

Biblical Poetry and Translation

Philip C. Stine

Volume 32, numéro 1, mars 1987

La traduction biblique
Bible Translation

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/004294ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/004294ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (imprimé)

1492-1421 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Stine, P. C. (1987). Biblical Poetry and Translation. *Meta*, 32(1), 64–75.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/004294ar>

BIBLICAL POETRY AND TRANSLATION

PHILIP C. STINE

United Bible Societies, New York, N.Y., USA

INTRODUCTION

Early in my career in Bible translation I became disturbed by problems I saw with poetry. In the first place, I discovered numerous passages where experts disagree as to whether or not they are poetry. I felt that if there was a clear understanding of what poetry was, there would be no such disagreement. Secondly, I found myself in agreement with some of my colleagues who suggested that the "meaning" of a poem was more than just the dictionary meaning of the words. But it was difficult to identify that extra element and even more difficult to analyse it sufficiently well to translate it. Consequently, for some time I have been formulating a particular point of view on biblical poetry that I would like to present here.

I will begin with a discussion of James Kugel (1981) who argues that there is no such thing as biblical poetry. I then turn to the definitions and descriptions of poetry of two modern literary critics, Antony Easthope (1983) and Veronica Forrest-Thomson (1978). Then, using their definitions, I will examine in some detail Job 18, a speech of Bildad the Shuhite, and somewhat less thoroughly Exodus 15:1-18, the Song of Moses or the Song of the Sea. Job 18 is considered by many scholars as an archetypical biblical poem, and the Exodus passage has been called one of the finest poems in the Pentateuch. I will try to determine whether they are poems or not, and will also note some implications of this study for the translation of the passages.

JAMES KUGEL

James Kugel states that "the basic feature of biblical songs — and, for that matter, of most of the sayings, proverbs, laws, laments, blessings, curses, prayers, and speeches found in the Bible — is the recurrent use of a relatively short sentence-form that consists of two brief clauses" (p. 1), in other words, what has traditionally been known as parallelism. He argues that these were not written in quantitative meter and nor do they have any regular rhyme or alliterative patterns. Nearly two thousand years of scanning and syllable counting and similar activities have failed to yield a consistent metrical structure, certainly nothing to which terms such as hexameter or pentameter might be meaningfully applied. No meter has been found, Kugel insists, because none exists (p. 301). For him, what has been called biblical poetry is really nothing more than a complex of heightening effects used in different combinations and intensities. Features such as the short seconding sentences (parallelistic clauses) and formal terseness are the essence of high eloquence in biblical Hebrew (p. 94).

Kugel argues strongly against the notion that in parallelism the second part (B) is nothing more than a restating of the first (A). In fact, he examines many traditional classifications of biblical parallelism, including the categories of Lowth, synonymous, antithetical, and synthetic, and finds them wanting. The ways of parallelism are numerous and varied, and the intensity of the semantic parallelism established between clauses might be said to range from zero perceivable correspondence to near perceivable differentiation. The basic style is to have two clauses, each one stripped to a minimum of just

a few major words. The second clause is not mere repetition, or even an elegant variation. Instead, Kugel demonstrates what differentiation seems to be about is the "afterwardness" of B. B follows A, and the fact it contains differentiated verbal themes or other morphological and syntactic differentiations seems designed to draw attention to the circumstance : "A is so, and what's more, B".

There is a very important point to recognize here : if B is merely parallel to or repeats A, then the assertion is A equals B. In translation we could drop one of them, or merge them, very much as the English translation *Good News for Modern Man* (hereinafter GNB) has done. But if B differentiates itself from A, the assertion is that A plus B together are a semantic unit. To translate only A, for example, would thereby be translating only half of the statement.

Sometimes B's verb is clearly subsequent to A's in time. An example is Psalm 80.9 "You brought up a vine from Egypt / You banished nations and planted it". This could be expressed as "You brought up a vine from Egypt and planted it after you banished the nations (here)". Or, of course, it could be translated as two separate and "parallel" clauses as in the text. It would depend on the receptor language. In either case, both A and B would be translated.

