

Reading/Applying Biblical Poetry, II

We want to continue talking about the essence of biblical poetry. So far we have observed the nature of parallel terms. We have observed the nature of the English poetic distinction of end rhyme, and now we want to begin to explore to what extent these kinds of conventional understandings, these implicit contracts, about the nature of poetry will serve us when we come to study biblical poetry.

Before we do that, let me just give you a few hints on terminology. For some reason, if you get into reading about biblical poetry, you will discover that a number of different terms are used to describe the very same thing. I do not know why that is. I think it is either because people writing on this subject do not read other people's writings (which I do not think is the case) or they keep themselves in work by creating new terms so that it seems that they know something that no one else knows. For whatever reason, there is a lot of variance in the terms that are used. The most standard terminology is to refer to a line that has two parts as a bi-colon. Then each portion of the line is referred to simply as a colon. If you have a three-part line, which is possible in Hebrew, you would refer to that as a tri-colon. You can even have a tetra-colon, which is a four-part line, but then most people would divide that into two bi-cola. That is fairly standard terminology. Others, like Robert Lowth (whom we will talk about in just a minute) refer to the line itself as a "verse," which makes sense, and a portion of the line as a "verse member," which also makes sense, although it is not very convenient to have to say "verse member" each time. Some people refer to the whole line itself as a stich, from the Greek *stichos*, which means a row or a line. This is other standard terminology that you see in writing. Then, of course, a portion of a stich is a hemi-stich. Now, to confuse us further, Norman Gotwald refers to the portion of the line as a "stich" and the two-part line itself as a "di-stich." Robert Alter refers to the line as a "poetic line" and to the portion of the line as a "verse set." I am going to talk a little about Alter's work in a little while, so you will hear me use the word "verse set," and I will try to pause and say what he means by that is a portion of the line, a colon. One of the more sensible ones is James Kugel's approach, and I am going to talk about him in just a minute, too. He refers to the line itself as a sentence and the two halves as simply "A" and "B." That is some terminology I wish we did not have to talk about, but it is good just to write a few of those things down so that you can understand the different terminology you will find in commentaries or other literature. When I first started reading into the subject, I thought, "There is so much to learn," and then I said, "No, actually there are a lot of terms for the same things," so you can take some comfort in that.

What about, then, the question of Old Testament poetry? We talked a little bit about what poetry is, but what is Old Testament poetry? We have noted that rhyme is an important part of English poetry. Is there rhyme in biblical poetry? Of course, if there were, the rhyme would be in the Hebrew and not in the English, so it would be a problem for non-Hebrew speakers to find it. There have been valiant efforts made to demonstrate that there is end rhyme in Hebrew poetry. However, these have failed. A man by the name of Jon Le Claire back in 1688 provided a scholarly treatment of this subject. He worked his system out very nicely, but the only problem was, as others pointed out, that his system would make not only biblical poetry rhyme, but it would make virtually everything in the Bible rhyme. He had come up with a system to discover rhyme in almost everything, so it did not really become widely accepted. There is no end rhyme in Hebrew poetry or in Old Testament poetry. That is one convention that we expect in some of our poetical literature, although not in all of it, of course. We expect to find end rhyme. In the Bible, we do not really find that, of course not in English, but also not in the Hebrew. That does not mean, however, that the writers in the Bible were unconcerned with the sounds of words. We mentioned alliteration as a characteristic of English poetry, and Hebrew poetry uses alliteration as well. Those of you who have had a little Hebrew or anticipate ever taking it should know that you can discover some wonderful beauties in biblical literature if you are listening with your ear to what the

Hebrew says. I am just going to read you a couple of lines in Hebrew so that you can hear it. I will read from Isaiah 24, verse 16, and then I am going to show you how the NIV translates it because they did a pretty good job of trying to capture some of the alliteration. This is the way it sounds in Hebrew: “*Vaomar, razili razili, oi li bogdim bagadu uveged bogdim bagadu.*” This is a rather doleful thing. The NIV translates it this way, “And I said, ‘I waste away, I waste away. Woe is me. Traitors betray with treachery. Traitors betray.’” In this English translation, you get the same kind of alliteration—with different consonants, but it is the same idea. That is what the NIV tries to do: it tries to be alert to the rhetorical force of the text and it will sometimes sacrifice lexical accuracy—the exact meaning of words—in order to capture some of the emotive force of the text and the impact that it would have had on an original hearer.

