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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

The dead letter?
Psalm 119 and the spirituality of the Bible in the local church

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1. Introduction: situation and analysis

This essay is concerned with the role of the Bible as a written text in local Christian spiritual practice. Sandra Schneiders understands Christian Spirituality to be 'the lived experience of Christian faith'.[1] This definition will be assumed here and 'spiritual practice' will be those activities, both private and corporate, that Christians take part in to enable more authentic Christian living in all aspects of life: thinking, speaking, feeling, acting and praying. In this essay, the 'spirituality of the Bible' will be taken as referring to the place and understanding of the written text of the Bible in Christian Spirituality.

The role of the sacred text of Scripture in the spiritual practice of local churches faces an uncertain future. This is particularly the case in the local small group or home group, as in other informal settings. Whereas, for the Church throughout most of its history, simple interaction with the written or spoken word of Scripture was normative in spiritual practice, today there is generally little confidence in the ability of the text to provide an encounter with God. When the Bible is used, it may be seen to provide such an encounter best when other forms of media are available. For example, Mark Ireland cites a school of prayer run by Exeter Cathedral in which stones, candles, music, ribbons and a fishing net are principal aids to devotion.[2] He suggests that such approaches provide the best means to enable divine encounter for a contemporary seeker, without exploring why this might be the case. Such assumptions are also evident in his positive description of 'Godly Play', a means of encouraging children to engage with a story from the Bible using figures and creative activities such as painting or collage, without reading the written text.[3] The Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Council report 'Mission-Shaped Church' similarly cites the use of secular

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1 Sandra M. Schneiders, 'Spirituality and Scripture', in *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Philip Sheldrake (ed.) (London: SCM Press, 2005), 62.
2 Mark Ireland, 'The Local Church Perspective' in *Evangelism in a Spiritual Age: Communicating Faith in a Changing Culture* (London: Church House, 2005), 76.
3 Ibid., 90.

music, videos and art in religious services in Manchester as a crucial means of engaging those with postmodern worldviews.[4] Indeed, the diminished spiritual status of the written text of Scripture is often linked to cultural change.

Jacques Ellul suggested that a late twentieth century interest in the audio-visual, initially intending to involve '…the equal association of images and words, with precise correlation', has in fact rendered the spoken or written word

> …practically useless, in any case a serf not an equal. At best, the word is used to provide the name of what is seen on the screen but is eliminated for all other purposes. Furthermore, anyone who needs convincing has only to listen to the vain talk and the comments that accompany a series of images: pompous discourse falsely poetic; dead time filled with pseudo-poetry! This is natural – what could you possibly add through words that could compare with images?[5]

Such lamentation is echoed by Peter Adam who attributes the decline of interest in the Bible in spiritual practice to popular beliefs in western societies. He argues that the perceived polarity of mind and heart has distanced the text, engaged intellectually in the mind, from feeling and experience. Because of such distance it is considered inadequate as spiritual nourishment, spirituality being characterised by its reference to the whole experience of human life, including feeling and emotion.[6] Adam also argues that in contemporary society inspiration is characterised by spontaneity. The text that, to some extent, prescribes the discussion of itself, that is composed of rigid words and that limits innovation is not seen as likely to enable an inspired encounter with God.[7] Ironically, Adam also suggests that the decline of the text in spiritual practice may also be due to the perceived subjectivity of the written word, the word which lacks any real meaning.[8]

There may also be theological reasons from Scripture itself which undermine the spiritual value of the text. For example, there is the Jeremianic promise that the law of YHWH will one day be given in the minds of his people and written on their hearts.[9] Likewise, the Pauline treatment of the written law as 'the ministry of death' in contrast with the 'ministry of the Spirit' suggests that the written text is of little importance.[10]

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4   Graham Cray et al., *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House, 2004), 132-133.
5   Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 218.
6   Peter Adam, *Hearing God's Words: Exploring Biblical Spirituality* (Leicester: Apollos, 2004), 162-163.
7   Ibid., 164.
8   Ibid., 139.
9   Jer 31:33 Here *beqirbam* might also mean 'in the midst of them (YHWH's people)'.
10 2 Cor 3:7-8. David G. Firth, *Hear, O Lord: A Spirituality of the Psalms* (Calver: Cliff College Pub., 2005), 17, suggests, because of this, many Christians find 'law' focused spirituality problematic.
11 Sandra M. Schneiders, 'Biblical Spirituality', *Interpretation* 56:2 (2002), 135.

It is most probable that cultural factors have been more significant in undermining the perceived spiritual value of the text, since Christian churches have generally asserted the inspiration, to varying extents, of the Bible, making extensive use of it in most local gatherings. Popular western attitudes towards written texts put the church in danger of limiting the relation of the individual to the text to the cerebral. The Bible is then seen as a 'dead' or passive object to be engaged with intellectually by the individual and which can offer very little stimulation when compared with other media. The relationship is perceived to be very simple, characterised by the individual's intellectual 'fact-finding' from the text.

