

The Psalms & Poetic Literature

Intro: Tonight we continue in our series through what is known as the poetic and wisdom literature, which consist of: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. Wisdom literature's purpose, as Char told us, is to make us wise concerning all things in this life that we may live a life of flourishing.

"The book of Psalms, a collection of inspired Hebrew prayers and hymns, is probably for most Christians the best-known and most-loved portion of the OT. The fact that the book of Psalms is often appended to copies of the NT and that psalms are used so often in worship and meditation has given this particular book a certain prominence for modern readers. But frequently the psalms, as beloved as they are, present special difficulties for understanding, since the poetic features of rhyme and repetitive meter (factors that indeed allow poetry to be far more memorable than prose) take very different forms in Hebrew poetry, and more importantly, are virtually always lost in English translation." Fee & Stuart

What is the first thing you think of when you think of a poem? Rhyme! Of course, rhyme and meter are primary features of English poetry. But that is not the case with Hebrew poetry. According to my good friend and OT scholar, *Dominick Hernandez*, "parallelism and metaphor are the heartbeat and heart of Hebrew poetry." We'll talk about that in a minute.

Poetry comprises about a third of the entire Bible, and is its second most common literary feature. Poetry even abounds outside the poetic books. OT narrative books periodically present long sections of poetry, and most prophetic oracles take poetic form. Listen to these words from Isaiah: "*The LORD gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. But those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not faint.*" Isa 40:29-31

“The Bible is an affective book that communicates much of its meaning by moving the feelings and the will of its readers.” Longman

It’s true, poetic language moves us. One of my favorite poems is Jerusalem by **William Blake**:

*And did those feet in ancient time, walk upon England’s mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God, on England’s pleasant pastures seen!*

*And did the countenance Divine, shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here, among these dark Satanic Mills?*

*Bring me my Bow of burning gold: Bring me my arrow of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold; Bring me my chariot of fire!*

*I will not cease from mental fight, Nor shall the sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem, in England’s green and pleasant land.*

“Poetry is a song of the soul. Wherever great civilizations have existed, poetry has been written, and the poetry of Israel is among the finest. The Psalms of David and the Proverbs of Solomon stand up well when compared with any body of poetry ever written.” Anders

There are three major types of Hebrew poetry:

- a. Lyric poetry—to be accompanied by music, a song— The Psalms
- b. Instructional poetry—teaches principles of living thru pithy maxims—Proverbs.
- c. Dramatic poetry—a narrative that tells a story in poetic form—The book of Job.

I. Hebrew Poetry-

A. **Parallelism:** The matching of ideas.

Six most common forms:

1. **Synonymous parallelism:** The ideas presented are similar.

*Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
Teach me your paths. (Ps 25:4)*

2. Synthetic parallelism: The second thought completes the first thought.

*The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want. (Ps 23:1)*

3. Antithetic parallelism: The second contrast with the first.

*For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked shall perish. (Ps 1:6)*

4. Emblematic parallelism: The first line uses a figure of speech to illustrate the idea stated in the second line.

*As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So my soul pants for You, O God. (Ps 42:1)*

5. Climatic parallelism: The second line repeats the first with the exception of the last word or words.

*It is not for kings, O Lemuel,
It is not for kings to drink wine. (Proverbs 31:4)*

6. Formal parallelism: Both lines of poetry must exist for a complete thought.

*But as for Me, I have set My King
Upon My holy hill of Zion. (Ps 2:6)*

B. Metaphor: Figures of speech.

1. Metaphor: A comparison in which one thing is said to be another.

The Lord is my shepherd. (Ps 23:1) Fortress, shield, rock etc.

2. Simile: A comparison of one thing with another thing of a different kind.

*As a father has compassion on his children,
So the LORD has compassion on those who fear him. (Ps 103:13)*

3. Hyperbole: Deliberate over statement for the purpose of emphasis.

*Every night I make my bed swim,
I dissolve my couch with my tears. (Ps 6:6)*

4. Rhetorical question: Asking a question for the purpose of making a statement.
*Who can speak the mighty deeds of the LORD,
Or who can show forth his praise? (Ps 106:2)*

5. Personification: Assigning the characteristics of a human to lifeless objects.
The sun knows the place of its setting. (Ps 104:19)

II. Authors, Types, Inspiration, Occasion-

a. Authors- David is the author of over half the Psalms, 73 in all. Moses 1, Solomon 2, Sons of Asaph and Korah, and some unnamed authors wrote the others. At some point in history, no one knows exactly when, the Psalms were divided up into groupings called books. There are five such books: Book 1: (1-41); Book 2: (42-72); Book 3: (73-89); Book 4: (90-106); Book 5: (107-150).

b. Types- Thanksgiving, Praise, Lament, Salvation history, Wisdom, Hope.

c. Inspiration- Many of the Psalms are words spoken to God rather than words spoken from God. How do words to God function for us as words from God? Fee and Stuart write: “Precisely in the ways they functioned for Israel in the first place —as opportunities to speak to God with the help of words he inspired others to speak to him in times past.”

Yet there are plenty of times where it is clear that God is the speaker: “The LORD said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand...” (Ps 110)

Messianic Psalms: 2; 8; 16; 22; 23; 24; 40; 41; 45; 68; 69; 72; 89; 102; 110; 118 are generally considered Messianic. These Psalms, either in whole or in part, speak of the Messiah.

d. Occasion- One of the main reasons the Psalms resonate with so many people is that they are written from just about every imaginable circumstance a person might go through. From the heights of joy to the depths of despair and everything in between.

“Every situation in life is represented in the book of Psalms. Psalms anticipate and train you for every possible spiritual, social, and emotional condition—they show you what the dangers are, what you should keep in mind, what your attitude should be, how to talk to God about it, and how to get from God the help you need.

They put their undeviating understanding of the greatness of the Lord alongside our situations, so that we may have a due sense of the correct proportion of things. Every feature and circumstance of life is transmitted into the Lord’s presence, and put into the context of what is true about him. Psalms, then, are not just a matchless primer of teaching but a medicine chest for the heart and the best possible guide for practical living.” Timothy Keller

III. Psalms 1&2 introductory to the rest-

a. Two ways- Either the way of God’s wisdom under his instruction (torah=law) or the way of folly under man’s wisdom.

“Blessed is the one who delights in the law of the LORD and in His law they meditate day and night... they shall be like a tree planted by rivers of water... whatever they do shall prosper...The wicked are not so, but are like the chaff the wind drives away.”

b. What is true of the individual in Psalm one, is also true for the nations in Psalm two: “Therefore you kings, be wise, you rulers of the earth serve the LORD with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling. Kiss the Son lest he be angry and your way will lead to destruction...Blessed are those who put their trust in him.”

Close: Walk through Psalm 103

