A "PERFECT" POEM:
THE USE OF THE QATAL VERBAL FORM
IN THE BIBLICAL ACROSTICS

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The purpose of this study is to critique some of the prevalent theories regarding the biblical alphabetic acrostics and to expose a previously unrecognized feature that most of the acrostics share. "Alphabetical thinking" manifests itself differently in each poem; however, one common thread in most of the acrostics is the more prevalent use of the *qatal* form instead of the *yiqtol* form as compared to other poetry. This is likely a function of the versatility of the *qatal* to fit both the acrostic artifice and the acrostic style (aspectual orientation in particular). Two psalms, one acrostic and one non-acrostic, are analyzed and their verb usage compared. Three avenues of further study are proposed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The alphabetic acrostic is an artifice of poetry in which successive letters of the alphabet are the key features of succeeding phrases, lines, or paragraphs—usually the first letter of the first word. There are more than a dozen such poems in the Hebrew canon, including at least eight in the Psalter, four in Lamentations, and one each in Nahum and Proverbs. It is difficult to say definitively how many alphabetic acrostics there are in the Bible, since the "messier" examples leave the modern reader wondering just how loosely the alphabetic pattern was applied. Some poems strictly adhere to the alphabet, whereas others leave out letters, do not consistently use "correct" letters at the beginning of lines, or are incomplete.

The biblical acrostics have been a source of bewilderment and amusement for modern scholars. The acrostic feature of these poems has often been dismissed or minimized as a silly trick. Recently, however, there is a renewed interest in the acrostic and its significance for the meaning of a poem.

The purpose of this study is to critique some of the prevalent theories regarding the acrostics and to expose another feature that most of the acrostics have in common. We will explore whether there is such a notion as "alphabetical thinking," that is, any discourse and semantic features that are com-

mon and expected in alphabetical acrostics.[1] The relationship between the horizontal and vertical placement of key words[2] in the poem will be evaluated—that is, the placement of the key word in its poetic line and in its sequence within the poem. Another section will discuss the use of other "alphabeticizing" techniques, including the embedding of certain letters and phrases. Third, the different verb types will be analyzed and initial conclusions posited. Fourth, two poems will be analyzed and compared as case studies. Finally, conclusions will be drawn and topics for further study will be presented.

The general thesis of this study is that there is no specific form-critical genre or discourse type into which all the Hebrew alphabetic acrostics fit. "Alphabetical thinking" manifests itself differently in each poem, but there is no discourse feature common to all the acrostics except that they are acrostics. Acrostics were intended for the viewing pleasure of the reader and not for the ear or as an aid to memory. There is no peculiar "acrostic vocabulary" or "acrostic grammar."

When studied as a sub-set of biblical poetry, the biblical acrostics do have a unifying feature: the more frequent use of the *qatal* form over the *yiqtol* form. The alphabetic feature indicates completeness, which may explain the preference for the so-called perfect verbal form. Conversely, the prevalence of the *qatal* in the acrostic poems could support the understanding of the completed aspect of the perfect.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES

2.1 Biblical Hebrew Acrostics

The acrostic poems have long been the subject of particular study. Different theories have been posited to explain the purpose and meaning of the acrostic form.

According to the *Midrash Lamentations Rabbah*, the biblical book was written in acrostics to aid memory, and to represent completeness.[3]

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[1] A. Ceresko, "Endings and Beginnings: Alphabetical Thinking and the Shaping of Psalms 106 and 150," *CBQ* 68 (2006): 32–46. Patrick Shekan was the first to use the term "alphabetical thinking." Compare, P. W. Skehan, *Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom* (CBQMS 1; Washington, D. C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1971), p. 75.

[2] In this paper, the term "key word" will be applied to the word in a poetic line that links the line to the acrostic. Most often the key word will be the first word, but this is not always the case.

[3] E. Assis, "The Alphabetic Acrostic in the Book of Lamentations," *CBQ* 69 (2007): 712.

Soll observes that contemporary scholars have come to appreciate more fully the creativity of the acrostic artifice, despite its belittlement by form-critical scholars such as Gunkel.[4] In a recent essay, Callaham expounds and admires the creativity of Psalm 119 within the constraints of the acrostic form.[5]

Gottwald argued that the acrostics of Lamentations served two purposes. First, the completeness of the alphabet, which is used to spell every word in the range of human ideas and emotions, expresses the completeness of grief. Second, the alphabetical lines served as an aid to memory. Gottwald acknowledged that four acrostics often using similar key words would have been confusing to remember. He speculated that the poems were composed separately as acrostics to aid memory, and then brought together later.

Gottwald categorized the poetry of Lamentations along the lines of those Gunkel found in the Psalter. Gottwald saw the poem as a *Leichenlied* (funeral song), such as used in 2 Sam 1:17–27, adapted for the death of a nation. "Both the funeral song and individual lament as formal types are employed here and there, but always in the communal sense. Type and imagery are, therefore, subservient to situation and intention."[6] He was skeptical about attempts to impose categories on each poem or section, or to conclude that there were many sources and redactions. The diversity of style heightens the effect of the poetry: "Owing to the great crisis, there is a shattering of the normal or 'typical' forms of speech and they are mixed in order to gain maximum effect."[7]

Watson affirms two key characteristics of alphabetic acrostics. First, he speculates that acrostics were designed to appeal more to the eye than to the ear. Second, he observes that the structure itself is "highly artificial."[8] The neater, more structured acrostics display a certain skill in writing within a structure. These are contrasted with those "occasional deviations from the

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[4] W. M. Soll, *Psalm 119: Matrix, Form, and Setting* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1991), p. 5. Siegfried Bergler ("Threni V: nur ein alphabetisierendes Lied? Versuch einer Deutung," *VT* 27 [1977]: 304–320) remarks, "In den Augen eines Menschen unserer Zeit erscheint die Befolgung solch eines künstlichen Gesetzes als Spielerei, als Zeichen verfallender Kunst" (In the eyes of a person of our time, following such an artificial rule appears to be a gimmick, a sign of decaying art) (p. 305).

[5] S. N. Callaham, "An Evaluation of Psalm 119 as Constrained Writing," *HS* 50 (2009): 121–135.

[6] N. K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (London: SCM Press, 1954), p. 37.

