

Passionate Pursuit of the God of Redemption: Interpreting Psalm 119 in the Light of its Immediate Context in Book V of the Psalter

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Introduction

Psalm 119 has often received a bad press. Perhaps the most damning comment I have come across comes from Bernard Duhm (1899) who found “no redeeming features in its art, thought or piety. It is useful only in illustrating the perils of book-religion. It stands as the most empty product that ever blackened paper.”¹ R.A.F. Mackenzie wrote, “One could start with the last verse and recite it backwards, and the general effect would be the same.”² Can a sympathetic reading of Psalm 119 with an eye to its canonical context provide a more positive reading?

The Character of Psalm 119 – Purpose and Process

The person portrayed in Psalm 119 is involved in an ‘I-You’ conversation with God. Apart from the opening three verses, every verse of Psalm 119 is personally addressed from the first person to God. And in virtually every stanza the psalmist expresses intense neediness. Far from being a dispassionate treatise on the law of God, it rather has the character of a cry from the heart; a cry from the mind, conscience, will and passion of a person who has nowhere to go but God to find the resources needed to live in a godly way in a fallen world. Ministry from Psalm 119 must reflect this character of the psalm. How does Psalm 119 teach or rebuke our minds, test or convict our conscience, train and correct our wills, stir our love and inspire our passions?

¹ Duhm, *Die Psalmen* (1899), quoted in John H. Eaton, *Psalms of the Way and the Kingdom: Conference with the Commentators* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 24–25.

² MacKenzie, cited in C Stuhlmüller, *Psalms*, 2 vols. Wilmington: Glazier, 1983, as quoted in Will Soll, *Psalm 119: Matrix, Form and Setting* (The Catholic Biblical Quarterly. Monograph series 023; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1991), 87.

Two significant aspects of answering these questions are *purpose* and *process*. What is the purpose of Psalm 119 – what does it set out to do? And what is the process by which it achieves its purpose? If we can prise open the purpose of Psalm 119 we will know what the application of Psalm 119 in ministry should look like. And understanding how Psalm 119 achieves its purpose will help us to know how to work with Psalm 119 towards that outcome.

Psalm 119 Is Not a ‘Cry of the Moment’

Even though Psalm 119 expresses a cry of the heart, it is almost the opposite of being a spontaneous composition ‘dashed off’ in a moment of desperate need. Rather it displays significant and highly disciplined poetic artistry; it is a carefully and patiently composed meditation. This aspect of the character of Psalm 119 must be appreciated in coming to terms with its purpose and process. As Erich Zenger wrote in 2008, “... it must be quite clearly asserted that this psalm is a work of literary artistry whose uniqueness one must appreciate in order to grasp its theological dynamics.”³

Psalm 119 is an alphabetic acrostic of 22 stanzas, all of which consist of eight verses. The verses are almost invariably bicola.⁴ There are eight ‘law words’ that are used as virtual synonyms throughout Psalm 119. If you exclude words which are not thematically significant from the analysis,⁵ then eight of the 11 most frequent words in Psalm 119 are the ‘law words’. They are תּוֹרָה *tôrâ* (“law, instruction”), דְּבַר *dābār* (“word”), מִשְׁפָּטִים *mišpāṭîm* (“judgments, ordinances”), עֲדוּת *édūt* (“testimonies”), מִצְוֹת *mišwōt* (“commandments”), חֻקִּים *ḥuqîm* (“statutes”), פְּקוּדִים *piqqûdîm* (“precepts”) and אִמְרָה *imrâ* (“word, promise”).⁶

³ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalm 101–150* (Hermeneia; trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 257.

⁴ Fokkelman identifies three tricola, vss 48, 145 and 176. J. P. Fokkelman, *The Psalms in Form: The Hebrew Psalter in its Poetic Shape* (Tools for Biblical Study 4; Leiden, The Netherlands: Deo Publishing, 2002), 170. Various modern translations take different approaches, sometimes in keeping with Fokkelman’s suggestion about these three verses and sometimes not. The other verses in Psalm 119 are invariably treated as bicola. Zenger states that there is only one tricolon: vs 176. See Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 261.

⁵ See a method for developing frequency analysis word lists in John de Hoog, “A Canonical Reading of Psalm 119” (Melbourne School of Theology, 2011), 68–70.

⁶ Most of these words are either exclusively singular or exclusively plural in their uses in Psalm 119. A simple gloss is provided, but note the comments about meaning that follow.

The eight ‘law words’ are always in Psalm 119 related to Yahweh with a suffix or in a construct expression with the Tetragrammaton. All eight terms appear in six of the 22 stanzas, and not less than six appear in every stanza. There is no regular pattern for their use; they are not used with unique meanings in relation to each other. The terms do not appear only in vv. 3, 37, 90 and 122. In v. 84 *mišpāṭ* appears but it is used in a different sense (“judgment”). In vv. 3, 37 a synonym “ways” takes the place of the law word. In v. 90 “faithfulness” performs this role. Hence, only in vv. 84 and 122 are there no ‘law’ words or synonyms at all. This construction speaks of a highly disciplined attention to form, and it also speaks eloquently to the purpose of the psalm.

