CHIASTIC PSALMS (II): A STUDY IN THE MECHANICS OF SEMITIC POETRY IN PSALMS 51-100

Robert L. Alden*

Several years ago I wrote a similarly titled article dealing with Psalms 1-50.[1] Here is the second installment. For an introduction to the whole matter, simply refer to that former article. There is no Psalm in this group as rigidly structured or with a chiasmus as extensive as those of Psalms 25 and 37. So if the thesis was suspect in the former article, it will be even more so in this one where the patterns are generally less obvious and the key words or phrases less strictly repeated. But it is undeniable that a Psalm often uses key words to unite the whole composition. R. G. Moulton called the repetition of certain words from the beginning of a Psalm at its end the "envelope figure."[2] And Martin Buber said:

> The recurrence of the key-words is a basic law of composition in the Psalms. This law has a poetic significance—rhythmical correspondence of sound values—as well as a hermeneutical one: the Psalm provides its own interpretation, by repetition of what is essential to understanding.[3]

To that I would add that often the key words are chiastically arranged. In this study are fifteen Psalms put into an outline that reverses itself once the center or apex is reached. It is like climbing a mountain pass—the climate zones, varieties of growth, temperature and barometric changes experienced on the way up are experienced on the way down but in reverse order once the summit is passed. Or it is like looking into a mirror—the things close to the mirror appear to be just inside it, while the objects farther from it appear at a greater distance behind the mirror. In these outlines the "A" members, for example, are some distance away and the "C" members are closer.

PSALM 52:1b-5a[4]

1b A God's grace is continual

---

*Robert Alden is associate professor of Old Testament at Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, Denver, Colorado.

[1]*JETS* 17/1 (1974), pp. 11-28.

[2]R. G. Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible* (Boston: Heath, 1900), p. 53.

[3]M. Buber, *Good and Evil* (New York: Scribner, 1953), p. 52.

[4]We shall follow the numbering in Protestant English Bibles rather than in the Hebrew Bible, which is frequently off by one verse due to the fact that the title is often considered the entire first verse. In the case of Psalm 52, verses 1 and 2 constitute the title in the Masoretic text.

```
2        B  "Your tongue works deceitfully"
3a          C  "You love evil"
3b            D  Lying (Selah)
4a          C  "You love devouring words"
4b        B  "You deceitful tongue"
5a     A  "God will destroy you forever" (Selah)
```

This first example of a chiasmus, as is obvious, covers only the first half of this Psalm. However, notice that *Selah* concludes the first quarter as well as the first half. To support the idea that we have here a chiasmus, note that the shorter name of God, *'ēl*, appears in the first and fifth verses. (The three other occurrences of the name are *'ĕlōhîm:* verses 7 and 8.) The "all the day" of verse 1 answers to the "forever" of verse 5. The word "tongue" and cognates of "deceit" occur in verses 2 and 4b (*rᵉmîyâ* in verse 2 and *mirmâ* in 4b). Identical forms of "you love" begin verses 3 and 4. The "D" element in the above outline may be considered as simply as expansion of verse 3a rather than as a separate element.

PSALM 58[5]

```
1      A  Leaders do not judge righteously
2        B  The wicked have violent hands
3-5        C  Description of the wicked: like a snake
6a            D  "Break their teeth, O God"
6b            D  "Break their teeth, O LORD"
7-9        C  Curses on the wicked: like a snail
10       B  The righteous wash their feet in the blood of the wicked
11     A  God will judge
```

The opening verse of this Psalm has some difficulties, and translations vary. The problems center on the first two words. The first looks like an interrogative participle plus the word for "truly" and the second looks like a defective spelling of either "gods" or "rams." Dahood emends the first to get the translation "counselors" and reads the second as "rams," meaning "leaders."[6] With others, he reads the verse as an imperative: "Speak righteousness, O leaders...." None of these departures from the traditional understanding affects the chiastic structure. Whether the opening lines of the Psalm are declarative, interrogative, or imperative makes little difference. The point is that the wicked are failing to administer with integrity.

