

CHIASTIC PSALMS: A STUDY IN THE MECHANICS OF SEMITIC POETRY IN PSALMS 1-50

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All students of Bible poetry are familiar with the device of parallelism. Fewer are aware of the device of chiasmus in single verses. Almost nothing is being written on the matter of whole Psalms being in chiasmic arrangement.¹

The study of chiasmus is not new. Lund, in his book on New Testament Chiasmus,² as well as in an article on Old Testament chiasmus, wrote an extensive history of the matter which is capsulized here.

In *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, published at Tübingen in 1742, J. A. Bengel calls attention to the presence of chiasms in a few passages of the New Testament and makes use of the principle for purposes for interpretation. . . . John Jebb, Bishop of Limerick, wrote a book called *Sacred Literature* in 1820 in which he continues the work of Bishop Lowth in the study of Hebrew parallelism. . . . *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum Praelectiones Academicæ* (Oxford 1753). Jebb's work was continued by Rev. Thomas Boys, M.A., of Trinity College, Cambridge, and curate of St. Dunstons in the West, in a small, but well written book entitled *Key to the Book of Psalms*, printed by L. B. Seely & Sons, Fleet Street (London, 1825).

This work of Boys contained only sixteen psalms. A later edition was put out by Bullinger.

In 1854 there appeared a book entitled *The Symmetrical Structure of Scripture, of the Principles of Scripture Parallelism Exemplified in an Analysis of the Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount, and Other Passages of the Sacred Writings*, by Rev. John Forbes, LL.D., Donaldson's Hospital, Edinburgh, published by T. & T. Clark. The author frankly avows his indebtedness to Jebb and Boys. . . . The most recent and also most extensive attempt to employ Jebb's "introverted parallelism" in biblical studies is found in *The Companion Bible* issued by the Oxford University Press and edited by the above-mentioned Dr. E. W. Bullinger.³

1. Meredith Kline, one of my teachers, first brought this whole matter to my attention as, in a class in poetry, he outlined the chiasmi of Psalms 1, 2, and 110.
2. Nils Wilhelm Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1942).
3. N. W. Lund, "The Presence of Chiasmus in the O.T.," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, XLVI (1930), p. 104ff.

The Companion Bible of 1914 undoubtedly reached the apex of abuse of this principle. There Bullinger sees a chiasitic structure (called inversion) not only in phrases, verses, stanzas, and chapters but in entire books and even the whole Bible!

A simple maxim might be: The more detailed the chiasitic structure thrust upon the literature the more vulnerable it is to criticism. So C. F. Kraft is almost uncharitable with Müller, Möller, and Lund while he himself assumes great freedom with the text.⁴ He adds, deletes and alters verses to make them fit his own strophic structure, which is not chiasitic.

This essay is devoted to the examination of Psalms 1-50 with a view to discovering those that are chiasitically arranged. I have found twenty-one that are more or less in this category. This study has nothing to do with types or families of Psalms (e.g., royal, confessional, praise, imprecatory, etc.), which has been a popular specialty in recent generations. It is purely a matter of the mechanics of poetry.

The noun *chiasmus* is from the Greek word *chiazein* meaning to place crosswise or in the shape of the letter *Chi* (X). *Chiasmi* is the plural of the noun and *chiasitic* is the adjective. In poetry the word normally describes the inversion of the order of words in two corresponding parallel phrases, clauses, or *stichoi*. Examples of this abound in all parts of the Old Testament, including the narrative sections.

Judges 20:26a in Hebrew is an illustration. Literally it reads, "And went up all the children of Israel and all the people went to..." Set up in poetic structure Amos 6:8b has

...I abhor
the excellency of Jacob
and his palaces
I hate...

Proverbs 24:20 has the chiasmus preserved in some English translations (KJV, ASV).

For there shall be no
reward to the evil man;
the candle of the wicked
shall be put out.

All of the above can be diagrammed like this: A B B A. Some verses have three elements corresponding to an A B C — C B A outline. Job 20:6 in Hebrew illustrates this:

Though mounts up
to the heavens
his height

4. Charles Franklin Kraft, *The Strophic Structure of Hebrew Poetry as Illustrated in the First Book of the Psalter* (1938). Also see Kraft, "Some Further Observations Concerning the Strophic Structure of Hebrew Poetry," *A Stubborn Faith... W. A. Irwin* (1956), pp. 62-89.

and his head
to the cloud
reaches.

Some patterns are more complicated, such as A B C — C A B or A B C — B C A. This latter is found in Isaiah 41:9a.

I took you
from the ends
of the earth
and from the corners
of it
I called you.

This could be diagrammed differently to show a purer chiasmus.

A
B¹
B²
B¹
B²
A

It is to this method that I must occasionally resort to show a Psalm is chiastically arranged, for there are pure synonymous parallels within various elements of the chiasmus. Undoubtedly the reader will consider some of the outlines somewhat forced—and they may be. But to bring the matter to the attention and appreciation of Bible students, I take some risks.