There is further evidence that the psalmist took great care in creating Psalm 119. The use of the number eight stands out: There are eight verses in each stanza. The eight ‘law words’ are used in statistically remarkable ways. There are 176 instances of the use of these words (8x22), 88 in stanzas 1–11 and 88 in stanzas 12–22. The four masculine law words are used 88 times, the four feminine law words are used 88 times.⁷ In addition, the number of I/me/my morphemes is precisely the same as the number of you/your morphemes in which the psalmist addresses God: 315 in both cases.⁸ Psalm 119 is clearly not a spontaneous ‘cry of the moment’.

Personal and Procedural; Purpose and Process

Psalm 119 has a dual character as both intensely personal and methodologically ‘procedural’. Some commentators have felt that the procedural character of the psalm poses the danger of the process of composition becoming an end in itself, such that the communication of meaning in the psalm is relegated by the author a position of secondary importance. For example, Sigmund Mowinckel argued that the procedure of filling in the acrostic and the aim of using the eight law words in a consistent way resulted in a psalm that is almost random in its composition. He wrote:

In a late psalm like Ps. 119 prayer and lament and hymnal motives so intermingle as to make interpreters feel at a loss with regard to the character and purpose of the psalm. When a psalm was tied down to

⁷ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 259.

⁸ Fokkelman, *The Psalms in Form*, 170.

an artificial ‘alphabetic’ pattern... it very often resulted in a rambling and obscure train of thought and a loose composition.⁹

However, this opinion overstates the effect of the ‘procedure’ on communication of thought in the psalm. In a critical study of Psalm 119, Will Soll tackles the common opinion that Psalm 119 has little internal coherence. He makes a good case for seeing Psalm 119 as an individual lament on a large scale, with the typical movement of lament psalms being repeated several times in the course of the psalm.¹⁰ Soll argues persuasively that the individual stanzas have more coherence than often supposed, and so does the psalm as a whole. For example, seeing Psalm 119 as an individual lament, he finds the psalm reaching its nadir in the *Kaph* stanza, followed by its zenith in the following *Lamedh* stanza.¹¹

While it is true that patterns in the overall flow of Psalm 119 can be difficult to discern, such patterns are not entirely absent. For example, David Powlison notices the same dynamics in the *Kaph* and *Lamedh* stanzas that Soll points to, but he extends the analysis in a useful way. He notes that every stanza in Psalm 119 mentions “situational suffering” except the first two and the last, but that vv. 81–88 (*Kaph*) are unique in Psalm 119 in focusing solely on distress, and that the following verses 89–92 (the first half of *Lamedh*) are unique in Psalm 119 in affirming the stability and certainty of the Lord.¹²

Older critical studies of Psalm 119 that tended to focus on the form of the psalm were prone to seeing the psalm as focused on ‘filling in’ the acrostic at the expense of thematic content. Newer approaches aimed more at literary analysis are better placed to take up the matter of thematic content. As already mentioned, one of the most prominent features of the content of Psalm 119 is the consistent use of the ‘law words’. The eight words are used ‘stereometrically’,¹³ that is, while the individual terms can be differentiated from each other, they are not precisely defined in the psalm and so overlap

⁹ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship. 2 Vols.* Nashville: Abingdon, 1963, 2.77–78, quoted in Soll, *Psalm 119*, 63–64.

¹⁰ Soll, *Psalm 119*, 71.

¹¹ Soll, *Psalm 119*, 90.

¹² David Powlison, “Suffering and Psalm 119,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, no. Fall (2004), 10.

¹³ To slightly modify a term Gerhard von Rad used to refer to the way various ‘wisdom’ terms are used in the Book of Proverbs. See Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (trans. James D. Martin; London: SCM, 1972), 13, 27.

with each other in meaning. The intention seems to be to express in a larger and more comprehensive way the ‘meaning field’ that could be expressed by the eight words individually.

The first and most frequently used of the words is תּוֹרָה (*tôrá*). The 220 uses of this word in the OT fall into three main categories: (1) teaching or instruction to be learned, (2) commands to be obeyed, and (3) guidance about how to live in specific situations.¹⁴ When one takes the eight ‘law words’ used in Psalm 119, all three of these categories of meaning are attached to the words. In what follows I will use the word ‘Torah’ to refer to the collection of law words in Psalm 119. The meaning of the word ‘Torah’ in this general sense is well captured by Kent Reynolds as “any verbal expression of God’s desires.”¹⁵ The author of Psalm 119 creates a ‘persona’ who loves Torah, longs for Torah, delights in Torah, loves to contemplate Torah and desires to obey Torah, not simply to avoid punishment but because of an intense joy in obedience.¹⁶ Reynolds has shown how Psalm 119 creates a portrait of an exemplary Torah student in order to persuade the reader of the value of being such a student. “In the process of reading Psalm 119, the reader begins to think like the speaker.”¹⁷

Psalm 119 constantly makes a particular ‘move’ in relating the reader to Torah. The ‘Psalm 119 move’ is to take words and themes that concern a person’s attitude to God and to apply those words and themes to an attitude to God’s Torah.

For example, the Book of Deuteronomy (the other place in the Hebrew Bible where ‘law words’ are used ‘stereometrically’ e.g. Deut 4:1; 5:1; 6:1–2; 11:1, etc.) repeatedly calls upon Israel to “love” (אָהַב *’hb*) the Lord. The Psalm 119 move is to ‘divert’ that love to Torah.

V. 97 Oh how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.

V. 113 I hate double-minded men, but I love your law.

V. 163 I hate and abhor falsehood, but I love your law.

¹⁴ Martin J. Selman, “Law,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2003), 498.

