HEBREW POETRY: A CRITICISM

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I.

THE *Journal of Biblical Literature* for June-September, 1919, carries as its leading article "The Rhythmical Analysis of Isaiah 1 10–20," by Professor Kemper Fullerton, of Oberlin Theological Seminary.

The paper seeks to show "how frequently the obvious defects in the rhythm of a passage coincide with the exegetical or critical difficulties," as is the case with Isaiah 1 12, 13; and how, when they do, the restoration of the Hebrew text may legitimately be sought under the useful cross-lights of *both* rhythmical and critico-exegetical considerations.

Applying, therefore, rhythmical as well as critical and exegetical tests, Professor Fullerton makes the following alterations:

v. 11c, deletes "lambs."
v. 12, adds a parallel to v. 12a.
v. 13b, deletes "calling."
v. 13b, amends "iniquity" into "fast." (So LXX.)
v. 13b, moves "fast and festival" forward to v. 14. (So LXX.)
v. 14a, deletes "your new moons."
v. 14a, amends "your appointed feasts" into "appointed feast."
v. 15a, deletes "from you."
v. 16, moves last phrase forward into v. 17.
v. 17, deletes entire.
v. 18, deletes entire.
vv. 19, 20, appropriates from their context and joins to v. 16, to complete a six-line stanza.

The text is thus restored, divided, and translated to read as follows:

1

v. 10 Hear the word of Jahweh—ye judges of Sodom.
Give ear to the instruction of our God—ye people of Gomorrah.
v. 11 What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices—saith Jahweh.
I am sated with burnt-offerings of rams—and the fat of fed beasts.
And in the blood of bulls and of goats—I take no delight,
v. 12 When you come to see my face—(I will not accept you).

2

Who hath sought this at your hands—to trample my courts?
v. 13 Do not continue to bring—an oblation of vanity;
Smoke (of sacrifice) an abomination—is it to me.
New moon and Sabbath and call(?)—I cannot endure;
v. 14 Fast and assembly and feast—my soul hateth,
They have become unto me a burden—I am weary of carrying it.

3

v. 15 When ye spread out your hands—I will hide my eyes,
Yea, when ye multiply prayer—I will not be listening;
v. 16 Your hands are full of blood—wash you, cleanse you,
Put away the evil of your deeds—from before mine eyes;
v. 19 If ye are willing to hear—the good of the land ye shall eat.
v. 20 But if ye refuse and rebel—ye shall eat the sword(?).

II

The following criticism is offered:

Hebrew poetry was constructed—to the limited extent that "construction" was a conscious process—*from the top down*. First came the thought, visualized as an organic whole composed of strongly articulated parts; then the stanzas in varied patterns

correspondent to the morphology of the thought; finally the lines, in patterns which are consistent only if convenient and natural, being modified if necessary and widely varied if appropriate.

The technical results are three. First, Hebrew poetry is *doubly* structural. Two elements, not merely one alone, make up its morphology, viz. stanza-patterns as well as line-patterns. Secondly, of the two elements, the line-patterns are most completely subject to circumstances. The thought wholly dominates the rhythms and holds them strictly subordinate. In other words the accent-pattern is *not* the regnant principle of Hebrew poetry, whatever it may be in poetry classical or modern. Thirdly, the directing principle, which dominates every technical factor, is the strophically-divided thought.

The practical results are two. First, being constructed from the top down, i. e., taking its inner genius and driving force from its vividly structuralized thought rather than from a semi-mechanical rhythm, Hebrew poetry is a problem *exegetical,* rather than poetical in our modern sense of the word. It is wholly erroneous, therefore, either to discover or restore "damaged" texts on the sole basis or even on the corroborative basis of rhythmical considerations. Secondly, the most useful clue to follow in the exegetical solution of Hebrew poetry is the stanza-analysis. It is easy to illustrate how false dissection of the stanzas leads inevitably to false deductions as to the rhythms. Even those, therefore, who are interested solely in the technique of Hebrew rhythm will first have to master the structure of the Hebrew stanza.

Professor Fullerton's method works in the opposite direction and exactly reverses the values.

