

THE PLACE OF THE TORAH-PSALMS IN THE PSALTER*

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Psalms 1, 19, and 119 do not have a significant place in the established critical approaches to the Psalms. They do not fit easily into any of the accepted genres or into any of the proposed orders for festivals in ancient Israel. In most introductory treatments, Psalms 1, 19, and 119 are among the leftovers. They are sometimes dealt with as "wisdom psalms," though there is uncertainty about whether all are so properly identified, and, of course, the classification "wisdom psalms" is itself ambiguous. Moreover, these three are generally regarded as the latest of the Psalms.

Though the three are quite different in form and content, they share one distinctive feature. They are psalms in which the instruction of the Lord is the central organizing topic and is viewed as the primary reality in the relation of mortals to God. Those who composed them wrote them *as Psalms*, and they were included *in the Psalter*. This double fact means that the latest and smallest group of the Psalms may provide the central clue to the way the Psalms, individually and as a book, were read and understood at the time of their composition and inclusion. The problem children of the Psalter do not have a place in the *Gattungen* and *Sitze* of Psalm criticism, but they do have a place in the book.¹

The question, then, of the torah psalms is not a question of their interpretation as isolated pieces. It is a question of what their presence in the book of Psalms means for the way the Psalms are to be viewed and read. How do things look if the direction of analysis is reversed and one begins with these latest leftover psalms and looks at them in the book and at the book through them? What can be said about the relation of Psalms 1, 19, and 119 to the book of which they are a part and to other psalms of which it is composed? What effect does their presence have on other psalms and the way they are to be understood? What is their "place" in the Psalter?

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¹ For an orientation to approaching Psalms as a book, see B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) chap. 33.

We will look first at the psalms individually, then at their relationship to some other psalms, and finally at their location.

I

First, the literary and theological character of the three psalms. All are the work of poets who are bringing together elements of vocabulary, style, and theology from various parts of the emerging Hebrew canon of scripture. This intentional mixing is a way of expressing a more comprehensive understanding of God and is the basic characteristic of such poetry. In each of these psalms there is a clue to how its author viewed the Psalter.

Psalm 1 connects the interpretation of Israel's past found in Deuteronomy-Kings with the question of how each person should live in the present to have a fortunate future.

In form, vocabulary, and topic, Psalm 1 is a creation of the literary conventions found in Proverbs. It begins with a "Happy is the one who . . ." formula and is shaped on the model of an antithetical saying. It contrasts two ways of conduct, the way of the righteous and that of the wicked. One brings life to fulfillment; the other leads to nothing. As in Proverbs, the way of the righteous is learned from instruction (*tôrâ*).

But in its central subject matter, the psalm is related to texts in the books of Joshua and Deuteronomy and Jeremiah. It describes the happy righteous as one whose concern is with the instruction of the Lord and who therefore studies it constantly. The description is a variation of the Lord's instruction to Joshua when he succeeds Moses as leader of Israel. Joshua stands in the succession of the torah of the Lord and must recite it day and night to incorporate it into his conduct as he leads Israel into the land; only then will he and Israel prosper in the ventures ahead (Josh 1:8). In the law for the kings in Deuteronomy, much the same is said about all rulers of Israel. Kings are to have a copy of the torah and read it all their lives and observe it so that their reign may endure in the midst of Israel (Deut 17:18-20). Judges-Kings emphasizes and illustrates the point by the way leaders and kings are evaluated in these books. In the book of Jeremiah, the simile of a tree planted by streams of water is used to describe the blessedness of those who trust in the Lord (Jer 17:5-8). By appropriating the simile, the author of Psalm 1 teaches that trust in the Lord is expressed by constant concern with his instruction.

