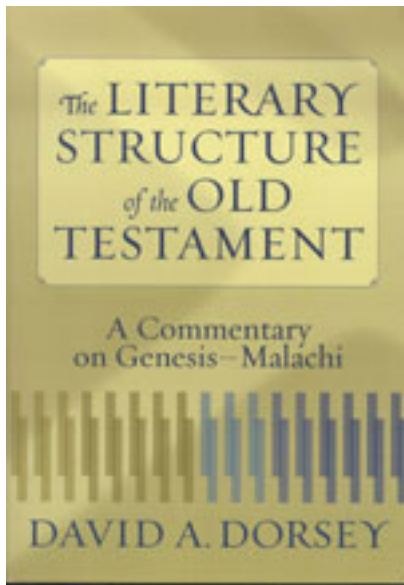


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Dorsey, David A.

***The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A
Commentary on Genesis-Malachi***

Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004. Pp. 330. Paper. \$39.99.
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The author of this book, David Dorsey, has set himself a challenging task: to survey the entire Hebrew Bible in order, book by book (deliberately foregoing depth analysis in favor of comprehensiveness), with the intention of exemplifying the connection between the literary structure of each biblical book and its primary message. After reading the book, I examined the list of recommendations on the dust jacket (such as “David Dorsey ably guides us toward a better sense of the structure and style of the books of the OT. This book will become a standard reference tool for all serious students of the Bible”) and can do naught but add my voice to the enthusiastic reviews.

In his introduction to his book, the author states that his purpose is to address the thought-provoking question of “the apparent lack of order within many of the biblical books” (9). Dorsey asks if it is possible “that the Hebrew authors might have organized their compositions according to literary conventions that were different from ours” (9). His central theory, accepted today in research, is that there is a connection between content and form and between structure and meaning. He claims that “[t]his was true in ancient Israel. The pages of the OT reflect a keen interest in literary structure. Hebrew authors and editors generally took great pains to arrange their compositions in ways that would convey their messages” (15). Therefore, deciphering the literary structure of a biblical chapter or book automatically uncovers its inner theological code. The author

accomplishes this systematically in his overview: he analyzes a small portion of each book of the Hebrew Bible and points out new theology uncovered by use of the literary symmetry of the “pivot patterns”: abcd-d'c'b'a'. Anyone wishing to learn for oneself or to teach others about the moral and ethical significance of many Old Testament chapters will discover a new and surprising world through David Dorsey’s analysis.

I nevertheless wish to make two cardinal points: the first regarding the status of Hebrew as a language in American biblical research, the second regarding his exclusive focus on pivot patterns.

The two major communities within the contemporary academic world involved in study and research of the Bible are the Jewish community in Israel and the Jewish and especially Christian communities in the United States and in Europe. The former, smaller community is Hebrew-speaking, whereas the latter is supposed to know Hebrew, primarily in order to be able to read the Bible in its original language. But whereas the Israeli community also reads scholarly literature in English, the American one does not read much Hebrew.

I shall illustrate this point regarding the book under discussion on three distinct levels: reading of the Bible in the original Hebrew; reading of Jewish exegesis throughout the ages; and reading of modern biblical research in Hebrew.

Reading the Bible in its original language. The author (9) describes three main patterns of literary structure to be found in the biblical books: chiasmus, parallelism, and sevenfold patterns. To exemplify a parallel, *nonchiastic* pattern (abc//a'b'c'), he “quotes” Ps 19:2 as follows (29):

- a The heavens
- b tell of
- c God’s glory

- a' the sky
- b' proclaims
- c' his handiwork

However, in Hebrew the verse reads as follows: השמים מספרים כבוד אל ומעשה ידיו (hšmym msprym kbwd el wm 'sh ydyw mgyd hrqy'). The English translations (such as KJV RSV, NEB, and even the Jewish NJPS), in adjusting the structure of the Hebrew verse to suit the ear of the English reader, alter its syntactical structure from an explicitly chiastic structure (abc-c'b'a') to a new, “English,” *nonchiastic* one (abc-a'b'c'),

thereby changing its original structure. In discussing the syntax of Hebrew sentence structure in the Bible, scholars must, of course, quote the original Hebrew, not its English translation. It would seem that the only ones “correctly” to translate the Hebrew into a European language (German) in a manner close to the syntax of the original Hebrew were Buber and Rosenzweig: “Die Himmel künden Gottes Ruhm, Sein Händewerk erzählt die Fläche.” (Everett Fox’s excellent English translation, following Buber-Rosenzweig, thus far includes only the Pentateuch. If he someday translates Psalms, he will, of course, remain faithful to the Hebrew original.)

