

Dr. Fred Putnam, Psalms, Lecture 2

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This is Dr. Fred Putnam presenting the second lecture of four on the book of Psalms. Dr. Fred Putnam.

In our first lecture, you probably noticed that I used the word poem a number of times interspersed with the word psalm and even spoke about biblical poets.

That's a big question these days. Probably for the past 25 years, there's been a debate going on about whether or not there really is poetry in the Bible. And because I think that has very large implications for the way that we read the Psalms, as well as other poetic passages, I'd like to discuss that for a little bit and talk about, first of all, what we mean by poetry? And secondly, are the Psalms and other biblical passages really poetic? And then finally, ask what are some implications of that? So, first question, what is poetry? Well, you can define it in about as many ways as you find writers.

Robert Frost said, for example, the good reader of a great poem knows the instant he has read it, that he has taken an immortal wound that he will never recover. Emily Dickinson said you ask me what is a poem or how do I know that it's poetry? I answer that if I feel as if the top of my head had been removed, or if I were so cold that no fire could warm me, I know that is poetry. Is there any other way? And there are lots of other definitions like that, which you notice put the emphasis on the effect that the poem or the text has on the reader.

That's kind of one approach to defining a poem. It makes me feel like it's a poem, then it's a poem. A second way of defining it is by asking about the author's intent.

So, we read some poems, I think more commonly in modern poetry, probably since the time of the new criticism, T.S. Eliot, since the Second, since the First World War. And they just seem to be prose that has been rearranged. So it looks a little different on the page.

In fact, there's a famous baseball announcer. I'm from New England, so I don't cheer for the Yankees. But the Red Sox are more my speed.

But Phil Rizzuto was a commentator, a play commentator for the New York Yankees. And about 10 years ago, two men took the transcripts of his play-by-play commentary, snipped out little sections rearranged it on the page, and sold it as a book of poetry. Now, Phil Rizzuto was not speaking in poetry, he had no intention of creating poems or being a poet or anything else.

And so, the question is, does that make them a poem? Because somebody says, this is a poem, does that make it one? So, the second point is, or the second approach is, it's in the intention of the author. If the author says it's a poem, it is no matter what we may think of it. First is, how does it affect us? The third one, third way of defining poetry, which tries to be a little more neutral, and maybe scientific, if that word should be applied to poetry, says that we recognize a poem because it uses rhetorical devices, we'll talk about that a bit later, that are used in all language, but poetry uses them a lot.

And so, poetry is compressed language. It's a language where every single word is chosen, not just for what it means, but for what it suggests, for how it sounds, for how it fits the other words, maybe for how it fits the mood of the poem so that at every point in a poem, the author is choosing which word best fits in here. In fact, a very interesting experiment is to go online, there's a website dedicated to the poetry of Wilfred Owen, who was a World War I English poet.

And when you read his poetry, it sounds like he's just like it is, prose kind of rearranged, little bits and pieces of it sound kind of poetic, but it just sounds like paragraphs that have been sliced a little bit and diced. But when you look at the manuscripts, and the website actually has photographs of his manuscripts, you realize that he wrote lines, crossed them out, and some lines he wrote three, four, five, six times, so that even though it sounds like he's just writing prose, he's very clearly struggling to find just the right word to go in each spot. And so, when we look at the way that he's chosen the words, and see how densely he has packed his writings, we realize, yes, these are poems in a way that even poetic-sounding texts are not.

So, some people would say that the end of Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address, where he says, with charity toward all, with malice toward none, with determination to do the right as God gives us strength to see the right, or Winston Churchill, nothing to offer but blood, sweat, tears, or we will fight them on the beaches, we will fight them in the lanes, we'll fight them in the villages. Is that poetry? Well, it certainly sounds very poetic, but they're not intending to write poems. And the piece as a whole, the whole speech, or the whole essay, or whatever else it may be, is not a poem.

It's neither presented as one, nor is it written as one. So, we find this interplay really of three factors. One is the effect on the reader, one is the intention of the author, and the third one is the way that the language itself is being used.

