

**Reading/Applying Biblical Poetry, I**

Let us begin by looking at Psalm 46. Let me read to you the superscription, which we will have opportunity to talk about later in this course. The small print says this: “For the director of music. Of the Sons of Korah. According to *alamoth*. A song.” We will talk about the significance of this later on. I will read the entire psalm:

God is our refuge and strength,  
 an ever-present help in trouble.  
 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way  
 and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,  
 though its waters roar and foam  
 and the mountains quake with their surging.  
 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
 the holy place where the Most High dwells.  
 God is within her; she will not fall;  
 God will help her at break of day.  
 Nations are in an uproar, kingdoms fall;  
 He lifts His voice, the earth melts.  
 The Lord Almighty is with us;  
 the God of Jacob is our fortress.  
 Come and see the works of the Lord,  
 the desolations He has brought on the earth.  
 He makes wars to cease to the ends of the earth;  
 He breaks the bow and shadows the spear,  
 He burns the shields with fire.  
 “Be still, and know that I am God;  
 I will be exalted among the nations.  
 I will be exalted in the earth.”  
 The Lord Almighty is with us;  
 the God of Jacob is our fortress.

A psalm that begins with “Our God is our refuge and strength” twice has that refrain “The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress”—in verse 7 and again in verse 11. This is a psalm about the tumult of the world of nature and also the tumult of those who rise against the city of God. Toward the end, in verse 10, God simply says, “Be still and know that I am God.” What kind of stillness is He commanding? I know that often when I have thought about this verse, I have thought that this is a mandate to serenity: to quiet our hearts, to be calm, to be restful, to be still and to meditate on God. But as we look at the context, and if we were to look at the Hebrew language that we are translating here, the text is actually saying, “Enough. Stop.” I am not going to say, “Shut up,” although it comes close to “Leave off.” When the world is in a tumult, when people are rising against God, He simply says, “Enough. Stop. Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth.” What really excites me is the next verse, the refrain, which says, “The Lord Almighty is with us.” When you think about the imagery used in the early part of the psalm—the mountains falling into the heart of the sea, its waters roaring and foaming, and the mountains quaking with the surging—we will not fear, for God is our refuge. He is an ever present help in trouble. This God who will be exalted among the nations, exalted in the earth, is with us. It is incredible, when you think about it, that the God of Jacob is our fortress. What is our response? I think probably you cannot do better than what Paul said in Romans 8. He was not, perhaps, reflecting on this particular psalm, but he was certainly reflecting on

this truth when he said, “What shall we say in response to all of these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?” What an exciting thing. I think we will be enriched in our understanding of God and, I hope, in our walks with God this semester as we explore these wonderful books, the Psalms and the wisdom books. We will learn so much from them. That will be my prayer for you.

Let us commit this time to the Lord in prayer.

*Father, what a joy it is to know that You, the Lord Almighty, are with us. We did not find our way to You, but You came down to earth to save us and to make us Your own, and we thank You for that. We recognize that if You are for us, no matter what rises against us, though the mountains should fall into the sea and the seas should roar and foam, we know, Lord, that we need not fear because the God Almighty is with us. Lord, we thank You for that, and we pray that You would cause that to have an impact on us, in our emotions as well as in our minds. Lord, I pray now that You would be with us in this lesson. I pray that You would help us in the things that we consider, that I would be able to speak clearly, and that the students would have attentive minds to understand what we are talking about. Most of all, Lord, I pray that Your Spirit would guide us and illuminate us, that You would repress those things which are false that may come from my lips, but that You would reinforce those things that are good and edifying and that will prepare us better to understand Your Word and love You more. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

