

The Lyrical Literature

Lyrics in the Hebrew Scriptures

IS IT APPROPRIATE TO employ a Greek term to identify a complex body of literature in the Hebrew scriptures? Lyric/lyrical is derived from “lyre” or “harp,” and for many it brings to mind images of romantic individualism and sentimentality. However, that part of the Hebrew scriptures under discussion here is all but void of such romanticizing features. Lyrics in this case, even though implying poetry set to music and accompanied by stringed and other instruments, designates compositions deeply rooted in the life and work, war and cult of the Israelite people. No matter how varied such “lyrical” manifestations may appear, they have in common just this social, festive, and ritual dimension. Thus, if the Greek concept is understood in this extended sense, it can legitimately be applied to this body of Hebrew materials.

The lyrical literature of the Hebrew scriptures is found primarily in the books of Psalms, Lamentations, and the Song of Songs. It is generally recognized, however, that lyrical materials have also been combined with other literary genres in the Hebrew Bible—most notably with narrative, prophecy, and wisdom. Thus, Judges 5 (victory song), Isaiah 12 (thanksgiving hymn), and Job 30 (personal lament), although representing different categories of lyrical literature, are illustrative of the way in which this type of material has been incorporated into a number of different literary contexts. In addition, poetic oratory has influenced the style of a number of other genres in the Hebrew scriptures, although we cannot disregard the differences between the poetic styles of prophecy and wisdom, epic and lyric. However, in spite of obvious points of contact and interrelationship with other literary genres, we must remember that the lyrical materials of the Hebrew Bible constitute a separate body of literature that is distinguishable by particular

characteristics. The distinctive linguistic structure of the lyrical literature, its musical qualities, and its ritualistic setting, all serve to identify it as a separate literary genre and consequently call for a method of analysis responsive to the particular characteristics and needs of the Hebrew poetic materials. In addition to providing a general knowledge of the content and form of the Hebrew lyrical literature, the study of this material is significant in view of its influence on our own culture and faith. The Psalms have inspired liturgy, songs, and prayer in both the Jewish and Christian communities. The theological affirmations of this literature have profoundly molded the thinking of many religious figures in the past and continue to play a vital role in modern theological movements, especially in the Third World.¹ Moreover, the ongoing spiritual power of Israel's poetry transcends its spiritual communities; its influence is discernible not only in the religious sphere but also in modern literature, poetry, and art.²

Research since 1945 on Israel's lyrical material reflects this widespread influence. Studies with a direct bearing on lyrical literature range from archaeological reports to essays deeply rooted in philosophy and theology, from anthropological observations to historical and literary scrutinies. The great variety of methods and perspectives represented by these studies, as well as the sheer mass of relevant publications, prohibits extensive discussion of all items. The aim of this study, then, is to provide an overview of the research done on the lyrical material of the Hebrew Bible since 1945 and to serve as an introduction to the most significant issues and findings of that research.

Text Criticism

The foundation of any exegetical endeavor is the painstaking work of recovering the oldest possible wording of the text. Unfortunately, because of its very nature and its widespread use throughout its history, the lyrical material in the Hebrew Bible has suffered considerable alteration and corruption. As a result, on almost every page the text poses more problems than the interpreter may be able to solve. In two new areas of research, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Ugaritic materials, scholars are attempting to deal with these problems. By looking at their work, we can gain a representative picture of the state of modern text criticism of the lyrical literature.

When the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was announced in 1947, hope was immediately kindled in the scholarly world that this could advance

1. See Cardenal, *Zerschneide*.

2. See Kurz, *Psalmen*.

the knowledge of archaic forms of Hebrew writings. However, the edition of the Qumran Psalms scroll³ and its comparison with the Masoretic text (MT)⁴ showed a surprising degree of agreement between these manuscripts, which originated centuries apart. While the Qumran community took great liberty in arranging the psalms and even in including noncanonical psalms, textual variants are at a minimum. Apart from the Psalms scroll, virtually no canonical material of the lyrical type has been found. The only other lyrical texts discovered at Qumran are *Hodayot*. These thanksgiving songs, however, represent a later stage of psalmody and allow for inference back to the MT only in exceptional cases.⁵

