

## **HEBREW POETRY**

The most outstanding feature of Hebrew Poetry is its parallelism. “This term refers to the practice of balancing one thought or phrase by a corresponding thought or phrase containing approximately the same number of words, or at least a correspondence in ideas” (G. Archer)

By this technique, the poetry is not only easy to memorize in Hebrew, but is easy to translate into other languages. There are three basic types of parallelism: synonymous, antithetic and synthetic...

1. Synonymous: very close similarity between each of the two lines.

Psalms 3:1 - “O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are risen against me!

2. Antithetic: the second line contrasts the first.

Psalms 1:6 - “For the Lord knows the way of the righteous. But the way of the wicked shall perish.”

3. Synthetic: the second line takes up and develops further a thought in the first line.

Psalms 95:3 - “For the Lord is a Great God, and a great king above all gods”

The Psalmists also make frequent use of figures of speech and other literary devices in their writings: metaphors, similes, anthropomorphisms, acrostics, and the like.

## **PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING THE PSALMS**

### **I. RELATE THE PSALMS TO THE THEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS THAT UNDERGIRD THEM**

A. God is a personal Creator, moral Lawgiver, theocratic Ruler, and the sovereign Purposer of history. He has a theocratic program to establish upon the earth.

1. The Psalms focus on God’s activity as He works out that program (cf. Ps. 2; Heb. 1:5, Acts 13:33)
2. The Psalms focus on the character and attributes of God
  - a) Psalm 145 - explicit
  - b) Psalm 135 - implicit

B. Since the Bible is the unfolding of God’s purposes throughout history, the Psalms can be viewed as episodes in the outworking of that purpose.

1. An artistic record of the human response to God’s working out His program
2. Accounts of victories, heartaches, and suffering of Israel
  - a) 1 Sam. 19:11 - David king
  - b) Psalm 59 - David is upset emotionally by circumstances but turns into confidence

C. God is the transcendent Creator of nature which is meaningful and orderly.

1. The psalmists had a deep respect for nature as being one of God’s great accomplishments

- a) The Israelites were an agrarian people whose lives were constantly affected by God's creation
  - b) Nature is awe inspiring - Psalm 33
- 2. Nature is pictured as reflecting the greatness of God's glory - Psalm 19
- II. BEWARE OF ANY MESSIANIC IMPLICATIONS IN THE PSALMS
  - A. Approximately 10% of the Psalms have a messianic focus
    - 1. Person - Psalm 110, Psalm 2 (Acts 2:32-36)
    - 2. Rejection - Psalm 118:22 (1 Pe. 2:6-7)
    - 3. Suffering - Psalm 22 (Mt. 27:46; 1 Pe. 2:24)
    - 4. Resurrection - Psalm 16:10 (Acts 2:29)
  - B. Messianic Psalms - 2, 8, 22-24, 34-35, 40-41, 45, 68-69, 109-110, 118
- III. TREAT THE PSALMS AS POETRY
  - A. The Psalms must be handled as poetry, which is an artistic expression of human experience (Psalm 59)
  - B. Give special attention to both the artistic structure and artistic language of the Psalms
    - 1. Parallelism and Acrostics
    - 2. The artistic language of the Psalm frequently concentrates its subject into an image (Ps. 23 - the shepherd)
- IV. IDENTIFY THE TYPE OR CATEGORY OF THE PSALM
  - A. 5 General categories of Psalms
    - 1. Hymns (Praise) - General worship (Ps. 29:1-2)
    - 2. Lament/Complaint - Israel's enemies/God far away (Psalm 142:1-4; Psalm 83:1-4)
    - 3. Royal - God is sovereign (Psalm 45:3-7)
    - 4. Thanksgiving - remember God's goodness (Psalm 138:1-3)
    - 5. Wisdom - benefit from following God (Psalm 37:5-7)
  - B. Some lists detail 17-20 categories
- V. UTILIZE THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PSALMS WHENEVER POSSIBLE
  - A. History provides context for the psalmist writing
  - B. Psalm 18 - David delivered from Saul
- VI. TRY TO GIVE A PICTURE OF THE PEOPLE WHO USED THESE PSALMS
  - A. Religious
    - 1. The psalmists had a strong idea of right and wrong
    - 2. Different content of salvation from the believer in Christ
      - a) The Old Testament saint did not have a regenerated spirit
        - (1) "Human soul...demonstrated in Scripture to be that immaterial part of man that interprets his senses to his mind and produces the resulting emotions." - Mark Conrad
        - (2) Soul (130x; NT writings to church - 18x)
        - (3) Psalms provides an expression of the full gamut of emotions
      - b) Jesus introduced a change in worship (John 4:19-24)
  - B. Unapologetically viewed themselves as God's people in contrast to wicked unbelievers
  - C. People of strong emotions
  - D. Lived off the land and close to nature
  - E. Strong nationalistic loyalty - concerns about theocracy
  - F. Militaristic with religious commitments

G. Enjoyed poetry

VII. LOOK FOR THE CENTRAL IDEA OF THE PSALM (ITS MESSAGE)

- A. Psalms are typically brief self-contained units of thought (Psalm 43)
- B. Each psalm usually has a single controlling topic or theme
  - 1. don't allow reference numbers to hinder from seeing the unifying theme
  - 2. Not a series of isolated thoughts disconnected from each other

\*This outline relies heavily on class notes prepared by Dr. Stephen R. Lewis