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BIBLICAL HEBREW POETRY IN RECENT RESEARCH

1. AN INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a good number of various publications on biblical Hebrew poetry have appeared. Some of them have been written with masterly skill and outstanding biblical knowledge. Undoubtedly, they bring a great contribution to the development and contemporary understanding of biblical poetry. Prominent biblical scholars provide us with analyses of the nature and characteristics of Hebrew poetry. They examine biblical poetry using different methods and approaches. Some scholars give attention to a semantic examination of biblical poetical texts. Other interpreters focus more on grammatical analysis. Others concentrate on poetic devices and techniques, which can be applied to an analysis of Hebrew biblical poems. In their studies, scholars try to answer essential questions: how can we recognize biblical prose from biblical poetry? What are semantic and linguistic criteria in identifying them? What are the components of biblical poetry and how can we define it? These questions give us a material for an analysis of Hebrew poetry and remain crucial in modern scholarly debate in this field.

2. IN IDENTIFYING BIBLICAL HEBREW POETRY

In the matter of the recognition of Hebrew poetry, it is appropriate to begin with a pivotal question: What is poetry? The passage from J. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* comes to mind:

'Sir, what is poetry?'

'Why Sir, it is much easier to say what it is not.

We all know what light is; but it is not easy to tell what it is.'

This passage refers to biblical Hebrew poetry too. In fact, it is not easy to define biblical poetry aptly. Even today, after a few decades addressed to a detailed examination of Hebrew poetry by different scholars, the topic still remains opportune and stimulating. Biblical poetry notably differs from the poetry of modern European languages¹. This is as a result of cultural and linguistic differences². The Hebrew poetic language, unlike the modern languages is dense and often contains enigmatic words and expressions. L. Perrine notes: 'Poetry is the most condensed and concentrated form of literature, saying most in the fewest number of words'³. This verbal mode of expression gives biblical poetry distinctive intensity and denseness. Biblical Hebrew poetry is elaborate, artfully designed, and carefully expressed. The poet skilfully uses selected language in order to communicate the desired message with maximum force⁴. If narration has its own literary rules, likewise poetry requires using a particular type of exegesis. Therefore an analysis of biblical poetry needs a different and specific approach other than biblical prose. For a considerable number of scholars, the presence of poetry in the Hebrew Bible remains an unquestionable fact. The Hebrew Bible contains over one third of poetic verses, and psalms, which belong to

¹ In his study, John Dancy briefly characterizes some main features of the Hebrew language. See John Christopher Dancy, *The Divine Drama. The Old Testament as Literature* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2001), 14-16. See also another recent study: Ernest Lucas, *The Psalms and Wisdom Literature (Exploring the Old Testament 3)*; London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), 67-77.

² More about specificity and history of the Hebrew language, see: Angel Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 1-160; Eduard Yechezkel Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Brill and Leiden: The Magnes Press, and Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1982); William Chomsky, *Hebrew: The Eternal Language* (5th edn., Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975); Mireille Hadas-Lebel, *Histoire de la langue hébraïque des origines à l'époque de la Mishna* (Paris 1981).

³ Laurence Perrine, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry* (7th ed; San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 9.

⁴ See Daniel J. Estes, 'The Hermeneutics of Biblical Lyric Poetry', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:608 (1995), 422.

the heart of biblical poetry. Some scholars provide a detailed list of biblical books and some passages, which marks biblical poetry. Thus, for instance, in his pioneering study in this field, *The Poetry of the Old Testament*, T. Robinson undertook an examination of Hebrew poetry. He provides a list of biblical books and passages, which constitute biblical poetry. He recognizes poetry exclusively in the Book of Psalms, the Songs of Songs, the Proverbs, the Book of Lamentations and in some chapters of the Book of Job (chapters 3-41). He maintains that the Books of Isaiah and Minor Prophets were largely written in poetic form (Jonah 2:2-9, etc.) He recognizes the poems between lines of prose in: Exod 15:1-18 (the Song of Moses); Exod 15:21 (the Song of Miriam); Judg 5 (Deborah's song); 1 Sam 2:1-10 (the Song of Hannah); Deut 32:1-43 (Moses' song); 2 Sam 22:2-51 (David's Song of Thanksgiving); 2 Sam 23:1-7 (the last words of David); 2 Kgs 19:21:28 (an oracle of Isaiah), and dirges: 2 Sam 1:19-27; 2 Sam 3: 33. Moreover, the tribal songs such as: Gen 4:23-24 (the Song of Lamech); Num 21:17-18 (the Song of the Well); Num 21:27-30 (the Song of Heshbon and Moab) belong to biblical poetry too. Most present-day scholars accept Robinson's catalogue of biblical poetical books and poems. However, the issue of the nature and definition of Hebrew poetry takes place in contemporary and intense scholarly debate. The essential question remains: What features do we find in these texts, which can allow us to categorize them into biblical poetry? Let us look at some points.

