

# Rhyme in the Hebrew Prophets and Wisdom Poetry

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## Introduction

It is commonly asserted that rhyme does not play a major role in classical Hebrew poetry. Instead, it is argued that parallelism, which can be understood as the use of “thought-rhymes,”<sup>1</sup> plays an analogous structuring role to rhyme in Western European poetry. As evidence for the prominence of parallelism, scholars have listed many examples of parallel word-pairs found in Hebrew poetry.<sup>2</sup> In view of the abundant use of parallelism as “thought-rhyme” in Hebrew verse, it is often said that Hebrew poets had no real need for sound-rhyme. Thus, in an older survey of *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry*, George Buchanan Gray considers rhyme something “merely occasional,” while in his magisterial study of *Hebrew Verse Structure*, Michael O’Connor calls rhyme an “entirely marginal phenomenon” for Hebrew verse.<sup>3</sup> A more nuanced view appears in Wilfred Watson’s analysis of *Classical Hebrew Poetry*: “It is generally agreed that rhyme does not play an important part in ancient Semitic poetry. The role it has in rhymed European verse (as distinct from blank verse) is taken over by parallelism in all its forms. Even so, rhyme does occur and is sometimes exploited.”<sup>4</sup> This article will indicate that rhyme does play a significant (though limited) role in classical Hebrew poetry. To be sure, rhyme is not a key structural feature, as is often the case in the verse writings of many modern European languages (we need only think of Goethe’s poetry, Racine’s dramatic verse, and Shakespeare’s sonnets).

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<sup>1</sup> Synonyms used in semantic parallelism are sometimes called “thought-rhymes,” according to Alter, Art 9.

<sup>2</sup> On Hebrew parallel word-pairs see. Watson, Poetry 128-144. For a list of parallel word-pairs occurring in the Psalter and in Ugaritic, see Dahood, Psalms 445-456.

<sup>3</sup> Gray, Forms 236; O’Connor, Verse Structure 142. Similar is the assertion of Good, Turns 26: “Hebrew poetry never seems to use rhyme as a poetic device. I suspect that the occasional rhymes in classical Hebrew poems are inadvertent.”

<sup>4</sup> Watson, Poetry 230 (see his discussion of rhyme on 229-234). Schökel also recognizes the role of rhyme in biblical Hebrew poetry; see his study, Manual, 23-24. In addition, Schökel notes many cases of Hebrew rhyme, especially in Isaiah, in his Estudios e.g. 220-221 on Isa 3:18-23. On the search for biblical Hebrew rhyme among Hebraists in earlier centuries, see Kugel, Idea 233-251.

Helpfully, Watson suggests a twofold classification for the use of rhyme: “The functions of rhyme can be classed, for convenience, into structural and ‘rhetorical.’”<sup>5</sup> The rhetorical function of rhyme may be to provide euphony, or to aid memory, or to intensify the emotion, while the structural use may serve a delimiting purpose by indicating the beginning or ending of poetic units. This brief article will show that, while not ubiquitous, rhyme is present much more widely than is sometimes recognized, and hence deserves to be considered a recurrent feature within classical Hebrew poetry.<sup>6</sup> Here I first discuss rhyme when employed for rhetorical purposes, and then rhyme when used structurally as a delimitation marker.

### Rhetorical Use of Rhyme

Where it is recognized in Hebrew poetry, rhyme is generally regarded as having some kind of rhetorical function. Rhyme can have a decorative role, contributing to the euphony of the poetry, along with other sound patterns such as assonance and alliteration. More particularly (as in the prophets and the Psalter), it may also add to the expressiveness by increasing the intensity of feeling through repetition of a specific sound.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it can serve to aid memorization (as is often the case for the individual aphorisms collected in Prov 10:1-22:16). Here we will consider several biblical chapters (from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Proverbs, Job, Psalms, and Ben Sira) containing more than one example of such rhyme.<sup>8</sup> In this article the Hebrew rhyming words will be placed in parentheses in the English translation. Note that the rhyming words at the end of a Hebrew line do not always appear in that position in the English translation.

