

The Art of Biblical Poetry³¹

I. The Importance of Understanding Poetry

A. Understanding is required to know God

The Scriptures contain many different types of literature - narrative, poetry, prophecy, law, wisdom, apocalyptic - each of which has its own style and characteristics. To fully understand the author's meaning and thus to know God, we must begin by understanding how different types of literature work. As Robert Lowth comments, "Nothing can be of greater avail to the proper understanding of any writer, than a previous understanding of his general character, and the peculiarities of his style and manner of his writing."³²

B. The extent of poetry in the Hebrew Scriptures

More than a third of the Hebrew Scriptures contain lines of poetry. Poetry is the main vehicle for expressing prayer (Psalms), wisdom (Proverbs), love (Song of Songs), complaint (Job), hymns and prophecy. This makes it very important that we understand poetry. To grasp their message with clarity it is imperative we understand the nature of their poetry. To know "what" a text means, we first need to know "how" it speaks.

II. Four Characteristics of Hebrew Poetry

A. Parallelism

By far the most dominant characteristic of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. Unlike English poetry where we rhyme sounds, the Hebrews rhymed thoughts. That is, each statement was followed by a restatement that was served as an echo of the first.

STATEMENT / RELATED STATEMENT

The related statement is not a mere repetition of the first statement, but usually heightens it. Thus it is both *linked* to the first statement and *differentiated* from it.

"Clear the way in the wilderness for the LORD
Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God." (Isa 40:3)

Here we find each element in the first line repeated in the second line; but the second line gives greater detail and progress (*clear the way* → *make smooth a highway*) than the first line.

³¹ The following material is a condensed outline taken from a lecture from Dr. Bruce K. Waltke on this subject supplemented with material from Robert Alter's, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

³² Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (London: Tomas Tegg, 1839).

B. Terse expression

One goal of poetry is to say much using an economy of words. This makes poetry compact and dense with emotion. As Fokkelman suggests, “What a poet undertakes does have a lot to do with creating ‘density.’ Poetry is the most compact and concentrated form of speech possible. By making the most of his or her linguistic tools, the poet creates an immense richness of meaning, and this richness becomes available if we as readers know how to handle the density: how we can cautiously tackle complexity, probe the various layers one by one and unfold them. The poet creates this abundance of meanings by visiting all the nooks and crannies of the language, and by being an expert at it.”³³

In biblical poetry terseness is achieved within the line by commonly omitting the definite article, the accusative (or object) marker and the relative pronoun (אשר “that”/“which,” etc.), and occasionally by gapping whole words or phrases. Terseness between the lines is achieved by the omission of conjunctions and particle such as “and” or “therefore.”³⁴

Verbs will sometimes do double duty though not repeated in each line (*gapping*).

We hope for light, but behold, darkness;
for brightness, but we walk in gloom. (Isa 59:9)

Read with gapping filled in:

We hope for light, but behold, (*we walk in*) darkness;
(*We hope*) For brightness, but (*behold*) we walk in gloom. (Isa 59:9)
Isa 59:9

Because of their semantic density, poems are often hard to understand. We as readers would therefore do well to exercise some patience. We need not set ourselves the goal of understanding everything in a single sitting, or even getting ‘the message.’ It is better still if we manage rid ourselves of the modern desire for instant satisfaction. The poem suffers if we focus our reading on determining one main point, preferably within a short time. We will, however, reap its rewards if we manage to discard the image we have formed of the text after a few reading sessions and start afresh, looking for new meanings; there will certainly appear, in proportion to our openness and alertness to surprises.³⁵

C. Imagery – heightened style

“In addition to being evocative, imagery is another form of compactness, for it enables the author to communicate his message in fewer words.”³⁶ Fokkelman writes, “Poetry is the most ingenious form of verbal expression. Furthermore, the poet’s virtuosity permeates every level of the text, from sounds and syllables to strophes and even high textual units; there is a box of tricks for every layer.”³⁷ Poetry uses a more restricted form of speech than prose and is dominated by figures of speech that evoke strong feeling and emotion. Such a heightened style elevates the substance of the material to makes “*sublime*.” Robert Lowth describes poetry as the language of the passions.