Let me give you one other example that is somewhat similar. Isaiah 22:5 reads this way in Hebrew: “*Ki yom mehuma umvusah umvukah.*” The NIV translation is, “For it is a day of tumult trampling turmoil.” Again, the translators of the NIV were obviously aware of the alliteration or the assonance in that line and they tried to capture it. The point is that biblical writers do not play with the sounds of words quite the way we do in the aspect of end rhyme (it does occur occasionally, but I think it is more coincidental than deliberate) but they did exploit the potential of sound and the impact that sounds can have. “Woe is me. I waste away, I waste away. Woe is me. Traitors betray with treachery. Traitors betray.” So rhyme is something that you should not be looking for, and that is a great thing, because most of you in this class are going to be reading the text in translation. It would be a shame, really, if the great beauty of the text were in end rhyme and non-Hebrew speakers could not appreciate it. However, that is not where the genius of biblical poetry lies.

What about rhythm? We have noted that English poetry uses various systems of metrical rhythm. Do we have in biblical poetry a strict system of meter? Can we scan it in the way we scan Greek classical poetry and find “iambic pentameter” or whatever these different terms are that are used to describe a certain kind of rigorous meter? The answer is no. Again, there have been attempts to find it. For example, Robert Lowth is the man who is responsible for first talking about parallelism in a book entitled *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, and this is not a first edition. This is an edition from 1935 and it was already the third edition, I think. Lowth felt that meter was the essential characteristic of all poetry and so he assumed that biblical poetry, because it is poetic, must have meter. The only problem is that he confessed that he was unable to find it, and so if it was once there, it had either been damaged somehow in transmission or for some reason was undetectable to us now. Perhaps we just had not figured it out. However, most scholars today are willing to say we should not expect biblical poetry to follow a strict meter like the meter in classical Greek poetry or in a Shakespearean sonnet, for instance. The reason that is an important point to make, again, is that commentators who followed that scheme would often get a metrical pattern in their mind and then begin to change verses because the verses did not fit their metrical pattern. Often in the critical notes at the bottom of a critical Hebrew text, for instance, it will say, “delete *metri causa*”—that is, the critic has removed something from the text for the cause of meter. Whenever you see that, you can delete that note and not think about it. We are not really looking for a strict kind of regular meter. However, there is a certain kind of living, vibrant rhythm to biblical poetry, but it is sort of a free rhythm. It is not as regular, as metrical, as English or Greek poetry.

The third possibility, which is also something that Robert Lowth talked about a great deal, is parallelism. This has become the most influential of the things that Lowth talked about. He really thought meter was more important than parallelism, but in fact, parallelism has turned out to be more important in the history of the study of biblical poetry. This is Lowth’s definition of parallelism: “The correspondence of one verse or line with another, I call parallelism. When a proposition is delivered and a second is

subjoined to it or drawn under it, equivalent or contrasted with it in sense or similar to it in form of grammatical construction, these I call parallel lines and the words or phrases, answering one to another in the corresponding lines, parallel terms.” We will actually use that terminology, “parallel lines,” or “phrases,” or “cola,” and “parallel terms.” When I use the word, “term,” I mean one word or a word cluster in a line. We notice also from his definition that he allows that there can be parallelism in sense or in grammatical construction, and so there are really two kinds of parallelism he was talking about: semantic and grammatical. The latter—grammatical or syntactical parallelism—has been largely ignored until recently. Because of certain frustrations with figuring out semantic parallelism, parallelism based on sense, people have begun to write rather complex books on syntactical parallelism. At this point, this is not something that will help us in this class a great deal. With semantic parallelism, parallelism of sense, however, there is an interesting debate, and I think we can be helped by that.

Let us move to the debate over parallelism. If you have had a course in biblical poetry at all or even an introduction to the Psalms, you have probably heard of Lowth’s three types of parallelism. Of course, you may not have. Many of you may not have had such a course or heard such words. Let us just take a look at the three types. The first is synonymous parallelism, which is the repetition of the same thought in two different ways or with different words.

