Watson, Wilfred G. E.
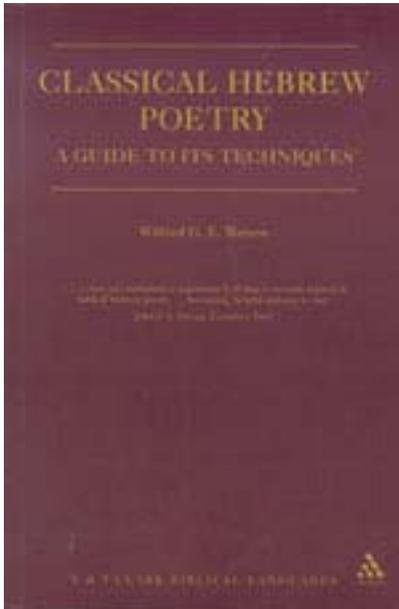
Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques

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This comprehensive and informative volume offers scholars and students a treasury of tools and techniques for the detailed analysis of classical Hebrew poetry. Meticulous and systematic in his presentation of material, Watson looks at biblical Hebrew poetry in relation to Ugaritic and Akkadian poetic material, which distinguishes his work from others on the same or similar topic. Composed of thirteen chapters, various indices, and a supplemental bibliography, this volume not only serves as a guide to the study of biblical Hebrew poetry but also provides worked examples of analyses that show the richness of Watson's thought and method. Recognizing the plethora of information already written on the style, structure, and technique of Hebrew poetry, Watson makes no claims to have written either a definitive or exhaustive work, but those who use his text are certain to appreciate his carefully nuanced presentation of complex material that will make the study of biblical Hebrew poetry both an engaging and rewarding experience.

Watson's study can be divided into three areas: (1) the poetry of other Semitic languages, namely, Ugaritic and Akkadian; (2) biblical Hebrew poetry: notes on methodology; and (3) the biblical Hebrew poet: style and technique. In the first part of his discussion, Watson observes that many of the patterns and devices found in Hebrew poetry are also characteristic of both Ugaritic and Akkadian poetry (e.g., chiasmus, enjambment,

acrostics). Watson's study of poetry in other Semitic languages is particularly helpful because it provides a comparative context for Hebrew poetry while shedding light on its rich intricacy.

In the second section of his work, Watson focuses on the method of analyzing biblical Hebrew poetry. Proceeding from the smallest to the largest units, Watson defines various key terms, including the hemistich, colon, monocolon, bicolon, tricolon, tetracolon, pentacolon, the strophe, stanza, poem, and stichography. Like most literary critics, Watson first examines a poem for particular features. Next, he shows how the features are interrelated to form a complete poem. Finally, he studies the poem's units and segments. Watson's step-by-step, systematic analysis incorporates delimitation, segmentation, innerstrophic analysis, isolation of poetic devices, tabulation, synthesis, and comparison with other literature. He also includes the thought of other scholars, and offers fresh translations of various short poetic passages that he explores for their poetic richness and literary style. Additionally, Watson considers the function of poetry vis-à-vis the poet and the audience and looks for archaisms and markers that would identify a piece's dating and whether or not the piece was originally prose or poetry. Both broad and structural indicators, which Watson outlines in extensive detail, aid in identifying a passage's original form.

The last section of the work focuses on the Hebrew poet. Here Watson offers a cogent and engaging discussion on such topics as oral poetry, the bard, spontaneity and tradition, the life cycle of an oral tradition, oral poetry and communication theory, techniques and characteristics of oral poetry, and epic poetry in Hebrew. In chapter 5 of this part of the book, Watson looks at meter. He first defines it, then provides a glossary of terms related to metrical theory, explores meter in other ancient Semitic languages, gives consideration to the stress theory of Hebrew meter, and outlines the functions of meter: to indicate tempo and texture; to set up a regular pattern; to measure a poet's skill; to disautomatize language; to imply the unusual; and to assist in memorization.

Complementing the discussion on meter are full discussions on parallelism, stanza and strophe, verse patterns, sound, imagery, and poetic devices found in chapters 6–11, respectively. In his chapter on parallelism, Watson explores the following avenues: line-forms and grammatical parallelism; gender-matched parallelism; parallel word-pairs; number parallelism; staircase parallelism; noun-verb parallelism; vertical parallelism; and Janus parallelism. Highlights of the stanza and strophe chapter include a study of the monocolon, tricolon, quatrain, pentacolon, six-, seven-, eight-, and ten-line strophes. The central topic in chapter 8 is chiasmus, chiastic patterns, chiasmus and line forms, along with terrace and pivot patterns. Popular sound patterns explored in chapter 9 include assonance, alliteration, rhyme, onomatopoeia, and wordplay and its function. Chapter 10

on imagery is particularly lucid, especially where Watson comments on similes and metaphors.

Having discussed various literary techniques separately, Watson in chapter 11 next surveys the interplay among the poetic devices and adds a few additional ones that have not been discussed earlier: oxymoron, hyperbole, merismus, hendiadys, and the like. Watson's two final chapters are devoted to secondary techniques (ch. 12) and an appendix (ch. 13) where he presents several worked examples of biblical Hebrew poetry: 2 Sam 19:1; Isa 19:1–4; Ps 123; Song 2:10–13; Job 18:2–21; and Jer 46:3–12.

Although Watson's guidebook can be a bit tedious for readers because of its dense content, scholars will be indebted to his efforts for years to come. Watson has left no stone unturned in this volume, and his sharp, clear thinking and attention to detail makes this study an extraordinary contribution to the field of Old Testament, and biblical Hebrew poetry in particular. I highly recommend Watson's guidebook to scholars and students alike. Its wealth of information is invaluable, which makes the study of classical Hebrew poetry both a challenge and a delight.