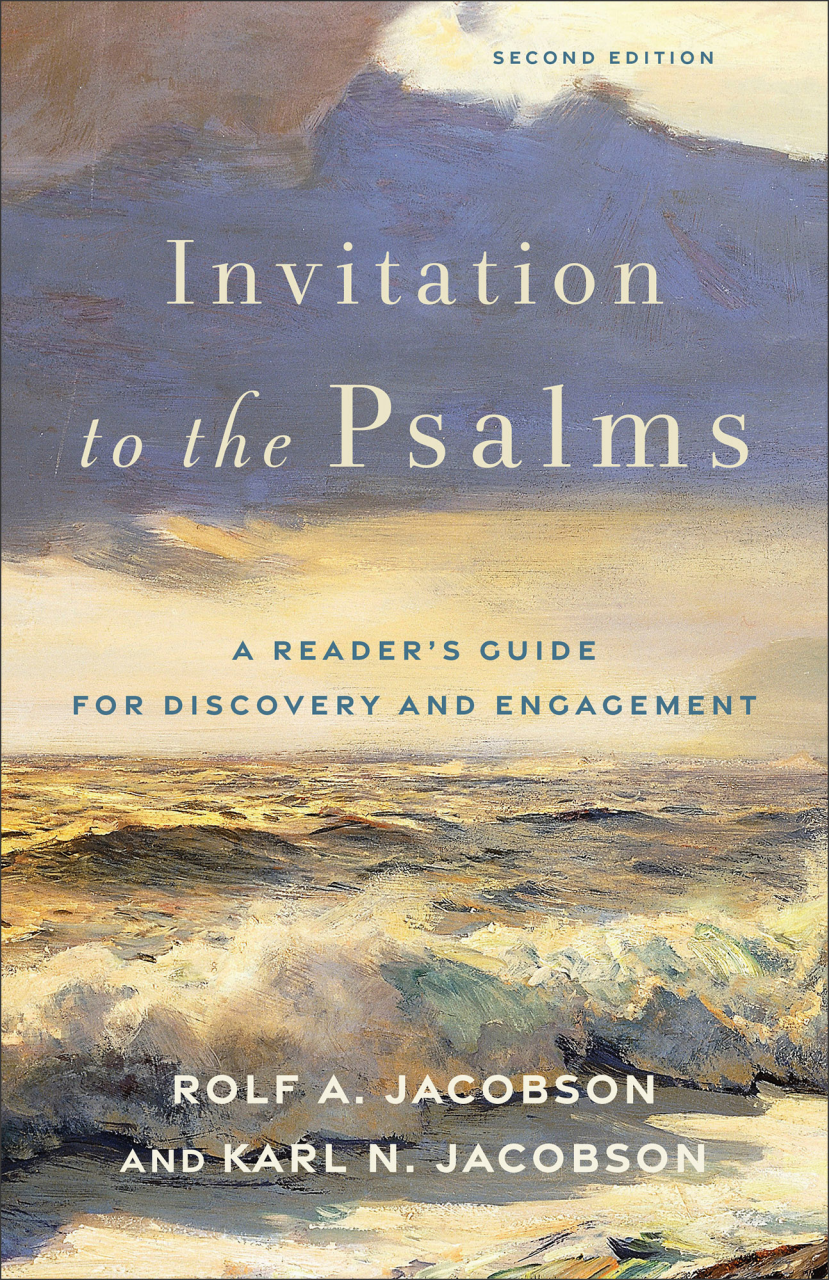
SECOND EDITION
Invitation
to the Psalms
A READER'S GUIDE
FOR DISCOVERY AND ENGAGEMENT
ROLF A. JACOBSON
AND KARL N. JACOBSON

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To Anne and Karen

Contents

Introduction

> Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
> be acceptable to you,
> O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.
>
> —Psalm 19:14

These are the final words of Psalm 19. In the psalm itself, the words are appended as a parting prayer, a faithful wish that God might find the psalmist's poem to be an acceptable offering. In some Christian traditions, these words have often been prayed at the start of the sermon, in the hopes that the preacher's words might matter—if only in some small way.

The words also seemed a fitting way to begin this book because it is meant more as an invitation to read the psalms than as an analysis of what they say or mean. *The psalms are meant to be read; they are meant to be experienced*. Analysis of poetry is helpful and important—but only if that analysis serves to assist the reader to enter into a poem with greater sensitivity. Analysis is a *servant*. A competent reader analyzes poetry so that the poetry itself can speak more profoundly. This is true of all poetry—and it is especially true of the psalms, which are the poetry of Christian and Jewish faith.