One of the most interesting arguments that Kugel gives for understanding B as a completion of A comes with his discussion of chiasmus. For example, in Psalm 91.13 one reads "On lion and snake you tread / You crush lion cub and serpent". The chiasmus here is a concomitant of the binary structure of the parallelism and it therefore represents a decision *not to parallel* the word order of A. B is not synonymous with A but is deliberately different from it. Another example of differentiation would be in Proverbs 15.14 : "The heart of a sage seeks out knowledge / While the mouth of fools fosters stupidity". The text says "The heart of a sage" and not "sages", but refers to the mouth "of fools" and not "a fool". This indicates the scarcity of the former and the abundance of the latter.

In connection with the poetry of Job, Kugel says that although it is accurate to say that Job is written in lines of six or seven stresses each or that there are usually six major words per line or six to ten syllables per hemistich, it is equally accurate to say "Job is written in the florid style of biblical rhetoric : highly parallelistic sentences, usually consisting of two clauses, each clause stripped to a minimum of two or three major words" (p. 300). The seconding is the central focal point for emphasis and ornamentation of the main metaphor.

Kugel would conclude that whereas the rules of American rhetoric push the speaker in the direction of variety in sentence forms, "the Bible's high style prescribes rather the opposite : the sameness of terse, parallelistic clauses, usually meted out in pairs, making for sentences of approximately equal length" (p. 300).

Kugel probably overstates his case. If we were to accept totally his point of view, we would say that what we have in the two passages to be considered is a high style, elevated eloquence, but not poetry. To find a tool to evaluate this claim, I now turn to recent work in literary criticism.

EASTHOPE AND FORREST-THOMSON

Among contemporary literary critics, there are two books that have recently struck me as being relevant to this discussion. The first comes from Veronica Forrest-Thomson (*op. cit.*) who is trying to devise ways of analyzing the various verbal and logical devices and the literary conventions which make up poetic artifice. As an opening perspective, she quotes from Wittgenstein : "Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information". Forrest-Thomson believes essentially that the poem must be analyzed and

understood in its own terms. Ordinary linguistic categories are subsumed and altered by rules that are specific to poetry. These rules cannot be analyzed in the way we normally analyze grammatical structures. She contends "We must articulate the categories of poetry itself — must try to define the operations of poetic artifice — before we see how they relate to the categories of other disciplines".

The reader is guided in the analysis process by what she calls the image complex. This is a level of coherence which helps us to assimilate features of various kinds, to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, and to control the importation of external contexts. She suggests that "it is primarily through image complexes that meaning and external reference are absorbed and changed" (p. 3), and further claims "The image complex is the node where we can discover which of the multitude of thematic, semantic, rhythmical, and formal patterns is important and how it is related to the others" (p. 16).

Forrest-Thomson's emphasis on the imagery calls to mind recent research reported on by Denis (1984) on what imagery does in prose. Basically, he suggests that imagery helps readers further encode information. The purely semantic analysis of sentences is supplemented by the construction of representations that have some characteristics in common with perceptions. Readers store not only the end-product of the semantic analysis, but also the product of their imaging activity, *i.e.*, images give structure to scenes.

Jan Sterk attempts to define poetry in terms of an accumulation of stylistic features (1984). He suggests that the aesthetic or "other" meaning is as important or more important than what a semantic analysis of the words would belie. Certainly Forrest-Thomson would agree with what Sterk is trying to do but in her definition of poetry in terms of the image complex she has a focal point for her theory, a feature that affects many of the other features of poetic artifice.

Another expression of Sterk's viewpoint comes from Watson (1984) who says that the mere listing of several mechanical and structural poetic elements in lines is not conclusive proof they are poetry. They are, however, pointers of a positive kind and cumulatively indicate that a passage is verse. Collaboration comes from the content and from the use of metaphor, particularly when the metaphor is given a new twist or depth.

