4 Morris Halle

A biblical pattern poem

It is a commonplace of literary criticism that an essential prerequisite for a proper appreciation of a text is a good grasp of its form. In what follows I shall try to show that one of the best-known psalms has striking formal properties that appear not to have been previously noticed. It is my hope that in bringing out these features of the psalm I shall contribute something towards a better understanding of a poem about which so much has been written that it might seem that there is no longer anything new to be said.

Some years ago, John McCarthy and I discovered that Psalm 137, the one that in the King James translation of the Bible begins with the words 'By the rivers of Babylon', is composed in conformity with a rudimentary vowel-counting metre which is quite similar to that utilised in most of the major poetry of the different Romance languages. (For details see Halle and McCarthy (1981)) Typically in such metres the number of vowels per line is limited in accordance with some simple principle. To make the writing of such lines a bit more challenging, in most of these traditions not all vowels are counted equally. For instance, in French verse the *e-muet* counts only if followed by a syllable beginning with a consonant, whereas all other vowels are counted without regard to what follows. As an example, consider the well-known lines of Verlaine:

Il pleure dans mon coeur
Comme il pleut sur la ville,
Quelle est cette langueur
Qui pénètre mon coeur?

If we count the vowels that are actually pronounced in each line in standard literary French, we get five in the first line, six in the second, five in the third, and five or six in the fourth. From the point of view of its metre, each line has precisely six vowels. We can get the correct count if, in conformity with the rule stated in the preceding paragraph, we count the *e-muet* in the first line. On the other hand, in the second line neither of the *e-muets* counts: the one in *comme* is discounted because it is not followed by a syllable with consonantal onset, whereas that in *ville* is not counted because no syllable whatever follows

it. As required by the rule above, in the third line the *e-muet* of *cette* is counted, but not that of *quelle*, whereas in the fourth line the *e-muet* in *pénètre* is counted.

The Old Testament verse that we shall discuss here conforms to a metrical scheme much like that of French. Syllables following the last stressed vowel in a line are systematically excluded from the count, and certain other vowels are not counted in certain contexts. For people interested in Old Testament verse I have listed the latter:

The so-called secondary *ḥaṭepīm*:

ʔaʕleh 'I shall rise' rather than ʔaʕǽleh

The *shwa* in 'doubly open' syllables $VC_1 \sim C_2V$: binʔóī 'in pastures' rather than binǽʔōī

The *patah* preceding syllable final gutturals:

ʔelóh rather than ʔelóah

Genesis 4, 23–24:   The Curse of Lemekh
Psalm 23:   'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want'
Psalm 54:   'Save me, O God, by thy name'
Psalm 114:   'When Israel went out of Egypt'

My guess is that there are metrical texts of this type yet to be discovered in the Bible, but their number is not large. I have investigated a fair number of additional Old Testament poems, but except for the five just mentioned, I have so far been unable to find any that are clearly composed in the vowel counting metre put forth above.[1] I do not consider this especially surprising since the texts included in the Bible were composed over a period which is significantly longer than that separating us from Chaucer.

The discovery that some text has metrical structure is, of course, far from uncommon. For example, when I was a graduate student our teacher Roman Jakobson taught us that the text below is an instance of Slavic epic verse.

rusi jestĺ veseljie piti   Rus(sia) takes pleasure in drinking
ne možemŭ bezŭ togo žiti   we cannot live without it

This text is to be found in the Russian Primary Chronicle, of which the oldest extant manuscript dates from the fourteenth century, and has been transmitted to us without any indication that it might be metrical. These words were supposed to have been uttered in 989 AD by the Grand Duke St Vladimir of Kiev in his reply to a missionary who was attempting to convert him and his people to Islam. The missionary had informed Vladimir that Islam prohibited its adherents from using alcohol, whereupon the sainted duke responded with the words above.

Jakobson pointed out that Vladimir's reply was a perfect example of the metre of Slavic epic verse, where each line is ten syllables long, and the fourth and tenth syllables coincide with the end of a polysyllabic word.[2] At this point the objection might be raised that the metrical organisation that Jakobson found in the above is the result of pure chance and is therefore without real significance, and the same objection might be raised against my proposal concerning the metre of the Biblical texts listed earlier. There are standard statistical methods to estimate precisely the likelihood of a line conforming to a particular metre arising accidentally. Although to my knowledge no one has actually calculated the statistical probability of a line conforming to the Slavic epic metre or any other metre arising by accident we may safely assume that it is quite low. If the probability of a single metrical line arising by accident is small,

the probability of two such lines arising by pure chance is lower still.

