

PSALMS AT THE POETIC PRECIPICE

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Were we to chart twentieth century scholarly interest in the study of biblical poetry in the manner that financial analysts do the stock market, our graph would show significant peaks during the first twenty years, when some scholars were working out in fine detail the patterns of semantic parallelism that Robert Lowth had described grossly in the mid-eighteenth century, while others were struggling with Hebrew metrics, and evolving what is known as the Ley-Sievers method of determining and describing meter (e.g., Sievers, 1903; Briggs, 1906, pp. xxviii–xlvi; Gray, 1915, pp. 143–154; Podechard, 1918, pp. 59–62). Thereafter, our graph would continue in a ho-hum, doldrum flat, undulating sporadically in the middle and late fifties as scholars applied the results of earlier work in Hebrew to the Ugaritic literary texts, and then, as work in Ugaritic severed its connection to the biblical umbilical cord, applied insights from Ugaritic to clarify features in biblical poetry (e.g., the initial work of Albright, 1934 and 1944; Cross and Freedman, 1950; Cassuto, 1951, pp. 19–41; Gevirtz, 1963, pp. 6–14). Following this, our graph would again be flat except for some tics reflecting interest in syllable counting as a form of metrics (Freedman, 1972; 1975; Stuart, 1976), some explorations of word pairs (Dahood and Penar, 1972; Dahood, 1975; 1981; Boling, 1960; Yoder, 1971; Avishur, 1971/1972), and discussions of oral formulaic language (Culley, 1967, pp. 33–101; Yoder, 1971, pp. 470–472, 477–480).

From the mid-seventies, our graph would begin to swell and climb, spearing upwards towards the peaks reached at the beginning of the century, reflecting a surge of interest and an outpouring of research. The buzz words of this last decade are uttered on three levels: in a whisper, “metrics” (Garr, 1983, pp. 57–58; Watson, 1984, pp. 87–113) and more recently, “*morae*” (Christensen, 1985a, pp. 221–225; 1985b, pp. 182–183, 185–186); in a louder voice, “word pairs” (Berlin, 1983), “rhetorical

criticism" (e.g., Landom, 1975, pp. 1–16, 113–120; Kessler, 1980; Kuntz, 1983), and "structuralism" (Globe, 1974; Ap-Roberts, 1977; Auffret, 1979; 1981), but in the loudest voice of all, "linguistics". Our graph would show that we are in an expanding market, one being made by students of poetry such as Berlin (1985, pp. 18–30), Collins (1978), Cooper (1976), Geller (1979), Greenstein (1974; 1982), O'Connor (1980), and Pardee (1981; 1984).

The relationship between the first part of the graph and the last part would not be one of displacement. With rare exception, the new work, especially that done under the banner of linguistics, despite claims to the contrary, does not replace or supplant the older work. Authors of the new work apply the insights and conclusions of structuralist linguistics to biblical poetry, primarily to determine *how* and *why* this poetry works. The *what* of biblical poetry, i.e., what it is and what it looks like, was described by the work done at the beginning of the century, much of which remains unsurpassed. When the new work does address the same problems as the old, it is often able to supplement or clarify matters on the basis of knowledge and discoveries made since World War II. At times it is able to utilize the recently acquired knowledge in order to raise new and interesting questions for research.¹

Most scholars working under the banner of "linguistics" are influenced consciously and conscientiously by the gnomic scripture of the late Roman Jakobson in his 1960 essay "Linguistics and Poetics": "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination" (1960, p. 358).

