INTRODUCTION TO
HEBREW POETRY

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It has been recognized since ancient times that the Hebrew Bible contains poetry, but the definition of what constitutes biblical poetry, the description of poetic features, and the identification of poetic passages have varied greatly over the centuries. This article will present a summary of the poetic features considered most relevant by contemporary biblical scholars, and will show how an understanding of them may lead to better interpretations of biblical poetry.

INTERNAL EVIDENCE FOR THE DEFINITION OF POETRY

A good starting place would seem to be the Bible’s own terminology. Certain terms occur in superscriptions or within passages that may indicate poetic genres. The broadest of these is שירים (šı’rֹ) or שירה (širֹ), meaning “song” or “poem.” שיר may stand alone, as in Judg 5:12 and Ps 65:1, or it may be qualified, as in שיר המַּהֲרָל בְּלֹא (šir ha-mmārāl bēlō’), “pilgrimage song”; Psalms 120–134), שיר סִיַּוְנָן (šir sīyyūn, “Zion song”; Ps 137:3), שִׁירָה (širāh, “new song”; Pss 96:1; 98:1; 149:1). For other types of שיר, see Pss 30:1; 45:1; 137:4. The “feminine” form, שירה (širā), is found, e.g., in Exod 15:1; Deut 31:30; Num 21:17. Another frequent term is מִזְמוֹר (mīzmōr, “song,” “psalm”), which appears in numerous psalms, sometimes in combination with שיר (e.g., Pss 67:1; 68:1). A third term, קִינָה (qīnā, “lament”), is known from 2 Sam 1:17; Amos 8:10. While these terms provide a useful entrée into ancient notions of literary, or perhaps musical, genres, they do not encompass every passage that a modern reader would consider poetry.

Likewise, the ancient scribal tradition, practiced from rabbinic times, of writing certain sections of the Hebrew Bible stichographically (i.e., with space left between lines of a poem; see, e.g., Exodus 15; Deuteronomy 32; Judges 5) is suggestive of what may have been perceived as poems. Yet it is not a sufficient criterion by today’s standards because, like the term שיר, stichographic writing was not used for all poetic passages and is occasionally used for non-poetic lists (Josh 12:9–24; Esth 9:7–9).

The internal features of the biblical text neither adequately define nor identify poetry. Moreover, no ancient Israelite or ancient Near Eastern treatises on poetry or poetics have been found. Hence, scholars in each time and place, beginning with the Greco-Roman period, have applied to the biblical text definitions of poetry from their own literary tradition. Early Christian scholars discussed biblical poetry in terms of classical metrical systems, medieval Jewish scholars searched the Bible for the types of rhyme and metrical patterns found in medieval Hebrew poetry, and English Renaissance scholars sought the attributes of their style of poetry in the Bible. We do the same today, applying
all we know of systems of versification, poetic syntax and vocabulary, symbolic and metaphoric representation—in short, all the ways in which language may be distinguished as poetic (as opposed to non-poetic)—to the study of biblical poetry. The result is an increasingly complex and sophisticated view of the Hebrew Bible’s poetry and, by extension, all biblical language, as well as an ever-deepening aesthetic appreciation for it.

VERSE OR POETRY?

When we speak of verse we mean a type of discourse with formal properties, generally quantifiable, such as meter or rhyme, that distinguish it from other types of discourse. The search for such properties in biblical verse has been, at various times and places, described as quantitative, syllabic, or accentual. But despite much effort, no one has been able to demonstrate convincingly the existence of a consistently occurring metrical system. (See the section “Meter and Rhythm,” below.)

M. O’Connor has suggested that instead of looking for formal arrangements built on the recurrence of phonological units (which is what most metrical systems are), we will find the formal properties of biblical verse in the arrangement of syntactic units. O’Connor proposed a system of syntactic constraints to define a line of verse. The terms that he employs are clause, a verbal clause or a verbless clause; constituent, each verb and nominal phrase and the particles dependent on it; and unit, the independent verb or noun along with the particles dependent on it (generally equivalent to a word). According to this system, a line of biblical verse may contain no more than three clauses; it may contain between one and four constituents; and it may contain between two and five units. The dominant line form, according to O’Connor’s description, contains one clause and either two or three constituents of two or three units. For example, Exod 15:7 may be analyzed as

7a. שבעה Labour of the Lord’s Supremacy שפע
7b. אתה תקנך תשלת חירות
7c. אפלך כץ יודי קלה מוקaisal

In your great majesty, you smash your foes,
You send forth your anger,
It consumes them like stubble?

Line 7a contains one clause of three constituents, 7b contains one clause of two constituents, and 7c contains one clause of two constituents. While O’Connor’s work is frequently cited, and is generally recognized as an innovative description grounded on a sound linguistic basis, it has rarely been applied to analyses of biblical poetry. Perhaps his description has not replaced the older types of search for meter because it is technical and complex, or because it is difficult to imagine that a native poet would have thought in these syntactic categories.

Other scholars, including myself, feel that the quest for a formal system of versification should be abandoned because it does not exist. It is preferable, therefore, to speak of “poetry” rather than “verse.” By “poetry” I mean a type of discourse that employs a high degree of the tropes and figures that are described below. Poetry can be distinguished from non-poetic discourse (historical narrative, legal discourse) by the comparatively high density of these tropes and by the structuring of some of them into recurring patterns. Poetry also employs sound and joins it to meaning in interesting ways. In stating this, I espouse a Jakobsonian view, which sees poetry as focusing on the message for its own sake. A poem conveys thought, and, moreover, it conveys that thought in a self-conscious manner, through a special structuring of language that calls attention to the “how” of the message as well as to the “what.” At the same time, the “how” and the “what” become indistinguishable. Robert Alter, taking his approach from New Criticism, puts it slightly differently: “Poetry... is not just a set of techniques for saying impressively what could be said otherwise. Rather, it is a particular way of imagining the world.”