[7] N. K. Gottwald, *Lamentations*, p. 39. "As in thought, so in literary type, this chapter provides the closest Hebrew prototype for the Suffering Servant Song of Isa. 52:13–53:12. The fusing of types cannot be charged to pedantry but must be attributed to emotional, and even ecstatic, intensity" (N. K. Gottwald, *Lamentations*, p. 42).

[8] W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), p. 191.

standard alphabetic sequence," which Watson speculates are evidence of "the poet's creative talent overriding his self-imposed limits."[9]

Watson attributes two main purposes to the acrostic form.[10] First, it is literary artifice designed to display the skill of the composer or scribe. The ability to write was rare and highly prized, and scribes delighted in displays of penmanship and composition. Second, it symbolizes completeness and wholeness. This is evidenced by the use of the full alphabet and multiples of twenty-two, and increased frequency of the words "all" and "forever" and phrases such as "for all generations."[11] Watson argues convincingly against the idea that these poems were mnemonics, citing messy and incomplete acrostics such as Nah 1:2–10 as evidence.[12]

Sweet gives an example of a "terminal acrostic," in which the final letters of each line spell a word or phrase. While none of his findings is an alphabetic acrostic, he emphasizes that the acrostic feature is intended to appeal to the eye rather than to the ear.[13]

Concerning Psalm 145, J. Phillips speculates that the completeness of the alphabet symbolizes a reversal of the confusion of languages in Genesis 11.[14]

L. Alonso Schökel does not attribute much significance to the "artificial alphabetical composition." In his view, the alphabetical feature serves only source criticism as an indication of unified composition. He argues that alphabetizing a poem was rather simple and "did not help the internal unity and coherence of the poem."[15] He even asserts that excessive attention paid to the alphabetical feature of certain poems distracts from other structural studies.[16]

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[9] W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, p. 198.

[10] W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 198–199.

[11] Between the acrostic poems and all the non-acrostic Psalms, the differences in frequency of the word עולם and the phrase דור ודר (or דור לדור) is negligible. However, כל occurs 110 times out of 4,926 lemmas in acrostic verses (2.23%) but only 280 times out of 22,409 lemmas in non-acrostic verses (1.25%).

[12] W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, p. 192.

[13] R. F. G. Sweet, "A Pair of Double Acrostics in Akkadian," *Or* 38 (1969): 459–460. The use of the acrostic in Lamentations has been somewhat perplexing. Heikens, recognizing the aesthetic value of the alphabetic acrostic, wonders whether such weighty subject matter as that found in Lamentations "lends itself to esthetic [sic] embellishments" (H. Heikens, "The Alphabet in Lamentations: a 'Dagmaat' contribution" [trans. J. W. Dyk], in *Give Ear to My Words: Psalms and Other Poetry in and Around the Hebrew Bible* [ed. J. Dyk; Amsterdam: Societas Hebraica Amstelodamensis, 1996], pp. 189–196).

[14] J. Phillips, *Exploring Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1988), 2:649: "The alphabetical arrangement suggests that the confusion of language which began at Babel will be reversed when all people learn to praise the Lord, when all unite in mind and purpose around the throne of the Lord Jesus."

[15] L. Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1988), p. 191.

[16] L. Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics*, pp. 190–191. In *Treinta Salmos: Poesia y Oracion* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1986), Alonso Schökel argues that the alphabetic structure of Psalm 37 is an unimportant artificial feature: "La composición alfabética no se suele prestar al desarrollo riguroso.… El

Hanson conducts a form-critical study of the Hebrew alphabetic acrostics, including Ben Sira 51 and the "Zion Apostrophe" (11QPs^aZion). He concludes that only Psalms 34, 37, 112, and 119, Proverbs 31, Ben Sira 51, and the Zion Apostrophe belong in a genre of "alphabetic acrostic."[17] The other acrostics belong to other genres, such as "lament" (Lamentations 1–4) or "hymn" (Psalms 111, 145).[18] He holds that the acrostics appealed both to eye and ear; the form offered a "sense of order and structure" in a "turbulent historical era."[19] He discounts the idea that the form conveyed completeness.[20]

2.2 Other Ancient Near Eastern Poems

Watson notes that acrostic poems occur in Akkadian, though none has been found in Ugaritic.[21] One Akkadian example is the "Babylonian Theodicy," a twenty-seven-stanza acrostic, with each stanza composed of eleven alliterative lines. The twenty-seven letters spell out a phrase meaning, "I, Saggil-kinam-ubbib the incantation-priest, am adorant of god and

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acróstico alfabético no es planta ideal para una clara y hermosa arquitectura. Pero puede darse otro tipo de *estructura* o de organización, digna de contemplarse o de descubrirse" (The alphabetic composition does not usually render rigorous development.... The alphabetic acrostic is not an ideal base for clear and beautiful artifice. But it lends itself to another type of structure or organization worthy of consideration and discovery) (p. 409). For Alonso Schökel, Psalm 37 is structured around the five-fold repetitions of the phrase ירש ארץ and the word נכרת (L. A. Schökel, *Treinta Salmos*, pp. 409–410), as well as the fifteen occurrences of the Divine Name (L. A. Schökel, *Treinta Salmos*, pp. 412–413). "The sapiential style manifests itself in its desire for simple antitheses, in alternating statements and advice, with frequent motivations of 'because,' in appeal to experience; many of the verses are no surprise to one who appreciates the book of Proverbs, and someone could dedicate himself to finding close parallels" (L. A. Schökel, *Treinta Salmos*, p. 409).

[17] K. C. Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostics: A Form Critical Study" (Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1984), abstract.

[18] K. C. Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostics," p. 403.

[19] K. C. Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostics," pp. 406, 408.

[20] K. C. Hanson, "Alphabetic Acrostics," p. 407: "It certainly makes sense with respect to texts like Ps 119, but what sort of totality is aimed at in the others? Could anyone say that the ten short verses in Ps 112 encapsulates the total description of the righteous one? What sort of totality is aimed at in Ps 37? In these and other cases the idea of totality does not account for much." However, Hanson does point out that *3 Enoch* 44:9 uses the idea of the alphabet to represent the whole Law which Israel has transgressed: "They transgressed it from *Alep* to *Taw*, and incurred extirpation thirty-six times over for each letter" (for *3 Enoch* 44:9, see P. Alexander, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* [vol. 1, ed. J. H. Charlesworth; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009], p. 296).

