

Shared Rhetorical Features in Biblical and Sumerian Literature

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Literary analysis of ancient near eastern texts has gained acceptance in recent years; studies on biblical style and rhetoric figure prominently in many journals, and cuneiformists, too, are beginning to see the value of this approach. This paper will point out several rhetorical features which appear in both Sumerian literature and the Bible. One need not argue the value of comparative studies. However, this study differs from most in that, while the Bible is often compared with Ugaritic texts, it is rarely compared, in the area of rhetoric, with Sumerian texts. The purpose of this paper is to show that such a comparison is possible, and that certain rhetorical features, although known in one particular literature, are not peculiar to it, but are more widespread than has been hitherto recognized.

The most outstanding characteristic in both biblical and Sumerian poetry is parallelism. There are, of course, many studies of biblical parallelism, dating from those of Robert Lowth in 1753 and 1778 up till the present. The study of Sumerian parallelism is in its infancy,¹ but some aspects of it can be discussed with certainty. One type of Sumerian parallelism which was first identified by Professor T. Jacobsen is called "the particularizing stanza."² It consists of a two or three line parallelism containing several repeated terms and one set of parallel terms which progress from the least specific or intense to the most specific or intense, often from a general designation or epithet to a name. An example is *Dumuzi's Dream*, lines 1-3:

ša-ga-né ír im-si edin-še ba-ra-è
guruš ša-ga-né ír im-si edin-še ba-ra-è
dumu-zi ša-ga-né ír im-si edin-še ba-ra-è

1 The following works contain discussions of Sumerian parallelism: B. Alster, *Dumuzi's Dream* (Copenhagen, 1972); idem, *Studies in Sumerian Proverbs* (Copenhagen, 1975); J. Cooper, *The Return of Ninurta to Nippur*, *An.Or.* 52 (Rome: 1978); H. Limet, "Essai de poétique sumérienne," *Kramer Anniversary Volume*, *AOAT* 25 (1976) 327-334; C. Wilcke, "Formale Gesichtspunkte in der sumerischen Literatur," *AS* 20 (Chicago, 1974) 205-316; A. Berlin, *Enmerkar and Ensubkešdanna, A Sumerian Narrative Poem* (Occasional Publications of the Babylonian Fund, 2, The University Museum, Philadelphia, 1979).

2 "The Myth of Inanna and Bilulu," *JNES* 12 (1953), 160-87, reprinted in *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, ed. W. L. Moran (Cambridge, Mass., 1970). See the latter, p. 334, n. 5.

His heart was filled with tears, he went out to the plain;
 The lad—his heart was filled with tears, he went out
 to the plain;
 Dumuzi—his heart was filled with tears, he went out
 to the plain.³

The effect created by this incrementation or particularization is like the narrowing of a beam to a pinpoint of intensity.

Less effective but more common is the two-line form; for example, *Dumuzi's Dream*, lines 42–43:

šeš-mu ma-mú-zu nu-ša ša₆ nam-ma-an-búr-e
 ddumu-zi ma-mú-zu nu-ša ša₆ ša₆ nam-ma-an-búr-e

My brother, your dream is not favorable, it is very clear to me;
 Dumuzi, your dream is not favorable, it is very clear to me.⁴

In Sumerian this form of two-line parallelism should probably be considered a subset of the parallelism in which all terms except one are repeated. This is a common occurrence in Sumerian, and the paralleled term (that is, the one not repeated) may or may not contain particularization.⁵ On the other hand, the device of particularization may be used independently of repetition of terms, as in *The Instructions of Suruppak*, lines 9–10:

dumu-mu na ga-ri na-ri-mu hē-dab₅
 zi-u₄sud-rá imim ga-ra-ab-d[ug₄] gizzal (?) hē-em-ši-ak

My son, let me give you instructions, may you take my instructions,
 Ziusudra, let me speak a word to you, may you pay attention to it.⁶

In biblical poetry there are few parallelism, with the exception of step-parallelism, in which

3 B. Alster, *Dumuzi's Dream*, 52–53. These are actually the first three lines of a four-line stanza.

4 Ibid., 58–59

5 E.g., *Dumuzi's Dream*, lines 131–32, contain repetition but not particularization.

i₇ a-ba mu-un-na-ba-e-ne šu n[u-um]-ma-gíd-dè
 a-ša še-ba mu-un-n[a-ba]-e-ne šu [nu]-um-ma-g[íd-dè]

They offered her a river in its water, she accepted it not;
 They offered her a field in its grain, she accepted it not.

