

Understanding the Psalms Through Poetry



PHILIP CALDERONE

LOYOLA SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

PHILIPPINES

The Psalms of Israel have long been recognized as poetry, that is, as texts whose intellectual content is expressed in imaginative and emotional language. This is to say, of course, that a psalm draws its power not merely from its theological ideas, but also from the form of its language, its images, sound and rhythm. Like all poetry, the psalms impart more than knowledge. They express personal feelings and desires. Even today, as much in scholarly analysis as in pious recitation, to be fully understood and appreciated, the psalms need to be received imaginatively and emotionally. They need, that is, to be experienced in the vigor of their imagery and sentiments.¹

While the scholarly approach to understanding a psalm's message from its structure, literary form, style and life-setting, might very well be described as "a process of detachment and analysis," the attempt to appreciate it in terms of its imaginative and emotional qualities is "more an attitude of engagement and receptivity. We need both in order to gain a more profound discernment of any poetry."² Indeed, "a deeper sensitivity to the poetic character of a text can enhance our understanding, and attention to poetic features may aid the interpretative process and its results."³ For by developing an understanding and appreciation of the poetry of the psalms, we come to understand their theological meaning more vividly, more clearly, and thus are in a better position to

¹W. E. Watson, in *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 1-2, suggests that the principal reason for the growing interest in this approach to understanding the psalms, apart from the sustained study of Hebrew poetry, has been the expanding knowledge of poetic techniques, made possible by the recent discovery of Ugaritic and Akkadian poetic texts.

²S. E. Gillingham, *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford Bible Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 4.

³P. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 30.

appropriate these biblical texts for our personal religious life. I hope to substantiate this claim through examples of poetic elements in the Psalter.

Introductory works on the psalms generally treat of the poetry of the Psalms, in terms of "parallelism."⁴ The more technical works include such discussions of their rhythm and meter as can only be appreciated by those who read Hebrew.⁵ Commentaries, as a rule, say little about the poetic elements that constitute the uniqueness of each psalm, beyond indicating the metrical construction in its lines.⁶

There are as numerous debates on the nature of poetry in the Hebrew Scriptures, as there are in English literature.⁷ In one introduction to biblical poetry, criteria for Hebrew verse are listed as aids in distinguishing poetry from prose. Yet subsequent sections contain examples of prose which might be read as poetry, and of poetry which could be read as prose.⁸ In this study, the problem of distinguishing one from the other will not affect our analysis, since psalms are universally accepted as verse. The "hallmarks of poetry" have been identified as a combination of rhythm, parallelism, and various stylistic techniques, like metaphor, simile, figures of speech, repetition. Although these features can also be found in prose, in poetry they occur more frequently and with greater intensity and compactness.⁹

⁴More specific information on biblical poetry is given by Miller, *ibid.*, pp. 29-47; M.S. Smith, *Psalms: the Divine Journey* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 19-26; W. H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Psalms* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), pp. 12-14, 33-43.

⁵*Classical Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 87-113; L. Alonso-Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1988), pp. 34-47. More student-friendly and intended for a general readership is *Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 44-68.

⁶J. L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), p. 5, offers a reason: "Detailed comments on the poetic dimensions of the psalms requires a lot of analytical description and often turns out to be reductionistic." But he intends to "interpret in a way that is constantly sensitive to the poetic quality of the psalms." The three volumes on the Psalms by Craigie, Tate, and Allen, in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, offer brief and at times extended poetic and literary treatment of the subject. See below, notes 23, 46, 56.

⁷See D. L. Petersen and K. H. Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, Old Testament Guides (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 1-19, esp. 6ff.

⁸*Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 21-43; similarly, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 44-62.

⁹*Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 13-14; *Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 18-43.

Poetic rhythm is generally thought to be found in meter, a regularity of a repeated number of accented syllables in each line. Some scholars look for rhythm in matching the number of syllables in each line. Since there is no consensus on what constitutes the rhythm of biblical poetry, and the question presupposes the use of the Hebrew text, the topic can be omitted from our discussion.¹⁰

Semantic Parallelism

Perhaps the most discussed feature of biblical poetry is the highly visible phenomenon of parallelism. This is seen in the balance and symmetry between adjacent lines, with their elements. Since there is little consistency in the use of terms among scholars, the precise definition of words used in this study is a prerequisite. The basic poetic unit is the line or colon. The bicolon, or couplet, made up of two lines or cola, is the most common unit. A tricolon, of three lines, occurs frequently; occasionally a quatrain of 4 lines, and even a monocolon, of only one line.¹¹

Two consecutive lines are said to be in parallelism when there is some correspondence or balance between the components of each. The correspondence can be semantic, when the meaning in each colon is the same or similar, or even in opposition to each other. Here are examples from Psalm 20: 3 and 7-8 (Hbr. 4 and 8-9).¹²

May he remember all your offerings,
and regard-with-favor your burnt sacrifices. (v. 3)
Some (boast) of chariots, some of horses,
but we boast in the name of our God.
They will collapse and fall,
but we shall rise and stand upright. (vv. 7-8)

¹⁰On the question of rhythm, see *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 87-113; *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, pp. 34-47; *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 37-47; *Poems and Poetry of the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 44-68.

¹¹*Classical Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 11-14.

¹²All the poetic examples in this article are from the psalms, and the quotations are taken from the *Revised Standard Version* of the *Holy Bible*, unless otherwise noted.

