

WHAT IS HEBREW POETRY?

- I. Definition of Hebrew poetry
 - a. It is a more picturesque way of saying things.¹
 - b. Sometimes it is best understood in contrast to its opposite: Prose.
 - i. Prose is not always easy to define either
 - ii. Prose is saying things with as little as possible.²
 - c. Hebrew poetry can also be defined as having certain elements.
- II. Elements to identify Hebrew Poetry
 - a. Hints of the musical
 - i. Are there any rhythms of sound in the text?
 - ii. Is there any reference to music?
 1. Does the text explicitly mention words of music?
 - a. Note: In the Psalms, the lines before the first verse in the English Bible are part of the Canon of Scripture and must be read!
 - b. Does it have Hebrew words for poetry?
 - i. See for instance, what is stated before Psalm 16:1
 - c. Does the text mention it being a song?
 - i. See for instance, what is stated before Psalm 18:1.
 - d. Does the text mention a choir?
 - i. See for instance, what is stated before Psalm 19:1.
 - e. Does the text mention any musical instrument?
 - i. See for instance, the mention of flute before Psalm 5:1.
 - b. Parallelism
 - i. Are there any rhythms of thought?³
 - ii. Parallelism is “where two statements are juxtaposed”⁴
 - iii. Parallelism is the most basic and common characteristic of Hebrew poetry.
- III. General Principles in interpreting Hebrew Poetry
 - a. The vocabulary in poetry is intentionally metaphorical.⁵
 - i. This is because Hebrew Poetry is by definition picturesque.
 - ii. Thus there is a need to recognize the intent of the poetry behind the imagery.
 - b. If the text is within a Psalm, treat the text in light of the entire Psalm.
 - i. A Psalm is one literary unit.⁶
 - ii. Each line is purposeful in connection to the whole.
 - c. Looking for hints by identifying parallelism
 - i. Since Hebrew poetry uses the literary device of Parallelism, this helps us in interpreting Hebrew Poetry.

¹ This is in the words of Keith Essex, Associate Professor of Bible Exposition in The Master’s Seminary.

² This is in the words of Keith Essex, Associate Professor of Bible Exposition in The Master’s Seminary.

³ Keith Essex, Bible Exposition 502 Syllabus, [pg](#)

⁴ Robert Chisholm Jr., *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company), 142.

⁵ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart., *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 190.

⁶ *Ibid*, 192.

- ii. How do the lines relate to one another? What are the emphasis interpreters should note?
1. Synonymous
 - a. This means that the second line reiterates the line before it.⁷
 - b. This symmetry exists in the Hebrew language and also conceptually in thought.
 - c. The reiteration is for emphasis of the same thought.
 - d. Examples of this can be seen in Psalm 19:1 and Psalm 18:5.
 2. Specifying⁸
 - a. While the first line is more general, the second is more particular.
 - b. Example of this can be seen in Psalm 5:12.
 3. Complementary⁹
 - a. This is when the second line is offering a related thought in the vein of the first line
 - b. It completes the thought
 - c. Example of this can be seen in Psalm 8:6 and Psalm 4:5
 4. Explanatory¹⁰
 - a. This is where the second line gives an account for the preceding line
 - b. This is a great interpretative insight, as the second line is an exposition of the first line.
 - c. Examples of this can be seen in Psalm 4:8
 5. Consequential¹¹
 - a. This is where the second line is making progress either logically or temporally from the preceding line.
 - b. Examples of this can be seen in Psalm 2:5 and Psalm 4:3.
 6. Comparative¹²
 - a. The second line is comparing the thought in the preceding line to something.
 - b. Examples of this can be found in Psalm 4:7 and 5:9b.
 7. Antithetical¹³
 - a. The second line is contrastive to the previous line.
 - b. Examples of this can be seen in Proverbs 10:1, Proverbs 12:15.
- d. Identify the proper genre of the text, and interpret it accordingly.
- i. The genre of poetry will be discussed in the next several sessions.

⁷ Robert Chisholm Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company), 142.

⁸ Ibid, 143.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 144.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.