

FORKED PARALLELISM IN EGYPTIAN, UGARITIC AND HEBREW POETRY¹

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Summary

A particular pattern of tricolon or triplet, sometimes known as forked parallelism, has been identified in Ugaritic and early Hebrew poetry. It has been suggested that it is a characteristic style of Canaanite or ancient Semitic poetry, and noted that in the Hebrew Bible its use declines dramatically outside the archaic and early examples of poetry. Hence it can be seen as a stylistic indicator suggesting authentic early composition of some portions of the Hebrew Bible. This paper shows that the pattern was also used as a regular feature in some genres of Egyptian poetry from the Old Kingdom through to the end of the New Kingdom. At that time it appears to have ceased being a device regularly used by Egyptian poets, in parallel with their counterparts in the Levant. Thus the use, and subsequent decline, of this pattern in Israel is a local reflection of a wider aesthetic choice rather than an isolated phenomenon. The structural uses of this and some other triplet patterns are reviewed, and some clear poetic purposes identified. This review also highlights some differences between the typical poetic use of triplets in Ugaritic, Hebrew and Egyptian. Some typical triplet patterns used in Ugaritic and Hebrew are not found in Egyptian sources.

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1. Introduction

It has been widely recognised for some time that Biblical Hebrew poetry is fundamentally built of couplets, themed pairs of lines, and that within the couplet lines, key components are recognisably parallel to each other.² Several different possibilities for creating parallelism have been identified, including semantic, syntactic, grammatical, gender matching, and the use of sound patterns such as alliteration. In a similar way, several authors have noted that Egyptian poetry is overwhelmingly carried along by means of couplets.³ The use of parallel composition has also been identified in Ugaritic and Akkadian examples,⁴ and may be recognised even in fragmentary texts such as the Balaam inscription at Deir ‘Alla’.⁵ It was clearly regarded as a fundamental poetic technique in the ancient Near East.

Although couplets predominate in all of these traditions, they do include a minority of larger poetic structures, from triplets through to multi-line forms. Less work has addressed the classification and role of these. For example, it is not agreed why, or for what poetic purpose, triplets were introduced at specific places into the overall couplet framework. Cross and Freedman in 1975 thought they were inserted ‘at random’,⁶ and while this is improbable, positive suggestions outlining

² See for example Stanley Gevirtz, *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (JSOT Sup 26; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1984) and *Traditional Techniques in Hebrew Verse* (JSOT Sup 170; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), Luis Alonzo Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000) esp. ch. 5, Jan P Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), or Andreas Wagner, ed., *Parallelismus membrorum* (OBO 224; Fribourg: Academic Press, 2007) for a range of differing views on the subject. Nomenclature differs between authors—for example bicolon or distich may be used instead of couplet.

³ See for example John L. Foster, ‘Thought Couplets in Khety’s “Hymn to the Inundation”’, *JNES* 34 (1975): 1, ‘Sinuhe: The Ancient Egyptian Genre of Narrative Verse’, *JNES* 39 (1980): 89, *Thought Couplets in The Tale of Sinuhe* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993), Miriam Lichtheim, ‘Have the Principles of Ancient Egyptian Metrics Been Discovered?’, *JARCE* 9 (1971): 103, Günter Burkard, ‘Metrik, Prosodie und formaler Aufbau Ägyptischer literarischer Texte’ in, *Ancient Egyptian Literature - History and Forms*, ed. A. Loprieno (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), or Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Poetry of Ancient Egypt* (Jonsered: Paul Åströms förlag, 1999).

⁴ Wagner, *Parallelismus membrorum* gives examples from several traditions.

⁵ P. Kyle McCarter Jr, ‘The Balaam Texts from Deir “Alla: The First Combination”’, *BASOR* 239 (1980): 49-60.

⁶ Frank M. Cross and David Noel Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, originally published 1950): 7.

the poetic reasons have not been forthcoming. In a recent volume devoted to the exploration of parallel structures in Hebrew and other poetry, little attention is devoted to analysing the form and role of triplet structures:⁷ for example Gzella was content to leave the matter with the comment ‘Tricola consist either of three parallel members, or of an extended bicolon’.⁸ This paper seeks to build on work specifically addressing triplet patterns, and aims to identify diachronic changes in their use. It also briefly considers some poetic uses of triplets within a work as a whole.

2. Background Discussion

In 1974, Greenstein identified in a footnote⁹ some examples of Ugaritic tricola (here called triplets) which were of a distinctive pattern. Although he later expanded his discussion slightly,¹⁰ this pattern remained for him a side issue compared with his main interest in three-line climactic parallelism. It remained for Fenton¹¹ to explore in rather more depth, not only the pattern in its own right, but also its connections with examples from the Hebrew Bible. Fenton’s pattern of forked parallelism is as follows:

- An A-line with single initial statement.
- A couplet, each line of which expands or elaborates the initial thought, and in which the two lines are parallel in a conventional sense.

In contrast, the three-line climactic parallelism form has the formal pattern:¹²

⁷ Wagner, *Parallelismus membrorum*.

⁸ Holger Gzella, ‘Parallelismus und Asymmetrie in ugaritischen Texten’ in *Parallelismus membrorum*, ed. Wagner, 133-46. (‘Trikola bestehen entweder aus drei parallelen Gliedern oder aus einem erweiterten Bikolon.’)

⁹ Edward L. Greenstein, ‘Two Variations of Grammatical Parallelism in Canaanite Poetry and Their Psycholinguistic Background’, *JANES* 6 (1974): 87-105, see p. 96, fn. 47.

