

Good summary of Hebrew Poetic definitions

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The Nature of Hebrew Poetry

Poetry can be difficult to define. There are times when Bible translations will even disagree about whether a passage should be considered poetry, which is usually presented in verse form. It is generally best to follow the consensus among translators.

The most striking characteristic of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. This occurs when two or more lines of poetry are set in balance to each other. There are many different opinions of how to define the different types of parallelism within Hebrew poetry, and the discussions can become quite complex. For the sake of simplicity, we will follow the three types of parallelism suggested by Robert Lowth:

1- Synonymous

2- Antithetical

3- Synthetic

Poetic Terminology

This guide will use the following terminology to refer to the structures of Hebrew poetry:

Colon: a single line of poetry (plural: **cola**)

Bicolon: two lines of poetry set in parallelism to each other, referred to as a single unit (plural: **bicola**)

Tricolon: three lines of poetry set in parallelism to each other, referred to as a single unit (plural: **tricola**)

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!

These three lines together form a single **tricolon**. Each separate line of the **tricolon** is a **colon**. These three **cola** form a **tricolon**.

Psalm 1:2

But his delight is in the law of the LORD,

And in His law he meditates day and night.

These two **cola** form a single **bicolon**. Each separate line is a **colon**.

Definition

Synonymous parallelism occurs when two or more cola have the same basic meaning. In other words, the second colon more or less repeats the first colon. Consider the examples below.

Example 1

The earth is the LORD's, and all it contains,

The world, and those who dwell in it. (Psalm 24:1)

This is a fairly straightforward case of synonymous parallelism. Both cola are essentially saying the same thing: everything belongs to God. Here is the same bicolon arranged according to its parallelism:

The earth is the LORD's and all it contains
The world (. . .) and those who dwell in it

In this example, "earth" and "world" are parallel terms. In the same manner, the phrases "and all it contains" and "those who dwell in it" are likewise set in parallel to each other. The phrase, "is the LORD's" is not repeated in the second colon, but its meaning is obviously implied (this is referred to as an "ellipsis").

Since this bicolon is an example of synonymous parallelism, it would probably be a mistake to interpret the parallel terms/phrases as though they were communicating distinctly different ideas. It is possible to view that the second colon makes a small emphasis on the final phrase ("those who dwell in it"), drawing our attention to God's sovereignty over all humanity.

Example 2

O LORD, how my adversaries have increased!
Many are rising up against me. (Psalm 3:1)

In this bicolon, the Psalmist is expressing a complaint to God through the use of synonymous parallelism. The following arrangement reflects the Hebrew word order:

O LORD how my adversaries have increased
(. . .) rising up against me many are

Note that the order of parallel terms/phrases have been reversed in this example. The phrase "O LORD" has been omitted in the second colon, but again it is clearly implied.

Example 3

For You formed my inward parts;
You wove me in my mother's womb. (Psalm 139:13)

Each colon in this example expresses the idea that God was intimately involved in the formation of the Psalmist.

For you formed my inward parts
You wove me in my mother's womb

The two verbs, "formed" and "wove" are directly parallel, but the second part of each colon are not grammatical equivalents. Still, the synonymous meaning between the cola is fairly straightforward.

Definition

Antithetical parallelism occurs when two cola are set parallel, but the second colon provides a contrast to the first. This type of parallelism features prominently in wisdom literature, as a way to provide contrast between the wise and the foolish. Consider the examples below.

Example 1

For evildoers will be cut off,

But those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land. (Psalm 37:9)

This is a fairly straightforward case of antithetical parallelism. The cola provide a contrast between God's treatment of "evildoers" and "those who wait for the LORD." Here is the same bicolon, arranged according to its parallelism:

For evildoers	will be cut off
But those who wait for the LORD	they will inherit the land

In this example, "evildoers" and "those who wait for the LORD" are parallel terms, although they express opposite subjects. In the same manner, the phrases "will be cut off" and "they will inherit the land" are set in parallel to each other in order to express the opposing outcomes of the two subjects.

Since the parallelism is making an explicit contrast between the two subjects, it is appropriate to draw some conclusion about their differences. So, it could rightly be said that evildoers do not wait for the LORD. Conversely, we could say that those who wait for the LORD are not evildoers. Although, you should exercise caution when drawing inferences from the text such as these. It may be helpful to try to summarize the meaning of the entire bicolon as a single statement.

Example 2

**The LORD protects the strangers;
He supports the fatherless and the widow,
But He thwarts the way of the wicked. (Psalm 146:9)**

This tricolon displays both synonymous and antithetical parallelism. The first two cola are synonymous, but the third colon is antithetical to the first two.

The LORD	protects	the strangers
He	supports	the fatherless and the widow
But He	thwarts	the way of the wicked

The verbs in the first two cola ("protects" and "supports") are similar in meaning, but the verb of the third colon ("thwarts") is directly opposite. The subject is the same in each colon ("The LORD"), but the object of the verb varies. Here, "strangers" is synonymous to "the fatherless and the widow." The Psalmist is communicating God's concern for the vulnerable/disenfranchised. Yet the third line expresses God's opposition to the wicked.

