

A Short Introduction to Hebrew Poetic Devices for the Pastor Exegete

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Preface

This text is written for the “pastoral exegete.” It is for those who must regularly prepare sermons, Sunday school lessons, and bible studies on a weekly basis. It is the pastoral scholar that often feels overwhelmed by the technical detail of poetic analysis. The poetry in the Hebrew bible has been a source of encouragement and comfort to believers reading their bibles in hundreds of different translations in their own vernaculars. That is because the genius of Hebrew poetry often survives translation well.

The following text includes excerpts from *Hebrew Poetic Devices in the Greek Text of the Psalms of Solomon*.¹ Much of that work is about the evidences of Hebrew poetry in a translated text. The portions included here present a useful overview of Hebrew poetry for the pastoral exegete. Understanding these principles can help that pastoral scholar to present the poetic passages to his audience in a way that will enhance the appreciation of the meaning and the beauty of the poetic text.

Not all pastoral scholars have the same gifts or talents, and in our current age of high pressure schedules, not every pastoral exegete shares the same facility with the Hebrew language. For those elements that endure translation well, this is only a minor inconvenience. There are some features of Hebrew poetry that disappear completely however if the poetry is not vocalized at all.

This is not only a problem for those who have let their Hebrew skills decline, it can be a problem to those who only translate “silently.” Often seminary students approach their language studies as if they are deciphering some arcane code. Laboring between text, lexicon, and grammars, they never think of reading a passage out loud. This will often truly lead to “missing the forest for the trees.” To cultivate the ability to vocalize Hebrew poetry, I encourage students to use some form of transliterated text.² This can be helpful to students at every level of ability.

Understanding the poetic devices used in the passages of the Hebrew bible that rely heavily on the forms of poetry can only increase the preachers confidence in teaching from these portion. The two major styles of language in the Hebrew bible, narrative and poetic, are both crucial mnemonic features. It can be argued that they have been designed by divine inspiration for two important purposes. The first was to assure the accessibility of the text to a large portion of the people of God in times when a written portion was not feasible for everyone to possess. Secondly, the familiarity of a cherished story or poem actually enhances the stability of the written text. When the audience knows the story well, there is no opportunity for the text to wander greatly. The interaction of an oral and a written form can actually stabilize transmission.

A Working Description of Hebrew Poetry

One of the great “mysteries” in the study of Hebrew Poetry is presented by the lack of consensus over the nature of Hebrew poetry.³ Kugel’s comment on this uncertainty may be more whimsical than informative when he

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1. Blackburn, Rollin J., Temple University, 1998
 2. The font bwtransh.ttf has been used in the preparation of this work. It and a transliterated Hebrew text are components of BibleWorks 8, published by BibleWorks LLC (Norfolk VA). This documents is heavily dependent on the resources of BibleWorks. It is one of my essential tools.
 3. R. Alter asks;

What are the formal elements that make up a poem in the Hebrew Bible? The incorrigible naïveté of

says, “The historical inability of poetic terminology to describe Hebrew style might be compared to modern physicists difficulty in deciding between wave and particle theories of light.”⁴ While this is certainly a caricature of the fundamental disagreement over the nature of Hebrew poetry, it is only a slight exaggeration. Kugel himself called into question the very concept of a significant difference between prose and poetry;

If one puts aside the notions of biblical poetry and prose and tries to look afresh at different parts of the Bible to see what it is about them that distinguishes one from another, it will soon be apparent that there are not two modes of utterance, but many different elements which elevate style and provide for formality and strictness of organization.⁵

This statement is a bit extreme, and it may be a reaction against a mechanical or statistical method of classifying prose and poetry. Consider Freedman’s assessment with which it needs to be compared;

Poetry is well delimited by its differences from prose. While there is an area of overlap, generally it is not difficult to distinguish the two without precisely defining the difference. Since the distinction is often quantitative rather than qualitative, and in terms of degree rather than kind, it may be asked why it is important to draw the line at all and try to separate one corpus from another. The answer is that in spite of some blending of types and blurring of the lines of demarcation, prose and poetry are basically two different ways of using language.⁶

There is a great distance between Freedman’s quantitative definition of Hebrew poetry (he concentrates on the absence of three Hebrew particles, **תא** - the marker of the direct object, **אשר** - the relative pronoun and **ה** the definite article, recognizing that these particles are statistically rare in passages that are considered poetic) and Kugel’s sense of elevated style. Between these relative poles there is a near infinite variety of other definitions.

In general, there may not be a definitive solution to the debate over the nature of Hebrew poetry. Whether the terminology that will be used describes “two modes of utterance,” or simply passages of “elevated style,” is not important to this study. Though it is hard to define Hebrew poetry, it is useful and convenient for our purpose to discuss certain reoccurring features of Hebrew poetry.

