

Parallelism In Biblical Writers

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It is well known that parallelism is one of the main features of Hebrew poetry. It is not so well known, although it is not at all a new idea, that some prose passages in the Bible also show parallelism. This suggests that parallelism is more than just a convention.

Just what the deeper significance of parallelism might be is discussed at the end of the article. Before that, we shall discuss parallelism in Hebrew poetry, Old Testament prose and prose in the New Testament, and illustrate how parallelism helps in interpreting the Bible.

Biblical quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version (RSV), unless otherwise noted.

Parallelism in Hebrew Poetry

After seeing parallelism in poetry, it can more easily be recognized in prose. The simplest form is *synonymous* parallelism—repetition of the same (or almost the same) idea :

Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?

Job 38:16

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Another form of parallelism brings in a contrasting idea (*antithetic parallelism*) :

A cheerful heart is a good medicine,
but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.

Prov. 17:22

Sometimes three parallel lines are involved :

At the blast of thy nostrils the water piled up,
the floods stood up in a heap;
the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.

Ex. 15:8

Another form involving more than two lines is *progressive* :

Who is like thee, O LORD, among the gods?
Who is like thee, majestic in holiness,
terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders?

Ex. 15:11

Hebrew poetry is not wholly made up of parallelism. Sometimes an extra line avoids monotony :

“I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,
and lack of bread in all your places,
yet you did not return to me”, says the LORD.

Amos 4:6

An important form is *introverted* parallelism (called *chiastic* parallelism by some writers). This is an initial sequence of themes, paralleled by a “return” sequence in the opposite order. Psalm 51:1 is a good example (the two themes are marked *a*, *b*):

a Have mercy on me, O God,
b according to thy steadfast love;
b according to thy abundant mercy
a blot out my transgressions.

The simplest possible form has the structure *aba*:

- a* Most blessed of women be Jael,
 - b* the wife of Heber the Kenite,
 - a* of tent-dwelling women most blessed.
- Judges 5:24

A more involved example of the same is Amos 5:18-20.

The structure *abab* is also found. It is termed *alternate* parallelism.

Recognizing the possibility of parallelism is a help in translating or interpreting the Bible, although this principle has to be used with care. An example where recent translations differ is the first half of Numbers 23:23, which is part of Balaam's second oracle. The RSV gives,

For there is no enchantment against Jacob,
no divination against Israel

The King James Version (AV) is similar and so is the New International Version (NIV), with "sorcery" instead of "enchantment".

This parallelism is not synonymous, because an "enchantment" is a spell or incantation, which normally had a fixed, written form.¹ This is a form of sorcery. "Divination", on the other hand, is trying to find out information about hidden or future matters.

The Jerusalem Bible (JB) translation is,

There is no omen against Jacob,
no divination against Israel;

and the New English Bible (NEB) is similar to this. The parallelism in these translations is synonymous.

Which type of translation is correct? We shall suggest a solution to this problem, partly from parallelism and partly from other points.

First, when Balaam uses parallelism elsewhere in this oracle (Num. 23:18-24) it is synonymous parallelism. Secondly, although Balaam was hired to "curse" Israel (Num. 22:6), he did not recite a

standard curse, but went off by himself to "meet the Lord" (Num. 23:3,15).

The third point concerns the Hebrew word which gives rise to the different translations, "enchantment" or "omen", in Num. 23:23. The word is *nachash*, and there are two passages where the context pinpoints its meaning (as a verb): in Genesis 44:5 it means "to divine" in connection with using a cup, and in I Kings 20:33 it means to take something as a sign or omen. Since Hebrew has several other words for divination of various kinds, it looks as if the specific meaning of *nachash* is connected with divination from external signs.

As a noun, *nachash* occurs only in Num. 23:23 and 24:1. The second of these verses tells that Balaam's original method, previously described as going "to meet the Lord", can also be described as going "to look for *nachash*-s". This obviously requires the translation "signs", "omens" or some similar word. (Even the RSV has "omens" here.)

