



*Lecture 9: The Historical Critical Method and Hebrew Poetry; BI 5305 Advanced Introduction to the Old Testament; Dr. Randall C. Bailey, Ph.D.; Fall 2008*

**I. GENERAL INFORMATION.**

- A. Hebrew poetry, which comprises one third of the Hebrew Bible, is unlike Classical, European, or Jewish poetry.<sup>1</sup>
1. Rhyme is virtually non-existent.
  2. Rhythm is flexible—not by syllabic feet, but a tonal system.
- B. “The fundamental formal feature of canonical poetry is the correspondence of thought in successive half lines, known as parallelism of members.”<sup>2</sup>
1. The thought may be repeated, contrasted, advanced, figurative, stairlike, or inverted.
  2. The parallelism may be within lines and/or between lines.
  3. “Hebrew is an explosive, staccato, sound-conscious language, and the devices of alliteration [the repetition of the same letter or sound at the beginning of two or more consecutive words], assonance [the resemblance of the sounds of words], paronomasia [wordplay], onomatopoeia [formation of a word by and imitation of sound associated with the thing or action designated] are used to great aesthetic advantage.”<sup>3</sup>
- C. Canonical poetry, which moves from brief extracts in Pent. and historical books to complete poetic works found in Psalms, Isa 40-66, and Job, exhibits various genres.
1. These include: hymns, laments, confessions, thanksgiving and trust songs, and royal psalms.
  2. These various forms were employed by prophets, psalmists, and sages.

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<sup>1</sup>Norman K. Gottwald, “Hebrew Poetry,” *IDB* 3 (1962): 829.

<sup>2</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 829.

<sup>3</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 829.

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**II. THE EXTENT OF HEBREW POETRY.**

- A. Only 7 books appear to contain no poetic lines: Leviticus, Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, and Malachi.
- B. Poetry analogous to Hebrew occurs in the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.
- C. Hebraic style poems occur in Luke and Revelation.
- D. Much of Jesus' teaching expressed in a parallelism similar to Hebrew poetry.

**III. HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION.**

- A. Only within last 50 years, in both Hebrew and English versions, have consistent efforts been made to represent Hebrew poetry in a stichometric format.
  - 1. Fragments of the Song of Moses (Deut. 32) and certain Psalms were copied with attention to poetic lines, but this was the exception rather than the rule.
  - 2. Even the Massoretic Mss. arranged poetic units only in Psalms, Proverbs and Job; Pentateuchal and prophetic poetry were ignored.
  - 3. The Greek and Latin versions, as well as the Syriac and Aramaic Mss., paid no attention to poetic forms.
  - 4. In the English versions the ERV and the ASV printed the poetic books stichometrically, but the RSV was the first to do the same for all poetic sections.
- B. Sporadic research on Hebrew poetry, which has been a mixture of false analogy and dissimilar poetry, has appeared since biblical times.
  - 1. Philo reported that the Egyptians taught Moses the "lore of metre, rhythm and harmony" (*Life of Moses* 1.5).
  - 2. Josephus made several statements relative to Hebrew poetry.
    - a. Speaking of Exod 15, said Moses, "Moses himself composing in hexameter verse a song to God" (*Antiq.* 2:16:4).

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- b. Speaking of Deut 32, he said Moses “recited to them [the Israelites] a poem in hexameter verse” (*Antiq.* 4:8:44).
  - c. Speaking of David, “he composed songs and hymns to God in various meters—some he made in trimeters, and others in pentameters” (*Antiq.* 7:12:3).
  - d. “Josephus was the first—though unhappily not the last to try to construe the poetry of the Hebrew Bible by classical meters. Thus began the long and unfruitful diversion from the path of true advance in Hebrew poetry.”<sup>4</sup>
3. Origin agreed with Josephus regarding Deut 32 and the Psalms, but insisted that Hebrew poetry was different from Greek.
  4. Jewish tradition is curiously silent about the formal character of Hebrew poetry.
  5. Medieval commentators such as Ibn Ezra, Kimchi, and Levi ben Gershom recognized the reduplication of thought in biblical poetry, while at the same time ignoring the synonymy of thought in the two halves of a verse by insisting on separate meanings.
  6. “It is astonishing that the formal structure of ancient Hebrew poetry was transmitted through the centuries generally intact in spite of the lack of poetic format, even though the older forms were no longer employed in contemporary poetry and were, in fact, largely disregarded in biblical exegesis.”<sup>5</sup>
- C. Serious advances, however, were made in 1753 when Bishop Robert Lowth of Oxford published his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (in Latin; Eng. tr. 1815).
1. A second edition in 1763 incorporated the notes of J. D. Michaelis who had guided the work into a German edition.

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<sup>4</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 830.

<sup>5</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 830.

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- a. His *Isaiah: A New Translation with Preliminary Dissertation* (1787) offered a fuller exposition of Hebrew poetic types.
  - b. "It is a tribute to Lowth's work that, in spite of archaisms and florid style, it retains aesthetic freshness and scholarly relevance."<sup>6</sup>
2. Lowth made many insights.
- a. He regarded Hebrew poetry as a matter of sense to which were linked sound and form.
  - b. He believed the balancing of ideas and phrases was more important than strict meter.

Central to his analysis was the recognition of the counterbalancing of verse members, to which he applied the technical term *parallelismus membrorum* ("parallelism of members"). This phenomenon was no mere ornamentation but of the essence of Hebrew poetry, its fundamental formal feature. He attempted to classify the types of parallelism, and with considerable success.<sup>7</sup>

- c. While "Our present understanding is an elaboration and enrichment of Lowth's viewpoint,"<sup>8</sup> scholars' new interest in poetry, coupled with the advances made by the newer "linguistic approaches, seem to indicate that poetry is fast becoming a quite useful tool for exegetes."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 830.

<sup>7</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 830.

<sup>8</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 830.

<sup>9</sup>James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History*. New Haven/London: Yale University, 1981; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. New York: Basic Books, 1985.

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- D. Following decades of neglect interest revived due to, among other issues, “a gradual refinement in the way Hebrew poetry is analysed and understood.”<sup>10</sup>

**IV. SEVERAL ISSUES SURFACE FOR ANYONE READING HEBREW POETRY.**

- A. ***Difficulties of Reading Poetry:*** “are due to several factors relating to time, place and language.”<sup>11</sup>

1. Remote in time to the modern reader, making many poems difficult to date.
2. The geographical setting is ancient, making the culture remote and different.
3. The ancient Hebrew is very concise, unlike modern languages, making open interpretations possible.

- B. ***The poet and the reader:***<sup>12</sup>

1. “. . . [T]here is a difference between the analytical techniques available to us in the study of Hebrew poetry and trying to understand how the poet composed and how his readers/listeners understood what he intended”<sup>13</sup>
2. Much work has been done relative to these techniques employed by the poet, but little on the point of view of the reader
3. The refrains occurring in some poems (e.g., Pss 8, 46, 67) indicate audience participation, which needs more study.

- C. ***The poet’s voice and the lyrical “I”:***<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>W. G. E. Watson, “Hebrew Poetry,” in *Text in Context*, A. D. H. Mayes, ed. (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 253.

<sup>11</sup>Watson, *Hebrew Poetry*, 254.

<sup>12</sup>Watson, *Hebrew Poetry*, 255.

<sup>13</sup>Watson, *Hebrew Poetry*, 253.

<sup>14</sup>Watson, *Hebrew Poetry*, 256.

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1. This problem, so important for Psalm studies, must be addressed also in poetry studies.
2. We are not always sure to whom the “I” refers when the author of a poem speaks in the first person.

**D. *Poetry or Prose?*<sup>15</sup>**

1. The debate relative to how to differentiate poetry from prose remains open, due, in part, to the “absence of an overall theory of Hebrew Poetry, especially whether or not it is metrical”<sup>16</sup>
2. Further, “The Hebrew Bible does not distinguish clearly between prose and verse.”<sup>17</sup>

**V. SPECIFIC TERMINOLOGY.<sup>18</sup>**

- A. Lowth did not develop a scientific terminology and scholars since him have borrowed terms at random, usually according to personal choice; yet some basic terminology must be given to understand the most elementary analysis.
1. ***Line:*** the basic unit of composition which constitutes one half (sometimes one third) of the parallelism.<sup>19</sup>
    - a. It expresses a complete thought and has grammatical and syntactic unity.
    - b. It is represented in each of the lines of Ps 24:1-3 above.