The first theory on biblical Hebrew poetry, which is contained in *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum*⁵, is accredited to R. Lowth. His theory, however, does not stand unscathed against the test of today's criticism. It is based mainly on a determination of meter and parallelism as constructive elements of biblical poetry. Whereas, there are many poetic lines in the Hebrew Bible where parallelism is absent or difficult to identify⁶ or, on the contrary, there are non-poetical discourses, which contain parallelism. Robert Lowth defines Hebrew poetry as follows:

⁵ See Robert Lowth, *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum* (Oxford 1733).

⁶ Stephen A. Geller argues that about 12 percent of Hebrew poetry exhibits nonparallel lines. See Stephen A. Geller, *Parallelism in Early Biblical Poetry* (HSM 20; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 30.

It consists mainly in a certain quality, resemblance, or parallelism, between the members of each period; so that in two lines, or members of the same period, things for the most part shall answer to things, and words to words, as if fitted to each other by a kind of rule or measure⁷.

Lowth's division of parallelism into three basic categories: synonymous, antithetic and synthetic parallelism is still widely accepted and used by many modern scholars. In recent researches, of these three types, synthetic has found the most attention. However, recent years have brought new models and fresh understanding of parallelism. Some scholars reject Lowth's tripartite division of parallelism. They, applying semantic criteria, emphasize the difference in the parts of parallelism, rather than their similarity⁸. Other scholars apply linguistic methods, describing parallel lines in terms of syntax instead of semantics⁹. The opinion of J. Fokkelman about Lowth's model is noteworthy. He remarks: 'It neglects or ignores the contributions of phonological or grammatical factors, and concentrates almost exclusively on the level of vocabulary and word meanings'¹⁰. In open discussion of parallelism in Hebrew poetry, the opinion of A. Berlin seems to be rational: 'If the grammatical aspect provides the skeleton of the parallelism then the lexical and semantic aspects are its flesh and blood'¹¹. Although parallelism and meter are important (perhaps dominant) features of biblical poetry, in

⁷ Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trans. G. Gregory (London: S. Chadwick and Co., 1847), 210.

⁸ See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1985), 3-61; and James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry. Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 1-58.

⁹ See Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 18-30. Studies which develop grammatical parallelism: Edward L. Greenstein, 'How Does Parallelism Mean?' in *A Sense of Text* (JQR.S; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1982), 41-70; Michael O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1980); Stephen A. Geller, *Parallelism in Early Biblical Poetry* (HSM 20; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979); Terence Collins, *Line-Forms in Hebrew Poetry: A Grammatical Approach to the Stylistic Study of the Hebrew Prophet* (SP.SM 17; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1978); and Paul Raabe, *Psalms Structures: A Study of Psalms with Refrains* (JSOT.SS 104; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).

¹⁰ Jan P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry. An Introductory Guide* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 29.

¹¹ A. Berlin, *Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, 64.

today's researches they are not adequate criteria to identify a poem. Thus, how to distinguish biblical poetry from prose?