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<sup>5</sup> Watson, *Poetry* 233. Watson observes that rhyme in Akkadian poetry “serves to mark strophic structure” (231).

<sup>6</sup> A recent discussion is Segert, *Assonance* 171-179. Several studies of Hebrew rhyme are a century old; see. Burney, *Rhyme* 584-587; Grimme, *Gedichte* 39-56; Schmalzl, *Reim* 127-132; Zorell, *Verwendung* 286-291.

<sup>7</sup> While repetition of words can serve as a means of intensifying the emotion (Alter, *Art* 64), a similar effect can be achieved through rhyme, which involves the repetition of sounds.

<sup>8</sup> The biblical texts will be quoted from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), except for Ben Sira, where the translations will be from Skehan and Di Lella, *Wisdom*. In this article I include the deuterocanonical Book of Ben Sira alongside the better-known protocanonical books of the Old Testament. Considerations of space have prevented the mention of cases of rhyme in other Hebrew poetic books (e.g., Micah, Lamentations, or Song of Songs).



Alec Motyer comments that the Book of Isaiah exhibits “a use of rhyme unparalleled in subtlety and abundance elsewhere in the Old Testament.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, Isaiah 41 several times employs rhyme for rhetorical effect, such as when describing the victories of a conqueror (perhaps Cyrus).

He makes them like dust with his sword (חרבו),  
 like driven stubble with his bow (קשתו). [Isa 41:2ef]  
 I the LORD will answer them (אענם),  
 I the God of Israel will not forsake them (אעזבם).  
 I will open rivers (נהרות) on the bare heights,  
 and fountains (מעינות) in the midst of the valleys.  
 [Isa 41:17de, 18ab]

Jeremiah 48 also makes use of rhyme (along with assonance), perhaps to intensify the expression of taunting or mockery.<sup>10</sup>

Moab has been at ease from his youth (מנעוריו),  
 settled [like wine] on its dregs (שמריו). [Jer 48:11ab]  
 Ask the man fleeing and the woman escaping (ונמלטה);  
 say, “What has happened?” (נהיתה). [Jer 48:19cd]  
 [...] of his loftiness (גבהו), his pride (וגאונו), and his  
 arrogance (וגאותו),  
 and the haughtiness of his heart (לבו). [Jer 48:29cd]

In one case (probably dependent on Num 21:28) there is an A-A-X-A rhyme:

[...] for a fire has gone out from Heshbon (מהשבון),  
 a flame from the house of Sihon (סיחון);  
 it has destroyed the forehead of Moab,  
 the scalp of the people of tumult (שאון). [Jer 48:45cdef]

Since many of the aphorisms collected in Proverbs 10-29 were doubtless transmitted orally, it is not surprising that rhyme is one of the sound patterns used to assist memory.<sup>11</sup> Proverbs 16 and 18 provide several examples where

<sup>9</sup> Motyer, *Prophecy* 24-25; for instance, he notes the presence of rhyme in Isa 41:2ef, 17de (see 25 n. 1).

<sup>10</sup> See also the opening divine words at the call of Jeremiah (Jer 1:5), where there is threefold end-rhyme as well as assonance, perhaps to add emphasis to the divine utterance. Rhyming phrases in Jer 9:16-20 and 12:7 are observed by Schökel, *Manual* 24.

<sup>11</sup> On rhyme and other sound patterns in Proverbs see Thompson, *Form* 63-65; McCreesh, *Sound*, passim. Rhyme often appears in English aphorisms, e.g.,

the rhyming word occurs at the end of the line in the Hebrew (though not always in the English translation).

