

## Hebrew Alphabetic Acrostics – Significance and Translation

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### **ABSTRACT**

*'In translating poetic texts there must be a concern not only for correct meaning, but also for conveying the poetic impact of the text'. Quotes like these are seen in literature, but the acrostic feature is mostly not included. This article explores the significance of Biblical Hebrew alphabetic acrostics and tries to give an explanation of the purpose of acrostics from the perspective of the Cognitive Sciences. This leads to the question whether this feature should be reproduced in a translation. Because of various obvious reasons, the acrostic form cannot be exactly reproduced in a translation. Is it better to produce a form that at least represents the original acrostic to some extent, or is it better not to endeavour it at all? The author is convinced that any acknowledgement of the acrostic form in a translation contributes much to conveying the poetic impact of the acrostic poem and it should not be ignored completely.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

Almost all papers focusing on Hebrew poetry make a strong plea for taking all the poetic features into account when working with poetic passages. However, only a few attend to the acrostic feature displayed in Hebrew poetry. For instance, Tauberschmidt (2005:66) makes a strong plea that the Hebrew poetic features should be accounted for: 'In translating poetic texts there must be a concern not only for correct meaning, but also for *conveying the poetic impact of the text*' (emphasis mine – RvdS). He illuminates sub-genres in Hebrew writings but he does not mention acrostics at all.

I agree with Tauberschmidt (2005:66) that a 'careful investigation of the function' of the poetic features should be made and then we should be concerned about '*conveying the poetic impact of the text*'. The very fact that we should take all Hebrew poetic features into consideration when translating Hebrew poetry brings us to the focus of this paper.

- How important are the poetic features of Hebrew poetry and specifically the acrostic feature?
- What is the purpose of the alphabetic acrostics in Hebrew poetry?

- How can we convey the acrostic poetic impact of Hebrew acrostic passages in a translation?
- Is it at all necessary?
- Is it possible to reduplicate the alphabetic acrostic feature in a translation?

## **B WHAT ARE ACROSTIC POEMS?**

According to the Oxford Companion to the Bible, ‘an acrostic poem is a poem in which the initial letters of each successive line form a *word, phrase or pattern*’ (Oxford Companion to the Bible 1999:6). This definition of an acrostic poem seems to be broader than what is normally considered to be acrostic psalms or poems in Biblical Hebrew. In Biblical Hebrew acrostic psalms, poems or passages normally refer to poetic passages that use the Hebrew *alphabet* as its structure. For this reason I will specify the Biblical Hebrew acrostics as *alphabetic* acrostics. These Hebrew poems use the letters of the Hebrew alphabet to begin a new line, strophe, unit or paragraph.

Here is an example of a non-alphabetic acrostic that forms a *phrase* with the beginning letters of each line. The heading of the poem is also the acrostic phrase that is constructed in the poem:

### **Jesus is Lord**

Just when  
Everything  
Seemed hopeless God  
Unselfishly  
Sacrificed His son  
In Sacrificing His  
Son He redeemed us  
Life from death  
Order from chaos and  
Returned a Kingdom to His  
Dearly beloved (Evans 2003).

## **C CORPUS OF ALPHABETIC ACROSTIC LITERATURE IN THE HEBREW BIBLE**

When thinking of acrostic passages, the Psalms mostly come to mind, but there are also many other passages that form part of the Hebrew alphabetic acrostic literature. Ps 119 is one of the most complete and extensive examples of a Hebrew alphabetic acrostic psalm. For many this is the only known alphabetic acrostic in the Bible.

Here is a list of all acrostic passages in the Hebrew Bible:

Psalm 9-10            Each Hebrew consonant covers two verses. These two psalms

	form one acrostic unit. Because of text-critical problems and the fact that they are presented as two separate Psalms, they are not always included in the list of acrostics. In the Septuagint they constitute one psalm ( <a href="http://bible1.wordpress.com/tag/psalms/">http://bible1.wordpress.com/tag/psalms/</a> Accessed 16 March 2007).
Psalm 25	Each Hebrew consonant covers 1 verse.
Psalm 34	Each Hebrew consonant covers 1 verse.
Psalm 37	Each Hebrew consonant covers 2 verses.
Psalm 111	Each Hebrew consonant covers ½ verse.
Psalm 112	Each Hebrew consonant covers ½ verse.
Psalm 119	Each Hebrew consonant covers 8 verses.
Psalm 145	Each Hebrew consonant covers 1 verse.
Lam 1- 4	In chapter 1 and 2 each Hebrew consonant covers 1 verse which consists of 3 stanzas. In chapter 3 each consonant covers 3 stanzas/verses, therefore it has 66 verses. Chapter 4 has 22 verses, each consonant consists of 2 stanzas beginning with that letter of the alphabet. Chapter 5 has 22 verses, but is not an alphabetic acrostic.
Prov 31: 10 –31	Each Hebrew consonant covers 1 verse.
Nahum 1: 1- 9	The Aleph covers three lines. There seems to be an interjection of 2 lines before the rest of the consonants, which covers only one verse each. The letter zayin appears in the second position of the line.