Let us turn to those psalms which are arranged chiastically in their entirety. As a pilot model, consider Psalm 8. The elements of a chiasmic pattern jump out at the reader. He notices that verses 1a and 9 are identical. Although one might say it is a repetition of the chorus, a pursuit of the question reveals that the psalm falls rather effortlessly into a full-orbed chiasmic pattern. I offer this outline for Psalm 8 based, I repeat, on the poetical structure.

1 A Benediction.
2-3 B God's rule.
4 C Man's meanness.
5 C Man's greatness.
6-8 B Man's rule.
9 A Benediction.

In this instance verses 1 and 9 are pure, synonymous parallelism. Verses 2-3 coupled with verses 6-8 and verse 4 coupled with verse 5 are varieties of combination parallelism. In verses 4 and 5 man is the focus of attention and that would make those verses synonymous, but they are antithetical in that verse 4 speaks of man's insignificance and finitude while verse 5 declares his value in God's sight. Apart from the general tenor of similarity between the B elements of the Psalm, notice *Thy heavens* in verse 3 and the *birds of the heavens* in verse 8.

In their regular order let us consider those Psalms found to have some sort of chiasmus characterizing their whole structure. These that I present were worked out without any consultation except where noted. Some similarities do and must appear with those who have worked on this matter before, and yet there are instances of what seem to be altogether new chiasmic outlines.

PSALM 1

- 1 A¹ The blessed man stands not with the wicked.
- 2 A² The blessed man chooses God's law.
- 3 B Green tree illustrates righteous man.
- 4 B Brown chaff illustrates wicked man.
- 5 A¹ The wicked man stands not with the righteous.
- 6 A² God chooses the righteous man.

Although *blessed* doesn't find its counterpart until the end of Psalm 2 (which fact, along with some other identical key words such as *meditate*, has led some to consider these first two Psalms a pair), there are other key words that tie the two halves together. *Stand* ('amaḏ) in verse 1 and verse 5 (qûm) is used in the former verse of the righteous and in the latter of the wicked. The LORD (yhwh) is mentioned in verses 2 and 6. The *wicked* (re'sa'im) occurs in verses 1 and 6. *Way* (dereḵ) is found in verses 1 and 6 also.

PSALM 2

- 1 A¹ Heathen rage.
- 2-3 A² Acts of disobedience.
- 4-5 B¹ God judges.
- 6 B² God sets Son.
- 7 B² Son quotes God.
- 8-9 B¹ Son judges.
- 10 A¹ Heathen learn.
- 11-12 A² Acts of obedience.

Everyone sees in this psalm four strophes of three verses each. It cannot be denied. Furthermore, this psalm has unduly suffered from textual surgeons. A simpler chiasmus is also available to the casual observer. Less complicated than the chiasmus above, it is obvious that the heathen are the subjects of the first and fourth strophes and that the deity is the subject of the two middle strophes.

Yet I present the outline which is most complete and still within the laws of sobriety and conservatism. As with Psalm 1, there are both the alternation of ideas and the repetition of key words to indicate that this structure was more than mere accident or coincidence.

In verse 2 there are the *kings of the earth* while in verse 10 are the *kings...and judges of the earth*. In verse 2 they are *against* ('al) *the LORD* whereas in verse 11 they are urged to serve the LORD. Also, there may be some word play in these two opposing, yet complementary sections. *Bonds* (moserôṭ) of verse 3 is from the same root (ysr) as *be instructed* (hiwwas'ru) in verse 10. There are possible alliterations and assonations

in these four following words: *let us break* (n^enatt^eqah) and *let us cast* (nashlikah) of verse 3 and *be wise* (nashkilu) and *kiss* (nashshequ) of verses 10 and 12 respectively.

Verses 6 and 7 are the only ones with the first common singular pronoun in them. The *I have set* of verse 6 answers to the *I have begotten* of verse 7.

On the other hand, there are other sets of synonymously and antithetically parallel words which tie the psalm together; although not chiasmically. The *nations* of verse 1 occurs again in verse 8. *Wrath* is found in verses 5 and 12 and, as we know only too well, *son* is in verses 7 (ben) and 12 (bar).

PSALM 4

- 1 A Prayer.
- 2 B Enemies.
- 3-5 C Exhortation to service.
- 6 B Enemies.
- 7-8 A Prayer.

Psalm 4 is typical of many smaller ones in the first book. This one is more balanced than most and it well illustrates chiasmus. Again, note the similarity in the various parts of the Psalm. Both *enemy* verses⁵ 2 and 6 or 3 and 7 in Hebrew, have questions as their basis. In verse 2 the psalmist asks the question of the heathen and in verse 6 it is the unbeliever who directs the question to the saint.

The three middle verses have a total of seven imperatives (counting the one prohibition) and thus they form a unit.

Lastly, there is a contrast between the prayer (verse 1) and the praise (verses 7-8). At the beginning of the psalm the writer was *in distress*, but at the end he is *in peace*.

