

The Attentive Heart

Meditation in the Old Testament

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Meditation is a natural, human activity like understanding speech or enjoying music. It is not in itself something spiritual, let alone Christian. A student day dreaming during a lesson, an athlete psyching himself up for a race, a young bloke pouring over a girlie magazine, a woman singing a familiar song to herself, a girl reading a love letter, a pastor listening to a Bach cantata - all these are forms of meditation. In each case the object of meditation determines its character, for the object is the decisive thing in meditation. It is, if I may venture a working definition, a passive or at least receptive frame of mind, in which a person concentrates physically and mentally on something, so that it in turn affects him subjectively in some way. It can be consciously cultivated or spontaneously enjoyed. In fact, most people who meditate don't realize that they do so.

In recent years, meditation has suddenly become quite fashionable, not only among people influenced by Eastern cults, but also by hard-nosed sportsmen bent on improving their performance. It has even recently been promoted as a cure for AIDS. In most cases, it has been merely treated as a method of relaxation which has proved to be of great therapeutic value in our stressful society. Apart from the proponents of yoga and other forms of Eastern mysticism, there has been little public discussion on whether or when it may be spiritually helpful or harmful. Hence Christians who are drawn to the practice of meditation often have no inkling of its prominence in the history of the Church. Since we lack the knowledge to give them sound advice, they are turning elsewhere for it. And we in turn become more unsure about the whole business. Some of us are needlessly suspicious of everything to do with the subject, while others naively suppose that any kind of meditation is beneficial to the Christian.

As children of this hyperactive age which overvalues performance, we have much to learn from the past in the art of meditation. Their wisdom may perhaps help us to discern what is good as well as what is evil in the present revival of interest in meditation. In this and another article, I would therefore like to explore the Biblical teaching on meditation, so that we can not only learn to meditate properly as Christians but also be in a position to evaluate other kinds of meditation more accurately. These articles aim to give the Biblical basis for some of the points made by Robert Banks in his article on 'Meditation in Reformed Perceptive' in an earlier issue of this journal (46, 1987, 10-16).

The Cultivation of Meditation in the Tradition of Wisdom

The book of Proverbs gives us the most deliberate and developed instruction in the art of meditation found in the whole Bible. We find material for meditation derived from meditation in Proverbs 10 - 31, as well as some reflection on the whole process of meditation in Proverbs 1—9.

Proverbs was used as a textbook in the wisdom schools which stood in the tradition of education inaugurated by Solomon in his court at Jerusalem. Now this tradition differed greatly from our own. To be sure, the book of Proverbs was used as a kind of primer and copybook to teach students to read and write; it also gave them some useful information on how to be successful and how to live a good life. But that was not its main concern. Rather, it set out to teach its students how to get wisdom. That was its chief goal (Prov 1:2-6). And meditation played a key role in that, for wisdom was gained by meditation on experience in the light of instruction.

1. The Definition of Meditation

It is remarkable that the teachers of wisdom coined no special technical term for the art of meditation that was taught by them. They used many terms to describe different aspects of the one process, but one term tends to predominate. They nearly always defined meditation as the art of hearing properly,¹ the practice of paying full attention to their teaching.² At this point they diverged sharply from many ancient and modern kinds of meditation which seek to obliterate normal consciousness. Above all else, they intended to turn their students into good listeners, with all their wits intact.

Their ideals were embodied in the figure of Solomon, the patron of wisdom in ancient Israel. So it comes as no surprise that he is portrayed as a good hearer in the story of his dream in 1 Kings 3:5-15.³ God appeared to Solomon in a dream at Gibeon, after his succession to the throne, and told him that he could ask for whatever he wished. To God's delight, Solomon asked for the gift of a 'hearing heart' (3:9), so that he could distinguish what was beneficial from what was detrimental. If he possessed such a 'hearing heart', he would be able to penetrate appearances and read people accurately, even if they were inarticulate or deceptive. He would have the ability to discover the truth about people and see things as they really were. But the power of a 'hearing heart' went even further than that. God tells Solomon that he would have the 'discernment to hear judgment' (3:11). With that gift at his disposal he would not have to fall back on his own judgment to administer the affairs of his kingdom but would be able to 'hear' the judgment of the heavenly King in any given circumstance. Since he could hear the voice of God, he would know God's will and be able to co-operate with him in governing his people. God himself would teach him wisdom and so communicate his own wisdom to him (3:28). Solomon then was a model sage, because he had a 'hearing heart'.

