

1

Counting Hebrew Letters, Words, and Verses in Jewish Tradition

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to give an account of the discovery I regard as one of the most important findings of our time in the field of biblical studies: the insight that the biblical writings are numerical compositions. The numerical aspects of the text of the Bible have remained almost completely unobserved until recently, when investigations into the design of the texts shed unexpected new light upon the way they were constructed. It appears that the biblical text was *composed* according to preconceived models and patterns shaped by certain numbers that regulate the amount of words, sentences, and verses.

Specific numbers were used to forge the structure of the text in its different component parts. Like musical compositions, which are artistically constructed and arranged with the help of rhythm and melody, so literary texts in biblical antiquity were composed and structurally organized with the help of certain numbers. In short, the art of writing practiced by the biblical writers seems to have involved compositional techniques inextricably bound up with counting.

By studying the numerical aspects of the texts, we can uncover and bring to light important facets of their structure that have been forgotten or have remained hidden. Using this as a key to unlock the secrets of the formation of the texts, we

are able to “decompose” them and to discover their precise organization. In biblical study, such an operation, is called *numerical structural analysis*, or *logotechnical analysis*, or *quantitative structural analysis*.¹

It stands to reason that the results of such an analysis have far-reaching consequences, not only for our view of the form and the history of the biblical texts, but also for their interpretation. As a matter of fact, form and content are closely inter-related, as we shall demonstrate in due course.

The study of the numerical aspects of the books of the Bible is still in an initial phase. At this point in time, sections of the Pentateuch, parts of the prophetic books, the book of Job, and some sections of the New Testament have been investigated; and the book of Deuteronomy and the book of Psalms have been subjected to a complete numerical structural analysis.² A systematic and comprehensive examination of the numerical aspects of biblical books, however, is yet to be carried out. What has been done so far must be regarded as random sample surveys. However, these investigations have produced sufficient evidence to show that the biblical writings are numerical compositions and that the numerical aspects of the texts simply cannot be ignored any longer.

Discoveries in this respect have opened up new avenues for scholarly research particularly in the books of the Bible. However, other writings should be included in the investigations and studied with regard to eventual numerical aspects, such as the Samaritan Pentateuch and other ancient manuscripts witnessing to the text of the Bible as well as the ancient translations. Also still to be addressed are the many historical problems regarding the use of numbers as a compositional device in biblical antiquity. At what time did such compositional techniques arise? To what extent were they employed and for what purpose? Are they limited to and specific for the canonical books of the Bible, or were they also used for the composition of other literature, such as the deuterocanonical and pseudepigraphical books and other contemporary and early post-biblical Jewish literature? Do

numerical compositional devices occur in non-Jewish literature? If so, what is specific about the books of the Bible and what are their characteristic numerical features?

Another question is how did it happen that the precise knowledge of the recently discovered numerical compositional techniques fell into oblivion, and how could the numerical aspects of the biblical books have remained hidden until their discovery in our time? The most plausible answer to this question is, in my opinion, that we are confronted with a rather esoteric compositional technique, a skill known only to insiders, the scribes. As a result of the continuous series of catastrophes suffered by the Jewish people, culminating in the annihilation of Jewish life in Palestine and resulting in the dispersion of the Jews and their persecution through the ages, the precise knowledge of this scribal secret fell into oblivion. What was handed down in Jewish tradition were vague reminiscences still reflected in the Kabbalah, more particularly in the gematria based on the principle that each letter of the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value. This esoteric Jewish tradition did not originate as late as the Middle Ages but goes back to early Judaism, as Gershom Scholem has argued, and has its roots squarely in the biblical texts, as Claus Schedl has shown.³

The main reason for writing this book at a stage in which scholarly numerical research is still in an initial phase, is that I want to make it clear from the outset that the study of the numerical aspects of the Bible is a serious scientific discipline. It has nothing to do with number mysticism, numerology or juggling with numbers. Neither does it aim at leading us back to kabbalistic speculations. Its only objective is to recover the literary structure of the biblical texts and to shed new light on the compositional techniques used by the writers.

