

On the Newer Literary-Critical Approach to Biblical Poetry¹

Krešimir Šimić

ORCID: 0000-0002-0114-372X

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek
ksimic@ffos.hr

UDK: UDK: 27-276(811.411.16'02)

Review paper

<https://doi.org/10.32862/k.17.2.3>

Abstract

This presentation discusses the views of three renowned authors – James Kugel, Robert Alter, and Jan Fokkelman – known for their literary-critical approach to the Bible, concerning biblical poetry. According to Kugel, looking at the Bible through the lens of division into poetry and prose (lyrical and epic literature) means looking at it wrongly. He maintains that even meticulous analyses of parallelism can be distorted if viewed through this lens. Therefore, Kugel asserts that there is no poetry in the Bible but rather a “continuum” of loosely connected parallel structures in what we see as prose sections and “heightened rhetoric” in what we often erroneously consider verses. According to Alter, biblical poetry is based on semantic parallelism. However, he points out that poetic expression deliberately avoids complete parallelism, just as language resists mere synonyms by introducing subtle differences between related terms. In contrast, Fokkelman believes that combining prose and poetry, and even transitioning between them, is possible because most Hebrew sentences contain two to eight words and are usually linked in sequences through parataxis (using “... and... and... but... and then”). All three opinions lead to the conclusion that biblical poetry, like prose, is to a large extent sui generis, and that any distinction between poetry and prose, if it exists at all, is not of

1 This article is associated with the project: *Narrative and Metanarrative in Biblical Psalmody and Biblical Psalter: How the Narrative in Biblical Poetry is used for Conveying Content and Message* (project leader: Danijel Berković).

the same nature as in Western literary culture and it is, therefore, inappropriate to refer to prosimetrum in the Bible.

Keywords: *Bible, poetry, versification, James Kugel, Robert Alter, Jan Fokkelman*

I.

In contrast to Classical Greece, ancient Israel has not left us any theoretical discussions about literature. The Bible does not include explicit literary-critical comments known as metatexts, which would problematize the text itself, including its literary procedures, referentiality, and construction. However, there are several biblical expressions (*ir, mizmor, qina*) that refer to poetry. These expressions are ancient and part of the biblical text. Although they were seen as a certain kind of literary terminology, their meaning, especially generically, was not completely clear. The extrabiblical tradition is somewhat more directional, which is especially evident in the medieval Masoretic manuscripts, which highlighted individual passages through versography (Berlin 1991, 7–8).² Since the Bible was usually compared to classical Greek literature, and meter was seen as the *sine qua non* of poetry, biblical poetry was left largely unexplored. Biblical poetry did not conform to the traditional metrical structures of ancient Greek literary culture. For example, in his *Poeseos Asiaticæ Commentarii* (1774), William Jones attempted to prove that biblical poets relied on quantitative versification; however, he had no other way to prove it but by altering the punctuation of biblical texts. As a result, Eduard Sievers (*Metrische Untersuchungen*, 1901, § 53) argued that Hebrew prosody differs from classical prosody in that it does not rely on the alternation of long and short syllables.³

During the early modern era, there was a significant growth in the production of vernacular literature, particularly in the form of poetry. For poetry to gain some legitimization, other than appealing to its divine origin, appeals were made to the Psalter and some other biblical texts. Such strivings led to new attempts to discover the source of poetry in the Bible. Since, especially in Italy, models of vernacular syllabic poetry (where the emphasis was not on length but on the number of syllables) replaced the classical ones, syllabic versification became the pattern for approaching biblical poetry as well. Jewish authors were not familiar with the

2 The print “destroyed” the Masoretic versography, but modern scientific editions of the Bible reversed this trend. In *Biblia Hebraica Kittel* and *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* not only are the traditionally versographical parts so printed but also anything considered poetic by modern standards, including the speeches of the prophets and “poems” inserted into narrative sections (for example, 1 Sam 15:22-23), is printed in versography.