The chiasmus is supported by the repeated use of certain words in corresponding members of the outline. Cognates of "righteous" appear in verses 1 and 11 (*ṣedeq* and *ṣaddîq* respectively) as well as forms of the verb "judge." If the second word of the first verse (*'ēlem)* is "gods," then it

---

[5] N. W. Lund offers a similar outline of this psalm in "The Presence of Chiasmus in the OT" in *AJSL* 46 (1930), p. 309, and in *Chiasmus in the NT* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1942), p. 95.

[6] M. Dahood, *The Anchor Bible: Psalms II* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 57.

is parallel to *'ĕlōhîm* in verse 11. The "hands" of verse 2 correspond to the "feet" of verse 10. The "wickedness" of verse 2 is from a different Hebrew root than that of the "wicked" in verse 10. (But verse 3 has the same word as verse 10.)

The preposition *kᵉmô*, "like," appears in both 4b and 8a. *Peten*, "snake," is parallel to *šabbᵉlûl*, "snail." Verse 6 is the center of the Psalm and contains two closely paralleled stichoi. Despite the similarities in some English translations, we actually have two different words for "break" and two different words for "teeth." Neither are the vocatives identical ("God" and "LORD").

In addition to the structure of the entire Psalm, notice also that verse 6 is a chiasmus within itself. Here is the order of the Hebrew words:

     O God,
        break
           their teeth
             in their mouth;
           the teeth of
             lions
       smash,
     O LORD!

PSALM 59

1-2	A	A Prayer to be set on high
3-8	B	Complaint against the wicked
9	C	Testimony of trust in God
10	C	Testimony of trust in God
11-15	B	Curses on the wicked
16-17	A	Praise to God, the high tower

Often the key word determines the choice for the title of a section in the outline. So it is with the "A" sections of the above scheme. The verb "set on high" *(śgb)* which appears only twenty times in the Bible answers to the cognate noun "high tower" *(miśgāb)* in verses 16 and 17. (That noun, which occurs but 16 times in the Old Testament, appears a third time in this Psalm at verse 9.)

Words that link the "B" sections are "sin" (verses 3 and 12), "mouth" and "lips" (verses 7 and 12). Also note that verses 6 and 14 are identical (except that 14 begins with a *wāw*). Both those verses are preceded by a *Selah*. The two innermost verses are like the pair at the beginning and the pair at the end. They both contain the name of God, but that key word is one of the most common and comes up in other places in this Psalm.

Throughout the poetical sections of the Old Testament there are many chiastically arranged verses. It is not the aim of this paper to highlight these, but notice that verse 2 of this Psalm is arranged with the verbs on the outside and the prepositional phrases on the inside.

PSALM 60

1-5	A	Complaint to God

6-9   B God promises judgment
10-12   A Prayer and praise to God

Psalm 60 is hardly an outstanding example of a chiasmus. About the only thing in the Psalm that gives it warrant to appear here is the repetition of the phrase "God has cast us off" which is in verses 1 and 10.

PSALM 62

1-2   A Testimony of trust
3-4   B Pessimistic complaint
5-6   C Testimony of trust
7   C Testimony of trust
9-10   B Pessimistic complaint
11-12   A Testimony of trust

As is plainly obvious the first, middle, and final parts of Psalm 62 are on the same theme. It is easy to see three stanzas in the Psalm because each of the first two ends with a *Selah* (verses 1-4 and 5-8). The first speaks of God's trustworthiness and man's untrustworthiness. The second speaks only of God's trustworthiness. And the third speaks first of man's untrustworthiness and then of God's trustworthiness. The opening verses of stanzas one and two are very similar. Apart from the many identical words in those two pairs of verses, other key words that tie the Psalm together are "man" (*'iš*) in verses 3, 9, and 12 and "lie" (*kāzāb*) in verses 4 and 9.

