

Introduction to Preaching Hebrew Poetry

This week we will be thinking about preaching the prophets, so let's lay a foundation by looking at the challenge of preaching Hebrew poetry. Most of the prophets wrote in poetry, so we have to be familiar with this type of literature if we are going to handle the prophets well.

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I. Diversity & Unity: The kind of Bible God would inspire!

A. Three broad types of literature

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

B. Implications for preaching

1. The form of literature is inspired, not just the content
2. God anticipates variety in our preaching (& helps us)

C. Biblical prophecy requires two levels of work for us. The historical distance means that the specific person, writing to specific people, at a specific time, is all distant and removed from us. And in order to access all of that, we have to read it is a type of literature that is not our own (i.e. Hebrew poetry!)

II. Poetry: When Only A Song Will Communicate

A. The location of biblical poetry:

Psalms & Wisdom (Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Proverbs) & **Prophets**

B. Studying Poetry

1. Be aware of main poetic forms (lament, praise and thanksgiving), but don't try to force a poem to fit a framework.
2. Take note of any historical indicators, but don't try to force a poem to fit in a historical situation that is only guesswork. In the prophets, there may or may not be a chronological order to the content.
3. Note especially how Hebrew poetry is built using parallelism (typically two lines where the second completes the first). Be sure to read poetry in light of

this (rather than studying only half a parallelism, or contrasting two elements that are actually reinforcing the same thought).

4. Look at the structure of the poem, but don't dissect it so that all emotion is drained away.
5. Notice the mood of the author and the images used to move the reader.

C. Preaching Poetry

1. Typically follow the structure of the poem unless you have good reason to change the order, but preach the poem holistically (rather than making it act like an epistle).
2. Take full advantage of the imagery and emotion of the poem to help the listener engage with their hearts as well as their heads.
3. Biblical poetry does not yield instant force, we may need to help to build that force – for example, the heavens, sun, stars, etc. in Psalm 8 (different now in a post-electricity world)
4. Don't rush – poetry is designed for pondering, not a clipped logical presentation.

D. The basic building block of Hebrew poetry: the parallelism

Eg. Proverbs 29:18

Where there is no vision, the people perish,
(*But happy is he who keeps the Law.*)

The community of God's people need the _____ of _____
taught to them or they will go _____!

Four typical types of parallelism:

1. Antithetical parallelism – the second line contrasts the first line (Ps.34:19)

*Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD delivers him out of them all.*

2. Synonymous parallelism – the second line is similar, and reinforces the first (Ps.49:3)

*My mouth shall speak wisdom;
the meditation of my heart shall be understanding.*

3. Synthetic parallelism – the second line builds on the first (Ps.49:5)

*Why should I fear in times of trouble,
when the iniquity of those who cheat me surrounds me,*

4. Emblematic parallelism – the two parts connect through simile or metaphor (Ps.49:20)

*Man in his pomp yet without understanding
is like the beasts that perish.*

E. Structure and imagery in poetry

Psalm 113

¹ Praise the LORD!

Praise, O servants of the LORD,
praise the name of the LORD!

² Blessed be the name of the LORD
from this time forth and forevermore!

³ From the rising of the sun to its setting,
the name of the LORD is to be praised!

⁴ The LORD is high above all nations,
and his glory above the heavens!

⁵ Who is like the LORD our God,
who is seated on high,

⁶ who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?

⁷ He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap,

⁸ to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.

⁹ He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children.

Praise the LORD!

Recommended resources

Search on “prophets” or “poetry” on BiblicalPreaching.net – there is plenty on the site!

Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (Basic, 2011)

Jeffrey Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety* (Kregel, 2007)

Kent Edwards, *Deep Preaching* (B&H, 2009)

J.P.Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001)