The first psalm, by echoing these texts, applies the instruction and lesson of that record to wisdom's question about how life is to be lived. The torah of the Lord replaces wisdom and its human teachers. The responsibility that once was primarily that of Israel's leaders is laid squarely on the shoulders of the pious.² In its introductory role, Psalm 1 is a signal of the

² For a somewhat similar assessment of these connections, see P. D. Miller, Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 83-84.

importance of the Psalter for that piety and of torah-piety for the book of Psalms. All the categories by which the psalmists identify themselves and their circle—servants, humble, fearers of the Lord, devoted ones—are to be understood in light of the first psalm.

Psalm 19 brings together cosmos, torah, and prayer. It puts in an interrelated sequence the language of the heavens, the instruction of the Lord, and the words of the psalmist.

The psalm is a literary unit. The custom of dividing it into two or three separate units overlooks the compositional techniques, uncovered in several recent studies, that unite quite different styles and topics.³ To a strictly form-critical approach, the combinations seem artificial. But that is an indication that this poem and many others assigned to “mixed-genres” are a type of literature whose generic characteristic is the gathering and combination of styles and materials into a new kind of unit.⁴ The juxtaposition of cosmic speech with categories of the Lord’s instruction is certainly intentional. The heavenly order praises God, and the psalmist praises the instruction of the Lord. The implication of this pairing is not expressly stated. Another psalm using similar vocabulary and motifs (Psalm 33:6–9) cites the Lord’s authority as creator as a reason to fear him (one of the parallel terms for torah in Psalm 19; see v 10). The certain point is the presentation of a God who is known both through creation and torah. The torah of the Lord is just as certain and everlasting, just as much a part of the nature of reality as the succession of day and night and the regular course of the sun.

The literary model for the second part of Psalm 19 comes from Proverbs. The Psalm commends the torah of the Lord in the same way that the teacher commends wisdom (Prov 8:1–21; see also 4:20–23; 6:23) and claims for the torah of the Lord excellences and functions that include and surpass those of wisdom. To extend the commendation, the author has searched out and assembled five companion terms for torah: testimony, precepts, commandment, fear, and ordinance.⁵ One can put it that way because the terms are at home in various kinds of literary sources, but the list and its order are unique. “Precepts” appears only in other psalms. The “fear of the Lord,” meaning content instead of practice, is found in the

³ M. Fishbane, “Psalm 19. Creation, Torah, and Hope,” in *Text and Texture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979) 84–90; D. J. A. Clines, “The Tree of Knowledge and the Law of Yahweh (Psalm XIX),” *VT* 24 (1974) 8–14.

⁴ See the excellent assessment of H. Gunkel’s *Mischgattungen* in F. Stolz, *Psalmen im nachkulturellen Raum* (Theologische Studien 129; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1983) 23–27.

⁵ I am using *tôrâ* as a comprehensive term for what is named discursively by the cluster of nouns in Psalm 19 (*‘ēdūt*, *piqqūdīm* *mišwâ*, *yir’â*, *mišpātīm*) and in Psalm 119 (*‘ēdōt*, *piqqūdīm*, *dābār*, *mišpātīm*, *mišwôt*, *huqqīm*, *‘imrâ*, *derek*, *‘orah*). I give RSV’s translations since they are familiar. No translation is entirely satisfactory, though note what JPS has done. Torah when translated is “instruction, teaching,” and “law” is avoided for well-known reasons.

Hebrew scriptures only in another psalm (Ps 111:10), and in the introduction to the book of Proverbs (Prov 1:7).⁶ The other four terms appear in clusters in Deuteronomy–Kings. This eclectic gathering of terms is a procedure used also in Psalm 119. For now, suffice it to say that the procedure suggests that the psalmist found the instruction of the Lord in a variety of sources.

The concluding prayer knows about the dangers of “the unintended errors” dealt with in Leviticus 4–5 and of the insolent men who afflict the righteous in Psalm 119. The author asks to be kept innocent and free of these dangers and offers his words and the meditation they express as the acceptable sacrifice to accompany his prayer. That is, the recited psalm performs a cultic function without the cultic procedures of sacrifice.⁷ This is a clue to the way other psalms, the hymns, and the prayers are viewed by the composer. They are all words of mouth expressing meditation of the heart said as the primary medium of worship.