In his influential essay *How Does a Poem Mean?*, John Ciardi writes, "Analysis is never in any sense a substitute for the poem. The best any analysis can do is to prepare the reader to enter the poem more perceptively."[1] He adds

1. John Ciardi, *How Does a Poem Mean?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 663.

that the concern of poetry "is not to arrive at a definition and to close the book, but to arrive at an experience."[2] For that reason, according to Ciardi, the reader of poetry should not ask "What does a poem mean?" but rather "How does a poem mean?" Poetry is not merely expressive; *it is expression*. Poems, that is, do not merely talk about love or passion or emotion: they are the very sound of love, of passion, of emotion.

Because the psalms are the poetry of faith, they are not meant to be studied; they are meant to be read. The prayers of the Psalter are meant to be prayed. The songs of the Psalter are meant to be sung. The lessons of the Psalter are meant to be lived. The angry psalms are meant to be shouted. The meditations are meant to be meditated on. When it comes to Psalm 23, the most well-known of all psalms, it is meant not as a lesson for a teacher to commend to a student but as a prayer to be prayed:

> The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
> He makes me lie down in green pastures;
> he leads me beside still waters;
> he restores my soul.
> He leads me in right paths,
> for his name's sake. (vv. 1–3)

The psalm does not just describe trust; *it is an expression of trust*. When the faithful follower prays the psalm, the psalm does not merely express how the pray-er feels. Rather, through praying the psalm the pray-er comes to trust.

If there is any value in learning about the psalms, it is just this: by learning about the psalms the students may learn to read, pray, sing, shout, chant, and wonder the psalms.

This book is an invitation to do just that. The information that is offered here is not meant as a replacement for the psalms—in the way that the CliffsNotes condensed study guides are meant as replacements for actually reading various works of literature. Rather, the analysis offered here may be likened to the sort of information that is offered in a tour-guide pamphlet. The goal is to familiarize the reader with the landscape of the Psalter so that the reader will be set loose to explore the Psalter and roam widely among its poems. Billy Collins, in the famous poem "Introduction to Poetry,"[3] poetically scores this point:

2. Ciardi, *How Does a Poem Mean?*, 666.

3. Billy Collins, "Introduction to Poetry," in *The Apple That Astonished Paris: Poems* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1988), 58. Copyright © 1988 by Billy Collins. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of the University of Arkansas Press, www.uapress.com.

Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

To reduce a poem to its meaning or to summarize its message is to "torture a confession out of it" in order "to find out what it really means." To read a psalm is, in Collins's marvelous language, "to waterski across [its] surface," to "press an ear against its hive," to "hold it up to the light." For that reason we use a great many examples from the psalms themselves. Writing this book, when we had to make a decision between quoting more of a psalm or less of a psalm, our motto was "more is better."

The intended audience for this book is the interested nonspecialist student—the student who does not read biblical Hebrew or who has only passing familiarity with Hebrew. For the most part, we have avoided arcane topics of debates of psalms interpretation—the sort of sticky-wicket technical issues that only the hyperspecialist would care about. Similarly, we have avoided lengthy footnotes filled with dizzying displays of our dazzling grasp of the secondary literature. In place of many notes, at the end of each chapter we provide short bibliographies that list appropriate further reading for beginning students of the psalms.

We have chosen to concentrate on the most accessible features of the psalms—their poetry (chap. 1), the basic genres of psalms (chaps. 2–3), the voice of "the psalmist" (chap. 4), the metaphors of the psalms (chap. 5), and the theology of the psalms (chap. 7).

For the second edition, we have also added a chapter discussing recent approaches to the psalms that focus on the shape and organization of the book of Psalms as a whole (chap. 6). We have also edited each chapter and added sidebars to the chapters highlighting how the psalms have been heard and used in popular culture.

We begin with poetry for two reasons: First, because the rhythms of Hebrew poetry are foreign to most English readers. Second, because we believe that the psalms are poetry. Although many have tried to do so, one cannot separate the poetic form of the psalm from the intellectual content of the psalm. To try to do so is like trying to separate the wet from water, or the heat from fire. We then proceed with familiarizing the reader with the basic genres of the psalms based on the assumption that words have meaning only in context, and the genres of the psalms offer the primary literary context in which the words of the psalms make sense. We then proceed by introducing the reader to the living "voice of the psalmist," to a consideration of the rich metaphorical life of these poems, to an interpretation of the God of the psalms, and finally to the shape of the Psalter.

