

INTRODUCTION TO THE
PSALMS

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A Song from Ancient Israel

NANCY L. DECLAISSÉ-WALFORD



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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

05 06 07 08 09 10

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

DeClaissé-Walford, Nancy L., 1954-

Introduction to the Psalms : a song from ancient Israel / Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-827216-23-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Bible. O.T. Psalms—Introductions. I. Title.

BS1430.52.D43 2004

223'.2061—dc22

2004014434

Printed in the United States of America

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PREFACE

In the fall of 1991, I began doctoral studies at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Over the next few years, my advisor, W. H. Bellinger Jr., introduced me to the study of the Hebrew Psalter. My dissertation, which subsequently took the form of a book published by Mercer University Press, was titled *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter*. My purpose in that undertaking was to discover clues to the shape and shaping of the Book of Psalms. I asked, “Why these 150 psalms, in this particular order in the Psalter? Why does Psalm 1 begin the Book? Why is Psalm 90 located where it is?” And so forth. The work was fascinating. And much remains to be learned and discovered.

This work, *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel*, seeks to provide the reader with a solid introduction to the Hebrew Psalter, one that is informed by an interest in its shape and shaping. After an Introductory chapter, I examine in successive chapters the poetic style of the psalms in the Psalter, their *Gattungen*, the broad shape of the book, and the history of its shaping. Beginning with chapter 5, I study each book of the Psalter, pausing at points to examine in detail individual psalms which are either key to the shaping of the Psalter, important examples of their *Gattung*, or interesting studies in poetic style. The final chapter is titled, “How Then Shall We Read the Psalter?”, and summarizes the conclusions of the previous chapters and proposes a way to read the Psalter as a unified whole. Two appendices provide a listing of the Superscriptions and *Gattungen* of the psalms in the Hebrew Psalter and an explanation of many of the technical terms found in their superscriptions.

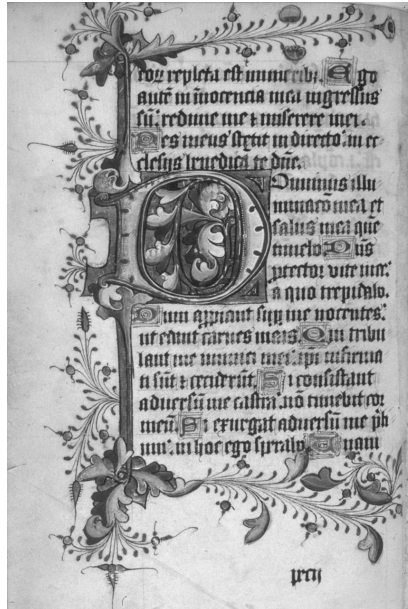
Thanks and gratitude are due many. The McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University, under the leadership of Dean R. Alan Culpepper, generously granted me a sabbatical leave during the spring and summer sessions of 2003. My colleagues at the school filled in the gaps in my teaching schedule and administrative duties during this time. My editor at Chalice Press, Jon Berquist, was enthusiastic and supportive about the project. The Society of Biblical Literature Book of Psalms Section has graciously listened to my presentations and input at

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meetings of the section for the past ten years. And of course, no project would be possible without the love and support of my family: my husband Steve and my sons Calvin and Aaron. Yes, Mom's in her study again. Yes. Mom's writing another book. They are my firm grounding in the real world, and there is no substitute for that kind of influence on the writing endeavor.

But perhaps my deepest gratitude should be to those ancient Israelite poets who first sang the songs that I find myself so carefully studying. And to the ancient communities of faith who took those songs and shaped them into the book that has been handed down to us. The Hebrew Psalter tells a story of faith and struggle, of despair and hope, a song that sings to all of us across the millennia.

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An illuminated manuscript of one of the psalms.

Courtesy of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

Introduction

The book of Psalms is perhaps the most well-known and best-loved of the books of the Hebrew Bible. Words like “The LORD is my shepherd” (23:1); “O LORD, you have searched me and known me” (139:1); “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (22:1); and “Bless the LORD, O my soul” (104:1) ring familiar in our ears.

