

What Does the Word Say?
Session 42: Hebrew poetry, understanding the Bible: Part IV
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Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine hermeneutics, the principles that we use to properly interpret the Bible. Dr. Spencer, we discussed prophecy last time, what would you like to examine today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to start with a few quick comments about poetry. I said before that I think most people are comfortable reading poetry, but it may still be useful to just point out a couple of things to look for in Hebrew poetry. We can limit ourselves to comments about Hebrew poetry since almost all of the poetry in the Bible is in the Old Testament.

Marc Roby: And there are significant chunks of the Old Testament that are poetry, aren't there?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely, according to Mickelsen,¹ Psalms, Proverbs, Job, The Song of Solomon – or Song of Songs, along with significant chunks of other books are all poetry.

Marc Roby: What can we say about Hebrew poetry that will be useful?

Dr. Spencer: Well, first of all, poetry is extremely difficult to translate, so we obviously miss many of the features that would be evident if we knew how to read the original Hebrew. We can't expect to catch any rhythmic meters or rhymes in our English translations, but most good study Bibles will point out where there is a play on words in the original. For example, the prophet Micah, who prophesied in the mid-8th century BC in the southern kingdom of Judah, loved to use wordplay and it makes it more interesting and vibrant to have these pointed out to us.

Marc Roby: Can you give us some examples?

Dr. Spencer: Sure. Micah 1:10 begins, "Tell it not in Gath; weep not at all."² In the Hebrew, the verb translated here as "tell" sounds like the name of the city Gath.³ The next half of that verse says, "In Beth Ophrah roll in the dust." And Beth Ophrah in the Hebrew literally means house of dust.⁴ The very next verse, Verse 11, begins, "Pass on in nakedness and shame, you who live in Shaphir." And Shaphir in Hebrew means splendid.⁵ So, the prophet was saying that those who live in splendid would go naked and in shame. Verse 11 goes on to say, "Those who live in Zaanán will not come out." Zaanán sounds like the Hebrew for come out.⁶ So, the prophet is saying that those who live in come-out town will not come out. Finally, Verse 11 ends by saying, "Beth Ezel is in mourning; its protection is taken from you." Beth means house and Ezel

¹ A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974, pp 323-324

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³ See text note in the 1985 NIV Study Bible

⁴ See text note in the 1985 NIV Study Bible

⁵ Calvin says "splendor" (John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophet Micah*, in Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. XIV, Baker Books, 2009, pg. 175), The text note in the 1985 NIV Study Bible says "pleasant"

⁶ See text note in the 1985 NIV Study Bible

resembles a word meaning withdraw, or withhold,⁷ so the prophet is saying that the house of withdraw will withdraw its protection from you.

Marc Roby: I get the idea that Micah would have been a very interesting person to talk to!

Dr. Spencer: I agree. His book has many such plays on words, and having them pointed out just brings the text alive and makes it more human and memorable.

Marc Roby: What else do you want to say about Hebrew poetry?

Dr. Spencer: It uses a great deal of parallelism, which is used to emphasize the point being made. If we are careful to look for this and to think about it when we see it, it can enhance our understanding of the text.

Marc Roby: I think some examples would again be useful.

Dr. Spencer: Of course. There are a number of different types of parallelism and I don't want to take time to go through all of them but let me illustrate a few. The first example is of what is called synonymous parallelism.⁸

Marc Roby: What is that?

Dr. Spencer: Synonymous parallelism is the repetition of a thought stated in a different way. For example, in Proverbs 19:5 we read, "A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who pours out lies will not go free." Now it is clear that the two independent clauses say the same thing, but in a different way. Being a false witness is synonymous with pouring out lies, and to not go unpunished is synonymous with not going free.

This example also illustrates a common literary device, which is called a litotes. This is again something that is quite common, not just in the Bible but in all human communication. A litotes is a deliberate understatement used to emphasize something, and in particular the understatement is a negation of the contrary idea. So, for example, when the proverb says a false witness will not go *unpunished*, to "not go unpunished" is a litotes. It emphasizes that the false witness *will* be punished, by the negative of the opposite idea of going unpunished.

Marc Roby: And the use of a litotes is, as you said, not at all uncommon.

Dr. Spencer: As you just illustrated it is quite common! But, getting back to idea of synonymous parallelism, the repetition does not have to be the exact same thought, it can be something very similar, but slightly different. For example, Psalm 103:3 says that God "forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases". Now, clearly, forgiving sins and healing diseases are not the same thing, but they are similar; in both cases God is graciously removing a serious problem. Psalm 103 is, in fact, a great place to look for parallelism because there are a number of examples in that one

⁷ See text note in *The Reformation Study Bible*, ESV version, Reformation Trust Publishing, 2015

⁸ R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, 2nd Ed, InterVarsity Press, 2009, pg. 95, or A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974, pg. 325

short psalm. In Verse 10 we are told that God “does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities”, which obviously repeats very much the same idea.