3 See Stuart 1976.

concept of biblical poetry being based on syllabic versification. Although it is difficult to assess the extent of the Jewish influence, it is known that many Jewish advocates of syllabic versification in the Bible, or something similar, lived in Italy for a time (Abravanel, Ibn Habib, Moses ibn Tibbon) (Berlin 1991, 41). Besides, some think that biblical poetry was based on something like accented versification (taking into account only those syllables that carry the basic accent) (e.g., Julius Ley, *Grundzüge des Rhythmus, des Vers- und Strophenbaues in der Hebräischen Poesie*, 1875).⁴ There were also other approaches. One of them was Parry-Lord's hypothesis of the oral composition of Homeric epics, which briefly influenced the study of biblical poetry. However, this approach demanded that the so-called fixed pairs of words in parallelism be replaced by conventional expressions that signaled oral origin, which was quickly dismissed as insufficient.⁵ Moreover, it was discovered that the Psalter and the Book of Job likely were not orally transmitted. Interestingly, although poetic figures and tropes were identified and cataloged mostly according to the classical Greco-Roman terminology and definitions, their impact on biblical poetry, for the most part, did not cause significant interest.

The most known solution regarding understanding biblical poetry was proposed by Robert Lowth (*Prælectiones de Sacra Poesi Hebræorum*, 1753). He abandoned the search for a versification system and, instead of turning to the classics or the vernacular literature for his conceptual frame, the way his medieval and early modern predecessors did, Lowth tried to read the Bible according to the "way of the Hebrews," i.e., the way he thought ancient Hebrews would have read it (Prickett 2016, 309). He realized that the fundamental principle of ancient Hebrew poetry is "parallelismus" (also known as *parallelismus membrorum*), in which two (and sometimes three) short "verses" are juxtaposed to create the effect of symmetry. Lowth's work had a significant impact on the study of biblical poetry for nearly 200 years, beginning in the late 18th century and lasting until the 1980s.⁶ Due to the popularity of narratology during the 1970s and 1980s, and even onward, the literary-critical approach to the Bible was dominated by studies mostly focused on prose (Erich Auerbach's study, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*, 1946, is widely regarded as the starting point of this approach).⁷

4 See Kurylowicz 1972.

5 R. Alter points out that literacy is remarkably old in the Middle East, so that there is no preliterate phase of an already existing Jewish nation. Record keeping is part of the formative experience of ancient Israel (Alter 1987, 13).

6 Rabbinical circles were not thrilled by the research into the uses of parallelism in the Bible. In fact, they were not interested in biblical versification at all. The concept of biblical poetry, advocated by Josephus and others, is completely absent in rabbinical texts. J. Kugel highlights that Moses, David, and Isaiah could certainly have been described as "poets," at least to magnify their abilities above those of ordinary singers. However, they weren't! (Kugel 1981a, 129).

7 A. Berlin suggests that contemporary Biblicalists and literary critics (theorists) may give the im-

Still, poetry was not completely relegated to the background. There are two reasons for the renewed interest in biblical versification. One is the discovery of the ancient Ugaritic (North Kanaan) epics, in many ways similar to biblical poetry and thus good for comparatist analyses. The other is the influence of structural linguistics, which offered patterns for intertextual linguistic analyses.⁸ One of the more extensive and remarkably erudite contributions to the study of biblical poetry is Michael Connor's *Hebrew Verse Structure* (1980). He noted that the patterns in biblical poetry were not metrical or rhythmical, but rather syntactical. This led him to base his study on the "line," which is mostly paralleled in rhetori-

pression that they are the first to approach the Bible from a literary perspective, but this is not the case. Some of the oldest methods of understanding the biblical text are literary approaches. Although it is true that modern literary and linguistic theories are far from their patristic and medieval ancestors, the earlier approaches still contain many modern observations about biblical language and style, albeit in a different form. This, according to Berlin, is not so surprising because the biblical texts did not change. What did change are the models and theories used to explain them. The more we understand the earlier models and theories, the more we begin to realize that the modern approaches are actually integral parts of a long tradition whose goal was to analyze the form and style of the Bible (Berlin 1991, 3). Relying on Kenneth Gros Louis' article, *Methodological Considerations* (Gros Louis 1982), here are the determinants of contemporary literary-critical approaches:

- 1) Approaching the Bible as literature means giving importance to the text itself, without considering its historical and textual background, or the circumstances that led to its present form, or even its religious and cultural foundations, which is typical of the historical-critical approach. In short, the literary-critical approach to the Bible is ahistorical.
- 2) The literary critic assumes that the text is a unified whole.
- 3) The literary critic is primarily interested in the structure or organization of the work.
- 4) Literary critics are primarily interested in the literary reality of the text and not its historical reality. Literature is here equated to fictionality: "Is it true, we wonder, not in the real world but in the fictional world?"
- 5) The literary reality of the Bible can be studied through literary criticism methods used to analyze any other nonbiblical text.