¹⁰ Edward L. Greenstein, ‘One more step on the staircase’, *UF* 9 (1977): 77-86, see p. 79.

¹¹ Terry Fenton, ‘Hebrew Poetic Structure as a Basis for Dating’ in *In Search of Pre-exilic Israel*, ed. J. Day (Clark International, 2004): 386-409.

¹² Greenstein, ‘Two Variations’, 97. For further discussion, Chaim Cohen, ‘Studies in Early Israelite Poetry I: An Unrecognised Case of Three-line Staircase Parallelism in the Song of the Sea’, *JANES* 7 (1975): 13-17, Edward L. Greenstein, ‘How Does Parallelism Mean?’ in *A Sense of Text, Papers from a Symposium at Dropsie College* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983) or Fenton, ‘Poetic Structure’.

- The initial two words of the first line are repeated at the start of the second.
- The last words of the first line are either the grammatical subject of the first two lines or else a vocative.
- The second and third lines are parallel, often using a stylistic transformation such as chiasmus or verb deletion.

There are two main ways that triplets can be classified. One is simply on the basis of which lines (if any) can be considered formally parallel. So Gzella's first option of three parallel members can be summarised as AAA. If the first two lines are parallel, with the third as a summary, we can write AAB. Conversely, if the first line serves as introduction, followed by a parallel pair, we can write ABB. The forms studied by Fenton and Greenstein are particular cases of the ABB type. Parallel first and last lines with differing centre can be written ABA, and finally, cases where the three lines show no overt parallelism can be written ABC. This final type appears less often in lyric than narrative poetry, where it is a convenient variation on advancing the plot-line by means of couplets. Examples of these types will be given later.

However, another way to view the poetic function of the triplet is to consider its overall effect on the poetic flow. Although each case should be considered according to its own merits, some general statements can be made which help summarise the different uses. Typically, the AAA and ABC cases cause least interruption to the flow, since they do not require the reader or listener to re-evaluate an earlier line in the light of a later one. AAB examples follow next in terms of interruption. The pattern has a somewhat similar effect to a caesura within a single line, in that it leads the audience to pause and reflect on prior content, but the degree of 'look-back' is not great. This pattern can conveniently be used to effect closure of a poetic section, or whole poem, as discussed later. The ABB form can present an even greater level of interruption, and indeed shows that the above classification is incomplete as it stands. Both Fenton's forked parallelism and three-line climactic parallelism are of type ABB, but differ considerably in how much they arrest the poetic flow. The first of these has a not dissimilar effect to the AAB form: usually slightly greater, since the third line of the triplet calls on the audience to recollect the first. However, as will be discussed later, climactic parallelism can be a much more radically intrusive form, and the two forms typically have different structural uses. As noted later, it seems

originally to have been used as an opening pattern for reported direct speech.

Quatrains and even longer poetic structures also vary as regards their compositional structure. A quatrain form that Fenton discusses briefly is one in which there are three parallel lines following the initial 'handle', an ABBB pattern schematically. He gives one such example in the Ugaritic corpus, where although the sense of the final line is obscure the overall parallelism of the three is clear.¹³ Egyptian examples may also be found.¹⁴ Foster, basing his conclusions on certain lines from the Story of Sinuhe, proposed as a general principle that triplets and quatrains were characterised by the additional lines using nominal rather than verbal forms, often being introduced by *r* + infinitive constructions.¹⁵ However, it is clear from the above examples that this is not generally true. The forms he suggests are one among several possibilities for building triplets or quatrains, not the only such pattern. These longer patterns are not discussed further here.

3. Review of Fenton's Study

As noted above, Fenton's 2004 study was concerned with two particular variations of the ABB triplet pattern, namely, three-line climactic and 'forked' parallelism, as defined formally above. The term 'forked' might equally apply to triplet patterns of type AAB, but Fenton was not concerned with these, and his formal definition explicitly excludes them.¹⁶ Because of differences in their poetic effect, and hence their possible function in the hands of a poet, it is useful to retain different terms for these types rather than classifying them all together under the generic ABB pattern. For this reason, Fenton's nomenclature will be kept, though consideration will be given to the AAB form later. He was particularly interested in showing the similarity of available examples in Ugaritic and early Hebrew poetry,

¹³ KTU 1.4.I.25-28, see Fenton, 'Poetic Structure', 403.

¹⁴ For example a quatrain of this pattern in the Second Intermediate Period 'Harper's Song', see Kitchen, *Poetry*, 139, with quatrains or longer examples generalising the pattern in the New Kingdom love poem cycles, see Kitchen, *Poetry*, 355, 357, 359, or the late Festal Songs for Hathor, see Kitchen, *Poetry*, 451.

¹⁵ Foster, 'Sinuhe', 107.

¹⁶ Fenton, 'Poetic Structure', 398.

and that in the Hebrew Bible the incidence of the forked pattern is largely confined to the archaic and early period.