Thus, there seems to be no evidence for *nachash* meaning "enchantment", and the JB translation of Num. 23:23, using synonymous parallelism, is supported by each point.

The following are some other verses in poetry where modern translations have parallelism but the AV does not: Ps. 56:8 (NIV); Is. 9:5; 49:24.

Some further interesting examples of parallelism in poetry are Adam's reaction to Eve (Gen. 2:23); Lamech's boasting (Gen. 4:23-24); God's oracle to Rebekah (Gen. 25:23); Isaac's blessing of Jacob and Esau (Gen. 27-29, 39-40); the ballad of the defeat of the Ammonites (Num. 21:27-30); and Joshua's prediction about the rebuilding of Jericho (Josh. 6:26).

Parallelism in Hebrew Prose

That parallelism is more than a poetic convention is shown by its appearance in conversation and prayer. When Abraham asked the Hittites for a place to bury Sarah, part of their reply sounded something like this :

In the choicest of our sepulchres bury your dead;

none of us will deny you his sepulchre or to bury your dead.

Gen. 23:6

Nabal's rude reply to David's men begins,

Who is this David?

Who is this son of Jesse?

I Sam. 25:10 (NIV)

A prayer of Nehemiah's includes these words:

Do not cover their guilt,

and let not their sin be blotted out from thy sight.

Neh. 4:5

An over-all introverted parallelism occurs in a heartfelt prayer of Moses:

- a* Why do you treat your servant so badly?
- a* Why have I not found favour with you,
- b* so that you load on me the weight of all this nation?
- c* Was it I who conceived all this people,
- c* was it I who gave them birth,
- d* that you should say to me, "Carry them in your bosom,
- d* like a nurse with a baby at the breast,
- e* to the land that I swore to give their fathers"?
- f* Where am I to find meat to give to all this people, when they
come worrying me so tearfully
- f* and say, "Give us meat to eat"?
- d* I am not able to carry this nation by myself alone;
- b* the weight is too much for me.
- a* If this is how you want to deal with me,
- a*₁ I would rather you killed me!
- a* If only I had found favour in your eyes,
- a*₁ and not lived to see such misery as this!

Num. 11:11-15 (JB)

In spite of its parallelism, this passage is in prose.

Introverted parallelism also occurs in Genesis 1:14 - 18. A possible analysis of it is as follows :

a 14 And God said,
b "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens
*b*₁ to separate the day from the night;
c and let them be for signs and for seasons
c and for days and years,
b 15 and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens
*b*₂ to give light upon the earth."

a And it was so.

a 16 And God made
b the two great lights,
d the greater light to rule the day,
d and the lesser light to rule the night ;
b (he made)² the stars also.

a 17 And God set them³
b in the firmament of the heavens
*b*₂ to give light upon the earth,
d 18 to rule over the day
d and over the night;
*b*₁ and to separate the light from the darkness.

a And God saw that it was good.

It is clear that this passage divides into three parallel sections : vv. 14 & 15, giving God's creative word; v. 16, listing what God made; and vv. 17 & 18, describing his putting them into action.

Does the parallelism help us to interpret the "signs" and "rule" in these verses? Some commentators interpret these terms in an astrological sense, while others do not.

The parallelism *cc* suggests that the "signs" are those enabling

men to construct a calendar—sunrise marking the day, phases of moon marking the month, and so on. Also it is possible to translate “signs and ...” as “signs, i.e....”⁴ The parallelism *c, d* in the three sections suggests that “ruling” is simply the giving of light. These interpretations are supported by the context, which has no astrological flavour.

Some other short passages with parallelism are Dt. 4:36; 1 Sam. 20:1; 2 Chron. 20:20.

Parallelism in the New Testament

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says,
 Do not give dogs what is holy;
 and do not throw your pearls before swine.
 Mt. 7:6

This, again, shows a natural use of parallelism in speech.

A similar example is Luke 11:11-12:

What father among you,
 if his son asks for a fish,
 will instead of a fish give him a serpent;
 or if he asks for an egg,
 will give him a scorpion?

