

INTRODUCTION – PSALM 119

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The team decided last year not to include Psalm 119 as one of the texts for group study, largely because of its length. However, I decided to study it during the past year and use this opening session to indicate some of the challenges it poses, at least to me.

Psalm 119 is composed as an acrostic based on the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet from *alef* to *tav*. It has twenty-two stanzas of eight verses, each verse of the stanza beginning with the same letter of the alphabet. This adds up to 176 verses which makes it the longest chapter in the Hebrew Bible. The overall theme is the celebration of Torah, and the commitment to study and to live fully by it. One building element is that each stanza contains at least five synonyms for Biblical law: *huqqot*, statutes, *edut*, testimonies, *piqqudim*, precepts, *mitzvoth*, commandments and *mishpatim*, judgments. When one of these words does not appear in the stanza, then one of the others is used twice, so that each of these words appears between 21 and 23 times in the Psalm. One result is effectively to break down any distinction that may exist amongst these terms. In addition, the word Torah itself appears 25 times, God's word, *davar*, occurs 25 times and God's speech, *imrah*, 19 times. The name of God comes 24 times. There is no doubt about the subject matter of the Psalm.

But the repetitiveness does not end there, and I found myself compulsively counting other recurring words. Twenty times the verb *sh-m-r* is used to refer to 'keeping' God's laws, and a further ten times the verb *n-tz-r* serves the same purpose. Twelve times the verb *a-h-v* proclaims the Psalmist's love for God's Torah. But the Psalmist has opponents, either called *zedim*, the arrogant, six times, or *r'shayim*, the wicked, six times. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the Psalmist insists seven times *lo shachachti*, 'I have not forgotten' referring either to the Torah or to one of the other synonyms for it. On the contrary, nine times the Psalmist claims to rejoice in God's Torah, using different forms of the verb *sh-a-a* and three times using the verb *s-i-s*. Twelve times the Psalmist speaks of walking in God's way, *derech*, twelve times asks to learn, *l-m-d*, God's Torah and seven times speaks of 'meditating', *s-i-ach*, in it.

But alongside these expressions of confidence, the Psalmist also expresses fears of being taunted or put to shame by adversaries, while waiting and hoping for an answer from God. It is as if the sheer weight of all these words for Torah is meant to construct a physical wall around the Psalmist, a defence against attack from without and, perhaps, against doubts and uncertainty within. Finally, the most puzzling verb is one addressed to God, repeated nine times as an imperative, and seven times in other grammatical forms: it is, *hayyeni*, perhaps 'give me life', or 'sustain me in life'. But what exactly is this life to which he aspires so forcefully?

A recent literary approach to the Psalm is to view it as an example of ‘constrained writing’, whereby an author deliberately sets artificial limitations and then has to meet the artistic challenge of overcoming them.¹ Some of the stanzas feel as though they were composed in a rather formal or mechanical way simply in order to include all the required words, but others come alive as they include personal information about the present or past situation of the Psalmist. For example, how the Psalmist has gone astray or been attacked or misrepresented by enemies, and now seeks to be restored to his place in the Torah. If the Psalm is the work of a single author, then these episodes might reflect different periods of a life, from youth to old age, a kind of spiritual diary. Nevertheless, although the different stanzas share the same vocabulary and also the same general beliefs and values, to me their diversity suggests the experience of different individuals. And this raises the possibility of at least some degree of multiple authorship. But what might be the circumstances that could produce it?

An article in the website *TheTorah.com* by Shalom Holtz builds on the work of Professor Avi Hurvitz who argues that the language of the Psalm is post-exilic.² For example the verb *d-r-sh*, to seek, in earlier Biblical books, refers to seeking God directly – for example in Amos 5:4 *dirshuni vih’yu*, ‘seek Me and live!’ But within the Psalm the verb is directed instead at seeking God’s laws, *piqqudim* (vv. 45, 94), *huqqim* (v. 155). Holtz gives another example:

Whereas books like Deuteronomy speak of loving God (6:5, 11:1, 13), Psalm 119 speaks of loving God’s Torah and commandments (for example in verses 97, 113 and 119), and even ‘cleaving’ (*d-b-q*) to them (v. 31; compare ‘cleaving to God’ in, for example, Deuteronomy 11:22, 30:20).

This leads Holtz to suggest that the Psalm anticipates rabbinic Judaism’s commitment to Talmud Torah, the study of Torah, as a mode of divine service and a path to God.

If this is indeed a transitional stage to a new basis of serving God, does the Psalm reveal something about how this might have come about? When I began studying the Psalm it felt like a compilation of materials produced in something like a classroom situation. As if the teacher has given the identical assignment to twenty-two of his students or colleagues: ‘compose an eight-verse stanza about your love of God’s Torah, using all the words I have listed – but feel free to introduce some personal aspect as well. I will allocate to you the letter of the alphabet you are to use to introduce each verse.’ That is to say that all the stanzas are about creating the shared ethos of a particular group or society, committed to their own way of understanding and relating to God through their direct engagement with Torah. Some amongst them identify themselves as belonging to ‘those who fear God’ (vv. 63, 74) The arrogant or wicked that they attack are those who have strayed from the Torah (vv. 52, 85, 126, 150). Their failure to teach or convince others of this path may be a source of regret for them: ‘My eyes run with rivers of tears because they do not observe Your Torah’ (v. 136). The schoolroom ethos may even be evoked:

I have more understanding than all of my teachers, because Your testimonies are my meditation.
I understand more than my elders, because I have kept Your precepts. (vv. 99-100)

How might someone have gained entrance into such a society? The second stanza may reflect such a rite of passage. It includes a statement of personal commitment to God and Torah and the recital of a blessing, the only one in the entire Psalm. It begins in verse 9 by asking how a young man, *na’ar*, may lead a life of purity. Perhaps it refers here to the applicant himself, as the word *na’ar* may mean a disciple or apprentice (*Jeremiah 1:6*). Here, the verb *d-r-sh* is expressed, as in its earlier Biblical usage, of seeking God directly. But subsequently throughout the Psalm, as noted above, it is used in the later way of seeking God’s Torah. Subsequently, the Psalmist refers to himself as *avadecha*, ‘Your servant’. It seems as if the speaker is reciting his personal commitment and qualifications for admittance to this Torah-based society.

¹ ‘An evaluation of Psalm 119 as constrained writing’ Scott M. Callahan *Hebrew Studies* 50 (2009) 121-134.

² ‘Seeking Torah, Seeking God: Psalm 119’ Professor Shalom Holtz <https://TheTorah.com/seeking-torah-god/>.

If anyone during this week has other ideas about the Psalm, I would welcome hearing them. But let us end, as we enter this week of study, much as this potential disciple might have done, with a question and a blessing.

- ⁹ How can a young man keep his way pure?
By guarding it according to Your word.
- ¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek You;
let me not wander from Your commandments!
- ¹¹ I have stored up Your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against You.
- ¹² Blessed are You, O Lord;
teach me Your statutes!

Baruch attah Adonai, lam'deni huqqekha.

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