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# On the Nature of Poetry, Parallelism, and Methods: A Response to Ernst Wendland

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**Abstract**: This article is a response to Ernst Wendland's article—also in this issue of *Journal of Translation*—which interacts with my cognitive approach to biblical Hebrew poetry, especially my recent monograph, *Unparalleled Poetry* (2023). In this article, I set my work within the broader context of biblical poetry studies and explain how it draws from literary and cognitive research to provide a robust framework for the concept of the poetic line—a contribution to not only biblical studies, but also broader poetry studies. The poetic line gets to the heart of the nature of poetry: the line is central to not just poetic structure (up to the level of the whole poem), but also poetry's potential for rhythm and effects and construction of meaning. My view of the centrality of the line affects how I address various issues related to parallelism. I close by discussing the role and limits of method in regard to both poetic lineation and reading of poems.

**Keywords**: parallelism, poetry, cognitive, poetics, Gestalt theory, lineation

## Introduction

I am grateful to the editors for giving me the opportunity to write this response, and to Ernst Wendland for interacting with my work and furthering an important conversation. My hope is that my comments here will provide a broader context for my work as it relates to current key issues within the field of biblical poetry studies—work that is set within the wider context of literary studies and informed by linguistics—and that these comments will provide clarification and value to the Bible translation community. Chapter abstracts for *Unparalleled Poetry: A Cognitive Approach to the Free-Rhythm Verse of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2023) are freely available on the publisher's website. Wendland unfortunately does not summarize or interact with chapter 1, in which I lay out

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overarching problems and issues within the field of biblical poetry studies and introduce a cognitive solution to these problems. I include aspects of that vital discussion here. Due to the constraints of a short article, I refer readers to my book for comparative analysis of the biblical texts Wendland discusses.

Before turning to less technical matters, I note that the following three points are misleading or incorrect statements from Wendland's brief overview of the book (63–65), related to the Gestalt theoretical framework: (1) He describes the Gestalt principles as "various interrelated 'laws'", but I do not use the word "law" in this way, nor is this terminology current in Gestalt theory. I refer to *simplicity* as the fundamental Gestalt law (Grosser 2023:78). (2) He presents "proximity" and "similarity" as aspects of "simplicity". This is only true insofar as *all* Gestalt principles are properties associated with the law of *simplicity* (Grosser 2023:81). (3) He lists "balance, imbalance, leveling, [and] sharpening" under the principle of symmetry, but this is misleading. "Symmetry" is a perceptual organizing principle, and the chapter on symmetry (ch. 5) describes how symmetry is distinct from but related to the perceived phenomenon of balance, and how balance/imbalance relate to the perceptual (cognitive) tendencies of leveling and sharpening (Grosser 2023:135–139). This is not merely a technicality: keeping these concepts distinct is key to understanding how many of the line-pairs that scholars describe as "parallel lines" artistically work as poetic lines (see further footnote 32 below).

For our purposes here, it is essential to clarify that *Unparalleled Poetry* is a scholarly monograph, published in Oxford's "Cognition and Poetics" series, driven by a specific research question: "How should we conceive of the line-unit in biblical poetry?" (xii).[1] It is not a biblical poetry handbook, nor is it a book of comprehensive poem analyses (even when full poems are included). The textual discussions focus specifically on what a line is and what poetic structure is (from a cognitive literary framework), and how poetic structure relates to poetic effects. Yet the implications of this approach go far beyond the line in biblical poetry, potentially impacting how we view whole poems, how meaning is constructed in biblical verse-poetry and prose verbal art, and how we talk about

[1] I explain in the Preface how I gradually came to this research question (xi). The related question of "how to lineate biblical poems"—without first considering what a line *is*, both in the Bible and in other poetries of the world—is loaded with (typically implicit) assumptions about what it means to lineate and why we moderns would want to lineate an ancient (unlineated!) text in the first place.

poems across languages and poetic traditions.[2] This is why this book is in the Cognition and Poetics series, written for a twofold audience of Hebrew Bible scholars (persons who know Hebrew) and researchers in cognitive literary approaches to poetry (who generally do not know Hebrew) (xix). Because this is not a biblical poetry handbook, it will very likely not do many things that readers working in Bible translation would desire.[3] But what it *does* is extremely relevant for Bible translation: it provides a theoretically-grounded way to think about and practice what it means to read a biblical poem as verbal art, according to the conventions (or shared poet-audience expectations) of its own tradition.