His starting-point is the line-rhythm, which he assumes to be uniform and invests with controlling virtue. For him, the five-toned rhythm "dominates" the passage; the passage does not dominate the rhythm. Hence any line which exhibits "obvious defects" in rhythm must be made to "satisfy the rhythmical demands of the rest of the poem."

Now on the face of it, if "rhythm" means flexibility, by just what standards does Professor Fullerton recognize the "obvious

defects"? And if rhythm means freedom, by what right does he assert that the rhythm in one stanza makes "demands" on the rhythm of another stanza, or even that mere rhythm makes any primary demands at all? And if rhythm is incidental, by what warrant can he make it a definitive test, as he certainly does when he avers that that revision, when revision of faulty texts is necessary, "will probably be nearest the original text which conforms most closely to the five-toned rhythm established for the remainder of the poem"? To handle Hebrew poetry, whose structurality is anything but metrical, on the basis of a dominant rhythmical constant, is both a contradiction in terms and a fundamental misapprehension of the real nature and relative values of the elements involved.

Faulty method leads to faulty results. According first and major attention and supreme value to the rhythm side of the problem, Professor Fullerton signally fails to give adequate treatment to the stanza-analysis. This is where his work is most demonstrably vulnerable, and where success and failure matter most of all. It is at his stanzas, therefore, that the following detailed criticism is directed.

In the first place, Stanza I does not open with v. 10, but with v. 11. From v. 11 on, Jahweh is speaking directly to his people; the pronouns are "you" and "your." In v. 10 some one else is calling the people to give attention to this Jahweh-discourse, referring to it as the admonition of "our" God. Certainly Jahweh would not refer to himself as "our God"! It is the whole Jahweh-discourse that constitutes the poem. It commenced with a quatrain, vv. 2, 3, which pronounced the divine indictment. Isaiah then digresses to explain in his own words the occasion and warrant of this indictment, vv. 4–9, using literal and figurative language which is significantly lacking in rhythmical or other structure and therefore may be set down as a sort of short prose interlude. This explanation he ends with the couplet, v. 10 . . .

v. 10 "Hearken!" to the proclamation of Jahweh, ye Sodom-rulers!
"Give ear!" to the admonition of our God, Gomorrah-people!

Obviously this belongs with what precedes, and not at all with Stanza 1 which follows. It is a couplet used as a transition out of the prose of Isaiah's explanatory digression back into the poetry of the direct discourse of Jahweh's proclamation. (Note how the first word in each member of the couplet catches up the first words in the divine indictment above,—"Hearken", "Give ear";—while the last word in each member of the couplet, "Sodom", "Gomorrah",—echoes the last words in Isaiah's preceding explanation.)

In the second place, Stanza I does not end with v. 12a, but with v. 13b. Thus divided, the stanza is a thought unit containing that part of Jahweh's arraignment which is directed at the *sacrificial* system. The picture is compounded of animals, clatter of hoof-beats, blood, fire, smoke, stench, all of which are mentioned, and all of which quite obviously belong together. Professor Fullerton alleges no reason, and there is none, either strophic or rhythmic, for making a stanza-division through the middle of this natural unit, and allotting three lines to the following stanza which is about another matter. As a minor corroboration of the boundaries of Stanza I, notice how it opens and closes with answering phrases: "What do I think of . . .?" and, "Is what I think of it!"

In the third place, why conjure up a parallel for v. 12a? It is suspicious in having no parallel, anyway; in addition it is grammatically doubtful, strophically irregular, and quite unnecessary to the sense. "Restore" the line to grammatical impeccability, rhythmical regularity, and parallelistic completeness, and what is the result? A *seven*-line stanza in the midst of a sequence of stanzas notable for their regular *six*-line structure. As there is nothing in the peculiar nature of the thought expressed, either in this line or those adjacent, which calls for an exception in favor of an extra-line stanza, obviously everything points to v. 12a being a gloss. Delete it altogether and see what happens . . .

v. 11 "What do I think of your droves of sacrifices?"—saith Jahweh;
"I am cloyed with burnt-offerings of rams—and fat of fatlings;

And bulls' blood and rams' and bucks'—I do not relish.

v. 12 Who sought this of you?—hoof-clatter in my courts!

v. 13 Never again fetch in—a gift empty of significance!
A nauseating stench—is what I think of it!"