Psalm 119 pushes the procedure of using torah as a center for organizing a variety of material to the limits possible for one literary unit. A large repertoire of genres and scripture material is combined into an expression of a piety that is the real setting of the psalm.⁸ The formal framework of the whole is an acrostic arrangement with eight poetic lines to the letter. The topic of each of the lines is one of the terms that make up a vocabulary of torah. The poem begins with two commendation formulas praising those whose way is blameless because they live by the torah of the Lord with their whole heart; after that it continues to the end as direct address to the Lord. Line by line, all the various situations and moods that belong to the relation between the Lord and the servant of the Lord are dealt with, always with one of the torah terms as medium of the relationship. The result is a liturgical tapestry of devotional moves. The compositional technique has rightly been called anthological, but with the reservation that what has been created is no mere collection but a combination into a unity. Psalm 119 is the consummate *Mischgattung* and a clue to what is going on in other psalms that do not fit the standard psalmic types.

The list of terms for torah is somewhat different from and longer than the list in Psalm 19. “Fear of the Lord” is not used. “Testimonies” is always

⁶ J. Becker, *Gottesfurcht im alten Testament* (AnBib 25; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965) 268–74.

⁷ H.-J. Hermisson, *Sprache und Ritus im altisraelitischen Kult: Zur Spiritualisierung der Kultbegriff im alten Testament* (WMANT 19; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1965). S. Towner makes the same point about the prayer in Daniel 9 in “Retributional Theology in the Apocalyptic Setting,” *USQR* 26 (1971) 203–14.

⁸ A. Deissler, *Psalm 119 (118) und seine Theologie* (Münchener Theologische Studien 1/2; Munich: Zink, 1955), an exhaustive study of the Psalm and its relations to other Psalms and Hebrew scriptures, is the basic resource for any study of Psalm 119.

plural. "Statutes" is added. "Word of the Lord" is second only to torah in frequency, a term whose provenance is the latter and former prophets. "Saying," a synonym of "word" in the Psalms (105:19; 147:15) is a major term. "Way" and its frequent parallel, "path," get marginal use. The practice of forming word clusters of this kind seems to begin in Deuteronomy-Kings, where the cluster is used to combine various kinds of legal sentences under the one rubric of torah.⁹ Psalm 19 continues the practice with the same intention of referring to what is being brought together. But in Psalm 119 the expansion of the list reflects not just the consolidation of various kinds of materials, as in Deuteronomy, but the assembling of various writings that provide access to the teaching of the Lord. The cluster of terms is not so much a list of synonyms that refer to one entity but more a vocabulary that refers to a variety of writings which are regarded as having one function. The list is meant to include whatever serves as instruction about the way of the Lord and of his servants.

Moreover, the psalm is strewn with phrases that appear in other books of the Hebrew canon and in other psalms. The correlations are all laid out in Alfons Deissler's minute investigations of the text.¹⁰ One can argue about whether the phrases are self-conscious references to and quotations of other texts, or the product of a mind so steeped in searching other texts that they are used in a subliminal way in composition. In either case, the implication is the same. The poet repeatedly refers to searching, studying, reciting the material identified by his cluster of terms, a clue that he is quite aware of his sources and what he is doing.¹¹ Within the acrostic structure the poetic lines form a generic montage of elements drawn from the principal types of psalms. The elements of the hymn, the thanksgiving, the lament, the song of confidence, and the didactic poem are used in a way that seems somewhat controlled by the demands of the acrostic pattern and somewhat by immediate context. Within those constraints, the psalm praises the Lord, makes petitions, describes trouble, confesses need, makes vows, tells of salvation, asserts trust, describes the wicked—and so on. All this generic diversity is held together as though the one who addresses God through the psalm were himself in his trust and experience the life setting of it all. This combination of psalmic genres into speech with which the servant of the Lord speaks to God is a clue to the way the rest of the psalms are viewed. They are all particular cases of the way a servant addressed his divine Lord, themselves fragments of a larger whole brought together in Psalm 119.