Jakobson's writ, which had been characterized as "piercingly insightful and maddeningly general" (Berlin, 1985, p. 7), means that when Webster informs Shelly that Webster's son went to the local 7-Eleven, he must select from a list of equivalent terms one to indicate the subject: A-1, the

1. A lone voice which programmatically claims that almost all of this scholarship has never grasped the correct nature of Israelite poetry owing to the fact that there is no real distinction between poetry and prose in the Bible is that of J. Kugel (1981, pp. 1–95). His notion that there is no such thing as semantic parallelism, which attracted much attention immediately after its publication, has not stood up well under critical analysis and review and has consequently had little influence on recent scholarship (cf. Geller, 1983, p. 626; Landy, 1984, pp. 61–87; Watson, 1984b, pp. 89–98; and in a somewhat more positive vein, Miller, 1984, pp. 99–106). The importance of his book, however, lies not in his views on poetry, but in his excellent essay on the history of the interpretation of poetry, a major contribution to western intellectual history.

boy; A-2, the lad; A-3, my son; A-4, James; A-5, he; one to indicate his action: B-1, went; B-2, ran; B-3, walked; B-4, skipped; B-5, proceeded; and one to indicate the place: C-1, the store; C-2, the 7-Eleven; C-3, the corner mall, etc. Usually, Webster would select one term from each vertical axis of selection and combine them in a conventional order on the axis of combination: A-1 + B-3 + C-3 or A-5 + B-1 + C-1. However, were Webster interested in demonstrating his ability to convey the information through the poetic possibilities of language, he would introduce more than one element from the vertical axis of selection into the horizontal one of combination and generate more "poetic" utterance: "The lad, my son, went to the store;" or, "Jim walked to the market; my son ran to the corner mall." Webster's second possible utterance to Shelly contains parallelisms similar to Isa 1:3b: *yisrāʿēl lō yādaʿ / ʿammī lōʿ hitbônān*.

For Hebrew, the horizontal axis may be conceived as containing slots for the constituents of a verbal sentence, e.g., *S*(ubject), *O*(bject), *V*(erb), and *M*(odifiers of *V*), each capable of being filled by specific classes of fillers drawn from specific vertical axes. Substantives, pronouns, participles and noun phrases could fill either the *S* or *O* slots; finite verbs, infinitives, or participles could fill the *V* slot; while prepositional phrases, adverbs, and locatives could fill the *M* slots. Syntactic parallelism conceived simply involves repetition of the slot order in adjacent cola, e.g., *VSOM/VSOM*, and close syntactic parallelism involves using words from the same classes of fillers in parallel slots (*apud* Collins, 1978, pp. 22–23). In Hebrew poetry, the selected words are usually associated semantically and are often perceived as being partially synonymous (cf. Berlin, 1983). This is reflected in Webster's second utterance and in the citation from Isa 1:3b presented above, as well as in the examples cited in all studies of poetry referred to the preceding paragraphs.

The new inquiries into biblical poetry have taken Jakobson's insight and forged it into a powerful tool for describing and understanding the *mechanics* of the Israelite poets' craft. Work on the vertical axis of selection has provided insights into semantics, word pairs, and word associations. Work on the horizontal axis of combination has provided insights into poetic syntax; syntactic constraints, i.e., a pronounced tendency to minimize the number of words that comprise a filler; syntactic preferences; and, most important, into the relationships between contiguous syntactic combinations, that is, into the structure of adjacent lines (or stichs or colas or versets) of a poem (Sappan, 1981, pp. 15–38;

O'Connor, 1980, chs. 1, 7; Collins, 1978, pp. 187-256; Watson, 1984, pp. 201-221).² All work on the axis of combination has yielded an appreciation of the terseness of poetic syntax and a recognition of its coarcting tendency.³

2. To some extent, the rather circumscribed objectives of recent investigations into the language structures underlying Biblical poetry seems to have been overlooked by R. Alter who, in his discussion of this poetry, first dismisses most of them rather abruptly and categorically (1985, pp. 3-4, 215), and then proceeds to describe in the meta-language of impressionistic, aesthetic literary analysis some of the same schemes and designs of verse that they described in more exact linguistic terminology (cf. his remarks on word pairs, syntax, varieties of parallelism in chs. 1-3). Perhaps this may be explained as due to Alter's main interest in studying and describing the images and metaphors, the tropes of selected poetic composition which convert the formal structures of verse into works of art.

