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THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE LAW OF YAHWEH

(PSALM XIX)

BY

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The terminology used to describe the law of Yahweh in Ps. xix 8 ff. is reminiscent of the description of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen. ii 9, 17; iii 5 ff.). It is here suggested that the author of Ps. xixB intended by his allusions to Gen. ii-iii to assert the superiority of the law to the tree of knowledge as a means of obtaining wisdom.

The terms of interest are principally the five two-word phrases which form the second halves of the five stichoi vv. 8-10a:

(1) *m^{e}šîbat nepeš* "reviving the life". Both the verb and the noun are capable of a wide range of meanings, so that it is difficult to fix the precise sense; but it is very likely that we have here a metaphor from food, which restores the vitality (*nepeš*) of a man. The phrase is sometimes used specifically of food: Lam. i 11 "They trade their treasures for food to revive their strength" (*l^{e}hāšîb nepeš*); i 19 "my priests and my elders ... sought food to revive their strength" (*w^{e}yāšîbû 'et-napšām*). *Nepeš* is found in a metaphorical sense, though still in the context of food, in the following passages among others: Ps. xxiii 3 "he restores my life" (*napšî y^{e}šôbēb*); Prov. xxiv 14 "Wisdom is like honey to one's *nepeš*"; Isa. lxv 3 "Hear, that your *nepeš* may live" (cf. "come buy, and eat", v. 1). It is therefore probable that the law of Yahweh is being described in Ps. xix 8 as "imparting refreshment to the inner man, his true soul-food" [1]).

Likewise the most obvious fact about the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is that it is food; though it is not "given for food" to man like the other trees of the garden (Gen. ii 16 f.), it shares with them the quality of being "good for food" (*ṭôb l^{e}ma'^{a}kāl*, Gen. iii 6). The eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge did not however

[1]) C. A. and E. G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. I (ICC; Edinburgh 1906), 169.

produce the wisdom hoped for, whereas the restorative food of the law brings true wisdom, as the next phrase makes clear.

(ii) *maḥkîmat petî* "making the simple wise". This is exactly the function of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Regardless of the precise interpretation we put upon "good and evil", it is plain that Eve found the tree to be *neḥmād l^ehaśkîl* (Gen. iii 6) [1]), "to be coveted in order to become wise", "attractive as a means of wisdom" [2]). *Petî* may then be taken as the psalmist's description of Adam and Eve in their state of innocence; it does not necessarily have a bad connotation (cf. Ps. cxvi 6) [3]), and it could well be translated "impressionable" [4]). Many descriptions of the *petî* in the wisdom literature would well suit the case of Adam and Eve: the *petî* believes everything he hears (Prov. xiv 15), he lacks *'ormâ* (Prov. i 4; viii 5; and cf. the description of the snake as *'ārûm*, Gen. iii 1), *bînâ* (Ps. cxix 130), *ḥokmâ* (Prov. xxi 11), and *da'at* (Prov. xiv 18). There is also the implication that the *petî* is young and immature [5]) (for *petî* and *na'ar* in parallelism, cf. Prov. i 4), a view which may underlie the Gen. iii narrative, for the knowledge of good and evil is regarded in some other passages as something not within the capacity of children (Deut. i 39) but acquired by them as they mature (Isa. vii 15 f.). It is clear that the "fall" of Gen. iii is not represented simply as a progression from immaturity to maturity, but it is difficult to eliminate such an idea altogether from the story [6]).

(iii) *m^eśamm^eḥê lēb* "making the heart rejoice". There seems to be no direct verbal parallel between this phrase and the description of the tree of knowledge, but it is not difficult to see a connection of thought.

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[1]) Even if, following LXX (ὡραῖον τοῦ κατανοῆσαι), we translate this phrase "beautiful to look upon" (so H. GUNKEL, *Genesis*[6] [Göttingen 1964], 17), it remains true that as the tree of knowledge of good and evil its fruit was "desirable in order to become wise".

[2]) So E.A. SPEISER, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible; New York 1964), 21, 23.

[3]) Cf. J. DUPONT, "Les « simples » (*petâyim*) dans la Bible et à Qumrân", *Studi sull' Oriente e la Bibbia offerto al P. Giovanni Rinaldi* (Genoa 1967), 329-36, who points to the often sympathetic attitude of the psalmists to the *petî* as distinct from the usually hostile attitude of Proverbs.