There are ample resources for the investigation of the individual characteristics of poetic Hebrew speech. Kugel,⁷ O’Connor,⁸ Gerstenberger⁹ and Berlin¹⁰ have all discussed the development of the study of biblical poetry.

common sense might lead one to suppose that the rudiments of an answer would be self-evident, but in fact there is no aspect of biblical literature that has elicited more contradictory, convoluted, and at times quite fantastical views, from late antiquity to the latest scholarly publications (*The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985), 3.

4. James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 385.

5. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History*, 85.

6. David Noel Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy: Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1980), 2.

7. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History*.

8. Michael Patrick O’Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1980).

9. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, “The Lyrical Literature,” in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, eds Douglas A. Knight and Gene M. Tucker. Centennial Publications (Society of Biblical Literature) (Philadelphia,

For the pastor exegete the history of this study is not essential. We have no need in our investigation to retrace those steps. It is however useful to describe a working model that is capable of productively interrogating the poetic passages of the Hebrew Bible. To do this, it is helpful to focus our discussion on several manageable areas of inquiry out of the full spectrum of continuing scholarship that thrives around the locus of Hebrew poetry.

Fitzgerald¹¹ has described the elements of Hebrew poetry in terms of meter, parallelism, and larger verse units (stanzic structure).¹² Alonso Schökel¹³ in his extensive catalog of poetic features offers a list of poetic techniques that are essential to Hebrew poetry. He has arranged his work in an ascending order of abstraction. He moves from features of “sound” to features of “development and composition.” These areas break easily into four general areas; 1) sounds, 2) rhythm and arrangement, 3) parallelism and related lexical and grammatical devices, and 4) thematic structures from images to motif. These four areas form a useful framework.

The pastor exegete often studies the poetry of the Old Testament in translation. The study of poetic forms in a translated text will obviously be able to say very little about sounds. This is an important reason for maintaining skills in the original languages or at least learning to use transliterated texts productively. Following Alonso Schökel’s order of abstraction, our investigation will survey these four areas, but will focus on the three areas of abstraction that are more accessible to the student who is not facile in vocalization.

These four types can be classified for our purposes as; phonological, rhythmic, lexical grammatical,¹⁴ and thematic. Under these general headings the issues of assonance and alliteration, allusion and imagery; meter and stanza; parallelism, equivalence and contrast (and other poetic devices based on lexical or grammatical relationships) can all be conveniently grouped. Observations and conclusions that arise from any of these individual areas of investigation can naturally influence the interpretation of details in the other areas. Because of this it is difficult to assign a methodological sequence to the investigation. The sequence in which the areas are presented does not imply any priority of significance. They are examined sequentially only for convenience of discussion. Together these areas provide a working comprehension of poetic organization that is capable of highlighting and identifying the structural influence of poetic devices. By comprehending the structure we see how the form of poetry reinforces and supports the meaning of the poetry. The order of our discussion will go from simple to abstract following Alonso Schökel’s outline.

Sound is a simple and important way that the Hebrew poets use to provide cohesion to their poetry. Poetic structure that works at the sound level is usually based on some form of repetition. At a very simple level, assonance and alliteration are the repetition of vowel and consonant sounds. Assonance usually describes a series of words with the same vowel sounds. Consonance describes words with the same consonant sounds. Alliteration is a form of consonance that involves words beginning with the same sound. Rhyme is used of words ending with the same sound. Because Hebrew words have a limited number of endings,¹⁵ rhyming schemes are infrequent and

Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1985).

10. Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).
11. A. Fitzgerald, “Poetry of the Old Testament,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, reprint, 1967 (Palatine, Ill.: Jack Heraty & Associates, Inc., 1981), 462.
12. Donald K. Berry, *An Introduction to Wisdom and Poetry of the Old Testament* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), 293.
13. Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, translated by Adrian Graffy. Subsidia Biblica (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988).
14. This last type corresponds to Alonso Schökel’s category of parallelism and its related devices,
15. The variety of word endings are limited because of the suffixes used to indicate gender and number of both nouns and adjectives. Similarly inflectional endings limit the possible final sounds of Hebrew verbs.

usually very simple.

