The recent surge in the popularity of literary approaches to biblical interpretation raises important hermeneutical questions. For some, viewing the Bible as literature means treating it as a human literary artifact, thus rendering it suitable for teaching in public schools and universities. From another direction, a literary study of the Bible is seen as a necessary remedy to the narrow agendas of traditional biblical scholarship. In modern times biblical studies have progressed along two tracks. Historical criticism, especially nurtured in the universities, has focused on philology, grammar, sources, and redactional history. Theological criticism, especially cultivated in the seminaries, has often reduced the Bible to a system of abstractions and propositions. Although both historical criticism and theological criticism have legitimate concerns, in practice they fail to read the Bible adequately on its own terms before using its data for other purposes. As Thompson notes:

When biblical interpretation is dominated by historical and theological concerns, the world in the Bible tends to be passed by too quickly in order to relate it to one of the other two worlds. At its worst such biblical interpretation tends to level out the fantastic world of the Bible for the sake of either historical credibility or theological viability. It does not allow a reader time to enjoy and to savor that wondrous world.

Although in modern times literary criticism of the Bible has not received the same level of scholarly attention given to historical and theological issues, there is a long history of literary interpretation of biblical texts. Early Christian writers drew frequent analogies between the genres of Greek and Latin literature and the Scriptures. Although the early Jewish exegetes largely followed the lead of Rabbi Akiba into midrash, Rabbi Ishmael represented a minority position that "the Torah uses language as human beings do" (Sanhedrin 64b).

In the 18th century Robert Lowth applied neoclassical concepts of literary criticism to the Bible. His analysis of Hebrew poetry, though recently challenged by James Kugel and others, still remains a significant advance in viewing the Bible in literary terms. Lowth’s approach insisted that the interpreter “must attend to the form as well as to the content of the revelation, trying to understand the internal system of genres which held Hebrew poetry together.”

In 1899 Moulton published a lengthy and insightful study in which he analyzed a wide range of literary types in the Bible, and used their genre distinctive to explicate the sense of the text. Moulton’s volume, however, remained for the most part an isolated classic, and even the call by Muilenburg for a renewed commitment to what he termed rhetorical criticism was not widely answered.

While the scholarly world was entrenched in its historical and theological analyses of the Bible, there came a wave of popular interest in viewing the Bible in literary terms. In many high schools and in most colleges in the United States, the Bible as literature became a standard elective course, ordinarily taught in an English program. In the past generation provocative studies by literary scholars such as Northrop Frye and Amos Wilder have encouraged significant contributions by Robert Alter, Adele Berlin, Michael Fishbane, and others. Among evangelicals, literary approaches to the Bible have featured discussions of genre analysis by Leland Ryken, Grant Osborne, and Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart. As Longman has summed up the current situation, “This literary approach is the hottest new method in biblical studies…. It involves a ‘paradigm shift’ in interpretation, replacing traditional critical methods that excavate the text for its sources - a move toward a literary analysis and away from a historical analysis.”

Approaches to Literary Criticism

Within the discipline of literary criticism there is a confusing array of theoretical schools. Spirited battles rage between structuralists and social constructivists, between deconstructionists and formalists.
These approaches have found their way into treatments of the Bible as literature. [11] What has typically happened is that biblical literary scholars have adopted the changing fashions of general literary criticism, often publishing their insights shortly after the interpretive approach has passed out of vogue. In its attempt to be in step with contemporary literary criticism, much biblical criticism unfortunately is somewhat obsolete on arrival.

Though this observation may suggest a pessimistic view of the viability of the literary criticism of the Bible, that is not necessarily the case. Ryken notes, biblical scholars "have tended to forget that behind the changing fashions is bedrock traditional literary criticism, which has never gone out of date to the extent that biblical scholars have inferred." [12] Ryken identifies this foundational approach with New Criticism or formalism. However, it could be described better as explication of the text in terms of the distinctive appropriate to its literary type in its historical setting. Thus a nature psalm such as Psalm 29 is better viewed in the light of nature hymns from other ancient Near Eastern cultures than in the light of Wordsworth’s Romantic view of nature.

