

Hebrew Poetry

Three Main Characteristics of Hebrew Poetry

Terseness

Imagery/Symbolism

Parallelism

Hebrew Parallelism

Not Rhythmic Meter, Not Rhyming sounds

But rhyming meaning- Parallelism

Second line somehow reinforces the meaning of the first

Not 2 distinct thoughts

Prov. 20:1

	Wine is	a mocker
	a	b
and	beer a	brawler
	a'	b'

Amos 8:10

I will turn	your religious feasts	into mourning	A
a	b	c	
(I will turn)	and all your singing	into weeping.	A'
elliptical	b'	c'	
I will make	all of you	wear sackcloth	B
d	e	f	
	and shave your heads.		C
	g		
I will make	that time	like mourning ...	B'
d	e'	f'	
	and the end of it like a bitter day.		B''
	g'		

Types of Correspondence

Morphological- grammatical forms- e.g. same or contrasting verb types

Syntactical- Sentence structure, word order

Lexical (most common) synonyms or antonyms

Common Word pairs:

Day	Night
Heaven	Earth
Good	Evil
Righteous	Wicked
Wise	Fool
etc.	

Some pairs may say the same thing: e.g. pain and suffering

Some pairs, by saying two opposite poles, include everything in between

e.g. “from the East and from the West” = ‘from everywhere’

Types of Parallelism

Synonymous- 2nd line restates same thought

Isaiah 44:22

I have swept away	your offenses	like a cloud,
a	b	c
	your sins	like the morning mist.
	b'	c'

Psalms 100:4

Enter	his gates	with thanksgiving
a	b	c
and	his courts	with praise
	b'	c'

Antithetical- 2nd line restates the opposite thought

Prov. 10:1

A wise son brings	joy	to his father,
a	b	c
but a foolish son	grief	to his mother.
-a	-b	c

Prov. 14:34

Righteousness	exalts	a nation,
a	b	c
but sin	is a disgrace	to any people.
-a	-b	c

Synthetic- 2nd line advances/ completes the thought (catch all)

Obadiah 21

Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion
to govern the mountains of Esau.
And the kingdom will be the LORD's.

Amos 1:7

I will send fire upon the walls of Gaza
a b c
that will consume her fortresses.
d e

Special Types of Parallelism

Emblematic (Comparison) –special type of synonymous

Psalms 103:13

As a father has compassion on his children,
a b c
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;
a' b c'

Stairstep (Repetitive) – special type of synthetic

Joel 1:4

What the locust swarm has left A
the great locusts have eaten; B
what the great locusts have left A"
the young locusts have eaten; B"
what the young locusts have left A"
other locusts have eaten. B"

What We Learn From Parallelism

1. Interpret the two (or more) lines as one whole thought
2. Learn concepts by the company they keep
 - a. Defines and Contrast Words
 - i. The laborer's appetite *works* for him; his hunger drives him on. -Prov. 16:26
 - ii. Above all, love each other deeply, because love *covers over* a multitude of sins. –I Pet. 4:8 cf. Prov. 10:12- Hatred stirs up dissension, but love *covers over* all wrongs.
 - b. Defines and Contrasts Concepts
 - i. *Do not answer* a fool according to his folly, *or you will be like him* yourself. *Answer a fool* according to his folly, *or he will be wise in his own eyes*. -Prov. 26:4-5
 - ii. *May all who seek to take my life* be put to shame and confusion; *may all who desire my ruin* be turned back in disgrace. –Psa 40:14
3. Learn by living in their world-
 - a. seeing according to their contemporary thought forms
 - b. seeing according to their ways of communicating.
4. Learn by looking carefully
 - a. Parallelism forces us to read slowly
 - b. Parallelism forces us to ask the relationship of lines
5. Cuts our work in half
 - a. When we see the two lines as one whole thought
 - b. We only have to deal with half as many thoughts
 - c. Helps us combine ideas into larger ideas and helps us see the bigger picture
 - d. Sometimes parallelism points out the structure/organization of the passage
6. Interpret the lines as one whole!

Miscellaneous techniques

Sometimes a word is assumed, but not written in the 2nd line (elliptical)

Psa. 50:4

He summons the heavens above
 a b
 and the earth, that he may judge
 b' c

Sometimes a word is then added to compensate (ballast)

Prov. 4:1

Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction;
 a b
pay attention and gain understanding.
 a' c

Chiasm- The order of the 2nd line is opposite, forming the pattern X (Gk. chi.)

Psalm 76:1

In Judah God is known;
 a b
his name is great in Israel.
 b' a'

Chiasm may be extended to more than 2 members

 a b c d
 d' c' b' a'

Chiasm may extend to larger structures, verses or whole chapters or books

 A
 B
 C
 D
 C'
 B'
 A'

Acrostic- Each verse begins with the next letter of the Heb. Alphabet

An English Example to demonstrate an acrostic:

At the beginning of time,
Before anything existed
Creation had not yet happened,
Don't look for anything
Emptiness is all you'll find
etc.

Some Psalms are arranged as acrostics. The most famous example is Psalm 119, which contains eight verses for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Most Bibles print the Hebrew letter as a heading for each section. Each verse in that section begins with that letter.

Acrostic form is an aid to memorization. It is evidence of careful, thoughtful composition. It may also imply that the author is claiming to have covered the subject 'from A to Z.'