

“Halbnachts steh' ich auf”

An Exploration
into the Translation
of Biblical Acrostics

Amersfoort, February 2012
M.J. van Eijzeren

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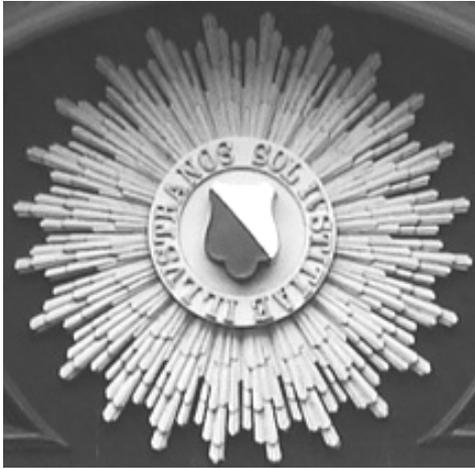
An Exploration into the Translation of Biblical Acrostics

Preface	3
1. Introduction	4
2. Translation Problems	6
2.1 Abecedarian	6
2.1.1 Psalm 9-10	8
2.1.2 Psalm 25	10
2.1.3 Psalm 34	12
2.1.4 Psalm 37	13
2.1.5 Psalm 111-112	14
2.1.6 Psalm 119	15
2.1.7 Psalm 145	17
2.1.8 Proverbs 31:10-31	19
2.1.9 Lamentations 1-4	20
2.1.10 Nahum 1	24
2.2 Non-Abecedarian	26
2.2.1 Psalm 96:11	26
2.2.2 Esther	27
2.3 Hebrew-Latin writing	28
2.4 Function	30
<i>Completeness, Mnemonic, Stylistic, Display of skill, Order and organization,</i>	
<i>Enhancement of the message, Magic, Pedagogic or didactic,</i>	
<i>Signpost to embedded message, Clue to way of reading, Responsive structuring,</i>	
<i>Dedication or reference, Authorship</i>	
2.5 Cultural Gaps	38
2.6 Recapitulation	39
3. Acrostic Translations	40
3.1 Bible translations preserving acrostics	40
3.1.1 Franz Delitzsch & Carl Friedrich Keil (1872, 1894) – <i>Biblischer Kommentar</i>	41
3.1.2 Bob MacDonald (2010-2011)	42
3.1.3 Ronald Knox (1944)	43
3.1.4 Four Friends (1870) – <i>The Psalms Chronologically Arranged</i>	44

3.1.5 Pieter Oussoren – <i>Naardense Bijbel</i> (2004)	45
3.1.6 Frans Croese – <i>Tot lof van God</i> (2010)	47
3.1.7 Other acrostic translations	48
<i>Mary Sidney Herbert, William Binnie, New Jerusalem Bible, Easy English, Brenda Boerger, Dru Brooke-Taylor, Psalmen voor Nu</i>	
3.2 Bible translations without acrostics	55
4. Translation Solutions	58
4.1 Techniques to preserve the acrostic	59
4.1.1 Sound- or sequential equality	59
4.1.2 Change in word order	64
4.1.3 Change in sentence structure	66
4.1.4 Line reversal	67
4.1.5 Paraphrasing	68
4.1.6 Addition or omission	69
4.1.7 Neologisms, archaisms, rare words, spelling	70
4.1.8 Second word in line, abbreviation, contraction	71
4.1.9 Adjustment to acrostic structure	72
4.1.10 Repetition	72
4.1.11 Alternative form of address	72
4.2 Psalm 9-10 – One incomplete acrostic	73
4.3 Psalm 25 and 34 – אֶלֶף pattern	74
4.4 Psalm 37 – ע	75
4.5 Psalm 119 – Repetition or variety, different words for Torah	76
4.6 Psalm 145 – Missing ך, king-acrostic	77
4.7 Proverbs 31 – She-initial	78
4.8 Lamentations – פ-ע reversal	79
4.9 Nahum 1 – Incomplete acrostic	80
4.10 Psalm 96:11 and Esther – יהוה-acrostic	81
4.11 Paratext	83
5. Conclusion	86
6. Bibliography	88
Appendix I Biblical Acrostics in Acrostic Translation	94

Preface

The preceding years I received the privilege to study under the Utrecht University's motto:



Sol Iustitiae Illustra Nos

The walk to university premises in the Binnenstad
often reminded me of this unceasing prayer
and the merciful might of its Addressee,
the One who inspired the Scriptures
intended to be translated
and spread into all the world
until the day which terminates the night
when the Lamb of God will be the everlasting Light

And thus, until then, frequently holds true – *halbnachts steh' ich auf*: to finish reading a captivating essay on the cross-cultural translation of metaphor, to end the translation work for the day, or to wake up and long for the time when translation will no longer be necessary.

Grateful that this *Sol Iustitiae* enabled me to complete my studies with this thesis,
thankful for the interest of family and friends,

Amersfoort, February 2012

M.J. van Eijzeren

1. Introduction

One originally Hebrew poem, two English translations:

Always will I give thanks unto Jehovah,
and His praise shall be ever in my mouth!
Boast thou in Jehovah, O my soul,
for the humble shall hear thereof and be glad!
Come with me and praise Jehovah,
let us magnify His name together!
Diligently I sought Jehovah and He heard me;
yea, He delivered me out of all my fear.
Enlightened are all they that have an eye unto Him;
their faces are not ashamed.
Great was the crying of the poor and Jehovah heard him,
yea, and saved him out of all his troubles.
Help cometh from Jehovah to them that fear Him,
for His angel campeth round about them.
Jehovah is gracious; O taste and see,
how blessed is the man that trusteth in Him.¹

I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.
Oh, magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together!
I sought the LORD, and he answered me
and delivered me from all my fears.
Those who look to him are radiant,
and their faces shall never be ashamed.
This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him
and saved him out of all his troubles.
The angel of the LORD encamps
around those who fear him, and delivers them.
Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him!²

What immediately catches the eye is the alphabetic sequence in the first, acrostic, translation. An acrostic is a short verse composition, so constructed that one or more sets of letters (usually the initial, though sometimes the middle or final letters of the lines), taken consecutively, form words. The word ‘acrostic’ is derived from the Greek *ακροστιχίδα*, which is formed from ‘acros’ (outermost) and ‘stichos’ (a line of poetry). The term may also refer to a literary work employing this technique. The words formed may be anything of importance – names, proverbs, or any other message. A subgroup of the acrostic is the abecedarius (formed from the first four letters of the Latin alphabet), in which the first letter of each line of a poem or the first letter of the first word of each stanza taken in order form the alphabet. These have also been labelled as sequence acrostics, the non-abecedarian acrostics as message acrostics.³

Acrostics are to be found in diverse manifestations of literature, and also in what may well be the best known book in the world, a book in which many might not expect to find them – the Bible. This collection of history, prophecy, wisdom, psalms, letters, and revelations is written in both prose and poetry, of which the latter appears much more frequent than is apparent in most Bible translations.

¹ Psalm 34:1-9 (Four Friends)

² Psalm 34:1-9 (English Standard Version)

³ J.F. Brug: 1, 5

The Old Testament contains at least thirteen abecedaries: Psalm 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119 and 145, Proverbs 31:10-31 (The Song of the Valiant Woman) and the first four of the five Lamentations of Jeremiah. In addition, Nahum chapter 1 seems to be the most disputed biblical alefbetical acrostic. As the above translation of Psalm 34 resembled already, reproducing the alefbetical pattern is not without complications. Moreover, most of these acrostic passages do not meticulously stick to the alefbetical pattern. Besides these alphabetical acrostics, there are also some non-alphabetical instances identified in the Old Testament, though other scholars call into question their existence. Psalm 96:11 shows a name acrostic on JHWH, the Name of God. This acrostic also seems to appear repeatedly in the Book of Esther. Another message acrostic is found in Psalm 145. In the New Testament, no instances have been identified.

Many persons familiar with the Bible are unfamiliar with the existence of biblical acrostics, as most translations tend to neglect their existence, probably considering this poetic characteristic of no importance or taking for granted that it cannot be preserved in translation, implying that such a rigorous separation between means and meaning is possible. Some translators though aspire to preserve both means and meaning, in one way or another. This calls for the following intriguing question:

What are the functions of the Biblical acrostics, what are the problems attached to translating them, and what possible solutions are there?

Chapter 2 provides an analysis of the corpus: the biblical acrostic passages and the specific translation problems attached to each. Consequently, to be able to weigh the importance of preserving the acrostic format in translation, their possible functions will be examined, followed by some notes on culture and translation. Chapter 3 lists and characterizes several translations preserving the acrostics (in part or in whole), prior to examining how they approach these problems. Finally, chapter 4 examines how these translators handled the specific problems.

2. Translation Problems

Chapter 2.1 and 2.2 will introduce the Biblical acrostics, both abecedarian and non-abecedarian, and chalk out their context as far as is helpful in this thesis. The specific translation problems attached to each will be described. Chapter 2.3 discusses the problems arising out of the different alphabets. The possible function(s) of this poetic format will be described in 2.4, whereupon 2.5 pursues some potential consequences of a differing source- and target context for the acrostic.

2.1 Abecedaria

The Abecedarian acrostics are Psalm 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119 and 145, Proverbs 31:10-31 and Lamentations 1-4. Some of these include all the letters of the Hebrew alefbet, some show irregularities. Generally speaking, the problem of incomplete or irregular acrostics can be approached in only a few ways: at one point in time they were regular; they never have been regular, though it is unclear why; or the missing letters have been omitted intentionally, whereby the poet included extra meaning into the text.

Jamieson answers for the deviations explaining that the Psalmist sometimes adapted the pattern “so as to make the form, when needful, bend to the sense”⁴, which seems to imply the view that an explanation for the alefbetical irregularities needs not be looked for, because there is no reason other than an occasional adaptation which better suited the poet.

Another reason for the omission of some letters in the alefbet is sought in “the dilapidated or faded state of the copy from which our text was derived at the time of fixing the book, during the time of the Second Temple, for the Rabbis of the Mishnah quote the Massoretic text, and the same is closely adhered to in the Greek Version. It is difficult to imagine a cause for an interpolator to interfere and alter the text, and surely he would have written understandable Hebrew!”⁵

I think there to be several valid objections against these opinions. In the first place, some irregularities appear more than once, like the ϑ - δ reversal and the final δ -verse. Secondly, as explained in chapter 2.3, it is unlikely that originally perfectly alefbetical poems were copied inaccurately by the Soferim and Masorets, who worked painstakingly precise and used letter counts to make sure they transcribed their source texts literally. Thirdly, the irregularities often make sense (chapter 2).

Before proceeding with the separate abecedarians, I will first introduce the view of R. Benun that the disruptions of the alefbetical pattern are deliberate and functional, in that they direct the reader to each Psalm’s embedded message. His name will return several times in the following paragraphs.

⁴ Jamieson, Fausset & Brown: 9

⁵ M. Berlin: 678

Benun lists the acrostics in the Psalter and mentions their deviations from the simple and predictable alefbetical pattern one should expect:⁶

Book	Psalm	Missing Letter(s)	Missing Letter Count	Letter Added To End	Total Letters
1	9/10	א, ב, ג, ד, ה, ו, ז	7	-	15
1	25	י and כ	2	פ	20+1=21
1	34	י	1	פ	21+1=22
1	37	ש	1	-	21
5	111	Complete	0	-	22
5	112	Complete	0	-	22
5	119	Complete	0	-	22
5	145	א	1	-	21

Contrary to the view that the acrostics originally all followed the alefbet precisely, but were textually corrupted over time, he believes all the abovementioned deviations to be intentional alterations, signalling disruptions “at precise locations in the text and other more subtle anomalies” and seeing that the poems are “otherwise very structured.” The omissions are meant to capture the reader’s attention and to incite him to search for an explanation: they are a “sophisticated literary device intended to lead the reader to uncover the psalms’ structures and facilitate transmittal of their messages.” The acrostics are not just a mnemonic device or a nice poetic characteristic, so Benun.⁷

NB With regard to the opinion that the once perfect acrostics have been textually corrupted over time, it can be said that these supposed alterations then necessarily must have taken place in one of the earliest manuscripts, and all the other manuscripts containing the Psalms or Lamentations must have been destroyed, perished or gone lost; otherwise remainders should have been preserved of both manuscripts with *uncorrupted* acrostics *and* with the versions we now have. The fact that we only have the ‘imperfect’ versions backs their authenticity. Psalm 145 is the only exception: see 2.1.7 for a more detailed discussion. In addition, it is more likely that the irregularities are intentional rather than unintentional, since scribes or editors of an acrostic text will complete rather than delete (part of) the pattern.

Benun finally enters into the coherence of the first four acrostic Psalms, which he sees to be closely interrelated, in theme as well as in word count: it is absolutely out of the question whether they have been corrupted over time, Benun says.⁸

⁶ R. Benun: 2. The first column, ‘Book’, refers to the common division of the Psalter in five parts: Psalm 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, and 107-150. Acrostics appear in Book 1 (imperfect alefbeticals) and Book 5 (almost all perfectly alefbetical). In this paper Benun discusses Psalm 9/10, 25, 34, and 37. At the close he writes his article to be “the first in a series that will attempt to explicate all the acrostics in Psalms and Lamentations. The missing Nun in Ps 145, the reversal of the letters *pe* and *ayin* in Lam 2, 3, and 4, and the twenty two letters of Lam 5 are all explained as literary techniques using the same system we set out in this paper.” Unfortunately, a new article in this series appears not to be published yet.

⁷ R. Benun: 1-3, 23

⁸ R. Benun: 22-23

2.1.1 Psalm 9-10

Though these Psalms are presented as two separate poems in most Bibles, the majority of scholars agrees they belong together, chiefly because they form one acrostic, with the letters א to ט in Psalm 9 and ל to ת in Psalm 10. At the same time, it is the most deficient acrostic in the Psalms. Several letters are missing (the acrostic translations indicate twelve up to seventeen of them), and of the others, some are found not in the initial words of verses but somewhere in the middle – the reason why there is no scholarly agreement on them.

The Psalm's heading gives its author, David, the indication 'to the choir-master', and a musicological instruction often translated as 'On the dead of the son', probably the melody of another well-known song in those days.

Its strophe arrangement is not easy to determine and translations often differ in this respect. The first four lines after the heading all begin with א: "das Vorspiel des Liedes."⁹ Verse 4 has ב, ג, ד, ה, ו, ז, ח, ט, after which the pattern becomes more obscure. Verse 1, 12, 14, 15 and 17 of Psalm 10 then have ל, מ, נ, ס, ע, פ, and ק. Psalm 10 has no introduction of its own.

Strikingly, ת-initial occurs three times in the penultimate triplet of this broken acrostic, which together with the א-quartet may function as extra evidence for the purposeful composition of this acrostic. Delitzsch reproduces the four A-initials but only one T-initial.

Various interpretations exist; for example: ט is missing, ז and ו are reversed, as well as ע and פ, and ס is absent.¹⁰ Or: the missing letters are ט, ז, ו, ס, ע, פ and צ.¹¹ Or: only five letters are missing, viz. ט, ז, ו, ס, and ע.¹²

Why have these two Psalms become separated and part of the acrostic letters, and their accompanying lines, been lost? Possibly because "the written stage was altered [...] by faulty memory during the oral transmission",¹³ or as a result from "the dilapidated or faded state of the copy from which our text was derived at the time of fixing the book"¹⁴, or similar reasons.¹⁵ Bittenwieser attempted to reconstruct the 'original' psalm.¹⁶

These theories assume that Psalms 9-10 originally formed a perfect acrostic – a hypothesis lacking supporting manuscripts or material. Casper Labuschagne defends his view that these defects are deliberate and gives an interesting explanation for the missing letters ט, ז, ו, ס, and ע: "[T]hese letters were deliberately omitted by the author in order to achieve a *hidden acrostic*. Taken in their normal alphabetic order, these five letters constitute the words [...] 'the *blood* of a *wayfarer*'. This ingenious little acrostic may be interpreted as a subtle comment on the fact that YHWH is called 'the

⁹ F. Delitzsch: 116

¹⁰ S.L. Terrien: 138

¹¹ R. Benun: 2, R: Gordis: 104-105

¹² C.J. Labuschagne 2009 on Psalm 9-10: 2

¹³ S.L. Terrien: 140

¹⁴ M. Berlin: 678

¹⁵ R. Gordis: 105, M. Bittenwieser: 423

¹⁶ M. Bittenwieser: 419-428

avenger of *blood*' (9:13), and more specifically, as an explication of the metaphor of the lion lurking in ambush to seize an innocent *passer-by* (10:9-10). Therefore, we need not endeavour on our part to 'restore' the presumed corrupted alphabetic acrostic."¹⁷

Benun argues that no verses or words are missing and provides threefold evidence for this claim: the poem is split exactly in the middle both in its division of letters of the alefbet and in terms of word counts, the λ verse ends with a τ "as a small consolation for the missing verse and to hint that its absence is intended", and an analysis of word counts of four verses seems to indicate that not one word is missing.¹⁸

To explain the disruptions in Psalm 9-10 (not only some letters are missing, but also the primary-attached verse pattern is disrupted, he says), Benun looks at its contents – "the situation is one in which the wicked are in power oppressing the afflicted" – and main themes: praise and request. Psalm 10:2-11 does not fit in either one of them, but "goes into the inner thinking of the wicked person and analyzes how he justifies his actions", this passage being the place where six letters of the alefbetical sequence are missing. The wicked thus represents "a breakdown in appropriate divine order"¹⁹, which the author reflected by means of a disruption in the pattern.

Benun explains the other deviations in this Psalm likewise: the pattern is disrupted immediately after the first occurrence of the word 'wicked', to be restored only when the ν -verse begins with a proclamation of God's judgment, which restores everything. That τ and its verses are nowhere to be found represents the complete erasing of evil where the surrounding verses tell about. Seemingly missing verses (where there is an alefbetic initial, but without the expected number of verse lines attached) he explains in the same way: the mentioning of the wicked person causes the omission of verse lines following τ .²⁰

Others think it impossible that Psalm 9 and 10 should be one, arguing that they differ in form and content and are complete poems in themselves, nevertheless most likely being written by the same author.²¹ This is a minority view however, and rebuttal refers to Psalms with a similar construction, at the same time nuancing the supposed sharp demarcation between Psalm 9 and 10 and pointing out their stylistic resemblance.²²

Yet others suppose that the acrostic never has been complete.²³ The author may have abandoned the alefbetical structure to incorporate part of an older poem.²⁴ Evidently, there is no consensus on both the unity of these two Psalms and their being preserved faultlessly or not.

¹⁷ C. Labuschagne, on Psalm 9-10: 1-2

¹⁸ R. Benun: 3-4

¹⁹ R. Benun: 6

²⁰ R. Benun: 6-7

²¹ F. Delitzsch: 115, 123-124

²² R. Gordis: 107-108, cf. C. Labuschagne 2009

²³ Amongst others F. Delitzsch (footnote p. 124)

²⁴ Four Friends: 141, 329

2.1.2 Psalm 25

Psalm 25, a prayer for protection and forgiveness, is chiefly distichal. Each strophe begins with the successive alefbetical letter, with a few exceptions: ׀ and ב are omitted,²⁵ two successive verses begin with ׀, and the last verse begins again with a ב.

Why did the poet not adhere to the alefbetical pattern perfectly? Possibly just because he thought it no problem to deviate from this norm whenever he could not find a word with the required letter. In 1938 Moses Bittenwieser noted: “critics are now agreed [that the final ב-verse] is not original but was added later when the psalm was adopted for liturgical purposes.”²⁶ Later, other, better-reasoned explanations have been given though, the most frequent of which sees importance in the ‘אלפ pattern’ or ‘aleph-lamed-pe pattern’.

The ׀ is the 11th letter of 22 in the alefbet. With the shown omissions and additions to the alefbetical pattern, and counting only one ׀, ׀ is both preceded and followed by ten letters, thus becoming the middle character. In combination with the first, א, and the (now) last, ב, it forms an acrostic on its own, spelling “aleph” – which is the first letter of the alefbet, but also the verbal stem meaning ‘to learn, teach’.²⁷ This may be meant as an exhortation to internalize the lesson of the psalm.²⁸

Benun links Psalm 9-10 and 25 to each other: just as he saw ׀ and ב in Psalm 9-10 marking the places where order was restored, he explains their omission in Psalm 25 as marking the places where order returns. He also points out that ׀ and ב “are the two main letters in the word for hope – קיה. How ironic that in a psalm whose theme is hope, the letters that spell hope should be missing!”²⁹

Tur-Sinai ascribes the missing ׀ and extra ב in Psalm 25 and 34 to variations in the arrangement in the alefbet over time. Concerning the missing ׀, he assumes that biblical Hebrew contained no words beginning with this letter, except the ׀-conjunction. He refers to Psalm 119, in which all eight ׀-verselines are constructed with the help of this conjunction, as extra evidence for this assumption.³⁰ However, this does not seem a very plausible explanation: seeing that this ׀-conjunction can be employed so easily in combination with so many different words, why should the composer of Psalms 25 and 34 not have used this same conjunction for the ׀-verse?

Concerning the extra ב-initial, Tur-Sinai writes: “There seem to have been in that period another kind of ב, which occurred in the word פדה, and which was different in pronunciation from that of the words פגה, פגים.”³¹ He admits though that there is no data to confirm this hypothesis.

²⁵ C.J. Labuschagne (2008, on Psalm 25: 3) however detects the vav-line within the he-verseline, and the qoph somewhere in the middle of the tsade-verse.

²⁶ M. Bittenwieser: 810

²⁷ J.F. Brug: 3, A.R. Ceresko: 101

²⁸ T. Longman and P. Enns: 3

²⁹ R. Benun: 12 (Consult this article for a more detailed explanation of Benun’s theory.)

³⁰ H. Tur-Sinai: 283

³¹ H. Tur-Sinai: 283

A final explanation looks into the atbash, a substitution cipher for the alefbeth. In this code, the first letter of the alefbeth is represented by the last, the second letter by the second last, and so on. (אתבייש, ATBaSH, for Aleph, Tav, Beth, Shin.) According to Saul Leeman, it appears that the author of Psalms 25 and 34 compensates for the ך by concluding with a ם – which is, in the ATBaSH, a ך. Leeman assumes the ך is omitted because there are practically no words beginning with this letter, except the conjunction, and that the ם is added at the end rather than in ך's place, because such an insertion would affect the alefbet more than an omission.³²

³² S. Leeman

2.1.3 Psalm 34

The distichal Psalm 34, a song of praise on יהוה, is similar to Psalm 25 in several respects. Again ו is omitted and final פ added. ק is retained, though.

