

# **Exegesis of Psalm 19**

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## Exegesis of Psalm 19

### TRANSLATION

For the musical director. A Psalm of David.<sup>1</sup>

- 1 The heavens are recounting the glory of God,  
and the firmament is declaring the work<sup>2</sup> of his hands.
- 2 Day to day<sup>3</sup> pours forth speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.
- 3 There is no speech and there are no words.  
Their voice is not heard.
- 4 Their voice<sup>4</sup> has gone out into all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.  
In them he pitched a tent for the sun,
- 5 So it is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber;  
like a strong man he rejoices to run his course.
- 6 Its rising is from one end of the heavens, and its circuit to the other end of them,  
and there is nothing hidden from its heat.
- 7 The law<sup>5</sup> of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul.<sup>6</sup>  
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.
- 8 The precepts of the LORD are upright, making the heart rejoice.  
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.
- 9 The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever.  
The judgments of the LORD are true; they are altogether righteous.
- 10 They are more desirable than gold, even much pure gold,  
and sweeter than honey, even honey flowing from honeycombs.
- 11 Moreover, your servant is instructed by them.  
In keeping them there is great reward.
- 12 Who can discern errors<sup>7</sup>?

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<sup>1</sup> Even though this translation was done by the exegete from the Hebrew MT, the verse numbers here correspond to most English translations as apposed to the verse numbers in the MT.

<sup>2</sup> Some Hebrew mss and versions (the Vulgate and the Targum) indicate a plural construction form, ‘works’.

<sup>3</sup> “It is possible to understand ‘the firmament’ of v. 2 as the subject of the verbs in v. 3 and to translate the phrases ‘day to day’ and ‘night to night’ as adverbial expressions of time, but it is preferable to maintain the poetic personification and translate, ‘One day pours forth speech to another day, and one night declares knowledge to another night.’” J. Ross Wagner, “From the Heavens to the Heart,” The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 61 (1999): p. 250.

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word in the MT is the word קִיָּה ‘line’. I tend to agree with the editors of the NIV, NRSV, and JPS which have taken the witness of the Septuagint, Jerome, and the Syriac translations indicating that the word at one time in MT was קוֹלָה ‘voice’, and has subsequently lost the lamed. This seems to make better sense in the context of the passage. See footnote Bruce M. Metzger, ed., Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 19, Psalms 1-50, by Peter C. Craigie (Waco: Word Books, 1983) p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> Hebrew is תּוֹרָה ‘torah’. The word ‘torah’ is used in this Psalm and throughout this paper as a general term denoting God’s instruction and teaching. It is not meant to convey a meaning of God’s Levitical laws and commandments. As stated by J. Ross Wagner concerning the use of the word ‘torah’ in Psalm 19, “Torah is probably best understood here in its wider sense of ‘teaching’, ‘instruction’, rather than in a narrow sense of ‘legal stipulations’ or even ‘the Pentateuch’.” J. Ross Wagner, *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew could also be translated “reviving the life”.

- Acquit me of hidden *faults*<sup>8</sup>.
- 13      Moreover withhold your servant from presumptuous *sins*<sup>9</sup>;  
             don't let them rule over me;  
             Then I will be whole,  
             and I will be acquitted from great transgression.
- 14      May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
             be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Whether read in English translation or in the Hebrew language, Psalm 19 is composed of beautiful poetry and yet contains a very powerful message. The writer C.S. Lewis said concerning Psalm 19, "I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world."<sup>10</sup> Creation, God's word, and the life of prayer speak in harmony to convey the profound message of God's glory to those who have ears to hear.

#### HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS

The Psalms are a group of writings collected by the people of ancient Israel to form a section of their sacred literature. As stated in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia concerning the Psalms, "The Heb title for the Psalter is *sepher t<sup>h</sup>hillim*, 'book of praises'. When we consider the fact that more than 20 of these poems have praise for

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<sup>7</sup> The Hebrew word here, שְׁגִיאוֹת, is best understood as 'errors'. However, it is related to the word meaning a moral error, or 'sin', and can be understood in that sense in this verse.

<sup>8</sup> In Hebrew is just the adjective 'hidden'; the word 'faults' is supplied in the translation. 'Hidden' is feminine plural in form and is therefore referring back to the word 'errors', which is also feminine plural. Could be translated 'hidden errors' or 'hidden sins'.

