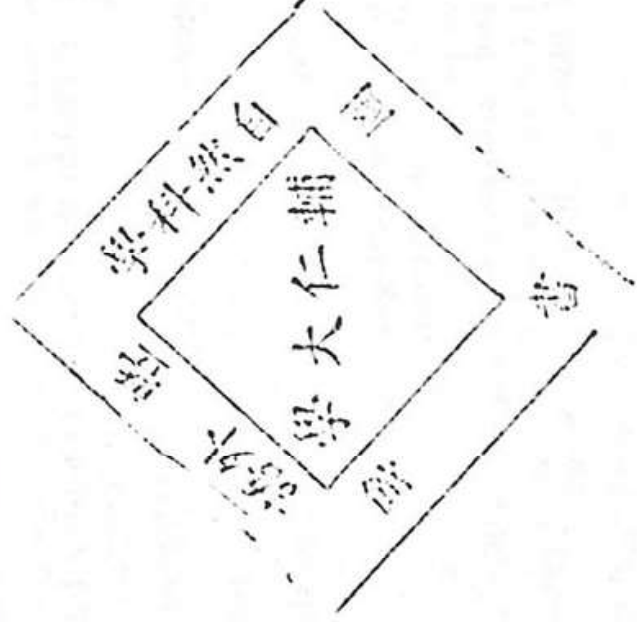




Interpreting Hebrew Poetry

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poem, namely, the relation between Yahweh's blessings and curses on Israel. To make these assessments is to supplement but not to replace other ways of viewing this poem, that is, from form-critical or philological perspectives. Not to undertake such literary analysis, however, risks a reading that fails to appreciate and understand this poem.

ISAIAH 5:1-7

Our second example of biblical poetry is taken from the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 5:1-7 provides an interesting text, since it, unlike many other units in the prophetic corpus, makes up a complete poem that may be isolated from the surrounding verses. The prose verses with strong eschatological coloration that precede it, Isa. 4:2-6, and the woe oracles that follow it, Isa 5:8-30, set off the song about a vineyard as a distinct unit. Furthermore, Isa. 5:1-7, at least initially, appears to be a coherent poem, not a fragment or an anthology.¹¹

We ask initially two sorts of higher-critical questions before proceeding to an examination of this text as poetry. First, may the poem be dated? A related question involves our ability to attribute the poem to Isaiah ben Amoz. Was it, in all likelihood, written by this prophet who was active in the last half of the eighth century, or was it penned by those who contributed, over a period of at least two centuries, to the growth of the book of Isaiah? About a poem such as Isa. 2:2-4, there might be some debate. However, there is minimal evidence to deny Isa. 5:1-7 either to Isaiah ben Amoz or to the time in which he lived.¹² Isaiah directed much of his rhetoric to Judah and Jerusalem, which are the subjects of this poem. Further, the marks of late additions to Isaiah ben Amoz's sayings, which may include specific attention to Assyria (10:5-11; 31:1-9) or eschatological material, for example, the aforementioned Isa. 4:2-6, are not in evidence here.¹³ In sum, we conclude that Isa. 5:1-7 represents the work of Isaiah ben Amoz. However, since specific historical allusions are absent, a more precise dating than the latter half of the eighth century B.C.E. is impossible.¹⁴ If the poem may be dated to this general period, it was written in a time soon after the demise of the Northern Kingdom in 721 B.C.E. and soon before the threat posed to Judah by the neo-Assyrian empire under its emperor, Sennacherib. Hence language of destruction, as that appears in vv. 5-6, would naturally have been understood by the author and his audience within the context of the military action that Israel had experienced and that Judah would soon experience.

