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PREFACE

AS THE TITLE WILL SUGGEST, this book is conceived as a parallel volume to my earlier venture into the literature of the Bible, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. The parallel is only approximate because differences in the topic under investigation dictated differences in both organization and critical strategy. What I have set out to do here is first to define the workings of the formal system of biblical poetry in three initial chapters, moving from the nature of the poetic line to larger structures. The stress throughout is on the basic convention of semantic parallelism rather than on the phonetic and syntactic elements of the system because the latter two aspects would not be perceptible to anyone reading the poems in translation, and in any case much about the phonetics of biblical Hebrew remains uncertain.

After these three chapters on the system of biblical verse, I try to extend and refine my generalizations by applying them to major poetic texts, and through such application to see something of the difference poetry makes in the Bible. I have not attempted a comprehensive treatment of every subgenre of biblical poetry or of all the various poetic insets in the narrative books, but the main genres and texts—psalms, prophetic poetry, Wisdom poetry from Job to Proverbs, love poetry—are all scrutinized. Indeed, one of the many gaps in the understanding of biblical poetry is a failure of those who generalize about it to make sufficient distinctions among genres, and this study represents an initial effort to correct that tendency of amalgamation. For the most part, I proceed through close readings of specimens of the poetry because that seemed to me the best way to recover a sense of the intricate artistry of the poems. As in my book on narrative, the aim is to illustrate principles of poetics working in the Bible, not to provide exhaustive exegesis of the particular texts considered. If I have succeeded in any degree, I would hope that a reader could put these principles to use to read other biblical poems with heightened understanding and keener appreciation.

I must confess that before undertaking this project I questioned its

feasibility because of the daunting problems of talking about poetry—the best words in the best order—to readers who, apart from a small minority, would not have access to the original Hebrew words in their original order. I became convinced, however, that the job was worth attempting because poetry is a vitally important aspect of biblical literature that needs to be better understood, while the recent flowering of literary studies of the Bible has concentrated on narrative to the neglect of verse. I offer a partial compensation here for the absence of the Hebrew originals in the translations I have provided for all the texts discussed. (Verse and chapter numbers refer to the Hebrew text; there are occasional discrepancies in verse numeration between the Hebrew and the Authorized Version.) My versions often ignore considerations of modem idiomatic fluency in order to give a closer idea than conventional translations do of such elements of the original as word-motifs, anaphora, envelope structures, and various kinds of significant syntactic designs. I have also sought to offer some sense of the rhythmic compactness of the Hebrew, though compactness is sacrificed when fidelity to meaning requires. No doubt in some instances, at least in the eyes of some readers, I will have succeeded only in betraying both English stylistic decorum and the Hebrew original, but I do think there are artful traits of the original that will be evident in some of the versions, whatever their failings, that are not easily detectable in the usual translations.

Let me add that many of the poetic texts of the Bible include formidable philological problems that I do not pretend to solve, and so I have merely marked the most egregious of these difficulties with a typographical symbol (an asterisk) while proceeding to the task of poetic analysis. On this issue, I would only observe that some supposed textual incoherencies or anomalies in fact make perfect sense in the light of certain general (and generally ignored) principles of biblical poetics. Readers familiar with these scholarly questions will note a few points along the way where poetic analysis of the sort I propose ought to be carefully weighed before conclusions are drawn about the need to emend the text.

A word is in order on the relation of this study to previous inquiries into biblical poetry. In contrast to biblical narrative, which to all intents and purposes was "discovered" as a subject for rigorous investigation barely a decade ago, biblical poetry is the subject of a vast scholarly literature, some of it going back two centuries. But whereas the relatively modest body of work on narrative includes some incisive studies, it seems to me that most of what has been written on biblical poetry is in some way misconceived and, however imposing the intellectual equipment

of the writers, tends to be guided by rather dim notions of how poetry works. It did not strike me as useful to try to contend in detail with this scholarly production, which was for the most part beside the points I was trying to make; and so, with the very limited exception of some ground clearing in the initial chapter, I have kept both notes and references to secondary works to a bare minimum, citing only what I thought was strictly relevant.