[416]

Limitations of Present Literary Approaches to the Bible

Informed literary criticism of the Bible requires a combination of skills. Just as the analysis of German literature necessitates a precise knowledge of German, and the explication of French literature requires in-depth understanding of French, so to work properly with the biblical texts, one must master Hebrew and Greek. Working from biblical texts only in translation will inevitably skew the interpretive process. In addition, to enter into the conceptual framework of the biblical writers, the interpreter must be conversant in theology, history, and ancient cultures.

Biblical literary criticism also requires skill in analyzing texts as literature. The interpreter must have sufficient expertise in literary studies to resist the temptation to follow blindly a narrow theoretical approach. Instead, the interpreter should be adept in assembling useful insights from a variety of approaches. [13]

Though there is much exegesis of biblical texts by philologists, historians, and theologians, and an increasing number of analyses of biblical texts by literary critics, relatively little material integrates these fields at a significant level. Frequently theologians speak beyond their range of competence when they discuss literary features, and literary critics often make their judgments without drawing on the resources available in the field of biblical criticism.

This regrettable situation is compounded in the case of biblical lyric poetry. Since the time of Lowth a large corpus of studies on biblical poetry has emerged. Nevertheless, as Alter correctly assesses the matter, “most of what has been written on biblical poetry is in some way misconceived and, however imposing the intellectual equipment of the writers, tends to be guided by rather dim notions of how poetry works.” [14] Added to this fact is the general indifference to aesthetic considerations in contemporary society, which is primarily committed to more utilitarian concerns. Because poetry is aesthetically charged, it is often neglected. [15] This is particularly true in the case of biblical poetry.

Literary Character of the Bible

Approaching the Bible as a literary text raises the important question of the uniqueness of the Bible. As Wilder wrote, “The recurrent urge to read the Bible ‘like any other book’ sounds appealing and liberating—until we realize that this means reading ‘any other book’ as we read the Bible.” [16]

However, the Bible is not just like any other book, because it alone is inspired revelation from God. Any approach to the Bible that domesticates it into merely another piece of human literature fails to come to terms with the distinctive nature of the Scriptures.

On the other hand the Bible, despite all its uniqueness as divine revelation, does have significant similarities to other literary texts. In His revelatory process God chose to communicate His truth within the conventions of numerous literary genres. As Alter argues, to hear the message of the Bible, the interpreter must listen in terms of the literary forms God employed.

Ethical monotheism was delivered to the world not as a series of abstract principles but in cunningly wrought narratives, poetry, parables, and orations, in an intricate patterning of symbolic language and rhetoric that extends even to the genealogical tables and the laws. We will scarcely feel the forceful modulations with which the texts address us unless we somehow attend to the literary forms of the address. [17]

Contributions by Biblical Literary Criticism

Several notable works have made significant contributions to the understanding of the biblical texts by analyzing literary genres. For example Kline’s study of the ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaty form opened up fresh understanding of the Book of Deuteronomy. [18] Similarly Greek rhetorical patterns have assisted in the interpretation of the Pauline epistles. [19]

Recognizing that God used a variety of literary conventions in the Scriptures, each of these studies seeks to read the biblical text within the parameters of its original genre. The danger exists, of course, that the interpreter may superimpose a modern concept of literature on an ancient text. This would produce an anachronistic interpretation, thus falling short of valid literary criticism. Therefore it is necessary for Bible students to “reconstruct and understand the genres that were actually available when the text studied was being written.” [20]
Interpretation of Biblical Lyric Poetry

This article explores how biblical poetry can be heard better as God intended it to be heard, that is, as poetry. Three potential areas of investigation may contribute to a valid theory of biblical poetics. First, analysis of ancient Near Eastern poetic texts helps clarify the literary conventions that plausibly could have shaped biblical poetic form and language. However, as useful as this information is, the corpus of appropriate comparative literature is relatively small, and it would be difficult to establish with reliability a high degree of verbal and structural borrowing.

