



## 05 Psalms - The Beauty of God's Word A Survey of Hebrew Poetry

**Review of Book of Psalms** - As we progress in our study of the Book of Psalms, I think it is helpful to understand the nature and structure of Hebrew poetry. By learning a little about Hebrew poetry, you'll be a better student of God's word. As you become a better student of God's word, you will be better able to understand what the author of each psalm is trying to communicate. Remember, they were all inspired by God, so in understanding they way in which they wrote, you will be better able to understand what God wants to communicate, and you can ask the Holy Spirit to help you apply whatever the communication is to your life.

Please recall the following about "The Book of Psalms":

The title "Psalms" is the English equivalent of the Greek word for *Tehillim* = praises in Hebrew) The book was written over 1000 years by many different writers. (ex. Moses wrote Psalm 150) David was greatest contributor. (He wrote approximately 70 of the psalms) Originally it was a collection of booklets of praises. Some are even duplicates. There are 150 psalms and they are divided into 5 sections. There are 7-9 categories. Psalter was used in the Old Testament as a Jewish song book, sung in synagogue and in temple worship. When the early Church formed they continued to sing psalms. Psalms is the most quoted book (out of the OT) in the New Testament. The book of Psalms contains many Messianic prophecies. Jesus confirmed that the Psalms were written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They are universal in nature and have universal appeal "The Lord is my Shepherd"

### Poetry in the Bible

Much of the Old Testament is written in poetic form rather than narrative. This is one reason I am not a big fan of the King James Translation. I love the beauty of the language of the King James Translation, but at the time it was translated there were fewer texts available showing phrasing, poetry etc. I usually teach from the NKJV, but I like to refer to other translations to understand more about the structure of the text being studied. It is important to understand what is poetry and what isn't, etc. This gives a more complete understanding. Poetry conveys certain passion and feeling not found in narrative literature.

Lyrical poetry is the oldest writing that we have from any civilization. Lyrical poetry means poetry that is sung. In ancient Greece the poets sang their songs long before the philosophers wrote their books. The Irish and other writers of other Celtic languages, preserved all old stories and history in poetry. They relied on memorizing expansive oral traditions, that they passed from generation to generation in poems. Poems are easier to remember. The Old

Testament is full of poetry. Remember Adam's reaction upon seeing "woman"; she is "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh". That is poetry.

Poetry is distinguished from other writing by: a) its imagination and emotional impact, and by the fact that, b) poetry uses lofty ideas and exalted diction to convey its message. The words are FULL of impact. They are FULL of emotion and meaning. The way in which the poem is said can be as important as what is said. Less words might be used in poetry, but the words used are more powerful. They convey a big "punch". c) Lastly, poetry is different from narrative in that it is delivered in some form of meter or rhythm. Western poetry has rhythm of sounds and beat, but Hebrew poetry has a rhythm of thought as opposed to rhythm of sounds.

Look at your outline now as we dive into the Word of God and as we learn to appreciate the way words are said, and not just what the words themselves might say.

Let's go to page one of our outline, and look at some of the devices that give Hebrew poetry its essence:

A) Rhythm but not "western" style of rhythm. It doesn't follow syllables, but patterns of ideas. Rhythm was produced by lines of poetry (also called "stichs"). There will be two or more stichs. They also stressed words in the stich. They emphasized words. I am not sure how scholars discovered the stressing of words, but somehow they did.

**Give ear** to my words, O LORD, / **Consider** my meditation.

<sup>2</sup>**Give heed** to the voice of my cry, **My King** and **my God**,

For to **You** I will pray. /<sup>3</sup>**My voice** You shall hear in the morning, O LORD;

In the morning I will direct *it* to You, and I will look up. (Psalm 5:1-3 NKJV)

Some may have heard the beautiful Maranatha singers put this to music.

( <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XV-eqriw09o> ) When I sing it, it moves my spirit. It puts me directly into God's presence. It prepares my heart to not only cry out my deepest needs from my soul, but it readies my spirit to know that He is listening, and to await His still small voice.

