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ALPHABETIC ACROSTICS: perhaps the form can be represented

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The possibility of reproducing in translation the acrostic form of Hebrew poems has generally been summarily dismissed. In this article I want to raise the question of whether this should be so.

The alphabetic acrostic

The basic characteristic of an alphabetic acrostic poem in biblical Hebrew is that its lines are arranged in alphabetical order. A more technical and accurate definition is:

- (1) The initial letters of the successive sections or units must follow the sequence of the letters of the alphabet.
- (2) The lines, or units, which are opened by the letters of the alphabet, are of approximately the same length.

(This definition is given by Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, in the "Word Biblical Commentary" series, page 128.)

In this article I will focus mainly on the first, and most important, part of the definition. However the translation of an acrostic poem should reflect the second part of the definition as much as possible.

The most complete alphabetic acrostics in the Hebrew Scriptures are: Psalms 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145; Proverbs 31.10-31; and Lamentations 1-4. There may be one line per letter as in Proverbs 31.10-31, several lines per letter as in Psalm 119, or an intermediate scheme such as in Lamentations 1 where each line in alphabetical sequence is followed by two or three supporting lines not necessarily beginning with the same letter.

Some of the Hebrew acrostics in our scriptures may have been composed to be used as a literacy tool which would enable students to consider the ABC's of their salvation history while learning to read and write. Many could also have been used in public worship; their structure would certainly make it easy for them to be memorized for communal recitation. Others such as Psalm 119 may have been part of a literary collection primarily intended to be read and reflected upon outside of the worship situation.

A key function of the acrostic A-Z (א-ת) form was probably to show **completeness** or **totality** in a form that can be seen. Norman Gottwald, in his discussion of the acrostics in Lamentations (*Studies in the Book of Lamentations*, page 29), suggests that there was a belief that:

"...in naming the whole alphabet one comes as close as man may to a total development of any theme or the complete expression of any emotion or belief. If the subject is to be exhausted, the alphabet alone can suffice to suggest and symbolize the totality striven after."

That is, given Psalm 111's topic "Praise YHWH", the form itself suggests that for everything – from A to Z – the LORD is to be praised; and given Psalm 119's topic "*torah*", the acrostic form suggests that in every respect – from א-ת – the instruction and law of YHWH is good.

Translating an acrostic poem

When we try to reproduce the form of an acrostic poem, some translational problems may arise more frequently or be more acute than they would in other passages. But solutions to these problems may be found in basically the same way as in dealing with any other text, regardless of what type of text it is.

I would add here that though unusual stylistic patterns should be limited as much as possible, their occasional necessity is not a sufficient reason for giving up the attempt to represent the acrostic form. The use of the acrostic form occasionally resulted in awkward, unusual, or ambiguous forms and reduced clarity of meaning in the Hebrew poetry as well.

In the next sections I will refer to some of the problems and illustrate them from my acrostic translation of Psalm 111 (see page 211). That translation closely follows the NRSV wording and interpretation, to make it easier to see the problems involved in working under the constraints imposed by following the Hebrew text's basic form. This means that for the purpose of this article we will proceed as if the NRSV offers the best possible representation of the meaning of the Psalm and judge the style and faithfulness of the acrostic translation in terms of it.

The number of lines

The fact that Hebrew has twenty-two letters in its alphabet while English has twenty-six poses an obvious problem: how do we make up for the differences in lines? The Knox translation, the only English Bible translation of this century to represent the form of all the major acrostics, handled the discrepancy by omitting four letters in the alphabetic sequence of the English translation. The last three letters of the alphabet are almost always omitted; the fourth letter omitted is either J, K, Q, V, or W, all of which are similar to the last three letters in their low frequency of occurrence.

The other way to handle the discrepancy is to subdivide some of the Hebrew lines so that, as each letter of the source language is represented in alphabetical order, so too is each letter of the translator's language. This approach, which I have followed in my translation of Psalm 111, has the advantage of reflecting the Hebrew's normal use of the **whole** alphabet.

Some languages may have fewer letters in their alphabet than the Hebrew. In this case it may be possible to combine lines of the Hebrew, or choose certain lines not to be part of the alphabetic scheme and indent them. The most difficult situation is probably with languages which have some letters in their alphabets that never begin a word; but it may be possible to handle these letters in a manner parallel to the use of the letters Q and X in my translation of Psalm 111.

It would certainly not be legitimate to add a line with new content or to omit some parts of the original for the sake of the alphabetic scheme. The control of lines is for formal purposes and should have the most minimal effect possible on the meaning and the way it is presented in the poem. My acrostic translation adds lines in verses 8-10 but attempts to remain faithful to the content of the source text overall. The following paragraphs contain discussion of these as well as other parts of the text.

