Chapter Five

Types of Biblical Poetry

To call something poetry is to identify the special idiom in which it is written. Virtually any literary genre can be written in poetry. In the Bible we find such diverse forms as poetic narrative (the Book of Job), poetic satire (much of Old Testament prophecy), and poetic discourse (parts of the Sermon on the Mount). Mainly, though, poetry implies various types of short poems, and it is the purpose of this chapter to describe the leading biblical examples.

LYRIC POETRY

What most people mean by "poem" is a lyric poem. A lyric can be defined as a short poem, often intended to be sung, that expresses the thoughts and especially the feelings of a speaker. Breaking that definition into its individual parts yields the following anatomy of lyric as a genre.

To begin, lyrics are brief. They express a feeling or insight at the moment of greatest intensity, and we all know that such moments cannot be prolonged indefinitely. The fact that lyrics are often sung likewise accounts for their characteristic brevity. Because of this brevity, lyrics are self-contained, even when they appear in collections like the Old Testament Book of Psalms. As part of this self-containedness, lyrics usually have a single controlling topic or theme (which may be an emotion rather than an idea). This unifying theme is stated early in the poem and exercises a formative A Definition of Lyric

Lyrics Are Brief
influence on the poem's development. Unless a reader identifies the unifying theme, a lyric will remain a series of fragments, and nothing can be more disastrous to the unified impact that is a hallmark of lyric.

The best means of grasping the unity of a lyric is to recognize that it is built on the principle of theme and variation. On the one hand, there is a unifying idea or emotion that controls the entire poem. The details by which this theme is developed are the variations. This principle places a twofold obligation on the reader: to determine the theme that covers everything in the poem, and to discover how each part contributes to that theme. Some of the Old Testament Psalms are, in fact, very miscellaneous and consist of a series of loosely related ideas. But most of them become unified wholes if a reader exercises patience and creativity in looking for a unifying theme.

A lyric is also personal and subjective. Lyric poets present their own thoughts and feelings directly, not through a story about characters viewed from the outside. The speaker in a lyric speaks in the first person, using the "I" or "we" pronoun. As readers we usually overhear the speaker, who may address anyone—God, himself, the stars, a group, enemies—but who rarely conveys the impression of speaking to the reader. Whereas stories present a series of events, a lyric presents either a sequence of ideas or a series of emotions. In other words, lyrics are either reflective/meditative or emotional. Emotion, especially, is often considered the differentiating element of lyric. We should not go to a lyric looking for a story; we will find only occasional snatches of narrative to explain the poet's emotion or to elaborate such feelings as praise or despair. Because lyrics are often emotional, and because even reflective lyrics tend to be mood poems, a good question to ask of a lyric poem is, "How does this poem make me feel?"

It is not easy to put emotion into words, and the means of doing so are rather limited. They include use of exclamation, hyperbole, emotive words, vivid description of the stimulus for the emotion (thereby evoking a similar feeling in the reader), projecting a feeling onto external nature, or describing parallels to the speaker's situation (as when the psalmist in Psalm 102 compares his loneliness to an owl and "a bird alone on a housetop").

Lyrics are concentrated and compressed. They are moments of intensity, very different from a drawn-out story with highs and lows of feeling. Stories have occasional moments of epiphany (heightened insight or feeling), but lyrics are moments of epiphany, without the surrounding narrative context. They are intense and packed with meanings. We must therefore emphatically not expect a lyric to cover the whole territory on a given topic. Lyric captures a moment and does not give a reasoned philosophy on a subject. It would be foolish to take such statements as "whatever he does prospers" (Ps. 1:3) or "no harm will befall you" (Ps. 91:10) out of their lyric context and treat them as absolutes.

Because lyrics are heightened speech, they often contain abrupt shifts and lack the smooth transitions of narrative. C. S. Lewis speaks of "the emotional rather than logical connections" in lyrics. Such abrupt jumps of course demand tremendous alertness and even interpretive creativity on the part of the reader.