In the first couplet, the corresponding words are almost synonymous: *remember* / *regard-with-favor*, *offerings* / *burnt sacrifices*. This alignment has been called "synonymous parallelism." But in the second pair of couplets, there is opposition in meaning, an "antithetic parallelism," between the components in each line: some rely on instruments of war; we rely on God. (The *grammatical* parallelism is clear, with the same syntactic order: subject—verb—phrase.)

The third type proposed by Robert Lowth, "synthetic parallelism," contains no semantic repetition or contrast, but can include any other type of relationship between the lines.¹³ In the past two decades of biblical poetry analysis, however, this threefold category has been set aside as both misleading and impractical. The third type is too vague and requires further classification. The claim that "no language has entirely true synonyms,"¹⁴ though perhaps hyperbolic, underscores the numerous variations between words and expressions with supposedly the same meaning.

The often quoted statement of James Kugel is a strong critique of complete synonymy: "Biblical parallelism is of one sort, 'A, and what's more, B' or of a hundred sorts; but it is not three."¹⁵ This opens the way to recognize an innumerable variety of relations between the two parallel lines (A and B in his terminology). "It is the dual nature of B both to come after and thus add to it, often particularizing, defining, or expanding the meaning, and yet to harken back to A and in an obvious way connect to it."¹⁶ Hence to understand the full meaning of the couplet, we have to reread the first line in the light of the modification and transformation effected by the second line. Kugel also highlights the emphatic nature of the second line (B) as "strengthening, and reinforcing" the idea in the first line (A).

The view of a predominantly synonymous parallelism in biblical poems would assume static ideas and actions that are simply repeated

¹³Robert Lowth published *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews in Latin* in 1753, and these came out in English in 1839. He was a key figure in the history of Hebrew poetic studies, emphasizing the three types of parallelism as the basis of Hebrew poetry. For a brief sketch of his work, see *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 21-27.

¹⁴R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 13.

¹⁵J. L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 58.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 47.

in the second consecutive line. In sharp contrast, Robert Alter points to the “dynamic movement from one verset [line] to the next.”¹⁷ While all literature thrives on parallelism, it avoids complete parallelism and strives to introduce differences and modifications between related terms. Beyond the change, there can also be development or intensification from the first to the second parallel line.

A common pattern in biblical poetry is a movement from ordinary words to more poetic or literary language.¹⁸

Hear my prayer, O Lord,
Give ear to my supplications. (Ps 143:1)

Are thy wonders known in the darkness,
or thy saving help in the *land of forgetfulness*? (Ps 88:12)

The second lines in these bicola also develop ideas slightly by more specific terms: the prayer becomes fervent petitions repeated, and the wonders include acts of salvation.

The second, specifying term can also be metaphorical.

O Lord, heal me, for my *bones* are troubled. (6:2)

[God] will snatch and tear you from your tent;
he will *uproot* you from the land of the living. (52:5)

Often the specifying term in the second line concretizes and intensifies the idea in the first, at times with a comparison, or even with a dramatic expression.

Thou dost smite all my enemies on the cheek;
Thou *dost break the teeth* of the wicked. (3:7)

You shall break them with a rod of iron,
and *dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel*. (2:9)

May his foes bow down before him,
and his enemies *lick the dust*. (72:9)

¹⁷ *Art of Biblical Poetry*, p. 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-23, where Alter presents many patterns and samples of poetic texts. For other examples, see *Interpreting the Psalms*, pp. 30-40.

The numerous diverse relations between nearly synonymous or repetitive ideas in parallel lines have been described as echoing, matching, seconding. More often there is discernible some modification or development that is specifying, concretizing, also explaining, elaborating, or continuing the first line, or even in contrast with it.¹⁹ The power of parallelism lies particularly in the emphatic character of the second line, heightening, reinforcing, intensifying the first line. A list classifying the different relationships would be tedious and unhelpful; only careful analysis can reveal the precise connections between the individual words and various lines.²⁰

There can also be progression in series of parallel lines with equivalences, contrasts, and other variations that build up a unified poem and can lead through a climactic structure to a culminating point. This phenomenon is frequent with psalms of lament.²¹

Parallelism in Psalm 6

An illustration of these features is found in Psalm 6, generally classified as lament of an individual in time of sickness, with the frequent optimistic conclusion that can even approach gratitude.

- 1 O Lord, rebuke me not in thy anger,
nor chasten me in thy wrath.
- 2 Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing;
O Lord, heal me, for my bones are troubled.
- 3 My soul is also troubled.
But thou, O Lord - how long?

The initial bicolon, or couplet, contains two imperative verbs with negatives and phrases in grammatical and semantic parallelism. Though

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 29. Alter cautiously calculates that instances of this intensification occur in two-thirds of the parallel lines.

²⁰Cf. the various attempts at categorization in *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 34-35. Watson lists a classification of twenty-five categories, with five main divisions in a review of *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28 (1984), p. 90.

²¹*The Art of Biblical Poetry*, pp. 62-84, esp. 62-72, with analyses of Psalms 13 and 39 as instructive examples.

clearly synonymous, there might be a variation, even intensity, in the verbs: "rebuke" pertaining simply to words, and "chasten" implying physical punishment. The second couplet is also in perfect balance, each line having an imperative, followed by a subordinate clause giving motivation. The ideas move from the general to the specific: "be gracious" is in parallel with the concrete "healing"; "languishing," with "troubled bones." Thus physical sickness is his complaint. In v. 3, internal turmoil of the soul is followed by an emotional outburst: "but thou, O Lord, how long?" The relationship between the two lines starts off with antithesis: "my soul" and "thou" but shifts to the ellipsis, the omission of whatever would complete the sentence, with the cry "How long . . . (must I suffer? or before you answer)? Overcome with emotion, the lamenter cannot express his thoughts.