Second, what is the genre of this poem? There is no scholarly consensus about the answer to this question despite the fact that there have been many proposals. In 1977, J. Willis provided a convenient catalog of these proposals: "an uncle's song, a satirical polemic against Palestinian fertility cults, the prophet's song concerning his own vineyard, the prophet's song expressing sympathy for his friend Yahweh, a drinking song, a bride's love song, a groom's love song, a song of the friend to the bridegroom, a lawsuit or accusation, a fable, an allegory, and a parable."¹⁵ J. William Whedbee deems it a juridical parable.¹⁶ Clearly, there is a welter from among which to choose, so much so that we do not think it possible to select one or another of these labels as *the* way in which to construe the poem. Rather, we think that the notion of *Mischgattung*, a genre appropriating a number of different elements, is the best way to think about Isa. 5:1-7. Song, introduction to song, statement of judgment using curse language, and allegorical elements seem undeniably present. As a result, we approach the task of literary assessment and interpretation with a preliminary judgment that Isa. 5:1-7 comprises no single genre but is instead a poem that represents a poet's appropriation of various stylistic features attested elsewhere in ancient Israel's literature.

We may now move to a detailed examination of the poem. Isa. 5:1a would appear to be an introduction (or part thereof), not only to the poem, but to whatever song is embedded in it. Introductions typically help set the context and clarify that which follows. Not so here. This introduction is ambiguous in several ways. First, we are not told who is "singing," and the identity of "my beloved" is not revealed. Second, the noun *dôd*, which has traditionally been translated "beloved," could as well mean "uncle" or "friend," or possibly it could be the proper name of a deity. Third, the Hebrew is difficult to translate. For example, RSV renders it:

Let me sing for my beloved
a love song concerning his vineyard:

whereas NRSV reads:

Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard.

The difference between the two translations in the second colon is consequential. On the one hand, one can, with RSV, construe there to

be a song, which may be characterized as a love song. Presumably it is a song authored by the songstress, a song that begins in v. 1b and is characterized by concern for the lover's experience with his vineyard. On the other hand, following NRSV, which in our judgment is a more accurate rendition of the Hebrew text,¹⁷ the song is written by the loved one, something he sang, at least in the first instance. If this is the case, then the song does not begin until v. 3, the first place in the poem at which the male lover speaks. According to this reading, Isa. 5:1-2, and not simply v. 1a, comprises the introduction to the song. This introduction provides the mundane background necessary for us to understand the song that the beloved one, the farmer, sings.

If the beloved's song begins in v. 3, then one must recognize that the singer herself (though the singer probably refers to the prophet—here the ambiguity involves gender) is singing a song in vv. 1-2 (and v. 7). Put another way, the poet presents us with a song surrounded by a song. The song of the singer surrounds the song of the beloved, an apt image for the words of lovers. Unlike the dialogic love poetry in the Song of Songs, we have here one lover's song—though not a love song—interpreting and enveloping the song of her lover.

In Isa 5:1a, one verb controls the bicolon, "let me sing." This cohortative or indirect imperative verb sets a forceful tone, which might be better captured by the translation, "I *will* sing." The verb does not involve a request for permission to sing. Rather, it suggests the necessity for presentation of the two songs that make up this poem.

The introduction to the poem, vv. 1-2, is made up of two quite different elements. The first element, the bicolon of v. 1a, indicates the nature of the relationship between farmer and singer, namely, that of love. Further, it indicates what the primary subject matter will be: the farmer's vineyard. The rhythm is balanced symmetrically, whether one counts accents (three in each colon) or syllables (seven in each colon). This balance is enhanced by the lexical reinforcement within the two cola, "sing"/"song," "my beloved"/"my love," as well as the more general phonetic parallelism found in the prominence of "i" vowels.

The second element in the introduction is a brief narrative, vv. 1b-2.¹⁸ In this section, one discerns a change in rhythmic structure. Instead of symmetric balance, there is a pattern of bicola in which the first line is often longer than the second (some would discern the so-called qinah meter [3 + 2]). This lack of balance anticipates the unexpected conclusion in this short narrative prologue to the farmer's song. There is an initial colon, which tells us something we already

know, namely, that the lover has a vineyard, and which tells us something that we did not know, namely, that it lay on a fertile hillock. Lexical parallelism and phonetic parallelism link the two introductory portions of the poem. The apparent stability of vineyard on this location is reinforced by the wordplay *kerem* ("vineyard") and *qeren* ("hill"), each word standing at the beginning of the colon in which it occurs.

