The following sketch of past research on the question of meter in ancient Hebrew poetry is meant to be as concise as possible. “Bibliography” is short for “Annotated Bibliography” at www.ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com.

In the field of metrical analysis, among those whose efforts are now largely forgotten, the work of Francis Gomarus, William Jones, Francis Hare, and Gustav Bickell might be mentioned. Gomarus applied standards of meter derived from Latin and Greek poetry, Jones from Arabic literature. Hare and Bickell took classical Syriac poetry as a model, and pioneered the counting of syllables. Conrad Gottlob Anton, Julius Ley, and Eduard Sievers pioneered the counting of stress maxima across the stichoi of a line.


Among others in their day, Francis Brown, “The Measurements of Hebrew Poetry as an Aid to Literary Analysis,” JBL 9 (1890) 71-106; Crawford Howell Toy, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1899), Friedrich Baethgen, Die


Frank Moore Cross, Jr. and David Noel Freedman (*Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* [joint Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1950; SBLDS; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975; 2d ed.; Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997] 5-8, 129) affirmed the approach of Ley and Sievers based on the counting of stresses even as they revived an approach based on syllable counting. Freedman applied the syllable counting method to a wide variety of poetic texts. Cross adopted a notation designating long and short cola which, in his own words, “leaves open the question” of whether the “rhythm” of Hebrew verse was accentual or syllabic-quantitative (“The Prosody of Lamentations 1 and the Psalm of Jonah,” *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972] 1:139-50)).
This is not the case. In some of his essays, a long colon, generally speaking, is one which contains three stress maxima; a short colon, two. In other studies, a long colon is a colon with an aggregate syllable count and/or word count superior to that of the short colon with which it is paired. For a list of relevant studies by Freedman and Cross, see “Bibliography.”


Those who have voiced the most trenchant doubts about the possibility that ancient Hebrew verse instantiates metrical structures in terms of fixed numbers of syllables or patterns of rhythmic stresses include Michael Patrick O’Connor (Hebrew Verse Structure [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1980; reissued 1997 with “The Contours of Biblical Hebrew Verse: An Afterword to Hebrew Verse Structure”] 631-61) 55-68, 146-52); James L. Kugel (The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981; repr. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998] 71-75; 298-99); Dennis Pardee (“Ugaritic and Hebrew Metrics,” in Ugarit in Retrospect: Fifty Years of Ugarit and Ugaritic [ed. Gordon Douglas Young; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1981] 113-130); and Donald R. Vance (The Question of Meter in Biblical Hebrew Poetry [Studies in Bible and Early Christianity 46; Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001]. To be sure, O’Connor and Pardee sometimes express their doubts less apodictically. For example, O’Connor states the following: “[A] minority view holds that there is a strictly recoverable metrical component to the poetry of the Heb. Bible (e.g. Eduard Sievers), but it is more generally assumed that there is an unrecoverable or opaque metrical element in the verse” (“Parallelism,” in The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics [gen. ed. Alex Preminger and Terry V. F. Brogan; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993] 877-79; 878). Perhaps, then, the “unrecoverable or opaque metrical
element in the verse” will one day be recovered to the satisfaction of the
guild. O’Connor, Kugel, and Pardee’s relevant contributions are listed in
“Bibliography.” The objections of Vance appear to be a function of the
standard he uses to define metricality. The prosodic regularities of ancient
Hebrew verse are comparable to “the inconsistent alternation of shorter with
longer lines” typical of early Japanese poetry; the “irregularly stressed
meters” of a swath of Scottish Gaelic poetry; the “lines of variable length” of
medieval Spanish poetry; the “imparisyllabic lines” in older Western Slavic
and Russian poetry; the flexibly balanced dicola and tricola of early Latin
ritual formulae and the half lines ranging in length from 5 to 7 syllables of
the Saturnine verse-form; and the lines of variable length characteristic of
folk verse in a number of Turkic and Uralic languages: quotations are from
the relevant articles in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and
Poetics*. The prosodic regularities of ancient Hebrew verse are not
comparable to the regularities of the sonnet in Italian, French, or English.

