

Hebrew Poetry

What is a poem?

- Webster's definition: "an arrangement of words written or spoken: traditionally a rhythmical composition, sometimes rhymed, expressing experiences, ideas, or emotions in a style more concentrated, imaginative, and powerful than that of ordinary speech or prose: some poems are in meter, some in free verse."
- Naturally, this definition was written to define English poetry. When it comes to Hebrew poetry, some of it is applicable and some of it not.

The goal of poetry is to "express... experiences, ideas, or emotions in a style more concentrated, imaginative, and powerful than that of ordinary speech or prose." In that respect, English and Hebrew poetry are very similar.

However, the form of Hebrew poetry is often very different than English poetry:

- *Does Hebrew Poetry Rhyme?*
 - No. In English, rhyming is often a key element to poetry, but in Hebrew, parallel phrases is often what makes a poem a poem.
- *Does Hebrew Poetry Have Rhythm?*
 - No. Some scholars would argue yes, but their explanations seem much too complicated for them to be right. For all practical purposes, Hebrew poetry does not have strict rules about rhythm that many styles of English poetry do. Hebrew poets were more concerned with parallel ideas and phrases than with rhyme or rhythm.

Hebrew Parallelism

One of the most significant features of Hebrew poetry is the use of "parallelism." This is where two or more phrases are juxtaposed.

"At its core, parallelism is correspondence. ... We can say, then, that parallelism is a relationship of correspondence between the cola of a poetic line."¹

How does parallelism work?

"Parallelism is the art of saying something similar in both cola but with a difference added in the second colon. Usually there is some kind of movement from the first to the second colon, some kind of addition."²

¹ Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 33.

² Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 38.

Types of Parallelism

1) Synonymous Phrases: somewhat synonymous phrases that build on each other or examine a truth from different angles. See Psalm 1:5.

“Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.”

2) Antithetic Phrases: contrasts two opposite truths, like two sides of the same coin. See Psalm 1:6.

“for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.”

3) Climatic Phrases: “the second and any subsequent lines pick up a crucial word, phrase, or concept and advance it in a stair-steps fashion.” See Psalm 1:1.

“Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers ...”

4) Chiastic or Introverted Phrases: the two lines have an “A ... B, B' ... A'” structure. See Psalm 1:6.

A - for the Lord
B - knows the way of
B - the righteous,
A- but the way of the wicked will perish

A B B' A'
for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Why did God choose Hebrew poetry?

- Perhaps the reason is because it translates well. Much of the impact of the poetry is preserved when it is translated into a different language.

- If you translate English poetry into another language, you destroy most of the beauty because English poetry is based so heavily on rhyme and rhythm. But since Hebrew poetry is based on parallel thoughts more than parallel rhyme and rhythm, much of the beauty and impact of the poetry is preserved when you go from one language to another.

How to Read Hebrew Poetry

There are a few important things to keep in mind when reading Hebrew Poetry, wherever it occurs in Scripture:

1) *Poetry is intended to be read slowly, thoughtfully, and with repetition.*

Since poems compact thoughts into concise phrases, it takes time to unpack everything that is there. There is some benefit to “speed reading” poetry, but only after careful reflection and meditation does a poem reveal all its secrets.

2) *Poetry tends to use metaphors and imaginative language to portray truth.*

For example, Psalm 17:8 states, “Hide me in the shadow of your wings.” Here David is praying for God’s protection, using “wings” as a metaphor. He is not making a theological statement, teaching us that God actually has wings. Thus, we need to allow the writer to use metaphors that are appropriate in poetry, and be careful about the truths that we draw out of the text.

3) *Poetry tends to describe reality in broad strokes. It emphasizes general truths and usually does not mention exceptions.*

For example, Proverbs 22:6 states, “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” This is a general truth, but will not hold true in every case. Children who are raised in godly homes, for the most part, will follow in the faith of their parents but not always. We need to interpret this section of scripture as describing general truths and not iron-clad promises.

Job

I. The Main Idea of Job

God is the source of all wisdom (Job 28:23-28).

Although humans can discern wise principles to a limited extent, our understanding is limited so we need to approach life with humility.