The same אלפ pattern can be read in this Psalm, though slightly different: since ק is maintained, ל is only the exact middle letter if you do not reckon with the final פ. The author may have thought it more important maintain the 22 line pattern than to have ל in the exact middle.³³ It has been considered as a later addition, “doubtless added for the purpose of conforming with the superstition ‘not to end with words of evil import.’”³⁴ Alternatively, a syllable count identifies the middle of the ל-verse as almost the exact middle of the psalm (leaving the heading out of consideration), thus also arriving at the more or less precise middle.³⁵ Ceresko found the same pattern inside verse 2; of its 23 consonants, the first, middle and last again spell out אלפ.³⁶

Hurowitz discovered yet more alefbetical sequences in Psalm 34, adding up to a total of six: (1) the first, the abecedarian acrostic without ו; (2) an overriding אלייה array made from the initial letters of the first and middle lines of the acrostic and the last line of the entire psalm; (3) an initial verse with an אלפ array (see above by Ceresko); (4) a twenty-two verse, ת, ש, ר, א reversed abecedarian mesostic; (5) a twenty-one verse reversed אלפ telestic; (6) a final verse with an inverted אלייה array.³⁷

Benun again compares this Psalm to 9-10 and 25 and argues that the ו-verse is missing in 25 and 34 “because ו represents God’s presence, as seen in the ו verse of Ps 9 [...] – ‘But the Lord abides forever; He has set up His throne for judgment.’ [...] While the acrostic of Pss 9/10 was a meditation on the effects of evil, Pss 25 and 34 bring us into the real world where the wicked prosper, and the downtrodden have nowhere to turn. In this world, God is not yet present.” The letter ק, conversely, returns in Psalm 34, for “ק represents the knowledge that God answers prayer”, while in Psalm 25 the situation seemed hopeless.³⁸

See the previous section on Psalm 25 for Tur-Sinai’s explanation of missing ו and extra פ, which he seeks in an alternate ordering of the alefbet.

³³ J.F. Brug: 3

³⁴ M. Bittenwieser: 840

³⁵ A.R. Ceresko: 100

³⁶ A.R. Ceresko: 101

³⁷ V.A. Hurowitz: 328-329

³⁸ R. Benun: 14-15

2.1.4 Psalm 37

In this Davidic Psalm, most stanzas consist of two distiches, and only the first letters of the stanzas make up this fairly regular abecedarian. The v appears to be missing; it is found in the last word of its stanza, directly before the v verse. The v is the second letter in the first word of the appropriate stanza; the first (v) might have been added later³⁹ – no improbable suggestion, seeing that this conjunction here has the meaning ‘but’ and the sentence can do without: it accentuates the relation with the previous verse, but without v , the opposition is as clear. For comparison: the King James Bible and Statenvertaling have ‘but’ / ‘maar’, while the English Standard Version has not – maybe, just maybe, because its translators considered the vav -conjunction as an addition, because it hinders the otherwise regular acrostic pattern.

Benun argues the ayin to be omitted purposefully, and points out some disruptions in the attached-verse-pattern: as a rule, each initial alefbetical letter has a second attached verse in addition to its primary verse, but the letters v , v and v all have only a primary verse. He takes into account a highly detailed word- and letter counts and draws the conclusion that “the letter v seem[s] to represent evil.” That this very letter is missing in the alefbetical sequence indicates that there will be no place for evil in the future reality, and the verse where you expected to find v speaks about hope instead of evil.⁴⁰

³⁹ C.J. Labuschagne 2008, on Psalm 37: 5

⁴⁰ R. Benun: 20-22. For a better understanding of his argument, I gladly refer to Benun’s article. Only a concise summary of his findings can be included here.

2.1.5 Psalm 111 and 112

The Psalms 111 and 112 are parallel psalms and share many characteristics, both in form and content. Both are constructed in single line verses and follow the alefbet without any aberration or deviation. Both open with 'Hallelujah', 'Praise the LORD'. This heading precedes the acrostic. Psalm 111 extols the LORD, Psalm 112 praises the man who fears Him. Both tell of the great and good things their subject works. Apart from the differing alphabets, this couple exhibits no problems with regard to their acrostic structure.

2.1.6 Psalm 119

“Its expressions are many as the waves, but its testimony is one as the sea”, Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote about this poem.⁴¹ Psalm 119 may well be the best-known acrostic in the Bible. It is remarkable in several respects: its length (22 strophes of 8 distiches each), its perfect alefbetical ordering, its characteristic that each verse of each strophe begins with the respective initial letter, and the fact that each of the 176 verses contains a synonym for the Torah, the law of God, His revealed Word (except v. 122, which however has the word טוב, *good*, which some explain to refer to Torah as well⁴²). Most strophes contain five to seven different synonyms out of eight to ten⁴³, all with their own shade of meaning.

This Psalm on the Torah receives varied appraisal: some commentators judge it a dull, repetitive collection of phrases about the law. Bernard Duhm, for example, writes: “Was der Author bei der Abfassung dieser 176 Verse für einen Zweck im Auge gehabt hat, weiss ich nicht. Jedenfalls ist dieser “Psalm” das inhaltloseste Produkt, das jemals Papier schwarz gemacht hat. [...] Auch in schriftstellerischer Hinsicht wird es schwer sein, ein Schriftstück nachzuweisen, das es an Ungeschicklichkeit und Gedankenlosigkeit mit diesem Ps aufnehmen könnte.”⁴⁴ Moses Buttenwieser has a similar judgment, devoting one and a half page to describe it as “void of the essential qualities of literary creation [...] constant repetition [...] literary inability.”⁴⁵

Nevertheless, many Jewish and Christian commentators never cease to read it with joy and only find, time and again, that it articulates precisely their inmost feelings and thoughts.⁴⁶ For example, H. Danziger sees it “describing the ceaseless striving to faithfully live a true life of Torah regardless of time, place, circumstance or social environment.”⁴⁷ Delitzsch entitles it “Zweiundzwanzigfache Spruchsnur eines um seines Glaubens willen Verfolgten”⁴⁸, “ein Gebet um Beständigkeit inmitten einer gottlosen Umgebung und in großer Trübsal, welche durch den Schmerz über den herrschenden Abfall gesteigert wird, und Gebet um endliche Errettung”⁴⁹, and refers assentingly to German Bibles which call it “Der Christen gülden ABC vom Lob, Liebe, Kraft und Nutz des Wortes Gottes.”⁵⁰

⁴¹ C.H. Spurgeon. “The Golden Alphabet – Preface.”

⁴² H. Danziger 2006: 356

⁴³ Some commentators find eight synonyms and, as a consequence, some more verses that do not contain a synonym of Torah; Delitzsch (718) and Bullinger find ten synonyms. Bullinger provides a clear overview of these ‘Ten Words’: the Hebrew term, its precise meaning, all its occurrences in Psalm 119, and its first occurrence in the Bible. See Appendix 73 of the Companion Bible.

⁴⁴ B. Duhm: 268

⁴⁵ M. Buttenwieser: 871-872

⁴⁶ Amongst others the NIV Study Bible: 896 (The alphabetic acrostic form, especially one as elaborate as this, may appear arbitrary and artificial to a modern reader (as if the author merely selected a traditional form from the poet’s workshop and then labored to fill it with pious sentences), but a sympathetic and reflective reading of this devotion will compel a more favorable judgment. The author had a theme that filled his soul, a theme as big as life, that ranged the length and breadth and height and depth of a person’s walk with God. Nothing less than the use of the full power of language would suffice, and of that the alphabet was a most apt symbol.)

⁴⁷ H. Danziger 1995: 259

⁴⁸ F. Delitzsch: 711

⁴⁹ F. Delitzsch: 718

⁵⁰ F. Delitzsch: 718

Spurgeon wrote little less than an ode on this Psalm in his preface to 'The Golden Alphabet'. He makes crystal-clear that this poem is of enormous depth and richness, contains not even one tautology, and in its variety can be likened to a kaleidoscope: "What you see is the same, and yet never the same. It is the same truth, but it is always placed in a new light, put in a new connection, or in some way or other invested with freshness."⁵¹

Some ascribe Psalm 119 to an old, others to a young man. Some see no progress whatsoever and consider it a collection of individual proverbs,⁵² others find a careful construction and inner succession in the individual strophes.⁵³ Callaham also noticed the wide variety of interpretations and theories concerning this Psalm and explains these differences as resulting from the diverse approaches in studying it.⁵⁴

This issue of (the absence of) variety in meaning is of great importance for the translator of Psalm 119. If the whole psalm is no more than a strongly repetitive enumeration of just one leading idea, it does not matter much which words you use in translating each individual sentence, as long as the essence is kept up; exchanging words or expressions between surrounding sentences, which may be very helpful in rendering this huge acrostic, should not be very problematical. If, on the other hand, each of these 176 verses express another thought, or another facet, the translator ought to study this Psalm in great depth so as to be able to translate it faithfully.

As noticed before, virtually all of the verses contain a synonym for the Torah, employing eight to ten 'synonyms' which all have their own precise definition(s). In light of the belief that each verse in Psalm 119 has its own unique meaning, it would be interesting to examine each acrostic translator's handling of these eight terms: do they consequently or concordantly use the same English, Dutch, German synonym for the same Hebrew term?

⁵¹ C.H. Spurgeon. "The Golden Alphabet – Preface."

⁵² Amongst others ESV Literary Study Bible: Psalm 119, S. Broyles ("The psalm does not, however, unfold according to any logical plan. The acrostic pattern has ruled out sequential thinking. [...] an arabesque of words without linear development or train of thought, seeking only to praise the word and law of God.")

⁵³ F. Delitzsch: 718, who also outlines his interpretation of this Psalms construction. M. Nodder, who discerns five stages in the Psalm, does likewise.

⁵⁴ S. N. Callaham

2.1.7 Psalm 145

Psalm 145 is the last acrostic in the Psalter. This song of praise on ‘My God, the King’ and His Kingdom is written in distiches, each of which begins with the successive letter of the alefabet. The heading ‘A Psalm of David’ falls outside this pattern, in which all letters but ך are included.

Opinions vary on the original (non-)existence of a ך-strophe. Some think the Psalm complete without; others think the strophe got lost sometime, either by the infirmity of a transcriber or for another reason. As Bullinger points out, ancient versions (Septuagint, Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopic, Vulgate, a Hebrew Codex) write: “The LORD is faithful in all His words, and holy in all His works.”⁵⁵

Labuschagne argues that “there is every reason to supply the missing verseline”, a belief for which he supplies logotechnical evidence. At the same time, he allows for the – in his eyes less probable – possibility that the ך-verseline may well have been omitted deliberately, considering the number of verselines in Psalms 107-145.⁵⁶

The frequent appearance of this ך-verse might indicate that the acrostic indeed ought to have 22 verses today, yet the possibility cannot be ruled out that one ancient scribe made up the verse himself while the original author never wrote one, wrongfully supposing that the verse had been lost.

Kimelman thinks the ך-verse has, intentionally, never been written, and calls its authenticity “highly questionable.” His threefold argumentation points out that it causes duplication in a psalm containing no other duplications (cf. verse 17); that it employs the Hebrew word for ‘God’, אלהים,⁵⁷ while the Psalmist uses His covenant name יהוה throughout the Psalm (Kimelman cites the ך-verse from its Qumran version – a difference not really confidence-building for the authenticity of the verse); and suspects it is a liturgical phrase brought in to complete the acrostic.⁵⁷ He sees structural benefits of the omission and ascribes meaning to it: it may be part of the message, viz. alefbetical imperfectness as symbolical for the theological inadequacy of human praise of God.⁵⁸

There is yet another remarkable feature. The word ‘kingdom’ appears four times in this psalm, all four clustered in vss. 11-12-13: the כ, ל and ך strophes, and precisely here a reverse acrostic appears spelling מלך, meaning ‘king’. Moreover, in the next line (only) these three letters all appear six times.⁵⁹ There might be more to this than just an unintentional incident.

Finally, Jacob Bazak offers yet another explanation. He thinks that the acrostic psalms are composed according to graphical-geometric patterns, mainly triangles. In case of Psalm 145, he justifies the omission of the ך-verse, arguing that the poem is divided in three times seven verses (seven being the symbolic-sacred number). These “do not just follow each other, but are arranged in a

⁵⁵ E.W. Bullinger, “Appendix 63. The Book of Psalms: miscellaneous phenomena.” Cf. D.N. Freedman: 385

⁵⁶ C.B. Labuschagne 2008 on Psalm 145: 2-3

⁵⁷ R. Kimelman: 49-50

⁵⁸ R. Kimelman: 50, citing Yafet ben Eli, as cited in Uriel Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms from Saadya Gaon to Abraham Ibn-Ezra*. Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University 1982 (Hebrew)

⁵⁹ R. Kimelman: 45

series of triangles, which together create the shape of the Star of David.”⁶⁰ Bazak explores this hypothesis in much greater depth – interesting, but much too specific to enter into it now.

⁶⁰ Y. Gitay

2.1.8 Proverbs 31:10-31

The Book of Proverbs closes with a poem known as ‘The song of the valiant woman’. These concluding distichal verses of the book of Proverbs (31:10-31) make up an ode to an almost ideal woman, describing her many and diverse daily pursuits. Since all sentences start with the successive letters of the alefbet, one gets the impression that this woman is able to do – and does do – virtually everything (from א to ת, from A to Z) to provide all things needed for her household. A not improbable suggestion is that this poem, which closes the Book of Proverbs, summarizes all preceding teaching in this hymn on wisdom, personified in a woman (cf. Proverbs chapter 1:20 vv.), thus presenting a pattern to follow for women as well as men.

Unfortunately, in most English and Dutch translations this grande enumeration of all kinds of activities the woman undertakes begins almost every sentence with the feminine personal pronoun *she/zij*. As a result, the ode has lost its poetic flavour in large measure – which cannot possibly cheer the conscientious translator.

How is it possible that in Hebrew all of these sentences begin with another letter, thus forming an acrostic? To answer this question one needs to revert to the Hebrew source text. The Hebrew language employs pre- and suffixes to form compound words, which thus provide more information than the separate words in a language without affixing.

The independent personal pronoun ‘she’ is אִתָּהּ.⁶¹ This pronoun is sometimes written in full, as in Proverbs 31:30, but oftentimes also affixed to a verb or noun. Thus ‘she’ at the beginning of a sentence – as often in Proverbs 31 – may be suffixed to the first sentence composite word, with the letter ת. Since verbs can have all kinds of initial letters and the personal pronoun is suffixed to it, not prefixed, the composer of this tribute in Proverbs is able to describe his subject from א to ת, beginning all his sentences with another word – unlike English, Dutch and German, languages that do not employ this kind of affixing and therefore necessarily need to apply another method if willing to acrosticize.

By way of comparison: the King James Bible has ‘She’ 14 times as the initial word in these verses. The other are *who* (the first verse, 10), *the* (verse 11), *her* (23), *strength* (25), *her* (28), *many* (29), *favour* (30), *give* (31). The Hebrew applies this pronoun just once, in its appropriate acrostic place, verse 14. Of the English she-verses, six begin in the Hebrew with a verb, four with a noun, one with an adjective, and the other with ‘also’ and ‘not’.⁶²

⁶¹ P.H. Kelly: 52

⁶² “Acrostics in the Hebrew Bible – The Excellent Wife”

2.1.9 Lamentations 1-4

The Book of Lamentations mourns the destruction of the city Jerusalem and the Temple, in the 6th century BC. It consists of five chapters, five poems, of which the first four are abecedarian acrostics. All five poems have 22 verses, yet there are differences: the stanzas in chapter 1, 2 and 3 are triplets, in chapter 4 distiches, and chapter 5 has only one line per letter. Chapter 3 is a triple acrostic: all lines in each stanza have the same initial letters, following the alefbet. In chapter 1, 2 and 4, only the first line of each stanza opens with the corresponding letter, while chapter 5 is not acrostically framed. The pattern is quite regular: only the reversal of the letters *פ* and *צ* in the chapters 2-4 is remarkable. This will be discussed first, followed by possible explanations of the absence of an acrostic in the fifth Lament.

Pe – Ayin order

How to explain the alternate letter order? Several possibilities have been put forward. There is the possibility that this reversal is the effect of just a mistake. This seems not very probable, though, since it occurs in three successive chapters of Lamentations as well as in a few other passages. In this view, the first chapter, with *צ-פ* order, should rather be the odd one out.⁶³

Another explanation suggests that the *פ-צ* order was an alternate order for the alefbet⁶⁴, or that, over time, alterations took place in the sequence of the letters. Possible underpinning of this hypothesis is found in archaeological findings in Israel, where alefbetic lists have been found which show the *פ-צ* order,⁶⁵ though J.F. Brug allows for the possibility that these were faulty, seeing that one of these texts shows more faults.⁶⁶

Keil thinks, referring to other incomplete biblical acrostics, that “die Dichter sich nur so lange streng an die Fessel der alphabetischen Regel banden, als dieselbe sich ohne Künstelei dem Gedankengange fügte”: composers sometimes departed from the pattern because “in solchen Fällen die Form dem Gedanken lieber geopfert [wurde] als durch gezwungene, unnatürliche Ausdrucksweise aufrecht gehalten wurde.”⁶⁷

H. Tur-Sinai does not waste words and ascribes this alternate ordering to “variations in the basic alphabetical verse usual at the time when the poems were written.”⁶⁸

The in this context most important finding is the 1976/1977 discovery of a shard – dated in ca. 1200 B.C. – at the archaeological site of Izbet Sartah in Israel. This fragment contains five lines of

⁶³ See also N.K. Gottwald (*Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (rev. ed.; SBT 14; London: SCM, 1962)), who in 1962 already suggested that the pe-ayin order might have been normal.

⁶⁴ J.F. Brug: 2

⁶⁵ J.F. Brug: 2-3, T. Longman and P. Enns: 3

⁶⁶ J.F. Brug: 2-3, with reference to Dernas and Kochavi, *Tel Aviv* 4 (1977), p. 1-27, and Dotan, *Tel Aviv* 8 (1981) p. 160-172

⁶⁷ C.F. Keil: 547-548

⁶⁸ H. Tur-Sinai: 282

Proto-Canaanite writing, of which four seem to consist of random letter characters, and one shows the alefbet with no irregularities except this **ב-ו** sequence. Another late 9th or early 8th century B.C. discovery showed Hebrew triple abecedaries containing **ב-ו**. This was in the Israelite Ze'er Meshel at Kuntillet Ajrud, in the northeast part of the Sinai peninsula.

From these archaeological discoveries T. Longman and P. Enns conclude that the **ב-ו** order “represents a secondary Israelite scribal tradition of ordering the letters,”⁶⁹ while A. Demsky and M. Kochavi define it more precisely as “a local Israelite variation in letter order [which] was used from the time of the Judges at least through the Israelite monarchy and probably through the Exilic Period when the Book of Lamentations was written.”⁷⁰ Some scholars have used this assumption – combined with literary arguments – to date the five laments in a variant chronological order; C.F. Kents assumes “at least two or three” different authors and thinks Lamentations 2 and 4 to be considerably older than the other chapters, relying on each poem’s sequence of **ו** and **ב**. Nevertheless, he dates chapter 3, which has the same variant order, after 2 and 4 and ascribes it to another author, thus arriving at the sequence 2-4-1-5-3.⁷¹ This is, however, not the right place to dive deeper into questions of historical dating of texts; this digression serves only to shed light on possible explanations of the alternate letter ordering.

In 2005 yet another Hebrew alefbet was discovered in which the **ב** precedes the **ו**. The wall in which the stone revealing this inscription was found is thought to be constructed in the 10th century BC. Besides these three findings, no alefbetic text has been found, and these three all show **ב-ו**, which seems to favour the variant historical alefbetical order.⁷²

In the first chapter of Lamentations, the **ו-ב** order might actually originally have been **ב-ו** also, these two strophes having been reversed by an early copyist who thought this order to be a mistake, or who wanted to adjust the pattern to fit the by then common alefbetical order. This possibility is supported by a discovery in the Dead Sea scrolls, where the first four Laments have the **ב** strophe precede the **ו** strophe.⁷³

I have asked one of the translators, MacDonald, about his choice to have the reversal be apparent. He points to the normal letter order in the Psalter and Lamentations 1, acknowledges the reversal in the other Laments and wants to “put to rest the idea that there might have been a different letter sequence at some period in history. It's a possibility, but I would not support it with the evidence I have: 9 examples in the above sequence and 3 with 2 letters reversed.”

MacDonald then raises the question about the ‘why’ of this variant order and compares this issue to the imperfection of the first four acrostics in the Psalter, the perfection of the pattern in the last four (which implies that he considers the **א**-verse in Psalm 145 as originally belonging), and the variant

⁶⁹ T. Longman and P. Enns: 3

⁷⁰ A. Demsky and M. Kochavi

⁷¹ C.F. Kent: 19-20

⁷² M. First

⁷³ M. First, referring to “Discoveries in the Judean Desert”, XVI, p. 234.

structure of Lamentations 3. His answer: “To be known is to be known in these questions. Beware the too easy answer. As Northrope Frye writes in *The Great Code*, [...] the answer to a question *consolidates learning at the level of the question and thus prevents the formation of fuller and better questions.*”⁷⁴

A few days later, he referred me to a possible interpretation. Rabbi Y.A. Sinclair – drawing from Talmud, Ramban and other sources – puts this reversal in the much wider context of the ninth of the Hebrew month Av, the ‘date of disaster’ in the Jewish calendar because great tragedies for the Jewish people happened on this date. On the ninth of Av, the First and Second Temple were destroyed (586 BC and 70 AD) as well as the city Jerusalem (70), the Romans destroyed Betar and killed approximately 580,000 Jews in the Bar Kochba revolt (133), the Jews were expelled from Spain (1492), the First World War began (1914) and “[t]he insubstantial peace that concluded this war was a direct cause of the Second World War in which the six million perished”, and the first killings started at Treblinka (1942). Yet earlier in history, ten of the twelve spies sent by Moses to explore the Land of Israel reported evil about this Promised Land and said that God could not give them the land, because its inhabitants were too strong – on the ninth of Av. Sinclair notices that these spies had a distorted vision of the land, because they “wrote their own script in which G-d was unable to bequeath the Land to the Jewish People, and then they used their eyes to ‘film’ their fantasy and make it into ‘reality.’” In other words: they put the mouth before the eye.

The Book of Lamentations mourns the destruction of Jerusalem. So, why was Jerusalem destroyed, and why all these subsequent tragedies on this very same date? The Rabbis see the root cause in the negative report of the spies, who therewith slandered the God of Israel. According to the Midrash (BT Sotah 35a), God said that night of the 9th of Av: “You cried for nothing. I will establish for you a crying for generations.”