The definition of poetry which I find most congenial to my own thinking comes from Antony Easthope who says poetry may be distinguished from prose not by the presence of the signifier but by the special use the text makes of the signifier in patterns of repetition and condensation (*op. cit.*). Relative to other discourse, poetry foregrounds the signifier. Easthope outlines three general effects of poetry (p. 16) :

1. **Information or communication is backgrounded.** Foregrounding in poetry pushes the communication into the background as the objective of expression. The assertion is that language is being used for its own sake. Through repetition in the signifier, poetry signals that it is to be read as fictional discourse.

2. **Repetition sets poetry apart.** This repetition in and of itself serves to mark poetry as separate from prose. He quotes from Ruth Finnegan who spoke of "the way in which a poem is, as it were, italicized, set apart from everyday life and language".

3. **Poetry is organized into lines.** Poetry shares these first two qualities with other forms of aesthetic discourse such as drama and the novel. However, a third quality which is specific to poetry is that poetry is organized into lines. This line organization or meter takes place mainly on the basis of phonetic parallelism, the repetition of sound line by line through the poem. Further, this repetition promotes other kinds of repetition in poetry, the phonetic, syntactic and semantic. So, Easthope says, "In several ways, one of which is entirely specific to it, poetry contains repetitions in the signifier

which thus work to foreground the signifier. This feature can stand as a definition of poetry."

I suppose it is possibly because Hebrew parallelism is really a series of short lines that one thinks it is poetry. Certainly this relates to what Watson says (*op. cit.*). He suggests that the difference between verse and prose or speech is not that verse has rhythm and prose and speech has not, but that in verse a rhythmical unit, the line, is superimposed upon the grammatical unit of all discourse, the sentence.

But the idea that line organization is central to poetry is still going to cause problems with Hebrew poetry. Even Easthope (*op. cit.*) remarks on the differences he finds in Hebrew poetry and that of any other languages in the world. He points out that since the time at least of the Prague School, critics have considered the one universal condition of poetry to be its organization into lines and he asserts that there are four main systems for establishing equivalence from line to line : the number of syllables in a line, syllable duration, tone, and stress. For example, in Hungarian folk poetry the only requirement for an utterance to constitute a poetic line is that it has six syllables. Classical Greek and Latin poetry is organized with recurring patterns of long and short syllables. Classical Chinese poetry is organized mainly with four-, five-, and seven- syllable lines patterned through an opposition between the level tone and the other three deflected tones in a binary opposition of even and non-even. In Old, Middle, and Modern English poetry the main organizing principle is stress, although this patterns with a set number of syllables per line.

But then a fascinating statement : "Besides these four main principles others are possible : classical Hebrew poetry, for example, ... remains an exception to the general rule by which in different languages the poetic line is organized phonetically. That is in terms of the physical properties of language" (p. 52). In other words, the traditional definitions that people use for poetry around the world simply don't work when it comes to Hebrew.

Thus we end up with a definition of poetry that it is organized into lines on the basis of some kind of phonetic or formal parallelism which promotes other phonetic, syntactic and semantic repetitions, and which thereby works to foreground the signifier. I now turn to Job 18.2-21 to see if it does indeed meet these criteria.

Job 18.2-21 Literal Translation¹

18.2 Until when / you will make ends of speeches (or, put the whip to words) ? / Be sensible and then we can talk.

18.3 Why are we regarded as the cattle / (why) we are stupid in your eyes ?

18.4 Tearing himself (= yourself) in his anger / for your sake is it abandoned the earth / or is it moved, the rock, from its place ?

18.5 Indeed (or, Still) lamp of wicked ones is snuffed out / and does not burn, the flame of his fire.

18.6 Light becomes dark in his tent (= body ?) / and his lamp beside him goes out.

18.7 They are weakened, the steps of his vigor / and throws him down, his scheme.

18.8 Indeed / he was thrust into net by his feet / and into webbing he wanders.

18.9 Seizes by heel, a trap / holds fast to him, a snare.

18.10 Being hidden on the ground, his noose / and his trap (is) in the path.

18.11 (On) every side startle him, terrors / and they harry him at his steps.

