

The Joy of Lex and the Language of Glory in Psalm 19

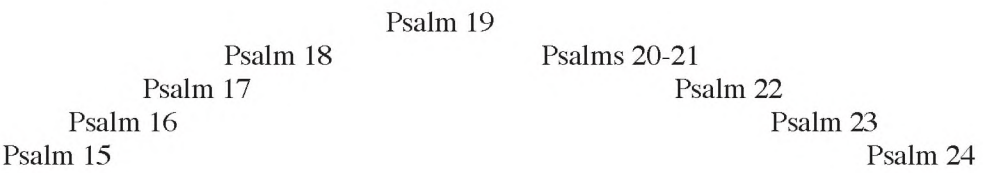
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Think of the “Psalms” and what likely comes to mind is either the anguish of lament or the ecstasy of praise. But what about the love of law? Such love marks the beginning of the Psalter: “Their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night” (NRSV Ps 1:2). Moreover, the longest psalm in the Psalter (Psalm 119) reflects just how “love sick” the psalmist is with God’s “law” or *tôrâ*. Though few in number yet strategically placed throughout the Psalter, the so-called “Torah Psalms” (Psalms 1, 19, 119), exhibit their own share of heightened pathos, directed, however, not to God but toward God’s *tôrâ*. I admit I never appreciated these psalms until I climbed to the top of Mt. Sinai some years ago—not the biblical Sinai where Moses was said to receive the tablets of the Decalogue, whose location remains forever uncertain,¹ but the traditional site of Mt. Sinai near St. Catherine’s Monastery in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula, a destination for pilgrims for at least two thousand years. Yes, it’s the rugged mountain featured in Cecil B. DeMille’s most famous movie *The Ten Commandments* (1956) with Charlton Heston. *Jebel Musa* is ascended by foot and/or by camel early in the morning in order to reach the summit before sunrise.

Why so early? I was about to find out. On an early August morning, our group reached the top, panting hard, in the pre-dawn dusk only to discover at least a hundred other Sinai enthusiasts waiting for the first rays of the sun, many having camped overnight. As the sun burst upon the horizon, most of us took out our cameras to capture the moment. But amid all the clicking (this was before iPhones), I could distinctly hear words recited in English and other languages: “The heavens are declaring the glory of God...” As the sun slowly rose above the distant mountains, we heard, “In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy” (NRSV), and two verses later: “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.” It dawned on me how fitting that Psalm 19 was recited to greet the sun on top of the “Mountain of Moses,” as if it were written for just such an occasion! On that morning and on that summit, Psalm 19 came to life visually as well as verbally, a sound and light show. And so it happens on every clear morning.

Psalm on the Summit

It is no coincidence that the editors of the Psalter positioned Psalm 19 on top of a literary mountain, or vertical chiasm, beginning with Psalm 15 and concluding with Psalm 24.



The chiasm becomes obvious in view of the kinds of psalms that surround Psalm 19. Psalms 15 and 24 are corresponding entrance liturgies, Psalms 16 and 23 are songs of trust, Psalms 17 and 22 are lament psalms, and Psalms 18, 20, and 21 are royal psalms. In any chiastic arrangement, the reader's attention is directed to what is outermost and innermost. In this case, the entrance liturgies (Psalms 15 and 24) suggest that the arrangement is more than just concentric. Because both psalms make reference to God's "holy mountain" or "hill" (15:1; 24:3), the overall arrangement of this cluster takes on a distinctly topographical shape, with Psalm 19 assuming the "summit" of the arrangement. Psalm 19, in other words, is the "king of the hill" of psalms!

So what is it about Psalm 19 that is deemed worthy of such literary elevation? C. S. Lewis considered Psalm 19 to be "the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world,"² and for good reason. Bursting with hymnic power, the psalm conjures a world replete with arresting metaphors and surprising connections. It's what a good poem does. But there is much more going on in this psalm than poetic flair. I invite you to read through this translation (NBV)³ to see if you would agree.

1. The heavens are declaring the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
2. Day to day spews forth speech;
and night to night dispenses knowledge.
3. There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice cannot be heard.
4. Yet their voice"⁴ goes forth throughout all the earth,
their words to the end of the world.
For the sun, [God] has set a tent in the heavens,
5. which goes forth like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
rejoicing like a warrior running the path.
6. From one end of the heavens is its rising,
and its completed circuit is at the other end.
Nothing is hidden from its heat.
7. YHWH's law is impeccable,
restoring the self.
YHWH's decrees are sure,
imparting wisdom to the simple.
8. YHWH's precepts are straight,
gladdening the heart.
YHWH's commandment is clear,
giving light to the eyes.
9. Reverence⁵ of YHWH is pure,
enduring forever.
YHWH's rulings are true,
altogether righteous.
10. They are more desirable than gold,
more than abundant fine gold,
sweeter than honey, even honey flowing from the honeycomb.

