

# Hebrew Poetry

## Why?

The Bible has a variety of genres – narrative, instruction, prophecy, visions... + poetry (~1/3 of the O.T.) – we want to be able to tune in to not just what the Bible is saying, but how (and crucially why)!

Why *now*? Exodus 15 is the first song of the Bible – AKA Moses song. Songs and poetry in the Pentateuch/The book of Moses (Genesis-Deuteronomy) are very important – and come at crucial moments!

It's the first of many songs & poems, this one gets 'riffed' on in some of the Psalms etc.

E.g. – Ps.77<sup>1</sup> v.16

"The waters saw you, God,  
           the waters saw you and writhed;  
           the very depths were convulsed."

It's also one of the last songs in the Bible (and I recon we're<sup>2</sup> going to be singing it)  
 Revelation 15:

<sup>2</sup> And I saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and its image and over the number of its name. They held harps given them by God <sup>3</sup> and sang ***the song of God's servant Moses*** and of the Lamb...'

So it's probably (definitely) worth thinking about!

## Classical Poetry<sup>3</sup> - i.e

What we're (probably) used to:

A: Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
 B: In the forests of the night;<sup>4</sup>

When spotting poetry, what we usually look out for:

Timing and metre	Rhyme
Da di da di da di da, Da di da di da di da;	-ight,      Often A+B, or A+C,B+D etc. -ight;

## Hebrew Poetry – general ideas and a correction

With Hebrew poetry, it's repeated words, grammatical constructs, syntax, repeated sounds in Hebrew etc. – the problem being we're (mostly) **not** Hebrew scholars! And that's OK!

Because another BIG category to look out for in Hebrew poetry is to look out for repeated **ideas!**

Now what we're **really** going to be thinking about now is this idea of Hebrew semantic parallelism - parallel ideas.

<sup>1</sup> I THOROUGHLY recommend going through Ps.77 after this and doing some of this work on it

<sup>2</sup> I *think* this can include us – but at least the martyred saints are/will be singing

<sup>3</sup> Forgive any lack of culture from me here on classic poetry, we're going to keep it as simple as possible

<sup>4</sup> "The Tyger" - poem by the English poet William Blake, published in 1794

But it's useful to know that we often find them in concentric structures – A.K.A. Chiasms<sup>5</sup>  
An example from the beginning of proverbs: *Proverbs 1:1-7*<sup>6</sup>

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:

To **know wisdom and instruction**,

to **understand words** of insight,

to *receive instruction* in *wise dealing*,

**in righteousness, justice, and equity**;

to *give prudence* to the simple, *knowledge* and *discretion* to the youth – Let  
the wise hear and increase in *learning*, and the one who understands *obtain  
guidance*,

to **understand** a proverb and a saying, the **words** of the wise and their riddles.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of **knowledge**; fools despise **wisdom** and **instruction**.

### Hebrew semantic *Parallelism*

A starter for 10 - how it's often described – whereas English poetry often rhymes, Hebrew poetry rhymes thoughts, by saying the same thing more than once, in different words. E.g.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,  
Shiny, shiny, tiny nebular.<sup>7</sup>

But we want to push it further, as it's not **really** about saying the same thing multiple times, rather we should expect movement/development/progression. Related, but not the same.

Ways this works out (verse examples from Exodus 15):

General > Specific (v.11)      Less intense > More intense (v.2)      Noun > Metaphor (v.8)

<sup>4</sup> *Pharaoh's chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea.*

*The best of Pharaoh's officers are drowned in the Red Sea.*

<sup>5</sup> *The deep waters have covered them; they sank to the depths like a stone.*

Or even numbers. E.g. Deut. 32:30 another **\*VERY important song\***<sup>8</sup> 1000 > 10,000

Sometimes the progression can tell a little story, sometimes the progression shows what the first part really means. Sometimes they are even 'gapped' and work like simultaneous equations<sup>9</sup> making you think about the logic flow in each line!

In fact sometimes it's even saying something opposite (like wise and fools in proverbs)!

E.g. Proverbs 10:14:

*Wise men lay up knowledge,*

{- *What's the implied consequence?*}

*but the dolt's mouth is impending disaster.*    {-*what's the relationship between wisdom and mouths?*}

### Drawing it together

All this is to say – Hebrew poetry is a deep well, and it's amazing, and it's not just worth slowing down for – in fact sometimes it forces you to slow down to **think hard** about it, not just the similarities, but also the differences, the progressions, the story, the inferences!

There's much more that could be said but this is **PLENTY** for now! Which leads us nicely to...  
Exodus 15!!!

<sup>5</sup> Can I get a WOOP WOOP!! Derived from the Greek letter Chi - χ

<sup>6</sup> This is running before we can walk so you can have a look at this later if you would like

<sup>7</sup> Taken from Dig Deeper/Dig Even deeper

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 32 pops up everywhere – you could do well to spend some time in these songs of Moses!

<sup>9</sup> For nerds like me sometimes it can go from A leads to B (with an implied C); to X results in Z (implied step Y)