PSALM 7

- 1-2 A Testimony and prayer.
- 3-7 B Self vindication.
- 8 C The LORD is my judge.
- 9a D Wicked die.
- 9b D Righteous saved.
- 10-11 C The LORD is my judge.
- 12-16 B Wicked self-condemnation.
- 17 A Testimony and praise.

As the outline for this psalm indicates, the elements of chiasmus are not evenly balanced. It is this kind of thing that discourages those who look at the subject at hand from a background of strict strophic and metric structure. Three solutions are available to such investigators: Reject the

5. In the Hebrew Bible many verse numbers are off by one digit because the title is called verse 1. That is the case in this psalm and in several of the psalms dealt with in this paper. The text uses only the versification of the English Bible.

whole idea, emend the text to make it fit your "chiastic bed," or recognize the flexibility of the chiastic structure. I repeat that this is not a tool for exegesis but simply a way of understanding the Semitic poetic process.

Although the LORD's name (Yhwh) is found throughout the psalm (e.g., verses 3, 6, and 8) it is interesting that His title is both the first and the last word.

The clue for beginning the B sections is the word *if* ('im). The section verses 12-16 has some uncertainties in it, but I have joined with those interpreters who understand it all the way through as the wicked man.

Verses 8, 10, and 11 are united by the various forms of *judge* and *righteous* (spt, šdq, ysr, din), although these ideas occur elsewhere in this psalm (e.g., verses 6, 9, and 17).

PSALM 9

- 1-2 A Praise.
- 3-6 B God judged the enemy.
- 7-10 C Testimony that God saves the righteous.
- 11 D Praise.
- 12-14 C Prayer that God will save the righteous.
- 15-18 B God judges the wicked.
- 19-20 A Prayer.

Longer psalms tend to be more difficult to outline. One reason for this is that they are often composed of several smaller segments only more or less related. Twenty verses is more than average for a chiastic psalm. Nevertheless, again there appears to be some forethought in the matter of the general outline.

At first glance it is evident that not all the parts weigh the same and that complementary sections have different numbers of verses in them. It is somewhat true here and will be more so later. But note that the number of *stichoi* in verses 7-10 equals those in verses 12-14.

Psalms 9 and 10 form an alphabetic acrostic. There are, however, several irregularities. Verses or phrases beginning with *daleth*, *mem*, *samekh*, and *tsadee* are missing, while *'ayin* and *pe* are in reverse order. No chiasmus is readily evident where the two psalms are taken together as a whole.

PSALM 11

- 1 A The Lord my refuge.
- 2-3a B Wicked punished.
- 3b C Righteous suffer.
- 4a D Lord in temple in heaven.
- 4b D Lord adjudicates everywhere.
- 5a C Righteous vindicated.
- 5b-6 B Wicked punished.
- 7 A Lord the righteous.

This little psalm is one of the neater ones in regard to a chiastic struc-

ture. My outline is very close to the one offered in *The Companion Bible*. One needs merely to underscore certain words in the text of his Bible to see how evident this structure is.

The LORD (Yhwh) is in the first and last verses. His name also appears twice in the middle verse, verse 4. Then it occurs once more in verse 5a which I have labeled "the righteous vindicated." *The wicked* (har^esa'im) is the key word to tie verses 2-3a and 5b-6 together. The *righteous* (ṣaddiq), then, are the focus of verses 3b and 5a. Verse 3 may have several translations, but the point in each is that the righteous need help—help which only God can give. He gives this help in verse 5 when He *tries* them and thus vindicates them.

PSALM 12

- 1 A Godly man ceases.
- 2 B They speak falsely.
- 3-4 C God condemns wicked.
- 5 C God vindicates righteous.
- 6-7 B God's words pure.
- 8 A Wicked walk on every side.

To my knowledge, this psalm has never been chiastically so outlined. It is somewhat antithetic inasmuch as the balancing elements are not pure, synonymous parallels but opposites. The verses called A say the opposite—the righteous are not but the wicked are. Verses under B contrast the false words of the wicked and the true words of the LORD. Then in the middle, verses 3-5, first we have God cursing the wicked and then vindicating the righteous. To outline the psalm in another, yet simpler, way one might offer:

- 1 A The godly
- 2-4 B The wicked
- 5-7 A The godly
- 8 B The wicked.

Because of the antithetical nature of the psalm, there are not so many identical key words found in the corresponding sections. However, notice that verses 1 and 8 end with the same phrase, *The children of men*. The word for *speak* (dibber) occurs twice in verse 2 (once more in verse 3), while a less common word for *words* appears twice in verse 6 ('im^aroṭ). While verses 2 and 3 and 4 are closely connected with the thought of speaking with flattering lips, verses 3 and 4 do contrast God's action toward those proud flatterers and His action toward the oppressed poor and the sighing needy.

Incidentally, verses 3 and 4 form a chiasmus themselves that is noteworthy. Observe the following order of words in both the English and Hebrew texts: LORD (Yhwh), *lips*, *tongue*, *tongue*, *lips*, and lord ('aḏon).