[21] W. G. E. Watson, "Quasi-acrostics in Ugaritic poetry," *UF* 12 (1980): 445–447. Watson remarks that, while alphabetic acrostics have not been found, often consecutive cola will begin with the same letter. He postulates that this fact can assist in the reconstruction of missing words or letters, or to help mark stanzas. He gives examples of instances in which the poet passed over a more logical word in favor of an alliterative one. He writes, "It is probable that the quasi-acrostic, which is basically an extension of initial alliteration, was originally just a by-product of pervasive parallelism and that it was only made overt when the oral poetry of ancient times was committed to writing" (W. G. E. Watson, "Quasi-acrostics," p. 447).

king."[22] Soll lists six other Babylonian acrostics.[23] No such non-alphabetic acrostics have been acknowledged in Biblical Hebrew.

3. ALPHABETICAL FEATURES

3.1 Vocabulary

Because certain letters of the alphabet are frequently used as prefixes (בּ, ה, ו, כ, ל, מ) or preformatives (א, ה, י, מ, נ, ת), it is conceivable that key words beginning with these letters could have a common function within acrostic poems.

Certain words are used in the same key positions in several different poems; for example, בְּ- (13 times), וּ- (exclusively), זכר (10 times) and טוֹב (13 times). However, it remains difficult to demonstrate the presence of an established acrostic vocabulary stock—words that the hearer of the poem would expect in such a poem. This is most likely the simple result of fewer lexical choices for a given letter.

The poets frequently use the preformatives of the imperfect (or jussive/ cohortative) verbal form and the Niphal and Hiphil stems to fit verbs into key-word spots. Half of the twenty-two ה lines begin with Hiphil forms, including seven of eight in Psalm 119. Fourteen of twenty-two י lines and twelve of twenty-two ת lines begin with imperfects (or jussives/cohortatives). Overall, out of 108 key words for the letters א, ה, י, נ, ת (Psalms 9–10 and 145 omit the נ line), forty-five fit the acrostic by the use of a preformative rather than with a root letter.[24]

It is also worth noting that those lexical forms that are also names of letters of the alphabet occur somewhat more frequently in the acrostic poems than in the non-acrostic psalms.[25] These words are occasionally used as key words, particularly the words עַיִן (seven times) and פֶּה (four times).

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[22] W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, pp. 191–192.

[23] W. M. Soll, *Psalm 119*, pp. 6–11. Soll also notes that the Akkadian cuneiform writing system made alphabetic acrostics impossible.

[24] In no instance is a participle that is formed by a מ preformative (Piel, Hiphil, Hophal, Hitpael) used as a key word.

[25] The words אלף, בית, גמל, דלת, כף, למד, סמך, עין, פה, ראש, and שן occur 95 times out of 4,926 lemmas in acrostic verses (1.93%) but only 257 times out of 22,409 lemmas in non-acrostic verses (1.15%). Compare A. Ceresko, "The ABCs of Wisdom in Psalm XXXIV," *VT* 35 (1985): 100.

3.2 Alphabetical Order

The poems in Lamentations 2–4 and Psalms 9–10 reverse the traditional order of the letters פ and ע. There are several explanations proposed for this oddity. It is possible that there were at one time two different orders of the alphabet. However, Heikens asserts that the order of the alphabet was determined "at a fairly early date."[26] Another possibility is that the two letters resembled each other so much that they were mistaken for one another, creating uncertainty about the order.[27]

Third, the difference could be a result of textual corruption. However, given that both orders are present in the book of Lamentations (ע → פ in chap. 1, פ → ע in chaps. 2–4), it is difficult to understand how a scribe, who would certainly have noticed the obvious discrepancy, would not have corrected the text in either instance.

Fourth, the difference could have functioned as an aid for recitation to distinguish between the very similar first and second chapters.[28] This seems unlikely in light of the difficulties with the *aide-mémoire* theory of the alphabetic acrostic.

Several acrostics omit one or more letters of the alphabet (Psalms 9–10, 25, 34, 145; Nah 1:2–10). There are several explanations offered for these omissions. Some of the omissions seem to be accidental, such as the repetition of רְאֵה in Psalm 25:18–19.[29] Psalm 9 may have begun as a partial acrostic and then been combined with Psalm 10 to complete the acrostic, though at least four letters (מ, נ, ס, צ,) are missing from the middle.

Psalms 25 and 34 omit the ו line and replace it with an additional פ line at the end to "complete" the acrostic. This is almost certainly intentional, and various reasons have been proposed.[30]

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[26] H. Heikens, "The Alphabet in Lamentations," p. 191.

[27] M. Dijkstra, as cited in H. Heikens, "The Alphabet in Lamentations," p. 192.

[28] J. Renkema, (*Klaagliederen*, Kampen, 1993), as cited in H. Heikens, "The Alphabet in Lamentations," p. 192.

[29] The critical apparatus of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* suggests קְשֹׁב.

[30] W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, p. 199. He further comments: "Some of the acrostics, as has been noted, omit certain letters or transpose some. Particularly significant is the omission of ו in both Ps 25 and Ps 34, which is compensated for by an extra פ after the ת-verse. While Sir 51 has both the ו-verse and an additional פ-verse, Ps 155 has neither. It has been argued that at some stage in the development of the Hebrew alphabet, the פ replaced the ו. If such should prove to be the case then (i) there is no need to 'correct' the text of these poems, and (ii), perhaps a relative chronology for acrostics can be proposed. If so, Sir 51 would be earlier than both Pss 25 and 34."

Watson cites Johnstone (W. Johnstone, "Cursive Phoenician and the Archaic Greek Alphabet," *Kadmos* 17 [1978]: 165–166), who speculates: "Because there are very few words which begin with *w*, writers of acrostic poems were faced with a problem when they reached the sixth letter of the alphabet. In Psalm 25 (though the occurrence of almost consecutive tricola in vv. 5 and 7 in place of the prevailing

Some dispute Nah 1:2–10 as a true acrostic, but at least half of an acrostic is demonstrable. The letters א through כ are found in verses 2–10, and the remainder of the poem contains eleven lines. To the extent that a full acrostic connotes completeness, the half-acrostic conversely connotes chaos (the immanent judgment against Nineveh).

