

CHAPTER 1



Reading Poetry from Ancient Israel

About one-third of the Old Testament is poetry. This includes the obvious poetic books like Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Songs, but it also includes most of the prophets as well as poems embedded in many of the historical books. The poetry of the Old Testament includes some of the Bible's most memorable language:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. (Ps 23:1)

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble. (Ps 46:1)

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;

and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (Isa 53:6)

He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:8)

Understanding the Bible well requires a solid grasp of what poetry is and how it works. One challenge is that not many of us sit down to read poetry on a regular basis. The type of poetry that we are likely most familiar with is song lyrics. Think of a song that you love for its lyrical power. What about those lyrics resonates with you? Answering that question is a good place to start recognizing the value and potential of poetry.

Let's reflect for a moment on how poetry communicates. The following is a poem by Haiku master Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) and translated from the Japanese:

The summer grass
'tis all that's left
of ancient warriors' dreams.¹

The poem starts with a serene image drawn from nature that brings a different perspective to war and battle. With few words the poem evokes a sense of war's futility. There is a pensiveness, a mild sorrow, and hard-won wisdom that this poem embodies. Poetry has a way of getting under our skin and impacting us at an emotional and rational level. Basho was inspired to write this poem when he visited the site of an important battle in Japanese history. By the time he visited the site, there was no trace left of the conflict, passion, and political intrigue that led men to fight to the death on that spot. He wanted to capture that dynamic. Interestingly, the poem communicates quite well even if the reader doesn't know these background details; the poem has a universal quality that enables it to stand on its own.

1. Matsuo Basho, "Haiku Monument," trans. Nitobe Inazo, JTA Sightseeing Database, <https://www.mlit.go.jp/tagengo-db/en/H30-00188.html>.

What is a poem? There is not a simple answer to this question. It is like trying to define *love* or *virtue*. One could easily write a book trying to define such terms in ways that capture all the necessary elements. Even then, the definitions would likely be debated. In cases like this, it is often more helpful to start with a working definition as a way into the subject, which can then be further nuanced.² One such definition of a poem comes from literary critic Terry Eagleton: “A poem is a fictional, verbally inventive moral statement in which it is the author, rather than the printer or word processor, who decides where the lines should end.”³

This definition, while not perfect or comprehensive, offers several helpful elements. First, poems use words in “verbally inventive” ways. Just like painters work in oils or watercolor and sculptors work in marble or granite, poets work in words; they are experts in language. They delight in using rare words or in using common words in uncommon ways. Students of Biblical Hebrew who have mastered reading narrative often still struggle to read the poetic sections of the Old Testament because of this. Ancient Hebrew poets, like their modern counterparts, dive deep into the language’s lexicon. They also play with grammar and syntax. The feel of a poetic line is quite different than prose, even if that feel can be hard to precisely define. Consider, for example, this selection of William Blake’s poem “The Tyger”:

Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?

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2. M. H. Abrams, “What’s the Use of Theorizing About the Arts?,” in *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Fischer (New York: Norton, 1991), 40–41.
 3. Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 25.

And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?⁴

This is quite a description of a tiger! It is very different from that of a science textbook or a *National Geographic* article. Blake is trying to portray the awesome nature of a tiger, and he uses complex imagery and unusual vocabulary to do so. Words like *sinews* and *dread* are not part of most people's everyday speech, nor is the image "Burnt the fire of thine eyes." The poetic form forces us to slow down and attend to its language and imagery.

A second element in Eagleton's definition is that poems are moral statements. This does not mean that poems always pronounce moral judgments. Rather, Eagleton means that poems deal in "values, meanings and purposes."⁵ He uses an example to illustrate this. Imagine someone in a room raised their hand. How would you explain that event? A physiologist would be interested in explaining the contraction of muscles and ligaments in causing the hand to be raised. Political scientists would be interested in how many other people raised their hand at the same time. Poets, however, are interested in the values that informed the decision to raise a hand.⁶ Poets are not the only kinds of people interested in values, but they are interested in exploring questions of meaning and significance.

