

Clues to Understanding Hebrew Poetry

1. Poetic language
2. Poetic structure
3. Form criticism (genres)
4. Poetic devices



Session objectives

- 1. Gain an introduction to the nature of poetry in the Hebrew Bible, including its common features and forms**
- 2. Identify the diverse genres of poetry in the Hebrew Bible**
- 3. Understand common poetic devices**
- 4. Analyze individual poems**

Clue #1: Language

- Poetry is to be more than a **head** thing.
- It is a **heart** language.

Special language

- “Poetry is a special kind of language... “
- Horace... “The aim of a poet is either to **instruct** or **delight** a reader, or preferably to do **both**.”

~Horace (65-8 BC), Roman lyric poet and satirist

Poetry Defined

- “The art which uses words as both speech and song to reveal the realities that:
 - the **senses** record,
 - the **feelings** salute,
 - the **mind** perceives, and
 - the shaping **imagination** orders.”
- Three basic qualities of poetry:
 - a particular **content**,
 - a particular **form**, and
 - a particular **effect**.



**Babette
Deutsch**

Poetry — Prose Continuum

1. **Terseness**
(short and tight)
2. **Elevated speech**
(figurative language)



Poetry

Prosaic poetry

Poetic prose

Prose



James Kugel



Adele Berlin

Terseness & Elevated Speech

- **Terseness:** Coleridge said, poetry is the best words in the best order. There are no extraneous words in poetry. Similarly, Hebrew poetry is often characterized by its **brevity (few words)**.
- **Elevated speech:**
 - Hebrew poetry often makes extensive use of **figurative language**, such as metaphor, simile, and personification.
 - **Word Play:** Just as English poetry often uses rhyme or word play to link different lines, make connections between certain themes or ideas, or simply to delight the ear of the reader, so Hebrew poetry uses language to similar effect

Compare Prose and Poetry

- Compare excerpts from the prose and poetry versions of the story of Jael and Sisera in the book of Judges.
- **Prose:** "He [Sisera] said to her [Jael], 'Please let me have a little water because I am thirsty.' And she opened the skin of the milk, and she gave him a drink. And she covered him." (Judges 4:19)
- **Poetry:** "Water he asked; milk she gave. She brought curds in a grand bowl." (Judges 5:25)

Clue #2: Poetic Structures

Poetry Psalm 116

116 קיה
1 אֶתְּבִיטִי^a כִּי־יִשְׁמַע^b יְהוָה^c אֶת־קוֹלִי^d תַחֲנוּנֵי :
2 כִּי־הִטָּה אָזְנוֹ לִי^e וּבִימֵי^a אֶקְרָא :
3 אֶפְפוּנֵי חֶבְלֵי־מָוֶת וּמְצָרֵי^a שְׂאוֹל מִצְּאוּנֵי צָרָה וַיַּנּוֹן אֶמְצָא :
4 וּבִשְׁם־יְהוָה אֶקְרָא אֲנִהּ יְהוָה מִלְטָה נַפְשִׁי :
5 תַּנּוּן יְהוָה וְצַדִּיק וְאֵלֵתֵינוּ מֵרַחֵם :
6 שֹׁמֵר פְּתָאִים^a יְהוָה דְּלוֹתַי וְלִי יְהוֹשִׁיעַ :
7 שׁוּבֵי נַפְשִׁי לְמִנוּחַיִכִי כִי־יְהוָה נָמַל עָלַיִכִי : [מִדְּחִי :
8 כִּי חִלַּצְתָּ^a נַפְשִׁי לְמָוֶת^b אֶת־עֵינַי^c מִן־דְּמָעָה^{be} אֶת־רַגְלִי^g

JUDICES שפטים

1 וַיְהִי אַחֲרַי מוֹת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ^a וַיִּשְׁאֲלוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בִּיהוָה לֵאמֹר
2 מִי יַעֲלֶה־לָּנוּ אֶל־הַכְּנַעֲנִי בַתְּחִלָּה לְהִלָּחֵם בּוֹ :² וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה יְהוּדָה
3 יַעֲלֶה הַיְנֹה נָתַתִּי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ בְּיָדוֹ :³ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה לְשִׁמְעוֹן אָחִיו
עֲלֶה אִתִּי בְּגוֹרְלִי וְנִלְחַמָּה בַּכְּנַעֲנִי וְהִלַּכְתִּי גַם־אֲנִי אִתְּךָ בְּגוֹרְלֶךָ