According to Maloney (2006:31), Gruseman and Hanson argue that acrostics should be a separate Gattung. I agree with Maloney that there is merit in the argument but think that this Gattung is too small and that it would fit better as a well-defined *feature* of the poetic passages in the Hebrew Bible.

## D THE PURPOSE OF ALPHABETIC ACROSTICS

Why were these acrostic poems written? Or, why were these poems written in an acrostic structure? If this external form does not carry much weight, as suggested by most translations, why did the original authors go through the painstaking process of writing these poems keeping to this structure? I agree with Seppo Sipila that the sheer beauty of the text must be looked at as well, and that a translation that does not convey the beauty of the poem, makes the text poorer (Translators' Workshop, Baku, Azerbaijan, 21 April 2008).

Since we are studying these Hebrew alphabetic acrostics thousands of years after they have been written, it seems that we have to agree with Longman (1993:86) that the purpose of Hebrew acrostics can only be *guessed*.

I feel that I. G. P. Gous, in his article: 'Reason to believe: Cognitive strategy in the acrostic Psalm 34' (1999:456), approaches this question in a way that is creative and meaningful. Many possible solutions have been offered why acrostics were written, but we lack an explanatory theory, which could help us decide about the validity of the interpretations offered. Gous then proceeds by

applying theories from the Cognitive Sciences in order to offer a more plausible theory for explaining the possible reasons for the existence of acrostics. Making the reader cognitively aware of the features will enhance the insight into possible reasons why the poet had constructed the acrostic. When being cognitively aware of the structure of an acrostic poem, one realizes that the alphabet has a well-defined order, it provides a finite structure and it communicates the sense of a complete unit and wholeness, and consequently helps the process of memorization. It is a skilful and attractive way of showing that God covers everything from A to Z, *Aleph* to *Taw*. It shows both the poet's love for the Hebrew language and his poetic skills.

When referring to Biblical acrostics, the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971: 230) mentions that acrostics fulfilled several important functions. It simplified learning by heart because of the logical order of the beginning letters of the lines. It helped the student to prevent mistakes and deletions by knowing which letter came next.

When listing the following features, I do not imply that all these features have been in focus in the mind of the poet at all times. Certain features may be in focus in certain poems, by certain poets, for certain purposes. The following is a list of possible features that are found in alphabetic acrostics.

## 1 Mnemonic feature

When discussing Biblical Hebrew alphabetic acrostics the mnemonic feature is the most commonly mentioned feature.

In *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, Israel Abrahams, referring to alphabetic acrostic passages in Hebrew literature, describes mnemonics as certain sentences, words, or letters used to assist the memory. He explains that acrostics were employed for mnemonic purposes and for helping people to recite these passages (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=750&letter=A> Accessed 30 March 2007).

In his dissertation, Maloney (2007:47) also states that the alphabetic feature is a feature of consonance, which is a form of alliteration, cohesion and mnemonics.

If the mnemonic feature was one of the main reasons for writing these poems in this form, could we transfer this aspect in a translation? Would it not make it much easier to learn these passages by heart if one knew that the next sentence, verse or paragraph began with the next letter of the alphabet? In what ways can this concept be transferred in a translation? If one followed the Hebrew alphabet, the cognitive knowledge of what the next letter will be, would be lost. Therefore following the Latin alphabet would make more sense. This will be discussed later on.

## 2 Enumeration feature

Maloney (2006:34) further relates to the above-mentioned aspect by saying that acrostic passages provide a structure, stimulus and a boundary for 'enumeration'. It provides the poet with a structure and prevents him from piling up too long a list in a poem, which is often possible in religious literature like laments, petitions, etcetera.

The Jewish Heritage Online Magazine ([www.jhom.com](http://www.jhom.com) accessed 19 Jan 2008) quotes Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*, Schocken Books 1991, where Rabbi Yizhak of Vorki was asked: 'Why on the Day of Atonement is the list of confession of sins arranged in alphabetical order?' He replied: 'If it were otherwise, we should not know when to stop beating our breasts. For there is no end to sin, and no end to the awareness of sin, but there IS an end to the alphabet.'

## 3 Feature of completeness, wholeness, totality

Kimelman (1994:52) quite convincingly reasons that from a poetic point of view Ps 145 has a very strong perception of unity. The acrostic appeals to the eye, the alliterations to the ear and the Hebrew word 'כל' (all) combine and strengthen the concept of unity, completeness and totality. It *produces a unified sensory experience*. Burden (1987: 170) agrees that the alphabetic structure of Ps 145 is fully supported by the contents and theme of the poem to highlight the feature of completeness and totality. The alphabetic framework enhances the inherent theme of the poem.