18.12 It is hungry his calamity (or, The hungry one is stationed to devour his generative power*) / and disaster is ready for his fall.

*(See Watson, *op. cit.*)

18.13 Eats away parts of his skin / devours his limbs, the firstborn of death.

- 18.14 He is torn from his tent of his security / and he is marched to the king of terrors.
 18.15 Resides in his tent, fire / is scattered over his dwelling, burning sulfur.
 18.16 Below his roots dry up / and above withers his branch.
 18.17 His memory perishes from the earth / and no name for him in the surfaces of land.
 18.18 They drive him from light into darkness / and from the world they banish him.
 18.19 No offspring to him or no descendant among his people / and no survivor in his dwelling places.
 18.20 At his day are appalled the Westerners / and the Easterners they seize (= are seized with) horror.
 18.21 Surely these (are) dwellings of an evil man / and this (is) a place of one who knows not God.

Is this poetry? For Forrest-Thomson, it is through examination of the image complex that we can discover which of the thematic, semantic, rhythmical, and formal patterns is important. The parallel columns below show the major image complexes of the poem.

speeches	talk
cattle	stupid
earth (not) abandoned	rock (not) moved
lamp snuffed out	flame not burning
dark	lamp out
tent	beside him
weakened	throws him down
net	webbing
trap	snare
noose	trap
terrors startle	harry
calamity is hungry	is ready for fall
eats away	devours
torn from his tent	marched off
fire	burning sulfur
roots	branch
dry up	withers
memory perishes	no name for him
drive	banish
from light	from the world
offspring or descendant	no survivor
appalled	horror
dwellings	place of
evil	knows not God

The repetition of the signifiers is obvious. Of course, this repetition is a feature of parallelism, but more than that, notice the following :

place : 4c, 6a, 10a, 14a, 15a, 15b, 17a, 17b, 18b, 21a, 21b.

traps : 4a, 8a, 8b, 9a, 9b, 10a, 10b. (And one commentator [Pope] quotes the Accadian *quinsu*, "trap", for line 2a — "How long will you set traps for words?")

light or dark : 5a, 5b, 6a, 6b, 15a, 15b, 18a.

calamity : 11a, 12a, 12b, 13a, 13b.

There are a few minor patterns of repetition that can also be seen. For example, in 4b and c, there is alliteration with ayin, tsade, qof, and resh. In 5a and 6b, there is the repetition *yadk*. Assonance does not seem to be present, and rhyme only occurs in verses 12 and the first part of 19. There are two or three places that could be said to be alliteration, but of course the major pattern one sees is in the parallelism that is the major feature of the passage.

If, following Forrest-Thomson, we look at these image complexes as discovery points for the theme of the poem, it would seem to be something like "In the place of the wicked person, things are so bad it is as if light is extinguished, he is held by traps of different kinds, calamities such as disease dog him, and his family is destroyed". In the terms of Easthope, these are the themes that are foregrounded: the details about sulfur burning his house or nets grabbing his feet are backgrounded and functional. If these images signal that poetry is to be read as fictional discourse, then this passage could be considered poetic if not poetry.

Further, there is a great deal of ellipsis throughout the poem: definite articles and pronouns are often dropped, and normal grammatical patterns are often reversed for the sake of making B different from A. (Chiasmus sometimes results.) So, clearly this language is, as Ruth Finnegan would say, "italicized, set apart from everyday life and language".

According to Easthope, the third quality specific to poetry is its line organization. Without question, this is organized as line. However, we cannot find significant phonetic parallelism.

If we segment this into strophes, most are couplets. But there are exceptions: 18 and 19 are tricola, and 5 and 6 form a quatrain. 4a may be a monocolon, but some analysts put it with 3 or the last part of 4. 11 is also something of a problem, not really forming a normal couplet.