This essay will investigate the psalmist's understanding of written texts of Scripture in Psalm 119, demonstrating that there is no such simple relation between the individual and the text, nor does it provide limited stimulus, rather it is an object of desire, of fear and an agent of personal change to be endlessly learnt from and reflected upon. This essay will then compare this understanding of the text with Roland Barthes' understanding of the text's 'pleasure' and its 'bliss', suggesting that the text might rather provide for a radically transformative and continuous encounter with God. It will then suggest ways in which spiritual practices might make such an understanding of the text available to participants in the local church.

2. Biblical spirituality

This essay can be seen to relate primarily to the study of 'Biblical spirituality'. Sandra Schneiders has outlined three senses in which 'Biblical spirituality' has been understood. These broadly illustrate the relationships that have existed between the written text of the Bible and Christian Spirituality. Firstly, 'Biblical Spirituality' may be the spirituality of the authors of the scriptural texts, the evidence of which are the texts themselves.[11] Such spiritualities are primarily historical and are often not seen as suitable for contemporary Christians.[12] Secondly, it may refer to those spiritualities that are essentially contemporary, though significantly influenced by a spirituality from the Bible.[13] Carmelite spirituality might be an example of this, making significant use of the Bible's treatment of the prophet Elijah as well as a developed Mariology.[14] Thirdly, it may simply refer to those spiritualities that make use of biblical texts, perhaps with little engage-

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12 Valerie Lesniak, 'Contemporary Spirituality' in *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Philip Sheldrake (ed.) (London: SCM Press, 2005), 16 see John C. Endres, 'Psalms and Spirituality in the 21st Century', *Interpretation* 56:2 (2002), 148, on plural spiritualities. Pieter de Villiers, 'The Psalms and Spirituality', *Old Testament Essays* 12:3 (1999), 431, suggests that 'the discipline of Spirituality sensitises us to the incomplete and even highly problematic spirituality in certain Biblical texts.'

13 Schneiders, 'Biblical Spirituality', 135.

14 Valerie Edden, 'The Mantle of Elijah: Carmelite Spirituality in England in the Fourteenth Century' in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition: Exeter Symposium VI*, Marion Glasscoe (ed.) (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 68.

ment with the historic difference of the spiritualities behind the text.[15] Such an understanding may be seen in the practice of *lectio divina*, which locates the spiritual potential of the text in its continued, rather than primarily historic, inspiration.[16] Schneiders suggests that Biblical Spirituality should attempt to make use of all three approaches.

> The spiritualities that come to expression in the biblical text…are fully encountered and interiorised in a transformative engagement of the text,… giving rise to a pattern of spirituality that is distinctively biblical.[17]

Because of the alleged spiritual deficiency of the written text, and thus, its uncertain place in the spiritual practice of the local church, inspiration will be sought from the historical spirituality of Psalm 119, a spirituality which casts the written text in a radically different light. This spirituality will be discussed in terms of a more recent understanding of the nature of written text, as well as in terms of contemporary spirituality, with a view to enabling it to be 'interiorised' by a pattern of practice in the local church.

3. Psalm 119

There is much to turn the reader away from engaging with Psalm 119, especially when approached in translation. Certain prominent scholars of the Hebrew Bible have been quick to point out its flaws. Artur Weiser complains that it is 'artificial', its legalistic subject matter being suppressed by its rigorous attention to literary form.[18] Likewise R.N. Whybray claims that the psalmist fails to produce connected thought, rather presenting a series of isolated statements. Only the psalm's lack of digression from the themes of 'self' and 'law' give any sense of unity.[19] This view of elevated form over content is developed in R.E.O. White's suggestion that the text was written as a poetic exercise by a young scribe, drawing primarily on vv. 9 and 100, whose theology betrays his theological immaturity.[20] Combined with the psalm's extraordinary length, such accusations of weak theology subdued by obsessive form are enough to deter most readers from exploring its theology, especially as its form cannot be translated into another language. This essay is concerned with exploring the spiritual role and value of the scriptural text. Psalm 119, with its concern for *tôrah* provides an obvious choice for such reflection.

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15 Schneiders, 'Biblical Spirituality', 135, though Schneiders argues against lack of historical interest.

16 David Foster, *Reading with God: Lectio Divina* (London : Continuum, 2005), 8.

17 Schneiders, 'Biblical Spirituality', 141.

18 Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (London: SCM Press, 1969), 739 and 741.

19 R. N. Whybray, 'Psalm 119: Profile of a Psalmist' in *Wisdom, You are my Sister: Studies in Honor of Roland E. Murphy, O Carm., on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*, Michael L. Barré (ed.) (Washington: CBAA, 1997), 32.

