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What is the Relationship between the Different Stanzas of Psalm 119?

Marcus Nodder

This study began as curiosity about Psalm 119 due to its neglect in church life. The length and assumed repetitiveness of the Psalm appear to be sufficient deterrent for most expositors in the pulpit and most leaders in Bible-study groups. This curiosity led me to begin my own work on the Hebrew text, which in turn has led me to the conviction that there are closer relationships between the verses of the Psalm than has been appreciated by research to date. An understanding of these relationships is not merely of academic interest, but rather is integral to a right interpretation of the Psalm. This reinterpretation of Psalm 119 is offered with the hope that it may stimulate the curiosity of others such that they too revisit the text of this the longest of the psalms and recover confidence in teaching it to the people of God.

Formal relationships in the Psalm

Psalm 119 is in the form of an acrostic, with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet being assigned to each of the twenty-two stanzas consecutively, and with each of the eight verses in each stanza beginning with the appropriate letter for that stanza. Almost every verse (the exceptions being vv. 3, 37, 90, 122) contains one of eight key words which are synonyms for the teaching of the Lord. Each of these synonyms occurs between nineteen and twenty-five times. The various terms used are as follows: *twrt*, *dbr*, *hq*, *mcwh*, *mspt*, *dwt*, *pqwd*, *mrh*. The absence of these synonyms from the verses mentioned above is balanced by the occurrence of two of these key terms in five other verses (vv. 16, 48, 160, 168, 172), with the result that in the 176 verses the total number of occurrences of these terms is 177. Other significant structural features to note by way of introduction are that the term YHWH occurs twenty-five times and the second person masculine singular pronomial suffix some 225 times.¹ Indeed, apart from verses 1-3, the whole Psalm is directly addressed to the Lord.

Introduction to thematic relationships in the Psalm

The frequency of occurrence of the eight key terms clearly marks out the

unifying motif in the Psalm as being that of the Lord's written revelation. Allen's designation of the Psalm as 'a literary monument raised in honour of Yahweh's revelation of himself to Israel' is therefore a useful starting-point.² However, this motif is refracted into a broad range of subsidiary themes which could be summarised by the following categories: the psalmist recognises that the Lord has given his law to be obeyed; he affirms the blessedness of keeping his law and his commitment to so doing; he praises the character of both the Lord and his law; he longs for personal obedience to the law; he prays that the Lord would not forsake him, that he would keep him obeying his law, that he would rescue him from his persecutors, that he would give him understanding of his law and strengthen him through it; he recognises the Lord's previous answers to his prayers; he affirms the Lord's opposition to the wicked; he laments his situation of distress; and he confesses his sin. All of the verses could be assigned to one or other of these categories. What is striking, even from such a preliminary overview of the thematic content, is that this Psalm is far more than just a celebration of the law of the Lord. Such a description would not do justice to the many discordant notes in the composition. The setting is not an ivory tower but rather a situation of deep personal distress at the hands of enemies who are never far away. Celebration is mingled with cries of anguish and longing for deliverance. This is an important preliminary observation to which we will return.

To what extent is there connection between the 176 verses of the Psalm beyond the formal acrostic and the thematic categories delineated above? The commentators fall into two main groups. Firstly, there are those who regard the Psalm as an anthology of verses in no particular order. This view makes the Psalm comparable in arrangement to the one-sentence sayings of Proverbs 10:1–22:16. So Matthew Henry comments that there is 'seldom any coherence between the verses, but, like Solomon's proverbs, it is a chest of gold rings, not a chain of gold links'.³ Charles Bridges has recourse to the same analogy while also noting the over-arching thematic connection of the law of the Lord: 'If...they are not links on the same chain, in continuous and unbroken dependence; they may at least be considered as pearls upon one string....' Beyond this broad thematic link though he admits that 'It is not always easy to trace the connexion between the several verses...'.⁴ and this is confirmed by his advice regarding how best to study the Psalm, namely to take a single verse every morning and meditate on it.⁵ White is of similar mind but more

dismissive, viewing it as ‘repetitious, lacking in movement of thought’, and lamenting ‘the tedium of this pious monologue’. He asks, ‘Who could possibly wish to jot down 176 disconnected remarks...all concerned with God’s disclosure of his will, arrange them in groups of eight having the same initial letter, and then the groups themselves into correct alphabetical order? And for what imaginable purpose?’ The answer he gives to his own question is that it is the work of a young trainee scribe doing a set assignment in poetic composition.⁶ Plumer sees the acrostic structure as evidence enough that there is no further link between the verses: ‘That the Psalm consists of a collection of individual sayings, and that there is no room for attempting to discover any connection, or to trace any consecutive train of thought, is evident *a priori* from the formal arrangement.’⁷ Clarke likewise sees the acrostic form and any further connection as mutually exclusive: ‘all connection...is sacrificed to this artificial and methodical arrangement.’⁸