Prose Judges 1

Clue #2: Poetic Structures

- Vocabulary
 - **Colon** (singular) / **cola** (plural)
 - The fundamental poetic unit in Hebrew poetry
“It is the smallest independent unit.”
 - Appear in **bicola** and **tricola**

Bicolon: Psalm 95:6

O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

Tricolon: Psalm 95:7

For he is our God,
and we are the people of
his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

Wrap around “hang”

Start of second and third cola

Structure continued

- **Strophe or stanza**
 - A group of bicola or tricola

GENESIS בראשית

1 בְּרֵאשִׁית־ בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ: 2 וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתָה תֹהוֹ וָבֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְרוֹם חֲרוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם: 3 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי־אֹר וְהָיָה־אֹר: 4 וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ: 5 וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ לַיְלָה וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד: 6 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי־רִקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם וַיְהִי־מִבְדִּיל בֵּין מַיִם לַמַּיִם: 7 וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַרְקִיעַ וַיִּבְרָא בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מִתַּחַת לַרְקִיעַ וּבֵין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל לַרְקִיעַ וַיְהִי־כֵן: 8 וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַרְקִיעַ שָׁמַיִם וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי: 9 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִקָּווּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם אֶל־מְקוֹם אֶחָד וְהִתְאֵחָד הַיַּבְשָׁה וְהִיְהִי־כֵן: 10 וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לַיַּבְשָׁה אָרֶץ וּלְמִקְוֵי הַמַּיִם יַם וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב: 11 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים תְּרַשָּׁא הָאָרֶץ וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְהָיָה עֵצִים וְעֵץ עֵשָׂה אֶשְׁכֹּחַ וְעֵץ לִמְנוּחַ אֲשֶׁר זָרַע וְזָרַע וְזָרַע עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי־כֵן: 12 וְהוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ יִשְׂאָ עֵשֶׂב מִזְרִיעַ זָרַע לַמִּנְהוּג וְעֵץ עֵשָׂה פְרִי אֲשֶׁר זָרַע וְזָרַע וְזָרַע עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי־כֵן: 13 וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם שְׁלִישִׁי: 14 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי־מְאֹרֹת בְּרִקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הַיּוֹם וּבֵין הַלַּיְלָה וְהָיָה לְאֹתוֹת וּלְמוֹעֲדִים וּלְיָמִים וּשְׁנָיִם: 15 וְהָיוּ לְמְאֹרֹת בְּרִקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהָאֵיר עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי־כֵן: 16 וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־שְׁנֵי הַמְּאֹרֹת הַגְּדֹלִים אֶת־הַמְּאֹר

- 1 Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
- 2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
- 3 He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
- 4 The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
- 5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
- 6 for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

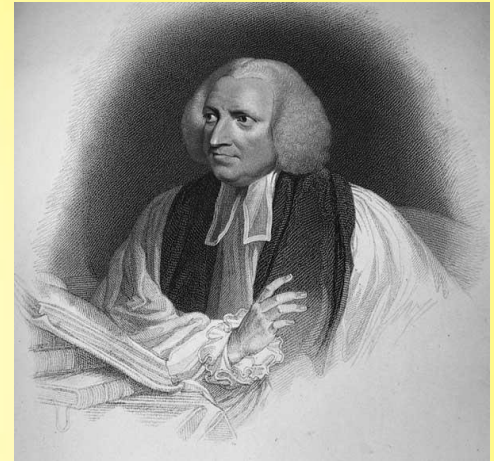
Ch 1. ¹Mm 1. ²Mm 2. ³Mm 3. ⁴Mm 3139. ⁵Mp sub loco. ⁶Mm 4. ⁷Jer 4,23, cf Mp sub loco. ⁸Hi 38,19. ⁹2 Ch 24,20. ¹⁰Mm 5. ¹¹Mm 6. ¹²Mm 3105. ¹³Hi וְהָיָה לְאֹתוֹת וּלְמוֹעֲדִים. ¹⁴Mm 200. ¹⁵Mm 7. ¹⁶Mm 1431. ¹⁷Mm 2773. ¹⁸Mm 3700. ¹⁹Mm 736. ²⁰Hi וְהָיָה לְאֹתוֹת וּלְמוֹעֲדִים. ²¹Mm 722. ²²Mm 2645. ²³Qoh 6,3.

