

Psalm 119—A Prayer for the New Covenant

Overview

This Psalm has three distinctive features: acrostic structure, vocabulary, and organization.

Acrostic Structure

This Psalm is organized as 22 stanzas of eight verses each, one stanza for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The verses of each stanza begin with the letter for that stanza. E.W. Bullinger has illustrated the scheme by his translation of the first two stanzas (chart):

Ah! the happinesses of the perfect in the way, Such as walk by the Law of Jehovah.
Ah! the happinesses of the keepers of His testimonies, Who seek Him with their whole heart.
Assuredly they have not worked iniquity : In His ways they have ever walked.
As to Thy commandments -- Thou hast commanded us, That we should diligently keep them.
...

By what means shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to Thy word.
By every means my heart hath sought Thee : Let me not err from Thy commandments.
Besides, I have laid up Thy Word in my heart, That I might not sin against Thee.
Blessed are Thou, O Jehovah : Teach me Thy statutes.
...

By itself this acrostic shows us a very clear framework for the Psalm, but one that appears mechanical and flat. We'll see in a moment that it is not; there is a progression within the Psalm.

Words for the Word of God

The Psalm repeats numerous terms for the Word of God (Table 1, chart). The Jewish scribes recognized ten, suggested by the Ten Commandments.¹ But their additional words are concentrated, not distributed like the other eight. Five of these eight are included in Psalm 19; the sixth term in Psalm 19, “fear of the Lord,” appears only once in 119. Thus the Psalm is built around eight terms, which may be why there are eight lines per stanza. Only five stanzas (Waw, Heth, Yodh, Kaph, and Pe) have all eight, and no word appears in all 22 stanzas. Only vv. 3, 37, 90, 122, and 132 have none of the eight.

The two terms for “word” are the most generic, reminding us that God has condescended to speak in human language. Of these, דבר is by far the most common, occurring more than 1500

1 Massorah on 119:122, the only verse with none of these words. See Bullinger, CB, Appendix 73. In addition to דבר, different traditions give alternatively צדק/צדקה/צדיק and אמונה.

Psa 119

times in the OT. אמרה appears only 37 times, mostly in poetry, of which 19 are in this Psalm.²

Paul’s warnings against Judaizers have conditioned us to think ill of the term “Law.” But the Hebrew word basically means “teaching,” and reflects God’s desire to instruct us. This is not something to be feared, but rather treasured. “Testimony” emphasizes first-hand knowledge. “Judgments” are decisions rendered in specific cases, while “statutes” are terse principles with penalties

attached. “Commandment” reminds us of the authority of the one who speaks, while “precept” emphasizes that God as our overseer is giving us an assignment.

	Ps 19	Ps 119				Max
		Singular	Plural	Total	# Stanzas	
Central Eight						
Law 8451 תורה	Singular	25		25	21	2
Word 1697 דבר		20	5	25	19	2
Testimony 5715 עדות	Singular	1 (v. 88)	22	23	19	2
Judgment 4941 משפת	Plural	4	19	23	21	2
Statutes 2706 חק, חקה			22	22	18	2
Commandment 4687 מצוה	Singular	1 (v. 96)	21	22	19	2
Precepts 6490 פקוד	Plural (Statutes)		21	21	19	2
Word 565 אמרה		19		19	17	2
Additional in Jewish Tradition (not uniform)						
Way 1870 דרך		7	6	13	6	5
Righteousness 6666 צדק, צדקה, צדיק		12		12	10	5
Faithfulness 530, אמונה		5		5	5	1
Additional in Psalm 19						
Fear 3374 יראה	Singular	1 (v. 38)		1	1	

Table 1: Vocabulary for God's Word in Psalm 119

Overall Organization

The acrostic organizes the Psalm, but leaves us with a rather mechanical view, and the various words for the law are distributed fairly evenly. However, other words and concepts are clustered in different parts of the Psalm. For example, that descriptions of enemies and trials are common in Gimel (starts in v. 17), Zain (49), Kaph (81), Ain (121), and Qoph (145), while the stanzas that follow each of these show how the Psalmist turns to God’s word for deliverance. Thus we may suggest the structure outlined in Figure 1 (chart),³ which echoes Psalm 1. The first two stanzas

2 I draw on Briggs among others for these suggestions.

3 This analysis draws heavily on the analysis of W. Soll, *Psalm 119*, CBQ Monograph Series 23 (1991).

Psa 119

lay down the foundation of obedience to God's law (Ps 1:1) through heart-centered meditation (Ps 1:2),

Psa 1:1 Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.

The next verse uses a metaphor to describe God's teaching:

Psa 1:3 And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water

The importance of a river to trees may seem strange to those who live in temperate climates. But Israel, particularly south and east of Jerusalem (the heart of Judea) is relatively arid, with only 4-12" of rain per year, and trees only grow along the riverbeds (Figure 2). The metaphor thus defines not only the role of the law, but the nature of our environment in a sinful world. The five stanzas that describe the Psalmist's suffering expand Psalm 1's implicit allusion to the desert.



Figure 2: Plant growth along a desert riverbed
(Andrew Shiva / Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 4.0,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=28865649>)

Text

1 ALEPH: The Goal

Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD. 2 Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart. 3 They also do no iniquity: they walk in his ways. 4 Thou hast commanded us to keep thy precepts diligently. 5 O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes! 6 Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all thy commandments. 7 I will praise thee with uprightness of heart, when I shall have learned thy righteous judgments. 8 I will keep thy statutes: O forsake me not utterly.--The Psalmist begins with his goal of keeping God's law, knowing that obedience brings blessing. Our relation with God begins with repentance, wanting to obey God and finding that we cannot. Twice he mentions the heart, which he picks up in the second stanza.

9 BETH: The Means

This stanza outlines four steps to achieving the goal of the first stanza: setting his priorities, depending on the Lord for understanding, making a commitment before others, and meditating joyfully on what one has found.

Psalm 119, Living in God's Word

1-16, The Foundation

1-8, The Goal: Obedience (Ps 1:1)

9-16, The Means: Meditation (Ps 1:2)

17-176, The Fruit (Ps 1:3-6)

17-48, Victory in a Hostile World

49-80, Encouragement to Others

81-120, Inhabiting Eternity

121-144, Attaining Righteousness

145-176, From Death to Life

Figure 1: Structure of Psalm 119

Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed *thereto* according to thy word. 10 With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments. 11 Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.--

The first is a dedication of the heart. Deut 6:5-6 laid down the priority, that we must love the Lord with all the heart, soul, and abundance.⁴ In v. 2, he declared a blessing on anybody who would seek the Lord in this way, and here he commits himself to focus his heart on the Lord.

