



Elements of Biblical Poetry

Elements of Biblical Poetry

An Introduction to Its Craft, Language, and Genres

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People sometimes tell me that they do not like poetry, but they usually have favorite songs and admire certain songwriters. Songs are poems that people sing, and modern poetry is perhaps most alive in places like Nashville. Psalms are also sung poems, and some with their strong emotions could well have been written in some ancient Nashville.

In addition to the psalmist, the prophets and the authors of wisdom wrote in poetry. Though Israel told its stories mostly in prose, its poetry shapes large sections of the Bible. These ancient poets belonged to a larger and even more ancient tradition than Israel's as the harpist on the cover attests, and yet its poetry shares much with that of other peoples down to the present. Poetry can be challenging, but the challenge often lies more in what we are going to do about the poetry, and not in what it has to say or how it says it.

This book focuses on biblical poetry in English. While the original language offers many riches, we can see much of its beauty and power in an English translation. This book uses the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible. As a revision of the King James Bible, it offers a rather literal presentation of the Hebrew text, and so it allows the reader to see the workings of the original. Other translations would provide similar insights, and each translation brings its own gifts.

I have long given an earlier version of this text to students in courses on psalms, wisdom, and prophets. Every topic here could be a book, but this book tries to lay out a clear foundation on which readers can build. Each chapter ends with exercises so that readers can explore its ideas.

The first chapter looks at some basic questions about poetry: tradition and creativity, the author's intention and the text, and the connections of association and likeness. The last section lays out a way to do a close reading of the text. Often people find a text difficult because they have not found all that a text wants to tell

them. They have scooped out an idea or two and have not looked closely at the text.

Part One deals with the craft of biblical poetry—mainly the ways that repetition creates word pairs that form the basis for parallel lines and their sequence.

Part Two deals with language. Poetry draws on the literal and non-literal ways of ordinary language, but it focuses and concentrates these elements to create its energy and levels of connection. The section gives particular attention to metonymy and metaphor, which we use in ordinary conversation though people do not always realize it.

Part Three considers the genres of psalms, wisdom, and prophets. The word, genre, refers to the basic types of literature and their typical construction. By recognizing these types, we begin to understand what the text wants to communicate. This understanding of what is common also helps us see what is different in a text, and the important point often lies in the difference.

A final chapter raises questions about meaning: What did the text mean? What did it come to mean? What does it mean?

A glossary follows and defines the key words used in the book.

The poetry of ancient Israel reflects the history of this people, and scholars have devoted much time and energy to these questions. Though they can be important, this book does not deal with questions of their composition, context, or use within ancient Israel. Susan Gillingham covers many of these issues in “The Psalms and Poems of the Hebrew Bible” in *The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Companion*, where she summarizes her book by the same name. Jennie Grillo also does the same for wisdom literature in the same volume. Other resources abound for the prophets. The distance in time and culture can present some challenges, but for the most part, biblical poetry contains what we need to make sense of it. Sometimes we just do not expect people to talk to God like that.

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Tammy Schuetter designed the cover using a photo of the marble seated harp player of the Cycladic period (2800–2700 B.C.) at the Metropolitan Art Museum (Public Domain).

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Finally, I want to thank my students who have helped me over the years to see what they needed in order to learn how this poetry works. by their questions and insights, they have helped me see more of this poetry's beauty and mystery.

Harry Hagan, OSB, SSD
Feast of the Transfiguration
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PART I
MAIN BODY

I. Some Basic Ideas

This book builds on several basic ideas that serve as a foundation for biblical poetry and for much language and literature in general. Though already familiar to anyone reading this book, you may not have examined them consciously. After all, they appear obvious and self-evident. However, because they shape our perceptions and decisions, they deserve some careful reflection.

I.I. Tradition and Creativity

In general, people like the ordinary—the predictable routines of life. We have our morning routines that allow us to begin the day without the need to think about what to do first or how to get breakfast. When something occurs out of the ordinary, people can easily become upset. Learning a new software program is often frustrating because it is new and different.

In literature, the ordinary becomes the tradition. Storytellers and poets learn the ordinary ways that people use to tell stories and sing songs. The tradition creates expectations that serve both the artist and the audience. The artist has a tested outline. The Italian sonnet always opens with eight lines establishing a theme or problem, followed by six lines that respond somehow. Knowledge of the tradition, conscious or unconscious, also helps the audience follow and understand the artist's work. Much of this book is about the traditions of biblical poetry—the ordinary ways in which biblical authors created their texts.

The ordinary can become too ordinary. Routine sets in, and everything seems boring, trite, and drearily the same. Every day is like the day before. So, we look forward to experiences that are

new and different. Vacations show us new worlds or offer us a new perspective. Differences can be vital to our lives.

Victor Shklovsky, in “Art as Technique,” recognized that seeing the same thing over and over dulls our sensitivity so that we no longer see or experience the ordinary. The familiar becomes so familiar that it no longer registers. With this as his starting point, Shklovsky argues that artists try to make us look at our world anew by making the familiar seem strange. They seek to defamiliarize the ordinary so that we can see and experience our world again for the first time. He calls this function of art simply “defamiliarization” (13). To do this, writers may use unfamiliar words or rough rhythms that force us to read more slowly or stop and look up a word in a dictionary. Complexity, in general, serves as a standard strategy, but when the complexity becomes too much, artists typically return to the basics in search of a new simplicity.

Sometimes the poet rearranges the traditional elements in new and unexpected ways, or the storyteller introduces an unexpected twist to the traditional story, such as an unexpected person as the hero. The unexpected is more than window-dressing. The unexpected suggests a new way of seeing and organizing the world. Here the artist hopes not just to defamiliarize but to create something that will move us in a new way.

Storytellers and poets must master the tradition to reshape it in unexpected ways. On the one hand, defamiliarization depends upon the artist and the audience knowing the tradition—the expected. The tradition then becomes the background for the unexpected and the different. Without a standard, everything would seem arbitrary.

This book seeks to help readers understand the tradition used by biblical poets to create their poetry. This allows us to appreciate the mastery that “breaks the rules” to defamiliarize the tradition. Unless we appreciate the conventions of literature, we cannot appreciate how the poet transforms the tradition.

1.2. The Poet's Intention and the Poem's Autonomy

Sometimes readers ask: "What did the poet intend?" This question recognizes that a poem is an intentional act. If you talk to poets, they will tell you how many hours they have spent writing even a short poem, and how many times they re-wrote and changed a line until they were satisfied. They will explain how the process of writing and rewriting allows them to put more and more into the text—even without their always knowing consciously what they include. Returning to their work later, they may find the text richer than they realized, or they may find that it still needs work. The goal is to create a text that no longer needs the poet to explain it. While we may find ourselves explaining what we intended to say, good authors write texts that no longer need them. These texts can stand on their own.

The desire to know the author's intention can even be misleading. It suggests that the meaning of the text lies in the mind of the author. Surely the author knows the text very well and so has an advantage in commenting on the text. If there are diaries or letters, these may help us understand a text better, but even here one must be careful. The writings of modern authors show that they sometimes change their minds or develop new ideas; some are not consistent. Even where a writer comments on a particular poem, the commentary is never better than the poem. What the author intended to say is the poem itself and not any notes or diaries about it. Again, the poet has made a text that is able to stand on its own.

A focus on the author's intention also assumes that these texts mainly convey ideas—as if the poem were an envelope in which the poet has put the idea. If so, our job would be simply to take the idea out of the envelope. Poems, however, are not primarily sources of information. Certainly, they convey ideas, but they also conjure up emotion and stir the imagination. The poem shows us something about life; it presents life's energy and invites us to experience it, to

see it from another viewpoint. The former poet laureate Billy Collins makes this point wonderfully in his poem “Introduction to Poetry” which can be found online. A poem connects the reader to a world, a story, an event, an experience, and more. It defamiliarizes and opens new doors. Rather than focusing on the intention of the poet, we should focus on the experience of the text that the poet has given us.

Admittedly, ancient texts can present problems because we no longer understand the poet’s tradition and context. This book seeks to fill in some of those gaps. Even so, texts handed on by the communities possess an ability to transcend their historical context and speak to later generations. These texts are not informational, such as the directions for putting together a toy or getting from one place to another. Informational texts should have only one clear meaning. However, as masters of their language and craft, these poets have constructed texts that give us possibilities and questions—not just answers.

Hans Georg Gadamer insists that the poem, like all art, is the thing itself. The poem does not point us toward something else but toward itself. The poem offers us an experience that only it can offer, and we can have this experience only by focusing on the poem itself. The analysis of a poem should make us more alive to its complexities and possibilities so that we can have a richer experience when we return to the whole.

To make sense of a text, we often identify a key line. There really is no wrong decision in this. The poem offers us possibilities, and the reader participates in discovering the connections within the text and in finding the connection to other texts and to ourselves. While some choices may prove more interesting or insightful, any understanding that can be reconciled to the whole is not wrong.

This does not mean that a text can mean just anything. The words count, and the world they conjure up sets certain boundaries. Even though the author has created texts that can stand on their own, they do not stand alone. They belong to a web of connections, to various traditions. Some connections are historical, such as

language and culture. However, some connections transcend history. In Part III, I argue that the basic genres have their roots in common linguistic experiences transcending individual cultures. Genre sets up important boundaries for understanding and interpretation.

Moreover, many people read biblical texts within a larger religious tradition which includes other texts which comment on each other—some having a priority. We also read these texts within a community of readers called a synagogue or a church or an academy. We should not underestimate the significance of those traditions and communities. Even so, we must begin with the words on the page, and this book deals mainly with the words on the page: their craft, language, and genres.

1.3. The Connections of Association and Likeness

Our understanding of the world depends on our ability to recognize what is like and what is different and also to recognize what goes together and connects. This may seem too simple and basic to bear much consideration, but this basic observation holds an important key for understanding and interpreting the world.

For some people, the great outdoors divides into trees, bushes, flowers, and weeds. A better observer can distinguish different kinds of trees: maples, oaks, pines, etc. A forester can make further distinctions: black oaks, white oaks, red oaks, pin oaks, and more. This ability to distinguish differences allows a person to see the complexity of the world. However, if we find only differences, then the world seems fragmented and unrelated. We depend on our ability to recognize the connections in order to make sense of our world.

These connections divide into two large groups: association and similarity.

a. association

Association refers to things that belong to the same group. For instance, a forest is a system of many pieces that belong together. Though we typically think of the trees making up a forest, a forester will point out that soil, climate, insects, other plants, and more come together to form the network of a forest. Likewise, a tree is made up of roots, trunk, limbs, bark, leaves, and more. Our world depends upon a vast array of interconnected associations. Sometimes this idea of association is expressed as “contiguity” from the Latin word meaning “to touch” as in the more common word “contiguous.” The idea of touching is fundamental for seeing how our world connects. Roots, trunk, limbs, bark, and leaves are not alike; rather they go together as parts of the tree; they share an association.

Language uses associations at several levels. First, we can think about words as signs which point to “the real thing.” The word “house” is not a house but is rather a sound or written sign associated with a building in which a family lives. If I use the sign “house” in an English-speaking community, I expect that people will associate that sign with “the real thing.” In a Spanish-speaking community, I would need to use a different sign, “casa,” in order to evoke the same general association. This kind of association is one of the basic problems of learning a new language.

Words from different languages and cultures seldom overlap completely. Cultural differences affect our understanding. The Hebrew word for “house” is “beth,” but we may well need some historical and cultural information to appreciate what a family dwelling meant for them.

Here we need to make a distinction between natural and conventional associations. Natural associations come just from

living in the world while conventional associations depend upon being part of a culture. Some associations, like “sun and moon,” come from living in the world. Others depend upon culture. Some associations have both a natural and conventional piece. As human beings, we grow up in families that live someplace, but its arrangement differs depending on time and place.

To this, we can add personal associations. We all have personal memories of the word “house” rooted in our individual experiences. Some memories may overlap with the memory of the English-speaking community, but some do not. If I want people to understand my experience of a house, then I will need to say more than the common English word. Likewise, those who come from different cultures and speak a different language may find that the common English word does not adequately convey their experience.

Things do not exist as isolated pieces. A house is associated with all the things that make it up; for us, that means door, windows, walls, roof, floor, ceiling, walls, etc. These connections involve not only the pieces but also the ways in which the whole is connected and operates as well as the ways in which people live in a house. Explaining all those dimensions would take considerable time. Commons words belong to complex systems of associations that create various possibilities for understanding. Linguists call these systems of associations “cognitive domains.” Moreover, we can call to mind the whole by using just a piece—a strategy called metonymy. We will look at these more carefully in Section III.

Each language has its own genius. In English, some words can be used as both nouns and verbs, and even adjectives. We all have “hands” (noun), and so we can “hand” (verb) people a “handbag” and a “handsaw” which might be a “handful” as we hold on to the “handrail” (adjective-like). All associations can potentially become part of the process of understanding. Just knowing the meaning of a sign does not guarantee that I will understand its possibilities for meaning.

Some words are not signs; they do not point to a “real thing.” The word “of,” for instance, does not point but creates a relationship

between two words: a ring of gold; a time of sorrow; the pledge of love. Some words define and quantify such as “a” and “the” and “many.” A careful discussion of this would lead us to the philosophy of language, but that is beyond our goal. For our purposes, it is enough to recognize that we need these other words in order to link words together in an association which we call sentences. These allow us to communicate ideas, emotions, and imagination. Grammar is a description of the common ways we combine words to form sentences and say what we want to say. This book does not review basic grammar, but the reader may want to do that to appreciate better the craft of language.

b. likeness: sameness and similarity

Likeness, of course, may be entire or only partial. Things are the same only if they are identical—an exact replica. Repetition of the same word is an example of sameness.

Similarity points to the likeness shared by two or more things, but similarity also recognizes that there is some difference, that the two are not identical. The words “good” and “nice” are similar, and may be used interchangeably, but not always. There is a difference between saying someone is “good” or “nice” even though it may be difficult to say exactly what it is. Part of their meanings overlap, but only part.

We depend upon our ability to recognize the similarity between pieces of our world at various levels in order to organize it. Our ability to identify oak trees, as we saw above, depends upon our ability to see the likeness between two trees with very similar leaves and bark. Though maples are not oaks, both are trees and share the similarity of trees. There are also fir trees without leaves and palm trees without branches, and yet we still call them trees. To create various groups, we may highlight the likeness as we hide the differences. Botanists, who categorize plants, have clear criteria

for their categories, but our everyday language is often more fluid. Sometimes we can see the similarity between things that belong to different categories. Psalm 1 says that those who meditate on God's law are like trees planted by streams of water. Similarity, as we shall see, is a basic dimension of parallelism and metaphor—hallmarks of biblical poetry.

This book seeks to help the reader recognize the similarity between words, lines, or sections of biblical poetry and between the poems themselves. At the same time, likeness forms the context for the difference which creates change and movement. Too often biblical studies have focused just on similarity and have failed to appreciate the importance of differences which adds to and moves a poem forward. The uniqueness of a poem lies in its difference, but this is difficult to recognize without knowing what to expect—the tradition.

Similarity can be found not only inside the text but also between text or between a text and human experience whether mine or ours, whether present or the past. Our ability to recognize similarity shapes an important part of our understanding and interpretation.

1.4. A Close Reading of a Poem: Basic Strategies

A close reading of a poem should help us understand better how the poem works so that when we read it again, we can have a richer experience of the poem. A close reading is not an end in itself but should make us more alive to the text.

A close reading is not just a paraphrase of the poem, though that can be a helpful first step. Rather, a close reading explains how the words and their arrangement work together to engage us. It answers questions of how and why.

While the arrangement below suggests an orderly progression,

some of our insights come at the same time. Still, it is good to have an orderly approach to guide us.

a. Read the poem and get a clear sense of what it says.

- You may need to read the poem several times.
- Look up any words or references that you do not understand.
- Are there historical and cultural contexts that bear on the poem?
- Make an outline of the basic pieces of the poem.

b. Give some attention to the speaker and the context.

- Who is speaking? What can we know about the speaker from the poem?
- Is the speaker speaking to another person? Are there other characters? What do we learn about them?
- What does this text want to accomplish? This is a question about the kind or genre of literature. Is it a thought, hymn, story, petition, proverb, judgment, etc.?
- Is there an implied story—that is, some problem hanging over the speaker that must be resolved?

c. Look carefully at the words on the page.

- With a pencil or a computer, mark what repeats. Repetition is one of the ways a text shows us what it considers important.

- What language does the poet use to create the experience? Give careful consideration to the words themselves. Take the words seriously. Why did the poet use these words and images?
- What does the craft of the poem contribute: its rhythm, sound, word pairs, parallelism?
- Is there a key word or image around a central idea? Mark them.
- Note the conjunctions and connecting words: and, but, when, where, how, (so) that, because, then, therefore, etc.

d. Look for connections and patterns.

- What does the poem's arrangement tell us?
- What does the speaker spend the most time telling us? What is its significance?
- What does the poem want to emphasize?

e. What strikes you as the most important line today?

There is seldom only one correct answer to this question. Different people will give precedence to different lines. Still, the question gives us a place to start.

- Why do you choose this line?
- How does this line relate to the rest of the poem?

1.5. Exercises for Chapter 1

Vocabulary

- association: the connection between things that belong to the same group or cognitive domain. §1.3a
- cognitive domain: the intellectual network(s) to which a word belongs. §1.3a
- defamiliarization: making the familiar different so that we can see it again as if for the first time; according to Viktor Shklovsky, this is a primary function of art. §1.1
- sameness: a complete overlap with no difference. §1.3b
- similarity: a sharing of much in common, but also with differences. §1.3b

Questions

Using just what you know, do a “close reading” of Psalm 46 using the questions below.

- Make an outline of the psalm.
- Mark up the psalm and note what repeats and connects.
- Who is the speaker? Who does the psalmist address?
- What does the poem’s arrangement tell us?
- What line strikes you today as the most important? Why is that?

Note: The word “*Selah*” appears mainly in the Book of Psalms and seems to mark a pause. However, its use is not consistent. The editors of the NRSV use it here to divide this text. Other translations divide the text into more pieces.

Psalm 46

To the leader. Of the Korahites. According to Alamoth. A Song.

¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. *Selah*

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. *Selah*

⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

¹⁰ "Be still, and know that I am God!

I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth."

¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

PART II

PART I: THE CRAFT OF BIBLICAL POETRY

Prose and poetry form traditional categories of literature. Visually prose goes all the way from one side of the page to the other, while poetry turns back before reaching the far side. Prose has the freedom to be long or short as seems good. Traditionally, some restraint has defined poetry. Until Walt Whitman's free verse, English poetry required the hallmarks of rhyme and strict meter. Hebrew poetry has a different hallmark: parallelism.

2. The Idea of Parallelism

2.1. Robert Lowth, *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum* (1710-1787)

In 1753, the Anglican Bishop Robert Lowth gave the modern study of biblical poetry its most important term: parallelism. Though people recognized the psalms as poems, they did not recognize the extensive poetry in the prophetic books. Lowth saw a similarity between the two and wanted to show that the prophets were poets. He identified the couplet as the basic unit and recognized a certain repetition of ideas between the two lines. As his prime example, he cited the two couplets opening Ps 114:1-2 (NRSV).

When Israel went out from Egypt
The house of Jacob from a people of strange language
Judah was his sacred heritage,
Israel his dominion.

The first word in each line refers to Israel.

1. Israel
2. house of Jacob
3. Judah
4. Israel

“Egypt” appears in the second line as “a people of strange language.” The third and fourth lines give us “sacred heritage” and “dominion,” which are not exactly the same but related, as indicated by the word “his.”

Lowth coined a word for these relationships: “parallelism” More specifically, he identified them as “synonymous parallelism” because the lines are alike. In 1981, James Kugel pointed out the lines are not

synonymous because they are not exactly the same. The differences may be subtle, but still, there are differences. While this may seem nit-picking, Kugel has an important point, as will become clear. Therefore, let us call this relationship “similar parallelism” because “similar” also implies differences.

Lowth identified other lines as “antithetical” because they contain opposites, such as Prov 12:5.

The thoughts of the righteous are just;
the advice of the wicked is treacherous.

Three-word pairs make up the lines:

thoughts & advice: similar
righteous & wicked: opposite
just & treacherous: opposite

Although thoughts and advice are similar, the righteous stand in contrast to the wicked, and just thoughts stand in contrast to treacherous advice.

Here too, Kugel objects that the meaning of the two lines is not “antithetical,” because they do not say the opposite. Instead, the lines say the same things, if in contrasting ways. We can call this “contrasting parallelism.”

Lowth recognized that some couplets had no similar or contrasting ideas. He called them “synthetic parallelism” because the lines had the same “length,” even though they lacked parallel ideas. Into this category, Lowth put here everything that did not fit neatly into the other two. Lowth’s three categories dominated biblical studies until Kugel. He, along with others, has built on Lowth’s insight and added some critical correctives.

2.2. James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (1981)

In his book, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, James Kugel sets out to

challenge the prevailing understanding of biblical poetry. Though he values Lowth's insight of parallelism, he rejects the three categories and points out the many ways in which the second line completes the first line. He also adds the central insight of sequence.

Kugel calls the two lines "A" and "B." He argues that the second line (B) is more important than the first line (A). Coming after line A, line B complements and completes it, and this "afterwardness" gives B "an emphatic character" (8). Therefore, he insists that we must pay careful attention to the differences in the second line, which moves the thought forward somehow. Kugel is adamant about this point. As indicated above, he rejects Lowth's terminology that equates the two lines. He insists that the second line brings some difference, some newness, something more. Kugel emphasizes the sequential nature of Hebrew poetry, its forward movement, and he summarizes this in his saying (13):

"There is A, and what's more there is B."

Kugel is so insistent and so adamant that others have criticized his position. Admittedly, you can find instances where it is difficult to say what more the second line brings. Even so, Kugel's basic insight is sound. The second line is typically moving the poetry forward in various ways. The lines are not static as Lowth's analysis would view it; the second line is not just repeating the first. As Kugel emphasizes, this poetry has a forward movement.

In Ps 114:1-2 above, both couplets say almost the same thing. However, as Alonso Schökel has pointed out, if you take the four lines together, the first two become the "when" clause and the last two are the main clause: When "A" happened, the result was "B" (48-49). As a unit, they demonstrate Kugel's insight. "There is A, and what's more there is B."

The importance of Kugel's insight cannot be understated.

2.3. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985)

In *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985), Robert Alter reiterates Kugel's insight and insists on the “emphatic character” of the second line. He sees the movement from the first to the second line as “one of heightening or intensification..., of focusing, specification, concretization, even what could be called dramatization” (18-19). Typically, semantic parallelism moves from a “standard term” in the first line to a more precise or poetic term in the second line (13). This brings a specification and an intensification that is not decoration but lies at the very heart of the poetry. He sees this as part of the poet's defamiliarization (10).

Alter and his books have played a vital role in helping both scholars and general readers recognize the role of the literary character in generating the meaning of the biblical text.

2.4. Wilfred G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (1985)

In 1929, French archaeologists discovered at Ugarit many tablets written between 1400 and 1100 BC in a language close to biblical Hebrew. The most famous tablets tell in poetry the stories of the deity Baal and other heroes. This poetry sparked a renewed interest in Semitic poetry, and Watson has made an exhaustive list of what he calls “techniques” with examples drawn from both Ugaritic and Hebrew. He focuses particularly on word pairs—sets of words that appear together throughout this poetry. The word pairs serve as the basic building blocks of biblical poetry, and we shall look more carefully at them in the following chapters.

2.5. Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (1985, 2008)

Adele Berlin grounds her work in modern linguistics, especially that of Roman Jakobson, who saw parallelism at the center of poetic language. Berlin argues that Hebrew parallelism appears at four different levels: sound, grammar, word, and idea. While each deserves its own analysis, the different levels work together to structure the poem. The sound can support the grammar, which serves as the frame for the words and meaning. For Berlin, the dominance of parallelism constitutes the poem itself (7-17).

Berlin strongly defends the distinction between Hebrew prose and poetry. She aims her insistence particularly at James Kugel who argues that Hebrew prose and poetry are not separate categories but “a continuum of organization” (85). He prefers to speak of a high (literary) and low (ordinary) rhetorical style (302). Criticizing Kugel's position, she defends “the predominance of parallelism, combined with terseness” as the hallmark of “the poetic expression of the Bible” (5).

Berlin also gives close attention to word pairs as the basic building blocks of parallel ideas.

2.6. F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (2015)

F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp argues strongly that biblical poetry has its ground in orality, and he explores this in four chapters on the line, free rhythm, lyric, and orality.

People have typically regarded the single line as only a half of a verse, but Dobbs-Allsopp argues that “isolated lines” exist, as, for example, “YHWH will reign forever and ever” (Exod 15:18; 84). Still,

lines of Hebrew poetry generally appear in twos or threes with their own signs of completeness. Sentence logic, line length, and parallelism mark out individual lines that call for a pause, and the last accented word in Hebrew lengthens to indicate a pause and the beginning of a new line (51, 57).

Along with others today, Dobbs-Allsopp states categorically: “Biblical poetry is not metrical” (98). Biblical poetry is free verse. In this context, he also explores Walt Whitman’s debt to the King James psalms, which various scholars have noted. As he says:

Anyone who comes to Whitman from a fresh encounter with biblical poetry, whether in (English) translation or in the original Hebrew, cannot help but sense the broad prosodic and rhythmic kinship that joins the one to the other. (96)

Whitman shows us that we can read biblical poetry in English as real poetry.

Dobbs-Allsopp’s main emphasis falls on biblical poetry as lyric—non-narrative poetry that can move in unexpected ways. He grounds lyric poetry in oral composition and sees there a freedom that can build an expression by juxtaposing ideas and strong emotions in contrast to a narrative’s orderly unfolding of events. Rather, the lyric gathers seemingly unrelated pieces into a suggestive mix and invites the reader to engage the poem imaginatively.

In his fourth chapter, Dobbs-Allsopp argues that line, free rhythm, and lyric have their roots in orality and take their power from its vitality. While lyric poetry surely has its roots in orality, I am not convinced that written culture precludes the vitality that Dobbs-Allsopp identifies with oral culture. Still, I agree with him that the juxtaposition of the unexpected and the spontaneous is not the result of clumsy redactors or inept poets but rather reflects a spontaneity and freedom that marks great poetry.

Whatever the role of orality may be, Dobbs-Allsopp’s emphasis on lyric remains important, and we shall return to this when we take up genre.

The literature on biblical poetry is vast, and we could consider other scholars. For the moment, these five provide a foundation for what will come. Along the way, there will be opportunities to add others.

2.7. Exercises for Chapter 2

Vocabulary

- couplet: two lines of poetry; sometimes called a cola or stich. §2.1
- line: a line of poetry followed by a pause; sometimes called by the Greek terms colon, stich, or hemistich. §2.1

Questions

1. Robert Lowth uses the first stanza of Psalm 114 as his example for parallelism. The psalm celebrates Israel's passing through the Red Sea on their exodus from Egypt (Exodus 14-15) and their passing through the River Jordan into the Promised land (Joshua 3). How does the rest of the psalm (114:3-8) reflect Lowth's insight of parallelism?

2. James Kugel sums up his insight in the sentence: "There is A, and what's more there is B." What do the second lines in 114:3-8 point us toward? What do they want to emphasize?

Psalm 114

¹ When Israel went out from Egypt,
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,

² Judah became God's sanctuary,
Israel his dominion.

³ The sea looked and fled;

Jordan turned back.

⁴ The mountains skipped like rams,
the hills like lambs.

⁵ Why is it, O sea, that you flee?

O Jordan, that you turn back?

⁶ O mountains, that you skip like rams?

O hills, like lambs?

⁷ Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the LORD,
at the presence of the God of Jacob,

⁸ who turns the rock into a pool of water,
the flint into a spring of water.

3. Repetition

Repetition is a major feature of all language and poetry. In addition to repeating words, poetry often features the repetition of stress and sound, which we call meter and rhyme.

3.1. Stress and Meter

Meter, the regularly recurring pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, defines English poetry for many people. Greek and Latin poetry also had strict and complex meters. Hebrew scholars spent centuries looking for a regular Hebrew meter. However, it is not there.

As Dobbs-Allsopp argues in great detail: “Biblical poetry is not metrical.” Instead, as he says, each line contains “two or three and sometimes even four stressed syllables” with various unstressed syllables followed by a pause; “then another two, three or four stresses and another pause, and so on” (98). This understanding represents the consensus of scholars today (Gillingham, 1994, 67-68).

Typical is the pattern 3+3, which indicates three strong stresses or accents in each line of the couplet with any number of unstressed syllables. Other possibilities are 2+2, 3+2, or 4+4. However, Hebrew does not strictly enforce these meters. Again, as Dobbs-Allsopp says, “Biblical poetry is not metrical” (98). Rather, it is a type of free verse.

Identifying stressed syllables in Hebrew can be tricky. Unlike English, Hebrew combines related words under one major stress. In translation, one stress in Hebrew may become two or more accented words in English. Even so, the pattern is often rather easy to see in English translations, as in Ps 92:1

It is good	to give thanks
to sing praises	to your name,

Examples could be easily multiplied, and so we often feel the cadence of the Hebrew poetry in English translation.

