

# INTRODUCTION TO HEBREW POETRY

## Overview

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## I. The Importance of Hebrew Poetry

### A. The Prominence of Poetry in the Scriptures

1. The Poetry & Wisdom section of the English Old Testament (Job through Song of Solomon) is cast almost entirely in poetic verse:
  - a. Job = a prose prologue and epilogue, but the speeches all in poetry
  - b. Psalms = poetic compositions
  - c. Proverbs = predominantly poetic/proverbial compositions
  - d. Ecclesiastes = cast in exalted prose, if not poetry
  - e. Song of Songs = poetic composition
2. A large portion of the Prophets section of the English Bible is cast in poetic verse. Some would estimate the proportions as follows:
  - a. Isaiah (82%)
  - b. Hosea (94%)
  - c. Joel (94%)
  - d. Amos (80%)
  - e. Obadiah (100%)
  - f. Micah (100%)
  - g. Nahum (100%)
  - h. Habakkuk (100%)
  - i. Zephaniah (95%)

The exceptions to the pattern are: Jonah (17%), which is cast as a biographical narrative; the exilic prophets, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, which contain major poetic sections within their elevated prose; and the post-exilic prophets, Haggai (0%), Zechariah (17%), and Malachi (0%). Why the latter prophets switched to prose is not clear. Some possibilities:

  - (1) The prophecies consist largely of expositions of visions.
  - (2) The prophecies reveal a greater interaction between God and his prophet.
  - (3) The intense urgency of the prophetic messages is comparatively lower.
3. The narrative texts are interspersed with poetry:
  - a. Genesis 2:23; 3:14-19; 4:23-24; 8:22; 9:6-7; 9:25-27; 12:1-3; 49; etc.
  - b. Exodus 15:1-18, 21
  - c. Numbers 6:24-26; 23-24
  - d. Deuteronomy 32-33
  - e. Judges 5:1-21

- f. 1 Samuel 2:1-10; 15:22-23; 18:7
- g. 2 Samuel 1:1-19-27; 22; 23:1-7
- h. 2 Kings 19:21-28
- i. Nehemiah 9:5-38

- 4. Approximately 1/3 of the entire Old Testament can be considered poetry.

Short pronouncements by God, blessings, prayers, songs, hymns, and laments all tend to be cast in verse. The Old Testament is therefore rich in Hebrew poetry.

#### B. The Unique Relevance of Hebrew Poetic Literature

- 1. For many Christians, Psalms and Proverbs are the favorite books of the Old Testament (cf. the Gideon New Testament). These works describe humanity's relationship to God from the perspective of the believer. Because they reflect the entire range of human emotions, there are passages that will minister to people in any situation in life.
- 2. The prophets also have direct and obvious relevance. In contrast to Hebrew narrative, in which the message is often implicit, the prophetic messages are usually explicit. They tend to be powerful, direct, and evocative, even as they call for immediate application. Thus, transference of the prophets' theological insights to the contemporary scene is often more readily apparent.
- 3. While the technicalities of Hebrew poetry may render these works initially more difficult to understand than Hebrew narrative, there is usually little difficulty in demonstrating the contemporary relevance of the theological message once it is ascertained.

## II. The Problem of Hebrew Poetry

The study of Hebrew poetry is faced with two major problems:

- A. The Old Testament never formally distinguishes between poetry and prose.

Hebrew has words for "chronicle," "writing," "document," "genealogy," "proverb," "song," "psalm," "lament," and "songs of praise," but it has no words for "prose" or "poetry."

- B. The boundaries between prose and poetry are quite imprecise.

There are many texts in which it is difficult to determine whether the author is expressing himself poetically or in prose. This has led some to conclude that there is no poetry in the Bible, only a "continuum" from standard prose texts to a more "heightened rhetoric" mistakenly labeled as verse. The distinction, they charge, is a Hellenistic imposition on a Semitic construct.

But is it that simple? The shift in style from Exodus 14 to 15, and Judges 4 to 5 is radical. It is not just a matter of degree. It is more a matter of specific literary features consciously employed by the author.

