

impenitence (vid., 7:13f., 109:17). Where, however, as in Ps. 69 and 109, the imprecations go into particulars and extend to the descendants of the unfortunate one and even on to eternity, the only justification of them is this, that they flow from the prophetic spirit, and for the Christian they admit of no other adoption, except as, reiterating them, he gives the glory to the justice of God, and commends himself the more earnestly to His favour.”²⁶

7. Hallel (Pss 113–118)

E. Genre and literary features of Psalms

As we come to Psalms we must bear in mind the critical issue of genre. While we may identify multiple subgenres in Psalms (e.g., hymn, praise, lament, penitential, thanksgiving, etc.), we should first remember that they are poetry. Indeed, the psalms were meant for corporate singing in Israel, but as we study them as texts, they are poetry first.

One reason I highlight the poetic nature of Psalms above their ‘song’ status is how different they are from modern songs. Even if we completely bypass most modern music and take only the most substantive hymnody for contrast, Psalms outstrips it all in two significant ways: *substance* and *form*.

Psalms as poetry, then, must be read understanding its key literary features. We tend to recognize modern poetry by rhyme and meter. (Incidentally, I would argue that rhyme and meter make less out of substance and more out of ‘show’ [i.e., sound].) While there are, no doubt, elements of rhythm and meter in Psalms, these are only condiments to the meat that grandly overshadows them—the substance of the text.

A remarkable thing about the key literary features of Psalms is that they are form-conceptual, so they come through in translation. Wherever a poetic movement makes much of rhyme and meter, such features would be doomed to naught in translation!

The most prominent feature of ancient Hebrew poetry is parallelism.

1. Parallelism

The effect of parallelism is like that of a dimmer switch. Imagine a dark room full of furniture. As the dimmer switch is lifted a little, then gradually and in grayscale the basic contours of the objects become visible. As the switch is slid up more, the color, depth, dimension, and details come into view.

The first line of a parallel structure just nudges up the dimmer switch—it begins the thought; it introduces the concept. Then the subsequent line or lines slide the

²⁶ Franz Delitzsch, *Psalms*, trans. Francis Bolton, Commentary on the Old Testament (reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 44–45.

dimmer switch up, and the snapshot concept is made multidimensional. We apprehend a dynamic concept.

a. Affirming parallelism²⁷

To describe affirming parallelism as ‘saying the same thing or repeating an idea with different words’ is sorely flawed (hence my preference for calling it “affirming” rather than “synonymous”). If the net effect is saying the same thing, why say it? There is more to the inspired words than bare repetition.²⁸

Affirming parallelism, by stacking comparable expressions, depicts one truth with growing detail and dynamism.

(1) Psalm 51:2

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin.

(2) Psalm 119:105

Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path.

(3) Psalm 7:16

His mischief will return upon his own head,
And his violence will descend upon his own pate.

b. Opposing parallelism²⁹

Opposing parallelism depicts a spiritual dynamic by unveiling a contrast.

(1) Psalm 37:21–22

The wicked borrows and does not pay back,
But the righteous is gracious and gives.
For those blessed by Him will inherit the land,
But those cursed by Him will be cut off.

²⁷ Sometimes called *synonymous parallelism*. I regard most of what has been called *synthetic parallelism* to be simply affirming parallelism.

²⁸ This is not to deny the function of word repetition or three-fold repetition (e.g., Deut 16:20; Isa 6:3). But this common method of emphasis is not poetic parallelism.

²⁹ Sometimes called *antithetic parallelism* or *antithetical parallelism*.

(2) Psalm 146:9

The LORD protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow,
But He thwarts the way of the wicked.

c. Climactic parallelism³⁰

Remember winding up a toy car by pulling it back, back, back, then letting it go?

Climactic parallelism accentuates a truth by compounding expressions with growing specificity or vigor.

(1) Psalm 3:1–2

O LORD, how my adversaries have increased!
Many are rising up against me.
Many are saying of my in soul, “There is no deliverance for him in God.” Selah.

(2) Psalm 5:4–6

For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness;
No evil dwells with You.
The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes;
You hate all who do iniquity.
You destroy those who speak falsehood;
The LORD abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit.

(3) Psalm 29:1–2

Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of the mighty,
Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due to His name;
Worship the LORD in holy array.

(4) Psalm 93:2–4

Your throne is established from of old; You are from everlasting.
The floods have lifted up, O LORD,
The floods have lifted up their voice,
The floods lift up their pounding waves.
More than the sounds of many waters,

³⁰ Sometimes sub-classified as a form of synthetic parallelism.