GENRES OF BIBLICAL POETRY

There does not seem to have been a formal or structural distinction between different kinds of poems. Hebrew poetry has no fixed number of lines or type of patterning that is characteristic of a par-

2. Unless otherwise specified, translations of the biblical text are the author’s.
ticular genre. If the ancient Israelites did make genre distinctions, those genres are largely lost to us. (They are presumably similar to the genres of other ancient Near Eastern literatures.)

As one might have expected, form-critical studies have discovered genres or subtypes of poetry, especially as they can be related to a specific Sitz im Leben, such as victory songs or communal laments. Hermann Gunkel’s work remains the classic source on form-critical types of psalms. Following Gunkel, most scholars find the following genres in the book of Psalms: individual and communal laments, hymns of praise, thanksgiving songs, royal psalms, songs of Zion, and wisdom psalms.

Modern scholars tend to impose their own notions of genre, based for the most part on analogy with the tone and contents of genres in other literatures, when they divide up the poetic territory in the Bible. This division corresponds to a large degree with the biblical books in which the poems are found; thus Proverbs and Job are wisdom literature; Psalms contains praise (or lyric) or perhaps liturgy; Lamentations has laments; Song of Songs is love poetry (or perhaps wedding songs). In other books, one may find victory songs (Exodus 15; Judges 5; Num 21:28) or elegies (2 Sam 1:19-27; 3:33-34). Prophetic writing makes an interesting test case, as Robert Alter has observed, for some prophetic speeches are written as poetry and others as prose. Alter has suggested that the vocative (addressing the reader in the second person) and monitory (admonishing) nature of prophetic poetry distinguishes it from other poetic genres.

Actually, most studies of biblical poetry are not concerned with genre per se, but concentrate on the common features of all biblical poetry. These are presented in the following sections.

TERSENESS

Scholars of comparative literature who have searched for a universal definition of poetry have noticed that poetic lines tend to be shorter and terser than lines of prose. This feature seems to occur whether or not there are metrical constraints on the length of lines. Whatever the reason, poetry has a tendency to be more terse, more concise, than non-poetic discourse, both within a single line and, in the case of biblical poetry, over the discourse as a whole. Biblical poems are relatively short, usually thirty verses or less; there are no epic poems in the Bible. Lines are short, and the relationships or transitions between lines are often unexpressed. This gives the impression that in poetry each word or phrase is more loaded with meaning, since fewer words must bear the burden of the message. In biblical poetry, terseness within lines is achieved largely by the omission of the definite article (א ha), the accusative marker (ם 'et), and the relative pronoun (שׁ 'asher). The decreased usage of these particles has been documented in computerized counts. The relationship between lines is frequently not made explicit, but is implied by the parallelism that compels the reader to construe some type of relationship.

We can see some of the terseness and the effect of parallelism in a comparison of Judges 4:19 and 5:25, a poetic and a prose version of the same incident:

Then he said to her, “Please give me a little water to drink; for I am thirsty.” So she opened a skin of milk and gave him a drink and covered him.

(Judg. 4:19 NRSV)

He asked water and she gave him milk, she brought him curds in a lordly bowl.

(Judg. 5:25 NRSV)

The poetic version is both more concise and more redundant. The parallelism in 5:25 sets up an exact equivalence, a reciprocity, which brings into focus the contrast between what was requested and what was served. The addition of “she brought him curds in a lordly bowl” does not add to the sequence of actions but doubles back upon the milk, stressing once more its “dairiness” (as opposed to water) and the noble flourish with which it was offered. The prose version carries the reader step by step along the narrative sequence, giving more information but not highlighting any part of it as the poetic version does.

PARALLELISM

Since the work of Robert Lowth, parallelism has come to be viewed as one of the two identifying

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4. For biblical terms that may possibly indicate different genres see above, “Internal Evidence for the Definition of Poetry.”
markers of poetry. And since the other marker, meter, is notoriously resistant to analysis, parallelism, which is relatively easy to perceive (at least since Lowth called attention to it), has emerged as the predominant feature of biblical poetry. We should note at the outset, however, that parallelism is also present in non-poetic discourse, albeit to a more limited extent. So the mere existence of parallelism is not a sufficient indication of poetry, although a high frequency of parallelism in adjacent lines or verses has a high correlation with what we consider poetic discourse.

Parallelism may be defined as the repetition of similar or related semantic content or grammatical structure in adjacent lines or verses. The repetition is rarely identical, and it is the precise nature of the relationship between the two lines that has been the focus of most discussion. Indeed, the flexibility of this relationship, its capacity for variation, makes parallelism rhetorically interesting.

**The Semantic Relationship.** There have been two schools of thought on how to describe the semantic relationship between parallel lines. The first, introduced by Lowth and followed until recently, emphasizes the sameness of the relationship and the types and degree of correspondence between the lines. Lowth’s classic definition is

> The correspondence of one Verse, or Line, with another I call Parallelism. When a proposition is delivered, and a second 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.*

Lowth advanced his description by proposing discrete categories into which parallelisms could fit, depending on the nature of the correspondence of the lines. His categories are synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic. In synonymous parallelism, the same thought is expressed in different words, as in Ps 117:1:

> Praise the LORD, all you nations!
> Extol him, all you peoples! (NRSV)

In antithetic parallelism, the second line contradicts, or is opposed to, the first line, as in Prov 10:1:

> “A wise child makes a glad father, but a foolish child is a mother’s grief” (NRSV).

Synthetic parallelism, a much looser designation, accounts for parallelisms that lack exact correspondence between their parts but show a more diffuse correspondence between the lines as a whole. An example is Cant 2:4

> “He brought me to the banqueting house, and his intention toward me was love” (NRSV).

This tripartite system of categorization of types of parallelisms gained wide popularity, for it accounted for large numbers of parallel lines.

As scholars continued to study parallelism, they refined Lowth’s original categories, furthering his typological approach by adding subcategories, such as staircase parallelism, in which the second line repeats part of the first but moves beyond it, as in Jer 31:21:

> “Return, O virgin Israel, return to these your cities” (NRSV)

and janus parallelism, hinging on the use of a single word with two different meanings, one relating to what precedes it and one to what follows, as in Cant 2:12:

> “The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.”

