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THE METRICAL STRUCTURE OF PSALM 137

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OT verse has been a subject for lively discussion among scholars for at least two centuries. Yet in spite of the length of time that the topic has been under intensive study, no generally accepted solution has emerged. (A brief survey of previous research into the topic is offered by Stuart.)[1] Among the different approaches to the problem, the one that seems most productive of insights is that of scholars, such as Haupt, Albright, Cross, Freedman, and others, who have proposed that biblical verse is syllable counting. Disagreements among these scholars concern details of the syllable counting algorithm as well as the principles of textual interpretation, in particular, such matters as whether the *šĕwâ mobile* is counted in establishing the meter, whether segholate nouns are to be counted as disyllabic or monosyllabic, etc. The following analysis of Psalm 137 provides evidence both for a specific syllable counting algorithm, which differs from any previously proposed, as well as for particular principles of textual interpretation that mostly adhere closely to the Masoretic tradition. Questions of textual interpretation that have no metrical consequences, such as, for example, the reading of *'t* as *'et* or *'att* are, of course, not dealt with here.

The system proposed here is not necessarily valid for all or any other part of OT verse. A stronger assertion would require a much more extensive investigation than is attempted in this article, but based on the analysis below there can be little doubt that this proposal holds true for Psalm 137; that is, the poet who wrote this psalm read the text and counted syllables in essentially the way presented.

The starting point for the present investigation is Freedman's study of Psalm 137.[2] Freedman points out that the poem's pattern "is at once

[1] D. K. Stuart, *Studies in Early Hebrew Meter* (HSM 13; Missoula: Scholars, 1976) 1–10.

[2] D. N. Freedman, "The Structure of Psalm 137," *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright* (ed. H. Goedicke; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1971) 187–205.

chiastic and symmetrical or balanced. Thus the Introduction (vss. 1–2) is linked with and balanced by the Conclusion (vss. 8–9). . . . The body of the poem (vss. 3–7) consists of three parts: an opening (vs. 3) and a closing (vs. 7) forming a frame around the central section (vss. 4–6)."[3] This analysis is recapitulated in table 1:

TABLE 1

Strophe I: Introduction	vv 1–2
Strophe II: Opening	v 3
Strophe III: Nucleus	vv 4–6
Strophe IV: Closing	v 7
Strophe V: Conclusion	vv 8–9

Even this very rudimentary subdivision of the poem shows striking structural symmetries: the first and fifth strophes are made up of two verses each; the second and fourth of one verse, whereas the third strophe consists of three verses. The symmetries are further confirmed by the number of lines per strophe. Freedman's analysis gives the distribution in table 2:

TABLE 2

Strophe I	5 lines
Strophe II	4 lines
Strophe III	8 lines
Strophe IV	4 lines
Strophe V	5 lines

This follows Freedman's division into lines in all cases except two. He proposes to split the first half of v 6 into two lines:[4]

tidbaq-lĕšônî	May my tongue stick
lĕḥikkî 'im-lō' 'ezkĕrēkî	To my palate, if I remember thee not.

This goes against the coincidence of line boundaries with major syntactic constituents (that is, the lack of enjambement) which is otherwise characteristic of the poem. The following division does conform to this generalization:

tidbaq-lĕšônî lĕḥikkî	May my tongue stick to my palate,
'im-lō' 'ezkĕrēkî	If I remember thee not.

Similar considerations argue that Freedman's reading of the second part of v 7 as[5]

hā'ōmrîm 'ārû	Who were saying: "Strip bare,
'ārû 'ad hayĕsôd bāh	Strip bare to its foundations."

[3]Ibid., 188.
[4]Ibid., 196.
[5]Ibid., 201.

should be replaced by

hā'ōmrîm 'ārû 'ārû	Who were saying: "Strip bare, strip bare
'ad hayĕsôd bāh	to its foundations."

In both cases the latter divisions are supported as well by the traditional accentuation of the MT.

In matters of vocalization, the pronunciation assumed here is fairly conservative, with only three deviations from MT. First, the reading of *yršlm* in vv 5–7 as *yĕrûšālēm* is accepted rather than the MT *qĕrê perpetuum yĕrûšālayim*. Second, *h'mrym* in v 7 is read as *hā'ōmrîm*, following the convincing arguments of W. Chomsky against the pronunciation of *šĕwâ* after a long open syllable.[6] Third, with Freedman and others, the secondary *ḥăṭēpîm* following guttural consonants are omitted, as in *'e'leh* of v 6. In all other respects the Masoretic vocalization is followed strictly. In particular, an epenthetic vowel appears in word-final consonant clusters, in the segholate nouns and elsewhere, consistent with the Tiberian tradition. The absence of this vowel in other traditions is not compelling evidence against its authenticity, for if epenthesis were a late, artificial Tiberian innovation, it would be expected to extend as well to loan words like *nērd* "spikenard" and to shortened III-*h* verbs, where it is systematically excluded when the second radical is nonsonorant. Therefore the end of v 9 is read *'ōlālayik 'el-hassāla'* as it appears in the MT, rather than *'ōlālayk 'el-hassāl'* as proposed by Freedman.

