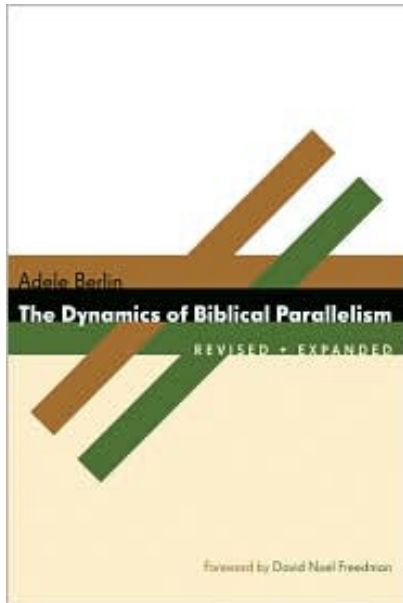


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Berlin, Adele

The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism

2nd edition

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. Pp. xxiv + 200. Paper.
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Allan Rosengren
University of Copenhagen
Copenhagen, Denmark

In 1753, Robert Lowth published his *De Sacra Poesi Hebræorum*, presenting what were to become the modern classical definitions of parallelisms. Lowth's method and terminology were occasionally revised and expanded, but it was largely accepted and appreciated by the scholarly community for more than two hundred years. From the 1970s, however, a number of scholars have launched fresh approaches on parallelism by using linguistics as a tool of analysis (Berlin, Collins, Geller, Greenstein, O'Connor, Pardee, Segert, and Watson).

Berlin's analysis has been the most successful of all these linguistic approaches. Berlin was chosen to write the article on "parallelism" for the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, and now her 1985 *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, a modern classic, has been republished largely unaltered. Berlin's analysis is the clearest, simplest, yet (as it seems) most-comprehensive analysis of the various aspects of parallelism. This accessibility is not present in all other works on parallelism.

Parallelism, from Berlin's point of view (inspired by Roman Jakobson), involves linguistic equivalence and/or contrast. Parallelism thus activates or uses language in a variety of ways, and what Berlin presents is a systematic analysis of this usage. Berlin uses the term

aspect “to refer to the area of linguistics activated” (27), that is, the grammatical, lexical, semantic, or phonological aspect, and the term *level* “to specify how much of the textual structure is involved” (27).

Berlin analyzes the four linguistic aspects of parallelism—grammar, lexis, semantics, and phonology—in four distinct chapters, which covers the larger part of the book. In this respect, her work is probably all-comprehensive. But in terms of *level* of language, Berlin’s analysis is for the most part restricted to the analysis of parallelism on the level of the line, even if the *inclusio* according to her is a form of parallelism (3, 132).

Do parallelisms equal poetry?

It follows from Berlin’s approach that parallelisms “touted as indicators of poetry are no different from the linguistic equivalences in prose texts” (3). Parallelisms are not limited to one super-genre of literature (poetry), but they are more prominent in what we call Hebrew poetry than in prose. Classical Hebrew poetry “is characterized by a high incidence of terse, balanced parallelism” (7). In respect to the prose/poetry question, Berlin takes a middle stand between James L. Kugel and Robert Alter, seeing parallelisms in both super-genres (as does Kugel) and maintaining the validity of the distinction between prose and poetry (as does Alter but not Kugel).

Revised and expanded

Berlin’s 1985 book has not been rewritten, which is probably a good decision. Minor errors have been corrected, but the text from 1–170 is largely a reprint of the 1985 book. A new introduction gives an overview of the scholarly context in which the book was written and presents briefly the subsequent study of parallelism, including a representative bibliography of research in the field since 1985. Finally, a paper by the Russian linguist Lida Knorina has been added.

Beyond Berlin

The inclusion of Lida Knorina’s essay on biblical metaphors, which “does not deal with parallelism, but rather with metaphor” (xii) points to the potentials of the field of parallelisms. Berlin has produced a seminal work that may replace Lowth’s book as a standard book of reference in this field, but as with Lowth’s *De Sacra Poesi*, departures will be made from the “standard” observations of Berlin, explorations of what is not covered by *Dynamics* will be produced, and postmodern questions of whether parallelisms are manifestly there in the text or whether they are rather the product of the interpreter will be raised. I will point to two points that may illuminate what is still to be explored in the realm of parallelism.

(1) If parallelism can be found at various levels of language—the word, the line, the clause, but also at greater distances, for instance, that of an *inclusio*—which Berlin readily concedes but refrains from exploring, one might ask: Are there any criteria for how much distance there can be between parallels? Let us concede (which I will do willingly) that there is a morphological parallelism between *these* and *this* in Job 12:9 (46, 52), although the lines do not look like a parallelism. Are then accordingly the words *these* in Gen 2:4 and *this* in 5:1 parallels? The occurrence of these two words in the same text is surely “a linguistic phenomenon involving linguistic equivalences and/or contrasts that may occur on the level of the word, the line, or larger areas of text” (158). If we concede that the words *these* in Gen 2:4 and *this* in 5:1 form a parallelism, we also need to say that some parallelisms are better than others, from an interpretational point of view (and this was one of the less interesting). The perspective and selection (and hence interpretational interest) of the reader will dominate more in the future studies on parallelism.

(2) In a paragraph on the “Expectation of Parallelism,” Berlin herself explores the limits of linguistic analysis. In this paragraph, the content of which I totally agree with, Berlin speaks much more subjectively and impressionistically on the matter than in her linguistic analyses. Indeed, the approach adopted here resembles Alter’s work on parallelisms. However, Berlin (consciously or unconsciously) conceals the subjective aspects of interpretation. In this passage, we find expressions such as:

— “one tends to find parallelism even in lines which have few or no linguistic equivalences.” Who does “one” refer to: to all possible readers? to readers who view things the way Adele Berlin does? Adele Berlin only?

— “the tendency is to read this verse, too, as a binary sentence.” Whose tendency is described here? Who is inclined to this particular reading?

— “equivalence ... spills over.” A vivid metaphor. But we may ask: In whose interpretation does equivalence spill over?

— all the parts of the text “begin to be viewed as participating in some way in the parallelism.” Who is the agent behind this passive construction?

Adele Berlin is captured between her own experience as a reader and her desire to state universal rules. The quotations above could be replaced by: *I tend to find...; in my interpretation equivalence spills over...; I begin to view all the parts of the text....* But such subjective readings are of limited value for Berlin, who strives toward controlled

analysis. On the other hand, not all readers read the parallelisms as Berlin does. What she describes here is matter of interpretation, of readers' strategies, not of linguistic evidence.

I can appreciate the psychological reasoning behind this argument, but we cannot set up a rule that states that this or that formal structure sets up a particular expectation in all readers. The pervasive parallelisms of the book of Zechariah did not make the author of the Gospel of Matthew read Zech 9:9 in a parallelistic way (Matt 21:5), and the pervasive parallelisms in parts of the flood story do not set up the expectation of parallelisms in readers familiar with biblical scholarship. Rather, we must say that pervasive parallelism yields a potential for parallelistic interpretation, which the reader can choose to activate in his or her reading or not. In this respect, parallelism is an interpretational strategy.