PSALM 19

- 1 A Nature's declaration.
- 2-6 B The very public word.
- 7-9 C The praise of the word.
- 10-13 B The very private word.
- 14 A Psalmist's declaration.

This psalm is a fine and favorite proof-text, first for natural revelation and then for special revelation. Everyone recognizes that verses 1-6 speak of God's word in the world at large, while verse 7 and following speak of His word inscripturated in the law. Not everyone is agreed on whether—or where—to make another break.

Coming to it with chiasmically-ground spectacles, I offer this not-too-balanced but not-too-forced outline. Verse 1 is introductory and speaks of God's revelation everywhere and in the most cosmic terms. Verse 19 balances it somewhat antithetically in that the psalmist prays that his private, personal, subjective declaration to God would also be acceptable. Verse 1 is followed by an elaboration of the original statement—the omnipresent evidence of God in the heavens and the earth. Whereas it is very public in verses 2-6, it is very private in verses 10-13. Not only is God's word everywhere out there, but it speaks to my most critical need to discover hidden things and tokens of pride. The central section, point C, verses 7-9, does not subdivide except into the six well-known parallel predications of God's word which are, in turn, described by six synonyms.

PSALM 21

- 1 A David exults in God.
- 2-7 B How God blesses David.
- 8-12 B How God curses enemies.
- 13 A David exalts God.

One might charge that this outline is too simple for this rather average-length psalm. The simple reason is that it is not a tightly structured psalm. It is, however, a psalm with a chiasmus in it, sketchy as it may be.

The tetragrammaton appears in the vocative position in the first and last verses as do the words, *in thy strength*. The two larger middle portions have no key words in common and we would not expect to find them, since they are antithetic parallels. The general tenor of verses 2-7 is positive while the tone of 8-12 is negative. In the former we have such beatific words as *blessings, good, life, glory, salvation, honor, majesty, trust, and lovingkindness*. In the latter part we find such cold and inhospitable terms as *enemies, hate, anger, wrath, destroy and evil*.

PSALM 25

- 1 A I lift up my soul unto thee.
- 2 B Let not shame.
- 3 C Treacherous shamed.
- 4-5a D Four petitions for guidance.
- 5b E My salvation.

5c	F I wait.
6	G ¹ God's mercy.
7	G ² God's goodness implored.
8-9	H God instructs meek.
10a	I God's faithfulness.
10b	I The Faithful.
11	J Pardon me.
12-13	H Instruction of God-fearers.
14-15	G ¹ God's friendship and covenant.
16a	G ² Have mercy.
16b	F I am desolate.
17a	E My troubles.
17b-19a	D Four petitions for salvation.
19b	C My enemies.
20	B Let not shame.
21	A I wait for thee.
22	J Redeem Israel.

This psalm is one of the longer and more elaborate chiasmi I am presenting. Even if the reader is unconvinced of some of the earlier presentations, and even though the critical may find some minor irregularities or what appears to be forced outlining, none can deny that there is something to this matter of chiasmus on the scale of the entire psalm. This is the psalm that H. Möller chose in his 1932 article, "Strophenbau der Psalmen."⁶

Before going into the chiasitic structure, there are a couple of other things about this psalm worth noting. It is an alphabetic psalm and almost perfectly regular. In the *beth* verse (2) the second word begins with *beth*, the first with *aleph*. Verse 5b which should begin with *waw* does not. Verse 18 should begin with *qoph* but does not; rather, there are two verses which begin with *resh* (18 and 19). Verse 22 is beyond the end of the alphabet (since verse 5 was to take two letters).

Then there is in this psalm what we often find in the writings of the apostle Paul: a certain concatenation of ideas. Many verses pick up from a word in the preceding verse and many of the verses in the Psalm are linked in this manner. Verses one and two are connected with first person singular testimonies: *I lift up . . . I have trusted*. Verses two and three are connected with the idea of *shame*. *Teach me* occurs in both verses 4 and 5. *Remember* appears in verses 6 and 7. In verse 7 we read of God's goodness

6. *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 50 (1932) pp. 240-256. His outline is simpler and goes as follows:

1	A
2-3	B
4-7	C
8-11	D
12-15	D
16-19	C
20-21	B
22	A

and then in 8 that He is good. The word *way* links 8 and 9. And so it goes.

Now, let us turn to the matter of the chiasmic outline. First, notice that verses 11 and 22 do not fit my scheme. There are similarities between these two verses: both have vocatives for the Deity, both are prayers in the imperative, both have the accusative intensified (*it is great* and *all his troubles*) and, whereas one is personal the other is national.

Even though verses 3 and 21 might be connected on the basis of the word *wait*, I have chosen to make smaller divisions and connect 2 and 20 on the basis of the exactly duplicated phrase, *Let me not be put to shame*. Verses 1 and 21 have *thee* as their subject. The *treacherous dealers* of verse 3 and *my haters* in verse 19 connect those two. Then, working downward from the top and upward from the bottom, note that verses 4 and 5 have four imperatives, as do verses 17b-19a. *Show, teach, guide* and *teach* balance *bring out, consider, forgive, and consider*.