PSALM 64

1-2   A Prayer for deliverance from fear of the enemy
3   B The wicked whet their tongue
4   C The wicked shoot suddenly
5   D The wicked plot
6   D The wicked plot
7   C God shoots the wicked suddenly
8   B The tongue of the wicked confounds them
9-10   A All righteous men fear and praise God

Again we have a chiastic Psalm of average complexity. The word "fear" in verses 1 and 9 translates two Hebrew roots *(phd* in verse 1 and *yr'* in verse 9). Plural and singular forms respectively of the root *p'l* appear in verses 2 and 9 to further link these elements of the outline. As the choice of words emphasizes, "tongue" occurs in verses 3 and 8. And the words "shoot" and "suddenly" are in both verses 4 and 7 ("shoot" twice in verse 4). It is only the theme of verses 5 and 6 that links them; they are not concatenated with key words.

PSALM 67

1   A "May God bless us"
2   B So the earth may know
3   C "Let all the people praise you..."

4a	D	"Nations, be glad"
4b	E	People judged
4c	D	Nations governed
5	C	"Let all the people praise you..."
6	B.	The earth has produced
7	A	"God will bless us"

Lund recognized this as a chiasmus and has an outline very similar to the one above.[7] Others have noted the similarity of the first and last verses. Leon J. Liebreich observes that seventy-five of the Psalms have key words in their opening and closing verses.[8] Liebreich, however, rarely goes beyond the second or penultimate verses in his search for similarities and apparently was unaware of studies in chiastic structure. The same is true of James Muilenberg.[9]

Most obviously, forms of the verb "bless" link the opening and closing verses of Psalm 67. Working toward the center of the Psalm, note that "earth" occurs in the second and sixth verses. Verses 3 and 5 are identical, while verse 4 is chiastic in itself as well as serving as the center of this Psalm. The less common word for "nation" (*le'ummîm*) is found twice in verse 4.

Selah appears twice in the Psalm—after verse 1 and after verse 4—but there is no immediately evident reason for either appearance.

PSALM 68

1-2	A	God scatters the enemy
3	B	The righteous praise God
4	C	"Sing to God, the rider on the clouds/deserts"
5-6	D	In the sanctuary God brings prisoners
7-10	E	God's people
11	F	Women publish
12	G	Kings flee
13	H	"Wings of a dove"
14-15	I	God scatters to Bashan
16-17	J	God's mountainous army
18	K	God delivers captives
19	L	Benediction
20	K	God gives escape from death
21	J	God crushes enemies
22	I	God gathers from Bashan
23	H	"Tongue of a dog"
24	G	"My king"
25	F	Damsels play

[7]N. W. Lund, "Chiasmus in the Psalms," in *AJSL* 49 (1933), p. 289; *op. cit.,* p. 97.

[8]L. J. Liebreich, "Psalms 34 and 145 in the Light of Their Key Words," in *HUCA* 27 (1956), pp. 183, 190-192.

[9]J. Muilenberg, "A Study of Hebrew Rhetoric: Repetition and Style," in *SVT* 1 (1953), p. 104.

26-28	·	E Four tribes
29-30		D Kings bring present to God in the temple
31-33		C "Sing to God in the heavens, to the rider"
34		B "Ascribe strength to God"
35	A	God strengthens his people

Psalm 68 is the most elaborate chiasmus under consideration in this paper—if indeed it is chiastic. Key words to link several of the paired elements are lacking. For example, in points "A" and "B" it is mainly the name of God that ties the pairs together. But just as we become discouraged that we are forcing something artificial on the Psalm, we notice the epithet "rider" for God in verses 4 and 33, an unusual title to be sure. In the "D" verses "sanctuary" is parallel to "temple" (but the two "brings" represent different Hebrew words). While verses 7-10 may seem poorly paired with verses 26-28, notice that the only references to females in the Psalm are in the "F" verses—"women" and "virgins." Two of the four occurrences of the word "king" are in the "G" verses, 12 and 24 (the other two are in 14 and 29). It is true that there is not much similarity between the "wing of a dove" and the "tongue of a dog," but at least both are similes. It must be more than coincidence that the land of Bashan is found in the paired verses 15 and 22. Verses 16-17 have little in common with verse 21, but verses 18 and 20 have similar motifs. Also note that the name "Yahweh" occurs only toward the center of the Psalm (verses 16 and 20, with the shortened form *Yāh* in verse 18). Verse 19 then is the apex or summit of the Psalm. And behold, a *Selah* follows it!

