

# METATHESIS

IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Wordplay as a Literary  
and Exegetical Device

ISAAC KALIMI

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IN THE HEBREW BIBLE



# M E T A T H E S I S

I N T H E H E B R E W B I B L E

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I S A A C K A L I M I

 HENDRICKSON  
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## **Metathesis in the Hebrew Bible: Wordplay as a Literary and Exegetical Device**

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*To the blessed memory of my beloved father,  
Rabbi Nisan Kalimi,  
איש חכם, תם וישר, ירא אלהים וסר מרע,  
יהי שמו וזכרו מבורך תמיד לעולם ועד.*



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# ABBREVIATIONS

## General

b.	Babylonian Talmud
ed(s).	editor(s) or edition(s)
ET	English translation
MS(S)	manuscript(s)
no(s).	number(s)
p.	page
y.	Jerusalem Talmud

## Journals, Reference Works, and Text Editions

<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BH</i>	<i>Biblia Hebraica</i> (ed. R. Kittel)
<i>BHS</i>	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>DSD</i>	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
<i>ESV</i>	The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (2007)
<i>HAR</i>	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>KJV</i>	The King James Version (1611)
<i>LXX</i>	Septuagint
<i>MT</i>	Masoretic Text
<i>NJPS</i>	Jewish Publication Society—Tanakh (1985)
<i>NKJV</i>	The New King James Version (1982)
<i>NRSV</i>	New Revised Standard Version (1989)

OLP  
ZAW

*Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica*  
*Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

## Biblical Books

Gen	Genesis	Nah	Nahum
Exod	Exodus	Hab	Habakkuk
Lev	Leviticus	Zeph	Zephaniah
Num	Numbers	Hag	Haggai
Deut	Deuteronomy	Zech	Zechariah
Josh	Joshua	Mal	Malachi
Judg	Judges	Ps	Psalms
1–2 Sam	1–2 Samuel	Prov	Proverbs
1–2 Kgs	1–2 Kings	Job	Job
Isa	Isaiah	Song	Song of Songs
Jer	Jeremiah	Ruth	Ruth
Ezek	Ezekiel	Lam	Lamentations
Hos	Hosea	Qoh	Qohelet (Ecclesiastes)
Joel	Joel	Esth	Esther
Amos	Amos	Dan	Daniel
Obad	Obadiah	Ezra	Ezra
Jon	Jonah	Neh	Nehemiah
Mic	Micah	1–2 Chr	1–2 Chronicles

## INTRODUCTION

### I. Definition of the Theme

The term “metathesis” is derived from Greek μετάθεσις, which means “change of position, transposition.”<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon is described with parallel terms in other European languages, such as Latin *transpositio*, French *métathèse*, and German *Metathese* (or *Umstellung*). The Hebrew term is שיכול אותיות.

As employed in this book, “metathesis” refers to the transposition, inversion, or reversal of *contiguous letters* within a single word in comparison to another word within a text-unit, which typically comprises a sentence or a couple of sentences.<sup>2</sup> This study focuses particularly on cases in the Hebrew biblical texts, but it also compares these with some instances of this phenomenon in later Hebrew literature, such as The Wisdom of Ben Sira and the rabbinic literature, while occasionally noting similar cases in other Semitic languages. Examples of this phenomenon in the biblical literature fall into three categories:

(1) *Linguistic* metathesis involves the *phonetic* reversal of letters—usually *unintentional*—that occurred during the historical development of the Hebrew language (below, Chapter Two).

(2) *Textual* metathesis involves the *accidental* inversion of letters due to errors made during the transmission of the biblical text by the hearing or writing of a word, that is, when a word was verbally transmitted, read, copied, or translated (below, Chapter Three).

(3) *Literary-stylistic* metathesis is a *deliberate* form of metathesis, incorporated into the text itself at the point of its composition or editing. This is an intentional use by an author or editor of two or more words within

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1. H. G. Liddell and R. Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon* (rev. H. Stuart Jones and R. McKenzie; with revised supplement; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1111–12, esp. 1111.

2. For clarification of this definition and what it includes and excludes, see below, §IV, “Methods.”

a text-unit that contain a similar or identical combination of letters but in inverted sequences. In other words, it is a literary-stylistic tool used, to various extents, by particular ancient Israelite writers. This category of literary-stylistic metathesis lies at the center of the current study (below, Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven). It is reflected in many biblical literary genres and is especially prominent in poetic and prophetic literature. It appears in earlier as well as later texts, and comparable cases are also found in Ben Sira and in various types of rabbinic literature.

## II. State of the Research

Biblical scholarship has concentrated almost exclusively on the first two categories of metathesis, which involve examples that arose *before* the existence of the text (what we call “linguistic” metathesis), or *after* the text was composed (what we call “textual” metathesis). Literary-stylistic metathesis, by contrast, was created *during* the composition of the text. Although this last category has been discussed in some articles on wordplay/pun/paronomasia in the Hebrew Bible, it has received comparatively little attention. Especially regarding biblical names, some literary metatheses have been noted by previous scholars, but very few metatheses connecting words other than names have been noticed. The commentaries on the passages in which they occur almost never mention or discuss them.

