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# Repetition and not Parallelism as the Determinant of Poetry in the Hebrew Bible. A Case Study of Biblical Story of Creation (Gen 1)*

**Abstract**

The article points to new research on the subject of poetics in the Bible and argues against the thesis that the basic indicator of poetry and poetic texts in the Bible is parallelism. According to the author, repetition is such an indicator. An analysis of the biblical story of creation of the world was used as the case study (Gen 1).

**Keywords**

Poetry, poetry in the Bible, parallelism, repetition, rhythm, biblical story of creation.

## 1. Introduction

It seems that the phenomenon of poetry exists in every developed culture. It is this kind of expression that cares about content as well as about its form and expressiveness. This is the main difference between poetry and prose or narrative,

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where it is the content that essentially matters, while the form is subordinated to it. Poetry is a language created to influence more than to convey.

Since the time of Hermann Gunkel's monumental commentary on the Book of Genesis[2], biblical researchers have been increasingly interested in the relationship between form and content. They devoted much of their studies to literary genres of biblical texts, with particular emphasis on poetic genres. Gunkel posed a question about the genres in the context of the story of the creation of the world in seven days.[3] Is this a creation myth? Or maybe cosmology? Or rather cosmogony? Perhaps a cult text recited on a holy day? Depending on the definition, Genesis chapter 1 can be any of them, and at the same time, something completely unique. The key and still unresolved discussion focuses on the more basic question: is Genesis 1 poetry or prose?

In this article, I want to ask a general question about the poetics in the Bible and a specific question about the poetics in Gen 1. This text is seen as a piece of prose – especially in the context of the poetic descriptions of creation found in Ps 104 or Isaiah. And so, it is interpreted and printed in Bible translations: as a narrative, a prose text. However, the contemporary debate on what characterizes biblical poetry – what distinguishes it and what is its essence – prompts to ask anew question about the literary genre of Gen 1. The standard answer to the question of poetry in the Hebrew Bible indicates parallelism as the basic determinant of biblical poetry. This approach has been re-examined in recent years and either questioned in full or overworked. On this basis, we can give a new answer to the question about the poetics of Gen 1.

## 2. What makes a text poetry?

Researchers cannot agree on the definition of poetry. It is also difficult to bring poetry present in different languages and cultures of the world to a common denominator. Sometimes it even seems impossible to define the phenomenon of poetry in one specific language. Still, poetry is quite easy to grasp and recognize. One could apply to poetry the observation of St. Augustine on attempts to define time: "When nobody asks me, I know what it is. But when I want

[2] H. Gunkel, *Genesis: ubersetztunderklart* (HKAT 1/1), Gottingen1910, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. The English edition I used: *Genesis. Translated and Interpreted*, trans. M.E. Biddle, Macon 1997, Mercer University Press.

[3] Gen 1:1 – 2:3.

to explain it, I don't know." Although poetry takes very different forms in different languages and works, it creates a special kind of language that we sense as artistic, beautiful to listen to, full of expression, and different from narrative or ordinary speech. Poetry is clearly an alternative form of language to prose, which is much closer to spoken language. While it is difficult to describe poetry satisfactorily as a comprehensive phenomenon, it is easier to point out its specific aspects and features. For example, condensing expressions is an important feature of poetry common to many cultures. Poets do not waste their words. They do not add unnecessary expressions and phrases. They do not elaborate, as we find in prose. Every word counts, every expression is thought over, accurate phrase consistency is desirable. Sometimes, however, certain aspects of poetry clash with other indicated features or are so general that they cover other types of literary expressions.

How then can one recognize poetry in the Bible? Does the Bible contain poetry or poems at all? This is not a trivial question. An insightful researcher of Hebrew poetics James Kugel has shown that all the features attributed to Hebrew poetry can be found in Hebrew prose. This may lead to the conclusion that Biblical Hebrew is devoid of any particular type of poetic language.[3] Indeed, the indicated features of biblical poetry can be found in the Hebrew narrative. Let us take, for example, the beginning of the well-known Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters."[4] Is this text poetic? What makes it poetry? The mere fact that it is inserted into a collection called psalms? Is lining up this text in modern Bible editions enough to call it lyrical? What, in fact, is the determinant of biblical poetry: language, individual elements of the verse, the specific unit of text or the whole composition?

[3] J.L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry. Parallelism and Its History*, New Haven1981, Yale University Press; J.L. Kugel, *The Great Poems of the Bible*, New York 1999, Free Press.

[4] Ps 23:1–2. Translation of biblical passages is my own, unless otherwise stated. Here: The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (RSV) is an authorized revision of the American Standard Version, published in 1901, which was a revision of the King James Version, published in 1611.