20 R. E. O. White, 'The Student's Psalm', *Expository Times* 102:3 (1990),72.

Psalm 119 is an acrostic poem; the initial consonants of each of its 176 bicola correspond, in 22 stanzas, to successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. J.H. Eaton suggests that the alphabet was perceived in the Ancient Near East as an object of wonder and that acrostic structure expresses the totality of all language.[21] This structural technique is not unusual in the Hebrew Bible but can also be seen in Psalms 25, 34, 111 and 112 and most prominently in Lamentations 1 – 4, where a new acrostic begins in each chapter. A more sophisticated understanding of the text's structure is harder to determine. Though it is possible to notice a progression of themes, as argued by Marcus Nodder, as well as a concern with specific themes in individual stanzas, as noted by Erhard Gerstenberger, it is hard to see a clear narrative.[22] Whilst the text has a very distinct *'ašrē* introduction in the third person (reminiscent of Ps 1) there appears to be no similarly clear ending. The Psalm is written as the lament of an individual, employing the standard asymmetrical metre for a lament, 3 + 2, lending each bicolon a mournful sound of incompleteness.[23] The text is conventionally referred to as a Torah Psalm, along with Psalms 1 and 19, being in essence a 'doxology of God's word'.[24] It is the psalmist's treatment of that word that will now be explored.

The text in the Psalm

Psalm 119 uses eight terms to refer to 'God's word'. Out of 176 bicola, four contain no such term and it has been suggested that these verses were added purely to balance the number of bicola in each stanza.[25] Before exploring the relationship between the psalmist and these terms, the issue at the heart of this enquiry, it is necessary to outline the terms themselves and the statements made about them outside any direct relation to the individual. The most thorough analysis of the terms used has been made by Will Soll, whose work will be drawn upon heavily here.[26]

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21 J. H. Eaton, *Psalms of the Way and the Kingdom: A Conference with the Commentators* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 133.

22 Marcus Nodder, 'What is the Relationship Between the Different Stanzas of Psalm 119?', *Churchman* 119:4 (2005), 337-8.

23 Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship: Vol II*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Blackwell: Oxford. 1962), 165 and Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part 1: With an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1988), 312.

24 Westermann, 117.

25 David Noel Freedman, 'The Structure of Psalm 119' in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish and Ancient Near Eastern Ritual, Law and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, David P. Wright et al. (ed.) (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 725-6

26 Will Soll, *Psalm 119: Matrix, Form and Setting*, (Washington: CBAA, 1991), 46 ff.

Term	Frequency in Ps 119	Etymological root	Literary Background	Possible meanings
tôrah	25	uncertain	Deuteronomy and the Dt History are the only texts to use *tôrah* 'comprehensively'. [27]	'law', 'instruction'[28] Understood as a 'summary term' for the people's obligations to YHWH.[29] *Tertius Usus Legis.*[30]
dābār	19	*dbr* ('to speak')	Deuteronomic in singular form as here. [31]	'word' 'promise'
'imrah	20	*'mr* ('to say')	Dt 32:2 and other texts from the psalter.	'promise' 'oracular utterance'[32] May have a legal meaning when used with the verb *šmr* ('to observe')[33]
mišpāṭīm	22[34]	*špt* ('to rule/ judge')	Common throughout the Hebrew Bible.	'rulings' 'judgements' Frequent use with the adjective *ṣedek* ('upright/righteous') in Ps 119 suggests that it possesses a moral quality. [35]
ḥuqqīm	22	*ḥqq* ('to carve/ engrave')	Common throughout the Hebrew Bible.	'statutes' Soll argues that the term lacks 'exploitable associations' and so it is used to form a formulaic refrain in Ps 119. [36]
miṣôth	21	*ṣwh* ('to command')	Deuteronomic	'commandments'
'ēdôth	23	*'wd* ('to bear witness/ testimony')	Deuteronomy and Aram. treaties.[37]	'testimonies'
piqqudīm	20	*pqd* ('to prescribe/ seek out')	Later parts of the Psalter.[38]	'orders' 'precepts'

Each of these eight terms is used roughly once in each stanza. In summary, the psalmist is keen to show that the 'word of God' is understood in various different ways; as instruction, orders, rulings, statutes and promises. Some of these terms (such as *dābār*) stress that the 'word' is straight from the mouth of YHWH. Other terms understand the 'word' as something that YHWH has placed in the public sphere, for learning and meditation, exhibiting orders and rules to the people. In addition to these diverse terms, Psalm 119 also makes various objective claims about the 'word', outside of a specific relation to the individual. YHWH's word is seen as righteous (vv. 7, 62, 75, 123, 144, 160 and 172), eternal (vv. 52, 89, 90, 144 and 152) good (v. 39), wonderful (v. 129) and true (vv. 86, 142, 151 and 160). It condemns (vv. 21, 118 and 126), gives understanding (v. 130) and demands obedience (v. 4). It is also given a cosmic function (v. 91) and is spatially located in the heavens (v. 89). However, before attempting to understand how the thought of Psalm 119 might contribute to the use of the scriptural text in the spiritual practice of the local church, the referent of the 'word' terms used must be shown to be the written text.

This issue of whether the various 'word' terms of Psalm 119 relate to written texts has been subject to a reasonable degree of scholarly discussion. Firstly, it is perhaps important to note that the terms refer in different ways to the same thing. Weiser suggests that all eight terms are intended to refer to a common referent and that their variety is merely to enhance the literary quality of the psalm.[39] What then do they refer to?

