

## **Meditation in the Psalms**

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### **Abstract**

*Meditation, even in evangelical circles, is often thought of in a manner not too far removed from what is practiced in Eastern religions, whereby the practitioner empties his or her mind and enters a subjective realm of waiting on insight from the Spirit or spiritual world. This article, through a study of the Hebrew words most often translated as “meditation” or “meditate,” demonstrates that biblical meditation is nothing of the sort, especially as contextually considered in the book of Psalms. Meditation in the Psalms is objectively based on written, divine revelation; and, therefore, comes closer to what we would call Bible study and reflection. In short, “meditate” is a misleading translation in light of its current, English usage. Helpful appendices comparing four major English versions are included.*

### **Introduction**

The English word “meditate” is thought to derive from the Latin *meditari*—a stem of *meditari*, from the root *med-* which is the basis for a number of words having to do with thought or care: e.g., Greek μεδεσθαι (“to think about” or “to care for”) and Latin *mederi* (“to cure”). The Latin uses are thought to have associations with ancient Greek μέλειται (< μελετή; “care, study, exercise”) from which the Latin term was supposedly derived.<sup>1</sup>

The way in which we use the word “meditation” today may or may not have any similarity with the meaning of Hebrew and Greek words in the Bible, which we sometimes translate “meditate.” Note that if you compare English versions they will not all use “meditate” to render the same verses or terms. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter *OED*) the history of the usage of “meditate” in English involves four meanings, the first two of which are rare today: (1) to consider, study, ponder, reflect upon; (2) to plan, conceive, or design mentally; (3) to entertain as an opinion, or think; and (4) to exercise the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. various standard and collegiate English dictionaries.

mental faculties in thought or contemplation, especially religious.<sup>2</sup> This latter is what people today first think of and usually signify when the term “meditate” is employed. “Meditation” is defined in the *OED* as “serious and sustained reflection or mental contemplation on a subject or series of subjects.”<sup>3</sup> The *Webster’s Ninth Collegiate Dictionary* explains “meditation” as “a discourse intended to express the author’s reflections or to guide others in contemplation.”<sup>4</sup> But is that what the biblical writers meant when they used the terms we translate as “meditate” (if indeed that is an appropriate translation)?

The concept of biblical meditation is mostly an Old Testament idea and seems to be more a Jewish than Christian practice. Only two New Testament passages include terminology that may be rendered “meditate.” In the RSV all but four occurrences of words for “meditate” or “meditation” are in the Psalms, as might be expected. As proper exegesis demands we must look at these various contexts to determine what kind of activity is suggested by the words we translate as “meditation” or “meditate.” It may be that different kinds of meditation are described. Or it may be that “meditate” is an inadequate substitute for these Greek and Hebrew words, used only because we have no better match in current English. The OT and NT contexts, not contemporary usage, are the clue to what these words indicate. One of the great dangers of Bible study in a translation rather than the original languages is that the student is tempted to infuse the ancient vocabulary of the source language with modern meanings of the receptor language, which may have nothing to do with the intended meaning of the biblical authors and the Spirit who guided them in using their own language as it was understood when they wrote to their contemporaries.

### **Investigation of Meditation in the Psalms**

In the OT five Hebrew words are sometimes translated “meditate” or “meditation”: (1) שׁוּׁב, 15x; (2) הִתְהַלֵּךְ, 10x; and three other terms, but only one time each; (3) אָמַר; (4) בִּקֵּר; and (5) דָּמָה.<sup>5</sup> For these latter three few versions use “meditate,” so these need not be considered for the purposes of this essay.

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<sup>2</sup> *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, The*. Vol. I: A-O (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1759.

<sup>3</sup> *OED*, 1759.

<sup>4</sup> *Webster’s Ninth Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1983), 738.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the various standard, academic Hebrew lexica and concordances.

### *The Use of הָגָה for Meditation*

Hebrew הָגָה is used of human or animal speech sounds or sounds in nature, as well as for ideas like plot, imagine, or make music. This has led some commentators to make the silly assumption that biblical meditation, therefore, involves private reading with a murmur or undertone. As will be seen, however, it does involve reading and reciting.<sup>6</sup> There are only three passages in the OT where this verb is translated “meditate” or “meditates” by all four of the major English versions consulted for this study: the KJV, NRSV, NASB, and NIV; and only one passage where the rendering “meditation” is agreed upon for the nominal counterpart.

