INVITATION
TO THE PSALMS

A READER'S GUIDE
FOR DISCOVERY AND ENGAGEMENT

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BakerAcademic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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To Anne and Karen

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INTRODUCTION

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

—Psalm 19:14

These are the final words of Psalm 19. In the psalm itself, the words are appended as a parting prayer, a faithful wish that God might find the psalmist's poem to be an acceptable offering. In some Christian traditions, these words have often been prayed at the start of the sermon, in the hopes that the preacher's words might matter—if only in some small way.

The words also seemed a fitting way to begin this book because this book is meant more as an invitation to read the psalms, than as an analysis of what the psalms say or mean. *The psalms are meant to be read, they are meant to be experienced.* Analysis of poetry is helpful and important—but only if that analysis serves to assist the reader to enter into a poem with greater sensitivity. Analysis is a *servant.* A competent reader analyzes poetry so that the poetry itself can speak more profoundly. This is true of all poetry—and it is especially true of the psalms, which are the poetry of Christian and Jewish faith.

In his influential essay "How Does a Poem Mean?" John Ciardi writes, "Analysis is never in any sense a substitute for the poem. The best any analysis can do is to prepare the reader to enter the poem more

perceptively."[1] He adds that the concern of poetry "is not to arrive at a definition and to close the book, but to arrive at an experience."[2] For that reason, according to Ciardi, the reader of poetry should not ask, "What does a poem mean?" but rather, "How does a poem mean?" Poetry is not merely expressive: *it is expression.* Poems, that is, do not merely talk about love or passion or emotion: they are the very sound of love, of passion, of emotion.

Because the psalms are the poetry of faith, they are not meant to be studied; they are meant to be read. The prayers of the Psalter are meant to be prayed. The songs of the Psalter are meant to be sung. The lessons of the Psalter are meant to be lived. The angry psalms are meant to be shouted. The meditations are meant to be meditated upon. When it comes to Psalm 23, the most well-known of all psalms, it is not meant as a lesson for a teacher to commend to a student, but a prayer that is meant to be prayed:

> The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
>   He makes me lie down in green pastures;
> he leads me beside still waters;
>   he restores my soul.
> He leads me in right paths,
>   for his name's sake. (vv. 1–3)

The psalm does not just describe trust: *it is an expression of trust.* When the faithful follower prays the psalm, the psalm does not merely express how the pray-er feels. Rather, through praying the psalm the pray-er comes to trust.

If there is any value in *learning about the psalms*, it is just this—that by learning about the psalms the students may learn to read, pray, sing, shout, chant, and wonder the psalms.

This book is an invitation to do just that. The information that is offered here is not meant as a replacement for the psalms—in the way that the CliffsNotes series of condensed study guides are meant as replacements for actually reading various works of literature. Rather, the analysis offered here may be likened to the sort of information that is offered in a tour-guide pamphlet. The goal is to familiarize the reader with the landscape of the Psalter, so that the reader will be set loose to

1. John Ciardi, *How Does a Poem Mean?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 663.
2. Ibid., 666.

explore the Psalter and roam widely among its poems. Billy Collins, in the famous poem "Introduction to Poetry,"[3] poetically scores this point:

Introduction to Poetry

> I ask them to take a poem
> and hold it up to the light
> like a color slide
>
> or press an ear against its hive.
>
> I say drop a mouse into a poem
> and watch him probe his way out,
>
> or walk inside the poem's room
> and feel the walls for a light switch.
>
> I want them to waterski
> across the surface of a poem
> waving at the author's name on the shore.
>
> But all they want to do
> is tie the poem to a chair with rope
> and torture a confession out of it.
>
> They begin beating it with a hose
> to find out what it really means.

To reduce a poem to its meaning or to summarize its message is to "torture a confession out of it" in order "to find out what it really means." To *read a psalm* is, in Collins's marvelous language, to waterski across its surface, to press an ear against its hive, to hold it up to the light. For that reason we use a great many examples from the psalms themselves. Writing this book, when we had to make a decision between quoting more of a psalm or less of a psalm, our motto was "more is better."

The intended audience for this book is the interested nonspecialist student—the student who does not read biblical Hebrew or who has only passing familiarity with Hebrew. For the most part, we have avoided arcane topics of debates of psalms interpretation—the sort

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3. Billy Collins, "Introduction to Poetry" in *The Apple That Astonished Paris* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1988), 58. Copyright 1988 by Billy Collins. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of the University of Arkansas Press, www.uapress.com.

of sticky-wicket technical issues that only the hyperspecialist would care about. Similarly, we have avoided lengthy footnotes filled with dizzying displays of our dazzling grasp of the secondary literature. In place of many notes, at the end of each chapter we provide short bibliographies that list appropriate further reading for beginning students of the psalms.

We have chosen to concentrate on the most accessible features of the psalms—its poetry (chap. 1), the basic genres of the Psalter (chaps. 2–3), the voice of "the psalmist" (chap. 4), the metaphors of the psalms (chap. 5), and the theology of the psalms (chap. 6). We begin with poetry for two reasons: First, because the rhythms of Hebrew poetry are foreign to most English readers. Second, because we believe that *the psalms are poetry*. Although many have tried to do so, one cannot separate the poetic form of the psalm from the intellectual content of the psalm. To try to do so is like trying to separate the wet from water, or the heat from fire. We then proceed with familiarizing the reader with the basic genres of the psalms based on the assumption that words have meaning only in context, and the genres of the psalms offer the primary literary context in which the words of the psalms make sense. We then proceed by introducing the reader to the living "voice of the psalmist," into a consideration of the rich metaphorical life of these poems, and into an interpretation of the God of the psalms.