The story (v. 2) commences with a series of three long verbs, long in the sense that the Hebrew words include both subject, verb and object, in the form of pronominal subject. This morphological similarity creates phonetic echoing as well: *way'azzēqēhū waysaqqēlēhū wayyittā'ēhū*. The poet continues by delineating the sorts of preparation that the beloved viticulturist has undertaken. He not only cleared, cultivated, and planted; he has also built a tower, which is itself ambiguous (was it a tower from which to guard against theft of crop or simply a place in which to store implements or in which to rest?) and created a wine reservoir. The last in the series of six verbs, which depict the work of this farmer, represents a surcease of activity: "he expected . . ." We are left with a picture of the farmer waiting, anticipating a harvest of luscious grapes. Then, in the final colon, which is the shortest in the introductory narrative, we are told about the harvest: the vineyard produced foul fruit. With that conclusion, the introductory poetic narrative ends. The poet has set the context for the song, which is embedded in the larger poem and which follows in vv. 3-6.

The song itself, namely, the song sung by the farmer about his vineyard, occurs in vv. 3-6. After the series of verbs in the introductory narrative, verbs that initiated all of the bicola in that section, the poet provides a significant break in the syntax. The particle *wē'attāh*, "and now," begins a disjunctive clause, the sort of clause that marks a break in the discourse. Here it signifies the beginning of a new section in the poem, namely, the beginning of the song itself. If the verb in v. 1a marked indirect address, the initial bicolon of the farmer's song marks a direct imperative. In contrast to v. 1a, which is addressed to an indefinite audience, presumably the readers of the prophetic book, the song of vv. 3-6 focuses on a particular group, which is defined in the initial bicolon: "inhabitants of Jerusalem/people of Judah." This colon is a classic example of what has been called synonymous parallelism. However, the contrast between Jerusalem-Judah and the difference between the nouns, inhabitants-people (here a singular collective

noun), suggest that no simple synonymy is involved. The poet moves in the second colon to a larger geographic entity, the territory of Judah, while at the same time shifting to a collective noun, "people," instead of "inhabitants." In so doing, the author balances the number and the scope of the two entities involved, people and place.

The vocative address of the "beloved's song" continues with the direct imperative, "judge!" the language used in Israel's judicial assemblies (cf. Isa. 1:17, "judge/defend (the case of) the orphan"). These first bicola constitute a performative utterance, namely, in calling for Judah/Jerusalem to judge, the speaker has created a legal assembly. The singer functions as plaintiff, uttering words on his behalf and against the vineyard, which is a peculiar defendant. To have a field function as defendant is a creative literary ploy, an implicit personification. Although there is ancient Near Eastern legal precedent for charging a field animal with violence, we are unaware that a field can be so indicted.

The legal logic of v. 4 is interesting. It is not an indictment. The farmer seeks to create a defense so that he will not be blamed for the rotten produce in his vineyard. The speaker sets his defense in the interrogative mood in a very creative way. Rather than make direct reports about all that he did on behalf of the vineyard, the farmer invokes those in the assembly, the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the people of Judah, to answer his questions. There are two questions that appear to be similar. Or put another way, it would not be surprising to hear someone claim that the questions are formulated using synonymous parallelism. The questions work quite differently, however. The apparent syntactic similarity stands in contrast with semantic diversity. In answer to the first question, one expects those in the assembly to respond: "There was nothing more that you could have done." Although no answer appears after the first question, the purport of what those in the legal assembly might have said is clear. The members of the assembly presumably know what the farmer has done in and for his vineyard. Hence there was an obvious, though implicit, response. Not so with the second question. Here the viticulturist asks: Why did foul-smelling grapes appear in place of the proper fruit? The rhetorical ploy here is decidedly different. Neither the farmer nor the members of the assembly know the answer, whereas with the earlier question the answer was clear to all. The difference between the presumed answers to these two questions is highlighted by their quite diverse grammatical structure. The controlling verb in the first is an infinitive

construct, a finite verb rules the second. However, the author has linked together all four cola that make up these questions by including the Hebrew verb *śh* in all four cola: *lā'āsôt* in the first, *āsîti* in the second, *lā'āsôt* in the third, and *wayya'as* in the fourth. In so doing, the poet has provided for both semantic parallelism and alliterative parallelism, with an emphasis on making and doing, both by the farmer and, surprisingly, by the vineyard in the second question.

