ınces this literary approach has involved ıding against the grain of the text. For in- ınce, a character whom the text treats as a bsidiary character may become for feminist alysis the central character of the text (e.g., ɔhthah's daughter in Judg. ch 11 or the vite's concubine in Judg. ch 19). Of particu- · concern to feminists has been the issue of ɔmen and violence, for many of the biblical ‹ts do represent violence against women, d a smaller but significant number repre- nt women engaged in violence. The influ- ce of these various types of feminist ap- oaches to the Bible has been significant, and s had an important impact on how both ıolars and the laity approach biblical texts. Finally, canonical criticism, which often de- ɔibes itself as a theological mode of interpre- ɪion, may also be considered as a form of ltural hermeneutics, since it also puts the mmunity context within which the text was ɜated and from which it is to be read into ɜ foreground. Though the forms of canoni- l criticism developed by its two major pro- ɔnents, Brevard Childs and James Sanders, ffer, one can identify common elements. ·ecifically, canonical criticism is concerned th how Scripture's final form was created thin a believing community and how the ɜanings created by that final form continue guide the reading practices of the commu- ty. The canonical shaping of the Jewish ble, for instance—which places the writings the final position and concludes in many itions with the call of 2 Chronicles for the iles to go up to Jerusalem to rebuild the mple—tells a different story from that pro- ıced by the shaping of the Christian Old stament, which places the prophets last and ncludes with Malachi's reference to the re- rn of the prophet Elijah to announce the ming Day of the Lord.

In one sense canonical criticism is an exten- ɔn of historical criticism's interest in the de- lopment of traditions. But in contrast to his- rical criticism's tendency to investigate the rliest stages of development, canonical crit- sm explicitly privileges the latest stage, the canon in its final form. This concern with reading the text of Scripture in its final form gives canonical criticism some similarity to the literary approaches of the "New Criticism." Thus, where historical criticism, reading the book of Isaiah, tries to distinguish which materials come from the 8th-century prophet, the 6th-century prophet, and the 5th-century prophet, literary and canonical critics focus on how the final form of the book has created the context within which all of its materials are now to be read, as a movement from destruction to hope. While canonical criticism's self-conscious attention to what it means to read Scripture as a member of a religious tradition links it with cultural hermeneutics, it also differs from some of the other forms of cultural hermeneutics discussed above. Just as those forms of interpretation make repeated reference to the specific experience of the reader as a guide to interpretation, canonical hermeneutics finds the clues to a proper reading in the ways in which the text of Scripture was shaped by the believing community at the time its canon was fixed.

If anything ties together the various strands of newly developing approaches to biblical interpretation, it is a concern for the relationship of language, meaning, and power. More historically oriented literary and social methods increasingly examine the ways in which issues of conflict and access to power can be traced, as there is a new awareness that people, typically elites functioning within a power-group, are responsible for writing and preserving biblical texts. Cultural hermeneutics, though not uninterested in historical reconstruction, also focuses on the ways in which access to the power to interpret the text and construe its meaning serves to empower those who have traditionally been marginalized. And postmodernism has attempted to underscore the ironies of all such strategies, since in its view a stable and definitive meaning always eludes the interpreter.

[*Adapted by* ADELE BERLIN AND MARC ZVI BRETTLER]





