Biblical Hermeneutics
Interpreting Biblical Poetry

I. The importance of understanding biblical poetry

A. About 1/3 of the Bible is poetry.
   1. Poetry is used in parts of 32 of 39 OT books. The psalms are entirely poetry. Large sections of the OT prophetic books are poetry.
   2. Jesus' teachings have a strongly poetic flavor: terse expressions, figures of speech, parallel and contrasting ideas.
   3. Even some of Paul's letters have hymns and poetic creeds interspersed.

B. Yet few Western Christians understand or appreciate the poetry and figures of speech of the Bible.
   1. The Semitic culture and style of poetry seems foreign and unfamiliar.
   2. Translation makes it difficult to preserve much of the power and beauty of poetry.
   3. Evangelicals often emphasize doctrine, propositional truths and “literal” interpretation.

C. The value of understanding the poetry of the Bible:
   1. Much of the richness of the Bible is in its poetry (in expression as well as content).
   2. Poetry conveys ideas with greater power than prose.
   3. Poetry has greater emotional impact and a greater ability to change attitudes, stir to action and comfort than prose.
   4. Jesus' teachings are more understandable if we understand the poetic and figurative language of the Hebrew culture in which He lived.

II. What is poetry?

A. Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard (p. 216) define poetry as “written compositions typified by terseness, vivid words and a high degree of structure”.
   1. Poetry has a higher degree of structure, cleverly arranged sound patterns, imagery and language tricks than prose.
   2. There is a continuum of these features between poetry and prose. Poetry possesses them to a greater degree than prose.

B. Major formal characteristics of Hebrew poetry:
   1. **Meter or Rhythm**: a pattern of stressed syllables that gives a rhythm to the poem. Hebrew poetry has flexible meter, with a similar number of stressed syllables per line. The meter of the line is superimposed on the grammar and takes priority over the sentence structure used in prose. (Watson, p. 46)
   2. **Parallelism**: correspondence of words and ideas between adjoining lines (“parallelism of members”). This is the most distinctive feature of Hebrew poetry.
   3. **Structure**: grouped in distinct units of 2 or 3 short lines, containing a single distinct thought and a definite break from the next unit.
   4. **Distinctive sound patterns**:
      a. E.g. alliteration (repetition of consonants), assonance (repetition of vowel sound patterns), plays on words (including puns), and onomatopoeia (words whose pronunciation imitates the sound, e.g. buzz, clippy clop)
      b. Rhyme is very rare, unlike Western poetry.
III. Some important terms:

A. **Colon**: a single line of poetry (plural cola).

B. **Strophe or verse**: a group of 2-4 related cola (often but not necessarily the same as a numbered verse in the Bible).
   1. **Bicolon**: a pair of related cola that form one thought unit. Most common.

   Ps 8:5 (8:4 in English):
   What is man that you should be mindful of him?
   or the son of man that you should care for him?

   Note: In the Psalms, Hebrew verse numbers can be 1 number higher than English, since the title found in some psalms is counted as a verse in the Hebrew Bible.

   2. **Tricolon**: a group of three cola together that form one thought unit.

   Ps 116:8:
   For you have rescued my soul from death,
   my eyes from tears,
   my feet from stumbling.

   a. Not as common as a bicolon.
   b. It may stress an important point by shifting away from the regular bicolon pattern in the rest of the poem.

C. **Stanza** (some call it a strophe): a subsection of the poem consisting of one or more strophes. Sometimes a thought section is separated by a refrain or musical notation (e.g. “Selah”).

D. **Refrain**: a recurring line or strophe, often marking the beginning or end of a stanza.

   2 Sam 1:19-27 (David's lament in honor of Saul at his death):
   How the have mighty fallen

IV. **Parallelism**

A. Definition:

   1. Balancing of thoughts, phrases and/or words from one colon to another.

   2. The balancing normally occurs between adjacent lines in a strophe (internal parallelism). It can occur between cola or strophes (external parallelism or distant parallelism).