The reactions elicited by the publication of my first discoveries and preliminary findings in this respect showed that readers are apt to associate the study of the numerical aspects of the Bible with the hazy world of mysticism and magic, suggesting that such research should not be taken seriously. I realized that

the pursuit of numerical studies ran the risk of being condemned beforehand as pseudo-science. On the one hand, biblical scholars, who were not interested in logotechnical research, used this as a pretext to shut their eyes to the findings and to subject such research to general ridicule. On the other hand, numerologists and number-jugglers tried to grab the results of serious numerical research and to use them for their own purposes to legitimize their pseudo-scientific practices. Moreover, fundamentalists, who believe in the mechanical divine inspiration of Scripture, claimed the discovery of the complicated numerical structures of the biblical writings as proof of the divine origin of the Bible, arguing that human beings are unable to produce such high-grade compositions.⁴

Therefore, what I envisage is to safeguard scholarly investigations into the numerical aspects of the Bible against unfounded imputations and to protect it from abuse. I intend to do so by making clear what numerical research is all about and to let the facts regarding the structural use of numbers in biblical times speak for themselves. The numerous examples I present as evidence to illustrate the extent of the use of numbers as a structuring device by the biblical writers can be checked and verified by any reader with a basic knowledge of Hebrew and Greek. It will become clear that numbers are basically pure, exact, and free of any inherent mysticism or magic. This does not rule out the fact that symbolic value could have been attached to numbers in biblical times, which unfortunately led to their use in early post-biblical mysticism and in medieval magical practices, as witnessed especially by the Kabbalah. However, such uses of numbers are definitely later phenomena, which must be regarded as secondary developments, aberrations clearly deviating from the use made of them in biblical antiquity.

The Function of Numbers in Antiquity

An examination of studies on the use of numbers in biblical times from the first half of the twentieth century, shows that these studies have themselves contributed much to the linking of numbers with mysticism and magic. A typical example is the frequently cited book by F. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie* (Berlin, 1925).⁵ The result was that the function of numbers in biblical times came to be associated primarily with number-symbolism, number-mysticism and magic—a most unfortunate and lamentable development. Countering this deplorable situation, the primary concern of the logotechnical analysis of the biblical writings is to study the use of numbers as a *purely technical device* in the art of writing to give structure to the text. It is an exact and rational approach to the text. Nonetheless, since numbers did have a symbolic value in antiquity, the investigation into the numerical aspects of the text inevitably involves the study of the symbolism of the numbers in question as well. Study of the pure technical function of numbers in the Bible has until now been grossly neglected; for scholars seem to have been interested in their symbolic function only and in their use in mysticism and magic.⁶

In order to study the pure technical function of numbers in biblical times, scholarly research requires us to distance ourselves from the traditional association of numbers with the hazy world of mysticism, magic and pseudo-science. This means that we have to concentrate on their two main functions: first, as a technique to count, calculate and structure—also with regard to the composition of texts—and second, as a means of adding depth to a text and to imbue it with symbolic significance. As everyone knows, numbers had a symbolic value in antiquity. Therefore they had a metaphorical and allegorical capacity to refer to something beyond the surface meaning.

In our modern, rationalistic First World culture, we seem to know numbers only in their arithmetical and mathematical functions, as a means to count, reckon and measure. Though

we are aware of the fact that numbers play an important role in composing music, the function of numbers in composing texts has fallen into oblivion. In addition to this, biblical scholars, being primarily schooled in arts and humanities, seem to feel ill at ease and out of their depth when it comes to numbers. This shows that though illiteracy has generally been conquered in our culture, mathematical illiteracy is still rife—even among academic scholars.⁷

Classical scholars and medieval specialists have long been acquainted with the use of numbers as a device to give structure to literary compositions. Substantial research has been carried out already regarding the structural function of symbolic numbers in classical and medieval texts, showing that numerical techniques were generally employed to organize literary compositions from antiquity until at least the eighteenth century. Numerical criticism is an accepted scholarly approach in text analysis.