¹⁵ Kent A. Reynolds, “Psalm 119: Promoting Torah, Portraying an Ideal Student of Torah” (University of Wisconsin, 2007), 20.

¹⁶ Reynolds, “Psalm 119,” 20.

¹⁷ The quote is from Reynolds, “Psalm 119,” 113. See pages 66–113 for the full argument.

V. 165 Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.

V. 47 For I delight in your commands because I love them.

V. 48 Because I love your commands more than gold, more than pure gold...

Psalm 119 contains ten uses of the verb “love”, and all of them are directed to Torah. Moreover, Psalm 119 contains the only verses in the Hebrew Bible where Torah, the ‘law words’, are the objects of the verb “love” (אהב *’hb*).

Throughout the Hebrew Bible God’s people are commanded to “trust” (בטח *bṭḥ*) only in the Lord. Trusting in anyone or anything else is idolatry. Trusting in God is also a common theme in the Psalms. But in Psalm 119:

V. 42 Then I will answer the one who taunts me, for I trust in your word.

There are many other examples of this typical Psalm 119 ‘move’:¹⁸

Clinging to God → clinging to Torah (e.g. v. 31)

Hoping in God → hoping in Torah (e.g. v. 42)

Believing in God → believing in Torah (e.g. v. 66)

Fearing God → fearing Torah (e.g. v. 120)

Seeking God → seeking Torah (e.g. v. 45)

Setting God before me → setting Torah before me (e.g. v. 30)

Raising up hands to God → raising my hands to Torah (e.g. v. 48)

While the ‘move’ documented here is typical of Psalm 119, its significance must not be exaggerated. The psalm is also *filled up* with expressions of exuberant pleasure, open admiration and blunt need for God himself. Nearly always these expressions of passion are connected with Torah in some way, but as Powlison reminds us, the ‘I-You’ language (expressed mainly in pronominal suffixes) is four times as prevalent in Psalm 119 as the law words combined.¹⁹

V. 7 I will praise you with an upright heart...

V. 10 With my whole heart I seek you...

¹⁸ See Reynolds, “Psalm 119,” 42–49.

¹⁹ Powlison, “Suffering and Psalm 119,” 4.

V. 12 Blessed are you, O Lord...

V. 174 I long for your salvation, O Lord...²⁰

In Psalm 119 there is no conflict in expression between loving and seeking and hoping in and fearing the Torah of the Lord and doing the same towards the Lord himself. The strong suggestion from the language of the psalm is that these are one and the same thing. According to Psalm 119, seeking the Lord is not a mystical process for which people need special techniques that are difficult to learn. Pursuing the Lord involves chasing after him in the manner he has ordained – through the Torah, the word in which he reveals himself. As the New Testament confirms with great clarity, it is the living word that teaches, rebukes, trains, corrects, tests, convicts, encourages and exhorts God's people (2 Tim 3:16; 4:2; 1 Cor 14:3; Rom 15:4; 7:7; Heb 4:12–13; 1 John 5:13).

We are now approaching an understanding of the *purpose* of Psalm 119. Psalm 119 constantly emphasises to the reader the importance of Torah, God's word, the verbal expression of God's desires, and its purpose is to commend that Torah as the premier resource for pursuing God.

The first three verses set the agenda for Psalm 119.

Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD.

Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart.

They do nothing wrong; they walk in his ways.

Verse 4 contains a shift to second person address that continues through the rest of the psalm. The shift is marked by an emphatic use of the pronoun "You": "You, you have commanded your precepts to be obeyed wholly and exactly." These first four verses celebrate an ideal image of perfection. But in v. 5, and for the rest of the psalm, the author is plunged into the reality of his own life, with all its agonies and joys.

His life is *not* the ideal that he paints in vv. 1–4. In fact, his life is full of inconsistencies. For example, in v. 110 he declares that he has not

²⁰ A quick survey of Psalm 119 suggests that expressions directly addressed to the Lord appear at vv. 7, 10, 11, 12, 26, 32, 38, 40, 41, 49, 55, 57, 58, 62, 64, 65, 68, 73, 76, 77, 81, 94, 102, 108, 114, 116, 117, 120, 122, 123, 124, 125, 132, 137, 145, 146, 147, 149, 151, 153, 154, 156, 159, 166, 169, 170, 171, 173, 174, 175.

“strayed” from the Lord’s precepts, but in v. 176 he declares that he has “strayed” (same word) like a lost sheep and asks the Lord to seek him. In verse after verse he declares that he has obeyed Torah. But in v. 88 he asks that his life be preserved *so that he can* obey the Lord’s statutes. In v. 52 he declares that he has found comfort in Torah, but in v. 82 he cries out “When will you comfort me?”

There are many of these kinds of tensions in Psalm 119, but none of these things are contradictions. They are the stuff of everyday life for someone who is trying to be obedient. All who have some experience of the committed life know that life is like that. A life of obedience is full of joy and disappointment, certainty and uncertainty, confidence and despair, communion with God’s people and opposition from God’s enemies, and so on. Psalm 119 is a vivid demonstration of what the life of a godly person actually looks like, with all the ups and downs of that life portrayed in Psalm 119’s subject’s first person experience and longing after the Lord through the medium of his Torah.