<sup>9</sup> In Hebrew is just the adjective 'presumptuous'. Since it is masculine plural in form, it may not directly refer to 'errors' in the previous verse (since 'errors' is feminine). It may instead refer to 'presumptuous persons', which can obviously lead one into sins. However, I tend to agree with J. Ross Wagner that the context fits much better that this means 'presumptuous sins'. He points out, "The majority of commentators understand שְׁגִיאוֹת to mean insolent *people* .... However, in a number of contexts (Deut 1:43; 17:13; 18:20; Jer 50:29; Neh 9:16, 29) the verb שָׁגָה describes arrogant, sinful *actions*. A reference to intentional, 'presumptuous sins' fits better in a context pregnant with cultic connotations (see v. 13 and vv. 14b-15)". J. Ross Wagner, "From the Heavens to the Heart," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61 (1999): 259.

Note also that in the Septuagint the word παραπτώματα 'errors' in verse 12 is neuter plural and the form of the adjective ἀλλοτρίων 'presumptuous' in this verse is also neuter (or masculine) plural. Because there is no explicit substantive for this adjective, a Greek reader would understand 'presumptuous' to refer back to 'errors'. Thus the readers of the Septuagint would have almost undoubtedly taken this to mean 'presumptuous sins'.

their keynote, and that there are outbursts of thanksgiving in many others, the fitness of the Heb title dawns upon us.”<sup>11</sup> They contain works of different poets and musicians and were probably used as a hymnal for individual and corporate worship by the people of Israel. Surely the Book of Psalms has been used as a hymnal for the Christian church since its inception.

Although there are many hymns and thanksgivings contained in the collection of Psalms, they also contain many other types of writings, such as: psalms for the king, psalms of remembrance, psalms of confidence, and psalms of laments. Of the various classifications and genres used in the form critical approach for categorizing each Psalm, number 19 has always seemed to pose some difficulty. Along with Psalm 1 and 119, Psalm 19 is a Psalm that has the torah<sup>12</sup> preeminent and central. Due to work by James Luther Mays,<sup>13</sup> scholars are recognizing that these three Psalms may play an important role in how all the Psalms should be interpreted. The centrality of the torah seen in these Psalms may point to the need to “elevate the concept of torah to one of central significance in understanding the Psalms.”<sup>14</sup> These three Psalms should more properly be called ‘torah-psalms’ as opposed to some more generic type of ‘wisdom hymns’.

#### FORM, STRUCTURE, AND MOVEMENT

The message of Psalm 19 is made emphatic by the use of parallel phrases, often chiasmatic in nature. Many phrases are repeated, using different words to convey similar

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<sup>10</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958) p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> James Orr, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956) p. 2487.

<sup>12</sup> See note above (v. 7) on the use of the word ‘torah’ in Psalm 19 and throughout this paper.

<sup>13</sup> James Luther Mays, “The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 no. 1 (1987): pp. 3-12.

<sup>14</sup> J. Clinton McCann Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) p. 25.

information from prior phrases. The Hebrew chiasm in each of the two parallel phrases (e.g. noun first then verb followed by verb first then noun) tends to create a most pleasing poetry, but also adds to the overall affect of proclaiming a powerful message.

One of the reasons for the difficulty in classifying Psalm 19 is that from a cursory view the Psalm seems to have two distinct sections with different subjects and emphases. The first section talks about the glory of God as seen in creation. The second section talks about God's torah and its benefits. Besides this apparent change in subject matter, there are a number of grammatical distinctives that seem to divide the Psalm. One clear difference is that the name for 'God' is a different Hebrew word in the two halves. The first half refers to God as אֱלֹהִים "God" (v. 1) and in the second half God is referred to as יְהוָה "LORD" (seven times in verses 7-9 and 14). Another distinctive is seen in the style of writing. The first half is characterized by relatively longer phrases and the second section with shorter phrases.

