

The Meaning Of The Hebrew Word *Torah* With Special Reference To Its Use In The Psalms

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When a Christian hears or reads the word law, it is natural for him to think of the Ten Commandments, God's dos and don'ts. The Ten Commandments are a summary of the moral law, God's holy, immutable will. When one of the scribes, an expert in the law, asked Jesus, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (Mt 22:35-39).¹ The Apostle Paul summed up the law in the one command, "Love!" when he wrote, "Love is the fulfillment of the law" (Ro 13:10).

God's law reminds the Christian first of all that he is a sinner (Ro 3:20). The law exposes his sin, his failure to obey perfectly all of God's commands. "Sin is lawlessness" (1 Jn 3:4), disobedience to God, missing the mark of perfect love for God and for one's fellow human beings. The law reminds the Christian also of God's threat, "Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out" (Dt 27:26). He knows that "the wages of sin is death" (Ro 6:23), and that means not only physical and spiritual death but eternal death in the fires of hell.

What then is the reader of the Old Testament to make of it when the Psalmist prays, "Be gracious to me through your law" (7.19:29), or when Isaiah writes concerning the Lord's Servant, "In his law the islands will put their hope" (42:4)? How is he to understand David's words, "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul" (Ps 19:7)? Does not Paul say, "The law brings wrath" (Ro 4:15)? Did not Paul find that the law, while intended to bring life, "actually brought death" (Ro 7:10)? How can David assert that it revives the soul?

The thoughtful reader's perplexity at reading the words of David, Isaiah, and other psalmists and prophets is apt to be like Luther's when he thought of God's righteousness as the righteousness which God demands or requires of us and then read in Psalm 31, "Deliver me in your righteousness" (v 1). How, he wondered, can David ask the Lord to deliver him in his righteousness when God's righteousness causes him to condemn and punish the unrighteous sinner. Equally puzzling to him was Paul's statement in Romans 1:17, "In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed." "As if," Luther said, "it is not enough that sinners are crushed by the law without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" It was only when the Holy Spirit led Luther to realize that David was speaking about God's passive righteousness, as Luther then called it, that is, the righteousness of Christ which God gives to sinners as a free gift, that Luther grasped the meaning of Paul's words and David's prayer. "Then," he said, "I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."²

How important it is then for the reader of the Bible to understand the meaning of the word law as it appears in various contexts.

The Hebrew word which is usually translated *law* is *Torah* (תּוֹרָה). It is used 221 times in the Old Testament. The root is תָּרָה, which means "to throw" or "to shoot." From the fact that a person extends the arm in throwing, the verb in the Hiphil comes to have the derived sense "to point out," "to teach," "to instruct." In the LXX *Torah* is translated some 200 times with νόμος.³ *TANAKH*, the new Jewish Publication Society translation, frequently—and appropriately—translates it with "teaching."⁴

Torah occurs for the first time in the OT in Genesis 26:5 (in the plural form). God appears to Isaac and gives him the blessing he had previously given to Abraham. The heart of this blessing is the messianic promise, "Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed" (v 4). "Abraham," God says, "obeyed Me and kept My charge (מִשְׁמֶרֶתִי), My commandments (מִצְוֹתַי), My laws (חֻקֹּתַי) and My teachings (תּוֹרֹתַי)" (JPS). These terms include

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations are cited from the *New International Version (NIV)*.

² *Luther's Works*, American Edition (*LW*), 34, 336-338; St. Louis Edition, XIV, 447; see also *LW*, 54, 193f.

³ W. Gutbrod in Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, translator and editor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), IV, 1046.

⁴ E.g., Ps 1:2; 19:8; 78:1; 119:1. *TANAKH*, *The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), hereafter cited as *JPS*.

everything that God at various times said to Abraham some 600 years before he gave his laws to Moses. God calls his words a "charge" because they included things to be observed, kept, guarded, and taken to heart. They were "commandments" because they involved divine commands, telling Abraham what he was to do. They were "laws," since they were divinely established, fixed, and immutable. And, finally, they were "teachings" because they were things God taught Abraham, revelations by means of which he instructed him.

Basically, God's *Torah* is his instruction or teaching. Frequently this consists in pointing out his will to man. In Exodus 24:12 the noun and the verb are used together: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to Me on the mountain and wait there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the teachings (הַתּוֹרָה) and commandments which I have inscribed to instruct them (לְהוֹרָתָם)" (JPS).