I have entitled this lecture simply, “How to Read and Apply Biblical Poetry.” We begin by discussing a concept called “literary competence” and its relationship to interpretation. Whether we are communicating using body language or spoken language or the written word, we share between us certain agreed-upon contracts. These are implicit contracts, not things that we necessarily talk about—that make communication possible between us. Some of these implicit contracts are rather universal in scope. For instance, a frown is a frown all over the world. It is not something that you have to learn, but is somewhat instinctual. Everyone understands that a frown communicates sadness or displeasure. A smile, depending on the position of the eyes, is usually a friendly gesture. I suppose if the eyes are frowning and the mouth is smiling, that could be a somewhat frightening gesture. Many of these things are rather universal. These are ways we communicate with one another even without words. We also use gestures. Some gestures have to be learned. In fact, when I was a teenager and had opportunity to visit in Brazil, I was instructed early on as to what kinds of gestures meant one thing in America but carried a different meaning in Brazil, and so I had to be careful about that. We must learn the gestures and their meanings in our culture, and when we go to another culture we must learn a different set of gestures and meanings. It is an implicit agreement, perhaps never spoken, but those who grow up in the culture know what that communicates. In addition to facial expressions and gestures, we have a lot of understandings and conventions that we experience in written documents as well as in spoken conversations. For instance, if you receive a letter in the mail, you can usually just look at the letter and know whether it is a business letter or personal letter. If it is handwritten, it is often a personal letter. In Britain or in Europe, in general, if you want to apply for a job, you write a handwritten letter, whereas if you want to apply for a job in the United States, you are expected to type it. It is a different convention for a different place. Now, there are other things I guarantee that many American students would be able to respond appropriately even though I have not given you really enough information apart from our agreed implicit contract. For instance, if I say, “Knock, knock,” you will say, “Who is there?” because you will think, “Oh, this is a ‘knock, knock’ joke.” Now, if I were standing by the door and I said, “Knock, knock,” you would probably say, “Come in.” In a different context, the same words have a different meaning. We understand each other because of the implicit cultural contract between us. If I say, “Once upon a time,” I am beginning a fairy tale. If I say, “I was born in a Christian home,” I am beginning testimony. Many people in our society would not know what that was, but we understand it here. “A proposition and three

main points” is a sermon by all means, yes. It does not even have to be verbal. In our culture, we all know the distinctive rhythm of a type of poem called a limerick. We all know certain proverbs. If I start off by saying, “A bird in the hand,” you will know the next part: “is worth two in the bush.” In all of the above examples, communication is successful, because both you and I had this unspoken agreement that if I say, “Knock, knock,” you will say, “Who is there?” and you know that I am going to say something silly. We all understand the joke even without knowing each other well. I do not know some of you at all, but our cultural background has prepared us with the right understanding of conventions of communication that we all could understand the joke. All of these different things that I have been talking about are, in a sense, signs. Gestures and facial expressions are certain kinds of signs. Spoken words are signs and signals of something. Written words are also signs of something.

“Semiotics” is the general science of signs. That is the academic word for the study of signs of all kinds, these signs by which people in cultures communicate. The word “semiotics” comes from *semeion*, which is a Greek word that means “sign.” Semiotics was the term favored by C.S. Peirce, one of the first people to talk a lot about this. “Semiology” is another word you might hear. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Frenchman, was the one who talked about “semiology,” but both terms are based on this general science of signs. The main point I want us to get is how important these implicit understandings are for cultural communication among people in a particular culture—in a particular society. I will share a story as an example. It comes from Nick Wilson, who is a good friend of mine who is in missions. He wrote a letter once, a general missionary prayer letter, in which he recounted the experience of two young women who had gone into a village to learn the language and to translate Scriptures into that language. This is what he writes:

They were new missionaries, alone in a remote tribal village, these two single women who had the highest of goals, the best of intentions, the purest of motives. They were to translate the Bible into this as-yet-unwritten tribal language. But, after a year’s worth of labor, they had no results. Oh, they had been well received at first. The tribe had even built them a small house complete with a screened-in porch. It was a hot, muggy climate with only a hint of breeze right at daybreak, so every morning they used to sit on the porch to read their Bibles and sip lime juice, the only refreshment they could find. But it seemed that rather quickly they became outcasts with tribal members avoiding them. They were unable to find someone to become their language helper. Just over a year later, those in the mission decided something had to be done. A veteran missionary couple was sent to replace them. It seemed that in no time at all, this couple had won the confidence of the tribe and began to make progress toward a translation. So they began to probe to find out why the two women had encountered such resistance. They were astonished to learn that the women had a reputation for exhibiting blatant immorality. The wives of the tribesmen even forbade their husbands and sons to go anywhere near the women. Inquiring further, the couple listened in utter shock to the tribesmen’s description of the activity that had confirmed the two women’s guilt. They drank lime juice every morning. You see, limes were the only citrus that grew here in the village, and for centuries the women of the tribe had drunk its juice in the belief that it was a morning-after contraceptive. The two single women, having been observed drinking it every morning, were thus a scandal in the village—while having their quiet times, I might add. The tribal people assumed that they had had gentlemen visitors each night. Of course, the truth is that there were no nightly visitors. The two women had no idea what drinking a glass of lime juice meant in the culture. They had no idea of what that simple act was communicating.

That is called culture shock. We have culture shock when we do not understand what a given action communicates in a certain culture. In order to overcome culture shock you seek to attain cultural

competence. You seek to become acculturated. Likewise, in order to overcome the awkwardness of being in a foreign culture, you probably need to develop linguistic competence. Even among people who speak the same language, there can be differences in the ways they express themselves, which can lead to serious misunderstandings. “Linguistic competence” means that one has a sufficient grasp of the conventions governing a particular language to interpret individual utterances according to their intended sense. In other words, you understand what other people are trying to say.

What we sometimes do not realize is that we also need to try to develop literary competence when we are reading the Bible. The Bible is a literary work. It is not pure literature, like a novel or anything like that. It is utilitarian literature. The Bible contains all kinds of different literary genres, from historiography to law codes to apocalyptic to psalms to proverbial wisdom literature to reflective wisdom literature. All kinds of different literary forms are found in the Bible, and in order to understand it rightly, we need to know something about these particular literary forms from a long time ago in a different place. We must develop our own literary competence. That is what we want to talk about in this lesson. In this course, we are dealing with the Psalms and wisdom literature, which are largely (although not exclusively) poetry. Literary competence means that one has a sufficient grasp of the conventions governing a particular type or form of literature to interpret individual exemplars according to their intended sense. I will explain this somewhat further as we move on to a discussion of what is called “poetics.”

What is poetics? The tendency would be to think that poetics is the study of poetry. In fact, oddly enough, the study of poetry is sometimes called “prosody,” which sounds like it comes from the word “prose.” Poetics is simply a grammar of literature. It is possible to have a poetics of narrative. There is a book entitled *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* by Meir Sternberg. It is also possible to have a poetics of biblical poetry. First, however, what do we mean by a grammar of literature? Let me give you a definition by Adele Berlin in a book published in 1983 and entitled *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*. Adele Berlin says that “Poetics is an inductive science that seeks to abstract the general principles of literature from many different manifestations of those principles as they occur in actual literary text.” She writes further, “Poetics is to literature as linguistics is to language. That is, that poetics describes the basic components of literature and the rules governing their use. Poetics strives to write a grammar, as it were, of literature.” Think of the benefit of learning grammar if you are trying to learn a foreign language. In trying to learn a foreign language as an adult learner, you doubtless spend some time trying to learn some grammatical rules and principles. Do the native speakers of the language care much about the rules? Not necessarily; native speakers know pretty much intuitively how to speak. However, as adult learners who do not have surrogate mothers to walk around correcting us at every step; we benefit by learning some general principles that are based on inspection of a number of different examples. You observe what goes on in that language and you ask, “What is the common denominator here? What are the general rules?” Once you learn those general rules, then you can transfer that to other people and say, “I have observed that in English, interrogative sentences are punctuated with a question mark at the end.” In Hebrew, for instance, there is no question mark at the end, but there is a question letter. There is a consonant that stands for a question early in the sentence. Every language has different conventions, so learning the grammar of a language is very beneficial. Likewise, learning the grammar of biblical literature will be beneficial. We will know what to expect. We will know what to be looking for. We will know if we are making the right kinds of judgments about what we encounter in Psalms and in the wisdom books.