For the teachers of wisdom, meditation was the art of hearing which came from hearing. They knew, however, that some kinds of hearing were of little value to their students. Fools too were adept at the art of meditation; their problem was that they listened to the words of the wrong people. They fed their souls with fantasy and illusion, evil and perversity. They heard the echo of their own voices in other cynics and fools. So listening was not in itself necessarily beneficial. The student had to listen properly to the right voices, or else he would come to ruin. By listening to his parents and teachers, his elders and his wife, provided that they were wise, he could begin to hear the voice of

¹ See Pr 1:5, 8, 33; 4:1, 10; 5:7; 7:24; 8:6, 32-33, etc.

² See Pr 2:2; 4:1, 20; 5:1; 7:24.

³ The best treatment of this story that I know comes from M. Görg, *Gott-König-Reden in Israel und Ägypten* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1975), 106-115. Of special interest is the section on the 'hearing heart' (82-88).

Wisdom herself speaking to him. All her benefits were conveyed to him via her words, for she gave herself and abundant life with her, through her words.

The wisdom teachers defined meditation as hearing. But this hearing had to be coupled with observation. What the student heard from the wise had to be tested and elucidated in experience. The words of his teachers were meant to shape his perception and mentality, so that he would see and understand what he would otherwise overlook in his experience. This connection between hearing and seeing is summed up rather succinctly in a little proverb from Proverbs 20:12:

*The hearing ear and the seeing eye,
the Lord has made them both.*

God has created us as hearers and seers. Both faculties are to be used together in learning the lessons which God teaches us via our experience in the school of hard knocks (Pr 3:6, 11-12). The priority, however, is given to hearing. By listening to what other wise people have learnt from life, we can know what to expect from life and how to interpret its strange twists. But what they say won't make any sense to us, unless we examine what happens to us and use what they have said to learn from our experience. So the words of the wise are aids for the interpretation of experience which are in turn interpreted by experience. They are a kind of alphabet which may be used to read the book of experience.

Thus, the sages of Israel taught a kind of meditation which arose out of the interaction between hearing and seeing. Hearing sharpened the mind for insight into the meaning of life. This insight in turn refined the hearing of students, so that they heard the message of their lives more clearly.

2. The Matter of Meditation

The teachers of wisdom taught their students to meditate on proverbs and wise sayings. Unlike most modern experts in meditation, they did not begin with methods of relaxation and concentration; they began with words and let them influence their students.⁴ By concentrating on these sayings and by becoming captivated by them, their students learnt to meditate.

Proverbs 10-31 consists of various proverbs which were used to teach meditation. As the fruit of meditation they were designed to stimulate meditation.⁵ Couched in poetic form, they are short in words and long in experience. Each is enigmatic and puzzling in some way. What they say seems commonplace and even trivial to the hasty fool who does not notice anything except what he expects to see. Yet each saying has some odd twist to it. Something is suggested but left unexplained. Some parallel needs to be drawn; some connection needs to be made. Hearers are challenged to work it out for themselves like a riddle. The saying makes them change their way of looking and thinking. In short,

⁴ See 1:18; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1-4, 10, 20, etc.

⁵ For an introduction to the poetic form and function of the proverb, see W. McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (London: SCM, 1970), 22-33, and D. Cox, *Proverbs* (Delaware: Glazier, 1982), 83-89. Cox maintains on page 88: 'From the very form of the proverb it can be seen that its function is not directly to teach, but to make one think effectively about life'.

it works on them and does something to them, if they have the patience to consider it properly.

Take for example the proverb about the use of proverbs in Proverbs 26:7:

*Legs dangle from a lame man,
And a proverb in the mouth of fools.*

The comparison here between the fool and the cripple is stated but left unexplained. The hearers must work out its meaning and application for themselves by drawing on their own previous knowledge and experience. Legs are meant for walking; they take you where you need to be. So a proverb is meant to take you somewhere. It lends feet to your mind; it leads you from somewhere to somewhere. But it is of no use to the fool, because he can't use it properly, just as a cripple can't use his legs. They don't take him to where he needs to go. Furthermore, the proper place for a proverb is not in the mouth where it is used as a weapon against others but in the heart or mind where it can motivate the wise man.