J. Kugel argues against such literary-critical approaches that view the Bible as literature. Instead, he believes that we should ask what the meaning of "as" in the phrase "Bible as literature" actually is. Kugel says the short answer might be that "it has many meanings." The Bible has been read *as* literature since the Greek and Roman times. Tropes and figures of classical rhetoric, allegorizing of Homer and Hesiod, hexameter and trimeter of both epic and lyrical literature were found in the Bible, too. The Bible *as* literature in the sense of interpretation has been obvious since the early days of biblical exegesis, dating back to Hellenistic Judaism and patristics. Modern Bible criticism developed from *Literarkritik*, or *Formkritik*, and then began to apply methodical starting points of Russian formalism and its French branch, structuralism, and starting points that take biblical texts as wholes, which is related to the American New Criticism. According to Kugel, such criticism can be traced back to the 16th century, when people stopped distinguishing between prophecy and poetry, divine and literary inspiration, and not to the 18th century. It brought about a new direction: reading the Bible began to be viewed as reading a "sacred" text as any other text (Kugel 1981b, 217-128).

- 8 For the influence of linguistics on the study of biblical poetry, i.e., understanding the biblical parallelism, see Berlin 1985, 7-30.

cal records by the term *colon* (pl. *cola*), as the foundation of biblical poetry. Due to the extensive and complex nature of O'Connor's study on biblical poetry, I will use the monographs of three authors – James Kugel, Robert Alter, and Jan Fokkelman – as my guide through literary-critical studies.

II.

According to Kugel, Lowth was the most insightful and sensitive writer on the topic of biblical poetry, as well as a remarkably talented writer. But even as such, he made a mistake while classifying various types of parallelisms into three comprehensive types: synonymous, antithetical, and synthetical parallelism. Instead of providing clarity on potential nuances, Lowth's classification resulted in ambiguity (Kugel 1981a, 12). Moreover, Kugel is correct to point out that, although Lowth was a philologist of rare sensitivity, ability, and even courage to pursue his ideas that diverged from the canons of his time, one should question how such a striking and fundamental phenomenon like *parallelismus membrorum* may have already been predicted by numerous earlier researchers and critics. Kugel believes that the answer lies in the fact that *parallelismus membrorum* was not so much a discovery as an invention.⁹ Lowth depicted parallelism as a system working in what is not systematic at all. Namely, "synonymous" parallelism, as Kugel has shown through many examples, was rarely truly synonymous, and there is no real difference between it and "antithetical" parallelism (Kugel 1981a, 57). "Parallelism of all the members" is not a structural constant, the *sine qua non* of biblical poetry, but something less consistent and more widespread than any organizational characteristics of Western poetry (Kugel 1981a, 68). Kugel resolutely asserts that Lowth's entire approach is incorrect.

Kugel believes that the parallelist style in the Bible is not based on sequencing sentences that carry some semantic, syntactical, or phonetic similarity. He also thinks they do not "say the same thing twice." Rather, he claims they are based on the sequence _____ / _____ // in which B is the continuation of A (A and B are denotations which Kugel uses for what Lowth calls *membrorum*, while biblical versification studies use the Greek-derived term *colon*), but is also separated from it by a, typically emphatic, pause. It is about a "seconding" style in which parallelism is important but not essential – the essence being the *seconding sequence* (Kugel 1981a, 53–54). Aware, on the one hand, of the lack of clear cut between A

9 It is noted by J. Kugel that R. Lowth called his discovery *parallelismus membrorum* with full knowledge that *membrum* is the standard Latin translation of the Greek "colon" in all writings on rhetoric. Lowth's expression is misunderstood. Namely, it was believed to indicate the parallelism of all members (words) of A (the first line) with all members (words) of B (the second line) (Kugel 1981a, 2).

and B (which means that those two merges into one statement) and, on the other hand, the lack of clear connection between A and B (which means that those two become isolated, independent statements), Kugel carefully examined how the subjunctivity of B is created. The separation of A and B, or rather their separability, is mostly a matter of syntax. When forming their connection, the essential elements to consider are the grammatical and semantic factors. Finding parallelism in both prose and poetry, Kugel questions the division of the biblical text into those categories.

