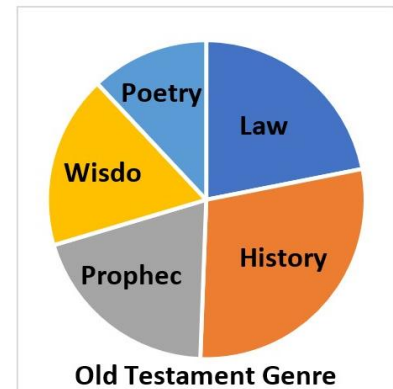


The Study of Biblical Poetry

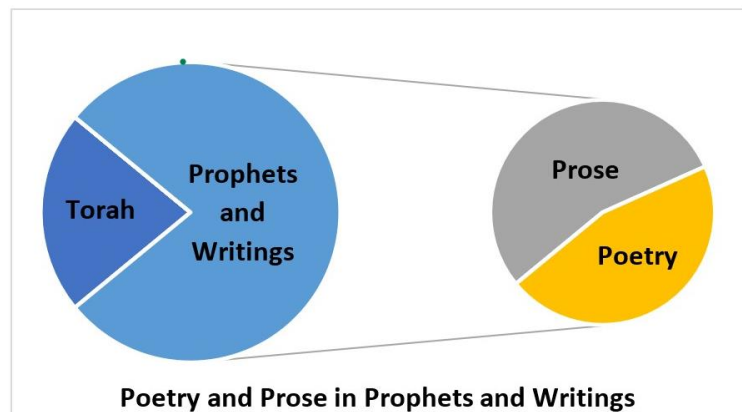
Poetry in the Old Testament

There may be a lot more poetry in your Bible than you think there is. Old Testament books are often divided into the categories of Law, History, Prophecy, Wisdom, and Poetry. When scholars categorize the books this way, the books listed in the “Poetry” category are Psalms, Lamentations, and Song of Solomon. Those three books only make up 12% of the Old Testament text, which turns out to be the smallest piece of the pie in the Old Testament Genre chart. These categories are misleading in regard to the amount of poetry that you actually encounter in the Old Testament. All literature can be defined as poetry or prose (non-poetry). Even though scholars have detailed debates about what counts as poetry, one of the interesting facts about poetic verse is that even if you do not know how to define it, you usually know when you are reading it. For our purpose, it is enough to define poetry as “formally structured text that follows principles of organization.”



Most Bibles help us out by visually printing poetry in verse form instead of paragraph form. If you have such a Bible, simply flip through the pages, and you will see which passages the translators consider to be prose and which poetry. Skimming through the Bible, the first half of the Old Testament from Genesis to Esther will almost all be prose formatted in paragraph form. After Esther you will see mostly poetic verse, though still with some sections of prose.

About 37% of the Old Testament, more than a third, is written in poetic verse. Moses rarely wrote in poetry. The first five books of Moses are known as the Law (or the Torah or the Pentateuch). Jews consider the books after the Torah to belong either to the Prophets or the Writings. When we consider the amount of poetry in the Prophets and the Writings, the percentage increases to 45.7%. These are the books covered in the IBS course OT II. Poetry makes up almost one-half of the text for the course.



Though modern readers are surprised by how much of the Old Testament is in poetic verse, ancient readers would have been surprised by the amount of prose. The cultures surrounding the Bible wrote all of their narrative stories in poetic verse. Ancient texts like the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Ugaritic *Legend of King Keret* were all written in poetic verse. The same is true of the much later Greek epics *Illiad* and *Odyssey* by Homer. If the Hebrew writers followed the same Ancient Near Eastern approach as the peoples around them, narratives such as the account of Abraham or the life of David would have all been written in poetry. The Old Testament authors stand out as unique among the surrounding cultures by writing their narratives in prose rather than poetry. In the early books of the Bible, the narrative histories are in prose while the direct speech of God was delivered mostly in poetic verse. Perhaps this was to highlight the speech of God. This convention of communicating God’s words in poetic verse continued on in the prophets. Poetic verse is not reserved only for the direct words of God. Most of the human response to God in the Psalms and Wisdom literature was also written as poetry. In fact, the first poetry recorded in the Bible are the words of a man spoken in response to God’s gift This is Adam’s response to the creation of Eve in Genesis 2:23.

This is now bone of my bones,
She shall be called Woman,

And flesh of my flesh;
Because she was taken out of Man.