Johannes de Moor, Willem van der Meer, Marjo Korpel, and others of the
Kampen school develop a theory of unit delimitation in Hebrew and Ugaritic
poetry attentive to the phenomenon of parallelism on multiple levels (Willem
van der Meer and Johannes De Moor, ed., *The Structural Analysis of Biblical
and Canaanite Poetry* [JSOTSup 74; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988]). The
Kampen school’s text model is so broadly gauged that the elevated prose of
Ruth and Genesis is also considered poetry. In a recent work, Marjo Korpel
and Johannes de Moor (*The Structure of Classical Hebrew Poetry: Isaiah
40-55* [OTS 41; Leiden: Brill, 1998]) count stresses as an index of
rhythmical balance. Korpel has also taken the lead in the Pericope Project, a
study of unit delimitation markers in ancient manuscripts. The data is of
great interest, though exaggerated claims are sometimes made on its behalf.
Overview at [www.pericope.net](http://www.pericope.net). A Korpel bibliography is provided in
“Bibliography.”

Donn W. Leatherman provides a useful summary and critique of the
approaches of Cross and Freedman, Collins, O’Connor, and the Kampen
school (*An Analysis of Four Current Theories of Hebrew Verse Structure*
[Ph.D. diss., McGill University, Montreal, 1998] available online at

Jan Fokkelman develops a theory of Hebrew poetic structure and applies
it to a large corpus of texts. He counts both stressed syllables and all
syllables, though he deemphasizes the stressed syllable counting method and
takes the counting of all syllables to a new level. A Fokkelman bibliography is provided in “Bibliography.”

Harm van Grol develops a metrical theory that brings greater coherence and precision to the classical stress counting method. Van Grol’s relevant publications are listed in “Bibliography.”


single main stress, they are equivalent to them. Craigie is followed by Marvin E. Tate (*Psalms 51-100* [WBC 20; Waco: Word, 1990]). A lucid exposition of the traditional stress counting method is that of John Bright, *Jeremiah*, (AB 21; New York: Doubleday, 1965) cxxvi-cxxxviii. A list of Alonso Schökel’s relevant contributions is provided in “Bibliography.”


Klaus Seybold argues at length for the appropriateness of the concept of meter relative to ancient Hebrew verse (*Poetik der Psalmen* [Poetologische Studien zum Alten Testament 1; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2003] 102-159). He offers a critique of the approaches of O’Connor and Fokkelman. Seybold makes primary stress counts and a study of accentual rhythms standard features of his analysis, but also counts syllables and consonants (with Loretz and Kottsieper). He views syllables and consonants as complementary indices of the measured out nature of ancient Hebrew verse, but also notes
the difficulties and limitations of the syllable, consonant, and mora (Christenson) counting methods (Poetik der Psalmen, 125-126). A list of Seybold’s relevant contributions is provided in “Bibliography.”


Gerhard Fecht brings his understanding of Egyptian prosody to bear on Hebrew and Phoenician metrics. He counts “lines” or what are more conventionally called stichoi and does not make a sharp distinction between prose and poetry (Metrik des Hebräischen und des Phönizischen. [ÄAT 19; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1990]).

William Sanford LaSor, “An Approach to Hebrew Poetry through the Masoretic Accents,” in Essays on the Occasion of the Seventieth Anniversary of the Dropsie University (1909-1979) (ed. Abraham Isaac Katsh and Leon Nemoy; Philadelphia: Dropsie University, 1979) 327-353; Paul Sanders, Raymond de Hoop, Thomas Renz (Colometry and Accentuation in Hebrew Prophetic Poetry [KUSATU 4; Waltrop: Spenner, 2003]), and Vincent DeCaen attempt to establish poetic colometry on the basis of the neumic accents and/or other prosodic markers preserved in the Tiberian and/or other ancient traditions. Sanders and de Hoop claim that the subdivision of the text in MT implied by the accents and other delimitation markers is, in addition
to being a prosodic representation of the text as it was traditionally understood and recited, a dependable guide to the poetic conventions the underlying text adhered to. They are contributors to the Pericope project (see under Marjo Korpel in “Bibliography” for further information). Other Pericope project collaborators who discuss examples of ancient Hebrew poetry rely less consistently than do de Hoop and Sanders on the witness of delimitation markers in ancient manuscripts when it comes to scanning the underlying text. E. J. Revell has offered a critique of Sanders’ approach. To be sure, stichographic arrangements of text in ancient manuscripts deserve close attention. An overview has been provided by Emanuel Tov. A list of DeCaen, de Hoop, Revell, Sanders, and Tov’s relevant contributions are provided in “Bibliography.”