Biblical Hebrew poetry has for millennia been approached through the lens of the dominant cultural tradition at the time (see Kugel 1981 and Berlin 1991), and most modern research on biblical poetry has been done through a Eurocentric lens.[4] It is essential that we consider the underlying assumptions we bring to biblical poetry from our native traditions. The question of what cognitive strategies a versification system demands is a unique contribution of this book for comparative studies, and one that is particularly relevant for Bible translation into diverse versification systems.[5]

I structure my comments here around four questions that are essential for understanding my approach to biblical poetry and how it fits into the field of biblical poetry studies.

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[2] The English term "verse" means composed in lines (on "lines", see below). The word "poetry" can likewise mean "composed in lines", but it is also used as a genre classification (often in the sense of "lyric poetry") or more generally to mean that a composition is somehow "poetic"(!). When I use the term "verse-poetry" or simply "poetry" for texts of the Bible, I am referring to texts of various genres that are composed in lines—lines which are exploited for the purpose of poetic effects. Biblical texts written in prose (e.g., narrative) do not share this potential.

[3] In addition to further academic research on verbal art in the Bible, I am working on creating other materials tailored to different audiences.

[4] This is why I spend so much time in my book explaining how biblical poetry is distinct—in both forms and the cognitive strategies it demands—from both English metrical verse and English free verse (see especially ch. 2–3).

[5] In 2023, I presented my work to the Bible translation community under the title "Hebrew Poetic Structures and Potential Effects in Relation to Quality Poetry Translations" (https://btconference.org/2023-proceedings/hebrew-poetic-structures-and-potential-effects-in-relation-to-quality-poetry-translations).

## 1 What is a poetic line?

This question may at first sound like a simple matter of terminology, a clarification that the basic unit of biblical poetry is the line, as opposed to a group of two or three (often called "parallel") lines.[6] While this is arguably true, much more is at stake in how we view the concept of the line. According to broader literary scholarship, a line is a unit of poetry composition (widely attested across languages) that sets poetry (or verse-poetry) apart from prose verbal art. Brogan refers to verse and prose as two distinct *modes of structure* (1993b; see also 1993a).[7] The poetic line is most commonly an aural phenomenon, though it may also be visual, and it must be experienced temporally as a poem unfolds (Freeman 2023:xx).[8] It may or may not be graphically represented. ("Line" in English comes from its formatting on the page, but the concept of the "line-unit" does not require written texts or graphic formatting.)

The line is formed according to different principles of organization in different versification systems (even in different versification systems within the same language). It is the basic unit of poetic structure and poetic rhythm, which interacts with but is distinct from the rhythm of speech (Brogan 1993a).[9] While the line is organized *from* elements of language (e.g., sounds, words, phrases, clauses, semantic units), the line cannot be reduced to any particular level of language or to any element of language (Grosser 2023:46–50). Thus, the line may correspond with a syntactic clause, but it is not a syntactic clause. The line may correspond with a phonological phrase, but the line is not a phonological

[6] The term "stich", in particular, has not been used in a uniform way by biblical scholars. For a complete account of "line" terminology in biblical poetry studies, see Dobbs-Allsopp 2015:20–29. Like Dobbs-Allsopp, I use the word "line", the standard English language term among literary scholars for the basic unit of verse (across languages and poetry traditions).

[7] For a discussion of the terms poetry, verse, and prose, see Grosser 2023:272–275.