In such an approach, the weak link was synthetic parallelism, because at best it appeared to be nothing more than a catchall of undefined categories or, at worst, a grouping of lines containing no parallelism. But the weakness of synthetic parallelism began to spread, as it was observed that no set of parallel lines is exactly synonymous or antithetic.

A major turning point came in the 1980s with the work of Robert Alter and James Kugel. Whereas Lowth’s approach emphasized the similarity between parallel lines, Alter and Kugel emphasized their differences. Kugel rejected the notion of the synonymity of parallel lines and substituted the

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8. Lowth, Isaiah, 10-11.
notion of continuity, phrasing his definition of parallelism as “A, what’s more, B.” Alter, moving independently in the same direction, spoke of the “consequentiality” of parallel lines. He saw the relationship between the lines as one of progression or intensification.

Indeed, both approaches contain elements of truth, for parallelism contains relationships of both similarity and difference. Take, for example, Ps 18:9 (Eng. 18:8 = 2 Sam 22:9):

Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him. (NRSV)

There is a grammatical and semantic similarity among the three lines: smoke/fire/coals coming forth from his nostrils/mouth. But at the same time, within the general sameness there is an intensification, an escalation of the sense of burning. A clearer example is Lam 5:11:

They raped women in Zion, Virgins in the Judean towns.

At first glance, these lines are synonymous, but on further reflection one sees intensification as one moves from women to virgins and progresses from Zion to the Judean towns.

Parallel Word Pairs. Lowth’s definition had called attention to “parallel terms”—that is, “words or phrases answering one to another in corresponding lines”—but it was only with the discovery of Ugaritic poetry and the widespread acceptance of the theory of oral composition that efforts to analyze parallelism focused on parallel word pairs, or, as they came to be called, “fixed word pairs.” Scholars noticed that certain sets of terms regularly recurred in parallel lines, such as day/night[e.g., Ps 121:6: “The sun shall not strike you by day,/ nor the moon by night” [NRSV)] and heaven/earth[e.g., Isa 1:2: “Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth” [NRSV)]. Such pairs were taken to have been the functional equivalents of the formulas in Greek and Yugoslavian poetry that enabled the poet to compose orally. The pairs were thought to have been fixed—i.e., they were stock pairs of words learned by poets who would then use them as the building blocks around which a parallelism could be constructed. Much research concentrated on discovering and listing these pairs (which were often the same in Hebrew and Ugaritic) and charting their frequency, the order in which the members of a set occurred, their grammatical form, and the semantic relationship between them. This last element led to categories not unlike those elicited by Lowth: synonyms and antonyms. But new categories were also noted, such as a whole and a part, abstract and concrete, common term and archaic term, and the breakup of stereotyped phrases. Examples of recurring word pairs abound: Jerusalem/Judah (Isa 3:8; Jer 9:10); father/mother (Ezek 16:3; Prov 1:8); right/left (Gen 13:9; Ezek 16:46; Cant 2:6).

Research on word pairs advanced the scholarly understanding of the components of parallel lines and the lexical and poetic similarities between Hebrew and Ugaritic. But because the study was largely based on an unproven hypothesis about the oral composition of Greek poetry and a tenuous analogy between Greek formulas and Hebrew word pairs, it misconstrued the nature of word pairs. They are not “fixed,” and they do not drive the composition of parallel lines. Rather, the process of composing parallel lines calls forth word pairs, which are nothing more than commonly associated terms that can be elicited by any speaker of the language (as word association games have shown). In fact, many of the same pairs occur together in non-parallel discourse (e.g., right/left, Num 20:17; 22:26).

Linguistic Models. In the 1970s and 1980s the focus of research on parallelism began to move away from word pairs and back to the lines as a whole. By then, however, there were new theories and models from the field of linguistics that offered new and better possibilities for understanding parallelism. Among the scholars employing linguistic models were A. Berlin, T. Collins, S. Geller, E. Greenstein, D. Pardee, and W. G. E. Watson. They drew on structural linguistics and transformational grammar for a grammatical analysis of parallelism. The major influence came from the work of Roman Jakobson, whose most famous dictum on parallelism was

Pervasive parallelism inevitably activates all the levels of language—the distinctive features, inherent and prosodic, the morphological and syntactic categories and forms, the lexical units and their semantic classes in both their convergences and divergences acquire an autonomous poetic value.9

This statement suggests that not only lexical units (word pairs) or semantic relationships, but all linguistic features as well come into play in parallelism.

Parallelism can be viewed as a phenomenon involving linguistic equivalences or contrasts that may occur on the level of the word, the line, or across larger expanses of text. (However, the analysis of parallelism generally operates at the level of the line.) Linguistic equivalence not only means identity, but also refers to a term or construction that belongs to the same category or paradigm, or to the same sequence or syntagm. This kind of equivalence can easily be seen in word pairs. Pairs like day and night or father and mother belong to the same grammatical paradigm (nouns) and might be said to belong to the same semantic paradigm (“time” and “family members”).

Similarly, entire lines can be grammatically equivalent—that is, contain the same grammatical deep structure (and perhaps surface structure). I call this the grammatical aspect. In fact, Lowth had called attention to lines with similar grammatical construction in his definition of parallelism, but this feature had never been carefully analyzed before. With the advent of transformational grammar, it began to receive major attention.

For example, Ps 103:10:

Not according to our sins did he deal with us,
And not according to our transgressions did he requite us.

These lines have the same surface structure as well as the same deep structure. More often, though, the surface structure varies in some way, while the deep structure remains the same. For instance, in Mic 6:2 ba nominal clause is paired with a verbal clause:

For the Lord has a quarrel with his people,
And with Israel will he dispute.

In Prov 6:20, a positive clause is paired with a negative clause:

Guard, my son, the commandments of your father,
And do not forsake the teaching of your mother.

The subject of one clause may become the object in the parallel clause, as in Gen 27:29:

Be lord over your brothers,
And may the sons of your mother bow down to you.