# Reading Biblical Poetry

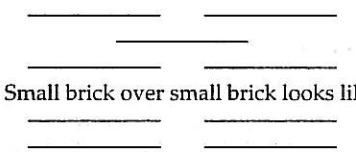
Most literary works from the ancient Near East are in the form of poetry. Prose narrative, which dominates in the Torah and the Former Prophets, as well as in several books in Kethuvim (the Writings), is a distinguishing feature of biblical literature. Yet while biblical narrative is mainly in prose (there are a few narrative poems, e.g., Ps. 136), biblical hymns, laments, victory songs, love poems, wisdom instruction, prophetic speeches, and several other types of discourse are in poetry. About one-third of the Bible is poetry, including the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes. Modern scholars also consider most of the speeches of the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve) to be poetry. In addition to these large blocks of text, poems are interspersed in the prose narrative; examples are the Testament of Jacob (Gen. ch 49), the Song of the Sea (Exod. ch 15), the Sayings of Balaam (Num. 23.7–10, 18–24; 24.3–9, 15–24), the Song of Moses (Deut. ch 32), the Testament of Moses (Deut. ch 33), the Song of Deborah (Judg. ch 5), the Prayer of Hannah (1 Sam. ch 2), the Elegy over Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. ch 1), and David's Song in 2 Sam. ch 22 (= Ps. 18). Shorter poems or fragments of poems have been identified in, for example, Gen. 4.23–24; 1 Kings 8.12–13; Ruth 1.16–17.

Poetry is a form of elevated discourse that differs in certain formal properties from prose (which is also somewhat elevated discourse, not a record of everyday speech). Some argue that these differences are a matter of degree rather than of kind, but at a certain point quantitative difference becomes qualitative difference. The attributes of poetry will be discussed below.

The identification of biblical poetry and the definition of what constitutes poetry in the Bible has been a vexed issue since early post-biblical times. Each generation of scholars has applied its own criteria, usually drawn from its own vernacular poetry, be it the classical meters of Greek and Latin poetry, the medieval Arabic systems of rhyme and meter, or the accentual meter of English poetry—but none of these fit biblical poetry. The Bible itself has little to say about its poetry, other than offering some terms that may indicate types of poems.

The most general term is *shir* or *shira*, "song." *Shir* may stand alone, as in Judg. 5.12; Ps. 65.1, or may be qualified, as in *shir hama'alot*, "song of ascents" (Pss. 120–134); *shir yedidot*, "a love song" (Ps. 45.1); *shir ḥanukat habayit* "a song for the dedication of the House" (Ps. 30.1); *shir tziyon*, "Zion song" (Ps. 137.3); *shir tehilah*, "song of praise" (Neh. 12.46). The feminine form, *shira*, is found in Exod. 15.1; Deut. 31.30; Num. 21.17; Isa. 5.1; and elsewhere, and appears to be synonymous with *shir*. Another frequent term is *mizmor*, "psalm, a song sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument," commonly found in the superscriptions to psalms, sometimes in combination with *shir* (e.g., Pss. 67.1; 68.1). A third term, qinah, "lament, dirge" is known from 2 Sam. 1.17; Amos 8.10; etc. These terms are suggestive of ancient notions of poetic genres, but they do not occur in every passage that a modern reader would consider poetry.

Aside from these terms, a suggestive feature of the Masoretic Text is the traditional scribal convention of stichography, whereby certain passages are written in verse-like lines (e.g., Exod. ch 15; Deut. ch 32; Judg. ch 5; 2 Sam. ch 22). This scribal convention, discussed in rabbinic literature, sets off certain sections from the blocks of surrounding text. There are two forms, called by the Rabbis "small brick over large brick, large brick over small brick" and "small brick over small brick, large brick over large brick." Small brick over large brick looks like



Small brick over small brick looks like



The stichographic writing, too, is not a sufficient criterion by which to identify poetry by today's standards because it was used for only a fraction of passages that we would consider poetry (for example, most manuscripts do not use this stichography for Psalms); moreover, it is occasionally used for nonpoetic lists (Josh. 12.9–24; 1 Sam. 6.17; Esth. 9.7–9).

A third potential indicator of poetry, in the Masoretic Text, is the system of accents (tropes, or cantillation marks) used in the Tiberian Masorah, whereby the books of Psalms, Proverbs, and most of Job are given a different system of accents from the other twenty-one books of the Bible. These three books are referred to as *sifrei 'emet*, *'emet* (meaning "truth") being an acronym from the initials of *'iyov* (Job), *mishlei* (Proverbs), and *tehilim* (Psalms). Again, while we consider these three books to be poetic, there are additional poetic books and passages for which these accents are not used. It seems that this system of accents indicates only the cantillation and says nothing about poetry per se.

