Biblical Terms for "Poetry"

One way to begin is to consider the terminology found in the Hebrew Bible that seems related to poetic materials. There are certain terms that are found in superscriptions or biblical texts that may be indicators of poetry. The broadest term is *sir* or *sira*, masculine and feminine respectively. This root word is understood to mean "song or poem." Sometimes this word stands alone, as in Judg 5:12, or it may be found with a qualifier: "*sir* of Zion" in Ps 137:3 or "pilgrimage *sir*" as in Pss 120-34. The feminine form, sira, is found in Ex 15:1; Deut 31:30; and Num 21:17. This word is used twice in the title of what is known as the "Song of Songs" or "Song of Solomon". The Hebrew title is *sir ha'sirim*, which is the way that Hebrew constructs the superlative, so the translation would be "The Song of Songs" (as in the best song of all). The next line, "which is of Solomon", has the word *le'sholomo*, which functions like *le'david* in the superscriptions of some psalms. This is not an authorial byline but more along the lines of a dedication ("to Solomon") or an honoring ("for Solomon"). Another frequently found term is *mizmor*, which is translated usually as "song or psalm" and appears often in the Psalms. Sometimes it is used with *sir*, as in Ps 67:1, or it can stand alone, as in Ps 15:1, *mizmor*. A more specialized term seems to be *qina*, which means "lament or dirge". It occurs in several texts (e.g., Sam 1:17 and Amos 8:10) but does not occur in the Psalms. We cannot rely exclusively, or always, on these terms; they are also used for texts that we would not consider "poetry".

Indicators of Hebrew Poetry

One major obstacle in defining/identifying Hebrew Poetry is that we do not have a guide to ancient Hebrew poetry or an ancient treatise on Hebrew poetics, as we do for other languages. Historically, biblical scholars have applied their own culture's literary

criteria for poetry to the texts of the Hebrew Bible. Early Christians evaluated the texts based on classical metrical systems. Medieval Jewish scholars sought to discover rhyme and metrical patterns. English scholars, during the Renaissance, tried to identify the characteristics of poetry based on their socio-historical context.[1] We still do this today. That is why you were to begin with the Jing on "What is Poetry", to consider what "poetic baggage" we bring to Hebrew poetry, particularly the Psalms. What are we looking for in order to label a text as poetry? Are these fair criteria to use in analyzing texts that are over 2000 years old?

The first indication that many non-Hebrew readers of the Hebrew Bible get that a text is poetry relates to how it is laid-out on the printed page. When we look at a translation of the Psalms, they are written in a different structure than prose; they are written stichographically, that is with a space within/between lines of the poem. For example, this would be how Ps 119:1 would appear (in Hebrew of course):

Happy are those whose way is blameless   who follow the teaching of the LORD

This, however, is a later scribal practice, so it is not to be understood as the "original" form of the written text but represents the literary conventions of the scribes. Also problematic is that this is not how most early Hebrew manuscripts render the Psalms, and it can be used within prose texts as an indicator of lists.[2] There are texts in the Hebrew Bible that have been deemed "poetic" by modern readers but are written the same way as prose materials in the Hebrew manuscripts.

There are some characteristics recognized in English poetry that are also found in Hebrew Poetry: use of sounds (e.g., alliteration, wordplays, assonance, etc.), repetition (of words/phrases), figures of speech (e.g., simile, metaphor, personification, etc.),

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[1] Adele Berlin, "Introduction to Hebrew Poetry" in *The New Interpreter's Bible, vol IV*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 301.

[2] Adele Berlin, "Reading Biblical Poetry" in *The Jewish Study Bible* eds Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford, 2004), 2097-98.

imagery, symbolism, compression, and dialogue/monologue formats. What do not work with Hebrew poetry are: rhyme, rhythm, and meter. Why? Since the earliest Hebrew manuscripts are un-pointed (i.e., do not have vowels), we really do not know the sounds of words, so there is no way to identify, with any certainty, a rhyme scheme. Without the vowels, we also cannot identify syllables and, therefore, cannot identify rhythm or meter. If we are relying on translations of the Hebrew texts (English or other), then we cannot rely on syntax/word ordering, because the translations do not reflect the way the Hebrew lines are structured. As mentioned above, even the way that a text is presented (poetry or prose) is the reflection of the translators' definitions of these literary forms.

So, is there something else?