[8] In English free verse, the line is both aural and visual/graphic. In signed poetries, the line is visual/spatial. In biblical Hebrew poetry, the line is aural (Grosser 2023:22–33). While I draw metaphors from the visual arts to describe biblical poetry (e.g., "figures"), the temporal experience of poetry is more akin to listening to a piece of music than it is to looking at a painting. The verbal shapes ("figures") of poetry emerge as it unfolds in time. (See, e.g., the relationship of temporality to closure, 188–189.)

[9] Where music or singing is involved, distinct musical rhythm(s) may also interact with the poetic rhythm of the line.

phrase.[10] The line may correspond with a semantic unit, but the line is not a semantic unit. But the line *is* a cognitive unit—it follows principles of organization and can be perceived as phenomenally real—and it is essential for reading/hearing and understanding poetry, because it provides a unique potential for structure, rhythm, poetic effects, and construction of meaning.[11]

The basic and essential distinction between prose and verse (due to the presence of lines in the latter) is not controversial in literary studies. (You can find quotes from Brogan and Longenbach and others in Wendland's writings; see 2017b:2, 5).[12] Yet, for various reasons (but especially due to developments in parallelism studies in recent decades as discussed below), many scholars within the field of biblical poetry (including Wendland 2017b:3) have come to view biblical prose and poetry as ends of a continuum, with "poeticity" as an aspect of style.[13] In the view of other scholars, however, such an approach obscures the

[10] In contrast, Wendland in his article describes poetic lines as "utterance units" of typically two to five words marked mainly by certain accents (67, footnote 8). The confusion of poetic lines with units of prosodic phonology and the use of the accents for lineation are problematic; see footnote 17 below.

[11] This often-quoted statement from Barbara Herrnstein Smith (in reference to English poetry, but widely applicable to other poetry traditions) illustrates the connection between rhythm, organizational principles, and effects: "[A]s soon as we perceive that a verbal sequence has a sustained rhythm, that it is formally structured according to a continuously operating principle of organization, we know that we are in the presence of poetry and we respond to it accordingly. We respond to it ... expecting certain effects from it and not others, granting certain conventions to it and not others" (1968:23). (Note that Wendland 2017b:2 includes this quote, but incorrectly cites the source as "Spicehandler et al. 2012".)

[12] This basic distinction does not rule out mixtures of the two modes or influence between the modes (Brogan 1993b), but in my view these topics are best approached after, not before, the nature of the line is established. These topics are addressed in ch. 8 of my book.

[13] Wendland and others who take the continuum approach view biblical poetry as the concentration of certain poetic features, of which parallelism is one (Wendland 2017b:2–3, 5). I address the problem of a features approach to biblical poetry in ch. 8, 277–279. One basic problem is that features are not necessarily differentiae (cf. Sternberg 1985:39). "Features must be heard as functioning *in a particular context*, and in order to be indicative of biblical poetry, they must somehow be related to emergent line

important function and potential of the line in biblical poetry (Grosser 2023; Dobbs-Allsopp 2015:3–94).

Of course, it is one thing to claim—based on comparison across the world's poetry traditions—that there are lines (in the sense of a distinct structural mode) in biblical poetry. It is another thing to demonstrate that this is indeed the case. The purpose of the textual discussions in my book is to demonstrate that there are lines in biblical poetry that follow continuously operating principles of patterning and organization. Thus, in contrast to Wendland and others, I take the view that poetic structure must be studied foremost *in relation to the line*, distinct from any linguistic structure (including structures of prosodic phonology and discourse), even though poetic structure is built from linguistic elements and interacts with linguistic structures.[14]

## 2 How does my approach build upon biblical poetry scholarship, and what is its contribution to the field of biblical poetry?

My work builds upon what other biblical poetry scholars have done in two key ways: (1) in its emphasis upon the centrality of the line, and (2) in its insistence upon the importance of all aspects of language to biblical poetic patterning. Yet it goes beyond their work to provide a framework for the versification system of biblical poetry, drawing from cognitive studies.

