

## “Your Torah Is My Delight”: Repetition and the Poetics of Immanence in Psalm 119

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Psalm 119's massive length and curious constraints—its rigorous acrostic structure and use of one of eight torah terms in nearly every couplet—have long puzzled interpreters. Though the poem dwells on pedagogy, the reader who seeks to learn from the text finds not a structured explication of torah but rather a string of seemingly interchangeable terms (אמרה, דבר, חוק, מצות, משפט, עדות, עדות, פקודים, and תורה). Scholars have made several attempts to delineate the boundaries of Ps 119's concept of torah. However, this search for a substantive definition of torah is misguided because what this text envisions is not sober-minded instruction but delight (שעשועים), to use a term characteristic of the poem. Psalm 119's repetitions provide a field for playfulness and newness and show that a definition of torah is less important than an account of what torah does. The repetition of the eight terms is to be understood not as a platonic repetition of real and copy but as a repetition of simulacra, in which each individual term is fully an instantiation of torah in its own right. This psalm, in other words, produces a torah that is immanent to the poem. Psalm 119 is a poem of torah whose torah is the poem itself.

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Scholars of Ps 119, the great acrostic poem of torah, have long delighted in rejecting the wisdom of their elders, much like the psalm itself.<sup>1</sup> In his 1938 commentary on Psalms, for example, Moses Buttenwieser, then professor of biblical exegesis at Hebrew Union College, observed,

Biased by the high regard in which Psalm 119 was held in the past by church and synagogue alike, some interpreters still consider it a great, profound psalm. Yet it is anything but this, being void of the essential qualities of literary creation—spontaneity and originality. There could not be either in anything as artificial

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<sup>1</sup>“I understand more than the elders / because I pursue your precepts” (Ps 119:100). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

as this psalm—an eightfold acrostic, each letter of the alphabet being repeated eight times in succession. It is by this external bond that the lines are held together, not by logical connection or progress of thought.<sup>2</sup>

Buttenwieser's harsh remarks are characteristic of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critical scholarship on Ps 119.<sup>3</sup> Yet, beginning at least with Mitchell Dahood's 1970 Anchor Bible commentary, contemporary scholars have in turn rejected the claim that this poem is a derivative and forgettable text.<sup>4</sup> While one can still find the stray negative evaluation of Ps 119 in current work—as recently as 2011 Philip Davies called it “doggerel”—recent interpreters have argued strenuously for the value of the psalm as a living, dynamic exposition of the delight in torah.<sup>5</sup>

I find much to agree with in these recent positive evaluations, but in the present essay I too wish to continue the tradition of rejecting the teaching of my elders (or, at the least, my very recent predecessors) by calling into question the stark difference between those who delight in this poem and the supposed *דַּיָּוָד* (usually translated “arrogant”; see 119:21, 51, 69, 78, 85, 122) who critique it. Let us begin by examining the most notorious scholarly rejection of Ps 119, Bernhard Duhm's scurrilous exclamation that the psalm is “the most contentless product that ever blackened paper.”<sup>6</sup> One can hardly find a recent work on Ps 119 that does not portray Duhm as a villain. I too recoil at the venom in these words and—perhaps more importantly—at the implicit permission they give for ignoring this powerful text.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Moses Buttenwieser, *The Psalms Chronologically Treated with a New Translation*, with introduction by Nahum M. Sarna (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 1969), 871. On Buttenwieser, see Sarna's introduction; also Bernard J. Bamberger, “Buttenwieser, Moses,” *EncJud* 4:319.

<sup>3</sup>For other examples of what William Soll calls Ps 119's “legacy of disdain,” see *Psalms 119: Matrix, Form, and Setting*, CBQMS 23 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1991), 5–6.

<sup>4</sup>Dahood notes that reading Ps 119 in Hebrew “revealed, in verse after verse, a freshness of thought and a felicity of expression unnoticed and consequently unappreciated” (*Psalms: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 3 vols., AB 16–17A (Garden City, NY: 1966–1970), 3:172).

<sup>5</sup>Philip R. Davies, “Reading the Bible Intelligently,” *Relegere* 1 (2011): 145–64, here 152. David Noel Freedman, however, calls it “endlessly inventive” (*Psalms 119: The Exaltation of Torah*, BJSUCSD 6 [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999], 87). For recent positive evaluations, see Soll, *Psalms 119*; Walter Brueggemann and W. H. Bellinger, *Psalms*, NCBiC (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); John Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3 vols., BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006–2008); Gordon J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically*, STI (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

<sup>6</sup>Bernhard Duhm, *Die Psalmen*, KHC 14 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Mohr, 1899), 268: “Jedenfalls ist dieser ‘Psalm’ das inhaltloseste Produkt, das jemals Papier schwarz gemacht hat.”

<sup>7</sup>See, e.g., Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, trans. Herbert Hartwell, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1959), 740: “The simple form of the diction makes it unnecessary to expound the psalm in detail.” True to his words, Weiser includes no verse-by-verse commentary for Ps 119. (In the entire volume only eight other psalms receive no commentary, and those—53,

Nevertheless, attention to the larger context of his remarks shows that Duhm follows his infamous statement with the interjection, “If only the author had imparted just something of the great achievements of his studies [of *torah*]!,” which may make his words as much a cry of exasperation as they are an insult.<sup>8</sup> From Duhm’s perspective, Ps 119 clearly and ostentatiously invites careful study and promises learned reflection—but then it reveals no additional exegetical treasures. Further, compare Duhm’s charges with the comments of another reader who takes what seems to be an opposing view of the psalm—Augustine of Hippo:

The plainer Psalm 118 [MT Ps 119] seems, the more profound does it appear to me, so much so that I cannot even demonstrate how profound it is. When in other psalms some passage presents difficulty, at least the obscurity itself is obvious, even though the meaning is hidden; but in [this] psalm not even the obscurity is evident, for on the surface the psalm is so simple that it might be thought to require a reader or listener only, not an expositor. (*Enarrat. Ps. 118*)<sup>9</sup>