12 Blessed art thou, O LORD: teach me thy statutes.--The second step is to depend on the Lord for understanding.

13 With my lips have I declared all the judgments of thy mouth.--The third is to speak to others of what one has found. Compare Paul in Romans (chart):

Rom 10:9 That if thou shalt confess with thy **mouth** the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine **heart** that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. 10 For with the **heart** man believeth unto righteousness; and with the **mouth** confession is made unto salvation.

When we commit ourselves verbally before others, our internal resolve is strengthened.

14 I have rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies, as much as in all riches. 15 I will meditate in thy precepts, and have respect unto thy ways. 16 I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word.--The final step is to use the heart, now dedicated to the Lord, to meditate joyfully on what we have learned.

17-48, First Cycle of Lament: Personal Instruction

The first cycle emphasizes the Lord's instruction, amplifying v. 12. The introduction mentioned the word "way" דָּרֶךְ , a course of life, twice of the Psalmist's way (5, 9), and once of God's ways (15). This term is heavily concentrated in these chapters (Figure 3, chart). Another feature concentrated here is imperative verbs, asking the Lord to help him (Figure 4, chart). This help is focused in two areas: understanding the law, and the practical matter of obeying it.

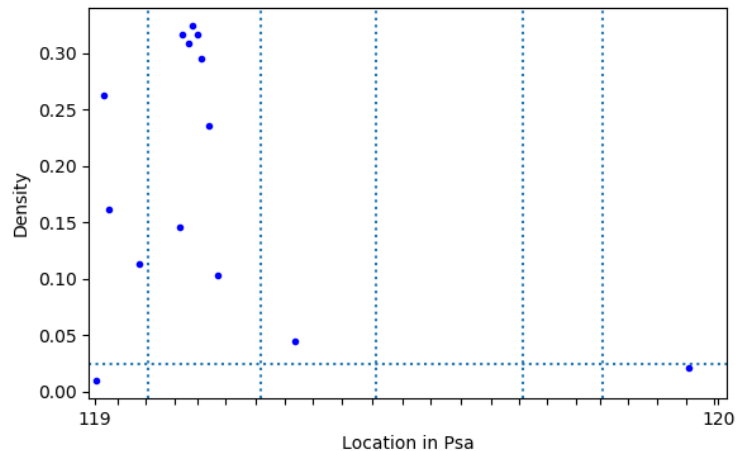


Figure 3: "Way" דָּרֶךְ in Psalm 119

4 Compare also the centrality of the heart in Prov 6:16-19 (note the odd chiasm); Matt 15:16-20

17 GIMEL: Sorrow before the Wicked

Deal bountifully with thy servant, *that* I may live, and **keep** thy word.

18 Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law. **19 I am** a stranger in the earth:

hide not thy commandments from me. **20 My soul** breaketh for the longing *that it hath* unto thy judgments at all times. **21 Thou** hast rebuked **the proud that are** cursed, which do err from thy commandments. **22 Remove from**

me **reproach** and contempt; for I

have **kept** thy testimonies. **23 Princes** also did sit *and* **speaking against me: but thy servant did** meditate in thy statutes. **24 Thy testimonies also are my delight and my counsellors.**--Like the first stanza of the other cycles, the Psalmist emphasizes the opposition that he faces because of his devotion to the law of God. It makes him a stranger in the earth (19), and his soul breaks with the inconsistency between God's word and what he sees.

Psalm 1 compared God's teaching with a river in a dry land that allows plants to flourish. Here the Psalmist describes the dry land in which he needs to draw on that teaching. His sober assessment reflects that of Lot in Sodom:

2Pe 2:7 [God] delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: 8 (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;)

His enemies are "the proud" (21) and "princes" (23), who reproach and accuse him.⁵ The reference here and elsewhere (46, 161) to kings and princes suggests that the Psalm was composed during the captivity, when the nation was humbled under foreign monarchs.⁶

25 DALETH: Teaching Actions as well as Ideas

My **soul** cleaveth unto the dust: quicken thou me according to thy word. **26 I have declared my ways**, and thou heardest me: **teach** me thy statutes. **27 Make me to understand the way** of thy precepts: so shall I talk of thy wondrous works. **28 My soul** melteth for heaviness: **strengthen thou me** according unto thy word. **29 Remove from me the way** of lying: and grant me thy law graciously **הִנֵּן**. **30 I have chosen the way** of truth: thy judgments have I laid *before me*. **31 I have stuck** unto thy testimonies: O LORD, put me not to shame. **32 I**

⁵ This cycle is the only one to mention "reproach" הרפה, הרפה (Strong 2778, 2781).

⁶ Soll suggests that the author is Jehoiachin, taken to Babylon with the second round of exiles in 597 BC.

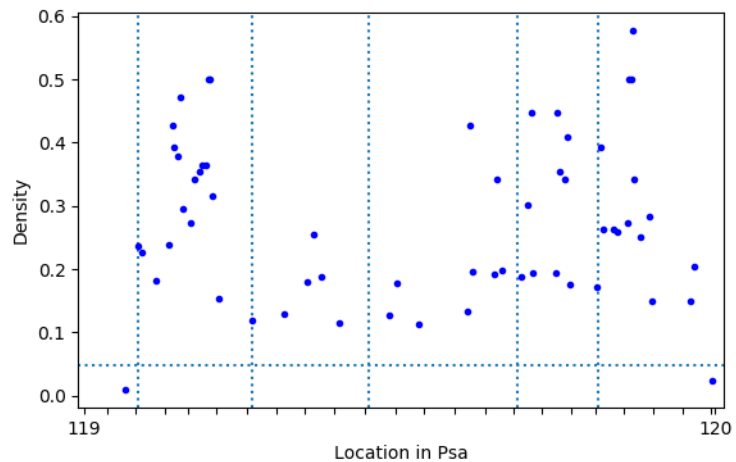


Figure 4: Imperatives in Psalm 119

will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart.--In the face of this opposition, he resolves to walk in God's way. He repeats the desire of v. 12 for God's instruction, not just for its contents, but for its practical implications (v. 27), and also asks the Lord to enable him to keep what he learns (28 "strengthen me," 29 "remove from me the way of lying," cf. "lead us not into temptation"). These two themes are echoed throughout the Psalm, and express his longing for the two great promises of the Spirit-powered New Covenant: knowledge of God's law (Jer 31:33-34) and ability to obey it (Ezek 36:27).

