

this
HOLY
ALPHABET

Lyric Poems
Adapted from
Psalm 119



MARGARET B. INGRAHAM

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Psalm 119

Foreword by
Rabbi Micah Greenstein

Preface by
Phyllis Tickle



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This Holy Alphabet: Lyric Poems Adapted from Psalm 119

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 For Meg and Chase

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The power of this “holy Hebrew alphabet” is hard to fully appreciate in English. In the ninth-century Jewish text known as *Sefer Yetzirah*, “The Book of Creation,” which focuses on the origin of the universe, it is written, “With [the] twenty-two letters [of the Hebrew alphabet], God engraved, carved out, weighed, changed, combined and formed out of them all existing forms in the universe, and all forms that may in the future be called into existence.” In other words, God created the world by means of the twenty-two Hebrew letters.

Just as it is nearly impossible to grasp all the nuances of Albert Camus’ French writings or Verdi’s Italian lyrics in English, the same may be said in reading the Hebrew Bible in general, and Psalms in particular. Rather than focusing on the inner working of the letters, Margaret B. Ingraham renders Psalm 119 in a new idiom by letting the themes of the verses do their own talking.

Psalm 119, along with psalms such as 25, 34, and 111, is an acrostic in which each verse or section begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In Jewish tradition, it is customary to read a specific selection from this and other psalms when a person is gravely ill. In one of the magical applications of Psalm 119, verses are selected that spell out the letters of the name of the ill person, together with verses that start with the letters of the expression "Kera Satan" (root out Satan).

Psalm 119 is also used at life's supremely special moments. For instance, when a child enters the covenant of the Jewish people and is given his or her Hebrew name, it is customary to create an acrostic using the letters of the child's name and the matching alphabetical verses of the psalm itself.

Larger themes also emerge from this holy alphabet—including the repeated teaching of Torah as an eternal expression of God's love for us. The Torah is viewed as a vehicle by which we can find our way to this loving God (see verses 97, 113, 127, 163).

Perhaps what is most distinctive about the Psalms is that instead of God talking to the people, the Psalms comprise the only book of the Hebrew Bible wherein the people cry out to God. We hear that not only in times of joy and love, but in enduring suffering (v. 71) and in viewing our misfortunes as teachable moments (v. 67).

I applaud Margaret B. Ingraham's adaptation of Psalm 119 and hope it inspires all readers to probe the deeper meaning and mystery of the twenty-two holy letters with which God created the world.

—Rabbi Micah D. Greenstein

Preface

With the very simple act of opening this book, you and I have already begun to engage one of the world's most often used and devoutly revered pieces of sacred literature. That fact alone calls for far more of a preface than could ever be written by any human hand, while at the same time it makes any prefatory remarks at all seem superfluous, if not downright suspect. Together, those two statements constitute a brace of facts that I assure you I am very aware of at this particular moment.

The Hebrew Psalter is known to every Christian just as surely as it is to every Jew, albeit in differing, or at least variant, applications and circumstances. The same is true as well for adherents of the other of the Abrahamic faiths; for the Prophet taught that the Psalms were revealed to David in the way that Torah was revealed to Moses and must, therefore, be eternally honored and revered.

For its part, the Church catholic has, from its very beginning, employed the Psalms in all forms of corporate worship and, most particularly, in the keeping of the daily offices or hours of prayer. Calvin likewise taught the Reformation Church that the Psalter was the only acceptable hymn book, and in essence, Anglicanism fashioned its integral and unsurpassed *Book of Common Prayer* around it. Of the whole of the Psalter, however, no single poem/hymn is so treasured or so often employed as is Psalm 119.

As Rabbi Greenstein makes clear in his superb Foreword to this volume, Judaism by tradition has always turned to the 119th for ritualistic, as well as devotional, uses. Christianity has done so as well, turning to 119 for not only worship but also the study of the nuances of theology. At the time of his martyrdom, for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was working on, and left behind as unfinished, a study of Christian ethics based on his exegesis of 119. And Christians and Jews alike have always agreed in regarding the 119th as the most individualistic or personal of the Psalter's poem/hymns. For both faiths, it is, in its entirety, the record of a love affair with God ... a personal, as well as an aggregate, love affair.

Doctrinally—and especially for Christians and most especially for Protestant Christians—the 119th has also been the piece of Hebrew scripture that dealt most ferociously and grandly and intimately with the Word of God. The one hundred and seventy-six verses that compose Psalm 119 make

it the longest psalm in the Psalter, but over and over again, those hundred and seventy-six dance with, praise, embrace, celebrate the Word as the law of God, the ordinances of God, the decrees of God, the path of God, the testimonies and precepts of God, the judgments of God, the statutes of God. Together, all those human words for the Word became a litany that rang, and still rings, with clarity and elegance in Christian ears.