[4]) Cf. BDB, 834a: "simple, possibly as open-minded", with reference to the meaning of the root *pth*, "to be open" (cf. Aram. *pt'*, "to be spacious").

[5]) Whether or not Heb. *pth* is to be related to Arab. *fty* "to be youthful". E. ULLENDORFF connects the root in its form *pittâ* "to seduce" with Eth. *fätäwä* to desire, love", and Ug. *pty*, probably "to copulate" (*VT* 6 [1956], 193).

[6]) Cf. G. W. BUCHANAN, "The Old Testament Meaning of the Knowledge of Good and Evil", *JBL* 75 (1956), 114-20, especially 119; S. R. DRIVER, *The Book of Genesis*[12] (Westminster Commentaries; London 1926), 46. Cf. also Heb. v 13 f., where the mature (τέλειοι) are "those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil" (RSV).

What is *neḥmād l^emar'eh* (Gen. ii 9) "desirable to look at" and *ta'^awâ lā'ênayim* "a thing desired by the eyes" will "make the heart rejoice" when it is obtained [1]). Further, since it is a tree of *knowledge*, we may note the frequent connections, especially in Proverbs, between wisdom and joy, e.g. "a wise son makes a glad father" (Prov. x 1; xv 20; cf. xvii 21; xxiii 15, 24, 25; xxix 3); "to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy" (Eccl. ii 26); "I [Wisdom] was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always" (Prov. viii 30 f.).

However, a clue to a closer connection between "rejoicing the heart" and the tree of knowledge lies in the possibility that the psalmist envisaged the tree of knowledge as a vine, a view which is well attested in rabbinic times [2]), and which could easily have been much earlier [3]), especially in the light of the association of drunkenness and sin (cf. Gen. ix 20-27; xix 31-38; Prov. xxxi 4 f.; Hos. iv 18). Wine is often referred to as "gladdening the heart": it is what cheers (*ham^eśammēaḥ*) gods and men (Judg. ix 13), it gladdens (*y^eśammaḥ*) life (Eccl. x 19), it gladdens the heart of man (*y^eśammaḥ l^ebab-'^ĕnôš*, Ps. civ 15; cf. Ecclus. xxi 27). A Qumran text of Ecclus. li (11QPs^aSirach) speaks of "grapes [that] gladden the heart (*'nbym ysmḥw lb*) [4]). The probable meaning of the Semitic root *śmḥ* "to grow, be high" (cf. Akk. *šamāḫu* "to grow high [of a plant]; Arab. *šamaḥa* "to be high"; and perhaps cf. also Heb. *ṣāmaḥ* "to grow") [5]) is very appropriate when applied

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[1]) Cf. Ps. xxi 2 f. "In thy strength the king rejoices . . . thou hast given him the desire (*ta'^awâ*) of his heart".

[2]) Bab. Talmud, *Berakoth* 40a; *Sanhedrin* 70a; *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis XV. 7; XIX. 5.

[3]) Cf. 1 Enoch xxxii 4 where the fruit of the tree of knowledge is "like the clusters of the vine". For evidence of an "original vineyard paradise" and for the idea of the tree of life as a golden vine see further J. Pairman BROWN, "The Mediterranean vocabulary of the vine", *VT* 19 (1969), 146-70, especially 150, 170. For a comparison between Wisdom and a vine, cf. Ecclus. xxiv 17.

[4]) J. A. SANDERS, *The Psalms Scroll of Qumrân Cave* 11 (*DJD* 4; Oxford 1965), 80f. *'nbym* must be the subject of *ysmḥw*, so the above translation is to be preferred to that of the editor: "Even (as) a blossom drops in the ripening of grapes, making glad the heart". Cf. also I. RABINOWITZ, "The Qumran Hebrew Original of Ben Sira's Concluding Acrostic on Wisdom", *HUCA* 42 (1971), 173-84, who also links together the words *'nbym ysmḥw lb* (p. 177).

