

Psalms Session 8 The Psalms as Poetry

Though we have concentrated to this point on the various types of psalms and the ancient Israelite understandings of human and divine nature that they present, we should not fail to remember that the book of Psalms is the most substantial collection of ancient Israelite poetry that we have. We conclude, therefore, with some considerations as to the poetic nature of the collection and the essential mechanisms of biblical poetry in general.

We may begin by noting that biblical poetry, although recognizably poetic, does not conform to many of the features that have commonly been associated with poetry as a genre. Biblical poetry does not rhyme—though it does certainly employ a wide range of phonological features, such as assonance. Biblical poetry is not metrical—though it often does have something like rhythm. Historically, many readers have sought to make biblical poetry conform to the generic poetic standards of their day, by searching for meter in particular, but these attempts are doomed to failure. The essence of Hebrew poetry is expressed, rather, by the term “parallelism.”

Parallelism is, quite simply, the relationship between the two (or more) parts of a single line. Almost every poetic line exists in two halves, which often seem to be saying much the same thing. We might take, for example, the opening of Psalm 24:

The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it

The world, and all its inhabitants.

One basic sentiment is being expressed here, but it is expressed twice in a single verse. The analysis of Hebrew poetry hinges on the reader's ability to recognize both the structural and the semantic interplay between the two parts.

On the structural level, we may notice lexical variation and pairing: “the earth//the world”; “all that is in it//all its inhabitants.” We may also note that the two halves of the line have a similar syntax and word order. In the Hebrew, we would note that each part contains precisely three words, and that both parts end with the *-ah* sound. Through this sort of lens we can come to an appreciation of the literary poetic artistry of the author.

On the level of semantics, or meaning, things get somewhat more complicated. Early examinations of biblical poetry, especially by the eighteenth-century British scholar Robert Lowth, to whom we are indebted for introducing the concept of parallelism, tended to divide poetic lines into three categories: synonymous, in which both parts of the line say the same thing; antithetical, in which the second line is rendered in opposite terms to the first; and synthetic, in which the second line completes the thought of the first. What we see here in Psalm 24 is patently synonymous, according to Lowth’s categories. But this observation obscures the deeper interplay between the two lines: they say basically the same thing, but we cannot leave it there; we should attempt to understand how they are not exactly the same, and what we might make of it. In this relatively simple case, we could observe that the words “earth” and “world,” though obviously very close in meaning, are not identical: “earth” is used for the natural world, or for the land, while the Hebrew word for “world” here is most often employed with reference to the inhabited world, to the world of human society. When we recognize this distinction, we can see how it lines up perfectly with the parallel phrases in the rest of the line: “the earth and all that is in it”—the world of natural creation—and “the world and all its inhabitants,” the human sphere.

While Lowth’s categories held sway for many years, centuries even, more recent scholarship has attempted to achieve a better understanding of how parallelism functions by rejecting Lowth’s categories and finding a more abstract and flexible mode of description. The

fundamental work on this front was done by James Kugel, in his book *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, in which he understands the second line of a poetic verse to be not just repeating what was said before, but to be “seconding” it, in any variety of ways: broadening, specifying, furthering, modifying. Kugel pithily expressed the fundamental relationship inherent in the biblical poetic line as “A, and what’s more, B.” This way of thinking about biblical poetry, at once more abstract and more nuanced, allows for a greater depth of interpretation, and a wider range of questions that can be asked of every individual poetic line.

What an appreciation of parallelism brings to the fore in reading the Psalms is, in some ways at odds with Gunkel’s attempt to view the psalms as generic types, a renewed attention to the individual literary craftsmanship that has gone into each individual psalm. Though the psalms as types may have been used as cultic liturgy, we cannot forget that the psalms we have are written, are literature, and are as driven by aesthetics, and therefore susceptible to aesthetic readings, as any other literature, ancient or modern. We do the ancient authors a grave injustice if we downplay their literary artistry.