⁹ It is not the appearance of single terms so much as their collocation in clusters of two or more that is the issue. See the useful table showing the composition and location of clusters in G. Liedke, *Gestalt und Bezeichnung alttestamentlicher Rechtssätze* (WMANT 39; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1971) 11–18.

¹⁰ A. Deissler, *Psalm 119* (118), 270–80.

¹¹ Note the use of *šāh*, *dāraš*, *lāmad*, *sippēr* in the Psalm.

II

Second, the relation of the torah psalms to other psalms. These three are the only psalms composed on the theme of torah, but they do not stand isolated in the Psalter. If one reads through the Psalms prompted by the introductory claim that the instruction of the Lord is the concern of the righteous and the effective factor in determining how life comes out, other expressions of this theology can be found scattered throughout the Psalter. Fourteen psalms are involved;¹² taken with the primary three, that makes seventeen. They all belong to the last stratum of the collection or have been developed by torah interests.

Taken together, this harvest of texts contains a profile of an understanding of the Lord's way with people and the world that is organized around torah. Torah applies to everything.

It applies to the basic narrative that runs from the fathers to the land. The story of the Lord's way with his people is said to have its meaning and purpose in his instruction. The wonderful deeds of the Lord are celebrated and rehearsed so that each generation will "not forget God's great deeds, but observe his commandments" (78:1-8). Psalm 105 teaches that all the Lord did from the time of the fathers to the settlement in the land had the goal "that they keep his statutes and observe his teachings" (v 45). Indeed, the very distinctiveness of God's relationship to Israel is that God proclaimed his word, statutes, and ordinances to Israel and did not do so for any other nation (147:19-20).

Torah applies to the offices of priest and king. Moses, Aaron, and Samuel, the original sequence of priests, responded to the speech of God by observing the testimonies and statutes he gave them (99:6-7). When David and his descendants called on the Lord in distress, he delivered them because of their righteousness in holding to his ordinances and statutes (18:21-25). The Lord's covenant with David will endure, but always David's sons will be under the discipline of the Lord's torah in ordinances, statutes, and commandments (89:30-33).

Torah applies to Israel's future. It is a condition of the continuity of the Lord's steadfast love and faithfulness to Israel. The steadfast love of the Lord is eternal, but it comes only to those who fear the Lord by observing his commandments and precepts (103:17-18; 25:10).

Torah applies to the life of every person. The lesson learned from the teachers of wisdom that it is well for the righteous and bad for the wicked is understood in the light of torah as the source of wisdom. "Happy is the one who fears the Lord, being concerned with his commandments" (112:1). The teacher is no longer one of the wise, but the Lord. "Happy is the one . . . O Lord, you teach by your instruction" (94:10). By the study of the

¹² Psalms 18, 25, 33, 78, 89, 93, 94, 99, 103, 105, 111, 112, 147, 148.

torah, more insight is gained than from any human teachers (119:97–99).

Torah applies even to the Lord's creating and ordering the elements of the world. The commanding word that brought forth the earth to endure (33:6–9) and sends winter and summer (147:15–19) is described by the same vocabulary and put in direct sequence with the Lord's word in statutes and ordinances to Israel.

It is not difficult to imagine how this unifying point of view, stated as an introduction to the Psalter and reiterated across its breadth, could provide a perspective from which the rest of the Psalter could be understood and read. In fact, Psalm 119 is a poetic inventory of the ways in which the instruction of the Lord in all its categories can become the agenda for virtually all the functions of psalmic hymn and prayer. Torah contains the mighty works of the Lord for which he is praised (vv 27, 18) and serves as a basis for and content of praise (vv 7, 62). It is the subject of thanksgiving for deliverance (v 46) and the fashion of sacrifice offered with thanksgiving (v 108). Involvement with torah creates the predicament in which prayer is uttered, excites the opposition of the wicked, and attracts their taunts (vv 22, 39). It is at once the motive for prayer and the answer (vv 28, 29). It is the subject of affirmation of trust (vv 33, 44) and furnishes the terms for the claim of innocence (v 69) and the content of vows (v 117). In this way of thinking, just as torah has taken over the functions of wisdom, the life concerned with torah is lived in psalmic functions. The coherence of the psalter with its introduction becomes clearer. The psalms are the liturgy for those whose concern and delight is the torah of the Lord.

