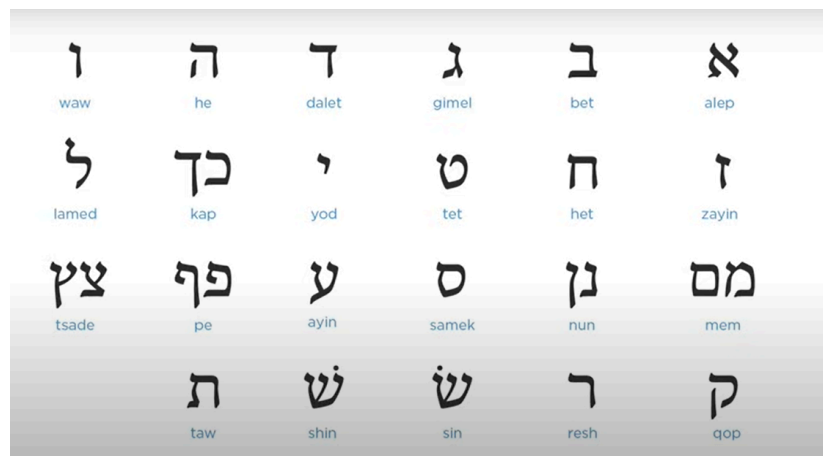


Introduction to Psalm 119

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David Rivas

When the third and fourth century philosopher and theologian Augustine of Hippo preached through the book of Psalms, he skipped Psalm 119. While its length (176 verses, or 5 pages in my Bible, roughly about the same as Philippians) played a factor in his omission of the psalm, it was its depth, which he described as “fathomable by few” which tipped the scales in his decision. He eventually agreed to preach through it, concluding that it was actually quite straightforward. Psalm 119, he wrote, seemed “not to need an expositor, but only a reader and a listener”. Why the change of heart? He concluded that it’s worth studying because of its simplicity and depth. Psalm 119 is indeed a long and wonderful Psalm.



The Form of Psalm 119

Besides its length (twenty-two, eight-verse stanzas, totalling 176 lines), Psalm 119 lives up to its nickname, the Great Psalm for a number of reasons. It combines formal characteristics of other psalms like lament (Psalm 25), hymn (111; 145), and a wisdom song (Psalms 1, 19, and 112).

- 1 אֲשֶׁר־י תְּמִיּוּ-דָרְךָ הִהְלֵכִים בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה:
- 2 אֲשֶׁר־י נִצְרִי עֲדָתְךָ בְּכָל־לֵב יִדְרָשׁוּהוּ:
- 3 אֲךָ לֹא־פָעַלְנוּ עוֹלָה בְּדַרְכֵי הַלְכוּ:
- 4 אַתָּה צִנִּיתָה פְקֻדֶיךָ לְשֹׁמֵר מֵאָדָּם:
- 5 אֲדֹלֵי יִפְנוּ דַרְכֵי לְשֹׁמֵר תִּקְוֶיךָ:
- 6 אַז לֹא־אֲבֹשׁ בְּהִבְטִי אֶל־כָּל־מַצּוֹתֶיךָ:
- 7 אֲוֹדֶךָ בְּיִשָּׁר לִבִּי בְּלִמְדֵי מִשְׁפָּטֶי צְדָקָה:
- 8 אַתָּה־תִּקְוֶיךָ אֲשֹׁמֵר אֶל־תִּעֲזָבֵנִי עַד־מֵאָדָּם:

One of its defining features is that it is an acrostic poem. The Hebrew alphabet consists of 22 letters, and this psalm contains 22 units, what we might call stanzas of eight verses each. Each one of the 22 sections is given a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and each line in that section begins with that letter. The closest parallel to this pattern of scripture is found in Lamentations 3 which is also divided into 22 sections.

Psalms 9-10 together, Psalms 25; 34; 37; 111-112 and 145 are all acrostic poems, but 119 is the more developed.

In Psalm 119, the first letter of the first word of each section begins with a corresponding letter of the Hebrew alphabet (see image above), as the poet works his way from beginning (aleph) to the end (taw). In a literary sense, the acrostic form can give the sense of completion and totality, that the topic has been covered fully, and its length and detail certainly gives the reader a sense that the poet has indeed fully covered the subject. The rigid structure also reflects an appreciation and value of order.

Subject Matter

The subject of this Psalm is the law of God. Almost every verse mentions the Word of God. While this psalm refers to the scriptures (and it does so using a variety of synonyms), it is understood that it is referring to the complete word of God, not just the Law of Moses, even though the writer would not have had the complete written word of God as we do now. For us, this would include the New Testament.