Some of the lines in my acrostic translation begin with rather mundane words such as "Beside" (verse 1), "He" (verse 6a), and "To," (verse 9).

But this is a feature of the Hebrew acrostics too, in which lines may begin with prepositions, verbal person markers, or conjunctions. In Psalm 119, for example, the eight lines for the sixth letter of the alphabet all begin with the single letter particle often translated as “and”; of course the writer did not have much choice since the number of words begun by this letter in Hebrew were fewer by far than those begun by the letter Z in English.

Changes in the order of lines

Without the freedom of changing the source text’s order of lines, a satisfactory translation would be terribly difficult and probably unduly strained. But, of course, the translator is always changing the order of clause units and frequently the order of sentences. As hyphenated verse references in the TEV suggest (see, for instance, 1 Sam 1.9-10; 1 Kgs 1.5-6; Isa 33.22-23), reordering of units at the paragraph level may also occur, though considerably less frequently.

In my acrostic translation, the order of lines in verses 2 and 3 has been changed but the relationship between ideas is the same. The lines of verses 4-7a have been more extensively reordered; however the effect on the relationship between ideas is minimal, and the treatment of this group of lines as a sub-unit of the poem has support from commentators (Allen, for instance, *Psalms 101-150*, pages 88, 91).

The clear-cut alphabetical organization of the poem as a whole does not rule out the existence of levels of organization lower than the whole poem but higher than the individual line. Translators should check with the discussion of an acrostic poem’s substructures in the commentaries, to make sure that a proposed rearrangement of lines does not seriously interfere with the cohesion of such smaller sections of text. It would be unfortunate, for example, if the lines beginning and ending Psalm 111 were displaced, since their references to praise of the LORD suggest that the reciter should begin, continue, and end the psalm in praise – that praise provides the fundamental framework of the psalm.

Though line-order changes have been made, I followed the order of the Hebrew source text for sixteen of its twenty-two acrostically-arranged lines. And while the position of verses 5 and 6 has changed, the two lines within each of these verses are ordered as in the source text.

Focus and shades of meaning

The way in which meaning is presented in the poem should be kept, but changes in focus and shades of meaning are probably inevitable – though the translator should make every effort to keep these changes to a minimum. And while the structure of the translated acrostic should appear simple, the sense should not ever be silly or contorted.

Reflecting the Hebrew, my acrostic translation contains no unusual or strange uses of vocabulary items. However there are some of the inevitable changes to note.

In verse 8 of my translation, “ordained” is used rather than “established” and this adds a legal sense. However since “precepts” are the object of God’s sustaining action, this addition seems acceptable.

In verse 9 the translation adds two lines by dividing in two the first and third lines of the source text. As a result of this the references to “sent”

and “venerable” are more prominent. Still, nothing is added to the source text’s overall meaning.

In verse 7b a positive statement in the Hebrew is translated with a negative, and the first part of verse 9 translates an active sentence as a passive. But again the translation in these instances remains faithful to the meaning of the original. Further, we know that such transformations are commonly made by translators, regardless of the type of literature they are working with.

The changes made in verse 10 are more problematic. The last line of the source text is represented by two lines in my acrostic translation which, for the sake of completing the acrostic, adds a reference to “zeal”. It also transforms the source text’s third person statement into a vocative, changing the Hebrew reference to “praise” from a noun to a verb in the first person and the pronoun “his” modifying “praise” in the source text to “You, O LORD”.

The added reference to zeal is consistent, on a general level, with the poem’s mood of praise, and in particular with the Hebrew reference to a praise that will last forever. However an expansion such as this should be made only as a last resort, and a more literal rendering should probably be given in a footnote.

The switch from talking **about** the LORD to talking **to** the LORD frequently occurs in the Psalms and offers a fitting rhetorical climax to this particular Psalm. It is also consistent with the element of direct address present in the Septuagint’s (but absent in the Hebrew’s) rendering of the initial line of the poem, “I will praise **you**, Lord, with my whole heart,” as well as with the use of the first person by both versions in that line. The content is affected little, if at all, by these rhetorical changes.

A Translation of Psalm 111

In the two-column setting out of the Psalm, the translation on the left reflects the acrostic form of Psalm 111. The twenty-three lines of the NRSV translation on the right correspond to the number of lines in the Hebrew poem: the first line “Praise the Lord” leads into the next twenty-two lines corresponding to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Since no appropriate words beginning with the letters Q or X in English could be used that would correspond to references in the source text at the appropriate place, words were used that contained the letters **near** the beginning of them.