3.3 Multiples of Eleven

Watson speculates that the pattern of eleven or twenty-two lines, even in non-alphabetic poems is characteristic of some laments (e.g., Lamentations 5, Psalm 38). He sees no connection between base-eleven poems in the Hebrew Bible and the eleven-line stanzas in the "Babylonian Theodicy."[31]

The connection between these alphabetical numbers and the acrostic form makes the presence of "pseudo-acrostics" in the Psalter and Lamentations all the more intriguing. Lamentations 5, though it contains twenty-two verses like chapters 1, 2, and 4, is not an acrostic. The reason for this is unclear, but the failure of the fifth chapter to "achieve" wholeness through acrostic form may reflect the themes of chaos and tragedy in the book. The half-acrostic in Nah 1:2–10 may convey a similar sentiment.

Psalms 29 and 32 have eleven lines, and Psalms 33 and 38 have twenty-two lines. These psalms may have been intended to mimic subtly the acrostics found in close proximity within the Psalter.

3.4 Other Alphabetical Features

There are several other ways that the various acrostic poems display alphabetical thinking.

3.4.1 Emphasis on Beginning and End

The stark absence of four middle letters in Psalms 9–10 indicates that these psalms were not intended to be a full acrostic. Rather, these two were placed together because Psalm 9 begins with א, ב, ג, etc., and Psalm 10 ends with ר, שׁ, ת. The alphabet is incomplete, but the alphabetical thinking still prevails.

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bicola suggests that the text may be disordered), and in Psalm 34, no verse beginning with *waw* occurs. Instead, a second verse beginning with *pe* is added at the end of both Psalms. That is, on occasion Hebrew omits consonantal *waw* from sixth position in the alphabet and replaces it at the end of the alphabet with *taw* with a related bilabial consonant."

[31] W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, p. 199.

Psalm 9:2–3 are the א-lines in the acrostic. These verses contain a striking number of first-person imperfect (cohortative) verbs:

אוֹדֶה יְהוָה בְּכָל־לִבִּי	I will give thanks to YHWH with all my heart;
אֲסַפְּרָה כָּל־נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ	I will recount all your wonders.
אֶשְׂמְחָה וְאֶעֶלְצָה בָךְ	I will be glad and rejoice in you;
אֲזַמְּרָה שִׁמְךָ עֶלְיוֹן	I will sing your Name, Most High.

Five verbs begin with א and end with ה. This repetition underscores the "א-ness" of this line and orients the poem toward the alphabet. Similarly, Ps 10:17 as the ת-line begins three cola with that letter:

תַּאֲוַת עֲנָוִים שָׁמַעְתָּ יְהוָה	You hear the desire of the afflicted, YHWH;
תָּכִין לִבָּם	You will strengthen their heart;
תַּקְשִׁיב אָזְנֶךָ	You will incline your ear.

Though תַּאֲוַת is not a second-person imperfect, its verb is second person (שָׁמַעְתָּ), so this contributes to the overall feel of the verse as oriented toward YHWH.

This thinking manifests itself further in the presence of the first two letters of the alphabet as the second letters of the last two key words: שְׁבֹר (Ps 10:15) and תַּאֲוַת (Ps 10:17). Psalm 34 contains a similar feature: the second cola of each of the first three lines (vv. 2–4) begin with the last three letters of the alphabet: וּנְרוֹמְמָה‎, תָּמִיד‎, יִשְׁמְעוּ‎, and[32]

3.4.2. Bracketing

Some acrostics contain layers of literary artistry in the choice of certain letters and the order and number of syllables.

For example, Ceresko notes that the fairly tight acrostic in Psalm 34 has some remarkable features in addition to the full alphabet. Psalm 34 contains twenty-two lines, but replaces the ו-line with an extra פ-line at the end. This shifts the middle of the poem, both alphabetically and in terms of syllable count, to the twelfth letter, ל. The first (v. 2), middle (v. 12), and last (v. 23) lines then form אלף, representing the first letter of the alphabet, and also a verbal root meaning, "to learn, teach." Verse 12 also features the root למד, the name of the line's key letter and a synonym of אלף.

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[32] V. Hurowitz, "Additional Elements of Alphabetical Thinking in Psalm XXXIV," *VT* 52 (2002): 327.

In addition, Hurowitz observes that if the *matres lectionis* are removed from verse two, the line contains twenty-three consonants, the first, middle, and last of which are א, ל, and פ, respectively—אלף. Finally, the last three words of Ps 34:2, 12, and 22 respectively are פִּי, אֲלַמֶּדְכֶם, and יֶאְשָׁמוּ, forming another אלף up the left side of the poem.[33]

4. DISCOURSE CONCERNS

4.1 Verb Usage

Scholarship has acknowledged that the first word of a Hebrew phrase is crucial to the function of that phrase in discourse. This is widely attested in the narrative genre; *wayyiqtol* verbs form the backbone of the narrative, while nominal clauses, *qatal*, *yiqtol*, and other verb forms break the narrative flow to provide background information, introduce new paragraphs, or direct discourse, etc. In poetry, the basic pattern is parallelism, with two or more lines in agreement, contrast, explication, ellipsis, etc.

Alphabetical thinking may have implications for the discourse grammar of these poems. One way to see this is through a study of the frequencies of verb types in these poems, particularly in comparison to other poems.

When the thirteen complete acrostics are compared to the all the non-acrostic Psalms, the difference in usage is intriguing. There is little difference in frequency of the less common verb types: imperative, participle, infinitives, jussive/cohortative, *wayyiqtol* (preterite or *waw*-consecutive) and *wᵉqatal* (*waw*-consecutive perfect). But between the perfect and imperfect there is significant deviation.

A methodological note: even though the two moods are often indistinguishable in form, the imperfect (indicative) and the jussive/ cohortative will be treated as distinct for the purpose of this study. The goal is to understand the differences in semantic value of the imperfect and the perfect. Because the jussive and cohortative verbs are non-indicative, imperfect forms are the only preformative verbs that could conceivably have been chosen in place of perfect forms.

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[33] V. Hurowitz, "Alphabetical Thinking," p. 326.

	Acrostics	%	Non-Acrostic Psalms	%
Perfect	476	**38.5%**	1180	**23.3%**
Imperfect	209	**16.9%**	1320	**26.1%**
Jus/Coh	107	8.7%	521	10.3%
Imperative	140	11.3%	585	11.6%
Participle	179	14.5%	833	16.5%
Inf. Const.	57	4.6%	249	4.9%
Inf. Ab.	4	0.3%	16	0.3%
Waw-Consec.	55	4.4%	315	6.2%
Waw+Pf.	9	0.7%	42	0.8%
Total Verbs	1236		5061	

In the non-acrostic Psalms, the imperfect outnumbers the perfect, 26.1% to 23.3%. In the acrostic poems, the balance shifts quite a bit, with the perfect used 38.5% of the time and the imperfect used 16.9%.