Soll argues that the terms refer to 'YHWH's covenant will in all its variety', suggesting that this is to be understood as the legal codes of the Pentateuch.[40] However, Jon Levenson draws attention to the lack of exclusive pentateuchal emphasis in Hebrew literature prior to the Rabbinic period, highlighting the psalm's paraphrases of Jeremiah 36:1-2 in v. 23 and Jeremiah 15:15 in v. 84 as evidence

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27 Ibid.

28 James Limburg, *Psalms* (Louisville, WJK Press, 2000), 414. This translation attempts to address polemical understandings of 'law', though Soll, Matrix, 46, suggests that it merely confirms such understandings.

29 Ibid., 36.

30 Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, trans Keith Crim (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 162.

31 Soll, *Matrix*, 38. see also 1 Kg 14:18.

32 Ibid., 39.

33 Ibid.

34 These numbers reflect the MT. 11QPs^a 119:43 'changes' *mišpātīm* to *dibber*.

35 Soll, *Matrix*, 40.

36 Ibid., 42.

37 Ibid., 43.

38 Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Vol. III*, (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1996), 959.

39 Weiser, *Psalms*, 740.

40 Soll, *Matrix*, 45.

of the psalmist's view of other material as *tôrah*.[41] His argument that the infinitive *lešmor* ('to observe') demonstrates a strong connection to Deuteronomistic literature undermines his ultimate argument that the various 'word' terms refer primarily to oracles revealed directly to the psalmist.[42] Indeed, the evidence of intertextuality within Psalm 119 demonstrates a strong orientation towards written texts, suggesting that the same are the referents of the 'word' terms. Whybray notes that the frequent use of *šīḥ* ('to meditate') with certain 'word' terms is indicative of their nature as written texts.[43] This view is supported by James Mays, who argues that the proverbial style of the psalm, as it employs short, mostly unconnected statements, reflects the style of the book of Proverbs, suggesting that that text was considered authoritative enough to exert influence over the law-obsessed psalmist.[44] He also suggests that the 'torah psalms', of which Psalm 119 is an example, are placed strategically within the psalter to offer commentary on the other psalms, suggesting how they are to be read and understood.[45] This indicates that the written psalms themselves are considered as *tôrah* by the psalmist or, at the very least, the redactor of the Psalter. Whilst the above arguments only go so far as to show the psalmist's consideration of Jeremiah, Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomistic History, Proverbs and Psalms as *tôrah*, this essay will take the liberty of employing Psalm 119 to discuss the spiritual role of biblical texts more generally.

It is clear that the psalmist's understanding of YHWH's 'word' has a breadth to it that exceeds the simplicity of modernity's account of the text as a passive object of intellectual enquiry that is so often assumed in the local church. For the most part, a study of 3rd person statements about the word and the terms themselves may contribute to a theology of scripture, removed from existential reality. However, the psalmist's primary treatment of the sacred text is fundamentally existential, continuously viewed from the perspective of the individual who stands in a dynamic relation to the text.

The text and the individual

In contrast to the alleged spiritual poverty of the text outlined in the introduction (its failure to engage more than the intellect of the individual), the way the text is related to by the individual in Psalm 119 is striking. This relationship involves a variety of responses from the individual which are irreducible to any simple rela-

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41 Jon D. Levenson, 'The Sources of Torah: Psalm 119 and the Modes of Revelation in Second Temple Judaism' in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, Patrick Miller et al. (ed.) (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 559 and 563. Note also the constant reference by Soll to the dependence of Ps 119 upon Deuteronomic literature.

42 Ibid., 565.

43 Whybray, 'Ps 119', 35.

44 James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: WJK Press, 1994), 134.

45 Ibid., 128.

tion of thinking subject and scrutinised object. Central to an understanding of this variety is a principle of indexicality, through which the psalmist, with whom the reader is intended to identify, is placed at the centre of the psalm's reality. This indexical element of the psalm often assumes a spatial character, by which the text of scripture is seen relating in various ways to his physical body.[46] Oliver Davies writes:

> Deixis or indexical language is language which reflects a particular spatio-temporal context and which therefore cannot be understood outside that domain of shared spatio-temporal parameters… Indexicality works by referring reality to the one who speaks, and its meanings cannot therefore be reconstructed outside that context.[47]

Indexicality implies that reality is described in terms of how it relates to the author, with that author at the centre of that reality. In Psalm 119 this can be seen when the psalmist describes the text as before him, under him or above him. The reality of the written text is discussed primarily from the perspective of the psalmist. This essay will offer an examination of the various relations that exist between the individual and the written text of Scripture in Psalm 119.

