

Week 2 Handout – Acrostic Psalms or Poems

Acrostic is a term that refers to a poetic form in which the initial letters or signs of each line, couplet, or stanza, when read in succession, spell out a name, sentence, alphabet, or some alphabetic pattern. Acrostics are known from many historical periods and literary traditions, the oldest coming from ancient Mesopotamia. The Old Testament contains a number of partial and complete alphabetic acrostics (Nahum 1; Ps. 9–10, 25, 34, 111, 112, 119, 145; Prov. 31:10–31; Lamentations 1, 2, 3, 4). These acrostics spell out the Hebrew alphabet with the initial letters of each line (Ps. 111, 112), couplet (Lam. 3), or stanza (Lam. 1, 2, 4).

Scholars have posited that acrostics are used in the OT as either a teaching device or memorization aid, or that they were associated with magical powers, or that they simply signified a sense of completeness. Whatever the plausibility of these theories, the acrostic is fundamentally a poetic form, and it functions in ways like other poetic forms (e.g., the sonnet or sestina in English poetic tradition), such as providing an aesthetic constraint on the poet's composition and presenting a formal pattern of repetition, which may be manipulated to achieve various effects, including to build in coherence and dynamism and to signal closure. Form is central to poetry in general, and the acrostic represents an important form device in Hebrew poetry.¹

¹ Dobbs-Allsopp, F. W. (2000). [Acrostic](#). In D. N. Freedman, A. C. Myers, & A. B. Beck (Eds.), *Eerdmans dictionary of the Bible* (p. 14). W.B. Eerdmans.