

**A CRITICISM OF SYSTEMS
OF HEBREW METRE: AN
ELEMENTARY TREATISE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649114511

A criticism of systems of Hebrew metre: an elementary treatise by William Henry Cobb

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

WILLIAM HENRY COBB

**A CRITICISM OF SYSTEMS
OF HEBREW METRE: AN
ELEMENTARY TREATISE**

a Heb. U.
CG53c

A CRITICISM OF SYSTEMS OF HEBREW METRE

AN ELEMENTARY TREATISE

BY WILLIAM HENRY COBB

80307
13/9/06

OXFORD
AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

1905

HENRY FROWDE, M.A.
PUBLISHER TO THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
LONDON, EDINBURGH
NEW YORK AND TORONTO

INTRODUCTION

THE time required to read the books worth reading so greatly exceeds the reading-time in any man's life, that each new book is properly challenged to show its importance and its freshness. It will not be denied that a system of Hebrew metre is important if true; for at the present moment, the whole field of Hebrew literature is in unstable equilibrium; to nothing fixed but love of change. There are many who assert and many who deny the value of metrical analysis as an aid in critical investigation of the original text; of the former class, there are various schools to be considered, each finding plausible reasons in favour of its position against all the others. The sublime confidence of the typical *Metriker* in his own statements of fact, which contradict his neighbour's statements regarding the same passage and even the same verse, is quite explicable when one remembers Legree's dictum in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 'I do the weighing.' Surely here, if anywhere, there is a call for level-headed judgement, that is, criticism; not necessarily condemnation, but the separation of the chaff from the wheat, and the judicial deciding among the doctors who disagree. If Englishmen and Americans have been somewhat backward in propounding theories, they may come forward with better grace in the rôle of Daniel. Germany as usual takes the lead in attempting to solve the problems before us; her scholars, from Gomarus in the seventeenth century, through Lcutwein in the eighteenth, and Ley in the nineteenth, to

Sievers in the twentieth, have put forth their brilliant and varied schemes for reducing Hebrew poetry to a versified form; of late years, America has published contributions, bearing on the same subject, by Professors Briggs, Brown, Arnold, Haupt, and others; but no English or American system of Hebrew metre has appeared since the days of Bishop Lowth, who held that no system was practicable. I do not forget Sir William Jones and his (Latin) commentaries on Asiatic poetry; but these could hardly be considered as forming a system.

Lowth and others after him ventured to assert that all possible solutions of the problem had already been proposed. There is a curious similarity in the language, upon this point, of Lowth (1753), De Wette (1811), Ewald (1835), Budde (1874), and Kuenen (German edition, 1894), but the event has proved them all mistaken. It is well to call attention to the second challenge above mentioned; a system must not only be important, but fresh. Never were truer words spoken than those of the Scotch teacher, John Henderson: 'More men become writers from ignorance than from knowledge, not knowing that they have been anticipated. Let us decide with caution and write late.' A typical instance in point may be given here as well as anywhere. When Professor Karl Budde, abandoning an earlier scepticism, presented in 1882 his well-known *kinā* theory, he remarked that this particular form had been noticed in a general way by Lowth, &c., but that Keil (in Hävernicks Introduction, 1849) was the first to describe it correctly as marked by three tones plus two. And yet Bellermann (*Versuch über die Metrik der Hebräer*, 1813, p. 137) has the following remark on the third chapter of the book of Lamentations: 'Something characteristic appears in this lamentation, namely, that the second hemistich consists fifty times of only two feet, while the first hemistich regularly numbers three of them. Because

of this significant preponderance, I would call this elegy *five-footed*¹.