The Bible contains a large number of genre classifications – words for different types of Psalms, hymns, songs, sayings, proverbs, curses, blessings, prayers, narratives, genealogies, laws, speeches, moral exhortations, prophecies, consolations, and rebukes. However, it does not group these genres into larger categories using a specific word that would correspond to what the Anglo-Saxon milieu calls poetry and prose (or what continental literature would classify as lyrical and epic genres). For example, talking about Solomon, Sirach 47:17 says: “Your songs, proverbs, and parables, and the answers you gave astounded the nations.” Of course, the Bible does not contain any expression that would point to parallelism *per se*, as some *differentia specifica* between poetry and prose. Kugel believes that discussing poetry in the Bible, even when not based on metrics, imposes foreign concepts on the biblical world. However, we continue to do it because we have an idea about the topical, generic, and organizational characteristics of poetry. When we find those characteristics in the Bible, we observe them through the lens of accepted literary theory terminology. It can be hard to resist the seductiveness of this approach. The regularity seen in some parts of the Bible should not automatically be identified as denoting poetry. Biblical critics who label them as such may be unwittingly making assumptions about the Bible (and parallelism). However, a closer reading of the Bible reveals that it does not contain consistency comparable to that which we are familiar with in Western literary tradition. Parallelism is frequent, but not unambiguous, and so cannot be taken as the criterion for the poetry and prose division. The equation which states that parallelism = poetry has pushed critics into overlooking parallelism in “unpoetic” places, such as laws, cultic regulations, etc. (Kugel 1981a, 69–70). Francis Andersen arrived at similar insights. In his study, *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew* (1974), he writes about “epic prose” in the Bible which is sometimes marked by the use of the same lexical props (repetitive parallelism), which often come in established order (Andersen 1974, 43). However, Genesis is “neither poetry nor prose, but epic composition containing both poetic devices and extended rhetorical structures” (Andersen 1974, 124).

Kugel points out that, even if the Bible contained something similar to meters of ancient Greek literature, such as parallelism, poetry as a generic term could only be used among Hellenized Jews. However, the Bible was not written in meters, and Greeks or Hellenized Jews who were steeped in the metric idea would

probably view parallelism as too loose a device to distinguish between poetry and prose. If this were not the case, we should be able to find a statement such as: “Jews even write their laws in verses” or something similar. Instead, the opposite happened – only those genres that were poetry in Greek were called poetry, or rather, metric, in the Bible. In describing Hebrew songs, Jewish writers did not recognize parallelism and instead imposed Greek terminology. Philo consistently did this, but occasionally emphasized the great variety of “meters,” as if hinting that their structure is no longer understood (Kugel 1981a, 128).

So, according to Kugel, looking at the Bible through the lens of division into poetry and prose (lyrical and epic literature) means looking at it wrongly. He maintains that even meticulous analyses of parallelism can be distorted if viewed through this lens.

III.

Alter notes that discussions on biblical poetry tend to lean towards two extremes. At one end is an orientalist from the 1930s named Paul Kraus who believes that the entire Hebrew Bible is written in verses. According to Kraus, we only need to accentuate the verses properly to make them visible (this idea was already anticipated by Sievers thirty years earlier). Kugel stands on the other end of the spectrum. He claims that there is no poetry in the Bible but rather a “continuum” of loosely connected parallel structures in what we see as prose sections and “heightened rhetoric” in what we often erroneously consider to be verses (Alter 2011, 1–2).¹⁰ According to Alter, biblical poetry is based on semantic parallelism. However, unlike, e.g., Theodor Robinson and Ruth Aproberts (cf. Robinson 1947, 21 and Aproberts 1977), who highlight parallelism in terms of synonymity, which is, according to Alter, a certain *stasis* within the “poetic line” – Alter points out, appealing to Viktor Šklovski, the importance of understanding that the poetic expression avoids complete parallelism, just like language resists mere synonymity so that it constantly brings in small differences between cognate notions. This is somewhat close to Kugel’s criticism of synonymous parallelism. Alter therefore believes that in the case of semantic parallelism, that many biblical texts are structured on, besides the sometimes almost bizarre repetitions in the “poetic line,” “semantic alterations” keep showing up, too (Alter 2011, 9–10). Alter believes that

10 B. Hrushovski uses the term “sentence,” while R. Alter uses “poetic line” (made up of two or three parallel lines) – which indicates that the term “verse” was not appropriate for biblical poetry. J. Fokkelman emphasizes that the so-called “biblical verse” is primarily a practical and liturgical unit that varies significantly in length, ranging from one up to ten “pauses” (Fokkelman 1999, 171–173).

many biblical texts, structured on semantic parallelism, exhibit not only bizarre repetitions in the poetic line but also semantic alterations.