The distinction between assonance and alliteration is not without a degree of fuzziness, but these are useful distinctions. Consider these English phrases:

- “Hey rain came, day saved,” *assonance*
- “Hot pet cut flat net,” *consonance*
- “Bring back black beans,” *consonance, alliteration*
- “How now brown cow” *assonance, rhyme*

Working with actual examples from the Hebrew text we can demonstrate some of these features. In Jeremiah 49:1 notice the dominant *a* vowel sound;

maddû ^{ac} yāraš malkām ʿet-gād wəʿammô bəʿārāyw yāšāb	מְדוּעַ יִרַשׁ מַלְכָּם אֶת־גָּד וְעַמּוֹ בְּעָרָיו יָשָׁב
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This is an example of the simplest kind of assonance.

Job 9:16 demonstrates a repetitive pattern of vowel sequences;

ʿim-qārāʾîṭi wayyaʿānēni lōʾ-ʾaʾāmīn kī-yaʾāzīn qôlī	אִם־קָרָאתִי וַיַּעֲנֵנִי לֹא־אֲמִין כִּי־יֵאָזִין קוֹלִי
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Sometimes assonance operates on the level of word pairs. Jeremiah 1:10 uses the word pair *destroy* and *demolish* lenitosh and lenitosz.

rəʿē ^h hiṣqadîṭîkā hayyôm hazze ^h ʿal-haggôyīm wəʿal-hammamlākôt linṭôš wəlinṭôš ûlahaʾābîd wəlahārôs libnôt wəlinṭô ^{ac}	רָאֵה הַפְּקֹדֶתֶיךָ הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה עַל־הַגּוֹיִם וְעַל־הַמְּמַלְכוֹת לִנְתוֹשׁ וְלִנְתוֹץ וְלְהַאֲבִיד וְלְהָרוֹס לְבָנוֹת וְלִנְטוֹעַ
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Joel 2:15, 16 shows a cluster of sounds that creates a strong cohesion to the command to assemble the people.

tiqʿû šôṗār bəšiyyôn qaddəšû-šôm qirʾû ʿāšārā ^h 16 ʿisṗû-ʿām qaddəšû qāhāl qibšû zəqēnīm ʿisṗû ʿôlālīm wəyōnqê šādāyīm yēšēʾ ḥāṭān mēḥedrô wəḵallā ^h mēḥuppāṭāh	תִּקְעוּ שׁוֹפָר בְּצִיּוֹן קְדְשׁו־צוֹם קְרְאוּ עֲצֵרָה: אֲסַפּוּ־עַם קְדְשׁו־קָהֶל קְבֹצוּ זְקֵנִים אֲסַפּוּ עוֹלָלִים וַיְנַקֵּי שְׂדֵימִם יֵצֵא חֲתָן מִחֲדָרׇוֹ וְכִלְהָ מִחֲפָתָהּ:
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Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast,
Call a sacred assembly;
Gather the people, Sanctify the congregation,
Assemble the elders, Gather the children and nursing babes;
Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber,
And the bride from her dressing room.

This repetition of similar consonants and vowels draws these two verses tightly together. This sense of cohesion makes the summons stand out from the surrounding verses which read much more like prose.

When observing repetitive use of initial consonants, one must not confuse alliteration with acrostic. Acrostic poems may appear alliterative when more than one line is used to represent an individual letter in a sequence as in Psalm 119.

Another use of sound in Hebrew poetry is *rhyme*, even though there are a limited number of endings to Hebrew words (because of the grammatical affixes) rhyme can still be a useful feature to establish cohesion consider Isaiah 33:22:

kî yhw(ʔādōnāy) šōp̄tēnû yhw(ʔādōnāy) məḥōqəqēnû yhw(ʔādōnāy) malkēnû hûʔ yôšīʕēnû	כִּי יְהוָה שֹׁפֵטנוּ יְהוָה מְחַקְקֵנוּ יְהוָה מַלְכֵנוּ הוּא יוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ
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Another phonological device is *onomatopoeia*. The poet uses sounds to invoke some kind of image, to paint an aural picture. For example in Isaiah 17:12 we read:

hōy hāmôn ʕammîm rabbîm kahāmōt̄ yammîm yehēmāyûn ûšəʔôn ləʔummîm kišʔôn māyim kabbîrîm yiššāʔûn	“Woe to the multitude of many people Who make a noise like the roar of the seas, And to the rushing of nations” That make a rushing like the rushing of mighty waters!
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Here the poet has recreated the sound of the murmur of the waves of the sea by choosing to repeat the double consonants m and b with a generous sprinkling of ooh and ohh between them.

Word Play involves structure that rises out of the use of ambiguity. One form of ambiguity is homonymy, different words that are spelled the same (I can open the can). Another variety is Polysemy, which is a single word with different connotations (I saw him come, I saw him off). There is also Figura Etymologica which involves word play based on a single root. In Isaiah 24:16b we read:

bōgđîm bāgāđû ûbēgēđ bōgđîm bāgāđû	“The treacherous dealers have dealt treacherously, Indeed, the treacherous dealers have dealt very treach- erously.”
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The use of the root *BGD* (בגד) which involves the idea of treachery appears in this phrase as noun, participle and finite verb. Together the various forms cooperate to provide an emphatic description of the actions of those who threaten the welfare of God’s people.