Points E and F are antithetical. Whereas verse 5b speaks of *my salvation*, 17b says the opposite: *The troubles of my heart*. And whereas verse 5c is positive in that the psalmist testifies that he waits, verse 16b is negative, for there he confesses he is desolate. Both 6 and 16 have the word *mercy* in them, although they are translations of two different Hebrew words. Both *raḥam* and *ḥesed* are in verse 6, while *ḥānan* is in verse 16. Likewise, in points G we have but a loose parallel, namely, between *thy lovingkindness* and *thy goodness*, and *His friendship* and *His covenant*. The same holds true for I, where we have two of the same words: *lovingkindness* (*ḥesed*) and *covenant* (*berit*). These two notions are bolstered with *truth* and *testimonies*, respectively. *Instruct in the way* is the key word for coupling verses 8 and 9 with verses 12 and 13.

Undoubtedly there are many more facets of this fascinating psalm on which we could reflect, but let this suffice to substantiate the fact that this is a chiasmic psalm and that there was some forethought either on David's or the Holy Spirit's part, or both, in the matter of constructing this piece of literature.

PSALM 27

- | | | |
|-------|---|---------------------------|
| 1 | A | The LORD is my strength. |
| 2 | B | My adversaries. |
| 4 | C | I ask and I seek. |
| 5-6a | D | He will lift me up. |
| 6b-7 | E | Three positive petitions. |
| 8a | F | Seek my face. |
| 8b | F | Thy face I will seek. |
| 9 | E | Three negative petitions |
| 10 | D | The LORD will take me up. |
| 11 | C | Teach me, lead me. |
| 12-13 | B | My adversaries. |
| 14 | A | Be strong. |

Once more we have before us what is undeniably a chiastically arranged psalm. Whether we can credit the Semitic poetic genius which unconsciously does this or whether we should save our appreciation for the specific authors is uncertain. In other words, we are not sure just how hard they worked at this if they had to work at it at all. Good sermons do this to some extent, only we tend usually to the simple repetition of things in their original order rather than in reverse order. For us, with our Hellenistic orientation, it is easier, but for the oriental, logic plays but a minor role, while word pictures, paronomasia, and other devices are more important.⁷

Psalm 27 has some most notable and most noticeable features to the chiasmus. Different words for *strong* appear in the first and last verses (ma'oz and h̄azaq, respectively). In verses 2 and 12 is the identical word for *adversaries* (šāra). It does not occur elsewhere in the poem. Verses 4 and 11 have similar thrusts but do not use identical words. The same goes for the pair of verses 5-6a and 10. *He will lift me up* (yêrôm^emēnî), and *my head shall be lifted up* (yārûm) of the former, and *The LORD will take me up* (ya'as^epēnî) of the latter, use different words even though they look the same in English. Points E contain imperatives. In verses 6b-7 they are positive: *hear*, *have mercy*, and *answer*. In verse 9 they are negated with the particle 'al: *hide not*, *put not*, and *cast not*. Verse 8 is difficult because, to make it sensible, we must either add an explanatory clause or change the suffixes so that the apparent contrast in speakers is eliminated. In any event, this appears to be the apex of the psalm with the two occurrences of the word *seek*.

As in Psalm 25, there are several instances where verses are connected with preceding and succeeding ones by certain words. This one outstanding example will suffice: The words *thy face* are found in verses 8 and 9. The words *forsake me* are found in verses 9 and 10. The holy Name occurs in verses 10 and 11. Verses 11 and 12 are connected with the synonyms *my enemies* and *my adversaries*.

PSALM 29

- | | | |
|-------|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| 1-2 | A | Ascribe strength to God. |
| 3 | B ¹ | God's voice in thunder. |
| 4 | B ² | God's voice is powerful. |
| 5 | B ^{3a} | God's voice breaks wood. |
| 6 | B ^{3b} | God's voice makes like calves. |
| 7 | B ¹ | God's voice is lightning. |
| 8 | B ² | God's voice shakes. |
| 9a | B ^{3b} | God's voice makes calves. |
| 9b | B ^{3a} | God's voice breaks wood. |
| 10-11 | A | God gives strength. |

There are at least two other extensive treatments of this psalm.⁸ Both

7. Cf. e.g., Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

8. Lund, *Chiasmus in the N.T.*, p. 99f. Also, Kemper Fullerton, "The Strophe in Hebrew Poetry and Psalm 29," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, XLVII, pp. 274-90.

of them produce an outline which is much more regular than mine. The structure offered above is difficult to describe. It differs from most of the others in that there is a large, regularly paralleled section in the middle and chiasmus is basically evident in the fact that the first two and last two verses correspond, while in the center is a large section on the same theme. That theme is the voice of God, meaning, of course, a storm which illustrates His power. Only verse 6 does not have God's name in it. All the other verses have it twice except 7 and 9, which have it but once. Verses 3, 4, and 5 and 7, 8, and 9 all contain the phrase, *the voice of the LORD*. It is on this basis that Lund produced his A B C D C¹ B¹ A¹ scheme with D being verses 5 and 6.

