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SYLLABLE-COUNTING METERS AND PATTERN POETRY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT*

In Halle and McCarthy (1981) we proposed that Psalm 137 is composed in conformity with a strict metrical scheme based on the following syllable counting algorithm:

1. In establishing the number of metrical syllables in a line, syllables following the last stress are not counted.

b. Syllabification is determined by the Masoretic vocalization except in the following cases:
   i. Secondary hālepim are omitted; thus, instead of Masoretic נֶאֶלֶת ‘I shall ascend’ we read נֶאֶלֶת.
   ii. The shwa is omitted in “doubly open” syllables VC, --C V where C₁ and C₂ are not identical. We therefore read בָּהֵמ ‘say’ (pl.) and בִּינֵי ‘in pastures’ rather than בָּהֵמ and בִּינֵי.
   iii. The patah associated with word final gutturals is omitted. Hence we read תְּלֹא rather than תְּלוֹא.
   iv. We read the Masoretic יָרְוָעַלְיָה "Jerusalem’ and יֶהוּעָד as יָרְוָעַל and יֶהוּעָד respectively.

In the cited paper we discussed the major differences that separate our approach from that underlying the very important body of studies in biblical metrics carried out by D.N. Freedman (now conveniently collected in Freedman 1980). We also stated that the metrical analysis we were proposing is not necessarily valid for any OT poetic text other than Psalm 137. In work conducted since 1981 I believe to have established that there are several additional texts in the OT composed in conformity with the syllable counting algorithm (1). The texts are presented and discussed below.

The Curse of Lemek, Genesis 4, 23-24

The text of the Curse is given in (2). The Arabic numerals at the right indicate the number of syllables in the line and parentheses enclose syllables that are extra-metrical.

(2) 10 סָדָה וּרְווּעַלְיָה רְמֵאֵשׁ וּגֹּאֵל 10 סָדָה וּרְיוּעַלְיָה רְמֵאֵשׁ וּגֹּאֵל
10 יָדָה וּרְיוּעַלְיָה רְמֵאֵשׁ וּגֹּאֵל
10 Ye wives of Lemek, hearken to my speech:

* I am grateful to Prof. D.N. Freedman for his extensive comments on an earlier version of this paper, which allowed me to eliminate several errors. I also thank John McCarthy and Malka Rappaport for most helpful advice. Errors of fact and interpretation that remain are, of course, my responsibility alone.
OETRY

is composed in syllable counting line, syllables in except in the of Masoretic VC, C, VC therefore read and binZol. is omitted. isal'm and separate our dies in biblical d in Freedman oposing is not work conducted itional texts in rithm (1). The is at the right e syllables that ize; to my speech:

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SYLLABLE-COUNTING METERS AND PATTERN POETRY

ki ʔâd háragti ʔepisÚ 8 for I have slain a man to my wounding,
weyeled ʔabharuâti 8 and a young man to my hurt.
ki šibšâlayim yuqqam-qâ(yin) 8 If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold,
weišmeq šibim wâįšlah 8 truly Lemeq, seventy and sevenfold.

The Curse, which is reproduced here without change from the Masoretic text, consists of three couplets, of which the first is decasyllabic and the other two, octosyllabic. The only comment to be made here is that in spite of the text’s brevity the metrical regularities in (2) must be the result of conscious planning on the part of its author. As readers can readily establish, a text even one as short as (2) exhibiting the regularities in line lengths noted above is quite uncommon in the OT.

Psalm 23

As shown in (3), psalm 23 consists of nine couplets plus an orphan line following couplet IV. In order to facilitate the discussion I have numbered the couplets with Roman numerals on the left. The verse numbers in the Masoretic text are given on the right. Otherwise, the format is identical with that of (2).

(3) I 7 v. 1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
yahuwh rói bâ ʔebûr
binZol deš irbis(hi)

II 8 v. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.
šâlm-mé mënâhôt ṣenâhi(ni)
nâši yâsîbèb

III 8 v. 3 He leadeth me beside the still waters.
yânâni hâmašqōt-sedeq
lemân ʔâmi

IV 8 v. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
gam ki-ʔâlîk béqé ʔâsâmâ(u) [u]
ì-gâ ʔâvât ʔâvâ
ki-ʔattâh ʔâmâdā

V 7 v. 5 Thou preparest a table before me
šîbîkâ-âmiškânte(kâ) hâmmâ ṣe nounâ(hi)

VI 7 v. 5 I will fear no evil:
tâʔôk lepînay ʔâbâhân
for thou art with me;
laʔsîhâ tâpnîy ʔâbâhān
thy rod and thy staff
hâmmâ ṣe nounâ(hi)
neged ṣōrqay 5 in the presence of mine enemies:

VII diššanā bašemen ʾuḏši 8 thou anointest my head with oil;
koř ṣuwaṭày 5 my cup runneth over.

