

Hebrew Poetry

Although Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs are specifically designated “poetry” in the Old Testament, there are many examples of poetry in other books, especially the prophets.

Hebrew poetry is not like English poetry. English poetry focuses on scansion (rhythm), meter and rhyme. Hebrew poetry, while it does employ “sense rhythm,” is measured better by the juxtaposition of ideas, which is called parallelism. Thought-arrangement, not word-arrangement, is the key to its composition. Such thought-arrangement can be found in couplets (Ps. 36:5), triplets (Job 3:9) or quatrains (Ps. 1:3).

Several kinds of parallelism have been noted in Hebrew poetry. Here is a list of those that are common:

Synonymous — repetition of the same thought

- Complete — second line repeats each element of the first line (Ps. 94:16)
- Incomplete — part of the second line is implied (Ps. 100:4a)
- Similar — the lines are similar (Ps. 19:2)

Antithetic — the second line contrasts with the first (Pss. 1:6; 34:10; 90:6)

Synthetic — each line builds on the one before it

- Constructive — completes a thought (Ps. 2:6)
- Explanatory — gives a reason (Prov. 26:4)
- Conceptual — uses a theme element (Ps. 1:1)

Climactic — The second line adds to the first (Ps. 29:1; 96:1)

Emblematic — uses a simile or metaphor to complete the parallel (Ps. 42:1; 103:13; Prov. 25:25)

Introverted — a triplet or quatrain in which the first line parallels the last (Ps. 137:5–6)

Scholars have noted that there has never been a language as fit for poetic writing as Hebrew. “Hebrew verse, especially, is rich in choice of words and vividness of imagery. It abounds in numerous rhetorical devices. Simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, alliteration and personification frequently occur and are used to great effect. The language itself, even in the form of prose, has a singularly rhythmic and musical quality admirably adapted to noble poetry” (Merrill F. Unger, *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament*).