Commit your work (מעשיך) to the LORD,  
 and your plans (מהשבתיך) will be established. [Prov 16:3]  
 The human mind plans the way (דרכו),  
 but the LORD directs the steps (צעדו). [Prov 16:9]<sup>12</sup>  
 It is better to be of a lowly spirit among the poor (עניים),  
 than to divide the spoil with the proud (גאים). [Prov 16:19]<sup>13</sup>  
 The mouths of fools are their ruin (מחיתה-לו),  
 and their lips a snare to themselves (נפשו). [Prov 18:7]  
 The wealth of the rich is their strong city (קרית-עזו);  
 in their imagination (במשכיתו) it is like a high wall.  
 [Prov 18:11]  
 The one who first states a case (בריו) seems right,  
 until the other comes and cross-examines (והקרו).  
 [Prov 18:17]

As a slight digression, an unusual feature found occasionally in Proverbs is the use of head-rhyme or first-word rhyme (or even first-and-second-word rhyme), where the rhyming pattern appears not in the final word but in the opening word or phrase.<sup>14</sup>

The desire of the righteous (תאות צדיקים) ends only in good;  
 the expectation of the wicked (תקות רשעים) in wrath.  
 [Prov 11:23]  
 Grandchildren are the crown of the aged (עטרת זקנים),  
 and the glory of children (ותפארת בנים) is their parents.  
 [Prov 17:6]

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“Birds of a feather flock together” (compare the French equivalent: “Qui se ressemblent s’assemblent”). German aphorisms may also exhibit rhyme, e.g., “Was man nicht kann meiden, soll man willig leiden” (“What cannot be cured, must needs be endured”).

<sup>12</sup> Compare the rhyming aphorism in English: “Man proposes, God disposes,” and in German: “Der Mensch denkt, Gott lenkt.” Both aphorisms derive from à Kempis, *Imitatione* I.19.2: “Nam homo proponit, sed Deus disponit.”

<sup>13</sup> Where the Kethib has “poor (עניים),” the Qere has “humble (ענויים),” but both words provide rhyme.

<sup>14</sup> While such head-rhyme or first-word rhyme is much less common than rhyme at the end of bicola, it does occur occasionally in Hebrew poetic books (e.g., Prov 12:15; 14:24; Sir 6:11, 13; 42:19; 44:17cd; 45:7-9).



To return to our observation of end-rhyme in Hebrew poetry: scholars have observed that Job's response to Bildad in Job 9-10 (particularly chapter 10) makes abundant use of rhyme.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the repeated use of the first-person suffix intensifies Job's feeling of unhappiness, while at the same time highlighting his preoccupation with himself.<sup>16</sup>

Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn  
me (ירשיעני);  
    though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse  
    (ויעקשני). [Job 9:20]

I shall be condemned (ארשע),  
    why then do I labor (איגע) in vain? [Job 9:29]  
    [...] I will give free utterance to my complaint (שיח);  
    I will speak in the bitterness of my soul (נפשי). [Job 10:1bc]

I will say to God, Do not condemn me (תרשיעני);  
    let me know why you contend against me (תריבני). [Job 10:2]

Did you not pour me out (תתיכני) like milk  
    and curdle me (תקפיאני) like cheese? [Job 10:10]

You clothed me (תלבישני) with skin and flesh,  
    and knit me together (תסככני) with bones and sinews.  
[Job 10:11]

You have granted me (עמדי) life and steadfast love,  
    and your care has preserved my spirit (רוחי). [Job 10:12]

If I am wicked, woe to me (אללי-לי)!  
    If I am righteous, I cannot lift up my head (ראשי) ...  
[Job 10:15ab]

You renew your witnesses against me (נגדי),  
    and increase your vexation toward me (עמדי);  
    you bring fresh troops against me (עמי). [Job 10:17]

<sup>15</sup> Skehan, *Patterns* 125-142, here 133; reprinted in his *Studies* 96-113, here 104; cf. Dhorme, *Commentary*, clxxxix; Watson, *Poetry*, 231. For a thorough study of Job 9-10 (with attention to literary features), see Egger-Wenzel, *Freiheit*. Alter notes the "significant use of sound-play" in Job 3:3-26 as a device for intensifying the emotion (*The Art of Biblical Poetry* 77).