3. One indication of this terseness can be discerned by determining the number of verses per page in various books of the Bible provided that in the printed edition used, the text fills up each page to practically the same extent. The following chart, based on the M. Letteris edition published by the British and Foreign Bible Society, 1937, is expanded from Haran, 1985, pp. 3-4 with the calculation of average number of verses per page:

<i>book</i>	<i>pages in Bible</i>	<i>number of verses according to Massorah</i>	<i>average number of verses per page</i>
Gen	36.3	1534	42
Exod	30.5	1209	39
Lev	22	859	39
Num	31	1288	39.6
Deut	27	955	35
Josh	19	656	34.5
Judg	19	618	32.5
Sam	45	1506	33.4
Kgs	47.5	1534	32
Isa	32.5	1295	39.8
Jer	41	1365	33
Ezek	37	1273	34
Twelve	29.5	1050	35.6
Ps	40	2527	63
Prov	22.3	915	41
Job	16	1070	66.8
Cant	2.5	117	46
Ruth	2.5	85	34
Lam	3	154	51
Eccl	5.5	222	40
Esth	6	167	27
Dan	11.5	357	31
Ezra-Neh	18	688	38
Chr	48	1656	34.5

The three books with the largest average number of verses per page are Job, Psalms, and Lamentations, all books with an extremely high poetic content. Esther, Daniel, and Kings have the lowest averages.

Although it is heuristically useful to isolate one axis from the other in order to study certain of its aspects, it is recognized that we are unable to demonstrate that a poet determined his axis of combination on the basis of decisions made on the axis of selection or *vice versa*. Thus, the production of poetry is best imagined as a consequence of an ongoing tension between the two. In some lines of a poem, equivalent terms from the same axis may appear in contiguous yet structurally different combinations, while in others, non-equivalent terms may occur in contiguous and structurally similar combinations. That is, in some cases, the parallelism is more apparent on the semantic level than on the syntactic, while in others, the syntactic parallelism is more apparent:

no syntactic parallelism

Ps 34:2: *ʾābārēkāh ʾet YHWH bēkol-^cet/ tāmīd tēhillātō bēpī*

Ps. 38:3: *kī ḥiṣṣekā niḥātū-bī/wattinḥat ʿalay yādekā*

Isa 59:8: *derek šālōm lō yādā^cū/ wēʾēn mišpaṭ bēma ʿgēlōtām*

syntactic parallelism

Isa 1:16: *raḥṣū/ hizzakkū/ hāsīrū roa^c ma^cālēlēkem minneged ʿēnāy/ ḥidlū hārēa^c*

Isa5:2: *wayʿazqēhū/ waysaqqēlēhū/ wayyiṭṭa^cēhū
sōrēq/ wayyiben migdāl bētōkō wēgam-yeqeb ḥāṣēb
bō/ wayqaw la^cʾsōt ʿānābīm/ wayya^cas bēʾūšīm*

Ps 2:10–11: *... mēlākim haskīlū/ hiwwāsērū šōpṭē ʾareṣ ʿibdū ʾet-
YHWH bēyirʾā/ wēgilū bir^cādā*

This notion of the “apparency of parallelism” is important because if the ancient poet’s projection of equivalences was so subtle that it was not readily apparent, then it is clear that his “recitership” and “listenership” would not have recognized the poetic function in his use of language. Hence, they would not have recognized his work as poetry.