Wilt (1993:203) argues that the fact that the alphabetic acrostics cover the alphabet from A to Z (*Aleph* to *Taw*) indicates completeness, a wholeness that can be seen in the external form. Poetic form, contents and message are quite often intertwined. For instance, Ps 111 indicates that we should praise Yahweh from the beginning to the end. Ps 119 makes it clear that the Law of the Lord covers our whole life from beginning to end. Referring to Lamentations, Wilt (1993:203) agrees with Gottwald that the alphabetic acrostic indicates that God is present in totality. The subject is exhausted in its totality. This fits with what is said by Rabbi Shimoni (2004:472) showing that these passages indicate a wholeness, totality, not only of the poem, but also of life.

Rabbi Yalkut Shimoni (2004:472-488) explains that these alphabetic acrostics indicate that God covers every aspect of life from A to Z, or *Aleph* to *Taw*, better known in our day as the Greek expression: *God is the Alpha and Omega*.

Gous (1999:461) argues from a cognitive point of view that the notion of completion is quite plausible, since the expression 'from A to Z' is quite well known. When the reader becomes cognitively aware of the fact that the poem

consists of an alphabetic structure, the reader will expect the next letter, but he will also naturally expect the poem to end at the last letter of the alphabet.

#### **4 Aesthetic feature**

Quite often it is reasoned that the author showed off his skills by being able to write a poem within these constraints (Gous 1999:460). Burden (1987:151) agrees that the poet showed great skill when constructing the book of Lamentations. The first four chapters show an acrostic structure and the fifth chapter has 22 verses, but does not show the acrostic structure.

Maloney (2006:188) feels that *the aesthetic motivations of the composers of acrostics have not been fully appreciated ... even if it has lost its attractiveness in the eye of many modern interpreters*. No one can deny that writing a poem keeping within the constraints of an alphabetic structure is an art. Is this very challenge not the reason why so few translators are reconstructing the alphabetic structure in their translations?

Weber (2005:896) argues that the inherent structure of Hebrew poetry is definitely a contributing factor to the value carried by these poems.

#### **5 Visual and Aural features**

Maloney also mentions that the grammatical and morphemic patterning of the alphabetic acrostic poems operate on two distinct levels: A visual and an aural level. (2004:195)

Weber (2005:896) looks at a different poetic aspect that should be kept in consideration when working with Hebrew poetry. As already mentioned, he feels that the visible alphabetic structure of Hebrew poetry contributes to the value of the poetry. This structure can be seen in the acrostic pattern of Hebrew poetic passages and therefore it is a feature that should be given an appropriate place when reproducing these poems.

Gous says, 'By using the Cognitive Sciences as such a framework, we come to understand the processes of Parallel Distributed Processing and prototype activation whereby the acrostic and other alphabetic features become apparent to *readers* and maybe even to *listeners*' (1999:467).

Focusing on the sensory effects of Biblical poetry, Raabe (2000:204) highlighted the idea that alphabetic acrostics provide a visual stimulus since we all know what our alphabets look like. After reading acrostic translated passages in the Knox Version, Raabe found the visual stimulus of the alphabetic acrostic so enchanting, that he encourages translators to incorporate this feature in their translations. He does feel, however, that Knox's acrostic translations are sometimes a bit too free. Even so, this was a stimulus for him to try his own hand at translating Ps 111 as an acrostic (Raabe 2000: 206).

Maloney (2006:66) mentions that the impact of a concentration of certain repeated sounds/letters is striking, both aurally and visually. On page 195 he concludes ‘the visual level concerns the written text and the aural level concerns the oral, spoken rendering of the text. The alphabetic structure of acrostic psalms appeals to the eye **and the ear**.

## 6 Cognitive Feature

As a final feature one may then also list the cognitive aspect as a separate feature.

Rabbi Yalkut Shimoni (2004:472-488) explained that David used the alphabet to indicate that man’s faith is not only emotional but also rational. ‘True faith is to move on the path of intellect, intellectual search and foundational knowledge of God’s almighty being’. He explains the use of the alphabet as follows: The letter *Aleph* literally means ‘to study’ and shows this priority in the life of the Jews. *Beth* means *understanding*, *Gimel* means *path*, *Dalet* means *door* or *gate*, *He* is the number 5, pointing to the first five books as the foundation of their lives. Rabbi Shimoni says this pattern has inherent meaning to the Hebrew reader: to study gives understanding, showing the path that leads through the door of everlasting life, the five books of Moses being the foundation. The last letter of the Hebrew alphabet *Taw* means *truth*. It indicates what the final goal of every action of the reader of the Torah should be.

## E TRANSLATING ACROSTIC PASSAGES

As mentioned before, most scholars focusing on Hebrew poetry feel very strongly about taking poetic features into account and then they mostly focus on the parallelisms, advising translators on how to translate them. Some would even go as far as to advise translators *not* to even try to translate an acrostic poem in an acrostic form. Wonderly (1987:211), a retired UBS consultant, like many other scholars, encourages translators to give good consideration to parallelisms when translating Hebrew psalms. He then mentions acrostic passages, but without much ado concludes that this aspect of poetry cannot be represented in a translation.

Most translations do not even attempt to render this aspect of Biblical Hebrew poetry in any form. A few of the more classic translations like the *King James Version* and the *Dutch Staaten Vertaling* inserted the transliterated names of the Hebrew alphabet where the original text started with that specific Hebrew letter. This is mostly done in Psalm 119.

