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Parallelism in Hebrew Poetry Demonstrates a Major Error in the Hermeneutic of Many Old-Earth Creationists

Tim Chaffey, Web writer and editor, Answers in Genesis, Petersburg, Kentucky

Abstract

Many old-earth creationists cite poetic passages in an effort to convince people that we cannot and should not interpret the creation account literally. Yet the old-earth creationist is quick to interpret poetic passages literally and treat the narrative passages figuratively. This article will provide a survey of the nature of Hebrew poetry and provide examples of the various forms of parallelism exhibited in the six poetic books of the Bible: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations. The final section of this study will show that Genesis 1 is not poetry, and a brief examination of a popular Old Testament event will readily display the vast differences between narrative and poetry.

Keywords: narrative, Hebrew poetry, synonymous parallelism, antithetic parallelism, synthetic parallelism, framework hypothesis, progressive creationism, hermeneutics, old-earth creationism, chiasm

Introduction

Poetry is a highly stylized form of writing used by many cultures, each having their own unique methods of conveying information. Americans and other Westerners are familiar with poetry based on rhyme and meter. For the ancient Hebrews, poetry was typically not based on rhyme, but on a concept known as parallelism.

The nature of Hebrew poetry was recognized in the 12th century by Ibn Ezra and by Kimchi in the 13th century, but it was more clearly defined by Robert Lowth in 1753 (Unger 1951, p. 282). This style is marked by a focus on the arrangement of concepts rather than arranging words in a rhyming pattern. Lowth listed three primary types of parallelism: synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic (Lucas 2003, pp. 67–68). These are sometimes called similar thoughts, contrasting thoughts, and additional thoughts, respectively (McQuilkin 1992, p. 205). This paper will define these types of parallelism, give examples of each type found in the poetic books of Scripture, and examine the importance of parallelism.

Types of Parallelism

Synonymous parallelism is perhaps the easiest to spot while reading. This term applies to successive lines of text which state essentially the same concept in two different ways. Unger defined it as "the first line (or, stich) reinforc[es] the second and giving a distich" (Unger 1951, p. 281). An example of this is found in Psalm 2:4:

He who sits in the heavens shall laugh;
The LORD shall hold them in derision.

Although these two lines are not identical, they convey the same concept regarding God's response toward those who plot and scheme to overthrow Him.

The second type of parallelism identified by Lowth is known as antithetic parallelism, which is nearly the opposite of synonymous parallelism. This occurs when the second stich is directly contrasted to the first, and it is done to emphasize or confirm the thought of the first. Proverbs 15:2 provides a good example.

The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable,
But the mouth of fools spouts folly.

By contrasting the folly from the mouth of fools with the tongue of the wise, it focuses attention on the rightness of the tongue of the wise.

The third type of parallelism has been the subject of much discussion because Lowth may have oversimplified this category into a sort of catch-all for every other type of poetry. Robertson McQuilkin stated that synthetic parallelism is found when "the poet adds to the original concept" (McQuilkin 1992, p. 201). He sees the first two verses of Psalm 1 as an example of this.

Blessed is the man
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.

Each successive line of this passage builds on the concept of what a man who is blessed will be like. Three lines describe what he will not do, and two give positive examples of what he will do.

But is synthetic parallelism really that easy to define? Mickelsen does not believe synthetic parallelism is even true parallelism. He wrote,

This is a category formulated by Bishop Lowth but in reality is not true parallelism. The meaning continues but the balance of thought is lost. The thought is extended—it flows on—but the stress and balance of true parallelism is not there (Mickelsen 1963, p. 326).

LeMon and Strawn added:

Synthetic parallelism is thus a kind of catchall category; when poetic lines are neither synonymous nor antithetical, Lowth placed them in this third type (LeMon and Strawn 2008, p. 504).[1]

James Kugel offered the most thorough critique of parallelism as the primary characteristic of Hebrew poetry. He argued that the attempt to classify all poetic lines into just three categories does not work (Kugel 1981, p. 68).