3.2. Rhyme and the Repetition of Sound

Poetry has a great affinity for sound. Many people consider end-rhyme as a hallmark of English poetry. Because rhymes can be hard to find in English, they create a strong impact. Forced and unhappy rhymes are signs of bad English poetry.

There is no rhyme in Hebrew poetry, which spares translators great difficulty. Still, Hebrew poetry can have concentrated repetition of consonants (alliteration) and/or vowels (assonance). Good translations find sound in their language to support the impact as it delights the hearer. Ps 127:1-2 repeat the following words: unless, LORD, build, in vain, guard. Note also the rhyme of “keep” and “sleep” as well as the alliteration of “rise” and “rest.” There is some assonance with the vowels of “eating,” “he,” “sleep,” and “be” of “beloved.” The sounds of the repeated words help to support the meaning.

¹ Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.
Unless the LORD guards the city,
the guard keeps watch in vain.

² It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives sleep to his beloved.

3.3. The Function of Repetition: Emphasis, Design, and Time

Repetition is one of the most basic strategies of all languages, whether poetry or not. Wherever it appears, the audience should pay careful attention. Among its various functions, three are central: emphasis, design, and time.

a. emphasis

Repetition by its insistence creates emphasis. It is one of the easiest strategies that a text has for showing us what is important. In Psalm 121, the word “keep” appears six times in eight verses to affirm that “my help comes from the LORD.” Anyone can count them, so it is not a personal opinion. “Keeping” is a central idea of the poem.

b. design

Repetition of a word, phrase, or line often defines boundaries in a poem and creates design. In Psalm 136, the second line of each couplet repeats: “for his steadfast love endures forever.” The line contains the psalm’s central idea and also gives the poem its design. In Psalm 8, the first and last lines repeat—a strategy called *inclusio*. In addition to emphasis, the repetition also defines the poem.

c. time:

Finally, repetition creates time for the audience to react. Any speaker knows that you must repeat what you want people to hear so that they have time to absorb and react to it. If you say something just once, it goes by too quickly. We need to hear things several times and in different ways so that we can understand, react and set them up in our imagination. Repetition helps us do that.

3.4. Strategies of Repeating Sameness

a. key words

Key words repeat the central theme or idea of a text. “Steadfast love” appears four times in Psalm 103, and “bless the LORD” appears six times. the repetition is significant.

Sometimes we must include similar words to discover what the poem is creating.

b. *inclusio*

Inclusio names the repetition of the opening and last line. The word “Halleluiah” begins and ends a number of psalms: “hallel” = praise; ‘u’ = “you all,” “iah” or ‘yah’ is short of YHWH. “Halleluiah” or “Alleluia” (from the Latin) means “Praise the LORD!”

Psalms 8 opens and closes with the same couplet (8:1, 9).

O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Likewise, the last lines of Psalm 118 repeat its first couplet:

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever! (118:1, 29)

By beginning and ending with the same lines, the psalm affirms its unity. Though the last lines repeat the first, the text between them creates a new context that enriches the meaning of the last line. The two do not mean precisely the same thing.

c. anaphora

In literary studies, anaphora describes the repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of a line or several successive lines. Ps 115:1 provides an easy example:

“Not to us, O LORD, not to us,
but to your name give glory.”

See also Ps 22:1 and Isa 40:1.

Another example has the beginning of lines repeating as in Ps 29:1-2.

Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy splendor.

Much of Psalm 93 is similar. Though very simple, the repetition creates an insistence that demands attention.

d. refrain

Refrain, the regular repetition of one or more lines, brings a sense of regularity and assurance. Psalm 136 provides one of the clearest examples.

e. alphabetic psalms

Poetry often imposes rules that challenge the poet to become creative. Some biblical poems use the Hebrew alphabet for this challenge. The first couplet begins with aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The second couplet begins with beth, the second letter, and so forth through the twenty-two letters. Psalm 119, the longest in the Psalter, divides into twenty-two stanzas of eight couplets. Each couplet of the stanza begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

The succession of letters gives the poem a sense of order, inevitability, and completeness. Unfortunately, it would be impossible to reproduce this in English.

Some alphabetic poems belong to the wisdom tradition: Psalms 37, 112, 119; and Prov 31:10–31. However, the pattern is also used for various hymns (Pss 9, 25, 34) and laments (Psalms 25; Lamentations 1–4).

The Hebrew alphabet comes from the Canaanite alphabet, which is also the source for the Greek alphabet and the basis for the Roman alphabet, which we use. Although the Hebrew alphabet seems totally different, you can see the link in the first letter. The Hebrew letter, aleph, is the word for ox, and if you turn the Greek first letter, alpha, ‘A’ upside down and draw ears at the crossbar and then eyes and a mouth, you can see the head of an ox.

Its impact of the alphabetic psalm is lost in translation.

3.5. Exercises for Chapter 3

Vocabulary

- alliteration: the repetition of consonants. §3.2

- anaphora: the repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of a line or several successive lines. §3.4c
- assonance: the repetition of vowels. §3.2
- *inclusio*: the repetition of the same phrase or line at the beginning and end of a text. §3.4b
- key word: a repeating word or phrase that signals critical themes in the story or poem. §3.4a
- meter: the regular appearance of stressed syllables. While English poetry Traditionally has a regular number of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables, Hebrew has only a regular number of stressed syllables (more or less). §3.1
- motif: a recurring concrete image connected to a theme, a recurring idea. §3.4a
- refrain: the regular repetition of one or more lines in a poem. §3.4d
- repetition: a basic strategy used to create emphasis, time to react, and design. Repetition is a sign of what the text deems important and demands the audience's attention. §3.0
- rhyme: the repetition of the last syllables of lines of poetry. §3.2
- stress: the accented syllable of a word. §3.1
- theme: a recurring idea in a text. §3.4a

Questions

Mark the strong English accents in Psalm 1. Do not force the accent into a regular pattern. Read it out loud, and follow your ear.

Mark Psalm 150 for its sound. There are repeating words but also look for repeating vowels, consonants, and syllables.

What are key words in Psalms 1 and 150?

Why does the Book of Psalms, also called the Psalter, begin and end with these psalms?

4. Word Pairs: The Building Blocks of Parallelism

The Building Blocks of Parallelism

The great find of cuneiform tablets at Ugarit in 1929 gave new impetus to the study of ancient poetry and its craft. Those texts, written before the Bible about 1400 to 1100, use a language close to Hebrew. Unlike other discoveries filled with economic texts, the Ugaritic texts tell stories about the Canaanite deity, Baal, and other heroes. Moreover, they tell these stories in poetry that uses word pairs as the building blocks of its parallelism, and examples of the “As Adele Berlin states:

there existed a stock of fixed word pairs which belonged to the literary tradition of Israel and Canaan, and that poets, specially trained in their craft, seemingly drew on this tradition to aid in the oral composition of parallel lines” (65-66).

As noted above, oral composition is challenging to explore since we have only written documents. Still, the Canaanite and biblical poetry shows that word pairs were a common feature of that literature.

Psalm 19’s opening verses provide an easy example of word pairs and their variety.

The heavens	are telling	the glory of God
and the firmament	proclaims	his handiwork.
Day to day	pours forth	speech
and night to night	declares	knowledge.

The first example pairs the whole with a part: heaven and

firmament. In the Hebrew world, the “firmament” was a dome separating the waters above from the earth and the waters below. (The sky is blue because of the water above the dome or firmament.) So, the firmament becomes a part for the whole heavens.

The second example is a similar pair: “tell and proclaim.” Communication stands at the heart of both words. Still, they are not the same in English. “Proclaim” has a more formal and emphatic sense than “tell.” They are also parallel to the verbs of the next two lines: “pours forth speech” and “declares.” The four verbs make clear the main point of the stanza: Creation speaks.

“Day” and “night” give us half and half. Taken together, they embrace all time, which is the point.

The last two elements of the first couplet equate the glory of God” to “his handiwork.” Though they are somewhat different ideas, the impetus of parallelism to form word pairs invites the reader to look for connections between them. It is not difficult to see that the line suggests that God’s handiwork is also God’s glory. Creation then becomes something like a word that communicates God’s power, and this “speech” conveys real “knowledge.” While word pairs are often synonyms, they can also invite us to find similarities between seemingly different elements.

4.1. Word Pairs: Natural, Cultural, and Personal

We generate word pairs first of all through association. Berlin notes that the time available to generate a pair plays a role. If the time is short, a person reaches for an easy connection. She uses the example of “man,” which generates the connection of “woman.” However, if a person has time to think, they may find a less common association, such as “boy.” If there is even more time, or if the person is particularly imaginative, other possibilities appear depending on

the context: groom, farmer, king (68-69). A close study of biblical and Canaanite poetry reveals that some pairs occur frequently while others are rare. Familiarity with the tradition would have given a biblical poet both an understanding of the poetry's parallelism and a treasure chest of traditional word pairs. Still, poets have an uncanny ability to find connections even where none seem to exist. We should not dismiss unconventional pairs that do not fit our expectations. The yoking of the unexpected may well be the point.

Pairs may be natural, cultural, or personal. Natural pairs reveal themselves to anyone alive in this world. "Night" and "day" would be a natural pair, and they appear together in a number of psalms, including Ps 1:2. Even so, the two come with many connections. The night can be a time of rest, but also of blindness, danger, and mystery. The day is the time of the known, of clarity, scrutiny, reality, and more. In the ancient Near East, both the sun and moon were deities for many. Some of these connections are natural, but some are cultural. There is no sharp line between the two. We encounter them in so many ways, and they offer us many possibilities. By personal, I mean pairs unique to the poet and the poem. If repeated in a poem or a prophet's book, they gather meaning.

"Heaven" and "firmament," seemed a natural pair to the psalmist, but they represent that culture's understanding of the universe. Sometimes their understanding fits easily with ours, but sometimes it does not. The psalmist lived in a three-story universe with heaven up, the underworld down, and earth in the middle. For us, the world is more complicated, with "up" continually changing directions as our world turns.

While much study has gone into identifying and categorizing traditional word pairs in Hebrew and Ugaritic, poets are forever generating new connections in their pursuit of defamiliarization. As a result, a complete list would be impossible and unnecessary. Still, some basic categories are helpful if only to provide us with a reference point.

4.2. Similar Pairs

a. pairs with the same word

In addition to anaphora, discussed above, the word may repeat and link two lines together, as in Ps 27:8, where both “seek” and “face” repeat with new grammar that creates a difference between the two lines.

“Come,” my heart says, “Seek his face!”
Your face, LORD, do I seek.

b. pairs of similar words

Similar pairs join words with much the same meaning, and they can, more or less, substitute for each other, such as “guard” and “protect” in Ps 12:7.

You, O LORD, will protect us;
you will guard us from this generation forever.

These pairs form the basis for Lowth’s understanding of parallelism.

c. pairs of contrasting words

Contrasting pairs depend upon a common foundation but name its positive and negative aspects, its fullness and void (Berlin, 11). Of the many possibilities, here are five contrasting pairs:

- good and evil (Ps 36:4)
- righteous and wicked (Ps 1:6)

- wise and foolish (Prov 10:1)
- peace and war (Ps 120:7)
- light and darkness (Ps 139:11).

d. a word with an explanatory phrase

A word is sometimes parallel to an explanatory phrase. Isaiah often pairs “the LORD” with “the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 1:4; 5:24; 29:19; 31:1; 41:14, 16, 20; 43:3, 14; 45:11; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5; 60:9, 14).

4.3. Pairs with Associated Words

If someone says “salt,” people will likely answer “pepper,” but they are not synonyms. You could not replace salt in a recipe with pepper. If someone says “pen,” another might answer “pencil,” or “paper,” or “ink.” These pieces belong to what linguists call the same “cognitive domain.” Salt and pepper are both condiments with an association to all other spices. Pen and pencil, paper, and ink all belong to the realm of writing with other pieces.

In Ps 104:14-15, food serves as the overarching category: animals have “grass” while humans have “plants,” “wine,” “oil,” and “bread.” The individual pieces often point not just to themselves but to the whole. Their specificity helps to make the whole more concrete.

You cause the grass to grow for the **cattle**,
 and plants for **people** to use,
 to bring forth food from the earth,
 and wine to gladden the **human heart**,
oil to make the **face** shine,
 and bread to strengthen the **human heart**.

Here “human heart” and “face” evoke the whole person: “people”.

As parts of the body, they belong to the same domain. Likewise, “people” and “cattle” are both animals, unlike plants.

Below are some basic types of associations, a topic we shall consider again as metonymy in Part III.

a. pairs with words from the same cognitive domain

Here in Ps 94:9, parts of the body point to the whole person and to their senses: seeing and hearing:

He who planted the **ear**, does he not **hear**?

He who formed the **eye**, does he not **see**?

b. pairs with the general and the specific

Typically, the first line will name the general category, and the second will focus on a specific. The movement from “hand” to the more specific “right hand” appears in Pss 21:8; 26:10; 80:17; 89:13; 138:7; 139:10; 144:11.

c. pairs of the whole and the part

“Jerusalem,” the city, is often paired with “Zion,” the biblical name of the temple mount, which is a part of the city, as in Ps 147:12.

Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem!

Praise your God, O Zion!

The two are paired together five times in the Book of Psalm: Ps 51:18; 102:21; 128:5; 135:21; 147:12. See also Isaiah 2:3; 4:3, 4; 10:12, 32; 24:23; 30:19; 31:9; 33:20; 37:22; 40:9; 41:27; 52:1-2; 62:1; 64:10.

d. merismus: half & half and polar pairs

The Greek term “merismus” means “to divide,” and it describes something divided into two (or three) essential parts to convey a sense of the whole. Alonso Schökel stated in class that the gathering of parts to create wholes was a fundamental movement of biblical poetry.

Ps 96:11-12a divides creation into the heavens and the earth and then divides the earth into the sea and field:

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.

Two main categories fall under merismus:

1) half and half: The two halves indicate the whole. Examples would be heaven and earth, day and night, male and female, life and death. As Alonso Schökel notes, the parts are not always exactly half and half but nonetheless evoke the whole. Moreover, the pieces chosen may be significant for the context (*Manual*, 83-84).

2) polar pairs: The extremes indicate the whole, such as “your going out and your coming in” (Ps 121:8). The expression does not refer just to the beginning and end but also to everything in between.

Ps 148:11-12 provides an easy example of both categories.

Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!	<i>unequal h pair simil</i>
Young men and women alike, old and young together!	<i>half and h polar pair</i>

“Young men and women” represent half and half, while “old and young” are a polar pair naming the endpoints of humanity. Also, notice how the second line expands “kings of the earth.” The third and fourth lines expand “all peoples.”

Sometimes individual pieces represent larger wholes. Ps 148:10 gathers the whole animal kingdom together in two lines:

Wild animals and all cattle, *wild and tame four-footed animals*
creeping things and flying birds! *many legs and two legs with wings*

4.4. Sequential Pairs

Sequence lies at the center of Kugel's insight, and sequential pairs contribute to that movement. They have the logical expectation that one follows the other, as in Ps 86:7 with "call" and "answer."

In the day of my trouble I **call** on you,
for you will **answer** me.

This English pair appears in many other places: Ps 4:1; 17:6; 20:9; 81:7; 91:15; 99:6; 102:2; 118:5; 138:3.

In Ps 48:12-13, the psalmist invites people to walk throughout the city of Jerusalem while counting its various towers and appreciating its fortification.

a Walk about Zion
a' go all around it
b count its towers,
c consider well its ramparts
a" go through its citadels

The first pair of verbs are similar. The second pair asks the hearer to "count" and then "consider." Those actions follow. The last line reiterates the invitation with the result following:

that you may tell the next generation
that this is God,
our God forever and ever.

The psalmist invites the hearer to visit the city and discover "her" as a manifestation of God. The word "city" is feminine in Hebrew.

4.5. Lists of 3 and 3+1, 7 and 7+1

Groups of three and seven are typical in many cultures (Propp 74). The first or the last element is often the most important. In some cases, we find two plus one (2+1), three plus one (3+1), or seven plus one (7+1), with the added element being the most important because it begins a new sequence.

Ps 83:1 gives us three verbs with similar meanings:

O God,	1) do not keep silence;
2) do not hold your peace	3) or be still, O God!

Ps 115:5-7 has a group of seven.

1	They have	mouths,	but do not speak
2		eyes,	but do not see.
3	They have	ears,	but do not hear;
4		noses,	but do not smell
5	They have	hands,	but do not feel;
6		feet,	but do not walk;
7	they make	no sound	in their throats.

Note that the first and last lines say essentially the same thing: mouth and throat cannot speak or make a sound. That repetition shows what the text wants the reader to notice. The couplet that follows says:

Those who make them are like them;
so are all who trust in them (115:8).

The psalm asserts that idol-makers are like the things they make, with an emphasis on being without a voice. This psalm ends by saying:

The dead do not praise the LORD,
nor do any that go down into silence" (115:17).

The psalm argues that those who make and worship idols have gone down into the silence and are dead. On the other hand, those who praise God are alive (115:18).

4.6. Exercises:

Vocabulary

- contrasting pairs: words that are opposite in some respect, such as the wise and the foolish. §4.2c
- half and half: a type of merismus that names the two halves to convey the whole, as in “day and night” for all time. §4.3d
- merismus: something divided into two (or three) essential parts to convey a sense of the whole. §4.3d
- polar pairs: the naming of the beginning and the end to convey the whole, as in “head to toe.” §4.3d
- similar pairs: two words that are similar and could stand for each other. §4.2
- word pairs: words that connect through similarity, contrast, sequence, and metonymy. They form the building blocks of biblical poetry. §4.0

Questions

1. Mark the word pairs in Psalm 91. Draw circles and connecting lines or use colors to indicate your findings. Everything does not make a pair, but the parallelism suggests that we connect things we might not usually connect.

2. Do the same for Psalm 26.

5. Parallel Lines: Similarity and Sequence

Robert Lowth focused on the similarities between lines. He saw Hebrew poetry as a repetition of similarity: the second line repeats the ideas of the first line in some way, or at least its length. Word pairs serve as the building blocks of this parallelism.

James Kugel has emphasized the importance of sequence. As Kugel argues: “There is A, and what’s more there is B.” The second does not merely repeat the first in some way, but it moves the thought forward.

Similarity and sequence, taken together, capture the fundamental movement of biblical poetry. Sometimes the emphasis falls more on similarity and at other times on sequence. While it is impossible and unnecessary to describe every possibility, this section outlines some basic relationships of similarity and sequence in parallel lines to help readers imagine the possibilities. By recognizing these relationships, we can follow how the psalmist shapes and develops the couplet, the stanza, and the whole poem. Some couplets have a complexity that allows them to fit into several categories. Any zeal to categorize these couplets should focus rather on better insight into the whole psalm and not on the “correct” answer.

Scholars often indicate the similarity between lines by assigning each element a letter. For example, “abc || abc” indicates that each line has three elements, and all three have a similar word pair. On the other hand, “abc || bc” indicates that the second line is parallel to the second and third elements of the line.

5.1. Similar Parallelism

Similar parallelism may be found at all four of Berlin’s levels: sound, grammar, word, and idea. However, I shall focus on the word pairs.

a. similar ideas without parallel word pairs

Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love. (Ps 31:16)

Here the ideas are similar even though expressed in different ways. Berlin calls this “semantic parallelism.” Kugel would surely argue that the second line brings something new and important. He might point to “steadfast love” and its connection to covenant.

b. full similarity of ideas, words, and even grammar: abc || abc

Here each element of the first line is paired with an element of the second, as in Ps 149:2 where the grammar is also parallel:

	a	b	c
	subject	verb	object
abc	Let Israel	be glad	in its Maker;
abc	let the children of Zion	rejoice	in their King.

c. elliptical parallelism: abc || bc or a variation

Ellipsis refers to an omitted word or phrase from a previous line that a reader must supply to make sense of the second line. Ps 96:13 omits “he will judge” in the second line.

a	b
abc He will judge	the world
bc	and the peoples

The standard meter, 3+2,, is visible in this verse.
Ellipsis produces conciseness that contributes to density—a value for poets.

d. parallelism with substitution: abc || bcd and the like

Amos 1:2 omits “the LORD” and replaces it in the second line with a new element: “his voice.”

	a	b	c	d
abd	The LORD	roars		from Zion,
bcd		and utters	his voice	from Jerusalem

e. apposition: abc || a or abc || b or abc || c

Apposition describes a noun followed by an explanatory noun or phrase. Here it refers to the use of the second line to explain one

element in the first line. Isaiah 63:15 expands on “heaven” in the second line.

abc Look down | from heaven | and see,
b from your holy and glorious habitation.

In Ps 125:1, the second line describes “Mount Zion” with contrasting verbs.

abc Those who trust | in the LORD | are like Mount Zion,
cc which cannot be moved, | but abides forever.

In Isa 28:15, the second line describes “you scoffers” in the first.

Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers
who rule this people in Jerusalem.

f. repetition of one or more element(s): ab || ac or the like

The second line repeats one or more of the elements from the first line while adding new elements as in Ps 93:3-4:

abc The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
abd the floods have lifted up their voice;
abd' the floods lift up their roaring.
efg More majestic than the thunders, of mighty waters,
ehf more majestic than the waves, of the sea,
eij majestic on high is the LORD!

g. chiasm: ab || ba

Chiasm (pronounced: KAI-asm) takes its name from the Greek letter

‘chi’ or ‘X’ because the arrangement of the two lines looks like the letter “X” if you draw a line between the pairs, as in Ps 91:14.

<i>a</i> Those who love me	<i>b</i> I will deliver.
X	
<i>b</i> I will protect	<i>a</i> those who know my name.

This arrangement creates a strong sense of unity between the two lines.

Ps 33:6 also has a chiasmic form but adds a middle term that serves both lines. .

<i>a</i> By the word of the LORD	<i>b</i> the heavens
<i>c</i> were made	
<i>b</i> and all their host	<i>a</i> by the breath of his mouth.

Chiasm appears often in Hebrew poetry. See other examples in Pss 50:11; 51:1; 82:1; 91:14. As with all poetic craft, its importance lies in its contribution to the whole, and we should be able to explain this and not just identify it.

h. contrasting parallelism

Here the two lines make the same point by stating some contrast. Ps 21:2 states what God has given to and has not withheld from the king.

- positive:* You have given him his heart’s desire,
- negative:* and have not withheld the request of his lips.

Wisdom literature is forever contrasting the ways of the righteous and the wicked, as in Ps 37:21.

The **wicked** borrow, and do not pay back,
but the **righteous** are generous and keep giving;

i. a group of three-line: a tercet

While the couplet is the basic unit of biblical poetry, three lines, called a tercet, are not uncommon. While full similar parallelism (aaa) is possible, the tercet often take the form of 2+1 or 1+2: aab or abb, as in Ps 90:7.

- a A thousand may fall at your side,
- a ten thousand at your right hand,
- b but it will not come near you.

The doubling of 'a' makes the contrast of 'b' that much stronger. Likewise, the doubling of the second line (abb) brings a different emphasis. The relationships of these three-line units can be as complex as those for couplets.

Ps 86:9 gives us three verbs that describe a sequence of actions which we consider in the next section.

- a All the nations you have made shall come
- b and bow down before you, O LORD,
- c and shall glorify your name.

5.2. Sequential Parallelism

Sequence refers to elements that typically follow one another. The sequential relationship may be circumstantial, such as time, place, cause, or result. As both Kugel and Alter argue, the sequence develops the thought, emotion, or action. As Kugel says:

What [Lowth's] synonymous reading...lacked was a recognition of the fact of B's afterwordness. It conceived

of the two as happening simultaneously and consequently failed to see that B must inevitably be understood as A's completion (13).

Without the ability to move the text forward, it can only repeat itself and quickly becomes trite.

An exhaustive treatment would be impossible and unnecessary because poets always seek new combinations. Below are some typical strategies used in biblical poetry.

a. the second line grammatically completing the first

Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem. (Ps 126:2)

Nothing in the first line is similar to anything in the second line, but it completes the idea of the first, as also in Ps 61:2.

From the end of the earth I call to you,
when my heart is faint.

b. lines of sequential actions

Ps 80:8-9 describes the sequence of events from Egypt to the promised land.

You **brought** a vine **out** of Egypt;
you **drove out** the nations and **planted** it.
You **cleared** the ground for it;
it **took deep root** and **filled** the land.

c. an independent clause and a subordinate clause

or vice versa

Subordinate clauses and phrases express place, time, manner, cause, purpose, result, condition, or serve to introduce a substantive clause. The examples below have sequential verbs.

When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears,
and rescues them from all their troubles. (Ps 34:17)

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the LORD would not have listened. (Ps 66:18)

Give victory with your right hand, and answer us,
so that those whom you love may be rescued. (Ps 60:5)

I have made you a tester and a refiner among my people
so that you may know and test their ways. (Jer. 6:27)

Blessed be God,
because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me. (Ps 66:20)

How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting. (Ps 147:1)

O sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things. (Ps 98:1)

d. statement and quotation

Ps 87:5 begins with a statement followed by a quote.

And of Zion it will be said:
“Each one was born in it.”

e. statement and question

A question may be joined to a statement as in Psalm 118:6:

The LORD is with me; I am not afraid;
what can mortals do against me?

There are other types of sequential statements, but these examples convey the basic idea.

5.3. The Combination of Similarity and Sequence

Though the examples above have focused on either similarity or sequence, Kugel would argue that they combine both and so belong here. Again, similarity and sequence are not different categories, but two dimensions that combine to create emphasis and nuance while moving the thought forward. Our ability to recognize both provides us with insight into the movement and concerns of the text. Rather than focusing only on similarity, we must look for the difference between the two lines. The similarity allows us to see the difference more clearly.

Psalm 20 opens with similar lines:

	The LORD		answer you	in the day	of trouble
The name	of the God	of Jacob	protect you.		

The second line replaces “in the day of trouble” with “the name” and “of Jacob” to link God’s presence to the people. The verbs also shift from “answer, to “protect” which is the answer to the prayer, and Kugel would insist that “protection” is the “more” added by the second line.

Below are three basic combinations, but the possibilities are endless. A fourth follows but can only be seen in Hebrew.

a. the difference of similar words: abc || abc

Because similar words are also different, their differences can play a crucial role, as in Ps 1:1 which is clearer in the translation of the New American Bible (Revised Edition):

Blessed is the man
who does not walk | in the counsel | of the **wicked**
nor stand | in the way | of **sinners**
nor sit | in the company | with **scoffers**.

The verbs shift from movement to standing in place to rest: walk > stand > sit. Taken together they embrace key moments of life. The last three terms begin with a state of being (“the wicked”) and move to active involvement (“sinning”) and end in a state of disdain (“scoffers”). All refer to those who do not keep the Torah, but the differences are significant and add intensity. The three middle terms are not similar, but the parallelism invites us to connect them.

b. substitution with a new element: abc || abd etc.

Often the second line drops some element from the first and replaces it with a new element as in Ps 96:1 where the second line names those who are to sing.

abc: O sing to the LORD a new song;
abd: sing to the LORD, all the earth.

c. step parallelism: ab || bc

Step parallelism uses the last element to connect to the first element of the next line—the repetition adding emphasis, as in Ps 97:5 – ab || bc

ab	The mountains melt like wax	before the LORD,
bc		before the LORD of all the earth.

d. Janus parallelism

For the sake of completeness, I include Janus parallelism, which English cannot reproduce. The Roman god Janus had a face in both the front and back of his head and so could look backward as well as forward. Janus parallelism uses a word with two different meanings: one relating to what has preceded it and the other meaning to what follows, as in this example, which appears in the Song of Songs 2:12:

The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of zāmîr has come,
and the voice of the turtledove.

The Hebrew word *zāmîr* can mean either “pruning” or “song,” and in this context, it means “pruning” in relation to the first line and “song” in relation to the third line. Since Janus parallelism depends on the meaning of the Hebrew, it is lost in translation.

5.4. Stanzas and Larger Groups

Although the couplet is the basic unit of biblical poetry, the sense of the text often indicates that couplets belong together and so form larger units which we call stanzas in English.

Traditionally, stanzas of English poetry are uniform in length, and the poets make these divisions clear in their manuscripts. However, Hebrew manuscripts do not preserve larger units. The word “*selah*” appears mainly in the Book of Psalms (seventy-one times), and it seems to have served as a liturgical or musical marker. However, it is not used consistently.

Divisions in translations today come from an editor, and various editors divide the same poem in different ways for good reasons. Any division that can be defended is viable. The *New Revised Standard Version* divides Psalm 29 into six stanzas, and the *New American Bible* (Revised Edition) divides it into three stanzas. Both of those translations tend to divide psalms into larger groups. The Grail Psalter, however, tends to divide psalms into groups of four, five, and six lines for singing. Even so, I find these smaller groups reasonable.

Ps 139:11-12 begins with an “if” clause (v. 11) followed by “then” clauses (v. 12); light and darkness hold the five lines today with the last being the most important.