Parallelism

Since the lectures of Bishop Robert Lowth in 1753, in which he identified parallelism as the identifying characteristic of Hebrew poetry, this has been the main focus of the study of the Psalms. One must recognize that parallelism occurs in non-poetic texts, so it, in and of itself, is not a guarantee of a text being poetry. Lowth defined parallelism as "the correspondence of one verse or line with another. When a proposition is delivered and a second subjoined to it or drawn under it, equivalent or contrasted with it, in sense; or similar to it in the form of Grammatical construction; these I call parallel lines; and the words or phrases answering one to another in the corresponding lines, parallel terms."[3] Hebrew poetry usually consists of short sentences that contain 2 (or 3) brief clauses, divided by a slight pause with the second clause followed by a full pause. For example:

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[3] Bishop Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (London: Joseph T. Buckingham, 1815), p 253 n 10.

_____A_____ / _____B_____ //. Parallelism describes the relationship between A and B,[4] this relationship can occur on many levels.

Lowth identified three types of parallelism: synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic. Examples of each type are provided below, but first we will cover the basic definitions for each type. In Synonymous Parallelism, B mirrors/echoes A; the second colon says essentially the same thing as the first colon, only using different words (synonyms of those in A).   In Antithetic Parallelism, B contradicts, or states the opposite of A; the second colon makes a statement that either is a contradiction or a contrast of the first colon. Lowth's third type is the hardest to define and is really a "catch-all" category. In his Synthetic Parallelism, the relationship between A and B is something other than synonymous or antithetic. This is clearly the weakest part of Lowth's theory, but since he suggested these categories, other scholars have sought to identify more specific types of Synthetic Parallelism. These include: Completion (where B completes A), Climatic/Stair-step (where the thought of B expands and reinforces the thought of A; there is a logical progression and building of thought), Explanation (where B provides the justification or reason for A), Emblematic (B builds up the thought in A by use of similes), Semantic (A and B contain expressions either close in meaning or sequentially related or both), Morphological (B employs words of same/contrasting parts of speech/syntactic function as those in A), and Syntactic (B contains a same/contrasting grammatical structure as A). The last three are easier to identify when reading the texts in Hebrew. There are other classification systems, but these give the idea of what has been done to further define/delineate Synthetic Parallelism.

Examples:

Synonymous Parallelism: Ps 117:1

      Praise the LORD, all you nations

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[4] A word about terminology: a line of poetry is called a colon (cola, pl) and two lines are bicolon or three are tricolon. Bicolon is the most basic form of occurrence in Hebrew poetry, although monocola do occur (e.g., Ps 1:1). A verse is made up of cola, stanzas are made up of verses.

Extol the Lord, all you peoples!

Antithetic Parallelism: Prov 10:1

A wise child makes a glad father,

but a foolish child is a mother's grief.

Synthetic Parallelism: SoS 2:4

He brought me to the banqueting house,

his intention toward me was love.

Completion: Ps 95:3

For the LORD is the great God,

the great Ruler above all gods.

Climactic/Stair Step: Ps 29:1

Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones,

ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

Explanation: Ps 130:4

But there is forgiveness with you,

That you may be feared.

Emblematic: Ps 22:17

Dogs surround me,

a group of evildoers encircles me.

Semantic: Isa 40:9

Ascend a high hill, Herald to Zion,

Lift your voice aloud, Herald to Jerusalem.

Morphological (can be in gender, verb form, pronouns, etc.): Ps 51:19

    The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken (feminine) spirit;

    a broken (masculine) and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Syntactic: Ps 103:10

    Not according to our sins did God deal with us,

    And not according to our transgressions did God requite us.

One example of 4 cola: Ps 17:7-8 [line 3 is parallel with line 1, line 4 with line 2]

    The teaching of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.
    The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.
    The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.
    The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

At a basic level, parallelism (at least certain types) is a form of repetition. The repetition of ideas, words, images, and sounds is a common feature of poetry in general and of Hebrew poetry specifically. Repetition can be seen at a larger structural level than just one verse (2 cola). One example is a Chiastic Pattern, where parallel terms/ideas are repeated in reverse order. Here are few examples of common chiastic structures:

    $A\text{-}B\text{-}A^1$

    $A\text{-}B\text{-}B^1\text{-}A^1$

    $A\text{-}B\text{-}C\text{-}B^1\text{-}A^1$

    $A\text{-}B\text{-}C\text{-}D\text{-}C^1\text{-}B^1\text{-}A^1$

The concept is that the message of the poem is structured so that it builds inward to a point and then builds outward to the initial idea. Or, the poem builds to a climax (middle line) and then moves backward from that climax. In either case, the lines with the "prime" letters (e.g, A prime – A1) echo the ideas of their paired lines. An example from the Psalms would be Ps 117:

(A)	Praise the Lord, all you nations!
	Extol God, all you peoples!
(B)	For great is God's steadfast love toward us,
	and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.
(A¹)	Praise the Lord!

