

# Poetry

## Study Notes

### Introduction

Did you know that a third of the Bible is ancient Israelite poetry? Poetry is a rich and artistic form of human communication, but it's also some of the most difficult to read. It's worth taking the time to study the unique characteristics of biblical poetry in order to discover its beauty and power. Use these study notes to go deeper into the ideas from our video *The Art of Biblical Poetry*.

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# What is Poetry?

## Definition of Poetry

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines poetry as “a kind of literature that evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of one’s experience or emotions by means of well-crafted language that is chosen for its meaning, sound, and rhythm.”

In his 1968 book, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, Laurence Perrine says, “Poetry is a kind of human language that says more, and says it more intensely than does ordinary language.”

In **Psalm 29**, the word “voice” is the Hebrew word “qol,” which means “sound, voice, thunder.”

Give to Yahweh, O sons of God,  
give to the LORD **glory** and **strength**.  
<sup>2</sup>Give to the LORD the **glory** due his name;  
worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness.

<sup>3</sup>The **voice** of the LORD is over the **waters**;  
the God of **glory** thunders,  
the LORD thunders over the mighty **waters**.

<sup>4</sup>The **voice** of the LORD is powerful;  
the **voice** of the LORD is majestic.

<sup>5</sup>The **voice** of the LORD breaks the **cedars**;  
the LORD breaks in pieces the **cedars** of Lebanon.  
<sup>6</sup> He makes Lebanon leap like a calf,  
Sirion like a young wild ox.

<sup>7</sup>The **voice** of the LORD strikes with flashes of lightning.  
<sup>8</sup> The voice of the LORD shakes the desert;  
the LORD shakes the Desert of Kadesh.

<sup>9</sup>The **voice** of the LORD twists the **oaks** <sup>n</sup>  
and strips the **forests** bare.

And in his temple all cry, “**Glory!**”

<sup>10</sup>The LORD sits **enthroned** over the flood;  
the LORD is **enthroned** as King forever.

<sup>11</sup>The LORD gives **strength** to his people;  
the LORD blesses his people with peace.

## Characteristics of Poetry

Poetry invites you into an imaginative experience in order to communicate more than you’d be able to with plain language alone. Across cultures, poetry is typically marked by characteristics like:

- Density of expression, terseness, and fewer words than normal speech
- Intentional, creative use of language through unique word combinations or repetition
- Heavy use of imagery and metaphor, which combine images that don’t normally occur to us, like being washed away by chaotic waters representing the idea of defeat in battle.

Poetry conveys thought, there is something the poet wants to communicate. And poetry conveys that thought in a self-conscious manner, through a special structuring of the language that calls attention to the “how” of the message as well as the “what.” In fact, in good poetry, the “how” and the “what” become indistinguishable. As Robert Alter puts it: “Poetry ... is not just a set of techniques for saying impressively what could be said otherwise. Rather, it is a particular way of imagining the world.”

Adele Berlin, “Introduction to Biblical Poetry,” quoting from Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*.

## Poetic Conventions in Different Cultures

Nearly all human cultures that developed a common literature have ways of separating functional, utilitarian language from intentional, expressive, and artistic language, namely, poetry. All cultures also develop their own unique patterns of poetic speech and common conventions.

Metered rhyme is a feature of classic Western poetry such as the familiar poem, “Roses are red, violets are blue, sugar is sweet, and so are you.”

Ancient Greek lyric poetry from the 7th to 5th centuries B.C. primarily used long versus short syllables in patterns, rather than the sound of words. Greek lyric style developed into iambic pentameter in traditional English poetry.

Haiku, the traditional Japanese style of poetry, focuses on line length and syllable structure. A haiku has three lines each with a different number of syllables in the pattern of 5-7-5.

An old silent pond ...  
A frog jumps into the pond,  
splash! Silence again.

Matsuo Bashō

These different poetic constraints force an economy of expression and compression of thought and language so that words have to perform unusual functions.

## Poetic Convention in Ancient Israel

The ancient Israelite poetry preserved for us in the Bible doesn’t fit any kind of master system like meter (though some think so). However, the Israelites were aware of a certain kind of speech that was poetic, dense, and distinct from normal speech. They even have vocabulary for it.