Romans 5:12-21 is a very complex passage, but its repetitions can be understood as parallelism of subject matter. In the last century, E. W. Bullinger⁵ analysed this passage as follows (where the topics in parallel are supplied by the present writer):

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|----------|----------|--------|---|
| <i>A</i> | <i>a</i> | 12 | (Adam's sin led to death for all.) |
| | <i>b</i> | 13 | (Sin was not counted before law;) |
| | <i>c</i> | 14 | (Yet death reigned since Adam, who was a type of Christ.) |
| <i>B</i> | | 15 | (The gift is not like the sin.) |
| <i>B</i> | | 16, 17 | (The gift is not like the effect of the sin.) |
| <i>A</i> | <i>a</i> | 18, 19 | (Adam's sin led to condemnation for all.) |
| | <i>b</i> | 20 | (Law increased sin.) |
| | <i>c</i> | 21 | (Sin reigned in death; grace through Christ.) |

Here *AA* (and *BB*) are not intended to be *exactly* parallel.

This analysis is undoubtedly correct in seeing vv. 12-14 as the initial sequence of thought, and in explaining the reference to law in v. 20 as parallelism of thought with v. 13. It is inadequate, though, in its treatment of the repetitions in vv. 15-19, where each verse points out the contrast between Adam and Christ.

It may be significant that of the three different Greek words used for "gift" here, one of them (*dorea*) is found in the second halves of vv. 15 & 17, and not elsewhere in the passage. This looks like *stylistic* parallelism.

The following is suggested as an improved analysis of the parallel subjects :

- a* 12 (Adam's sin led to death for all.)
- b* 13 (Sin was not counted before law.)
- a* 14 (yet death reigned since Adam.)
- c* (Adam was a type of Christ.)
- c*₁ 15 (Many *died* through Adam's sin;
- c*₁ many receive the gracious *gift* in Christ.)
- c*₂ 16 (*Condemnation* followed Adam's sin;
- justification follows the free gift.)
- c*₁ 17 (Death reigned because of Adam's sin;
- c*₁ reign in life because of the gracious *gift* in Christ.)
- c*₂ 18 (All are *condemned* because of Adam's sin;
- c*₂ all can have acquittal and life because of Christ.)
- c* 19 (Many became sinners through Adam's disobedience;
- c* many become righteous through Christ's obedience.)
- b* 20 (Law increased sin; but there is grace:)
- a* 21 (although sin reigned in death,
- grace reigns to eternal life through Christ.)

The reader may like to scrutinize the following passages for the presence or absence of parallelism: Mt. 21:23; Acts 3:12-26; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 15:3-4; 18:4-8.

Psychology of Parallelism

Writing poetry certainly involves the emotions, and some spontaneous utterances in parallelism broke out under emotional stress (e.g., Nabal's in I Sam. 25:10). "Emotion" includes any stirring of the heart. This can be present when any serious matter is being expounded or discussed, as well as at other times. We may therefore suggest, as a tentative hypothesis to be examined, that *the presence of parallelism, whether in poetry or in prose, always indicates an emotional tone*. What this means is that there can be emotion without parallelism, but that there cannot be parallelism without emotion.

The first part of this statement seems easy to establish. David's reply to Nathan's accusation (2 Sam. 12:13) is an example of a statement which must have involved emotion, but where there is no parallelism.

The second part of our statement could be disproved by a single example, although all the examples of parallelism considered in this article seem to agree with it. It therefore seems possible that parallelism was used as one effective way of expressing emotionally stirring thoughts in prose as well as in poetry.

While the hypothesis is just a suggestion, what is certain is that neglecting the possibility of parallelism can lead interpreters of the Bible astray. Understanding parallelism makes the light of the sacred text shine brighter.

Notes

1. Cf. *The New Bible Dictionary* (London : Inter-Varsity, 1965), p. 770.
2. "he made" is not in the Hebrew.
3. The Hebrew word order requires "them" to be there.
4. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (The Anchor Bible).
5. E.W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, p. 723.