A second approach is to study the biblical poetry inductively to surface its implicit literary conventions. This is the general focus of Moulton's work, which is indeed replete with useful data. However, to analyze completely the biblical poetic material would constitute a daunting challenge.

This article presents a third, more indirect approach to augment the present understanding of biblical lyric poetry. Although it is undeniable that poetic conventions have changed over time and among different cultures, certain distinctive of poetry transcend time and place. Literary theorists and literature teachers who work with a variety of texts drawn from diverse epochs make use of these transcendent generic conventions. This article (a) investigates how lyric poetry is treated in the disciplines of literary criticism and pedagogy, (b) isolates the salient distinctive of lyric poetry, particularly in its language and form, and (c) suggests guidelines for interpreting biblical lyric poetry informed by the insights of literary criticism. After observes:

Comparative Semitic philology and continuing archaeological excavation have made their own contributions to the clearing away of the sediment of time by giving us more precise notions of what many biblical words mean and what artifacts, cultural practices, and institutions may be alluded to in the texts, though this admirable enterprise has too often been carried on with no attention, or at best rather misguided attention, to the poetic form in which the words of the text are cast.[21]

This article endeavors to redress that oversight.

The Nature of Lyric Poetry

What is it that lyric poetry attempts to do? Granted that lyric poetry has changed in many ways throughout its long history, what common elements have distinguished lyric poetry from other forms of discourse? What is the distinctive nature of lyric poetry?

Re-creation of Experience

As imaginative literature, poetry endeavors to re-create the poet's experience in the reader, rather than merely reporting what the poet experienced. "The poet's business in writing his poem is not to tell us that this 'moment of imaginative experience' has happened to him, but to make it happen to us as well."[22]

The ultimate purpose of lyric poetry is not simply to communicate information to the mind. If that were the case, poetry would be an unnecessarily inefficient means. Poetry does convey cognitive data, but that is only a part of its purpose. The poet uses language to reconstruct in the reader an experience comparable to what the poet felt. The poem broadens and deepens the reader's experience by guiding him into participation with the author's experience.[23] In effect the poem enables the reader to "remember an experience that he has never had."[24]

Concentrated Expression of Feelings

Lyric poetry is marked by its intensity of expression. Lyric poems rarely tell a story, but instead reflect on the emotion of a moment. Their chief contribution is meditative, as they focus on a single feeling. "We should not try to get more intellectual mileage out of an individual lyric poem than it is designed to yield. A lyric poem cannot cover the whole territory of a given topic. It captures a moment, a mood, a feeling."[25]

Lyric poems are characteristically brief, for intense feeling cannot easily be maintained over an extended discourse. Because the poet compresses so much experience into such a brief utterance, the reader must unpack the language. At the same time

the interpreter must not flatten the poem into a prose paraphrase of the content. Lyric poetry "says more and says it more intensely than does ordinary language."[26]

Skillful Use of Language

Lyric poetry achieves its concentrated expression of feelings by the skillful use of language. Poets exploit the potential of language to maximize their communicative range and force. By artful use of both content and form, poets are able to speak multidimensionally to their readers. Poetry displays self-conscious attention to how the message is communicated, as well as what is communicated. Thus poetry embodies highly concentrated language in skillfully wrought form. Form and content are intertwined in a synergistic act of communication.
What one cannot help but sense in good poetry is a sense of the whole language striving toward richer possibilities than one could have foreseen. To consider some of the impressions that can be isolated from that total feeling, and to speculate on their possible causes, is at least to enter the question of how language functions in a poem. One must remember, however, that such impressions do not exist in isolation in the poem. To separate them for analysis is pointless unless one then attempts to put them back in context. One does not take a poem apart for the love of dissection but only in order to put it back together more meaningfully.