Modern western cultures do not tend to emphasize the reading and interpretation of poetry, putting many modern Christians at a disadvantage in studying the Old Testament. This would not have been true for the original listeners of Scripture who were more culturally sensitized to receiving poetry. With so much of the Old Testament being communicated through poetic verse, the believer who wants to “faithfully handle the Word of truth” faces the challenge of becoming more familiar with how to read, interpret, and enjoy the Hebrew poetry of the Old Testament. There is no quick solution for learning to appreciate biblical poetry. Appreciation comes over time spent in God’s Word, continually building, little by little, on your understanding of the meaning of the words and your appreciation of the artistic way in which that meaning is communicated. Even though time spent in the text is a crucial element for appreciating the Prophets and Writings, learning how to approach biblical poetry helps make the time spent in poetic passages more fruitful.

Three Approaches to Biblical Poetry

Reading poetry is both a left brain and right brain activity, inviting both analysis and imagination. Poets use descriptive language often intended to stir up emotion or create a visual scene. The poet also takes great care to choose just the right words and to place those words in just the right order. The structure and flow of the verses help communicate the intended meaning.

The movie *The Dead Poets Society* emphasizes the use of the imagination to receive and experience the impact of poetic verse. Professor Keating (Robin Williams) famously begins the first day of class having the boys tear out the dry analytical preface to their poetry textbook. He did not want the boys to kill the poetry through metrical analysis. Instead, he works to enliven their imagination, challenging them to feel the words of the poet and to receive the force of the meaning.

Keating brings out the emotion in a short piece of poetic verse this way by taking his students out of class into the hallway. They stand in front of a trophy cabinet filled with class photos of boys who had attended the school in years gone by, Keating calls on a boy, “Mr. Pitts would you open your hymnal to the to page 542. Read the first stanza of the poem you find there.”

Young Mr. Pitts reads,

“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may. Old Time is still a flying.
And this same flower which smiles today, tomorrow will be dying”

Keating continues, “Thank you Mr. Pitts. ‘Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.’ The Latin term for that sentiment is ‘Carpe diem.’ Seize the day. ‘Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.’ Why does the writer use these lines?”

A boy answers, “Because he is in a hurry.”

Keating, “No! Thanks for playing anyway! It is because we are food for worms lads. Because, believe it or not, each and everyone of us in this room is one day going to stop breathing, turn cold, and die. I would like you to step forward over here (to the cabinet) and peruse some of the faces of the past. They’re not that different from you, are they? Same haircuts. Full of hormones just like you. Invincible, just like you feel. The world is their oyster. They believe they are destined for great things, just like many of you. Their eyes are full of hope, just like you. Did they wait until it was too late to make from their lives even one iota of what they were capable? Because, you see, gentlemen, these boys are now fertilizing daffodils. But if you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you. Go on. Lean in. Listen. Do you hear it? Carpe... Carpe... Carpe diem. Seize the day boys. Make your lives extraordinary.”

Keating has done the hard work of imagination for the boys. He took the line of poetry, considered the meaning for the boys, and presented that meaning to them in a way that would stir up their emotions and kindle their imagination.

When we read biblical poetry, we face the challenge of engaging with the verses in a way that encourages our minds and emotions to be stirred by the poet. The challenge in personal Bible study is to do that on our own, without the help of a professor Keating.

Here are three approaches to uncovering the imagery, emotion and meaning of biblical poetry.

Approach to Biblical poetry #1: Read and observe.

The first approach is to simply read the poetic passage and take note of what you see. This is the first step of inductive Bible study. Observe the text and write down your observations. As you read, ask the reporter questions: who, what, when, where, why. You want these questions to become second nature as you observe any text of Scripture. With poetic verse, try to engage your imagination as you observe. Ask, "What visual scene do these words and phrases create?" And ask, "What emotions are being expressed or what emotional response might the poet expect from the reader?"

Observe repeated words and phrases. Maybe the poet is emphasizing something. Observe contrast. Observe ideas that seem to connect. Write down what you see in your Bible study notebook. Mark up the text. If you do not like circling and underlining in your Bible, print out the text for use in your study. Writing and marking up a text forces your brain to engage more actively.

Change your environment. Read the poem out loud. Maybe add music in the background as you read. Both your voice and music help connect your heart emotions to the text. Try reading a psalm to yourself during the worship time at your church. Read out in nature, in a field or forest, by a lake or the sea.

Study poetic passages in a group. Focus together on basic observation. Start the group with 20 minutes of silent, personal observation of one Psalm or a poetic passage. Write down several observations. Then go around the group and share out loud what you have noticed. Appoint a group leader to study the passage more in-depth before you meet, but do not let the group leader teach before everyone has done their own observation unless it is just to give some basic points about the passage to help with the context or structure. The group leader can give additional thoughts after everyone has observed and shared observations.