Another device based on sounds is called Root Transformation. An example of this is Psalm 107:33.

yāšēm nəhārōt̄ ləmiđbār ûmōšāʕē mayim ləšimmāʔôn	He turns rivers into a wilderness, And the water <i>springs</i> into <i>dry</i> <i>ground</i> ;	וּמִצְאֵי מַיִם לְצִמְאוֹן
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Notice how the imagery of the sentence and the rearrangement of the consonants in the root both reflect this transformation.

Still another form of word play is polysemantic punning, often called *double entendre*. Proverbs 28:23 is an example of the double meaning of the root (הִלֵּק) this root can mean *smooth* in the sense of *flatter* or it can mean *to divide* (hiphil stem). So that the meaning of the verse; “Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with his tongue.” carries the implication that the one who flatters actually distances himself with his smooth words.

Paranomasia is wordplay based on similar sounding words of different meanings, or near homonyms.

lōʔ-ʕāšāʕ ləreʕēhû rāʕāʕ	Nor does evil to his neighbor	לֹא-עָשָׂה לְרֵעֵהוּ רָעָה
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Here the roots for *neighbor* and *evil* are spelled the same but are actually different words. The paranomasia makes for a striking and memorable aphorism. Another example is Amos 8:2 “And He said, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ So I said, ‘A basket of summer fruit.’ Then the LORD said to me: ‘The end has come upon My people Israel; I will not pass by them anymore.’” The word for *summer fruit* is פֶּרִי־קַיִץ while the word for *the end* is קֵץ `this simple play on words is very difficult to represent in any translation.

One of the most compelling reason to be aware of wordplay in the Hebrew text is to avoid exegetical excesses that come from using the lexicon as the primary tool for interpreting a text. Many times we could mistakenly argue for a nuance to a word that is lexically appropriate but unsuitable for the context, if we are not aware that the word in question has been chosen not for its semantic nuance but for its phonological contribution to the *art* of the poem.

Rhythmic Structure

The question of meter and rhythm in Hebrew poetry has always been enigmatic. From the time Karl Budde suggested that there was a *Qinah* meter¹⁶ or a pattern of *falling rhythm*¹⁷ typical of elegiac themes, there have been numerous attempts to explain Hebrew poetry in metrical terms. A simple summary of the variety of approaches to Hebrew meter has been outlined by Stuart as he divides the development into several basic approaches:¹⁸

1 The traditional approach:

This approach counts accents; it is highly dependent on Masoretic accentuation. Bellerman,¹⁹ Saalschütz,²⁰ Ley,²¹ Budde,²² and Sievers²³ are representative of this approach.

2 The semantic parallelism approach:

Lowth,²⁴ Gray²⁵ and Robinson²⁶ are representative of this approach. This system does not count accents, the tone or stress of a word makes little difference here. Instead the colon is analyzed by semantic units, inseparable units of meaning that are counted.

16. Karl Budde, “Das hebräische Klagelied,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 2 (1882): 1-52.

17. A bicolon pattern in which the lines are never divided equally. The first line is always longer than the second.

18. Douglas K. Stuart, *Studies in Early Hebrew Meter*. Harvard Semitic Monograph Series, Harvard Semitic Museum (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1976), 7, 8.

19. J. J. Bellerman, *Versuch über die Metrik der Hebräer* (Tübingen, 1939).

20. J. L. Saalschütz, *Form und Geist der biblisch-hebräischen Poesie* (Königsberg, 1853).

21. J. Ley, *Die Metrischen Formen der Hebräischen Poesie* (Leipzig, 1866).

22. Budde, “Das hebräische Klagelied.”

23. E. Sievers, *Studien zur hebräischen Metrik*, in *Metrische Studien* (Leipzig, 1901).

24. Robert Lowth, *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum* (Lipsiae, 1815).

25. George Buchanan Gray, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry*. Library of Biblical Studies (New York: KTAV, 1972).