   3. The balancing may be repetition (synonymous), contrasting (antithetical) or extension (synthetic).

B. Parallelism of thought is the chief distinguishing characteristic of Ancient Near Eastern poetry. Western poetry uses a rhythm of sound (rhyme and meter), but Ancient Near Eastern poetry uses a rhythm of thought (“thought rhyme”).
C. Types:

1. **Synonymous parallelism:**
   a. The same or a similar thought is expressed in successive cola in different ways.
   b. The **two thoughts may not be exactly the same**, but will have a close relationship.

   Ps 24:1:
   The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains,
   The world, and those who dwell in it.

   *"earth" corresponds to "world" and "all it contains" corresponds to "those who dwell in it"

   c. The **corresponding elements may occur in a different order** in the two cola

   (1) **Chiasm** is a special case: where 2 or more elements occur in reverse order in the second colon. It is like a mirror image. (NOTE: A single Hebrew word is represented by all words in brackets. Sometimes this reversal does not come through in translation.)

   Jer 6:25:
   [Go not forth] [into the field]
   \[\begin{array}{cc}
   \text{a} & \text{b} \\
   \text{b'} & \text{a'}
   \end{array}\]

   (2) The exact order of elements may be lost in translation.

   d. The **parallelism may vary in the degree of completeness of elements** in the two halves:

   (1) **Complete**

   Ps 103:9:
   [not forever] [does He contend]
   \[\begin{array}{cc}
   \text{a} & \text{b} \\
   \text{a'} & \text{b'}
   \end{array}\]

   (2) **Incomplete**

   (a) Without compensation (number of elements is different in the two cola)

   Jer 17:9:
   [Wicked] [the heart] [above all]
   \[\begin{array}{ccc}
   \text{a} & \text{b} & \text{c} \\
   \text{a'} & \text{b'}
   \end{array}\]
(b) **With compensation** (adds additional elements to make up for a missing element).

Ps 103:8:

- [He made known] [His ways] [to Moses]
  - a
  - b
  - c

- [to the sons] [of Israel] [His deeds]
  - c'
  - c'
  - b

(c) **Compensation and a different number of elements in the two cola.**

Jer 17:10b:

- [and to give] [to man] [according to his way]
  - a
  - b
  - c

- [according to the fruit] [of his deed]
  - c'
  - c'

2. **Antithetic parallelism:**

   a. The second colon balances the first with an opposing or contrasting thought.

   b. The **second thought may be the same as the first, but stated in a negative manner.**

     **Prov 10:1:**

     A wise son makes his father glad
     But a foolish son is a grief to his mother

     *This is very common in proverbs which express two contrasting ways of life to choose from.

   c. The second thought may be in **total and stark opposition to the first.**

     **Ps 1:6:**

     For the Lord knows the way of the righteous
     but the way of the wicked will perish

3. **Synthetic or formal parallelism:**

   a. The second line completes or extends the thought of the first.

   b. A parallel of form more than thought.

   c. Some criticize that this is not true parallelism, but James Kugel argues that the relationship of the cola is always one of sharpening or seconding:

      1. “A is so, and what’s more, B”
      2. The B colon extends the A colon in some way, carrying it further, defining it, restating it, contrasting with it, etc.
      3. The exact relationship varies, but there is always a seconding relationship
      4. This larger view of the relationship between the cola includes synonymous and antithetic parallelism as a subcategory of the overall seconding relationship.
d. Synthetic parallelism can have several functions (not an exhaustive list; cf. Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard, pp. 230-236):

1. **Subordination**: the second line is grammatically a subordinate clause. It may explain reason, time, result, means, etc.
   
   a. Ex 15:21 (reason):
   
   sing to the Lord,  
   for He is highly exalted
   
   b. Ps 111:6 (means):
   
   He has shown his people the power of his works,  
   giving them the lands of other nations

2. **Continuation**: the second line extends and completes the thought of the first line

   Ps 14:1:
   
   The fool says in his heart,  
   “There is no God.”

3. **Comparison**: parallel lines form a simile or metaphor. This could be classified as a type of synonymous parallelism:

   Ps 103:13:
   
   As a father has compassion on his children,  
   so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.