Lyric is preeminently a poet's response to a stimulus. In the lyric poetry of the Bible the poets are always busy responding to something that has moved them—God, their enemies, a personal crisis, nature, victory, defeat, a beloved, and so on. One of the most helpful things to do with a lyric is to identify the exact stimulus to which the poet is responding.

The overwhelming majority of lyrics are built on the rule of three-part structure. They begin with a statement of theme, which is also the idea or emotion or situation to which the poet is responding. Ways of stating the theme are varied: a description (Ps. 121:1), a situation that is hinted at (Ps. 2:1), an invocation (Ps. 3:1), an address to an...
implied human audience (Ps. 107:1), an idea (Ps. 19:1). Regardless of how the theme is stated, it alerts the reader to what will control the entire poem.

The main part of any lyric is the development of the controlling theme. There are four ways of doing this, and many poems combine them:

1. **Repetition**, in which the controlling emotion or idea is simply restated in different words or images (Ps. 32:1–5).

2. The **listing or catalog** technique, in which the poet names and perhaps responds to various aspects of the theme (Ps. 23 or any of the praise psalms).

3. The principle of **association**, in which the poet branches out from the initial emotion or idea to related ones. A common pattern in the Psalms is movement from God’s character to his acts, or vice versa. In Psalm 19, the poet moves from God’s revelation of himself in nature to his revelation in the moral law.

4. **Contrast**, in which the poet is led to consider the opposite emotion or phenomenon as he develops the main theme (Ps. 1).

3. **Resolution**

In the last, brief part of a lyric, the emotion or meditation is resolved into a concluding thought, feeling, or attitude. Lyrics do not simply end; they are rounded off with a note of finality. In the Psalms this is often a brief prayer or wish.

Explicating a Lyric

The key to a good discussion or explication of a lyric is to have an orderly and discernible procedure, so a reader or listener knows what is going on. The best plan of attack is to move from the large to the small, according to the following fourfold procedure.

1. **Identifying the topic, theme** (what the poem says about the topic), underlying situation or occasion (if one is implied). This part of the explication should produce an understanding of what unifies the poem.

2. **Laying out the structure** of the poem, including the following considerations (using whichever ones are appropriate for a given poem):
   a. Identifying whether the primary controlling element is *expository* (a sequence of ideas or emotions), *descriptive* (of either character or scene), or *dramatic* (an address to an implied listener).
   b. Dividing the poem into its topical units from beginning to end, thus showing the sequential flow of the poem.
   c. Identifying underlying contrasts that organize the poem.
   d. Determining whether a given unit develops the theme through repetition, catalog, association, or contrast.
   e. Applying the framework of theme and variation.

3. **Progressing through the poem unit by unit and analyzing the poetic “texture”** (in contrast to the “structure” already discussed). This means identifying and exploring the meanings of the figures of speech and poetic devices discussed in the previous chapter of this book. We should isolate whatever unit lends itself to separate consideration; it might be an individual image or figure of speech, a line, a verse, or a group of verses.

4. **Techniques of versification** (in biblical poetry, parallelism) or patterning that make up part of the artistry and seem worthy of comment. For example, the imagery in Psalm 1 is organized around an envelope pattern in which the metaphors of the assembly and the path appear early and late, with harvest imagery occurring in the middle. After we have said all that we wish to say about the structure and meaning of a biblical lyric, there tends to remain a residue of artistic beauty that simply deserves comment and admiration.

It is by now apparent that when we speak of “a short poem,” we usually mean a lyric poem. In fact, most of the additional categories I am about to describe are subtypes of lyric. The further traits of each of these subtypes may provide a supplemental framework for organizing an analysis of them. But even in such cases it is necessary to make use of the lyric considerations that I have noted. A lament
psalm or praise psalm, for example, does not bypass the general features of lyric but rather builds on them.

**TYPES OF PSALMS**

Let me say at the outset that biblical scholars have identified so many types of psalms, and made so many arbitrary and subtle distinctions, that the whole enterprise is in danger of collapsing under its own weight. I say this because sooner or later it may be liberating to realize that we are under no obligation to use a complicated system of classification. All of the Psalms are lyrics, and we can do an excellent job with any psalm by using what we know about poetic language and lyric form. We should also note that classification of the Psalms rests largely on elements of content or subject matter, not on literary form as such.

