Evil and the Disruption of Order: A Structural Analysis of the Acrostics in the First Book of Psalms

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Abstract

The four alphabetic acrostics in the first book of Psalms (9/10, 25, 34, and 37) are all missing verses beginning with certain letters of the alphabet and have other anomalies as well. Most scholars attribute these problems to errors in transmission and try to solve them through textual emendation. We argue that these disruptions are an original feature of these psalms and are placed purposefully as part of a sophisticated literary structure.
Mitchell First compares ancient abecedaries to the Book of Psalms for a new perspective on letter order in the ancient Hebrew alphabet. The likely original pe/ayin order in chapter 34 makes us suspect that the three other acrostics in the first book (= the same collection) might also have been composed with the pe/ayin order. Although this cannot yet be proven, there are strong arguments to support this. For example, in the acrostic that spans chapters 9 and 10, it is fairly clear that our text is corrupt, since the acrostic only includes 15 of the 22 letters. But many scholars believe that the words וּוחַפ/pe (verse 10:7, second word) and וּיַשָּׁב/ayin (verse 10:8, third to last word) were once the first words of pe and ayin verse Chapter 1 analyzes the phenomenon of alphabetic acrostic psalms. Freedman attempts to show that the eight acrostic psalms (Pss 9/10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, and 145) are structured and arranged in an intentional way such that each psalm is paired with another and the structure of the group leads to a conclusion or quantitative summation in Ps 119. Chapters 2 and 3 are the heart of the book and provide the structural analysis for Ps 119. Chapter 2 focuses on the form and occurrence of the eight key words-tord and its seven synonyms. Chapter 3 shifts the focus to the meter of the psalm. Freedman begins with the famous statement by Eusebius that the Song of Moses (Dent 32) and Ps 119 are in heroic meter consisting of hexameters with sixteen syllables.