
SYNONYMOUS PARALLELISM

“hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth” (Isaiah 1:2)

Poetic parallelism is the most basic form of poetry in the Old Testament.¹ As Wilfred G. E. Watson has written, “Parallelism is universally recognized as *the* characteristic feature of biblical Hebrew poetry.”² Hebrew scholar James L. Kugel points out that poetic parallelism is “the basic feature of biblical songs—and, for that matter, of most of the sayings, proverbs, laws, laments, blessings, curses, prayers, and speeches found in the Bible.”³ Parallelisms in the Bible number in the thousands in poetic works, with more than a thousand in Isaiah alone.⁴ In some cases, such as in Proverbs and Isaiah, entire chapters are filled exclusively with two-lined poetic parallelisms. (Other examples abound in Psalms, Joel, and elsewhere.)

A parallelism generally consists of two lines, with each line having features or expressions that parallel or correspond with the other. For example, in the parallelism “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth” (Isaiah 1:2), *hear* parallels *give ear* and *heavens* parallels *earth*. The prophet-psalmist thus sets forth his ideas in the first line, then restates, reinforces, or reconfigures them in the next line. This reconfiguration may serve to emphasize, broaden, or add further light to the first clause. In a parallelism, both lines

are equally important. The second line, writes Kugel, is “not expected to be (nor regarded as) mere restatement” of the first half, but is meant to “add to it, often particularizing, defining, or expanding the meaning, and yet also to harken back” to it.⁵

Hebrew poetic parallelism was not a mere literary trick—it had a higher purpose. Prophets and poets created parallelisms to teach significant doctrines about the Lord; about his character, divine attributes, and qualities; about his workings with individuals, families, peoples, and nations; and more. Parallelisms can come in a variety of configurations (in

THE BOOK OF PROVERBS: A POTPOURRI OF PARALLELISMS

PROVERBIA. משלי

1 יִשְׁלֵי שְׁלֹמֹה בְּיַדְדֵי סֹלֶן יִשְׂרָאֵל:
 2 יִלְמַד חֵכְמָה וּמִסֵּר לְחֵינֵי אִמּוֹ בִּדְבָרָה:
 3 לְעֵלְמֵת מִסֵּר חֵשְׁבֹן וּמִשְׁפָּט וּמִשְׁפָּטִים:
 4 לְעֵלְמֵת לְחֵכְמָה וְעֵלְמֵת לְעֵלְמֵת וּמִסֵּר:
 5 יִשְׁמַע זֶהֱבָה וְיִחְסֵה לִפְנֵי זֶהֱבָה וְיִחְסֵה לִפְנֵי זֶהֱבָה:
 6 לְהַבִּיחַ מִשְׁלַל וּמִלִּצְיָה דְבַר חֵכְמָה וְתוֹרָה:
 7 יִרְאֵת יְהוָה וְיִתְּנָה רֵאשִׁית חַיֵּיהֶם וְיִתְּנָה אֱוִילִים כְּזָבִים:
 8 שְׁמַע בְּנֵי מִסֵּר אֲבִיךָ וְאַל תִּשְׁשׁ וְתִרְתָּ אִמְךָ:
 9 כִּי יִוָּלְדוּ לָךְ אֲנִי אֶלֶם לִאֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִים לְנַרְוָתִי:
 10 וְכִי אֲבִיפְתֹךְ חֲסִידִים אֵלֶיךָ וְאַל תִּבְזֶה:
 11 לֵב אֲתֵנָּה אֲבָרְכָה לְדָם נִשְׁמַתִּי לִנְפֹשׁ חַיִּים:
 12 וְגִבְלוֹם כְּשֹׁמֵל חַיִּים וְחִסְדִּים כְּזֹרֵךְ בָּדוּד:
 13 וְכִי יִרְוֶה נֶגֶד נִצְחָה וְכִי יִרְוֶה נִצְחָה:
 14 וְכִי יִרְוֶה נִצְחָה וְכִי יִרְוֶה נִצְחָה:
 15 וְכִי יִרְוֶה נִצְחָה וְכִי יִרְוֶה נִצְחָה:
 16 וְכִי יִרְוֶה נִצְחָה וְכִי יִרְוֶה נִצְחָה:
 17 וְכִי יִרְוֶה נִצְחָה וְכִי יִרְוֶה נִצְחָה:

In this image of the Hebrew of Proverbs 1:1-17, verse 1 reads, “The proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel.” Verses 2-4 give the purpose of proverbs: “to know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding; to receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity; to give subtlety to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion.” The book of Proverbs contains hundreds of examples of parallelisms, including synonymous and antithetical parallelisms. In fact,

the greater portion of Proverbs’ thirty-one chapters are parallelisms. Note how, in the image above, all verses except verse 11 are set forth in poetic lines rather than wrapped lines, the latter being a feature of scriptural histories and chronologies. Verse 8 submits a typical synonymous parallelism:

My son, hear the instruction of thy father,
and forsake not the law of thy mother.

this book I deal with three primary types—synonymous, antithetical, and coordinating).