Jewish exegesis throughout history. In tracing the development of exegetical awareness of chiasmus, Dorsey begins in 1753 with the English bishop R. Lowth, followed by his disciple J. Jebb, who was the first one (in 1820; thus Dorsey claims on 18) to observe the phenomenon of chiasmus in the Bible; he was in turn followed by Th. Boys (1824) and others. But readers of classical Hebrew exegesis know that R. Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164 C.E.), one of the outstanding Spanish Jewish commentators, already discussed the phenomenon of chiasmus in the Bible (in his “longer commentary,” Exod 17:7; 25:22), just as he noted many other literary phenomena, such as inclusion (on Ps 103:22), antithesis (Ps 119:150), paronomasia (Zeph 2:4; Ps 56:9), and others. (There is some suggestion that he may have been preceded in this by his relative R. Moses ibn Ezra, who was born forty-five years earlier.) Had Dorsey read Jewish exegesis, he would have found that Jebb was not the first to discover chiasmus and other like phenomena but that these had been known at least 750 years earlier.

Modern Research. Virtually all Israeli Bible scholars read English, so that even when they publish their own work in Hebrew, they also refer to the major literature in English (and frequently in other European languages as well) and will usually publish some of their studies in English as well (inter alia as a condition for their own academic advancement in the university). Nevertheless, many studies remain in Hebrew, as was the case for many years of the pioneering doctoral dissertation of Nathan Klaus, written under the aegis of Yair Zakovitch of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, *Pivot Patterns in the Former Prophets* (1994; this is the added English title of the dissertation, which is in Hebrew), in which Klaus discusses this issue in depth (incidentally, mentioning Ibn Ezra in his introduction).

Yet Dorsey’s important book, devoted almost entirely to the identical phenomenon of pivot patterns throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Malachi, book after book—and indeed, this is its important innovation—does not refer to a serious study devoted to the analysis of this same phenomenon published five years earlier, simply because it was written in Hebrew. Similarly, the Hebrew dissertation of Amos Frisch, written at Bar-Ilan University, devoted to the book of Kings (“The Narrative in Solomon’s Reign in the

Book of Kings,” 1986), which makes serious use of chiasmus, is not mentioned at all, although Dorsey does mention a short article in English written by Frisch on this subject (137).

The second point I wish to make about Dorsey’s book is that, with all the importance of pivot patterns (making this book, because of its comprehensive nature, indeed unique), one cannot legitimately state that it is the only structure known to us. (The author himself is careful and in several places states that there are in fact other criteria.) In my opinion, in a book devoted to a survey of the literary structure of all the biblical books, it is impossible not to mention, if only briefly in the introduction, the development of a substantial literature concerning intertextuality, beginning with T. S. Eliot and through Julia Kristeva, with regard to literature in general, as well as Michael Fishbane, in his pioneering work on the internal literary connections among the biblical books (see T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* [New York, 1932]; Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* [New York, 1980]; Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* [Oxford, 1975]).

At this point I would like to mention the unique, rapidly developing area (mostly in Hebrew) of “mirror-image narrative” that seeks to determine the system of structural and ideational relationships among various chapters, and even among different books, in the Bible and outside of it. According to this approach, one may discover two seemingly *similar* stories in the Bible that upon deeper examination prove to be in fact *opposite*, from which it ensues that the latter story “corrects” the former. The pioneer in this area was Yair Zakovitch, in the wake of his teacher, I. A. Seeligmann, who discovered the use of this method in rabbinic literature (see Zakovitch’s book, *An Introduction to Inner-Biblical Interpretation* [Hebrew], published in Israel in 1992). I have recently published several studies (in Hebrew) with a like orientation, such as one arguing that the scroll of Esther “corrects” the story of the destruction of “Amalek” (in 1 Sam 15) (*Mo’ed* 14 [2004]) and that the apocryphal book of Judith may be seen in turn as “correcting” the canonical book of Esther (*Beit Mikra* 179 [July 2004]).

In summary, one can only approve of the growing tendency in Hebrew journals and academic publications in Israel to include English abstracts, as well as to have an additional English title page. Perhaps in the future the dialogue between those who write in the language of Moses and those writing in that of King James will be strengthened, to the mutual benefit of both sides.