

How Ancient Hebrew Poetry Works: An Introduction

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Poetry in any language is characterized by a fusion of form and content that satisfies and surprises at the same time. That being so, a reader of ancient Hebrew poetry will eventually ask: What formal structures set poetry apart from narrative or speech as they otherwise occur in ancient Hebrew literature? Are there rules that govern the formation of a poetic line or a poetic composition, rules that we do not fully understand, or have yet to be discovered?

This blog is dedicated to an examination of these questions. At issue is the system of versification, or prosody, ancient Hebrew poetry instantiates. The subject matter is obscure to many. What is meant by prosodic structure?

Prosodic structure is the mold into which a poet pours semantic content. All language, analysis shows, is subject to prosodic constraints at various levels. Syllables, feet, words, phrases, and utterances come in certain shapes and sizes, phonologically speaking, and not others, in any given language. In poetry, language-specific constraints are stylized according to specific expectations.

In most times and places, poetry has taken the form of verse. As Albert Willem de Groot put it, “Continuous correspondence of successive segments, called ‘lines,’ is the only constant feature which distinguishes verse from prose.”¹

In many systems of versification, groups of lines form chunks according to established convention. Lines often divide into half-lines. Half-lines too come in certain shapes and sizes, and not others.

Many agree that roughly a third of the Hebrew Bible is written in verse. What organizing principles define the way ancient Hebrew poetry works? If we knew, we would be able to parse poetic texts and the semantic content they convey with greater precision than is now the case.

¹ Albert Willem de Groot, “The Description of a Poem,” in *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Linguists, Cambridge, Mass., August 27-31, 1962* (ed. Horace G. Lunt; The Hague: Mouton, 1964) 294-300, 299; cited by Walter T. W. Cloete, *Versification and Syntax in Jeremiah 2-25: Syntactical Constraints in Hebrew Colometry* (SBLDS 117; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 5.

In the posts which follow, I provide an overview of previous attempts at describing the organizing principles of ancient Hebrew poetry, and I advance a descriptive model of my own. I offer analyses of specific poems, occasionally with supporting essays.

Those who have responded to my work are thanked in the appropriate places. I continue to revise my posts in response to feedback and observations and in light of further findings. The last extensive revisions were posted on January 12 2007.

Much of what follows cannot be understood without a working knowledge of ancient Hebrew. Those with little or no Hebrew at their command may get a sense of what my theory of ancient Hebrew poetry entails by working through the post entitled "Regularities in Ancient Hebrew Verse - An Overview" and taking a look at the translations I offer of specific texts.

I highly recommend the translations of David Curzon. See the post entitled "Ancient Hebrew Poetry in Translation." A "Glossary" and a list of "Abbreviations" are also provided.

The masthead of this blog reproduces part of a high resolution digital photograph of a leaf of the Aleppo Codex. Reproduced is Deuteronomy 32:7-11, part of one of the most famous poems of the Hebrew Bible. The photograph was realized by Ardon Bar Hama and may be viewed in all its glory at the site under construction dedicated to the Aleppo Codex (<http://aleppocodex.org/>).