Abstract: Janus parallelism is a recently discovered tool evident in ancient Hebrew poetry. Like the two-faced Roman god Janus, Janus parallelism employs a Hebrew word with two meanings that faces two ways. One meaning of the word relates to the preceding text while the other meaning of the word relates to the following text. Examples of such wordplays have been found in many parts of the Old Testament, though the Book of Job appears to be especially rich in these sophisticated puns. A valuable tool for exploring the richness of Janus parallelism is Scott B. Noegel’s detailed work, Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2009), where over 50 examples are considered. His book can greatly strengthen our appreciation for the intense and clever wordplays in Job, a book laden with puns and semantic artistry. In many cases, important new layers of meaning are revealed by understanding the long-overlooked wordplays in Job’s many Janus parallelisms.

An outstanding work of biblical scholarship is found in Scott B. Noegel’s research work, Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job, based on his PhD dissertation at the University of Sheffield and related to a variety of publications.

After all the centuries of biblical studies, it is fascinating to see how much continues to be found in the pages of the Bible. In the heavily investigated areas of poetry and especially parallelism in the Hebrew Bible, only recently have scholars begun to uncover evidence of an intriguing form called Janus parallelism. Referring to the two-faced Roman god Janus, this form of parallelism uses a single word or phrase with two meanings. One meaning completes or relates to the immediately preceding text, while the second meaning relates to the following text. It is a clever wordplay in which one word works in two ways, looking forward and backward.

Cyrus Gordon discovered and named this technique in a 1978 publication where he examined a verse in Song of Solomon 2:12:

The blossoms appear in the land
the time of the zâmîr [pruning season / music] has arrived
and the song of the turtle-dove is heard in our land.

Gordon noted that zâmîr means either the “pruning season” or “music” and can thus relate appropriately to the preceding and following phrases, using both its meanings. What Gordon called Janus parallelism has been given different labels by others, including Shalom M. Paul’s delightful “polysensuous polyvalency.” Gordon himself later called the technique “asymmetric Janus parallelism,” but the simple original term seems to have stuck.

The wordplays in Janus parallelism are often classified as a form of polysemy, wherein a single lexical unit has two or more meanings. Paul Raabe, in his examination of many forms of ambiguity in the Psalms, notes that while technically one should distinguish between polysemy and homonymy (when two or more etymologically unrelated lexical units are identical in sound and spelling), it is often difficult to clearly distinguish between the two, and thus he ignores the distinction as he examines lexical ambiguity, phonetic ambiguity, and grammatical ambiguity.

Noegel’s work likewise embraces Janus parallelisms with a variety of forms. Some occur based on alternate pronunciation of words, making the parallelism an oral one. Others rely on words written in the same way or nearly the same way, although the pronunciation may be different, making them a visual Janus parallelism. Each proposed Janus parallelism is labeled to show whether it is visual or not, oral or not, and symmetric or asymmetric. If a Janus parallelism comprises three stichs with the pivot word (the word with double meaning) in the second stich, it is classified as symmetric. If it is composed of two stichs, it is considered asymmetric. Noegel’s lexicon departs from the terminology of Gordon, whose “asymmetric Janus parallelism” was composed of three stichs with a central pivot, defined as symmetric by Noegel.

Janus parallelism has now been extensively studied in Hebrew, a language well adapted for complex wordplays, and also has been reported in Ugaritic, Akkadian, Arabic, and Sumerian. A similar feature occurs in Japanese court
and I suppose many examples can be scoured from Chinese poetry, where puns abound, and a single written character can have not only multiple meanings but, through homonyms or relationships to different characters with similar appearance, can invoke a variety of other words to add complex layers of wordplays.

Regardless of what it and related forms are called, Gordon’s insight has helped many scholars strengthen their approach in interpreting or translating ambiguous passages in scripture. Gordon explained that, in the past, commentators encountering a word like ẓâmîr, while fully aware that it could have an agricultural meaning and a musical meaning, would make the mistake of assuming it must be intended as one or the other and did not generally recognize that the ambiguity may be intentional, with both meanings correct. Since then, there has been healthy progress in recognizing and learning from many other instances of intentional ambiguity with a Janus function. Other possible cases of Janus parallelism, sometimes tentative, include:

- Genesis 6:3 (“going astray”/“in that, inasmuch as”),
- Genesis 15:1 (“shield”/“giver, donor”),
- Genesis 49:6 (“enter”/“desire” and “be united”/“rejoice”), and Genesis 49:26 (“parents”/“mountains”),
- Exodus 33:13 (“way”/“power”),
- Ruth 1:21 (“to answer”/“to afflict”),
- Psalm 22:17 (“encircles”/“dismembers”),
- Psalm 30:13 (one word can mean “be silent”/“mourn”/“perish,” with connections before and after its occurrence),
- Psalm 55:3 (“I groan”/“I am in a panic”), and Psalm 75:2 (“your name”/“your heavens”),
- Jeremiah 25:10 (“tillage” or “tilled land”/“lamp” — but Noegel disputes this, arguing that the meaning of “land” is unsupported)

But the richest source of such wordplays appears to be in the Book of Job, based on the thorough and groundbreaking work of Scott Noegel, whose book is based on his PhD dissertation and preceded by a publication in the Journal of Biblical Literature.