Of course, no one could be foolish enough to imagine that what he has to say on a topic so abundantly discussed is entirely new. There are certain local anticipations of my observations about parallelism within the line in the traditional Hebrew commentaries from late antiquity to the Renaissance, but these exegetes work on very different interpretive assumptions, with no real sense that there is a formal system of poetics that defines the operations of units of meaning within the text. Among contemporary analysts of biblical poetics, I am indebted for a general orientation to Benjamin Hrushovski, from whose brief but seminal comments on ancient Hebrew prosody I quote in my first chapter. Certain perceptions about the nature of parallelism proposed in the introductory chapter of James L. Kugel's *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (1981) proved close to ideas I had worked out in my Berkeley seminars in the late 1970s. It is in a way reassuring that different critical eyes should see the same object, though there is also much in Kugel's general conception of biblical poetry to which I strenuously object, as I try to make clear at the outset.

I believe that criticism, like literature, forms a tradition, and this study therefore must owe various debts, large and small, witting and unwitting, to its many predecessors. At the same time, I would hope it will provide a useful new point of departure for others seeking to illuminate this complex and fascinating subject. The book is addressed, like my study of narrative, to all those curious about the Bible, whether their motives are religious, cultural, or specifically literary, and I would like to think that it contains things that will be instructive to specialists and general readers alike. Since the poetry of ancient Israel is, moreover, one of the wellsprings of Western literature, this inquiry may hold some interest for anyone concerned with poetry, even without a special involvement in the Bible.

It gives me great pleasure to express my gratitude to the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, under whose generous auspices I completed the first half of this book in 1982–1983. The Institute gave me not only a year free of teaching obligations in which to begin the project in a very congenial setting but also the weekly

stimulation of my colleagues in the group on biblical studies. Sections of the early chapters were first tried out on that learned audience, and I am sure that my formulations benefited from their questions and suggestions. I was also very fortunate to be able to discuss many of these poetic texts with a graduate seminar in biblical poetry at the University of California, Berkeley, in the spring semester of 1984, and to learn from the alert comments of my students. Typing and incidental research costs were covered by the Committee on Research of the University of California at Berkeley. The typing itself was done by Florence Myer, as always with exemplary precision. Chapter 1 and abridgments of chapters 2 and 4 appeared respectively in *Hebrew University Studies in Literature and the Arts*, *Poetics Today*, and *Commentary*, and I would like to thank the editors of those journals for their receptivity.

Berkeley
August 1984

The Art of Biblical Poetry

I

The Dynamics of Parallelism

The detail is everything.
—VLADIMIR NABOKOV

WHAT ARE the formal elements that make up a poem in the Hebrew Bible? The incorrigible naïveté of common sense might lead one to suppose that the rudiments of an answer would be self-evident, but in fact there is no aspect of biblical literature that has elicited more contradictory, convoluted, and at times quite fantastical views, from late antiquity to the latest scholarly publications. To many it might have seemed that after Robert Lowth's *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum* (1753) semantic parallelism between the two (or sometimes three) components of a line was firmly established as the chief organizing principle of the system; but questions have been raised about the actual prevalence of such parallelism, about how it is to be conceived if it is really there, and about whether it might not be an entirely secondary feature of biblical poetry. One influential contemporary theory imagines syllable count to be the defining characteristic of ancient Hebrew verse, with parallelism appearing, as one adherent of this notion rather lamely puts it, when the poet (thought of, without much evidence, as an oral-formulaic composer) needs more syllables to pad out his idea to the end of the line.[1] A still newer theory proposes a bewilderingly elaborate system of "syntactic constraints" as the basis of biblical verse, though this analysis entails, among other intrinsic difficulties, an arbitrary chopping up of poetic lines into units that will confirm the proposed pattern.[2] Others have argued for a combination of syntax and stress as the basis of versification.[3]

The dismaying range of discussion on this topic is vividly illustrated by two extremes. At one end of the spectrum, an Orientalist in the 1930s, Paul Kraus, set out to show that the entire Hebrew Bible, once properly accented, could be demonstrated to have been written in verse (a project in which he had been anticipated three decades earlier by the German Old Testament scholar Eduard Sievers). When he discovered two-thirds of the way through his analysis that the texts no longer bore out his thesis, he took his own life. At the other end of the spectrum, an ambitious recent study, James L. Kugel's *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*,[4] after a splendid first chapter full of incisive comments on what happens in semantic parallelism, comes perilously close to concluding that there is no poetry in the Bible, only a "continuum" from loosely parallelistic structures in what we think of as the prose sections to a more "heightened rhetoric" of parallelistic devices in what we misleadingly label verse.