In the last two decades the question of what is Hebrew poetry and how can we define it, became crucial for some modern scholars. Their analyses of Hebrew poetry have tended to interpret biblical texts in their own particular way and to put biblical poetry in a framework of definition. In the modern study of Hebrew poetry mainly three approaches dominate. Some scholars who read the biblical texts as literature represent a first approach. Others scholars who analyse Hebrew poetry by technical studies of Hebrew prosody represent a second approach. And some biblical scholars, as for example, David L. Peterson and Kent H. Richards¹², who interpret the biblical texts in a general way, mainly for purposes in the services of religious communities represent a third approach. To works of these latter scholars, can be counted some general commentaries as for example, Calvin's and Luther's Old Testament commentaries. In a brief survey of these three approaches, the first two merit some further comments.

In analysing the biblical texts, scholars who represent the first approach, put the emphasis on such things as attention to particular literary techniques, analysis of characterization, theme, motifs, symbolism, and interpretation of texts. To these scholars we rank, for example, James Kugel and Robert Alter. In his study *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, James Kugel¹³ concentrates mainly on such features as parallelism, pair-words and meter. He argues that the Lowth's classification of parallelism into three types cannot be applied to all poetic texts. Kugel brought forward his broad definition of parallelism as a rhetorical device in which two lines state that 'A is so, and what is more B'. He describes B as 'seconding' the thought of A in some way. Moreover, his analysis leads him to an observation that in number narrative passages we find parallelism (e.g. Gen 3:3; 9:6; 21:1,5,18; 22:12,17; Exod 2:1-7; 15:12-14; Deut 22:5; 32:1; Judg 5:3; 1Sam 12:1; Isa 1:2; 1:10). In other words he observed that not all poetry is parallelism and not all parallelisms are poetry. Kugel argues that basically there is no distinctive difference between po-

¹² See David L. Peterson and Kent Harold Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 14-16

¹³ See J. L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 59-95.

etry and prose in the Hebrew Bible. Instead of the notion of 'poetry' Kugel speaks about 'elevated style'. He argues that some biblical passages are more elevated than others, but the same 'elevated style' we can find throughout the Bible. He maintains that mainly two elements: parallelism and terseness determine the 'elevated style'. Kugel comes to the conclusion that there is a sort of poetry-prose continuum from parallelistic structures to a more 'elevated rhetoric' of parallelistic devices.

Many scholars have accepted his understanding of parallelism. They have also accepted his argumentation that the distinction between poetry and prose is not a sharp one. Thus Kugel's explanation finds greater credibility, as in many biblical verses the boundary between poetry and prose seems to be fluid or unclear. However, Kugel's standpoint has been greatly criticized by many biblical scholars. Very few scholars accept his criteria of recognizing Hebrew poetry. In fact, it is not solely parallelism and terseness as Kugel shows, which defines biblical poetry. But despite Kugel's nihilism in his approach to poetry, his study has started a fresh discussion between scholars on the defining of Hebrew poetry. It is my opinion that his idea of biblical poetry merits labelling as an original standpoint in an interpretation of biblical texts.

J. Kugel's opinion found criticism in Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. R. Alter argues that Kugel's standpoint comes perilously close to concluding that there is no poetry in the Bible¹⁴. Robert Alter represents a slightly different approach than Kugel's viewpoint. In his study, R. Alter analyses various biblical texts showing his splendid biblical scholarly erudition. He examines some elements, which make up a poem in the Hebrew Bible. In his scrutiny of prophetic poetry, of the Book of Job, and of the Book of Proverbs he focuses on such poetic features as parallelism, pair-words, meaning of lines, poetical structure and rhythm. Analysing the forms in the psalms, Alter observes:

'Poetry is the most complex ordering of language, and perhaps also the most demanding. Within the formal limits of a poem the poet can take advantage of the emphatic repetitions dictated by the particular prosodic system, the symmetries and antitheses and in-

¹⁴ See R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 4.

ternal echoes intensified by a closed verbal structure, the fine inter-twinings of sound and image and reported act, the modulated shifts in grammatical voice and object of address, to give coherence and authority to his perceptions of the world'¹⁵.