In the Jewish faith, the Psalms are valued as the songs of King David, the tenth-century B.C.E. king of ancient Israel, and they are read at every synagogue service. The rabbis wrote, “Whatever David says in his book pertains to himself, to all Israel, and to all times.”¹ The New Testament contains some sixty-nine quotations from the book of Psalms, including:

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The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes.
(Mk. 12:10–11=Ps. 118:22–23)

I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;
therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover my flesh will live in hope.
(Acts 2:25–26=Ps. 16:8–9)

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.
(Heb. 1:8–9=Ps. 45:6–7)

Benedictine monks, following the Rule of Saint Benedict, recite the complete Psalter once each week and the psalms form the prayer life of the community.² The printed New Testament often includes the books of Proverbs and Psalms as something of a “preface” to the work. The *Revised Common Lectionary*, a guide for scripture reading in worship, lists a psalm for reading at nearly every worship occasion³; and the words of the Psalter are read at weddings, baptisms, funerals, and anniversaries.

“The Psalter”

“The book of Psalms”

Both are names for the collection of 150 poems found in the Jewish and Christian Bibles. The word “psalm” is from the Greek word ψαλμος, which means “hymn.” “Psalter” means “a printed collection of hymns.” The Hebrew title of the book is סֵפֶר תְּהִלִּים (sēper t' hillim), which means “book of hymns.”

Perhaps the book of Psalms is so well-loved and well-used because of its unique nature. The Bible is described as “the word of God”—the words of the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of the world—to

humanity. We read in its pages the story of creation, the stories of the ancestors and ancient Israel, the words of the prophets and the wisdom writers, the stories told by the gospel writers, and the words of the writers of the New Testament letters—words from God, via human agents, to God’s created humanity. But we encounter something different in the Psalter. Its pages record, for the most part, not the words of God to humanity, but the words of humanity to God. In it, we encounter striking second-person language, language found only rarely in the rest of the Bible. The words are meant to be spoken by people in the presence of and directly to God:

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. (16:1)

Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion. (65:1)

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness
in the assembly of the holy ones. (89:5)

Nahum Sarna wrote these words in 1993:

In the Psalms, the human soul extends itself beyond its confining, sheltering, impermanent house of clay. It strives for contact with the Ultimate Source of all life. It gropes for an experience of the divine Presence. The biblical psalms are essentially a record of the human quest for God.⁴

And Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote during the first half of the twentieth century:

Whoever has begun to pray the Psalter earnestly and regularly, will soon give leave to those other, easy, little prayers of their own because they lack the power, passion, and fire, to be found in the Psalter.⁵

Many scholars describe the book of Psalms as “the prayerbook of the second temple”; William L. Holladay titled his 1993 book about the Psalter *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses*. The psalms are the prayers and songs of generations of Israelites who strove to define their relationship to and communicate with the God they called the Lord. The psalms encapsulate the joys, the grief, the questions, and the praises of our ancestors in the faith.

The psalms in the Hebrew Psalter come from many times and many places in the life of ancient Israel. We read the recorded history of the

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ancient Israelites in the pages of the Old Testament—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Rachel and Leah and Jacob, and Joseph; Moses and Miriam and Aaron and the exodus from Egypt; Saul and David and the kings of ancient Israel; the prophets—Isaiah, Hosea, Joel; the wisdom teachers—Solomon and Qoheleth; and the prophets of the exile and the return from exile. Psalms were composed, sung, preserved, and handed down during each of these periods in the history of ancient Israel.

