

UNUSUAL WORD GAMES FOUND IN BIBLE

Check out the book store at your favorite mall for a volume of acrostics. You'll find it on the same shelf as the crossword puzzles and other word games. They're fun exercises if you like playing with words.

In an acrostic you interpret a series of clues to write out a list of words; then the first letter of each word spells a different word.

Another acrostic form is patterned on the alphabet. A is for apple; B is for boy; C is for cat—that sort of thing. This A-B-C device is especially popular for children's poems.

All in all, it's no big deal. This acrostic business is little more than a cute way of lining up words on paper.

But it's also one of the most ancient ways of playing around with words. In fact there are a dozen or so examples of acrostics in the Bible.

The trouble is you can't find them in your English translations. All of the good acrostics are in the poetical sections of the Hebrew scriptures.

And it's almost impossible to reproduce a Hebrew acrostic in English. But for what it's worth, here are a few examples.

Psalms 111 and 112 (which may be numbered 110 and 111) in some Bibles are both acrostics. Each line of these poems begins with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in sequence. Psalm 112, for example, starts out something like this:

A man will be happy if he reveres the Lord
By obeying his commands he gets pleasure.
Children born to him will rule the land.
Descendants like his will be blessed.

And so on for twenty-two lines.

But you can't keep it up in English. The Hebrew alphabet has only 22 letters, and they're not in the same order as the 26 letters in the English alphabet. Besides such an artificial English translation could be terribly boring.

If it's carried out to an extreme, the effect can be mesmerizing even in the original Hebrew. Psalm 119 (or 118 in some Bibles) is a good case in point.

All eight lines in each stanza of this poem begin with the same letter. And the twenty-two stanzas carry the effect all the way through the alphabet. After 176 lines, the effect can tire you out.

You can find the same acrostic style in a handful of other poems: Psalms 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 145 (or 9, 24, 33, 36, 144), at the last 22 verses of the book of Proverbs, and in each of the first four chapters of Lamentations.

Why did the ancient biblical authors go to the trouble? They certainly weren't the only ones to play around with words in this fashion. The Babylonians, Greeks and Romans also produced acrostic literary works.

Their reasons for writing this way were probably the same as the reasons modern authors do it. It's fun. It's a mental challenge for a poet to decide on a scheme like that and then make it work.

And it pays dividends. A-B-C type poems are easier to memorize. So if the ancient writers wanted their students to remember their words of wisdom, they could catch it more quickly in an acrostic form.

Furthermore, the scheme suggests a sense of completeness. By the time you've gone from A to Z (or from aleph to tau in Hebrew) you feel as though you've pretty well comprehended the whole subject.

The neat thing about this entire business is that you don't expect to find crossword puzzles in the Bible. But you've got the next thing to it.

This unexpected playing around with words is just another indication that the biblical authors must have enjoyed their work.