

POETIC STRUCTURE IN WISDOM LITERATURE

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WHAT IS POETRY?

Poetry is a text type. It is a passage of literature in which there is a special focus on feelings and ideas, expressed by the use of distinctive style, rhythm, and imagery.

The characteristics of Hebrew poetry include terseness (short lines), parallelism (*parallelismus membrorum*), and cultural and natural imagery (with a focus on Creation and ancient society).

Remember, Hebrew poetry shows in nearly every book of the Old Testament and it forms the bulk of the Wisdom Literature and the Prophetic and Apocalyptic Literature. Importantly, it also is the foundation for the few instances of New Testament poetry (in Greek).

PRINCIPLE

The key to understanding how a poem is organized (and its emphasis) is seeing how the stanzas work.

Or to put it differently, if you are able to grasp the content and arrangement of the stanzas, you will be able to see the author's point.

POETRY MORPHOLOGY/TERMS

Not everyone will know even how to talk about poetry. So, it might be worth going over some terms at the beginning of the session. The basic units of a poem are:

- *line* (or colon), hence terseness
- *verse* (or stich, bicolon or tricolon – not confused with English version verse delineation, which typically follows the verse of poetry, but not always; bicola and tricola are sets of 2 and 3 lines)
 - the relationship of the cola to each other within the verse is parallelism
- *stanza* (or strophe – this is a group of verses of poetry)
- *poem* (the full set of stanzas)

Let's see this in Psalm 2:1-3.

- 1 Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
- 2 The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying,
- 3 "Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us."

In these three verses, there are seven *lines* of poetry. Note how the editors of most bibles have indented certain lines. This is to indicate *verses* of Hebrew poetry. So, in this case, verses 1 is a *bicolon* (2 lines of poetry), verse 2 is *tricolon* (3 lines of poetry), and verse 3 is another *bicolon*. Again, the verse numbers here correspond to *verses* of Hebrew poetry. This is NOT always the case. Sometimes you will have two or more verses of poetry for each numbered verse.

In the ESV Bible, you might also note that there is a small space between verses 3 and 4 in Psalm 2. This is a way for the ESV editors to indicate that they think verses 1-3 are a *stanza*. They are usually (but not always!) right. One of the primary goals of doing structure work in Hebrew poetry is to figure out the stanzas for yourself so that you can see how they work together. Other ways of indicating *stanza* breaks in other bibles include special indentations for each new *stanza* or the use of a paragraph marker (¶) or quotations marks (“) at the beginning of each *stanza*.

Psalm 2, of course, is itself a *poem*.

TOOLS FOR IDENTIFYING STANZAS

In some ways, poetry is the easiest text type in which to see structure because the editors of the Bible have done a lot of the work. The single best tool for identifying stanzas is, again, looking at the English text and seeing where editors think the stanzas break. In the ESV, they have inserted a little space between stanzas.

Importantly, though, the editors aren't always right. You'll want to start there, but also make sure you're double-checking their work and can justify why the stanza should be broken there. The tendency of editors is to make too many stanzas rather than too few, so what they mark as stanzas will likely need to be grouped rather than split apart.

Ways of splitting up stanzas in Hebrew poetry:

- repetition (see Psalms 42-43)
- shifts in imagery (see Psalm 23, or Job 14)
- shifts in voice/shifts in point of view (Psalm 114)
- shift in type of parallelism
- other literary devices: alphabetical (Psalm 119)

METHOD

Work outside in.

- Workout the stanzas (using the tools above)
- Summarize the content of the stanzas.
 - Is there a logical flow?
 - Is there an obvious comparison or contrast?
 - Is there an important repetition?
- If there are a lot of stanzas, start to see if they group together at all.

- Try to identify the single concept or image that connects the stanzas from one to the next. It may be a logical or progressive notion, it may be a simple comparison or contrast, it may be a single aspect of God's character or the situation of the author. This idea, this thread that binds the stanzas, this concept is the *emphasis*.
- [If it is important, then identify the verses, sketch out kinds of parallelism.]
- Look for any imperatives or calls to action.

PSALM 23

It can be helpful to see this method at work. Let's take a look at Psalm 23.

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

3 He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

forever.

How many stanzas are there? How would you divide up this Psalm? Why?

- The ESV divides it up into three.
- There are two or three images/settings: 1-3 is a green pasture, 4 is a valley, 5-6 is a house; some would combine 1-3 and 4 and treat that as a single image/setting of a shepherd's field because 4 comes back to the rod and staff of the shepherd.
- There is a shift in voice between 1-3 and 4, where 1-3 refers to the shepherd in the third person where 4 starts to address the shepherd in the second person, perhaps signifying that there should be stanza break.