Further, even many studies of the poetic and narrative style of the Hebrew Bible do not refer to literary-stylistic metathesis,<sup>3</sup> and those that do rarely use the term “metathesis,”<sup>4</sup> nor do they carefully distinguish it

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3. For example, the following do not mention it at all: G. B. Gray, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry* (Library of Biblical Studies; New York: Ktav, 1915; repr. 1972); S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 70; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989); D. L. Peterson and K. H. Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); W. Bühlmann and K. Scherer, *Sprachliche Stilfiguren der Bibel: Von Assonanz bis Zahlenspruch, Ein Nachschlagewerk* (2nd ed.; Gießen: Brunnen, 1994); F. Polak, *Biblical Narrative: Aspects of Art and Design* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994) [Hebrew]; K. Seybold, *Poetik der prophetischen Literatur im Alten Testament* (Poetologische Studien zum Alten Testament 4; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2010).

4. The term “metathesis” is used by, e.g., E. L. Greenstein, “Wordplay, Hebrew,” in D. N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:968–71, esp. 969; L. J. de Regt, “Wordplay in the OT,” in K. D. Sakenfeld (ed.), *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 5:898–900, esp. 899.

from other, related phenomena. In fact, there has been no consistency in how this literary device is referred to, with scholars employing a wide range of terms, including “chiastic correspondence,”<sup>5</sup> “semantic-sonant chiasmus,”<sup>6</sup> “alliterative transposition,”<sup>7</sup> “consonantal order change,”<sup>8</sup> “chiastic sound pattern,”<sup>9</sup> “chiastic sound pairs,”<sup>10</sup> “anagramic paronomasia,” and “palindrome,”<sup>11</sup> or simply “paronomasia,”<sup>12</sup> “wordplay,”<sup>13</sup> or “alliteration.”<sup>14</sup> This diversity of definitions demonstrates the need for clear and consistent terminology, particularly since many of the above terms apply to a broader range of literary features than just metathesis.

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5. E. König, *Stilistik, Rhetorik, Poetik in Bezug auf die biblische Literatur* (Leipzig: Dietrich, 1900), 294–95.

6. See J. S. Kselman, “Semantic-Sonant Chiasmus in Biblical Poetry,” *Bib* 58 (1977): 219–23; W. G. E. Watson, “Further Examples of Semantic-Sonant Chiasmus,” *CBQ* 46 (1984): 31–33.

7. W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 26; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 240.

8. M. Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (trans. P. Hackett; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991), 90; cf. idem, *Midrashic Name Derivations in the Bible* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1987) [Hebrew].

9. See T. P. McCreesh, *Biblical Sound and Sense: Poetic Sound Patterns in Proverbs 10–29* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 128; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 32–33, 149–53.

10. See A. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (2nd ed.; Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 118–21.

11. S. B. Noegel, “Paronomasia,” in G. Khan (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 3:24–29, esp. 26; he uses both of the latter terms.

12. E.g., I. M. Casanowicz, “Paronomasia in the Old Testament,” *JBL* 12 (1893): 105–67, esp. 114; idem, *Paronomasia in the Old Testament* (Boston: Norwood, 1894); E. D. Reymond, “Wordplay in the Hebrew to Ben Sira,” in J.-S. Rey and J. Joosten (eds.), *The Texts and Versions of the Book of Ben Sira: Transmission and Interpretation* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 150; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 37–53, esp. 44.

13. For example, A. B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel: Textkritisches, Sprachliches und Sachliches* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908–1914), 1:132, and B. Jacobs, *Das Buch Genesis* (Berlin: Schocken, 1934; repr. Stuttgart: Calwer, 2000), 569, call the metathesis in Gen 27:36 “Wortspiel”; Kselman, “Semantic-Sonant Chiasmus in Biblical Poetry,” 220, calls it “word-play.”

14. For instance, G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (Word Biblical Commentary 2; Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 211, defines it imprecisely as “alliteration.”

At the same time, the widespread use of literary-stylistic metathesis across the full range of biblical genres has not been explored, much less given full-length discussion. For example, in his study of “paronomasia” in the Old Testament, Immanuel M. Casanowicz mentions metathesis, without using the term (“the consonants are transposed”), but gives only three examples (Isa 61:3; Ps 107:33; Job 36:15).<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, pairings of similar *sounding* words have been noted by Eduard König under the term “chiastic correspondence” (“chiastischer Korrespondenz”). However, König’s only examples that represent genuine metatheses are the three he takes from Casanowicz (Isa 61:3; Ps 107:33; Job 36:15), as well as Mic 1:11 and b. Baba Batra 16a; his other cases do not involve the inversion of letters within a word.<sup>16</sup>

John S. Kselman focuses on “semantic-sonant chiasmus,” in which a chiasm is combined with “assonance” (which he uses to refer to the repetition of similar-sounding words), but he does not distinguish cases in which letters are repeated in the same order from those in which the order is reversed (metathesis). Accordingly, only a few of his examples include metatheses, which he does not identify as such (Gen 27:36; Qoh 7:1; Ps 51:19 [ET 51:17]; 78:33; Prov 14:4).<sup>17</sup>

Wilfred G. E. Watson discusses “alliterative transpositions” among other forms of wordplay based on similar-sounding roots, including what we refer to as “literary metathesis.” However, like others, Watson does not

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15. See Casanowicz, “Paronomasia in the Old Testament,” 114, 135, 150, 153, nos. 125, 328, 360. On these examples, see below, Chapter Five, §II, nos. 50, 58, and 59, respectively.