In the face of situations that don't make sense (such as the righteous suffering or the wicked prospering) God doesn't answer all of our questions, but instead offers Himself as a firm foundation where we can place our trust.

II. Outline of Job³

- I. Prologue (Job 1-2)
 - A. Job's Character (Job 1:1-5)
 - B. Job's Calamities (Job 1:6-2:13)
- II. Dialogues (between Job and Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) (Job 3-27)
 - A. Job's Opening Lament (Job 3)
 - B. Cycle 1: Consolation (Job 4-14)
 - C. Cycle 2: The Fate of the Wicked (Job 15-21)
 - D. Cycle 3: Specific Accusations (Job 22-27)
- III. Interlude on Wisdom (Job 28)
- IV. Monologues (Job 23:1-42:6)
 - A. Job's Call for Vindication (Job 29-31)
 - B. Elihu's Speeches (Job 32-37)
 - C. God's Response to Job (and Job's answer) (Job 38:1-42:6)
- V. Epilogue (42:7-17)
 - A. God's Verdict (Job 42:7-9)
 - B. Job's Restoration (Job 42:10-17)

III. Interpretive Keys to Job

Genre: Some Narrative; Mostly Poetry

- It expresses "experiences, ideas, or emotions in a style more concentrated, imaginative, and powerful than that of ordinary speech or prose."

³ Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker, and Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 502-503.

- Form of poetry is Hebrew parallelism.

Wisdom Literature

- Wisdom literature was concerned with uncovering the hidden principles that God hardwired into creation so that one could live their life in harmony with those principles and thereby experience success.
 - The book of Proverbs is a classic treatment of wisdom.
 - The books of Job and Ecclesiastes grapple with the harsh reality that righteous living does not always lead to success.
- A full introduction to wisdom literature will be provided in our discussion of Proverbs.

When did Job live?

- Job seems to have lived before or around the time of Abraham. He was at least 190 years old when he died (Job 42:16), and his possessions and lifestyle were very similar to Abraham's. There is no reference to Abraham, Israel, the Tabernacle, or the Temple, so it seems most likely that this holy man lived before any of those people or things had existed.

When was the book of Job written?

- The date of the book itself is not clear. The author is not known. Although the events seem to have occurred in the third millennia B.C., the book itself could have been written much later.

IV. Key Passages of Job

Job 1-2 – God & Satan's Interactions

From the interactions between God and Satan it is clear that Satan does not have absolute freedom in this world. God is the ultimate authority so Satan is limited in what he can do.

Job 3-27 - Dialogues between Job and Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar

- Outline:

A. Job's Opening Lament (Job 3)	Job alone
B. Cycle 1: Consolation (Job 4-14)	Job interacting w/ Eliphaz, Bildad, & Zophar
C. Cycle 2: The Fate of the Wicked (Job 15-21)	Job interacting w/ Eliphaz, Bildad, & Zophar
D. Cycle 3: Specific Accusations (Job 22-27)	Job interacting w/ Eliphaz & Bildad
- As the interaction between these four individuals progresses, the conversation deteriorates.
 - The three friends start in Cycle 1 with general accusations against Job.

- o In Cycles 2 & 3 the accusations get more specific.

The problem being highlighted here is that the three friends cannot break out of their paradigm that says: obedience always leads to blessings, and disobedience always leads to disaster.

- o They wrongly concluded: "If Job is experiencing a great disaster, then he must have committed a great evil."
- However, the narrator and God Himself already told us that Job was "blameless and upright" (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3; i.e., obedient to God), and told us that the disaster was unfairly sent upon Job by Satan. Thus the conclusion of the three friends was incorrect.
 - o The book of Proverbs explains that in general obedience leads to blessings while disobedience leads to disaster.
 - o The books of Job and Ecclesiastes explain that sometimes there are exceptions to that principle.

