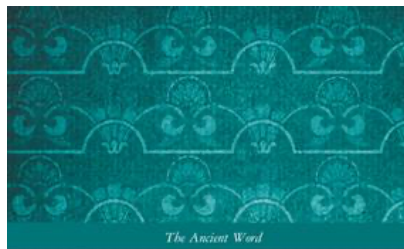


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BEYOND ORALITY
BIBLICAL POETRY ON ITS OWN TERMS

Jacqueline Vayntrub



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Beyond Orality: Biblical Poetry on its Own Terms

The Ancient Word

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The title of Jacqueline Vayntrub’s monograph echoes the title of James Muilenburg’s 1968 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature: “Form Criticism and Beyond.” Just as his address opened a new approach to encountering biblical texts, in what became known as rhetorical criticism, Vayntrub has produced an equally provocative and productive challenge to current scholarship on biblical poetry. The subtitle captures Vayntrub’s method quite well. Her work seeks to replace the scholarly construct of “biblical poetry” with a classification derived from the biblical text itself. Since the biblical text does not have a unified category of poetry, we must ask, “how does the text describe or name its own genre?”

In the first chapter, “From Proverbs and Poetry to Prose: The Bible’s Own ‘Great Divide,’” Vayntrub interrogates the traditionally accepted understanding that language follows a developmental course that places the short, pithy saying as the earliest expression in language. As language matures, it becomes more complex in structure and expression. She examines early rabbinical work in order to demonstrate this developmental frame as it has been used to describe the growth of literary culture from simpler units to more developed ones. The biblical books attributed to Solomon (Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes) are interpreted by rabbis as reflecting the maturation of the Solomon character in real life. This

notion of development is enlarged by Western scholars to encompass the entire biblical corpus.

Interrogating the work of Bacon, Vico, and Lowth, Vayntrub challenges the imposition of poetic structures that have more to do with the historical location of the scholar than with the text. She suggests that texts provide their own understanding of genre when words such as *mashal* and *shir* are used to introduce a textual unit. These categories might indeed be constructs created by the biblical authors and deserve to be investigated as such, rather than seeing them as categories that interpreters merely take for granted. Vayntrub concludes her investigation with the question: “What of the literary claims advanced by the biblical authors?” (32).

In the second chapter, “The Idea of *Mashal*: Scholarship’s Quest for the Essence of Poetry,” Vayntrub reminds us that the problem of identifying biblical “poetry” rests in the fact that no such term exists in the text’s description of itself. Other terms introducing what are described as poetic units do appear with frequency, but these are usually subsumed under the scholarly construct of poetry. Vayntrub does not offer a definition of biblical poetry but problematizes the category by identifying how its definition has been shaped by literary currents popular in any given era.

Jewish medieval exegetes, along with later scholars such as Herder and Lowth, continued to use the developmental model to explain how biblical poetry worked. What most of these scholars did not appreciate was how much their own contemporary understanding of poetry (their world in front of the text) drove their conclusions. Lowth, for example, connected the *mashal* to the “sublime,” which at the time represented the essence of “true poetry.” During this period the emphasis shifted from the poet to the poem itself, escorting parallelism into the conversation as *the* most important structural aspect of biblical poetry.

Although Lowth was not the first to call attention to parallelism as a constant structural element in poetry, Vayntrub points out that Lowth’s conclusion about parallelism “was shaped by foundational ideas of classical rhetoric and a need to find a rhythm to biblical poetry in the absence of meter” (50). She reminds us throughout the monograph that theories of biblical poetry emerged out of specific historical-cultural contexts that were shaped by contemporary theories of poetry. In the following chapter, Vayntrub reiterates clearly her conclusions in this chapter, writing “that in each of these periods of the study of biblical poetry, scholars identified biblical *mashal* as a native Biblical Hebrew term for poetry’s essence. But this purported essence was, in fact, dictated by scholars’ own contemporary aesthetics” (89).

In chapter 3, “Wisdom, Orality, and Recovering Native Poetics,” Vayntrub notes that *mashal* has been considered the “key to all of biblical poetry.” She then examines how this term came to be “understood by scholars” as the “prototypical form of wisdom literature” and became the central element that “determined the outlines of the formal, thematic, and lexical dimensions of the wisdom genre” (70). In this chapter Vayntrub articulates an understanding of *mashal* that goes beyond the work of genre and folklore studies. Her attention turns toward the text as the framework of the utterance that is to be highlighted as the distinguishing characteristic of *mashal* rather than its length.

