

The Function of Repetition

As noted at the outset, reading and studying the Bible, especially the Old Testament prophets, may not be straightforward for readers with a modern and Western background in culture and language. The biblical texts are ancient and Eastern in origin—they come from a different culture and a different time. Critical scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not rigorously ask these questions: What were the Hebrews' own rules for writing literature and prophecy? What patterns, rules, or traits did they use in their writing? Instead, analysis of the prophets as literature was based on modern and Western rules of literary analysis rather than the rules of literature governing ancient and Eastern texts.

The Nature of Hebrew Literature

We all know that Hebrew writers, including the prophets, were very repetitive. In fact, repetition is at the heart of Hebrew discourse. The normal pattern in Hebrew literature is to consider topics in a recursive—in other words, progressively repetitive—manner. This approach is boring, frustrating, and monotonous to those who do not know and understand that this approach was a purposeful way of communicating the content.

Normally a Hebrew writer would begin a discourse on a particular topic, develop it from a particular angle or perspective, and end by closing down that conversation. Then he would begin another conversation, taking up the same topic again from a different angle or point of view and considering it from a different perspective.

Do you recall the illustration we considered earlier about stereo sound? When two conversations or discourses on the same topic are heard or read in succession, they are meant to function like the left and right speakers of a stereo system. Now, here is the key question: Do both speakers of a stereo system provide the same music or does each give different music? The answer is both—the music is different and the same.

In one sense the music from the left speaker is identical to that of the right, yet in another way it is slightly different so that when we hear the two together, the effect is stereo instead of just one-dimensional or monaural. In Hebrew literature the ideas presented can be experienced in a similar manner.

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