## III. The General Characteristics of Hebrew Poetry

- A. Negative Characteristics of Hebrew Poetry

- 1. The Absence of a Prevailing Rhyme Scheme

- a. Unlike English and most Indo-European poetry, Hebrew poetry (like Sumerian, Akkadian, Ugaritic, Egyptian, and Aramaic poetry) does not seem to have been characterized by a prevailing rhyme scheme. (Cf. famous poems and poetic structures in our culture.)
- b. The closest counterpart to the rhyme at the end of a line in English poetry with which we are more familiar is the use of the same pronominal suffix at the end of two lines (e.g., Isa 41:11-12), but this is often required by Hebrew syntax, not used necessarily for poetic effect.
- c. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that language changes over time, and some ancient pronunciations of Hebrew words may have yielded more euphony than can be detected today. (Cf. the rhyme scheme in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*; did the word “again” rhyme with “pen” or “rain”?) But this phenomenon, if it existed at all, does not appear to have been predominant.

2. The Irregularity of Meter/Rhythm

- a. Again, unlike English and most Indo-European poetry, Hebrew poetry does not seem to have been characterized by a prevailing meter or rhythm. (Cf. famous poems and poetic structures in our culture.)
- b. Specific patterns, however, are not uncommon. One metrical pattern is the 3:3 rhythm, but variations such as 2:2 and 4:4 occur rather frequently. The 3:2 pattern is generally recognized as the *qina* (lament) meter, which is featured in the book of Lamentations.
- c. But this tendency toward rhythm is better described as periodic accentuation, arising out of a balance of component clauses. The stress in Hebrew poetry is on *literary* symmetry (i.e., the harmony of ideas and concepts) rather than on sound. In that regard, Hebrew poetry is less “phoney” than English poetry.

B. Positive Characteristics of Hebrew Poetry

1. Brevity of Wording

The sentences in Hebrew poetry tend to be significantly shorter than in Hebrew narrative.

2. Vivid Imagery, Figurative Language & Holistic Impact (cf. *The Chronicles of Narnia*)

3. Expressions in Couplets

- a. Hebrew poetry features “thought rhyming” (as opposed to word rhyming), or “parallelism,” as the English clergyman Bishop Robert Lowth of Oxford labeled it in his seminal study of Hebrew poetry in 1753.
- b. This distinction between Hebrew prose and poetry can be illustrated as follows:

**Prose:**

a _____	b _____	c _____
d _____	e _____	f _____
g _____	h _____	i _____

*The flow is linear, with relatively long sentences and clauses.*

### Poetry:

a \_\_\_\_\_ b \_\_\_\_\_ c \_\_\_\_\_ ;  
a' \_\_\_\_\_ b' \_\_\_\_\_ c' \_\_\_\_\_ .

d \_\_\_\_\_ e \_\_\_\_\_ f \_\_\_\_\_ ;  
d' \_\_\_\_\_ e' \_\_\_\_\_ f' \_\_\_\_\_ .

g \_\_\_\_\_ h \_\_\_\_\_ i \_\_\_\_\_ ;  
g' \_\_\_\_\_ h' \_\_\_\_\_ i' \_\_\_\_\_ .

*The flow is repetitive as it progresses, with relatively short sentences and clauses.*

c. E.g., Three Couplets of “Rhyming Thought” in Psalm 24:1-3

- 1 The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it,  
the world, and all who live in it;
- 2 for he founded it upon the seas  
and established it upon the waters.
- 3 Who may ascend the hill of the LORD?  
Who may stand in his holy place?

d. E.g., Four Couplets of “Rhyming Thought” in Psalm 33:6-9

- 6 By the word of the LORD were the heavens made,  
their starry host by the breath of his mouth.
- 7 He gathers the waters of the sea into jars;  
he puts the deep into storehouses.
- 8 Let all the earth fear the LORD;  
let all the people of the world revere him.
- 9 For he spoke, and it came to be;  
he commanded, and it stood firm.

## IV. The Building Blocks of Hebrew Poetry

### A. The Line

The basic unit of Hebrew poetry is the line, also referred to in the literature as the “colon,” “part,” “member,” “stitch,” or “hemistich.” We will use the simple term **“line.”**

### B. The Verse

1. A completed thought in Hebrew poetry is referred to as a “distich,” “bicolon,” or “verse” (not to be confused with the chapter and verse markings in our Bibles, although the two often coincide). We will use the simple term **“verse.”**
2. Verses are made up of lines in varying combinations:

- a. monadic verse            1 line
- b. dyadic verse             2 lines
- c. triadic verse             3 lines
- d. quadratic verse         4 lines

3. An example of a dyadic verse is Psalm 34:1:

1	I will extol the LORD at all times;	Line A	> Verse 1
	his praise will always be on my lips.	Line B	

The author may switch within a poem from one pattern to another for the sake of interest, to highlight a certain element, to create an envelope around a core, or for some other stylistic reason.