In his whole study, Alter shows that there is a difference between prose and poetry. However, in recognizing Hebrew poetry, Alter like Kugel, values the dominant role of parallelism. He also often refers to narrative texts and values them. In his scrutiny, R. Alter examines the different poetical constituents but he does not clearly conclude that these elements constitute biblical poetry. Therefore his idea suggests a similar conclusion as Kugel's. Although, their studies bring a great contribution to the understanding of biblical poetry, their conclusions do not provide a clear concept in defining Hebrew poetry. What has become clear from the studies of J. Kugel and R. Alter is that it is necessary to look for a variety of characteristics rather than a single defining feature. A weakness in the approach of Lowth, of Kugel and of Alter consists in overvaluing the semantic aspect of poetry, that is, the meaning of lines. And this is a part of the truth about poetry but not the whole.

Other scholars have used linguistic methods in the attempt to understand the working of biblical Hebrew poetry. These scholars who analyse Hebrew poetry by technical studies of Hebrew prosody represent a different approach than Kugel's and Alter's. We can understand the term 'prosody' following the definition of T. Brogan. He defines the prosody as follows: 'Prosody is the most general term used to refer to the elements and structure involved in the rhythmic or dynamic aspect of speech. Literary prosody studies the rhythmic structure of prose and verse'¹⁶. Scholars, who represent this approach in analysing Hebrew poetry, describe poetry using the terminology of linguistic methods. Some of them like David Noel Freedman and Frank Moor Cross¹⁷ have analysed Hebrew poetry by putting an emphasis on metrical and structure analysis of Hebrew poetry. Others modern scholars, as for example, Terence Collins¹⁸, Stephen

¹⁵ R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 136.

¹⁶ T. Brogan, 'Prosody', *PHPT*, 218-219.

¹⁷ See Frank Moor Cross and David Noel Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (SBLDS 21; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975).

¹⁸ See T. Collins, *Line-Forms in Hebrew Poetry*.

Geller¹⁹ and Michael O'Connor²⁰ have examined biblical poetry in order to discern its essential features and to show some grammatical rules. In his study, *Line-Forms in Hebrew Poetry*, T. Collins puts grammar ahead of semantics in describing Hebrew poetry. He examines the grammatical constituents of a sentence: 'subject' which includes pronouns, nouns, noun phrases and noun clauses; 'object' which includes the same elements what subject; 'verb' may be finite verb, a participle or an infinitive; and 'modifiers of the verb' which may be adverbs, prepositional phrases, locatives etc. Collins finds that these constituents occur in four Basic patterns. He distinguishes four Line-Types:

1. The line contains only one Basic Sentence (e.g. Isa 30:19; 57:1; 62:11; Jer 6:21; 17:1; 51:58; Joel 1:12; Ezek 26:2).
2. The line contains two Basic sentences of the same kind, in such a way that all of the constituents in the first half-line are repeated in the second, though not necessarily in the same order (e.g. Isa 1:3; 2:11; 10:33; Jer 4:9; 12:1; 14:2; Amos 7:9; Nah 1:4; Joel 1:11).
3. The line contains two Basic Sentences of the same kind, but only some of the constituents of the first half-line are repeated in the second (e.g. Jer 6:11; Isa 9:8, 23:2; 24:3; 27:13; Zeph 1:12, Nah 1:5; Hab 3:18).
4. The line contains two different Basic Sentences (e.g. Isa 13:15; 14:30; 42:9; Jer 2:3; 6:8; Joel 1:2; Zech 9:9).

Analysing Basic Sentences Collins observes that these line-forms feature prophetic poetry.

In his study, *Hebrew Verse Structure*, another biblical scholar Michael O'Connor describes biblical poetry by analysing Hebrew syntax. He maintains that Hebrew poetry can be defined in terms of 'syntactical constraints', which are a basic feature of Hebrew poetry. He argues that lines of Hebrew verse are shaped by syntactical constraints at the level of units, i.e. words, of constituents, i.e. phra-

¹⁹ See Stephen Geller, 'The Dynamics of Parallel Verse. A Poetic Analysis of Deut 32:6-12,' *Harvard Theological Review* 75 (1982), 35-56; 'Theory and Method in the Study of Biblical Poetry,' *JQR* 73(1982), 65-77.

