Ambiguity in Hebrew Poetry

Some thoughts inspired by William Empson[1]

The presentation of ideas with clarity in prose form is a splendid art, and it takes much effort on the part of the author to craft words and sentences that delight, motivate, and inform the reader. A professor of mine once said that fuzzy writing usually means fuzzy thinking, and over the years I have found this to be true. Sloppy writers and thinkers really do not care about the truth. Often they are lazy, hiding this wretched fact under the guise of "heart-felt" spirituality. Contrary to popular opinion, clarity and precision, like cleanliness, are next to godliness.

Poetry is a much more complex affair than prose. Whereas great prose seeks clarity, great poetry utilizes ambiguity. This is not to say that good prose is completely devoid of a certain indefiniteness. Every statement, no matter how lucid, inherently possesses a certain vagueness; this is evident by the simple fact that it can be analyzed. Statements are made of words, and words are mere symbols. When we deal with symbols, there is always potential for one reader to part ways with another, though the paths might diverge ever so slightly.

When we say that poetry is intentionally ambiguous, we do not mean an ambiguity of the sloppy sort but a studied ambiguity. Something is meaningfully communicated but is done so in a compact way, working on the whole of the inner person, not just the intellect. The goal of bald prose is to communicate facts as clearly as possible. The goal of poetry is to create an atmosphere where many profound and complex feelings and ideas are activated in a short span of words. Words and grammatical structures are effective in several ways at once. As Empson has said, "The machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry."

The implications of this for biblical hermeneutics are very important. It has been said that as much as one third of Holy Writ is of the poetic genre. This fact alone flies in the face of those who would say that a biblical author had one intended meaning alone. We can no longer hold on to such illusions. Reality and truth are complex, and the Bible deals with the complexities of our environment with sophistication that both challenges and satisfies the soul. Take, for instance, those wonderful lines in Proverbs 30:18 - 19:

> Three things are too wonderful for me;
>
> four I do not understand:
>
> the way of the eagle in the sky,
>
> the way of the snake upon the rock,
>
> the way of the ship on the high seas,
>
> and the way of a man with a girl.

[1] William Empson. Seven Types of Ambiguity (New York: New Directions. Pub., 1947).

The introduction of verse 18 sets the mood for the quatrain in verse 19. This “three things. . . four” graduated numerical device is a stock expression in Hebrew that denotes completion and finality of thought, with an emphasis on the fourth element. The mood set is that of bafflement. . .the poet cannot penetrate into these seemingly common phenomena. When one reads each line of the quatrain, pleasant pictures waft into the psyche. One imagines sunny afternoons lying down under the open blue sky mesmerized by the graceful flight of a majestic eagle. The snake upon a rock has, admittedly, ominous overtones, but against the pleasant thoughts the eagle inspires in the first line, one is able to push aside one’s prejudice against these coiling reptiles and think the best of them. Besides, the poet has achieved a “merism,” where two extremes are evoked and therefore hint at the totality between them. In this case, it would be the highest creatures (birds in flight) to the lowest creatures (earth crawlers). With the third line one finds oneself again in the open air, but this time along the Mediterranean Sea in ancient times, looking out into the watery deep, thrilled by the ships in their full-bellied sails making their adventurous ways over the waves to lands exotic and unknown. This crescendos into the most wonderful mystery of them all - human romance!

This is a valid reading, and certainly satisfying, especially if one is in a good mood. The snake on the rock, however, leaves one with a certain discomfort, unless, of course, one is into herpetology. If one happens to be in a particularly bad mood or has become wily in the ways of the world, one might begin to suspect the eagle as well. After all, the eagle is a bird of prey, and we all know that the creature is not in flight on holiday but is out to kill. Moreover, if we take the lines in an alternating fashion, matching the eagle with the boat, then the primal fear of the watery deep surges into our minds. The boat is not out on holiday, either, but is a fragile object bobbing up and down on the surface of a dark and terrible force that is very unforgiving and unpredictable. We therefore are invited to match the snake on the rock and the man with the maid. Is the man a lover or a predator? Is he both? Who is the snake? Ah, the dark and stormy ways of romantic love!