16. König, *Stilistik, Rhetorik, Poetik*, 294–95; on these examples, see below, Chapter Four, §III nos. 35–36; Chapter Five, §II nos. 50, 58, and 59; Chapter Seven, §I, no. 3. The other examples he lists are אבטח and אפחד in Isa 12:2, מאס and משוש in Isa 8:6, and מרוח סרוחים in Amos 6:7, none of which inverts the same characters; he also discusses מה הבמה in Ezek 20:29, though this does not involve an inversion of letters at all.

17. See Kselman, “Semantic-Sonant Chiasmus in Biblical Poetry,” 219–23. On these examples, see below, Chapter Five, §I, no. 37, §II, no. 41, §III, nos. 220, 225, 268–269. His other examples, which do not contain metatheses, are Gen 7:11; 2 Sam 1:21; Ezek 22:2; Lam 3:22; Ps 37:6 (the inversion of letters between והציא [from יצ"א] and כצהרים involves a verbal prefix ה in the first word); 72:7; 147:15; Jer 2:7 (he notes ותבעה and ותבאו, which is not a metathesis according to our definition since it does not invert the *same* letters, but he overlooks ואביא and ותבאו, which will also not be considered a metathesis in this study, since the first א is not part of the root). See also Watson, “Further Examples of Semantic-Sonant Chiasmus,” 31–33, but the examples he discusses (Mic 4:6; Isa 51:11) contain no metatheses.

use the term or acknowledge its relation to any other forms of metathesis in the Hebrew Bible or any extrabiblical literature. Moreover, while some of his examples are compelling and are discussed below (e.g., Isa 9:10 [ET 9:11]; 40:4; Ps 5:10 [ET 5:9]; 83:3 [ET 83:2]; Job 36:15),<sup>18</sup> others are uncertain (e.g., Isa 38:10–12; Jer 4:12; Ps 133:1).<sup>19</sup>

In studies on biblical names, Andrzej Strus and Moshe Garsiel each note some examples that employ metathesis. Strus does not list these examples separately, and his usage of the term “metathesis” is quite broad, since he appears to consider inversions of vowels to be metatheses, even when the consonants remain in the same order, and he includes examples where the words stand far apart from each other.<sup>20</sup> Some examples that he identifies as metatheses do invert the consonants (Gen 24:60–66; 32:23–25 [ET 32:22–24]; 38:7), but many others do not (Gen 19:38; 26:22; 27:19; 35:18; 49:22; Num 11:4; 24:21–22; Deut 32:32). Meanwhile several texts that Strus only refers to as “paronomasia” or “similitudes” actually contain metatheses (e.g., Gen 15:1; 26:2–5, 24; Num 24:18; Deut 2:12; 33:5).<sup>21</sup> For instance, though he notes the link between קַיִן (“Cain”) and קַיִתִּי (“I

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18. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 240. On these examples, see below, Chapter Four, §II, no. 26, and Chapter Five, §I, no. 14, §II, no. 59, and §III, nos. 213, 228.

19. Watson (*Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 240) lists the pair קַפְדָּתִי – פְּקָדָתִי in Isa 38:10, 11, but the second term actually appears further away, in 38:12 (and not in 38:11, as he mistakenly cites it), so may not be intentionally linked to the first. Moreover, the second term may be a textual error (which would be classified in our second category of textual metathesis below, Chapter Three), and the metathesis is entirely missing from 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>, which reads סְפָרְתִי instead of קַפְדָּתִי in 38:12; see E. Ulrich, *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls: Transcriptions and Textual Variants* (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 134; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 404. Similarly, מְלֵא מְאֵלָה in Jer 4:12 may be the result of dittography, as מְאֵלָה is grammatically disruptive and is not represented in the LXX; see W. Rudolph, *Jeremia* (Handbuch zum Alten Testament 12; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1947), 28. Finally, the pairing of אַחִיִּים and יְחַד in Ps 133:1 includes the ך from the plural ending of אַחִיִּים, and חִי appears in the middle of the word, while יח appears at the beginning of יְחַד.

20. For example, A. Strus, *Nomen-Omen: La stylistique sonore des noms propres dans le Pentateuque* (Analecta Biblica 80; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1978), 99, refers to “a metathesis of vowels A, O – O, A” (“métathèse des voyelles A, O – O, A”) between the names פְּרָתָה (in Gen 49:22) and פְּרָעָה (e.g., Gen 50:4).