11. To be sure, your servant is enlightened⁶ by them;
 in observing them there is great reward.
 12. Who can discern (my) errors?
 Clear me of hidden sins!
 13. Even from willful sins⁷ deliver your servant!
 Let them not gain mastery over me!
 Then I will attain complete integrity,
 and be innocent of great iniquity.
 14. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
 be acceptable to you,
 YHWH, my rock and my redeemer.

A lot goes on in Psalm 19 as it moves from the celestial to the political and the personal, three interrelated domains matched by three different forms of discourse: testimonial hymn, instruction, and prayer. The connecting thread in all three sections is the power of divine discourse as attested visually in God's creation, verbally in God's *tôrâ*, and existentially in a person's life. The psalm begins with a description of creation's communication of God's glory. Next comes God's verbal communication as found in the guiding and enlivening force of *tôrâ*. The third section, a prayer, articulates the result of embodying God's *tôrâ*, specifically the purging of sin. By their juxtaposition, the psalm weds together two distinct "voices": creation and *tôrâ*. Although quite distinct, both domains are deeply interrelated in the psalm. In the eyes (and ears) of the psalmist, creation and *tôrâ* provide two complementary modes of divine discourse: God's "world" and God's "word," or perhaps one could say today: science and Scripture.

Psalm 19 thus provides a powerful hermeneutical framework that comes to be deeply embedded in Christian tradition, beginning at least with John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407) and Augustine (354-430) and extending to John Calvin (1509-1564) and Galileo (1564-1642).⁸ Augustine, for example, referred to creation as God's "great big book,"⁹ about which he said, "Look carefully at it from top to bottom, observe it, read it.... Observe heaven and earth in a religious spirit" (p. 226). That "religious spirit," however, did not mean for Augustine rejecting the findings of science in favor of, say, the three-tiered model of the universe depicted in Genesis 1. To the contrary, Augustine found it shameful for Christians to make empirical claims about creation by means of Scripture (*Literal Meaning of Genesis*, I, xix, 39).¹⁰ Rather, it is a matter of duty and delight that God's "two books" be read together, for God is the author of both. One need look no further for biblical backing than Psalm 19, which binds together God's world and word into a seamless whole. As "the heavens are telling the glory of God" (v. 1), so "the precepts of YHWH" gladden "the heart,...enlightening the eyes" (v. 8). Indeed, it is with such eyes that one "reads" God's world along with God's word. Making a bolder claim than Karl Barth, the psalmist challenges us to read the Bible in one hand and the whole world in the other (not to say that the *New York Times* doesn't help). The psalm invites us to interpret God's word and world together on the lookout for God's glory, whether in the world, in the text, or in oneself. As creation communicates God's glory for all the world to see and hear, so *tôrâ* imparts God's guidance for all the self to embody—mind, body, and soul.

Psalm 19 in Depth

The psalm begins with a hymnic testimony of creation's discursive power. The heavens and the celestial dome ("firmament") communicate God's "glory," the transcendent, effulgent "weightiness" (*kābôd*) of divine presence that, in this case, is perceived from the vastness and fullness of the celestial sphere (cf. Ps 8:3-4). And with "glory" communicated comes "knowledge" imparted, day by day and night by night. Set on equal functional footing, day and night impart discursive knowledge, as if they were constant conversation partners. Such is the rhythmic "beat" of God's celestial glory. Even as we sleep, God's cosmic discourse is constantly "streaming live." One might think today of the ever-present "cosmic background radiation," the primordial "hum" of the universe set by the Big Bang over thirteen billion years ago. Or one might consider "gravitational waves," ripples in spacetime that have only recently been detected by supersensitive instruments. For the psalmist, divine discourse is also manifest in the varying movements of the celestial bodies: the sun, the moon, the stars, and the wandering planets throughout the seasons, all testifying to the dynamically intricate orderliness of creation. Day and night constitute the universal medium of divine glory and knowledge, ever constant, ever present, and for all to discern.

What they impart, however, is not necessarily verbal or auditory, according to the psalmist. Day and night, along with their ruling agents (see Gen 1:16-18), are *silent* communicators; what knowledge they impart is visually, rather than verbally, mediated. They communicate via "body language," as it were, that is, in their movements across the sky—language in motion. Creation, the psalmist affirms, is discursive; it is the communicative arena of God's glory, a claim that comes close to being divinatory. Throughout the ancient Near East, divination was employed to reveal hidden matters, including the future, through the use of omens to establish the correct course of action, as in the case of a king preparing for battle. Everything from inspecting sheep entrails (extispicy) to studying the heavens (astrology) for signs was employed in order to discern the plans of the gods. The practice was forbidden in ancient Israel, which of course meant that it was, in fact, practiced.¹¹ Indeed, the casting of lots and the use of the Urim and Thummim come close to divination.