No doubt, much more could be said about these lines. This is the beauty of great poetry; it lives on in a most inexhaustible way, and it is its ingenious use of ambiguity that makes it this way. And the possibilities are not limited to just the words of a poem. The mood of the reader at any given reading plays a profound role in the decipherment of meaning, as do the reader’s imaginative ability and maturity. Closely aligned to issues of mood is the idea of sound. Poetry was not meant to be read silently but read aloud. How one reads a poem, how fast one reads it (rhythm), and how its sounds resonate in the ears of the hearers determine meaning as well. The slightest tonal innuendo may, in fact, open up new possibilities of meaning. Added to this complexity is the fact that the mouth is limited in the possible gestures it can make in the enunciation of words. Each gesture has to serve multiple meanings. An example of this is the use of the “o” sound produced by the gesture of rounding the mouth and sending the tongue down to the bottom of the mouth. Isaiah uses this in a lament in chapter 1 verse 4:

hôy gôy ḥōtē´ `am ke<u>b</u>e<u>d</u> `āwôn

Ah, sinful nation people laden with iniquity

The *hôy*, which is an outburst of funerary lament, controls the “o” sounds of “nation” (*gôy*) and sinful (*ḥōtē’*) of the first line, as well as the “iniquity” (*`āwôn*) of the second line, making both lines howl with the “o” sound of lament. This same sound and mouth gesture, however, is used in a totally different way in *Last Words of David* (II Sam. 23:3c-4):

môšēl bā´ādām ṣaddîq môšēl yir´aṯ ´^{e}*lohîm*

one who rules over people justly ruling in the fear of God

ûḵ´ôr bôqer yizraḥ- šāmeš bôqer lo´ `āḇôṯ

is like the light of morning when a morning without clouds

the sun rises

minnōg̱ah mimmāṭār deše´ mē´āreṣ

gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.

Here, the “o” sound is used in a most positive light, bringing together the terms “ruler” (*môšēl* repeated twice in the first couplet), “light” (*´ôr*), “morning” (*ḇôqer* repeated twice in the second couplet), and “gleaming” (*minnōgah*) in the last line. Because the same mouth gestures make sounds that are associated with meanings as opposite as lamenting and the happiness of morning light, ambiguity is inherent in sound symbolism as well as word symbolism. In fact, Isaiah combines these two opposites in 5: 11a-b, creating the ambiguous combination of lament and the joyous anticipation of morning and conquest:

hôy mašḵîmê babbōqer *šēḵār yirdōp̱û*

Ah, those who rise up early pursuing beer in the morning

The whole idea of “atmosphere” is key to the understanding of poetry. Atmosphere, of course, is a very mysterious thing. It is like a mist creeping in on the reader, readily felt but less readily explained. In fact, the danger in trying to explain it is that the mist will dissipate, leaving the reader with thin air. We disagree, however, with those who say that poetic atmosphere cannot be analyzed, agreeing with Empson that though “atmosphere” (which he defines as “the consciousness of what is implied by meaning”) may transcend verbal analysis, analysis can be helpful in making sense of parts of it. He gives a great example from Shakespeare, that master of atmosphere, to illustrate this point. Macbeth is looking out his window as night is falling, trying to muster up his courage to cancel out his conscience and murder Banquo.

Come, seeling Night,

Skarfe up the tender Eye of pitiful Day

And with thy bloddie and invisible Hand

Cancel and teare to pieces that great Bond

That keeps me pale.

Light thickens, and the Crow

Makes wing to th' Rookie Wood.

Good things of Day begin to droope, and drowse,

While Night's black Agents to their Prey's doe rowse.

Thou marvell'st at my words, but hold thee still;

Things bad begun, make strong themselves by ill:

So prythee go with me.

This section is heavy with atmosphere: one senses the surreal witching hour when the night begins to overtake the day; evening shadows are charging the woods outside with a demonic presence as Macbeth is brooding over his appalling thoughts. One may, in fact, try to "chase down" the atmosphere by analyzing the words. Empson italicizes the middle lines here and notes the suggestion of witches' broth, or curdling blood, about *thickens*, the k-sounds which may in fact replicate the sound of a stalker crackling over sticks, the assonance of the "*ow*" vowel sound as the *crow* goes deeper into the dark woods as the day *drowses*, and Night's black agents are *rowsed*. He notes the ambiguity about the *crow*; is it a good thing of the day, or one of Night's black agents? What is the relationship between the crow, which is a solitary carrion eater, and the rook, which lives in community and is vegetarian? Is Macbeth a crow that wants to be a rook living peacefully, or a rook that sees himself now as a crow?

Analysis of this kind may in fact yield profound insight into the heart of the atmosphere. Too much of it will no doubt tear the once beautiful body apart into grotesque pieces that cannot be put back together again. Moreover, there is always the fact that no two readers will feel or recognize the very same things in a poem. Empson, after his analysis, states that he "would be very surprised if two people got the same result from putting sound-effect into words" in the way he did. Still, analyze we must if we wish to engage the mind in poetry. Atmosphere "can be either felt or thought; the two things are similar but different; and it requires practice to do both at once."