Firstly, the text of scripture is primarily an object of desire and of love. Of the 128 bicola of the psalm which mention scripture in relation to the individual, 30 express the psalmist's passion and longing for it.[48] Of these, 8 use the verb '*āhab* ('to love') to describe the psalmist response to God's word, such as v. 48: 'I will lift up my palms to your commandments which I love and will meditate on your statutes.' Only two of these verses, vv. 113 and 163, could be said to use '*āhab* in a formulaic manner and this could be a coincidence. In vv. 16, 24, 70, 92, 143 and 174, forms of the root *š"* ('to delight') are employed, though these may be verbs or nouns. The psalmist generally seems keen to express desire for the text in as many ways as possible. The text is described as 'treasure' (v. 11), 'riches' (v. 14), 'great plunder' (v. 162), 'better than gold' (v. 72 and 127), 'better than fine gold' (v. 127) and 'sweeter than honey' (v. 103).[49] The psalmist 'seeks' (vv. 45 and 94), 'desires' (v. 35), 'longs' (vv. 81, 82 and 131) and is 'consumed with longing for' (v. 20) the text. In terms of indexical relations, the language of desire places the text beyond the reach of the individual where it must be sought out and lusted after

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46 Indexicality is a phenomenon especially important within historic Celtic spirituality as well in early Rabbinic material. See Oliver Davies and Fiona Bowie, *Celtic Christian Spirituality: An Anthology of Medieval and Modern Sources* (London: SPCK, 1995), 41, and J. Philip Newell, *Echo of the Soul: The Sacredness of the Human Body* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2000), 131.

47 Oliver Davies, 'Celtic Christianity: Texts and Representations' in *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland*, Mark Atherton (ed.) (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 31.

48 Vv. 11, 14, 16, 20, 24, 31, 35, 40, 45, 48 (twice), 70, 72, 77, 81, 82, 92, 94, 97, 103, 111, 113, 127 (twice), 131, 140, 143, 159, 162, 163, 167 and 174.

49 V. 127 refers to two types of gold, *zāhāb* and *paz*.

as something of immense value. Yet desire does not exist purely because of the text's distance from the individual; it has been 'tasted' and found to be 'sweeter than honey'.

Yet the text is not merely an object of desire. It confronts the individual and demands a response in the individual's actions. The verb *šāmar* ('to observe') is employed in 18 bicola whilst the verb *nāṣar* ('to keep/guard') is used in 7.[50] Both of these terms refer to a legal fulfilment of *tôrah*, an ordering of life in response to its demands. Here the text is seen to stand over and against the individual. Yet obedience to the word of God is not perceived simply as a threatening other; the observed law offers security in the face of God, grounds for requesting aid. V. 22 'take from me scorn and contempt, for your '*ēdôth* have I kept (*nāṣar*)'. In such cases, the text must be seen as standing alongside the individual as a source of appeal to YHWH.

The psalmist also places great emphasis on the individual's desire to be taught (*lāmad*) the word of God and to understand it (*bîn*). These terms of education appear in 25 of the 176 bicola.[51] In the majority of cases, the individual asks for understanding of the text from YHWH, whose texts they are. Yet understanding is not shown to be sought for its own sake. In v. 18, the individual asks for understanding to perceive 'wonderful things' from YHWH's instruction. This might suggest that the search for understanding is an expression of desire for the riches of the text seen above. The psalmist also suggests in v. 144 that understanding of God's testimonies will result in life. Whilst it is not clear what this 'life' refers to, it is certain that the text is seen to hold great promise to the individual. The Psalm also creates a sense of ambiguity as to how much the individual understands the texts of scripture already. In vv. 95 and 171, knowledge is seen to be possessed by the individual, yet in the majority of *lāmad/bîn* type verses it is requested as if not possessed. Whybray regards this tension as paradoxical, suggesting that the desire for further learning reflects a need to understand the full implications of what is known already, though there is little to support such a limited view of such learning.[52] What remains clear, however, is that understanding the text of God's word in Psalm 119 is dependent upon divine aid and is an unending task which promises wonder and life to the reader. It is likely that this task is pursued practically through constant meditation upon the text. The root *šiḥ* ('to meditate/muse/study/consider') is used 8 times in the psalm in conjunction with 'word' terms and is described in vv. 97 and 148 as the nearly constant occupation of the individual. There has been a great deal of discussion of 'meditation' in the 'torah psalms', particularly relating to the kind of activity it relates to, though this

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50 *Šmr*: vv. 4, 8, 9, 17, 22, 55, 57, 60, 67, 88, 101, 106, 119, 134, 136, 146, 167 and 168. *nṣr*: vv. 5, 56, 69, 100, 115, 129, 145. See also *'śh* ('to do') in v. 166.

51 Vv. 12, 18, 26, 29, 31, 33, 34, 64, 66, 68, 73 (twice), 95, 98, 99, 100, 104, 108, 117, 124, 125, 128, 135, 144 and 171.

52 Whybray, 'Ps 119', 36.

has focussed, not on *šiḥ*, but on *hāgah*, the term used in Psalm 1:2.[53] The range of meanings highlighted in these studies is unfortunately unattested with regard to *šiḥ*. Meditation and learning are not the only cognitive acts associated with the text; great emphasis is placed upon the individual's promises to remember and not forget the text.[54] If the relation of desire places the text before the individual at a distance, the relations of learning, meditation and remembrance make the text immanent, before the eyes of the individual, present to the mind, day and night.