The Old Testament features thousands of synonymous parallelisms in Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, and other books. Following are four brief examples.

Adah and Zillah, Hear my voice;
Ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech. (Genesis 4:23)

Three separate elements in the second line correspond with elements in the first line: *Adah* and *Zillah* are the names of the *wives of Lamech*, the word *hear* is the equivalent of *hearken*, and *my voice* corresponds with *my speech*.

Look unto Abraham your father,
and unto Sarah that bare you. (Isaiah 52:2)

This parallelism pairs male and female twice: *Abraham* with *Sarah* and, by extension, *father* with *mother* (she “that bare you”).

Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion;
put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city. (Isaiah 52:1)

This parallelism pairs the commands *put on thy strength* with *put on thy beautiful garments*, as well as the holy cities *Zion* with *Jerusalem*. Note also that in this passage the prophet Isaiah utilizes parallel structure to associate *garments* in the second line with *strength* in the first line, conveying the religious idea that God’s people who clothe themselves with “beautiful garments” clothe themselves with strength.⁶

we should have been as Sodom,
and we should have been like unto Gomorrah (Isaiah 1:9)

This brief parallelism pairs two similes, introduced with *as* and *like*. Each line begins with the same words, *we should have been*, and end with the two corresponding sister cities, *Sodom* and *Gomorrah*. These cities parallel

each other perfectly: both were so wicked that they were destroyed by the power of God.

Having emerged from the world of the Old Testament, the Book of Mormon likewise contains a number of synonymous parallelisms. This literary form is not as plentiful in the Book of Mormon because the Old Testament contains several books that are wholly dedicated to poetic structures (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and most of Isaiah), while the Book of Mormon consists primarily of historical narrative (roughly corresponding to the Old Testament books of Genesis, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and so forth).

pray unto him continually by day,
and give thanks unto his holy name by night (2 Nephi 9:52)

As can readily be seen, the command to *pray* pairs with *give thanks, unto him* parallels *unto his holy name*, and *by day* corresponds with *by night*.

for their works were works of darkness,
and their doings were doings of abominations (2 Nephi 25:2)

Here *their works, works*, and *darkness* pair with *their doings, doings*, and *abominations*.

Wo unto him that spurneth at the doings of the Lord;
yea, wo unto him that shall deny the Christ and his works!
(3 Nephi 29:5)

In this example, *wo unto him* occurs on each line, *spurneth* is paired with *shall deny*, *doings* is linked to *works*, and *Lord* corresponds with *Christ*.

Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh;
my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities. (2 Nephi 4:17)

In this parallelism, *heart* and *soul* correspond, *sorroweth* and *grieveth* are synonyms, and *my flesh* parallels *mine iniquities*.

Behold, my soul is rent with anguish because of you,
and my heart is pained. (1 Nephi 17:47)

Notes

1. See Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, 349–50. For an exploration of parallelisms in the Bible and the Book of Mormon, together with a definition and multiple examples, see Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon*, xii–xxxiv. For a list of synonymous parallelisms in the Book of Mormon, see the index of poetic forms therein on pp. 566–67 (under the entries “extended synonymous” and “simple synonymous”).
2. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 114. For a lengthy study of parallelism, including definitions and various categories of parallelisms, see pp. 114–59. For additional biblical examples of various types of parallelisms, examine the comprehensive study of Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, 349–62. See also Berlin, *Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, 3. One of the earliest scholars to examine the role of parallelisms in the Bible was Robert Lowth, who authored a two-volume work on the topic, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*. Concerning the history of the study of biblical parallelism, see Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 96–170; and Broadribb, “Historical Review of Studies of Hebrew Poetry.”
3. Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 1.
4. For the entire book of Isaiah laid out in parallelistic form, see Parry, *Harmonizing Isaiah*.
5. Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 8.
6. The idea of “beautiful garments” being associated with strength is further interpreted in Doctrine and Covenants 82:14 and 113:8.