If modern readers are at times unable to comprehend the semantic nexus between some intended equivalents seemingly drawn from the same axis of selection by Israelite poets, or, if they are unable to clarify them through the rules of word association described by psycholinguists (cf. Berlin, 1983; 1985, pp. 64–83), then moderns may claim that they lack a byte of linguistic knowledge possessed by the ancients. However, the modern reader has no such claim on the syntactic level. Syntactic parallelism is either apparent in the surface structure of the text or it is not

These verse per page statistics can only be an inexact measure of terseness, a measure of thumb, since the verses are units of recitation usually marking major disjuncture at the ends of phrases or clauses, not necessarily at the ends of sentences. A grammatical sentence can extend over more than one verse; a verse may contain more than one grammatical sentence.

present. That syntactic parallelism which linguists describe and reconstruct in deep structure is of interest, but in the fleeting moment of recitation, when the poem lived for the Israelite audience, it was irrelevant because it was not apparent. Thus, the generation of apparent parallelism between contiguous combinations must always be considered a surface structure phenomenon.⁴

By and large, many psalmodic texts canter along to a dominant 3:3 rhythm when scanned according to the Ley-Sievers method—about 100 psalms can be characterized this way—with some variations. They canter along with at least two equivalent terms from the axis of selection projected periodically into recognizably similar, although not always identical, contiguous combinations. Israelite psalmists were capable of playing with the possibilities of the equivalents, piling them up or stretching them thin, but never so thin that they were no longer apparent, because then the poets would have drifted into prose.

The objective of this study is to use Jakobson's insight in exploring the outer limit of biblical poeity as described above, the point at which the poetic function of the language totters on the brink of dissolution. It presupposes the general validity of work done at the beginning of this century as well as the *modus operandi* and linguistic presuppositions of more recent scholarship. This objective may be achieved best through a consideration of three "sloppy psalms".

The advantages of conducting this exploration in Psalms are twofold: 1) with few exceptions, each psalm is a well defined composition; 2) with the exception of psalm titles and the five prosaic doxologies, all psalms can be considered poetic compositions perceived as being generically akin—though not of the same psalmodic genre—by virtue of the inclusion in the collection.

Psalms 133

Psalm 133 is a psalm that starts but never really ends. Its point, *hinnēh ma-tôb ūma-nā^cim šebet ʾaḥim gam-yāhad*, is made in the first verse, and then it chases a chain of similes into a verbal whirlpool and stops, never really clarifying itself. Like a passenger after the jerking halt at the end of a roller-coaster ride, the reader of Ps 133 asks, "How did I get to *ḥayyim ʿad-hā^côlām* from the apogee of *šebet ʾaḥim gam-yāhad*?"

4. Contrast Greenstein (1982, p. 45, note 14; pp. 46, 48): "In order to reveal a repetition of syntactic patterning one must of necessity examine not only the surface structure of the line, but also its more abstract underlying relations" (p. 46).

If *gam-yāhad* at the end of v. 1 is the end of a sentence, then v. 2–3 are a collection of clauses that peter out with no syntactic cloture; if v. 1 is not a sentence, then vv. 1–3 comprise a lengthy, run-on, asyndetic sentence. There is nothing in the text that indicates which of these possible readings is correct. The choice of interpretation would be made by the reciter and signalled by his decision to either lower or maintain the pitch of his voice at the end of v. 1. Lowering his pitch would signal a cloture at the end of v. 1 and indicate the first reading; maintaining his pitch across the traditional verse boundary between vv. 1–2 would indicate the second reading. Assuming the psalmist's grammatical competence, the following analysis considers only the second possibility. (An unscientific survey among colleagues and students indicates that most readers prefer the first possibility. This may be due to the fact that the lyrical possibilities of v. 1 have been exploited by many tunesmiths whose work is familiar to the readers.)

How does psalm 133 work?

V. 1 presents a value statement about a(n observed [?]) fact.

V. 2a introduces a simile to enhance and illustrate the statement.

V. 2b extends the simile of v. 2a by supplying an appositive for *hazzāqān*, qualifying it either as a specific type of beard, an “Aaron beard”, or as the beard of a specific individual “the beard of Aaron”, *zēqan-ʾahārōn*. It is not just any old beard. Subjoined to the appositive is a relative clause that characterizes the beard even further and echoes the vocabulary of the initial simile through the repetition of *yōrēd* ^{al}.

