



# Science, Scripture, and Self: Epistemological Implications of Psalm 19

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## Abstract

This article suggests three ways that the psalm advances a biblical approach to epistemology. First, this psalm implies that some kinds of truth may be learned through careful observation. Psalm 19 as an invitation to seek the truth through scientific study in the form of disciplined observation, discovery, and analysis. If creation is speaking, then we must learn how to listen and hear its voice. Second, this psalm declares that truth can be learned from the Torah, the revealed word of God. Torah is a kind of knowledge that cannot be discovered; it must be revealed (Job 11:7-8; Romans 11:33). God's self-revelation is a gift of God to humanity, discerned relationally; therefore, it cannot be discovered by searching, even if the search is enhanced by microscopes, telescopes, or microwave kinetic inductance detectors. Third, Psalm 19 invites us to discover ourselves. Moral and spiritual progress requires self-examination and transformation. Beholding God's glory in creation and hearing God's word through the Torah provide the orientation that is necessary for us to face the truth about ourselves.

**Keywords:** scientific method, naturalism, epistemology, worldview, revelation

## Introduction

Psalm 19 was written centuries ago in a pre-scientific age. Nevertheless, it has something to say to us about the relationship between science and faith. The interdisciplinary nature of the psalm is displayed in its combining of three concepts that are normally separated in modern thought: the cosmos, the Torah, and the human self. The juxtaposition of these three concepts suggests that they are related somehow, and this article will explore those interrelations.

## A Translation of Psalm 19

לְמַנְצֵחַ מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד:	1/Hd	To the Leader. A Psalm of David.
הַשָּׁמַיִם מְסַפְּרִים כְּבוֹד־אֱלֹהִים וּמַעֲשֵׂה יְדָיו מְגִיד הַרְקִיעַ:	2/1	The heavens are recounting the glory of God; and the sky is telling the work of his hands.
יּוֹם לַיּוֹם יִבְיַע אָמָר וּלְיַלְלָה לְלַיְלָה יְסַנְהֶ-דָעַת:	3/2	Day to day will gush forth speech, and night to night will declare knowledge.
אֵין־אָמָר וְאֵין דְּבָרִים כָּלִי נִשְׁמָע קוֹלָם:	4/3	There is no speech, and there are no words; their voice is not audible;
כָּכֹל־הָאָרֶץ יִצְאָ קוֹנָם וּבְקִצָּה תִבֵּל מִלִּיקָם	5/4	Their call went out into all the earth, and their discourses to the end of the world.



לְשֶׁמֶשׁ שָׁם־אֶהָל בָּהֶם:		In them he set a tent for the sun,
וְהוּא כְּחָתָן יֵצֵא מִחַפְצָתוֹ	6/5	And it is like a bridegroom going out from his wedding canopy.
יִשְׁיֵשׁ כְּגִבּוֹר לְרוֹץ אַרְחָ:		He will revel like a strong man running a race.
מִקְצֵה הַשָּׁמַיִם מוֹצֵאוֹ	7/6	Its going out is from the end of heaven,
וּתְקוּפָתוֹ עַל־קְצוֹתָם		and its circuit is to the other end;
וְאֵין נִסְתָּר מִחַמָּתוֹ:		and there is nothing hidden from its heat.
תּוֹרַת יְהוָה תְּמִימָה מְשִׁיבַת נַפְשׁ	8/7	The torah of Yahweh is perfect, restoring the soul;
עֵדוּת יְהוָה נֶאֱמָנָה מִחִפְיַמַּת פְּתִי:		the testimony of Yahweh is trustworthy, making wise the inexperienced;
פְּקוּדֵי יְהוָה יִשְׂרִים מְשִׂמְחֵי־לֵב	9/8	the precepts of Yahweh are right, rejoicing the heart;
מִצְוַת יְהוָה בְּרָה מְאִירַת עֵינַיִם:		the commandment of Yahweh is pure, brightening the eyes;
יִרְאַת יְהוָה טְהוֹרָה עוֹמֶדֶת לְעַד	10/9	the fear of Yahweh is clean, standing forever;
מִשְׁפָּטֵי־יְהוָה אֱמֶת צְדָקוֹ יַחְדָּו:		the judgments of Yahweh are truth, they are righteous altogether.
הַנְּחֻמָּדִים מִזָּהָב וּמִפָּז רָב	11/10	More desirable are they than gold, much fine gold;
וּמְתוּקִים מִדְּבַשׁ וְנֹפֶת צוּפִים:		and sweeter than honey, even honey from the honeycomb.
גַּם־עֲבָדְךָ נִזְהָר בָּהֶם	12/11	Also, your servant is warned by them;
בְּשִׁמְרָם עֲקֹב רָב:		in keeping them there is great reward.
שִׁגְיאוֹת מִי־יִבִּין	13/12	Who can discern errors?
מִנְסֻתוֹת נִקְנִי:		Free me from hidden ones.
גַּם מִזֵּדִים חֲשֹׁף עֲבָדְךָ	14/13	Also, keep back your servant from willful ones;
אַל־יִמְשְׁלוּ־בִי		do not let them rule over me.
אֲז אֵיתָם וְנִקְיִתִי מִפְּשַׁע רָב:		Then I will be blameless, and I will be free of great transgression.
יְהִי לְרִצּוֹן אִמְרֵי־פִי וְהִגִּיוֹן לִבִּי לִפְנֶיךָ	15/14	Let the words of my mouth and the utterance of my heart
יְהִי צוּרִי וְגֹאֲלִי:		be pleasing before you,
		O Yahweh, my rock and my redeemer. <sup>1</sup>