It also becomes clearer why study of the torah is said in the introduction to be the characteristic of the righteous. How does one come to be able to praise and pray and act out of the center of torah? Three times in the Psalter we hear of the person on whose mind and emotions torah is, as it were, imprinted.¹³ "I am concerned to do your will; your torah is inside me" (40:9); "Your word I have stored up in my mind" (119:11); "The mouth of the righteous recites wisdom and his tongue speaks what is right. The instruction of his God is in his mind" (37:30–31). How is it that the instructing word has been incorporated in the very structure of consciousness? By a kind of study mentioned in the context of two of these quotations and in all three of the torah psalms.¹⁴ It is a kind of study that proceeds orally; it rehearses and repeats. It searches the instruction of God by reciting in receptivity until the matter becomes part of the thinking and willing and doing. For this kind of discipline any text that has become scripture can become instruction, command, word, precept.

¹³ For a study of the connection of the texts with prophetic books, see H. J. Kraus, "Zum Gesetzesverständnis der nachprophetischen Zeit," in *Biblische-Theologische Aufsätze* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972) 278–95.

¹⁴ Note *hāgā* in Pss 1:2; 37:30; *hegyôn* in 19:15 and n. 11.

III

Third, the location of the torah psalms in the Psalter. Psalm 1 is only half of the introduction to the book. It is generally recognized that Psalms 1 and 2 together form a literary unit.¹⁵ They are held together by the commendation formula which opens one and closes the other and by a number of common motifs and themes. Indeed, the last strophe (vv 10–12) of Psalm 2, calling on the rulers of the nation to be prudent in the face of the claims of the Lord's kingship, was likely composed in the process of combining the two psalms.

The resulting literary unit brings together the topics of torah and the kingship of the Lord. One part addresses the question of the individual, the other of history. One is concerned with the problem of the wicked in society, the other with the nations of the world. There is a choice between two ways for the individual (one can scoff at torah or delight in it) and for the nations (one can rebel or one can serve the Lord). This intricate pairing as introduction says that all the psalms dealing with the living of life under the Lord must be understood and recited in the light of the reign of the Lord and that all psalms concerned with the kingship of the Lord are to be understood and recited with the torah in mind.

It is also generally agreed that by the time the Psalter was being completed, the psalms dealing with the kingship of the Lord were understood eschatologically.¹⁶ They no longer refer only to what was enacted in cult, but as well to what was promised in prophecy. Psalm 2, reread as a vision of the goal of history, puts the torah piety of Psalm 1 in an eschatological context. The end of the wicked and the vindication of the righteous can be understood in terms of the coming kingdom of God. The compositional pairing of the two psalms is a work of theological synthesis, a combining of literary entities which reflects an intellectual consolidation of the resources of Pentateuch, prophecy, and wisdom in psalmic form.

There are other cases in the Psalter of composing and arranging psalms in pairs to bring topics together to create a more comprehensive theological statement.¹⁷ Psalms 111 and 112 are a set of two, both in the acrostic form, and clearly composed to complement each other. Psalm 111 summarizes the deeds of the Lord and concludes with the point that "the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord." Psalm 112 commends the one who fears the Lord by delighting in his commandments and concludes with a contrast

¹⁵ See especially G. T. Sheppard, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct* (BZAW 151; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980) 136–43.

¹⁶ Among others, see B. S. Childs, *Introduction*, 517–18; C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 258.

¹⁷ On Psalms 111/112 and 105/106, see W. Zimmerli, "Zwillingspsalmen," in *Studien zur alttestamentlichen Theologie und Prophetie* (TBü, Altes Testament 51; Munich: Kaiser, 1974) 261–71.

with the wicked. The ways of God and the ways of the righteous are paired.