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structure" (Grosser 2023:278). As an example, Wendland views Genesis 21:1 as "composed poetically" (72)—based on the presence of the feature of parallelism. I view Genesis 21:1 as narrative prose, based on both its presence in narrative prose and the nature of the segment of text, which would be atypical for poetic lines (see 2023:285 for a discussion of why the word order is natural in biblical prose but would create certain unresolved expectations in biblical poetry). He and I agree that this verse has a distinct function in its context. Wendland describes that function in terms of a structural poetic function, while I describe the function according to the poetics of how repetition functions in prose narrative (following Sternberg's important work on the poetics of biblical narrative [1985:388]). As I discuss in my book, whether we mentally structure this verse as poetry or prose (i.e., within the poetics of biblical poetry or the poetics of biblical prose) affects how we view its function in its context (cf. Smith's quote in footnote 11 above).

[14] See Longenbach 2008, on the poetic line in English poetry: "The line is no arbitrary unit, no ruler, but a dynamic force that works in conjunction with other elements of the poem: the syntax of the sentences, the rhythm of stressed and unstressed syllables, and the resonance of similar sounds" (43).

Dobbs-Allsopp, in his extensive book on biblical poetry (2015), likewise begins with the centrality of the line to biblical poetry.[15] He offers various kinds of evidence for the line in free-rhythm (nonmetrical) biblical poetry (29–94).[16] I go further in providing a framework for how this is possible. *Unparalleled Poetry* asks what makes a line a line, since it is not graphically marked in the manuscripts (23–28),[17] does not use a consistent line-internal pattern (e.g., meter) (38–43), and does not text-internally mark line-ends (e.g., with rhyme) (33–38).

Berlin's seminal study of biblical parallelism (1985) established that parallelism is a complex phenomenon touching all aspects of language.[18] (Note, however, that she was intentionally writing about parallelism, not the poetic line [1985:11].) In Grosser 2021, I establish that symmetrical poetic structure (i.e., symmetrical line-groupings) in biblical poetry uses potentially any aspect of language to organize lines: sounds and intonational contours, words and phrases and clauses, and semantic correspondences and shapes. Near the end of Berlin's book, she turns to the important issue of perceptibility of parallelism and notes the need for cognitive studies on this topic (1985:131).[19]

My book steps into this gap, beginning not with parallelism as Berlin does, but with the more basic concept of the poetic line—which necessarily affects how I approach concepts of parallelism. I focus on the question of how it is possible for the biblical poetic line to be perceived aurally, since it is not just organized from aspects of one level of language (e.g., phonology), but it is potentially organized from elements of so many different aspects of language.

To answer this question, I turn to the cognitive poetics theory and practice of Reuven Tsur, who pioneered a perception-oriented approach to English meter

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[15] His first chapter is titled "'Verse, Properly So Called': The Line in Biblical Poetry".

[16] I cite his evidence and add more in 2023:7, footnote 16.

[17] Some biblical poetry scholars have sought to use the Masoretic accents as indicators of poetic structure (see Grosser 2023:33, footnote 21). Pitcher 2020, 2023 has convincingly argued that the Masoretic accentual system represents the (linguistic) prosodic phonological system of the oral reading tradition (cf. the earlier work of Dresher 1994). The accents cannot be used in any simplistic way to delineate poetic structure, because prosodic phonology does not simply map onto poetic structure (Grosser 2023:84). The term "prosody" is used in literary theory to refer to the study of poetic versification. Literary prosody and prosodic phonology are two distinct fields of inquiry, and the "prosodic" units that they refer to must not be conflated.

[18] Berlin examines the following aspects of biblical parallelism: grammatical (morphologic and syntactic), lexical and semantic, and phonological (sound pairs).

[19] For other biblical studies articles on versification or parallelism from cognitive perspectives, see Grosser 2023:15, footnote 39.

