

The Poetical Books of the Old Testament An Introduction

The majority of the verses in the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs are in the form of Hebrew poetry. Before we begin it would be good for us to spend some time learning about Hebrew poetry.

Unlike English, Latin or German poetry, Hebrew poetry does not rely on rhyme and rhythm. It uses what has been called "Parallelism of Members." "This term refers to the practice of balancing one thought or phrase by a corresponding thought or phrase containing approximately the same number of words, or at least a correspondence in ideas." (Archer)

This parallelism can be divided into the following types: synonymous, antithetic, synthetic and climactic.

Synonymous Parallelism: (the second half of the verse restates the first)

Job 3:11 (NIV) "Why did I not perish at birth,
and die as I came from the womb?"

Psal 24:1 (NIV) The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;

Antithetic Parallelism: (the second half of the verse contrasts the first)

Psal 1:6 (NIV) For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Prov 1:7 (NIV) The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

Prov 11:28 (NIV) Whoever trusts in his riches will fall,
but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.

Prov 13:24 (NIV) He who spares the rod hates his son,
but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.

Synthetic Parallelism: (the second half of the verse advances the thought of the first)

Psal 1:1 (NIV) Blessed is the man who does not
walk in the counsel of the wicked or
stand in the way of sinners or
sit in the seat of mockers.
2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.

Question and answer:

Psal 4:6 (NIV) Many are asking, "Who can show us any good?"
Let the light of your face shine upon us, O LORD.

Illustration or comparison:

Psal 4:7 (NIV) You have filled my heart with greater joy
than when their grain and new wine abound.

Explanation or reason:

Psalms 4:8 I will lie down and sleep in peace,
for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.

Climactic Parallelism: (often included as a type of synthetic parallelism, an incomplete first thought prepares for a conclusion or climax in the second half of the verse.)

Psal 29:1 (NIV) Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

Chiasm:

Chiasm gets its name from the Greek letter Chi which looks like an X. The two halves of the verse form an "A B B A" format.

Prov 5:21 (NIV) For a man's ways are in full view of the LORD,
and he examines all his paths.

Prov 10:11 (NIV) The mouth of the righteous is a
fountain of life,
but violence overwhelms the
mouth of the wicked.

- In what way is God's wisdom evident in inspiring people to use this style of poetry for the Bible?

Other features of Hebrew poetry:

The Acrostic: Psalm 119 (Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 145; Proverbs 31:10-31)

אֲשֶׁרִי תְּמִימֵי־דֶרֶךְ הֵהֲלִכִים בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה:
אֲשֶׁרִי נֹצְרֵי עֲדוּתוֹ בְּכָל־לֵב יִדְרְשׁוּהוּ:
אֵף לֹא־פָעֵלוּ עוֹלָה בְּדַרְכּוֹ הִלְכוּ:
אִתָּה צוֹיִתָּה פִקְדוֹתֶיךָ לְשֹׁמֵר מֵאֵד:
אֲחִלִּי יִכְנֹו דַרְכֵי לְשֹׁמֵר חֻקֶיךָ:
אִז לֹא־אֲבוֹשׁ בְּהִבִּטִי אֶל־כָּל־מִצְוֹתֶיךָ:
אִוְדֶךָ בִּישָׁר לִבִּי בְלִמְדֵי מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ צִדְקֶךָ:
אִת־חֻקֶיךָ אֲשֹׁמֵר אֶל־תִּעֲוֹבֵנִי עַד־מָאֵד:
בְּמָה יִזְכֶּה־נַעַר אֶת־אֲרָחוֹ לְשֹׁמֵר כְּדַבְרֶיךָ:
בְּכָל־לִבִּי דִרְשָׁתִיךָ אֶל־תִּשְׁגֵּנִי מִמִּצְוֹתֶיךָ:
בְּלִבִּי צָפַנְתִּי אִמְרֹתֶיךָ לְמַעַן לֹא אֲחֻטָּא־לְךָ:
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה לְמַדְנֵי חֻקֶיךָ:
בְּשִׁפְתֵי סִפְרָתִי כָל מִשְׁפָּטֵי־פִיךָ:
בְּדֶרֶךְ עֲדוּתֶיךָ שִׁשְׁתִּי כַעַל כָּל־הוֹן:
בְּפִקְדוֹתֶיךָ אֲשִׁיחָה וְאֲבִיטָה אֶרְחֹתֶיךָ:
בְּחֻקֶיךָ אֲשַׁתְּעֶשֶׂע לֹא אֲשַׁכַּח דְּבָרֶיךָ:

Simile: (comparison using “like” or “as”)

Song 2:2 (NIV) Like a lily among thorns
is my darling among the maidens.

Prov 26:14 (NIV) As a door turns on its hinges,
so a sluggard turns on his bed.

Metaphor: (comparison without “like” or “as”)

Psal 22:12 Many bulls surround me;
strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.

Psal 22:16 (NIV) Dogs have surrounded me;
a band of evil men has encircled me,
they have pierced my hands and my feet.

Synecdoche: (part for the whole)

Psal 51:8 (NIV) Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

Personification: (ascribing the action of living persons to inanimate things)

Psal 19:2 (NIV) Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge.

Psal 85:10 (NIV) Love and faithfulness meet together;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.

Allegory: (extended metaphor, using symbols to represent truths)

Ecclesiastes 12:1-7

Anthropomorphism: (a human form ascribed to God who is a spirit)

Job 12:9 (NIV) Which of all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this?
10 In his hand is the life of every creature
and the breath of all mankind.

Psal 98:1 (NIV) Sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things;
his right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.

Introduction to Job

The book of Job presents the age old struggle to answer the question “why do bad things happen to good people?” Job’s “friends” try to answer on the basis of logic and experience. They preach the false idea that if you are good you will be blessed, if you are bad you will be punished; so if things are going well, it must be because you are living right, if things aren’t going well, it must be because you aren’t living right. The book doesn’t provide an answer that satisfies our sinful nature. The answer it gives is, no matter what happens, trust God and his love.

Most agree that Job must have lived about the time of Abraham (2000 BC). There are several hints that lead to this conclusion. He seems to have lived about 180-200 years, he is the priest of his family as the patriarchs were, wealth was measured in cattle, the mention of Sabean and Chaldean raiders, and the discovery of an Aramaic paraphrase dating from that time.

We don’t know for sure where the land of Uz is. But it is referred to as East and Eliphaz, one of Job’s friends, is from Teman which is associated with Edom. The location seems to be somewhere South-East of the Dead Sea.

The introduction and the conclusion of the book are written in prose. Chapters 3 – 31 are poetry.

Structure of the book:

- Prose prologue

- Three cycles of speeches/discussions between Job, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar(2).

- Elihu’s speeches

- God speaking to Job

- Prose epilogue