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<sup>15</sup>Watson, *Hebrew Poetry*, 257.

<sup>16</sup>Watson, *Hebrew Poetry*, 257.

<sup>17</sup>Watson, *Hebrew Poetry*, 257.

<sup>18</sup>Lucas, *EOL*, 75-76

<sup>19</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 831.

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2. **Stich** or **stichos** (στίχος, “row, line”): basic unit of the line, also known as **hemistich** (ἡμιστίχος, “half line”), **colon** (κῶλον, “part, member”), or verse number. Two (or three) of these elements together form the larger thought-units by which the poem is articulated.
3. **Distich** or **tristich**: two or three stichs; stich when the half-line components are called hemstitches. These are the larger units represented each by the two lines of Ps 24:1-3.
4. **Bicola** or **tricola** (two or three colons), and **verse** (Latin, *versus*, “line, row”; composed of two or more verse members): alternative terminology for **distich** or **tristich**.
5. **Strophe**: a series of lines forming a system the metrical structure of which is repeated in a following system called **antistrophe**. Also, in a wider sense, one of two or more metrically corresponding series of lines forming divisions of a lyric poem (OED).
  - a. Acrostic poetry (e.g., Ps 119) shows that such arrangements were possible, yet in most acrostics the true sequence of thought ignores the formal strophic divisions.
  - b. Sometimes a refrain occurs in reasonably regular intervals. E.g., in Ps 42-43 a refrain is found in 42:5, 8, 11, and 43:5.
  - c. In the absence of acrostic or refrain, the symmetrical articulation of the thought sometimes argues strongly for strophic division--note the four divisions of Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5).
  - d. “It is often tempting to assume that glosses or dislocations have disturbed a regular strophic order. . . . The attempts of scholars to delete, introduce, and rearrange lines and strophes in the interests of regularity must be judged individually, but wholesale emendation and reshuffling of the text not only have little evidence to go on but also are contradicted by the Ugaritic poetry, with its analogous freedom of form.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 836.

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- B. These terms are still in use, but may begin passing away, dependent upon the popularity of the newer terminologies of Alter, Kugel, and others.

**VI. PARALLELISM OF MEMBERS.<sup>21</sup>**

- A. **Parallelism**, the “habit of the Hebrew poet of balancing thought against thought, phrase against phrase, word against word, is the persisting feature of his method of working.”<sup>22</sup>

1. It is virtually a mode of thought taken over from the ANE.
2. There are several kinds of parallelism

- B. **Internal parallelism** “consists of a series of terms that fall into pairs, each set of terms marked off from preceding and following elements by major strophes or caesuras [double diagonals below]. . . . Within each of the pairs, the parts are distinguished by a lesser stop [single diagonals below]. . . .”<sup>23</sup>

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof./  
the world and those who dwell therein;//  
for he has founded it upon the seas,/  
and established it upon the rivers.//  
Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?/  
And who shall stand in his holy place?// (Ps 24:1-3)

1. The relationship between lines (known as “parallelism”) is described as follows:
  - a. Lines 2, 4, and 6 introduce no new thought, rather repeat the immediate preceding lines. (Kugel and Alter will disagree with this.)
  - b. Lines 1 and 2 are said to be “parallel” or “in parallelism.”

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<sup>21</sup>Cf. Lucas, *EOL*, 67-68.

<sup>22</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 830.

<sup>23</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 831.

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- c. Lines 3 and 4 extend divine sovereignty over the waters, while lines 5 and 6 raise questions about the entrance to the temple of God.
- d. “Thus the primary elements in Hebrew prosody are the half lines that fall into parallel and that, taken together in pairs (or sometimes in threes), create a single thought or image.”<sup>24</sup>

C. **Internal parallelism** (parallelism between stiches).

1. **Synonymous:** states the same thought in successive stiches.

- a. The three distiches in Ps 24 are all synonymous.
- b. The second stich repeats the idea without significant addition or subtraction to it.
- c. “The practical consequences for the biblical exegete are considerable.”<sup>25</sup>
- d. In Ps 24:1-3 the first parallelism of “earth” and “world” are two ways of discussing creation, while the second parallelism of “rivers” and “seas” refer to the subterranean water deep, and “the hill of the Lord” and “his holy place” refer to the temple on Zion.

2. **Synonymous complete:** each term in the first stich is matched by a term in the second.

- a. To access properly the completeness of a parallel, the original language must be taken into account, since the English translation must often use more than one word for a Hebrew term.
- b. In the following examples all English words representing a Hebrew word will be linked with a hyphen.

The-forgiver of-all-our-iniquities/  
The-healer of-all-our-diseases//

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<sup>24</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 831.

<sup>25</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 831.

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Not-forever does-he-contend/  
 And-not-perpetually is-he-angry//  
 Not according-to-our-sins does-he-deal with-us/  
 And-not according-to-our-iniquities does-he-reward us.//  
 (Ps 103:3, 9-10)

- (1) The pattern for this complete synonymous parallelism in the first two distiches is:

a . b  
 a' . b'

- (2) The pattern for the third distich is:

a . b . c . d  
 a' . b' . c' . d'

3. ***Incomplete synonymous parallelism:*** due to the poets' preference for variation a majority of synonymous parallelisms are ***not*** complete, however.

- a. "Though difficult to classify, the incomplete parallelism supplies Hebrew poetry with a fluency and attractiveness unrivaled by the generally stereotyped repetitions of ancient Near Eastern poetry."<sup>26</sup>
- b. Furthermore, when parallelism is incomplete it may be with or without compensation.

4. ***Incomplete without compensation and its pattern:***

Wicked [is] the-heart above-all/  
 And-corrupt [is] it//  
 I the-Lord try the-heart/  
 test the-mind// (Jer 17:9-10a)

a . b . c  
 a' . b'  
 a . b . c . d

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<sup>26</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 832.

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c' . d'

The second stich balances only two terms in the first ('and corrupt' parallels 'wicked'; 'it' parallels 'the heart'), but there is no counterpart to 'above all,' so that the parallelism is synonymous (saying the same thing) but incomplete (not all terms paralleled) and without compensation (lacking any expansion of the terms that are paralleled)<sup>27</sup>

5. ***Incomplete with compensation and its pattern:***

And-to-give to-a-man according-to-his-way/  
according-to-the-fruit of-his-deed.// (Jer 17:10b)

a . b . c  
c'2

The parallel is incomplete, since 'and to give' and 'to a man' have no equivalent in the second stich. Compensation is provided, however, by paralleling the one term 'according to his way' with two terms in the second stich. The paralleled term is expanded into two terms, prolonging and emphasizing a single idea from the first, stich, although the other elements are implicitly carried over into the thought of the corresponding stich.<sup>28</sup>

6. ***Antithetic:*** "balances the stichs through opposition or contrast of thought."<sup>29</sup>

- a. Often the second stich recapitulates the thought of the first in a negative form:

In a multitude of people is the glory of a king,  
but without people a prince is ruined// (Prov 14:28).

- b. More often the second stich is in sharp contrast to the opening one:

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<sup>27</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 832.

<sup>28</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 832.

<sup>29</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 832; cf. also below "conditioned meaning."

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For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish//  
(Ps 1:6).

- c. Wisdom literature, due to its stress on two courses of action, offers many instances of antithetic parallelism.

The poor is disliked even by his neighbor,  
but the rich has many friends// (Prov 14:20).

The glory of young men is their strength,  
but the beauty of old men is their gray hair// (Prov 20:29).

- d. Like synonymous parallelism, antithetic parallelism may be complete or incomplete, with or without compensation.

7. **Synthetic or formal parallelism**—“balances stichs in which the second element advances the thought of the first” but “the two stichs are parallel only in the sense that a continuous straight line is parallel with its beginning,”<sup>30</sup> as the following passages illustrate.

- a. **Ps 14:1-2 :**

The fool says in his heart,  
“There is not God.”//  
They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds,  
there is none that does good.//  
The Lord looks down from heaven/  
upon the children of men,//  
to see if there are any that act wisely,  
that seek after God.//

- (1) The 1st and 3<sup>rd</sup> distiches neither repeat nor contrast thoughts in their stichs. Rather the 2<sup>nd</sup> stich extends or completes the thought in a way that could not be guessed from the initial half line. From the first stich we do not

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<sup>30</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 832.

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know what the fool says inwardly, but the synthetic parallel gives us the content of his musing—“there is not God.”