One of Fenton's Ugaritic examples is:

I alone will rule over the gods
that may grow fat gods and men
that may be full the multitudes of the earth.¹⁷

One of the Biblical Hebrew examples he gives is:

Benjamin is a ravening wolf;
in the morning he devours (the) prey
and in the evening he divides the spoil.¹⁸

Fenton only discussed Ugaritic material and, while commenting that both Ugaritic and Hebrew might be descended from common Canaanite origins, was not concerned with identifying similar patterns in other poetic traditions. His main interest was to trace the trends of historical use of this pattern within the Hebrew Bible, and he showed convincingly that the clear-cut examples of usage of this pattern in the archaic pieces of poetry lose their coherence rapidly in the major period of Hebrew psalmody. This is in clear contrast with the three-line climactic form, for which he finds examples across a very wide span of the Hebrew corpus.¹⁹ His examples of the forked form come from the blessings of Jacob and Moses (Gen. 49 and Deut. 33), the Song of the Sea (Exod. 15), the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), and the Lament of David (2 Sam. 1). The few cases in the psalms bearing some similarity to this pattern are marked, as he puts it, with a 'looseness of composition ... one might suspect that the resemblances to the structure arise from accident rather than from a linear tradition'.²⁰ An example from the psalms reads

The words of YHWH are pure words
silver refined in a crucible of clay
purified seven times.²¹

Here, the degree of parallelism in the trailing couplet is weak compared to the tightly constructed examples found in the earlier poetry. This is typical of the examples he indicates, as in one way or

¹⁷ KTU 1.4.VII.49, see Fenton, 'Poetic Structure', 398.

¹⁸ Genesis 49:27, see Fenton, 'Poetic Structure', 404.

¹⁹ Fenton, 'Poetic Structure', 391-97.

²⁰ Fenton, 'Poetic Structure', 407-408.

²¹ Psalm 12:7 (12:6 English text).

another they show less concern for the formal shape of this particular triplet pattern.

In summary, he describes this as ‘a Bronze Age poetic structure no longer in use, apparently, after the initial period of the monarchy ... a structure which hardly survived the end of the Bronze Age’.²² Within Israel, the transition from the Late Bronze to Iron Ages is typically set about the start of the Twelfth Century BC,²³ or in Biblical terms during the Judges period. Thus, the usage of the forked pattern within David’s Lament, near the end of the Iron I period, reflects a style that was already becoming archaic. This is, perhaps, suitable for a poem probably composed at a time when tribal social structures were being subsumed into a monarchic state.

These comments should be seen as applying only to poetry newly composed in the later periods of the monarchy and exile. Older examples were clearly being copied and transmitted to later generations with the forms preserved—a process which has continued to this day—even if these forms were no longer a favoured compositional style. This is analogous to the preservation of grammatical forms in the various pieces of archaic poetry which were no longer a living feature of the language.²⁴

4. Egyptian Examples of the ABB Forked Pattern

Various triplet forms may readily be found in Egyptian poetry at all stages from the Old Kingdom through to the Graeco-Roman period and later. This applies in general to the various formal shapes AAA, ABB and so on, although not, as we shall see, to all of the variant patterns within this. In particular, the forked triplet pattern is one of the standard devices of Egyptian poetry and may readily be found in examples from all periods and all genres. The following is a brief review of examples of the ABB forked pattern, with brief comments where relevant.

²² Fenton, ‘Poetic Structure’, 406-407.

²³ For example James K. Hoffmeier, *The Archaeology of the Bible* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2008), in particular the chronological chart in the preface.

²⁴ See for example D. A. Robertson, ‘Linguistic Evidence in Dating Early Hebrew Poetry’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1966), or Cross and Freedman, *Yahwistic Poetry* among others.

Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period

Pyramid Utterance 510, section E (6th Dynasty) contains the following lines at the end of the main body, just before a coda section:

ink irt tw nt hr
wšrt ir rmt
nht̄t ir ntrw

I am this eye of Horus
 more powerful than men
 stronger than gods²⁵

Another example occurs a few lines earlier in section E, and several of the other pyramid utterances contain similar patterns.

Moving on to the First Intermediate Period, we find A Man Tired of Life, Poem 3:

iw mwt m hr. i min
mi st̄i sšnw
mi hmst hr mryt nt th̄t

Death is in my sight today
 like the fragrance of lotuses
 like sitting on the brink of intoxication²⁶

This poem consists of five stanzas sharing the same structural pattern, with the first line of each identical with the above example: the final stanza changes slightly. It may therefore be described in stylistic terms as an extended exploration of the forked form. Slightly later than the above is the Lyrical Address for Hathor:

ht(.i) dd(.s) spty(.i) wḥm.sny
iḥy w'b n ḥth̄r
iḥy ḥḥw ḥfnw

My body speaks, my lips repeat
 the music of a priest of Hathor
 the music of millions and myriads²⁷

Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period

The following is one of several examples in the Story of Sinuhe, this being taken from the praise hymn for Senuseret I. Although most of the

²⁵ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 53.

²⁶ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 87.

²⁷ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 111.

poem is written in couplet form, there is repeated use of the forked pattern in the early parts of this portion.

*nb s3t pw
ikr shrw
mnh wdt-mdwt*

A master of wisdom is he
excellent in counsels
effective in commands²⁸

The later Song of the Cynical Harper contains the following (note there is uncertainty about the composition date of this piece, which may originate slightly earlier or later than the conventional limits of the Middle Kingdom²⁹):

*šms ib.k wnn.k
imi 'ntyw hr tp.k
wnh.k m p3kt*

Follow your inclinations while you still live
Put myrrh upon your head
Dress your(self) in fine linen³⁰

The recto of the Stele of Sobk-iry contains a hymn to Osiris that also exists in several later copies in the Middle and New Kingdoms. As noted by Lichtheim and others, there is a high degree of formal structuring in this poem, including a twelve-line portion where the opening words form a complex envelope pattern. As regards the study here, the main portion of the work ends with the following ABB fork:

To whom the Two Assemblies come bowing down
For great is fear of him
Strong is awe of him³¹

New Kingdom

Hapusomb's Statue, Cairo CGC 648, dating from the reign of Hatshepsut, has the following, with the pattern repeated for a total of five stanzas:

²⁸ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 93.

