

Regularities in Ancient Hebrew Verse: An Overview

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Parallelism is the chief hallmark of ancient Hebrew poetry. Prosodic, semantic, syntactic, morphological, and phonological features parallel each other across the versets of a line and the lines of a strophe. Prosodic parallelisms alone are obligatory. A verset of two or three stress maxima is unfailingly followed by another verset of two or three stress maxima, until a poem's conclusion.

Benjamin Harshav notes that ancient Hebrew poetry instantiates a hierarchical system. His “seven-storied hierarchy” corresponds to the stress-unit - verset - line - strophe - stanza - section - poem sequence of the general rule below. Each level, Harshav observed, is characterized by a group of usually two or three sub-groups. The “hierarchy is reinforced - but also *crisscrossed* - by various kinds of parallelism and, at the same time, deautomatized by various kinds of *asymmetry*.”¹ Examples of asymmetry include tripartite lines in a bipartite line context, syntactic variation across the members of a group, and the randomized order of occurrence of 2:2, 2:3, 3:2, and 3:3 lines.

The General Rule

Ancient Hebrew verse is confined within a system of “twos and threes”: two to three “stress units” make up a “verset”; two to three versets a poetic “line”; two to three lines a “strophe”; two to three strophes a “stanza”; two to three stanzas a “section”; and two to three sections a poem, or a more extensive section thereof.

Length constraints measurable in syllables also govern ancient Hebrew verse. A verset contains a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 10 syllables; a bipartite line, a min of 6 and a max of 18; a tripartite line, a min of 8 and a max of 24. Details and descriptions of more strictly constrained varieties of ancient Hebrew poetry are offered below.

Versets, lines, strophes, stanzas, and sections, if tripartite, are usually (1:1):1 or 1:(1:1) in structure. Generally speaking, either the first two or the last two elements in a unit cohere to a greater degree over against the third or the first element.

¹ Benjamin Harshav [Hrushovski], “Prophecy” (unpubl. ms., Berlin, 1983) 4.

The Length Rule

Once the lines of a poem are correctly identified, it will also be observed that a poem, if it contains more than 10 lines, typically consists of 12, 18, 22, 28, or 36 lines, or combinations thereof. Among the Psalms, 14 lines is also a common length.

Ancient Hebrew and Greek Prosodies Compared

Sequences of feet of fixed type and length as found in ancient Greek verse are not a continuously operating principle of organization in ancient Hebrew verse. The “stress unit” or “prosodic word” is the equivalent of a foot in classical prosody in the sense of a minimal counting unit. Poetry in Akkadian, Ugaritic, Old Latin, Old German, Old Norse, and Old English is similar. A prosodic word in ancient Hebrew is one to six syllables long up to and including the maximally stressed syllable. Traditional terminology for feet in the sense of classical prosody may be adapted to refer to attested prosodic word types : mon (a single stressed syllable); iamb (˘); trochee (˘˘); anapest (˘˘˘), amphibrach (˘˘˘); 3rd class paeon (˘˘˘); 4th class paeon (˘˘˘); 4th class dochmius (˘˘˘˘); 5th class dochmius (˘˘˘˘). Words with six syllables up to and including the maximally stressed syllable are remarkably rare.

Varieties of Ancient Hebrew Poetry

If phonological length is parameterized, with word stress reconstructed on the penult in a series of verbal forms as preserved in MT pausal forms, and post-stress syllables not counted, three meters or systems of constraint are identifiable. If post-stress syllables are counted, three meters are still discernible, but the qinah meter in particular resists elegant formulation. The letters *x*, *y*, and *z* are placeholders for versets in a line.²

Common meter is constrained as follows:

x:*y* where *x* and *y* individually=**2 to 10** syllables

NB: absent this constraint, up to 18 syllables is conceivable with two to three prosodic words per verset and up to 6 syllables in a prosodic word.

where *y*=*x* **plus or minus 0 to 6** syllables and *x*+*y*=**4 to 20** syllables

NB: absent this constraint, plus or minus 0 to 16 syllables difference between versets and up to 36 syllables aggregate is conceivable.

² The varieties of poetry stand out once lineation, stress patterns, and syllabification are, on independent grounds, reconstructed as proposed in “Retaining and Transcending the Classical Description,” “Stress in Ancient Hebrew,” and “In Search of Prosodic Domains,” online at www.ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com.

$x:y:z$ where x, y and z individually = **2 to 10** syllables
 where y or $z=x$ **plus or minus 0 to 6** syllables and $x+y+z=$ **8 to 24**
 syllables

NB: absent this constraint, 54 syllables aggregate is conceivable.

Examples: Isa 1:2-20; 5:1-7; 40:1-11; Zeph 1-3; Psalms 2, 4, 6, 103, 137; Job 3.

In Zeph 1-3 and Psalm 103, long stress maxima units, long versets, and long tripartite lines, a predominance of which is avoided in most poetry, are used to effect.

Qinah meter is more severely constrained:

$x:y$ where $x=$ **5 to 8** syllables and $y=$ **3 to 7** syllables
 where $y=x$ **minus 0 to 4** syllables and $x+y=$ **9 to 14** syllables

$x:y:z$ where x, y and z individually = **3 to 6** syllables
 where y or $z=x$ **plus or minus 0 to 5** syllables and $x+y+z=$ **10 to 14**
 syllables

Examples: Lam 1-4; Jonah 2:3-10

Mashal meter is also more strictly constrained than common meter:

$x:y$ where x and y individually = **4 to 10** syllables
 where $y=x$ **plus or minus 0 to 2** syllables and $x+y=$ **8 to 20** syllables

$x:y:z$ where x, y and z individually = **2 to 9** syllables
 where $x=y=z$ **plus or minus 0 to 3** syllables; or
 where two of x, y and $z=$ the remaining verset **plus or minus 0 to 3**
 syllables
 and $x+y+z=$ **14 to 22** syllables

Examples: Prov 1:10-19, 20-33; 2:1-22; 8:1-21; Ps 111; Lam 5.

Prov 2:1-22; 8:1-21:

$x:y$ where $x=$ **4 to 10** and $y=$ **4 to 10** syllables
 where $y=x$ **plus or minus 2** syllables and $x+y=$ **8 to 20** syllables

$x:y:z$ where x, y and z individually = **3 to 9** syllables
 where $x=y=z$ **plus or minus 2** syllables; or
 where two of x, y and or $z=$ the remaining verset **plus or minus 0 to 2**
 syllables and $x+y+z=$ **14 to 20** syllables