

On Meditating

“Adjusted Living in a Maladjusted World.”

This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success. The Lord to Joshua, Joshua 1:8, KJV

In his book *Life with God*, Richard Foster describes Spiritual Disciplines as activities Christians engage in so that they might become the *athletae dei*, the athletes of God. Foster pairs some of the disciplines to be, “fasting and prayers, study and service, submission and solitude, confession and worship, meditation and silence . . .” [1] Note the author’s association of “meditation” with “silence”—it’s as if the one equates to the other—and superficially, at least, the pair do seem to be associated. But biblically, are they?

To answer to the question, we must go to the Old Testament where, especially in the book of Psalms, meditation is portrayed as a path to quality living, both spiritual and material. For example, the first Psalm exclaims, “**How blessed is the man who . . . [delights] in the law of the Lord, And in His law he meditates day and night . . . And . . . whatever he does . . . prospers**” (Psalm 1:1-3; See 119:15, 23, etc.). In that meditation appears to be such an important avenue to *divine blessing*, it would be well to understand from a biblical perspective what the activity is, and its relation, if any, to silence.

The word “**meditate**” (Hebrew, *haga*) occurs approximately twenty-five times in the Old Testament. Though the activity of meditation is not encouraged in the New Testament as it is in the Old, Paul does encourage believers to “**think upon**” **the positive values of life, things which are “honorable . . . right . . . pure . . . lovely . . . [and] of good repute**” (Philippians 4:8). But integral to meditation under the Old Covenant dispensation, was the law of God, for it defined the conditions of God’s relationship to and presence with His people. For example, after having broken the divine law, David plead with God, “**Do not cast me away from Thy presence, And do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me**” (Psalm 51:11). Thus, the ancient nation of Israel found spiritual communion with God through a meditation which centered upon His law, which focus then gave rise to obedience to the law and divine blessing in the believer’s life.

Therefore, the Psalmists encouraged meditation upon the “**law, precepts, statutes, word, and commandments**” of God (Psalm 1:2; 119:15, 23, 48, 78, 148). Indicating the role that mediation played in Hebrew spirituality, one inter-testamental apocryphal book advises: “Let thy mind be upon the ordinances of the Lord, and meditate continually in his commandments” (*Sirach* 6:37). But how are we to understand meditation (*haga*)? Did Hebrew meditation involve cultivating silence? On this point, the Old Testament meaning of meditation becomes instructive. Several lines of evidence argue that Old Testament mediation did not involve seeking to enter a state of subjective silence.

First, that mediation was to center upon the law indicates that biblical meditation did not involve cultivating a wordless void. Words comprised the law (See preceding paragraph.). For a moment, let's assume that meditation involves cultivating silence in which state one's mind is emptied and a *tabula rasa* (i.e., a hypothetical blank state of mind) is created in which state the mind becomes prepared to receive divine "impressions." If contemplators were to succeed in creating such "silence," then the Psalmist would have had no need to pray, "**Let . . . the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer**" (Psalm 19:14), for there would have been nothing there for God to be either pleased or displeased with!

Second, the word "**mediation**" (Hebrew, *haga*) does not connote silence. [2] As the word's usage in the Old Testament indicates, "**mediation**" can refer to the growling of a lion (Isaiah 31:4). Such meditation hardly qualifies as silence.

Third, some scriptures indicate that "**mediation**" involved the "mouth." For example, in one classic passage on meditation, the Lord told Joshua, "**This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success**" (Emphasis mine, Joshua 1:8, KJV). In this verse, note the association of the "mouth" with "meditate." In the 19th Psalm the Psalmist prays, "**Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart / Be acceptable in Thy sight, / O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer**" (Emphasis mine, Psalm 19:14, NASB). Again, the Psalmist juxtaposes "**the words of my mouth**" with "**meditation.**" Noting that "the meditation of my heart" parallels "words of my mouth," Wolf comments that "the psalmist compares his own speech with what God communicates in nature and in Scripture." [3] The Old Testament portrays meditation to be a world apart from the spirituality of silence. Of the process, Wolf concludes, "Perhaps the Scripture was read half out loud in the process of meditation." [4]

Fourth, according to the Old Testament, meditating involves thinking or devising. The 2nd Psalm begins with a question: "**Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?**" (Psalm 2:1, KJV). Interestingly, the word "imagine" means *meditate*. Thus, one version translates the verse, "**Why do the nations rage, And the peoples meditate a vain thing?**" (Psalm 2:1, ASV 1901). In other words, unrestrained by God's Word, the heathen were meditating (i.e., devising, plotting, conspiring) a vain thing; namely, that they could build a messianic kingdom without the Messiah. Thus, meditating can create a fertile state of mind in which rebellion against God is hatched. Such meditation hardly qualifies as godly. In this regard, Calvin's warns: "If Scripture does not direct us in our inquiries after God, we immediately turn vain in our imaginations." [5] *Meditation can promote imagination*, and God has not called us to cultivate a silence in which a spiritual Disneyworld enters our consciousness, or worse, a raging against God (See Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:17.).