Empson goes on describing various forms of ambiguity, beginning with the metaphor and simile, which place words together that suggest a likeness. An example of simile is the famous line in Psa. 1:3 "they shall be like trees planted by streams of water," or Ps. 126:1 "When YHWH restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream." Such similes are rich, and continue to yield insight over the years the longer one contemplates trees and dreams. There is

also the ambiguity of contrasting modifiers, where Empson gives an example from Mr. Waley's Chinese translations:

> Swiftly the years, beyond recall.
>
> Solemn the stillness of this spring morning.

"Swiftly" is an adverb modifying "years," and "Solemn," along with "stillness" derived from the adjective "still" are modifiers of "this spring morn." What is striking is the contrast between "swift" and "still," especially as they relate to the nouns they modify. The noun "years" belongs to the time span of the mortal life that swiftly passes by; when they pass, we can hardly remember them. This, of course, taps into the pathos of all who recognize how fleeting life is. Left by itself, this line would not be very hopeful. The second line with the contrasting adjectives "solemn" and "still," however, sets this line in direct contrast to the first, with the emphasis on the "this spring morning" that ends the couplet. "This spring morning" belongs to a whole new time dimension, which in contrast to swift moving years, we may call the "eternal now." The beauty of the moment transports us to a whole new dimension that diminishes the threat of death and places it far off. Empson calls "swift" and "still" ambiguous in that between them they put two time-scales into the reader's mind in a single act of apprehension. Is time moving swiftly, or is it moving at all? Are we quickly aging, or are we in heaven?

Another phenomenon in poetic ambiguity is the mixed metaphor. Here Empson quotes the following lines from Nash's *Last Will and Testament*:

> Beauty is but a flower
>
> Which wrinkles will devour.
>
> Brightness falls from the air.
>
> Queens have died young and fair.
>
> Dust hath closed Helen's eye.
>
> I am sick, I must die.
>
> Lord, have mercy on us.

One does not expect "devour" in the second line, for wrinkles, in and of themselves, do not devour. Rather, one would expect "replace" or the like. It is not clear how wrinkles devour . . . are they time's tooth marks? Are they the furrows that caterpillars create as they eat their way across the petal? Are they the worms that gnaw in the grave? Moving on to the next line, it is not all that clear how "brightness," which is not an object of weight, can be said to "fall." Shall we

understand by “brightness” the heavenly luminaries that seem to fall as the world turns? Is it lightning? In the context of the verse, did Nash wish to make a pun on “air” with “hair,” thus associating “falling hair” with “wrinkles” and Helen’s eye closed in death? Speaking of Helen, it is not at all clear how “dust” closes her eye. Is Helen an undecaying corpse or a statue? “Dust” then would, in a way, close Helen’s eye from the outside by settling on her eyelids till the eye is covered. However, is the “dust” generated from Helen’s own corruption, and therefore closing the eye from within? Mixing metaphors like this creates ambiguity that profoundly moves the soul but confuses the mind.

There is much more to Empson’s discussion on ambiguity, but we have covered enough to get a feeling for how it works in poetry. As one can see, poetry makes great demands on the whole of the inner person, both heart and mind. Unfortunately, in our day of rapid information broadcasted on TV and the WWW, we hardly read anything but technical manuals and newspapers, if even these. Clarity is everything, and any form of literature, particularly poetry, that doesn’t yield its ideas immediately is brushed aside as worthless. The result is that we have become a race of utilitarians, turning our thoughts only to things we can manipulate and control. We are no longer deep-souled. In days not that long ago, when poetry was still important to both the educated and uneducated alike, it was often said “this poet will mean more to you when you have had more experience of life.” This “experience” refers not just to higher cognitive ability, but maturity of the totality of the inner person, including those more affective facilities like the will and feeling.

This is not just the “sour grapes” of some antiquarian professor who loves to cling on to the past because he has not the ability or heart to keep up with the present (although this is part of it). The very Word of God is at stake. Vast portions of it are poetry, and much of its prose is highly elevated, employing various forms of ambiguity to deepen its effect upon the psyche. If we read our Bibles, we read them superficially. God’s Word, however, will not yield its deepest treasures to superficial readers. As Abraham Heschel has said, “In the realm of theology, shallowness is treason.”