

## Hermeneutics 8 – How do we interpret poetry?

Like a good story, poetry is powerful for its imagery, its rhyme and meter, clever wordplays, and the ability to say a lot with few words. The Psalms have a bid for the best loved and most well read portion of all of Scripture. You frequently see the NT printed with...the Psalms. Berkhof says “in other parts of Scripture God speaks to man, in the psalms the relation is reversed, and man speaks to God.” The fact that God has inscripturated these Psalms (and other poetry) shows us that He does approve of their conceptions of Him, because He did, in fact, inspire them. We don’t want to build out entirely theology of God out of the Psalms, but we never want to build a conception of God that ignores the Psalms.

Unlike English poetry, Greek and Hebrew rarely rhyme, and little effort is made to try to rhyme equivalent English words in a translation anyway. The Hebrews write their poetry emphasizing different things that we do in English. One indication that you are reading biblical poetry in English is the layout and spacing of the stanzas. Most modern versions indent poetical text. Most KJV Bibles do not.

Like narrative and prophecy, the Bible is loaded with poetry: Psalms, Proverbs, Lamentations, Song of Solomon, and Job are all poetry. Even in the prophetic writings much is written poetically. And then we have songs and poems within the narrative portions of Scripture as well: Jacob blessings His sons in Genesis 49, The Songs of Moses in Ex. 15 and Deut. 32, the song of Deborah and Barak in Judges 5, and Hannah’s song of thanks in 1 Samuel 2 are just a sampling of some of the poetry inserted in narrative portions.

Hebrew poetic structures and types:

**1. “x, x +1”** – Does not indicate the writer forgot about an item and added it. A common form of Hebrew poetry: Prov. 6:16; Agur son of Jakeh really likes these: 30:15,16; 18,19; 21-23; 29-31.

### **2. Parallelisms**

a. Synonymous – the second set of terms convey the same idea, Ps. 2:2,3

b. Synthetic – the second set of terms conveys a new idea/additional information, Psalm 1:3. Grant Osborne illustrates: “yields its fruits” = fruitfulness; “leaf does not wither” = endurance; “Whatever...he prospers” = drops the metaphor.

c. Antithetical – the second set of terms conveys an opposing idea. It states the positive by the negative and the negative by the positive, Prov. 3:1.

d. Climactic – the ideas build to a climax, Ps. 29:1.

e. Emblematic – the first idea is figurative, the second, literal: Ps. 42:1.

f. Introverted – Lines 1-2 correspond to 7-8, & 3-4 correspond to 5-6. This is called a chiasm.

3. The Psalms (and poetry in general) are meant to stimulate the emotions and call for an emotive response. Where they use figurative language (Ps. 23), this in no way detracts from the trustworthiness of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> A. Berkeley Mickelsen writes, “The very essence of poetry is destroyed if we are absorbed in the mechanics of it.” *It’s the very emotive personality that makes the Psalms so endearing to us.* The Psalms are deeply personal. “Oh yes, the Psalms are just...precious.” – Lydia Ferrill. I know of no emotion for which there is not a corresponding Psalm. When emotions are high or low, pray the Psalms. When your heart bursts with thankfulness and a longing to praise the Lord, the language of Psalm 116 comes to my mind: “What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord, I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.” Or Psalm 63!

In the darkest times of depression I pray Psalm 42 until the pain is gone. “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God.”

When you give in to sin and guilt has you by the throat – Psalm 51.

When you wonder if the Lord ever holds your sins against you – Psalm 103.

When you wonder if all the madness will ever stop – Psalm 2.

When you wonder if the wicked will prevail – Psalm 37.

---

<sup>1</sup> Remember the figurative language used of the kosmos, that “the earth shall not be moved” isn’t referring to geocentricity any more than “pillars of the earth” refers to a pedestal the earth is on.

When you want God to slay His enemies (not ours) Psalm 139. Note: “Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!” is supported with zeal for the Lord’s name, not personal vendettas. David punctuates this imprecation with “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!” It is absolutely biblical to pray the imprecatory Psalms against God’s enemies. One time I asked Pastor Miles Mckee how does the Christians square Jesus’s “love your enemies” with the imprecatory psalms. He answered, “We are to love our enemies, but God nowhere tells us that we have to love His enemies.”

4. As a way to make a truth more memorable. What makes a great speech great? The happy marriage of poetic flair coupled to sound logic.

5. Who wrote the Psalm/Proverb? Solomon’s position as king adds force to the Proverbs on ruling well. Where the Psalms arose out of a certain historical event in the life of David, those narrative portions cannot be overlooked in our interpretation of the psalms. See especially 3, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, etc. For the poetry in Job, we must be careful to note who is speaking: Job, Elihu, Eliphaz, Bildad, or Zophar? Job is tricky if we don’t know who is speaking in each portion. Because some of the speakers are not Christians, we cannot blindly pull verses out of Job to support a view. We must remember the precept that “not everything the Scriptures record the Scriptures teach.”

6. What type of poetry do we have?

a. War Song – Deborah and Barak’s, Judg. 5.

b. Love Song - Song of Solomon. Is it a merely an erotic piece about two lovers? Or purely symbolic and only about Christ and the church? I like to think both. If you say its about married lovers, marriage is designed to picture Christ and His church. If you say it is about Christ and His church, we use the picture of marriage as an illustration of that love. There is no reason to feel like you have to pick between the two. You just pick the point at which you enter the circle.

c. Lament – Lamentations, “more than 60 of the Psalms” (Grant Osborne). Laments teach us that it is acceptable to pour out our grief to God. These type of writings serve as model prayers for us in times of calamity.

d. Psalms of praise – Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart note three types: God praised as Creator (Ps. 8, 19, 104, 148), God praised as Israel’s

defender (Ps. 66, 100, 111, 114, 149), and God praised as Lord of history (Ps. 33, 103, 113, 117).

e. Messianic Psalms – 2, 22, 45, 110. The NT use of Psalms in relation to Jesus is absolutely essential here.