Psalm 119 is an acrostic poem. That is, it is composed of twenty-two sections, each one of which commences with a letter, in sequence, of the Hebrew alphabet. There are nine such poems—such acrostic hymns—in the Psalter. By the very intricacy of their construction, those nine inevitably rivet the attention and command the respect of those of us, Christian or Jew or Muslim, who sink ourselves, our souls, and our spirits into their art. None of the nine, however, gives itself over with such perfection of phrase and image as does Psalm 119. Poetry's hold on our human imagination has long fascinated philosophers and wisdom teachers alike; for poetry is that singular form of art in which the tool of verbal thought is inextricably entwined with the corpus of nonverbal thought that is conveyed only in music. All too often, as most of us so painfully know, when poetry—even imagistically rich and finely honed poetry—is translated out of the language of its composition and into some other tongue, its music dies or, at best, becomes only a suggestion of its true or

original self. Because of the stature of Psalm 119, the loss of its poetry in English translation has been most especially felt and regretted over the years.

There is no way to lift a suite of poetry from Hebrew to English and have equivalency of music. Margaret B. Ingraham seems to know that as completely and experientially as does any poet working in English today. But years of living with, and being tutored by, Psalm 119 in its Hebrew original also seem to have taught her how to achieve, if not an equivalency of exactitude, then at least an equivalency of similitude or effect. Using the tools of English poetry that are her stock in trade, she has created a Psalm 119 that is identical to its Hebrew forebear in thrust, fervor, and images; but she has mounted those things in a setting of English poetry. The result sometimes is stunning:

Pull from Your pouch of justice
The lot of grace for me,
Mercy as right judgment
For my iniquity.

Sometimes the underlying concepts are so familiar that Ingraham's gift is that of giving them back to us washed clean of their very familiarity:

In Your word is my delight;
Hidden within my heart as treasures.
All Your promises bring me light ...

Sometimes the wording itself is wrenching enough so even the artifice of translation disappears into visceral experience:

Once my soul had dropped from grief;
You, O Lord, revived me.

Whatever the result may be within the individual souls, spirits, and devotion of each of us who enters here, however, one certain and more public result will be that of gratitude. As contemporary, English-speaking Christians, we have been blessed by the coming of this book, and any one of us who ponders here for a while will know it.

—Phyllis Tickle

Introduction

This is a small book that contains only twenty-two poems, or perhaps just a single poem of twenty-two sections. It can be read as either or as both. Like the text from which it is taken, it is designed to speak for itself. My hope is that it will. That said, providing some sense of context may be helpful.

This volume is a cycle of lyric poems that are *adaptations*, not translations, of Psalm 119. I am not sure how to explain the distinction between those two things precisely but I know that it is a significant one. If readers are expecting a new translation of a familiar work, they will not find it here. These poems are not translations but are based on translations—my own original translations from the Hebrew text of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS), which is regarded by both Jewish and Christian scholars as the definitive edition of the Hebrew Bible based on the masoretic texts.

I originally turned to that text for clarification when I found a verse of the psalm in a popular English translation perplexing. In other words, I did not approach the psalm with a well devised plan to write this book but as a part of my daily devotion and study. As I worked through the Hebrew, the masterful poetry of the psalm engaged me in a manner I have not experienced before, and it opened up my vision to conceive the project that became *This Holy Alphabet*.

Throughout the centuries poets writing in English have been drawn, as I was, to the psalms, and translations—fine translations in the ever-changing styles and vernaculars of our language over the decades—abound. To my knowledge, adaptations like this one are less common and no other has yet appeared in this new century.

Once I had envisioned the project, the method of completing it was clear. Only in going back to that original text, I believed, could I understand the subtleties of the Hebrew language and the imagistic and lyrical and rhetorical richness and complexities of this magnificent poem.

That is a fact that deserves reiteration. While I am unequivocal in my personal belief that the BHS is "Holy Writ in the Holy Tongue," as my Hebrew instructor was fond of reminding his students, the psalms are great literature as well—arguably the finest poetry ever written in any language, in any century, in any culture, and in any faith or secular tradition.

While Psalm 119 is clearly part of the same tradition as the other 149 poems in the Psalter, and while it shares a

poetic voice with numerous ones of them—particularly those known to have been written by or attributed or dedicated to King David—this particular psalm stands out from all the others for a number of reasons. It is the longest of all the psalms and, in fact, is the longest chapter in both the Hebrew and Christian Bible.