When reading the psalms, the reader will face an entire set of minor, technical irritations. One of these is that the enumeration of the psalms and especially of the verses of the psalms varies from one version to another. There are two widely used systems for numbering the psalms, one based on the Hebrew text (the so-called Masoretic Text [MT]) and one based on an ancient translation of the psalms into Greek (the so-called Septuagint, or "Old Greek" version of the Old Testament [LXX or OG]). The order of the psalms in these two systems is the same, but the enumeration differs slightly:

Hebrew (MT)	Greek (LXX or OG)
1–8	1–8
9–10	9
11–113	10–112
114–115	113
116:1–9	114
116:10–19	115

Hebrew (MT)	Greek (LXX or OG)
117–146	116–145
147:1–11	146
147:12–20	147
148–150	148–150

In addition, there are two basic systems for enumerating the verses of the psalms. In general, the two systems treat the superscriptions of the psalms differently. The term "superscription" refers to information included at the start of some psalms, such as "A Psalm of David" (Ps. 23) or "To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David" (Ps. 22). Beginning with the King James Version (KJV), most English versions, including the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and the New International Version (NIV), have not numbered the superscription but have counted as "verse 1" whatever follows the superscription. Other English versions, such as the New Jewish Publication Society version (NJPS), do count the superscription as verse 1 and then continue enumerating. In this book we join the majority of English versions by following the Hebrew (MT) textual tradition when it comes to numbering the psalms, but track the KJV by *not* counting the superscriptions as verse 1.

Finally, a word of thanks to our older sisters. Psalm 133:1 says, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" It may be "good and pleasant," but when the four of us were kids, living "together in unity" may not have seemed to our parents like a daily experience. In this, as in many things, getting older is a blessing. Two little brothers could not have asked for two more marvelous sisters. We love you. This book is dedicated to you. P.S.: Mom loves us best.

1

WHY IS MY BIBLE REPEATING ITSELF?

Learning to Understand Hebrew Poetry

Introducing Hebrew Poetry

The biblical book of Psalms is, first and foremost, a collection of *Hebrew poetry*. If a reader sets out to understand the psalms—or even to understand a single one of the psalms—that reader must take into account the central reality that the psalms are Hebrew poetry. Why? Because reading is a "logical" exercise—in the sense that words, phrases, and sentences are put together according to principles that are governed by a logic. You cannot understand what the words, phrases, and sentences are trying to communicate if you do not understand that governing logic. Poetry as a whole is a type of language that has a different governing logic from other types of writing. And *Hebrew poetry*, in particular, has an even more specifically different set of governing logic.

An example may help. Mathematical equations are basically sentences that use numerical and mathematical symbols rather than words to communicate. Imagine that you are given the task of understanding

what the following mathematical equation (sentence) is trying to communicate:

$$2 + 2 = 4$$

The meaning is transparently clear, right? Before you answer yes, imagine that you do not understand what numbers are or how they work. Imagine that you do not understand that the symbol "2" represents the numerical concept of two. Or that the symbol "4" represents the numerical concept of four. Furthermore, imagine that you do not understand that the symbols "+" and "=" stand for the concepts of adding and totaling, respectively. A reader who does not understand these things could, of course, not understand even the simplest equation. The reason for this is that the basic building block of mathematical equations is a signification system in which $2 =$ two, $+ =$ addition, and so on. A reader who does not understand that system cannot understand the longer "sentences" that are created when various elements such as 2, 4, +, and = are put together. But a reader who does understand these basic building blocks, and how they work, can understand even complex mathematical sentences, like the quadratic formula: $ax^2 + bx + c = 0$ (where $a \neq 0$). Now that we've exceeded what we know about math, let us return to Hebrew poetry.

Just as numerical and mathematical symbols are the building blocks of mathematical sentences, Hebrew poetry is the basic building block of the biblical psalms. In order to understand the overall message that a psalm is trying to communicate, it is helpful (perhaps even "necessary") to know some basic elements about the governing logic of Hebrew poetry. When a reader does not understand the basic features of Hebrew poetry and how they work, that reader will find it almost impossible to read and understand even the most simple lines from the psalms, such as: "The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD's throne is in heaven" (Ps. 11:4). But a reader who does understand these basic building blocks can read *and understand* even complex psalms.

The thesis of this chapter is that if readers of the psalms will take the time to understand the basic conventions and features of Hebrew poetry, they will be in a far better position to understand the witness of the psalms—to "waterski across the surface" of a psalm. In this chapter we explain and illustrate some of these

central conventions, beginning with a concept that is usually called parallelism.

Understanding Parallelism

If you have ever read the psalms, you may wonder why your Bible is repeating itself. Consider these four examples from the psalms:

> [A] what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
> [B]   mortals that you care for them? (Ps. 8:4)

> [A] I will give thanks to you, O LORD, among the peoples,
> [B]   I will sing praises to you among the nations. (Ps. 108:3)

> [A] O God, do not keep silence;
> [B]   do not hold your peace or be still, O God! (Ps. 83:1)

> [A] You forgave the iniquity of your people;
> [B]   you pardoned all of their sin. (Ps. 85:2)

In each of these examples, the second line is very similar to the first line. One could almost—almost, but not quite—say that the second line simply repeats the sentiments of the first line. One could *almost* say that the second lines are basically *synonyms* for the meanings of the first lines.