[5]) Cf. G. R. DRIVER, *Bib.* 32 (1951), 179; L. KOPF, *VT* 9 (1959), 249, 260, 276f.; J. C. GREENFIELD, "Lexicographical Notes II", *HUCA* 30 (1959), 141-51. Professor J. A. EMERTON has kindly informed me that a comparison between Heb. *śāmaḥ* in Prov. xiii 9 and Arab. *šamaḥa* was already drawn by I. EITAN, *A Contribution to Biblical Lexicography* (New York, 1925), 5, and much earlier by J. J. REISKE *Coniecturae in Jobum et Proverbia Salomonis* (Leipzig, 1779), 185.

to wine as that which "makes high", "elevates". The law of Yahweh, according to the psalmist, has the same effect as the fruit of the vine, the tree of knowledge: it "elates" the heart with joy.

(iv) *me'îrat 'ênayim* "enlightening the eyes". The similarity with the fruit of the tree of knowledge is here unmistakable. It is sometimes suggested that the phrase should be understood as "causing the eyes to shine", i.e. giving new vigour [1]), which is undoubtedly the sense in *'ōrû 'ênay* "my eyes have become bright" (1 Sam. xiv 29), i.e. my strength has returned [2]). But such an interpretation here would make *me'îrat 'ênayim* merely equivalent to the first phrase *mešîbat nepeš*, which is unlikely, since the other three phrases refer to different aspects of the tree and one would expect likewise a differentiation between these two phrases. It seems preferable therefore to follow the literal meaning of the words, especially since the law is elsewhere often called a light (e.g. Prov. vi 23 *nēr miṣwâ wetôrâ 'ôr*; Ps. cxix 105 *nēr leraglî debārekā we'ôr linetîbātî*) [3]).

In the Gen. iii narrative we find that after Adam and Eve had eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge "their eyes were opened" (*wattipaqaḥnâ 'ênê šenêhem*, iii 7). *Pāqaḥ 'ênayim* often means "to open the eyes after sleep", but sometimes metaphorically "to cause someone to become aware of something" by means of supernatural insight: e.g. God opened Hagar's eyes, Gen. xxi 19; Elisha prays to God to open the eyes of the young man to see the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire (2 Kings vi 17). In this sense the phrase is exactly equivalent to *gillâ 'ênayim* as in Num. xxii 31: Yahweh opened (*wayegal*) the eyes of Balaam and he saw the angel of Yahweh on the path [4]). With this we may compare "Open thou my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law" (Ps. cxix 18). The law of Yahweh as a light to the eyes is thus compared to the fruit of the tree which brought knowledge (*wayyēde'û*, Gen. iii 7) through the opening of the eyes [5]).

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[1]) So H.-J. KRAUS, *Psalmen*, vol. I (Biblischer Kommentar 15; Neukirchen 1962), 159: "sie schenkt neue Lebenskraft"; G. PIDOUX, *ZAW* 66 (1954), 43: "Dire que les yeux de l'homme et de la femme s'ouvrirent, c'est dire qu'ils sont devenus forts".

[2]) The Qere has a form from the same root in v. 27 also. Cf. also Ps. xiii 3; xxxviii 10; Prov. xxix 13; Ezr. ix 8.

[3]) Cf. also Ps. xliii 3; cxix 130; Isa. li 4; Hos. vi 5. For some post-Biblical uses of this symbolism, see G. VERMES, "The Torah is a Light", *VT* 8 (1958), 436-8.

[4]) Balaam is also *gelûy 'ênayim* "open of eyes" (Num. xxiv 4, 16).

[5]) There may be here some connection with the fact that sun-imagery is used in the adjectival terms in the first half of each stichos in vv. 8-10a; cf. M. DAHOOD,

(v) *ʿômedet lāʿad* "enduring forever". A contrast with the fruit of the tree of knowledge may be here discerned, in that the result of the acquisition of that knowledge was the deprivation of access to the tree of life (Gen. iii 22 ff.) and the sentence of *môt tāmût* (ii 17; cf. iii 19). The fear of Yahweh (*yirʾat yhwh*), on the other hand, which involves departing from evil (Prov. xvi 6) and hating it (Prov. viii 13), is a bringer of life (Ps. xxxiv 12 f. "I will teach you the fear of Yahweh. What man is there who desires life and covets many days?"; cf. Prov. x 27 "The fear of Yahweh prolongs life"; xix 23 "The fear of Yahweh leads to life"; and cf. also xxii 4; xxiii 17 f.).

