

“I turned back my feet to your decrees” (Psalm 119:59): Torah in the Fifth Book of the Psalter by Michael Kodzo Mensah. *Österreichische Biblische Studien* 45. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016. 370 pages. Hardcover. € 70. ISBN 978-3-631-67229-7.

This book is the result of intensive research into the structure of Ps 119, the development of its thought, and the way in which the concept of Torah (which is central to this long psalm) also plays a role in Book V of the Psalter. It was originally presented as a thesis by the author, Michael Mensah, a scholar from Ghana, at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and the imprint of the eminent Prof. Gianni Barbiero, who acted as supervisor, is evident in more ways than one.

It provides, in my view, a very insightful and convincing structural and thematic analysis of Ps 119 and contributes also to our understanding of the structure and purpose of Book V of the Psalter. Mensah was inspired by the suggestions of Childs, Wilson, and Mays that Torah-psalms such as Pss 1, 19, and 119 were intended to guide the reader of the Psalter towards a new understanding of this biblical book as a whole (p. 15). This led him to the problem of the role of Torah in Book V of the Psalter, a subject which in turn cannot be investigated without a proper study of Ps 119. His interest in the role of Torah-psalms at the seams of Book V also explains his interest in Pss 111 and 147, two psalms in which Torah plays an important role, even though Book V runs from Ps 107 to Ps 150 and those two psalms are not found right at the beginning or right at the end. J. L. Mays included Pss 112 and 148 as psalms which show interest in Torah, but Mensah purposefully excluded those two for reasons of space (p. 32). He does, however, contextualise both Pss 111 and 147 within their immediate surroundings, thus paying attention also to Pss 112 and 148 and in this way covering “all the important texts in the Fifth Book relating to Torah” (cf. p. 33). It is noteworthy, however, that Ps 119 is the only psalm in the final book that contains the word תורה itself, so that one has to include other Torah-words (e.g. פקודים in Ps 111:7) to be able to carry out this investigation.

The study is organised into four chapters. “Chapter I: The Torah Question at the End of the Psalter” (pp. 15-32) serves as introduction to the book. It explains the

research question and reviews the literature on the topic, while it also sets out the organisation and limitations of the investigation. “Chapter II: Psalms 111 and 147 and the Theme of Torah” (pp. 33-94) discusses the structure of Ps 111 as well as its role, together with its “twin,” Ps 112, in Book V of the Psalter. According to Mensah, the twin psalms 111-112 unite the themes of YHWH’s works as revealed in his Torah, the response of the upright in observing them, and the obstinacy of the wicked in denying them – three themes which remind one also of the role of Torah in Ps 1 (p. 58). A second part of the chapter contains a similar analysis of the structure of Ps 147, as well as a discussion of its role within the context of Pss 146-150. Mensah points out that four Torah words are used seven times in Ps 147. In the final *Hallel*, Torah is related either to YHWH’s work in creation or to his intervention in Israel’s history (p. 92). These two aspects of YHWH’s intervention eventually provide the motivation for the universal praise of YHWH in Ps 150 (p. 93).

“Chapter III: Psalm 119 and the Theme of Torah (pp. 95-302)” constitutes the longest and most important part of the book. It provides an analysis of the poetic and thematic structure of Ps 119 in its 22 stanzas, grouped together in 6 cantos according to the author. In contrast to many previous investigators who could not find a coherent unity of thematic development in Ps 119, Mensah argues that the 22 strophes of the psalm are arranged in six chiastically arranged cantos (each canto consisting of two strophes). In this way, Canto 1, verses 1-16, corresponds to Canto 6, verses 161-176; Canto 2, verses 17-48, corresponds to Canto 5, verses 129-160; and Canto 3, verses 49-88, corresponds to Canto 4, verses 89-128. All six cantos are linked together in the theme of the return of the suppliant to the Torah of YHWH, a theme which is developed throughout, according to the author (cf. the subtitle of the book; p. 105). In this chapter, the author also makes a number of conclusions on the influence of wisdom on the psalm, the identity of the suppliant and his adversaries, and the significance of the absence of the word ברית in the psalm. In a second, much shorter part, it considers the place of Ps 119 within the context of the Fifth Book of the Psalter. Mensah finds connections between Ps 119 and the frame of Book V since it develops the theme of the two ways, namely the way of YHWH and the human way.

This same motif is also found in Ps 107, according to Mensah (p. 289). He also finds a connection between Ps 119 and the final *Hallel*, since Pss 146-150 contain a cluster of Torah words, reminiscent of a similar cluster in Ps 119 (p. 290). He also sees a pattern in the five-fold repetition of the stem יהה in Ps 107, its use in the introduction of Ps 119 (v. 7), the use of the stem להלל at the conclusion of Ps 119 (vv. 164, 172, and 175), and its repeated use in the conclusion of Book V of the Psalter (Pss 146-150) (p. 291). In the final pages of this chapter, Mensah proceeds to argue that Ps 119 forms the thematic centre of Book V of the Psalter, flanked on both sides by a frame (Pss 107 and 146-150 respectively), a Davidic collection (Pss 108-110 and 138-145 respectively), two sets of psalm-pairs (Pss 111-112 and 135-136 respectively, with the attachment of Ps 137); and two sets of liturgical groups (Pss 113-118 and 120-134 respectively).

“Chapter IV: Returning to YHWH’s Torah” (pp. 303-308) provides a synthesis of the findings. The book also has a list of symbols and abbreviations (pp. 309-316); a bibliography (pp. 317-342); an index of authors (pp. 343-350); a subject index (pp. 351-357); as well as an index of selected biblical references (pp. 359-370).

The important contributions Mensah makes, in my view, are the structural analyses of Pss 111, 119 and 147, as well as the explication of the centrality of Ps 119 within Book V of the Psalter in terms of various groups of psalms. His arguments about the role of Torah as an organising principle in Book V are perhaps not as compelling, although I regard his investigation as worthy of serious consideration and a contribution that will stimulate debate about the purpose of the editors of the Psalter for many years. The book is welcomed enthusiastically and recommended for all who have an interest in the message of the Psalter, especially those who work on Book V of the Psalter.

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