³³ Jan Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry* (Leiden: John Knox Press, 2001), 15.

³⁴ B. K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs 1-15* (NICOT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 38.

³⁵ Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 50.

³⁶ Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 39.

³⁷ Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, vii.

The word *sublimity* [is]...that force of composition, whatever it be, which strikes and overpowers the mind, which excites the passions, and which expresses ideas at once with perspicuity and elevation...The language of reason is cool, temperate, rather humble than elevated, well arranged and perspicuous, with an evident care and anxiety lest any thing should escape which might appear perplexed or obscure. The language of the passions is totally different; the conceptions burst out in a turbid stream, expressive in a manner of the internal conflict; the more vehement break out in hasty confusion; they catch (without search or study) whatever is impetuous, vivid or energetic. In a word, reason speaks literally, the passions poetically.³⁸

Waltke gives further expression to this concept.

The prophets' lofty ethical oracles are elegant and sublime, forcible and ornamented, imaginative and arresting, attractive and alluring; they combine punch with clarity; energy with copiousness, and dignity with variety. In sentiments, one feels uncommon elevation and majesty; in imagery, uncommon taste and diversity; in language, uncommon beauty and energy.³⁹

Because poetry deals with passions and the "*sublime*," one finds in Hebrew poetry unusual syntax, ellipses, and shifts in grammatical person and tenses a common occurrence.

D. METER AND RHYTHM: THE DEBATE REVISITED – Fokkelman

Alter notes how later aspects of poetry were often imposed on Hebrew poetry.

Some analysts, with an eye to the number of stresses in a *verset* (usually one half a verse), have sought to detect a system of 'meters' in biblical poetry. It is true in many poems a particular count of stresses in each of the matched *verset* tends to predominate, the most common combinations being 3:3 and 3:2, but there is little evidence that the counting of stresses was actually observed as a governing norm for a poem, in the way a Greek or Roman poet watched his iambs or hexameters through a poem, and so the term meter should probably be abandoned for biblical verse.⁴⁰

Fokkelman reopened the debate by counting syllables. "Even though meter has gone, there is still a powerful rhythm, which is even stronger in Hebrew and is not denied even by scholars who have no time for metrics." In counting every syllable of the psalms, Fokkelman observed that the poets worked within well-defined units. "Some 65 percent of the cola in the book of Psalms are seven, eight, or nine syllables long. Recent investigations have shown that the poets themselves counted their syllables, and often used the syllable totals to make patterns in their verse and strophes."⁴¹

³⁸ James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 279-80.

³⁹ Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 816.

⁴⁰ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 9.

⁴¹ Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 23-24.

Fokkelman defines the Hebrew poem as follows:

A poem is the result of (on the one hand) an artistic handling of language, style and structure, and (on the other hand) applying prescribed proportions to all levels of the text, so that a controlled combination of language and number is created...[but note, most importantly]...Where poetry is concerned, literary sensitivity and an open mind are more valuable than constructing definitions. Love and concentrated attention are far superior to theories.⁴²

III. HEBREW PARALLELISM

A. A NEW UNDERSTANDING

In the past scholars viewed parallelism as simply line *B* restates line *A* without looking for any new emphasis or differentiation in line *B*. Because of this, much of the sharpness and beauty of the poetry was lost and synonymity was often imposed where it did not exist (Kugel).

