

A Guide to Parallelism in the Psalms and Hebrew Poetry

Parallelism defined: *Parallelism describes two or more lines of poetry that are related to each other through synonym, contrast, or ascent, and/or grammatical structure. The moving, memorable effect of parallelism is something that is pleasantly and powerfully experienced by all regenerate readers of the Holy Scriptures, even if they do not know the term(s) or technicalities exhibited thereby. Parallelism in its simplest form has been described as “A is true, and what’s more, B is true.”*

Different kinds of Parallelism:

1) Synonymous Parallelism: *The truth in the first line is repeated and restated in the second line with synonymous, equivalent terminology. (A is synonymous with B)*

**If the lines mean the same thing, without line B going beyond line A, it is synonymous parallelism.*

“Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching” (Proverbs 1:8)

“For they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck” (Proverbs 1:9)

“If you lie down, you will not be afraid, when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.” (Proverbs 3:24)

2) Antithetical Parallelism: *The truth stated in the first line is contrasted in the second line by the opposite truth. (A is contrasted with B; both lines are true).*

** But or not are key words to identifying antithetical parallelism.*

Proverbs 12:15 The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, **but** a wise man listens to advice.

Proverbs 15:29 “The Lord is far from the wicked, **but** he hears the prayers of the righteous.”

Psalms 73:26 “My flesh and my heart may fail, **but** God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

Proverbs 15:1 “A soft answer turns away wrath, **but** a harsh word stirs up anger.”

(Review: Identify the following as either Synonymous or Antithetical parallelism: Proverbs 1:2 _____;

Proverbs 15:17 _____; Proverbs 16:28 _____

3) Ascending Parallelism: *The truth stated in the first line is heightened and/or completed in the second line with different words.*

“My son, if you **receive** my words,
and **treasure up** my commandments with you...”

(Here, “treasure” heightens “receive” because it involves an emotional ascription of value as opposed to a simple reception).

“But the path of the righteous is like **the light of dawn**,
which **shines brighter and brighter** until full day.” (Proverbs 4:18)

4) Climactic Parallelism: The second line repeats part of the first line, and the final part of the parallelism heightens and goes beyond the first.

(Think of jumping on a trampoline. The first jump is shorter than the second. The first jump gets you *part of the way to where you're going, the second retraces the path of the first, but takes you beyond the first*).

Psalm 96:7 **Ascribe to the LORD**, O families of the peoples, **ascribe to the LORD** glory and strength!

Romans 4:7 "**Blessed are those** whose lawless deeds are forgiven, **and whose sins are covered**; **8 blessed is the man** against whom the Lord will not count his sin."

Review: Identify the following as either Ascending or Climactic Parallelism: Psalm 93:3 (_____); Psalm 95:6 (_____); Psalm 29:1 (_____);

5) Emblematic Parallelism: A figure of speech is used to grab attention in the first line, and then that figure of speech is explained in the second line.

Psalm 42:1 "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God."

Proverbs 26:14 As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed."

Review: Identify the following as Synonymous, Antithetical, Ascending, Climactic, or Emblematic Parallelism: Psalm 1:2 (_____);

Psalm 57:1 (_____); Psalm 26:21 (_____);

Proverbs 27:15 (_____); Psalm 2:4 (_____); Psalm 127:4

(_____); Psalm 146:3 (_____); Psalm 1:6

(_____); Psalm 129:1-2 (_____); Psalm 130:5-6

(_____); Psalm 8:3 (_____); Proverbs 16:29

(_____); Proverbs 16:32 (_____); Proverbs 21:1

(_____); Psalm 2:8 (_____); Proverbs 21:5

(_____); Psalm 8:4 (_____); Proverbs 21:9

(_____); Proverbs 24:3 (_____); Psalm 146:1

(_____); Proverbs 25:12 (_____); also 25:14);

Proverbs 11:22 (_____); Proverbs 9:8 (_____); Psalm 150 (_____).

Parallelism through grammatical structure

6) Alternating Parallelism: The third part relates to the first part, and the fourth part relates to the second part (ABAB)

Synonymous Alternating Parallelism

Psalm 103:11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; 12 as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. (These lines are also emblematic!)

Psalm 19:8: "**The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.**" (Here, lines A and C are related, in that they speak of the quality of the Lord's directions, and Lines B and D are related, in that they show the effects of the commandments and statutes physiologically to the believer).

Antithetical Alternating Parallelism

Psalm 57:6 **They set a net for my steps**; my soul was **bowed** down. **They dug a pit in my way**, **but** they have **fallen** into it themselves. (Here, lines A and C are related, and the result of each line appears in lines B and D... but the contrast is brought out by the heightened direction words (bowed/fallen), with dramatic effect!).

7) Chiastic Parallelism: *In its simplest form (ABBA), the first part relates to the fourth part, and the second part relates to the third part.*

Psalm 124:7 (A) **We have escaped** like a bird
(B) from the **snare of the fowlers**;
(-B) the **snare is broken**,
(-A) and **we have escaped!**

Isaiah 60:1

Arise, **shine, for your light** has come, [A]
And the glory of the Lord **has risen upon you** [B]
For behold, **darkness** shall cover the earth, [C]
And thick **darkness** the peoples; [-C]
But the Lord will **rise upon you** [-B]
and His **glory will be seen upon you**. [-A]

(Line -A interprets HOW they will shine, which is a natural question that arises from the command in line A, the line to which line -A structurally relates: because His glory will be seen upon them)

John 1:1-2

e=n arch In the Beginning

hn o logoj was the Word

kai o logoj and the Word

hn proj ton qeon was with God

kai qeoj and God

hn o logoj was the Word

outoj hn He was

en arch In the Beginning