The students of the wisdom schools were therefore taught to meditate by confrontation with short sayings which encapsulated the wisdom and experience of the past. Yet these proverbs were much more than the epitome of human experience. On the one hand, they had been taught to the wise and had been inspired by Dame Wisdom herself in the school of life.⁶ She used the teachers of wisdom to reveal her words to the uninstructed and to pour out her spirit upon them (Pr 1:23). The book of Proverbs gives her teaching (Pr 1:20-33; 8:1—36). On the other hand, since Dame Wisdom mediates between God and man (Pr 8:32-36), her words of wisdom were the revealed word of God which wise men had heard and tested in their experience (Pr 30:1-6). So then the students of wisdom meditated on what God-fearing men had learnt in the past from God in the school of life.

3. The Method of Meditation

The book of Proverbs has little to say about the method of meditation. It is either assumed that everybody knew how to do it, just as we all know how to daydream, or else it is believed that people would discover for themselves how to do it quite readily in the course of events, just as people used to learn how to make love by making love rather than reading manuals about the proper technique for it.

Some aspects of meditation do receive due emphasis. They all have to do with the method of listening properly. First, the teachers of wisdom highlight the need for receptivity (Pr 2: 1-2).⁷ It is not enough to hear a proverb with the ears and regard it objectively, like a table which we have painted. It needs to be absorbed like food and taken into the heart, the very core of our being, the seat of our thinking and imagining,

⁶ See G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1972), 144-176, for an excellent treatment of the figure of Dame Wisdom in Proverbs. This work is still the best single introduction to the wisdom movement.

⁷ The verb *lāqāh* is used in 2:1 to describe the process of reception. The noun from this verb occurs in Pr 1:5; 4:2; 7:21; 9:9; 16:21,23 to denote the act of reception, the thing received and the capacity to receive.

feeling and desiring. By assimilating and internalising it, the hearer becomes a recipient of the word. The word becomes his subject, and he becomes its object. It touches him personally and affects him totally. He stores it up with himself and lets it direct his behaviour. What is more, the more he attends to it receptively, the more it increases his capacity for reception.

Secondly, the teacher of wisdom underlines the importance of retention. The words must not go in one ear and out the other. The student must write the words on the tablet of his mind by memorising them (7:3). He must lay hold of them (4:4) and hold onto them (4:13); he must guard them (3:1; 4:13, 23) and keep them (4:4, 21; 7:1); he must never forget them (3:1; 4:5), nor let them escape from his sight (3:21; 4:21). By keeping the word in his mind, the student is in turn kept by Wisdom through her word (2:11; 4:6; 6:22).

Thirdly, the teachers of wisdom stress the need for prayer (2:3-4). Wisdom, insight and understanding cannot be gained directly by tapping the latent potential in the human soul. They are hidden like treasure in the words of the wise and remain undiscovered to the uninitiated. The student must therefore search diligently for them and cry out to God for them in prayer. Illumination and invigoration do not originate in the correct performance of meditation but come as a gift from God to those who seek them. Remember the story of Solomon's dream! Solomon received the gift of a hearing heart because he prayed for it. The teachers of wisdom knew that the person who meditated would experience periods of frustration and darkness, when he or she seemed to get nowhere or achieve nothing. But such times of seeking and searching were most necessary, because they emptied students of themselves and made them focus more intensely on the gift of wisdom from God.

The students of wisdom were taught to employ a very simple method of meditation. They were encouraged to assimilate what they had learnt, to retain it in their minds, and to pray for that wisdom which would be imparted through it as they reflected on their experience.