33 HE: More Enabling

Teach me, O LORD, the way of thy statutes; and I shall keep it unto the end. 34 Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law; yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart. 35 Make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight. 36 Incline my heart unto thy testimonies, and not to covetousness. 37 Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way. 38 Stablish thy word unto thy servant, who is devoted to thy fear. 39 Turn away my reproach which I fear: for thy judgments are good. 40 Behold, I have longed after thy precepts: quicken me in thy righteousness.--The requests continue, both for internal understanding and for aid in obedience.

41 VAU: Result of God's Teaching

The final stanza in this cycle calls on the Lord for his loyal love, and anticipates three results.

Let thy mercies חסד come also unto me, O LORD, even thy salvation, according to thy word. 42 So shall I have wherewith to answer him that reproacheth me: for I trust in thy word. 43 And take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth; for I have hoped in thy judgments. 44 So shall I keep thy law continually for ever and ever. 45 And I will walk at liberty: for I seek thy precepts.--The first result is that, through the Lord's help, he will live in obedience to God's teaching, which will remove any grounds of reproach.

46 I will speak of thy testimonies also before kings, and will not be ashamed.--The second is that he will boldly confess God's law, as in v. 13. Note the audience, "kings."

47 And I will delight myself in thy commandments, which I have loved. 48 My hands also will I lift up unto thy commandments, which I have loved; and I will meditate in thy statutes.--The third result is continued meditation and delight in the law of God.

49-80: Second Cycle of Lament: Impact on Other Believers

This cycle refers three times to those who fear the Lord (vv. 63, 74, 79).⁷ The Psalter speaks of fearing God more than any other OT book (31x; Deuteronomy has 8, 2 Kings 6, and Kings as a whole 9). Within Psalms, most instances are in the first and last books (Figure 5, chart). In Book

⁷ These are the only instances of this expression in Psalm 119; v. 120 is פחד rather than ירא.

Psa 119

1 the peak begins with the invitation in the independent hymn, Psalm 33,

Psa 33:8 Let all the earth **fear the LORD**: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. ... 18 Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon them that **fear him**, upon them that hope in his mercy;

“All the earth” prepares us for how the term is used in Book 5. David also emphasizes this virtue in the first of the Songs of the Sufferer,

Psa 34:7 The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that **fear him**, and delivereth them. ... 9 O **fear the LORD**, ye his saints: for there is no want to them that fear him.

Then it peaks in Book 4 with David’s exposition of Ex 34:6 in Psalm 103,

Psa 103:11 For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that **fear him**. ... 13 Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that **fear him**. ... 17 But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that **fear him**, and his righteousness unto children's children;

We’ll see that this reference may be the reason that Psalm 119 picks up the phrase in this section.

In 115 and 118 that “them that fear the Lord,” with “Israel” and “the house of Aaron,” describes all of the Lord’s worshippers, including Gentiles as well as Jews, as 33:8 anticipated.

It is popular today to say that the fear of God is simply “reverential awe.” This greatly devalues the word. The first instance of fear in the world was when Adam hid himself in the garden:

Gen 3:9 And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? 10 And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and **I was afraid**, because I was naked; and I hid myself.

Adam feared to appear before the God whom he had offended. The instances in Exodus 14, by the shores of the Red Sea, are illuminating:

Exo 14:10 ... the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and, behold, the Egyptians marched after them; and **they were sore afraid**: and the children of Israel cried out unto the LORD. ... 13 And Moses said unto the people, **Fear ye not**, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, ... 31 And Israel saw that great work which the LORD did upon the Egyptians: and the people **feared the LORD**, and believed the LORD, and his servant Moses.

Their attitude toward the Lord is the same that they previously had toward Egypt: recognition of

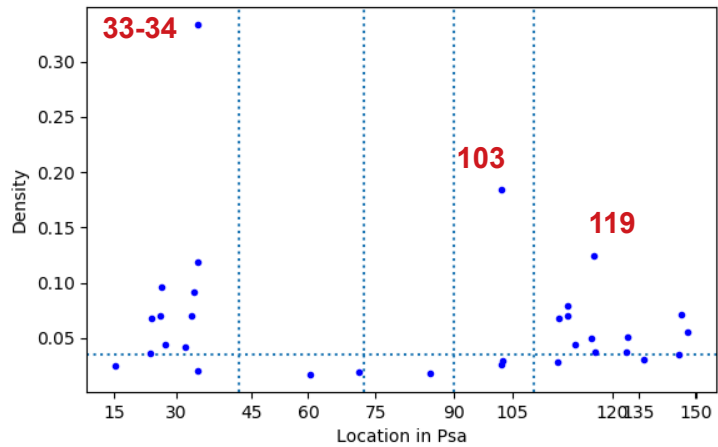


Figure 5: Fear of YHWH in Psalms

someone’s power, and apprehension lest he use it to harm them.⁸

Fear is not in conflict with grace. When the churches in Acts are healthy, they are “walking in **the fear of the Lord**” (9:31). The NT commands us to “perfect holiness **in the fear of God**” (2 Cor 7:1) and “submit yourselves one to another **in the fear of God**” (Eph 5:21).

So those who fear the Lord are the ones who take his power seriously, and submit to him. In the first cycle of Psalm 119 the Psalmist focused on his individual relation to God, but here he describes his relation to others who, like him, fear the Lord.

The stanzas of this cycle cascade into each other (Figure 6, chart): references to keeping the law at the end of the

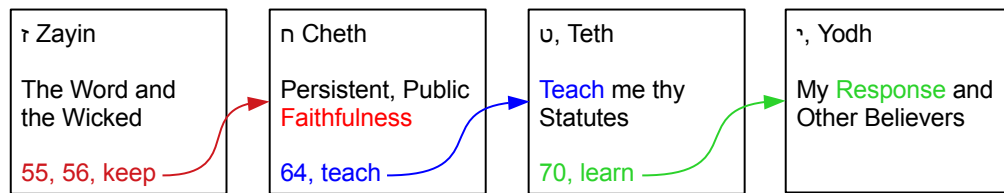


Figure 6: Cascading Themes in the Second Cycle

first stanza anticipate the theme of the second and third, while a reference to God’s instruction at the end of the second anticipates the third, and learning in the third develops into a broader response in the fourth.

49 ZAIN: The Word and the Wicked

This stanza alternates encouragement from the word of God with the suffering he experiences (Table 2, chart). Like Gimel, this chapter concentrates references to adversity, but this time it is interspersed with the remedy, the Word of God.

His adversaries in Gimel were the proud, more specifically princes. Here he adds another, the wicked, and each successive stanza in this section recalls one or the other of these.

