

# THE WORD-PAIR MORNING/EVENING AS A PARALLEL WORD-PAIR IN BIBLICAL POETRY

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The words “morning” and “evening” appear five times in the Bible as a parallel pair in poetic texts.<sup>1</sup> Commentators have focused on explaining the functioning of this word-pair in each individual verse without reference to its use in other verses. The purpose of this article is to examine all the instances of this word-pair in biblical poetic texts, with special focus on whether it is used literally or figuratively – and if figuratively, with what meaning.

In biblical poetry, the word-pair appears twice in the order morning/evening (Genesis 49:27 and Psalms 90:6) and three times in the order evening/morning (Psalms 30:6, Isaiah 17:14 and Zephaniah 3:3). In Zephaniah 3:3, the word *erev* appears in construct with the word “wolves,” and the 1999 JPS translation renders *erev* as “steppe” instead of “evening.”<sup>2</sup> It is thus unclear whether the words *erev* and *boker* in this verse are even being used as a parallel word-pair in the normal sense.<sup>3</sup> With such serious uncertainty as to the verse’s translation, I believe it unwise to try to learn anything about our word-pair’s normal use from this verse.

In the remaining verses, we shall see that the meaning of the word-pair in each bicolon will depend on whether the bicolon exhibits *sequential* or *synonymous* parallelism. If the other parallel terms in the bicolon refer to things or events which cannot logically exist or occur simultaneously, then one of them must precede the other and I call this *sequential* parallelism. However, if the other parallel terms are simply different ways of saying the same thing, *synonymous* parallelism exists.

## THE WORD-PAIR IN SEQUENTIALLY PARALLEL BICOLA

Three uses of this word-pair occur in sequentially parallel bicola: Psalm 30:6 and 90:6, and Isaiah 17:14.

Psalm 30:6 contrasts God’s anger at people with His favor towards them, and how each of those divine emotions are experienced by human beings.

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The poet focuses especially on the aspect of time: *For a moment with [or “in”] His anger - /A lifetime with [or “in”] His favor; // In the evening, [one] lies down to sleep [with] crying / But in the morning – [one arises with] shouting for joy!* (My translation).

The second bicolon, which contains our word-pair, exhibits ABC/A'C' parallelism. The parallelism is without compensation, i.e. not every unit in the first colon has a parallel unit in the second; since there is no parallel for the verb *lies down to sleep*, a verb such as *arises* must be understood as implied in the second. Ibn Ezra notes that since the subject in the second bicolon is unstated, the subject may be understood to be a person: in the evening “one” with whom God is angry lies down to sleep with crying, but in the morning that same person arises with shouting for joy. He also notes that this explanation also requires that a preposition such as *b'*, “with,” be understood before the nouns “crying” and “shouting for joy” just as it appears in the first bicolon with the words “anger” and “favor.” In the evening, the one who lies down to sleep *with crying* will in the morning arise *with shouting for joy*.

Since one cannot cry and shout for joy at the same time, the parallelism is *sequential*; over a period of time, the crying ends and then rejoicing takes its place. It follows that “evening” and “morning” are meant to be understood as two separate times, one following the other. Thus, Ibn Ezra does not offer a figurative explanation for the use of the word-pair in this verse, apparently taking the word-pair literally. After all, if the person with whom God is angry *lies down to sleep*, it makes sense that this is in the evening; in the same way, it makes sense that if the person then arises, it would be in the morning.

But why does the poet introduce the image of lying down to sleep in the evening and arising in the morning at all? David Kimḥi (Radak) explains that the crying caused by God’s anger is symbolized by and therefore paired with evening, a time of darkness and sadness; on the other hand, the rejoicing which arises from God’s favor is symbolized by and therefore paired with the light of morning. Thus, Kimḥi offers a figurative explanation: “going to sleep in the evening” and “arising in the morning” are not to be understood literally but as images of sadness and joy.<sup>4</sup> However, the poet could also have used a word-pair such as darkness/light to convey the same symbolism, more succinctly and perhaps even more effectively. Kimḥi’s explanation doesn’t ex-

plain why these specific images, which include this particular word-pair of time-opposites, are used.

Malbim offers a different figurative explanation which addresses this point. He argues that although the person with whom God is angry goes to sleep with crying because he is suffering God's punishment for his sins, that punishment lasts only a brief time (evening to morning), and by morning the crying is replaced by shouting for joy because God has forgiven him. Malbim's explanation focuses on the period of time *bracketed* by these time-opposites, and sees them as an image of a *brief* period of time.