NIV has “meditate(s)” for הָגָה four times in the OT: Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2; 77:12; and 143:5. NRSV has it five times: Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2; 38:12; 63:6; and 77:12. KJV has it six times but not the same six: Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2; 63:6; 77:12; 143:5; and Isa. 33:18. NASB has it for the same six as the KJV. NIV has “meditation” for הָגָה one time in the OT: Psalm 19:14. NRSV has it two times: Psalm 19:14 and 49:3. KJV has it three times: Psalm 5:1; 19:14; and 49:3. NASB has it the same two as NRSV. So the four verses shared by all of these are: Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2; 19:14; and 77:12. These are the most important, then, for our immediate attention.

*Psalm 1:2.* In Psalm 1:2 the action “meditate on the law of the LORD” is synthetically or synonymously paired poetically with “delight in the law of the LORD.” This meditation is further described as taking place “day and night” or continually—not non-stop but daily and regularly and habitually. Its character is also seen as similar to or growing out of an attitude of “delight”; which is the rendering given to this attitude by all four of the versions consulted. Notice again that this practice is focused on the spoken word of God. Instead of following the unfortunate and wicked advice of pagan religion (vv. 1, 4-6), the righteous (vv. 1, 5-6) are fortunate (v. 1, “happy” is a poor translation) and find correct counsel in the law of Yahweh (v. 2). This guidance does not float into the righteous people’s minds while they “wait on the Lord” so to speak but while they are diligently and delightfully engaged in prolonged and purposeful investigation of verbal revelation.

*Psalm 19:14.* In Psalm 19:14 the noun form of הָגָה “meditation” is coupled with “words.” “Words of my mouth” is repeated or amplified by “meditation of my heart.” This seems to be typical Semitic restatement

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<sup>6</sup> For what it’s worth, the ancient Semitic cognate term in Ugaritic means “to count” or “reckon.”

and, therefore, should be treated as synonymous. In Hebrew thought the “heart” is not the seat of emotions or feelings as in our Western culture. The heart could be connected to the thought process. So to “meditate in the heart” should not be seen as something very different than thinking or reflecting on an issue. And here as often this is related to “words of the mouth,” which is the verbalization of cognition. These are two sides of the same coin. Thoughts are silent words. Words are written or spoken thoughts. And these thoughts are based on words revealed by God (vv. 7-13). Again this  $\text{הָגִיד}$  is grounded in the “law of the LORD” (v. 7). God’s servant is warned or advised or counseled regarding error by them (vv. 11-12). Apart from God’s word less noble advisors will influence God’s servants and they will not know how to live blamelessly or acceptably (v. 13). So in v. 14 this “meditation” or the servant’s thoughts (silent or spoken) cannot be truthful or acceptable to God, the Rock and Redeemer, unless controlled and conditioned by the objective and authoritative verbal record of Scripture. True “meditation” or  $\text{הָגִיד}$  (ever how you translate it) is not a matter of receiving thoughts or ideas or developing opinions which are inspired by exposure to the Bible but a matter of reviewing and repeating the truths clearly and directly taught by the Bible. New ideas are not the goal; just obedience to the old ideas.

*Psalm 77.* Three verses in Psalm 77 have words that various versions render as “meditate” in one or more of the instances. However, only v. 12 has the Hebrew verb  $\text{הָגִיד}$ . In the other verses there is more disagreement among the translations, where other than “meditate” concepts like “complain” [KJV], “commune” [KJV], “sigh” [NASB], and “think” or “muse” [NIV] appear. Of the four versions consulted only the NRSV uses “meditate” in both vv. 3 and 6. The KJV and NIV use it in neither and NASB uses it only in v. 6. All of these as noted use it in v. 12. This verse is an obvious example of synonymous parallelism. The verb  $\text{הָגִיד}$  “meditate” is paired with the other principal Hebrew word rendered “meditate,” which is the same one used in vv. 3 and 6:  $\text{דַּבַּר}$ . The KJV renders this parallel term as “talk”; NRSV and NASB as “muse”; and NIV as “consider.” Since it also can be translated “meditate” (and is in the OT more times than  $\text{הָגִיד}$ ), the translators could have used “meditate” for it in the second line and paired it with other similar concepts in the first line; consequently rendering  $\text{הָגִיד}$  as  $\text{דַּבַּר}$  has been rendered. Here these terms are meant as synonyms, and an astute Bible teacher will not make the mistake of thinking that the use of different parallel terms by the Hebrew poet signifies he means something different by “meditating on works” than “musing on deeds.” Many probably chose “muse” here because it alliterates with “meditate.”