The life of obedience is not a smooth road, but the subject repeatedly commits himself to delighting in and observing Torah so as to pursue the Lord. So we come to a summary of the purpose of Psalm 119. *Psalm 119 is designed to commend a life of pursuing the Lord through his Word.*

It is also possible now to summarise the process by which Psalm 119 achieves its purpose. *Psalm 119 is a multi-faceted portrayal of what it actually looks like to pursue the Lord through his Word. It achieves its purpose not by admonishing the reader but by painting a portrait of the life of a God-seeker.*

Summary: Purpose and Process

A step by step pattern of communication of thematic content is not the chief concern of the author of Psalm 119. It has the content of a personal cry of the heart to God. As Powlison puts it, “Psalm 119 is torrential, not topical. It’s relentless, not repetitive. It’s personal, not propositional.”²¹ Psalm 119 is written in the highly disciplined form of an all-encompassing acrostic and the extensive use of eight law words. Within that strictly-enforced structure its great intention is to portray the life of a committed God-seeker, so as to encourage the reader to emulate the model Torah student so portrayed.

²¹ Powlison, “Suffering and Psalm 119,” 4.

Psalm 119 within Book V of the Psalter

Book V and the Canonical Approach to the Psalter

One of the burgeoning areas of Psalms study since the mid-1980s, stimulated in part by the publication of Gerald Wilson's work *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*,²² has been the rise of what has been called "final form studies of the Psalms"²³ or the "canonical approach to the Psalter."²⁴ Jamie Grant provides a useful summary of this approach.²⁵ We will not air it further in a general sense beyond saying that the canonical approach is based on a fundamental conviction that the order of the psalms in the Psalter and especially the placement of certain psalms at significant locations in the Psalter are not random. Rather, Psalms is regarded by this approach as having been shaped by its final redactors to communicate themes that were crucial to Israel's faith and very existence as a community in the post-exilic situation.

Psalm 119 dominates Book V of the Psalter by its sheer size. Psalm 119 alone has more verses than all the neighbouring Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120–134) put together. We now turn to some observations of Book V, which provides the wider canonical context for Psalm 119.

Psalms 146–150 are widely recognised as constituting a doxological ending to the Psalter as a whole. Psalms 146–150 all open and close with הַלְלוּ-יָהּ (*hallelu-yah*). The distribution of this phrase in the Psalter bears consideration. הַלְלוּ-יָהּ is found 23 times in the Psalter, 19 times in Book V and also in Psalms 104–106, which are the final three psalms of Book IV (the closing words of Psalms 104 and 105 and the opening and closing words of Psalm 106). So the words *hallelu-yah* appear only in Book V and in the three psalms leading up to Book V.

The question raised by the exceptional presence of the phrase in the three psalms outside of but leading up to Book V is: What is the

²² Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Dissertation Series (Society of Biblical Literature) 076; Chico, Ca.: Scholars Press, 1985).

²³ David C. Mitchell, "Lord Remember David: G.H. Wilson and the Message of the Psalter," *Vetus Testamentum* 56, no. 4 (2006), 526.

²⁴ Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Laws in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms* (Society of Biblical Literature Academia Biblica 17; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).

²⁵ Grant, *King as Exemplar*, 11–19.

function of this phrase in Psalms 104–106? In applying some of the insights of linguistics to biblical interpretation, Cotterell and Turner identify a number of stages in the development of discourse, including the role of “stage-setting”²⁶. The appearance of the phrase *hallelu-yah* in Psalms 104–106 appears to be setting the stage for the frequency of this theme of considering and responding to God’s work in Book V.

There are further stage-setting features to be observed in Psalms 105 and 106. Psalm 106:1 – (after *hallelu-yah*) “Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting” – is identical with Psalm 107:1. These words are repeated again in the opening and closing lines of Psalm 118 and again in the opening line and the (nearly identical) closing line of Psalm 136. These features suggest that the post-exilic editors wanted the reader/hearers to discern a strong link between the end of Book IV and Book V, and that the feature of Book V that they wanted to emphasise at the end of Book IV is its theme of rejoicing in the goodness and everlasting lovingkindness of Yahweh.

There is a third stage-setting function discernible in Psalms 105 and 106. They review God’s work in Israel’s history from the points of view of the perfection of God’s work (105) and the failure of Israel to respond perfectly to that work (106), pointing to the importance this theme will have in Book V.

A fourth stage-setting function lies in the way Psalm 107, the first psalm in Book V, responds to the end of Psalm 106, the final psalm in Book IV. Apart from the doxology, Psalm 106 ends with the plea

Save us, O Yahweh our God,
 And gather (קִבְּצֵנוּ *qbs*) us from the nations
 To give thanks (יְדַהּ *ydh*) to your holy name
 And glory in your praise (106:47)

Psalm 107 responds by beginning

Oh give thanks (יְדַהּ *ydh*) to Yahweh, for He is good,
 For His lovingkindness is everlasting.
 Let the redeemed of Yahweh say so,
 Whom He has redeemed from the hand of the adversary

²⁶ Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1989), 247.

