

## LEARNING FROM BIBLE POETRY

Lynn Gardner

After a concentrated study of the Psalms a man said, "This study has helped me know God."

A professor in a state college has his students read the book of Job when they discuss the problem of evil.

Some people each day read five Psalms to help them live with God and one chapter of Proverbs to help them live with their fellow man.

Some of the world's most beautiful literature is found in the Bible poetry. Many people turn to the Psalms for inspiration and comfort. What a blessing awaits the person who reads with understanding the poetry of the Bible!

Poetry is literary expression with rhythm. Clinton Lockhart lists the following descriptions of poetry: concrete in thought; artistic in form; imaginative in substance; emotional in spirit; rhythmical in movement (*Principles of Interpretation*, 1901, pp.

191-192). We have grown up being acquainted with poetry, but it is difficult to define the exact limits between poetry and prose.

Good poetry has a certain amount of dignity. It has rhythm and usually a certain pattern. It deals with deep feelings expressed in highly imaginative and figurative language. Poetry that endures has integrity, truth, energy, strength and deals with basic values and important issues.

### FACTS ABOUT BIBLE POETRY

Poetry may be divided into several types. *Lyric* poems are songs suitable to be sung to the lyre. Most of the poetry in the Bible is lyrical. Many of the Psalms are lyric poems. The Hebrews classified them according to the spirit of the subject matter as the hymn of praise, the lament or dirge, the love song, the wise saying and the riddle. *Gnomic* poetry consists of terse wise sayings about life. The books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are examples of gnomic poetry. *Dramatic* poetry stresses action, for example the book of Job. The book of Lamentations is an example of the *lament* or *elegy*.

Poetry deals with life as it is lived in the every-day world. Bible poetry deals with the home dwelling (Prov. 3,31); the sick room (Job 2; Psa. 18:1-6); the bedroom (Psa. 4:3,4); the wedding (Psa. 45; Song of Sol.); the business world (Prov. 1:11-15; 6:1-5). It is concerned with the mouth (Psa. 1:1-3; 8:1-4); the heart (Psa. 19:4; Prov. 4:23); the feet (Prov. 1:16); hands (Psa. 22:4); the eyes (Psa. 19:8; Prov. 6:17).

Most of the poetry of the Bible is found in the Old Testament. The following books are mostly poetic in form: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations and Job. Much of Isaiah and Jeremiah is poetry. Many other Old Testament books have parts that are poetry. At least one-third of the Old Testament was written in poetic form. Various other passages in the New Testament are also poetic. Most recent translations print the

poetry of the Bible in poetic form.

The Hebrew language and Hebrew poetry is essentially religious. The verb is prominent. When studying Bible poetry, pay special attention to the verbs. The Hebrews thought in pictures. Relatively free from abstractions, Hebrew poetry is expressed in concrete terms. Instead of saying God is omniscient, as the Greeks would have done, the Hebrew poet said, "For his eyes are upon the ways of a man, and he sees all his steps" (Job 34:21). The poetry of the Bible has some characteristics of form which are visible in the Hebrew language but are not seen in translation: alliteration, acrostic stanzas, alphabetic poems and puns.

Poetry with imaginative imagery and deep emotional quality is characterized by figurative language. Truth is effectively expressed through poetic imagery. The wonderfully expressive and highly imaginative figures of speech are able to be translated so as to retain much of their original freshness and power.

Through poetry, prophets and psalmists opened their hearts and expressed their anguish and sorrows, their joys and victories, the concerns of their hearts, their concerns for others, their experiences and expectations from God, and their awareness of the qualities of God, and their worship of God.

Poetry plumbs the depths of human experience and expression. The Bible poets were face-to-face with reality, especially with God.

### *PARALLELISM IN BIBLE POETRY*

Hebrew poetry resembles our blank verse. It does not have a rhyme of words but rather a rhythm of thought. Instead of a balance of sound, it has a balance of thought. Parallelism is one of the main features of Hebrew poetry. In parallelism a line repeats, contrasts, completes or develops a previous line.