“Works” parallels and thus is synonymous with “deeds”—two ways of saying the same thing. And what is this “one thing” the poet intends to communicate? He pledges to give thought to matters which are past events, acts which are objective realities. He will not wait for a subjective insight; he will recall and recite what God has done. This is predicated in v. 11: “I will call to mind the deeds of Yahweh // I will remember his past wonders.” The current usage and connotations of “meditation” or “meditate” make them inappropriate substitutes for Hebrew  $\text{הִגַּד}$ . The verses leading up to vv. 11 and 12 in this psalm also indicate the writer’s sense when he uses  $\text{הִגַּד}$  and  $\text{בָּשַׂח}$ : “I cry aloud” (v. 1); “I seek” (v. 2); “I think” (v. 3); “I consider” (v. 5); “I remember” (v. 5); “I search” (v. 6); and “I say” (v. 10). You will notice that most of these concepts are ones used to translate  $\text{הִגַּד}$  and  $\text{בָּשַׂח}$  when they are not rendered as “meditate.” In Psalm 4:4 the usual Hebrew word for “say” ( $\text{אָמַר}$ ) is translated as “meditate” by NASB. In Psalm 27:4 a Hebrew word for “seek” or “inquire” ( $\text{בִּקַּח}$ ) is translated “meditate” by the NASB. Again the notions of thinking and speaking about God’s revelation are what color  $\text{הִגַּד}$ .

In a few cases three of these four major versions consulted render  $\text{הִגַּד}$  as “meditate” or “meditation”: Psalm 63:6; 143:5; and 49:3. In two of these three instances the NIV is the “rebel” rendition, using “think” or “utterance.” In the third case the NRSV uses “think.” These passages are also worth consideration (or should I say “meditation”?).

*Psalm 63:6.* Here the NIV has “think” rather than the “meditate” employed by KJV, NASB, and NRSV. Compare this with the NRSV, where the parallel term to  $\text{הִגַּד}$  (“meditate”),  $\text{זָכַר}$ , is translated “think.” The NIV keeps the usual “remember” for this twin term in the synonymous parallelism of this verse. The NASB and KJV are the same: “remember // meditate.” So translators are comfortable with “think” for either of the parallel terms here:  $\text{זָכַר} // \text{הִגַּד}$ . And again thinking and speaking are interrelated in connection with  $\text{הִגַּד}$  or “meditation” in the OT. In the bookend verses to v. 6 (vv. 5 and 7) the psalmist sings God’s praise.

*Psalm 143:5.* In this verse  $\text{הִגַּד}$  has a similar context as Psalm 77. In a time of trouble the psalmist finds refuge and comfort in reflecting on God’s past activities; i.e., how he revealed himself in history. Verse 5 is a rare OT poetic line composed of three, rather than the normal two, parallel members. Since it is synonymous parallelism, we have three words used as synonyms; two words are paired with  $\text{הִגַּד}$ : one is the

same as in Psalm 77, פִּשׁ, and the other is זָכַר, the usual word for “remember.” In this context הִגִּד has to do with remembering and whatever פִּשׁ means. Since it is often rendered “meditate” we have to figure out what other meanings it conveys to understand biblical “meditation” (if we are going to use that term). When פִּשׁ is not rendered “meditate” in passages where some other versions do so, it is given notions like “sigh, talk, or speak.” The NRSV renders הִגִּד “think” and פִּשׁ “meditate” in Psalm 143:5. For the latter the NIV has “consider” and both the KJV and NASB have “muse.” The fact that in v. 7 the psalmist cries out to God “answer me quickly!” and begins in v. 1 with “hear my prayer” indicates that the verbs of verse 5 suggest verbalizations of prayer. “I stretch out my hands” in v. 6 pictures the posture for prayer in the OT and the ancient Near East cultures. The KJV even renders פִּשׁ as “prayer” in Job 15:4. It cannot be escaped that הִגִּד or “meditation” in this context, as in others, is clearly characterized by the silent or audible reciting of God’s attributes as revealed in his word or his world.

