

The Poetry and Wisdom Literature of the Scriptures:

Every literate culture has poetry. Poetry could be defined as literature that is based on defined forms and structures, an art form. The word comes from a Greek word meaning "to form, to make." In different cultures, poetry takes different forms. In the English language, poetry is based usually on rhythm and rhyme. Line length, meter (beats), and usually we find rhyme is foundational. Whether discussing nursery rhymes, sonnets, Shakespeare, or Homer's epics - Sound is important. In contrast, Hebrew poetry uses neither rhythm or rhyme.

There is poetic material through much of the Old Testament - approximately one third of it is poetry, and only seven books of the Old Testament do not include some poetry. Poetry, which is easily memorized, is often found in the earliest literature of a people. There are the Psalms, magnificent songs of faith and worship, not only in the book of that name but scattered through the narrative books as well. There is poetry even in the first chapters of Genesis : see 1:27, 2:23, 4:14f., 4:23,24. Often versions such as the NIV and NASV set these in a different type. The Book of Job and the Song of Songs are extended dramatic poems. The Wisdom literature includes the Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the "wisdom" being of practical day by day living, rather than searching for philosophical truth. A large portion of the prophets are written in Hebrew poetic form as well. Most of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Lamentations, Amos, Obediah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk, and Zephaniah are written in poetic form, as well as parts of the other prophets.

THE FORM OF HEBREW POETRY: Parallelism

The prime feature of Hebrew poetry is thought- and word-parallelism. An idea is expressed and repeated in another way, or contrasted with another idea. "*The basic principle of Hebrew poetry is the repetition, elaboration, or variation of the sense of a line.*" (Pope: Anchor Bible: Job, p. LI) Along with this is a relatively greater terseness of form and a greater use of rhetorical devices. Rhythm and rhyme are secondary features of Hebrew poems, if they are considerations at all.

There are three basic kinds of parallelism: Synonymous, Anti-thetical and a catch-all for a variety of forms: Synthetic. A basic verse may be two, three, four or more lines.

Synonymous parallelism repeats the thought in synonymous terms:

Deut- 32:1,2: *Hear O heavens, and I will speak;
Hear O Earth, the words of my mouth.
Let my teaching fall like rain
and my words descend like dew,
like showers on new grass,
like abundant rain on tender plants.*

or Prov 11:25: *A generous man will prosper
he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.*

Anti-thetical parallelism contrasts the thought with another usually introducing the second line with "but":

Prov 10:1,2 *A wise son delights a father,
but a foolish son is a mother's grief.
Ill gotten treasures will not avail;
but virtue saves from death.*

Or Psalm 1:6 *For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous
but the way of the wicked will perish.*

Synthetic parallelism is the third category of form. *"The term Synthetic parallelism is a rather infelicitous catch-all for a great variety of artful elaboration's and departures from synonymy many terms have been introduced to describe the multiplicity of variations in poetic parallelism: emblematic, climactic, introverted, complete, incomplete, external, internal, among others. The proliferation of terms by modern critics in an attempt to describe the variant types of poetic parallelism testifies to the imagination, freedom and skill of the poets who were able to employ this device without falling into monotony."* (Pope. p. LII) Several of the more important forms are:

- **Completion or internal:** where the second line completes the first:
 Psalm 2:6 *Yet have I set my king
 Upon Zion my holy hill.*
- **Comparison:**
 Prov 15:17 *Better a meal of vegetables where there is love,
 than a fattened calf with hatred.*
- **Climatic:** where a stairstep of lines adds thoughts to the first:
 Psa 29:1;2: *Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones,
 Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name;
 Worship the Lord in the splendor of His holiness.*
- **Chaiastic:** Similar to Synonymous, only the second-line reverses the first:
 Psa 51:1 *Have mercy upon me o Lord, according to your unfailing love;
 according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.*
- **Emblematic:** The second line serves as an emblem to illustrate the first without any words of contrast:
 Prov 11:29 *A gold ring in a swine's snout-
 a fair woman without understanding.*
 Prov 25:25 *Cold water to a thirsty soul,
 and good news from a far country.*

The basic unit of Poetry is the Strophe or Stanza, while Narrative is the Paragraph. All these examples are of two-line stanzas - however there are groupings of three, four, five or more lines and other variations in the way individual lines of the stanzas can be related to each other. We must allow even a Hebrew poet the occasional use of poetic license. A variety of larger parallel structures, refrains (which are used in 18 of the Psalms), and other devices (acrostics, etc.) are used to unite the whole into a larger unit. There are distinct forms for some types of poems such as laments, thanksgivings, etc.

Hebrew poetry uses all the figures of speech of English poetry: metaphors, similes, personification, etc., etc. Poetic language makes extensive use of these. The vividness and colorful nature of Hebrew word pictures is striking.

Hebrew poetry is also noted for its terseness - it frequently drops nouns or verbs from the second line, or omits conjunctions ("and, but, or"), temporal indicators ("when, then, afterward") or logical connectors ("thus, therefore"). Three common features of prose are rare in poetry - the direct object marker; the relative pronoun ("who, which, that") and the narrative form of the verb ("and" plus the imperfect tense.)

It should be clear that Hebrew poetry is readily translated. Where the rhythm and rhyme of one language would be lost in translation, the "parallelism" of ideas and thoughts is not lost. These poetic forms are also characteristic of other ancient middle-eastern cultures such as Sumerian, Ugaritic, Assyrian, Babylonian, etc. The Ugaritic epic poems in particular have helped us in our understanding of Hebrew poetic forms, though they lack the beauty and truth of the Bible's great poets.