



## A STYLISTIC READING OF ‘THE BOW’

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### Abstract

This paper is a stylistic analysis of the Hebrew poem, *Kesheth* (‘The bow’), in English translation. The aim of the analysis is to account for the stylistic features which contribute to both the thematic focus as well as the aesthetic appeal of the poem. Some of the features identified include the use of *apostrophe* to enhance empathy; the use of *semantic field* to develop the theme of violence, death and sorrow; and the use of *verbal repetition* as well as *structural reiteration* to achieve textual cohesion, memorability, and lyrical effectiveness. Others include linguistic markers which situate the poem in the context of Ancient Middle-Eastern literary culture.

**Keywords:** Apostrophe, Semantic Field, Structural Reiteration, Stylistics, Verbal Repetition.

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### Introduction

This paper is a stylistic analysis of the Hebrew poem *Kesheth* (meaning ‘the bow’) in English translation. The English translation of the poem (2 Samuel 1:19–27) used in this study is drawn from the *Amplified Version* of the Bible. The poem belongs to the genre, elegy (from Greek *elegeia*, meaning ‘lament’), a generic term which originally denoted any verse written in *elegiac couplets*—a metrical form comprising alternating hexameter and pentameter—and which dealt with a variety of thematic concerns such as war, death, and love (*cf.* Nagy, 2010). In



contemporary English usage, *elegy* depicts a lament or song of mourning irrespective of the metrical form adopted by the poet. ‘The Bow’ fits into this concept of the elegy as a poem of profound, personal sorrow.

In the poem, the poet—King David (*circa* 1025–931 B.C.) of ancient Israel—pours out his grief over the tragic death of his king (King Saul) and his bosom friend, Jonathan, at the Battle of Gilboa. The poet celebrates and immortalizes the military prowess and kingly generosity of the king, and the unparalleled love of his friend, Jonathan, Saul’s son and heir to the Israelite throne. The title presumably derives from the triple fact that *the bow* was the weapon with which the enemy cut down Saul and Jonathan (1st Samuel 31:3); it was the favourite weapon of Jonathan (2 Samuel 1:22); and the famed weapon of the Benjamites, the tribal family of Saul and Jonathan (1 Chronicles 8:40; 12:2; 2 Chronicles 14:8; 17:17). Beyond these, in Ancient Hebrew literature, the bow was a metaphor for strength. For instance, Joseph, the favourite son of Jacob, was not a fighter; yet it was said of him that ‘his *bow* remained steady, his strong arms stayed limber...’ (Genesis 49:24; *New International Version*).

In this paper, we aim at accounting for the stylistic features which underpin both the thematic development as well as the aesthetic appeal of the poem. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: In 1.2 (*Background*), we examine the historical context of the poem; in 1.3 (*Structure*), we examine the structure of the poem; in 1.4 (*Content Analysis*), attention is drawn to the thematic concern of the poem; in 1.5 (*Stylistic Features*), the focus is on identification of the relevant stylistic features, while the final sub-section, 1.6 (*Conclusion*), presents a summary of the identified stylistic features.

The paper adopts minimalist architectural language. In the Minimalist Program (MP) of Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG), all syntactic structures are considered binary-branching endocentric units (Radford, 2002, p. 92; Mede, 2019, pp. 49 & 50). With the exception of technical terms (such as ‘minimalist *program*’, ‘*complementizer*’, etc.) which almost invariably reflect American English orthography, the model adopted in this study is the British English spelling system. The adopted citation style is APA (6<sup>th</sup> Edition). A marginal point bordering on issues of style needs to be noted, namely the use of the self-effacing ‘*we*’ rather than (the more accurate but somewhat egoistic) ‘*I*’ (in self-reference to the researcher) in the study.