*Psalm 49:3.* This verse has the noun “meditation” for הִגִּד rather than the verbal form. Instead of “meditation” the NIV goes with “utterance.” This is significant since the parallel lines here are similar to the coupled phrases of Psalm 19:14, where “meditation of the heart” (which means the mind) is tied to verbal expression, which in turn extends from God’s revelation in the world (19:1-6) and through his word (19:7-11). Likewise in Psalm 49 the “meditation of the heart” which leads to understanding is parallel and synonymous with the psalmist’s mouth speaking wisdom. This verse (49:3) is pivotal to vv. 1-2, where the psalmist makes proclamation to the nations, and v. 4, in which the psalmist grounds his utterance of wisdom on the objectivity of a sapient saying or proverb.

### *The Use of פִּשׁ for Meditation*

The other main Hebrew word translated “meditate” or “meditation” is פִּשׁ. This is a difficult term for translation for there are two Hebrew roots with similar spellings;<sup>7</sup> and which is intended in each context is hard to determine absolutely: פִּשׁ (to converse; speak; lament; meditate

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Koehler, L. and W. Baumgartner, eds., *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. English translation in 5 vols., vol. 3: פִּשׁ (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996); s.v. פִּשׁ.

with thanks or praise; taunt) or פִּי'שׁ (praise; lament; worry; talk). The noun based on this latter term is sometimes translated (correctly?) “thoughtful contemplation” or “meditation.” According to A. R. P. Diamond:

Fluctuating between the act of speaking and thinking, [פִּי'שׁ] takes on more specific connotations in contextual usage. . . . In the Psalms, the vb. is used by the psalmist primarily in a transitive sense (11x), for reflection on the saving deeds of Yahweh on behalf of Israel, and secondarily in an intransitive sense (2x), to speak of the psalmist’s act of complaint or lamentation (55:17 [18]; 77:3 [4]; cf. Job 7:11; see below on the nom.). Specific context determines whether the focus is on thought (77:6 [7]) or speech (105:2). In either case, the action in view ranges from dramatic action depicted within the psalm to the psalm itself and its recitation in cultic worship. This mental/verbal reflection on Yahweh’s saving deeds identifies the psalmist as a deserving suppliant for divine aid (143:5), provides the basis for comfort and encouragement in context of suffering (77:12 [13]), and gives the motive for and substance of communal praise of Israel’s God (105:2; 145:5). Within the context of Israel’s ritual psalmody, [פִּי'שׁ] constitutes one of the vbs. of worship.<sup>8</sup>

There are (besides Gen. 24:63, which is highly questionable) fifteen passages where פִּי'שׁ is translated “meditate” or “meditation” by at least one of the four major English versions consulted for this investigation. In eight of these all four versions render this Hebrew root as “meditate” or “meditation.” In two other cases only the KJV has something else. In two cases the verb is rendered as a noun and vice versa by one or more of these versions. In two other instances this root is parallel to הִגִּד, which is translated “meditate” or “meditation,” except in one passage where NRSV gives “meditate” for פִּי'שׁ and “think” for הִגִּד. All this means that twelve different passages are important for understanding פִּי'שׁ as “meditation” and what that implies if that English term is to be retained in modern versions.

The KJV has “meditate” or “meditation” for פִּי'שׁ eight times in the OT: Psalm 104:34; and 119:15, 23, 48, 78, 97, 99, 148. The NRSV has these ideas in fourteen verses: Job 15:4; Psalm 77:3, 6; 104:34; 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 97, 99, 148; 143:5; and 145:5. The NASB has these in twelve verses: Job 15:4; Psalm 77:6; 104:34; 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 97, 99, 148; and 145:5. The NIV has these in ten verses: Psalm 104:34;

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<sup>8</sup> פִּי'שׁ by A. R. Pete Diamond in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Willem A. VanGemeren, gen. ed., vol. 3 (United Kingdom: Paternoster Press, 1996), 1234. Hereafter cited as *NIDOTTE*.