Lyric poetry does more than communicate facts from the author's mind to the reader's mind. Lyric poetry addresses the whole person, not just the intellect. In addition to the cognitive dimension, poetry "adds a sensuous dimension, an emotional dimension, and an imaginative dimension."[28]

The Language of Lyric Poetry

How does lyric poetry use language to communicate meaning in particularly potent ways? By scrutinizing how poets use words, the interpreter can understand how poetry may be read more insightfully.

Exploitation of Lexical Potential

Words contain sound, denotation, and connotation. Expository writing attempts to communicate with singular clarity to prevent ambiguity and misunderstanding.[29] In its pursuit of exactness of expression, expository literature focuses on the denotation of the word.

On the other hand lyric poetry exploits the full range of meaning implicit in words. "Where the scientist requires and has invented a strictly one-dimensional language in which every word is confined to one denotation, the poet needs a multidimensional language, and creates it partly by using a multidimensional vocabulary, in which the dimensions of connotations and sound are added to the dimensions of denotation.”[30]

Not content to be confined to the strict meaning of a word, the poet explores the rich potential of connotations suggested by the term. These connotations empower the word to move beyond the communication of facts to the reproduction of the author's experience in the reader. The poet's carefully chosen words are evocative, in addition to being informative.[31]

Thus the meaning of a poem is more than a paraphrase of its propositions. To grasp the total meaning of a poem, the reader also must listen to the sounds and savor the connotations. The interpreter of lyric poetry must meditate on the language, letting the words work on his mind and feelings, until the message of the author becomes apparent. Because poetry is written to speak to the total person, it must be read as more than cognitive principles.

Evocative Imagery

To communicate their complex meanings, poets make extensive use of imagery. In literary criticism an image is a word picture that evokes in the imagination “an impression made upon any of the five senses, hearing, taste, touch, smell, and sight.”[32] Although people vary in their imaginative ability, imagery is the language preferred by poets. As Ryken states, “The most basic of poetic principles is that poets think and write in images.... The corresponding ability that is required of readers is that they allow the images of poetry to become as real and sensory as possible. Readers of poetry need to think in images, just as poets do.”[33] By using imagery, the poet is endeavoring to communicate a complex message that will evoke a response in the reader's imagination. To grasp this kind of message, the reader must be oriented to the agenda of the poet. To read a poem as though it were expository denotation alone is to misread its intended meaning.

All poetic imagery is metaphorical. That is, the image uses a point or several points of comparison between a sensory object and an abstract concept. On the literal level the metaphor is nonsensical, but by drawing attention to salient aspects of the image, the poet exploits latent associations that enable him to reproduce the message in the imagination of the reader.[34] It is crucial for the interpreter to determine accurately what points of comparison the poet intended to include in using the image. If the characteristics of the image are pressed beyond the selective associations employed by the poet, then the interpreter has imported foreign content into the poem.

When two things are compared, they are not to be considered like in all respects. There is an intended point of comparison on which we are being asked to concentrate to the exclusion of all irrelevant fact; and communication breaks down, with ludicrous and even disastrous effect, if we wrongly identify it.[35]

Verbal Economy

As Perrine notes, “poetry is the most condensed and concentrated form of literature, saying most in the fewest number of words.”[36] This verbal economy gives poetry its distinctive intensity and denseness. The poet crafts language skillfully in order to communicate the desired message with maximum force. The poet's purpose is not simply to relate a concept to the
Poetry, and particularly lyric poetry, is lean, artfully designed, and carefully expressed. The choice of words is not arbitrary, for the poet selects language that best communicates his message. Through skillful combinations of words, making use of their sounds and connotations, the poet transcends the limitations of verbal denotation to speak to both the mind and the imagination of the reader. For the poet every detail is significant. Each word, each image, each patterned line is calculated to contribute to the total impact of the poem. Therefore "we come to feel, with a truly first-rate poem, that the choice and placement of every word is inevitable, that it could not be otherwise."[37]

The Form of Lyric Poetry

In addition to its exploitation of the meanings of words, lyric poetry also combines words together in ways that maximize the intended effect. The skillful poet consciously orders the language of the poem, using a variety of strategies that lend intensity and texture to the utterance.