V. 3a reintroduces the simile pattern of v. 2b, and in doing so introduces an apparent ambiguity into the poem. Rereading the psalm, v. 3a can be perceived as a new simile for *šebet ʾaḥīm gam-yāhad*; but on first hearing, it would be comprehended naturally as a simile describing the adjacent phrase *zēqan-ʾahārōn šeyyōrēd* ^{al-pî middōtāw}. The simile of v. 3a, like that of v. 2b, contains a relative clause and repeats the words *yōrēd* ^{al}.

V. 4, Whose first word, *kî*, is to be rendered “because” and not considered an asseverative “indeed” or the like, is a comment on the proper noun *šiyyôn* in v. 3b, *šām* and *šiyyôn* having come from the same axis of selection.⁵ (Cf. the 7-Eleven, the store, there.)

5. So already Schutz (1904, p. 368). The suggestion of Power (1922, pp. 346–47) that *šywn* is a misspelling of *šywn* = *šyʾn* (cf. Deut 4:48) reflected in some commentaries is clever but gratuitous. It renders the last verse unexplicable in terms of the cultural setting. (Cf. the following note.)

Considered backwards, the psalm contains a comment on a simile to an appositive to a simile for an evaluative statement of a fact.

The apparent semantic equivalents, in this brief composition are *zēqan-³ahārōn* > *hazzāqān*, *yōrēd ^cal* (3x), and *šām* > *šiyōn*. Associated word pairs which are less apparent are *šemen* > *rōš*, *rōš* > *zāqān*, *rōš* > *ʔal*, *rōš* > *hermōn*, and *šemen* > *ʔal*. (In these notations, the arrow indicates the direction of association, from the second term to the first. Whereas genre awareness would prompt the listener to anticipate pairs, only the appearance of the second term, and its recognition as *the* second term would satisfy this anticipation.)

The syntactic parallelism between the various verses that contain combinations built on the (X) *yōrēd ^cal* (Y) pattern is the main integrative factor in the psalm.⁶

Psalm 134

If psalm 133 could be characterized as never really ending, this psalm may be described as never really starting. Ps 134 is a compact poem in which the psalmist singlemindedly commands a group of devotees, *ʕabdē YHWH*, to bless YHWH and then either expresses the hope or prays that YHWH bless them.

How does psalm 134 work?

V. 1 begins with a command to bless YHWH and then makes the subject of the imperative explicit; an appositional relative clause is appended to the explicit subject, qualifying it even further. The last word of this verse is ambiguous. It could be part of the relative clause indicating that the psalmist was addressing his words to those who stood in the temple courts in the nighttime or during specific nights; alternatively, it could be a prepositional phrase functioning adverbally with the imperative: "Praise YHWH . . . in the nighttime."⁷

6. The "dwelling together of brothers" and the reference to "mountains of Zion" suggest that the psalm lauds the fact that Jerusalem, whose topography is characterized by distinct hills—1) the south-east hill, the City of David, 2) the Temple mount, 3) the north-west hill, site of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and 4) the south-west hill, the contemporary Mt. Zion—is united. Cf. Ps 122:3: *yērušālayim habbēnūyā kēʕir šehubbērā-llāh yaḥdāw*. The reference to "life forever" may allude to the blessing mentioned in Ps 21:5: *ḥayyim šāʔal mimmēkā nātattā lō ʔōrek yāmim ʕōlām wāʕed*, which is part of the royal theological tradition (cf. Skehan, 1971, pp. 62–63). Thus the psalm represents an integration of both royal and Zion theologies.