Here is an example of how Ps 119 is rendered in the *King James Version*. I will only show the first three letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

- 1 **ALEPH**. Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD.

- 2 Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart.
- 3 They also do no iniquity: they walk in his ways.
- 4 Thou hast commanded us to keep thy precepts diligently.
- 5 O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!
- 6 Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all thy commandments.
- 7 I will praise thee with uprightness of heart, when I shall have learned thy righteous judgments.
- 8 I will keep thy statutes: O forsake me not utterly.
- 9 **BETH**. Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word.
- 10 With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments.
- 11 Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.
- 12 Blessed art thou, O LORD: teach me thy statutes.
- 13 With my lips have I declared all the judgments of thy mouth.
- 14 I have rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies, as much as in all riches.
- 15 I will meditate in thy precepts, and have respect unto thy ways.
- 16 I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word.
- 17 **GIMEL**. Deal bountifully with thy servant, I may live, and keep thy word.

The *Dutch Staten Vertaling* also applied the concept of entering transliterated Hebrew letters to indicate the beginning of a new acrostic section to Ps 25, Ps 34, Ps 37, Ps 111, Ps 112, Ps 119, Ps 145, Proverbs 31:10-31 and to Lamentations 1-4. The old Afrikaans translation (1953) followed the Dutch fairly closely, and applied this concept to all the above-mentioned passages. The new Afrikaans translation (1983) did not follow this concept at all, but elevated the poetic impact of Hebrew poetry by printing the psalms in poetic verse form, which was not done in the older translation.

## F EXAMPLES OF ALPHABETIC ACROSTICS TRANSLATIONS

I found a few renderings where translators kept to the acrostic form of the psalms in their translations.

T. L. Wilt (1993:211) translated Ps 111 in this manner. This is an impressive attempt to incorporate the *whole* Latin alphabet, but as soon as one looks a bit more intensely, a few problems pop up. The first minor problem is the use of the X and the Q that actually appear as the second letter of the word, following the phonemic sound of the letter. This does, however, appeal to the aural feature when reading the psalm out loud. The letter L has the definite article in a separate line, which is not accounted for. The biggest problem I have with this attempt is that Wilt diverted from the original text and reorganized the



text quite a bit – as can be seen from the numbering he provided himself in brackets at the end of the lines.

**Ps 111 – Wilt**

1. Praise the Lord!

All my heart praises the Lord,  
Besides the upright, in the congregation.

2. Contemplated by those delighting in them, the  
Deeds of the Lord are great.
3. Everlasting is his righteousness;  
Full of honor and majesty is his work.
4. Gracious and merciful is the Lord. (4b)  
He has shown his people the power of his work (6a)  
In giving them the heritage of the nations. (6b)  
Just and faithful are the works of his hand. (7a) The  
Lord provides food for those who fear him, (5a)  
Mindful, always, of his covenant. (5b)
- 7b None of his precepts can fail,
8. Ordained forever and ever,  
Performed with  
eQuity and faithfulness.
9. Redemption for his people was  
Sent by the Lord  
To be kept forever is his Covenant.  
Untarnished is his name and  
Venerable.
10. Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord.  
eXcellent understanding marks all who practice it.  
You, O Lord, will be praised with a  
Zeal that lasts forever.

The biggest plus is that he used the whole Latin alphabet. Wilt (1993:212) recorded his experiences when translating this and other acrostic passages. He tried to cover the whole Latin alphabet in order to show the aesthetic value of using a complete whole alphabet. The Tok Pisin alphabet of Papua New Guinea has only 22 letters and therefore he could use the whole alphabet to translate a complete alphabetic acrostic when translating Proverbs 31:10-31 as an acrostic poem.

The Easy English Bible ([www.easyenglish.info](http://www.easyenglish.info) accessed 14 March 2007) translated Psalm 9 and 10 as acrostics using the Latin alphabet. They did not follow the order of the alphabet precisely. They were led by the omissions in the Hebrew alphabet when they constructed the Latin alphabetic framework.

**Psalm 9**

1. All my heart sings ‘thank you’ to the LORD.  
I will tell (people) of all your wonderful work.

2. I will be very happy with you, (LORD). I will rejoice in you.  
I will sing praises to your name, Most High God.
3. Back my enemies went,  
they fell down. They died in front of you,
4. because you judged that what I did was right.  
You sat on your throne. You made a righteous judgment.
5. Clearly you judged the nations and destroyed the wicked.  
People will never remember their names.
6. You caught the enemy. You killed them.  
You knocked down their cities. People will just forget them.
7. Evermore the LORD will rule.  
He has built his throne. On it he will make his judgments.
8. He will make righteous judgments for the world.  
His government will give justice to the people.
9. For the LORD is a place where the oppressed can hide.  
He will be a fortress in times of trouble.
10. Everyone that knows your name (LORD) will put their trust in  
you.  
LORD, you will never turn away from anyone that looks for  
you.
11. Go to the LORD with praises. His throne is in Zion.  
Tell all the nations all that he has done.
12. (God) will remember the people that somebody murdered.  
He will not forget the oppressed people that cry to him.
13. Have mercy on me, LORD.  
See how my enemies make my life very difficult.  
Make me safe from the gates of death.
14. Then I will tell your praises in the gates of Jerusalem.  
I will rejoice that I am safe with you.
15. Into the hole that they dug the nations fell.  
They caught their own feet in the net that they hid.
16. You will recognise the LORD by his justice.  
The enemies of God will catch themselves in their own nets.  
SELAH
17. Just as the enemies of God go to Sheol,  
so will all the nations that forget him.
18. Know this: God will not always forget the poor.  
The oppressed will not have to hope for evermore.
19. LORD, stand up! Do not let men become too powerful.  
Let the nations find justice before you.
20. LORD, make them afraid.