Now it is important to know that ‘pe’ and ‘ayin’ indicate Hebrew letters, but at the same time are words: pe means ‘mouth’, ayin means ‘eye’. The author of the Lamentations thus worked the root cause of Jerusalem’s destruction, ‘putting the mouth before the eye’, into the structure of his laments.⁷⁵

Considering all this information, however, the reversal of פ- and ע strophes in Lamentations and other Biblical acrostic passages turns out to be most likely the effect of an alternate alefbetic ordering, common in the time of writing. A translation of these poems therefore should not reverse the sequence of two letters in order to resemble the supposed Hebrew alternation, which appears to be meaningless except in that it supports evidence for the one-time existing variant alefbet.

⁷⁴ B. MacDonald, “On Translating Acrostics”

⁷⁵ Y.A. Sinclair

Many commentators remark the absence of an acrostic in the fifth chapter without taking pains to suggest a well-founded reason for it. Some offer a tentative explanation. J. Brug, for example, writes that “[t]he text offers no explanation for this switch, but since Chapter 5 is a closing prayer, the switch of style may be intended to close the lament with a more personal, less stylistic tone. The acrostic style reaches a high point in the third poem and then fades away. This disappearance of the acrostic style may be a subtle way of stating that the intensity of the poet’s grief has exhausted his poetic powers.”⁷⁶

Assis argues that the Book of Lamentations uses the acrostic to draw the reader’s attention to their careful construction: its author wanted the reader to meditate on them rationally, rather than only read them as emotional outbursts. Assis also sees importance in the absence of the alefbetic pattern in the fifth Lamentation, importance that he deduces from the inseparable cooperation between form and content. He explains the form of the individual poems from their nature – the third contains the crux or turning point of the whole Book, wherefore the acrostic is intensified there – and argues, like Brug, that the fifth, unlike the first four, is no lament but a prayer, in which the message of the former laments is applied, “as befits prayer from the heart, it is not written in an acrostic.”⁷⁷

Though chapter 5 is not abecedarian, scholars attempted to establish an acrostic nevertheless. Siegfried Bergler reconstructed the following sentence: “Die Abtrünnigen, (nämlich) das Volk verschmähe ich, (es) strafend mit Verachtung, wie dein Gott klagt.”⁷⁸ To achieve this result, Bergler had to replace a few initial letters by ignoring some first words. Philippe Guillaume discovers an acrostic-telestic (telestic being the opposite of acrostic, composed by the last letter of each successive line), which he finds in verses 19-22: “your god is exalted greatly”. Moreover, he cites Azriel Rosenfeld who saw “a kind of colophon based on the first two words of chapter 5 [...] which he reads as ‘Zechariah’”. The mesotic (first letters of half verses) of the next verses produces the phrase “the prophet”. Guillaume combines his acrostic-telestic with Rosenfeld’s acrostic-mesotic and thus frames this fifth Lament with a pseudonym and a confession of faith: “Zechariah the prophet [says]: your God is greatly exalted!” (Reasoned) adding two letters to this acrostic, he arrives at twenty-two, in which he sees “a final confirmation” of its existence. Verses 4-18 do not play a part in any acrostic, according to Guillaume.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ J.F. Brug: 2

⁷⁷ E. Assis: 721-724. See also Keil: 548

⁷⁸ S. Bergler: 317

⁷⁹ Ph. Guillaume: 4-5

2.1.10 Nahum 1

Besides the accepted abecedaries in the books of Psalms, Lamentations and Proverbs, one is said to be found in the book of Nahum, the last pre-captivity prophet – a founded but also disputed view, since the acrostic is incomplete: it runs from א to ט.

Concerning this issue I would like to refer to a recent, quite substantial study about this subject, in which – so the author – “I have argued that the acrostic features in Nahum 1 are there by design, that the alphabetic sequence only covers half the alphabet, that the irregularities are not as haphazard as they seem at first, and that the poem is bigger than the acrostic.”⁸⁰

This statement is in line with the saying that “as for partial alphabetical acrostic sequences, the correct sequence of three or four letters [...] could perhaps have occurred accidentally [...], but the chances that the sequence of eleven acrostic monostich’s א-ט in Nah 1:2-8 occurred in alphabetical order unintentionally would be infinitesimal.”⁸¹

Attempts have been made to reconstruct ‘the original complete acrostic’, assuming there has been one once, but these endeavours all produce different results and compel no small interventions in the text.⁸² An example is that of Gustav Bickell, who found “a sequence running from א to ט at the beginning of lines in vv 2–10, and the remainder of the alphabet within the line.”⁸³ Note that Bickell claimed to have found two additional initial characters, ב and ז, in the first ten verses. Afterwards Hermann Gunkel suggested another version, making up an acrostic ending in chapter 2:3.⁸⁴ None of these received much credit, as many artificial manoeuvres were needed to accomplish them, which did not contribute to the credibility of their theory.⁸⁵

Others acknowledge the existence of several elements of the acrostic, but argue that there is no textual evidence for a complete, unbroken acrostic here in any ancient Hebrew manuscript or other textual versions, and judge it wise to abstain from such speculation. The defectiveness might be intentional and meant to reflect “the disruption of which the text speaks, as the created order is overthrown by the warrior-Lord.”⁸⁶

Yet others just think that “[t]he whole idea should therefore be abandoned, so that the interpretation of Nahum can begin to take a potentially more fruitful turn”, also because “[t]he very idea of an acrostic that spells out only part of something would seem to be a contradiction in terms.”⁸⁷

⁸⁰ T. Renz: 21

⁸¹ H. Eshel and J. Strugnell: 442

⁸² Amongst others A. Pinker.

⁸³ T. Renz: 5

⁸⁴ T. Renz: 5

⁸⁵ A. Pinker: 2-3

⁸⁶ M. Nodder

⁸⁷ M.H. Floyd: 422, 437

A few years ago, Klaas Spronk published his discovery of another acrostic in Nahum 1.⁸⁸ Below are the first three verses of the book.⁸⁹ The first verse, the heading (“The burden of Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite”), stands alone. The initial letters of the first words of the next three lines compose the Hebrew ‘ani’ (English pronoun ‘I’). Subsequently, the first word of the third line composing this little acrostic is ‘יהוה’, often

pronounced as Jahwe, the Name of God.

Considering that the pronouncement ‘I am יהוה’ appears often in the prophetic Biblical books, to underline a message spoken in God’s Name, Spronk sees here as it were a divine signature woven into the text by Nahum, to confirm that his vision comes from God.

א מִשָּׂא, נִינְוָה--סִפֵּר חֲזוֹן נַחֻם, הָאֱלֹהִים שֵׁי.

ב אֵל קִנּוּא וְנִקָּם יְהוָה, נִקָּם יְהוָה וּבִעַל חֲמָה;
נִקָּם יְהוָה לְצָרָיו, וְנוֹטֵר הוּא לֹא יָבִיז.

ג יְהוָה, אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וּגְדוֹל- (וּגְדֹל-) כֹּחַ, וְנִקָּה,
לֹא יִנְקָה; יְהוָה, בְּסוּפָהּ וּבְשַׁעֲרֶיהָ חָרְפוּ, וְעִנּוּ,
אֲבָק רִגְלָיו.

The alefbetic acrostic then starts in the words following immediately after יהוה and continues to the ninth letter (verse 7), ט, at the same time the first letter of the word טוב, ‘tov’, ‘good’. Again the next word is the Name of God; thus: ‘Good is יהוה’.

So, this abecedarian acrostic starts immediately after the pronouncement ‘The LORD is a jealous and avenging God’ – the first line of the poem – and ends with ‘יהוה is good’, suggesting a connection between them.

Spronk finally reports the discovery of a name telestic by someone not identified by name, who saw that the last letters of the first four lines of Nahum 1 again form יהוה. Spronk then refers to Assyrian Court Chronicles (the Assyrians being the enemy of Judah), which in those days repeatedly incorporated their king’s name in an acrostic or telestic, and sees de author giving this nation a bitter taste of their own medicine.

⁸⁸ K. Spronk, “Nieuwe Bijbels – Nahum”

⁸⁹ “Nahum Chapter 1 נחום”

2.2 Non-Abecedarian

The non-abecedarian acrostics are identified with less certainty: their existence often is a questionable, or at least disputable, one. The occurrence of the Tetragrammaton in the Book of Esther will be discussed, as well as Psalm 96:11.

2.2.1 Psalm 96

In Psalm 96, an acrostic on the Name of God is found. In verse 11a, the Hebrew reads (right to left): ישמחו השמים ותגל הארץ. The initial letters compose יהוה, the Tetragrammaton, which in the Latin alphabet is often represented with the capitals JHWH, written in full as ‘Jahwe(h)’ or ‘Jehova(h)’. Only one examined translation incorporates it: “Ja, dat de hemelen zich verheugen, heel de aarde zij blij.”⁹⁰ Most other examined translations are silent about it. Delitzsch though discovered yet another acrostic in verse 11b, where the initial letters of the first three words form an abridged form of the Name of God: יְרַעַם הַיָּם וּמַלְּ. He allows for the possibility that this “wohl nur zufällig” is⁹¹ and makes no effort to reproduce either of both in his translation.

This ‘coincidence’ might be less likely when you observe that almost all lines in this Psalm contain either this Name of God or a reference to Him with the word ‘him’ or ‘his’. Only verses 11 and 12 contain no Name of reference whatsoever. It is therefore not implausible that these acrostics are intended to bring in His name in another way.

⁹⁰ F. Croese, *Tot lof van God*: 165

⁹¹ F. Delitzsch: 615-616

2.2.2 Esther

The Book of Esther is often said to be the sole book in the Bible that does not explicitly name God. This is most true in its plain sense. According to Ethelbert Bullinger,⁹² however, the Tetragrammaton or יהוה is hidden several times by means of the initial letters of four consecutive words, read either backwards or forwards: in chapter 1:20, 5:4, 5:13, and 7:7. Another name of God, in English 'I Am', he discovered in acrostic form in Esther 7:5. Some ancient manuscripts have the initial letters written majuscular to emphasize these acrostics.

Bullinger considers these five acrostics as “something far beyond a mere coincidence; we have design.” In this occurrence of God’s Name while at first sight it seems absent in the whole Book of Esther, Bullinger sees illustrated what God foretold in Deuteronomy 31:17: “I will hide my face from them”. God’s presence may have seemed hidden for the Jews in those frightening days, but all the while, He was present and prevented the commanded massacre of this nation.

Barry Blake, emeritus Professor of Linguistics, says that “[t]he chances of an accidental acrostic vary from language to language but are high in biblical Hebrew and in English.”⁹³ On the other hand, someone asserts that “Jewish copyists carefully guarded against the accidental acrostic that might spell out this divine name because it was considered inviolate and ineffable”⁹⁴, a not altogether perspicuous statement, since copyists did not write the autographs but only copied the sacred texts, and did so with the intention not to change a single jot or tittle. The ones to guard against the accidental acrostic ought have been the ones who first wrote down the words. However, this indeed may have well been the case, seeing the high reverence for this Name of God and the crept in practice to avoid pronouncing it.

By now, having left the abecedaries and proceeded with other, little, acrostics, a point is reached where some caution might be helpful. After all, how unlikely is it for a four-letter sequence as the one signifying the Tetragrammaton to appear unintentionally in a text? Should every single occurrence of it – even when discovered written backwards – have a particular meaning? Not denying this possibility altogether, it seems a little exaggerated and even possibly misleading to say so.

To know if and, supposing a positive answer, how often the Tetragrammaton occurs as an acrostic in the whole Old Testament should be really helpful to decide more well-founded about the function of these acrostics in de book of Esther.

⁹² E.W. Bullinger, “The Name of Jehovah in the Book of Esther.”

⁹³ B.J. Blake: 118

⁹⁴ R.H. Graham

2.3 Hebrew – Latin writing

Quite obviously, Hebrew employs another alphabet than English, German and Dutch. Not only a completely different script is used, and not only the number of characters is different – the Semitic language Hebrew has 22 characters, the Latin languages English, German and Dutch have 26 – but also the structure of the alphabet. The 22 characters are all consonants, while the 26 are both consonants and vowels. Written Hebrew initially did not indicate vowels and only after some time introduced *matres lectiones*: already existing consonants “began to function not only as consonants but also as vowel indicators. Thus א and ה were used to indicate ‘a’ class vowels, ו to indicate ‘e’ and ‘i’ class vowels, and ו to indicate ‘o’ and ‘u’ class vowels.”⁹⁵

Consequently, the first letter of the alphabet is a consonant, unlike the first letter of the alphabet, though both seem to represent the Dutch A (/a:/ or /ɑ/). Since א came to be used to represent “a” class vowels, the first sound of Hebrew abecedaries is actually the /ɑ/. This similarity does not hold true, however, for the other *matres lectiones*. The consonant ו is itself pronounced as /j/, not as /e/ or /i/. (The consonant א is a silent letter; nowadays it only serves as *mater lectionis*. The other *matres lectiones* ה, ו, and ו have their own meaning and pronunciation as consonants, besides their vowel-indicating function).

The necessary differentiations need be made concerning the alphabets. The current Hebrew alphabet has 22 characters. Five of these letters have another form in word-final position, called sofit: the kaf (כ-ך), mem (מ-ם), nun (נ-ן), pe (פ-ף) and tsadi (צ-ץ). What is more, some letters know two pronunciations, depending on the presence of a dot, called dagesh, in the character: bet can be pronounced as /b/ or /v/ (represented as בּ or ב), kaf as /k/ or /χ/ (represented as כּ or כ), and pe as /p/ or /f/ (represented as פּ or פ). Historically the same applied to ל, ל and ת, but these distinctions have vanished over time. Finally, sin and shin use the same character (respectively שׁ and שׂ). On the other hand, several consonants nowadays have the same pronunciation: כ (without dagesh) and ו, ה and כ (without dagesh), ו and ת, כ (with dagesh) and ק, ט and שׁ.

The current English alphabet contains 26 characters, but the language knows other characters as the ash (æ, as in encyclopædia) and ethel (œ, as in cœlom). Besides, there are digraphs as for example ch, ng, ph, sh, th, wh and zh, plus more than ten diphthongs. In particular Q and Z are used infrequently, as is J.

The Dutch C can be pronounced as /k/ (as in ‘cruciaal’), but also – together with H – as /sj/ (as in ‘chocolade’). Dutch moreover has the problematical, nowadays infrequently used Y, which functions mainly in loanwords. Word-initially the y is in use as a consonant (as /j/ in ‘yoghurt’) and in other cases as a vowel (as /I/ in ‘symbol’ or as /i/ in ‘baby’). Much can be said about the historical developments that led to the present usage of the y and its position in the alphabet. The letters Q and X

⁹⁵ P.H. Kelley: 6

are also used relatively rarely, let alone in word-initial positions. Besides, there are digraphs as ch, ng, nk and oe, besides diphthongs as au, ei, eu, ie, ij, ou and ui.

The German alphabet has the same 26 cardinal letters as English and Dutch, but the language knows additional characters or sounds as the Ä/ä, Ö/ö, Ü/ü, and the (never word-initial) ß, which adds up to thirty letters or sounds. The letters C, Q, X and Y occur almost exclusively in loanwords. Like the other languages, the German knows digraphs and diphthongs.

This brief sketch illustrates some of the complications that translators face in acrostic passages. The fact that alphabets are subject to historical change came up already in chapter 2.1. Not always is clear which of the encountered variations in the acrostic alphabetical pattern, as the ɔ-ʏ reversal, are due to historical change. The pronunciation of several letters allows for two sounds. Moreover, due to the dissimilar number of characters in the basic alefbet and alphabet, the verse number of perfect abecedarians in Hebrew – twenty two – will not match those in Latin languages.

2.4 Function

To be competent to decide on the importance of maintaining the acrostic format in translating Biblical acrostics, one needs to know its original function. Should the particular format and the content of the poems concerned turn out to be inseparably linked together, and prove both strictly necessary to understand its message, this may pose serious complications in translating them. Should the acrostic pattern prove highly insignificant, one has no need to give it much thought.

A gamut of functions has been suggested. Not all of them will apply to every acrostic passage in the Old Testament nor will each poem fit only one of these functions. The following possible functions mostly apply to abecedarian acrostics, while some also or only fit non-abecedaria.

Completeness

The expression ‘from א to ת’ – the equivalent for ‘from A to Z’ – stands for ‘everything’ or ‘from beginning to end’. In an acrostic, the entire alefbet is employed in describing an object of praise, such as God’s Law (Psalm 119) or the woman of valour (Proverbs 31). These poems use this poetical means to enumerate as much positive, praiseworthy characteristics of their subjects as possible; from A to Z.⁹⁶ Every subject can thus symbolically be dealt with exhaustively by making every line start with a successive letter of the alefbet.

Psalm 111 and Psalm 145 are also songs of praise; their alefbetic pattern indicates their intention to praise God as much as He is worthy – the incomprehensiveness is expressed by the comprehensiveness of the alefbet.⁹⁷ Delitzsch draws an analogy with a musician: “[D]er Lyriker [betrachtet die Reihe der Sprachelemente] als die Klaviatur, auf welcher er alle Tasten greift, um seine Empfindungen erschöpfend auszudrücken.”⁹⁸

Accordingly, Pembroke offered an English edition of the Psalms, in which she reproduced the 22 stanzas of Psalm 119 each in a different form, which “express[es] the comprehensiveness and scope of its prophecy” and may “simply imply an intensification of this formal expression of totality or universality.”⁹⁹

The use of the acrostic in the Lamentations of Jeremiah might be meant to indicate that not only the description of Jerusalem’s great misery is complete, but also the foretold seventy years thereof will be completed; a message of new hope dawning,¹⁰⁰ as articulated in Lamentations 4:22: “The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished; he will keep you in exile no longer.”¹⁰¹ Someone has said it as follows: “Das vollständige [*as indicating the acrostic, ThvE*]

⁹⁶ J.F. Brug: 4, R. Kimelman: 49, M. Nodder, W.G.E. Watson: 17

⁹⁷ T. Longman and P. Enns: 4

⁹⁸ F. Delitzsch: 115

⁹⁹ H. Hamlin: 122

¹⁰⁰ Ph. Guillame: 5

¹⁰¹ ESV: Lamentations 4:22

Durchschreiten von Schuld und Not soll dem Leser eine emotionale Katharsis ermöglichen und ihn so zu neuem Gottvertrauen führen.”¹⁰²

V. Hurowitz suggests the possibility that “the alphabet in its entirety can be symbolic of JWHW, expressing his infinity, all inclusiveness, omnipresence, and omniscience.” To support this thought, Hurowitz refers to New Testament texts where God reveals Himself as the ‘Alpha and Omega’, α and ω, which are the first and last letter of the Greek alphabet. (Revelations 1:8, 1:11, 21:6, 22:13). Again: from κ to η, from A to Z, from beginning to end.¹⁰³

Conversely, the use of deficient acrostics, as in Psalm 9-10 and Nahum 1, may be used to indicate brokenness, incompleteness.

Mnemonic

The acrostic may have been employed as an aid to the memory: the logical pattern facilitates the task of learning the poems by heart. According to the Bible Commentary written by Jamieson and others, it “is found only in such compositions as do not handle a distinct and progressive subject, but a series of pious reflections, in the case of which the precise order was of less moment.”¹⁰⁴ Among others, J. Calvin thinks the abecedarian order in Psalm 119 to be intended “to aid the memory. [...] This help does not extend to those who read it in other languages; but the principle must not be overlooked, that the doctrine exhibited in this psalm should be carefully studied by all the children of God, and treasured up in their hearts, to render them the more conversant with it.”¹⁰⁵

G. Boardman asks attention for the fact that some of the Psalms are written during the captivity of Israel; “exiled from the land of their fathers, they were greatly aided in their devotions and in the memory of their ancestral songs by these artificial devices of parallelism, alliterations, and alphabetic order.”¹⁰⁶

C. Kent says: “That they may readily memorise and remember its teachings, he has put them in the acrostic form.”¹⁰⁷ R. Lowth judges likewise: “The acrostic or alphabetical poetry of the Hebrews was certainly intended to assist the memory, and was confined altogether to those compositions, which consisted of detached maxims or sentiments without any express order or connection.” In a footnote, his translator comments on the quality of these acrostics: “M. Michaelis very justly remarks, that except the Lamentations of Jeremiah, and the xxxviith Psalm, none of the alphabetic poems of the Hebrews rise in any degree above mediocrity. A certain indication, that however useful this kind of discrimination might be on some occasions, in assisting the memory of children and the vulgar, yet such minute arts are in general inconsistent with true genius.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² K. Koenen, quoting N.K. Gottwald, *Studies in the Book of Lamentations* (SBT 14), 2. Aufl. London 1962

¹⁰³ V.A. Hurowitz 2002: 332

¹⁰⁴ Jamieson, Fausset & Brown: 9

¹⁰⁵ J. Calvin: 358

¹⁰⁶ G.D. Boardman: 335

¹⁰⁷ C.F. Kent: 292

¹⁰⁸ R.Lowth: 318, see also 39 (“...principally intended, it should seem, for the assistance of memory.”)

The same goes for non-abecedarian acrostics: these may function as a mnemonic aid also, since the subsequent initial letters of the lines of a poem form a name, word or sentence and can thus be remembered with ease.

Nevertheless, the presence of many imperfect acrostics – not having the character of basic primer-like exercises as some non-biblical acrostics do, incomplete, with an alternate ordering, irregular patterning, or intricacies of style like the אלה pattern in Psalm 25 and 34 – calls this mnemonic function somewhat into question.¹⁰⁹

Besides, seeing that the whole Torah has been learned by heart by not a few Jews and just a handful of passages therein are acrostics, the need for this mnemonic device appears not to have existed. Which does not altogether rule out, however, the possibility that some acrostics indeed were composed with facilitating memorization in mind.

Jamieson answers for the deviations explaining that the Psalmist sometimes adapted the pattern “so as to make the form, when needful, bend to the sense.”¹¹⁰

Stylistic

Some think the function of the acrostics in the Bible to be stylistic or decorative, almost to the exclusion of everything else. An argument in favour is that the effect is most apparent in written text, and less in oral circulation of the poems.¹¹¹ According to H. Gunkel they even offer “nothing for the ear or the spirit.”¹¹² Lowth makes a similar comment, saying that “though an appeal can scarcely be made to the ear on this occasion, the eye itself will distinguish the poetic division and arrangement, and also that some labour and accuracy has been employed in adapting the words to the measure.”¹¹³

Munch does not rule out the possibility that the biblical acrostic had become an independent stylistic form, though he thinks it was principally intended by post-Exilic (the Babylonian Captivity lasted to about 539 B.C.) Jewish religious teachers to facilitate the learning of the Holy Scriptures¹¹⁴ – and thus intended as a mnemonic aid. According to W. Binnie, “[l]iterary delight is never aimed at in Holy Scripture for its own sake.”¹¹⁵

Boardman likes the acrostic to the English use of end rhyme. “One of the artifices of the English poet is often seen in the terminations of his lines, as when he ends them with rhymes. On the other hand, one of the artifices of the Hebrew poet is often seen in the commencements of his lines, as when he begins them in the alphabetic psalms with the same letters or similar sounds.”¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁹ See also J.F. Brug: 4, K. Koenen, T. Longman and P. Enns: 4

¹¹⁰ Jamieson, Fausset & Brown: 9

¹¹¹ J.F. Brug: 4

¹¹² S. Callahan, “An evaluation of Psalm 119 as constrained writing”, quoting Hermann Gunkel.