Parallelism may pair lines of different grammatical mood, as in Ps 6:6 (Eng. 6:5) where a negative indicative clause parallels an interrogative one.

For in death there is no mention of you,
In Sheol, who can acclaim you?

All parallelism involves the pairing of terms, the lexical aspect; as already suggested, the process whereby specific terms are paired is similar to the process that generates associations in psycholinguistic word association games. Linguists have discovered rules that account for the kinds of associations made, much as biblical scholars had tried to discover the principles at work in “fixed word pairs.” They have noted that in word association games a word may elicit itself; so, too, in parallelism a word may parallel itself or another word from the same root—e.g., 2 Sam 22:7: I called/ I called; Job 6:15: stream/ bed of streams. Linguists have also noted that a word may have a number of different associates and that some are likely to be generated more often than are others, thereby giving rise to the perception that some associations are “fixed.”

The rules for word association are categorized by linguists as paradigmatic and syntagmatic (like the rules for the grammatical, and other, aspects of parallelism). Paradigmatic pairing involves the selection of a word from the same class as a previous word. The most common type of paradigmatic pairing is one with minimal contrast, which produces an “opposite,” such as good/bad or man/ woman. Other linguistic rules explain other paradigmatic choices.

Syntagmatic responses involve the choice of an associate from the same sequence rather than from the same class. This is often realized in the completion of idiomatic phrases or conventional coordinates, like horses/chariots or loyalty/truth. (This phenomenon is similar to what had been called the breakup of stereotyped phrases.) Another type of syntagmatic pairing involves the splitting of the components of personal or geographic names; e.g., Balak/ king of Moab (Num 23:7) and Ephrathah/ Bethlehem (Ruth 4:11).

While this lexical aspect of parallelism generally accompanies the grammatical aspect (the pairing of
lines with equivalent syntax), it may occur in the absence of grammatical parallelism (strictly speaking, lines with paradigmatic grammatical equivalence). An example is Ps 111:6:

The power of his deeds he told to his people,
In giving to them the inheritance of nations.

The grammatical relationship of the lines is not paradigmatically equivalent. Moreover, *people* and *nations* do not refer to the same entity in this verse (*people* refers to Israel, and *nations* refers to non-Israelite nations). But the pair *people/nations* is a known association that occurs frequently, usually referring to the same entity. The manner in which this pair is used is somewhat novel, but the use of a common pair helps to draw the two lines together, making them appear more parallel.

Even in the presence of grammatical equivalence, word pairs may run counter to this equivalence instead of reinforcing it, as is more usual. An example is Job 5:14:

By day they encounter darkness,
And as at night they grope at noon.

Both lines express a similar thought (semantic content); during the daytime it will seem like nighttime. The semantic and syntactic equivalent terms here are *day/noon* and *darkness/night*. But the poet has employed a common word association, *day/night*, and has placed these terms in the same position in each line. In this case, the lexical pairing is at odds with the semantic and syntactic pairing, creating a tension between the two, which in turn sets up a competing relationship between the lines, thereby binding them even more closely together.

This illustration reminds us that the sense of the entire verse comes into play in the selection of word pairs, for words are chosen to express or emphasize a particular message. Just as the selection of parallel words is not totally random, so also it is not totally fixed. Through linguistics, we have come to understand better the process of word selection, and so to understand better the workings of parallelism and the effect of a particular word choice. Another illustration will demonstrate the subtle difference that the choice of a word pair can make. Compare, for example, Ps 102:13 [Eng. 102:12] with Lam 5:19:

But you, O LORD, are enthroned forever;
your name endures to all generations.
(NRSV, italics added)

But you, O LORD, reign forever;
your throne endures to all generations.
(NRSV, italics added)

The difference in the choice of one word underscores the difference in the messages of these two passages. Psalm 102 contrasts the weakness and fleetingness of a human being with the permanence of God. God’s name—that is, God’s existence—lasts forever. The author of Lamentations, on the other hand, laments the destruction of the Temple, the locus of God’s throne. Despite its physical destruction, he maintains that God’s throne—the metaphoric seat of God’s rulership—will remain intact.

I have made reference to the semantic aspect of parallelism, which pertains to the relationship between the meaning of the parallel lines. Lowth characterized this relationship as synonymous, antithetic, or synthetic, and Kugel called it “A, what’s more, B.” From a linguistic perspective, the semantic relationship between lines (like the lexical and grammatical relationships) can be described as either paradigmatic or syntagmatic. It is not always easy, however, to decide specific cases, for often one reader sees similarity where another sees sequential development (see above the discussion on Lowth vs. Alter and Kugel). Part of the confusion arises because both paradigmatic and syntagmatic elements may be present.

Ascend a hill, Herald (to) Zion,
Lift your voice aloud, herald (to) Jerusalem. (Isa 40:9)

The actions of the herald are sequential (syntagmatic), but the vocatives, “herald (to)J?on/Jerusalem,” are paradigmatic. It seems to be the nature of parallelism to combine syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships on different levels or in different aspects. The effect is to advance the thought, while at the same time creating a close relationship between the parallelism’s constituent parts.

Another linguistic aspect that may come into play in parallelism is phonology. Equivalences in sound may be activated in parallelism just as equivalences in grammar are. This is the phonological aspect, which often takes the form of pairing words with similar consonants. These pairs may also be semantic
or lexical pairs, such as שלוה (šālôm) /* שלוה (šalvā), peace */ "tranquility" (Ps 122:7); or they may be unrelated, as in Ps 104:19:

He made the moon for time-markers מזערי, The sun knows its setting יד מבוא.

Sound pairs reinforce the bond between lines created by grammatical and lexical pairings, providing an additional type of linguistic equivalence in the parallelism. The more linguistic equivalences there are, the stronger is the sense of correspondence between one line and the next. Such similarity, in turn, promotes the sense of semantic unity.

There are infinite ways to activate linguistic equivalences, and hence there are infinite ways to construct a parallelism. No one type is "better" or "worse" than another. Each is designed for its own context and purpose.