But in spite of these apparent differences, there are a number of similarities between these two sections that hold this Psalm together and call for us to treat it as a whole (as will be seen below). In this regard, I appreciate the words of Peter C. Craigie, "It is reasonably certain that the Psalm in its present form is a unity, either composed as a single piece, or else the author took a fragment of an old hymn (vv 2-7) and extended it by means of a theological commentary and comparison."<sup>15</sup>

Despite what initially appears to be two separate sections to this Psalm, it is probably more helpful to make a further distinction in the second half, where the language changes from statements about the torah to a prayer addressed to God.<sup>16</sup> I will show that it

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<sup>15</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, ed., Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 19, Psalms 1-50, by Peter C. Craigie (Waco: Word Books, 1983) p. 179.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Lawrence, ed. The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) p. 751.

is best to view this psalm as a coherent whole, with one powerful message, but for purposes of discussion, a helpful outline of this Psalm is as follows:

- a) God's glory declared in nature – God's General Speaking (vv. 1-6)
- b) The virtues and benefits of God's Torah – God's Specific Speaking (vv. 7-10)
- c) Prayer to God from his servant – Our Speaking To God (vv. 11-14)

#### DETAILED ANALYSIS

##### *God's glory declared in nature – God's General Speaking (vv. 1-6)*

There are two parts to this first section of the Psalm. The first three and a half verses talk about the glory of God being actively witnessed to by nature, specifically by the heavens and the sky. There is a shift in verse four to a specific item of creation in the heavens that shows God's glory, the sun.

Verses one and two form a unit, speaking of the sky as seen in the daytime and at night. The first mention of the sky is הַשָּׁמַיִם 'the heavens'. A parallel but chiasmic phrase in verse one then mentions הַרְקִיעַ 'the firmament'. The 'firmament' is the sky that is seen during the day, and the 'heavens' refers to what is beyond the sky, the starry hosts as seen by night.<sup>17</sup> So verse one first talks about the 'heavens' and then about the 'firmament'. Verse two then goes on to talk first about the 'day' and then the 'night', thus forming the conceptual chiasm with verse one.<sup>18</sup>

The main point that is seen in these verses sets the tone for the rest of the Psalm and indeed ties together what otherwise could seem as loosely collected ideas. The key idea in the first four verses is that of 'a message being told'. The heavens are recounting, the firmament is declaring, each day is pouring forth speech, and each night is making

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<sup>17</sup> Daniel G. Ashburn, "Creation and the Torah in Psalm 19," The Jewish Bible Quarterly 22, (1994): p. 242.

known knowledge. This is further punctuated with verse four making the bold statement that “their (the heavens’) voice has gone out into all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.” Clearly what first strikes the reader of Psalm 19 is all the ‘speaking’ and ‘words’ that are present.

Verse three makes a statement that must be understood in this overall context. In saying that ‘there is no speech’, ‘there are no words’, and ‘their voice is not heard’, it conveys the meaning that the speech which is being uttered by the creation is not physically audible to human ears,<sup>19</sup> yet its message is a most fundamental proclamation<sup>20</sup> continually being announced to all of creation. “All of the ‘speaking’ he has been describing takes place wordlessly.”<sup>21</sup> Although it cannot be heard with human ears, its testimony to humankind is clearly seen. It testifies to God’s creative power and glory.

The second part of this first section (vv. 4b-6) now focuses attention on a particular item in the firmament, namely the sun. The psalmist probably chose to talk about the sun because it is such a pervasive and powerful force in the life of all humans, and is an item of God’s creation located in the firmament just mentioned. God’s glory and power is shown by the fact that he is in control of the sun; he was the one that has provided a place for the sun to stay and has set its course in the sky. This testifies to one of the ways in which the firmament is proclaiming his handiwork. “The sun takes its rightful place as one of the heavenly witnesses to the glory of the creator.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59, A Commentary*, trans. by Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988) p. 271.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel G. Ashburn, *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>21</sup> J. Ross Wagner, *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

The psalmist finishes up this section by likening the sun to a bridegroom and to a strong man. J. Ross Wagner shows how these images further testify to God's great glory.

“Brilliant images of uncontainable joy now burst on the scene. . . . The sun is like a bridegroom who has consummated his marriage with his beloved, like a strong warrior who rejoices in his speed and stamina. These similes link the psalm with imagery used elsewhere of God. Isaiah describes God as a bridegroom rejoicing over his bride, Israel (Isa 62:5). Ps 24:8 is one of the many texts that portray God as a strong warrior. It comes as no surprise that God himself is described as a ‘sun’ in Ps 84:12. The psalmist’s description of the sun language elsewhere used for God reinforces the point that the sun by its very nature serves as a vibrant witness to the glory, joy, and might of God.”<sup>23</sup>