Poetry is the most complex ordering of language, and perhaps also the most demanding. Within the formal limits of a poem the poet can take advantage of the emphatic repetitions dictated by the particular prosodic system, the symmetries and antitheses and internal echoes intensified by a closed verbal structure, the fine intertwinnings of sound and image and reported act, the modulated shifts in grammatical voice and object of address, to give coherence and authority to his perceptions of the world.[38]

To grasp fully the poet's message the reader must become sensitive to the distinctive ways by which the poet structures the form. By analyzing how literary artists construct their masterpieces, one can appreciate their work to a greater degree.

Parallelism

Much has been written on the significance of parallelism for understanding biblical poetry. Because Hebrew poetry does not seem to use rhyme with conscious intent, and its metrical patterns are probably unrecoverable without definitive knowledge of its original pronunciation and accentuation, semantic parallelism stands as its most prominent distinctive.

Kugel's rejection of the traditional understanding of parallelism in biblical poetry has been answered well by Robert Alter. Alter argues that in poetry there are no genuine synonyms. When similar terms are used in juxtaposition there is always an intensification of some sort, even though the words may appear at first to say much the same thing.

The dominant pattern is a focusing, heightening, or specification of ideas, images, actions, and themes from one verset (sic) to the next. If something is broken in the first verset (sic), it is smashed or shattered in the second verset (sic); if a city is destroyed in the first verset (sic), it is turned into a heap of rubble in the second. A general term in the first half of the line is typically followed by a specific instance of the general category in the second half; or, again, a literal statement in the first verse becomes a metaphor or hyperbole in the second. What this means to us as readers of biblical poetry is that instead of listening to an imagined drumbeat of repetitions, we need constantly to look for something new happening from one part of the line to the next.[39]

To appreciate semantic parallelism, the reader must ask what is the implicit relationship between the parallel members. The network of these verbal relationships helps disclose the intricate meaning of the poem.

Intentional Ambiguity

Because lyric poetry typically manifests verbal economy, the frequent absence of conjunctions, temporal markers, and logical markers leaves many features of the poem ambiguous.[40] Though this might seem to be a detriment to understanding, in reality the intentional ambiguity of the poem adds to its power.

To understand and assimilate the poem, the interpreter must infer how the words and lines relate to each other. This demands active reading and thoughtful meditation. This savoring of the text compels the reader to feel the message more thoroughly, comprehending not only what the words mean but also how their combinations reconstruct in his personality what the poet had already experienced. The lyric's ambiguity forces the reader to probe, using both logical analysis and intuition to ascertain how the terms are combined and what their significance is.

Laws of Composition

Literary artists commonly use a variety of techniques as they join words together in meaningful combinations. These techniques, or laws of composition,[41] are used with conscious, concentrated effect in poetry. The following strategies are employed frequently by poets.

In repetition the same term is repeated in the poem, usually to emphasize a key theme. In similarity similar terms are used, both to reinforce an idea and to extend it by means of variation. In contrast the use of opposites communicates a single concept by stating it both positively and negatively. In comparisons figures of speech, including similes, metaphors, and other types of
In cause and effect the effect and its cause are placed in juxtaposition, although their relationship is not necessarily stated explicitly. In general and particulars a general reality is preceded or followed by its particular components. In climax several items are positioned so that they lead to a logical climax through a process of progressive heightening.

To read poetry well, one must detect how the poet has arranged the words to imply the message. The laws of composition are patterns characteristically used to great effect in poetry. Therefore understanding poetry requires skill not only in discerning what the sound, denotation, and connotations of the individual words contribute, but also in discovering the intricate ways in which the poet combined the words to imply meaning. In a sense the reader of lyric poetry must read the words, and must also listen between the words and the lines for whispers from the poet.

The Interpretation of Lyric Poetry

Because poetry is "the most concentrated and complex use of language there is, and it is used as a means of communication by men and women who live more richly and intensely than we do," its interpretation places special demands on the reader. Accurate interpretation of lyric poetry requires good technique. It is not enough to give great effort to interpret the poem; it must be the right kind of effort.