The four examples above nicely illustrate the basic building block of Hebrew poetry, which scholars call *parallelism*. The term "parallelism" was coined by a scholar named Christian Schöttgen in 1733, who described "the linking of entire sentences, several words or clauses of sentences . . . in a kind of parallelism."[1] The term was made famous by Robert Lowth, a bishop of the Church of England, who in 1753 published a very influential study of biblical poetry.[2] Parallelism can be defined most briefly as *the repetition of elements within a grammatical unit.*

1. Claus Seybold, *Studien zu Sprache und Stil der Psalmen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 8. Thanks to Seybold for this reference: Christian Schöttgen, *Horae hebraicae et talmudicae* (Dresden: Hekel, 1733), 1:1252; cf. http://oce.catholic.com/index.php?title=Parallelism.
2. Robert Lowth, *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum* [Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews] (Oxford: Clarendon, 1753).

The four examples above all show repetition in the "grammatical unit" that we are calling a *line* (above, the lines are each marked either as A or as B). But note that scholars also use several terms to demark this unit of text, including "colon" (plural: cola) and stich (plural: stichoi). We will use the term "verse" for a unit of poetry normally made up by two or more lines—above, there are four "verses" of poetry; each verse is made up of two lines.

Within biblical scholarship, most interpreters focus on parallelism between lines, but parallelism occurs at many different levels in Hebrew poetry: within lines, between lines, between verses, between entire sections, and between psalms.

Parallelism Can Occur within a Line of Hebrew Poetry

[A] The LORD is my light and my salvation. (Ps. 27:1a)

[A] The LORD is gracious and merciful,
[B]   slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. (Ps. 145:8)

In these two examples there are parallel sets of words to describe God *within each line*. In the first example, "my light" is used *in parallel* with "my salvation." In the second example, parallelism occurs within both lines. In line A of Psalm 145:8, the single word "gracious" is used in parallel with the single word "merciful," while in the second line the phrase "slow to anger" is used in parallel with the phrase "abounding in steadfast love." Thus parallelism can occur within a line of Hebrew poetry. Now it is your turn to try it. Finish these two lines of poetry and make sure that you include some parallelism within the lines:

Praise the Lord with _____.
I will sing of _____.

If you want to see how an ancient poet handled the same lines that you were given, you can check out Psalm 150:3–4a and 101:1a. But remember, the purpose of this little exercise is not to try to "get it right" by guessing exactly what the ancient poet wrote. Rather, the purpose is to "get it right" by showing that you are beginning to understand what parallelism is and how it works.

Parallelism Can Occur between Lines of Hebrew Poetry

[A] Where can I go from your spirit?
[B]   Or where can I flee from your presence? (Ps. 139:7)

[A] The LORD is gracious and merciful,
[B]   slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. (Ps. 145:8)

[A] Fortunate is the one
            who does not walk in the advice of the wicked,
[B]   who does not stand on the path that sinners tread,
[C]   who does not sit in the seat of scoffers. (Ps. 1:1 AT)

In these three examples the repetition is between lines. Notice especially that in the first two examples, there are two lines in parallel with each other, but that in the third example three lines are in parallel with each other. This tripartite parallelism is less common than the bipartite parallelism, but it occurs frequently enough that readers should be aware of it. This *line-level parallelism* is the part of Hebrew poetry that has been studied the most. Indeed, a great deal of ink has been spilled by scholars arguing with one another over how best to describe it.

As you will see in the next paragraph, some scholars have tried to categorize the many and various ways in which the A lines of Hebrew poetry are parallel to the B lines. Like an extremely organized person who lines up all of the spices alphabetically in the cupboard, scholars have tried to organize how Hebrew poetry works. But, like the spices in the cupboard, all of these attempts work for a while and then sort of crash to the ground. After all, do you alphabetize "Crushed Red Pepper" under C, R, or P? And what about Lemon Pepper, which is not really lemon or pepper? Our point is that the impulse to categorize things is usually helpful, but achieving a perfect or complete categorization is not always possible. We believe that this is the case with Hebrew poetry.

Bishop Lowth got the whole categorizing thing going when he asserted that there are three types of parallelism:

- *synonymous parallelism*, in which the second line basically says the same thing as the first line;

- *antithetical parallelism*, in which the second line basically says the opposite of the first line; and
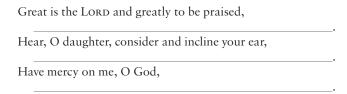
- *synthetic parallelism*, in which the second line says neither the same thing nor the opposite of the first line.

The obvious problem with Lowth's categories is that if you need a catchall category such as "synthetic parallelism" to fit in everything that does not fit into your other categories, maybe there is a problem with your categories. Or, as we maintain, maybe the real problem is that *there is a problem with trying to categorize art*!

The real danger in trying to categorize the way parallelism works, however, is not that such categorization cannot be done, but that such categorization might lead readers to think that they have adequately analyzed the poem once they have assigned a label such as "synthetic parallelism" to a verse. The really destructive thing about this categorizing approach, then, is that it limits the imagination of readers. It exposes readers to a superficial level of analysis, which can prevent them from engaging in the deeper levels of meaning in the poem. It presents readers with a way of labeling the poetry but does not show them how to digest the poetry. As we wrote in the introduction, the purpose of analysis is to help a reader enter a psalm.

So, for now, all you need to know is this: in Hebrew poetry, parallelism occurs between lines of poetry. Once you know that, the challenge of reading Hebrew poetry is not to try to assign a label to the poetry—such as *synthetic parallelism*—but is rather to understand what the poetry is meaning. Or, to use a metaphor that is almost poetic, the joy of reading Hebrew poetry comes from getting the "feel" of parallelism and learning to "enjoy the ride."

Once again, it is now your turn. We will give you the first line of a real psalm and let you write a verse that would work in parallel with it:

> Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised,
>
> _____ .
>
> Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear,
>
> _____ .
>
> Have mercy on me, O God,
>
> _____ .

