Parallelisms: Teaching About the Lord Jesus Christ Through Poetry

Poetic parallelisms are regularly attested forms of poetry in the Old Testament (see Proverbs, Psalms, Isaiah, Joel, and other books). 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 Hebrew Bible."[37] Examples of parallelisms number in the thousands in poetic works, with more than one thousand in Isaiah alone. In some cases, entire chapters are two-lined poetic parallelisms, such as chapters in Proverbs and Isaiah.

Poetic parallelism, similar to larger poetic units, features symbols, metaphors, similes, personification, colorful images, and creative expressions that *serve to teach about God and His commandments*. That is to say, prophets and poets created parallelisms to teach significant doctrines regarding the lord; His character; His divine attributes and qualities; His workings with individuals, families, peoples, and nations; and more.

What are poetic parallelisms? As Kugel explained, "In poetic parallelism, the prophet makes a statement in a line, a phrase, or a sentence and then restates it, so that the second line, phrase, or sentence echoes or mirrors the first."[38] Both lines in a parallelism are equally important. The second line, explained Kugel, was "not expected to be (or regarded as) a mere restatement" of the first half but was meant to "add to it, often particularizing, defining, or expanding the meaning, and yet hearken back"[39] to it.

Each of the two lines has features or expressions that parallel or correspond with the other, hence the name *parallelism*. For example, in the parallelism "Hear O heavens and give ear O earth," "hear" in line 1 parallels "give ear" in line 2, and "earth" in line 1 parallels "heavens" in line 2. The prophet/psalmist sets forth line 1, then restates, reinforces, and/or reconfigures it in line 2. This reconfiguration may serve to emphasize the words of line 1, to broaden, to punctuate, or to add further knowledge or light. Understanding this form of poetry makes Isaiah and other passages more understandable and meaningful.

Parallelisms are presented in a variety of configurations; the chart presents seventeen configurations (synonymous, antithetical, etc.), although there are no doubt more that could be presented.

Type of Parallelism	Example
Synonymous parallelism. Words in line 1 correspond with synonyms in line 2.	"Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth" (Isa. 1:2).
Identical words or phrases. Words or phrases in line 1 are repeated in line 2.	"Thou hast increased the nation, O lord, thou hast increased the nation" (Isa. 26:15).
Antithetical parallelism or opposites. Line 2 presents terms or ideas that contrast with those in line 1.	"My servants shall sing for joy of heart, but ye shall cry for sorrow of heart" (Isa. 65:14).
Complements. Something that makes another thing complete—bow and arrow are complements; a bow is incomplete without an arrow.	"Whose arrows are sharp, and all their bows bent" (Isa. 5:28).
Double similes. A simile (an expression that uses *like* or *as* to compare two different things) is featured in both lines.	"We should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah" (Isa. 1:9).
Resultative relationship. Line 2 provides the results of an action set forth in line 1; for example, conception results in birth.	"Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son" (Isa. 7:14).
Gender-matched parallelism. Genders are paired in the two lines.	"Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you" (Isa. 51:2).
Progression. The action progresses from line 1 to line 2; for example, the lord first pleads the cause of the people, and then he judges them.	"The lord standeth up to plead, and standeth to judge the people" (Isa. 3:13).
Rhetorical questions. Rhetorical questions are posed in both lines.	"Who hath heard such a thing? who hath seen such things?" (Isa. 66:8).
Numbers. Numbers are listed in each line, often with a higher number in line 2 than in in line 1.	"Two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost fruitful branches thereof" (Isa. 17:6).
Lists. In this example, four body parts—eyes, ears, heart, and tongue—are listed in two parallelisms.	"And the eyes of them that see shall not be dim, and the ears of them that hear shall hearken. The heart also of the rash shall understand knowledge, and the tongue of the stammerers shall be ready to speak plainly" (Isa. 32:3–4).

Type of Parallelism	Example
Grammatical parallelisms. Certain grammatical aspects of line 1 correspond with those of line 2. In the example, each of the two lines features an imperative, an object, and a subject.	"Hear the word of the lord, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah" (Isa. 1:10).
Opener for prophecy. A parallelism opens a prophecy.	"Come near, ye nations, to hear; and hearken, ye people" (Isa. 34:1).
Domain and subcategory. One line features a domain and the other a subcategory of the domain (e.g., lion is a subcategory of the domain "beast").	"No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon" (Isa. 35:9).
Declaration followed by an explanation. A declaration in line 1 is followed by an explanation in line 2.	"Woe unto their soul! for they have rewarded evil unto themselves" (Isa. 3:9).
Metaphors. Each line features a metaphor (a word or expression that represents something other than its literal meaning).	"For the vineyard of the lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant" (Isa. 5:7).
Masculine and feminine nouns. In Hebrew all nouns are either feminine or masculine, a biblical distinction lost in the English translation. In the example, the nouns *dust* and *chaff* in Hebrew are masculine, and the nouns *sword* and *bow* are feminine.	"He gave them as the dust to his sword, and as driven stubble to his bow" (Isa. 41:2).