¹¹ If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,”
¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

With this, we come to the end of our consideration of poetic techniques which biblical poets used to craft their poems. These elements are not separate from poetic language and genre which we shall explore in the next two parts. Still repetition at various levels, word pairs, and parallelism provide the framework for this poetry.

5.5. Exercises for Chapter 5

Vocabulary

- apposition: a word or phrase is in apposition when it follows and explains another word. §5.1e
- chiasm (pronounced: KAI-asum): the arrangement *ab | ba* in which the second line ends with what the first began, and the second line begins with what ends the first line. §5.1g

a Those who love me | **b** I will deliver

b I will protect | **a** those who know my name.

- ellipsis: the omission of a word or phrase from a previous line that a reader must supply to make sense of the second line.

§5.1c

- tercet: a group of three lines. §5.1i

Questions

1. Analyze the parallel lines of Psalm 148.

- The repetition clearly indicates that the psalm divides into two main sections. Where does it divide?
- Each of those sections then divides into two parts. Where are those divisions?
- The word “praise” repeats often, but where and how does it change?
- The psalm creates both a sense of God being near and far. How does that work?

2. Analyze the parallel lines of Psalm 27 or 33. Mark ‘S’ for mainly similar; ‘C’ for mainly contrasting; ‘Q’ for sequential, or ‘S&Q’ for a combination.

PART III

PART II: POETRY AND LANGUAGE

Many people equate English poetry with rhyme and meter. While craft often separates literary language from ordinary language, it is not the only feature of poetry. Some distinguish between verse and poetry, where verse means meter and rhyme while poetry means more than craft. Language often provides the necessary weight for poetry, even without meter and rhyme.

In this section, we shall explore how language generates meaning. Many words correspond to their dictionary meaning, but language can also diverge from this literal sense in typical ways. The audience must recognize this divergence to grasp the meaning of the poem. We make these shifts in our ordinary conversations, and we do it without thinking. Here we want to bring all of that to a conscious level.

6. Literal Language

Literary studies often make a distinction between literal and figurative language.

Literal language uses words that correspond directly and only to their basic dictionary meaning. When I say “door,” I mean a physical door used as an opening in a wall. When I say house, I mean a dwelling where people live.

Figurative language is actually a catch-all category that refers to words used in a non-literal way. Here, a word’s meaning has shifted in some way, and we must understand it just literally. For instance, the Bible talks about “the house of David,” and, for the most part, this ‘house’ refers not to his palace but to his dynasty, the family who lived in the palace. If I take the language literally and think that ‘house’ means his palace, then I will miss the point. Likewise, Psalm 22 begins: “The LORD is my shepherd.” We easily recognize that God is not literally a shepherd but only like a shepherd in some respects. Again, a literal interpretation would be misleading and silly.

These shifts are part of our ordinary language. We make them easily as we speak and listen to others, often without reflecting on what is happening. In this section, we want to understand exactly what has shifted, but first, we must be clear about literal language.

6.1. Literal Language

Literal language uses words with their primary dictionary meaning. We use literal language to describe the world around us, especially when we want to be precise. The instructions for using a software program should be univocal—that is, they should have one unambiguous meaning. This depends on good sentence

construction, but it also depends on knowing the exact word for all the pieces.

Ps 74:4-7 uses literal language to capture the reality and impact of Jerusalem's destruction.

⁴ Your foes have roared within your holy place;
they set up their emblems there.

⁵ At the upper entrance they hacked
the wooden trellis with axes.

⁶ And then, with hatchets and hammers,
they smashed all its carved work.

Except for the word “roared,” which suggests the enemy was like a lion, the words literally describe what the enemy has done to the temple, and it makes the violence graphic.

The word ‘literal’ seems to suggest a simple identification, but the reality can be much more complicated. The Hebrew word for ‘house,’ ‘beth,’ refers to a family dwelling, but that structure was rather different from houses today. Some history or archaeology may be important for understanding the literal meaning in its original context. In the passage above, we could explore exactly what “axes...hatchets and hammers” were like at that time. Also, what did “wooden trellis” refer to?

Likewise, a word may have several meanings depending on the context. The Hebrew word *shamaʿ* means both “hear” and “obey.” Unless you know the language, these relationships get lost, but commentaries can help illuminate them.

6.2. Cognitive Domain

In his work with Mark Johnson and Mark Turner, George Lakoff emphasizes that a word is part of a way of thinking. Already we have considered a house not just a building with many parts but also a building where life takes place. Human beings eat, sleep, carry on conversations, and more in a house. Houses have windows,

walls, and roofs; they are often found in neighborhoods that make up cities. All of this is connected to a house. Therefore, the word “house” points us not just toward the building but also the network of ideas involving a “house.”

This network or “cognitive domain” shows that a house is part of an organized system. When we use a word literally, we conjure up not just the building but also its place and function in this larger physical and intellectual system—its cognitive domain.

6.3. Denotation and Connotation

Literary studies have often made a distinction between denotation and connotation. Denotation is another name for the literal meaning. Connotation is kin to the idea of cognitive domain; it refers to the emotive and associational aspects of a word, which can be natural, cultural, and/or personal. Words bring to mind more than what they point us to.

For instance, “house” and “home” have different connotations in English. Though we sometimes use the words interchangeably, not every house is a home. The word “home” conveys not just the place but a complex of emotions, relationships, and images. Careful readers are alive to the individual personalities of words and can use them with some precision. For good communication to happen, people must share some common understanding. We all have our own personal image of the house where we grew up. Sometimes our personal experiences overlap with the common understanding; sometimes, they do not. If we want others to understand very personal experiences, we must make them explicit to others.

Often people think that they are speaking literally, but this is not always the case.

6.4. Exercises for Chapter 6

Vocabulary

- cognitive domain: the intellectual network(s) to which a word belongs. §1.3a, §6.2
- connotation: the natural, cultural, and personal connections that words have for us; it is similar to the word's cognitive domain. §6.3
- denotation: another name for the literal meaning of a word. §6.3
- literal language: the use of words corresponding to their basic dictionary meaning. §6.1

Questions

1. Write three sentences that use language literally.
2. Describe the cognitive domain of the word “hand.” That is: what are the literal connections for “hand”? The sculptor Louise Bourgeois created an artwork, called “Helping Hands,” to celebrate the work of Jane Addams in Chicago. When asked what her sculpture meant, she said you just had to ask yourself what significance hands have for you.
3. What does “school” denote, and what are some of its connotations for you? What is another word that has many connotations for you?

7. Metonymy: Connection by Association

7.1. A Definition of Metonymy: X for Y

Metonymy (mi-TAHN-i-mee) is the use of an entity for something associated with it: X for Y.

When we talk about “Hollywood,” we are usually talking about the film industry associated with the city and not the city itself. The city becomes a kind of shorthand for the large and complex industry. If we are reading Shakespeare, we are reading the works written by Shakespeare. If we drive a Ford, we are driving a car made by the Ford Motor Company.

In each of these cases, we are not using the word in a completely literal way. We are using one entity to provide access to another associated with it. This is a regular feature of ordinary language with many, many examples. We can analyze it as follows: “X _____ for Y_ _____.”

The easiest example of metonymy is the part for the whole. In the Bible, body parts are often used for the whole person. Ps 71:8 says, “My mouth is filled with your praise.” Here “mouth” stands for the whole person; the psalmist is saying that “I” am praising God with my whole being, not just with my mouth. Since “my mouth” sings the praise, the psalmist focuses on the mouth; the choice of “mouth” is not arbitrary. If the psalmist had said, “My hand is filled with your praise,” we would have to ask what that might mean—if anything.

The Greeks gave this use of the part for the whole its own name: synecdoche. Still, it is a subcategory of metonymy, another Greek term. The double “y” makes this word strange and seemingly

difficult to grasp, but it names a common feature of speech. A piece of metonymy is a metonym.

In addition to part for the whole, Lakoff and Johnson give the following typical categories of metonymy (*Metaphors*, ch. 8):

- the producer for the product: He bought a Ford.
- objects used for the user: The buses are on strike.
- the controller for the controlled: Napoleon lost at Waterloo.
- the institution for the people responsible: The Army wants to reinstitute the draft.
- the place for the institution: Wall Street is in a panic.
- the place for the event: Remember the Alamo.

In each case, the metonymy invites us to see not just the piece but something associated with it from the same cognitive domain.

7.2. The Importance of Metonymy

Metonymy adds to the power of poetry in at least four ways.

1. Metonymy gives the audience access to the larger cognitive domain.
2. Metonymy allows the speaker to draw our attention to some particular feature(s). Typically, the choice is not arbitrary, and we should ask why our attention has been focused on this particular part. What nuance or emphasis does the metonymy bring?
3. Metonymy often serves parallelism by moving from the general to the specific, from the whole to a more specific and concrete part, or vice versa. Following Kugel, we should ask what the significance of the second piece might be.
4. Metonymy provides another way of achieving defamiliarization by making us ask just what the language evokes.

7.3. Some Examples of Metonymy in the Bible

Metonymy pervades the Bible. The “Red Sea” connects us to the larger and more crucial event at that place and to its story. Of course, anyone unfamiliar with those events will not make the connections.

In the theology of Zion, God sits unseen on the cherubim throne in the Holy of Holies within the Temple like a king. The cherubim throne with the ark as its footstool becomes a metonym (MET-uh-nim) for God’s royal presence. In the Deuteronomistic tradition, the temple becomes “a house for the name of the LORD” (1 Kgs 8:17). Here “the name” becomes a metonym for the person of God, just as many people see their name as a special manifestation of their person. The Priestly tradition identifies the divine presence in the temple with God’s glory (2 Chr 7:1). In both cases, the metonymy of name and glory moves away from the anthropomorphic (human-like) theology of Zion to a more transcendent understanding of God.

Jacob, the son of Isaac, receives the name of Israel, meaning “one who strives with God,” after wrestling the whole night with the “man” (Gen 32:22-32); the new name connects Jacob to the event. Both names become metonyms for his descendants as a whole. Later, they become the names for the divided kingdom: Israel for the northern kingdom and Judah, the tribe from which David came, for the southern kingdom.

The Bible often evokes covenant by referring to its stipulations or laws, as in Ps 78:10.

They did not keep God’s covenant,
but refused to walk according to his law.

Likewise, “covenant” is paired with its hallmark virtues: steadfast love and faithfulness, as in Ps 25:10:

All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and
faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Lifting up or stretching out hands was the typical gesture of prayer, as we see in Ps 141:2.

Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,
and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.

In Isa 1:15, the prophet uses “outstretched hands” for “prayer.”

When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.

“Blood” typically stands for life, which belongs to God and so is holy. Therefore, touching blood makes a person “impure” because they have transgressed into the realm of the divine. Here “hands full of blood” suggests not just touching but immersion and so violence against others. “Hands” stands for the whole person but focuses on the part that brings about the violence, just as “eyes” stand for God’s assent.

In his Codex (c. 1800 BC), King Hammurabi says that he will ensure justice for “the orphan and the widow” (Epilogue, 26). While this pair has a literal meaning, they are also a metonym for all who have no public voice, and Deuteronomy adds to them the alien because Israel was once a slave in Egypt (Deut 24:19-22).

In both Isaiah 2:4cd and Micah 4:3, we read:

They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks.

Swords and spears recall war and death, while plowshares and pruning hooks conjure up agriculture, fertility, and peace. The concreteness of the images and their transformation makes this couplet so vivid and memorable that many who do not read the Bible know this verse.

At times, an entity may function both literally and metonymically. Take Ps 8:8-9, for instance.

All sheep and oxen,
even the beasts of the field,

The birds of the air, the fish of the sea,
and whatever swims the paths of the seas.

“All sheep and oxen” have a literal meaning, but they also represent small and large animals. They also represent tame animals as distinct from the wild animals of the field in the second line. They are all land animals as opposed to the air and water animals of the third line, and all of the animals of the first three lines are what we can see as opposed to what we cannot see beneath the sea in the last line. These four lines demonstrate a highly refined ability to organize the world. We must not underestimate the ability of biblical poets.

As this brief overview shows, metonymy pervades the Bible, just as it pervades our ordinary speech.

7.4 Exercises for Chapter 7 on Metonymy

Vocabulary

- metonym (MET-uh-nim): a piece of metonymy. §7.1
- metonymy (mi-TAHN-i-mee): the use of an entity for something associated with it: X for Y. The part for the whole is the easiest example: “My mouth is filled with your praise” (Ps 71:8); X: mouth for Y: the whole person. §7.1
- synecdoche (si-NEK-doh-key): a subcategory of metonymy which names a part used for the whole. §7.1

Questions

1. Identify three examples of metonymy in our daily language.
2. Identify the metonymy in the verses below. Put a word or

phrase from the text on the X line and what it connects to by association on the Y line.

Example:

Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer. (Ps 86:6)

X ear for hearing

X _____ for Y _____

1. On the holy mount stands the city he founded;
the LORD loves the gates of Zion
more than all the dwellings of Jacob. (Ps 87:1)

X _____ for Y _____

2. But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever;
your name endures to all generations. (Ps 102:12)

X _____ for Y _____

3. "Deliver me, O LORD,
from lying lips,
from a deceitful tongue." (Ps 120:2)

X _____ for Y _____

4. Rescue me from the cruel sword,
and deliver me from the hand of aliens,
whose mouths speak lies,
and whose right hands are false. (Ps 144:11)

X _____ for Y _____

5. Because of their tongue he will bring them to ruin;
all who see them will shake with horror. (Ps 64:8)

X _____ for Y _____

6. In Judah God is known,
his name is great in Israel. (Ps 76:1)

X _____ for Y _____

7. For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from him comes my salvation. (Ps 62:1)

X _____ for Y _____

8. I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation. (Ps 111:1)

X _____ for Y _____

9. Praise is due to you,
O God, in Zion;
and to you shall vows be performed,
2 O you who answer prayer!
To you all flesh shall come. (Ps 65:1-2)

X _____ for Y _____

10. that today you would listen to his voice.
Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness... (Ps 95:7b-8)

X _____ for Y _____

11. You turn us back to dust,
and say, "Turn back, you mortals." (Ps 90:3)

X _____ for Y _____

12. Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
and chiefs of the house of Israel,

who abhor justice
and pervert all equity,
who build Zion with blood
and Jerusalem with wrong! (Mic 3:9-10)

X _____ for Y _____

8. Metaphor: Connection by Likeness

Metaphor stands at the heart of poetry. Monroe Beardsley called it “a poem in miniature.” However, metaphor also plays an important role in ordinary language. Everyone uses them and recognizes, at least unconsciously, how they work. This chapter seeks to help readers understand their power and their pervasive reach.

8.1. The Definition of Metaphor: A is (like) B

A metaphor is an assertion of likeness, and it can be analyzed as follows: A is (like) B.

For this book, the terms “comparison,” “analogy,” and “simile” are equivalent to metaphor. All assert that something is like something else. The two elements are not literally the same but only similar and, therefore, different as well. Unlike metonymy, which uses something for another thing associated with it from the same realm or cognitive domain, metaphor uses two entities from different cognitive domains. It asserts some likeness between the two terms and their two cognitive domains.

Take this statement: “All people are my brothers and sisters.” Literally, I have only one brother and three sisters. This statement, therefore, is not literally true for anyone else. Other people can only be “like” my own brother and sisters in some ways. Still, even though this statement is not literally true, most people today would say that it expresses a fundamental truth with many implications.

The first element ‘A’ is what we want to know more about, and

the second element 'B' should help us understand the first by what is similar. Here my family relationship provides an insight into my relationship with everyone else.

Even if the metaphor asserts complete identity, we can tell that it is not a literal statement. The famous Psalm 23 asserts: "The LORD is my shepherd." However, we know that it does not assert that God is literally running around and chasing after four-footed animals. The psalmist is only affirming some likeness between God and a shepherd.

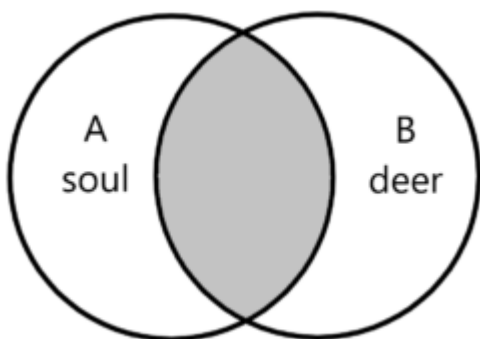
In Ps 42:1 the psalmist sings:

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

Here the psalmist compares "my soul" to "a deer." The deer is thirsty and longs for water. The psalmist claims that "my soul" is longing for God in a way similar to the deer longing for water. Here the psalmist uses the word "as" to indicate the comparison. Some people call statements using "as" or "like" a "simile," and they separate them from statements without "as" or "like." However, both assert some likeness, and the audience must recognize that the speaker is not using the words literally, but metaphorically.

Clearly, Ps 42:1 is not a literal statement. "My soul" is not an animal with antlers. "My soul" does not have fur or four feet or a body that can thirst. This couplet invites us to imagine some way in which a soul longing for God is like a deer longing for water.

If we think of the two ideas as circles, they overlap in part, but only in part. The parts that overlap are similar, and the parts that do not are different. We must hide those parts that do not overlap to make sense of the metaphor: the antler, fur, four feet, body, etc.



Often, we need to stop and explore the 'B' part to figure out what is like and what is different. A deer is an animal that needs water to live. Without water, the animal will die. When the deer gets thirsty, it begins to look for water. The thirstier it gets, the greater its drive to find water. Here the psalmist also defines the water as "flowing streams." Flowing water is not stagnant but purifies itself by running over rocks. So, it is healthy and refreshing. If you know some biology, you would be able to add to this description, but being alive makes us all aware of this basic fact.

The psalmist asserts that "my soul" longing for God is like this deer. The verse then implies that God is like water. Without it, we die. Though the statement is not literally true, it still asserts an important truth about the psalmist and God. Moreover, it would be difficult to explain all the implications of the metaphor.

Sometimes, a metaphorical relationship seems simple, but the more we explore the relationship, we find that more elements are similar than we originally thought. Still, some aspects of each would be nonsense or far-fetched if we try to insist on their similarity.

Metaphors are so prominent in our language that we easily and automatically shift from a literal to a metaphorical understanding without noticing. Still, we need to know how they work.

8.2. Implied Metaphors: Unless the LORD

builds the house.

Every metaphor is not stated as “A is like B” or even “A is B.” Ps 127 begins:

Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.

The first line implies a metaphor though it does not state it directly. The word “builds” cannot be literal. God does not literally take up hammer and chisel but is only somehow like a builder. Though using a metaphor, the psalmist still wants to tell us something true.

Psalm 130 begins:

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
LORD, hear my voice!”

The word “depths” literally means a place deep down and is often used in English as a metonym for the sea because it is so deep. Clearly, the psalmist is not literally deep in the earth or the depths of the sea. Here “depths” must be a spatial metaphor in which down is bad, and the space is psychological and/or spiritual. The psalm goes on to link “depths” with sin:

“If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?”

Being in a state of sin is like being deep in the depths. Though not literally the case, the psalmist nonetheless points us toward the reality of the situation.

In Hos 8:7, we read:

For they sow the wind,
and they shall reap the whirlwind.

The metaphor builds on the image of a farmer planting a seed and reaping a big plant. Here the wind is like a seed, and the whirlwind is like the harvest. The metaphor asserts that the wind, though insubstantial, can grow into a tornado. Hosea uses this metaphor to explain another reality: idol worship.

Worshipping idols is (like) planting the wind, which will yield a harvest of destruction.

Sometimes poets make us work for our understanding. They know that if we have to work, we will remember.

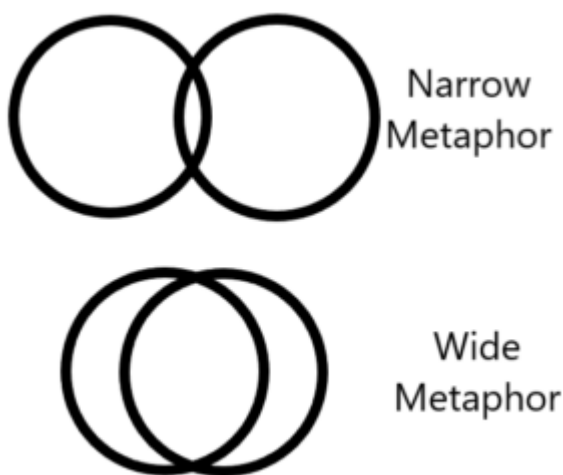
Many metaphors are implied like those above, and we easily move between a literal and metaphorical understanding.

8.3. Wide and Narrow Metaphors

Narrow metaphors assert only a small degree of likeness. For example, tables have “legs” but cannot run, while cars can “run” but have no legs. Neither explores other dimensions of animals that have literal legs. Table legs keep the top off the ground, and cars move like animals. These metaphors provide little more than that basic narrow insight.

On the other hand, wide metaphors suggest a complex, multi-valent relationship between the two images, such as the metaphor we began with: “All people are (like) my brothers and sisters.” To understand this metaphor, we must first explore the literal meaning of “brother and sister,” which has many dimensions. Then we must decide which of those many possible dimensions offer insights into “my” relationship with people who are not literally my siblings. It would be hard to express all the possible implications of that metaphor.

As the diagram below indicates, the narrow metaphor has a small overlap while the wide metaphor has a much larger overlap.



Wide and narrow are ends of a continuum rather than two different categories, and usually, we know where we are on this continuum. Still, sometimes what we expect to be narrow can become complex in the imagination of a poet who gives us tables walking away or cars looking for their feet.

Again, the more we explore a metaphor, the more it may surprise us with similarities we had not first imagined.

8.4. Paul Ricoeur: Live and Dead Metaphors

Traditionally, metaphors were considered rhetorical decorations for literal language.

Paul Ricoeur has written extensively about metaphors, particularly about what he calls “live metaphors.” He argues against the older understanding that considered metaphors only as substitutes for the original word, as decoration that brought no new understanding. Instead, Ricoeur argues that metaphors create new relationships and bring new information; it “tells us something new

about reality.” These live metaphors “are not translatable because they create their meaning.” By bringing the two unrelated elements together and asserting their relationship, the speaker gives these “tension metaphors” a surplus of meaning. Even infinite paraphrase would be “incapable of exhausting the innovative meaning” (*Interpretation Theory*, 52-53). Metaphor, therefore, expands our understanding of the world.

The prophet Hosea was a master of metaphor, and in 5:12, God says:

Therefore I am like maggots to Ephraim,
and like rottenness to the house of Judah.

God’s claim to be maggots cannot be literal and must be metaphorical. To understand this, we must first be clear about maggots. They are the larva of house flies that live on the rotting flesh or dead tissue of animals or plants. This metaphor causes us to stop and reimagine what this could mean. It not only asserts that God is like maggots but also that Ephraim and Judah are like the dead matter. By feeding on dead matter, maggots clear away the dead matter. Hosea demands that we think about God in a way that we probably have not imagined. It offers us possibilities.

Ricoeur contrasts these “live metaphors” with “dead metaphors,” which have become so familiar and so trite that they no longer engage our imagination because we think of them as literal and no longer metaphorical. However, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have pointed out that much of our everyday thought depends on metaphorical thinking that we largely take for granted.

8.5. Lakoff & Johnson: Metaphors as Conceptual Frameworks

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that we understand parts of our lives metaphorically. We make

sense of life by thinking of one area being similar to another. As an example, they give us “ARGUMENT IS LIKE WAR” (4). According to this metaphor, when we argue, we think of it as waging war. This metaphor shapes the way we think about argument, and it appears in our language.

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.

His criticisms were *right on target*.

I *demolished* his argument.

I've never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*

If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.

He *shot down* all my arguments.

These statements are not isolated metaphors but reflect the larger idea that ARGUMENT IS LIKE WAR. This does not mean that we must approach every disagreement as a war to win or lose. Still, the linguistic evidence indicates that this is one of the common ways English speakers think about arguments.

Lakoff and Johnson call this a conceptual metaphor because it shapes how we think about a part of our life. They argue that this metaphorical thinking is pervasive and give other examples:

TIME IS MONEY.

Example: You *are wasting* my time (7-9).

LOVE IS A JOURNEY.

Example: I don't think this relationship is going anywhere (44)

The Conduit Metaphor (10-13):

IDEAS ARE OBJECTS.

LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS ARE CONTAINERS.

COMMUNICATION IS SENDING A PACKAGE.

Examples:

Try to *pack* more ideas into your sentences.

Your reasons *came through* to us.

Orientation Metaphors (14-21):

HAPPY IS UP, AND SAD IS DOWN.

Example: Things are looking *up*.

POWER IS UP, AND WEAKNESS IS DOWN.

Example: She has a *lofty* position.

HEALTH AND LIFE ARE UP. SICKNESS IS DOWN.

Example: She is at the *peak* of health. He *fell* ill.

MORE IS GOOD, AND LESS IS BAD.

Example: He has *big* plans for getting *ahead*.

Again, Lakoff and Johnson argue that we commonly understand parts of life, not literally but metaphorically. We understand time, love, ideas, power, and more by their perceived similarity to other parts of our lives. Zoltan Kövecses builds and expands upon this insight in *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*.

These conceptual metaphors are so pervasive that we forget that our understanding is metaphorical, but it is. An argument is not and does not have to be like a war. There are other ways of understanding arguments. Time is not always like money. More is not necessarily better, and less is not always a problem. However, since these metaphors have become part of our language and thinking (or vice versa), they shape how we deal with our world. They may be dead metaphors for Ricoeur, but as Lakoff and Johnson have shown, they remain very powerful and play important roles in our thinking and living.

8.6. Some Metaphors That the Bible Lives By

Some metaphors in the Bible surprise us as Ricoeur would have it, but the most important metaphors in the Bible are so pervasive that we can forget that they are metaphors.

Though the metaphor of God as shepherd may be the most famous, the Bible contains various conceptual metaphors for God,

with the most pervasive being YHWH as lord. The Hebrew word *ʾadon*, meaning “lord” or “master” of a household or land, belongs to the language of covenant. The more powerful party is the “lord,” and the less powerful is the “servant.” A covenant seeks to secure the life of both parties, and so the lord and the servant swear and take on the responsibility to protect and fight for each other in this covenant relationship. Ittai, the Gittite, captures this most succinctly when he swears his fealty to David in 1 Sam 15:21.

“As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there also your servant will be.”

This understanding shapes much of the Bible’s language about Israel’s relationship with God. The prohibition against using God’s name in vain caused Israel to replace the saying of YHWH with *ʾadonay*, in English, “my lord.” English Bibles regularly use LORD in small caps to indicate that the Hebrew word is YHWH. In contrast, the lowercase “lord” or “Lord” indicates the Hebrew word is *ʾadon*, as are the references to David in the quote above.

A related metaphor, “The LORD is king,” appears in many psalms, e.g., Pss 47:2; 93:1; 95:3; 96:10, etc. The metaphor of God as king projects an idea of God as Israel’s warrior, lawgiver, and judge. This conceptual metaphor pervades both the Old and the New Testaments. It is a “dead metaphor” in the sense that we so take it for granted, but it is a metaphor. This does not deny its truth, but it is a metaphorical truth.

God is also the creator, and Hebrew has a word for “create,” *baraʾ*, which has only God as its subject. Gen 1:1 then is literal language: “In the beginning when God created (*baraʾ*) the heavens and the earth...” Human beings do not *baraʾ*. However, in Gen 2:7, God “forms” the earth creature “from the dust of the ground,” like a potter shaping a vessel. Isaiah and Jeremiah also use the metaphor of God as a potter (Isa 45:9; 64:8; Jer 18:6,11). Unlike the human potter, God can breathe life into the clay figure.

Some Old Testament texts call God “father,” but it does not have

the primacy that “Abba” has in the New Testament. There are also references to God as a mother in Isa 49:15; 66:13 and elsewhere, as in Hosea 11. Indeed, God in the Bible has traits often attributed to women rather than men. The primary Hebrew word for mercy (*rehamim*) is the plural of the word for womb (*reḥem*). More attention should be paid to this metaphorical language.

God is also the husband, and Israel the wife. The Jewish and Christian communities have typically understood The Song of Songs metaphorically in this sense. Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel use this metaphor to cast Israel as the adulterous wife. Though the language can be highly charged, the differences between their understanding and ours demand that we deal critically with this metaphorical language.

All of these metaphors understand God anthropomorphically—that is, they understand God as a human being. The justification for this comes in Gen 1:27, which tells us that God made humanity, male and female, in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, God walks in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:8), dwells in a house (1 Kgs 8:3), gets angry (often), and loves (also often). On the other hand, Exod 20:4 commands: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” Though the chosen people put no image of God in the Temple, their metaphors of God are often anthropomorphic. As with the metaphor of the shepherd, part is true, and part is not.

Finally, we should note that the metaphorical language for God can work both ways. If God is like a human king, a human king is or should be like God somehow. A human ruler should be like God by being just and merciful as God is, but the biblical stories make it clear that this was not always the case. God is the ideal ruler whom human rulers should imitate. Yet to grasp the metaphor of kingship, we must also understand this institution in the ancient Near East and its role in shaping this conceptual metaphor in its original context.