When reading the psalms, the reader will face an entire set of minor, technical irritations. One of these is that the enumeration of the psalms and especially of the verses of the psalms varies from one version to another. There are two widely used systems for numbering the psalms, one based on the Hebrew text (the so-called Masoretic Text [MT]) and one based on an ancient translation of the psalms into Greek (the so-called Septuagint, or "Old Greek" version of the Old Testament [LXX or OG]). The order of the psalms in these two systems is the same, but the enumeration differs slightly:

Hebrew (MT)	Greek (LXX or OG)
1–8	1–8
9–10	9
11–113	10–112
114–115	113
116:1–9	114
116:10–19	115
117–146	116–145
147:1–11	146
147:12–20	147
148–150	148–150

In addition, there are two basic systems for enumerating the verses of the psalms. In general, the two systems treat the superscriptions of the psalms

differently. The term "superscription" refers to information included at the start of some psalms, such as "A Psalm of David" (Ps. 23) or "To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David" (Ps. 22). Beginning with the King James Version (KJV), most English versions, including the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and the New International Version (NIV), have not numbered the superscription but have counted as "verse 1" whatever follows the superscription. Other English versions, such as the New Jewish Publication Society version (NJPS), do count the superscription as verse 1 and then continue enumerating. In this book we join the majority of English versions by following the Hebrew (MT) textual tradition when it comes to both numbering the psalms and *not* counting the superscriptions as verse 1.

Finally, two words of thanks. First, to Rolf's daughter Ingrid, who read through the first edition and offered feedback both on what worked well in that edition and also on what we might change or add. Thank you, Ingrid. Second, to our older sisters, Anne and Karen. Psalm 133:1 says, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" It may be "good and pleasant," but when the four of us were kids, living "together in unity" may not have seemed to our parents like a daily experience. In this, as in many things, getting older is a blessing. We still look up to you, continue to learn from your wisdom, and deeply respect you. Two little brothers could not have asked for two more marvelous sisters. We love you. This book is dedicated to you.

PS: When we dedicated the first edition to our sisters, we joked that "Mom loves us best." Since then, in December 2020, our mom died. She had suffered a stroke in July of that year. Her final months unfolded during the COVID lockdown; it wasn't always fun. We prayed many psalms during those months. Mom died late one December evening—in her bedroom, with our dad at her side. He reported to us, "I prayed Psalm 23 and then the Lord's Prayer. Sometime between the start of the one and the end of the next, your mother died." That was fitting in so many ways. With gratitude, we join our sisters and father in remembering the words of Psalm 23: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me." This book is indeed for our sisters, with whom we shared such wonderful parents. Mom and Dad were our first Scripture teachers. They taught us to love God (always) and each other (most of the time), and they offered us each an invitation to the psalms.

ONE

Why Is My Bible Repeating Itself?

Learning to Understand Hebrew Poetry

Introducing Hebrew Poetry

The biblical book of Psalms is, first and foremost, a collection of Hebrew poetry. If a reader sets out to understand the psalms—or even to understand a single one of the psalms—that reader must take into account the central reality that the psalms are Hebrew poetry. Why? Because reading is a "logical" exercise—in the sense that words, phrases, and sentences are put together according to principles that are governed by a logic. You cannot understand what the words, phrases, and sentences are trying to communicate if you do not understand that governing logic. Poetry as a whole is a type of language that has a different governing logic from other types of writing. And Hebrew poetry, in particular, has an even more specifically different set of governing logic.

An example may help. Mathematical equations are basically sentences that use numerical and mathematical symbols rather than words to communicate. Imagine that you are given the task of understanding what the following mathematical equation (sentence) is trying to communicate:

$$2 + 2 = 4$$

The meaning is transparently clear, right? Before you answer yes, imagine that you do not understand what numbers are or how they work. Imagine that you do not understand that the symbol "2" represents the numerical concept of two. Or that the symbol "4" represents the numerical concept of four. Furthermore, imagine that you do not understand that the symbols "+" and "=" stand for the concepts of adding and totaling, respectively. A reader who does not understand these things could, of course, not understand even the simplest equation. The reason for this is that the basic building block of mathematical equations is a signification system in which 2 = two, + = addition, and so on. A reader who does not understand that system cannot understand the longer "sentences" that are created when various elements such as 2, 4, +, and = are put together. But a reader who does understand these basic building blocks and how they work can understand even complex mathematical sentences, like the quadratic formula: $ax^2 + bx + c = 0$ (where $a \neq 0$). Now that we've exceeded what we know about math, let us return to Hebrew poetry.