And gathered (קָבַץ *qbs*) from the lands,
 From the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.
 (107:1–3)

This response to the question of Psalm 106 is cast in terms of an invitation for the “redeemed” to give thanks for Yahweh’s lovingkindness (חֶסֶד *hesed*). The invitation is then supported in the rest of the psalm by four illustrations of Yahweh’s חֶסֶד in four examples of redemption (vv. 4–9, 10–16, 17–22, 23–32), concluding with a hymnlike summary based on the four examples (vv. 33–42) and an admonition to be wise by continuing to pay attention to the message about Yahweh’s חֶסֶד. The psalm contains two refrains repeated four times each (vv. 6, 13, 19, 28 and vv. 8, 15, 21, 31). In each of the four circumstances of distress, the people cry out to Yahweh and he rescues them. In each of the four circumstances, they are called to thank (יָדָה) the Lord for his חֶסֶד and his wondrous deeds (נִפְלְאוֹת *nīplā’ôt*) which have been done “for the sons of men” (לְבָנֵי אָדָם *libnê ’ādām*).

Significant links between Psalms 107 and 145 exist. The last mentioned repeated phrase from Psalm 107, לְבָנֵי אָדָם (“for/to the sons of men”), appears in the centre of Psalm 145 (v. 12). Other key words from the fourfold refrains, יָדָה, חֶסֶד and נִפְלְאוֹת also appear in Psalm 145 (vv. 5, 8, 10). Just as Psalm 107 ends with a call to be wise, so Psalm 145, which is an acrostic, ends with a wisdom note (vv. 19–20).²⁷ Wilson argued that this connection between Psalms 107 and 145 put a “wisdom frame” around Book V.²⁸ (Wilson sees Book V as concluding with Psalm 145, with Psalms 146–150 forming the final doxology of the Psalter as a whole.²⁹)

Zenger, who follows Wilson in regarding Psalms 107–145 as Book V of the Psalter followed by a doxological conclusion, argues that

²⁷ Gerald H. Wilson, “Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkages in the Book of Psalms,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (ed. J.C. McCann; vol. 159 of JSOTSup; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 79.

²⁸ Wilson, “Shaping the Psalter,” 79.

²⁹ Gerald H. Wilson, “The Structure of the Psalter,” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (eds. P.S. Johnston and D.G. Firth; Leicester: IVP, 2005), 232.

these links between Psalms 107 and 145 put a frame around Book V which emphasises its overall “hymnlike structure”³⁰.

The call to be wise at the end of Psalm 107 is actually framed as a question. Translated a little more literally than most English versions, Psalm 107:43 reads:

Who is wise? Let him give heed to these things,
and consider the “lovingkindnesses” (*hesed* plural) of Yahweh.

To summarise, Psalm 107 opens Book V of the Psalter by responding to Psalm 106. It is strongly interconnected with several other psalms in Book V in its repetition of words, sentences and themes, and it opens Book V by asking the question, “Who is wise?” Psalm 107 can be seen as setting an ‘agenda’ for Book V that is crucial for the identity and survival of Israel in a post-exilic setting. Book V of the Psalter is concerned with answering the question at the end of Psalm 107: “Who is wise?”

Erich Zenger has suggested that Book V of the Psalter has an overall “theological program” and has summarised that program in the following diagram:³¹

R A		A		R A
107, 108–10, 111 and 112	113–18	119	120–136.137	138–144.145
David (eschatological/messianic)	Exodus (Pesach)	Torah (Shabuoth)	Zion (Sukkoth)	David (eschatological/messianic)

(R = royal psalm; A = acrostic psalm)

In v. 43 Psalm 107 gives an initial answer to its own question “Who is wise?” The wise person is the one who considers the “lovingkindnesses” of Yahweh. Book V of the Psalter then ‘actualizes’ the wondrous deeds (נִפְלְאוֹתָיִם) of Yahweh in the exodus (Psalms 113–118 are often called the ‘Egyptian Hallel’), in the giving of the law at Mt Sinai (Psalm 119) and in his establishment of his kingdom centralized in Zion (120–136 are the “songs of Zion” that the exiles in Psalm 137 think they cannot sing in a

³⁰ Erich Zenger, “The Composition and Theology of the Fifth Book of Psalms, Psalm 107–145,” *JSOT* 80 (1998), 101.

³¹ Zenger, “Fifth Book,” 98.

foreign land). So Yahweh is praised as “the God of the Exodus who rescues, and the God of Zion, who blesses.”³²

The allusions to the canonical history of Israel in Psalms 113–137 are framed at beginning and end by psalms connected in their titles with David (108–110 and 138–145), thus reinforcing the messianic hope of a Davidic king who will reign under Yahweh. Including a short Davidic collection (Psalms 108–110) as the first group of psalms following immediately after Psalm 107 and concluding Book V with another Davidic collection suggests that the redactors wished the reader to understand that Book V of the Psalter includes the idea that a Davidic king would participate in some way in answering the question of Psalm 107.

The three acrostics, Psalms 111–112 and Psalm 119, are themselves strongly connected verbally and thematically (more on this below); together they suggest that paying careful attention to the law of Yahweh is also part of the answer to the question of Psalm 107.

The overall three-fold answer to the question of Psalm 107 provided by Book V of the Psalter is as follows:

Who is wise?

- The person who meditates on the mighty redeeming works of Yahweh in Israel’s canonical history (Psalms 113–137)
- The person who remembers that a Davidic messiah will be involved in the working out of God’s purposes for Israel (Psalms 108–110, 138–145)
- The person who makes a commitment to obedience to Yahweh (Psalms 111–112 and 119).

The third of these responses to the question of Psalm 107 receives more support as a likely connection from the particular links between the end of Psalm 107 and Psalm 119. When the ‘frequency analysis’ words noted above are used to analyse the particular verbal connections between Psalms 107 and 119³³, it turns out that the final two verses of Psalm 107 have a dense concentration of Psalm 119 language.