- (2) Further, while Yhwh looks down from heaven in the third distich, we do not know what he is looking at until the synthetic parallel tells us that it is mankind.
- (3) “By way of contrast, the second and fourth distiches fall into the category of synonymous parallelism, since in each case the second stich only embroiders the basic thought, already complete in the first stich”<sup>31</sup>

- b. *Ps 2:1-6* show how synthetic parallelism placed at strategic points can produce striking effects:

Why do the nations conspire,  
and the peoples plot in vain?//  
The kings of the earth set themselves together,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the Lord and his anointed, saying, //  
“Let us burst their bonds asunder,  
and cast their cords from us.”//  
He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
the Lord has them in derision.//  
Then he will speak to them in his wrath,  
and terrify them in his fury, saying, //  
“I have set my king/  
on Zion, my holy hill.”//

- (1) The psalm makes two points: intense heathen opposition to the king; firm establishment of Yhwh’s decree.
- (2) “Each of these is underscored by a synthetic parallelism that retards the balanced flow of the poem while it adheres to the formal requirement of parallelism.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 833.

<sup>32</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 833.

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- (3) “The second parallelism of the poem (which is also a tristich), synthetic in form, stresses the hostility of the nations ‘against Yahweh and against his anointed.’”<sup>33</sup>
- (4) The last parallelism counters the threats of the enemies by the proclamation of the coronation, which itself is synthetic in form:

I have set my king/  
on Zion, my holy hill.//

- (5) “No small part of the effect of the poem results from the momentary imbalance in shifting from simple reduplication of thought to its extension.”<sup>34</sup>

8. **Additional types** of parallelism which are combinations of the above basic types of parallelism also occur.

- a. **Emblematic parallelism:** simile or metaphor (Jer 17:11a).
- b. **Stairlike parallelism:** repetition and advance of thought in successive stichs, often involving three or more stichs; it is a combination of synonymous and synthetic parallelism in which the thought appears to climb or ascend by recapitulation and extension.

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,  
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.//  
Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;  
worship the Lord in holy array.// Ps 29:1-2

O Lord, how many are my foes!  
Many are rising against me;//  
Many are saying of me,  
there is no help for him in God.// Ps 3:1-2

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<sup>33</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 833.

<sup>34</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 833.

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- c. ***Inverted or chiasmic parallelism:*** the inversion of words or terms in successive stichs, Isa 11:13b; 59:8a.

Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah,  
and Judah shall not harass Ephraim.//

The way of peace they know not,  
and there is no justice in their paths.//

- D. ***External parallelism:*** Operates just like internal parallelism, but the correspondence between distiches.

- E. When external parallelism is added to internal parallelism (correspondence between stichs) the possibilities for parallelism are multiplied.

1. *Two internal synthetic emblematic parallelisms form an external synonymous, emblematic parallelism in Isa 1:10.*

Hear the word of the Lord,  
you rulers of Sodom!//  
Give ear to the teaching of our God,  
you people of Gomorrah!//

2. *Two internal synonymous parallelism form an external antithetic parallelism in Isa 1:3.*

The ox knows its owner,  
and the ass its master's crib;//  
but Israel does not know,  
my people do not understand.//

3. “As employed by the poets of ancient Israel, the possibilities of parallelism are virtually unlimited. It offers an elasticity that evokes endless aesthetic delight, while it avoids complexity and diffuseness through adherence to the principle of balanced stichs. . . . Few readers of Hebrew poetry will wish or need to analyze the parallelisms of every poem encountered. But the ability to pause occasionally and spell out the precise parallelistic pattern, and to test the theories against complex passages, serves to heighten the sense of enjoyment of form and content. Faithful study of even a limited number of parallelisms will vastly enhance that sixth sense

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by which the compression and amplification of poetic thought is grasped almost intuitively.”<sup>35</sup>

**VII. METRE AND RHYTHM.**<sup>36</sup>

- A. Since Lowth, who considered recovery of Hebrew meter impossible, several theories of meter have surfaced
- B. ***Metre based on stress:*** focuses “on the primary stress of words or word-groups within a line, with couplets forming patterns such as 3 + 3, 4 + 4, 4 +3, etc.; yet there are problems with this interpretation:
1. “Considerable uncertainty about which words are to be stressed”<sup>37</sup>
  2. “No stress pattern is sustained for long within a poem”<sup>38</sup>
- C. ***Metre by counting letters or syllables:***
1. No one suspects that the ancient poet actually counted the letters or syllables
  2. Yet the apparent balance in lines indicates a symmetry.
  3. However, proponents show “a tendency to make the verse fit the pattern (by excising material that does not fit)”<sup>39</sup>
- D. ***Metre based on syntactic restraints:***
1. Several complicated theories have surfaced.

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<sup>35</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 834.

<sup>36</sup>Watson, *Hebrew Poetry*, 258-59; cf. Lucas, *EOL*, 72-73.

<sup>37</sup>Watson, *Hebrew Poetry*, 258.

<sup>38</sup>Watson, *Hebrew Poetry*, 258.

<sup>39</sup>Watson, *Hebrew Poetry*, 259.

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2. None have gained prominence, although those which offer most promise are also the most complex.
  - E. **An alternative to metre:** “has been proposed” which suggests the ancient poets attempted rhythmical balance between lines, but were not dogmatics.
  - F. **Reading Hebrew Verse:** “The modern reader . . . must simply accept that the metrical or rhythmical component is only apparent in the balanced, parallelistic structure of most Hebrew verse and some of the effects intended by the poet are irretrievable”<sup>40</sup>
- VIII. **TECHNIQUES**---rhyme occurs only occasionally, but there are several other techniques which are used quite successfully.
- A. **Alliteration:** the consonance of sounds at the beginning of words or syllables. The English can be very beautiful, but it can never duplicate the *sh* and *l* sounds in Ps 122:6, or the sixfold *k*, the fivefold *t*, and the threefold sibilants of Isa 1:18-20, which can only be appreciated by the reader of Hebrew..
  - B. **Assonance:** the correspondence of sounds in the accented vowels, is especially prominent where pronominal suffixes and verbs recur.
    1. “The climatic Servant Song of Isa. 52:13-53:12 draws an impressive contrast between the innocent sufferer and the guilty confessors, a contrast strengthened by the ‘oo’ sound in the pronominal forms *hû* for ‘he’ and *nû* for ‘we.’”<sup>41</sup>
    2. In 53:4-7 the “oo” sound, with its emission of grief and awe, occurs fifteen times.<sup>42</sup>
  - C. **Paronomasia:** -Hebrew poets and especially the prophets had a penchant for word play.

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<sup>40</sup>Watson, *Hebrew Poetry*, 259.

<sup>41</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 835.

<sup>42</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 835.

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1. Amos' vision of **קִיָּץ** (basket of summer fruit) reminds him that the **קֵץ** (end) of Israel has come (8:2).
  2. In Isa 5:7 Israel is compared to a vineyard, with the men of Judah being God's pleasant planting. God is pictured as looking into this vineyard for justice, **מִשְׁפָּט**, but finding bloodshed, **מִשְׁפָּח**; looking for righteousness, **צִדְקָה**, but finding a cry, **צַעֲקָה**.
- D. **Onomatopoeia:** "Hebrew is rich in words that sound like what they describe, inasmuch as the language is directly denotative of objects and actions. The Hebrews did not mime reality in drama or in art; but they mimed it exquisitely and movingly with lyric poetry."<sup>43</sup>
1. *Ps 93:4* the alliteration of the "m" sounds the swelling of the sea; while the repeated "r" sound the raging of the waves.
  2. The guttural and 'p" sounds of Isa 42:14 exhibit the gasping and sighing of a woman in childbirth.
  3. "Thus a rich plasticity of sound joins with the flexibility of parallelism to assault the reader's eye and ear with sharp impressions and unexpected sensations. The language is wholly alive, so that an abstract-appearing poem is in actuality vibrating with the delectability of sound and impact of image."<sup>44</sup>
- E. **Parallel word pairs**--certain words that naturally, or traditionally have been paired together.
1. "The Ugaritic word pairs . . . enable the critic to recover in the OT braces of words misinterpreted by tradition. Thus Ugar. 'd, 'seat,' // *ksu*, 'throne,' favors this rendition of Ps. 89:29."<sup>45</sup>
  2. And I will put his offspring upon his seat, **לְעֵד**,

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<sup>43</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 835.

<sup>44</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 835.

<sup>45</sup>Mitchell Dahood, "Hebrew Poetry," *IDBSupp* (1976): 669-672.

