Isaiah 5:1-7
A Brief Introduction

John F. Hobbins
jhobbins@gmail.com

Controversy surrounds the question of genre or genres represented by Isa 5:1-7. In my view, a barrier to understanding is created by the false expectation that prophetic speech will adhere to conventions beyond its own in a sustained and predictable fashion. It is instead the case that prophetic discourse exploits whatever genres and topoi serve its purposes without reproducing them in full or slavishly following them.

Isa 5:1-7 illustrate the point. 5:1-2 exploit the conventions of narrative song, whereas 5:3-6 build on the preceding with an unexpected switch to the language and themes of a lawsuit. 5:7 interprets 1-6 as a parable. The unit as a whole functions as an accusation of wrongdoing and a prediction of woe.

A great deal of nonsense has been written about the meter of this poem. Wildberger supposes that 5:1-3 instantiates the 3:2 meter characteristic of the lament form as preserved, e.g., in Lam 1-4. But he obtains a 3:2 meter throughout by arbitrary additions and subtractions to the natural rhythm of the text.1 שירת הודי לְכַרְמוֹ is given two beats only. The iambic-anapestic rhythm typical of ancient Hebrew is set aside. וַיְסַקְּלֵהוּוַיְעַזְּקֵהוּ is given three beats by double-beating the second word. This is arbitrary: why double-beat one and not the other? Why either? בּוֹ is given a single beat in accordance with a ‘no two stresses in a row’ rule. But this rule is far from established, and goes against the practice of the Masoretes. I argue elsewhere that the rule is an overgeneralization.2

The decliticization of נָּא throughout the poem cannot be ruled out from first principles, but neither can it be considered a given. In light of the above, 3 of 7 lines only in 5:1-3 securely exhibit a 3:2 rhythm. The other lines are more naturally read in other ways.

Williamson rightly debunks the suggestion that the qinah rhythm hints at the pericope’s final denouement. “[S]uch a rhythm,” he points out, is by no

---

means restricted to laments.”³ As demonstrated above, the notion that 5:1-3 instantiates qinah meter is itself problematic.

It is possible to scan the first line of 5:5 as a bipartite line as Williamson does.⁴ It would make for a tighter construction, but in order to obtain it, an unusual double-cliticization must be posited. The frequency and conditions under which double-cliticization occurs are not well-understood. Until they are, a final judgment is impossible.

Folmer and Williamson take the first two words of 5:5 with the preceding rather than the following (against MT).⁵ Attested patterns in the use of apposition and syndetic coordination support this. Concatenated lines in apposition to each other together with line-internal versets in syndetic coordination are frequent in Isaiah (e.g., 1:2-3, 5-6, 23-24; 2:10, 19; 3:2-3, 13-14).

So construed, 5:5-6 contain two distinct vignettes of the impending destruction to be wreaked on the vineyard.

The second half of 5:7 might be scanned as a single tripartite line. In favor of the two-line scansion is the dramatic effect of a concluding slowdown of tempo, with resultant emphasis on the keyword צְדָקָה ‘justice.’ The rule of twos and threes is broken on the two line scansion. In poetry, to be sure, even iron-clad rules are likely to be broken in exceptional cases.

---

⁴ Isaiah 1-5, 316.