

Lesson 16 – Mizmor 37

Goal:

Students will be able to summarize the main point of this Mizmor and show how its form parallels its content.

Activity:

1. Read through the Mizmor. Let each student read and explain one or two Pesukim. Then ask students to summarize the main points of the Mizmor. The writer addresses the problem of *צדיק ורע לו רשע וטוב לו* and promises that even though the wicked abound at the present, soon enough they will all be wiped out and the righteous will be vindicated.

2. *What is the structure of the Mizmor? Can you find the acrostic? Is it perfect or are there problems with it?* Just like in Mizmorim 9 and 10, the expected pattern is to have one primary verse begin with a successive letter of the alphabet followed by an attached verse which can begin with any letter. However, there are three letters which only have one Pasuk each – ד, כ, and ק. Furthermore, there is no verse for the letter ו. Instead we find a Pasuk that begins *צדיקים* (v 29) in the place where we would expect to find the ו Pasuk. Some people think that originally the acrostic was perfect but that mistakes crept in over centuries of copying. However, it is unlikely that a simple acrostic pattern would be messed up.

There are many indications, in fact, that all these anomalies are purposeful and that our text is original word for word. The three letters with only one primary verse each are not in random placement but are the fourth letter, ד, the middle letter, כ (since there is no ו verse this is the exact middle), and the fourth letter from the end, ק.

If we take these verses as section breaks then the psalm can be broken into symmetrical parts. The first three letters א, ב, and ג correspond to the last three, ר, ש, and ת. The anomalous breaking verse ד parallels the anomalous ק. And the letters between ד and ק are split in half by כ leaving six letters on each side. We thus find a chiasmic structure based on the number of acrostic letters in each section: 3-1-6-1-6-1-3.

A – אבג	(two verses per letter)
B – ד	(one verse)
C – הוזחטי	(two verses per letter)
D – כ	(one verse)
C' – למנספצ	(two verses per letter)
B' – ק	(one verse)
A' – רשת	(two verses per letter)

Analyzing word counts reveals another layer of the chiasm. The first and third single verse letters, ד and ק, have the same number of words. In other words, B and B' of the chiasmus contain 11 words each. This prompts us to analyze whether we also find equivalences in word counts of other parallel sections. Section A contains 42 words (excluding the heading) while A' contains 41 words. While these are not exactly equal they still create a clear balance. C contains 88 words. C' contains 94 words; but, if we omit the anomalous וverse, so that C and C' both contain 6 primary and attached verses, the total number of words in C' becomes 88 words as well.

- A – 42 words for 3 letters
B – 11 words for 1 letter
C – 88 words for 6 letters
D – 10 words for 1 letter
C' – 88 words for 6 letters
B' – 11 words for 1 letter
A' – 41 words for 3 letters

[illegible]

The first words of all primary verses are highlighted in yellow and the first words of all secondary verses are highlighted in gray. V 29 is blocked off because it is not counted. Verses boxed in red mark section breaks because they have no attached verses thus breaking the primary-attached pattern.

L16 - Structure of Mizmor 37 - Summary Chart.doc

The fact that the word counts line up so well without the γ verse indicates that this verse is simply out of place. Further proof that the six words of the γ verse should be excluded from the word count of C' comes with the realization that the number 88 appears again when counting the words of the primary and attached verses of C and C' separately. The word counts of the primary verses of C (8-8-6-11-6-7) adds up to 46. The word counts of the primary verses of C' (7-6-11-6-7-5) adds up to 42. Together, all of the primary verses in C and C' contain 88 words. Similarly, as it must work out, the word

counts of the attached verses of C (8+7+8+5+7+7 = 42) and C' (6+8+6+13+6+7 = 46) also add up to 88. This symmetrical structure shows that the single verse letters are carefully and deliberately placed. We now wonder what happened to the ν verse. What is the significance of the letter ν ? This is even more pressing because the letter ν occurs exactly seventy times in this Mizmor, which is the numerical value of that letter. What are the chances that the letter ν which is missing in the acrostic should appear exactly seventy times? Now that we know this is all intentional and part of an intricate design, we ask what does it all mean?

We notice that that ν 29 which should have begun with the letter ν does not; instead we find the word צדיקים. If we formulate this as a logical equation “not ν = צדיק” then perhaps we can derive from its negation that “ ν = רשע.” In other words, in the spot where ν =רשע is missing we find righteousness. Keeping in mind that word counts are very significant in this psalm, we further notice that the word רשע appears fourteen times – a multiple of seven. Seven and the letter ν seem to represent evil.

The picture comes together by understanding ν 10 as a self-reflective statement about the text of this psalm itself. On its surface this verse is part of the wisdom narrative: “soon, the wicked will be no more.” But on a deeper level, it provides an instruction as to how to read the continuation of the psalm. “And in a little while there will be no wicked person, you will analyze (והתבוננת) his place (מקומו) but he will not be there (ואיננו).” Anyone who has reviewed this acrostic, looked for the ν verse, analyzed where it belongs and noticed that it is missing will immediately sympathize with ν 10. ν is the place where we expect to find evil but the ν verse is missing.

The prominence of ν and seven throughout the psalm reflects the current, but temporary, state of affairs when the wicked abound – ν מון רשעים רבים. But God knows, and the prophet promises that soon enough they will perish. Not only won't they thrive, but even if you look for them (והתבוננת) where they live and where you would expect to find them (מקומו), they won't be there (ואיננו). The missing ν verse represents the future reality, which includes no safe haven for evil.

Vv 35 and 36, which occur a little after the ν verse, turn from current to retrospective views:

³⁵I saw a wicked man, powerful, well-rooted like a robust native tree.

³⁶Suddenly he vanished and was gone; I sought him, but he was not to be found.

Notice how the word ν ע, backwards or forwards is embedded within almost every word of ν 35, not to mention the word רשע itself: ν ראיתי רשע עריץ ומתערה כאזרה ν ענן. The wording of this verse poetically echoes its meaning. The letters representing evil – ν , ש, and especially ν - are indeed well-rooted within this verse. If we substitute ν for רשע, we can understand these verses too as self-reflective statements about the entire psalm: “I found ν everywhere deeply entrenched in every word and in the very structure of the Psalm. Then I passed by the ν verse and it was no more – I sought it and it was not to be found.” Now that the psalmist has seen the wicked disappear, he can testify that he remembers how numerous they once were. The wicked have been replaced by the צדיקים who will inherit the earth and dwell on it forever (ν 29).

We thus see how the form of the acrostic, because of its anomalies, serves to reinforce the main message in the content of the words. For more interesting aspects of this Mizmor see Ronal Benun, “Evil and the Disruption of Order: The Acrostics of Book One,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 6:5 (2006).