If you want to compare your poetry with that of the ancient Hebrew poets, you can read Psalms 48:1; 45:10; and 51:1. But remember, you are not "right" if you write exactly what the psalm writer wrote; you are right if you are beginning to understand the rhythms of Hebrew poetry.

Parallelism Can Occur between Verses of Hebrew Poetry

Consider these examples from the psalms:

> [A] O Lᴏʀᴅ, how many are my foes!
> [B]   Many are rising against me;
> [C] many are saying to me,
> [D]   "There is no help for you in God." (Ps. 3:1–2)

> [E] If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
> [F]   if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
> [G] If I take the wings of the morning
> [H]   and settle at the farthest limits of the sea (Ps. 139:8–9)

In these two examples, parallelism occurs between verses. In the example from Psalm 3, there are two verses made up of four lines. Basically, the second verse as a whole is in parallel to the first verse. Notice that line B and line C are very similar, both having this form: "Many are _____ing __ me." This very similar element in each verse thus becomes like a hinge in the middle of the two verses, around which the two verses as a whole swing. It may be easier to see how the two verses function in parallel to each other if the verses are laid out like this:

> A O Lᴏʀᴅ, how many are my foes!
> B   Many are rising against me;
> B′   Many are saying to me,
> A′ "There is no help for you in God."

In the example from Psalm 139, parallelism again occurs between the two verses. Notice that the first line of each verse begins with a conditional "if" statement.[3] But notice also that in the first lines of each verse (E and G), there is a statement that is related both to

---

3. In the Hebrew of Ps. 139 is only one instance of the conditional particle that we translate as "if." This occurs at the start of v. 8. But in the syntax of Hebrew poetry, it is not necessary to repeat the "if" at the start of each phrase or line. The particle governs each of the lines, even though it only occurs at the start of the first line of a series of parallels. Scholars refer to this syntactical phenomenon as the particle doing "double duty"—in this case triple duty, since the particle governs lines E, F, and G.

flying and to the sky: "ascend to heaven" in line E and "take the wings of the morning" in line G. Then in the second lines of each verse (F and H), there are statements related both to a sedentary bodily position and to what the ancient Hebrews would have recognized as a netherworld: "make my bed in Sheol" and "dwell at the farthest limits of the sea" (Sheol was the place of the dead, where people go after life ends; the sea was the place of chaos, where the Canaanite god of the dead reigned). Thus we could diagram the way these two verses function in parallel with one another as something like this:

> If . . . reference to flying . . . reference to the sky
>   Reference to sedentary act . . . reference to netherworld
> If . . . reference to flying . . . reference to the sky
>   Reference to sedentary act . . . reference to netherworld

And once again, now it is your turn. You are given two full verses of Hebrew poetry. Write two more verses that will function in parallel to these two verses:

> The sea looked and fled;
>   Jordan turned back.
> The mountains skipped like rams,
>   the hills like lambs.

> _____
> _____
> _____
> _____

If you want to compare your parallelism with that of the ancient psalm writer, read Psalm 114.

Parallelism Can Occur between Entire Sections of a Psalm

In addition to occurring within a line, between lines, and between verses of poetry, parallelism can occur between entire sections of a psalm. Consider the way in which Psalms 42–43 (these two separately numbered poems actually form one psalm) have a refrain that occurs three times, basically creating three parallel sections of the psalm:

Psalm 42 A	Psalm 42 B	Psalm 43

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
  so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
  for the living God.
  When shall I come and behold the face of God?
My tears have been my food day and night,
  while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"
These things I remember,
  as I pour out my soul:
  how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God,
  with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
  a multitude keeping festival.
	My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you
	  from the land of Jordan and of Herman, from Mount Mizar.
	Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts;
	  all your waves and your billows have gone over me.
	By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
	  and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.
	I say to God, my rock,
	  "Why have you forgotten me?
	Why must I walk about mournfully
	  because the enemy oppresses me?"
	As with a deadly wound in my body,
	  my adversaries taunt me,
	  while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"
		Vindicate me, O God,
		  and defend my cause against an ungodly people;
		from those who are deceitful
		  and unjust deliver me!
		For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
		why have you cast me off?
		  Why must I walk about mournfully
		  because of the oppression of the enemy?
		O send out your light and your truth;
		let them lead me; let them bring me
		  to your holy hill and to your dwelling.
		Then I will go to the altar of God,
		  to God my exceeding joy;
		and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
  my help and my God.
	Why are you cast down, O my soul,
	and why are you disquieted within me?
	Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
	  my help and my God.
		Why are you cast down, O my soul,
		and why are you disquieted within me?
		Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
		  my help and my God.

We arranged Psalms 42 and 43 in three columns, to illustrate that this psalm has three parallel "panes." Each section ends with the refrain that begins, "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" This psalm illustrates that parallelism can occur between entire sections of psalms. Other psalms in which this form of parallelism occurs are Psalms 107 and 119.

Psalm 111

[1] Praise the LORD!
   I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
   in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
[2] Great are the works of the LORD,
   studied by all who delight in them.
[3] Full of honor and majesty is his work,
   and his righteousness endures forever.
[4] He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
   the LORD is gracious and merciful.
[5] He provides food for those who fear him;
   he is ever mindful of his covenant.
[6] He has shown his people the power of his works,
   in giving them the heritage of the nations.
[7] The works of his hands are faithful and just;
   all his precepts are trustworthy.
[8] They are established forever and ever,
   to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
[9] He sent redemption to his people;
   he has commanded his covenant forever.
   Holy and awesome is his name.
[10] The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
   all those who practice it have a good understanding.
   His praise endures forever.