On one level, juxtaposing Duhm’s words with Augustine’s presents us with a neat contrast between a skeptical higher critic dismissing the psalm and a theologian praising it. Yet, if one sets aside the tone of each quotation, *are they not but two sides of the same coin?* Duhm and Augustine each encounter a poem that conspicuously displays its profundity but also blocks readers precisely at the point where they seek to penetrate below its surface. Psalm 119 unambiguously shows its delight in *torah* as that which gives life and creates desire. Nonetheless, as the thread common to Duhm and Augustine presumes, it does not yield “meaning”; it seems to hide no exegetical secrets. In other words, perhaps the psalm is contentless—but not because it lacks anything—and is no less complete, joyful, and productive for being so.

It is no surprise, however, that the charge that Ps 119 is contentless has made recent readers recoil, since, in a sense, it is a text defined by completeness, even excess. Extensively and rigorously structured, Ps 119 is a uniform acrostic poem with twenty-two stanzas, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each stanza

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70, 88, 108, 117, 136, 140, and 150—are very brief or otherwise treated in discussion of parallel psalms).

<sup>8</sup>Duhm, *Die Psalmen*, 268–69: “Wenn doch der Verf. auch nur etwas von den gerühmten Errungenschaften seines Studiums mitgeteilt hätte!” While I do believe that one can mine Duhm’s words for insight, I fully concur that his and similar comments belong to an outdated, indeed darker, chapter in scholarship on the Psalms. (See, e.g., Weiser’s gratuitously vicious backhanded compliment of Ps 119: “[it] does not yet exhibit that degeneration and hardening into a legalistic form of religion to which it succumbed in late Judaism and which provoked Jesus’ rebuke” [*Psalms*, 740]).

<sup>9</sup>Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms: 99–120*, trans. Maria Boulding, ed. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 3.19 in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 342.

includes eight couplets,<sup>10</sup> the first letter of each couplet beginning with the appropriate letter of the alphabet. In addition to the acrostic structure, nearly every single line includes one of eight interrelated nouns, each of which indicates some kind of utterance or declaration: *אמרה*, *דבר*, *חק/הקים*, *מצות*, *משפט*, *עדות*, *פקודים*, and *תורה*.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the most obvious elements of the poem's form clearly, perhaps ostentatiously, display its overflowing nature.

In this essay I wish to explore Ps 119 as the site of a paradoxical simultaneity of fullness and emptiness, or of completeness and incompleteness. The poem dwells on pedagogical matters yet in fact teaches very little. Rather than sober-minded instruction, this poem approaches the topic with playfulness and spontaneity—or, in the text's own terms, with “delight” (*שעשועים*). As numerous frustrated interpreters have observed, the overwhelming repetition of the eight torah terms hints at order, but no clear configuration can be found. Additionally, the structure of the entire poem cannot be outlined according to an overarching logic (apart from the alphabetic acrostic structure), yet the individual stanzas are the sites of inventive poetic wordplay. This “delight” offers the reader what I call a poetics of immanence, wherein wonder and joy and mystery can be present even—and perhaps especially—if the poem refuses to allow concepts external to the poem to determine its shape and value. Psalm 119 offers a nonmimetic poetics in which torah is the source of delight precisely insofar as torah remains immanent to the text. Psalm 119 is a poem of torah whose torah is the poem itself.

## I. THE SEARCH FOR THE CONCEPT OF TORAH IN PSALM 119

One of the most striking problems of Ps 119 is that it attends so deeply to torah without ever offering any clear definition of it. As evidenced by the numerous usages of the root *למד* (“to teach” or “to learn”; vv. 7, 12, 26, 64, 66, 68, 71, 73, 99, 108, 124, 135, 171), the psalm appears to be a text intimately concerned with teaching and learning. Yet with this clear emphasis on instruction, what does the

<sup>10</sup>With the exceptions of triplets in 119:48, 145, and 176. See J. P. Fokkelman, *The Remaining 65 Psalms*, vol. 3 of *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible: At the Interface of Prosody and Structural Analysis*, SSN 43 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003), 235. The terminology for the constituent parts of a biblical Hebrew poem is a matter of debate. In this essay, I follow F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp's use of “line” to indicate the syntactic building block of poetry, rather than, as in other scholarship, the terms *colon* or *verset* (*On Biblical Poetry* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2015]).

<sup>11</sup>Some couplets include none of the terms (119:3, 37, 90, 122), while some contain two terms (119:16, 43, 48, 160, 168). Translators usually gloss the terms as follows: *אמרה* (“word”), *דבר* (“word”), *חק/הקים* (“statute/statutes”), *מצות* (“commandments”), *משפט* (“judgment”), *עדות* (“testimonies”), *פקודים* (“precepts”), *תורה* (“instruction/law/torah”). As I will argue, though, the precise meaning of each individual term is not important to the poem—in fact, detailed attention to the definitions of each individual term distracts from the primary thrust of the text. Accordingly, I leave these eight terms for the most part untranslated.

attentive reader of the psalm learn? As commentators such as Jon D. Levenson have noted, Ps 119 contains no references to the story of Israel, nor to any particular laws or religious/ethical covenant stipulations, nor to any Israelite ritual practices, nor to any notable torah terms, such as ברית (“covenant”), Moses, ככתוב (“as it was written”), or ספר (“book”).<sup>12</sup> The absence of ספר is particularly suggestive. In a study of Ps 119 as “constrained writing,” Scott N. Callaham argues that the *samek* stanza (vv. 113–120) is one of the three most constrained of the poem’s twenty-two stanzas.<sup>13</sup> That is, this stanza uses a relatively low number of couplet-initial words that are found elsewhere in the poem.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the *samek* stanza contains the rarest vocabulary in the poem (according to Callaham’s counts, the words in *samek* appear 159 times in the remainder of the poem, in comparison to *het*’s 214 and *pe*’s 216). In other words, the fact that the writer chooses to reach for relatively rare *samek* words to achieve the acrostic’s demands, rather than using ספר, suggests a strategy of active avoidance.