- 4 Turn, O Lord, save my life;
 deliver me for the sake of thy steadfast love.
 5 For in death there is no remembrance of thee;
 in Sheol who can give thee praise?

The petitions continue with three imperatives, "turn, deliver, save" that show a sequence of turning, delivering from trouble and the total saving action. (This is the more literal translation of the verbs which are in this order in the Hebrew text.) The second line matches the first with the important act of saving and goes beyond to include the motive of love (*hesed*), a prime characteristic of God. The next bicolon continues motivation with two sentences semantically parallel. But there is heightening of the general idea of death and the internal act of memory which are balanced in the second line by the specific place of horror "Sheol" and the exuberant act of joyous praise. There is also the grammatical variation of indicative and interrogative sentences.

- 6 I am weary with my moaning;
 every night I flood my bed with tears;
 I drench my couch with my weeping.
 7 My eye wastes away because of grief,
 it grows weak because of all my foes.

The distress may be described in a tricolon (if v. 6a is to be retained, despite its inconsistent thought and incomplete meter).²² The first line would then express a general state of weariness manifested by groans. The following couplet with hyperbole in the verbs specifies the effects of anguish: there is a heightening, first with cascading tears, and then the more intense personal act of weeping. Finally, in the imagery, the organ of sight itself is affected, wasting away and weakening. The phrase in the first line is balanced by the phrase in the second, but "grief" contrasts sharply with the unexpected and external danger from "foes." Here is the climax of depression, a low point in misery and peril.

- 8 Depart from me, all you workers of evil;
for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping;
9 The Lord has heard my supplication;
the Lord accepts my prayer.
10 All my enemies shall be ashamed and sorely troubled;
they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment.

The defiant command to these evil-doers marks the turning point, a sudden change of mood from deepest anguish to triumph, and links the conclusion thematically to the previous line.²³ This bicolon joins the imperative sentence with a following causal statement: "for the Lord has heard." The next couplet repeats these words, revealing the joy and confidence of the petitioner, and then explains the simple divine "hearing" as full "acceptance."

The concluding bicolon focuses on the enemy who are "shamed," the translation of a few Hebrew synonyms used often for defeat or downfall.²⁴ They are the ones now "troubled" (*balal*), in antithesis to

²²H. J. Kraus, *Psalms 1-59. A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), p. 160, considers v. 6a a later addition or a fragment of a complete line. It has only two words and two accented syllables, unlike the regular three accents in almost all the other lines.

²³The sudden emotional shift from anguish to confidence is explained by many commentators as the result of an oracle or priestly word of hope, recited after the petitioner's prayer and expressions of grief (v. 7). See *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, pp. 163-164; P. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50, Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, Tex.: Word Publishers, 1983), p. 94. Or it could reveal an assurance of faith derived in worship from the conviction of God's promise of salvation to those who ask. See A. Weiser, *The Psalms, Old Testament Library* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), p. 61.

²⁴See Psalms 35:4, 26; 83:16-17; 89:45.

the petitioner who was at the outset twice troubled (vv. 2b, 3c). The inclusio or envelope structure, with the same key word at beginning and end, embraces the whole psalm. The two final parallel lines stand in chiasm, with the matching verbs in reverse order: shame—troubled // turn back—shame. This positioning highlights the theme of “shamed,” another key word that resolves the problem of trouble. Here is the culmination of the poem. The petitioner is “delivered” by the intervention of God’s acceptance of the prayer, and the enemies, harassing and taking advantage of the man who was ill, will now be (are as good as) defeated and shamed.²⁵ Faith in the Lord’s “steadfast love” (*hesed*) led to the confidence and unshakable conviction that he had accepted the trusting prayer of the psalmist.

Poetic stylistic considerations confirm the RSV division of strophes. The parallel bicola in the first and second strophes both begin with imperatives and end with questions.²⁶ There is moreover a balance of three bicola in the first and last strophes, and also (if v. 6a is an addition) of two bicola in the two middle strophes. This overall balance of the whole poem is fully congruous with the consistent parallelism of the bicola that is varied with heightening effects and two notable contrasts: the ellipsis in v. 3a and the mention of “foes” in v. 7b. The “foes” and the “shamed enemies” in the last strophe highlight the tremendous relief from the external factor of harassment which appears in so many laments of the sick.

Grammatical Parallelism

In recent years scholars have utilized the science of linguistics to move beyond the semantic parallelism of lines to include the study of words,

²⁵*Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, p. 160, eliminates the repeated word, “they will be shamed” in v. 10, as an unlikely occurrence. This view is subjective and unjustified. The poetic effect of the chiasm, with the emphasis on a key word in the conclusion confirms the originality of the word in the text.

²⁶C. Stuhlmueller, *Psalm 1, Old Testament Message 21* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983), p. 79. This simple stylistic feature is a convincing reason for the correct strophic division, as presented in the Bibles (*RSV, New American Bible, Jerusalem Bible*). The commentators’ use of form-critical elements for their divisions is less satisfying. See, e. g., *Psalm 1-59: A Commentary*, p. 160, who separates v. 1 as the call. *Psalm 1-50*, p. 92 joins vv. 4-7 as the central strophe, thereby obliterating the carefully balanced construction of the whole psalm.

sounds, grammatical forms and syntax. Parallelism is now understood under various aspects: the lexical (for words), the grammatical (involving syntax and the variable forms of nouns and verbs), the phonological (pertaining to the repetition of similar consonants and vowels).²⁷ The grammatical forms and the phonological aspect can only be perceived in the Hebrew text of the Psalms and need not be discussed in a general article.

