

“Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law.”
Psalm 119:18

§ Read: Psalm 46 aloud (handout)

LESSON FOUR — Poetry part 2: Patterns & Figures

Poetic Patterns

(1) ACROSTIC PATTERNS. In an acrostic poem, the first letter of each line forms a pattern — in Hebrew acrostics typically follow the alphabet. Other ancient acrostic poems used the first letter of each line to spell a message or a name. Among the acrostics in the OT are Psalms 9–10, 25, 34, 37, 111–112, 119 and 145. Acrostic patterns are also used in Proverbs 31:10-31, and in Lamentations (in its five laments).

“No one is certain what function acrostics serve. They may be a formal way of reflecting their trust that God gave order to His creation. More likely they are a device to aid memorization or were simply aesthetically pleasing to ancient Israelite poets.” [Longman, page 108].

The Hebrew acrostic pattern is lost when translating into English, but certainly the content is maintained.

- Psalm 25. This is the first psalm with a full alphabet–acrostic pattern, with each line beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet (which has 22 letters).
- Psalms 9–10. The acrostic begun in Psalm 9 is continued in Psalm 10, although some letters of the alphabet are missing. Same pattern for Psalms 111–112.
- Psalm 119. This “Giant Psalm” is the most famous acrostic in the Bible. This one has 22 sections of eight verses each, and every line of each section begins with that letter of the alphabet. [see separate sample page]

(2) INCLUSIO. This feature of poetry involves repetition of a phrase at the beginning and at the end of a section or psalm, often in the first and the last verse, to signal closure of thought.

*“An **inclusio** give the reader of the psalm a sense of closure, a sense of having read a complete poem. It imparts to the psalm a sense of unity, and perhaps most important, it sets the mood for the whole psalm. In the case of Psalm 8, it promotes an attitude of awe toward God.”* [Longman, page 107]

- Psalm 8 (v. 1) O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!
(v. 9) O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!
- Psalm 106 (v. 1a) Praise the LORD!
(v. 48c) Praise the LORD! [in Hebrew = “hallelu-Yah!”]

(3) ASSONANCE. This feature of poetry employs words that **sound alike**; but this is hard to spot in English translations. (Commentaries usually mention such things).

(4) ALLITERATION. This is when two or more words begin with the same letter creating some *repetition of its sound*; but this, too, is hard to spot in English translations.

Figures of Speech in the Psalms

By **literal** meaning the writer refers to the usual or customary sense conveyed by words or expressions. ... By **figurative** meaning the writer has in mind the representation of one concept in terms of another because the nature of the two things compared allows such an analogy to be drawn. When Jesus says: 'I am the bread of life' (John 6:35), He uses this metaphor because He is to man, spiritually, what bread is to man physically — the source and sustenance of life. [Mickelson, p. 179]

(1) FIGURES OF COMPARISON:

(a) **SIMILE** — a comparison usually employing the words “like” and “as”.

- Psalm 1:3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water...
- Psalm 1:4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away....
- Psalm 42:1 As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.

(a) **METAPHOR** — is a comparison made directly (without ‘like’ or ‘as’). Metaphors are very common in the Old Testament. Note: metaphors ascribing to God a human body part, or human actions, are called **anthropomorphisms**.

- Psalm 3:3 But you, O Lord, are a shield about me...
- Psalm 23:1 The Lord is my shepherd... *Qn: How would this read if a simile?
- Psalm 46:1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
- Psalm 89:13 You have a mighty arm; strong is your hand, high your right hand.

(2) FIGURES OF ASSOCIATION:

(a) **METONYMY** — the exchange of one noun for another because the two are frequently associated together, or because one suggests the other. For example, “the White House said today” instead of “the President said today” (or in the New Testament, when “circumcision” is employed instead of “the Jews”). The associations here are in both the minds of the writer and the reader.

- Psalm 5:9 For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue.
- Psalm 20:7 Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

(b) **SYNECDOCHE** — makes reference to the whole of something by speaking only of one part. Unlike metonymy, the association here actually stands upon physical or categorial connections. Note that when an individual person is used to represent a whole group of people, it is called **eponymy**.

- Psalm 24:4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
- Psalm 24:6 Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.
- Psalm 44:6 For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me.

(Quote on this **synecdoche** in **Psalm 44**): “

We would misunderstand the poet if we thought he did not trust his bow or sword but did trust in his shield and chariot. Here “bow” and “sword” are synecdoches for military weaponry.

This text can also be used to remind us of the flexible nature of imagery. If you do not use weapons, as the psalmist did, you might conclude that this text does not apply to you. “Bow” and “sword” more broadly speaking, however, represent human resources. So you can readily grasp this image as your profession of ultimate reliance on God rather than on your resources, whether those resources are athletic skills or interpersonal skills, intellectual ability or financial power, or any other resource. While you use these resource, you ultimately trust in the Lord, not the resources. [from Dr. Mark Futato, page 48]

(3) OTHER FIGURES OF SPEECH:

(a) **EUPHEMISM** — *uses a less direct word or phrase in place of a more direct statement*, often to conceal harsh or offensive (or sensitive) topics. The Old Testament, for instance, often uses euphemisms when speaking of sexual topics.

- Ps. 88:11-12 *Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? 12 Are your wonders known in the darkness...*

(b) **HYPERBOLE** — *saying more than is literally intended*. It is the intentional exaggeration of a statement to achieve a particular effect. The word ALL is often used. (Jesus Himself often used hyperbole).

- Ps. 10:4 *In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him; all his thoughts are, “There is no God.”*
- Ps. 118:10 *All nations surrounded me; in the name of the Lord I cut them off!*
- John 21:25 *Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*

(c) **PERSONIFICATION** — *to ascribe human emotions or actions to something non-human*

- Psalm 98:8 *Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together*
- Psalm 114:4 *The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs.*

Some Principles for Interpreting Figures of Speech

- When you read a verse literally, and it does not seem to make sense that way, consider if it employs a figure of speech. Always check the context.
- Consider first what is used in the figure (such as *clapping*, in Ps. 98:8); take your time here.
- Connect the figure with the point of comparison or association (such as *rivers* in Ps. 98:8), and try to picture what this might look like (what point is being highlighted).
- Do not push a figure of speech beyond the author’s intended meaning.

Practice with poetic patterns and figures of speech...

- (1) Find an example of each on your own...
- (2) Discuss WHY figures of speech are used, and, HOW they help the reader...