## 3. Parallelism as an indicator of biblical poetics

Psalm 23 is considered as a piece of poetry not by the sublimity and uniqueness of the metaphors used, although they are beautiful, but by undertaking a genre convention according to specific language patterns. In every introduction to the Bible we read that *parallelism* is such a pattern of Hebrew poetics. Parallelism – originally *Parallelismus Membrorum* or parallelism of the line – is a term introduced by the Anglican bishop, Oxford professor of poetics, Robert Lowth in the eighteenth century.[5] For Lowth, biblical poetry is a series of couplets (twin and mirror lines) in which the second line repeats the syntax and sense of the first. Lowth called these pairs *parallelism*, as the two lines are somehow parallel to each other. In geometry, parallelism is two lines that run parallel to each other, side by side at an equal distance. In poetry these are two lines of text that somehow correspond to each other.

We also owe the division of parallelism to Robert Lowth: 1. synonymous or saying something similar, but in other words (e.g. "Praise the Lord, all nations! // Extol him, all peoples!"[6]), 2. antithetical or colliding opposing realities (e.g. "My mouth will utter truth; // wickedness is an abomination to my lips"[7]) and 3. synthetic meaning adding new content to the first verse, developing the thought of the previous verse (e.g. "Though they say, 'As the Lord lives,' // yet they swear falsely"[8]).

Indeed, in the Hebrew Bible, as well as in the geographically and culturally close Ugarit, poetry is essentially created by a balance of two (or possibly three) elements – parallelism. It is the technique of composing a text in relatively short paired lines that somehow correspond, at some level – similar length, vocabulary, sense, morphologist words (endings), syntax/grammar, sound, rhythm – are parallel to each other. In the Lowth system, parallelism was defined by semantic means, i.e. meaning (synonyms, antonyms). Other researchers have expanded

[5] R. Lowth, *De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum*, Oxford 1753. Anonymous English translation appeared in 1787. I used the translation of G. Gregory, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, London1835, Tegg& Son, https://openlibrary.org/works/OL3209476W/De_sacra_poesi_Hebraeorum (11.05.2020).

[6] Ps 117:1.

[7] Prov 8:7.

[8] Jer 5:2.

the possibilities for parallelism. Adele Berlin has added a morphological and symbolic (emblematic) component.[9] Stephen Geller has expanded the semantic field of parallelism, adding, for example, a cause-effect relationship and the like.[10] Benjamin Hrushovski, in turn, developed a semantic-syntactic and rhythmic network of parallelism.[11]

## 4. Rhythm as an indicator of biblical poetics

Poetry is often composed for the purpose of public proclamation, recitation or singing. That is why sound effects are particularly important, much more important than in prose. The lyrics are characterized by various sound techniques designed to embellish, strengthen or be moving. The sounds, syllables, word length, grammatical endings, accents, logical and emotional emphasis, pauses, intonation, tempo, rhythm, repetitions, parallels and contrasts count in poetry. Sound effects influence the song's aesthetics, atmosphere and reception; the experienced orator uses them to bring out and emphasize the meaning of the whole.

In biblical literature there are many literary figures and stylistic measures regarding voicing, the sonic side of a text. There are alliteration[12], assonance[13], paronomasia[14],

[9] A. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, Bloomington 1985, Indiana University Press. I used the new edition: *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, Grand Rapids 2008, Eerdmans.

[10] S.A. Geller, *Parallelism in Early Biblical Poetry* (HSM 20), Missoula 1979,Scholars Press; S.A. Geller,*The Dynamics in Parallel Verse. A Poetic Analysis of Deut 32:6–12*, "Harvard Theological Review" 75 (1982), pp. 35–56.

[11] B. Hrushovski, *Prosody, Hebrew*, in: *Encyclopedia Judaica*, M. Berenbaum, F. Skolnik (eds.), Detroit 2007, Macmillan Reference, vol. 16, col. 595–623.

[12] Alliteration is a repetition of the same consonant/syllable at the beginning or in accented positions of successive words forming a verse, most often for expressive, mnemonic or decorative purposes, e.g. Isa 31:3, Ps 127:1 or Heb 2:18.

[13] Assonance, called incomplete rhyme or vowel harmony, is a type of repetition of sounds that is obtained e.g. from the inflection of verbs and/or nouns (grammatical rhyme), e.g. Dtr 6:5, Ps 22:17 for Ps 106:6.

[14] Paronomasia is a phonetic stylistic figure consisting of a juxtaposition of two or more words that sound similar or identical, sometimes to emphasize the opposite of their meaning, e.g. Ecc7:1a, Isa 5:7 or Zeph 2:4.

etymological figure[15], onomatopoeia[16], rhyme[17] and others, like wordplay.[18] However, in the context of the poetics of the Hebrew Bible, rhythm or meter are most often indicated. Rhythm is a regular accent stroke in poetic verses. It is assumed that biblical poetry was first and foremost a vocal art, intended for recitation or singing, so its rhythm was an important part of the song. Most researchers have accepted that in the rhythm of Hebrew poetics, accented syllables (and not open, closed, long, short or unstressed) count.[19] The rhythm is therefore created by repetitive and often predictable beats of sound accents, and the metric unit is one strongly accented syllable. This assumption allowed to determine the rhythm of individual songs. For example, Ps 117, the shortest psalm in Psalter, contains two parallel verses, i.e. 4 lines[20], each with 3 accent strokes. The pattern of the psalm looks like this: 3 + 3 and 3 + 3.