Alter points out that at first, it might seem that semantic parallelism is an operation taking place concerning what Roman Jakobson calls the paradigmatic (metaphorical) axis or axis of word choice. More specifically, the poet introduces a certain term, such as “orphan,” in the first line. Then he chooses another term, such as “widow” from the same general category for the second line. However, Alter continues, this is an incomplete and misleading description of what happens in biblical parallelism. The connections between the lines are often closer to what Jakobson called the syntagmatic (metonymic) axis – a movement along the axis of closeness that the poet turns into a real connection. According to this observation, it is more practical to reject Jakobson’s “axiological imaginary,” because what we usually find in biblical poetry is the derivation of the syntagmatic from the paradigmatic. Based on this, Alter concludes that biblical poetic compositions have a “narrative” (Alter 2011, 37–41). He disagrees with Shemaryahu Talmon’s claim that biblical writers (although there are numerous allusions to Canaanite-Ugaritic mythology in the Hebrew Bible) avoided narrative poetry because of its association with mythological compositions and says this should not lead us to the conclusion that there are no narrative elements in biblical poetry. On the contrary, Alter claims that the narrative impulse, though mostly invisible in the structural aspects of biblical poetry, often reveals itself between the “poetic lines” in careful articulation (Alter 2011, 31). Admittedly, Hebrew writers used “verses” for celebratory poetry, lamentations, prophecies, liturgy, and insertions in prose sections, but very rarely to tell stories, unlike in the ancient Mediterranean literary culture. For example, Ugaritic literature was written around 1300 BC. It was composed in a language similar to the Bible’s and follows the same poetic conventions, such as parallelism. This form of literature included long and complex verses with recognizable epic elements, such as alternating narration and dialogue, and a slower narrative pace that allowed for more detailed character descriptions, etc. There is nothing similar in the Hebrew Bible, and supposedly “epic” elements such as the historical Psalms (Ps 78; 105; 106) are very rare exceptions that are catechistically minded versified summaries of Israel’s history without narrative “realization.” We can observe a similar pattern in the poem of Deborah and Barak (Judges 5), where the exposition of the narrative event is omitted, assuming that the addressees are already familiar with it (Alter 2011, 29–30).

In his monograph, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985), Alter outlined his understanding of parallelism and illustrated it through many examples. He conducted a thorough analysis of the poetics of the Psalms, Job, Proverbs, and the Song of Songs. He adopted Benjamin Hrushovski’s concise definition of biblical poetry, which was introduced in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (cf. Hrushovski 1971). Based on this, Alter discovered that, beyond strict parallelism, there existed a network of

flexible formal linguistic and semantic patterns. He showed that every couplet could utilize parallelism through elements such as sound, morphology, lexical associations, syntactical structure, or a combination of these factors. However, what appears to be crucial is the “discovery” of the joining of the “poetic lines” and their expansion into larger sequences. Alter claims that there is a connection between the formal properties of any given prosodic system or poetic genre and the type of meaning that is most easily expressed in that particular system or genre (Alter 2011, 75). He repeats this claim when he points out his allegiance to the insights of American New Criticism and, admittedly, from a completely different perspective to Russian literary semiotics. Then, namely, he notes that from his own reading experience (which confirms neocritical and semiotic insights) he came to the realization that poetry uses a system of complex connections of sound, image, word, rhythm, syntax, theme, ideas to transmit (opaque) meanings that cannot be conveyed by other types of discourse. This, Alter points out, is not “the idolatry of the text” (Alter 2011, 141–142). Poetry, in this case biblical, is therefore not just a set of techniques for impressively expressing what could be expressed otherwise. It is a special way of imagining the world, in a twofold sense: 1) poetry as such has its logic, its ways of connecting, and the implications that arise from it, and 2) each system of poetry has certain recognizable semantic effects that follow the momentum of its formal expressions (Alter 2011, 189). Alter points out that the prophets primarily conveyed their messages through poetry. This was not solely for the sake of poetic language’s memorability or because of the feeling that poetry is a medium of sublime and solemn discourse, but because parallelism offered an especially effective way to convey imaginative knowledge of inevitability, a strong manifestation of the idea that what they were saying could happen soon (Alter 2011, 92). According to Alter, poetry from the later, early modern, and even post-romantic eras not only borrowed phrases, motifs, and themes from the Bible but also its way of viewing the world (Alter 2011, 263). A similar belief was held by Auerbach, who argued that the Bible had a decisive impact on the development of Western “realist” literature.

