



DIGGING DEEPER

Introduction to the Book of Psalms

Lesson 5: The Two Key Elements of Hebrew Poetry

The difference between English and Hebrew poetry.

- The focus of English poetry is on rhyme and meter. While rhyming is not absent in Hebrew poetry we can't see it because it only exists in the original language. The same is true for meter.
- The biggest difference between Hebrew and English poetry is that Hebrew poetry relies primarily on parallelism and figures of speech to emphasize meaning.

Parallelism. Hebrew poetry repeats and rearranges thoughts rather than sounds. The five most common types of parallelism include synonymous, antithetical, synthetic, climactic, and emblematic.

- *Synonymous*--the thought of the first line is basically repeated in different words in the second line (examples 2:4; 3:1; 7:17).

“He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision” *Psalms* 2:4 (ESV).

- *Antithetical*--the thought of the first line is emphasized by a contrasting thought in the second line (examples 1:6; 34:10). They are often identified with “but.”

“The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing” *Psalms* 34:10 (ESV).

- *Synthetic*--the second line explains or further develops the idea of the first line (examples 1:3; 95:3).

“For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods” *Psalm 95:3 (ESV)*.

- *Climactic*--The second line repeats with the exception of the last terms (example 29:1).

“Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength” *Psalm 29:1 (ESV)*.

- *Emblematic*--One line conveys the main point, the second line illuminates it by an image (examples 42:1; 23:1).

“As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God” *Psalm 42:1 (ESV)*.

Figures of Speech. Hebrew poetry uses vivid images, similes, metaphors, and other rhetorical devices to communicate thoughts and feelings. The ten most common include:

- *Simile*: A simile is a comparison between two things that resemble each other in some way (examples. Ps. 1:3-4; 5:12; 17:8; 131:2). Often uses the word “like.”

“He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away” *Psalm 1:3-4 (ESV)*.

- *Metaphor*: This is a comparison in which one thing is likened to another without the use of a word of comparison as in “like” or “as” (examples 84:11; 91:4).

“He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler” *Psalm 91:4 (ESV)*.

- *Implication*: This occurs when there is only an implied comparison between two things in which the name of one thing is used in place of the other (example 22:16).

“For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet” *Psalm 22:16 (ESV)*.

- *Hyperbole*: This is the use of exaggeration to stress a point (examples 6:6; 78:27; 107:26).

“I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping” *Psalms 6:6 (ESV)*.

- *Paronomasia*: This refers to the use or repetition of words that are similar in sound, but have different meaning (example 22:16).

This can only be observed by those who can read the original Hebrew text. For example, Psalm 96:5 reads, “For all the gods (elohe) of the nations are idols (elilim).

- *Pleonasm*: This involves the use of redundancy for the sake of emphasis. This may occur with the use of words or sentences.

“May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble! May the name of the God of Jacob protect you!” *Psalms 20:1 (ESV)*.

Here “name” appears to be redundant. It has more emphasis than if only the term “God” had been used.

- *Rhetorical question*: The use of a question to confirm or deny a fact (examples 35:10; 56:8; 106:2).

“All my bones shall say, “O LORD, who is like you, delivering the poor from him who is too strong for him, the poor and needy from him who robs him?” *Psalms 35:10 (ESV)*.

- *Metonymy*: This occurs where one noun is used in place of another because of some relationship or type of resemblance that different objects might bear to one another (Ps. 5:9; 18:2; 57:9; 73:9).

“For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue” *Psalms 5:9 (ESV)*.

- *Anthropomorphism*: The assigning of some part of the human anatomy to God’s Person (examples 10:11, 14; 11:4; 31:2).

“He says in his heart, ‘God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it’” *Psalms 10:11 (ESV)*.

- *Zoomorphism*: The assigning of some part of an animal to God’s Person to convey certain truths about God (examples Ps. 17:8; 91:4).

“Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings” *Psalms 17:8 (ESV)*.

Source: <https://bible.org/seriespage/5-poetical-books>