

Book of Psalms: Structural Patterns and Parallelism

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Fred Putnam examines the structural patterns and literary mechanics of biblical Hebrew poetry, focusing on how individual lines, strophes, and whole psalms are deliberately constructed. Unlike English poetry, which relies on rhyme and meter, Hebrew poetry employs parallelism, chiasmic inversions, and line-length variations to organize thoughts and signal major structural transitions. By analyzing specific passages from Psalm 2, Psalm 113, Psalm 114, and Psalm 13, Dr. Putnam demonstrates how recognizing literary forms and genres allows readers to move past arbitrary interpretations and follow the author's intended theological flow. Ultimately, understanding poetic architecture enables readers to apprehend the deeper meaning, unity, and communicative power of the Psalter.

Outline

I. Introduction: Poetic Patterns and Literary Structure

- A. Definition of poetic pattern: intentional repetition and assembly where the whole exceeds the sum of its parts.
- B. Illustration from English poetry: Christina Rossetti's 'Water Heavy' and progressive questioning.
- C. Contrast between English and Hebrew poetic organization:
 - 1. English poetry utilizes rhyme and meter as key organizing tools.
 - 2. Hebrew poetry utilizes parallelism and thought correspondence instead of rhyme.

II. The Mechanics of Biblical Parallelism

- A. Historical approaches to Hebrew parallelism:
 - 1. Rabbinic perspective: assumed God never repeats Himself, leading to minute distinctions between lines.
 - 2. Bishop Robert Lowth's classification (17th Century):
 - a. Synonymous parallelism: second line repeats or reinforces the first line.
 - b. Antithetic parallelism: second line contrasts with the first line (common in Proverbs).
 - c. Synthetic / Non-parallel lines: lines progress thought without direct line-for-line correspondence.
- B. Organic nature of parallel pairs:
 - 1. Parallel lines form a single compound assertion rather than isolated statements.

2. The second line frequently intensifies ('ups the ante') or completes the first.
3. Ellipsis: deliberate omission of verbs in second lines to bind clauses together (e.g., Psalm 114).

III. Line Length and Structural Boundaries

A. Characteristics of Hebrew line length:

1. Hebrew lines are brief (typically 3–4 words per line), expanding significantly when translated into English.
2. Modern double-column layout traditions often mask authentic line structures.

B. Pattern interruption as a structural marker:

1. Poets establish regular line rhythms and disrupt them to signal major section transitions.
2. Analysis of Psalm 2: verse 6 contains a 7-word line following 3-word lines, marking strophic closure.
3. Structural transitions correspond to thematic shifts (e.g., Psalm 2: rebellion, divine response, summons to submission).

IV. Symmetrical and Inverted Structures: The Chiasm

A. Definition and visual concept of chiasm (from the Greek letter Chi / X).

B. Detailed analysis of Psalm 113:2–3:

1. Concentric arrangement: Outer lines focus on Praise; Inner lines focus on Time and Space.
2. Concrete representation: converts abstract concepts ('always and everywhere') into experiential terms ('rising to setting sun').

C. Verbal and grammatical chiasms:

1. Grammatical chiastic pairing of perfect and imperfect verb forms in Psalm 2:1–2 (A B B A pattern).
2. The aesthetic and cognitive value of formal discipline in ancient poetic craft.

V. Inclusio and Theological Rationale for Praise

A. Inclusio (envelope structure): framing a psalm with matching opening and closing lines.

B. Functional progression in repeated refrain ('Praise the LORD' in Psalm 113; 'Bless the LORD' in Psalm 103):

1. Opening line serves as an initial summons or invitation.
2. Closing line serves as an informed resolution after reasons for praise have been detailed.

C. Theological foundation of biblical worship:

1. Scriptures ground praise in specific divine acts (creation, providence, and salvation) rather than bare existence.
2. Correlations with New Testament hymnology (e.g., songs of heavenly worship in Revelation 4–5).

VI. Genre Analysis and Structural Models in the Psalter

A. Lament / Complaint Psalms (approx. one-third of the Psalter; e.g., Psalm 13):

1. Standard five-part structural form:

- a. Invocation / Address to God (questions: 'How long?')
 - b. Plea for help / Request
 - c. Motivation / Reasons for divine intervention
 - d. Expression of confidence / Assurance
 - e. Promise of praise / Vow of thanksgiving
- 2. Structural anomalies: Psalm 88 as an exceptional lament ending without resolution.
- B. Praise Psalms / Hymns (e.g., Psalm 113, 148, 150):
 - 1. Three-part structural form: Call to praise, Reasons for praise, Renewed call to praise.
 - 2. Variations in thematic emphasis (e.g., Psalm 148 on participants vs. Psalm 150 on instruments).

VII. Conclusion: Purpose of Structural Analysis

- A. Inseparable relationship between poetic form and theological content.
- B. Core objective: enabling readers to think the biblical poet's thoughts after him/her and apprehend authorial intent.