

Petersen, David L., and Kent Harold Richards. *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*. Guides to Biblical Scholarship. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992.

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Kent Harold Richards, while holding multiple teaching positions through out the United States during his career, is best known for his contributions to the Society of Biblical Literature.

Thesis/Purpose

This book is part of the Guides to Biblical Scholarship Old Testament series, which is edited by Gene Tucker. According to the editor's preface, "The goal of this volume is to provide a guide both to the recent scholarly discussion and to understanding poetry itself" (vii). The recent scholarly discussion regarding biblical poetry refers to the growing number of Old Testament scholars that are moving away from Bishop Robert Lowth's position on parallelism as the defining characteristic of biblical poetry. A significant portion of Peterson and Richards' work looks at this development in studies of Hebrew parallelism. In addition to parallelism, they also discuss matters of rhythm and style. The book concludes with demonstrations of poetic analysis.

Outline of the Book

The first chapter, entitled "Understanding Hebrew Poetry," attempts to provide a more nuanced definition of poetry that incorporates elements of English poetry analysis that are often neglected in studies of Hebrew poetry. Hence, instead of focusing primarily on the concept of parallelism, Peterson and Richards believe that more attention needs to be paid to elements like "rhythm, rhyme, stanzaic structure, and symbolism" (2). At this point in the chapter, the authors attempt to address "a series of problems that one does not confront when studying or reading modern poetry" (3). These problems are as follows (3-6):

1. There are no extant discussions from antiquity about poetic theory within Hebrew or, for that matter, any other ancient Semitic language.

¹ Author information completely dependent and based on biography provided by the Candler School of Theology's faculty page. See <http://www.candler.emory.edu/faculty/faculty-bios/petersen.cfm>

2. Our understandings of some poetic forms and poetic subdivisions, for example, stanzas, are sometimes imprecise.
3. Since we have no original text, it is not obvious how the poems were structured.
4. The form of the language in Hebrew poems is not always certain.
5. The isolation of the study of this ancient poetry from the study of non-Semitic poetry.

The enumeration of these problems leads the authors to state that “one important goal of this book is to place the study of Hebrew poetry within the broader context of reflection about poetry, since Hebrew poets did have at their disposal diverse rhythmic patterns and various forms of parallelism as well as a whole series of other stylistic devices, the sorts of which appear prominently in poems composed in other languages” (6).

In the next section of chapter one, the authors discuss the different theories that, according to them, “serve as maps” in the analysis of Hebrew poetry (6). The express goals of these maps are as follows (7):

1. To assist the reader to think about Hebrew poetry within the context of poetry composed in other languages
2. To place the discussion of Hebrew poetry within the context of recent technical work on Hebrew poetry during the last decade, in particular
3. To alert readers of Hebrew poetry to its literary features, many of which have often gone unnoticed

After defining the goals of these “maps,” the authors briefly discuss the five theories (8-11): the expressive/emotive theory of poetry, the mimetic/imitation theory of poetry, the goal-oriented theories of poetry, the objective theory of poetry, and the indeterminacy theory of poetry. Each one of these theories are explored and related to the study of Hebrew poetry.

In final two sections of chapter one, Peterson and Richards revisit the matter of defining poetry in contrast to prose. At this point, the authors “foreshadow” where the book is heading in terms of a proposal of poetic analysis. Their focus will be on “parallelism, rhythm, and style” (14). Consideration of these elements, according to the writers, will help the student distinguish between poetry and prose in Old Testament literature. The chapter comes to a close with a discussion of three common approaches to the study of Hebrew poetry. The authors conclude that these three approaches (analysis of Hebrew poetry, reading the Bible poetry as literature, and interpretative work), instead of standing in opposition to one another, should “stand in dialogue so that they may mutually enhance the goal of reading biblical literature with understanding and appreciation” (16).