METER AND RHYTHM

Although I earlier rejected meter as a demonstrably formal requirement of biblical verse, it is appropriate to summarize some of the modern analyses of meter because they are so pervasive in discussions of biblical poetry, and because they raise important questions about the nature of that poetry. Moreover, it is practically impossible for someone raised in a modern North American or European tradition to imagine poetry without meter.

Strictly speaking, meter requires the recurrence of an element or group of elements with mathematical regularity. The element to be measured may be the syllable (or a certain type or length of syllable), the accent or stress, or the word. (M. O’Connor’s system of syntactic constraints is a substitute for meter, or a metrical system of a different order.) There have been various metrical theories of biblical poetry involving one or more of these elements. The theory of word meter assumes that there is a fixed number of word units in each line of verse. Related to word meter is the theory of thought meter, in which the thought unit (usually one or two words receiving one major stress) constitutes the basic unit of measurement. A third theory counts the number of syllables (without respect to whether they are open or closed, or stressed or unstressed). While technically not a metrical theory, syllable counting is related to discussions of syllabic meter. The most popular theory of biblical meter is accentual, which counts the number of accents or stresses per line. This approach is sometimes combined with the counting of the number of words or syllables.

All of these metrical theories suffer from several deficits. First, none has gained sufficient acceptance among scholars to place it clearly above its competitors. Second, all have had problems defining precisely the unit to be counted. For instance, what constitutes a “word”? Does it include affixed prepositions? Is a construct noun (a noun linked grammatically to an adjacent noun, as in “mountaintop”) a separate word? Finally, when the counting is done, the pattern of recurrence of the unit does not appear with sufficient regularity, even within a few lines, not to mention throughout an entire poem. While there are certain parameters for the number of words or syllables that may occur in a line, these parameters do not appear to result in a metrical system. They are, rather, a factor of the biblical Hebrew language, the terseness of poetic lines, and parallelistic construction. It seems best, therefore, to abandon the quest for meter in the poetry of the Bible.

The absence of a real metrical system notwithstanding, sounds do seem to recur with some regularity in biblical poetry, and this recurrence can be differentiated from non-poetic discourse. I prefer to use the term rhythm rather than meter for this type of recurrence because rhythm conveys the notion of the recurrence of sound, or the patterning of sound, without the requirement of measured regularity.

The rhythm of biblical poetry results from terse parallel lines. The number of thoughts and, therefore, of words and of stresses in each line of a parallelism tends to be about the same—not necessarily precisely the same, but about the same. Benjamin Hrushovski has described this as “semantic-syntactic-accentual free parallelism,” which, as far as the recurrence of sound is concerned, produces “free accentual meter.” In this system, most lines have between two and four stresses. More important, the lines within a parallelism tend to have the same number of stresses. Thus parallel lines are rhythmically balanced. Lines throughout a poem may vary in number of stresses (within linguistic constraints), but sets of parallel lines tend to be of the same “length.” An exception is the so-called qinah meter, the rhythm found in

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREW POETRY

laments, which has an unbalanced 3-2 stress pattern. Many lines in the Songs of Ascent collection (Psalms 120–134) have similarly unbalanced lines, but the pattern is not consistent. On the whole, though, a rhythmic balance within a parallelism, and some times over larger textual expanses, seems to be present, no matter what elements are counted. This rhythm, a by-product of parallelism, may be viewed as the “metrical” aspect of biblical poetry.

REPETITION AND PATTERNING

All discourse entails repetition, but we have come to expect more of it in poetry because we expect poetry to be more formally organized around certain structures and patterns. Patterning depends on repetition. We have already seen that parallelism, the most dominant characteristic of biblical poetry, involves many types of linguistic repetition or equivalences — grammatical structures, semantic terms, words, and sounds. While much of the repetition described in this section occurs in parallelism, and some is a direct result of parallel structuring, other forms of repetition occur independently of parallelism. Whether or not they are found in discourse formally designated as poetic, they add to the poetic nature of the discourse because they encourage the reader to focus on the message for its own sake; in Jakobsonian terms, they contribute to the poetic function.

The repetition described below involves repeating the same word or triliteral Hebrew root, or the same or closely related basic sounds. The repetition may occur in various combinations or patterns. Sometimes it seems designed to emphasize the message or to focus attention on only a part of that message. At other times, the effect is less discernible, but nevertheless creates an agreeable impression.

Key Words. The same word or root may occur numerous times throughout a passage. For example, the root הָרָה (hara, “guard”) occurs six times in the eight verses of Psalm 121. In Psalm 137 (nine verses) the root זָכָר (zakar, “remember”) occurs three times, and the root צֶר (zir, “sing/song”) occurs five times. In both cases, the key words point to the essence of the psalm’s message. Psalm 121 assures us that God is the guardian who never sleeps, and Psalm 137 struggles with the conflict between remembering Zion and singing Zion-songs — that is, between the need to remember the Temple and the impossibility of performing the temple worship.

Anaphora. Several consecutive lines may begin with the same word or phrase. An excellent example is Psalm 150, in which every line begins with “praise him.” Compare also Eccl 3:2-8: “a time to...and a time to...” More often, the repetition occurs within just a few lines, as in Ps 13:2-3: “How long” (four times).

Cataphora (Epiphora). Consecutive lines end with the same word or phrase. This is rare in the Hebrew Bible and may be considered incidental. An example is Isa 40: 13-14; both of these verses end with “instructed him.”

Anadiplosis. In this type of repetition, the last word or phrase of a line is repeated at the beginning of the next line. Examples are Ps 96: 13:

before the LORD, for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness. (NRSV)

and Ps 98:4 b-5:

break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody. (NRSV)

Side-by-side Repetition. This is the immediate repetition of the same word (a device used also in prose); for example, “Comfort, O comfort my people” (Isa 40:1 NRSV); “Awake, awake, put on your strength” (Isa 52:1 NRSV). Isaiah 28:10 (NRSV) makes extensive use of this form:

“For it is precept upon precept,
precept upon precept,
line upon line, line upon line,
here a little, there a little.”