Mickelsen apparently agreed with this aspect of Kugel's assessment since he explained five other types of parallelism, which would have all been categorized by Lowth as synthetic. The first three fall under the category of complete parallelism, while the last two are classified as incomplete parallelism.

Emblematic parallelism occurs when one stich states a concept in a literal manner and the other line states a corresponding idea figuratively. This form is fairly easy to recognize due to the use of metaphor or simile. As such, it is also called parallelism of comparison.[2] A well-known example of this is found in Psalm 42:1.

As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So pants my soul for You, O God.

The deer literally does pant for water for the brooks, but a soul does not literally "pant" for God. This is a figurative way of expressing the psalmist's desire for God.

Mickelsen stated that stair-like parallelism

is a fascinating kind of parallelism which utilizes meaningful repetition to the utmost. A part of the first line is repeated while the newer elements build up to a climax (Mickelsen 1963, p. 326).

Psalm 29:1–2 displays this stair-like approach.

Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones,
Give unto the LORD glory and strength.
Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name;…

"Give unto the LORD" is stated in each of the lines, but the second and third lines add to the first by telling the "mighty ones" what they should give unto the LORD.

Introverted or inverted parallelism is the most complex of the forms discussed so far. Mickelsen stated,

In this type, two lines stand closely together, and they are balanced off against two other lines. In a strophe or stanza consisting of eight lines, introverted parallelism is found when lines 1–2 correspond to lines 7–8, and lines 3–4 correspond with lines 5–6

(Mickelsen 1963, p. 326).

When two lines are paired together and are parallel to another pair of lines it is called external parallelism. An example of introverted parallelism is found in Psalm 30:8–10 (slashes and spacing added to display the parallelism).

To You, O LORD,	/	I called,
And to the LORD	/	I made supplication:
What profit is there	/	in my blood
	/	if I go down to the pit?
Will the dust	/	praise You?
Will it declare	/	Your faithfulness?
Hear, O LORD	/	and be gracious to me;
O LORD	/	be my helper.

When laid out like this, it is easy to see how the first two and last two lines correspond to each other. The two middle pairs also correspond to each other. Notice that the parallelism is nearly complete. It is only missing a phrase in the fourth line.

This type of parallelism makes use of chiasm, a common device in Hebrew poetry (Bullock 1988, p. 36), so named because when it is diagrammed, the lines form an X, which is the equivalent of the Greek letter chi. Bullock cites Proverbs 2:4 as an example. The phrases of the English version have been rearranged to match the Hebrew order.

If you seek her   as silver

as for hidden treasures   and search for her

The X format of this verse is clearly visible. Some have sought to apply this chiastic structure to larger portions of Scripture. This will be examined in the final section when discussing the importance of parallelism.

There are also two forms of incomplete parallelism. The first is known as incomplete parallelism with compensation. In this form there are an equal number of stressed units in each stich, but they are not exactly parallel. Psalm 103:15 displays this type.

As for man / his days are like grass;
          / As a flower of the field, / so he flourishes.

The second form of incomplete parallelism is known as incomplete parallelism without compensation. This one barely qualifies as parallelism in any way because, as the title suggests, it is incomplete, and the lines do not even have an equal number of stressed units. Mickelsen cites Psalm 27:4 as an example of this, and includes a diagram to help the reader see what parts are parallel. Below, the pattern is given first, followed by the passage divided up to match the

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[1] LeMon and Strawn cite Lowth's admission that his third category was very broad, often including a scheme of parallelism that is subtle or obscure. The difficulty with such a broad category is highlighted by them. "A very real problem arises: what keeps mundane prose from being just another kind of synthetic parallelism?" LeMon and Strawn (2008, p. 504).

