

HEBREW POETRY

What's it all about?

BACKGROUND COMMENTS:

You may have noticed, if looking at a modern-day translation, that poetical portions of the Old Testament are organized into groups of normally two or three lines, and that very often the lines seem to say similar (or sometimes, contrasting) things. If so, you will have observed one of the basic concepts of Hebrew poetry.

Unlike much English poetry, the primary emphasis of Hebrew poetry is not rhythm or rhyme, but "parallelism." The basic thought unit (composed of two or three lines) can accomplish one of several different things.

1. The lines can *complement* each other; they can express similar thoughts.
2. They can *contrast* each other, affirming one thing and then denying its *opposite* (or saying that the opposite is true for another set of circumstances).
3. The second (and additional lines, if they exist) can clarify (further explain) the first.
4. The lines can in some other manner develop the thought that is being expressed.

Furthermore, several of these thought units (groups of lines) may together display additional parallelism or patterns. (Often English translations will separate these groups of verses from each other, by putting extra space between them.)

For those who like technical terms (and if not, then ignore this paragraph), the basic unit of thought is called a "period," and is composed of individual lines or segments. Each line is called a "colon" (or "stitch"). If the "periods" have some sort of parallelism or pattern in the way the thoughts are being expressed, these would be grouped together as a "strophe."

There are no "rigid" rules governing the flow of thought and the way the various lines relate to each other. So there will be much variety in the way thoughts are presented. But most verses will probably fit into one of the loosely defined categories listed below. (Be aware that some verses may overlap two of the categories listed. And because of the lack of "rigid" rules, there may even be times that one is not completely certain how to define the parallelism between parts of a thought-unit.)

EXAMPLES OF PARALLELISM IN HEBREW POETRY:

1) Repetition of the Same Thought (all or part of it)

The thoughts in the two lines may be identical, or just similar to each other. The entire passage may display this type of parallelism, or just part of it might.

- Psalm 24:1

The earth is the LORD'S, and all it contains,
The world, and those who dwell in it.

"The earth" and "the world" are parallel thoughts. So are "all it contains" and "those who dwell in it."

- Psalm 24:5

He shall receive a blessing from the LORD
And righteousness from the God of his salvation.

In this passage, "a blessing from the LORD" and "righteousness from the God of his salvation" are parallel. The first part of the first line ("He shall receive") is not repeated.

- Job 3:17

There [in the grave] the wicked cease from raging,
And there the weary are at rest.

This is an instance in which concepts are parallel, but definitely *not* synonymous! "The wicked" and "the weary" are parallel, but do not refer to the same group of people. Looking at death from the perspective of *this present life*, Job is saying that *all* human activity ceases at that point. Cemeteries are filled with people "resting in peace," not engaged in human activities.

- Psalm 1:2

But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.

This verse illustrates another feature that sometimes occurs in Hebrew poetry. "His delight" obviously parallels "he meditates," and "the law of the LORD" parallels "His law." But in the second line, these two thoughts occur in the reverse order to the way they occur in the first line. (If you are interested, the technical term is "chiasm.")

- Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is more deceitful than all else
And is desperately sick;
Who can understand it?

"More deceitful than all else" and "desperately sick" describe similar concepts. "Who can understand it" builds upon what is stated in the first two lines. (This second type of parallelism is described below.)

Some other examples of parallelism are: Genesis 4:23-24; Job 8:11; Job 8:15; Job 27:4; Psalm 22:20.

2) Contrast Between Thoughts

- Psalm 1:6

For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.

In this verse, the way of the righteous is contrasted to the way of the wicked.

- Matthew 8:20

The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests;
but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.

Even the animals have homes - a place to rest. This is contrasted to the Son of Man's condition.

- Proverbs 29:18

Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained,
But happy is he who keeps the law.