Doing small group observation of the Psalms over one school year with my daughters, I was struck by how each daughter tended to make certain observations that fit with her personality. My oldest daughter tended to observe the bottom line or concluding point of the Psalm. My middle daughter observed visually. She saw the scene presented by the Psalmist. My youngest daughter was most likely to feel the Psalm. She connected empathically with the author. Sharing our observations together in the small group helped us all see things in the Psalm that were probably intended by the author, but which we missed on our own.

Approach to biblical poetry #2: Analyze the flow of thought through the passage.

In their book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart identify ten types of Psalms. Each Psalm type contains certain elements. Observing the different elements of a given Psalm helps you to follow the flow of thought in a Psalm. The notes for the IBS course Old Testament II contain all ten types suggested by Fee and Stuart, along with the elements in each type. Here is one Psalm type for us to use as an example in following the flow of thought through a biblical passage.

Most Psalms, almost half, can be categorized as lament Psalms. You can find examples of individual lament by one person in Psalms 3, 22, 31, 39, 42, 57, 71, 120, 139, 142 and examples of group lament by a community in 12, 44, 80, 94, 137. You can also find laments outside of the Psalms, such as in Jeremiah 20:7-18 or the whole book of Lamentations.

The elements in a lament Psalm do not have to all appear in every lament and may be ordered differently from lament to lament. That is one thing you find to be true of poets. Though poetry is a formal way of communicating using recognized literary devices and structures, good poets are constantly playing with the conventions. Take the elements described here as flexible categories that can help you think about the flow of the Psalm. It is not critical for you to have every verse classified. It is more important that you have a sense of what the psalmist is doing, and where he is taking you.

Here are the classic elements of a lament described by Fee and Stewart.

- a. Address – Here the Psalmist directs his words to God.

b. Complaint – Here the Psalmist gives a description of the problem which is often stereotyped. That means the Psalms tend to express the complaint in standard language. Often, we do not know the details of the specific case. The problems described usually fall into these four categories.

- 1) Enemies
- 2) Illness
- 3) Description of death
- 4) Being trapped

c. Trust – Here the Psalmist states his trust in God to deliver him from his troubles. This statement of trust is an act of faith that may or may not go along with a sense of peace. The statement of trust might be made while the Psalmist continues to feel significant stress or fear.

d. Deliverance – the Psalmist asks God for help out of the crisis.

e. Assurance – Here the Psalmist goes further than a statement of trust in God, to a statement of assurance. Assurance is often grounded in the character of God and may be expressed in the past tense as though God has already delivered the Psalmist from his troubles, even though the troubles are still present. The trust and assurance sections are very similar. Generally, the trust section is an expression that God is trustworthy even in the midst of trial. The assurance is a statement that God is going to deliver him from the trial.

f. Praise – Here the Psalmist praises the character or actions of God. The statement of praise may also overlap with trust and assurance.

As you study biblical poetry, recognizing standard types helps you follow the flow of thought and emotion being expressed by the Psalmist. Consider how this works with Psalm 3. This first lament Psalm is an example of how the standard elements are present and also how David does not hold to those elements too tightly. The Psalm flows naturally without being forced into a standard formula. (I have used the English numbering of Psalm 3 that starts with verse 1 after the title, “A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.” If that title is verse 1 in your Bible, then what I call verse 1 is your verse 2, and so on.)

Psalm 3

A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 O LORD, how my adversaries have increased! | Many are rising up against me. |
| 2 Many are saying of my soul, | “There is no deliverance for him in God.” |
| 3 But You, O LORD, are a shield about me, | My glory, and the One who lifts my head. |
| 4 I was crying to the LORD with my voice, | And He answered me from His holy mountain. |
| 5 I lay down and slept; | I awoke, for the LORD sustains me. |
| 6 I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people | Who have set themselves against me round about. |
| 7 Arise, O LORD; save me, O my God! | For You have smitten all my enemies on the cheek;
You have shattered the teeth of the wicked. |
| 8 Salvation belongs to the LORD; Your blessing <i>be</i> upon Your people! | |

The address comes in the first two words of verse 1, “O Lord.” The rest of verse 1 and verse 2 explain the complaint. This is a complaint of the first type in regard to enemies. We even know who the enemies are and what the occasion is because this is one of those Psalms that gives us a brief title, “A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.” Verse 3 gives us a statement of trust in the Lord. “But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the one who lifts my head.” And verse 6 gives us a statement of assurance, “I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me round about.”

