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# THE POETIC STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF JOB AND THE UGARITIC LITERATURE

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## INTRODUCTION

Within the short period of less than half a century (1887-1929) the scholarly world was placed under heavy debt to two peasants. Through a peasant woman at Tell El-Amarna in Egypt the valuable Amarna Tablets were brought to light (1887, and through the plowing of an Alaouite peasant at Ugarit in Syria the even more important Ras Shamra texts were later unearthed by the French archaeologist Schaeffer (1929)." The texts resulting from these discoveries date from a period about the middle of the second millennium B.C. The findings at Ras Shamra have opened to us the vast extent of the Canaanite civilization: its society, commerce, political institutions, and religion.[1] These had formerly been only imperfectly known through allusions in the Hebrew Bible and from Greek sources. As study progresses much light is being thrown not only upon Hebrew lexicography, grammar, and poetry, but also upon the cultural milieu in which Israel came to live in Canaan.

The task of comparing the Biblical literature with the Ras Shamra alphabetic texts is an exacting one and has many ramifications. The purpose of this article is to compare the poetic structure of both literatures. The matters

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[1] W. F. Albright, CBQ, Vol. VII, 1945, pp. 5-9, and the fuller discussion in *Studies of the History of Culture*, pp. 11-50. Note the abbreviations used in this article: AJSL, *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures;* BASOR, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*; CBQ, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*; JPOS, *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society*; RB, *Revue Biblique*; RP, *Revue de Paris*; ZA, *Zeitschrift fur Assyriologie*.

of similarities and differences in grammar, vocabulary, and concepts will occupy us in future studies.

## HEBREW METRICS

Though unanimity has not been achieved on all points and much remains yet to be done, the study of Hebrew meter has made definite advance. Some of the early deliverances on the subject were those of Josephus and Philo, who held that Hebrew poetry had meter.[2] Whether they were judging by Greek models or not, as some affirm, it is impossible to determine. Toward the end of the eighteenth century Lowth made his contribution to the study in his lectures at Oxford.[3] To him we are indebted for characterizing the basic relationship in Hebrew verse as parallelismus membrorum.[4] This phenomenon had been noticed before him by Ibn Ezra (twelfth century) and Kimchi (thirteenth century), but

the latter had not designated it in the clear fashion which Lowth did. Lowth also maintained that the utterances of the prophets especially, as well as other parts of the Hebrew Bible, were originally in metrical form. Subsequent study has borne out the validity of this position. His shortcomings were that he drew his examples from Greek and Latin sources, since he was not conversant with Oriental literature as such, and that, though he recognized the Hebrew poets must have had metrical rules, he felt it was impossible to ascertain them now.

Because of the rich discoveries of the past century through archaeological campaigns in the Near East, comparisons were made possible with Babylonian and Assyrian, as well as Egyptian, poetry.[5] Assyrian poems, like the Epic of Creation and the Descent of Ishtar, reveal that the Accadians had a regular metric system and that the meter was accentual.

[2] The statements of Josephus are not pertinent to Job, because *Ant*. II 16.1 refers to the song of Exodus 15; *Ant*. IV 8.44 to Deuteronomy 32; and *Ant*. VI 12.3 to hymns composed by David.

[3] Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, 1829.

[4] For his definition of this phrase cf. R. Lowth, *op. cit*., pp. 35, 43, and 157.

[5] W. F. Albright, *JPOS*, II, 1922, pp. 69-71.

Usually the couplets were of two bicola (four hemistichs), each with a caesura. Delitzsch and Zimmern showed that the bicolon was 2 plus 2. Some of the poems manifest a complex strophic arrangement as well as a refrain, as in the Ishtar and Saltu poem.[6] The strophes are quatrains with four bicola. When dealing with the Assyrian poems, we must keep in mind that much of the Accadian poetry has been translated from a Sumerian original.[7] Not only is the meter of Assyrian poetry accentual, but, as Erman has shown, that of Egyptian poetry was also. Generally the meter was 3 plus 3 or 2 plus 2. The period of greatest development in prosody in Egypt and Babylonia was during the Twelfth Dynasty (c. 1989-1776 according to Edgerton's revised low chronology).

The work of Ley and Sievers, along with Budde, Duhm, and others, was destined to lay the foundation for later strides in the study of Hebrew metrics. Over a period of some twenty years Ley occupied himself with the subject and published three basic works.[8] Sievers set out to find the rhythm of Hebrew poetry and to judge the Hebrew meter from it.[9] The conclusion was that Hebrew did not count syllables, that is, it was not quantitative in the strict sense of the term, but depended upon the number of accents. Lyric meter was found to be 2 plus 2 (Canticles), dirge (qinah) is 3 plus 2 (Lamentations), and epic or didactic is 3 plus 3 (Job and Proverbs).