Now, with respect to Psalms, C.S. Lewis, in his book *Reflections on the Psalms* says, “Most emphatically, the Psalms must be read as poems, as lyrics with all the licenses and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connection, which are proper to lyrical poetry. They must

be read as poems if they are to be understood, no less than French must be read as French or English as English. Otherwise, we shall miss what is in them and think we see what is not." Notice again that he is talking about a literary form, but he compares it to language. French is French, English is English. Biblical poetry is biblical poetry.

Let me issue a few qualifications before we begin to explore what this all means in terms of biblical poetry. First of all, poetics, the attempt to develop a grammar of literature, helps us understand what a text may be claiming—what its truth claim is. It does not necessarily help us decide whether that particular claim is itself true. In other words, it does not decide the truth value of what is being stated. I know that is confusing, so let me illustrate it. If someone says, "I just saw a UFO," some of us know exactly what that means, but if someone else had learned English as a second language and had never heard of the acronym or that abbreviation, "UFO," that person might say, "What is a UFO?" Then you could respond, "That is an unidentified flying object." When you say that, the second person understands the truth claim that the first person was making. Understanding what he meant, however, does not establish the truth value of what he said.

Often in our discussions of Scripture, we find ourselves disagreeing with each other. Have you ever heard someone say, "Well, if you do not believe that, then you just do not even believe the Bible"? In other words, "If you do not believe my interpretation of this particular text, then you do not believe the Bible." However, that may or may not be true. The debate may be over what the Bible is actually claiming. You may disagree with that person's interpretation of the Bible while at the same time you may agree with that person in saying, "Whatever the Bible teaches, I embrace and believe. I accept on faith the full truth value of the Bible." Agreeing on that does not settle every question of truth claim. That is where interpretation comes in and trying to figure out what the Bible is really saying. So that is one qualification. Poetics will help us understand what the Bible is claiming, but it will never force us to faith. Faith is a gift. God is the one who enables us to believe to be true what the Bible says is true, but what we are talking about tonight will help us better grasp what is being claimed.

It is also very important that we recognize the particular literary forms, or literary genres, so that we do not misinterpret their truth claims. Let me give you one example of that. The story of Deborah and Barak in Judges 4 and 5, although it is not part of the books we are studying here, is a nice example because we have first a prose account of a particular event and then we have a poetical celebration of that same event. Judges 4 accounts an event in the life of Deborah and Barak, the hesitant hero, and then the poetic account comes in Judges 5. Now, I am not going to take time to read both of these chapters, but I want to first point you to something in the poetry. This is something that is sometimes pointed out by those who would wish to assert that the Bible contradicts itself. Judges 5 celebrates the death of Sisera, whom Jael killed. She took the tent peg in one hand and the hammer in the other; and while he was sleeping, according to the prose account, she drove the tent peg through his head and thus he died. I will read from chapter 5, beginning in verse 26:

Her hand reached for the tent peg,  
her right hand for the workman's hammer.  
She struck Sisera, she crushed his head,  
she shattered and pierced his temple.  
At her feet he sank,  
he fell; there he lay  
At her feet he sank, he fell;  
where he sank, there he fell—dead.

