

Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Session 5,

Psalm 4 on Hebrew Poetry

20-min. Podcast Audio Overview

BiblicaleLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome back, everybody, for another deep dive. And today we're going to be looking at Hebrew poetry. Oh, fun.

But don't worry, we're not going full on academic here. OK. We're going to have some aha moments.

I like those. That will totally change the way you read the Bible. And we're working with a lecture by Dr. Bruce Waltke, a renowned Old Testament scholar.

Yeah. And you might be surprised how relevant a lecture from 2024 still is. Right.

We are going to be uncovering. OK. Why so much of the Old Testament is poetry.

Why parallelism matters and why it's not what you think. Ooh, exciting. And how all of this gives us a new perspective on some very famous passages like Psalm 23.

That's a good word. Plus, we have an incredible story from the Vietnam War that really shows the power of Psalm 4. I think you'll find this one truly eye-opening because there's a tendency to approach the Bible with a very Western mindset, like logic and prose. But yeah, when you understand the nuances of Hebrew poetry, it really does unfold this whole new dimension of beauty and meaning.

I'm intrigued. So first things first, how much of the Old Testament is actually poetry? Prepare to be surprised. A whopping 50 percent.

Really? Yeah. Wow. We're talking Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, and even all the prophets.

Wow. So that tells us something fascinating about God then, doesn't it? It definitely does. Like we're seeing this artistic side of God.

This appreciation for structure, beauty, and language. Absolutely. It really suggests that God values creativity and aesthetics.

Yes. Not just logic and reason. So Hebrew poetry is clearly important, but what makes it so unique? Yeah.

You mentioned earlier something called parallelism. Right. So what exactly is that? Parallelism is the heart and soul of Hebrew poetry.

Okay. Unlike English poetry, which relies heavily on rhyme and meter, Hebrew poetry focuses on the relationship between lines. So it sounds like repetition to me.

Why is it more than that? Yeah, that's a common misconception. For a long time, scholars thought that the second line was just a restatement or a shadow of the first. But in the 1980s, there was a real shift in understanding led by scholars like James Kugel.

They showed that the second line isn't just an echo. It adds, emphasizes, or gives a new perspective on the first line. So it's not just repeating the same thing, but adding depth.

Precisely. Even a single word difference can completely change the meaning. Think of it like those 3D pictures where you have to really look closely to see the hidden depths.

I love that analogy. Yeah. Could you give us a concrete example, like from the Bible? Certainly.

Let's look at Psalm 2.5. It says, "He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath." So the second line isn't just repeating the first. You got it.

So it's adding the consequence. Rebuke is the action, but terrify is the impact on the people. Exactly.

It's subtle, but powerful. Yeah. These layers of meaning are what make Hebrew poetry so rich and thought-provoking.

This is blowing my mind. Like I'm seeing the Bible with new eyes. Dr. Waltke uses this great example from Zechariah 9.9, where it talks about the king riding on a donkey on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

It seems very straightforward, but it actually highlights this evolution in how we understand parallelism. So break it down for me. Okay.

What's so significant about this donkey business? Well, Matthew in his gospel takes this verse very literally, describing two animals, a donkey and her colt. Now, before the 1980s, scholars just thought that Matthew had misunderstood Hebrew poetry and that the second part of that phrase was just poetic emphasis on the animal's youth. So colt, the foal of a donkey, was just a fancy way of saying young donkey.

Young donkey. But this new understanding of parallelism suggests that Matthew might've been right all along. Exactly.

Oh, wow. There could be two animals. That's a big difference.

Yeah, it is. It's amazing how one little detail can just change the whole interpretation. It does.

So why would Matthew include this extra detail about the colt? That's a great question. And there are many interpretations. Okay.

It could be about emphasizing Jesus's humility coming on a lowly animal. Yeah. Matthew seems to be highlighting that imagery even further.

It makes you wonder if there's like a hidden message there, doesn't it? Speaking of layers of meaning. Yeah. Can we talk about Psalm 23? Sure.

Probably the most famous Psalm. It is. Even for people who don't know much about the Bible.