No amount of syllable counting or letter counting seems to bring forth any meter here. But what we do have, to quote Kugel, "are highly parallelistic sentences, usually consisting of two clauses, each clause stripped to a minimum of two or three major words". It might be interesting to look at Kugel's contention that B is some kind of progression, a seconding of A. In fact, in this Job passage, the affirmation would seem to stand up.

- 18.2 A possible translation treating A & B as a unit would be "When will you quit all this speech-making and be sensible so we can talk?"
- 18.3 There is ellipsis here in that "Why" does not appear in B. "Cattle" could be images for a variety of things, but B clearly indicates that here their stupidity is in focus.
- 18.4 Many translators understand 4a to be a vocative. "You who tear yourself apart in your anger." The second part of this verse is a classic case of what most scholars in the past called "synonymous parallelism". But of course, the two parts are not synonymous. "Would God abandon the earth for you sake? No. In fact, he wouldn't even move a rock for your sake."
- 18.5 First of all, there is chiasmus here. But B again supplements the information of A, "The wicked person's lamp is snuffed out, and not just temporarily: its flame will never burn again." (See GNB.)
- 18.6 GNB has clearly seen the two parts as equivalent and collapsed them. A better rendering might be: "The light in his body (= tent) is made darkness and the lamp beside him goes out too." In other words, his interior

- light is out and anything he might use as a light, some kind of exterior device, is also out.
- 18.7** GNB has done an excellent job here : "His steps were firm, but now he stumbles ; / he fails — a victim of his own advice."
- 18.8** GNB sees A and B as equivalent. But it might better be to see that this poor man's body is really letting him down. "His feet get caught in a net ; in fact, he is so unaware that he wanders straight into some webbing."
- 18.9** "A trap seizes him by the heel (A) ; more than that, he is held fast by the snare and can't get free (B)."
- 18.10** Another example of chiasmus. "Not only is there a noose or a rope hidden in the ground for him, but there's also a trap set on the path he is following." Again, B seconds A.
- 18.11** "Not only is he startled by terrors on every side (A), but they continue to harry him as he tries to flee (B)."
- 18.12** GNB had to repoint to reach its translation. But if we don't do that, we have plain straightforward seconding, a classic case : "Calamity is hungry for him ; disaster is just waiting for him to fall."
- 18.13** Here we have ellipsis, with the subject, "the Firstborn of Death", dropped from A. "Death's firstborn (= "Death ?") eats part of his skin ; more serious than that, it destroys his limbs."
- 18.14** There are two actions in sequence here : "He is torn away from the tent where he has been secure, and marched off to the king of terrors." Again, the "tent" might be his body, and "king of terrors" could equal death. Then this would be "He is ripped from life and taken before death."
- 18.15** This might be "Nothing is left in his tent ; in fact, sulfur is scattered over it to completely destroy it." Or, repointing as Dahood suggests (cited in Watson, *op. cit.*), "There is fire in his tent ; and burning sulfur is scattered over it as well."
- 18.16** Another good case of seconding : "His progenitive powers are dried up, and even the offspring that he has will perish."
- 18.17** Another good case of seconding : "People on earth forget who he was ; no one can even remember his name."
- 18.18** Another good case of chiasmus. "Darkness" probably means death, or least it refers to the world of the dead. "He is driven from the light of life into darkness of death ; further, he is driven out of the world altogether."
- 18.19** "Not only has he no offspring or descendants among his own people, but there are not even any survivors in the area where he once lived."
- 18.20** Another nice case of chiasmus. And again, A and B together form the full meaning. Only when both the Westerners and the Easterners are considered do we have the idea that everyone everywhere is seized with horror by what happened to him. A alone or B alone is only half the idea.
- 18.21** The conclusion is also a case of parallelism where B seconds A : "Surely there are the dwellings of an evil man ; the man here does not even know God." As is often the case, "knows" can mean "attended to" or "obeys".

Exodus 15:1-18 offers something of a contrast. Although most of the lines there are couplets, there are a number of quatrains and several ternary lines as well. It is worth stating that a song, which this is, is not necessarily poetry, so that it must be examined as to that aspect the same as any other passage.

