ENJOY THE BEAUTY OF THE POETRY!

Poetry can be confusing, especially when we are trying to see the meaning of a text, and it can be frustrating when that text is trying to tell us something important. God chose to reveal himself and his plan of salvation in part through poetry in the Bible. Understanding what it is and how poetry works can help us gain deeper insight into the God behind the words. Join us as we explore the poetry of the Bible and hear God ever more clearly.

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Poetry is beautiful and moving. It can give expression to thoughts and emotions that we didn’t know we had. But let’s be honest, poetry can be confusing, especially when we are trying to see the meaning of a text, and it can be frustrating when that text is trying to tell us something important.

God chose to reveal himself and his plan of salvation in part through poetry in the Bible. Understanding what it is and how poetry works can help us gain deeper insight into the God
behind the words. Knowing poetry can help us see more clearly what God is doing and what is being communicated to us through the rhymes and rhythms of the text. Join us as we explore the poetry of the Bible and hear God ever more clearly.

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The Lord is my shepherd,
I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul (ps. 23:1–3a).

Skim quickly through the Old Testament. Even without reading a word, you’ll be able to tell the difference between the poems and the stories. The poems are the ones with all the white space on the page. While the stories of the Old Testament have sentences and paragraphs, the poems have short lines that form stanzas.

If you leaf through the Old Testament from Genesis
through Malachi, you’ll notice that there’s a lot of poetry. Most books have poems in them, and some books are completely or almost completely poetic. Books that are mostly or completely poetry include the wisdom books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes) and most of the prophetic books (especially Isaiah, but also Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Minor Prophets). Other booklets in this series cover those books of the Old Testament in greater depth, but learning how to read poetry in this booklet will deepen your understanding of them as well. This booklet, however, will focus on exploring three poetic books in the Old Testament: Psalms, Lamentations, and Song of Songs (Song of Solomon).

So there is a lot of poetry in the Old Testament, but why? I don’t know about you, but if I’m honest with myself, I’m not a big fan of poetry. I love a story; they seem so much easier to understand and follow. If the purpose of the Bible was to communicate facts, there’s nothing like a good prose statement to do so.

But God apparently is interested in doing more in the Bible than just giving us facts. And that’s where poetry comes in. Poetry does a great job, not only of informing our intellect, but also of arousing our emotions, stimulating our imaginations, and appealing to our wills. God is interested in us as whole people, not just brains.
But what makes the poetry of the Old Testament distinct? How does understanding the distinct characteristic of Hebrew poetry help us better appreciate Scripture?

**How Is Biblical Poetry Unique?**

Why all the white space?

Poetry says a lot using a few words. It’s compact language. The poets who wrote portions of the Old Testament spoke Hebrew, and since Hebrew poetry is slightly different than poetry written in modern languages, we need to ask how poetry worked in that ancient Near Eastern culture. Today we might be familiar with poetry that has rhyme and meter (a patterned rhythm). A popular poetic proverb goes:

> Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

Hebrew poetry, on the other hand, does not use either rhyme or meter. We come to know better how to read Hebrew poetry when we become familiar with the tools that the ancient poet uses, particularly parallelism, imagery, and acrostics.

*Parallelism* may be the single most important poetic tool to understand, because it is used so frequently in Hebrew poetry and affects how we should read it. Parallelism is a term that is used to describe the echoing affect within a single poetic line or verse.
Notice the echoes within each verse of the first three verses of Psalm 2:

Why do the nations conspire
   and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up
   and the rulers band together
against the Lord
   and against his anointed, saying,
“Let us break their chains
   and throw off their shackles” (psalm 2:1–3).

Do you hear the echoes between “nations” and peoples” and between “conspire” and “plot” in the first verse? How about between “kings of the earth” and “rulers” and “rise up” and “band together” in the second verse? And what about “let us break their chains” and “throw off their shackles” in the third verse?

But is the second part of each parallel line simply saying the exact same thing as the first part only using different words? That’s the way some people read a Hebrew poem like Psalm 2, but that would be mistaken. While such a reading would not completely misunderstand the verse, it would not get all the rich meaning out of it.

The truth is that in Hebrew poetry the second part always takes the meaning of the verse further than the first part. The second part continues by
sharpening or intensifying the thought of the first part. In other words, referring to the first part as A and the second part as B, A does not equal B (A≠B), but B furthers the thought of A.

