

A KEY TO
UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

THINK HEBREW

Hebrew thinking is discovered in its written thought patterns. These patterns are best reflected in Hebrew poetry. These same hebrew thought patterns can be found throughout the New Testament, giving a fresh understanding of God's Word.

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HEBREW POETRY

Hebrew poetry is characterized by a rhythm of thought expressed in graphic language. This rhythm of thought usually finds expression in a basic parallelism of structure which is its foundation. The Hebrew poems are divided into lines which are approximately the same length. The lines are further arranged in couplets, triplets, quatrains, etc. which are further balanced into stanzas. In general, the lines and group-ings are so arranged that the thought is expressed in different ways, by repetition, amplification, contrast or response.

Most of the newer translations write the poetic passages in the poetic format. Thus, in addition to the poetical books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, you will find excellent poetry in almost every book of the Old Testament. Isaiah is almost all poetic, about half of Jeremiah and all of Lamentations are in the poetical format. Most all of the minor prophets wrote in poetic form. (cf. Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Malachi.) Why is this so? One reason given by most scholars is that poetry is much easier to memorize than prose. The individual, of course, did not have copies of the Scriptures, but the constant hearing, repeating, and then meditating on the Word, committed it to memory. Therefore, each person really did carry the Word of God with him and did have his own personal copy. Remember the admonition of Joshua, given to the Israelites just before they crossed into Canaan:

"This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success." (Joshua 1:8)

I personally believe, however, that we can observe something else in the poetical structure. We can increase our understanding of the operation of the very mind of God. In 1 Peter 1:21 we read, "for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." Since the prophets were moved to speak in this "rhythm of thought," then we can observe that God operates in a constant movement of rhythm. The entire universe is in a constant rhythmic motion, every living plant and organism is in a predictable motion. God is moving! When we then consider

the time span of the entire Bible and the great number of human authors, we then see another confirmation of the divine authorship of the Holy Spirit. God is not stagnant, He is active and moving in our daily lives today just as much as He was on day He created Adam and Eve. We are thereby constantly reminded that our relationship with Him cannot be stationary, but must also be moving and growing.

The basic and most frequently used poetical structures are the two-line (distich) couplets. Most of the following are couplet parallelisms. (Quotes are from the New King James Version)

SYNONOMOUS PARALLELISM

In this form the same thought is expressed in two parallel lines, with the second line echoing or expanding the first, and saying virtually the same thing in different words. This is the most common form.

(a) _____ affirmation

(b) _____ repetition (in different words)

(a) "The heavens declare the glory of God;

(b) And the firmament shows His handiwork." (Ps. 19:1)

Cf. Job 3:25; Is. 9:2; Ex. 15:4.

SYNTHETIC OR CONSTRUCTIVE PARALLELISM

In this form the second line is similar but adds a variation, or supplement, in thought. The first line is amplified or explained by the second.

(a) _____ affirmation

(b) _____ enhances, is a variation or a supplement

(a) "The Law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul:

(b) The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple." (Ps. 19:7)

cf. Job 19:25; Deut. 33:27.

ANTITHESIS PARALLELISM

In this form the second line is in direct contrast or opposition to the first.

(a) _____ affirmation

(b) _____ opposite of(a)

(a) "Weeping may endure for a night,

(b) But joy comes in the morning." (Ps. 30:5)

cf. Ps. 1:6; Is. 9:10.

ANALYTICAL PARALLELISM

Here, the second line gives a consequence or a result of the first. What is implied in the first line is drawn out and made explicit in the second.

- (a) _____ affirmation
 - (b) _____ consequence
 - (a) "Therefore evil shall come upon you;
 - (b) You shall not know from where it arises.
 - (a) And trouble shall fall upon you;
 - (b) You will not be able to put it off.
 - (a) And desolation shall come upon you suddenly,
 - (b) Which you shall not know." (Is. 47:11)
- cf. Ps. 23:1; Deut. 32:4; Lam. 3:24.

TAUTOLOGICAL PARALLELISM

In this form, for rhetorical reasons, the same words are exactly, or almost exactly, repeated.

- (a) _____ affirmation
- (b+) _____ affirmation repeated
- (a) "Lord, how long shall the wicked,
- (b) How long shall the wicked triumph?" (Ps. 94:3).

STEP PARALLELISM

This is usually very difficult to recognize in English because it totally depends on the Hebrew word structure which becomes distorted in the translation. In addition, it may also be found within other types of parallelisms and thus not recognized in the English. The words or thoughts would be in steps as follows:

- (a) _____ (b)
- _____ (c)
- _____ (d)

A good example is in the N.T. John 1:1, in the original Greek, is a perfect step parallel of the words:

"In the beginning was the Word,
 And the Word was God,
 And God was the Word."

The WORD has special emphasis because it appears in all three lines.

CLIMATIC PARALLELISM

The same words are repeated for effect and the thought is gradually built up to a climax:

"On come, let us sing to the Lord:
 Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.
 Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving,
 Let us shout joyfully to him with psalms.
 climax: For the Lord is the great God,
 And the great King above all gods." (Ps. 95:1-3)

CHIASTIC PARALLELISM

This form has many variations. Basically it involves a reversal of parts. That is, there would be one type of parallelism and then that type would be reversed:

- (a) _____
- (b) _____
- (b) _____
- (a) _____

In the following illustration, the distich is in analytical parallelism which is then reversed:

- (a) "Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgement,
 - (b) Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.
 - (b) For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
 - (a) But the way of the ungodly shall perish." (Ps. 1:5,6)
- A good N.T. example of the chiasmic with words and not lines is found in Mark 2:27:

"The sabbath was made for man,
 Not man for the sabbath."