²⁰ See M. O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure*.

ses, and of clause predicators, i.e. clauses. O'Connor identifies six constraints²¹:

1. A line contains from zero to no more than three clause predicators. It is the absence of a clause predicator in the second line of a pair that produces 'gapping'.
2. A line contains at least one and no more than four constituents.
3. A line contains at least two and no more than five units.
4. A constituent may contain no more than four units.
5. If a line contains three clause predicators it cannot contain a dependent noun or noun phrase, and if it contains two clause predicators only one of them may have a dependent noun or noun phrase.
6. If a line contains one or more clause predicators it cannot contain a noun or noun phrase that is not dependent on one of them.

Using this system of rules, O'Connor argues that the structure of a poem can be analysed by the examination of individual lines or group of lines, and then the whole poem. O'Connor also examines other tropes of the Hebrew poem as parallelism, meter and repetition. He observes that the most significant feature of Hebrew poetry, which distinguishes it from Hebrew prose, is 'gapping' or ellipsis, that is, omission of words in a verse. Although O'Connor's analysis of the grammatical structure of the Hebrew poem shows some features of Hebrew poetry, yet his approach has its limitations. In his scrutiny, O'Connor concentrates too much on the 'sub-structure' of poetic lines. It does not involve the semantic analysis of a poem, which, in an analysis of the biblical poem, should be taken under scrutiny.

To a group of scholars who analyse biblical poetry by the technical study of Hebrew prosody we can include J. P. Fokkelman as well. His analysis of poetry and narrative, particularly in the Books of Samuel, brings a major input to the understanding of poetry²². In

²¹ I place this concise description from review of O'Connor's constraints proposed by E. Lucas in *Exploring the Old Testament. The Psalms and Wisdom Literature*, 69.

²² See J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel. A Full Interpretation Based in Stylistic and Structural Analyses*, 4 vols. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981, 1986, 1990, 1993).

his recent study *Reading Biblical Poetry*, he examines Hebrew poetry and its ingredients. He especially gives attention to the structure of the poem. He identifies and then analyses the smaller textual units as cola and verses, and the larger components of poem as strophe and stanza. Fokkelman examines various biblical texts. Among his numerous examples, he provides an example of Psalm 18, which shows how cola, strophes, and stanzas may be recognized²³. For Fokkelman these elements feature biblical poetry. In his analysis, he also provides a new and comprehensive definition of the Hebrew poem. His definition is based on taking into account both components of poetry: prosody and language. He understands prosody as: 'The measures of all textual levels together, from syllables through to stanzas or sections'²⁴. He defines the Hebrew poem as follows:

A poem is the result of an artistic handling of language, style and structure, and applying prescribed proportions to all levels of the text, so that a controlled combination of language and number is created²⁵.

Fokkelman's definition is an attempt in defining Hebrew poem. It takes into account both ingredients, which the poet uses in writing a poem, namely, language and prosody, and also a proportion during the creation of meaning and sense.

In a recent and significant research on poetry – *Seeing the Psalms. A Theology of Metaphor*, William Brown²⁶ analyses the imaginative and effective power of psalmic poetry, particularly the power of imagery. In his review on Brown's study, a biblical scholar Patrick Miller remarks:

'This is the most important work on the poetry of the Psalms since James Kugel's *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*. Brown takes the study of Psalms poetry beyond the more functional analysis of parallelism into the way in which the varied, powerful, and often surprising images of the psalms convey their content and theology for the sake of instruction, prayer, and praise.

²³ See J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 151.

²⁴ J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 34.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 35.

²⁶ See William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms. A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

Brown, in a fresh and lucid way, explores the language of metaphors and the «iconic structure» of individual poems in order to uncover their theological meaning. In his study he examines metaphor in different psalms. He perceives imagery as an important feature of biblical poetry. Brown argues that the poetry of the psalms achieves a verbal level of iconography as for example Psalm 139, which reveals iconic language taking a stand against idolatry. He maintains that beside the importance of the text's form-fullness and linguistic background, images play an important role in conveying the text's meaning. He notes that word and image, form and icon are bound together in the formative aim of the biblical psalms²⁷.