D. **Significance of parallelism for interpretation**:

1. Function of parallelism:
   
   a. Aesthetic, to add beauty and increase the impact of the message.
   
   b. Expand the meaning in a fuller way than a single statement.
   
   c. Makes it easier to memorize (particularly obvious in the proverbs).

2. **Not two separate ideas** with independent significance, but one large idea expressed in two different ways. Both lines must be taken together to see the whole thought.

   Ps. 24:3:
   
   Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord?  
   And who may stand in His holy place?

   *the “hill of the Lord” and “His holy place” are not two separate places, but two aspects of the same thing (God's temple)

3. Sometimes the combination of the two pieces creates a combined idea that is bigger than each part separately (Merismus).

   Ps 139:8:
   
   If I ascend to heaven, thou art there.  
   If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there.

   *God is everywhere--in heaven and the netherworld and (by implication) everywhere in between.
V. Meter or Rhythm.

A. Meter refers to a consistent pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that gives a rhythm to the poem.

B. Meter is much a less important feature of Hebrew poetry than parallelism
   1. Attempts to reconstruct a consistent meter have had only moderate success.
   2. A certain fluidity of meter is allowed, even within one poem.
      a. One pattern may be followed through most of the poem and change for one or two strophes.
      b. Sometimes the variation in meter is at a point of emphasis. Other times for no apparent reason.
   3. There is a tendency to try to achieve a balance of numbers of elements between the two cola.
   4. Meter is more a result of the parallelism of thought, which results in roughly the same number of elements in both lines of a strophe. There is a concern for balance of mass more than stresses.

C. Since most Hebrew words are accented on the last syllable, the meter tends to be a rising one.
   1. Since most words are 2 or 3 syllables, the most common meter is similar to the classical iambic meter (once unstressed syllable followed by one stress syllable) or anapestic meter (2 unstressed followed by one stressed syllable).
      
      di-dah di-dah di-dah,
      di-dah di-dah di-dah

   2. But the rule is not as rigid as classical poetry, since the number of unstressed syllables can vary.

D. Meter is measured in number of stressed syllables per line.
   1. Most common is 3:3 (3 on first line and 3 on second line of colon). Less often 2:2 and 4:4.
      
      di-dah di-dah di-dah,
      di-dah di-dah di-dah

   2. 3:2 is most common unbalanced meter.
      
      di-dah di-dah di-dah
      di-dah di-dah

      a. The falling cadence suggests finality and expresses intense emotion.
      b. The second colon breaks short, like a catch in the throat.
      c. Called “Qinah”, the Hebrew word for “lament” because it is often used in laments.
      d. Sometimes it is used for poems of intense joy and praise. (Ps 65)

VI. Structure patterns in poetry

A. stanza
   1. Generally a thought grouping.
   2. Common indicators of stanzas:
      a. Content: usually (not always) contains one unifying idea.
b. **Structural pointers**: inclusion, refrains, “selah”, introductory formula: (Is 56:1, “This is what the Lord said”), acrostic grouping (e.g. Ps 119, see commentary or marginal note).

c. **Meter**: sometimes a shift from 2 line strophes to a 3 line strophe.

d. **Size**: often (not always) stanzas are a roughly similar size.

3. Many English Bibles indicate stanzas, but the markings are not always reliable.

**B. Key words**

1. **Definition**: significant words that are repeated several times

2. **Functions**:
   a. **Emphasize major themes** (Ps 145 repeats “all”/”whole” 17 times emphasizing Psalmist's desire for all flesh to praise the Lord)
   b. **Often to indicate structure** (especially inclusion and chiasm as discussed later)

**C. Inclusion** (envelope figure)

1. Repetition of key words or phrases at the beginning and ending of a verse, strophe or poem.

2. Whole poem:
   a. Ps 103--begins and ends with “Praise the Lord, Oh my soul”
   b. Ps 145 has “bless” in verses 1, 10, 21--beginning, middle and end (stresses theme)

3. Stanza or subsection of a stanza:
   a. In Ps 145 most stanzas have inclusion to separate them
      
      1-2  “praise”
      3-6  “great” and “greatness”
      7-9  “goodness” and “good”
      10  interlude repeating the theme of praise from beginning (1) and end (21)
      11-13  “kingdom”

4. The words may not necessarily be the exact first word of first line and last word of last line, but will be close to this point.