Now, sing it with me

*Give ear to my words O Lord*

*Consider my meditation*

*Harken unto the voice of my cry*

*My King and my God*

*For unto Thee will I pray*

*My voice shalt Thou hear*

*In the morning*

*O Lord in the morning*

*Will I direct my prayer*

*Unto Thee and will look up*

B) Rhyme happens but not of sounds. In Hebrew poetry there is a rhyming of ideas only presented in the rhythm (stichs) in the text. It is present in the passage we just sang, but also in Psalm 49

**Hear this**, all you peoples; **listen** all who live in the earth. (It is saying the same thing in a little different way.)

C) Devices of sound, acrostics, and parallelism (parallelism is EXTREMELY prevalent in Hebrew literature).

1) Assonance - refers to similar sounding words with different meanings. We can't really appreciate this because we are looking at the psalms only in English. Much of the Book of Jeremiah is poetry and we see the use of this device in Jeremiah 11:11-12. In Hebrew, two words that sound the same are [ Almond = *Shaqued* and Watching - *Shoqued*"] This is how it is used in the passage:

"The word of the Lord came to me: "What do you see, Jeremiah?"  
"I see the branch of an **almond** tree," I replied. The Lord said to me, "You have seen correctly, for I am **watching** to see that my word is fulfilled.

The biblical truth that is not obvious without understanding this literary device is that the almond tree is the first tree to bud in spring in the Middle East. In the same way it is first, God is the first one who sees who is listening to His word and who is doing His will.

2) Acrostics - the lines in the poem begin with the letters of the alfabet. We've all seen that in our Bibles in Psalm 119. You see an alef, bet, etc. The verses in each of those sections begin with the letter shown at the top of that section.

## תהלים Chapter 119 Psalms

- א ALEPH. Happy are they that are upright in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD. **א** אֲשֶׁרִי תְּמִימֵי-דֶרֶךְ-- הַהֲלֹכִים, בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה.
- ב Happy are they that keep His testimonies, that seek Him with the whole heart. **ב** אֲשֶׁרִי, נֹצְרֵי עֵדוּתֶיךָ; בְּכָל-לֵב יְדַרְשׁוּהוּ.
- ג Yea, they do no unrighteousness; they walk in His ways. **ג** אֵף, לֹא-פָעִלוּ עוֹלָה; בְּדַרְכָיו הֲלָכוּ.
- ד Thou hast ordained Thy precepts, that we should observe them diligently. **ד** אֲתָהּ, צִוִּיתָה פְּקֻדֹתֶיךָ-- לְשֹׁמֵר מֵאֵד.
- ה Oh that my ways were directed to observe Thy statutes! **ה** אֲחֵלִי, יִכְנֹוּ דַרְכֵי-- לְשֹׁמֵר חֻקֶיךָ.
- ו Then should I not be ashamed, when I have regard unto all Thy commandments. **ו** אֲזַל-לֹא-אֲבוֹשׁ-- בְּהִבִּטִי, אֶל-כָּל-מִצְוֹתֶיךָ.
- ז I will give thanks unto Thee with uprightness of heart, when I learn Thy righteous ordinances. **ז** אֲזַדְרֹךְ, בְּיִשָּׁר לִבְבִי-- בְּלִמְדֵי, מִשְׁפָּטֵי צְדָקָה.
- ח I will observe Thy statutes; O forsake me not utterly. {P} **ח** אֶת-חֻקֶיךָ אֲשֹׁמֵר; אֶל-תַּעֲזֹבֵנִי עַד-מֵאֵד.
- ט BETH. Wherewithal shall a young man keep his way pure? By taking heed thereto according to Thy word. **ט** בְּמָה יִזְכֶּה-נְעָר, אֶת-אָרְחוֹ-- לְשֹׁמֵר, כְּדַבְּרֶךָ.
- י With my whole heart have I sought Thee; O let me not err from Thy commandments. **י** בְּכָל-לִבִּי דִרְשָׁתִיךָ; אֶל-תִּשְׁגֵּנִי, מִמִּצְוֹתֶיךָ.
- יא Thy word have I laid up in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee. **יא** בְּלִבִּי, צִפְנֵתִי אִמְרֹתֶיךָ-- לְמַעַן, לֹא אֶחְטָא-לָךְ.
- יב Blessed art Thou, O LORD; teach me Thy statutes. **יב** בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה-- לְמַדְּנִי חֻקֶיךָ.