However, not all commentators share this view. A second group argue for some thematic coherence to each stanza. So Calvin, although he admits that the writer ‘frequently passes from one topic to another, and prosecutes no one particular subject continuously’, also comments that it is ‘a mistake to suppose, that no connection of thought is observed throughout this lengthened composition’. He agrees with Jebb that ‘too much seems to be conceded to the prevalent opinion of a want of connection’, and approvingly quotes his conclusion that ‘I do not intend to maintain what could not be proved, that a consecutive order can be traced throughout; but instances can, undoubtedly, be drawn of passages which maintain a beautiful sequence and connection between their several members’.⁹ Spurgeon goes further than Calvin in not just dividing his commentary into sections according to the various stanzas but also beginning each section with a summary of the theme of that stanza.¹⁰ Each stanza is seen as a coherent passage rather than verses joined together only by the acrostic form. So, for example, of verses 137-144 he writes that ‘The keynote of this section is righteousness’.¹¹ It is this approach that seems to be adopted by most modern commentators. So Harman comments that ‘While there does not seem to be any progressive development of the theme in the Psalm, yet in most stanzas a major aspect is in focus’.¹² Likewise Allen notes that although any overall logical development is limited by the acrostic form, yet ‘rational ordering is not completely absent, and on closer inspection many strophes have their own distinctive emphases’.¹³

These then are the two main groupings. Some see no connection between the verses beyond the acrostic and the theme of the law of the Lord. Others argue for emphases to each stanza. But none of the commentators goes further still and makes a case for development in the Psalm as a whole beyond this. In fact, as has been observed, the acrostic form is at times even regarded as evidence in itself that there can be no such logical development. There are one or two exceptions who do speak positively of some overall development, but the claims receive only passing reference and are not substantiated. This is the case with Spurgeon when he makes mention of ‘an evident growth in the subject-matter’, claiming that the earlier verses may be those of a young man and the later ones those of age and wisdom.¹⁴ Likewise Delitzsch who refers to ‘coherence and progressive movement’ but whose claim for ‘internal progression’ is far from substantiated by one short paragraph joining together brief summaries of each stanza.¹⁵

Contrary to what many commentators maintain, and developing what only one or two merely hint at, this paper will seek to substantiate that not only is there a distinctive emphasis to each stanza but, more than this, there is indeed a progression in the Psalm as a whole, and one which is significant in the interpretation of the Psalm. There are three stages in the argument: firstly, relationships within stanzas; secondly, relationships between adjacent stanzas; and thirdly, relationships between stanzas as a whole.

Notwithstanding the claims of many commentators that the Psalm is merely an anthology of unconnected verses, closer examination reveals that there are relationships between the verses in each of the stanzas on both formal and thematic levels.

Formal relationships within stanzas

The most obvious formal linking within each stanza is provided by the eight verses of each stanza beginning with the same Hebrew letter. This striking feature is not conveyed by most English translations. Although this is understandable, given the difficulty of reproducing the acrostic in another language, it is regrettable that some versions do not even lay out the verses of the Psalm clearly in their stanzas, with the result that all evidence of this formal patterning is thereby removed.¹⁶

The formal connections within stanzas are, however, not limited to the verses beginning with the same letter. There is sufficient evidence to support the view that the eight verses of each stanza should be divided into four couplets.

(i) there are adjacent verses beginning with the same word (vv. 1-2, 23-24, 65-66, 71-72, 81-82, 127-128, 145-146, 147-148, 167-168) or words (vv. 71-72).

(ii) there are adjacent verses containing the same word(s) elsewhere in the line, sometimes in the same position in the line. Examples of this are *mcwtyk* 'sr 'habti in verses 47-8; the 'mr root in verses 57-8; 'ny in verses 69-70; in stanza 14 there are three instances of this repetition; YHWH in verses 107-8 (3rd word from the end of the line), *l' in* verses 109-10 (penultimate word), and *l'wlm* and *lby* in vv.111-12 (forming a chiasmic structure); the 'sq verb in verses 121-2; *lpnyk* in verses 169-70 (third word in the line).

(iii) the link between two adjacent verses may be a contrast of words rather than a repetition. So verses 127-8 are linked by the contrast of 'habty and *sn'ty*.

(iv) the link may be the repetition of an idea rather than a specific word. So verses 14 and 16 share the same idea of delighting in the law of the Lord, and may both be regarded as the second line of a couplet, although a different verb is used to express the concept of 'delight', the respective words being *ssty* and 'st 's'.

(v) there are adjacent lines beginning with words which though not the same are linked by alliteration and assonance beyond that of the initial letter (vv. 33-4, 57-8, 59-60, 69-70, 73-4, 111-12). At times this extends beyond the first word to the first two words (vv. 15-16) or the first three words (vv. 169-170).

(vi) there is repetition of the same word in the same line of consecutive couplets. Often this is in the first line of each couplet: so the verb *hbk* in verses 1 and 3 and the noun *drk* in verses 1, 3 and 5; *h'br* in 37 and 39 (first word); *twrk* in vv. 53-4 (final word); 'ny in verses 67 and 69; *l'* in verses 83, 85 and 87; the noun *syhb* in verses 97 and 99; *mkl* in verses 99 and 101 (first word); the verb *cdq* in vv. 121 and 123; YHWH in verses 149 and 151; the verb 'hb in verses 163, 165 and 167; *thy* in verses 173 and 175 (first word). On occasion it is in the second line of each couplet: so *lmdny* in verses 66 and 68 (fourth word); the verb *bws* in verses 78 and 80; *mty* in verses 82 and 84; the verb *smr* in verses 134 and 136; *l'wlm* and *cdq* in verses 142 and 144; *hyny* in verses 154 and 156 (final word).

(vii) there is the repetition of a word in lines 1 and 7 of a stanza, from which we may infer that these are the first lines of couplets which open and close the stanzas. So the noun *'rh* in verses 9 and 15; *'bdk* in verses 17 and 23; the verb *dbq* in verses 25 and 31; the verb *zkr* in verses 49 and 55; the verb *smr* in verses 57 and 63; the verb *klh* in verses 81 and 87; *mh* in verses 97 and 103; *'hbty* in verses 113 and 119; *r'h* in verses 153 and 159 (first word).

