

59. The Torah Psalter

In the Exile, devotion to the Law took the form of meditation on a group of Psalms, defined by the framing Psalms 1 and 119.

Hezekiah (§56) had been reduced to the status of a client state of Assyria. At one point, relying on Egyptian help, he sought to break free of Assyria. Sennacherib, King of Assyria, mocked him in the following terms:

2Kgs 18:20-21. Now, on whom does thou trust, that thou hast rebelled against me? Behold, thou restedst upon the staff of this bruised reed, even Egypt.

Assyria attacked Jerusalem in 0701; Egypt gave no help. Sennacherib, finding the Jerusalem defenses formidable, accepted a payment of tribute, and Judah became again a vassal state. 2 Kings 19:35-36 records the departure of the Assyrians as a miraculous victory of Yahweh, who slew the 185,000 men of the attacking force, and drove Sennacherib away. No one was deceived: Josiah (§57), making his move later when Assyria was weaker, died in a battle with an also resurgent Egypt at Megiddo in 0609. *There was no national future.*

At such times, it is natural to ask what had gone wrong. The orthodox view was, disobedience to Yahweh. The laws of Yahweh were scrutinized for any overlooked rules. Eventually, the Law itself became an object of contemplation. And to the Psalter as it then was, there were added a new Preface (Psa 1) at the beginning,¹ and at the end, a very long acrostic poem, Psa 119.

Psa 1 focuses on the law of Yahweh. *Nothing but Yahweh's law exists.* Following it, and intensely meditating on it, will give blessing:

- [1] Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor standeth in the way of sinners,
nor sitteth in the seat of scoffers,
- [2] but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law doth he meditate day and night.
- [3] And he shall be like a tree planted by the streams of water,
that bringeth forth its fruit in its season,
whose leaf also doth not wither,
and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.
- [4] The wicked are not so,
but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.
- [5] Therefore the wicked shall not stand in the judgement,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked shall perish.

Here at last is a source of assurance, one not dependant on mere human effort. These words of assurance at least will remain, whatever else might fail.

So much for fixing the *beginning* of the Psalter. What about its end?

¹For Psa 2, the original Preface to Book I of the Psalter, see again §50.

At the other end comes the new Psa 119, an acrostic to end all acrostics. To each letter of the alphabet it gives, not *one* verse, but *eight* verses. And within those eight verses, it rings the changes on synonyms for “law:” statutes, ordinances, commandments . . .²

Psa 119 begins by echoing the new Psa 1, at the beginning of the collection:

Ⲡ ALEPH (#1)

- [1] Blessed are they that are perfect in the *Way*,
who walk in the *law* of Yahweh.
- [2] Blessed are they that keep his *testimonies*,
that seek him with the whole heart.
- [3] Yea, they do no unrighteousness;
they walk in his *ways*.
- [4] Thou hast commanded us thy *precepts*,
that we should observe them diligently.
- [5] Oh, **that my ways were established**
to observe thy *statutes*!
- [6] Then **shall I not be put to shame**,
when I have respect unto all thy *commandments*
- [7] I **will give thanks** unto thee with uprightness of heart,
When I learn thy righteous *judgements*.
- [8] I **will observe** thy *statutes*:
Oh, forsake me not utterly.

It then continues with instruction for the young:

Ⲩ BETH (#2)

- [9] Wherewith shall **a young man** cleanse his way?
By taking heed according to thy *word*.
- [10] With my whole heart have I sought thee:
Oh **let me not wander** from thy *commandments*!
- [11] Thy *word* have I laid up in my heart,
That I might not sin against thee.
- [12] Blessed art thou, O Yahweh,
Teach me thy *statutes*.
- [13] With my lips have I declared
All the *ordinances* of thy mouth.
- [14] I have rejoiced in the way of thy *testimonies*,
As much as in all riches.
- [15] I **will meditate** on thy *precepts*,
And have respect unto thy *ways*.
- [16] I **will delight myself** in thy *statutes*;
I will not forget thy *word*.

Thus does the poem set out, in the first of its two-stanza pairs, the dedication of a young man to the teachings of Yahweh.

How will it end?

²For a detailed consideration of its structure, and its relation to other acrostics in the Psalter, see Freedman **Psalm 119**.

It ends with an old man's acknowledgement of responsibility for past disasters, but with an abiding dedication to the law, and the assurance that he has done his part, and that, whatever may happen, Yahweh will save.

ו SHIN (#21)

- [161] Princes **have persecuted me** without a cause,
But my heart standeth in awe of thy *words*.
[162] I rejoice at thy *word*,
As one that findeth great spoil.
[163] I hate and abhor falsehood;
Thy *law* do I love.
[164] Seven times a day do I praise thee,
Because of they righteous *ordinances*.
[165] Great peace have they that love thy *law*,
And they have no occasion of stumbling.
[166] **I have hoped** for thy salvation, O Yahweh,
And **have done** thy *commandments*.
[167] My soul **hath observed** thy *testimonies*,
And I love them exceedingly.
[168] **I have observed** thy *precepts* and thy *testimonies*,
For all my ways **are before thee**.

. . . and the poem concludes with an explicit supplication:

ת TAV (#22)

- [169] Let my cry come near before thee, O Yahweh;
give me understanding according to thy Word.
[170] Let my supplication come before thee;
deliver me according to thy Word.
[171] Let my lips utter praise.
for thou teachest me thy statutes.
[172] Let my tongue sing of thy word,
for all thy commandments are righteousness.
[173] Let thy hand be ready to help me,
for I have chosen thy precepts.
[174] **I have longed** for thy salvation, O Yahweh,
and thy law is my delight.
[175] Let my soul live, and it shall praise thee;
and let thine ordinances help me.
[176] **I have gone astray** like a lost sheep; seek thy servant,
for **I do not forget** thy commandments.

All is Torah. No *doing* is involved. Responsibility for the sin that caused the evil past is admitted, but the law *defining* sin is now the sole focus of attention. The law ("I do not forget") has been reduced to an object of meditation.

The Psalms themselves would move on, in response to more hopeful situations (see §65, below). But this new contemplative mode would remain, for some, a permanently habitable heritage.