Another way Hebrew poetry is structured and given context is through Numerical Patterns. Contrary to what might first come to our minds, this pattern is not about repeating a number, or numbers, over and over. Rather, this pattern is present when words or phrases are repeated a certain number of times with that number having a deeper significance. For example, a word might be repeated seven times, which represents "perfection or completeness" in the Israelite faith. For example, in Ps 20 "the voice of the LORD" is repeated seven times. Another possible Numerical Pattern, which is especially connected to wisdom texts, is a sequencing of numbers. We see this in Amos 1-2, where the pattern, "for three transgressions, for four . . ." is repeated as the introduction to the oracles against the nations.

A final structure used by Hebrew poets (and by English ones) is an Acrostic Pattern. In this format, each line of a poem begins with the next letter of the alphabet (e.g., Ps 119) or with the next letter in a word. While there are no biblical examples of the latter form of an Acrostic Pattern, it does exist in poetry found in other cultures/languages. How many of us have, at some time in our lives (probably childhood), been asked to write a poem using our name as the overarching structure, where each line begins with the next letter of our name? There are examples in Assyrian and other languages of "Message Acrostics", where the first word/letter of each line spells out a message. Although no one has found clear evidence of this in the Hebrew Bible, one of the results from my dissertation on Ps 119 is a theory that it is an "end-word acrostic". If, in the Hebrew, a person reads the last word of each line, the result would be a 176 word summary of the psalms message, quite the synopsis for a poem that is 176 verses long.

These Acrostic Patterns, unfortunately, do not appear in English translations of the Psalms, though some versions will print the letter of the Hebrew Alphabet (approximately 22 letters) for each line/stanza. In addition to Ps 119, other alphabetic acrostics include: Pss 9-10 (one pattern), 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, and 145.

Other repetitive patterns found in Hebrew Poetry include:[5]

> Anaphora: several consecutive lines begin with same word: Eccl 3:2-8 "a time to".

> Cataphora: consecutive lines end with same word or phrase: Isa 40:13-14 "instructed him."

> Anadiplosis: last word/phrase begins the next line: Ps 96:13 "before the LORD; for the LORD is coming, for the LORD is coming to judge the earth. The LORD will judge the world with righteousness."

> Side-by-side Repetition: immediate repetition of same word/phrase: Isa 40:1 "comfort, comfort" and Isa 28:10 "For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little."

> Refrain: word/phrase/line repeated after each verse or subdivision of the poem: Ps 136 "for God's steadfast love endures forever."

> Inclusio: poem begins and ends with the repetition of the same word/phrase: Ps 103 "Bless the LORD, O my soul."

> Assonance: the repetition of sounds (in the Hebrew): Eccl 7:1: *tob sem missemen tob*

Parallelism and many of the patterns/techniques named above are, at a deep level, about balance: word with word, verse with verse, sound with sound, etc. This

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[5] The following is adapted from Berlin, "Introduction to Hebrew Poetry", 311.

"balancing act" of the Hebrew poets provided a focus on not only the meaning of the particular poem but also an underlying message about finding balance in one's life. On a broader scale, the Hebrew language also has sense of balance (grammatically, syntactically, and semantically), whether it be in prose or poetry. Within the Hebrew Bible, the concept of *shalom* plays a major role in theological perspectives represented in the texts. Shalom has suffered from the unfortunate oppression of translators who have limited its meaning to "peace". A better and fuller translation would be the English word "wholeness", which certainly encompasses peace but is so much more. It is the testimony of the Hebrew Bible, especially the Psalms, that God is the Source of Shalom and that God desires for all of Creation to experience this Divinely envisioned wholeness. The balance of Hebrew Poetry functions within the Psalms, at a deep level, by reinforcing the claim that prayer is a path to discovering God's Shalom.

Lisa's pet peeve or "How to sound educated when reading a psalm text"

Even though Polish gave a nod to the idea that the Psalms is a book made-up of chapters, that is not the dominant scholarly opinion. Rather, most see the Psalms as being a collection of numbered prayers (of course the numbers were a late addition). So, when reading a psalm in worship or other public setting, do NOT say: "A reading from Psalms 42." Instead, the proper introduction/wording would be: "A reading of Psalm 42." Only use the plural form, psalms, when referring to the entire Psalter or when you are reading/referring to more than one psalm ("I will be reading portions of Psalms 40 and 43." OR "I will be reading portions of Psalm 40 and Psalm 43.). Doing this will prevent your professor from pulling her hair out in frustration! ☺

If you have any questions, please contact me as soon as possible [mailto:lisa.davison@ptstulsa.edu].