

All This Is The Torah

The great 119th Psalm is written by someone who deeply loves God's law. At midnight he rises up to give thanks for it. His eyes stay open through the watches of the night that he might meditate on it. Given my own ambivalent experiences with religious law, I wonder what he sees that I don't?

So I try to put myself back back in fifth-century BC Judea when this poem may have been written. The psalmist doesn't have a book called the Bible in front of him. He doesn't even have an "Old Testament." Maybe he has some scrolls he looks at from time to time, but maybe he still spends a lot of his time out on the hills of Judea tending sheep. He's not book conscious at all. He doesn't even have a word equivalent to our English word "law." The Hebrew word most often translated "law" is "torah," and it actually means teaching or instructions. You see, this guy doesn't have all the centuries of Latin jurisprudence laid down as a filter over Scripture. His is a much simpler view of things. We have, for instance, "The Ten Commandments." He had "The Ten Words." In Exodus 20, remember, that's the word—*dabar*. It means "word." The oneness of this God. No partial pictures of God. Not using God's name for dark purposes. Resting every seventh day. Honoring your parents. These are simply the Ten Words at the heart of reality. They're just the way things are.

For this reason our Psalmist rejoices in God's law, God's torah, God's instruction. He's thrilled to have God's teachings, God's instructions, and he sees them everywhere, not just on a scroll or through the oral teachings of a prophet or priest. "The heavens themselves declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge" (Psalms 19:1-2). And he hasn't had the Church Fathers, the Latin church, the New England Puritans, the countless self-appointed religious tyrants who claim to speak for God wearing him down, stifling his spirit, and killing his spiritual passion.

So what does he know that I don't know? A whole lot it turns out. He knows that God's instructions, God's teachings, wherever they come from – from a scroll, from the oral teachings of a prophet or priest, from his own meditation on the nighttime sky, from his own God-intoxicated dreams – liberate him. They set his heart free, so that he walks about in freedom. They're worth getting up at midnight to give thanks for. They're worth praising God seven times a day for. They'll keep his eyes open through the watches of the night.

And all this is true because this Psalmist knows God. From 119:64, "The earth is filled with your love, O Lord; teach me your decrees." Or verse 90, "Your faithfulness continues through all generations." The Psalmist has acquired the natural grace, the natural ease, of one who knows that the universe is a friendly place. No one has yet told him that God is a capricious tyrant with a hair-trigger temper. If we could only know what the Psalmist knew – that that the earth is filled with your love, O Lord! If we could know that as deep soul knowledge – the unshakeable truth! If we could only climb back out from under what the Church Fathers, the Latin church, the New England Puritans,

and the countless self-appointed religious tyrants who claim to speak for God, have told us and still tell us about God and his word! If we could only see that God's word, properly understood, liberates us, sets our hearts free so that we walk about in freedom! If we could only see that this is true of all torah, all God's instructions wherever they come from! When they are properly understood, they do liberate us. They do set our hearts free so that we walk about in freedom.

So we hear that God is love and that we must let nothing separate us from this truth. This is the torah, the instruction of God. We hear that the truth is one but the wise speak of it in many ways. This too is the torah, the liberating instruction of God. We hear that creation is sacred, that all of life is open to the Spirit of God. This is the torah, the instruction of God. We are told to be still and let go, to pay attention to the present moment in a way that is gentle, appreciative and nourishing, to let go of those unthinking judgments – those likes and dislikes – that distort our ability to see reality clearly, to feel the simple yet profound joy of Being. All this is the torah, the instruction of God. We are taught to live simply so that we might give generously to all who are truly needy. This is the torah, the liberating instruction of God. We hear that all men and women everywhere, whoever they are and whatever they have done, can start over, be reborn, be forgiven, and discover within themselves the Spirit of God. This is the liberating torah of God. We are told that we can transcend the fearful, little world of “I,” “me” and mine,” of “us” and “them,” and enter a larger, kinder world open to all. This for sure is the torah, the liberating instruction of God.

These truths, wherever, whenever and from whomever they come, are the torah, the instruction of God. They liberate us. They set our hearts free, so that we might walk about in freedom. And in knowing these things and acting on them, we encounter the presence of God, and now we can rise at midnight; seven times a day we can praise God; and our eyes can stay open through the watches of the night meditating on the promises of God.

All of this happens because now in reading Scripture we are not storing up proof texts, we are not reading in flat-footed literalistic ways, and we are not trying to re-enact the world of 2000 years ago. Instead we are factoring in the living context. We are allowing for the humanity of the writer. We are rising above the point and counterpoint of Scripture to the truths that are transcendent. We are finding in Scripture the sacred. We are penetrating the deep mysteries at the heart of the universe and we are encountering the presence of the living God.

The challenge then is to understand what the Psalmist understood. To have a sense of God everywhere: in the nighttime sky, in the stories we tell, in our deepest passion; in our God-focused intuition – everywhere the sacred. To know that the earth is filled with the love of God. To hear the heavens when they declare the glory of God – when night after night they display knowledge. To understand that God's torah when it is properly understood liberates us, sets our hearts free so that we walk about in freedom. And then to do whatever it takes to master Scripture, to become literate in the word of God, to take

it down off the shelf and dust it off, to learn its beat and its rhythms, and to encounter in Scripture not proof texts but the glorious presence of the living God.

– Dale Pauls