

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

§ Read: [Psalm 103](#) aloud (handout)

LESSON THREE — HEBREW POETRY, part 1

Hebrew poetry

(1) What is poetry?

“Poetry has its own way of reaching into the hearts and minds of men. No formal list of principles, no careful analysis of the mechanics involved in poetry can tell why it impresses so deeply. Yet some analysis must be provided, especially of Old Testament poetry.” [B. Mickelson, p. 232]

(2) What is distinct about Hebrew poetry?

*“In many languages, both ancient and modern, poetry consists in a balance of SOUND, i.e., in phonetic rhythm. Nursery rhymes are a simple form of this balance of sound. many people enjoy making up rhyming couplets, although they are quick to acknowledge that this does not make them poets! Yet they tend to identify true poets with masters of this balance of sound. **But in Hebrew... poetry consists in a balance of THOUGHT, i.e., in LOGICAL rhythm.** The poet follows one assertion by another line of thought parallel to the first. A verse then consist of at least two parts in which the second part is parallel to the first. PARALLELISM is one of the main features of Hebrew poetry.”* [B. Mickelson, p. 324]

(3) What is parallelism?

“What is parallelism? ...It uses sense-rhythm rather than sound-rhythm. In it the thought of a second line has a special sense-relationship to the thought of a first, and this is sometimes continued also in a further line or lines.” [Grogan, page 56]

Types of Parallelism in Hebrew Poetry

- **Synonymous** = having the same or nearly the same meaning as another word or phrase
- **Antithetical** = directly opposed or contrasted; mutually incompatible
- **Synthetic** = relating to or using synthesis; the “placing together” of components

(#1) **SYNONYMOUS Parallelism.** This is the most common form in Hebrew poetry: two lines express *similar* thoughts, as terms from the first statement align with terms from the second. *“The second line of [such] a couplet is often more precise and specific than the first”* [Grogan, p. 60]. When they match term for term (example ‘a’) it is called “complete.” When one or more terms are without parallel (example ‘b’), it is called “incomplete;” sometimes these have an added term or phrase to compensate (example ‘c’).

(a) [Psalm 103:3](#) *who forgives all your iniquities,
and heals all your diseases.*

(b) [Psalm 103:7](#) *He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.*

(c) [Psalm 98:5](#) *Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody!*

(#2) **ANTITHETICAL Parallelism.** Here the second line of a couplet expresses a *contrasting* thought to that declared in the first line. Watch for *contrasting conjunctions* such as ‘**but**’ or ‘yet.’ (Note, that the OT book of *PROVERBS* is filled with such antithetical statements). “*The Bible as a whole tends to use a good deal of the language of polarity. Life and death, light and darkness, truth and error, are familiar biblical categories, and the Psalter is no exception to this.* [Grogran, p. 57]

- (a) Ps. 1:6 *For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,*
but the way of the wicked will perish.
- (b) Proverbs 15:1 *A soft answer turns away wrath,*
but a harsh word stirs up anger.

(#3) **SYNTHETIC Parallelism.** Scholars originated this third category as a sort of “catch-all” for parallel statements that were not simply synonymous or antithetical. With “synthetic” parallelism the second line continues or supplements the first, but often loses the balance of thought (thus it is not true parallelism).

- (a) Ps. 27:6a *And now my head shall be lifted up*
about my enemies all around me...
- (b) Ps. 97:7 *All worshipers of images are put to shame,*
who make their boast in worthless idols;
worship him [CONTRAST], all you gods!

Additional types of Parallelism

(#4) **EMBLEMATIC Parallelism.** This kind of parallelism has a *figurative* statement in one line (an “emblem”) and a *literal* parallel in the other, thus drawing an analogy. Often words of comparison (like/as) will be used to join them together. This is a helpful classification!

- (a) Psalm 42:1 *As a deer pants for flowing streams,*
so pants my soul for you, O God.
- (b) Psalm 103:11 *For as high as the heavens are above the earth,*
so great is his steadfast love toward
those who fear him.

(#5) **STEPLADDER Parallelism.** This makes use of *repetition* in the two (or more) statements to create a stepladder, stair-like or climatic parallelism.

- (a) Ps. 29:1-2 *Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,*
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness
- (b) Ps. 103:2-5 *Bless the Lord, O my soul,*
and forget not all his benefits,
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Cautions when working with Hebrew Parallelism

- (1) Parallelism is not as simple as “saying the same thing twice in different words.”

*“As we read the lines of Hebrew poetry carefully, we see that the second phrase is related in meaning to the first phrase. However — and this is important — it **always carries forward the thought found in the first phrase in some way.**” [Longman, page 98]*

- (2) Yet with synonymous parallelism, be careful not to press the variety of details too far, when the inspired psalmist desires you to understand them as **synonymous!**

- (3) The goal of interpreting Hebrew parallelism is not simply to take two poetic statements and *re-cast them into one prose statement*.

“Poetic language is valuable for it is often more memorable than prose, and this is particularly true of the sense-rhythm of the Old testament, for the very similarity of the synonymous lines or the marked contrast of those that are antithetical actually helps the memory.” [Grogan, 59]

Two precious observations —

- (1) **Behold God’s glorious provision for translation Hebrew poetry into other languages!**

“It is the striking fact that this type of poetry loses less than perhaps any other in the process of translation. In many literatures the appeal of a poem lies chiefly in verbal felicities and associations, or in metrical subtleties, which tend to fail of their effect even in a related language. ... But the poetry of the Psalms has a broad simplicity of rhythm and imagery which survives transplanting into almost any soil. Above all, the fact that its parallelisms are those of sense rather than of sound allows it to reproduce its chief effects with very little loss of either force or beauty. It is well fitted by God’s providence to invite ‘all the earth’ to ‘sing the glory of His name’.” [Derek Kidner, page 4]

- (2) **The beauty and design of inspired poetry serves to reveal and advance God’s truth!**

“We should remember that the aesthetic features of a psalm are the servants of its meaning. There is nothing wrong in being captivated by the beauty of some psalms, for instance 103 and 104, the loveliness of each usually surviving even in translation, but we should also be concerned to understand their meaning. We need to move through the beauty to the truth, for this is essentially divine truth for living. The words of God are a warning to us all:

*To them you are like a singer of love songs,
one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument;
they hear what you say, but they will not do it. (Ezek. 33:32)”*

[Grogan, page 61]

Assignment: read Psalm 46 —

- ** Outline the contents, topics and flow of thought in Psalm 46
- ** List all of the commands and all of the figures of speech that you find

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES OF PARALLELISM —

(c) Ps. 103:20-22 *Bless the Lord, O you his angels,
you mighty ones* *who do his word,
obeying the voice of his word!*

*Bless the Lord, all his hosts,
his ministers, who do his will!*

*Bless the Lord, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.*

Bless the Lord, O my soul!