In fact, Roman Jakobson, who is a famous literary critic and structural philosopher, talked about poetry, or the poetic function of language, as he said, the seventh function, he identified seven basic functions of language to communicate knowledge, to motivate someone, to do something, to make someone feel a certain way, and so

on. But he said the poetic function is the focus upon language for its own sake so that the poet chooses a word far more deliberately than someone who's writing a paper. I know we all choose words deliberately, that's true, and Jakobson knew that as well.

He's not talking in that, he doesn't mean only poets choose words carefully, but in poetry the significance of those choices goes up and becomes far more important. And we have to remember the significance is not simply what the word means, or what the phrase or sentence means, but what it connotes, that is, what are the other associations that come in because he used that word. Let me give you a quick example.

If someone invites you over to, or if you invite someone over to your house for dinner, you could say, why don't you drop by our place? Or you could say, hey, come on over and visit our new castle. Or you could say, well, it's kind of a hovel, but you're welcome anyway. Now, place, castle, and hovel, are three very different words, with three very different associations.

Probably the, when you say that, if you use the word castle, the person you're speaking to thinks you're joking, and it's, they know you don't live in a place that's built of stone, surrounded by a moat with dragons and dungeons and all that. But they get the idea that you've just bought a, maybe a big new house. You're proud of it.

You're excited about it, or you've changed something. But if you say my hovel, well, that certainly does not have very positive overtones for most of us. We think, do I need to take some Sani wipes with me? Or do I need to, do I dare go here? Do I want to eat anything that this person serves? Whereas the term place is very innocuous.

It doesn't really have many connotations at all. It probably has the least association, the fewest associations. And so poets are constantly choosing words for their association.

Let me read you a very brief poem. This is written by a 19th-century Christian poet, Christina Rossetti. This is four lines.

It's from a book called Sing Song, which is a book of children's poems that she wrote. What are heavy? Sea sand and sorrow. What are brief? Today and tomorrow.

What are frail? Spring blossoms and youth. What are deep? The ocean and truth by Christina Rossetti. What has she done? Well, first of all, that doesn't really sound like a poem for children to me, or maybe for very thoughtful children or children whom you want to be thoughtful.

She's done a number of things. First, each line has the same pattern, a question and an answer. Each answer has the same pattern, two different nouns.

Each line starts with the same two words, what are. There's a rhyme, sorrow, tomorrow, youth, and truth. There's a meter, what are heavy? Sea sand and sorrow.

What are brief? Today and tomorrow, et cetera. And there are these images. Notice this, sea sand is a physical thing.

Truth is not. Today, we know that today exists because we're here. We don't know anything about tomorrow.

Spring blossoms are physical things. Youth is not, it's quality. The ocean also is a physical thing.

Truth is not. And she's put all these things together. The sound, what we call anaphora, which is when a number of lines start with the same word or expression, the repetition in other words, the pattern, the question with the two-word answer, the meter, the image.

She's put all those together to take a very simple idea and make it resonate far more deeply than it would if she just said something like, you know, sorrow can be really difficult. Life is brief and actually kind of frail like youths. And the ocean is really deep.

I mean, or truth is really deep. Could she have said, what's the difference? Well, the difference is that the patterning of the language, the compression of it, the pictures that she uses, change it from a series of pretty banal or even trite statements into a way of thinking that affects us and communicates far more deeply than any four-point outline would have. Here's another example.

We talk about the difference between poetry and prose. If we turn to the book of Judges, we find in Judges four and five, very familiar passages. Judges four is a story of Deborah and Barak and the war with Cicero or Yavin, who's the king of Canaan and Cicero his general.

And in chapter five, we have a poem about the same incident, a song that Deborah and Barak chanted on that day. I'm just going to read a couple of verses from these two chapters and see if you can tell which is the poem and which is the prose narrative. This is when Cicero, the general fled from the army and he's fleeing for his life and he sees a tent and he goes to a woman named Yael and asks her for help to protect him.

So, this is starting in Judges 4.18. He turned aside to her into the tent. She covered him with some sort of cloth, a rug, a blanket, or something. And he said to her, please give me a little water to drink because I'm thirsty.

So, she opened a container of milk and gave him a drink and then she covered him. And he said to her, stand in the doorway of the tent and if anybody comes and asks you and says, is anyone here that you shall say no, but Yael Hever's wife took a tent peg, put a hammer in her hand, went secretly to him and drove the peg into his temple and it went through into the ground for he was sound asleep and exhausted. So he died.