In this passage, "vision" and "the law" are similar concepts. [The "vision" (or "revelation" in some translations) has to do with prophetic revelation. Today we might say "the words of the prophets" or "Scripture."] Being unrestrained is contrasted with being happy ("blessed" in some translations) - the consequences of either the *absence* of the law, or its *presence* (coupled with obedience). This verse also provides another illustration of chiasm (two thoughts of the second line occurring in the reverse order to the way they occur in the first line).

3) Building Upon (or Continuing) a Previous Thought or Word

Many of the verses which don't fit into any other category belong here. Sometimes there may be an obvious instance of something in the first line being repeated in the second. At other times, the thoughts may seem to just continue from the first to the second line, without any repetition.

This may occur in several ways. Two of them are illustrated below.

3A. Building From One Thought to Another (Related But Not Identical Thoughts in the Lines)

- Psalm 23:1

The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.

The second line builds on the first. "I shall not want" (or, "I shall lack nothing") is the natural consequence of the LORD being "my shepherd."

- Psalm 1:1

How blessed is the man
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the path of sinners
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!

The last three lines (which are parallel, expressing similar thoughts) build upon (or flow from) the thoughts mentioned in the first line. Who is blessed? The one who doesn't do the things mentioned in the last 3 lines. (He also *does* what is mentioned in verse 2.)

- Proverbs 15:17

Better is a dish of vegetables where love is,
Than a fattened ox and hatred with it.

The flow of thought is that the one is better than the other. There is also a contrast between the things mentioned (vegetables vs. fattened ox, and love vs. hatred).

- Job 9:3

If one wished to dispute with Him,
He could not answer Him once in a thousand times.

The consequences of attempting to argue with God (line 1) would be speechlessness. God's wisdom and power are so great that we would find ourselves with nothing to say!

- Job 14:1

Man, who is born of woman,
Is short-lived and full of turmoil.

The flow of thought is first focused on being "born" (line 1) and then the futility of life (the consequences of being born!), which is summarized as "short-lived and full of turmoil."

- Psalm 2:6

But as for Me, I have installed My King
Upon Zion, My holy mountain.

The second line builds on the first, by describing *where* the King was being "installed."

- Psalm 24:9

Lift up your heads, O gates,
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
That the King of glory may come in!

The first two lines are parallel with similar thoughts; the third builds on them, giving the reason for telling the gates/doors to "lift up your heads." (This phrase, "lift up your heads" is also an example of the figurative use of language, mentioned in a section below.)

- Proverbs 26:4

Do not answer a fool according to his folly
Lest you also be like him.

In this proverb, the second line builds on the first by describing the consequences of not following the first line's instructions.

- Job 9:19

If it is a matter of power, behold, He is the strong one!
And if it is a matter of justice, who can summon Him?

It might seem that there is a somewhat similar pattern of thought between these two lines, but the second line really isn't a repeat of what the first line says. The two lines build on a common theme, each being one aspect of that theme. Job was convinced that he could not argue with God and survive. In every respect (including the matters of power and justice), God was superior.

3B. Building to a Climax

Part of the first line is repeated in the second, but the thought is expanded, to reach the final climax of what is being said.

- Psalm 29:1

Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of the mighty,
Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

The climax of the statement is *what* the "sons of the mighty" are to ascribe to the LORD.

- Psalm 29:5

The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
Yes, the LORD breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.

The passage reaches the climax in its description of the power of the LORD, by not only saying that he breaks the mighty trees, but that he splinters them into pieces. This psalmist seems to be making reference to the power of God as reflected in the mighty thunderbolts of a severe storm. (It is a common Old Testament theme that the wisdom and power of God is revealed in what he has created.)

- Psalm 121:3-4

He will not allow your foot to slip;
He who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, He who keeps Israel
Will neither slumber nor sleep.

In this instance, the second half of verse 3 is expanded in verse 4.

4) Using Figures of Speech

- Psalm 42:1

As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So my soul pants for Thee, O God.