4. The Purpose of Meditation

The purpose of meditation was quite clear for the sages. It was to get wisdom. Now wisdom was not what we would call intelligence; it was a practical skill, the ability to live in harmony with God in the world and to co-operate with him in the good management of his creation. It was a personal power which could be best equated with the God's Spirit.⁸ In fact, wisdom was depicted in Proverbs as a lovely woman who presented herself to the young man as a noblewoman, teacher, and bride (4:8-9; 8:4- 21; 7:4). As such she had the power to save him (2:10-19). She could watch over him (6:22), keep him (4:6; 7:5) and guard him (4:6) from all moral evil and spiritual danger. She could call him, explain herself to him and pour out her spirit upon him (1:23). She could speak to him and lead him on the right way (6:22). She loved her lovers (8:17) and promoted them to royal status (4:8-9). She mediated God's grace and vitality to those who heeded her words (8:35; 9:6). Through meditation she bestowed herself and became active in the life of her student (8:32-35). She came into his heart and offered her help to

⁸ Proverbs 1:23 prepares the way for this equation. It occurs quite explicitly in the Wisdom of Solomon 11:17.

him (2:9-15). With her help the student gained moral insight and strength to evade the temptations which beset him. She reconstituted his imagination, so that he desired what was lovely and true and good.

But there was also another side to the getting of wisdom. We read in Proverbs 2:6-8:

*the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
he is a shield to those who walk in integrity,
guarding the paths of justice
and preserving the way of his saints.*

Ultimately God is the source of all wisdom. It comes from his mouth and is communicated by his Word. God gives his own wisdom to those who are upright and devout. Thereby he allows them to gain spiritual insight in his way of dealing with people and managing their affairs (2:5). And more than that! They enjoy intimacy with God and get to know him personally (2:5; 3:6). Like the prophets they are allowed to stand in his council and enjoy his confidence (3:22).

From what has been said so far, it could appear as if meditation were purely an intellectual matter, a way of conforming the human mind to the mind of God. But it is much broader than that. The whole person is the instrument for the reception of God's wisdom. Hearing therefore includes obedience in behaviour and a whole life lived in harmony with God. What's more, the gift of wisdom affects the physical state of the student. It brings him health and healing (3:8; 4:22). It satisfies his desires (3:17) and promotes his prosperity (8:18-21). So by meditation the whole of the student's life was captivated and enriched by the wisdom of God.

In sum, meditation had a passive purpose for the students of wisdom. By it they did not aim to realize their mental or spiritual potential; they waited on God to receive wisdom from him. When they meditated they did not enact God's Word in their lives but rather relied on God's Word to activate them.

The Practice of Meditation in the Psalms

The book of Proverbs has much to say about meditation but gives only a few examples of the kind of meditation which it advocates.⁹ For such examples, we need to turn to the Psalter, the prayer book of ancient Israel. The Psalter does not theorise about meditation. Instead it shows us how to meditate. It has therefore proved much more helpful and fruitful in inculcating the practice of meditation than the book of Proverbs. In fact, you cannot appreciate the development of meditation in the Church unless you begin with the influence of the Psalter.

Psalms 1 and 2 act as introductions to the Psalter.¹⁰ They tell us how this collection is to be used by the pious reader, contrasting two different kinds of meditation.

⁹ See Pr 3:13-18; 7:6-23; 31:10-31.

¹⁰ See B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979), 513 and 516, as well as G. T. Sheppard, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct* (Berlin/New York: Gruyter, 1980), 136-144.

In the first psalm we hear about the righteous man who constantly meditates on the Lord's teaching (Ps 1:2). In the second Psalm we hear about the pagans who meditate on illusions, because they rebel against the Lord God and his Messiah (2:1). The whole Psalter is meant to show the righteous person how to meditate on the Lord's teaching in all the vicissitudes of his or her life. It is thus a text book in the art of meditation.¹¹

1. *The Definition of Meditation in the Psalter*

Like the book of Proverbs the psalmists regarded meditation as a verbal activity. But unlike the teachers of wisdom, the writers of the psalms also developed some technical terms for this process. The main verb which they used was *hagah*.¹² And so it is perhaps worth our while to examine the semantic range of this verb if we are to appreciate how they envisaged the practice of meditation.

The verb *hagah* describes the noise people make when speaking or muttering to themselves.¹³ It was also used to describe the moaning of a dove (Is 38:14; 59:11) and the growling of a lion (Is 3 1:4). It covers a wide range of human vocalisation from inarticulate groaning (Ps 5:1) to singing a song to oneself as one played an instrument (Ps 92:3). In each case the focus of attention determines the kind of expression involved.