Psalm 119 is also one of a small group of intricate acrostic poems from the book of Psalms. Within that group, it is the most elaborate and complex of them all. My purpose here is not to give a scholarly explanation of those complexities—or what C.S. Lewis more appropriately termed the “embroidery” of the poem. But one can understand neither the intention of the author who brilliantly and painstakingly wrote the psalm, nor its significance to Jewish worship and instruction throughout the millennia, nor even the heart of this small book, without some awareness of its form.

Like every acrostic psalm, this one relies on the twenty-two letters (consonants) of the Hebrew alphabet to give it structure. Each of the twenty-two sections of Psalm 119 begins with the successive consonant of the alphabet. So, the first letter of the first word of the first section is *aleph*, the equivalent of the English letter *a*; the second is *bet*, *b*; and so on. That kind of writing requires considerable rigor, as I found out while first attempting to preserve a portion of the acrostic nature of the poems as I adapted them.

But Psalm 119 also goes well beyond this simple acrostic pattern in its intricacy. In fact, in this psalm the first letter

of the first word of every line (or, what in Hebrew poetry would be called a *stich*) in each section begins with the same letter. That is, the *aleph* section has eight lines, and each one of those lines begins with *aleph*. The same is true for the *bet* section, and the pattern is repeated through to the end of the psalm, the 176th *stich*.

In addition, all but two of the 176 *stiches*, which English has generally transformed into verses by breaking the line somewhere near the middle, contain one of nine Hebrew words. These words are translated as follows: *law (Torah/teaching/instruction)*; *testimony*; *way*; *precept*; *statute*; *commandment*; *judgment*; *saying/promise*; and *word*.

Throughout generations, for Jews and Christians alike, Psalm 119 has been regarded as a sort of instruction manual, containing all that one needed to know to live a holy and righteous life. Commentaries abound, from century after century until the present day, and their number and variety give testimony to the fact that those who have taken the time to study and meditate on Psalm 119 have found wisdom and blessing in it.

For some, however, the psalm's tightly structured pattern apparently seems more like an artifice than the psalmist's honest attempt to faithfully reflect what he sees of the orderliness and the fine and intricate design of what the Maker has done. The purpose of the repetition of words as more than simply a poetic device, but as both an effective method of instruction and a means of adoration and praise

seems to have been lost on some modern readers. Many find it tedious; others suppose the psalmist is simply saying the same thing over and over again. Or they assume that, except for the need to complete the puzzle, some of the repetitions could easily be eliminated. I do not hold that view, although I certainly understand it. Part of my purpose here is to dispel those notions, not by argument or scholarship (neither of which I am qualified to claim or present), but by leading readers into the core of each section and letting the text itself, newly arranged and freshly stated, do its own talking.

That is why—or one of the principal reasons why—adaptation rather than strict translation was the approach I selected. The other reason was a far more practical one. I simply could not maintain even a limited acrostic pattern without rearranging or reordering some of the *stiches* or “verses” of each section. Sometimes the transition from Hebrew to English letter was easy, and the line sequences could be easily maintained. Other times it was more difficult, and in some cases required an invention on my part. *Tsade*, for example, for which there is no English counterpart, became *z*, the closest that I could come to single letter replication and remain faithful to the text.

While all of the poems in *This Holy Alphabet* rely on that kind of reordering and invention, let me stress that in every case I strove fastidiously to maintain the integrity of the text. That is why my process began first with transliteration from the Hebrew, then translation, and after that, adaptation. A

good deal of my adaptation is technical and structural in nature and stems largely from the fact that ancient Hebrew poetry and modern English poetry have distinctly different characteristics and do not use the same forms. Hebrew poetry, for example, does not utilize rhyme or meter in the same sense that we who are accustomed to modern English verse understand. But most Hebrew poetry is inherently lyrical and achieves what is *like rhyme* by virtue of the fact that the Hebrew language has particular word endings (suffixes) that are repeated throughout. And it has music, if not a meter. It does not, however, utilize verses, per se.

What Hebrew poetry does share with English, and indeed all poetry in every tongue, is rich imagery and allusion. As I worked through these poems, I mined those images and references and attempted to present them in a fresh, though accurate, way—in a way that I hoped would engage a contemporary reader and open these ancient words and mysteries anew.

As much as the psalms are poems and prayers, they are also songs. Even today we find them in the synagogue and in liturgical Christian churches sung aloud or chanted as anthems or canticles, either by choirs and congregations or a single cantor. To demonstrate how this tradition might be practiced with these poetic sections, I have essentially set two of them to music by conforming them to a metrical pattern that fits familiar tunes found in various Christian hymnals. And I have referenced these tunes in the notes to the text.