6 B. Alster, *The Instructions of Suruppak*, 34–35. Cf. *Studies in Sumerian Proverbs*, 55. While it is correct that names of characters are often introduced by a two-line particularizing stanza, I doubt whether this was intended to produce suspense, as Alster claims. Did the audience really wonder which son of Suruppak was being addressed in *The Instructions of Suruppak*, lines 6–8? Furthermore, the same device appears in the lines immediately following (9–10), although the son has just been named in line 8. In some cases the name is unimportant. For instance, in *Enmerkar and Ensubkešdamma*, lines 135–36, the sorcerer is introduced and named in a particularizing stanza, but his proper name is never used again; he is referred to throughout the rest of the poem as the sorcerer.

many terms are repeated.⁷ Nevertheless, there are analogs of the particularizing device in the Bible, in poetry as well as in prose. The particularizing device is not a peculiarity of Sumerian poetry, as is sometimes implied, and is not limited (even in Sumerian) to repetitive parallelism.⁸

Psalm 29:5: The voice of (or: Hark!) the Lord breaks cedars;
The Lord smashes the cedars of Lebanon. (Cf. 29:8)

In this case three of the terms are repeated in both stichs and the term 'cedars' is particularized to 'cedars of Lebanon'. The need for an additional term at the end of the second stich may have been due to metric requirements, but the choice of 'of Lebanon' appears to have been made on the particularizing principle.

Deut. 32:9: For the portion of the Lord is His people;
Jacob is His inherited lot.

This is an example of non-repetitive parallelism. The particularization occurs in the pair 'His people' || 'Jacob'.

Psalm 89:4 I have made a covenant with my chosen one;
I have sworn to my servant David.

The pair *bhr* 'chosen' || *bd* 'servant' can be construed here as parallel terms,⁹ and they alone would have been sufficient to create the parallelism. 'David' is the particularizing term which, in this case, occurs *in addition* to a parallel term (*bdy*) instead of in place of it.

There are also a number of pairs which consist of a plural term designating a general category and a singular term containing a specific name; for example, 'the shield of heroes' || 'the shield of Saul' (2 Sam. 1:21), 'kings' || 'David' (Ps. 144:10), 'the cities of Judah' || 'Jerusalem' (Jer. 7:17 and *passim*). The principle behind these pairings may be the paralleling of a whole and its part, but there is an element of particularization here as well.

In Sumerian the most common type of particularization is that in which a generic category is paralleled by a proper name. In all of these biblical examples, too, the first member of the pair is a general term and the second **is a proper**, or geographic, name. It would seem, then, that in Hebrew, as well as in Sumerian, a particularizing term could be used to form a parallel word pair or to supplement it.

In Hebrew, as in Sumerian, this device is even more dramatic when it occurs in a three-stich parallelism.

⁷ This is thought by some to be the major difference between biblical and Sumerian poetry. Cf. W. Hallo, *JNES* 37 (1978). 270.

⁸ Hallo, *loc. cit.*, does not clarify the distinction between repetition and particularization, and speaks of particularization as if it were found only in Sumerian. Particularization is a means for creating parallel word pairs, and theoretically would be equally useful in Hebrew and Sumerian poetry. I do not know whether Sumerian actually uses it more than Hebrew, although my feeling is that it may. It seems to stand out more visibly in repetitive parallelism, but I do not know whether it is more likely to occur in repetitive parallelism.

⁹ Cf. Isa. 41:8-9; 42:1; 43:10; 44:1-2; 45:4; 65:9, 15; Ps. 105:6 and perhaps Hag. 2:23.