Example 3

**A gentle answer turns away wrath,
But a harsh word stirs up anger. (Proverbs 15:1)**

This bicolon uses antithetical parallelism by contrasting "gentle answer" with "harsh word."

A gentle answer	turns away	wrath
But a harsh word	stirs up	anger

Definition

Synthetic parallelism occurs when the second colon completes or compliments the meaning of the first. It is difficult to put a precise definition on this type of parallelism, and it is consequently used as a "catch-all" category. In other words, if the parallelism doesn't appear to be synonymous or antithetical, then it is classified synthetic.

We should note here that most Hebraists today no longer refer to the "synthetic" category. It has been replaced with more detailed and precise categories of parallelism, which would require a knowledge of Hebrew to adequately discuss.

While recognizing its inadequacy, this guide still uses the term synthetic as a useful category of parallelism.

Example 1

Fire goes before Him

And burns up His adversaries round about. (Psalm 97:3)

In this example of synthetic parallelism, the second colon neither echoes nor contrasts the first colon. Rather, it completes the thought which began in the first colon. One cannot draw direct equivalencies between the cola.

Often, the second colon of a synthetic bicolon will answer one of these questions: who? what? where? when? why? how?

In the above bicolon, the second colon answers the "what?" questions. It can be expressed thusly:

Q: **What** does the fire (that goes before Him) do?

A: It burns up His adversaries round about.

Example 2

Because your lovingkindness is better than life,

My lips will praise You. (Psalm 63:3)

Again, there are no direct equivalencies between these two cola. Yet the second colon is related because it completes a thought that began in the first colon and is carried forward.

This bicolon answers the question "why?" However, the answer to the question actually comes in the first colon:

Q: **Why** will my lips praise You?

A: Because Your lovingkindness is better than life.

Example 3

But as for us, we will bless the LORD

From this time forth and forever. (Psalm 115:18)

The second colon in this bicolon answers the question "when?" It completes the thought of the first colon by adding a further detail:

Q: **When** will we bless the LORD?

A: Now and forever.

Definition

Meter refers to the rhythmic structure and cadence of poetry. There is considerable debate over meter in Hebrew poetry. The only consensus among Hebraists is that there is no consensus as to how meter works. For this reason, unless you are prepared to engage in the scholarly debate with a fairly strong grasp of Hebrew, it is probably best to ignore any question regarding the meter of Hebrew poetry.

Below are brief descriptions of the two major theories of meter in Hebrew poetry.

Accent Patterns

One way of analyzing the meter of Hebrew poetry is by counting the number of accents. Consider the following example:

אַשְׁרֵי־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִלְךָ בְּעֵצַת רְשָׁעִים

blessed is the man who does not
walk in the counsel of the wicked

וּבְדַרְךְ חַטָּאִים לֹא עָמַד

and in the path of sinners does not stand

וּבְמוֹשָׁב לְצִיִּים לֹא יָשָׁב:

and in the assembly of scoffers does not sit

In order to express the meter, one simply counts the number of accents in each colon. In the above tricolon, the first colon has 7 accented syllables and the following cola have 4 each. This metrical scansion can be written as 7 + 4 + 4. Of course, many scholars disagree over how to divide a verse into its cola, as well as some specifics of the accents.

Syllabic Patterns

Another way of analyzing the meter of Hebrew poetry is by counting the number of syllables. We will consider the example from Psalm 1:1, as above:

אַשְׁרֵי־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִלְךָ בְּעֵצַת רְשָׁעִים

blessed is the man who does not
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וּבְדַרְךְ חַטָּאִים לֹא עָמַד

and in the path of sinners does not stand

וּבְמוֹשָׁב לְצִיִּים לֹא יָשָׁב:

and in the assembly of scoffers does not sit

The first colon has a total of 15 syllables, followed by 9 in the next colon and 8 in the last colon. This can be expressed as 15 + 9 + 8. The greatest difficulty with this method of scansion is that it requires a certain amount of conjecture over the development of Hebrew orthography.

Further Resources

The following publications represent significant works on Hebrew poetry. A PDF of these titles is available below.

Alonso Schökel, Luis. *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics*. Roma: Editrice pontificio Istituto biblico, 1988.

Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1985.

Berlin, Adele. *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1985.

Fokkelman, J. P. *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide*. Translated by Ineke Smit. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001.

Kugel, James L. *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Lunn, Nicholas P. *Word-Order Variation in Biblical Hebrew Poetry: Differentiating Pragmatics and Poetics*. Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2006.

O'Connor, Michael Patrick. *Hebrew Verse Structure*. Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 1980.

Petersen, David L., and Kent Harold Richards. *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1992.

Watson, Wilfred G. E. *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques*. London, UK: T & T Clark, 2005.