Let me introduce you to the difference between “internal” and “external” parallelism. If you say something is “internal synonymous parallelism,” that means that there is a parallel within one bi-colon, within one poetic line, so we would have a minor pause in the middle and then a major pause at the end. If we had two full lines with the second full poetic line paralleling the first, that would be called external parallelism or “interlinear” parallelism. There is “inner-linear” parallelism within one line, and there is “interlinear” parallelism within two lines. Look at Isaiah 1:10. A, “Hear the Word,” B, “of the Lord,” C, “you rulers,” D, “of Sodom,” E, “Give ear,” A-prime, “to the teaching,” B-prime, “of our God,” C-prime, “you people,” D-prime, “of Gomorrah,” E-prime. ABCDE is one whole poetic line, and then again, ABCDE, a second line, so you have external parallelism. Notice that it is external, complete parallelism. “Complete” means there is a parallel for each term. Each term in the first member is paralleled by a term in the second member. “Incomplete” means that there is some variation, as when you have ABC in the first member and then only BC in the second. We find an example of internal, incomplete parallelism in Psalm 24:1. “The Lord’s is,” A, “the earth,” B, “and its fullness,” C. “The world” is paralleling “the earth,” so we do not want to start with A again, but we will call “the world” B-prime, “and those who dwell in it,” that parallels “its fullness,” so we will call this C-prime. You see this is internal; it is all within one poetic line, but it is incomplete because there is not a parallel term for each term in the first half. It is fairly straightforward when you see it done that way. Again, this is just terminology for talking about things you sometimes read in discussions of poetry in the Bible. The idea is to make us notice and not so much to be concerned with exactly what to call it. That is synonymous parallelism—saying the same thing twice.

What is antithetic parallelism? It sounds like it would mean two lines that say the opposite of one another, but be careful; antithetical parallelism is not really saying the opposite. Antithetic parallelism uses opposite terms to make the same point. It says the same thing perhaps using a positive term and then a negative term. For instance, look at Proverbs 10:1: “A wise son gladdens the father, but a foolish son grieves his mother.” This is called antithetical parallelism because the same thing is being said, but the terms are inverted. At least one of the terms is a negative rather than a positive. Another example would be Psalm 1:6: “For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” That is antithetical parallelism.

What about synthetic parallelism? How did Robert Lowth define it? With synthetic parallelism, simply put, the second member in some way advances the thought of the first. An example might be Psalm 14:1 and 2. This passage could almost be prose because there is no real parallelism of terms so much. There are some things in apposition, “a wise actor” and “a seeker of God,” you could call that apposition, but you have that kind of thing in prose. There are problems with synthetic parallelism—and this leads us to some of the criticisms of Lowth’s model.

What is the problem with Lowth’s system of three types: synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic? Some people call synthetic parallelism “garbage can” parallelism. If you cannot find a place for it, if it is not synonymous and not antithetic, then just toss it into “synthetic parallelism” and you have labeled everything. You feel good because you have labeled the text, even if you have not learned anything from it. That has been one of the big criticisms. Another simple criticism is that synonymous and antithetic are about the same thing. They are both sort of repeating the same idea, but one just happens to use a negative term or an opposite term, but they are pretty much the same thing. So that may be a distinction without a difference. Different things have prompted people to react to what had become sort of standard practice of talking about three and only three types of parallelism. There have been two different reactions. One has been to return to discussions of grammatical and syntactical parallelism. Again, it is not very helpful for us at this point to know which verb tense is used in the first line and the second line. That does not relate very directly to the sense and thus the significance of the Hebrew lines or of the Old Testament poetry. There may be some fruit to harvest from that study later, but I think it is too early to tell.

More importantly have been the reactions to semantic parallelism, parallelism dealing with sense. One reaction has been simply to multiply the number of categories. Some have said that three—synonymous, antithetic, synthetic—is not enough, so some have said we need to come up with more kinds of parallelism. Some of the new kinds that are being talked about are “emblematic” parallelism. An example would be “As the deer pants for the water, so my heart longs after you.” The deer is an emblem, and the action of the deer, the thirst of the deer for water, is an emblem of my thirst for God. Another proposed category is “repetitive parallelism,” sometimes called “climatic parallelism” or “step-ladder parallelism.” This is where you are repeating and building: “Ascribe to the Lord, the Almighty one, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength, ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name.” Another proposed category is “chiastic parallelism.” It is named after a Greek letter, the letter chi. The letter chi looks like an X or a cross, and chiastic parallelism is crossover parallelism, the inversion of the order of terms. If instead of ABC, ABC, we had ABC, CBA, then that would be a chiastic parallelism. The reason for the name chiastic is that if you had a simple line, AB, and then the next line was BA; the inverse order of the terms creates a chi. That is another kind of parallelism. There has been this tendency to expand categories, but there is a sense that there are never quite enough. We could expand to 20 or 30 or 40, we could start learning these grand taxonomies and all these different names and such, but we do not need that many terms. There is something else going on here. Maybe there is another way to approach it.

