

her·me·neu·tics

HOW TO STUDY YOUR BIBLE

— an eight week course with pastor ben —

Lesson 7 Studying Poetry and Wisdom

The Bible wants to change our thinking, but it also wants to move our hearts. When changing someone's thinking, the best tactic is normally to reason with them by laying out arguments, supporting data, and responding to their objections. But influencing how someone feels is the function of poetry. Robert Frost, the famous English writer, once said that "Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words."

We don't interact with poetry much in our everyday lives, but the Old Testament is full of poetry. The largest book of the Bible, Psalms, is entirely poetry. We find poems are sprinkled throughout the rest of the Bible, in books like Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, and Judges. Both the major and minor prophets of the Old Testament used quite a bit of poetry, as did the writers of the wisdom literature of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. If you are going to read you're Old Testament, you will need to understand how poetry works!

Too often we try to read the poetry of the Bible like we would read the letters of the New Testament. But while both are inspired, inerrant, and necessary for godly living, they function very differently. Studying poetry can be tough because, like a story, breaking a poem down into all its pieces instead of just reading it might feel a little odd. Psalms is one of people's favorite books, and for good reason! Obviously, this poetry is already impacting people, even if people don't understand parallelism, similes, or acrostics. Yet knowing some of the mechanics of how Hebrew poetry works can give an even greater appreciation and can help the careful reader get more out of their reading of a beloved portion of God's Word.

Poetry in the Old Testament

All writing can be categorized as poetry or prose. Prose is a fancy way of saying normal writing: a textbook, a novel, the newspaper. So then, what is poetry, and what makes poetry poetry? That

question can be tough to answer. While many would simply say “It rhymes!” poetry actually doesn’t have to rhyme to be poetry. English poetry often includes rhyme, but it also includes things like meter, rhythm, and imagery. Finding a technically precise for what exactly makes poetry poetry is challenging because poetry is in many ways communication taken to a more artful level, and getting more specific than that is tough.

Poetry also doesn’t work the same in every culture. Hebrew poetry, for example, almost never rhymes. Scholars debate whether it even has meter, the fixed repetition of syllables that gives poetry a rhythm and a cadence. Even if Hebrew poetry does have meter, that meter won’t show up in our English Bibles, so how can we detect poetry? Scholars have typically defined Hebrew poetry by using three characteristics: terseness, parallelism, and imagery.

Terseness

Terseness refers to the fact that poems are normally compact ways of saying things. One writer said that “Poetry is a kind of human language that says more, and says it more intensely than does ordinary language.” In Hebrew poetry, poems are broken up into short, terse lines that communicate one simple idea. These short lines are then strung together in various ways to communicate an idea.

Example: Psalm 23:1 states “The Lord is my shepherd//I shall not want.” This is short in English, but it’s even shorter in Hebrew. In Hebrew, the first and the second line are composed of only two words a piece! Yet in these four words the psalmist gives us a powerful and moving picture of God’s care that has captivated the thinking of God’s people for thousands of years. That’s the terseness of Hebrew poetry in action!

Parallelism

Hebrew poetry typically works by making one short statement and then following it up with another statement that repeats, contrasts, or builds on the first. Normally this parallelism occurs with just two lines, but it can also be done with three lines and at times more. This pattern of two or more terse statements that build off each other followed by two more short statements that build off each other is the heart of Hebrew poetry, and it’s the clearest way to distinguish Hebrew poetry from prose. Modern versions of the Bible and some editions of the King James display this poetry on the page in such a way that you can see what the individual lines are. If you are reading from a Bible that doesn’t do this, you will want to play careful attention to what the individual lines are in whatever poetry you are reading.

So how do these individual lines relate to one another? There are a few ways people attempt to categorize the parallelism in the Hebrew poetry, and these categories can even have subcategories. For our purposes, we will use one of the simplest schemes and will break down parallelism in Hebrew poetry to three overall categories.

- **Synonymous**

In synonymous parallelism, the second line is essentially the same as the first. The poet will say something, and then will say something else that means the same thing. This repetition is done for style, variety, and can sometimes add color to what the psalmist is saying.

Example: Psalm 19:1

The heavens declare the glory of God,
And the firmament showeth his handiwork.

In this short section “heavens” and “firmament” both refer to the sky above us. “Declare” means the same thing as “show.” Finally, “the glory of God” is paralleled with “His handiwork” because God’s glory is seen through His handiwork. Both lines of this verse are saying the same thing: What God has created testifies to how great He is.

- **Antithetic**

Another way that the writers of Scripture can parallel two ideas is by setting up a contrast. This is particularly common in the wisdom literature, especially Proverbs, where the fool and the wise person are often contrasted, as are the diligent and the sluggard and others.

Example: Proverbs 12:2

A good man obtaineth favour of the LORD:
But a man of wicked devices will he condemn.

Here you can see the contrast is between a good person and a man of wicked devices. God will give favor to the one but will condemn the other. These types of contrasts are very common in Hebrew poetry.

- **Synthetic**

Synthetic is a catch-all category in which the second line develops the first in some way. Sometimes the second line will illustrate or compare the first half to something else. Sometimes the second half will give more information to the first half. Sometimes it’s hard to state exactly what the relationship is.

Example: Proverbs 26:17

He that passeth by, and meddleth with strife belonging not to him,
Is like one that taketh a dog by the ears.

Here the second line illustrates the first line. It doesn’t simply repeat, nor offer a simple contrast, as many lines do, but rather builds on the idea. Don’t just label a pair as “synthetic,” though, try to determine what the relationship between the two is.

As you read the poetry of Scripture, ask yourself how the lines relate to one another. Do the ideas reflect one another in a synonymous sense? What ideas are compared? contrasted? illustrated? Realizing that Hebrew poetry is based on parallelism can help you appreciate it better and see more clearly what the writers of Scripture want to accomplish. Hopefully with enough practice you will begin to “hear” the poetry of the Bible by recognizing these lines and their relationships.

Imagery

The final component in Hebrew poetry is imagers. Poetry abounds in figures of speech, things like metaphors, similes, and hyperbole. Prose can include figures of speech, but poetry uses them a lot more. God is described as a rock, a shepherd, and a fortress. The ungodly are described as chaff which the wind drives away or as dross that the Lord removes. Rather than simply say, “I was really discouraged and God helped me,” the psalmist says “He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, And set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.” The biblical authors use these images to draw up mental pictures and associations that help us feel how they felt so that we can learn what they learned.

Many of these figures of speech we understand intuitively. When the psalmist says that he makes his bed swim with his tears, we don’t think he is literally sitting on a bed floating in a room chest deep with tears. But even having that mental image helps us understand how distraught he is. However, it will be helpful to work through what figures of speech are included in the prophets to get a clearer picture of how they work.

- **Metaphor**

A metaphor compares two things by equating them. “The Lord is my shepherd” is a metaphor. So is the statement “The Lord is my light and my salvation.” But it’s not just God who can be described by metaphors. Proverbs 12:4 says that a virtuous woman is a crown to her husband. Metaphors help us see truths in a creative way. They play on our imagination and present truth in a way that is fresh and compelling.

- **Simile**

A simile is a specific type of metaphor that uses the words “like” or “as.” When we say the wicked are like the chaff, or that the righteous is like a green bay tree, or that our hearts should seek after God as the deer pants for the water, the writer is using similes.

When you study metaphors and similes, look for the main idea and be careful not to press the comparison too far. Metaphors and similes are normally communicating one main idea and trying to find every possible connection between a metaphor and what it represents could cause confusion. When we are told that as the deer pants for water so the heart of the psalmist panted for God, we should envision a wild animal, living in the desert plains of Israel and Judah, desperately thirsty for a drink. To say that deer are

skiddish, and that too often we don't have the fellowship with God that could be because we're scared off too easy misses the main point of the comparison. While perhaps true, that's not what the psalmist meant when he penned those words. His point was that we should thirst after God, and so that's what we want to take away.

- **Hyperbole**

Hyperbole is intentional overstatement for effect. If I say, "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse," everyone realizes that I don't actually mean that I could eat an animal larger than my body, let alone my stomach. I mean that I am very hungry. Scripture uses hyperbole as well. For example, we've already observed that David expressed feeling like he cries so much that his he floods his room and makes his bed float (Psalm 6:6).

- **Personification**

Sometimes the poet will refer to an inanimate object or an idea as if it were a real person. The earth and heaven (sky) are frequently called upon by God in poetic contexts. Isaiah 44:23 tells the mountains, forests, and trees to burst out into song. Wisdom is depicted as a woman in the streets compelling people to come by and listen to her. Again, this technique helps us think creatively and paints vivid images in our minds.

- **Wordplay**

Sometimes a poem will associate two words because they sound similar in Hebrew. In the first poem of the Bible, Adam calls his wife woman (the Hebrew is *'isha*), because she was taken from man (the Hebrew is *'ish*). Fortunately for us, woman and man also sound similar, so that one translates well. But in Jeremiah 1 the prophet sees an almond, and God goes on to tell Jeremiah He is watching over His Word to bring it to pass. That seems like a strange connection for us, but that's because we don't see that the Hebrew word for almond is *shaqed* and the Hebrew word for watch here is *shaqad*.

- **Acrostics**

Some psalms and other poems begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet, so verse 1 begins with aleph, verse 2 with beth, and so on. The first four chapters of Lamentations are formed as acrostics. Proverbs 31 is an acrostic praising the virtuous woman, and so are several psalms. The most notable example of acrostics in Scripture is Psalm 119. Here the first 8 verses begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the next 8 with second, and so on. In fact, many Bibles will include the letter of the Hebrew alphabet that each section of the poem starts with as a subtitle to help break up the lengthy poem.

Understanding figures of speech is important, because there are many of them in our Bibles and careless study can lead to misunderstanding. Figures of speech are also used in the New

Testament, especially in the teaching of Jesus, which is rich in metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, and other poetic devices.

Hebrew poetry combines short, terse expressions of parallel thoughts, often drawing on imagery to help us respond emotionally to the truth of God. It seeks to inspire us, convict us, encourage us, and illustrate to us how God works and what that means for us. Poetry is another way that God has chosen to communicate truth to us so that we know who He is and how we should live.

Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament

Many of the principles of studying wisdom literature will employ the techniques used in studying Hebrew poetry, because the wisdom literature of the Bible is written in poetry. However, it will be helpful to take a minute and talk specifically about the wisdom books of the Old Testament.

What is wisdom?

The Hebrew word for wisdom is *hakmah*, and while we tend to think of wisdom primarily as an intellectual pursuit of the mind, this Hebrew word often means “skill.” This skill can sometimes be the skill of a craftsman, as it is in Exodus 31:3, 6, but normally it refers to the skill of making wise choices that please God. While skill will involve a certain degree of knowledge, the knowledge is not abstract knowledge but the practical, how-to knowledge that you need to make the right choice in a complex situation.

Wisdom must also have the right goal. The Bible warns against the wisdom of the world. What separates the wisdom of God from the wisdom of the world? The difference is the goal of each. If wisdom is the skill of living right, the question becomes, right by whose definition? If your goal is the goal of the world: to become successful, have a lot of fun, and get as far ahead in life as you can, then that will lead to a certain way of thinking and acting to reach that goal. If you start with the fear of the Lord, a desire to honor and please your Creator with your life, you will seek a very different goal which will lead to a very different way of thinking and acting. That’s why Job, Proverbs, and Psalms all remind us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Job 28:28; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 9:10). Truly successful living begins with God, and then asks how to live life well in light of how God has created His world to work and of His coming judgment.

How do I study wisdom literature?

The wisdom literature forces us to think carefully about the world around us. As one commentator put it

“in the Wisdom books the tone of voice and even the speakers have changed. The blunt “Thou shalt” or “shalt not” of the Law, and the urgent “Thus saith the Lord” of the Prophets, are joined

now by the cooler comments of the teacher and the often anguished questions of the learner. Where the bulk of the Old Testament calls us simply to obey and to believe, this part of it... summons us to think hard as well as humbly; to keep our eyes open, to use our conscience and our common sense, and not to shirk the most disturbing questions.”¹

The Poetry and Wisdom Books of the Old Testament

Psalms

Psalms is one of people’s favorite places to go in Scripture, and for good reason. Here we read the honest account of people working out what faith in God looks like in a world filled with personal tragedy, joyful wonder, spiritual failure, incredible success, and frustrating defeat. Psalms is a collection of the songs and prayers of ancient Israel. As we read these ancient documents, we realize that God’s work with humanity has in many ways remained unchanged through the millennia. A careful study of the Psalms will go a long way in helping believers in their worship and prayer life.

- **Purpose of Psalms**

The Psalms don’t directly teach doctrine or give commands to obey. Rather, the Psalms function to show us how we should handle our emotions as we seek to live a life of faith. The Psalms are designed to model for us how people of faith should process their emotions living in such an uncertain and at times painful life.

- **Types of Psalms**

- **Hymns of Praise**

These songs praise God for who He is. They glory in His person, His character, and all that He has done. They function well as simple worship songs, praising the greatness of God. Several well-known hymns of praise include Psalms 103, 104, 145-150.

- **Lament**

These psalms represent the sorrowing believer. This may be a lament over sin, such as Psalm 51, or a lament over suffering, such as Psalm 22. These psalms often begin with the psalmist giving his complaint to God, but normally by the end the psalmist has brought himself to a place of faith in what God is doing.

- **Thanksgiving**

¹ Derek Kidner, ???

These psalms thank God for all that he has done. Whereas a hymn focuses on God's person and character more generally, a psalm of thanksgiving focuses on what God has done for the psalmist individually. Well-known thanksgiving psalms include Psalm 32, 34, and 40.

- **Wisdom**

These psalms are poetic meditations on the nature and value of wisdom. Some of the most famous of these are Psalms 1, 8, and 73.

- **Royal**

These psalms celebrate the Davidic king, the specially chosen one whom God appointed to rule the people of Israel. The most well-known of these is Psalm 110, which the New Testament repeatedly picks up on as pointing forward to Christ.

- **Trust**

These Psalms describe the psalmists rock solid confidence in God's ability to protect the author from danger. The most famous of these is Psalm 23, but others would include Psalm 91 and 63.

Proverbs

When people think about the big issues of life today, they read a book. They want depth; they want the issue to be covered in 300 pages worth of description. But in ancient Israelite culture, an oral culture where only a few could read, the goal of thinking about life was to be short, pithy, and memorable rather than exhaustive. Wise men and philosophers would make observations about life, drawing comparisons between the natural world the world of humanity. These short, pithy sayings were collected and compiled into larger collections which were eventually edited into the book of Proverbs as we have it today. Proverbs tells us what is generally true about life in God's world. The authors meditate on what type of behavior is good, what is bad, and what are the results of each.

Job

Job wrestles with the question of why godly people suffer. This book takes the form of a long dialogue between Job and his friends in which Job asserts his innocent and his friends insist that he must have sinned greatly for God to punish him this way. The four go back and forth until eventually another one of Job's friends speaks up and then eventually God himself gives His

perspective. God's ultimate answer to Job is not to tell him why he is suffering, but to remind Job who God is and to call on him to believe God because God is God and Job is not.

Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes deals with the hollowness and the emptiness of life, especially life that is lived apart from God. The author is acknowledging that life is often frustrating and it doesn't always work out the way we think it ought to, but he reminds the reader that judgment is coming and that because life is so hollow without God, people ought to live in light of eternity while still enjoying the good things God has given us here. Paying attention to the overall book of Ecclesiastes is important when studying this book, as individual statements, isolated from the whole will miss the main conclusion the author is aiming for in the second half of chapter 12.

Contradiction?

Many new students of God's Word have been troubled with the relationship between Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. Specifically, do Job and Ecclesiastes contradict Proverbs? Proverbs seems to argue that if you obey God and do things wisely, you will have success. But Job says that righteous people sometimes suffer to reasons known only to God, and Ecclesiastes observes that life is often random and unpredictable, with success, wealth, and wisdom in the end being fleeting and unsatisfying. So who is right?

They all are. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job should be read together, recognizing they each give a unique and important perspective on life. The principles of Proverbs are general observations, and generally speaking people who work hard, are kind to others, and live by the rules God has hardwired into universe are more successful than those who don't. But there are exceptions.

Ecclesiastes reminds us that this life is now cursed, and death and chance happen to all. Ecclesiastes wrestles through what happens when we try to turn the general principles of Proverbs into iron clad promises of God that will never fail. Doing so will leave us very disillusioned and will point us to eternity. Beyond the intellectual issue of the randomness of life, Job asks why it is that God lets his people suffer. Job wrestles through the issue of suffering on a very personal level, showing us what it looks like for a person of faith to really struggle with these issues and yet to be reminded of God's power and to ultimately submit to God's plan in faith.

Proverbs is accurate when it describes life in general terms, and living by the principles of Proverbs will usually lead to a successful life and successful relationships. But there are exceptions to these norms, and Ecclesiastes and Job help balance Proverbs by working through these exceptions.

Song of Solomon

This beautiful poem celebrating romantic love pictures a man and a woman go through the courting process and enjoy marriage to one another. It is packed with metaphors and similes, as the madly in love couple describe one another using everything around them. The description of this joyful relationship is meant to be a literal poem celebrating the happiness of human love, but since marriage is used as a picture of God's love for His people in both the Old and the New Testament, it is probably also legitimate to see this couple as a picture of the intimacy and joy that God desires to have with His people.

The Six Steps for Studying Poetry and Wisdom

Study the Context

- **Historical Context**

When studying the context, the historical context normally matters less. Some psalms have titles that point to when they were written, but these are rare. The poetry of the wisdom literature is often devoid of any historical context.

- **Cultural Context**

The cultural context tends to be more important than the historical background. Imagery draws on common life experiences, and some of the life experiences of an ancient Israelite are quite different from ours. Using good study tools can help point out when there is a cultural gap between the ancient people to whom the Scriptures were originally written and to us today.

Example: When we think of God leading us in green pastures, most of us think of green rolling hills. Green pastures look very different in a desert than they do in Midwest America. In Israel green pastures are hard to come by, taking a skilled shepherd to find them, because they aren't always super green from a distant. While we might think of green pastures as describing the shepherd helping his sheep live in luxury, the first readers would have realized this was talking about the shepherd providing for the sheep's basic needs.

- **Literary Context**

The importance of literary context differs from book to book in the poetry and wisdom section of our Bible. The literary context of Job matters a lot! If you find yourself particularly moved by a verse in Job, check to see who is speaking. There's about a good chance you're reading the words of Eliphaz, Bildad, or Zophar, and you don't really want to be putting their speeches up on your social media account! When reading the Psalms, the literary context of the Psalm is important, but psalms don't tend to depend on other nearby psalms for their interpretation. Proverbs is a mix. The first half nine chapters give a set of speeches

on the theme of wisdom and the need, especially for youths, to desire and seek it. The rest of the book has random wisdom sayings that have been collected and compiled, with a few longer speeches tacked on in the last two chapters. Ecclesiastes is another hybrid. While there are many individual proverbs in the book that can stand on their own, the book as a whole has woven these observations on life into a unified message that the author gives at the end of the book. Song of Solomon is a series of poems that tell a beautiful love story, and so here literary context tends to matter more.

Observe the Details

Look at the parallelism and the figures of speech in this step. Ask how individual lines relate to one another: is there a repetition, a contrast, or some form of comparison, illustration, description, or other development? Observe the figures of speech. Use your imagination and try to picture the scene the biblical writer is describing. Take note of anything that seems odd or out of place, and check with a commentary or dictionary resource to see if there is some cultural element you are missing.

Outline the Passage

When it comes to the Psalms, outlining can be a mixed bag. Some Psalms can be outlined nicely, like Psalm 1, which breaks down into a description of the righteous and his destiny (v 1-3), a warning about the destiny of the wicked (4-5), and a summary of the psalm (v 6). Others are harder to outline. Do your best to see how a Psalm flows, but don't spend an undue amount of time trying to squeeze a poem into a structure if one seems elusive. Outlining the poetry in Ecclesiastes, Job, and Song of Solomon often works like this as well. Outlining can be a help, but need not become overly restrictive.

As for Proverbs, the first nine chapters and the last two chapters contain larger poems and work as discussed above. The middle section, however, is an assortment of wisdom sayings that does not fit into a tight outline structure. Here, doing a thematic outline might be more helpful. What does Proverbs say about laziness, for example, or money? Find all the Proverbs you can that address this theme, and then organize them into a general structure such as: 1) causes of laziness 2) cost of laziness 3) cure for laziness.

Study Key Words

Studying words in poetry and wisdom normally means recognizing wordplay in the original language in the few situations that arises, or seeing where a specific word is used elsewhere in

Scripture. Often, the wordplay will be picked up on by careful commentaries. When it comes to studying other words, try doing a search on where certain key words show up elsewhere in the Bible. For example, in Psalm 40 the psalmist praises God for bringing him out a horrible pit. A search of other places where this word pit is used will show us that this word is used when Jeremiah is thrown into a muddy cistern in Jeremiah 38.

Study Themes

Studying themes is one of the best ways to study poetry. We've already touched on doing thematic studies in Proverbs, but studying the themes in an individual psalm can be a helpful way to study these books as well. Poetry in general tends to work thematically rather than linearly. In other words, rather than developing a series of arguments it meditates on several big ideas. Read poetry looking for repeated words, motifs, or ideas and see how the writer develops these throughout the poem.

Apply the Truth Personally

The wisdom and poetry section of the Bible are some of the most easily applicable, and for that reason many people run for these books when they read their Old Testament. This is understandable, but we need to be careful that we don't misapply scripture because we misunderstand its genre. For example, proverbs are not always a guarantee or a promise from God. Proverbs are usually general observations about the way the world normally works, and yet as we saw earlier even the writers of scripture acknowledge there are exceptions.

As we read through the books of Job and Ecclesiastes it's important to remember that these books must be interpreted by the whole. Don't take a phrase from one of Job's friends or an isolated statement from Ecclesiastes and run with it. We need to recognize the Job's friends are actually rebuked by God for not understanding Him properly, and the observations of Ecclesiastes, while depressing at times, are intended to point us to God and a life lived with eternity in mind yet also enjoying the good gifts that God has given us.

And of course, when we're reading the poetic and wisdom books were still asking our three big questions: What does this teach me about God? What does this teach me about man? And what does this teach me about the world in which I live? The goal is not just to change our behavior, but as we've said before to change the way we think to change what we desire, so that ultimately we do change the way we behave.