I know that this discussion is getting a bit technical, but if your eyes are beginning to blur, just consider what this means for reading Psalm 1:1:

Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers.

First of all, notice that this poetic line has three parts rather than only two. Typically the Hebrew poetic line has only two parts, but occasionally they can have three or four or, more infrequently, even more parts. But even so, these longer poetic lines work the same way as those with only two parts.

So how should we read this first verse of Psalm 1, in light of the knowledge that Hebrew parallelism is not just repeating the same idea but carrying forward the basic idea and expanding on it in the following parts? Well, it’s clear that all three parts of the verse are pronouncing a blessing on the person who does not associate with bad people. On the other hand, there is also an intensification as we move from A to B to C. We can see this intensification as the verbs move from walking to standing to sitting. When we walk with
someone we associate ourselves with them, but can easily break away. To stand with someone requires more energy to move away, and then to sit with someone shows a really settled connection with them. Further, the reference to “the wicked” and then to “sinners” and finally “mockers” also involves an intensification. All three are bad, but sinners are worse than wicked people and mockers are the worst of all since they are not only bad, but they try to shame the innocent.

What can we learn from this study of parallelism? We’ve already mentioned that poetry is compact language, packing a lot of meaning into a very few words. That means we need to slow down when we read and carefully reflect on the words that are used. Our understanding of parallelism encourages us to pay attention to how the echoes within a poetic verse continue but carry forward the thought of the first part.

The other frequent characteristic of Hebrew poetry, like that which we find in the book of Psalms, is the frequent use of imagery. The use of imagery, or figurative language, is not unique to Hebrew poetry, so we might be able to understand it more quickly than parallelism, but still it is helpful to take a look at the typical type of imagery we get in Old Testament poetry.

The book of Psalms, for instance, is full of figurative language, mostly metaphors and similes, in which two things are compared to each other that are essentially not alike except in some specific way. In
the psalms, God is compared to a shepherd (see Psalm 23:1 cited above), a storm (Psalm 29), a king (Psalm 47), a mother of a weaned child (Psalm 131), and more. In the book of Lamentations, the suffering people of God are likened to a weeping widow (Lamentations 1) and a man of affliction (Lamentations 3). The man and woman in the Song of Songs speak to each other with passionate compliments dripping with figurative language. The man lovingly tells the woman that she is “like a lily among thorns” (Song 2:2) and the woman responds that he is “like an apple tree among the trees of the forest” (2:3).

These are just a few examples of the figurative language that occur in biblical poetry. We can again see through imagery how poetry causes readers to slow down and reflect on the rich meaning of the poem as we have to unpack the image by asking questions like “in what way is God like a shepherd?” We can also see how the imagery of poetry heightens the emotional impact of a poem. To think of God as a shepherd is not only more vivid than to simply state “God guides us, sustains us, and protects us,” but warms our heart in a way that the non-figurative statement does not.

Hebrew poets love to write using few words to convey deep meaning. They carefully consider their word choices as they create parallels within a poetic line (parallelism) as well as striking images that stimulate the reader’s imagination.
But this survey of poetic devices just skims the surface by looking at the poet’s most frequently used tools. There are others. The poet sometimes uses sound plays and word play, for instance. But I will focus on just one other poetic device, in Psalm 119, because most it comes through in translation into English.

When you turn to that (long) psalm, you will see that each eight verses are divided into separate sections, and that the translators have put a Hebrew letter at the start of each section. Those who know Hebrew can see that the first section is marked by the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet (aleph) and the last one by the last letter (tav). There are twenty-two sections, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Even though Psalm 119 is the only one that is clearly marked in this way in the Old Testament, there are about a dozen examples of such poems in Psalms, Lamentations (see chapter 3), and Proverbs. Today we refer to these poems as acrostics, and they are a way of communicating that the poet is giving us a complete presentation of his topic, an A to Z so to speak.