An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master's manger,
Israel does not know, my people do not understand. (Isa 1:3)

ידע שור קנהו / וחמור אבום בעליו //
ישראל לא ידע / עמי לא התבנן //

If biblical parallelism were merely a repetition, the meaning of this verse would be: an ox knows its owner, and an ass its master's trough; Israel does not know, my people does not understand. Any reader would, of course, be aware that some sort of unflattering comparison is being made. But if, in place of mere restatement, one allows *B* some independent existence, this series of clauses presents itself as a kind of progression. How is the first clause different from the second? The same verb, 'know, obey,' (obey = 'is attendant to') governs both halves. The animal of the first was hardly considered the most praiseworthy of beasts: nevertheless 'ox' is in several significant respects considered superior to its frequent pair, 'ass.' More important, parallel to the 'owner' of the first is 'master's trough' in the second. The cumulative effect of these differences is the establishment of a climactic descent: 'An ox knows its owner, and even an ass' – who may not be very obedient or attentive – at least knows where to stand to be fed, i.e., know 'his master's trough' but Israel does not know,' – or obey, even this much; in fact – 'my people does not understand at all.'⁴³

B. TYPES OF DIFFERENTIATION

1. Intensification⁴⁴

a. INTENSIFYING VERBS: *flow*—> *gushed*

He made the water *flow* out of the rock for them
He split the rock and the water *gushed* out. (Isa 48:21)

b. INTENSIFYING NOUNS: *light*—> *brightness*: *darkness*—> *gloom*

We hope for *light*, but behold, *darkness*;
for *brightness*, but we walk in *gloom*. (Isa 59:9)

⁴² Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 35.

⁴³ Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 9.

⁴⁴ The following examples are from Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 11ff.

c. INTENSIFYING NUMBERS: *one*—>*two: a thousand*—>*ten thousand*

How could *one* chase *a thousand*,
And *two* put to flight *ten thousand*? (Deut 32:30)

2. Focusing: The second line narrows the meaning of the first line

a. FOCUSED GEOGRAPHY: *cities of Judea*—>*streets of Jerusalem*

b. FOCUSED MEANING: *sound of gladness and joy*—>*sound of the bridegroom and bride*

I shall put an end *in the cities of Judea*
and *in the streets of Jerusalem*
to the *sound of gladness and joy*,
to the *sound of bridegroom and bride*. (Jer 7:34)

c. DYNAMIC HEIGHTENING⁴⁵

The LORD *detests* all the proud of heart,
Be sure of this: they will not go *unpunished*. (Prov 16:5)

Note: Both lines pertain to the Lord's relationship to the proud, but the focus is from his attitude ("*detests*"), to his action ("*punishes*").

Through *love and faithfulness* sin is atoned for;
Through *fear of the LORD* a man avoids evil. (Prov 16:6)

Note: Both lines deal with alleviating sin by spiritual virtues. Line A pertains to removing *past* sin; Line B pertains to avoiding *future* sins.

d. NUMERICAL PROVERBS

There are *six* things which the LORD hates,
yes, *seven* which are an abomination to him:
Haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
and hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked plans,
feet that run rapidly to evil,
a false witness *who* utters lies,
and one who spreads strife among brothers. (Prov 6:16-19)

In Hebrew poetry one moves up from the lower number in the first line (6) to a higher number (7) in the second line to convey the sense of "**how much more so**" in connection with the second, the real number. "If you introduce a number in the first verset, you have to go up in the second verset, either by adding one to the number or by moving to a decimal multiple of the first number or a decimal multiple plus the number itself."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ The following examples are from Bruce Waltke's *Lecture Notes on Hebrew Poetry*.

⁴⁶ Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 11.

3. **Specification:** The second line gives a more *concrete* instance of the first line.

She *weeps bitterly* in the night,
And her *tears* are on her *cheeks*. (Lam 1:2)

4. Dramatization

The second line repeats the first with *metaphors* to dramatize the meaning.

a. NOUN METAPHOR: *wine*—>*blood of grapes*

He washes his garments in *wine*,
and his robes in the *blood of grapes*. (Gen 49:11)

b. ADJECTIVE METAPHOR: *at ease* —> *undisturbed on his lees*

Moab has been *at ease* since his you;
undisturbed on his lees, Jer 48:11

5. Sequential or consequential

a. SEQUENTIAL: narrative vignettes

The *righteous man* is *rescued* from trouble,
And the *wicked* enters in his place. (Prov 11:8)