Surveys of Research on Ancient Hebrew Verse


Strong-Stress Meter in Ancient Hebrew Poetry: The Pioneers

Primary stress analysis of ancient Hebrew verse was pioneered by Julius Ley. One often reads of the “Ley-Sievers method,” but despite the latter’s qualifications, it is Ley more than Sievers to whom we may go back with profit, as Ernst Vogt pointed out in 1961. Vogt’s comments, still worth reading, are quoted in Otto Eissfeldt, The Old Testament: An Introduction (trans. Peter R. Ackroyd; New York: Harper and Row, 1965) 732. In Ley’s work, the minimal counting unit is what linguists today call the prosodic word. In Sievers’ work, the minimal counting unit is still the prosodic word,
but the parameters of the unit are defined in terms of an iambic-anapestic rhythm. Ley conceived of the bipartite line as the fundamental building block of ancient Hebrew poetry, and identified the tripartite line (‘dreigliedrige Langverse’) as a rare variation thereof (*Leitfaden der Metrik der hebräischen Poesie* [Halle: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1887] 8-17).

*Julius Ley*

In his last published essay, Ley refers back to the following studies for the principles of his approach:


*Eduard Sievers*

Sievers’ expertise in prosody and phonology was immense. We might not wish to follow him in detail, but his fundamental approach to ancient Hebrew prosody, especially insofar as it agrees with that of Ley, retains validity.
Sievers adds a second primary stress to “long” words and deletes stress on “short” words in accordance with assumptions about the number of unstressed syllables that intervene between stressed syllables. But Sievers’ stress rules have little foundation in the received tradition. They unduly curtail the variety of shapes and sizes of the “foot” in ancient Hebrew verse. The foot in ancient Hebrew belongs to the dimension of rhythm, not meter (for this distinction, see the Glossary at www.ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com). To be sure, “ultra-long” words like מִמַּחְשֶׁבְּךָ and פִּסְתֵּיכֶ֑בְּשָׁבֻעֹ֖ sometimes receive two stress maxima in ancient Hebrew. Zero to two non-monomoraic syllables between stress maxima is indeed the norm. In a loose sense, ancient Hebrew possesses an iambic-anapestic rhythm, but said rhythm characterizes both poetry and prose.

Sievers parsed the fluent prose of Genesis, Samuel, Jonah, and the narrative frame of the book of Job into prosodic phrases of roughly equal dimensions. One is reminded of the efforts of another great prosodist, George Saintsbury, whose A History of English Prose Rhythm (London: MacMillan, 1912) describes the measured rhythms of a swath of great English prose. A part of ancient Hebrew prose lends itself to this kind of analysis, even if said prose also differs in decisive ways from verse as found in, e.g., Isaiah, Amos, Zephaniah, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Lamentations, and Song of Songs.


Ley and Sievers were not the first to recognize that ancient Hebrew verse instantiates a strong-stress meter. That prize goes to a classicist, orientalist, and Hebraist of the 18th century, Conrad Gottlob Anton. Another scholar, Christian Ludwig Leutwein, came to the same conclusion in the same decade as Anton. Two decades before Ley, Ernst Meier, whose knowledge of
poetry, folklore, and prosody was far-reaching, also made the stress maximum the determining principle of measurement.

Conrad Gottlob Anton


Christian Ludwig Leutwein


Ernst Meier

*Die Form der hebräischen Poesie nachgewiesen* (Tübingen: Osiander, 1853).