The idea that Ps 119 rejects traditions is not merely an argument from the absence of certain terms or ideas. Psalm 119 resists assimilation to Israel’s literary and intellectual heritage in other, more explicit ways. The *lamed* stanza (vv. 89–96) explicitly states that the psalmist’s search is not limited to traditional venues, including the stunning statements that “I have more insight than all my teachers,” and “I understand more than the elders” (vv. 99–100). These proclamations, striking even without context, become even more telling when one notes, as Nancy deClaissé-Walford observes, that this stanza contains a number of terms elsewhere related to wisdom literature (חכם [“wisdom”] in v. 98, שכל [“insight”] in v. 99, and בין [“understanding”] in vv. 100 and 104).<sup>15</sup> Psalm 119 points the seeker of torah neither to an external text nor to an intellectual tradition but to the authority of the poem itself.

Accordingly, the reader who turns to the poem discovers its fundamental orientation from the very first line: “Happy are those who are perfect in their ways,

<sup>12</sup>Jon D. Levenson, “The Sources of Torah: Psalm 119 and the Modes of Revelation in Second Temple Judaism,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 559–74. Most recently, see Kent Aaron Reynolds, *Torah as Teacher: The Exemplary Torah Student in Psalm 119*, VTSup 137 (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

<sup>13</sup>The other two stanzas are *het* and *pe*. See Scott N. Callaham, “An Evaluation of Psalm 119 as Constrained Writing,” *HS* 50 (2009): 121–34. “Constrained writing” is a literary practice in which a writer executes a project within a predefined constraint, such as the absence of one or more letters (a “lipogram”) or, well, an acrostic. On the phenomenon of constrained writing more broadly, see Daniel Levin Becker’s book on the French “Oulipo” group, *Many Subtle Channels: In Praise of Potential Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>14</sup>The verb סור (“to turn aside”) is the only couplet-initial term in this stanza (v. 115) that appears elsewhere in the poem (vv. 29, 102).

<sup>15</sup>Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 883.

who walk in the torah of YHWH" (v. 1). Psalm 119 is a text that seeks to unfold and celebrate the powers of torah. Though often grouped with the other "Torah Psalms" (Pss 1, 19), Ps 119 differs markedly from each of them. Psalm 1 explicates torah by means of metaphor (more properly simile), likening life under torah to the plant fed by the sustaining stream, while Ps 19 links torah metonymically with the order of creation. In contrast to both, Ps 119 continually defers a definition of torah by leading readers not to illustrative metaphors or other dominant concepts but, instead, through a stream of interchangeable *synonyms*.

The eight torah terms, in the context of Ps 119, show little semantic variation. Scholars have expended much effort to tease out the precise meaning of each term, but the burden of finding shades of meaning among the eight terms falls solely on the lexicon. That is, the reader may be able to discern subtle differences between clusters of terms,<sup>16</sup> but the psalm itself does not support such nuances. To illustrate the interchangeability of the synonyms, we can note, with Kent Aaron Reynolds, that several important verbs in the poem (שמר ["observe"], נצר ["guard"], שכח ["forget"], אהב ["love"], שיח ["meditate upon"]) take any number of the eight terms as objects—for example, the psalmist "observes" (שמר) all eight of them.<sup>17</sup> The only verb that could possibly be considered to adhere to one particular torah term is למד, which appears with חקים in eight of its thirteen occurrences (vv. 12, 26, 64, 68, 71, 124, 135, 171),<sup>18</sup> though it also is seen alongside משפטים and מצות.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, no commentator has been able to discern any order for the use of terms across stanzas, in contrast to a poetic form like the English sestina.<sup>20</sup> Not every

<sup>16</sup>See, e.g., Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 86–88. Wenham's attempt at a brief lexicon of the eight terms implies the limitations of this approach. For example, he notes that פקודים occurs outside of Ps 119 only in Pss 19:8; 103:18; 111:7. To broaden the scope, he then draws attention to the verbal form of פקד as "visit, intervene," and then finally notes that the word פקודים is paired with "covenant" in Ps 103:18 and "the works of his hands" in Ps 111:7, leading to the less-than-grand conclusion that פקודים "may refer to wide variety of divine words and deeds" (88).

<sup>17</sup>Reynolds also notes that נצר occurs with five; לא שכח with five; אהב with five; שיח with three (*Torah as Teacher*, 116–17). Additionally, I observe that דרש occurs with פקודים (vv. 45, 94), and חקים (v. 155); שעשוע occurs with חקות (v. 16), עדות (v. 24), מצות (vv. 47, 143), and תורה (vv. 70, 77, 92, 174); *piel* חיה occurs with דבר (vv. 25, 107), אמרה (vv. 50, 116, 154), פקודים (v. 93), and משפטים (vv. 149, 156).

<sup>18</sup>Reynolds, *Torah as Teacher*, 127 n. 54.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid. Reynolds also points out that the poem reveals "no discernable difference in meaning" between the masculine and feminine forms of חק (*Torah as Teacher*, 110 n. 14).