²⁹ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 137.

³⁰ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 139.

³¹ Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume I (Old and Middle Kingdoms)* (University of California Press, 1975): 203.

rs.ti m htp
rs nsrt m htp
rs twt htp.ti

May you awake in peace
 awake O Nesret in peace
 awake you peacefully³²

The devotional poem Cairo JdE 43591, from the early Nineteenth Dynasty, has:

rdi(t) i3w n imn-r' nsw ntrw
p3wty hpr m-h't
ntr w' nqm mrt

Giving praise to Amen-Re king of the gods
 Primordial One who existed from the beginning
 unique god sweetly beloved³³

New Kingdom love poetry includes a number of extended forms such as this example, from P. Harris 500 Collection I Stanza 2:

sh(3)s.k r m33 snt.k
mi ssmt hr pg3
mi bik [3h hr] n3y.f dywt

May you speed to see your sister
 like a steed upon the battlefield
 like a falcon [overflying] his marshes³⁴

Finally, the Israel Stele of Merenptah has the following construction:

sddt n3yf nhtw m-t3w nbw
r-di.t 'm3 t3 nb dmdw
r-di.t m33.tw nfr m-n3yf knw

Recital of his victories in all lands
 to let all lands together know
 to let the glory of his deeds be seen³⁵

Later Periods

The above examples show that this pattern was in regular use up until the end of the New Kingdom, and that during these many years kept a strict and clearly identifiable form. This is directly analogous to the

³² Kitchen, *Poetry*, 263.

³³ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 271.

³⁴ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 355.

³⁵ Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume II (New Kingdom)* (University of California Press, 1976): 74.

situation Fenton studied in the Levant, though the examples span a much longer period. However, the clarity of the pattern is lost rapidly after the end of the New Kingdom.

For example, the Triumphal Welcome for Shoshenq I has two examples that could be considered of the ABB form as follows:

smʒ.n.k [tʒw]
psw.n n.k hʒswt [nb] hmw kmt
wn wʒw r tkk tʒšw[.k]

You have united the [flat lands],
 served up for you are all the foreign countries ignorant of Egypt,
 who had dared infringe your boundaries³⁶

iw.sn 'hʒ (w) r tʒ nb dmd(w)
ski.n s(n) hm.k n mntw
wsr(t).ti titi hftyw.f

They fought against every land entirely,
 Your Majesty destroyed them for Montu,
 You being mighty, O crusher of his foes³⁷

These may be found early in the first and last sections of this inscription. Clearly the degree of coherence of the B-couplet is low compared with the earlier examples. The ideas cohere as a pair, but the lines show little parallelism at the verbal level. This is directly analogous to Fenton's findings for Hebrew poetry, for which he used the phrase 'looseness of composition'.³⁸ The same looseness of composition characterises other triplet patterns which approach the ABB forked pattern in later Egyptian poetry. The lyrical tribute to Mutirdis, dating from the end of the Eighth Century BC, contains the following triplet as the conclusion of the first section: it is unclear whether to classify it as AAB or ABB, but AAB seems more probable:

[bn]r hr tʒyw
nbt mrwt hr hmwt
sʒt-nsw pw bnr mrwt

[Sw]eet, say the men,
 Lady of love, say the women,
 a princess is she, sweet of love³⁹

³⁶ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 435.

³⁷ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 439.

³⁸ Fenton, 'Poetic Structure', 407.

³⁹ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 461.

Later still, in the Fourth Century BC tomb of Petosiris we again find a triplet that could be categorised as either ABB or ABC in the Vintagers portion:

*kʒrw m-bʒh.k hr hmt
s'šʒ iʒrrt hr ht.f
wr mw im.f r kt rnpt*

The vintagers before you do the treading out,
Abundant are the grapes upon the tree,
More juice is in them, than (at) any other year⁴⁰

Finally, the Graeco-Roman era Festal Songs for Hathor at Dendera have a number of possible candidates, such as the following lines near the end of section A3, which probably indicate use of an AAB pattern, though ABB is just possible:

*ib.f 'kʒ(w)
ht.f phʒ.ti
n snk m hʒt.f*

His mind is upright,
his thoughts are loyal,
with no dark duplicity in his heart⁴¹

Other triplet patterns in the Festal Songs are equally ambivalent: near the start of section A4 we have a potential ABA or ABC form,⁴² the end of section B1 has a very weakly structured triplet with no obvious classification,⁴³ Section C opens and closes with AAB forms,⁴⁴ and the last intact lines of the engraving are, once again AAB.⁴⁵

The general use of the triplet pattern certainly persisted throughout Egyptian poetic history, as summarised in the following section. However, the clarity of form shown in the forked pattern up until the end of the New Kingdom is lost in these later periods. ABB triplets weaken into themed lines that display much lower levels of coherence, although the AAB form seems to have survived better. Again, this mirrors Fenton's findings for Hebrew poetry. Triplets bearing some similarity to the forked pattern are to be found in later parts of the

⁴⁰ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 465.

⁴¹ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 449.

⁴² Kitchen, *Poetry*, 451.

⁴³ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 451.

⁴⁴ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 453, 455.

⁴⁵ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 457.

Hebrew Bible, but do not show the same degree of formality or tightness.

