

How to Study the Bible

Lesson 11: Poetry

Since over one-third of our Bible contains poetry this is an important style for us to understand. I will openly admit to having a type A analytical personality making it much more in my comfort zone to digest a book like Matthew or James. When it comes to poetic language I struggle to subdue my urge to over-analyze every component. It is important for us to understand that poetry is not all about an exact word for word meaning, rather it is about painting a picture in the mind of the reader.

The poetic literature of the Bible uses some of the most beautiful language and imagery ever created, and rightly so since the God who created the minds of men to produce language inspired these very words. When looking at poetry we will take a very different approach than the precise word for word analyzation practiced in the previous lessons.

Many times in Hebrew poetry a technique called parallelism is used. Parallelism groups two or three lines of poetry together and uses them to express one thought. Sometimes these lines further develop an initial thought and sometimes they contrast it. Pay attention to any use of parallelism and group these lines together when trying to understand a passage.

Another favorite technique of Hebrew poets was the use of acrostics. An acrostic is a poem in which each line starts with the next letter of the alphabet. It is not easy for us to identify these in our modern translations but a quick look in a reference text will give us a list.

Acrostics occur in Psalms 111 and 112, where each letter begins a line; in Psalms 25, 34, and 145, where each letter begins a half-verse; in

Psalms 37, Proverbs 31:10-31, and Lamentations 1, 2, and 4, where each letter begins a whole verse; and in Lamentations 3, where each letter begins three verses. Psalm 119 is the most elaborate demonstration of the acrostic method where, in each section of eight verses, the same opening letter is used, and the twenty-two sections of the psalm move through the Hebrew alphabet, letter after letter.--J.A. Motyer, "Acrostic," in The New International Dictionary of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 12.

Again, remember as we examine these passages that they rely heavily on figurative language. Now might be a great time to skim through the lesson on comparisons and refresh these ideas in your mind.

For our example let's take a look at Psalm 1. In this passage we get to see comparison and contrast and then a beautiful picture painted. In Psalm 1:1-2, we encounter the man who is blessed and see the things he avoids contrasted with the things in which he partakes. These two verses are meant to contrast each other. We can see this is a man who doesn't listen to the advice of wicked men, he doesn't consistently socialize with sinners nor is he a scoffer-he doesn't use his words for destructive purposes. Now let's look at what he does do: He delights in God's law and he meditates on it constantly.

Now that we have an image of what this man does we can see in Psalm 1:3 a stunning comparison. Read this verse and let the image of this strong, productive tree with deep roots dwell in your mind. Think about the different characteristics of this tree. It would take

Finer Grounds

an incredible force of nature to uproot it, not passing breeze will bring it down. Also, this tree would be a blessing to all around through its fruit and shade. In Psalm 1:4 we see the contrasting picture, that of chaff which blows away with very little effort. Taking these two verses together helps us understand exactly what about the tree the writer is trying to get us to view.

In the last two verses (Psalm 1:5-6) we see the end result of a righteous character. The Lord knows this righteous man, but the wicked man will perish.

As we begin our homework, remember to look for parallelism and group the verses accordingly. Doing this will help you see more clearly comparisons and contrasts. Also keep in mind that poetry is all about the image painted, try to picture what you are reading. This should help you capture the emotion and purpose of the passage.

Finer Grounds

Homework: Lesson 11

Exercise 1:

Read Psalm 23.

Identify the parallelism and list the verses that should be grouped together.

List the different things God does for the writer.

Describe the images that are painted and how they are related to the content of this Psalm.

Exercise 2:

Read Proverbs 15.

Identify parallelism and then determine the main idea of the passage.

How are imagery and comparisons used to support and expand upon the main idea?

Exercise 3:

Read Lamentations 5 and analyze the meaning of the text using some of the techniques we discussed.