Unfortunately, not many psalms and other works that are included in biblical poetry can boast of such regularity. Most of them have a very irregular rhythm. For example, for the aforementioned Psalm 1, the rhythm is distributed as follows: verse 1: 2 + 2; verse 2: 3 + 3; verse 3: 2 + 4; verse 4: (4 + 4) + (2 + 2); verse 5: (3 + 2) + (3 + 2); verse 6: (3 + 2) + (3 + 2). The last two lines show the same pattern of accents, but this is the only rhythmic regularity of this psalm. The remaining verses are characterized by the seemingly random distribution

[15] Etymological figure is a kind of paronomasia; words are put together based on the same etymology. In Hebrew it is a very common construction, which is considered to be a literary language convention (e.g. to sin a sin or to dream a dream). The combination of the same verb in the infinitive (*infinitives absolutus*) and the conjugatedverb in Hebrew serves to strengthen its meaning or emphasize its overtones, e.g. Gen 2:17, Lam 1:8 or Ex 22:22.

[16] Onomatopoeia is a sound-tracking word, a stylistic measure consisting in choosing words so that they imitate the described phenomenon or sounds made by the described object (e.g. animal voices). The Bible includes both sound-trackingwords, as well as sound-tracking verses, e.g.Isa 5:24 or בקבוק (*bakbuk*) 'bottle' – a noun imitating the sound of the poured liquid.

[17] Rhyme – this well-known poetry feature is a correspondence of the sound of words occupying a fixed position within a verse (most often at its end). Rhyme relatively rarely occurs in biblical poetry, e.g. Gen 4:23.

[18] For more on each of these figures with examples, see M. Majewski, *Jak przekłady zmieniają Biblię. O przekładach i przekładaniu Pisma Świętego raz jeszcze*, Kraków 2019, pp. 12–15 and 165–169.

[19] H. Kosmala, *Form and Structure in Ancient Hebrew Poetry. A New Approach*, "Vetus Testamentum" 14 (1964), pp. 423–445.

[20] Each poetic verse in the Bible and in Ugarit has two lines (*bicolon*) as standard, less often it has three lines (*tricolon*, e.g. 2 Sam 22:9), and exceptionally four lines (*tetracolon*, e.g. Ps 53:3). Verses with more lines do not appear.

of tonic beats. Analysis of individual psalms in terms of rhythmics fails. Tadeusz Brzegowy in his analysis of the poetic structure of the Psalter notes that "we don't have a completely regular rhythm in any psalm."[21] Lowth believed that the biblical Hebrew had a meter, but he explained that during transmission of the text and addition of vowels it was lost. In the last century, many scholars have attempted to work out the principles of the biblical meter; many, however, abandoned these attempts as ineffective.

We can cautiously state that some traces of meter and rhythm could be found in biblical poetry. One of them is that in parallelism both lines are usually of the same length – they are often pronounced with a similar amount of time. In addition, accents sometimes fall in the same places in the verse. There are repetitive patterns, such as the one indicated above (3 + 3) or an asymmetrical pattern, where the first line is longer and the second shorter (3 + 2). This pattern is well known from the Book of Lamentations, hence called elegiac. The shorter line is obtained here for example by omitting a verb or other analogous structure in the second of two parallel lines. However, it is difficult to notice more specific rhythmic regularities. It seems that, apart from applying the general rule of similar line length, meter is often ruled by chance. The analysis of Psalter in terms of rhythmics suggests that the accent system was often not taken into account or that we cannot reproduce it. The Psalter's meter is not determined by constant accent strokes, but at most by occasional sequences that are subject to numerous variations. The conclusion of Benjamin Hruszowski, who studied the Hebrew prosody of Psalter, is that the rhythm is free, and the rules that govern it are very flexible.[22] The already mentioned James Kugel is more radical here. He concludes his research with the proposal that the impossibility of detecting a uniform repetitive meter of a biblical poetic text results from the fact that there is no such meter.[23] So he proposed the thesis that the only distinctive feature of Hebrew poetry is parallelism.

To this day, three positions have clarified in the matter of biblical poetic rhythm. According to some, there is meter in the Bible and it can be fragmentarily reproduced, which they try to prove by analyzing selected examples and narrow samples. According to others, there was meter in biblical poetry, but

[21] T. Brzegowy, *Psałterz i Księga Lamentacji*, Tarnów 2007, Biblos, p. 33.

[22] B. Hrushovski, *Prosody, Hebrew…*, col. 607.

[23] J.L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, … p. 90.

we do not have access to it for one reason or another. Finally, according to the latest, Hebrew poetry simply does not have such a feature.