### C. The Strophe

1. A strophe is a group of lines intentionally arranged to develop a general idea or flow of thought. What the paragraph is to prose, the strophe is to poetry.
2. In various types of poetry (e.g., Greek tragedy, etc.), there is a nuanced difference between a strophe and a stanza. One distinction often made is that “strophe” is used for unmetered poetry whereas “stanza” is used for metered poetry. Since Hebrew poetry is not typically meter specific, we will use the term strophe.
3. Strophes may be identified on the basis of **content** (i.e., subject matter, keywords, themes, etc.) or **form** (i.e., structuring devices, such as acrostics, numerical patterns, repetition, *selah* breaks, etc., all of which we will examine more closely later). E.g., Psalm 119 is the longest psalm in the Psalter, well known for its devotion to God’s law. It is an **acrostic** composition, giving each letter of the Hebrew alphabet an opportunity to introduce eight verses on the subject over the course of 22 strophes:

אשרי תמימי-דרךך הַהֲלֹכִים בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה:  
אשרי נצרי עֲדֹתָיו בְּכָל-לֵב יִדְרֹשׁוּהוּ:  
אף לֹא-פָעִלוּ עוֹלָה בְּדַרְכֵי הַלְכוּ:  
אִתָּה צְנִיתָה פִקְדוֹתַי לִשְׁמֹר מְאֹד:  
אֲחִלִּי יִכְנֹו דְרָכַי לִשְׁמֹר תִּקְוָה:  
אֲזִ לֹא-אֲבֹשׁ בְּהֵיטֵי אֶל־כָּל־מִצְוֹתֶיךָ:  
אֹדְךָ בְּיֶשֶׁר לֵבָב בְּלִמְדֵי מִשְׁפָּטֶי צְדָקָה:  
אֶת־תִּקְוָה אֲשַׁמֵּר אֶל־תַּעֲזֹבֵנִי עַד־מָאֵד:  
  
בְּמָה יִזְכֶּה־נַּעַר אֶת־אַרְחֵו לִשְׁמֹר כְּדַבְּרֶךָ:  
בְּכָל־לֵבִי דְרֹשְׁתִּיךָ אֶל־תִּשְׁגֵּנִי מִמִּצְוֹתֶיךָ:  
בְּלִבִּי צַפְנֹתִי אִמְרֹתֶיךָ לְמַעַן לֹא אֲחַטָּא־לָךְ:  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה לְמַדְנֵי תִקְוָה:  
בִּשְׁפָתַי סִפְרֹתֵי כָל מִשְׁפָּטֶי־כִּיֶּיךָ:  
בְּדַרְךָ עֲדוֹתֶיךָ יִשְׁתִּי כַּעַל כְּלֵהוֹן:  
בִּפְקֻדֶיךָ אֶשְׁיַחֵה וְאֶבְיֹטָה אֶרְחֹתֶיךָ:  
בַּחֲתֻמֹּתֶיךָ אֲשַׁמְעֶשֶׂע לֹא אֲשַׁכַּח דְּבָרֶיךָ:  
  
גְּמִל עֲלֵי־עַבְדֶּךָ אֲחִילֶיךָ וְאֲשַׁמְרֶה דְּבָרֶיךָ:  
גְּלִיעֵינִי וְאֶבְיֹטָה נִפְלְאוֹת מִתּוֹרָתֶךָ:  
גֵּר אֲנִי בְּאַרְץ אֶל־תִּסָּתֵר מִמֶּנִּי מִצְוֹתֶיךָ . . .

## V. The Parallelisms in Hebrew Poetry

### A. Introductory Definitions & Background

1. Literary parallelism (*parallelismus membrorum*) may be defined as the structuring of lines in such a way that they exhibit patterns of literary symmetry and balance. This balance involves vocabulary, form, meaning, and thought.
2. As noted above, the pioneering work in the recognition and study of Hebrew parallelism was done by Robert Lowth in 1753. The study was developed more fully by G. B. Gray in 1915.
3. It is commonly thought that parallelism is the literary feature that distinguishes poetry from prose. This view, however, may draw the line too sharply. Parallelism also occurs in prose (e.g., Gen 1:27; Exod 20:34, etc.). In fact, Kugel has found it so pervasive that he abandons the distinction between poetry and prose altogether. Moreover, not all poetry involves parallel constructions. Some Hebrew verse is remarkably free. Yet, as we noted above, there is a discernible distinction between poetry and prose in the Bible.
4. In reality, the difference between poetry and prose is not the presence or absence of parallelism, but the prevalence and usage of parallelism in a passage (along with certain other literary devices).