In the fourth place, Stanza II does not commence with v. 12b, nor end with v. 14. After the arraignment of the sacrificial usages, Jahweh enumerates and condemns the remainder of the ritual. The monthly festival of New-Moon, the weekly Sabbath, the special proclamations and set feasts,—all the items of the formal system, even to that most solemn and holy feature common to them all, the posture of public prayer. He states to be equally unendurable and unavailing, because all are as "empty"—i. e. of moral significance—as the sacrifices are, and so are hypocritical, loathsome, abominable, nauseating. Setting together all these items wich so obviously belong together, the stanza-boundaries are plain: vv. 13c–15b: and it is hard to see how Professor Fullerton's exegesis could miss them.

In the fifth place,—turning momentarily from criticism of the stanzas,—this is one of the instances when a single-eyed search for rhythmical uniformity makes quite as bad work of the lines, too. As it stands in the text, Stanza II has only three of the five-toned lines which "dominate" the poem,—and one of these is 2×3 instead of 3×2. The rest are four-toned (2×2). But why not let them stand that way? The passage is capable of reasonable interpretation, both exegetically and poetically, without recourse to reconstruction. Moreover, the whole significance of "rhythm" as distinguished from "meter" is in the predominance of flexibility over strict regularity. As stated above, within the stanzas the line rhythms are consistent if possible, but freely modified if necessary. Stanza II is a case in point, for, unlike Stanza I, fully half of it expresses Jahweh's personal reaction toward those whom he is addressing. The emotional element is emerging and culminating. If the rhythms are different from those of Stanza I, so is the mood. If the rhythms are variable, the mood is jerky, too,—almost choking in the second line, where the grammar, however broken, leaves the sense unmistakable, and the effect eloquent beyond the

power of faultless rhetoric. (Many things may admittedly be what Professor Fullerton calls "grammatically impossible," which are rhetorically powerful. This is poetry, and poetry is rhetoric, not primarily a grammar exhibition.) There is abundance of reason, too, for the appearance of the shorter rhythm as the utterance approaches the climax of emotional outburst in the next stanza, where whole sentences are phrased in monosyllabic commands and the rhythm finally settles down to a fairly consistent 2×2 pattern. But Professor Fullerton, pruning to fit the fixed pattern, redistributes v. 13c and v. 14a, b, and finally emerges with all his lines five-toned. Incidentally there are only five of them, where there would have been six if taken as they stood...

v. 13c "As for the New-Moon and Sabbath—Proclamation of Assembly,—
I am not able—iniquity!... *and celebration!*
v. 14 Your New-Moons and your calendar feasts—my soul loathes!
They have become a crushing burden—I am exhausted by carrying them!
v. 15 At the spreading of your hands—I will cover my eyes from you.
Yea, when ye multiply prayer—I am not even listening!"

Lastly, Professor Fullerton's third stanza,—the most vulnerable piece of work of all. Three lines are discarded entire. Three other lines are telescoped into two. These are then joined with two which belong to the previous stanza and two others from the farther end of the stanza following. Really, if such playing fast and loose with the text beyond all common-sense is permissible, we could easily go just a little farther and make poetry, rhymes and all, out of the Declaration of Independence! Surely, such work refutes itself! The individuality of Stanza III is as clear and as homogeneous as nine consecutive imperatives can make it. Moreover, its place in the thought-sequence is equally distinct, natural, and obvious. Stanza I itemized the sacrificial system and its distastefulness to Jahweh. Stanza II passed to the remainder of the ritual,—the various religious gatherings,—with increasing emphasis upon their loathsomeness

in Jahweh's sight. Then the storm breaks in a climax of short, sharp orders to "Reform"!—Stanza III . . .

v. 15c "Your hands!—They are full of murder!
v. 16 Wash! – Cleanse!
Avert the evil of your deeds—from before my eyes!
Cease to do evil!—Learn to do right!
Pursue justice!—Correct oppression!
Judge the fatherless!—Plead for the widow!

