

Interpreting a Biblical Passage

Genre – Poetry

Concentrated in the **Psalms** and **Prophets**, Hebrew poetry occurs throughout the OT and occasionally in the NT. It is distinguished by its *rhythm* (stressed syllables), *compactness*, vibrant *imagery*, and, especially, **parallelism**.

Three Forms of Hebrew Parallelism

- *Synonymous Parallelism* – the second line **repeats** and **reinforces** the previous line (Pss 3.1; 18.4; 24.1; 40.13; 120.2; 139.13; Prov 3.11; Isa 53.5; Gen 49.11; Matt 7.7-8)
Occasionally, parallelism appears with **three lines** (Ps 100.1-2; Isa 51.11; Jer 9.23; Hos 5.1; Amos 8.10; Mic 1.7; Luke 23.29) and **four lines** (Jer 2.8; 4.23-26; 5.17; Luke 6.29-30, 37-38).
- *Antithetical (contrasting) Parallelism* – the second line **contrasts** the previous line with the **opposite** notion (Pss 18.27; 34.10; 37.9; 146.9; Prov 10.1; 15.17; Eccl 10.2; Matt 7.17-18; 10.32-33; Luke 16.10).
- *Synthetic Parallelism* – the second line **adds to** and **develops** the previous line (Pss 63.3; 42.1; 97.3; 115.18; Prov 21.4, 27; Eccl 7.5; Amos 1.7; Matt 5.17; 10.40; Luke 10.16).
- *Intensification* – Parallelism often **intensifies** (Prov 20.1a) and can have a pattern x, x+1 (Ps 62.11a; Mic 5.5b)

Imagery

Poets (including the Prophets) use familiar imagery to express ideas *figuratively*. God as **protector** is a shield, tower, fortress, rock, sheltering wing, canopy, cooling shade; **affliction** is expressed as ravening beasts, serpents, arrows, burning coals, pestilence. Poetic language is not meant to be read *literally*. (God is not a giant hen.)

Types of Hebrew Poetry

- *Lament* (complaint) – either **individual** or **corporate**, approximately 1/3 of the Psalms are laments, identified by (e.g., **Psalm 3**):
 - Address (“O, Lord”) – the one to whom the lament is addressed (**3.1a**)
 - Complaint – identifies the trouble; uses honest and forceful language to express why God is being sought (**3.1b-2**)
 - Trust – expression of trust in God and confidence in God’s ability to deliver (**3.3-6**)
 - Deliverance – plea *for* God’s deliverance (**3.7a**)
 - Assurance – expression of confidence that God *will* deliver. Somewhat parallels Trust (**3.7b**)
 - Praise – thanking God for his blessings, present or future (**3.8**)
(e.g., Pss 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 12, 13, 14, 17, 22, 42-43, 44, 58, 120, 141, 142)
- *Imprecatory* (curse) – type of lament distinguishable not in form but by the harsh, ill will prayed against enemies (“Happy who dashes your infants against the rocks!” – Ps 137.9; cf. Pss 35, 69, 70, 79, 83, 109, 140).
- *Thanksgiving* – either **individual** or **corporate**, includes (e.g., Ps 30): 1) praise of God for his help (30.1, 12b), 2) invitation to join in thanks and praise (30.4-5), 3) account of God’s salvation (30.2-3, 6-12a).
- *Liturgy* – involves two or more speakers, often priests and “us”, the congregation (Pss 66, 75, 118, 136).
- *Wisdom* – meditation praising wisdom; often teaching morality and God as creator (e.g. Pss 1, 19, 33, 49, 127).
- Others include *Entrance Liturgy* (worshippers affirming readiness to enter the sanctuary – Pss 15, 24), *Covenant Renewal* (Pss 50, 81), *Kingship* (Ps 24, 89, 144).

Reading and Applying Hebrew Poetry

- Identify the type of parallelism
- Read Psalms in their entirety. Immediate context is less important than comparing with similar psalm types.
- Identify the **type** of poetry and whether it was used **individually** or **corporately**; apply it in the same way.
- Read poetic language **poetically**; don’t force figurative images into literalist moulds.
- Biblical poetry is meant to help us connect with God and express our joy and thanks to him **honestly**.
- Jesus’ teaching to love and pray for our enemies (Matt 5.44) and Paul’s to “overcome evil with good” (Rom 12.17-21) invalidates the *imprecatory* lament; repaying evil is *God’s* business (Deut 32:35).