

Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Rhetorical Approach, Poetic Techniques, Session 23, 6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome to The Explainer. Today we are going on a kind of literary treasure hunt. We're going to uncover the secret architecture behind some ancient poems, and we'll be using the Psalms as our guide to reveal this hidden world of meaning that's been right there in plain sight all along.

So let's just dive right into this powerful idea from the scholar Adele Berlin. Her whole point is that to really get what a text is saying, you first have to kind of put on your architect's hat and understand how it was built, you know, piece by piece. You know, sometimes when you read these ancient texts, it can feel like you're just looking at a big pile of bricks.

You see the individual words and phrases, sure, but you're missing the grand design. But with just a simple shift in perspective, this stunning architecture that's hidden just beneath the surface can suddenly become visible. For a really long time, the traditional way to study a collection like the Psalms was to look for what was typical, what was common.

So scholars would group poems together based on shared forms like, okay, these are all songs of praise and these over here are songs of lament. This method has a name. It's called form criticism, and it's all about identifying the genre.

It asks questions like, what are the shared moods? What's the common vocabulary here? What motifs keep popping up that tie this whole group of texts together? And that's useful for sure, but it's really focused on the forest, not the individual trees. But that brings up a really fascinating question, right? What if the real genius of a poem isn't in how it's similar to all the others, but in how it's profoundly artistically unique? What if the most important stuff lies in the specific creative choices that one poet made? And that leads us to a totally different way of seeing things: rhetorical criticism. Instead of studying the typical, it zooms right in on the particular.

So it's not about what genre a poem belongs to. It's about the specific artistry inside a single text. It's about asking what makes this piece of literature truly special.

This whole approach is basically the science of poetics. Think of it almost like linguistics, but for literature. It's all about identifying the basic components, the building blocks, and then understanding the grammar of poetry to see how the author actually built their message from the ground up.

All right, so let's open up the toolkit. What are these building blocks really? Well, ancient poets had this whole sophisticated set of techniques they used to weave meaning into their work. And learning to spot them, well, that's the key to unlocking the whole text.

So today we're going to focus on two of the most powerful tools in their kit. The incredibly clever use of repetition and these beautiful hidden blueprints of structural patterns. Now, repetition, it's probably the most fundamental tool in any poet's kit.

And it's so much more than just saying something over and over. It's a way to create rhythm, to add emphasis, and to build this powerful structural anchor for the entire piece. One of the most common forms of this is something called the refrain.

It's just like a chorus in a song you'd hear today. A refrain pops up at key moments to divide the poem into sections and just hammer home a central, unforgettable idea. A perfect example of this is in Psalms 42 and 43.

This really powerful refrain appears three different times, and it acts as an anchor. Right in the middle of all this despair, the poet uses this repetition to basically command his own soul, and ours too, to get back to a state of hope. But believe it or not, it gets even cooler.

A master poet can take a simple tool like a refrain and use it with this brilliant, subtle twist to hide the solution to a riddle right in plain sight. So let's dig into a really fascinating case study, Psalm 49. So the poet of Psalm 49 straight up tells us that he's presenting us with a riddle.

And the key to solving it is hidden in a single letter change inside its repeating refrain. It is an incredibly clever bit of wordplay. You've got to see this.

Alright, let's look at the evidence. The refrain appears twice. In verse 12, the key Hebrew phrase is *bal yalin*, and that means they will not endure.

But now watch this. When it shows up again in verse 20, a single letter gets swapped, and the phrase becomes *lo yavin*, which means they do not understand. It's such a subtle shift.

So that first refrain in verse 12 makes this universal, almost bleak point. Death is the great equalizer. Doesn't matter if you're wealthy or powerful, you will not endure.

Everyone, wise or foolish, doesn't matter, dies just like the animals. But then the second refrain, with that one little letter change, sharpens the whole argument dramatically. It's not about everyone anymore.

Now it's only those people who lack understanding who are truly like the beasts that perish permanently. And that, that is the solution to the riddle. The poet is making this incredibly subtle but profound distinction.

He's saying, yeah, okay, all people die, but not all people die forever. And this just brilliantly reveals the psalm's core message. Wisdom is the key to a fate beyond the grave.

That one tiny letter changes absolutely everything. Okay, now for our final tool. Beyond just clever wordplay, the overall structure of a poem can be just as meaningful as its individual lines.

Sometimes the blueprint is the message. A really common and incredibly elegant pattern is called a chiasmic structure. You can think of it like a literary palindrome.

The poet presents ideas in a sequence, say A, B, C, and then right at the center, they hit you with a crucial pivot point before revisiting those same ideas in reverse order. C, B, A. The whole thing is designed to draw your eye to that powerful idea in the middle. Probably the best way to picture this is like throwing a rock into a perfectly still pond.

The main idea hits the water right at the center, and the meaning just ripples outward symmetrically. This structure literally forces your attention directly onto that central pivot, which is where the entire meaning of the text turns. So why does any of this matter? Well, because these tools- the clever refrain, the symmetrical structure- are the hidden blueprint.

They show us how a poet can transform simple words into this profound, multi-layered art. So learning to see how a text means it isn't just some academic exercise. It's the key that unlocks what a text truly means.

You know, when we learn to spot these patterns, we kind of transform from being passive readers into being literary detectives. We're uncovering these layers of genius that have been waiting for centuries to be discovered. And it really makes you wonder, doesn't it? What hidden blueprints are waiting there in the books, the poems, and the stories that you love?