[6] E. Sievers, *ZA*, N.F., 4, 1929, pp. 22-29. Note refrain in strophes XIII and XXVIII, pp. 23, 24, and 26.

[7] W. F. Albright, *BASOR*, 91, 1943, p. 44.

[8] J. Ley, *Die metrischen Formen der hebraischen Poesie*, 1886 (here much emphasis was placed on alliteration as a metric form of Hebrew (poetry); *Grundzuge des Rhythmus, des Vers- und Strophenbaues in der hebraischen Poesie*, 1875. (esp. pp. 8-15 on accent as. the principle of Hebrew meter); and *Leitfaden der Metrik der hebraischen Poesie*, 1887.

[9] E. Sievers, *Studien zur hebraischen Metrik*, 1901. The two basic laws of his system may be summarized thus: (1) no more than four unaccented syllables may accompany an accented syllable, so that a word with five syllables would have two stresses; (2) the accented syllable follows the unaccented ones and may not in turn be followed by more than a single unstressed syllable. Cf. G. B. Gray, *Forms of Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 143-144.

### THE POETRY OF JOB

Before entering into a more detailed treatment of the poetry of Job, we note the view of Bickell and, more recently, Holscher, because it differs from the position just stated that the meter of Job is 3 plus 3.[10] These scholars, judging the Biblical material from Syriac patterns where the law of accentuation places the tone on the penult, seek to construct a system of quatrains for the Book of Job. Bickell holds that the strophe of the book is "durchgangig je zwei siebensilbige, rhythmischjambische, inhaltlich parallele Verszeilen zu einem Doppelverse, und zwei von diesen zu einer Strophe verbindet."[11] The arrangements resulting from these attempts are not only quite subjective, but require much emendation of the text. Rigid conformity to one pattern is not possible throughout the whole poem, as we shall see.

What type of poetry is Job? Is it drama, Greek tragedy, a didactic poem, or an epic poem? No one will deny that the book has dramatic action, but the action in the prologue and epilogue is subordinate to the main purpose of the work. Nor can we call Job a Greek tragedy for, among other distinctions, there is nothing in it to answer to the interspersed choral odes. Though its subject matter is of a didactic nature, it is not a didactic poem, for its differences from the poetry of the Book of Proverbs are clear. It is definitely an epic poem, treating of a lofty theme with unity and some progress in the action.[12]

This poem, the longest in the Old Testament, is unique in that it combines prose and poetry and utilizes the dialogue, the narrative being in prose and the dialogue in poetry. In the historical books of the Hebrew Bible, as well as in the prophetic books, we have the combination of prose and poetry, but not in the same manner as Job. Dialogue may

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[10] G.Holscher, *Syrische Verskunst*, 1932, esp. pp. 49-123, and *Das Buch Hiob*, 1937, esp. pp. 3, 4, 8. His p~ition, as far as Job is concerned, is that the poem follows the same metric system as the Syriac.

[11] G. Bickell, *Das Buch Hiob*, p. 11.

[12] R. Dussaud, *RP*, 1937, p. 216, thinks Ras Shamra has what Hebrew and Arabic poetry lack; namely, epic poetry. Surely Job can be placed in the category of the epics.

be found in the Song of Solomon (for example, 2 :1-3), but it is not employed in the same type of discussion.

Attempts have been made to find parallels to the Book of Job in Semitic literature. The Babylonian poem on the righteous sufferer, the so-called Babyloman Job, has been compared to the Biblical Job.13 Even a cursory reading of the Babylonian selection reveals that the resemblances are slight, while the differences are considerable. The cuneiform poem is, moreover, monologue and not dialogue. Among the Assyrian texts published by Ebeling he entitles one *Ein babylonischer Kohelet*, but Dhorme thinks the relationship to Job is closer, although he is not dogmatic on the point.[14] The selection contains a discussion of the problem of evil and bears some striking parallels to Job. It is composed in twenty-seven strophes and employs the dialogue. Our Judgment would be that a closer parallel to the subject matter of Job must still be sought. As to the use of the dialogue in epic poetry, both a Babylonian and an Egyptian source have been posited. The "Descent of Ishtar" has been compared with Job, because in both dialogue is introduced into epic.[15] "The Sayings of Amenemope" has been suggested as the Egyptian source of the dialogue." These maxims are arranged in thirty chapters, and are counsels directed to Amenemope's youngest son, who was priest in the Temple of Min in Panopolis. In form they scarcely parallel Job. Comparisons with the philosophical dialogue of the Greeks are not relevant.