Numerological criticism analyses literary structures of various kinds, ordered by numerical symmetries or expressing number symbolism. In poetry, numerological structure often forms a level of organization intermediate in scale and externality between metrical patterns, on the one hand, and structure as ordinarily understood, on the other. As such, it constitutes a huge subject—perhaps even larger than most medieval and Renaissance scholars have begun to realize. It is probably no exaggeration to say that most good literary works—indeed, most craftsmanlike works—were organized at this stratum from antiquity until at least the eighteenth century. Moreover, numerological criticism is potentially a more fruitful subject than large-scale prosody, since it has more bearing on meaning, thematic content, structure and other adjacent strata.⁸

To what extent the biblical writers employed numerical techniques to give structure to their texts has not yet been studied systematically. In this respect, biblical scholars are lagging far behind their colleagues in classical and medieval study. This is rather surprising, if not astounding, since there have always

been clear indications that biblical writers did not write their literary productions off the cuff, but composed them with care, using a variety of compositional principles.

The Counting of Letters, Words, and Verses In the Masoretic Tradition

As every student familiar with the text of the Hebrew Bible knows, the Masoretes and other copiers who were responsible for the handing down of the text of the Old Testament carefully *counted verses, words, and even letters* of the biblical books. Moreover, they painstakingly *sought, located, and marked the mathematical center* of the books, or groups of books. And, apart from their introduction of vowel signs to secure the correct pronunciation of the words that were originally written with consonants only, they brought about different kinds of spaces in the text to indicate how the text was organized in larger and smaller literary units. Finally they divided the text into reading units, *sederim* and *parashoth*, according to two systems, the Palestinian and the Babylonian, in view of the Scripture reading in the synagogue.

Below the text and in the margin they recorded “statistical” information regarding the occurrence of important or difficult words and phrases. Though deficient and incomplete, this information is nevertheless interesting because it attests to the importance attached by the Masoretes to the frequency in which words or phrases occur in a particular book. This and other information is found in scholarly printed editions of the text of the Hebrew Bible, such as the standard critical edition, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. The precise way in which these notes were written in the manuscript on which the printed editions are based, can be observed by anyone who examines Codex B 19^A, generally known as the *Leningrad Codex*. This manuscript, the oldest complete hand-written manuscript of the text of the Hebrew Bible (dating from 1008 or 1009 CE), which is housed in the Russian National Library in St. Peters-

burg (formerly Leningrad), is now available in a superb facsimile edition for any student of the Bible to examine.⁹

To give an example of the statistical information: at the end of the book of Genesis there is a note saying:

The sum of the verses of the book:
one-thousand-five-hundred-thirty-four
1534

And in Gen 27:40, the center of the book of Genesis is marked with a marginal note calling attention to the words that Isaac says to Jacob: **וְעַל-חַרְבֶּךָ תַחֲיֶה** “By your sword you will live.” On the level of verses this verse forms the mathematical center of the book, which has been marked at the appropriate place in the text.

The total number of verses, 1534, happens to be a multiple of the extremely important and particularly holy number 26 (59×26), representing the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton, the four letters of the divine name **יהוה** *YHWH*, which signifies his presence. The numerical value is based upon the position of the four letters in the Hebrew alphabet: (י=10) + (ה=5) + (ו=6) + (ה=5) = 26. We shall examine the significance and function of this number in detail below.

Contrary to what we would have expected, there is no statement of the number of words and letters in Genesis—neither is there such a statement in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers or Deuteronomy. However, a note to this effect appears at the end of Deuteronomy, i.e., at the end of the five books of the Torah:

Sum of the verses of the Torah: 5845
Sum of the words of the Torah: 79,856
Sum of the letters of the Torah: 400,945

What is significant about these numbers is that the first two are a multiple of 7 ($5845 = 7 \times 835$; $79,856 = 7 \times 11,408$) and the last one a multiple of 17 ($400,945 = 17 \times 23,585$). Next to 26, the number 17 is the other particularly important and holy number, which is also associated with the name *YHWH*

(see chapter 5, under the heading “The Symbolic Meaning of 17 and 26”).

Seeking and Locating the Center of the Text

As in the case of the book of Genesis and the masoretic note about the central verse of that book, such centers have been located in the other books of the Pentateuch as well. Thus the verse in the absolute middle of the book of Exodus is 22:27, in Leviticus it is 15:7, in Numbers 17:20 (in some translations 17:5) and in Deuteronomy 17:10. The statements concerning the mathematical center of the Torah on the level of verses, words and letters do not occur at the end of the Pentateuch but can be found at the relevant places in the margin.