Part of this shift toward the perfect is explained by the inclusion of Lamentations 1–4, which is even more heavily weighted toward the perfect (52.3% to 12.8%). However, even if the verbs found in the four acrostics from Lamentations are removed from the totals, the shift remains significant at 30.7% to 19.3% in favor of the perfect. This represents roughly a 7% shift toward the perfect.

Another significant shift in verb usage in the acrostics as compared to the non-acrostic Psalms is the increased use of the *qal* rather than the Niphal, Hiphil or Hophal. This is particularly evident in the *qal* perfect, which accounts for 15.5% of the verbs in the non-acrostics but 26.5% in the acrostics.

The following table shows the percentages of verb usage in the acrostics as compared to the non-acrostics:

Non-Acrostic Psalms	Qal	D, Dp	H, Hp	N	Dt	Other	Total
Perfect	15.5%	3.2%	2.5%	1.8%	0.1%	0.2%	23.3%
Imperfect	14.8%	4.7%	4.5%	0.9%	0.9%	0.2%	26.1%
Jus/Coh	5.7%	1.7%	2.0%	0.6%	0.2%	0.2%	10.3%
Imperative	5.5%	2.8%	3.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%	11.6%
Participle	10.7%	2.6%	1.3%	1.6%	0.2%	0.1%	16.5%
Inf. Const.	3.1%	0.6%	0.9%	0.1%	0.2%	0.0%	4.9%
Inf. Ab.	0.2%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%
Waw-Consec.	3.3%	0.9%	1.6%	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%	6.2%
Waw+Pf.	0.5%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%
Total	59.5%	16.6%	15.9%	5.4%	1.8%	0.9%	

Acrostics	Qal	D, Dp	H, Hp	N	Dt	Other	Total
Perfect	26.5%	6.3%	3.1%	1.9%	0.1%	0.7%	38.5%
Imperfect	10.2%	1.8%	3.2%	0.9%	0.7%	0.2%	16.9%
Jus/Coh	5.7%	1.3%	1.1%	0.2%	0.3%	0.1%	8.7%
Imperative	6.4%	2.3%	2.3%	0.0%	0.2%	0.1%	11.3%
Participle	10.5%	1.5%	0.9%	1.5%	0.1%	0.0%	14.5%
Inf. Const.	2.4%	0.6%	1.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%	4.6%
Inf. Ab.	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%
Waw-Consec.	2.5%	1.1%	0.7%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	4.4%
Waw+Pf.	0.4%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.7%
Total	64.9%	15.0%	12.5%	4.8%	1.8%	1.1%	

These tables show that in the non-acrostic Psalms, the percentage of preformative verbs (61.6%) is much higher than the percentage of non-preformative verbs (38.0%).[34] In the acrostics, the non-preformative verbs enjoy a slight edge (52.3% to 46.8%).

These phenomena reflect to some degree the alphabetical restrictions on the first word. One of the characteristics of Hebrew poetry is terseness; in contrast to prose and other forms of discourse, sentences are short and word

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[34] Preformative verbs include all imperfect, jussive/cohortative, infinitive construct, *waw*-consecutive, and *waw* + perfect forms; all Niphal, Hiphal/Hophal, and Hitpael forms; and Piel/Pual participial forms. Non-preformative verbs include Qal and Piel/Pual perfect, imperative, and infinitive absolute forms; and Qal participial forms. Perfect and imperative forms for the more obscure stems account for fewer than one percent of occurrences.

counts are low.[35] As a key word, the imperfect is limited to the א, י, נ, and ת lines, whereas the perfect (G- and D-stems) can in theory occur at any point (except the ו line). As key words in the thirteen acrostics, perfects outnumber imperfects, ninety-nine to twelve (in addition to nineteen jussives and co-hortatives). The impossibility of the imperfect as the key word for eighteen out of twenty-two lines accounts for a great deal of the overall weight toward the perfect.

However, it does not account for all of the weight of the perfect. Even if perfects and imperfects used as key words are excluded from the verb totals, the use of the perfect still prevails, 30.5% to 15.9%. It might be that the genre, content, or setting of the alphabetic acrostics lends itself somehow to the use of the perfect. Just as the use of the full alphabet and multiples of twenty-two symbolize completeness, so also the *qatal* is the verb form that most commonly denotes a completed past action or a stative present.

4.2 Implications For Discourse

It is difficult to speak of patterns and rules in poetic discourse, particularly in Hebrew poetry. Whereas Hebrew narrative features the *wayyiqtol* as the primary verbal form, and instructional discourse utilizes the *waw*-consecutive perfect,[36] poetry uses a wider variety of forms. In contrast to the sequential cohesion that is characteristic of narrative, poetic lines are harder to connect. Berlin observes that biblical poetry is paratactic, in that the syntactic connection between two or more poetic lines is often unclear: "The lines, by virtue of their contiguity, are perceived as connected, while the exact relationship between them is left unspecified."[37]

In this way, the acrostic poems have at least one discourse feature, however artificial, that connects each line to the next. Like the *wayyiqtol* in narrative, the alphabet is the macrosyntactic framework of the acrostic poem. Unlike a narrative, however, a poem does not need to progress temporally, though it may do so. A (moderately) rigid discourse framework serves the purpose of narrative discourse quite well but may result in somewhat stilted poetry.

The key question regarding the implications of the observed shift in verb usage is whether the perfect is used to fit the acrostic *artifice* or to fit the

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[35] Compare J. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
[36] R. E. Longacre, "Discourse Perspective on the Hebrew Verb: Affirmation and Restatement," in *Linguistics in Biblical Hebrew* (ed. W. R. Bodine; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992), p. 183.
[37] A. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 6.

acrostic *style*. Most likely the shift toward the perfect is a combination of both these factors.

5. TEST CASES

These analyses will follow the approach outlined by T. Notarius in a recent essay on poetic discourse.[38] Her four analytical criteria are as follows:

1. The participants of the communication, addresser and addressee, and their role in the communication;
2. The main pragmatic inferences of the speech, for example, the main speech acts produced by the speaker;
3. The aspectual and temporal arrangement of the text, namely, the prevailing situation types, aspectual perspectives, and temporal locations;
4. The principles of text progression, which characterize a certain text.[39]

The goal of this approach is to balance "different levels of semantic and pragmatic information and create a dynamic discourse representation."[40] Notarius then analyzes the semantic value of the verbal types used in her chosen poetic text, particularly the perfect, imperfect, and participle.