Parallelism Can Occur between Two Psalms

Parallelism also occurs between psalms. That is, the editors who collected all 150 psalms and arranged them into the book of Psalms intentionally placed certain psalms next to each other. In this final arrangement, the two psalms may be read "in parallel" with each other. This type of arrangement, sometimes called "twin psalms," occurs in many places, such as Psalms 1–2; 103–104; 105–106; and 113–114. But perhaps the clearest example of this is found in the twin psalms 111–112 (see above). Both psalms are alphabetic acrostic psalms: each line of these psalms begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Both psalms begin with the call, "Praise the LORD!" Psalm 111 is about God and God's ways, whereas Psalm 112 is about those who follow God and who follow God's ways. One commentator has

Psalm 112

[1] Praise the LORD!
  Happy are those who fear the LORD,
  who greatly delight in his commandments.
[2] Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
  the generation of the upright will be blessed.
[3] Wealth and riches are in their houses,
  and their righteousness endures forever.
[4] They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;
  they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.
[5] It is well with those who deal generously and lend,
  who conduct their affairs with justice.
[6] For the righteous will never be moved;
  they will be remembered forever.
[7] They are not afraid of evil tidings;
  their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD.
[8] Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;
  in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.
[9] They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;
  their righteousness endures forever;
  their horn is exalted in honor.
[10] The wicked see it and are angry;
  they gnash their teeth and melt away;
  the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.

titled these two psalms "The ABCs of Theology" and "The ABCs of Anthropology."[4]

Echoing and Extending: The Building Blocks of Parallelism

There is one more aspect of biblical parallelism that it is useful for the beginning reader of the psalms to know. Up to this point, the focus has been on identifying what parallelism is and where it occurs. Now we wish to change the focus to *how* parallelism is built, to help the beginning reader develop an understanding of what the basic building blocks of parallelism are.

The twin concepts of "echoing" and "extending" provide a helpful set of lenses through which one can understand the building

4. James Limburg, *Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 381–87.

blocks of parallelism. *In most parallelism, the second element of the parallelism either echoes or extends the first element—**and usually it does both***.

Echoing. We use the term "echo" to describe how a word, phrase, or sentence responds in a ping-pong-like manner to a word, phrase, or sentence. In the following set of words, the secondary word echoes the first in some manner.

day ↔ night	day ↔ sunrise	day ↔ month	day ↔ days
love ↔ hate	love ↔ mercy	love ↔ beloved	love ↔ forgive
Jerusalem ↔ temple	Jerusalem ↔ Judah	Jerusalem ↔ David	
I ↔ my soul	I ↔ you	I ↔ my bones	I ↔ they
sing ↔ praise	sing ↔ be silent	sing ↔ new song	

Each of these pairs of words can be said to be functioning in an echoing manner. The echo does not have to be noun for noun or verb for verb. Nor does the echo need to be a synonym or an antonym. The second word may be a synonym, an antonym, a complementary concept, a plural form of the first, a smaller subset or part of the first word, a noun that corresponds with a verb, and so on. There are an almost infinite number of ways that the second term can echo the first.

The concept of echoing also takes place with phrases. Consider the following set of corresponding phrases, each of which is taken from a biblical psalm:

<div align="center">

for a moment ↔ for a lifetime

up from Sheol ↔ down to the pit

sin with my tongue ↔ muzzle on my mouth

I shall be clean ↔ I shall be whiter than snow

Up to my neck ↔ no foothold

Lift your horn on high ↔ speak with insolent neck

</div>

Notice that sometimes the echoing phrases take almost an identical form, while other times the echoing interplay takes a more free form. But echoing is only one of the two basic building blocks of Hebrew parallelism; a second one, which we call extending, also exists.

Extending. We use the term "extend" to describe how a word, phrase, or sentence can *build on and continue* the thought of a

previous word, phrase, or sentence. Although parallel poetic elements that "echo" take the energy from the first element and fire it back, parallel poetic elements that "extend" take the energy from the first element and give it a boost forward. Whereas we described "echoing" as being like a ping-pong game, "extending" is like a relay race: the first element passes the baton to the second, which carries it forward. Extending parallelism takes the baton and keeps going. Consider these sets of words and phrases:

<div align="center">

red ↔ wagon

fast ↔ reader

quickly ↔ descend

like trees planted by streams ↔ which yield their fruit
of water   in due season

the decrees of the Lord are sure ↔ making wise the simple

Who can detect their errors? ↔ Clear me from hidden faults.

</div>

In each of these examples, the secondary element takes the ball from the primary element and runs with it. The secondary element does not merely echo back at the primary element but also picks up the concept and explores a direction in which it might go.

Echoing and Extending. In Hebrew parallelism, the norm is that the secondary element is usually *both echoing and extending* the primary element in some fashion. Do not misunderstand! Do not reduce parallelism to either echoing or extending! Normally there are features of both echoing and extending going on. Consider a few examples:

> Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
>   those he redeemed from trouble. (Ps. 107:2)

Notice that the second phrase echoes the first phrase by repeating God's action of redeeming: "redeemed of the Lord" ↔ "those he redeemed." But notice that it also extends by defining more precisely what God redeemed the people from: "redeemed" ↔ "from trouble." Here is another example:

> The days of our life are seventy years,
>   or perhaps eighty, if we are strong. (Ps. 90:10a)

The second phrase both echoes the statement of the first phrase by repeating a number: "seventy" ↔ "eighty." Yet it also extends the thought of the first phrase by applying a condition to the statement: "seventy years" ↔ "eighty, *if we are strong*." And one more example:

> The dullard cannot know,
>   the stupid cannot understand this. (Ps. 92:6)

The second phrase echoes the concept that there are some who cannot comprehend: "The dullard cannot know" ↔ "the stupid cannot understand." But it then defines precisely what the stupid cannot understand: "cannot know" ↔ "cannot understand *this*." Next the psalm continues to "extend" as it goes on to describe precisely what the stupid do not understand. If you want to know what the stupid cannot understand, you will need to read the rest of Psalm 92.