- ▶ The center of the Torah on verse level is Lev 8:8, where it is said: “He (Moses) put the breastpiece on him (Aaron) and set the Urim and Thummim in it.”
- ▶ The center of the Torah on word level is in Lev 10:16, *darosh darash*, “He (Moses) made searching inquiry.”
- ▶ The center of the Torah on letter level is the *w* (= *o*) of the word גַּחֲוֹן (*gachon*), “belly,” in Lev 11:42, indicated by a dot above the *w* (*waw*) and by the fact that the *w* is written somewhat larger than the other letters.

Statements of the number of verses in a particular book and a note indicating its center can be found with regard to the other books of the Old Testament as well. Without going into any further details, we may draw the following conclusions on the basis of the fact that the people responsible for the transmission of the text of the Hebrew Bible meticulously counted and registered the verses, words, and letters of the texts and located their mathematical center. First, they committed themselves to counting, because they knew that counting had something to do with the biblical text. Second, the fact that they looked for and located the mathematical center of a book

or a group of books shows that for some reason they attached importance to knowing the location of the center of a text.

The Significance of Such Counting Activities

Scholars have always been aware of the fact that verses, words, and letters were counted and some results registered in the transmission process of the text of the Hebrew Bible. The traditional explanation biblical scholars have always given for this remarkable phenomenon was that counting was used as an instrument to control whether the text was copied correctly when new copies were made. However, when we weigh this answer critically, we have to admit that it does not offer a satisfactory explanation. By counting, only one thing can be checked, and that is the correctness of the total number of words in the text, no more than that. It simply cannot guarantee that the text was copied faultlessly. Even if the total number of words are correct, words could have been spelled incorrectly or transposed; a word could have been left out in one place, and at another point in the text a word could have been written double. The correctness of a new copy can only be controlled by a word-for-word check.

There must be a better and more satisfactory answer. Moreover, we have to look for an answer that can explain other phenomena as well, namely the painstaking locating and registering of the center of the text. As far as I am aware, scholars have always disregarded this curious phenomenon. They seem to have been at a loss to explain this aspect of the transmission process of the text. In any case, the two phenomena were never viewed together and explained in conjunction with each other.

What I propose is to explain both phenomena in light of the discovery that the biblical writings are numerical compositions and that the people responsible for the transmission of the text were, in some way or other, aware of this. As I shall demonstrate and substantiate with examples below, counting

was part and parcel of the art of writing in biblical antiquity as a device to give structure to the text.

One of the techniques commonly used was to organize the contents of a text in such a way that the most important element was situated in the mathematical center position. A good example is Psalm 23, which we shall study more closely later. There the three words in the phrase *ki 'atta 'immadi*, “for you are with me” (23:4), are situated in the mathematical center of the text, with 26 words preceding them and 26 after them. The structure of the text, formed according to an often used model, the balance-model: $26 + 3 + 26$, signifies that the statement about the *presence* of God is a central and crucial element in the psalm. Seeing that 26 represents the divine name YHWH, and therefore his presence, I interpret the message encoded in the structure of the Psalm as an affirmation of the poet’s conviction that God is all around him. This is perfectly in line with what is said of God in Ps 139:5, “You keep close guard behind me and before me.”

In light of this, we can imagine that the disturbance of the numerical organization of a text would mean the changing of its structure as a means of underscoring and enhancing its message. Therefore, in order to keep such purposeful and meaningful structures of the text intact, it was of paramount importance in the transmission process to preserve its numerical aspects. This was, in my opinion, the real reason behind the counting of the verses, words, and letters of the biblical texts and the seeking and locating of their mathematical center.

During the transmission of the text of the Hebrew Bible through the centuries, the precise knowledge of the numerical compositional techniques employed in the biblical writings fell into oblivion. Nevertheless the counting of verses, words, and letters and the locating of the center of texts continued. This happened no longer on the basis of intimate knowledge of their precise structure, but on the basis of vague reminiscence of the importance of its numerical aspects. It should be kept in mind that it concerns a specialized crafts-

manship. In the course of time, such expertise, known only to a limited number of people, could easily be lost sight of and forgotten, until its rediscovery in recent times.