<sup>20</sup>See Freedman, *Psalms 119*, 77–80. J. P. Fokkelman argues that some of the eight terms reveal tendencies based on where they appear in a stanza. For example, דבר appears in the first two couplets of a stanza sixteen times; in the second two, five times; in the third two, once; and in the final two couplets zero times (in other words, a distribution of 16, 5, 1, 0). This leads Fokkelman to conclude only that this term "like[s] to be in front." See his *Remaining 65 Psalms*, 269. The impact of Fokkelman's observations is unclear, however. The term דבר that I cite as an example in fact displays the starkest discrepancy in distribution among all the terms (מצות, on the other hand, has a distribution of 4, 6, 4, 8, while אמרה, which he groups with דבר as a term

couplet contains a torah term, and no stanza uses all eight. Nor is each term used an equal number of times. The most frequent is, unsurprisingly, תורה (twenty-five times) and the least common is אמרה (nineteen times). Neither the semantic ranges of the terms nor their placement in the poem reveals substantial differentiation among them.

The strongest argument for some distinction among the terms comes from Reynolds, who argues for a twofold, not eightfold, division: “instantiations” of torah and “abstract” torah terms.<sup>21</sup> The instantiations include all uses of עדות, חקים, and פקודים (the terms that occur only in plural form), which he defines as references to “specific commandments” and “directives that can be enumerated and should be obeyed, observed or performed.” The abstract terms, in comparison, include the words תורה and אמרה, always in the singular. The remaining terms (משפט, דבר, and מצות) are more difficult, because they occur in both singular and plural forms. The relationship between instantiations and abstract terms is hierarchical—“hyponymy” is the linguistic term Reynolds uses to express a “unilateral” semantic relationship, in which one term (such as an instantiation like עדות) implies the other (abstract term like תורה) but not necessarily vice versa. Reynolds acknowledges some difficulties with this division, noting that this scheme has “inconsistencies, since some of the eight terms are used for both instantiations and for the abstract conception.” Part of the problem boils down to the poem’s refusal to make a hard-and-fast distinction between singular and plural terms (משפט, דבר, and מצות are all inconsistent in their grammatical number).<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Reynolds concedes that grammatical number is not sufficient on its own to make a differentiation and does not “consistently correspond with the two different levels of meaning, but it does generally correspond.”<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, though, the text itself gives no justification *beyond grammatical number* for making a two-tiered division. If, as we have seen above, each of the terms functions much like any other (if any number of terms can be the “observed,” “guarded,” “loved,” “delighted in,” and so on), the text itself makes no distinction among the functions of each of them. The relationship among the eight terms is best defined as coequal and interchangeable.

Neither is Reynolds explicit about what makes for an “abstract” concept. A solid case can perhaps be made for the primacy of one of the terms, תורה. It is the most frequently used (25x); it appears in the first verse; and it never occurs in the

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that has a preference for the front of the stanza, has a distribution of 7, 8, 3, 1). Fokkelman makes no claim about the behavior of the terms as a set but only about some of the terms individually. Even further, it is not clear to what extent these numbers are large enough to be significant. Accordingly, I still concur with Freedman’s judgment that the precise distribution of the terms does not reveal any discernible order.

<sup>21</sup>For the discussion in this paragraph and the quoted material, see Reynolds, *Torah as Teacher*, 112–20.

<sup>22</sup>See Freedman, *Psalm 119*, 445–47.

<sup>23</sup>Reynolds, *Torah as Teacher*, 114.

plural.<sup>24</sup> Yet what would justify including other “abstract” terms alongside it? Granted, תורה is the most frequent term, but אִמְרָה, which Reynolds unambiguously categorizes as an “abstract” term, is the least frequent (19x). Reynolds’s position is intriguing, and it indeed emerges out of a curious feature of the text, the hint of a macrostructural plan with the eight terms (see the discussion of David Noel Freedman’s work below), but it cannot fully capture the function of the terms in the poem. It falls short, in other words, not just because the categories of “instantiation” and “abstract” concept cannot be maintained with any consistency but because it proceeds from the presumption—mistaken in my estimation—that Ps 119 includes anything that can defensibly be labeled as an abstract concept.

At its core, Reynolds’s distinction between instantiation and abstract concept is useful for his definition of torah in Ps 119. The idea that abstract terms are elucidated with a variety of instantiations presents us with what he calls an “expansive” concept of torah, in which no individual instantiation can capture the entirety of torah.<sup>25</sup> He thus defines torah as a concept that is “greater than the sum of its parts.”<sup>26</sup> Reynolds’s claim here resonates with that of other commentators who work under the assumption that the eight terms *must* refer to some given extratextual concept. For example, Jerome Creach writes that Ps 119’s torah “assumes normative written texts, but it is not limited to them.”<sup>27</sup> This view portrays torah as something that includes the nuances of the eight terms but which is not encapsulated by any of them, not even the term תורה itself. This argument creates an entity, a transcendent Torah-beyond-torah (or Torah-beyond-תורה).<sup>28</sup> This assumption is simply not warranted, I submit, by the poem itself. The repetition that characterizes Ps 119 is not a “platonic” repetition, in which every instantiation must be considered a partial, incomplete version of the real thing.<sup>29</sup> At most, we can posit that the term תורה,

<sup>24</sup>Reynolds, *Torah as Teacher*, 112. Reynolds cites Erich Zenger, “Toraförmigkeit: Beobachtungen zum poetischen und theologischen Profil von Psalm 119,” in *Freiheit und Recht: Festschrift für Frank Crüsemann zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Christof Hardmeier, Rainer Kessler, and Andreas Ruwe (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 2003), 380–96, here 387.

<sup>25</sup>Reynolds further writes, “The repetition of the eight Torah terms is therefore essential to the author’s goal of describing and promoting an expansive conception of Torah” and that this repetition “contributes to a network of interrelated ideas and enables the author to expand the conceptual sphere further” (*Torah as Teacher*, 107.).

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 136–46.