(2012). Tsur's research demonstrates ways that literary structures tend to be good cognitive fits: that is, prevalent cultural forms (like versification systems) tend to fit the natural capacities of the mind (2008, 2017). I argue that even though perception of lines in free-rhythm biblical poetry from potentially any aspect of language is a complex process, human brains are wired to do this kind of processing, and we do it all the time (2023:53–55, 65). This kind of (part-whole) processing has been studied in Gestalt psychology—in everyday perception and in relation to the arts (visual art, music, verbal art).[20]

While Gestalt principles also function as a constraint in other versification systems (Tsur 2002:78), I argue that they function in a special way in the versification system of the Hebrew Bible. Since lines are not end-marked, the versification system places a demand on its listeners/readers for aural, temporal, part-whole mental organization of lines within line-groupings (Grosser 2023:33–36, 59–65). While this may seem like a stretch for modern visual readers, I consistently demonstrate through textual examples why I believe it is not only possible, but also a good fit for human cognitive processing, *if listeners/readers come to the text with this expectation* (216–217).[21]

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[20] See Grosser 2023:17, 69–70 for these studies. Wendland questions "how many typical Bible translators or exegetes would manage to apply" the task of listening/reading that I describe, suggesting that only a highly informed or "Super-reader" could do such a thing (75). I do not propose that the ancient Israelites were "super-readers", but that their versification system was (and is!) a good fit to aural mental processing, even if such processing seems foreign or challenging to modern readers. Practically speaking, for anyone who wants to learn to read and experience poetry in a foreign language and versification system, it does take a lot of work—but some people might consider it worth the effort, especially if it is Scripture.

[21] English readers/hearers of poetry (even experienced ones) typically do not come to a poem with the expectation for this kind of mental organization, because the lines are given to them on the page and English poetry often uses text-internal line-end markers. (On end-marking of lines, see Brogan 1993a:694–695.) Wendland questions how one could mentally organize lines in relation to each other without recourse to physical text formatting (66, footnote 5). But my point is precisely that the ancient Israelites did not have text formatting, yet they presumably still experienced their poetry according to the artistry of its lines and effects. (Yes, they had cues from how the texts were vocalized, but the verbal art of poetic lines cannot be reduced to how it is performed. On end-marking in performance, see Grosser 2023:33.) How *we* should format biblical poetry in texts and translation is something that I leave as an unresolved question for further essential discussion (xii–xiii): what expectations does formatting, as a cultural convention, create in a particular tradition, and what does it communicate? How does formatting affect how readers cognitively engage with the text?

Furthermore, I argue, the part-whole processing of lines and line-groupings is the same kind of processing that allows the listener to organize (temporally) the shapes of a poem into larger and larger wholes, up to the unified whole of the poem (xii).[22] It is in the process of doing this that the listener experiences how the poem unfolds and how it moves as a *poem* (not simply as information).

This brings me to a key difference between Wendland's and my approaches: what we mean by structure, which is related to how we regard the poetic line. In my framework, *poetic structure* is unique to verse-poetry: its basic unit is the line. Lines fit together to form line-groupings, which are integrated (by the same part-whole principles) into larger and larger units of poetic structure. In contrast, Wendland (at least in this article) seems to be using "structure" primarily in the sense of "discourse structure" (66). Yet he refers to these units ("strophes, stanzas, and larger poetic units") with terms that are identical to terms of *poetic structure*. This is consistent, however, with his description of the line as an "utterance unit" (67, footnote 8).[23] I am not uninterested in discourse structure and markers, but it is not clear to me how discourse structure can be used to discern poetic structure without a robust understanding of what poetic lines (and larger poetic structures) are. Wendland writes, "As far as the sacred Scriptures are concerned (whether prose or poetry), the formal beauty and expressive sounds of the original texts (whether Hebrew or Greek) are present to serve the normally preeminent *informative* function of the divine message" (2017b:3, footnote 1). Wendland's view of the informative function as preeminent is consistent with his approach to and methods for analyzing biblical poetry. In my view, the preeminent function of the divine message given through verbal art is *transformative*: whether poetry or prose, human language is used in verbal art to engage and shape not just the minds but also the hearts and wills of the audience.