That's one account. Here's the other account. Most blessed of women is Yael, the wife of Hever the Canaanite.

Most blessed is she of women in the tent. He asked for water. She gave him milk.

In a magnificent bowl, she brought him curds. She stretched out her hand for the tent peg and her right hand took the workman's hammer. Then she struck Cicero.

She smashed his head. She shattered and she pierced his temple. Between her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay.

Between her feet, he bowed, he fell. Where he bowed, there he fell, destroyed. They don't quite sound the same, do they? Describe the same incident, but two very different ways of even thinking about what's going on.

So, we say, well, what shall we call them? And the people who argue about whether there's poetry in the Bible want to say, well, the second one is we'll call that high language. Well, if you're going to give it a term, high language is, we may as well call it a poem because it certainly sounds a lot more poetic, or at least it has some of the same characteristics of poetry. This compression, this use of images, this, in Hebrew, this repetition, which is very standard, as we'll see, very normal for biblical poetry.

And yet we might ask, well, which one is a more accurate picture of what went on? Surely the narrative tells us the real story and the poem just gives us an artistic interpretation of it. And you know, I think that sometimes that's one of our hesitation about thinking of the Bible as having poetry in it, because we hear the word poetic license, or Shakespeare, who says, and has his character saying several times, all poets are liars. And we have this sneaky suspicion that poets don't really deal in quite an upright way.

We want the facts, like Dragnet. But when we look at them, if we were to read all of Judges 4 and all of Judges 5, and if we were to highlight the things that they have in common, they have hardly anything in common. Those are actual statements.

Most of the things that they have in common are proper names and places and things like the article, the, or a, or an, or something in English translations. Very few of the incidents are described in the same way, or even described in one and completely left out of the other. So, at the end of chapter five, of the poem, we have this story about Caesar's mother wondering where her son is and her servant saying, oh don't, servant girl saying, don't worry, he'll be back and he'll bring lots of booty and spoil with him and then we'll get our choice of whatever we want.

Well, that's not in chapter four at all. Did it really happen? Or did Deborah and Barak just make it up? Well, first of all, we say we can trust the Bible. And so our assumption is if they describe this, then the Lord revealed it to them, or they captured a Canaanite and he said, yeah, that's probably what's happening back at the palace right now, or something like that.

However, they got their information, we can't know, but we say, okay, yes, we're going to, this happened. But the differences between the two stories, Ray, which is the more accurate account or which one tells us what really happened? Actually, the answer is that they both do. It's just that they look at the same events in two very different ways.

This is not a fair comparison. Okay. So please don't misinterpret what I'm going to say, but it's the difference between somebody writing a history textbook about the Reformation and a student studying the textbook and the same student going to watch the movie, Martin Luther.

Now the movie communicates some of the same things. Now, of course, I realize in a movie, there's a license, artistic license, and see, that's what makes us nervous about poetry too. Same thing, right? Well, you can't really trust that.

And you're right. Everything in the movie, they even tell you some of this stuff is made up. It's fictitious.

The conversations are made up. We can't trust that. The textbook communicates in one way.

Its goal is to get across X, Y, and Z amount of information in as few words as possible so that the textbook publisher can make as much money per book as possible, right? Short, but with all the information. So, the student has what he or she needs to pass the test, to graduate, to get a job, et cetera. The movie is made so that you will sit through the whole movie and not leave the theater and ask for your money back.

You're going to want to watch it and you're going to enjoy it. And you're going to walk away, maybe even thinking about what went on. The textbook doesn't really care about how you feel.

The goal of the textbook is you need this information. I'm going to give it to you. The movie says I'm going to entertain you.

Judges 4 says, okay, here's an account of the battle. The focus is on Barack's role and his obedience or his hesitation to obey and Yael's role. Here's a poem about the same battle.

The focus of the poem is on the way that the tribes of Israel did or did not join the war. So, there's a long catalog, which goes back and forth and says, from Ephraim, they came down. Benjamin came down.