119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 97, 99, 148; and 145:5. The eight verses shared by all are: Psalm 104:34; and 119:15, 23, 48, 78, 97, 99, 148. To these four should be added for reasons stated above: Psalm 77:12; 119:27; 143:5; and 145:5.

*Psalm 77:12.* All four versions render  $\text{הָגִיד}$  as “meditate” but  $\text{פָּשַׁע}$  is its semantic and synonymous parallel term. What was said above in regard to the meaning of “meditation” for  $\text{הָגִיד}$  in this verse is applicable here as well for  $\text{פָּשַׁע}$ .

*Psalm 104:34.* “Meditation” is used in this verse by all four of the versions consulted. It is coupled with the activity of rejoicing. The immediately previous verse (33) speaks of the psalmist singing praise. Much of the psalm deals with God’s revelation of himself in the world through his mighty works. Here “meditation” ( $\text{פָּשַׁע}$ ) is like  $\text{הָגִיד}$  in being connected with notions of the verbal and public proclamation of known truth about God’s ways and wisdom.

*Psalm 119.* This psalm contains the most references to “meditation” in any one place in Scripture. All the versions consulted agree on “meditation” or “meditate” for 7 verses in this psalm, and three agree on an additional verse (27). So, eight verses may be examined: 15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 97, 99, and 148.

**119:15.** This verse is a synonymous parallelism which pairs  $\text{פָּשַׁע}$  and  $\text{מִבְּרָא}$ . The KJV reads “meditate // have respect”; the NRSV reads “meditate // fix my eyes”; the NASB reads “meditate // regard”; and the NIV reads “meditate // consider.” The object of this activity is God’s “precepts // ways.” It is interesting that God’s spoken revelation is made parallel with his revelatory acts in history. The line between words and deeds, or character and conduct, is blurred. What God decrees he must act in accordance with. Belief and behavior are always inseparable in the Bible. This is why James said, “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith” (2:18; NRSV).<sup>9</sup> Not that works earn God’s favor but that true internal faith is always discernable in external ways. Jesus said by their influence on others you determine which people are not genuinely rooted in Christ (cf. Matt 7:15-16). Jesus also said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn 14:15). We say “actions speak louder than words.” If words and deeds do not match, we call people hypocrites (as Jesus did; cf. Matt 7:5). The NIV renders  $\text{פָּשַׁע}$  as “devotion” in Job 15:4. One OT psalmist

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise indicated all Bible verses quoted are from the NRSV.

said “I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you” (Ps 119:11). Deeds are the proof of words. The two are the opposite sides of the same coin. Jesus is the “Word of God made flesh.” No stronger illustration or example could be devised of the mutual relationship between our Lord’s law and life. In older times verbal contracts were binding and accepted. Today we have drifted so far away from an expectation that people will do what they say that such contracts are unthinkable, even among Christians. I once heard the chairman of an elder board say to the congregation, “my problem is that I am very suspicious of you.” At any rate in this passage the concept of concentrated consideration is synonymous with “meditation.” The context is about God’s written revelation. Surrounding verses speak of delighting in, rejoicing in, and not neglecting God’s objective decrees, statutes, ordinances, and laws. Whatever “meditation” is it involves an intense focus on what has been said and recorded as Scripture, not on what might be imagined as possibly in line with what is being read. The Christian meditates on what the Bible says. Meditation is not just whatever drifts into the mind as one reflects after one reads a Bible verse or passage. Biblical meditation seems to be the actual rehearsal of, not reflection on, Scripture. In this way  $\text{נָּוֶן}$  and  $\text{נָּוֶן}$  are similar to worship or praise. As the *NIDOTTE* was cited earlier: “Within the context of Israel’s ritual psalmody,  $\text{נָּוֶן}$  constitutes one of the vbs. of worship.”<sup>10</sup> In the OT, worship or praise is the verbal and public *proclamation* of God’s conduct and character. What is proclaimed is what has been revealed; not personal opinion based on imagination.

**119:23.** This bicolon parallels “meditate” and “plot.” But these are not synonymous. The psalmist’s enemies plot against him so he responds by “meditating” on God’s statutes. He does not focus on any more or less than what God has already said and has been recorded as Scripture.