Refrain. A refrain is a phrase that is repeated after every verse or at major subdivisions of the poem. The refrain may have been chanted by a chorus in liturgical poems, such as Psalm 136, in which every verse contains the refrain “for his steadfast love endures forever” (cf. Ps 107:1, 8, 15, 21, 31). An example of a refrain in a non-liturgical poem occurs in David’s lament over the death of Saul and Jonathan: “How the mighty have fallen!” (2 Sam 1:19, 25, 27 NRSV).

Inclusio (Envelope Figure, Frame). In this figure, the passage or poem begins and ends with the same word or phrase. The inclusio in Psalm 8 is
“O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (NRSV). In Psalm 103 it is “Bless the Lord, O my soul” (NRSV). The framing of a poem gives a sense of closure and completeness.

**Chiasm (ABBA Word Patterning).** There are many types of chiasm, or reverse patterning, ranging from within one verse to entire books. The figure has been widely documented. I cite here only two examples of the ABBA patterning of words in one verse or two.

Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! (Isa 5:20 NRSV)

Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isa 40:30-31 NRSV, italics added; this is part of a larger patterning of these words)

**ABAB Word Patterning.** Isaiah 54:7-8:

For a brief moment I abandoned you, But with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, But with everlasting love I will have compassion on you.

Notice that the patterned words in Isa 54:7-8 are not semantically related, as they are in Isa 51:6:

Lift up your eyes to the heavens, And look at the earth beneath. For the heavens will vanish like smoke, And the earth will wear out like a garment.

**Sound Patterning.** Various types of sound patterning are possible in poetry. I have already mentioned the use of sound pairs, terms in parallel lines that share the same or similar phonemes (see the section “Parallelism,” above). The most common type of sound patterning that one might expect is rhyme, but such rhyme as can be found in the Bible is incidental. There are many examples of alliteration, the repetition of the same sound or sounds (or more precisely, consonance, the repetition of consonant sounds). For example, Isa 1:2 contains what may be viewed as consonance in an AABB pattern: סְכִּית רֵאוּם וְהָאָזִינוֹ (lit. “an outpouring of justice and hearing”); cf. also Ps 46:10; Job 5:8.

Closely related to consonance and to parallel sound pairs is paronomasia, or word play—the use of words with different meanings but similar sounds. This is a favorite technique in the Hebrew Bible, and it occurs in prose as well as in poetry. A classic example is in Isa 5:7:

This play on words is rendered in the Tanakh translation as:

“And He hoped for justice, But behold, injustice; For equity, But behold, iniquity! (See also Isa 61:3; Zeph 2:4.)

The discussion thus far has focused on repetition and patterning within small passages of text, usually a line or two. Many more possibilities may occur in an entire poem. Of course, the most obvious structuring device is the alphabetic acrostic (Psalms 9–10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; 145; Prov 31:10-31; Lamentations 1–4). Daniel Grossberg has analyzed centripetal and centrifugal structures. An adequate appreciation of the ways in which poems may be structured requires a separate study. I cite here only an example of the manner in which the various types of repetition presented above may intertwine and interact in one poem, Psalm 122.11

The key words of the psalm are Jerusalem (3 times) and peace (3 times), and they are good pointers to the message. The phonemes of Jerusalem echo in the word peace (שלום) and in several other words throughout the poem, so the entire poem reverberates with the sound of the city’s name. House of the Lord (Temple) forms an inclusio, and at the midpoint, in verse 5, is House of David. Anadiplosis occurs in w. 2-3 in the repetition of Jerusalem, and in two lines in v. 4: “To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord” (NRSV). There is anaphora in the repetition of therein w. 4,5 and for

the sake of in v. 8-9. The words שלום (šālôm, “peace”) and שלום/שלום (šālā/šalvā, “have peace”/“ease”) alternate in an ABAB pattern in vv. 6-7; v. 6 has a high degree of consonance. Moving away from the repetition of words and sounds, we might note that the poem employs five verbs of speaking (say, praise, ask, speak, request) and four verbs of motion (walk/go, stand, ascend, sit). All of these forms of repetition help to bind the poem into a tight unity of sound and meaning.

IMAGERY

Metaphor and simile are hallmarks of poetry in all languages, to the extent that some theorists would define poetry in terms of the presence or dominance of metaphor rather than in terms of formal linguistic structures, like meter or parallelism. While biblical scholars generally do not view metaphor as the sine qua non of poetry, there is widespread acknowledgment that metaphor abounds in the Bible’s poetic discourse. At the same time, there is widespread ignorance of how metaphor operates in biblical poetry, both from a theoretical point of view and on the practical level of how it affects the message of the poem.12 An introductory article such as this one does not permit a full treatment of the theory of metaphor, or of the wealth of biblical examples, but a few observations on the use and effect of metaphor may be offered.

Imagery involves more than a simple comparison of one object to another. By placing the two objects in juxtaposition, a relationship between them is established such that their qualities become interchanged. This can be seen in Ps 42:2-3 [Eng. 42: 1-21:]

As a deer longs for flowing streams, [‘in qipiq]
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God. (NRSV)

Water, the life-sustaining element, is equated with God; and the psalmist’s thirst for God is like the deer’s thirst for water. It is a natural, intuitive

thirst for a basic substance. Thus the qualities of the deer image are transposed to the psalmist. But “longing” is not an emotion usually associated with a deer. It is a human emotion, transposed from the psalmist’s longing for God onto the deer. The verb that one would expect in v. 1 in connection with the deer, “to thirst,” is used for the psalmist in v. 2. There is a crossover effect: The deer longs (like a human) for water, and the human thirsts (like a deer) for God. (The psalm continues inv. 4 with “My tears have been my food day and night” [NIV]—continuing the parallelism between “water” and “food/bread” and doing so through another metaphor, equating “tears” [water, non-food, a symbol of despair] with “food.”)

Even stock images like water can be used creatively. Let us see how the same term found in Ps 42:2, “stream” (‘apist), is used in two other passages.