But then goes on and says, wait a second, Reuben didn't come. The tribes of Gilead stayed on the other side of the Jordan. Dan stayed where they were.

Asher stayed where they were. But Zebulun and Naphtali risked their lives. There's no account of that.

All you read in chapter four is that Barack went up Mount Gilboa and Mount Tabor and all these men came after him. That's all it says. In the same way, in chapter five, we find this, that the stars themselves fought from heaven.

Now in chapter four, it does say the Lord routed Caesar and his chariots and his army with the edge of the sword before Barack. And Caesar got down from his chariot and fled away. But we see that the chariots of the Israelites, which is shown, which is actually a fairly small stream, overflowed its banks, got the ground muddy, so that all these chariots, these 500 iron chariots, bogged down and were no longer an advantage, but actually a disadvantage to the Canaanites.

If they were counting on using their chariots to overwhelm the foot soldiers of the Israelites, all of a sudden their advantage was gone. And so, their strategy for the battle falls apart. And Caesar, being a smart commander, looks out, knows it's a disaster, and runs for his life.

But we don't get that from the prose account. So, the poet, the singers, the chanters, Deborah and Barack, give us a view of their experience of these events that's very different from the view of the author of the rest of the book of Judges. And the two accounts complement each other.

They work together and they work on us in different ways. That points up another aspect of poetry. And that is that a poem, this theory goes back maybe 600 years to Sir Philip Sidney's defense of poetry.

He said that poets actually create a golden world. He said, you know, if you're a mathematician or an astronomer or a chemist, you don't have any choice. You have to work with what you've got.

You can't make up stars or chemicals or elements or other things. You just got to work with what's there. But as a poet, he gets to create a golden world.

And the poem then invites the reader to enter this world that the poet has created. Now the poet knows that this is not the whole universe. It's a different, it's a separate world.

So poems communicate truth, but they communicate truth in a different way than expository prose or logical sense of sets of propositions. So that no one poem ever tries to tell the whole truth. You know, we read a psalm and we'll look at this in a few minutes in quite a bit more detail.

But if we read a psalm like Psalm 121, I lift up my eyes to the mountains, where does my hope come from? Etc. It will be easy to come away from that psalm thinking to ourselves, this promises that nothing bad ever happens to anyone who belongs to the Lord. Because that's what he says.

He who keeps you won't let your foot slip. He won't slumber. He's your shade on your right hand.

He will protect you from all evil. He'll keep your soul, guard you going out. You're coming in from now and forevermore.

And it sounds like nothing bad can possibly happen to anyone who belongs to the Lord. But the poet has no intention of describing the whole of theology. He's only working in eight verses or 15 lines.

So, he's not trying to encompass everything. Instead, he says, let's think about the relationship between the Lord and his people this way. Yes, all those other things exist.

You're right, all those other things exist. And there are lots of psalms that talk about the troubles that happen. I mean, there's no reason to ask for the Lord to rescue you from disaster if you're not in the middle of a disaster.

Or the poet saying, the waters are going up to my neck, the waters had nearly swept me away, etc. Well, he's not concerned about those things. What he wants to do is think about, what does it mean to think of God as a watchman? What does it mean when we consider God's role in guarding over and keeping us? What does that look like? And so that's what he meditates on.

So, we have to read pretty carefully. We have to then read looking for all the ways that the poet has compressed his poem or compressed his message and how he has packed that poem with meaning. But at the same time, we have to be careful not to assume that the poem tries to tell us everything about anything.

Instead, it's playing with, as I said in the first lecture, some aspect of reality, the Lord, our relationship to him, the world, our relationship to others, something like that. So, when we think about poetry in English, and I'm using English for a moment because I've just found in teaching that if you start talking about poetry with biblical poems, everybody wants to argue with theology. They don't want to talk about the poetry.

So, I'd rather talk about the poem first, and then we can talk about what it actually means. But think about English. We recognize a poem because it has rhythm, and rhyme, by its layout on the page, by its broken up into stanzas.

There may be sentences, but the sentences don't stop at the end of a line. They might keep on going. So, all sorts of things.

In biblical poetry, there really isn't any rhythm. People argue about that all the time, but there really isn't rhythm in the way that we think of it in English. There is no rhyme.