³² Zenger, “Fifth Book,” 99.

³³ As done in de Hoog, “Psalm 119,” 73–80, 158–160, see also Appendix, 13–14.

Psalms 107: 42–43 “The upright (יֵשָׁר) see it (רָאה) and are glad (שָׂמַח); but all (כָּל) unrighteousness (עוֹלָה) shuts its mouth (פִּיהַ). Who is wise? (a verb from same root, חָכַם, is used in Psalm 119) Let him give heed (שָׁמַר) to these things, and consider (בִּיַן) the lovingkindnesses (חֶסֶד) of the LORD (יְהוָה).”

Of the 13 ‘frequency analysis’ words in these two verses, 11 are also found in Psalm 119, and several of them are significant words in Psalm 119. This usage would draw the thought of the attentive reader to Psalm 119. It seems distinctly possible that the end of Psalm 107 is designed, in part, to point the reader to Psalm 119 as giving part of the answer to the question with which Book V of the Psalter opens.

The Connections of Psalm 119 to Psalms 111–112

A detailed comparison of the use of words in Psalm 111–112 and Psalm 119 reveals that Psalm 119 has a stronger lexical, formal and thematic overlap with Psalms 111–112 than with any other psalm or group of psalms in Book V.³⁴ For example, four of the eight Torah words in Psalm 119 also appear in Psalms 111–112. The links between these three psalms are more than the coincidence of shared lexemes. All three are acrostics. The three psalms also have strong thematic links. The thematic links can be demonstrated by a careful analysis of the way in which the shared lexemes are used. The significantly shared language between the psalms falls into the following categories.

Words that are used in Psalm 119 in the same way as they are used in Psalms 111–112 without variation:

- a. יָרָא (“fear”) and cognates. Although these words are relatively common in the Psalter, they play a significant role in Psalms 111–112 in that the end of Psalm 111 (v. 10) and the beginning of Psalm 112 (v. 1) are linked by this word group, with 111:10 affirming that the fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom, and 112:1 declaring how blessed is the one who fears Yahweh. The uses of these words in the

³⁴ De Hoog has shown that of all the ‘frequency analysis’ words in Psalms 111–112, fully 63.4% of them also appear in Psalm 119; which is the highest ‘overlap’ with Psalm 119 of all the psalms in Book V and compares with an average ‘overlap’ for all of the other psalms in Book V with Psalm 119 of 50.7%.

Psalter as a whole are widely varied, but their use in Psalms 111–112 and Psalm 119 are highly consistent.

- b. צְדָקָה (“justice, righteousness”). For example, what is affirmed of Yahweh in Psalm 113:3 is almost synonymously affirmed of Yahweh in Psalm 119:142. (See also category 4 below.)
- c. מִשְׁפָּט (“ordinance”). One of the four Psalm 119 Torah words that appear in Psalms 111–112, מִשְׁפָּט is used once each in 111:7 and 112:5, uses which are in keeping with two of the uses of this word in Psalm 119. In fact, both these verses are so full of Psalm 119 words that they sound as if they could come from Psalm 119.
- d. אֲשֶׁרִי (“how blessed”). Psalms 112 and 119 use this word in identical fashion.
- e. דְּבָר (“word”) is used in Psalm 112:5 – see note on מִשְׁפָּט.
- f. הוֹן (“enough, riches”). Yahweh’s Torah is as great (119:14) as the riches of the righteous man in Psalm 112:3.
- g. חִפָּץ (“take delight in”). Identical kind of use.
- h. מִצְוָה (“commandment”). Identical kind of use.
- i. פְּקוּדִים (“precepts”). Identical kind of use.

Words that are used in Psalm 119 in the same way as they are used in Psalms 111–112 with the variation of adding uses of words that relate to Yahweh’s Torah:

- a. עוֹלָם (“forever”) and עַד (“forever, perpetuity”). Yahweh’s righteousness is eternal in both Psalms 111–112 and Psalm 119, but Psalm 119 goes on to express the eternity of Yahweh’s Torah and of its benefits and of a desire to keep Torah forever. (See also category 5 below.)
- b. כָּל (“all, every”). Identical kind of use.
- c. דַּרַּשׁ (“seek with care”). The word is used in the same way in both Psalm 119 and 111, but the object of seeking in

Psalm 111 is Yahweh's works, while in Psalm 119 it is Yahweh himself (twice) or Yahweh's Torah (three times).

Words used to affirm things about Yahweh in Psalms 111–112 that are used to affirm the same things about Yahweh's Torah in Psalm 119:

- a. יָשָׁר (“right, upright”). Where Psalm 111:8 attributes uprightness to Yahweh's work, Psalm 119:137 says Yahweh's Torah is upright.
- b. אֱמֻנָה (“firmness, truth”). Again Psalm 119 applies what Psalm 111 affirms about Yahweh's works to Yahweh's Torah.

Words used to affirm things about Yahweh in Psalms 111–112 that are used as the basis of petition in Psalm 119:

- a. צְדָקָה (“justice, righteousness”). Psalms 111:3 and 119:142 declare that Yahweh's righteousness endures forever (see also category 1 above). Psalm 119:40 turns that affirmation into a prayer that the psalmist be preserved in Yahweh's righteousness.
- b. סָמַךְ (“lean upon”). In Psalm 112:8 this word is used to denote the security of the godly person. This use is turned into a prayer in Psalm 119:116.
- c. זָכַר (“remember”). What is affirmed in Psalm 111:5 is the basis of a petition in Psalm 119:49.