Torah is used of specific ordinances as well as of groups of regulations and instructions. Often it is a synonym of commandments. When the Israelites disregarded God's commands not to gather more manna than they needed for the day, except on Friday when they were to gather twice as much, and not to look for it on the Sabbath Day, the Lord said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commands (מִצְוֹתַי) and my instructions (תּוֹרָתַי)?" (Ex 16:28). The Lord is referring to the specific directions he had given the people for gathering the manna.

Torah is used also for the regulations and instructions God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai, including not only the Ten Commandments but also the entire body of ceremonial and civil laws and ordinances. In Exodus 24:12, quoted above, God designates what he wrote on the stone tablets given to Moses as "the law and commands (הַתּוֹרָה וְהַמִּצְוֹת)."

The individual provisions of the Mosaic Law are also designated as *Torah*. For example, Leviticus 6:9 (H:2) states, "These are the regulations (תּוֹרָת; KJV: 'law') for the burnt offering," and 6:14 (H:7), "These are the regulations (תּוֹרָת; KJV: 'law') for the grain offering."

The basic general sense of teaching or instruction is found in Deuteronomy 1:5, where all the words Moses spoke to Israel on the east side of the Jordan River are designated as the *Torah*: "On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this Teaching" (JPS; NIV: "law"). So also later everything that Moses wrote in a book, the sum total of his written teaching and instruction, is called the *Torah*: "Moses wrote down this Teaching and gave it to the priests" (Dt 31:9, JPS; NIV: "law"); "When Moses had put down in writing the words of this Teaching to the very end,..." (Dt 31:24, JPS; NIV: "law").

It is not surprising then to see how *Torah* is used in Joshua 1:7,8, "Be careful to observe all the law [JPS, 'Teaching'] my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law [סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה; JPS, 'Book of Teaching'] depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful." In this passage *Book of the Law* clearly refers to the entire Pentateuch. Incidentally, it is rather obvious that the author of Psalm 1 was reflecting on the Lord's instructions to Joshua when he described the godly man: "His delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.... Whatever he does prospers" (Ps 1:2,3).

Torah as a name for the Pentateuch came into general use among the Jews. In Nehemiah 8 we are told how Ezra and the Levites read the Book of the Law of Moses to the people after their return from exile in Babylon. After his resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples and told them, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Lk 24:44). The Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (*Kethubhim*) are the traditional threefold division of the OT. Jesus probably makes special mention of the Psalms because of all the books included in the Writings the Psalms are especially rich in messianic prophecies. At times the Pentateuch is also referred to as *the Law of the LORD* (1 Chr 16:40) or simply as *the Law* (2 Chr 34:19; Lk 16:16; Jn 1:45; Ac 13:15; 24:14; 28:23).

Sometimes in the NT the entire OT is called *the Law*, as when Jesus, citing Psalm 82:6, asked the Jews, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'?" (see also Jn 12:34; Jn 15:25; 1 Cor 14:21).

In John 1:17 a clear distinction is made between law in the sense of God's commandments and the doctrine of the gospel. John writes, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." It would be altogether false, of course, to think that no gospel is found in the Pentateuch. In the Pentateuch God revealed not only his holy will in what we refer to as the moral, ceremonial, and civil law. Through his inspired prophet Moses he also revealed his life-giving gospel. Its saving light shines forth clearly from Genesis 3:15, the first promise of a Savior, through the glorious promises given to Shem, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, down to such

distinct messianic prophecies as Deuteronomy 18:15,18, where the coming of a Prophet like Moses is foretold. Jesus himself testifies concerning Moses, "He wrote about me" (Jn 5:46).

The gospel, in fact, is the chief message of the Pentateuch. Through Moses the Holy Spirit set down for posterity the record of God's gracious dealing, first with fallen mankind, and then with his chosen people, the children of Israel. God's repeated promises to send a Savior and his covenant of grace are the very heart and core of his pentateuchal revelation.