Well-Known Numerical Compositions The Alphabetic Poems

Certain texts in the Old Testament that are unmistakable numerical compositions, the so-called alphabetic poems, have been a constant reminder that biblical texts were not written off the cuff, but were artistically composed according to premeditated patterns and models. In its most simple form, the alphabetic poem is structured on the basis of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, consisting of 22 lines, verses, or groups of verses. The first letter of the first word of each line represents a letter of the alphabet in succession in the traditional order, from the *'aleph* to the *taw*. Unfortunately in most modern translations this typical structure of the alphabetic acrostics is not shown. In the *King James Version*, however, the text of Psalm 119 is divided into groups of verses following the letters of the alphabet.

A good example of this type of poem is found in the twin psalms 111 and 112, which are closely connected in terms of form and content. Both have the heading *Hallelu-Yah*; both consist of 22 lines divided over 10 verses, in such a way that the first eight verses have two lines each while verses 9 and 10 have three lines each. Psalm 111 with its 72 words and Psalm 112 with its 77 words comprise together 149 words, but including the 4 words of their headings the total number of words comes to 153 (9×17). This is a very significant number, being the sum of the numbers 1–17, well-known from the 153 fish referred to in John 21:11, symbolically signifying all the nations gathered into the kingdom of God. Moreover, in accordance with the principle that the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet have numerical value, 153 is the numerical value of the Hebrew words **בני האלהים** “the children of God” (**ב** = 2)

$$+ (\aleph=50) + (\beth=10) + (\daleth=5) + (\kappa=1) + (\lambdabar=30) + (\mem=5) + (\nun=10) + (\samekh=40) = 153.^{10}$$

What is significant about Psalm 112 is that the total number of words (77) is a multiple of two structuring numbers, 11 and 7. Moreover, since verses in the Bible are divided into two halves by the verse-divider *'atnach*, the verses in this psalm are so divided that there are 44 (4×11) words before and 33 (3×11) after the divider, showing that 11 was intentionally used as a structuring number. In Psalm 111, there are 41 words before and 31 after the divider, bringing the total in the two poems to 85 (5 × 17) words before and 64 after the divider. Reading the two psalms in translation, one would never notice the strict alphabetic and numerical form of the text behind the natural flow of words. It is only when one consults the original Hebrew text that one can detect the alphabetic structure, and only when one counts and assesses the number of their words can one uncover their numerical structure.

The compositional technique employed in the alphabetic poem not only gives structure to the text, but also serves as a mnemonic device to facilitate the learning and recitation of the poem. The alphabetical structure was intended to have a symbolic function: to connote the totality of expressiveness by using all the letters of the alphabet to express what is said in the text. In terms of music, for instance: opening all the registers of the organ.

Other examples of the alphabetic poem are found in Psalm 37 and Prov 31:10–31. It appears in its most extensive form in Psalm 119, consisting of 176 one-line verses divided into 22 blocks of *eight* verses, each beginning with the same letter of the alphabet. This means that in addition to the normal 22 alphabetic verses the poet produced 22 times *seven* extra verses beginning with the same letter: $22 \times 7 = 154$. Since 7 is the number expressing fullness and abundance, as will be illustrated in the next two chapters, the purpose of using this number was obviously to enhance the already exuberant praise of the Torah in

the psalm symbolically, amplifying them to extreme fullness. So to speak, here all the registers of praise were opened *sevenfold*.

On the level of *verses*, the mathematical center of Psalm 119 with its 176 verses is between verse 88 and 89, dividing the psalm into 88 verses before and 88 verses after this center. Most significantly, a count of the *words* of the psalm (a total of 1063) brings to light that the mathematical center on word level is situated at the very same place. It is constituted by the three words at the end of verse 88, *we'eshmera 'edut pika*, “that I may follow the instruction of your mouth,” showing a balance-model (which we have already encountered in Psalm 23): $530 + 3 + 530$. This means that the mathematical center on *word* level corresponds with the mathematical center on *verse* level. That the two coincide bears witness to the compositional craftsmanship of the author of this psalm.