The materials found at Ugarit proved to be an extraordinary stimulus to text-critical work. Excavation began at Ugarit in 1929 and in subsequent years yielded hundreds of tablets containing poetic texts. Analysis of these texts revealed that the Ugaritic language was closely related to Hebrew and that Ugaritic poetic style was quite similar to that of Israelite poetry. Consequently, numerous scholars began to draw on this newly recovered vocabulary and poetic structure in order to solve textual enigmas in the MT, and many emendations and new meanings of difficult terms and passages in the Hebrew scriptures were proposed. The use of Ugaritic materials thus touches not only the establishment of the text but matters of philology as well. A host of specialist from any countries dedicated themselves to this study of the Ugaritic literature: C. Virolleaud, C. H. Gordon, J. Gray, G. R. Driver, R. Dussaud, W. F. Albright, F. M. Cross, M. H. Pope, O. Loretz, L. R. Fisher, J. C. de Moor, A. S. Kapelrud, H. Gese, U. Cassuto, S. E. Loewenstamm, L. Delekat, and many others.

However, none of these scholars has been more prolific than Mitchell Dahood, who has published numerous articles as well as a three-volume commentary on Psalms. Throughout his studies the working premise is that analogies established between the Ugaritic and Hebrew literature warrant direct inference from Ugaritic to Hebrew poetry and vocabulary; consequently, Dahood is largely concerned to emend the Hebrew text on the basis of Ugaritic parallels. To cite but one example: Ps 22:30 reads in Dahood's translation:

Indeed to him shall bow down
All those who sleep in the nether world;

3. Sanders, *Dead Sea Psalms Scroll*.

4. Sanders, "Variorum"; Bardtke, *Liber Psalmorum*; Homan, "Comparative Study."

5. See Sukenik, *Dead Sea Scrolls*; and Mansoor, *Thanksgiving Hymns*.

Before him shall bend the knee
 All who have gone down to the mud.
 For the Victor himself restores to life.⁶

Two principal emendations lead to this reading. The difficult *dšny* is held to be composed of the “relative pronoun *dī* as in Ugaritic and Aramaic, and *šēnē* < *y^ešēnē*, from *yāšēn*, ‘to sleep.’” The “Victor,” on the other hand, emerges from an audacious new interpretation of the lexeme *l*, which now becomes a “stative participle . . . from *l’y*, a root frequently attested in Ugaritic and Phoenician.”⁷

Many scholars have protested Dahood’s basic assumption and practice, however, as an unjustified and uncontrolled use of cognate material,⁸ and it is unlikely that many of Dahood’s proposals will in the final analysis prove satisfactory. Yet he has made a significant contribution by provoking debate concerning the value and applicability of the Ugaritic materials to the Hebrew Bible in particular and the value of comparative vocabulary and literature studies in general.

Although the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ugaritic tablets have at times clarified difficult Masoretic wording, textual criticism of the Hebrew lyrical literature has basically been proceeding at a slow pace and without spectacular changes. Undoubtedly, scholars will continue to use information derived from such extra-biblical documents, including the newly discovered Ebla texts. Primary emphasis for text-critical studies, however, will continue to be on the Masoretic tradition, with secondary emphasis on the LXX and other ancient versions. Representative examples of this continuing approach in text-critical studies are those of Leveen and Schmuttermayr in *Psalms*;⁹ Albrektson, Bergler, Dahood, Gottlieb, and Hillers in *Lamentations*;¹⁰ and Pope and Schneekloth in the *Song of Songs*.¹¹

6. Dahood, *Psalms I*, 138.

7. Dahood, *Psalms I*, 143–44.

8. See Loretz, *Psalmen*.

9. Leveen, “Textual Problems”; Schuttermayr, *Psalm 18*; See Gerstenberger, “Zur Interpretation,” 23–26.

10. Albrektson, *Studies*; Bergler, “Threni V”; Dahood, “New Readings”; Gottlieb, *Study*; and Hillers, *Lamentations*.

11. Pope, *Song of Songs*; and Schneekloth, “Targum.”

Lyrical/Poetic Language

Language is the basic material with which modern interpreters of ancient texts must work. The question in our case, then, is this: Do we find a particular poetic or lyrical language and linguistic structure in the Hebrew Bible? This issue has increasingly entered scholarly consciousness and debate, and much study has been done on the way in which lexicographical and syntactical units are structured in Israel's poetic literature. This section will discuss these overall cultural patterns of lyrical language. The more individual stylistic elements will be considered in the following section.

