

“‘Sleep Not,’ He Says”: A Bilingual Edition

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“‘Sleep Not,’ He Says” is a famous poem of the founder of Andalusian Hebrew poetry, Dunash ben Labrat (mid-tenth century). Six of thirteen strophes are reproduced below. I have left the text unpointed. For a pointed version, go [here](#). Without exception, the poet employs biblical vocabulary. Sometimes a vocabulary item is used according to a post-biblical sense.

The poem’s meter and rhythm both deserve attention. (On the distinction between meter and rhythm, go [here](#).) The quantity of syllables per verset is fixed and invariable: six. The first syllable is always short; the following syllables are long or treated as such: / v - - / - - - /. Two versets invariably combine to form a line; two lines invariably combine to form a strophe. These features constitute the poem’s meter. The rhyme across the versets is also fixed and invariable: aaab, cccb, dddb, etc. The rhymeme is CvC in structure. In this poem, a = *shawn*; b = *leem*; c = *neem*; d = *reem*; etc.

The poem’s predominant rhythm is accentual in nature. It consists of two accentual units per verset, expandable to three. Maqqephim are added where appropriate to highlight this aspect of the poem’s texture.

It thus transpires that the most basic feature of ancient Hebrew poetry – “[the rule of twos and threes](#),” whereby versets of two to three accentual units combine in twos and threes to form lines, which in turn combine in twos and threes to form strophes – is a “subtext” of this medieval Hebrew poem. On the foundation of this prosodic substrate, the meter and rhyme patterns described above are superimposed. Meter, rhythm, and rhyme – all three – regulate the timing and aural texture of the poem.

Excerpts from the translation of Peter Cole, together with his base text, are reproduced first. The texture of the original shines through. To be sure, Cole departs from the syntax and wording of the Hebrew more often than one might wish.

The translation I offer is wooden in comparison. My goal is simple: to furnish a global approximation of the poetry and prosody of the Hebrew, even if the results are necessarily piecemeal. I retain examples of enjambment. Perforce the result is a less idiomatic rendering. The translation is indebted to the renderings of T. Carmi and Peter Cole.

One of the poet’s tropes is not obvious in either translation. High and low flora are repeatedly paired in the opening strophes, consistently and chiasmically in the text I follow: myrrh trees / lilies + henna / aloe trees; palms / vines + plant beds / tamarisks. The *paessaggio* of the wine-party is described with great care.

Drink, He Said [strophes 1-3, 9-10, 13]

“Drink,” he said, “don’t drowse,
drink wine aged well in barrels,
near henna beds and aloes
and roses mixed with myrrh-

in pomegranate groves
by grapevines and date palms
with tender plants and saplings
and tamarisks in rows

To the sound of coursing water,
the thrumming of the zither
accompanies the singers
with reed-pipes and an oud.

Anointed then with oil
we’ll burn fragrant scents-
and before destruction’s hour,
live our lives in bliss.”

“Silence!” I rebuked him.
“How could you propose this?
The Temple and God’s footstool
are held by unclean hands.

How could we drink wine
or even raise our eyes-
while we, now, are nothing,
detested and despised?”

[Translation by Peter Cole,
The Dream of the Poem
(Princeton, 2007) 24-25.]

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ואומר אל-תישן
שתה יין ישן
וכפר עם-שושן
ומר עם-אהלים

בפרדס רמונים
ותמר וגפנים
ונטעי נעמנים
ומיני האשלים

ורגש צנורים
והמית כנורים
עלי-פה השרים
במנים ונבלים

ונמשח שמן טוב
ונקטיר עץ רטוב
בטרם יום קטוב
יבואנו נשלים

גערתיהו דם דם
עלי-זאת איך תקדם
ובית קדש והדום
אלהים לערלים

ואיך נשתה יין
ואיך נרים עין
והיינו אין
מאוסים וגעולים

“Sleep Not,” He Says [1-3, 9-10, 13]

“Sleep not,” he says,
“but drink well aged wine,
by myrrh trees with lilies
near henna and aloes-

in a grove of pomegranates,
grapevines and palms,
delightful beds of plants
and tamarisks in rows -

to the splash of fountains
and the strum of lyres,
to the sound of singers
with strings and harps.

With fine oil we'll smear ourselves
and burn fragrant scents;
before the day of doom
o'er us comes, fare well we will.”

“Silence!” I rebuked him.
“How can you so propose
while the temple and the footstool
of God the uncircumcised hold?

How can we drink wine,
how can we raise our eyes,
while we are nothing,
detested and despised?”

[Translation by John Hobbins.
Indebted to: Peter Cole,
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(Princeton, 2007) 24-25, 362-363.]

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Text of Strophe 1b
as in T. Carmi, *The Penguin
Book of Hebrew Verse*
(Harmondsworth, 1981) 280.