Psalm 111*Acrostic form*

NRSV

1 Praise the Lord!

1 Praise the Lord!

All my heart praises the Lord,
Beside the upright, in the
congregation.

I will give thanks to the Lord
with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright,
in the congregation.

2 Contemplated by those delighting
in them, the

2 Great are the words of the Lord,
studied by all who delight in them.

Deeds of the Lord are great.

3 Full of honor and majesty
is his work,
and his righteousness endures
forever.

3 Everlasting is his righteousness;
Full of honor and majesty is
his work.

4- Gracious and merciful is

4 He has gained renown by his
wonderful deeds;
the Lord is gracious and
merciful.

7a the Lord. (4b)

He has shown his people the power
of his work (6a)

In giving them the heritage
of the nations. (6b)

5 He provides food for those
who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

Just and faithful are the works
of his hand. (7a)

Known by his wonderful deeds, (4a)
the

6 He has shown his people the
power of his works,
in giving them the heritage
of the nations.

Lord provides food for those who
fear him, (5a)

Mindful, always, of his
covenant. (5b)

7 The works of his hands are
faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.

7b None of his precepts can fail,

8 Ordained forever and ever,
Performed with

8 They are established forever
and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness
and uprightness.

eQuity and faithfulness.

9 Redemption for his people was
Sent by the Lord.

9 He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant
forever.

To be kept forever is his covenant.
Untarnished is his name and
Venerable.

Holy and awesome is his name.

10 Wisdom begins with fear of the Lord.

eXcellent understanding marks all
who practice it.

10 The fear of the Lord is the
beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have
a good understanding.

You, O Lord, will be praised with a
Zeal that lasts forever.

His praise endures forever.

Conclusion

Certainly the translation I have proposed in this article could be improved upon in both style and content. But it comes close enough to representing the form as well as the content of the Psalm, avoiding stylistic travesties and maintaining faithfulness, to suggest that a satisfactory representation of the acrostic form can be made.

It seems that well-translated acrostics could be used today as they were long ago: in joyful worship, in religious and literacy instruction, and in personal or small-group study and reflection. Even if not all the Scripture's

acrostics can be happily translated, some might be translated for Scripture portions, to be used, for example, in Sunday Schools or even as the scripts for Scripture songs. Translators may find that they can translate some acrostics well enough to include them in their Bible translation but not others. In this case, those not reflecting the form could have a footnote such as "The Hebrew poem is written in acrostic form as represented in the translation of Psalm 111". The readers would at least have some examples of this form, and their appreciation for Old Testament literature could be all the more enriched.

Since I first wrote this article, one recent translation which has reproduced the acrostic form of a passage has been brought to my attention. This is the Bible in Tok Pisin which is in use in Papua New Guinea, in which Proverbs 31.10-31 appears as an acrostic. Starting from verse 10 each verse begins with one of the 22 letters in the Tok Pisin alphabet, continuing with the letters in their correct order to verse 31. A translation of the footnote to this passage is:

"One of the ways the Israelites followed in writing was a bit different. In the Hebrew alphabet there are 22 letters. Well sometimes they used to divide the talk that they wanted to write into 22 parts, and each part had to start with a different letter. When people translate Hebrew into other languages, they are not able to follow this custom in the translation. But Tok Pisin has 22 letters in its alphabet, the same number as in Hebrew. So in just this one passage in the Bible, we (translators) have followed this custom and reproduced it (the form of the Hebrew), so that you can see how it goes.

"If you look carefully at this section 'What a good wife/woman does' you will see that it has 22 parts. The first letter of the first part (verse 10) is the letter A, and for the second part (verse 11) it is the letter B, and so on to part 22 which is verse 31. The first letter of verse 31 is the letter Y, which is the last letter in Tok Pisin. In Hebrew this custom is not found only in this passage. No. They followed this custom in writing Lamentations 1-4 and Psalms 9-10 and 25 and 34 and 37 and 111 and 112 and 119 and 145."

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GOD AS RESPECTED "ELDER" OR CLOSE "FRIEND"?

Use of honorific versus familiar forms for the Deity

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It was one of those "no win" situations. The meeting of the executive committee was rather tense. It had been called especially to air a crucial controversy that threatened to split a joint Bible translation project in Central Africa – a project which had been quite harmonious up to this time.

Those supporting each of the two opposing sides in the controversy were able to bring strong arguments in favor of their position. The trouble