Metaphors for humanity abound in the Bible. If God is lord and

king, then we are servants in a covenant with responsibilities to that relationship. The prophets are sentinels who watch and announce the coming dangers. Though the Hebrew term for prophet means “ecstatic” and therefore someone who can pierce the mystery of God, they often use the ancient messenger formula: “Thus says the LORD....” This statement shows them to be like ancient messengers bringing royal pronouncements from afar. Their Greek title, “prophet,” meaning “one who speaks for,” captures this understanding.

This little survey barely scratches the surface of metaphor in the Bible. It can only serve to alert readers to its presence.

8.7. Metaphor and Metonymy

Metonymy and metaphor are not mutually exclusive. A metonym may serve as either term in “A is like B.” In Ps 45:1, the psalmist proclaims: “My tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.” The psalmist’s “tongue” stands for the poet’s ability to make poetry, and the pen represents the ready scribe’s ability to write down the language. Examples could easily be multiplied.

Sometimes the psalmist challenges us to use our power of imagination, as at the beginning of Psalm 131

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;

Here we have heart and eyes as metonyms for the person. Then we have to ask ourselves what “not lifted up” and “nor raised too high” could mean? Usually, “up” is good, and “down” is bad, but as the following couplet shows, “up” here is problematic.

I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.

The translators of the NABRE seemed to have been afraid that readers would not understand, and so they have made the metaphor into a literal statement:

LORD, my heart is not proud;
nor are my eyes haughty.

Surely, Paul Ricoeur would have the translators give us the metaphor and let us struggle with it.

8.8. Exercises for Chapter 8

Vocabulary

- analogy: another name for metaphor. §8.1
- anthropomorphism: the understanding of God as being like a human being. §8.6
- comparison: another name for metaphor. §8.1
- metaphor: an assertion that something is like something else: A is (like) B. Comparison, analogy, and simile are other names for this assertion of likeness. §8.1
- simile: a type of metaphor that acknowledges the comparison with the word “like” or “as.” §8.1

Questions

1. Write three statements that reflect the conceptual metaphors:

TIME IS LIKE MONEY. E.g., Don't spend a lot of time on that assignment.

LIFE IS LIKE A JOURNEY. E.g., He has lost his way.

2. Find three metaphorical statements in the news or other media.
3. Metaphors help us understand something (A) by asserting its likeness to another thing (B). The 'A' line should have what we want to understand better, and the 'B' line should have the elements that help us understand. Sometimes the metaphor offers us various

possibilities for filling in the blanks. In Ps 63:1, the first line is literal, but the second line has several possibilities for metaphor. To discover the metaphor, ask yourself what word does not make sense if you understand it literally.

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you. (Ps 63:1)

A my soul is (like) B a person thirsting.

A God is (like) B water.

A desire for God is (like) B thirsting.

1. The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed, he is girded with strength. (Ps 93:1)

A LORD is (like) B _____

A _____ is (like) B _____

2. LORD, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations. (Ps 90:1)

A _____ is (like) B _____

3. (God) will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge. (Ps 91:4)

A _____ is (like) B _____

4. My days are like an evening shadow;
I wither away like grass. (Ps 102:11)

A _____ is (like) B _____

5. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin. (Ps 51:2)

A _____ is (like) B _____

6. For I eat ashes like bread,
and mingle tears with my drink,
because of your indignation and anger;
for you have lifted me up and thrown me aside. (Ps 102:9-10)

A _____ is (like) B _____

7. As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,
as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the LORD our God. (Ps 123:2)

A _____ is (like) B _____

8. God sends out his command to the earth;
his word runs swiftly. (Ps 147:15)

A _____ is (like) B _____

9. The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all. (Ps 103:19)

A _____ is (like) B _____

10. For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb. (Ps 139:13)

A _____ is (like) B _____

11. Thus says the LORD:

“As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion
two legs, or a piece of an ear,
so shall the people of Israel who dwell in Samaria be rescued,
with the corner of a couch and part of a bed.” (Amos 3:12)

A _____ is (like) B _____

12. O you who turn justice to wormwood,
and cast down righteousness to the earth! (Amos 5:7)

A _____ is (like) B _____

13. Therefore because you trample upon the poor
and take from him exactions of wheat, ... (Amos 5:11)

A _____ is (like) B _____

14. But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)

A _____ is (like) B _____

15. Your love is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes away early. (Hos 6:4b)

A _____ is (like) B _____

16. Therefore, I have hewn them by the prophets,
I have killed them by the words of my mouth,
and my judgment goes forth as the light. (Hos 6:5)

A _____ is (like) B _____
—

17. For they sow the wind,
and they shall reap the whirlwind. (Hos 8:7)

A _____ is (like) B _____
—

18. I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs,
and will tear open the covering of their heart. (Hos. 13:8)

A _____ is (like) B _____
—

19. For my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns
that can hold no water. (Jer 2: 13)

A _____ is (like) B _____
—

20. As a mother comforts her child,
so I [the LORD] will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. Isa 66:13

A _____ is (like) B _____
—

9. Other Non-Literal Language with a Note on Hebrew and Greek

Irony, overstatement, understatement, and multiplicity also diverge from the literal meaning and depend on the reader to realize this. Though perhaps complicated by metaphor and metonymy, these strategies also stand on their own. To this survey, I have added a note on the Hebrew and Greek languages followed by a close reading of Psalm 23.

9.1. Irony

In Isa 1:10, the prophet addresses the “rulers of Sodom” and the “people of Gomorrah.” Those two cities had been long destroyed because of their sin. The statement cannot be literal and must be metaphorical. Isaiah states that the rulers and people of Judah are like those of Sodom and Gomorrah. However, something else is going on. A reader must not only recognize the impossibility of the literal statement but must also know something of the infamy of these two cities. By identifying Judah with Sodom and Gomorrah, Isaiah is mocking them. The statement is incongruous. Judah is part of God’s chosen people. They are the “good guys” and not the “bad guys.” It is inappropriate to make this comparison, but Isaiah wants to attack and shock them.

A similar example can be found in Ps 58:1.

Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods?

Do you judge people fairly?

Literally, the verse addresses “you, gods,” but the second line

provides the clue to its irony with the word “judge.” As the following verse makes clear, the psalmist sarcastically addresses unjust judges and calls down a violent judgment against them. The psalmist metaphorically asserts that these judges are like “gods” because of their power and what they should do, but with great irony, the psalmist condemns their unjust judgments.

Even so, metaphors are not necessarily ironic; something else is happening. Clarifying this, “something else” has occupied thinkers since the classical Greek period.

Carolyn J. Sharp, in *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (2009), surveys the complex discussion of irony in recent biblical and literary studies. Sharp’s definition of irony emphasizes the “aporetic, culturally disruptive, and invitational” force (24). By “aporetic,” she underlines the doubt created by irony when the audience recognizes that they should not trust the literal text. As a result, she argues, the text “invites” the audience to question their “cultural assumptions” about how they make sense of the world. Sharp sees irony as a way of undermining “the impressive capacity of the Israelites and all humans for self-deception” (240).

To Sharp’s analysis, I would add two typical features of irony: incongruity and hostility. The incongruity here is appropriate inappropriateness. Though comparing Judah’s rulers and people with Sodom and Gomorrah should be inappropriate, Isaiah does just that because of the blood on their hands (1:10-11). As here, the irony is often hostile; it goes after someone or is had at someone’s expense. Prophets often turn to irony to sting and provoke a change. Amos uses it in 8:4-6, where he goes after the unscrupulous business people who cheat and swindle people out of their lives. Amos does this by putting words into the mouths of merchants. They talk about how they cannot wait until the holy days are over so that they can get back to the business of cheating people with their false scales and selling people what they sweet up off the ground. Amos’ words are meant to sting. They are hostile and, at the same time, comic.

In his little book, *The Jokes and Its Relation to the Unconscious*,

Sigmund Freud argues that aside from verbal jokes like puns, humor is either sexual or hostile or both (Ch. 3). Whatever one may think of his psychic mechanics, his insight here touches a nerve. Those who doubt this can take their favorite joke and ask at whose expense the joke is made. The hostility of humor may run from playfully teasing through farce and parody to satire, mockery, and sarcasm. While it may make us laugh, comedy is never far from tragedy, and the tragic may be so tragic that we must rely on comedy to bring it to the surface.

Beyond the prophets, Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth begins with “Vanity of vanities” and offers easy examples. Too often, people think that the Scriptures must be “pious,” and they miss its irony and humor. When we do that, the joke is on us. Unless we can recognize the irony of the Scriptures, we will not be able to recognize that we too may be addressed by the prophets as “the rulers and people of Sodom and Gomorrah” or by the psalmist as “gods” who judge unjustly.

9.2. Overstatement or Hyperbole

Overstatement or hyperbole claims more than is reasonable; it is an exaggeration. In some contexts, this exaggeration may be a requirement to meet the cultural expectation of hospitality. In other contexts, it may be humorous. Ps 73:4-9 offers an exaggerated picture of the wicked who have pride for a necklace and violence as a garment; it is both ironic and comic.

Lovers everywhere embrace hyperbole, and in the Song of Songs 6:5, we find the groom saying:

Turn away your eyes from me,
for they overwhelm me!
Your hair is like a flock of goats,
moving down the slopes of Gilead.
Your teeth are like a flock of ewes,

that have come up from the washing;
all of them bear twins,
and not one among them is bereaved.
Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate
behind your veil.

Since they are lovers, we do not begrudge them this indulgence in overstatement.

We could find other examples, and in each instance, we must ask: Why the overstatement? What purpose does it serve?

9.3. Understatement or Litotes

Understatement or litotes plays down the importance of an idea or situation to create a difference that brings freshness or emphasis. Denying the negative is not an uncommon example of understatement. The defamiliarization of saying too little shifts the perspective, if slightly, and gives us a new look at the familiar.

Understatement can also create strong emotion by hiding the actual depth of emotion. Erich Auerbach, in his classic work *Mimesis*, argues that understatement is a hallmark of biblical narrative (Ch. 1). Contrasting the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22) with Homer, he shows how the biblical story tells us nothing about the inner reaction of Abraham, and by this understatement, the Bible invites us to imagine what we, if not Abraham, would have felt. Homer, Auerbach argues, tells us everything. Though all biblical narrative does not fit this generalization, it is a perceptive and useful insight.

Psalm 88 gives us one of the great voices of despair in the psalms, but it opens with a standard plea for help. This ordinary petition belies the coming accusations against God, and the contrast heightens the emotion.

Similarly, Psalm 136 begins with a calm and matter-of-fact statement about exile in Babylon. Only the word “wept” points to

the dammed-up emotions that vents themselves in the final stanza that calls for the enemy children to be dashed on the rocks. The understatement of the opening allows the poet to establish the context that will justify the strong emotion of the conclusion.

9.4. Multiplicity or Ambiguity

In his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, the famous Italian author, Italo Calvino, discusses “multiplicity” as a central literary value. Literary language, he argues, seeks to connect the many pieces of life, but in this quest, it also reveals “a sense of endless possibilities” (147). In the first half of the twentieth century, this idea went by the name of ambiguity, made famous by William S. Burroughs in *The Seven Types of Ambiguity*. He made it the hallmark of poetry because it made “room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language” (1). The last part of the twentieth century emphasized the subjectivity of the reader response and raise questions about the coherence of the text (deconstruction). All of these have insisted that we remain open to all the possibilities of the text.

At times, biblical scholarship has been too set on finding the one, correct meaning when it should have opened the doors of possibility. This desire for control is perhaps a reaction to the possibility that multiplicity or ambiguity is just endless chaos. I prefer to see it as a manifestation of mystery.

An important dimension of ambiguity cannot be seen in English because it belongs to the Hebrew language, and this ambiguity can be found at the level of both words and syntax. Though this book has focused on what can be seen in English, a few brief comments on the Hebrew and Greek are in order.

9.5. The Hebrew and Greek Languages:

Some Brief Notes

The standard Hebrew lexicon by L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner lists some 5,700 separate entries. The Greek New Testament, though a shorter text, has about the same number of words. While Greek words can have some range of meaning, it possesses a large vocabulary with great nuance. Hebrew words often have several meanings, sometimes as the result of metonymy or metaphor. The Hebrew word *ruah* can mean “wind, breath, spirit.” An English translator must decide which fits the context and leave the other two behind. The Hebrew word for “spirit” is also grammatically feminine, which provides another range of possibilities.

Greek multiplies words by adding a preposition to the root. The Greek verb *akouo* means “to hear” (acoustic), and Greek adds the preposition *hupo* to form *hupoakouo* meaning “to obey.” In Hebrew, the verb *shema* means both “to hear” and “to obey.”

Both Greek and English are hypotactic languages; they subordinate ideas to the main idea. Hebrew is a paratactic language; it arranges ideas alongside each other by joining them with the simple conjunction “and.” Hebrew invites the hearer to discern the relationship between clauses. Compare the two translations of Ps 26:6 below; the NRSV reproduces the Hebrew literally with “and” while the NABRE provides the logical hypotactic connection with “so that.”

NRSV:

I wash my hands in innocence,
and go around your altar, O LORD,

NABRE:

I will wash my hands in innocence
so that I may process around your altar, LORD.

The two translations reflect different philosophies of translation.

Hebrew verbs indicate only whether the verb's action is complete or incomplete. The verbs have no tense, which is very odd for English speakers. The two basic verb forms indicate whether the

action is complete or incomplete. In the example above from Psalm 26, the verb is translated as a present in the NRSV and as a future in the NABRE because the verb form only indicates that the action is incomplete. In another context, the verb might be translated as “was washing” for an incompleting action in the past. The audience must determine the tense from the context. The verb forms for incomplete action can indicate what is factual: “he is rescuing”; or it may indicate what is possible: “he may rescue” or “he could rescue”; or it could signal a wish: “May he rescue.” Again, the audience must make decisions about what is said.

Classical Greek was capable of great nuance—as if painting with a very fine brush. Classical Hebrew was capable of great suggestion inviting us to imagine—as if painting with a wide brush. Therefore, it is not surprising to find some ambiguity even in the English translation.

Finally, the biblical text is often the product of several hands, sometimes added by different generations. As a result, it may not form a unified whole. The prophetic books, especially, offer challenging questions of composition, and historical critics have used the inconsistencies to identify different hands, sometimes widely separated by time and social context. While historical studies have an important role, this information does not always resolve the text’s inconsistencies. The multiplicity of meanings may instead be part of the gift. Ambiguity challenges us to look beyond our trite certainties and our narrow logic.

9.6. Exercises for Chapter 9

Vocabulary

- irony: a statement marked by incongruity and hostility. §9.1
- overstatement or hyperbole: a statement that claims more

than is reasonable. §9.2

- understatement or litotes: a statement that presents something as less than it is. §9.3
- multiplicity or ambiguity: a statement with various possibilities. §9.4

Question

1. The following is an example of irony and overstatement from Micah 3:1-3. Explain how it is ironic and overstated.

Then I said:

Listen, you heads of Jacob
and rulers of the house of Israel!

Should you not know justice?—

² you who hate the good and love the evil,
who tear the skin off my people,
and the flesh off their bones;

³ who eat the flesh of my people,
flay their skin off them,
break their bones in pieces,
and chop them up like meat in a kettle,
like flesh in a caldron.

Excursus: A Close Reading of Psalm 23

Psalm 23

- ¹ The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
- ² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
- ³ he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
- ⁴ 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.
- ⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
- ⁶ 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.

Literary language is sticky in a way that ordinary language is not. It can stick to different people in different ways and connect these people with a text as a common experience. Psalm 23 is arguably one of the stickiest texts in the Bible. Many people know this psalm though they may know little else of the Bible. I want to explore something of why this is so.

Hebrew and English differ in two fundamental ways. First, English

favors nouns while Hebrew prefers verbs, and we see this in the opening phrase. The English word “my shepherd” translates the Hebrew participle with its object: “the one shepherding/grazing me.” The Hebrew focuses less on the role and more on the verb’s action for “me.” The shepherd is mine because he is taking care of “me.” The English translation tends to hide this.

The second difference lies in the way that the two languages connect ideas. Like Latin and Greek, English wants to indicate the relationship between ideas by subordinating clauses. Hebrew tends to make statements, one after another. While some translations make the connections explicit, the NRSV translation used here respects the original and invites the reader to work out the relationship:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

The Hebrew text does not explicitly link these two sentences, but it invites us to connect the two and affirm the whole statement.

The shepherd is one of the great images of the ancient world and the Bible. In his famous Codex, King Hammurabi of Babylon, who lived about eight hundred years before David, calls himself “the beneficent shepherd, whose scepter is righteous...so that the strong might not oppress the weak.” King Hammurabi uses the image of the shepherd to capture this vision.

Though Psalm 23 does not refer to kingship, the link between the two is ancient, and it is no accident that David is among the sheep when Samuel has run through all of the sons of Jesse without finding the one to anoint (1 Sam 16:11).

The image of the king conjures up strength and power, while the shepherd puts the emphasis on care. Second Isaiah captures these two dimensions in 40:10-11. We hear that the LORD “comes with might” and “his arm rules for him.” Then the text adds:

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Isaiah juxtaposes the arm that “rules” with the arms that “gather the lambs.” The LORD, as Isaiah reveals, holds together both strength and care. Though strength is often associated with men, and care with women, God holds both of these together.

This care dominates the psalm’s next four sentences with the LORD as subject and “me” as object:

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
³ he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name’s sake.

Again, the Hebrew invites us to find the connections between these sentences. The first two verbs deal with giving rest and movement to embrace the coming and going of life. The two lines add “green pasture” and “still waters” to suggest abundance and peace and, even more essential, food and drink, the basic needs for being alive.

The third line literally states: “he causes my ‘soul/being/self’ to return.” The Hebrew word for “soul,” *nephesh*, originally meant “throat,” but it becomes a part for the whole because without your throat you are not a living being. Hebrew word *nephesh* means “the self,” “one’s whole being.” The Greek translation captures this idea with *psyche*, its word for “soul.” The word “soul” suggests a larger, existential horizon. Life and self can seep away and even hemorrhage. We need more than physical food and drink, and here the psalmist testifies that God will bring back and re-establish life and self and soul.

The verb “leads” repeats and underlines God’s initiative that guides this psalmist “along right paths.” The word “right” connects us to the language of righteousness and justice. It suggests more than correctness. My walking this path conforms me to the justice of God, yet the LORD leads “me” along this path, not for my sake, but “for his name’s sake,” that is, for God’s integrity.

The first person voice dominates this psalm and makes the psalm a personal testimony that allows no contradiction. It asserts what

God has done for “me.” Unlike some psalms that reveal an ambivalent speaker, the voice here is clear and unequivocal. The psalmist now makes a personal affirmation of trust:

⁴ 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.

Statements of trust often appear in the psalms of petition as reasons why God should act and answer the psalmist’s prayer. Here the psalmist is asking for nothing but only stating what is true. The statement is particularly bold because of the future condition that the psalmist envisions. This translation reads “darkest valley,” which may be technically correct. However, it misses the ominous foreboding of the King James, which literally translates the Hebrew as “the valley of the shadow of death.” Death becomes some towering entity able to cast its shadow as if about to strike and annihilate “me.” In the face of this threat, the psalmist asserts, “I shall not fear, for you are with me.” Trust in the presence of God creates the possibility of life without fear. This short line captures a breadth of affirmation.

Here also, there is a small but crucial shift. Up to this point, the psalmist has spoken about the LORD as a shepherd without naming the audience. The psalmist could be addressing the community or whoever will listen. The psalmist could be speaking just to hear the words their sound. Now the psalmist clearly addresses God as “you.” This crucial shift adds a new level of intimacy, revealing the psalmist’s ability to speak directly and personally to God.

Quickly the psalmist adds: “your rod and your staff comfort me.” The shepherd’s rod and staff can guide or goad a flock; they can also serve as weapons against the thieving wolves. The repetition of “your” underlines the intimacy, while “comfort” reinforces the basic theme of the shepherd’s nurture.

To protect the holiness of YHWH, people in the late post-exilic period began to avoid this name and use Adonai, “my Lord,” in its

place. This title translates into Greek as *kyrios* ('lord'), the same word used in the New Testament to identify the Messiah. The Latin "*Dominus*," the English "Lord," and the Spanish "Señor" continue that identification of YHWH with Jesus, who also calls himself "the good shepherd" (John 10:11); As a result, Christians have always understood this psalm Christologically. The psalm also invites the hearer to identify with the speaker and claim the LORD as the comforting shepherd who leads and restores.

Many people overlook the second metaphor of the psalm: God as host.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

The God of green pastures and still waters becomes a host who provides a feast "in front of my enemies."

Commentators see the reference to enemies as a sign of the protection required of the nomadic host to a guest. Even so, Fr. Luis Alonso Schökel, SJ, once said in class that God provides this feast "in front of our enemies" so that we can invite them to join us and share the meal. While this reading may seem to be heavily influenced by the Sermon on the Mount, Elisha does something similar in 2 Kgs 6:8-23, where he leads the blinded enemy into Samaria for a feast. In any case, Fr. Alonso would surely have argued that it was a fair and real understanding of the text as it stands from his point of view.

Here the host not only sets the table "before me" but also anoints "my head with oil." Oil served many functions in ancient Israel: food, heat, light, healing, moisturizer, and election. Here it represents hospitality that is more than friendliness. The anointing manifests care for the person, and the host does this anointing.

The image of the overflowing cup reveals a bountiful feast—with nothing held back and more coming all the time.

The feast gives way to the proclamation that "goodness and mercy will pursue me / all the days of my life." Goodness embraces everything good—all creation. Translators use the English word

“mercy” to translate several Hebrew words: one connected to gracious favor, another to womb-emotion, and a third to the loyal love of covenant. The Hebrew word points us toward the covenant, but the English can connect all three.

The reality of “goodness” and “mercy” creates the possibility of living “in the house of the LORD my whole life long.”

The stickiness of the psalm is the result of many pieces, and this reading does not exhaust them.

PART IV

PART III: GENRE: THE TYPES OF BIBLICAL POEMS

Genre is a word that can baffle people, but the idea is simple. The word “genre” comes from the Latin word *genus*, which means “type” or “kind.” So, a genre is simply a type or kind or category of literature. It groups texts that share common characteristics. People use the word for various types and categories, and that can create problems because you are not always sure what the category is. So, it is important to be clear about what the genre categorizes.

We often divide literature into prose and poetry and talk about them as different genres/types of literature. With its regular rhyme and rhythm, traditional English poetry stands in sharp contrast to prose that lacks these regular features. A reader noticing the regular rhyme and rhythm brings different expectations to the text. Biblical poetry, as we have seen, moves by parallel lines. Once readers notice this in a text, they begin to expect it and look for it. While the division between prose and poetry can be helpful, it is not the only category. Homer told his story in poetry, while biblical stories are mainly in prose.

Stories are another category or genre of literature. As Aristotle famously observed in his *Poetics*, a story has a beginning, a middle, and an end (Ch. VII). The beginning introduces the main tension; the middle heightens the tension even as it prepares for the resolution, which brings the story to an end. A story is then a sequence of events with three essential moments: tension, development, and resolution. Typically, characters must resolve minor tensions before the overarching tension finds its resolution, and sometimes the resolution becomes the new tension for a new story.

In his *Republic*, Plato divided literature into three genres, which today are called narrative, drama, and lyric (Ch. 3, 7 §394c). While

Plato's categories were more complicated, this threefold division provides a helpful starting point by using the story's sequence of events and its mode of presentation as the basis for the genre.

- Narrative or story is a presentation of events moving from tension to a resolution, told by a narrator.
- Drama is a presentation of events moving from tension to resolution, presented directly by the characters themselves.
- Lyric is not a story, but a thought or reaction presented directly by a single speaker whom the audience, as it were, overhears.

Narrative and drama differ in their mode of presentation. The narrator presents a narrative while the characters in a drama present the story themselves. Lyric, like drama, is a direct presentation but without a story.

These are not the only possibilities. The three can combine in various ways. The storyteller may present exactly what a character says rather than giving us a summary. Likewise, a lyric may presume a story as we find in a victory hymn, such as Exodus 15 or Judges 5; both presume the hearer already knows the story.

Herman Gunkel (1862-1932) first pointed biblical scholarship toward a study of genre, which in German is called "Form." As a result, "form criticism" serves as the typical biblical term for the literary study of genres. Gunkel began with the stories of Genesis, and his work highlighted the relationship between biblical stories and those of the ancient Near East and world literature.

For the Book of Psalms, Gunkel introduced a list of categories that continues to be used in various ways. However, his categories are not consistent. He bases some on linguistic elements and others on their subject matter. This mixing has created some confusion. The royal psalms, for instance, are psalms related to kings, but some are hymns addressed to God, and others are the king's petitions to God. Claus Westermann later consolidated Gunkel's insight into two primary genres: praise and lament, which we shall take up below.

Genre is not just a matter of lining up ducks. Genre gathers together texts with similar functions and expectations. If we are familiar with the genre, then we have an idea of how they work and what they hope to accomplish. When we realize that someone is telling us a story, we begin to expect a tension and a resolution.

Newspapers have often been examples of different genres. On the front page, we expect to find stories that give us an objective reporting of the facts, which may or may not lead to a resolution of the tension. The editorial page gives us the opinions of the editors and other commentators. Movie reviews offer opinions about a movie. The sports page gives us both stories about the results of games as well as opinions about almost everything. Cartoons can make us laugh and sometimes make us think. Genres are then categories of likeness.

Since our familiarity with genre brings expectations, these categories also help us to see how each text is different and unique. Typically, storytellers and poets are looking to transform the genre, to do something new, to defamiliarize. By knowing the traditional expectations, we can identify how a text deviates from our expectations. The difference can be the main point.

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian literary critic, has pointed out that literary genres are based on “speech genres” used in ordinary communication. He asserts that everyday language is full of “typical forms of utterances” that allow us to understand what others want to communicate (“Speech Genres,” 78-80). Literary genres often have their roots in our ordinary language.

Vocabulary

10. The Lyric and Biblical Poetry

In his dense and erudite book, *On Biblical Poetry*, F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp insists on the lyric as the primary genre for the Bible's poetry. As defined above, a lyric is not a story, but a thought or reaction presented directly by a single speaker whom the audience, as it were, overhears.

In chapter three, Dobbs-Allsopp defines the lyric as “a sung word,” shaped by the freedom and spontaneity of music. The singer has crafted the words into an “obviously linguistic creation.” Like drama, it is the direct “utterance of a voice,” but without the story. Not bound by the linear sequence of narrative, it moves easily from topic to topic. It juxtaposes very different ideas, images, and emotions as it seeks an expression of complexity and depth. “Small in scale,” a lyric explores Hebrew parataxis, that is, the tendency of the Hebrew language to connect ideas with the conjunction “and” while leaving the hearer free to imagine and supply the relations. In this way, lyric creates “feeling through language” and gives them value. Finally, the “extravagance” of overstatement fuels a lyric's reach for transcendence and excitement (178-232).

Psalms 121 offers a basic example. It belongs to the “Songs of Ascent,” which seem to be a collection of psalms sung on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This psalm begins with the psalmist asking a question which the psalmist then answers. The psalm is then an internal dialogue that we overhear.

- ¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
² My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
³ He will not let your foot be moved;
he who **keeps** you will not slumber.

- ⁴ He who **keeps** Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
⁵ The LORD is your **keeper**;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
⁷ The LORD will **keep** you from all evil;
he will **keep** your life.
⁸ The LORD will **keep**
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

The word “keep,” which repeats six times, establishes the basic theme affirming the “LORD” (five times) as the psalmist’s keeper. In the context of the journey, God is the guide who does not let the psalmist’s foot slip. “The LORD” also watches through the night and “neither slumbers nor sleeps.” Likewise, God guards the pilgrim by day and night (merismus: half and half). The sun, of course, can cause heatstroke, and, as in English, being moonstruck means going mad. The polar pair of “going out” and “coming in” embraces the whole journey. The merismus of the last line emphasizes that this does not come to an end.

Psalms 133 also gives us something to overhear.

- ¹ How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
² It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
³ It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the LORD ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.

The psalm begins with an affirmation about the harmony of living together. The Hebrew and other translations focus on “brothers living together.” Genesis, with its stories of Cain and Abel, Jacob and

Esau, Joseph and his brothers, highlights the problem of brothers living in unity, yet the problem is not limited to brothers alone. The NRSV takes the image as metonymy and translates the Hebrew as “kindred.”

The word “good” appears often in the Bible. Genesis 1 repeats it seven times to affirm the goodness of creation. “Pleasant” is an understatement that captures the calm of daily unity.

The psalmist then gives us two metaphors for this living together. In the first, it is like oil running down, and the poetry repeats this and gives us a sense of its sensuality. The oil runs down upon Aaron and conjures up the image of his consecration as a priest. The metaphor suggests that living together somehow consecrates us and separates us out for God.