**119:27.** Here the psalmist parallels “understand” as synonymous with “meditate.” The NRSV, NASB, and NIV have “meditate” for  $\text{נָּוֶן}$  but KJV has “talk.” The object of the understanding is God’s precepts while the synonymous object of meditation is God’s works. The word of God is one of his wondrous works. We do not need more revelation. We have all we need and more than we can handle as it is. Biblical meditation has to do with understanding what we already have as Scripture. This involves exegesis. Whatever is not of faith is sin; and whatever is not of exegesis is eisegesis, mere human opinion that may put words in God’s mouth he never intended to say or imply. This is why James warns against many being teachers (Jas 3:1). One of the great problems in the

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<sup>10</sup> Diamond, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 1234. Cf. n. 6 above.

church today is the surplus of those who try to speak determinatively and decisively about God's word and will. It is a serious challenge to get to the point where we say no more and no less than the Bible clearly says. Even a "master of theology" degree is no guarantee that you have mastered Scripture. At best the most educated of us all still has a lot about the Bible to learn. Many verses are still mysteries. Remember we will give an account for every idle word. We might even say that a misinterpretation is not just idle but idolatry. The KJV here may have hit it on the head with "talk" rather than "meditate." Teachers must speak what they understand in order to be teachers. What you do is what you are. Doctors heal or they are not doctors. Evangelists lead people to Christ or they are not evangelists. And teachers must teach. One of the purposes of understanding God's word is to then communicate it effectively. Preparation must precede presentation. This first and indispensable step is "meditation" or "study." Afterwards one is ready to talk about what has been learned. Yet what is learned is better understanding of God's revelation; so such "meditation" is not about getting new thoughts but a better grasp on existing thoughts, given by God in Scripture.

**119:48.** Verse 48 likewise parallels as synonymous actions "meditate" and "revere." The object of these verbs is "commandments" (v. 48a) or "statutes" (v. 48b). Reverence for God's commandments means obeying them and knowing or understanding them, not necessarily some other believer's advice based on them, simply because that person is a good speaker or writer. Do you spend more time in books about that Bible than the Bible itself? If you learn how to "divide the word of truth" adequately then you need little more than the Bible and those tools that aid exegesis. The purpose of the rigors of seminary study involving the original languages is so you are no longer overly dependent on secondary sources but the primary source of the ancient text itself. Your theology then becomes not what someone tells you it should be based on their thoughts, but what you actually understand the text to say. Of course you need the input of the community of faith; but only when you master the primary text can you effectively evaluate what others are saying about the Bible. This is when Eccl. 1:18 becomes a painful reality.<sup>11</sup> You begin to be aware of so many errors in popular Bible teaching that you would rather be blissfully ignorant.

**119:78.** Verse 78 has no term parallel with "meditate." But again the objective object of this enterprise is God's "precepts." Read them; understand them; live them. Meditation in this regard is the equivalent of

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<sup>11</sup> "For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow."

Bible study, the process of gaining understanding of the text, not mentally and imaginatively elaborating on the text.

**119:97-99.** In 119:97 and 99 some versions have “meditate” and others “meditation.” 119:97 speaks of meditation on God’s law as an outflow of love for his word. Law and grace are not opposites in the OT. The Israelites had God’s law because of his love and gracious decision to reveal his will to them in spoken and written form. Their love for God was expressed through thankfulness for and obedience to this deposit of inspired information. The Hebrews did not earn salvation through keeping the law any more than we do. Abraham “trusted in God and he was reckoned as righteous.” Keeping the law was how righteousness was demonstrated rather than deserved. It sounds strange to us who talk so much of how we love God’s grace and how we have moved from law to grace, to hear the psalmist exclaim “Oh, how I love your law!” Doesn’t the letter of the Law kill and the Spirit give life? Yes, but that is not the same as saying the law is essentially negative and needs to be abandoned. While the NT believer is not called to serve the legal system that God gave to the Hebrew nation for their unique historical calling, the Christian is expected to live according to a code of conduct that reflects the life and teachings of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. We too should love to live in the manner for which we were created and called, because it pleases the one who saved us and sanctifies us and graced us with an objective record of holy thoughts and themes. This “law” of v. 97 is called “commandment” in vv. 96 and 98 and decrees in v. 95 and 99. As a result of having this gracious gift from God, the psalmist experiences a number of practical outcomes: he is (1) given life (v. 93), (2) rescued from a life apart from law, (v. 94), (3) comforted in the midst of persecution (v. 95), (4) placed in a broad place yet one that has boundaries (v. 96), (5) wiser than his enemies, his teachers, and people older than he (vv. 98-100), and (6) kept from evil (v. 101). By God’s grace we have a clear set of guidelines, which are good and true, to help us explain and experience godliness. The psalmist says he “meditates” on God’s word all day long. He was not unemployed or a monk, so what he means is not that he hypothesizes about it endlessly but that he thinks about the content of the law continually. It informs everything he says and does.

