Does the parallelism of Biblical poetry go beyond mere repetition?

Rupert Swallow — March 2016

Word Count: 1988

Parallelism is a technique employed in many and various ways throughout Biblical poetry. This essay, however, shall focus mainly on its use in the Psalms. The Psalms are particularly suitable as, not only is the use of parallelism in them as extended and developed as anywhere else in the Bible, but also because the Psalms themselves are a repository for such a wide variety of ideas; Calvin described them as 'The anatomy of all parts of the soul ... for not an affection will a man find in himself, an image of which is not reflected in this glass.'[1] Parallelism is used formally, in combination with sequential trains of thought, to create an echo chamber of repeated and refigured phrases in the book of Psalms. Not only does this prevent monotony in the verse, but it also provides a structural analogue for the psalmist's ideas; this can be seen particularly clearly in the psalms of lamentation. While, on the surface, synonymous and emblematic parallelism may appear merely to offer repetitions on a theme and no progression, as we shall see, the 'doubling of one element [...] found throughout the psalm [...] has the effect of conceptual reinforcement or expansion.'[2]

The first, simplest, and most obvious use of parallelism is in synonymous parallelism. This is the type which might most easily be seen as mere repetition in the Psalms since it 'occurs when the first member states an idea that is restated with variation by the second member'.[3]

> 7 The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul:
> the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.
> 8 The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart:
> the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes
> [Psalm 19:7-8]

The same syntactic order is paralleled throughout and each line restates the same idea using the synonyms 'law', 'testimony', statutes', and 'commandment'. This kind of parallelism recurs in the Psalms

> 1 I will praise thee, O Lord, with my whole heart;
> I will shew forth all thy marvellous works.
> 2 I will be glad and rejoice in thee:

[1] John Calvin, *The Author's Preface, Commentary on The Psalms, Vol. 1.*, (Geneva, July 22, 1557), last accessed 12/03/2016, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom08.vi.html
[2] Stephen P. Sondrup, 'The Psalm of Nephi: A Lyric Reading', *Brigham Young University Studies, Vol. 21, No. 3* (Summer 1981), last accessed 12/03/2016, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43040966, p.363.
[3] Sondrup, 'The Psalm of Nephi: A Lyric Reading', p.360.

> I will sing praise to thy name, O thou most High.
> [Psalm 9:1-2]

However, if, for the moment, we view synonymous parallelism simply as a repetition of the same idea, in the same syntactic order, in different words, then it is clear that it is a structure that '[serves] the moralist well. Having made an observation or stated a principle, he [can] profitably restate it for emphasis:

> Wounding strokes are good medicine for evil
> Blows have an effect of the inmost self.
> [Proverbs 20:30]'[4]

Thus synonymous parallelism, through ideational and syntactic repetition, creates emphasis. This strengthens the argument of the psalmist, for example, in the case of the two psalms above, making them more expressive invocations of God's glory.

On the other hand, although the words are not the same, the insistent restatement of the same idea in the same way which synonymous parallelism creates can make the Psalms seem tedious and circular. Initially, the repetitions appear to offer no more than a kind of plodding emphasis. However there is also a subtle progression and elaboration of argument in both the psalms above. In Psalm 9:1 the movement is from an internal expression of praise with the 'heart', to an external appreciation ('I will shew forth') of His 'marvellous works'. The same movement outwards is seen in verse 2 and the chiastic arrangement of the two verses is completed with the exhortation 'O thou most High' structurally expressing the progression of ideas. Likewise, in Psalm 19, the repetition is linked to the Psalms' potential purpose as didactic liturgical texts. The psalmist emphasises that salvation is a process and can only be achieved through continual reference to 'the statutes of the Lord', not in a single moment but through constant re-readings in the course of one's life. Just as the verse continually returns to the statement that 'The law of the Lord is perfect', so must we return to the Scriptures to improve ourselves, bit by bit.