As early as 1753, Bishop Lowth described in considerable detail the outstanding characteristic of Hebrew and other ancient Near Eastern poetry—the parallelism of words and ideas in a given poetic unit. Scholars have studied and reevaluated this phenomenon ever since, but the accuracy of Lowth's observation is still accepted.¹² As Norman Gottwald observes, "Parallelism of thought, and corresponding word-mass, is the substance and mode of Hebrew poetic expression."¹³ The continuing study of parallelism has isolated three or four principal types: synonymous, antithetic, synthetic, and climactic.¹⁴ For the most part, there has been little alteration or modification of this basic schema. Although further types of parallelism have been proposed (e.g., the "coordinating" and "summarizing" parallelism of Horst), they have not been generally accepted. Proposals of this type do not, of course, in any way alter the overall significance of parallel stichoi (or cola) as being the most characteristic elements of the Hebrew poetic line.

The intricate problems of Hebrew meter are, however, more difficult to resolve. The modern urge to investigate questions of meter and rhythm in Hebrew poetry seems to derive less from the Hebrew scriptures themselves than from our classical forebears. After all, if the Greeks and the Romans knew and used a quantifying and accentuating verse melody, why should the Hebrews not have employed it also? Assuming, then, that the Israelites did seek to achieve metrical equilibrium in their poetry, the issue is whether they attained this by counting syllables or by counting stresses.

Experts are divided on this question. Continuing the work done by Bickell in the last century, Mowinckel and others have defended an alternating system, a regular sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables. Most scholars, however, including Robinson, Kraus, and Feuillet,¹⁵ and

12. See G. B. Gray, *Forms*; Robinson, "Hebrew Poetic Form"; and Boling "Synonymous' Parallelism."

13. Gottwald, "Poetry," 835.

14. Alonso Schökel, *Estudios*; Ridderbos, *Psalmen*; and Kosmala, "Form."

15. Robinson, *Poetry*; Kraus, *Psalmen*; and Feuillet, *Cantique des Cantiques*.

going back to Ley and Sievers,¹⁶ prefer to see a system of accentuation more in line with the present Masoretic punctuation. Thus, for them the number of stressed syllables, usually separated by some number of unstressed ones, determines the balance of the line. The difficulty with both these interpretations is that these scholars must presuppose more than a millennium of linguistic history with no major changes in speech habits and grammar. This would be most unlikely. Between the time of the judges and that of the Masoretes profound shifts in spoken and written Hebrew occurred, not to mention the transition that took place in the very beginning of Israel's history from Aramaic to the language of Canaan. Given this historical perspective, it is little wonder that there is growing dissatisfaction in the scholarly world with any ironclad or exclusive theory regarding the meter and rhythm of Hebrew poetry.¹⁷

Indeed, Segert has revised and elaborated an older hypothesis of his own allowing for change and development in Hebrew poetry. In the beginning, he argues, Hebrew meter depended on verbal units, without regard to quantity or quality of syllables. Only later did Israelite poets adopt an accentuating beat as a schema for their compositions.¹⁸ While such hypotheses as these help in clarifying the issues regarding meter in Hebrew poetry, the material condition of our sources and the lack of any reliable information make it altogether inadvisable to hope for clear-cut solutions. As Freedman observes, no “magic key has ever been found, or is likely to be.”¹⁹

Inspired both by metrical and structural considerations, Fohrer challenged the hegemony of parallelism in Hebrew poetry. He describes a poetic system based on autonomous semi-stichs (*Kurzverse*—short lines).²⁰ His evidence includes, besides some acrostic psalms (Pss 111; 112; etc.), parts of prophetic speeches such as Isa 63:10. Mowinckel, on the other hand, contests this interpretation, which in his opinion relies on exceptional and unusual passages.²¹ So far, then, this theory has found little support from other scholars, although Piatti comes to similar conclusions and some other exegetes will admit, rather reluctantly, the existence of verses that do not obey the rule of parallelism.²²