[2] Some have argued that this form of parallelism was actually a form of synonymous parallelism (McCabe n.d.) "Emblematic parallelism is actually a type of synonymous parallelism in which one line is figurative and the other line is literal" (Parsons 1993, p. 156).
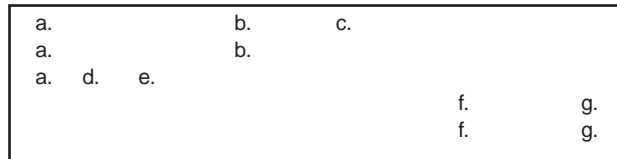
Fig. 1. Mickelsen classified the form of Psalm 27:4 as incomplete parallelism without compensation. This complex scheme illustrates one of the problems with Lowth's simplistic categories.

pattern (Mickelsen 1963, p. 327) (Figs. 1 and 2).

It is certainly difficult to keep track of this complex form of incomplete parallelism. It is no wonder that Mickelsen, Kugel, and others do not agree with Lowth's simplistic categories.

Examples of Parallelism in the Poetic Books

With the exception of the chiastic example, every example has come from the Psalms. However, the other poetic books employ parallelism. This section will provide examples of parallelism found throughout the poetic books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations.

Job

In many respects, the book of Job is far different from the other poetic books. It is considered to be wisdom literature, like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (Lucas 2003, p. 79), but Job is largely made up of conversations between Job and his friends trying to figure out why he is suffering so much. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes take the form of a teacher passing on instructions to his readers. Despite their differences, these books are primarily written as poetry, and, as such, contain a great deal of parallelism.[3]

Synonymous parallelism is used throughout Job, by each of the major characters. Below are examples of synonymous parallelism from the mouths of Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, Elihu, and God.

Job
Why did I not die at birth?
Why did I not perish when I came from the womb?
(Job 3:11).
Eliphaz
By the blast of God they perish,
And by the breath of His anger they are consumed

(Job 4:9).
Bildad
Does God subvert judgment?
Or does the Almighty pervert justice? (Job 8:3).
Zophar
Can you search out the deep things of God?
Can you find out the limits of the Almighty?
(Job 11:7).
Elihu
Hear my words, you wise men;
Give ear to me, you who have knowledge
(Job 34:2).
God
…When the morning stars sang together,
And all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:7).
Antithetical parallelism is very common in Proverbs, but scarce in Job. An example can be found in Job 8:7.

Though your beginning was small,
Yet your latter end would increase abundantly.
Job does contain a great deal of synthetic parallelism, as defined by McQuilkin, in which the speaker or writer adds additional information to the original idea. This can also be found in the speeches of each major character.
Job
Why is light given to him who is in misery,
And life to the bitter of soul (Job 3:20).
Eliphaz
I have seen the foolish taking root,
But suddenly I cursed his dwelling place
(Job 5:3).
Bildad
For we were born yesterday, and know nothing,
Because our days on earth are a shadow (Job 8:9).
Zophar
For an empty-headed man will be wise,
When a wild donkey's colt is born a man
(Job 11:12).
Elihu
What man is like Job,
Who drinks scorn like water… (Job 34:7).
God
He moves his tail like a cedar;
The sinews of his thighs are tightly knit
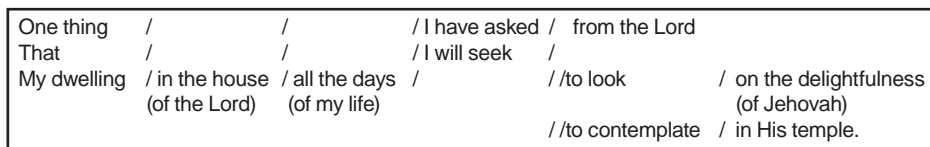(Job 40:17).
Synthetic parallelism seems to be more of a natural

Fig. 2. Here is the text of Psalm 27:4 according to its form.

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[3] The prologue and epilogue of Job are not poetic.

fit for the book of Job because it allows the speaker to convey more information per distich. Since Job and his friends carry on lengthy discourses, this form of parallelism is well-suited to give the reader the necessary amount of information.

Proverbs

Since the examples in the first section of this paper were primarily from the Psalms, there is no need to find more examples of these forms of parallelism from this book. Turning to the book of Proverbs reveals multiple examples of Lowth's three types of parallelisms.