Other sections may lend themselves to song and chant as well; in fact, by creating refrains I have structured some of the poems with the hope that they may find tunes in the future.

That said, it is not my place or my purpose to suggest to readers how this volume or its contents can best be used. But it is my desire that whenever and wherever and however it is read, it will evoke anew a sense of wonder and awe, in the power of language as building blocks not only of creation but also of praise, and of the holiness of God's alphabet, which to this day God uses to speak afresh to Jew and Christian alike.

Hallelujah!

Acknowledgments

This book would never have been conceived if my parents had not raised me in the Christian faith, and specifically in a liturgical church, where the psalms were a regular component of corporate worship as well as of private devotion, and if my Jewish friends had not invited me at an early age into their houses of worship. There I experienced firsthand Jewish liturgical traditions—the reading of Torah in Hebrew and the cantors' songs—and there I began to understand in a personal way what “Judeo-Christian” meant and to discover the profound connection of that faith tradition to my own. It is impossible to recognize every individual or institution that contributed to this project. So I can simply express my gratitude to the many whose lives have surrounded and sustained mine and hope that they will accept my heartfelt thanks.

There are some, however, whose roles have been particularly significant. First is Phyllis Tickle, whose contribution reaches far beyond her Preface. I have been blessed to have Phyllis as a mentor, teacher, friend, editor, collaborator, and encourager for more than three decades. Without her support over the years, there would be no *This Holy Alphabet*. I am also extraordinarily grateful to Paraclete Press for undertaking the publication of this work and specifically to Jon Sweeney for both his expert editorial guidance and his patience. My special thanks are due to Rabbi Micah Greenstein, who brings the gift of the Jewish perspective and a personal understanding of the great Hebrew wisdom literature to this volume. The Reverend Dr. William A. Weiler's love for the Holy Tongue and fine pedagogic skills opened the wonders of Hebrew to me. I am indebted to him, to the Virginia Theological Seminary for making his teaching and its facilities available to the laity, and to my fellow students for their mutual encouragement and perseverance in the study of a difficult language. Finally, I want to express my appreciation to the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts for providing the creative sanctuary where this book could come into being.



this

HOLY

ALPHABET

Psalm
119:1-8



ALEPH

Ah, happiness! Ah, truly blessed
are those who walk
inside the law of God.

Lord, may my heart be firm
to guard my every word,
to turn my eyes from wrong.
Do not forsake me.

Ah, happiness! Ah, truly blessed
are those who hold
Your precepts in their hearts.

Lord, may my soul be strong
to turn at Your command,
be guided by Your hand.
Do not forsake me.

אֲשֶׁר־תְּמִיַּם

Ah, happiness! Ah, truly blessed
are those who walk
inside the law of God.

Lord, may my voice be free
to cast my praise on Thee,
to toss my shame away.
Do not forsake me.

Ah, happiness! Ah, truly blessed
are those who hold
Your precepts in their hearts.

Lord, may my heart be firm,
and may my soul be strong,
and may my voice be free.
Do not forsake me.

Ah, happiness! Ah, truly blessed
are those You hold
upright in righteousness.

Psalm **ב** BET
119:9-16 *(may be sung to the tune of Grosser Gott¹)*

Blessed are You, O Lord of all;
With my heart I have sought to see You.
Blessed am I when I heed Your call,
Walk unswervingly by Your leading—
Follow on the path before
Which You lead me evermore.

I declare Your holy way;
Raise my voice to sing Your glory.
Ponder Your statutes night and day,
To claim the riches You stored up for me—
Follow on the path before
Which You lead me evermore.

¹ Melody from Katholisches Gesangbuch 1686, alt. Cantate, 1851.
Harmony, Charles Winfred Douglas (1867–1944), after Conrad Kocher (1786–1872).



In Your word is my delight,
Hidden within my heart as treasures.
All Your promises bring me light,
Keep me from vain sin and sorrow—
Follow on the path before
Which You lead me evermore.

Psalm ג GIMEL
119:17-24

Graciously, graciously
Deal with me graciously
Open my eyes to see
Surpassing wonders of Your word.

Long have I wandered off
Long has my soul been crushed
I am a stranger in the earth.

Graciously, graciously
Roll reproach far from me
Show me humility
Guarding Your law within my heart.

Long have I wandered off
Long has my soul been crushed
I am a stranger in the earth.



Gratefully, gratefully
Broken I come to Thee
Fall down on bended knee
Musing upon Your righteousness.