Note: The two sequenced images, then, that the line evokes are of the good man, first seemingly pinned down and then popped out of the tight squeeze into which he has fallen, and the wicked man slipped into his place.

b. CONSEQUENTIAL

Commit to the LORD whatever you do,
and your plans will *succeed*. (Prov 16:3)

When a man's ways are *pleasing* to the LORD,
he makes even his enemies live a *peace* with him. (Prov 16:7)

6. Complementary: Antithetical

a. Often WITH FOCUSING OR HEIGHTENING: *ways*—>*motives*; *seem*—>*weigh*

All a man's *ways* seem *innocent* to him,
but *motives* are *weighed* by the LORD. (Prov 16:2)

Note: Both God and man make judgments about man's man, but in line A, man is deceived about himself, since he looks at outward appearance. In line B, God is not deceived, for he looks deep into the heart.

b. OFTEN WITH CONSEQUENTIAL

To *man* belong the plans of the *heart*,
But from the *LORD* comes the reply of the *tongue*. (Prov 16:1)

Note: The final outcome of one's reflections and purposes, (as in finding the apt word for the occasion), is a gift from God so that he has the last word (see also Prov 16:9,33; 19:21; 20:24; 21:30, 31).

IV. FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS REGARDING THIS NEW UNDERSTANDING

A. HEBREW LITERARY STRUCTURE: The Chant

Israel Yeivin, in his *Introduction to the Tiberian Massorah* shows how the Hebrew text was divided into distinct halves by a system of accentuation. In the Hebrew text each word was given an accent (either conjunctive = run on; or disjunctive = stop). This added dignity, solemnity, and beauty to the reading of the text. The conjunctive accents usually divided a line into half points.

1. First Division: A | B

A I will destroy the cities of your land,
B and tear down all your strongholds. (Mic 5:10)

2. Second Division: A1 / A2 | B1 / B2

A1 Hear, O peoples all of you,
A2 Make yourself attentive, O earth and all that is in it;
B1 For the Lord GOD will become a witness against you,
B2 The Lord from his Holy Temple. (Mic 1:2)

3. Third Division: A1/ A2 | B1A : B1B / B2A : B2B

A1 All this for the rebellion of Jacob,
A2 And for the sins of the house of Israel.
B1a What is the rebellion of Jacob?
B1b Is it not Samaria?
B2a What is the high place of Judah?
B2b Is it not Jerusalem? (Micah 1:5)

Over time these accents (indicating pauses) became musical prescriptions and eventually developed into three different very complex systems – the Palestinian, Babylonian and Tiberian. The Tiberian, perfected by the Massoretes of Tiberias, was the most complex and the one currently in use. The musical diversity can often blur the parallelism of the text. Within the parallelistic line, the generally binary structure, which under a loose and improvised chant had been obvious (the only melodically emphasized pauses falling at the middle and end of each line) was now lost in a series of elaborations at minor pauses...Moreover, there was a corresponding psychological effect, for now the written signs for the main pause—the medial and the final—were but two among many. Every verse came with its own special series of signs, a genetic code of different counters attached to each word or phrase. Their communality of structure was obscured on the page and in the memory by the very obvious diversity.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 113-14.

C. THE NEW TESTAMENT USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

When the New Testament authors quote the Old Testament poetic material as being fulfilled, they reveal that they did not treat the repetition as synonymous but **differentiated** between line *A* and line *B*.