Since the Bible does not define or describe its poetry, scholars have offered their own descriptions. Most would accept the following description: Biblical poetry is a type of elevated discourse, composed of terse lines, and employing a high degree of parallelism and imagery. Other tropes and figures may also be present, most commonly, word and sound repetition and patterning. There is no scholarly consensus regarding meter (see below).

Terseness is a feature of many of the world's poetries, whether or not there are metrical constraints on the length of lines; lines of poetry tend to be shorter and more concise than prose clauses. Lines of biblical poetry are generally no longer than three or four words. Their terseness is further enhanced by the omission of the definite article, the accusative marker *'et*, and the relative pronoun *'asher*. This tendency toward terseness operates both within a single line and over the composition as a whole. Biblical poems are relatively short, about thirty verses or less on average; there are no epic-length poems in the Bible. (The longest single poem is Psalm 119, with 176 verses. The book of Job is poetry from 3.2 to 42.6, but is actually a series of poems set in a prose frame.) Accompanying the terseness of the lines is the paratactic style by which lines are joined together. In parataxis, the connectives between lines may be missing altogether or may consist of the multivalent conjunction *vav*, "and, but, or." Thus the relationship between lines is often not explicit, opening up both difficulties and opportunities for interpretation. Terseness and parataxis make poetry seem more intense; they give the impression that each word is heavily laden with meaning.

Biblical poetry is characterized most of all by its binary form of expression known as parallelism. Parallelism is the pairing of a line (or part of a line) with one or more lines that are in some way linguistically equivalent. The equivalence is often grammatical—that is, both parts of the parallelism may have the same syntactic structure, as in

> The LORD is my light and my help;
> whom should I fear?
> The LORD is the stronghold of my life,
> whom should I dread? (Ps. 27.1).

Often, though, the grammatical structure is not identical, at least on the surface, as in

> . . . before I created you in the womb . . .
> Before you were born (Jer. 1.5).

In this example, "you" (the prophet) is the grammatical object in the first line and the subject in the second. In Prov. 6.20, a positive clause is paired with a negative clause.

> My son, keep your father's
> commandments,
> Do not forsake your mother's teaching.





Grammar has many facets and any one of them can be brought into play in parallelism.

Another form of equivalence is semantic equivalence; the meaning of the lines is somehow related: perhaps synonymous, perhaps reflecting the converse or reverse (sometimes called antithetical), or perhaps extending the meaning in any one of a number of ways. Equivalence does not imply identity. The second line of a parallelism rarely repeats exactly the same words or exactly the same thought as the first; it is more likely to echo, expand, or intensify the idea in the first line in any one of a number of ways. For example,

> Women in Zion they raped;
> Maidens in the towns of Judah (Lam
> 5.11).

The parallelism intensifies from "women" (women in general) to "maidens" (women of marriageable age), making the second line a more poignant image of rape. It expands from "Zion" to "towns of Judah," making the atrocity more widespread—not only in the capital but throughout the country. Such intensification of the first line by the second is common.

Grammatical and semantic equivalence account for most parallelisms (both are present in Lam. 5.11), but because there are so many equivalent permutations for any given line, the number of potential parallelisms is enormous, if not infinite. By shaping the parallel line, that is, by narrowing the potential choice to a single statement, the poet clarifies the first line and moves the poem forward. Compare, for example, two couplets that differ in only one word:

> But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever,
> Your *fame* endures throughout the ages
> (Ps. 102.12)

> But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever,
> Your *throne* endures through the ages
> (Lam. 5.19).

Both verses open with the image of God enthroned as a king. The slight difference in their second lines changes the thrust of the thought in their first lines. Ps. 102 is concerned with God's permanence, which it contrasts with the fleeting life of humans; it therefore focuses on God's fame, literally, the mention of His name, symbolizing His being. Lamentations has a different concern: the existence of God when He has no Temple, no earthly locus for divine worship, no earthly throne to symbolize His kingship. The author of Lamentations claims that God's throne is independent of the Temple and continues to exist despite the loss of the Temple. In parallelisms like these, the first line presents a picture and the second line shines a spotlight on a certain part of it.

Parallelism helps to bind together the otherwise paratactic lines. In this sense it works as a counterweight to the parataxis, creating a relationship between the lines that is otherwise unexpressed. The basic structuring unit of the poem is not a single line, but a set of parallel lines (a two-line set is sometimes called a couplet or a bi-colon, and a three-line set is a tri-colon), as these examples demonstrate.

Another by-product of parallelism is the balance that it creates. Scholars have long sought metrical regularity in biblical poetry, but no metrical system—be it syllable counting, stress counting, thought-rhythm, or constraints on the number of syntactic units in a line—has met with unanimous acceptance. If biblical poetry has a metrical system, it has been eluding us for 2,000 years. More likely, the ancient Hebrew poets embraced a looser system—one in which many lines of a poem are more or less the same length and partake of the rhythm of their parallelism, but without the requirement of precise measurement.

Beyond the level of sets of parallel lines it is possible to find larger structural units, sometimes called strophes or stanzas. These are not units of a required number of lines, but merely a subdivision of a poem, not indicated formally, that modern readers make on the basis of the poem's contents or its structural or lexical repetitions. Some translations indicate subdivisions by leaving space between

sections. The strophe is less well-defined than a couplet, and less basic to the overall poetic structure. The principles whereby couplets are combined into longer segments or entire poems is not well understood, but it is clear that poems have movement and development, and that their lines and couplets cohere as unified compositions. A dramatic example is the "scene" at the end of the Song of Deborah (considered to be one of the oldest poems in the Bible), with a dialogue in which Sisera's mother answers her own question (Judg. 5.28–30).

> Through the window peered Sisera's mother,
> Behind the lattice she whined:
> "Why is his chariot so long in coming?
> Why so late the clatter of his wheels?"
> The wisest of her ladies give answer;
> She, too, replies to herself:
> "They must be dividing the spoil they have found:
> A damsel or two for each man,
> Spoil of dyed cloths for Sisera,
> Spoil of embroidered cloths,
> A couple of embroidered cloths
> Round every neck as spoil."

In these verses some words repeat while others are echoed by words related in meaning. Redundancy is raised to an art-form. The terse lines—snapshots, as it were—grow into a larger moving picture as we imagine, through the eyes of Sisera's mother, that Sisera is bedecking himself with damsels and beautiful cloths obtained as the spoils of war (even as we know all the while that he lies dead in Jael's tent).

The unity of a poem is sometimes, but far from always, promoted by a formal device like an acrostic, an inclusio, or a refrain. Occasionally, an alphabetic acrostic forms the unifying structure of a poem, marking it as ordered and complete, from A to Z. Acrostics may have served also as a pedagogic or mnemonic device. Alphabetic acrostics (sometimes incomplete) are present in Pss. 9–10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145; Prov. 31.10–31; Lam. chs 1–4. A more common unifying device is "inclusio" (also called inclusion, frame, envelope, or ring-composition), in which the poem begins and ends with a similar line, as in Ps. 104.1 and 35: "Bless the LORD, O my soul." Compare also Ps. 8.2, 10: "O LORD, our LORD, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth." Inclusio provides a strong sense of closure to a poem. Less common is refrain, the repetition of a chorus-like line which, in the case of psalms, may have been sung antiphonally (e.g., Ps. 136); sometimes refrains are not repeated exactly.

We can see terseness and parallelism in operation, as well as larger structuring devices, in a segment of Psalm 136. The segment also illustrates how poetry differs from prose, since it is a poetic rendering of a prose narrative in the Torah.

> Who made the heavens with wisdom
> His steadfast love is eternal;
> Who spread the earth over the water,
> His steadfast love is eternal;
> Who made the great lights,
> His steadfast love is eternal;
> the sun to dominate the day,
> His steadfast love is eternal;
> the moon and the stars to dominate the night,
> His steadfast love is eternal (Ps. 136.5–9).

Immediately evident is the refrain, which unambiguously separates each line of poetry, and also gives cohesion to the whole, as well as rhythm. Even in English translation (and more so in Hebrew) each line seems terse, and about the same length, so that reading the lines one after another creates a rhythm, although not a precise meter. Compare the Genesis account of the creation of the celestial bodies that the psalm encapsulates in vv. 7–9: "God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars" (Gen. 1.16). The prose account also has parallelism, but it is not as obvious or as pervasive as in the psalm. The psalm has broken up the prose





verse into poetic lines, by the use of, and clearly marked by, the refrain.

In addition to terseness and parallelism, biblical poems may employ the repetition and patterning of words and sound clusters, sometimes producing word- or soundplay. An ABBA or chiastic word pattern occurs in Song of Songs 2.14:

> Let me see your *face*, let me hear your *voice;*
> for your *voice* is sweet, and your *face* is comely.

A classic example of soundplay is found in Isa. 5.7:

> *vayekav lemishpat vehineh mispaḥ litzdakah vehineh tzeʿakah,* "And he hoped for justice, but behold injustice; for equity, but behold, iniquity."

(Cf. also Isa. 61.3; Zeph. 2.4.) Repeated words may be key words, words that recur often and point to the message of the poem; for example, in Ps. 121 the word "guard/guardian" occurs six times within the eight verses of the psalm, and indeed the psalm is about God as Israel's guardian. In Ps. 122 the topic is Jerusalem, and the name of the city occurs three times. In addition, combinations of the letters that make up the name "Jerusalem" occur frequently throughout the poem; many words in the poem echo Jerusalem's name.

These are a few samplings of the myriad repetitions of words and sounds that enhance the poeticalness of biblical poetry, and often its rhetorical force as well. Poetry is an auditory medium. Sound—be it the repetition of sounds or the rhythm of lines—and the nexus of sound and meaning contribute to the heightening of the discourse and to the effect on the listener. Poetry is related to music. The psalms were probably recited or sung to musical accompaniment, as were other poems (cf. Exod. 15.20–21; Ps. 137.2). Musical instruments are called *kelei shir,* "instruments of song/poetry" (Neh. 12.36). David, the psalmist par excellence (according to tradition), is a musician (1 Sam. 16.23). At the same time, poetry *(shir)* is associated with "speaking, reciting" (Ps. 137.3; Judg. 5.12.) The combination of music and words, sound and meaning, is epitomized in poetry.

No discussion of poetry can omit imagery, or metaphor, often thought to be the essence of poetry. It is not merely a question of inserting metaphors here and there for decoration; imagery, like parallelism, is pervasive in poetry. Poetry envisions the world metaphorically; it offers an alternative way of seeing reality. As medieval Jewish scholars put it, "The best part of poetry is its falseness (that is, its figurativeness)." (They got this idea from Arabic sources, who in turn got it from Aristotle:) Poetry, in this view, is not only elevated language, it is elevated vision.

A small example is in Ps. 136.6. We looked at this psalm earlier, noting how it poeticizes the creation story in Gen. ch 1. But the poetry of Ps. 136 is not merely a matter of breaking up prose sentences into terse, parallelistic poetic lines; it is a matter of re-envisioning the account of creation. Ps. 136.6 says that God "spread (Heb *roka*ʿ) the earth over the water." Genesis does not say this; in fact, according to Gen. 1.9, the water was gathered to one place so the dry land could appear—the land was actually under the water, visible when the water was removed. Moreover, the word that the psalm uses for "spread" is the same word that Genesis uses for "firmament." The psalmist has a different conception, or a different interpretation, of how the world was created. He sees the earth being spread, like a firmament, upon the water. The earth is a firm expanse set permanently in place over the waters (the forces of chaos, which cannot now escape); the earth is made analogous to the firmament of Genesis that separates the upper and lower waters. The psalm's conception of the creation of the earth is more mythological than that of Genesis, more like, for instance, Ps. 24.2: "He founded it [the world] upon the ocean, set it on the nether-streams." Poetry can retain more mythological concepts than prose, not because it is earlier or more primitive (Ps. 136 is probably exilic, after 586 BCE),

but because it is free to call upon more imaginative views of the universe than can be tolerated in the "logical" or "theological" discourse of prose.

Metaphor, rather like parallelism, juxtaposes similarities and differences in such a way that a relationship between them is created. In metaphor, two things that do not generally occur together are brought together; they collide, or explode, leaving in their wake a new way of seeing. Metaphors come in many shapes and sizes. Some take but a line, others inform an entire poem. Some are deeply embedded in the culture of Israel, like the parent-child relationship or the husband-wife relationship used to portray the relationship between God and Israel; others may be the new creation of the poet; and still others may be "dead metaphors," commonplace idioms that have lost their impact. Much of the difficulty in understanding poetry arises from the difficulty in recognizing what is metaphoric (and what is not) and in perceiving the meaning of the metaphor.

Ps. 133.1: "How good and pleasant it is that brothers dwell together," contains a metaphor that is often overlooked. The verb "dwell together," *shevet yaḥad*, is a legal term that means to live in joint tenancy; that is, to hold land in joint ownership without dividing it up among separate owners (cf. Gen. 13.6; 36.7; Deut. 25.5). The psalm is not about harmonious family life (a common reading based on a misunderstanding of the verb and adverb), but is about brothers holding land together. This is a metaphor for the (re)unification of Israel and Judah, as observed in *Metzudat David*, an 18th century commentary written by David Altschuler (and printed in most editions of *Miqra'ot Gedolot*), which explains:

> How very good and how very pleasant is the thing when the whole house of Israel will dwell on its land; they are called "brothers" for the great affection that is among them. . . . And they will be together in one kingship and will not be divided into two kingdoms any more.

Metaphors, again like parallelisms, can have many permutations. A common metaphor for human beings is a tree, with its leaves and fruit. The water that nourishes the tree/person is God's *torah* or trust in God. Prov. 11.28 and 30 capture the idea in pithy statements: "The righteous shall flourish like foliage" and "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life." More embellishment is found in the following examples.

> The righteous bloom like a date-palm;
> they thrive like a cedar in Lebanon;
> planted in the house of the LORD,
> they flourish in the courts of our God.
> In old age they still produce fruit;
> they are full of sap and freshness (Ps. 92.13–15).

The image is of beauty and stature; the date-palm has beautiful flowers and the cedars of Lebanon are tall and massive. They are also long-lived trees, and the righteous will be similarly long-lived, vigorous in old age.

More famous is the tree imagery in Ps. 1.3, applied to the man who delights in God's teaching *(torah)*.

> He will be like a tree planted beside water channels,
> which produces its fruit in its season,
> and whose foliage does not wither;
> And all that he does will succeed (author's translation).

Just as the tree is nourished by water, more specifically, by irrigation canals that provide a constant supply of water, so the man is continually nourished by God's teaching *(torah)*, a constant source of life, which he studies day and night (v. 2). Just as the tree flourishes and accomplishes its purpose in life, so will the man succeed in his purpose. The rootedness and productiveness of the righteous man is contrasted with the transience and worthlessness of the wicked, who are like the chaff, the husks that are blown away in the winnowing process.

There may be a further implication in the description of the tree's fruit and foliage, if





they are taken not merely as an enhancement of the tree image but as part of the analogy between the man and the tree. The man, like the tree, will have fruit (= children) in its season (year after year) and unwithering foliage (= a long life). Children and long life are the ideal blessing in ancient Israel (cf. Job 42.16–17), and that blessing is achieved, says the psalm, through devotion to God's teaching.

Often compared to Ps. 1 is Jer. 17.5–8, which contrasts the man who trusts in humans with the man who trusts in God. The former will be like a tamarisk, a desert shrub with small, narrow leaves.