The second metaphor uses a very different image: living in unity is like dew falling on Mount Hermon, the great mountain of Lebanon—actually a ridge of mountains. Because of its elevation and cooler temperatures, its dewfall would have been heavy and a source of fertility in an arid climate. However, the dew of Hermon falls on the “mountains” of Zion, the temple mount in Jerusalem—the place of God’s holiness where “the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.”

The psalm asserts that “living in unity” is similar to “oil running down...on the beard of Aaron” and to the dew of Hermon on Mount Zion, the place of the LORD’s blessing. In just over sixty words, the psalm explores a fundamental issue of life, and despite the distance between us and its world, the poem can still engage us.

While other lyrics exist, much of biblical poetry does not fit the definition of lyric given above. Even Psalm 121, with its interior monologue, is moving toward drama. Many psalms address God directly, as if they were speeches in a play. Hymns typically call others to join the praise. Laments make petitions directly to God. In wisdom instructions, a teacher or parent speaks to a student or child. The prophets bring a message from God to the people. Many psalms and perhaps all the poetry of the prophets presume

an implied narrative. Even so, Dobbs-Allsopp's insistence on lyric highlights an important dimension of this poetry.

10.1. Exercise for Chapter 10

Vocabulary

- lyric: not a story, but the direct presentation of reaction or idea by a single voice. §10.0

Questions

1. Write a lyric without rhyme or meter. Choose a familiar object, and describe it carefully so that a person reading the lyric will take away a real sense of the thing itself and maybe your emotional connection to it.

2. Look at the following texts and ask to what extent it fits the definition of lyric as not a story, but a thought or reaction presented directly by a single speaker whom the audience, as it were, overhears.

Psalm 43

Psalm 77

Psalm 131

Ecclesiastes 2:1-8

Song of Songs 8:6-7

3. Make a close reading of a text listed above.

II. Hymns of Praise and Thanksgiving

II.I. Praise and Thanksgiving in Ordinary Speech

Most people both like and need to be appreciated. We want people to tell us that we did a good job, that we are a fine person, or that our contribution counted. While we may appreciate receiving this affirmation from others, a certain maturation comes when we no longer depend on them telling us that we have done well. We carry out our job or give ourselves to others because these things are in and of themselves good or true or beautiful, as Plato would say. Still, even though a person may not need our acknowledgment, we sometimes feel the need to acknowledge someone who has done something good or true or beautiful. Here we are not building up the person or currying favor. Rather, the quality of the person or the thing they have done demands a response from us. “Monet’s painting is masterful!” “The touchdown pass was perfect!” “The care was exquisite.” Even though the person may not be there to hear it, we may feel compelled to say it out loud. The thing somehow demands our acknowledgment. Here we have pure praise, a fundamental human reaction.

Linguistically, praise is a statement. If you want to praise someone, you make a statement about them. You might say to them: “You are very generous.” Or you tell them that they have done something well: “You have written a fine essay.” Or you praise the thing itself: “This essay has many perceptive insights.” Statements are the essence of praise.

In the Scriptures, praise is a statement about God. Praise

acknowledges who God is and what God has done. As such, praise implicitly acknowledges that we are creatures before our creator, that we are dependent on God in countless ways. Praise defines our relationship with God. Clearly, we do not offer praise to bolster God's ego. We sometimes praise God before making our petition, and as we shall see below, this is typical. However, this is not the heart of praise. Instead, praise acknowledges our proper relationship to God, and in these moments, we can be most truly ourselves, most fully human.

Thanksgiving is similar. We thank people by making statements, but here there is a personal dimension. We tell the other person what they have done for me or us, so I feel responsible for acknowledging that and letting the person know that I realize what they have done for me or us. Thanksgiving has a personal, subjective dimension, while praise is more objective. If Monet had done the painting for me, I would thank him; as it is, I praise him and the painting. Still, there is not always a clear line between praise and thanksgiving. They are related—sometimes closely.

God did not make the world just for me, yet I benefit from it. Thanksgiving focuses on what God has done, especially for “us” or for “me.” It becomes the offering that we make when justice is impossible. Some try to repay every act of human kindness lest they owe anyone anything. However, this is foolishness. Sometimes we can only be thankful.

Both praise and thanksgiving point out what another has done. Praise points out the goodness, truth, and beauty of what they have done. Thanksgiving points out what they have done for us or for me.

11.2. Hymns of Praise

Hymns of praise consist of statements about God and often begin with a call for others to praise God. Psalm 117, the shortest of all the psalms, reveals this pattern.

call:

Praise the LORD, all you nations!
Extol him, all you peoples!

reason/statements:

For great is his steadfast love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.

call:

Praise the LORD!

The first two lines have parallel grammar, words, and meaning, and they form an *inclusio* with the last line.

The second couplet, introduced by ‘for,’ gives the reasons for praise. The Hebrew word is *kî* (pronounced: “key”), which can mean either “for/because” or “that” or “indeed.” We could translate the second couplet:

Indeed! Great is his steadfast love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.

This translation becomes what we say in order to praise God. The Hebrew encompasses both meanings. English translations almost always choose “for” and make these statements the reasons for praise. However, the Hebrew also gives them to us as statements of praise.

We see this use of “for” also in Isaiah 49:13.

call:

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;
break forth, O mountains, into singing!

reason/statement:

For/Indeed! the LORD has comforted his people,
and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

Again, the statements introduced by “for” indicate the reason to “sing for joy” what to say.

a. the call for others to praise: a command or an invitation

Many hymns begin with a call for others to praise God. They use either the imperative or an invitation beginning with “let.” The imperative mood expresses both commands and requests depending on the relationship between the speaker and the audience. Ps 100:1-2 begins with three imperatives which add a sense of directness and insistence:

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.
Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

The call can also be introduced by “let,” which creates a stronger sense of politeness. Ps 149 begins with two imperatives and then follows with “let” clauses:

Let Israel be glad in its Maker;
let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.
Let them praise his name with dancing,
making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.

By using the “let us,” the speaker invites the audience to join in a corporate action, as in Ps 95:1.

O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

The call may go out to Israel, but it may include all the earth as in Psalm 66 or all heaven and earth as in Psalm 148. Psalm 150 contains only a series of calls to praise to which it adds who, where, why, and how God should be praised. Only an indication of ‘when’ is missing, which we find else.

Ps 102:1 creates an interior dialogue by calling “my soul” to praise.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me, bless his holy name.
This contributes to the psalm’s sense of intimacy.

b. the psalmist's vow of praise

The Hebrew verb forms can have several possible translations because they do not indicate time and have lost earlier endings. The word ²odeh can be translated in the following ways:

- a present: "I praise," or "I am praising."
- a future: "I shall praise."
- a modal: "I should praise."
- a subjunctive: "I may praise."
- a petition: "let me praise."

If translated as a present tense, "I am praising," the verb states what the psalmist is doing. However, if translated as a future, "I shall praise," the statement becomes a vow, as we see in Ps 145:1-2 with statements following in 145:3.

vow:

I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.
Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name forever and ever.

statements:

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.

The British philosopher J.L. Austin pointed out that sometimes language performs an action. Much of language is indicative; that is, it describes what we believe to be true. However, some language does what it says. Originally Austin called this performative language. The easiest examples are marriage vows. When you say, "I do," you are not describing a fact; rather, by saying those words, people perform the marriage; by saying the words. Likewise, in a courtroom, a witness takes an oath by saying: "I swear, so help me, God." The saying of the words performs the action of the oath. Verbs having this performative dimension include marrying, naming, bequeathing, betting, and promising. The "I will" in Ps 145:1-2, as

translated, does not describe but makes a promise of what the psalmist will do. It is performative language, and by it, the psalmist vows to praise God “forever and ever.” People may want to stop and think about what they are doing before taking these words into their mouths.

c. statements about God as the reason for praise

The statements about God are the heart of praise, and they typically follow the call as in Psalm 117 and Isa 49:13 above.

Sometimes the statements may precede the call, as in Ps 97:1.

The LORD is king!

Let the earth rejoice;

let the many coastlands be glad!

In 1969, Frank Crüsemann made the argument, presented above, that *kî* introduced a statement of praise. He pointed to Miriam’s hymn in Exodus 15:21, which the NRSV translates:

“Sing to the LORD, for [*kî*] he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

Crüsemann also insisted that *kî* did not mean “for/because.” Other scholars reacted by rejecting his insight and insisting on the translation “for/because.” Words give us possibilities. The Hebrew word can mean both “for/because” and “indeed.” Both fit the context, and so both are possible. We should not eliminate either one, although a translator will have to choose.

In some texts, the statements follow the call without “for”/*kî*, as in Ps 147:7–8:

call:

Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God on the lyre.

statement:

He covers the heavens with clouds,

prepares rain for the earth,
makes grass grow on the hills.

Other examples that begin without *for/kî* can be found in Psalm 29; 66:1-4; 67:6-7; 68:4-6; 75:1; 103:1-5; 104:1; 105:1-7; 111:1-2; 113:1-3; 144:1-2; 145:1-3.

Just as Psalm 150 is constructed only of calls to praise, some hymns contain only statements about God, such as Pss 8; 46; 48; 76; 93; and 114.

Creation and Israel's history form the main two themes for the statements about God. We have this in Psalm 136, in which 136:4-9 sings of creation, and 136:10-22 tells the story of the Exodus and victories leading to the Promised Land. The covenantal refrain emphasizes the main theme: "for his steadfast love endures forever."

In summary, the pattern for the hymn of praise has two main elements.

1. an introduction which consists of a call for others to praise God and/or a vow that "I" the psalmist will praise God.
2. statements about God, often introduced in English by "for" (a translation of *kî*), which form both the reason for praise and the statement of what one should say to praise God.

The psalmist may repeat this pattern as often as it seems good. Psalm 147 repeats the pattern three times, creating three sections: 147:1-6, 7-11, 12-20. Psalm 146 shows the pattern's flexibility by adding other elements.

d. the formula: Blessed be God!

The Hebrew word *barak*, "to bless," means to bestow power for success, prosperity, and fertility. The passive participle, *baruk*, serves to introduce praise. In Genesis 14:19-20, Melchizedek, king of Salem, brings out bread and wine and blesses Abram and God:

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
maker of heaven and earth;
and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”

The blessing of Abraham asks that he receive success, prosperity, and fertility because of his rescuing Lot. The blessing of God acknowledges the Most High as the source of success, prosperity, and fertility.

This formula “Blessed be God” is found often in the Old Testament—in the mouth of Abraham’s servant (Gen 24:27), Jethro (Exod 18:10), Naomi (Ruth 4:14), Abigail (1 Sam 25:32), Solomon (1 Kgs 1:48), Hiram (1 Kgs 5:7) among others. The phrase also serves as the doxology at the end of the first four books of the Psalms (Pss 41:13; 72:18–19; 89:52; 106:48), with the whole of Psalm 150 forming the final doxology. We also find it at the beginning of the Canticle of Zachary, followed by ‘for,’ as we expect.

Blessed be the LORD God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed
them. (Luke 1:68)

“Blessed be the LORD our God,” the translation of “*Baruk Adonai Elohenu*,” becomes a standard introductory formula for praise and prayer during the Rabbinic period with great importance for the liturgy of the synagogue.

11.3. The Thanksgiving Hymn

While I would like to be influenced by all the virtues, there is no quality I would rather have, and be thought to have, than being grateful. For this is the one virtue that is not only the greatest but also the mother of all the other virtues. — Cicero, *Cnaeo Plancio*, xxxiii.80

Cicero, the great Roman orator, calls gratitude the mother of virtue, and there is much to be said for his insight. Thanksgiving recognizes that I am not self-sufficient and that I depend on others. It acknowledges that others are good to me, and this lays the foundation for the other virtues which define and clarify our relationships. Our culture values independence, and so thanksgiving makes some people uncomfortable. They try to repay every favor as if it were a commodity. However, some things have no price. If someone gives you life or saves your life, how do you repay that? What is your life worth? Thanksgiving acknowledges both the goodness of another and our inability to repay in kind. In smaller things, it may be possible to repay the debt of kindness, but this approach misses the point. I cannot predict what I may need from others or what they may need from me. Nor do I know when or whether I will be able to repay the “debt” of kindness. A culture of thanksgiving creates a world of mutual dependence where I can depend on others, and they can rely on me, and this trust allows us to meet the future with confidence.

The Bible understands thanksgiving as a dimension of praise, and the difference is not hard and fast. The Hebrew words that we translate as ‘praise’ and ‘thanks’ are often interchangeable. One verb, *hallel*, makes up the first part of ‘Halleluiah’ or ‘Alleluia.’ The other verb, *yadah*, and its noun *tôdah* are traditionally translated as “thank” and “thanksgiving,” but the context does not always carry the personal dimension of “thanks.” Often, both may have a sense of “praise.” As a result, Claus Westermann eliminated Herman Gunkel’s category of thanksgiving hymns and gathered these psalms into the genre of hymns of praise. Both make statements about God and what God has done, and their elements are similar:

1. call to others or a vow (“I will thank...”)
2. statements about what God has done for “me” or “us.”

In Ps 138:3, the psalmist clearly states what God has done for “me”:

“On the day I called, you answered me,
you increased my strength of soul.”

While it is difficult to know exactly what happened, the psalm gives praise as a sign of thanks. Moreover, the deliverance also allows the psalmist to trust in the future, and so the psalm ends with a statement of trust and a prayer (138:7-8).

We often add a gift to our works of thanks, and in the Bible, thanksgiving to God is linked to sacrifice, which the psalmist vowed to offer when facing some great trouble. While some may regard these vows as bargaining with God, they represent the psalmist's desperation and not some calculated deal. Furthermore, a gift recognizes the act of goodness and acknowledges that God's kindness is beyond our ability to repay.

In conclusion, praise and thanksgiving hymns have a close connection. They share a common pattern: statements about what God has done, often with a call and sometimes a vow. The hymns of praise proclaim what God has done in creation and the saving history of Israel, and sometimes they focus on what God has done for me or us in the recent past.

11.4. Exercises for Chapter 11

Vocabulary

- hymn: statements about God and God's deeds either in general (praise) or as related to “me” or “us” (thanksgiving), often with a call for others to join the psalmist or a vow or the formula: Blessed be God. §11.1-2
- thanksgiving hymn: statements about what God has done for “me” or “us,” sometimes with a call for others to join or a vow by the psalmist to thank God. §11.3

Questions

1. Give two examples of praise and two of thanks in your daily life.

What is the motivation for this praise and thanks?

2. Write your own hymn of praise or thanksgiving. It need not be religious.

3. The praise & thanksgiving psalm has two main pieces:

1) the call to others or to oneself

2) the statements, often introduced in English by “for” giving the reasons to praise but also the statements of praise.

Analyze the following texts for these two elements:

Psalm 46

Psalm 47

Psalm 138

Psalm 145

Psalm 150

4. Make a close reading of one of the psalms given above.

5. Psalm 147 is one psalm in the Hebrew text and two in the Greek text: 147:1-11 and 147:12-20. How many psalms do you see here? What are your reasons?

12. Narrative and Implied Narrative

Homer tells his stories in poetry, as do Israel's neighbors. Biblical storytellers mainly use prose, and I have explored that genre in *Elements of Biblical Narrative*. Even so, narrative shapes some of the Bible's poetry, and so I want to provide a foundation here for that.

Narrative or story is a sequence of events moving from tension to a resolution, which a narrator tells. Unlike the drama where the characters present their story directly, here the storyteller mediates the story. Though this definition may not fit every modern story, sometimes focused completely on character, this definition works well for the Bible.

12.1. Plot

A narrative or story has a plot with a sequence of actions beginning with a tension and ending with a resolution. The concrete expression of the tension and resolution tells us something important about the themes of the story.

The middle typically raises the tension while putting in place the means for resolving the problem. Sometimes those with the problem must find, call, and commission a hero.

Typically, the characters must overcome various trials that bar the way out, or they must overcome temptations that would cause them to abandon the project. All the while, they must put in place the means that will bring about the

resolution. The storyteller often delays the resolution to explore the problem more fully.

Typically, narratives are told sequentially—that is, told as the events unfold, one after the other. A storyteller may include a flashback or flashforward to fill in the necessary information. Prophecies sometimes function as flashforwards.

As a rule, audiences demand closure—that is, they demand the story resolve the overriding tension and the questions. Audiences do not like to be left hanging, but, as we shall see, the psalms do not always come to closure.

a. basic plots

Christopher Booker has outlined seven basic plots, which I have explored in my article, “Basic Plots in the Bible.” There I show how the Bible uses these basic plots extensively, if with its own twist.

- Overcoming the monster or the battle narrative, which moves from physical threat to triumph
- Rags to riches, which moves from poverty and powerlessness to riches and power
- Journey quest, which moves from search to fulfillment
- Journey of voyage and return, which moves out from the known to the unknown and back again
- Comedy, which moves from confusion and separation to identity and union
- Tragedy, which moves from sin, flaw, or fate to destruction
- Rebirth, which moves from a deathlike situation to rebirth

Booker also names three recurring subplots:

- Call narrative, in which someone calls and commissions another to carry out a task, or they call for commission

themselves

- Test, in which characters must overcome an external obstacle
- Temptation, in which characters must overcome the temptation of appetite (food, sex, pleasure, wealth) or animus (anger, pride, envy, ambition) lest they abandon the task

The psalms of petition, both communal and lament, are call narratives petitioning God to be the hero to save them from some enemy (battle narrative) or from death-like affliction (rebirth narrative). We shall look at them more closely in Chapter 13.

b. implied narrative

Lyric, as discussed above, does not present a story, but some biblical poetry builds on a traditional story, or it requires us to reconstruct the implied narrative.

Several psalms tell the story of Israel's history and depend on the audience already knowing it. Both Psalms 105 and 106 tell a version of Israel's early history, but they do not tell it in great detail. Rather, they expect the audience to know the story which they need only evoke.

The poetry in the prophetic books often addresses a specific tension in need of resolution. Much of it has a historical context that functions as an implied story, and we may also know its ending. Jeremiah warns Judah to repent lest Jerusalem be destroyed. We know that they did not repent, and Jerusalem was destroyed. For these texts, the book as a whole or sources from the ancient Near East can help to fill out that story.

The prayer psalm calls upon God to be the hero and deliver the psalmist from some kind of tension. In lyric fashion, these prayers juxtapose tension, emotions, pleas, and the hoped-for resolution. The reader must reconstruct the implied story from the piece given in the speech, and we shall see below.

History is sometimes told with a beginning, middle, and end, but unlike fiction, should correspond to what happened and so should be verifiable. However, we cannot verify many things in the Bible. We only have the narrative.

12.2. Characters: Flat & Round, Traditional & Realistic

E.M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* famously divided characters into “flat” and “round.” Flat characters “are constructed around a single idea or quality.” If more than one factor becomes involved, then the reader sees the “beginnings of curves” that make them into round characters, but “the really flat character can be expressed in one sentence” (103-104).

Round characters, on the other hand, have complex emotions and motivations like human beings. According to Forster, “the test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way” (118). Being a modern novelist, Forster favors round characters, and much modern storytelling follows this path. However, as Forster suggests, these are not two isolated categories but opposites along a continuum.

Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg in *The Nature of Narrative* make a similar distinction between traditional and realistic characters.

Traditional characters are “stylized and stipulative, highly dependent on artistic tradition and convention” (84). They are stereotypes or stock characters that draw on conventions to reveal their character. One detail can evoke a whole world for an audience who knows the tradition. Therefore, when an old man with a grey beard or an old woman with a cane arrives on the scene, those who know the tradition recognize that wisdom has arrived.

In contrast, a realistic character “seeks continually to reshape and

revitalize ways of apprehending the actual, subjecting convention to an empirical review of its validity as a means of reproducing reality” (84). The realistic character is mimetic, a word dear to the heart of Aristotle, who saw all art as mimesis, that is, as an imitation or representation of real life.

Again, the traditional and the realistic are not isolated categories but poles on a continuum. While the Bible tends to present traditional characters, it adds a sense of realism by breaking with traditional expectations or by leaving gaps that the audience must fill in. A number of the psalms give us very realistic characters who speak their mind to God.

Characters can be as complicated as people, and in the second edition of the *Nature of Narrative*, James Phelan discusses some of the more recent explorations of this topic (310-314; also, Fotis Jannidis). The above provides a basic framework for our discussion, but more is possible.

Interpreters of biblical narrative get themselves in trouble when they try to make characters rounder than they are. Pharaoh is the king of the land of slavery and oppression. The story does not ask us to feel sorry for him because he is a flat character whose destruction represents the end of slavery and oppression.

12.3. Other Entities: Literal and Significant

Stories also contain other entities: the road, a staff, the temple—in short, anything that does not speak or act. Readers tend to overlook these entities, but everything in a poem counts. We must always ask whether it is a just literal detail or whether it carries some larger significance.

Details expand their literal meaning in the standard ways discussed above: metaphor, metonymy, irony, and ambiguity. Some images or motifs like “shepherd” and “sea,” have a rich literary tradition. Those connections and connotations may or may not be

relevant, but they are always available. They cannot be dismissed, as some have tried to do.

We must be ready to see these entities as more than literal elements.

12.4. Time and Place in the Story

In her fine essay, “The Psalms and Poems of the Hebrew Bible,” Susan Gillingham points out that the Psalms have been notoriously difficult to date. During the nineteenth century, scholars tended to date many of the psalms in the late exilic period, while by the mid-twentieth century scholars favored a date during the monarchy. Gillingham deals with this question by looking for characteristics of the main periods. Some psalms reflect the Canaanite world and religion as well as the emergent state religion of the monarchy with its focus on the king. These elements point toward an origin during the monarchy before Jerusalem’s fall to the Babylonians in 587 BC. A few psalms reflect the great tragedy of Jerusalem’s fall and the pain of the exile before the rebuilding of the temple in 515 BC. A number of psalms reflect the Torah theology that marks the post-exilic period under the Persian and Greek empires. These three periods—the monarchy, the exile, and the post-exilic period—serve as a basic frame. Since the Book of Psalms comes together during the post-exilic period, that time serves as a first lens for viewing the psalms (2016, 206-217).

Though often difficult to date, some psalms provide key temporal and geographic details where that is important. Ps 72 celebrates a human king and calls for a historical context within the monarchy. Psalm 73 is a wisdom psalm and fits into the theology of the post-exilic period. Psalm 74 vividly remembers the destruction of Jerusalem and reflects the experience of exile in Babylon. If the historical context plays an important role in the psalm, then the text provides clues, which a good commentary will fill out.

Many psalms, however, presume only a general life context of sickness or human conflict. Some psalms propose a link to David's life, but, as Gillingham points out, these links come in the post-exilic period with the idealization of David (2016, 206-207). The problem in many psalms could fit the experience of many people in many different periods and places. This universality allows a psalm to transcend the time and place of its composition. Even so, the temple, Jerusalem, and the Promised Land, in contrast to the lands of the nations, represent not just physical geographical spaces but also imply a spiritual geography with important thematic dimensions. Likewise, the time of Moses and Abraham take on a theological significance in the post-exilic period.

For prophetic texts, historical context and geography often play a crucial role because these poets speak directly to their historical situation. Unlike the psalms which are separate pieces, prophetic texts belong to a larger body of work that provides a context for the individual poems. Here too, geography plays an important thematic role. Interestingly, the times of Moses and Abraham play a minor role in the prophetic books.

12.5. The Narrator or Storyteller, Author, and Worldview

During the last fifty years and more, literary critics have given much careful attention to the narrator or storyteller because this voice mediates the story. Though people often assume that the narrator and author are the same, this need not be the case. Huckleberry Finn tells his own story, but Mark Twain wrote it.

There are two main types of storytellers: the omniscient third person narrator and the first person narrator.

The third person omniscient narrator stands outside the story, knows everything, but typically does not tell everything. The

storyteller of Genesis 1 tells us: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void” Clearly the narrator is not God, but the narrator speaks with an omniscience like that of God. This storyteller knows what happens in the very beginning, knows what God says, and then what happens. This narrator seemingly knows everything but chooses what and when to tell us. Because this voice is hidden, we hear it as an authoritative voice. However, we do well to ask what its theology might be. The voice of Genesis 1:1-2:4a belongs to the Priestly tradition, and its emphasis on the Sabbath fits into that larger theological context.

In the historical psalms, omniscient narrators retell the biblical stories in Psalms 78, 105, and 106, but the stories they tell are not the same. Psalms 78 and 106 emphasize Israel’s sin while Psalm 105 sings of God’s faithfulness without reference to Israel’s sin. Psalms 78 and 105 have an omniscient narrator who stands outside the story, but in Psalm 106 the psalmist identifies with the people of his day: “Both we and our ancestors have sinned” (106:6).

In many psalms, a voice sometimes speaks directly and commands us, as in Ps 96:1

O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.

As with the voice of Genesis 1, this voice speaks with authority and expects us to give ourselves to its word. Our reading of the text will be shaped by whether we accept the authority of this voice, or not. We also hear this voice in wisdom literature. A voice full of confidence delivers the various wisdom instructions. Sometimes, it addresses the disciple directly, but, except for old man Ecclesiastes, these wisdom voices are disembodied teachers. Likewise, the proverbs seem to drop from the sky, unconnected to any voice except the ethereal Solomon.

Unlike these authoritative, seemingly objective voices, the first person narrators offer us their own personal understanding from inside the story. Their understanding depends on what they know. Many psalms have a first person speaker who is also a character in

the implied story. These speakers do not tell the story in a linear progression. Rather, they pour out their hearts to God in a mix of emotions and insights as happens in lyrics. Some are flat characters who react in an expected way according to a standard theology. Others, however, are complex round characters with their own very personal theology and understanding of events, and we can only construct their character from what they say. They demand close attention, and we may ask whether they really understand their own situation.

The Book of Job comes as close as the Bible does to drama, and there the different characters speak for themselves. The prophetic literature gives us God speaking in the first person. Though the speaker is the same person in these books, the emotions and reactions cover a vast range, and their differences make God into a complex character that eludes our demands for clarity.

Every story also has a worldview, that is, its understanding of how the world works. Some scholars call this “the implied author” because it represents the mind and sensitivity responsible for the narrative. The narrator presents rather than explains this worldview. Therefore, the audience must reconstruct this understanding from what the narrator presents. For a biblical story, the worldview could also be called its theology—that is, its understanding(s) of God, humanity, creation, and their relationship to each other.

12.6. Duration or Narrative Time

Narrative time refers to the amount of time the storyteller devotes to the various parts of the story. A storyteller cannot tell everything or tell it fully, and so they select. Therefore, time is an indication of importance. The more time the narrator gives to an element, the more we should pay attention.

Some biblical poems depend upon the audience already knowing

the story, and so the poets can pick and choose what to tell and rearrange the order for their own purposes. We see this, particularly in victory hymns and the psalms recounting Israel's history.

Just as these narratives achieve a complexity of character by presenting them in different ways, so also a retelling of the same story in its many versions creates a complex story in our minds. The story of the Exodus is told many times in the Scriptures both in the book of Exodus and beyond. When we remember the story, we remember it as an amalgam—remembering some versions better than others. The many versions give depth and possibilities to the story and preserve the mystery of God's action.

12.7. The Performer and the Audience

In oral cultures, storytellers told their stories to live audiences, and the living voice was there to bring the text alive. This live performance still goes on in churches and synagogues. Too often people read these texts as if they were dead serious, and the texts sound dead. This betrays their vitality. Like a musician playing Bach, the performer must make decisions about the interpretation of the text and then bring that interpretation to life in a different way with every performance. This takes both skill and insight.

The audience too has an active role. Reader-response theory has emphasized the centrality of the audience, for they complete the performance by finding a connection to the text. We often think of literature as an interior affair because we read books alone and silently. In those moments, we become both the performer and the audience. As with the storyteller, it takes skill and insight to be a good reader. We shall take up the question of finding meaning again in Chapter 16.

While we do not live in an oral culture, most people's experience of literature today is not just or even mainly silent and alone. We live in an aural and visual culture that comes to us through the multi-

media that continues to expand. There too, we are not just detached onlookers but participants accepting or finding challenges in what comes toward us and demands our response.