Once or twice, there are places where you get words that end with the same sound, but that's very, very unusual to see any pattern to that. There really aren't stanzas. That is, when you buy a book of poetry, there are blank lines, and so there might be eight lines, and a blank line, and eight lines, and a blank line.

I mean, you'll see those in your English Bible, but that's the editor's decision. It's not done that way in the manuscripts that we have. That's just either the translator and editor, or in some cases, the editors of the Hebrew Bible, and the translators are just following that.

And we find that in biblical poetry, line sentences tend not to go from one line to the next and continue down the page. Each line tends to be its own clause or its own sentence. There are a few exceptions, but as a rule, that's true.

So those are pretty big differences between English and biblical poetry. But at the same time, the basic similarities are what makes them both poetic. The compression, the idea that the language, the words used are very deliberately chosen.

Almost we could talk about manipulated language. I don't like that. That word makes people nervous to think about the Bible being like that.

But the words have been chosen, and the language is being used in ways that are pretty striking. You know, it's interesting that if you study Hebrew, or maybe I should say it this way, when you study Hebrew, you can think in terms of reading biblical stories. And by the middle, by the end of your first semester, even the middle of your first semester, you should be able to begin to work your way through story of Joseph or Abraham or something.

But then you say to yourself, why this is so much fun? I think I'm going to read a psalm. And you turn to the book of Psalms, and it's like a different language.

All of a sudden things that should be there aren't there. And the things that are there don't quite look or sound like they're supposed to. Well, did you know that if you open up the Encyclopedia Britannica to the article on poetry, it says, poetry is the other use of language.

And some critics even talk about poetic language as a language of its own within the language of its culture. So there's the English language, then there's the language of English poetry. And by that, they don't just mean the choice of words, like using, ere I saw you, or words that sound archaic or old, or oft in the eve, sort of thing.

They don't mean that. They mean the whole way of using the language, of organizing thoughts, of organizing sentences, of putting pictures together is different than what we find in books of history or philosophy or organic chemistry. So, poetry really is a very different language because it's language that's self-consciously manipulated, that is self-conscious on the part of the poet.

And we also find other things in both that are common to both, so that what's called par on amasia, or we think of them as puns, but using words that sound alike or using sounds that reflect each other, English poetry does that a lot. That's what rhyme is, right? Sorrow and tomorrow, youth and truth. Hebrew poetry does that as well.

Of course, we lose that in translation. That's just the cost of translation. There's a lot of repetition in both.

That's fairly common. And both of them are organized line by line. So even in English poetry where a sentence goes across the lines, the question is, why does the

sentence go across the line? Why does it stop and start? One question, why does it stop and start where it does? And both of them rely very heavily upon imagery.

In fact, there's a marvelous little book by a woman named Molly Peacock called *How to Read a Poem and Start a Poetry Circle*. Poetry Reading Circle, I'm not sure of the subtitle, in which she says that is a very helpful key when we're struggling with a poem and trying to figure out what it's saying, she actually says this. She says three different things at different points in her book.

One time she says is to just go through the poem and list all the nouns, write out a list of all the nouns in order through the poem. Do that for a psalm sometime. You'll be quite surprised, I think.

Another thing is to list all the verbs in the poem because the verbs tell us what's happening. So, the nouns tell us what it's about. The verbs tell us what's happening.

List all the verbs. And again, sometimes some poems, the nouns will help, some poems, the verbs will help. And then the third thing she says is to go through a poem and list all the images that are in the poem.

And the important thing is to list them in order because that's the way the poet arranged them. And so we think our way through the poem in terms of his or her nouns, his or her verbs, his or her images, because that's how the connection goes. That's how the logic of the poem actually works.

Because that's what we mean when we talk about self-conscious language. And in fact, the poetry in the Bible is just as self-conscious. Now some of you, I can almost hear this coming right through the camera, are saying, oh, wait a second, this is going to get technical.

You're going to start using words like synecdoche and metaphor, simile and anaphora, and things like that, aren't you? Well, yes, some of them. But what does it mean to use technical language? If you're watching the Super Bowl and the commentator says, oh, they're using a, oh, that was a quarterback draw, that's technical language, isn't it? Or if you're watching the Olympics and they talk about, and here I don't know what I'm talking about, a double axel. I mean, I know that means they jumped up in the air and went around twice versus a double or something else.