Now the verb is used technically in two basic genres of psalms, in laments and in didactic poems. It is the laments which best show us the full range of the word. When a speaker fixes his attention on his distress, the verb means to sigh, groan or complain to God (Is 5:1; 39:3; Ps 90:9). When the speaker confesses his confidence in God's grace despite his present trouble, the verb describes how he tells himself of God's past benefits to his people and him (Ps 63:6; 77:12; 143:5). When the speaker vows to show his gratitude to God after his coming deliverance, the verb describes how he will hum the praise of God to himself all day long (Ps 35:28; 7 1:24; cf. 9:16). Meditation then arises from the personal experience of trouble. People meditate when they reflect on the connection between their trouble and God's grace. Such meditation leads to prayer for help and results in praise.

There is one psalm which shows most clearly for me how the process of meditation fluctuates between the poles of lamentation and praise. It is Psalm 77. This psalm falls into two distinct parts. Psalm 77:1-10 is an individual lament, while the rest of it is a hymn of praise. The meditation in this psalm is stimulated by the lack of an answer to the psalmist's desperate cry for help to God (Ps 77:1-2). What strikes him first is the disparity between God's past performance and his own hopeless situation. The fact that he receives no perceptible comfort from God leads him to the point of despair in God's grace. But then he shifts the focus of his meditation from his own trouble back on to

¹¹ Childs (*Introduction*, p. 513) maintains: 'Psalm 1 has assumed a highly significant function as a preface to the psalms which are to be read, studied and meditated upon'.

¹² Two other verbs are used as synonyms for this verb. The first is *śāh* which has almost the same range of meaning. It covers any form of preoccupied or obsessive talking, from complaints (Ps 52:2, 17; 64:1; 77:3, 6; 102:1; 142:2) and gossip (69:12) to verbalised meditation (119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 148) and even praise (77:21; C4:34; 143:5; 145:5). The other is *zākar* which means to recall verbally and hence to remember.

¹³ For analysis of this verb, see M. Augustin, 'Der Begriff "Meditieren"', *Pastoraltheologie* 72 (1983), 490—504, and A. Negoita and H. Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament III*, pp. 321-324. What follows here is largely derived from the thorough-going analysis in the former article.

God's past dealings with his people in the Exodus. He ceases to speak about God and begins to address God directly as he recites to himself a hymn of praise to God for the redemption of his ancestors and his miraculous appearance at the Red Sea. As he does so, he begins to understand two things which throw light on his own trouble. First, God led his people through the waters of destruction to rescue them from destruction. Secondly, even though God's presence paved the way for his people through the sea, he himself remained hidden from them. So by his meditation on his trouble in the light of his faith, the psalmist is sure that, despite appearances to the contrary, God is present with him to lead him to safety. In his meditation he proceeds from lamentation to praise. And the same verb is used to describe both these activities.¹⁴

In the didactic psalms the verb *hāgāh* is used to describe how the righteous man keeps on 'muttering' and 'speaking' God's Word to himself, until it becomes so fixed in his mind that it produces its fruit in his life (Ps 1:2; 19:14; 37:30-31).¹⁵ Once God's word has become embedded in him, it will speak God's wisdom and justice through him to others (Ps 37:10).

Meditation in the psalms is not at all a dispassionate contemplation of heavenly things. It is much more concrete and earthbound than that. It has to do with speaking. When people meditate they speak about their troubles to themselves in the light of God's Word, so that God's Word begins to speak to them in their troubles. Their trouble turns them from themselves to God and his grace. They speak God's Word to themselves, so that it speaks to them and through them to others. They bring God's grace to bear on their trouble so that their whole life with all its joys and sorrows is drawn by God's Word into fellowship with him.