Time Line of Ancient Israel

PREEXILIC PERIOD						POSTEXILIC PERIOD	
1800	1200	1000	950	722	586	538	515
Abraham and Sarah	Exodus from Egypt	David and Solomon	Divided Kingdom	Fall of Northern Kingdom	Fall of Southern Kingdom	Return from Exile	Temple rebuilt

Assigning a precise date to most of the psalms in the Psalter is extremely difficult, since a part of their beauty is their timelessness.⁶ We can find clues within a few psalms, however, that indicate the general time frames of their original compositions. Psalm 45, for instance, was most likely composed in the preexilic period (before 587 B.C.E.) as a royal wedding song.⁷

The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes;
in many-colored robes she is led to the king;
behind her the virgins, her companions, follow.
With joy and gladness they are led along
as they enter the palace of the king. (45:13–15)

Psalm 81 probably originated in the northern kingdom of Israel between 950 and 722 B.C.E.⁸

Hear, O my people, while I admonish you;
O Israel, if you would but listen to me!
There shall be no strange god among you;
you shall not bow down to a foreign god. (81:8–9)

Psalms 74 and 79 most likely come from the exilic period of ancient Israel's history (between 587 and 538 B.C.E.).⁹

O God, why do you cast us off forever?

Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your
pasture?
Remember your congregation, which you acquired long ago,
which you redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage.
(74:1–2)

And Psalm 119 can be dated to the postexilic period (after 538
B.C.E.).¹⁰

Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD.
Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,
who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways. (119:1–3)

In the Second Temple period (after 515 B.C.E.), these prayers and
songs of ancient Israel were collected and ordered into the book we call
Psalms and placed within the canon of scripture.

Second Temple

The first Israelite temple was built in Jerusalem during the reign of
King Solomon (10th century B.C.E.). That temple was destroyed by
the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. The temple was rebuilt around 515
B.C.E. by the Israelites who returned from captivity in Babylon. It is
this temple to which we refer as the Second Temple.

In that process, the Psalms underwent a transformation from being
the words of humankind to God into being scriptural words of God to
humankind. They became words of encouragement and hope to a
community in turmoil, a community coming to grips with a new life
situation.¹¹

What are those words of encouragement and hope? What is the
story and message of the Psalter? We will begin by examining the
literary styles, forms, structures, and historical backgrounds of the psalms
in the Psalter. We will then explore each of the Psalter's five books,
pausing along the way to study individual psalms and groups of psalms.
Finally, we will attempt to draw some conclusions about the shape of
the Psalter and about its story and message.

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Let us now turn to this book of hope and encouragement and seek to understand its words—words spoken and written to our ancestors in the faith and words written to communities of faith today.

1

What Words Are We Reading?

The Psalter is written in poetry rather than prose. How do we recognize poetry and how do we read it? Compare the following two passages:

The library of Brown Middle School wants to encourage each student to check out and read at least twelve books during the upcoming school year. Imagine traveling to different times and places and meeting new and interesting people without spending a penny—what a great way to broaden your horizons, make you aware of the many possibilities your life holds, and help you understand other peoples' lives! Please participate in this program during the year, and we think you will agree that reading is a wonderful way to explore your world.

There is no frigate like a book
To take us lands away,
Nor any coursers like a page
Of prancing poetry.
This traverse may the poorest take
Without oppress of toll;
How frugal is the chariot
That bears the human soul!

The Nature of Poetry

The reader approaches prose and poetry in very different ways. The first passage above is prose. It is an invitation to students at Brown Middle School to come to the library and take advantage of a wonderful way to explore their world. The message of the second passage is the same—"Come, explore your world through books." But the second passage is poetry. How can we tell? How do we know when we are reading poetry? One author offers the following:

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As soon as we perceive that a verbal sequence has a sustained rhythm, that it is formally structured according to a continuously operating principle of organization, we know that we are in the presence of poetry and we respond to it accordingly. We respond to it...expecting certain effects from it and not others, granting certain conventions to it and not others. All our experiences with language and literature, from the time we are small children, condition that discrimination.²

We learn then to identify poetry in several ways:

1. It looks different from prose on the page. Its lines are shorter; they don't fill the width of the page. Some lines are indented.
2. It has a certain rhythm or beat. We can describe the poem quoted above as having a 4/3 beat or rhythm:

There **is** no **fri**-gate **like** a **book**
To **take** us **lands** a-**way**,
Nor **a**-ny **cour**-sers **like** a **page**
Of **pranc**-ing **po**-e-**try**.