**119:148.** Verse 148 also has no parallel term for “meditate.” However v. 147 is a parallel verse, where “put my hope in” is a substitute. The object of these verbs is “promise” and “words,” respectively. The psalmist says he rises early and in the night for the purpose of being reminded of what God’s word promises him because he is in trouble (v. 149). So once again “meditation” is not a mental exercise of clearing the mind so a spiritual thought can be heard from the distance

of inner space; but a purposeful procedure of reviewing the Scripture in order to recall its truths as they apply to an immediate problem. The psalmist is not looking for “something new” but only for “something old,” the unchanging word of God giving certainty in the midst of chaos. If the meaning of a passage could change with circumstances related to the reader’s response, then there would be no permanent promise to give hope. Consequently the psalmist says in v. 147: “I put my hope in your words.” Biblical meditation is reading and believing the old words of the Bible and the old Bible that is the word of God, not silently hearing new spiritual thoughts that come from some inner place or peace.

*Psalm 143:5.* פִּשׁ here is parallel with חָגַח, which is translated “meditate” by the KJV, NASB, and NIV but “think” by the NRSV, which is the only one to give “meditate” for פִּשׁ. The others give “muse” or “consider.” What has been said regarding חָגַח in this verse earlier is still appropriate as regards the presence of פִּשׁ.

*Psalm 145:5.* Finally in Psalm 145:5 פִּשׁ for the second time is rendered “meditate” by all of the versions consulted but KJV, which uses “speak.” Here what is “meditated” is God’s majestic works. That this is about the verbal and audible and public proclamation of his character and conduct is seen in the surrounding verses. Note the entire immediate context (Psalm 145:3-7, emphasis added):

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be *praised*;  
his greatness is unsearchable.  
One generation shall *laud* your works to another,  
and shall *declare* your mighty acts.  
On the glorious splendor of your majesty,  
and on your wondrous works, I will *meditate*.  
The might of your awesome deeds shall be *proclaimed*,  
and I will *declare* your greatness.  
They shall *celebrate* the fame of your abundant goodness,  
and shall *sing aloud* of your righteousness.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, what is biblical meditation? It is anything but silent and subjective. It is the understanding and utterance of what a passage of Scripture teaches. It is the recital, rehearsal, or repetition of what is recorded as God’s written and revealed word. It is the studied reading of a text of the Bible. It is concentration on what the Bible says in the context of communication. It is exegetical preparation and truthful

presentation. In short, it is Bible study, which demands dedicated and daily, informed and inspired, interpretive thinking and re-thinking about Scripture. The current use of “meditate” or “meditation” in English makes it an inappropriate or incorrect translation of הַגָּה or שׁיחַ in the Hebrew Psalms.

