

THE PSALMS & OTHER HEBREW POETRY

Begin with some examples of Hebrew poetry & a look at basic principles of composition.

In *Understanding the Bible*, Stephen L. Harris distinguishes three main types of **parallelism** as structural characteristics of Hebrew Poetry: *synonymous*, *antithetical*, & *synthetic* (or *formal*, or *additive*). The term *additive* suggests that the idea in the first line (*stich*) is augmented, rather than repeated [*synonymous*] or contrasted [*antithetical*], in the second line. Two lines constitute a *distich*, which is the normal unit of Hebrew verse.

Here are some examples:

Happy are those

who do not follow the advice of the wicked, **SYNON.**
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;

ANTITHETICAL

but their delight is in the law of the Lord,

and on his law they meditate day and night. **SYNON.**

(Psalm 1:1-2)

For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born,
and a time to die;
a time to plant,
and a time to pluck up what is planted.
(Ecclesiastes 3:1-2)

When I lie down I say, "When shall I rise?"
But the night is long,
and I am full of tossing until dawn.
My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt;
my skin hardens, then breaks out again.
(Job 7:4-5)

As an exercise, for homework, identify the types of parallelism exhibited in the passages below. The answers are given at the end of the exercise.

7. The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. _____

8. For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish. _____

9. The LORD looks down from heaven on humankind
to see if there are any who are wise,
who seek after God. _____

10. A wise child makes a glad father,
but a foolish child is a mother's grief. _____

11. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his
wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course
with joy.

12. But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

The passage below is comprised of two *distichs* and exhibits both **internal** parallelism (**within** each *distich*) and **external** parallelism (**between** *distichs*).

Zion shall be redeemed by justice,
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.
But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together,
and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed.

13. The parallelism **within** the **first** distich is

14. " " " " **second** " "

15. " " **between** distichs is

7. Synonymous
8. Antithetical—the second stich negates the contrary of the first
9. Additive (a vs. b&c) and synonymous (b & c)
10. Antithetical (like 8)
11. Additive (a vs. b&c) and synonymous (b & c)
12. Synonymous
13. Synonymous
14. Synonymous
15. Antithetical (“But” is often—though not always—a signal.)

The other salient characteristic of Hebrew poetry (and often of prose) is the use of imagery and figurative language.

Let's look at one of the most familiar poems in the English language, the 23rd Psalm in the King James Version:

The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy [*chesed*] shall follow me
all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

The first 4 verses are based on a single metaphor, an analogy:

G*d = Shepherd
 :
 ? ?

What is the vehicle of the metaphor?

What is the tenor?

Then the metaphor shifts.

What is the metaphor in verse 5?

Notice that the “royal” metaphor essentially inverts the logic of the first four verses. Humble, “sheepish” obedience to the Sovereign of the Universe exalts the believer so that he (or she?) can “lord” it over enemies.

This kind of sudden reversal is a common characteristic of the Psalms, many of which shift from deep mourning & lamentation to joyous exaltation. In Psalm 23, this shift is anticipated and marked by a shift from 3rd person (*He is & does*) to 2nd: *You are*.

This figurative and grammatical dynamism is an important source of emotional power in the Psalms.