¹¹³ R. Lowth: 39-40

¹¹⁴ See P.A. Munch, “Die alphabetische Akrostichis in der jüdischen Psalmendichtung.” *ZDMG*, XV (new ser. 1936), 703-10

¹¹⁵ W. Binnie: 141

¹¹⁶ G.D. Boardman: 334-335

Display of skill

Another function might be to show the prowess of the poet; to impose restrictions on yourself in written expression proves your skill and ability to creatively compose literary texts using self-imposed limited means.¹¹⁷ Likewise, S. Broyles does not exclude the possibility that the acrostic may “simply [be] a tour the force with little meaning beyond the poet’s decision to construct one and his ingenuity in carrying the decision out.”¹¹⁸ Recent literature shows many examples, Broyles says.

This explanation fails to explain why the acrostic model was chosen as a design for communication, say Longman and Enns.¹¹⁹ Binnie says that “as a rule, they are the least poetical of all” and “by no means the best examples of Hebrew poetry.”¹²⁰

More important yet, the main aim of the Bible is not to be a creative masterpiece of literature, but one of the means by which God speaks with man; it is not man-centred, but God-centred. To just show off the prowess of the poet will therefore not be the function of the biblical acrostics.

Order and organization

The biblical acrostic passages are sometimes said to lack internal coherence and a logical sequence of thoughts. Some even argue that the alefbetic model is applied precisely to *introduce* order and organization.¹²¹ The opposite view is also put forward; according to L. Chokel, such a literary format “does not help the internal unity and coherence of the poem.”¹²²

A. Ceresko sees yet another factor at work: the “seeming disconnectedness of the experiences of everyday life” is dealt with in an effort to “wrest some kind of order and coherence”.¹²³ He refers to the dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and filing systems, which use the alphabet as a means to impose order on “otherwise unmanageable and useless masses of information and knowledge.”

Binnie ascribes the acrostic in Psalm 119 the same function, though in more positive wording: “The psalm is a meditation on God’s law – the meditation of a soul, in the presence of the Lord and in communion with Him. In such a psalm, it is sententious wisdom rather than high poetry that we look for; and a better vehicle for the aphorisms of sententious wisdom could hardly be imagined than that which is furnished by this acrostic.”¹²⁴ This bears comparison with Kent’s judgment that the acrostic Psalms all are “a mosaic without close logical connection or climax.”¹²⁵

According to K. Koenen, the acrostic in Lamentations serves the order in a still more specific way: the laments bemoan the destruction and ruin of Jerusalem and the resulting chaos. The alefbet serves as a messenger of hope: there will be order again, even “[i]n allem Chaos gibt es durchaus

¹¹⁷ A. Pinker: 2

¹¹⁸ S. Broyles

¹¹⁹ T. Longman and P. Enns: 4

¹²⁰ W. Binnie: 139, 150

¹²¹ A. Pinker: 2

¹²² S. Callahan, “An evaluation of Psalm 119 as constrained writing”, quoting Luis Alonso Chokel

¹²³ A.R. Ceresko: 102

¹²⁴ W. Binnie: 143

¹²⁵ C.F. Kent: 221

Ordnung”; restoration of Jerusalem is at hand, and “[g]erade nach der Zerstörung Jerusalems konnten und mussten – wie nach Auschwitz – wieder Gedichte geschrieben werden.”¹²⁶ M. Nodder makes a similar remark when he says that the author of Lamentations may have used the acrostic to “give shape to his experience of perplexity”, and suggests the imperfect abecedarian in Nahum to be symbolical for “the disruption of which the text speaks, as the created order is overthrown by the warrior-Lord.”¹²⁷

The view that solely the introduction of order should have been the objective has interesting implications for translation: it implies that in an edition not preserving the acrostic pattern, the poems utterly fail to show coherence. With the belief that both order *and* completeness were served with this model, though, the absence of the alphabetic order in translation is less serious, since this implies that the content of the verses still expresses comprehensiveness.

Enhancement of the message

A. Melitz suggests that an acrostic “adds grace and beauty to a poetic creation, not for their own aesthetic sake but as values that would enhance the prophet’s message. If the acrostic format was meant to demonstrate the skill of the writer, it was motivated by a wish to create something unique, singular and attractive, because the topic or circumstances so dictated.”¹²⁸

Likewise, Delitzsch writes: “[j]enen Grundged[anke] entfaltet der D[ichter] nicht in umfänglichen Strophen, sondern die Buchstaben des Alphabets entlang in kürzeren Sprüchen, nicht ohne Wiederholungen und Nachholungen, um ihn immer überzeugender und tiefer einzuprägen.”¹²⁹

Magic

With reference to the use of acrostics in occult religion, where the feeling lived that the letters of the alphabet “directly breathe the spirit of God” and that “the whole alphabet forms the cosmic circle”, A. Jeremias puts forward the possibility that their presence in the Bible might be a remnant of magic influences.¹³⁰ This possibility seems not to be supported by others, and the *Dictionary of the Old Testament* notes that evidence for a magical or occult purpose of any of the biblical acrostics is completely lacking.¹³¹

Pedagogic or didactic

Another possible function that is named several times but generally not supported is a pedagogic or didactic one.¹³² B. MacDonald calls the acrostic a “game” and its function “for teaching and

¹²⁶ K. Koenen

¹²⁷ M. Nodder

¹²⁸ A. Pinker: 1-2, citing A. Melitz, “אקרוסטיס כון במקרא” *Beit Mikra* 36 (1991) p. 261

¹²⁹ F. Delitzsch: 291 (on psalm 37)

¹³⁰ R. Marcus: 110, quoting Alfred Jeremias, *Das Alte Testament im Lichte des alten Oriente* (4th ed.: Leipzig, 1930), pp. 646-47

¹³¹ T. Longman and P. Enns: 4

¹³² T. Longman and P. Enns: 4, Marcus: 110, quoting P.A. Munch, “Die alphabetische Akrostichis in der jüdischen Psalmendichtung.” *ZDMG*, XV (new sec. 1936), 703-10

learning.”¹³³ Koenen cites P.A. Munch, who argues that the alefbetic acrostics have been written to be used in writing lessons. Koenen says this to be highly unlikely: “ja es scheint sehr unwahrscheinlich, dass man für den Schulunterricht ausgerechnet Klagelieder gedichtet haben soll.”¹³⁴

R. Marcus gives a second didactic purpose: conveying moral instruction in an easy-to-memorize form. A biblical example is probably, he says, the ode in Proverbs 31.¹³⁵ Delitzsch mentions a similar function: “[Die alphabetische Form] ist nicht ein kleinliches Ersatzmittel für den entflohenen Geist der Poesie, nicht bloß eine Zugabe für das Auge, ein äußerer Zierrat – sie ist sinnig in sich selber. Der Lehrdichter betrachtet die Reihe der Sprachelemente wie die Treppe, auf welcher er den Schüler zum Heiligtum der Weisheit hinaufführt, oder als den vielfächerigen Schrein, in den er die Perlen seiner Weisheitslehren hineinlegt.”¹³⁶ Kent says about Psalm 119 that “[i]ts acrostic form suggests that it was written so that it might be memorised and recited by the candidates for membership in the scribal order, if not by all faithful Jews.”¹³⁷

Signpost to embedded message

Yet another opinion, put forward by R. Benun, calls attention to the deficiencies – disruptions in the alefbetic sequence and other departures from this rule – in most of the Psalm acrostics and argues that these are intended as signposts to guide the reader to their hidden messages. The text of the seemingly defective acrostics must by no means be adapted to follow the alefbet perfectly.

The widely shared assumption that the imperfections are due to scribal errors is not convincing, Benun argues, since it is very unlikely that “such glaring mistakes [...] could possibly have slipped by the careful Biblical scribes.”¹³⁸ He adds a footnote about the Soferim (literally, ‘counters’), who in copying the Bible scrolls counted letters, words and verses to make sure they transcribed the text exactly. After them, the Masorets did the same. Chances that mistakes as apparent as disruptions in perfect abecedarian patterns took place in the transcription process were highly unlikely.¹³⁹

Clue to way of reading

In a discussion of the Book of Lamentations, E. Assis argues that its author(s) employed the acrostic to indicate that these poems are not just, or not only, emotional outbursts of grief, but a rational reflection

¹³³ B. MacDonald, “On Translating Acrostics”

¹³⁴ K. Koenen

¹³⁵ R. Marcus: 110

¹³⁶ F. Delitzsch: 115

¹³⁷ C.F. Kent: 277. See also 132 (on psalm 145: “didactic purpose”), 221 (on psalm 25: “the didactic purpose is obvious).

Kent looks upon the acrostic rather negatively: “... the necessity of beginning each alternating line with the succeeding letter of the Heb. alphabet made it impossible for the poet to express himself freely” (139, on psalm 111), cf. “the parallelism of the thought is sacrificed to artificial form” (277, on psalm 119).

¹³⁸ R. Benun: 2-3

¹³⁹ R. Benun: 23. Benun further founds his view with references to F. Delitzsch, who, commenting on the imperfect acrostic in Psalm 9-10, draws attention to seemingly incomplete Syriac acrostic hymns, and argues that these are undoubtedly uncorrupted, and to G. Rendsburg, who comments on the use of irregular syntax or unclear language as deliberate literary devices to reflect the mood of the passage (“Confused Language as a Deliberate Literary Device in Biblical Hebrew Narrative.” In *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, Vol. 2, Article 6, 1999).

on the terrible circumstances as well. Dirges, in which genre these Lamentations do fit, are usually not composed rationally; they are largely uncontrolled, unstructured mourning. The reader of this Book might thus overlook the ‘rational part’, had not the author asked attention for it by using this highly structured pattern, indicating that these poems are well thought out, and ought to be studied; the contrast between form and content tells the reader that “the purpose of the poems was not only to lament the destruction of Jerusalem but also to encourage meditation on it and to give it meaning.”¹⁴⁰

Assis also sees importance in the absence of the alefbetic pattern in the fifth Lamentation, importance that he deduces from the inseparable cooperation between form and content. He explains the form of the individual poems from their nature – the third contains the crux or turning point of the whole Book, wherefore the acrostic is intensified there – and argues that the fifth, unlike the first four, is no lament but a prayer, in which the message of the former laments is applied, and “as befits prayer from the heart, it is not written in an acrostic.”¹⁴¹

Responsive structuring

One commentator, dealing with the Book of Lamentations, exemplifies his belief that its authors applied parallel abecedaria because “they wanted to visualize their parallel, responsive structuring of the composition.” J. Renkema runs through the four opening verses of each lament and shows connections in language and content between the \aleph -strophes, the \beth -strophes, the \daleth -strophes et cetera. He sees the identical letter strophes as song responses, parallelisms.¹⁴²

Dedication or reference

A name-acrostic may be intended to dedicate the poem, or the book in which it occurs, to a certain friend, or to honour someone. Thus, Lewis Carroll (alias of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) in his story *Through the Looking-Glass* wrote a concluding poem of which the initial letters read ‘Alice Pleasance Liddell’, the full name of the little girl who inspired him to tell *and* write down his stories.¹⁴³

Another instance: the first letters of each strophe in the Dutch national anthem *Wilhelmus* spell out ‘Willem van Nassov’, the name of William I, Prince of Orange, a.k.a. William the Silent, the father of the nation of the Netherlands.

A biblical example is Psalm 96:11, which supposedly contains an acrostic on the Name of God.¹⁴⁴ The same phenomenon might also be found in the Psalms 2 and 110.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ E. Assis: 717-721

¹⁴¹ E. Assis: 721-724

¹⁴² J. Renkema: 379-382

¹⁴³ G.S. Hubbell: 177-178

¹⁴⁴ See section 3.1

¹⁴⁵ M. Treves: 82-83, 86

Authorship

Name-acrostics may also function as a signature of the author. The final lines of *Van den vos Reynaerde* show a well-known example in early Dutch literature. Its author leaves his footprints in the initial letters: “**B**i gode, ic dart hu wel raden. / **I**singrijn sprac toten beere: / **W**at sechdīre toe, Brune, heere? / **I**c hebbe te ligghene in de rijssere / **L**ievre dan hier int ysere! / **L**aet ons toten coninc gaen / **E**nde sinen pays daer ontfaen... / **M**et Firapeel datsi ghinghen / **E**nde maecten pays van allen dinghen.”¹⁴⁶ The first letters form the signature ‘Bi Willeme’, ‘(written) by Willem’.

Another example is to be found in Akkadian literature, where the supposedly earliest acrostic – which, transcribed, reads “I Saggil-kinam-ubbib, the exorcist, am a worshipper of god and king” – dates back to around 1000 B.C.¹⁴⁷

Yet another variation of the acrostic as a signature is proposed by Hurowitz, who suggests that the recurring אַלפֿ-pattern might serve as a profession acrostic of its author, a professional scribe.¹⁴⁸

In conclusion

Considering these possible functions, it seems undesirable and, what is more, impossible to choose one ultimate function for all the Biblical acrostics. Denoting completeness appears to be a likely purpose of many abecedaria, though variations and additions on this theme will play their part. In non-abecedarian acrostics, several other considerations may apply.

MacDonald put it this way: “The acrostics are games. To translate a game, one must play the game.”¹⁴⁹ In the words of Kimelman: “Once the function of the acrostic is understood, it can be seen as integral to the message of the psalm.”¹⁵⁰ Longman and Enns agree: “[a]crostic is not merely ornamental; it is part of the communicative process. Put another way, what a poem says is the result of *how* it is said.”¹⁵¹

What remains is still the crucial question concerning the particular function of each individual acrostic. Ongoing research may be needed to establish this with more certainty.

¹⁴⁶ H. van Dijk a.o.: 103-104

¹⁴⁷ J.B. Brug: 5

¹⁴⁸ V.A. Hurowitz 2002: 333

¹⁴⁹ B. MacDonald, “On Translating Acrostics”

¹⁵⁰ R. Kimelman: 49

¹⁵¹ T. Longman and P. Enns: 3

2.5 Cultural gaps

Why study the original function of acrostics at all? Why not just decide to either neglect the means and commit oneself to translating the meaning of these biblical texts, or lay emphasis on the means and allow considerable freedom in paraphrasing the wording, whilst only safeguarding against fundamentally altering the meaning?

The above question presupposes that it is possible to separate means and meaning of a text – a disputed presumption. It is therefore important to consider both the acrostic's possible functions in its source culture and time and the appearance of the acrostic in the target culture, so as to be able to make a well-reasoned decision regarding their treatment.

Culture dissimilarity is an undeniable factor in the translation process. Whereas literate cultures are familiar with paratext and a variety of poetical forms, among which the acrostic, largely illiterate cultures may have no clue concerning their existence and meaning. There is no consensus concerning its function and status in its original context. This lack of clarity mainly arises out of the large gap in time and place – in other words, in culture. The question then arises whether it might even be counterproductive, in some contexts, to reproduce the acrostic passages acrostically.

For example, theoretically speaking it is possible that a specific poetical manifestation in one culture is highly valued, but in another has a low status. Robert Bascom, in his essay on the role of culture in translation, discusses David Katan's work on 'translating cultures' and asks attention for the "lexical and conceptual gaps" Katan describes, gaps which are caused by "the differing cultural experiences of individuals". A not to be underestimated problem, though, is differing categorization or evaluation (in other cultures) of (closely) corresponding terms or concepts. Associations that are part of cultural baggage are largely 'out-of-awareness', hidden in the sub-consciousness of its members. Translators coming from another culture will discover these dissimilarities almost only by chance.¹⁵² This applies to all kinds of customs, but also to aspects of language, like proverbs and idioms. Only mothertongue speakers understand and master these subconscious subtleties and newcomers have to acquire them, a process that takes a lifetime and often will not reach the same level of acquaintance. Translators are thus dependent on insiders for their knowledge of these implicit aspects¹⁵³ – *and* have to work hard at tracing them, especially where certain things seem similar in both cultures whereas they have a different connotation.

Theoretically speaking, it is possible that acrostics have a high literary status in the source language and culture, but a low one in the target language and culture. Should this be the case, translators ought to know this to be able to decide how to handle them.

¹⁵² R. Bascom: 83-84

¹⁵³ R. Bascom: 110-111

2.6 Recapitulation

Considering the above, and fully aware that research and its findings will proceed, probably revealing evidence still unknown today, I tend to think most, if not all deviations from the alefbet to be caused by the authors deliberately. Consequently, a 'restoration' of the alphabetical sequence should not restore but tear down a carefully constructed pattern and message. At the same time, reproducing the message- and name acrostics and the deviations in the abecedarians meaningfully into any other language seems impossible, partly because there is no consent about the function of the individual acrostics and their peculiarities, but mainly due to the plain fact that languages differ.

3. Acrostic Translations

This chapter will present a number of acrostic Bible translations (3.1) and outline some of the reasons why other translations do not reproduce the acrostic passages (3.2).

3.1 Bible translations preserving acrostics

Before actually investigating the existing acrostic translations, these will first be introduced; one German, three English, and subsequently two Dutch editions, followed by six English translations which handed us only one or a few of the acrostic passages in acrostics. Finally, a metrical Psalter more or less preserving the acrostic is presented. These translations cover a considerable period in history; the first stems from 1599, while the most recent has just recently been revised.

If possible, these introductions will provide translator's comments on their handling the acrostics, and – more general – their translation principles. Not all translators let us share easily in their thoughts, though, wherefore it is impossible to use the same format in each description.

NB Each translator's approach in initial letter order will be discussed only concisely in this section; Appendix I provides a detailed specification of all discussed acrostic translations, including their initial letter sequences.

3.1.1 Franz Delitzsch and Carl Friedrich Keil (1872, 1894)

The Keil & Delitzsch Bible commentaries are the joint effort of Franz Delitzsch and Carl Friedrich Keil. Delitzsch was a 19th century Christian Hebraist. Delitzsch – not to be confused with his son, the Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch – has many books to his name, among which a series of commentaries on the Old Testament books. He also took part in the publication of a revised Masoretic text of the Old Testament (left unfinished), together with Baer, and in a revision of Luther’s Bible translation.¹⁵⁴ One could thus ascribe him thorough knowledge about the Hebrew language and the Biblical books, where the acrostics lodge: a great advantage, for he could not help but observe the occurrence of the alefbetic pattern, and mastered the language enough to detect, for example, departure from the standard word order. Delitzsch views the acrostic form as “sinnig in sich selber”¹⁵⁵ and therefore reproduced it in his translations included in the said commentaries.

Johann Friedrich Karl Keil is known as a conservative German Lutheran Old Testament commentator, and best known for his contributions to this *Biblischen Commentar über das Alte Testament*.

The manner in which Keil & Delitzsch applied the acrostic is at first sight remarkable, because they choose two different strategies. Lamentations shows the sequence A B D E F G H I J K L M N O P S R (/ R S) T U V W Z: the Latin alphabet minus the most problematical C, Q, X and Y. The Psalms exhibit another approach: roughly A B G D H U/W S H T I K L M N S E P Z K/Q R S T. It turns out that Delitzsch wrote the Psalms volume and Keil the Lamentations volume – apparently, they did not endeavour (successfully?) to reach agreement about a corresponding strategy.

Binnie, who remarks that “Dr. Delitzsch has industriously made an attempt of the sort in his German Version, but with little success”¹⁵⁶, does not amplify on his motivation for this judgment, but his problem may well have been the scholar’s original strategy.

Since Keil & Delitzsch delivered these passages in an alphabetic translation, they may have translated the Ode in Proverbs 31 in the same way. Unfortunately, I could not retrieve a legible text of this passage.

¹⁵⁴ “Delitzsch, Franz”

¹⁵⁵ F. Delitzsch: 115 (on psalm 9), see also chapter 2.3

¹⁵⁶ W. Binnie: 141

3.1.2 Bob MacDonald (2010-2011)

“I am a private student of Hebrew for reasons of passion. I post a mixture of flowers and poetry - my translations of the ancient kind.” MacDonald’s notes on the individual Psalms and Lamentations provide an interesting insight into his translation principles concerning acrostics. Some general things he does say, though, that reveal his unpretentiousness and awareness of the fact that perfect translations do not exist: “[M]y translations are personal (not individual but personal - a person formed in this age for this time and purpose).” And: “Be prepared for revisions, so let yourself change your mind and in love revisit all your prior decisions. Watch with him one hour.”¹⁵⁷ His versions of the Psalms and other Bible chapters are indeed subject to change, since he applies new insights on his earlier translations every now and then.

About his initial letter choice for the acrostics, MacDonald says: “I always translate an acrostic as acrostic using the Hebrew letter sequence.”¹⁵⁸ That is to say, he takes the English letters of which the sounds match closest to the respective Hebrew sounds¹⁵⁹, like Keil. He chose roughly the following sequence: A/I B G D H V/W Z H T Y C/K L M N S P I (/ I P) S Q R S/S..T/T S/C T.

