

# Reading Biblical Poetry

## Introduction

One of the many challenges we face when studying the Bible is understanding literature written in unfamiliar styles. With the impact that novels and book series have on today's literary culture, studies show that poetry in particular has fallen by the wayside.

Christopher Ingraham writes that according to the National Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, "Since 2002, the share of poetry readers has contracted by 45 percent—resulting in the steepest decline in participation in any literary genre." "The downward trend has been nearly perfectly linear over the last 20 years and shows no signs of abating."

This presents a challenge when we try to understand the Bible, which, according to The Bible Project's How to Read Biblical Poetry video, is a third of the Bible's content.

What often makes poetry difficult for readers is its intricate structure and heavy reliance on symbolism. While books are primarily concrete descriptions and dialogue with occasional hints of poetic elements, works of poetry rely almost entirely on the relationship between the concrete and the abstract—taking abstract emotions like grief and hope and using concrete imagery to bring those emotions to life inside the reader.

Time and cultural differences have an effect on these images. The contrast between sun and moon, fire and ice, heat and cold is universal, and the implications of these polar opposites are easy for readers to understand. Those metaphors make the main ideas more vivid and relatable.

For example, writing that someone's eyes are "as cold as their heart" is understood to be a description of a distant, apathetic, or unsympathetic character, while writing of "the fire behind their eyes" depicts someone experiencing a burst of passion, anger, or another strong emotion.

In the book of Psalms, for example, there is a heavy use of land and sea metaphors in biblical poetry. Land is used to depict safety, shelter, and refuge, while the untamable sea illustrates danger, chaos, and ruin.

David uses these metaphors in multiple psalms: "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck." "I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me." (Psalm 69:1-2). He cries out to God to "be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me; for you are my rock and my fortress" (Psalm 71:3).

Some poetry, on the other hand, is more specific to specific eras or people groups, making it difficult for readers who are not members of the group to relate to. For example, most modern Americans would not write a love poem for their wife describing her with "hair like a flock of goats," "teeth like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing," or "cheeks like halves of a pomegranate" (Song of Solomon 4:1–3). However, for the Hebrews, without grocery stores or the possibility of upward mobility, these symbols illustrate a life of ease, abundance of food, and prosperity that would be attractive to a prospective spouse.

## Parallelism

Another key difference between biblical and mainstream poetry is the structure. While the most well-known poems today are governed by rhyme and meter, Hebrew poetry is written in free verse—poems with neither rhyme nor meter. Instead, they are structured by "couplets"—put simply, pairs of poetic lines.

Let's first define a few terms:

- **Colon:** a single line of poetry (plural: cola)
- **Bicolon:** two lines of poetry set in parallelism to each other, referred to as a single unit (plural: bicola).
- **Tricolon:** three lines of poetry set in parallelism to each other, referred to as a single unit (plural: tricola)

There are many different types of parallelism used by biblical authors, but the most popular are as follows:

**Synonymous parallelism** occurs when two or more cola have the same basic meaning. In other words, the second colon more or less repeats the first colon. Consider the following example:

*The earth is the LORD's, and all it contains,  
The world, and those who dwell in it. (Psalm 24:1)*

See how it parallels:

The earth	is the LORD's	and all it contains
The world	(. . .)	and those who dwell in it

**Antithetical parallelism** occurs when two cola are set parallel, but the second colon provides a contrast to the first. This type of parallelism features prominently in wisdom literature, as a way to provide contrast between the wise and the foolish. Consider the following example:

*For evildoers will be cut off,  
But those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land. (Psalm 37:9)*

Now, see how the parallel reads:

For evildoers	will be cut off,
But those who wait for the LORD,	they will inherit the land. (Psalm 37:9)

**Synthetic parallelism** when the second colon completes or compliments the meaning of the first. It is difficult to put a precise definition on this type of parallelism, and it is consequently used as a "catch-all" category. In other words, if the parallelism doesn't appear to be synonymous or antithetical, then it is classified synthetic. Here is one example:

*Fire goes before Him  
And burns up His adversaries round about. (Psalm 97:3)*

In this example of synthetic parallelism, the second colon neither echoes nor contrasts the first colon. Rather, it completes the thought which began in the first colon. One cannot draw direct equivalencies between the cola.

Often, the second colon of a synthetic bicolon will answer one of these questions: who? what? where? when? why? how?

In the above bicolon, the second colon answers the "what?" questions. It can be expressed thusly:

Chiastic parallelism is literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order. The result is a "mirror" effect as the ideas are "reflected" back in a passage. Each idea is connected to its "reflection" by a repeated word, often in a related form. The term chiasm comes from the Greek letter chi, which looks like our letter X. Chiastic pattern is also called "ring structure."

The structure of a chiasm is usually expressed through a series of letters, each letter representing a new idea. For example, the structure ABBA refers to two ideas (A and B) repeated in reverse order (B and A). Often, a chiasm includes another idea in the middle of the repetition: ABXBA. In this structure, the two ideas (A and B) are repeated in reverse order, but a third idea is inserted before the repetition (X). By virtue of its position, the insertion is emphasized. The center always conveys the most important idea.

Many passages in the Bible exhibit chiastic structure. For example, Jesus' words in Mark 2:27 are in the form of a chiasm: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." Using the ABBA form, the words Sabbath and man are repeated in reverse order. Matthew 23:12 is another example.

A longer chiasm is found in Joel 3:17–21. This one has seven parts, diagrammed this way: ABCXCBA. Read the passage in your bible and then see how the ideas presented in this prophesy follow this arrangement:

- B - Jerusalem is holy (verse 17b)
- C - Foreign invaders are banished (verse 17c)
- X - The blessings of the Kingdom (verse 18)
- C - Foreign enemies are destroyed (verse 19)

B - Jerusalem and Judah are preserved (verses 20–21a)

A - God dwells in Zion (verse 21b)