<sup>16</sup> "Poor rhymes [made up by morphemes] produce an effect in Hebrew poetry when they accumulate. A series ending in the vowel *-i*, suffix of the first person, is both pathetic and dramatic in Job 10,16-17" (Schökel, *Manual* 23). In the case of Job 10:10-12, however, the rhyme may serve a different rhetorical purpose: "The description of the creation of an individual person (10:10-12) perhaps represents a further employment of hymnic style"; so Clines, *Job* 224.

The next example here comes from Psalm 88, where the rhyme intensifies the unchanging gloomy feeling of the distressed psalmist.<sup>17</sup>

Let my prayer (תפלתִי) come before you;  
 incline your ear to my cry (לרנתי). [Ps 88:3(2)]  
 You have put me in the depths (תהתיות) of the Pit,  
 in the regions dark and deep (במצלות). [Ps 88:7(6)]

Finally, Ben Sira also makes rhetorical use of rhyme on various occasions; for instance, Sir 6:11-13 (MS A) employs striking rhyme to emphasize the tragedy of the fair-weather friend's inconstancy.<sup>18</sup>

When things go well (בטובתך), he is your other self (כמניך),  
 but when things go badly (וברעתך), he will depart from  
 you (ממך).  
 If disaster befalls you, he turns against you  
 and hides when he sees you coming (ומפניך יסתר).  
 Keep away from your enemies;  
 be on your guard with your friends (ומאהביך השמר).  
 [Sir 6:11-13]

Later in the book, the rhyme in Sir 36:18-19 (MS B) adds to the intensity of the lament prayer.<sup>19</sup>

Take pity on your holy city (קריית־קדשך),  
 Jerusalem, the foundation of your throne (מכון־שבתיך).  
 Fill Zion with your majesty (את־הודך),  
 your temple (את־היכלך) with your glory. [Sir 36:18-19]

Thus we have seen that in several biblical chapters (Isaiah 41, Jeremiah 48, Proverbs 16 and 18, Job 9-10, Psalm 88, and Sirach 6 and 36), more than one case of rhyme is present in each case. Here the rhyme seems to be used for rhetorical effect, frequently to intensify the emotion. In the following section, however, the examples of rhyme serve a structural purpose as delimitation markers.

<sup>17</sup> On the use of poetic techniques in the Psalter, see Seybold, *Poetik*.

<sup>18</sup> The translation comes from Skehan / Di Lella, *Wisdom* 186 (except for 6:11b, taken from 188). The rhyme here is observed by Beentjes, *Mensch* 1-18, here 12; cf. Corley, *Ben Sira's Teaching* 41.

<sup>19</sup> Several cases of rhyme in Ben Sira are listed in Skehan / Di Lella, *Wisdom* 64-67; on Sir 36:18-19 see 66-67. According to Peters, *Buch*, rhyme can serve a decorative function in Ben Sira: "Der Reim is hin und wieder als Schmuck der Rede verwendet, z. B. 7,35f; 10,27; 11,7; 13,2. 24 (introduction, p. L).



## Structural Use of Rhyme

In accordance with Watson's reference to the structural use of rhyme in Hebrew poetry, I will now give examples of the use of rhyme for the purposes of delimitation, especially to indicate the opening and closing of poetic units.<sup>20</sup> The examples are taken from several biblical books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Proverbs, Job, Psalms, and Ben Sira). Often the structural use of rhyme confirms the evidence of delimitation provided by the content, as well as other indicators such as *inclusio*.

