

Psalms: Rhetorical Approach and Poetic Techniques

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Poetics, Refrain, Keyword, Rhetorical criticism, Chiasm, Contrast, Intercalation, Wisdom psalm

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Bruce Waltke explores rhetorical criticism and poetics as foundational methods for interpreting the Book of Psalms holistically. He outlines various poetic devices and techniques that inspired biblical poets used to structure their compositions, including keywords (leitwort), refrains, contrasts, comparisons, alternating parallelism, and chiasmic structures. Through detailed examinations of Psalms 2, 24, 49, 51, and other passages, Waltke demonstrates how understanding the literary artistry ("how a text means") reveals the deeper theological message of the biblical text ("what it means").

Outline

I. Introduction to Hermeneutical Approaches and Poetics

A. Review of Previous Hermeneutical Approaches

1. Spiritual approach: Emphasizes right spiritual attitude toward God and the inspired writer.
2. Historical approach: Focuses on historical context and the central role of the king.
3. Form-critical approach: Groups psalms by genre (e.g., praise, lament) and typical communal settings.

B. Rhetorical Criticism vs. Form Criticism

1. Phyllis Trible's distinction: Form criticism studies the typical; rhetorical criticism studies the particular within the typical.
2. Definition of Poetics: The study of literary devices and artistic rules used to assemble literature and communicate an author's evaluative point of view.
3. Historical shift in biblical studies (~1980): Move toward holistic interpretation led by scholars like Robert Alter and James Kugel.
4. Core hermeneutical axiom (Adele Berlin): We must first understand "how a text means" before we can determine "what it means."

II. Key Poetic Devices and Structural Techniques

A. Keywords (Leitwort)

1. Definition (Martin Buber): A meaningfully repeated word or root that guides, clarifies, and emphasizes the text's message.

2. Example (Psalm 2): Repetition of "the Lord" and "the King" across all stanzas.

B. Refrains

1. Function: Repeated phrases that divide stanzas and structure the poem's thematic development.
2. Example (Psalms 42–43): The repeated refrain "Why my soul are you downcast... Put your hope in God."
3. Detailed Case Study (Psalm 49 - Wisdom Psalm):
 - a. Introduction (vv. 1–4): Universal address to all peoples (low/high, rich/poor) and self-introduction of the author as sage.
 - b. First Stanza (vv. 5–12) & Refrain 1 (v. 12): Universal mortality—all people die like perishing beasts (bal yalin: "will not endure").
 - c. Second Stanza (vv. 13–20) & Refrain 2 (v. 20): Wordplay shift from bal yalin to lo yavin ("without understanding")—only the foolish wicked die permanently.
 - d. Theological message: Wealth cannot ransom a soul from Sheol, but God redeems the righteous.

C. Contrast and Comparison

1. Contrast: Juxtaposing opposites to highlight spiritual truths.
2. Narrative illustration: Contrast between Manoah's wife (no prayer, relying on Samson's physical charisma) and Hannah (prayer, seeking God's anointed king).
3. Poetic illustrations: Psalm 1 (righteous vs. wicked; tree vs. chaff) and Psalm 23 (shepherd and sheikh motifs).

D. Logic, Climax, and Escalation

1. Logical development of thought across stanzas.
2. Intensification and climax (X - 1 formula) leading to a triumphant resolution.

III. Structural Patterns in Biblical Poetry

A. Alternating Pattern (ABC, A'B'C')

1. Concept: Repeating sequence building like incoming waves of increasing intensity.
2. Illustration (1 Kings 19 - Elijah at Horeb): Parallelism between natural manifestations (wind, earthquake, fire, sheer silence) and divine agents of judgment/restoration (Hazeel, Jehu, Elisha, the 7,000 faithful).

B. Concentric and Chiastic Patterns (ABC, X, C'B'A')

1. Concept: Symmetrical structure focusing on a central pivot point (X).
2. Illustration (1 Kings 1–11): Structure centered on 1 Kings 7:1–12 where Solomon builds his own palace before God's house, marking his turning point and decline.
3. Application in Psalms: Symmetrical thematic arrangements (e.g., Psalm 92).

C. Janus (Transitional Device)

1. Definition: A two-faced literary doorway facing both backward and forward.

2. Example (Psalm 23): Shift from 3rd person ("He leads me") to 2nd person ("You are with me") smoothly bridging shepherd and host imagery.

IV. Additional Rhetorical and Poetic Devices

A. Generalization and Particularization (e.g., Psalm 103)

B. Preparation and Foreshadowing (e.g., Psalm 51's introductory petition preparing for main petition)

C. Interrogation and Inclusio (e.g., Psalm 15, Psalm 8 framing)

D. Intercalation

1. Definition: Insertion of distinct material that interrupts a primary narrative or hymn.

2. Examples: Psalm 24 (inserting conditions for worshippers ascending the mountain before the King enters; Ugaritic background of personified gates) and Psalm 100 (confessional interruption).

E. Intertextuality and Scenic Depiction

1. Intertextuality: Allusions to earlier scriptures (e.g., Psalm 8 drawing on Genesis 1).

2. Scenic Depiction: Setting atmospheric scenes to convey spiritual proximity (e.g., David fleeing Absalom, morning prayer in Psalm 5).

F. Divine Naming

1. Strategic deployment of distinct divine titles (e.g., Most High, Almighty, Lord, God in Psalm 91) to enrich theological depth.