So what's the big idea of Psalm 119? The big idea is that God's Word is life. It is the key to righteous living and living an abundant life. And then, the text in verse 11, the writer gives the

secret as to why it does a person good to meditate on the Word and how it can be most effective.

*<sup>11</sup> Your word I have hidden in my heart,  
That I might not sin against You.*

The writer says that in hiding, memorizing, and keeping God's word in our hearts, we are able to avoid constantly "missing the mark" of where we should be headed.

In Psalm 25, every line begins with the successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Lamentations Chapter 3 is a triple acrostic. It repeats the Hebrew alphabet 3 times.

3) Parallelism - presents truths in pairs, triplets, or other numbers. The stichs keep presenting a truth repeatedly constructed in varying ways.

- a. **Synonymous parallelism** involves the repetition in the second part of what has already been expressed in the first, while simply varying the words.

<sup>3</sup> He will not allow your foot to be moved; **He who keeps you will not slumber.** <sup>4</sup> Behold, **He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.**  
Psalm 121

- b. **Antithetic parallelism** - second line is a contrast to the first one. Psalm 30:5

<sup>5</sup> For His **anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; Weeping may endure for a night, But joy comes in the morning.** Psalm 30:5

- c. **Synthetic parallelism** - 2nd line builds on the 1st line or completes it.

Psalm 78:1-4 <sup>1</sup> My people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. <sup>2</sup> I will open my mouth with a parable; I will utter hidden things, things from of old—<sup>3</sup> things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us. <sup>4</sup> We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.

Call to the people - the rest of the psalm tells how the people have not paid attention to the wisdom and they were punished because of it. This is an example of synthetic parallelism. Synthetic parallelism builds on an idea of truth, and often intensifies them.

- d. **Introverted parallelism**- ABBA  
First line states idea No. 1  
Second line states idea No. 2  
Third line repeats idea No. 2

Fourth line repeats idea No. 1

- e. **Climactic** parallelism - (stairlike) - one line builds on the next and then the next etc. Psalm 93:3

*<sup>3</sup>The floods have lifted up, O LORD the floods have lifted up their voice; The floods lift up their waves. <sup>4</sup>The LORD on high is mightier than the noise of many waters, than the mighty waves of the sea.*

- f. **Emblematic** - using "as" or "like" Psalm 103:12-13

Psalm 133:1-3 <sup>1</sup>How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! <sup>2</sup>It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe. <sup>3</sup>It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

Here is an observation of the joys of a community of faith. Interestingly, the precious oil that was used in anointing Aaron was a special blend of spices. It wasn't holy until it was mixed in the diversity that God required in the Torah.

So the take-away today is that God inspired His Word. Literary devices were used in a Hebrew way to give us and understanding of EXACTLY what God wants to say to us. Poetry of the text reveals the emotions and passions of what is being communicated. As you see these modes of declaring God's praises, perhaps it will help you in your own prayer life and praise life to be able to declare the emotions you experience to the God who knows you and loves you so intimately. You can even pray the psalms personally. You can declare Psalm 103 or sing Psalm 25 along with King David,

"Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, *bless* His holy name!

<sup>2</sup> Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits:

<sup>3</sup> Who forgives all of my iniquities, who heals all of my diseases,

<sup>4</sup> Who redeems my life from destruction, who crowns me with lovingkindness and tender mercies, <sup>5</sup> Who satisfies my mouth with good *things*, so *that* my youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Or sing:

Unto Thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. Unto Thee O Lord, do I lift up my soul.

Oh my God, I will trust in Thee, Let me not be ashamed.

Let not mine enemies triumph over me.

Let us pray.

Union Grove is one of the oldest Baptist communities of faith in the State of Texas dating back to 1844. Pastor Faber McMullen may be reached by email at [uniongrove362@gmail.com](mailto:uniongrove362@gmail.com) or by snail mail at: 15301 FM 362, Navasota, Texas 77868. Tel: 936-825-1227 (Edited and proofed by Amanda Neese- Webster, Texas.) All financial gifts to this ministry are tax-deductible as a 501 (c) (3) Corporation.