The largest category of psalms is the lament psalm, which can be either private or communal. A lament psalm consists of the following five elements, which (note well) may appear in any order and which can occur more than once in a given psalm.

1. An invocation or introductory cry to God, which is sometimes expanded by the addition of epithets (titles) and often already includes an element of petition.

2. The lament or complaint: a definition of the distress; a description of the crisis; the stimulus that accounts for the entire lament. Most lament poems are “occasional poems,” arising from a particular occasion in the poet’s life, which is usually hinted at in the complaint section.

3. Petition or supplication.

4. Statement of confidence in God.

5. Vow to praise God, or simply praise of God.

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Psalm 54 as a Lament Psalm

Psalm 54 (RSV) illustrates the form of the lament psalm in succinct fashion. It reverses the normal order of events by beginning with the petition or supplication:

*Save me, O God, by thy name,*

*and vindicate me by thy might.*

This is followed by the cry to God to hear the prayer (the element that usually comes first):

*Hear my prayer, O God;*  
*give ear to the words of my mouth.*

The lament or complaint, as so often in the Psalms, defines the crisis in terms of threat from personal enemies:

*For insolent men have risen against me,*  
*ruthless men seek my life;*  
*they do not set God before them.*

The poet then asserts his confidence in God:

*Behold, God is my helper;*  
*the Lord is the upholder of my life.*  
*He will requite my enemies with evil;*  
*in thy faithfulness put an end to them.*

The poet ends with a vow to praise God:

*With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to thee;*  
*I will give thanks to thy name, O Lord, for it is good.*  
*For thou hast delivered me from every trouble,*  
*and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.*

The second major grouping of psalms is the psalms of praise. The English word “to praise” originally meant “to appraise; to set a price on.” From this came the idea that to praise means “to commend the worth of.” The psalms of praise, theocentric in emphasis, direct praise to God. Such praise psalms include:

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Psalms 10, 35, 38, 51, 74, and 77 are typical lament psalms.

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They are explicated in my book The Literature of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 138–44.
poems are the voice of response to the worthiness of God.

The elements of praise (not to be confused with the form of praise psalms discussed below) are what give these poems their distinctive traits. One of these elements is the elevation and exaltation of the person being praised. A second one is the directing of the speaker's whole being away from himself or herself toward the object of praise. Psalms of praise are filled with the speaker's feelings, but we do not look at the speaker. Instead, we share his feelings as a way of experiencing the worthiness of God. In the words of C. S. Lewis, "The poet is not a man who asks me to look at him; he is a man who says 'look at that' and points." Another ingredient of much praise is testimony. Praise, in other words, has a communal dimension to it, and it often occurs in a worship setting.

There are two main types of praise in the Psalms, Declarative or narrative praise extols God's activity on a particular occasion. Its main thrust is that God has done such and such on a specific occasion. Descriptive praise describes God's qualities or the acts that he does perpetually. Its thrust is that God is this or that, or that he habitually does these things. Descriptive praise, in other words, is not occasional in the way that declarative praise is. Both types can be either private or communal.

The Catalog of Praise

This three-part structure is obviously a specific manifestation of the three-part lyric structure noted earlier in this chapter.

The most crucial element in a praise psalm is the catalog of praiseworthy acts or qualities of God. Accordingly, a necessary part of explicating such a poem is to divide the catalog into its topical units. Such a division will show the remarkable range in most psalms of praise. It might also uncover the presence of declarative praise and descriptive praise in the same catalog. Typical psalms of praise include Psalms 18, 30, 65, 66, 96, 97, 103, 107, 124, 136, and 139.

Worship psalms, also known as songs of Zion, are an important category. They do not have a fixed form like lament and praise psalms, but they are readily identified by the presence of references to worship in Jerusalem. Many of these poems also allude to the pilgrimages that were a regular part of Old Testament religious experience (in fact, the heading "A Song of Ascents" for Psalms 120–134 shows that these pilgrim songs were sung or recited on the trips to Jerusalem). Worship psalms are among the most beautiful in the Psalter and are well represented by Psalms 27, 42–43, 48, 84, 121, 122, 125, 137.