The grammatical aspect of parallelism, particularly the syntactic, is quite fundamental, and helps for immediate perception of the parallelism. It is the syntactic correspondence of one line with another, rarely with a total repetition of the grammatical structure as in Ps 103:10.²⁸

Not according to our sins did he deal with us,
and not according to our transgressions did he
requite us. (A. Berlin's trans.)

The structure of both these lines consists of: negative—phrase—verb—indirect object. Generally there is only syntactic equivalence between two lines, with a grammatically different element in the second line as a substitute for an element in the first.²⁹ In Ps 97:9:

For thou, Lord, art *most high* in all the earth;
Thou *art exalted* far above all gods.

The first line has subject—predicate adjective—phrase. In the second, there is substituted a passive verbal form for the adjective.

A subject in the first line can become the grammatical object in the second, as in Ps 2:7.

²⁷A. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) has thus distinguished the different aspects of parallelism. Others have also developed views on grammatical parallelism, but in various ways: S.A. Geller, *Parallelism in Early Biblical Poetry*, Harvard Semitic Monographs (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979); T. Collins, *Line-Forms in Hebrew Poetry: A Grammatical Approach to the Stylistic Study of the Hebrew Prophets*, Studia Pohl, Series Maior, 17 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1979); M. O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1980).

²⁸*The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, pp. 31-32.

²⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 53-63. Berlin cites examples from many books; we have chosen only a few psalm texts.

You are my son;
today I have begotten you.

There can be a shift in the grammatical mood of the verb: from indicative to interrogative in Ps 6:6.

For in death *there is no* remembrance of thee;
in Sheol *who can* give thee praise?

These few examples indicate how grammar is used to construct parallelism, and how the syntactic equivalence of the two lines calls attention to the semantic parallelism, and underscores the meaning of the couplet.³⁰

Even in translation, the poetic quality of semantic and grammatical parallelism, with their equivalences and contrasts, is discernible and helps for a clearer, richer understanding of the biblical poem. After these and further examples of parallelism, including those in grammatical forms and sound repetitions, Adele Berlin concludes her work: "Parallelism embodies the poetic function, and the poetic function heightens the focus on the message."³¹

Repetition in the Psalms

The message and meaning of any psalm can be clarified, sharpened, intensified by various poetic techniques that contribute to a full and richer interpretation. Repetition has been cited as the underlying basis of many poetic features.³²

Rhythm, perhaps the backbone of all poetry, consists in the repetition of the number of accented syllables in parallel lines (according to a common understanding of Hebrew poetry).³³ A repetition of ideas or of syntactical elements in balanced lines is what characterizes and differentiates semantic and grammatical parallelism. A repetition of distinct sounds can result in a rhyme scheme at the ends of lines, or alliteration (if the same consonants are involved) or assonance (with the same vowels).

³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 140-141.

³²*Classical Hebrew Poetry*, p. 275.

³³See note 9 above.

The repetition of words, whether singly or in groups, is a common literary technique in apparently all languages. This can be boring if overdone, at least according to Western standards. Even in Hebrew poetry authors utilized several devices to avoid repetition and to highlight variation.³⁴ But repetitions are so consistent and frequent in Hebrew literature as to be characteristic, if not an essential aspect of it.³⁵

Repetitions can be helpful in identifying significant themes, linked units, and strophe divisions. A repeated word emphasizes the idea, calls attention to it, and prods the mind to seek the reason behind the emphasis.³⁶

In Psalm 1, the lowly negative particle “not” (lo’) is repeated three times in the first verse, and three times in vv. 4, 5, 6 in significant places.³⁷

Blessed is the man
who walks *not* in the counsel of the wicked,
and stands *not* in the way of sinners,
and sits *not* in the seat of scoffers. (my trans.)

The righteous one is introduced in sharp contrast to the wicked—as not in their counsel, way, seat. In v. 5, the wicked are contrasted with the righteous in not standing in their company (in a trial or at worship).

³⁴*Classical Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 279–282.

³⁵My colleague, Fr. Victor Salanga, S.J., expressed his views forcefully in a written communication: “For Hebrew narratives and poems, repetition is the standard—part of what makes their poem a poem. Non-Hebrew narratives may avoid repetition, but Hebrew narratives and poems require it!” He also cited from the *Oxford Bible Series* on Hebrew narratives what can apply equally well to poetry. “Whereas English prose composition eschews repetition, so that we are constantly looking for synonyms as we write, ancient Hebrew prose enjoys it. The verbatim repetition of a word, phrase, sentence, or set of sentences, or even the recurrence of words falling into the same semantic range can function to structure the story, to create atmosphere, to construct a theme or a character, to emphasize a certain point to the reader, or to build suspense.... Reappearing words and phrases, then, often guide the reader in understanding the narrator’s rhetoric.” See D. M. Gunn and D. N. Fewell, *Narratives in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford Bible Series (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1993), p. 148.

³⁶*Classical Hebrew Poetry*, p. 279. On pp. 274–299, he provides helpful descriptions and various functions of each type of repetition. Also *Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, pp. 75–83, who explains many examples, but avoids “rigid classification” and any summary of functions.

³⁷*Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 89–97, gives a full poetic treatment of Psalm 1.

A transition, like a hinge, begins in v. 4 with the same particle which, together with a change of subject, points to the start of a second strophe.