Among the things ascribed to the LORD in verse 1 is *strength*. And it is *strength* that God gives His people in verse 11. The *voice of the LORD* is obviously thunder throughout this psalm, but it specifically says so in verse 3. Its companion verse is 7, which focuses on lightning. The cedars of Lebanon in verse 5 immediately attach themselves to the forests mentioned in verse 9b. Then the noun *calf* and the verb *calve* of verses 6 and 9a leap out at the English reader, yet they are different words in Hebrew (*calf* is 'egel and *calve* is ḥḏl). Incidentally, this is the word rendered *shake* in verse 8, only there it is in the Qal or Hiph'il whereas in 9 it is Polel.

PSALM 30

- | | | |
|-------|----------------|----------------------|
| 1 | A | Testimony of praise. |
| 2 | B ¹ | I cried. |
| 3 | B ² | No pit. |
| 4 | B ³ | Sing praise. |
| 5a | C | God's short anger. |
| 5b | D | His favor. |
| 6 | E | Testimony of praise. |
| 7a | D | "Thy favor." |
| 7b | C | God's hidden face. |
| 8 | B ¹ | I cried. |
| 9 | B ² | No pit. |
| 10 | B ³ | Hear O LORD. |
| 11-12 | A | Testimony of praise. |

There is nothing too extraordinary about this psalm whose chiasmic outline is presented above. Lund worked on this one, as well, but produced a different outline.⁹ His was made possible only by eliminating verses 6

9. *Ibid.*, p. 304.

- | | |
|----|----------------|
| 1 | A |
| 2 | B |
| 3 | A ¹ |
| 4 | A |
| 5 | B |
| 8 | C |
| 9 | D |
| 10 | C ¹ |
| 11 | B ¹ |
| 12 | A ¹ |

and 7 as an editorial gloss, which seems like an easy way to escape certain problems.

Following the usual pattern, notice certain key words repeated in their counterparts. The English reader might easily miss the connection between verses 1 and 11. But the verb *rejoice* is from the same root as the noun *gladness* (šmḥ). Hence, there is the contrast: my enemies will not be glad but I will be glad. The very first phrase of the Psalm is, *I will extol thee, O LORD*, while the last is *O LORD...I will give thanks unto thee for ever*.

The phrase *I cried to thee* which occurs in verses 2 and 8 actually translates different Hebrew verbs. We have in verse 2, siwwa'etî, and in verse 8, 'eqra'. The same applies to the word *pit* in verses 3 and 9. In the former it is bôr, while in the latter it is sāhat. Verses 4 and 10 are of a somewhat different genre. One is essentially praise and the other is basically a prayer. There are no identical words in them, but the Hebrew roots ḥsd (here *saints*) and hnn (here *have mercy*) are often synonyms.

Parts C, D, and E might have been combined to make the outline simpler, but there is some warrant for breaking down this section. The ideas of God's short anger and the hiding of His face are somewhat complementary. The word *favor* is found in both 5a and 7a. That leaves verse 6 as the apex, which can be understood as a testimony of praise—although some commentators see this as unwarranted self-confidence and basically pride. This interpretation is difficult to reconcile with the context, which is altogether God-oriented, gratitude-filled, and prayer-centered.

PSALM 36

- 1-4 A Indictment of proud character and deeds of the wicked.
- 5-6 B Testimony *re* God's perfection in cosmic terms.
- 7a C God's lovingkindness.
- 7b D Human benefit of above.
- 8a D Human benefit of God's supply.
- 8b C God's supply.
- 9-10 B Prayer for benefit of God's perfections.
- 11-12 A Prayer for deliverance from wickedness and testimony regarding destruction of the wicked.

Many will only be satisfied with a simpler chiasmus that goes A B A of verses 1-4, verses 5-10 and verses 11-12. However, there does appear evidence of some forethought in the arranging of that center section and that is offered above.

Words such as *wicked* (rāšā') and *iniquity* ('āwen) link sections labeled A. Note the related words for *iniquity* in verses 2 and 3 ('āwôn and 'āwen). There is another *iniquity* ('āwen) in verse 4. In addition to the words exactly repeated, notice that idea of pride illustrated in verse 2 and named in verse 11.

Thy *lovingkindness* and *thy righteousness* both occur in verses 5-6

and 10. Thy *lovingkindness* appears again in 7, but I have coupled that occurrence with *thy pleasures* in verse 8b. The remaining elements, the central points, are protection under the shadow of God's wings and provision in the abundance of God's house, verses 7b and 8a.

