

AN INTRODUCTION TO HEBREW POETRY

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Poetry is pervasive in the Hebrew Bible—the only books in the Old Testament without any poetry are Leviticus, Ruth, Esther, Haggai, and Malachi (although 1 Kings and Nehemiah could perhaps be added to this list). In order to be a competent reader of Scripture, one must have some understanding of the nature and conventions of Old Testament poetry: What is it? How does it work? Who wrote it?

Even in English it is not always a simple matter to distinguish poetry from prose. Often the reader is simply guided by the layout of the text: in poetry, each line of poetry has its own line of text; in prose, there are no special line breaks. No such convention can be seen in our oldest biblical Hebrew manuscripts, and only with the work of the medieval Jewish scribes were biblical texts presented in a manner that distinguishes prose and poetry.

"Poets" in Ancient Israel

If the boundary between prose and poetry is sometimes difficult to discern, so too are the traces of poets in the archaeological record of ancient Israel. While the nations of Israel and Judah had functioning bureaucracies and civil servants as well as a temple complex that required administration and accounts, little explicit evidence remains for the education of the people who filled these positions or for the milieu in which they would have matured and flourished. There is enough to know there was a literate scribal class, but not enough to say how they became such.

In biblical literature, the concerns of poetry and scribes come together. In addition to the Psalms, the biblical Wisdom Books are also books of poetry, and the poets and sages who were responsible for them belonged to that scribal class (e.g., see Prov. 25:1). Even if the extra-biblical record of their activity is minimal, their contribution to the writings that became the Scripture of Israel is immense. Wherever poetry is found in the Bible, one finds literary reflection in the service of worship and godly living.

What Is Hebrew "Poetry"?

Poetry is commonly recognized by lines exhibiting rhythm and rhyme, readily exemplified by nursery rhymes: even the simple "one, two, buckle my shoe" demonstrates both aspects. This brief snippet exhibits rhythm (one, two, [pause] buckle my shoe), terseness, assonance (the resemblance of the vowel sounds in "one" and "buckle", and "two" and "shoe"), and rhyme—and this sort of word craft can also be seen in the work of the ancient Hebrew poets. Apart from rhyme, conventions such as terse expression, freedom in word order, and an absence of typical prose particles [the smallest parts of speech] also distinguish biblical Hebrew poetry from prose.

One prominent feature of biblical poetry not found in English poems is that of the "seconding sequence"; that is, a line of Hebrew poetry generally has two parts. The poet's art allows the relationship between those parts to be crafted in manifold ways. Here is Psalm 19:1:

*The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*

In the opening of Psalm 19, "the heavens" in the first part finds an echo in "the sky" above in the second part; likewise, "declare" parallels "proclaims", and "the glory of God" partners "handiwork". With nearly one-to-one correspondence, it is obvious why such poetic parallelism has often been called "synonymous"—one of three such categories, the others being "antithetical", where the second part provides the opposite to the first part (e.g., "A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother," Prov. 10:1), and "synthetic", where the two parts of the line do not display either of these kinds of semantic relationship. Assigning a line of poetry to one of these simple categories represents only a first small step in discerning the poet's art. This "parallel" structure offers the poet a surprisingly rich framework for artistic development: the poet is not simply saying the same thing twice in slightly different terms. The parallel line structure provided Hebrew



poets with a means of exploiting similarity and difference on the levels of *sound, syntax, and semantics* to achieve an artistically compelling expression of their vision. Unfortunately, of these three elements, the first two (sound and syntax) usually do not survive translation. In the Hebrew of Psalm 19:1, both parts of the line are roughly eleven/twelve syllables, with three stresses in the first part, and four in the second. Syntactically, they form a very neat "envelope" structure, of the a-b-c/c'-b'-a' pattern: subject-verb-object/object-verb-subject. Such symmetry already begins to express the totality of the poet's vision.

However, semantics—the meanings of words—are observable in translation. Of course, complete overlap of the meanings of words cannot be sustained across languages, so there is still an advantage to those who can enjoy the poetry in its original setting. While the simple matches across the parts of this first line of Psalm 19 were noted above, there is yet more to be observed. The a/a' pair ("heavens" and "sky above") are not precise synonyms.

"Heavens" is the more generic term, and occurs well over four hundred times in the Old Testament; by contrast, "sky above" (Hb. *raqia*) occurs only seventeen times, and nine of those are in the creation account of Genesis 1. Even in this apparently simple development, which exploits the seconding pattern of the parallel line structure, the poet moves from the more generic assertion in the first part to the more specific in the second to display God's glory in his creative acts ("handiwork"). (Confirmation of this allusion to creation comes in Ps. 19:4, which partners "earth" and "world" so that Ps. 19:1 and Ps. 19:4 together allude to the "heavens and earth" of Gen. 1:1.) Something similar could be noted of the verbs: "declare" (Hb. *mesapperim*) refers to the simple act of rehearsal or recounting; "proclaim" (Hb. *maggid*) on the other hand brings the nuance of announcement, of revelation, of news. This invitation to savor the wonder of creation's wordless confession of the glories of God (Ps. 19: 1-4a), then, forms a profound counterpart to the famous reflection on the verbal expressions of the will of the Lord found in the law (Ps. 19:7-11).

Many lines of Hebrew verse do not offer this kind of parallel correspondence, however. Sometimes simple grammatical dependency binds the parts together (e.g., Ps. 19:3), or the first part asks a question that the second part answers (Ps. 19:12). Sometimes there is a narrative development (Ps. 19:5,13), sometimes an escalation or intensification of terms (Ps. 19:1, 10). These few examples are drawn from a single psalm with fairly regular features; surveying the entire poetic corpus would add a myriad of possibilities. Consistently, however, the art and craft of the Bible's poems offers an invitation to read slowly, to have one's vision broadened, one's perception deepened—or as it was put above, to see *literary reflection in the service of worship and godly living*.

Where Is Poetry Found in the Old Testament?

Poetry is pervasive throughout the Old Testament, in spite of the fact there is no word in biblical Hebrew for "poem." The medieval Jewish scholars responsible for the accentuation of the Hebrew text of the Bible used a distinct notation for Psalms, Job, and Proverbs (their order in the Hebrew Bible) that marked these books as "poetic." However, Hebrew terms may refer to a particular kind of poem, and thus illustrate their wide diffusion. Poetry is at home in every part of Israelite life.

Songs and prayers of praise and lament most naturally cluster in the book of Psalms, although they can be found elsewhere in the Old Testament as well (e.g., 2 Samuel 22 [and Psalm 18]; 1 Chronicles 16; Habakkuk 3). There is considerable overlap here, with some of the "epic poetry" found in the Pentateuch (e.g., Genesis 49; Exodus 15; Deuteronomy 32; 33) and beyond (Judges 5). Wisdom and "song" often come together (e.g., Ps. 49:4), and the parallel structure of the Hebrew poetic line was a perfect vehicle for proverbial sayings (Proverbs 10—31). Likewise, the dialogues of the book of Job (Job 3-41) are formed entirely in poetry. The book of Lamentations contains a collection of *qinah* poems, whose acrostic structure also forges a connection to a "wisdom" form of composition. The term *massa'* points to a connection with the Hebrew prophets, whose oracles were normally delivered in verse form. The greater part of Isaiah—Malachi is written in poetry: while definitions of a "prophet" may vary, the writing prophets at any rate may at least be said to be poets.