Despite the grim fate of Paul Kraus, I don't think the attempt to describe the system of biblical poetry need be a suicidal enterprise, and it is obviously important to get some handle on the system in order to understand what kinds of meaning, what representations of human and divine reality, are made possible by this particular poetic vehicle. But it does seem wise to state clearly at the outset what we do not know and are unlikely to recover. The actual sound of biblical poetry will remain at least to some extent a matter of conjecture. Certain distinctions among consonants have shifted or blurred over the centuries, and what is worse, we cannot be entirely sure we know where accents originally fell, what the original system of vowels and syllabification was, or whether there were audible changes in these phonetic features during the several hundred years spanned by biblical poetry. (The indications of stress and vocalization of the Masoretic text were codified well over a millennium after the composition of most of the poems and centuries after Hebrew had ceased to be the vernacular.) On the level of meaning, although comparative Semitic philology in a remarkable age of archaeological discovery has done heroic work in restoring the original sense of poorly understood words, it would be foolhardy to imagine that we can always recover the real nuances of biblical terms, or the relation between poetic diction and colloquial diction (of which there is no record) or between poetic diction and other specialized usages of the ancient language. Moreover, because the language of poetic texts presents a higher concentration of rare locutions and other stylistic difficulties—difficulties even, apparently, for an ancient Hebrew scribe—one encounters in the poetry phrases, lines, or sometimes whole sequences of lines that look thoroughly

corrupted and that read as little more than gibberish unless one has sufficient faith to accept someone's radical emendation of the text. To these problems of sound and meaning, one must add a formal problem: because the poems are not set out as poetry in the traditional Hebrew text, there are sometimes serious questions as to where the line breaks should come and, especially in some of the Prophets, ambiguities about the boundaries between prose and poetic passages.

All these puzzlements should be kept in mind, for there are aspects of the system of biblical poetry, and certainly features of individual poems, that will continue to elude us from where we stand, two and a half millennia—and, in the case of a few texts, perhaps three millennia—after the creation of the poems. The difficulties, however, need not be overstated. There remains much that can be understood about biblical verse; and sometimes, as in the text I am about to quote, even where there are doubts about the poem's meaning, it may exhibit perfectly perceptible formal patterns that tell us something about the operations of the underlying poetic system. My initial example, then, Genesis 4:23–24, is an instructive enigma, and only the second instance of clearly demarcated formal verse in the Bible (the first being the two-line poem in Genesis 2:23 that Adam uses to name his helpmate Woman). It is a poem, addressed by Lamech to his two wives, that would seem to be almost entirely dependent on context, some obscure story of an injury or insult perpetrated on Lamech and the vengeance he exacts. The trouble is that no context whatever is offered. All we know about Lamech is that he is the fifth linear descendant of Cain, of whom God had said, "Whoever slays Cain will be avenged sevenfold," and that he begat with his two wives the inaugurators of the archetypal civilized activities of flock tending, music making, and metal forging, and a daughter with no designated archetypal role. This frustrating lack of context for the poem, however, can be taken as the occasion to look without distraction at the formal configuration of meanings and rhythm and word order that constitute its three lines:

'adáh vetziláh shemá'an qolí
ki 'ísh harágti lefitz'í
ki shiv'atáyim yúqam-qáyin

neshéi lémekh ha'zéna 'imratí
veyéled leḥaburatí
velémekh shiv'ím veshiv'áh

Ada and Zilla, hear my voice.

A man I have killed for my wound,
If sevenfold avenged is Cain,

Wives of Lamech, give ear to my speech.
a boy for my bruising.
Lamech then seventy-seven.