1. The Triumphal Entry

Say to the daughter of Zion,
"Behold your King is coming to you,
Gentle, and mounted upon a *donkey*,
even upon a *colt*, the foal of a beast of burden." (Zech 9:9)

And the disciples went and did just as Jesus had directed them, and brought the *donkey and the colt*, and laid on them their garments; on which he sat. (Matt 21:6,7)

2. The Persecution of the Messiah

Why did the *nations* rage,
and the *peoples* devise futile things?
The *kings* of the earth took their stand,
and the *rulers* were gathered together,
against the LORD, and
against His Anointed One." (Ps 2:2)

"For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou did anoint, both Herod (*king*) and Pontius Pilate (*ruler*), along with the Gentiles (*nations*) and the peoples of Israel (*peoples*)." (Acts 4:27)

V. THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE HEBREW POETS

Fokkelman outlines the following building blocks to the Hebrew poem:⁴⁸

levels in the poem	step no.
the poem as a whole	9
sections	8
stanza (usually 2 or 3 strophes)	7
strophes (" <i>turn</i> "- rhetorical or argumentative design)	6
verse (semantics or meaning)	5
versets (or cola – one poetic line)	4
words	3
syllables	2
sounds	1

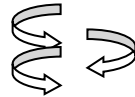
⁴⁸ Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 30.

A. Cola and Verses

The poet sets out to write a verse. There is more than 95 percent chance that it will be bi- or tri-partite. To fill that space, and to remain within the poet's own cultural environment and its literary rules, the poet thankfully exploits parallelism as a means to balance the members of the verse and control the subject matter. The poet creates *equivalence* by introducing "parallelism of members."⁴⁹

In the desert prepare | the way of Yahweh, A cola
make straight in the desert | a highway for our God B cola

The B-colon can do all sorts of things with the statement, contribution, or information of the A-colon: expand it, intensify it, underline it, embellish it...The first thing a parallel construction does is to introduce a form of repetition. As a result, the reader immediately notices or recognizes a correspondence between the cola...The similarity becomes the background against which disparity announces itself: the folds of difference in the half-verses...The dynamics and surprises of parallelism may also be expressed in a metaphor. This way of constructing verses is like a pair of binoculars. We look through two cylinders, with both eyes, so that we have the advantage of seeing depth...Parallelism does something comparable: this shaping device creates two subtly different images on one line (the full poetic line). As this is done with the tools of language, we have every opportunity to consider both pictures separately and let them sink in. This is where metaphor ceases to be appropriate: the point of the similarity between A and B is their very difference! Only those who look closely and have patience will discover and savor the role played by dissimilarity, its surprises, and its richness of meaning.⁵⁰



B. The Strophe - "the turn"⁵¹

The word "strophe" comes from Greek and means "turn" or "twist." Biblical poetry is characterized by rapid shifts and changes. Tone, verb tense, grammatical person, genre, subject material, and mood all constantly vary, and all these changes are reflected in the structure of the strophe.

What makes a strophe a strophe? The strophe has internal as well as external **cohesion**. This cohesion may come about in various ways. The strophe may...

- constitute one syntactic unit, for instance, one compound sentence or a sentence extended in a different way,
- formulate or explain one thought,
- present its cola as a clear series,
- be an embedded speech, for instance a quotation,
- present or work out a metaphor or simile,
- demarcate itself by means of *inclusio* (a frame that opens and closes a unit).

⁴⁹ Fokkerman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 30-31.

⁵⁰ Fokkerman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 78-79.

⁵¹ The material on "strophe" is adapted from Fokkerman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 87-115.

Example: **Psalm 13** consists of three strophes: (Psalm 13 JPS)

13:2a	How long, Yahweh; will You ignore me forever?	}	strophe 1
b	How long will You hide Your face from me?		
3a	How long will I have cares on my mind,		
b	grief in my heart all day?	}	strophe 2
c	How long will my enemy have the upper hand?		
4a	Look at me, answer me, Yahweh!		
b	My God, restore the luster to my eyes,	}	strophe 3
c	lest I sleep the sleep of death,		
5a	lest my enemy say, "I have overcome him,"		
b	lest my foes exult when I totter.	}	strophe 3
6a	But I trust in your faithfulness,		
b	my heart will exult in Your deliverance.		
c	I will sing to the Yahweh, for He has been good to me.		