### B. Types of Parallelism in the Hebrew Bible

Lowth distinguished three types of parallelism in the Hebrew Bible: synonymous, antithetical, and synthetic. To these three types have been added at least two others: emblematic and staircase. While these categories have come under increasing criticism in recent years, they have been widely followed in the past (cf. Kaiser, Bruce, Harrison, etc.), and they figure predominantly in the literature on Hebrew poetry as well as in scholarly commentaries on the book of Psalms. We will therefore acquaint ourselves with these categories.

#### 1. **Synonymous Parallelism**

In synonymous parallelism, the B-line repeats the basic idea of the A-line, but in different words. Gerhard von Rad called this device “truth in stereo.”

##### a. Psalm 103:9-10

<sup>9</sup> He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;	Line A Line B	> Verse 1
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<sup>10</sup> he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.	Line A Line B	> Verse 2
--	------------------	-----------

##### b. Psalm 19:1-2

<sup>1</sup> The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.	Line A Line B	> Verse 1
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<sup>2</sup> Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.	Line A Line B	> Verse 2
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c. *Types of Synonymous Parallelism*

(1) Complete

a-b-c // a'-b'-c'

Each element in the A-line is repeated in the B-line.

(a) Psalm 19:1

<sup>1</sup>	<u>The heavens declare the glory of God;</u>	Line A
	a            b            c	
	<u>the skies proclaim the work of his hands.</u>	Line B
	a'            b'            c'	

(b) Psalm 19:2

<sup>2</sup>	<u>Day after day they pour forth speech;</u>	Line A
	a            b            c	
	<u>night after night they display knowledge.</u>	Line B
	a'            b'            c'	

(2) Incomplete

a-b-c // b'-c'

One or more elements in the A-line are not repeated in the B-line.

(a) Psalm 98:9b

<sup>9b</sup>	<u>He will judge the world in righteousness</u>	Line A
	a            b            c	
	<u>and the peoples with equity.</u>	Line B
	b'            c'	

(b) Psalm 96:3

<sup>3</sup>	<u>Declare his glory among the nations,</u>	Line A
	a            b            c	
	<u>his marvelous deeds among all peoples.</u>	Line B
	b'            c'	

(3) Ballast Variant

a-b-c // c'+

One element in the B-line is lengthened to compensate for any missing element(s) from the A-line.

(a) Psalm 98:5

5	<u>make music to the LORD with the harp,</u>	Line A
	a                    b                    c	
	<u>with the harp and the sound of singing,</u>	Line B
	c'+	

(b) Psalm 95:3

3	<u>For the LORD is the great God,</u>	Line A
	a                    b                    c	
	<u>the great King above all gods.</u>	Line B
	c'+	

(c) Psalm 40:3

3	<u>He put a new song in my mouth,</u>	Line A
	a                    b                    c	
	<u>a hymn of praise to our God.</u>	Line B
	b'+	

(4) Concentrism/Chiasm

a-b-c // c'-b'-a'

The order of elements in the A-line is reversed in the B-line. Note: Technically, a chiasm is a specific type of concentrism (a-b // b'-a'), but the terms are often used interchangeably today.

(a) Psalm 58:6

6 Break the teeth in their mouths, O God;  
tear out, O LORD, the fangs of the lions!

The Hebrew word order is as follows:

a O God,  
b break  
c their teeth  
d in their mouth  
c' the teeth of lions  
b' smash  
a' O Lord

Concentric patterns are sometimes easier to see in Hebrew, but they are often discernible in English as well.

(b) Psalm 98:5-6

5	make music to the LORD with the harp,	Line A
	with the harp and the sound of singing,	Line B
6	with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—	Line B'
	shout for joy before the LORD, the King.	Line A'

- Line B is a synonymous ballast variant parallelism to Line A.
- Line B' is a complete synonymous parallelism to Line B.
- Line A' is an incomplete synonymous parallelism to Line A.
- Taken together, these four lines form a chiasm.