## 5. Brevity as an indicator of biblical poetics

As I mentioned in the introduction, brevity or condensed expressions is an important indicator of recognizing poetic texts in many cultures. This is also the case in the Bible, especially in poetic excerpts from prophetic books or wisdom works such as the Book of Job, Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. These texts are characterized by the phenomenon of the absence or small number of these parts of speech that are very often used in prose. They are primarily (by frequency of occurrence): the conjunction "and" (ו), the definite article (ה), the prepositions "for/to" (ל) and "in" (ב), *nota accusativi* (את) or the adjective pronoun "which/that" (אשר). In prose, each of these forms is very popular, and appears repeatedly in every sentence of the story. However, in prophetic oracles, wisdom sayings or psalms, these forms are often overlooked, where we would normally expect them. The stronger the desire for compactness and coherence is revealed, the more the text gets closer to the lyrical expression.

Another condensational feature of biblical poetry is the abovementioned omission of a verb or an analogous structure in the second line of parallelism – making some of the parallelisms asymmetrical (e.g. 3 + 2). This is called parallelism with ellipse (omission). The reader or listener usually has no problem with supplementing the second line with the default form. For example: "God has gone up with a shout, // the Lord with the sound of a trumpet"[24] or "For every beast of the forest is mine, // the cattle on a thousand hills."[25]In old Hebrewpoetry there also occurs a type of concentration by omitting the verb and creating nominal sentences, non-verbal sentences[26], although it is not reserved for lyrics.[27] Both phenomena also appear in Ugaritic poems.

The criterion of brevity – though useful – is, however, insufficient, because Hebrew prose can also be characterized by the attribute of conciseness. One of the characteristics of Hebrew prose is its economic nature. The stories told

[24] Ps 47:6.

[25] Ps 50:10.

[26] For example Ps 46:8.

[27] For example Gen 12:6b.

are simple, the vocabulary is limited, and the plot is not complicated. The same is true of characters and heroes: their appearance, individual character traits, life choices and moral dilemmas are most often omitted in favor of a clear plot and a clear ideological message. Conciseness should therefore be treated as an auxiliary but not decisive criterion in identifying Hebrew poetry. It works more often with prophecy oracles than in classic narrative texts.

## 6. New research on parallelism: does the second line repeat the first?

Neither rhythm nor brevity are the decisive criteria in the recognition of biblical poetry; parallelism works much better in this role. It is used for distinguishing poetry from prose, because it is the most popular means of organizing a lyrical verse in the Hebrew Bible.

The division of parallelism into synonymous, antithetical and synthetic, dating back to the 18th century, is used eagerly today. However, it is not an adequate description of this literary phenomenon. An important weakness of the still popular Lowth system is treating the second line in a subordinate way to the first. In this approach, in synonymous and antithetical parallelism, the second line repeats or reverses what was said in the first. In newer studies, it has been noticed that the second line does not copy the first, but rather adds, explains and expands through the expressions used.[28] The second line has a slightly different meaning than the first one and is necessary for a proper understanding of the whole expression. So, it is not just a pair, a mirror image, but a separate, specific element of the whole. The old approach to synonymy suggested that one line is enough to understand the sense and content of the verse. Today, it is important to highlight the mutual complex and multidimensional interaction of both lines, their exposure and explanation of each other, and complementarity of the

[28] For more esp. D. Pardee, *Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetic Parallelism. A Trial Cut* (VTSup 39), Leiden 1988, Brill; N.P. Lunn, *Word-Order Variation in Biblical Hebrew Poetry. Differentiating Pragmatics and Poetics*, Milton Keynes 2006, Paternoster; A. Wagner, *Der Parallelismus membrorum zwischen poetischer Form und Denkfigur*, in: A. Wagner (ed.), *Parallelismus membrorum*, Fribourg 2007, Academic Press, pp. 1–26; M. Frog, L. Tarkka (eds.), *Parallelism in Verbal Art and Performance*, Columbia 2017, University of Missouri.

content.[29] The widespread view of parallelism as a repetition of a thought in the second verse with a synonymous or antithetical change should be abandoned in favor of a more dynamic view of the relationship between the two lines of parallelism. It is simplification to say that the following line repeats the thought of the previous one. It is never so simple that A = B. The biblical author in the second line expresses the intended content differently from the first. Rather, B is a complement or addition to A, and the relationship between them is complex.