The final reference to keeping God’s precepts (55 שמר, Strong 8104, 56 נצר, Strong 5341) recalls the emphasis on this theme in the introduction, and in turn prepares for the concentration of the verbs (mostly שמר) in Cheth and Teth.

57 CHETH: Persistent, Public Faithfulness

*Thou art my portion, O LORD: I have said that I would **keep שמר** thy words. 58 I intreated thy favour with *my* whole heart: be merciful חנן unto me according to thy word. 59 I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies. 60 I made haste, and delayed not to **keep שמר** thy commandments. 61 The bands of the **wicked רשע** have robbed me: *but* I have not forgotten thy law. 62 At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto thee because of thy righteous judgments. 63 I *am* a companion of all **them that fear thee**, and of them that **keep שמר** thy precepts. 64 The earth, O LORD, is full of thy mercy חסד: **teach** me thy*

8 The writer of 2 Kings uses the contrast between fearing other gods and fearing the Lord to summarize the covenant of Sinai (17:35-36).

Psa 119

Encouragement	Discouragement
49 Remember the word unto thy servant, upon which thou hast caused me to hope. 50 This is my comfort	in my affliction:
for thy word hath quickened me.	51 The proud דָּרְסוּ have had me greatly in derision:
yet have I not declined from thy law. 52 I remembered thy judgments of old, O LORD; and have comforted myself.	53 Horror hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked רָשָׁע that forsake thy law.
54 Thy statutes have been my songs	in the house of my pilgrimage.
55 I have remembered thy name, O LORD, in the night, and have kept שָׁמַר thy law. 56 This I had, because I kept נָצַר thy precepts.	

Table 2: Alternation of Encouragement and Discouragement

statutes.--This stanza picks up the theme of keeping God’s words, that is, paying special attention to what they teach. But note also the references to God’s mercy (condescension in 58, loyal love in 64). These are two of the four main attributes of Jehovah from Ex 34:6, which motivate him to care for his people. We will see the others in the final stanza of this section, making this section the prominent one in the entire Psalm for these terms (Figure 7, chart).⁹

This reference to Ex 34:6 may explain why this cycle concentrates on “them that fear thee.” One of the two previous peaks concerning “fear of the Lord” in Psalms (Figure 5) is Psalm 103, which was David’s great exposition of Exod 34:6. The two notions seem to go together. God is a great and terrible God, one who deserves our fear, but he also shows tender love and mercy toward his people, and we must keep both of these truths clearly in mind.

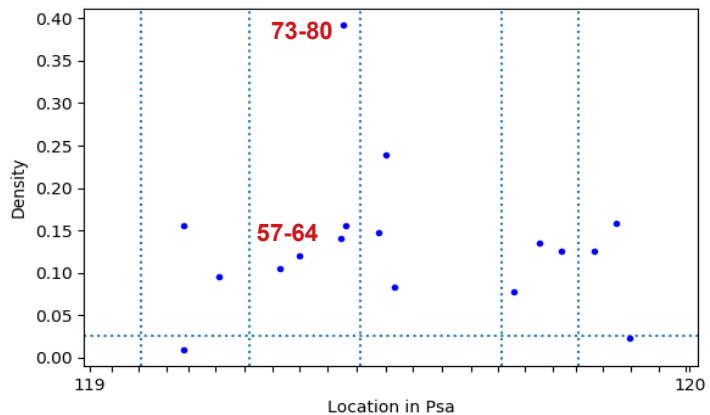


Figure 7: חסד, חגג, רחם, אמונה in Psalm 119

This concentration is important in two ways.

1. It emphasizes that our keeping of the Lord’s word is a response to his patient, loyal care for us. We love him, because he first loved us.
2. It is the basis for God’s care of his people as a people, and thus aligns with the emphasis on “them that fear thee” in this section.

9 The אמת of Ex 34:6 does not appear in this cycle, but the related אמונה does, along with חסד and רחם, in Yodh. Similarly, the Psalm uses the noun רחם in place of רחום in Exodus.

Psa 119

The section ends with a prayer for God to teach him, which dominates the next stanza, and characterizes the entire section (Figure 8, chart).

65 TETH: Teach me thy Statues

In v. 12, the Psalmist acknowledged his need for the Lord's instruction. This stanza is the high point in the Psalm of the Hebrew verb למד (Strong 3925,

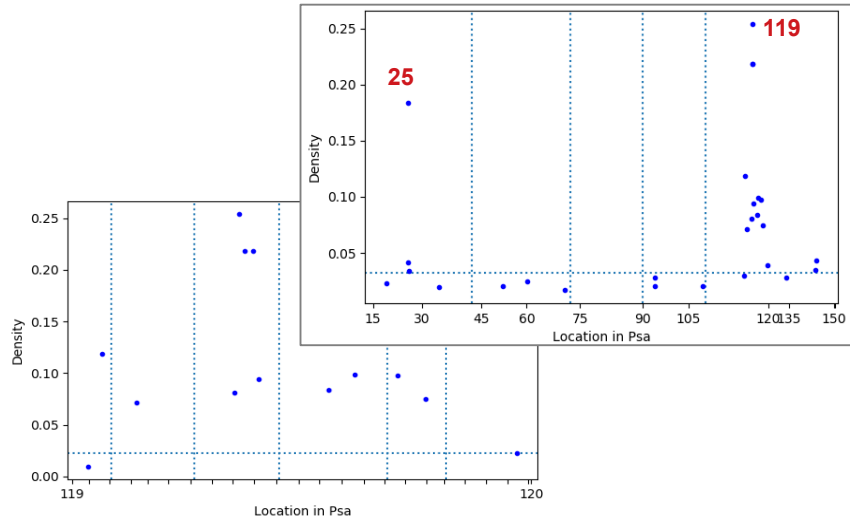


Figure 8: למד in Psalm 119 and in Psalms

Figure 8), which can mean either “teach” or “learn.”¹⁰ It shows how God teaches his people.

Thou hast dealt well with thy servant, O LORD, according unto thy word. 66 Teach me good judgment and knowledge: for I have believed thy commandments. 67 Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept שמר thy word. 68 Thou art good, and doest good; teach me thy statutes. 69 The proud גז have forged a lie against me: but I will keep נצר thy precepts with my whole heart. 70 Their heart is as fat as grease; but I delight in thy law. 71 It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes. 72 The law of thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver.--Note the apparent paradox between his appreciation of God's goodness in 64 and 68, and the affliction he has suffered in 67 and 71. This suffering is the Lord's way of teaching us to walk in his law.

His delight in v. 70 anticipates the theme of the final stanza in this cycle.