But the psalmist handily avoids such implications by deploying the vivid example of the sun. The sun is celebrated not for its divinatory power but for its demonstration of God's glory in the created order. The second half of v. 4 shifts the focus from the panorama of the cosmos to a particular celestial orb, the one that in Pentateuchal tradition "rules the day" (Gen 1:16). The sun has its own prescribed path (Ps 19:5b). But the sun's starting point is its "tent" in the sky, provided by God, where it resides and rests in order to start every new day. Mythology turns to metaphor as the poet likens the sun to a "bridegroom" and the "tent" to a "wedding canopy." The metaphor prompts the question as to who is the sun's partner? In a Sumerian/Akkadian bilingual prayer, the sun has his repose with Aya, the goddess of the dawn, his beloved spouse. Psalm 19 is a case of metaphor playfully and masterfully drawn from mythology.¹² A second metaphor, specifically simile, likens the sun to a "warrior" (*gibbôr*) rejoicing as it runs the "path" (v. 4b). Nothing explicitly militaristic is suggested here; the image of the warrior deployed in this context would be dynamically equivalent to the athlete today, a human embodiment of agility and strength. Together, the two

metaphorical images suggest that the sun is the prime celestial example of God's glory as it traverses the sky, from east to west with such vigor. At the same time, however, the sun also offers a paradigmatic response to God's glory: it sets about its prescribed path unwaveringly and with exuberance. Metaphorically, the sun does double duty by communicating God's glory and responding to it. The final reference to its "heat" testifies to the sun's power to illumine and warm the earth, which can be both lifegiving and oppressive (cf. Ps 121:6). There is no hiding from the sun's radiant power.

Similar to creation, divine "law" (*tôrâ*) is also regarded as discursively efficacious. As the psalm's centerpiece, this section is crafted with fine poetic balance and repetition (vv. 7-10). Various legal terms for God's instruction are listed, followed by their attributes and impacts. Several terms are found in Pentateuchal polity: "law" (*tôrâ*), "decree" (*'edût*), "commandment" (*mišwâ*), and "rulings" (*mišpāṭîm*). The one exception is "precepts" (*piqqûdîm*), a term found largely in Psalm 119, which features the most extensive taxonomy of *tôrâ* in the Bible.

Just as the terms for *tôrâ* are varied in Psalm 19, so also are *tôrâ*'s attributes, from "impeccable" (*tēmîmâ*) to "pure" (*těhôrâ*). Indeed, as v. 10 makes clear, YHWH's instructions are of ultimate value, exceeding that of pure gold and rich honey. It is as if the psalmist is proclaiming, "O taste and see that the Law is good!" (cf. Ps 34:8). But that is not all: the supreme value of *tôrâ* is also evidenced in the benefits it extends to the human self: restoration, renewal, wisdom, joy, enlightenment, and life. Note the subtle parallels with the preceding creation hymn: YHWH's "precepts" are "straight" (*yěšārîm*; v. 8a), like the sun's "path" across the sky. YHWH's commandment gives "light to the eyes" (v. 8b), as much as the sun radiates light and heat (v. 8b). The self's renewal (vv. 7a, 8a) could not be more vividly illustrated than in the sun's vigorous and joyous trek across the sky (v. 5). One could say that the efficacy of *tôrâ* is derived from its solar power!

The theological relationship between the psalm's first two sections remains a matter of debate. As the centerpiece of the psalm, does *tôrâ* supersede creation in Psalm 19? Or are *tôrâ* and creation cast as complementary arenas of God's glory and knowledge? Yes. If both sections were originally independent (vv. 1-5a and vv. 5a-11ff), their deliberate linkage effectively shifts the center of gravity from a heliocentric to a *tôrâ*-centric poetic hymn. Creation as the medium of God's glory prefaces *tôrâ* as the medium of God's guidance.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of the sun to culminate the first section is no accident. In Mesopotamian religion, the sun, Šamaš, was typically given the role of law-giver. Thus, the conjunction of sun and *tôrâ* is a "natural" fit, mythologically speaking, for the psalmist. However, the psalmist revises the connection in a significant way. The sun is no longer cast as the cosmic *source* of *tôrâ*, but as a cosmic *follower* of *tôrâ*. In the hands of the psalmist, the sun is not the divine agent of law and justice, contra Babylonian mythology, but a celestial observer of law and justice, indeed, model of *tôrâ* piety. Moreover, the sun does not fly with fiery wings or is enthroned above the waters or is carried by a cosmic barque, as attested in Egyptian and Mesopotamian lore. Instead, it simply follows its prescribed path, running it with joy. In the hands of the psalmist, the sun is thoroughly anthropomorphized for a purpose: to cast it as an exuberant embodiment of *tôrâ* piety. In Psalm 19, the sun is "*tôrâ*-sized."