In fact, if the probability of one metrical line arising by chance is one in a hundred, that of two such lines is one in ten thousand, three such lines one in a million, etc. But though the probability is low, occasionally such line sequences will arise by accident.

I have set off the phrase above because without any conscious intention on my part, the phrase is composed of two consecutive iambic pentameter lines. We thus have experimental proof that a metrical couplet may arise by pure chance. In view of this it would seem that with regard to a short text like Vladimir's reply, reasonable individuals may well disagree, some siding with Jakobson, others remaining sceptical. With regard to longer passages, however, even passages only a few lines longer, the belief that these might have arisen by accident is no more warranted than the belief that to win the Irish Sweepstakes one needs only to buy a ticket.

The Old Testament texts that we are discussing here are, in fact, considerably longer than the couplets illustrated. Thus, the probability that they might have arisen by accident is vanishingly small. For instance, Psalm 23 is composed of nine couplets with the syllable count[3]

7–7   8–5   8–5   8–10(5)   7–5   7–5   8–5   8–5   8–5

If we apply the same syllable count to the King James translation of Pslam 23, we obtain the distribution

10–10   9–6   9–4   14–10(5)   5–4   9–7   8–5   9–6   10–2

Even the most cursory comparison of the number distribution shows that there is a pattern in the first but none in the second. Patterns are readily discerned also in the remaining three texts listed as shown by their syllable distributions:

Gen. 4, 23–24:   10–10   8–8   8–8
Psalm 54:   8–8   8–7–7–8   8–8–8–7–7–8–8–(8)
Psalm 114:   8–7–8–7   7–8–8–6   7–8–8–6   8–7–8–7

The Curse of Lemekh from Genesis thus consists of three couplets. Pslam 54 is composed of two identical stanzas if the last line of the second stanza is disregarded, for which there is some semantic support. Psalm 114 consists of four stanzas in the chiasmatic arrangement A–B–B–A.[4] It is totally improbable that patterns with this much structure could have arisen by accident. Consider now Psalm 137, which I have reproduced with translation:

I
ʕal-nehārōt bĕbābel   7   On rivers in Babylon
šām yāšabnû gam-bakî(nû)   7   there we sat and also wept
bĕzokrēnû ʔet-siyyôn   7   as we were recalling Zion.
ʕal-ʕarābîm bĕtôkāh   7   On poplar-trees in her midst
tālînû kinnōrôtê(nû)   7   we hung up our violins.

II
kî šām šĕʔēlû(nû)   5   For there our own captors
šôbēnû dibrê-šîr   6   asked from us words of song
wĕtôlālēnû simhāh   7   and those who mocked us, rejoicing:
šîrû lānû miššîr siyyôn   8   'Sing us some of the songs of Zion'.

III
ʔēk nāšîr ʔet-šîrĕ-yahwēh   8   How are we to sing Yahweh's songs
ʕal ʔadmat nēkār   5   on an alien soil?
ʔim-ʔeškāhēk yĕrûšālēm   8   If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,
tiškah yĕmînî   5   let my right hand wither!
tidbaq lĕšônî lĕhikkî   8   Let my own tongue stick to my palate
ʔim-lōʔ ʔezkĕrē(kî)   5   should I not recall thee,
ʔim-lōʔ ʔaʕleh yĕrûšālēm   8   should I not raise thee, O Jerusalem,
ʕal rōʔš simhātî   5   .on my head in gladness.

IV
zekôr yahwēh libnê ʔedôm   8   Recall, Yahweh, to Edom's sons
ʔet yĕmê yĕrûšālēm   7   their deeds on the days of Jersualem,
hāʔōmrîm ʕārû ʕā(rû)   6   who said: 'Strip it all down:
ʕad hayĕsôd bāh   5   to its bare foundations.'

V
bat-bābel haššĕdûdāh   7   O daughter of plundered Babylon,
ʔašrê šeyyĕšallem-lāk   7   happy he who pays you back
gĕmûlēk šeggāmalt lā(nû)   7   the evil that you have done us!
ʔašrê šeyyōhēz wĕnippēs   8   Happy he who seizes and dashes
ʕōlalayik ʕel-hassā(laʕ)   7   your infants against the rock!

