

The Psalms as Torah (Psalm 119)

The Hebrew word *Torah* is usually translated into English as *law*. However, the concept of *Torah* is much larger than the typical associations that go along with the English word *law*. The word *law* tends to conjure up images of rules and regulations, and perhaps in a religious context, most specifically, the Ten Commandments, a divine code that prescribes the proper way to relate to God and to one another. Indeed, *Torah* means much more than a set of rules to keep. In its most general sense, the law is the revelation of God and the mediator between God and man. It not only reveals information about God, but it is also the means by which one may have a relationship with God. It contains the covenant, the agreement that obligates God and man to one another in sacred reciprocal promises. It is the wisdom of God shared with man and the path that man must follow to remain in fellowship with his creator.

Torah in the Jewish context refers to the first five books of the Old Testament, (the books of Moses, also known as the Pentateuch). Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy contain the story of God and lay out a foundational worldview that answers the big questions in life: How did we get here, what is our purpose, how are we to relate to God, and how are we to relate to one another as human beings? These and so many other significant questions are answered in the *Torah*. It is not difficult to see then why the psalmist is so enamored with the *Torah*. The words of God are central to his faith and his daily life. As Kriegshauser concludes:

“[The Torah] is the revelation of the saving will of Israel’s God and of the path that leads to him. It contains both the account of the saving acts by which God made Israel his people and the commandments that this people must follow to remain one with him. For the psalmist the Law is the means, the only means, by which he can enter into communion with this covenant God; hence it is the focus of his life.” (Kriegshauser, 254-255)

There are three psalms that scholars have designated as *Torah* psalms – Psalms 1, 19, and 119. The first psalm invites the worshiper to “delight in the law of the LORD, and on his law meditate day and night” (Psalm 1:2). The psalmist invites the reader to consider two paths—the path of *Torah* observance and its opposite, the path of the wicked. There are only two options. Psalm 19 elaborates on the meaning of *Torah* by claiming that nature itself speaks the words of God. The voice of creation confirms the written word of God and the psalmist concludes by praying, “may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer” (Psalm 19:14). In other words, may the life and words of the psalmist be consistent with the words of God as revealed in his ordered world and his revealed written word.

Finally, the 119th psalm bursts into the Psalter as the *magnum opus* (great work) of the psalmist. It is an acrostic meditation on the *Torah*. At 176 verses, it is the longest psalm by far, making it also the longest “chapter” in the Bible. As an acrostic meditation on the *Torah*, it is arranged into 22 stanzas, one for each letter of the alphabet. Each stanza of the psalm consists of eight verses all beginning with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This elaborate literary technique is a poetic exclamation point to the significance of the *Torah* in the life of the psalmist. The word *torah*, or one of its seven synonyms is found in every verse of the psalm except verses 3, 37, 90, and 122. However, the psalmist makes up for these four omissions by using a synonym for the law twice in verses 16, 48, 160, 168, and 172.

Each of the twenty-two stanzas has at least one word that is used more than once, giving a loose unity to that section. Adjacent sections have at least one word in common, usually several. These links weave the parts of the psalm together. The psalm was most likely intended to be read aloud rather than sung. It takes approximately twenty minutes to read the entire psalm aloud; its rhythm and repetition make it

an ideal tool for meditation. In fact, one of the Hebrew words translated “meditate” [*see-ach*] occurs eight times. The object of this *meditation* is the precepts, wonders, decrees, law, statutes, and promises of the Lord.

It seems as if the psalmist employs every poetic technique available to convey the all-encompassing magnificence of the word of God revealed in the language of man. He uses the following eight Hebrew words interchangeably as he references the *Torah*.

Torah (law, instruction)

Edot (statutes)

Piquidim (precepts)

Mitzvoth (commands)

Mishpatim (laws)

Huqqim (decrees)

Dabar (word, law, promise)

‘imrah (word, promise)

Together with the Songs of Ascents (120-134), Psalm 119 is central to Book 5. In fact, it has been suggested that at some point in its development, Psalm 119 might have been the final psalm of the Psalter. If the *Torah* is the revelation of God and the mediator between God and man, for the Christian it should not be difficult to see Christ, the incarnate Word, as the mediator and revelation of God. In fact, a very helpful way for the Christian to meditate on Christ is to read Psalm 119, substituting the name of Jesus for each synonym for the law.

Jesus is the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14) and he is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). These are all claims that the psalmist makes of the *Torah* in Psalm 119. Thus, the Christian can meditate on Jesus, the wisdom of God, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3) as the psalmist meditated on the *Torah*, as central to his faith and life.

Works referenced:

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