

Dr. Fred Putnam, Psalms, Session 3, Book of Psalms: Structural Patterns and Parallelism, 6-min. Video Overview

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Today, we are going to crack a code, one that's thousands of years old, hidden in plain sight inside some of the world's most famous poems, you know, like the Psalms. We're about to uncover this deliberate, absolutely brilliant artistry that, honestly, most of us just read right past. So if you've ever spent time reading something like the Psalms or Proverbs, I'm willing to bet you've had this thought: man, why do they keep saying the same thing twice just in slightly different words? It can feel, well, a little repetitive, right? I mean, take a look at this classic from Psalm 2: nations in an uproar.

That sounds an awful lot like people devising a vain thing. And kings take their stand is pretty much the same as rulers take counsel together. So what is going on here? Well, here's the thing.

This isn't a mistake. It's not some kind of ancient mental stutter. The poets weren't just running out of ideas.

This repetition is actually the key. It's a super deliberate and sophisticated artistic choice that, once you see it, unlocks the whole system. So what is this big secret? Well, the foundational rule of all Hebrew poetry is a concept called parallelism.

And this idea- this is the master key we're going to use today. For most of us, when we hear poetry, our brain immediately thinks rhyme, right? We connect lines because of how they sound. But ancient Hebrew poetry works on a completely different level.

It's not about rhyming sounds. It's about rhyming ideas. The lines are connected by how their meanings relate to each other.

OK, so here's how it works. A poet writes a line, and then they craft a second line to deliberately interact with the first one. It might echo it, it might contrast with it, or it might build on the idea.

The main thing to get is that the two lines are designed to be read together as one complete thought. Now, there are two main flavors of this you'll see all the time. The first is synonymous parallelism, which is all over the Psalms.

That's where the second line basically restates the first, maybe even intensifying it a bit. The second is contrasting parallelism. And you see this a ton in Proverbs.

Think of a line like, "A wise son makes his father happy, but a foolish son is his mother's grief." You see, the whole point is the contrast. So that's the basic building block.

But you know, the truly great poets, they didn't just stop there. They used this principle to build even more complex and beautiful structures. So let's look at how they really took it to the next level.

Okay, this is one of the cleverest tricks in the book. A great poet will establish a really clear, consistent pattern. They'll lull you into a certain rhythm and then bam, they intentionally break it.

Why? To make you sit up and pay attention. That break is a signal that something important is happening. Let's go back to Psalm 2. If you were to look at the original Hebrew, the first five verses all follow this really tight structure: two parallel lines.

And each of those lines is about three words long. So you get two lines, two lines, two lines. A very steady, predictable rhythm gets established.

But then you get to verse six and boom, verse six completely shatters the pattern. It's just one single line that, in Hebrew, is more than double the length of any of the lines before it. It's this sudden dramatic break, almost like a musical crescendo after a quiet melody.

And this is no accident. That long line is like a giant signpost from the poet. It's marking the end of the first section of the poem.

The poet is using the very architecture of the poem to guide our reading and signal that a brand new thought is about to begin. But hey, pattern breaking is just one tool. Sometimes the poets created these perfectly symmetrical, almost architectural patterns.

Let's look at one of the most elegant forms, what you could call the inside-out tome. Okay, check this out from Psalm 113. If you just read it straight, it says, "Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and forever."

From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised. Now watch how it's actually built. The first and last phrases form an outer frame, both praising the name of the Lord.

Let's call those A. The two ideas in the middle, praise through all time and all space, form the inner core. We'll call those B. So what do you get? This perfectly symmetrical A, B, B, A structure. It's a hidden architectural design.

This A, B, B pattern actually has a formal name. It's called a chiasm, pronounced chiasm. And it gets its name from the Greek letter chi, which looks like an X. Because if you drew lines connecting the parallel parts, they'd form a crisscross.

It's an incredibly common and, I think, super elegant feature of biblical poetry. All right, let's tackle one more kind of repetition. One that can seem even more baffling when you first see it.

So why would a poet start a psalm with a phrase like, praise the Lord, write this whole beautiful poem, and then end with the exact same phrase, praise the Lord? I mean, isn't that just redundant? Not at all. In fact, it's brilliant. Think of it this way.

At the beginning of the psalm, the phrase praise the Lord, is a summons. It's an invitation that makes you ask, okay, but why? Why should I? Then the poet spends the entire poem giving you the answer to that question. So by the time you hear praise the Lord again at the end, it's not a question anymore.

It's the conclusion. The why has been totally and completely answered. The words are identical, but their purpose, their entire meaning, has been transformed by the journey of the poem that came in between.

It's a really powerful framing device. So what does this all mean? Well, it means we now have a brand new toolkit. We can start reading this ancient literature, not just for its message, but for its brilliant artistic design.

As Dr. Fred Putnam puts it, these two parallel lines were never meant to be read as separate, isolated statements. They form one single unit of thought. He says that reading one without the other is basically illegitimate.

You're missing the poet's entire point. So here's your new toolkit. Next time you open up the Psalms or Proverbs, look for connections in meaning, not in sound.

Keep an eye out for those sudden breaks in a pattern. They are clues. Hunt for those elegant, symmetrical chiasms.

Because when you start to see how these poems were built, you start to understand what they're saying on a whole new level. Learning to see this hidden architecture really transforms these familiar texts into these intricate works of art. And it makes you wonder, doesn't it? What other profound secrets are still waiting to be discovered, hiding in plain sight within the very structure of these ancient poems?