Each of the two halves of this first section (first the heavens and firmament in general and then the sun in particular) end with statements that describe the all-pervasive nature of these words going out into the world. At the end of the first section, verse 4 makes the statement, “their voice has gone out into all the earth” and “their words [go out] to the end of the world”; then at the end of the second half, verse 6 says concerning the sun that “there is nothing hidden from its heat.” These three phrases create a very powerful message concerning the fact that this testimony of nature is going out to all the inhabitants of the earth; nature speaks forth an inescapable message that testifies to the glory of God. Just as nothing can escape the heat of the sun, so nothing can hide from the heavens’ testimony of God’s glory. “The wordless message of the heavens concerning the majesty of the creator of the universe has a universal scope. . . . No place on earth is untouched by their proclamation.”<sup>24</sup>

*The virtues and benefits of God’s Torah – God’s Specific Speaking (vv. 7-10)*

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 252.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 251.

Although this next section is clearly delineated from the previous one by a sudden change in both topic and grammatical structure, its unity with the previous section is seen in that it is still talking about ‘words’ that are testifying about God. In speaking of this transition, Daniel Ashburn makes an interesting observation, “But the knowledge of God that is revealed in Creation is only very limited. Beyond the awareness of the Creator, the instruction of nature tells us little about the ways of God or what our response to God should be. Therefore, the psalmist turns to the instruction of God’s Torah.”<sup>25</sup>

So although the topic may seem different from the first section of the psalm, it is intimately tied to it in the fact that the emphasis is still on God’s speaking. The first section describes God’s speaking through nature; this second section is emphasizing God’s speaking through a more specific revelation concerning himself, namely in the torah. Both creation and the torah testify to the existence, majesty, and worthiness of God. James Mays says concerning this dual testimony of God’s glory in Psalm 19 that, “The certain point is the presentation of a God who is known both through creation and torah. The torah of the Lord is just as certain and everlasting, just as much a part of the nature of reality as the succession of day and night and the regular course of the sun.”<sup>26</sup>

In verses 7-10 there are six parallel phrases that talk about the Lord’s speaking, showing six aspects of the torah (as law, testimony, precepts, commandment, fear, and judgments). The torah of the Lord is then is described by seven different words, each one driving home the fact that it is good in every sense, aspect, and dimension. The torah is perfect, sure, upright, pure, clean, true, and righteous. Each of these characteristics of

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel G. Ashburn, *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>26</sup> James Luther Mays, *Ibid.*, p. 5.

God's torah is then spoken of in relation to how it affects human beings.<sup>27</sup> Because of torah's beneficial affect on humans, this description of torah then ends with two metaphors and some wonderful imagery concerning the torah's desirableness. The psalmist likens the torah to fine gold and sweet honey. Humans strive for wealth and gain sustenance and pleasure from food; this is how humans should view the value of God's speaking in the torah.

*Prayer to God from his servant – Our Speaking To God (vv. 11-14)*

Although verse 11 is still speaking about the benefits of the torah, the psalm changes in form from statements about the torah, to a prayer to God. The psalmist now addresses God by referring to himself as 'your servant'. He is no longer speaking in the grammatical third person, making statements about God revealing himself in the creation or in the torah, but now speaking in the second person, addressing God. The psalmist eventually goes on to speak of himself in the first person, as 'me' (vv. 12 & 13) and 'my' (v. 14).

Also in verse 11 the psalmist speaks of himself as God's 'servant'. He is thus witnessing to the proper response of a person that hears the twofold testimony of creation and the torah concerning God's glory. He takes the position of a slave to the master, thus describing the proper relationship of a human being to the all-powerful creator.

Verses 12 and 13 form part of a prayer, asking God to acquit him of transgressions and to not let him commit presumptuous sins. In placing this prayer right after the section concerning the excellency of the torah, it indicates the value of the torah in exposing sin in a person's life and keeping them from sin. The psalmist's prayer is for his life to be

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<sup>27</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *Ibid.*, p. 181.

cleansed from transgression and to be free from the effects of sin so as to correspond to the God who is so prevalently testified to in both nature and torah.