You're right. The Lord is my shepherd. Yeah.

Incredibly well known, but it's so familiar that we often miss the poetic brilliance woven into it. Right. Dr. Walt Reed breaks it down into three distinct scenes.

Shepherd, shake, and then temple. Wait, a shake? Yeah. I'm not seeing that explained.

Of course. So it starts with this very classic shepherd imagery, green pastures, quiet waters, protection from danger. Right.

But then there's a subtle shift in verse five. Okay. You're right.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Yes. It's like the scenery changes.

Exactly. Now we're in a sheik's tent being treated as an honored guest. Okay.

And notice that the psalmist also shifts from talking about God to talking to God directly. So it's not just the scene, but also the speaker's perspective that's changing. Yeah.

That's incredible. Isn't it? And then what about the temple? Right. In verse six, we move away from the imagery of the pasture and the tent, and we enter the temple.

Okay. The focus is on God's goodness and faithfulness extending not only through this life, but into eternity. Wow.

I never noticed those layers before. It's amazing, isn't it? It's like a carefully crafted play with different acts and characters. And that's the power of Hebrew poetry.

It's not just about beautiful words. It's intentionally structured to make us think and engage with the text on a deeper level. This deep dive is really making me want to reread all the psalms.

Me too. But before we do that, you mentioned a story about a soldier in Vietnam. Yeah.

I'm dying to hear it. It's a truly remarkable story that shows how these ancient words still resonate today. Yeah.

Dr. Waltke tells of a soldier in Vietnam who found solace in Psalm 4.8 amidst the chaos and death surrounding him. So what happened? Just imagine this soldier, exhausted, surrounded by the horrors of war. He finds himself clinging to the words of Psalm 4.8. I will lie down and sleep in peace for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.

That's powerful. It must've been incredibly comforting in such a terrifying situation. Absolutely.

Even after thousands of years, the Psalms' themes of fear, trust, and finding peace still speak to the human experience. See, even amidst chaos, these ancient words offer timeless solace. Absolutely.

It's the power of Hebrew poetry. Exactly. And that's just the beginning.

There's so much more to explore. Well, let's dive back in. Okay.

We've talked a lot about the what of Hebrew poetry, but I'm kind of curious about the how. Dr. Waltke mentions this word, *terse*, to describe Hebrew poetry. What does he mean by that? Oh yeah.

How does that impact how we read it? Good question. *Terse* is a great word to describe it because it means that it's concise, almost like a puzzle you have to piece together, unlike a novel where you can kind of skim along. Right.

Hebrew poetry demands your full attention. So it's not just about what the words say, but also what they don't say. Precisely.

Think of it as a slideshow, not a movie. Okay. Each line is a snapshot, and we have to connect the dots to see the bigger picture.

Yeah. The spaces between the lines are just as important as the words themselves. That makes sense.

It's like each word is a brushstroke creating this vivid image in our minds. That's a great way to put it. Hebrew poetry invites us to participate in the meaning-making process.

That's what makes it so challenging, but also so rewarding. Okay. I'm starting to see how this all works.

Yeah. Can we take another look at Psalm 23 through this lens of parallelism and terseness? Absolutely. Remember how we talked about those three scenes? Shepherd, shake, temple.

Yeah. Let's focus on that transition from shepherd to shake. Okay.

So we're moving from the open pastures to the intimacy of the tent. Yes. What's the key verse here? Verse four.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. It's a verse many find comfort in, but with this new understanding of Hebrew poetry, we can see even more depth.

I've always loved that verse, but I'm ready to see it with new eyes. Okay. What stands out to you about the parallelism? Well, notice how that first line, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, sets up this feeling of danger and fear.

But then the second line instantly reassures: I will fear no evil. It's like a one-two punch: fear and then comfort. Yes.

And that comfort is emphasized even further in the next line. Okay. For you are with me.

That's the turning point. Right. The presence of the shepherd banishes fear.

Uh, and then we have your rod and your staff. They comfort me. It's interesting that it mentions two objects.

Yeah. That's significant. Great observation.