## Abbreviations

Adv= <i>adverb</i>	N= <i>noun</i>	Spec= <i>specifier</i>
AdvP= <i>adverbial phrase</i>	NP= <i>noun phrase</i>	Spec-TP= <i>specifier of TP</i>
C= <i>complementizer</i>	Neg= <i>negation</i>	T= <i>tense</i>
CP= <i>complementizer phrase</i>	NegP= <i>negation phrase</i>	TP= <i>tense phrase</i>
D= <i>determiner</i>	P= <i>preposition</i>	V= <i>verb</i>
DP= <i>determiner phrase</i>	PP= <i>prepositional phrase</i>	VP= <i>verb phrase</i>

## THE POEM

### ‘The Bow’

STANZA 1 Your glory, O Israel, is slain upon your high places.  
[1]

How have the mighty fallen!

STANZA 2 Tell it not in Gath,  
announce it not in the streets of Ashkelon,  
lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,  
[5]

lest the daughters of the uncircumcised  
exult.

STANZA 3 O mountains of Gilboa, let there no dew or rain  
upon you, or fields with offerings;  
for there the shield of the mighty was  
defiled,  
the shield of Saul,  
[10]  
as though he were not anointed with oil.

STANZA 4 From the blood of the slain,  
from the fat of the mighty,  
the bow of Jonathan turned not back,  
and the sword of Saul returned not empty.  
[15]

STANZA 5 Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!  
In their lives and in their deaths,  
they were not divided:  
They were swifter than eagles,

[20]

STANZA 7    How the mighty have fallen in the midst of battle!

[25]

STANZA 8     How have the mighty fallen,

[30]

## Background

Another dangerous neighbour was the Amalekite nation. The centre of the Amalekite territory was north of Kadesh-Barnea in the Negev desert located in the southern part of Canaan. The Amalekites led a nomadic lifestyle which frequently brought them into conflict with Israel. In an earlier conflict with these nomads, Saul had sacked them; but in the course of the conflict, he flagrantly violated the divinely laid-down rules of engagement, an omission that would cost



him his throne and, eventually, his life and that of his heir, Jonathan. Having rejected Saul as king for acting in breach of the rules of engagement in the Israel-Amalek Battle, Israel's divine Sovereign, Yaweh, transferred the mantle of leadership to a fledgling youth from a rustic background, David. In time, Saul discerned that David posed a threat to the Sauline lineage; alarmed at David's rising profile and popularity, the king made several attempts to assassinate him, a situation which compelled David to flee Israel and seek political asylum in Philistine territory.

In the process of time—about 931 B.C.—the Philistines invaded Israel. Saul mustered his forces and confronted the invaders at Mount Gilboa (Hebrew: *Har Gilboa*), a mountain range overlooking the Jezreel Valley in northern Israel. Israel was routed, Jonathan (Saul's son and heir) slain, and Saul himself mortally wounded by enemy archers. Fearing that the 'uncircumcised' enemy would deliver the *coup de grace*, Saul opted for the military dignity of suicide.

When the tragic news reached David, he was inconsolable. Jonathan was his bosom friend who had incurred his father's wrath and, on one occasion, even risked being assassinated by the irate king, in order to protect David. Moreover, in spite of the late king's attempts to assassinate David, Saul was Israel monarch who (together with his people, Israel) had suffered the humiliation of defeat at the hands of the 'uncircumcised' enemy; at a personal level, Saul was David's father-in-law, having pledged one of his daughters to David for David's earlier military exploits against the Philistines; but far more importantly, the fallen king was God's anointed sovereign over His people, Israel. The outpouring of David's grief over the death of King Saul and Prince Jonathan crystallized in this memorable elegy, *The Bow*.

### **Structure**

The poem—the version adopted in this paper—comprises eight stanzas: Stanza 1 (Lines 1 & 2); Stanza 2 (Lines 3–6); Stanza 3 (Lines 7–11); Stanza 4 (Lines 12–15); Stanza 5 (Lines 16–20); Stanza 6 (Lines 21–23); Stanza 7 (Lines 24–29); and Stanza 8 (Lines 30 & 31). With the sole exception of Stanza 1, each of the other seven stanzas instantiates at least one sentence 'flowing' into the next line/s (enjambment). This enjambment symbolically parallels the flow of the poet's grief, a flow that could hardly be stemmed.