Just as numerical and mathematical symbols are the building blocks of mathematical sentences, Hebrew poetry is the basic building block of the biblical psalms. In order to understand the overall message that a psalm is trying to communicate, it is helpful (perhaps even "necessary") to know some basic elements about the governing logic of Hebrew poetry. When a reader does not understand the basic features of Hebrew poetry and how they work, that reader will find it almost impossible to read and understand even the simplest lines from the psalms, such as, "The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD's throne is in heaven" (Ps. 11:4). But a reader who does understand these basic building blocks can read *and understand* even complex psalms.

The thesis of this chapter is that if readers of the psalms will take the time to understand the basic conventions and features of Hebrew poetry, they will be in a far better position to understand the witness of the psalms—to "waterski across the surface" of a psalm. In this chapter we explain and illustrate some of these central conventions, beginning with a concept that is usually called parallelism.

Understanding Parallelism

If you have ever read the psalms, you may wonder why your Bible is repeating itself. Consider these four examples from the psalms:

> [A] what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
> [B] mortals that you care for them? (8:4)

[A] I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples,
[B] I will sing praises to you among the nations. (108:3)

[A] O God, do not keep silence;
[B] do not hold your peace or be still, O God! (83:1)

[A] You forgave the iniquity of your people;
[B] you pardoned all of their sin. (85:2)

In each of these examples, the second line is very similar to the first line. One could almost—almost, but not quite—say that the second line simply repeats the sentiments of the first line. One could *almost* say that the second lines are basically *synonyms* for the meanings of the first lines.

The four examples above nicely illustrate the basic building block of Hebrew poetry, which scholars call *parallelism*. The term "parallelism" was coined by a scholar named Christian Schöttgen in 1733, who described "the linking of entire sentences, several words or clauses of sentences . . . in a kind of parallelism."[1] The term was made famous by Robert Lowth, a bishop of the Church of England, who in 1753 published a very influential study of biblical poetry.[2] Parallelism can be defined most briefly as *the repetition of elements within a grammatical unit*.

The four examples above all show repetition in the "grammatical unit" that we are calling a *line* (above, the lines are each marked either as A or as B). But note that scholars also use several terms to demark this unit of text, including "colon" (plural: cola) and stich (plural: stichoi). We will use the term "verse" for a unit of poetry normally made up of two or more lines—above, there are four "verses" of poetry; each verse is made up of two lines.

Within biblical scholarship, most interpreters focus on parallelism between lines, but parallelism occurs at many different levels in Hebrew poetry: within lines, between lines, between verses, between entire sections, and between psalms.

Parallelism Can Occur within a Line of Hebrew Poetry

[A] The Lord is my light and my salvation. (27:1a)

[A] The Lord is gracious and merciful,
[B] slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. (145:8)

1. Claus Seybold, *Studien zu Sprache und Stil der Psalmen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 8. Thanks to Seybold for this reference: Christian Schöttgen, *Horae hebraicae et talmudicae* (Dresden: Hekel, 1733), 1:1252; cf. https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/parallelism.

2. Robert Lowth, *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum* [Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews] (Oxford: Clarendon, 1753).

In these two examples there are parallel sets of words to describe God *within each line*. In the first example, "my light" is used *in parallel* with "my salvation." In the second example, parallelism occurs within both lines. In line A of Psalm 145:8, the single word "gracious" is used in parallel with the single word "merciful," while in the second line the phrase "slow to anger" is used in parallel with the phrase "abounding in steadfast love." Thus, parallelism can occur within a line of Hebrew poetry. Now it is your turn to try it. Finish these two lines of poetry and make sure that you include some parallelism within the lines:

Praise the Lord with _____.

I will sing of _____.

If you want to see how an ancient poet handled the same lines that you were given, you can check out Psalm 150:3–4a and 101:1a. But remember, the purpose of this little exercise is not to try to "get it right" by guessing exactly what the ancient poet wrote. Rather, the purpose is to "get it right" by showing that you are beginning to understand what parallelism is and how it works.