Parallelism or Seconding

- Bishop Robert Lowth in Oxford (1753—63)

- **Parallelism**

- **Synonymous**: “repeated in different, but equivalent terms”
- **Antithetic**: “sentiments are opposed to sentiments”
- **Synthetic**: “all such as do not come within the two former classes”



Kugel critiques Lowth’s parallelism as having a “disastrous effect.”

Coins “seconding” or “afterwardness”

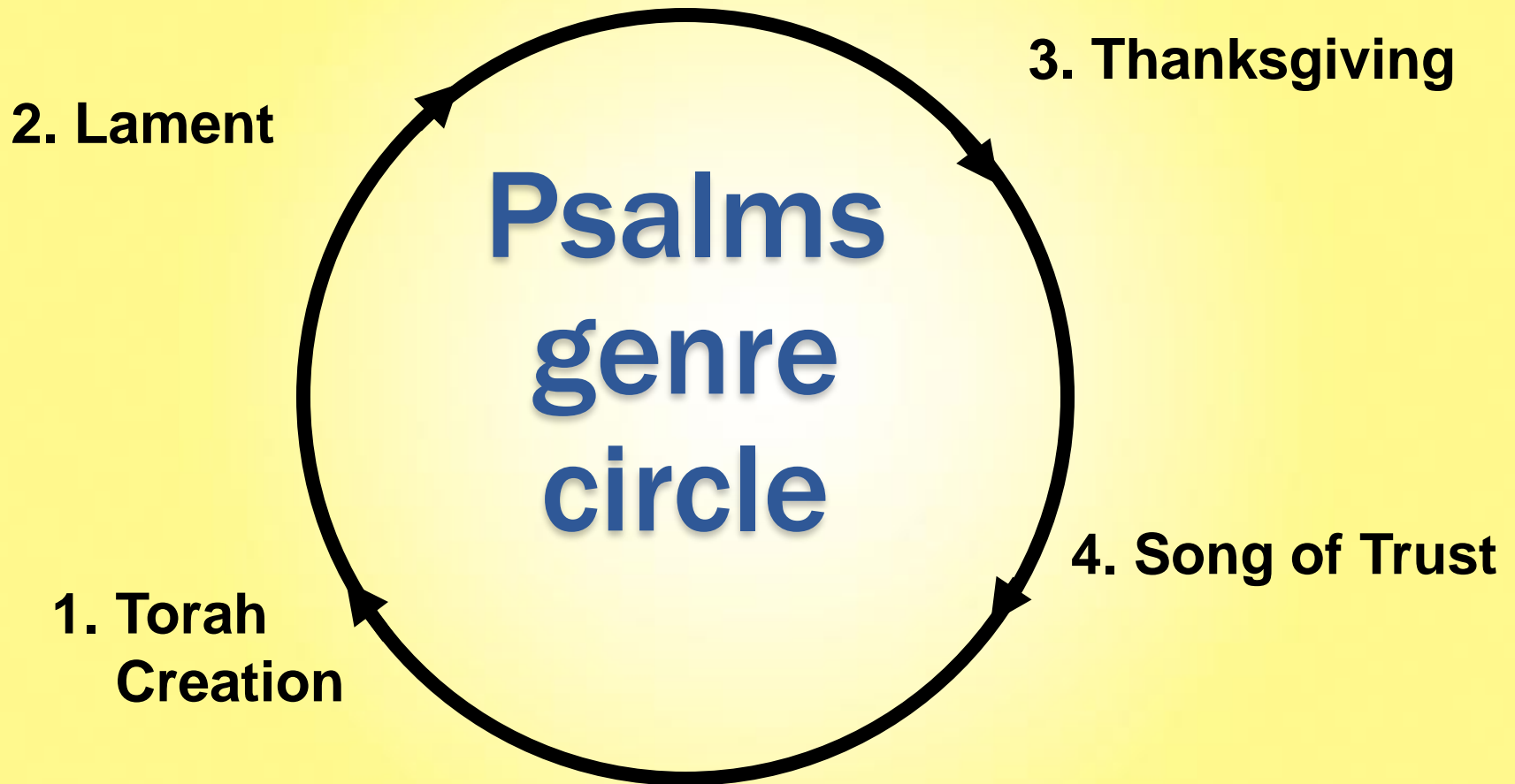
Clue #3: Form Criticism

- Form criticism was originally developed for Old Testament studies by Hermann **Gunkel**.
- Form criticism is a method of biblical criticism that **classifies units of scripture by literary pattern** and then attempts to trace each type to its period of oral transmission...