<sup>27</sup>Jerome F. D. Creach, *The Destiny of the Righteous in the Psalms* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008), 139. Creach makes this point in even stronger terms when he notes that Ps 119 “encourage[s] meditation on written texts, of course. It recalls many other biblical texts, thereby implicitly recognizing their authority and encouraging attention to their truths” (138). See also Wenham’s claim that “in this psalm the law is *not limited* to the laws in the Pentateuch, or wisdom teaching or the book of Deuteronomy” (*Psalms as Torah*, 84; emphasis added).

<sup>28</sup>I use this somewhat awkward formulation to show that Reynolds (and many others) presumes a stable, translatable concept (“torah” in English) that lies beyond the poem’s term (תורה) in Hebrew).

<sup>29</sup>See Krystyna Mazur, “Repetition,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed., ed. Roland Greene et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1168–71.



as the initial and slightly more frequent term, hints at a primary position, but, because it behaves indistinguishably from the rest, remains a first among equals, so to speak. Psalm 119 perhaps evokes a hierarchy of terms but steadfastly refuses to explicate any such hierarchy. Rather, I propose that Ps 119's repetition of terms frustrates the division between abstract and instantiation, or between real and copy. These terms relate to one another in virtually identical ways, and, because they do not appear in predictable places in the stanzas (as would be the case in a poetic form like the *sestina*), surprise and newness emerge out of sameness. The repetitions in this poem, then, are repetitions of continual becoming, of undefined difference. As we have seen, the reader who comes to this text looking for the meaning of *torah*, for the "real" *torah* behind the copies (or synonyms or instantiations) will either turn away from the poem toward extratextual solutions or, like Duhm, simply throw their hands up in frustration.

The eight terms in Ps 119 relate to one another on the level of nearly pure synonymy. This, however, does not imply that the arrangement of terms is random or "thoughtless."<sup>30</sup> As Freedman has shown in his thorough research on the psalm, an analysis of the uses of the terms throughout the poem indicates several suggestive near-symmetries. Even though not every verse uses precisely one term per verse, the first half of the poem (stanzas *aleph* through *kaph*) uses eighty-eight terms, while the second half (*lamed* through *tav*) uses eighty-nine. Additionally, the poem uses equal numbers of feminine terms (*תורה*, *עדות*, *מצות*, *אמרה*) and masculine terms (*דבר*,<sup>31</sup> *חקים*, *משפט*, *פקודים*) (88 and 89) and, within each of those groups, uses half plural and half singular (44 and 44/45).<sup>32</sup> These remarkable properties suggest great care for the purposeful use of the eight terms—a purpose that, I submit, is playful synonymy.

While the distribution of the synonyms as a whole evokes a sense of balance and completeness, the progression of the individual terms as the text unfolds highlights a surprising absence of order and balance. Freedman argues that, given the tight control of other parts of the poem, this lack of order cannot be coincidental.

<sup>30</sup> Reynolds uses rhetorical questions to express his objection to the idea that the terms have a synonymous relationship: "Is it possible that the author thoughtlessly interchanges the eight Torah terms? Does he simply follow the poetic constraints of using one of the terms in each verse?" (*Torah as Teacher*, 115). The second question seems to conflate the issue of poetic constraint (that the distribution of terms is determined by a certain sequence) with that of synonymy. Nevertheless, even a precisely constrained order of the eight terms (which, again, is not present in this poem—see Freedman, *Psalm 119*) would not necessarily imply that the terms are synonymous.

<sup>31</sup> Freedman's scheme is weakened by the fact that *חק* appears in both masculine and feminine forms.

<sup>32</sup> The case of masculine nouns is more complicated, since two appear in either singular or plural—at any rate, the masculine nouns appear in two clusters of forty-four each: *דבר* and *חק/חקים*, and *משפטים/משפט* and *פקודים*. See Freedman, *Psalm 119*, 35–36; Frank Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 259.

He posits that the psalmist uses the unpredictability of the individual terms to create a fascinating tension between order and “chaos” that reflects the poem’s simultaneous concern for the totality of torah and the tumultuousness of life under torah.<sup>33</sup> I agree that the lack of order in the distribution of the individual terms is purposeful (and I would go beyond Freedman to insist that the synonymy too is purposeful). I stop short of characterizing this as “chaos,” however, because I understand the unpredictability of the psalm to represent not simply disordered tumult but a drive to push readers through the poem ever onward to the next line, to make the reader into a seeker and student of torah. In Reynolds’s interpretation, Ps 119 becomes a portrayal of the ideal student of torah.<sup>34</sup> Despite its emphasis on pedagogical matters, however, the psalm does not instruct *about* torah. If a reader seeks to learn torah, the psalm’s only instruction is: read on. The sheer length of this text provides the occasion for the ineluctable push forward.<sup>35</sup> The forward-moving dynamism in Ps 119 is made evident by the repetition of the eight synonyms and is enabled by the massive scope of the text. The reader who does read on finds not substantive content but rather a string of interchangeable terms. The use of these eight terms creates a fascinating and productive tension between completeness and incompleteness, which manifests itself here as a simultaneity of stasis and dynamism.

The poles of this tension between stasis and dynamism are simultaneously expressed through repetition in this text. On the side of stasis and completeness, the rigorous *aleph-to-tav* acrostic and the meditative (or, depending on one’s view, numbing!) repetition of synonyms shows this poem to be complete, exhaustive, and self-containing. Yet, on the other side, the dance of desire satisfied and unsatisfied encoded in the repetitions creates a vision of torah in which contentment is always over the next horizon, in the additional explication. This productive tension is a both-and that creates some fascinating, perhaps even radical, implications. My argument here resembles a conclusion by Klaus Seybold: “There is no definition [of torah] in 119, because it is about the experience of a reality that can be described only obliquely in conceptual terms.”<sup>36</sup> The question “what *is* torah in Ps 119?” is, in my estimation, the wrong question—and, most importantly, a question that the poem itself chooses not to answer. Rather, one should ask what does torah *do* in this poem? The “concept” of torah, in other words, functions something like a “MacGuffin” in Ps 119. The term *MacGuffin*, as coined (or perhaps popularized) by filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock, is an object in a film that provides the impetus for the plot but whose precise identity is itself beside the point.<sup>37</sup> Examples would include

<sup>33</sup>Freedman, *Psalms 119*, 92–93.