This, however, is the point where much of biblical literary scholarship has often gone awry. If poetic interpretation does not involve careful research and aesthetic sensitivity, it may miss the true sense of the poem. Biblical scholars frequently have focused on issues of philology, history, and theology, succeeding only "in burying a living poem under a mountain of dead information." On the other hand literary critics often have been prone to consider the aesthetic dimensions of biblical poetry without adequate regard to historical and theological issues. The connection between form and meaning has been widely neglected.

What is needed is better technique for interpreting biblical lyric poetry. This method would recognize the distinctives of poetry as a genre, and then read biblical lyrics in accord with the generic distinctives. Instead of forcing all biblical literature on a hermeneutical Procrustean bed, valid interpretation evaluates the text in terms of its genre.

Establishing the Text

When working with a recent piece of literature, there is usually relatively little question as to the original text. With ancient biblical texts, however, the interpreter must be careful to ascertain through textual criticism the precise language of the text. Of course it is not always possible to demonstrate with certainty the exact text. Nevertheless for the results of interpretation to be accurate, its starting point must be as reliable as possible.

This is especially important in studying biblical poetry. Because lyric poetry uses the full potential of language, exploiting its sounds, denotations, and connotations, it is crucial to establish the text before launching into its analysis.

In addition the nature of lyric poetry demands that it be studied in its original language. Reading poetry in translation is like looking at a black-and-white picture of a sunset. The general patterns of the poet's communication may be recognizable, but much of its brilliance and evocative power is lost. Even a good translation is a poor substitute for the original poetic text.

Reading the Poem Aloud

Like narrative, poetry is intended to be heard. Much of present-day education, however, depends on silent reading. This modern propensity hinders the interpreter of lyric poetry, for "poetry, as much as drama, is meant to be performed, to be heard rather than read with the eye." Reading poetry aloud assists in appreciating its unity. Because the concentrated language and intricate form of poetry requires intensive reading and lengthy meditation, it is possible to miss the whole by concentrating too intently on the parts. However, "the essence of a poem is almost never to be found in its first line, or even in its first stanza. It is to be found only in the whole, and not conclusively in any part." Reading the lyric aloud helps keep the focus on the overall message.

Reading aloud also highlights the poet's use of sound. A slow, attentive reading of the poem will discover the sounds the poet used to express his content and reproduce the emotions he intended to evoke in his hearers.

Poets have written to be heard - spoken, recited, sung. To appreciate them fully, we too need to speak them, recite them, sing them. For the experienced reader of poetry this may indeed be unnecessary: his aural imagination may be sufficiently developed for him to "hear" the poetry in his head, even when he reads silently. The inexperienced reader, however, needs to hear poetry read aloud, and to read it aloud himself whenever possible.
The sound of the poem, along with the poet's use of language and form, helps define the tone or the inflections the poet would have used if he were speaking. The poem's tone is a crucial component in the reader's interpretive framework.

Reading Reflectively

Reflection, or meditation, is an essential key to comprehending a poem and responding to it. The denseness of language in lyric poetry means that its dimensions of meaning will not yield themselves to the casual reader. Poetry is designed to compel the reader to think and feel in new ways. "Readers… who think that all good poetry should come home to them in entirety at a first reading, hardly realise [sic] how clever they must be."[50]

Great poetry, which includes much of the biblical lyrics, invites rereading. Its depth of meaning and richness of emotion reward the interpreter who meditates on it deeply and frequently. The meaning of a lyric cannot be grasped in an instant, and its power to recreate experience emerges from leisurely, intimate acquaintance. The reader must approach the poem as though it were a love letter, clasping it to his heart and listening for the whispers undetected by casual observers.

