

CHRISTIAN STUDIES

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*Institute for
Christian Studies
1909 University Avenue
Austin, Texas 78705
(512) 476-2772
Fax: (512) 476-3919*

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Foreword

As this convulsive century moves toward its conclusion, many new problems rightly call for attention. In our concern to address new issues, however, it is crucial that we not neglect thorny problems which have beset Christians for centuries. Lives are still regularly damaged by “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.”

This issue of *Christian Studies* addresses a cluster of issues relating to the nature and function of law and grace in biblical faith and in the Christian life. Misunderstandings abound. Biblically, grace is not lawless, law is not graceless, and “legalism” is a distortion of both grace and law.

These essays are not intended to settle the dust on the issues they address. They are intended to invigorate and in some instances reformulate conversation about familiar issues. Readers are invited to reflect on, discuss, and circulate the essays. As always, responses are invited.

Michael R. Weed, *Editor*

Delighting in the Law:

Psalm 119 and the Christian Torah

R. Mark Shipp

The word “law” conjures up conflicting images in our minds. Law restrains, sets boundaries and limits. Law exacts punishments and penalties. Many other similar images come to mind, but we generally do not associate joy or delight with the term “law.” Many Protestants are under the impression that Jesus died to take away the demands of the law, which were impossible to keep anyway. To many in the church, law and grace are in opposition, with law symbolizing impossible demands and punishment, and grace symbolizing freedom and life.

When one compares the consistent view of the Old Testament relative to the nature of the law, one is immediately impressed with the difference in the way the law is characterized. We are repeatedly told in the book of Deuteronomy that the law gives life and in Psalm 119 the law is a delight. How should we understand the Old Testament’s view of the law? Is this view somehow sub-Christian?

It is customary to characterize the sixteenth-century reformation as a return to New Testament grace against the Roman Catholic dependence on law. As applied to Martin Luther there is some truth to this statement, as he has been accused of emphasizing the punitive nature of the law. John Calvin, on the other hand, emphasized the positive nature of the law and that it is a gift of grace. Perhaps it is best for us to avoid the use of the term “law” altogether, with its forensic and often negative connotations in modern culture. In the Old Testament there is not a single meaning for the word we often translate “law,” torah in Hebrew, but a single English

word comes closer than any other in capturing the essence of its meaning: the word “instruction.” In the Pentateuch, this instruction takes many forms. It includes legal statutes and ordinances, instructions about rituals and worship, and the story about God’s gracious deeds on behalf of the Israelites. It is important to understand that torah is the instruction about God’s grace and the response of his people to that grace in faithful living.

Psalm 119 contains some of the most positive statements anywhere about the law. As a result of these positive statements and its unusual organization, this psalm, perhaps more than any other in the entire Psalter, has been characterized as artificial, pedantic, and sub-Christian. How are we to account for this discrepancy of perspective relative to law? Above all, how are we to account for the intensely positive functions of the law promoted in this psalm? It is the purpose of this paper to explore the positive functions of law in the life of the believer: first, the law brings order and stability; second, the law brings freedom; and third, the law is a gift of God’s grace.

The Torah Brings Order and Stability

According to Psalm 119, the law provides order, stability, and structure. I want to underscore this point with two observations; the first is a literary observation about law and structure and the second is a theological observation.

If Psalm 119 were written in English, we would be able to see immediately its most striking characteristic: it is composed of eight verse stanzas, each line of which begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each succeeding section of eight lines begins with the next letter of the alphabet and so on through the entire twenty-two letter alphabet. Equally important to the organization of the psalm is the fact that most verses have one and only one synonym for “torah of God” except for six verses which contain no synonym and six which contain two, for a grand total of 176.¹ These terms are “torah,” “commandment,” “statute,” “precept,” “word,”

¹ Will Soll, *Psalm 119: Matrix, Form, and Setting* (CBQ Monograph Series 23; Washington, D. C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1991) 46-47 and David Noel Freedman, “The Structure of Psalm 119,” in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, David P. Wright et. al., eds. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 725-756, count 177 torah terms based on eight synonyms for torah; Soll resorts to emending the text to do so, while Freedman refrains from

“utterance,” “path,” “way,” “judgment,” and “testimony.”² It is likely that the author’s intent was at least to come close in the use of synonyms for torah to the total number of verses in the psalm.

