

Lesson 15 – Mizmorim 9 and 10

Goal:

Students will be able to list arguments why these two Mizmorim belong together, show that they are an acrostic, and explain why there are irregularities in the alphabetic sequence. They should be able to define the terms “form” and “content” and show how the form these Mizmorim fits their content.

Activity:

1. Read Mizmorim 9 and 10 Pasuk by Pasuk to make sure class understands any difficult words or phrases and noticing parallelism or other poetic devices. They should be able to summarize the basic messages. In Mizmor 9, the writer is surrounded by evil, his life is in danger and he calls to God to destroy the evil. In Mizmor 10, the pleas become more desperate and the writer describes the thoughts and actions of the wicked person in detail in order to invoke God to act.

2. Ask students to break into pairs for a do now:

Try to find the acrostic structure. Circle the first letter of each Pasuk that begins with the next letter of the alphabet.
What pattern do you notice predominates?
What are the problems with the structure?

The regular pattern in this acrostic is to have every other Pasuk begin with a successive letter of the alphabet while the Pesukim in between can begin with any letter. This works for the first four Pesukim. Pasuk 1 begins with א followed by an attached verse at Pasuk 2. Pasuk 3 begins with ב followed by an attached verse at Pasuk 4. Pasuk 5 begins with ג but then we have a disruption. There is no attached verse for the letter ד and there is no ה verse at all. Pasuk 7 begins with ו but has no attachment. Pasuk 8 begins with ז and has three attachments of Pesukim 9-11. Pesukim 12-17 follow the regular pattern: ח, attachment, ט, attachment, י, attachment. Pasuk 18 begins with י but has no attachment. Pasuk 19 begins with כ and has two attachments. Moving onto Mizmor 10, Pasuk 1 begins with ל. After that we are missing the next six letters. The alphabet only picks up again at Pasuk 12 with ק and an attachment. Pasuk 14 begins with ר but has no attachment. The rest of the Mizmor follows the regular pattern of ש, attachment, ת, attachment.

Do you have any suggestions about why the acrostic is all messed up? Many modern Bible scholars think the acrostic was once perfect but that it got corrupted over centuries of transmission? Do you think that is likely? It is highly unlikely that such careful scribes as the Massorites would make such glaring mistakes in a simple alphabetic pattern. Rather, these anomalies in the structure must be an original part of the composition. Why would a writer skip letters and put different numbers of attached verses between the letters?

3. An insightful student should realize that the place where we are missing six letters of the alphabet (an anomaly in the form) is also the place where we have a long digression

about the ways of the wicked person (an anomaly of content), Mizmor 10:2-11. Therefore, it seems that the form of the acrostic matches its content.

An alphabetic acrostic is the most structured and predictable pattern. This structure represents order and goodness in the world. When people act properly, everything is predicatable and good. However, when wicked people commit evil, this causes disruption and chaos in the world. Similarly, when the Mizmor discusses wickedness, the acrostic goes off track and becomes chaotic. But chaos is not allowed to reign forever. When people cry out and God decides to intervene, evil is destroyed and order is restored. Similarly in the Mizmor, when God is called upon to act, the acrostic structure goes back to normal. This connection between form and content works throughout the Mizmor.

The first two letters of the acrostic (ב-א, vv 2-5) are complete with one primary and attached verse each. These four verses praise God and remember past vindications. The third letter (ג, v 6) continues to recall past vindications but here we have the first mention of the word רשע. Immediately, we see a disruption in the order with a missing attached verse for ג, no verses at all for ד, and a missing attached verse for ה. Here, apparently, the mere mention of the wicked in v 6, even within a description of his destruction, also disrupts the acrostic sequence. Proper order is not restored until the letter ו which begins וי-הוה לעולם ישב; proclamation of God's everlasting sitting in judgment brings the acrostic back into proper format. God's name is a key word in the four verses of the letter ו. YHVH is the first, last, and middle word of vv 8-11. The YHVH in v 10 is the fourteenth word from the first YHVH in v 8 and also the fourteenth word from the last YHVH in v 11. Not only do we find complete primary and attached verses for the next three letters, ו even has two extra attached verses perhaps to replace the missing ג and ה attached verses. God's judgment restores the partial havoc caused by the wicked.