Than the mighty breakers of the sea,
The LORD on high is mighty.

2. Word pairs

A word pair takes a word (or words commonly used together) as its theme and unfolds some aspect(s) of it. Often word pairs are used in conjunction with parallelism.

a. Psalm 1:6

For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.

b. Psalm 84:3–4

The bird also has found a house,
And the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young,
Even Your altars, O LORD of hosts, My King and my God.
How blessed are those who dwell in Your house!
They are ever praising You. Selah.

c. Psalm 127:3–4

Behold, children are a gift of the LORD,
The fruit of the womb is a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,
So are the children of one's youth.

3. Figures of speech

Figures of speech always play a significant role in any creative rhetorical mode.

a. Simile

(1) Psalm 1:3a

He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,

(2) Psalm 36:6ab

Your righteousness is like the mountains of God;
Your judgments are like a great deep.

b. Metaphor

(1) Psalm 84:11

For the LORD God is a sun and shield;

(2) Psalm 31:3a

For You are my rock and my fortress;

c. Metonymy

Metonymy uses a word to represent a broader reality or concept.³¹

(1) Psalm 10:15a

Break the arm of the wicked and the evildoer,

(2) Psalm 75:10

And all the horns of the wicked He will cut off,
But the horns of the righteous will be lifted up.

(3) Psalm 45:6 (cf. Ps 110:2)

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever;
A scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom.

d. Idiom

(1) Psalm 1:2

But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.

(2) Psalm 110:7

He will drink from the brook by the wayside;
Therefore He will lift up His head.

(3) Psalm 139:5

You have enclosed me behind and before,
And laid Your hand upon me.

³¹ Closely related to metonymy is synecdoche. Synecdoche uses a word (which is physically part of something) to represent the whole of that thing (e.g., *wheels* for *car*). Where synecdoche might be identified in Psalms, I consider them simply idioms (e.g., Ps 3:3b, where lifting of the head is an idiom for giving honor [cf. Gen 40:13, 20; 2 Kgs 25:27 (Heb.); Ps 110:7]; 109:27, where *hand* commonly represents power).

e. Personification

(1) Psalm 19:4–5

Their line has gone out through all the earth,
And their utterances to the end of the world.
In them He has placed a tent for the sun,
Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber;
It rejoices as a strong man to run his course.

(2) Psalm 98:8

Let the rivers clap their hands,
Let the mountains sing together for joy

4. Chiasm

Chiasm³² presents parallel ideas in a corresponding pattern, often with an emphasis in the middle.

– Psalm 97 (antithetical chiasm)

A Gladness of the earth (1)
B Darkness (2)
C Destruction of His adversaries (3)
D Totality of awe (4–6)
E Divergent responses (7–8)
D' Totality of supremacy (9)
C' Preservation of His people (10)
B' Light (11)
A' Gladness of His people (12)

F. Unity of purpose

God is to be acknowledged in, and praised for, every aspect of life. Sin is vain and foolish, and the LORD reigns eternally.

G. Excurses

1. Learning 'Psalmic': understanding the genre and literary features of Psalms

Genre, in biblical studies, refers to the various rhetorical modes, literary forms, or types of writing, that appear in the Bible. Three broad categories of genre often

³² Also called *chiasmus* or *palistrophe*.

identified in the Old Testament are prose, prophecy and poetry. These categories can be further subdivided into five or ten classifications as illustrated below³³:

Old Testament								
Prose			Prophecy			Poetry		
Narrative	History	Law	(Combination of Prose and Poetry)			Psalm		Wisdom
			Oracles of Salvation	Announcements of Judgment	Apocalyptic	Lament	Praise	Proverbial Non-Proverbial

Just as we don't expect the same thing from a funeral dirge as we would from a limerick, so we don't approach Psalms the same way we would law, narrative, or epistle. As we approach Psalms, we need to remember that it is poetry, and because it is poetry, we need to orient ourselves in our approach to it. We need to learn 'Psalmic.'

We do not approach a poem the same way we would a news article or instruction manual, and we don't approach Scripture as though it were written as an encyclopedia. Nevertheless, "Your law is truth" (Ps 119:142) and "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). And Psalms, in particular, demonstrates that it is truth written from the most *human* of circumstances.