26. Theodore H. Robinson, *The Poetry of the Old Testament* (Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1947).

- 3 Alternating meter approach:
Ewald,²⁷ Meier,²⁸ Bickell,²⁹ Hölscher,³⁰ Mowinckel,³¹ and Segert³² fall under this heading. Those who adopt this model read the colon as primarily iambic alterations of stressed and unstressed syllables. The counting of iambic feet lends an aura of precision but ends up describing slightly longer patterns.
- 4 Reconstructive vocalization:
Haupt³³ and Albright³⁴ employed this methodology. This is an offshoot of the traditional approach. Superb linguists, these scholars were not dependent on Masoretic accentuation and vocalization. In analyzing the ancient vocalizations of Hebrew poetry they occupied a transitional position preparing the way the practice of counting syllables.
- 5 Syllabic scansion:
Cross and Freedman³⁵ first suggested the syllable as the basic unit for determining colon length. This required a facility with the archaic vocalization of Hebrew. Freedman limits himself to the analysis of the Masoretic Text while Cross uses versions to supplement and *correct* that text. The quantity of syllables, not stress or vowel value, are the determining feature of Hebrew meter in this system.³⁶

The continuing debate on the nature of Hebrew poetry is often divided over using parallelism or some metrical scheme as the chief criterion in defining Hebrew poetry. There is a history however of balancing the roles of parallelism and meter. Gray argued that `parallelism was only one principle of organization in Hebrew poetry and that rhythmic devices, as difficult as they are to define, “seems to govern much of the present text of the Old Testament.”³⁷ S. Gevirtz gave almost equal status to rhythmic organization and parallelism in his analysis of Hebrew poetry;

. . . parallelism could not be regarded as the sole or even sufficient criterion of Hebrew verse, if only because of the large number of lines which have no parallelism. Since Gray and others have pointed out correctly, these lines often share a common rhythm or meter with others in the same poem which, however, have parallel elements, it then becomes clear that the overriding consideration in such cases is rhythm

27. Heinrich Ewald, *Allgemeines Über die Hebraische Poesie and Über das Psalmenbuch*, in *Die Dichter Des Alten Bundes Erklärt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1839).

28. Ernst Meier, *Die Form der Hebräischen Poesie* (Tübingen, 1853).

29. Gustav Bickell, *Metrices Biblicae regulae exemplis illustrae* (Innsbruck, 1879).

30. G. Hölscher, *Hesekiel* (Giessen, 1924).

31. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*.

32. Segert, “Vorarbeiten Zur Hebräischen Metrik,” *Archiv Orientalni* 21 (1953): 481-510.

33. Paul Haupt, “The Book of Canticles,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* 18-19 (1902): 193-245, 1-32.

34. William F. Albright, “The Earliest Forms of Hebrew Verse,” *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 2 (1922): 69-86.

35. Frank Moore Cross, Jr., and David Noel Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*. Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series (Missoula, Montana: Scolars Press, 1975).

36. A very useful analysis of earlier metrical studies is Cobb's *Criticism of Systems of Hebrew Metre A Criticism of Systems of Hebrew Metre: An Elementary Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford <imprint: Clarendon Press>, 1905).

37. Gray, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry*, 123-24.

rather than parallelism.³⁸

It is useful to remember Freedman's comments, "There is no single solution to the problem of Hebrew meter and poetic structure, but there are many possible descriptions, some more adequate than others, some more pertinent for different sets of questions than other."³⁹ It is enough to admit for this study that rhythmic organization must be considered.

Recognizing in this way the importance of rhythmic structure to Hebrew poetry, it is necessary to employ a methodological device capable of assessing its influence upon the structure of Hebrew poetry in translation. In order to do this it is only necessary to be able to demonstrate the evidence of these features that survives the translation process.

The traditional schools of meter are obviously of little use without a high degree of comfort in Hebrew vocalization. because without a vocalizing the Hebrew text there is no way to count feet, stress or syllables. However, Stuart in citing the benefits of syllabic scansion does make an observation that is pertinent to this study;

It should be noted that a system of meter based on the quantity of syllables per colon does not ignore the possibility of internal feet of various types. It merely gives primary consideration to the variable most neglected in past approaches to Hebrew meter: overall colon length in number of syllables and the patterns discerned therefrom.⁴⁰

One feature of the technique used in the pastoral study must be the ability to assess the relative length of each colon in the Hebrew of the psalms. Being able to describe the overall length of each colon as it stands in relationship to the other cola within a poem can be an adequate means of describing rhythmic patterns. Counting syllables is probably too fine a degree of discrimination for which to aim. Freedman has suggested that "the principal object is to devise a measuring system that is symmetry-sensitive and will describe the metrical pattern as clearly and as simply as the data permit."⁴¹In analyzing the poetic structure of the *Hodayot*, Kittel defined the rhythmic patterns of that late Jewish poetry in terms of "rhythmic balance." She explained her choice of that term for her methodology this way:

This term is chosen rather than meter to avoid misunderstanding; under this term I have included all material relating to the perception (on our part) of rhythmic balance. In some cases, the traditionally discussed meters, based on accentual systems, work in these poems. In almost all of the poems, however, the psalm seems to collapse into metric chaos in one or more sections when these systems are used, so that the poem as a whole defies metrical analysis. As it will be shown in the following chapters, the syllable weight of these "chaotic" sections quite often balances another section of the poem. Combinations of stanzas syllabically balance each other, usually in accord with the poem's structure as determined by other means. Whatever the metric rules were for the author of the *Hodayot* may not be determinable in our present state of knowledge, but it can be shown that rhythmic balancing is present by counting the syllables of the bicola and stanzas. Such syllable counting does not claim any validity as the metric system

38. Gevirtz, *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel*, 37.

39. Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy: Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry*, 7.

40. Stuart, *Studies in Early Hebrew Meter*, 10.

41. Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy: Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry*, 7.

used in this period, but it does offer a way to increase our perception of the poem's balance and organization.⁴²

It is convenient and appropriate to use a similar concept of Rhythmic Balance for pastoral study. In light of what has already been observed about rhythmic patterns, the method utilized in pastoral study should focus on three major features. First it must be able to evaluate individual colon length. Second it must be able to demonstrate the relative lengths of cola in the context of an individual poem. Third it should provide a means of evaluating the weight of sections comprised of groups of cola. If the method can provide information regarding these three parameters it will help the pastor exegete appreciate the contribution that rhythmic balance makes to the structure and meaning of the poem.

There is no quantitative formula that could predict the length of a Hebrew line from the number of syllables in any given translation of the Hebrew text. However we can "increase our perception of the poem's balance and organization," using a method suggested by Freedman; "An equally simple system that also works with large samples is word-counting."⁴³

While not as precise as counting syllables it could provide insight into the individual colon length as well as relative lengths of related cola. It could also be used to provide relative weights for larger units of the poems. This satisfies our three criteria.⁴⁴ In this way patterns of rhythm as revealed in the distribution of various lengths of lines and weighted stanzas in the Hebrew text.

Modern computer study aids have actually made this task much easier. Copying the Hebrew text into a word processor and simply looking at the patterns created by the various line lengths can often provide insight into the intentional organization of the poem.

Lexical and Grammatical Structure

Of all the structural devices that operate at the level of words and sentences, the various relationships that are classified as parallelism form the feature that is most intimately associated with the very nature of Hebrew poetry. A. Berlin describes this intimate association;

Parallelism, then, consists of a network of equivalences and/or contrasts, parallelism calls attention to itself and to the message which it bears. Parallelism embodies the poetic function, and the poetic function heightens the focus on the message.⁴⁵

Once used to describe the simple repetition of terms in adjacent lines the concept of parallelism has expanded to include many patterns of relationships operating across every level of linguistic organization. The variety of "equivalence," "contrast," and "similarities"⁴⁶ that exist go far beyond the traditional boundaries of synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic. Like the quest for understanding the rhythmic structures of Hebrew poetry, the efforts to describe the operations of parallelism are not primarily a structural investigation. It is instead a search for tools to understand the meaning and mind of the poet.

42. Bonnie Pedrotti Kittel, *The Hymns of Qumran Translation and Commentary*. Dissertation Series - Society of Biblical Literature, no. 50 (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Scholars Press, 1981), 30, 31.

43. Freedman, *Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy: Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry*, 8.

44. The three criteria are; first, to be able to estimate individual colon length, second, to be able to evaluate the relative length of related cola in context, third, to be able to compare the relative weights of larger units within the poem.

45. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, 141.

46. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, 138.

Synonymous parallelism builds cohesion by using terms that are similar or equivalent. Consider Psalm 19:1,

2. Notice the use of similarity.

[The heavens] [declare] [the glory of God];
[and the firmament] [shows] [his handywork].
[Day unto day] [utters] [speech],
[and night unto night] [shows] [knowledge]

Most discussions of parallelism use symbolic representation to align the various elements:

A – B – C / A' – B' – C' // A – B – C / A' – B' – C'

Other Parallel Structures

Parallelism with ellipsis, as in Psalm 24:1,

[The earth] [is the LORD's,] [and the fulness thereof];
[the world], [and they that dwell therein]

A – B – C / A' – C'

Antithetical parallelism involves one or more elements that are contrasting. From Psalm 1:6:

[For the LORD] [knows] [the way] [of the righteous]:
[but the way] [of the ungodly] [shall perish.]

A – B – C – D / C' – D' – B'

Synthetic Parallelism: Consider Psalm 95:3;

[For a great] [God] [is the LORD]/
[And a great] [King] [above all gods]

A – B – C / A' – B' – D

The third element (C) in the first colon is the subject, while in the second colon it is the false gods to whom the LORD is being compared. This extension of meaning in the second colon constitutes the synthetic element.