Obviously, in all these examples, the argument for couplets is at its strongest when the words highlighted constitute the only occurrences of that word in the stanza. In most of the examples given that is the case.

In addition to this division of the verses of each stanza into couplets, there is some justification for going further and seeing a stanza as divided into two halves, lines 1-4 and 5-8.

(i) there is the repetition of a word in lines 1 and 5 of some stanzas, which could be seen as marking the beginning of each half. So in stanza 12, lines 1 and 5 begin with *l'wlm* (the only occurrence in the stanza).

(ii) there is the contrast of words in lines 1 and 5. In stanza 18 *'th* (v. 137) contrasts clearly with *'nky* (v. 141), and both are the second word of their respective lines.

(iii) there is the repetition of a word in lines 4 and 8 of a stanza, which could be seen as marking the end of each half. So verses 4 and 8 in stanza 1 both end very strikingly with *m'd*; in stanza 10 they both begin with *yhy* (vv. 76, 80); in stanza 13 these two lines (vv. 100, 104) are both marked by *'tbwmm* and in both instances it is the second word.

(iv) there is the repetition of a word in lines 2 and 6 of a stanza, which could be regarded as marking the second line of each half. So in stanza 3 *gl* begins verses 18 and 22.

(v) there is repetition of a word in lines 3 and 7, which could be seen as marking the third line of each half. So in stanza 22 the verb *hll* in verses 171 and 175.

(vi) there is repetition of a word in lines 5 and 8 which could be seen as opening and closing a half. So in stanza 5, verses 37 and 40 both end with *hyny*.

(vii) there is linking of the verses of each half by the line-endings. So in stanza 4 the line-endings in the first half are in an AAAA pattern and in the second half in a BBBB pattern, with verses 25-8 all ending with *-k*, and verses

29-32 all ending with *-y*; in stanza 8 the endings in the first half are AAAA (vv. 57-60 ending in *-k*) and in the second half CAAC (vv. 61 and 64 ending in *-y*); in stanza 13 the line-endings in the first half are related in an ABBA structure (*ty* in vv. 97 and 100, and *ly* in vv. 98-9); similarly in stanza 9 (vv. 65-8), stanza 10 (vv. 73-6), stanza 14 (vv. 105-8); in stanza 3 the second half is linked by ABAB line endings (*-k* in vv. 21 and 23, and *ty* in vv. 22 and 24).

These examples of couplets and halves demonstrate that there is formal patterning within stanzas which links the sets of eight verses together beyond the connection of the same initial letter. This challenges the position which maintains that the Psalm is an anthology of disconnected verses. It suggests rather that each of the stanzas is to be treated as a unit. But can the relationship between the eight verses in each stanza be shown to be more than just formal? Is there also thematic cohesion to these formal units? It is to these questions that we now turn.

Thematic relationships

The formal patterning in the stanzas is not just for aesthetic purposes but rather is a means of directing our attention to distinctive thematic emphases within each stanza. One of the main ways in which such thematic particularity is conveyed is through the use of key words in a stanza. Key words may be highlighted through their repetition within a stanza. Such repetition is reinforced when these key words are in significant positions in a stanza, and all the more when their occurrence elsewhere in the Psalm is rare.

So, for example, in stanza 1 our attention is directed to the following words: *'sry* (at the beginning of vv. 1-2), *drk* (vv. 1, 3 and 5), *blk* (vv. 1 and 3), and *smr* (vv. 4, 5 and 8). The theme of the stanza could be summarised as that the psalmist affirms the blessedness of walking in the way of the Lord and his longing to be committed to this way in his own life. As *'sry* appears only here in the Psalm its significance is particularly highlighted. The other three words are more common, but from their repetition in this stanza it seem reasonable to regard them as receiving particular emphasis here.

In stanza 3 *'bdk* stands out by its repetition in the first lines of the opening and closing couplet (vv. 17 and 23; six other occurrences in the Psalm), and *gl*, by its repetition at the beginning of the second line in each of the two halves of

the stanza (vv. 18 and 22; only occurrence in the Psalm, and only two other occurrences in the Psalter, both of which use the verb in a different sense). It is striking that the psalmist's distress in the face of his opponents is present in four out of the eight verses (vv. 19, 21-3), in contrast to its total absence in stanza 1. The theme of this stanza may be summarised as being that as a servant committed to the Word, the psalmist asks for the Lord to open his Word to him and to silence his scornful enemies.