Without emendations, condensations, omissions, or borrowed conclusions, the six lines as they stand constitute a true stanza.

Professor Fullerton's work has thus far been criticised from two angles. On the one hand it is contended that his method is *a priori* erroneous because it commences by looking for a dominant rhythmic constant. On the other hand, it is contended that his vulnerable results are corroborative proof of false method. A third angle may now complete the attack upon his method. Professor Fullerton has spent no time mastering how the varying thought actually did produce a *versatile* rhythm, in order to spend all his time guessing how the same thought or fragments of it or some other might have been expressed by an unvarying rhythm. But Hebrew poetry was not written to be rendered on a drum. It is not solely *tempo*. In other words, Professor Fullerton *has left out the reciter*. Whether Hebrew poetry was lyric or liturgic, it was dramatic,—intended to be visualized if not actually dramatized. Figuratively if not literally, it presupposes a public reader. But under the art of a competent reciter, two bare imperatives,—to take an extreme case,—if rendered with appropriate gesture, pose, *and dramatic pause*, can be made of parallel temporal, and therefore artistic, value, with the common five-toned line, if the imperatives themselves have the proper thought value. It is *the thought* which determines the value of a line, not the rhythm.

Here, then, really, are two opposite methods. Professor Fullerton starts with a pattern, fits the variant rhythms to it, and thus arrives at what goes to make up a line and a stanza. The critic advocates a method which works down from the thought, through the stanza, to the lines, and lets the rhythms

be what they will. The two methods operate in opposite directions. They have nothing in common. The relative success of their final results is the ultimate test of their practical value.

III

Passing by many incidental matters, direct criticism rests with Stanza III, since Professor Fullerton closes the poem here. Two final items, however, clamor to be heard.

Is it so certain that here is where the poem closes? Says Professor Fullerton: "Vs. 21–26 are admitted on all hands to be an independent poem and vs. 27–31 are fragments which have nothing to do with the topic in vs. 10–16;" [v. 18 is] "utterly at variance with the context." Remembering that vv. 11–17 have formed themselves into three six-line stanzas, is it not striking that the remainder of the chapter also lies in the same rather uncommon six-line stanzas?—and that they are Jahweh's direct discourse, like the first three?—that they form a sequence, likewise?—and that the sequence of the last four stanzas exactly fits and completes the arrested sequence of the first three? After denouncing the sacrifices as "empty" of moral significance (Stanza I), and execrating the fasts, feasts, and prayers as also intolerable (Stanza II), and commanding a reform (Stanza III), Jahweh holds out the alternatives of conduct and consequence (Stanza IV), sadly anticipates the rejection of the proffered chance (Stanza V), decrees therefore that He must purify what they will not (Stanza VI), and forecasts the ultimate destruction of the offending elements (Stanza VII). It is a veritable program of moral discipline, complete, plain, logical. Whereas, if the poem ended with Stanza III, and its command to reform, the proclamation is artistically, not to say theologically, incomplete and weak.

Finally, Professor Fullerton's translation,—tame prose, curiously punctuated,—raises the question: What is the purpose of all this study, speculation, and restoration? Is it not to place before English readers the powerful, majestic swing of Isaiah's imperial imagination and dramatic language? Does a ragged style and a commonplace vocabulary befit the task? The first

chapter of Isaiah contains a dramatic poem. Can the poeticalness of it be transferred by anything short of a *poetical* translation? Why not at least try? . . .

THE PROGRAM OF MORAL DISCIPLINE
or
GOD'S ADJUSTMENT TO SIN

PATERNAL LAMENT OVER UNFILIAL WRONG

2 "Listen! O Heavens, and hearken! O Earth; for Jehovah is speaking.
Sons whom I favored and magnified—they are the ones who have wronged me!
3 Even an ox knows his owner,—a mule the crib of his master—
But Israel cannot perceive; mine own people pay no attention!"