We have already acknowledged that poems may be found throughout the Old Testament. But we will look at three books that feature poems that express the inner emotions of the poet: Psalms, Lamentations, and the Song of Songs.
Psalms: The Sung Prayers of Israel

The book of Psalms is a collection of 150 separate poems. These are poems that were set to music, so we can also call them songs. Many of them have titles that give us information about various matters including the composer, the type of psalm (though these names shiggaion, miktam, and more aren’t often translated because their meaning is obscure to us), musical instruments, and in a few cases even the particular historical setting that inspired its composition (see, for example Psalm 3, “when he [David] fled from his son Absalom). From these titles we learn that the earliest poem comes from the time of
Moses (Psalm 90) and then from the content we find out that some psalms were written in the post-exilic period (Psalm 126). The book of Psalms came together over a one thousand year period, from the earliest to the latest period of Old Testament history.

![These titles are likely not original to the psalm but added later for grouping purposes. Also, attributions such as “Of David” do not necessarily indicate that David wrote it. That designation can also be used to group psalms written in the style of David.]

During its long period of growth, the book of Psalms was the hymnbook of Israel, used primarily for corporate worship. Like our own hymnbook, it could be sung, read, or prayed by individuals, and we see Hannah (1 Samuel 2), Jonah (Jonah 2), and even Mary (Luke 1:46–56) doing exactly that—using it as a prayer book. When all the poems of the book were finally written, an unknown editor put the poems into their final order including dividing them into five books (Psalms 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, 107–150).

Scholars today discuss whether the final order of the book of Psalms has a contribution to the meaning of the book, but all agree that Psalm 1 and 2 were placed intentionally at the beginning, introducing the themes of the law and the Messiah, while Psalms 146–150 form a fitting conclusion to the book with their recurrent refrain of Hallelujah. Indeed, there is
a subtle movement from psalms of grief and lament to songs of joy and praise as one reads from the beginning to the end.

**A Psalm for Every Season of Life**

John Calvin, the sixteenth century theologian, famously called the book of Psalms a “mirror of the soul.” Just as we find out what we look like on the outside when we look into a mirror, so we discover how we are doing on the inside when we read the psalms. After all, as Calvin also pointed out, the psalms are an “anatomy of the soul,” expressing every emotion ever felt by human beings. There are hymns of joy, laments that express anger or despair or confusion, thanksgivings that express gratitude to God for help, psalms of trust, and we could go on. As we read the different types of psalms, we can find psalms that help us express what is going on in our hearts. They also minister to us as they move us toward God.

**A Portrait Gallery of God**

Indeed, every psalm brings the reader into the presence of God. When we discussed figurative language earlier, we saw how the psalmist presents us with many different pictures of God including shepherd, warrior, king, mother, and more. The psalms also speak directly to God. So, when we read the psalms, we not only learn about our own spiritual state, we
also come to know God better and more intimately.

**Pointing to Christ**

Jesus himself told his disciples that all of Scripture anticipated his coming (**Luke 24:27, 44-45**), and indeed specifically mentioned the book of Psalms. Jesus’s words here remind us that when we read the psalms we should always reflect on how the psalm might point to Jesus. After all, Jesus is the good shepherd (**John 10:11, Psalm 23**); he is the Christ, Greek for Messiah (**Psalm 2:2**); he is our divine warrior who defeats the spiritual powers by his death and resurrection (**Ephesians 4:8**, **citing Ps. 68:18**). We could go on and on speaking about the many ways in which the psalms anticipate Christ. In fact, the book of Psalms is close to being the most cited book of the Old Testament in the New Testament.

> The *psalms* are quoted by all but two New Testament authors and are quoted or alluded to over 100 times.

**Encouraging Our Worship**

Previously, we talked about how the psalms were used in public worship and how still today they encourage us to worship God with our whole selves. Listen to the psalmist call on his hearers to “clap your hands, shout to God with cries of joy” (**Psalm 47:1**). Perhaps our best response then to the book of Psalms is to join in as we enthusiastically and passionately worship our God.
Lamentations is a relatively short book often lost between two large books, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. While just five chapters long, the book packs an emotional punch, written as it is after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. While placed after Jeremiah because of the tradition that Jeremiah wrote the book, we cannot be sure who wrote it (the book itself does not name the
author). But like Jeremiah, the author was surely one who remained in the city after the destruction and the deportation of its leading citizens. The city was in ruins, and, most disturbing, the temple, the symbol of God’s presence with his people, was destroyed.