12.8. Exercises for Chapter 12

Vocabulary

- author: the person who created the text, and distinct from the narrator who tells a story and the poetic voice who speaks in a poem. Though often conflated, the author is not necessarily the same one who speaks. §12.5
- basic plot: a storyline that captures a basic human event. §12.1a
- characters: all those who speak and act in a story. §12.2
- closure: the sense of an ending that resolves the story's overriding tension and the questions. In general, audiences dislike the lack of closure. §12.1
- drama: a story presented directly by the characters, as distinct from a narrative mediated by the narrator. §12.1
- entities: those things in the story, in addition to the characters, that serve some function in the story. §12.3
- flashback: a narrative scene out of sequence that takes the audience back to an earlier event needed to understand the present action. §12.1
- flashforward: a scene out of sequence that takes the audience forward in time to reveal what will happen. In the Bible, prophecy has this function and helps the audience see the consequences of the present action. §12.1
- flat character: a stereotype that represents an idea or trait. §12.2
- history: an account that corresponds to what happened and so should be verifiable. §12.1

- implied narrative: a text that presumes a story with some tension and a projected resolution, which the audience must reconstruct from what the speaker says. §12.1b
- narrative space: the geography of the story which carries thematic dimensions. §12.4
- narrative time or duration: the amount of time and the number of times something is told. Typically, the more narrative time an element receives, the more important it is. §12.6
- narrative, also referred to as story: a plot with a sequence of events moving from tension to a resolution, told by a narrator/storyteller. §12.1
- narrator, also called the storyteller: the voice that tells the story. §12.1
- narrator, first person: a narrator who tells the story from “my” point of view, usually as a character in the story; many of the prayer psalms are speeches in the first person. §12.5
- narrator, third person: a narrator outside the story, typically possessing an omniscient understanding of the characters and events. This narrator typically gives the impression of impartiality and objectivity but plays a crucial role in shaping the story, its worldview, and the narrative lens.
- plot or storyline: the skeletal events with its characters. §12.1
- realism: a presentation of the world true to our experience with its round characters and complex motives. §12.2
- resolution: whatever brings a tension to an end. Stories typically have a major resolution that brings the whole to an end, but along the way, smaller tensions demand their own resolution so that the story can move ahead. §12.1
- round character: E.M. Forster’s term for a realistic character who possesses the complication and surprise of real human beings. §12.2
- sequence of events: the chronological unfolding of the events of the story which may or may not be the way in which the narrator tells the story. The narrator may add flashbacks and flashforwards to provide the information needed for the story.

§12.1

- story: another word for narrative. §12.1
- storyline: the skeletal events with its characters. §12.1
- tension: a problem that the characters must resolve for the story to move forward and come to closure. A story typically has a major tension whose resolution brings the whole to an end. Between them, small tensions arise and demand resolution for the story to move forward. §12.1
- time of the story: the time when the story takes place, in contrast to the time of its composition, the time of its reading, and also its narrative time. §12.4
- voice: the speaker in a poem which may be a disembodied, authoritative voice or a personal voice recounting “my” experiences. Hymns and wisdom texts often have an authoritative voice, while the laments often have very personal voices, whether individual or communal. §12.5
- worldview: the story’s understanding of how its world works. This worldview is largely presented rather than explained. Therefore, the audience must reconstruct this understanding from what the narrator presents. This understanding is also called “the implied author.” For a biblical story, the worldview could also be called its theology—that is, its understanding(s) of God, humanity, creation, and their relationship to each other. §12.5

1. Stories move from tension to resolution. Name the present tension and the hoped-for resolution in Psalm 44 and Psalm 55.

2. Psalms 105 and 106 retell the story of Israel’s history in different ways. What is the difference between the two psalms? Support your understanding with lines from the psalms.

3. Prepare one of the following psalms for public reading: Pss 16, 27, 42, 97, 103, or another as directed. Make a close reading, and be ready to explain why you shaped your reading as you did.

13. Laments: The Prayer Psalms or Psalms of Petition

Prayer sometimes refers to everything that a person says to God. The English word “pray” means “to petition, entreat, implore,” and a third of the psalms are petitions or prayers for God to rescue the psalmist. Though these psalms reflect the same elements and patterns, they show us a wide range of possibilities.

13.1. Petitions in Ordinary Speech

Although we think of prayer as a religious activity, petitions are a regular feature of daily life and language. Often someone needs to ask someone for help: a cup of sugar, directions to a new store, a helping hand. As a result, there is a typical pattern for making petitions.

call/invocation:	Joe,
description of the person:	you are a strong fellow.
description of “me”:	I have a bookcase I need to move.
petition:	Please, help me move it
“so that”:	so that I can finish arranging this room.

Often when someone says our name and compliments us, we sense what is about to come. The personal address creates a connection, and the complimentary description explains why a person should respond. The “so that” introduces a result or purpose clause that describes the hoped-for outcome. While all the elements fit together logically, the only necessary element is the petition. The

order of the elements can change. We could begin with the petition: “Please, help me, Joe, because you are a strong fellow, and I need to move this bookcase.”

This same basic pattern shapes petitions to God throughout the Bible; cf. Gen 24:12-14; 1 Kgs 3:6-9; 18:36-37; 2 Kgs 19:15-19; Dan 4:27; Mark 14:36, as well as the prayers of the Roman Missal, the Book of Common Prayer, and the like.

The prayer psalms or psalms of petition constitute the largest group of psalms. Often these psalms give a dramatic account of some immediate and pressing problem facing either the community or the individual psalmist. As a result, Herman Gunkel called these psalms “Klage,” which refers to the description of psalmist’s desperate, often a major feature of these psalms. The German was translated as “lament,” which is not entirely accurate. A lament is traditionally a poem that laments the death of a person, such as David’s lament over the dead Saul and Jonathan in 2 Sam 1:19-27. Even so, the term has stuck, these poems are often called “laments.”

Gunkel further divided these psalms into communal and individual laments, but except for the differences between the singular “I” and the plural “we,” the basic elements are the same. The communal laments deal mainly with war, while the individual laments arise from personal problems. Susan Gillingham lists forty psalms as individual prayer psalms and another sixteen as communal prayers (2016, 216).

13.2. Prayer Psalms as Dramatic Monologue

Dobbs-Allsopp emphasizes the lyric quality of biblical poetry, which he defines as “chiefly... a non-narrative, nondramatic, nonrepresentational kind of poetry” (185). For these laments, that is not entirely accurate.

Like lyrics, these psalms give us a speaker making a direct presentation, which we overhear, but they move toward drama.

They are speeches to another person, that is, petitions to God. These speeches also contain a larger story, but they do not tell it sequentially with a beginning, middle and end. Instead, the audience must reconstruct the implied story with its plot and characters. English literature calls this a “dramatic monologue”: a speech by a single character to another character revealing a dramatic situation.

Robert Browning was a master of the dramatic monologue, and his “My Last Duchess” is a prime example. The poem reports the Duke’s speech to the emissary, who has come to negotiate a marriage contract. The Duke begins: “That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive.” After reading the poem, one may reasonably ask whether the Duke had his last Duchess murdered because of his jealousy. Although Browning bases his poem loosely on historical characters, he is not a historian; he is a poet. His poem does not depend on knowing any more of the history than he presents in his poem. The reader must reconstruct the story from what the Duke says in the dramatic monologue. The implied story is Browning’s version of the story as its author. However, what we know of the plot and characters comes only from the Duke’s point of view. and he does not tell us everything that we want to know.

The prayer psalms or laments are also dramatic monologues, and we must reconstruct the implied story with its characters from what the psalmist tells us. These psalms are speeches in the first person with a very personal point of view. They do not claim the authority of the omniscient third person voice.

A few psalms have a clear historical context. Their power comes in the personal plea. Psalm 74 presents a vision of the destruction of Jerusalem, but it opens with a direct question: “O God, why do you cast us off forever?” The psalm follows with a plea for God to “remember” and then a detailed picture of the destruction and violence (74:4-8). The next section shifts and celebrates God as the divider of the sea and the conqueror of the mythic Leviathan as well as the founder of this world (74:12-17). This faith sets up the psalmist’s nine pleas for God to remember the covenant and not

to forget (74:18-23). The psalm has a historical context, but mainly it reveals the personal struggle of this psalmist caught between desperation and belief.

As with Browning's dramatic monologues, we must reconstruct the story and the psalmist's understanding. Unlike other books of the Bible that have a growing unity, the Book of Psalms offers us one hundred and fifty different voices. We must identify and appreciate each voice.

13.3. The Stock Plot of the Prayer Psalms

Most laments have no clear historical context. Their problems come with life: sickness, false accusations, oppression, unjust judges, and enemies. As such, they presume an implied narrative with the psalm as a speech from the middle of the story:

- Beginning: Something terrible has happened to the psalmist: sickness, false accusation, betrayal, sin, etc.
- Middle: As the problem grows worse, the psalmist makes a prayer (i.e., the psalm), petitioning God to be the hero and resolve the problem.
- End: Some psalms end only with the hope of a resolution, but others follow the petition with a thanksgiving hymn, praising God for resolving the problem.

This sequence of events represents the traditional plot—the way we expect things to work out, and many laments move according to this expectation.

In terms of basic plots, the psalm is a call narrative. This subplot belongs particularly to the battle narrative in which some enemy physically threatens “our” side. Those beset by the enemy call a hero to save them, and here the psalmist calls on God to be the hero. Some

laments reflect the rebirth narrative in which some death-like state overwhelms the psalmist who calls on God for new life.

13.4. The Stock Characters

These prayer psalms have their stock characters who play traditional roles.

- a. The good psalmist, trusting but weak, depends on God's help to overcome the enemy whose attack lacks a just cause.
- b. The enemy plays the traditional role of the villain in the story. Having no redeeming qualities, the enemy attacks and even threatens the psalmist's life, as in Ps 64:1-4. Villains are comic figures in the sense that we cheer at their downfall. As flat characters, they represent evil with no redeeming qualities.
- c. The hero of the story is, of course, the LORD, whom the psalmist expects to act swiftly and decisively to resolve the problem. Ps 31:1 captures this hope:

“In you, O LORD, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.”

Here we have the makings of the stock hero found in every battle narrative, cowboy movie, and police show. Though the psalmist expects God to be the ideal hero, God proves more interesting than this stock character.

- d. The psalmist's friends, acquaintances, and community appear regularly. While we might expect them to offer support, they typically stand aloof and create a sense of isolation. Generally, they do not provide support until the tension has been resolved. The psalmist is left to depend on God alone.

The characters above are flat; they represent a simple idea, and the stock plot has God coming quickly to rescue the poor, weak

psalmist from the evil enemy. However, some psalms add complications and create a genuine sense of realism, as we shall see below.

13.5. The Prayer Psalm in One Act

Many of these prayer psalms end in hope but without our knowing the outcome. Psalm 70 provides a basic example. It begins by asking God “to deliver me” and petitions God to bring “shame and confusion” upon those “who seek my life.” The psalm ends with the plea, “O LORD, do not delay!” The characters are flat, predictable characters with a single motivating force. However, in 70: 4, the psalmist moves beyond concern for himself and breaks out of the traditional role. Turning outward, the psalmist makes a prayer for “all who seek you.” This small detail adds a bit of realism. No matter how personal a problem may seem, no matter how isolated “I” may feel, the problem is a human problem, and this psalmist acknowledges this connection to other people before returning to the final petitions in which “hasten” and “delay” repeat the urgency of the opening.

Psalm 70 ends without a resolution. Though the psalm and psalmist are hopeful, this dramatic monologue does not tell us the ending. In that sense, it does not fulfill the expectations of the stock plot, which insists that all come to an end and that it will end well. This lack of closure raises the possibility that God will not act, and some psalms address that possibility (Ps 88:9)

13.6. The Prayer Psalm in Two Acts

As translated in the NRSV, a dramatic shift takes place in a number

of prayer psalms, dividing the psalm into two pieces. The problem, which had been so urgent in the first part of the psalm, is resolved somehow. The psalmist is no longer making desperate pleas for God's help but turns instead to thank God for deliverance. In short, the psalm has moved from a prayer of petition to a thanksgiving hymn. We can see this in Psalm 54, which begins:

“Save me, O God, by your name,
and vindicate me by your might.”

The opening section ends in 54:5 with the petition:

In your faithfulness, put an end to them.

The following verses reflect a complete change of mood.

With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;
I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.
For he has delivered me from every trouble,
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies (Ps 54:6-7).

The translation's use of the perfect tense –” has delivered...has looked”—indicates that the act of salvation has already taken place. Sacrifice and thanksgiving are now the order of the day because God has filled the role of savior.

Some scholars make sense of this shift by understanding the psalm as part of a liturgy. A person would come to a sanctuary and re-live their trouble by reciting the first part of the psalm. A priest would then deliver a salvation oracle, that is, a speech by God announcing deliverance. After that, the person would recite the thanksgiving hymn in the final section of the psalm. This explanation seems reasonable, and it would be even more convincing if the psalm preserved the salvation oracle.

Other scholars read these psalms as a unity with the problem still unresolved. They see 54:6-7 as a promise to sacrifice, trusting that God will act as the savior. They read the last two lines to mean that since God “has delivered me” in the past, I trust that God will do it again, and so I am promising that I will make a thanksgiving sacrifice when that happens. (See Hossfeld and Zenger on Psalm 54.) The ambiguity of the Hebrew tense system makes both positions tenable for this psalm.

While I can see both sides of the argument for Psalm 54, other psalms have a clear break between the lament and the thanksgiving hymn. The famous Psalm 22 would be a good example. This thanksgiving element appears in the following: Pss 6:8-10; 13:5-6; 22:21b-31; 28:6-9; 31:21-24 (beginning perhaps already in 31:19); 52:8-9; 54:6-7; 56:12-13; 57:5-11; 59:16-17; and perhaps also 69:30-36 and 94:22-23. See what you think.

13.7. The Basic Elements of the Prayer Psalms

The elements of these psalms are those of the petition described above with the addition of two standard elements.

a. the call or invocation

The invocation calls directly on the LORD (YHWH) God. Psalmists use other titles, such as “Most High” and “Holy One of Israel,” and these move toward a description of God.

b. a description of God serving as the reasons why God should act

The description of God is simply statements and, therefore, praise, which also serves as the reason why God should act. As a result, it may begin with the conjunctions “for” or “because” (*kî* in Hebrew). The description underlines God’s power and highlights other themes, such as God’s covenant love.

c. a description of the psalmist's situation as the reason why God should act

The psalmist typically devotes considerable narrative time to a description of the problem, which may be told more than once to create a sense of drama. From these disjointed elements, we must reconstruct the implied story as best we can.

The main problems concern sickness and the prospect of death, unjust accusation and injustice, persecution and oppression by evildoers, and physical attack by enemies (whether personal or national). Although the descriptions can be rather concrete, they maintain a generality that allows others to identify with their problem. For instance, in the psalms concerning sickness, it is difficult to diagnose the exact disease; as a result, the psalm confronts us with the larger problem of sickness that touches many.

As with the description of God, the psalmist's situation also becomes an important reason why God should act and so may begin with "for" or "because" as in Ps 56:1-2: "Be gracious to me, O God, || for people trample on me."

d. the petition

The petition is the main element of this genre. It reveals the psalmist's desire. Since the creature is petitioning the Creator, we would expect the psalmist to use deferential language. Wishes can express the hope that the future might bring salvation, and English often uses helping verbs to express these wishes: let, may, might, and would. Ps 17:1-2 begins with an imperative asking God to listen and then says:

Let my vindication come from Your presence;

Let Your eyes look on the things that are upright.

Ps 54:1-2 begins with four imperatives.

Save me, O God, by your name,
and vindicate me by your might.
Hear my prayer, O God;
give ear to the words of my mouth.

These are not the commands of a person in authority; rather they are the entreaty of desperation.

In Ps 44:23, however, the psalmist in frustration takes a different path and commands God:

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O LORD?
Awake, do not cast us off forever!

Here we no longer have a meek psalmist, but one who takes God to task.

The curse is a negative wish and is found rather frequently in this form: “Let something bad happen to X.” Psalm 58 lashes out against unjust judges who “devise wrongs...and deal out violence.” In Ps 58:7-8, the psalmist graphically asks for vengeance from the LORD. These curses reflect more than a cerebral response to injustice. Though their violence may offend us, they reveal the psalmist’s deep hurt and thirst for justice, and the psalm invites our empathy even if we do not join them literally in their petition. The petition not only tells us what the psalmist wants but also something about the character of the psalmist.

e. the purpose and result of the petition: “so that” and “(in order) to”

English expresses the hoped-for result with the conjunctions “so that” or just “that.” We see this in Ps 60:5.

Give victory with your right hand, and answer us,
so that those whom you love may be rescued.

English also expresses the result or purpose with “to,” meaning “in order to,” as in Ps 31:2cd.

Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.

Even so, this is not a major feature of the prayer psalms of the Bible. Rather the psalmist uses curses to express their hope, or they state confidently what God will do, as in Ps 64:7.

But God will shoot his arrows at them;
they will be wounded suddenly.

Hebrew tends to add sentences without making their relationship explicit.

f. statements of trust

The prayer psalms often feature a statement of trust affirming that God will intervene for the psalmist, as in Ps 71:5:

For you, O LORD, are my hope,
my trust, O LORD, from my youth.

These statements of trust serve as a reason for God to act, and they reinforce our sense of the psalmist's righteousness and piety.

In some psalms, trust is the dominant theme: Psalms 16, 61, 62, 90, 131. These psalms shift the focus away from the petitions to statements of trust that God will act.

g. questions

Questions appear in various psalms. Some are rhetorical questions that expect no response because the answer is obvious. A good orator will use these questions to invite the audience to take the initiative and answers the question in their own minds. This allows the orator to make the point without saying it. Ps 56:11 is an example:

“In God I trust; I am not afraid.

What can a mere mortal do to me?”

The answer is, of course, “Nothing.”

In other laments, questions express deep frustration and irony, as in Ps 74:10:

How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?

Is the enemy to revile your name forever?”

These questions challenge God to act immediately. They also tell us something about the psalmist’s relationship with God. Likewise, Psalm 13 begins with a series of questions that capture the psalmist’s frustration. We see this also in Ps 88:14, which invites us to imagine the psalmist’s state of mind:

O LORD, why do you cast me off?

Why do you hide your face from me?

These questions help to establish the psalmist’s character.

h. bartering with God and vows

Rhetorical questions are also used to barter with God as in Ps 37:9: “What profit is there in my death...” The answer is obvious: “None!” This kind of bartering with God sometimes, at least, involves a vow made during the crisis. Our information about these vows comes mainly from thanksgiving hymns, such as Ps 66:13-14 where the psalmist promises to make a sacrifice to repay a vow made during the time of trouble.

This kind of bartering with God is sometimes criticized as being a very low-grade spirituality that seeks to buy off God. While there may be some truth in that, it is also true that desperate people will do anything, even barter with God, in the hope that something might work. Anyone who has sat in the waiting room of an intensive care unit knows this. The issues here are not trivial but questions of life and death, of faith and despair. Before belittling this bartering, we should look to see what desperation it may represent.

i. thanksgiving

As discussed above, a number of psalms end with the psalmist either vowing to give thanks or offering thanks for God's salvation. This section draws its elements from the thanksgiving hymn, sometimes with a call for others to join the psalmist. See §11.3 and §13.6 above.

13.8. Realism and the Laments

The traditional implied story of the prayer psalm presents the good psalmist, beset by an enemy and crying out to God for help. Even the psalms adhering most closely to the stock plot add details to make it real, as in Ps 102:3-5:

For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.
My heart is stricken and withered like grass;
I am too wasted to eat my bread.
Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my skin.

The concreteness of the metaphors and the description moves this psalm toward realism, but it mainly through more complex characterization that breaks with the stereotypes.

a. the depth of emotion

As someone once told me, the Book of Psalms shows that you can say anything to God. These psalmists are not afraid to reveal the depth of their emotion or to show their anger and frustration with God. They share their violent wishes freely and pointedly; they do not hold back.

In Ps 58:10, the psalmist looks forward to the day when the righteous can “will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked” judges. In Ps 137:9, the exile of Jerusalem says of Babylon:

Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

The violence of this verse reveals both the depth of the psalmist’s anger and hurt.

Here it is important to recognize that we are confronting another person’s prayer. Often people who take up the Book of Psalms expect to a hundred and fifty psalms like “The LORD is my shepherd.” Instead, they find things that they would never want to say. In this way, the psalms present us with a range of raw human emotions. The anger of Psalm 58 toward unjust judges comes from an ancient time, but it has modern counterparts. The ancient and the modern can inform each other and help us confront the present reality of injustice.

b. theologies different than ours

Unlike other biblical books where a single theology or even several theologies shape the whole book, each psalm is its own theological unit. Some psalms reflect a similar theology, that is, a similar understanding of God and of how this God relates to “me” and “us.” Others have a very individual and personal understanding of God and how the world should work. These texts create a round character with complex emotions and desires.

The curse, calling for violence against others, is a scandal to many modern readers, and it stands in opposition to the theology elsewhere in the Bible. However, we must not dismiss them, but let them tell us about the psalmist’s depth of feeling. This does not mean that we must make their words our words. Still, we must take their words seriously.

While sin may undo our well-being, some psalms understand

sickness as a direct result of personal sin, as in Ps 38:3b: “there is no health in my bones || because of my sin.” Those around the psalmist are often convinced that sin is the root cause of the psalmist’s sickness, and they use this as a reason to isolate and even persecute the sick. While our common humanity allows us to relate to human suffering and joy found in the psalms, some elements, like this, reveal the distance between their world and ours. We may think of ourselves better than this, but Susan Sontag’s books on illness challenge our self-righteousness.

c. the psalmist as a sinner and therefore the cause of the problem

The good and trusting psalmist of the traditional story is innocent and upright, but in Ps 38:1-4 and 41:4, the psalmists understands their sickness as retribution for their sin. In the communal laments, the problem is more typically tied to the sin of the community, as in Ps 79:9 or 90:8. However, Ps 43:17-18 goes against this common wisdom by claiming that they have suffered even though they had not sinned.

In Psalm 51, the psalmist offers a heartfelt admission of guilt and asks for God’s forgiveness. Here there is no enemy or problem caused by them. The psalm focuses on the bald fact of personal sin, and the realism of the psalm lies first in this frank admission and then in the sense of interiority created by the images of “a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart” (Ps 51: 17; also 51:6,10-12).

d. the feeling of abandonment by God

While the statements of trust are a major feature of the prayer psalms, some psalmists accuse God of abandoning them. Perhaps

the most famous example comes at the beginning of Ps 22:1: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The psalm then moves back and forth between this sense of isolation and a sense of trust ending in 22:21a with the line: “Save me from the mouth of the lion!” A joyous thanksgiving hymn follows in the second part.

Psalms 39 and 88, however, move deeper and deeper into the darkness of despair. The only ray of hope is the fact of their prayer.

e. “my” friend, the enemy

The stock enemy is bad and different than “me.” However, in Ps 41:9 the psalmist says:

“Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,
who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.”

Here, the enemy is not some outsider or even a bad person within the community. Rather a friend has surprised the psalmist with betrayal. We find this again in Pss 35:13; 38:11; 55:13-14, 20-21; 88:18. The traditional expectation has been broken.

f. the community’s opposition

We might expect that the psalmist’s community would be a support in times of trouble, but, in general, these psalms portray the psalmist as alone. Since the community sees sickness and adversity as signs of sin, they excommunicate the sinner. The psalmists may heighten this isolation with their own assertions, as in Ps 35:13-14.

But as for me, when they were sick,
I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting.
I prayed with head bowed on my bosom,
as though I grieved for a friend or a brother;

I went about as one who laments for a mother,
bowed down and in mourning.
Here the metaphor of family shows how deep the rejection cuts.

g. God's delay

God according to the stock plot should come and rescue the psalmist quickly, but this does not always happen. Significantly Psalm 13 begins not with the usual plea for God to listen or help but with rhetorical questions asking God “How long?” This phrase appears nineteen times in the mouth of various psalmists: Pss 6:3; 13:1-2; 35:17; 62:3; 74:9-10; 79:5; 80:4; 82:2; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3; 119:84.

Generally, the rhetorical question is used ironically in these laments to chastise God for inaction: Ps 74:10-11; 79:5; 80:4. Even so, these psalms do not answer the question of why God delays.

Some psalmists do more than question God. Some tell God exactly what to do, and they are not afraid to make it a command. Even though God may eventually come to the psalmist's rescue, the question of why God delays remains unanswered.

h. God as the one who has caused “my” problem

According to the stock plot, the enemy causes the psalmist's problem, but in some psalms, the psalmist identifies God as the source of the problem. In that sense, God takes on the role usually given to the enemy. Within a theology that connects sin with sickness and adversity, it is easy to see God as the source of the problem as in Ps 38:1-2 where the psalmist boldly says to God:

For your arrows have sunk into me,
and your hand has come down on me.”

The psalmist goes on to admit that his sin has caused the problem

with God's punishment described graphically. This speech reveals the psalmist's anguish and fear of abandonment.

Perhaps the most sustained accusations against God come in Psalm 44, a communal lament. In Ps 44:9-14, the psalmist states that God has "rejected ...not gone out with our armies" even though "we have not forgotten you." For the psalmist, God is clearly the problem, for "we" have kept the covenant, and so the psalmist says in 44:23: "Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O LORD?"

Scholars have also identified a number of prayers or laments in the Book of Jeremiah. In them, Jeremiah calls for God to take vengeance on those who attack him for bringing a prophetic word. After Jeremiah's laments in 12:1-4 and 15:15-18, God responds with an oracle. The last two laments are, perhaps, the most famous. Jer 20:13-17 accuses God of seducing him and forcing him to be a prophet though it ends with a statement of trust that God will vindicate him. The last, 20:14-18, gives us a man in despair, wishing he had not been born. They show the pattern's ability to create a sense of great realism. A list of Jeremiah's laments includes the following: Jer 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:15-21; 17:14-18; 18:19-23; 20:7-13; 20:14-18.

13.9. Conclusion

The psalms were first of all other people's prayers to God. Sometimes people think that they should be "my" prayers. Some, like Psalm 23, can be "my" prayer. We find in some pieces of psalms words that capture what we are thinking or feeling in the moment. However, mostly when we read these psalms, we are confronting other people's prayers in the midst of great trouble. They are not pure lyric but reveal the intimate moment of a person addressing God and expecting a response. Though these psalms reflect a tradition, the break from it in personal ways as they capture a breadth of emotion and faith.

13.10. Exercises for Chapter 13

Vocabulary

- prayer psalm or lament or psalm of petition: a plea for God to come and save the psalmist with a thanksgiving hymn added sometimes. §13.0
- curse: a negative wish, frequently in this form: “Let/May something bad happen to X.” §13.7d

Questions

1. Write your own lament.
2. Psalm 79 is very similar to Psalm 74; both petition God for help in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem. Compare the two voices. What differences do you find between them?
3. What is the implied story of Psalm 5? Who are its characters? What kind of person is the psalmist? What is its tension? What is the hoped-for resolution?
4. Psalms 6, 13, 22, and 28 end with praise/thanksgiving. Do you see them as a single psalm or a psalm in two acts: lament and thanksgiving?
5. Make a close reading of one of the following psalms: Ps 38, 39, 44, 102

14. The Genres of Wisdom Literatures

Wisdom literature is more ancient than the Bible and comes from both Egypt and Mesopotamia. Fundamentally didactic, it seeks to teach people, particularly those in high places, how to promote the orderliness of the world or deal with problems when it fails. Wisdom in the Bible shares the themes and genres of this larger literature, but Israel joins wisdom to the study of the Torah and identifies the wise as those who keep the Torah.

14.1. Wisdom in the Bible

Wisdom literature presumes an understanding of the world in which the good are rewarded, and the bad are punished. According to wisdom, order leads to wisdom which brings about justice and goodness, while disorder causes foolishness and leads to injustice and sin. The central problem of wisdom emerges when this expectation fails: when the good are punished, and the bad are rewarded.

The Book of Proverbs opens with a statement of wisdom's purpose (1:1-7):

- ¹ The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:
- ² For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
- ³ for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;
- ⁴ to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—
- ⁵ let the wise also hear and gain in learning,

and the discerning acquire skill,
⁶ to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.

⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

The statement links wisdom to both learning and skill—theoretical and practical knowledge. Prudence allows the wise to find the middle way leading to “righteousness, justice, and equity,” which assure the good order of the world.

Prov 1:a7 announces: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” This literature continually equates “the fear of the LORD” with wisdom: Ps 111:10; Job 28:28; Prov 1:7, 29; 2:5; 9:10; 15:33; Sirach 1:14,16,18,20,27; 19:20; 21:11; 25:10. The word “fear” can suggest “terror,” but the word “awe” better captures the emotion of overwhelming wonder and reverence which characterize this beginning. Primarily biblical wisdom celebrates God’s creative and active power, especially as revealed in the Torah, which defines justice and goodness for Israel.

Like the Torah, wisdom should pervade the whole of one’s life; it is practical and daily. Much wisdom comes from a shrewd observance of life. According to its favorite metaphor, life is like a journey, and each person must decide which way to follow. Psalm 1 provides a classic example of the two ways of wisdom and wickedness. Still, life demands different responses; as Qohelth says: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” The wise can discern whether it is a time to seek or to lose, to keep or to throw away (Eccl 3:1-8).

The problem for wisdom comes when the good suffer and the wicked prosper. The Book of Job is, of course, the most famous wrestling with this question. Job 3-31 moves back and forth between speeches of counsel by his friends and Job’s response to them as they deal with this dilemma.

14.2. The Characters of Wisdom Literature

The characters of wisdom literature are, first of all, the teacher and the student. Then come others in similar relationships, such as parents and children, and especially in this culture, the father and his son. Not surprisingly, parents are under the special protection of wisdom. Other characters reflect the contrast between wisdom and ignorance: the righteous and the wicked, the wise and the foolish, the skillful and the ignorant, the good and the bad, the just and the sinners. The poor also receive the special protection of wisdom, yet this theology often identifies the wise with the prosperous and successful and celebrates their achievement.

