

Aramaic Poetry in the Book of Daniel

John F. Hobbins
jfhobbins@gmail.com

Is there poetry in the Aramaic of the book of Daniel? You would not have guessed it if you read the book in translation until quite recently. The Jewish Publication Society Version of 1917 seems to have been the first translation to distinguish poetry from prose therein.

It's hard to find something you are not looking for. Prayer and prophecy are featured in the book of Daniel. In a cross-cultural perspective, it is patent that both genres of speech often take the form of verse. Awareness and appreciation of the diverse genres represented in the Bible waxed and waned through the centuries, but was not strong enough to impel readers to systematically distinguish verse from prose, either in the book of Daniel or elsewhere in the Bible, until the distinctive features of Hebrew verse were described with perspicacity by Lowth in a series of lectures at Oxford published in 1753.¹

According to James A. Montgomery, the first scholar to recognize that the book of Daniel contains poetry was Leonhard Bertholdt.² Bertholdt's massive commentary on Daniel (publication date: 1806-08) is not widely read today, but earned him a professorship at the time.

¹ Robert Lowth, *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum: praelectiones academicae Oxonii habitae, subjicitur Metricae Harianae brevis confutatio et oratio Crewiana* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1753; 1763, 1775; repr. with introd. by David Reibel; Robert Lowth [1710-1787]: The Major Works; London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1995); ed. Johannes David Michaelis, *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum . . . notas et epimetra adjecit Ioannes David Michaelis* (Göttingen: Pockwiz u. Barmeier, 1758-61; Göttingen: Ioan. Christ. Dieterich, 1770); *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews: From the Latin of the late Robert Lowth, by G. Gregory; to which are added the principal notes of Professor Michaelis and notes by the translator and others* (London: J. Johnson, 1787; repr. with introd. by Vincent Freimarck and bibliogr. note by Bernhard Fabian, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1969; repr. with introd. by David Reibel; Robert Lowth [1710-1787]: The Major Works; London: Routledge / Thoemmes Press, 1995; repr. of the 4th Eng. ed. [London: T. Tegg, 1839]; Whitefish MT: Kessinger, 2004).

² Referred to as "Bertholet" in idem, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (ICC; New York: Scribner's, 1927) 23. The work Montgomery had in mind is the following: Leonhard Bertholdt, *Daniel aus dem hebräisch-aramäischen neu übers. und erklärt mit einer vollständigen Einleitung* (Erlangen: J.J. Palm, 1806-8).

Most Bibles now print a number of passages in Daniel as verse. BHS versifies, to the exclusion of introductory material, 2:20-23; 3:33; 4:7-9, 11-14, 31-32; 6:27-28; 7:9-10, 13-14, 23-27; NJPSV: 2:20-23; 4:8-9, 11-14, 20, 31-32; 7:9-10, 13-14; NIV: 2:20-23; 4:3 [= MT 3:33]; 4:34-35 [= MT 4:31-32]; 6:26-27 [= MT 6:27-28]; 7:9-10; John J. Collins: 2:20-23; 4:7-9, 11-14a; 6:27-28; 7:9-10, 13-14.³

The study of Aramaic poetry in the book of Daniel is nonetheless in its infancy. The most detailed study to appear to date is that of Segert.⁴

Languages in Contact: Hebrew and Aramaic

The evidence of the books of Ezra-Nehemiah and Daniel suggests that vocabulary, set phrases, and syntactic patterns of ancient Hebrew of earlier times and of liturgical Hebrew of the Persian and Hellenistic periods were taken over into Aramaic of the same period in the context of the liturgy and in the creation of new literature. Vice versa, and not less importantly, vocabulary, set phrases, and syntactic patterns of Aramaic were taken over into Hebrew in the same period, as the same books, Chronicles, Qohelet, and Esther attest.⁵

Daniel 2:20-23, a poetic inset composed ad hoc for the narrative in which it is found, may illustrate. A translation of the Aramaic into late classical Hebrew, with parallels in terms of phraseology and syntactic patterns noted, is offered [here](#). Loans and calques in both directions are evident.

The Prosody of Biblical Aramaic Verse

The scansion I offer of Dan 2:20-23 differs from all previous inasmuch as 2:2 units are consistently treated as prosodic equivalents of 3:3 units. Go

³ John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

⁴ Stanislav Segert, "Aramaic Poetry in the Old Testament [in Dan 2-7]," *Archiv Orientalní* 70 (2002) 65-79.

⁵ As Michael O. Wise noted, though the focus of his remarks is somewhat different: "in the postexilic period, when many inhabitants of Judea became Aramaic speakers, Hebrew and Aramaic entered into an adstratum relationship. The originally heterogeneous structures of the two languages began to homogenize" ("A Calque from Aramaic in Qoheleth 6:12; 7:12; and 8:13," *JBL* 109 (1990) 249-257; 250).

[here](#). More generally, the scansion accords with a working hypothesis developed in the course of research on ancient Hebrew verse.⁶

As is true over the corpus of ancient Hebrew verse, the typology of enjambment in the Aramaic verse of the book of Daniel across 2:2 units is indistinguishable from that in evidence across 3:2, 3:3, (2:2):2, and 3:(2:2) units (Dan 2:20a, 23a; 4:12a; 6:28a; 7:13b).