PSALM 37

- 1-8 A Exhortation to righteous to ignore wicked and to trust God.
- 9 B Wait and inherit the land.
- 10-15 C Righteous inherit but LORD destroys the plotting wicked.
- 16 D The poor are blessed though poor.
- 17 E LORD upholds righteous.
- 18a F LORD guides righteous.
- 18b G Righteous inherit.
- 19 H Righteous get.
- 20a I Wicked perish.
- 20b J Wicked like a sacrifice.
- 20c J Wicked like a sacrifice.
- 21a I Wicked give not.
- 21b H Righteous give.
- 22 G Blessed inherit.
- 23 F LORD guides righteous.
- 24 E LORD upholds.
- 25-26 D The blessed may be poor but not forsaken.
- 27-33 C LORD loves the righteous who will live and inherit but the plotting wicked will die.
- 34 B Wait and inherit the land.
- 35-40 A God destroys the wicked but saves the righteous.

This psalm is longer than Psalm 25, but is only slightly less complicated. This is a favorite psalm of many people. It is also an alphabetic psalm. All the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are represented, and in their correct order, but the verse numbering and the stichoi do not always agree. That is why there are 40 verses in the psalm but 22 letters in the alphabet. Most letters have two verses, but not all. The letter *'ayin* is the second letter of the second stich of verse 28.

Again, it is possible to point out identical words and phrases in the complementary parts of the chiasmus. Where this is not so, there are obvious complementary or antithetical thoughts. Several themes occur and reoccur throughout the psalm. The nation that the righteous inherit is found, for instance, in verses 11, 18, 22, and 34. The note on the destruction of the wicked almost permeates the poem. Compare verses 2, 9, 10, 15, 17, 20, 28, 34, 36, and 38.

To tie sections labeled A together, note that the verbs *cut down* and *cut off* occur in verses 2 and 38. Sections marked B have almost the identical phrases, *wait for the LORD* and *inherit the land*. The idea of the plotting wicked is prominent in verses 12 and 14 and 32. The relatively uncommon Hebrew participle *uphold* (somek) appears in verses 17 and 24, this coupling them together. And so the study can continue. By now the

reader can pick out the corresponding words and phrases which have led the writer to outline this particular psalm as he has.

PSALM 41

- | | | |
|--------|----------------|---|
| 1-3 | A | Blessed of the LORD is the considerate. |
| 4 | B ¹ | Have mercy. |
| 5-9 | B ² | My enemies. |
| 10a | B ¹ | Have mercy. |
| 10b-12 | B ² | Requite my enemies. |
| 13 | A | Blessed by the LORD. |

Psalm 41 is a rather simple chiasmus but not too well balanced. The words and themes generally follow the outline given above. The Hebrew word for *blessed* in verse 1 is different from the *blessed* in verse 13. One is 'āsre, which can only mean *happy*, while the latter is the passive participle of the well-known brk. Both serve as benedictions, the former for the good man and latter for the eternal God of Israel. The tetragrammaton occurs in both sections (as well as throughout the psalm).

Elements marked B¹ have identical wording, *have mercy upon me* which represents identical Hebrew words. Then the idea in the following parts of verses 4 and 10 is similar: *heal my soul* and *raise me up*. The psalmist's enemies are the focus of verses 5-9 and 10b-12. The former is in the nature of a complaint and the latter is a song of triumph over them and vindication by God.

PSALMS 42 AND 43

Lund has offered a double chiasmic outline for Psalms 42 and 43 combined, which I am sorry I cannot claim for myself.¹⁰ With slight modification, it is reproduced here.

- | | | | |
|--------|-------|-------|----|
| 42:1-3 | A | | |
| 4 | | B | |
| 5 | | | C |
| 6-7 | | B' | |
| 8-10 | A' | | |
| 11 | A'' | | |
| 43:1-2 | | B'' | |
| 3 | | | C' |
| 4 | | B' '' | |
| 5 | A' '' | | |

The key words in 42:1-3 and 8-10 are *the living God* coupled with *the God of my life, day and night*, and the almost identically repeated phrase, *while they say unto me all the day, Where is thy God?* Parts B and B' are linked with the words *I remember, within me, my soul, and voice*. Points C and C' which belong to the different chiasmi are parallel without the use of identical phraseology and words. In fact, verse 5 is identical to verses 10 and 43:5 and this has led most people to see here a three-stanza hymn with a common refrain.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

In the second chiasmus notice again that the concluding verse of Psalm 42 is identical with the concluding verse of Psalm 43, but in the outline they serve as the *opening* and closing verses. Psalm 42:1-2 and 4 complement each other on the basis of *God* in the vocative and that they are a prayer and a resolution to praise and service.

PSALM 45

- | | | |
|-------|---|--------------------------|
| 1 | A | I speak. |
| 2 | B | You are blessed forever. |
| 3-8 | C | The glorious groom. |
| 9 | D | King's daughter. |
| 10 | E | Bride to leave. |
| 11 | E | Bride to cleave. |
| 12 | D | Daughter of Tyre. |
| 13-15 | C | The beautiful bride. |
| 16 | B | Your children will rule. |
| 17 | A | I will remind. |

This is another well-known and well-worked-over psalm. Mostly, it has been subjected to examination by those expert in royal weddings and enthronement festivals. From the point of view of the mechanics of Semitic poetry, it is less popular. There are, however, some strong reasons for seeing a chiasmus here.