Related to the striking order manifested in the literary structure of the psalm is that of the placement of the psalms of torah in the book as a whole.³ First of all, there are three such torah Psalms: 1, 19, and 119. The placement of these psalms within the Psalter is suggestive of symmetry and intentionality, but besides this, each psalm internally is characterized by symmetry and perfection. Psalm one comes to us in two sections: verses 1-3 and verses 4-6. Verses 1-3 show the characteristics of the righteous person, while 4-6 give the characteristics of the wicked. On the one hand, the righteous person is like a strong, deeply rooted tree, receiving abundant sustenance, while on the other, the wicked person is like useless chaff, good for

such emendation. Jon Levenson [“The Sources of Torah: Psalm 119 and the Modes of Revelation in Second Temple Judaism,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, ed. by Patrick D. Miller, *et. al.* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 562] finds ten torah synonyms as I have done and counts 182 such terms. See note two below for the justification for my count of 176 such terms.

² These terms in Hebrew are *torah*, *mitswah*, *huqqah/hoq*, *dabar*, *piqqûd*, *imrah*, *mishpat*, and *edôt/edût*. In addition, there are several occurrences of the terms *orah*, “path,” and *derek*, “way,” which may also be structurally important to the psalm. Soll rejects these two terms as synonyms for torah. He does so on the grounds of coming up with exactly 176 such terms, occurring once and only once per verse, corresponding to the number of verses in the psalm, but he often has no text-critical or literary grounds for so doing. For example, he emends *derek*, “way,” to *dabar*, “word” in v. 3 with no appeal to manuscript evidence in support of such emendation. In fact, Soll may be correct on grounds totally other than the ones he has argued. First, one must agree with Levenson that there are at least ten torah words in the psalm, rather than eight. There is no good basis for excluding “path” and “way” from the list of synonyms, particularly when they occur in synonymous parallelism (see v. 15). If one counts all occurrences of these ten terms, excluding those which refer to attributes of the Psalmist or the wicked rather than God, one arrives at a total of 181 torah synonyms in the psalm, five more than the total number of verses. Another method of counting, however, may be the key to understanding the use of torah synonyms in the psalm: one should count all ten torah synonyms when they are in a genitival (construct) relationship with a designation for God or with a pronoun suffix referring to God (usually second masculine singular); for example, “torah of God,” “your testimonies,” etc. This count excludes a few synonyms for torah which do not refer directly to God by means of a pronoun or genitival relationship (such as vv. 43, 49, 84, and 128), refer to the psalmist himself (vv. 121 and 122), or use the term *emûnah*, “faithfulness,” a synonym for covenant loyalty elsewhere in the Old Testament, but not for torah (see especially v. 90). With this method one arrives at a count of 176 terms for torah, corresponding exactly to the number of verses in the psalm, without resorting to conjectural emendation.

³ For a good discussion of the importance and place of the psalms of torah in the book of Psalms, see James Luther Mays, “The Place of the Torah Psalms in the Psalter,” *JBL* 106 (1987) 3-12.

nothing but scattering. Psalm 19 is another psalm about torah. Verses 1-6 of this psalm relate to God's creation and the perfection of the sun and the heavenly bodies, which illuminate and follow the perfect paths and functions God laid out for them. Verses 7-15 praise the perfection and righteousness of the torah, which, like the heavenly bodies, illuminates and guides. Finally, Psalm 119 illustrates symmetry and structure as does no other Old Testament passage.

