

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

(3) BIBLICAL POETRY

and the use of Imagery and Rhythm

Language is basically functional. We need to communicate something to another person, and much of what we need to get across is able to be expressed in literal or absolute terms. In fact much of it doesn't need sophisticated speech at all. We could probably get away with simply miming it or by drawing pictures in the sand. For example, "I'm thirsty and need a drink of water," or, "Don't come too close or I'll hit you with my stick," are both relatively straight forward in meaning, and could easily be acted out to one another.

This simplicity is reflected in the development of writing in the ancient world. Sumerian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Chinese characters, all reflect their origins as 'pictograms' or picture-symbols of the 'things' referred to. And most of the clay tablets and stone carvings that remain from those eras are a result of the practical need to keep an account of who owned what (or how many 'things').

Much of our language is used to identify and translate our physical wants and desires to one another in easily understood form, and is therefore relatively mechanical. But what about the bigger themes - those things that are beyond our biological needs? How do we deal with the deeper emotions of mankind? How do we relate moral or ethical questions? In what terms do we express aesthetic values? Why are we here? Who is God?

This is the realm of poetry, or poetic language. Poetry is a special type of language that attempts to 'express the inexpressible.' It is not the pragmatic prose of scientific journals or instruction manuals. Instead it is a language of insights and imagery. It is not meant to be clinically analysed, or relied upon for its purely factual content, or interpreted as if all its parts were equally weighted in significance. Instead it is designed to prompt and stimulate the mental and spiritual responses of man, encouraging the inner man to 'soar' into the 'heights' and to 'plunge' into the 'depths.'

Poetry does not need to rhyme or be in verse form, but it does need to have rhythm and imagery. The best poetry is intense, with colourful language, but tightly written--a few words, but speaking volumes. Consider the following examples from the Old Testament.

MAN IS AS GRASS

(Job 14:1-2, 1450 BC? Job 'a servant of God')

**"Man who is born of woman
Is of few days and full of trouble.
He comes forth like a flower and fades away;
He flees like a shadow and does not continue."**

(Psalm 103:15-16, 1050 BC? David 'King of Israel')

**"As for man, his days are like grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.
For the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
And its place remembers it no more."**

(Isaiah 40:6-7, 750 BC? Isaiah 'the prophet')

**"All flesh is grass,
And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field,
The grass withers, the flower fades,
Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass."**

DESTRUCTION OF BABYLON

(Jeremiah 51:41-44)

**"Oh, how Sheshach is taken!
Oh, how the praise of the whole earth is seized!
How Babylon has become desolate among the nations!
The sea has come up over Babylon;
She is covered with the multitude of its waves.
Her cities are a desolation,
A dry land and a wilderness,
A land where no one dwells,
Through which no son of man passes.
I will punish Bel in Babylon,
And I will bring out of his mouth what he has swallowed;
And the nations shall not stream to him any more.
Yes, the wall of Babylon shall fall."**

When the reader is confronted with biblical writing in poetic form, he is alerted to expect word pictures or **artistic imagery**, and **rhythmic balance**.

IMAGERY is a picture or representation of something--a figure of speech which creates a likeness in the mind. Hebrew poetry is highly figurative and abounds in:

- *simile* - the explicit likening of one thing to another. eg: 'man is like grass',
- *metaphor* - the implicit likening of something to another thing which it only resembles - eg 'the sea has come up over Babylon.' In this case 'sea' does not represent the ocean but some other overwhelming thing such as 'a sea of trouble,' or the burial of the city ruins in 'a sea of sand',
- *hyperbole* - producing a vivid impression by obvious and extravagant exaggeration. eg: 'man ... is of few days and full of trouble.' Job is covered in painful and suppurating sores, unable to sleep and relegated to the rubbish heap outside the town. He is very down and this how he feels at this moment,
- *personification* - to ascribe personality to. eg: 'she [ie the city of Babylon] is covered ...her cities are ...'

RHYTHM or repetition is created by using the same sounds (*alliteration* and *assonance*), and by arranging the number of syllables and accents in recurring patterns. More notable in Hebrew poetry however is something called *parallelism*. This a type of sense rhythm rather than sound rhythm--more a thought arrangement than a word arrangement.

(A) *synonymous parallelism* The simplest form of *parallelism* is restating in the second line what has been expressed in the first--a repetition of the same thought with equivalent expressions.

'He comes forth like a flower and fades away;

He flees like a shadow and does not continue.'

(B) *antithetical parallelism* The second line expresses a contrasting thought in order to accentuate the thought contained in the first line. eg:

'I will bring out of his mouth what he has swallowed,

And the nations shall not stream to him anymore.'

(C) *synthetic parallelism* The second line amplifies or complements the first line. There is a heightening of the effect or a building up of the thought in the first line - and this can continue through a number of subsequent lines - eg

'Her cities are a desolation, a dry land and a wilderness, a land where no one dwells, through which no son of man passes.'

SUMMARY

Poetry is a condensation of thought, expressed vividly. It is descriptive but not necessarily complete in every detail. It is evocative rather than conclusive or exhaustive.

Interpretation of poetry should not to be undertaken as a strictly logical or legalistic exercise, or as a critical analysis of its factual content. The inspiration of poetry and the subjectiveness of its method also need to be taken into account.

Neither should these principles of interpretation be restricted to the obvious verse forms in Psalms and Proverbs. Poetic language, whether in verse or not, is to be found throughout the Old Testament in the writings of the prophets and the histories.