Psalms 32 and 34 will be the subjects of the present study. These poems were chosen for several reasons. First, their proximity within Book 1 of the Psalter makes them comparable on many levels.[41] Psalm 32 contains certain themes often found in the acrostic poems, for example, confession, instruction, and thanksgiving. Second, the lengths of the poems are conducive to study and extrapolation. Psalm 32 has eleven verses, a feature which we have seen is often significant. Furthermore, Psalm 34 is undisputed as an acrostic, unlike some of the other Book-1 acrostics.[42]

Third, Psalms 34 and 32 contain verb-type "profiles" similar to the overall patterns found in the acrostic poems and non-acrostic Psalms, respec-

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[38] T. Notarius, "Poetic Discourse and the Problem of Verbal Tenses in the Oracles of Balaam," *HS* 49 (2008): 55–86.

[39] T. Notarius, "Poetic Discourse," p. 60.

[40] T. Notarius, "Poetic Discourse," p. 60.

[41] Many scholars recognize Psalms 15–24 as a chiasm with a Torah psalm (19) in the middle. Some also view Psalms 25–34 as a sort of unit beginning and ending with acrostics and centered on Psalm 29. See F. Böhmisch, "Kanonische Schriftauslegung am Beispiel des Psalters," [cited September 1, 2009]. Online: http://www.animabit.de/bibel/psalmen.htm.

[42] W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, disputes Psalms 9–10 as an acrostic.

tively. The dangers of "cherry-picking" examples to test are considerable and will be addressed in the conclusion.

5.1 Psalm 34

5.1.1 Participants

Psalm 34 apparently contains only two participants, though there are many referents. The psalmist is the speaker throughout the poem, which is addressed to an assembly of Israelites, perhaps the psalmist's children or pupils (v. 12). The referents described include the psalmist and his pupils, YHWH (mentioned fourteen times) and his angel (v. 8), the afflicted, the righteous, and evildoers.

These participants and referents are themselves part of the various groups. The psalmist sees himself as afflicted (Ps 34:5, 7; cf. 34:1), and the afflicted who call upon YHWH are righteous (vv. 9–10). The psalmist invites his audience to take refuge in YHWH and thereby join the assembly of the righteous, rather than throwing their lot in with the evildoers.

5.1.2. Pragmatic Inferences and Speech Acts

The poem contains various sorts of speech acts, including praise, promise, prediction, and narrative. These form the argument of the poem, which is found in verse 12: "Come, children, listen to me: let me teach you the fear of YHWH." Within the overall hortatory act of the poem, description and narrative provide support.

The poem begins with an act of praise and promise (34:2–4). The psalmist's praise for YHWH is a covenant act, an acknowledgement of YHWH's faithfulness. The psalmist adjures his audience to do the same.

Psalm 34:5–7 contains a description of the actions that prompted the confession in the first three verses. This section is characterized by the use of the *qatal* form, which occurs nine times.

Psalm 34:8 and 11 contains descriptions of general truth evidenced in verses 5–7. Verses 9–10 contain further exhortation to trust YHWH. The descriptives use three types of verbal forms: two participles, two *qatal* forms, and one *yiqtol* form. The exhortation contains three imperatives and one *yiqtol* form.

Psalm 34:12–15 contains the exhortation at the heart of the poem. From verse 16 to the end, descriptions and predictions prevail. Again, the descriptions and predictions of YHWH's faithfulness are covenant acts by the speaker.

5.1.3 Aspectual and Temporal Arrangement

The hortatory sections of Psalm 34 (vv. 2–4, 9–10, 12–15) are speech-time oriented. These sections are dominated by imperative and jussive/cohortative forms. These verbs commonly have a progressive aspect to them, and they are by nature oriented toward the future.

The narrative and descriptive sections of the poem are somewhat more vague. Psalm 34:5–7 begins with the perfect verbal form and is dominated by that form (eight occurrences). This section seems to describe a specific, past event. The other descriptive sections have gnomic aspect, stating general, non-temporal truths. This is evidenced by the mixture of verbal forms found in these sections; for example, Ps 34:11 parallels two perfects with a participle and an imperfect:

כְּפִירִים רָשׁוּ וְרָעֵבוּ	Lions suffer want and hunger,
וְדֹרְשֵׁי יְהוָה לֹא־יַחְסְרוּ כָל־טוֹב	but those who seek YHWH do not lack any good thing.

The hortatory nature of the psalm lends itself to the use of atomized truths and individual statements of wisdom. These statements have no particular temporal value and are gnomic in aspect.

5.1.4 Text Progression

Psalm 34 has several dimensions of discourse progression. The most obvious of these is the acrostic form, which clearly links each verse to the next. The acrostic form offers added cohesion to lines that might otherwise appear disparate or disjointed; acrostic lines do not have to fit as neatly within the flow of the poem because their place is secure.

This artificial cohesion may have caused a disjunction in the latter half of the poem. The subjects of verses 16 (ע) and 18 (צ) appear to be the same. However, "the righteous" is stated in verse 16 but implied in verse 18. Verse 17 (פ) is about "those who do evil;" the immediate antecedent subject of the verb צָעֲקוּ in verse 18 would be עֹשֵׂי רָע, which is absurd in the context. One possible explanation for this difficulty is that the ע and פ lines were composed in the opposite order and then reversed by later scribes "correcting" the alphabetical order. The rigidity of the structure and differing alphabets caused a slight awkwardness.

As mentioned previously, Ceresko has demonstrated that Psalm 34 also has several other alphabetical features, most notably involving the first, middle and final verses and the letters אלף. This feature has the effect of

emphasizing the ל line as the climax of the poem. Like several of the acrostics, Psalm 34 teaches wisdom, which is "the fear of YHWH." The verses before and after this central verse are roughly balanced between exhortation, narrative, and description. Also, several prominent words occur both before and after verse 12. The word כֹּל appears eight times (3.72%).

Psalm 34 progresses logically rather than temporally. The argument alternates exhortations (vv. 2–4, 9–10, 12–15) with descriptions.

