SHORT NOTES

NUMERICAL DEVICES IN BIBLICAL POETRY

It may be safely assumed that not all the poetic techniques, ornaments and devices that were employed in the poetry of the Bible are known to us today. Poetic ornaments and devices that are no longer in use today might escape the eyes (or the ears) of a modern reader, and even those of the experienced biblical scholar, through unawareness of the very possibility of their existence. In this note I wish to point out a biblical literary device which, as far as I know, has not yet been treated comprehensively and systematically by biblical scholars, though it has been mentioned here and there, namely, numerical structure.

The ancients were sensitive to numbers and measures and their relationships. From Plato onwards, measure, proportion and harmony were considered the main constituents of beauty. The view held was that beauty is a question of order and that order in its turn is a question of numerical ratios or proportions. The world was made in number, weight, and measure, all of which are qualities of a good poem.

In the foreword to the book *Silent Poetry: Essays in Numerological Analysis* the editor, Alastair Fowler, says the following about the nature of numerological criticism:

Numerological criticism analyses literary structures of various kinds, ordered by numerical symmetries or expressing number symbolisms. In poetry, numerological structure often forms a level of organization intermediate in scale and externality between metrical patterns on the one hand and structure as ordinarily understood on the other. As such, it constitutes a huge subject, perhaps even larger than most medieval and Renaissance scholars working today have begun to realize. It is probably no exaggeration to say that most good literary works—indeed, most craftmanlike works—were organized at this stratum from antiquity until the eighteenth century at least. Moreover, numerological criticism is potentially a more fruitful subject than large-scale prosody, since it has more bearing on meaning, thematic content, structure and other adjacent strata.

In the following remarks I shall try to demonstrate that in some of the Psalms the Psalmist uses numerological devices in order to emphasize a phrase which is of central importance.

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In the late middle ages and in the Renaissance, the mystics' preoccupation with number symbolism occasionally produced bizarre and absurd conclusions, as can be seen from Maren-Sophie Røstvig's article in the book mentioned above. Cassiodorus, for instance, who wrote a scholarly commentary on the Psalms, was sure that there was complete agreement between the theme of a psalm and the symbolism or its ordinal number (p. 41). The medieval and Renaissance theologians' exaggerated and irrational perceptions of number symbolism have led to a reaction of complete contempt for anything connected with numerology. This attitude, however, is no less mistaken than the previous one. As is demonstrated in some of the articles in Silent Poetry, renowned poets such as Edmund Spenser, John Milton, Geoffrey Chaucer and others, organized some of their compositions along numerical principles, for instance by putting a symbolic action or a symbolic object at the numerical centre of a chapter (p. 147). The study of numerological devices could make an important contribution to the analysis of literary structure in biblical poetry.

I shall now turn to some examples of how numerological techniques are used in some of the psalms. One numerological technique is to emphasize a sentence which is of central importance by placing it in the numerical centre of the psalm, i.e., the beginning of that central sentence is a certain number of words from the opening of the psalm, while the end of the sentence is the same number of words from the end of the psalm. I shall illustrate this by means of four examples:

1. In Ps. xxiii ("The Lord is my shepherd") the central expression is "for you are with me" (ki-'atta ʾimmādi, v. 4). This expression begins 26 words after the beginning of the psalm and ends the same number of words, 26, from the end of the psalm. In this way the poet emphasizes the central idea of the psalm, i.e. that the close feeling of God's presence is his highest wish. In the original Hebrew this expression ki-'attā ʾimmādi contains three words only, with the word "you" in the middle; thus the pronoun designating God is in the centre of the central expression. Incidentally, the expression "for you are with me" is part of v. 4, which is the central verse and the peak of this psalm. Its centrality is also demonstrated by its being the longest verse in this psalm—it contains 15 words. In other psalms the central verse sometimes stands out as the shortest verse, as in the next example to be dealt with.