More ominously, when not centered upon the Word, meditating can facilitate spiritualism. Regarding the meditations and mutterings of mediums, Isaiah the prophet warned the Israel, "**When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter (i.e., *haga*, or "meditate"), should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf**

of the living? (Isaiah 8:19, NIV). If devoid of God's Word, meditation can describe an activity by which people enter into the forbidden zone of the occult (See Deuteronomy 18:9-14.). Seemingly, even Richard Foster was aware of this danger, for he warned regarding the practice of silent contemplation:

I also want to give a word of precaution. In the silent contemplation of God we are entering deeply into the spiritual realm, and there is such a thing as supernatural guidance that is not divine guidance . . . there are various orders of spiritual beings, and some of them are definitely not in cooperation with God and his way! [6]

Foster's warning highlights exactly why biblical meditation demands *the sight of reading and the sound of reciting Scripture*. As when the devil tested Jesus—when in His humanity, Jesus experienced solitude and starvation in the wilderness—He fought-off the silence by audibly quoting the Deuteronomy code (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10), what stood "**written.**" Of Jesus' response, thrice Matthew records that Jesus, "**answered and said . . . Jesus said . . . [and] Jesus said . . .**" Though Jesus often practiced solitude, there is no evidence from the Gospel record that in His life and ministry, He practiced a spiritual discipline of silence.

As one authority characterized the activity:

[M]editation means active contemplation, not wandering reverie [i.e., a state of dreamy or fanciful musing). It depends on purposeful concentration of the mind on the subject of meditation and deliberate expulsion of discordant thoughts and images. Later mysticism describes a further stage of meditation in which personal activity is inhibited, rational thought transcended, and the individual is carried on a current of contemplative feeling into a state of ecstasy which marks the summit of religious experience. Of this there is no trace in the Psalter . . . [7]

Neither is there, it can be added, any hint of it in the rest of Holy Scripture.

In summary then, biblical meditation is not cultivating silence. [8] The Hebrew words for "**meditation**" (*haga* and *siyach*) do not suggest it. As we have seen, meditation in the Old Testament is a conscious activity whereby devout souls think and speak the "law, precepts, statutes, word, and commandments" of God. Thus, any meditation is objective, not subjective; is active, not passive; and is conscious, not unconsciousness. Biblical meditation is neither silent nor empty-headed. As believers focus their minds upon the words of Scripture, meditation involves the participation and response of the whole person, body (speaking and hearing) and soul (cognition, feeling, and obedience), to God's communication, a communication that comes through the words, works, wonders, ways, and wisdom of the most holy and beautiful God (See Psalms 1:2; 63:6; 77:11-14; 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 148; 143:5; 145:5).

Silent contemplation, as least as defined by contemporary spiritualists, does not qualify as biblical meditation. Human silence does not invoke the Divine Presence. But according to the Old Testament paradigm of spirituality, thinking upon and reciting of God's Word does. As the

scriptures are intellectually engaged and willfully obeyed, they are meditated. Always, the Word must mediate meditation.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Richard J. Foster, *Life with God, Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008) 14.

[2] Herbert Wolf, "haga 467," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Volume 1, R. Laird Harris, Editor (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980) 205. The Old Testament also uses another word for "meditate" (Hebrew, *siyach*). As with *haga*, *siyach*'s range of meaning is broad. Gary Cohen notes: "The basic meaning of this verb seems to be 'rehearse,' 'repent,' or 'go over a matter in one's mind.' This meditation or contemplation may be done either inwardly or outwardly. Since English differentiates these two notions, the word is usually rendered 'meditate,' or 'talk.' . . . In the first instance it is used of silent reflection on God's works . . . and God's word . . . In the second instance it is used of rehearsing aloud God's works . . . If the subject, however, is painful, it is translated 'to complain'." Ibid., Volume 2 (Gary G. Cohen, "siah 2255," 875-876. Thus, however else meditation may be described, it does not qualify to be a void of silence.

[3] Wolf, "haga," *Theological Wordbook*.

[4] Ibid. In January of 1984, I was privileged to tour Israel by bicycle. Yes, I pedaled from Dan to Beersheba. But before departure from New York, via El Al Airlines for Tel Aviv, I noticed several Hassidic Jews standing before an airport wall. Holding a book in their hands, they alternately moved their upper torso forward to and then backward from the wall as they read the *Torah* aloud. What were they doing? Seemingly, and according to an Old Testament understanding of *haga*, they were meditating!

[5] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Volume I, Henry Beveridge, Translator (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972 Reprint) I.14.1, 141-142. Calvin concludes: "Therefore, let us willingly remain hedged in by those boundaries within which God has been pleased to confine our persons, and, as it were, enclose our minds, so as to prevent them from losing themselves by wandering unrestrained."

[6] Richard Foster, *Prayer, Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992) 157.

[7] James S. McEwen, "Meditate," *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, Alan Richardson, Editor (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950) 142.

[8] Trappist monks of the Cistercian order practice silence. Thomas Merton (1915-1968), well known author and contemplative spiritualist who in his later life converted to Buddhism, was a Trappist monk from the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky. See "Trappists," Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trappist>).