3. It uses metaphorical and imaginative language. A book is compared to a "frigate" in line one and a "chariot" in line seven; poetry is described as "prancing"; and the "human soul" is used as a synonym for "reader" in the last line of the poem.

Poetry in the Book of Psalms

When we open the pages of the Hebrew Bible, we see that the book of Psalms is laid out on the page differently from, say, the books of Genesis and Kings. Let's have a look at Psalm 3.

O LORD, how many are my foes!
Many are rising against me...
But you, O LORD, are a shield around me,
my glory, and the one who lifts up my head. (3:1, 3)

In Hebrew, the lines have a recognizable rhythm, what we may call a 3/3 pattern:

y^ehwāh māh rab-bū šā-rā
rab-bīm qā-mīm 'ā-lā...
w^e-at-tāh y^ehwāh mā-gēn ba 'ā-dī
k^e-bô-dī ū-mē-rīm rō-šī
(3:2, 4; MT 3:1, 3)

And Psalm 3 uses figurative language. The Lord is a “shield” to the psalmist (v. 3); the psalmist is not afraid of “ten thousand people” (v. 6); and the psalmist calls on God to “strike all my enemies on the cheek; break the teeth of the wicked” (v. 7).

Why are the psalms written in poetry? Walter Brueggemann titles a chapter in a book on poetry, “Poetry in a Prose-Flattened World.”³ What a statement—“A Prose-Flattened World”! Brueggemann is right. Our world is full of prose. We are bombarded daily with words—words that inform, instruct, guide, dictate, and attempt to persuade us. We become numb to the bombardment, and we tune out; we ignore. But when we encounter poetry, something happens to us; we tune in; we listen; we remember—the words to a song:

We are travelers on a journey,
fellow pilgrims on the road.
We are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.
I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the nighttime of your fear.
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.⁴

the rhythm of a poem:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.⁵

and the imagery of a psalm:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul. (23:1–2)

Poetry draws us in, engages us, invites us to hear and remember. It is succinct, graphic, concrete. Walt Whitman wrote these words in the nineteenth century:

After the seas are all cross'd,
(as they seem already cross'd,)
After the great captains and engineers have

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accomplish'd their work,
After the noble inventors, after the scientists,
the chemist, the geologist, the ethnologist,
Finally shall come the poet worthy that name,
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.⁶

Walter Brueggemann summarizes the matter well when he states that the power of poetry lies in its “shattering, evocative speech that breaks fixed conclusions and presses us always toward new, dangerous, imaginative possibilities.”⁷

Hebrew Parallelism

The Psalter of the Hebrew Bible is composed in a special type (or genre) of poetry that was common throughout the ancient Near East. In addition to containing all of the elements of poetry that are discussed above, Hebrew poetry is made up of two or three parallel line units that are connected to one another in a number of ways. In the year 1779, Bishop Robert Lowth brought the phenomenon to the attention of the scholarly world:

The correspondence of one Verse, or Line, with another I call Parallelism. When a proposition is delivered, and a second is subjoined to it, or drawn under it, equivalent, or contrasted with it, in sense; or similar to it in the form of Grammatical Construction; these I call Parallel Lines; and the words or phrases answering one to another in the corresponding Line Parallel Terms.⁸

Students of Hebrew poetry have been grappling with the concept of “parallelism” ever since. We will use a simple method of categorizing the ways in which the parallel line units are connected with one another. Observe the following examples:

Type One: Synonymous Parallelism

- a) The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it. (Ps. 24:1)
- b) You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy. (30:11)
- c) The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. (18:2)

Type Two: Antithetic Parallelism

- a) O let the evil of the wicked come to an end,
but establish the righteous (7:9)
- b) For you deliver a humble people,
but the haughty eyes you bring down. (18:27)
- c) Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses,
but our pride is in the name of the LORD our God. (20:7)

Type Three: Synthetic Parallelism

- a) Come and see what God has done:
he is awesome in his deeds among mortals. (66:5)
- b) From the rising of the sun to its setting
the name of the LORD is to be praised. (113:3)
- c) The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows
to bring down the poor and needy,
to kill those who walk uprightly. (37:14)

In Type One, “synonymous parallelism,” the first line makes a statement, such as, “The earth is the LORD’s and all that’s in it,” and the second (and sometimes a third) line reiterates—restates—the first, “the world and those who live in it.”