VIII ʾpah ʾōḥ wāhesed yirdēpān(ni) 8 v. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
kōl-jēmē bayyāy 5 all the days of my life:

IX uṣyāṣabī ʾbēḥet yahūḏh 8 and I will dwell in the house of the Lord,
šēpēk yāmūm 5 for ever.

I have emended the Masoretic text in only two places. In the last couplet I have replaced the Masoretic wešabīti “and I will return” with uṣyāṣabīti “and I will dwell”. My grounds for this emendation are both palaeographic and semantic. In view of the shape of the letters involved it should not be surprising that a抄ist had overlooked a yōd between woāw and šin. Moreover, the verb /šāb/ “dwell” makes better sense than the verb /šāb/ “return”. Since there are otherwise no 10-syllable lines in the poem, I considered emending the second line of couplet IV to read

(4) ṣōḥ Piyāh ṣafāh “I shall fear no evil”

thereby further regularizing the metrical structure of the poem.

In some of the nine couplets of the psalm, the second line has 5 syllables. In the first couplet the second line has 7 syllables, and in fourth couplet the second line has 10 syllables. In couplet I, V and VI the first line is 7 syllables long; whereas in the remaining six couplets, it is 8 syllables long. Once again I note that this degree of organization is not commonly encountered in the text of the OT and could have arisen only as the result of conscious planning by the author, and this planning involved recourse to the syllable counting algorithm (1).²

1 In his study of psalm 23, Freedman (1980, pp.275-302) qualifies the Masoretic verb form as “curious” and expresses the opinion that “we would expect to have yāṣabī from the root yāḥ to go with the prepositional phrase bḥt yḥuh.” (p. 298) Freedman then reviews four ways in which the Masoretic text might be explained. Although he entertains the possibility that a抄ist’s error might be involved, he does not consider the possibility, proposed above, that the copyist might have omitted the letter yōd.

2 The proposed segmentation of psalm 23 into lines is supported by the ingenious discovery reported in Bazak 1988, a study that appeared while this paper was in press. In this study, Professor Bazak draws attention to the fact that the letters of the first
Psalm 54

(5) yahuwêh bêsimkà hôiṣê(yêti)n 8 v. 3 Save me, O Lord, by thy name, and judge me by thy strength.

ûbighûrâkâ lêrinâ(yêti)n 8

yahuwêh temâlâ lêpillit 8 v. 4 Hear my prayer, O Lord, give ear to the words of my mouth.

haʔzinâh lêpîrinâ-pî 7

ki zârîm qâmû Yâlêy 7 v. 5 For strangers are risen up against me, and oppressors seek after my soul;

ûēlîrîṣîm biqûl napašî 8

lûd sâmâ yahuwêh teneqâdâm 8 they have not set the Lord before them. (Selah)

hinnêh Òêlôhîm yîger li 8 v. 6 Behold, God is mine helper, Pâdônîy bêsimkê napâšî 8 The Lord is with them that uphold my soul.

yâîth hâraq lêqirî ṭêyî 8 v. 7 He shall reward evil unto mine enemies:

baʔmîlitêkâ haqîmatîm 7 cut them off in thy truth.

bîndûlh yêkîbêh-kîkâ 7 v. 8 I will freely sacrifice unto thee:

yôdeh ñîmkâ yahuwêh kî-fâb 8 I will praise thy name, O Lord; for it is good.

ki mikkol-sânâh hisînî(nî) 8 v. 9 For he hath delivered me of all trouble:

ûbîpyâbî râʔîbî Yêni 8 and mine eye hath seen his desire upon mine enemies.

The first two verses of the psalm have been omitted here as they are clearly not part of the poem. The only emendation that has been made in the text was to replace in verses 3, 4 and 5 the word Òêlôhîm with yahuwêh. Its only justification is that it regularizes the meter, but the emendation itself is not implausible as these different terms of address for the deity could well have been confused by a later editor. In fact in v.6 several of the older ms. have yahuwêh rather than Òêlôhîm.

