

PSALM 119



GOD, MY EXCEEDING JOY
A JOYFUL JOURNEY THRU THE PSALMS

GOD'S GOLDEN ALPHABET – INTRODUCTION

I. THE **TOPIC** OF PSALM 119: *GOD'S WORD*

- A. The most prolonged discussion about God's Word in the Bible!
- B. Almost every single verse refers to God's Word.
- C. It is 1 of 3 pss (Pss 1, 19, 119) that lays special attention to the place of God's Word in the life of the believer.

II. INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT PSALM 119

- A. It is the longest chapter in the Bible, containing 176 verses, using 946 Hebrew words.
- B. It is close to the middle chapter in the Bible (Ps 117).
- C. It is arranged as an elaborate acrostic. Each v. in each 8-verse section begins with same letter in the Hebrew alphabet, advancing through all 22 letters in 22 sections.
- D. Nicknames: "The Great Psalm" & "The Golden Alphabet"

III. HUMAN **AUTHORSHIP** OF THE PSALM

- A. No author label on the psalm even though the psalmist repeatedly refers to himself throughout
- B. David's psalms almost all have his name attached, so it would be very strange to omit his name from such a conspicuous song if he wrote it.
- C. There is little or no reference to the sanctuary, priesthood, sacrifices, or elements of group worship.
 1. This suggests the psalm originated during or after the exile when the temple was not running.
 2. During that time, the Scripture was most cherished.

- D. Early Jewish tradition says Ezra wrote it after the exile. He certainly had a key ministry in restoring Scripture to the center of the Jewish people after the exile.
- E. Some scholars suggest that since the psalm speaks of a young godly man who was wiser than his counselors (see vv. 9, 98-100) that the author might be Daniel.

IV. **GENRE** OF THE PSALM

- A. Ps 119 is typically regarded as a **wisdom** psalm.
 1. It offers counsel like what is found in Proverbs.
 2. The acrostic suggests a teaching function.
 3. The other great Torah pss (1 & 19) are also wisdom psalms.
- B. Ps 119 is really a combination of 2 types: Wisdom & Lament.
 1. The psalmist asks God for help in 90 vv. (over ½).
 2. There are repeated references to enemies & persecutors, often mentioned in laments.
 3. The life of wisdom according to God's Word is lived out in a world that is hostile & adversarial to it.

V. **STRUCTURE** OF THE PSALM

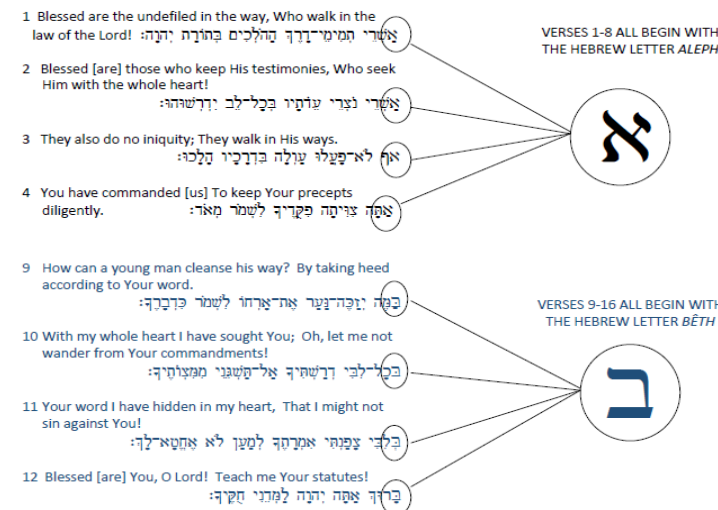
- A. The major outline of the psalm is an acrostic following the Hebrew alphabet.
 1. Several other pss & poems follow this structure. (Examples: Pss 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 145, and Lamentations.)
 2. Authors use acrostics for multiple reasons:
 1. To aid in memorization of the material.
 2. To convey a sense of thoroughness.
 3. To create a sense of **order** out of chaos.

- B. Ps 119 has 22 sections, following the 22 symbols of the Hebrew alphabet.

1. Each section is **8** verses long, and each verse in each section begins with the same Hebrew letter.
2. Each section advances thru the 22 letters

C. Sample breakdown:

1. Verses 1-8: Each verse begins with the 1st letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *aleph* (א).
2. Verses 9-16: Each verse begins with the 2nd letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *beth* (ב).
3. After each 8-verse section, a new letter is introduced.



