



Teaching the Bible Classically with Dr. Fred Putnam

Lecture 6: Poetry (I)

Outline:

Introduction

- Poetry is the other way of using language.
- Poems are not the same as prose “re-arranged” on the page.
- Biblical poems are poems. They are not an epistle rearranged.
- Read biblical poems as poetry, not as prose.
- “The poem is the message.” The poem is not a puzzle to be figured out. The poem is a text that is inviting us to consider what it is meditating on.

What makes something a poem?

- The way the reader responds:
 - Dickinson: “If I feel so cold as that no fire could warm me, or as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. If there is any way, I don’t know it.”
 - Frost: “The right reader of a good poem knows the moment he reads it that he has taken a mortal wound, that he will never get over it.”
- It is a poem if I (the author) say it is a poem.
- Poetic devices can tell us it is a poem.
 - Syntax under pressure.

Challenges

- We live in a non-poetic age. Many students hate poetry.
- They’ve been taught that a poem is a code that you have to figure out.
- The worst question is “What does this poem really mean?”
- To look for meaning besides the words on a page assumes that we know more than the poet does.
- Inspirational fallacy: Coleridge says that he took a nap, and woke up with a 2000 word poem (Kubla Khan) in his head. A neighbor’s knock interrupted him and he couldn’t finish the poem.
- The poem is a crafted thing. Everything in the language has been chosen deliberately. This makes it difficult when we read translated poetry.
- Biographical fallacy: If I don’t know the influence under which the poet wrote the poem, then I can’t know what he is getting at. “I” and “me” and “my” in the poem is not about the poet.



- Every poem in the psalter cannot be assigned to separate incidences that happen to David.

Reading Poems

- Appreciate the poetry of your own culture before you can appreciate the poems of another culture.
- Read lyric poems, epics, works of philosophy, or history. Read a poem every week. Learn to hear the way the language is being used to say what the poem is saying.
- Read the poem out loud with a different voice.
- Don't read the Psalms as if you are reading a text or a parable.

Two Main Questions

- Do not ever ask, "What does this poem mean?"
- What do you notice?
 - You can't be wrong.
- What is this about?
 - A line, a sentence, a stanza, the whole poem
- "What does the poem mean?" is a questions that takes care of itself.
- When reading the Psalms it is helpful to ask, "Why would somebody write this?" Why would they say these things?