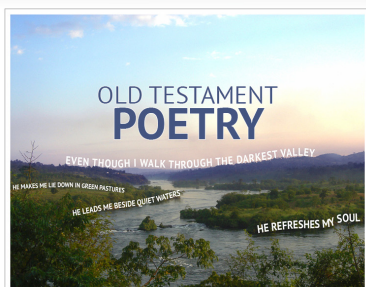


Old Testament Poetry



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Introduction



Introduction

In this lesson, we study some of the Bible’s most profound and treasured literature. In fact it’s some of the most beautiful literature written anywhere. In this lesson, we will study Israel’s Old Testament poetry. There are five Old Testament books—Job, Psalms, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, and Lamentations—that are written entirely or almost entirely in poetic form. Many narrative books contain poetry and so do all but two of the prophetic books. Isaiah contains some of the most magnificent poetry in all of the Old Testament. From Genesis to Malachi, the Old Testament is enriched by poetry.

Characteristics of Old Testament Poetry

Poetry:

“distilled language.”

The reader must discover the **message** by working with the poem’s **construction**.

Truth discovered is more powerful than **truth given**.

Characteristics of Old Testament Poetry

Poetry is distilled language. While prose is usually explicit in its form, poetry is written in such a way that the reader has to interact with the writer. The message is written so the reader has to discover it by working with the poem’s construction. When writing in distilled language, the poet works very hard to find just the right word to make the poem work. He or she has to make the lines in the poetic verses interact with each other. The poet writes with the expectation that the reader work the meaning out of the poem and that truth discovered is more powerful than truth given. So if you try to read Old Testament poetry quickly, casually, easily, it won’t work. You have to get into the process.

Characteristics of Old Testament Poetry

Parallelism

— one line of verse —
— in t e r a c t s w i t h a n o t h e r —

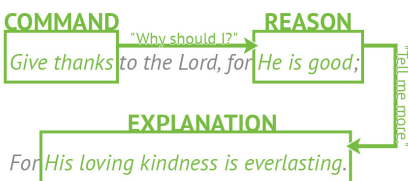
Parallelism

Old Testament poetry isn’t like most poetry today. It doesn’t rhyme or have meter. Instead, much of Old Testament poetry uses a device called parallelism where the writer composes one line of a verse and then composes another line that interacts in some way with that first line. We discover the verse’s meaning

Characteristics of Old Testament Poetry



Characteristics of Old Testament Poetry



by comparing the two lines. The meaning lies between the lines. It's like rubbing two sticks together to get a fire—you need both. And in Hebrew poetry, you rub the two lines together until the meaning flames out between them. Poetry, like Jesus' parables, offers truth in a way that forces the reader or hearer to mentally engage with the literature. The authors' point is there, but they want us to dig it out.

Psalm 118:1, like most Hebrew poetic verses, contains two lines. The first line says, "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good" (NASB). The psalmist wants us to give thanks, and provides a reason why we should do so. Then he adds a second line that enhances the first line, "for His lovingkindness is everlasting." The second line explains the thought of the first line so we have both the poet's command and his explanation. To read Hebrew poetry, we have to identify how the lines of each verse relate to each other.

Three Types of Parallelism

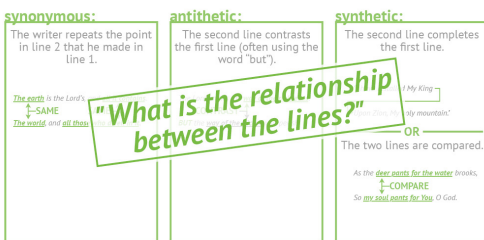
The lines in Hebrew poetry parallel each other in three different ways. Sometimes the relationship is called *synonymous parallelism* because the writer will repeat the same point in line two that he made in line one. In Psalm 24:1, the first line says, "The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains." And the second line: "The world, and those who dwell in it" (NASB). The thoughts are synonymous.

Other poetic verses use contrast. When you see the word *but* introducing the second line, you know you are reading a verse with *antithetic parallelism*. The first line in Psalm 1:6 says, "The Lord knows the way of the righteous. Then the second line presents a contrast to the righteous, "but the way of the wicked will perish."

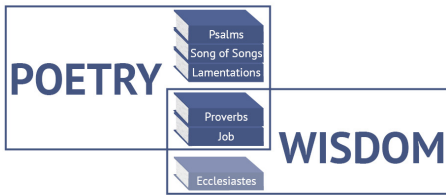
In the third type of parallelism, the second line completes the first line. Line one of Psalm 2:6 reads, "I have installed my king" (NIV). Then the second line, "on Mt. Zion, my holy mountain," completes the thought. This relationship is called *synthetic parallelism*. Synthetic parallelism sometimes compares the two lines' thoughts. The first line of Psalm 42:1 says, "As the deer pants for the water brooks," and the second line says, "so my soul pants for You, O God" (NASB). The second and first lines compare something. So when reading Hebrew poetry, ask, "What is the relationship between the lines?"