“Song” (Heb. <i>shir</i> / <i>shirah</i> )	“Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song ...” (Exod. 15:1)
“Psalm” (Heb. <i>mizmor</i> )	Many headings to the Psalms have these. “A <i>mizmor</i> of David” (Ps. 3).
“Lament” (Heb. <i>qinah</i> )	“David lamented this <i>qinah</i> over Saul and Jonathan” (2 Sam. 1:17).

These compositions show a unique cultural form of Hebrew poetry that is not a formal system but a series of characteristics. To illustrate these characteristics, here's a poem by John Hollander from *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*.

*The Verse of the Hebrew Bible is strange  
The meter of Psalms and Proverbs perplexes  
It is not a matter of number,  
No counting of beats or syllables  
Its song is a music of matching,  
Its rhythm a kind of paralleling  
One line makes an assertion;  
The other part expresses in other words  
Sometimes a third part will vary yet again*

Now, let's look at some of the specific elements of Hebrew poetry.

### **Rhythm**

Hebrew poetry is shaped into a line-rhythm or verse. It is not metrical (based on syllable counts) but a form of free verse.

The word "verse" refers to a description of poetic form. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says verse is "a succession of words arranged according to natural or artificially created rules, forming a complete line; a verse is one of the lines of a poem or a piece of versification."

People have proposed many words to describe the poetic line (stitch, colon, verse, membrum), but "line" is the most simple and common English word.

Free verse is a category in the history of poetry named by Israeli scholar Harshav Hrushovsky. His work has been adopted by Chip Dobbs-Allsopp in *On Biblical Poetry*, who says,

"The poetry of the Hebrew Bible is a natural, free, and rhythmic system. The poems have no consistent metrical scheme, and so have a freedom from predetermined arrangements. But their language is organized so as to create impressions and fulfill the functions of poetic rhythm. Free verse is totally free, it is verse, but it's free to play with the verse rhythm in a variety of ways, making use of all manner of linguistic artistry" (120).

The line in Hebrew poetry is most often (1) a complete sentence or subordinate clause (2) consisting of three to five words (3) marked by repetition and clear end-stop signals. The Dead Sea Scrolls show the earliest divisions of Hebrew poetry into line-columns.

### **Terseness**

To be terse or concise means to use as few words as possible to communicate as much as possible. In "Introduction to Biblical Poetry," Adele Berlin says, "The terseness of biblical poetry gives the impression that each word or phrase is more loaded with meaning, since fewer words must bear the burden of the message" (4).

### **Parallelism**

In simple terms, parallelism refers to two things presented next to each other to show their relation. The short sayings in the book of Proverbs are written using this poetic form.

Robert Lowth created the first comprehensive synthesis of the features in biblical poetry.

There is a certain conformation of the sentences, which is chiefly observable in those passages which frequently occur in Hebrew poetry, in which they treat one subject in many different ways, and dwell upon the same sentiment; when they express the same thing in different words, or different things in a similar form of words: and since this artifice of composition seldom fails to produce an agreeable and measured cadence, we can scarcely doubt it must have imparted to their poetry an exquisite degree of beauty and grace.

Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*.

The correspondence of one verse or line with another, I call Parallelism. When a proposition is delivered, and a second is subjoined to it, or drawn under it, equivalent, or contrasted with it, in sense; or similar to it in the form of grammatical construction; these I call parallel lines; and the words or phrases answering one to another in the corresponding line, I call parallel terms.

Robert Lowth, commentary on *Isaiah*, 14.

The proverbs are cast in this poetic form. In fact, the word "proverb" in Hebrew (mashal) means "a comparison."

- Both lines are positive "better than" sayings.

- Proverbs 16:32

*A Being slow to anger is better than being a warrior*

*B And one who rules their passions than one who captures a city*

- The lines match in form, but they contrast in meaning.

- Proverbs 13:3

*A One who guards his mouth preserves his life*

*B One who opens wide his lips comes to ruin*

- Line A describes a behavior, and line B describes its result.

- Proverbs 19:17

*A One who lends to the Lord, one gracious to the poor*

*B And he will repay him for his good deed*

However, the biblical authors are not simply rhyming thoughts or saying the same thought in different words. James Kugel and Robert Alter both wrote important works on biblical poetry showing how the relationship between these parallel lines can be really diverse, but the B line is always one of progression, heightening, and intensification.