In Type Two, “antithetic parallelism,” the first line, as with Type One, makes a statement, like, “For you deliver a humble people.” In Type Two, however, the next line (or lines) of the parallelism expresses an opposite thought: “but the haughty eyes you bring down.”

In Type Three, “synthetic parallelism,” the first line expresses a thought: “Come and see what God has done.” The following line (or lines) further explains the meaning of the first line: “he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.”

COMBINED OR MIXED TYPES

The types can be combined within their parallel lines. In Psalm 68:6, we read the following:

God gives the desolate a home to live in;
he leads out the prisoners to prosperity,
but the rebellious live in a parched land.

In this construction, lines one and two are synonymous, while line three is antithetic to both lines one and two. Look at Psalm 37:7:

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Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him;
do not fret over those who prosper in their way,
over those who carry out evil devices.

Here lines two and three are synonymous, and line one is set in synthetic parallelism with them.⁹

In all of the types—synonymous, antithetic, synthetic, and mixed—the two (or three) lines are to be read as a unit. A complete understanding of what the psalmist is saying comes from appropriating a single meaning from all of the lines read together.

Word Pairs

Another characteristic of Hebrew poetry is the occurrence of common word pairs within the parallel line units—what Bishop Lowth called “words or phrases answering one another in corresponding lines.” Observe the words used in the line units of the opening verses of Psalm 49:

Hear this, all you peoples;
give ear, all inhabitants of the world,
both low and high,
rich and poor together.
My mouth shall speak wisdom;
the meditation of my heart shall be understanding. (49:1–3)

In the first parallel structure, “hear” and “give ear” are paired, as are “peoples” and “inhabitants of the world.” In the second parallel, “low and high” are paired with “rich and poor,” and in the third, “my mouth” and “my heart” are paired, as are “wisdom” and “understanding.” Psalm 92 provides additional examples:

It is good to give thanks to the LORD
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
to declare your steadfast love in the morning
and your faithfulness by night,
to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre. (92:1–3)

In these three verses, we find a number of paired words: “give thanks” and “sing praises,” the LORD” and “O Most High,” “steadfast love” and “faithfulness,” “morning” and “night,” “music” and “melody,” and “lute and harp” and “lyre.” Finally, observe these verses from Psalm 21:

In your strength the king rejoices, O LORD,
 and in your help how greatly he exults!
 You have given him his heart's desire
 and have not withheld the request of his lips...
 Your hand will find out all your enemies;
 your right hand will find out those who hate you...
 You will destroy their offspring from the earth,
 and their children from among humankind. (21:1–2, 8, 10)

Here, “strength” is paired with “help,” “rejoices” with “exults,” “given” with “not withheld,” “desire” with “request,” “hand” with “right hand,” “enemies” with “those who hate you,” “offspring” with “children,” and “the earth” with “among humankind.”

During the past two hundred years, students of Hebrew poetry have devoted a great deal of time to the study of word pairs. Some suggest that there existed in the ancient Near East a kind of thesaurus of acceptable word pairs that poets consulted as they composed their works. Far more likely is that the phenomenon of word pairs came about as the result of the unique character of the poetry—its structure of parallel line units. The frequently-used word pairs are a natural result of that structure.

Chiasmus

Hebrew poets also used certain structural elements in the composition of the psalms. One such structural element is called chiasmus—a reversal in the order of words in two otherwise parallel phrases. Observe the following chiastic lines:

For the LORD knows *the way of the righteous*,
 But *the way of the wicked* will perish. (1:6, NASB)

Here the psalmist has reversed the order of the words in line two so that the verbs occur at the beginning and the end of the two lines, while “the way of the righteous” and “the way of the wicked” are at the center of the construction.