21. Strus, *Nomen-Omen*, 55–77, 91–101, 105, 111, 165–66, 221. On the examples in Gen 15:1; 24:60–66; 26:2–5, 24; 32:23–25; 38:7; Num 24:18; Deut 2:12; 33:5, see below, Chapter Four, §II, nos. 2, 7, 11, 12, 14, 16, 27.

have acquired”) in Gen 4:1, he does not mention that it is an example of metathesis,<sup>22</sup> but then he claims that קיני and קנר (with קין) in Num 24:21–22 form a “metathesis,” even though no consonants are inverted.<sup>23</sup>

For his part, Garsiel does emphasize a few examples of “consonantal order change between name and pun,” which he further describes as “a chiastic change (transposition) of two consonants,”<sup>24</sup> and “puns based upon a backwards reading,”<sup>25</sup> but he does not refer to these as “metatheses,” only addressing some cases involving names, and he does not discuss the phenomenon more widely.<sup>26</sup>

Thomas P. McCreesh’s study of sound patterns in Proverbs also includes some instances of “chiastic sound pattern[s]” (e.g., Prov 18:13), but he does not mention metathesis in his overall discussion of wordplay.<sup>27</sup>

In a discussion of “chiastic sound pairs,” Adele Berlin lists a few examples of what we classify as literary metathesis, but she offers no discussion of these examples and does not specifically mention the transposed letters. She also does not use the term “metathesis” or note its connection to other forms of the phenomenon in the Hebrew Bible or elsewhere. Instead, she mixes the examples together with cases of chiastic word order, which do not involve literary metathesis within the words.<sup>28</sup> It is also unclear whether she identifies these as metatheses, rather than just noting that the words sound similar, as illustrated by her treatment of **העקב** and **בקעה** in Isa 40:4, a verse that she cites in the work in question and discusses more fully elsewhere, without in either case explicitly noting the inversion of letters.<sup>29</sup>

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22. Strus, *Nomen-Omen*, 65; on Gen 4:1, see below, Chapter Four, §II, no. 5.

23. Strus, *Nomen-Omen*, 91. He identifies the metathesis in the vowels, but not only does this depend on the pointing, which is secondary, it is still not a direct inversion: “the similitude . . . [is] reinforced by the metathesis of the phonemes E...I-I...A” (“similitude . . . renforcé par la métathèse des phonèmes E...I-I...A”).

24. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 90.

25. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 91.

26. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 90–92. In particular, he discusses Gen 4:4; 6:8; 25:21–22; 38:7; Exod 31:2–3 (cf. also 35:30–31); 1 Kgs 14:10–11; 16:3–4; Isa 9:10 [ET 9:11]; 1 Chr 4:9–10. Each of these examples is discussed below, in Chapter Four, §II, nos. 1, 2, 3, 5 (note 16), 8, 25, 26, 28.

27. See McCreesh, *Biblical Sound and Sense*, 32–33, 149–53. On this example, see below, Chapter Five, §III, no. 246.

28. See Berlin, *Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, 118–21.

29. See A. Berlin, “Isaiah 40:4: Etymological and Poetic Considerations,” *HAR* 3 (1979): 1–6, and see below, Chapter Five, §I, no. 14.

The phenomenon of metathesis (but not always the term) is mentioned in some dictionary entries on “wordplay” in the Hebrew Bible, but none of these offers more than a handful of instances. Thus, for example, Edward L. Greenstein notes that “frequently the play on words involves a metathesis,” but gives only two examples, Gen 4:1 and Isa 61:3.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Lénart J. de Regt notes that “wordplay may consist in repeating consonants from one word in another word but in a different order, a technique known as metathesis,” noting the examples of Gen 27:19, 36; 32:23–25 [ET 32:22–24]; Ps 39:5–6 [ET 39:4–5]; and Isa 61:3.<sup>31</sup> Finally, in an article on “paronomasia,” Scott Noegel has a brief discussion of what he calls “anagramic paronomasia,” which includes literary metathesis (he refers to this as a type of “palindrome”) along with other wordplays involving the arrangement of letters in one or more words, but the only examples he notes are Job 6:6; 36:15; and Prov 30:1 (the last of which does not involve a metathesis according to our definition).<sup>32</sup>

Ben Sira’s frequent use of wordplay in various forms has been widely noted, and numerous examples of assonance, alliteration, rhyme, chiasm, and inclusio in this book are listed by Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella.<sup>33</sup> However, they do not specifically note the use of literary-stylistic metathesis, even when it occurs in the examples they list for other literary devices. Thus, none of the examples of metathesis discussed below in Chapter Six are noted in their comments on the specific verses, though Di Lella briefly notes one of them (Ben Sira 11:5; below, Chapter Six, §I, no. 6) in an article.<sup>34</sup> Eric D. Raymond does list some examples of “paronomasia” in Ben Sira, but of these the only genuine metatheses according

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30. Greenstein, “Wordplay, Hebrew,” 969. On these examples, see below, Chapter Four, §II, no. 5, and Chapter Five, §II, no. 49. Greenstein also summarizes various functions that wordplay (including metathesis) can serve in the Hebrew Bible (*ibid.*, 970–71).

31. De Regt, “Wordplay in the OT,” 899. On these examples, see below, Chapter Four, §II, no. 14, and Chapter Five, §II, nos. 41, 42, 50, 56.

32. Noegel, “Paronomasia,” 26; see below, Chapter Five, §II, no. 59, §III, no. 249. Though לֵאֵיִתְאֵל in Prov 30:1 inverts the letters, this occurs within a word rather than between two words, and involves a *mater lectionis*, so it does not fit our definition of metathesis.

33. P. W. Skehan and A. A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira: A New Translation and Notes, Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 39; New York: Doubleday, 1987), 63–74.