A Human-Divine Product

Psalms, like all Scripture, has both a human and divine author (2 Pet 1:20–21). In Psalms we see expressions of humanity, which are simultaneously divine revelation. Scripture was composed in the most unexpected of ways. The authors were not writing from ivory towers, but from jails, from experiences in a fish, in caves, from exile, foreign palaces and foreign lands. And the Law of God wasn't written from a law office or a congressional chamber; the Law of God was written in "that great and terrible wilderness" (Deut 1:19). Many psalms were written from persecution (Ps 38) from fear (Ps 56), from depression (Ps 88), etc. Most of the psalms are prayers—and prayer is borne out of neediness.

Referring to the book of Psalms as "An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul," Calvin explained, "for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror."³⁴ Psalms drips with expressions of human experience (Ps 13:1; 51:7–12). Yet through such expressions we hear the instruction of God—sometimes unmediated (Ps 50:10–15).

³³ This table is adapted from an illustration and nomenclature from Ronald L. Giese, Jr., "Literary Forms of the Old Testament" in D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., eds., *Cracking Old Testament Codes* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 18–19.

³⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 4:xxxvii.

“Often ... [the psalms] include a record of the psalmist’s own inner emotions of discouragement, anxiety, or thankful joy in the face of the opposition of God’s enemies or in view of God’s varied providences. But whether the psalmist is occupied with a mournful or a joyous theme, *he always is expressing himself as in the presence of the living God.*”³⁵

Poetic Form: Inspired Syntax

As we read Psalms, we should keep in mind that the author imposed upon himself a form, and he did so in order to express himself precisely the way he wanted. Just as we would uphold the importance of syntax in New Testament epistolary, so must we of the psalms. Equally true of every genre, the meaning is found not only in the words themselves but also how they are arranged (i.e., syntax).

“[T]he inspiration of Scripture extends to the very choice of the words and sentences of Scripture, and that means it extended to and incorporated the various genres of biblical literature.

....

[M]any psalms teach doctrinal truths about God and man, but they do so in a poetic genre. God could have communicated those same truths through different genres. In fact, in other Old Testament books they are taught through prophetic literature or the wisdom literature of Job, Proverbs, or Ecclesiastes. The New Testament also teaches many of the same truths through the epistolary genre.

....

Perhaps the reason is also that there is a certain content God can communicate by means of the poetic form, the aphoristic form of Proverbs, the narrative form of the historical books, or the apocalyptic form of some of the prophetic literature, a content that goes beyond the mere meanings of the words in the sentences. For example, it is surely possible for us to write a biblical theology of Job or to incorporate its content into a broader systematic theology or philosophy text. But to do that would lose something. In Job, we do not find reflections about God written in the third person by an uninvolved writer as we might if we were reading a theology or philosophy text. Instead, through the direct speeches of Job and his friends, we feel the emotion that attaches to the ideas they discuss and the events they experience. This is not some abstract theological treatise. It is the deepest emotional expression of a man in the midst of an existential crisis of faith. By using this form, the biblical writer not only informs us that evil is an intellectual problem for theistic belief. He shows us that in real life it can precipitate a personal crisis of faith. The author could have simply told us this, but instead, he *showed* us exactly what it means by *showing* us Job’s raw emotions as he experienced evil and interacted with his ‘comforters.’ The genre and style of the book communicate so much more than the mere content of the words

³⁵ Archer, Jr., *Old Testament Introduction*, 487; emphasis added.

themselves. Of course, if God had chosen, the intellectual answers the book offers could have been communicated in a different genre. But it is hard to see how Job's feelings and his religious crisis could be so clearly and effectively communicated through another genre. Anyone who has experienced significant affliction, thought Job's thoughts, and felt his emotions will understand how much would be lost if, for example, Job's writer had written in the genre of philosophical discourse or systematic theology.

Indeed, we must analyze the genres of biblical literature not as incidental and accidental to the authors' message but as part of the very substance of what they are saying."³⁶

Benefiting from the Psalms: Meditation and Neediness

Psalms demands a prayerful-meditative approach. Scripture teaches not only its reading, but also its meditation (cf. Josh 1:8; Ps 1:1–2; 27:4). All Scripture is inexhaustible in its richness and application, and just as is the case with all Scripture, so clarity and application from your study of Psalms will be stymied apart from the discipline of meditation.