In my distress I called upon the LORD;
 to my God I cried for help. (18:6)

In the above example, the two prepositional phrases “upon the LORD” and “to my God” are placed at the center of the parallel lines.

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Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name *forever and ever*. (145:2)

Each line of this verse consists of two phrases. The reversal of the phrases in the second line creates a perfect chiasmic structure.

Inclusio

A related structural element in Hebrew poetry is the *inclusio*—beginning and ending a particular unit of poetry in the same or similar ways. We may describe verse 2 of Psalm 145, which we examined just above, as having an *inclusio* structure as well as a chiasmic structure. The first line begins with an adverbial phrase, “every day,” and the second line ends with one, “forever and ever.” *Inclusios* are also used on a larger scale. The magnificent creation poem in Psalm 8 begins and ends with the words:

O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth! (8:1, 9)

And in Book One of the Psalter, which includes Psalms 1–41, Psalm 1 and Psalm 41, the two psalms at the edges of the Book, begin with the word “happy”—אֲשֶׁר־י (*’ašrê*):

Happy—אֲשֶׁר־י (*’ašrê*)—are those who do not follow the
advice of the wicked. (1:1)

Happy—אֲשֶׁר־י (*’ašrê*)—are those who consider the poor.
(41:1)

Acrostic Poetry

Another fascinating structural element of Hebrew poetry is the *acrostic*, where the lines or group of lines of a psalm begin with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.¹⁰ Psalms 25, 34, 111, 112, 119, and 145 are acrostic psalms, as is the wonderful poem in Proverbs 31:10–31. Observe the structure of Psalm 111:

תִּלְלוּ יְהוָה | 111:1
אֹרְחָה יְהוָה בְּכָל־לֵבב (א)
בְּסֹד יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעֵדָה: (ב)

- (ג) 2 גדלים מעשי יהנה
- (ד) דרושים לכל־חפציהם:
- (ה) 3 הודו־הדר פעלו
- (ו) וצדקתו עמדת לעד:
- (ז) 4 זכר עשה לנפלאותיו
- (ח) חנון ורחום יהנה:
- (ט) 5 טרף נתן ליראיו
- (י) יזכר לעולם בריתו:
- (כ) 6 כח מעשיו הגיד לעמו
- (ל) לתת להם נחלת גוים:
- (מ) 7 מעשי ידיו אמת ומשפט
- (נ) נאמנים כל־פקודיו:
- (ס) 8 סמוכים לעד לעולם
- (ע) עשויים באמת וישר:
- (פ) 9 פדות | שלח לעמו
- (צ) צוה־לעולם בריתו
- (ק) קדוש ונורא שמו:
- (ר) 10 ראשית חכמה | יראת יהנה
- (ש) שכל טוב לכל־עשיהם
- (ת) תהלתו עמדת לעד:

The characters in parentheses along the right margin are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each line of Psalm 111 begins with its corresponding letter of the alphabet in “abc” order.

Psalm 119 is an acrostic poem on a grand scale. It is divided into 8-verse stanzas. The eight lines in each stanza all begin with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Verses 81–88 begin with the Hebrew letter כ, equivalent to English “k”; verses 89–96 begin with the Hebrew letter ל, equivalent to English “l”; and verses 97–104 begin with מ, equivalent to “m.”