(c) Psalm 137:5-6

<sup>5</sup> If I forget you, O Jerusalem,	Line A
may my right hand forget its skill.	Line B
<sup>6</sup> May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth	Line B'
if I do not remember you . . . Jerusalem.	Line A'

2. **Antithetical Parallelism**

In antithetical parallelism, the B-line presents the contrast of the A-line. One might call it “the other side of the coin.” Antithetical parallelisms can also be complete, incomplete, or chiasmic. They can also feature ballast variants.

a. Psalm 1:6

<sup>6</sup> For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,	Line A
<u>but</u> the way of the wicked will perish.	Line B

b. Psalm 37:9

<sup>9</sup> For evil men will be cut off,	Line A
<u>but</u> those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.	Line B

c. Psalm 37:21

<sup>21</sup> The wicked borrow and do not repay,	Line A
<u>but</u> the righteous give generously.	Line B

3. **Synthetic Parallelism**

In synthetic parallelism, the B-line advances or completes the thought of the A-line. The B-line may express a purpose reason, result, or the completion of the sentence begun in the A-line.

a. Psalm 14:2

<sup>2</sup> The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men	
to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.	[Purpose]

b. Psalm 14:7b

<sup>7</sup> When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people,	
let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!	[Result]

c. Psalm 23:1

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd,	
I shall not be in want.	[Result]

d. Psalm 40:1

<sup>1</sup> I waited patiently for the LORD;  
he turned to me and heard my cry.

[Completion]

#### 4. Emblematic Parallelism

In emblematic parallelism, one line employs a simile to illuminate the other.

a. Psalm 42:1

<sup>1</sup> As the deer pants for streams of water,  
so my soul pants for you, O God.

b. Psalm 103:11-13

<sup>11</sup> For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his love for those who fear him;

<sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

<sup>13</sup> As a father has compassion on his children,  
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.

#### 5. Staircase Parallelism

Staircase (or “step” or “climactic”) parallelisms consist of a series of three or more lines, usually with a key word repeated in every successive line, or a key word in the first line repeated in the second, or a key word in the second line repeated in the third, etc. A “step” version of the staircase parallelism conveys the idea of progression or graduation between a series of lines (e.g., Ps 1:1).

a. Psalm 29:1-2

<sup>1</sup> Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones,  
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.  
<sup>2</sup> Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;  
worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness.

b. Psalm 1:1

<sup>1</sup> Blessed is the man who [introductory formula]  
does not walk in the counsel of the wicked  
or stand in the way of sinners  
or sit in the seat of mockers.

### C. Examples of Parallelisms in the Ancient Near East

#### 1. Sumerian

From “Inanna’s Descent to the Nether World” (ANET, pp. 52-57)

The goddess from the “great above,” she set her mind towards the “great below,”  
Inanna, from the “great above,” she set her mind towards the “great below.”

My lady abandoned heaven, abandoned earth, to the nether world she descended,  
Inanna abandoned heaven, abandoned earth, to the nether world she descended.

At the door of the nether world she acted evilly,  
In the palace of the nether world she spoke evilly.

“Open the house, gatekeeper, open the house,  
“Open the house, Neti, open the house, all alone I would enter.”

## 2. **Egyptian**

From “The Great Hymn to the Aten” (ANET, pp. 369-372)

Creator of seed in women,  
You who makes fluid in man

Who maintains the son in the womb of his mother,  
Who soothes him with that which stills his weeping.

## 3. **Akkadian**

From “The Gilgamesh Epic” (ANET, pp. 94-95):

No one can see his fellow,  
Nor can the people be recognized from heaven

The gods cowered like dogs,  
They crouched against the outer wall.

Ishtar cried out like a woman in travail,  
The sweet-voiced mistress of the gods moaned aloud.

## 4. **Ugaritic**

From “The Baal Epic” (ANET, pp. 130-131):

I tell you, O Prince Baal,  
I declare, O Rider of the Clouds

You will take your eternal kingdom,  
Your everlasting dominion.

Chase Yamm from his throne,  
Nahar from his seat of dominion.

Swoop in the hand of Baal,  
Like an eagle between his fingers.

Strike the back of Prince Yamm,  
Between the arms of Judge Nahar.

Drive Yamm from his house,  
Nahar from his seat of dominion.

He cries to El the Bull, his father,  
To El the King, his begetter.

He cries to Asherah and her children,  
To Elath and the band of her kindred.

Look, no house has Baal like the gods,  
Nor court like the children of Asherah.