

# *The Songs of Sonship*

## *Reclaiming the Psalms in Worship and Prayer*

### **I. Introduction**

The Psalter – the Book of Psalms – is unique in the Old Testament scriptures, not least because of the central role that it played in Israel’s worship. Composed and compiled over a thousand years or so from the time of Moses (Psalm 90) through the end of the Babylonian captivity (Psalm 126), the psalms served as Israel’s songbook during the Second Temple period that ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D. Thus Jesus would have grown up reading and singing the psalms, and they doubtless played a significant part in nurturing His knowledge of His Father, His own self-understanding, and His messianic role in the Father’s purposes (ref. Luke 24:27, 44-45; cf. also Matthew 4:1-7, 21:12-16, 33-46, 22:41-46, 27:45-46; Mark 14:18-21; etc.).

The Psalms are written in the genre of Hebrew poetry, but they’re hardly alone in this. Much of the Old Testament scriptures are poetic, including the prophetic books (Major and Minor Prophets) as well as the Bible’s wisdom literature, which includes Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. In fact, more than one-third of the Old Testament is poetic in its literary form. (Much of the non-narrative portions of the Hebrew scriptures are composed as poetry.) The clear implication is that a good grasp of Hebrew poetry is critical to Old Testament interpretation – *whether reading the prophets, the psalms, or the wisdom literature*. And this involves an understanding of the poetic literary genre as well as the unique features of Hebrew poetry.

### **A. The Poetical Genre**

One of the most fundamental characteristics feature of poetry is its use of *figurative language*. This is as true of scriptural poetry as it is of poetry in general. In itself, figurative language poses unique interpretive challenges, and biblical poetry adds the further challenge of *remoteness*. That is to say, it draws on figures and imagery that pertain to cultures, conditions, and circumstances far removed from the contemporary reader. The interpreter must not only recognize the *presence* of figurative language, he must rightly understand the figures *themselves*. Failure to recognize biblical figures of speech and/or discern their meaning insures misinterpretation of a biblical text.

### **1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech**

Quite apart from the Scriptures and Hebrew poetry in particular, there are numerous linguistic devices and expressions that are common to all language and literary forms, prose as well as poetic. These include the following:

#### **a. Metaphor**

A metaphor is a direct comparison in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to indicate a particular likeness or analogy between them. An example is the statement, “*Feed my sheep.*”

b. Simile

Simile is another form of comparison that typically employs comparative terms such as *like*, *as*, *as such*, etc. So the statement, “*You will be like God.*”

c. Personification

Personification is a form of description in which human attributes or functions are assigned to inanimate things. Personification is common in scriptural poetry and the Bible’s wisdom literature, most notably the personifying of wisdom itself in the book of Proverbs (cf. 4:1-9, 8:1-9:4, 31:10-31).

d. Metonymy

Metonymy is the substitution of the name of one thing for the name of another thing when the first thing is related to or associated with the name it replaces. An example is “*whose god is their belly,*” where “belly” represents natural, fleshly desires and appetites. Metonymy (and synecdoche) must not be confused with *symbolism*, for symbols are assigned and aren’t inherently related to or associated with the thing they represent. Examples of biblical symbols are the animals that represent the various kingdoms in Daniel’s visions.

e. Synecdoche

Synecdoche is similar to metonymy as another figure of speech that uses substitution. But rather than substituting a related concept, synecdoche substitutes a part for the whole, the whole for a part, or the material for the thing made. A scriptural example is the statement, “*The end of all flesh has come before Me.*”

f. Paronomasia

Paronomasia is a simple play on words. This device is common in the Hebrew scriptures, though it is often not readily obvious in English translations. Jeremiah 1:11-12 provides an excellent example. There God showed Jeremiah a vision of an almond tree (the Hebrew noun *shaqeid*), and then noted that He was *watching* (Hebrew participle *shoqeid*) over His word to perform it. Biblical names and designations are themselves commonly paronomastic. A case in point is the name *Adam* (the person and man in general), which reflects the fact that man was formed from the ground (*adamah*). Note also *Isaac*, *Israel*, etc.

g. Hyperbole

Hyperbole is conscious, intentional exaggeration for the sake of rhetorical effect. So the psalmist’s affirmation of the impossibility of escaping from God (Psalm 139:7-9), and Paul’s treatment of the supremacy of love: “*If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love....*” Note also Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:7-9.