Literal Translation of Exodus 15.1-18

- 15.1 I will sing to YAHWEH / for to be exalted he is exalted / horse and rider he hurled into the sea.
- 15.2 My strength and song (is) YAH / and he became to me as salvation / this one (is) my God, and I will praise him / (he is) the God of my father, and I will exalt him.
- 15.3 YAHWEH (is) a warrior / YAHWEH (is) his name.
- 15.4 The chariots of Pharaoh and his army he hurled into the sea / and the best of his officers drowned in the Sea of Reeds.
- 15.5 Deep waters covered them / they sank to the depths like stone.
- 15.6 Your right hand, YAHWEH, is majestic in power / your right hand, YAHWEH, shattered the enemy.
- 15.7 In the greatness of your majesty / you threw down those who opposed you / you unleashed your anger / it consumed them like stubble.
- 15.8 And by a blast of your nostrils piled up, the waters / they stood firm like a wall, the surging ones / they congealed, the deep waters, in the heart of the sea.
- 15.9 Boasted the enemy I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoils / I will gorge on them myself / I will draw my sword / I will destroy them, my hand.
- 15.10 You blew with your breath / it covered them, the sea / they sank like lead in mighty waters.
- 15.11 Who (is) like you among the gods, YAHWEH / who is like you, majestic in holiness / awesome in glory / working wonders ?
- 15.12 You stretched out your right hand / swallowed them, the earth.
- 15.13 You will lead in your love the people whom you redeemed / you will guide (them) in your strength to your holy dwelling.
- 15.14 They will hear, nations, they will tremble / anguish will grip the ones living in Philistia.
- 15.15 Then they will be terrified, the chiefs of Edom / the leaders of Moab will be seized by trembling / they will melt, all the ones living in Canaan.
- 15.16 It will fall on them, terror and dread / by the power of your arm they will be still as stone / until (t)he(y) pass(es) by, your people, YAHWEH / until (t)he(y) pass(es) by, the people whom you bought.
- 15.17 You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance / the place for you to dwell that you made, YAHWEH / the sanctuary, Lord, they established, your hands.
- 15.18 YAHWEH will reign forever and ever.

Again following Forrest-Thomson, we will examine the image complexes to try to discover the thematic, semantic, rhythmical, and formal patterns. Below are some of the major image complexes of the poem.

- 15.1 Yahweh, exalted, horse and rider, sea
 15.2 strength, song, salvation
 15.3 warrior, name
 15.4 chariots, sea, officers, Sea of Reeds
 15.5 deep waters, depths, stone
 15.6 right hand, power, right hand, shattered, enemy

15.7	greatness, majesty, threw down, unleashed, consumed, stubble
15.8	blast, piled up, stood firm, wall, surging, congealed, deep waters, heart of the sea
15.9	enemy, spoils, gorge, destroy
15.10	breath, sea, lead, waters
15.11	majestic, holiness, awesome, glory, wonders
15.12	right hand, swallowed, earth
15.13	redeemed, guide, dwelling
15.14	nations, tremble, anguish, Philistia
15.15	terrified, chiefs of Edom, leaders of Moab, trembling, melt, Canaan
15.16	terror and dread, arm, stone, people, bought
15.17	bring in, plant, mountain, place, dwell, sanctuary, established

Notice the repetition of certain of the signifiers :

<i>praise</i> :	1b, 2c, 2d.
<i>sea/depths</i> :	1c, 4a, 4b, 5a, 5b, 8b, 8c, 10b, 10c.
<i>devour</i> :	7d, 9b, 12b.
<i>terror</i> :	14a, 14b, 15a, 15b, 16a.
<i>place</i> :	13b, 17a, 17b, 17c (this does not count all references to the sea and the earth).
<i>salvation</i> :	2b, 13a, 16c, 17a.
<i>Yahweh's power/action</i> :	1a, 2a, 4a, 6a, 6b, 7a, 7b, 8a, 10a, 11c, 11d, 12a, 13a, 13b, 16b, 17a, 17b, 17c.