Metzger (1993:284) wrote: ‘The presence of an acrostic format in such passages as Psalm 119 and Lamentations 1-4 is the despair of many translators. Ronald Knox, however, was no ordinary translator and he managed to present in English the equivalent kind of structure’. Here are the opening words of the first ten lines of Knox’s rendering of Lam 4:1-10.

All dim....  
Bright....  
Cub....  
Dry throat....  
Even they feared....  
Faithless Judah....  
Gone....  
Here....  
It were better....  
Juda brought low...'

Raabe (2000:206) found the visual stimulus of the alphabetic acrostic enchanting, appealing both to sense and sound. He too, was so inspired by the Knox Version's acrostic translations that he himself attempted to translate Ps 111 in an acrostic form. He followed the Latin alphabet, but used only the first 22 letters to fit the Hebrew alphabet.

**Ps 111 – Raabe**

- A. All my heart will thank the LORD.
- B. Before the council of the upright and the assembly.
- C. Colossal are the deeds of the LORD.
- D. Desired by all who take pleasure in them.
- E. Esteemed and splendid are his works.
- F. Forever his righteousness stands.
- G. God made a memorial for his wonderful deeds.
- H. How the God is gracious and compassionate
- I. It is the Lord who gives food to those fearing him.
- J. Just as he remembers his covenant forever.
- K. Kingly in strength are his deeds proclaimed to his people.
- L. Lasting heirs of the nations he makes his people.
- M. Mighty in truth and justice are the deeds done by his hands.
- N. Nothing but faithful are his all his precepts.
- O. On eternal supports will stand.
- P. Precepts done in truth and uprightness.
- Q. Quick redemption he send to his people.
- R. Ratified forever is his covenant.
- S. Sacred and awesome is his name.
- T. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.
- U. Understanding belongs to all who do his precepts.
- V. Veneration of him sands forever.

The only full rendering of an acrostic translation of Ps 119 that I could find was the momentous attempt by Brenda Boerger (1997:56). I wholeheartedly support the way she named the Psalm to indicate the completeness of the Law of the Lord, from A to Z. Although she has done an excellent job, I have to agree with Fritz Goerling (BT List. [BT@lists.kastanet.org](mailto:BT@lists.kastanet.org) , 24 May 2007) that this amazing effort to produce Ps 119 in an acrostic form does sometimes stretch the

accuracy of the translation, especially since it is not only one word per alphabetic letter that has to fit the structure, but she had to find **16** words beginning with the same letter. Nevertheless I feel much has been gained by keeping to the acrostic form. In the example below, I once again am only including the first three letters of the alphabet. She succeeds to focus the attention of the reader and the listener on the alphabetic structure of the poem by inserting the stanza headings.

**PSALM 119 – Boerger**

The A to Z of the Amazing Word of God

**A. Absolute Authority**

1. Absolute Authority, you affirm all who do right,  
Adopt your ageless law,
2. Agree to your teachings,  
Ache for you with all their heart,
3. And avoid going astray,  
Alert to walk a godly path.
4. Anchored firm are all your principles,  
Assembled for us to avidly obey.
5. Assign me a straight path, Yahweh,  
Aligned with your directions!
6. And I won't be ashamed,  
As I pay attention to all your rules.
7. And I'll adore you in all honesty,  
As I acquire your approved standards.
8. And I'll adhere to your admonitions,  
Asking only that you not abandon me.

**B. Beloved Benefactor**

9. Beloved Benefactor, youths can be blameless  
By basing their behavior on your word.
10. Bar me from breaking your laws,  
Because I'm absorbed in pursuing you.
11. Behold, I've branded your promise into my heart,  
Because I don't want to sin against you.
12. Blessed Yahweh,  
Better my grasp of your directions.
13. Basic God-breathed standards  
Burst from my lips.
14. Boldly I celebrate your teachings,  
Beyond bountiful possessions.
15. Burrowing deep, I ponder your principles,  
Brood on your personality.
16. Buoyantly I embrace your directions,  
Barricaded against betraying your word.