2 Sam. 22:51=Ps. 18:51:
 He makes great the victories/blessings of His king,¹⁰
 And shows kindness to His anointed;
 To David and to his seed, forever.

The particularizing terms are 'king' || 'anointed' || 'David'.

Gen. 37:33: It is the coat of my son;
 A wild animal has eaten him;
 Surely devoured is Joseph.¹¹

Again in these examples the culminating term is a proper name.

Even in passages which are non-parallelistic, certain types of apposition create a particularizing device. Often we find a proper name preceded by some sort of designation, often of familial relationship; for instance, Gen. 4:2: "his brother, Abel"; Gen. 32:12: "from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau"; or a geographic name preceded by a more general term, as in Gen. 19:4: "men of the city, men of Sodom."¹²

One might question whether this type of apposition in the Bible really constitutes a particularizing device.¹³ However, when there is a series of three (or more) gradually intensifying terms in apposition it seems more certain that we are dealing with an intentional feature of rhetoric. Such is the case in Gen. 12:1: "Go forth from your country, from your homeland, from your father's house"¹⁴ and in Gen. 22:2: "Take your son, your precious one whom you love, Isaac."¹⁵ Another example of an intensifying series (not strictly in apposition) is found in Gen.

10 There are various interpretations of this verse.

11 F. I. Andersen, *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew* (The Hague-Paris, 1974), 44-45, notes a type of apposition of clauses which he calls "climactic repetition in apposition." He cites Gen. 37:33 as an example and states that "the postponement of the name 'Joseph' heightens the effect."

12 These examples and others are quoted in P. Joüon, *Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique* (Rome, 1923), p. 398. On p. 398, n. 1, Joüon notes that in this "apposition explicative," which he compares to the Arabic 'aṭf 'ul bayān, 'explicative apposition' (cf. W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language* [Cambridge, 1955], p. 286, #139D), the second noun is more precise, more determined than the first. There also exists the opposite—the name preceding the designation—but this is less common.

13 It might be relevant to mention that terms which occur as parallel pairs may also occur in juxtaposition, in poetry as well as in prose. Cf. M. Dahood, with the collaboration of T. Penar, "Ugaritic-Hebrew Parallel Pairs," in L. R. Fisher, ed., *Ras Shamra Parallels*, vol. I, *An. Or.* 49 (Rome, 1972), p. 87.

14 The phrase *m' ršq wmmwldtk* is apparently a hendiadys; cf. E. Z. Melamed, "Hendiadys in the Bible," *Tarbiz* 15 [1945], 178-79; and the translations in the New JPS and E. A. Speiser, *Genesis AB 1* (Garden City, N.Y., 1964), 85. However, the writing of the phrase in this manner instead of the equally acceptable *m' ršq mwldtk* (Gen. 24:7; 31:13) only serves to underscore the fact that here a graded sequence of terms was intended.

15 The word *ybydk* is not to be understood literally as 'your only one', but as 'your precious one' (or New JPS 'favored one'). Compare Prov. 4:3 and also Ps. 22:21; 35:17 (which New JPS translates 'my precious life'). Cf. also M. Weinfeld, *Beresbit* (Tel Aviv, 1975), 118. The phrase *'t bnk 't ybydk* may be a hendiadys (cf. Gen. 22:12, 16 and Melamed, loc. cit.), but this is not reflected in the translations.

New JPS inverts the word order: "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love . . ." but this mutes the effect of the particularization. It also forces one to consider more consciously whether there are three or four terms in this series. *'šr 'bbt* is usually considered to be a separate term, but I question this

44:16: *mb n'mr l'dny mb ndbr wmb nštdq*. This is effectively rendered in the New JPS by "What can we say to my lord? How can we plead, how can we prove our innocence?" Although only one of these three examples culminates in a proper name, all contain forms of particularization. This device in prose is as effective as it is in poetry.