Characteristics of Old Testament Poetry

Three Types of Parallelism



The Poetic Books



WHAT the writer says is important, but **HOW** the writer says it is **more important**.

The Poetic Books

Proverbs and Job, two of the five books written in poetry, are wisdom books. Remember that in poetry, *what* the writer says is important, but *how* the writer says it is more important. We'll study Proverbs and Job in the next lesson, because even though they're written as poetry, their content makes them fit with the wisdom literature.

Psalms

The book of Psalms was written over many years of Israel's history. Moses wrote Psalm 90 during the time of Israel's wanderings recorded in Numbers. Psalm 137 is the latest psalm and was written during the Babylonian exile. David wrote many of the psalms and collected many others. So even though these poems span centuries of Israel's history, we plug the book of Psalms into the time books during the Kingdom era.

The psalms are hymns of praise and prayers. They are expressions people have made to God, and there's something very interesting about these prayers. The rest of the Bible contains God's messages to us. In the Bible, God is the one speaking. God inspired the Psalms just as He did the rest of Scripture. But the difference is that the prayers in the Psalms are designed to help us talk to God. All the Scripture comes from God to us—it's God speaking to us. But the Psalms are God's way of teaching us how to talk to Him.

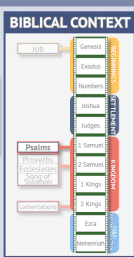
Some psalms express worship. Some express thanks for deliverance. Some express confidence in God's power and willingness to deliver us from trouble. Often the psalmist poured out his trouble to God in the early verses of the psalm and then by the end of the psalm he was confidently thanking God because he believed God would deliver him from his trouble.

Other psalms express anger and frustration toward God or say terrible things about the psalmist's enemies. What we discover in the Psalms is that there is nothing in our mind we can't express to God honestly, confidently, and openly. It's hard to believe that anybody would say some of the things found in the psalms to God. But Psalm 139 tells us that God knows what's in our mind before we say it, and He's inviting us to say it to Him. Our omniscient God already knows our harshest or most vile thoughts, and He knows we need to dump them someplace or they will corrode our mind. The best place to dump these deep, ugly feelings is on the

The Poetic Books

Psalms

- Written over many years of Israel's history
- Included with the time books of the Kingdom era



The Poetic Books

Psalms

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- Hymns of praise and prayers
- Expressions people have made to God



The Poetic Books

Psalms

- Written over many years of Israel's history
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- Hymns of praise and prayers
- Expressions people have made to God
- Psalms express...



The Poetic Books Song of Solomon

- A young man and woman are attracted to each other.
- They have a courtship and a wedding.
- Their love and affection culminates in the sexual fulfillment after their wedding.
- Tension enters the relationship but is resolved.

"Why is this book in the Bible?"

God who understands us. When we're angry at God or frustrated with Him, He says, "Come and tell Me how you feel. Let's deal with it. Let's put it on the table."

Song of Solomon

Another poetic book is the Song of Solomon. It is a difficult book for some readers. It's a story of a young man and a young woman who are attracted to each other. They have a courtship and a wedding scene, all written in beautiful poetry. The book describes the culmination of their love and their affection for each other after their wedding.

The book describes the sexual fulfillment of their marriage in poetic language. Tension enters the relationship but is resolved and the book closes. You might ask why this book is in the Bible. Perhaps God put it there to give His perspective on an important part of our life. God is never embarrassed about how He created us. Genesis teaches that the purpose of the sexual relationship between a man and a woman is procreation. We read in 1 Corinthians 7 that a healthy sexual relationship in a marriage helps prevent people from going outside of their marriage to find fulfillment. The Song of Solomon teaches us that God created sex as something a man and a woman should marvelously enjoy as part of their marriage relationship. It's a beautiful story written in poetic form. When you read it, you may have to slow down and work with the poet to see what he's doing with this beautiful story.

Lamentations

The tragic book of Lamentations is a third poetic book. We've referred to Lamentations a couple of times in our Old Testament course because it plays a number of roles. It becomes a color book that adds insight to Jeremiah's broken heart when he sees Jerusalem's destruction. It is included with the prophetic books because Jeremiah the prophet wrote it. And we also include it with the poetic books because it's written in poetic style.

Conclusion

Old Testament poetry expresses thoughts about God in deep meditative fashion. We see God presented by the poets in ways we don't see Him presented anywhere else. When we take the time to listen to the poets' messages, we can genuinely delight in the Law

The Poetic Books Lamentations

- COLOR** • Adds insight into Jeremiah's broken heart when he sees Jerusalem's destruction (2 Kings, Jeremiah)
- PROPHETIC** • Written by Jeremiah the prophet
- POETRY & WISDOM** • Written in poetic style

Conclusion



of the Lord. Let God speak to the depths of your soul by urging your mind and your heart to work with the Hebrew poet. You have to think, pray, and meditate when you read Old Testament poetry, but the fruit is worth the effort.