**C. Compassionate Counselor**

Boerger also translated Ps 111 and Ps 112 as alphabetic acrostics (1997:40). She also covered the *whole* Latin alphabet like others. She used 'eX' because there are not enough words beginning with the letter X. I, however, would like to point out that she has expanded some verses with additional words of praise to have 26 lines in order to be able to use the *whole* Latin alphabet. Her translation of Ps 111 follows:

**PSALM 111**

**Boerger**

God's Character  
1 Allelujah! Praise Yahweh, the almighty King!  
Bless him! I thank him with all of my being,  
Commune with my righteous companions and sing.  
2 Dynamic his deeds in every detail,  
Eagerly studied in all they entail,  
For delight can be found in them all without fail.  
3 God's glory glows from his every endeavor,  
His heavenly holiness enduring forever.  
4 Incomparable marvels make us recall,  
Just, gentle, good Yahweh is Lord of us all.  
5 King Yahweh gives food to those who revere him,  
Lovingly fulfills his pledge, draws us near him.  
6 Manifesting his marvelous might to his clan,  
Now we inherit other men's land.  
7 Outstanding truth, his justice renowned,  
Principles proven on hard-packed ground,  
Quintessentially solid and sound.  
8 Righteousness and truth bind them together,  
Securely, supremely, forever and ever.  
9 Truly he triumphed in saving his sheep,  
Upholding his covenant, a promise to keep,  
Victoriously, unwaveringly, always the same.  
Wonderful, holy, and awesome his name!  
10 Exalting Yahweh shows wisdom is growing.  
Yielding to him, understanding is flowing.  
Zealously, then, let his praise be ongoing.

The last attempt of an acrostic translation I would like to mention, was done by Iver Larsen in Danish. Ps 111 appeared in the Bible Translation email group ([BT@lists.kastanet.org](mailto:BT@lists.kastanet.org), 24 May 2007). He translated Ps 145 in an acrostic form:

**Psalm 111 – Larsen**

1. Af hele mit hjerte vil jeg takke Herren,  
*From all of my heart I will thank the Lord*  
berømme ham midt i de gudfrygtiges forsamling.  
*extol him in the midst of the assembly of the God-fearing.*

2. De ting, han gør, er vidunderlige,  
*The things he does are wonderful,*  
enhver, der oplever dem, må juble og glæde sig.  
*all who experience them rejoice and are happy.*
3. Fantastiske er alle hans undere,  
*All his wonders are fantastic,*  
glem ikke hans uendelig godhed.  
*never forget his unending goodness.*
4. Herren er nådig og barmhjertig,  
*The Lord is compassionate and merciful*  
ingen må glemme hans velgerninger.  
*no one should ever forget his good deeds.*
5. Jeg ved, at han altid sørger for sit folk.  
*I know that he always provides for his people,*  
Kan han nogensinde glemme sin pagt med dem?  
*Could he ever forget his covenant with them?*
6. Landet, som tilhørte de fremmede, gav han til sit eget folk,  
*The land that belonged to foreigners he gave to his own people,*  
med magt drev han de andre væk for øjnene af sine udvalgte.  
*he forced them away before the eyes of his chosen ones.*
7. Når han handler, gør han altid det rigtige,  
*When he acts, he always does what is right,*  
ordene fra ham kan man stole på.  
*his words are trustworthy.*
8. Pas på, at I trofast adlyder hans bud,  
*Be careful to faithfully obey his commands,*  
retsindighed har evighedsværldi.  
*uprightness/justice is of eternal value.*
9. Sit folk har han sat i frihed,  
*He has given his people their freedom,*  
til evig tid varer hans pagt med dem.  
*his covenant with them will last forever.*  
Underfuld og hellig er Herren.  
*Wonderful and holy is the Lord.*
10. Visdom udspringer af ærefrygt for Gud.  
*Wisdom results from respectfully honoring God.*  
Ypperlig er den indsigt, man får ved at adlyde ham.  
*The insight you get from obeying him is superb.*  
Æren er hans for evigt!  
*He is to be honored forever!*

I approve of the footnote added by Larsen explaining what an acrostic is and that only originally Danish letters are included in this effort. ‘This means that we don’t use c, q, w, x and z. On the other hand we do use the extra Danish vowel symbols æ, ø and å, and the y is a vowel, not a consonant. Since Danish has more than 22 letters, we cannot use all the letters, so among those last ones (æ, ø, å) I chose what fits best’ (Larsen in Danish. Ps 111 appeared in the Bible Translation email group ([BT@lists.kastanet.org](mailto:BT@lists.kastanet.org), 24 May 2007).

## G CHALLENGES TRANSLATING ACROSTICS

I also tried my hand at translating some acrostic psalms into my mother tongue, Afrikaans. I encountered quite a few challenges, similar to what have been mentioned by other translators.

Although we use the Latin alphabet in Afrikaans, we do not actually have ample indigenous mother tongue words beginning with the letters C, Q, X and Z. These letters mostly serve the purpose of writing loan words, or names. Keeping this fact and the fact that the Hebrew alphabet has only 22 letters in mind, I had to make a few choices in my attempts to follow an acrostic pattern in my translations.