My brothers are treacherous like a wadi,
Like a wadi-stream [apist] that runs dry. (Job6:15)

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams [apist] in the Negev. (Ps 126:4 NIV)

The image in both verses is taken from nature: the wadis that flow with water in the winter and dry up in the summer. The primary transfer of qualities in Job 6:15 is from the water to the friends. They are treacherously inconsistent like the wadis; they are unreliable, changing with the seasons. The choice of water imagery may also suggest that, like water, the friends should be life-giving and that, therefore, their betrayal is all the more disappointing. But there is also a transfer in the other direction. One does not normally think of wadis as traitors; yet that is what is suggested here in a hint of personification of the wadis. (The root “to betray, be treacherous” [bəgad] is never used of inanimate objects.)

The same natural reference serves a more optimistic purpose in Ps 126:4, where the return of the streams in the rainy season forms the basis of the image. Is the restoration of fortunes, like the streams in their cyclical return, a certainty? Or is it unpredictable (as in the Job verse), and therefore an act of grace?

Sometimes multiple metaphors are linked to one subject, generally to clarify or to reinforce the thought. The metaphors derive from different images and are linked only in that they convey a shared idea.

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12. One of the few volumes devoted to this topic, G. B. Caird, The Language and Imagery of the Bible (London: 1980), is not helpful except as a catalogue of common images. The interpretations of Harold Fisch and Meir Weiss on specific passages are much more successful in explaining the workings of metaphor. See Harold Fisch, Poetry with a Purpose (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Meir Weiss, The Bible from Within (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984).
They go by like skiffs of reed,
like an eagle swooping on the prey. (Job 9:26 NRSV)

And it [the sun] is like a bridegroom coming out
from his wedding canopy,
It rejoices like a strong man in running its course. (Ps 19:6 [Eng. 19:5])

In the example from Psalm 19, which I have translated literally, it is not clear whether both images have the same sense—agerness—or whether the first represents happiness/brightness and the second eagerness/strength. Again there is a crossover, this time between the two images, for “rejoices” (קָנֹל) is a verb more aptly used for a bridegroom than for a runner. The NRSV has neatly bound the two images together:

which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.13

There may also be a series of metaphors deriving from a central image—a conceit—as in Ecc 12:1-7; or a series of different metaphors for different parts of the subject, like the wasfs in Song of Songs 4-7.

When the Bible talks about God, it must speak, by necessity, metaphorically. God is sui generis and abstract, having no form, shape, color, or size. The deity is not like anything else, hence the only way to picture God is to compare God to other things. The most commonly used metaphor is that of a human, which results in anthropomorphisms, but aspects of God may also be compared to natural phenomena (Deut 32:11; Ps 36:5-7) or to the works God created (Ps 48:13-15).

On occasion, the same image may recur in close proximity with a new twist that gives a jarring effect, thereby reinforcing the power of the image, as in Isa 1:9-10:

If the LORD of hosts
had not left us a few survivors,
we would have been like Sodom,
and become like Gomorrah.
Hear the word of the LORD.
you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah. (RSV, italics added)

Because the Sodom-and-Gomorrah image has two different connotations, Isaiah is able to use it for two different effects. He first invokes the association of Sodom and Gomorrah with total destruction, suggesting that the destruction that he describes might have been, but for the grace of God, just as catastrophic. But then, in an arresting reversal, he calls upon the association of Sodom and Gomorrah with total corruption, equating his present audience with the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah, which must inevitably lead them to a similarly catastrophic end:

Raise your eyes to the heavens,
And look upon the earth beneath.
Though the heavens should evaporate like smoke,
And the earth wear out like a garment,
My salvation shall stand forever.
My deliverance shall not cease.
Listen to me, you who know the right,
You people with my teaching in its heart.
Fear not human insults,
And be not dismayed at their jeers.
For the moth shall eat them up like a garment,
The caterpillar shall eat them like wool.
But my deliverance shall endure forever,
My salvation through the ages. (Isa 51:6-8)

The image of the earth’s wearing out like a garment makes the earth, which does not wear out nearly so quickly, seem ephemeral compared to the permanence of God’s victory. Then, in v. 8, the jeering enemy will be eaten as a garment eaten by a moth, making the enemy not only ephemeral but also powerless before the attack of a small insect that will come to punish it. While the single use of “Sodom and Gomorrah” and “being eaten like a garment” would be effective, the reuse of these images strengthens the rhetoric by forcing the audience to give deeper thought to the image and its range of associations.

Finally, when reading the Bible, especially Hebrew poetry, it is not always easy to know when to read the text figuratively and when literally. What are we to make of Ps 114:3-4?

The sea looked and fled;
Jordan turned back.
The mountains skipped like rams,
the hills like lambs. (NRSV)

It seems clear that the personification of the sea and the Jordan refers to a “literal” event, the crossing of

13. But the NRSV may have gone astray here. The word occurs in Job 39:21 in connection with strength or eagerness. It may well be that the image in Psalm 19 is not one of joy, but of virility. See my article “On Reading Biblical Poetry: The Role of Metaphor” forthcoming in VT.
INTRODUCTION TO HEBREW POETRY

the Reed Sea and the crossing of the Jordan, which form a frame around the wandering in the wilderness at the time of the exodus. But what of the animation of the mountains and hills? Was this earth imagery made up to match the water imagery, to provide a kind of figurative background? Or does it, perhaps, also refer to a “literal” event, the theophany at Sinai?

Psalm 133:1 presents a different case:

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! (NRSV)

Most modern scholars interpret this verse literally as a reference to family harmony. They perceive the entire psalm as a practical teaching on correct conduct. But, as I have shown elsewhere, this verse is both more concrete and more metaphoric than is generally understood. The phrase “live together in unity” is a technical legal term for joint tenancy (cf. Gen 13:6; 36:7; Deut 25:5), but the psalm uses the phrase metaphorically. The joint tenancy refers to the united monarchy. The psalm is expressing an idealistic hope for the reunification of Judah and Israel, with Zion as the capital and focal point.