Terraced or Staircase parallelism.

It is primarily a form of synonymous parallelism, elements of the poem are extended or intensified. Look at Psalm 29:1,2:

Give unto the LORD, (O you mighty ones),
Give unto the LORD glory and strength.
Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name;
Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.

This area of study should pay careful attention to the relationships of words and grammatical structures. The repetition of words and structures, the use of synonyms or contrasting terms in adjacent lines are anticipated elements in the analysis of the poetry of the Hebrew Bible. However even a casual reading of many poetic passages raises the question of parallel structures that work above the level of adjacent lines. This larger structure is called external parallelism by van der Meer, he describes this as “parallelism on a higher level.”⁴⁷ The pastoral exegete needs to recognize this higher level of organization. Berlin tried to describe such a broader sense of parallelism:

linguistic equivalences work toward promoting thematic or conceptual equivalences as the text is read. The result is that the elements in the text, which of necessity occur in a linear sequence (contiguity), are then perceived as equivalent or contrasted (similarity).⁴⁸

Although this addresses thematic and conceptual structures, there is still a linear consecutive focus implicit in Berlin's methodology. Van der Meer and de Moor have tried to describe non linear structures. Describing patterns of

47. Willem van der Meer, and Johannes C. de Moor, eds, *The Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplemental Series, no. 74 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press <JSOT Press>, 1988), 60.

48. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, 138.

language they use terms such as “embracing” and “figures of inclusion.” These figures are posited as means to understand the movement of thought. Their stress is on devices which operate beyond the context of adjacent cola. “As a result of the concentric structure we described, the deeper intentions of the poets may escape the modern reader who is accustomed to linear interpretation of texts.”⁴⁹

The structure of many lyrical passages is difficult to describe with a linear interpretation. Often the structure is difficult to determine because the relationship of adjacent elements is hard to describe. The pastor exegete needs to determine if that is because there is no significant structure to discern, or is there a higher structure that slips by unnoticed because we are focused on adjacent and linear forms.

One feature of Hebrew poetry that can provide structure and unity is *chiasm*. Chiasm is a device that was first used to describe features operating on adjacent lines. But it is loosely applied to features that operate at the level of the overall structure of a passage. Chiasm proper is named for the Greek letter Chi [X] because a line connecting the corresponding elements in adjacent lines forms an x pattern. Consider Palm 140:2⁵⁰

[Deliver me] LORD [from evil men]	הִלְצֵנִי יְהוָה מֵאֲדָם רָע
X	X
[From violent men] [preserve me].	מֵאִישׁ חֲמָסִים תִּנְצֵרְנִי

This kind of ABBA arrangement can be observed operating at the level of lines, stanzas, and entire poems. But as the structures become larger, the units of correspondence are connected in a more thematic rather than a lexical manner. Such structures provide cohesion and increase the structural integrity of the poem. These larger structures can be difficult to describe with the traditional vocabulary of parallelism.

Concentric and Linear Structures . An approach to Hebrew poetry that is more global and dynamic in its orientation is suggested by Grossberg, “The predominant formal feature of the poem is its articulation of these discreet units into a series of organized parts that are both distinct from and related to each other and that together form a unified whole.”⁵¹ Borrowing from E. Stankiewicz,⁵² Grossberg describes a continuum of structures that tend either to emphasize the unity of the whole or the individual character of the parts. The elements that serve to unify and contribute to coherence, that serve to establish the integrity of the whole are categorized as “centripetal.” Devices that stress detail and decentralization, that are atomistic and linear or successive in progression are identified as “centrifugal.”

Perhaps the most important contribution that Grossberg’s work makes to the study of the pastoral exegete is to provide a means of describing the structures that provide cohesion and movement. His study provides the vocabulary to describe the nonlinear elements that weld the diverse parts of the whole together. The metaphor of a fabric with a texture and weave is a useful paradigm for describing the tension between unifying and atomizing elements. These elements are major stylistic structures in poetic passages that seem unorganized when we look only for traditional parallelism.

Lexical and grammatical elements are certainly the easiest devices to work with as we try to establish the structure and meaning of various Hebrew poetic passages. There are too many individual devices available to the poet’s ingenuity to exhaustively catalog these elements in this introduction. They are the strings and threads that form the warp and woof of the poem. They will expand and compact the framework mapped by stanzic and rhythmic elements. It is upon this fabric that the texture of the artistry is embellished by the phonological elements.

