**Reading the Bible Again…For the First Time**

**(Hermeneutics: The Science and Art of Biblical Interpretation)**

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**LESSON 4 Part 2: Poetry as Genre**

Introduction:

Poetry is the second largest genre in the Bible. It covers about 30% of the Bible (narrative, 40%).

Poetry, as a kind of literature, is particularly emotional and impacting. Think about what it “does to us”:

There once was a man from the city,

Who saw what he thought was a kitty.

He patted its back and said “nice little cat”,

And then buried his clothes out of pity.

A quarrelsome wife is ***like*** Your tongue plots destruction;

a constant dripping on a rainy day, it is ***like*** a sharpened razor,

Restraining her is ***like*** restraining the wind You who practice deceit.

or grasping oil with the hand. Psalm 52:2

Proverbs 27:15-16

**I. Poetry Compared to Prose** (cf. Stein chapter 7).

A. An opportunity to understand how poetic description differs from the matter-of-fact presentation of prose is afforded us by comparing Judges 4 & 5 and Exodus 14 & 15, where the **same historical account is described in these two different ways.**

**Judges** 4 **Judges 5**

Prose Poetry

4:12-16 Battle narrative: 5:4-5 Battle review:

Barak leads for God The LORD himself leads

**Raw facts of battle** Divine perspective of battle

5:19-20

Hyperbole and personification, “stars fought”

4:17-22 Sisera death narrative 5:25-30

Detailed **brute fact explanation** **Poetic focus on a defeated enemy**

4:23-24 **Historical summary** 5:31 **Poetic with narrative summary**

**Exodus** 14 **Exodus 15**

[READ and note differences as illustrated in Judges above]

Note Poetic license in reference to “hurled into the sea” (15:1, 4, 21); “consumed them like stubble” (15:7); and “earth swallowed them” (15:12).

B. Lessons learned from this comparison.

1. Prose states the facts while poetry sings a song— “Physicians use prose and lovers use poetry.”
2. Prose details the facts while poetry solicits an emotional response.
3. Poetry utilizes “poetic license” within the conventions of literature.
4. Poetry particularly focuses on the divine perspective of an event.

**II. Biblical Poetry Utilizes the Power of Figurative Language**

1. “Poetry is a language of ***images*** that the reader must experience as a series of imagined sensory situations.” As such, it is primarily affective and experiencial.
2. Poetry artfully employs figures of speech to communicate larger ideas, particularly metaphor and simile.
3. Metaphor: “The Lord is my shepherd” (Ps 23:1)

“Thy word is a lamp to my feet” (Ps 119:105)

1. Simile: “He is like a tree planted by streams of water” (Ps 1:3)
2. Figures use the “principle of indirection”-- They say one thing but mean another. Note what the psalmist SAYS while he MEANS mean spirited slanderers:

“I am in the midst of lions

lie among ravenous beast--

men whose teeth are spears and arrows,

whose tongues are sharp swords.” (Ps 57:4)

1. Figures are extra-logical— “green pastures” and “still waters” solicit a feel for more than color and calm.
2. The employment of these and other figures in poetry calls for the reader to ***meditate*** upon the statements rather than just read and run.

**III. Biblical Poetry Utilizes Certain Forms of Composition to Give Balance to Its Presentations. These Forms Are Called “Parallelism.”** The traditional forms are

1. **SYNONYMOUS PARALLELISM**— Repetition of the same thought in the second line. Note how this observation clarifies partial lines, which when isolated, are subject to misunderstanding.

Surely I have been a sinner from birth,

*sinful* from the time my mother *conceived* me. (Ps 51:5)

Do not cast me from your presence

or *take* your *Holy Spirit* from me. (Ps 51:11)

The *fear* of the Lord is the beginning of *wisdom*,

and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (Pro 9:10)

Love your enemies,

*do good* to those who hate you,

*bless* those who curse you,

*pray* for those who mistreat you. (Lk 6:27-28

1. **ANTITHETICAL PARALLELISM**— The second line provides a sharp contrast to the thought of the first line. (Used about 130 times by Jesus!)

A gentle answer turns away rage,

But a word that hurts stirs up anger. (Pro 15:1)

Better a meal of vegetables where there is love

than a fattened calf with hatred. (Pro 10:1)

Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.

But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my

Father in heaven. (Mt 10:32-33)

1. **CLIMACTIC PARALLELISM**— The second line builds on the first line by repetition and addition.

When I consider your heavens,

the work of your fingers,

the moon and the stars,

which you have set in place,

what is man that you are mindful of him,

the son of man that you care for him? (Ps 8:3-4)

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets;

I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. (Mt 5:17)

1. **CHIASMIC PARALLELISM**— Ascending and descending structures between lines which answer to each other.

a In Judah

b God is known;

B his name is great

A in Israel. (Ps 76:1)

a For whoever wants to save his life

b will lose it

B but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel

a will save it. (Mk 8:35)

1. Other variations exist but are not treated here. The treatment here merely highlights several traditional categories and does not engage the scholarly debate about the nature of parallelism. Poetry can be more complicated than these categories.

**IV. Biblical Poetry Utilizes a Variety of Structural and Genre Opportunities to Organize its Presentation**.

A. Structural variety

1. Alphabetic poetry

Psalms 9-10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 145

Psalm 119 (this feature explains its massive length)

Proverbs 31:10-31

Proverbs 32:1-40

2. Alliteration and assonance in original languages.

B. Categories of sub-genres which are prominent in the poetry of the Psalms.

Laments (10, 35, 38, 51, 74, 77)

Prayers (imprecatory, 59:12-13; complaint, 22)

Thanksgiving (118)

Praise (18, 30, 65, 66, 96, 103, 107, 124, 136, 139)

Worship (27, 42-43, 48, 84, 121, 122, 125, 137)

Love (45)

War

Liturgical (certain Psalms for certain occasions, e.g. 92 on the Sabbath)

Wisdom (1, 19, 33)

Cf. The Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55) and the Benedictus (Lk 1:67-79) in the New Testament

*Think* about the subject matter of these categories as a window into the nature of biblical poetry.

**V. Poetry permeates the Bible.**

**The Books of the OT:**

Entirely poetic: Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Obadiah

Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah

Primarily poetic: Job, Joel, Isaiah, Amos, Hosea

Jeremiah is 50% poetic

Many other OT books have substantial sections of Poetry.

Seven books do not seem to have poetry: Leviticus, Nehemiah, Malachi, Ruth, Esther

Ezra, Haggai

**The Psalms: The Bible’s Premier Collection of “Poems”** [BUT many other books are poetry and many have poetic sections.]

The Psalms are organize into FIVE books:

Book 1 1-41 note 41:13 (book ending expressions)

Book 2 42-72 note 72:20

Book 3 73-89 note 89:52

Book 4 90-106 note 106:47-48

Book 5 107-150

Our current setting does not permit time to delve into the structure of the Psalms. PLEASE do not use the internet to figure the “why” or “logic” of the divisions and the subject of a book. I surfed this issue and saw that “one’s creativity is their only limitation.” False news.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

1. Poetry is “high context.”

2. Poetic “form” reigns

3. Figures of Speech are extensive

4. Poetry is poetry, not wooden literalism (hence poetic license applies)

5. Poetry is “visceral”

5. Poetry requires interpretation; Surface reading is usually moralized and therefore abused.