

THE FORM OF HEBREW POETRY: Parallelism

The basic principle of Hebrew poetry is the repetition, elaboration, or variation on the sense of a line

This *parallelism* may be semantic and/or grammatical.

Hebrew poetry uses all the figures of speech of English poetry: metaphors, similes, personification, etc. in striking ways. Vivid word pictures are a characteristic of the Hebrew language.

Synonymous parallelism: repeats the thought in synonymous terms

Deut- 32:1,2: *Hear O heavens, and I will speak;
Hear O Earth, the words of my mouth.
Let my teaching fall like rain
and my words descend like dew,
like showers on new grass,
like abundant rain on tender plants.*

Prov 11:25: *A generous man will prosper
he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.*

Antithetical parallelism contrasts the thought with another usually introducing the second line with "but":

Prov 10:1,2 *A wise son delights a father,
but a foolish son is a mother's grief.
Ill gotten treasures will not avail;
but virtue saves from death.*

Or Psalm 1:6 *For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous
but the way of the wicked will perish.*

Synthetic parallelism : A “catch-all” variety of forms:

- **Completion or internal:** where the second line completes the first:
Psalm 2:6 *Yet have I set my king
Upon Zion my holy hill.*
- **Comparison:**
Prov 15:17 *Better a meal of vegetables where there is love,
than a fattened calf with hatred.*
- **Climatic:** where a stairstep of lines adds thoughts to the first:
Psa 29:1;2: *Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones,
Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name;
Worship the Lord in the splendor of His holiness.*
- **Chaiastic:** Similar to Synonymous, only the second-line reverses the first:
Psa 51:1 *Have mercy upon me o Lord, according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.*
- **Emblematic:** The second line serves as an emblem to illustrate the first without any words of contrast:
Prov 11:29 *A gold ring in a swine's snout-
a fair woman without understanding.*

Prov 25:25 *Cold water to a thirsty soul,
and good news from a far country.*

Frequently the first of two paralleled lines is a more “general” term, and the following part uses more specific, extravagant, or explanatory terms or figures of speech to “intensify” and strengthen emotions, sharpen images, or make actions more powerful, real and concrete.

The combination of this “dynamic” *parallelism* with its vivid figurative language allows for the rich development of themes, meaning, and ideas within the poetry.

The basic unit of Poetry is the Strophe or Stanza.

A wide variety of larger parallel structures, refrains, alliterations, repetitions, acrostics or other literary devices may be used to unite the whole into a larger unit.

There are distinct forms for some types of poems such as laments, thanksgivings, praise songs, etc.

There is a striking absence of any “narrative storytelling” in Hebrew poetry, But these poetic forms are often used in the narrative and prophetic writings to make the images or descriptions of events or judgements vivid.

Hebrew poetry is also noted for its terseness : Frequently drops nouns or verbs; or omits conjunctions, temporal indicators or logical connectors.

It should be clear that Hebrew poetry is readily translated as it is the thoughts and images that “rhyme,” not the words.

**Praise the Lord, all nations!
Extol him, all peoples!
For great is his steadfast love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.
Praise the Lord!**

Psalm 117:1-2