Remember, we're looking for those subtle differences. Right. Some scholars believe that the rod represents protection.

Okay. The staff symbolizes guidance. So it's not just that the shepherd is present, but he's actively guiding and protecting.

Exactly. And all of that is packed into just a few words. Wow.

That's the beauty of Hebrew poetry's terseness. This is really changing how I see Psalm 23. It's not just about the shepherd leading the sheep to green pastures.

It's about this deep intimacy and trust between them, even in the face of danger. And that sets the stage for that transition to the sheik's tent. Okay.

We move from the vastness of the outdoors to a more personal, intimate setting. It's like the Psalm is zooming in, getting closer and closer to the heart of the relationship. Precisely.

And that's why understanding the nuances of Hebrew poetry is so crucial. It helps us appreciate the artistry and depth of these ancient texts in ways we might otherwise miss. Right.

We talked about the soldier in Vietnam finding comfort in the Psalms. Are there other ways that understanding Hebrew poetry matters to us today? Like in our everyday life? Absolutely. For one thing, it changes how we read and interpret the Bible.

It helps us to avoid misinterpretations and really appreciate the richness of the original text. So we're less likely to just skim the surface. Exactly.

We learn to slow down and savor the words, to appreciate those nuances and layers of meaning. But it goes deeper than that. Remember that soldier's story.

Yeah. It's a powerful example of how these ancient poems can still speak to us today. Yeah.

Offering comfort, guidance, and even courage in the face of life's challenges. And it's not just about finding personal solace. Understanding Hebrew poetry also helps us see the beauty and complexity of God's character.

Absolutely. It reveals his artistry, his love for language, and his desire to connect with us on an emotional and spiritual level. This makes me wonder if God chose to communicate so much of his word through poetry; maybe we should be paying more attention to the role of art and beauty in our own lives.

That's a profound thought. It challenges us to move beyond a purely intellectual understanding of faith and embrace the power of creativity and imagination. It's like we're invited to become poets ourselves.

Yes. To see the world through God's eyes and to express our own experiences of faith in new and creative ways. Beautifully said, but let's step back for a second.

We've been talking about this revolution in understanding Hebrew poetry. Right. But what exactly changed? What were scholars missing before? Yeah.

What was the big aha moment? It all comes down to how we understand parallelism. Okay. For centuries, scholars approached Hebrew poetry with this assumption that the second line of a verse was simply a restatement of the first.

Like a shadow or an echo. Right. But we know now that there's more to it than that.

Yeah. They were missing those subtle but significant differences in wording, the way the second line adds to, expands, or even contrasts with the first. So instead of seeing a flat image, we're suddenly seeing this three-dimensional picture with depth and layers.

Yes. It's like they were wearing blurry glasses before. Ha.

I love that analogy. And now they've got a new prescription. It's like they discovered a whole new way of seeing.

And this shift in understanding has had a huge impact on biblical scholarship. I can imagine. It's like a whole new world of meaning has opened up.

Exactly. We can now appreciate those subtle nuances, the wordplay, the imagery, the layers of meaning that were previously hidden from view. Right.

It's not just about understanding Hebrew poetry. It's about understanding the Bible itself in a deeper and more profound way. That's incredible.

Isn't it? It makes you realize how much we can miss when we read the Bible without understanding its literary context. Absolutely. Okay.

My brain is officially buzzing. We've covered so much ground, but it feels like we've only just scratched the surface. There's always more to explore.

I bet. Hebrew poetry is a vast and fascinating field, and even seasoned scholars are still uncovering new insights. Which is exciting.

It means there's always something new to discover in the Bible. Yeah. Even if we've been reading it our whole lives.

But let's shift gears a bit. Okay. We've talked a lot about theory.

Right. Do you have any practical tips for actually reading Hebrew poetry? Like, how can we apply all this knowledge to our own Bible study? That's a great question. Let's talk about how to unlock the secrets of Hebrew poetry in a practical way.

Give me your best wisdom. Okay. First and foremost, slow down.

Resist the urge to skim or speed-read. Yeah. Hebrew poetry is meant to be savored like a fine wine.