### Structure and Unity of Psalm 19

Through a striking poetic juxtaposition of creation and Torah, Psalm 19 beckons its hearers to behold God's glory, to hear God's word, and to submit to God's rule. Its exalted language, passionate expression, and depth of theology moved C.S. Lewis to declare, "Psalm 19 is the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world" (1958: 63).

The beginning reference to the "heavens" (v. 1) gives the initial impression that the psalm will focus on God's creative power. However, as the psalm progresses, it becomes clear that the message is not focused on creation for creation's sake but on creation as a vehicle for communicating God's revelation. The heavens, the sky, the day, the night, and the sun speak forth a message that reaches "the ends of the earth" (vv. 1-6). Creation, however, is not God's only means of communication. God has also spoken through "torah," "testimonies," "precepts," "commandments," and "judgments" (vv. 7-11).

References to the heavens and to the Torah function as an indirect call to worship. The glory of the heavens and the perfections of the Torah are motives for humanity's praise of God. More specifically, the psalm offers praise for God's revelation, whether that revelation be through the

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from the biblical text will be my translation unless noted otherwise, and citations will follow the English verse numbers. Readers should be aware that versification of the English text is different from that of the Hebrew text.



heavens or through the Torah. Moreover, God's revelation has a profound impact upon the hearers, giving them wisdom (v. 7), joy (v. 8), enlightenment (v. 11), and discernment (v. 12).

Psalms 19 integrates into one song what appear to be three completely different topics: creation (in vv. 1-6), Torah (in vv. 7-11), and human sin (in vv. 12-14) (Oeming, 2000: 130). These themes do not normally appear in the same psalm (Goldingay, 2006: 1, 284). References to creation are found throughout the hymns of praise; statements about the Torah occur in wisdom psalms and historical psalms;<sup>2</sup> and prayers to be delivered from sin are characteristic of the laments. Here, however, the three distinct types of material are found combined into one psalm. For this reason, many scholars argue that Psalm 19 is a composite, created from parts of three separate psalms (Bratcher & Reayburn, 1991: 188).<sup>3</sup> However, another psalm—Psalm 89—also integrates the three themes of creation, Torah, and human sin, thus demonstrating how the topics are interrelated.<sup>4</sup>

The truth is that no one knows the compositional history of Psalm 19, and speculations about the psalm's history do not shed any light on the message of the text as it comes to us in Scripture. The psalm, as we have it, moves through a series of three distinct phases; and this paper will find meaning in the rhetorical presentation, in the sequencing of topics, and in the theological interrelationships.