Significantly, the seventh stanza—the one which is exclusively dedicated to the poet's 'covenant' brother, Jonathan—comprises four sentences, two of which involve enjambment,



making a total of six lines. Given that almost every other stanza (2, 3, 4, 6 and 8) comprises only one sentence, the four-sentence structure of Stanza 7 is fore grounded and, therefore, significant for interpretation. The impression which this fore grounded structural deviation conveys is that the poet desired to dwell on the painful memory of his fallen friend and fellow warrior, Jonathan. The placing of this stanza in the last but one position in the poem is also significant: The preceding stanzas, as it were, build up in emotional intensity which peaks in the seventh stanza; this stanza is the ‘climax’; what follows—that is, Stanza 8—is the tragic ‘resolution’: The mighty have fallen in battle and the weapons of perished!

Finally, the fact that the opening and concluding stanzas each comprises two lines which instantiate the same concept of the tragic fall of the mighty in battle creates an overall effect of structural balance.

### **Content Analysis**

The opening stanza sets the tone and the thematic focus of the poem; namely, the tragic death of Saul and Jonathan (both of whom personify the ‘glory’ of Israel) at the ‘high places’—that is, the mountainous region of Gilboa where the Israel-Philistia Battle took place.

In the second stanza, the poet—anticipating the hysterical joy with which the news of Israel’s defeat and the death of Saul and Jonathan would be received by the Philistines—admonishes his vicarious audience to refrain from breaking the sad news at Gath and Ashkelon, chief cities in Philistia which, in the poem, represent the entire Philistine nation. The gloating joy with which the Philistines would receive the news was predictable; on three preceding occasions, they had been defeated by Israel: first, at the Battle of Mizpah (I Samuel 7:7–13); then, at the Battle of Beth Aven, where Jonathan initiated the attack that culminated in total defeat of the Philistine army (1 Samuel 14:1–23); finally, near the Valley of Elah, where David killed the Philistine champion, Goliath, in single combat (1 Samuel 17:1–58). After these humiliating defeats by Israel, Philistia had at last defeated Israel! The joy of the Philistine populace could be readily imagined.

Stanza 3 is culturally significant. In Ancient Middle-Eastern cultures, it was customary to place a curse vicariously on a temporal or physical entity associated with human misfortune. In the Book of Genesis, for instance, the ground from which man was formed was cursed for the perfidy of man (Genesis 3:17); similarly, the suffering Job placed a curse on his birthday (Job 3:1–10). Following this tradition, the poet places a curse of drought on the mountains of Gilboa



for witnessing, as it were, the vile defilement of ‘the shield of Saul’—a poetic reference to Saul’s tragic death.

Stanza 4 recalls the military prowess of Saul and Jonathan: In preceding confrontations with the now triumphant enemy, ‘the bow of Jonathan’ and ‘the sword of Saul did not return empty’; they had consistently wrought victory over the enemy.

Stanza 5 offers further details of the virtues of the slain king and prince: ‘beloved and lovely’; united in life and death. In preceding military conflicts, they had swooped on the enemy with the swiftness of an eagle and the strength of a lion. The reference to the military accomplishments of Saul and Jonathan in this and the preceding stanza is no mere eulogy; rather, it suggests that the death of Saul and Jonathan was not a consequence of any military superiority on the part of the enemy (since the Philistines had been repeatedly defeated in previous confrontations) but merely a chance military misfortune. In other words, Israel had no need to tremble before the enemy; for the moment, the fortunes of war had favoured the Philistines, but the enemy would surely be defeated again. Thus, in this moment of national grief and near-despondence, the poet holds out hope for his people, Israel.

In the next stanza (Stanza 6), the poet admonishes the ‘daughters of Israel’ to mourn the death of Saul who, as Israel sovereign, had afforded them much luxury. Lines 22 and 23 paint a vivid picture of the affluence from which the people benefited in the days of the now-fallen king. The mention of scarlet is, in particular, culturally significant: In ancient Middle-Eastern cultures, it was the favourite colour of royalty and those who were affluent. As Greenfield (2007:5) explains, scarlet in ancient times was a colour of power, wealth and luxury; in the empire days of Rome, its prestige was exceeded only by the purple worn by the emperors.