The reader will observe that Budde mentions Lowth. Now Rosenmüller's edition of Lowth (1815, p. 565) refers to this very passage in Bellermann, and that is the edition commonly used in Germany. But we shall find eventually that Bellermann has been too much neglected by others also who have unconsciously depended on him. In the case of Budde himself, the oversight just noted is more than balanced by the frank confession which he makes in the article 'Poetry (Hebrew),' in Hastings's *Dictionary of the Bible*, and which I take pleasure in quoting: 'We have here to do with a subject akin to mathematics, a subject giving scope for playing with numbers. It is a fact perhaps too little observed, that all departments of study akin to this offer a special incentive to the ingenuity. One need only recall the subject of Chronology. One must have at some time gone deeply for himself into the subject of Hebrew metre and triumphed over the temptation to lose oneself there, before he can understand the attraction wielded by such speculations. Since the present writer has had this experience he has no finished metrical system to offer, nor can he attach himself unreservedly to any of the others that have been proposed, although he cheerfully concedes that to each of the above-named champions of metre we are indebted for much stimulus and help.'

On the title-page of this volume I have called attention to its elementary character. For a comprehensive treatise on Hebrew metre, that will endure every scientific test, we still wait; we must probably wait long. Meanwhile, let us heartily second the suggestion of Professor Hubert Grimme (*Psalmprobleme*, 1902, p. viii): 'In my view, the welfare of the young science of biblical metrics is to be found in special

¹ I return to this matter on p. 107.

investigation rather than in broad, systematic effusions'; and let us hope that one or more competent scholars will be able to devote to these subjects as many years of conscientious labour as Westphal gave to kindred researches. It cannot be amiss, even now, to take one's bearings in the sea of controversy, and present to the best of one's ability the state of the question. If it be objected that this very thing has lately been done by Schlögl and by Döller (both in 1899), and by König in his *Stilistik* (1900); if it be added that the entire material was thrashed out a dozen years ago by no less a critic than Kuenen himself in his *Einleitung*; there are three replies to make. First, these works, except the last-named, are very little known in England or America; next, some of the best investigations have appeared since the death of Kuenen; and lastly, his method is reversed in the present treatise, which instead of holding up the defects of each successive theory, attempts to find the merits, and by combining results, to indicate how far we have gone. Of course, the two methods imply each other; the extrication of what is true involves the ascertainment of what is untrue; but the difference in emphasis is no slight matter. In the attempt to be fair to each author, I assume that when a system of Hebrew metre has been carefully wrought out by a competent scholar, then, to use a common phrase, 'there is something in it'; and what that is, it is our business to find. The ideal aimed at is a patient induction of the facts accessible, a sound deduction of the principles involved, and an unbiassed application of those principles to the theories under review. Every theory accounts for some facts; a plausible theory accounts for most of the facts; the true theory when found will take in all of the facts naturally; hence it is to be reached by a positive rather than a negative process.

The reader of this book is supposed to know three

things; Hebrew, English, and poetry. Outside of these bounds he is not asked to travel. It would have been easy to give the work a more learned look by discussing, for example, the Assyrian parallels noted in 1884 by Ernest Budge, in 1895 by Hermann Gunkel, and in 1896 by Delitzsch and Zimmern¹. But supposing these Assyriologists to have made out their case, it has only predisposed us to expect something similar in Hebrew; that bias is immediately overcome if we do not find it; so why not let the Hebrew stand on its own bottom? As things are now, to draw inferences of this sort from one Semitic tongue to another is to do what the late Mr. John Fiske called guessing at half the truth and multiplying it by two. On the other hand, a thorough knowledge of Hebrew cannot be dispensed with. A selected list of metrical passages may suffice to deduce certain general principles, but can never establish a science. Still less can we rely on transliterations alone. If the reader fancies that he knows Hebrew when he can read *'āḥōpīm* and not עֲחֹפִים he is only deceiving himself.

What I mean by a knowledge of English includes its development as well as its latest forms. Suffice it for the present to observe that when any given species of rhythm is both common and proper throughout the history of English verse, it will not be necessary to alter a Hebrew text on account of the same phenomenon there.

The third requisite is as essential and rare as either of the others; a knowledge of poetry. Poetry differs from prose—both as to form and substance—only in degree, not in kind. But differ it does, and many a plausible emendation shatters against this rock. It is strange to what lengths some have gone in the process of transforming the noble poetry of the Old Testament into the rudest prose, making thistles grow instead of wheat, and cockle instead of barley.

¹ Cf. D. H. Müller, *Die Propheten* (1896), part i, sec. 1.