Noegel’s Contribution

Noegel’s work not only outlines how each of his uncovered Janus parallelisms works but also how it relates to other portions and themes in Job. After expounding the meaning and beauty of the pun, he shows how other translators and commentators have treated it in the past. Occasionally it appears the translators of the Targum or Vulgate recognized the double meaning and sought to build something similar into the text, but usually it appears that translators and others did not recognize that a double meaning might have been intended.

As an example, consider the treatment of Job 7:6–7, Noegel offers this translation:

6. My days are more trifling than a weaver’s shuttle. They go without ?????????.
7. Remember, my life is but a wind, my eyes will see no more good.

Noegel explains that the word ????????? (tiqvah, Strong’s 8615) means both “thread” and “hope.” “Thread” parallels “a weaver’s shuttle” in line 6, while “hope” parallels Job’s failing hope in line 7. Noegel points to related usage of key words here in other biblical passages to strengthen the case that the relationships here are intentional.
He then examines the Septuagint and the Vulgate, both of which reflect only the meaning of “hope” for the pivotal word, but the Vulgate adds “(more) than the web is cut by the weaver” suggesting an attempt to convey the allusion to thread. The Targum attempts to capture the pun with some extra words: “they wear out and are cut off without hope.” Noegel notes that nearly all commentators recognize the pun, but its specific role as a Janus parallel apparently was not recognized.

Noegel then returns to the use of “hope” and other relevant words in Job to show how the reader is prepared earlier for the wordplay in 7:6. Noegel also explores Bildad’s response to Job in 8:14–15, which builds on Job’s pun in 7:6, demonstrating that both meanings were intended, while trying to get the upper hand with his own pun:

The hope of the godless will perish; his confidence is a mere gossamer thread; his trust, but a spider’s web.  

Here Bildad has used both meanings of ????????, and has turned the “weaver’s shuttle” of 7:6 into a spider. The root for the word “weaver’s shuttle” in 7:6 occurs in Isaiah 59:5 in connection with a spider, further highlighting “the skill with which both Job and Bildad weave their remarks.”

In addition to identifying several types of Janus parallelism, Noegel also distinguishes it from related poetical techniques such as antanaclasis, in which a word with the same root is repeated twice but conveys differing meanings. A single word or expression is used in Janus parallelism, and different roots may be involved but not always.

Across the 222 pages of his book, Noegel unravels several dozen sometimes intricate puns and brings out substantial new meaning and beauty in the process. It is a careful work with extensive footnotes and fascinating detail.

In addition to the core of his work with the Book of Job, in Appendix 1, he also discusses a handful of additional newly discovered Janus parallelisms he has found in other parts of the Old Testament. For example, in Isaiah 14:11–13, Noegel finds a Janus parallelism wherein one word can mean both Bright One (Lucifer) and Boastful One. As Bright One, it is parallel with the “stars of Elohim” in verse 13, while “Boastful One” is parallel with “your pride” in the previous verse.

In Appendix 2, Noegel examines new Janus parallelisms he has found in extra-biblical sources, including texts in Akkadian, Sumerian, Hittite, Ugaritic, Arabian, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and medieval Hebrew. This section is substantial and especially detailed in the Akkadian section. Finally, in Appendix 3, Noegel discusses a variety of Janus parallelisms in the Old Testament that others have proposed but which don’t meet the criteria to be valid Janus parallelisms. His objections are often based on challenging the evidence for a proposed second meaning of a Hebrew word.

Noegel’s work should greatly enhance our appreciation of Job as a literary marvel. The onslaught of cunning puns in that text astounds me, in particular the sophisticated use of Janus parallelisms. The Book of Job is like the transcript of a heated contest of punsters battling for literary mastery, with God being the ultimate victor. Noegel’s work is a thorough, intelligent, thought-provoking work and a significant contribution in biblical studies, in my opinion.

In light of Noegel’s work, it may be worthwhile to also compare some of the patterns he identifies in Job to possibly related passages in the Book of Mormon, where there may be value in considering the speculative possibility that Janus parallelism may have been used by some Nephite writers. A tentative exercise along these lines will be pursued in a future article.


30. Ibid., 52.

31. Ibid., 187.

32. Ibid., 155.