TERMINOLOGICAL PATTERNS
AND THE FIRST WORD OF THE BIBLE:
‘(IN THE) BEGINNING’

Wilfried Warning

Summary

Close reading of the final text of the Pentateuch has brought to light three linguistic linkages based on the nouns ‘beginning’, ‘Omer’, and ‘end’. According to the text’s extant Endgestalt the two nouns ‘beginning’ and ‘Omer’ overlap in their respective seventh positions, and the two antonyms ‘beginning’ and ‘end’ in the seventh and seventh-from-last/twelfth positions. The conjecture has thus been corroborated that the text has been carefully composed by its ancient author.

In some recent studies scrutinising selected passages of the Hebrew Bible the existence of linguistic links has been uncovered. Evidently these so-called ‘terminological patterns’ are one of the structural devices by means of which the extant Endgestalt, i.e. final shape, of the Pentateuch has been crafted. As established in a previous essay these terminological patterns have been discovered by tabulating all the words used in a given self-contained literary unit, an entity which may consist of a brief passage, a chapter, or even a whole biblical book. By tabulating the vocabulary of a given passage, the distinct

1 W. Warning, Literary Artistry in Leviticus (BInS 35; Leiden: Brill, 1999).
distribution, relative frequency, and structural positioning of significant terms and/or phrases comes to light. In recent analyses of the book of Leviticus and several selected pericopes of the Pentateuch, it has been disclosed that in a variable length list the seventh and, in the case of a longer list, at times the twelfth position are emphasised by means of some special term or phrase. In the course of these studies the conjecture has been corroborated that each of the pericopes examined thus far has been carefully composed by its ancient author, ‘the term “author” being understood and used as referring to the person(s) responsible for the text before us, the person(s) who composed the literary units we call, for instance, “Genesis 17”, “the Joseph Story” or “Genesis”, literary entities which did not exist prior to their composition, whatever the prehistory of their individual parts may have been.’

As of the beginning of 2001, more than 150 terminological patterns have been disclosed in the Pentateuch, and in each of these structural outlines the stringing together of various texts turns out to be sensible and meaningful. It is exactly because of the plethora of these expressive linguistic links—most of them appear in individual narratives, several encompass one of the five books of the Pentateuch, and only a few extend from Genesis to Deuteronomy—that I have deliberately desisted from discussing the diverse arguments adduced in support of the hypothesis claiming literary disunity, arguments that

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3 W.G.E. Watson, Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques (JSOTSS 26; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 288, points out that the seventeen occurrences of the particle כל ‘all, every’ in Ps. 145 are ‘obviously related to the universalist theme of the poem’.
4 W. Warning, ‘Terminologische Verknüpfungen in der Urgeschichte’, ZAW (forthcoming), points to linguistic links based on the deliberate distribution of the two roots ‘good’ and ‘make’ in the creation story. In two significant statements, ‘God saw all that he had made, and it was very good’ (1:31) and ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’ (2:18; NIV), the two terms ‘good’ and ‘make’ coincide the seventh and twelfth times in Genesis respectively. Because of the double overlapping we might presume that the present text of the creation story in Gn. 1–2 is a carefully composed literary unit, whatever its oral and/or written prehistory may have been.
6 Preliminary research has brought to light over 80 terminological patterns in Esther, Isaiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Jonah, Micah, Haggai, and in the NT in each of the four Gospels and the book of Revelation.
seem to be primarily based on the assumption that we can somehow ‘reconstruct’ previous stages of the extant text.⁷

If we analyse the eighteen occurrences of the word ראשית ‘beginning; firstfruit, firstling’ it turns out that the author of the Penteateuchal Endgestalt has made use of the very first word of the Bible, in correlation with the two nouns עמר ‘Omer’ and אחרית ‘end’ in conceiving and composing a terminological pattern that encloses, as it were, almost the entire Pentateuch.

**The Noun ראשית**

Because of its seventh and seventh-from-last (= twelfth) positions the substantive ראשית ‘beginning’ seems to be part of a profound terminological pattern. In Leviticus 23:10, which reads ‘bring the first sheaf of your harvest to the priest’, its seventh occurrence overlaps with the seventh occurrence of the noun ע臲 ‘Omer (ancient dry measurement), sheaf’. In the seventh-from-last, i.e. twelfth occurrence, in Deuteronomy 11:12, the noun ‘beginning’ coincides with the seventh of its antonym אחרית ‘end’ (‘The eyes of the LORD your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to the end of the year’).

