

The Psalms and Hebrew Poetry

Apart from their introductory words, the psalms are all written as Hebrew poetry, which has two distinctive features.

The first, which is difficult to see in an English translation, is what really makes Hebrew poetry “poetry”. Each line has a sort of “rhythm” set up by a standard number of stresses in the words used. No matter how many syllables they have, Hebrew words usually have one syllable that is spoken with a stress; a syllable that is emphasised when spoken. It’s almost impossible to see that in English.

Hebrew poetry has a number of different stress-patterns, but a common pattern is three stresses per line. For example, the underlined word contains the syllable with the stress;

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be
clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than
snow. Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice

Psalm 51:7-8

Just to make life complicated, it won’t surprise you to learn that, as Hebrew words have stressed syllables, prose can also be written rhythmically. And it can sometimes be hard to distinguish between Hebrew poetry and rhythmical prose!

(If you ever get the chance to visit the remains of the Western Wall of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, you may see Jews reading the scriptures from Hebrew scrolls on large tables. As they read, they bob their heads on each of the stresses in the words. {They are unlikely to be reading psalms, but the principle is the same.} And if you look closely, although the reader has an open scroll in front of him, his eyes are likely to be closed. He is reciting a memorised text and head-bobbing with the pattern of stresses in the words, in time to the “rhythm” of the text helps memorisation.)

You can see the same sorts of patterns in other types of Hebrew poetry.

There are other songs that have a different sort of use to the public liturgical use of the psalms. For example, the Song of Songs' focus on physical love has many of the "standard" features of Hebrew poetry, but is not likely to be a text for public worship.

Most of the prophets prophecy in poetry. If you take a look at the major books of prophecy; usually there is a mixture of poetry and prose, but much of the direct speech is poetry. Jeremiah and Ezekiel both preach in prose as well as poetry, but the majority of prophetic texts are poetic.

Much of the wisdom literature is written in poetry. Take a look at the wisdom literature – especially books of Proverbs, Job and the introduction and closing chapters of Ecclesiastes (sometimes called Qoheleth).

The second distinctive feature of Hebrew poetry is one that is easy to see in translation. Hebrew poetry often uses a form of repetition called "parallelism". There are lots of types of parallelism.

At its most simple, parallelism consists of two lines of poetry, the second of which says the same thing as the first, but in a different way.

Psalm 2:1 "Why do the nations
 conspire, and the peoples
 plot in vain?"

Sometimes, the order of the elements in the first line are reversed in the second.

Psalm 75:1 "In Judah God is known :
 his name is great in Israel."

In this last example, "Judah" at the beginning and "Israel" at the end form another important sort of repetition – "inclusio" – which helps to mark a complete unit of thought. (*You can find something similar, but on the scale of a whole psalm in Psalm 8.)

In some examples, the second line states the reverse of what was said in the first

line. Psalm 90:6 "in the morning it flourishes and is renewed,
 in the evening it fades and withers."

In more complicated examples, the second line may develop the thought of the first in some way, perhaps with a comparison ...

Psalm 103:13 "As a father has compassion for his children,

so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.”

... or through paralleling only some of the terms ...

Psalm 21:10 “You will destroy their offspring from the earth,
and their children from among humankind.”

... or “stepping” on to other thoughts ...

Psalm 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 splendour.”

How do we use these features to help us understand psalms and other poetry?
Most importantly, parallelism helps to clarify meaning and progression of thought.
Where an idea is repeated in a different form, that idea is clarified. Repetition using
different terms also encourages different ways of saying things – perhaps even
playfulness about the way we offer our thoughts, prayers and concerns to God.

¹ You might want to think about some of the implications of the parallel between “God” and “his name” – and the way Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History represent the presence of God in the Jerusalem temple (“a place for his name to dwell”).