- Psalm 62:11-12

*One thing God has spoken*

*two things I have heard:*

*that power belongs to God,*

*and covenant loyalty is yours, O Lord.*

*For you will recompense each person according to their deeds.*

- Psalm 51:1-3

- Notice how the B line doesn't always simply repeat; rather, it intensifies and develops the idea/vocabulary of the A line.

**A** *Be gracious to me, O God, according to your lovingkindness;*  
**B** *according to the greatness of your compassion blot out my transgressions.*  
 2 **A** *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity*  
**B** *and cleanse me from my sin.*  
 3 **A** *For I know my transgressions,*  
**B** *and my sin is ever before me.*

- Isaiah 11:1-5

- There are six groups of lines—five are couplets (A line + B line) and one is a quintuplet (5 lines). Each one expresses parallel statements that are more than the sum of their parts.

*<sup>1</sup>Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,  
 and a branch from his roots will bear fruit.*  
*[A] <sup>2</sup>The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him,*  
*[B] the spirit of wisdom and understanding,*  
*[B] the spirit of counsel and strength,*  
*[A] the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*  
*<sup>3</sup>And he will delight in the fear of the Lord,  
 he will not judge by what his eyes see,  
 nor make a decision by what his ears hear;*  
*<sup>4</sup>but with righteousness he will judge the poor,  
 and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth;  
 and he will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
 and with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.*  
*<sup>5</sup>And righteousness will be the belt about his loins,  
 and faithfulness the belt about his waist.*

- Psalm 51:10-12

- These lines are not strictly parallel, but they are progressively intensive.
  - Clean heart > steadfast spirit
  - Your presence > your Spirit
  - Joy > willing spirit

*<sup>10</sup>Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
 and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*  
*<sup>11</sup>Do not cast me away from your presence,  
 and do not take your Holy Spirit from me.*  
*<sup>12</sup>Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
 and sustain me with a willing spirit.*

Parallelism creates an infinite number of ways to communicate creatively. For example, in the book of Psalms, the poets ask God to hear their prayer 29 times, and none of them are identical (Berlin, *Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, 127-130).

Psalm 54:2

*O God, hear my prayer // listen to the words of my mouth*

Psalm 61:1

*O God, hear my cry // pay attention to my prayer*

Psalm 66:19

*Truly God has heard // he paid attention to the sound of my prayer*

Psalm 84:8

*Yahweh, hear my prayer // listen, O God of Jacob*

Psalm 102:2

*Yahweh, hear my prayer // may my cry come to you*

Psalm 88:3

*May my prayer come before you // incline your ear to my cry*

Psalm 88:13

*To you, Yahweh, I cry out // in the morning my prayer meets you*

Psalm 28:2

*Hear the voice of my petition // when I cry out to you*

At its root, parallelism is a form of comparison and analogy. It assumes that to truly understand and experience a thing, you need to grasp not only that thing but also another thing that is both similar and distinct at the same time. This is an associative mode of thought—comparative cognition that has been turned into an art form. We grasp a thing when we have thoroughly considered what it is like (comparison), and what it is not like (contrast).

### **Juxtaposition**

Juxtaposition is an artistic technique turned into a poetic principle. This type of poetic style is a wonderful way to express complex thoughts through pairing unexpected words or images in order to communicate more. This “speaking in pairs” creates opportunities to use multiple words and images to communicate one core idea from many angles. This is done through the juxtaposition itself, rather than by using more and more words to convey meaning.

This is a common technique in cinema and filmmaking.

It remains true to this day, that the juxtaposition of two separate shots by splicing them together, resembles not so much a simple sum of one shot plus one shot. Rather, it resembles a new creation. The result is qualitatively distinguishable from each of the elements viewed separately ... This is the effect of the montage: each piece exists no longer as something unrelated, but as a given particular representation of a larger common theme that now penetrates all of the shot-pieces. This juxtaposition of these partial details calls to life and forces into light any general qualities that each piece expresses that might bind them together into a single whole, a single image that the spectator experiences.

Sergei Eisenstein [famous Russian film director], *The Film Sense*, 24.

## Juxtaposition in Psalms 104:24-26

<sup>24</sup>O Lord, how many are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all;  
the earth is full of your possessions.  
<sup>25</sup>There is **the sea**, great and broad,  
in which are **swarms** without number,  
**animals** both small and great.  
<sup>26</sup>There the ships move along,  
Leviathan, which you have formed to sport in it.