The poet took no small liberty to make up the acrostics: “I often add words in the English to make the right starting letter when translating an acrostic in an acrostic manner.”¹⁶⁰ An illustration hereof is his account of Psalm 9-10: “9:6 God – added for the acrostic, not in the Hebrew, similarly ‘verily’ in verse 8, and Zion repeated verse 12. [...] 10:12 quash is chosen for the acrostic, the Hebrew is Arise as at the end of Psalm 9.”¹⁶¹ He gives a similar explanation of how Psalm 34 came into being.¹⁶² With Psalm 37 MacDonald places the remark “Verse 37: *surely* added for the acrostic.”¹⁶³ With Psalm 112 he freely admits to take “liberties with glottal stops and impossible letters like tsade.”¹⁶⁴ And in his discussion of Psalm 119: “... I have largely followed the alef-bet, but I refused zayin and doubled the use of yod - in this creative patch, I thought a double yod would have symbolic value. (More likely, it just happened.) I also have used C for Chet, F for kaf, and S three times for samech, tsade, and shin/sin. For the glottal stops, Aleph is A and Ayin is I. And of course I typed T twice too.”¹⁶⁵ And: “I have taken some freedom with words and placement due to the restriction of the acrostic form – a demand I think I should respect as a translator of this letter game.”¹⁶⁶

About his preserving the acrostic pattern at all, MacDonald says that “[t]he poems are foreign and strange to our ears. Making them read smoothly would betray their reality.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁵⁷ B. MacDonald, “My Essay on Translating Biblical Poetry”

¹⁵⁸ B. MacDonald, “On poetry and form”

¹⁵⁹ B. MacDonald, “Psalm 9 – Sing a psalm perpetually”

¹⁶⁰ B. MacDonald, “Psalm 10 – Value spurned”

¹⁶¹ B. MacDonald, “The Acrostics (1)”

¹⁶² B. MacDonald, “Psalm 34 – the madness of taste – nothing lacking”

¹⁶³ B. MacDonald, “Psalm 37 – Burning instead of delight”

¹⁶⁴ B. MacDonald, “The Acrostics (112)”

¹⁶⁵ B. MacDonald, “The Acrostics (119)”

¹⁶⁶ B. MacDonald, “Lamentations 1”

¹⁶⁷ B. MacDonald, “On Translating Acrostics”

3.1.3 Ronald Knox (1944)

Ronald Knox (1888-1957) completed his translation of the Bible in 1944. Six years before, in 1938, he was granted official authorization to take this task upon him, i.e. as far as concerns the Old Testament. Once finished, he himself decided to proceed with the New Testament. Both were published in 1949.¹⁶⁸

Knox reproduced almost all acrostics, but probably oversaw the one in Psalm 9-10 or thought the pattern too defective to maintain. The four Lamentations all follow, without any aberration, the letters A to V. The other acrostics do differ slightly from each other, omitting either J, K, Q, V or X (or sometimes a combination of them) and finishing with either T, V, or W.

Remarkable may be his seemingly inconsistent approach of the 19th strophe of Psalm 119, in which he uses both T and Y as the initial letters for the successive eight lines. This needs to be set right. I could not lay my hand on a version of the original, unadapted Knox Bible, but was able to find an edition that comes close: Cormac Burke published its text online, changing all ‘thou’ forms in ‘you’ forms, assuming that this alteration will attract readers who were initially put off by this somewhat archaic form. Consequences for the acrostics are, that in Psalm 111 Knox’ final initial is changed from T(hine) to Y(ours), and in Psalm 119 the T-strophe has become a T/Y strophe, Thine/Thou being replaced by Your/Yours/You.

He goes on to discuss the ‘how’ of translating and describes the literal and the literary method, of which he prefers the latter “for the benefit of a person who wants to be able to read the word of God for ten minutes on end without laying it aside in sheer boredom or bewilderment” and the first “for the benefit of a person who wants to learn Latin by following the gospel in a Latin missal when it is read out in church”¹⁶⁹. It may be clear that Knox himself used the literary method and abhorred the literal: “[A] new translation of the Vulgate [...] should break away from the literal translation of sentences.”¹⁷⁰ Knox advocates the translator’s business to be “to recondition [...] whole sentences, so as to allow for the characteristic emphasis of his own language [...] to transpose whole phrases, so as to reduce them to the equivalent idiom of his own language.”¹⁷¹ Paraphrasing where necessary to convey the exact shade of meaning of a particular word in a particular context is translator’s duty, and often so since “every common word in every living language has [...] a quantity of shades of meaning.”¹⁷² In a broadcast talk Knox mentioned three things an interpreter needs to do: write down in the target language *what* the sender intended to say in his; express the *why* of his message, its emphasis; and do so in the *way* he did it, i.e. preserve its literary merit.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ G.W. Bromiley: 99

¹⁶⁹ R.A. Knox 1949: 3

¹⁷⁰ R.A. Knox 1949: 3

¹⁷¹ R.A. Knox 1949: 9

¹⁷² R.A. Knox 1949: 10-11

¹⁷³ R.A. Knox 1949: 67

3.1.4 Four Friends – *The Psalms Chronologically Arranged* (1870)

In the second half of the 19th century, four friends published an edition of the Psalter, in which they both provided a new translation of the Psalms and arranged them according to their probable historical order. These ‘Four Friends’ did not reveal their names in the book, but are known to be C.T. Arnold, F.E. Kitchener, S. Philpotts, and A.W. Potts, four assistant masters at the renowned Rugby School. The first edition (1867) contains only the Psalms, while the second edition includes eleven other Old Testament songs plus the book of Lamentations. Thus, of all acrostics, only the one in Proverbs is missing. In this 1870 version, some of the Psalms acrostics are slightly altered: in Psalm 25 and 34, the F-initial strophe replaces an originally G-strophe.

These friends applied a fairly regular letter sequence; the Lamentations follow A to Y, omitting J/K, Q, X and Z. The Psalms are somewhat irregular, roughly omitting two of the letters C, F, I, K/L, U, W, Z, besides Q and X. Psalm 9-10 displays larger gaps.

About the poetic form, the authors write: “Such an arrangement is constrained and artificial, adapted for didactic rather than for lyrical expression; but it is an aid to memory, and was employed as a vehicle for lamentations or consolations addressed to others; or for purposes of private devotion, to express confidence in the watchful protection of Jehovah; to dwell on His attributes; and to meditate lovingly on every aspect and title of His written Law.”¹⁷⁴ The alefbetic arrangement “hinders the flow of thought and language, and often necessitates repetition of ideas”, “we see how uneasily the spirit of the Hebrew poet bore its shackles”, the poem is “struggling to clothe its religious thoughts in a poetic form”, and there is “apparent forcing” of language, the friends say – a possibly negative sounding judgment, but at the same time they reckon the abecedarian arrangement “the very life of the poem” (the very reason why they themselves reproduced it) and the acrostic “a version of poems which are by their very nature contrained.”¹⁷⁵ The necessary crampedness of Psalm 119, “abounding in spiritual life”, they say to be “pervaded by the glow of love” – an altogether positive final conclusion.

¹⁷⁴ Four Friends: 140, cf. 329

¹⁷⁵ Four Friends: 329-331

3.1.5 Pieter Oussoren – *Naardense Bijbel* (2004)

The first known to me Dutch translation using the acrostic format is the *Naardense Bijbelvertaling*, launched in 2004 – the same day the *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* was presented, which neglected this poetic form. Pieter Oussoren produced this translation on his own.

Oussoren and others provide an extensive exemplification of their guiding translation principles in several articles on the website of the *Naardense Bijbel*. He says his edition to be even more literal than the *Statenvertaling* from 1637 – which is known as the most literal Dutch Bible translation – and aims at providing insight in the ‘literal’ content of the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament, without presupposing reader mastery of these languages, nevertheless explicitly wanting to translate in Dutch and not in a half-Hebrew, half-Greek artificial language.¹⁷⁶

The translator states that the Hebrew Bible, i.e. the Old Testament, has not been written in the common vernacular of those times; the writers employed a traditional, literary language they thought most appropriate in writing about the relationship between God and His people. Therefore, translations of the Old Testament in Dutch vernacular deviate from the basic principles of the Bible writers.¹⁷⁷ Oussoren wants to assess, and bring the reader close to, all the details of the original text.¹⁷⁸ Rather than concordant he calls his method idiolect, from Greek *idiom* (het gelijke, alike) and *legein* (zeggen, to say). The idiolect translation method prefers to maintain the word order of the source language as much as possible. For the Hebrew this is often not too hard. One of the reasons why it is important to stick to the original Hebrew word order is that its writers emphasized certain words by starting the sentence with them, Oussoren explains.¹⁷⁹

The following explanation is of importance in considering the acrostic: “[Deze aanduiding] verwijst naar de nauwe band die er volgens deze methode bestaat tussen vorm en inhoud. Men wil het gelijke zeggen als er in het oorspronkelijk staat, en dat kan niet zonder de vorm van het origineel zo veel mogelijk over te nemen. Wie de vorm van een tekst wijzigt, verandert ook de inhoud. Daarom moeten vorm, sfeer en opbouw van het origineel in de vertaling zoveel mogelijk behouden blijven. Zowel de woordkeuze als de woordvolgorde van het origineel moeten zo herkenbaar zijn dat men - bij wijze van spreken - de tekst ook terug zou kunnen vertalen vanuit het Nederlands naar het Hebreeuws en hetzelfde resultaat krijgen. Dat is niet eenvoudig, want Hebreeuws en Nederlands zijn zeer verschillende talen, maar door de vorm zoveel mogelijk te handhaven stelt men een lezer die het Hebreeuws niet machtig is, toch in staat om vertrouwd te raken met de specifieke stijl van de bijbelschrijvers.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ P. Oussoren and others, “Een verantwoording bij de *Naardense bijbel*”

¹⁷⁷ K. Smelik

¹⁷⁸ P. Oussoren and others, “Een verantwoording bij de *Naardense bijbel*”

¹⁷⁹ K. Smelik

¹⁸⁰ K. Smelik

Oussoren does not dwell too long on the acrostics; he merely informs the reader that he used an abridged Dutch alphabet.¹⁸¹ An inventarisation proves that his basis pattern is A B G D E F G H I J K L M N O P R S T V W Z. He exchanged the Dutch C for a G, and omitted Q, U, X and Y. Occasionally, he slightly deviated from this rule, using C for the first G, V or D for F, and U in stead of I or J.

Frans Croese, who himself issued a translation of the Book of Psalms, says Oussoren's handling of the acrostic to be sloppy and rather inconsequent,¹⁸² underpinning this allegation with illustrations from five of the Psalms – for example, Oussoren applied the letter G two times in the perfectly regular modeled Psalm 119 (A-B-G-D-E-F-G-...). This judgment is too harsh, to my mind: Oussoren does indeed not strictly adhere to one overall pattern, as Croese himself does, but his deviations are minimal. His choice for G in stead of C, resulting in two G's per psalm, is a deliberate decision applied consequently. The other deviations can be justified by a comparison with the original Hebrew sounds of the concerning characters.

Because of Oussoren's flowery, ornate style, his translation abounds in Hebraisms, anthropoids, word play and neologisms, which is an advantage in the search for the right initials.

¹⁸¹ P. Oussoren and others, "Een verantwoording bij de Naardense bijbel"

¹⁸² F. Croese 04-02-2010

3.1.6 Frans Croese - *Tot lof van God* (2010)

A second and quite recent acrostic translation of the Psalms is provided by the just quoted Frans Croese, a Jehovah's Witness who initially did not intend to publish this personal rendering but in 2010 assented, urged by friends to make his efforts available to a wider public.

Croese gives an account for his guiding translation principles and mentions three different methods in particular: the concordant translation or formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence, and a third method he himself employed and calls the 'empathic method': "[Ik heb] gestreefd naar een taalgebruik dat het best past bij de poëtische vorm van de Psalmen; dat vanuit de gedachte dat de poëtische vorm een integraal deel van de tekst is. De structuur stond steeds centraal, de boodschap die de dichter wilde overdragen, specifieke sleutelwoorden etc. Vanuit die eenheid heb ik, met de diverse theoriën in het achterhoofd, op een intuïtieve manier aan de tekst gewerkt. [...] Ik heb geprobeerd mezelf te verplaatsen in de positie van de dichter en mij dikwijls af te vragen: hoe zou hij dit hebben geschreven als de taal destijds Nederlands zou zijn geweest?"¹⁸³

The translator wanted to do justice to the poetical style of the Psalms. Quoting Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer, he expressed his approval of the opinion that the form must not be allowed to dominate the content, but instead used to enhance it. Thus the acrostic intensifies the message.¹⁸⁴ Unlike Eugene Nida, who wrote in his book *Toward a science of translating* that acrostics, being "based on phonological features of the source language, simply cannot be reproduced in a receptor language, unless a formal correspondence is introduced by some radical distortion of the meaning"¹⁸⁵, Croese states his view that the Psalms *can* be translated acrostically and also proves this with his edition. He acknowledges though that it is a different matter when acrostics are not alefbetically ordered but by means of the first letters of names or specific sentences¹⁸⁶, in which cases the number of lines, for instance, can differ.

Translating the acrostics, Croese consequently leaves out the letters C, Q, X and Y, and in two instances also the G. Psalm 9-10 shows more inaccuracies in the pattern. The Dutch poet answers for his method as follows: "Ik heb voor de 22 letters van het Hebreeuwse alfabet één enkel vervang-alfabet gekozen van 22 letters (de 26 letters minus de 4 'moeilijke', de C, Q, X and Y). En dat heb ik minutieus overal toegepast (afwijkingen in de vertaling zijn dan afwijkingen in de grondtekst, zichtbaar gemaakt in de vertaling)."¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ F. Croese 2010: 258

¹⁸⁴ F. Croese 2010: 256

¹⁸⁵ E. A. Nida: 195

¹⁸⁶ F. Croese 2010: 267

¹⁸⁷ F. Croese 04-02-2010

3.1.7 Other acrostic translations

This paragraph introduces seven translations – six English and one Dutch – that handed us only one or a few acrostic Psalms, and of which the majority did not leave us much information concerning their translation beliefs. The first, however, is an exception to this rule.

Mary Sidney Herbert (The Sidney Psalter, 1599)

The title ‘The Sidney Psalter’ refers to its two composers. Philip Sidney, who began the work, died in 1586. He had been preparing a new English version of the Book of Psalms and had reached the 44th Psalm. His sister, Mary Herbert (née Sidney, a.k.a. ((Countess of)) Pembroke), took on herself to complete her brother’s work. In 1599 the complete Book was presented to Queen Elizabeth I of England.

Herbert used a great many different verse forms to compose the Psalms, and all of them received one or another form of end rhyme – a feature the Hebrew originals do not possess. The title page of one of the manuscripts rightly says: “The Psalmes of David translated into divers and sundry kindes of verse, more rare and excellent for the method and varietie than ever yet hath been done in English.”¹⁸⁸

Few of the acrostic Psalms maintained their characteristic of initial letters: only 111 and 119.¹⁸⁹ It remains a mystery why the other psalms are not reproduced in this way – a lack of poetical skilfulness cannot possibly be the cause, considering the work of these siblings. At the same time, Herbert composed a non-alphabetical acrostic Psalm that originally was no acrostic, to wit Psalm 117. The Sidney’s have not explained the rationale behind this decision, but it might follow from the information their sources provided. Hannay, who studied the coming about of the Sidney Psalter, discovered that the Sidneys consulted a considerable variety of commentators on the meaning of the Psalm verses, and that the work of John Calvin was one of their important sources. Hannay noticed that “[w]here Calvin does not note that structure, the Sidneys do not write them as acrostics. Now, Pembroke could have known the verse form from the Hebrew and avoid repeating it on aesthetic principles, but the correspondence to Calvin is noticeable.”¹⁹⁰

Mary Herbert, though she adhered in these two Psalms to the alphabetical pattern, still allowed herself a certain freedom in the application of it: while the Hebrew has invariably eight times the same initial letter in Psalm 119, Herbert only applies the alphabetic pattern in the first line of each strophe. It is especially worthwhile mentioning that each of the 22 strophes has received its own verse form and rhyme pattern.¹⁹¹ Note that this pattern follows the English alphabet from A to Y, omitting J, U, X and

¹⁸⁸ H. Hamlin: 121

¹⁸⁹ A. Feuillerat: 187-246

¹⁹⁰ M.P. Hannay: 18-19

¹⁹¹ A (aa-bb-cc), B (ababc), C (ababc), D (abba cdeedc), E (ababc), F (aaaa – bbbb – cccc – etc.), G (ababcaca), H (ababcbedcdefefghghih), I (aabcbc), K (abaabc), L (abaccb), M (ababcaca), N (abcbca), O (ababc), P (aabbcc –

Z, thus arriving at the original 22 strophes. Her Psalm 111 is very similar in this respect, also following the English alphabet from A to U – arriving at 20, unlike the original 22 – and omitting J. Pembroke was well aware that the Psalms were sacred, not ordinary texts. She made use of various other translations as well as commentaries on the Bible text to inform herself thoroughly about its meaning¹⁹², which indicates that she has not used paraphrases without much thought. Her wording sometimes betray that she consulted other metrical translations of the Psalms, as the *Psaumes* by Marot and Bèze (1562) and versions by Robert Crowley (1550), Matthew Parker (1567?1557?), Sternhold and Hopkins (1549), George Gascoigne, and Anne Lok (1560).¹⁹³ Not a few metaphors in her translation seem to come from Calvin’s commentary on the Psalms¹⁹⁴ and from the commentary of Bèze.¹⁹⁵

Mary Sidney Herbert “shared [the] Protestant goal of naturalizing the scriptures in her native tongue, although [...] she was concerned with poetic quality as well as scholarship” and “attempted to retain the sense of the original Hebrew text while she clothed it in English verse.” It is undecided whether Herbert mastered the Hebrew language.¹⁹⁶ The striking similarity noted before – the Sidneys only applied the acrostic where Calvin comments on its existence – might tentatively indicate she did not. However, this should be a deficiency sufficiently compensated for, in that she consulted many commentators who did master the original source language.

William Binnie (1886)

At the end of the nineteenth century, W. Binnie, a Doctor of Divinity and professor of church history at Free Church College in Aberdeen, wrote a work on the Psalms and their history, teachings, and use. In the first edition of this study, Binnie used a translation of his own making. In the 1886 edition, however, the Revised Version of the Old Testament is used – that is to say, with a few exception, among which the acrostic Psalms. “Without calling in question the wisdom of the Revisers in declining to reproduce these Psalms in the form of English acrostics, it still seemed to me that in such a work as the present, it would be a pity not to make at least an attempt to exhibit to the eye of the English reader a form of literary structure so remarkable.”¹⁹⁷

Binnie discusses the essential characteristics of Hebrew poetry, and deals in particular with its versified structure. In this context, he dwells at some length on the alefbetic Psalms, since “their peculiar form brings out, with extraordinary distinctness and certainty, the principles that regulate the

eeffggd – hhijjd – kllmmd), Q (abaccdd), R (abccab), S (ababbcb), T (abbaccdd), V (aabb – ccdd – eeff – etc.), W (ababaa), Y (abba – cddc – effe – etc.).

¹⁹² M.P. Hannay: 11

¹⁹³ M.P. Hannay: 11

¹⁹⁴ M.P. Hannay: 21

¹⁹⁵ M.P. Hannay: 23-24

¹⁹⁶ M.P. Hannay: 15-17

¹⁹⁷ W. Binnie: III

poetical composition of the Hebrews.”¹⁹⁸ To illustrate his argument, he translates Psalms 111 and 112 in full, and Psalms 37 and 119 in part.

The professor acknowledges but does not shun the alphabetical challenge. He takes for granted that the only “feasible method” is to use the 22 most frequently used letters of the English alphabet, and judges Delitzsch’ “attempt” – in which he “follow[s] in English the order of the Hebrew letters” – to have “little success”.¹⁹⁹ Binnie himself, for that matter, seems not to follow his own instructions, seeing that he once employs the letter U and omits the V, and once the other way round. Both times he leaves out the letters I, X and Z.

Concerning the function of the pattern, Binnie believes that “useful purposes are served by its being actually reproduced, at least in translations which are chiefly intended for use in the study or in Bible classes.” Some paragraphs later, it becomes clear that he in particular aims at exhibiting the *structure* of the original to the reader.²⁰⁰

The acrostics are “as a rule [...] the least poetical of all”, and “seldom rises into the region of poetry; being rather a versified meditation than a poem in the strict sense of the word”, according to Binnie,²⁰¹ who yet does not despise them; quite the reverse, as shows the following comment on the 119th Psalm: “If inferior to many others in poetical embellishment, [in particular the acrostic Psalms 119, 25, 34, and 37] are inferior to none in the variety and richness of the aliment they minister to devout meditation.”²⁰² That they are, in some respects, “by no means the best examples of Hebrew poetry”, he ascribes to the forced word order resulting from the contraining initial letter order.²⁰³

New Jerusalem Bible (1985)

The New Jerusalem Bible, a Catholic translation published in 1985, is a translation directly from the Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic.²⁰⁴ It does not incorporate acrostics, save the one in Psalm 25, which exactly follows the alphabet from A to V.

Its predecessor, the Jerusalem Bible, is the English equivalent of the 1956 French *La Bible de Jérusalem*. Not much is said about translation principles guiding each of these. While the New Jerusalem Bible is said to be translated directly from the original languages, “[p]arts of the English edition were translated from the French, then carefully compared with the Hebrew or Aramaic texts. However, more parts were translated from the Hebrew or Greek and compared with the French.” An interesting comment is made about the Psalms, which are said to present “a special problem because

¹⁹⁸ W. Binnie: 139

¹⁹⁹ W. Binnie: 141

²⁰⁰ W. Binnie: 140-141

²⁰¹ W. Binnie: 139, 144

²⁰² W. Binnie: 145

²⁰³ W. Binnie: 150

²⁰⁴ “New Jerusalem Bible”

they are a collection of verse not only to be read but also to be sung or chanted.”²⁰⁵ Nothing however is said, or found elsewhere, about the acrostics. The presence of this one acrostic nevertheless proves that the translators were aware of their existence.

Easy English (2001-2002)

The Easy English Bible is issued by Wycliffe Associates (UK), an organization that has developed a simplified form of English called *EasyEnglish* in order to facilitate Bible reading and understanding for people who learn English as a second language. They provide material – Bible translation as well as commentaries and Bible studies – on two language levels; one standard with a 1200-, and one with a 2800-word vocabulary. EasyEnglish is “able to express complex or abstract ideas in simpler words and grammatical structures without significantly losing meaning. It does this by: Restricting vocabulary, simplifying grammar, applying a logical structure to optimise comprehensibility.”²⁰⁶ Because of the wide variety of cultural backgrounds of its target group, *EasyEnglish* also makes implicit information like culturally-specific metaphors and idioms explicit.²⁰⁷

Their website provides general information about their working method and in the notes accompanying the Psalms some remarks are made about the acrostics, while the notes on Lamentations and Proverbs 31 do not mention them. Only Psalm 9-10 and 145 are reproduced in acrostic form. In Psalm 9-10 the letters D, M till Q, U till X, and Z are omitted, in Psalm 145 the letters I, Q, X and Y. In the notes on the latter, Churchyard explains: “As there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, we have left out 4 English letters.”²⁰⁸

Why Easy English did translate Psalm 9-10 as an acrostic: “We have done it with psalms 9 and 10 because some of the letters are missing. This makes it easier for us! [...] D is not here. Perhaps somebody changed some words into other words that meant the same. You can see that the acrostic is incomplete. “Incomplete” means that it is not all there. The psalm is all there, though. A few words became changed. They still mean the same thing.”²⁰⁹

On Psalm 34: “Psalm 34 is an alphabet psalm. [...] We have put verse 16 before verse 15, because this makes it easier to understand. Because it is an alphabet psalm there are a lot of different ideas in it.”²¹⁰ The notes on Psalm 111 explain what an acrostic is and then simply say: “This Easy English translation of Psalm 111 does not make an acrostic.”²¹¹ With the following Psalm Churchyard gives a little more information: “All the psalms are Hebrew poems, but some of them are acrostic poems. [...] This is very difficult to do when you translate the psalms into another language. This set

²⁰⁵ “The Jerusalem Bible”

²⁰⁶ R. Betts

²⁰⁷ R. Betts

²⁰⁸ G. Churchyard, “An Alphabet Of Praise. Psalm 145”

²⁰⁹ G. Churchyard, “God Will Always Remember You. Psalms 9 and 10”

²¹⁰ G. Churchyard, “The Fear of the Lord. Psalm 34”

²¹¹ G. Churchyard, “God is Righteous. Psalm 111”

of psalms does it with Psalms 9 and 10, but not with Psalm 112. But we have put the letters of the Hebrew alphabet before each part. So, after the first “hallelujah” (that means “praise the LORD” or “tell the LORD that he is very great”) there are 22 lines in the psalm. This is because there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet.”²¹² Psalm 119 has the same basic explanation about the acrostic structure again and then provides a possible reason for it: “We think that they did this to make it easier for them to remember the psalm. It was probably a psalm that Jewish leaders had to remember.”²¹³

Brenda Boerger (recent)

This paper includes only one acrostic Psalm from Boerger – unfortunately, I have not been able to find the others (at least 111, 112 and 119 exist of her hand), nor to read the article in which she discusses the translation of the biblical acrostics²¹⁴, except the introductory statement in which she says: “I find myself occasionally out of step with colleagues in my desire to maintain aspects of the form in translating poetry [...] Both form and content are woven together in a poem to reflect the beauty and order imposed by the author. Meaning is clearly conveyed extra-lexically.”²¹⁵

Boerger followed the English alphabet, without omitting any letters, which she accomplished by reworking the structure of the Psalm. Besides, she rendered the 22-verse, non-acrostic Psalm 33 into an English double acrostic – not only the first, but also the last letters of each line form the alphabet – and there even added some initial letters: CH after C and SH after S. For the letter X, she used the words “Expect” and “Exhibiting”, thus approaching both sound and letter.