How would you summarize the content of the stanzas?

- 1-3 God provides and cares for David like a shepherd cares for and provides for a sheep

- 4 God protects David, like a shepherd protects a sheep
- 5-6 God prizes David like a host esteems a valued guest at a banquet (note the images of preparing a meal, anointing, overflowing cups)

You may have better thoughts here. I was going for somewhat homiletical as well as structural. It is worth noting that David connects the images to particular spiritual realities.

- God's provision isn't simply material provision, it's a provision to walk in righteousness.
- God's protection isn't merely physical protection, it's protection from the stain of evil and a comfort in treacherous times.
- God's prizing of David isn't only manifested as blessing in this life, but in a relationship of worship and adoration that extends into eternity.

What is the concept that runs through these stanzas and connects them to each other?

- It seems that this Psalm is all about the relationship between God and David. David is reflecting on God's character and how that plays out in relationship to him. God cares for David, bringing him along in righteousness and protecting him from evil and blessing him with the comfort of knowing that they will be in relationship forever.
- The temptation in a Psalm like this is to interpret it phrase by phrase and never ask "big picture" questions. If you Google search "Psalm 23 interpretation" you'll get thousands of sites that will tell you what it means phrase by phrase but never once try to state the main idea of the Psalm in a single *emphasis*.
- Ultimately, then, it seems this Psalm is David's expression of confidence/hope that God will take care of him and preserve their relationship, even as David walks through a difficult time (i.e., the valley of the shadow of death, the presence of mine enemies).

[KINDS OF PARALLELISM]

If you want to get into parallelism, you can. But again, this is only rarely helpful in finding stanzas. The goal of parallelism is to emphasize (via call and response, line and it's intensifying or contrasting echo). It is not necessarily *structural*.

We mentioned above about "noticing the shifts" in parallelism. For this, we need to understand, broadly, about parallelism. Various academic works on the subject put the types of parallelism in the dozens—and there is no consensus on number or definitions. I, however, think there is a way of working in parallelism in my study using just three broad categories (and most sets of a parallel lines will fall into the first two categories here).

1. Synonymous Parallelism

One kind of parallelism is synonymous parallelism. In it, the second line repeats the first line without altering, adding, or subtracting anything significant.

Genesis 4:23

Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;

you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:

1.1. *Inverted or Chiastic Parallelism*

One kind of synonymous parallelism is chiasmic parallelism (or chiasmus). In it, multiple lines or elements

of lines are stated and then restated in inverse order. The pattern is often shown as A-B-B'-A' or A-B-CB'-A' where C represents a vertex that has no counterpart.

Isaiah 11:13b

Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah,
and Judah shall not harass Ephraim.

In this case, the pattern is A-B-C-C'-B'-A'. Where A=Ephraim, B=not be jealous/not harass and C=Judah. It would look like this:

Ephraim (A)
 shall not be jealous of (B)
 Judah, (C)
 and Judah (C')
 shall not harass (B')
Ephraim. (A')

See also Isaiah 2:3.

1.2. *Climactic Parallelism*

Climactic parallelism is sometimes categorized as a subset of synonymous parallelism. In it, the second line echoes the first, in part, and adds a new element.

Psalms 29:1

Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

1.3. *Emblematic Parallelism*

Another kind of parallelism is emblematic parallelism. In it, a line takes the form of a simile or a metaphor as a figurative statement of the other a straightforward or factual statement.

Psalms 42:1

As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.

2. **Antithetic Parallelism**

Another kind of parallelism is antithetic parallelism. In it, the second line of poetry contrasts with or negates the first line in thought or meaning.

Proverbs 10:1

A wise son makes a glad father,
but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.

3. Synthetic Parallelism

The last kind of parallelism we're looking at there is synthetic parallelism. In Lowth's work, this category referred to parallel lines in which the second adds to or completes the first.

Psalms 2:6

As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.

Synthetic is a difficult kind of parallelism to distinguish from those lines which are not semantically parallel at all and can be confused with lines that are only syntactically parallel. What's more, the term is now frequently used to refer to all lines of poetry that don't fit within the other kinds of semantic parallelism. It has really ceased to be a useful category.

Psalms 148:7-12

Praise the LORD from the earth,
You great sea creatures and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and mist,
stormy wind fulfilling his word!

Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!
Beasts and all livestock,
creeping things and flying birds!

Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the earth!
Young men and maidens together,
old men and children!

Isaiah 1:3 (differences between Lowth and Kugel)

The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib.
But Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.