Verses 4-5 do not fit precisely into the elements of the lament form. This leads us to ask, “How do verses 4 and 5 move us from the statement of trust to the statement of assurance?” What is David adding here? What is he telling us? I will leave that for you to consider.

Verses 7-8 conclude with a prayer that includes both a request for deliverance in verse 7 and a statement in verse 8 that sounds like assurance but could also be understood as praise, "Salvation belongs to the Lord; your blessing be upon your people."

Understanding the types of Psalms and the various elements of those types helps us to observe the movement being made through a particular hymn or poetic passage. In this case, we are observing the movement from stanza (several verses) to stanza or maybe verse to verse. The study of biblical poetry also calls us to consider the movement within a verse, from verset to verset (from the first phrase of the verse to the second phrase).

Approach to biblical poetry #3: Analyze the movement in the verses.

As much as we may love the experiential side of poetry that Professor Keating draws out in *The Dead Poet's Society*, being able to appreciate poetry like Keating did requires the use of the right side of the brain. The biblical poets invite us not only to imaginative experience but also to thoughtful analysis. We need to pay attention to the words and structure of the verses.

a. Observe the parallelism in a verse and between two verses.

The defining organizational feature of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. Though the poets do a lot of word play in the Hebrew, the rhyming of words is not critical. And if there is rhythm it is lost to us. Fortunately for most of us who read the Bible in our own language, parallelism translates rather well. A typical verse of Hebrew poetry is divided into two phrases or versets. And verses are typically paired. Sometimes there is a third verset or a grouping of three verses. But quite often we have two verses with two versets as in the Isaiah 1:2-3 example below.

Scholars have identified Hebrew parallelism as synonymous, antithetic or synthetic. The verse is synonymous parallelism if the second verset repeats or restates the same idea as the first verset. The verse is antithetic parallelism if the second verset contrasts the idea in the first verset. Synthetic parallelism is not really parallelism but rather a term for everything that is not synonymous or antithetic.

We can see the parallelism better by writing out the two versets of one verse side by side on the same line as we have done throughout this article. Consider Isaiah 1:2-3.

2 Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth;	For the Lord speaks	(synthetic)
"Sons I have reared and brought up,	But they have revolted against me.	(antithetic)
3 An ox knows its owner,	and a donkey its master's manger,	(synonymous)
But Israel does not know,	My people do not understand.	(synonymous)

The first verse in 2a sets up the poetic passage by calling on heaven and earth to hear the Lord speak. The second verset does not repeat or contrast the idea in the first verset. We are moving from one idea to the next. This is synthetic parallelism. The second verse in 2b presents the contrast of God's action and Israel's action. In 3a we have synonymous ideas with what a donkey knows restating the point made by what an ox knows. Notice how there is no verb in the second verset. Parallelism allows for dropping out parallel elements, in this case the verb. We are able to fill in the verb from the first verset. The first verset has a subject, "the ox", a verb, "knows", and an object, "its owner." The second verset has only a subject, "a donkey" and an object, "its master's manger." Because both the idea and the structure of the versets is parallel, we recognize that we should insert the verb from the first verset into the second verset, "and a donkey *knows* its master's manger." The next verse in 3b is also synonymous, this time with my people not understanding being a restatement of Israel not knowing.

Observing the relationship between the versets of one verse is a foundational skill of good observation when studying biblical poetry. We also need to pay attention to the relationship from verse to verse. For example, notice how the versets of 3a and 3b are both synonymous within the verses, and yet, when we compare the whole of 3a to the whole of 3b, we have antithetic parallelism. Who knows? And who does not know? The ox and donkey know. Israel and my people do not know. Israel is being contrasted with a donkey.

The organization principle of parallel versets in pairs of verses is a confining principle that most biblical poetry holds to. There is very little variation from this pattern of two verses with two versets each or from the principle of parallelism. That does not mean there is no creativity in biblical poetry. The poets work creatively within the confinement of this formal organization. This is the same principle you see at work in an English sonnet or in a Japanese haiku. Formal rules exist. If the poet does not follow those rules, then the final product is not a sonnet or not a haiku. A great poet like William Shakespeare takes the conventional form and works creatively within that form.

Notice the structure of this example from Psalm 145:11-12.