One basically has 3 choices when doing an alphabetic acrostic translation in any given target language:

- 1) **Follow a transliteration of the Hebrew alphabet**, but then the cognitive advantage of knowing the alphabetic pattern, would be nullified. The KJV provides a good example of this.
- 2) **Follow the *complete* Latin alphabet** by inserting or changing lines in order to get 26 lines and sometimes using less well-known words in some target languages, which will make the translation more difficult to understand.
- 3) **Follow the Latin alphabet, with the exception of less used letters.** These letters could be omitted adding a footnote to this effect. If, for instance, we omitted the letters C, Q, X and Z in Afrikaans, we are left with 22 letters which fit the Hebrew alphabet perfectly. We will have to see how much the cognitive effect is undermined in this scheme.

Having noted all these challenges I would like to present my two attempts of Afrikaans acrostic translations. I entered a fairly literal English gloss below each line.

In Ps 111 I **followed the transliterated Hebrew alphabet**. I inserted a transliteration of the Hebrew letters at the beginning of each stanza to indicate what the Hebrew letter is. I used the Afrikaans transliteration of the Hebrew letters. In certain instances it caused me to use different Latin equivalents from what would have been used if the English transliteration of the Hebrew alphabet was followed. For instance I have an S for *ṣ Sajin*, (and not Z for *Zajin*), and another S for *Sade ṣ* (not T for *Tsade*). It is problematic that there are no perfect Latin equivalents for the Hebrew letters.

### Ps 111 – Van der Spuy

<sup>1</sup>Alef.            Alles wat in my is wil die Here loof,

<b>Bet.</b>	<i>Everything that is in me wants to praise the Lord,</i> Binne in die gemeente en in die byeenkoms van die regverdiges. <i>within the congregation and in the gathering of the righteous.</i>
<sup>2</sup> <b>Gimel.</b>	Groot is die werke van die Here, <i>Great are the works of the Lord,</i>
<b>Dalet.</b>	Deurgrond deur almal wat die Here liefhet. <i>Scrutinized by all who love the Lord.</i>
<sup>3</sup> <b>He.</b>	Heerlikheid en majesteit is sy daade <i>Glory and majesty are his works</i>
<b>Wau.</b>	Want sy geregtigheid bestaan tot in ewigheid. <i>Because his righteousness exists for ever.</i>
<sup>3</sup> <b>Sajin.</b>	Sy magtige daade word vir altyd onthou. <i>His mighty deeds are remembered forever.</i>
<b>Get.</b>	Genadig en barmhartig is die Here. <i>Gracious and empathetic is the Lord.</i>
<sup>5</sup> <b>Tet.</b>	Te ete gee Hy aan die wat Hom vrees. <i>Something to eat He gives to those who fear him.</i>
<b>Jod.</b>	Ja, vir altyd hou Hy sy verbond in gedagte. <i>Yes, forever He keeps his covenant in mind.</i>
<sup>6</sup> <b>Kaf.</b>	Kragtig het die volk sy daade ervaar, en <i>Powerfully his people experienced his deeds, and</i>
<b>Lamed.</b>	Lande van die heidennasies gee hy aan hulle. <i>He gives them the heritage of the heathen.</i>
<sup>7</sup> <b>Mem.</b>	Met sy hande doen Hy wat goed en reg is. <i>With his hands he does what is good and right.</i>
<b>Nun.</b>	Nie een van sy bevele is onbetroubaar nie, <i>not one of his commandments are untruthful,</i>
<sup>8</sup> <b>Samek.</b>	Stewig staan hulle vir tyd en toekoms. <i>Firm they stand for ever.</i>
<b>Ajin.</b>	Opreg en geloofwaardig, <i>upright and truthful,</i>
<sup>9</sup> <b>Pe.</b>	Pakket van verlossing stuur hy aan sy volk. <i>Gift of salvation he sends to his people.</i>
<b>Sade.</b>	Sonder einde is sy verbond, <i>Without end is his covenant,</i>
<b>Kof.</b>	Kragtig en heilig is sy Naam. <i>Powerful and holy is his Name.</i>
<sup>10</sup> <b>Resh.</b>	Raad om wysheid te bekom, is om vir die Here ontsag te hê. <i>Advice to get wisdom, is to honour the Lord.</i>
<b>Sin.</b>	Seëninge van goeie insig gee Hy aan almal wat Hom dien. <i>Blessings of good insight He gives to all who serve him.</i>
<b>Tau.</b>	Tot in ewigheid bestaan sy roem! <i>Forever endures his praise!</i>

I like the aesthetic view of inserting these ‘ancient’ Hebrew transliterations, showing something about the original that is not well known by most modern Bible readers.



Following the **Latin alphabet, with the exception of less used letters:**

**Psalms 145 – Van der Spuy**

**Die lof aan die Here omsluit my hele lewe!**

The praises to the Lord surround my whole life!

