Poetry

- Poetry is writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm. It is often metrical writing.

- Poetry is distinct from
  - Prose: writing meant to inform
  - Rhetoric: writing meant to persuade
More than ⅓ of the Old Testament is poetry
- Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Lamentations
- All but 3 of the 42 chapters of Job
- Much of the prophetic literature
- Almost all of the wisdom literature
- Many passages in narrative literature

Less frequently used in the New Testament, but Hebrew poetic principles are used in works written in Greek
- Many of the sayings of Jesus
- Canticles of Luke
- Canticles in Paul’s letters
- Canticles in Revelation

Hebrew poetry, like other Semitic poetry, is metrical
- Hebrew and Semitic meters are different from the most common English meters

Hebrew poetry does not rhyme
**Meter**

Poetic meter can be described as a sequence of feet, each foot being a specific sequence of syllable types.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENGLISH</th>
<th>HEBREW</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The most common feet are the <strong>iamb</strong> (da DUM) and the <strong>anapest</strong> (da da DUM)</td>
<td>Feet are determined only by accented syllables</td>
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<td>The most common meter is <strong>iambic pentameter</strong>, five iambic feet per line. To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells (Keats, <em>Ode to Autumn</em>)</td>
<td>Most frequent metrical pattern: 3 + 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Another common meter is <strong>ballad meter</strong>, one or two lines of <strong>iambic tetrameter</strong> and one line of <strong>iambic trimeter</strong></td>
<td>For intense emotion or urgency: 2 + 2</td>
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| Amazing Grace! how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me;  
I once was lost, but now am found;  
Was blind, but now I see. | For laments: 3 +2 |
| Less frequently used: 4 + 4, 2 + 2 + 2, 3 + 3 + 3 | |
Parallelism is a major characteristic of Hebrew poetry

- It may or may not be preserved in translation

Parallelism balances the thought between successive lines in a poem

- Most common are
  - Distichs (two lines)
    - The heavens are telling the glory of God;
      and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. (Psalm 19.1)
  - Tristichs (three lines)
    - Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.
      Worship the LORD with gladness;
      come into his presence with singing. (Psalm 100.1)

- There is always a pause (caesura) between distichs and tristichs

Parallelism is more than mere repetition of words or ideas in successive lines

- The second line is a specification, often an intensification, of the first
- It sometimes complements the thought of the previous line
Parallelism appears in four main forms:
- Synonymous
- Antithetic
- Formal
- Climactic

Each form may be
- Internal or External
- Complete or Incomplete
In Synonymous Parallelism, the same thought is expressed in successive lines.

The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master’s crib (Isaiah 1.3a)

But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever flowing stream (Amos 5.24)

but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,
and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. (Matt 20.26-27)

- The second line simply repeats the sense of the first in slightly different terms
- Sometimes the second line gives more precise expression to the sense of the first

Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit. (Psalm 34.13)
In Antithetic Parallelism, the thought expressed in the second line is in contrast to that in the first:

- For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish (Psalm 1.6)

- This type of parallelism is particularly characteristic of the wisdom literature:
  - A wise child makes a glad father, but a foolish child is a mother’s grief. (Prov 10.1)

- It occurs frequently in the sayings of Jesus:
  - A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. (Matt 7.18)
  - Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matt 10.39)
In Formal or Synthetic Parallelism, the thought of the first line is carried further and completed in the second

- There is a formal balance of clause with clause
  - No such correspondence in content
- Two factors emphasize the balance:
  - A clearly marked pause between lines
  - A correspondence in rhythm or meter

The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. (Psalm 14.2)
Climactic Parallelism combines Synonymous and Formal Parallelism

- The second line echoes part of the first and also adds to it an element which carries forward or completes the sense

Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
    ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. (Psalm 29.1)

Pray to your Father who is in secret;
    and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matt 6.6b)
In Internal Parallelism, the balance of form and thought is between the individual lines within a distich or tristich:

- All previous examples have been examples of internal parallelism.
- Hebrew poetry always has internal parallelism.