Cohesion in the first strophe is found in the chain of questions "how long" four times. Cohesion in the second strophe is found in the contrast of the positive (4ab) with the negative (4c-5b). The positively worded verse (4ab) contains two commands and two vocatives for God in a neat chiasm, after which a tri-colon occurs, fending off negative events. The transition to the first person and a positive outcomes mark off v. 6 as the third strophe.

A strophe is never alone, but always works together with its colleagues, the textual units surrounding it. The strophe always functions in relation to the other strophes, which offers new possibilities to the "composer," the poet who assembles them. The poet marks the differences between strophes by always introducing new twists. Here too, the poet can employ all sorts of linguistic, stylistic, and structural devices to make the reader experience transitions. We enter a new strophe is there is a change in...

- the characters who populate the unit;
- verb tense;
- the mood of the sentences (do they report or describe?; are they wishes or commands?);
- grammatical person;
- language: from verbal (reporting or desiring action) to nominal (static, describing enduring characteristics) language;
- subject matter;
- tone or genre.

Furthermore, the boundary positions in the strophe are sensitive: especially the beginning may be clearly marked, for instance, by a striking conjunctions as "Therefore," a form of address (the vocative, in the Psalms often "o Yahweh" or "My god!"), or an imperative such as "Hear me" or "Save me!"

C. Stanzas

Stanzas most often consist of two or three strophe, while in extreme cases some may consist of one, four, or five strophes. These larger building blocks work together to form cohesion for the entire poem.

D. The Poem as a Whole

What is it that makes a text into a whole, and how does the poet control this? How does the poem become a well-rounded whole? There are many devices the Hebrew poets use that show they have taken great care to give meticulous proportion to the shape of the entire poem. Some examples include:

- the beginning and end are identical, this is rare (Psalm 8),
- using a frame that offers a slight variation on the idea of identical beginning and end (Psa 18; 103),
- refrains (2 Sam 1; Pss 42-43; 46, 49, 56, 57, 67 and 99),
- concentric design of seven strophes in an A B C X C B A design (Ps 28).

VI. QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED OF BIBLICAL POETRY⁵²

1. Who is speaking, an “I” or a “we”? Can we picture this lyrical subject? Does it change in the course of the poem?
2. Who is the lyrical subject addressing? Is the addressee visible in the text, or can we put a face to him/her? Does the addressee change? Do we encounter apostrophe?
3. Which verb tenses are used? Are the various tenses (present, past, future) distributed over the strophes?
4. Which moods are used besides the indicative? Wishes, commands, exclamations?
5. Are verbs used as actions, or descriptions or qualities?
6. How do space and time function in the lyrical world?
7. Can a diagram be drawn of the relations between the lyrical characters—for instance, a triangle such as me–God–enemy?
8. Parallelism:
 - a. How much parallelism (both semantic and morphological) is there between half-verses? Ask yourself regularly if the “A, what’s more, B” rule applies.
 - b. How much parallelism exists between the verses?
 - c. How much parallelism exists between the strophes?
9. Try to find the demarcation of strophes and stanzas. What devices does the poet use to create those units? Are there any boundary markers?
10. Look for parts of speech as simile, metaphor, metonymy,⁵³ synecdoche,⁵⁴ and symbols.

⁵² Adapted from Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 208-209.

⁵³ *Metonymy* – “a figure of speech based on a shift in meaning: something is stated, but an adjacent or contiguous concept or entity is meant, as when “the Crown” is used to refer to the monarch.” Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 227.

11. How are the verses related in regard to meaning?
12. How are the strophes related? Are they steps in a line of argument?
13. How does the theme develop? Is a specific line of thought followed?
14. What are the keywords?
15. Be sensitive to contrasts, oppositions, and transitions.
16. Try to make the most of various forms of repetition by listening for it and testing the function of variation-in-repetition.

⁵⁴ Synecdoche – “a figure of speech in which the whole is substituted for a part, or a part for the whole.” Fokkeman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 228.