Solomon is the archetypal wisdom figure of the Bible, and the opening lines of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Song honor him as their author. Finally, since “wisdom” is grammatically feminine in Hebrew, she is personified as a woman, as in Proverbs 9, and she speaks for herself in Prov 1:20-33; 8:1-36; and Wis 6:12-16. In the Book of Wisdom, this personification becomes an even larger ontological reality and force.

The Book of Ecclesiastes gives us one of the great wisdom voices, called “Qoheleth” in Hebrew, and translated as “the Teacher,” or “the Preacher.” He famously begins: “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, / vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (1:2). Traditionally identified as the old man Solomon, the speaker does not entirely fit this description. Surely a man of many parts, Qoheleth shows himself a round character with his sardonic yet admittedly wise observations about life. Most of wisdom’s characters are not round—Job and Ecclesiastes being the main exceptions. Much of the literature presents us with flat characters representing the idea of wisdom and foolishness. These flat characters fulfill stock plots, in which good triumphs. The complexity of wisdom comes with its incisive observation of life and its juxtaposition of truths. The wise know all of the proverbs, and, more importantly, they know which one fits the present moment.

14.3. The Genres of Wisdom Literature

In world literature, wisdom takes the form of narrative. Fables with their talking animals ending with a moral are prime examples. Though people are forever making biblical stories into moral fables, there are very few real instances of this genre. The stories of Daniel and Susanna (Daniel 13) and Tobit have a clear didactic function. However, wisdom in the Bible does not favor narrative but proverbs and instruction. The Book of Proverbs begins with a section of wisdom instruction (ch. 1-9), followed by several collections of proverbs (ch. 10-31), and ends with a celebration of the wise woman (ch. 31). The proverb is its basic building block.

a. the proverb

The proverb appears in almost all cultures, and in folklore scholarship, proverbs have their own branch of study: paremiology. Wolfgang Mieder, a renowned folklorist and paremiologist, gives this definition.

Proverbs [are] concise traditional statements of apparent truths with currency among the folk. More elaborately stated, proverbs are short, generally known sentences of the folk that contain wisdom, truths, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and that are handed down from generation to generation. (Mieder, 1996, 597; 2008, 11).

An easy example is the English proverb, “Haste makes waste.” The key words rhyme and are mediated by “makes,” a near rhyme. The choice of words makes the proverb memorable.

No proverb captures the whole of wisdom, so this proverb warning about moving too quickly has a complement: “A stitch in

time saves nine.” The wise know both proverbs and, more importantly, they know whether we need a stitch in time or whether that would only waste our time. Only those who know which proverb applies to the moment are actually wise.

Peter Grzybek points out “the close interrelationship of the proverbs context, proverb function, and proverb meaning” (35). The performer asserts a relationship of likeness between the proverb and the situation at hand—a metaphorical relationship. Here the proverb clarifies the present moment by functioning as warning, caution, explanation, justification, etc. (38). Second, the proverbs of a given community also capture essential elements of its norms and values. By learning the society’s proverbs, a person imbibes its basic social fabric (39). These proverbs also reinforce social control, set an educational agenda, and provide psychological release and entertainment (Fontaine, 4.2.1). Though wisdom literature is much older than the biblical books, the proverb becomes dominant in the late exilic period when Judah is forging a new identity around Torah, which it identifies with wisdom.

Proverbs make use of every available strategy: alliteration, rhyme, parallelism, ellipsis, metonymy, metaphor, irony, hyperbole, humor, etc. Biblical proverbs follow the parallel structure of the couplet. The “Proverbs of Solomon” begin in Proverbs 10:1 with the couplet:

A wise child makes a glad father,
but a foolish child is a mother’s grief.

The word pairs are clear, and the vocabulary of “wise and foolish” with the parent-teachers belongs to the language of wisdom. The couplet forms contrasting parallelism with the two lines affirming the same idea from different perspectives. Many proverbs use contrasting parallelism as here. There are also examples of similar parallelism, as in Prov 17:4.

The evildoer gives heed to wicked lips,
the liar, to a mischievous tongue.

Comparative proverbs also make up a large group.

Better is a little with the fear of the LORD
than great treasure and trouble with it. (Prov 15:16-17)

Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is
than a fattened ox and hatred with it.

Some proverbs contain metaphors, often with “like.”

Like snow in summer or rain in harvest,
so honor is not fitting for a fool. (Prov 26:1)

Other proverbs follow the pattern of “If/when this, then that.”

If you curse father or mother,
your lamp will go out in utter darkness. (Prov 20:20)

These examples represent basic types of biblical proverbs, but wisdom’s teachers were capable of great creativity (Grillo, 186; Schipper, 29-32).

b. the wisdom monologue or instruction

Wisdom literature often uses monologues by a wisdom figure to instruct a child or student. The wisdom figure may be a generic teacher, a parent, or a specific person. The proverb serves as the basic building block, and the instruction typically links individual proverbs together to form its discourse. These monologues encourage disciples to listen and make this teaching part of their lives. Proverbs 1-7 provide clear examples of the didactic monologue, and Lady Wisdom adds her own monologue in 8:1-36.

These teachers instruct by insistently contrasting the wise and the wicked, also by using the imperative to instruct or correct, as in Prov 4:13-14 (Schipper, 28-29).

Keep hold of instruction; do not let go;
guard her, for she is your life.
Do not enter the path of the wicked,
and do not walk in the way of evildoers.

In Psalm 1, an anonymous wisdom figure defines the wise in contrast to the wicked. The anonymity gives the speaker authority like that of the omniscient narrator. In Psalm 37, the psalmist, an older and more experienced person (37:25), speaks in the first

person and gives an authoritative instruction to an unspecified “you.”

In Psalm 73, we hear a very personal voice. The psalmist struggles to make sense of the rewards received by the wicked. Though the psalm affirms wisdom’s order for the righteous, the psalmist comes to a deeper spiritual insight:

But for me it is good to be near God;
I have made the LORD God my refuge.

Whatever the fortunes of the good or the wicked, this psalmist glories in being near to God.

c. the phrase: Happy is the one who...

The formula, “Happy the one who ...,” appears often in wisdom literature. It opens the Book of Psalms, and appears another twenty-eight times, as in Ps 84:4-5:

“Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.”

The Hebrew word *’ashre* (pronounced: ash-ray) means “happy, fortunate.” The Greek Septuagint translated *’ashre* as *makarios*, which has a more transcendent and religious dimension. The Greek word comes into English as “blessed,” and we find it in the beatitudes of the New Testament (Matt.5:3-11; Luke 6:21-22).

d. wisdom psalms

The term “wisdom psalms” appears as a category in some biblical scholarship, but the category’s defining feature is the theme of wisdom rather than any linguistic form or pattern. Gillingham uses instead the category of “didactic psalms” because of their strong

instructional tone. In this category, she includes Psalms 1, 19, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 127, 128, 139.

Wisdom literature embraces a diverse collection of books that consider wisdom and its relation to the Torah from different points of view. Though common threads run through this literature, its focus on daily life with its changing situations brings ever-shifting perspectives.

14.4. Exercises for Chapter 14

Vocabulary

- proverb: a memorable saying, which in the Bible typically comes as a couplet of parallel lines. §14.3a
- wisdom instruction or monology: a didactic speech by a wisdom figure, constructed of linking proverbs. §14.3b

Questions

1. Wisdom literature moves by contrasts: the good and the wicked, the wise and the foolish, the just and the unjust, the righteous and the unrighteous, the blessed and the cursed. Choose one of the following texts and show how it creates these contrasts: Psalm 73, 100, 112

2. Proverbs 1:1-19 sets forth an understanding of wisdom. What are its key elements? Does that sound right to you, or does it raise questions?

3. Choose a single proverb from Proverbs 10 and make a close reading that explains why it appeals to you.

15. Prophetic Genres

15.1. The Prophets as Bearers of God's Word

As Robert Lowth recognized in the mid-1700s, the prophets who left us books were poets, and their poems fall into two main categories:

- oracles, which communicate the direct speech of God
- prophetic speeches, in which the prophet speaks as himself for God.

Since both address an audience, they belong to the genre of dramatic monologue rather than pure lyric.

The narratives about their lives are generally in prose, perhaps with oracles or prophetic speeches in poetry. Some prophets have a call narrative recounting their commission as a messenger of God's word.

Unlike the psalmist, defined by one psalm, these prophets give us many poems, which create a character for us. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, offer us complex characters that defy easy characterization. Their poetry adds a psychological depth that gives the reader the sense of a real human being engaged with a passionate God. They are definitely a round characters. The author of Isaiah 40-55, called Second Isaiah, tells us little about himself and functions much like an omniscient third person narrator. Some of the minor prophets also come to life as complex individuals.

The Hebrew word for prophet, *nabi'*, comes from a verb meaning "to be in a prophetic ecstasy," suggesting that the prophets were originally "ecstatics." From these experiences, they could see into the world of the divine, and so there were also called "seers." Both words emphasize their ability to transcend this world and to have immediate contact with the divine. The English word "prophet"

comes from Greek and means “one who speaks for.” The prophets then were human beings believed to possess a transcendent connection to God and so were able to speak for God. Mainly this speaking comes to us in poetry.

Not all prophets wrote books. We have stories about Elijah and Elisha, but no writings. 1 Kgs 22:14 also names the prophetess Huldah and gives her prophetic words in prose. In addition to the “true” prophets, there were the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18) and false prophets (cf., 1 Kings 22; Jeremiah 23; Ezekiel 13).

Deuteronomy 18 lays out three criteria to identify a false prophet:

1. one who speaks in the name of another deity,
2. one who presumes to speak something not said by the LORD while claiming that it is from God,
3. one who predicts something that does not come true.

The last emphasizes predicting the future, which has come to dominate our understanding of prophecy, but this misses the central idea of one who brings God’s word.

Since these prophets bring the word of God like ancient messengers, they use the messenger formula of the ancient Near East, discussed below. The oracles from God fall into two main categories: judgment oracles and salvation oracles. Claus Westermann published classic works on these genres. Some oracles and prophetic speeches do not end in judgment or salvation; instead, they bring a warning or a call to repentance. Still, the prophet is mainly one who brings God’s word.

15.2 The Call Narrative

More than fifty years ago, Norman Habel recognized the importance of the call narrative as a genre, and he wrote a classic article on his understanding of the pattern. His pattern contained six elements,

and, applying them strictly, he finds only six instances of the form: the call of Moses (Exodus 3:1-10), Gideon (Judges 6), Isaiah (Isa 6), Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-10), Ezekiel (Ezek 1-3), and Second Isaiah (Isa 40:1-11) (Habel: 297-323). While his precision creates clear criteria, it fails to recognize the similarity of these passages to many others. Later scholars expand the list, and Booker identifies the call narrative as a ubiquitous subplot (17, 48, 65, 70-71). In my article on subplots, I show that the call narrative appears throughout the Bible (Hagan, *Basic Plots*, 201-202).

At its most basic, the leader calls and commissions the hero, who then accepts. Since this provides little dramatic interest, the storyteller may complicate the pattern by having the hero raise a question or objection, which the leader answers. The primary variation has the hero asking for the commission, with the leader granting it perhaps after raising a question or an objection (cf. 1 Sam 17:31-37).

We can outline this for the prophets as follows:

God calls and commissions the prophet.

possible complication:

The prophet raises an objection or question.

God answers this.

The prophet accepts.

Call narratives for prophets appear in the following passages:

for Elijah in 1 Kgs 19:1-18

for Elisha in 1 Kgs 19:19-21; 2 Kgs 2:9-14

for Hosea in Hos 1:2-8; 3:1-5

for Amos in Amos 7:10-17

for Isaiah in Isaiah 6

for Jeremiah in Jer 1:4-10 and 1:11-19

for Ezekiel in Ezekiel 1-3

for various people in Isa 40:1-1

for Jonah in Jon 1:1-3; 3:1-3a.

Habel identifies Jeremiah's call in 1:4-10 as a classic example, and God's words come to us in poetry:

⁴ Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

⁵ “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”
Jeremiah famously objects:

⁶ Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to
speak, for I am only a boy.”

God answers the objection with

⁷ But the LORD said to me,
“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you.

God adds the typical motifs of encouragement (“Do not fear!” and the like) and the assurance of divine presence (“I am with you!). I discuss this at more length in my book, *Mighty in Battle* (ch. 2.4.3).

⁸ Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,

Jeremiah does not voice his acceptance of the commission, and later he says in 20:7, “O LORD, you have enticed me, || and I was enticed.”

In the battle narrative, the arming of the hero follows the call and commission, and here God “arms” Jeremiah while making clear the commission is not just to Judah but to the whole world:

⁹ Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth,
and the LORD said to me,

“Now I have put my words in your mouth.

¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

In the call of Isaiah, the objection comes before the call. Isaiah has a vision of God’s glory, which causes him to say:

And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isa 6:5)

The metonymy of the mouth is key because it will be the instrument for fulfilling his commission. A seraph comes with a burning coal held by tongs to touch Isaiah's mouth and take away his sin. He then hears a general call from God, and he eagerly volunteers for the commission following.

Then I heard the voice of the LORD saying,
"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"
And I said, "Here am I; send me!"
And he said, "Go and say to this people:
'Keep listening, but do not comprehend ... (6:8-9).

Isaiah asks a question (6:11a) but does not object. He is an eager prophet.

Jonah, of course, is not eager and must be called twice, and even then, he is not at peace (Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-2). Amos reports his call to Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, who has been objecting to his prophecy in Israel (Amos 7:10-17). God calls Hosea and commissions him to take Gomer as his wife, and their marriage becomes a prophecy.

The story of Elijah begins with him bringing the oracle of drought to Ahab, followed by God's call for him to flee, and eventually to the woman of Zarephath (1 Kings 17). Then God calls him to return and confront the prophets of Baal (18:1). Though this ends in a bloody triumph, Jezebel promises to take his life. A dark mood descends on the prophet and makes him wish for death (19:4), but God sends an angel twice to strengthen him for the journey to Mount Horeb. There he encounters God and receives a new commission, which revives him. This commission includes the call of Elisha, which Elijah makes by throwing his robe over this farmer. Elisha then destroys his means of livelihood and follows. Finally, in 2 Kgs 2:9-14, Elisha asks Elijah for "a double share of your spirit" and receives it as his master ascends in the fiery chariot.

Ezekiel 1 tells of a fabulous vision that causes the prophet to fall on his face. A spirit then sets him on his feet for the commission. Always passive, Ezekiel neither accepts nor objects. God tells him what he is to do and gives him the scroll to eat "Then I ate it,

and in my mouth, it was as sweet as honey” (3:3). After another commission, the spirit lifts him up and carries him back to the exiles by the river Chebar. After seven days, he receives the commission as sentinel, and then God makes him unable to speak and reprove the house of Israel (3:22-27). The juxtaposition of these commissions creates its own complexity for this special prophet.

15.3. The Messenger Formula

In the ancient Near East, someone wishing to send a message to another would send a messenger to speak for them in the first person as if the messenger were the sender. The pattern is clear in the opening letter of the Royal Archives of Mari, in which Abi-Samar commissions a messenger to deliver the following words to Iahdulim.

To Iahdulim say:

Thus (says) Abi-Samar:

“Show (me) the peace of friendship. ...”

The messenger then goes to Iahdulim and reads the words above in the name of the sender, Abi-Samar

We see another clear example in Genesis 32:3-5 where Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau.

Thus you shall say to my lord Esau:

Thus says your servant Jacob,

“I have lived with Laban as an alien, ...”

For the prophets, the formula, “Thus says X,” becomes “Thus says the LORD.” They announce themselves as the messengers of God—especially in major prophets. We often find a similar phrase, “says the LORD,” at the end of a passage. The role of the prophet as messenger is also clear in the command: “Hear the word of the LORD” and in the formula, “The word of the LORD came to X...,” which appears often in the historical books.

I am including here the many references to these formulae to show how pervasive they are.

The formula, “Hear the word of the LORD...,” appears in the following verses:

1 Kgs 22:19; 1 Ki. 22:19; 2 Ki. 7:1; 20:16; 2 Chr. 18:18; Isa. 1:10; 28:14; 39:5; 66:5; Jer. 2:4; 7:2; 17:20; 19:3; 21:11; 22:2, 29; 29:20; 31:10; 34:4; 42:15; 44:24, 26; Ezek. 6:3; 13:2; 16:35; 20:47; 25:3; 34:7, 9; 36:1, 4; 37:4; Hos. 4:1; Amos 7:16; Acts 13:44

The formula, “Thus says the LORD,” which literally translates the Hebrew: *koh ’āmar YHWH*, appears in these texts:

Exod. 4:22; 5:1; 7:17, 26; 8:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3; 11:4; 32:27; Jos. 7:13; 24:2; Jdg. 6:8; 1 Sam. 2:27; 10:18; 15:2; 2 Sam. 7:5, 8; 12:7, 11; 24:12; 1 Ki. 11:31; 12:24; 13:2, 21; 14:7; 17:14; 20:13-14, 28, 42; 21:19; 22:11; 2 Ki. 1:4, 6, 16; 2:21; 3:16-17; 4:43; 7:1; 9:3, 6, 12; 19:6, 20, 32; 20:1, 5; 21:12; 22:15-16, 18; 1 Chr. 17:4, 7; 21:10-11; 2 Chr. 11:4; 12:5; 18:10; 20:15; 21:12; 34:23-24, 26; Isa. 8:11; 18:4; 29:22; 31:4; 37:6, 21, 33; 38:1, 5; 43:1, 14, 16; 44:2, 6, 24; 45:1, 11, 14, 18; 48:17; 49:7-8, 25; 50:1; 52:3; 56:1, 4; 65:8; 66:1, 12; Jer. 2:2, 5; 4:3, 27; 5:14; 6:6, 9, 16, 21-22; 7:3, 21; 8:4; 9:6, 14, 16, 22; 10:2, 18; 11:3, 11, 21-22; 12:14; 13:1, 9, 12-13; 14:10, 15; 15:2, 19; 16:3, 5, 9; 17:5, 19, 21; 18:11, 13; 19:1, 3, 11, 15; 20:4; 21:4, 8, 12; 22:1, 3, 6, 11, 18, 30; 23:2, 15-16, 38; 24:5, 8; 25:8, 15, 27-28, 32; 26:2, 4, 18; 27:2, 4, 16, 19, 21; 28:2, 11, 13-14, 16; 29:4, 8, 10, 16-17, 21, 25, 31-32; 30:2, 5, 12, 18; 31:2, 7, 15-16, 23, 35, 37; 32:3, 14-15, 28, 36, 42; 33:2, 4, 10, 12, 17, 20, 25; 34:2, 4, 13, 17; 35:13, 17-19; 36:29-30; 37:7, 9; 38:2-3, 17; 39:16; 42:9, 15, 18; 43:10; 44:2, 7, 11, 25, 30; 45:2, 4; 47:2; 48:1, 40; 49:1, 7, 12, 28, 35; 50:18, 33; 51:1, 33, 36, 58; Ezek. 11:5; 21:8; 30:6; Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6; 3:12; 5:4, 16; 7:17; Mic. 2:3; 3:5; Nah. 1:12; Hag. 1:2, 5, 7; 2:6, 11; Zech. 1:3-4, 14, 16-17; 2:12; 3:7; 6:12; 7:9; 8:2-4, 6-7, 9, 14, 19-20, 23; 11:4; Mal. 1:4

The formula, “says the LORD” or “oracle of the LORD,” which

translates the Hebrew words: *nēʾum* YHWH, appears in the following verses:

Gen. 22:16; Num. 14:28; 1 Sam. 2:30; 2 Ki. 9:26; 19:33; 22:19; 2 Chr. 34:27; Ps. 110:1; Isa. 14:22-23; 17:3, 6; 22:25; 30:1; 31:9; 37:34; 41:14; 43:10, 12; 49:18; 52:5; 54:17; 55:8; 59:20; 66:2, 17, 22; Jer. 1:8, 15, 19; 2:3, 9, 12, 29; 3:1, 10, 12-14, 16, 20; 4:1, 9, 17; 5:9, 11, 15, 18, 22, 29; 6:12; 7:11, 13, 19, 32; 8:1, 3, 13, 17; 9:2, 5, 8, 21, 23-24; 12:17; 13:11, 14, 25; 15:3, 6, 9, 20; 16:5, 11, 14, 16; 17:24; 18:6; 19:6, 12; 21:7, 10, 13-14; 22:5, 16, 24; 23:1-2, 4-5, 7, 11-12, 23-24, 28-33; 25:7, 9, 12, 29, 31; 27:8, 11, 15, 22; 28:4; 29:9, 11, 14, 19, 23, 32; 30:3, 8, 10-11, 17, 21; 31:1, 14, 16-17, 20, 27-28, 31-34, 36-38; 32:5, 30, 44; 33:14; 34:5, 17, 22; 35:13; 39:17-18; 42:11; 44:29; 45:5; 46:5, 23, 26, 28; 48:12, 25, 30, 35, 38, 43-44, 47; 49:2, 6, 13, 16, 26, 30-32, 37-39; 50:4, 10, 20-21, 30, 35, 40; 51:24-26, 39, 48, 52-53; Ezek. 13:6-7; 16:58; 37:14; Hos. 2:15, 18, 23; 11:11; Joel 2:12; Amos 2:11, 16; 3:10, 15; 4:3, 6, 8-11; 6:8, 14; 9:7-8, 12-13; Obad. 1:4, 8; Mic. 4:6; 5:9; Nah. 2:14; 3:5; Zeph. 1:2-3, 10; 2:9; 3:8; Hag. 1:9, 13; 2:4, 8-9, 14, 17, 23; Zech. 1:3-4, 16; 2:9-10, 14; 3:9-10; 5:4; 8:6, 11, 17; 10:12; 11:6; 12:1, 4; 13:2, 7-8; Mal. 1:2

These phrases underline the fundamental metaphor: the prophets are like the messengers of the ancient Near East. They do not claim to bring their own understanding of the situation; rather, they present themselves as messengers of God's own words.

15.4. Oracles and Prophetic Speeches

Oracles are messages from God brought by human beings to others. Typically, God speaks in the first person, and so the oracles often begin with a messenger formula: "Thus says the LORD."

Prophetic speeches refer to the words of the prophet himself.

References to God appear in the third person and not in the first. Still, the prophets are the messengers of God, and their words are somehow God's words.

Finally, it is not always easy to know where to divide the text in the books of the prophets. Different translations divide the text differently. As in other situations, whatever divisions support an understanding of the whole is viable.

a. judgment oracles and prophetic speeches

Especially before the fall of Jerusalem in 586, prophets announced judgment against Israel or Judah or the nations. The two key elements are the accusation and the sentence. Often these oracles begin with a call either to the accused or to witnesses. The accusations enumerate the sins of the accused. The judgment, often introduced by “therefore,” announces that punishment. Often there follows the reason, introduced by “because” or “for.” The reasons are the same as the accusations.

The famous judgment oracle in Mic 2:9-12 offers a helpful example.

call:

⁹ Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
and chiefs of the house of Israel,

accusations:

who abhor justice
and pervert all equity,
¹⁰ who build Zion with blood
and Jerusalem with wrong!

¹¹ Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,
its priests teach for a price,
its prophets give oracles for money;
yet they lean upon the LORD and say,

“Surely the LORD is with us!
No harm shall come upon us.”

judgment:

¹² Therefore because of you
Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

The word pairs and parallelism of Hebrew poetry are readily evident here.

These judgment oracles may also introduce the accused with “woe” or “alas” or “ah,” as in Amos 6:1-7; Hosea 4:1-3; Micah 2:1-3; 3:5-6; Jeremiah 14:10, etc.

While these judgments are mainly oracles, Isaiah 28:1-13 lets us hear the prophet in his own voice before the oracle. The distance of the third person allows the prophet to achieve an understatement that belies the strong emotion just below the surface of this text.

Judgment with its accusation and sentence appears in many human contexts, such as parent and child, employer and employee, coach, and player, etc. The most formal context is the trial, where the accused comes before the court to hear the accusations and the formal judgment. The prophets, not surprisingly, adopt the formal vocabulary and roles of the lawsuit which translates the Hebrew word *rîb* (pronounced ‘reeve’).

In the prophetic literature, the lawsuit or *rîb* may have the following elements:

1. the call of the accused party or the call of witnesses to observe the trial
2. the accusations by the plaintiff against the defendant
3. occasionally a statement about the innocence of the plaintiff
4. “Therefore” or “now, therefore” followed by the sentence
5. “Because/for” followed reasons for the sentence, which are the same as the accusations.

The defense by the defendant does not appear in these texts. Their

guilt is certain. God takes the role of plaintiff and judge, and the judgment is clear.

Jeremiah 2:1-37 represents one of the most elaborate developments of the lawsuit, but perhaps, the most famous example is found in Hosea 2, where God's role as husband is added to plaintiff and judge. There the speaker's shifting emotions make it one of the masterpieces of biblical literature. Like much in prophetic literature, these poets constantly transform everything they use. An analysis should not concentrate on how it fits the model but on how the prophet has defamiliarized and transformed the genre.

The judgment oracle has a formal similarity to the lawsuit, and we need not see them as distinct categories. The lawsuit offers the prophet a way to elaborate the judgment oracles.

Both the judgment oracle and the judgment of the lawsuit are performative language, a concept discussed above in §11.2b. The language does not describe but rather puts into effect what is said. A judge in pronouncing the judgment of guilt with a sentence is creating a legal reality. These judgments are not a wish for justice but rather the execution of justice.

b. salvation oracles

The salvation oracles are the counterpart to the judgment oracles. According to Claus Westermann, they mainly “arose anonymously [in the period exilic and post-exilic period] between Deutero-Isaiah (a few probably earlier) and the conclusion of the prophetic canon” (*Prophetic Oracles*, 13). Surely, the people in exile had heard enough of judgment and were in need of salvation. The whole of Isaiah 40-55 can be considered an elaborate salvation oracle. Still, the books of the pre-exilic prophets, as they stand, also contain salvation oracle as if to remind us that prophecy is not just a matter of being angry. The announcement of judgment and salvation are two pieces of a

whole. If the Bible confronts us with our sin, it also announces a saving word.

The salvation oracle is the statement or promise by God to save people, and in Micah 4:6-7, we hear:

In that day, says the LORD,
I will assemble the lame
and gather those who have been driven away,
and those whom I have afflicted.
The lame I will make the remnant,
and those who were cast off, a strong nation;
and the LORD will reign over them in Mount Zion
now and forevermore.

In the judgment oracles, “that day” or “the day of the LORD” is the day of punishment and retribution, but in the salvation oracles, “that day” becomes the day of fulfillment (Amos 9:11).

The salvation oracles then are promises, and as such, they too are performative language. When the prophet proclaims a salvation oracle, God is promising to fulfill the oracle. The salvation oracles are not descriptions of what the future might be; they are a promise by God of what the future will be or what is already taking place in the present. By announcing these oracles, God is guaranteeing their fulfillment.

c. the warning and the call to repentance

Though sin may bring judgment, the prophets sometimes bring only a warning. Imperatives to repent and do good create these warnings, perhaps with reasons added to motivate people.

Isaiah opens his book with this variation on the judgment oracle. It begins with the standard call and accusation (1:2-3).

call:

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

accusation:

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

Instead of adding the judgment with its sentence, he accuses Israel's children of being dumber than the ox and the donkey. It is as if a parent shakes their head and says:

The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.

Isaiah hopes the irony will bring people to their senses. The ox and donkey, because of their good sense, have found a place at the Christmas manger.

Though Jeremiah is famous for judgment oracles, we find several calls to repentance in his work; see Jer 3:11-13; 3:21-22; 10:1-5; 21:11-14 (with a threat of future punishment). Hosea continually highlights the call to return as we see in 14:1-3.

Both the warning and the call to repentance become variations on the oracles of judgment and salvation. These prophet poets are continually taking traditional forms and turning them upside down.

15.5. Conclusion

The prophets take other genres and use them for their purposes, such as the dirge (Jer. 9:19-20), the riddle (Ezek. 17), and the hymn (Isa. 49:13). However, the dramatic monologue, whether a divine oracle or the prophet's speech, dominates the prophetic literature. As in the laments, we must pay close attention how the prophet creates the implied story and the characters. Unlike the laments, in which each psalm is a unity, the prophetic literature gives us recurring characters and contexts. Even so, their words are larger than the moment. They can transcend their context and create possibilities for inter-textual readings.

15.6. Exercises for Chapter 15

Vocabulary

- call narrative, prophetic: the story of the call of the prophet which is one of the basic subplots. §15.2
- judgment oracle: a speech by God, often with a call to the defendant or to witnesses, followed by accusations and then the judgment, often introduced by “therefore,” with its punishment and reasons. §15.4a
- lawsuit: *rib* in Hebrew, an expanded form of the judgment oracle based on the process of a law court in which witnesses are called; the defendant is accused, the plaintiff is defended, and the judgment is given with its punishment and reason. In the biblical lawsuit, the Lord is the plaintiff, prosecutor, and judge. §15.4a
- oracle: a message from God brought by a human being to others, with God speaking in the first person. §15.4
- salvation oracle: a message by God announcing coming salvation. §15.4b

Questions

1. The following passages are judgment oracles. If they contain the messenger formula, identify that. Then identify the elements of the judgment oracles contained in the text. Every passage does not contain all of the elements, and the prophet sometimes adds other elements.