In her job as a translation consultant working in the Natqgu language (vernacular) of the Solomon Islands, Boerger also maintained the acrostic pattern of the Psalms.

Dru Brooke-Taylor (recent)

Dru Brooke-Taylor composed a collection of metrical Psalms with the objective “to produce a singable version of each psalm that is as near as one can get to the scripture behind it as possible while being compatible with the metre one is using.”²¹⁶ Most lyrics he took from existing psalm books, some he himself wrote when he could not find an existing metrical translation that “quite fulfilled what was required”.²¹⁷ One of these is an acrostic version of the 111th Psalm. He writes: “This version attempts to replicate in English metre the acrostic of the Hebrew original. It also shows why this form does not resonate in English. As English has no corresponding distinction between the sounds of Aleph and

²¹² G. Churchyard, “God’s Man is Righteous. Psalm 112”

²¹³ G. Churchyard, “The Word of God. Psalm 119”

²¹⁴ See Boerger, Brenda H. *Extending translation principles for poetry and biblical acrostics*. Notes on Translation 11(2):35-56. Dallas: SIL 1997.

²¹⁵ F. Boswell: 465

²¹⁶ D. Brooke-Taylor, “The Psalms in Metre. Preface and Doxologies”: 6

²¹⁷ D. Brooke-Taylor, “The Psalms in Metre. Preface and Doxologies”: 11

‘Ayin, I have chosen ‘a’ for one and ‘e’ for the other.’²¹⁸ In his introduction on Psalm 119 he says it to be “not possible in English verse to replicate the acrostic pattern, which would not work anyway.”²¹⁹ Regrettably, he does neither explain this disapproval nor distinguish (or say he does not) between metrical and non-metrical translations. Why this form should not ‘resonate in English’ is not as obvious. The background of this statement might be that the pattern is not flawlessly alphabetical because the initials match the original Hebrew sounds instead of the English alphabet order, as with Delitzsch and MacDonald.

Brooke argues his intention was to translate as close to the Bible as possible in writing singable, correctly metrical Psalms. “Singability is not the same thing as a good poem as poetry. Good poetry does not always fit a singable metre.” Compromises are sometimes “sadly [...] inevitable”: “[t]here are some situations where inversion is essential either so as to get the word that rhymes to come in the right place, or to ensure that an important word comes at a point in the line where either basic scansion or the way that particular metre works, places the emphasis.”

The poet translated as faithful to the original as to preserve its metaphors and idioms as far as possible, “even if sometimes this makes the translation less fluent”. Brooke states that inserting your own ideas or convictions into the text, “however worthy the motive”, implies having failed as a translator of the text.²²⁰

The existence of the other acrostics Brooke does not mention, except with Psalm 145, where he interjects: “[t]he original Hebrew is an acrostic but no attempt has been made to replicate this.”²²¹

Jim Cladpole (1938)

One more acrostic translation is published in *De A.B.C. Psalms put into de Sussex dialect and in due A.B.C. fashion*. This edition is written by Jim Cladpole – an alias of James Richards – and launched in 1938. At the end of the 20th century, Richard Coate put this book – now edited by himself – on the market anew (Younsmere Press, Brighton 1992). I have not been able to lay my hand on a copy.

Psalmen voor Nu (recent)

Only one Dutch rhymed version of the Psalms incorporates a few acrostics, as far as I know: the lyrics of the ‘Psalmen voor Nu’-project. Not all Psalms are released yet; up to now, four of the acrostic ones are ready, of which Psalm 145 did not maintain this poetic feature. The recurrent pattern of the

²¹⁸ D. Brooke-Taylor, “The Psalms in Metre. Book 5 - Part A - Psalms 107-119”: 141

²¹⁹ D. Brooke-Taylor, “The Psalms in Metre. Book 5 - Part A - Psalms 107-119”: 24

²²⁰ D. Brooke-Taylor, “The Psalms in Metre. Preface and Doxologies”: 6-7

²²¹ D. Brooke-Taylor, “The Psalms in Metre. Book 5 - Part B - Psalms 120-150”: 32

remaining three is A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P R S, ending with either U W V (111), U V Z (112) or U V W (119). Psalm 112, moreover, largely received end rhyme.

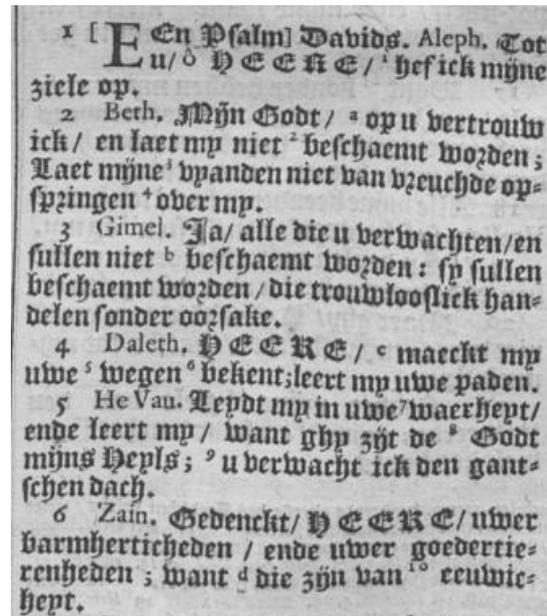
Each strophe of Psalm 119 has the first and third line begin with the successive letters of the Dutch alphabet, omitting the most problematic Q, X, Y and Z. The poet also compressed the wording slightly, perhaps to suit the singing of it as a whole (which takes appropriately 22 minutes), and this freedom he took possibly also due to his belief that the acrostic pattern in the Hebrew text often detracts from the natural speech ('nogaal eens ten koste gaat van de natuurlijke zeggings').²²²

²²² <http://www.boekencentrum.nl/index.php?cId=367&aId=178> (cached version; the actual content has been edited somewhere after 31 March 2011)

3.2 Bible translations without acrostics

These were some Bible translations maintaining the acrostics, more or less. Yet a great many others do not. Many ignore their existence altogether (as does the King James Bible), some indicate this feature of the source text by mentioning the initial Hebrew letters at the appropriate places or in a footnote or another explanatory text. An example is the Dutch Statenvertaling, which gives the Hebrew letter names in italicized Latin writing at the proper places in the Bible verses. Below is an illustration taken from a facsimile of the 1637 edition.²²³ Its recently revised edition, the *Herziene Statenvertaling*, gives the Hebrew letter names in italics the right-hand margin of the page.

The Statenvertaling offers the following explanation, introducing Psalm 25: “Deze psalm (als ook de 34ste en 145ste) is met bijzondere vlijt also gemaakt, dat elk vers begint met een letter van het Hebreeuwse **A B**, meest (want er is somtijds wel een uitgelaten en een andere tweemaal gesteld) in zulke orde, als de letters daarin elkander volgen. Dergelijks vindt men in de psalmen 37; 111; 112; 119. Spreuken 31, van het tiende vers af. Klaagliederen 1; 2; 3; 4.”²²⁴ Strikingly the translators seem not to have noticed the acrostic pattern in Psalm 9-10, nor their belonging together, possibly because the pattern is less apparent while the two parts are divided and some letters are missing.



The NIV Study Bible mentions the acrostic structure – including some deviations – in the marginal notes on the individual Psalms and the Ode in Proverbs, and in the introduction on Lamentations. It does not give the Hebrew letters in the passages themselves, except in Psalm 119, where each strophe of eight is preceded by both the Hebrew character and its transcribed name. The Willibrordvertaling mentions the acrostic structure in the introduction on Lamentations, but does not include the Hebrew letters in the individual laments. In the Psalms, the ode, and the first eight verses of Nahum, however, it gives the Hebrew letters (transcribed) in the left-hand margin (except deviations as the final resh verses of Psalm 25 and 34).

The Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling (NBV) mentions the acrostic in marginal notes on the individual Psalms, Proverbs 31, and the Lamentations, including a little information on the irregularities – for example, that the in Psalms 25 and 34 falls outside the acrostic pattern. The NBV translation team of

²²³ See <http://www.bijbelsdigitaal.nl/statenvertaling-1637>

²²⁴ Statenvertaling: 672 (on Psalm 25)

Proverbs²²⁵ expounds its considerations concerning acrostics in some detail when discussing Proverbs 31:10-31. The team distinguishes four options and their implications:

1. Translating the Hebrew acrostic into a Dutch acrostic. This will involve transformations concerning the content that should not be made should the acrostic be ignored.
2. Not translating the Hebrew acrostic as a Dutch acrostic, but compensating this feature, for instance by a structural application of rhyme. This will involve transformations concerning the content.
3. Not maintaining the acrostic at all.
4. Not maintaining the acrostic, but indicating its existence in the margin by means of Hebrew letters, whether or not transcribed. This is not an option to be considered: “Opname van de Hebreeuwse letters in de marge lijkt ons volledig in strijd met de methode.”

The decisive factor for the Proverbs team was the original function of the acrostic in the source text. Admitting the difficulty of judging this function – did it only serve as a decoration or did it also influence its meaning? – they think each pronouncement concerning its meaning speculative.

Moreover, they fear that reproducing it in translation produces an artificial text, and involve too much deviations with respect to content, wherefore they opted for 3: “Om deze redenen vertalen we het acrostichon niet, in het besef dat een aspect van de brontekst noodzakelijkerwijze verloren gaat.”²²⁶

The Lamentations team wrote: “Een vertaling die recht wil doen aan de wezenlijke kenmerken van de brontekst, kan dit vormprincipe niet negeren. Omdat het niet zinvol en niet haalbaar is om Klaagliederen als abc'tje te vertalen, hebben wij gezocht naar een andere methode om dit vormkenmerk herkenbaar in de vertaling weer te geven.”²²⁷ The translation team preferred to print the initial letters – transcribed – in the right margin of the page. Interestingly, a supervision team judged it in the similar case of Psalm 145 to be best to include a footnote indicating the original acrostic, since the letters in the margin – the choice of the Psalms translation team – should not be functional. For this reason, and because of the just expounded opinion of the Proverbs team, the Lamentations team decided to bring in only an explanatory footnote in V5.²²⁸

Others just mention the existence of the original acrostic, passing it by with remarks as “... an acrostic structure, which of course cannot be reproduced in translation”²²⁹ or “Obviously, while this makes great sense and is easy to grasp by the ancient Hebrew mind, it is almost impossible to translate such acrostic forms into modern English.”²³⁰

²²⁵ “Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling (2004)”. A short explanation of the working method of this translation project might be helpful. The translators of the NBV worked in twenty pairs, each working at its allotted portion of the Bible. Repeatedly the concept text was presented to other source- or target language experts and authors, poets, preachers, exegetes, rabbi's, linguists and literature critics. The successive working editions of each part were named V1 – V7, the latter being the final edition. The information about acrostics in Lamentation comes from a document accompanying V5, i.e. after the supervision team gave its opinion and proposed alterations. The Proverbs and Psalms teams seem to be progressed further by then.

²²⁶ NBG, “Toelichting Spreuken”

²²⁷ NBG, “Toelichting Klaagliederen”

²²⁸ NBG, “Toelichting Klaagliederen”

²²⁹ T.J. Meek: 151

²³⁰ R. Rhodes: 24

Many do not mention it at all, assuming the untranslatability of it as a matter of fact and thus removing all signs of it completely. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia affirms this observation: “Most translations make no attempt at all to preserve this ACROSTIC in English apart perhaps from indicating the Hebrew letters.”²³¹

E. Nida and C. Taber discuss word play in Greek, which often “cannot be reproduced in English. The best we can do under such circumstances is to use a marginal note to call the attention of the reader to the fact that in the source language one and the same word has both meanings.”²³² They then go on to apply the same conclusion to other poetic features: “In a similar way, we cannot reproduce the rhythm of Hebrew poetry, the acrostic features of many poems, and the frequent intentional alliteration. At this point, languages just do not correspond, and so we must be prepared to sacrifice certain formal niceties for the sake of the content.”²³³

Croese also sees a positive implication of ignoring the acrostic; the translator does not need to meet these initial-letterrestrictions: “Door het acrostichon juist niet mee te nemen in de vertaling, is men niet meer gebonden aan de daarbij behorende restrictie. De aanpassingen die nodig zijn om het acrostichon te volgen zijn dan niet nodig.”²³⁴

It appears that there are three main strategies in translating acrostics: ignore, signal and leave, or reproduce. Most Bible translations choose for the first option, some decide to the second, while only a few take this road less travelled by. The translators of the first and second group possibly follow translation principles that rule out the possibility of reproducing the acrostic, ascribe no (important) function to it, or have an audience that will not be able to interpret it. The third group ascribes enough meaning to this poetic characteristic to aim at reproducing it, irrespective of the various functions each individual translator believe it to serve, and think means and meaning to be thus strongly intertwined in these poems that the whole will suffer a great loss if translated non-acrostically.

It should be overdone to say Nida, Taber, and all others adopting the untranslatability-view are altogether wrong, but the existence of acrostic translations proves them wrong at least to a certain extent. The reason for these differences lies in different views on translation, perhaps more specific: Bible translation: to what extent a translator is willing to use paraphrase, inversion, line reversal et cetera. Chapter 4.1 will examine these techniques.

²³¹ G.W. Bromiley: 99

²³² E.A. Nida and C.R. Taber: 5

²³³ E.A. Nida and C.R. Taber: 5

²³⁴ F. Croese 10-05-2010

4. Translation Solutions

All translators know that it often proves impossible to adhere to the original word order, that the extent to which the original imagery is to be retained is subject to diverse considerations, and so on. This applies to prose, even more to poetry, and still more to acrostics. This is partially because of their apparent limitations concerning the initial words of each line or verse. However, besides the challenges poetic passages raises, the discussed acrostics frequently present additional problems. This chapter discusses the varied solutions that translators applied for the specific problems.

First, there is a range of possibilities to attain an alphabetical translation, despite the differences between Hebrew and Latin writing (4.1). Moreover, often the alefbetical sequence appears to be broken by more important stylistic considerations, such as the aleph-lamed-pe pattern of Psalms 25 and 34 (4.3). Sometimes the acrostic is incomplete (4.2, 4.6, 4.9), there is no scholarly consensus on the existence of some suspected biblical acrostics (4.9), or additional message acrostics are found (4.4, 4.6). Some poems follow an alternate order of the alefbet, such as the פ-ע reversal in Lamentations 2 – 4 (4.8). The Hebrew ‘she’-suffix presents a problem (4.7), as does the delicately framed Psalm 119. Finally, there is the name acrostic on יהוה (4.10).

The Psalm passages will be discussed in their numerical order, followed by Proverbs 31, Lamentations, Nahum 1 and the יהוה acrostic. NB Chapter 4.2 ff will not provide exhaustive accounts of the exact patterns each individual translator applied in the individual psalms: Appendix I does.

4.1 Techniques to preserve the acrostic

Chapter 2.3 introduced the problem of differences between Hebrew and Latin writing in script, pronunciation, number of characters and the structure of the alphabet. Despite these hindrances, the existence of acrostic translations proves that certain people must have thought it possible and desirable to both faithfully translate the content of these poems and preserve their acrostic format. The question then arises: how did these translators overcome these problems?

It turns out that they employed several techniques: sound- or sequential equality; change in word order or sentence structure; line reversal; paraphrasing; adding or omitting words; neologisms, archaisms, rare words, spelling; appointing the second word in line as the acrostic initial, using an abbreviation or contraction; adjustment to acrostic structure; repetition; alternative form of address. These will be discussed in that order, at the same time roughly reflecting their importance or occurrence – those first named are used by all translators, the last by a few.

4.1.1 Sound equality and sequential equality

After examining the translated acrostic passages, there turn out to be roughly two options to handle the differences between alefbet and alphabet: the possibility of what I will call sound equality, and the other possibility that I will call sequential equality. This distinction appears not to be made yet in literature, while I think it to be of significant importance: it explains structural differences in the translated acrostics, resulting from a truly different approach. Commentators often not recognize the sound equality approach and therefore depict its result the blacker than is just.

Sequential equality implies that the corresponding lines in both editions begin with the letter that has the same position in the alphabets in question. Thus, where Hebrew has א, ב, ג and ד, English and Dutch have A, B, C and D in the first four lines. The last translated line has a Z most times, the final letter in the Latin alphabet, and not a T, equivalent of the final Hebrew letter ת.

Sound equality implies that the corresponding lines in both editions of a text begin with the same sound. Its orthography may or may not be alike in both. Thus where the alefbet acrostic ends with ק, ר, ש and ת, the alphabet acrostic ends with Q/K, R, S/Sh and T (and not U, V, W, X, Y, Z).

Sequential equality

With sequential equality, the translator has to find a solution for the four remaining letters. Here a royal road does not exist, a best way out is missing. Knox, the Four Friends, Keil, Binnie, Herbert, Boerger, Croese, Oussoren, the New Jerusalem Bible (Psalm 25) and the yet under construction Dutch metrical version of the Psalms all follow, more or less strictly, the order of the Latin alphabet. How did they handle the difference in number?

One option is to follow the Latin alphabet without omitting any characters, beginning with A up to the 22nd letter. This option has its downside; an acrostic that is complete in the source text ('from א to נ'), will be seemingly incomplete in the translation ('from A to V'). Knox' approach in Lamentations is a perfect illustration: he went from A to V, thus omitting W till Z. Herbert did almost the same in Psalm 111, where she skipped only the J, thus ending with U. NB 'Without omitting any characters' applies only, of course, when the source text does not omit any characters.

Another option is to make up a substitute alphabet, which in the Hebrew-English/German/Dutch situation means an abridged alphabet with 22 letters, safeguarding that the first letter is an A and the last a Z. Most translators choose to adhere to order of the Latin alphabet, consonants as well as vowels, and to let go of the four most difficult initial characters – often four out of C, Q, X, Y, Z.²³⁵ As seen already, Croese made up one substitute alphabet (omitting C, Q, X and Y) and followed this system rigidly, allowing alterations only where the source text does. The Four Friends did likewise in Lamentations, where they omitted J, Q, X and Y, with one exception where they replaced K with J. The composers of *Psalmen voor Nu* also applied one substitute alphabet for Psalm 111 and 112, omitting Q, X and Y (unlike the other translators, they included the 'Hallelu-jah' in the acrostic, beginning with the letter A: "Alle eer aan God!") Others seem to have allowed themselves more freedom, omitting the four most difficult letters that suited best in the particular poem: Oussoren, the Four Friends, Binnie, Herbert in Psalm 119,

A third option is to use only the consonants of the alphabet, which makes up 21 characters, and make 22 by applying one consonant in two ways, for example the S with pronunciation /ʃ/. The advantage of this approach is its similarity to the Hebrew in this respect, but it remains true that the alefbet does not contain vowels and the Latin does. As a consequence, this is no perfect solution. It will furthermore prove quite a challenge to find suitable words with in particular the letters Q, X, and (in Dutch rather than English) Y. The advantage is, though, its correspondence to the source text in that only consonants are used. None of the examined translations applied this method.

Yet another alternative is to use the whole alphabet and change the structure of the poem somewhat, adding the necessary four lines to complete the A-Z. This may be an option to consider for certain kinds of texts, as children's books, where the exact content or wording needs not too strict adherence. Problems herewith with regard to more serious translation as literature, let alone the Holy Scripture, are huge, making this option virtually impossible in my opinion. The Hebrew poems under consideration are constructed far too carefully to allow interventions in the text like adding, omitting, or restructuring strophes, which affects – and destroys – the whole composition. There is, however, at least one who ventured to use this strategy, and chose to rework the strophes: Boerger, in her translation of Psalms 25, reconstructed the Psalm into 13 strophes, each containing four verse lines,

²³⁵ See for example W. Binnie: 141. "The only feasible method is to omit from our alphabet the four letters that are of least frequent use, and make the two-and-twenty that remain stand for the two-and-twenty letters of the Hebrew. This may not suffice to meet the demands of a pedantic accuracy, but it will exhibit to the English reader the structure of the original, which is all that I propose."

resulting in the pattern AA-BB CC-DD EE-FF et cetera. She followed the Latin alphabet, except that she replaced X and Z with E and O, respectively.

By way of illustration, the following chart will show the Hebrew alefbet and the alfabeth Croese applied in *Tot lof van God*. In addition, a (non-exhaustive) indication of their word-initial pronunciation is provided. Note that the \aleph itself is a silent letter, but as a *matres lectionis* serves to indicate ‘a’ class vowels. Apparently, only the first two sounds in the alphabet match with the corresponding sound in the alefbet.