In typical parallelism, the relationship between lines A and B usually occurs in one of four ways: similarity, opposite, complement (additions) and causality (effect). However, there are many other possible correlations between lines A and B: A and moreover B; not only A, but B; not A or not B; not A and certainly not B; just like A, so B and others. For example, the parallel figure from Isa 1:7 can be reconstructed as follows: "Your country will be destroyed // (moreover), your cities will be consumed with fire!" In this context, James Kugel insists that the term parallelism should be replaced by "seconding", indicating – after Robert Alter – that the second line outweighs and exceeds the first. Not so much repeats but strengthens or significantly complements. In parallelism "To get wisdom is better than gold // to get understanding is better than silver"[30] the second thought repeats the basic thought of the first. But in the following verse the second thought is not a simple repetition of the first: "He who gives heed to the word will prosper // and happy is he who trusts in the Lord."[31] The second line outbids the first and reaches the essence of the biblical principle of retribution. It is not uncommon that the second line adds drama or strengthens what was said in the first. If something is broken in A, it will be crushed in B. If something is good in A, it will be exquisite in B, as in this example:"A insidiousman spreads strife // and a whisperer separates close friends."[32] Second line parallelism is intensified and more specific. Often the B line of parallelism is more specific, intense or rhetorically significant. It resembles the echo that takes up the voice of the A, playing it in a new way.

[29] F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry*, Oxford 2015, Oxford University Press, p. 112; T. Linafelt, *Poetry and Biblical Narrative*, in: D. Nolan Fewell (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, Oxford 2016, Oxford University Press, pp. 84–92; R. Alter, *The Glory of Creation in Psalm 104*, in: J. Blake Couey, E.T. James (eds.), *Biblical Poetry and the Art of Close Reading*, Cambridge 2018, Cambridge University Press, pp. 49–50.

[30] Prov 16:16.

[31] Prov 16:20.

[32] Prov 16:28.

The world of Hebrew parallelism is much more complex than is generally assumed. The similarity of parallel lines can be not only semantic (similarity in meaning), but also grammatical (the same sentence arrangement, form, number of words, endings, suffixes, variation, conjugation etc.)[33] or sonoric (similarity of sound, various types of assonances) or both at once. The link between the two lines can be logical: action – reaction[34], reason-result, cause-consequence[35], general-detail, method-goal, base-conclusion, current state-expectation.[36] It can also be of a temporal (sequential, conditional) nature, as we observe in historical psalms[37], or of a grammatical nature: pairs of words, positive-negative, question-answer[38], single-plural[39], male-female[40], number-bigger number[41], etc.[42] Grammar parallelism is superior when both lines say differently, but syntax and/or morphology is repeated in the second line. Lines are then paired by a linguistic pattern. When the second line is reflected in the reverse order, we are dealing with chiastic parallelism, which is a kind of mirror for the first part.[43] Pairing popularтandems is another form of building parallel statements. Israel and Jacob, heaven and earth, good and evil, light and darkness, father and mother, sun and moon, etc. – all of these couples were well known to every educated Israelite. We find the same pairs of words in Ugarit. There are also couples typical for religious literature, such as grace and truth, Zion and Jerusalem, etc. Finally, there are various comparisons among the categories of parallelism.[44]

The term "parallelism" thus covers a whole range of forms of biblical verse structure, different and changing mechanisms of repetition in the following

[33] D.T. Tsumura, *Vertical Grammar of Parallelism in Hebrew Poetry*, "Journal of Biblical Studies" 128 (2009), pp. 167–181.

[34] For example Prov 3:6.

[35] For example Ecc 11:3.

[36] For example Isa 1:18.

[37] For example Ps 107:6.

[38] For example Isa 44:8.

[39] For example Ps 105:6.

[40] For example Ps 144:12.

[41] For example 1 Sam 18:7.

[42] See more E.R. Wendland, L. Zogbo, *Hebrew Poetry in the Bible. A Guide for Understanding and for Translating*, New York 2000, United Bible Societies, pp. 23–25.

[43] Gen 1:27, Ps 124:7.

[44] Ps 42:1.

verses. In the Lowth system, the third category, synthetic parallelism, served as a huge bag, which included all the parallelisms that did not match the simple distinction between synonymy and antithesis. Today we can say that we either have one parallelism – as a form – or dozens of different parallelisms – its individual types. Many features of the language can be harnessed to create a pair, parallelism. Whatever makes this symmetry and shapes the lines in pairs, creates parallelism. It is therefore difficult today to create a closed list of types of parallelism, i.e. all possible relations that arise between A and B. At the stage of the study of parallelism we are now: although various lists of parallelisms are being created, it is stipulated that this is not a closed list.

Repeating the theory of three types of parallelism is an impoverishing simplification not only in exegesis, but also in biblical translation. Luckily, parallelism is easily replicated in translation with a similar poetic effect. However, if the translator assumes only two or three types of it, he can reduce the second line to a simple repetition or explanation where parallelism retains a puzzle, surprise or presents one of many complex relations. The problem also lies in the fact that, until the end of the twentieth century, the framework of Semitic poetics was still set by standards inherited from ancient Greeks, specifically by Aristotle's *Poetics* and its use in building literary theory. A new mindfulness allows us to see that what we call parallelism concerns many phenomena of biblical poetry, including the various types and ways of functioning of these unique couples.