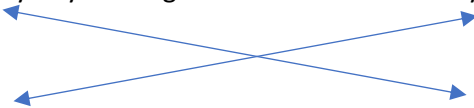
11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and talk of your power;

12 To make known to the sons of men your mighty acts and the glory of the majesty of your kingdom

We notice that both verses have synonymous versets. So, we then ask, "What is the relationship between the verses?" The focus in verse 11 is on speaking/talking. The focus in verse 12 is slightly different. It is on making known. What is to be made known? The glory of God's kingdom. How is it to be made known? By the speaking/talking of those in verse 11. Notice also how the Psalmist reverses the order of the object in each verse. In verse 11 they speak of "glory" first and "power" second. Power is a specific example of God's glory. In verse 12 the more specific example comes first, "mighty acts", followed by the more general concept "glory." Taking the two verses together, the first verset parallels the last verset and the second verset parallels the second to last verset.

11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and talk of your power;

12 To make known to the sons of men your mighty acts and the glory of the majesty of your kingdom



This is a chiasm pattern where the versets at the beginning and end are parallel and the versets in the middle are parallel. The terms chiasm and chiasm come from the Greek letter chi which is written as x. The x is particularly visible in this kind of parallel poetry that uses two verses with two versets per verse.

Reasons for using a particular structure, like chiasm, vary. A poet might use a structure to emphasize certain concepts, to make a text more memorable, or to make the text more aesthetically pleasing.

Both of our examples, from Isaiah 1 and from Psalm 145, use synonymous parallelism. The term synonymous is helpful but can be misleading. The word power is not exactly synonymous with the word kingdom in Psalm 145:11. There is a move from the more general concept of glory to the more specific element of power. When Hebrew poets use synonymous parallelism, they are usually not restating the same idea. There is usually movement from one idea to the next that adds meaning. The dynamic movement within apparently synonymous lines is addressed further in the appendix to this article, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*.

b. Observe the poet's word choice and the use of literary devices, especially metaphor.

Along with an awareness of the parallel organization, the appreciation of biblical poetry requires a little excitement about word choice and metaphor. Poets consider carefully the words they choose. Sometimes the choice of words connects to the larger message of a chapter or even a whole book. For example, the word "revolt" attributed by Isaiah in 1:3 to the Israelites is used again by Isaiah in the very last verses of the book where he describes the defeat of rebellious humankind by God in a final battle that will occur before the establishment of a new heaven and new earth. In the NASB version of Isaiah 66:24 that Hebrew word "revolt" in 1:3 is translated as "transgressed." "Then they shall go forth and look on the corpses of the men who have transgressed against me." The use of this one word ties together the whole book beginning with the judgment of rebellious Israel and ending with the judgement of rebellious humankind.

That is an extreme example of showing poet's awareness of his own word choice by recognizing repeated words. We are not usually considering repeated words across 66 chapters! We are usually paying close attention to the words used in a given passage from verse to verse.

Sometimes a change of words is synonymous like the “know” and “understand” we observed in Isaiah 1:3. There does not appear to be any significant difference between the two words in that context. What about a verse like Psalm 21:7?

7 For the king trusts in the LORD and through the lovingkindness of the Most High he will not be shaken.

The second verset might be loosely synonymous to the first verset, but the words are not simply a restatement of the same idea. The second verset adds additional meaning. The first verset states that the king trusts in the LORD. Trust is an attitude or a decision of the will that describes something about the internal state of the king. What is that trust grounded in? It is grounded in a specific character quality of God, his lovingkindness. And what is the result of that trust? The result is that the king will not be shaken. Once we have observed the relationship between the words in the first verset and the words in the second verset, we can begin to imagine what that is like in the real-life experience of the king. How would that kind of trust in God affect the actions of the king? We need to continue on in Psalm 21 to see what the context is. What is causing the king's need to trust and to not be shaken? I will leave you to consider that question yourself.

The three approaches to biblical poetry recommended here can be employed separately. We may come to a section of poetry and simply read through it, allowing whatever stands out to stand out. Or we may determine to take a little time to identify the flow of thought through a passage. Or we may choose to get very specific, looking closely at each line to see how the author moves through the versets, noticing important words, considering metaphors, appreciating the detail.

We can employ these three approaches separately. Or we can employ all of them together when we sit down for 20-30 minutes with a piece of biblical poetry. We could start with the first approach and read through the whole once just to see what stands out. Then we could move to the third approach, looking closely to identify specific movement from verset to verset and from verse to verse. Then we could consider the second approach trying to identify the flow of ideas through the whole Psalm. We can do this on our own. Or we can do this with a small group, observing first for ourselves and then sharing observations with each other.