However, the missing ד verse is not replaced. This missing letter is of a different nature than the other six missing letters discussed earlier. The latter at least have ten verses in their place, even though those verses do not begin with the correct letters. The ד verse is completely erased. This may connect to the verses immediately before and after the spot where it should be located. Both say that the name of the wicked was wiped out - שמם מחית לעולם ועד (v 6) and אבד זכרם המה (v 7). The first phrase describes the erasing of the letter, and the following phrase states that its memory has perished. These are the only two verses in the psalm which state this idea in the past tense and not as a prayer that God should destroy the wicked. The ד verse is not replaced because it apparently represents evil and its absence represents the erasing of evil as well as its memory.

Order is restored through the letters ז, ח, and ט. But, the end of v 17 mentions רשע for a second time followed by yet another mention of רשעים at the beginning of v 18. This causes a skipping of the yod's attached verse. The first attached verse to כ, v 20, invokes YHVH with קומה ה' and this is echoed in the next verse as well – שיתה ה'. This double invocation restores order from the chaos caused by the double mention of רשע. The second attached verse for כ (v 21) serves as a replacement for the missing attached verse for י.

The acrostic continues with a primary ל verse but is abruptly interrupted by three occurrences of the word רשע in 10:2, 3, and 4 and the word רע in v 6. This meditation on evil continues for ten verses during which YHVH only appears once as the object of the

wicked man's scorn (v 3). Six letters of the acrostic – ז,פ,ס,ע,ג,מ - become garbled by this extended deliberation on the thought process of the wicked. Order is not restored until YHVH is once again invoked with the words 'קומה ה' in 10:12.

Structure of Mizmorim 9 and 10															Verse	Psalm			
Superscription	Letter																		
																1	9		
Normal	א	Primary														2			
		Attached														3			
Normal	ב	Primary														4			
		Attached														5			
Partial Disruption	ג	Primary														6			
Total Disruption	ד	Missing																	
Partial Disruption	ה	Primary														7			
Normal	ו	Primary														8			
		Attached														9			
Restoring Verses	ו	Extra														10			
		Extra														11			
Normal	ז	Primary														12			
		Attached														13			
Normal	ח	Primary														14			
		Attached														15			
Normal	ט	Primary														16			
		Attached														17			
Partial Disruption	י	Primary														18			
Normal	כ	Primary														19			
		Attached														20			
Restoring Verse	כ	Extra														21			
	ל	Primary														1	10		
Total Disruption	מ נ ס ע פ צ	Missing														2			
																		3	
																			4
																			5
																			6
																			7
																			8
																			9
																			10
																			11
Normal	ק	Primary														12			
		Attached														13			
Partial Disruption	ר	Primary														14			
Normal	ש	Primary														15			
		Attached														16			
Normal	ת	Primary														17			
		Attached														18			

Black highlight represents disruption caused by the word רשע. Blue highlight indicates the return of the normal pattern by an invocation of God's name. There is a red box around each instance of disruption and reorder.

L15 - Structure of Mizmorim 9 and 10 - Summary Chart.doc

ק has a primary and attached verse, as expected. But the word רשע appears in the ק attached verse (13). This causes ר to lose its attached verse. We then proceed to ש (v 15) which contains רשע twice and the word רע once. But this conglomeration of evil words is immediately stopped by the declaration in ש's attached verse (v 16) – ה' מלך עולם ועד.

Mention of God's kingship is able to restrain the effects caused by evil. There are no further ramifications of the evil words in v 15. This is in fact hinted to in the words of v 15, תדרש רשעו בל תמצא. If we take this phrase as being a self-referential comment about the structure of this acrostic, then we can translate as, "You will look for [the disruption caused by] רשע but you will not find it" because by the end of the psalm, God's presence is very near and does not allow the wicked to cause harm. From v 15 until the end of the psalm there are no further disruptions.

The very form of the acrostic reflects its central message. The message is that evil disrupts the natural order of the world and the ramifications of evil are far reaching. However, evil can only exist when God allows this to happen. This is poetically represented in the structure of the acrostic where any occurrence of the word רשע disrupts either the acrostic or the primary-attached verse pattern. However, an invocation of God to act – קומה ה' – or a description of God in His active role as king puts the acrostic back on track.

There are many more interesting aspects of the form, word count, and structure of this Mizmor which are described in the article by Ronald Benun, "Evil and the Disruption of Order: The Acrostics of Book One."