## Poetic Ambiguity

Poetry is a form of speech that achieves a unique balance of maximum communication and ambiguity at the same time.

*If we could hear God talking, making his will manifest in words of Hebrew language, what would it sound like? Poetry is our best human model of intricately rich communication. It's not only solemn, weighty, and forceful, but also densely woven with complex internal connections, meanings, and implications. It makes perfect sense why divine speech in the Hebrew Bible is most often represented as poetry ... The form of this divine poetry helps explain why these texts have touched the lives of millions of readers far removed in time, space, and situation from the small groups of ancient Hebrews who produced and first read these texts.*

Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 141.

Nearly all messianic prophecy in the Hebrew Bible is written in poetic form. Therefore, it has a level of ambiguity.

<sup>14</sup>The Lord God said to the serpent,  
"Because you have done this,  
cursed are you more than all cattle,  
and more than every beast of the field;  
on your belly you will go,  
and dust you will eat  
all the days of your life;  
<sup>15</sup>and I will put enmity  
between you and the woman,  
and between your seed and her seed;  
he shall bruise you on the head,  
and you shall bruise him on the heel."

Genesis 3:14-15



# Larger Scale Poetic Conventions in Biblical Poetry

## Chiasm

The principles of biblical poetry (repetition, rhythm, parallelism, and juxtaposition) are used together to make a complete poem. This large scale structure is called chiasm, or symmetry. Chiasm is a literary device where lines of the poem parallel each other in a mirror-image or reverse order (a>b; b>a). Here are some examples of chiasm in biblical poetry.

### ABAB Form

- Psalm 33:10-11
  - A Yahweh frustrated the **plans** of the nations;
  - B he reduces to nothing the **schemes** of the peoples,
  - A Yahweh's **plan** endures forever,
  - B the **schemes** of his heart, from generation to generation.

### ABBA Form

- Jeremiah 17:7
  - A Blessed is the one who **trusts**
  - B in **Yahweh**
  - B so that **Yahweh**
  - A is their source of **trust**.
- Psalm 137:5-6
  - A If I forget you Jerusalem
  - B let my right hand wither;
  - B Let my tongue stick to my palate
  - A if I don't remember you.

### Psalm 67 [composed as a large chiasm]

- A May God be gracious to us and **bless us**  
and make his face shine upon us, Selah
- B **that your ways may be known on earth,**  
your salvation among all nations.
- C May the peoples praise you, O God;  
may all the peoples praise you.
- D May the **nations** be glad and sing for joy,  
E for you rule the peoples with justice
- D' and guide the **nations** of the earth. Selah
- C' May the peoples praise you, O God;  
may all the peoples praise you.
- C' **Then the earth will yield its harvest,**
- A and God, our God, will **bless us.**

Some other larger scale structures used in biblical poetry include acrostic, refrain, and inclusio.

### **Acrostic**

This is an alphabet poem, where the lines of the poem each start with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in order (line 1 with a, line 2 with b, etc.).

See Psalm 119, where the first eight verses begin with the first Hebrew letter (aleph), and the next eight begin with the second Hebrew letter (beth). Other acrostic poems include Psalm 9-10 (together); Psalms 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 145; Proverbs 31:10-31; Lamentations 1-4; Nahum 1:2-8.

### **Refrain**

Refrain means the poetic lines are repeated in order to indicate divisions (similar to the choruses of popular worship songs and hymns). For example, take the phrase “his love endures forever,” which is the second line of every verse of Psalm 136. Psalms 42-43 (42:5,11; 43:5) and Psalm 80 (vv. 3, 7, 19) also use refrains.

### **Inclusio**

Inclusio refers to when the poetry repeats the opening words of the psalm at the end of the poem. For example, “Praise [Bless] Yahweh, O my soul” in Psalm 103 and “Praise Yahweh” [“Hallelujah!”] in Psalms 8, 113, and 146 through 150.

### **Stanzas**

A stanza is a movement of poetic thought that usually has two to five parallel lines. Stanzas are marked by paragraph spaces in our English translations.

## **Poetic Devices**

The biblical authors used unique poetic devices in their poetry that allowed them to elicit response from the audience and make connections in the biblical text.