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and his throne, כִּסְאוֹ.

- F. **Conditioned meaning:** words which through use have assumed a particular nuance, as when contrasted with “right hand” (יְמִינָהּ), the word “hand” (יָד), sometimes specifically designates the left hand, as in Judg. 5:26:

Her left hand (יָדָהּ) she stretched out for the tent peg,  
and her right hand (יְמִינָהּ) for the workmen’s mallet.

- G. **Abstract-concrete pairing:** the practice of pairing an abstract with a concrete noun, both of which translate concretely. Thus the balance with concrete ‘new wine’ (וְתִירוֹשׁ) points to a concrete signification for abstract “satiety” (שִׂבְעַ), in Prov 3:10, where the following literal rendition attempts to reproduce the complete a.b.c // c'.b'.a'

Then filled will be your barns with grain (שִׂבְעַ),  
and with new wine (וְתִירוֹשׁ) your vats will be bursting.

- H. **Breakup of composite phrases:** splitting of composite or stereotypical expressions for the sake of parallelism.

1. In Isa 11:2 the prophet employs the phrase רִיחַ עֵצָה, “the spirit of counsel,” while in 19:3 he distributes its components over the parallel stich.

Egypt’s spirit (רִיחַ) will gush out of his belly,  
and his counsel (וְעֵצָתוֹ) will I confuse.

2. Break up of the construct chain in Isa. 40:13:

Who has meted out Yhwh’s spirit (רִיחַ),  
what man has taught him his counsel (וְעֵצָתוֹ)?

- I. **Double-duty modifier:** also termed the “two-way middle,” this technique creates an interpenetrating, and fluid entity, in which phrases will connect with both the sentence before and after it. At times chiasmus was combined with the technique as the second example will show.

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O mountains of Gilboa,  
no dew and no rain upon you,  
O upland fields! (2 Sam 1:21).

Recorded (*A*) by the iniquity of his father (*B*)  
by El Yhwh  
the sin of his mother (*B'*) never erased! (*A'*)

- J. **Inclusion:** a special feature of the repetition technique, also called "envelope figure," and "cyclic composition," in which the author returns to the point where he began.

How much sweeter your love than wine,  
than the scent of your oils how much sweeter?  
(Cant 1:2b-3a).

Do you know how the clouds are balanced,  
the wondrous works of the Perfect in Knowledge? (Job 37:16).

- K. **Ellipsis:** the omission of a word or words which should complete or clarify the construction.<sup>46</sup>

1. The omission of "They have" in the fourth stich of Ps 135:16-17 has the effect of racing to the conclusion as well as balancing the lines.

They have mouths, but do not speak,  
they have eyes, but do not see.  
They have ears, but do not hear,  
nostrils, but there is no breath from their mouths.

2. The negation in the first stich serves to negate the second also in Job 22:11.

Or will you not see the darkness,  
and will (not) the cascading waters cover you?

3. A double ellipsis creates an exegetical problem in Prov 19:22.

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<sup>46</sup>Cf. Kugel below, p. 65.

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What is desired in a man is loyalty,  
and a poor man is better than a liar (RSV)

- a. At first the second stich does not make sense.
- b. One must supply two adjectives omitted by the author, who is really saying “a poor *truthful* man is better than a *rich* liar.”

- L. **Enjambment** or **run-on**: has the effect of hastening to the end, particularly when used in connection with the two-way middle, as Isa 11:9b illustrates:

For the earth shall be filled with  
the knowledge of Yhwh  
shall be like the waters covering the sea.

- M. **Delayed identification**: is used to create suspense when the poet reserves explicit mention of the subject or object until the latter part of the verse.

Can it be he will bind up a hater of justice,  
or will you condemn the Just Mighty one? (Job 34:17)

- N. As has been noted, many of these are often combined.

1. When they are Hebrew poetry can reach tremendous heights of complexity.
2. E.g., Isa 57:12-13 employs a double-duty negative, a two-way middle, and delayed identification:

And they will not avail you  
when you cry out  
your pantheons will not rescue you.

## **IX. GENRE AND SITUATION IN LIFE.**

- A. **Poetic fragments**: short poetic pieces which offer insight into life before the conquest (Kugel disagrees sharply with this).
1. Song of Lamech, Gen 4:23-24.

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2. Song of Miriam, Exod 15:20-21.
3. Song of the Ark--going into/returning from battle, Num 10:35-36.
4. Song of the Well--when a new well was opened, Num 21:17-18.
5. Curse on Amalek, Exod 17:16.
6. Melchizedek's blessing Abraham, Gen 14:19-20.
7. Blessing of Rebekah's brothers, Gen 24:60.
8. Aaronic benediction, Num 6:24-26.

**B. *Recurring and nonrecurring types.***

1. Gottwald contends that the early poetry was a communal creation which was repeated at certain public recitals of great events. Some of these were probably liturgical in nature, while others were connected with singular and unforgettable events.
2. He does recognize however, "The distinction in principle between the general and the concrete, the communal and the individually creative, is not easily applied in practice. But to recognize the strong impress of religion-social patterns upon Hebrew poetry is to have made long strides toward appreciating its concrete power, its adherence to types, and its frequent lack of historical allusion."<sup>47</sup>

**C. *Secular types.***

1. Hebrew poetry is for the most part "sacred."
2. Yet there are examples of poetry connected with secular activities: war (Josh 10:12-13; Judg 5); blood revenge (Gen 4:23-24); mocking of an enemy (Num 21:27-30); work (Num 21:17-18); marriage (Gen 24:60); death (2 Sam 1:17-27).
3. Even so, there were sacred elements in this as Gottwald observes:

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<sup>47</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 836, 837.

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In most cases these songs were not repeated in temple worship, and the name of Yahweh is not often included . . . , but this fact does not remove them totally from the religious sphere. That the interpenetration of secular and sacred was always typical of Israel may be seen in the way prophetic poetry is cast in forms of secular origin: harvest song (Isa. 5:1-7), mocking or taunt song (Isa. 14:1-27; 47), funeral lament (Jer. 9:17-22; Amos 5:2), victory ode (Isa. 63:1-6; Nahum), and litigation (Isa. 45:20-21; Mic. 1:1-7)<sup>48</sup>

D. *Sacred types.*

1. Those reserved for worship are mostly of the recurring type.
2. They are free of proper names and preserved in the Psalter because they could be used repeatedly.
3. Yet they were not just a body of songs for temple singing, for some may have been incidental music accompanying a specific service.
4. Others seem detached from the cultic setting.
5. “It is difficult to trace a clear history of the evolution of forms, since psalms composed for the cult passed into general devotional usage and vice versa. Nevertheless, significant strides have been made in isolating some of the primary forms and their communal setting.”<sup>49</sup>
6. Some of the more general types are as follows (for more discussion see my introduction to Psalms):
  - a. **Hymn:** casts in direct address to the deity and extols his attributes and works; seeks to praise and adore; may have been an outgrowth of the public feasts; special subdivision is the Song of Zion.
  - b. **Lament:** occasioned by a threat to the worshiper (individual), or the community (collective); for the individual the occasion is

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<sup>48</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 837.

<sup>49</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 837.

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sickness, unjust accusation, etc.; for the community it is famine, military defeat, exile, etc.; the plight of the lamenter is detailed and speedy action from God is requested/demanded.

- c. **Thanksgiving:** stands beyond the disaster which provoked the lament; presupposes salvation from the threat; typologically close to the hymn, but more precise in praise since it usually names the threat from which the individual/community was saved.
- d. **Royal:** more problematic than the others; functions in some way in a ceremony in which a king participated. Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, summarizes the problem:

It is a matter of debate how wide and in what sense this category should be conceived. Was the installation of the Israelite king anything more than a 'secular' appointment? Particularly, are the many psalms in which Yahweh is regarded as king to be assigned as royal psalms? Was there a pre-exilic ceremony in which the Israelite king represented Yahweh, either at his coronation or in an annual New Year's festival? Interpreters divide sharply. Some regard Yahweh's kingship as part of the pre-exilic monarchic pattern which was sacrally supported. Others insist that Yahweh's kingship is a post-exilic metaphorical usage, developed to express divine sovereignty over the nations after the kingship ceased. It is hardly to be denied, however, that there are some psalms in which the pre-exilic king was protagonist.<sup>50</sup>

- 7. **Prophetic poetry.**
  - a. Had its roots in the oracular utterance delivered at shrines.
  - b. Priests and prophets seem to have a common origin in their respective roles of interpreters of the divine will.
  - c. Their early (preclassical) utterances were brief and simple.