- D. The use of 8 verses per stanza is clearly significant. Why might the author choose a system of 8?
 1. There are 8 notes to the common scale.
 2. Eight = 7+1, a combination that may speak of absolute completeness (see Ecclesiastes 11:2 for an example).
 3. Eight words for Scripture are repeated throughout.

1. **“Law” (torah) = instruction.** The word is not restricted to rules or commandments but God’s instruction in general.
 2. **“Testimonies” (‘edah) = direct claims by God.** God declares things to be so, and so they are.
 3. **“Statutes” (huqah) = a commandment for permanent observance.** The English word “statute” is related to “statue,” both referring to permanent things.
 4. **“Commandment” (mitzwah) = direct command.** These refer to specific things which God requires.
 5. **“Precepts” (pikedim) = authoritative orders.** This is a synonym of “commandment” (mitzwah).
 6. **“Judgments” (mishpat) = decisions on matters & related actions.** The supreme Judge determines right & wrong.
 7. **“Word” (dabar) = a spoken message.** God has spoken and revealed Himself clearly.
 8. **“Word” / “Promise” (amar) = saying.** What He says is so.
4. Like 8 bells rung, each word adds its own tone to the sound.
1. These words function as synonyms, each highlighting some difference aspect of God’s written revelation.
 2. By themselves, they could refer to specific things God revealed (e.g. the 10 commandments), but grouped together they refer to God’s entire revelation.
- C. Psalm 119 is not structured like other poems with an observable progression of thought.
1. All other acrostic pss have a double structure: the acrostic determines the start of each v., but a flow of thought creates movements throughout the poem.
 2. The acrostic of Ps 119 is so demanding that its not possible to develop a flow of thought throughout the ps..
 3. But each 8-verse segment has its own simple structure.

VI. THE ARTISTRY OF REGULARITY AND IRREGULARITY

A. Under-Appreciated Artistry

1. Despite the enormity of this psalm and its rich theological content, some liberals denigrate it as too simplistic.
2. One has scoffed that the ps takes 176 verses to say what could have been said in 1 verse. This demonstrates both a lack of respect for Scripture and the psalm’s artistry.

B. Apparent Irregularities

1. The Eight Words

- a. Since there are 8 key words for Scripture, one might expect each word to appear in each of the 8 v. stanzas. But this only happens 4 times.
- b. One might expect to find mention of the Scriptures in every single verse. But 4 vv. have none of the 8 words (vv. 3, 37, 90, & 122), and 5 vv. have two uses of them (vv. 16, 48, 160, 168, & 172).
- c. The 8 words for Scripture are not used evenly. On average they appear 22 times each, but one would expect their usage to be exactly even.

2. **The name Yahweh.** The divine name appears 24 times in the poem, usually once per section. But there are 5 sections with no references to it, 4 sections where it’s used twice, and 1 section with 3 uses of it. (“God” appears only once in v. 115.)

3. These variations should not be seen as mistakes, imperfections, or corruptions of the Hebrew text.

C. Intentional Irregularities

1. The 4 vv. with no direct reference to Scripture are over-compensated by the 5 vv. with two references it.
 1. The result is that in 176 verses there are 176 + 1 references to God’s Word.

2. The extra count hints at the surpassing complete-ness of Scripture. (Cf. Prov 30:15ff’s +1 formula)

2. The 8 words may be divided into 2 groups based on their grammatical gender. Each of the two groups is represented an equal number of times (+1 extra).

1. Words a, b, c, and d (see the left column), which are all feminine nouns, appear a total of 88 times.

2. Words e, f, g, and h, which are all masculine nouns, appear a total of 89 times.

3. Of the 8 words, the ones used least (letter h. *amar*) and most (letter a. *torah*,) begin with the first & last letters of the alphabet, *aleph* & *tau*.

D. Important Lessons from the Artistry

1. The artistic poetics do not give a hidden messages but reinforce messages plainly taught in the psalm.

2. The predictable features reinforce the psalm’s strong emphasis on the absolute **reliability** of God’s Word.

1. It is the only fully reliable source of help to live our lives rightly before God. From A-Z (*Aleph* to *Taw*) God’s Word covers all the bases of life.

2. Ps 119 artistically celebrates Scripture’s sufficiency.

3. The unpredictable features **mirror** the volatile experiences of life which the godly experience.

1. Over half the ps pleads for help in the struggle against sin or the sin of personal enemies.

2. Life has many unexpected turns, but there is a grand design behind it, and all things eventually even out.

3. **The only sure place of counsel to which we may turn in times of crises is the wonderful Word of God. It alone makes our paths straight as we walk in a crooked world.**