The text reproduced above is that established in Halle and McCarthy (1981) and differs in a number of details from the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible. As the arguments for the emendations are given in the cited paper I shall not discuss any of our emendations except for that in the first line because of its somewhat special interest. In the Masoretic text the first line of the psalm reads

ʕal nahărōt bābel   'on the rivers of Babylon'

rather than, as proposed

ʕal nĕhārōt bĕbābel   'on rivers in Babylon'

This reading, which was first argued for in Freedman (1971), is supported by the following arguments: a) The extra syllable 'in' is required by the metre, for the first and last stanza of the psalm are made up of lines that contain

seven – not six – syllables. b) The introduction of the preposition is supported by line 4

ʕal-ʕarābîm bĕtôkāh   'on poplar-trees in her midst'

It establishes an exact parallelism between these two lines in their prepositions, as is quite common in biblical poetry. c) An accidental haplography in copying a sequence of three identical letters is quite likely. d) The line has been preserved in one of the finds in the Qumran caves and contains there the preposition bĕ.

Returning to the psalm it is easy to see that as pointed out by Freedman the poem is composed of five stanzas. Moreover, one notices at once that the first and the last, and the second and the penultimate stanzas have the same number of lines. In addition, the lengths of the lines – where length is measured by counting vowels in accordance with the proposed algorithm – constitute an additional pattern: we have a stanza of five lines each seven syllables long adjacent to a stanza of four lines of increasing (respectively, decreasing) length. The stanza in the middle consists of four couplets in which an eight-syllable line is paired with a five-syllable line.[5]

It hardly needs saying that such regularities do not normally arise in a poem without being consciously put there by the poet. Equally obvious – and of special relevance from the point of view of the linguistics of writing – is the observation that the regularities just pointed out imply that the poem was composed in a written form, for the regularities cannot be apprehended just by listening to the text. The psalm therefore is the creation of a literate poet writing for a literate audience exploiting possibilities provided by the fact that his medium is simultaneously both phonetic and graphic. These observations immediately bring up the further question as to the purpose the poet might have pursued in giving this unusual form to his poem.

A possible answer suggests itself if we examine the distribution of metrical vowels in the lines of the poem and represent each metrical syllable by an x, as shown below. We represent the lines from right to left because that is the direction of Hebrew writing:

If, in addition, the poem is 'laid on its side' with its first line on the right and its last line on the left, we obtain the graphic pattern

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                                                x
                            x x x x x           x x x x x
            x               x x x x x           x x x x x       x x x x x
            x x x x x       x x x x x       x   x x x x x   x   x x x x x
x x x x x x x   x x x x x   x x x x x   x   x x x x x x x x x   x x x x x x x
x x x x x x x   x x x x x   x x x x x   x x x x x x x x x x x   x x x x x x x
x x x x x x x   x x x x x   x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x   x x x x x x x
x x x x x x x   x x x x x   x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x   x x x x x x x
x x x x x x x   x x x x x   x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x   x x x x x x x
                x x x x x   x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x   x x x x x x x
                x x x x x   x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x   x x x x x x x
                x x x x x   x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x   x x x x x x x
                x x x x x   x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x   x x x x x x x
                x x x x x   x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x
                x x x x x   x x x x x x x x x x x
                x x x x x

    V              IV              III              II              I
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With a modicum of imagination and some good will this pattern may be seen as a building consisting of two wings – stanzas I and V – and a central structure composed of a sloping roof – stanzas II and IV – and four columns in the middle – stanza III. The obvious further inference that this pattern invites is that it represents the temple in Jerusalem, whose destruction by the Babylonians in 586 BC is the central event commemorated in the poem.

If my suggestion is correct we have before us a pattern poem of great antiquity. Pattern poetry is 'verse which by varying the length of lines forms a picture' (Church (1946)). Though of considerable antiquity and obviously popular down through the ages, pattern poetry has had a very cool reception from critics. The sixteenth-century English critic Gabriel Harvey wrote: 'Simmias Rhodius (c300 BC) a folishe idle phantastical poet that first devised this riminge with other triflinge and childishe idle toys to make verse that shoulde in proportion represent the form and figure of an egg, an ape, a winge, and sutche ridiculous and mad gugaws and crockchetts, and of late foolishly revived by sum, otherwise not unlearned, as Pieriors, Scaliger, Crispin and the rest of that crue ...' (quoted by Church op. cit.). Harvey's opinion is shared by the early twentieth-century American critic W.S. Walsh, who apparently attempted to go Harvey one better in the following passage (Walsh (1906) pp. 270 – f.): 'There is pity, or even forgiveness, for all forms of human folly, imbecility, errors and crime, yet the makers of [Emblematic, Figurative or Shaped Poems] strain the divinity of forgiveness to an almost diabolical tension ... Though one's better self may revolt at the grotesque horrors of the medieval hell, one feels that not even the theological mind has ever conceived a punishment severe enough to castigate these trespassers on our patience. ...', Yet Walsh is forced to admit just a few short sentences further on in his text that 'in spite of the degradation of the offence, great names in the past, great names even in the immediate present, must be grouped among the offenders. Indeed, so highly was it thought of at one time that the very name of the reputed inventor has been preserved to us.'