The Sinaitic covenant with its detailed regulations governing all aspects of Israel's personal, religious, and political life was to serve Israel as a guide showing them how they as God's redeemed people were to walk thankfully and faithfully in the ways of their gracious God. At the same time it served as a curb and mirror. As a curb it restrained the unbelievers among the people and the sinful nature of believers from outward acts of violence and wickedness. As a mirror it served the interests of the gospel. On the one hand, it did not and could not give life (Ga 3:21). It was a ministry that brought death and condemnation (2 Cor 3:6-11). It drove sinners to despair of gaining heaven by their own efforts. In that way it became clear to them that their only hope lay in the covenant God had made with Abraham more than 430 years earlier and which was not set aside by the covenant established on Sinai (Ga 3:15-18). On the other hand, many of the provisions of the Sinaitic covenant were in fact gospel types, serving as "a shadow of the things that were to come" (Col 2:17). The Sabbath was a picture of the spiritual rest the Savior would bring (He 4:1-11; Mt 11:28,29). The Passover lamb was a type of Christ, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). The scapegoat represented the One on whom the Lord laid the iniquity of us all (Is 53:6). The high priest was a type of Jesus Christ, the great High Priest, who "offered for all time one sacrifice for sins" (He 10:12). The atonement cover or mercy seat (הַכַּפֶּרֶת) of the ark, on which the high priest sprinkled blood to make atonement for the sins of the people, symbolized the atonement (ἱλαστήριον, literally, covering) made by Christ with his blood (Ro 3:25). Many more examples could be given.

Turning now to the use of Torah in the Psalms, we find that it occurs 35 times in the Psalter. In each instance the broad, general sense of "teaching" or "instruction" underlies its use. In the first nine verses of Psalm 119, the giant Psalm which is acrostic in structure and has been called "The Golden ABC of God's Word," ten synonymous terms are used to designate the Word of God, eight of them appearing in the first nine verses of the Psalm:

Blessed are they whose ways are blameless,
who walk according to the *law* (תּוֹרָה) of the LORD.
Blessed are they who keep his *statutes* (עֲדוֹת)
and seek him with all their heart.
They do nothing wrong;
they walk in his *ways* (דְּרָכִים).
You have laid down *precepts* (פְּקֻדִים)
that are to be fully obeyed.
Oh, that my ways were steadfast
in obeying your *decrees* (חֻקִּים)!
Then I would not be put to shame
when I consider all your *commands* (מִצְוֹת).
I will praise you with an upright heart
as I learn your righteous *laws* (מִשְׁפָּטִים).
I will obey your *decrees* (חֻקִּים);
do not utterly forsake me.
How can a young man keep his way pure?
By living according to your *word* (דְּבָר).
Two other synonyms are used in later verses:
I have hidden your *word* (אִמְרָה) in my heart
that I might not sin against you (v 11).

Your *faithfulness* (אֱמוּנָה) continues through all generations;
you established the earth, and it endures (v 90).

The Masoretes observed that one of these terms referring to God's Word occurs in every verse of Psalm 119 except verse 122. *Torah* is obviously the equivalent of the Word of God. A careful study of each passage in which *Torah*, or one of these equivalents is found will show, however, that at times there will be a special emphasis on the law in the Word, at other times on the gospel, and in still other cases the term remains general. The context must in every instance determine the scope of the word.

In some passages, for example, the Psalmist ascribes effects to the *Torah* of the Lord which are clearly effects of the gospel, not of the law. Note, for example,

Keep me from deceitful ways;
Be gracious to me through your law (תּוֹרַתְךָ, v 29).

If your *law* (תּוֹרַתְךָ) had not been my delight,
I would have perished in my affliction (v 92).

Similarly, gospel effects are ascribed to the Word when it is designated by one of the synonyms of *Torah*:

Remember your word (דְּבָרְךָ) to your servant,
for you *have given me hope* (v 49).

My comfort in my suffering is this:
Your promise (אֶמְרַתְךָ) *renews my life* (v 50).

Let me live that I may praise you,
and may your laws (מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ) *sustain me* (v 175).

The same gospel effects and characteristics of *Torah* and its synonyms will be noted also in other Psalms. In Psalm 19:7-8 David writes:

The *law* (תּוֹרַת) of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul.

The *statutes* (עֲדוּת) of the LORD are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.

The *precepts* (פְּקֻדֹת) of the LORD are right,
giving joy to the heart.

The *commands* (מִצְוֹת) of the LORD are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.

