

Poetic Parallelism

Repetition with variation is the backbone of all poetry. English poetry repeats meter and sound.

Hebrew poetry rhymes ideas rather than words. Two or more lines are arranged in a parallelism, each line having two or more elements:

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*
- Robert Frost

Psalms 105:23 (ESV)

Then Israel | came | to Egypt;

a b c

Jacob | sojourned | in the land of Ham.

a' b' c'

This verse is classified as synonymous parallelism because its corresponding parts are synonyms (a = a', etc.) But the parallels between lines need not always be synonymous. Here are some common types of parallelism used in the Bible:

Type	Description	Example
Synonymous	Saying the same thing twice with the same grammatical structure but different words	Psalms 27:1 (ESV) The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
Synthetic	The second line further develops a thought started in the first	Psalms 95:3 (ESV) For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.
Antithetical	The second line contrasts the first or uses a negative to say the same thing	Psalms 27:10 (ESV) For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me in.
Emblematic	One line is an image or emblem of the thought expressed in the other	Proverbs 25:11 (ESV) A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.
Climactic	The second line completes or adds to the first	Psalms 29:1 (ESV) Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Formal	Connected by metrical considerations, not logic.	Psalms 2:6 (ESV) 6 "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill."

These classifications are helpful, but not rigid. The poet uses considerable variation to express himself, sometimes varying the order of the clauses, dropping one of the clauses, or adding a third line.