Synonymous parallelism is found numerous times throughout the book, and several times in the first chapter alone.

We shall find all kinds of precious possessions,
We shall fill our houses with spoil;
Cast in your lot among us,
Let us all have one purse
My son, do not walk in the way with them,
Keep your foot from their path;
For their feet run to evil,
And they make haste to shed blood (Proverbs 1:13–16).

Each distich in this section contains an example of synonymous parallelism. The context of the passage may explain why this was chosen. The writer instructed his son to stay away from people who would entice him to make evil decisions. As such, the information bears repeating and synonymous parallelism works perfectly in this setting.

Proverbs contains the highest percentage of antithetical parallelism in the poetic books. One of the most popular verses in the book is a great example of this form.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
But fools despise wisdom and instruction
(Proverbs 1:7).

The mention of fools despising instruction reiterates the importance of seeking wisdom and instruction, but this can only truly begin when one fears the LORD.

Just as it does with synonymous parallelism, Proverbs also strings together multiple antithetical distiches.

In the multitude of words sin is not lacking,
But he who restrains his lips is wise.
The tongue of the righteous is choice silver;
The heart of the wicked is worth little.
The lips of the righteous feed many,
But fools die for lack of wisdom (Proverbs 10:19–21).

The contrast between the righteous man and the foolish or wicked man is drawn into clear focus by the use of antithetical parallelism. The first stich tells the reader to either strive for something positive or to avoid something negative. The very next line shows what happens when that advice is ignored. This is a powerful way to communicate one's point.

Proverbs does not utilize synthetic parallelism as frequently as the other two forms. This is likely due to the fact that in most places, the book is not advancing a narrative at all, but simply providing short pieces of wise advice. One place where a sort of pseudo-narrative is told is found in the passage about a virtuous wife in Proverbs 31. As expected, this is also the passage that contains a high percentage of synthetic parallelism.

Who can find a virtuous wife?
For her worth is far above rubies.
The heart of her husband safely trusts her;
So he will have no lack of gain.
She does him good and not evil
All the days of her life.
She seeks wool and flax,
And willingly works with her hands.
She is like the merchant ships,
She brings her food from afar (Proverbs 31:10–14).

In fact, every verse in the account of the virtuous wife is made up of synthetic parallelism. There are also several examples of this form in the warning about the harlot in Proverbs 7.

Proverbs masterfully utilizes each of the forms of parallelism. To stress a point that is being made, the writer used synonymous parallelism. To offer both an exhortation and a warning of failing to achieve a goal, the author used antithetic parallelism. Finally, when the writer wanted to expound on particular subject, he utilized a high percentage of synthetic parallelism.

Ecclesiastes

The book of Ecclesiastes is quite different from any other book in the Bible. In many regards, it is almost the opposite of Proverbs, except for the final chapter. In Proverbs, the writer already has gained wisdom and is seeking to pass that on to others. In Ecclesiastes, the author (likely the same man who wrote most of Proverbs)[4] is seeking that wisdom by a study of the natural world. The author discovers the complete vanity or futility of a life "under the sun," which is not centered in the fear of God and devotion to Him (Parsons 2003, p. 166). The pessimism portrayed throughout much of the book caused disputes among rabbis about whether it belonged in the canon. Some argued that it contained the Epicurean philosophy and a denial of the life to come (Archer 1994, p. 78).

The point of the book is to demonstrate the futility of a life lived from a naturalistic or materialistic point of view. This is identified by the phrase "under the

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[4] King Solomon is often considered to be the author of Ecclesiastes and much of Proverbs; however there are many scholars who reject Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes. For a good overview of arguments for both Solomonic and non-Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes see Garrett (2001, pp. 257–261).

sun," which occurs 29 times. By the end, the author discovers that only when one recognizes his Creator can life have meaning and purpose (McCabe 1996, p. 99). So the final chapter is more like Proverbs.