Hebrew	IPA ²³⁶	Croese	IPA ²³⁷
א	/ʔ/ or Ø or ‘a’ class vowels	A	/ɑ/ or /aː/
ב	/b/	B	/b/
ג	/g/	D	/d/
ד	/d/	E	/eː/ or /ɛ/
ה	/h/ or Ø	F	/f/
ו	/v/ or /w/ or Ø	G	/ɣ/
ז	/z/	H	/ɦ/
ח	/ħ/ or /χ/	I	/i/ or /ɪ/
ט	/tʰ/	J	/j/
י	/j/ or Ø	K	/k/
כ	/k/	L	/l/
ל	/l/	M	/m/
מ	/m/	N	/n/
נ	/n/	O	/oː/ or /ɔ/
ס	/s/	P	/p/
ע	/ʃ/ or /ɕ/	R	/r/
פ	/p/	S	/s/
צ	/sʰ/ or /ts/	T	/t/
ק	/q/ or /kʰ/	U	/y/ or /ʏ/
ר	/r/	V	/v/
ש	/ʃ/ or /ʧ/	W	/ʊ/
ת	/t/	Z	/z/

²³⁶ The IPA belonging to the Classical or Biblical Hebrew

²³⁷ The IPA belonging to the current Dutch pronunciation

Sound equality

MacDonald pursued the path of sound similarity rather than sequential similarity, as well as Delitzsch and Brooke-Taylor (who only acrosticized Psalm 111). The following chart shows the Hebrew alefbet and the alphabets MacDonald and Delitzsch used in translating Lamentations chapters 2-4 and the Psalms, respectively. In these laments, *ו* and *פ* changed places; MacDonald did the same, unlike Delitzsch. In addition, a (non-exhaustive) indication of their word-initial pronunciation is provided.

Lm2-4	IPA ²³⁸	MacDonald	IPA ²³⁹	Ps	Delitzsch	IPA ²⁴⁰
א	/ʔ/ or Ø	A	/æ/ or /a:/	א	A	/ɛ/ (with diaeresis) or /a/
ב	/b/	B	/b/	ב	B	/b/
ג	/g/	G	/g/	ג	G	/g/
ד	/d/	D	/d/ or /ɾ/	ד	D	/d/
ה	/h/ or Ø	H	/h/ or /ħ/	ה	H	/h/
ו	/v/ or /w/ or Ø	V	/v/	ו	U / W	/ʊ/ (with diaeresis) or /ʊ/ or /v/
ז	/z/	Z	/z/	ז	S	/s/ or /z/ or /sʃ/
ח	/ħ/ or /χ/	H	/h/ or /ħ/	ח	H	/h/
ט	/tʰ/	T	/t/ or /tʰ/ or θ or /ð/	ט	T	/t/ or /tʃ/ or /ts/
י	/j/ or Ø	Y	/j/	י	I / J	/j/
כ	/k/	K	/k/	כ	K	/k/
ל	/l/	L	/l/	ל	L	/l/
מ	/m/	M	/m/	מ	M	/m/
נ	/n/	N	/n/	נ	N	/n/
ס	/s/	S	/s/	ס	S	/s/ or /z/ or /sʃ/
פ	/p/	P	/p/ or /pʰ/	פ	E	/ɛ/ or /ə/
צ	/ʃ/ or /ʒ/	I	/i/ or /i:/	צ	F / P	/f/ or /p/
ק	/sʰ/ or /ts/	S	/s/ or /z/	ק	Z	/ts/
ר	/q/ or /kʰ/	Q	/k/	ק	K / Q	/k/ or /kv/
ש	/r/	R	/r/	ר	R	/r/
ת	/ʃ/ or /ʧ/	S	/s/	ש	S	/s/ or /z/ or /ʃ/
ת	/t/	T	/t/ or /tʰ/	ת	T	/t/ or /tʃ/ or /ts/

Now most of the 22 sounds do match at the appropriate places. MacDonald said to “imitate the Hebrew by having the first letter of the English *correspond to* the Hebrew letter”²⁴¹ [emphasis added]. The first sound that does not necessarily match is the Hebrew ‘silent letter’ or glottal stop א (which cannot be represented by a Latin consonant), which is often used to indicate an ‘a’ class vowel, though sometimes also for other vowels, as in the divine Name Elohim - אלהים. The second is the פ, also a glottal stop.

²³⁸ The IPA belonging to the Classical or Biblical Hebrew

²³⁹ The IPA belonging to the current English pronunciation of the letters MacDonald used here

²⁴⁰ The IPA belonging to the current German pronunciation of the letters Delitzsch used here (sometimes in combination with another letter, such as the T: tsch > /tʃ/, or in a specific context, such as the S: before and between vowels: /z/ or /z̥/; before consonants or when final: /s/; before P or T at the beginning of a word or syllable: /ʃ/).

²⁴¹ B. MacDonald, “Psalm 9 – Sing a psalm perpetually”

MacDonald accounts for his rendering of these sounds: “I make some exceptions, particularly for the gutturals. *Aleph* is not equivalent to ‘A’ in English. It is a guttural, like a glottal stop in English, having no particular vowel sound. So also is *ayin* (the 16th letter), only deeper. In my translations, any glottal stop in English counts as imitation.”²⁴²

Concerning sound- and sequential equality, the one choice is not to be valued higher than the other, as for example Binnie did with his judgment on Delitzsch’ version;²⁴³ its makers just aimed at another goal. However, the pattern will be less apparent in the sound similarity translation, where the acrostic may be thought to be rather sloppy and lacking structure. Without explanation, the reader will definitely not understand the substantial deviation from the expected alphabetical pattern, while the sequential similarity approach will not occasion much bewilderment.

²⁴² B. MacDonald, “Psalm 9 – Sing a psalm perpetually”

²⁴³ W. Binnie: 141

4.1.2 Word order

The acrostics of some translators attract attention due to the uncommon word order they employ, and yet more frequently, the original word order is altered inconspicuously – all in order to gain the right initial letter. A comparison with a fairly ‘literal’ translation such as the ESV or SV, that follow the original word order closely, proves that the following examples of inversion are due to the acrostic requirements.

MacDonald abundantly uses uncommon word order in each acrostic passage. Just a few examples:

Psalm 34:15-16: “Eyes, those of יהה [...] Face, that of יהה.” Psalm 119:64, 81 “Covenant mercy yours, יהה, has filled the earth”, “Faints my being for your salvation.”

Other translators apply this technique less conspicuously; the word order is apparently non-standard, and places emphasis on the inverted word(s), but generally does not hinder the flow of the text.

Delitzsch writes Psalm 25:4 as “Deine Wege, Jahve, thu mir kund”, in Psalm 34:4 “Durchzudringen zu Jahve sucht’ ich.”

Knox renders Lamentations 1:4 as “Desolate, the streets of Sion; no flocking, now, to the assembly.”

The Four Friends have in Psalm 9:9 “Great defence shall Jehovah be.” Psalm 25:11 “Merciful be Thou, o Jehovah, unto my sin.” Psalm 119:20, 23 “Consumed is my soul”, “Counsel have princes taken against me.” Lamentations 1:3 “Captive is Judah gone.”

Oussoren: Psalm 9:17 “Keren zullen booswichten / terug naar de hel.” Psalm 111:9 “Redding, loskoop zond hij zijn gemeente.” Psalm 112:9 “Stand houdt zijn gerechtigheid voor immer.” Psalm 145:20, 21 “Waken wil de Ene over [...]”, “Zeggen zal mijn mond [...]”

Croese: Psalm 34:6 “Hij, Jehovah, Hij luistert waar de ellendige Hem aanroept.” Psalm 112:9 “Strooiend bijkans deelt hij wijd en zijd aan de behoeftigen uit.”

The NJB in Psalm 25:11: “Let my sin, great though it is, be forgiven, Yahweh, for the sake of your name.”

Does the Hebrew text justify this technique? According to Binnie, “the structure of Hebrew poetry is such, that a translator is able to render it perfectly into English without deviating from the natural order of the words.”²⁴⁴ He explains that the Hebrew poems can be rendered – in form as well as substance – in a literal translation into any other language, due to the nature of the Hebrew poetry: no classical meter or modern rhymes are used, but parallelism, which can be transferred easily into any other language: “the versification is regulated by the thought rather than by the words.”²⁴⁵ The only exception to this rule are the acrostic poems, Binnie says, where you find “the same inversion of the sentences, and the same laborious seeking out of rare words for the purpose of getting the right initial

²⁴⁴ W. Binnie: 150

²⁴⁵ W. Binnie: 147

letter”, as in English (and in Dutch, German and probably any other) acrostics.²⁴⁶ The Four Friends likewise call the acrostic “an arrangement which hinders the flow of thought and language.”²⁴⁷

Smelik thinks it important to stay close to the Hebrew word order, because the authors used inversion to emphasize certain words (by placing them sentence-initial). This is “often not too hard” in the language pair Hebrew-Dutch, he says.²⁴⁸

H. Kelly explains that the normal word order in a Hebrew verbal sentence is verb – subject (+ any modifiers) – object (+ any modifiers), except that the negative participle is placed before the verb. In case a different word order is used, the author emphasized the part of speech that is placed initially.²⁴⁹ There are exceptions to these rules, of course, but this basic knowledge gives some footing in assessing the frequent use of uncommon word order in the translated biblical acrostics.

²⁴⁶ W. Binnie: 150

²⁴⁷ Four Friends: 329

²⁴⁸ K. Smelik

²⁴⁹ H. Kelly: 87

4.1.3 Sentence structure

Frequently an adaptation of the sentence structure is visible: the agent, patient, and/or other thematic relations undergo change, or verb forms alter. To enable comparison, I will – in this paragraph and the following – provide the same text in the ESV, since this ‘literal’ translation strongly adheres to the Hebrew word order, as a comparison with an interlinear Hebrew-English Bible established.

“To you the helpless commits himself” versus “Toeverlaat werd u voor de zwakke” (Oussoren: Psalm 10:14).

“The angel of the LORD encamps round those ...” versus “Gelegerd is de engel van de Ene rondom ...” (Oussoren: Psalm 34:7).

“Light dawns in the darkness for the upright” versus “Genadig, barmhartig en rechtvaardig / helpt in het duister licht de oprechten” (Oussoren: Psalm 112:4).

“Treulich lohnt sich Leihn und Schenken” versus “It is well with the man who deals generously and lends” (Delitzsch: Psalm 112:5).

“Your hands have made and fashioned me” versus “Knitt and conformed by thy hand / hath been ev’ry part of me (Herbert: Psalm 119:73).

“Every day I will bless you” versus “Blessed art Thou every day” (Four Friends: Psalm 145:2).

“Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his grace is unsearchable” versus “Can any praise be worthy of the Lord’s majesty, any thought set limits to his greatness?” (Knox: Psalm 145:3).

“The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made” versus “Is he not a loving Lord to his whole creation; does not his mercy reach out to all that he has made?” (Knox: Psalm 145:9).

“You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing” versus “Shall He not open His hand, and fill all things living with plenteousness?” (Four Friends: Psalm 145:16)

“The LORD is good” versus “In Jehovah is kindness” (Four Friends: Lamentations 3:25).

“I have been hunted like a bird / by those who were my enemies without cause” versus “Chased – they chased me as a bird / my enemies / without a cause” (MacDonald: Lamentations 3:52)

4.1.4 Line reversal

Most translators choose only occasionally for a reversal of two lines in a verse.

Delitzsch: Psalm 25:10 “Kommt Jahve zu solchen die seinen Bund und Zeugnisse halten / So sind alle seine Pfade Gnade und Wahrheit” (All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness / for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies).

Keil: Lamentations 3:28 “Komt auf ihn eine Last / sitzt er einsam und schweigt.” (Let him sit alone in silence / when it is laid on him).

Knox: Psalm 119:6 “Attentive to all your commandments / I go my way undismayed” (Then shall I not be put to shame / having my eyes fixed on all your commandments).

Four Friends: Lamentations 3:4 “Broken of Him are my bones / my flesh and my skin hath He wasted away” (He has made my flesh and my skin waste away / he has broken my bones). Verse 52 “They that are mine enemies without cause / chased me sore like a bird” (I have been hunted like a bird / by those who were my enemies without cause).

Herbert: Psalm 111:4 “Gracious and good and working wonders soe / His wonders never can forgotten goe” (He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered / the LORD is gracious and merciful).

Brooke: Psalm 111:8 “Each done in truth and equity / for ever they shall last” (They are established for ever and ever / to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness).

Easy English: Psalm 145:20 “Wicked people will the LORD destroy. But he will save the people that love him.” (The LORD preserves all who love him / but all the wicked he will destroy).

4.1.5 Paraphrasing

When the straightforward translation of a sentence did not produce a right initial, paraphrasing proves a popular method.

“God, daily I count on your help to enfold.
Grant me your compassionate mercy and love –
Here are heaven’s instruments from times of old.
Here’s help that you’ve sent down to folks from above.”

is Boerger’s translation of “Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love, for they have been from of old” (Psalm 25:6).

Psalm 37:8 “Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath!” becomes “Furieuus? Ach, laat toch af, laat varen die woede” (Croese). Verse 34 “Wait for the LORD” becomes “Uw hoop zij op Jehovah derhalve” (Croese)

Psalm 111:9 “Holy and awesome is his Name” becomes “Quell der Ehrfurcht und heilig ist sein Name” (Delitzsch).

Psalm 112:7 “He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD” becomes “Nooit raakt hij in paniek, hoe slecht het nieuws ook wordt, / omdat hij altijd rekent op zijn trouwe God” (Psalmen voor Nu).

Psalm 119:9 “How” becomes “By what correcting line” (Herbert). Knox translates this verse “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word” as “Best shall he keep his youth unstained, who is true to your trust.” Verse 18 “Open my eyes” becomes “Clear sight be mine” (Knox), verse 57 “The LORD is my portion; I promise to keep your words” becomes “Heritage, Lord, I claim no other, but to obey your word” (Knox), verse 97 “Oh how I love your law!” becomes “Nought can enough declare / how I thy learning love” (Herbert).

Psalm 145:3 “Great is the LORD” becomes “Consider how great Jehovah is” (Four Friends), verse 13 “Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom” becomes “Never shall Thy kingdom be moved” (idem), verse 21 “My mouth will speak” becomes “You will hear me speak” (Easy English).

Lamentations 3:20 “My soul continually remembers it” becomes “God knows it shall be remembered” (Knox).

4.1.6 Addition or omission

All translators took the freedom to add, sometimes also to remove words. An anthology.

Delitzsch & Keil used the interjection “O” for the O-strophe 5 times out of 6, and likewise “Ja” for the J-strophe (4 out of 6). Cf other first words, as in Psalm 34:1 and 6: “Auf, benedeien will ich Jahve allezeit” (I will bless the LORD at all times), “Sieh der Leidvolle rief” (This poor man cried).

Examples taken from MacDonald: “Pathos – Zion spreads with her hand” (Lamentations 1:17, Zion stretches out her hands), “He יהוה is my portion” (Lamentations 3:24, The LORD is my portion), “Zonked they will ferment the memory of ...” (Psalm 145:7, They shall pour forth the fame of ...).

Sometimes he omitted an article, as in Lamentations 3:10: “Dreadful lurking bear he is to me.”

Knox’ first word in verse 1 of Psalm 145 is a conjunction not appropriate as the first word of this poem: “And shall I not extol you [...]?” (I will extol you). In verse 13 he applies the interjection “O”.

Other examples: “Be sure she weeps” (Lamentations 1:2, She weeps bitterly), “Pray you, should I not weep?” (verse 16, For these things I weep). “He, the Lord, is kind and merciful” (Psalm 111:4, The LORD is gracious and merciful). An omission: “Heart whispers, The Lord is my portion”

(Lamentations 3:24, “The LORD is my portion”, says my soul).

The Four Friends and Binnie frequently use “yea” for the Y-strophe (the first 11 times out of 20 Y-lines). Moreover, the Friends repeatedly chose “Lo” for the L-strophe, as in Psalm 112:6: “Lo! He shall ...” (The righteous shall ...). Accordingly, three of their four A-strophes in Lamentations begin with “Alas”, which fits in with the context but does not appear in the source text. Examples where they added other words, likewise interpreted from the context, are Lamentations 3:10: “Dreadful was He to me as a bear lying in wait” (He is a bear lying in wait for me) and verse 46 “Proud enemies have ...” (All our enemies have ...).

Often Oussoren used “ja” in the J-strophe: 12 times out of 22, and several times “ach” for the A-initial. Sometimes he omitted an article, as in Psalm 145:17: “Toonbeeld van een gerechte is de ENE.”

Croese easily used “en” (and) in the E-strophe – 11 times out of 14, while this conjunction is never necessary. The same applies for the A-strophe, where he frequently used the interjections “ah” and “ach”, the J-strophe, with “ja” 10 times out of 16, and the Z-strophe, with “zo” 11 times out of 15.

Another favourite is “inderdaad”, in Psalm 145:8, Psalm 34, 111, 119. See also Psalm 145:14:

“Prachtig, Jehovah pakt allen stevig vast die vallen” (The LORD upholds all who are falling). See also Psalm 34 and 37, with initial words that usually can be left out, and appear to be inserted for the sole purpose of establishing the alphabetic pattern: “Natuurlijk”, “Werkelijk”, “Stellig”, “Dus”, “Kortom”,

“Luistert”, “Merkt op”, “Reken maar dat”, “Voorwaar”. The same phenomenon is visible in Herbert:

“Sure, lord, thy self art just” (Psalm 119:137, Righteous are you, O LORD), “Yeeld me this favour,

Lord / my plaint may presse into thy sight” (Verse 196, Let my cry come before you, O LORD), and in

Psalm 25:16 of the NJB: “Quick, turn to me, pity me” (Turn to me and be gracious to me).

4.1.7 Neologism, archaisms, rare words, and spelling

Some translators invent new words, or drag up old, to meet the alphabetical requirements. An archaism is for example “Yon presumptuous will be shamed” (MacDonald, Psalm 119:78), a neologism “Halvernacht sta ik op” (Oussoren, Psalm 119:62).

Besides, MacDonald frequently uses existing words that are only seldom used, such as “Tsuga troubles of my heart are enlarged” (Psalm 25:17. His explanation by ‘tsuga’, of which the common name is ‘hemlock’, a genus of conifers: “tsuga, a word beginning with ts, common in Hebrew, rare in English, recalls the hemlock as a way of dealing with troubles. Such a method is not required with the one to whom we lift up our eyes.”²⁵⁰) Other examples are “Top notch [...] is יהוה” (Psalm 25:8, Good [...] is the LORD) and “Zero in with your mercies” (verse 6, Remember your mercy). He even adapts the spelling, if needed: “Zis poor one calls” (Psalm 34:6). MacDonald brought in colloquial exclamations for the ts-sound: Psalm 34:17 has “Tza! They cry out and יהוה hears” (When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears). Lamentations 2:18 “ts crying out to the Lord is their heart” (Their heart cried to the Lord), 4:18 “ts-our steps they hunt” (They dogged our steps). He explains: “In the psalms I was sometimes a little flippant - e.g. tza! in Psalm 34.”

Oussoren repeatedly uses the construction “In-goed” (Psalm 25:8, cf Lamentations 3 and Nahum 1). Comparable is “Gast-en-zwerver” (Psalm 119:19, sojourner). Other examples of his creative or poetic use of language are “Paalvast maakt de Ene voor een kerel zijn schreden” (Psalm 37:23, The steps of a man are established by the LORD) and “Puilend vol is zijn mond” (Psalm 10:7, His mouth is filled), and words as fluks, flagrant, onverwijld, posteer, smeltzuiver, capabel, doorvorsbaar. Interestingly, there is no indication that the original poems made use of neologisms.

²⁵⁰ B. MacDonald, “Psalm 25 – I wait, in covenant teach me your paths”

4.1.7 Second word in line, abbreviation, contraction

Another tactic to smuggle in the right acrostic letter is to count the second word of the appropriate word as the first. Delitzsch, MacDonald and Oussoren do so a few times.

In Psalm 37 verse 28 and 39, Delitzsch needed an E and a T as initials, but apparently could not find the suitable words. Eventually he wrote “In Ewigkeit werden sie behütet” and “Und Teilhaft des Heils macht Jahve Gerechte”,

**37 v Schau den Rechtschaffnen an und beobachte den Geraden,
Daß Nachblieb hat der Mann des Friedens.
38 Aber die Abtrünnigen werden vertilgt zusamt,
Der Frevler Nachblieb wird ausgerottet.
39 Und Eeilhaft des Heils macht Jahve Gerechte,
Der ihre Bergung in Bedrängnis-Zeit.
40 Es steht Jahve ihnen bei und befreit sie,
Befreit sie von den Frevlern und hilft ihnen,
Weil sie traun in Ihn.**

respectively. This edition emphasizes the acrostic initials by decorating them slightly, whereby there can be no misunderstanding of his intention.²⁵¹ De beth-verse of Psalm 25 begins with “Mein Gott, bei dir verbleib’ ich”. Here Delitzsch decorated none of the initial letters, but he appointed the third word as representing the B-line, because “... nach Art der Interjektionen bei den Tragikern z.B. φμοι nicht zum Verse gerechnet ist.”²⁵² In all probability, the reason why this particular acrostic initial is not decorated will be the fact that the word ‘bei’ ought not to be capitalized. These three instances are the only places where Delitzsch applied the ‘sentence-initial request’ loosely, except in one of the S-strophes in Lamentations 3, which reads: “s Sperren ihr Maul auf wider uns -- alle unsere Feinde.”

Oussoren’s choices are in keeping with this example: he wrote “n Flits en wie kwaad zaait is heen” when he needed an F-initial verse in Psalm 37. He applied this method again in Psalm 145:7 (‘t Gedenken van uw goedheid overvloedig / verbreiden zij uitbundig), nine times in Psalm 119, and once in the second Lament. Written in full, these sentences should thus begin with “Een”, “Het” or “Ik” (a, the, or I), while the initial of the second word served as the appropriate acrostic letter. Using these abbreviations is, incidentally, an accepted formula in Dutch.

MacDonald used this tactic of employing another than the first word for the acrostic letter only in Psalm 10, for example (acrostic letters underlined): “Criminal looks down its un-searching nose / There is no God in all its multifarious schemes / Its ways are twisted in all times / High is your judgment, out of its sight / All its troubles, It snorts at them.” He did so for another reason: “Whenever you see a letter in the middle of the text it is my attempt to show how rare those missing letters are in this text.”²⁵³ MacDonald also applied a contraction, in Psalm 119:71 “‘Tis good for me that ...”

Though this contraction is not common in writing, the VanDale dictionary acknowledges it as English.

²⁵¹ F. Delitzsch: 290

²⁵² F. Delitzsch: 230

²⁵³ B. MacDonald, “Psalm 10 – Value spurned”

4.1.9 Adjustment acrostic structure

In Psalm 111 and 112, Oussoren included the heading, “Alleluia”, in the acrostic sequence, unlike the Hebrew acrostics. The composers of ‘Psalmen voor Nu’ assigned some second half lines an ‘initial’ position, for example in the last part of Psalm 111:

Prachtig is elk gebaar,
Royaal de hand waarmee hij ons in vrijheid leven laat.
Sta stil bij wat de HEER in Trouw en liefde doet.
Uniek wat komt van God, yerbazingwekkend ook.
Wie daarvan ook maar iets begrijpen kan, is wijs.
Zing: alle eer aan God, die altijd bij ons blijft.