2. *Meditation as Waiting on God*

In the late intertestamental period a form of meditation developed which produced a flood of apocalyptic speculation. Encouraged by the example of people like Daniel, certain groups fostered visionary experiences by meditation coupled with fasting and other ascetic practices. In their visions they claimed to have been taken up into the heavenly realms where they received special insights into cosmic mysteries and future events.¹⁶

But such forms of meditation were never encouraged in orthodox circles, for they fostered spiritual arrogance and transgressed the boundaries set by the Creator for his creatures. Instead they practised a kind of meditation which is most vividly expressed in Psalm 131, a song of ascent sung on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. At the centre of this psalm lies the picture of a baby at her mother's breast.¹⁷ The psalmist finds in this a perfect picture of his attitude to God. His soul rests in God's arms and enjoys his presence. And that gives him peace. In his meditation he doesn't use his mind to plumb divine mysteries too large for him to fathom, nor does he use his imagination to envisage heavenly

¹⁴ According to the LXX, the verb *hāgāh* should be read in Ps 77:7. It also occurs in 77:13. Note the occurrence of its synonyms *sāh* and *zākar* here.

¹⁵ H. J. Kraus, *Psalmen 1* (Neukirchen- Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1978) says that *hagah* here means 'das leise murmelnde sich-selbst-Vorlesen der Heiligen Schrift' (137).

¹⁶ The apocalyptic book of Enoch is the outstanding instance of this.

¹⁷ Most translations do not translate the second part of Ps 131:2 accurately. The Hebrew reads: 'like a baby on its mother, my soul is like the baby on me'.

wonders. No, his meditation involves resting in God's presence and letting himself be carried by God like a baby with its mother.

Such passive meditation is a matter of simply waiting on God, even in adversity. It is compared in Psalm 130:5-7 to the attitude of the watchman on the city walls as he waits for day to dawn. The soul of such a person ceases from all activity and waits patiently for God to act as he has promised (Ps 37:5-7). Experience has taught him that he cannot save himself, nor can he rely on human beings for help. So he waits in silence for God alone (Ps 62:1, 5).

But ultimately, this kind of meditation goes beyond just waiting in the presence of the heavenly King to receive a favour from him. It leads to the simple, unadulterated enjoyment of God's presence. The writer of Psalm 73 discovered that this enjoyment was the greatest possible privilege. He confesses (25-26):

*Whom have I in heaven but thee?
There is nothing upon earth I desire besides thee.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.*

Which leads him to the simple conclusion (73:28): 'But for me it is good to be near God'.

3. *The Liturgical Context of Meditation*

The psalms constantly remind us of the liturgical roots and context of Biblical meditation. The psalmists do not regard it as a private practice in splendid isolation. Just as most of the psalms originated in Israel's worship and were edited for use in worship, so meditation was fostered by corporate worship and led a person to a deeper appreciation of it.

This is shown most strikingly in Psalm 63. According to the title, it is a royal psalm which describes the state of David as an exile in the desert of Judah. He is in a spiritual desert far from God's presence in the temple at Jerusalem. His life is threatened by enemies and a hostile environment. He has exhausted himself spiritually and is at the end of his tether. He is hungry and thirsty for God who seems far away.

In this situation of abandonment by God, the psalmist recalls his past worship at the temple. He remembers the prayers, the singing, and the sacrificial banquets. He also remembers how God revealed himself to him there and helped him. And even though he is not at the temple, he acts as if he were. From that comes his meditation. He seeks God's presence as intently as if he were entering the sanctuary. First, he lifts up his hands and uses the psalms which he has learnt there, to call on God and praise him for his steadfast love. Then he feasts on God's goodness by remembering how God has helped and upheld him whenever he has come to the temple. Lastly, he clings to God, like a suppliant to the feet of a king, and asks for God's help now as he has done so often in the worship at the temple.

So the 'temporal' and 'spatial' gap between God and the psalmist is bridged by meditation. By it the objective experience of worship is internalised and extended into his subjective experience. He claims and receives for himself what God had previously offered him in corporate worship. The benefits of public worship are appropriated by him in meditation. And now his meditation, which arose out of worship, is used in worship to

help others to meditate on the significance of their own experience in the light of worship.

4. *Meditation on God's Torah*

Psalm 1 advocates a deliberate form of meditation on the words of Scripture. It has had by far the greatest influence on the teaching and practice of meditation of any part of the Bible. It urges the people of God to meditate on God's law.

