Isaiah 5:1-7
A New Translation

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The translation offered below is designed to enhance appreciation of the poetry and prosody of the underlying Hebrew text. Unobtrusive differences in the use of blank spacing define stress units, versets, lines, strophes, and stanzas. An introduction to the building blocks of ancient Hebrew verse is offered elsewhere.[1]

A verset of two to three stress units is given a line of its own, with stress units marked by differences in the use of spacing. A line of two to three versets is set off from contiguous lines by an empty line of minimal dimensions. Minimal use of capitalization and punctuation is intentional. Capitalization marks the onset of a strophe as defined in the general rule.[2]

The goal has been to furnish a global approximation of the poetry and prosody of the Hebrew text, even if the results are necessarily piecemeal. The rich texture of the original cannot be mapped onto a translation except in fits and starts. I sometimes retain, in imitation of the Hebrew, examples of enallage, chiasm, ellipsis, and inversion which perforce result in a less idiomatic rendering.

A particular challenge to the translator resides in the threefold occurrence of the enclitic נָא. It is usually left untranslated. It functions, here and elsewhere, as a call to attention. At the same time, it is a discourse cue, and coordinates with other discourse cues in this passage in the marking of key pivots in the plot of the whole. I render it with an intercalatory '*I say*.' I italicize to set it off from its environment.

My thanks to David Curzon for going over a draft of this translation, and for helping me to avoid unnecessary archaisms and awkward expressions.

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[1] See the writer's "Regularities in Ancient Hebrew Verse: An Overview," and supporting essays, at www.ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com.

[2] 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 an extensive section thereof.

Isaiah 5:1-7

I sing *I say* for my friend
my confrere's song for his vineyard

my friend he had a vineyard
high up on a fertile slope

He dug it, cleared it of stones
and planted it with merlot

he built a tower inside it
hewed out a wine vat within

he waited for grapes to come
they came sour

Now o citizens of Jerusalem
men of Judah

judge *I say* for me
or for my vineyard

What more could be done for my vineyard
that I did not do in it?

why when I waited for grapes to come
they came sour?

Now *I say* I'll tell you
what I'm about
to do to my vineyard
remove its hedge
and let it be ravaged
break down its wall
and let it be trampled
I'll make it a waste

it will not be pruned

it will not be hoed

and it will fill with briar and thistle

and to the clouds I shall command
to rain no rain on it

for the vineyard of Yahweh of Armies
is the house of Israel

the men of Judah
the planting of his delight

he expected order
he saw murder
the way of right
he heard a cry of fright

The last line of this poem in the Hebrew contains two highly alliterated pairs of items. My rendering is indebted to the rendering of James Barr (*Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* [repr. with additions and corrections; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1987 (1968)] 48). Barr translated: "He looked for order, what he saw was murder, he looked for right, what he heard was the cry of fright."