Another similarity to Proverbs is the masterful way in which the author makes use of each type of parallelism. Although synthetic parallelism is used most frequently, synonymous parallelism is scattered throughout the book.

Because of laziness the building decays,
And through the idleness of hands the house leaks (Ecclesiastes 10:18).

Antithetic parallelism is also utilized throughout the book, seemingly to a higher degree than the synonymous kind. This is often done to contrast the wise man and the fool.

A wise man's heart is at his right hand,
But a fool's heart at his left.
The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious,
But the lips of a fool shall swallow him up;… (Ecclesiastes 10:2, 12).

As mentioned above, synthetic parallelism appears more often than synonymous parallelism in Ecclesiastes. Once again, this is likely due to the advancement of a sort of narrative. This book also includes numerous verses composed of tristiches instead of the common distich. For example, Ecclesiastes 1:9–11 illustrates the use of tristiches and synthetic parallelisms.

That which has been is what will be,
That which is done is what will be done,
And there is nothing new under the sun.
Is there anything of which it may be said,
"See, this is new"?
It has already been in ancient times before us.
There is no remembrance of former things,
Nor will there be any remembrance of things that are to come
By those who will come after.

Although the first two lines in this passage are fairly synonymous, the remaining lines build upon what is before them and provide more detail. Through the use of synthetic parallelism, the author is able to tell of his futile search for wisdom by trying to experience everything "under the sun."

Song of Solomon

The proper interpretation of the Song of Solomon has been disputed among scholars due to its subject matter. On its surface, it appears to be an ongoing drama between a man and his bride, including a description of their wedding night. Some scholars have objected to a straightforward interpretation and instead have proposed that it is an extended allegory to show God's love for Israel or Christ's love for the Church (Archer 1994, p. 541).[5]

Since the Song advances an ongoing account, one would expect it to contain quite a bit of synthetic parallelism. In fact, most of the Song does take this form. Nevertheless, there is some synonymous parallelism.

You are all fair, my love,
And there is no spot in you (Song of Solomon 4:7).

I did not find any examples of antithetical parallelism in the Song. This is likely due to the nature of the content. The characters frequently express their desire for each other, and describe each other in positive terms. There really is no need for the positive/negative contrast found in antithetical parallelism. However, there are plenty of examples of synthetic parallelism.

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
As a seal upon your arm;
For love is as strong as death,
Jealousy as cruel as the grave;
Its flames are flames of fire,
A most vehement flame.
Many waters cannot quench love,
Nor can the floods drown it.
If a man would give for love
All the wealth of his house,
It would be utterly despised (Song of Solomon 8:6–7).

Through the use of synthetic parallelism, the characters in the Song of Solomon are able to advance the plot. They describe their passionate experiences together in graphic detail through poetic language, which is perfectly suited for this type of dialogue.

Lamentations

The final poetic book in Scripture was written by the prophet Jeremiah. This short book is made up of a series of laments by the prophet concerning the devastation which had just been leveled on Jerusalem by the Babylonians. Approximately one-third of the Psalms take the form of a lament (Lucas 2003, pp. 3–4), which "give voice to the complaint saints feel when they experience various troubles in this life" (McGinniss 2006, p. 35).

Chapters 1, 2, and 4 are dominated by lengthy verses often composed of four or five lines. The third and fifth chapters are marked by numerous distiches. Despite the difference in format, the verses are still predominantly made up of synthetic parallelism. Here is an example of two quatrains.

Even the jackals present their breasts
To nurse their young;

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[5] Archer seems to favor a third view, which blends these two elements. The typical view sees the account as being an actual account of Solomon with one of his wives who taught him the true meaning of love, which is symbolic (or typical) of God's love for His people and/or Christ's love for His church.

But the daughter of my people is cruel,
Like ostriches in the wilderness.
The tongue of the infant clings
To the roof of its mouth for thirst;
The young children ask for bread,
But no one breaks it for them (Lamentations 4:3–4).

It is easy to see how the author uses synthetic parallelism to build each successive line upon the original idea. The same is true even when the format switches to the use of distiches.