Near the opening of the first chapter of Isaiah, there is a short pericope delimited by rhyme (Isa 1:4-9).<sup>21</sup>

... offspring who do evil (זרע־מרעים),  
 children who deal corruptly (בנים משחיתים). [Isa 1:4cd]  
 ... we would have been (היינו) like Sodom,  
 and become like (דמינו) Gomorrah. [Isa 1:9cd]

An even more striking rhyme appears as a delimiting feature in Isa 1:21-26, which is also marked off as a unit by the double *inclusio* of קריה נאמנה = "faithful city" (Isa 1:21b, 26d) and צדק = "righteousness" (Isa 1:21d, 26c).<sup>22</sup>

How the faithful city has become a whore  
 (איכה היתה לזונה קריה נאמנה) [Isa 1:21ab]  
 I will turn my hand against you (על־יד);  
 I will smelt away your dross (סיגיד) as with lye  
 and remove all your alloy (בדיליד).  
 And I will restore your judges as at the first (כבראשנה),  
 and your counselors as at the beginning (כבתחלה).  
 Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness,  
 the faithful city (קריה נאמנה). [Isa 1:25-26]

<sup>20</sup> It is interesting that Shakespeare often indicates the end of a scene by means of a rhyming couplet; see Hamlet, Act I, Scenes II and V; Act II, Scenes I and II; Act III, Scenes I, II, III and IV; Act IV, Scenes I, III, IV and V; Act V, Scenes I and II.

<sup>21</sup> The rhyme in Isa 1:9cd and 1:25 is observed by Motyer, Prophecy 25 n. 1, while the rhyming phrase opening Isa 1:4: "Ah, ... nation (הוי גוי)" is noticed by Schökel, Manual 44. Striking rhyme is also present in Isa 58:1cd and 58:2ab, near the opening of a new poem.

<sup>22</sup> The double *inclusio* delimiting 1:21-26 is noted by Schökel, Manual 191. On sound patterns in Isa 1:21-26 see Korpel / de Moor, Fundamentals 44-47.

Conspicuous rhyme is also present in Jeremiah 46, at the opening of the poetic oracle on Egypt.<sup>23</sup>

Prepare buckler and shield (וּצְנָה),  
and advance for battle (לְמַלְחָמָה)!  
Harness the horses (הַסּוּסִים);  
mount the steeds (הַפָּרָשִׁים)!  
Take your stations with your helmets (בְּכֹבְעֵיכֶם),  
whet your lances (הַרְמָחִים) ... [Jer 46:3-4d]

In addition, it is evident that the beginning of Proverbs 9 is marked by a significant use of rhyme.<sup>24</sup>

Wisdom has built her house (בֵּיתָהּ),  
she has hewn her seven pillars (שִׁבְעָהּ).  
She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine (יַיִנָּה),  
she has also set her table (שִׁלְחָנָהּ). [Prov 9:1-2]

Moreover, Proverbs 31 concludes with a description of the capable woman in an alphabetic acrostic poem (Prov 31:10-31), marked by opening and closing rhyme (as well as *inclusio*).<sup>25</sup>

A capable wife who can find? (יִמְצָא)  
She is far more precious (מְכָרָהּ) than jewels. [Prov 31:10]  
Give her a share in the fruit of her hands (יָדֶיהָ),  
and let her works (מַעֲשֵׂיהָ) praise her in the city gates.  
[Prov 31:31]

Job 27-28 also employs extensive rhyme to mark the opening and close of Job's sapiential speech (as the final form of the text presents it).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The rhyme in Jer 46:3 is observed by Watson, Poetry 380.

<sup>24</sup> In fact, the rhyme is very conspicuous, since 14 out of the 16 words of Prov 9:1-3a end in the sound *-ā*. This sound pattern may explain why the author replaces the normal Hebrew form חִכְמָה ("wisdom") with the unusual form חִכְמוֹת, for the sake of "desonance" (the avoidance of rhyme or assonance).

<sup>25</sup> The fine poem is delimited by a triple *inclusio* (אִשָּׁה = "woman" in 31:10a, 30b; קִיל = "valour" in 31:10a, 29a; בַּעֲלָהּ = "her husband" in 31:11a, 28b); cf. Lichtenstein, Chiasm 202-211, here 205-206; McCreesh, Wisdom 25-46, here 32-33. Note also the rhyme in 31:18, and the series of three rhyming words in 31:26a.

<sup>26</sup> It is possible that part of Job 27 originally belonged to another speech (such as the missing third speech of Zophar), and that Job 28 was once a separate sapiential poem, but these possibilities do not alter the presence of structural rhyme in the final form of the book. Note the further presence of rhyme in Job 27:23;



As God lives, who has taken away my right (משפטי),  
 and the Almighty, who has made my soul (נפשי) bitter,  
 as long as my breath is in me (נשמת־יבי)  
 and the spirit of God is in my nostrils (באפי),  
 my lips will not speak falsehood (עולה),  
 and my tongue will not utter deceit (רמיה) [Job 27:2-4]  
 Then he saw it (ראה) and declared it (ויספרה),  
 he established it (הכינה), and searched it out (חקרה).  
 And he said to humankind,  
 “Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom (חכמה);  
 and to depart from evil is understanding (בינה).”  
 [Job 28:27-28]

In a comparable way, many psalms start and finish with rhyming lines. Thus, the beginning and the ending of Psalm 18 is marked by significant rhyme.

I love you, O LORD, my strength (חזקי).  
 The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer  
 (סלעי ומצודתי ומפלטי),  
 my God (אלי), my rock (צורי) in whom I take refuge,  
 my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold  
 (מגני וקרן־ישעי משגבי). [Ps 18:2-3 (18:1-2)]  
 Great triumphs he gives to his king (מלכו),  
 and shows steadfast love to his anointed (למשיחו).  
 [Ps 18:51ab(50ab)]

Similarly, the opening and the conclusion of Psalm 38 is highlighted by conspicuous rhyme.<sup>27</sup>

O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger (בקצפך תוכיחני),  
 or discipline me in your wrath (ובחמתך תיסרני). [Ps 38:2(1)]  
 Make haste to help me (לעזרתי),  
 O Lord, my salvation (תשועתי). [Ps 38:23(22)]

In some other psalms, it is just the beginning that is marked by rhyme. Thus, significant rhyme is present at the start of Psalm 54.

28:14, 16, 23. In addition, rhyme marks the opening of Elihu's first and second speeches (Job 32:6; 34:2).

<sup>27</sup> Another stylistic feature of Psalm 38 is its length of 22 lines, imitating the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet; cf. Watson, *Poetry* 199. In addition, we can observe the delimiting role of rhyme in Ps 79:1 and 79:13, as well as in Ps 106:1-2 and 106:47cd.

Save me, O God, by your name (בשמך הושיעני),  
 and vindicate me by your might (ובגבורתך תדינני).  
 [Ps 54:3(1)]

More strikingly, the opening of Psalm 110 is indicated by a double rhyme.<sup>28</sup>

The LORD says to my lord (לאדני),  
 “Sit at my right hand (לימיני)  
 until I make your enemies (איביך)  
 your footstool (לרגליך).” [Ps 110:1]

Besides *inclusio*, Ben Sira often employs opening and closing rhyme to delimit a passage.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, three examples are here noted, drawn from pericopes which are also delimited by means of *inclusio*. Thus, 13:1-23 (MS A), a poem on relations between rich and poor, is delimited by a double *inclusio* (the root נגע = “touch” in 13:1a, 23b; the term עשיר = “rich” in 13:2b, 23a) as well as opening and closing rhyme.

Whoever touches pitch blackens his hand (ידו);  
 whoever accompanies a scoundrel learns his ways (דרכו).  
 [Sir 13:1]

The rich speaks and all are silent (נסכתו);  
 his wisdom they extol (יגיעו) to the clouds.

The poor speaks and they say (יאמרו), “Who is that?”

If he stumbles they knock him down (יהדפוהו). [Sir 13:23]

Moreover, the poem in Sir 14:20—15:10 (MS A) on the search for wisdom has an *inclusio* (the root חכם = “wise” in 14:20a and 15:10a) as well as delimiting rhyme.

Happy the person who meditates (יהנה) on Wisdom,  
 and fixes his gaze (ישעה) on understanding. [Sir 14:20]

But praise (תהלה) is offered by the tongue of the wise,  
 and its rightful master teaches it (ילמדנה). [Sir 15:10]

<sup>28</sup> Dahood (Psalms III: 101-150, 113-14) calls these cases in Ps 110:1 “assonance.” Other examples of opening rhyme include Ps 3:1; 4:2; 6:2; 55:2; 105:1-2; 117:1.

<sup>29</sup> Corley, Ben Sira’s Teaching 24-25; for reasons why Sir 13:1-23 is a poetic unit see 126-128.



In addition, the poetic unit on mourning the dead in Sir 38:16-23 (MS B) is marked off by means of *inclusio* (מת = “dead” in 38:16a, 23a) along with delimiting rhyme.<sup>30</sup>

My son, shed tears (דמעה) for one who is dead  
with wailing and bitter lament (קינה). [Sir 38:16]  
With the dead at rest, let memory ((זכרו) cease;  
rally your courage once the soul (נפשו) has left. [Sir 38:23]

There is also opening rhyme in Sir 7:18 and 13:24 (both MS A).

Barter not (אל תמיר) a friend for money (במחיר),  
nor a true brother for the gold of Ophir (אופיר). [Sir 7:18]  
Wealth is good where there is no guilt (עון),  
but poverty is evil by the standards of the proud (זדון).  
[Sir 13:24]

Closing rhyme appears in Sir 7:17 and 9:16 (both MS A).

More and more, humble your pride (גאווה);  
what awaits humans is worms (רמה). [Sir 7:17]  
Have just people for your table companions (בעלי־לחמך);  
in the fear of God be your glory (תפארתך). [Sir 9:16]

The most extensive case of rhyme in Ben Sira appears in 44:1-15 in the introduction to the Praise of the Ancestors.<sup>31</sup> A striking poetic feature of 44:1-8 is the repeated end-rhyme with *-ām*,<sup>32</sup> a feature that serves to indicate the opening of the lengthy Praise of the Ancestors (44:1-50:24). In fact, all of the ten bicola of 44:1-8 end in *-tām* (if we assume an emendation in the last word of 44:5), except 44:2 which ends in *-lām*.

I will now praise those godly people,  
our ancestors, each in his own time (בדורותם) –  
The Most High’s portion, great in glory,

<sup>30</sup> Literary aspects of the poem are considered by Beentjes, Tränen 233-240, esp. 237-238.

<sup>31</sup> The Hebrew text given here (based on the Masada scroll and MS B) follows the reconstruction in. Reymond, Innovations 78-79, except for the reading במכתם (“with lyric themes”) in 44:5 and the word בתהלותם (“in their praises”; cf. the Greek text) in 44:8. Note that in 44:5, the emended text with במכתם (“with lyric themes”) better fits the rhyme scheme of 44:1-8 than the reading in the Genizah manuscript, בכתב (“in writing”).

<sup>32</sup> Skehan, Staves 66-71, here 69-70. For a different interpretation of 44:2 see Reymond, Innovations 79.

reserved to himself from ancient days (מימות עולם):  
 Rulers of the earth, of royal rank (במלכותם),  
 persons renowned for their valor (בגבורתם),  
 Or counsellors with their shrewd advice (בתבונתם),  
 or seers of all things in prophecy (בנבואתם);  
 Resolute (במזמתם) governors of the folk,  
 or lawgivers with their rules (במחקתם);  
 Sages with their literary discourse (בספרתם),  
 or framers of proverbs and pointed maxims (במשמרותם);  
 Composers of melodious psalms,  
 or authors with lyric themes (במכתם);  
 Stalwart, self-reliant persons,  
 at peace in their own estates (מכוננתם) –  
 All these were glorious in their time,  
 each illustrious (תפארתם) in his day.  
 Some of them have left behind a name  
 so that people recount their praises (בתהלותם). [Sir 44:1-8]

In a remarkable way, Ben Sira also highlights the conclusion of 44:1-15 by means of head-rhyme or first-word rhyme, whereby the first word (or phrase) in all but one of the twelve cola of 44:10-15 (from אולם to ותהלתם, except 44:12b) ends with the rhyming sound *-ām*, mostly formed by the Hebrew third person plural suffix (“their”).<sup>33</sup> This rhyme forms a skilful counterpart to the use of end-rhyme with *-ām* in 44:1-8.

Yet (אולם) these also were godly people  
 whose virtues (וצדקתם) will not be forgotten;  
 Their wealth (טובם) remains in their families (עם זרעם),  
 their heritage (ונחלתם) with their descendants.  
 Through God’s covenant with them (בבריתם) their family  
 (זרעם) endures,  
 and their offspring for their sakes (בעבורם);  
 For all time (עד עולם) their progeny (זרעם) will last,  
 their glory (וכבודם) will never be blotted out.  
 Their bodies (וגויתם) are buried in peace,  
 but their name (ושמם) lives on and on;  
 At gatherings their wisdom (חכמתם) is retold,

<sup>33</sup> Additional end-rhyme is created by the repetition of the same sound *-ām* in Sir 44:11a, 12a, 13a.



and the assembly declares their praises (ותהללם).

[Sir 44:10-15]

In this section we have seen that in several biblical chapters (Isaiah 1; Jeremiah 46; Proverbs 9 and 31; Job 27-28; Psalms 18, 38, 54 and 110; Sirach 13, 14-15, 38 and 44), passages make use of rhyme for the purposes of delimitation, especially to indicate the opening and closing of poetic units. Although Watson has recognized this function of rhyme, it is not widely appreciated, and hence this article has gathered examples to illustrate the frequency of this phenomenon in classical Hebrew poetry.

### Conclusion

This study has indicated that while parallelism is a regular feature of Hebrew poetry, rhyme occurs in a considerable number of passages. In some cases the rhyme is there for rhetorical purposes (often in combination with assonance and alliteration), but in other cases the rhyme serves a structural or delimiting function, indicating the opening or closing of a poetic unit. Since the examples given above are taken from diverse prophetic and sapiential books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Proverbs, Job, Psalms, and Ben Sira), it is evident that the phenomenon of rhyme, while by no means ubiquitous, plays more than a marginal role in classical Hebrew poetry. While rhyme is more prevalent in Hebrew poetry than is sometimes acknowledged, its delimiting function is perhaps its least recognized purpose.<sup>34</sup>

### Summary

Using examples from the prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah) and wisdom books (Proverbs, Job, Psalms, Ben Sira), this article suggests that the phenomenon of rhyme, while by no means ubiquitous, plays more than a marginal role in classical Hebrew poetry. Rhyme often has the structural function of delimiting poetic units, by marking the opening and closing lines.

### Zusammenfassung

Mit Beispielen von den Propheten (Jesaja, Jeremia) und den Weisheitsbüchern (Proverbien, Hiob, Psalmen, Ben Sira) deutet dieser Artikel an, dass das Phänomen des Reims (obgleich keineswegs überall) mehr als eine Randrolle in der klassischen hebräischen Poesie spielt. Durch die Bezeichnung der Anfangs- und Schlusszeilen hat oft der Reim eine strukturelle Rolle, um poetische Einheiten abzugrenzen.

<sup>34</sup> I am grateful to Bernard Robinson and Patrick Welsh for commenting on drafts of this article.

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