4 Not so the wicked,
but they are like chaff . . .
5 Therefore the wicked will *not* stand in the judgment,
(nor) sinners in the congregation of the righteous,
6 for the Lord knows the *way* of the righteous
and the *way* of the wicked will perish. (my trans.)

In the concluding verse “way” is repeated and put in chiasmic (reverse) order with the accompanying verbs, thus helping to emphasize again the contrast between the good and the bad. A simple particle or word can illuminate the theme and structure of the whole poem.

In Psalm 3:1 the triple repetition of the “many” foes (in Hebrew, the first is a verbal form) puts emphasis on the seriousness of the petitioner’s distress. “How long” is repeated four times in Psalm 13:1-2, introducing the lines and underscoring the desperation in the lament. The triple use of “awake” highlights the exuberance of a grateful heart in Psalm 57:8 (and in Ps 108:1-2): “Awake, my soul! / Awake, O harp and lyre! / I will awake the dawn!”

Some repeated words stress the theme of the poem and are considered *key words*. Their secondary function is to indicate structural patterns.³⁸ But only a careful calculation of their frequency and relative position will give certainty of their importance. The prime example is Psalm 29 with the “voice of the Lord” repeated seven times, introducing lines, and acting as structural markers separating the body of the poem from the introductory call to praise in vv. 1-2, and from the concluding temple praise in vv. 10-11. The key word leaves no doubt about the theme of God’s power manifested in the thunder peals as the object of heavenly praise.

In Psalm 82 *elohim*, “God” or “gods,” occurs in v. 1ab and the concluding v. 8. The root for “judge” (*shpt*) also appears four times in vv. 1, 2, 3, 8.³⁹ These are clearly key words highlighting the theme of God as

³⁸ *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 287-295, esp. 288.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 290-293. Watson offers a poetic study with diagrammatic outline of Psalm 82.

judge. Similarly, the Lord is said five times in Psalm 121 to keep (*shamar*) you and Israel - truly the guardian of Israel.

The word "holy" is repeated three times in Psalm 99, along with the same root (*rum*), translated "exalted" (v.2) and "extol" (vv. 5, 9). These key words point to the theme of the holy, exalted Lord, described under three aspects, who should be praised by all peoples and his own. They also serve as refrains, segmenting the psalm into three (uneven) strophes. (See below.)

Inclusio, or the envelope figure (or structure), repeats an element, phrase, or line at the beginning and at the end of a poem or a strophe, then puts stress on the words, and delimits smaller units.⁴⁰ This is frequent in the psalms of praise, and immediately identifies the literary type of hymn, with its intent to praise God. The invitation, "Hallelujah," "Praise the Lord," starts off, and concludes Psalms 106, 113, 117, 146-150. With the same purpose, the self-exhortation, "Bless the Lord, O my soul," opens and closes Psalms 103 and 104.

The inclusio of Psalm 8 is more expressive of the awe felt in contemplating the wonders of heaven and mankind: "O Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth." The repetition of "the earth" underlines a dominant theme of God-given human supremacy over lower creation. The repeated particle "all" may be the chief thematic key word which points to God's universal domain over all that he puts in man's power ("under his feet").⁴¹

At times a single word is repeated at both ends of a psalm, but the connection with the theme may not be immediately recognizable, at least not at first hearing.⁴² But when the one-word inclusio becomes familiar to listeners or readers, it can be of interpretative value. Examples are frequent enough: Psalms 1:1, 6, "wicked"; 29:1, 11, "strength"; 17:1, 15, "righteous(ness)"; 73:1, 28, "good"; 96:1, 13, "the earth."⁴³

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 282-287.

⁴¹*Art of Biblical Poetry*, pp. 118-120.

⁴²*Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, p. 62.

⁴³*Classical Hebrew Poetry*, p. 284.

Psalmic Refrains

The refrain is a highly visible type of repetition, composed of a line or a couplet or even a strophe, recurring more than once within a poem.⁴⁴ Its function is structural, dividing the piece into strophes or sense units.⁴⁵ Like keywords it also tends to highlight and clarify the main theme. Minor variations, at times major, can occur in subsequent repetitions and produce remarkable results in indicating a psalm's structure and meaning.

Psalms 42 and 43 are considered to be a single poem, in good part because of the refrain repeated three times.

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

The refrain reflects the moods from "near despair to surging confidence" that are also present in the strophes.⁴⁶ The two units of lament (42:2-5, 7-11) are followed by the prayer (43:1-4, capped with optimism for future praise. The intervening and concluding refrains reiterate the basic themes: the person's anguish and the underlying hope that culminates in the transformed prayer. It now seems to harbor the conviction that God has already heard the plea!⁴⁷ Similar movement from distress and misery to optimism can be found in Psalms 56, 57, 59, and is reflected in their refrains.

Interesting refrains occur in some hymnic refrains that contain elements complicating their precise classification.

Psalm 67, often considered a harvest thanksgiving, begins and ends with the words "May God bless us." But since the moods and tenses of

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 295-299; *Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, p. 192; P.R. Raabe, *Psalm Structures: A Study of Psalms with Refrains* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).

⁴⁵There is disagreement on the relation between strophe and stanza and on their natures, and some tend to identify the two. I shall use "strophe" for a division in a psalm, composed of one or more verses, and generally unified in some way. Full discussion can be found in *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 160-200, and Raabe's work (in previous note) cited in *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, p. 107, n. 16. They provide a brief treatment, pp. 60-61.