[22] Wendland is mistaken that I am not interested in larger structures of poems (66, 70). From my perspective, understanding larger structures of a biblical poem flows from understanding the line, which is the research focus of the book. I explain in my book that I use *stanza* in a general way (see 2023:37). When I analyze poems in the book, I describe discrete shapes within stanzas as well as sections larger than stanzas. Wendland misrepresents this by saying that I "identif[y] only the 'stanza' unit" (66, footnote 6). He includes a lengthy quote describing the stanza in English poetry, which cannot simply be adopted for biblical Hebrew poetry, since lines/poetic structure in the two traditions are formed by different principles of organization. He also misrepresents what I mean by "the organization of the whole" (66): I am not referring to a top-down procedure of structural analysis. I am talking about the cognitive process of reading (2023:215–218; see also 71–77).

[23] On the problem of confusing poetic lines with utterance units, see footnote 17 above.

Poetry is uniquely suited to this role, especially because of the line's potential for rhythm and effects.

In summary, *Unparalleled Poetry* builds upon literary work in the line and linguistic work in parallelism within biblical studies. It is distinct from these studies in that it proposes a framework for the versification system of biblical Hebrew poetry, draws upon cognitive poetics to ask what mental listening/reading strategies this system requires of its listeners/readers, and focuses especially on the relationship between perception of structure and the experience of poetic effects in a poem. Most notably, it builds a framework for the structure of biblical poetry around the poetic line, not around parallelism.[24]

## 3 What is parallelism, and what is problematic about it?

Answering the question "What is parallelism?" is extremely difficult because there is simply no consensus in biblical studies on what parallelism is, or what its relationship is to poetic structure. I cannot do full justice to this topic here, as it requires a historical survey of how the concept has developed over nearly three centuries, but I will give some brief comments and refer readers to my book for further reading, especially the views of specific scholars (2023:10–15, 275–288).

Through a series of lectures on biblical poetry (1741–1751) by Robert Lowth, and especially through his articulation of parallelism, the modern idea of biblical poetry was born.[25] Lowth's later formulation of parallelism reads as follows:

> The correspondence of one Verse, or Line, with another, I call Parallelism. When a proposition is delivered, and a second is subjoined to it, or drawn under it, equivalent, or contrasted with it, in Sense; or similar to it in the form of Grammatical Construction; these I call Parallel Lines; and the words or phrases answering one to another in the corresponding Lines Parallel Terms (1825:14).

While Lowth clearly had a more nuanced view of the kinds of language correspondences that parallelism involved, he resorted to a semantic classification system of three sorts of parallelism: synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic.[26] Scholars since Lowth have found these categories inadequate and misleading, yet they continue to be repeated and used by introductory biblical

[24] Another influential work that has built a framework for structure around the line is O'Connor's *Hebrew Verse Structure* (1997). O'Connor's approach, however, prioritizes syntax as the organizing principle of the line. I critique O'Connor's approach in 2023:46–50. His project has been continued by Holmstedt 2019 and Krohn 2021.

[25] As Dobbs-Allsopp says, "Biblical Hebrew poetry, in many respects, is a construction of Lowth, his lectures, and their reception over the last two and a half centuries" (2015:4).

[26] On the reason for this, see Grosser 2023:12, footnote 31.

poetry handbooks in the English-speaking world—perhaps because no consensus on what parallelism is has replaced them, or perhaps because English translations typically prioritize the content or clause-level semantics of biblical poetry.

Since Lowth, scholars have continued to modify or critique formulations of parallelism.[27] For many, parallelism came to be viewed as the essence of biblical Hebrew poetry.[28] Thus, some scholars have adjusted the concept to make it better encompass all lines of biblical poetry. For other scholars, the concept is considered too broad to be meaningful for poetic structure, or they consider it one among various features of biblical poetry, and they limit parallelism to only certain line relationships. Yet other scholars have pointed to the use of parallelism in prose, and they view parallelism as an aspect of biblical style. Finally, parallelism has in addition been equated with the essence of *all* poetry and the poetic function of language (Jakobson 1987:71, 82–83). Thus, "parallelism" is variously conceived as what makes biblical poetry unique (in relation to biblical prose or even in relation to many other poetries), as a common feature of biblical poetry, as an important aspect of biblical style or even thought-patterning (in all kinds of biblical texts), or as the essence of all poetry in all languages.[29]

As I write in my book, "Saying that parallelism has problems is nothing new" (13). And as Wendland notes, among biblical poetry scholars, I am not alone in moving away from the term "parallelism" to try to more carefully articulate a framework for biblical poetry.[30]

There are two basic reasons why I have not tried to reclaim the term "parallelism" for metadiscourse about biblical poetry.