Let us look at James Kugel’s redefinition of parallelism. He redefines it as what he calls a “seconding sequence.” He says, “We cannot reduce all parallel lines to three, but rather we must look carefully at the relationship of each one.” In his view, the genius of parallelism is sharpening—“A, and what is more, B.” If you have ever driven a nail, you know that you set the nail with a light tap and then you drive it home with a harder tap. Biblical poetry is kind of like that; it says something and then it drives it home. It says, “A,” and then it drives it home, “B,” so there is this intensification or sharpening. Kugel’s criticism of Lowth’s attempt and his description is that it tends to obscure this emphatic seconding character of the second phrase in a bi-colon. Let me give you an example from Kugel that will show you

what he is talking about. You see point B on your outline, an example, Isaiah 1:3. This is the example he gives in his book and it is translated simply this way, “An ox knows his master, and an ass its master’s trough. Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” The normal approach to these verses prior to Kugel’s discussion and some of these recent discussions has not had any compelling explanation of the parallelism between “an ox knows its master,” and “a donkey its master’s trough.” Before Kugel, people had just said that since the word, “knows,” was left out of the first part, the word, “trough,” was added to the second part as “ballast.” In other words, it was just there to add balance. You can read this in commentaries; it is called “ballasting.” Kugel comments in a different fashion. Listen carefully to what he says about it: “If biblical parallelism were merely a repetition, the meaning of this verse would be, ‘an ox knows its master and an ass its master’s trough. Israel does not know. My people do not understand.’ Any reader would of course be aware that some sort of unflattering comparison is being made. But if, in place of mere restatement, one allows B, that is the second line, some independent existence, this series of clauses presents itself as a kind of progression. How is the first clause different from the second? The same verb ‘know’ or ‘obey’ governs both halves. The animal of the first was hardly considered the most praiseworthy of beasts; nevertheless, “ox” is in several respects considered superior to its frequent pair, “ass,” and more important, parallel to the owner of the first, its master’s trough in the second. The cumulative effect of these differences is the establishment of a climatic decent, a downward spiral. An ox knows its owner, and even an ass who may not be very obedient or attentive at least knows where to stand to be fed (i.e., it knows its master’s trough), but Israel does not know or obey even as much. In fact, “my people do not understand at all.”

You see, it is starting a downward decent, a climatic decent, whereby the ass is worse than the ox. Where does Israel come in the sequence? They do not even know who feeds them. They do not even know to stand at the trough that feeds them. Rather than just writing a line off and saying that “the master’s trough” is mere ballasting, I think Kugel has a good insight here. Most Old Testament scholars and commentators are beginning to move in this direction of seeing that there is more going on in this biblical poetry than simply saying the same thing twice. It is saying it once and then it is saying it in a more graphic or powerful way. Kugel’s thesis, in kind of summary form, is that the essence of biblical parallelism is seconding. B is “subjoined”; that is, it is joined to A and is hence more emphatic. B has a more emphatic seconding character. It is this, more than any aesthetic of symmetry or paralleling, which is at the heart of biblical parallelism. If you did not understand that, I am going to say it several different ways.

I will give you one other quote from Kugel. He says, “Biblical parallelism is of one sort—A, and what is more, B—or it is of a hundred sorts, but it is not three.” He sees that Lowth’s categories have tended toward reductionism, or reducing the biblical text. How do we evaluate Kugel’s theory? I would say, as I have already indicated, that I think he has a good insight. I think it helps us. All we need to be aware of is not to become simplistic. Many good ideas and good men who have creative minds have been followed by what are sometimes called the terrible simplifiers—people who take the basic idea and make it an absolute, and thus end up doing a great disservice to the great mind that was originally behind the idea because they push it to the extreme—to where it no longer is quite true. If we were to say that every line of biblical poetry must have this emphatic seconding character—“A, and what is more, B”—then I think we would be going beyond what even James Kugel would want to see. However, he does want us to look for that. The nature of the relationship between A and B or the first line and the second line is complex and varied, and it is the task of the interpreter to determine in each case what the nature of the relationship is. Now, what this does is invite us to inspect closely not only the first half of the line, but the second half. That is a lesson we need to learn because you could cut your reading time in half. Since there is parallelism in biblical poetry, you might be tempted to read only the first half in every line. However, I think you would miss a great deal if you were to take that route.