The parallelisms are not limited to 2 lines, but can appear in 2, 4, 6, 8 etc. Emphasis can be given to thoughts or words by relationships of varying lines of the same and/or differing parallelisms.

i.e. 2 or more lines of one type of parallelism may be followed by one single unrelated line or by another type of parallelism and then the first parallelism repeated. This gives added emphasis to the center portion. ie. Job, chapter 9. verses 14-31 the prevalent theme is "I/my (Job) and "He/Him" (God). v.32 is analytical parallelism in 2 lines and so is v.33, however, v.32 as a couplet is also in analytical structure with v.33 as a

couplet. The theme in chapter 10 then goes back to "I" and "You". Therefore there is an emphasis in v.32 and 33. V.32 introduces "we" and v.33 has "us" meaning God and Job. This is the only use of "us" in the entire book in which Job and God are included in one pro-noun. Job is saying that there is no "us". There is no "days-man" (KJV) which means "mediator" (NKJV) to make an "us". We do have a mediator in Jesus, therefore God and ourself is an "us" and we don't have Job's problems! The theme of Job is made clear to the Hebrew by the structure. Job did know that there would be a mediator, however, for his restoration concluded with:

"For I know that my Redeemer lives,
And he shall stand at last on the earth." (19:25) -
(Analytical Parallelism)

Many of these Hebrew parallelisms are found in the Greek of the N.T. The book of Ephesians is a classic example.

In Chapter 2, vs. 1-3 is all Before Christ, "And you were dead. . ." etc. (Note: the "He made alive" is in italics, meaning it is not in the original and only added for clarity). Then in v. 4 - "But God, . . ." and 4-7 is After Christ. So 1-3 is line (a), and 4-7 is line (b) in antithetic parallelism. Then we see that v. 8-10 gives the "How" so it is in theSynthetic relationship to vs. 1-7.

Vs. 11 - 22 are the chiasitic parallel format with the emphasis on the unrelated line, e.g.:

- (a) _____
- (b) _____
- (c) _____
- (d) _____(unrelated)
- (c) _____
- (b) _____
- (a) _____

The first part of Chapter 2 prepared the reader for the "before" and "after" format found in this chiasitic parallelism in which the a's, b's etc. are antithetic:

- (a) 11a in the flesh
- (b) 11b Uncircumcision and circumcision made by hands
- (c) 12a separate from Christ
- (d) 12b aliens from the commonwealth
- (e) 12c No hope and without God

- (f) 13 But Christ came (the "but" signals the transition) to those far off and they were made near by the blood. (saved by His blood)
- (g) 14-15a broke down wall, abolished in his flesh (what He did)

- (h) 15b Make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace.

- (g) 16 reconcile, having slain (result of what He did)
- (f) 17 He preached to the far off and the near (the saved now also hear)
- (e) 18 Have access in one Spirit
- (d) 19 fellow-citizens
- (c) 20 Christ is cornerstones
- (b) 21 joined together in a Holy temple in the Lord
- (a) 22 in the Spirit

The chiasitic parallelism goes on in Chapter 3. This time it is not before/after but rather a variation of Synonymous P. (a's, b's are synonymous):

- (a) 1 prisoner for you Gentiles
- (b) 2 grace
- (c) 3,4 revelation, mysteries
- (d) 5 was not made known, now revealed
- (e) 6 Gentiles
- (f) 7a minister (server)
- (g) 7b according to the gift of the grace of God (Note: V.7bod shown exactly as written in the original Greek.)
- (h) 7c (The grace) given me

- (g) 7d according to the working of His power
- (f) 8a least of all the saints
- (e) 8b Gentiles
- (d) 9 see, mystery, hidden for ages
- (c) 10,11 manifold wisdom, made know, eternal purpose
- (b) 12 faith
- (a) 13 tribulation for your glory

Thus we see that the emphasis which results from the structure shows us clearly the importance of what Christ has done. He has made us all into "One new man." We are a new creation.

In Chapter 3, Paul is establishing his own credentials in order to give substance to his statements that God has given him revelations of God's mysteries. Consequently, the structure, to the Hebrew mind, clearly singles out the fact that Paul received these revelations as gifts of God's grace.

Some other parallelisms in Chapter 4:

- v.3 This verse introduces the important message - The unity of the Body of Christ = the unity of the Godhead:
- v.4 Three "ones" in one sentence: One body (Father), one Spirit (Holy Spirit), One hope (Jesus).
- v.5 Three "ones" in one sentence: One Lord (Father), one faith (Jesus), one baptism (Holy Spirit).
- v.6 Three "alls" which are a part of "one" and in one sentence: One God - above all (Father), through all (Jesus), in you all (Holy Spirit).

If we are alert to the Hebrew thinking in the use of parallelisms, many times we can see a "hidden" emphasis, or have a clearer understanding of a passage in Scripture. Finding them in the N.T. is especially exciting, because Hebrew thinking and the Hebrew language are so vastly different from the Greek, that uniting them in one written work again points out that we really are "One new man" and there is "neither Jew nor Greek."