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<sup>50</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 837.

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d. “What distinguishes the prophetic poetry from priestly and wisdom poetry is its formulation toward specific situations. The prophetic ‘life situation’ was the moment of social, political, and religious crisis when men must decide the destinies of people and nations. Thus the old sanctuary forms take on the character of reproach and admonition. They are charged with a fresh urgency and ultimacy. Moreover, the secular forms . . . are appropriated and merged with older . . . modes of speech. The specific situations to which the prophetic poetry speaks are as manifold as the circumstance in which men must choose or reject God's will. Thus, in basic form and technique, prophetic poetry is not markedly distinguishable from other biblical poetry, just as prophet shares with priest and wise man in the common belief in the will and purpose of Israel's God as a binding reality by which all of life was to be shaped.”<sup>51</sup>

8. ***Emancipation from types.***

- a. Extended poetic works such as Isa 40-55 and Job represent the pinnacle of Israelite poetry.
- b. Such extended works merge many smaller poetic forms into a larger entity.

E. Indeed, the new linguistic approaches have pushed the research forward.

**X. LINGUISTIC APPROACHES**

A. Begun by Kugel and Alter these approaches have grown since the 1970s to improve our understanding of Hebrew Poetry.

B. ***Kugel on Parallelism:***<sup>52</sup>

- 1. Basic feature of poetic passages is short sentence-form consisting of two brief clauses, designated as “A” and “B”

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<sup>51</sup>Gottwald, *Hebrew Poetry*, 838.

<sup>52</sup>Kugel, *The Idea*, 1-58.

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2. These clauses are separated by a slight pause in which the second is a continuation of the first
3. E.g., Psalm 94:1-4:
 

|   |  |
|---|--|
| God of retribution, Lord/<br>Rise up, earth's ruler/<br>How long shall the wicked, Lord/<br>They brag, speak arrogance/ | God of retribution appear!//<br>give the arrogant their due//<br>how long shall the wicked rejoice?//<br>all the evil-doers do act haughtily// |
|---|--|

  - a. Common element in 1st v.--repetition of "God of retribution"
  - b. in 2d each half begins with an imperative
  - c. 3d v. the 2d line repeats something from the first
  - d. 4th describes successive acts of evil doers.
4. There is expressed "the general tendency of this biblical style to establish, through syntax, morphology, and meaning, a feeling of correspondence between the two parts," hence the name "parallelism," even though such is really very rare. (2)
5. Out of this general observation Kugel builds several specific types of structures:
  - a. **Restatement:** as in *Ps 146:2*

*I will praise the LORD as long as I live;/*  
*I will sing praises to my God all my life long// (NRSV)*
  - b. **Mere Comma:** no real semantic parallelism, but a mere comma separating the two parts as in *Psalm 50:22*

*Be strong and let your hearts be firm/ all you who trust the Lord//*
  - (1) **Citation** as in *Ps 31:33*:
 

I said in my dismay/ "I have been driven from your sight"//
  - (2) **Sequence of Actions** as in *Ps 80:9*:

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You brought up a vine from Egypt/ you banished nations  
and; planted it//

(3) **Various subordinations:**

Let your love, Lord, be upon us/ since we hope in you//  
Ps 33:22; cf. 27:3

6. **Commonly paired elements:**

a. *By day* the Lord sends forth his love/  
and *by night* his song is with me// Ps 42:9

b. Oh God *hear* my prayer/  
*hearken* to the words of my mouth// Ps 54:4

c. May the Lord of *Zion* bless you/ and enjoy *Jerusalem's* goodness/  
your whole life// Ps 128:5

7. **Repeated element:**

In you our fathers trusted/  
they trusted that you would save them// Ps 22:5

8. **Each term of A paralleled in B:**

Yhwh is your name eternally/  
Yhwh your appellation forever//  
Ps 135:13

9. **All of B in apposition to part of A:**

Let the Lord cut off all lips of falsehood/  
a tongue speaking untruths// Ps 12:4

10. **AB/ B'C//:**

He calls to the Heavens above/ and to the earth to judge his people//  
Ps 50:4

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11. **"Blessed" + Attribution:**

Blessed is the Lord/ may he hear the sound of my plea// Ps 28:6

12. **A is statement, B question:**

In death none can call on you/  
In the netherworld who will praise you?// Ps 6:6

13. To sum up: The relationship between A and B:

a. Parallelism is varied and ranges from "zero perceivable correspondence" to "near-zero perceivable differentiation" (7).

b. As illustrated, parallelism is a mere restatement:

(1) Rather B goes beyond A in such cases--"A is so, and *What's more* B is so."

(2) Or, the pause between the two lines is not an equal sign, as a mere restatement would seem to imply, but rather a double arrow, "for it is the dual nature of B both to come *after* A and thus add to it, often particularizing, defining, or expanding the meaning, and yet also harken back to A and in an obvious way to connect it." (8)

(3) "One might say that B has both *retrospective* (looking back to A) and *prospective* (looking beyond it) qualities" (8).

(4) Thus B has an emphatic character, a going one better, "a kind of progression"(9).

c. In wisdom literature A and B take on a didactic function which adds to its "sharpness": "A is so and B is so"; "Just as A, so B also"; etc.

A thorn comes by chance into the hand of a drunkard/  
and a proverb into the mouth of fools// Prov 26:9

The words of the wise are like goads/  
and like nails firmly planted are those used in assemblies//

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Ecc 12:11

14. ***B*** might be perceived as a ***decision not to parallel***.
- a. ***Morphological differentiation of verbs:***  
You brought up a vine from Egypt/  
you banished nations and planted it// (Ps 80:9)
- b. ***Coordination of actions:***  
When sorrow and pain I find/ on the name of the Lord I call//  
(Ps 116:3-4)
- c. ***B going beyond A to complete it:***  
Since you gladden me with your deeds/ in your creations I exult//  
(Ps 92:5)
- d. ***Integrating of A and B into a single whole:***  
I removed his shoulder from toil/  
his hands were freed from the basket// (Ps 81:7)
- e. ***Chiasmus represents a decision not to parallel:***  
I will give you a new heart/  
and a new spirit will I put in your midst// (Ezek 36:26)
- f. ***Singular and plural differentiation:***  
Better is the little of one righteous man/  
than the plenty of many evil men// (Ps 37:16)
- g. ***Apposition of a word with a possessive suffix in A with an article in B, and vice versa:***  
*The* horse is no salvation/  
and by the might of *his* force one will not escape//  
(Ps 33:17)

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h. ***Changes from one grammatical person to another:***

Let him give me of his kisses to drink/  
better is your love than wine// (SOS 1:2)

i. ***Omission of pronominal suffix in one verse-half when present in the other:***

But you despise (my) teaching/ and cast my words behind you//  
(Ps 50:17)

j. ***Prepositional alternation:***

The eye is not satisfied with [*l*] seeing/  
nor the ear filled up with [*m*] hearing// (Ecc 1:8)

k. ***Omission of prepositions, conjunctions, interrogative particles, negations and other particles from one clause:***

The poor will not be forgotten forever/  
[nor] the hope of the needy be eternally dashed// (Ps 9:19)

l. ***The differentiating "all":***

For upstanding is the Lord's word/  
and all that he does [is done] in faithfulness// (Ps 33:4)

m. ". . . what differentiation seems to be about is the 'afterwardness' of B. B. follows A, and its containing differentiated verbal themes or other morphological and syntactic differentiations seems designed to draw attention to this circumstance, 'A is so, and what's more, B.'"

15. ***Fixed pairs:***

- a. The function of fixed pairs is to establish a correspondence between B and A so that ". . . the more stereotypical the pairing, the greater the bond; with the most frequently pairs, the appearance of the first in itself creates the anticipation of its fellow, and when the latter comes it creates a harmonious feeling of completion and satisfaction" (29).

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b. Such pairing has various functions:

(1) **Establish continuity:**

*In love* a throne is prepared/  
so that one may sit *faithfully* upon it// Isa 16:5

(2) **Repetition:**

Vanity of vanities, says Qohelet/  
vanity of vanities, all is vanity// Eccles 1:2

16. ***The distribution reading (40).***

a. The reading is "seen through" so that A and B are recombined to make a single complex utterance.