The psalm uses eight main synonyms for God's word. How do they relate to each other? Is any distinction in meaning possible between these synonyms? If they are different, can there be any common ground between them? What are the nuances of the different words? To attempt to address these questions, let's consider the following:

English word used in ESV	Hebrew	Definition
Law (25x)	<i>tôrâ</i>	The parent verb means to 'teach' or 'direct.' It can refer to law or instructions, but especially the Decalogue, Pentateuch, or the entire revealed written law of God.
Example from Psalm 119		Psalm 119:1 Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord!
Example outside of Psalm 119		Exodus 13:9 And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the Lord has brought you out of Egypt.
Testimonies (23x)	<i>'ēdâ</i>	Related to the word for witness, signifies loyalty to the covenant. It speaks of the trustworthiness and faithfulness of what God says.
Example from Psalm 119		Psalm 119:2 Blessed are those who keep his testimonies , who seek him with their whole heart,
Example outside of Psalm 119		Genesis 21:30 He said, "These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well."
Precepts (21x)	<i>piqqûdîm</i>	Means 'precept, statute,' but is drawn from a root that means to attend to, visit, or frequent often as in the sphere of an office or an overseer like a man who is responsible to look closely into

		the situation and to take action. By implication the word points to the particular instructions of the Lord as one who cares about detail.
Example from Psalm 119		Psalm 119:4 You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.
Example outside of Psalm 119		Genesis 39:4 So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had.
Statues (21x)	<i>ḥōq</i>	Derived from the root word ‘to engrave’ or ‘to inscribe,’ and carries the idea of the authority of God’s written word it declares the authority and power of giving us laws
Example from Psalm 119		Psalm 119:5 Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!
Example outside of Psalm 119		Exodus 12:24 You shall observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever.
Commandments (22x)	<i>mišvâ</i>	A command, whether human or divine that emphasizes the straight authority of what is said
Example from Psalm 119		Psalm 119:6 Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.
Example outside of Psalm 119		Exodus 20:6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.
Judgment/rule (23x)	<i>mišpāṭ</i>	properly, a verdict (favorable or unfavorable) pronounced judicially, especially a sentence or formal decree, from the Hebrew word to judge, shows how rules are to be regulated cause us to discern to choose
Example from Psalm 119		Psalm 119:7 I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous rules.
Example outside of Psalm 119		Genesis 18:25 Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just? ”
Word (24x)	<i>dābār</i>	Spoken or written word; a thing, but in this Psalm speaks of God’s revealed written word to mankind
Example from Psalm 119		Psalm 119:9 How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.

Example outside of Psalm 119		Genesis 11:1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same <i>words</i> .
Promises/Word (19x)	<i>'imrâ</i>	An utterance, speech, or word; May denote anything that God has spoken commanded or promised, intended to encourage and be the basis for expectation
Example from Psalm 119		Psalm 119:41 Let your steadfast love come to me, O Lord, your salvation according to your <i>promise</i>
Example outside of Psalm 119		Genesis 4:23-24 23 Lamech said to his wives: “Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to <i>what I say</i> : I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. 24 If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold.”

All sections use at least five of these words, and five use all eight. There’s no one word that can capture the glory, scope, function, purpose of God’s Word, so the Psalmist uses these eight words primarily. The Psalmist applied these words to the entire, as-yet-incomplete canon of scripture as he had it in his day, and so we can apply it to the complete revealed written revelation that we now have.

We may be tempted to critique it for an absence of variety, rather than admire hyper focused lovesong to the Word of God. The beauty of psalm 119 is very much like that of a kaleidoscope that uses beautiful colors and shapes that are the same but are arranged again and again in a different and beautiful pattern.

Language

Psalm 119 features a prominent use of the first person pronouns “I” and “you,” reflecting that true religion is a personal relationship with the Lord. Calvin’s comment on the entire book of Psalms is an appropriate one for 119: “The anatomy of all parts of the soul, for not an affection will anyone find in himself whose image is not reflected in this mirror. All the grief, sorrows, fears, misgivings, hope, cares, anxieties in men are wont to be agitated, the Holy Spirit hath here pictured exactly” (from the preface on his commentary to Psalms).

2 Timothy 3:16-17 16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

During our study of this Psalm, you’ll notice that we will frequently refer to the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) as the Greek words often add significant insights to the meaning of the verse. In a sense, the Septuagint functions somewhat like a “commentary” on the Hebrew text. In fact, many (if not most) of the Old Testament quotations made by the writers of the New Testament are taken not from the Hebrew text but from the Greek text, the Septuagint.