### **Shift in Speaking Voice**

The voice of the speaker will often shift without explicit notice. The reader is left to ponder the significance of these shifts. See Psalm 2 and 51 for examples.

### **Confession**

Many biblical poems include an admission of sin and guilt to God, where the poet cries out in prayer. For examples of this, see Psalm 51:3-6, Daniel 9:5-11, and Nehemiah 1:6b-7.

### **Hymn**

This refers to a poetic song that praises God either for his character (see “praise”) or for his actions of kindness toward his people (see “thanksgiving”). There are frequent examples in both the Old and New Testaments, such as Judges 5, Isaiah 61:10-11, Colossians 1:15-20, 1 Timothy 3:16, and Revelation 5:9-13.

### **Curse (“Imprecation”)**

An imprecation is a poetic prayer in which the poet asks God to punish the wicked. See Psalm 69:22-28, 109:6-20, 137:8-9; Jeremiah 18:21-23; and Lamentations 3:64-66 for examples of this.

### **Petition**

This poetic prayer is a direct plea for God asking for help with a specific human need. See Psalm 7:1-2 and Acts 4:29-30 for examples.

### **Prayer**

In the Bible, a prayer is a direct human (quoted) speech addressed to God. Prayers include confession, petition, praise, and thanksgiving.

## Poetic Styles Used in Psalms

All cultures form genres or conventions for specific types of songs and poems. American pop music, for example, uses the pattern AABA: verse + chorus/verse + chorus/bridge/verse + chorus. Hebrew authors used the genres of lament, praise, and thanksgiving in their poems.

### Lament

A lament is a psalm in which the author complains to God about his current hardships and calls upon God to deliver him. Typical elements include:

<b>Opening cry</b> or question	Psalm 13:13: "How long, O Yahweh ... ?"
Description of <b>circumstances</b> or enemies	Psalm 3:1: "Many are rising up against me."
<b>Petition</b> , or asking God to do something to help, sometimes with a request that God punish his enemies ("imprecation") and/or an explanation of reasons why God should act	Psalm 3:7: "Arise O Lord, and save me, O my God!" Psalm 6:4: "Return, Lord, rescue my life ( <i>nephesh</i> ), save me because of your loyal love."
Statement of <b>confidence</b> and faith in God	Psalm 11:7: "For the Lord is righteous, and he loves those who do righteousness, they will see his face."
<b>Vow</b> which promises to thank God when deliverance does come	Psalm 3:7-8: "Arise, Lord; save me, my God! For you have struck all my enemies on the cheek; you have shattered the teeth of the wicked. Salvation belongs to the Lord; may your blessing be upon your people!"

### Praise

A praise is a specific kind of psalm that honors God for his character and/or attributes. For examples, see Psalms 113, 117, and 146-150. Elements include:

<b>A call</b> to praise	Psalm 103:1-2: "Praise Yahweh, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise Yahweh, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits ..."
<b>A list</b> of those who should praise Yahweh	Psalm 103:20-22: "Praise Yahweh, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word. Praise Yahweh, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will. Praise Yahweh, all his works everywhere in his dominion. Praise Yahweh, O my soul."
<b>Reasons</b> for praise	Psalm 103:8: "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in mercy."
Concludes with the phrase " <b>Praise Yahweh!</b> " ["Hallelujah!"]	Psalm 103:22

## Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving poems refer to psalms that honor God for his gracious actions toward people. For examples, see Psalms 30, 34, 66, 73, 105-106, and 111-118. Elements include:

<b>A call</b> to give thanks	Psalm 116:1-2: "I love Yahweh, for he heard my voice ... I will call on him as long as I live."
<b>A description</b> of distress before deliverance	Psalm 116:3: "The snares of death encompassed me and the terrors of Sheol came upon me; I found distress and sorrow."
<b>Praise</b> to God for his compassion and faithfulness in deliverance	Psalm 116: 5-7: "Yahweh is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion."
<b>A general statement</b> about how God cares for all his people	Psalm 116:15: "Precious in the sight of Yahweh is the death of his saints."
<b>A Promise</b> to fulfill one's vows	Psalm 116:14: "I will pay my vows to the Lord; may it be in the presence of all his people!"
<b>A Final statement</b> of praise	Psalm 116:19: "Praise Yahweh!"