The Book of Lamentations as a Numerical Composition

Please visit my website for a more in-depth numerical structural analysis of Lamentations.

The number **154** (7×22), which we encountered above, the product of the number of fullness **7** and **22**, the number of letters in the alphabet (and incidentally 14×11 , the number of fulfillment), also occurs in the book of Lamentations, another example of a conspicuous numerical composition in the Old Testament. This fascinating booklet with its **154** Masoretic verses is structured consistently by the idea of the **22** letters of the alphabet. It comprises five chapters, with chapter 3 in the mathematical center—which, with its 66 verses, has strikingly three times the 22 verses of the surrounding four chapters.

In terms of poetic verselines, we get a different picture: chapters 1, 2, and 3, have **67** verselines each,¹¹ while chapter 4 has **44** and chapter 5 has **22**. Moreover, chapters 1 and 2 stand out as having only **22** (initial) alphabetic verselines each (with 45 non-alphabetic verselines). Chapter 3, on the other

hand, is made up of $3 \times 22 = 66$ *one*-line alphabetic verselines, in which every letter of the alphabet occurs three times as initial letter in each verse.

Chapters	Verses	Verselines	Words
1	22	67 (22 alphabetic, 45 not)	374 (17×22) <small>see note 11</small>
2	22	67 (idem)	381 <small>see note 11</small>
3	66	66 (22 sets of 3 alphabetic)	381
4	22	44 (22 alphabetic, 22 not)	259
5	22	22 (22 sets of 1 alphabetic)	145
Totals:	154 (7×22)	264 (12×22)	1540 (70×22)

What has been said above about the symbolic function of the structural numbers 7 and 22, applies here as well, but now with regard to the affliction of the people and the passionate expression of grief for them: the number **22** and its multiples signify that the registers of lament are opened *sevenfold*, on Masoretic verse level, *twelvefold* on verseline level, and *seventyfold* on word level.

Chapter 3 not only forms the mathematical center of the book on the level of chapters: 1–2 + **3** + 4–5, but also on the level of Masoretic verses: 44 + **66** + 44. Moreover, from the perspective of content, chapter 3 constitutes the turning point in the book. The *mathematical center* of this central chapter is to be found in 3:25–42, comprising *six* sets of three-line verses. Here the leading theme, already intimated in verses 19–24, is no longer lament, but hope, self-examination, and conversion based upon Yahweh’s mercy. This center can be delimited precisely. It starts most significantly with a threefold use of the key word *tob*, “good,” in verses 25, 26, and 27, and ends with a striking shift from third to second person, addressing Yahweh directly, in verse 42, as is also the case in the next section 3:43–45.

The Masoretes located the *mathematical center of the book* on the level of *verses* between verses 33 and 34—in the Leningrad Codex at the indentation at the beginning of verse 34. At this point, not only the 18 verses of 3:25–42 but also *chapter 3*, with

its 66 verses, and the *whole book*, with its **154** verses, are all divided into two equal halves:

$$\begin{aligned} 18 &= 9+9 \text{ verses, and } 66 = 33+33 \text{ verses in the center,} \\ &\text{and } 154 = 77+77 \text{ in the book.} \end{aligned}$$

With the 18 Masoretic verses of 3:25–42 at the *center* of both chapter 3 and the book as a whole, the entire text appears to have a typical *sevenfold* structure in a *menorah* pattern, of which I shall give many examples later:

1.	1:1–22	22 verses	}	68 (4x 17) Masoretic verses
2.	2:1–22	22 verses		
3.	3:1–24	24 verses		
4.	3:25–42			18 verses — mathematical center
5.	3:43–66	24 verses	}	68 (4x 17) Masoretic verses
6.	4:1–22	22 verses		
7.	5:1–22	22 verses		

The 18-verse center is flanked by *three* branches consisting of **68** (4×**17**) verses on each side, which clearly demonstrates once again the use of the holy number **17**.