Long had I wandered off
Long had my soul been crushed
I was a stranger in the earth.

Graciously, graciously
With grace You dealt with me
Grateful I'll always be
Delighting in Your marvelous ways.

בַּעֲדוֹתֶיךָ
תְּבַיֵּשׁנִי :

Psalm **7** DALET
119:25-32

Dust of grief enshrouds my soul;
Now, O Lord, revive me.

All my wandering ways I've told;
Now, O Lord, revive me.

Cause me to discern Your ways,
Turn from falsehood and sing praise
Of Your marvelous works.

דְּבַקְתִּי
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי



Once my soul had dropped from grief;
You, O Lord, revived me.

By Your word, You raised me up;
You, O Lord, revived me.

So enlarge my heart this day.
I will choose the faithful way.
Show me Your favor.

אֲשֶׁר יִגְרָתִי

Psalm **ה** HEY
119:33-40 *(may be sung to the tune of Tallis' Canon)*

Help me, O Lord, Your law to see
that I may keep it endlessly.
Make me discern Your holy way;
preserve it in my heart today.

Cause me to walk by Your command,
along the path to take Your hand.
And turn my heart from unjust gain
and turn my eyes from all that's vain.



Give life to me in Your just way
and raise Your servant up today.
Utter Your word so I may hear.
Pass over the reproach I fear.

Behold, I long for what is good.
I long to follow as I should.
Revive my heart to set it right.
Show me, O Lord, my soul's delight.

כָּל-מִצְוֹתֶיךָ

Psalm ׀ VAV
119:41-48

Valiantly, Lord, I speak Your word,
give testimony to the world.
As I do, I'm not ashamed
because I trust what You have told.

You make me walk in a broad place
because I choose to keep Your law.
And bless me as I meditate
upon Your ways in humble awe.



Deliverance You give to me
by Your kindness mercifully.
Your lovingkindness meets me, Lord.
Salvation is Your gift to me.

Refrain:

I'll take delight in Your commandments,
which I have loved;
I'll raise my palms at Your commandments,
which I have loved.

Repeat Refrain.

עַד-מֵאִז
נִטִּיתִי.

Psalm ז ZAYIN
119:49-56

Zeal has overtaken me and my songs of praise flow forth
as I remember all that You have done.

Out of my poverty, Your quickening words have lifted me
and I have taken comfort in Your hope.

The proud have scorned me utterly while they forsake
Your law but I journey on holding fast Your truth.



Your eternal judgments, I have learned well, will ever stand
and in that way my heart has been consoled.

Recalling Your holy name, O Lord, as the evening comes
has drawn me with comfort into Your keep.

Speak Your word to me in my house of earthly sojourning
so I may remain faithful all my days.

אֶל-עֲדוֹתֶיךָ

Psalm ח CHET
119:57-64

Cords of guilt coiled round about me
Cannot keep me from Your ways.
Though these cords of guilt surround me
Yet I rise to sing Your praise.

You, Lord, are my territory,
You, the land my heart calls home.
You, the one who shows me favor,
You are my righteous judge alone.

Cords of guilt coiled round about me
Will not keep me from Your ways.
When these cords of guilt surround me
Still I rise to sing Your praise.

חֲשַׁבְתִּי דַרְכֶיךָ
וְאַשְׁיִבָה רַגְלִי,



I have made Your holy face sweet
Turning my feet toward Your commands,
You made me a true companion
To all who are Your faithful band.

Cords of guilt coiled round about me
Do not keep me from Your ways.
When these cords of guilt surround me
Then I rise to sing Your praise.

I have seen, O Lord, Your kindness
Spread throughout the earth this day.
Teach me, teach me, Lord, Your statutes
So I may hasten to obey.

When the cords of guilt surround me
Then I will turn to keep Your ways.
Cords of guilt are loosed from round me
As I rise to sing Your praise.

לְמַדְנִי
הָאֱמֻנָּה

Psalm ט TET
119:65-72

Teach me judgment that is good
and deal fairly with me by Your word
for I have believed in Your commands,
learned by the afflictions of Your hand
the truth that my heart should keep.



The godless have hearts of fat,
and smear all the righteous with their lies
but that, Lord, is not Your servant's way,
who preserves Your precepts and delights
in Your law more than in wealth.

בְּחֶקֶךָ --
אֲבוֹשׁ.

Psalm **י** YUD
119:73-80

Your hands, O Lord, have made me,
fashioned me firm.

Those who fear You see me
rejoice in Thee

For they know how I tarry
to wait Your word.

Make me discern
So I may learn
All You command.