## 7. Repetition as a fundamental phenomenon of biblical poetics

Despite the extension of the definition of parallelism in more recent studies, it still does not cover all forms of biblical poetry. As pairing and duplication occurs in very different forms, the fundamental category of biblical poetics should arise from, but exceed, the nature of parallelism. Such a category seems to be *repetition* – a phenomenon present at various levels of the language – not only on the surface, but also in the so-called deep structure of it. The repetition covers all kinds of parallelisms, chiazmas, inclusions, rhymes and finally rhythm. Studies of Hebrew poetics indicate that its important feature is not so much parallelism, but the broader literary phenomenon of repetition or recurrent returns. The main feature of Hebrew poetics, understood in this way, includes the essential forms of expression with a higher, lyrical register. Let us list the most important forms and techniques, starting from the smallest units:

- repetition of sounds: consonants (alliteration) or vowels (assonance)
- repetition of syllables (wordplay), final repetitions (rhyme)
- repetition of individual words (word pairing, anaphora)
- repetitions of phrases, lines, sentences (e.g. inclusion)
- accent repetitions (rhythm, accent strokes, rhythmic division, tempo)
- repetition of whole fragments (verses, stanzas and refrain)
- repetition of meanings and ideas (e.g., chiasm and concentric structure, parallelism).

Parallelism – as a dyadic, repetitive structure of equivalence – is a form of repetition; the same rhythm. What connects parallelism and meter – as well as all kinds of symmetries, refrain, inclusion, chiasm, merism, hendiadys, assonance or polysemy – is a common category of repetition. Parallelism is a recurrence of semantic or syntactic elements in two directly consecutive lines. But the corresponding elements can also be separated, creating an inclusion or refrain. They serve, for example, to indicate the borders of a text or part of it, as in Psalm 8[45] or in Psalm 98.[46] The rhythm, if it appears, is also based on the constant return of accents in analogous places in the verse: the recurrence of prosody units creates the rhythm and regularity of the reading. The recurrence of the same consonants, vowels or syllables creates assonance, alliteration and rhyme, the juxtaposition of synonyms creates hendiadys, and juxtaposition of binary forms – merism, etc.

Repetition as a determinant of Hebrew poetry allows to analyze a multidirectional network of densities and polysemy absent in other types of Hebrew literature. Each language has different abstract semantic levels, not just the literal sense of words. On each of them it is possible to repeat. A form of repetition seems to be an important tool of poetry in general. In the Bible it seems to be the basic indicator of lyrical expression. This is one of those common features of various Bible poetic works, which allows one to distinguish poetry from prose. This is a fairly general category, but it is comfortable and wide enough to embrace various phenomena of biblical poetics. Characteristic repetitions and recurrences give the right impression that we are dealing with something other than ordinary speech or narrative. Repetitions make the statement more sublime and unusual. Repetitive forms make the text special and more expressive.

[45] Verse 8:1 = 8:8.

[46] Verse 98:4a=98:6b.

## 8. Is the creation story a piece of poetry or prose?

The above analysis is necessary to properly determine the literary character of the text about the creation of the world from Gen 1, i.e. Priestly (P) story of creation.[47] If biblical poetry is characterized by exact and purposeful repetition, then we can look at the work from Gen 1 in a new way. Let us start with the fact that the creative myth of Gen 1 is not only an introduction to the Bible. It is a sacred story which, through ordered narration, repetition of formulas and thoughtful structure, conveys more than the content of words and sentences themselves. It expresses the specifically understood order of the world, which was established "in the beginning" by God. This work marks the essential foundations of theology of the Priestly writer (P). It is an expression of the understanding of God, man in the world, holiness, the sanctuary and the Sabbath. It is *sensu stricto* theology, or the discourse of God, anthropology, or the discourse of man, and cosmology, or the discourse of world order.

The text from Gen 1 is most often treated as narrative, as prose. In the Priestly source of the Pentateuch, this work belongs to the continuum of the narrative leading from the creation of the world to the new creation, i.e. the sanctuary of the presence of Jhwh.[48] The prosaic nature of Gen 1 is also emphasized by juxtaposing it with poetic songs about the creation of the world, such as Psalm 8 or Psalm 104. But the term "narrative" in relation to this text is misleading. Genesis 1 is not a story to be found, for example, in non-Priestly works from biblical protology.[49] There are no characteristics, plot or twists. Genesis 1 is more like an exhibition, a presentation of key Priestly concepts – God as creator, man as *imago Dei* and the world as a temple – in a disciplined literary form. The author has dressed this exhibition as a narrative – it is clear that the genre of legislation in this case was not suitable. However, this is not a typical Priestly narrative, because the intensity of the literary means used here is special.

The first verse of the song attracts attention: בראשית ברא אלוהים – the first three consonants of the first word, ברא, are repeated in the second word, while

[47] Gen 1:1 – 2:3. Priestly source (or P) is one of the widely recognized sources underlying the Torah (Pentateuch). It is both stylistically and theologically distinct from other material in the Torah; it is concerned with "priestly" matters – sanctuary, ritual law, priests, sacrifices, Sabbath, holidays etc. P is classically dated to the time of (or after) Babylonian exile (6th century BC).