In my view, the images of lying down to sleep and getting up in the morning are being used as a follow-up to the first bicolon, which speaks of *a moment* in God's anger versus *a lifetime* in His favor. The second bicolon expands on this by using the evening/morning word-pair; the crying with which the person lies down to sleep in the evening is replaced in a very short time, the time between evening and morning (which to a sleeping person seems like no time at all) by the longer-lasting joy which appears in the morning of a new day. The word-pair evening/morning is functioning here as a merism, a figure of speech in which two contrasting parts express the whole (for example, "young and old" meaning "everyone"). In this verse, the word-pair is a merism meaning "night," which in turn is used in this verse as an image of a very short and swiftly-passing period of time. Instead of using two synonymously parallel terms which mean "a brief period of time," the poet makes use of a merism whose terms are split apart and used in parallel positions to convey this meaning.

In Psalm 90, the poet reflects upon the briefness of human life, as well as its difficulties, which the poet ascribes to God's anger at human sinfulness. Verses 4-5 describe the difference between the divine and the human perspectives on time, and verses 8-10 focus on human sinfulness, and the difficulties and briefness of human life. Between these verses, verses 6-7 appear comparing God's anger towards humans to the sun's effect on fresh grass during the course of a day: (6) *at daybreak [literally: in the morning] it [the fresh grass] flourishes anew;/ by dusk [literally: towards evening] it withers and dries up.* (7) *So we are consumed by Your anger,/ terror-struck by Your fury.* Verse 6 is a bicolon that exhibits ABC/A'B'C' parallelism. In this

verse, it is clear that the parallelism is sequential; grass first sprouts/ flourishes, and then withers/ dries up.

Why and in what way is the morning/evening word-pair used in this bi-colon? At first glance, it is not difficult to understand the pair literally: in the morning the grass is fresh, but by evening the heat of the sun has withered and dried it up. But this is not really true to life: fresh grass isn't killed by one day in the sun, no matter how hot it is; many days in the sun are required to have that effect. Ibn Ezra writes that the verse likens human life to the time between morning and evening; David Kimḥi expands on this idea by explaining that "morning" is used to symbolically represent youth and "evening" old-age. The poet is using the image of grass emerging full of life in the morning but drying up by evening, after the sun has shone on it the whole day, figuratively to represent human life which is lived in the face of God's anger at human sin. Just as with the grass, human life begins in youth, freshness and innocence, but as life proceeds and human actions inevitably result in God's increasing anger, the human being "withers" into old age under the heat of that anger. Such a use of the word-pair morning/evening as symbolic of youth and old age may be unique to this verse; Kimḥi doesn't cite any other verses in which the word-pair is so used.

There is another possible reason why the poet uses the image of the time between morning and evening to portray the human lifespan. The theme of the briefness of human life is one of the focuses of this Psalm. Verse 4 draws attention to how a thousand years, a period of time that humans would consider very long, passes incredibly swiftly for God. In comparison, verse 10 points out that human life is only seventy or eighty years long, less than one-tenth of that! We have seen in Psalm 30:6 that the word-pair evening/morning can be explained as a merism meaning "a night" and functioning as an image of a short and swiftly passing period of time. Here, I would argue that the word-pair morning/evening is used as a merism meaning "a day." Just as in Psalm 30:6, the merism is split apart into its components which are used as parallel terms, and this parallelism is used to represent a short period of time. It is within this brief life span that humans wither under the heat of God's anger at their sinfulness. Verse 6, appearing between verses 4 and 10, uses our word-pair to introduce this idea in preparation for its explicit mention in verse 10: human life passes as swiftly as a day, the time between

morning and evening.<sup>5</sup> The advantage of this interpretation is that it explains the use of the word-pair morning/evening in Psalms 90:6 in the same way that it explains the word-pair evening/morning in Psalms 30:6.

Finally, Isaiah 17:12-14 describes God's destruction of enemies who threaten Israel. Verse 14 reads: *At eventide, lo, terror!// By morning, it [or: he] is no more.// Such is the lot of our despoilers,// The portion of them that plunder us.* The verse is composed of two bicola, both of which exhibit AB/A'B' parallelism.