34. See A. A. Di Lella, “Sirach 10:19–11:6: Textual Criticism, Poetic Analysis and Exegesis,” in C. L. Meyers and M. O’Connor (eds.), *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 157–64, esp. 163.

to our definition are in Ben Sira 4:9 and 33:5 (see below, Chapter Six, §I, nos. 1 and 16).<sup>35</sup>

Regarding metathesis in the rabbinic literature, Shamir Yona names only a single example, from Exodus Rabbah 3:12 [should be 3:17], פרעה פנקה את ישראל לפי שהיה נשך . . . שנקרא נחש, “Pharaoh is called a *snake* . . . because he was in the habit of *biting* Israel.”<sup>36</sup> However, although phonetically the words נחש and נשך are similar, the inverted letters are different: ח/ך.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, he also notes three biblical examples, which are included below (Gen 6:8; 9:26–27; Job 36:15).<sup>38</sup>

In sum, at the present time there is no detailed study of the nature of literary-stylistic metathesis, nor of its relation to other forms of (non-literary) metathesis. Further, even those who recognize that letters are sometimes inverted as a literary device refer to the phenomenon by means of a wide range of terms, often without providing a clear definition or terminology or adequately distinguishing this phenomenon from other literary features. They also have not addressed the range of distinct forms, functions, meanings, and purposes that this literary method encompasses, nor have they supplied clear-cut examples from a variety of genres. Accordingly, the biblical commentaries also regularly overlook the phenomenon where it occurs, or at best they refer to it generically as “wordplay.”<sup>39</sup> In particular, though a number of examples of literary-stylistic metathesis involving biblical *names* have been discussed by scholars, the much more widespread use of this literary method to link *other* types of words is rarely acknowledged where it occurs and has never been studied in detail and comprehensively. Therefore, despite its frequent use in the Bible itself, and in later Jewish literature, the transposition of letters as an intentional

35. Reymond, “Wordplay in the Hebrew to Ben Sira,” 44. In total, he lists Ben Sira 4:9 (Ms A); 6:4 (Ms A); 11:4c–d (Ms A); 13:24 (Ms A); 13:25a (Ms A); 33:5a (Ms F); 37:18b (Ms B); 38:25a (Ms B); 43:6 (Ms Mas).

36. See S. Yona, “Rhetorical Features in Talmudic Literature,” *HUCA* 77 (2006): 67–101, esp. 89; the translation is from Yona.

37. For the same reason, the words ונשכו הנחש in Amos 5:19, and אצורה את הנחש ונשכו in 9:3, should not be considered to be metatheses.

38. On these examples, see below, Chapter Four, §II, no. 1, and Chapter Five, §II, nos. 40, 59.

39. An example of the latter is R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 70–71, who mentions the “word-play” between חדל and חלד in Ps 39:5–6 [ET 39:4–5], without discussing the phenomenon further; see also de Regt, “Wordplay in the OT,” 899. Other commentators emend the verse to eliminate the metathesis; see the discussion of this passage below, Chapter Five, §II, no. 56.

literary device, its contribution to the aesthetic features of the biblical text, and its importance as an exegetical and theological tool in a wide range of biblical passages have not yet received sufficient attention.

### III. Purpose and Importance

The purpose of this study is to define and investigate the use of literary-stylistic metathesis, which involves the deliberate transposition (or inversion) of contiguous letters among multiple words in the same context. That is, the goal is to collect cases where identical letters are inverted in two or more juxtaposed terms in the same text. The volume highlights the appearance of diverse forms of this phenomenon in various literary genres of the Hebrew Bible, within their broader contexts. It demonstrates that many different authors and editors of the biblical literature, in various times and places, used metathesis as a compositional device, not only to achieve a literary, aesthetic, or rhetorical effect, but also to make a theological or exegetical point, to create a relationship between different words, or to emphasize a specific viewpoint. It should not be assumed that the examples discussed in the following chapters represent the *only* cases within the Hebrew Bible, but they provide a broad and representative sample of a widespread phenomenon, which can be seen to recur again and again across the Bible, and beyond.

Further, this study strives to demonstrate that the continuous usage of the literary method of metathesis is not limited only to the biblical literature, but that it also appears in postbiblical Jewish Hebrew compositions, such as in *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* and in the rabbinic literature. Or to put the point the other way around: the use of this literary tool by the Rabbis in the midrashic literature is not just a late, artificial approach to Scripture, but has deep roots in the biblical texts themselves, which continued to develop in Second Temple period writings, such as *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*.

This study includes discussion of a range of examples of all three types of metathesis noted above (linguistic, textual, and literary-stylistic) in both the Hebrew Bible and postbiblical Jewish literature, though the primary focus is on cases of literary-stylistic metathesis in the Bible, of which over 350 examples are listed and discussed.

The analysis of literary metathesis in a particular text—beyond pointing out the stylistic and aesthetic significance of this phenomenon—offers an important tool for the evaluation and better understanding of the author's or editor's writing, since the form of the text is part and parcel of

its content. To cite Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Content determines form; form never exists without content” (*Gehalt bring die Form mit; Form ist nie ohne Gehalt*).<sup>40</sup> Unawareness of this literary phenomenon and its relation to other forms of metathesis has caused scholars to overlook the emphases and connections such metatheses create between words, or it has led to unnecessary emendations of certain texts, aimed at eliminating the metatheses they contain, as if they were textual errors.