16. Ley, *Grundzüge*; Sievers, *Metrische Studien*.

17. See Alonso Schökel, *Estudios*; and Freedman, “Poetry.”

18. Segert, “Problems.”

19. Freedman, “Poetry,” 10.

20. Fohrer, “Über den Kurzvers.”

21. Mowinckel, *Real and Apparent Tricola*.

22. Piatti, “I carmi alfabetici”; W. Rudolph, *Buch Ruth*, 122, 124, 125; Ridderbos, *Psalmen*, 12–13.

The use of a strophic structure in Hebrew poetry also remains a more or less open question. Those who claim that such structuring devices were used can point to Isa 5:1–7, which falls neatly into four strophes,²³ or to the refrains of Psalm 42/43 and also to the Song of Songs generally. However, such examples of carefully structured strophic poetry appear to be the exception rather than the rule. Ridderbos, a dedicated scholar of all kinds of poetic phenomena, rightly observes that “only in relatively few cases can we detect a formal regularity.”²⁴ Somewhat more optimism regarding the possible organization of Hebrew poetry in stanzas is shown by Mowinkel, Montgomery, Baumann, Skehan, Kunz, Cross, Freedman, and many others. Further, we may suspect that if the occidental predilection for seeing strophic order prevails, analysis could degenerate into the construction of artificial strophic arrangements.

A significant innovation occurred in postwar studies when researchers identified nearly self-sufficient poetic elements smaller than the colon or line. This discovery bears a certain resemblance to the isolation of those components which make up atomic nuclei. Like subatomic particles, these self-sufficient elements in Hebrew poetry have been seen as the basic structural elements, as the kernels of Hebrew poetry, the building blocks used in the constructions. Consequently, a good number of scholars, beginning with H. L. Ginsberg, have dedicated themselves to this research.²⁵ While some investigations, notably the recent monograph by Watters,²⁶ have been criticized because of questionable methodology,²⁷ on the whole scholars agree that fixed formulaic expressions of various kinds do constitute important poetic devices.

The use of such fixed formulas extends far beyond the cultures of the ancient Near East. As anthropologists and experts on compositional techniques have noted, standard phrases are part of the stock of creative elements used by all poets. Their use is especially prevalent, however, in the oral phase of poetic literature. Scholars of the Hebrew Bible have drawn on these general observations and have applied them to the questions of the setting and structure of Hebrew poetry. Thus, in the light of the general trend toward oral composition through the use of fixed formulas, Culley argued that the formulaic elements used in the psalms clearly

23. Willis, “Genre of Isaiah 5:1–7.”

24. Ridderbos, *Psalmen*, 67.

25. Ginsberg, “Some Emendations.”

26. Watters, *Formula Criticism*.

27. Good, Review of *Formula Criticism*.

demonstrate their oral origin.²⁸ Gevirtz followed Ginsberg in analyzing traditional word pairs in Israel's poetry,²⁹ and Dahood furthered this work significantly by considering Ugaritic parallels.³⁰ Whallon, after an extensive study of classical Greek, Old English, and Hebrew poetic compositions, explicitly linked word pairs with the wider phenomenon of parallelism: "The word pairs became formulaic because they assisted the poet in composing,"³¹ and the act of composing in Hebrew poetry is tantamount to "creating parallelism."³² We need to recognize, then, that societies create and provide, among other linguistic instruments for poetic work, fixed formulaic expressions which in some cultures, including Israel, included word pairs to be used in parallel lines. The conscious breakup or alteration of such fixed combinations is a matter of individual style, the significance and character of which will be discussed below.

In taking up other poetic devices we approach the realm of individual style, but since these linguistic features can be systematically identified they are at least partially collective in origin and function. While they may be distinctively altered and nuanced by individual poets, they are not the exclusive property of those poets or their times. From this perspective we may mention here further phenomena associated with Israelite poetry. Alonso Schökel's work will serve as a guide because his book on Hebrew poetry is the most comprehensive treatment written since 1945.³³

According to Alonso Schökel, the first task of prosody should be a verification of the "sound material" (*material sonoro*) of a given language.³⁴ In the case of biblical Hebrew the difficulties of recovering sound values should not be overemphasized. After all, phonological investigations have revealed that the Hebrew script is phonetic in character and that "we can sufficiently trust in the extant text as far as consonants are concerned. In many cases this is true also for the vowels, and in general for the accents as well."³⁵ A second observation, based on specific texts, undergirds this optimistic conclusion. Certain sound-effects are universally known in all languages, and others we can extrapolate from semantic or symbolic values of the word or phrase concerned. Alonso Schökel observes that "Hebrew writers kept alive

28. Culley, *Oral Formulaic Language*.

29. Gevirtz, *Patterns*.

30. Dahood, *Psalms I, II, III*.

31. Whallon, *Formula*, 141.

32. Whallon, *Formula*, 154.

33. Alonso Schökel, *Estudios*; see also Alonso Schökel, *Manual*.

34. Alonso Schökel, *Estudios*, 71–117.

35. Alonso Schökel, *Estudios*, 80.