First, although the vast scholarship on biblical parallelism (in the various ways it is conceived) is full of insightful observations and analyses, the term

[27] "The multifaceted correspondences of parallelism have been studied in relation to many aspects of language, such as syntax (both surface structure and deep structure), semantics, phonology, word pairs, and accentual rhythm" (Grosser 2023:12–13).

[28] This is distinct from Lowth's view, who regarded parallelism as *indicative* of the original (but irrecoverable) meter of biblical poetry (Lowth 1835:34).

[29] For Wendland's approach to parallelism, which includes both line-adjacent poetic parallelism ("a complex of features" [2017a:125]) and an extension of parallelism to more distant correspondences at the discourse level, see Wendland 2007:108–113; 2017a; and 2017b:5–6, 177–198.

[30] Wendland considers it interesting that both Holmstedt (2019) and I (2021) challenge the notion of parallelism in the same journal, three issues apart, without referencing each other's article (69–70). The two articles were concurrently in the peer review and publishing process, as is typical. I interact with Holmstedt's article in my book.

"parallelism" is used to describe too many different kinds of phenomena, which are related in all kinds of ways.[31] In an effort to increase clarity, I have sought to use more specific and precise terms for these different phenomena.[32] In my own writing, I find the term parallelism most useful for talking about certain constructs of the modern history of biblical poetry scholarship. But if other people choose to use the term in textual analysis, it is important to define precisely what is meant by it (both contextually and in relation to the larger framework of biblical poetry espoused), and it is essential that people be aware of what is problematic about it.

Second, as I discuss in my book, I find Lowth's term of "conformation" (found in his earliest description of biblical Hebrew lines) to be more appropriate for line relationships than "parallelism."[33] Parallelism not only brings a long history of conflicting or conflated ideas, but it is also a constricting linear visual metaphor of line correspondences. In contrast, "conformation" refers not just to correspondence, but to "the formation of something by appropriate arrangement of parts or elements: an assembling into a whole."[34] I explain in

[31] As O'Connor says, "Parallelism cannot cover the field of Hebrew poetry unless it is not only left undefined, but allowed to cover so many phenomena that it is undefinable" (1997:51). This is true both within biblical studies and in cross-disciplinary discourse. I was recently at a conference where scholars of various ancient languages and literatures were present to discuss parallelism and repetition in the literatures they study. Scholars across disciplines were using the word "parallelism" for various phenomena, without defining how they were using it. Cross-disciplinary conversations and research can only be improved by more precise terminology.

[32] For example, while on the surface the concept of symmetry might look like "parallelism" in new garb, it is not. Symmetry can be precisely articulated in terms of its corresponding parts, yet it is a property of wholes. Parallelism can be used to describe correspondence of parts, but it is not a property of wholes. Thus, a symmetrical line-pair is inherently closed, while "two parallel lines" communicates nothing about closure. Perceptual symmetry requires balance, yet a poet may compose a symmetrically arranged line-pair that resists balance, for particular contextual effects. Balance, however, has often been described in a parallelism framework as an aspect of or even a kind of parallelism. See further Grosser 2021, and 2023:107–171, 188–189.

[33] When considering whether my framework for lines and line-groupings is essentially the same as "parallelism" (68–69), Wendland quotes not from my book but from my 2021 article on symmetry, which focuses on why parallelism (of corresponding adjacent lines) is not the same as the Gestalt principle of *symmetry* (see footnote 32 above). In my 2023 book, I argue that "conformation" is a better metaphor than "parallelism" for how lines fit together as line-groupings, in all kinds of patterned ways, including but not limited to symmetry (14–15).