Word used to affirm something about the godly man in Psalms 111–112 that is used to express the commitment or orientation of the psalmist in Psalm 119:

- a. עוֹלָם (“forever”). Psalm 112's godly man's righteousness endures forever. The author of Psalm 119 promises four times to keep Torah forever (vv. 44, 93, 98, 112), so becoming like the godly man of Psalm 112.

Word used to describe the godly man in Psalm 112 used as a basis for petition in Psalm 119:

- a. חַנּוּן (“be gracious”). Used to describe the godly man in Psalm 112:5, Psalm 119 uses the word three times to ask for grace from Yahweh (vv. 29, 58, 132), each time on the basis

of a commitment to keeping Yahweh's Torah (and so be like the righteous man in Psalm 112).

It is very likely that Psalms 111–112 and Psalm 119 were intentionally linked. We do not know when Psalms 111–112 and Psalm 119 were composed or located within Book V of the Psalter. But whatever their history, the consistent amount of shared language and theme between every section of Psalms 111–112 and Psalm 119 is almost certainly not coincidental.

It is difficult to judge how well we can reconstruct the intentions of the redactors of the Psalter in placing psalms where they are now located. But it is possible to make suggestions about what impact the nature and the placement of these psalms has on the message of Book V as a whole.

Psalms 111 and 112 are twin psalms. They both begin with *hallelu-yah*. Psalm 111 is a song of praise about the Lord's righteousness, his redemption, his covenant and his mercy. Psalm 111 ends with the words, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise."

This theme of fearing the Lord is then immediately picked up in v. 1 of Psalm 112 "How blessed is the one who fears the Lord, who finds great delight in his commands." Psalm 112 is a psalm about the godly person's righteous response to God's work. There are many parallels between the two psalms – see for example the exact coincidence of language between 111:3b and 112:3b. But fundamentally, Psalm 111 is about Yahweh and his redemptive work and Psalm 112 is about his people and their response to his redemptive work.

The connection between Psalms 111 and 112 reflects a similar connection between Psalms 105 and 106, which are the final two psalms of Book IV, which also contain the phrase *hallelu-yah* and which perform a stage-setting function for Book V. Psalm 105 is about Yahweh and his redemptive work, and Psalm 106 is about his people and their response to his redemptive work. In Psalms 105 and 106 the depiction is of Yahweh's *good* work and his people's *disobedient and rebellious* response; in Psalms 111 and 112 the picture is of Yahweh's *good* work and his people's *obedient and faithful* response. This is how things should be. Godly people, as they grow in godliness, begin to reflect God's character, and that growth is part of the answer to the question of Psalm 107.

This analysis allows us to suggest a function for Psalm 119 within Book V. The way the shared language is used suggests that *Psalm 119 is trying to demonstrate what Psalm 112 obedience might look like in real life*. In real life, an obedient response to Yahweh, as called for and *idealised* in Psalm 112, is brought down to earth in Psalm 119.

As we have already noticed, Psalm 119 is utterly realistic about the struggles of living a life in pursuit of God. Book V calls for Psalm 112 type obedience and only Psalm 112 type obedience can be pleasing to God. Through the connections between Psalms 111–112 and Psalm 119, Book V directs the reader to Psalm 119 to demonstrate what Psalm 112 obedience begins to look like in real life.

Psalm 119 is a vivid demonstration of what the life of a godly man actually looks like, with all the ups and downs of that life portrayed in Psalm 119's subject's first person experience and longings after Yahweh through the medium of his Torah. In Psalm 119 the wicked have not yet disappeared; indeed, they pose a genuine threat to the psalmist. Psalm 119 clearly shows that the pious life is not a smooth road. The subject of Psalm 119, speaking mostly in the first person, repeatedly emphasises his dependence upon Yahweh as he commits himself to delighting in and observing Torah in all of life.

The Group of Psalms 111–119

Psalms 113–118, often called the 'Egyptian Hallel', is a group of psalms bounded by the acrostics Psalms 111–112 and Psalm 119. We have noted the strong lexical and thematic connections between Psalms 111–112 and Psalm 119. They appear to function as 'brackets' around Psalms 113–118. However, at first sight there appears to be a jolting discontinuity between Psalms 113–118 and Psalm 119.

Psalms 113–118 certainly 'fit' well within Book V of the Psalter. Psalms 113–117 (not 114) share the phrase הַלְלֵי-יְהוָה (*hallelu-yah*) with Psalms 111–112 and with Book V more widely, and Psalm 118 opens and closes with the opening words of Book V in Psalm 107:1. Psalms 113–118 provide one perspective on the call of Psalm 107:43 to be wise and give heed to Yahweh's redemptive work, in particular by considering the lovingkindness (חַסְדֵּךָ) of Yahweh. Psalms 113–118 answer that call by such devices as encouraging the reader to remember the Exodus account and Yahweh's redemption of corporate Israel, affirming that there is no comparison between

Yahweh and other so-called “gods” and rejoicing in kings acting in the name and authority of Yahweh. All these connections serve to tie Psalms 113–118 tightly into the structure and main themes of Book V.