Finally, Eagleton describes poetry as "fictional." He does not mean that poems are purely products of the imagination. Most poems grow out of real-life experiences. However, a poem detaches a particular experience from its immediate context and crafts it into a public statement.⁷ Eagleton calls this process "fictionalizing." It may not be the best word to use, but the point remains valid: Poems are designed for wider use. For this to work, poems are often written in such a way that a reader does not need to fully understand the poem's historical context for it to communicate. We see this dynamic in many of the psalms. For example, the previously mentioned Psalm 13 is a lament in which David cries out to God, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How

4. William Blake, "The Tyger," available online at Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43687/the-tyger>.

5. Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, 29.

6. Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, 28–29.

7. Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, 31.

long will you hide your face from me?” (v. 1). Although we do not know exactly what caused David such distress, the poem still communicates powerfully. Part of its power is that its universal language resonates with people across cultures and circumstances. Later readers can make David’s words of lament their own.

Now that we have a working definition of poetry, you may be wondering, Why is so much of the Old Testament written in poetry? Wouldn’t it have been clearer if God revealed himself to us using prose? While there is not a chapter and verse that answers that question, it helps to reflect on how God created us as human beings. We are not simply “brains on a stick.”⁸ Humans are embodied creations of God with a will, mind, emotions, and a capacious imagination. Poetry is especially suited to engage our imaginations and transform our way of looking at the world. It forces us to slow down in our reading and reflect. Poetry gets under our skin. Its words sink into our bones and become a part of who we are.

In his essay “The Language of Religion,” C. S. Lewis categorizes speech into three types: ordinary, scientific, and poetic.⁹ To illustrate, he described a cold day using each type:

- Ordinary speech: “It was very cold.”
- Scientific speech: “It was -13 degrees Fahrenheit.”
- Poetic speech: “Ah, the bitter chill it was! The owl, for all his feathers was a-cold; The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass, And silent was the flock in woolly fold: Numb’d were the Beadsman’s fingers” (J. Keats).

Each type of speech has a different purpose. Ordinary speech is the easiest and most natural way to communicate. Scientific speech is far more precise. It is the language of the laboratory and enables, for example, one to predict how molecules will act at -13 degrees Fahrenheit. Poetic speech is not as precise as scientific language and is more cumbersome than ordinary speech. So why use it? Keats appeals to our imagination and senses. He provides a series of verbal snapshots of a

8. To borrow a metaphor frequently repeated by James K. A. Smith in *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016).

9. C. S. Lewis, “The Language of Religion,” in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 129–41.

cold day: a trembling hare, a workman with fingers made clumsy by the frigid weather, and a flock of sheep silently enduring the cold. His description helps us to see a cold day, and he sharpens our own powers of observation. After hearing an ordinary or scientific description of a cold day, we know it is cold. After reading Keats's description, we feel cold. Poetic speech has the power to transform us in ways that other registers of speech cannot. As we go through the Psalms and wisdom books, good questions to ask yourself are, Why is this written in poetic language? What would we be missing if it were prose?

What Is Poetry For?

If you were to picture a poet, what kind of person would they be? In Western culture especially, we tend to think of poets as artists who are concerned with making art for art's sake. This understanding of the poet as the tortured artist or reclusive idealist is a relic of the Romantic era (1798–1837). Since that time, poetry has been defined as both verbal artistry and, more importantly, as an expression of the artist's soul. Poetry is often equated with the emotional use of language.¹⁰ This has led to definitions of poetry like the following: "Poetry is feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude."¹¹ Such an understanding of poetry emphasizes its purpose as an authentic expression of emotion and concludes that any speech with a pragmatic purpose is not considered poetic. While most literary critics today have rejected such a narrow understanding of poetry, it still influences popular perception. To clarify, this narrow understanding of poetry is simply not true. It is certainly not true about biblical poetry.

Almost all ancient poetry had pragmatic goals.¹² In addition to expressing emotion, ancient poetry was written to delight, instruct, and instill morals. This is similar to how many song lyrics function today. Patriotic songs seek to instill a love for country. Pop songs might try to persuade the hearer to "seize the day." Other songs make biting social commentary. In the same way, the poetry in the Bible has a purpose.

10. M. H. Abrams, "Poetry, Theories of," in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 945.

11. John Stuart Mill, "What Is Poetry?" in *John Stuart Mill: Literary Essays*, ed. Edward Alexander (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 56.

12. T. S. Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry," in *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), 16.