<sup>34</sup>Reynolds, *Torah as Teacher*, chapter 3.

<sup>35</sup>I thank Elaine James for this observation.

<sup>36</sup>Klaus Seybold, *Die Psalmen*, HAT 1/15 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), as quoted in Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 259.

<sup>37</sup>Slavoj Žižek describes the MacGuffin as follows: “the Hitchcockian object, the pure pretext whose sole role is to set the story in motion but which is in itself ‘nothing at all’—the only significance of the MacGuffin lies in the fact that it has some significance for the characters—that

the titular statue in *The Maltese Falcon*, the “government secrets” in Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest*, or the briefcase with mysterious contents in *Pulp Fiction*.<sup>38</sup> Like these MacGuffins in their respective films, torah is something that is absolutely essential to the poem. Yet pressing the question of the definition of torah, of the “semantic field” of the term, is, I suggest, akin to a misguided focus on what’s *really* in the briefcase. Psalm 119 has not yet yielded to its readers a stable, identifiable concept of Torah-beyond-תורה underneath the shifting and slippery words of the poem. Psalm 119 directs the reader to torah, but then in turn keeps the seeker of torah within the unfolding lines of the poem itself.

## II. DELIGHT IN TORAH, DELIGHT IN POETRY

I employ the analogy of a MacGuffin not to diminish or denigrate torah in this poem but to highlight the idea that, even though the content of torah is not revealed to us, such content is ultimately unimportant to the poem. Psalm 119 is not “about” torah, in the sense of delineating any concept, program of study, or progression of argument. Rather, torah is central for its effects.<sup>39</sup> In other words, while the exploration of Ps 119 does not reveal to the reader a definition of what torah is, it is abundantly clear on what torah does. Torah gives life;<sup>40</sup> it is the source and object of desire; it distinguishes the pious from the זדים (“arrogant”).<sup>41</sup> Most important for the purposes of this essay, however, torah provides the occasion for delight.

“Delight,” שעשוע, or שעשע in verb form, is the term most distinctive to Ps 119. Its eight occurrences (three verbs, five nouns; see table 1 below) do not make it the most frequently used term in the poem, but, given that it appears only eight

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it must seem to be of vital importance to them.... Needless to add, the MacGuffin is the purest case of what Lacan calls *objet petit a*: a pure void which functions as the object-cause of desire” (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Phronesis [London: Verso, 2008], 183–84). The suggestion that a MacGuffin is simultaneously object and cause of desire (the “*objet petit a*”) provides another intriguing suggestion about the function of torah in Ps 119, but one that is beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>38</sup>In *Pulp Fiction*, the audience is shown *that* its contents are important when the opened briefcase illuminates Vincent’s face, but the audience never sees what is inside.

<sup>39</sup>Compare Zenger’s declaration that “this is not a psalm about the Torah; it is the meditative prayer of a human being to YHWH as the giver and teacher of Torah” (Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 267).

<sup>40</sup>For example, Ps 119:116: “Support me, according to your word [אמרה], so I may live”; 119:93: “For all eternity I will not forget your precepts because in them you give me life.”

<sup>41</sup>A curious feature of the זדים is that their behavior at times strongly resembles that of the psalmist. He accuses them of “sitting” and “chatting” (נדברו) where he, in the next line, “meditates” (שיח; v. 23). Most strikingly, the זדים “smear me with lies” (טפל עלי שקר; v. 69), to which the psalmist immediately responds, “their heart is dull like fat” (טפש כחלב לבם; v. 70). Finally, the common translation of זדים, “the arrogant,” points up uncomfortable parallels with the persona of the psalmist, which, as mentioned, boasts that he “understand[s] more than my elders” (v. 100).

times in the Hebrew Bible outside of Ps 119 (four as a verb and four as a noun),<sup>42</sup> it is a characteristic term. Even more, I suggest not just that “delight” functions as one of the many effects of torah in the poem but that it describes the text’s poetics more broadly. The reader does not discover the meaning of torah, but the reader does delight in it. The primary orientation of Ps 119 is, in other words, playful rather than pedagogical, ludic rather than lucid.

TABLE 1. OCCURRENCES OF שַׁעֲשׂוּעַ/שַׁעֲשׂוּעַ IN PSALM 119<sup>43</sup>

v. 16	In your statutes I delight [אֲשַׁחֲמַדְךָ] / I will not forget your word
v. 24	Indeed, your testimonies are my delights [שַׁעֲשׂוּעַי], / my men of counsel
v. 47	I will delight [וְאֲשַׁחֲמַדְךָ] in your commandments / which I love
v. 70	Their heart is dull like fat / but I will delight [שַׁעֲשׂוּתִי] in your torah
v. 77	Your mercies come to me that I may live / your torah is my delight [שַׁעֲשׂוּעַי]
v. 92	Were your torah not my delight [שַׁעֲשׂוּעַי], / I would have perished in my straits
v. 143	Distress and hardship fill me, / your commandments are my delights [שַׁעֲשׂוּעַי]
v. 174	I long for your deliverance, O YHWH, / your torah is my delight [שַׁעֲשׂוּעַי]

That Ps 119, notorious in some quarters for being repetitive and even boring, would be defined by playfulness may strike one as implausible. Yet precursors to this idea are already present in scholarship on Ps 119. J. P. Fokkelman calls the psalm “a multicolored pyrotechnic of variations and other formal devices glittering against the background of a baffling synonymy.”<sup>44</sup> Two aspects of this quotation are worth highlighting. On the one hand, the work of Fokkelman (and others) has drawn out the extent to which Ps 119’s “multicolored pyrotechnics” show it to be a poem that is playful and tightly constructed, though constructed so as to display a sense of spontaneity. The following section provides an indication of my sense of the text’s “pyrotechnics.” On the other hand, the poetic pyrotechnics “glitter,” in Fokkelman’s words, “against the background of a baffling synonymy.” One of the aspects of the psalm that has frustrated interpreters is its practice of illuminating its central concept, torah, by means of a seemingly unenlightening array of synonyms. In contrast to Fokkelman, though, I would insist that this “baffling synonymy” is not the background of the poem but its foreground. In a sense, bafflement—which may be but the flip side of wonder or delight—is the fundamental orientation of this poem.