IV.

According to Fokkelman, the difference between poetry and prose in the Bible is radical in principle, but not in practice. The definition of (narrative) prose largely depends on the plot. However, only competent readers (I don’t know what Fokkelman means by competent readers, probably readers of the original text) can see the development of narrative linguistic material. These readers may identify two basic principles of narrative arrangement: sequential and thematic. The story presents a sequence of events, actions, and speeches that follow a chronological order. Any accidental interruptions of the narrative flow by a sudden change are simply

exceptions that prove the rule. Meanwhile, the course of events and dialogues consists of a series of elements that are all thematically marked: every word, sentence, and paragraph is selected or crafted to contribute to the theme of the narrative. There are no unnecessary ornamentations, including descriptions of the countryside, someone's appearance, etc. Everything is utilized for the action. In principle, the poetry in the Hebrew Bible resists any definiteness through narrowing and corresponding plot rules and chronological order. A reader who has read Judges or Kings and then the longest and most famous poetic biblical books (Psalms, Proverbs, and Job) will notice this immediately. According to Fokkelman, it is instructive to study the literary culture of the time to understand the difference between biblical prose and poetry. In ancient Israel, storytelling in verse was quite common. The Greeks had Homer, the Mesopotamians, who spoke Babylonian or Assyrian for over two millennia (both being Semitic dialects related to Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic), had Gilgamesh and other epic poems, and the Ugarites had their epics that narrated stories about King Kirtu or about Daniel and Baal). On the other hand, Israel, as we have repeatedly said, did not leave any epic poems. If we carefully examine the Psalms or the Book of Job, we realize there is another difference and it is related to prosody. In poetry books, pauses are usually only one line long and are often grouped into two or often even three lines. The main difference between biblical poetry and narrative prose is based on negative and positive characteristics. Negatively, the poet did not follow chronological order or action, and there is no epic poetry. Positively, the clauses in biblical poetry follow the rules of quantity and meter, are more compact on average, and use all kinds of means for varied repetition more intensively. However, literary production in ancient Israel managed to blur the rigid boundaries between poetry and prose. For instance, while books like Isaiah, Joel, and Amos are almost entirely composed of poetry, the prophecies in Jeremiah and Ezekiel are associated with prose texts, and there are passages where it's hard to distinguish between the two (Fokkelman 1999, 171–174).

Fokkelman highlights two main reasons why the distinction between prose and poetry should be loosened: (a) descriptive and (b) explicative.

- a) Prose writers like to add poetry to their prose at specific moments. We regularly come across pieces of poetic art in prose works, ranging from perhaps just a single verse or stanza to sometimes poetry of considerable length: a series of sayings or a poem consisting of six to twelve stanzas.
- b) Sometimes, prose texts do not only consist of poetry that can be read as an independent whole, such as Lamech's Song of the Sword (Gen 4:23-24). Instead, the language the writer uses in narration can become more condensed and compact, suddenly approaching poetry (Fokkelman 1999, 175).

Fokkelman believes that combining prose and poetry, and even transitioning between them, is possible because most Hebrew sentences contain two to eight words and are usually linked in sequences through parataxis (using "... and... and... but... and then"). Poetry embedded in prose, on the other hand, serves different functions. It articulates the narrative material, conveys a lesson or message, and amplifies the meanings that are already hinted at or implied in the surrounding prose. These functions are mostly subject to prose, but sometimes we encounter a reversed situation where the prose is written to complement the poetry (Fokkelman 1999, 178–179).