Glossary of Poetic Devices⁵⁵

acrostic poem

Wilson defines an acrostic poem as “one in which lines are so arranged or created that the initial letters of successive lines produce a recognizable pattern...The initial letters of successive lines consistently follow the order of the Hebrew alphabet’s twenty-two characters, beginning with א *aleph*, ב *bet*, ג *gimel*, ד *dalet*, ...and continuing in order to completion with ש *sin* and ט *taw*. Thus Hebrew acrostics will usually demonstrate twenty-two lines or (in the case of more than one line for each letter) multiples of twenty-two lines. In some cases a twenty-third line beginning with the letter *pe* is added at the end of an acrostic psalm (see Pss 25; 34), so that the first line begins with א *aleph*, the middle with ל *lamed*, and the final line with פ *pe*. As a result, the combination of these letters –*aleph* אָלָפ – spells out the name of the initial alphabetic character as well as the Hebrew verb ‘to train,’ since on purpose of the alphabetic acrostic might be as a mnemonic aid to learning. There are in the Hebrew Psalter eight acrostic poems (9-10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; 145).”⁵⁶

alliteration

words using the same consonants (Ps 63:1)

anaphora

identical openings of verses or higher-level textual units

“Anaphora...shifts the center of attention from the repeated element to the material that is introduced by the repetition, at once inviting us to see all the new utterances as locked into the same structure of assertion and to look for strong differences or elements of development in the new material.”⁵⁷

apostrophe

the poet addresses a person or object directly; in the Psalms often “O *Yahweh!*”

assonance

words using the same vowels

bicolon

a biparte verse (2 poetic lines)

caesura

interruption of the poetic line, often around the middle, which occurs in much poetry, usually indicated by a slash (/) by exegetes

chiasm

arrangement of four elements according to an a b / b' a' pattern; a form of mirroring, named after the Greek letter chi, which looks like an X

⁵⁵ The glossary of terms is taken and adapted from Fokkelman’s *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 225-228 and expanded with explanations from Bruce K. Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15* (NICOT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms Volume 1* (TNAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002); and Frances Mays, *The Discovery of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, 2001).

⁵⁶ Wilson, *Psalms*, 55.

⁵⁷ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 64.

colon

verset; often a half-verse

ellipsis

omission

epiphora

identical endings of line or higher-level textual units; sometimes coinciding with end rhyme

euphony

“lines that have flowing and pleasing sounds often by repeating vowels (or smooth consonants: *l, m, n, y, w*)

The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.

–Alfred Lord Tennyson⁵⁸

hendiadys

lit. “one through two”: a figure or metaphor in which one concept is expressed by two words

inclusio

“inclusion,” using the same words to frame [.....] a textual unit

“The effect is to create a sort of literary envelope marking the extreme boundaries of a poem. Perhaps the most beautiful example of the form from the biblical Psalter is found in Psalm 8:

O Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Ps 8:1, 9)

The *inclusio* sets the context within which the thrust of the poem is played out. The awesome power and majesty of Yahweh provides the framework against which human insignificance is scrutinized. The stark contrast between divine magnificent and human poverty provides an almost dumbfounded recognition of the exalted honor received by the gracious election of God. But everywhere the focus is on the God who gives, not the human who receives. And the *inclusio* clarifies this theme both before and behind.

In other words, *inclusios* encapsulate a psalm, emphasizing the dominant theme that is expected to remain. The reader (or hearer) is led back to the beginning at the end, and all encountered between must be understood in the light of this twin witness.”⁵⁹

merism

a figure of speech by which a whole is indicated by mentioning two components, two extremes or two opposites: “*the rich and poor,*” or “*heaven and earth.*” *Merisms* give expression to *totality* or *completeness*.

metaphor

⁵⁸ “*euphony*” definition taken from Frances Mayes, *The Discovery of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, 2001), 37.

⁵⁹ Wilson, *Psalms Volume 1*, 53.

Metaphor literally means “transference,” thus meaning is conferred through the juxtaposition of images rather than literally. Mays explains the significant difference between similes and metaphors:

“Metaphors, like similes, connect unlike things having common qualities. How metaphor differs from simile is subtle but crucial.

