The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History

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Is there poetry in the Bible? Does it have rhyme or meter? How did ancient Hebrew writers compose their works? James Kugel's provocative study provides surprising new answers to these age-old questions. Biblical "poetry" is not a concept native to the Bible itself, he proposes, and the idea that the Bible is divided into prose and verse is merely an approximation of the reality of biblical style. Arguing that the Bible presents a continuum of speech heightened in varying degrees by different means, Kugel sets out to describe Hebrew's high style on its own terms. He also offers a thorough history of the idea of biblical poetry, starting with Philo of Alexandria and Josephus in the first century C.E. and charting its development through the Church Fathers, medieval Jewish writers, the Christian Hebraists of the Renaissance, and on into modern times. The story of how each age understood the nature biblical poetry, Kugel concludes, is a key to understanding the Bible's place in the history of Western thought.

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