Once the emendation has been accepted the metrical structure of the poem is quite transparent. It consists of two stanzas where corresponding lines are of identical metrical length. The second stanza is one line longer than the first. It is conceivable that this is due to the fact that a line was lost or was added in the course of the transmission of the text. As there is no evidence for either of these conjectures, I have made no further emendations in the text.

word of the poem, the tetragrammaton YHWH, have the numerical value of 10+5+6+5=26. He notes further that the total number of words in the psalm is 55, of which 26 precede and 26 follow the line ki Patâh Yîmmâdâ. This line thus occupies the precise middle of the psalm. Since the line also epitomizes the central idea of the psalm, it is most fitting that it should be placed in this prominent position.
Psalm 114

(6) I 8 v. 1 When Israel went out of Egypt,
bet yisra’el mamayyaret
mamayyaret 7 the house of Jacob from
ha-yashar isha ilay yisra’el
ha-yashar 8 v. 2 Judah was his sanctuary,
yisra’el mamayyaret 7 Israel, his dominion.

II hayyam razah vayyanos 7 v. 3 The sea saw it, and fled:
ha-yarden yissob irparo 8 Jordan was driven back.
keharem roqdu kepetlim 8 v. 4 The mountains skipped like rams,
gedo kibnu-yon 6 and little hills like lambs,

III mah-ilekha yam ki ianu 7 v. 5 What ailed thee, O sea,
yarden ki tissob 8 irparo Jordan, that thou wast
driver back?
keharem roqdu kepetlim 8 v. 6 Ye mountains, that ye skipped like rams,
gedo kibnu-yon 6 and the little hills like lambs?

IV millitno yadon huil paro 8 v. 7 Tremble, thou earth, at
militno pelekh yashar 7 the presence of the Lord,
hahfers hassar bagam-matsam 8 v. 8 which turned the rock into a standing water,
hallama masiyeh-nu-ma(yin) 7 the flint into a fount of waters.

The stanzaic organization of the poem is quite simple. Stanzas I and IV are
metrically identical and contrast with stanzas II and III, which are also metrically
identical. The poem thus exhibits mirror image symmetry of the ABBA type.

A relatively large number of emendations have been instituted here. 1) In
stanzai II the definite article ha has been removed from the three nouns in the
vocative (hayyam – yam, hayyarden – yarden, keharem – harem). Though the primary
motivation for it is metrical, the emendation is supported also by the fact that
vocatives usually do not take the definite article. 2) In the second line of stanza III
we have inserted the particle ki before the verb. Here metrical considerations are seconded by the fact that the inserted particle establishes the otherwise missing parallelism between lines one and two of stanza III; this parallelism is to be expected in view of the parallelism between lines three and four. 3) On the grounds of parallelism again, I have removed in the last line of the poem the preposition l 'to' before the phrase ma'yên-o-mayim, for the preposition does not appear before Yagam-mayim, which is the parallel counterpart of the former in the preceding line.

Psalm 137: A Pattern Poem

As remarked above, in Halle and McCarthy (1981) we attempted to show that psalm 137 is composed in conformity with the syllable counting algorithm (1). The reconstructed text from the article is reproduced in (7).

(7) I Šal-nêhârôt bêââbel 7 v. 1 On rivers in Babylon,
šam yâdânu gam-bâkî(nû) 7 there we sat down, yea, we wept,
bezokrênu Pet-êyyôn 7 when we remembered Zion.
Šal-Yêrâhîm bêûkôâh 7 v. 2 On willows in their midst
tâ Altın kinnôôle(nû) 7 we hung our viols.

II ki šam WêPêlu(nû) 5 v. 3 For there they asked us,
ôbênu dibê-êr 6 our captors, for words of song,
wêûlûênû simhâh 7 and our destroyers, for rejoicing:
ôtu lânû missir śîyôn 8 "Sing us of the songs of Zion."

III Tek nôôr Pet-iôô -yahuôh 8 v. 4 How shall we sing the Lord's
Šal Padmat nêkâr 5 songs in a strange land?
Pim-Pêkêkhêk 8 v. 5 If I forget thee,
yûrûlêm 8 O Jerusalem,
tîskah yêômûni 5 let my right hand forget her cunning.
tîdîqâq lêôôni têhikîki 8 v. 6 Let my tongue cleave to my cheek
Pim-lôô Òtekêrê(kî) 5 if I do not remember thee,
Pim-lôô Pêôôôth 8 if I prefer not
yûrûlêm 8 Jerusalem
Šal rôôû simhûâl 5 above my chief joy.
IV  זֶקֶר יָהוֹעֵה לִיבְנֶ  8 v. 7 Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom,
     פֶּדוֹמָ  7 for the days of Jerusalem;
   פֶּט יֶמֶנֶ הַרְעָעָאֶ  7 who said: “Raze it, raze it,
     הַדּוֹמִירִמֶ סָרָו סָרָו (ר)  6 even to the foundation thereof.”
     יָד הַעֵסְדָד בַּ  5

V  הַבּוּבֶל הַזֶּרְדֶּלֶדֶדֶ  7 v. 7 O daughter of Babylon, the destroyed,
     פָּחוֹ בֶּהֶלֶמֶ לָ  7 happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee
     גֶּנֶּוֶּדֶק לוֹגֶּדֶל לָעָלָ  7 as thou hast served us.
   פָּחוֹ בֶּהֶלֶמֶ לָ  8 v. 9 Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth
     יָלוֹלְיֵהֶק פֶּלֶחֶל (ל)  7 thy little ones against the stone.