Simile: My joy is like a river

Metaphor: My joy is a river.

or: My joy, a river.

Poets use metaphor when they want a close, more direct comparison between the two things. But metaphor is not simply the removal of *like*, *as*, or other connectives. The word *metaphor* comes from Greek roots that mean ‘to transfer.’ When Shakespeare says, ‘Juliet is the sun,’ he *transfers* the sun’s qualities to Juliet. More is at stake than if he’d said, ‘Juliet is like the sun.’ Juliet’s life-giving powers, brightness, and all-importance are intensified by the direct link. There is only one sun in our solar system. Perhaps another woman could be ‘like the sun,’ but only one can *be* the sun. Look at the difference:

No man is an island.

– John Donne

No man is like an island.

Like dilutes the assertive power of this image. Part of the reason for this is in the eye’s response. Without the comparative word, the images have closer physical proximity on the page. *Like* and *as* call attention to themselves; we realize a comparison is taking place. Without them, a ‘transfer’ occurs easily, almost automatically. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle said that metaphor is the ‘one thing that cannot be learned from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars.’ Metaphor is not simply a device writers use to ornament poems...[Metaphors tell us that] “unlike things can have mysterious, informing links that we can discover.”⁶⁰

Waltke explains the difference between the *complete* and *incomplete metaphor*: “In a *complete metaphor* the two things being compared are stated. [The proverb]

A gold ring in a pig’s snout,
a beautiful woman who turns aside from discretion (Prov 11:22)

implicitly draws the absurd comparison between the precious beauty of a woman who abuses it in unclean living and an adorning ring in the snout of an unclean pig, which roots in mud and swill. The comparison’s common denominator, squandered beauty, evokes ridicule and revulsion. In an *incomplete metaphor* a declaration implies the comparison. ‘Rich and poor meet together; the Lord is the Maker of them all’ (Prov 22:2) implies that God is no respecter of persons based on economic distinctions and evokes respect for rich and poor alike...a simile or metaphor must be evocative.”⁶¹

metonymy

⁶⁰ Mays, *The Discovery of Poetry*, 87.

⁶¹ Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 39-40.

figure of speech based on a shift in meaning: something is stated, but an adjacent or contiguous concept or entity is meant, as when “the Crown” is used to refer to the monarch or when “tongue” and “hands” refer to a person’s speech and deeds.

refrain

“A line or series of lines is repeated almost verbatim at intervals throughout the poem. The result is somewhat akin to a chorus alternating with the verses of a hymn or ballad...Refrains punctuate their compositions and break the blow of the poetry. Thus, they provide an obvious means of structuring compositions into smaller components...In the Psalter, psalms with repeated refrains are found concentrated in the second book (Pss 42+43; 46; 49; 56; 57; 59; 62; 67), with only a single example each in the third (80) and fourth (99) books. The fifth and final book offers two examples (107; 136).”⁶²

rhetoric

the art of (verbal) persuasion

simile

Waltke defines *simile* as “an explicit, evocative comparison between two things of unlike nature that yet have something in common.

Like a madman who shoots flaming missiles and deadly arrows,
so is the person who deceives his neighbor
and says, “Am I not only joking?!” (Prov 26: 18, 19)

[The sage] explicitly compares a liar who conceals his deceit as a harmless prank to a madman who kills with deadly weapons. The comparison’s common denominator, the mischievous use of deadly instruments, evokes outrage.”⁶³

synecdoche

a figure of speech in which the whole is substituted for a part, or a part for the whole as “gray hair” representing an old person (Prov 16:31; 20:29).⁶⁴

tricolon

a tripartite poetic line (three poetic lines)

Let me tell you of Yahweh’s decree;
He said to me: You are my son,
I have fathered you on this day. (Psalm 2:7)

⁶² Wilson, *Psalms*, 53-55.

⁶³ Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 39.

⁶⁴ Waltke, *Proverbs 1-15*, 40.