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Freedman, David Noel
Psalm 119: The Exaltation of Torah

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The artificial and laboriously overdone style of Psalm 119 has contributed to a lack of close reading of the psalm and to a negligence of the importance of its content. David Noel Freedman has attempted to rectify both counts of the present situation in his new book that analyzes both the macro- and micro-structures of the psalm and draws theological conclusions. He believes that the psalm when given close and careful attention bears the result of an incredible and intricate balance and detailed artistry.

Freedman's book attempts to demonstrate that a detailed analysis of the structure of Ps 119 in relation to the other acrostic psalms in the Psalter shows that Ps 119 is a magnificently prepared and balanced psalm in praise of *tôrâ*. His method bears strongly on his past work in Hebrew poetry and on his particular method of analyzing Hebrew meter on the basis of syllable counting. His method also reflects his belief that the Scriptures were prepared and compiled with an awareness of the canonical structure and with careful attention to quantitative balance.

The book is divided into four chapters, the two middle of which have appeared earlier as an essay and article. Chapter one analyzes the phenomenon of alphabetic acrostic psalms. Freedman attempts to show that the eight acrostic psalms (Pss 9/10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, and 145) are structured and arranged in an intentional way such that each psalm is paired with another and the structure of the group leads to a conclusion or quantitative summation in Ps 119. Chapters two and three are the heart of the book and provide the structural analysis for Ps 119. Chapter two focuses on the form and occurrence of the eight key words— *tôrâ* and its seven synonyms. Freedman concludes in this chapter that the eight key words are distributed throughout the psalm so that, while there is little consistency in the distribution from line to line or stanza to stanza, the larger context of the psalm reveals an incredibly detailed and balanced work.

Chapter three shifts the focus to the meter of the psalm. Freedman begins with the famous statement by Eusebius that the Song of Moses (Deut 32) and Ps 119 are in heroic meter consisting of hexameters with sixteen syllables. After presenting the intricacies of his metrical counting system Freedman concludes that while there are too many variations in the meter to agree with Eusebius, the larger structure of the psalm reveals that on average the numbers given by Eusebius are accurate. In addition, the variations in line length seem to be arranged so that long lines are paired with shorter lines with a resulting overall balance in meter. Chapter four is a brief theological conclusion. In it Freedman discusses *tôrâ*'s apotheosis in the same way that wisdom has been so considered in Proverbs. Based on the theology of the psalm Freedman offers a setting for the psalm during the time of Ezra or Nehemiah.

Freedman's apotheosis of *tôrâ* is supported by much of the work done in the past decade on the book of Psalms. Particularly, J. Clinton McCann in his *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) presents the book of Psalms as a book of instruction and James L. Mays discusses the issue in his commentary and more to the point in "The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter" (*JBL* 106:10-12). One facet of the work of these two that is latent but vital in the work of Freedman is the concept of the unity of the Psalter. Freedman assumes throughout his work that the writer of Psalm 119 had access to the other acrostic psalms contained in the Psalter, that they existed for him in their present canonical forms, and that he is working with the knowledge or assumption that they are part of closed body of collected works. Whether Freedman would state it quite way, these seem to be unstated but necessary premises or conclusions.

There is one shortcoming and one objection to Freedman's work. The shortcoming is the lack of interaction with other work in the field. This is easily explained, however, by the originality of Freedman's work, but is also a sign that this type of analysis is not being done beyond Freedman and some of his followers. It will be left to others to see, first, if Freedman's analysis has relevance in the discussion of Hebrew meter done in the broader field, and second, whether an analysis of Ps 119 using other methods would yield similar, supportive, or at least non-contradictory results. One will not find that interaction in Freedman's book, however.

The objection is to the lack of a firm methodological principle that precedes the work. This failure leads to a wavering level of credibility or relevance of the evidence presented. For example, when Freedman attempts to show the importance of the number eight in biblical numerology and thus demonstrating that it is significant that there are eight acrostic psalms in the Psalter, his evidence is (1) that Ps 119 has eight-line stanzas, and (2) that the prophetic corpus is arranged into an eight-fold structure, four books in the Former Prophets and four in the Latter Prophets (pp. 1-2). While there is certainly other evidence that could be marshaled to give weight to this numerological principle,

Freedman does not give any. The evidence provided is hardly convincing. In another case the significance given to the results of the analysis seems forced. When Freedman discovers that there are either 176 or 177 keywords in Ps 119, depending on the text-critical analysis, the result has significance either way (p. 78). The sense is created that whatever the result of the counting, a meaningful result can be drawn that shows the overall balance of the work. One gets the sense that there is no methodological guides or restraints before the analysis is done, but that the methodology is created as the analysis is done.

Despite these objections, Freedman's work has much to offer. His close analysis of the acrostic psalms is a boon for anyone doing further work in these psalms. His many tables and lists provide helpful visual means for assimilating what otherwise would be very confusing data. Also, this work provides an introduction, albeit a crash course, to certain features of Hebrew metrical studies and Freedman's particular contribution to that field of study.

Freedman is to be commended for the furtherance of his methodology and for the additional example of its fruit. It is refreshing to see a theological conclusion to what is essentially a structural study. The state of Old Testament theology will be enhanced by more work that is focused on moving from careful exegesis to theological insights. Also, although Freedman has been referenced throughout this review as the author, credit should be given to Jeffrey C. Geoghegan and Andrew Welch, listed as co-authors, and to Miriam Sherman, whose assistance was noted in the final chapter.