Parallelism in Hebrew Poetry

Ever since Robert Lowth’s 1753 study, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, biblical scholars have known that ancient Hebrew writers relied on **parallelism** to make their poetry. What is parallelism? It is a structure of thought (rather than external form like meter or rhyme) in which the writer balances a series of words so that patterns of deliberate contrast or intentional repetition appear. These rhetorical devices also appear in English. For instance, consider the parallel repetition in the Gettysburg Address: “That government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” This parallelism is called **tricolon epistrophe**. Another type of parallelism is juxtaposing opposites, or **antithesis**. Consider the antithesis from the “moon landing” speech by Neil Armstrong: “That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for all mankind.” Here, we have a contrast or antithesis between “small step” and “giant leap” and between a singular “man” and the collective “all mankind.” The ancient biblical writers were also suckers for this technique. Here are some examples from the Hebrew Bible to illustrate such parallelisms.

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**The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it.**

Heaven, and those who dwell therein.

For it was he who founded it and planted it firm upon the sea upon the waters beneath.

Happy is he who has found wisdom and the man who has acquired understanding

For wisdom is more profitable than silver better than gold.

Does the LORD desire offerings and sacrifices as he desires obedience?

Obedience is better than sacrifice, the fat of lambs.

And the LORD protects the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked the LORD dooms.

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