If each metrical syllable is represented by an x and the poem is “laid on its side” with its first line on the right and its last line on the left (we perform the rotation in this direction because Hebrew is written from right to left), we obtain the graphic pattern in (8).

(8)

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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
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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 with a sloping roof — stanzas II and IV — and four columns in the middle — stanza III. Even the extraneous eighth x in the second column from the left does not destroy this perception. The obvious further inference that the pattern in (8) invites is that it represents the temple in Jerusalem.

The major structural features represented in the reconstructed poem are also found in the representation of the Temple on coins struck around the beginning of the Christian era. Many of these coins show the facade of the Temple as having four large columns. A coin from the reign of the Tetrarch Herod Philip I of the year 26/27 CE shows in addition to the four columns also the sloping roof
represented in the psalm as reconstructed here (see photograph of this and other coins in The Encyclopedia Judaica V (Keter Publishing House Jerusalem Ltd. 1972), column 704.) Since these parallels cannot be fortuitous, they must be taken as solid evidence for the reconstruction of the poem’s form that has been offered above.

Pattern poems of this type are found in Greek poetry of the Hellenistic period (Wojaczek, 1969). Several such poems were written by the so-called Boculic poets, among whom the best-known was Theocritus (ca. 310-250 BC). According to Wojaczek these poets belonged to a poets’ club or guild located on the island of Cos. He also reports that one member of the group, Philikos of Kerkyna, was a Dionysian priest in Alexandria (op.cit., p. 1). Greek pattern poems were thus being produced in an area and at a time when there were extensive contacts between Jews and Greeks. It is therefore plausible that the idea of writing pattern poems was the result of cultural borrowing. This however does not settle the original source of the idea: were pattern poems a Greek or Jewish invention?

The question of who influenced whom is relevant here since it has direct bearing on the dating of the psalm. If the idea originated with the author of the psalm, an early date of composition (ca. 500 BC) is not implausible. If, on the other hand, pattern poems are a Greek invention, then it is unlikely that psalm 137 was composed before the third century BC. The possibility that the idea of writing pattern poems arose independently in two literary traditions is, of course, not to be excluded a priori. This possibility seems, however, much less probable than the other two, in view of the fact, that the idea is by no means self-evident, and, on the other hand, that during the period of interest — between 500 and 200 BC — there was constant contact between Jews and Greeks, which provided many occasions for borrowing.

Pattern poems were a recognized, if minor genre in the Greek poetic tradition (Wojaczek, 1969). By contrast, pattern poems are not a recognized genre in Hebrew poetry.3 It is, therefore, hard to see how a Greek poet might have learned of the existence of such poems (specifically, of psalm 137) in Hebrew and been led

3 In his provocative study of the distribution of grammatical elements in the alphabetic psalms, J. Bazak (1984) draws attention to a number of hitherto unnoticed regularities. For example, Professor Bazak has found that in psalm 145 each of the 21 verses composing the text contains a reference to God, which is either direct, in the second person, or indirect, in the third person. E.g., v. 13. malkutkâ malkût kôl-Yôlämim ‘thy kingdom is the kingdom of all eternity’ vs. v. 9. lôh-yahû́h lakkôl ‘the Lord is good to all’. There are 11 verses with direct reference and 10 with indirect reference. This regularity could, of course, not have arisen by accident, but must have been consciously placed there by the poet and thus is an integral part of the poetic form of the psalm. Professor Bazak argues further that the distribution of these grammatical
to imitate it in his own production. It would seem much more likely that the author of psalm 137 was influenced by a Greek model. As indicated above, this would imply that the psalm was composed in the third, rather than in the sixth century BC.  

It is almost superfluous to add that from the preceding no inferences can be drawn about the date of composition of the other OT poems discussed in this note. Although these poems share with psalm 137 the feature of utilizing the syllable counting algorithm (1), we cannot infer from this anything about their date of composition, for in view of its utter simplicity we cannot exclude the possibility that the algorithm was invented independently by different poets at different periods of time. All that can be concluded from this study is that the five texts discussed in the note were composed in conformity with the syllable counting algorithm (1). Moreover, I would conjecture that additional metrical texts of this type remain to be discovered in the Hebrew Bible.