In External Parallelism, the balance is not only within but between distichs:

Zion shall be redeemed by justice,
and those in her who repent, buy righteousness.
But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together,
and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed. (Isaiah 1.27-28)

- This example has internal synonymous parallelism within each distich and external antithetic parallelism between the distichs.
Hear the word of the LORD, 
you rulers of Sodom! 
Listen to the teaching of our God. 
you people of Gomorrah! (Isaiah 1.10)

- This example has formal parallelism within each distich and external synonymous parallelism between distichs

To you, O LORD, I cried; 
and to the LORD I made supplication; 
“What profit is there in my death, 
if I go down to the Pit? 
Will the dust praise you? 
Will it tell of your faithfulness? 
Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me! 
O LORD, be my helper!” (Psalm 30.8-10)

- The first, third, and fourth distichs have internal synonymous parallelism, but the second has internal formal parallelism. There is external synonymous parallelism between the first and fourth distichs and between the second and third giving a pattern ABBA (chiasmus). The juxtaposition of the second and third distichs serves to emphasize the thought which they both express.
Complete Parallelism

- In Complete Parallelism, each term in the first line is matched by a corresponding term in the second
  - Hyphens are used to link multiple English words to a single Hebrew term and an underline to separate terms
    I-will-praise_the-LORD_as-long-as-I-live;
    I-will-sing-praises_to-my-God_all-my-life-long. (Psalm 146.2)

- In Incomplete Parallelism, one or more terms in the first stitch have no counterpart in the second
  Our-inheritance_has-been-turned-over_to_strangers,
  our-homes_to-aliens. (Lament 5.11)

- Complete and Incomplete Parallelism are lost in English translation
Aesthetic Techniques of Hebrew Poetry

- Hebrew poetry uses certain technical devices to secure particular effects
  - Acrostic Patterns
  - Alliteration
  - Assonance
  - Onomatopoeia
  - Puns or *paronomasias*
- These technical devices can rarely be preserved in translation
Acrostic patterns are deliberate arrangements involving alphabetic letters

- Psalm 34.1-21 consists of successive verses beginning with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet in alphabetic order (vs. 22 is out of the pattern)
- Psalm 9 and 10 form a single poem with an imperfectly preserved acrostic pattern in which pairs of verses begin with successive Hebrew letters
- Various patterns appear in Lamentations
- Psalm 119 consists of 22 sections of 8 distichs with each distich in a section beginning with the same Hebrew letter
Alliteration

- Alliteration is the juxtaposition of words or syllables that begin with the same consonant:
  - Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers
  - busy as a bee
  - dead as a doornail
  - good as gold
  - right as rain

- Psalm 122.6-7 uses recurring *sh* and *l*:
  - sha`lu shelom Yerushalayim
  - yishlayu ’ohabhayikh
  - yehi shalom behelekh
  - shalwah be’armenothayikh
There is no systematic use of rhyme, but the recurrence of the same vowel sound is often deliberately contrived.

Hear the mellow wedding bells. (Edgar Allen Poe)
That solitude which suits abstruser musings (Samuel Taylor Coleridge)
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn. (William Wordsworth)

Psalm 90.17 uses recurring –enu and –ehu

wihi ho’am ‘adhonay ‘elohenu ‘alenu
uma’aseh yadhenu konenah alenu
uma’asehyadhenu konenehu
Onomatopoeia is the use of words that sound like what they describe

Animal sounds: oink, meow, woof, moo, quack
Common noises: boom, zoom, bonk, clang, buzz, bang, splash, hiccups
Machine noises: click, honk, beep, vroom, zap
Birds named for their calls: bobwhite, chickadee, cuckoo, whip-poor-will, killdeer
A pun, or *paronomasia*, is a form of word play that deliberately exploits ambiguity between similar words for humorous or rhetorical effect.

- Being in politics is just like playing golf: you are trapped in one bad lie after another.
- Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this son of York (Shakespeare, *Richard III*).
- For Gilgal shall be led into exile (*galah*), and Bethel shall become nought. (Amos 5.5b)
- He expected justice (*mishpat*), but saw bloodshed (*sedhaqah*);
- Righteousness (*mispah*), but heard a cry! (*se’aqah*) (Isaiah 5.7b).
- You are Peter (*Petros*), and on this rock (*petra*) I will build my church.

Puns are not infrequent in the Bible.
The supreme quality of ancient Hebrew poetry is seen in the concentrated expression, within a limited compass, of experience, emotion, and aspiration.

With the exception of Job and Deutero-Isaiah, there are no sustained poetic compositions of great length.

In late Wisdom poetry, didactic and reflective notes tend to predominate.

In the sayings of Jesus, the form and spirit of classical prophecy and of Wisdom are fused in a new and creative manifestation of the Hebrew poetic genius.