5.1.5 Verbal Forms

After the superscription, Psalm 34 contains fifty-two verb occurrences:

Form	Occurrences
Perfect	14
Imperfect	8
Jus/Coh	6
Imperative	11
Participle	9
Inf. Const.	3
Waw-Consec.	1

The jussive, cohortative, and imperative forms dominate the hortatory sections; sixteen of the seventeen occur in Ps 34:2–4, 9–10, and 12–15. The lone *wayyiqtol* form occurs in verse 8, paralleled with a participle.

The narrative section (34:5–7) is dominated by perfect forms; eight out of nine verbs are *qatal* verbs.

Perhaps the most important sections for the present study are those in which the main verbal forms (imperfect, perfect, and participle) are mixed. In these sections, the verbs may take temporal and aspectual value from the first in the series. Psalm 34:16–19 contain three *qatal* verbs, two participles, and a single *yiqtol* form. The predicates of the פ and ע lines are the implied verb of being; however, the object of the פ line is the participle עֹשֵׂי. Assuming that the order of these two verses is reversed (see discussion above), this verb, as the lead verb, lends its continuous aspect and varied temporal value to the rest of the section. Thus the three *qatal* forms in verse 18 are understood as having gnomic aspect. The *yiqtol* in verse 19 similarly has vague temporal value.

Verse	Verbal Form	Time/Aspect	Translation
פ (17)	(to be); participle	non-temporal; continuous	"is against those doing evil"
ע (16)	(to be)	non-temporal;	"eyes…are toward"
	(to be)	gnomic	"ears…are toward"
צ (18)	*qatal*		"they cry out"
	qatal	general; gnomic	"YHWH hears"
	qatal		"he delivers"
ק (19)	(to be); participle	non-temporal; gnomic	"YHWH is near"
	yiqtol	general; iterative	"he *always* delivers"

The final four verses contain a similarly varied set of verbal forms: four *yiqtol* forms, four participles, and one *qatal*. Again, the fact that the section begins with the implied verb of being signals non-temporal or general quality of the following participles and imperfects.

5.2 Psalm 32

5.2.1 Participants

There are at least three and possibly four parties in Psalm 32: the psalmist, YHWH, the audience of the faithful, and possibly an individual disciple of the psalmist.

Psalm 32	Speaker	Addressee
1–2	Psalmist	(general)
3–5a, 5c	Psalmist	YHWH
5b	Psalmist	Psalmist
6–7	Psalmist	YHWH (implicitly, the righteous)
8–9	YHWH	Psalmist
	OR	
	Psalmist	Pupil
10–11	Psalmist	The righteous

The psalmist begins with a general statement about the relationship between YHWH and the forgiven man (Ps 32:1–2). The psalmist then recounts

his own experience with forgiveness; in verses 3–5 YHWH is the addressee. Nested within the narrative is a comment made by the psalmist to himself as he resolves to confess his sin.

Psalm 32:6–7 offers exhortation and praise, respectively. In both verses, YHWH is the explicit addressee, though the statement in verse 6 is directed toward the faithful listener.

In Ps 32:8–9, the addressee and possibly the speaker change. The speaker promises to instruct and guide the addressee. This is either the psalmist addressing a pupil or YHWH addressing the psalmist. The latter scenario is more probable, because the promise to keep his "eye" on the addressee implies omniscience. Also, the immediately preceding and succeeding verses are about YHWH surrounding the psalmist himself (v. 7c) and "the one who trusts in YHWH's covenant faithfulness" (v. 10b). For the psalmist to address a pupil would be inconsistent with the rest of the psalm. In this instance, content directs the understanding of grammar.

In Ps 32:10–11 the speaker is once again the psalmist, but this time he is addressing the assembly of the righteous. The truths of verses 1, 2, and 7 are restated in verse 10, and verse 11 is an adjuration to praise YHWH.

5.2.2 Pragmatic Inferences and Speech Acts

In Ps 32:1–2, the speaker's main purpose is to urge his audience toward confession of sin and honesty before YHWH; therefore it is an *argument*. The author is stating a general truth for which he will offer evidence.

In Ps 32:3–5, the speaker's purpose is to give a *report* of a personal experience with sin and forgiveness. The speaker's recounted comment to himself in verse 5c is more than a personal resolution. This confession is not merely a description of an act, but the act itself.

Psalm 32:6–7 continues the *argument* of verses 1–2. The speaker's statement of trust in YHWH is itself a covenant act, acknowledging YHWH's faithfulness to the covenant.

In Ps 32:8, YHWH as the speaker makes a *promise* of blessing to the psalmist. Verse 9 contains an *exhortation*, the first fulfillment of the promise.

Psalm 32:10 continues the psalmist's *argument* of verses 1, 2, and 7, now evidenced in personal narrative (vv. 3–5) and YHWH's own promise (v. 8). Verse 11 is also an *argument*, an invitation to the audience to accept the previous argument and accompanying promise.

5.2.3 Aspectual and Temporal Arrangement

Psalm 32:1–2 contains statements of general truth. These verses are marked by descriptives, including two passive participles (v. 1) and the implied verb of being (vv. 1a, 2a–b). There is only one finite verb in this section, an imperfect with iterative or continuous aspect. Overall, these two verses have a *gnomic* aspect. Temporally, these verses describe a present continuous state resulting from a past action.

Psalm 32:3–5 is *descriptive* of completed past actions. These verses contain all six *qatal* forms in the poem, in addition to two *yiqtol* forms. The *qatal* forms each have an aorist or perfect aspect. The first *yiqtol* form (v. 4) has iterative or continuous aspect, made explicit by the temporal adverbs יוֹמָם וָלַיְלָה. The second can be read as a simple past.

Psalm 32:6, 9, and 11 contain directive discourse, marked by the use of jussive and imperative forms.

Psalm 32:7 and 10, like verses 1–2, are descriptive. Verse 7 clearly has a continuous aspect, but the verbs are temporally vague. Verse 10 seems to have a non-temporal, gnomic aspect, similar to verses 1–2.

Psalm 32:8 is YHWH's promise to the psalmist, marked by cohortatives. Though the speech is explicitly self-directive, an exhortation to the psalmist to submit is implied (and made clear in the following verse).

5.2.4 Text Progression

Psalm 32 explores a single theme, and the text progresses *temporally*. Events are anterior, simultaneous, and posterior to the speech-time, and some descriptive statements are non-temporal.

