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CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it will be helpful to review and summarize the contributions of this work to the study of Psalm 119. This study began by documenting the failure of most Biblical scholars to discern any coherence in the psalm. The impression given by the majority of commentators (both conservative and critical) is that the poem is a mere conglomeration of disconnected lines. Supposedly, the only link between the great number of verses is their repeated praise for the Torah; beyond this, there is no cohesion. In the case of the exceptional few who have claimed to discern coherence in the work, they have failed to document it for their readers.

The failure to perceive the poem's coherence results from faulty methodology. Commentators who have sought for a logical progression of thought in the psalm have based their approach on the level of individual stanzas. The presupposition is that the poet must have devoted himself to a discussion of a single or dominant theme in each stanza that is distinctive to that stanza. To move from one stanza to another would then produce a logical flow of thought. This study has documented that in no stanza does the psalmist confine himself to exclusive or unique ideas. Structurally, each stanza represents a complete, unique, and creative entity; semantically, however, the break between stanzas is not so pronounced. Instead, major themes recur throughout the whole so that the work evidences unity on a macrostructural level.

Despite its overwhelming unity resulting from a high degree of repetition, it is possible to discern a progression of thought in the psalm. The progression is discernible when one categorizes all the themes in the poem and takes note of where they occur with greatest frequency. By bringing certain themes to the fore in various sections of the poem, the author creates a sense of movement. There is, thus, a progression of thematic emphases that all commentaries ignore. The progression demonstrates that the poem is not merely an incoherent hymn of praise for the Torah, but rather a prayer that moves in a logical sequence.

The psalmist begins in the “A” section (א ב) by holding forth the “blessed state” as an ideal to attain. The means to attaining it is meditation and study of the Torah. Hence, it is here that he most stresses his meditation upon the Word. Moving on to the “B” section (ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י), the psalmist recognizes the need for Yahweh to reward his study in the Word with illumination and the grace to obey what he learns. No section of the psalm contains more petitions for illumination and help in remaining obedient. As the poet continues into the “C” section (יא יב יג יד טו טז יז יח יט כ), he pauses to reflect more heavily upon his affliction. The heightened focus upon his persecution intensifies his desire for deliverance and vindication. At the same time, however, he also acknowledges that the Lord has used his affliction as a means of bringing about much good in his life. Not only have his trials yielded repentance, insight, and an occasion to put his faith to the test (thus demonstrating its reality), but they have also afforded him the opportunity to experience the depths of God’s comforting grace as never before.

At the exact mid-point of this lengthy prayer there is a shift in mood. The ancient Hebrews familiar with acrostic poetry would know to take the middle stanza (represented by the letter “ל”) as a signal to look for the change. Whereas the psalmist up to this point has been more petition-oriented and less positive

with a heavier focus upon his affliction, he now becomes more positive and affirmative. In the “D” section (ל מ נ ס ע פ) the author begins more strongly to affirm his loyalty to Yahweh and to stress his choice of the Torah as his guide in life. These affirmations about his character serve as appeals for the Lord to answer his prayer. In the “E” section (צ ק ר) the psalmist introduces another motivational affirmation. Here, he appeals to Yahweh on the basis of His revealed character as faithful and righteous. Additionally, in both the “D” and “E” sections the psalmist frequently intensifies his righteous character and that of Yahweh by contrasting them with the wicked. Finally, the psalmist concludes the prayer in the “F” section (ש ת) with the psalm’s highest degree of praise.

Not only have previous studies of Psalm 119 failed to discern its progression of thought as summarized in the preceding paragraphs, but they have also failed to recognize the significance of its various literary elements. A key literary aspect of the psalm is its acrostic structure. Probably the most common assumption for the poet’s use of an acrostic form is that it is intended to serve a mnemonic purpose. This study has demonstrated the inapplicability of this theory to Psalm 119, as well as the weakness of other pragmatic functions such as a pedagogic or magical purpose. No doubt, his prayer employs the acrostic structure for reasons more associated with its art and contents. In addition to its aesthetic appeal and its ability to symbolize exhaustiveness, the acrostic format in Psalm 119 serves to generate a structural framework that readily marks its division into stanzas for the reader. It further creates an atmosphere of orderliness and highlights the sequence of thought.

The role of the Torah words in Psalm 119 is often misrepresented, too. Because of their sheer repetition and the presupposition that the poem is a hymn, most commentaries suggest that the function of the Torah words is to

serve as the object of the psalmist's hymnic praise. This study, however, has argued that Psalm 119 is not primarily a hymn about the Torah. In fact, one really gleans little about the Torah itself by reading the work. Rather, it is a prayer based upon the Torah. In this prayer, the Torah functions as both the object of the psalmist's requests and as the grounds for his appeals. A complementary error that results from the assumption that the poem is a disconnected series of praises for the Torah is that the author utilizes the various Torah words with no regard for their various connotations. Supposedly, an indiscriminate dispersion of the synonyms was sufficient to accomplish his purpose. To the contrary, this study has demonstrated that the psalmist carefully selects the placement of Torah words within the psalm for contextual and aesthetic purposes.

Although the acrostic structure and Torah words usually receive some mention in most commentaries, there is a host of other literary devices in the psalm that go totally unnoticed. One would gain the impression from most commentaries that the use of an acrostic format and the consistent repetition of Torah words had exhausted the limits of the poet's creativity. To ignore the presence of the numerous other literary elements within the psalm is to lessen its aesthetic quality and its intended impact on the reader. Not only so, but this study has illustrated that an awareness of the poem's literary devices can be a great aid in interpreting the text and marking its shifts in thought.