

### **Reading/Applying Biblical Poetry, III**

Robert Alter wrote a very influential book entitled *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, and a second book entitled *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. Essentially Alter is moving in the same direction as James Kugel. But he came to these conclusions independently of James Kugel's work, which lends some credence to the direction in which they were moving. Alter's theory is one of dynamic movement.

He first of all says, "Unfortunately, the notion of semantic parallelism betrays the mistaken notion of a considerable degree of static quality between poetic lines." He goes on to talk about the fact that what he sees is something diametrically opposed to that. He argues for dynamic movement from one verse set to the next. Where Kugel talks about "AB," Alter refers to "verse set 1 and verse set 2." Alter says, "The heart of semantic parallelism is heightening, sharpening intensification." That is very similar to what Kugel is saying, but he provides us with some further examples and a further breakdown.

Alter says that there are four kinds of heightening intensification in Hebrew poetry. Specification is the first kind. In specification, the general term occurs in the first line or phrase and a more specific instance of the general term occurs in the second. This is his example from Proverbs 3:10: "Then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine." Here abundance is the general term and new wine is a specific example of that abundance. Job 41:16 is another example: "His heart is as solid as stone, as solid as the nether millstone." It is not just any stone, but the nether millstone. Another kind of intensification is focusing. This is where the first term is special or geographical and the second is usually a smaller special entity. For example, Jeremiah 7:34 says, "I will bring an end to the sounds of joy and gladness and to the voices of bride and bridegroom in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, for the land will become desolate." "The towns of Judea" is a broad geographic region. "The streets of Jerusalem," is a smaller, more specific place. The first line, "The sounds of joy and gladness and to the voices of bride and bridegroom" might be more along the lines of specification. The general term, "joy and gladness," is specified by the example of "the voices of bride and bridegroom." The third kind of intensification that Alter gives us is concretization. This is where the general term is transformed into a specific instance or concrete image. There is much overlap between these three. An example of concretization is Isaiah 17:1: "Behold, Damascus will cease to be a city and will become a heap of ruins." Ceasing to be a city is rather abstract; we do not know what that looks like. But a heap of ruins is more concrete. Lamentations 1:2 says, "She weeps on through the night and her tears are on her cheek." The first is a description of a general activity and the second is a graphic or concrete image that we can visualize. The fourth and final form of intensification is dramatization. Isaiah 49:23 says, "With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you and lick the dust of your feet." The second line is rather dramatic. Job 30:10 says, "They abhor me; they keep aloof from me; they do not hesitate to spit at the sight of me." Spitting is quite dramatic, so the second line is an intensification of what came before. The point is not to categorize things, but to think about what might fit so as to more closely observe what is in the text.

The purpose of labeling terms is not so that we get all the terms labeled. If that were the point, then someone would have published a book of *Labeled Parallel Terms in Hebrew Poetry*, and we would all buy the book and put it on our shelves, but that is not the point. The point is to enable us to observe more closely what is in the text. These are observational aids. It is a technique for closer observation. Do not force every line to involve intensification because not every line will, particularly in the Psalms. In the Psalms, we have more examples of synonymous parallelism where A equals B, although there is still sort of a driving intensification.

What is the importance of poetry in the Old Testament? Or to ask it in two different ways, why is it important to recognize poetry? And why is there so much poetry in the Bible? Why would God choose to include so much? Poetry sometimes leaves matters ambiguous and it is important for us to recognize that and let them be ambiguous. It is important to recognize the nature of poetry. It can involve hyperbole, or an exaggeration, or imagery, or all kinds of anthropomorphisms, metaphors, and similes, and we should not understand them in a strictly literal sense. Now, I am not saying that a poem about an historical event such as the song of Deborah is therefore not of historical import. We can indeed get historical information from the song of Deborah, but we want to interpret images as images and not construe them literally if they are not intended to be taken that way. So it is important, in doing justice to the literature, to recognize when we are dealing with poetry and to recognize the kinds of truth claims it makes. Also, poetry is more emotive than prose. Fee and Stewart, in their wonderful little book entitled *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, say that poetry is addressed to the mind through the heart. It is important when we are reading poetry that we engage not simply our minds but our hearts. Sometimes all this analysis that I encourage you to do can tend to make it purely cerebral. I do not want that to happen in the end. I want you to be able to observe more closely what is happening, what the text is actually saying, so that it can move you and impress itself upon you in a significant way.

Poetry is more emotive than prose. That leads us to this other question. Why is there so much poetry in the Bible? Why do you think God in His wisdom chose to make this large portion of Scripture in poetic form? It addresses the whole person. It does not just address our critical faculties or our minds. It is also more memorable—sometimes parallelism helps with this. It demonstrates to us God’s creative ability that in His wisdom He inspired these creative works in Scripture. Even in narrative contexts the climactic point is often cast in a heightened, poetic speech. If you think of some of the best sermons you have heard, probably there was some word or phrase at the heart of that sermon that was almost poetical. You went away remembering that because of the careful way in which it was formulated. That is often the case even in biblical narrative or in the historical books. If suddenly the speech is elevated to the level of poetry, that is likely to be a very important thing to notice. The old view was that was from a different source and so we should disregard it, but that is wrong thinking. If there is elevated speech we should give it all the more attention. Poetry is more moving. it engages us in a different way. Think about Psalm 19:1: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.” Compare that to “God is revealed in His creation, especially in the heavenly bodies.” I said the same thing, but I just did not say it as well. I said it in prose and I believe the proposition, but it does not move me in the same way that reading the poetry does. One more thing, which Alter points out, is that poetry is a particularly appropriate medium for prayer and for talking about God. That is because of this sense of heightening. When we are talking about God, when we are composing a hymn of praise, it is appropriate that it be in poetry, particularly biblical poetry. When can you really have said it all? All you are doing is sort of launching the trajectory—all these things that really go beyond our capacity to express. Thus poetry is a particularly appropriate idiom for talking about God and for talking to God.