There are also other patterns of repetition. There is some assonance and what might be considered alliteration, but there does not seem to be any real rhyme. The outstanding pattern that one sees is in the parallelism that constitutes the major feature of the passage.

Again looking at the image complexes to discover the theme or themes of the poem, it would be something like "I will praise the Lord greatly because he overthrew the forces of Egypt in the sea with great power, thereby saving his people whom he then lead to the promised land and established in the sanctuary he created."

Other features that we see are the fact that definite articles and pronouns are often dropped and normal grammatical patterns are often reversed for the sake of making B different from A. Clearly this is also language set apart from the mundane.

If we look for the qualities specific to poetry, its line organization, we see that it is organized as lines, but we cannot find significant phonetic parallelism.

If we try to segment this into strophes we find no real agreement from scholars. Most of them decide on the basis of their interpretation of the form and history of the poem as much as anything else (eg. Noth, *op. cit.*). Verse 1 can be said to serve as an introit, verses 2 and 3 as a hymnic confession, 4 through 10 as a recounting of the overthrow of the Egyptians, 11 and 12 as another hymnic confession or response, 13 through 17 would then recount how Yahweh led his people into the promised land and established them, and 18 is then seen to wind things up by praising Yahweh again.

Most of the lines are couplets, but a few verses (e.g. 2, 9, 16 and possibly 11) are quatrains. There are a fair number of ternary lines, specifically in verses 8, 15, and 17. Kugel treats the case of ternary lines rather casually because, he argues, the difference between binary and ternary lines is not really crucial to the analysis. B seconds A, but so does C, particularly if B and C are considered together.

Looking at Kugel's statements about parallelism that B is some kind of a progression, a seconding of A, this passage also exhibits that rather clearly.

- 15.2a** Hyatt (*op. cit.*, p. 120) translates "My song" as "My defense". So does GNB. In this, B is clearly seen as a seconder of A : "Yahweh is the source of my strength and the one who defends me ; he is one who has saved me." But even if we do not accept that emendation, B still seconds A : "Yahweh is the source of my strength and my reason for praise ; he is the one who has saved me." (But GNB and Hyatt make more sense.)
- 15.2b** B does differentiate from A : "He is my God, and I will praise him ; he was even the God of my father, so I will praise him greatly."
- 15.3** This verse is not simply stating that Yahweh fought for his people. Rather, by looking at B as well as A, we see that the Israelites experienced Yahweh as the one who acted by fighting for his people : "Yahweh is our warrior ; that is how we know him (or, that is what his name means to us)."
- 15.4** B seconds A : "He hurled the chariots of Pharaoh and his army into the sea ; even the elite of his officer corps were drowned in the Sea of Reeds."
- 15.5** "The waters covered them ; the destruction was total — they sank to the bottom like stones." A, and what's more B.
- 15.6** GNB has done a good job here. B gives a concrete example of just how powerful Yahweh's hand is. Incidentally, Hyatt supports GNB's rendering "majestic in power" as "awesome in power". Of course, since this kind of information is totally backgrounded and not part of the signified meaning of the passage, it doesn't really matter.
- 15.8** Clearly B and C second the statement of A : "By a blast of your nostrils the waters piled up ; and they didn't just pile up, but those surging floods stood up straight like a wall, and the very deepest part of the ocean became solid."
- 15.9a** This verse could be divided in several ways, but the seconding of the last part remains : "The enemy boasted 'I will pursue them and overtake them and divide up their property ; I am going to take every single thing of theirs I jolly well please'."
- 15.9b** Here the relation is one of chronological sequence : "I will draw my sword and then I will kill them."
- 15.10** It is probably easiest to analyse this in terms of three parts linked by chronological sequence, although C can be seen as a seconding of B : "But one breath from you and the sea covered them, and they sank like lead in the mighty waters."
- 15.11** In this verse, each part differentiates by describing added qualities of Yahweh : "Lord, you are unique among the gods ; you are majestically holy, awesomely glorious, and a worker of great acts." In other words, the best analysis would be to see A being seconded by B, C and D which expand A. On the other hand, Hyatt suggests that "majestic and holiness" might better well be "majestic among the holy ones." In which case, the lines could go like this,

"Yahweh, you are unique among the gods ; of all the holy beings, you alone are majestic, you alone have an awesome glory, and you alone can work wonders."