Marc Roby: What other kinds of parallelism do we see in the Bible?

Dr. Spencer: The next type usually discussed is antithetic parallelism. In this case, rather than repeating the same or similar thought, the second thought expressed is in some sense the opposite of the first. A good example here is given by Proverbs 13:1, which says, “A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a mocker does not listen to rebuke.” We see in this example that the second statement does not need to be an exact opposite of the first, the opposite of a wise son is, arguably, a careless or foolish son, not a mocker, and instruction does not always take the form of rebuke. But, I think the antithetic nature of the parallelism is obvious, and our understanding of the fundamental idea being expressed is deepened when we take the time to think through the parallelism carefully.

Proverbs 15:1 provides another example. It says that “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

Marc Roby: What other forms of parallelism do you want to mention?

Dr. Spencer: The other types that occur have different names, and not everyone agrees on the names in every case, so I don't think it will be profitable to list a whole bunch of terms, but it will be profitable to give some more examples. A number of parallelisms involve building on a basic idea by adding to it in successive lines. For example, in Psalm 92:9 we read, “For surely your enemies, O LORD, surely your enemies will perish; all evildoers will be scattered.” You can see how new information is added in each phrase. The psalmist begins with the phrase “surely your enemies, O LORD”, and adds information saying, “surely your enemies will perish”, and then he concludes by making a different but similar statement, “all evildoers will be scattered.”

We see this same kind of parallelism in Psalm 29:1-2, where we read, “Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name”.

Marc Roby: That is a great example. And I see your point about paying attention to this kind of pattern. Those verses have a greater impact when we meditate on the repetition and additions – we are to ascribe something to the Lord, then we are told that we are to ascribe glory and strength, and then we are to ascribe the glory due his name!

Dr. Spencer: And the verse then ends by saying “worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness”, which is not considered part of the parallelism, but I think caps the growing thought of ascribing glory to God quite nicely.

Marc Roby: Is there anything more to be said about parallelism?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. R.C. Sproul gives a good example of how recognizing parallelism can even help with understanding.⁹ In Isaiah 45:6-7 we read, “I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.” Now that rendering is not problematic, but if you read the KJV, Verse 7 says, “I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the LORD do all these things.”

Marc Roby: I see the problem immediately, this says that God creates evil!

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly the problem. But, Sproul points out that if you notice the parallelism the problem goes away. God forms both light and darkness, which are opposites, and he makes peace and evil, which are not opposites in our normal understanding of the word evil. In this case, the better translation is to say that God makes peace and disaster as the NIV rendered it.¹⁰

Marc Roby: That is a very useful application of parallelism. It would be a grossly unbiblical characterization of God to say that he created evil in the sense of moral evil.

Dr. Spencer: That would, in fact, be blasphemous. But, let me go off of the topic of parallelism for a moment to point out that the word evil used to have a broader range of meaning. If you look in a good dictionary, the archaic meanings of the term include denoting something as worthless, uncomfortable, painful, angry and so on.¹¹ So you find the KJV of the Bible saying things that are very strange to the ears of modern man.

For example, in Exodus 32, we read about the Israelites making a golden calf to worship and when God tells Moses he is going to destroy the people for this sin, Moses intercedes on their behalf and we read in the KJV of Exodus 32:14 that “the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.” The word “repent” is also clearly being used in a way that is strange to most of us in this verse, but the word can simply mean to change your mind. So, the NIV translates this verse as saying that “the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.”

I wanted to point this out simply to illustrate that we need to be very careful in interpreting the Bible. If you have a translation that says something strange, look in other translations. Find out what the original words mean and be careful to interpret each verse in a way that is consistent with what is taught in all of the Bible.

Marc Roby: In other words, use Scripture to interpret Scripture again; our first rule of hermeneutics.

Dr. Spencer: Precisely, or as we noted last time you can say that all of Scripture is a unity and cannot contradict itself.

⁹ Sproul, op. cit., pp 96-97

¹⁰ W.E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Thomas Nelson, 1996, pg. 233 (in Old Testament Section)

¹¹ Webster's Third New International Dictionary, unabridged, Merriam-Webster Inc., 2002, pg. 789

Marc Roby: Do we want to say anything more about parallelism or Hebrew poetry?

Dr. Spencer: I don't have anything more I want to cover with respect to poetry specifically. But with the time we have left I would like to say a little bit more about figures of speech, which are quite common not just in poetry, but throughout the Bible and human communication. We've already mentioned the use of a litotes to emphasize a point, but there are many other figures of speech that it is good to take notice of as well.

Marc Roby: Certainly the Bible uses a lot of anthropomorphic speech when it speaks about God.

