

Insights from Old Testament Poetry

1. Why God reveals truth in poetry.

- Personal copies of the scripture were rare and literacy was not nearly universal, so people had to rely on what they could recall
- Poetry is easy to remember “Was the night before Christmas ...”
- Poetry is suitable for children (Dr. Seuss)
- Poetry presents truth in creative and dramatic ways (Canterbury Tales)
- Poetry offers dramatic and memorable figures of speech
- Poetry can be set to music
- Understanding poetry requires reflection and thought

2. Distinctives of Hebrew poetry

- Not parallel sounds as in English poetry
- English poetry focuses on the sounds of the words
- Hebrew poetry focuses on the meaning of the words
- In Hebrew poetry you find the rhythm in parallel or contrasting meanings
- In Hebrew poetry you do not have to sacrifice meaning for sound

Common Types of Old Testament Poetry

1. Identical Parallelism = one line echoes the truth of another line

[We can restate the ideas below. The restatement may not be as memorable as the original, but should convey the essential truth.]

Isaiah 1:3 “The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.”

Isaiah 5:24 “Therefore as tongues of fire lick up straw and as dry grass sinks down in the flames, so their roots will decay and their flowers blow away like dust.”

Psalms 51:2 “Was away all my iniquity and cleanse me from sin.”

Psalms 51:7 “Cleans me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me and I will be whiter than snow.”

Psalms 33:2 “Praise the Lord with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.”

Hosea 2:2 “Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband. Let her remove the adulterous look from her face and the unfaithfulness from between her breasts.”

Isaiah 54:2 “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.”

2. Contrasting Parallelism = one line gives an idea that contrasts with another line

Proverbs 17:1 “Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting with strife.”

Proverbs 15:1 “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up

anger.”

Proverbs 10 [most verses]

Proverbs 15:29 “The Lord is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous.”

3. Complementary Parallelism = the second line adds a complementary thought to the first line

Psalms 9:10 “Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, Lord have never forsaken those who seek you” [Gives a reason]

Isaiah 56:12 “Come,” each one cries, “let me get wine! Let us drink our fill of beer! And tomorrow will be like today, or even far better” [Gives a reason]

Isaiah 12:5 “Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.”

4. Climactic Parallelism = the second line repeats part of the first, adding something new

Psalms 34:4 “I sought the Lord, and he answered me, he delivered me from all my fears.

Jeremiah 23:12 “Therefore their path will become slippery; they will be banished to darkness and there they will fall. I will bring disaster on them in the year they are punished,” declares the Lord.

Job 15:31 “Let him not deceive himself by trusting in what is worthless, for he will get nothing in return.”

Nahum 3:14 “Draw water for the siege, strengthen your defenses! Work the clay, tread the mortar, repair the brickwork!”

Zephaniah 3:17 “The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”

Song of Songs 8:6 “Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame.”

Note the strong figurative language in the following verse:

Job 16:12-13 “All was well with me, but he shattered me; he seized me by the neck and crushed me. He has made me his target; his archers surround me. Without pity, he pierces my kidneys and spills my gall on the ground.”

5. Emblematic Parallelism = one line is literal and the other line is figurative.

Psalms 42:1 “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.”

Proverbs 11:22 “Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion.”

Proverbs 27:8 “Like a bird that strays from its nest is a man who strays from his home.”