Okay. Take your time with each line, each phrase, each word. Okay.

Slow and steady wins the race. Yes. And pay attention to the parallelism.

Okay. Look for those subtle differences between the lines. Ask yourself, how does the second line add to, expand, or contrast with the first? It's like playing spot the difference, but with ancient poetry.

Exactly. And as you do that, pay attention to the specific words the poet chooses. Yeah.

Look up their meanings in a dictionary or concordance. Okay. You might be surprised by the depth and nuance you uncover.

So it's about getting granular, really digging into the details. Precisely. And don't be afraid to use your imagination.

Okay. Hebrew poetry is full of vivid imagery and metaphors. Try to picture the scenes in your mind, engage your senses and emotions.

So we're not just reading with our heads, but with our hearts as well. Exactly. And finally, remember that Hebrew poetry was often meant to be sung or chanted.

Yeah. Try reading a Psalm aloud, paying attention to the rhythm and flow of the language. It's like we're bringing the ancient words to life.

Precisely. And that's the magic of Hebrew poetry. It's not just about deciphering ancient codes.

It's about encountering the living God through the beauty and power of language. This makes me want to grab my Bible and start exploring all the poetic books right now. Me too.

But before I do, I have one more question. What about those parts of the Bible that aren't poetry? Okay. Should we read those differently? That's a great question.

It's important to remember that the Bible is a diverse collection of literary genres, each with its own unique conventions and purposes. So we wouldn't necessarily apply the same interpretive lens to the historical books or the letters of Paul. Exactly.

It's like using different tools for different jobs. You wouldn't use a hammer to saw a piece of wood, would you? Not unless I wanted to make a mess. Good point.

Similarly, we need to approach each genre of biblical literature with the appropriate tools and methods. So how do we know which tool to use? How can we become more discerning readers of the Bible, more sensitive to its different genres and styles? That's a great

question and something I struggle with, too. It feels like a lifelong pursuit, learning to read the Bible well.

It is. It involves careful observation, study, and a willingness to be challenged in our assumptions. But as you said, it's a worthwhile journey.

The more we learn about the different facets of biblical literature, the more we can appreciate the depth and complexity of God's word. I totally agree. This deep dive into Hebrew poetry has really opened my eyes to how much richness there is to uncover.

Before we wrap up, what's the biggest takeaway you want our listeners to remember from today? That's a great question. If I had to boil it down to one key point, it would be this. Hebrew poetry isn't just an ancient art form.

It's a living expression of God's heart. I love that. It's like we're invited to listen in on a conversation between God and humanity, one that spans centuries and cultures.

Exactly. And that conversation is still going on. Every time we engage with Hebrew poetry, we enter into that dialogue, allowing God's words to shape our thoughts, emotions, and actions.

That's such a powerful thought. These ancient poems aren't just relics of the past. They're living words that can still speak to us today, offering comfort, guidance, challenge, and inspiration.

Precisely. So as you go about your week, let the rhythms and images of Hebrew poetry stay with you. Pay attention to the parallelism in your own conversations, the metaphors you use, the ways in which you express your own experiences of faith and life.

It's like we're all poets in the making, shaping our words to reflect the beauty and complexity of God's creation. But before we say goodbye, do you have any final provocative thought for our listeners to ponder? I do. Let's circle back to the fact that God chose to communicate so much of his word through poetry.

What if we took that seriously? What if we approached our own lives with more artistry and intentionality, paying attention to the beauty and structure, not just in our words, but in our actions, even our thoughts? Oh, that's good. It's like we're all invited to become poets of our own lives, crafting our stories in a way that reflects God's creative heart. What a beautiful thought to end on.

It has been a pleasure joining you for this deep dive. Remember, the journey of discovery never ends. There's always more to learn, more to uncover, more to appreciate in the rich tapestry of God's word.

Thank you so much for sharing your expertise with us. I know I'm walking away with a fresh perspective and a renewed excitement to dive back into the Bible. And to everyone listening, keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep seeking truth in all its forms.

Who knows, maybe you'll even find yourself writing a poem or two along the way.