FIGURES OF SPEECH

The notion of “figures of speech” is a Greek invention, as is much of the terminology used to describe poetic diction, but many of the phenomena that the Greeks identified in their own poetry and rhetoric may be found in other literatures as well. There is no clear consensus among modern scholars as to the figures of speech used in biblical poetry. Among the figures of speech usually cited are allusion, apostrophe, hendiadys, hyperbole and litotes, irony, merismus, oxymoron, personification, and rhetorical questions. It should be noted that these figures also appear in the non-poetic sections of the Hebrew Bible, with the same rhetorical force. They are rhetorical figures, not poetic figures per se. These figures are not critical to the structuring of the poetry, nor do they dominate the poetic landscape like repetition or parallelism. They are merely decorative, enhancing the rhetorical effect of the message.

For example, in Ps 107:26 sailors tossed about in a storm are described through hyperbole (extravagant exaggeration) and merismus (the expression of a totality through mention of its representative components) as: “... mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths” (NIV). Often hyperbole is conveyed through metaphor or simile, as in Obadiah 4: “If she [Edom] soars aloft like an eagle; if she places her nest among the stars.”

Personification of death can be seen in Isa 28:15 and Ps 49:15; and wisdom is personified as a woman in Prov 1:20-33 and Proverbs 8.

Rhetorical questions may occur in series (Job 38; Amos 3) or singly. The effect can be as varied as the message in which the question is contained: anguish in Lam 5:21; sarcasm in Job 8:12 and Zeph 2:15; instruction in Prov 31:10; amazement in Ps 8:5. A rhetorical question is a good way to draw the listener into the argument, and it is effectively employed by the prophets, as in Isa 5:4 and Jer 5:7, 9.

MOTIFS AND THEMES

A number of motifs or themes recur throughout or are specific to certain types of biblical poetry. These devices, no less than parallelism and repetition, are part of the forms of poetic expression. The recognition of motifs and themes allows the reader to understand them as overarching cultural references or metaphors and to compare their use in different contexts. They may be taken from the natural world, from human relationships, or from historical or mythical references.

Some themes are well-known, but even these have rarely been studied systematically. Among these are the prophetic use of familial relationships—i.e., husband-wife, father-child—to represent the relationship between God and Israel. Familial imagery is found throughout prophetic writing and reaches its height in the book of Hosea. Brief example are:

I accounted to your favor The devotion of your youth, Your love as a bride. (Jer 2:2)

For I am ever a father to Israel, Ephraim is my firstborn. (Jer 31:9)
Another pervasive theme is creation, which may be used to demonstrate God’s infinite power over the enemy (Isaiah 40); God’s benevolence to the natural world (Psalm 104); the awe and mystery of God’s deeds (Job 38); the appreciation of the place of humans in the cosmos (Psalm 8); or the venerability of wisdom (Proverbs 8). Each iteration of the creation theme is different—in the wording used, in the items enumerated, in the aspects omitted or emphasized—so that the effect in each instance is tailored to the specific tone and message of the poem in which it is located.  

Other common motifs include God as a shepherd (Ps 23:1; Isa 40:11) and water as a metaphor for the life-preserving nature of God (Ps 1:3; Jer 2:13). Less commonly recognized as a motif, but used frequently in the psalms, is the enemy or foe. This may be taken literally, but it is just as likely that it is intended to be an image for a more generalized type of danger or distress, physical or psychological.

O LORD, how many are my foes!  
Many are rising against me. (Ps 3:1 NRSV)

O LORD my God, I take refuge in you;  
save and deliver me from all who pursue me. (Ps 7:1 NIV)

Lest my enemy say, “I have overcome him;”  
My foes exult when I totter. (Ps 13:5)

An individual poet or prophet may have his own motifs or refrains, as Jeremiah does with “to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer 1:10 NIV; 18:7-9 and passim) and Ezekiel does with “O, human being” (12:2, 9 and passim).

READING A POEM

Most scholarly analysis of biblical poetry has concentrated on its measurable features, such as formal structuring devices, repetition, parallelism, meter, and the like. Commentaries generally offer line-by-line interpretations focusing on difficult words and constructions or unusual references. Occasionally provided by the exegete, but often left to the reader, has been the actual reading of the poem—the making of sense and beauty from its sounds, words, and structures, the perception that it is a unified entity with a distinctive message. This, after all, is the raison d’etre for all the analysis, but because it requires more art than science, there has been some reluctance to engage in it. But there are ways to approach the reading of poetry and some guidelines to direct the reading process. One might look for the movement within the poem, the repeated words or phrases, unexpected expressions or images, and the general tone and the effect that it produces. It is also useful to compare similar passages, with an eye to their differences. (Meir Weiss does this with great skill and insight.) An introductory article does not permit a full-blown discussion of these points, but a few examples may be offered.

Movement in Psalm 13. The psalm begins at the depths of despair: “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?” (v. 1 NRSV). It slowly moves toward the possibility of hope: “Look at me, answer me, O Lord, my God” (v. 3). Then it reaches its climax in hope and exultation: “But I trust in your faithfulness...I will sing to the Lord for he has been good to me.” The reader of this psalm, if identifying with the speaker, traverses the same emotional path from despair to hope.

Repetition in Job 38. Job 38 contains numerous rhetorical questions that involve first- and second-person pronouns: “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?” (v. 4 NIV); “Do you know who fixed its dimensions?” (v. 5); “Who closed the sea behind doors...when I clothed it in clouds?” (v. 8-9); “Have you ever commanded the day to break?” (v. 12); “Have you penetrated the vaults of snow...which I have put aside for a time of adversity?” (v. 22). The effect of these pronouns is to create an opposition between the “you” and the “I”—Job and God—and the answers to the rhetorical questions prove that Job lacks even a fraction of God’s knowledge and power. The combined effect is to show that Job is no match for God.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The bibliography on biblical poetry is extensive, and much of it is extremely technical. It includes monographs and articles on specific features of poetry as well as explanations of poetic verses and sections in the Hebrew Bible. I have listed here only the most broad-based studies. References to more narrowly focused studies were made in the body of the discussion when appropriate. For additional bibliography, see Berlin,

**INTRODUCTION TO HEBREW POETRY**