Postscript August 1987

Since August 1985 when the text above was sent to the editors I have had a number of occasions to return to biblical metrics. On one of these occasions I believe I succeeded in discovering an additional text composed in the same syllable counting meter as the passages analyzed above. The text is from chapter III of the book of Amos and thus is one of considerable antiquity, about 750 BC. The text is reproduced below:

Amos, III, 3-6.8.

1  ḫāyēlkhū ṣēnayìm yahdāw  8  v. 3  Can two walk together,  ḫāyēlkhū ṣēnayìm yahdāw

bīlit ṭim-nōṣā(ḥū)  5  except they be agreed?  ṭim-nōṣā(ḥū)

ḥāysiḏag ṭaryēh bayya(ḥar)  7  v. 4  Will a lion in the ṭaryēh bayya(ḥar)

forest, ṭaryēh bayya(ḥar)

elements in psalm 145 reflects a complex geometrical pattern composed of six triangles and a circle which together constitute a star of David. I am not in a position at this time to pronounce judgement on these highly ingenious and radical proposals, as this requires extensive further study and reflection. In any event, the type of pattern poetry envisaged by Professor Bazak is considerably more abstract than the type encountered in Greek poetry or in psalm 137, which are based on a straightforward count of syllables in the lines of the poem.

4 There is no trace in the Septuagint translation of psalm 137 of an attempt to imitate the "pattern" of the Hebrew original. While the imitation of the "pattern" in the Septuagint translation would have constituted almost conclusive proof of the hypothesis I have proposed above, the absence of the attempt to imitate the "pattern" cannot be taken as evidence controverting the hypothesis since even such striking formal properties of the Hebrew original as alphabetic acrostichs are not systematically imitated in the Septuagint translation.
hātippol šippōr ʿal-ḥāʾā-
(res) 8 v. 5 Can a bird fall to earth, and there is no snare on it?
ūmōqēʾ ʿen lāḥ 5

II
hāyašʿṭh-pāh min-ḥāʾā(res) 7 shall a trap rise up from the earth
wēlākōd lōʾ yilkōd 6 and have taken nothing?
ʾim-yittiqsāʾ šōpār bēʾēr 8 v. 6 Shall a trumpet be blown in a city,
wēṭērep ʿen lōʾ 5 when he hath no prey?
hāṣittēn kēpīr gōlō 7 Will a young lion cry out bīli šāmākād 5 if he have taken nothing?
wēšēm lōʾ yehrā(dū) 5 and the people not be afraid?
ʾim-tiyē rēšē bēʾēr 7 shall there be evil in a city,
wēyahuēk lōʾ ʿasāḏ 6 and the Lord hath not done it?

III ṣārēʾēk šēʾāq 4 v. 8 The lion hath roared,
mī lōʾ yiyrā? 4 who will not fear?
yahuēk dibbēr 5 the Lord hath spoken,
mī lōʾ yimmābē? 5 who can but prophesy?

The text given above reproduces the MT except for the following emendations. In v. 4 I have deleted mināʾēnātō “from his dwelling” after gōlō; this correction is purely metri causa. In v. 4 I read ʿal-ḥāʾā ʾēres in place of the MT ʿal-ʿahāʾā ʾēres. The couplet as modified translates “Can a bird fall to earth and there is no snare on it?” which to my mind makes much better sense than the MT “Can a bird fall on a trap of the earth, and there is no snare on it?” In the second couplet of v. 5 I have replaced the MT min-ḥāʾāʾāḏānāh with the synonymous min-ḥāʾāʾēres. This emendation is justified on the grounds that the repetition of ḫāʾā ʾēres in the two couplets in v. 5 is paralleled by the repetition of bēʾēr in the two couplets of v. 6. I assume that verse 7 is a prose intercalation of a later editor and I am therefore omitting the verse. Finally in v. 8 I have deleted the redundant ʿāḏānāy before yahuēk. With the exception of the replacement of min-ḥāʾāʾāḏānā by min-ḥāʾāʾēres in v. 5, all other emendations have been suggested repeatedly by other students of the text. (For a listing of the latter, see Koch et al. (1976), pp. 128-131.)

The metrical structure of the edited text is now transparent. The first stanza is composed of four couplets with line lengths in the chiastic arrangement: 8-5-7-5
7-5 8-5. The second stanza is composed of three couplets with line lengths that exhibit a somewhat different chiastic pattern: 7-6 8-5 7-6. The third and final stanza differs from the other two in not being organized into couplets; it is composed of four lines with lengths 4-4-4-5.

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