Psalm 119 often depicts the individual as a traveller on the way (*derek*).[55] On this journey, the text is seen as either determining or constituting the way beneath the traveller's feet (e.g. v. 32; 'The way of your commandments will I run') as well as providing an aid for the journey (v. 105; 'A lamp for my feet is your word: and a light for my path'). Geza Vermes is keen to show that the imagery of 'light' in v. 105 is not to be understood in an intellectual sense, dependent upon the Greek use of *photizein*, rather that it is derived from a 'midrashic process' of reflection on the similarity of '*ôr* ('light') with *tôrah*.[56] Yet it is not clear how the text functions as such an aid. Soll suggests that the second clause of v. 9, which has been read as urging *tôrah* observance as the means by which a 'young man' might 'purify his way', should be read as an infinitive of purpose, having a pure way so as to observe YHWH's word.[57] It could be that, whilst the text is seen as the road itself, journeying in the way of the text must be done with the aid of the text. If the text demands ethical action, described as language of travel, as is common within the wisdom literature, it will also provide guidance for that action. In terms of indexicality, this language of travel places the text beneath the feet of the individual as determining a course of action whilst being alongside the individual, making that action possible.

The relations between the individual and the text that are characterised by delight, learning and travelling presuppose some degree of the individual's comfort or familiarity with the text. Yet there is much in Psalm 119 which undermines this, allowing the text to retain a sense of strangeness and hostility. In vv. 5-6 the individual prays; 'I wish that my ways were established to keep your statutes, then I will not be ashamed when I look into your commandments.' Shame is also seen to result from blame or guilt in the presence of YHWH's statutes in v. 80. P. J. Botha writes,

> Shame will arise from the feeling that insufficient care has been taken to observe the decrees, statutes and commandments. Shame would result if

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53 See Michael LeFebvre, 'Torah-Meditation and the Psalms: The Invitation of Psalm I', in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, Ed. Philip S. Johnston and David G. Firth (Leicester: Apollos, 2005), 218, and Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 2006), 7.

54 Vv. 16, 52, 61, 83, 92, 109, 141, 153 and 175.

55 Vv. 5, 9, 26, 27, 32, 35, 59, 105 and 133.

56 Geza Vermes, 'The Torah is a Light', *VT* 8:4 (1958), 437.

57 Will Soll, 'The Question of Psalm 119:9', *JBL* 106:4 (1987), 687-88.

the claim that one is wholeheartedly dedicated to the observation of the Torah is publicly denied.[58]

The text is not always seen to have a positive effect upon the individual; rather it may be seen to be the source of condemnation. The psalmist also expresses a sense of fear or agitation towards the text in vv. 120 and 161. Whilst the text's demand for observance places it against the individual, the experience of fear and shame show the text as hostile to the individual. Westermann points out that the text is understood in Psalm 119 as a 'living entity', rather than a passive object.[59] This may contribute to an understanding of how it can have such a variety of effects upon the individual.

The principle of indexicality is clearest in the psalmist's use of parts of the human body to describe how the individual relates to the text of YHWH's word. The text is engaged with the mouth (vv. 43 and 103), tongue (v. 172) lips (v. 13), heart (vv. 11, 36, 69, 111 and 112), eyes (vv. 82 and 123) hands (v. 48), and feet (v. 105). Whybray suggests that the use of these organs is intended to express a sense of the completeness of the individual's response to the text.[60] The mouth tastes the text, the tongue answers the text, the lips proclaim the text, the heart is the place where the text is guarded (v. 69), the eyes look to the text and the feet travel in the way of the text.[61] Any sense that one faculty engages the text in one way alone is unattested in this psalm.

Finally, the text is seen as something of great promise to the individual; a means of salvation, restoration, hope and life. Amidst the individual's dire suffering in v. 28 ('My soul has collapsed[62] from sorrow, establish me according to your word') YHWH's word is either an agent for the restoration of the individual, or else the grounds for making such a request realistic.[63] Yet the agency of the text in giving life (from the root *ḥyh*) is much more explicit. 'This is my comfort in my affliction: that your utterances[64] give me life (v. 50). 'Forever will I not forget your precepts: for by them you have made me live' (v. 93).[65] This was clearly seen as a bold claim to make about the text of YHWH's word. It is notable that 11QPs[a] reads *ḥānan* ('to be gracious/compassionate') where the Massoretic Text uses the verb *ḥāyah*.[66] This 'change' occurs too frequently to be a mere transmis-

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58 P. J. Botha, 'Shame and the social setting of Psalm 119', *Old Testament Essays* 12:3 (1999), 392.

59 Westermann, *The Psalms*, 118.

60 Whybray, 'Ps 119', 38.

61 The verb *spr* ('to tell/proclaim') is employed six times in the psalm and could constitute its own category of relating.