If Psalm 68 is a chiasmus, then it cannot be said that the psalmist made the structure itself his major point. But whether consciously or unconsciously, there is evidence of some introverted parallel structure. Perhaps if his major concern had been the structure (as is the case with the alphabetic Psalms) he would have sacrificed the development of the ideas themselves.

<div align="center">PSALM 70[10]</div>

1	A	"Make haste, O God, to deliver"
2-3	B	Curse on enemy
4	B	Benediction on righteous
5	A	"Make haste, O God, my Ransomer"

The repetition of the imperative "make haste" in the "A" verses is patent, as is the vocative "God." Although some English translations have forms of the word "deliver" in verses 1 and 5, they are not the same Hebrew word. The interior three verses are characterized by jussive forms, with verses 2 and 3 being wishes for curses on the enemy and verse 4 being a wish for blessings on the righteous. Notice that the word "seek" is in verses 2 and 4, although in antithetical contexts.

---

[10]Compare Psalm 40:13-17.

PSALM 71

1-4	A	Prayer for deliverance
5-7	B	"From my youth you are my God"
8	C	"My mouth shall be filled"
9-11	D	Prayer against enemies of "my soul"
12a	E	"O God, be near"
12b	E	"O God, help"
13-14	D	Prayer against adversaries of "my soul"
15-16	C	"My mouth shall tell"
17-18	B	"From my youth I am yours"
19-24	A	Praise for deliverance

In addition to the thematic-like titles to the "A" sections, there are some key words that tie the opening and closing verses together. The verb "put to shame" occurs in both the first and last verses. "Thy righteousness" also is found in verses 2, 19 and 24. (It also occurs in verses 15 and 16.) The somewhat unusual expression "from my youth" *(minn'ûrāy)* is in both "B" sections of the outline. The term "my mouth" links the "C" parts together and "my soul" joins verses 9-11 with 13-14. The themes of these groups of verses are roughly parallel as well. The central verse of the Psalm, then, is 12 with its two parallel stichoi. It is similar to the opening and closing verses of Psalm 70.

PSALM 74:1-12

1-2	A	Complaint
3-5	B	The sanctuary profaned
6-9	B	The sanctuary profaned
10-12	A	Complaint

This arrangement is from Lund.[11] He continues it in parallel fashion: A (13-14), B (15-16), C (17-18); A' (19), B' (20-21), C' (22-23).

The opening and closing sections of the first twelve verses contain questions—"Why" in verses 1 and 11 and "How long" in verse 10. The expression "of old" *(qedem)* further ties the two groups of verses together. The interior sections focus on the desecration of the sanctuary by the heathen. One word for "sanctuary," *qōdeš*, is in verse 3 and a cognate, *miqdāš*, in verse 7. "Your assembly" *(mô'ădekā)* is in verse 4 and "God's assemblies" *(mô'ădê-'ēl)* is in verse 8. Incidentally, 74:8 is the only place where the KJV used the word "synagogue" to translate *mô'ēd*. Yet one more synonym for God's house is in this group: "dwelling place" *(miškān)* in verse 7.

PSALM 75

1-2	A	Thanks to God
3	B	The earth dissolved
4-5	C	The wicked not to lift up horns
6-7	C	God will lift up

[11]N. W. Lund, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

8   B Wicked of the earth to drink
9-10   A Praise to God

A non-chiastic outline is as follows:

1-2   A God will judge
3   B The earth dissolved
4-5   C The wicked not to lift up horns
6-7   A God is the judge
8   B Wicked of the earth to drink
9-10   C Wicked horn destroyed and righteous horn lifted up

A cursory examination will show that the second outline has merit especially when we notice the key words "judge" in verses 2 and 7 and "horn" in 4, 5 and 10.