These features have prompted considerable discussion about the purpose of such a composition. A recent article suggests that it is a youthful composition, possibly a school exercise, by a young scribe who wished to toot his own horn by means of an artificial composition.⁴ Others have recently suggested that there is movement and structure to the whole psalm, other than in eight line stanzas, in short, that there is art and not just mechanics involved.⁵ Perhaps the most convincing of all such recent suggestions is that of a recent monograph on Psalm 119, in which the author suggests that the overarching structure of the psalm is that of the individual lament, in which the psalmist addresses God, laments his present evil circumstances, remembers past goodness, voices his lament and petition to God, rejoices in answered prayer, and vows to praise and thank God in the community of the faithful. Psalm 119, therefore, demonstrates order in its poetry (an acrostic in eight verse stanzas), literary style (the individual lament), and use of terminology (176 synonyms for the torah of God).

The second issue relates to theology. In what way does Psalm 119 reflect order and symmetry theologically? Perhaps the most significant feature related to the stability and order of torah is its relation to creation. Torah is said to be reliable, firm, built into the very fabric of creation, and, indeed, its dynamic and generating force:

Forever, O Lord, thy word is firmly fixed in the heavens (v. 89).

Thy faithfulness endures to all generations; thou hast established the earth, and it stands fast (v. 90).

By thy appointment they stand this day, for all things are thy servants (v. 91).

⁴ White, R. E. O., "The Student's Psalm?" *Expository Times* 102 (1990) 71-74.

⁵ Freedman, David Noel, "The Structure of Psalm 119, pt. 2," *Hebrew Annual Review* 14 (1994).

The torah of God is reliable and stable precisely because it is not bound by the changes and vicissitudes of history. God's word (*dabar*), a synonym in Psalm 119 for torah, is reliable because it is permanent and unchanging, generating the created order and being reflected in it. The one who laments and cries out to God may therefore depend on God's unchanging grace manifested in creation, but also made clear in His covenant commitment to be near to those who cry out to Him (see "torah and the covenant of grace" below).

Because the torah is manifested in creation and creation demonstrates symmetry (Psalm 19, Psalm 119:89-91) and perfection, torah itself is perfect. Verse 96 is particularly telling in this regard:

I have seen a limit to all perfection; but thy commandment is exceedingly broad.

Finally, the psalmist understands in verses 5-6 that only in the torah of the Lord are true life and stability to be found:

O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping thy statutes!
Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all thy commandments.

For the psalmist, the torah is perfect, stable, and ordered like the creation. We may, in turn, partake of that order and stability if we focus our attention and devotion upon it.

The Law Brings Freedom and Life

This is an interesting statement in light of the popular characterization of the law as that which brings slavery and condemnation. Nevertheless, it is explicitly stated in the psalm. Psalm 119 calls this freedom a "broad" or "wide" place:

I shall indeed walk in a wide place, for I have sought your precepts (v. 45). The RSV translates the words "wide place" as "liberty." What is it about keeping the law which brings liberty? There is something about *not* walking in the precepts of the Lord which is limiting; to the psalmist, it is to walk in a narrow and confining space.

First, notice the heart, or understanding of the one who walks in the way of the torah as opposed to the ones who do not follow God's will:

Their heart is gross like fat, but I delight in your law (v. 70).

Contrary to the fatness, or numbness and difficulty of perception, of the wicked, is the

perceptive heart of the psalmist:

I will run in the way of your commandments when you make my heart wide
(v. 32).

There is a freedom in keeping the torah which gives one space to live and depth of understanding.

How do we achieve this love of the law and wideness of heart? It is only through the discipline of keeping the righteous judgments and statutes and this in turn only occurs through the discipline of affliction and study:

If the law had not been my delight I would have perished in my affliction (v. 92).

It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes (v. 71).

In fact, nine times the psalmist entreats, "Teach me your torah!" This instruction occurs through the disciplined and focused devotion to the learning and observation of torah as well as through God's correcting rod.

The wicked, on the other hand, are ignorant and shameful, because they do not know or obey the torah:

Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me
(v. 98).

You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones, who wander from your commandments (v. 21).

And finally,

You spurn all who go away from your statutes, for their cunning is in vain
(v. 118).

Freedom, paradoxically in the Old Testament or the New, comes about only through disciplined service. For example, I am not free to play the piano for I have never studied it, while others who have exercised the discipline of study can run in the wide space made available through that discipline.