73 YODH: My Response and Other Believers

Thy hands have made me and fashioned me: give me understanding, that I may learn thy commandments. 74 They that fear thee will be glad when they see me; because I have hoped in thy word. 75 I know, O LORD, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness אמונה hast afflicted me. 76 Let, I pray thee, thy merciful kindness חסד be for my comfort, according to thy word unto thy servant. 77 Let thy tender mercies רחם come unto me, that I may live: for thy law is my delight. 78 Let the proud be ashamed; for they dealt perversely with me without a cause: but I will meditate in thy precepts. 79 Let those that fear thee turn unto me, and those that have known thy testimonies. 80 Let my heart be sound in thy statutes; that I be not ashamed.--The outcome of this cycle is the pleasure that he

¹⁰ In turn, Ps 119 is the high point (13x) of למד in Psalms; next is Psalm 25, the great acrostic that lies at the center of Book 1.

and other believers share in the knowledge of God's care: gladness (74), comfort (76), and delight (77). With Cheth, this stanza completes the enumeration of God's covenant characteristics from Exodus 34.

81-120, Third Cycle of Lament: Facing Eternity

The third cycle focuses on the attempt of the wicked to shorten his life, and his trust in the eternal word of God. This section is particularly strong in the

words עולם "Eternity" (Strong 5769) and תמיד "Continually" (Strong 8548) (Figure 9, chart).

Reflecting this emphasis on long duration, the section has five stanzas rather than the usual four, before we encounter the next stanza of intense complaint in Ayin (121).

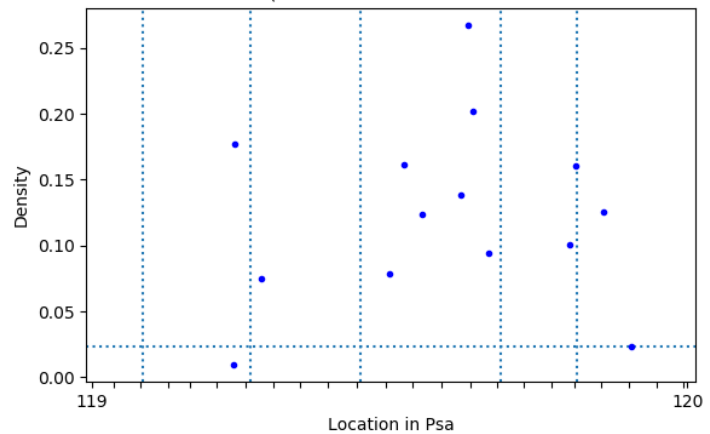


Figure 9: עולם or תמיד in Ps 119

81 CAPH: Suffering before the Proud

My soul fainteth for thy salvation: *but* I hope in thy word. 82 Mine eyes fail for thy word, saying, When wilt thou comfort me? 83 For I am become like a bottle in the smoke; yet do I not forget thy statutes. 84 How many are the days of thy servant? when wilt thou execute judgment on them that persecute me? 85 The proud have digged pits for me, which are not after thy law. 86 All thy commandments are faithful: they persecute me wrongfully; help thou me. 87 They had almost consumed me upon earth; but I forsook not thy precepts. 88 Quicken me after thy lovingkindness; so shall I keep the testimony of thy mouth.--The complaint emphasizes the Psalmist's transitory condition. He is old and withered (83), and sees the end of his days (84) as the wicked seek to consumer him (87). But once again he alternates the references to suffering with his reliance on God's word.

89 LAMED: Permanence of God's Word

For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven. 90 Thy faithfulness is unto all generations: thou hast established the earth, and it abideth. 91 They continue this day according to thine ordinances: for all are thy servants. 92 Unless thy law had been my delights, I should then have perished in mine affliction. 93 I will never forget thy precepts: for with them thou hast quickened me. 94 I am thine, save me; for I have sought thy precepts. 95 The wicked have waited for me to destroy me: *but* I will consider thy testimonies. 96 I have seen an end of all perfection: *but* thy commandment is exceeding broad.--The answer is in the permanence of God's word (89). Its permanence explains the duration of the earth (90-91), and so the Psalmist can trust that the Lord will sustain him as well.

97 MEM: Overcoming the Weakness of the Past

O how love I thy law! it *is* my meditation all the day. 98 Thou through thy commandments hast made me **wiser** than mine enemies: for they *are* ever with me. 99 I have **more understanding** שכל than all my teachers: for thy testimonies *are* my meditation. 100 I understand בין **more than** the ancients, because I keep thy precepts. 101 I have refrained my feet **from** every evil way, that I might keep thy word. 102 I have not departed from thy judgments: for thou hast taught me. 103 How sweet are thy words unto my taste! *yea, sweeter* than honey to my mouth! 104 Through thy precepts I get **understanding** בין: therefore I hate every false way.--He emphasizes the understanding that the law gives him. Because of its eternal character, God's teaching exceeds any insight available to others, whether his enemies, his teachers, or the sages of antiquity.

105 NUN: Resolve to Obey in the Face of Opposition

Thy word *is* a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. 106 I have sworn, and I will perform *it*, that I will keep thy righteous judgments. 107 I am **afflicted** very much: quicken me, O LORD, according unto thy word. 108 Accept, I beseech thee, the freewill offerings of my mouth, O LORD, and teach me thy judgments. 109 My soul *is* continually in my hand: yet do I not forget thy law. 110 The **wicked** have laid a snare for me: yet I erred not from thy precepts. 111 Thy testimonies have I taken as an heritage for ever: for they *are* the rejoicing of my heart. 112 I have inclined mine heart to perform thy statutes *always, even unto the end*.--Recognizing this advantage, he resolves to follow the Lord. He has sworn (106) and decided (112) that this is his course, and affirms it with freewill offerings (108).

113 SAMECH: God Upholds the Righteous and Puts Down the Wicked

I hate *vain* thoughts: but thy law do I love. 114 Thou *art* my hiding place and my shield: I hope in thy word. 115 Depart from me, ye **evildoers**: for I will keep the commandments of my God. 116 Uphold me according unto thy word, that I may live: and let me not be ashamed of my hope. 117 Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe: and I will have respect unto thy statutes continually. 118 Thou hast trodden down all them that err from thy statutes: for their deceit *is* falsehood. 119 Thou puttest away all the **wicked** of the earth *like* dross: therefore I love thy testimonies. 120 My flesh trembleth for fear of thee; and I am afraid of thy judgments.--He began with fear of destruction, but through the eternal word of God he has been instructed and encouraged to follow the Lord. Now he is confident that he will live (116) and be safe, so that he can continue to respect God's law (117). But the wicked have no such assurance, facing only destruction (119). In the fact of this reality, he stands in fear of the Lord.

