

SING A NEW SONG



SING A NEW SONG:  
THE TETRAMETER IN BIBLICAL HEBREW POETRY

*Vincent DeCaen*

July 2025 draft 9

© 2025 Vincent DeCaen

## EPIGRAPH

*But seek alone to hear the strange things said  
By God to the bright hearts of those long dead,  
And learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know.<sup>1</sup>*

*There is no escape from metre.<sup>2</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> W. B. Yeats, "To the Rose upon the Road of Time", lines 19-21 (Yeats 1991: 21).

<sup>2</sup> Note spelling is British because appears in British publication: T. S. Eliot, "Reflections on *Vers Libre*" in *New Statesman* (March 1917).

## **DEDICATION**

Paul Dion (1934-2019)

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

2025/07 draft 9

I can see him before me. *Ah, mon cher!* he would exclaim. This was good. The scene was generally his office. He had a bounce in his step, smiling ear to ear, laughing, rubbing or clapping his hands. There was the joyous twinkle in his eye as if he were opening presents on Christmas morning. His enthusiasm for his studies was infectious. Sometimes in a moment of grace, the enthusiasm was for something I had said.

*Oh, mon cher!* was sighed in a low key. This was bad—and mortifying. He executed the most perfect of Gallic shrugs that not even my father-in-law could imitate. His head would droop at just the perfect angle. Into his face came a profound world-weary pout. The twinkle was no more. I had just said something incredibly obtuse, and it seemed to pain him physically.

This was Paul Dion of blessed memory (1934-2019).

I am now in his graduate seminar on the poetry of the book of Job. The textbook for the course was his own *Hebrew Poetics* (2nd edition 1992). We had just started reading Job, that first class, and after class I pulled him aside and burst out with a declamation of the lines in a tetrameter: **jó:vað jó:m živvó:leð bó:**, vahallá:jló: žo:má:r hó:rō: **vé:ver**, etc. etc. It was a joyous epiphany that I will never forget ...

*Oh, mon cher!* Subsequently, I began reading his textbook and to my surprise read: “no metre proper, but syntactic constraints” (p. 4). Thence began my love-hate relationship with *Hebrew Verse Structure* and the “quasi-consensus”.

Late in my doctoral work, I was fortunate to study with Elan Dresher, a collaboration that continues to this day. His pursuit of a generative analysis of Tiberian Hebrew, its post-lexical phonology, and its two systems of cantillation overlapped with the focus of my thesis co-supervisor, John Revell of blessed memory (1934-2017). The question arose: why a special so-called ‘poetic’ system of accentuation seemingly tailor-made for the book of Job? The question is acute in Job, for the so-called ‘prose’ system is employed in the prose, and the ‘poetic’ system in the poetry. My answer is that there is in fact a direct connection between the dominant metre in the Three Books and the regularities observed in the chanting of the text. This is the burden of my “Theme and Variation in Psalm 111: Phrase and Foot in Generative-Metrical perspective” (2009), a brief exercise to exorcize the claim that there is necessarily no biblical poetic metre *sensu stricto*.

Fabb & Halle’s *Meter in Poetry: A New Theory* (2008) spurred a decade of my failed attempts at an algorithmic analysis of the biblical tetrameter. Yet there was also Vance’s *The Question of Meter in Biblical Hebrew Poetry* (2001) that convincingly demonstrates—ironically—that there is a biblical tetrameter of some kind. Finally, in my despair, I discovered Hayes (2009) and the constraint-based approach to the text-setting of traditional English verse. The metrical grid. The alignment of syllables by constraints. *C’est ça!*

This book is the result of applying the insights gleaned to the crux in Ps 111:3a: “His work is honourable and glorious”.

|    ♪    ♪    ♪    |    ♪    ♪    ♪  
ho:ð-    vo    ho:       ðó:r<sup>f</sup>    pò:ʕo    ló:

The IPA transcription employed here (Khan 2020) is an invitation to non-Hebraists to take a look at ancient Hebrew poetry. Ideal readers are not specialists in Hebrew or in Generative Metrics (the application of Generative Phonology in the investigation of the world's metrical systems). What is required is only bravery in the face of the new, and a desire to unpack the full implications of line 111:3a. My hope is that the conceptually simple frameworks can be understood in enough detail that others may replicate the analysis, and tweak it, and extend it beyond the limited corpus here—and to the other biblical metres. The analysis will also be of interest to poets in the modern idioms.

*Toronto*  
*July 2025*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

X ...