As we study biblical poetry, we want to employ both sides of our brain, the right analytical side and the left imaginative side. To just analyze biblical poetry without visual and emotional imagination flattens the text to the point where much of the meaning is lost or inaccessible. To not analyze biblical poetry is to make the reader's experience more important than the ideas and experiences being communicated by the biblical poet. The study of biblical poetry is a challenge to love God with heart, mind, and soul, as we seek to understand the concepts and experiences communicated by the text in order to better understand our own walk with God, the experience of God in our believing community, and the sovereign work of God throughout society.

Appendix: The Art of Biblical Poetry

(These notes are adapted from the book *The Art of Biblical Poetry* by Robert Alter.)

The Principle of Incremental Repetition

What does the parallelism of Hebrew poetry accomplish, especially when the meaning appears synonymous? Many scholars conclude that the parallelism is a static repetition. There is no significant movement from one verset to the next verset. The parallel terms are seen as simply a repetition of the same idea in different words. Robert Alter argues something different. He argues that the parallel structure usually moves forward a poetic narrative through small movements in the story or moves forward thought through intensification of ideas.¹ Poetic movement is different from prose movement, yet there is still movement. Let's consider these two basic principles of biblical poetry (1) incremental repetition and (2) intensification. We will start with the principle of incremental repetition.

Alter compares the movement from verset to verset in biblical poetry to the slight, yet, significant movement we see in an animated cartoon. From panel to panel there is real, significant change. Each panel moves the story forward. If you were to flip through the panels quickly you would have the appearance of movement, ending up in a very different place than where you began.



Consider the above two lines from the Disney animated film *Snow White*. Think of the top row as line 1 with four scenes, a, b, c, and d. Then think of the second row as line 2 with four scenes. Make at least one observation for each scene. What do you see?

- 1a.
- 1b.
- 1c.
- 1d.
- 2a.
- 2b.
- 2c.
- 2d.

This example shows narrative movement describing a series of events over time. The old woman offers the apple to Snow White. Snow White takes the apple. Snow White considers the apple. Snow White takes a bite from the apple. And then something happens to Snow White. She appears to be lying on the floor. The movement in the animation is not only about the outward facts. The scenes suggest a progression of thoughts and emotions in Snow White and to some degree in the old woman.

¹ Alter, 63.

repeated element to the material that is introduced by the repetition, at once inviting us to see all the new utterances as locked into the same structure of assertion and to look for strong differences or elements of development in the new material. There is, in other words, a productive tension between sameness and difference, reiteration and development, in the use of anaphora.

If we are rigorous about the way poems communicate meanings, we will have to conclude that the repeated word or phrase in anaphora never means exactly the same thing twice, that in each occurrence it takes on a certain coloration from the surrounding semantic material and from its position in the series. This general point about repetition has been nicely formulated by the Russian semiotician Jurij Lotman:

Strictly speaking, unconditional repetition is impossible in poetry. The repetition of a word in a text, as a rule, does not mean the mechanical repetition of a concept. Most often it points to a more complex, albeit unified, semantic context...

Lotman goes on to offer a telling illustration of the principle, an instance of emphatic repetition. When one encounters a line of verse like 'Soldier, bid her farewell, bid her farewell,' every reader realizes that the second 'bid her farewell' could not be identical in meaning with the first. For the soldier is not being urged to say goodbye twice to his girl but, obviously, is being reminded of the poignancy of the leave-taking, the dearness of his beloved, the possibility he may never see her again, the dreadful imminence of the departure, or any combination of such implications. Let me propose that in our psalm the anaphoric series of four times 'how long,' ...reflects an ascent on a scale of intensity, the note of desperate urgency pitched slightly higher with each repetition. Heightening, as in many other instances, is in part associated with a movement from cause to effect and from general to specific statement, but here without any real development of narrative momentum.

The rising movement is clear, compact, and, as I have suggested, exemplary of the supplication as a form of Hebrew verse. Initially, the speaker complains of being perpetually forgotten (or 'neglected') by God; in the parallel verset this plight of neglect is imagined more personally and concretely – in a way, more terribly – as God's hiding his face from the supplicant. The second triadic line translates the general condition of abandonment into the inward experience of the speaker, who flounders devising futile schemes and, what is more, is in the constant grip of grief – because, as we finally learn in the third verset, his enemy is winning out against him. It is worth noting that this last 'how long' in the anaphoric series ('How long will my enemy be over me?') not only introduces a specification barely hinted at in the preceding statements but also has a virtual causal force absent in the previous occurrences of the self-same syllables (that is, 'How long is my distress to continue?' – for this is the reason for it). It thus nicely illustrates how verbatim repetition in a poetic text is not to be equated with total identity of meaning.