Many people have pointed out that verse 21 of Judges 4 tells us that Sisera did not fall at all. Judges 4:21 says, “But Jael, Heber’s wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep.” The prose account describes Sisera lying down. He was not standing up; he was lying down, and she crept up quietly as he was lying down exhausted. She drove the tent peg through his temple into the ground and he died. So which is it? Did she peg him while he was on the ground or did he fall, fall, fall? Do we have a conflict in the Bible? Is there a contradiction here? Believe me, some serious scholars point to this and say that we obviously cannot trust the Bible in matters of detail because of this obvious conflict. However, I think that it is a fundamental misperception of two kinds of literary genre. One account is narrative prose reporting of events and the other is poetic celebration. Furthermore, let me just say that if you read on in verse 22 of chapter 4, it says, “Barak”—the man who is supposed to be leading this thing—“came by in pursuit of Sisera and Jael went out to meet him. ‘Come,’ she said, ‘I will show you the man you are looking for.’ So he went in with her and there lay Sisera with a tent peg through his temple—dead.” Let me enrich the text a little. In the Hebrew, it says “fallen.” The Hebrew says, “There he lay with a tent peg through his temple—fallen.” You understand that he did not in fact fall, but he was fallen. He was not getting up. We understand it in this way, too, sometimes when we say that many people have fallen in battle. That term could refer to someone who was prone and was shot in a foxhole. Now he is fallen, even though he did not actually fall. My point is that we have to understand the figurative aspects of language and we have to read the Bible with common sense and recognize if there is a poetic celebration that keeps repeating, such as “at her feet he sank”; it is saying that the guy was fallen, just as the prose text says. It is important that we do not misconstrue what a text is actually claiming. The poetry here in Judges 5 is recounting a historical event, but it is recounting it in poetic idiom, which allows for hyperbole and imagery and so forth.

Another caution: context makes all the difference when it comes to the Bible’s truth claims. Therefore, it is important that we read verses in context. A friend of mine once gave me an example of this. He said, “Context makes a great deal of difference. If my wife comes to me and says, ‘I am going to go shopping,’ and I say, ‘Okay, well, come back in an hour. I will see you in an hour.’ That means one thing, and it is not likely to make her angry or upset. However, if she comes out of our bedroom in her jogging outfit and says, ‘I do not have much time, but I am going to just jog around the block once,’ and I say, ‘Okay, I will see you in an hour,’ then I have just mocked her and probably discouraged her from exercising.” Context makes a great deal of difference. That is a trivial example. It is very serious in the Bible that we establish the context of the texts we are studying so that we understand what they truly mean to claim.

Here is one more caution: grammar is descriptive, not prescriptive. Grammar of a language is descriptive in the first instance, not prescriptive in the first instance. I will explain what I mean by that. To describe something is simply to detail, discuss, and explain it. To prescribe something is to mandate, to command that something must be a certain way. Let us say you go into a setting where a language has never been written down. Your first task in writing the grammar is to describe the way the people talk. You do not come in with your own grammar already in place and say, “Okay, this is the right way to talk and now you must start talking this way.” Once the descriptions of how people speak become known, then they take on something of a prescriptive function in society. That is what is true of language.

The reason I make that point is because of the way it applies to literature. We will be talking about certain forms of psalms, for instance. We will talk about lament psalms, psalms of thanksgiving, hymns, and wisdom psalms and royal psalms. There are certain expectations for what these kinds of psalms will contain, but we need to remember that our descriptions are just that. They are descriptions and not prescriptions of what the psalmist had to do. Sometimes people have made mistakes there. Someone

might say, “Well, a lament psalm is only supposed to have these features and here is an extraneous feature of something that is not normally expected, so this psalm must not be genuine.” There was a time when scholars would say of something unexpected, “Let us remove that. That should not be there. It does not fit.” However, this is an incorrect understanding of the categories of psalms. They are descriptions of generalities or ideal forms, but every psalmist is free, just as every artist is free, to exercise his own creativity and freedom in the writing of a particular psalm. It is helpful to have the grid but not if we force everything into that grid and thereby destroy parts of the text.

Let us move on to the next main question. What is the essence of biblical poetry? That is kind of a bold question. There are many ways we could answer that. The essence of biblical poetry is that God is speaking, of course. However, I am talking about, in terms of its form, what is that determinative feature? What is it that distinguishes biblical poetry from biblical prose? Before we get into that question, let us think a minute about what poetry is in general. What are some of the features of poetry? We are familiar with English poetry, and it contains a number of special features including meter, rhyme, parallelism, and literary devices like alliteration, imagery, and metaphor. Hebrew poetry is characterized very much by parallelism, and we will talk about that in the next lesson.