[48] Ex 25 – 40.

[49] Gen 1 – 11.

the third word takes the last consonant of the second, א. This significant א will appear three times in the first and second parts of the verse, in the repetition of the particle את and in the climatic הארץ at the end of the sentence. Alliterations are accompanied by assonances: the long "e"in the last syllable of the first word is repeated in the last syllable of the third. ברא and הארץ also sound together thanks to the same long vowels in an identically accented place. *Heaven* and *earth* create merism with a simultaneous contrast (binary antithesis), and the beginning of the second verse with the last word from the first verse (הארץ) is a kind of epiphora obtained by the inversion of normal sentence order (verb – subject). The word תהום takes the root and the sound of the preceding word והת. In the first two verses of Genesis, one could indicate more alliterations and assonances of this type, as well as hendiadys, parallelism, repetitions, inversion and contrast. Ultimately this leads to the initial assumption of the poetic structure of the whole.[50]

Poetic features do not end in the introduction. The third verse that opens the work of creation begins with the phrase יהי אור ויהי אור – the shortest and perfectly balanced sentence composed in the Hebrew Bible, built of multilevel parallelism (syntactic, morphological, sound). The compression and discipline of the language as well as the strength of the figures used reach further. Throughout the song, couples are clashing together: sky/earth, light/darkness, sea/land, day/night, sun/moon, people/animals, man/woman, work/rest, etc. It abounds in numerous stylistic means and literary forms – some perhaps accidental, others probably intentional – which make it an unusual text. The author uses constructions that can be considered poetic, like verse 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Added to this are repeated formulas, refrains, summaries, inclusions and a well thought out structure of the whole. This text is not ordinary prose.[51]

I will not carry out a detailed literary analysis of Gen 1. Literature on this subject is vast. The arrangement of the song around number seven is well known: scheme 6 + 1 (3 days grouped in pairs plus a special seventh day). The text abounds in constant, repetitive formulas, with a characteristic refrain summarizing each day of creation: "And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the… day." These refrains form a structure of seven relapses, between which stanzas appear, also full of characteristic repetitions

[50] M. Majewski, *Pięcioksiąg odczytany na nowo…*, p. 109.

[51] M. Majewski, *Pięcioksiąg odczytany na nowo…*, p. 110.

of the same phrases, formulas and idioms. The text is rich in fixed dyads of terms, assonances, alliterations and a noticeable rhythm here and there. Regular symmetry and inclusions also appear.

However, there is no parallelism in Gen 1 – this literary figure to which researchers of poetry in the Bible are so accustomed to by reading psalms or prophetic and wisdom books. Due to the lack of regular parallel constructions, many refuse Gen 1 to be considered as poetic.

But this does not prejudge the matter. As noted above, parallelism does not seem to be a sufficient criterion for identifying Hebrew lyrics. Rather, the umbrella phenomenon of repetition should be indicated here. Hebrew lyrics are not a rigid system of comparable lines, but a form recognizable by the recurrent patterns of language signs and conventions that set it apart from ordinary prose. In this approach, Gen 1 can be described as a poetic text, as a song about God the Creator or a poem about the week of creation. If biblical poetry is characterized by exact and purposeful repetition, then the text from Gen 1 meets this criterion very clearly.

Poetic elements in Gen 1 have been noticed for a long time. Albright, Loretz, Kselman and Andersen, and in Poland for example Artur Sandauer emphasized the poetic character and pointed to specific poetic structures in the Priestly source (P). So, although Gen 1 lacks parallelisms, researchers agree on the recognition of the specific literary character of this story. There is no agreement as to what in Gen 1 is poetry and what is not.

## 9. Is the creation story a hymn?

Those who go furthest in underlining the poetics of Gen 1 classify the song as a hymn, i.e. a solemn apostolic song of praise, composed in honor of a deity, a special person, event, homeland (here in honor of God the Creator). An example is the work of Frank Polak, who proves the hymnic nature of this Priestly work[52]; Gordon Wenham had expressed the same opinion before.[53] However, a thorough analysis of Gerhard von Rad, who refused the work of hymnic

[52] F.H. Polak, *Poetic Style and Parallelism in the Creation Account (Genesis 1.1–2.3)*, in: H. Reventlow, Y. Hoffman (eds.), *Creation in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, London2002, Sheffield Academic Press, pp. 2–31.

[53] G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Dallas 1987, Word, p. 10.

features, is more justified. In his opinion, the song contains few hymnic elements, just as faded as mythical. These are: the main theme and repeated formulas: "God said", "God saw that it was good", "And there was evening and there was morning". They act like refrains and rhythmize the text. Thus, this is not enough to describe the work as a hymn on this basis.[54] First of all, there are no hymnic, apostrophic phrases, praise or solemn eulogy.