121-144, Fourth Cycle of Lament: Attaining Righteousness

This cycle emphasizes the words צדק Strong 6664, צדיק Strong 6662, and צדקה Strong 6666,

Psa 119

translated variously “righteous” or “righteousness,” thanks largely to the Tsade stanza (Figure 9, chart). All but one instance describe the character of God and his law.

We can summarize the cycles so far (Table 3). The first gives the basic idea that God’s word delivers us from difficulty. The second amplifies the “who” to include a larger community, unified by the fear of God. The third deals with “when” by reminding us of our temporal limitations and the eternity of God’s word. Now we concentrate on “what,” the righteousness that obedience brings.

The core meaning of righteousness¹¹ is conformity to a standard. This is seen in verses that deal with mundane topics, for example (chart):

Lev 19:35 Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment, in meteyard, in weight, or in measure. 36 **Just** balances, **just** weights, a **just** ephah, and a **just** hin, shall ye have: I am the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt.

Verses	Key Words	Qn	Theme
17-48	Way		Overcoming trouble through the Word of God
49-80	Those who Fear the Lord	Who?	Community of those who fear the Lord
81-120	Eternity, Continually	When?	Continuing Commitment to the Eternal Word
121-144	Righteous, Righteousness	What?	The Nature of True Righteousness
145-176	Live, Quicken	Why?	Life through God’s Word

Table 3: Thematic Progression through Psalm 119

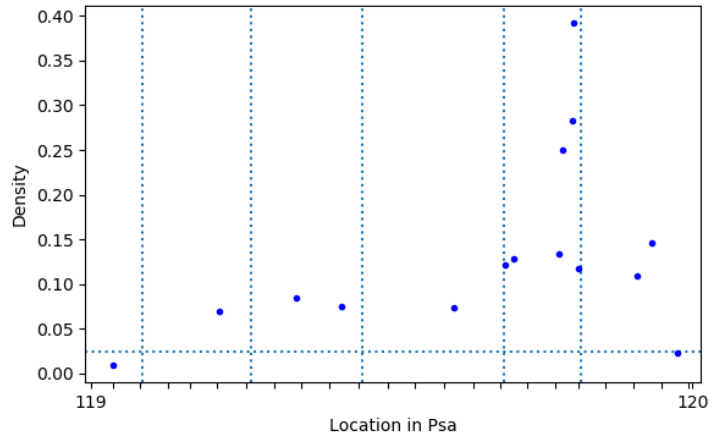


Figure 10: "Righteous" קָדִישׁ, קִדְשׁ and "Righteousness" הַקִּדְשׁ in Psalm 119

A weight or measure is unjust if it doesn’t correspond to the standard. A “just ephah” is also “complete” or “perfect,” containing the full amount of the standard:

Deu 25:15 But thou shalt have a perfect and **just** weight, a perfect and **just** measure shalt thou have: that thy days may be lengthened in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.

The term is often applied to people in an ethical sense, as in v. 121, “I have done judgment and justice [righteousness].” It’s not hard to think of a relevant standard: the law of God. But problems arise when God’s law itself is called “righteous,” as here, or when the term is applied

11 I am indebted here to J.A. Bollier, “The Righteousness of God,” *Interpretation* 8 (1954) 404-413.

Psa 119

to God himself (e.g., Deut 32:3; Ps 145:17). This is the most common sense in this section (chart; vv. 123 “thy righteous word,” 137, 138, 142, 144). By what standard can God be judged? He made the law—how can it judge him? Isn’t it just a tautology to say that the law is righteous?

An important clue is that God’s righteousness is often in parallel with the vocabulary from Ex 34:6 describing his character:

Psa 36:10 O continue thy **lovingkindness** **חסד** unto them that know thee; and thy **righteousness** to the upright in heart.

Psa 40:10 I have not hid thy **righteousness** within my heart; I have declared thy **faithfulness** **אמונה** and thy **salvation**: I have not concealed thy **lovingkindness** **חסד** and thy **truth** **אמת** from the great congregation.

Psa 103:17 But the **mercy** **חסד** of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his **righteousness** unto children's children;

In Exodus 34, these characteristics of God motivate his work as savior, who forgives and delivers his people. We see this connection already in Ps 40:10, and these echoes of Exodus 34 are reinforced in the prophets, where his righteousness is often in parallel with his salvation. For example (see also 46:13; 61:10),

Isa 45:21 there is no God else beside me; a **just** God and a **Saviour**; there is none beside me.

Isa 51:5 My **righteousness** is near; my **salvation** is gone forth,

Isa 56:1 my **salvation** is near to come, and my **righteousness** to be revealed.

God is righteous because he conforms to his revelation of himself, with special emphasis on Ex 34:6. This confession is quoted repeatedly throughout the OT (Num 14:18; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Neh 9:17) and as we have seen, lies behind many other passages.

The implications of this identification of God’s righteousness with the loving, forgiving character in Exodus 34 are profound. His law is righteous because it advances and reflects this character. In turn, for us to be righteous means that we, in conforming to his law, ourselves manifest these qualities of compassion, love, and mercy. Thus our Savior summarizes all the law as loving God and loving one’s neighbor (Matt 22:35-40), and declares “judgment, mercy, and faith” to be more weighty than tithing (Matt 23:23).

So to come back to the progress of thought through the Psalm: what is the true objective that we, and the community of God-fearers of which we are a part, seek to attain? It is righteousness, that is, conformity to the character of our God, as revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Each stanza of this section describes the attitude of the wicked toward God’s law, his own attitude, and his repeated request to the Lord to intervene.

121 AYIN: The Need for Righteousness

The section begins with his suffering at the hands of the oppressors (121), the proud (122), those

who seek to annul God's law (126), all of which cause him deep grief (123). As in every cycle but the first, he takes refuge in God's law.

I have done judgment and justice: leave me not to mine oppressors.--His claim on the Lord is based on his own obedience to God's teaching. The reference to "judgment" suggests that he may be a king or other individual with judicial responsibility.

122 Be surety for thy servant for good: let not the proud oppress me. 123 Mine eyes fail for thy salvation, and for the word of thy righteousness. 124 Deal with thy servant according unto thy mercy רַחֵם , and teach me thy statutes. 125 I am thy servant; give me understanding, that I may know thy testimonies. 126 It is time for thee, LORD, to work: for they have made void thy law. 127 Therefore I love thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold. 128 Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right; and I hate every false way.--In the first stanza, the wicked seek to make God's teaching void, while he loves and esteems it.

