

Psalms: What is Poetry?

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Session 2

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Fred Putnam explores the nature of biblical poetry, examining how poetic texts differ from prose and why poetry comprises roughly one-third of the Bible. He evaluates three primary approaches to defining poetry—reader impact, authorial intent, and compressed language—using examples from modern poets, Christina Rossetti, and the contrasting accounts in Judges 4 and 5. Putnam demonstrates how biblical poets deliberately select words, imagery, and structural devices like anaphora to communicate complementary, experiential truths rather than exhaustive propositional facts. Ultimately, he cautions against both overly casual readings and mechanical technical analysis, urging readers to thoughtfully engage the artistic depth and divinely intended power of biblical poetry.

Outline

I. Introduction & The Debate Over Biblical Poetry

- A. Context of Psalms lectures presented by Dr. Fred Putnam
- B. Ongoing scholarly debate over the past 25 years regarding biblical poetry
- C. Significant interpretive implications for reading the Psalms and biblical literature

II. Defining Poetry: Three Primary Approaches

- A. Approach 1: Reader Impact (Affective Definition)
 - 1. Robert Frost on the 'immortal wound' left by a great poem
 - 2. Emily Dickinson on intense physical and emotional reactions to poetry
- B. Approach 2: Authorial Intent
 - 1. Post-WWI and New Criticism shifts focusing on modern structural forms
 - 2. Example: Phil Rizzuto play-by-play commentary rearranged and published as poetry
 - 3. Evaluation of whether intent alone determines if a text is poetry
- C. Approach 3: Compressed and Deliberate Language (Scientific / Neutral Definition)
 - 1. Dense use of rhetorical devices common to all human language

2. Wilfred Owen's manuscript revisions demonstrating painstaking word selection
3. Distinguishing poetic-sounding speeches (Lincoln, Churchill) from formal poetry
4. Roman Jakobson's 'poetic function': language focused self-consciously upon itself
5. Connotative associations in word choice (e.g., 'place' vs. 'castle' vs. 'hovel')

III. Illustrating Poetic Compression and Structure

- A. Christina Rossetti's poem ('What are heavy?')
 1. Structural symmetry through recurring question-and-answer pairs
 2. Use of anaphora (repetition of initial words), meter, and imagery
 3. Juxtaposition of concrete physical objects (sea sand, spring blossoms, ocean) with abstract realities (sorrow, youth, truth)
 4. Resonance of compressed artistic language over flat four-point outlines
- B. Narrative vs. Poetic Accounts in Scripture (Judges 4 vs. Judges 5)
 1. Prose narrative of Yael and Sisera in Judges 4
 2. Poetic song of Deborah and Barak in Judges 5
 3. Linguistic and thematic contrast between the two descriptions
 4. Complementary views of reality: historical textbook vs. artistic/experiential depiction

IV. Characteristics and Functions of Biblical Poetry

- A. Sir Philip Sidney's concept of the 'golden world': poetry invites readers into a created realm
- B. Non-exhaustive truth: poems focus deeply on specific aspects of theology (e.g., Psalm 121 on God as watchman)
- C. Key differences between English and Biblical poetry
 1. Absence of English meter, strict rhyme, and standard stanzas in Hebrew poetry
 2. Clause-based line structure where each line typically functions as an independent clause
 3. Shared reliance on imagery, wordplay (paronomasia/puns), and repetition
- D. Poetic language functioning as a distinct dialect within a culture
- E. Practical reading strategies (Molly Peacock)
 1. Listing nouns in order (identifying what the poem is about)
 2. Listing verbs in order (identifying what is happening)
 3. Listing images in order (tracing the logical progression of the poem)

V. Navigating Pitfalls in Reading Biblical Poetry

- A. Purpose and role of technical terminology (anaphora, metaphor, synecdoche)
- B. T.S. Eliot's 'tightrope' between two reading pitfalls
 1. Pitfall 1: Casual impressionism leading to misreading and diving-board preaching

2. Pitfall 2: Over-analysis reducing scripture to a mere laboratory specimen (Quintilian's warning)

C. Overcoming external commentary and interpretive filters to hear the biblical text directly

VI. Conclusion: Why God Chose Poetry

A. Approximately one-third of the Bible is written in poetic form

B. Poetry communicates specific truths and experiential depth better than logical prose

C. The deliberate, divinely inspired use of poetic language across Scripture

D. Call to re-learn the language of poetry to properly appreciate and interpret biblical texts