“In its most basic sense, a *mashal* is a formal, rhythmic speech performed by characters” (88). Here Vayntrub introduces “register,” a “broader level of language use,” into her discussion. Several types of *mashal* are attested in the biblical literature, and this evaluative lens broadens the work that *mashal* does in a text, whether it be a pithy saying or a complex narrative such as Num 23–24 and Isa 14. These texts identify themselves as *mashal* and demonstrate how the various modes of *mashal* function in the “same formal speech register” (89). In order to fully appreciate this register, scholars must attend carefully to “the social context as it is represented by its received form” (90).

In the fourth chapter, “The Speech Performance Frame: The Case of Balaam’s Speeches,” Vayntrub tests her method of attending to the narrated performance context as represented in the text by examining the speeches of Balaam (Num 22–24) through her lens. Balaam’s speeches are introduced as *mashals* in the biblical text. “Character speech” in a narrative that is structurally poetic is identified as the type of speech Balaam performs, and its effectiveness is judged as a function of a literary type familiar to Israelite and non-Israelite alike. That is, it makes specific claims about the world that are recognized as effectual due to their literary form.

The narrative frame of the Balaam speeches “shaped an interpretation of his *mashal* performances as prophetic speech.” (134) Without the narrative frames, Balaam’s speeches become generalized instruction rather than prophetic utterance, thus demonstrating the importance of frames for shaping and reshaping the rhetorical effect of poetry.

In the fifth chapter, “Social Dimensions of Speech and Its Framing in Isaiah 14 and 1 Samuel 24,” Vayntrub broadens her inquiry into the nature of literary forms by crossing “traditional generic boundaries” in order to understand why there are correspondences between genres such as *mashal* and *qinah*. (145) This task is carried out by examination of a prophetic text, a narrative text, and the use of *mashal* in the abstract, as in the phrase “to become a *mashal* (proverb).” In each case, Vayntrub demonstrates that the social context in which the *mashal* is performed provides the basis for understanding its meaning.

The sixth chapter, “Titles and Tales: Framing Speech Performance,” returns to the concept discussed in chapter 1, that of the narrative frame as a guide to understanding biblical poetry. Using the book of Proverbs as a test case, Vayntrub demonstrates that it is not the narrative frame that gives poetry its distinctive features but the poem as speech. In Proverbs, it is *mashal* that frames the speech rather than a narrative so that it becomes a generalized spoken truth associated with a famous figure, Solomon, rather than being presented as the actual speech of Solomon.

The conclusion to the book suggests two areas for further study that arise out of Vayntrub’s work. The first “should focus on the literary and cultural-historical forces that shaped these [broad compositional] values” (219). These values are suggested by the effect anthologies achieve in shifting the “voice away from a singular performance captured by the story and its characters to a perpetual one, unmediated by an audience in the story-world” (218). The second suggestion “emerges from an implicit observation made throughout this study of biblical poetry’s presentation as character speech.” The voice that speaks the *mashal*, whether human or divine, is “a significant locus of meaning” for biblical authors, and it is this voice that gives the particular shape to the utterance found in the text and “plays a significant role structuring discourses of transmission and survival beyond bodily death” (219). Vayntrub concludes her reflection on the direction of future studies by suggesting that studies “focused on the intersection of voicing, compositional structure, and the textual medium, might uncover meaningful connections between the literary presentation of the voice and its staying power in these texts” (219).

This volume uses endnotes and includes a bibliography of each chapter, an index of biblical and extrabiblical primary sources, and a subject index. The publisher has produced a pristine volume almost free of errors. The only error found was on page 118, where the transliteration of Num 23:10b is incorrect.

Vayntrub’s work contributes significantly to the landscape of the study of biblical poetry. Her emphasis on using terms found in the text to describe the literary types encountered therein offers a shift away from the endless, and often fruitless, discussion to define biblical poetry. By interrogating the presuppositions of all interpreters and the influence of their own social-historical context, we might yet free the biblical text to possess its own imaginative language (what we call poetry) that is understood on its own terms