The suggestion has often been made to emend *yirʾat* (v. 10), which seems out of place among the terms *tôrâ*, *ʿēdût*, *piqqûdîm*, *miṣwâ* and *mišpātîm*, to *ʾimrat* "word of" Yahweh [1]). Yet if the frequent connection between "the fear of Yahweh" and wisdom or knowledge is recalled (cf. Prov. ii 5; ix 10; xi 7,29; xv 33; Ps. cxi 10; Isa. xi 2), and if the suggestion is correct that the law is here contrasted with the tree of knowledge as a means to the acquiring of knowledge, the parallel betwwen *yirʾat yhwh* and the various terms for the law becomes closer, so that the MT may be allowed to stand [2]).

Ps. xix 8-10a may thus be seen as a meditation upon the law of Yahweh as the source of wisdom, in the light of the Gen. iii narrative concerning the tree of knowledge [3]). If so, a point of contact between the two halves of the psalm, additional to those already pointed out by others [4]), becomes apparent: the background of Ps. xixA is the crea-

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Psalms I: 1-50 (Anchor Bible; New York 1966), 123; J. H. Eaton, *JTS*, NS 19 (1968), 604 f.

[1]) So e.g. Briggs, *Psalms*, vol. I, 168, 173; Kraus, *Psalmen*, vol. I, 153. M. Dahood's suggestion (*Psalms I*, 123 f.) that the *m* of *ʿênayim* (v. 9) should be transferred to the first word in v. 10, thus reading *mirʾat yhwh*, is open to two objections: (i) *pty* (v. 8) has to be analysed as *pt* "head" + suffix (a word poorly attested, if at all, in Heb.), in order to provide a "double-duty suffix" parallel to the *ʿênay* resulting from the transposition; (ii) the root *mrʾ* "to command", from which *mirʾat* must be derived, is not found elsewhere in Heb., either as noun or verb.

[2]) Among more recent publications, "fear of Yahweh" is retained by S. Holm-Nielsen, *ST* 14 (1960), 32 n. 76; J. van der Ploeg, *Jaarbericht Ex Oriente Lux* 17 (1963), 200; J. Becker, *Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament* (Rome 1965), 268; A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, vol. I (New Century Bible; London 1972), 171 f.

[3]) For the law as synonymous with wisdom, cf. Ps. xxxvii 30 f.; Ezr. vii 25. See also G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era, the Age of the Tannaim*, vol. I (Cambridge, Mass. 1927), 263 ff. For the idea of the Torah as the remedy of the Fall, see A. Altmann, "*Homo Imago Dei* in Jewish and Christian Theology", *JR* 48 (1968), 235-59, especially 249.

[4]) Most commonly the view of L. Dürr is followed, that the well-known Near Eastern analogy between the sun and justice is here reflected ("Zur Frage nach

tion narrative of Gen. i, that of xixB the fall narrative of Gen. ii-iii.

A question may finally be raised whether the fall narrative may not underlie the language of the petition of vv. 12-15, especially v. 14, where *peša' rab*, *'al-yimšelû-bî* and *zēdîm* may be reminiscent of Gen. iiff. "The great transgression", which has proved problematic to exegetes [1]), is provided with a concrete reference if the psalmist is thinking of Gen. iii, no matter whether he regarded Adam's sin as disobedience, hybris, or sexual misbehavior [2]). "Let them [presumptuous sins, or men [3])] not reign over me" recalls the divine address to Cain *we'attâ timšôl-bô* (Gen. iv 7) [4]), where sin is represented as a

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der Einheit von Ps. 19", *Sellin-Festschrift. Beiträge zur Religionsgeschichte und Archäologie Palästinas* [Leipzig 1927], 37-48; cf. also J. H. EATON, *JTS*, NS 19 (1968), 604 f.). A similar theme in Ps. cxxxix, the idea of Yahweh as the sun of justice, has been proposed by J. HOLMAN, "The Structure of Psalm CXXXIX", *VT* 21 (1971), 298-310. S. MOWINCKEL made several different connections between the two parts of Ps. xix: "In the same way as the sun is the most glorious gift of the Creator to his creatures . . . thus is the law. As the sun illuminates the world . . . so the law illuminates man both religiously and morally. As nothing is 'hidden' from the rays of the sun, so the law is 'a light to the mind'" (*The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, vol. I [Oxford 1962], 90 f.). S. AALEN saw the link between the two halves of the psalm in the idea of the *ḥuqqîm* of God, which are to be found both in nature and in the law (*Die Begriffe 'Licht' und 'Finsternis' im Alten Testament, im Spätjudentum und in Rabbinismus* [Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo. II. Hist.-Filos. Klasse. 1951; Oslo 1951], 28); similarly A. H. VAN ZYL, *Biblical Essays. Proceedings of the Ninth Meeting of "Die Ou-Testamentiese Werkgemeenskap in Suid-Afrika"* (Stellenbosch 1966), 150; ANDERSON, *Psalms*, vol. I, 167 f. P. A. H. DE BOER refers to the connection between *qaw*, Ps xix 5, and *tôrâh*, "Étude sur le sens de la racine QWH", *O.T.S.* X (1954), 225-246, especially 245f.