To paraphrase Dr. Zemek, "Identifying the structure and outlining—think particularly of the Psalms—can be like a hermeneutical wrestling, a hermeneutical 'Jacob,' wrestling all night with the structure. People may look at a text and think it looks like a Picasso, but a studied examination with descriptive outline will reveal order, structure, and clarity." If you come to the pulpit without confidence that you have exegetically discerned the structure of the passage—or without the ability to communicate it clearly—then you 'tapped out' in your study.

Just as the composition of Palms was borne out of neediness, so your benefit from and appreciation of the psalms are directly proportional to your neediness, your hunger and thirst for them, and your meditation in them.

Application

To generalize, Paul's epistles can be described as formal didactic, logically progressing argument, networked with systematically-placed conjunctions.

We cannot read a psalm and categorize its theology line by line. If we could, here we would have a schedule of times to be without fear:

You will not be afraid of the terror by night,
or of the arrow that flies by day;
of the pestilence that stalks in darkness,

³⁶ John S. Feinberg, "Literary Forms and Inspiration" in D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., eds., *Cracking Old Testament Codes* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 58–60; emphases original.

or of the destruction that lays waste at noon. (Ps 91:5–6)

What is the point? With picturesque and parallel language, the psalmist simply says that no threat at any time should frighten God's people.

Take two more examples:

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path. (Ps 119:105)

Is the psalmist saying one thing or two? Is one room, or two, being illumined by the dimmer switch?

What is the literary feature? Should we search for some theological or applicational difference between lamp and light or feet and path? Think of parallelism as an expanding dynamic, rather than systematic argument. Again:

His mischief will return upon his own head,
And his violence will descend upon his own pate. (Ps 7:16)

Notice three groups of corresponding words:

mischief/violence
return upon/descend upon
his own head/his own pate

Again, we have one scene upon which the light is coming up. There is one basic truth in view, and affirming parallelism raises the dimmer switch so that we get a more comprehensive/multidimensional view of that truth.

We want to understand every word, but the dissection of every word does not necessarily yield distinct theological categories.

2. The shortest psalm

Praise the LORD, all nations;
Glorify Him, all peoples!
For His lovingkindness overwhelms us,
And the truth of the LORD is everlasting!
Praise the LORD! (Ps 117)

The original Hebrew title of this book is *t^ehillim*—"praises." This psalm distills the message of the entire book into just two verses—seventeen Hebrew words.

Notice the two sets of affirming parallelism:

praise/glorify
all nations/all peoples

His lovingkindness/the truth of the LORD
overwhelms/everlasting

It is evangelistic!

III. Job

A. Designations

B. Author and date

The author is unknown. Events ca. 2300–1500 BC; writing in the same range.

Broadly speaking, we may say that the events of Job took place between the lives of Abraham and Moses.

C. Structure

Introduction: Job's character and behind the scenes facts (1:1–2:13)

Discourses

I. Misguided counsels: Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar (3:1–31:40)

II. God's righteousness upheld: Elihu (32:1–37:24)

III. Divine rhetoric: God (38:1–42:6)

Epilogue: Job's restoration (42:7–17)

D. Selected doctrines in Job

1. Theodicy

2. The preeminence of the Almighty (Job 22:21–27)

3. Effectual prayer (Job 22:21–27; cf. 8:5–6; 33:26)

4. Repentance (Job 22:21–27; cf. 8:5–6)

5. Imputed righteousness (Job 33:26)

6. Chastening of God for one's spiritual well-being (Job 33:13–30)

7. Cosmology (Job 26:5–14)

8. The Almighty’s sovereignty over His creation (Job 38–42)

E. Unity of purpose

God, the Almighty, demonstrated to the angels, Satan, and the world that true faith in Him cannot be destroyed, regardless of circumstances.

F. Application

IV. Proverbs

A. Designations

B. Authors and date

– Solomon

Collection 1 (1:1–9:18)

Collection 2 (10:1–22:16)

Collection 5 (25:1–29:27)

– “the wise”

Collection 3 (22:17–24:22)

Collection 4 (24:23–34)

– Agur

Collection 6 (30:1–33)

– Lemuel

Collection 7 (31:1–31)

ca. 970–931 BC (cf. Prov 25:1 for some later compilation, ca. 690 BC)

C. Structure

- I. Introduction [of Solomon] (1:1–9:18)
- II. Proverbs of Solomon (10:1–22:16)
- III. Sayings of wise men (22:17–24:22)
- IV. Further sayings of wise men (25:1–29:27)
- V. Words of Agur (30:1–33)
- VI. Words of Lemuel (31:1–31)

D. Significant themes of Proverbs

1. Wisdom

Wisdom is supernatural skill for supernatural living. Therefore, it cannot be acquired through natural means (Prov 17:16).

