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A New Method to Differentiate
Between Poetry and Prose in the Hebrew Bible

Modern scholarship identifies Psalms and Isaiah as poetic works, but how can a critic identify poetry in more controversial cases? In this paper, I reappraise the field of poetic biblical studies to show that the verses most scholars accept as poetry share varying degrees of nine “poetic markers.” Observation of the presence, dominance, and effect of these markers in a text enables the critic to make a reasonable separation between prose and poetry.

This study of poetic markers in texts not generally considered poetic, such as narrative material in the Pentateuch, produces startling results. When the source attribution of a text is in doubt, a poetic examination often clarifies which verses belong to which author. Also, poetic line readings often require exciting new exegetical understandings that are different from prose readings.

No single definition of poetry can apply broadly to the Bible, as individual poets write using individual and genre-specific styles. Moreover, no binary differentiation exists between poetry and prose, as both occur in degrees. In other words, all writing in the Hebrew Bible exists at some point on a prose-poetry continuum. But instead of the flat line proposed by James Kugel and others, I posit a two-dimensional continuum. At some point, a line has a sufficient cluster of these nine poetic attributes to “round the corner” and allow a critic to reasonably—if subjectively—label it “poetry.”