This artistry can be seen in a number of facets, beyond just the parallelism on the level of the individual line. Many psalms have verbal and structural elements that span the entire poetic piece, words or phrases that call back to or prepare the way for ideas elsewhere in the psalm. We find psalms that are structured chiasmically (same or similar words in the opposite order express the same idea): Psalm 29, for instance. And there are a number of psalms (and this is true of the entire book of Lamentations as well), that are structured as alphabetic acrostics, in which each line begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Acrostics have often been understood as mnemonic devices, as aids to a reciter’s memory. Yet this seems unlikely, if only because the vast majority of Hebrew poetry, including

some very lengthy poems, are not acrostics. Memorizing them, if that were a concern, does not seem to have been a widespread problem. Rather, we should understand the acrostic structure as a more deliberately poetic choice, one that has real meaning for the psalm in question. The poems of Lamentations, for instance, can be understood to use the acrostic structure as a way of symbolically containing the deep grief that they express. The grief evident in the laments for the fall of Jerusalem is boundless; using an acrostic imposes a structure that makes that grief manageable. It is an artificial constraint that at once permits the expression of grief and simultaneously reminds us that it is being artificially constrained. Similarly, Psalm 119, the longest of the psalms, is a wisdom psalm that moves through the alphabet in eight-line segments: the first eight lines begin with *aleph*, the second eight with *bet*, etc. This can hardly be for the sake of memory; rather, it can be read as a means of expressing the totalizing nature of wisdom, covering all aspects of life just as it covers the entire alphabet, and many times over. Wisdom, according to this acrostic structure, is the alpha and the omega, and everything in between.

An appreciation of the aesthetics of the psalms cannot avoid the constant use of metaphor. This is a feature we appreciate in contemporary poetry as well: the poet's ability to use an image to elicit an emotional reaction, or to illustrate a general point through the use of a specific reference. The ancient Israelite poets who produced the psalms were masters of metaphor; as we have noted already, it is one of the reasons that the psalms retain so much of their power down to the present.

Poetry has been understood, from the ancient Greeks who theorized about it to our modern society, as the highest means of expression. This has to do with the aesthetic pleasure we derive from a well-crafted poem, to be sure, but also with poetry's ability to concentrate

emotions into a concise and accessible form. Perhaps the best known psalm in the corpus is

Psalm 23:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

my whole life long.

The beauty of this psalm is inescapable. It is notable that this is among the least obviously “parallelistic” psalms in the entire Bible; with the possible exception of “you are with me/your

rod and your staff—they comfort me,” almost no line exhibits the clear “A, and what’s more, B” construction that we saw in the line from Psalm 24. Yet Psalm 23 certainly employs metaphor, right from the beginning—“The Lord is my shepherd”—and a wonderful overarching structure, in which the speaker goes from being the sheep led by a shepherd to being the one that is in turn followed, by goodness and mercy; from being outside, in the pasture, through the valley of the shadow, to finally arrive inside, in the house of the Lord. It is not by chance that this psalm has achieved such wide use, both in liturgy and elsewhere. It is not merely aesthetically beautiful; it is also a remarkable, and remarkably concise, expression of a universal emotion.

By contrast, some of the least aesthetically attractive poetry in the Psalms is often that which is most didactic in nature. Psalm 119, although a remarkable technical achievement, is hardly readable. It is more like a lecture than a poem, despite being patently poetic. Where it fails to move is precisely where it seeks to instruct. The book of Psalms as a whole may have been shaped in order to be a sort of Torah, an instruction, but almost every reader, for the past two thousand years, has recognized that it is most valuable not where it instructs, but where it expresses our own feelings and situations in ways that we, not all being poetic geniuses, could not hope to discover for ourselves.

As we noted in the first section, what gives the Psalms so much of their power is that they do not claim to be divine revelation. As this is often how we characterize the importance of the biblical text—as the divine word—this aspect of the Psalms should not go unappreciated. The Psalms, precisely because, as poetry, they give us access to a higher mode of expression, and because they cover such a remarkable range of human experience in so many dimensions, are the part of the Bible where the individual gets to speak back to God. They give us a language for understanding and expressing our relationship with God, and a means to connect our lives with

those of the ancient Israelites who began down this religious path. Of all the books of the Bible, Psalms more than any other leaps out from the historical situations of its composition, from its ancient context, and makes itself an essential part of our lives, and the lives of everyone who reads from it.

Questions for Discussion:

What does it mean to read the Psalms, or any biblical text, as poetry?

How does poetic structure affect the meaning of the Psalms?

Is it important that the Psalms be aesthetically pleasing? How are our own aesthetic sensibilities shaped by biblical poetry, and how do we import our own sensibilities into the biblical text?