Once again, we wish to stress a basic point: the purpose of learning about the "echoing" and "extending" aspect of Hebrew poetry is not to label the various elements of the poetry and then close off interpretation. Rather, the purpose is for the beginning interpreter to learn the basic rhythm of the poetry, so that one can ride along on the crest of the poetry, so to speak.

Understanding Poetic Structure and Development

Earlier in this chapter, we introduced psalms as forms of human expression that are governed by certain sets of logic. A first set of logic that governs the psalms (as well as all other Hebrew poetry) is the logic of parallelism. A second set of logic that governs the biblical psalms is a logic of *structure* and *development*. Most forms of human communication are governed by some logic of structure. For example, telephone conversations are governed by the logic of

Alert → Greeting → Identification → Communication

The phone rings or buzzes (Alert). A person answers and says, "Hello" (Greeting). The caller says something like, "Hi, it's Mom calling" (Identification). Then the call continues (Communication). Another example is a three-part joke. Many jokes have three parts (example, "Three fonts—Courier, Times New Roman, and Arial—walk

into a bar, and they each order a beer . . ."). The first two parts set the pattern, and the third deviates from the pattern: this deviation is intended to be funny. For example: ". . . the bartender served the first two, but said to the third, 'Hey, we don't serve your type in here.'" (Remember that we said this joke is *intended* to be funny. There are no guarantees.) The point is that many forms of communication depend on structure to communicate meaning. Oftentimes humans are so deeply familiar with a form of communication that they do not ever realize that there is an apparent structure. But when a reader is trying to understand and interpret a new form of communication, paying attention to structure and development can be very helpful.

First Example: Question-Answer Structure

Paying careful attention to structure is important when learning to read the psalms. Like other forms of communication, the psalms have structure and develop according to certain sets of logic. But rather than all of the psalms sharing one structure, each of the psalms tends to have its own unique structure and tends to develop according to its individual logic. And quite often, unlocking the logic of a psalm's structure is the key to unpacking its meaning. And the more deeply one can understand the structure of a psalm, the more complete one's understanding of a psalm will be. Consider the following example.

Psalm 121

¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills—
    from where will my help come?
² My help comes from the LORD,
    who made heaven and earth.

³ He will not let your foot be moved;
    Your keeper will not slumber.
⁴ Israel's keeper
    will not slumber or sleep.

⁵ The LORD is your keeper;
    the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day,
    nor the moon by night.

⁷ The LORD will keep you from all evil;
    he will keep your life.

       [8] The Lᴏʀᴅ will keep your going out and your coming in
           from this time on and forevermore. (AT)

At the most basic level, the structure of the psalm is *question* and *answer*. The first verse poses a question: "I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?" The rest of the psalm provides an answer: "My help comes from the Lᴏʀᴅ, who made heaven and earth." So, in terms of understanding the meaning of the psalm, this basic level of structure helps one understand its basic message. One might sum it up this way: *Psalm 121 asks the question, "To whom can a person turn to for help?" Then it provides its own answer: "One can turn to the Lᴏʀᴅ, who 'keeps' those who 'come and go' as they journey."*

Notice that there is a second level of structure to this psalm. Verses 1–2 are spoken in the first person: "I lift . . . my eyes . . . my help . . . my help. . . ." The rest of the psalm (vv. 3–8) is spoken in the second person: "He will not let your foot . . . he who keeps you . . . your keeper . . . your shade . . . your life . . . your going out and your coming in. . . ." So, in terms of understanding the meaning of the psalm, this second level of structure helps one understand its message slightly more deeply. One might sum it up as follows: *In Psalm 121, two speakers converse. A first speaker asks a question and provides an initial answer: "Who do I turn to for help? I turn to the Lᴏʀᴅ for help." Then a second speaker responds with words of promise: "The Lᴏʀᴅ will keep you safe as you travel."* Further, notice that this second level of structure begs some further questions. These questions include (1) Who are these two speakers? (2) What is the occasion upon which they spoke? Scholars (of course) disagree about the answers to these questions. Based on a close reading of the poem, the most widely accepted likely interpretation is this: A person about to set out on a journey spoke verses 1–2 (*I am about to leave. Who will help me as I travel through those distant hills? The Lᴏʀᴅ, who made those hills and everything else that exists*). A second person then speaks (*As you travel, the Lᴏʀᴅ, who guides and protects our entire people, will guide and protect you on your journey until you return*).

But there is also a third and even more complex level to the structure of Psalm 121. Notice that in verses 3–8, the word "keep" occurs six times: three times as "keeper" in verses 3–5, and three times as "will keep" verses 7–8. In the middle of these repetitions, verses 5b–6—with references to "shade," "sun," and "moon"—sit at the "center" of this part of the psalm. Furthermore, this section of the psalm employs the

personal name of God (the Lord in English translation, "Yahweh" in Hebrew) four times. These occurrences of the divine name also are balanced around verses 5b–6: two occur before the center section, and two occur after it:

> A He will not let your foot be moved;
>   Your *keeper* will not slumber.
>   B Israel's *keeper*
>   will not slumber or sleep.
>   C The Lord is your *keeper*;
>   the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
>   D The sun shall not strike you by day,
>   nor the moon by night.
>   C′ The Lord *will keep* you from all evil;
>   B′ he *will keep* your life.
> A′ The Lord *will keep* your going out and your coming in
>   from this time on and forevermore.