At this climactic point of desperation (at the end of line 3), the speaker breaks away from the anaphora and pronounces three imperative verbs – the only such verbs in the poem – addressed to God: 'Look, answer me, Lord my God, / give light to my eyes, /lest I sleep death.' The looking, which is heightened in the second verset into giving light to the eyes – presumably the effect of God's gaze – is obviously a prayer for the reversal of that awful hiding of the divine face invoked in line 1. The third verset, a subordinate clause, is linked to the second verset by an association of thematic and causal antithesis: either you make my eyes shine by turning toward me at once or they will close forever in the sleep of death. At this point, the poet complements the initial anaphora of 'how long,' which stressed his persisting anguish, with an anaphoric insistence on 'lest,' which stresses the critical precariousness of his present condition. The 'lest' at the beginning of line 4 unfolds the meaning of its counterpart in the last verset of line 3: 'lest I sleep death' – which is to say, lest my enemy, who has long had the upper hand over me, be granted his final triumph (to cry out 'I have him' or, more literally, 'I have prevailed over him'). This picture of defeat is then emphatically rounded out in the second verset of line 4, with the representation of the foes exulting as they behold the speaker tottering, about to topple.

The general complaint, then, of being forgotten by God with which the poem began has been brought to a painfully vivid culmination in which the speaker imagines his own death both as a subjective state – sleeping the sleep of death, where God's gaze will never be able to light up his eyes – and as a dramatic

scene – going down for the last time, with his enemies crowing in triumph. This is the white-hot point to which the magnifying glass of the structure of intensification has concentrated the assertions of desperate need. At the moment of the imaginative enactment of death, the speaker swings away sharply into a concluding affirmation of faith, introduced by a strongly contrastive ‘but I.’ He trust in God’s kindness, or faithfulness, and, what is more, his heart exults in God’s deliverance, in a precise antithetical response to the enemies who were imagined exulting over his death. The poem that began in a cry of distress to a neglectful God ends (line 6) in a song of praise to God, whose deliverance of those who trust in him is already considered an accomplished fact.

Structurally, the countermovement of the last two lines functions differently from the concluding couplet of a Shakespearian sonnet, which reflects a tendency of the speaker to stand back contemplatively from his own preceding assertions and, even when an antithesis to them is proffered, to tie up the meanings of the poem with a certain sense of neat resolution. In the psalm, there is less resolution than surprising emotional reversal impelled by the motor force of faith. In this respect, the uses that later religious tradition made of Psalms are very much in keeping with the spirit of the original poems, even though the psalmist conceived being ‘saved’ in more concrete and literal terms than have most postbiblical readers. The speaker, that is, finds himself plunged into a fierce reality where things seem to go from bad to worse to the worst of all. There is no ‘logical’ way out of this predicament – it is an image in miniature of the general biblical predicament of threatened national existence in the dangerous midst of history – as there is no discursive means in verse to imagine anything but its ominous intensification, except for the sudden, unaccountable, paradoxical swing of faith that enables the speaker at the height of terror to affirm that God will sustain him, indeed has sustained him. Generically, the supplication has been transformed in a single stroke into a psalm of thanksgiving.”⁶

2 Samuel 22: and Various relationships between versets.

To help us understand various ways versets relate in biblical poetry, Alter provides an example from David’s victory hymn in 2 Samuel 22. Alter believes this poetic passage provides a good range of examples which are also loosely equivalent to the proportion of these types of relationships found throughout the Bible. Here is a key to Alter’s symbols.⁷

- = The versets are synonymous in meaning, though using different words.
- ⊖ The versets are synonymous with repetition of the same words.
- { } The versets show complementing ideas.
- The versets show a consequent action. In this case, the poetry acts similar to narrative.
- > The versets may appear synonymous but in reality show a focusing, heightening, intensification, or specification of ideas.

The numbering of these verses come from Alter himself, not from the Bible. When you see a verset in the middle of the line, that is an example of biblical verse employing three versets instead of two versets. The verset goes with the two versets on the previous line.

“1 The Lord is my crag and my fortress	= >	and my deliverer.
2 God my rock where I shelter	=	my shield, my saving horn.
3 My stronghold and my refuge,	>	my savior, who saves me from havoc.
4 Praised I called the Lord,	→	and from my enemies I was saved.
5 For the breakers of death washed round me,	>	the torrents of the underworld terrified me.
6 The snares of the pit encircled me,	=	the traps of death sprung on me.
7 In my strait I called to the Lord,	=	to my God I called.
8 From his abode he heard my voice,	>	my cry in his ears.
9 The earth heaved and shuddered,	{ }	heaven’s foundations shook, →

⁶ Alter, 63-67.