- 15.12** Here again is a case of chronological sequence : "When you stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed them."
- 15.13** More obvious seconding : "In your love, you will lead forward the people you rescued ; and in your strength, you will guide them to your holy dwelling."
- 15.14** "When they heard this, the nations trembled ; in particular the Philistines were gripped with fear." (Hyatt points out that possibly Philistia was mentioned here because it's near the peninsula of Sinai and Egypt ; *op. cit.*, p. 167).
- 15.15** There is further geographical progression here : Edom was in the extreme southern part of Transjordan and Moab was just north of there. Beyond Moab was the whole land of Canaan.
- 15.16** The first part of this verse makes a statement which is then explained and expanded by the second part. Actually, GNB is excellent here. The idea is "They become terrified and full of dread ; because of your strength, Yahweh, they stand transfixed as your people pass, the people that you have set free from slavery."
- 15.17** B and C here give further information to the place mentioned in A : "You will bring them in and establish them on your own mountain, the very place you made for yourself to dwell, Yahweh, the very sanctuary that you established with your own hands, Lord."

CONCLUSION

1. Although these passages do not conform to forms of poetry known in other languages, in that the line structure is not based on any form of phonetic repetition, they clearly represent a heightened style, and share many of the features of poetry, particularly in that the images or image complexes are foregrounded. The use of parallelism and the repetition of the signifiers set the language apart from ordinary language and indicate what the important themes are to a greater degree than would be gleaned from semantic analysis of the individual clauses, sentences, or words. In the Exodus passage, the theme of praise to Yahweh because of his deliverance suggests the need to find what forms of oratory might be used for praise in the receptor languages. They might or might not be poetry. But for translation, there are at least two implications :

- a) First, we have to find the factors of heightened style in the receptor language.
- b) Secondly, and more importantly, we should recognize the importance of foregrounding the imagery, using whatever devices are available in the receptor language. This may well include repetition, of course. It also means that the forms, the images, are worth retaining in the translation.

2. As I look at Job 18 and Exodus 15 I find a great deal of justification for treating the two clauses A and B as a semantic whole ; the second part does add something, an afterwards, to the first, and this differentiation is central to the understanding of the imagery. This means there is little justification for collapsing the two parts as GNB and some other translations have often done.

Elements of both A and B must be translated. Either the parallel form should be retained, if that would be good style in the receptor language or the line can be otherwise restructured, as I illustrated at 18.2 or Psalm 80.9 (see above).

Note

1. Taken from *The NIV Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament*, John R. Kohlenberger III (ed.), 1982, Vol. 3, Grand Rapids, MI : Zondervan, but with several of my own modifications.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- DENIS, Michel (1984) : "Imagery and prose : A critical review of research on adults and children", in *Text* 4 (4), pp. 381-401.
- EASTHOPE, Anthony (1983) : *Poetry as Discourse*, New York : Methuen.
- FORREST-THOMSON, Veronica (1978) : *Poetic Artifice*, New York : St. Martin's Press.
- HYATT, J.P. (1971) : *Exodus* (NCBC), Greenwood, SC : Attic Press.
- KUGEL, James L. (1981) : *The Idea of Biblical Poetry : Parallelism and its History*, New York : Yale University Press.
- NOTH, Martin (1962) : *Exodus* (OT Library), Philadelphia : The Westminster Press.
- STERK, Jan (1985) : *Bible Poetry in Translation : A Matter of Accuracy*. (Unpublished paper given to the Triennial Translation Workshop, Bernhauser Forst, May 1985.)
- WATSON, Wilfred G.E. (1984) : *Classical Hebrew Poetry : A Guide to its Techniques*, Sheffield, England : JSOT Press.