The crown has fallen from our head.
Woe to us, for we have sinned!
Because of this our heart is faint;
Because of these things our eyes grow dim;
Because of Mount Zion which is desolate,
With foxes walking about on it (Lamentations 5:16–18).

Once again, Jeremiah, like the other writers examined in this section, was able to expound on an idea through the use of synthetic parallelism.

The Importance of Recognizing Hebrew Parallelism

Readers of English translations of the Bible do not have much difficulty in identifying poetic and prose texts; the work has already been done for them by the translators. The original text simply runs together like narrative rather than giving away the fact that it is poetry by the way it is formatted on the page.

It is crucial for a Christian to know when he is reading narrative or poetry. James Kugel did not believe there was any substantive difference between the two, but several distinctions can be made. Besides the parallelism readily found in poetry, there are other distinguishing characteristics which can help the reader spot poetry. Poetic passages contain a high percentage of figurative language. For example, they have a much higher rate of perfect and imperfect verbs than narrative passages, which often utilize preterite verbs.[6]

This ability to identify parallelism and differentiate between these two genres has become increasingly important in modern times. Many scholars, such as Meredith Kline, have promoted a novel explanation of the Genesis creation account, which seeks to reclassify the first chapter as poetic or "semi-poetic" (Kline 1958, p. 157). His view, known as the framework hypothesis, was invented to de-emphasize the actual meaning of the text, so that its adherents can claim that it is not

meant to convey detailed historical information. As such, if someone wants to add the billions of years suggested by naturalistic sciences, then he is "free of biblical constraints" (Kline 1996) to do so. However, if the Bible's opening chapter does not contain these hallmarks of Hebrew poetry, then this view fails.

One of Kline's former students, John Rankin, has attempted to identify parallel concepts in Genesis 1 in an effort to support this view. He wrote, "The Framework theory begins in recognition of the basic nature of Hebrew poetry, and its service to literary device" (Hodge 2006, pers. comm.).[7] He continued,

In Genesis 1, all but v. 27 is written in prose, but the overall structure and details abound in the parallelisms of Hebrew poetry. It is in many ways the song of God's creation. The Framework theory highlights this:
Day 1 is parallel to Day 4;
Day 2 is parallel to Day 5; and
Day 3 is parallel to Day 6 (Hodge 2006, pers. comm.)

There are many problems with this approach, but space does not allow for a full critique. It is sufficient to say that the alleged parallelism does not hold up under close examination (Chaffey 2008, pp. 48–50). Moreover, it should be apparent that this argument misrepresents Hebrew parallelism prevalent in the poetic books.[8] The Genesis creation account is not dependent upon parallelism, whether synonymous, antithetic, or synthetic. As such, it stands as historical narrative and should be interpreted as such.

Comparison of the Poetic and Narrative Reports of the Red Sea Crossing

One of the simplest ways to showcase the vast differences between poetry and narrative is to look at Exodus 14 and 15. In Exodus 14, the Red Sea crossing is described in historical narrative. Exodus 15 provides a poetic account of this same event. Both accounts are inspired and true, but narrative and poetry convey God's Word in a different manner. Pay close attention to the type of language used in the following accounts.

Here is the narrative recording of the Israelites' miraculous crossing through the Red Sea on dry ground:

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD caused the sea to go back by a strong east

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[6] A statistical analysis of 522 Old Testament passages was conducted by Dr. Steven Boyd. He found that poetic and narrative passages could be categorized with a better than 99% accuracy based on the verb usage alone (DeYoung 2005, p. 162).

[7] Information from personal correspondence with Bodie Hodge on 11/14/06. Rankin's quotes are from a chapter that he wrote for a yet to be published book. Page numbers are based on that correspondence. To the best of my knowledge, this work remains unpublished, but I have participated in a series of four forums on the subject of the proper interpretation of Genesis with Rankin and have heard him make similar statements.