#### IV. Methods

As noted above, the term “literary-stylistic metathesis” will be used in this volume to refer to the deliberate inversion of letters between two or more words in the same context, incorporated into the text itself at the point of its composition or editing. To call this “deliberate” or “intentional” means that the metatheses are neither accidental nor due to pre-existing features of the language, but instead appear to have arisen due to the choices of an author or editor in composing or editing the text. That is, at the point of the text’s composition or editing, particular words were selected rather than others, and they were placed in particular forms and orders where others would have been possible, such that two or more terms related by metathesis appear together. Thus, the focus in this study is on the compositional methods of the text itself, and it attempts to understand the text as it is. The purpose is not to reconstruct the intentions of the author(s) or editor(s) per se. That is, it is irrelevant whether the author or editor employed this literary method consciously or only unconsciously, which cannot be known definitively. What matters is that it is part and parcel of the current form of the text.

This phenomenon can therefore be clearly distinguished from linguistic metatheses, which exist as part of the language itself and are not created by the text in question, as well as from textual metatheses, which arise due to mistakes made during the transmission or translation of the text. Additionally, literary-stylistic metathesis should be distinguished from other forms of “wordplay,” such as paronomasia (pun), alliteration, or assonance, with which it is often combined or confused. These other terms refer to the use of words with consonants or vowels in the *same* order in

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40. See J. von Goethe, “Paralipomena,” in E. Beutler (ed.), *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche* (Zürich: Artemis-Verlag, 1949), 5:539–619, esp. 541; see also I. Kalimi, *The Reshaping of Ancient Israelite History in Chronicles* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005; repr. 2012), 404–5.

the same context, whereas metathesis involves terms with consonants in inverted order. At the same time, metathesis should not be diluted to include any kind of “transposition,” “chiastic sound patterns,” or “chiastic sound pairs,” labels by which scholars have referred to a variety of rearrangements of letters that are not always directly contiguous or even in the same words. Indeed, not just any inversion of sounds or letters should be counted as deliberate metathesis. On the contrary, this study takes a selective approach, both regarding the form and meaning of the words themselves, as the following principles and examples will demonstrate.

First, a practical matter: In order to make these metatheses as visually obvious as possible, this book marks the inverted letters in distinct colors, while the parallel characters within the linked words are printed in bold. Characters that are not the same are not bold. In all cases, a literal English translation has also been included, with the linked terms italicized. Although the translation does not and cannot reproduce the metathesis in the Hebrew text, it gives the reader a sense of what the text is about.

For example, Hosea 13:2 reads: ועתה יוספו לחטא ויעשו להם מסכה מספם. “And now they sin more, and have made for themselves *molten images* from their *silver*.”<sup>41</sup> The letters מסכ are bold because they parallel מס, and the inverted letters כס and סכ are colored to highlight the metathesis, while ה and פם appear in regular script because they are neither parallel nor inverted. The מ is bold to stress the similarity between the two words, although it is not a part of the metathesis itself, and therefore it is not colored. Finally, the English equivalents of these Hebrew terms are italicized. Though what was two words (plus their prefixes and suffixes) in Hebrew must be rendered in five words in English, I will typically only italicize the main term, not the English equivalents for prepositions, pronouns, or helping verbs.

What, then, qualifies as an example of literary-stylistic metathesis? The following principles should be observed:

(1) To begin with the form of the words: Only cases where the inverted letters are identical and contiguous will be considered metatheses. For example, cases that involve homophones (such as ת and ט, or ק and כ, as well as כ and ח), but that do not invert *the same* letters, will be excluded, as in the example of נחש and נשך noted above (Exodus Rabbah 3:17; cited above in §II).

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41. All translations in this book are the author’s, except where otherwise noted. The biblical translations are influenced mainly by the New Revised Standard Version, but they have been modified to better correspond to the Hebrew.

(2) Cases where the inverted letters are not directly beside one another will also not be counted as metatheses for the purposes of this study. For example, in Ezek 30:4b, בנפל חלל במצרים ולקחו המונה ונהרסו יסודתיה, “when the slain fall in Egypt, and their riches are taken away, and the foundations are destroyed,” the inverted letters in the words חלל and לקח are not considered to be a literary metathesis because the letter ק interrupts the ח and ל in the word לקח. In the same way, the phrase והדבר והרעב in Ezek 7:15 is not considered a metathesis, even though the ב and ר are inverted, since the second occurrence is disrupted by ע. However, the pairing of החרב and הדבר in the same verse is considered a literary-stylistic metathesis, since the inverted letters are contiguous: החרב בחוץ והדבר והרעב מבית אשר, “The sword is outside, pestilence and famine are inside; those in the field die by the sword; those in the city are consumed by famine and pestilence.”<sup>42</sup> Though the phrase בעיר רעב also includes an inversion of letters, this is not only disrupted by a *mater lectionis* (though see below, rule 3), but also the ב in בעיר is a preposition (see below, rule 6), so it is not included in our definition of metathesis.

