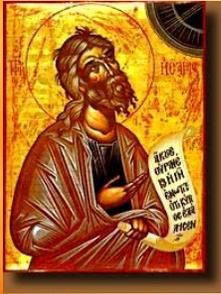


The Art of Hebrew Poetry



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1

“The Psalms must be read as poems: as lyrics, with all the licences and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry.”

C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*

2

The Limits of Translation

“He who reads the Bible in translation is like a man who kisses his bride through a veil.”

Hayyim Bialik

3

Features of Hebrew Poetry Observable in English

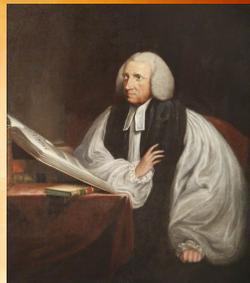
Parallelism: . . . the repetition of similar or related semantic content or grammatical structure in adjacent lines or verses.

Adele Berlin, *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IV, p. 304.

4

Robert Lowth

- 1741-1751 Chair of Poetry at Oxford
- 1741 ordained an Anglican Priest, later became the Bishop of London
- 1753 published *On the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*



5

Semantic Parallelism

Psalm 103:1

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

6

Parallelism is a progression, intensification of thought not a mere repetition

Psalm 18:8

Smoke went up from his nostrils,
and devouring fire from his mouth;
glowing coals flamed forth from him.

Lamentations 5:11

Women are raped in Zion,
virgins in the towns of Judah.

7

Terseness of Expression

Then he said to her, "Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty." So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him.

Judges 4:19

He asked water and she gave him milk,
she brought him curds in a lordly bowl.

Judges 5:25

8

Word Pairs

The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

Psalm 121:6

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the LORD has spoken:

I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.

Isaiah 1:2

9

Rhythm of Sounds

Isaiah 5:7

For the vineyard of the LORD of Hosts Is the House of Israel,
And the seedlings he lovingly tended Are the men of Judah.
And He hoped for justice, But behold, injustice; For equity, But
behold, iniquity! NJPS

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard
a cry! NRSV

lišdāqâ w'hinnē š'cāqâ

10

Imagery: Metaphor and Simile

Psalm 19:4b-5

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his
wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

Psalm 114:3-4

The sea looked and fled;
Jordan turned back.
The mountains skipped like rams,
the hills like lambs.

11

Imagery: Physicality of Images

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.
I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.

Psalm 69:1-3

12

Imagery: Physicality of Images

While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon
me;
My strength was dried up as by the heat of
summer.

Psalm 32:3-4

13

Advice for Reading Biblical Poetry

“Look for movement in the poem,
repeated words and phrases,
unexpected expressions or images,
and the general tone and effect that it
produces.”

Adele Berlin, *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IV, p. 314

14

Psalm 23: An Exercise in Reading

A Psalm of David.
The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

15