After the questions that create a defense for the farmer, he moves to language of judgment or sentence. Again the legal assembly is silent, a silence that apparently enables the farmer to act as sole judge. Nonetheless, the discourse still occurs within the legal assembly, since the second person personal pronoun in v. 5, "you," must refer to those already addressed in v. 3, the first part of the farmer's speech. This sentence is introduced by a disjunctive clause, which itself commences with the introductory word "and now." The bicolon that makes up 5:5a is long 3 + 3 (perhaps even four) accents (9 + 10 syllables). The bicolon does not comprise two balanced clauses but instead expresses one thought: "And now, I will tell you//what I will do to my vineyard." (The *śh* theme, which was so prominent in v. 4b, continues in v. 5a and provides for semantic parallelism across the boundaries of the primary divisions of this poem.)

The rhythm of the farmer's judgmental language changes decisively in the ensuing cola, vv. 5b-6. Instead of the long, almost prosaic statement in v. 5a, we find a lapidary collocation of destructive language. In v. 5b, the rhythm is clear, two two-accent bicola: "I will remove its hedge and it shall be devoured / I will break down its wall; it shall be trampled down//." The consistency of rhythm is reinforced by parallel syntax and word order: infinitive absolute followed by object with pronominal suffix in the first colon with waw conversive plus *hāyāh lê* and noun, indicating result in the second colon. Although the first person pronoun "I" properly appears in English translation, there is no explicitly first person element in the Hebrew morphology. Instead, the tone is impersonal; one could translate in a woodenly literal way, "there shall be a removal of its hedge." In v. 6, however, the first verb, here a finite verb, "I will make it a waste," does include an explicit first person element. In v. 6a, one finds a tricolon followed by a three-accent bicolon. The tricolon is even more tightly packed than the bicolon that initiated the language of punishment. The lines read (1) I will make it a waste, (2) it will not be pruned, (3) it will not be hoed, (4) briers and thorns shall grow up. Of these cola, only the last has

three accents; the others have only two accents. One is struck here by the prominence of verbs and, consequently, action: lay waste, prune, hoe, grow. Although these verses are carefully crafted, they are not really surprising. Any Israelite farmer could have done such to a garden that did not yield appropriately.

The same cannot be said for the final bicolon of the farmer's speech. The verse's final bicolon is, again, long, balancing the bicolon with which the poetry of judgment began. However, what distinguishes this colon is not the rhythm but the semantics: "the clouds I will command, to prevent rain from falling upon it."* The word order is a bit unusual, since the prepositional phrase "concerning the clouds" appears before the subject of the verb. We take this word order to be a careful attempt to veil the identity of the farmer as long as possible. Had the verb appeared first, that identity would have been known at the very beginning of the bicolon. With this bicolon, the poet reveals that the farmer is a deity, since only a god could control the rains. This revelation signals the end of the speech of this individual, now known to be Yahweh.

In vv. 5-6, the poet uses the elements of rhythm and semantics in a particularly prominent way. He does so with another element, which we have not yet mentioned: allusion. In lists of treaty or covenant curses, both biblical and extra-biblical, the notions of unproductive land (Lev. 26:20; Deut. 28:16) and drought (Deut. 28:22-24) are prominent. Specific mention of weeds, "briers and thorns," v. 5, is probably also a part of this tradition. Isaiah 34, a text replete with covenant curses, mentions weeds, "thorns, nettles and thistles," as a part of a description of cursed land.¹⁹ This particular element in the legal traditions of the ancient Near East, namely, curse language, has been appropriated in this speech of the divine winemaker. The poet has adopted the ploy of literary allusion to covenant curse traditions in order to make the language of legal sentence especially vigorous, since it is language connected intimately with Israel's understanding of its relationship with Yahweh.