In stanza 9 the first word in five of the verses is *twb*, emphasising the goodness of the Lord and of his treatment of the psalmist. Because of the acrostic pattern in the Psalm and the constraint of each verse of a stanza beginning with the appropriate letter for that stanza, it might be objected that the repetition of this word at the beginning of so many lines is not thematically significant but rather is an unavoidable consequence of such a limiting poetic form. Such a conclusion, however, does not do justice to either the richness of the Hebrew language or the linguistic ability of the psalmist. Admittedly, words beginning with the letter *teth* are relatively small in number. Nevertheless, the entry in the BDB lexicon covers thirteen pages,¹⁷ and, given the evidence of the psalmist's considerable linguistic ability in the Psalm as a whole, it would seem unlikely that his knowledge of words beginning with the letter *teth* was so limited that he had no choice but to use the same word five times. It is more reasonable to conclude that the psalmist's repetition of *twb* is a deliberate device to highlight a thematic emphasis. The Lord's goodness has been experienced by the psalmist in his humbling of him; the verb *'nb* comes in the third line of each half of the stanza (the only other occurrences with this meaning are verses 75 and 107) and refers to his treatment by the arrogant liars of verses 69-70. It has been a good experience for the psalmist because through it he has learned the Lord's statutes, and his desire is that the Lord should continue to teach him; the verb *lmd* comes three times (vv. 66, 68 and 71; the verb is used ten other times in the Psalm, but does not appear more than once in any other stanza). Drawing together these emphases, we may summarise the distinctive theme of this stanza as being that the psalmist affirms the goodness of the Lord in his humbling of him, and asks the Lord to continue to teach him as the arrogant oppose him.

Often the distinctive theme of a stanza is captured by a play on words involving one of the key words in the stanza. So in stanza 3 the key-word *gl* is used in two senses: in verse 18 the direct object of this imperative is *'yny* and

the meaning is ‘open my eyes’; in verse 22 the indirect object is *m’ly* and the direct object is *brph urwz*, the meaning being ‘take away from me their scorn and contempt.’ This play on words could be reproduced in English by the summary, ‘Take away the scales from my eyes and the scorn of my enemies’.

Stanza 4 provides another example of this. The repetition of *drk* as the first word in five of the verses (vv. 26-7, 29-30 and 32) emphasises the psalmist’s concern to go the way of the Lord. The two references to *npsy*, opening and closing the first half of the stanza (vv. 25 and 28) stress his concern for his soul. In each of the first 4 verses (vv. 25-8) there is an imperative with the first-person masculine singular direct object suffix, as the psalmist’s pleas to the Lord for help pour out in his anguish (*qymny*, *hbynny*, *lmdny*, *hyny*). The repetition of *kdbrk* at the end of lines 1 and 4 (vv. 25 and 28) shows that his cries for help are based on the Lord’s promises in his Word. The play on words occurs with the verb *dbq* which is the first word of the first and last couplet (vv. 25 and 31). In verse 25 the sense is ‘my soul clings to the dust’; in verse 28 ‘I cling to your decrees’. This juxtaposition captures the heart of the stanza and could be summed up as ‘My soul is clinging to the dust and I’m clinging to you, Lord’. A fuller theme–statement would be that in great distress of soul the psalmist depends totally on the Lord, piling up requests for the Lord to revive and strengthen him and ‘to teach him his ways as he has promised.’

On occasion the distinctive thematic contribution of a stanza is captured in a contrast of two key-words rather than in a play on one key-word. So in stanza 18 righteousness is clearly a central idea, words based on the *cdq* root appearing five times (vv. 137-8, 142 twice and 144). The righteousness of the Lord and of his decrees is in view, and emphasis is placed on the eternal nature of both through the repetition of *l’wlm* in the second line of the last two couplets (vv. 142 and 144; in both cases the middle word in the line). The use of *skh* highlights the contrast between the psalmist’s foes who forget the Lord’s words (v. 139) and the psalmist who affirms that he does not forget them (v. 141). The central contrast in the stanza though is between the Lord himself and the psalmist. The second word in the first line of the first half is *’tb*; this stands in contrast to the second word in the first line of the second half, *’nky*. It might be objected that for such subject pronouns to be positioned as the second word in a line merely conforms to expected usage. It is true that such a position is common, but it is not required. The pronoun in verse 141 could have been

placed as the third word in the line, coming after the second adjective, as comparison with verse 114 demonstrates (though with two nouns in that case). Moreover, within this Psalm *'nky* only appears twice elsewhere (vv. 19 and 162) and *'th* is used in only six other places (vv. 4, 12, 68, 102, 114 and 151); and in no other stanza do they both occur together. In light of such usage within the Psalm as a whole, it is perfectly reasonable to conclude that the use of the two terms together and in such prominent parallel positions in stanza 18 is indeed significant and not coincidental. The Lord in his everlasting righteousness is being portrayed in sharp contrast to the small and despised psalmist, and this juxtaposition lies at the heart of the stanza. A summary-statement of the stanza's distinctive thematic contribution might therefore be 'You, Lord, are righteous and eternal, whereas I am small and despised, but I hold on to your decrees'.

Space does not permit working through every stanza to demonstrate how the distinctive thematic contribution of each is highlighted through the use of key-words and how a play on a key-word or contrast of key-words often encapsulates the main idea and makes it memorable. Appendix A identifies the key-words in each stanza and Appendix B summarises the thematic content of all the stanzas. These appendices [not included here—*ed.*] show that the examples we have worked through are not exceptions but rather are representative. One could however infer this about the whole even from the few examples we have examined, since it is highly improbable that the Psalm would be a mixture of some verses in formally and thematically related stanza-units and other verses listed in an anthology of isolated verses. In summary, what we have sought to establish is this: that each stanza is a unit in which the verses are closely related to one another. This relationship is not just formal but also thematic, with each stanza having its own particular thematic emphasis.

