ON READING BIBLICAL POETRY: 
THE ROLE OF METAPHOR

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I am concerned in this essay with biblical Hebrew poetry and with the study of biblical Hebrew poetry. My concerns can be organized around three questions: (1) How may we approach the reading of a biblical poem? (2) What makes the poem poetic? (3) What is the place of the study of biblical poetry within the larger field of biblical studies? In chiastic order, I begin with the last question, which will lead to the second and then to the first.

There has been no period during the last few centuries when literary approaches to the Bible have enjoyed more popularity and success than in the last two or three decades. One might expect that these literary approaches would have concentrated on the study of poetry, for what genre could be more literary? But a survey of published works, such as that done by Mark Allan Powell in *The Bible and Modern Literary Criticism*, suggests that this has not occurred. Powell lists 1749 entries, divided into six parts, including theory, methodology, evaluation, and criticism of individual books of the Bible. When we look at the listings under individual books, we find confirmed what most of us already knew: that the main focus of the literary study of the Bible has been narrative, and, more specifically, four narrative works: Genesis (54 entries), Samuel–Kings (58 entries), Ruth (14 entries), and Jonah (15 entries). Now it is not hard to explain this disproportionate attention. Narratology has received more critical study among literary scholars than other areas of literature, and bold new theories and methods were brought to bear on it. So it is only natural that narratological knowledge was applied to the Bible; and the parts

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1 In using this term, or the shorter term "biblical poetry", I am waging a quiet battle against the use of the term "Hebrew poetry" to refer to poetry in the Hebrew Bible. "Hebrew poetry" is a much broader term, encompassing all poetry written in Hebrew from biblical to modern times.
of the Bible most obviously amenable to narratology are precisely those just listed.

While there is still more work to be done on narrative, the most blatant absences are in the area of poetry, the very area that would seem to have the loudest claim to literary analysis. The book of Lamentations, roughly the size of Ruth and Jonah, has three entries; and Psalms, comparable in size to Genesis, has only twenty. My rough estimate is that there are three studies of narrative to every one study of poetry. Again, the reasons derive from the interests and focus of secular literary criticism, where the majority of the texts are not poetic and where the innovative theories grew out of non-poetic genres (if they grew out of texts at all). While it is good, and in fact inevitable, that we will apply to the Bible the focus and methods that others are applying to their literatures, there is a danger here. To ignore poetry in the Bible is to produce a much larger lacuna than to ignore poetry in, say, 20th century English literature—simply because poetry forms a much larger part of the literary corpus in pre-modern times than it does in modern times.

Now biblicists have not really been ignoring poetry. They have been studying it from non-literary perspectives—in recent years mostly from linguistic perspectives with emphasis on the formal aspects of meter, parallelism, and structural devices like repetition and word patterning. In addition, commentaries on poetic books and chapters have been interpreting biblical poetry, although often this has been done more philosophically than poetically. I would argue that we need to attend more to biblical poetry qua poetry—to give more attention to the meaning of a poem and to how a poem achieves its meaning. That is, to develop ways of reading poetry. We have some fine models in the work of Luis Alonso Schökel, Robert Alter, Harold Fisch, Francis Landy (especially in Paradoxes of Paradise), and Meir Weiss.

A good starting-point in the quest for reading strategies is the study of metaphor. In some theories of poetry, beginning with Aristotle, metaphor is the defining characteristic of poetry. While it is generally not taken as such by most modern biblicists, and scant attention has been paid to it in a systematic way, most descriptions of biblical

\footnote{That is, relative to the attention that has been heaped upon other aspects of poetry. There are some systematic studies of metaphor, going back as far as Robert Lowth. See Alonso Schökel, pp. 95–141; Brensinger; Caird; Watson, pp. 251–72. An example of the treatment of a specific metaphor is Nielsen. There are many fine studies of metaphors in specific passages.}