129 PE: The Means of Righteousness

This stanza is the only one of the three that does not have a word for "righteous" or "righteousness," but it describes how he is pursuing righteousness, in contrast with the wicked.

Thy testimonies are wonderful: therefore doth my soul keep them. 130 The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple. 131 I opened my mouth, and panted: for I longed for thy commandments.--First, he declares his devotion to God's word.

132 Look thou upon me, and be merciful רַחֵם unto me, as thou usest to do unto those that love thy name. 133 Order my steps in thy word: and let not any iniquity have dominion over me. 134 Deliver me from the oppression of man: so will I keep thy precepts. 135 Make thy face to shine upon thy servant; and teach me thy statutes.--Next, he prays for the Lord's help in three ways: teaching him (135), enabling him to obey (133), and delivering him from those who oppose his righteous conduct (134).

136 Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law. --In contrast, the wicked, having made God's law void (126), do not keep it.

137 TZADI: The Standard of Righteousness

Here the emphasis on the intrinsic righteousness of the Lord and his word comes to the fore.

Righteous art thou, O LORD, and upright are thy judgments.--In v. 121 he noted his commitment to righteous judgment, in the face of opposition. Now the Lord guarantees that judgment by his own action.

138 Thy testimonies that thou hast commanded are righteous and very faithful. 139 My zeal hath consumed me, because mine enemies have forgotten thy words.--For the third time, we are reminded of the enemies' disregard for God's word.

140 Thy word is very pure: therefore thy servant loveth it. 141 I am small and despised: yet do not I forget thy precepts. 142 Thy righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and thy law is the truth. 143 Trouble and anguish have taken hold on me: yet thy commandments are my delights.--And for a third time we read of the Psalmist's dedication to God's revelation.

144 The righteousness of thy testimonies is everlasting: give me understanding, and I shall live.-- "Live" links to the final cycle

145-176: Fifth Cycle of Lament: Life through God's Word

The key word of this cycle is חי, which can mean "to live" or "to quicken" (that is, "make alive") (Figure 11, chart). Life is part of his core request in the first cycle, and naturally recurs in the third, dealing with eternity. But now it comes to a crescendo in the final cycle, particularly the request: "Quicken me, quicken me, quicken me."

The four stanzas in this cycle form two groups, (Figure 12, chart). The first pair describe the problem he faces, while the last two describe the outcome he anticipates.

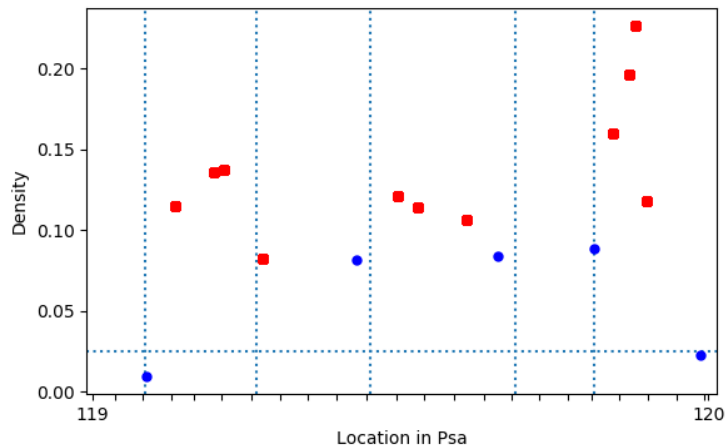


Figure 11: חי "Live, Quicken" (Strong 2421) in Psalm 119. Blue = "live" (G), red = "quicken, make alive" (D)

145-160, The Problem

These two stanzas set forth his complaint, first subjectively (the distress he feels), then objectively (the adversaries that are causing him distress). Each ends with a reference to the eternal word of God that stabilizes him in his troubles (the lesson he learned in the third cycle).

145 QOPH: Crying to the Lord when the Wicked Approach

Just as the initial Tsade invited the Psalmist to meditate on righteousness in the fourth cycle, the letter Qoph suggests two words that characterize this stanza. The first is קרא (Strong 7121) "to cry" in 145 and 146. 146 adds the request "save me," which in 147 becomes a different verb, also translated "cry" in our version. And 149 paraphrases the cry with the request, "Hear my voice."

I cried with my whole heart; hear me, O LORD: I will keep thy statutes. 146 I cried unto thee; save me, and I shall keep thy testimonies. 147 I prevented the dawning of the morning, and cried: I hoped in thy word. 148 Mine eyes prevent the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word. 149 Hear my voice according unto thy lovingkindness **קסז: O**

LORD, quicken me according to thy judgment.

The second Qoph word means “to be near.” His cry is motivated by two entities that are near. The wicked are approaching him, providing the need for his cry, but the Lord is already there near him, assuring him of a hearer whose word has always been steadfast and unailing.

150 They draw nigh that follow after mischief: they are far from thy law. 151 Thou art near, O LORD; and all thy commandments are truth. 152 Concerning thy testimonies, I have known of old that thou hast founded them for ever. --The first complaint stanza ends with an assurance that God’s word is steadfast and unailing. Here is he drawing on the lesson he learned in the third cycle: if we hold fast to the eternal word of God, we will not be swept away in the tides of eternity.

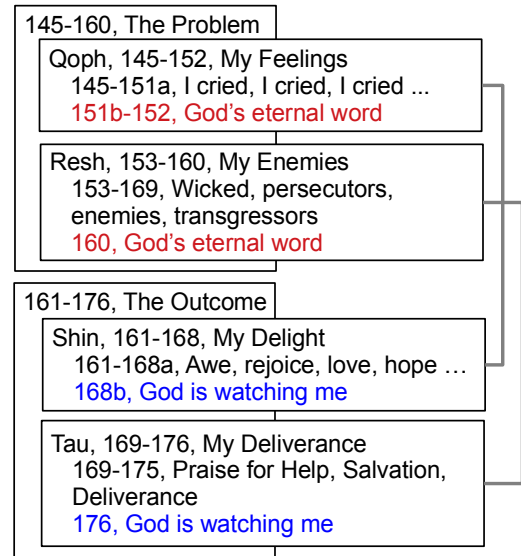


Figure 12: Structure of the Final Cycle

153 RESH: Asking Life in the Face of Enemies

The first stanza mentioned his adversaries only briefly, but now he enumerates them, and in the process repeatedly requests that God would quicken him.

