

# "I Have Gone Astray Like a Wandering Sheep: The Problem of Sin in Psalm 119"

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## JUSTIFICATION FOR THE RESEARCH

Psalm 119, because of its simple vocabulary, its highly structured nature, and repetitive style has been the victim of overly simplistic characterizations. Raymond Surburg identifies only one theme running through the entire psalm: the praise of the law. The law is not burdensome, but rather for the psalmist "The law is his joy, his recreation, his diversion." Gerstenberger identifies the genre of the psalm as a "portrait of a Yahweh confessor" which was to serve as an example for the community to emulate. What is displayed in the psalm is "a portrait of the perfect practitioner of true faith."

However, the psalmist's admission of his sinfulness in the past (v. 67), and admissions that he does not keep *tôrâ* perfectly (vv. 5-6; 8; 176) stand in juxtaposition with assertions of faithfulness to *tôrâ*. Such a paradox suggests this psalm has a greater degree of complexity than has hitherto been acknowledged.

## OBJECTIVES

The objective of this research project is the completion of the dissertation and related articles.

## METHODOLOGY

The dissertation will most likely include a study of the literary structure of Psalm 119, examining the parallelism within the stanzas, how each stanza relates to those surrounding it, the introduction and conclusion of the psalm. Theologically there will be a need to examine the major themes of Torah; the wisdom idea of the two ways; the wicked; and significant word studies.

## DISCUSSION OR RESULTS / OUTLOOK

The plan for this dissertation is that it would build upon the current scholarship, supplementing it by clearly describing the theme of the problem of sin in Psalm 119. It will show how the structure of the psalm requires a consideration of the theme. As such, it will build on the work of Freedman and Soll with regards to structure, bringing to bear some of Auffret's insights. It will take into consideration Soll's and other more recent studies as well as internal evidence that has not been heretofore considered (i.e. the psalmist's reactions to *tôrâ*, in order to define the meaning of *tôrâ* in Psalm 119 as specifically as possible. Consideration will be given as to how the problem of sin "complicates" a simple reading of the psalm, and to the light that can be shed on various paradoxes within the psalm, as well as the questions of coherence and progression.

It is anticipated that this dissertation will contribute to current scholarship in the areas of psalm and wisdom studies and the study of biblical theology. Psalm 119 is a unique psalm, not just because of its length and highly structured nature, but because it stands at the nexus between psalm, wisdom and *tôrâ* study. Unfortunately, preconceived notions of literary artistry as well as preoccupation with genre and historical setting have meant that the theme of the problem of sin in Psalm 119 has been overlooked. This dissertation, it is anticipated, will introduce that theme to the ongoing discussion about this psalm and lead to a richer and more nuanced reading of the psalm. It will reinforce a careful, contextual reading of the *tôrâ* words that, in the case of this psalm, more often than not mean "law" rather than "instruction."

This dissertation is expected to also impact the church and her reading of scripture. Psalm 119 has long been a favorite in the Christian tradition, and has shaped Christian spirituality for centuries. In the new lectionary of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, portions of Psalm 119 are part of the assigned propers 15 times, more than any other psalm. It is hoped that this dissertation will lead to a deeper understanding of the psalm as well as lead to a meditative/reflective use of it.

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