62 See William L. Moran, 'A Note on Ps 119:28', *CBQ* 15:1 (1953),10.

63 It has also been noted that psalmist's enemies receive their negative status through their rejection of God's law. P. J. Botha, 'The Function of the Polarity between the Pious and the Enemies in Psalm 119', *Old Testament Essays* 5:2 (1992), 253.

64 Soll, *Matrix*, 39.

65 See also vv. 37, 107 and 154.

66 For the full text of 11QPsa, see J. A. Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1967).

sion error and seems to reflect a diminishing of what is being claimed about the text, though *ḥānan* is still significant. Whilst it is not clear how the text might be said to give life, it is certain that the psalmist perceived it as vivifying. White notes that

> …the author speaks fourteen times of the 'salvation' to be found in God's word. He means, in part 'deliverance', 'help' in affliction, encouragement and strength imparted when they are needed.[67]

The suggestion that the promise of the text is 'encouragement' is an easy way to understand how the text gives life and salvation, yet the association of the text with the root *yḥl* ('to hope') could express this, as it does 5 times, whilst 'encouragement' lacks the substance of 'to give gife'.

In summary, the text of YHWH's word, spoken of using eight different terms or images, is related indexically to the individual in a complex variety of ways, at times reflecting profound paradox. The text gives life, yet it also shames. The text is an object both of desire and fear. The text demands observance yet it tastes sweet. The text is understood, yet beyond understanding. The text is both road and companion for the journey. The text is engaged with the lips, tongue, mouth, eyes, hands, heart and feet. How might such an understanding of the text contribute to the spiritual practice of the local church in the 21st century?

4. The living text?

It is clear that the understanding of the sacred text in Psalm 119 is far more complex than the contemporary understanding outlined in the introduction. Yet why should it be considered as able to contribute to contemporary practice? Whilst it may be considered authoritative simply by virtue of attestation in the Scripture of the contemporary Church, Lesniak is right to point out that not all historic 'spiritualities' of the Bible are easily applicable to that Church.[68] For example, one might wish to employ christological or eschatological criteria to the application of the spirituality of a text such as Psalm 18:31-42.

Rowan Williams, in *The Wound of Knowledge*, describes Christian Spirituality as the 'ground of belief' which is characterised by 'intractable strangeness' and 'profound contradictoriness' and which, as an active force, scrutinises the believer.[69]

> The greatness of the great Christian saints lies in their readiness to be questioned, judged, stripped naked and left speechless by that which lies at the centre of their faith.[70]

If Christian spirituality is to be understood as a paradoxical experience of be-

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67 White, 'Student's Psalm', 73.
68 Lesniak, 'Spirituality', 16.
69 Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: DLT, 1979), 1.
70 Ibid.

ing searched by God, the understanding of the text in Psalm 119 could be an appropriate aid to use of the Bible in spiritual practice. In Psalm 119, the text is not a dead piece of historic data, to be intellectually scrutinised in relative safety, rather it is a 'living entity' challenging and enticing the reader. Such an understanding of written texts is also seen in the work of Roland Barthes, particularly in his notions of 'pleasure' and 'bliss'.

> Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, it is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading.
>
> Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.[71]

The 'bliss' of the text equates to the fear and shame experienced in encounter with the text in Psalm 119. Barthes suggests that 'bliss' involves an uncomfortable probing of the reader's beliefs and presuppositions as well as a disconcerting reappraisal of how he or she stands in relation to the text. Yet the text also 'grants euphoria' as the text in Psalm 119 is sweet and desirable. Because of 'bliss', the reader cannot neutrally scrutinise the text.

> With the writer of bliss (and his reader) begins the untenable text, the impossible text. This text is outside pleasure, outside criticism, *unless it is reached through another text of bliss*; you cannot speak 'on' such a text, you can only speak 'in' it, in its fashion, enter into a desperate plagiarism, hysterically affirm the void of bliss.[72]

Hans-Georg Gadamer also discusses the entry of the reader into the text which he compares to the ontology of 'play' in aesthetics.

> The player himself [*sic*] knows that play is only play and exists in a world which is determined by the seriousness of purposes. But he does not know this in such a way that, as a player, he actually intends this relation to seriousness. Play fulfils its purpose only if the player loses himself in his play.[73]

In the same way:

> The work of art [the text] is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience changing the person experiencing it.[74]

Here the text seeks to be entered into, to be experienced, not merely observed. If the sacred text is understood this way in spiritual practice, a purely objective

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71 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Noonday Press, 1975), 14.

72 Ibid., 22.

73 Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, trans. William Glen-Doepel (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979), 91-92.

74 Ibid., 72.

and rational approach to the text will have to be discouraged and readers laid bare before the living text. This is not to say that the historical and particular aspect of texts be ignored, indeed the authorial intention behind the text plays a significant part in the action of the text upon the reader in Barthes' 'second meaning' of the text 'which comes to seek me out'.[75] William Barry and William Connolly, writing on the use of the Bible in spiritual direction express this theologically:

> Those who set themselves to hear the word…meet a God who addresses his own attitudes to them directly. More than that, it may not let them rest until they react.[76]

Barthes may also help in understanding how the indexicality of Psalm 119 could benefit the use of the biblical text. He argues that one's varying relations to a given symbol may provide a variety of perspectives on the symbol itself as well as all other things viewed from that symbol.[77] Likewise by entering into the text, by learning and meditation, the psalmist, as well as the contemporary Christian, might find themselves exposed to the negative power of the text or else might relish its sweetness and richness. The text offers a fullness of sensation that has not been appreciated enough in contemporary spiritual practice. How then might the text be approached in the local church in a way that allows its richness to be expected and appreciated?

