

Shared Rhetorical Features in Biblical and Sumerian Literature

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

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

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

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

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