<sup>42</sup> As a verb (from שַׁעַע) in Isa 11:8; 29:9; 66:12; Ps 94:19; as a noun in Isa 5:7; Jer 31:20; Prov 8:30, 31.

<sup>43</sup> All instances of the noun שַׁעֲשׂוּעַ in Ps 119 are plural.

<sup>44</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 45.

As a brief example of these so-called “pyrotechnics,” consider the *qoph* stanza (vv. 145–52; see table 2). One of the most striking aspects of this stanza is the overwhelming use of anaphora, or the repetition of words in the successive couplets/triplets (קראתיך + קראתיך + קדמתי; קדמו + קדם + קרבו; קרוב + קרוב).<sup>45</sup> Additionally, this stanza reveals a number of interconnections via the device of consonance. So, ואשמרה in verse 146 is clearly consonant with אשמרות in verse 148, but it also resonates with אצרה in verse 145 and ואשועה in verse 147, which itself bears similarities with הושיעני in verse 146. A pun between ענני in verse 145 and עיני in verse 148 is also possible (especially when one considers that both couplets contain a reference to parts of the body), while verse 152 also suggests wordplay with the phrase ידעתי מעדתך (“I have learned from your decrees”).

TABLE 2. PSALM 119:145–152 (THE ק STANZA)

I call out in my heart: “Answer me YHWH, I will observe your statutes!”	קראתי בכל־לב ענני יהוה חקיך אצרה
I call out to you: “Save me, So I may keep your testimonies!”	קראתיך הושיעני ואשמרה עדתיך
I wake at dawn and I cry for help; For your words I wait.	קדמתי בנשף ואשועה לדברייך יחלתי
My eyes wake in the middle of the night To meditate on your word.	קדמו עיני אשמרות לשיח באמרתך
Hear my voice according to your <i>hesed</i> ; Make me live by your judgments, YHWH!	קולי שמעה כחסדך יהוה כמשפטך חיני
Schemers draw near; But they are far from your torah.	קרבו רדפי זמה מתורתך רחקו
You are near, YHWH, And all your commandments are true.	קרוב אתה יהוה וכל־מצותיך אמת
I have always known of your testimonies, Indeed you founded them eternally.	קדם ידעתי מעדתך כי לעולם יסדתם

<sup>45</sup>I am drawing on the observation of Fokkeman, *Remaining 65 Psalms*, 257. On anaphora, see J. Weare, “Anaphora,” in Green et al., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry*, 50. Even more, it is possible that the anaphora is extended with a visual pun by the use of two consecutive lines beginning with קד after two lines beginning with קר. The 7/ד affinity, present even in the Herodian script of Ps 119 in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> (which, unlike the other compositions in 11QPs<sup>a</sup> is laid out in poetic lines; see J. A. Sanders, *The Psalms Scroll of Qumrân Cave 11 (11QPs<sup>a</sup>)*, DJD IV [Oxford: Clarendon, 1965]), may be further evidence of wordplay in this stanza. If it is plausible to see playfulness in the graphic representation of letters here, I would also suggest that שוש/ששון (“rejoice/delight”) in 119:14, 111, 162 might also be playing on the visual resemblance to the term (שעשוע). The first occurrence of שעשוע in verse 16a, אשתעשע, parallels ששתי two verses prior in verse 14a (an observation made by Amos Hakham in *Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary*, 3 vols., Bible with the Jerusalem Commentary [Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2003], 215), perhaps indicating that the graphic and semantic “slant consonance” is purposeful in this poem.

To return to the larger issue of how Ps 119 interacts with torah, I contend that “delight” functions as a controlling concept not just in terms of the small-scale poetic devices but also in terms of the usage of the eight synonyms. This poem displays a sense of spontaneous experimentation in the distribution of the terms in interchangeably semantic situations. The surprising, even confounding, use of the terms becomes, then, a way to use the rigorous structural constraints as a site of playfulness and spontaneity. To be sure, a reader may find this situation highly dissatisfying. One could ask rhetorically, Are we to understand the poem’s delight in torah as merely a superficial composition technique? Indeed, I wonder if Duhm’s critique of Ps 119 fundamentally boils down to a charge that the poem is “pretentious”: it pretends to be the site of deep insight but ultimately leaves the reader only with glittering formal devices and playful artifice.<sup>46</sup> This charge is, in a sense, correct; yet is not the only proper response simply to point the critic back to the opening verse of the poem: “And happy are those who walk in the torah of YHWH”? Psalm 119 is artificial and repetitive, but these very formal features of the text make the case that poetry can—through constraint and repetition—give life and create desire.