In the Psalms and wisdom books in particular, poetry is used to speak to God and to the congregation in order to express lament, praise, and thanksgiving; to instruct, warn, and admonish; and to persuade, celebrate, and reflect. The poetry in these books is used in practical ways that impact our relationship with God and our neighbor.

How Does Hebrew Poetry Work?

In the 1989 classic film *Dead Poets Society*, English teacher John Keating has a student read aloud a short essay on how to interpret poetry. The essay argued that by following a few simple rules, a person could assign a score to objectively rate a poem's greatness. Mr. Keating pronounces this method "rubbish" and commands the student to tear up the essay and throw it in the garbage. His point is that reading poetry well involves more than following a few simple rules. And while we do want to avoid an overly simplistic and mechanical approach to reading Hebrew poetry, it is helpful to outline a few common traits that Hebrew poems exhibit. Poetry is a cross-cultural phenomenon, but there are particular ways in which each language expresses its poetic idiom.

Parallelism

The most important trait of Hebrew poetry is a type of repetition with variation that scholars have labeled parallelism. Our goal here is to introduce and illustrate the trait.¹³ To illustrate parallelism and other traits of Hebrew poetry, we will use Psalm 6 as an example text.

Stanza 1

- | | |
|---|------|
| ¹ O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger | (1a) |
| nor discipline me in your wrath. | (1b) |
| ² Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; | (2a) |
| heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. | (2b) |
| ³ My soul also is greatly troubled. | (3a) |
| But you, O LORD—how long? | (3b) |

13. If you'd like to read more on Hebrew poetry, we'd encourage you to consult one of the many book-length treatments on the topic, e.g., Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, rev. and exp. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, rev. and exp. (New York: Basic Books, 2011); David L. Peterson and Kent Harold Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

Stanza 2

- ⁴Turn, O LORD, deliver my life; (4a)
 save me for the sake of your steadfast love. (4b)
⁵For in death there is no remembrance of you; (5a)
 in Sheol who will give you praise? (5b)

Stanza 3

- ⁶I am weary with my moaning; (6a)
 every night I flood my bed with tears; (6b)
 I drench my couch with my weeping. (6c)
⁷My eye wastes away because of grief; (7a)
 it grows weak because of all my foes. (7b)

Stanza 4

- ⁸Depart from me, all you workers of evil, (8a)
 for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping. (8b)
⁹The LORD has heard my plea (9a)
 the LORD accepts my prayer. (9b)
¹⁰All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled; (10a)
 they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment. (10b)

There are several things to observe here. Psalm 6 is a unified and coherent poem comprised of ten verses. The poem is divided into four stanzas. These are made up of individual lines, sometimes called cola (singular colon).¹⁴ Each line consists of two to five words. It is at this level that we want to focus first.

Parallelism refers to the way in which “successive poetic lines dynamically strengthen, reinforce, and develop each other’s thought.”¹⁵ The most common type of parallelism is for two lines to be related to each other (bicola). It is also possible for three lines to be related (tricola). Let’s look at the first two verses of Psalm 6 as an example:

- ¹O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, (1a)
 nor discipline me in your wrath. (1b)

14. Other terms you might hear used for this are *stich* or *verset*.

15. William W. Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. and updated ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 284.

²Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; (2a)
 heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. (2b)

Consider lines 1a and 1b. Are these lines saying the same thing? Well, yes and no. In both lines, the psalmist pleads to God. The two lines are clearly related, but they are not exactly synonymous. Let's examine the elements of these parallel lines:

[A] O LORD [B] rebuke me not [C] in your anger,
 [B'] nor discipline me [C'] in your wrath.

In the first line, the psalmist addresses God directly ("LORD"). The second line assumes this address. The first line uses the verb "rebuke." The second line sharpens or clarifies the meaning as "discipline." Discipline is a more specific word than rebuke; it assumes a corrective and educational function. Both lines include a prepositional phrase. Notice that the word "wrath" in English is more vivid than "anger" in the first line. This difference is the same in Hebrew as well.

