NON-ACROSTIC ALPHABETIC PSALMS

DAVID NOEL FREEDMAN AND DAVID MIANO

STRUCTURE OF THE ALPHABETIC PSALMS

One of the sad consequences of the long transmission of the Hebrew text is the loss of the original stichometry of its songs and poems. That much of the Bible’s poetry was copied as if it were prose has resulted in the obscuration of the original arrangement of poetic lines. This has given analysts much over which to ruminate. Of all the types of poems in the Hebrew Bible, the alphabetic acrostic has a structure that is easiest to determine.\(^1\) Because the lines of these poems are organized and arranged by means of the normal sequence of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet, students can determine line and stanza length with a considerable degree of objectivity and accuracy. Although various methods of measuring quantity in line length are employed by scholars today, we find that no matter what system is used, there is variation in line and stanza length among the poems of this type. The basic pattern is a poem of 22 lines or bicolons with an average syllable count of 8 in each colon \((8 + 8 = 16\ \text{syllables per bicolon})\) and 3 or 4 stresses per colon \((3 + 3 = 6\ \text{stresses, or} 4 + 4 = 8\ \text{stresses, per bicolon})\), if we use the usual \((\text{Ley-Budde-Sievers})\) method of counting stresses.\(^2\) However, the majority of the alphabetic acrostics in the Hebrew Bible deviates from this norm, exhibiting variations, adaptations, and elaborations of the basic structure. Some poems follow a 9-syllable/3- or 4-stress design, while others follow a 10-syllable/4-stress design. While some researchers prefer to emend the text so as to make these poems conform to the “ideal” paradigm, careful study has shown that such deviations are intentional and that the poets were not content to follow the simplest pattern so strictly.\(^3\)

Alphabetic poems may be divided into the following classes:

---


1. **Standard Alphabetic:** 22 lines (bicolons) of approximately 16 syllables each (8 per colon); no examples from the Bible are perfect, but the following fit into this class while exhibiting some acceptable deviations: Proverbs 31 (contains one tricolon), Psalms 25 and 34 (omit the waw line and add a pe line at the end; the former also contains two tricolons) and Psalm 145 (contains one tricolon and averages 18 syllables per bicolon instead of 16).

2. **Half-line Alphabetic:** 22 lines (colons) of approximately 8 syllables each (1 colon per letter of the alphabet); for example, Psalms 111 and 112.

3. **Double-line Alphabetic:** 22 stanzas (tetracolons) of approximately 32 syllables each (8 per colon); no examples from the Bible correspond perfectly, but Psalm 37 fits into this class while exhibiting some acceptable deviations (it contains one bicolon and one hexa­colon, which end up evening each other out).

4. **Qina Alphabetic:** 22 lines (bicolons) of approximately 13 syllables each (8 in the first colon, 5 in the second). Conceptually speaking, this derives from the standard form, except that the final stress in the second colon and its corresponding unstressed syllables are purposely omitted. The result is an unbalanced rhythm, for example, Lamentations 1–4.

Psalm 119, the greatest of all alphabetic acrostics, stands by itself, as it is made up of 22 stanzas, each consisting of eight standard bicolons.\(^4\)

In the past, attention has been drawn to the fact that other poems of a non-acrostic nature conform to the structure of the alphabetic acrostic.\(^5\) Some poems from this group include Lamentations 5, Psalms 33 and 94, and several examples from the Book of Proverbs (especially from chaps. 1–9, such as 2, 5, 8:1–11, 12–21, 22–31, 32–36 and 9:1–18). All of them build on the basic 22-line foundation, but the

---