⁴⁶*Psalms 1-50*, p. 325.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 329. Also *Interpreting the Psalms*, p. 41.

the verbal forms in vv. 1, 6, 7 are problematic,⁴⁸ many scholars opt for jussive forms and list the classification as a petitionary psalm. Verses 1-2 are a petition, but the refrains in vv. 3 and 5 surround a wish for universal joy and praise of God the judge.

3 Let the people praise thee, O God;

let all the peoples praise thee!

4 Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,

for thou dost judge the people with equity.

If the double refrain can indicate the main theme of the psalm with some certainty, then the universal call to praise - an ordinary synonym for thanks - might better suggest this psalm to be one of thanksgiving. It should then be understood as the RSV presents it.

6 The earth has yielded its increase;

God, our God, has blessed us.

The refrain in Psalm 46:7,11 echoes the main theme immediately introduced in the first verse in the confessional statement about God as refuge and strength.

The Lord of hosts is with us;

the God of Jacob is our refuge.

The threefold repetition of "refuge" highlights the feeling of trust that permeates the whole psalm and has led some scholars to classify this as a "community song of confidence."⁴⁹ It has generally been joined with the "Songs of Zion," praising the Lord dwelling in the Jerusalem temple.⁵⁰ The emphasis on the Lord's protection (vv. 1, 7, 11) and upon the "earth" (vv. 2,6,8,9,10) in all three strophes would indicate that this is the central theme that provides overall unity for the psalm. Thus the

⁴⁸See M. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), pp. 154-155 for discussion and his reasons for classifying this as a prayer. *Psalms 1-50*, p. 300, offers general reasons: "The tone and spirit of this psalms seems to militate against this latter interpretation"—which my emphasis on the refrains would support.

⁴⁹*Psalms 1-50*, pp. 342-343.

⁵⁰*Psalms 1-59*, p. 460.

refrain and its repeated keywords may well tip the balance towards clarifying the literary type as a psalm of trust.

A frequently repeated refrain must have encouraged the hearers, whether in the temple or elsewhere, to participate in the chanting. It has been suggested that copyists may have excised some repetitions, and the worshippers could add them according to their devotion. If true, this could justify the addition of the refrain after Psalm 46:3.⁵¹

A litany of repeated refrains thanking the Lord is the distinctive feature of Psalm 136. "For his steadfast love endures forever" is the reason for thanking God for his works of creation and salvation, that are developed and alternated with the refrain through 26 verses of the poem. The relentless iteration may appear monotonous to modern ears, but indicates the "strong audience participation" in Israel's worship.⁵² Called a "chorus," it is less poetic and artistic than a vivid echo of cultic action. The repeated refrain also puts emphasis on the characteristic of the Lord moving him to perform wondrous deeds: his hesed. There can be no doubt about this central theme, so vital to their faith, that the people acclaimed again and again in their response!

Minor variations in a refrain do not change the message substantially, but they can add emphasis or dramatic effect to some aspect of the theme. Three refrains, preferably to two, divide Psalm 99 into three strophes of unequal length.⁵³

3 Let them praise thy great and terrible name!
Holy is he!

5 Extol the Lord our God;
worship at his footstool!
Holy is he!

9 Extol the Lord our God,
and worship at his holy mountain;
for the Lord our God is holy!

⁵¹"Surely to be inserted" avers Kraus, *ibid.*, p. 462. For the copyists' abstention, see *Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, p. 82.

⁵²*Classical Hebrew Poetry*, p. 296.

⁵³*Ibid.* Here, Watson considers v. 3 a variant term. Stuhlmueller, *Psalms* 2, pp. 92-93, recognizes three strophes. Most commentators see only two, vv. 1-5, 6-9.

The themes of “the holy” and “wholly other and transcendent” Lord is developed through the strophes in terms of the great King, the lover of justice, and the covenantal, forgiving God. The first refrain summons the peoples (of the world!) to praise his great name, the very person of the great King (vv. 1-2). The second and third present commands, presumably to worshipping Israel, to glorify the Lord in the specific locale of the temple mount. The last refrain, longer than the others, forms a climax — a frequent occurrence — concluding with full title “the Lord our God” and repeating it for the fourth time (vv. 5, 8, 9).⁵⁴

A key word in v. 2, or root to be precise (rum), is repeated in the refrains.

2 (He) is exalted over all people (ram, “high”)

5, 9 Extol (exalt) the Lord our God (romemu)

The repeated root helps unite the poem: the high, exalted One rightly deserves to be exalted, praised and petitioned.⁵⁵ The final “our God” underlines the covenantal quality of the holy God-King, which is the theme of the last strophe (vv. 6-8).⁵⁶

In the community lament and prayer of Psalm 80, the refrain in vv. 3, 7, 19 repeats and highlights the basic petition for salvation (v. 2), and divides the poem into three strophes. The variations, “O God” (v.3), “O God of hosts” (v. 7), “O Lord, God of hosts” (v. 19), add merely a slight emphasis with the lengthening vocatives., again in climactic order.⁵⁷

The thanksgiving liturgy for different groups of rescued people in Psalm 107:1-32 is introduced by a call to thanksgiving.⁵⁸ This is echoed in four refrains that segment the song into strophes. Each of the four groups is described regarding their particular distress, prayer, and rescue. Each is finally summoned to thank the Lord, and the specific reasons that follow vary according to circumstances.

⁵⁴ *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, p. 297.

⁵⁵ *Psalms 51-100*, p. 529.

⁵⁶ A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, New Century Bible (London: Oliphants, 1977) II, 693, 697.

⁵⁷ See note 52.