h. Irony

Irony is often misunderstood and ascribed to anything that appears unusual, out of character, or is unexpected. But irony refers to the use of words or expressions to express something other than, and often opposite to, what that language naturally denotes. Thus irony can be an effective instrument of sarcasm or rebuke, as in Paul's words to the Corinthians: "*You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us...*"

i. Euphemism

Euphemism is a figure of speech in which unpleasant or potentially offensive words or ideas are replaced with innocuous or inoffensive counterparts. A scriptural example is Peter expressing Judas' death in terms of "*going to his own place*" (Acts 1:24-25). So the similar contemporary euphemisms "*going to a better place,*" or "*passing away.*"

j. Paradox

Paradox is another concept that is frequently misunderstood and misapplied. Most people recognize that paradox has to do with *contradiction*, but many don't understand that this contradiction is only *apparent*, not actual. That is, paradox refers to contradiction that exists in the language or manner of expression, not in reality. So Paul's self-representation as "*sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.*"

k. Climax

As a literary device, climax involves a progression of words or ideas that ascends to a focal point, apex or crescendo. This progress can involve a related sequence of concepts (Romans 8:29-30), a single concept (Psalm 150), or a line of thought or argumentation, as with the *Songs of Ascent* (Psalms 120-134).

l. Pleonasm

Pleonasm is the redundant or excessive repetition of words, statements, or ideas for the purpose of emphasis. Pleonasm is seen throughout the book of Ezekiel in the repeated assertion, "*They will know that I am the Lord.*" This expression occurs 26 times in Ezekiel's prophecy, and nowhere else in the Bible.

m. Apostrophe

Apostrophe is a literary device in which words are addressed to an inanimate object, *usually in an exclamatory tone*. It is employed extensively in the Psalms with regard to the worship of God, an example being "*Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!*" (Psalm 147:12; cf. also Isaiah 40:9, 52:1-2; Zephaniah 3:16-17).

n. Rhetorical Question

Just as the phrase suggests, this figure of speech poses a question that doesn't anticipate an actual response because the answer is regarded as obvious. Paul commonly employed this device, and he often underscored the obvious nature of the answer by explicitly asserting it himself (cf. Romans 3:9, 29, 31, 4:9-10)

## 2. Hebrew Poetry

Being a collection of literary works, the Scriptures employ all of these literary devices (and many others) in their prose as well as their poetry. Biblical poetry also contains various structural features (length and number of lines, meter, rhyme, etc.) characteristic of poetry in general. But perhaps the most distinct feature of Hebrew poetry is its pronounced use of *parallelism*. This is a structural device in which one or more thoughts or phrases are balanced by corresponding thoughts or phrases containing approximately the same number of words or a correspondence in ideas.

There are six commonly used forms of parallelism in Hebrew (scriptural) poetry:

- a. Synonymous Parallelism, in which the correspondence involves closely related ideas or entities. This type of parallelism is broken down into two sub-categories: *identical* (Psalm 18:4-5) and *similar* (Psalm 19:1-2, Proverbs 9:9).
- b. Antithetic Parallelism, which correlates opposite, contrasting, or negated ideas. This type of parallelism is especially common in the Proverbs, which characteristically contrast wisdom with folly and righteousness with wickedness (ref. Proverbs 2:21-22, 3:1, 8:35-36, 10:1-15:33, etc.)
- c. Synthetic (Constructive) Parallelism, in which ideas or phrases are built together (synthesized) into a larger, more complete whole. There are three sub-categories of this type of parallelism: *completion* (Psalm 24:1-4), *comparison* (Psalm 118:8-9), and *reason* (Psalm 63:3).
- d. Climactic Parallelism has related terms, ideas, or themes building upon one another to the point of an intended and important climax (Psalm 29:1, 96:7-8, 150:1-6; cf. also Isaiah 1:8)
- e. Emblematic Parallelism is a kind of metaphor in which one thought or phrase provides a figurative illustration of a corresponding one (Proverbs 11:22, 25:25).
- f. Chiastic Parallelism has the correspondence of parallel ideas occurring in *reverse* order. The chiasm is normally constructed so that the central or crucial idea or assertion stands at the center of the structure (Psalm 139:5-7; cf. Luke 1:68-78).

*Rhythm, meter, and acrostic* (Psalm 119; Proverbs 31:10-31; Lamentations) are other important features of Hebrew poetry, but they are less recognizable to English readers because, like paronomasia, they are typically lost in translation.