As briefly discussed above, these comments apply to new compositions in the later periods, and not necessarily to later copies or reuse of earlier material. A specific example that may indicate this reuse is from the Famine Stele, from the Ptolemaic but purporting to record an Old Kingdom decree.⁴⁶ Opinion is divided as to whether there was indeed an authentic earlier text, but the authorial intent was to make this at least credible. In this, Khnum's reply to Djoser ends with a form that different commentators variously represent as ABB or ABBB:

Egypt's people will come striding,
Shores will shine in the excellent flood,
Hearts will be happier than ever before⁴⁷

The land of Egypt will come at a clip,
the banks will glisten,
the flood will be excellent,
and their hearts will be happier than they have ever been previously⁴⁸

The author's intention may well have been to reuse, or allude to, genuinely earlier lines, but the uncertainty felt by modern translators echoes the weakness of form which the lines display.

5. Egyptian Examples of Other Triplet Forms

It is not difficult to find examples of other triplet forms in Egyptian poetry. The AAA pattern is often found again in the Israel Stele:

di.f s'kt sntr m-b3h ntr
di.f h3m srw hi.w
di.f kr(i) nmhw n3y.sn niwt

He has let incense be brought to the gods
He has let the nobles retain their possessions
He has let the humble frequent their towns⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume III (The Late Period)* (University of California Press, 1980, reprinted 2006): 94-103.

⁴⁷ Lichtheim, *Egyptian Literature (The Late Period)*, 99.

⁴⁸ Robert R. Kritner, 'The Famine Stela' in *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, ed. William Kelly Simpson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003): 391.

⁴⁹ Lichtheim, *Egyptian Literature (New Kingdom)*, 76.

An AAB example can be seen in the Rhetorical Stele of Rameses II at Abu Simbel:

*inw.sn m šbnw m ht t3.sn
mš'.sn msw.sn m-h3t-iry
r dbh htpw hr hm.f*

Their tribute is a mixture of products of their land(s)
with their forces and their children at the head of it
to ask for peace from His Majesty⁵⁰

This stele also contains an example of the ABA pattern:

*pr.n. i m ht 'pr.kwi m qn nht
spd.kwi šm.kwi dm.kwi m 'h3
ii.kwi m sf ntr mn.kwi hr st.f*

I came from the womb, (already) armed with valour and victory,
Being alert, firm and renowned in conflict,
Coming as the child of the God, established on his throne⁵¹

An example of the ABC pattern can be seen in the Triumph Hymn for Tuthmosis III ('the Poetical Stele'):

*hnd.k h3swt nb(w)t ib.k 3w(w)
nn wn hsy sw m-h3w hm.k
ti wi m sšmy.k spr.k r.sn*

You tread down all foreign countries, with happy heart,
none can turn back in Your Majesty's presence,
but while I am your guide, you can reach them⁵²

These other triplet forms can be found in all periods of Egyptian poetry, and do not show the same loss of recognisable structure as the ABB forked pattern. Several AAB forms were noted above for the Festal Songs for Hathor at Dendera: it is worth noting also the AAB pattern which follows the Petosiris Vintagers example cited above, and which closes the section:

*s(wr) i tw thī
m-3b r ir(t) mr.k
hpr.sn n.k r šms ib.k*

Drink yourself drunk,
Cease not from doing what you want,
They've grown for you, to have pleasure of⁵³

⁵⁰ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 187.

⁵¹ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 191.

⁵² Kitchen, *Poetry*, 167.

6. Discussion of the Egyptian Examples

The above examples of the ABB forked pattern are representative of their kind, and it will be noticed that they fit into very wide classes of genre. It can be found in official religious poetry, represented here with numerous examples from the Old Kingdom through to the New Kingdom. Poetic expressions of popular piety are represented by JdE 43591. Harper's Songs contain such examples, as does New Kingdom love poetry. All of these genres use the pattern regularly.

Royal inscriptions, however, very rarely display forked parallelism in any era, and never in the earlier periods. The late New Kingdom example from Merenptah's Israel Stele is unusual. This might be because such texts tend to use a higher proportion of stock phrases, but is, perhaps, better attributed to the fact that royal inscriptions are more concerned with narration. The forked pattern tends to hold back the poetic flow, whereas royal inscriptions tend to focus on maintaining this flow to achieve a rhetorical purpose.

It was noted above that examples of the other triplet forms may be found in all the other genres considered in the previous section. Their presence does not discriminate between genres. We see, therefore, that while certain kinds of triplet pattern may be found in all periods and all genres of Egyptian poetry, the forked pattern is more restricted in its use. It was, apparently, only occasionally used in royal inscriptions, and it appears to have fallen out of use around the end of the New Kingdom. Later triplets which approach the structure of the forked pattern no longer adhere to the clear form found earlier.

It is striking that the other ABB form reviewed above, three-line climactic parallelism, is absent—or at best extremely rare—in Egyptian. No examples of its use have yet been found. Since many formal devices are common stock-in-trade in all ancient Near Eastern poetry—such as parallelism, chiasmus, anaphora, alliteration, and so forth—it may seem puzzling why these particular devices do not appear in Egypt.