This brings us to the meter of the poem. As noted above, the claim here is that this poem is written in a syllable-counting meter. This is essentially Freedman's view. But the algorithm for syllable-counting proposed here differs in that syllables following the last stress in a line are regarded as extrametrical and invariably omitted from the count. For example, the second line of the poem *šām yāšabnû gam-bākînû* "There we sat, even we wept," is seven syllables long by this method, whereas Freedman counts it as being eight syllables long.[7] Some independent support for this new proposal comes from the major syllable counting metrical systems of Western Europe, e.g., those of Italian and Spanish, where final posttonic syllables are systematically treated as extrametrical.

Further support for this syllable counting algorithm comes from v 7: *hā'ōmrîm 'ārû 'ārû* "Saying 'Strip bare, strip bare. . . .'" The MT accents the words as indicated, so the syllable count by this method is six, versus seven if the final syllable is counted. It has often been noted that *'ārû* here is anomalously accented for unspecified rhythmical reasons[8] since final stress is expected on purely grammatical grounds. The only likely explanation for the retraction of stress was a desire by

[6]W. Chomsky, "The Pronunciation of the Shewa," *JQR* 62 (1972) 88–94.
[7]Freedman, "The Structure of Psalm 137," 191.
[8]Cf. *GKC* 214, GKB 166.

the poet to reduce the syllable count by one, from seven to six. Therefore, this anomalous form appears *metri causa*, assuming a system like the one here which does not count syllables after the final stress of a line. The penult stress of the first instance of *'ărû* is not for metrical reasons, but rather for symmetry with the stressing of the following repetition of this word.

Adopting this method of counting and the pronunciation conventions listed above yields the distribution of syllable lengths in table 3. (The figures in parentheses give the syllable count taking into consideration some textual emendations discussed directly below.)

TABLE 3

Strophe	I	II	III	IV	V
	v 1 6(7)	v 3 5	v 4 7(8)	v 7 8	v 8 7
	7	6	5	6(7)	7
	7	7	v 5 8	6	8(7)
	v 2 7	8	5	5	v 9 8
	7		v 6 8		8(7)
			5		
			9(8)		
			5		

Given the parenthesized values for line length in table 3, it is clear that the symmetries in strophic structure carry over to the syllable counts of individual lines. Strophes I and V, the Introduction and the Conclusion, both have seven syllable lines consistently (except for the first half of v 9). The Nucleus, Strophe III, displays a regular alternation in line length, with four pairs of 8/5 lines. The second and fourth strophes have an even more interesting structure: the Opening has line length increasing regularly from five syllables to eight, while the Closing has the opposite, a progression from eight to five syllables. This rather surprising increment of line length in Strophe II is closely paralleled in Isa 3:24, with the syllable counts determined by the method adopted here:

wĕhāyâ	3
taḥat bōśem maq yihyeh	7
wĕtaḥat ḥăgôrâ niqpâ	8
wĕtaḥat ma'śeh miqšeh qorḥâ	9
wĕtaḥat pĕtîgîl maḥgōret śāq	10
kî-taḥat yōpî	5

And it will happen that
Instead of spices there will be a rotten odor
And instead of a girdle, rags
And instead of curled hair, baldness
And instead of a garment, sackcloth
Burning instead of beauty.

The fact that the central lines of this passage have the same regular increase in line length clearly suggests that this was one of the devices available to give metrical unity to a strophe.

As noted, the syllable counts indicated in parentheses in table 3 presuppose a number of emendations in the text. Such emendations *metri causa* must, of course, be made with the greatest caution, and arguments must be advanced for the plausibility of the emendations on grounds other than meter. In each case in Psalm 137 this goal can indeed be achieved.

The easiest emendation is that in the first line of the psalm. As Freedman notes,[9] parts of vv 1 and 9 have been preserved in 11QPs^{a}[10] and there the poem begins with the words, *'l nhrt bbbl* "By rivers in Babylon" with the last word containing the preposition *b* "in," which totally supports the emendation required by the meter. In conformity with this we have also altered the vocalization of *nhrt* from plural construct to plural absolute.

The first line in Strophe III reads in the MT: *'êk nāšîr 'et-šîr-yahwēh* "How shall we sing Yahweh's song?" A simple emendation with the requisite number of syllables is: *'êk nāšîr 'et-šîrê-yahwēh* "How shall we sing Yahweh's songs?" Here appeal for independent support can be made to the notion of a shared consonant, adduced elsewhere by Freedman and Dahood.[11] The presumed final yod of *šîrê* was either omitted by haplography or by virtue of a particular orthographic practice. In either case the initial yod of *yahwēh* is responsible. Moreover, Freedman's suggestion[12] that some anthology (perhaps the Temple Hymnal) is intended here supports the contention that the plural is the correct form.