An interesting test to apply is that of memorability. An argument which has been advanced to support the view that there is little connection between the verses, apart from the acrostic and the theme of the law of the Lord, is that 'memorising becomes a matter of extreme difficulty', as Blaiklock expressed it.¹⁸ However, this test needs treating with caution. Firstly, difficulty in memorising may be in part a Western problem. It may be rooted more in the neglect of the memory faculty in modern Western society than in the text in question. The recall-capacity of people in more oral contemporary cultures

may astound the Westerner. Secondly, it may be in part a contemporary problem. In times past in the West, it seems that memory was generally more relied upon and so more developed. This may explain the accounts of others in previous generations who seem to have committed the Psalm to memory. Blaiklock himself mentions Ruskin, and Spurgeon gives the examples of Philip Henry's daughter, Henry Martyn, and William Wilberforce.¹⁹ Thirdly, it certainly is in large measure a translation problem. The Psalm would be much easier to memorise for someone who spoke Hebrew because of the formal patterning: the acrostic; the positioning of key-words in each stanza; the plays on words; the fact that in almost every case one of the key-words begins with the letter assigned to that stanza, facilitating the recall of at least an aspect of that stanza's distinctive thematic emphasis (for example: ' = 'sry ; g = gl; d = dbq; z = zkr; t = twb; k = klb; l = l'wlm; m = mkl; ' = 'sb; c = cdq; q = qr'; r = r'h; s = smr; t = thlh). For these reasons the memorising objection does not carry much weight, and to the contrary the test of memorability may actually be used in support of the thesis for formal and thematic cohesion within stanzas.

Relationships between adjacent stanzas

Having considered relationships between verses within the stanza-unit, the next stage is to explore relationships between the stanzas. Striking verbal links between some adjacent stanzas make it reasonable to propose the hypothesis that the twenty-two stanzas are actually in eleven pairs. When the Psalm is laid out in this fashion, with the pairs side-by-side, the parallels do appear to be more than coincidental.

Stanzas 7 and 8 may be taken as an example. Firstly, in the second half both refer to 'night' (*b-lylh* in v. 55, and *lylh* in v. 62), and this term is found nowhere else in the Psalm. Secondly, in line 6 of each stanza there is reference to praising God in song. Although the terms used are different, the parallel is still striking given that the words used are rare in the Psalm. The noun *zmrwt* in verse 54 occurs nowhere else in the Psalm and indeed only once elsewhere in the psalter (95:8), and the verb *ydb* occurs only one other time in the Psalm (v. 7). Thirdly, the plural noun for 'the wicked' appears in line 6 of each stanza (*rs'ym* in vv. 53 and 61). These are the first two occurrences of this noun in the Psalm. It appears just four more times in the rest of the Psalm, and in none of these cases is it in the same line of adjacent stanzas. Fourthly, these verbal links

are indicative of thematic parallels between the stanzas. When the themes of the two stanzas are compared it is evident that there is considerable overlap. The heart of stanza 7 is found in the verb *zkr* (vv. 49, 52 and 55) and could be summed up as ‘Remember me, Lord, as I remember you and your Word’. The heart of stanza 8 is found in the root *’mr* (vv. 57-8) and could be summed up as ‘I’m keeping my promise, Lord, please keep yours’. Both stanzas express the same sentiment, namely that the psalmist feels that he has kept his own side of the covenant and is imploring God to keep his. A combined theme–statement for the two stanzas might read, ‘In distress from the wicked the psalmist praises the Lord in the night and asks that the Lord respond to his faithful dependence on him.’

The next two stanzas (9 and 10) similarly provide considerable justification for regarding them as a unit. Firstly, between the two stanzas there are 3 references to being ‘humbled’ using the verb *’nh* (vv. 67, 71 and 75). Two of the references are in line 3 of each stanza. Although the same verb appears five other times in the Psalm (vv. 26, 42, 107, 145 and 172), in only one of these other verses (v. 107) is it used in the same way with the meaning ‘humble/afflict’ rather than the meaning ‘answer, respond’. Secondly, at the end of lines in the second half of both stanzas, the psalmist speaks of himself delighting in the law using *twrk* followed by the root *s*“, in a verbal form in verse 70 and a noun-form in verse 77. The verbal form is to be found in only two other verses in the Psalm (vv. 16 and 47) and both instances employ a different term for God’s revelation. The noun-form appears in only four other verses (vv. 24, 92, 143 and 174), and only in two of these is it used together with *twrk* (vv. 92 and 174). We can conclude that in the Psalm the occurrence of the *s*“ root together with *twrk* is in itself rare, and this occurrence in adjacent stanzas is unique.

Thirdly, the psalmist speaks of ‘the arrogant’ in the second half of both stanzas (vv. 69 and 78). The term *zdym* is clearly an important concept in this Psalm as it appears six times (vv. 21, 51, 69, 78, 85 and 122) compared to only two other uses of it in the whole psalter (19:14; 86:14). Its appearance in adjacent stanzas is therefore significant, though not unique in the Psalm (there being adjacent occurrences in stanzas 8-11). Fourthly, in both stanzas (in the second half) the psalmist contrasts himself with his opponents. The emphatic *’ny* (carrying the force of ‘but I...’) appears twice in stanza 9 in consecutive lines (vv. 69-70) and then reappears in stanza 10 (v. 78). What is especially striking

is that in both stanzas there is this contrast in line 6 (vv. 70 and 78), with *'ny* being the third word from the end of the line. In both cases this is then followed by a line in which the focus remains on the psalmist with the second word being *ly*. Fifthly, all these parallels are again indicative of thematic cohesion between the two stanzas. A combined theme-statement might be that 'The psalmist affirms the goodness of the Lord in having humbled him, and faced with the arrogant he asks for the Lord to teach and help him'.