⁵⁸ For varying nuances in explaining the life setting, see L. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, Word Bible Commentary (Waco: Waco Books, 1983), pp. 60-63.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures for ever. (v. 1)

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love (hesed),
for his wonderful works to the sons of men. (vv. 6, 13, 19, 28)

The repetition of this refrain, like that in Psalm 136, may appear less poetic than liturgical. But the introductory command and the four refrains present clearly the whole purpose of the celebration.

Within the narrative of each strophe, there is another bicolon repeated with the word "delivered" reproducing three Hebrew verbs. The variation may be insignificant, but the refrain itself makes the motivation for the liturgy unmistakable.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress. (vv. 6, 13, 19, 28)

Variant refrains have been suggested for somewhat lengthy repetitions. The repeated verses in Psalm 114:4, 6 seem better explained, with most commentators, as dramatic, suspenseful strophes, involving vv. 3-6. In Psalm 144:7-8, 11, the repetition emphasizes the king's distress in the petition, "rescue and deliver me." But it may be simply a variant (according to Gunkel and the Hebrew textual notes.)

In the wisdom Psalm 49:12, 20, the refrain emphasizes the basic theme, that both wealthy and poor will die and death is the fate of all, by introducing a comparison. The scribe puts mankind on a par with animals.⁵⁹

Man cannot abide (understand) in his pomp;
he is like the beasts that perish.

The variations in most refrains tend to emphasize one or other aspect of the main theme. At times, recognizing refrains, despite their sharp differences, can lead to a clearer, surer, view of the structure and meaning of a psalm.

Views on the structure of Psalm 112 are numerous.⁶⁰ Some authors seem frustrated when they write that there is little development of

⁵⁹For the variations, see *Psalms 1-50*, pp. 359-360.

⁶⁰The psalm is a perfect acrostic, with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet

thought or no particular structure.⁶¹ The recognition of a variant refrain, linked together with the antithesis of the refrain, can shed light on the poem. This wisdom psalm starts with a congratulatory statement: "Blessed is the man who fears the Lord,/ who greatly delights in his commandments."

The refrain and its variations mark and conclude the four strophes. The themes of the strophes, even if they are not perfectly applicable in each unit, are conveniently summed up as the just one's blessings, behavior, faith and the fate of the wicked.⁶² The refrains need to be seen schematically:

3b And his righteousness endures forever.

6b The righteous man will be remembered forever (Hebrew text).

9b His righteousness endures forever.

10c The desire of the wicked will perish.

The subject of the psalm is the just or righteous one (tsadiq), with his virtues and blessings. According to L. Perdue, this psalm is an "artistically constructed didactic poem contrasting the behavior and lot of the right with those of the wicked."⁶³ He explains that the piece is structured around the wisdom saying, expressed in the complex antithetical proverb of vv. 6b and 10c. The variants in vv. 3b and 9b also point clearly to the basic theme, emphasizing the quality that will make the person endure forever in the community's memory.

beginning each line, but most commentators say nothing about strophes. Allen, in *Psalms 101-150*, p. 96, rejects a few attempts at finding strophes and writes of the author's "attempt to juggle with three basic schemes, acrostic, chiasmic and strophical."

⁶¹e. g., R. E. Murphy, *The Psalms Are Yours* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 130: "There is no particular structure, but merely typical wisdom sayings."

⁶²In *Psalms 101-150*, p. 97, Allen objects that the scheme appears forced in that the four themes do not correspond exactly with the strophes. The straightjacket of one-theme-per-strophe is hardly a requirement of poetry. Moreover, in commenting on Psalm 139 (ibid., p. 255), Allen accepts "thematic overlap" as a feasible device: a motif in one strophe can be developed in another. This overlap can easily apply to Psalm 112.

⁶³L. Perdue, *Wisdom and Cult. A Critical Analysis of the Views of Cult in the Wisdom Literature of Israel and of the Ancient Near East* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), pp. 294, 291-294.

Symmetry, a strong element in poetry, tends to confirm the refrains' marking of the strophes. The strophes are balanced in their number of lines: three, five, five, three, arranged in chiasitic order. And the central theme is placed in the middle of the poem (v. 6b).

It may be helpful to note that reading a psalm in translation may not always reveal its structure clearly, if the rendering of words is more stylistic and idiomatic than literal, consequently obscuring the original connections. In the New American Bible, "generosity" is the translation in vv. 3b and 9b of what the RSV renders consistently as "righteousness." In the NAB the relations between the three refrains are not immediately perceptible.

Repetitions in Psalm 145

As in Psalm 112, there is an acrostic or alphabetic construction also in Psalm 145. Here each couplet begins with succeeding letters of the Hebrew alphabet.⁶⁴ An acrostic arrangement can make a logical development of thought difficult to compose. Authors consistently fail to find well-defined strophes in this psalm. However, the use of repeated key words and variant refrains help to reveal the artistry behind this poem in its structural and logical construction.

In a comprehensive study of Psalm 145, R. Kimelman divides the poem into four strophes (or stanzas), introduced by a "prelude," intersected by an "interlude," and concluded with a "postlude."⁶⁵ Since these three units contain repetitions of key words with variations, highlight the permeating motif of praise, and segment the psalms into two clearly distinct sections (that can be subdivided into strophes), might they be considered variant refrains? At any rate, the repetitiveness is striking, despite the variations.

I extol you, my God, the King,
and bless your name forever and ever.

⁶⁴Since the letter *nun* was not used to start a line, many scholars, and the RSV, fill out the twenty-two letters, by adding an extra line as v. 13b. The line is found in ancient versions and in the Qumran collection of psalms. However, this reconstruction is not necessary, since several acrostic poems are incomplete. See *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 198-199; and Kimelman, pp. 49-51, in the article cited in the next note.