Perhaps the clearest statement relating to the torah and freedom is that used in another connection above:

I have seen a limit to all perfection, but thy commandment is exceedingly broad (v. 96).

The word translated "broad" here is the same as that which the RSV translates as

“liberty” in verse 45. The point is, even the most perfect of human endeavors is limited and narrow in comparison to the perfection and spaciousness of torah.

Torah and the Covenant of Grace

Law and grace are opposing principles in Romans and Galatians. How then can law be a gift of God’s grace? Jon Levenson has recently stated that Psalm 119 reflects a theology of torah separate and apart from covenant theology. It is true that the term “covenant” is not used in the psalm and that torah in Psalm 119 has a much more cosmic and universal application than simply a reference to the “law of Moses,”⁶ but Levenson is at least overstating his case. We have seen previously that torah is connected in Psalm 119 with the stability and immutability of creation, but the psalm also connects it with God’s covenant of grace. It does so by the means of words which are used predominantly in the Old Testament in connection with God’s covenant with his people.

There is perhaps no better place to turn than to Hosea 2:18-20 for a description of terms relating to God’s covenant loyalty and faithfulness. Hosea describes God’s faithfulness to Israel in spite of her “adultery” with the gods of the nations, poignantly portrayed in the “living parable” of Hosea’s relationship to Gomer:

I will make a covenant with them in that day,
 With the beasts of the field and with the birds of the heavens, and the
 creeping things of the earth . . .
 And I will make them lie down securely,
 And I will betroth you to myself forever;
 And I will betroth you to myself in righteousness and in justice and in
 loyalty and in mercy,
 And I will betroth you to myself in faithfulness, and you will know the Lord.

With the exception of the actual word “covenant” (*berith*), all these “covenant terms”

⁶ Indeed, the term “law of Moses” is not to found in the psalm, nor even a reference to Moses! As Levenson has pointed out, this does not mean that torah in Psalm 119 excludes the law given to Moses, but that God’s torah includes utterances and instruction beyond that law. He even suggests that the reason for the writing of the psalm is to induce in the reader “the psychic conditions conducive to the spiritual experience he seeks” (Levenson, 566). Levenson has alerted us to the fact that torah as instruction goes beyond a simple equation with the Pentateuch, bearing close resemblance to wisdom in the book of Proverbs. If

occur repeatedly in Psalm 119. They are “righteousness” (*tsedeq*, 12 occurrences), “justice” (*mishpat*, 23 occurrences; also used as one of the synonyms for torah in a way similar to Deut. 12:1), “mercy” (*rahamim*, 2 occurrences), and “steadfastness” (*emûnah*, 5 occurrences). Against Levenson, there is no dichotomy in Psalm 119 between torah as a “pneumatic” gift separate from his great deeds in Israel’s history and that manifestation of God’s instruction given to Israel in covenant at Sinai.⁷ Torah is reliable and a sign of God’s grace because it is based in creation (Psalm 119:89-90) and therefore not capricious or subject to change. It is also a manifestation of God’s grace because it demonstrates his mercy, loyalty, and steadfastness to his covenant people. This steadfastness the psalmist affirms, but more than this, he cries out for God once again to manifest his mercy and loyalty to him in his suffering as he has so often to his ancestors in the past. As a lament, the purpose of this psalm is to confess the stability, freedom, and grace which walking in the path of God’s torah can afford as well as to cry out for God’s help, because stability, freedom, and grace seem far from the psalmist.

Many examples could be cited of God’s covenant loyalty and grace and their relationship to torah in Psalm 119, but these will suffice:

The earth, O Lord, is full of your covenant loyalty (*hesed*); teach me your statutes! (v. 64).

I know, O Lord, that your judgments (*mishpatim*) are right, and that in faithfulness (*emûnah*) you have afflicted me (v. 75).

I have done justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedeq*); do not leave me to my oppressors! (v. 121)

Let your mercy (*rahamim*) come to me, that I may live; for your law is my delight (v. 77).