The semantic polyvalence of the noun ‘Omer’ has obviously been utilised by the ancient author because this is one of those cases that ‘Play on words exploits the polyvalence of meaning of one word … It is probable that many plays on words in the OT escape us; perhaps those which are more ingenious and allusive.’⁸ In view of the evident ‘numerological precision’ we cannot close our eyes to the fact that the pericopes juxtaposed in the table below present themselves as an artistically arranged literary entity. Although according to the prevailing scholarly understanding the respective passages derive from completely different eras, the author has managed to interlink them terminologically:

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Whatever the oral and/or written Vorlagen of the present Pentateuch may have been, the preceding table presents itself as a rather carefully composed ‘numerological entity’.

The Noun

As stated above, the seventh occurrence of the noun נְפִּירָם ‘Omer, sheaf’ coincides with the seventh of the substantive ‘beginning’. Whereas in Exodus 16, the story of the manna, the word נְפִּירָם on six occasions has the connotation of ‘Omer’, i.e. an ancient Israelite dry measurement, in its seventh occurrence in Leviticus 23:10 the noun takes on the meaning ‘sheaf’ for the first time in the Bible. The divine injunctions regarding the offering of the firstfruits emphasise that the Israelite worshipers were strictly forbidden to ‘eat any bread, or roasted or new grain, until the very day you bring this offering to your God’ (v. 14, NIV). Because in the literature of many ancient peoples...
the number ‘seven’ is loaded with the notion of fulfilment, completion, and finishing, we might correctly conclude that the author of this terminological pattern has been successful in making the form and the content coincide completely. The phrase ‘first sheaf’ which consists of two nouns both of which appear for the seventh time at this point, is found but once in the Hebrew Bible. Hence the theological significance of the ‘first sheaf’ in the Israelite cultus seems to be corroborated by the symbolism inherent in the number ‘seven’:

Ex. 16:16 נמר הלגללה מספר משתחוות
Ex. 16:18 נמר
Ex. 16:22 נמר בחרת ל智库 ל智库 שלים והיא陸ור
Ex. 16:32 נמל נמר מס掣ת לחרותות
Ex. 16:33 נמל שמל נמל
Ex. 16:36 נמל נמר משערת שונים אוה
Lv. 23:10 תמר ראשית קצירכם אל הכהן
Lv. 23:11 תמר להמר לעפי יד
Lv. 23:12 בחרת להמר את החרותות
Lv. 23:15 מימי柄ך את תמר להמר
Dt. 24:19 יעמוד נמר בלשה
Ex. 16:16 an omer according to ...
Ex. 16:18 they measured it with an omer
Ex. 16:22 on the sixth day ... two omers apiece
Ex. 16:32 a full omer of it ...
Ex. 16:33 put an omer of manna in it
Ex. 16:36 now an omer is the tenth part of an ephah
Lv. 23:10 bring the first sheaf of your harvest to ...
Lv. 23:11 he is to wave the sheaf before the LORD
Lv. 23:12 on the day you wave the sheaf
Lv. 23:15 from the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering
Dt. 24:19 and you forget a sheaf in the field

Exegetical inferences: the offering of the תמר ראשית—be it a bundle of stalks of barley or as Jewish tradition has it (Nu. 15:20; b. Menahot 66a, 68b) a cake made out of barley meal mixed with water—‘is important in itself and also it is important because it starts the counting for the next festival (cf. Ex. 23:19a; 34:26a’), namely the Feast of Weeks: ‘You are to count from the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, seven full weeks’ (Lv. 23:15). The structural uniqueness emphasises the divine command: Israel is permitted to enjoy the bounteous blessings of the new harvest only after having completed the offering of the first sheaf

with its accompanying sacrifices, in other words, the fullness of God’s
gifts to Israel is answered by them in offering first what belongs to the
Lord and only after having done so may they delight in his generous
gifts.

In the third and last terminological pattern to be analysed in this
study, the seventh positions of the two antonyms ‘beginning’ and
‘end’ evidently focus on the Lord’s providential care over the land
that he is about to give to his people Israel.

