

Music and the Bible

Hebrew Poetry

Introduction

- It is sometimes difficult for a modern English-speaking reader to recognize and appreciate Hebrew poetry.
- Hebrew poetry is a very different style that we are used to. It is not built on rhythm and rhyming schemes like our poetry is.
- One of the challenges is even in identifying portions of Scripture that are meant to be poetic. The ancient Hebrew texts have no method to indicate there is poetry present.
 - Example: perhaps first poem in the Bible is the words of Lamech in Genesis 4:23-24, but we only recognize this from identifying the style as poetry.
- There are six books in the Bible that are classified as poetry: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations.

Parallelism

- “The fundamental law of Hebrew poetry is parallelism, which is also very frequently found in the other books which are not classed as poetical.” - A.C. Gaebelein
- “By parallelism in Hebrew poetry is meant that one line corresponds in thought to another line.” – B.H. Carroll
- While it is most common to find this in couplets of lines, we can see triplets in Lamentations chapters 1-3.
- B.H. Carroll notes that there are three primary forms of parallelism are a few less frequent ones:
 - **Synonymous**
 - “a second line simply repeats in slightly altered phraseology the thought of the first line.”
 - Examples: Psalm 2:4, Proverbs 1:18
 - **Antithetic**
 - “the second line is in contrast with the first.”
 - Examples: Psalm 20:8, Proverbs 10:1
 - **Synthetic/Constructive**
 - “the second line supplements the first, both together giving a complete thought.”
 - Examples: Proverbs 1:10, 3:27
 - **Climatic**
 - “the second line takes up words from the first and completes them.”
 - Examples: Psalm 29:1, Judges 5:7

- **Introverted**
 - “the first line corresponds with the fourth, and the second with the third.”
 - Examples: Psalm 123:1-2, Proverbs 23:15
- **Emblematic**
 - “the second line brings forward something similar to the first, but in a higher realm.”
 - Examples: Proverbs 25:14, 26:20-21

Further Characteristics

- Lines of Hebrew poetry can be grouped in *stanzas* or *strophes* based on common subject or thought. This can be found in as few as two lines (Proverbs 13:1) to sixteen lines in the sections of Psalm 119.
- A common technique is the *chiasm*, which is a “mirror” structure (such as in ABBA or ABCCBA).
 - Psalm 51:1 is an example of this structure.:
 - A - “Have mercy upon me, O God,”
 - B – “according to thy lovingkindness:”
 - B – “according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies”
 - A – “blot out my transgressions.”
 - This structure can be seen applied in larger sections also.
- Sometimes the lines of poetry are arranged as *acrostics* using the Hebrew alphabet.
 - The most famous example is Psalm 119, but other examples include Psalms 25, 34, 37, 111, 145, and Lamentations 1-4.
- There are many genres of Hebrew poetry, ranging from love songs (Song of Solomon) to laments (Lamentations) to narratives (Exodus 15:4-10) to dramas (Job) to proverbs (Proverbs) to songs (Psalms).