

Dr. Fred Putnam, Psalms, Session 2, What is Poetry? 6-min. Video Overview

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Alright, let's just jump right in. When you think of the Bible, what probably comes to mind are things like stories, laws, maybe some letters from the apostles. But what if I told you a massive chunk of it is written in a totally different language? One we often read right over, without even realizing what it is.

Get this. About one third of the entire Bible is poetry. Let that sink in for a second.

That's actually more than the entire New Testament. And this isn't just, you know, a stylistic flair. It's a fundamentally different way of communicating truth.

So the big question is, what is this other language? And how in the world do we spot it, especially when it doesn't rhyme or look anything like the poems we're used to from school? Well, that's exactly what we're going to unpack. To get a handle on the Bible's poetry, we first have to ask a much bigger question. What makes any piece of writing a poem in the first place? It turns out there are really three main ways to think about this.

First, we can look at the effect a text has on us, the reader. Second, we can try to figure out what the author was trying to do. And third, and this is where it gets really interesting, we can look at the specific nitty-gritty ways the language itself is being used.

Let's break them down. Let's start with Emily Dickinson's take on it. Because it's just so good.

For her, it was all about the effect. It's this idea that poetry isn't just words on a page. It's a physical experience.

It's a piece of writing that hits you in a way that regular prose just doesn't. It makes you feel something powerful, almost like a jolt. But that feeling isn't the whole story.

Take the strange case of Phil Rizzuto, a famous baseball announcer. A couple of guys literally took transcripts of his play-by-plays, chopped them up into lines, and published them as a book of poetry. Now Rizzuto had absolutely zero intention of being a poet.

Which brings us to our second point. The author's intent really matters. Did they mean for it to be a poem? And that brings us to the third, and maybe the most precise way of looking at this.

The poetic function of language. This is where language gets really dense and compressed. A poet isn't just trying to get information across.

They are choosing every single word for its specific weight, its sound, and the whole cloud of feelings and ideas it brings along with it. Here's a perfect way to see what I mean. Think about it.

If I invite you over to my place, that's pretty neutral. But if I invite you to my castle, you get a totally different vibe. A sense of pride.

Maybe I'm even being a little playful. But if I call it a hovel, the feeling is completely different. It's humble.

Maybe a bit sad. See? All three words mean house. But their poetic function, their associations, are worlds apart.

Okay, theory time is over. Now we get to see this in action, right inside the Bible itself. We're going to look at two different accounts of the exact same event.

The wild story of a warrior named Jael and an enemy general named Sisera, which you can find in the book of Judges. Just look at this side by side. On the left, in Judges chapter 4, you've got the prose.

It's a straightforward report. She gave him milk. She took a peg.

He died. Just the facts. But then look at the right.

The poem in Judges 5. Notice the rhythm. The repetition. The absolutely brutal and vivid verbs.

Struck. Smashed. It even repeats the action.

He bowed. He fell. He lay.

To make you feel the heavy final thud of that moment. So which one is true? Well, that's the wrong question. They're both true.

The best way to think about it is like a history textbook versus a movie. The prose in Judges 4 gives you the information, the facts you need to know. The poem in Judges 5, well, it puts you in the theater.

Its goal is to make you experience the event, to feel the raw tension and the triumph. Okay, so knowing all this is one thing. But how does it actually change the way we read? Let's build ourselves a little toolkit for how to approach these powerful and, let's be honest, sometimes confusing texts.

First things first, we have to reset our expectations. Most of the stuff we connect with English poetry- you know, rhyme, a steady rhythm, or meter- you'll almost never find that in Biblical poetry. Instead of being organized in neat little stanzas, it's organized by parallel lines, where the second line will repeat, contrast, or build on the idea of the first.

Now, if you're ever feeling totally lost in a Biblical poem, here is a fantastic, simple technique from the poet Molly Peacock. Just read through the poem and make three lists, in order. First, all the nouns.

Then, all the verbs. And finally, all the images. This forces you to slow way down and actually see the building blocks the poet is using.

Now, you might hear some technical terms thrown around, like anaphora, which just means repeating a word at the beginning of a few lines. Don't let that stuff intimidate you. It's just jargon.

It's a shortcut. It's really no different than a sports commentator saying, quarterback draw. It's just shared language to help us talk about the specific moves the poet is making.

So why does any of this really matter? Because if a third of the Bible is written this way, it means God deliberately chose poetry to communicate with us. It means that sometimes the goal isn't just to give us information, but to completely shape our experience and our imagination. And think about this finding from the Encyclopedia Britannica.

It's amazing. When people are told that the text they're about to read is a poem, something incredible happens. Their voice changes.

Their posture changes. They instinctively read it with more care, more thoughtfulness, than they would a normal paragraph. We have this built-in sense that poetry demands more from us.

And that brings us to this really powerful challenge from Dr. Fred Putnam, the scholar whose work really inspired this whole explainer. He asks us to think about our own habits. When was the last time we read a psalm with the same careful attention and respect that we might give to a famous poem by someone like Robert Frost? Or do we just kind of skim it for a nice thought? Ultimately, recognizing this other language in the Bible isn't just some academic exercise.

It's an invitation to a deeper, richer, and way more profound engagement with these ancient texts. So, the question I want to leave you with is this: knowing what you know now, how might you read differently?