The only first person singular pronouns in the psalm are in the first and last verses. Hence the *I will speak* of verse 1 is echoed in the *I will remind* of verse 17. The ideas of longevity and posterity evidence themselves in verses 2 and 16, which answer to each other. The largest segments deal with elaborate and exalted descriptions of the groom and the bride. They are found in verses 3-8 and 13-15. Words such as *palace* (verses 8 and 15 and *gladness* (*šāšōn* in verse 7 and *semāhoṭ* in verse 15), as well as descriptions of attire and mentions of attendants couple these two sections. Verses 9 and 12 focus on the honored guests at this wedding. There are *king's daughters* in verse 9, including the *daughter of Tyre* in verse 12.

Perhaps verses 10 and 11 in the very center of the poem are speaking of the vows the bride says and are therefore both the physical center of the poem as well as the climax of the ceremony. So in verse 10 she is told to forget her parents and in verse 11 to reverence her new husband.

PSALM 46

- | | | |
|-----|---|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | A | God is refuge. |
| 2 | B | No fear. |
| 3-4 | C | God rules over natural calamities. |
| 5 | D | God in here. |
| 6a | E | Nations rage. |
| 6b | E | God speaks. |
| 7 | D | God in here. |
| 8-9 | C | God rules over political calamities. |
| 10 | B | Be still. |
| 11 | A | God is refuge. |

Nobody knows for certain what *Selah* means. Sometimes it appears at what seem to be the ends of strophes. At other times its appearance seems quite out of place. In Psalm 46 three *Selaha*s divide the psalm quite evenly into three sections, but these three sections are not particularly integrated. Therefore, despite the fact that verses 7 and 11 are identical and both end with a *Selah*, I am proposing this chiastic outline.

The word *refuge* occurs three times in this psalm but has two Hebrew words behind it. The Hebrew word is *mah^aseh* in verse 1 and *misgab* in verses 7 and 11. The first and last verses are seen to be parallel through the use of these synonyms.

Verses 2 and 10 are not as closely parallel as the verses which constitute the extremities of the outline, but they are nevertheless complementary. Note that the word *earth* occurs in both. (It also appears in verse 6.) Elements labeled C are more comprehensive sections and deal in general with God's sovereignty in the realm of storm and earthquake, as well as in international affairs. Verses 3 and 4 are a nice contrast. On the one hand are the raging waters of a storm and on the other the gladdening streams of God's holy city. Verse 8 speaks of God's power in general terms while verse 9 specifies it in militaristic terms.

No one will deny the connection between verses 5 and 7. *God is in the midst of her* almost perfectly parallels *The LORD of hosts is with us*. Finally, in the very center of the psalm, the apex of the argument, there is verse 6 with its contrasting statements. A most contemporary sermon could be preached just from this verse and the position it has in the psalm. Around us and from a human point of view nations rage and kingdoms shake. But from a theistic point of view it is merely God speaking and making the earth melt. Christian, citizen of God's colony in man's frightfully fluxing world, remember that the LORD of hosts is with us.

- | | |
|-----|---------------------|
| 1 | A People clap. |
| 2-4 | B God is king. |
| 5 | C God with a shout. |
| 6 | C Praise God. |
| 7-8 | B God is king. |
| 9 | A People gather. |

This relatively short and simple psalm concludes this list of chiastic psalms in the first third of the Book of Psalms. As with most of the other psalms we have studied, its chiastic structure is based on the use of identical words, similarities of phrases, and parallel ideas.

So, for instance, notice that *people* occurs in the first and last verses (in fact, twice in the last verse). But as with the others, the chiasmus is not based solely on the occurrence of one word. The lines, *Shout unto God with the voice of triumph* and *He is greatly exalted*, are very similar.

Point B, that God is king over all the earth, is based on the use of an

almost identical phrase in verses 2 and 7. This is essentially a psalm of praise and this note is most clearly struck in verses 6 and 7, the center of the poem.

CONCLUSION

The only point this paper seeks to make is that consciously or unconsciously many of the psalms were written on a chiastic pattern.

There are smaller chiasmi throughout the Bible. Most of them are individual verses, many are several verses long, but I have sought to show that some psalms in their entirety are based on this structure.

This is not an effort to affect the interpretation and, certainly, is not a device for determining glosses, rearranging verse order, or emending the text. "God's Word is like a garden, with flowers bright and fair, and everyone who seeks may pluck a lovely cluster there." Having chosen a bouquet from the Psalms, I have examined just one facet of their total intriguing beauty and message. Perhaps this will spark a deepened appreciation of the sweet singers of Israel, as well as augment our devotion to these Holy Spirit inspired words of life.