I suggest that the theme of knowledge (epistemology) is a common thread that runs through Psalm 19 and holds together the apparently disparate parts (DeClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, & Tanner, 2014: 203-204). The psalm indicates that knowledge can be gained through observation of the cosmos (19:1-6), through study of the Torah (19:7-10), and through self-reflection (19:11-14) (Motyer, 1994: 498). The knowledge that comes through observation of nature is sometimes referred to by theologians as "natural revelation" or "general revelation," and the knowledge that comes through the study of the Torah (and all of Scripture) is referred to as "special revelation" (The well-known debate between Emil Brunner and Karl Barth over "natural theology" is beyond the scope of this paper). Furthermore, because God is creator of the cosmos and giver of the Torah, God is the implied source of all knowledge.

At this point, we will examine each section of the Psalm, seeking to discover theological implications.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, wisdom psalms that speak of the Torah include Psalms 37, 78, and 94. Psalms of historical recital that mention the Torah include Psalms 89 and 105. Psalm 119, of course, is devoted entirely to the praise of God's Torah. Surprisingly, outside of Psalm 119, the word "torah" (תורה) appears only 10 times in the Psalter.

<sup>3</sup> The theory sounds logical; however, there is no evidence of the three "original" psalms. If they existed, then why were they discarded in favor of a pastiche? If the three themes are as incompatible as scholars allege, then why would an editor combine them into one song? Why would they convert three coherent songs into a single incoherent song?

<sup>4</sup> The integration of the three themes (creation, Torah, and human sin) occurs also in Psalm 89; therefore, Psalm 19 is not entirely unique in its mixing of topics. A close examination of Psalm 89 reveals more than 30 exact verbal parallels to Psalm 19, including these significant words: "heavens," "hand," "tell," "day," "speak," "words," "earth," "world," "sun," "strong man," "hidden," "heat," "torah," "Yahweh," "restore," "soul," "sure," "rejoicing," "commandment," "brightening," "judgments," "true," "righteous," "your servant," "keep," "reward," "rule," "transgression," "acceptable," and "rock." Other parallels are obvious though not exact. E.g., in 19:15, God is "my rock and my redeemer," while in 89:27, God is "rock of my salvation."



## The Message of Psalm 19

### 1. Knowledge gained through the observation of creation (19:1-6)

#### *A message from the cosmos (19:1-4b)*

The topic of the first section of the psalm is introduced and summarized in v. 1, which states emphatically that the heavens and the sky are speaking about God's "glory" and God's "handiwork." The words "heavens" (שמים) and "sky" (רקיע) are essentially synonymous in this context (cf. Genesis 1:8), and they include the stars, the moon, and the sun. The word "heavens" (שמים) can indicate either the abode of God or the created space above the earth. The inclusion of "sky" (רקיע) as parallel to "heavens" suggests the latter. Thus, angels and other heavenly beings are excluded from the thought of v. 1, as confirmed by the statement in v. 3 that there are no "words" and no "voice." Such a statement would not be true of the angels, seraphim, cherubim, etc. In good poetic fashion, the heavens are personified so that they speak. They speak, and we listen. They speak of God's "glory" (כבוד), which is God's awesomeness, prestige, splendor, majesty, and honor. They speak of God's "handiwork" (מעשה ידיו), which encompasses everything God has made, both visible and invisible, both material and spiritual—in a word, creation. Therefore, "God's own beauty is visible in that which he has created beautifully, that is, nature" (Loader, 2011: 1).

The verbal activity of the heavens is ongoing, as indicated by the Hebrew participles "recounting" and "telling" (Ross, 2011: 473). Furthermore, these terms suggest more than a revealing of factual information. The psalmist could have used more static verbs, such as "show" (הראה or ירה) "reveal" (גלה) or "display" (הודיע). Instead, the verbs "recount" (ספר) and "tell" (הגיד) normally indicate the narration of a story (Jenni & Westerman, 1997: 810). Therefore, the suggestion is that the heavens recount the glory of God, not ontologically but narratively, as it is revealed in God's activity through time. The narrativity suggested in Psalm 19 accommodates Amos Yong's assertion that, from the very beginning in Genesis 1, "creation is best understood in terms of processes directed toward the eschatological intentions of God" (2005: 282; cf. Weiser, 1962: 198).