The 3 plus 3 meter in the Book of Job is unmistakable. Whether it be in the cycles of addresses of Job and his friends or in the Elihu monologue or in the Jehovah speeches, the predominant epic meter is clear. Jerome had spoken of "the hexameters" of Job 3:2 to 42:6 in distinguishing the prose from the poetry. There is no serious disagreement

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[13] H. Zimmern, *Der Alte Orient*, 7, 3, pp. 28fF.

[14] E. Ebeling, *Berliner Beitrage zu Keilschriftforschung*, 1922. P. Dhorme, *RB*, 32, 1923, pp. 5-27.

[15] E. Konig, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, pp. 410 f.

[16] G. Holscher, *Das Buch Hiob*, p. 4 refers to H. Gressmann, *Altorientalische Texte zum Alten Testament* (2nd ed.), 1926, pp. 38-46."

with this view, apart from the position of Bickell and Hol-scher discussed above. The three basic parallelisms--syn-onymous, antithetic, and synthetic or constructive-appear in the text, with the great majority of the last type and few of the second type. An example of each will suffice.

> Synonymous parallelism, Job 8:3:
> > Will God pervert justice,
> > Or will Shaddai pervert righteousness?
> Antithetic parallelism, Job 8:7:
> > Though your beginning was small,
> > Yet your latter end will be very great.
> Synthetic parallelism, Job 5:19:
> > In six troubles he will deliver you,
> > And in seven no evil will touch you.

Though the prevailing rhythm of Job is that of the bal-anced bicolon with three accents to each colon, rigid uni-formity is not maintained throughout the poem. Attempts to impose such uniformity have been unsatisfactory. On the other hand, variations are comparatively few and must be dealt with cautiously.[17] Ley, according to Budde, claimed to be able to find 800 bicola out of 1,000 verses.[18] The presence of tricola can be explained as resulting from the poetic freedom and skill of the writer. Most of the alleged ex-amples, however, are doubtful or open to suspicion. Those in Job 3 :4, 5, 6, and 9 probably arise from disturbance in the text. Possible examples are 7:11; 8:6; 19:12; 38:41; and 39:25. What appears to be a tricolon of 2 plus 2 plus 2 in 9:21 disappears when we see the probability that the first two words are vertical dittography from line 20. Few cases of 3 plus 2 and 4 plus 3 rhythm are original, while 3 plus 4; 4 plus 4; and 2 plus 2 are very rare. However, there are too many variations from the dominant rhythm to allow the conclusion that none of them is original.

[17] B. Gray, AJSL, 36, 1919-20, pp. 95-102. His emendations are not con-vincing.
[18] K. Budde, Das Buch Hiob, p. VII, n. 2.

When we examine the bicolon more closely, we find a number of variations in the sentence structure. While the literary form a b c--a b d occurs in the Hebrew Bible, there are no examples in the Book of Job. The common harmonic sequence in Job is a b c--a' b' c'. Variations from this pattern occur, but we shall occupy ourselves with the bicolon most frequent in the poem. Following Gordon's arrangement,[19] we allow s, v, o, p, and x to represent subject, verb, object, prepositional phrase, and adverb or any miscellaneous particle. Analysis shows that these harmonic Ibalances are present: pv pv, 4:9,

> "By the breath of God they perish,
> And by the blast of his anger they are destroyed";

vsp vsp, 6:5 (also 8:11),

> "Brays the wild ass upon (when he has) the grass,
> Or lows the ox over his fodder?"

pvo pvo, 7:2 (also 26:12),

> "As a servant that desires the shade,
> And as a hireling awaits his wages";

ovo ovo, 10:11,

> "(With) skin and flesh thou dost clothe me,
> And with bones and sinews thou dost knit me together";

and vpo vpo, 15:33,

> "He shall shake off as the vine his unripe grape,
> And he shall cast off as the olive-tree his flower."

Instances could be multiplied, but variety, even within certain types of bicola, is clear. We are coming to realize increasingly that Hebrew prosody was much more complex than formerly recognized.[20] Early in this century Arnold held that "The rhythmopoiia of Hebrew is, as we should expect, of the simplest and crudest description."[21] His pronouncement is not borne out by subsequent studies.

In concluding our discussion of the poetry of Job, we

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[19] C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Grammar* (Rome, 1940), p. 85 if.

[20] W. F. Albright, *CBQ*, 7, 1945, p. 19.

[21] W. R. Arnold, *Old Testament and Semitic Studies in Memory of W. R. Harper*, Vol. I, p. 202.

may note that the poem employs alliteration and assonance (6:14, 16, 25), rhyme (10:8-18; 39:3), and paronomasia.[22] Rhyme, like strophe (see 31:5-10; 37:9-10), is only an occasional form of Hebrew poetry. Efforts have been made to divide large portions of Job strophically, as in Bickell's system, but the results are subjective and arbitrary.