Most word studies and definitions will be taken from PreceptAustin.org, and BlueLetterBible.com which includes *Strong's Concordance*, as well as Hywel R. Jones's book *Psalm 119 for Life: Living Today in the Light of God's Word*.

Authorship

The book of Psalms includes individual poems and poems organized by author (Asaph or Korah) and occasion (Songs of Ascent), but there is no attribution or internal evidence of authorship for 119.

While the author is unnamed, tradition ascribes it to David, and many older commentators such as Charles Spurgeon agree, believing that the psalm must have been composed throughout David's entire life. More modern commentators conclude that Psalm 119 is post-exilic, written after the Babylonian exile from the days of Nehemiah or Ezra. Besides David, scholars have suggested that Ezra, Daniel, or Jeremiah could have written it. Each of these proposed authors suffered serious difficulties in life. These trials could have been what the poet discusses in descriptions of plots, slanders, and taunts against him (verses 23, 42, 51, 150), persecutions (verses 61, 86, 95, 110, 121, 134, 157, 161), and afflictions (verses 67, 71, 143, 153). I mention this because the subject matter mentioned above speaks to the practical application of the Psalm (but more on that later, see Application and Central Theme below).

Davidic authorship is not impossible, since it bears similarities in content and tone to other Psalms that are attributed to him. Acts 2 ascribes Psalm 2 to David although it's anonymous so maybe Psalm 119 is a similar situation. However, other Psalms in Book 5 in which Psalm 119 is found ascribe authorship to David, namely Psalms 108 - 110 and 138 - 145. In the introduction to his book on Psalm 119, Hewell R. Jones argues that rather than asking "who is the author?", it is more beneficial to ask "what is the author?" noting that "something that is more important to explore than an authorial connection between Psalm 119 and King David *individually*. It is whether there is a connection between the psalm and the monarchy in Israel as an institution" (p. 15). He argues that there is evidence that the author of this Psalm was a Davidic king. First, he gives a thematic reason, citing Deuteronomy 17:14-20, a definitive text of the connection that the king of Israel must have with the law.

Deuteronomy 17:14-20 18 "And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. 19 And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, 20 that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.

Secondly, he argues the "striking correspondence" between the words used for the law and this Psalm and monarchy passages in the Old Testament. Particularly, David used six of the eight terms listed above in his farewell address to Solomon in 1 Kings 2:3-4: "and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his *statutes*, his *commandments*, his

rules, and his **testimonies**, as it is written in the **Law** of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn, that the Lord may establish his **word** that he spoke concerning me...”

While these are interesting notes, I don't believe they point definitively to David or one of his descendants as the author, but I believe we will find that the monarchy connection will be enlightening as we continue in our exposition of this Psalm in weeks to come. Whether David or another king wrote it, I think it's safe to say that it's not really for us to know. If the human authorship was necessary to understand this Psalm, then God would have preserved that information for us.

Regardless of who the human author of Psalm 119 was, it was likely written over some period of time and then later compiled because there's not a definite flow of thought from beginning to end. It has been likened to a string of pearls, in which each pearl has its own independent value as opposed to a chain where one link is connected to the other.

Application and Central Theme

The central theme is that the Word of God provides all things necessary to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). The poet's love for the Word of God and his dedication to remember it and live by it is a theme that is repeated over and over (verses 11, 15–16, 24, 34, 44, 47, 55, 60, etc.).

This Psalm is a psalm that not only loves God's Word but most especially loves God and connects with God in and through his word. As such, Psalm 119 affirms not only the character of the Scriptures, but it affirms that God's Word reflects the very character of God himself. Notice these attributes of God ascribed to Scripture in Psalm 119:

1. Righteousness (verses 7, 62, 75, 106, 123, 138, 144, 160, 164, 172)
2. Trustworthiness (verse 42)
3. Truthfulness (verses 43, 142, 151, 160)
4. Faithfulness (verse 86)
5. Unchangeableness (verse 89)
6. Eternality (verses 90, 152)
7. Light (verse 105)
8. Purity (verse 140)

The Word of God is sufficient to make us wise, train us in righteousness, and equip us for every good work (2 Timothy 3:15–17). The Scriptures are a reflection of God's nature, and from them we learn that we can trust his character and his plan and purposes for us, even when those plans include affliction and persecution. Indeed we are blessed if our delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law we meditate day and night (Psalm 1:2).