The next three chapters focus in on the three elements of parallelism, rhythm, and style. The discussion of parallelism naturally begins with a look at the contribution of Robert Lowth to the study of Hebrew poetry. At this point, the authors consider the “basic nomenclature” of parallelism analysis. The essential conclusion of the chapter is that while Lowth’s work with parallelism is right, it is also inadequate to fully describe the parallelism that is found in the Old Testament. The next chapter, entitled “Meter and Rhythm,” demonstrates how the concept of rhythm is to be preferred over the concept of meter. Providing helpful definitions and examples

of both, the authors show that “Hebrew poetry is more complex” than previously suggested in studies that emphasized meter (47). “Rhythm in Hebrew poetry works in a way quite distinct from the way in which meter is often understood to function in the poetry of many other languages” (47). The key point to be made by the writers is that the Hebrew text possess both a “regularity and variety” that is uncharacteristic of “metric predictability” (47). In chapter four, the authors consider the use of “two literary devices other than parallelism and rhythm – namely, simile and stanza – under the rubric of style” (49). Taking advantage of the contributions of literary critics, the author demonstrates how such features function in Hebrew poetry.

In the final chapter of the book, the authors conclude their work with three examples of poetic analysis. The passages of choice are Isaiah 5, Deuteronomy 32, and Psalm 1. While not providing a systematic approach to poetic analysis, the authors do offer “preliminary comments on the way poetic analysis proceeds and constitutes a part of the larger interpretive process” (66). Basically, the authors suggest that the interpreter should “link historical-critical concerns with more singularly literary issues so as to provide the basis for a comprehensive interpretation of the poem in question” (66). Furthermore, once a link has been formed, the interpreter “should attempt to discern the most prominent poetic features in the text” (67).

Critique

The greatest strength of Peterson and Richards’ work is the accessibility of the material. This book represents a concise guide to analyzing Hebrew poetry. In that sense, the book has fulfilled part of its express purpose. The first chapter helps the novice get acclimated to the current debates in Hebrew poetry, without completely overwhelming them with state of research details. The second chapter on parallelism is probably the strongest chapter in the book given its thoughtful engagement with Lowth and helpful presentation of other, previously ignored forms of parallelism. Providing a section on “basic nomenclature” is just another example of how this book accommodates the non-specialist. Chapter three is a bit more technical, but still helpful. Approaching the text with more of a concern for rhythm than meter makes more sense in light of the variation found in Hebrew poetry. The authors’ discussion of rhythm on pages 43-47, wherein they discuss the four elements of regularity, variation, grouping, and variation, was well organized with good examples. Again, it is easy to tell that the authors and the editor were writing and constructing this book with their intended audience in mind.

The guide would have been greatly aided by a subject index. Furthermore, a more extended discussion of concepts like colon, bicolon, stanza, and strophe would have been helpful as well. The chapters on rhythm and poetic style were demonstrably less important to the authors than the other chapters. This may be due in part to the fact that these matters are covered more extensively in other works, but since this book is a guide for the non-specialist, it seems that such a discussion would have received more attention. Admittedly, chapter two set the standard for a thorough chapter in this book. One cannot help but wonder how much better this guide would have been if each chapter would have received this much treatment.

The problem with this guide arises as it turns from discussion of the concepts of Hebrew poetry to the application of these concepts in the form of poetic analysis. The expectation set by the book’s title is that the reader will learn how to interpret Hebrew poetry. However, as

Meredith Kline notes in his review of the book in *Kerux*, interpretation is strikingly lacking in this volume. Kline writes, "Where's the interpretation? Discussion restricted to the bun of poetic craft and the pickle of the putative results of liberal criticism, but missing the interpretational meat, is a minimal Kantian phenomenal burger." Kline concludes, "*Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* will help you to understand how poetic skill builds images, but not how to interpret Hebrew poetry, to realize why contemporary analysis of Hebrew poetry can be the high point of technical erudition and the low point in church history of exegetical substance." This reviewer essentially concurs with Kline's assessment of the "interpretive" section of the book. The reader is well equipped throughout the book with the tools of interpretation only to come to a "barren wasteland" of analysis without understanding or application. This reviewer feels as though the book is a helpful resource to inform particular steps in the interpretation process, but it does not represent a comprehensive guide for interpreting Hebrew poetry. The book needs a section that guides the reader on how to synthesis, understand, and apply the findings that result from the poetic analysis.