[34] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conformation.

chapter 3 (which I call "the heart of this book's cognitive approach" [51]) what it means to move from a linear to a figural conceptual framework for the many complex shapes formed by biblical poetic lines. While Gestalt theory provides the theoretical framework of part-whole conceptual processing, the basic principle of the biblical Hebrew versification system can be simply stated: *biblical poetry is built from lines that fit to each other as line-groupings* (Grosser 2023:15).[35] These line-groupings are integrated into larger shapes, up to the level of the whole unified poem.

Parallelism is a conceptual framework (albeit it a nonunified one), and historically it is intertwined with the modern idea of biblical poetry. I did not begin my research in biblical poetry by trying to better understand the nature of parallelism. Instead, I started with the poetic line (and thus the versification system of biblical poetry), and I built my framework from there. In the process, I have constructed a framework for biblical poetry, not for parallelism. Yet my framework for biblical poetry has implications for the many important issues that scholars have raised in relation to parallelism (see especially ch. 8) and the many important observations they have made about biblical poetry.[36]

## 4 Does my book give a method and, if so, a method for what?

Methods can be especially useful and efficient. Wendland wonders (and he is not the first) how "teachable" my methodology is (75). This raises the question of what a method is *for*, and how well a method can be suited toward that purpose.

I discuss method in the context of whether I have provided a method *for the lineation of texts* (2023:215–222). I explain that the Gestalt principles give us tools for lineation, but it is impossible for them to give us rules for lineation because the shapes of real biblical poetry are far too complex. Yet we can still strive for principled lineations.[37] In my reading of biblical poems, understanding what the lines do and how they do it is integral to understanding what the poem does—which is intrinsically related to what a poem means.

The more important question, I think, is to what extent a "method" is possible *for reading poetry*. Even if someone is handed a principled lineation of a

[35] This local emerging patterning/organization contrasts with other versification systems in which lines fit to an external pattern (e.g., English iambic pentameter).

[36] For example, though I reject meter as an organizing principle of biblical poetry, I note how my framework for balance and research of it in texts even finds relevance in the observations of the (long-discarded) syllable-counting metrical approaches to biblical poetry (2023:137, footnote 81).

[37] For comparison, Wendland describes how he lineates poetic texts in his article, 67–68, footnote 8 (cf. 2017b:340). It is not clear to me how this is a method.

Hebrew poem, this does not ensure that he knows how to read it as a poem. This is why I spend so much time explaining how the mental organization of lines affects how we read biblical poems. On my office shelf, I have various fine books that help me read English poetry better, but none of them gives me a method, a systematic procedure for reading English metrical or free verse poems. They help me grow in what kinds of things to look and listen for, and they model adept readings of poems, but that is different from a method. If, however, a student wants guidance on writing an explication of a poem (a poetic analysis), she can surely find useful methods for this. But she must learn how to read a poem first. In the process, she must read poems (and listen to herself read poems) many times.

## 5 Conclusion

The point of *Unparalleled Poetry* is to help readers understand the nature of the poetic line in biblical poetry—which gets to the heart of understanding the nature of poetry, and what makes a poem or song poetry. In the process of exploring how the versification system of biblical poetry works, the book provides insight into the conventions and compositional strategies used by ancient Israelite poets. (The more biblical poems I read, the more I am convinced that every word—and the order that every word is in—matters to the artistry, and thus, to the message.) Whether in academic publications or through other materials, what I am striving to do is to better grasp and then teach how to read biblical poetry as poetry: to help people recognize, appreciate, and perhaps even experience its artistry.

*Unparalleled Poetry* is necessarily a scholarly monograph; I am looking forward to finding new ways of showing people what biblical poems *do*, how they aurally unfold in real time. If we want our translations of biblical poetry to be artistic, aesthetically pleasing, and *moving* for both the heart and mind, we have to grow in our understanding of and appreciation for biblical poetics. Doing so requires a different approach to interacting with the text than exegetical methods or discourse analysis (for all their merits) can provide.

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