Past	Present	Future
	→ 1–2	
3–5a, 5c		
5b →		
		6
	← 7 →	
		8–9 →
	← 10 →	
		11 →

5.2.5 Verbal Forms

There are thirty-one verbs in Psalm 32:

Form	Occurrences
Perfect	6
Imperfect	8
Jus/Coh	6
Imperative	3
Participle	3
Inf. Const.	5

The perfect forms are concentrated in the narrative past section of the psalm; all six occur in verses 3–5. Two of the participles are passive and occur as descriptives in verse 1; the third participle is a substantival usage in verse 10. The jussive, cohortative, and imperative forms occur in the predictive and hortatory sections of the poem (vv. 6, 8–9, 11).

The most versatile verbal form in this poem is the imperfect, which occurs in every section. Its tense and aspect range from present continuous (vv. 2, 7), past continuous or iterative (v. 3), simple past or past punctiliar, and future (vv. 6, 8, 10).

This versatility characterizes the imperfect generally. The temporal orientation of this poem dictates that the perfect be understood as a simple past, while the imperfect is used to describe past, present, future, and non-temporal (gnomic) actions.

5.3 Comparison

These two Psalms, while containing similar themes, present their content in somewhat different ways. The text of Psalm 34 is structured around the acrostic form, whereas Psalm 32 tells a story. The content of Psalm 34 is more topically diverse; the acrostic form both permits and in places necessitates less thematic unity. Psalm 32 more or less stays with the topic of sin and salvation.

The perfect verbal form is one of the tools with which the poet crafts the acrostic. However, the acrostic artifice accounts for only three of the fourteen uses of the perfect. This verbal form fits the style and content as well as the alphabet. Had the psalmist chosen not to limit himself with the acrostic pattern, the lines and strophes of Psalm 34 could have been arranged any number of different ways. For example, the author could have grouped the

hortatory sections together after the narrative/descriptive sections, as in Psalm 32.

Psalm 32 tells a story, and temporally arranged statements form the structure of the poem. The verbal forms are more diverse and mixed. In most instances, the verb choice more precisely fits the feel of the line and the discourse progression overall. Psalm 32 has narrative structure that links the individual lines. Were the poem to have been constructed as a tight acrostic, the narrative flow might have been more stilted.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary

Some types of literary artistry are associated with certain themes or content. For example, the limerick in English nearly always conveys humor or sarcasm. An adaptation of John Donne's Holy Sonnet X ("Death, Be Not Proud") to the limerick form would sound highly inappropriate and possibly blasphemous to a native English speaker.

The Hebrew alphabetic acrostic does not appear to have such limitations on themes or content. The fourteen biblical acrostics include a range of emotions, themes, and content. Furthermore, each of these themes is found in other poems, so the content of acrostic poetry is not exclusive to that form. Neither were there any limits, it seems, on vocabulary; the acrostics demonstrate some consistency of usage across key words, but these common key words are the most frequently used words in the entire Hebrew canon.

Hoping to inspire further inquiry into the nature and purpose of the acrostic form, Ceresko writes:

> Granted the close association of these poems with wisdom circles, I suggest a further factor at work, a characteristic concern of those wisdom writers: that effort to wrest some kind of order and coherence out of the variety and seeming disconnectedness of the experiences of everyday life and to express that order in language, especially language in its written form.[43]

The acrostic form is essentially an imposition of order onto disorder, a way of making connections where none is apparent or strengthening existing connections.

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[43] A. Ceresko, "The ABCs of Wisdom," p. 102.

Given the limited set of tools with which the Hebrew poet could craft an acrostic, the *qatal* form occurs more frequently in the acrostic poetry. Furthermore, the *qatal* form is the form that most commonly denotes completed or gnomic aspect. The *qatal* form accommodates both the acrostic artifice and the acrostic style.

6.2 Further Study

Three issues raised by this study of acrostic poetry may be worthy of further inquiry: 1) the ratio of verb-initial clauses to nominal (and other) clauses; 2) the acrostic psalms that do not appear to shift toward the *qatal*; and 3) whether the prevalence of the *qatal* form within the acrostic poetry should have any influence on the understanding of the *qatal* form as having completed aspect.

If the acrostic psalms show an increase in verb-initial clauses relative to psalms of similar length, then the shift toward the perfect may only be in order to fit the acrostic. If the ratios of verb-initial clauses to nominal clauses are similar in both sets of poems, then the shift toward the perfect in the acrostics may indicate that the perfect fits the acrostic style better than the imperfect.

Though the overall tendency of the acrostics is to prefer the perfect, several psalms do not fit the "profile" of an acrostic. Some of the more noteworthy examples include:

	Pf.	Impf.
Psalm 25	15.6%	24.4%
Psalm 37	15.2%	28.6%
Psalm 145	None	48.6%

In these Psalms 25 and 37, the relative absence of the perfect is compensated for by the use of the *qal* and *piel* imperative and *qal* participle. Psalm 25 uses the *qal* imperative six times as key words. Psalm 37 uses six imperatives (five *qal*, one *piel*) and four participles as key words. These give the poems a different shape and feel.

Psalm 145 presents a particular difficulty for the present thesis, because the imperfect prevails so strongly and the perfect is completely absent. The acrostic is composed using nominal clauses (eight times), predicate adjectives (five times), participles (three times) and other short words. The significant number of imperfect and participle forms gives the poem a

progressive aspect and orients the poem toward the future. The artificial use of so many nominal and adjectival clauses makes the poem seem stilted and contrived in certain places. The author may have intentionally excluded the perfect to emphasize the future/progressive aspect, but he then had to resort to less-common constructions in order to fit his chosen constraints. However, the poem's coherent theme and message are made to seem all the more complete by the acrostic form.[44] Psalm 145 may be the exception that proves the rule.

Related to the "exceptional" acrostics are the "pseudo-acrostics," such as Psalms 16, 29, 32, 33, and 38, and Lamentations 5 (cf. §3.3). If indeed these poems are intended to feel like acrostics, what features do they share with the acrostics besides the number of lines?

It remains to be seen whether the completeness of the acrostic form should have any bearing on the understanding of the *qatal* form. Usage in context should still be the primary consideration when interpreting a given verbal form. The usage of the *qatal* in the acrostics cannot be the basis for an understanding of the perfect, but it may be a helpful component. Further study in other sub-genres of poetry would be necessary in order to demonstrate links between the *qatal* form and other discourse features connoting completeness.

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[44] Psalm 145 "compensates" for the lack of the perfect by using the word כֹּל seventeen times (8.25% of the words in the Psalm, as compared to 1.25% in the non-acrostic Psalms).