But because chiasmus is the focus of the study let us note the features of the Psalm that support the first outline. The name of God appears in the opening and closing verses, and the terms "thanks" and "praise" are close parallels. The word "earth" appears but two times in the poem and they are in the paired verses 3 and 8. The four innermost verses all have forms of the verb "lift up" *(rûm)*. (Verse 10 also has one, the only Polal imperfect of it in the Old Testament.)

PSALM 84
1-4   A Praise of God's house
5-8   B Blessedness of trusting
9-12   A Praise of God's house

This rather broad outline can be easily defended as a chiasmus. Although the entire Psalm is about temple worship, the choice and position of words is interesting.

"LORD of hosts" occurs in the opening and closing sections (verses 3 and 12; see also "LORD God of hosts" in verse 8). The "tabernacles" of verse 1 are opposite the "tents" of verse 10, and the "courts" of verse 2 reappear in verse 10. "House" is yet another synonym for the temple which occurs in the "A" parts of this Psalm (verses 4 and 10).

The "B" section of the Psalm cannot be broken down further, although several translations insert a "Zion" at verse 5 which nicely balances the one the sons of Korah put in at verse 7.[12] At least there is a *Selah* both before and after the central portion of the poem.

PSALM 90
1   A "Lord,
               B you have been our dwelling place
                    C from generation to generation;

[12]See *Revised Version, American Standard Version, Revised Standard Version, Amplified Bible, New American Standard Bible,* and *The Psalms: Singing Version.*

```
2              D  before the mountains
                 E  were brought forth,
                 E  or was formed
               D  the earth and the world,
                C  from everlasting to everlasting
             B  you are
           A  God"
3-4     A  Command to children
5-6        B  Daily pessimism
7-9           C  "We perish"
10              D  Brevity of life
11-13         C  "Save us"
14-15      B  Prayer for daily rejoicing
16-17   A  Prayer for children
```

The chiastic structure of verses 1 and 2 is rather well known, and since all the words are given above in their Hebrew order there is no need to explain further how it works. The only noteworthy lack of symmetry is in the heavy member, "you have been our dwelling place," which has no counterpart except the simple pronoun "you," the next-to-last word in verse 2.

The outline here offered is the same as that of Lund.[13] Again, in an effort to help see that the chiastic outline is based on the actual words of the Bible, the vocabulary in the outline is chosen from the words in the text itself. So, for example, "children" occurs in verses 3 and 16. "In the morning" is in verses 6 and 14. The "C" parts are linked by the common words "anger" (*'ap*) in verses 7 and 11 and "wrath" (*'ebrâ*) in verses 9 and 11. (The other "wrath" in verse 7 is *ḥēmâ.*) All this leaves only verse 10 to stand at the divide in this Psalm—and it is perhaps the best-known verse of all.

The KJV has provided us with a chiasmus in the last verse which, however, is not chiastic in Hebrew: "... establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it."

PSALM 92

```
1-5     A  "I will praise"
6-7a       B  The wicked described
7b            C  Wicked destroyed forever
8             C  God reigns forever
9          B  The enemy destroyed
10-15   A  Personal praise
```

This "song for the sabbath day" falls rather neatly and easily into outline form. While it is true that there are few words to link the "A" sections together, they do have the same motif. The tetragrammaton appears in verses 1 and 5 and in verses 13 and 15. The verb "to show forth" (*ngd* in the Hiphil) is in verses 2 and 15. The expression "workers

[13]N. W. Lund, *op. cit.,* pp. 125 ff.

of iniquity" ties the "B" sections of the Psalm together. That leaves verses 7b and 8 as the apex of the Psalm and the epitome of the two themes: the demise of the wicked, and the exaltation of God. Notice that a synonym for "eternity" is in each stich.

CONCLUSION

The only point this paper seeks to make is the same point the previous study on the subject sought to make—namely, that consciously or unconsciously many of the Psalms were written in a chiastic pattern.

It is common to find chiasmi within individual verses. The more you read the Hebrew Bible the more often they appear. But here I have tried 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. But a study of chiastic structure in the Psalms can evoke a new appreciation for the ancient poets who gave to us a body of God-inspired hymns, songs, meditations, poems, and Psalms.