# Biblical Poetry

**Parallelism**


Biblical poetry is important for many reasons. The fact that so much of Scripture is comprised of poetry shows that God places great value on its form and purpose. Biblical poetry, however, is not exactly like modern English poetry with all of its typical rhymes and meters. Hebrew poetry is often characterized by what has been termed "parallelism," which is the idea that thoughts from one phrase correspond to thoughts in a subsequent phrase in important ways (some have called this "thought-rhymes"). Parallelism is seen in differing senses, as well. For example, there is what is often termed "synonymous parallelism," which can be seen in passages like Psalm 6:1:

O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger,
Nor chasten me in Your wrath.

We can see the synonymous nature of these phrases, where "rebuke" corresponds to "chasten," and "anger" corresponds to "wrath." Yet, this is more than a synonymous idea. The second phrase takes the idea of the first phrase further to strengthen and intensify the thought. This is a common feature of the Psalms.

Another type of parallelism is often termed "antithetical," where the second phrase strengthens the thought of the first phrase by making a sharp contrast (usually seen with the contrasting term, "but"). For example, notice the way Psalm 20:8 uses this:

They have bowed down and fallen,
But we have risen and stood upright.

The contrast strengthens the overall point being made. It's not just that enemies have bowed down and fallen, it's that this happened in contrast to the victors rising and standing. The Psalms contain many of these, but these contrasts are also very noticeable in the book of Proverbs, where wisdom is continually contrasted with folly.

Of course, not all lines of poetry have such well-identified parallels. Sometimes the thought of the second phrase simply carries forward and finishes what the first phrase began. For example, we might see a cause and effect relationship between the phrases. Psalm 119:11 says,

Your word I have treasured in my heart,
That I may not sin against You.

Here, by storing up the word in the heart (cause), sin becomes minimized (effect).

Within this feature of parallelism we will find many other types of patterns and ways to emphasize the text. For example, did you know that Psalm 119 is an alphabetic acrostic? This means that each successive line (or verse) begins with the

next letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Psalm 119 has 176 verses, formed by 22 separate stanzas with 8 lines in each. Each line of the respective stanza begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and each letter is represented throughout the Psalm. Imagine 8 verses that begin with "A," then the next 8 all begin with "B," and so on through the alphabet. It would have been a great memory aid for the people. This feature occurs in several Psalms and Proverbs (e.g., Prov. 31:10-31 forms a complete alphabetic acrostic where each line takes the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet—hence 22 verses).

There is much more. For now, we simply want to be aware that this is an important part of what we are reading. We should be looking out for these kinds of features because they can enhance our understanding and appreciation for what we are reading.

**Figurative Language**

Another strong feature of poetry are the uses of symbolism and figures of speech. Reading the Psalms in some kind of rigid, literalistic way simply cannot work. For example, when David referred to himself as a "worm and not a man" (Psa. 22:6), we don't really think that at some point David literally became a worm. When David said, "Every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears" (Psa. 6:6), no one thinks that David's bed literally swam or that his couch was actually dissolved by his tears. These are figures of speech, helping us understand what was in his heart during difficult times.

There are multiplied types of figures. There are metaphors (direct comparison by saying one thing is another, Psa. 5:9), similes (comparison using "like" or "as," Psa. 58:4), personifications (giving human character to inanimate objects, Psa. 98:8), hyperboles (intended exaggerations, Psa. 73:7), anthropomorphisms (giving human-like features to God, Psa. 8:3), ironies (ideas or actions that turn on themselves, Psa. 9:15), and so on. There are far too many to try to catalogue here.

Why are figures used as they are? They give us vivid, memorable images that help us understand the more concrete ideas that they convey. They capture our attention and leave deep impacts on our minds. We can "see" what they represent rather than just think about the words. We are shown, rather than just told, and they appeal to our imagination. Consider the powerful imagery, then, when reading:

The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,
My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge;
My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. (Psalm 18:2)

As we read the Psalms and any other poetry in Scripture, let us be aware of the powerful ways in which God's mind has been revealed.

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