The psalmist wasn't claiming that his soul *is* a deer, but is *like* a deer in some manner. How? His soul longed for God in the same way a thirsting deer longs for water. And he's probably referring to a deer that is *very* thirsty!

- Psalm 22:6

But I am a worm, and not a man,
A reproach of men, and despised by the people.

The second line helps explain the meaning of the first line. The psalmist was describing the way he was being treated by others, rather than describing which species of organism he belonged to!

[There are many types of figures of speech, and they are commonly used in the English language. So we will not place a major emphasis on this form of parallelism.]

(Other examples: Psalm 24:9, which is mentioned in a previous section, and Proverbs 25:25.)

OTHER ITEMS OF SIGNIFICANCE

1) "Alphabetical" poems

Some Psalms are structured in the form of an "alphabetical acrostic," with the lines beginning with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. (An example in the English language would be a poem in which the first line started with "A," the second with "B," the third with "C," and so forth.)

Psalm 119 is the most famous psalm of this type, with 8 verses for each of the 22 Hebrew letters. Some others are Psalms 25, 34, and 37. Some of the alphabetical poems are irregular, with one of the letters perhaps "missing" or "misplaced." Perhaps the authors of the poems were more interested in the message, and were willing to break the pattern, if it were necessary, to accurately communicate what they needed to say.

2) Poetic use of numbers

In some passages, you will find a number used, followed in the next line by the next greater number. An example of this is:

- Proverbs 30:18-19

There are three things which are too wonderful for me,
Four which I do not understand:
The way of an eagle in the sky,
The way of a serpent on a rock,

The way of a ship in the middle of the sea,
And the way of a man with a maid [maiden].

In the first line, we find the number "three," while in the second line we find the number "four." It is *not* that the author couldn't count. Rather, he was using these numbers poetically, starting with one number ("three"), then "building upon it" (by addition) in order to reach the climax in the second line. This second number is the real number of items he intended to describe, as the context demonstrates. In many respects, this is a special instance of the third type of parallelism, mentioned above.

This may have been the reason that, after David killed Goliath and Israel had victory over the Philistines, the singers sang :

- 1 Samuel 18:7b

Saul has slain his thousands,
And David his ten thousands.

They would have been innocently adding a "0" to the end of the first number, for poetic climax. Saul however, did not think it was very "poetical"! (1 Samuel 18:8-9)

Some other examples of the poetic use of numbers include: Proverbs 6:16 and the first two chapters of Amos. In some instances, the numbers may indicate "many," rather than a specific number. (Amos mentions "three" and "four" sins committed by various nations – though in most cases, only *one* specific example of sin is given.)

3) Parallelism across extended passages

Many of the same poetical structures that can be found in individual verses can also span across several verses - or even across entire chapters.

Psalm 1 - The first 3 verses (which describe the blessed man), form a contrast with verses 4-5 (which describe the fate of the wicked). Verse 6 is like a climax which summarizes the theme of the entire psalm.

Psalm 25 - This psalm has 4 sections, verses 1-3, 4-7, 8-15, and 16-21, with a final statement (prayer) in v. 22. The themes of the first and fourth sections are parallel, both being a prayer for relief from distress and slander. The two middle sections are also parallel, being a prayer for pardon and guidance (and confidence that it will be received.)

Even non-poetical (prose) sections of Scripture will sometimes have parallelism of one form or another. One example is found in Revelation 2-3, in which each of the seven letters follow a basic format (with only a few exceptions to the pattern): the letter's Destination, Commendation, Rebuke, Exhortation, and Promise.

A final comment:

Yes, it is possible to understand and benefit from the Scriptures without knowing all these things about Hebrew poetry. You will still be able to benefit from studying the Word of God. God's Word was written for *all of us*, not just for "experts" and "scholars."

But knowing these things may enable you to *better understand* some of the poetical portions of Scripture. And if this happens, you will benefit greatly from this knowledge.