7. The exact reference of this phrase is difficult to ascertain since no cultic activities took place in the Temple during the night. 1 Chr 9:33 indicates that the "singers" had duties to perform at night but does not mention singing whereas Isa 30:29 does mention it but only in

V. 2a, b is comprised of two syndetic imperative sentences. V. 2b repeats part of v. 1a verbatim.

V. 3 contains the psalmist's intonation on behalf of those whom he has just commanded and concludes with a phrase appositive to YHWH, *ʿōsēh šāmayim wāʾāres*.

The apparent semantic equivalents in this psalm are *YHWH* (5x), the root *b-r-k* (3x); and perhaps *bêt YHWH > qōdeš*. Less apparent, if at all real, is *šēʿû-yēdēkem > bārēkû* (cf. Ps 28:2 where the expression *bēnosʿî yāday ʿel-dēbîr qodšēkā* seems to indicate a posture of supplication).⁸

The apparent parallels in patterns of combinations are 1) the imperative pattern which recurs three times, vv. 1–2, to which the related jussive of v. 3 may be appended; and 2) the appositive constructions of vv. 1, 3.

Psalm 125

How does psalm 125 work?

V. 1 likens those who trust in YHWH to Mt. Zion, *kēhar-šiyyôn*, which is then characterized additionally with a relative clause.

V. 2a continues the sentence that began in v. 1, introducing a simile with the ellipsis of the preposition *k*: (are <like>) Jerusalem. This second simile of the psalm is also characterized additionally by a relative clause, “mountains encircle her.”⁹ The application of the second simile with its accompanying clause to the subject of the sentence, “those who trust in YHWH”, is clarified by a concluding clause introduced by a *waw explicativum*: “that is, YHWH encircles his people now and forever.”

V. 3, which comments on the implication of the expression *YHWH sābîb lēʿammô*, continues the sentence from the end of v. 2 without interruption: “. . . now and forever because, *kî*, the staff of the wicked (or “of wickedness”) will not rest . . .,” or “. . . now and forever because he will not place the staff of the wicked . . .” (reading *yānîaḥ* for M.T. *yānûaḥ*).

the evenings of holidays. The Isaiah passage tilts the interpretive translation possibilities towards “during the nights (of holidays).”

8. The LXX may reflect a Hebrew consonantal text that had *bḥsrwt byt ʿlḥynw*, “in the courts of the house of our God”, before *blylwt*. This reading adds balance and typical semantic parallelism to the psalm. However, these words appear to be due to an inner LXX development influenced by a copyists instinctive feel for parallelism and Ps 135:2. The additional words are absent from liQPs^a.

9. In contrast to the mountains implied in Ps 133:3, this refers to mountains outside of Jerusalem: Mt. Scopus, Mt. of Olives, Mt. of the Destroyer, and the rise on which the Rechavia section of west Jerusalem was built.

V. 4 contains the conclusion of the sentence begun in the first verse. The prayer of this verse indicates that vv. 1–4 are a complex topic sentence that follow a familiar pattern: (Concerning) those who trust in YHWH, . . . may YHWH do good. . . .¹⁰

V. 5a presents a prayer different than that in v. 4, following the same pattern as vv. 1–4: “But (concerning) those who turn to their crooked ways, may YHWH cause them to walk with workers of inquiry.”¹¹

V. 5b contains a pious concluding statement.

Despite the many difficulties of interpretation posed by this psalm, especially v. 3, it is possible to indicate the following apparent equivalents: *lō yimmōt* > *yēšeb*, *yērūšālayim* > *šiyyôn*, *hārīm* > *har*, *sābīb* > *sābīb*, *mē^cattāh wē^cad^c ḥōlām* > *lē^cōlām*, *šaddīqīm* > *šaddīqīm*, *ṭōbīm* > *yēšārīm*, *YHWH* > *YHWH*, and to the following less apparent words pairs: *gōrāl* > *yērūšālayim*, *šaddīqīm* > *bōṭēhīm ba YHWH*, and *ṭōbīm* > *hēṭībā*.