[8] This does not eliminate the possibility that narrative accounts like Genesis contain parallel elements. For example, some scholars have highlighted a chiastic structure in the Noah and Flood account of Genesis 6–9. Even if a chiastic structure exists it would not diminish the fact that these chapters are written as historical narrative. In order to maintain a strict chiasm in these chapters, one must gloss over much of the information in the account.

wind all that night, and made the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided. So the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on the dry ground, and the waters were a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. And the Egyptians pursued and went after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. Now it came to pass, in the morning watch, that the LORD looked down upon the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud, and He troubled the army of the Egyptians. And He took off their chariot wheels, so that they drove them with difficulty; and the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the face of Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians, on their chariots, and on their horsemen." And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and when the morning appeared, the sea returned to its full depth, while the Egyptians were fleeing into it. So the LORD overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. Then the waters returned and covered the chariots, the horsemen, and all the army of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them. Not so much as one of them remained (Exodus 14:21–28).

This account is very straightforward, as if providing a play-by-play account of exactly what happened. There are also tell-tale marks of narrative in the Hebrew, such as the fact that each verse begins with a *waw* consecutive. McCabe explains that "the Hebrew conjunction waw that is prefixed to an imperfect form" (McCabe 2006, p. 67),[9] which most often reflects "a sequential advancement of the narrative" (McCabe 2006, p. 67). Here are portions of the poetic version of the same event from Exodus 15.

The LORD is a man of war;
The LORD is His name.
Pharaoh's chariots and his army He has cast into the sea;
His chosen captains also are drowned in the Red Sea.
The depths have covered them;
They sank to the bottom like a stone.
Your right hand, O LORD, has become glorious in power;
Your right hand, O LORD, has dashed the enemy in pieces.
And in the greatness of Your excellence

You have overthrown those who rose against You;
You sent forth Your wrath;
It consumed them like stubble.
And with the blast of Your nostrils
The waters were gathered together;
The floods stood upright like a heap;
The depths congealed in the heart of the sea.
The enemy said, "I will pursue,
I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil;
My desire shall be satisfied on them.
I will draw my sword,
My hand shall destroy them."
You blew with Your wind,
The sea covered them;
They sank like lead in the mighty waters.
Who is like You, O LORD, among the gods?
Who is like You, glorious in holiness,
Fearful in praises, doing wonders?
You stretched out Your right hand;
The earth swallowed them (Exodus 15:3–12).

The differences between the historical narrative and the poetic are striking and immediately apparent. These verses exhibit a great deal of synonymous and synthetic parallelism, as would be expected from poetic passages. Also, notice the emotions engendered by the poetic language, which is typical since Hebrew poetry often appeals to the senses.[10] There is a high percentage of figurative language. While historical narrative includes figurative language, it is often the exception, not the rule, whereas poetry regularly employs figurative language.

Hugh Ross, a leading old-earth creationist, has often interpreted poetic passages like Job 38 or Psalm 104 in a literal fashion, while simultaneously treating Genesis 1 in a non-literal manner. I recently participated in a debate with a progressive creationist in which he told the audience that Christians can't just follow the plain meaning of the text, because then we would have to believe in geocentricism. He cited 1 Chronicles 16:30, Psalm 93:1, Psalm 104:5, and 1 Samuel 2:8 to claim that a straightforward reading of these passages would lead one to conclude that the earth is firmly established and will not be moved. The problem with taking these in a straightforward manner is that each of these passages are poetic— even the passages in 1 Samuel and 1 Chronicles— and were never intended to be interpreted in a strictly literal fashion. First Samuel 2 is Hannah's prayer of

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[9] Modern English style tends to avoid starting a sentence with the word "and," so the *waw* is not readily apparent in many English Bibles, since the "and" is dropped for stylistic purposes. However, many older translations, such as the King James Version and American Standard Version, usually did translate the *waw* as "and" at the beginning of numerous verses. In these translations, it is easy to see how the *waw* is used to advance the narrative in a sequential manner from one point to the next. See also McCabe (2008) and Chaffey and McCabe (2011).