For I know that YHWH is great/  
our lord is [greater] than all the gods// Ps 135:5

b. Interpreting this without distribution causes the B statement to lose its "what's more" quality

c. Better: *For I know YHWH is great, in fact, our Lord is greater than all gods!*

d. Thus "The impulse to 'redistribute' brings parallelism's ambiguity to the fore . . . and at the same time obscures the essence of the form" (45).

17. ***"Compensation" and "ballasting":*** the tendency for the B-clause to compensate for some missing element by adding something new, or by paralleling a small term in A with a larger term in B (45).

The Lord destroys all lips of falsehood/  
a tongue speaking untruth// Ps 12:4

Recall the wonders he worked/ his signs and laws of his mouth// Ps 105:5

18. ***The essence of parallelism (49).***

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- a. “. . . the whole notion of syntactic, morphological, phonetic, etc. parallelism is a relatively recent critical creation, which, however, valid, seems to have been devised in the necessity of salvaging the principle of parallelism for lines where semantic similarities were obviously lacking.”
- b. Things such as repetition, nonsynonymy of numerical and self-contradictory parallelism, the "B-clause *kol*" are all arguments against focusing on the similarity between A and B (51).
- c. Instead argues for *sequence*: first part--pause--next part--bigger pause, etc.
- d. Thus “The briefness of the brief pause is an expression of B's connectedness to A; the length of the long pause is an expression of the relative disjunction between B and the next line. What this means is simply: B, by being connected to A--carrying it further, echoing it, defining it, restating it, contrasting with it, *it does not matter which*—has an emphatic, ‘seconding’ character, and it is this, more than any aesthetic of symmetry or paralleling, which is at the heart of biblical parallelism” (51).

19. ***Parallelism in Poetry and Prose***<sup>53</sup>

- a. Parallelism and "seconding sequence" occurs in variety of contexts, including prose

And the Lord remembered Sarah as he had said/  
and the Lord did for Sarah as he had spoken// Gn 21:1

God made me cause to laughter/ all who hear me will laugh at me//  
Gen 21:6, Cf. 18; 22:12, 17

- b. Such seconding in “prose” passages is difficult to distinguish from some “poetic” passages in the Psalter

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<sup>53</sup>Kugel, *The Idea*, 59-95; Watson, *Hebrew Poetry*, 257.

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- c. Such passages are something more, a natural “reflex of the language,” often turning up in such things as laws (61)

Let not a man’s garments be on a woman/  
nor let a man wear a woman's dress// Deut 22:5

Who sheds man’s blood/ by man his blood is shed// Gen 9:6

Do not eat of it/ do not [even] touch it// Gen 3:3

- d. Such are not “accidental rhymes, for they are, on the one hand, far more common than mere accident would explain, and on the other, they are not consistently present in what is considered biblical ‘poetry’” (63).
- e. Thus should not accept the tradition interpretation that “parallelistic pair (or even seconding sequence) = poetic line” (66).

20. The concept of biblical “poetry” (69)

- a. No word for poetry in Hebrew, but a number of genres classifications: “psalms, hymns, songs and coral arrangements; proverbs, saying, wordplays; curses, blessings, prayers; histories, tales, genealogies; laws, cultic procedures; speeches, exhortations of moral intent; oracles, predictions, orations of consolation” (69)
- b. None of these are as large as the classifications “poetry” and “prose.”
- c. Thus in strictest sense “poetry” is a foreign word imposed on the literature
- d. While there is some justification for it in that we can identify its basic characteristics, it is still subjective and involves the assumption that regularity = poetry.
  - (1) But prose often exhibits this same characteristic
  - (2) “The equation parallelism = poetry has led critics both to overlook parallelism in ‘unpoetic’ places—in laws, cultic procedures, and so forth, and especially in *single lines* that

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come to punctuate, emphasize, or sum up less formally organized discourse; and, on the other hand, to attribute to biblical parallelism a consistency it lacks” (70).

21. Where prose and poetry meet (76)
  - a. Scholars have often retreated to the concept of “poetic fragments,” but “to see in every instance of parallelism in Genesis another fragment of some ‘long-lost original’ seems all too convenient” (77)
  - b. Such problems are particularly acute in Jeremiah where scholars have traditionally divided the text into: “poetic” oracles and sayings; biographical “prose”; “rhetorical” prose discourses (77)
    - (1) Often argued that the prose of Jeremiah is not much, while making use of some excellent poetry!
    - (2) **Bright:** “It must be admitted that the prose of Jeremiah—particularly that of the prose discourses . . .—is not, at least to our taste, the best of which the ancient Hebrew was capable. It is a rather inflated style. It lacks the terse stylistic economy of the classic prose of the ‘Golden Age’ (tenth century)—such as we find, for example, in the stories of Saul and David in the books of Samuel—and is not without a certain rhetorical eloquence, repetitious and wordy and, moreover, loaded with stereotyped expressions”<sup>54</sup>
    - (3) **Kugel:** “Elsewhere the same author expresses astonishment that ‘some of the noblest passages in the book (the Temple Sermon in VII 1-15 and the New Covenant passage in XXXI 31-34, to mention only two are couched in this rather pedestrian “Deuteronomistic” style.’ But this is hardly believable. Certainly one capable of the highest use of the Hebrew language would not elsewhere frame his message in a ‘repetitious and wordy’ manner if that was, indeed, how this style was perceived. And should a critic claim, as

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<sup>54</sup>Bright, *Jeremiah*, p. lxxv, quoted in Kugel, *The Idea*, 80.

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some have, that these 'prose sermons' are not the work of the prophet himself but a reconstruction made by his disciples, let it be admitted that any Tel Aviv high school student today would be capable of turning the 'Temple Sermon' into strict parallelisms. It is a most incredible thesis to suggest these verses were once in a higher, more pleasing form, but in the process of being 'remembered, understood and repeated' fell into a prolixity utterly out of keeping with the original. On the contrary, 'terse stylistic economy' tends to be remembered exactly—in fact, where it is originally absent the memory, or tradition, tends to invent it. Even if Jeremiah's exact words had been forgotten, certainly something similarly pithy would have replaced them—if *that had been their form*. Instead of the 'poor style' of these passages, it is the commentator we must fault, and the whole set of assumptions he brings to bear in this stylistic assessment" (80-1)

- c. Prophetic books have a similar problem in that here one encounters passages of semantic parallelism intermingled with something quite different—lines lacking any parallelism at all.
  - (1) At what point in such passages does prose shift into poetry and vice versa?
  - (2) How illusive the problem is can be seen in such misleading ideas as "rhythmical prose," "Now-lost poetic sagas," "unmetrical poetry," "parallelistic prose," or "poetic resonance."

d. Hence "poetry" and "prose" must be rethought

22. Actually what exists is "not two modes of utterance [poetry and prose], but many different elements which elevate style and provide for formality and strictness of organization" (85).

- a. "Poetry" and "prose" are terms which are too sharp and exhibit a polarity that does not really exist
- b. Thus Kugel would have us abandon the concept of "poetry" as it now stands and redefine it in terms of an elevated prose style.

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23. Biblical style (94)
  - a. Biblical “poetry”—“a complex of heightening effects used in combinations and intensities that vary widely from composition to composition even within a single ‘genre’” (94)
  - b. “Poetry,” as generally defined by scholars is, thus, too narrow a term.
  - c. Rhetoric of the Bible “. . . consists of a few characteristic features that, singly or in combination, mark a sentence as special, lofty, carefully made. Such sentences appear consistently, fairly regularly, or here and there. There is nothing more prescriptive to be said about biblical style--and yet everything remains to be said about single lines or individual compositions” (94-5)
  - d. Biblical parallelism is not mere paralleling, nor does it appear at a single level of intensity, nor is it consistently present or absent, but is capable of “elaboration to increasingly high levels of symmetry and design, and frequently combined with other elevating features” (95)

**C. *Alter’s Methods.*<sup>55</sup>**

1. Disagrees with Kugel’s near inferences that there is no poetry in the Bible but only “continuum,” “heightened rhetoric” in prose sections (4).
2. Accepts Smith’s definition of poetry: ““As soon as we perceive that a verbal sequence has a sustained rHythm, that it is formally structured according to a continuously operating principle of organization, we know that we are in the presence of poetry and we respond to it accordingly . . . , expecting certain effects from it and not others, granting certain conventions to it and not to others”” (6).
3. Regarding how parallelism, etc. works, argues:

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<sup>55</sup>Alter, *The Art*, 3-26.