⁶⁵R. Kimelman, "Psalm 145: Theme, Structure and Impact," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113 (1994), pp. 37-58, 38-39.

- 2 Every day I bless you
and praise your name forever and ever:
- 10 All your creatures shall praise you, O Lord,
and your faithful bless you.
- 21 The praise of YHWH shall my mouth speak,
and all flesh shall bless his holy name forever
and ever. (trans. by Kimelman)

The first line announces the main theme of God's kingship, the reason for praising and blessing him. The quasi-refrains emphasize the basic purpose and motif of every hymn, which is the praise of God. Moreover, they indicate how the divine sovereignty will be communicated to successively broader circles: first by the psalmist (v. 2), then by the Lord's faithful (v. 1), and finally by "all flesh" (v. 21). Both the psalmist and "all flesh" will bless the name of God "forever and ever." And there is no time limit for the ever-expanding number of worshipers (v. 4) who acclaim God's dominion "for generations and generations" and "for all ages" (v. 13).⁶⁶

Each section of the psalm is segmented into two strophes. Each of the four strophes is visibly marked by an inclusio, a repetition of key words in the first and last verses, that advertise the particular theme of the unit. But in the fourth strophe the inclusio is partial.

I

- 3 Great is the Lord and exceedingly praised. . .
6 and your greatness I recount.

II

- 7 Recitation of your abundant goodness they declaim . . .
9 Good is YHWH to all.

III

- 11 The glory of your kingship they intone . . .
13 Your kingship is a kingship for all ages. . .

IV

- 14 YHWH supports all who stumble, . . .
20 YHWH preserves all who love him, . . .

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 40-41. *Psalms 101-150*, p. 296, recognizes the progressive blessing.

The greatness of God (in I) becomes more specific and concrete as his glorious kingship (in III). The goodness of God (in II) is concretized with seven verses of specific examples from supporting to preserving his faithful ones in IV). In III and IV the more general qualities (great and good) become more explicit and graphic (as king and beneficent). The piling up of synonyms and examples, which occurs only here in the whole Psalter, writes Kimelman, indicates a structure of intensification. And this accompanies an escalation of praise throughout the strophes.⁶⁷

God's greatness and kingship will be active and acknowledged everywhere and for all times. His gracious care makes the "cosmic ruler ... the daily nourisher." The last strophe leads to the finale and climax of praise by all flesh forever and ever!⁶⁸ (A similar desire for all the earth and all nations to acknowledge the king of the world is also highlighted in the so-called enthronement Psalms 47, 96-99.)

The symmetry in the buildup of the strophes is noteworthy. There are four couplets (and verses) in I (vv. 3-6), three in II (vv. 7-9), then three in III (vv. 11-13), but in the last strophe IV, there are seven couplets. Excluding the middle refrain (or interlude of v. 10), I and II have seven verses; III and IV have ten verses. Joining the strophes with the same theme, we find seven verses in I and II, and ten in II and IV. The ratio of seven to ten remains with either division, and helps confirm the validity of the structural analysis.⁶⁹

Thus the repetition of key words in the three quasi-refrains, also indicators of the envelope figure, clarifies the purpose, structure and thought of the psalm. The repetitions and synonyms help to cement and disclose the overall unity of the psalm. The universalism is intensified by the inclusion of vv. 2 and 21 that frame the whole psalm, moving from the psalmist to all flesh blessing his name "forever and ever." The Hebrew particle *kol*, translated by "all" or "every" and occurring seventeen times in the psalm, has been recognized as a remarkably unifying feature related to the universalist theme.⁷⁰ "Its virtual ubiquity highlights the unending universality of praise to a God whose

⁶⁷"Psalm 145," pp. 41-42.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 45-47.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁷⁰*Classical Hebrew Poetry*, p. 288; *Psalms 101-150*, pp. 295, 298.

sovereignty and solicitude are not only eternal but everywhere breaking through temporal and spatial frontiers."⁷¹

Conclusions

Psalms must still be interpreted according to their literary forms of lament, thanksgiving, or hymn, if readers are to get on the same wavelength as Israelite worshippers and appreciate the inspired prayers and songs in their original setting of faith. Poetic analysis plays a supplementary role. It reveals and highlights the aesthetic qualities that render these poems imaginative and heart-warming. But the purpose of marshaling examples of poetic parallelism and various types of repetition has been to support the interpretative process. We have tried to illustrate precisely how these poetic features can also guide to a more lucid and full understanding of the theological message in the psalms.

The parallelism in lines unveils the dynamic movement of thoughts, step by step, as they develop with similarities, contrasts and variations. Repetitions emphasize important words, throw light on themes and motifs, indicate the structures of a psalm, with demarcations and development of ideas. The emphases resulting from parallelism and repetition illuminate the text, graphically impress it upon the minds of readers/listeners, and allow for an overall deeper appreciation of the biblical message.

Many other poetic features help contribute to the process of interpretation. Images presented through metaphors and similes hold a prime position in vividly formulating every aspect of the biblical message in psalms.⁷² But discussion of these must wait for another day.⁷³ ~

⁷¹"Psalm 145," p. 51.

⁷²*Classical Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 251-272; *Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, pp. 95-141. For a visual commentary on the Psalms, see O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978).

⁷³Here I must express gratitude to Fr. Victor Salanga, S.J. for his kindness in reading the manuscript and offering valuable suggestions and insights.