2:2, 3:2, and 3:3 units are the fundamental building blocks of ancient Aramaic verse, with (2:2):2, (2:2):3, and 3:(2:2) units less common variants thereof. The proverbs of Ahiqar, not just the Aramaic poetry of the book of Daniel, reflect these patterns.⁷ Verse in ancient Aramaic and verse in ancient Hebrew feature similar sets of prosodic regularities.

The bisection of Dan 2:20b, 21a, 22a, and 23b will not encounter the favor of traditionalists. It will not matter that there are indisputable examples of enjambed 2:2 lines (Ps 119:13; Lam 1:1b, 17c, 18c, 19b; 2:2b, 5c, 12b; 3:6, 13, 31; 4:5a, 13a-b, 14b, 18a). According to the conventional wisdom, a 4:(3:3) scansion of Dan 2:22 (thus NRSV, NJPSV, REB, NAB, NJB, and NIV) is preferable to a (2:2) (3:3) scansion.

The unstated assumption is that a short verset of two, three, or four syllables is acceptable only if it contains a complete clause (e.g., Ps 4:8α; 99:3b; 101:4bα). In this line of reasoning, syntax trumps prosody. The short verset of Dan 2:22α on my scansion, for example, is thereby ruled out.

But this has it backwards. It is constitutive of prosody to trump syntax. The phenomenon of enjambment is a case in point, and is far more common in ancient Hebrew verse than is generally recognized.⁸

According to conventional scansions, Dan 2:20, 22, and 23a are (4:2):4 [or (5:2):4], 4:(3:3) and (3:3):4 lines, respectively. But do such lines exist in

⁶ For an introduction to the working hypothesis, see “Regularities in Ancient Hebrew Verse: A New Descriptive Model,” *ZAW* 120 (2008) [forthcoming]; “Retaining and Transcending the Classical Description of Ancient Hebrew Verse” and supporting essays at www.ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com.

⁷ I plan to demonstrate this in a future post.

⁸ One third of the lines in the corpus studied by him, M. O’Connor remarks, exhibit enjambment (*Hebrew Verse Structure* [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1980; reissued 1997 with “The Contours of Biblical Hebrew Verse, An Afterword to Hebrew Verse Structure” (pp. 631-61)] 409). More than two thirds of the lines in Lamentations 1-5 are enjambed, according to a study by F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp (“The Enjambling Line in Lamentations: A Taxonomy (Part 1),” *ZAW* 113 (2001) 219-39; “The Effects of Enjambment in Lamentations (Part 2),” *ZAW* 113 (2001) 370-95; 371).

the Hebrew verse of the Tanakh? And if they don't, what makes one think they do in the Aramaic verse of the Tanakh?

Line Lengths in Psalm 119 and Lamentations 1-5

It is instructive to work through the prosody of Ps 119. $22 \times 8 = 176$ acrostic lines make up the poem. 5 beat lines dominate. 6 beat lines are also frequent. 7 beat lines and 4 beat lines are infrequent but still well-attested.⁹ Exceptionally, the last line of the poem contains 8 beats ((3:2):3). But 10 or 11 beat lines, 4:(3:3), (3:3):4, or otherwise, are not attested.

The prosody of Lam 1-5, where lineation is once again relatively certain, yields a similar picture. 5 beat lines predominate. 4, 6, and 7 beat lines are frequent. Lines with more than 7 beats are unattested.

8 and 9 beat bipartite lines and 10 and 11 beat tripartite lines continue to be posited by accomplished students of biblical Hebrew and Aramaic verse. But it is not possible to point to such lines in acrostic poems whose lineation is nearly certain. The existence of said lines lacks an empirical basis.

Structural Symmetries

The point of all this? I thought you'd never ask. Once 10 and 11 beat lines are eliminated, the structural symmetry of Dan 2:20-23 becomes evident. The unit's halves, 5 lines, 11 versets each, mirror each other chiasmically. In terms of the notation used for the description of compositional figures, with letters standing for strophes (=masoretic verses), the poetry of Dan 2:20-23 looks like this: $A^1B^1:B^2A^2$. Look [again](#).

The 22 verset poem has an onion-like structure. The outermost peel consists of v20a + the last verset of v23; if pared more deeply, of vv20a and 23b-c; more deeply still, of vv20 and 23. The core consists of vv21-22, in structural counterpoint to the poem's bipartition into equal halves.¹⁰

Documentation

For a scansion of Daniel 2:20-23, go [here](#).

For a bilingual Aramaic - English edition, go [here](#).

For an Aramaic - late classical Hebrew edition, go [here](#).

⁹ 5 beat lines (3:2; less commonly, 2:3) account for half of the total number of lines in Ps 119. 6 beat lines (3:3; less commonly, 2:2:2), for more than three tenths of the total. 7 beat lines ((2:2):3; less commonly, 3:(2:2), etc.), for one-tenth. 4 beat lines occur 10x.

¹⁰ I thank John Strazicich for encouraging me to write on Dan 2:20-23. His dissertation has just been published and looks very interesting. For more information, go [here](#).