

## HOW TO READ HEBREW POETRY

Practical suggestions

Banska Bystrica, 21st September 2014

LITERATURE: WILKINSON & BOA: *Talk Thru the Bible*; MEARS, H. *What the Bible is All About*; HILL, H. *A Journey through the Bible*; PAWSON, D. *Unlocking the Bible*.

### 0. INTRO TO BIBLICAL POETRY

- ...about 1/3 of the OT<sup>1</sup> is *poetry* (only 7 books don't have any poetry: Leviticus, Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Malachi)

#### 0.1. THE OLD TESTAMENT (HEBREW CANON)

- (1) Moses, (2) history, (3) the Prophets, (4) [the Writings] Wisdom, Psalms (poetry)

#### 0.2. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Lower level of inspiration? (Torah  $\supset$  Prophets  $\supset$  Wisdom) = some of the Jewish teachers considered the biblical poetry to be of lower inspiration in comparison to Torah and the Prophets, because they found it uneasy to interpret and less important
- Wisdom literature:
  - Biblical wisdom  $\leftrightarrow$  philosophy (ethics)
  - Book of Proverbs; the Book of Job; Ecclesiastes; Song of Solomon
  - Wisdom Psalms

#### 0.3. WHY POETRY?

- to aid MEMORY – measured speech, beautiful expressions...
- to call for EMOTIONS – powerful words, metaphors, turns of ideas, imagination
- to subdue the WILL – dignified, lofty ideas, magnificent expressions
- to help spiritual EXPERIENCE – “immersing”, absorbing the whole being in the flow of words...

#### 0.4. PROBLEMS READING POETRY

- Poetry is *harder* to read:

Poetry is the most ingenious form of verbal expression. Furthermore, the poet's virtuosity permeates every level of the text, from sounds and syllables to strophes and even higher textual units; there is a box of tricks for every layer. The result is that anyone who discusses poetry should be able to draw on a similar extensive repertoire of tools; dealing with poetry is a much more technical job than interpreting narrative prose. Then there are the readers, from whom considerably more patience and stamina is required than in the case of prose with its familiar forms of organization such as plot, time, etc.<sup>2</sup>

- Older translation – no graphic form to differentiate poetry from prose
- Theological “nonsense” = Reading poetry as “science”, “philosophy”, “argumentation”, “logic”...?
- The emotional side of faith! ( $\rightarrow$  Jonathan EDWARDS *Religious Affections*) = God calls us to love Him with all our hearts
- The Hebrew language:

"I have listened to you." In Hebrew this is only one word, of three or four syllables, which moreover contains an extra element of information as compared to English: it shows whether "you" (the direct

<sup>1</sup> KAISER - SILVA *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, s. 87.

<sup>2</sup> FOKKELMAN, J.P. *Reading Biblical Poetry*, Louisville : Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, p. vii.

object) is a man or a woman. A phrase such as "the people who pursue me without reason" in the original language consists of only two words, five syllables in all.

- Poetry – using poetic *words*, *syntax* (order of words), metaphors, allegory etc. → playing with language, connotations, puns, suggestions, culturally accepted meanings...<sup>3</sup>
  - E. W. BULLINGER, in his manual, listed more than 200 figures of speech used in the Bible (*Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* e.g.: Repetition, Amplification, Description, ...)
- Experiencing great truths calls for powerful words and strong emotional response. We need to open up, to listen by heart.
- Emotional view of nature, history, relationships...

## 1. BASICS OF BIBLICAL POETRY

### 1.1. TROPES

- *trope*: a figurative or metaphorical use of a word or expression
- What does "literal" truth mean in the Bible? → author's intention
- Imagination = very important to use our imagination when reading poetry – imagination submitted in prayer to God

**Isaiah 55:10-11** "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, <sup>11</sup> so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

- metaphor (the most important tool of poetry)
  - Ps 80:8-9** You brought a vine out of Egypt;  
you drove out the nations and planted it.  
<sup>9</sup> You cleared the ground for it;  
it took deep root and filled the land.  
Z Egypta si preniesol vinnu révu,  
pohanov si vyhnal a vysadil si ju  
Pôdu si pripravil pre ňu,  
zasadil si jej korene a zaplnila krajinu.

- hyperbole
  - Psalm 13:1** How long, O LORD?  
Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?

- irony
  - Amos 4:4** "Come to Bethel, and transgress;  
to Gilgal, and multiply transgression;  
bring your sacrifices every morning,  
your tithes every three days;

### 1.2. PARALLELISM

The key to reading the Hebrew poetry = parallelism = saying the same thing in another way: the first part of the verse (the first line) represents the main thought, the second part (line) either repeats the main thought using different words (synonymous parallelism), or it develops it by opposition (antithetical) or gradation (synthetic).

- correspondence → synonymous parallelism
  - Pr 1:20** Wisdom cries aloud in the street,  
in the markets she raises her voice

<sup>3</sup> FOKKELMAN, J.P. *Reading Biblical Poetry*, p. 16.

- opposition → antithetical parallelism

**Proverbs 10:1** A wise son makes a glad father,  
but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother

- gradation → synthetic parallelism

**Ps 32:2** Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

### 1.3. POETIC GENRES

- Psalms (adjust your emotional response!): (1) Praise (2) Lament (3) Thanksgiving (4)
- Prophets: Qinah;
- Wisdom: MASHAL (simile; parable; riddle; allegory; pithy saying...)

## 2. PRACTICAL ADVICE

- Get the Bible in which you can see poetic text by the way it is printed.
- Read slowly!
- Read the *whole* poem (psalm; prophetic speech; allegory etc.)
- Observe not only *WHAT* is being said but *HOW* (unusual words; metaphors; hyperboles etc....)
- Open up your *emotional* response → empathise!!! (gratitude; wonder; fear; anxiety; compassion; trust; joy; love...)
- Let the Word work on your imagination/"phantasy" – but be careful not to depart from under the workings of the Holy Spirit

## 3. CONCLUSIONS

- Allow for the difference in your understanding to poetic texts.
- Let the emotional side of your faith be on alert especially when reading poetry
- Pray for the Holy Spirit to guide you into the adequate spiritual experience of the poetic language of the Word of God.