(3) The only exception to rule (2) is when the intervening character is a *mater lectionis* (Hebrew: קְרִיאָה, אָם, “mother of reading”; namely, א, ה, ו, י, and י), that is, a consonant used to indicate a vowel (י and ו in particular are more often vowels than they are consonants). Since *matres lectionis* were often added or omitted during the transmission of the text,<sup>43</sup> they can in principle be ignored when evaluating metatheses, while intervening consonants should not be. For the same reason, cases in which one of the inverted letters is itself a *mater lectionis* will also be excluded from the following analysis, since in such cases one cannot be certain that the metathesis was original or deliberate. Therefore, particularly in the case of literary-stylistic metathesis, we will generally only discuss examples where at least two identical consonants appear side by side in at least two distinct words, without intervening letters, and in reverse order.

The following examples will further illustrate these principles: Deuteronomy 9:4–6 includes a series of metatheses involving the characters

42. See below, Chapter Five, §III, no. 138, with many similar examples.

43. Compare, for instance, the frequent use of *matres lectionis* in the Great Isaiah Scroll, 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>, at many points where they are absent in other versions, such as 1QIsa<sup>b</sup> and the MT. On the common tendency to add *matres lectionis* where they were originally absent, see, e.g., E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (3rd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 208–18, 235–36; cf. also J. Hoegenhaven, “The First Isaiah Scroll from Qumran (1QIsa<sup>a</sup>) and the Masoretic Text: Some Reflections with Special Regard to Isaiah 1–12,” *JSOT* 28 (1984): 17–35, esp. 20.

ר and ש, as well as ל and א, most of which are directly contiguous, but in one case the inverted letters are separated by a י, in the word מורישם in 9:5a–b: לא בצדקתך ובישר לבבך אתה בא לרשת את ארצם כי ברשעת הגוים האלה: יהוה אלהיך מורישם מפניך, “Not for your righteousness, nor for the *uprightness* of your heart, do you go to possess their land; but for the *wickedness* of these nations the LORD your God drives them out from before you.”<sup>44</sup> The word מורישם is included as a metathesis even though the inverted characters are not contiguous, only because the intervening letter is a *mater lectionis*, and because this case is linked in context with several other metatheses involving these same letters, which *are* contiguous. By contrast, the inversion of ה and י in יהוה האלהי יהוה is not considered a metathesis, since the letters do not occur next to one another in הגוים (that is, the letters גו stand between the inverted letters; additionally, the ה in הגוים is a definite article, and therefore not formally part of the noun; see rule 6, below).

(4) Even when the inverted letters are identical and right next to one another, they will only be considered a literary-stylistic metathesis if they either appear at the same point in each word, or at opposite ends of the word (the beginning of one and the end of the other, or vice versa). That is, just because two words happen to include the same two letters in reverse order should not automatically be taken to be significant when these do not appear at comparable points in the word. For instance, consider Ezek 43:15, ומהראל ארבע אמות ומהאראיל<sup>45</sup> ולמעלה הקרנות ארבע, “and the altar, four cubits; and from the altar hearth, and above it four horns.” The words הראל ארבע are not considered to involve a literary metathesis, because the letters רא appear in the middle of one word but at the beginning of the other. Though the possibility that this inversion of letters is deliberate cannot be ruled out, such cases could simply be coincidental, and so will not be counted as literary metatheses.

(5) Turning to the meaning of the words: Also some other cases where two letters are identical and contiguous will be excluded from this study when there is reason to doubt that the inversion resulted from the compositional choices of the author or editor, rather than from the structure of the language itself. For instance, according to Josh 14:10, Caleb the son of Jephunneh said to Joshua: ועתה הנה אנכי היום בן חמש ושמונים שנה, “and now, behold, today I am *eighty-five* years old.” There is definitely a metathesis between the final letters of חמש and the first letters of שמונים, but there is no reason to assume that this is deliberate. How could the

44. For full citation and discussion of this example, see below, Chapter Five, §III, nos. 78–79.

45. This is the Ketib, but the Qere also has the same inversion: ומהאראיל.

author have expressed this number otherwise? This way of writing the number “85”—including the metathesis—was not invented by the author, but rather was an already existing part of the language that he simply employed.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the use of the number here should not be considered a literary-stylistic metathesis, nor should other comparable cases of the use of numbers, unless they are otherwise emphasized in context.

(6) Similarly, when the inverted letters are not part of the base form of a word (such as the root of a verb or the unmodified form of a noun), but instead involve prefixes or suffixes (including prepositions, pronouns, articles, singular or plural endings, and so on), these also will not be considered literary metatheses in this study. For example, the end of Ezek 28:2 reads, ותתן לבך כלב אלהים, “though you have treated *your* heart [i.e., wisdom] as the heart [i.e., wisdom] of a god.”<sup>47</sup> This kind of inversion of letters is not counted as a literary metathesis because it results from grammatical features of the language that may or may not have been consciously selected by the author: The letter כ of כלב is a prefixed preposition indicating comparison (creating a simile; it functions like the word כמו), rather than a part of the noun לב itself, and the ך of לבך is a pronominal suffix and also not a part of the noun. As another example, in Ezek 43:11 we read: . . . ואם נכלמו מכל אשר עשו צורת הבית ותכונתו ומוצאו ומובאו. . . . “If they are *ashamed* of *all* that they have done, make known to them the plan of the Temple, its arrangements, its exits, its entrances. . . .” Though in the phrase נכלמו מכל some letters appear inverted, this study does not consider this to be a literary metathesis because the מ in מכל is a preposition rather than part of the word כל. Similarly in Ezek 5:16, בשלחי את חצי הרעב, הרעים בהם אשר היו למשחית אשר אשלח אותם לשחתכם, “when I *send* against them my deadly arrows of famine, which are for destruction, which I *send to ruin* you.” The words בשלחי and לשחתכם are not considered to be linked by metathesis, because the ל in the word לשחתכם is a preposition rather than part of the root שח. In Ezek 30:9, ביום ההוא יצאו מלאכים מלפני שח. In Ezek 30:9, בצים להחריד את כוש בטח והיתה לחלה בהם כיום מצרים כי הנה באה

