

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREW POETRY: CONTRASTS WITH PROSE

DEFINITIONS

A glance at any page in the books of Psalms or Proverbs, followed by a glance at almost any page in any of the historical books discussed in the present work, will immediately reveal some differences in form: most modern English Bibles print the former as poems, with relatively short, parallel lines whose text leaves wide margins, while the latter are printed as prose narratives, with full paragraphs whose text extends from margin to margin.

What is prose? In its broadest sense, it is any expression that is not poetry, which is defined as having a regular rhythmic pattern.¹ Historical narrative is a type of literature written in prose, not poetry. Not all writings in prose are historical narrative, but all historical narratives are in prose form.²

Among prose forms, the distinctive of historical narrative is that it attempts to give an account of past events.³ In its broadest sense, historical narrative may have any

¹C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, s.v. "Prose"; Northrop Frye, "Verse and Prose," *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, p. 885; M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, s.v. "Prose."

²The presence of poetic "narratives," such as found in some "historical psalms" -- Psalms 78, 105, 106 -- does not obviate this conclusion. The historical psalms, while telling a story of God's involvement in the past, nevertheless does so within a poetic -- not a prose -- framework.

³In the field of literary study, it is one of four types of composition that are generally distinguished: argumentation, description, and exposition are the others. See Holman, *Handbook to Literature*, s.v. "Narration."

number of purposes,⁴ but in the Bible, it tells its story for the purposes of edification and instruction (see 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

A more careful perusal of the historical books will reveal that they are not composed entirely of historical narrative written in prose form. One finds many other literary types embedded in them, such as poems, lists of various kinds -- genealogies, census lists, materials lists, and so forth -- proverbs, songs, and many more. Yet, the overall structure found in the historical books reveals their intent to be historical narratives, accounts of past events with the purpose of instruction.⁵

A helpful way by which to begin a study of historical narrative is to study it as prose, in contrast to poetry. This can be done both in terms of form and of content.

FORM

Many formal features help us to distinguish between poetry and prose.

1. Line Length. Fundamental to poetry is a constriction of the length of the lines: they cannot be infinitely long, nor, in most poetry, can the line length vary radically from line to line. This is the most basic distinction between prose and poetry. Many theorists speak of the presence or absence of meter, although this is not as prominent in Hebrew poetry as it is in poetry of other languages. In Hebrew poetry, the average line length is three to four words, each having one beat (in a metrical system), consisting of eight to nine syllables.

Thus, Ps. 1:1 reads as follows (author's translation):

Happy (is) the-man who

⁴Holman, *Handbook to Literature*, pp. 335-36, s.v. "Narration"; Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, p. 128, s.v. "Narrative."

⁵See also John Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 25.

does-not-walk in-the-counsel of-wicked-ones,
and-in-the-way of-sinners does-not-stand,
and-in-the-seat of-scoffers does-not-sit.

The units connected by the dashes represent one metrical unit in Hebrew (in most cases, one word), so that each line after the introductory phrase consists of three metrical units. The syllable count for these three lines in the Masoretic Text is 9, 10, 9.⁶

Contrast the following verse from a prose text (Esth. 8:9):

At once the royal secretaries were summoned -- on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan. They wrote out all Mordecai's orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. These orders were written in the script of each province and the language of each people and also to the Jews in their own script and language (NIV).

This verse -- the longest in the Bible -- is one long, extended sentence in Hebrew, which has been broken up in the NIV into three English sentences. The immediate point here is that the length of the sense units are in no way restricted in this prose passage.

2. *Parallelism of Members.* A second feature of poetry -- one which has long been considered to be *the* defining characteristic of Hebrew poetry -- is called "parallelism of members."⁷ This can be seen easily in Ps. 1:1, above: the second, third, and fourth lines of the verse all have a verb of bodily motion (walking, standing, sitting), a prepositional phrase with "in," and a word for God's enemies (wicked-ones, sinners, scoffers). By contrast, the prose passage in Esth. 8:9 has nothing like this.

⁶A reconstruction of the language as it was probably pronounced during the time when the text was written yields a count of 8, 9, 9.

⁷I.e., equivalencies of parallel words, thoughts, or sense units.

To be sure, Hebrew prose often is characterized by repetition, such as we see in Josh. 3:6:⁸

"And Joshua said unto the priests, 'Lift up the ark of the covenant and pass before the people.' So they lifted up the ark of the covenant and walked before the people."

However, in such cases -- which are legion in the Old Testament historical books -- repetition is not parallelism: it is usually exact repetition of words, and not the parallels of near-synonyms found in poetic parallelism. Furthermore, none of the other features of poetry are found in such prose narrative texts.

3. *Literary Devices.* A third feature of Hebrew poetry is that it tends to use more literary devices than does prose. Poetry makes frequent use of such devices as [1]alphabetic acrostics, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, paranomasia, chiasms, and more.⁹

In Ps. 1:1, we see alliteration/assonance in the first three words: *ashre haish asher*. We also see a chiasmic arrangement in the parallel elements in the second through fourth lines, as follows:

A - B - C
B' - C' - A'
B'' - C'' - A''

Again, no such patterns are discernible in the prose text of Esth. 8:9. Hebrew prose does make rich use of literary and rhetorical devices, but they are of different types and they are not usually packed as "densely" into prose narratives as they are into poetic texts.