That's technical language, isn't it? And yet we're not intimidated when it comes to sports or even to music, perhaps, depending on what your interest is. So, we can say that the adagio was a little too slow, or the forte was a little too soft, or the fortissimo was quite loud enough, thank you very much. And we're using language that helps us understand what we're talking about.

It gives us a common language, which is really where jargon and insider talk come from anyway. We have a need to communicate things without using all the words that we need to explain them to someone else. We have to figure out some way to say this in a short compass.

So rather than say that the poem, *Water Heavy*, begins with, has four lines, each of which begins the same way, we can just say, oh, the whole poem is anaphoric, save words, save space. And we know exactly what we're talking about because we're using when I say each line begins the same way, you might say, well, does that mean they begin with a capital letter? Does that mean they begin with the same word, the same phrase? Well, anaphora tells us what we're talking about is an identical expression. So sure, we use some technical language, but that's the way of studying anything.

And in fact, technical language gives us a way of thinking about even biblical poems in a way that maybe we've never thought of them before. So, we realize in a psalm like Psalm 113, which again is anaphoric, praise Yahweh, praise servants of Yahweh, praise the name of Yahweh, starts with the same again. And the question then we ought to ask ourselves is, oh, there's an anaphora.

Why would the poet do that? What's the purpose of that? What's its function in relationship to the meaning of the poem? How's it actually working? Now, part of this you've probably noticed already is that I'm very interested in helping us, helping myself, helping you learn to read poems carefully. Thinking of ways to force ourselves to pay attention to what it says by thinking about why it says it that way, how it says it, and why it uses that particular method. T.S. Eliot, in a very famous essay on reading poetry, said that we run into, or we kind of walk a tightrope.

On the one hand, there are people who read a poem once and they say, they come away with an impression of it. And they say, oh, yeah, okay. That poem is about X, Y, Z. So, somebody reads Psalm 23 and says, oh, that's comforting.

And they walk away. The other kind of approach is to analyze everything that can be analyzed. How many words are in each line? How many syllables are in each line? How many lines are there? Why is it, how it, listing all the nouns, all the verbs, all the images, and analyzing everything and assigning a technical label to everything.

Now, Eliot points out a problem with both of those. First, the casual impression is often wrong. I can tell you; I just heard many sermons where I could tell the person was preaching based on a casual impression.

They hadn't really studied a text, but they were looking for a sermon or a message. And so, they read something and it made them think of something else. And so, then

they just kind of use that passage, that Psalm, like a diving board and went springing off into what they really wanted to talk about.

And oftentimes had nothing to do with the Psalm itself. So, we can misread because we don't take the text seriously enough. On the other hand, we can subject the text to our analysis to such an extent that we forget that we're reading somebody else's text.

And we analyze it in such a way that it becomes merely a specimen to be pinned to the board and displayed. I was on an ordination committee for quite a number of years for my denomination, and we got papers from students. And I can remember papers on Psalms by students who were obviously very capable based on their grades, and even on the things they said in the paper, who described everything in the Psalm, every poetic aspect of the Psalm that you could possibly want to comment on was noted, annotated, usually in Hebrew and English, sometimes even in Greek if they were really ambitious.

But then they kind of forgot to tell you why any of that mattered. And even sometimes what the poem was about so that the analysis became the end. Quintilian, an early orator, a Roman orator said, the danger is becoming stuck in the analysis.

T.S. Eliot says that's one problem. On the other hand, if we're reading scripture, we want to be sure that we're actually reading what the Bible says. You see, one of the challenges that you and I face, if we've been going to a church or even Bible study or college or seminary and studying theology or religion or the Bible, is that we've heard lots of people tell us what Psalm 119 means, or what Job 6 is really about, or what any other passage.

And so when we come to the text, we almost can't read Psalm 1 anymore. It's sort of like putting on or taking off our real glasses and putting on a pair of sunglasses and then putting on another pair of mirrored sunglasses, and then maybe some of those funny glasses with the eyeballs that fall out and trying to read through that. That's a little exaggerated.