Furthermore, synonymous parallelism is never 'merely' repetition. Even in the simplest cases such as Psalm 19:7-8 above, repetition still constitutes a central part of the effect created by the

---

[4] John B. Gabel, *The Bible as Literature*, 'Chapter 9: The Wisdom Literature', (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.143.

form of the Psalms. This form, loosely-collected, two-part verse paragraphs, while suitable for statements of truth, are not suited to explaining the reasoning behind them. However, the inherent wisdom of each verse of the Psalms, derived from a wealth of experience and presented very concisely, may need explaining to those who have not had those experiences. Since they are so concise, individual verses are liable to have interpretations foisted upon them. C. S. Lewis, using the bashing of the Babylonian babies 'against the stones' in Psalm 137:8-9 as an example, says that 'Of the cursing Psalms I suppose most of us make our own moral allegories.' [5] If we extend this thought to the Psalms as a whole, a little further prompting from the psalmists to direct our thoughts along the intended moral paths seems useful, particularly if the Psalms are considered didactically. For example, in Psalm 19, the four words 'perfect', 'sure', 'right', and 'pure' all have slightly different associations; perfect with 'supreme moral or spiritual excellence',[6] sure with certainty (perhaps in God), right with 'That which is consonant with justice, goodness, or reason',[7] and pure with freedom from taint. Each association expands and reinforces the original idea. 'An abstract statement meets with its example, yes, the way a wind runs through the tree's moving leaves'[8] and, in this way, these reiterations on the same theme offer an implicit explanation of the reasoning underpinning the Psalm.

A development of this method of elaboration through reiteration is seen in emblematic parallelism, a variant of synonymous parallelism in which the second member defines the first in terms of it being like something else. For example

> 5 By reason of the voice of my groaning
> My bones cleave to my skin.
> 6 I am like a pelican of the wilderness;
> I am like an owl of the desert.
> [Psalm 102:6]

The use of imagery as an explanatory device is far more efficient and also adds to the lyricism of the poetry; the blessed man who

---

[5] C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, (London: Collins, 1961), p.113-14.
[6] "perfect, adj., n., and adv.", (OED Online: Oxford University Press, 2016), last accessed 12/03/2016, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/140704?rskey=K19s35&result=1&isAdvanced=false.
[7] "right, n.". OED Online: Oxford University Press, 2016), last accessed 12/03/2016, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/165853?rskey=FsF6d3&result=1&isAdvanced=false.
[8] John Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse, 2nd Edition*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p.26.

> 3 Shall be like a tree planted by
> The rivers of water, that bringeth forth
> His fruit in his season;
> his leaf also shall not wither

is thus associated with tranquil images of the pastoral idyll, with fecundity, and with the innocence, and exemplary morality, attendant on Adam and Eve in their prelapsarian state. The psalmist, in refiguring their original statement and evoking wider cultural associations, moves beyond more repetition and thus makes the sense stronger and more fully explained to the reader.

These parallelisms can be seen, not only at the micro level, within verses, but at the macro level too, between verses and psalms. In psalm 72 the 'prayer for the long life of king and progeny in vss. 15 and 17 forms an inclusion with the parallel prayer for king [...] and progeny [...] in vs. 1.'[9] The wish for 'righteousness unto the king's son' [Psalm 72:1] at the start of the psalm is reflected at the end in 'his name shall endure for ever: his name shall be continued as long as the sun' [Psalm 72: 17]. Also, in the original Hebrew, the particular combination of particles echoes Psalm 22:30-31, producing a sequence 'as full a parallel to Ps 72:9-11 as one could wish', [10] and providing resolution to the query raised in Psalm 22, when one later reads Psalm 72.

Likewise, this kind of correspondence between verses can also be seen within Psalm 22, in an example of the second major, and generally accepted, type, antithetic parallelism, in which 'the second member states the idea of the first but in negative or contrasting form:

> 4 A time to weep,
>
> And a time to laugh.
>
> [Ecclesiastes 3:4]'[11]

The invocations in Psalm 22:2, 'O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not', are finally answered in 22:21, 'thou hast heard me' and echoed again in verse 24, 'when he cried unto him, he heard.' These echoes of imagery and language resonate throughout the corpus of

---

[9] John S. Kselman, 'Psalm 72: Some Observations on Structure', *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, No. 220, Memorial Issue: Essays, in Honor of George Ernest Wright (Dec., 1975)*, last accessed 12/03/2016, http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1356240.pdf?acceptTC=true, p.79.

[10] Kselman, 'Psalm 72: Some Observations on Structure', p.79.

[11] Sondrup, 'The Psalm of Nephi: A Lyric Reading', p.363.

Psalms and give the repetitions that parallelism, by its nature, produces 'a wider, more complex symmetry'[12] which moves far beyond the simplicity of mere repetition.

Finally, the psalmists use parallelism in combination with other poetic devices. For example, in the psalms of lamentation Miller notes a particular type of combination which he calls synonymous-sequential psalms.