A final quote is particularly telling relative to the place of torah in the life of the believer:

Put false ways far from me and in your torah be gracious to me (*haneni*) (v. 30).

the psalm is a lament, as Soll has insisted, then the point of the psalm is not to “induce psychic conditions,” but to invoke the presence of the covenant-keeping God.

⁷ Levenson, 564-566.

Conclusion

There are many ways in which torah incorporates and prescribes rituals and observances which are time and culture-bound, which cannot be practiced in our day, particularly on this side of the cross of Christ. Psalm 119, however, teaches us that torah is far more than such external observances. Torah is “instruction.” For the Christian as well as the Jew it is the “good way,” the way of stability in an uncertain world, the way of freedom through discipline, and the way of loyalty to our covenants and commitments. Who can deny that the stability and immutability of God’s torah are needed in a world where the only constant seems to be change? In a culture where the words “responsibility” and “discipline” are rarely used and where the disciplined life often gives way to easy pleasures, who would disagree that the “wide place” afforded by disciplined living is sorely needed? In a time when covenants and commitments are easily made and easily broken, who would deny that the world cries out for faithfulness to commitments? The way of torah is not an easy way, but it brings us near to the God who established order out of chaos and who still creates stability out of the disorder of this world. Through its exercise, the discipline of righteous living commended by torah sets us free to enjoy the higher benefits of the presence of God and the community of the faithful. The way of torah is also the way of covenant loyalty, for it teaches us that God keeps covenant with his people and shows us how to keep covenant with one another.

But to focus on the positive statements of torah in Psalm 119 and its benefits to the believer is to understand the psalm only partly. As we noted above, the psalm is a lament. We do not possess this psalm because its author lived a life characterized by stability and freedom. Psalm 119 is structured grief. It is the cry of faith of one who has seen the good way, but it is far off from the psalmist, so he cries out to God in faith that the one who redeemed and rescued his ancestors will once again act decisively to redeem him from his own troubles.

The experience of many in the church is not unlike that of the psalmist. Many perceive order, discipline, and covenant relationship as realities far off and not to be grasped. Their lives are characterized more by chaos than stability, by restraint more than freedom, and by breach of covenant more than commitment. Psalm 119 commends itself to these believers in the confidence of the psalmist that, in spite of

distress, persecution, and grief, God still responds to those who cry out to him and is still the one who creates order out of chaos and calls light out of darkness.⁸

As a legal principle, the law could save no one, nor was it ever the intent of the law to do so. As instruction in righteousness and the grace of God, torah instructs, provides stability, disciplines us, and creates covenant-keeping communities. Because of this, torah is called a delight ten times in Psalm 119:

For I find my delight in your commandments, which I love (v. 47).

⁸We began by suggesting that John Calvin emphasized the positive function of the law as it related to God's covenant. Mary Potter has given us seven general principles about the law in relation to God's grace found in Calvin's theology

- 1) The law is a revelation of the eternal will of God in time.
- 2) The law is not contradictory to the covenant of grace but an aid to its fulfillment.
- 3) The law's form is not unchanging, though its intent (to guide humans down the path of salvation) and its content (the rule of righteousness) are.
- 4) The law is a gift and a blessing to be celebrated.
- 5) The law is a mode of instruction.
- 6) The law is addressed to the whole person.
- 7) The law is twofold, guiding one's relation to God (piety) and to other people (justice).

These seven principles are taken from Mary Potter, "The 'Whole Office of the Law' in the Theology of John Calvin," *The Journal of Law and Religion* 3 (1985) 117-139.

Contributors

Gary Holloway is head of the Graduate Bible Program at Lipscomb University.

Allan J. McNicol is A. B. Cox Professor of New Testament at the Institute for Christian Studies.

R. Mark Shipp is Assistant Professor of Old Testament and Missions at the Institute for Christian Studies.

Charles Siburt serves as Director of the Doctor of Ministry program and as the Frazer Professor of Church Enrichment at Abilene Christian University.

William W. Stewart is a director in the Division of Student Services, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Dr. Stewart serves as an adjunct faculty member at the Institute for Christian Studies.

Michael R. Weed is Billie Gunn Hocott Professor of Theology and Ethics at the Institute for Christian Studies.