Reading Imaginatively

In interpreting lyric poetry, it is especially crucial for the reader to enter into the poet's world, employing what Coleridge called the "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith."[51] Poetry cannot be grasped from the outside by the passive bystander. By imaginative empathy, the reader must become part of the universe created by the poet, able to breathe its air, smell its scents, and hear its music. Adler and Van Doren's challenge for reading fiction is particularly appropriate for poetry: "Become at home in this imaginary world; know it as if you were an observer on the scene; become a member of its population, willing to befriend its characters, and able to participate in its happenings by sympathetic insights, as you would do in the actions and sufferings of a friend."[52] Until the poem has been experienced, it cannot be explained, for "the reader who has experienced most fully will finally be the best judge."[53]

Unlike narrative and epic poetry, which endeavor to tell a story, lyric poetry focuses on responding to a stimulus.[54] The reader needs to reconstruct from the language of the poem the stimulus that prompted the lyric. Recognition of the stimulus will enable the reader to define the central purpose of the poem, which is the interpretive key that unlocks the meaning and function of its details.[55]

Analyzing the Language

Because poetry employs the skillful use of language, the interpreter is obliged to examine the words with special care. Poets are fond of drawing on the complete semantic range of terms as they accomplish their purpose. Therefore the reader needs to be alert to the possibility that an apparently common word is being used with an uncommon sense. This does not open the door to interpretive caprice, however, for the poet worked within the lexical boundaries of the language.

Knowing the meaning of the words and sentences of a poem may not be tantamount to a full understanding of the poem, but it is a necessary beginning, not only for literary works but for any written or spoken discourse whatsoever. And it is on the fact that we cannot arbitrarily or whimsically attach whatever meanings we wish to past utterances that the stability and power of the written word rests.[56]

The denotation of the words must be established in terms of the author's linguistic, historical, and ideological framework. The interpreter is not free to import his own concepts into the poem and attribute them to the poet. Schreiber rightly states, "The business of the critic as scholar is, as far as is possible, to re-create for us the intellectual and emotional climate…which the writer assumed, so that his words may bear for us, again as far as is possible, that meaning and those emotional overtones which their writer intended them to bear."[57] The poem must be understood on its own terms.

Lyric poetry is especially distinguished by its use of connotations and imagery. Therefore the reader must be attentive to the nonliteral meanings and emotional colorings of the terms. Insightful poetic interpretation reflects on figurative language, unpacking the nuances of sense, tone, and texture. Behind apparently ordinary language it discovers rich mines of meaning to which the poem points.[58]

Consulting Skillful Interpreters

Poetic interpretation is a skill that is developed through training and practice. At present, biblical scholars are shaped by educational systems that for the most part produce philologists, historians, or theologians. The increasing specialization of higher education has typically
divorced biblical interpretation from the discipline of literary criticism. In addition the lack of emphasis on literature in most undergraduate general education programs has produced a society that in many ways is unable to think, feel, and imagine as lyric poetry requires. Drew describes this plight this way:

It is a sorry thought how many readers there are, who, through habit, through laziness, through rigidity of outlook, and perhaps most of all, simply through lack of training, have their potentialities standardized at a very low level, their responses atrophied, withered, stunted, so that their "need of the moment" never reaches beyond the most mediocre poetry, and thus their heritage of stored vitality lies sterile.\[59\]

To obviate this problem, the interpreter can begin by making judicious use of studies by those who are more skillful in understanding and responding to lyric poetry. Those who have focused their attention intently on poetry have learned by long practice to hear the poet's melodies and to feel his pulse. By sensitizing themselves to the distinctive sounds and movements of poetry they become guides to those for whom lyric poetry is unfamiliar country. As Ciardi says, "The way to develop a poetic sense is by using it."\[60\] The way to learn to use that poetic sense is to observe those who are already sensitive to poetry and then to appropriate their insights.