Dr. Spencer: That is one of the big categories. Anthropomorphism is actually a type of metaphor in which we ascribe human characteristics to animals or objects or, in this case, to God. The Bible tells us that God is a Spirit, so he does not have a physical body as we do. Nevertheless, in speaking about God, the Bible frequently talks about human characteristics. So, for example, we read in Isaiah 59:1, "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear." And in Exodus 33:11 we are told that "The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend." These are anthropomorphisms that describe God in ways we can relate to.

Marc Roby: You mentioned that anthropomorphic speech is a type of metaphor, so perhaps it would be good to remind our listeners that a metaphor is a word or phrase used to refer to something else because of some underlying similarity in the things. For instance, if I say someone is drowning in his sorrows, I'm using a metaphor to describe the depth of his sorrow.

Dr. Spencer: That's a good example, and it's always useful to be reminded of these definitions.

Marc Roby: In addition to using anthropomorphic speech, the Bible also describes God as having emotions.

Dr. Spencer: That's very true. The technical word for ascribing human emotions to something that isn't human is anthropathism. God is a personal God and *does* have emotions however, so this is a bit different than talking about God's arm or face.

Mickelsen very usefully points out that "Grief, anger, wrath, etc., are all genuine responses of God. The metaphorical element arises from the fact that human grief, anger, and wrath are a complex array of elements. Grief can involve self-pity; anger can be filled with an irrational obsession for revenge; wrath can be overlaid with a passion to return in kind. Yet these elements must be excluded from an accurate picture of God's grief, anger, and wrath. God's response is genuine; it is the human counterpart that is tainted by corrupt elements."¹²

Marc Roby: I like that way of putting it. God's anger is a genuine anger, it is human anger that is a corrupt copy.

Dr. Spencer: I like that too because it makes it clear that the problem is with us, it is our sin. There is nothing necessarily wrong with getting angry, in fact, we should get angry at some

¹² Mickelsen, op. cit., pg. 185

things. But our anger is almost always, perhaps I should just say always, corrupted by other emotions and sinful motives. That's why the Bible does not command us to never be angry, but we *are* told in Psalm 4:4, which is quoted in Ephesians 4:26, "In your anger do not sin".

Marc Roby: What else do we need to know about the figures of speech used in the Bible?

Dr. Spencer: We need to realize that many of them are foreign to modern readers. Most of us grew up in the city or suburbs and buy our food at a grocery store. We may have gardens and pets, but very few modern people are well versed in the ways of agriculture, livestock or wildlife, and many of the metaphors used in the Bible come from these areas. That means that we have to do some work to properly understand them.

Marc Roby: It's not hard to find examples for these. I immediately think of Jesus calling Herod a fox for instance in Luke 13:32.

Dr. Spencer: Now that one is probably pretty easy for most modern readers to grasp. For whatever reason foxes are considered clever and sly, perhaps because they are small nocturnal carnivores and must rely on stealth to catch their food, I don't know.

But there are other references that are more difficult for modern readers. For example, in Psalm 18:33 the psalmist, in speaking about God, declares that "He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to stand on the heights." When someone raised in the city reads this, he may be confused. What do deer have to do with standing on the heights? The answer, of course, is that deer are known for being very surefooted. If you go up to Lassen National Park in Northern California you can watch deer run quite quickly over terrain that would cause almost any human being to stumble. So, this simile is an apt one, having feet like a deer would be pretty good at times.

Marc Roby: You just used the word simile, so it might be worthwhile to remind our listeners of what that means – it's been a while since some of us were in high-school English class!

Dr. Spencer: That's true. A simile is a type of metaphor, it is a phrase that uses either the word *like* or *as* to compare something with something else. So, if I say that someone is as swift *as* a gazelle, that is a simile. The reason it is important to point these things out is that we are accustomed to reading things too quickly in this day and age and we tend to skip over simile's and other figures of speech far too quickly. We should stop and take the time to consider the comparisons being made carefully.

Marc Roby: And, of course, the Bible uses many other figures of speech as well.

Dr. Spencer: It does, and I don't want to take the time to go over all of them, but it is worthwhile to point out a couple of things that sometimes cause people trouble. We mentioned these when we talked about the infallibility of the Bible, but it is worth quickly repeating two of them. The first is that the Bible uses hyperbole, which is an intentional exaggeration for effect. So, for example, in John 21:25 we read that "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." This is a clear example of hyperbole and is not meant to be taken literally.

Secondly, the Bible also uses phenomenological language, which is language that describes something in terms of how it appears to the observer. So, for example, the Bible speaks about the sun rising and setting in many places, and about the earth not moving, for example in Psalm 93:1 we read that “The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved.” This again is clearly not contradicting what we know from science, it is simply describing our everyday experience.

Marc Roby: Very well. I think that wraps up our time for today. I'd like to once again encourage our listeners to email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We would very much appreciate hearing from you.