However, the translation of *tōrāh* as law is a little too narrow. This Hebrew word basically means 'teaching' or 'direction', and that is the most likely sense here.¹⁸ It includes both law and gospel as defined by Paul. It is the word of God as taught by God. In a narrower sense it could refer to the book of Deuteronomy¹⁹ or to the whole Pentateuch.²⁰

Behind the practice of meditation on the Torah lie two fundamental convictions. The first is that God has revealed his Word to Israel, so that he could bestow his presence and grace on her as his people. The second is that this is the same word as that which created, ordered and now governs the whole world. This means that through his Word God gives his people the wisdom to discover the mystery of his wisdom in managing the world and in dealing with them as his people. This connection between creation and revelation is expressed most clearly in Psalm 19 where the first six verses associate the inaudible speaking of God in the daily cycle of the sun with the law of the Lord which enlightens those who fear him.²¹ The Lord governs the sun by the same law which he has revealed to Israel.²² Thus, the righteous who are justified by God's word become properly adjusted to the divine order of creation by hearing and keeping that Word.²³

Psalm 1 has four important things to say about meditation on God's Word. First, it maintains that meditation begins with 'delight' in it. It is therefore fundamentally *a matter of the desire*. Unless a person wishes to hear God and desires his Word as something infinitely precious to him, all attempts at meditation on it will ultimately fail. The wicked who are under God's condemnation find no such delight in God's Word. Only those who are righteous before God find delight in it, just as a person who is loved delights in the words of his lover.²⁴ Meditation is therefore not a legalistic business but begins with a right relationship with God and a conviction of his goodness. Secondly, it

¹⁸ See Kraus, *op.cit.*, 135-137.

¹⁹ See Deut 1:5; 4:8, 44, etc.

²⁰ At least from the time of Ezra the Pentateuch was called the Torah by the Jews.

²¹ See O. H. Steck, 'Bermerkungen zum thematischen Einheit von Psalm 19, 2-7,' *Wahrnehmungen Gottes im Alten Testament* (München: Kaiser, 1982), 232-239.

²² The same notion is expressed in Job 28. It provided the theological foundation for the wisdom movement. See also Ps 119:89-96.

²³ The practice of meditating on the divine law is mentioned also in Joshua 1:8 and Psalm 119.

²⁴ The notion of desire eventually linked together the tradition of meditation in Proverbs with the tradition found in the Psalter via the Song of Solomon. The epilogue to the Song of Solomon at 8:13-14 seems to indicate that this book was used by the sages to teach the getting of wisdom by the process of meditation. The beloved woman who dwelt in the gardens was identified with Dame Wisdom in Proverbs. The companions of the speaker in 8:13 who seeks Wisdom are those who have already 'heard' her voice and so enjoy intimacy with her. He pleads with her to let him 'hear' her voice too. The book then ends with Wisdom's call to him in 8:14. The remarks of Childs about the canonical sense of the book are very much to the point (*op. cit.* 573-579). Whatever the historical process, this book eventually became an important textbook for instruction in meditation both in Judaism and in Christianity.

asserts that meditation on God's Word is not an occasional affair but *a constant process*. The whole of a person's life, whether waking or sleeping, is to focus on the absorption and expression of God's Word. Thirdly, it maintains that the person who meditates *does not draw on his own inner resources but on God's grace*. He is like a tree planted in a desert place where there is nothing for him to nourish himself. His nourishment comes from God's Word, just as the nourishment of a tree in the desert depends on its irrigation from elsewhere. Fourthly, this psalm states that meditation on God's Word *transforms the whole existence of a person*. The person who meditates on God's Word bears fruit in the proper seasons of his life and proves to be successful in his work, because God knows him in all spheres of his existence and is at work in Him.

So then, by meditation on God's Word the righteous person has his whole being harmonised with God and conformed to his will. His whole existence becomes a stable expression of God's personal intimacy with him (Ps 1:6). Because his roots are fixed in God and draw nourishment from heaven, he remains evergreen and fruitful on earth.