## UGARITIC POETRY

With the finding of the Ras Shamra texts we have poetry which comes from a cultural and literary setting more closely related to Hebrew poetry than either the Babylonian or Egyptian. We do well to remember also that the cuneiform tablets have not undergone the copyings which the Hebrew poetic books have. In the short period in which the mythological poems of Ugarit have been studied, certain distinctive features of the prosody have been noted. Like Hebrew poetry, Ugaritic poetry is accentual. It is characterized by parallelism with the common rhythm of three accents to a colon. Examples are numerous so we confine ourselves to one case. 49 (I AB) III 6, 7:

שמם שמן תמטרן
נחלם תלך נבתם

The heavens rain oil;
The wadies run with honey.

Not only is the bicolon frequent, but the tricolon is common as well. A case in point is 49 VI 27.

Though the poetry was not quantitative in the strict sense, as we understand it from Indo-European models, there appears to have been an attempt at counting syllables. Words vary from two to four, and even five, syllables. Cases with more than four are rare. Verbs with double energic nun appear to have five syllables: תשרפנן and תדרינן in 49 II 32 and 33. The number in each colon varied from eight to ten syllables, with the commonest at nine. If the second member of a bicolon omitted a word found in the first, there was added in

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[22] I. M. Casanowicz (*Paronomasia in the Old Testament*) cites 52 examples (pp. 91-92) of this literary device in Job.

the former one or more words to counterbalance the latter, a "ballast variant" as Gordon calls it.[23] A list of such devices shows how largely it entered into Ugaritic versification. Albright explains the fact thus, "The regularity in the number of syllables must be connected with the fact that these poems were chanted with simple melodies adapted to regular poetic syllabification, not as psalms and liturgies are chanted today in ecclesiastical music, where almost any number of syllables can be accommodated to the melody.[24]

As in Job, the Ugaritic poetry manifests variations from the parallel cola with three beats. Dussaud, after referring to the dominant rhythm in Phoenician poetry, holds that when a colon of two accents follows two cola with three stresses each, it is always by the intention of the poet. The uneven colon marks the pause or punctuation.[25] Besides the tricola, Ginsberg marks other divergences from the bicolon: single (extra-metric) words, as ואדע in 49 III 8; single (extra-metric) lines,[26] as the oft-repeated ישא גה ויצח; run-on lines; apocopated end-lines; and rhyme, as ידי and יהדי in 67 VI 17-21.[27]

Ugaritic poetry enjoys a wide variety of harmonic balances within verses. The poets of Ras Shamra endeavored by artistic devices to avoid monotony, and the result is an elaborate system of sentence structure. Gordon has listed twenty-six different types of verses, and this number does not exhaust the possibilities.

Before we summarize the similarities between the poetry of Job and the Ugaritic texts, we call attention to some differences. First, there is nothing in Job that answers to the long sections in Ugaritic poetry which are repeated twice. Second, the verse-form a b c-a b d common in the cuneiform texts is completely lacking in Job. Third, Ugaritic poetry

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[23] C. H. Gordon, *op. cit.*, pp. 83, 84.

[24] W. F. Albright, *BASOR*, 91, 1943, pp 43-44.

[25] R. Dussaud, *Syria*, 16, pp. 196, 198; RP, 1937, p. 212. De Vaux (*RB*, 1937, pp. 534-535) holds the same position.

[26] Such extra-metric lines are found in Job 4:1; 6:1; 8:1; etc.

[27] H. L. Ginsberg, *Orientalia*, N.S., 5, 1936, p. 171.

makes use of refrain (49 VI 16-22) as well as strophic arrangements (51 IV 52-57). Job has no example of the former, and the occasional examples of the latter in the book are not so extended as the Ugaritic patterns.

The similarities between the poetry of Job and the Ras Shamra literature may now be summarized briefly. (1) Parallelism, with its repetition, marks both literatures. (2) The 3 plus 3 meter based on accented syllables is the dominant one for both. (3) Lines vary as to the number of words, and words differ in the number of syllables they contain. The corollary to this fact is that neither Hebrew nor Ugaritic poetry is quantitative in the strict sense. (4) There does seem to be a conscious effort to keep lines approximately to (the same quantity. (5) Rhythms vary in both literatures, so that change in rhythm cannot be interpreted as "the blending of different poems."[28] Rigid uniformity is not to be imposed on either the Hebrew or Ugaritic poems. (6) The sentence structure within verses reveals great artistic skill. Prose order does not apply; the elements of the verse may be found in any order.

Definite points of contact, then, between Hebrew and Ugaritic poetry cannot be denied. Indeed, the relationship is closer than that which exists between Hebrew poetry and that of Mesopotamia and Egypt.

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[28] C. H. Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 79, sec. 12.2.