⁷ Alter, 30.

They heaved, for he was incensed.

10 Smoke went up from his nostrils, → consuming fire from his mouth, →
Coals blazed froth from him.
11 He bent the heavens, came down, → dense mist beneath his feet.
12 Mounted a cherub and flew, → soared on the wings of the wind.
13 Set darkness pavilions around him, > a massing of waters, looming thunderheads
14 From the brilliance before him → fiery coals blazed.
15 The Lord thundered from heaven, < → the Most High sent forth his voice.
16 He let loose arrows and scattered them, > lightning, and routed them.
17 The channels of the sea were exposed, {>} the world's foundations laid bare.
18 From the Lord's roaring, > the blast of his nostrils' breath.
19 He reached from on high and took me, > He pulled me out of the mighty waters.
20 He rescued me from my strong enemy, > from my foes who were too much for me.
21 They overtook me on the day of my disaster, → but God was my support.
22 He set me out in an open place, > He freed me for he was pleased with me.
23 The Lord dealt with me by my merit, > the cleanness of my hands he requited.
24 For I kept the ways of the Lord, > I did not evil before my God.
25 All his statutes are before me, > I swerved not from his laws.
26 I was blameless before him, > and kept myself from sin.
27 He requited me by my merit, > my cleanness in his eyes.
28 With the loyal you deal loyally, { } with the blameless warrior, blamelessly
29 With the pure you deal purely, { } with the perverse, deviously.
30 A lowly people you save, { } on the haughty your eyes look down.
31 You are my lamp, O Lord, > the Lord lights up my darkness.
32 With you I rush a barrier, { } with my God I vault a wall.
33 God's way is blameless, → the Lord's word pure, →

He is a shield to those who shelter in him.

34 For who is god besides the Lord, = who a rock besides our God?
35 The God, my mighty stronghold, → who kept my way blameless,
36 Made my legs like a gazelle's → and stood me on the heights.
37 Taught my hands combat, > made my arms bend a bow of bronze.
38 You gave me your saving shield, ? Your answering power made me great.
39 You helped me take broad strides, → and my feet did not trip.
40 I pursued my enemies, destroyed them, → turned not back till I finished them off.
41 I finished them off, smashed them beyond rising, → they lay beneath my feet.
42 You girded me with might for combat, → brought my adversaries low before me.
43 Made my enemies turn tail before me, → my foes, and I wiped them out.
44 They looked-there was none to save them, > to the Lord he answered them not.
45 I crushed them like the dust of the earth, > like street mud, I ground them, trampled them.
46 You delivered me from the strife of peoples, → kept me at the head of nations, →

a people I knew not served me.

47 Aliens cowered before me, → at the mere report become my vassals.
48 Aliens shrank, → came trembling from their forts.
49 The Lord lives, blessed is my rock. { } exalted is God my saving rock.
50 The God who grants me vindication, > and lays low peoples before me.
51 Frees me from my enemies, => lifts me over my adversaries, =

Saves me from wreckers of havoc

52 For this I sing your praises, Lord, among the nations, = and chant your name.
53 Saving tower to his king, = performing kindness to His anointed

The poem is long enough that a statistical breakdown of the varieties of semantic relation between versets may be instructive. In fact, the proportions here are fairly typical of the corpus of biblical poetry. In thirty-six of the fifty-three lines there is a clear element of dynamic movement from the first verset to the second: in nineteen lines this involves some sort of intensification or specification; in another seventeen lines, some relation of consequentiality. Twelve lines reflect a relatively static relation between versets – six of these through the deployment of synonyms, the other six through the bracketing of complementary terms, which may be similar in meaning, as in line 28, or antithetical pairs in lines 29 and 39.”⁸

It is unfair to Alter to end his commentary at this point. We have only addressed ideas from the beginning of his book, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, and have left out much interesting commentary on the text to focus on the two principle ideas of incremental repetition and intensification. Alter rightly challenges the idea that synonymous parallelism in biblical poetry is static – a simple restatement of ideas. Closer attention shows movement of narrative and meaning. The small changes matter a lot. I highly recommend the rest of Alter’s book, where he applies these basic principles from the first three chapters to consideration of Job in chapter IV, faith in the Psalms in chapter V, Prophecy in chapter VI, and Proverbs in chapter VII.

⁸ Alter, 29-32