

Hebraic Parallelism

The basics

Roses are red;
 Violets are blue;
Sugar is sweet,
 And so are you.

You may recognize this poem. It's a good example of the characteristics we anticipate in poetry—rhyme, rhythm, and meter. If someone says something with a noticeable cadence and rhymes their words, we might respond, "How poetic!"

Hebrew poetry is different. Rhyme, rhythm, and meter may be present, but they are not defining characteristics. Especially when it concerns understanding and interpretation, Hebraic parallelism is the defining trait of Hebrew poetry. There are three basic types of Hebraic parallelism: 1) Synonymous, 2) Antithetic, and 3) Synthetic.

Synonymous parallelism is when line one expresses the same idea as the second. Similar ideas are paralleled. Hence, synonymous parallelism. Psalm 19:1 (NASB:1995) is a good example:

The heavens are telling of the glory of God,
And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.

Here, we have three key components in each line. Creation is personified, and the testimony of her existence (the work of His hands) manifests God's glory.

Synonymous parallelism can also be in reverse order—the key components of the first line are in reverse order in the second. "Reverse" synonymous parallelism is called Chiastic parallelism. Psalm 51:1 is a good example:

Be gracious to me, O God,
 according to Your lovingkindness;
 according to the greatness of Your compassion,
Blot out my transgressions.

Antithetic parallelism is when the second line expresses the antithesis or opposite of the first. This is commonly found in contrasts between wickedness and righteousness, as in Psalm 1:6:

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

The way (lifestyle) of the righteous, of which the Lord approves (knows), is contrasted with that of the wicked, which ends in certain doom.

So, synonymous and antithetic parallelism are acutely defined. **Synthetic parallelism** is basically everything else. It is sometimes called constructive parallelism because the second line expands or amplifies the first. For example, Psalm 2:6:

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

Notice the lack of punctuation after King. The second line builds on or helps construct the first.

Synthetic parallelism is found in Proverbs, indicating a comparison. Proverbs 15:17:

Better is a dish of vegetables where love is
Than a fattened ox served with hatred.

Synthetic parallelism may also explain the first line in the second line. Proverbs 26:4:

Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
or you will be like him.

Synthetic parallelism may also continue beyond two lines, as in Psalm 1:1, where a blessed man is described in three ways:

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!

Of course, there are more types of Hebraic parallelism. These are the most common and significant types, and knowing how to identify and understand them will take you far in "meditating on His precepts, and fixing your eyes on His ways" (Psalm 119:15).

Try to identify all three types of Hebraic parallelism in Psalm 1 (ESV).

1. Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
2. but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law, he meditates day and night.
3. He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
4. The wicked are not so
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
5. Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
6. for the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.