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- a. A movement occurs from the first line to the second, in which the parallel does restate the first but with a different emphasis.
  - b. When parallel terms are used the movement is from general to specific (13) and intensifies (14). In this way the second term defines the first, by being a realization of the first, or by being an explanatory epithet, a metaphor, or a kenning (minimal metaphor) (15).
  - c. Often such language involves a chiasmic structure of literal/figurative/ /figurative/literal. Such involves a movement from prosaic to poetic to poetic to prosaic (16).
4. Specifically:
- a. Verbs and nouns become more intense: Prov 3:10; Job 41:16 (19).
  - b. Intensification of geographical descriptions, the second term is a smaller spatial entity (cf. Jer 7:34) (19).
  - c. Movement from the literal to the figurative often uses a general term followed by a synecdochic substitution (cf. Prov 1:14) (20).
  - d. Greater verbal activity in the second verset is a way of dramatically realizing the initial verset (Isa 49:23; Ps 72:9) (20-21).
  - e. Nouns in the first verset can be focused adjectivally in the second (Prov 4:3) (21).
  - f. A pair of nouns may be bracketed by a pair of intensifying verbs (Ps 3:8) (21).
  - g. Intensification via introduction of simile or metaphor (Ps 2:) (21).
  - h. Image intensified through hyperbole (Isa 58:10) (21).
  - i. Sometimes the reverse of the above occurs, i.e., a movement from the specific to the general (Job 30:27) (22).

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j. All of these things occur with varying degrees of emphases when comparing different poets and different kinds of literature (22-23, esp. 23).

5. **“Verse Narrative” is Narrative in Poetry**<sup>56</sup>

a. Key terms include:

(1) **Leitwörter:** certain key words or synonyms repeated throughout a poetic piece for the purpose of emphasizing a certain concept, etc. (32).

(2) **Intensification:** the introduction in the second verset a term that is stronger than its counterpart in the first (33).

(3) **Specification:** usually of place, action, agency in the second verset, accomplishes similar purpose to intensification (22:19) (33). Both accomplished through parallelism of meaning or substitution of a more specific and/or more concrete term in the second verset (33-4).

b. When movement between lines occurs narrativity (metaphor) is the result.

c. Movement between lines is speeded up when semantic parallelism is abandoned (36).

d. But when semantic parallelism is used, and as "the poet offers an approximate equivalent for an image or idea he has just evoked, he also begins, by the very logic of specification or intensification of the system in which he works, to push the initial image or idea into action, moving from one image to another that is temporally subsequent to and implied by the first" (37). Narrative is the result (37-8).

e. Movement can be of various types

(1) **Chronology** is one such type of movement (38).

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<sup>56</sup>Alter, *The Art*, 27-61.

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- (a) It may involve two nonsimultaneous actions with the chronologically later action in the second verset.

You drew me out of the womb  
made me safe on my mother's breasts  
(ps. 22:10)

- (b) It may at the same time involve specification

Their feet run to evil/  
they hurry to shed blood// Prov 1:16)

- (2) **Cause to Effect:**

He bites the horse's hooves/  
and its rider falls back// (Isa 1:31)

- (3) **Linked Actions:** approximate equivalent actions which lead from one to the next (39).

- (4) cf. Job 16:9-14

His anger rent and pursued me.  
He gnashed his teeth against me  
My foe stabbed me with his eyes  
They opened their mouths wide against me,  
In scorn they struck my cheeks.  
In the hands of the evil He thrust me.  
They were inflamed against me.  
God gave me over to the wicked.  
In the hands of the evil He thrust me.  
I was untroubled and He broke me.  
He smashed me, set me up as a target.  
His archers surrounded me,  
He pierced my kidneys mercilessly,  
spilled to the ground my bile.  
He breached me, breach upon breach,  
rushed at me like a warrior.

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- (5) Such a “piling up of lines” to form an image might be illustrated by the cinema in which still images are put together to produce “motion” (40).
  - (6) All of this is narrativity rather than pure narrative because metaphor (symbolic language) is used rather than describing a real event (39, 40))
  - (7) Such works without the use of summary and is thus different from prose narrative (40).
  - f. ***Verbs:*** in verse narrative different verbs are used to produce overlapping actions (42-3).
6. ***Supposed contradictions:*** cf. Judg 5:23-31 and 4:15-20 (43-47):
- a. The differences in the literature often accounts for the so-called “contradictions” as well as varying “traditions” of an event (47ff).
  - b. This is an excellent point!
  - c. The two passages use dialogue differently (48) and furnish different emphases (49).
  - d. Such may explain why Hebrew poetry generally avoids narrative (49).
7. ***Theophanic (God intervening):***
- a. Verse narrative is quite useful to relate (50).
  - b. Perhaps because of its need to use metaphor to describe God.
8. ***Narrative Character/Gesture/Speech/Act:***
- a. Close to fictional imagination of prose (54); cf. Prov 7 & 55ff.
  - b. Story teller is known (56).
  - c. Makes use of dialogue (57-8).

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d. *Leitwörter*: “sayings,” “house,” “way.”

9. ***Structures of Intensification.***<sup>57</sup>

a. Argues that “There is a certain affinity . . . between the formal properties of any given prosodic system or poetic genre and the kinds of meaning most readily expressed through that system or genre” (62).

b. In short, the type of form/method used is dependent upon the *genre/gattung* of poetry written (62).

c. Some examples follow:

10. ***Specification/Heightening*** produce a narrative structure filled with minute details and a climatic structure of thematic intensifications (62-3).

a. Such focusing sometimes gives prominence to themes rather than events, ca. the result that the theme is brought to a climax, and demands resolution, at the end of the poem (63).

b. Such is quite useful in prophecy and complaint (63).

c. Psalm 13, an example:

1 How long, Lord, will you forget me perpetually,  
how long will you hide your face from me?  
2 How long will I cast about schemes in my mind,  
grief in my heart all day?  
How long will my enemy be over me?  
3 Look, answer me, Lord my God,  
give light to my eyes,  
lest I sleep death  
4 Lest my enemy say, "I have him,"  
my foes exult when I slip.  
5 But I trust in Your kindness,  
my heart exults in Your saving might.  
6 I will sing to the Lord

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<sup>57</sup>Alter, *The Art*, 62-84.

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for He has requited me.

d. **Anaphora:** “the rhetorically emphatic reiteration of a single word or brief phrase, in itself not a syntactically complete unit” (64).

(1) “Shifts the center of attention from the repeated element to the material that is introduced by the repetition, at once inviting us to see all the new utterances as locked into the same structure of assertion and to look for strong differences or elements of development in the new material” (64).

The rising movement is clear, compact, and, . . . exemplary of the supplication as a form of Hebrew verse. Initially, the speaker complains of being perpetually forgotten (or ‘neglected’) by God; in the parallel verset this plight of neglect is imagined more personally and concretely--in a way, more terribly--as God's hiding His face from the supplicant. The second, triadic line translates the general condition of abandonment into the inward experience of the speaker, who flounders devising futile schemes and, what is more, is in the constant grip of grief--because, as we finally learn in the third verset, his enemy is winning out against him. It is worth noting that this last ‘how long’ in the anaphoric series (‘How long will my enemy be over me?’) not only introduces a specification barely hinted at in the preceding statements but also has a virtual causal force absent in the previous occurrences of the self-same syllables (that is, How long is my distress to continue?--for this is the reason for it). It thus nicely illustrates how verbatim repetition in a poetic text is not to be equated with total identity of meaning. (65)

(2) Lines 3, with its three imperatives “look, answer, give light” is climax of Anaphora “How long” in lines 1-2 (65). Line 4 describes the result when the climax is reached—when he dies (line 3), the enemies will rejoice (line 4).

(3) Lines 5-6 swing away (provide the answer?) to the climax—affirmation of faith (66).

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(4) *Results:* Their being no logical way out of his predicament, the poet swings to faith; similarly the intensification, by building to the climax, makes this point (67). Alter describes as: “its [Ps 13] spare, compact assertions of critical need, which at first glance may seem merely a series of equivalent statements, in fact generate a rising line of tension, reaching the pitch of ultimate disaster that then triggers the sudden turn and resolution of the believer's trust at the end”(67).

e. Psalm 39 is a more intricate variation of the linear development in Psalm 13:

1 I said: let me keep my way from offending with my  
tongue,  
let me keep a muzzle on my mouth  
as long as the wicked is before me.