It is this rhythm of thought that makes Bible poetry universal

poetry. Since it does not depend on rhythm of sounds it can be translated into other languages without losing its effectiveness. The translator needs only to be literal and retain as far as possible the original order of the words to make the poetry of the Hebrews the poetry of any language.

Recognition of parallelism in Bible poetry will prevent one from the mistake of thinking the author is making two separate statements when in reality the pair of lines repeats the same thought in different words. A line of poetry must not be read in isolation but lines must be read together, seeking to see how they relate to each other. Understanding parallelism assists one in learning the meaning of obscure terms and concepts.

Poetic parallelism has several varieties or patterns. In *synonymous parallelism* a pair of lines express the same thought in different but equivalent terms. It utilizes repetition.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin! (Psa. 51:2).

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork (Psa. 19:1).

Hear this, all peoples!  
Give ear, all inhabitants of the world (Psa. 49:1).

In *antithetic parallelism* lines express contrasting or opposing thoughts. Often the second line begins with "but." This form appears frequently in the Proverbs.

A wise son makes a glad father;  
but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother (Prov. 10:1).

A soft answer turns away wrath;  
but a harsh word stirs up anger (Prov. 15:1).

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish (Psa. 1:6).

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In *synthetic parallelism* the second line builds upon or develops the idea of the first line. This form utilizes the concept of addition.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and on his law he meditates day and night (Psa. 1:2).

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil,  
for thou art with me;  
thy rod and thy staff,  
they comfort me (Psa. 23:4).

Answer not a fool according to his folly,  
lest you be like him yourself (Prov. 26:4).

In *climactic parallelism* the second line completes the thought started in the first line in an ascending rhythm of thought. Expansion of thought is involved as the second line repeats part of the first but also adds something new.

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,  
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength (Psa. 29:1).

I sought the Lord and he answered me,  
and delivered me from all my fears (Psa. 34:4).

In *emblematic parallelism* one line expresses figuratively what another line expresses literally. The first line is often introduced by "as" and the second line by "so." Since it involves comparison it is also called comparative parallelism.

As a hart longs for flowing streams,  
so longs my soul for thee, O God (Psa. 42:1).

Like a gold ring in a swine's snout  
is a beautiful woman without discretion (Prov. 11:22).

## UNDERSTANDING BIBLE POETRY

1. *Read and reread passages attempting to visualize, understand and feel what the author experienced and expressed.* Preoccupation with the mechanics of poetry can destroy its wonderful communicative power.

2. *Understand the nature and types of parallelism in Bible poetry.* Realize that in synonymous parallelism both lines express the same thought. Establish the meaning of an obscure word or expression by the clear expression to which it stands parallel. Understanding the nature of parallelism adds to the enjoyment as well as comprehension of Bible poetry.

3. *Identify the Old Testament poetry that predicts the coming Messiah.* Jesus said, "Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44). Many messianic predictions are found in the Psalms (Psa. 16,22,69) and in the poetry of the prophets (Isa. 53).

4. *Interpret in the light of context and historical setting.* Some take pessimistic statements in Ecclesiastes as God's final truth. The pessimistic statements would be true "under the sun" (if there were no God). But because God is real the author of Ecclesiastes concludes that the greatest good in a man's life is to fear God and keep His commandments (Eccl. 12:13).

Carefully study poetry in the light of the immediate context as well as the larger context of the book and in the light of the historical setting of the poetry. The statements of Job's friends must not be accepted as divine truth because God declared that they were wrong and Job was right in their debate, even though they said some good and true things. David's prayer of repentance in Psalm 51 is a powerful statement when seen as his expression of true penitence when he realized his sin with Betsheba.

5. *Many statements in poetry were intended by the author to be understood in a figurative sense rather than in a literal sense.* Not everything in the Old Testament which sounds unconditional

and universal is to be understood in that sense. The Hebrews did not use the word *all* in the absolute sense that we use the word. To them it meant the bigger part. See Psalm 18:22; 26:7; 27:4; 34:1,17. *Forever* in the Old Testament usually does not mean without end. Rather it meant for the age, or for that period of time, or for one's lifetime (Psa. 37:29; Eccl. 1:4; Job 41:4). (See also Exod. 27:21; 28:43; 30:21; Lev. 6:22; 16:29,34; 17:7; 23:14,21,41; especially Deut. 23:3,6; 4:40; Jer. 7:7.)

