

**Genre: Poetry**

**Genre:** the category of literature to which the text belongs classified by style, form, or content

**Poetry:** succinct compositions that employ innate linguistic rhythms and imposed literary rhetoric in order to interpret a redemptive act, intercede for redemptive purpose, or indicate a redemptive experience

Poetry is the second most common genre of literature in the Bible after historical narrative. One-third of the Bible is poetry. That means poetry is found not only in the poetic books (Psalms and Song of Solomon), but also in the warnings of the prophets, the stories of the chroniclers, and even the sermons of Jesus. Poetry in the Bible is used to interpret historical events (Exodus 15), to order the worship of God's people (Psalms 113-118), to reveal the means of relationship with God (Psalm 1), to identify the coming of the Messiah (Isaiah 9:2-7), or to establish ethical teaching (Matthew 5:2-12).

I define poetry as an effort to share a moving experience by using language that is chosen and structured differently from ordinary prose. Sometimes it rhymes. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it has a regular cadence. Sometimes it doesn't. But almost always the poet has *experienced* something — something horrible or wonderful or ordinary — and he feels that he must share it. Using words differently from ordinary prose is the poet's way of trying to awaken something of his experience (and perhaps even more) in the reader. (John Piper, "God Filled Your Bibles with Poems," August 16, 2016)

Biblical poetry is...

- rhythmic, though not usually rhyming
- subjective, though not without limits
- positioned for reflection and revelation
- abbreviated, yet amplified

**Poetry in the Gospels**

In the Gospels there are numerous examples of poetry in the sayings of Jesus. This poetry is frequently unrecognized because these sayings lack rhyme, but what is basic to poetry is not so much rhyme but rhythm. The poetry of Jesus is to be found not in its rhyme but in its rhythmic balance. The expression frequently used to describe this kind of poetry is *parallelismus membrorum*, or parallelism in the members. Generally five kinds of parallelism are listed: synonymous, antithetical, synthetic, step or climactic, and chiasmic. (Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*, 26-27)

***Synonymous Parallelism***

a correspondence between the various lines or strophes, and the lines that follow are essentially synonymous repetitions of the first

Example: Mark 3:24-25

If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.

***Antithetical Parallelism***

the second line contrasts with the first and instead of providing a synonymous parallel provides an antithetical one

Example: John 3:6

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and  
that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

***Synthetic Parallelism***

the thought of the second line...supplements and brings [the thought of the first line] to completion

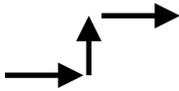
Example: Luke 12:49-51

I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!  
I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is  
accomplished!  
Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.

***Step or Climactic Parallelism***

the second strophe takes up the thought of the first strophe and advances the thought one additional step

Example: Matthew 5:17

Do not think that I have come  
to abolish the Law or the Prophets;  I have not come to abolish them  
but to fulfill them

***Chiasmic Parallelism***

an inversion of parallel statements that result in an a b // B A pattern

Example: Mark 2:27

And he said to them,  
a "The Sabbath was made  
b for man,  
B not man  
A for the Sabbath.

**Principles for the Interpretation of the Psalms**

1. Promote active listening by reading the text aloud.
2. Subject yourself to the writer's experiences.
3. Acknowledge the rhythms, rests, and rhetorical devices employed.
4. Look for why the psalm was written and the way it was used.
5. Make note of the movements in the text.

**Psalm 99**

- <sup>1</sup> The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble!  
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!
- <sup>2</sup> The Lord is great in Zion;  
he is exalted over all the peoples.
- <sup>3</sup> Let them praise your great and awesome name!  
Holy is he!
- <sup>4</sup> The King in his might loves justice.  
You have established equity;  
you have executed justice  
and righteousness in Jacob.
- <sup>5</sup> Exalt the Lord our God; worship at his footstool!  
Holy is he!
- <sup>6</sup> Moses and Aaron were among his priests,  
Samuel also was among those who called upon his name.  
They called to the Lord, and he answered them.
- <sup>7</sup> In the pillar of the cloud he spoke to them;  
they kept his testimonies  
and the statute that he gave them.
- <sup>8</sup> O Lord our God, you answered them;  
you were a forgiving God to them,  
but an avenger of their wrongdoings.
- <sup>9</sup> Exalt the Lord our God,  
and worship at his holy mountain;  
for the Lord our God is holy!

The psalm is divided into three sections: verses 1-3, verses 4-5, and verses 6-9. Each of these sections ends with a declaration that the LORD—the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God of Israel, whom the psalmists presents as reigning, enthroned, great in Zion, king, mighty, hearing, speaking, forgiving, and avenging, is holy. That the psalmist makes this declaration of God's holiness three times speaks to the perfection of God's holiness. It is the way of saying that God is infinite in his holiness. He is not just holy. He is not just holier. He is holiest.