However, the particular phrases, sentences and many of these themes appear to be entirely absent from Psalm 119, which leads to an initial perception of radical discontinuity between Psalms 113–118 and Psalm 119. But can a connection between Psalms 113–118 and Psalm 119 be drawn on the basis of a more careful analysis of shared language?

The Use of the Divine Name Yahweh

The very frequent use of divine names in Psalms 113–118 is a feature of this corpus. The portrayal of Yahweh in Psalms 113–118 has several dimensions, including the following: (a) Statements that have Yahweh as the direct object of praise using verbs like הלל (“praise”), ידה (“give thanks”) and ברך (“bless”): e.g. 113:1, 2, 9; 115:1, 18; 116:19; 117:1–2; 118:1, 28–29; (b) statements attributing glory, greatness, honour, etc to Yahweh: e.g. 113:4, 5; 115:16–18; 117:2; (c) statements that request or place confidence in Yahweh’s grace and blessing: e.g. 113:6–9; 115:12–15; 116:5–9; 118:2–4, 6–9, 17–18; (d) statements affirming the power of his redemptive work and calls to rejoice in it: e.g. 114:1–8; 116:3–4, 6; 118:5, 19–27; (e) statements mentioning Yahweh’s incomparability: e.g. 113:5; 115:2–8; (f) calls to trust in Yahweh: e.g. 115:9–11; (g) statements of personal commitment to Yahweh: e.g. 116:1–2, 12–19; (h) Yahweh as a warrior and help against enemies: e.g. 118:10–16.

All these themes (a–h) can be found in Psalm 119, but not one of them occurs without the characteristic adjustment of including Yahweh’s Torah in the reference. For example, the author of Psalm 119 includes 32 ascriptions of praise, adoration and commitment to Yahweh that are scattered throughout the psalm, but he does so in the following way: ten times he says he “loves” (אהב – vv. 47, 48, 97, 113, 119, 127, 140, 159, 163, 167) Yahweh’s Torah,³⁵ nine times he says he “delights” (שעע, חפץ and שֶׁשְׁעִים – vv. 16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92, 143, 174) in it; five times he “praises” (הלל, תְּהַלֵּל, and

³⁵ As already noted, these are the only places in the whole Hebrew Bible where Torah words are the object of the verb אהב.

יהוה – vv. 7, 62, 164, 171, 175) Yahweh for his Torah and twice he “rejoices” (שׂוֹשֵׁ – 14, 162) in his Torah. Further, virtually the whole of Psalm 119 is taken up with theme (g) above, ‘Statements of personal commitment to Yahweh’, but again almost entirely in terms of appreciation for, meditation upon or execution in life of Torah.

None of the explicit means of stating direct praise or confidence or praise or trust in Yahweh in Psalms 113–118 are found in Psalm 119 without either a superimposed or an intervening reference to Torah. Moreover, the major emphases in Psalm 119 of relating to Yahweh through meditation upon Torah, through delighting in and rejoicing in Torah, by obedience to Torah, through hope in Torah, by being delivered and vindicated through Torah and in the face of the enemies of Torah obedience are entirely absent in Psalms 113–118.

Nevertheless, the overall portrayal of Yahweh in Psalms 113–118 is crucial for Psalm 119. A comparison of the use of divine names between Psalms 113–118 and Psalm 119 reveals a consistent pattern. The eternal glory, greatness, goodness and power ascribed to Yahweh in Psalms 113–118 are ascribed to Yahweh’s Torah in Psalm 119. The reliance on Yahweh and his help in trouble affirmed in Psalms 113–118 are stated in terms of reliance on and help given by Yahweh’s Torah in Psalm 119. On every occasion the character of the God who stands behind the Torah is assumed. If Yahweh were not who he is described to be in Psalms 113–118, then affection for, trust in and obedience rendered to his Torah would be pointless.

Relationships within Psalms 111–119

The analysis above relates only to the use of the divine name Yahweh in Psalms 113–118 and Psalm 119. We do not have space in this article to consider the use of other words, but a pattern consistent with the connections established here emerges. The picture of Yahweh and his redemptive work painted in Psalms 113–118 is assumed in Psalm 119. Perhaps this could be said of many portraits of Yahweh from many parts of Scripture, but the fact that Psalms 113–118 are contiguous with Psalm 119 and are sandwiched between Psalms 111–112 and Psalm 119 suggests that the final redactors of the Psalter wished the particular portrait of Yahweh in Psalms 113–118 to be taken note of when reading Psalm 119.

The connections can be summarised in the following diagram:



Psalm 111 provides a précis of the redemptive work of Yahweh that is expanded upon in Psalms 113–118. Psalm 112 provides an outline of the response of the godly person to Yahweh’s redemptive work that is expanded upon in Psalm 119. This closely connected structure provides a *two-fold exemplary response* to the call of Psalm 107:43. One aspect of the response focuses on praising Yahweh for his redemptive work; the other aspect encourages paying loving attention to Yahweh’s Torah. Moreover, the interconnections between these psalms suggest that these two aspects must not be separated but tightly held together.

Final conclusions

In contrast to Duhm’s position, it is possible to affirm that Psalm 119 blackens paper in a rich and literarily complex manner. Its passion points to the pursuit of God as the preoccupation of the godly person. Its precision and focus on Torah suggest that such pursuit can be executed through disciplined engagement with God’s self-revelation. And its canonical context points to the God being pursued as the God of redemption. His acts of redemption (“lovingkindnesses”) are the material most prominent in that passionate, disciplined pursuit.