At the level of basic meaning these two lines are synonymous, but the second line does not simply repeat the first. Instead, it sharpens or carries forward the thought of the first line. Robert Alter describes this dynamic: "In the abundant instances, . . . the characteristic movement of meaning is one of heightening or intensification[,] . . . of focusing, specification, concretization, even what could be called dramatization."¹⁶ Think of how our eyes work. Our brain takes the sensory input from two eyes, which see things from a slightly different perspective, and combines them into one integrated picture. As Adele Berlin describes it, "human vision . . . superimposes two slightly different views on the same object and from their convergence it produces a sense of depth."¹⁷ The parallel lines force the reader to slow down and reflect on how the two (or three) parts of parallel lines work together to communicate the author's fuller, more robust meaning.

As Alter describes in the quote above, there is an emphatic quality to the second parallel line. This is the case simply because it comes last.

16. Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 20.

17. Berlin, *Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, 99.

One way to think about it is that the first line gives the general topic, and the second line sharpens, emphasizes, or heightens the meaning of the first line in some way. Let's take a look at lines 2a and 2b:

[A] Be gracious to me, [B] O LORD, [C] I am languishing;
[A'] heal me [B'] O LORD [C'] for my bones are troubled.

The first verb ("be gracious") gets clarified in the second line. How does the psalmist want God to be gracious? Well, he wants to be healed. Also, notice the heightened language in the third element. The "I am languishing" of the first line becomes the more vivid "my bones are troubled."

The kind of parallelism we have been discussing so far functions at the level of semantics. That is, the meaning of the first line is connected to the meaning of the second. While there are many ways in which the second line can sharpen, restate, or carry forward the thought of the first, a few categories can help. The following list is based on the discussion in Robert Alter's book *The Art of Biblical Poetry*.¹⁸

Synonymous Parallelism

In the first kind of parallelism, the second line restates the first. The lines are synonymous, though they never say exactly the same thing. Even if they use the same words, the repetition nuances the meaning of the second line. Within this category, there are several ways in which the second line sharpens or carries the idea of the first line forward.

1. Intensification: The second line can intensify the first in a variety of ways.

O LORD, how many are my foes!
Many are rising up against me. (Ps 3:1)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my
groaning? (Ps 22:1)

18. Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 32.

I will extol you, LORD, for you have drawn me up
and have not let my foes rejoice over me. (Ps 30:1)

2. Focusing: The first line makes a general statement, while the second focuses on a particular aspect of the statement.

Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts. (Ps 33:3)

3. Specification: The second line provides a specific example of the statement in the first line (there is some overlap between this category and “focusing”).

He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap;
he puts the deeps in storehouses. (Ps 33:7)

4. Concretization: The second line clarifies the first by providing a more concrete image.

For my iniquities have gone over my head;
like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me. (Ps 38:4)

At your rebuke, O LORD,
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. (Ps 18:15b)

Antithetical Parallelism

In a second kind of parallelism, the second line can reinforce the meaning of the first through stating a contrast. This category can have subcategories similar to those of synonymous parallelism.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits. (Ps 103:2)

Many are the sorrows of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.
(Ps 32:10)

Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;

fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way,
over the man who carries out evil devices! (Ps 37:7)

Developmental Parallelism

In this third kind of parallelism, the second line carries forward the thought in the first either in a logical or narrative progression.

Delight yourself in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Ps 37:4)

Then he led out his people like sheep
and guided them in the wilderness like a flock. (Ps 78:52)

Parallelism operates not only at the level of meaning but also at the level of grammar, syntax, and word order. Some of these will become evident as we examine other traits of Hebrew poetry.

Six Other Traits of Hebrew Poetry

While parallelism is the most dominant trait of Hebrew poetry, there are several others worth mentioning. In this section, we will cover six of them briefly and hopefully encourage you to slow down and make some of your own observations about Hebrew poetry.

Terseness

This is true of most poetry the world over. Poets use words sparingly. They often omit conjunctions, prepositions, or other grammatical words. At times, a verb or verbal object will be elided (i.e., omitted) in the second parallel line. Additionally, because of the nature of the Hebrew language, which can attach a pronoun object directly to a verb or preposition, poetry in Hebrew is often more compact than English translations are able to show. For example, Psalm 22:1 is usually twenty words or more in English translations, while in Hebrew it is only eight.

Figurative Language

As is typical of poetry in general, Hebrew poetry extensively uses figures of speech and symbolic language. Bernd Janowski has helpfully categorized the figurative language in the Psalter as falling into two broad categories: