

Preaching the Psalms Series

(1A)

What Is Hebrew Poetry?

Appreciating Hebrew Poetry

In this series on preaching the psalms, we're going to begin by talking about appreciating the poetry. Hebrew poetry is unlike English poetry and it's unlike most poetry that we are used to if we're at all used to reading poetry. So, we want to come to appreciate the nature of Hebrew poetry.

There's a line from [Psalm 119:18 NASB](#) where the poet says, **“Open my eyes, that I may behold, see Wonderful things from Your law.”**

[Psalm 119:18 \(KJV\)](#)

¹⁸ **“Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.”**

Now, when the poet's talking about these wonderful things that he wants to see, he's no doubt talking about wonderful things in terms of content. But he is, after all, a poet. He's an artist, so I have no doubt that when he's talking about the wonderful things that he wants to see, he's also talking about the beauty of the poetry that is found in the book of Psalms. These two things actually go together. The more we understand the beauty of Hebrew poetry, the more we're going to understand the content that the poets are communicating through this medium of poetry.

Characteristics of Poetry

We're going to begin by asking, what is poetry? And let me start by giving you just a brief definition. While poetry is a type of Hebrew literature, there are other types. For example, poetry can be distinguished from prose. Most of the time in modern English translations you can see the difference between prose and poetry just by looking at the way the modern editors have laid out the text. Prose is going to be printed in block, and poetry is going to be printed in indentations. We'll talk about these indentations momentarily when we look at the nature of poetic line. So Hebrew poetry is a type of Hebrew literature distinguished from prose.

Short Sentences

One thing that distinguishes poetry from prose is that poetry uses short sentences. Sometime read the story of Deborah in [Judges 4](#) (that's prose) and then read it in [Judges 5](#)—same story, again in poetry—and you'll notice that these sentences in [Judges 5](#) are markedly shorter. This is even more the case when you're reading not in translation, but in Hebrew.

Parallelism and Imagery

So, Hebrew poetry uses shorter sentences than prose. We're not really going to develop that idea any further. What we will develop more is the idea that Hebrew poetry can be distinguished from prose based on the high frequency of two things: **parallelism** and **imagery**. We're going to have much more to say about these two things. Now, it's not that prose doesn't have parallelism and it doesn't use imagery, it does. *But* poetry has a very intense level, a high frequency, of both **parallelism** and **imagery**.

Three Steps to Understanding Hebrew Poetry

So, what is Hebrew poetry? We're going to answer this question in three ways. **First:** analyzing the parts. What are the constituent parts of a Hebrew poem? **Second:** penetrating the parallelism. What is parallelism? How does it work? How does it help us interpret psalms? **And then finally:** seeing the pictures. What is imagery? How do images work, and how do images and parallelism help us to understand a psalm so that we're better prepared to preach and teach that psalm in the context of the local church?

Isaac Watts

Minister

Isaac Watts was an English Christian minister, hymn writer, theologian, and logician. He was a prolific and popular hymn writer and is credited with some 750 hymns. He is recognized as the "Father of English Hymnody;" many of his hymns remain in use today and have been translated into numerous languages.

Born: Jul 17, 1674 · Southampton, England

Died: Nov 25, 1748 · Stoke Newington, England

The Psalms and Hymns of Isaac Watts

The Psalms of David

Psalm 1

Blest is the man who shuns the place
Where sinners love to meet;
Who fears to tread their wicked ways,
And hates the scoffer's seat:
But in the statutes of the Lord
Has placed his chief delight;
By day he reads or hears the word,
And meditates by night.
[He, like a plant of gen'rous kind,
By living waters set,
Safe from the storms and blasting wind,
Enjoys a peaceful state.]
Green as the leaf, and ever fair,
Shall his profession shine
While fruits of holiness appear
Like clusters on the vine.
Not so the impious and unjust;
What vain designs they form!
Their hopes are blown away like dust,
Or chaff before the storm.
Sinners in judgment shall not stand
Amongst the sons of grace,
When Christ, the Judge, at his right hand
Appoints his saints a place.
His eye beholds the path they tread,
His heart approves it well
But crooked ways of sinner's lead
Down to the gates of hell.

The [book of Psalms](#) is the longest book of the Bible, with 150 “chapters”—more properly called “psalms” or “songs.” Psalms is divided into **five books**:

Book 1: Psalms 1—41	Genesis
Book 2: Psalms 42—72	Exodus
Book 3: Psalms 73—89	Leviticus
Book 4: Psalm 90—106	Numbers
Book 5: Psalm 107—150	Deuteronomy

It is uncertain why Psalms is divided into five books. Some sources, including Jewish Midrash traditions, suggest the five-fold division is based on the **five books** of [the Torah](#) ([Genesis](#) to [Deuteronomy](#)). The division of the Psalms is not based on authorship or chronology, as several authors composed Psalms, and their individual songs are mixed throughout the various collections.

David is listed as the author of 73 psalms, **Asaph** of 12, and the sons of **Korah** of 11. Other psalms were written by [Solomon](#), [Heman the Ezrahite](#), [Ethan the Ezrahite](#), and [Moses](#) ([Psalm 90](#)). The earliest extant copy of Psalms is from the Dead Sea Scrolls from about the first century AD. That copy shows that the division into five books extends to at least that time and certainly earlier.

It is most likely that [Ezra](#) and/or other Jewish religious leaders compiled the Psalms into their existing order during Ezra’s lifetime in the fourth century BC. Interestingly, the Psalms was one of the most popular writings among the [Dead Sea Scrolls](#), with thirty scrolls of all or parts of the book included. Overall, Psalms is the book of the Old Testament with the most Hebrew manuscripts available for research, indicating its enduring popularity among both Jews and Christians.

Each of these five books or sections of Psalms ends with a doxology or a song of praise. The final verse of each concluding psalm includes either “**Praise the Lord!**” “**Blessed be the LORD**” or “**Amen.**”

[Psalm 41:13 \(NASB\)](#)

¹³“**Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, From everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.**”

[Psalm 72:19 \(NASB\)](#)

¹⁹“**And blessed be His glorious name forever; And may the whole earth be filled with His glory. Amen, and Amen.**”

[Psalm 89:52 \(NASB\)](#)

⁵²“**Blessed be the LORD forever! Amen and Amen.**”

[Psalm 106:48 \(NASB\)](#)

⁴⁸“**Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, From everlasting even to everlasting. And let all the people say, “Amen.” Praise the LORD!**”

[Psalm 150:6 \(NASB\)](#)

⁶“**Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!**”

[Psalm 150](#), the final Psalm, serves as the fitting final doxology, concluding with the words, “**Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. / Praise the Lord.**”