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.

--Psalms 24:1-2--

The earth is the LORD's ‖ and all that is in it.
the world ‖ and those who dwell therein.

Here, we have a synonymous distych.

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

Here, we have another synonymous distych.

--Proverbs 3:13-14--

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

For wisdom is ‖ more profitable than silver
and the gain she brings is ‖ better than gold.

This last distych is really clever because the poet has three levels of synonym-patterns at once.

--1 Samuel 15:22--

Does the Lord desire ‖ offerings and sacrifices
as he desires ‖ obedience?

Here, the Hebrew has an implied antithesis, i.e., obeying God's moral law is the opposite of making showy offerings and sacrifices.

Obedience is better than ‖ sacrifice,
and to listen to him than ‖ the fat of lambs.

However, in the last diptych, we go back to synonyms rather than antitheses.

--Psalms 1:6--

And the LORD protects ‖ the way of the rightous
but the way of the wicked ‖ the LORD dooms.

*Here, we have a **chiasmus**, an antithesis in a "criss-cross" pattern.*

Chart adapted from John B. Gabel and Charles B. Wheeler's *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction*. NY: Oxford UP, 1986. 38.