A second type of parallelism that is shared by biblical and Sumerian poetry consists of a group of four parallel stichs (often written in three lines, but sometimes in two or four) in which stichs *a* and *b* parallel each other, and stichs *c* and *d* parallel each other and also echo the parallelism of *a* and *b*. This form of parallelism has been observed in Sumerian literature by B. Alster.¹⁶ Examples in Sumerian are *The Instructions of Suruppak*, lines 177–79:

šěš-gal a-a na-nam nin_g-gal ama na-nam
šěš-gal-zu-úr gizzal hē-em-ši-ak
nin_g-gal ama-zu-gim gú hē-em-ši-gál

The elder brother is indeed a father; the elder sister
 is indeed a mother;
 May you pay attention to your elder brother;
 May you submit to your elder sister like to your mother.¹⁷

and *Lugalbanda*, lines 205–8:

a[nz]u mušen an-ta i-gin
lu[gal-bànd]a ki-ta i-gin
[mušen-e an]-ta igi mi-ni-in-íl erén-e igi bí-in-du_g-ru
[lugal-b]àn-da ki-ta igi mi-ni-in-íl saḡar éren-e du_g-a
igi bí-in-du_g-ru

A[nz]u went above;
 Lu[galband]a went below;
 [Anzu] looked down from [above], spied the troops;
 [Lugalb]anda looked from below, spied the dust which the
 troops had raised.¹⁸

An analysis of this pattern shows that there are two factors at work: structurally, stichs *a* and *b* are most alike, yielding an AABB pattern; but lexically, the same term or terms appear in stichs *a* and *c*, and *b* and *d*, producing an ABAB word order pattern.

assumption. It is not preceded by the particle *ʔ*, as are the other terms, and seems rather to be modifying or clarifying *ybydk*, i.e., stressing that *ybydk* means 'favored, precious, beloved'. If this interpretation of *ʔr hbt* is correct, this would lessen the probability that *ʔt bnk ʔt ybydk* should be understood as a hendiadys. The verse would then contain three particularizing terms culminating in a proper name.

Although the particularizing series in Gen. 12:1 does not conclude with a proper name, as it does in Gen. 22:2, the structural similarity between these two verses has long been noted. Cf. *Genesis Rabbah* on these verses, as well as U. Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem, 1964), 310; N. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York, 1966), 160.

¹⁶ *Studies in Sumerian Proverbs*, 55.

¹⁷ B. Alster, *The Instructions of Suruppak*, 44–45.

¹⁸ C. Wilcke, *Das Lugalbandaepos* (Wiesbaden, 1969), 110–11. It is not clear to me why Wilcke restored *m u š e n* instead of *a n z u* in line 207. His translation reads 'Anzu'. But cf. line 209 and variants and lines 218–19.

While there are published lists of biblical verses containing ABBA word order,¹⁹ there are none, to my knowledge, listing ABAB word order. Yet numerous verses contain such a pattern and many of these display an interlocking parallelism like that found in Sumerian poetry.

Mal. 1:6: *bn ykbb 'b w 'bd dnyw* 'b 'dnyw
w'm 'b 'ny 'yb kbwdy 'b
w'm 'dwnym 'ny 'yb mwr'y 'dwnym

A son honors his father, and a servant his master;
 If I be a father, where is my honor;
 If I be a master, where is my fear.

Isa. 51:6: *š'w lšmym 'ynykm* šmym
wbb'yf'w 'l h' rš mtht h' rš
ky šmym k 'šn nml'w šmym
wb' rš kbgd tblb h' rš

Lift up your eyes to the heavens;
 And look upon the earth beneath;
 For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke;
 And the earth shall wear out like a garment.

Isa. 54:7-8: *brg' qtn 'zbt'k* rg'
wbr'hmym gdwlym 'qbšk r'hmym
bššp qšp hstrty pny rg' mmk rg'
wb'hsd 'wlm r'hmtyk r'hmty

For a small moment I have forsaken you;
 But with great compassion will I gather you in;
 In a little wrath I hid my face from you
 for a moment;
 But with everlasting kindness will I have
 compassion on you.