An examination of the center itself on the level of *words* reveals that it is likewise structured by the number **17**. The 6-word verse **34** at the mathematical center is flanked by **51** (3×**17**) words on either side, and surrounded by **17** Masoretic verses (9 + 8):

3:25–33	51 words (3×17)	9 verses	}	17 verses.
3:34	6 words	1 verse		
3:35–42	51 words (3×17)	8 verses		

This structure can hardly be a matter of chance and must be reckoned with in interpreting the book. It means, in any case, that both centers, 3:25–42, and 3:34 should receive special attention. The leading theme of the central section is not lamentation and wailing but hope, self-examination, and conversion based upon Yahweh’s mercy. Note also that the “trampling underfoot of all the prisoners of the earth” (v. 34a) is the first thing Yahweh does not approve.

Like Psalm 23 and 119, the book of Lamentations is an example of the meticulously organized structure of biblical texts, of the important function of the numbers **17** and **26** as a structuring device, and of the significance of the mathematical center of a text. I will illustrate these three aspects later in more detail, but at this stage I would sound a note of warning. We should not expect that every text in the Bible has been structured with the help of the divine Name numbers, nor should we suppose to find a mathematical center in every text. A text can certainly lack such a center and need not be structured necessarily by divine Name numbers. Other numerical characteristics are possible.

Though what has been said above on the structure and content of the book of Lamentations must suffice,¹² I would call attention to another interesting feature in this book: the *acrostics* in chapter 5:1–4 and 19–22. The acrostic is a technique used to form a name, word, or phrase with the first letters of successive lines or verses of a text to “encode” a message in it. The alphabetic poems are in fact *alphabetic acrostics*.

In chapter 5, the author of Lamentations abandoned the principle of the *alphabetic* acrostic but retained the regular number of 22 verses.¹³ Instead of the alphabetic acrostic, he employed another type of acrostic, using, so far as we can see, not all but only some initial letters. Such an acrostic can be detected in 5:1–4 where the initial letters of the four verses, *z n y m*, spell the word *zonim*, “adulterers.” The word obviously refers to the unfaithfulness of the Israelites in their relationship with God (see also Hosea 4:15).

Significantly enough the total number of words in 5:1–4 is **26** (9 in vs. 1 and **17** in vss. 2–4). The numbers **17** and **26** appear to have been used intentionally as a device to “seal” the passage, giving it special emphasis and accentuating Yahweh’s *presence*.

Another acrostic appears in 5:19–22, where the initial letters of these four verses spell the word *aeloheka*, “your God.” This passage, consisting of 28 words—which does not seem to have a special symbolic significance—contains an urgent appeal to

God to mend and restore his relationship with his people. The acrostic clearly functions to stress the fact that Yahweh is still Israel's God, in spite of their apostasy. However, such acrostic devices were used on a small scale, since they have been detected in a limited number of instances only.¹⁴

Once again it should be stressed that such "coded messages" are very sparse in the Bible. In this respect, a stern warning against Bible freaks using the computer to detect supposed hidden predictions in the biblical text, is necessary and appropriate. See my remarks in chapter 7 under the heading "The Misuse of Numbers by Numerologists."

Conclusions That Could Have Been Drawn Long Ago

Evaluating the evidence adduced above, we may wonder why evidently numerical compositions such as the alphabetic acrostics have not been studied more carefully with regard to their numerical aspects, and why biblical scholars have turned a blind eye in general to the numerical aspects of the biblical text. Though there has always been a vague awareness among scholars that there is something significant about numbers in the Bible, the biblical writings in general have not been studied with regard to their numerical aspects.

That the Masoretes diligently *counted* verses, words, and letters—something we have known all along—should have made us appreciate such counting and should have opened our eyes to the significance of counting. The fact that the Masoretes attached great importance to seeking and locating the center of the biblical writings on the level of verses, words, and letters *by counting*, should have led us to realize that the mathematical center of texts has relevance to their structure. Moreover, in view of the fact that the biblical writers used the 22 letters of the alphabet to give structure to acrostic poems, an operation

that involved *counting* we should have drawn the conclusion long ago that numbers were used in the composition of texts and that *specific* numbers imbued these texts at the same time with symbolic meaning. However, it was only in recent times that biblical scholars began to appreciate the significance of numbers as a compositional principle to give structure to a text and imbue it with a specific symbolism. How I myself came to realize that counting was part and parcel of the art of writing in biblical antiquity forms the substance of the following chapters.