Psalms 105 and 106 are both narrative hymns. The first surveys the wondrous works of the Lord and makes the point that the Lord's purpose was that Israel should keep his laws (v 45). The second surveys the same history as a recitation of Israel's faithlessness throughout and makes the point that Israel's salvation depends on the Lord's great faithfulness. The righteousness of God and the sinfulness of Israel are paired.

Psalms 9 and 10 are a continuous though broken acrostic of two parts. The first, using the style of thanksgiving, deals with God's way with the wicked nations. The second, using the style of lament, deals with God's way with wicked people. In the midst of each, the kingship of God is announced (9:8 and 10:16), and from each the cry "Arise, O Lord" (9:20 and 10:12) is heard. All of the psalms appearing as pairs have thematic connections with the three torah psalms.

This raises the question whether Psalms 19 and 119 are located so they stand in correlation with another psalm. Is it a mere accident that both, with their emphasis on torah as the center of life, follow a psalm in which, as in Psalm 2, the problem is the nations against whom the Lord acts to save the righteous one as a vindication of his sovereignty? Is it fortuitous that both 18 and 118 are subject to an eschatological rereading? There are features of content and motif that suggest an intentional pairing. In the case of 18 and 19, both begin with a cosmic theophany which reveals the power of God (18:8-16 and 19:2-7). Psalm 18 says that the way of God is perfect and the word of the Lord is pure (v 31) and Psalm 19 says that the instruction of the Lord is perfect and the commandment of the Lord is pure (vv 8, 9). Psalm 118 tells of the salvation of a rejected righteous one which vindicates the faith of the righteous. Psalm 119 is a prayer for salvation by the righteous who are rejected on account of faithfulness to torah. These are only illustrations of the connecting features to be found.

In all three cases, the purpose of the pairing seems to be the provision of an eschatological context for a piety based in torah. Those who were at work in the final shaping and arrangement of the Psalter were completely committed to torah as the divinely willed way of life. Their theology said: "The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (Ps 1:6). But things did not work out that way in their experience. The Psalter is itself full of evidence that it does not. Those who trust in the Lord suffer. The righteous are afflicted. Prayers for help go up as the liturgy of the pious. Yet nowhere in the final content of the Psalter is this faith surrendered. It is tried and questioned, but neither the way of Job nor the way of Ecclesiastes is followed. The reason is the eschatological context of the torah piety—the hope for the coming kingdom of God.

IV

The three points considered above sketch an approach to the Psalms that begins with the torah psalms. These considerations show that much appears in a different light when these psalms are allowed to provide an introduction to and a perspective on the rest. To take up the torah psalms as the problem children of the Psalter is in the end to take up the question of the entire book of Psalms. Implications, possibilities, and questions are uncovered that do not usually arise in other approaches.

The context for the construal of language in the Psalms shifts. Semantic horizons are more those of intratextual relations and less groups of types and reconstructed cultic occasions. Form-critical and cult-functional questions are subordinated and questions of content and theology become more important. The so-called mixed type of psalm takes on an important role as clue to the way the Psalms are to be viewed and understood.

The torah psalms point to a type of piety as setting-in-life for the Psalms, a piety that used the entire book as prayer and praise. That means this piety was quite different from any self-righteous, single-minded legalism. Its basic religious commitments were devotion to the instruction of the Lord and trust in the reign of the Lord. The two primary problems with which it lived were wickedness in self and society and the arrogance and power of the nations. The questions with which it wrestled were the incongruence of conduct and experience and the hiddenness of the purpose of God in history. Its way was faithfulness through study and obedience and hope through prayer and waiting. The Psalms were reread in the light of this piety and it in turn was constantly shaped by the use of the Psalms.

If there be a bit of cogency to this approach to the Psalter, it is an illustration in the field of criticism of the eschatological proverb, "The last will be first, and the first last."

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