2 I was mute, in stillness,  
I was dumb, cut off from good,  
and my pain was stirred.

3 My heart was hot within me,  
in my thoughts a flame burned,  
I spoke with my tongue.

4 Let me know, Lord, my end,  
and what is the measure of my days,  
that I may know how fleeting I am.

5 Bare handbreadths You made my days  
my existence is nothing to You,  
mere breath each man stands.

6 In but shadow man walks about,  
mere breath his bustlings,  
he stores up, knowing not who will gather.

7 And so what can I expect, O God?  
My hope is in you.

8 From all my transgressions deliver me,  
make me not the scorn of the fool

9 I was mute, did not open my mouth,  
for Yours was the doing.

10 Take away from me Your plague,  
from Your blows I perish.

11 In chastisement for sin You afflict a man,

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- melting like a month what he treasures.  
Mere breath are all men. Selah  
12 Hear my prayer, O Lord,  
    give ear to my cry,  
    to my tears be not silent.  
13 For I am an alien with You,  
    a resident like all my forefathers.  
14 Look away from me so I may recover,  
    before I go off and am not.

- (1) Triads in first 3 verses used to create an imbalance.

In each of these three lines the third verset stands in some relation of tension to the preceding versets, retrospectively casting a new light on them, and in the case of line 3 also following consequently from them in a way that involves an element of surprise (69).

- (2) Human condition described until focal point reached in v. 7 (71).  
(3) Suffering for that described in 8-11 (71).  
(4) The formulaic conclusion returns to triadic line (like first 3 verses), but introduces an unexpected element: "to my tears be not silent" (71).

11. ***Various genres:***

a. ***Prophetic poetry:***

- (1) most often opts for the single line approach due to the nature of their material; cf. Amos 8:9-10 (73); Amos 9:1-4 (74-5).  
(2) Furthermore, prophets used this method because it "offered a particularly effective way of imaginatively realizing inevitability, of making powerfully manifest to the listener the idea that consequences he might choose not to

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contemplate could happen, would happen, would happen without fail" (76).

b. **Job:**

- (1) In Job, the poetry of chapter 3 "sets up" the poetic answers for the rest of the book so that "the `answer' it proposes cannot be separated from the poetic vehicle of the book, and that one misses the real intent by reading the text, as has too often been done, as a paraphrasable philosophic argument merely embellished or made more arresting by poetic devices" (76).
- (2) The structures of intensification in Job are examples of structures that are not static but exhibit movement. This movement is exhibited through contrasts (e.g., "light and darkness"), so that the possibilities of the contrasts are exhibited line for line until a concrete picture is developed (80).
- (3) "The movement of intensification in Job is by no means identical with that in the Prophets; and, even within a single genre, careful scrutiny may reveal that, for example Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah respectively use the general orientation toward progressive heightening in rather different ways. One should not conclude, moreover, that either intensification or narrative focusing invariably dictates a single rising line of development in the structure of a biblical poem. Particularly in Psalms, one encounters many poems that show elaborate formal patterning that is not at all linear and that serves other expressive patterning that is not at all linear and that serves other expressive purposes than those of intensification and specification" (84).

D. From about 1970 through the present new methods in interpretation have advanced our knowledge of Hebrew poetry in ways similar to that of Alter and Kugel.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Lucas, *EOL*, 68-72.

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1. **O'Connor/Berlin:** poetry can be defined in terms of “syntactical patterns” found in the structure of the sentences, or lines, of which “gapping” (ellipsis, see above) is one of the major types. Others include:
2. **Grammatical Parallelism Morphology:** Parallelism at the level of individual words; cf. Ps 33:8, *EOL.*, 70-71
3. **Grammatical Parallelism: Syntax:** Parallelism in the surface structure of the sentence; cf. Ps 34:1, *EOL*, 71
4. **Semantic (meaning) parallelism:** Term(s) in the second line contain a “semantic continuation, progression of thought,” *EOL*, 71
5. **Phonological (sound) parallelism:** The occurrence of sound pairs in the two lines.

**XI. POETIC HERMENEUTICS**—the exegete must be aware of several issues in the practice of “poetic hermeneutics.”

A. **Hermeneutical Characteristics:**

1. **The language of emotions:**
  - a. As an “artificial language” poetry “does not follow the normal rules of communication.”<sup>59</sup>
  - b. It’s function is to express, either verbally or literarily, those feelings that come from inside a person.
  - c. Because figurative, symbolic, etc., language is open ended, i.e., open to multiple interpretations, where as doctrine requires precise, emphatic, detailed statements, poetry must be used with caution when attempting to make doctrinal proofs.
2. **Terseness:** The short clauses, comprised of varying degrees of repetition with different nuances, are often enigmatic.

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<sup>59</sup>Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 27.

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3. **Imagery:** makes use of metaphor and simile which forces the exegete to slowed down and ponder the varying possible interpretations.

a. **Imagery**, e.g., “the idea of *refining*, of removing dross, is present in

‘For silver, the crucible; for gold, the furnace.  
And Yahweh tests the mind. (Prov. 17:3)’<sup>60</sup>

b. **Simile:** These “are common enough” and in many cases come in pairs”

Let justic well up like water,  
Uprightness like a constant stream. (Amos 5:24)

c. **Metaphor:** is more direct.

Your word is a lamp to guide my feet,  
And a light on my path. (Ps 119:105).

B. These characteristics necessitate that the exegete make use of the following:

1. **Structurally** the exegete must be able to recognize the passage’s poetic components.<sup>61</sup>

2. **Comprehensively**, after breaking the passage down into its components, the exegete must be able to describe the some of the parts, to articulate the entire package.

3. The exegete must be able to recognize and articulate the various figures of speech; this “making dead” figurative language is not easy task.

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<sup>60</sup>Watson, *Hebrew Poetry*, 271.

<sup>61</sup>Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., “Hebrew Poetry,” in *Old Testament Survey: The Message Form and Background of the Old Testament*, 2 ed., William Sanford Lasor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 231ff.

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**XII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS<sup>62</sup>**

- A. The research progresses and is continually refined as Dahood's remarks show:<sup>63</sup>

Because of a growing awareness that Israelite poets inherited from their predecessors in Canaan a refined poetic tradition with a varied assortment of techniques, modern scholars treat biblical poetry with increased respect. The literary and rhetorical conventions at their disposal enabled the poets and prophets of Israel to give to their religious and theological message a subtlety and sophistication whose extent continues to unfold.

- B. Three basic approaches to Hebrew poetry to Hebrew Poetry exist:

1. ***Technical Studies***, represented above by Gottwald, F. M. Cross, David Noel Freedman, etc.
  - a. This approach involved metric analysis and comparisons to other, similar ANE material.
  - b. "Valuable as much of this work is, it often stops short of the larger interpretive task, namely, discussing poetics or poetry. Furthermore, because some recent work has been extremely technical in character, those involved in the literary study of the Bible or more general interpretive efforts have not availed themselves of the resources that these technical works provide" (15).
2. ***The Bible as Literature Movement***, represented above by Kugel and Alter.
  - a. This approach is not much different "from the ways they read Milton, Dickens, Eliot, or Frost" (16).

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<sup>62</sup>Cf. David L. Petersen and Kent Harold Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 14ff.

<sup>63</sup>Dahood, "Hebrew Poetry," 670.

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- b. “The interpretive categories are those of the literary critic, for example, the analysis of characterization, plot, theme, motif, symbolism, and the like” (16).
3. ***What might be called “Traditional.”***
  - a. These are found in most commentaries, such as Calvin and Luther, or the newer Hermeneia, etc.
  - b. Followers of this method are “interested in explicating the meaning(s) of the text by utilizing whatever perspectives—allegorical, philological, historical-critical, or theological—they deemed appropriate” (16).
- C. These three methods have not been very much in dialogue though they need to “so that they may mutually enhance the goal of reading the biblical literature with understanding and appreciation” (16).
- D. This brings us to the question, “What is the relationship between the study of Hebrew poetry and other ways of examining biblical texts?,” to which the following may be stated as worthy of consideration.
  1. “Ideally the interpreter will use various perspectives, both philological and historical-critical, in order to formulate the interpretation of a biblical text” (17).
  2. The new linguistic methods move toward a kind of iconoclasm in which historical-critical concerns are ignored due to the attraction of the literary approach. This should not be.
  3. The task of interpreting a text involves whatever tools are available to the exegete.
  4. All methods should be employed, especially all of the poetic tools discussed above, in arriving at the meaning of a text.