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Reading Poetic Texts in Isaiah

JENNIFER GREEN

Even a quick flip through the pages of Isaiah makes it clear that this is not the stuff of storybooks or novels or narrative forms of literature that many of us know well. Instead, the broken-up lines of verse are poetry, and this makes a tremendous difference in how we read Isaiah's words. The same is true for Isaiah that is true for all other biblical writers: the way they say something has everything to do with what they say. Think of how differently we would hear the messages of the Psalms if they were written as theological treatises, or Paul's letters if they were written as stories, or the Song of Songs if it were a list of directions about developing a love relationship with someone.

Comparing Judg 4:19 and Judg 5:25 offers a quick demonstration of the important effects of the poetic genre because these verses describe the same incident in prose and then in poetry (see also Exodus 14 and 15). The effects of these different texts—and ultimately their overall meaning—are quite different because they are written in different forms. In the end, poetry is not simply a decoration in language that can be discarded but a primary and necessary mode of expressing something. It is not a fancy way of saying something that could be said in another form, but it is essential to meaning. It is a “particular way of imagining the world.”



Just as the farming metaphor in Isa 28:23-29 points out that there are certain “rules” of farming that must be followed in order to yield a crop, so it is with poetry. To reap the rich harvest of Isaiah's words, we need to know the rules of reading these words. To understand most of Isaiah—and indeed, much of the entire Bible—we cannot ignore the fact that it is written in poetic form.

The challenge, though, is that many of us and many in our churches feel somewhat daunted by the poetic genre. Most Americans do not regularly read poetry, and this may be due to a number of reasons. Even though poetry is one of the oldest and most common forms of expression known to humanity, some have argued that we have lost much of our poetic sensitivity in this contemporary culture. Reading poetry, after all, requires slowing down, paying attention, and focusing.

Because reading poetry doesn't always come naturally, it requires having patience with ourselves and a willingness to make ourselves vulnerable in reading. When teachers sense people in Sunday school classes losing patience with a poetic text, the temptation may be to “boil it down”

and explain what appears to be the gist of the poem. But once we discard the poetic genre and the poetic process, we lose an important part of the poem's meaning. In fact, the struggle itself may contribute to what we learn from a poem.

We might also note that challenges to reading poetry come from our own religious tradition as we have inherited something of a suspicion of poetry and the arts in general. When H. R. Moore eulogized Tolbert Fanning, the mentor of David Lipscomb, he intended to pay him the utmost compliment by saying, "He waved no plumes, wreathed no garlands, but struck from the shoulder and at the vitals. He was destitute of poetry and barren of imagination."

Such wariness of poetry likely comes from the fact that it is open to many interpretations and resonates with different experiences. This contrasts with the ideal so often held up that there is one and only one correct way of interpreting a biblical text. But isn't it interesting that Mr. Moore himself revealed his own poetic inclinations in that eulogy! He could have said those words in simple, non-poetic speech, but he deliberately chose those poetic words because they had a much greater rhetorical effect.

In actuality, we regularly draw on poetry in life and even in our religious settings—though we may not always notice it. Poetry set to music is a core feature of our worship, and the various elements of music—tempo, chorus, rhyme, responsive singing—all affect how we understand lyrics. One scholar, Robert Alter, has further argued that poetry is especially suited to representing God's speech in the Bible because poetry has a kind of "external" quality: it attempts to put into language something that actually exceeds language or full comprehension. He writes,

Since poetry is our best human model of intricately rich communication, not only solemn, weighty and forceful but also densely woven with complex internal connections, meanings, and implications, it makes sense that divine speech should be represented as poetry.

Given the enormous implications of reading poetry in the Bible as poetry, it is essential that we pay attention to poetic elements when reading and teaching biblical texts and that we nurture the poetic sensitivities we may already have. A good introductory guide is "Introduction to Hebrew Poetry," by Adele Berlin (*The New Interpreter's Bible*; vol. IV; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994, 301-15). This article, full of examples from the Old Testament, provides an overview of genre, terseness, parallelism, meter and rhythm, repetition and patterning, imagery, figures of speech, motifs and themes.

As you work through this article, it may help to open to a simple biblical poem or section of a poem (for example, Isa 2:11-17) and identify the various elements. In that poem, you will notice the repetition of the phrase "against all/every," which appears twice in verses 12, 13, 14, 15, 16. Note also how the poem is framed by the words "the Lord alone will be exalted on that day" (verses 11, 17) as well "the haughty eyes of people shall be brought low/and the pride of everyone shall be humbled" (verses 11, 17; notice the slightly different wording and consider the effects of that). Parallelism is also clear in this poem both in the ways that lines reflect each other (cedars of Lebanon/oaks of Bashan, high mountains/lofty hills, etc.) and contrasts each other (lifted up/brought low). One can also find vivid imagery (massive and impressive things, natural things, and things made by humans) as well as the recurrence of refrains that appear elsewhere in Isaiah ("in that day").

Several resources offer more advanced aid in reading poems, including *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* by David Peterson and Kent Richards (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). For a treatment of Isaiah 5, see pages 81-89 in that book. Another helpful resource is Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1985).

In addition to these books that refer directly to biblical texts, it also helps to practice reading non-biblical poetry from the twentieth century. If we are unfamiliar with the genre of poetry in our own time and culture, how can we expect to read the poetry of an ancient time and culture, originally written in another language?

Reading poetry from more familiar contexts helps us to pay attention to language and sharpen our skills as readers. A number of introductory books on poetry present basic poetic elements and techniques. I would recommend Edward Hirsch's *How to Read a Poem And Fall in Love with Poetry* (San Diego: Harvest, 1999) or Robert Wallace's *Writing Poems* (3rd ed., San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991). Briefly analyzing several contemporary poems may be a helpful entry point to a group Bible study on biblical poetry.

Reading poetry is both a discipline and an art. Although outside resources can offer tremendous help, one only improves in reading poetry by jumping in and doing it. Instead of relying solely on commentaries or Sunday school teachers to explain these texts, we need to recognize that part of the power of poetry is the imagination and discovery process that occurs when we feel the effects of a text or make connections—however subtly—to personal experiences or other biblical images. Even if we feel uncomfortable with poetry in the early stages, with time, reading it becomes more natural (and, yes, even delightful!) so that the words of Isaiah and other biblical texts written in poetic form might touch us even more profoundly.

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