It is noteworthy that in analysing Hebrew poetry, other scholars give attention to various elements. Thus, for instance, S. Mowinckel²⁸ argues that Hebrew poetry is characterized by the occurrence of stressed syllables that is metre. D. Freedman²⁹ and M. Dahood³⁰ argue that number or length of syllables is a characteristic feature of Hebrew poems. The latter scholar notes also that imagery plays an important role in biblical poetry³¹. His comparative analysis of biblical Hebrew with the resources of Northwest Semitic languages, specifically Ugaritic, is a fundamental characteristic in his rendition and interpretation of the Book of Psalms, and an unconventional approach to an analysis of Hebrew poetry. In his study, *Manual de Poética Hebrea*, L. Alonso Schökel³² examines, in a comprehensive way, a series of techniques, which are common in biblical poetry. He remarks, however, that it is difficult to distinguish strictly between prose vocabulary and poetic vocabulary, and to discern techniques, which are exclusively poetic³³. Other scholar – A. Berlin³⁴

²⁷ Ibid. 4.

²⁸ See Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, II (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

²⁹ See D. N. Freedman, 'Pottery, Poetry and Prophecy: An Essay in Biblical Poetry', *JBL* 96 (1977), 5-26.

³⁰ See Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 101-150*, II (AB 17; Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1968), XXV-XXX.

³¹ Ibid. XXVI.

³² See Luis Alonso Schökel, *Manual de Poética Hebrea* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1987).

³³ See L. Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000), 19.

³⁴ See A. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*.

regards parallelism and terseness as the marks of Hebrew poetry. In his outstanding study – *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, W. Watson³⁵ provides a long list of poetic constituents and devices. He gives an account of the methods, poetic techniques and results of current scholarship. A general background and references to the non-Hebrew literatures, which he provides in his study, is particularly valued and useful for comparative study of Hebrew poetry and poetical texts of the Ancient Near East.

In an examination of biblical poetical texts, each scholar tends to emphasize a particular aspect or feature, which can distinguish Hebrew poetry from biblical prose. However, all scholars concur and acknowledge that biblical poetry is complex and difficult for defining. Like the modern world's poetry, which utilizes an array of tropes and figures, biblical poetry also employs the whole range of poetic devices, which belong to the stuff of Hebrew poetry. Poetic devices are in the domain of stylistics or rhetoric. They do not define poetry but are often present in poetry³⁶. These factors make an analysis of Hebrew poetry complicated and intricate; on the other hand, this fact makes a contemporary research more engrossing and stimulating.

3. CONCLUSION

The above survey of the contemporary position of biblical Hebrew poetry endeavours to highlight insights into the distinctive features of biblical poetry, and allows for the drawing of some conclusions. Firstly, the question of recognizing Hebrew poetry is still under discussion among present day scholars. Every scholar has his unique and original approach in analysing and defining biblical poetry. Taking into account these various *modi operandi*, it is difficult to define poetry univocally. Secondly, Hebrew poetry is complex. It uses the extensive set of poetic devices and figures of speech, which are in the domain of stylistics or rhetoric. These poetic devices are essential and important elements of poetry but they do not define it.

³⁵ See Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry, A Guide to Its Techniques* (JSOT. SS 26; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1984).

³⁶ See Adele Berlin, *Biblical Poetry Through Medieval Jewish Eyes* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 14-15.

Thirdly, poetry and prose share some common features. Often the borderline between poetry and prose may be hardly discernible, which creates the difficulty of identifying clear characteristics of poetry. Fourthly, in analysing biblical poetry both semantic and linguistic criteria must be taken into account. An analysis, which gives attention to all these factors, may produce a sweeping and reliable concept of Hebrew poetry.

Let me conclude with a quotation from the French writer, Paul Valéry who noted: 'Poetry is to prose as dancing is to walking.' Valéry's note may grasp the point and subtly express the boundary between poetry and prose. Dancing is not walking, and walking is not dancing. These two things are different operations. However, walking with a majestic and sublime step can sometimes resemble dancing, and conversely. We may observe something similar in biblical Hebrew poetry and prose. Some common elements overlap in biblical poetry and prose. They both share some common features. Can we, however, by the common features which poetry and prose share together, identify poetry with prose or speak about poetry-prose as a continuum? Some distinctive characteristics presented by different scholars, show that there is a rationale for the treatment of biblical poetry as a phenomenon in its own right.