> He shall be like a tamarisk in the desert,
> which does not sense when good (= rain) comes.
> It dwells in the parched wilderness,
> in salt-lands, without inhabitants.
> As for the man who trusts in God,
> He will be like a tree planted beside water,
> sending forth its roots by a stream.
> It does not sense when heat comes,
> Its leaves remain fresh,
> And in a drought year it does not worry;
> It does not cease to produce fruit.
> (author's translation)

The man who trusts in humans lives in a permanent desert, without nourishment; even when a bit of water reaches him, he cannot make use of it. On the other hand, the man who trusts in God is constantly nourished, and because he has sunk his roots deep into water sources, he can easily survive a drought with no loss of productivity.

These tree metaphors show how the same basic image may be altered or embellished to fit different contexts. Now let us see how the same concept may be conveyed through different images. Wisdom is an abstract concept that is expressed metaphorically in different ways in Proverbs and in Job. Prov. 1.20–33 personifies Wisdom as a woman calling aloud in the public square, scolding those who reject her and warning them that she will be gleeful when they fail in life (cf. also Prov. chs 8–9). Lady Wisdom, while not quite a prostitute, is certainly advertising her availability and urging everyone to pay heed to her. This is firmly in keeping with the main purpose of the book of Proverbs, to provide Wisdom to everyone so that all may prosper.

Job, on the other hand, has a very different notion of Wisdom. Wisdom is desirable but elusive, unattainable. Job ch 28 compares it to precious metals and gems hidden in deep mines, showing that Wisdom is more precious than metals and gems and more difficult to find. Like the other poems in Job, this chapter employs difficult language and develops its images in detail. It opens with a picture of metal mining, deep in the dark earth, far from human habitation, where men dig shafts to retrieve ore. Especially evocative are vv. 5–6:

> Earth, out of which food grows,
> Is changed below as if into fire.
> Its rocks are a source of sapphires;
> It contains gold dust too.

The world below the surface is a very different place from the world above. Above is the soil that provides bread, below is a hot colorful fantasy-world of potential riches. The poem moves on to its main point, that, unlike any other creature—even the sharp-eyed birds of prey and the hunter par excellence, the lion—humans are capable of finding these sources of wealth; and by prodigious construction projects—overturning mountains and carving out channels through rock (vv. 10–11)—they extract these precious ores and bring them to the surface, "so that hidden things may be brought to light" (v. 11). This last phrase is, of course, suggestive of more intangible "hidden things" that need to be brought to light, and it leads directly to the main topic: Wisdom.

> But where can wisdom be found?
> Where is the place of understanding?
> (v. 12).

Humans may be able to bring hidden treasures from under the ground to light, but they are not able to find wisdom, the greatest trea-

sure of all. The link between the first section (v. 1) and the second section (v. 12) is forged by the repetition of two words.

> There is a source *(motza')* for silver
> And a place *(makom)* where gold is refined (v. 1).
>
> But where can wisdom be found *(timatze')*;
> Where is the place *(makom)* of understanding? (v. 12).

Verses 13–19 echo the first section by saying that no one can put a price on wisdom; its value is beyond all the precious materials in the world. Moreover, its location is not anywhere in the natural world, nor even in the mythological world of the "deep" and the "sea" (the primordial waters).

Where, then, does wisdom come from? asks the third section of the poem (vv. 20–28).

> It is hidden from the eyes of all living,
> Concealed from the fowl of the sky.
> Abbadon and Death say,
> "With our ears we have heard a rumor of it" (vv. 21–22, author's translation).

A number of parallels are invoked: earth, sky, and the netherworld; the living and the dead; eyes and ears and seeing and hearing—to the effect that no creature, earthly or not, alive or dead, anywhere in the cosmos, has perceived Wisdom.

Only God knows where it is and how to reach it, for He is all-seeing, and in the course of creating the world He saw and gauged Wisdom. The poet here borrows the well-known idea that Wisdom was present at creation—compare Prov. 8.22–31. But the picture of creation in vv. 25–26 is not at all like Gen. ch 1, or like Ps. 136, or even like Prov. ch 8.

> When He fixed the weight of the winds,
> Set the measure of the waters;
> When He made a rule for the rain
> And a course for the thunderstorms.
> (Job 28.25–26)

This description focuses on God's power over meteorological, or mythological forces. The creation is not centered on the earth, or below the earth where the mines are (where men can penetrate to), or in the watery deep, or in the realm of Death (below the ground), but far above the earth, the place of wind and water. Wisdom was and remains in the domain of God, not in the domain of human beings. How, then, can humans achieve wisdom? Only through the fear of the Lord (v. 28). "Fear of the LORD" is the essence of wisdom according to most biblical conceptions, but Job ch 28 puts that principle in a special light.

It is not easy to sum up what biblical poetry is. More than just a set of formal features or structures, poetry is sound and vision compressed for intensity and expressed with potency. Biblical poetry struggles to probe and stretch the important cultural concepts and issues of ancient Israel in exquisitely distilled Hebrew. In that sense, it is the purest, most rarefied, expression of biblical thought.

[ADELE BERLIN]



# Weights and Measures

Modern equivalents for biblical weights and measures are presented in the following tables.

WEIGHTS

| HEBREW | NJPS | EQUIVALENCE | U.S. AVOIRDUPOIS | METRIC UNITS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *kikar* | talent | 60 minas | 75.558 pounds | 34.3 kilograms |
| *maneh* | mina | 50 shekels | 20.148 ounces | 571.2 grams |
| *shekel* | shekel | 2 bekas | 176.29 grains | 11.42 grams |
| *pim* (or *payim*) | pim | .667 shekel | 117.52 grains | 7.61 grams |
| *beka'* | half-shekel | 10 gerahs | 88.14 grains | 5.71 grams |
| *gerah* | gerah | | 8.81 grains | .57 gram |

The practice of weighing unmarked ingots of metal used in commercial transactions prior to the invention of money explains that the names of the units of weight were used later as indications of value, and as names for monetary standards.

LENGTH MEASURES

| HEBREW | NJPS | EQUIVALENCE | U.S. MEASURES | METRIC UNITS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *'amah* | cubit | 2 spans | 17.49 inches | .443 meter |
| *zeret* | span | 3 handbreadths | 8.745 inches | .221 meter |
| *tofaḥ, tefaḥ* | handbreadth, hand's breadth | 4 fingers | 2.915 inches | .074 meter |
| *'etzba'* | finger | | 0.728 inch | .019 meter |

The cubit described in Ezekiel 40.5; 43.13 is equal to seven (not six) handbreadths, namely 20.405 inches.

CAPACITY: LIQUID MEASURES

| HEBREW | NJPS | EQUIVALENCE | U.S. MEASURES | METRIC UNITS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *kor* | kor | 10 baths | 60.738 gallons | 230 liters |
| *bat* | bath | 6 hins | 6.073 gallons | 23 liters |
| *hin* | hin | 3 kabs | 1.012 gallons | 3.829 liters |
| *kav* | kab | 4 logs | 1.4349 quarts | 1.276 liters |
| *log* | log | | 0.674 pint | .32 liter |

CAPACITY: DRY MEASURES

| HEBREW | NJPS | EQUIVALENCE | U.S. MEASURES | METRIC UNITS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *ḥomer* | homer | 2 lethechs | 6.524 bushels | 229.7 liters |
| *kor* | kor | 2 lethechs | 6.524 bushels | 229.7 liters |
| *letekh* | lethech | 5 ephahs | 3.262 bushels | 114.8 liters |
| *'efah* | ephah, measure | 3 seahs | 20.878 quarts | 22.9 liters |
| *se'ah* | seah | 3.33 omers | 6.959 quarts | 7.7 liters |
| *'omer* | omer | 1.8 kabs | 2.087 quarts | 2.3 liters |
| *'isaron* | tenth of a measure | .1 ephah | 2.087 quarts | 2.3 liters |
| *kav* | kab | | 1.159 quarts | 1.3 liters |