HEBREW POETIC FORM: THE ENGLISH TRADITION

BY

T. H. ROBINSON

From ancient times students of the Bible have realised that the Old Testament includes a kind of verse anthology, in which we have selections from the poetic literature of a great people. It can be only a small selection, preserved for a special purpose. It is difficult to believe that the Book of Job was the only specimen of its class; though it is unique in quality its form seems too well developed to be a first experiment. A great work of art can appear only in an age where deep thought and lofty expression are common to large numbers of men. Lovely erotic lyrics such as those enshrined in Canticles come to the surface only among a people which had a song in its heart and on its lips. Dante and Shakespeare are at once unique and representative.

From the first (and especially in earlier days) students of Hebrew poetry have been handicapped by their familiarity with the literature of Greece and of Rome. It needs a strong mental effort to convince ourselves that the categories of classical verse may not apply to Hebrew or some other ancient poetic forms. Statements—we could almost say boasts—made by writers like PHIL01), JOSEPHUS2), and early Christian scholars, seem to have been intended as propaganda. Unless the system of vocalisation handed down to us is grossly misleading the greater number of Hebrew syllables would be counted as ‘long’. One or two attempts were made in the seventeenth century to analyse Hebrew poetry on a classical basis, sometimes by applying an Arabic system of vocalisation. LOWTH has an amusing essay in which he parodies one of these, the work of HARE, by offering another, but similar, scheme. He concludes with the words: hoc

1) Cf. De Vita Contemplativa, 10, where various terms are used to describe poetic forms.
2) Cf. Ant. II. 16.4, where “hexameters” are mentioned; IV.8.4, Moses com­poses Deut. xxxii in “hexameters”; VII.12.3, David writes poems in trimeters and pentameters. Though the terms are such as would be used by modern students of Hebrew prosody Josephus was probably thinking of the Greek quantitive metres.
certe me facile impetraturum confido, ut utramque eodem in loco habeat, utrique parem tribuat auctoritatem; hoc est omnino NULLAM 1).

LOWT H's own views are familiar to every student of the Old Testament. His lectures on the subject were published in 1753 under the title De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum. A second edition appeared ten years later; L OWT H claims to have revised his work thoroughly and to have made many additions and modifications. These, however, did not affect his main position, and were largely confined to the footnotes. He was sufficiently steeped in the classical tradition to believe that there must have been a genuine 'metre' in the strict sense of the term, i.e. a phonetic rhythm based on the alternation of long and short syllables. Our ignorance of the way in which classical Hebrew was pronounced makes it impossible to recover the actual sound and rhythm of its poetry. We can only note that the lines varied considerably in the number of syllables they contained 2). Many students would agree with L OWT H here, and would go even further, remarking that only a few can imagine what classical Greek poetry conveyed to the ear, for when we read it our rhythm is essentially accentual and not quantitative. One peculiarity of Hebrew verse, however, is obvious: the relation of the sentences, or rather the parts of the line, to one another, 'cujus ea ratio est, ut plena comprehendio in suas partes fere aequaliter distribuat, atque integra ejus membra integros versus conficiant 3). Just as a whole poem falls naturally into periods, so the period falls into verses, most commonly in pairs but often in slightly larger groups. He goes on to add: 'Hoc iis in maxime locis cernitur, qui apud Hebraeos vates ubique fere occurrunt, ubi rem unam multis modis versant, et in eadem sententia com­morantur, ubi idem saepius diversis exprimunt, aut diversa eadem verborum forma includunt; cum paria paribus referuntur, adversis opponuntur con­traria . . . . It is to be noted that this is not stated as a universal and rigid law, though L OWT H does suggest that the term mizmor necessarily indicated a structure of this kind.

Here we have the famous parallelismus membrorum, of which L OWT H has more to say later. Indeed, it is not till we come to ch. XIX that the feature suggested thus in ch. III is fully developed. Here

1) De Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum, 2nd Ed., 1763, p. 466. Throughout this paper it is this edition which will be quoted, since it represents a more mature view than that of the 1753 edition.