Apparent syntactic parallelism is discernable in the two topic sentences that dominate the structure of Ps 125 as a whole, vv. 1–4, v. 5a, and between the various phrases and clauses that constitute vrs. 1–4 as pointed out above.

None of these psalms contain compact semantic parallelism of the type that Webster might have used to impress his friend Shelly: “Jim walked to the market; my son ran to the corner mall.” Examples of such compact parallelisms from Psalms are the following:

Ps 85:11: *ḥesed-wē^ṣemet nīpgāšū* | *šedeq wēšālōm nāšāqū*

Grace and truth meet; justice and well being kiss.

Ps. 85:12: *ṣ^ṣemet mē^ṣereš tišmāh* | *wēšedeq miššāmayim nišqāp*

Truth from the earth springs (up), while justice from the heavens looks (down).

10. This is a very clear example of a *casus pendens* functionally adnominally for emphasis. Cf. Muraoka, 1985, p. 94 and cf. p. 96 for his remarks on the emphatic function of the structure of v. 5.

11. A reader has suggested that vv. 1–3 could be viewed as a complex nominal sentence whose grammatical core is *X (is) like Y*, while v. 4 be seen as an independent sentence. If this be the case, since the psalm's context identifies the object of the imperative verb in v. 4, the *ṭōbīm*, with the subject of the preceding sentence (vv. 1–3), the two would comprise a logical unit with something being predicated about a complexly presented object, i.e., the grammatical object of the sentence in v. 4 would be perceived as the logical subject of the idea beginning in v. 1. This comprehension of the relationship between vv. 1–3 and v. 4 would be confirmed by the syntax of v. 5.

Ps 123:2: *hinnē kē'ēnē 'ābādīm 'el-yad 'ādōnēhem/ kē'ēnē šiphā
'el-yad gēbirtāh/ kēn 'ēnēnū 'el-YHWH 'ēlōhēnū 'ad
šeyyēhannēnū.*

As the eyes of slaves (gaze) at the hand of their masters

As the eyes of a slave-girl (gaze) at the hand of her mistress

So our eyes (gaze) at YHWH our god until he shows us favor.

These examples contain syntactically parallel units, combinations, in which semantic equivalents (or word pairs) occupy corresponding slots so that the see-saw movement between them is recognizably balanced syntactically while the similarities in the semantic import of each combination are equally perceptible. This piling up of equivalences on the axis of combination produces the poetic effect of *déja entendu*. In the three psalms examined above, such a piling up or thick bunching is not found.¹²

Of the listed semantic equivalents and word pairs in Ps 125, 133, and 134, only four occupy corresponding slots on similarly constructed axes of combination, and of these, only one pair occurs in two contiguous combinations:

Ps 125: 1, 5: *hammaṭṭîm 'āqalqallôtām > habbōṭēhîm baYHWH*

Ps 133:2, 3: *kēṭal ḥermôn > kaššemen haṭṭōb*

Ps. 134:1, 2: *bārēkū 'et-YHWH > šē'û-yēdēkem qōdeš > bārēkū 'et-YHWH*

The exception to this is found in Ps 125:1–2: *yērušālayim > har šiyyôn*. If exact repetitions are counted, e.g., YHWH in Ps 134, the number of examples could be increased; but such repetitions belong properly to the genre “list” and not to the projected equivalencies of Jakobson’s statement.

The rest of the apparent equivalents and word pairs identified above do not fall into this pattern and hence cannot be considered as demonstrating the poetic function of language. They are no different than the following associated words *'āhikā > nāḥôr, nāḥôr > milkā, nāḥôr > 'abrāhām*, and *bānîm > yālēdā* in Gen 22:20: *wayēhî 'aḥrê haddēbārîm hā'ēlleh*

The whole question of nominal sentences in Biblical Hebrew—a question that underlies part of the discussion in this note—must be reconsidered in light of non-Western approaches to grammar. Cf. B. Weiss, 1985, pp. 619–620.