4.1.10 Repetition

Occasionally, the translator repeated one or a few words. So Croese, when he needed a U-initial: “... uit al hun noden bevrijdde Hij hen./ Uit al hun noden!” (Psalm 34:17-18, ... delivers them out of all their troubles). MacDonald did something similar, though the result is less fluent, up to confusing: “Being – my being will praise יהוה” (Psalm 34:3). “Chased – they chased me as a bird” (Lamentations 3:52). “Zion in Zion where יהוה sits, let all sing a psalm” (Psalm 9-10:12).

4.1.11 Alternative form of address

Oussoren uses ‘U’ and ‘Uw’ (polite form of address) when the psalmist addresses God. In the J-strophe of Psalm 119, however, he switches to ‘Jij, Je, Jouw’ (familiar form of address).

4.2 Psalm 9-10 – One incomplete acrostic

Psalm 9 and 10 are usually printed as two separate Psalms, though together they seem to form one – deficient – acrostic poem, missing dalet and several letters after lamed. There are attempts to ‘restore’ the assumed original complete acrostic pattern, on the assumption that the text has been corrupted and the original poem was a perfect acrostic.²⁵⁴

How did the translators deal with these problems? The Four Friends actually present the two Psalms as one, while most of the others still had them printed as separate poems. Knox either overlooked or ignored the pattern, while Delitzsch, MacDonald, the Four Friends, Easy English, Oussoren and Croese all included this acrostic. All omitted one initial for the missing dalet, like in the Hebrew poem. Not one remodelled the psalm using a complete alphabet, as to ‘restore’ the acrostic, though MacDonald emphasizes some letters mid-sentence in Psalm 10 verses 1 to 11: Ts, P, N and I, the ones he usually applies as the acrostic initials at this place in his acrostics – but now in random order and not sentence-initial. Delitzsch and Easy English leave out a number of acrostic letters after the L (ending up with 16 and 15 acrostic initials), The Four Friends after the K (with 12 left). Oussoren and Croese also omit some letters, but fewer; they reproduce respectively 17 and 18 initials.

Interpretations as that of Labuschagne, who reads the ‘hidden acrostic’ *blood ... wayfarer* in the missing letters, cannot possibly be incorporated into an English, Dutch or German acrostic. The theory of Benun is valid for any acrostic translation that omits the initials at exactly the same places (verses, lines) as the Hebrew original.

²⁵⁴ M. Berlin: 669 ff, e.g. Buitendijk: 419-428

4.3 Psalm 25 and 34: Aleph-Lamed-Pe

The problems in Psalm 25 and 34 are similar. Both have the normal number of 22 acrostic letters, but in Psalm 25, ו and פ are missing, there is an extra ג-verse and the acrostic ends with an extra ט-verse. In Psalm 34, ו is missing and there is again an extra, final, ט-verse.

In Psalm 25, most translators include 22 acrostic initials. Exceptions are Boerger (26) and MacDonald (21). All but MacDonald, Knox and the NJB represent the extra ט verse (with F, S, or O). In Psalm 34, all translators include 22 acrostic initials and all represent the extra ט-verse (with F, T, S, or M), except MacDonald (21 initials, none in the last verse).

An indication how the various translators handled these deviations from the alphabetical order:

	Missing vav	Extra peh	25: extra resh	25: missing qoph	25: vss	34: vss
Delitzsch	+	F	+	+	22	22
MacDonald	25 + , 34 -	-	+	+	21	22
Knox					22	22
Four Friends	+	S	-	-	22	22
Boerger	-	O	-	-	26	-
NJB	-	-	-	-	22	-
Oussoren	-	O resp. M	-	-	22	22
Croese	+	S	+	+	22	22

The Four Friends write about the composition Psalm 25: “In the alphabetical arrangement of the original no verse begins with the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, but the full number of twenty-two verses usual to alphabetical psalms is made up by the repetition of the 17th letter at the beginning of the last verse. This peculiarity has been imitated here to keep up the similarity of structure between this and the 34th Psalm.”²⁵⁵ Croese may well have reasoned the same: in his basic pattern, the S is the 17th letter. The overall sequence of the Four Friends is less rigid. Delitzsch’ final F-verse is peculiar, in that he has no other F-initial verses.

In conclusion: most translations reflect something of the deviations, which is in line with most commentator’s belief that they really are deviations from the standard sequence, but clashes with Tur-Sinai’s belief that they are due to historical change in the alefbet.

However, the belief that the aleph-lamed-pe pattern is intended to form the word ‘aleph’ (also ‘to learn, teach’) cannot be reflected in a translation, as English, Dutch and German have no three-letter, A-initial word with that meaning. Neither can Benin’s theory that the author introduced word play on ‘hope’, nor the additional acrostics Hurowitz found. In theory, the atbash explanation could be implemented, using U as the last initial – yet this should fail attract the attention, since today’s readers have no knowledge of this code.

²⁵⁵ Four Friends: 201

4.4 Psalm 37 – Ayin

The few deviations in Psalm 37 have not elicited much scholarly pens yet. The letter *ayin* appears to be missing, others do find it. All translators have 22 acrostic initials and no one adapted the sequence round the 16th letter, save Oussoren, who changed N-O-P into P-N-O (which is still no omission).

Benun argues that the letter *ayin* represents evil and that its omission indicates that there will be no place for evil in the future reality – an interpretation entirely based on specific characteristics of the Hebrew words of this psalm, wherefore a transfer of this information is impossible without paratext.

4.5 Psalm 119 – Repetition or variety, different words for Torah

The two main translation problems in Psalm 119 are whether the Psalm is highly repetitive or that, on the contrary, each sentence has its unique shade of meaning; and the issue of the eight to ten different words for ‘Torah’ that its author made use of in (well-nigh) all of the 188 verses.

Further research may reveal if the translators applied the same target text word for all of these source text terms: this will uncover how they thought about the first problem. This requires and deserves an investigation of its own, for which this paper allows no room and time.

4.6 Psalm 145 – Missing nun, king-acrostic

The missing nun in Psalm 145 is either left out intentionally, or a sign that the text is corrupted over time. From the way the translators handled this problematical issue can their thoughts be deduced: Knox, the Four Friends, Easy English and Oussoren employed 22 letters and thus included this nun-strophe, while Delitzsch, MacDonald, and Croese left it out (the first two omitted the N, the latter the O: like the ך in the alefbet, the 14th in his sequence). Choosing a certain source text edition may have steered translators towards their decision.

Kimelman discovered the reverse acrostic ‘king’ in vss. 11-13, which cannot be reproduced in translation: the letters M, L, K (13th – 11th letter in the alphabet and thus comparable to Hebrew ך, ך, and ך) do not spell a comparable word.

4.7 Proverbs 31 – ‘She’-suffix

In most Bibles, most sentences of this originally acrostic ode in Proverbs 31:10-31 begin with ‘she/zij/sie’, for the obvious reason that the Hebrew language allows for suffixing this pronoun, abbreviated, to verbs and nouns.

The two translators who reproduced this poem alphabetically are Knox and Oussoren. Both versions read smoothly. Oussoren employed superfluous initial words as ‘ach, dus, en, ja’, inversion, paraphrase or adding words, once enjambement across verses: “haar handpalmen / houden een weefspoel vast. Zij / knijpt haar handpalm niet dicht / voor de gebogene” (vss. 19-20), and line reversal (verse 18, 20, 23).

Knox’ techniques are comparable: otherwise superfluous initial words (‘ever, often, that is why’), inversion, paraphrase or adding words (as ‘ripe wisdom’ for ‘wisdom’). He alters a statement into a question (verse 13) and applies line reversal (verse 29).

4.8 Lamentations – פ-ע reversal

The Book of Lamentations has two main difficulties: the פ-ע reversal in the second to fourth lament, and the presumed acrostic in the fifth.

Pe-ayin

The established order of the Hebrew alefabet has the sequence פ – ע – פ – ע. Lamentations 2, 3 and 4 show a variant order; פ – פ – ע – ע. The Septuagint version of Proverbs 31 shows the same characteristic. Needs a translator use the normal order in Latin writing or needs he reverse two letters (in Hebrew the 16th and 17th)? To be able to decide this, one needs to know whether or not this reversal has happened purposefully, and if so, with what purpose. Different answers are given, as shown in 2.1.9: a mistake, an alternate alefbetical order, a message ('putting the mouth before the eye').

If the reversal is due to an alternate alefbetical sequence, reversal in a target language seems counterproductive (except in a scholarly edition, perhaps). A mistake seems improbable, but in that case, reproduction seems unnecessary. The Sinclair interpretation allows no reproduction – no Latin letter names mean 'mouth' or 'eye'.

The examined Bible translations are not all agreed about this issue. Knox used the normal order of the Latin alphabet in Lamentations, while MacDonald, the Four Friends, Oussoren and Keil show inversion of I-P vs. P-I, two times P-R vs. R-P, and R-S vs. S-R, respectively.

Lamentations 5

The German scholar Bergler reconstructed a presumed message acrostic in the fifth lament: "Die Abtrünnigen, (nämlich) das Volk verschmahe ich, (es) strafend mit Verachtung, wie dein Gott klagt."²⁵⁶ As other non-abecedarian or message acrostics, reproduction is impossible. The same goes for Guillame's acrostic-telestic "your God is greatly exalted", name acrostic "Zechariah", and mesotic "the prophet".

²⁵⁶ S. Bergler: 317

4.9 Nahum 1 – Incomplete acrostic

The most outstanding example of an incomplete biblical acrostic is the one in Nahum chapter 1. The easiest way out apparently is to forget about the possible acrostic and leave no traces, even no marginal notes, in the translation.

Those who are convinced of its existence may choose to ask attention for it in a marginal note, or have it recur in its incomplete format, i.e. א to ט, the 11th letter. Of the examined translations, only the Dutch Naardense Bijbel follows the alphabet with A B G D E F G H I J K M N (verse 2-10): the first eleven letters, and two more after omitting the 12th. It may indeed be wise to stop here and not proceed to 'restore' the suspected complete abecedarius, seeing that there is no evidence for this hypothesis. Spronk's acrostics and name telestic again cannot be reproduced in a translation.

4.10 Esther and Psalm 96:11 – JHWH-acrostic

Acrostics that are no abecedaries involve other complications, that are mentioned briefly before. Imagine a nominal acrostic, a poem in which the initial of every single *word* delivers the next letter of the acrostic. Imagine this poem to be originally written in a language with a large affixing ability. Imagine having to translate this text into a language without. This may be quite a challenge, seeing that the target text will need to be substantially longer.

Another example. Imagine a nominal acrostic. Imagine this poem to be originally written in a language that only writes down consonants. Imagine having to translate this text into a language that spells both consonants and vowels – or vice versa, for that matter. This also may be quite a challenge, seeing that the target text will inevitably need to be considerably longer to reach the necessary number of lines to complete the name. WLLMVNNSSV and WILLEMVANNASSOV, to use the initial letters of the fifteen strophes of the Dutch national anthem as an illustration, make a difference of five letters. It might not be a brilliant idea to either invent or embezzle five strophes.

As explained before, Psalm 96:11 contains a nominal acrostic on God's Name יהוה, as does the Book of Esther. Psalm 96:11 is composed as a distich, and reads as follows in the King James Bible: "Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea roar, and the fulness thereof." In Hebrew, the first half of this distich consists of the four words (right to left) ותגל הארץ ישמחו השמים, composing the Tetragrammaton.

A translation willing to retain this acrostic faces the problem how to accomplish this desire. The translator's options depend on his translation of this Divine Name in the Bible overall. A great many English translations use 'LORD', the Dutch editions often choose '(de) HEERE/HERE/HEER' (in capitals, to distinguish this Name from the title 'Lord' or 'Heere/Here/Heer' for the Hebrew אֲדֹנָי, Adonai. Others use 'Jahve' (Delitzsch) or 'Jehova(h)' (Four Friends, Croese) while some explore yet other possibilities as '(de) Ene' (Oussoren).

Considering that this Hebrew acrostic is constructed in four successive words, and not in successive lines as do the Psalms and Lamentations, the scope for creative recasting of sentences is limited, as good as zero; the translating poet needs to come up with yet more creative capacity. A requirement might seem to be that the translated acrostic is made up of four words again. It may be fine, though, to use a five-, six- or even seven-word sentence in order to arrive at the Divine Name the target text uses.

Already is observed that only one translation seems to retain this particular acrostic in Psalm 96, and not a single one those in the Book of Esther. Croese writes: "Ja, dat de hemelen zich verheugen, heel de aarde zij blij"²⁵⁷, thus arriving at an eleven-word sentence employing only the consonants of 'Jehovah'. Advantageous is the possibility he thus created to use fill-up words, what the Hebrew did

²⁵⁷ F. Croese 2010: 165

not do. Theoretically spoken, the same should be possible for the other Divine Names. By way of experiment:

Lord **L**et the heavens be
 overjoyed,
 round the earth be great
 delight

Here **H**emelen, verheug u
 en aarde, wees blij;
 rumoeren mag de zee
 en alles wat ze bevat.

Jehova **J**a, laat
 enthousiast zijn de
 hemelen,
 opgetogen en
 verheugd de
 aarde.

God **G**elukkig mogen de hemelen zijn,
 Opgetogen de aarde;
 Dartel de zee en alles daarin!

These finger exercises bring their own complications, such as the emergence of different verbal forms and the insertion of a form of address. Notice that the third and fourth example took the liberty to employ both verses, i.e. the whole distich. The fourth, moreover, is transformed into a three-line verse. The whole is paraphrase rather than translation, while most Bible editions do aim at the latter. In addition, to draw the reader's attention to such little acrostics, they really have to be pointed out using the typographic layout at the least (either using indenting, bold or colored letters or yet another means, depending on the overall layout of the poetic passages in the same edition).

4.11 Paratext

Research into general translation theories and theorists demonstrates the almost unanimous belief that translators have considerable freedom to tailor a translation to the needs of the target audience, which implies that reproducing acrostics is certainly a possibility. When it comes to the translation of religious books of diverse faiths, translational discussions are even more intensified, and bring to light fundamental differences as well as a range of differing opinions on translating. Where Islamic consent tells that the Quran actually cannot be translated, and ought not to be recited in any language but Arabic, the Christian urgent mission is to spread the Bible in all the world, translating it in all languages necessary to reach all mankind.²⁵⁸

This indicates, roughly speaking, the importance of meaning over means in translating the Bible into target languages where this has not been accomplished before. When it comes to the third, seventh or such-and-such Bible translation in a certain language, the means will receive another importance and some translators might consider preserving the acrostic. This is what happens in languages like English, Dutch and German, where a wide diversity of Bible translations is available and still more editions are being produced. By far the bigger part, however, does not reproduce the acrostics.

Many scholars agree that the existence of multiple translations of the Bible in each language is positive, since together they can provide a better understanding of the text. This array of editions, however, will not solve all difficulties, since users comparing different versions will repeatedly meet with different translations of certain passages and wonder which rendering is the true or the best one – an unavoidable scenario, often arising out of the differences between the languages concerned.

Partly for this reason, diverse scholars raise the question whether “there is any longer any justification for producing translations of the Bible without any translational notes”²⁵⁹, i.e. notes explaining issues the translation itself does not make unambiguously clear, as arising out of the said differences. A study Bible is called “necessary as a minimum to call attention to the main structural and stylistic features of the original that defy adequate interlingual representation in a translation”, since not one translation, irrespective of its ‘literariness’, can communicate the entire communicative significance of the biblical text without additional comments.²⁶⁰ This need also arises out of the great gap in time and place: knowledge of the historical setting of texts is a great help to interpret their meaning more adequately.²⁶¹

Such Study Bibles, or Bibles with explanatory notes, ought to indicate “the existence of such a remarkable style of composition [...], even in the popular Versions”, according to – among others – Binnie, who adds that “useful purposes are served by its being actually reproduced, at least in

²⁵⁸ See chapter 2.2, and for example Brook W.R. Pearson: 81, Glen G. Scorgie: Introduction and Overview.

²⁵⁹ See for example J.W. Rogerson: 123-124

²⁶⁰ E. Wendland: 227

²⁶¹ G. Ogden: 156

translations which are chiefly intended for use in the study or in Bible classes.”²⁶² An example in the English language field is the ESV (English Standard Version) Study Bible, published in 2008. A Dutch edition providing a great many mainly textual notes is the Statenvertaling, first published in 1637 and still in use. These two translations have their essentially literal translation method in common.

An advantage of indicating the Hebrew acrostic in paratext is that the running text can be translated without having to take more translational freedom than desired, for example by paraphrasing or alternate word order, and without the painstaking search for words with the correct initial letters.

An important side-note needs be made, though: the possibility of using paratext is only applicable to literate cultures. In many missionary contexts, it will often prove impossible to convey extra information via paratext. Oftentimes the reader audience first has to be taught how to read. Once this skill is mastered, in some measure, (part of) the audience is able to decipher and voice the words – which yet expressly does not imply that their literate skills are equal to those of people grown up in a literate country. The second often-encountered hindrance is the absence of a reading culture; there is no spare time to read because people have to slave away for their living, or there is no high status attached to this skill (as in many animistic cultures). Thirdly, the reading method in illiterate areas cannot be compared to that in literate regions; those who can read, often learned to read linear – starting with title page, colophon, page one until the end, and then stop, irrespective of whether or not a sentence or paragraph ends there. Footnotes are read as part of the running text, not as explanation accompanying a section of that text.²⁶³ As a consequence, it is rather distracting in such contexts to use side notes commenting on the acrostic in the original Hebrew, which will detract from comprehension rather than enrich its readers.

When, after decades, an illiterate culture has partly turned literate – ignoring for the moment that this process will by no means pass off smoothly or rapidly, and that many who have learned to read yet abstain from employing this skill and thus stay functionally illiterate²⁶⁴ –, a Bible edition with notes can be considered, thought it will still most likely be used almost exclusively by a few, higher educated, pastors and church members: all the more reason for missionary organisations working in oral cultures to provide the translations both in written *and* audio form. In contexts like these, translators will most likely neglect the pattern.

In conclusion, paratext is an appropriate means to indicate the original alefbetical pattern and serve the reader with additional information about its possible functions, irrespective of whether the translation in question reproduces this pattern. However, there are certain restrictions: in certain

²⁶² W. Binnie: 140-141

²⁶³ K.J. van Linden, “De setting van een vertaling”: 57

²⁶⁴ K.J. van Linden, “Tekst en paratekst”: 111-116

audiences – oral, illiterate, deaf – the use of paratext is impossible or, at the very least, complicated.²⁶⁵ In other words: since the function(s) of the original acrostics in the Hebrew Bible are unclear, it is highly debatable whether missionary translations, especially those intended for societies with a low literacy, should benefit by an acrostic translation of the passages. So-called common language translations, intended for the lower educated in ‘more developed’ countries, may have to find their way somewhere in between. An example hereof is the *Easy English*-approach, as discussed in section 3.2.10.

²⁶⁵ See also Robert Bascom: “Translators must be trained to explicitly understand both source and receptor cultural maps, and help their intended audience (most likely through helps such as side-notes) to make relevant connections between the conceptual and symbolic worlds of the biblical text and their own. *These helps will also have to be developed for the presentation of Scripture in non-print media.*” (R. Bascom: 110-111, emphasis added).

5. Conclusion

What are the functions of the Biblical acrostics, what are the problems attached to translating them, and what possible solutions are there?

To answer these questions, chapter 2 first introduced all known biblical acrostic passages and the specific problems attached to each (most show some irregularity: missing or extra characters, a reversal of two characters), as well as the problem of a differing source- and target language alphabet, after which some thirteen possible function(s) of these acrostics were listed.

Chapter 3 introduced a German, two Dutch, and a handful of English translations that reproduce the acrostic, gleaning some information about their translator's translation beliefs, and sketched the approach of other, non-acrostic, translations.

Chapter 4 then examined which techniques translators use to reproduce the acrostic passages in the Bible. As regards the differences between alefbet and alphabet, the two options are sequential equality and sound equality – yet not two translators apply exactly the same sequence. To attain at the right initial letters, several methods are adopted, the most frequent being an alternative word order or sentence structure, paraphrasing, and adding or omitting words. ('Literal') Bible translations not reproducing the acrostic will usually not allow for this translational freedom. Then there are the specific problems attached to the individual passages: missing or extra acrostic letters in the abecedarian, and name- or message-acrostics. Is it possible to show these characteristics in translation? Concerning the irregularities: if they merely indicate that 'something is not perfect', for example, that human praise of God can never be comprehensive, their function might be maintained, and their message preserved, by omitting some letters in the alphabet. This reveals an intricate difficulty, though: the 22-letter abecedarians represent the entire Hebrew alefbet, while the 22-letter acrostics are already defective in that they omit four letters of the Latin alphabet. Omitting yet one extra character in a specific poem in imitation of its original, then, will not attract notice. Most scholars who came up with an explanation for the missing letters did not translate the Psalms into a perfect acrostic themselves: they are engaged in explaining its ingenious construction rather than transmitting all its features in a translation.

Likewise, it proves impossible to reproduce name- and message acrostics, other than in very exceptional cases – the reason why the examined translations did not reproduce them. There seems no way out except the use of explanatory notes, which are also necessary if the irregularities serve as signposts to particular messages. If the irregularities are of a different kind, such as the Tetragrammaton- and king-acrostics, their preserving will be yet more complicated up to impossible, as underlined by their absence in the otherwise acrostic Bible translations. However, explanatory notes, or paratext, cannot be used in every context: as a rule, paratext in translations serving mainly illiterate cultures will be counterproductive.

Is it necessary to reproduce the acrostics? It is a poetic plus, but not indispensable. The Word of God was expressly intended to be spread into as much languages as necessary to reach the whole world, which indisputably involves translation. Poetic features not seldom being bound to the original text, omitting them in translations thus poses no theological problems, all the more so because it proves difficult to establish the function(s) of the acrostic in the passages concerned. From the fact that the mainstream of Bible translation does not maintain them, one might conclude that most Bible translators do not think this a 'mission possible' within the boundaries of their translation principles.

The editors of Study Bibles can reasonably be asked to provide a section on the Biblical acrostics; their occurrence, their probable function(s), and their individual peculiarities (deviations from the regular pattern, together with the probable meaning of those alterations). Other translations incorporating marginal or other editorial notes should at the very least point out their existence – possibly including those yet largely unknown, such as the various occurrences of the Tetragrammaton in Esther and the king-acrostic in Psalm 145.

In all cases, scholarly modesty is necessary – there is always more to be known.

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