lord makes the deer to calve and strips the forests bare. . .

Refrain: *Chorus-like repetition dividing psalm into sections.*

Read Psalm 107 and notice that verses 8, 15, 21, and 31 are identical. They serve as a refrain, not unlike the chorus in many of our worship hymns.



Each of those verses read: “*Oh that men would praise the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!*”

The repeated refrain both divides the psalm into sections and simultaneously and repeatedly calls upon men to acknowledge and express gratitude to the Lord. It also serves as emphatic repetition, calling particular attention to the importance found in the phrase.

Inclusio: *A bracketing or envelope form of repetition that occurs at the beginning and ending of a psalm or a major section of a psalm.*

Psalm 103 serves as an example of this form. Notice that the first words of the psalm and the last are identical—“Bless the Lord, O my soul.”

Chiasm: *A sequence of lines with a mirror relationship in which the first and last are parallel, the second and next to the last are parallel, the third and third from the last are parallel, etc.—so that the last half is in inverted order.*

Psalm 19:1 is a familiar psalm and demonstrates a simple example of this form in the structure of the Hebrew verse.

A The heavens
B declare
C the glory of God

C¹ His handiwork
B¹ shows
A¹ And the firmament

Again, notice the parallels. “Heavens” and “firmament” speak of the same thing. The verbs “declare” and “shows” convey the same idea and we can appropriately conclude a connection between “the glory of God” and His “handiwork.”

Not All Purely Synonymous

A purely synonymous poetic verse might be structured as:

Line A = Line B

However, it may be observed that some verses are more accurately described as:

Line A is so...Line B is also so

Basic Types of Parallelism

The paralleling of thoughts within the psalms presents itself in several forms. The most basic of these are:

1. Synonymous Parallelism

Here, two lines of the poem express fairly closely the same idea in different words.

Psalm 24:2

*For He has founded it upon the seas,
And established it upon the waters.*

Psalm readers will observe that the parallel words in synonymous lines are not always exactly identi-

cal in meaning. Melvin D. Curry has pointed out that sometimes the second half “intensifies” the first phrase, as from “break” to “smash.” In other cases, he says, the second line “dramatizes” the first, as from “bow” to “lick the dust of your feet.” Or, the parallel word or phrase may “concretize” the first phrase, as from “wrath” to “flaming fury.” Finally, he suggests the parallel may “zoom in” on the first phrase, as from the general “cities of Judah” to “the courtyards of Jerusalem.”

John Goldingay suggests that the purpose of this expanded repetition can be to “underline” an idea or the “sharpen the point” in some way or “give it precision or clarify its ambiguity or complete it.”

2. Antithetic Parallelism

In this form, we have a thought or truth expressed or strengthened by contrast or opposition. Sometimes the single thought is expressed in both positive and negative modes.

Psalm 1:6

*For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the ungodly shall perish.*

3. Synthetic Parallelism

This style presents a truth by having the first and second lines of

Exploring the Messages in Hebrew Poetry

When examining a psalm, look for the purpose or goal of the writer by:

1. Looking at the opening lines, which may identify the writer's intent.
2. Look for the plot or task, which may center on a conflict that needs resolution or may be a search for justice or call to faithful living
3. Look at the concluding lines to see if there is a renewed call to whatever the focus or purpose of the psalm might be.

There is generally a progressive movement of thought in the psalms, a development of a principle or idea that is first set forth and then elaborated upon.

the poem bear some relationship to one another. It may be a relationship of cause and effect or of proposition and conclusion.

Psalm 119:11

*Your word I have hidden in my heart,
That I might not sin against You!*

There are other less common forms of parallelism, such as pro-

gressive (stair-like), climactic, and introverted parallelism.

Psalm 1:1 (*progressive*)

*Blessed is the man Who **walks** not
in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor **stands** in the path of sinners,
Nor **sits** in the seat of the scornful*

Psalm 29:1 (*climactic*)

*Give unto the LORD, O you mighty
ones,*

*Give unto the LORD glory and
strength.*

Psalm 91:14 (*introverted*)

*Because he has set his love upon
Me, therefore I will deliver him;
I will set him on high, because he
has known My name.*

Word Pictures in the Psalms

While not unique to Hebrew poetry, students need to recognize that the psalms present “word pictures” to help readers and singers visualize certain concepts. This is accomplished through the use of figures of speech, which provide comparison, contrast, emphasis or clarification.

Use a dictionary, grammar, and language handbook or other reference to define each of the following figures of speech. Examples of each are provided.

Simile: _____

Psalms 1:3; 1:4; 5:12; 17:8

What is the comparison? _____

Metaphor: _____

Psalms 23; 84:11; 91:4

What are these comparisons teaching? _____

Hyperbole: _____

Psalm 6:6; 78:27; 107:26

What is the point made by this figure of speech? _____

Anthropomorphism: _____

Psalms 31:2; 11:4; 18:15; 32:8

What parts of man's body are assigned to God to convey some truth about God in these examples? _____

Personification: _____

Psalms 35:10; 77:16; 96:11; 104:19

What characteristics are assigned to the lifeless objects in these examples? _____

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Looking in the song book you use for worship, find a song whose chorus is identical for three or more verses of the song. Drawing upon what you've learned about repetition in Hebrew poetry, what do you think are the purposes of singing the same chorus words repeatedly in one song? _____

Look at other songs and see if you can find other types of repetition similar to that in Hebrew poetry.

2. Using Psalm 6:9 as your pattern, write your own two-line psalm or poem, repeating in some way the subject, verb, and object in each line. _____

3. Using Psalm 19:1 as your pattern, see if you can write a verse about a worshipful thought of your own, where you use chiasm (make the second line a mirror reverse of the idea in the first line).

a. _____

b. _____

4. Find the song "He's My King." Go through the song and list all the figures of speech you can find. _____

Do the same with the following songs: "Praise the Lord" and "Higher Ground." And, if you like, choose another song to peruse for figures of speech. _____