Job 28 – Interlude on Wisdom

- "Chapter 28 serves as an interlude on wisdom by Job himself (or the author of Job) that speaks to the dialogues and the misunderstanding of wisdom found in them."⁴
- This chapter contrasts man's ability to mine the deep places of the earth with man's inability to find wisdom.
 - o Bartholomew & O'Dowd summarize this chapter in this way: "although God has carefully hidden all the precious jewels and metals of the world, humanity has been able to find them out. Not so with wisdom. Wisdom remains elusive despite all the developments and ingenuity of the human race."⁵
- Verse 20 repeats the words of verse 12:
 - o Job 28:12 "But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?"
 - o Job 28:20 "From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding?"
- The poem answers those questions by saying: "God understands the way to it, and he knows its place" (28:23). So the book tells us to look to God for wisdom, not ourselves.
- The poem closes with a statement about the fear of the Lord, similar to Proverbs 3:7.
 - o Job 28:28 "And he said to man, 'Behold, **the fear of the Lord** (*adonai*), that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.'"
 - o Proverbs 3:7 "Be not wise in your own eyes; **fear the Lord** (*Yahweh*), and turn away from evil."

⁴ Merrill, Rooker, and Grisanti, *The World and the Word*, 502.

⁵ Craig G. Bartholomew & Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; Apollos, 2011), 141.

God's Response to Job (and Job's answer) (Job 38:1-42:6)

- "Somewhat ironically, God's *answer* is in fact a series of more than eighty rhetorical questions. ... The two lists of questions are divided by Job's short reply in Job 40:3-5."⁶
- Instead of answering Job's questions or allowing Job to make his case, God humbles Job by asking him a series of questions that place Job in a finite and humble position while placing God in an omnipotent and exalted position.
- Although he had been asking all along for an audience with God, when he finally got one, Job had nothing to say. (Job 40:3-5; 42:1-6)
- At the end of the experience, God does not answer any of Job's questions, but He does point Job to himself.
 - o "The Yahweh speeches assured Job that his relationship with God was intact and that his suffering was not indicative of a loss of God's favor. This experience made it clear that Job was right in vigorously affirming his innocence through his suffering; at the same time it is clear that Job must continue to affirm God's goodness and justice even when his innocence and God's justice seemed like mutually incompatible ideas. There is mystery at the intersection of faith and experience, and wisdom does not always provide a way to explain away such tensions."⁷

Why do bad things happen to good people?

The book does not directly answer that question. Instead, the book teaches:

- 1) Sometimes bad things happen to good people because there are events happening in heaven that cannot be seen by man, but the ramifications can be felt by man. The book makes no indication that Job ever learned about God's conversation with Satan.
- 2) When bad things happen to good people, the proper response is humility and trust in the God who is in control and who is perfectly just.

V. Messianic Elements within Job

Adapted from Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 61-64.

Foreshadowing

In the book of Job, Jesus is foreshadowed by the repeated reference to a mediator between God and man. This can be seen in four passages:

Job 9:33 [Job speaking]

"There is no **arbiter** between us, who might lay his hand on us both."

⁶ Bartholomew & O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 144.

⁷ Edward M. Curtis, *Interpreting the Wisdom Books: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2017), 62.

Job 16:19-21 [Job speaking]

"Even now, behold, **my witness** is in heaven,
and **he who testifies for me** is on high.
My friends scorn me;
my eye pours out tears to God,
that **he would argue the case of a man with God**,
as a son of man does with his neighbor.
For when a few years have come
I shall go the way from which I shall not return."

Job 19:23-27 [Job speaking]

"Oh that my words were written!
Oh that they were inscribed in a book!
Oh that with an iron pen and lead
they were engraved in the rock forever!
For I know that **my Redeemer [Heb.: *goel*]** lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
yet in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see for myself,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!"

Job 33:23-28 [Elihu speaking]

"If there be for him an angel,
a mediator, one of the thousand,
to declare to man what is right for him,
and he is merciful to him, and says,
'Deliver him from going down into the pit;
I have found a ransom;
let his flesh become fresh with youth;
let him return to the days of his youthful vigor';
then man prays to God, and he accepts him;
he sees his face with a shout of joy,
and he restores to man his righteousness.
He sings before men and says:
'I sinned and perverted what was right,
and it was not repaid to me.
He has redeemed my soul from going down into the pit,
and my life shall look upon the light.'"

Job both expresses his need for a mediator and his faith that such a mediator exists.