The Noun אסתר

Even a quick glance at the following table makes us realise that the
seventh of the total of ten occurrences of the noun אסתר ‘end,
posterity; remnant; last (days)’ coincides with the seventh-from-last
(= twelfth) of the substantive ‘beginning’ in Deuteronomy 11:12: ‘It
is a land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God
are continually on it from the beginning of the year to the end of the
year.’ On the other hand, in the following table the structuring
function of Numbers 24:20 in its relation to Deuteronomy 11:12
seems likewise to be of importance. A close-up look at the ten
occurrences of the word ‘end’ indicates that the antonyms ‘beginning’
and ‘end’ have syntactically been juxtaposed only twice, namely in
the fourth and fourth-from-last positions. Since it cannot be contested
that according to the present text the noun ‘end’ appears the seventh
time and the noun ‘beginning’ the seventh-from-last time in
Deuteronomy 11:20, we might presume this ‘numerological precision’
to be due to somebody’s deliberate literary design. Furthermore, in
comparison with the two preceding terminological patterns it is of
interest that in the present one several poetic sections have been
integrated: Jacob’s blessing his sons (Gn. 49), the Balaam oracles
(Nu. 24), prose sections from Deuteronomy 4, 8, and 31, and the song
of Moses (Dt. 32):

| Gn. 49:1 | את אשתו אתה אתכם אסתריה אסתריה הדמיום הדמיום הדמיום 
| Nu. 23:10 | אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה הדמיום הדמיום הדמיום הדמיום הדמיום 
| Nu. 24:14 | אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה 
| Nu. 24:20 | אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה 

| Dt. 4:30 | לארשיים נגלה נגלה דה אסתריה
| Dt. 8:16 | אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה
| Dt. 11:12 | אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה
| Dt. 31:29 | אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה
| Dt. 32:20 | אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה
| Dt. 32:29 | אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה אסתריה

The Noun אסתר
Exegetical inferences: first, probably few modern readers of the Pentateuch would want to attribute the overlapping of the antonyms ‘beginning’ and ‘end’ in Deuteronomy 11:12 to chance. Second, in looking at the fourth and fourth-from-last texts we should be aware of the thematic antithesis: whereas ‘Amalek was first among the nations, he will come to ruin in the end’, the Promised Land will continually be under the LORD’s care ‘from the beginning of the year to the end of the year’. Third, in contemplating the present and the first terminological pattern jointly, their theological implications are self-evident: the Almighty God, who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth, is the very same, the God of the chosen people, who promises Israel on the plains of Moab that his eyes will forever be on the land of Canaan, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. Once again ‘the what and the how’ clearly correspond and complement each other. Hence this astounding artistic arrangement deserves scholarly attention, not least because of its being replete with theological significance.

**Conclusion**

Close reading of the final text of the Pentateuch has brought to light three linguistic links based on the nouns ראשית ‘beginning’, מִדְרֶשֶׁה ‘Omer’, and אחרית ‘end’. Since according to the extant Endgestalt the two nouns ‘beginning’ and ‘Omer’ overlap in their respective seventh positions (Lv. 23:10), and the two antonyms ‘beginning’ and ‘end’ in the seventh (‘end’) and seventh-from-last/twelfth (‘beginning’) positions (Dt. 11:12), this fact should be seriously taken into consideration. Because of the congruence of literary form (numerological overlapping) and theological content (both the phrase ‘first sheaf’ and the statement that ‘the eyes of the LORD your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to the end of the year’

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appear but once in the Hebrew Bible) the pericopes juxtaposed in the preceding tables present themselves as a sensible and theologically expressive entity. With regard to the present situation in Pentateuchal studies, R.N. Whybray has aptly remarked that

as far as assured results are concerned we are no nearer to certainty than when critical study of the Pentateuch began. There is at the present time no consensus whatever about when, why, how, and through whom the Pentateuch reached its present form, and opinions about the dates of composition of its various parts differ by more than five hundred years.11

While reflecting on Whybray’s assessment of the current conditions in Pentateuchal studies, the reader should consider the evidence presented in the preceding pages. It is my firm conviction that although more than 150 terminological patterns have hitherto been disclosed in the Pentateuch, many more await their being revealed. Therefore, the Endgestalt, ‘the only fact available to us … in all its complexity’,12 should be more highly esteemed in Pentateuchal studies.

12 Whybray, *Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 27 (his emphasis).