But the association between creation and *tôrâ* also cuts the other way. Reading *tôrâ* in light of a helio-oriented creation underlines *tôrâ*'s lifegiving power. The poetic result is a *tôrâ* that is "solarized." Divine guidance is not just contained within the written *tôrâ* for the individual; it is also projected throughout the cosmos. As Psalm 19's much "bigger brother" claims,

Forever, YHWH,
does your word stand firm in the heavens.
Your faithfulness extends from one generation to the next;
you have established the earth, and it stands fast.
On account of your rules do they¹³ stand today;
indeed, all things are your servants. Ps 119:89-91 (NBV)

In this psalm of the law, God's "word," with its just "rules," is cosmically contextualized and functionalized. Together, creation and *tôrâ* reflect each other in both subtle and less than subtle ways. The most obvious link, however, is forged in the final section of Psalm 19, whereby the petitioner acknowledges the purgative power of *tôrâ*, whose outcome is the attainment of integrity (13b), consonant with *tôrâ* itself (v. 7a) and its attendant qualities: pure, clean, upright, and enduring. Purged of sin, delivered by God, the petitioner is the living embodiment of *tôrâ* and, thus, a channel of God's glory, no less. You are what you follow. The early church theologian Irenaeus picked up on this with his bold claim that "the glory of God is a human being fully alive" (*Against Heresies* IV. 20.7), to which the psalmist would add: the glory of God is all creation fully flourishing and God's *tôrâ* fully followed. For the psalmist, the law is no burden, but a source of human freedom: freedom from sin and freedom for following. Moreover, the *tôrâ* that radiates with God's glory proves that no one, not one, is above the law. The *tôrâ* of the LORD is transcendent, so claims the psalmist. And so we strive for God's glory all the time confessing, like the psalmist, how far we fall short of God's glory. Perhaps the way forward is to regard every instance of moral understanding, every moment of ethical discernment, every occasion for edifying wisdom as an opportunity for living into God's glory, for the sake of God's World.

Notes

1 Given the Midianite connection of Moses's father-in-law, Jethro, the biblical site of Mt. Sinai was most likely east of the Gulf of Aqaba, in the northwest part of the Arabian Peninsula.

2 C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1958), 63.

3 The "New Brown Version" (aka my own translation).

4 As often suggested, the form (*qawwam*) is likely a textual corruption of an original *qolam* ("their voice," so OG).

5 Or "fear of YHWH" (*yir'at yhwh*).

6 The Hebrew verb $\sqrt{zhr}$ carries the meaning of "warn, instruct" (e.g., Exod 18:20; Ezek 3:18, 21; 33:8-9), as well as "shine" (Dan 12:3; cf. the nominal form in Ezek 8:2). The above translation captures the double meaning of the verb in this context.

7 The Hebrew *zēdīm* can also be translated the "insolent" or "arrogant," its most common meaning (e.g., Pss 86:14; 119:21, 51, 69, 78; Prov 21:24; Mal 3:15). However, the following petition in v. 13 ("do not let them gain mastery over me" [*al-yimšēlā-bī*]) alludes to Gen 4:7, in which YHWH challenges Cain to resist sin of violence: "and if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (*wē'attā timšol-bō*)." As Cain fails to master the impulse to commit fratricide, the

psalmist pleads to God that his sins not dominate him.

8 For a concise historical survey, see Peter J. Hess, "'God's Two Books': Revelation, Theology, and Natural Science in the Christian West," in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Cosmology and Biological Evolution* (Australian Theological Forum Science and Theology Series 2; Hindmarsh, Australia: Australian Theological Forum, 2002), 19-51.

9 *The Works of Saint Augustine: Sermons Part III (51-84)*, trans. Edmund Hill (Augustinian Heritage Institute; New York: New York City Press, 1991) 255.

10 *The Literal Meaning of Genesis, Volume 1*, trans. John Hammond Taylor (Ancient Christian Writers 41; New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

11 E.g., Gen 30:27; 44:15; Deut 18:10; 2 Kgs 17:17; Ezek 13:6-7.

12 One wonders how the psalmist would reframe the celestial imagery in light of the fact that it is Earth's own movement that is responsible for the sun's apparent trek across the sky.

13 That is, the "earth" and the "heavens."