Pattern poems, as noted above, were composed by Greek poets as early as the third century BC. Wojaczek (1969) has shown that these poems were creations of poets belonging to a special club or guild active on the island of Kos, the most famous among whom was Theocritus (c.310–250 BC). It is therefore natural to inquire whether the idea of writing pattern poetry was borrowed by the psalmist from the Greeks, or vice versa. We know that both Greeks and Jews were deeply involved in the affairs of the Persian empire during the fifth and sixth centuries BC. Recall that the Persian emperor Darius (522–486 BC), who authorised the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and thereby officially ended the Babylonian exile that is the subject of Psalm 137 was also responsible for sending to Greece the Persian invasion force that was defeated in the battle of Marathon (490 BC). The involvement of Jews and Greeks with Persia must inevitably have led to contacts between the two peoples especially since both were heavily involved in commerce. As Bickerman has written: 'It is a widely spread error ... that the Jews ... were immune to foreign contagion and, until the Macedonian conquest, separated from the Greek world. As a matter of fact, excavations have shown that in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, Palestine belonged to the belt of an eclectic, Greco-Egyptian-Asiatic culture, which extended from the Nile Delta to Cilicia' (Bickerman (1949) p.75). That these contacts might also have resulted in

literary influences, of which the pattern poem that we have just examined is one bit of evidence, is most plausible.

It is, of course, next to impossible at this distance in time to establish definitive links between the author of Psalm 137 and Theocritus, Simmias and other Greek poets. The remarkable popularity of pattern poems among readers as well as writers of poetry is persuasively attested by the mere fact that the poems survived in various manuscript copies from the third century BC until the sixteenth century AD when they were reproduced in some of the earliest printed books and elicited almost immediate imitation by poets writing in English, French and other languages.[6] Given the popularity of pattern poetry it would be quite unsurprising if a Jewish poet had decided to compose verse in this form and produced a poem that was ultimately included in the Old Testament canon. If these speculations are near the mark, one might guess that Psalm 137 was composed between 300 and 200 BC.

When I first thought about these matters it occurred to me that since the earliest translators of the Old Testament into Greek were active only a century or two after these dates, they well might have known that Psalm 137 is a pattern poem and might therefore have attempted to imitate the pattern in their translation, much as I have done it here in the English translation. A check of the Greek text of Psalm 137 in the Septuagint translation, however, made it quite clear that this aspect of the poem was not captured in the translation. It is therefore unlikely that the fact that Psalm 137 is a pattern poem was known to the Septuagint translators.

Pattern poems have been a recognised, albeit minor genre of Greek poetry but are otherwise unknown in Hebrew.[7] I am therefore inclined to believe that the author of Psalm 137 imitated a Greek model. It must however be admitted that nothing that I have said here excludes the hypothesis that pattern poems were a Jewish invention and were borrowed by the Greeks: or that both Greeks and Jews got the idea from an Eastern (Persian, Assyrian or Babylonian) source. What seems to me implausible in view of the close contacts between the two people all through the ages is that pattern poetry was invented by Greek and Hebrew poets independently. But unless and until additional evidence is uncovered all this must remain in the realm of speculation.

What I hope to have established more solidly than mere speculation is that Psalm 137 is a pattern poem representing the temple in Jerusalem. And knowledge of this fact cannot but affect and enhance our understanding of Psalm 137, this shocking mixture of elegiac sorrow and barbaric vengeance.

Notes

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1 Since originally giving this lecture on 4 July 1986 I have discovered a further metrical text in the Bible: Amos 3.3–6 'Can two walk together'. I hope to publish this in the near future.

2 For an instructive discussion of this metre, see R. Jakobson's Ilchester lecture given at Oxford University in 1950 and reprinted in Jakobson (1966) pp. 414–63.

3 The numbers enclosed in parentheses represent the syllable count of an alternative reading which seems to me plausible, although it has no support in any of the known Biblical manuscript sources.

4 For details see Halle (to appear).

5 The penultimate line in the poem has eight rather than seven syllables. It has been suggested to me that this irregularity is not accidental, but that it is a reflex of the taboo against creating anything that is absolutely perfect.

6 A very interesting discussion of pattern poetry from which I have learned a great deal is found in Hollander (1975).

7 John Hollander has suggested to me that the Jewish prohibition against graven images might well have played a role here.

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