There are many other verbal links in other stanzas which could be explored. For example, the chiasmic pattern of 'hate' and 'love' topping and tailing stanzas 15 and 16, using the verbs *sn'* (vv. 113 and 128; the only other references in the Psalm are in vv.104 and 163) and *'bb* (vv. 113 and 127). Or the contrast, in the penultimate line of the same stanzas, between the wicked being 'dross' (v. 119: *sgym*) and the psalmist loving the Lord's commandments more than 'gold' (v.127). This is the only reference to *sgym* in the psalm. Moreover it is one of only seven references in the entire Old Testament (Prov. 25:4; 26:23; Isa. 1:22,25; Ez. 22:18,19), in four of which a precious metal is also mentioned. Where *sgym* is used a contrast with a precious metal may therefore be expected, but what is striking in this case is that the reference to the precious metal does not come in the same verse or stanza but rather in the next stanza. The likelihood of this link being coincidence decreases further still when one considers that the noun *zbb* ('gold') appears in only one other verse in the Psalm (v. 72). In stanzas 21 and 22 the verb root *hll* ('praise') appears three times (vv. 164, 171 and 175) and there are no other occurrences in the psalm. Furthermore, the phrase 'your salvation, O Lord' occurs in both stanzas (vv. 166 and 174) and nowhere else in the psalm. The noun *ysw'h* is found only in two other places in the Psalm (vv. 123 and 155) and in neither case does it occur with YHWH. Therefore it is most striking that this phrase should be used in the final two stanzas of the Psalm, and that these occurrences are found in same line (line 6) of each.

Not only could more verbal links be explored in other stanza-pairs, we could go on to demonstrate the thematic parallels between the stanzas. However, space does not permit such a comprehensive examination and the reader is instead referred to Appendix C for a summary of the links and a combined theme-statement for each pair.

One final comparison, though, must be detailed and that is the 11 and 12 stanza-pair. This pair is unusual in that the link between them is more by way of contrast rather than by similarity. The key-word in *k*- stanza 11 is the verb *klb* (vv. 81-2 and 87; elsewhere in the Psalm only in v. 123) meaning ‘to end, fail’. The psalmist’s soul is ‘languishing’, his eyes are ‘failing’, and his persecutors have almost made an ‘end’ of him. He is in great distress and three times calls out to the Lord ‘When/how long...?’ (vv. 82 and 84 twice). In two of these cries the term used is *nty*, which is used nowhere else in the psalm. A proposed theme-statement for this bleak stanza would be ‘In such distress from his persecutors that he is almost finished, the psalmist cries out to the Lord for rescue, lamenting “How long...?” and affirming his commitment to the law’.

Stanza 12 is a stark contrast. The key-word in this *l*- stanza is *l’wlm* (vv. 89 and 93, meaning ‘forever, ever’) appearing as the first word in each half of the stanza. This emphasis on what endures and lasts, in contrast to the emphasis on ending and failing in the previous stanza, is reflected in the use of the verb ‘*md* (vv. 90-1; only here in the Psalm; meaning ‘to endure, remain, stand’) and also in the phrase *ldr wdr* (v. 90; only here in the Psalm; meaning ‘from generation to generation’). In contrast to the weakness of the psalmist who seems near his end and the destruction his opponents threaten, the Lord is proclaimed as the one who exists for ever and whose Word and faithfulness stand fast. The psalmist has almost perished from the earth (v. 87) and yet the Lord is the one who created the earth (v. 90) in the first place; the references to ‘*rc* here are two of only five in the psalm, and only in verse 90 is it linked to the Lord as Creator. The theme of this stanza, then, could be stated as ‘The psalmist affirms his trust in the trustworthy Word of the eternal Creator Lord who has established the earth, in the face of the wicked who seek to destroy him’. To sum up the contrast between the two stanzas, the essential message of stanza 11 is ‘Lord, I’m almost finished; when are you going to step in!’ and of stanza 12 is ‘For ever you are Lord, and so for ever I will hold to your Word’. The despair of stanza 11 is met by the reassurance of stanza 12.

So far we have sought to establish that the verses of the Psalm are arranged in formally and thematically cohesive stanzas, and that the twenty-two stanzas are in adjacent pairs which are formally and thematically related. We turn now to the question of the overall shape of the Psalm.

The dynamic of the Psalm

Five stages may be discerned in the Psalm as a whole:

(i) The Psalm begins in positive mood. In the first stanza-pair the psalmist affirms the blessing of going the way of the law of the Lord and his joyful commitment to this path, whilst recognising his need of the Lord's help to do this.

(ii) It is in stanza 3 that we are introduced for the first, but by no means last, time to those who are opposing the psalmist, with 4 of the verses striking this discordant note (vv. 19, 21-3). In the stanzas which follow these opponents are never far away. They are a source of ongoing distress to the psalmist who cries out again and again to the Lord for help and deliverance, as he maintains his commitment to obeying the Lord and suffers at their hands. This suffering creates a tension in the psalm. On the one hand the Lord has promised blessing to those who walk in his ways, as the 'creed' in verses 1-3 declares. On the other the psalmist's experience is one of suffering, in spite of the fact that he delights in the law of the Lord and remains committed to obeying it.