12. Contrast the relatively thick clustering of equivalents in Ps 89 as analyzed in Pardee, 1984.

wayyuggad lē^ʔabrāhām lē^ʔmōr hinnē yālēdā milkā gam-hī bānīm lēnāhōr
 ʔāhīkā; or šām > māqôm, YHWH > ʔēlohēkā, šōn ūbāqār > zābahtā
 pesaḥ in Deut 16:2: wēzābahtā pesaḥ laYHWH ʔēlohēkā šōn ūbāqār
 bammāqôm ʔāšer yibḥar YHWH lēšakkēn šēmō šām. These pairs are part
 of the communication, associated by reason of the subject of the com-
 munication, and do not, in and of themselves, constitute poetry.

What makes Ps 125, 133, and 134 sloppy is the relative paucity of any
 overt semantic parallelism in the overbearing presence of syntactic paral-
 lelism. The apparent semantic equivalents and word pairs in these psalms
 are trivial or repetitive; yet it is only their presence in the three composi-
 tions that enables modern readers—and it is to be suspected, the ancient
 Israelite as well—to recognize them as demonstrating the application of
 Jakobson's description of the poetic function of language.

The overly long first sentences of Ps 125 and 133 are atypical of most
 psalms (but cf. Ps 124:1–5) and of most biblical prose (but cf. Gen 1:1–3).
 Thus, their very length may be interpreted as representing an experiment
 that attempted to elicit the experience of *déja entendu*, first by extending
 the limit of syntactic closure atypically in order to draw attention to the
 syntax of the grammatical sentence, and second by repeating similar axes
 of combination in the dependent clauses and embedded independent
 ones, highlighting them as the equivalencies. The very few semantic
 equivalents may then be explained as conventional holdovers intended to
 mark the compositions' genre despite the fact that the psalms were written
 in an unconventional manner. This description may be applied also to
 Ps 134 with its imperatives. In this psalm, however, the only significant
 atypical element is the piling up of appositives in the first verse. It is less
 sloppy than the others.

In the light of these observations, the sloppy psalms 1) may be
 considered attempts by ancient poets to explore the possibilities of
 changing a perception of poetic language away from one that emphasized
 repetition of message, with some tolerable variations, toward one that
 emphasized repetition of combinations.¹³ 2) They may also be deemed

13. Extrapolating from the fact that the only clear examples of such psalms are from
 those entitled *šir hamma'ālôt*, and that there are clear linguistic indications that some of
 these may be exilic or post-exilic compositions (Hurvitz, 1972, pp. 152–160), it may be
 proposed cautiously that these experiments were initiated near the end of the pre-exilic
 period, *circa* 630 B.C.E. If this proposal has merit, the connection between the experiment in
 psalmody which the sloppy psalms represent, the contemporaneous development of the
 florid Deuteronomistic style of paranesis (cf. Braulik, 1978, pp. 78–155) and the prosaic style
 of Jeremiah's oracles suggest a research topic in biblical linguistic history which I hope
 others will see fit to examine.

experiments promoting diffuse syntax at the expense of more traditional coarcting structures. 3) Alternatively, they just may be poorly written psalms.¹⁴

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14. This point, made by Dr. J. Unterman at the AJS meeting in Boston, December, 1985, has much merit. The contemporary trend in literary analyses of biblical texts is to discover, reveal, or assert that they are all exquisite, artful, ingeniously complex, etc. compositions. Nary is heard a discouraging word. Are there no poor, inelegant compositions in the Bible? I suspect that the answer to this question lies in the sociology of scholarship rather than in the literary study of the Bible.

This same issue is broached for Biblical narrative by S. Geller who asks "if no art is bad, can any art be good?" He continues his remarks on this issue by pointing out that the aesthetic judgment, be it positive or negative, has no bearing on whether or not a given text is meaningful (1984, pp. 414–415).

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