In Stanza 7, the poet directs the focus of his grief to his bosom friend, Jonathan. The expression ‘Jonathan lies slain upon *your* high places’ (Line 25; emphasis added) accentuates the tragic irony of Jonathan’s death: A skilled mountaineer, he had defeated the Philistines in armed confrontation on Israel’s craggy heights (*cf.* 1 Samuel 14:1–14); yet it was here, in one of the ‘high places’ he was expert at fighting in, that he was felled by the enemy. The entire stanza is a grief-drenched tribute to the friendship the poet shared with the slain prince: David and Jonathan had entered into a solemn covenant of perpetual brotherly affection when the latter saved David from being assassinated by the psychologically impaired King Saul (1 Samuel 20:14–17, 42). It



is this bond of covenant brotherhood which the poet considers dearer than marital affection (Lines 28 and 29).

Stanza 8 concludes the poem by re-echoing the tragic theme: the death of the mighty—Saul and Jonathan—in battle.

### **Stylistic Features**

The poet employs a number of literary devices in developing the theme. One of these is *apostrophe*. The use of this literary device creates an empathetic intimacy between the reader/hearer on the one hand, and the tragic happenings addressed in the poem, on the other hand. Linguistic markers of this device include the use of vocatives and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Person Personal pronominal forms: *you*, *your*, etc. Consider the instances (1)–(3) below:

(1) *Your* glory, *O* Israel, is slain upon *your* high places.

[Line 1]

(2) *O* mountains of Gilboa ...

[Line 7]

... let there be no dew or rain upon *you* ...

[Lines 7, 8]

(3) Jonathan lies slain upon *your* high places.

[Line 25]

I am distressed for *you*, my brother Jonathan;

[26]

very pleasant have *you* been to me.

[27]

*Your* love to me was wonderful ...

[28]

Note that none of the three subjects directly addressed—Israel, the mountains of Gilboa, or Jonathan— was in the immediate spatial communicative context of the poet; nor indeed could any of them rationally respond to the poet's direct address: Mountains are inanimate entities, and Jonathan was dead. The choice of this literary device remedies the dual deficiency of inanimacy and physical absence by imbuing the subjects (as it were) with poetic life and imaginatively





placing them in the immediate spatial environment of communication. Generally, the use of this literary device accentuates the tragic ambience of the poem.

Another stylistic feature in the poem is the use of *semantic field*—that is, thematically related lexical items and structural units—to develop the theme of violence, death and sorrow. Consider the instances (4)–(7) below:

- (4) *slain* [Lines 1, 12, 25]; *blood* [Line 12]; *sword* [Line 15]; *death* [Line 17];  
*weep* [Line 21]; *distressed* [Line 26]  
(5) How the mighty have fallen [Lines 2, 30]  
(6) ... the shield of the mighty was defiled ... [Line 9]  
(7) ... the weapons of war perished! [Line 31]

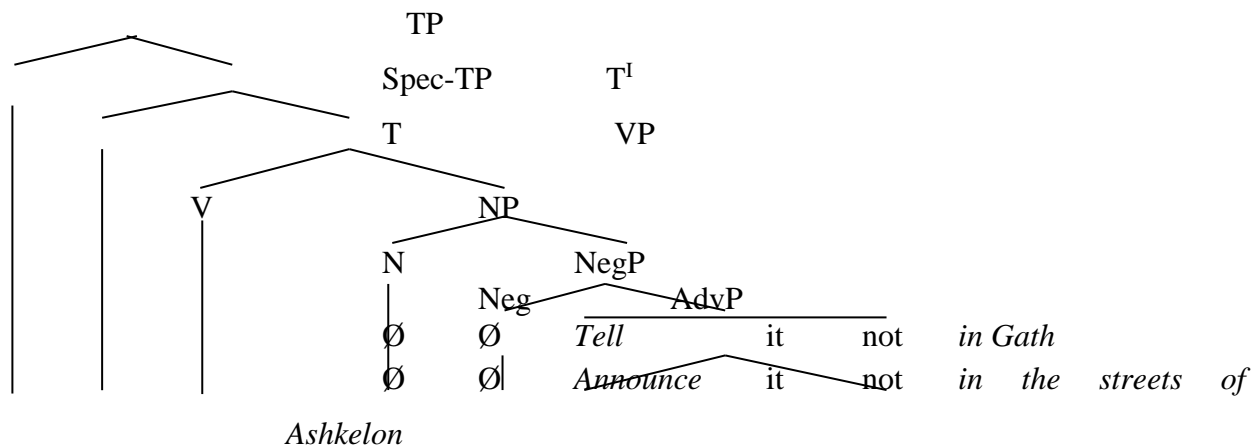
The poet also exploits *verbal repetition*, e.g. ‘How have the mighty fallen’ [Lines 2 & 30] as well as *structural reiteration* to achieve textual cohesion, memorability, and lyrical effectiveness. In the poem, structural repetition serves an additional semantic function: it equates synonymous items or structures. Consider the following instances.

- (8) Tell it not in Gath

[Spec-TP Ø [T Ø [V Tell [N it [Neg not [AdvP in Gath]]]]]]

Announce it not in the streets of Ashkelon

[Spec-TP Ø [T Ø [V Announce [N it [Neg not [AdvP in the streets of Ashkelon]]]]]]



In (8), *tell* and *announce* are structurally equated because the two words are synonyms. Similarly, *Gath* and *the streets of Ashkelon* are equated by virtue of the fact that both represent ‘enemy territory’, specifically the territory of the Philistines, Israel’s enemy whose army had caused Saul’s death and that of his son, Jonathan. The reason for wishing that the tragic news would not stray into Philistine territory was to deny the enemy the satisfaction of gloating over the death of Israel’s sovereign and that of his heir [Lines 5 and 6]. In these lines, as shown in (9)



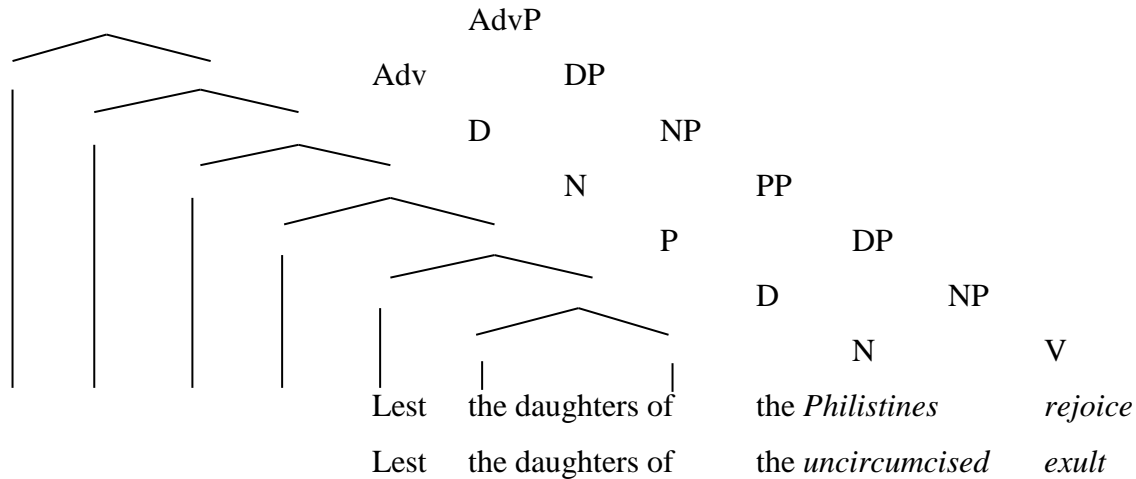
below, *the Philistines* and *the uncircumcised* occupy the same structural rung because the Philistines were a people outside the commonwealth of Israel, a theocratic nation whose citizens, among all ancient middle-eastern peoples, solely enjoyed the privileged status of being Yahweh's chosen people. The sign and seal of that privileged status was the circumcision of all Israelite male citizens. Over time, the expression 'uncircumcised' became a derogatory term for all non-Israelites, particularly those who opposed the 'covenant' people, Israel, as the Philistines did. Note also the synonymous terms, *rejoice* and *exult*, both of which occupy the same structural rung.

(9) Lest the daughters of the **Philistines** *rejoice* [Line 5]

[AdvP [Adv Lest [DP [D the [NP [N daughters [PP [P of [DP [D the [NP [N Philistines [V rejoice]]

Lest the daughters of the **uncircumcised** *exult* [Line 6]

[AdvP [Adv Lest [DP [D the [NP [N daughters [PP [P of [DP [D the [NP [N uncircumcised [V exult]]



In adulating the military prowess of the slain king and prince, the poet again employs structural parallelism, as shown in (10) and (11) below.

(10) From the *blood* of the *slain*

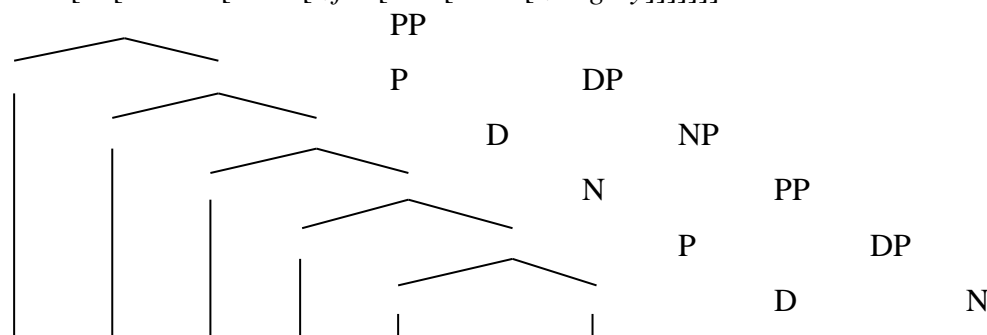
[Line 12]

[PP [P From [D the [N *blood* [P of [D the [N *slain*]]]]]]]

From the *fat* of the *mighty*

[Line 13]

[PP [P From [D the [N *fat* [P of [D the [N *mighty*]]]]]]]





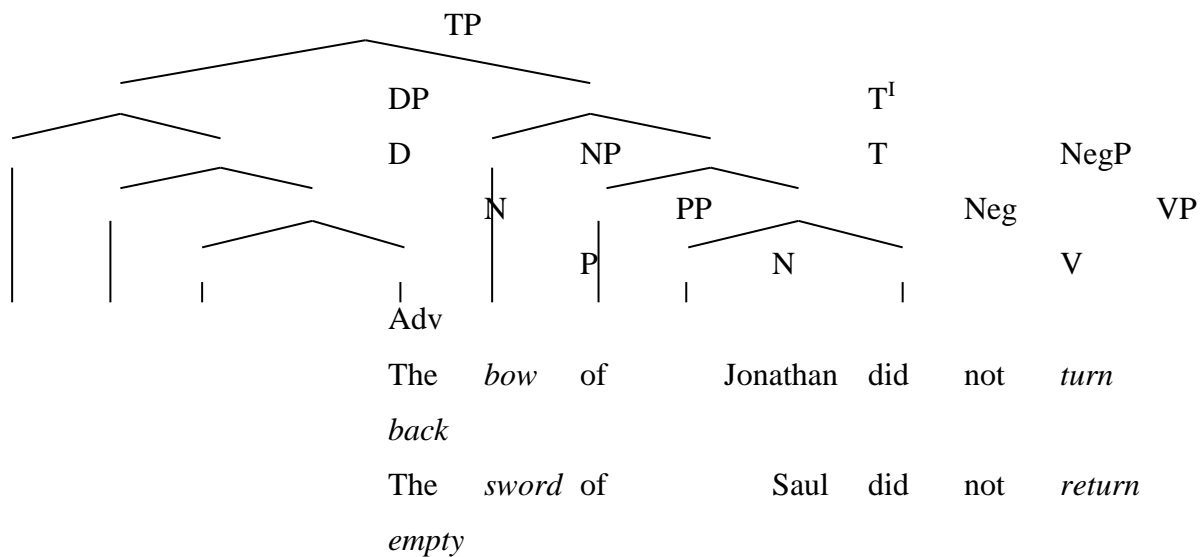
From the *blood* of the *slain*  
 From the *fat* of the *mighty*

(11) The *bow* of Jonathan did not *turn back*. [Line 14]

[DP [D The [N *bow* [P of [N Jonathan]]]] [T did [Neg not [V *turn* [Adv *back*]]]]]

The *sword* of Saul did not *return empty*. [Line 15]

[DP [D The [N *sword* [P of [N Saul]]]] [T did [Neg not [V *return* [Adv *empty*]]]]]



The structural pairing of 'blood' and 'fat' in (10) is readily understood: Both are metaphors for human life. Those from whom 'the bow of Jonathan' and 'the sword of Saul' did not turn back or return empty (11) were not scrawny weaklings; 'the slain' (those defeated by them in previous battles) were 'the mighty'—battle-hardened, frontline warriors. Continuing the theme of the invincibility of Saul and Jonathan, the poet presses into poetic service the rhetorical device of simile:

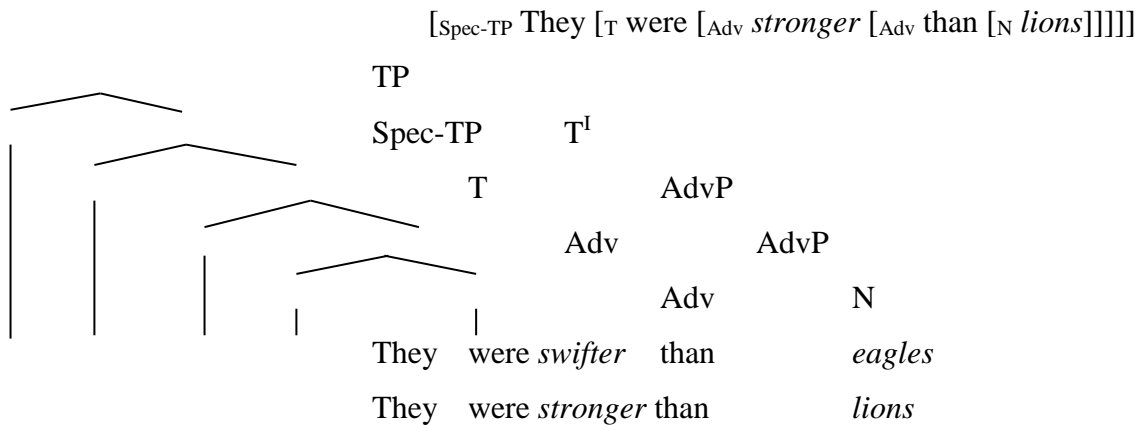
(12) They were *swifter* than *eagles*, [Line

19]

[Spec-TP They [T were [Adv *swifter* [Adv than [N *eagles*]]]]]

They were *stronger* than *lions*. [Line

20]



In armed conflicts, speed (swiftness) and strength are complementary qualities; both are required for decisive victory, hence in (12) ‘swifter’ and ‘stronger’ are structurally equated. Similarly, the eagle and the lion are fearless (and dreaded!) hunters. By implication, Saul and Jonathan were, as warriors, noted for their swiftness and strength—dual virtues which made them fearless and dreaded fighters. Equally significant is the fact that generally, but particularly so in Ancient Hebrew literary culture, the eagle symbolizes loftiness and royal majesty, while the lion prefigures strength and kingly dignity, virtues which the poet identifies with Saul and Jonathan.

## Conclusion

Generally then, the stylistic features which contribute to both the thematic development as well as the aesthetic appeal of the poem, ‘*The Bow*’ include the use of *apostrophe* to weave an empathetic thread between the reader/hearer and the tragic events addressed in the poem; the use of *semantic field* to develop the theme of violence, death and sorrow; and the use of *verbal repetition* as well as *structural reiteration* to achieve textual cohesion, memorability, and lyrical effectiveness. Others include linguistic markers which situate the poem in the context of Ancient Middle-Eastern literary culture. It is these stylistic features which make *The Bow* a memorable elegy, not only in the original language of composition, Hebrew, but equally so in the English translation.



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