5. Application in the local church

In many ways the form and *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 119 give some indication of how its understanding of the written text of scripture might be communicated. Throughout this essay, the speaker of the psalm has been referred to as the 'individual' because it is not clear whether this voice is to be identified with the psalmist. There is little agreement as to the identity of the individual, though it is likely that he (or she) stands in an exemplary role, embodying the ideal relation to the text and to YHWH to the community.[78] The first person singular concen-

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75 Roland Barthes, 'The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eistenstein Stills' trans. Stephen Heath, in *A Barthes Reader*, Susan Sontag (ed.) (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), 319.

76 William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1982), 36

77 Roland Barthes, 'The Eiffel Tower' trans. Richard Howard, in *A Barthes Reader*, Susan Sontag (ed.) (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), 236.

78 See Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part 1: With an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 315, arguing for the psalm as a 'portrait of a confessor' and Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms: Part 2 and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 20 for the individual as the corporate voice of Diaspora law focus. Soll, *Matrix*, 126-154 argues that the individual is the exiled king of Judah whilst Leo G. Purdue, *Wisdom and Cult: A Critical Analysis of the Views of Cult in the Wisdom Literatures of Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), 312, suggests that the psalm is the efficacious cultic prayer of an archetypal wise man. Mowinckel, *Psalms*: I, 225, describes the psalm as a communal lament in one mouth.

tration of the psalm is not to be taken as affirming individualism, but rather a concern for community united around a way of relating to God. Perhaps the text could be performed in such a way in the local church as an exemplar of relating to the text. However, whilst the impression of the text to many reading in translation is one of endless repetition, selected verses could be performed which attempt to show the diversity of how a believer might relate to the text of God's word. D.J. Clark tentatively suggests that, since the psalm is poetic, there could be a reasonable degree of flexibility in the translation to overcome any monotony.[79] This may help listeners to engage with the psalm. The translated text could also encourage renewed relations to the Bible as communal liturgy, as has been attempted by Klyne Snodgrass.[80]

Crucial to the encouragement of such relations to the text would be use of the full range of language that the psalm employs; delight, desire, love, observe, fear. Familiarity with the language of desire for the text could create an awareness of the possibility of receiving more from the text. It would also help to make the same requests that the psalm makes for understanding and for life. Perhaps introductory prayers or songs which emphasise the promise of the text could be used before reflection on the text to create a sense of anticipation of strangeness and wonder from the text. It might also be helpful to spend significant time reading and reflecting on the text to allow it to be tasted and enjoyed, to give it time to grasp and challenge the reader or listener.

The clear acrostic structure of the psalm seems designed to aid personal recitation and memorisation, according to Steven Croft.[81] Perhaps such memorisation could be encouraged as a means of internalising the psalm's understanding of the written text.

Indexical relations to the text could be encouraged by exploring how the Bible relates to all aspects of living, that there can be no escape from the text. Indexicality could also be fostered by creating a spatial dimension to the text, perhaps by placing inscriptions from it in many places; on walls, desks, computer screens or personal accessories.

The sacred written text of God's word holds great promise to spiritual practice in the local church; giving life and hope, confronting and shaming, a light for the journey of which it is a part, engaging the body in indexical relations. The local church should strive to realise the potential of the rich treasure it has in the written text that is the Bible.

Abstract

This essay discusses the use of the Bible in contemporary Christian spiritual

79 D. J. Clark, 'Translating Psalm 119: Some Practical Suggestions', *Bible Translator* 58:4 (2007), 186.
80 Klyne Snodgrass, 'Litany on Law and Liberty: A Response to Psalm 119', *Ex Auditu* 11 (1995), 151-152.
81 Steven J. L. Croft, *The Identity of the Individual in the Psalms* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 167.

practice suggesting that its potential to provide an experiential 'encounter with God' is underestimated. This is due to a cultural prejudice against written texts in favour of other media. The essay goes on to study the various ways in which the text in Psalm 119, referred to as 'law', 'statutes' etc., is related to the individual in the psalm. What becomes clear is that there is not a single simple relation between the text and the individual, but rather a range of relations suggesting the individual's sense of 'indexicality'. Moreover, the text is seen to act upon the individual and is not seen merely as a passive object of study. Such an understanding of the written text has much in common with the work of Roland Barthes, in particular his sense of the text of 'bliss', the text that subsumes the reader and confronts him in force. These notions of the written text ought to place the Bible in a more central position in spiritual practice. Finally, some suggestions of how such views of the text might be reflected in practice are offered.

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