Conclusion

Alter comes to this conclusion regarding biblical poetry:

We will of course never be able to hear these poems again precisely as they were once heard in ancient Israel, but the effort to set aside certain literary and religious prejudices and recover what we can of biblical poetics is abundantly warranted. Even a limited success in the enterprise of recovery should help us take in more fully the extraordinary force of these ancient poems, the intricate substantive links between the poetic vehicle and the religious vision of the poets, and the crucial place of the corpus of biblical poetry in the complex growth of the Western literary tradition.\[61\]

This article has endeavored to draw insights into the distinctives of lyric poetry from the disciplines of literary criticism and pedagogy. By listening to scholars laboring in fields parallel to biblical interpretation, Bible students can sharpen their understanding of how poets of all times typically use language and form to communicate their messages with evocative force. The proposed set of interpretive guidelines can help enhance one's reading of biblical lyric poetry. Much remains to be done to translate this theoretical model into practical interpretation. The next step is to test the interpretive guidelines on a variety of biblical lyrics to demonstrate the validity and value of the model. Eventually informed poetical interpretation should produce commentaries and monographs on the poetical books of the Bible, integrating the traditional attention to philological, historical, and theological issues with sensitivity to the poetic distinctives of the text. In other words students of the Bible must read biblical poetry as poetry, feel biblical poetry as poetry, and hear biblical poetry as poetry. Only then will they truly appreciate the richness of the ancient melodies of God's Word.

References

[1] Kugel notes a similar agenda in Renaissance humanism. "The Bible as literature now meant not a broadening but the narrowing of reasonable interpretations, reading the Psalter not as hints concerning the coming of the Messiah but, in Luthers phrase, as a book in which "everyone, in whatsoever situation he may be, will find Psalms and sayings that rhyme with his own affairs" - not the voice of an all-knowing God, but the voice of David Everyman saying merely, "what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed"" (James Kugel, "On the Bible and Literary Criticism," Prooftexts 1 [1981]: 218).


fly-fishing and golf) merely by making a little careful inquiry into the best methods, surely there is
activities as running or jumping (not to insist upon the more parallel examples of mountaineering,
approach to poetry has not yet received half so much serious systematic study as the technique
results that the most whole-hearted efforts fall short of if misapplied. And the technique of the
analyzing the forms of poetry (\textit{The Language and Imagery of the Bible} (New York: Basic, 1992), 204).
[32] Schreiber, \textit{An Introduction to Literary Criticism}, 42.
[33] Leland Ryken, \textit{How to Read the Bible as Literature} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 90.
[34] G.B. Caird discusses insightfully the ways in which metaphors employ points of comparison (\textit{The Language and Imagery of the Bible} [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980], 145-47).
[35] Ibid., 145.
[37] Ibid., 205.
[40] Longman, \textit{Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation}, 122.
[41] Robert A. Traina discusses a variety of structural relations found between paragraphs or larger sections of biblical books. Many of these laws of composition are equally valid for analyzing the forms of poetry (\textit{Methodical Bible Study} [reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985], 49-55).
[45] I. A. Richards reasons, “A better technique, as we learn daily in other fields, may yield results that the most whole-hearted efforts fall short of if misapplied. And the technique of the approach to poetry has not yet received half so much serious systematic study as the technique of pole-jumping. If it is easy to push up the general level of performance in such ‘natural’ activities as running or jumping (not to insist upon the more parallel examples of mountaineering, fly-fishing and golf) merely by making a little careful inquiry into the best methods, surely there is
reason to expect that investigation into the technique of reading may have even happier results" (Practical Criticism [San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929], 291-92).


[50] Richards, Practical Criticism, 183.


[52] Adler and Van Doren, How to Read a Book, 211.

[53] Ciardi, How Does a Poem Mean? 666.

[54] Ryken, Words of Delight, 229. Nevertheless, as Walter Blair and W. K. Chandler note, there is often some narrative element even in lyric poetry, although usually it is deemphasized (Approaches to Poetry, 2d ed. [New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953], 255).


[57] Schreiber, An Introduction to Literary Criticism, 16.

[58] Ryken comments, "Taking the obligation of metaphor and simile seriously would revolutionize commentary on biblical poetry. As I read commentary from biblical scholars, I hear far too little about pastures and shields and horns, and about the multiplicity of meanings implied in the text" (Words of Delight, 168).