How is "terror" parallel to "it is no more?" "Terror" could either be referring to the terror of the people of Israel as they face the enemy, or the terror felt by the enemy as God faces off against it. In either case, "terror" and "it is no more" are referring to the endpoints of a process: first the people or the enemy experience terror, and subsequently the enemy is no more. Thus, the bicolon is sequentially parallel. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the phrase *le'et erev* actually means *at evening-time*, while *b'terem boker* actually means *before morning*, i.e. even *before* morning arrives; thus, the likelihood is that the bicolon is describing two states that occur one after the other.

Now how does the word-pair evening/morning function in this bicolon? Ibn Ezra and David Kimḥi assume that the bicolon is sequentially parallel. They explain that the bicolon is referring to God's overnight destruction of Jerusalem's Assyrian besiegers as related in II Kings 19:35; in the evening, the people of the city were terrified, but God sent out an angel to destroy the attackers, and by morning "it" (the attacking army) was gone. Thus these commentators understand our word-pair literally, as a reference to the overnight breaking of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem, or at least to some overnight miraculous rescue from an enemy. However, the text itself does not explicitly refer to any such event.

The evening/morning word-pair can more simply be understood as a traditional pair of time-opposites, used in the same way that we have seen in Psalms 30:6 and 90:6. Building on the use of this pair as a merism for "night" or "in the course of the night", the poet may be utilizing "a night" as an image of a short period of time, a period that passes swiftly. The tailoring of the word-pair into *le'et erev* [*at evening-time*] versus *b'terem boker* [*before morning*, i.e. even *before* morning arrives], which was already pointed out,

emphasizes the shortness of the time involved even more. The poet uses this word-pair to highlight how swiftly God can cause the enemy to go from terror-inspiring (or feeling terror itself) to “being no more.”<sup>6</sup>

In summary, the three bicola we have examined in this section can all be explained in the same way. The word-pair evening/morning or morning/evening in a sequentially parallel bicolon builds on its meaning as a merism for “a night” or “a day.” The poetic technique is to split the merism into its two terms and use them in parallel to function as an image of a brief period of time, a period which passes swiftly.

#### GENESIS 49:27

Genesis 49:27 requires special treatment because it may be explained as exhibiting either sequential or synonymous parallelism. The verse reads: *Benjamin is a ravenous wolf;/ In the morning he consumes the foe,/ And in the evening he divides the spoil.* The JPS 1999 translation notes that the Hebrew word *shalal*, translated as “foe,” may possibly mean “booty” instead. Whether we explain the last two cola of this verse as sequentially or synonymously parallel will depend on which translation we adopt.

The verse is actually a tricolon: the first colon is a metaphor in which Benjamin is depicted as a ravenous wolf (literally, a wolf ripping apart its prey), and the last two cola exhibit ABC/A'B'C' parallelism as they extend the metaphor. But the extension abandons the image of the wild animal devouring its kill and replaces it with parallel terms taken from a military context: “foe/booty” and “spoil.”

Some classical Jewish commentators ignore these military terms and take the morning/evening word-pair literally, writing that wolves generally hunt, kill or consume their prey in the morning and the evening (see Rashbam and Sforno). However, the short poems about Jacob’s sons in Genesis 49 are, according to Genesis 49:1, allusions to the futures of the tribes which will bear their names. For this reason, other classical Jewish commentators understand the wolf metaphor in light of the military vocabulary, and explain the morning/evening word-pair figuratively. They see the comparison of Benjamin to a wolf as an image of the tribe’s future moments of great military power, and the word-pair morning/evening is understood as a figurative allusion to the beginning and the end of that power in history: “morning” refers

to the early military victories of Saul the Benjaminite's kingship, and "evening" refers to the triumph of the Benjaminites Mordechai and Esther in Esther 8:1-2, in which they are given the possessions (the "spoil") of Haman (see Rashi, Ibn Ezra and even Sforno). These commentators thus see the word-pair as referring to the end-points of a long period of time.

The use of military vocabulary in this verse supports the idea that the comparison of Benjamin to a wolf refers to the tribe's future military power. However, Ibn Ezra recognizes that the explanation that spans the period from Saul to Esther is homiletic in nature. In my opinion, the metaphor is more likely an allusion to the tribe's early military strength when at the peak of its power during the time of the Judges and Saul. The stories about Benjamin in Judges 3 and 20, as well as the stories of Saul and the war after his death between his Benjaminite loyalists and David (in I Samuel and II Samuel 2), support this explanation.