The *fear* (יִרְאַת), a metonymy, substituting the godly,
filial fear which the gospel produces for the gospel itself
of the LORD is pure, *enduring forever.*

The *ordinances* (מִשְׁפָּטֵי) of the LORD are sure,
and *altogether righteous.*

It may strike us as strange that such terms as *statutes*, *precepts*, *commands*, and the like that we usually associate with the law are used of the gospel. It may help somewhat if we recall Jesus' answer to the question of the Jews, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" He replied, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (Jn 6:28,29). The Apostle John also writes, "This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us" (1 Jn 3:23). The First Commandment calls for faith, as

Luther reminds us in his explanation of it in his *Small Catechism*: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

The use of *Torah* and its synonyms to refer to the gospel is not limited to the Psalms. It occurs also elsewhere in the OT as the following examples demonstrate:

- Isaiah 2:2,3, "In the last days [the New Testament time]...the law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem." Zion and Jerusalem are the New Testament church, from which the gospel goes out into all the world.
- Isaiah 42:4, referring to the Messiah, "He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice (מִשְׁפָּט , i.e., the perfect righteousness which he has won for sinners and bestows on them as a free gift) in the earth. In his law (תּוֹרָה) the islands *will put their hope*."
- Jeremiah 31:33, "But such is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel after these days [i.e., in the New Testament time]—declares the LORD: I will put My Teaching (תּוֹרָה) into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then I will be their God, and they shall be my people....For I will forgive their iniquities, and remember their sins no more" (*JPS*). In contrast to the old Sinaitic covenant of the law, the new covenant which God will establish with both Jews and Gentiles is the gospel of forgiveness. Inscribe this teaching on believers' hearts,⁵ he gives them the same promise he gave to Abraham when he instituted circumcision as the seal of his gospel covenant with him, "To be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Gen 17:7).

It should be noted that in contexts such as these where *Torah* or its synonyms refer to the gospel, the expression "to keep the *Torah*" means to cling to it and confidently trust its saving promises. So, for example, Psalm 119:52, 55, 56: "I remember your ancient laws (מִצְוֹתֶיךָ), O LORD, and I find comfort in them....In the night I remember your name, O LORD [i.e., the name by which you have revealed yourself as the Savior-God, the One who is "the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin"—Ex 34:6,7], and I will keep your law (תּוֹרָה). This has been my practice: I obey your precepts (פְּקֻדֹתֶיךָ)." It is the exact equivalent therefore of the NT expression, to obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Th 1:8), which obviously means to believe it.

It is natural, of course, for believers to take delight in doing God's will as it is expressed in his holy commandments. What Paul says of himself is true of every child of God, "In my inner being I delight in God's law" (Ro 7:22). In the days of the OT, too, those who were true children of God by faith in his gospel promises found pleasure in serving him and obeying his commandments. "We love because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19) was also the attitude of their regenerate hearts. The commandments of their merciful God and Father were therefore not distasteful to them, but sweet. With the Psalmist they declared, "I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free" (Ps 119:32). They prayed, "Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain" (Ps 119:35, 36). The contrast here shows that the Psalmist is asking God to help him live a life of sanctification. As a fruit of faith he strives to do God's will. Other passages also make it clear that *Torah* is used at times in the sense of God's commands or demands, as, for example, in Psalm 119:53, "Indignation grips me because of the wicked, who have forsaken your law," or verse 150, "Those who devise wicked schemes are near, but they are far from your law."

Summarizing the results of our study then, we find that *Torah* always has the basic sense of *teaching*. At times it is used in a broad sense, denoting the entire Word of God. At other times the emphasis may be on either the law or the gospel. The context must determine the meaning in each instance. If there is nothing in the context to indicate that the reference is specifically to the law or the gospel, the term is to be taken in the broad sense.

So, for example, in Psalm 1:2, speaking of the godly man, the Psalmist says, "But his delight is in the law [teaching] of the LORD, and on his law [teaching] he meditates day and night." Since nothing in the context limits

⁵ See Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part I, Fred Kramer, translator (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), p 76, "The Holy Spirit writes the doctrine of the Gospel into the hearts of the believers, that it may be fulfilled what He says: 'I will be their God, and they will be My people,'" and Theodore Laetsch, *Bible Commentary, Jeremiah* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1952), p 257: "This Gospel of forgiveness, justifying, sanctifying, preserving unto the end, is the 'Law,' the teaching put into the innermost life by being written in the hearts of all members of the covenant by the Lord."

the significance of *Torah* to either the law or the gospel, the Psalmist is saying that the godly man finds delight in God's entire Word, both in the law and the gospel. Examples of passages in which the context indicates that the reference is specifically to the law or the gospel have been given above.

In conclusion, the following diagram may serve to illustrate the meaning of *Torah* in the OT:

