

Wrigton and Lynch Chapels Minister's Website Article August 2021

Here's something to do when bored on holiday: look for poetry in your Bible. The Bible, at least, expresses a people's understanding about God. Doesn't that warrant poetic soarings?

Some biblical books show poetry clearer than others. Psalms, for instance, or Song of Songs, or Job; Proverbs occasionally. But what about the rest? Over the last century, it's become increasingly clear how much verse there is. Sadly, the King James Version didn't lay out poetry in a recognisable form. Hopefully your modern translation does.

Where is the poetry? Remember, our bibles are translations. Sorting out the poetry has been complicated. But there are guidelines.

In general, the speeches of prophets are mostly in poetry. They spoke for God, and a poem was a memorable way to get that across. Non-narrative portions of Isaiah and Jeremiah are likely poetic, also Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Nabakkuk, Zephaniah. Consider the power here:

*Ah, soiled, defiled,
oppressing city!
It has listened to no voice;
it has accepted no correction.
It has not trusted in the Lord;
it has not drawn near to God.
(Zephaniah 3.1-2 NRSV)*

Look, also, at speeches of characters during important moments; like these words of Adam, about Eve:

*This at last is bone of my bones,
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.
(Genesis 2.23 NRSV)*

Remember, the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. And biblical poetry uses different forms. One is the acrostic, where the first word of each line starts with a letter, through the alphabet. Psalm 119 is an acrostic of the Hebrew alphabet - an eight-verse stanza for each letter. Lamentations follows a verse-by-verse acrostic, except for chapter 3 which has a three-verse stanza for each letter, each line beginning with the same letter. Hopefully your translation makes it easy to see. Hebrew poetry is compact, and you may see extra spaces around the poetry. Each line is generally two short pieces, each containing three Hebrew words. Some things to remember:

Conjunctions (*and, but, or, for, as, since*) smooth the flow, but are almost completely absent in Hebrew poetry.

Parallelism - *The practice of saying the same things twice in different words* (CS Lewis) - isn't just repetition. Instead, the words focus and sharpen the idea, e.g:

*In fury you trod the earth.
In anger you trampled the nations.
(Habakkuk 3.12 NRSV)*

God moves from just treading the earth to trampling nations. More destructive.

*You came forth to save your people,
to save your anointed.
(Habakkuk 3.13 NRSV)*

Moves from 'your people' to 'anointed', explaining and heightening. Verses may start by saying 'broken', and end by saying 'smashed'; or start with 'destroyed', and end with 'heap of rubble.' It moves on.

Imagery gives a picture that makes us think and demands reaction. Different forms:

- **1. Simile** compares two objects, finding similarity, often using 'as' or 'like':

*Yet I planted you AS a choice vine,
from the purest stock.
(Jeremiah 2.21, NRSV)*

- **2. Metaphor** speaks of something as if it is something else:

*A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
a garden locked, a fountain sealed.
your channel is an orchard of pomegranates
with all choices fruits...
(Song of Songs 4.13 NRSV)*

Metaphor takes alarmingly different objects and finds a connection, opening layers of meaning. The best known is probably Psalm 23.1:

*The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.*

God isn't really a shepherd; but it makes us ask how God is like a shepherd.

- **3. Personification** sees objects as if they are living, understanding beings. The psalmist calls on creation:

*Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice,
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it.
(Psalm 96.11-12)*

- **4. Apostrophe** expresses emotion by talking to someone who can't hear as if they can:

*Pack your bags for exile,
sheltered daughter Egypt!
For Memphis shall become a waste,
a ruin, without inhabitant.*

(Jeremiah 46.19)

When reading your Bible, think of how people were inspired to express their belief, passion, concern, in poetic form. Jesus quoted several such passages. It's good to think his words may owe their impact to poetry.

Have a great August.

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