The first section ends with the statement in verse 6, “and nothing is hidden from its heat.” The same Hebrew word translated ‘hidden’ (סתר) is used in this section in the psalmist’s prayer for cleansing from “hidden faults” (v. 12). The psalmist seems to be clearly indicating that just as nothing is hidden from the heat of the sun, so no sin is hidden from God. Concerning this connection between the psalmist’s prayer for cleansing from sin and the previous sections on the cosmos and torah, J. Ross Wagner says,

“This meaning of נסתרות [‘hidden faults’] is unique to the psalmist. He appears to have chosen the word deliberately in order to connect his prayer with this previous praise of the sun and Torah. Having painted Torah in the colors of the sun and displayed its superiority to the cosmic revelation of God, the psalmist suggests that if nothing can be hidden from the heat of the sun (v. 7), much less can anything be hidden from the radiance of Torah or the eyes of Yhwh. The psalmist may be unable to see his hidden faults, but Yhwh has no such impediment. In humility and truth the psalmist asks that Yhwh acquit him of these unintentional, unknown sins.”<sup>28</sup>

In verse 14 the climax of the psalm then ends in a prayer for the life of the psalmist to correspond with the testimony of creation and the torah in being pleasing to God. As J. Clinton McCann says, “The ‘words’ of verse 14 repeats the Hebrew word translated as ‘speech’ in verses 2-3. In short, this final verse is the psalmist's prayer that his or her life be in tune with the music of the spheres, the very structure of the universe.”<sup>29</sup> What dominated the theme of the Psalm in the first two sections ties the whole together in the last verse. Section one emphasizes the speech of creation (or God speaking concerning himself through creation), whereas the second section emphasizes God’s speaking in his torah. Based on these words, the psalmist now prays that his words will be pleasing to

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<sup>28</sup> J. Ross Wagner, *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>29</sup> J. Clinton McCann Jr., *Ibid.*, p. 30.

God. In his prayer, the psalmist mentions both the ‘words of my mouth’ and the ‘meditation of my heart’. These two statements seem to correspond to the kind of sins that he has just been praying about. Having the ‘words of my mouth’ pleasing to God may refer to the outward actions, and seems to correspond with asking God to withhold him from ‘presumptuous sins’ (v. 13). Whereas ‘the meditation of my heart’ speaks of something hidden from others and may correspond to his prayer in verse 12 to be acquitted from ‘hidden faults’.

Concerning these three sections of the psalm, James Mays says, “Psalm 19 brings together cosmos, torah, and prayer. It puts in an interrelated sequence the language of the heavens, the instruction of the Lord, and the words of the psalmist.”<sup>30</sup>

#### SYNTHESIS/CONCLUSION

The heavens proclaim a powerful message concerning the existence of God and how wonderful he is. This testimony is an inescapable message for all who live on earth because it is being announced day and night from the sky over every person’s head. Yet it is an incomplete message in that it does not give details about the God who created it. In order to know the details of who God is, how he relates to humans, and how humans should live their lives, God also speaks more specifically through his torah. The torah is something very desirable to humans in that it has the great reward of keeping them in right relationship to God. Eventually those who hear God’s testimony from creation and from his torah become his servants, and this very testimony of God directs their lives and keeps them from sin. The words of God’s servant should ultimately match the testimony coming

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<sup>30</sup> James Luther Mays, *Ibid.*, p. 5.

from creation and from his torah; their lives should be pleasing to him and thus declare his glory.

#### REFLECTION – PSALM 19 FOR TODAY

Hasn't everyone at one time or another looked up in the sky at night and been amazed by the immense sight of twinkling stars. As far as the eye can see and for as long as one is able to stand gazing, there are wonders to behold in the night sky for anyone who will take time to stop and look. This is surely a testimony to us of the God who created the universe. It is good to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed and humbled by the endless expanse we see and know that the universe does not revolve around us, but around the one who created us.

Then we continue that awe in admiring the fact that this same Creator chose to communicate more directly with us through the Bible. As we see the torah as God's desire to communicate himself to us more directly and bring us into relationship with him, then we cannot help but to treasure the words of his mouth more than our daily bread.<sup>31</sup>

This in turn causes us to plead with God to forgive us from all forms of sin and to keep us from its power. As a servant in relation to his master, we desire our life to be pleasing to him. We want not only our life before other people to reflect this relationship, but even our inward thoughts and motives.

Just as the heavens are always looking down on mankind, and we can never hide from the heat of the sun, so we should know that we are always under the view of the Creator. The part of our life that is hidden from other people is not hidden from the Creator. This fact should cause us to live genuinely, not as hypocrites with only our outward actions

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<sup>31</sup> NIV, Job 23:12.

appearing to be 'acceptable to God'. Even our inward thoughts and private lives should be lived in a way that is acceptable and pleasing to the one to whom all creation testifies and nothing is hidden from his sight.

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