## APPENDIX I

### “Meditate(s)” in Four English Versions (X = “MEDITATE/S”)

TEXT	KJV	NRSV	NASB	NIV
Gen. 24:63 שׁוּחַ	X	“walk”	X	X
Josh. 1:8 הַגָּה	X	X	X	X
Psa. 1:2 הַגָּה	X	X	X	X
Psa. 4:4 אָמַר	“commune”	“ponder”	X	“search”
Psa. 27:4 בִּקֵּר	“inquire”	“inquire”	X	“seek”
Psa. 38:12 הַגָּה	“imagine”	X	“devise”	“plot”
Psa. 48:9 דַּמָּה	“thought”	“ponder”	“thought”	X
Psa. 63:6 הַגָּה	X	X	X	“think”
Psa. 77:3 שׁיחַ	“complained”	X	“sigh”	“mused”
Psa. 77:6 שׁיחַ	“commune”	X	X	“mused”
Psa. 77:12 הַגָּה	X	X	X	X
// שׁיחַ	“talk”	“muse”	“muse”	“consider”
Psa. 119:15 שׁיחַ	X	X	X	X
Psa. 119:23 שׁיחַ	X	X	X	X
Psa. 119:27 שׁיחַ	“talk”	X	X	X
Psa. 119:48 שׁיחַ	X	X	X	X
Psa. 119:78 שׁיחַ	X	X	X	X
Psa. 119:97 שׁיחַ	“meditation”	“meditation”	“meditation”	X

Psa. 119:99 שׁיח	“meditation”	“meditation”	“meditation”	X
Psa. 119:148 שׁיח	X	X	X	X
Psa. 143:5 הגה	X	“think”	X	X
// שׁיח	“muse”	“meditate”	“muse”	“consider”
Psa. 145:5 שׁיח	“speak”	X	X	X
Isa. 33:18 הגה	X	“muse”	X	“ponder”
Mark 13:11*	“premeditate”	“worry”	“be anxious”	“worry”
Luke 21:14	X	“prepare”	“prepare”	“worry”
1 Tim. 4:15	X	“practice”	“take pains”	“be diligent”

\*KJV adds extra line not in others (“take no thought . . . neither premeditate”)

## APPENDIX II

### “Meditation” in Four English Versions (X = “MEDITATION”)

TEXT	KJV	NRSV	NASB	NIV
Job 15:4 שׁיח	“prayer”	X	X	“devotion”
Psa. 5:1 הגה	X	“sighing”	“groaning”	“sighing”
Psa. 19:14 הגה	X	X	X	X
Psa. 49:3 הגה	X	X	X	“utterance”
Psa. 104:34 שׁיח	X	X	X	X
Psa. 119:97 שׁיח	X	X	X	“meditate”
Psa. 119:99 שׁיח	X	X	X	“meditate”

## APPENDIX III

**The Earliest and Current Meanings  
of Selected English Words Compared**

<b>ENGLISH WORD</b>	<b>EARLIEST USAGE (root or old English)</b>	<b>TRANSITION-AL USAGE (early or middle English)</b>	<b>CURRENT USAGE (modern English)</b>
bless	to cause blood to flow	invoke divine favor through sacrifice	consecrate; sanctify
bread	piece; fragment	piece of baked food	food; baked flour or meal
cannibal	native of Canibe	Carribeans (believed to eat people)	eater of human flesh
chapel	cloak	building housing relic of a cloak	worship building or room
fornication	furnace (heating)	arching (architecture); prostitution	immoral sexual behavior
glamour	writing; literature	grammar (called "glomery")	enchantment; wonder
God	Deity who enjoys blood sacrifice	that which is poured forth; the sacrifice itself	the Deity (himself)
goodbye	"God be wi' you"	"God buy, my lord!"	so-long; farewell
gossip	sponsor at a baptism	friend; idle talk	rumor-mongering
man	one [or, mind]	human being; person	male person; human being
martyr	witness; testimony	false witness who is punished	one who suffers for a cause
meat	measure	portion of something to eat; food	food; edible flesh
person	through sound; mask	one wearing a mask	individual
Sabbath	rest; seven; lunar taboo	seventh day or day of rest	weekly day of worship

sad	satisfied; filled up	solid (full); or weary (from too much)	serious; unhappy
salary	salt money	wages for white-collar worker	wages for anyone
sandwich	Earl of Sandwich	food of noblemen between bread	in-between; food on bread
serpent	creep or crawl	creeping thing; reptile	snake
silly	happy; prosperous	good; innocent; simple	lacking judgment; foolish
sinister	on the left side	ominous; auspicious	evil
street	something spread out	bed; mattress; framework; road	road in a city
test	pot	pot used to test content of coins	measure of achievement
tithe	a 10th part	a 10th of produce donated to church	10th of income to church
worship	value (monetary)	importance; worthiness; reputation	veneration of the sacred