[10] While summarizing the RATE research of Steven Boyd, DeYoung wrote that a distinction of "poetry is its goal to engage the reader's five senses and emotions. The poet wants the reader to hear, see, smell, taste, and feel the experience" (DeYoung 2005, p. 159).

praise stemming from God giving her a son (Samuel). First Chronicles 16:30 is in the midst of David's song of thanksgiving when the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem. This song also makes up the first 15 verses of Psalm 105.

This tactic is very common among old-earth creationists, yet it represents an irresponsible handling of the text.[11] Each passage should be interpreted according to the appropriate principles for its particular genre. Historical narrative can be understood in a straightforward manner, recognizing that figures of speech will occasionally arise. Interpreting poetry requires one to identify the parallelism and the frequent use of figurative language. If one fails to do this, and interprets poetry in a literal manner, then it will inevitably result in contradictions and theological absurdities. For example, consider again the verses from Exodus 15. If we are supposed to interpret this passage literally, then we would conclude that God is a man (v. 3) with nostrils (v. 8) and a right hand (v. 12), who picked up Pharaoh's army and cast them into the sea (v. 4) where they drowned (v. 5), but were also dashed into pieces (v. 6), consumed like stubble (v. 7), and swallowed by the earth (v. 12).

Recognizing that poetry and historical narrative must be interpreted differently immediately solves these problems. Exodus 14 reveals precisely what happened to the Egyptian army, while Exodus 15 explains the same truths in a highly figurative manner.[12] Exodus 15 is no less true and authoritative than Exodus 14, but it is not to be taken in a straightforward manner. In the same way, poetic passages that speak of God's creative work must be interpreted according to the principles in place for poetry rather than treating them as historical narrative.

Conclusion

Hebrew parallelism is found throughout the poetic books of Scripture. It has been demonstrated that each of the poetic books utilizes the various forms of parallelism in ways that fit their purpose. Job, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, and Lamentations rely heavily on synthetic parallelism because of its ability to convey a greater amount of information without the need for repetition. Proverbs is made up largely of antithetic parallelism because of the sharp contrasts drawn between the wise man and the foolish man. Finally, Psalms contains a wide variety of each form because there are numerous types of Psalms, each written with a specific purpose.

The ability to recognize Hebrew poetry has implications beyond basic translation work. Recognizing parallelism can aid in properly interpreting the text. Also, one of the greatest debates in the modern church can be resolved by realizing that Genesis 1 is not poetic in nature because it does not bear the hallmarks of Hebrew parallelism. Students of the Bible would do well to study parallelism, the basic structure of Hebrew poetry.

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[11] Ross has consistently called Job 38 and Psalm 104 creation accounts, and insists that one must use these passages to rightly understand Genesis 1. While one can certainly learn about creation from Job 38 and Psalm 104, using these two passages to override the narrative account in Genesis 1 represents a seriously flawed hermeneutic. The point of Job 38 is not to convey a "play-by-play" account of what God did during the days of the Creation Week, but to give Job a proper perspective of himself and of God. Nor is Psalm 104 a creation account. Rather, the psalmist looks back on certain things that God has made and praises the Lord for them. Yet Genesis 1 is a narrative account of what God did on each day of the Creation Week, so it would be folly to discount the text of the historical narrative and treat poetic passages as though they were historical narrative.

[12] A similar study could be made of Judges 4 and 5. Judges 4 provides the historical account of Deborah and Barak defeating the army of Sisera, while the fifth chapter recounts this event in poetry (a song by Deborah and Barak). In the poetic retelling the "mountains gushed" (v. 5), "village life ceased" (v. 7), the "stars…fought against Sisera" (v. 20), and the "Kishon [River] swept them away" (v. 21). Judges 5 should not be interpreted literally, and then used to reinterpret the straightforward historical narrative of Judges 4. Yet this is precisely the error made by many old-earth creationists when they propose that Job 38, Psalm 104, and other poetic passages should be used to reinterpret Genesis 1.

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