49. van der Meer, and de Moor, *The Structural Analysis of Biblical and Canaanite Poetry*, 60, 61.

50. In an English translation, the verse would be numbered 1.

51. Daniel Grossberg, *Centripetal and Centrifugal Structures in Biblical Poetry*. The Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series, no. 39 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989), 5.

52. Edward Stankiewicz, “Centripetal and Centrifugal Structures in Poetry,” *Semiotica* 38 (1982): 217-42.

Together establishing meaning and significance in a way that is truly greater than the sum of the individual components,

Thematic Structure

Form criticism and the traditional *Gattungen* have exerted a great influence on the perception of poetic genres in the Psalms. These types often enhance our understanding of the thematic development of the biblical Psalms. Yet their usefulness in dealing with the broader poetic corpus is negligible. Form criticism and the forms of the traditional *Gattungen* are useful to a degree in the Psalter, but even there we find considerable mixing of types within these poems. There is little hope of recovering the *Sitz im Leben* by a form-critical approach to the psalms. Unless we are willing to speculate about circumstances and rituals that are unattested in the historical literature. Because of this, other techniques to understand the thematic development become important. As a supplement to a form-critical approach to the content of the Psalms, a careful attention to the imagery of the Psalms and the broader corpus is useful.

In a thorough examination of the Odes of Solomon, Franzmann noted that, there exists a close relationship between form and imagery: “Ideally a study of form should go hand in hand with a thoroughgoing analysis of the imagery, such studies being complementary and in the nature of a mutual critique/control.”⁵³ This is equally important for biblical poetry because the conclusions of a form-critical analysis are so tentative. The manipulation of themes within the poetic context deserve special attention. These thematic structures are best examined by observing the creative recycling of biblical imagery. Gevirtz has identified this device, the creative reuse of familiar images, as an important feature of the art of Hebrew poetry:

Of none is this more true, perhaps, than the ancients, for whom, it would appear, not the strikingly original but the meaningful manipulation of the long familiar constituted the apex of poetic technique . . . So too the creativity of the Hebrew poet will not be found by the application of any modern requirement for “originality.” Rather it is in the reworking of old themes in the traditional manner, to reproduce familiar actions uniquely and poetically significant that the poet’s genius is to be sought.⁵⁴

It follows then that to understand the flow of thought in a given passage one must understand the present imagery and its relationship to the rich heritage of biblical history and literature. To accomplish this, careful attention should be paid to the possible sources of the images and word patterns that are under examination.

Method of Thematic Inquiry. How does the pastoral exegete explore thematic structures. Since imagery is constructed from words, pairs and clusters of words and even whole phrases can connect one passage to another. Word pictures can create and reenforce allusions and invoke a prior milieu. Terminology, and technical words can build a context. Attention of this kind, to the imagery created by the use of words and phrases that are invested with layers⁵⁵ of connotation can help establish the meaning and significance of a psalm. This thematic orientation can play an important role in establishing the movement of thought within the poem. While there are many different kinds of movement or thematic developments they all share the role of providing a conceptual structure. This structural device which is built up out of the interplay of words and lines, provides a point of view, a frame of reference, in

53. Majella Franzmann, *The Odes of Solomon: An Analysis of the Poetical Structure and Form*. Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus (Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1991), 13.

54. Stanley Gevirtz, *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel*. The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization, no. 32 (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 4.

55. The semantic spread of meaning for words that are used in this way can invoke multiple images. It is important to look for those uses of words that occur in clusters of significance. Multiple words from a given context or verbatim phrases are more likely to be evidence of intentional allusion.

which the constituent elements, the words and lines are easier to interpret. Thematic enquiry is not independent of the other structural devices nor is it more important, but it does present a convenient background to understand them.

The analysis of each psalm or fragment of poetry will not necessarily involve a thematic investigation. The categories of the traditional *Gattungen* may be noticed. Primarily, however, the movement of ideas as they are propelled by the emotions and energy of images drawn from the Torah and Prophets will be the most significant tool for this aspect of the analysis. The goal of this thematic investigation is not to catalog themes, but rather to observe the structural influence these themes exert on each poem.

Summary

The analysis of Hebrew poetry is not a science, yet there are techniques to appreciate the artistry and understand the meaning of poetry, which can be learned. The study of Hebrew poetry is much more than literary analysis. To understand the interplay of sounds and words, to trace the supporting fabric of rhythmic balance and stanzic structure, to discern the cohesion and linear movement of the lexical and grammatical devices, all blended together to invoke and transform ancient themes, is the job of the pastoral exegete. But the purpose of all of this literary investigation is not just to observe and catalog devices. Poetic analysis is used to establish meaning and to understand the mind of the poet.

15
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