

Poetry, The Bible and us

“I don’t like poetry.”

I’ve heard that little sentence more than once, including from members of my faith community.

It’s always struck me as strange, not just because I am a published poet but primarily because The Bible is dominated by poetry or poetic language. I’ve thought, “How can you love The Bible and not love one of its primary modes of expression?” And, without a doubt, there is such great comfort in poetry that I’ve been amazed by the pragmatism that denies that comfort.

Primary modes of expression? Is that too big a call? Well, try *Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* and large parts of *Zachariah*.

Pure poetry

Then much of the discourses of the Lord Jesus are pure poetry.

So, The Bible is a poetic book. This mode of language has been deliberately chosen because of its complexity. It is not just concerned with conveying of information, although it often does that. The best poetry appeals to intellect, emotions and aesthetics. Importantly, it reveals the writer more than the other modes of writing.

Poetry is both a written and aural art form. An essential feature is the musicality in the line. This is sometimes referred to as metre and the Biblical poets adhered to a much more formal metre than do the poets from the 20th and 21st centuries. This feature of poetry is the most difficult challenge of the translator and I often wish that I could read and hear the Hebrew. That said, many translators have done a superb job in finding musicality.

Metre may be difficult to translate but one feature of poetry that translates well is the image, one of its primary rhetorical devices. Let me give a few examples, starting with this magnificent image from the great poet, Isaiah.

60 Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
2 For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will be seen upon you.
3 And nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising.

These dramatic lines, with the sense of awe, majesty and beauty, are not about the sun rising. They are about the glory of what is variously called Jerusalem, Zion of the Kingdom of God. The metaphor Isaiah uses to describe that glory is that of the sun rising from the darkness of the night. We all know its beauty. We all know its inevitability. We all know how it disperses the night. Isaiah’s rising is special: it is “the glory of the LORD”; it disperses the “thick darkness [of] the peoples”; it is so special that everyone, kings and people, are attracted to it. His poetic metaphor allows us to visualize its wonder, majesty and beauty.

Who could deny the comfort in magnificent visions such as this?

It is the power of poetry and the choice of metaphor that works so sublimely here.

Then there are these well-known words from Psalm 23.

23 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.
 He leads me beside still waters.
 3 He restores my soul.
 He leads me in paths of righteousness
 for his name's sake.

Compared to the drama of Isaiah's lines, this is quiet and gentle. The exquisite simplicity of the metaphor and the quietly untroubled nature of its language are beautiful. Security and trust permeate it. It is the language of the shepherd whose life is devoted to looking after his flock. The quiet assertions reveal the depth of the poet's trust: He makes, He leads, He restores. His shepherd leads him in paths of righteousness to green pastures and still waters. I don't know how prose could convey all the information here. It's not just the metaphor with its implicit trust and view of who God is; it is the beautiful, untroubled peace the psalmist feels; it is his implicit modesty because he understands that this is "for his name's sake".

It is a gorgeous demonstration of the power of poetry and [whenever the world closes in or personal burdens become difficult to bear, we have words like this to bring comfort.](#)

Poetry in Job

As a last example, I will offer a few words about Behemoth and Leviathan of Job 40-41. I've heard many tortured expositions of these chapters, looking at all the examples where these words are used in the Scriptures and trying to find examples in living creatures, crocodiles and hippopotamuses being the two most common. However, Job's creatures are the work of poetry and use another key device of poetry, that is, [symbolism](#). Symbolism is a representative device: the poetic creation stands for, or symbolises, something else. So it is in Job.

What do these creatures symbolize, with their bronze bones, limbs of iron, impenetrable skin, teeth of terror, back of rows of impenetrable shields, emitting fire from mouth and smoke from nostrils, heart as hard as millstone, unconquerable by weapon?

The answer is simple and the poet provides it to us in the last two verses of Job 41.

33 On earth there is not his like,
 a creature without fear.
 34 He sees everything that is high;
 he is king over all the sons of pride.