- call to the accused or to witnesses
- accusations
- defense of the accuser (rare)

- Therefore/Now therefore
- judgment and punishment
- reasons introduced by for/because (= accusations).

Amos 3:9-11; 3:13-15; 4:1-3;

Micah 1:2-7; 3:1-4; 3:5-8; 3:9-12; 6:9-16

2. Make a close reading of Amos 3:9-11 or another from the list above.

3. How does Isaiah reshape the judgment oracle: Isa 1:2-3; 1:10-17; 28:14-22

4. Choose one of the following salvation oracles and analyze how it creates a promise of salvation.

Amos 9:13-15;

Micah 2:12-13; 4:1-5 (= Isa 2:2-4);

Micah 4:6-7 – Should It be part of the previous verses?

5. Write your own judgment oracle and salvation oracle.

16. An Afterword: Finding Meaning

From one perspective, meaning is largely a matter of finding connections. This book has dealt primarily with the connections created by craft, language, and genre. It has also emphasized the tradition's common expectations, which poets transform to forge their particular poems.

Here, I would like to explore the text's connections and meaning by asking three questions:

1. What did it mean?
2. What did it come to mean for those before us?
3. What does it mean?

The answers to these three questions are related, but they are not the same. Moreover, each answer also has its own complication.

16.1. What did the biblical text mean?

The question of what the biblical text meant depends on our understanding of history.

First, history suggests people and events, and archaeology has given us a larger understanding of Israel's place within the ancient Near East. Along with many ancient cities, archaeologists have uncovered numberless tablets and inscriptions that have unlocked ancient literature, laws, and culture. Within that history, Israel appears as a late culture. The great pyramids predate David by more than fifteen hundred years, and the Sumerians invented writing more than two thousand years before David. The kingdoms of Judah

and Israel are insignificant compared to the empires of Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. History plays a central role for the prophets who speak to world events. Today we understand this history much better although much remains hidden.

Second, the great biblical scholar, Herman Gunkel (1862-1932), emphasized the importance of understanding a text within its historical context. However, fixing a text in a specific context can be challenging. Moreover, text from one period found new meaning in later periods. Psalms addressing God as king reflect the culture of Solomon's temple, but they find a place in Israel's prayer during the Persian and Hellenistic periods before taking their place in the Bible. These texts can transcend their original context.

Third, language communicates a historical understanding of life and culture. The Hebrew word for "house," as noted earlier in this book, does not have the same sense as what we understand as a house. Likewise, we must know something of ancient kingship to understand the acclamation, "The Lord is king!" If we only know what words mean today, we will miss what the Bible wants to tell us.

Fourth, the Bible does not offer us just one theology; rather it presents several theologies—sometimes at the same time. The royal theology of Jerusalem, which celebrates YHWH as king, gives way to the deuteronomistic theology, which insists that YHWH alone is the one God. After the destruction of Jerusalem, the priestly theology focuses on the temple and Torah to forge a new theology that shapes the religion during the New Testament. Apocalyptic theology, grounded in royal theology, provides the other theological context for that time. The Bible holds together these different theologies, and their differences help to preserve the mystery of God.

Fifth, over the last three hundred years, scholars have given much attention to the development of biblical texts. Our notion of a single author writing and publishing a book does not fit these biblical books. Some texts begin as an oral story or poem, which another person writes down at a later period. A final editor may then weave several traditions into the final text which bears the marks of its

hybrid history. Most prophetic books contain not only the words of that prophet but also poems and stories added by their disciples who continued to build on and adjust what they received.

Sixth, this book has dealt with the biblical texts as they appear in the New Revised Standard Version with minimal consideration of the Hebrew text. The best Hebrew manuscript was copied more than thirteen hundred years after the scribes began to create the book that we have. Though the text appears in English as coherent and legible, the Hebrew text is sometimes ambiguous and even opaque. Good translations provide indications of the problems in the footnotes.

Seventh, the Hebrew Bible itself comes together during the Persian and Hellenistic periods, and it reflects the concerns and issues of that time. The post-exilic community was in search of an identity that would allow them to live in the midst of a foreign culture and maintain their own religious and cultural identity. Their concerns shape the book and provide an important lens for viewing the book. On the other hand, their specific concerns are not exactly ours. The psalms were originally someone else's prayer. Likewise, the prophets were not speaking first of all to us. We must recognize their concerns as we attend to our own.

Historical studies have come under some critique during the last fifty years. Some of its claims have proved to be wrong. The post-exilic period, which was regarded earlier as a period of decline, stands now as a time of great creativity. Also, historical studies necessarily focus on what is behind the text and can lose sight of the words on the page, and this book has focused on the words on the page.

What the text meant, therefore, can be a complicated matter. Still, these texts carry the information we need to make sense of them—if we pay attention.

16.2. What did the biblical text come to

mean?

In both the Jewish and Christian traditions, an important period follows the book which has become a foundation for later interpretation. The Rabbis lay this foundation for Judaism, and the early Church does it for Christianity.

The Jewish Study Bible provides a fine overview of “Classical Rabbinic Interpretation” by Yaakov Elman and “Midrash and Jewish Interpretation” by David Stern. As Elman says, Rabbinic interpretations seek first to explain the text itself and then develop its “application” or “practical intent” for the present. The rabbis carry this out in a conversation that stretches over generations and preserves both the major and minor opinions of Rabbis as it seeks to clarify and make the Torah real in the life of the people.

The early Church affirmed the unity of the two testaments, grounded in Luke 24 and elsewhere. Platonic thought provided the philosophical framework. These early writers understood Christ as Plato’s ideal and everything else as a reflection of that ideal. Therefore, the Old Testament became a manifestation of the Gospel. The prayer psalms, with the psalmist praying for salvation from sickness, oppression, and death, mirror Christ’s crucifixion, and the psalmist’s release reflects the resurrection. While some have criticized this interpretation as arbitrary (and some of it is), they miss the larger metaphorical connections that the early Church grasped.

Two large schools of interpretation developed in the early period. One at Antioch focused on the literal or plain meaning of the biblical text. The other at Alexandria, with Origen as its leader, saw the literal meaning as a shadow of a Christological interpretation. Origen could always find a Christological interpretation for every word, but eventually, there was a reaction to the excesses of his followers.

St. Augustine talks about these two meanings as the text’s plain sense and its transferred sense. The plain sense would be what

it meant in its context. The transferred sense is a Christological sense that builds on the plain sense. Any interpretation, Augustine insists, should be consistent with the whole text, though he realizes that this does not solve every problem. People often prefer simple, unambiguous answers, but the Bible is better suited to engage us in a serious conversation that deepens our understanding.

Augustine recognizes the psalms as ancient prayers, but he sees them primarily as the prayers of Christ. Because some do not fit easily into the mouth of the ideal Christ, Augustine distinguishes between the prayers of Christ the Head and those of the Body of Christ, that is, the Church.

Augustine also sets out an important criterion for interpreting all Scripture: the commandment of love.

If you seem to understand the divine Scriptures or some part of them but by that understanding do not build upon the twofold love of God and neighbor, then you have not yet understood them. (*De doctrina christiana*, I.40 = XXII 20)

With this, Augustine emphasizes the moral context for interpretation.

Christians have not used the Hebrew text liturgically since the earliest times. Instead, they have used it in translation, beginning with the Greek text, then the Latin, and vernacular languages. In the West, the same is also true for the New Testament. Even so, Christians have accepted these translations as the Word of God, and they ground this approach in the incarnation. From the beginning, God's Word has come to us in human words.

If you belong to a community of faith, its tradition of understanding the Bible provides both guidance and limits for interpretation. Still, a careful examination of tradition reveals a multiplicity of understandings that both affirm and challenge our understanding of God and the world.

16.3. What does a biblical text mean?

A text becomes meaningful to us when we can find a relationship between the text and our understanding of God and the world. Though this statement sounds rather simple, it conceals many complexities. This relationship is fundamentally metaphorical. We find meaning when we discover how the text is like us. As in all things metaphorical, the overlap is not whole and entire. The relationship is sometimes narrow but often wider than we first suspect.

In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, H. Porter Abbott observes that we can take three different approaches to interpretation which I characterize as standing inside the text, outside the text, and between texts (ch. 7).

In the first, standing inside the text, we try to key our understanding to the worldview of the text itself. We accept its world and the way it works. We interpret its meaning accordingly. People sometimes talk about “what the author meant.” However, we do not have journals from these authors or interviews with them. We have only the text. Our insight can only be our reconstruction of what fits with the text’s worldview. Moreover, and this is particularly true for poets, what they want to say is the poem itself. If they had wanted to say something different, they would have written a different poem. The poem is what they want us to confront.

When standing outside the text, we can ask whether we agree with that worldview, and we easily find ourselves standing outside because of our differences and distance. Their world was not round (Genesis 1). They took slavery as a given (Exodus 21; Deuteronomy 15). Women in some texts are considered part of a man’s property (Exod 20:17), or at least wives should be subservient to their husbands (Eph 5:24). Sometimes we bracket these differences and read on, but sometimes they are central to our relationship to the text, or they should be. In Genesis 38, Tamar gets justice for herself only by playing the prostitute. Though the narrator seems

comfortable with this resolution, it raises questions about whether we would want to live in that world and whether we do, in fact, live in that world.

Finally, we stand between texts when we find relationships of likeness between the biblical text and other texts in or outside the Bible or with the texts of our lives. The connections here are metaphorical and so partial. While the worldview of the text is central to our understanding when standing inside or outside the text, here, it is not the controlling factor. Here readers play a central role because they discover relationships that the text and its author did not foresee. Readers with a larger world of connections see more possibilities than those with a restricted imagination.

Standing inside, outside, or between texts are all legitimate places to stand. It is essential to know where you are standing and what you can accomplish from that place.

Though the psalms were once other people's prayers, we try to discover how they might be "our" prayers. Here we might regard them as mirrors or windows. They are mirrors when we find that the psalm reflects something of ourselves. We catch sight of our suffering or joy in the psalm, which gives us words to express our experience. If windows, then the psalm gives us insight into the lives of others. Just as the ancient psalmists experienced sickness and injustice, so also do people in our world today. We do not always know their names, but they are out there, and the psalms give us connections to them.

Today, "post-modern" approaches to literature emphasize the instability of texts. These scholars argue that every text has inconsistencies and contradictions that undermine every understanding, for they admit no universals. While I do not accept their premise, their observations have a point. Texts can be more challenging and ambiguous than we want them to be. Our world is not the world of the text. Its worldview does not always make sense, and it may even be objectionable to us. Sometimes, as in the case of slavery, it takes a long time to discover this. St. Augustine's

insistence that our interpretation must build upon “the twofold love of God and neighbor” remains an enduring principle.

The philosopher, Hans Georg Gadamer, has argued that all interpretation comes by engaging the text in a thoroughgoing conversation with questions we have not already answered. If we look for answers that we already know, we will make the text confirm that. However, if we come to the text with an openness that allows us to engage the text in a real dialogue. This may challenge us to think differently, or it may invite us to see life more deeply and more fully than before.

16.4. Exercise for Chapter 16

Pick your favorite psalm and answer the three questions:

- What did the psalm mean?
- What did it come to mean?

For this question, Google St. Augustine’s commentary on the psalms called “Exposition on the Psalms,” and see what he thought the psalm meant.

- What does the psalm mean for you?

Glossary

- alliteration: the repetition of consonants. §3.2
- analogy: another name for metaphor. §8.1
- anaphora: the repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of a line or several successive lines. §3.4c
- anthropomorphism: the understanding of God as being like a human being. §8.6
- apposition: a word or phrase is in apposition when it follows and explains another word. §5.1e
- association: the connection between things that belong to the same group or cognitive domain. §1.3a
- assonance: the repetition of vowels. §3.2
- author: the person who created the text, and distinct from the narrator who tells a story and the poetic voice who speaks in a poem. Though often conflated, the author is not necessarily the same one who speaks. §12.5
- basic plot: a storyline that captures a basic human event. §12.1a
- call narrative, prophetic: the story of the call of the prophet which is one of the basic subplots. §15.2; §12.1a
- characters: all those who speak and act in a story. §12.2
- chiasm (pronounced: KAI-asum): the arrangement *ab* | *ba* in which the second line ends with what the first began, and the second line begins with what ends the first line. §5.1g
- a** Those who love me | **b** I will deliver
b I will protect | **a** those who know my name.
- closure: the sense of an ending that resolves the story's overriding tension and the questions. In general, audiences dislike the lack of closure. §12.1
- cognitive domain: the intellectual network(s) to which a word belongs. §1.3a, §6.2
- comparison: another name for metaphor. §8.1

connotation: the natural, cultural, and personal connections that words have for us; it is similar to the word's cognitive domain. §6.3

contrasting pairs: words that are opposite in some respect, such as the wise and the foolish. §4.2c

couplet: two lines of poetry; sometimes called a cola or stich. §2.1

curse: a negative wish, frequently in this form: "Let/May something bad happen to X." §13.7d

defamiliarization: making the familiar different so that we can see it again as if for the first time; according to Viktor Shklovsky, this is a primary function of art. §1.1

denotation: another name for the literal meaning of a word. §6.3

drama: a story presented directly by the characters, as distinct from a narrative mediated by the narrator. Part III

duration or narrative time: the amount of time and the number of times something is told. Typically, the more narrative time an element receives, the more important it is. §12.6

ellipsis: the omission of a word or phrase from a previous line that a reader must supply to make sense of the second line. §5.1c

entities: those things in the story, in addition to the characters, that serve some function in the story. §12.3

flashback: a narrative scene out of sequence that takes the audience back to an earlier event needed to understand the present action. §12.1

flashforward: a scene out of sequence that takes the audience forward in time to reveal what will happen. In the Bible, prophecy has this function and helps the audience see the consequences of the present action. §12.1

flat character: a stereotype that represents an idea or trait. §12.2

gaps: the things that the narrator does not tell us but that we want or need to know about the story. Some gaps are inconsequential, but the way in which we fill in other gaps can have important consequences for the interpretation.

half and half: a type of merismus that names the two halves to convey the whole, as in "day and night" for all time. §4.3d

history: an account that corresponds to what happened and so should be verifiable. §12.1

hymn: statements about God and God's deeds either in general (praise) or as related to "me" or "us" (thanksgiving), often with a call for others to join the psalmist or a vow or the formula: Blessed be God. §11.1-2

implied narrative: a text that presumes a story with some tension and a projected resolution, which the audience must reconstruct from what the speaker says. §12.1b

inclusio: the repetition of the same phrase or line at the beginning and end of a text. §3.4b

irony: a statement marked by incongruity and hostility. §9.1

judgment oracle: a speech by God, often with a call to the defendant or to witnesses, followed by accusations and then the judgment, often introduced by "therefore," with its punishment and reasons. §15.4a

key word: a repeating word or phrase that signals critical themes in the story or poem. §3.4a

lament: another name for the psalm of petition or prayer psalm. §13.0

lawsuit: *rîb* in Hebrew, an expanded form of the judgment oracle based on the process of a law court in which witnesses are called; the defendant is accused, the plaintiff is defended, and the judgment is given with its punishment and reason. In the biblical lawsuit, the Lord is the plaintiff, prosecutor, and judge. §15.4a

line: a line of poetry followed by a pause; sometimes called by the Greek terms colon, stich, or hemistich. §2.1

literal language: the use of words corresponding to their basic dictionary meaning. §6.1

lyric: not a story, but the direct presentation of reaction or idea by a single voice. §10.0

merismus: something divided into two (or three) essential parts to convey a sense of the whole. §4.3d

metaphor: an assertion that something is like something else: A is

(like) B. Comparison, analogy, and simile are other names for this assertion of likeness. §8.1

meter: the regular appearance of stressed syllables. While English poetry Traditionally has a regular number of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables, Hebrew has only a regular number of stressed syllables (more or less). §3.1

metonym (MET-uh-nim): a piece of metonymy. §7.1

metonymy (mi-TAHN-i-mee): the use of an entity for something associated with it: X for Y. The part for the whole is the easiest example: “My mouth is filled with your praise” (Ps 71:8): X: mouth for Y: the whole person. §7.1

motif: a recurring concrete image connected to a theme, a recurring idea. §3.4a

multiplicity or ambiguity: a statement with various possibilities.

§9.4

narrative space: the geography of the story which carries thematic dimensions. §12.4

narrative time or duration: the amount of time and the number of times something is told. Typically, the more narrative time an element receives, the more important it is. §12.6

narrative time: the amount of time given to telling the parts of the story. The more narrative time an event receives, the more important it is. §12.6

narrative, also referred to as story: a plot with a sequence of events moving from tension to a resolution, told by a narrator/storyteller. Part III

narrator, also called the storyteller: the voice that tells the story. Part III

narrator, first person: a narrator who tells the story from “my” point of view, usually as a character in the story; many of the prayer psalms are speeches in the first person. §12.5

narrator, third person: a narrator outside the story, typically possessing an omniscient understanding of the characters and events. This narrator typically gives the impression of impartiality

and objectivity but plays a crucial role in shaping the story, its worldview, and the narrative lens. See also “voice.” §12.5

oracle: a message from God brought by a human being to others, with God speaking in the first person. §15.4

overstatement or hyperbole: a statement that claims more than is reasonable. §9.2

performative language: an utterance that does not describe but performs the action it names, such as betting, vowing, and swearing. By saying, “I swear, so help me God,” a person performs the act of taking an oath. §12.1b

plot or storyline: the skeletal events with its characters. §12.1

polar pairs: the naming of the beginning and the end to convey the whole, as in “head to toe.” §4.3d

praise hymn: see hymn

prayer psalm: another name for the lament or psalm of petition. §13.0

proverb: a memorable saying, which in the Bible typically comes as a couplet of parallel lines. §14.3a

psalm of petition: a plea for God to come and save the psalmist with a thanksgiving hymn added sometimes; also called prayer psalm or lament. §13.0

realism: a presentation of the world true to our experience with its round characters and complex motives. §12.2; 13.8

refrain: the regular repetition of one or more lines in a poem. §3.4d

repetition: a basic strategy used to create emphasis, time to react, and design. Repetition is a sign of what the text deems important and demands the audience’s attention. §3.0

resolution: whatever brings a tension to an end. Stories typically have a major resolution that brings the whole to an end, but along the way, smaller tensions demand their own resolution so that the story can move ahead. §12.1

rhyme: the repetition of the last syllables of lines of poetry. §3.2

round character: E.M. Forster’s term for a realistic character who possesses the complication and surprise of real human beings. §12.2

salvation oracle: a message by God announcing coming salvation.

§15.4b

sameness: a complete overlap with no difference. §1.3b

sequence of events: the chronological unfolding of the events of the story which may or may not be the way in which the narrator tells the story. The narrator may add flashbacks and flashforwards to provide the information needed for the story. §12.1

similar pairs: two words that are similar and could stand for each other. §4.2

similarity: a sharing of much in common, but also with differences. §1.3b

simile: a type of metaphor that acknowledges the comparison with the word “like” or “as.” §8.1

story: another word for narrative. §12.1

storyline: the skeletal events with its characters. §12.1

stress: the accented syllable of a word. §3.1

synecdoche (si-NEK-doh-key): a subcategory of metonymy which names a part used for the whole. §7.1

tension: a problem that the characters must resolve for the story to move forward and come to closure. A story typically has a major tension whose resolution brings the whole to an end. Between them, small tensions arise and demand resolution for the story to move forward. Part III, §12.1

thanksgiving hymn: statements about what God has done for “me” or “us,” sometimes with a call for others to join or a vow by the psalmist to thank God. §11.3; §13.6; §13.7i

theme: a recurring idea in a text. §3.4a

time of the story: the time when the story takes place, in contrast to the time of its composition, the time of its reading, and also its narrative time. §12.4

understatement or litotes: a statement that presents something as less than it is. §9.3voice: the speaker in a poem which may be a disembodied, authoritative voice or a personal voice recounting “my” experiences. Hymns and wisdom texts often have an

authoritative voice, while the laments often have very personal voices, whether individual or communal. §12.5, 14.2

wisdom instruction or monology: a didactic speech by a wisdom figure, constructed of linking proverbs. §14.3b

word pairs: words that connect through similarity, contrast, sequence, and metonymy. They form the building blocks of biblical poetry. §4.0

worldview: the story's understanding of how its world works. This worldview is largely presented rather than explained. Therefore, the audience must reconstruct this understanding from what the narrator presents. This understanding is also called "the implied author." For a biblical story, the worldview could also be called its theology—that is, its understanding(s) of God, humanity, creation, and their relationship to each other. §12.5

Scripture References

Genesis

1:1 – §8.6

1:27 – §8.6

2:7,8 – §8.6

24:12-1 – §13.1

33:22-32 – §7.3

Exodus

15:18 – §2.6

18:10 – 11.2d

20:4 – §8.6

20:17 – §16.3

Deuteronomy

24:19-22 – §7.3

Joshua

3 – §2.7

Ruth

4:14 – §11.2d

1 Samuel

17:31-37 – §15.2

1 Kings

1:48 – §11.2d;

3:6-9 – §13.1;

5:7 – §11.2d;

8:3 – §8.6;

8:17 – §7.2;

17 – §15.2;

18 – §15.1

18:36-37 – §13.1;

19:1-18 – §15.2;

19:19-21 – §15.2;

22 – §15.1

22:14 – §15.1

2 Kings

2:9-14 (2x) – §15.2

6:8-23 – §9.7

19:15-19 – §13.1

ch. 22 – §15.2

2 Chronicles

7:1 – §7.3

Tobit — §14.3

Job — §12.5; §14.1

8:28 – §14.1

Psalms

1 – §1.3b; §14.1; §14.3b

1:1 – §5.3a

1:2 – §4.1

1:6 – §4.2c

4:1 – §4.4

6:3 – §13.8g

6:8-10 – §13.6

8 – §3.3.3b; §11,2c

8:1, 9 – §3.4b

8:8-9 – §7.3

9 – §3.4e

12:7 – §4.2b

13:1-2 – §13.8g

13:5-6 – §13.6

17:1-2 – §13.7d

17:6 – §4.4

19:1-2 – §4.0

20:1 – §5.3

20:9 – §4.4

21:2 – §5.1h
21:8 – §4.3b
22 – §6.0
22:1 – §3.4c; §13.8d
22:21a – §13.8d
22:21b-31 – §13.6
23 – §9.6
23:1 – §8.1
25 – §3.4e; §3.4e
25:10 – §7.3
26:6 – §9.5
26:10 – §4.3b
27:8 – §4.2a
28:6-9 – §13.6
29 – §5.4; §11.2c
29:1-2 – §3.4c
31:1 – §13.4
31:2cd – §13.7e
31:16 – §5.1a
31:21-24 – §13.6
33:6 – §5.1g
34 – §3.4e
34:17 – §5.2c
35:13 – §13.8e
35:13-14 – §13.8f
35:17 – §13.8g
36:4 – §4.2c
37 – §3.4e
37:9 – §13.7h
37:21 – §5.1h
38:1-2 – §13.8h
38:1-4 – §13.8c
38:3b – §13.8b
38:11 – §13.8e
39 – §13.8d

41:4 — §13.8c
41:9 — §13.8e
41:13 — §11,2c
42:1 — §8.1
43:17-18 — 413.8c
44 — §13.8h
44:9-14 — §13.8h
44:23 — §13.7d; §13.8h
45:1 — §8.7
46 — §11,2c
47:2 — §8.6
48 — §11,2c
48:11-12 — §4.3d
48:12-13 — §4.4
50:11 — §5.1g
51:1 — §5.1g
51:6,10-12 — 413.8c
51:17 — 413.8c
51:18 — §4.3c
52:8-9 — §13.6
54:1-2 — §13.7d
54:1, 5, 6-7 — §13.6
54:6-7 — §13.6
55:13-14, 20-21 — §13.8e
56:1-2 — §13.7c
56:12-13 — §13.6
57:5-11 — §13.6
58:1 — §9.1
58:10 — §13.8a
58:7-8 — §13.7d
59:16-17 — §13.6
60:5 — §5.2c; §13.7e
61:2 — §5.2a
62:3 — §13.8g
64:1-4 — §13.4

64:7 – §13.7e
66:1-4 – §11.2c
66:13-14 – §13.7h
66:18 – §5.2c
66:20 – §5.2c
67:6-7 – §11.2c
68:4-6 – §11.2c
69:30-36 – §13.6
70 – §13.5
71:5 – §13.7f
71:8 – §7.1
72 – §12.4
72:18-19 – §11,2c
73 – §12.4
73:4-9 – §9.2
74 – §12.4; §13.2
74:4-7 – §6.1
74:9-10 – §13.8g
74:10 – §13.7g
74:10-11 – §13.8g
75:1 – §11.2c
76 – §11,2c
78 – §12.5
78:10 – §7.3
79:5 – §13.8g
79:9 – §13.8c
80:4 – §13.8g
80:8-9 – §5.2b
80:17 – §4.3b
81:7 – §4.4
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83:1 – §4.5
84:4-5 – §14.3c
86:7 – §4.4

87:5 – §5.2d
88 – §9.3; §13.8d
88:9 – §13.5
89:13 – §4.3b
88:14 – §13.7g
88:18 – §13.8e
89:46 – §13.8g
89:52 – §11,2c
90:7 – §5.1i
90:8 – 413.8c
90:13 – §13.8g
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91:15 – §4.4
92:1 – §3.1
93 – §3.4c; §11,2c
93:1 – §8.6
93:3-4 – §5.1f
94:3 – §13.8g
94:9 – §4.3a
94:22-23 – §13.6
95:3 – §8.6
96:1 – §5.3b ; §12.5
96:10 – §8.6
96:11-12a – §4.3d
96:13 – §5.1c
97:1 – §11.2c
97:5 – §5.3c
98:1 – §3.4a; §5.2c
99:6 – §4.4
100:1-2 – §11.2a
102:1 – §11.2a
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102:3-5 – §13.8
102:21 – §4.3c
103 – §3.4a

103:1-5 — §11.2c
104:1 — §11.2c
104:14-15 — §4.3
105 — §12.1b; §12.5
105:1-7 — §11.2c
106 — §12.1b; §12.5
106:6 — §12.5
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111:1-2 — §11.2c
111:10 — §14.1
112 — §3.4e
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114:1-2 — §2.1; §2.2
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115:5-7 — §4.5
115:8 — §4.5
115:17 — §4.5
115:18 — §4.5
117 — §11.2; §11.2c
118:1, 29 — §3.4b
118:5 — §4.4
118:6 — §5.2e
119 — §3.4e
119:84 — §13.8g
120:7 — §4.2c
121 — §10.0
121:8 — §4.3d
122 — §3.3a
125:1 — §5.1e; §5.1f
126:2 — §5.2a
127:1 — §8.2
127:1-2 — §3.2
128:5 — §4.3c
130:1 — §8.2; §8.7

133 — §10.0
135:21 — §4.3c
136 — §3.3b; §3.4d; §9.3; §11,2c
136:11-12 — §3.4a
137:9 — §13.8a
138:3 — §4.4; §11.3
138:7 — §4.3b
138:7-8 — §11.3
139:8-12 — §5.4
139:10 — §4.3b
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144:1-2 — §11.2c
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145:1-2 — §11.2b
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149 — §11.2a
149:2 — §5.1b
150 — §11,2c

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1:7 — §14.1
1:29 — §14.1
2:5 — §14.1
4:13-14 — §14.2b
8:1-36 — §14.2b

9:1-6 — §14.2b
9:10 — §14.1
10:1 — §4.2c
12:18 — §4.2a
15:16-17 — §4.2a
15:33 — §14.1
31:10-31 — §3.4

Ecclesiastes

3:1-8 — §14.1

Song of Songs — §8.6; §14.2

2:12 — §5.3
6:5 — §9.2

Wisdom of Solomon

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19:20 — §14.1
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Isaiah

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6:5 – 8-9 – 11a – §15.2
28:1-13 – §15.4a
ch. 40-55 – §15.1
40:1-11 – §15.2
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Jeremiah

1:4-10 – §15.2
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Daniel

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2 – §15.4a

3:1-5 – §15.2

4:1-3 – §15.4a

5:12 – §8.4

14:1-3 – §15.4c

5:12 – §8.4

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Amos

1:2 – §5.1d

6:1-7 – §15.4a

7:10-17 – §15.2

8:4-6 – §9.1

9:11. §15.4b

Jonah

1:1-3 – §15.2

3:1-3a – §15.2

Micah

2:1-3 — §15.4a

2:9-12 — §15.4a

3:5-6 — §15.4a

4:6-7 — §15.4b

Matthew

5:3-11 — §14.3c

Mark

14:36 — §13.1

Luke

1:68 — §11.2d

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John

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Ephesians

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