⁸Author's translation. I have translated in a rather wooden fashion in order to bring out the repetitions between the halves of the verse better; the NIV's translation obscures these exact repetitions.

⁹For catalogues and explanations of poetic devices, see C. H. Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, pp. 31-38.

CONTENT

1. Selectivity. Because of the constrictions associated with short line lengths, poets tend to be more highly selective than writers of prose narratives. A glance at two parallel passages, Exodus 14 and 15, confirms this. Exodus 14 is the prose account of the Israelites' coming to and crossing the Red Sea, while Exodus 15 contains the hymnic reflection on the same events by the people. Exodus 14 goes to some lengths to emphasize the fact that the Israelites crossed on dry ground: see vv. 16, 21, 22, 29. However, upon close inspection, we find that dry ground is never once mentioned in the poetic text that tells of this event. The poem in 15:1-18 is much more selective in its details -- it is almost "impressionistic" in terms of the way it retells the story. The reason for this, of course, is that the poem is not concerned at all to give a coherent account of how Israel crossed the Red Sea; the details of the story are only incidental to the purpose of the poetic text, which is to glorify God for his great deliverance.¹⁰

2. Figurative Language. As a generalization, figurative language finds a home more readily in poetic expression than in prose. Poetry -- in any language -- is more often the conveyor of deep emotions, and it breaks more easily into figurative expression. Compare the following two texts that describe situations of great distress:

David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground (2 Sam. 12:16).

Save me, O God,

¹⁰We will make the point below that narrative texts also are selective. However, when the two are compared, especially in parallel passages such as Exodus 14 and 15, or Judges 4 and 5, the point made here hold: poetry is more selective than prose.

for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in the miry depths,
where there is no foothold.
I have come into deep waters;
the floods engulf me (Ps. 69:1-2 [MT 69:2-3]).

The prose passage is straightforward, telling of David's activity of mourning. The poetic text is emotive and impressionistic, conveying the psalmist's great emotion. However, we do not literally imagine the psalmist standing -- or worse, treading water -- in flood waters up to his neck, pen and parchment in hand, composing this psalm. Because of the nature of poetry, we instinctively understand the language in the psalm to be figurative.

3. *The Stage.* The stage on which events unfold in prose is usually limited to earthly events on an earthly stage.¹¹ Poetry reaches into the heavenlies more often.

Compare the following two texts:

On that day God subdued Jabin, the Canaanite king, before the Israelites.
And the hand of the Israelites grew stronger and stronger against Jabin, the
Canaanite king, until they destroyed him (Judg. 4:23-24).

O LORD, when you went out from Seir,
when you marched from the land of Edom,
the earth shook, the heavens poured,
the clouds poured down water.
The mountains quaked before the LORD, the One of Sinai,

¹¹A major exception is the Prologue to Job (Job 1-2, which tells of God's and Satan's conversations about Job).

before the LORD, the God of Israel...

From the heavens the stars fought,

from their courses they fought against Sisera

(Judg. 5:4-5, 20).

The prose text is more "prosaic," i.e., more straightforward, and it tells of the Israelites' victory in a matter-of-fact manner. The poetic text reflects upon that victory, and speaks of God's involvement from the heavenly perspective.

4. Time Frame. Prose narrative is usually written from a past time perspective. Indeed, as we have noted, that is its nature: it attempts to give an account of the past for the purposes of instruction. Poetry is not so limited. It ranges from past to present to future time frames. In the books of the prophets, for example, the large majority of prophetic texts that tell of God's future intentions and activities are written in poetic, not prose, form.

CONCLUSION

Poetry differs from prose narrative in both form and content.¹² This does not mean that poetry and prose cannot be found together, however. For example, a number of major poems are found in the historical books, in Judges 5, 1 Samuel 2, 2 Samuel 1, 2 Samuel 22, 2 Samuel 23, 2 Kings 19, and 1 Chronicles 16. Norman Gottwald has observed that only seven Old Testament books contain no poetry: Leviticus, Ruth, Ezra,

¹²We could also attempt to distinguish the two in terms of purpose -- i.e., prose narrative intends to inform as part of its task, while, say, hymns intend to praise and glorify God -- but this is a more difficult endeavor, since, ultimately, all Scripture intends to instruct us (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, and Malachi.¹³ Conversely, only nine Old Testament books contain no prose: Psalms,¹⁴ Proverbs, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. Thus, at least 23 Old Testament books combine the two. Actually, a good one-half to two-thirds of the Old Testament is prose. As we have noted, not all prose is historical narrative -- outside the historical books, we find large bodies of laws that are prose, but not historical narrative, for example. Nevertheless, this historical narrative component of the Old Testament is a large and important part of that portion of Scripture.

¹³Norman Gottwald, "Poetry, Hebrew." *IDB*, 3, p. 829.

¹⁴Although we do find brief prose snippets in the historical titles to 14 psalms (e.g., at Psalms 3, 18, or 51).