**Hermann
Gunkel**
(1862 –1932)

Clue #3: Form Criticism



Other Genres: Royal, Zion, Enthronement, Wisdom, etc.

Work in pairs and identify the genre.

Ps 27

Ps 69

Ps 111

Ps 119

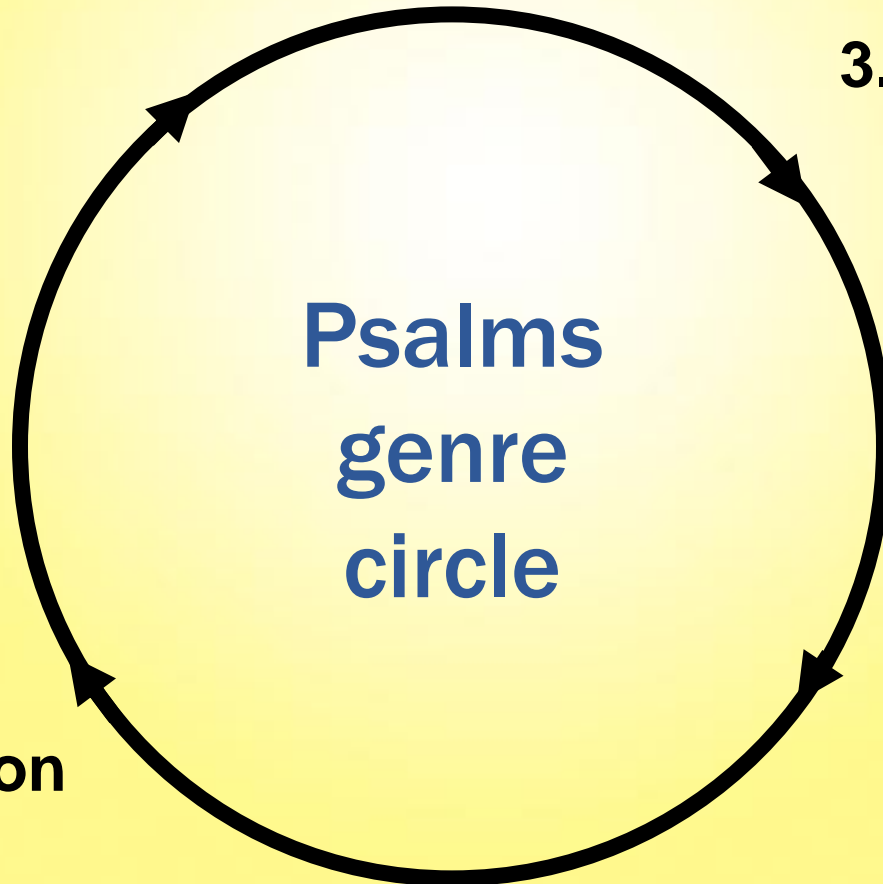
2. Lament

3. Thanksgiving

**Psalms
genre
circle**

**1. Torah
Creation**

4. Song of Trust)



Rhyme & Meter

- **Rhyme is not a significant feature**
- Meter: scholars still argue!
 - Except on the *qinah* (dirge) meter (Lamentations)
(3/2, i.e. 3 accented vowels in the first colon
and 2 in the second colon of a bicolon)

Parade of Poetic Devices

- **Assonance** (in Hebrew)
 - Sound similarity: the similarity of two or more vowel sounds or the repetition of two or more consonant sounds, especially in words that are close together in a poem.
 - Example: Floating **down**, the **sound** **re****ounds** **ar****ound** the icy waters **undergr****ound**” ~ Pink Floyd
- Example: Ps 18:27

**For you deliver a humble [ānî] people;
But the haughty eyes [`ênayim]
you bring down.**

Parade of Poetic Devices

- **Gender-matched parallelism** (in Hebrew)
 - In Hebrew, nouns are designated as feminine or masculine
- Example: Habakkuk 3:3

His glory [m.] covered the heavens [m.]

And the earth [f.] was full of his praise [f.]