It is important not to go too far in emphasizing the lyrics of the passage, because the Priestly author used, in Gen 1, well-known, repeatedly practiced para-poetic techniques, on the basis of which he created a composition captivating with its simplicity, purity and elegance. The main hero is *Elohim* (God). It is quite a lot, but still not enough to classify it as an hymn. Rather, it is a specifically Priestly narrative-poetic exhibition of theological truths about creation. In the context of Priestly work, Gen 1 is a truly unique text, but researchers sometimes look for perfection in it, which does not exist. If we compare it with psalms, we will be willing to place it closer to prose. If we compare it with biblical prose, it will clearly move towards poetry. When we look at Gen 1 in its own right, it turns out to be a rhythmic, sublime exposure. The Priestly author is not an outstanding prose writer or biblical poet. All "narratives" in P bear traces of symmetry and specific schematism. Against the background of the Priestly literary skills, this work is unique, and its form was supposed to emphasize its special importance, as well as to facilitate listening, remembering and reciting during the holy day.

## 10. Poetry in the Priestly source?

The growing interest in its literary character is a peculiar sign of modern research on the Priestly source of the Pentateuch. Starting from the analysis of Gen 1, scholars are willing to search for poetic fragments throughout the corps of Priestly work. These studies lead some to suggest that all Priestly material can be described as para-poetic, creating its own kind of poetry. The thesis that there is much more poetry in the P than is normally assumed, was announced by Jason Gaines in the 2013 in his doctoral dissertation "Poetic Features in Priestly Narrative Texts", published in 2015 as "The Poetic Priestly Source".

[54] G. von Rad, *Genesis. A Commentary*, trans. W.L. Jenkins, Philadelphia 1972, Westminster Press, p. 47.

The author analyzes nine prime poetic features of biblical Hebrew (such as parallelism, structural measures or a special style) and on this basis distinguishes Priestly prose and poetry, noting that all biblical texts fall somewhere between these literary genres. With the help of style analysis, he distinguishes two layers of Priestly source: poetic ("Poetic-P") and prose ("Prosaic-P"). The first is almost complete and independent – thus creates a basic Priestly document – and the second is fragmentary and incoherent when read in isolation from the first, therefore creates a series of later supplements. For example, analysis of Gen 17 leads Gaines to conclude that this text contains many poetic verses; similarly in the story of the Flood or the Egyptian plagues. The author admits in several places that P's "poetics" is fundamentally different from what is normally called poetry in the Bible, but concludes that many verses in the source of P have the character and characteristics of poetry, and therefore "they are poetic but not necessarily poetry."[55] Although Gaines's study is not convincing regarding the division of P into "poetic" and "prosaic" sources, or the assignment of a significant part of P's narrative material to poetry, it notes that: 1) there is still much analysis to be done in studying the style of Priestly compositions; 2) the writing style of P is so specific that attempts to classify it under the standard modern understanding of literary genres will still face the same systematization problems.[56]

## 11. Summary

In Gen 1 there is no parallelism of lines or such features of biblical poetics as condensed forms (without particles, articles, etc.), rhetorical questions or exclamations. This important observation seems to exclude this work from the circle of biblical poetry. But the poetry in the Bible is not just parallelism. If we make the umbrella phenomenon of intentional recurrences a determinant of biblical poetry, we can classify Gen 1 as a poetic text, as an attempt to capture the key Priestly text in the frame of Hebrew poetry. An intermediate position can also be adopted, seeing in Gen 1 something between poetry and prose, a literary style proper to the Priestly author, a special kind of structured exhibition of key topics. This exhibition would be externally similar to prose, at the same time substantially different from it due to the use of repetitions at many levels of the

[55] J. Gaines, *The Poetic Priestly Source*, Minneapolis 2015, Fortress Press, p. 90.

[56] M. Majewski, *Pięcioksiąg odczytany na nowo*, p. 114.

text. The priestly author is not so much an outstanding poet as a good craftsman writer who as an introduction to the Bible proposed an elevated, solemn text, easy to recite and remember.

New Bible literary studies indicate that the clear division into poetry and prose present in modern literature does not work for classical Hebrew literature – the work from Gen 1 is the best example. There is no single pattern of biblical poetry, there are various variations and forms. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the body of biblical writings we find both prose-like poetry and poetry-like prose. In Gen 1 we deal with the latter case. It seems that Hebrew prose and poetry are not two separate worlds between which there is a clear demarcation line determined by the use of parallelism. The difference between poetry, prose-like poetry, a narrative similar to poetry, and finally typical narrative prose is a difference of degree, not essence, and the transition between these literary worlds is smooth. In the Bible, certain prophecy, proverbs or sayings will be more poetry or more prose, not just one or the other. Robert Alter, a scholar specializing in comparative literature and biblical literature, notes, in his latest study "The Art Of Biblical Translation" (2019)[57], that biblical poetry is not so much a specific form as a way of looking and perceiving. Thus, the debate about what is and what is not biblical poetry remains open.

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