(iii) The psalmist's frustration and perplexity come to a head in stanza 11, the bleakest and most anguished of all the stanzas. The psalmist fears that death may not be far away (v. 87) and is in desperation as he cries out to the Lord to intervene. His questions capture his sense of perplexity (vv. 82 and 84), as he cannot understand why the Lord does not intervene to rescue him from these wicked people who flout his law. The 'answer' to his distress comes in stanza 12 as he turns his thoughts to the eternal nature of the Lord, his Word, and his faithfulness. The Lord does not remove his opponents but the psalmist is reassured that the Lord, his Word, and his faithfulness will endure for ever and, as such, are a firm basis for ongoing trust and hope.

(iv) In the subsequent stanzas circumstances remain unchanged, and the psalmist renews his prayers for deliverance, but the utter despair and perplexity of stanza 11 has been left behind. Although he does not understand why the Lord fails to intervene to deliver him and overthrow his enemies, stanza 12 has been a turning-point and has reassured him that his trust and hope are well-placed, being in the eternal Lord. We noted earlier that *l'wlm* is the key-word in stanza 12. It is striking that this term appears in the Psalm only twice before stanza 12 (vv. 44 and 52) but seven times after it (vv. 98, 111, 112, 142, 144, 152 and 160). The position of some of these references is also noteworthy. It is to be found in

stanza 14 in both lines of the final couplet (vv. 111-12); in stanza 18 it is the middle term in the second line of the last two couplets (vv. 142 and 144); and in the 19 and 20 stanza-pair it appears in the final line of each stanza. This note of eternity appears to have impressed itself on the psalmist's outlook and is the final word which gives him hope, as he lives with the tension of promised blessing for obedience and yet experienced suffering in spite of his faithfulness to the law. It points the psalmist in the direction of an eschatological resolution to the tension, although how this will be realised is hidden from him.

(v) The Psalm ends with the psalmist praising the Lord. This is the key-note of the final stanza-pair (21 and 22). The persecutors are still there (v. 161), the prayers for rescue are still being offered, the psalmist's love for the law and commitment to it are still being affirmed by him, but at the heart of it all there is now the distinctive note of praise. It may well be that the final verse of the Psalm (v. 176) is to be understood as a confession, as the psalmist reviews the experience which he has gone through in the course of the Psalm and thinks back to the climax of his frustration with the Lord expressed in stanza 11. Now, at the end of the Psalm, he looks back and confesses that in his railing against the Lord he had 'gone astray like a lost sheep' and asks that now the Lord would restore him to full fellowship with him ('seek out your servant').

By way of additional support for this thesis about the overall shape of the Psalm, two further observations may be made. Firstly, the 11 and 12 stanza-pair, which is being regarded as the turning-point in the psalm, is numerically the middle pair. Such a structure would obviously not be possible if the Psalm were an incomplete acrostic (as is the case, for example, in Psalm 145). If such were the case, there would be a middle stanza rather than two middle stanzas and the thesis we are proposing would be undermined. Moreover, the form of a complete acrostic in which the *k*- and *l*-verses are the centre thematically, as well as numerically, is not unique to this psalm. The structure of the book of Lamentations displays this same symmetry. Of the five chapters of the book chapters 1-2 and 4-5 consist of twenty-two verses each (all except ch. 5 being acrostics), while chapter 3 is a triple acrostic consisting of sixty-six verses. As Brown has commented: 'Thus the book's careful literary crafting makes it very easy to locate its center, and it is instructive to note that Lamentations reaches its exact midpoint in 3:31-36, the kaph and lamed verses, which form both a numerical as well as thematic core.'

Secondly, the overall shape to the Psalm which has been proposed may be seen to be reflected in the overall shape of the Psalter. Space does not permit exploring all the parallels but the following preliminary observations lend support to this. Just as in Psalm 119 stanza 1, the Psalter begins with an affirmation of blessing for the one who lives according to the law (1:1-3). The opening formula is the same: 'sry. There are only three other psalms which begin with this word (32, 112, 128). Moreover, the blessing is linked specifically in both cases with 'the law of the Lord' (*btwrt* YHWH). This expression is very rare in the Psalter. In fact there is only one other occurrence (19:7) apart from 1:2 and 119:1. Only in the latter two cases is the particle preposition *B* prefixed to the phrase, and only in these two cases is it linked to 'sry. Other parallels are the use of the noun *drk*, (1:1,6) and the verb *hllk* (1:1). And the use of the third person in 119:1-3 but then the third person in the rest of the Psalm is mirrored by psalms 1 and 2 in relation to the rest of the Psalter. Also the thematic links between stanza 2 and Psalm 1 are noteworthy; although different words are used, the concepts of delighting in, and meditating on, the law are common to both (119:14, 16; 1:2).

This similarity in beginning is matched by a similarity in ending. The note of praise which was the hallmark of stanzas 21 and 22 is trumpeted unmistakably at the end of the Psalter in the 'Hallel' psalms of 146-150 which begin and end with the phrase *Hllw-YH*. These last five psalms account for 23 of the 76 occurrences of the verb *hll* in the Psalter.