Ps. 125:5-6: *h'zr'ym bdm' b brnb yqšrw* zr'ym rnb
hlwk ylk wbbk nš' mšk h'zr' zr'
b' yb' brnb nš' 'lmt'w rnb

19 Cf. A. Ceresko, "The AABA Word Pattern in Hebrew and Northwest Semitic, with Special Reference to the Book of Job," *UF* 7 (1975), 73-88; idem, "The Chiastic Word Pattern in Hebrew," *CBQ* 38 (1976), 303-11; idem, "The Function of Chiasmus in Hebrew Poetry," *CBQ* 40 (1978), 1-10.

They that sow in tears, in joy will they reap;
 He may go weeping as he carries the seed bag;
 But he will surely come back joyfully,
 carrying his sheaves.

The two forms of parallelism we have examined above comprise only a sampling of the possibilities for comparison between biblical and Sumerian (and other) literatures. In concluding I would like to present one further example that demonstrates the benefits one can derive by recognizing similar rhetorical features in different literatures.

The Sumerian word *tuš*, like the Hebrew *yšb*, can be rendered 'sit' or 'dwell'. Only on the basis of context and knowledge of rhetoric can one choose the proper translation. A case in point is *Lugalbanda*, lines 332–334:

ki-gub-ba-me-a nam-ba-e-dè-gub-bu-nam
ki-tuš-a-me-a nam-ba-e-dè-tuš-à-nam
saḫar-gìri-me-a gìri nam-ba-e-dè-ús-e

C. Wilcke's translation, rendered into English, reads:

You will not stand with us at our "standing place";
 You will not dwell with us at our dwelling place;
 You will not place your foot upon the ground (on which) our feet (stand).²⁰

These lines express the fear of Lugalbanda's companions that Lugalbanda may never again be found among them. This meaning is conveyed in an AAB pattern, not uncommon in Sumerian, in which the first two lines of the parallelism are structurally much more similar than the third.²¹ The thread which binds all three lines together is formed by three actions which signify three aspects of "being with." The three actions are not "standing," "dwelling," and "going" (=placing the foot), but "standing," "sitting," and "going." Not only does this make more sense from the

20 *Das Lugalbandaepos*, 121: "wirst du an unserem 'Standort' nicht mit uns stehen, wirst du an unserem Wohnort nicht mit uns wohnen, wirst du auf den Boden (,auf dem) unsere Füße (stehen,) deinen Fuss nicht setzen."

21 This pattern is discussed in my *Enmerkar and Ensuhkešdanna*. Another example is *Lugalbanda*, lines 126–28:

dam-zu ama-mu ḫé-àm bí-in-du 1 1
za-e ad-da-mu ḫé-me-en bí-in-du 1 1
di₄ di₄ lá-zu-ne šeš-mu-ne-ka nam-ba-e-ni-in-ku₄ ku₄

Your wife shall be my mother, he said;
 You shall be my father, he said;
 Your young I shall bring into (the circle of) my brothers.

point of view of a logical series, but we actually find the same three verbs used in the same way in Psalm 1:1: "Happy is the man who has not walked in the counsel (or council) of the wicked, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seat of the scornful."²² The *Lugalbanda* passage is better translated:

You will not stand with us in our standing place (i.e., where we stand);
 You will not sit with us in our sitting place;
 You will not set (your) foot with us in our "foot-dust."²³

This has been a small demonstration of an area which holds much potential for biblical scholars, Sumerologists, and students of comparative literature. Knowledge of a particular rhetorical device in one literature can help us to identify it and understand its usage in another, and this will ultimately improve our understanding of the rhetoric of all literatures concerned. In addition, such studies have bearing on the problem of literary borrowing, oral *vs.* written composition, textual transmission, etc. They are crucial if we are to appreciate—as well as understand—ancient near eastern literature.

22 Biblical critics have noted that the sequence of verbs is not in order and that one would expect "stood in the counsel/council" and "walked in the way."

23 The meaning is "You will not go with us where we go." For *s a ḫ a r - g ò r i* see Wilcke's commentary, *Das Lugalbandaepos*, 212.