Fokkelman begins his definition of Hebrew prose from old starting points, although he considers them to be inadequate. He asserts that the biblical poem is determined by two factors: a) meter and b) parallel arrangement of "verses" (technically referred to as *parallelismus membrorum*, which was introduced by Robert Lowth, as mentioned earlier) (Fokkelman 1999, 22). Regarding meter, he points out that 19th-century biblical science came to an important negative conclusion: although the "verses" in the Hebrew Bible may give the strong impression of rhythm, they are subject to rules that are very different from those governing the metric of Greco-Roman poetry and its offshoots in the poetry of the Western vernacular literature. Homer, Vergil, Sophocles, and Plautus all used a quantitative meter based on a clear distinction between long and short syllables. However, the difference between long and short syllables does not work in classical Hebrew. At the end of the 19th century, scientists concluded that the Hebrew poetic line was best described as a sequence of interchangeable accented and unaccented syllables, also known as an accentuated "verse." It was necessary to count the number of accents. However, Fokkelman concludes, there is a fierce debate about the nature of the Hebrew "verse" and it is very unlikely that the consensus will ever be reached. As a result, the focus has shifted to parallelism.

To adequately define Hebrew poetry, Fokkelman produced a critique of Lowth's three-part structure of parallelism (synonymous, antithetical, and synthetic). He raised three main areas of objection: (a) epistemological criticism (criticism of Lowth's terminology); (b) strictly literary criticism and (c) criticism of a structural nature.

- a) Referring to parts of a verse as synonyms obscures the fact that they are not the same. Words are never identical, and their meanings are never quite the same, creating gaps between them. There are thousands of "verses" that at first glance appear to consist of synonymous articles, but upon closer analysis, reveal differences. Therefore, it is not appropriate to use the term "synonymous parallelism" for the relationship between articles. Lowth's second term, antithetical parallelism, deserves similar criticism. If we call two articles, X and Y, opposites, we are already assuming an antithetical relationship. But only when X and Y have something in

common, it is possible to meaningfully talk about the antithesis between them. This means that in every instance of synonymous parallelism, differences between the articles are evident, and in every example of antithesis between adjacent articles, there must be a common basis.

- b) In the United States, contemporary scientific research has led to another criticism of Lowth's triad, which is more linguistic and literary than the first. This criticism suggests that biblical parallelism cannot be reduced to just three types, but rather has multiple forms. As a result, the term "parallelism" should be used as a very broad category with subdivisions within it. Recent research has revealed many different linguistic means by which parallelism is realized, making Lowth's three-fold division outdated, arbitrary, and oversimplified. This is because Lowth's model disregards the role of phonological and grammatical factors and focuses primarily on the semantics of words.
- c) Criticism of the structural nature of parallelism comes from Fokkelman's structural view of poetry. He holds the belief that every poem warrants examination beyond just its words and meanings. According to him, there are numerous parallelisms present on multiple levels within the text that require detailed analysis and discussion. Essentially, the text is made up of a hierarchy of layers, each with its distinct characteristics and rules that contribute to the poem's overall effect on the reader. This textual hierarchy includes eight layers for short and medium-length poems and nine for longer poems such as Deuteronomy 32 (The Song of Moses) or Psalm 89 (Hymn and Prayer).

V.

Therefore, based on three renowned authors – James Kugel, Robert Alter, and Jan Fokkelman – known for their literary-critical approach to the Bible, we can conclude that biblical poetry, like prose, is to a large extent *sui generis*, and that any distinction between poetry and prose, if it exists at all, is not of the same nature as in Western literary culture, and it is therefore inappropriate to refer to *prosimetrum* in the Bible. Of course, one must bear in mind that literary-critical analyses (of poetry as well as prose) mostly refer to the Hebrew Bible. When poetic "verses" appear in the Gospels and other New Testament texts, they are mostly quotations from the Psalms or the prophets. For instance, Luke includes two poems in the first chapter of his Gospel: *Magnificat – the Song of Praise* spoken by Mary after visiting Elizabeth who was to become John's mother (Luke 1:46-55), and, shortly afterward, at the birth of John the Baptist, *Benedictus* – a "prophecy" spoken over the child by his father Zacharias (Luke 1:68-79). Both texts strongly rely on Hebrew poetry and its rules. They are collages of terms and phrases from the

Old Testament (cf. 1 Sam 2:1-11 – Hannah's Song of Thanksgiving). Fokkelman notes that the only original New Testament poetic text is the ode to love in 1 Corinthians 13 (Fokkelman 2001, 231, note 1). In somewhat rare literary-critical approaches to the Gospels, it is often pointed out that they use elements of ancient biography and romance, although their meaning was utterly different (cf. Elsom 1987).