In the MT the seventh line of Strophe III reads: *'im-lō' 'a'ăleh 'et-yĕrûšālayim* "If I not raise Jerusalem." Following Freedman, the MT Hiphil *'a'leh* is emended to Qal *'e'leh*, as it appears in the close parallel of 2 Sam 19:35: . . . *kî 'e'leh . . . yĕrûšālēm* "that I should go up . . . to Jerusalem."[13] Note that in this passage the direct object *yĕrûšālēm* appears without the accusative preposition *'et*, the usual locution after verbs of motion. In fact, Freedman observes that there is only one other instance of the prepositional accusative construction with this verb in the OT (Num 13:17).[14] The omission of *'et* from this line is thus by no means implausible on grounds other than the meter.

[9]Freedman, "The Structure of Psalm 137," 191.

[10]J. A. Sanders, *The Psalms Scroll of Qumran Cave 11* (DJD IV; Oxford: Clarendon, 1965) 41.

[11]Freedman, "The Structure of Psalm 137," 195; M. J. Dahood, *Psalms III* (AB 17A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1970) 371–72.

[12]Ibid., 194.

[13]Ibid., 197.

[14]Ibid., 198.

By the reckoning of the strophic structure offered here, the second line of Strophe IV should be seven rather than six syllables long. The possibility of a shared yod suggests that MT *'ēt yôm yĕrûšālēm* "the day of Jerusalem" be emended to *'et yĕmê yĕrûšālēm* "the days of Jerusalem." However, this requires the further emendation of deleting waw in MT *ywm*. In support of this, there are numerous examples of *zkr* with plural object *yāmîm* or *yĕmê* (*yĕmōt*) (Deut 32:7; Isa 63:11; Ezek 16:14, 22; 23:19; Ps 143:5; Eccl 5:19; 11:18; Lam 1:7) versus just one with the singular object *yôm* (Deut 16:3). Moreover, one instance of this form offers a strong parallel to the suggested emendation. In Ezek 22:4 the plural object is found: *wattaqrîbî yāmayik* "and you have brought on your days." Here, as in Psalm 137, Jerusalem is personified and addressed in the second person and her calamity is referred to by the plural object "days."

Finally, the metrical pattern demands that the last three lines of the poem should be seven, rather than eight syllables long. It is fairly easy to emend the antepenult and final lines. In the MT both lines begin with the preposition *'et* which introduces a definite direct object phrase. Definite direct object phrases appear in Biblical Hebrew frequently without the preposition. This is particularly true of the phrase *šlm gml* "pay a payment":

haggĕmûl 'attem mešallĕmîm 'ālāy	the payment you are paying for me (Joel 4:4)
ûgĕmūlô yĕšallem-lô	and he will pay to him his payment (Prov 19:17)

If the prepositions were dropped in both lines there would be no significant effects on the meaning of the sentences, and the parallelism between the two lines would be preserved. The only effect of the emendations would be to bring the lines in closer conformity with the postulated metrical patterns of the poem. What militates somewhat against these emendations is the fact that in the fragment from Qumran Cave 11 the preposition *'et* appears in the last line. (The antepenultimate line has not survived in the fragment.)[15]

No ready emendation suggests itself to us for the penultimate line of the poem; this line is left, therefore, in the form in which it appears in the MT.

The reconstructed text of Psalm 137 follows:

'al nĕhārôt bĕbābel	By rivers in Babylon
šām yāšabnû gam-bākînû	There we sat and wept
bĕzokrēnû 'et-ṣiyyôn	As we remembered Zion.
'al-'ărābîm bĕtôkāh	By laurels in its midst
tālînû kinnōrôtênû	We hung up our harps.

[15]Sanders, *The Psalms Scroll*, 42.

kî šām šĕ'ēlûnû	For there they asked of us
šôbênû dibrê-šîr	Our captors, words of song,
wĕtôlālênû śimḥâ	And those who mocked us, rejoicing:
širû lānû miššîr ṣiyyôn	"Sing to us of Zion's song."
'êk nāšîr 'et-šîrê-yahwēh	How can we sing Yahweh's songs
'al 'admat nēkār	On alien soil?
'im-'eškāḥēk yĕrûšālēm	If I forget thee, Jerusalem,
tiškaḥ yĕmînî	May my right arm wither.
tidbaq-lĕšônî lĕḥikkî	May my tongue stick to my palate
'im-lō' 'ezkĕrēkî	If I remember thee not,
'im-lō' 'e'leh yĕrûšālēm	If I fail to ascend to Jerusalem
'al rō'š śimḥātî	With joy on my head.
zĕkōr yahwēh libnê 'ĕdôm	Recall, Yahweh, to Edom's sons
'ēt yĕmê yĕrûšālēm	The days of Jerusalem,
hā'ômrîm 'ārû 'ārû	Who were saying, "Strip bare, strip bare
'ad hayĕsôd bāh	To its very foundations."
bat-bābel haššĕdûdâ	Daughter of Babylon, the doomed,
'ašrê šeyĕšallem-lāk	Happy he who renders you
gĕmûlēk šeggāmalt lānû	The payment you paid us.
'ašrê šeyyō'ḥēz wĕnippēṣ	Happy he who grasps and shatters
'ōlālayik 'el-hassâla'	Your babes upon the cliff.[16]

[16]Our translation is adapted with slight modifications from Freedman, "The Structure of Psalm 137." Grateful acknowledgment is made for permission to use his translation.