   Ps 12:1, 8--“sons of men” repeated as last word of first and last line

5. **The words repeated**:

   a. **Same word**

   b. **Related words from same root** (noun and verb: “worship” and “to worship”)

      Job 37:16:
      Do you know how the clouds are balanced,  
      the wondrous works of the perfect in knowledge?

   c. **Synonyms**

   d. **Parallel pairs**--standard pairing of words (like English, “ham and eggs”)
      (1) E.g. heaven/earth; eye/ear; tent/dwelling; rock/trees; nobleman/peasant
(2) These are word pairs that might normally be used in a single bicolon to form parallelism, but they are separated into two verses

e. **Similar sounding words** (play on words)

6. **Function of inclusion:**
   a. Often marks the beginning and ending of a stanza or subsection, to enclose it (Ps 145). There is no punctuation in ancient Hebrew, so this functioned to group ideas (“verbal punctuation”).
   b. Stress the unity of the theme through repetition

D. **Distant Parallelism**

1. Repetition anywhere other than at the beginning and end of verse, stanza or poem.

2. May use identical word, word from same root or a parallel pair

Is 1:10:
- Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom
- Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah

3. Function:
   a. Indicates a **close relationship of two verses** which may be separated in the poem.
   b. Can indicate **thematic emphasis** in a stanza or poem, due to the repetition.

E. **Chiasm**

1. Definition: repetition of a series of words, clauses or ideas with the repeated elements arranged in a reverse order the second time. Any number of repeated elements are possible (from 2 to 10).

   A
   B
   C
   C'
   B'
   A'

2. Within a single bicolon:

Is 22:22:
- When he opens, no one will shut
  A  B
- When he shuts, no one will open
  B'  A'

Ps 83:2:
- O God, do not remain quiet
  A  B
- Do not be silent and do not be still, O God
  B'  B'  A'
3. In a larger section:

Is 6:10:
   A heart
   B ears
       C eyes
       C' eyes
   B' ears
   A' hearts

Ps 51:1-9:
   A blot out my transgressions (1)
   B wash me (2)
       C cleanse me from my sin (2)
           D I know my transgressions (3)
               E I have sinned (4)
                   E' in sin my mother conceived me (5)
           D' you will make me know wisdom (6)
               C' I will be clean (7)
                   B' wash me (7)
                       A' blot out all my iniquities (9)

4. Function of chiasm:

   a. **Structurally**: functions like modern punctuation to indicate structure or subsections

      (1) **Open or close a stanza** (Num 23:7) or whole poem (Job 30:31)

      (2) **Indicate turning point or climax of poem**: The center of the chiasm is often the stress point (Ps 51:3-11, stress on “I have sinned”).

      (3) **Join components into a unit** (Is 1:21-26)

   b. **Emphasis**

      (1) **Emphasize or draw attention to certain words or ideas**

          Ps 72:1-2: emphasizes the righteousness and justice. The king's righteousness and justice is to reflect the Lord’s righteousness and justice.

              Endow the king with your justice, O God,
              the royal son with your righteousness.

              He will judge your people in righteousness,
              your afflicted ones with justice.

      (2) **The center of the chiasm is often the main point**
F. Refrain

1. Repetition of a line, strophe or phrase at regular intervals.

   Ps 67 (3, 5):
   Let the peoples praise Thee O God
   Let all the peoples praise Thee.

2. Functions:

   a. Often marks off stanzas and creates structure (e.g. Song of Solomon).

   b. Emphasize an important point (allows the audience to rehear a point when read aloud).

       Ps 42-43 (repeated at 42:5, 11; 43:5) -- two psalms are a unit; the main point is in this refrain:

       Why are you in despair, O my soul?
       And why have you become disturbed within me?

       Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him
       The help of my countenance, and my God

   c. Encourage audience participation in the liturgy

       (1) Especially for chorus: special type of refrain repeated after every line

       Ps 136: an antiphonal psalm, the congregation would repeat the chorus after each line read by
       the worship leader: “For his lovingkindness is everlasting”

G. Acrostic

1. Definition: each strophe begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in alphabetical order.

2. Examples:

   a. Ps 34, 111, 145: one strophe per letter.
   b. Ps 119: stanzas of 8 strophes in which each strophe in a stanza begins with the same letter of the
      alphabet.

3. Functions:

   a. To aid memorization
   b. Provide a sense of completeness in his treatment of the topic (a literary impression only)
   c. Demonstrate poets skill in fulfilling the demands of such a structure (ancient poets delighted in
      showing their writing virtuosity)

VII. Sound patterns

A. Sound patterns only come through in the original Hebrew, but many commentaries point them out.

B. Rhyme: the ending sound pattern of the last word in a line is echoed in a later line (rare).
C. **Alliteration**: repetition of consonants, especially at beginning of words or syllables.

Ps. 122:6:

*sha-a-lu she-lom ye-ru-sha-lay-im*

[pray] [peace] [Jerusalem]

*yish-lay-u o-he-ba-yid*

[may they be secure] [ones loving you]

D. **Assonance**: repetition of vowels, especially in accented syllables.

E. **Onomatopoeia**: words whose sounds imitate what they describe.

1. **Examples**:

Judges 5:22: the sound of galloping battle horses:

*mid-da-he-roth da-he-roth a-bi-raw*

[with galloping] [galloping] [his steeds]

Is 2:4: the sound of a hammer pounding on metal:

*we-kit-te-tu har-bo-tam le-it-tim*

[and they will hammer] [their swords] [into sickles]

2. **Function**:
   a. Heightens the imagery
   b. Links sound with meaning for emphasis or to make it more memorable

F. **Paronomasia** *(word play)*: a play on words or pun, where two words with similar sounds are used together.

1. **Functions**:
   a. Aesthetic beauty
   b. To amuse
   c. Emphasize an important point and make it more memorable

2. Amos 8:1-2—God shows Amos a basket of summer fruit (*qayits*) and says, “the end (*qets*) has come for My people Israel”

3. Is 5:7:

And He looked for justice [*mish-pat*]

but, behold, bloodshed [*mish-pah*]

for righteousness [*tse-da-qah*]

but behold, a cry [*tse-‘a-qah*]

VIII. **Determining the big picture in a poem**

A. An important part of analyzing any poem or section of prose is to determine the theme of the whole poem and each stanza. Do not want to get lost in analyzing verses until see the overall idea of the poem

B. **Some indicators of themes**:

1. Grouping of poem into **stanzas**, with a major thought in each; the overall theme of the poem may be indicated by the combination of several smaller themes.
2. Repetition of keywords and parallel pairs (Ps 145 example above).

3. Structuring devices such as distant parallelism, chiasm, inclusion or a refrain.

4. Sudden shift in meter or change from 2 line to 3 line strophe. E.g. Ps 2:7 shifts from 2 to 3 colon strophe emphasizes the decree of the Lord that the king is God's begotten son.

5. Sometimes a play on words will be designed to drive a point home.

C. A suggested procedure in preliminary study of a biblical poem:

1. Read out loud several times (more likely to hear sound patterns, chiasms and repetition out loud; poetry was meant to read aloud).

2. Divide the poem into stanzas

3. Summarize the main idea of each stanza
   a. May be indicated by keywords, repeated themes or an overall integrating idea or tight progression of thought (one idea leads to next)

4. Summarize the main idea of the poem, based on the main ideas of each stanza

D. After you have the big picture you are ready to do more detailed study: analyze and interpret individual verses, look for chiastic patterns, etc.

E. Determine the significance of the message of the poem for your own life.
   1. A poem is meant to connect with you emotionally, not simply intellectually
   2. Look for similarities in your life situation to the situation of the author. How does he express his faith?

F. Memorize poems to allow them to minister to you as you meditate on them.