The carefully crafted structure of verses 3–8 suggests that the psalm is far from an off-the-cuff exchange. Rather, it is a carefully crafted liturgy, most likely designed for repeated use by a community. The formal nature of the liturgy helps the reader speculate a little further on the identification of the second speaker. Most likely this second speaker is either a priest or some other community elder, who speaks formal words of blessing on a traveler who is departing on a journey.

As mentioned above, each psalm has its own unique structure. But there are common features to look for, as well as common patterns to be aware of. Psalm 121, as just noted, opens with a question, and then the rest of the psalm is effectively a response to that question. Other psalms share that structure. Notice how Psalm 115 unfolds:

> Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory,
>   for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.
> Why should the nations say,
>   "Where is their God?"
>
> Our God is in the heavens!
>   he works everything that he desires.
> Their idols are silver and gold—
>   the work of human hands!

They have mouths, but do not speak.
   They have eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear.
   They have noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel.
   They have feet, but do not walk.
They make no sound from their throats.
Those who fashion them are just like them,
   So are all who trust in them!

O Israel, trust in the LORD!
   He is their help and their shield.
O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD!
   He is their help and their shield.
O you who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD!
   He is their help and their shield. (vv. 1–11 AT)

Notice how the psalm is structured: An introduction (vv. 1–2) closes with a question: "Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?'" The body of the psalm then unfolds in two halves. In the first half of the body (vv. 3–8), the psalmist literally answers the question, "Where is their God?" by asserting, "Our God is in the heavens!" (v. 3a). The psalmist then goes on to compare Israel's heaven-dwelling God with the idols that the nations worship. Israel's God "*works* everything that he desires." But the nations' idols are themselves the *works* of human hands—they are mute, blind, deaf, unable to smell or feel, and lame. And so are all those who trust in such idols.

In the second half of the psalm's body (vv. 9–18; only vv. 9–11 are quoted here for reasons of space), the psalmist shifts tones and now exhorts his audience. The psalm writer addresses "Israel" (the members of God's people gathered for worship), the "house of Aaron" (the company of priests gathered for worship), and those "who fear the LORD" (probably meaning non-Israelites who worship the Lord but have not formally been received into the people). The psalmist exhorts this audience to "trust in the LORD" (rather than trusting in the idols of the nations). So an abbreviated outline of the psalm's structure might look like this:

- Question (vv. 1–2)   Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?"

- Answer (vv. 3–8)   Our God is alive in the heavens (not a dead idol).
- Exhortation (vv. 9–18) Trust in the living Lord.

Note: Take care to notice the extra line spaces that occur, respectively, between verses 2 and 3, and between 8 and 9. These spaces do not exist in the ancient Hebrew manuscripts from which our modern English Bibles are translated. Modern editors have added these spaces to make it easier for English readers to follow the structure of the psalms. As such, these spaces are *interpretations* of how the psalm is structured and where major and minor breaks in the psalm occur.

Psalms 15 and 24 also are examples of psalms that are marked with the question-answer structure. Psalm 15:1 asks, "O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?" (by this point you should notice and understand the parallelism of this question). The rest of the psalm goes on to describe the qualifications of one who may enter God's presence. Similarly, Psalm 24:3 asks, "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?"

Second Example: Division into Stanzas

A second common type of structure in the psalms consists of the division of a psalm into several equal (or mostly equal) stanzas. A very clear example of this is Psalm 114:

> [A] When Israel went out from Egypt,
>   the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,
> Judah became God's sanctuary,
>   Israel his dominion.
>
> [B] The sea looked and fled;
>   Jordan turned back.
> The mountains skipped like rams,
>   the hills like lambs.
>
> [B′] Why is it, O sea, that you flee?
>   O Jordan, that you turn back?
> O mountains, that you skip like rams?
>   O hills, like lambs?

[A′] Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord,
  at the presence of the God of Jacob,
who turns the rock into a pool of water,
  the flint into a spring of water.

Psalm 114 is a clear example of how a psalm can be structured to have several equal stanzas. Each stanza consists of four lines of poetry. As we noted above with respect to Psalm 115, the extra line spaces that occur between each of the four stanzas are not present in the ancient Hebrew manuscripts from which the modern English versions are translated. Such spaces are the interpretations of expert translators, who make judgments about how to divide the psalm so that modern readers can understand the psalm more easily. But in the case of Psalm 114, the division is very clear. The stanzas that we have marked B and B′ are obviously similar. In both stanzas, each line shares identical words or phrases: "sea" and "fled"/"flee," "Jordan" and "turned back"/"turn back," "mountains" and "skipped"/"skip like rams," and "hills" "like lambs." And note also that stanzas A and A′ each mention "Jacob."

A second example of a psalm that is structured with equal stanzas is Psalm 46:

1 God is our refuge and strength,
  a very present help in trouble.
2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
  though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
3 though its waters roar and foam,
  though the mountains tremble with its tumult.   *Selah*

4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
  the holy habitation of the Most High.
5 God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
  God will help it when the morning dawns.
6 The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
  he utters his voice, the earth melts.
7 *The Lord of hosts is with us;*
  the God of Jacob is our refuge.   *Selah*

8 Come, behold the works of the Lord;
  see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
  he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
  he burns the shields with fire.

[10] "Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth."
[11] *The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*   *Selah*

This psalm has three stanzas, each of which is three verses long. At the end of the second and third stanzas is a refrain (in italics here for emphasis): "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." At the end of each stanza, the Hebrew word *Selah* also occurs. The meaning of this Hebrew word is no longer known. The best guess is that the word indicated some kind of musical instruction regarding the performance of the psalm in worship. But for our purposes, notice that the word functions to divide the psalm into three crisp stanzas. Some scholars have suggested that the refrain—"The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge"—may originally have been included after verse 3. In other words, perhaps the psalm originally had three equal stanzas, each of which was followed by the refrain and then the word *Selah*.

