

OUTLINE - DISCUSSION OF THE PSALMS - PART V

INTRODUCTION TO PSALMS OF WISDOM AND THE LAW

PSALMS 19 AND 119

I. The overall idea of wisdom and a delight in the law is that they provide access to a comprehension of the order by which God governs all things.

A. As understood in Scripture, wisdom is above all the order that is at the very heart of all creation. See, e.g., Wis. 9:1-3; Sir. 24:1-8; Prov. 8:22-31. As applied to human beings it means both the ability to peer into this order and the ability to carry out a righteous life, almost by instinct. See, e.g., Sir. 16:22-25; Proverbs 1:1-7; Wis. 7:22-25.

B. Wisdom also gives one the ability to solve difficult problems, as demonstrated especially by the figures of Solomon and Daniel and his companions. See 1 Kings 3, 10; Daniel 1.

C. At a lesser level, wisdom can be the ability to apply this order to specific areas, such as conversation, craftsmanship, medicine, and especially governance. See 1 Kings 7:13; Isaiah 40:20; Sir. 20:6; 37:22, 38:1-8; Wisdom 9.

D. The law guides one to be able to be wise. See, e.g., Sir. 38:24-34. The law (torah) involves commandments, but means in general God's guidance of all things, including human lives, history, and natural phenomena.

- The Psalms especially reflect a delight in the law, for it guides one's life and elevates one above the chaos and strife that is the ordinary lot of man. See, e.g., Ps. 1

- Knowing the law is critical to gaining wisdom because one can become wise only by obeying God's law. Wisdom and a true understanding of the order of creation is a gift of God. See, e.g., Wisdom 1:4; Sir. 1:1; 16:22-25; Prov. 2:1-5.

II. Psalm 19 connects the law of God in the world, which glorifies God, and in the guidance of each person so that we may glorify God, as well as a desire to be purified of sin so that one can participate in this order and worship of God.

A. The first seven verses present creation, and especially the sun, the moon, and the stars as glorifying God by their continual pageantry. These celestial bodies, which work according to their set laws above the human condition, are considered analogies for the law of God, which can be seen by all, and even as analogies to the saints. See, e.g., Wis 3:7; Dan. 12:31; 1 Cor. 15:41.

- There is also an implicit condemnation of pagans who worshiped the sun, the moon and the stars, rather than seeing them as honoring their creator. See also Wisdom 13:1-10; Romans 1:19-23.

B. The next section then switches right into a praise of God's law as it guides each person. It is the same order and law that guides the universe and personal conduct. In a like fashion, Sirach 43 goes right from describing the wisdom of God in creation to praising the patriarchs.

1. These verses use five terms for the law, and adds the fear of the Lord to the list, almost as if that is a part of the law. This inclusion represents a constant theme of wisdom literature that the fear of the Lord is at the essence of wisdom. See, e.g., Prov. 1:7, 9:10; Sir. 1:16; Ps. 11:10; Job 28:28. A sense of wonder at the glory of God and a desire to avoid offending Him is both a condition and a result of wisdom.

2. There is a notion that anyone has access to wisdom by following the law, and that the law gives delight, refreshment, purity and grandeur to the law.

C. The final three verses recognizes, however, that one cannot be free from all sins. It asks with increasing fervor to be freed from unknowing sins, from deliberate sins, and from being controlled by sins.

- These verses balance the preceding section by keeping the speaker from being arrogant or complacent in believing that his appreciation of the law is enough.

III. Psalm 119 is the longest of the psalms and has a very structured, acrostic style to it.

A. The acrostic style is based upon the fact that each stanza has eight lines, each of which begins with a set letter of the alphabet. The first stanza uses the first letter of the alphabet to begin each line, the second stanza uses the second letter, and so forth. In addition, the psalm reflects the order and rotating aspects of the law by using eight or nine terms for the law or order in each stanza. The terms are law, precept, way, decree, commandment, statute (or edict), ordinance, word, and promise (or teaching.)

B. There is no comment on the Temple, the history of the Chosen People, or on worship. Instead, the focus is entirely on God's guidance of the faithful person's life in the midst of enemies and struggles.

- Consequently, it seems that this psalm was written during or after the Exile, during a time in which the Temple worship was downplayed.
- The focus is much more upon the individual person than is the case with most Jewish writing.
- After a general wisdom reflection at the beginning, the psalm becomes a prayer for guidance in the ways of God and deliverance from evil. There is a dramatic contrast between the chaos of the world and the stability and order of the law of God.

C. The first two stanzas (verses 1-16) proceed along the lines of traditional wisdom literature, describing the way of the just that leads to stability and delight in the presence of God. There is not much of a reflection on the fortunes of the unjust.

D. The next four stanzas (verses 17-48) begin a prayer for deliverance from the travails of the world. The third and fifth stanza portrays the speaker as desperately seeking the order of the law during this life's pilgrimage. The speaker abides by the law as he understands it, but desperately desire to understand it more. Intertwined with these stanzas are two others that focus on enemies who threaten the speaker and confidence that God and His law

E. The next four stanzas draw a connection between the law, suffering, and comfort. The seventh stanza (verse 49-56) comfort that the law gives in the midst of suffering, while the next stanza (verse 57-64) indicates that the Lord and His order are the portion of the just, which brings them into a realm of love that fills the world at a level deeper than all human struggles. The next stanza (verses 65-72) go so far as to indicate that the struggles were necessary to attain the wisdom that brings one such a sense of peace and comfort. Then there is a stanza that focuses on how the law of God guides the just into the order of all of creation and leads to the defeat of enemies.

F. The next two stanzas, standing at the middle of this psalm (verses 81-96) again reflect al call for help in the midst of turmoil, and then a reflection of salvation from God.

G. The next stanzas (verses 97-112) goes up again to the heights of praising God and His law, which bring one to the heights of vision and are sweeter than any food. There is a sense of adventure in this stanza and the next one as God's law is described as guiding the faithful in the midst of life's journey.

H. The next three stanzas (verses 113-136) then go on to praise God's law as imminently precious and providing stability. They also reflect a desperate need for protection and guidance so that the psalmist may follow God's law in the future.

I. The following two stanzas (verses 137-152) alternate between a declaration to keep God's law and a call for protection based upon that law.

J. There, in the following two stanzas (verses 153-168) there is then another sense of plummet into distress, with enemies threatening the psalmist's life. But there is also a determination to keep these commandments against all opposition.

- Verse 164m referring to praising God seven times a day is part of the basis for the old rules for the Liturgy of the Hours, which would traditionally be prayed seven times a day.

K Finally, at the end there is a stanza that mysteriously reflects both a confidence that the speaker has followed God's law, along with a recognition of a need for forgiveness and further instruction. The psalm thus ends on a note of humility to avoid the arrogance that can come from looking down on others who do not understand or keep the law.