- 1 **A**ltyd wil ek u loof, my God en Koning, ek wil U verhoog sonder einde!  
*Forever I will praise your name, o King, I will exalt thee without end!*
- 2 **B**esing die lof van die Here, Ek wil U loof, vir tyd en ewigheid!  
*Sing the Lord's praises, I will praise thee, I will always praise your Name.*
- 3 **D**ie<sup>1</sup> Here is groot, Hy moet sonder perke geprys word, oor sy grootheid is daar geen twyfel nie.  
*The Lord is great, He has to be praised without end, his greatness is unquestionable.*
- 4 **E**en geslag prys u werke by die ander, hulle vertel van u magtige dae.  
*One generation praises your deeds in front of the other, they proclaim your mighty deeds.*
- 5 **F**antasties is u heerlikheid en majesteit. Ek sal oor u magtige dae nadink.  
*Fantastic is your glory and majesty. I will ponder on your mighty deeds.*
- 6 **G**root dae van U sal hulle oral verkondig. U grootheid sal ek verkondig.  
*Great deeds of yours they will proclaim everywhere. I will declare your greatness.*
- 7 **H**ulle sal sonder ophou u groot goedheid verkondig en oor u reddingsdae juig.  
*They will proclaim your greatness without end and rejoice over your deeds of salvation.*
- 8 **I**ntense liefde en genade bewys die Here. Hy is lankmoedig en vol liefde.  
*Intense love and mercy are shown by the Lord. He is long-suffering and full of love.*
- 9 **J**a, **J**ahwe is goed vir almal. Hy wys sy liefde aan almal wat Hy geskep het.  
*Yahweh is good towards everybody. He shows His love to all he created.*

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<sup>1</sup> Because Afrikaans has very few words that begin with the letters C, X, Q and Z, therefore we are not using these letters in the alphabetic structure of the acrostic Psalms.

- 10 **Kore** van lof gaan op na U, O Here. U getroues prys U oor alles wat U gemaak het.  
*Chorusus of praise rise up to you, O Lord. Your faithful praise you for all you have made.*
- 11 **Luisterryk** vertel hulle van u koninklike mag en hulle getuig van u groot krag  
*With splendour they tell about your kingly power and they witness about your great strength.*
- 12 **Met** die doel om aan alle mense sy krag en koninklike mag bekend te maak.  
*With the purpose of making known His strength and royal power to all.*
- 13 **Nimmereindig** is u koningskap, u heerskappy strek oor die geslagte heen.  
*Never-ending is your kingship, your reign spans over generations.*
- 14 **Ondersteuning** gee die Here aan hulle wat platgeval het! Hy help almal op wat terneergedruk is.  
*Support the Lord provides to the fallen ones. He helps everyone up who is depressed.*
- 15 **Platgeslaandes** fokus hulle oë op U, en U gee hulle kos op die regte tyd.  
*The fallen focus their eyes on you and You provide them with food in due time.*
- 16 **Raak** hulle aan! U versadig elke behoefte van al wat leef.  
*Touch them! You satisfy every need of all that are alive.*
- 17 **Sy** daade is regverdig, die Here is getrou in alles wat Hy doen.  
*His deeds are righteous, the Lord is faithful in everything He does.*
- 18 **Teenwoordig** is Hy by almal wat Hom aanroep, die Here is by almal wat Hom in opregtheid aanroep.  
*The Lord is present with all who are calling upon him, the Lord is with them who call him in truth.*
- 19 **Uitroepe** van nood hoor Hy. Hy hoor die noodkrete van die wat Hom vrees en red hulle.  
*Cries of need He hears. He hears the cries of all who fear him and He saves them.*
- 20 **Vir** hulle wat Hom liefhet, beskerm die Here, maar Hy verdelg al die goddeloses.  
*Those who love Him, the Lord protects, but the wicked He destroys.*
- 21 **Woorde** van lof kom die Here toe!  
Laat al wat leef sy heilige Naam prys van die begin tot die einde!  
*Words of praise belong to the Lord!  
Let all who live bless His holy name from the beginning to the end.*

## H CONCLUSION

Is it worth the effort and does it produce acceptable and worthwhile results to translate an alphabetic acrostic passage into a similar form in a target language? Does the fact that we cannot keep precisely to either the Hebrew alphabet or the alphabet of the target language weigh heavier than the results produced by the effort?

I feel that following the Latin alphabet of the target language presents a good framework to represent the essence of an alphabetic Hebrew acrostic. It would be good to set the premises beforehand: 'In this translation the letters C, Q, X and Z are not used'.

I hope that this paper will at least make current Bible translators aware of the fact that it is possible to translate poems using acrostics in (most) target languages, and that it has value for the readers, whether only the Hebrew alphabet is inserted, the transliterated Hebrew alphabet is followed or the alphabet of the target language is followed in full or mostly adhered to. In striving to be serious about Hebrew poetic features, any of these efforts is at least better than ignoring the alphabetic acrostic feature.

I conclude that an alphabetic acrostic translation is possible and that it preserves the essence of what the original poet strived to present. It contributes towards the cognitive, mnemonic, visual (even more when the letters are written as headings to each stanza) and aural (especially when the letters are mentioned as the poem is read) effectiveness and it evokes a sense that it is one fully complete unit.

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