46. If the number is not historically reliable, then perhaps the author could have chosen a different number without the metathesis (for instance, שבעים וחמש, “seventy-five,” or תשעים וחמש, “ninety-five”) for Caleb’s age; regardless, the metathesis itself was not created by the author, only used by him. It is beyond the scope of this volume to consider the relation between the historical and literary character of the biblical text.

47. For this sense of the expression נתן + accusative + כ, see Gen 42:30; 1 Kgs 9:9; Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur Hebräischen Bibel*, 5:106; H. J. van Dijk, *Ezekiel’s Prophecy on Tyre (Ez. 26,1 – 28,19): A New Approach* (Biblica et Orientalia 20; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1968), 99.

day, messengers will go out from me in *ships* to frighten the unsuspecting Ethiopians; and shaking will come upon them on the day of *Egypt*, for it is coming,”<sup>48</sup> the metathesis is not found in the noun itself, but rather in the ending of בְּצִיִּים. In Ezek 40:5, והנה חומה מִחוּץ לְבַיִת סָבִיב סָבִיב, “See, there was a *wall outside* of the Temple all around.” Here also the מ in מִחוּץ is a preposition, rather than an integral part of the word חוּץ. In all these cases, and others like them, there is a graphical inversion of letters that could conceivably be intentional, but since they are a result of grammatical or syntactical features of the text that may be dictated by the context, they will not be counted as literary metatheses. Though it is not always possible to determine whether a given inversion of letters was intentional, this is generally more likely to be the case when the inversion involves the words the author or editor chose to use than when it only involves prefixes or suffixes, so such cases will be excluded from this study.

## V. Outline of the Study

In line with the principles just mentioned, the examples in this volume have been selected due to their clarity, and they have been organized according to several subcategories. Within each section, the examples are listed *mostly* according to the canonical order of the Hebrew Bible, but related examples are often listed or discussed alongside one another, rather than in their expected places, so the reader is advised to consult the indexes to find particular cases.

In order to present a complete picture of the phenomenon of metathesis, the linguistic and textual categories are first briefly discussed, with some new cases and insights (Chapters Two and Three). This study then focuses in detail on literary-stylistic metathesis (Chapters Four to Seven), which appears in diverse forms and contexts in the Hebrew Bible and beyond. First, in Chapter Four, examples from the Hebrew Bible involving personal and geographical names, and their etymological explanations, are discussed. Then, in Chapter Five (the largest chapter of the book), numerous sets of paired words and phrases from different literary genres of the Hebrew Bible are noted, each of which employs the same letters in transposed order. Due to the large number of examples discussed in this

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48. The LXX reads σπεύδοντες (= “go forth hastily”) here; therefore it is possible that the original version was אָצִים instead of בְּצִיִּים. Cf. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph (eds.), *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (= *BHS*; 5th ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), 950.

chapter, it has been further subdivided based on the manner and degree to which the words are inverted, as follows:

(§I) Cases in which *all* the letters of the words are inverted;

(§II) Cases in which all the letters of the words are identical, but only one portion of the word(s) is inverted;

(§III) Cases in which the metathesis is only partial but appears at the same point in each of the paired words or phrases;

(§IV) Cases in which the positions of the inverted letters mirror one another, with one at the beginning and the other at the end of their respective words;

(§V) Finally, cases in which the inverted letters include  $\psi$  and  $\var�$ , which are similar graphically but which differ phonetically.

It should not be assumed that only the first category of inversions represent genuine literary metatheses, as many cases in the other categories are emphasized or repeated in context, sometimes in combination with other forms of wordplay or paronomasia. This suggests that even the more subtle combinations of partially inverted words can reflect a deliberate strategy of literary metathesis.

Following the literary-stylistic metatheses in biblical texts, some clear cases of the phenomenon are introduced from the Hebrew texts of *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (Chapter Six)<sup>49</sup> and the rabbinic literature (Chapter Seven). The latter are especially valuable, because we often have their sources in front of us in the Hebrew Bible and can follow exactly how they were created. They explicitly employ the same literary device already used by a variety of biblical authors and therefore highlight an essential continuity regarding this literary technique from biblical to rabbinic sources.

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49. Because Ben Sira is only partially preserved in the Hebrew manuscripts, Chapter Six distinguishes and discusses metatheses found in the manuscripts themselves and those reconstructed in the missing parts, based on the LXX.