[1]) It may be: the great variety of sins a man may commit (BRIGGS, PSALMS, vol. I, 171; VAN DER PLOEG, *JEOL* 17 [1963], 200); any grave sin (so, apparently, RSV); the great sin of presumption (so *La Sainte Bible . . . École Biblique de Jérusalem* [Paris 1956], 669); or some particular great sin (e.g. idolatry, cf. DAHOOD, *Psalms I*, 125; or rebellion, cf. A. F. KIRKPATRICK, *The Book of Psalms* [Cambridge Bible; Cambridge 1891], 106).

[2]) If the latter, the common ancient Near Eastern use of "the great sin" for adultery (or, in the Old Testament, for "religious adultery") is striking. For the Egyptian use, cf. J. J. RABINOWITZ, "The 'Great Sin' in Ancient Egyptian Marriage Contracts", *JNES* 28 (1959), 73; and for the term at Ugarit, see W. L. MORAN, "The Scandal of the 'Great Sin' at Ugarit", *ibid.*, 280 f.

[3]) *zēdîm* probably refers to presumptuous sins, a third category of sins beside *śegî'ôt* and *ništārôt* (cf. J. MILGROM, "The Cultic שגגה and its Influence in Psalms and Job", *JQR* 58 (1967), 115-25, especially 120 f.; similarly BRIGGS, *Psalms*, vol. I, 170; RSV). Alternative suggestions are: presumptuous men (KRAUS, *Psalmen*, vol. I, 152 f.), demons (MOWINCKEL, *Psalms in Israel's Worship*, vol. I, 114), "proud ones", i.e. idols, false gods (DAHOOD, *Psalms I*, 124), or it may be an abstract plural, meaning "pride" (E. J. KISSANE, *The Book of Psalms*, vol. I [Dublin 1953], 86 f.; VAN DER PLOEG, *JEOL* 17 [1963], 194).

[4]) BRIGGS already noted the resemblance to Gen. iv 7 and thought it "probable that the author had in mind the story of Cain" (*Psalms*, vol. I, 170).

crouching animal (*rōbēṣ*) attempting to gain the mastery over man. It is possible also that the psalmist is thinking of the snake of Gen. iii when he speaks of the *ẓēdîm* [1]); for its questioning of God's commandment (Gen. iii 1) and imputation of envy to God (iii 5) may fairly be termed presumption, and the curse upon it to go on its belly and eat dust (iii 14) is likewise a fitting punishment for the sin of presumption [2]).

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[1]) Some support for the association of presumption or pride with the serpent may be found in Job xxviii 8, where "proud beasts" (*bᵉnê šaḥaṣ*) is paralleled with *šaḥal* "serpent" (following S. MOWINCKEL, "שחל", *Hebrew and Semitic Studies presented to Godfrey Rolles Driver*, ed. D. Winton THOMAS and W. D. MCHARDY [Oxford 1963], 95-103, who translates *šaḥal* as "lizard, worm-dragon, wyvern"; so also M. H. POPE, *Job* [Anchor Bible; New York 1965], 175 f.).

[2]) Dependence on the early chapters of Gen. similar to that suggested here is claimed also for Ecclesiastes by C. C. FORMAN, "Koheleth's Use of Genesis", *JSS* 5 (1960), 256-63, and for Job by N. M. GLATZER, " ' Knowest Thou . . .?' Notes on the Book of *Job*", *Studies in Rationalism, Judaism and Universalism in memory of Leon Roth*, ed. R. Loewe (London 1966), 73-86.