Although both three-line staircase and forked parallelism are of the basic ABB pattern, arguably the three-line form represents a more elaborate development. However, in the absence of securely dated Levantine poetry earlier in the second millennium BC, this is hard to

⁵³ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 465.

determine with confidence. In both cases the second and third lines are formally parallel, and the main differences between the two devices are in the relationship of the first line to the others. Very commonly the reader or listener is led in one direction by the first part of the construction, and then has to rethink the meaning as the later parts unfold. An example from the psalms is:

For see your enemies, YHWH:
 for see your enemies will perish,
 scattered will be all workers of wickedness.⁵⁴

Here, the first line in isolation leaves the reader or listener uncertain as to the meaning—are the enemies threatening, terrifying, many in number, or to be condemned? The second and third lines clarify the situation, and perhaps effect a reversal of expectation. Thus in staircase parallelism one is often faced with a more radical reinterpretation of the first line on the part of the listener or reader, following Greenstein's psycho-linguistic argument.⁵⁵ It is, therefore, a more demanding poetic pattern for an audience.

The staircase pattern, then, is a tightly bound construction as regards its various parts, following from the requirement of repeated words and the common convention of reversing initial expectations. The forked pattern has only a loose degree of coupling—the relationship is shaped solely by the descriptive imagery in view. These reasons, together with the considerably older poetic lineage of the forked pattern, combine to suggest a process of historical development for triplet patterns. The extant examples of Ugaritic poetry span a relatively short time, and hence exploration of evolutionary development is hardly possible. However, Egyptian examples cover a much greater span of time, assisting diachronic analysis. Before considering the historical development, however, it is worth addressing the matter of how the various triplet forms are used in a structural sense.

⁵⁴ Psalm 92:9 (92:10 Hebrew text).

⁵⁵ Greenstein, 'Two Variations', 97-102. He describes the psycholinguistic process as one in which the hearer is forced to suspend assimilation of the (incomplete) first line, and in many cases reappraise the presumed meaning through changes in the syntactical function of a repeated word (or close parallel). The second line presents an obstacle to the hearer which must be overcome, and the re-analysis is rewarded by the third line. The effect is one of anticipation or suspense.

7. Some Structural Uses of Triplet Patterns

It is useful here to review the ways in which triplets are placed structurally within poems in the different poetic traditions represented here. This has been noted for particular examples by various commentators,⁵⁶ but not with specific regard to the forms of triplet being used. The study of closure is an important one in wider poetics, and Smith's classic study concentrating on the English tradition⁵⁷ has inspired other critics to identify closure strategies in other traditions.⁵⁸ The following table shows that triplets are in fact frequently used for clear structural purposes. 'Opening' and 'Closing' here can mean either the start or end of a whole poem, or more commonly, the start or end of a distinct portion of the work as a whole. In some cases of 'Other' an important structural role (such as a pivot point) is being served and is indicated.

Item	Opening	Closing	Other
Egyptian examples cited above			
Pyramid Utterance 510, E		ABB-F	ABB-F
A Man Tired of Life, Poem 3 ⁵⁹	ABB-F		ABB-F (4)
Lyrical Address for Hathor			ABB-F
Praise hymn for Senuseret I	ABB-F		ABB-F (4)
Song of the Cynical Harper			ABB-F
Hymn to Osiris ⁶⁰		ABB-F	ABB-F
Hapusomb's Statue, Cairo CGC 648	ABB-F		ABB-F (4)
JdE 43591	ABB-F		
P. Harris 500 I Stanza 2		ABB-F	ABB-F
Israel Stele	ABB-F		
Shoshenq I Triumphal Welcome			ABB-F (2)
Lyrical Tribute to Mutirdis		AAB	
Petosiris Vintagers		AAB	ABB-F
Festal Songs for Hathor	AAB (2)	AAA, AAB	AAB

⁵⁶ For example Kitchen, *Poetry*, 272, or Lichtheim, *Egyptian Literature (New Kingdom)*, 35.

⁵⁷ Barbara H. Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (University of Chicago Press, 1968).

⁵⁸ For example Watson, *Traditional Techniques*, 194 and elsewhere, or Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 6 and elsewhere.

⁵⁹ All units except the last are of the ABB forked pattern: the last verse changes the pattern.

⁶⁰ Lichtheim, *Egyptian Literature (Old and Middle Kingdoms)*, 111.

Item	Opening	Closing	Other
Other Egyptian examples			
Pyramid Utterance 217 ⁶¹	ABB-F (4)		
Songs of the People A (Herdsmen) ⁶²	ABB-F		
Praise of Militant Theban Ruler ⁶³	AAB		
Praise of Amen-Re ⁶⁴	ABB-F		
Prayer to Amun ⁶⁵			ABB-F
Burrell Collection Penitential Hymn ⁶⁶			AAB
Piye Victory Stele ⁶⁷			AAB
Ugaritic examples from Fenton⁶⁸			
KTU 1:2 I 36-37	ABB-3		
KTU 1:2 IV 8-9	ABB-3		
KTU 1:15 II 21-23	ABB-3		
KTU 1:16 VI 54-57	ABB-3		
KTU 1:17 VI 26-28	ABB-3		
KTU 1:3 III 18-20			ABB-F
KTU 1:4 VII 49-50		ABB-F	
KTU 1:5 VI 25-26	ABB-F		
KTU 1:14 II 9-11			ABB-F
KTU 1:14 II 13-15			ABB-F
KTU 1:15 II 18-20		ABB-F	
KTU 1:15 III 17-19		ABB-F	
KTU 1:17 VI 16-19	ABB-F		
KTU 1:114 2-4		ABB-F	
Hebrew examples from Fenton⁶⁹			
Ps. 92:10 (9 ET)			ABB-3 (pivot)
Ps. 77:17 (16 ET)			ABB-3
Ps. 93:3			ABB-3 (mid)
Ps. 94:1-2a	ABB-3		
Exod. 15:11			ABB-3 (pivot)
Hab. 3:8	ABB-3		
Gen. 49:3	ABB-F		
Gen. 49:8	ABB-F		
Gen. 49:27		ABB-F	

⁶¹ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 13, 15, 17.