Consider mine affliction, and deliver me: for I do not forget thy law. 154 Plead my cause, and deliver me: quicken me according to thy word. 155 Salvation is far from the wicked: for they seek not thy statutes. 156 Great are thy tender mercies, O LORD: quicken me according to thy judgments. 157 Many are my persecutors and mine enemies; yet do I not decline from thy testimonies. 158 I beheld the transgressors, and was grieved; because they kept not thy word. 159 Consider how I love thy precepts: quicken me, O LORD, according to thy lovingkindness.--His woes comes from two kinds of people. V. 157 mentions personal adversaries, those who oppose him. But these titles are surrounded by references to those who have rejected the Lord and his word—the wicked in 155 and the transgressors (those who break God’s law) in 158. As they rush on to destruction, he asks the Lord to make him alive.

160 Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth for ever.--As at the end of Qoph, he reflects on the eternal, steadfast character of the word in which he has placed his trust.

The first two stanzas in this cycle ended with similar references to the true, eternal nature of God’s word. The last two also have similar endings, this time reflecting his consciousness that this eternal, unchanging Lord pays attention to him and cares for him.

161-176, The Outcome

The first outcome stanza describes the internal delight he feels in God's word, overcoming the emotional distress in Qoph. The second describes the praise he will offer God, in thanks for deliverance from the enemies of Resh. Again, there is a common refrain, this time reflecting his awareness that he lives under God's attentive care.

161 SHIN: Emotional Strength from God's Word

Princes [v. 23] have persecuted me without a cause: but my heart standeth in awe of thy word. 162 I rejoice at thy word, as one that findeth great spoil. 163 I hate and abhor lying: but thy law do I love. 164 Seven times a day do I praise thee because of thy righteous judgments. 165 Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them. 166 LORD, I have hoped for thy salvation, and done thy commandments. 167 My soul hath kept thy testimonies; and I love them exceedingly. 168 I have kept thy precepts and thy testimonies:--Qoph focused on his emotional distress in the face of his troubles, reflected in his cries to the Lord. Now he celebrates the emotional relief he finds in God's word.

for all my ways are before thee.--While God's word brings him peace, it also reminds him that God cares about how he lives. This is the first time we have seen "way" דרך since v. 59, and before that almost all instances were in the first cycle and the introduction (Figure 3, chart). In summing up the Psalm, he emphasizes that true peace comes through the consciousness that he walks before the Lord.

169 TAU: Humble Promise of Praise

Let my cry come near before thee, O LORD: give me understanding according to thy word. 170 Let my supplication come before thee: deliver me according to thy word. 171 My lips shall utter praise, when thou hast taught me thy statutes. 172 My tongue shall speak of thy word: for all thy commandments are righteousness. 173 Let thine hand help me; for I have chosen thy precepts. 174 I have longed for thy salvation, O LORD; and thy law is my delight. 175 Let my soul live, and it shall praise thee; and let thy judgments help me.--"Deliver," "help," "salvation," and "judgments," with a final reference to life, take us back to the adversaries of Resh. The Lord has overcome them, and he now gives thanks for this deliverance.

176 I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant; for I do not forget thy commandments.--The Massoretic accents separate "I have gone astray" from what follows. "Like a lost sheep" modifies "seek," not "go astray." The appropriate comparison is not Isa 53:6, but Matthew 18; the Psalmist, with his commitment to know and follow God's law, is not deliberately rebellious. But as in vv. 28, 29, and elsewhere, he recognizes that he needs the Lord's direct intervention in addition to the Word of God.¹² As throughout, the Psalm expresses longings that are only satisfied with the work of the Spirit under the New Covenant.

¹² Delitzsch's rendering of the first word as a condition is rhetorically tempting, but grammatically unparalleled.

Notes

Distribution of Prominent Terms

Words occurring with particular concentration in different stanzas—often, the verbs used with words for “law”

	א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	י	כ	ל	ם	ן	ס	ע	ף	ץ	ק	ר	ש	ת	
שמר	3						1	3	1														
נצר																							
both	4				3		1	4	2														
אהב						2							1		2	1	1	1		1	3		
למד								1	3	1													
בין													2										
לב or לבב	2	2			3				2														
Imperatives			3	6	7				3					3	3	4	6		5	7		3	
חיה			1	1	2																		

Verbs with Nouns

Red: subject YHWH; blue: negative

	אמרה	דבר	חק, זקה	מצוה	משפט	עדות	פקוד	תורה	Other
אהב	140			47, 48, 127		119, 167	159	97, 113, 163, 165	132
אור		105, 130							
אמן				66					
אמת, אמונה		160		86, 151		138		142	
ב	133, 148								

Psa 119

	אמרה	דבר	חק, זקה	מצוה	משפט	עדות	פקוד	תורה	Other
בחר							173		
בין C		169				95	27, 104		
בטח		42							
דבק						31			
דבר						46			
דרך-			33	32		14	27		
דרך				35					
דרש			155				45, 94		
הלך								1	
זכר		49			52				55
חיה	154	25, 107			149, 156				
חנן								29	
טוב					39			72	
יאב				131					
ידע						79, 125			
יחל		74, 81, 114, 147			43				
יסד						152			
ירא					120				
ירה			33						
ישר					137		128		
ך	41, 58, 76, 116, 170	9, 65						85	
ל	82, 123, 154								
למד			12, 26, 64, 68, 124, 135,	73	7 108				

Psa 119

	אמרה	דבר	חק, זקה	מצוה	משפט	עדות	פקוד	תורה	Other
			171 71						
נבט				6				18	
נחל						111			
נטה						36 157		51	
נצב		89							
נצל	170								
נצר			145	115	129	2, 22	56, 69, 100	34	33
נר		105							
נתיב־				35					
סור					102				
ספר					13				
סתר				19					
עזב							87	53	
עזר					175				
ענה	172								
עשה			112	166	84, 121				
פחד		161							
פלא						129			
פרר								126	
צדק*				172	62, 75, 106, 160, 164	138, 144			
צפן	11,								
קום	38	28							
רוץ				22					
רחב				96					
רחק								150	

Psa 119

	אמרה	דבר	חק, זקה	מצוה	משפט	עדות	פקוד	תורה	Other
שיח, שיחה	148		23, 48			99	15, 78	97	27
שש	162					14			
שכח		16, 139	83	176			93, 141	51, 109, 113, 153	
שמר	67, 158	17, 57, 101	5,8	60	106	88, 146, 167, 168	4, 63, 134, 168	34, 44, 55, 136	9
שגה			118	10, 21					
שזה					30				
שעה			117						
שעשע, שעע			16	143, 47		24		70, 77, 92, 174	
תאב							40		
תעה							110		
Other				48	20, 160	59			