**99:1-3            The LORD who exalts himself over all is holy.**

There are three declarations about God in these verses:

1. The LORD reigns. (99:1)
2. He is enthroned upon the cherubim. (99:1)
3. The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. (99:2)

Each of these declarations merits a response of reverence and worship from all peoples.

1. Let the peoples tremble. (99:1)
2. Let the earth quake. (99:1)
3. Let them praise your great and awesome name! (99:3)

The psalmist speaks of God's reign generally and specifically. God reigns, which is to say his reign is complete, it is all-encompassing, it is universal. But, also, God is enthroned upon the cherubim, he is great in Zion, which is to say his reign has a center of authority, a place from which he rules; it is local. The

psalmist sees God's reign as emanating from Zion. His authority, his rule, his control of all things goes out from his presence, from the place where he dwells with his people and that place is Zion, specifically the tabernacle in the most holy place.

The psalmist has in view as the center of God's righteous rule his presence in the pillar hovering over the mercy seat. That's what he has in mind when he says that the LORD is enthroned upon the cherubim. The cherubim are those winged angels which were imaged in hammered gold and fixed to the two ends of the mercy seat, itself made of pure gold, which is atop the ark of the covenant (testimony). These cherubim face one another, their wings spread out and overshadowing the mercy seat. In between these cherubim, God promised to dwell with and speak to his people. We read in Exodus 25:22,

"There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel."

We know from Numbers 7:89 that God kept his word. There we read that when Moses went into the tent of meeting at the consecration of the tabernacle to speak with the LORD, "he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the testimony, from between the two cherubim; and it spoke to him."

After asserting the authority of God over all of creation and calling upon all the peoples to respond to the rule and reign of God with adoration and worship, the psalmist affirms why God is worthy of this praise: *Holy is he.*

#### **99:4-5      The LORD who executes justice for all is holy.**

Having declared that God reigns in a way that is all-encompassing, the psalmist now describes the LORD's reign. This description begins with a title ascribed to God: The King. This is not an earthly king. This is not the human ruler of Israel. This is the divine sovereign who reigns, who is enthroned, who is exalted. God is the king here and he is mighty. He is strong. He is powerful. Yet in his power, the king is not tyrannical. He is marked by self-control, by perfect justice. He defines what justice is according to his standard, according to his statutes. He builds justice into his world and into the lives of his people. He secures justice in the way that he interacts with his own, both forgiving and punishing. His justice serves to magnify him, to compel people to worship him. His justice inspires praise and adoration. Those are the way we are called to respond to this God who executes justice. The psalmist says of this king who executes justice for all that he is holy. *His holiness is inherent to who he is. His holiness infiltrates what he does. And as the psalmist comes to the final section, we see that the king's holiness is imputed to all he forgives.*

#### **99:6-9      The LORD who entertains the worship of all who are forgiven is holy.**

The psalmist begins with a history lesson. He recalls two of God's priests: Moses and Aaron. He reminds us of Samuel who was also a priest. These three all interceded on behalf of God's people to the LORD. They called upon the LORD and he answered them. We are reminded of how God answered them: in the pillar of the cloud he spoke to them. We may be inclined to remember first the cloudy pillar of Exodus 13:21-22, but that is not the pillar primarily in view here. This is the pillar over the mercy seat, this pillar that represents his presence, the pillar that hovered over the mercy seat (Numbers 7:89), the pillar that stood at the entrance of the tent of meeting (Exodus 33:9, Numbers 12:5). They kept his testimonies (laws) and statutes (decrees). But they did not do so perfectly, the psalmist reminds us. They called. God

answered. They obeyed, but not perfectly. God forgave, but he also avenged. That is part of God's justice: he forgives and he condemns. Without doing both, he would not be just. We recall his revelation of his character from Exodus 34:6-7:

"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation."

The psalmist recalls how God interacted with those who sought him before, thus implying that what God did with Moses, Aaron and Samuel, he will do with all those who seek him, serve him, are saved by him. All sins need to be forgiven. All sins will be judged. The final reason we worship God is because of this great extension of holiness he makes to us. Bound up in that cloudy pillar of God's presence hovering upon the cherubim over the mercy seat is the hope of our faith: that God's judgment is poured out on his son whose blood covers the mercy seat once and for all and that all those who trust in his son are forgiven, his righteousness imputed to them. Therefore, because he is holy, we should exalt the LORD and worship in His presence.