

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Session 4, Parallelism, Variant Repetitions, Lectures in Proverbs 1-9, 6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome to The Explainer. Today, we are cracking open a 250-year-old literary mystery, one that's been hiding in plain sight in some of the most ancient poetry ever written. So let's kick things off with a real head-scratcher.

It's a puzzle that has stumped readers for centuries. A flat-out contradiction in the Bible that just seems to make zero sense. Okay, so look at this.

You've got two verses right next to each other in the Book of Proverbs, and they give you the exact opposite advice. One says, do not answer a fool, and the very next one says you should answer a fool. I mean, what gives? How can both possibly be right? For a long, long time, people just wrote this off as a mistake.

But, as you'll see, the truth is way more interesting than that. To solve this, we actually have to go back in time. We need to understand the old rulebook, the blueprint that people used to read poetry like this for more than two centuries.

And it was all dominated by one single really powerful theory. Yeah, our story begins way back in 1753 with an Oxford poetry professor, a guy named Bishop Robert Louth. He came up with this theory of parallelism, and it was so influential that it basically became the law of the land for studying biblical poetry for the next 250 years.

So Louth broke it down into three types. First up, you've got synonymous parallelism. This one's pretty simple.

The second half of a verse just repeats what the first part said, but, you know, using different words. Line B is basically an echo of line A. And you can see it right here, clear as day. The heart of the discerning, that's a parallel idea to the ear of wise men.

And what are they both doing? Acquiring or seeking learning. See that? It's this nice, neat, mirrored structure. Very satisfying.

Okay, his second category was called antithetical parallelism. Now this one works with opposites. The second line is pretty much the total inverse of the first.

So line B is the flip side of line A. And wow, this verse is a perfect example. You've got the light of the righteous set against the lamp of the wicked, and rejoices versus will be snuffed out. It's a perfect, clean contrast.

And then there was Lao's third category, synthetic parallelism. Honestly, this was kind of a junk drawer. It was a catch-all for everything that didn't fit neatly into the first two boxes.

You know, where the second line kind of builds on the first, but without that clean repetition or contrast. So you've got this tidy, three-part system. It seems perfect, right? Well, that perfection created a massive problem.

What happens when the ancient poems themselves don't follow the rules? Right, you need to hear this, because this is where the story takes a wild turn. The scholars believed Lao's rules were so rock solid that if a verse didn't fit, it couldn't be the theory that was wrong. Oh no, it had to be the original text that was flawed, maybe copied wrong over the centuries.

And get this, they thought they could fix it. Check out this example: a modern scholar, a guy named Richard Clifford, he's looking at a verse in Proverbs and just decides, you know, based on Luth's rulebook, that the parallel is just not satisfactory. It wasn't good enough for him.

So what does he do? The original Hebrew says a righteous person sings out and rejoices. But to make it a better parallel with the first half of the verse, he just changes the word. He swaps sings out for runs.

He literally rewrote the art just so it would fit his theory. Unbelievable. And this is the really crucial part.

This wasn't just a one-off thing. We're talking centuries of this. Literally hundreds of verses were tweaked and changed by scholars who were just trying to cram them into Luth's neat little boxes.

They were changing the evidence to fit the hypothesis. A huge scientific no-no. But what if the problem wasn't the poetry? What if the blueprint itself wasn't just a little off, but totally incomplete? So let's jump to a new way of thinking, because recent scholarship has just blown this whole idea wide open.

It turns out modern scholars have realized that this whole idea of parallelism is way bigger and way more flexible than Luth ever dreamed. It's not just happening in one line. It operates on at least four different levels.

You've got stuff happening within a half line, then between the two halves of the same line. That's what Luth was obsessed with. But it also happens between different lines and even across lines that aren't even next to each other, spanning a whole text.

So remember that puzzle we started with? The two proverbs that totally contradict each other? Well, this new model solves it just like that. It's not a mistake. It's a beautiful example of interlinear parallelism.

The pattern isn't inside each line. It's between them. They were designed to be read together as one single complex and brilliant thought.

I mean, this changes everything. It means that what scholars for centuries dismissed as a flaw, an imperfect verse, is actually the mark of incredible poetic genius. Yeah, the whole way of thinking has flipped.

Now the idea is that the imprecision is where the magic is. It's not about boring, perfect repetition. It's about creative twists and turns.

Those little differences between the parts that are supposed to be parallel? That's where the poet is creating all these new, interesting layers of meaning. So these imprecise parallels? They're not mistakes. They're a tool.

A really clever technique. They make us, the readers, hit the brakes, slow down, and actually use our brains. They create this awesome ambiguity that makes you think.

And it lets a poet pack a ton of meaning into just a few short words. And this technique even has a name. It's called ellipsis.

It's the art of deliberately leaving something out. By not saying a word, the poet actually frees up space for something new. And that little gap? Well, it ironically creates even more meaning because it forces our brains to jump in and fill in the blank.

Okay, so what's the big takeaway here? What does all this mean for you and me? For how we should read not just ancient proverbs, but maybe all poetry? Basically, it means we have to stop treating poetry like a math problem that has only one right answer. We need to stop trying to solve it. Instead, we should lean in and just appreciate its incredible, deliberate complexity.

That ambiguity? It's not a bug. It's a feature. And the parts that seem to break the rules? Those are almost always the most brilliant parts of all.

It really makes you wonder, doesn't it? What other masterpieces have we missed? In art? In literature? Maybe even in life? All because they didn't fit into the neat little boxes we expected them to.