



BOOK REVIEW

A Review of Unparalleled Poetry: A Cognitive Approach to the Free-Rhythm Verse of the Hebrew Bible

Terrance R. Wardlaw Jr., Ph.D., M.A., M.Div., B.A.¹

¹ Applied Linguistics, Dallas International University

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics, Cognitive Poetics, Poetry, Gestalt Theory

<https://doi.org/10.64830/001c.161785>

Journal of Language, Culture, and Religion

Vol. 7, Issue 1, 2026

Unparalleled Poetry: A Cognitive Approach to the Free-Rhythm Verse of the Hebrew Bible. By Emmylou J. Grosser. Cognition and Poetics. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. 304 pp.

Grosser's application of the work of Reuven Tsur and Gestalt theory to the cognitive poetics of Hebrew poetry exhibits a wide range of considerations, as well as an admirable breadth and depth of previous scholarship. Grosser argues against (1) a metrical view of Hebrew poetry and (2) the traditional view that Hebrew poetry is organized in parallel lines, which has reigned since Bishop Lowth. She instead argues that Hebrew poetry consists of a free-verse style (Part I). Following a clear presentation of Gestalt theory, Grosser develops the principles of proximity, symmetry, good continuation, closure, and requiredness in working toward an account of poetic lineation (Part II). She demonstrates the wide range of features her approach can handle with further discussion of integrated and unintegrated lines, as well as constraints on short and long lines. This is followed by a consideration of the distinction between Hebrew poetry and prose (Part III).

Grosser is to be commended for focusing on the reader's perception of poetry, as well as for a focus on the aural experience of poetry in relation to its perception and cognitive organization. However, one may question some of Grosser's findings. Although Grosser rightly observes that Hebrew poetry is for the most part not metrical, her discounting of parallelism seems iconoclastic. A more integrative approach that accounts for how readers have historically inferred and conceptualized parallel features and lines would have been more convincing. Although Grosser argues that accounts of parallelism remain complex, the present reader found Grosser's approach to be more complex than approaches that build on the concept of parallelism. In fact, the strength of a cognitive approach lies in its explanatory power in accounting for the construction of meaning and pragmatics rather than in redefining the nature of poetry altogether.

Second, Grosser examines Hebrew poetry in etic terms as free-rhythm, and in opposition to metrical approaches. However, an emic analysis without appeal either to “free-rhythm” or meter would have brought focus to bear on the poetic devices by which Hebrew lines are organized, whether that be semantic development, grammatical parallelism, assonance, etc. An approach that begins with an emic analysis of devices and then builds from the ground-up to an overarching account of poetic conceptualization and cognitive processes would have resulted in greater empirical credibility. Moreover, Grosser argues that traditional accounts of Hebrew poetry consider poets to have many line-types, structural patterns, and templates which the audience expects (pp. 64–65). Although she offers four arguments against this approach, the notion of genre has been empirically verified across many cultures and has been described by many cognitive accounts in the analysis of text processing. On this point, Grosser seems to overextend the use of Gestalt theory and fails to incorporate the notion of genre into her approach in a manner that would have provided greater explanatory power for the commonalities among various strands of Hebrew poetry. It is precisely at this point that the notion of genre provides an explanation for how human cognition generalizes patterns in order to create the mental framework for processing the microstructural details in relation to macrostructure (i.e. the Gestalt).

Third, Grosser argues against historical lineation in manuscripts and scribal traditions as she deconstructs parallelism. However, she then lineates her own analysis throughout the remainder of the book without accounting for how her display is historically justified.

Fourth, Grosser argues that what has traditionally been classified as 3:2 *Qinah* meter is not really metrical. However, the repeated use of this metrical form in Lamentations, psalm units, and prophetic poetry would suggest otherwise. Although this metrical constraint is not followed rigidly, its use in association with lament and dirge helps explain the identification of background materials that build toward a climax and the identification of prominent materials departing from this form.

In sum, Grosser has performed a great service by demonstrating one possible cognitive approach through the use of Gestalt theory for interpreting Hebrew poetry. However, the argument against Hebrew poetry as metrical seeks to prove what most credible scholars already assume, excepting the *Qinah*. Whereas one would have expected an account of how and why astute readers through the centuries have conceptualized the various types of parallel lines, as well as a description of the devices functioning as the linguistic trigger leading to this inference, one instead encounters a nebulous description of how readers perceive lines. The strength of cognitive linguistics remains its

descriptive power for semantics and text processing, and the application of Gestalt theory for understanding poetry, similar to cognitive grammar, seems overly complex.

Terrance R. Wardlaw Jr.

Submitted: December 01, 2025 CDT. Accepted: December 19, 2025 CDT.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.