> They cried, but there was none to save them:
> Even unto the Lord, but he answered them not.
> [Psalm 18:41]

In these type of psalm, two elements in each colon are synonymous, the second two in Psalm 18; they simply echo each other, both in syntax and ideas. However, what is particularly interesting is that, in Psalm 18, the first element of each colon can only be understood if read in sequence. 'They cried [...] Even unto the Lord'. In synonymous-sequential psalms there is a parallel section and a continuous section. Recognising this fact makes transparent many previously opaque Psalms, such as

> 1 Deliver me from the mouth of the lion;
> From the horns of the wild oxen you have answered me.
> [Psalm 77:1]

Now, if one sees the Psalm as a chiastic arrangement in which the phrases 'from the mouth of the lion' and 'From the horns of the wild oxen' are a refiguring of the same idea, then the sequential section 'Deliver me [...] you have answered me' makes far more sense.

Aside from a simply explanatory role, there are two reasons that this combination is an interesting device. Firstly, in using formal and ideational parallelism in an original way, the psalmist prevents the monotony of formulaic and stereotypical expressions. The psalmist can break up a traditionally figured sequence of thought by interspersing it with imagery, as in Psalm 77:1, or elaborating the situation, as in Psalm 18:41 in which the repeated section explains the cause of their lament.

---

[12] *Ibid*

Secondly, this structure is actually an analogue of the process of lamentation. Miller says that the combination of a synonymous parallelism, which is like an invocation, with a continuous train of thought 'represent the sequence that is at the heart of the lament as a genre: outcry/lament, hearing/response'.[13] This can be seen across the corpus, as in Psalm 22 above, in which there is a 'clear structural movement from lament to praise'.[14] However, Miller does not go far enough. Even more than representing the sequence at the heart of lament as a genre, the structural delay created by the chiastic arrangement, interspersing the sequence of thought with a parallelism, mirrors the process of mourning, as it is expressed in elegy. It gives a sense of balance to the process of mourning. The first element is an expression of grief, and the second, in its resolution, shows the closing consolation the elegist experiences; there is 'a lyric reversal from grief and despair to joy.'[15]

To conclude, the use of parallelisms in the Biblical poetry of the Psalms extends far beyond mere repetition. Parallelism does not necessarily involve repetition, though when it does, as in the case of synonymous parallelism, the mirroring of syntax and ideas usefully reinforces the moral message of the psalmist. The ideational refiguring also allows the psalmist to explain the message of their poetry more fully to an audience who were without the poet's benefits of wisdom and experience. When it does not not involve repetition, as in antithetic parallelism, the associations the use of parallelism creates echo each other throughout the corpus of the Psalms. In combination with other poetic devices, parallelism gives a sense of symmetry to the verse and allows the structure to be an echo of the sense, as, for example, in the psalms of lamentation, in which the structure acts as an analogue of the mourning process.

---

[13] Patrick D. Miller, 'Synonymous-Sequential Parallelism in the Psalms', *Biblica, Vol. 61, No. 2* (1980), last accessed 12/03/2016, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42706862, p.257.
[14] Miller, 'Synonymous-Sequential Parallelism in the Psalms', p.259.
[15] M. H. Abrahms, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, (London : Harcourt Brace College Publishers, c1999), p.211.

Bibliography:

Primary texts

Anon, *The Bible: Authorised King James Version with Apocrypha*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Secondary texts

Abrahms, M. H., *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, (London : Harcourt Brace College Publishers, c1999).

Anon, *The Oxford English Dictionary Online,* (OED Online: Oxford University Press, 2016), last accessed 12/03/2016 http://www.oed.com/.

Calvin, John, *Commentary on The Psalms, Vol. 1.*, (Geneva, July 22, 1557), last accessed 12/03/2016, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom08.vi.html.

Gabel, John B., *The Bible as Literature*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Hollander, John, *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*, 2nd Edition, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

Kselman, John S., *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, No. 220, Memorial Issue: Essays, in Honor of George Ernest Wright (Dec., 1975)*, last accessed 12/03/2016, http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1356240.pdf?acceptTC=true.

Lewis, C. S., *Reflections on the Psalms*, (London: Collins, 1961).

Miller, Patrick D., Biblica, Vol. 61, No. 2 (1980), last accessed 12/03/2016, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42706862.

Sondrup, Stephen P., *Brigham Young University Studies, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Summer 1981)*, last accessed 12/03/2016, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43040966.