Overstatement or hyperbole appears often in poetry. Extravagant language is often employed when strong feelings are expressed. Extreme sadness was expressed (Psa. 69:7-20; 88:3-9) as well as extreme gladness (Psa. 23:5,6; 98; 133).

We see Job used the overstatement, "The speech of a despairing man is wind" (Job 6:26). Because of chapters one and two we do not interpret literally Job's statement, "I was at ease, and he [God] broke me asunder; he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces . . . he slashes open my kidneys" (Job 16:12,13).

*Imprecatory psalms* are psalms which call for God to bring drastic judgment upon His enemies. Some sensitive souls wonder why such awful and harsh statements should be in the Bible. How can they be harmonized with God's mercy for the sinner? Benefit can be gained from what appears to be a serious problem. A careful study of these psalms can help us learn to "be angry but not to sin" (Psa. 4:4). Primary examples of these are Psalms 58:6-11; 59:5,13; 69:22,23; 109:6-15; 137:8,9; 139:19-22; 143:12.

Are these harsh statements just the sinful, human expressions of the psalmist? This view seems to conflict with the high view of the complete inspiration of the Bible writers.

The imprecatory psalms are better understood as expressions of righteous anger because God is being mistreated. Intense feeling burns into violent language. Statements like "dashing them [little ones] against the rock" are to be understood as figurative and not literal. The psalmist does not seek personal revenge. He

said, "Do I not hate them that hate these, O Lord?" (Psa. 139:21). See Matthew 18:5,6; I Corinthians 16:22; Galatians 1:8,9; Revelation 6:10; 18:20,21.

Psalm 137 is a lament for the suffering Israel had endured through the fall of Jerusalem and in captivity in Babylon.

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites  
the day of Jerusalem,  
how they said, "Raze it, raze it!  
Down to its foundations!"  
O daughter of Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall he be who requites you  
with what you have done to us!  
Happy shall he be who takes your little ones  
and dashes them against the rock! (Psa. 137:7-9).

The psalmist asks God to fulfill his promise, "It is mine to avenge, I will repay" (Deut. 32:35, NIV). In God's covenant with Israel He included curses on wicked nations that defied God (Deut. 32:23-25; 28:53-57). The psalmist addressed to God his angry feelings and asked God to take care of the injustice of these enemies of God.

In Hebrew poetry the word "hate" does not always mean what we use hate to mean. The psalmist's statement, "I have nothing but hatred for them" (Psa. 139:22, NIV), was no more sin than God's statement "Esau I have hated" (Mal. 1:3; Rom. 9:13). The Hebrew word may mean despise but it also may mean reject or be unwilling to put up with.

God loves beauty. He created much beauty in the world. He gave men the creative ability to make beautiful things. The poetry of the Bible is beautiful and great literature.

The poetry of the Bible speaks to our hearts as sinful men and women who live before the living God. The Biblical poets help us know ourselves — in our guilt, in our sadness, in our joys and in our praise to God. The poetry of the Bible helps us know ourselves because it helps us know and speak with our God.

### Study Questions

1. What is poetry?
2. List and briefly define three types of poetry.
3. Where can poetry be found in the Bible?
4. Why does poetry usually have more figurative language than prose?
5. What is parallelism in poetry?
6. List and briefly define five patterns of parallelism. Give one example of each.
7. List five guidelines for understanding Bible poetry.
8. What are imprecatory psalms? What problem do they present? How may they be understood?

### Project

Study Psalm 8. Reread it at least ten times. Identify any parallelism. Outline the pattern of the psalm. See how the New Testament quotes and uses this psalm. What does this psalm teach about God? What does it teach about man?

Using an exhaustive concordance identify all the Proverbs on the subject of words or tongue. Read each one and itemize on a sheet of paper the lesson taught in each verse.