PRESENT PLIGHT THROUGH ISAIAH'S EYES[1]

4 Alas! what a sinful nation it is! A people guilt-laden! A whole breed of evil-doers! A corrupt progeny!
They have deserted the Lord! They have scorned Israel's Holy One! They have turned their backs!
5 Whereupon would you be further smitten? You continue defection! The whole head is diseased! And the whole heart sick!
6 From top to toe there is nothing sound! Wound and welt and fresh blow! Uncleansed, unbandaged, nor soothed with oil!
7 Your land—desolation! Your cities—burnt with fire! Your tillage—aliens devour it to your face! And the desolation is like only an alien's havoc!

[1] *Prose.* Isaiah speaking, digressing to paint the situation as it looks through his own eyes. The poetical structure resumes with Jahweh's words.

8 And the Daughter of Zion is left behind like a shelter in a
vineyard, like a shack in a melon-patch, like a city bombarded!
9 Had not the Lord of Hosts reserved us a narrow escape, we
had been like Sodom itself,—we had resembled a very Gomorrah!
10 "Listen" to the message of the Lord, O Sodom-rulers!
"Hearken" to our God's instruction, O Gomorrah-people!

MOCKERY OF SACRIFICIALISM

11 "What unto me are the droves of your sacrifices worth?"
saith the Lord.
"Lo! I am cloyed with burnt-off'rings of rams and choicest
of fatlings.
Bullocks' and rams' and he-goats' blood cannot satisfy me.
12 *You* who appear in my courts!—who *asked* you this?—
hoofbeats in here!
13 Have done with continuous proffer of such hypocritical
off'rings!
An incense whose smell is a stifling stench are such unto me!"

MASQUERADE OF CEREMONIALISM

14 "As for the New-Moon and Sabbath, Proclamation of
Solemn Assembly—
How can I tolerate brazen festivity masking transgression?
Your New-Moon and all your punctilious feasts give me
loathing of soul.
A burdensome load have they grown on me—Lo! I am
spent with their carrying.
15 So when you raise your suppliant hands, I cover my eyes.
Verily though you may multiply prayers, I am listening not."

REFORM!

"Your hands, indeed!—they are dripping with murder!
16 Wash ye yourselves!—and make yourselves clean!
Remove from my sight the wrong of your deeds!
Cease to do wrong! 17 Learn to do right!
Pursue even justice! Correct all oppression!
Judge ye the fatherless! Plead for the widow!"

ALTERNATIVES

18 "Come and let argue," saith the Lord.
"Though your sins may be like scarlet, white as wool they yet may grow.
Though their red may be like crimson, they may be transformed like snow.
19 If you willingly will hearken, you may eat the country's good:
20 If you stubbornly refuse, then the sword must drink your blood—
For the mouth of God Himself has said the word."

ALLOY

21 "Alas! How the city that once was called 'Faithful' goes whoring!
Her native and plentiful righteousness ousted by cut-throats!
22 Her silver but slag, and her choice wine insipid with water!
23 Her unruly rulers are bosom-companions of thieves;
They all of them hanker for hush-gold, soliciting bribes,
Till the plea of the widow and fatherless fails to engage them!"

PURIFICATION

24 "Hence the verdict of Jehovah, God of Hosts,—yea, the Mighty One of Israel:
Ah! but I will ease me of my haters, and avenge me of my foes!
25 I will drive my hand against thee, and in furnaces will sternly smelt thy slag!
And thine alloy I will wholly fling away!—
26 Thy Counsellors and Judges I will drive to be again as at the first,—
And then shalt thou be called, O Trusty City, 'The Metropolis of Right!'"

DESTRUCTION OF SLAG

27 "With Justice shall Zion be ransomed, and Right shall redeem all her penitent members.
28 But partners in doom and destruction are the sinful and rebels and haters of God.

29 For you shall be shamed at the oaks that you prized, and
humbled at favorite gardens.
30 For you shall become as a tree that is stripped of its leafage,
a garden unwatered.
31 Thus shall man become but as flax, and his work like
a spark, —
Together the twain shall meet common destruction,—no
quencher shall stay it."

NOTE. The translation above is taken from two articles on Hebrew Poetry by the present writer, which were published in the *Biblical Review* for October, 1918 and January, 1919, and is reprinted here be kind permission of the Editor.