1 אֲשֶׁר־י תְּמִימֵי־דַרְךְ (א) 119
 קיח
 2 אֲשֶׁר־י נִצְרֵי עֲדוֹתָיו
 3 אֵף לֹא־פָעַלְוּ^a עוֹלָה
 4 אֲתָה צְנִיחָה בְּקִדְיָךְ
 5 אֲחֲלֵי יִכְנוּ דְרֹכֵי ל
 6 אִז לֹא־אֲבוֹשׁ בְּהַבִּיטֵי
 7 אֹדְךָ בְּיֵשֶׁר לִבִּי ב
 8 אֶת־חֲקִיךָ אֲשַׁמֵּר א
 9 בַּמָּה יִזְכֶּה־נַעַר אֶת־ (ב)
 10 בְּכָל־לִבִּי^a דְּרִשְׁתִּיךָ
 11 בְּלִבִּי צַפְנֹתִי אִמְרֹתֶיךָ
 12 בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה ל
 13 בְּשִׁפְתַי סַפְּרֹתִי כָּל־
 14 בְּדַרְךְ עֲדוֹתֶיךָ שִׁשְׁתִּי
 15 בְּפִקְדֹיךָ אֲשִׁיחָה וְאִ
 16 בְּחֻקֹּתֶיךָ^a אֲשַׁתַּעֲשֶׂע

Parade of Poetic Devices

- **Acrostic (in Hebrew)**

- A composition in which the first letter of each line forms a word or phrase or an alphabet sequence

- **Example Ps 119**

- 22 stanzas of 8 strophes, each beginning with that letter of the aleph-bet

Parade of Poetic Devices

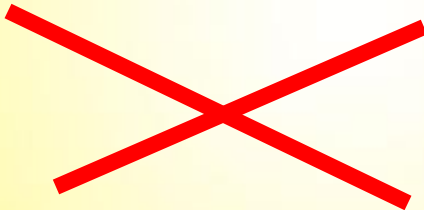
- **Abstract to concrete**
 - The move from the general to the specific and vice versa
- Example: Ps 18:24

**Therefore, the Lord has recompensed me
according to *my righteousness*,
According to *the cleanness*
*of my hands in his sight.***

Parade of Poetic Devices

- **Chiasmus/Chiasm/Chiastic structure**

- (often not carried in English translation)
- From the Greek letter X (chi)
- A B B' A'
- Example: Song of Songs 6:3

I am  my beloved's
and my beloved is mine;

אני ליהודי ויהודי לי
אני ליהודי ויהודי לי

Parade of Poetic Devices

- **“Concentric”** when more than two pairs
 - A B C C' B' A' or A B C X C' B' A'
 - Example: Psalm 58:6
 - A O God
 - B break
 - C their teeth in their mouth;
 - C' the fangs of the lions
 - B' break out
 - A' O LORD.

Parade of Poetic Devices

- **Ellipsis**

- The omission of an implied word:
especially when what is omitted can be understood from the context.
- Example: Ps 24:1

The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it;


is the LORD's

Parade of Poetic Devices

- **Hendiadys**
 - A figure of speech with “and”
 - Expressing an idea through **two words linked by “and,”** instead of by a grammatically more complex form.
 - Everyday examples of hendiadys are the expressions **“nice and soft,”** rather than “nicely soft.”

Parade of Poetic Devices

- **Inclusio** or **envelope figure** (“bookends”)
 - Here an element at the beginning of a text is repeated at the end of the unit, to recall the beginning and in so doing underscore the initial word of the psalm.
 - This is especially common in psalms of praise.
- Example: Ps 1:1 and Ps 2:11c;
Blessed/Happy



Parade of Poetic Devices

- **Merismus**

- Two polar or opposite terms are placed in parallel to that together they convey the notion of totality

- Example: Psalm 91:5

You will not fear the terror of the *night*,
Nor the arrow that flies by *day*,

Parade of Poetic Devices

- **Synecdoche**

- Where the whole is represented by a part

- Example: **crown** in Ps 21:3

- For you meet him with rich blessings;
you set a crown of fine gold on his head.

- or **scepter** in Ps 110:2

- The LORD sends out from Zion / your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your foes.

- to speak of the whole dominion of the king.

Parade of Poetic Devices

- “Mysterious” **Selah**
 - 71 occurrences in Psalms and 3 in Habakkuk
 - “Musical interlude for strings” in Septuagint (Greek translation of Hebrew Bible, “LXX”)

Poetic Devise Exploration

Look at **Psalm 98**.

1. Identify bicola and tricola.
2. Look for the poetic devises used.
See how many you can identify!
3. What might have the psalmist been trying to accomplish?

Parade of Poetic Devices

- Why use poetic devices?

Parade of Poetic Devices

- Why use poetic devices?
 - **Intensification**, the power of poetry
 - **Particularization**, looking at the details
 - **Expanding**, engaging imagination
 - **Defining meaning**, clarifying for deeper understanding