Even more, we should not rush to understand delight in poetry as “mere” delight. As Goldingay recognizes, “delight” in Ps 119 “suggests a child’s uninhibited, carefree playfulness.”<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, he is also correct to puzzle that this playfulness is “paradoxical”<sup>48</sup> because it would seem to be at odds with the resolute *commitment* to torah that is expressed in a number of ways, whether by the frequent imagery of paths (דרך and ארה) or the numerous uses of the term אהב (“love”).<sup>49</sup> The paradox for Goldingay is, implicitly, that the poem can be playful, even superficial, and still be purposeful. This paradox is at the heart of some critiques of the text: Duhm’s wish that the “author [impart] just something of the great achievements of his studies!” is a demand that the poetic torah in which the poet delights conform to a discernible abstract concept of torah. Without some kind of clearer elucidation of the central argument, the central *concept*, Ps 119 becomes in this view merely an imitation of the real thing and therefore worthy of dismissal. Yet Ps 119 frustrates the division between “real” and “copy.” Each mention of one of the eight terms is

<sup>46</sup>Compare Jonathan Culler’s observation about reader response of repetition; he writes that, when confronted with repetition, “the interpreter’s temptation . . . is to master the effects of repetition by casting them into a story, determining origins and causes, and giving it dramatic, significant coloring” (*On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982], 260–68; quoted in Krystyna Mazur, *Poetry and Repetition: Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery*, *Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 2005), xii).

<sup>47</sup>Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3:754.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup>The term דרך occurs thirteen times (vv. 1, 3, 5, 14, 26, 27, 29, 30, 32, 33, 37, 59, 168); ארה occurs five times (vv. 9, 15, 101, 104, 128); אהב occurs twelve times (vv. 47, 48, 97, 113, 119, 127, 132, 140, 159, 163, 165, 167). Notably, Goldingay translates אהב as “be dedicated” (*Psalms*, 3:754).

just as much fully torah as any other. The entirety of torah—including both its presence and potentiality—is realized in the poem itself. Torah is not, in Reynolds's words, "more than the sum of its parts" in the sense of being an entity that transcends the text and can thus be abstracted from it. Neither, however, is it just its parts alone. Rather, torah in Ps 119 emerges as an immanent presence in the poem, unfolding as the series of its parts, the stream of synonymous terms that flows through the poem. This stream is the causal force that drives the reader to try to add it up, and it is also the intrinsic limit that keeps the reader from ever calculating a sum.<sup>50</sup> In other words, Ps 119's torah is to be discovered by relating it not to something outside the poem but solely by locating it among the overwhelming, delighting words of the poem itself. Psalm 119's use of repetition to push the reader ever onward within the poem, to frustrate attempts to go beyond its bounds, embodies a poetics of immanence.

### III. THINKING IMMANENCE WITH PSALM 119

Readers often approach Ps 119 with the expectation that the poem will open up a window onto some deeper meaning, only to find their expectations thwarted. Yes, this poem is a celebration of the torah of YHWH, but it is a celebration that startles readers because it resists explicating the meaning of torah. Psalm 119 delights in the proliferation of terms, poetic techniques, and play. Further, the poem does not unfold in a structure that reveals any kind of plot progression or central argument. Numerous readers have understood these features to be an indication that the text is, if not contentless, then at least without substance. Psalm 119's innovation is that the presence of torah can be found within the text itself. The poem rejects the demand that poetry be mimetic—the variations on the eight terms need not be in a relationship of "instantiations" of a singular abstract reality. Rather, and to draw out a term mentioned above, the repetition of the eight terms is not a "platonic" repetition of real and copy but a variety of repetition akin to what Gilles Deleuze terms the "simulacrum."<sup>51</sup> By way of defining *simulacrum*, I simply point to what we have seen so far in Ps 119: each individual appearance of each of the eight terms is to be affirmed and understood on its own, not merely insofar as it corresponds to a supposed pure (or abstract) original that is said to undergird it. As Zainab Bahrani writes regarding the ancient Mesopotamian iconic image, "Simulacra are images without dependence; they are not based on a pre-existing original

<sup>50</sup>I thank Davis Hankins for this observation.

<sup>51</sup>See Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), esp. 253–79. For a helpful guide to Deleuze's writings on simulacra, see Daniel W. Smith, "The Concept of the Simulacrum: Deleuze and the Overturning of Platonism," in *Essays on Deleuze* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 3–26.

that they set out to imitate, like the mimetic copy, but exist as creations in their own right.<sup>52</sup> We do not need to presume that the eight synonyms earn their meaning only if and when they participate in and refer to a larger concept, whether that be a text (the canonical Torah) or a broader abstract concept (Torah-beyond-תורה) that is outside of and beyond it.<sup>53</sup> Psalm 119 rejects the privileging of the “authentic” over the “artificial.”

This poem, in other words, shows itself to be a rigorously structured and self-consciously complete text that nonetheless presses the seeker of torah continually onward, not to a unifying concept behind the poem but always back to the poem itself, to the next synonym. These features of the text suggest a connection with the philosophical notion of immanence in its refusal to posit a meaning-giving entity outside of the world that is necessary for understanding in and of the world.<sup>54</sup> In the case of Ps 119, the world described is the world of the poem; the subject of the psalm is poetry itself. The psalm points to torah, and torah returns the favor. In that way, perhaps this psalm fulfills a promise suggested by the very form of biblical Hebrew poetry. The Hebrew poets worked with a literary tradition that prizes balance but also always moves forward, a tradition in which received forms could be exploited to surprising effect.<sup>55</sup> This poem employs traditional theological language<sup>56</sup> but turns it inside out to place its power on the surface of the poem. Psalm 119 suggests that poetry’s task lies not only in signifying worlds but also in creating them.

<sup>52</sup>Zainab Bahrani, *The Infinite Image: Art, Time and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 70.

<sup>53</sup>For “participation,” see Smith, “Concept of the Simulacrum,” 8.

<sup>54</sup>For a concise discussion of the concept of immanence and some of its broader implications, see James Williams, “Immanence,” in *The Deleuze Dictionary*, ed. Adrian Parr, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 128–30.

<sup>55</sup>See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

<sup>56</sup>On the use of language from Israelite traditions, see Reynolds, *Torah as Teacher*, chapter 2.



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