Meditation on God's Torah in Deuteronomy

Like many modern people, ordinary folk in the ancient world wanted to be lucky; they believed in good luck and feared bad luck. They therefore made amulets and bought lucky charms; they wore these as jewellery on their neck and chest and head to protect these vulnerable parts of the body from evil; they put them as rings on their hands to make sure that they were successful in their work; they fixed them on gates of their towns and the entrances of their houses. These amulets had religious symbols and words inscribed on them and were therefore miniature idols. In fact, they often had the symbol or name of a particular deity engraved on them.

Such amulets were worn for three reasons. First, they indicated that a person was devoted to a particular god or spirit. Secondly, they were meant to ward off bad luck and protect the wearer against black magic which could unleash a curse upon him. Thirdly, they brought good luck and prosperity to him and his family. Amulets therefore were supposed to make their wearers lucky and successful in their daily life.

In Deuteronomy 6:8-9 and 11:18, 20 Moses urges the Israelites to replace these magical and idolatrous symbols with something far better and more powerful, namely *God's words*. By this he refers to the Shema in 6:4: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God; the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might'. This was Israel's basic confession of faith. In it they acknowledged the Lord as their God and accepted his claim for their whole-hearted exclusive devotion to him. God's name and the confession of it was powerful and 'lucky' for those who bore it; it evoked God's presence and secured his blessing; it confirmed faith in him and awakened love of him; it gave people access to God in prayer and empowered them to keep his commandments; it created lasting security and protected against disaster; it alone ensured that a family would continue to remain on God's land and enjoy its benefits. God's name and his Word: these are the source of life, strength and security for the people of God. Only as long as a family continued to adhere to the Lord and his Word would they experience solidarity and continuity from generation to generation in the Promised Land.

The heads of the Israelite families are therefore urged to do three things with the name of their God and the words of their creed. First, they were to use them to make jewellery and to wear them as jewels on their head and their hands, their neck and their throat. They should also set them on their doorways and the entrances to their towns, so that all who came and went would notice them and realize that these places belonged to the Lord (Deut 6:9; 11:20).

Secondly, each adult should memorise these words and meditate on them (Deut 11:18). It would not do just to use God's name and his Word as an amulet and to fix them like a lucky charm on the neck and the chest; they had to be fixed in the heart and spoken with the breath from their throats, for only if they were assimilated into the very core of a person's being and spoken out aloud would they exercise their power on that person and his whole environment.

Thirdly, each parent was told to teach them to their children (Deut 6:7; 11:19). It is interesting to see how this occurs. The parents would, of course, explain who the Lord was and why they served him. But that was not their main way of teaching their children. Rather they were to teach their children by their own daily acts of devotion. When they went to bed in the evening and got up again in the morning, when they ate the meals and set out for work on their farms, they were to invoke the Lord by name, confess their faith in him, remember his Word to them, and pray to him. They were therefore called to teach God's Word to their children by using it to mark the most important points of their daily routine as a family.

Note the sequence of events in these verses. God's Word should first become incarnate in the hearts of his people. They could then teach it powerfully to their children, since what they said was illustrated and explained by their behaviour. Once they had assimilated it for themselves and had taught it to their children, God's Word should be fixed on the doors of their houses and the gates of their villages, since through them it exercised its power on these places. Once God's Word was allowed to shape the life of the family and the whole of its workaday environment, it would create solidarity and ensure the continuity of the family in perpetuity on its ancestral estate. The endurance of the family then depended on its devotion to the Lord and his Word. That Word was a source of blessing; it was powerful and life-giving for those who dwelt on it and allowed it to dwell in them.

Conclusion

A number of points stand out for me. First, Biblical meditation is basically a matter of listening to God's Word as it speaks to us personally in our experience and of seeing our experience in the light of that Word. Secondly, what we do is not the decisive thing in meditation but rather what we receive in faith from God. When we meditate on God's Word and his dealings with us we seek his wisdom and his grace for ourselves. Thirdly, only those who are right with God and thus desire his gracious will for them can meditate properly and receive all that God offers them in his Word. Fourthly, Biblical meditation arises out of involvement in the public worship of God's people and leads back to a more whole-hearted participation in it. Lastly, meditation is both a physical and a mental reception of God's Word. Hence its practice and its effects are both physical and mental. And so the writer of Psalm 119:103 says:

How sweet are your words to my taste,

sweeter than honey to my mouth!