Wisdom comes:

- from (Prov 2:6)
- through (Prov 9:10; 15:33; cf. 1:7)
- through (Prov 2:1–10; cf. Matt 5:6)

The Scriptures contain many explicit prohibitions and imperatives, but where they are silent, we do not take it to mean necessarily prohibition or imperative. What is called for is biblical wisdom. We live and minister in context—historical, ecclesiological, and cultural. There are decisions that must be made in light of these realities, and what is needed is not premature, universal prohibitions or imperatives, but rather, studied, prayed, earnest biblical wisdom.

“There are details of character small enough to escape the mesh of the law and the broadsides of the prophets, and yet decisive in personal dealings. Proverbs moves in this realm, asking what a person is like to live with, or to employ; how he manages his affairs, his time and himself. ...

The samples of behaviour which it [Proverbs] holds up to view are all assessed by one criterion, which could be summed up in the question, ‘Is this wisdom or folly?’ This is a unifying approach to life, because it suits the most commonplace realms as fully as the most exalted. Wisdom leaves its signature on anything well made or well judged, from an apt remark to the universe itself, from a shrewd policy ... to a noble action In other words, it is equally at home in

the realms of nature and art, of ethics and politics, to mention no others, and forms a single basis of judgment for them all.”³⁷

“Wisdom is living a biblically informed life. It is remembering the fear of the Lord and God’s instruction before we proceed (Prov. 4). It is thinking before we act. It is considering the consequences of our actions in contrast to giving ‘no thought to the way of life’ (Prov. 5:6). It is remembering what the Lord hates and choosing to hate those things too (Prov. 6:16–19; 8:13). It is learning from the lessons of the past. It is meditating on the good instruction we have received (Prov. 16:20) and being suspicious of our ability to justify our own plans and desires.

Notice how we are tempted to act rashly when we are arrogant, prideful, struggling with cravings, or even riddled with fear. Any time we feel something strongly we feel compelled to act immediately. Wisdom, however, is willing to count to ten—or a thousand—before acting on impulse. It seeks out counsel and submits to it. The wise, thoughtful person loves to have wise people tell her what to do, and the wise, thoughtful person loves to have God do the same.”³⁸

2. The fear of the LORD

a. Its relation to salvation (Prov 2:5; cf. Gen 20:11; Ps 36:1; Rom 3:18; cf. 1 Cor 1:21)

b. Its relation to sanctification (Prov 8:13; 16:6)

c. Learning the fear of the LORD

3. The tongue

“The wise person knows what to say, when to say it, and how to say it.”³⁹

See, e.g., Proverbs 10:19, 32; 11:9, 11; 12:6; 13:2, 3; 14:3; 15:2, 28; 16:23; 18:2, 6–8; 18:20; 19:28; 21:23; 26:28; 27:2; cf. Matt 12:34, 36.

4. The fool

Proverbs consistently points to the fool’s reliance: (cf. Prov 3:5).

³⁷ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 13–14.

³⁸ Edward Welch, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave: Finding Hope in the Power of the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2001), 210–11.

³⁹ Warren Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination: The Quest for Biblical Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 131.

“Essentially he is one who questions the trustworthiness of God’s wisdom revealed to man.”⁴⁰

“The root of his trouble is spiritual, not mental. He *likes* his folly, going back to it ‘like a dog that returns to his vomit’ (26:11); he has no reverence for truth, preferring comfortable illusions (see 14:8 ...). At bottom, what he is rejecting is the fear of the Lord (1:29): it is this that constitutes him a fool, and this that makes his complacency tragic, for ‘the careless ease of fools shall destroy them’ (1:32).”⁴¹

E. Unity of purpose

Divine wisdom is beneficial for every person at every level of maturity, and it has an opportunity to display itself in every aspect of life.

F. Application

V. Ruth

A. Designations

B. Author and date

The author is unknown (possibly Samuel). Date of the events are ca. 1140–1130 BC (cf. Ruth 1:4; the time of David’s great-grandfather Boaz, within the days of the judges [Ruth 1:1]).

C. Structure⁴²

Introduction: A Godly Family Emptied (Ruth 1)

⁴⁰ Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *Every Thought Captive: A Study Manual for the Defense of Christian Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 85.

⁴¹ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 37–38; emphasis original.

⁴² Adapted from David M. Howard, Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody, 1993), 139.