In Isa. 5:7, the poet returns to the voice of the lover, who had spoken in vv. 1-2. This change is marked by the emphatic particle *kî*, "indeed," and by an extraordinarily long line: "Indeed, the vineyard of Yahweh of Hosts is the house of Israel."* This statement includes no action verbs, and with good reason. It is designed to provide interpretive information, not to narrate action. Some of the information is not even new. On the basis of the last bicolon in Isa. 5:6, the listener or

reader knows that Yahweh is the owner of the vineyard. The new information involves the identity of the vineyard, that it is the house of Israel. And with this information, we enter the world of allegory, or something very much like it.²⁰ In an allegory, every important element may be translated into some reality external to the imagery of the poem. So, according to the beloved as exegete, the vineyard signifies the house of Israel, the men of Judah refers to that which the wine-maker planted, and, elliptically, the expected grapes represented justice and righteousness, and the wild grapes, bloodshed and a cry. Such allegorical interpretation makes clear that which might not be understood, even by the attentive audience or reader. Certain human activity, which may be characterized by the nouns "bloodshed" and "cry" required the legal sentence, which has already been fully described. Put another way, the action of the deity as farmer is already clear. The allegory does not interpret vv. 3-6. Instead, the allegorical interpretation jumps back to vv. 1-2. This jump underlines the envelope structure of this poem, namely, the relative independence of vv. 1-2 and 7, which almost may be read as a sensible unit in its own right. The poet could have written the verses in an order like 1-2, 7, 3-6. However, the ambiguity, which we have mentioned earlier, functioned to create interest and intrigue on the part of the hearer. Hence the ambiguity about the identity of the farmer is resolved only at the end of his speech. And the identity of the other parties, expressed allegorically, is revealed only in the final verse of the poem. Everything happens—or put another way, the piling up of verbs occurs—before we are clear about who is perpetrating what. Moreover, there is an ironic touch. We now know that those who had been called to judge (v. 3) are, at the conclusion, condemned. The poem functions to accuse and announce judgment.

As befits such a carefully formulated poem, the final lines are highly refined. Verse 7a,b links language from vv. 1-2, that of vineyard and planting, to the group or groups mentioned in the deity's speech, namely, the individuals of Judah. Moreover, the final line as well returns to the earlier language of the poem, the verb *qwh*, "looked for," which had occurred in v. 2. However, the key element in the line is the wordplay: justice-*mišpāt* and bloodshed-*mišpāh*; righteousness-*šēdāqāh*, and cry-*šē'āqāh*. This linking of assonance and alliteration underscores a key issue in the poem, namely, the difference between that which was expected and that which appeared: good grapes versus stinking fruit; the difference between justice and bloodshed and be-

tween righteousness and a cry. Put in a slightly more pointed way, the poet has highlighted the difference between that which was expected and that which eventuated by presenting nouns that sound alike. The phonetic similarity underscores the profound difference between, for example, justice and bloodshed. The difference between the good and the bad fruit is expressed here in the semantic difference between nouns that sound alike.

It is important to note that certain ambiguities remain even after one reads through the poem with care. We are still not certain about the identity of the singer, although it is presumably the prophet. The more important element of ambiguity rests on the second question of the farmer: "why did it yield wild grapes?" or to use the language of the allegorical interpretation, "why did it yield bloodshed and a cry?" This question remains unanswered, left for hearer and reader to ponder. Surely one element of this poet's artistry is the ploy of unresolved ambiguity.

In sum, Isa. 5:1-7 is a remarkably complex poem. It presents a song, sung by the deity as viticulturist, which is surrounded by introduction and conclusion, verses uttered by the deity's beloved, presumably the prophet. The poem is made up of a complex, envelope structure utilizing two songs. One of the prominent devices used in this poem is, therefore, that of changing voices.²¹ In addition, the creative use of ambiguity early in the poem, the appropriation of legal language (v. 3) and the allusion to curse traditions (vv. 5-6), the presence and absence of verbs (and its corollary, varying pace), and the allegorical style of interpretation (v. 7) provide much of the richness in this brief prophetic poem.

PSALM 1

The book of Psalms presents issues for interpreters unlike those raised either by poems embedded in narrative texts, for example, Deuteronomy 32, or by poetry in the prophetic corpus, even when a complete poem seems discernible, for example, Isa. 5:1-7. First, unlike prophetic poetry, it is usually easy to determine the extent of an individual poetic unit in the Psalter. The beginnings and endings of over three quarters of the psalms are marked by various titles or superscriptions, for example, "A Psalm of David."²² As a result, there are few questions about the boundaries of the poems.

Second, the process by which the Psalter was compiled presents