How does understanding the structure of the psalm help a reader understand the meaning of the poem? In this case, understanding the structure of the psalm helps the reader grasp what it means to believe that "the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold" (AT). The first stanza of the psalm describes what some scholars call "natural evil": dangers and threats that come from the natural order, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and the like. The second stanza focuses on what scholars refer to as "moral evil": dangers and threats that stem from human beings, such as war and oppression: "the nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter." The third stanza ends with God's speaking words that silence both the moral evil ("I am exalted among the nations") as well as the natural evil ("I am exalted in the earth"). Then the psalm closes with the refrain. In other words, stanzas 1 and 2 name two ways in which creation is in rebellion against God. Stanza 3 then describes God's response. And the refrain in turn gives the community words that express its faith.

Other psalms that are structured as stanzas include Psalms 2; 107; 42–43; and 139. These psalms are discussed elsewhere in this book.

Third Example: Turning Points in Psalms

Some psalms have key turning points in which the mood or concept of the psalm makes a significant turn. The language of "turning point"

was developed by the prominent psalms scholar Patrick Miller.[5] The term is helpful because it names the way in which some psalms are structured. It is often good for the reader of a psalm to look for the key point around which the meaning of the psalm pivots.

Psalm 73 is a good example of such a psalm. The psalm begins with a basic assertion: "Truly God is good to the upright" (v. 1a). But then the psalm describes how hard this faith statement is to accept because so often in life it seems as if the wicked prosper and the upright suffer (vv. 2–16). This section of the psalm can be summed up by two verses. The first is verse 3: "I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked." The second is verse 16: "When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task." The psalmist even admits that he was tempted to give up on God and join with the wicked. Then with verse 17 comes the turning point of the psalm: "until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end." The great Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann says Psalm 73 "pivots on verse 17."[6] Brueggemann also calls the verse "the center of the psalm." He explains: "We would like to know more, but we are given only a hint. . . . In some ways—perhaps liturgical—the reality of God's holiness caused the speaker to reperceive the tempting alternative [to live like the wicked]." Brueggemann says that the psalmist experienced "a moment of utter inversion."[7] This moment was a turning point for the psalmist—and is the turning point of the psalm.

Another example of a psalm that is structured around a central turning point is Psalm 12, which begins with a vulnerable cry for help: "Help, O Lord, for there is no longer anyone who is godly; the faithful have disappeared from humankind" (v. 1). But the psalm ends with a note of quiet confidence: "You, O Lord, will protect us; you will guard us from this generation forever" (v. 7). How did the psalm writer travel from such a feeling of vulnerability to such security? The turning point comes in verse 5, where a promise from the Lord

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5. Patrick Miller, "*Yāpîaḥ* in Psalm XII 6 [= 12:5 NRSV]," *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (1979): 495–501. See also idem, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

6. Walter Brueggemann, "Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon," in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 209.

7. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 118.

is spoken: "'I will now rise up,' says the LORD; 'I will place them in the safety for which they long.'" So the structure of the psalm might be described something like this: a human cry for help, followed by a promising response from the Lord, followed by a human expression of trust.

Anatomy of a Psalm

When authors write about the psalms, they use special terms to refer to various parts of the psalms. The figure "Anatomy of a Psalm" (see p. 30) illustrates the meaning of these terms.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the reader was introduced to the basic features of Hebrew poetry, based on the assumption that in order to read the psalms with understanding, a reader needs to grasp the basic governing logic of how Hebrew poetry creates meaning. First, the reader was introduced to Hebrew parallelism. It was argued that parallelism operates on multiple levels: between words (parallelism that works within a phrase), between phrases (parallelism that works within a verse), between verses (parallelism that works within a stanza), between stanzas (parallelism that works within a psalm), and between psalms (parallelism that works to create "twin psalms" or pairs of psalms). The reader was also introduced to the idea of poetic structure of psalms and to poetic development within a psalm.

Going Deeper

In order to deepen your understanding of the concepts in this chapter, consider doing one or more of the following exercises:

1. Find someone who has not studied Hebrew poetry and try to explain the concept of Hebrew parallelism in a way that they can understand it.
2. Open up a Bible to the book of Psalms and pick any psalm. See if you can track both the way that parallelism is working in the psalm and the way that the psalm develops poetically.

Anatomy of a Psalm

Psalm 89 "God's Covenant with David"

[1] *A Maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite.*

I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord,
  forever;
    with my mouth I will proclaim your
      faithfulness to all generations.
[2] I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;
    your faithfulness is as firm as the
      heavens.
[3] You said, "I have made a covenant with
      my chosen one,
    I have sworn to my servant David:
[4] 'I will establish your descendants
      forever,
    and build your throne for all generations.'" *Selah*

Verses 5–51

[5] Let the heavens praise your wonders,
      O Lord,
    your faithfulness in the assembly of
      the holy ones.
. . . .
[50] Remember, O Lord, how your servant
      is taunted;
    how I bear in my bosom the insults of
      the peoples,
[51] with which your enemies taunt, O
      Lord,
    with which they taunted the footsteps of your anointed.
[52] Blessed be the Lord forever. Amen and
    Amen.

3. Think about a question that you have asked or that someone has asked you in the last week. Write a six-line psalm about the question. Construct the psalm so that the first two lines ask the question by using Hebrew parallelism, and the last four lines answer the question by again using Hebrew parallelism.

For Further Reading

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