In between these 'book-ends' of promised blessing and praise we find the same tension of experience as in Psalm 119. This tension finds expression in the lament, which is so dominant a feature of the book, as reality fails to live up to promise. As Moberly has noted, 'The most frequent occurrence of laments is in the Psalter. Indeed, the single most numerous type of psalm...is the lament.'²⁰ Does this tension reach a climax and 'resolution' in the Psalter as it does in stanzas 11 and 12 of the Psalm? Two options present themselves as the strongest contenders. Firstly, Psalm 73. As the first Psalm of book 3, the middle book of the Psalms, it is centrally located in the Psalter. Thematically it encapsulates stanzas 11 and 12. The psalmist's theology of blessing (v. 1) is at odds with his own suffering (vv. 13-14) and the prosperity of the wicked (vv. 3-12). The 'resolution' comes from the same perspective of eternity (vv. 17-20) through which he is given strength to persevere (vv. 21-8). The key-words of

stanzas 11 and 12 are strikingly juxtaposed in v. 26 (*klb, l'wlm*). Secondly, Psalm 90. It could be argued that the tension between promise and experience comes to a climax at the end of the middle book, in the rejection of the Lord's anointed in Psalm 89:38-51. This climax of perplexity finds its 'resolution' as Book 4 takes us back to the foundational truth of the eternal kingship of the Lord (Ps. 90; 93-9).

The parallels between the shape of Psalm 119 and that of the Psalter are tantalising, and do provide additional support for our thesis regarding the dynamic of Psalm 119. It is not within the compass of this paper to explore them further here, but at the very least we may conclude that the dynamic of the Psalm encapsulates the piety of the Psalter.

The acrostic

One remaining question regarding relationships between the stanzas as a whole concerns what is, at first sight, the most obvious link between the stanzas, namely, the acrostic. What is the significance of this formal feature? Is it related to the meaning of the psalm? Freedman considers the acrostic to represent nothing more than an artistic challenge for the author, who provides 'a dazzling display of virtuosity in handling technical matters of intricacy and complexity.'²¹ However, what the motive of the author might be in so doing he fails to explain. White's thesis that it was a set assignment in poetic composition for a young trainee-scribe²² founders on insufficient evidence. The learning and meditating on the law (at night) which White assumes to indicate the practice of a scribe is more plausibly that of the king or another leader, or indeed of any pious Israelite following Psalm 1.

The simplest explanation for the acrostic is that it is an aid for memory. However, there are in addition two ways in which the form of the acrostic is related to the content of the psalm. Firstly, the acrostic may express the perfection and totality of the law of the Lord. By way of comparison, the acrostic device seems similarly to express 'A-Z' comprehensiveness and perfection in the description of the wife of Proverbs 31:10-31. By way of contrast, the incomplete acrostic in Nahum 1 reflects the disruption of which the text speaks, as the created order is overthrown by the warrior-Lord. Secondly, the acrostic may well also be a means through which the psalmist gives shape to his experience of perplexity. As Webb (following Hillers) has

observed, such a therapeutic and pastoral significance to the acrostic seems to be the best explanation for its use in the book of Lamentations, a book which ‘portrays such radical disorientation’ and yet is ‘one of the most ordered books of the Old Testament’.²³ He notes that ‘the acrostic form...has the effect of giving grief a shape which is itself a kind of resolution’.²⁴ In the light of the themes we have traced in Psalm 119, such an explanation for the use of acrostic fits well in this case too.

Conclusion

We have sought to establish that Psalm 119 comprises not just isolated verses but stanzas, and indeed stanza-pairs, which are formally and thematically related units. Further, that there is an overall shape and dynamic in the arrangement of these stanzas. Such relationships within and between the stanzas appear not to have been sufficiently appreciated to date, but our contention is that discerning them is integral to a right interpretation of the Psalm and a right understanding of its particular contribution within the Psalter.

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ENDNOTES

1. For details about the distribution of these terms in the Psalm see David Noel Freedman, ‘The Structure of Psalm 119,’ in David P. Wright, ed., *Pomegranates and Golden Bells* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1995), pp. 725-56.
2. Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983) p. 141.
3. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, L. F. Church, ed., (Andra Pradesh, India: Operation Mobilisation India, 1992), p. 705.
4. Charles Bridges, *Exposition of Psalm CXIX* (London: Seeley, Jackson and Halliday, 1857), p. xi.
5. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
6. R. E. O. White, “The Student’s Psalm (119),” *Expository Times* 102 (1990): 71-4.
7. W. S. Plumer, *Psalms*, The Geneva Series of Commentaries (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), p. 1017.
8. Dr. Adam Clarke, quoted in C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, VI, *Psalms CXIX-CXXXIV* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1883), p. 7.
9. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. IV, Calvin’s Commentaries 22 vols., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), VI, 398.

10. C. H. Spurgeon, *The Golden Alphabet: A Devotional Commentary on the 119th Psalm* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1898).
11. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
12. Allan Harman, *Psalms*, A Mentor Commentary (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1998), p. 381.
13. Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
14. Spurgeon, *The Golden Alphabet*, p. 12.
15. F. Delitzsch, *Psalms*, in C. F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 5 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), pp. 736-7.
16. The Revised Standard Version and New Revised Standard Version leave just a one line gap between the stanzas; but the New International Version and *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* clearly mark out the different stanzas with the appropriate Hebrew letter transliterated as a heading for each stanza.
17. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1997), pp. 370-83.
18. E. M. Blaiklock, *Commentary on the Psalms: vol. 2: Psalms for Worship: Psalms 73-150* (London: Scripture Union, 1977), p. 90.
19. Spurgeon, *The Golden Alphabet*, pp. 13-14.
20. R. W. L. Moberly, article on 'Lament', *ibid.*, 4:879.
21. Freedman, 'The Structure of Psalm 119', *op. cit.*, p. 756.
22. White, *The Student's Psalm (119)*, *op. cit.* 71-4.
23. Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, no.10 (Leicester: IVP, Apollos, 2000), p. 60.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 61.