Nature poems are also a high point of the Psalms. Although nature finds its way indirectly into dozens of psalms, there are five psalms that we can call nature poems—Psalms 8, 19, 29, 104, and 148. They all share common traits: they take some aspect of nature as their subject; they praise nature for its beauty, power, provision, and so forth; and they describe nature in evocative word-pictures that awaken our own experiences of nature. Needless to say, the poet in each of these poems does not treat nature as the highest good but allows


5They are explicated in Ryken, *Literature of the Bible*, 146–64.
nature to become the occasion for praising God, the creator of nature.

SUMMARY

The psalms of lament and the psalms of praise are the two primary lyric types in the Psalter. A host of smaller categories fill out the Psalms. In addition to the categories of worship psalms and nature poems discussed above, there are descriptive-meditative poems (such as Psalm 1 on the godly person or Psalm 119 on the law of God), royal psalms that deal with the king, penitential psalms (prayers for forgiveness), and imprecatory psalms (psalms calling misfortune on one's enemies). Psalms such as 23 lack the opening call to praise of the praise psalms, but in every other way belong to that type.

LOVE LYRICS

The Bible contains some of the most beautiful love poetry in the world. It appears mainly in the Song of Solomon. The best way to understand this frequently misinterpreted book is simply to compare it with the love poetry that one can find in a standard anthology of English poetry.

My present purpose will be served by simply categorizing the types of love poems in the Song of Solomon. The largest category is pastoral love poems, in which the setting is an idealized rural world and the characters are described metaphorically as shepherds and shepherdesses. Such poetry describes in rural images and metaphors the delights of the love relationship. In the pastoral invitation to love the lover invites the beloved to share the life of happy, fulfilled love by metaphorically picturing that life of shared love as a walk in nature (Song of Sol. 2:10-15; 7:10-13).

A blazon is a love poem that praises the beauty and virtue of the beloved, usually by comparing features of the beloved to objects of nature (e.g., 2:3). In an emblematic blazon, the lover lists the features of the beloved and compares them to objects or emblems in nature (4:1-7; 5:10-16; 6:4-10; 7:1-9). The key to interpreting such poems is to realize that they are symbolic rather than pictorial; literally pictured, these comparisons are ludicrous. An epithalamion is a poem celebrating a wedding (Song of Sol. 2:3-5:1; and Ps. 45).

ENCOMIUM

One of the most appealing of all lyric forms in the Bible is the encomium. An encomium is a lyric (whether in poetry or prose) that praises either an abstract quality or a general character type. The conventional formulas in an encomium are these:

1. An introduction to the topic that will be praised.
2. The distinguished and ancient ancestry of the subject.
3. The praiseworthy acts and/or attributes of the subject.
4. The indispensable or superior nature of the subject.
5. A conclusion urging the reader to emulate the subject.

A few biblical encomia are in prose rather than poetry, but the prose is so tightly packed with imagery and so highly patterned that it is virtually poetic in effect. Psalms 1, 15, 112, and 128 all praise the godly person (a general character type). Proverbs 31:10-31 is an acrostic poem that paints a composite portrait of the ideal wife. John 1:1-18 and Colossians 1:15-20 praise Christ with the conventional encomiastic motifs. Hebrews 11 (and 12:1-2) and 1 Corinthians 13 (and 14:1) praise the abstract qualities of faith and love respectively. The portrait of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is a reversal or parody of the conventional formulas.

Further Reading


For explications of the poems in the Song of Solomon, see Ryken, Literature of the Bible, 217-30 and 234-33.

Detailed explications of these passages appear in Ryken, Literature of the Bible, 201-14.

Full explications of specimens of all the types discussed in this chapter appear in my book *The Literature of the Bible*, pp. 121–230. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), is a thematic study of the Psalms that shows great sensitivity to the lyric and poetic form in which those themes are presented.