Reference List

- Alter, Robert. 1987. Introduction to the Old Testament. In: R. Alter and F. Kermode, eds. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, 11–35. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- _____. 2011. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. New York: Basic Books.
- Andersen, Francis I. 1974. *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew*. New York: Mouton.
- Aproberts, Ruth. 1977. Old Testament Poetry: The Translatable Structure. *PMLA* 92/5: 987–1004.
- Berlin, Adele. 1985. *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- _____. 1991. *Biblical Poetry Through Medieval Jewish Eyes*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Collins, Terrence. 1987. *Line-Forms in Biblical Poetry*. Rome: Biblical Institute Press.
- Elsom, Helen. 1987. The New Testament and Greco-Roman Writing. In: R. Alter and F. Kermode, eds. *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, 561–578. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Fokkelman, Jan P. 1999. *Reading Biblical Narrative*. Trans. I. Smit. Leiden: Deo Publishing.
- _____. 2001. *Reading Biblical Poetry*. Trans. I. Smit. Louisville – London: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Gros Louis, Kenneth. 1982. Some Methodological Considerations. In: K. Gros Louis and J. S. Ackerman, eds. *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narrative II*, 13–24. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Hrushovski, Benjamin. 1971. Prosody, Hebrew. In: C. Roth and G. Wigoder, eds. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Vol. 13, 1200–1202. Jerusalem – New York: Keter Publishing House – Macmillan Company.
- Kugel, James. 1981a. *The Idea of Biblical Poetry. Parallelism and Its History*. New Haven – London: Yale University Press.
- _____. 1981b. On the Bible and Literary Criticism. *Prooftexts* 1/3: 217–236.

Kurylowicz, Jerzy. 1972. *Studies in Semitic Grammar and Metrics*. Warszawa: Polska Akademia Nauk.

Prickett, Stephen. 2016. Robert Lowth's Biblical Poetics and Romantic Theory. In: M. Z. Cohen and A. Berlin, eds. *Interpreting Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, 309–326. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Robinson, Theodore. H. 1947. *The Poetry of the Old Testament*. London: Duckworth & Co.

Stuart, Douglas K. 1976. *Studies in Early Hebrew Meter*. Missoula: Scholars Press.

Krešimir Šimić

O novijem književno-kritičkom pristupu biblijskoj poeziji

Sažetak

U članku se iznose mišljenja trojice reprezentativnih autora – Jamesa Kugela, Roberta Altera i Jana Fokkelmana – važnih predstavnika tzv. književno-kritičkoga pristupa Bibliji, o biblijskoj poeziji. Prema Kugelu, gledati na Bibliju kroz leću podjele na poeziju i prozu (liriku i epiku), znači krivo gledati. Ako tako gledamo, čak ni minuciozne analize paralelizma neće biti od koristi – jer će se i one distorzirati. Kugel stoga smatra da u Bibliji ne postoji poezija, već samo „kontinuum“ sačinjen od labavo povezanih paralelnih struktura u onome što smatramo proznim dijelovima do „pojačane retorike“ u onome što pogrešno označavamo stihom. Alter smatra da je osnovica biblijske poezije semantički paralelizam. Ali, pritom ističe da je važno uvidjeti da pjesnički izraz zapravo izbjegava potpuni paralelizam, baš kao što se jezik opire pukoj sinonimnosti tako da neprestano uvodi male razlike između srodnih pojmova. Fokkelman pak smatra da je miješanje proze i poezije, pa i prijelaz proze u poeziju moguć jer velika većina rečenica na hebrejskom sadrži dvije do osam riječi. Štoviše, obično se povezuju u sekvence parataksom („...i ... i ... ali ... i onda ...“). Iz sva tri mišljenja proizlazi zaključak da je biblijska poezija, kao uostalom i proza, u velikoj mjeri *sui generis*, da razlika između poezije i proze, ako uopće postoji, nije iste naravi kao u zapadnoj književnoj kulturi, pa je stoga neprimjereno govoriti o prosimetrumu u Bibliji.