⁶² Kitchen, *Poetry*, 77.

⁶³ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 161.

⁶⁴ Lichtheim, *Egyptian Literature (New Kingdom)*, 111.

⁶⁵ Lichtheim, *Egyptian Literature (New Kingdom)*, 111.

⁶⁶ Kitchen, *Poetry*, 301.

⁶⁷ Lichtheim, *Egyptian Literature (The Late Period)*, 80.

⁶⁸ See N. Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit* (2nd edn; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) for the wider context of each of these passages.

⁶⁹ Note that examples requiring textual emendation or rearrangement are excluded here.

Item	Opening	Closing	Other
Exod. 15:8			ABB-F
Deut. 33:5		ABB-F	
Deut. 33:13	ABB-F		
Deut. 33:26	ABB-F		
Judg. 5:3	ABB-F		
2 Sam. 1:22			ABB-F
2 Sam. 1:24			ABB-F

Some clear themes emerge from this table. The three-line climactic ABB pattern is always used as an opening gambit in Ugaritic, and a closer study of the examples shows that it is always used as an opening to direct speech. KTU 1:2 I 36-37, for example, is the start of El's reply to Yam's messengers, and KTU 1:17 VI 26-28 is the start of Anat's reply to Aqhat. This is supported by Watson's observation on the use of staircase parallelism in prose contexts, of which he said, 'the implication seems to be that the origin of this form of parallelism lies in actual speech'.⁷⁰ The forked ABB pattern in Ugaritic has a wider use, and may be found most commonly to close a section. This usage exploits the way in which the forked pattern gives an opportunity to pause and review: judicious use of words in their context can extend the caesura-like quality into a thematic break.

In Hebrew verse, the opening qualities of the three-line climactic ABB pattern are retained in a few places, but a new feature is the use at central, commonly pivotal, locations within poems. If indeed the original context of this form was to introduce direct speech in a formal way, it has been creatively applied into a new context in which the potential for ambiguity in the first line can be exploited to create a turning-point for the poem as a whole. The forked ABB pattern again appears in several structural contexts, most commonly as an opening. It would appear that, once the climactic form had begun to be displaced from an opening position, the forked form could be used to fulfil this role.

In Egyptian verse, the three-line climactic ABB pattern does not appear to have been used at all, as noted earlier. The forked ABB pattern was, however, often deployed in both opening and closing positions. It is more commonly found as an opening, but there are also

⁷⁰ Watson, *Traditional Techniques*, 260, in the section, 'A Note on Staircase Parallelism', 258-61.

several cases where this pattern dominates most or all of a poem, in ways that are not to be found in Levantine poetry. In later poems, as the ABB forked pattern fell into disuse, the AAB pattern seems to have replaced it as a tool for opening and closing poems.

Considering all three traditions, then, we find some consistent patterns in the poetic use of triplets, together with some minor but important differences. In all cases, the variation from the regular couplet pattern offered opportunities to poets for both opening and closing strategies. The differing impact of the ABB three-line and forked patterns lends itself to different kinds of use. In Egypt, the decline of the ABB forked pattern opened possibilities for other triplet forms to occupy these places.

8. Historical Development of Triplet Patterns

The study of Egyptian examples suggests that the earliest forms of triplet would be the simplest: complete parallelism between all three lines, or direct advance of the plot-line with little overt parallel construction. Both of these patterns are readily assimilated by an audience. The ABB forked pattern, requiring a little more involvement from the hearer to 'decode', followed soon after, certainly well before the end of the Old Kingdom. The AAB and ABA patterns also emerged at this stage. Egyptian poets then chose to elaborate this pattern not by increasing the complexity of the triplet pattern itself, but by prolonging it to span more than three lines. This development can also be identified during the Old Kingdom.

As noted above, forked parallelism is only one formal variant of the ABB structure, with the three-line climactic variant also being used in Ugaritic and early Hebrew poetry. Climactic parallelism may be found in two-line⁷¹ and three-line forms. There has been debate as to which of these forms originated first: Loewenstamm held that the shorter form was the older,⁷² but Greenstein marshalled evidence from Ugaritic to suggest the reverse.⁷³ The three-line pattern can be found with relative ease in Ugaritic or Hebrew poetry, but while clear

⁷¹ See for example Roman Jakobson, 'Grammatical Parallelism and Its Russian Facet', *Language* 42 (1966): 399-429, especially 427.

⁷² Samuel E. Loewenstamm, 'The Expanded Colon in Ugaritic and Hebrew Verse', *JSS* 15 (1969): 176-96.

⁷³ Greenstein, 'Two Variations', footnote 48, 96-97.

examples of the two-line pattern can be found in Hebrew, there are no undisputed examples in Ugaritic. This suggests that the two-line form developed as a compact version of the three-line form.

Egyptian poets appear never to have used either the two-line or three-line climactic forms. However, in Semitic poetry as practised in the Levant, the triplet form was quite creatively mined for its potential. Here, poets developed structures requiring a higher level of engagement from their audience. For them, the forked parallel structure was not the final developmental stage, but only a step on the way towards three-line staircase parallelism. Indeed, the fact that the ABB forked pattern seems to have been abandoned, whereas the ABB three-line climactic pattern persisted, suggests that it was felt to be a more suitable, or more engaging, literary device. From an apparent original use to introduce direct speech, other structural uses were found for the pattern, such as a pivotal turning point in a poem.