- (כ) 81 כָּלִיתָה לַתְּשׁוּעָתֶךָ נַפְשִׁי לְדַבְרֶךָ יִחְלָתִי:
 82 כָּלוּ עֵינַי לְאִמְרֹתֶיךָ לְאֵמֹר מִתִּי תִנְחַמְנִי:
 83 כִּי־הֵייתִי כְּנֹאד בְּקִיטּוֹר חֲקִיךָ לֹא שָׁכַחְתִּי:
 84 כַּמָּה יְמֵי־עֲבֹדֶיךָ מִתִּי תַעֲשֶׂה בְּרֹדְפֵי מִשְׁפָּט:
 85 כְּרוּלֵי יַדִּים שִׁיחֹת אֲשֶׁר לֹא כִתְוֹרְתֶיךָ:
 86 כָּל־מִצְוֹתֶיךָ אֱמוּנָה שֶׁקֶר רֹדְפוּנִי עֲזַרְנִי:
 87 כַּמַּעַט כָּלוּנִי בְּאֶרֶץ אֲנִי לֹא־עֹזְבֹתִי פִקּוּדֶיךָ:
 88 כַּחֲסֻדֶךָ חַי נִי וְאַשְׁמְרָה עֲדוֹת פִּיךָ:
 (ל) 89 לְעוֹלָם יִהְיֶה דְבָרֶךָ נֶצֶב בַּשָּׁמַיִם:
 90 לְדָר וָדָר אֱמוּנָתֶךָ כֹּגֵן נֶת אֶרֶץ וְתַעֲמֹד:
 91 לְמִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ עֲמַדוֹ הַיּוֹם כִּי הַכֹּל עֲבָדֶיךָ:
 92 לוֹלֵל תּוֹרַתֶךָ שֶׁעָשִׂי אֲזִי אֲבָדְתִי בְּעֵנִי י:
 93 לְעוֹלָם לֹא־אֲשַׁכַּח פִּקּוּדֶיךָ כִּי בָם חִייתִנִּי:
 94 לֵךְ־אֲנִי הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי כִּי פִקּוּדֶיךָ דָּרְשֵׁתִי:
 95 לִי קִנּוּ רָשָׁעִים לְאִבְדָנִי עֲדֹתֶיךָ אֶתְבוֹנֶן וְ:

- 96 לְכֹל תִּכְלֶה רְאִיתִי קִץ רַחֲבָה מִצֹּתֶךָ מֵאֵד:
 (מ) 97 מִה־אֶתְּבִי תוֹרְתֶךָ כָּל־הַיּוֹם הִיא שִׁחָתִי:
 98 מֵאִיבֵי תַחֲכַמְנִי מִצֹּתֶךָ כִּי לְעוֹלָם הִיא־לִי:
 99 מִכָּל־מַלְמְדֵי הַשִּׁכְלָתִי כִּי עֵדוּתֶיךָ שִׁיחָה לִּי:
 100 מִזִּקְנִים אֶתְּבוֹנֶנְךָ כִּי פִקּוּדֶיךָ נִצְרָתִי:
 101 מִכָּל־אֶרֶח רַע כָּל־אֲתִי רִגְלִי לְמַעַן אֲשַׁמֵּר דְּבָרֶיךָ:
 102 מִמִּשְׁפָּטֶיךָ לֹא־סָרְתִי כִּי־אֲתָה הוֹרַתְנִי:
 103 מִה־נִּמְלָצוּ לְחַפֵּי אִמְרֹתֶיךָ מִדְּבַשׁ לִפִּי:
 104 מִפִּקּוּדֶיךָ אֶתְּבוֹנֶנְךָ עַל־כֵּן שָׁנֵאתִי | כָּל־אֶרֶח שִׁקְרָה:

Acrostics were challenging, and, I think, fun compositions for the gifted poets of the Hebrew scriptures. Acrostic compositions most likely began as a “memory device,” a method of prompting the speaker in the oral recitation of the psalm. As we see in Psalm 119, the structure became quite sophisticated and stylized as time went by.

The acrostic form was also used to indicate that the psalm writer has said all there is to say on a given subject, having summed it up “from א to טו,” “from A to Z.” The acrostic Psalm 145 is a good example. It begins with the words, in its א line:

(א) I will extol you, my God and King,
 and bless your name forever and ever. (145:1)

The psalm then goes on, in its acrostic lines, to call upon Israel and all creation to extol God and to bless God’s name, to summarize—from א to טו—all that readers and hearers need to know about remembering who God is and praising God for who God is.

And so we begin with poetry—elevated, rhythmic, evocative language spoken by humans to their creator God. In the carefully and artistically crafted parallel lines of that poetry, we read words of praise, of despair, of hope, of vengeance, and of wonder. How were the words shaped? Where did they come from? That is the subject of the next chapter.