King over all the sons of pride, i.e. the King of Pride. Pride is an undesirable quality because it blocks the development of the fruit of the spirit.. These creatures symbolize pride and the power of the creatures demonstrates both the horror and foolish power of pride, a power that alienates mortals from God. It is through the power of poetry, through its characteristics of imagery and symbol, that the challenge, pervasiveness, unruliness and obstinacy of pride are conveyed.

Of course, there is the promise that only God has power over these beasts, so if we rely on him we can achieve the impossible.

Destruction of the Temple

Finally, a couple of words of warning. God permits humans to express their humanity and that includes their confusion and errors of understanding. When we read the Scriptures, we are reading a complex guidebook into the mind of Christ. Part of that is revelation about ourselves, and the psalms abound with revelations both positive and negative. Many examples can be seen in Book 3 of the Psalms (73-89), where the various psalmists are in utter confusion about the destruction of the Temple and the captivity of Judah. A good example is in Psalm 74. There is an immediacy here: the psalmist is an eyewitness to the destruction of the Temple,

- 74 O God, why do you cast us off forever?
 Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?
² Remember your congregation, which you have purchased of old,
 which you have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage!
 Remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt.
³ Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins;
 the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary!

The deep anguish and confusion is immediately apparent. This is the psalmist's voice, seeking understanding but not finding it. It is a lesson that we are not always right. This psalmist made the assumption about the permanency of Solomon's Temple. He was shattered by its destruction. Much searching would have to occur to understand that the Temple exists primarily in the hearts of the faithful. It is poetry that allows expression of this emotional confusion and spiritual challenge.

The Kingdom

Similar confusion can be seen in the Psalm 89, the last psalm of Book 3. The subject here is not the Temple but the Kingdom and the end of the Davidic monarchy. Poetry allows the psalmist to expression his shattered confusion and deep lament.

- ³⁸ But now you have cast off and rejected;
 you are full of wrath against your anointed.
³⁹ You have renounced the covenant with your servant;
 you have defiled his crown in the dust.
⁴⁰ You have breached all his walls;
 you have laid his strongholds in ruins.
⁴¹ All who pass by plunder him;
 he has become the scorn of his neighbors.

This psalmist knew the promises about David and his heir sitting forever on an eternal throne. He took that to be the temporal throne that was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. The psalm depicts his confusion and is an exhortation in humility.

Comfort

Is there comfort in this? What comfort can we draw from great people of faith who have been mistaken in their understanding? This. God knows we are filled with misunderstanding and mistakes. That is human. They are recorded in the Scriptures. But they were people of faith and God recognizes their faith, not their errors. We will make errors. Sometimes we will be thrown into confusion. But there will be a way out. Answers will come. Poetic visions will help our

understanding. We will eventually see the larger picture. Meanwhile, be humble enough to admit our limitations. Be not quick to judge. Open the ear and listen.

Finally, two things

The first is when reading poetry, we should understand that it is not written primarily as history. Sometimes it may be history but mostly it is describing an emotional response to a situation or event. As such, we learn about the poet and the event and perhaps a perspective on the history but we are not reading history as such. The psalms of Book 3 are good examples of this. We already know about the events; **what we are learning is the psalmist/poet's response to it.** Mostly the illumination is in the response.

Secondly, it is a mistake to read a figure of speech as a literal statement. Once, at a Bible Class, two participants were lamenting their lack of faith and they were referring to these verses:

Matthew 17:20 He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."

This is a device of language called hyperbole, a deliberate exaggeration for rhetorical effect. The point is not about moving mountains, which is impossible. It is about what great things can be achieved through faith. Indeed, the mountainous obstacle that is in your heart may be moved or the leviathan of pride may be overcome.

Poetry is rich. Perhaps it is difficult because it is so often not literal but it is The Bible's chosen medium to convey so much about our personal lives. Take all the poetry out of The Bible and what is left is a depressingly diminished book. But we have the poetry. We have its aesthetics. We have its humanity. We have its deep revelations.

In this we can rejoice.

In that rejoicing, there is deep comfort.

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