Greenstein comments, in the context of a discussion of ‘hot’ (complete) and ‘cool’ (incomplete) stimuli, ‘Nowhere does parallelism demand more audience involvement than in certain forms of the “staircase” or “climactic” variation’.⁷⁴ Levantine poets, or their audiences, seem to have appreciated this level of demand and engagement, but apparently this was a step too far for Egyptian poets, or their audiences. In Egypt, it seems that the levels of tension and ambiguity inherent in the three-line staircase, often withholding crucial aspects of thought from the opening line in a kind of extended enjambment, were not acceptable. Instead, poetic forms were cultivated which upheld and reinforced the listener’s first expectation rather than challenging it. Poetry is always suspended between gratifying and frustrating the expectations of the audience:⁷⁵ Egypt seems to have leaned more heavily towards gratification.

This study has focused on use of triplets in the Levant and Egypt, and has not considered use in Akkadian texts. Two comments seem particularly relevant here. Greenstein noted, ‘In Canaanite ... parallelism is the predominant poetic form, while in Akkadian it ... is not usually a dominating form ... in Canaanite the verb is as often as not deleted in the second of two parallel hemistichs and in Akkadian

⁷⁴ Greenstein ‘How does Parallelism Mean?’, 54.

⁷⁵ Smith, *Poetic Closure*, especially chapter 1.

the verb is hardly ever deleted'.⁷⁶ The practice of verb deletion (or indeed other elements of the poetic line) is a crucial component of the ABB three-line climactic pattern, and allows it to be used in versatile ways: it is the formative component of the psycho-linguistic tension that makes it effective. Hence, its comparative lack in Akkadian suggests that this triplet pattern is not to be expected in Mesopotamian poetry. Indeed, Watson comments that 'the staircase pattern does not occur in Akkadian verse, in spite of one or two approximations ... it is probable, therefore, that the pattern is primarily West Semitic in character'.⁷⁷ It seems, then that the ABB three-line triplet pattern is not to be found in Akkadian material: the study of other triplet patterns in such poetry is a separate matter and is not pursued further here.

9. Conclusions

This study has explored a particular triplet pattern of the ABB form, called forked parallelism, which has been recognised for some time in Ugaritic and early Hebrew poetry. Here it is shown that the pattern was also well-used in Egyptian poetry, though less frequently in royal inscriptions than other genres. The Egyptian examples span a much wider range of time than the Ugaritic ones, which all date from a specific, narrow band of time in the Late Bronze age shortly before Ugarit's destruction.⁷⁸

The pattern seems to have fallen out of favour in Egypt at approximately the same time as in the Levant, around the Late Bronze-Iron I transition, in the last couple of centuries of the second millennium in round figures. This observation applies to compositions originating from later dates, rather than later copies or reuse of older material. Fenton's observations concerning the forked pattern at Ugarit and its implication for Hebrew compositions are an extremely valuable starting point. The identification of a similar chronological pattern within the much more extensive corpus of Egyptian poetry, however, provides considerable extra weight to his arguments. Egyptian

⁷⁶ Greenstein, 'Two Variations', 89-90.

⁷⁷ Watson, *Traditional Techniques*, 258-59.

⁷⁸ See Peter C. Craigie, *Ugarit and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1983) for a readable introduction to the history of Ugarit, or K. Lawson Younger, ed., *Ugarit at Seventy-Five* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007) for a selection of contemporary work areas.

examples are easy to identify, and adhere quite strictly to the form, from Old Kingdom through to New Kingdom times, but become rare, diluted, and incoherent thereafter. Within Egypt as well as the Levant, the forked pattern is, as Fenton said, ‘a structure which hardly survived the end of the Bronze Age’.

The support provided by Egyptian material mirrors observations previously made about the use of the pattern within the corpus of Hebrew poetry, and has significant bearing on the difficult problem of ascertaining the composition date of early Hebrew poetry. Assessments of the composition time of Biblical poems have varied very considerably depending on what criteria are favoured by different critics. Evidence of a linguistic nature has been investigated over the years by several authors, and indicates that certain poems embedded in narrative contexts can legitimately be seen as of very early origin.⁷⁹ Looking at considerations of larger-scale poetic composition helps to confirm this picture. Several of the Hebrew poems embedded in a narrative context, identified as archaic or early on linguistic grounds, contain formal structures identifying them as early on stylistic grounds as well.

Considerations of the use of triplet forms, and in particular the ABB three-line and forked patterns, at key structural locations has concluded that Ugaritic, Hebrew and Egyptian poets did indeed routinely employ them as important thematic signals. The use by each of these three cultures is broadly similar, but also reveals small but important local differences.

Finally, a brief review of triplet forms in general suggests a particular diachronic model of poetics through the Bronze Age. Forked parallelism occupies a middle ground in the overall trend of development, and indeed can be seen as marking a crucial decision point separating Levantine poetry from Egyptian. In the Levant, poets explored more complex and challenging staircase patterns, whereas in Egypt, this did not happen. The emergence of the three-line form in the Ugaritic tradition, and its continued creative exploration in the Hebrew tradition, illustrates a divergence in poetic development from Egypt. However, the abandonment of the ABB forked pattern, at least in its clear earlier form, appears to have been a common response. The two

⁷⁹ See for example Robertson, *Linguistic evidence*, or Cross and Freedman, *Yahwistic Poetry* among others.

poetic traditions developed in different directions from the Late Bronze Age onwards.