Title: Definition of biblical law: a study of its synonyms in Psalm 119

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Abstract:

The understanding of the meaning of “law” is a problem among Christians. The root cause of this common misunderstanding should be searched for in the attitude of the believers toward the meaning of law in the Bible.

The most frequently used term for law in the Old Testament is the Hebrew tôrā. The meaning of tôrā varies. To the Jews the meaning granges from the whole Hebrew Bible to the Pentateuch, and even to the Decalogue.

The Christian understanding of law differs from that of the Jews. Law is negatively understood by many Christians, and even connotes legalism. In contrast, a positive understanding sees tôrā as a privilege, a promise, a gift from God.

The purpose of this study is to define and identify the positive meaning of “law.” The method of study is a thematic-exegetical approach and contextual word studies of the synonym of tôrā in Psalm 119.

The usage and meaning of tôrā and its synonyms in Psalm 119 is significant in understanding the meaning of law. This study reveals that in Psalm 119, the psalmist paints the meaning of law in vibrant multicolor with enthusiasm and delight. This study supports a
constructive understanding which views law more from its positive virtues than from its negative aspects.

An analysis of the concept of the meaning of tôrā in the OT shows that, basically, it means “instruction” or “teaching.” The etymological findings support the derived meaning of tôrā.

The meaning of the eight synonyms of tôrā use by the psalmist in Psalm 119 defines the positive meaning of tôrā. (1) ‘ēdôt means “reminders”; (2) derek means “way [of living], lifestyle”; (3) piqqûdîm means “orders, directions [for sustentation or provision]”; (4) hōq means “prescription”; (5) miswā means “right, claim”; (7) dāḇār means “word, word of God”; and (8) ‘imrā means “promise.”

With such meanings, tôrā cannot be understood as a legalistic “law,” but “teaching” or “instruction” stipulating both responsibilities and rights. It is a promise prescribed by god for one’s deliverance and happiness, God’s revelation that can be loved by man.