Does that mean that Judah’s God was unable to protect them from the Babylonians? The composer of Lamentations knew that the truth was even worse than that—God not only allowed the destruction of Jerusalem, he himself caused its destruction. The Babylonians are never mentioned as the cause of the destruction because they knew that ultimately God was behind the city’s fall:

How the Lord has covered Daughter Zion with the cloud of his anger!
He has hurled down the splendor of Israel from heaven to earth;
he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger. (Lamentations 2:1)

The rest of the poem in chapter 2 goes on to speak of God coming against Jerusalem as an enemy.
Indeed, the book of Lamentations contains five separate poems, one in each chapter, each of which recounts the horrors that came on Jerusalem and their present desperate state:

Even jackals offer their breasts
to nurse their young,
but my people have become heartless
like ostriches in the desert.
Because of thirst the infant’s tongue
sticks to the roof of its mouth;
the children beg for bread,
but no one gives it to them. (Lamentations 4:3–4)

Each of the five poems was written with an acrostic structure (see above) in mind. The first two chapters as well as the fourth are acrostics in that the poet begins each verse with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet and moves from the first to the last (twenty-second) letter. The third chapter is three times longer because rather than one letter per verse, the poet starts the first three verses with the first letter and does the same with all twenty-two letters. This feature draws our attention to this middle chapter (see below). The final chapter has twenty-two verses so a reader of the book in English might mistakenly think that this poem too is an acrostic, but it’s not! What is the poet trying to communicate by having four acrostics followed by
a broken acrostic? All we have to do is read the final verses of the book to understand:

Why do you always forget us?  
Why do you forsake us so long?  
Restore us to yourself,  
Lord, that we may return;  
renew our days of old  
unless you have utterly rejected us  
and are angry with us beyond measure  
(LAMENTATIONS 5:20–22).

With these verses, the book does not end with reconciliation with God but with a note of continuing separation and trouble.

But does that mean there is no hope in the book of Lamentations? To find it we go to the middle of that long third chapter which is the center of the book. After “the man who has seen affliction” (LAMENTATIONS 3:1) who represents the people of God describes his horrific suffering he then proclaims:

Yet this I call to mind  
and therefore I have hope:  
Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed,  
for his compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness (LAMENTATIONS 3:21-22).

Now we can understand what is going on. The
book of Lamentations, while acknowledging that their situation is their own fault because of their sin (Lamentations 1:8, etc.) is now appealing to God’s pity. Enough is enough! Restore us! And there is hope. Again, “no one is cast off by the Lord forever” (Lamentations 3:31).

Is this really true? Was the poet of Lamentations’ hope ever realized? Yes, far beyond what he might have imagined!

In the first place, just a few decades after the book of Lamentations, the Persians defeated the Babylonians. Cyrus was king of Persia, a person whom Isaiah hailed as an anointed one (Messiah; see Isaiah 45:1). Cyrus issued a decree that allowed the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell how the exiles came back and over the next century rebuilt the temple, re-established the law, and rebuilt the wall.

However, this re-establishment of the city of Jerusalem was just setting up the conditions for the full realization of God’s reconciliation with his people. That happened with the coming of Jesus:
“the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). It is in Jesus that God fully responds to the question that ends the book of Lamentations:

Restore us to yourself,
Lord, that we may return;
renew our days as of old… (Lamentations 5:21)
The Song of Songs: A Collection of Love Poems

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—
for your love is more delightful than wine.

(SONG OF SONGS 1:2)

The Song of Songs (in many Bibles titled the “Song of Solomon”) is a passionate and sensual poem where an unnamed man and an unnamed woman express their deep desire for physical intimacy with each other. What kind of book is the Song of Songs, and what is it doing in the Bible?
For some, the Song of Songs is a deeply symbolic book (an allegory) in which the man represents Jesus and the woman represents the church or the individual Christian. But there is nothing in the book itself to require such an interpretation, which seems to be an attempt to avoid the obvious. The book is speaking about human love between a man and a woman as well as the desire for physical intimacy that flows from that love.

We should not be surprised that such a book is in the Bible. After all, God created humans with sexual desires that were to be fulfilled in the context of marriage. In Genesis 2, we witness the divine institution of marriage and at the end of the chapter Adam and Eve were naked in the Garden of Eden and felt no shame (Genesis 2:24–25). Sex is God’s gift to his human creatures.

But then why doesn’t sex always feel like a gift? Genesis 3 tells us that the harmony between the man and the woman we see in Genesis 2 was broken by sin. No longer can the man and the woman stand naked before each other and feel no shame.

But the message of the Song of Songs tells us that all is not lost. While sin still affects our enjoyment of God’s gift, there can still be joy. Indeed, the fact that the couple often find enjoyment in garden settings in the Song of Songs (see for instance 2:1–13) is a way of reminding us of the harmony in Eden. The Song
The Song of Songs is a celebration of God’s gift of sexuality, which is not just for having children, but for enjoyment and binding a married couple together physically and emotionally.

But the Song of Songs is also a realistic book. We might get glimpses of sexual joy in this life, but our brokenness makes it difficult. The Song thus includes poems that signal the struggle to find delight in our marital sexual intimacy. We see this in the warning of the man to the woman about the “little foxes” that “ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom” (Song 2:15). The vineyard is the place of intimate bliss, and the foxes represent people or situations that disturb that bliss. Or consider the lengthy poem found in 5:2–6:3, in which the man comes to the woman for intimacy, but the woman is not ready. When she is ready and moves to open up to him, he has gone away. Or finally note the warning that the woman
gives to a group of woman known as the Daughters of Jerusalem to “not arouse or awaken love until it so desires” (Song 2:7, also 3:5 and 8:4). Love is sweet, so she seems to say, but don’t rush into it.

The Song is a collection of love poems that both celebrate and warn about love, particularly the physical intimacy that flows from it. The Song does not tell a story about a particular couple, but rather presents us with a number of poems that express godly desires in keeping with the way God made us at the time of our creation, desires that are met in the “two becoming one flesh” marriage relationship instituted in the garden.

Our Divine Marriage

But does the Song have anything to say about God and our relationship with him? We can answer this question with an enthusiastic yes when we read the book in the context of the whole Bible, where we see a frequent comparison made between our relationship with God and human marriage.
In the Old Testament, we often hear about God’s relationship with Israel being like a marriage where God is the husband to his bride Israel. Jeremiah, for example, quotes God as saying “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me” (2:2). But because Israel’s sin, the marriage was spoiled, so Israel was often pictured as an adulterous wife (see Ezekiel 19 and 23 and Hosea 1 for instance). But in spite of the negative portrayal of the relationship, we should not miss the fact that Israel’s relationship with God was supposed to be like the type of marriage celebrated in the Song of Songs. The more we learn about the nature of a good marriage in the Song, the more we should understand what the relationship between God and his people was supposed to look like. When we ask that question, the answer that the Song gives us is that our relationship with God should be intimate, passionate, exclusive, and mutual just like the relationship between the man and the woman in the Song.

As Christians, we should remember that Paul also described the church’s relationship with Jesus along the lines of a marriage (Ephesians 5:21–33). Marriage, he says, is a “profound mystery,” as it pictures the relationship between Christ and the church (5:32). Further, we as Christians look forward to the day when Jesus will return again, which the
book of Revelation describes as “the wedding of the Lamb” with his bride, the church (Revelation 19:6–8). “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” (19:9).
five

Things to Keep in Mind When Reading Poetry

It pays to know how to read the poetry of the Old Testament since about one-third of it is written in poetry. So in this brief study we took a good look at how poetry works in the Old Testament in order to learn how to maximize our understanding of its message.

Remember, poetry says a lot using a few words. That means when we read scriptural poetry, we need to slow down and reflect on the compact message. We need to think about how parallel lines relate to
each other. We need to meditate on the images that the poet presents before us. We need to be aware that the poets not only want to inform our intellects, but also to arouse our emotions, stimulate our imaginations, and appeal to our will.

In particular, we’ve focused on the poetic books of the Old Testament where the poets expressed their innermost passions. The book of Psalms, we’ve noted, are poems of worship that rejoice, thank, weep, express confidence, and more. Since the psalms are a mirror of the soul, there will always be a psalm that helps us express what we are feeling to God. We’ve seen how, through poetry, the book of Lamentations eloquently expresses bitter grief at the suffering of God’s people in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem, along with a glimmer of hope that God might restore his relationship with them. And the Song of Songs expressed the deep desire for intimacy that the man and the woman feel for each other.

As we read these books, we learn more about God, ourselves, and ultimately our relationship to Christ. Read these books more deeply, and you will find yourself growing in your relationship to God.
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