But we do let everything get in our way. And so, we're reading and we're hearing the voice of the preacher. We're hearing the voice of the commentary.

We're hearing the voice even of the bull session in the dorm. So, one of the goals, one of the reasons, not goals, one of the motivations, the reasons for trying to be very careful and read and pay attention to everything in the poem is that I really want to read Psalm 113. I don't want to walk away with just an impression of it.

And I don't simply want to read it through what everybody else has said. They may all be right. That's fine.

But poetry is meant to be read, to be thought about, to be played within our own minds, just as the poet plays with ideas in writing the poem. You know, in our approach to scripture, I think very often we run into the idea that the purpose of the Bible is to communicate information. And that's certainly true.

We get lots of information through the Bible that we wouldn't know any other way. Who was Hezekiah's father, for example? No other way of knowing that. Who was his son? Who was his descendant? Well, it's good that we have the Bible so that we know things like that.

But we do have to ask a question. Why would God work within very limited scope, I mean, the Bible, is a fairly big Bible. In addition, this is about 1600 pages.

Well, I have copies of Shakespeare here in my library that have more than twice that number of pages with much smaller print. If I were to pull down all the writings of Winston Churchill, there are many times that many pages. The Bible really is, in the scope of world literature, a fairly small book.

So, we ought to ask ourselves, perhaps, why would God choose to use poetry for one-third of this book if his purpose is to communicate? Let me suggest then that the reason is that poetry communicates some things better than any other way. And if that's true, that is, if the use of poetry is deliberate, divinely inspired, which since it's in Scripture, I think we would have to say, then God used poetry to communicate with us. And again, not just that in the book of Psalms, all through the Bible, all the way into the book of Revelation, in fact, because poetry says best what he wanted to say.

And perhaps here's the important thrust of that. If poetry is another way of using language, and if poems are another way of thinking about reality, then we need to use, and learn how to use that language as well. We need to learn to use the conceptual language, the words, the images, and the way of putting things together that we find in biblical poems.

So that when we pick up the book of Psalms, we say, I'm not just getting a statement about God, okay, the Lord is king, okay, I've got the point. If that's all he wanted to say, that's all there would be. But he doesn't stop with that one sentence.

Instead, he goes on for 12 or 13 or 15 or 30 verses, because he wants us to think about what that statement means. And when we talk about the technical aspects of poetry, such as anaphora, Psalm 13, how long, O Lord, will you be far from me? How long will you hide your face? How long will I have to, how long? Well, part of

understanding any poem is appreciating the artistry with which it is created. The person who best appreciates a Mozart sonata is the person who has actually tried to play piano or violin or whatever else it might be.

The person who best appreciates that quarterback draw in the Super Bowl is the person who maybe has at least played a little touch football on Thanksgiving with his family. The person who best appreciates any poem is the person who understands the language of poetry. You know, in, and with this I'll close, in the Encyclopedia Britannica, they cite this fact which is so well known they don't even footnote it.

If you try this experiment yourself, go to the streets of whatever town or city you live near with two pieces of paper, one of which has a short poem, and one of which has a short paragraph. Stop 10 people and ask five of them, to say, would you please read this, would you please read this poem out loud? And after they've done that, ask them to read the paragraph. The other five people ask them to read the paragraph first, then the poem.

And that's all you say. Would you please read this poem? Would you please read this paragraph out loud? Don't say anything beyond that. And you tell them you're doing an experiment.

This is what you will find in many more than 99 out of 100 cases. The person who, when they know that they're reading a poem, their voice will change, their posture will change, the way they pronounce the words will change, and the thoughtfulness with which they read the text will change. Now ask yourself, when was the last time that in a worship service, I heard a psalm read with the same care as I heard Dr. Putnam read, *What is Heavy, Water Heavy?* When was the last time I read a psalm or any biblical poem for that matter, with the same thoughtfulness that I might read *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* by Robert Frost? I'm not trying to make you feel guilty.

That's not the goal. It's instead that if these things really are poems, we need to teach ourselves again to think the language of poetry that we might appreciate them because appreciation for a poem is part of understanding it.

This was Dr. Fred Putnam in his second lecture of four on the book of Psalms.