Parallelism Can Occur between Lines of Hebrew Poetry

[A] Where can I go from your spirit?
[B] Or where can I flee from your presence? (139:7)

[A] The Lord is gracious and merciful,
[B] slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. (145:8)

[A] Fortunate is the one who does not walk in the advice of the wicked,
[B] who does not stand on the path that sinners tread,
[C] who does not sit in the seat of scoffers. (1:1 AT)

In these three examples the repetition is between lines. Notice especially that in the first two examples, there are two lines in parallel with each other, but that in the third example three lines are in parallel with each other. This tripartite parallelism is less common than the bipartite parallelism, but it occurs frequently enough that readers should be aware of it. This *line-level parallelism* is the part of Hebrew poetry that has been studied the most. Indeed, a great deal of ink has been spilled by scholars arguing with one another over how best to describe it.

As you will see in the next paragraph, some scholars have tried to categorize the many and various ways in which the A lines of Hebrew poetry are

parallel to the B lines. Like an extremely organized person who lines up all of the spices alphabetically in the cupboard, scholars have tried to organize how Hebrew poetry works. But, like the spices in the cupboard, all of these attempts work for a while and then sort of crash to the ground. After all, do you alphabetize "Crushed Red Pepper" under *C*, *R*, or *P*? And what about "Lemon Pepper," which is not really lemon or pepper? Our point is that the impulse to categorize things is usually helpful, but achieving a perfect or complete categorization is not always possible. We believe that this is the case with Hebrew poetry.

Bishop Lowth got the whole categorizing thing going when he asserted that there are three types of parallelism:

- *synonymous parallelism*, in which the second line basically says the same thing as the first line;
- *antithetical parallelism*, in which the second line basically says the opposite of the first line; and
- *synthetic parallelism*, in which the second line says neither the same thing as nor the opposite of the first line.

The obvious problem with Lowth's categories is that if you need a catchall category such as "synthetic parallelism" to fit in everything that does not fit into your other categories, maybe there is a problem with your categories. Or, as we maintain, maybe the real problem is that *there is a problem with trying to categorize art*!

The real danger in trying to categorize the way parallelism works, however, is not that such categorization cannot be done but that such categorization might lead readers to think that they have adequately analyzed the poetry of a psalm once they have assigned a label such as "synthetic parallelism" to a verse. The truly unhelpful dimension about this categorizing approach, then, is that it limits the imagination of readers. It exposes readers to a superficial level of analysis, which can prevent them from engaging in the deeper levels of meaning in the poem. It presents readers with a way of labeling the poetry but does not show them how to digest the poetry. As we wrote in the introduction, the purpose of analysis is to help a reader enter a psalm.

So, for now, all you need to know is this: in Hebrew poetry, parallelism occurs between lines of poetry. Once you know that, the challenge of reading Hebrew poetry is not to try to assign a label to the poetry—such as *synthetic parallelism*—but is rather to understand what the poetry is meaning. Or, to use a metaphor that is almost poetic, the joy of reading Hebrew poetry comes from getting the "feel" of parallelism and learning to "enjoy the ride."

Once again, it is now your turn. We will give you the first line of a real psalm and let you write a line that would work in parallel with it:

Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised,

_____.

Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear,

_____.

Have mercy on me, O God,

_____.

If you want to compare your poetry with that of the ancient Hebrew poets, you can read Psalms 48:1; 45:10; and 51:1. But remember, you are not "right" if you write exactly what the psalmist did; you are right if you are beginning to understand the rhythms of Hebrew poetry.

Parallelism Can Occur between Verses of Hebrew Poetry

Consider these examples from the psalms:

[A] O Lord, how many are my foes!
[B] Many are rising against me;
[C] many are saying to me,
[D] "There is no help for you in God." (3:1–2)

[E] If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
[F] if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
[G] If I take the wings of the morning
[H] and settle at the farthest limits of the sea (139:8–9)

In these two examples, parallelism occurs between verses. In the example from Psalm 3, there are two verses made up of four lines. Basically, the second verse as a whole is in parallel to the first verse. Notice that line B and line C are very similar, both having this form: "Many are _____ing __ me." This very similar element in each verse thus becomes like a hinge in the middle of the two verses, around which the two verses as a whole swing. It may be easier to see how the two verses function in parallel to each other if the verses are laid out like this:

A O Lord, how many are my foes!
B Many are rising against me;
B′ Many are saying to me,
A′ "There is no help for you in God."