Now let's return to the two possible ways to translate the first half of the bicolon. If the translation "foe" is correct, then the parallel phrases *consumes the foe* and *divides the spoil* are sequentially parallel, giving the beginning and end-points of a military victory. In that case, the word-pair morning/evening is probably not intended literally, i.e. to indicate that Benjamin's tactics are always to engage and defeat their enemies in the morning and divide up the spoil in the evening. Rather, it is more likely that the poet uses this word-pair figuratively in the same way as it is used in Psalms 30:6 and 90:6 and in Isaiah 17:14: to emphasize the short period of time required for Benjamin to attain victory, and therefore how swiftly it is achieved. In the time bracketed by the time-opposites morning and evening, i.e. by the end of only one day, he triumphs and divides the spoil.

On the other hand, if "booty" is the correct translation, then *consumes the booty* and *divides the spoil* both refer to the same thing, and the bicolon is synonymously parallel. If so, it would not make sense to explain "morning" and "evening" literally; why would the poet state that Benjamin does the same thing in both the morning and the evening? The word-pair may thus be a parallel pair of time-opposites giving the beginning and end-points of the time of daylight and functioning as a merism meaning "a day." As opposed to the other verses we have examined, though, in this case the merism isn't being used to mean a swiftly-passing period of time, since there aren't two se-

quential events related in the bicolon. Instead, I would suggest that the poet is using the two time-opposites to indicate “morning *or* evening,” i.e. “whenever,” or by extension “always,” “constantly” or “at all times” (as we might say in English, “You can call me day or night,” “24/7”). Because of Benjamin’s success in battle, he is always/constantly/invariably to be found consuming/dividing the booty/spoil of his enemies.

## CONCLUSION

In discussing the uses of the word-pairs sow/reap and plow/reap, Ronald Hyman writes that “Mention of these word-pairs is able to bring a host of associations to mind immediately in order to set the context for the material at hand....”<sup>7</sup> My examination of the four bicola in which the word-pair morning/evening (in whichever order) clearly are functioning as parallel terms suggests that this pair is used in Biblical poetry in a similar way. The word-pair is a merism meaning either “a day” or “a night,” and its component terms are used as parallel units in a bicolon. If the bicolon exhibits sequential parallelism, the word-pair is used to signal that the sequence of events described by the bicolon occurs in a stunningly brief period of time. It invokes the idea of swiftness of the passage of time in the mind and heart of the reader/listener. Although we have only seen one possible instance of the use of this word-pair in a bicolon exhibiting synonymous parallelism, the word-pair in that case may be wrapping the other information in the bicolon in a mantle of constancy; the poet signals that whatever ideas or characteristics the bicolon is relating are characteristics that are always or constantly present.

## NOTES

1. I define “parallel pair” as the use of the words in parallel positions in a bicolon. A bicolon is two consecutive lines which exhibit parallelistic structure (plural “bicola”). Each of the consecutive lines is called a colon (plural “cola”). This article only addresses bicola that are part of a larger poetic text (i.e., a text which is completely structured in parallel cola). The appearances of the words evening/morning together in prose texts in the Hebrew Bible include the formula *vayehi erev vayehi boker* in Genesis 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31, as well as Exodus 16:6-7, 8, 12, Deuteronomy 28:67, I Kings 17:6 and Ecclesiastes 11:6.
2. All translations of Biblical verses are taken from the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh – Second Edition* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), unless stated otherwise.
3. In addition, there is a question as to the meaning of the verb *garmu* in this bicolon; see F. Brown, S.R. Driver and C. Briggs (eds.), *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*



(Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, reprinted from the 1906 edition), p. 175 (hereafter, “BDB”).

4. M. Dahood argues, based on the Ugaritic parallel pair *rega’/hayyim* which he understands as “annihilation”/ “immortality,” that the evening/morning parallel similarly refers to death versus resurrection to eternal life. Notably, he does not reference any use whatsoever of evening/morning as a parallel pair in Ugaritic poetry. See M. Dahood, *Psalms I:1-50*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966) pp. 182-3.

5. M. Dahood does not comment on the morning/evening word-pair in Psalm 90:6 at all. See M. Dahood, *Psalms II:51-100*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968) p. 324.

6. See E.J. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah Vol. I (I-XXXIX)* (Dublin: The Richview Press, 1960) p. 197. Kissane understands the word-pair’s meaning to be “suddenly, in a moment.”

7. R.T. Hyman, “Two Fundamental Word-Pairs: Sow/Reap and Plow/Reap,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 31:4 (2003) p. 239.



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