In vv. 2-4, we learn three more details about the cosmic narrative. First, the narrative told by the heavens is continuous—each day will "gush forth" (Clines, 1993: V, 596) or "bubble over" (Brown, Driver, Briggs, 1979: 615) with speech to the next day; and each night will "declare knowledge" to the next night. The Hebrew word translated "will declare" (יְהַלֵּל) comes from the same root (חלה) as the word "bow down" (Clines, 1993: III, 169), as in worship (in the *hishtafel*). It also has the same consonants as "tent village" (חֹתָנָה), which foreshadows the word "tent" in v. 4. By day, the sun is trumpeting God's power; and by night, the moon and stars are singing God's praise.

Second, lest the hearer of the psalm misunderstand the symbolism, v. 3 makes clear that the "speech" (אמר) of the cosmos is not audible (Charry, 2015: 95). The message comes to humanity in visual form, not through "words" (דברים) and not through a "voice" (קול). Therefore, we do not actually *hear* the message; we see it; we observe it. The absence of literal "speech" also strengthens the psalmist's case that the heavenly bodies are not gods. Third, the knowledge provided by the heavens is universal—"their call (Dahood, 1966: I, 121-122) went out into all the earth," and their "discourses to the end of the world" (v. 4). I translate מְלִיקָהּ as "discourses" because the Hebrew signifies a unit of speech, not just a "word" (Holladay, 1988: 197). All regions of the earth are able to view the heavens, thus beholding God's glory and God's works. Moreover, creation does not reveal some kind of secret knowledge. John Goldingay remarks, "The heavens



do not reveal something that was hidden but draw attention to something that has always been apparent” (I, 298). The heavens’ universal witness is echoed later in the Psalter: “The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory” (Psalm 97:6 RSV).

### ***The sun, a powerful messenger (19:4c-6)***

Inasmuch as the word “heavens” includes the sun, the moon, and the stars, it is not surprising that the third line of v. 4 singles out the sun as a powerful heavenly agent. John Goldingay explains why the psalmist moves to a description of the sun: “The process of proclamation is also left behind as they focus on the most impressive means of proclamation” (I, 289). Yes, the sun is the most impressive of God’s creations in the heavens, and vv. 5-6 highlight the sun’s fiery power (Sommer, 2015: 382-385). God has pitched a tent for the sun, where it spends the night before emerging every morning, when it exits its tent “like a bridegroom going out from his wedding canopy.” The sun is joyous, energetic, and hopeful, like a bridegroom leaving his marriage ceremony and leading his new bride to his village. Also, the sun “revels” (שוש) like a “strong man running a race” (v. 5). The image brings to mind the “exultation” (Brown, Driver, & Briggs, 1979: 965), the “delight” (Clines, 1993: 147), the “joy and jubilation” (Fabry, 2004: 51) of a vigorous athlete who anticipates victory as he runs. Like a newlywed and like a strong runner, the sun is not hesitant, not reluctant, not nervous, not halfhearted. The heavenly proclamation of God’s glory goes forth passionately, confidently, powerfully, energetically, and joyously.

Furthermore, the sun’s daily journey from one end of the earth to the other end (v. 6), reiterates the narrative quality of heaven’s message and its universal reach. The word translated *heat* (חֶמֶה) means “sun” elsewhere in the Old Testament (Job 30:28; Song 6:10; Isaiah 24:23; 30:26); it comes from geminate root חמם/חמם “to be or become warm” (Brown, Driver, & Briggs, 1979: 328). There appears to be an allusion to חֶמֶה, which used c. 80x for “God’s wrath” (Köhler & Baumgartner, 2001: I, 326; see also Psalm 78:38). The sun’s heat (חמה) touches everything and everyone; indicating that the knowledge that comes by observing the cosmos is available to all people. No one is excluded. Moreover, the Hebrew word translated “heat” (חמה) can also mean “excitement” (Jenni & Westerman, 1997: 435), thus reiterating the fervent and spirited delivery of the vital message.

## **2. Knowledge gained through scriptural revelation (19:7-11)**

### ***Praise for the Torah (19:7-9)***

The abrupt transition to the Torah is unexpected; and, at first glance, the praise of the Torah seems to be unrelated to the previous section. A closer look, however, reveals that the creation narrative, manifested in the steady course of the sun, continues in the Torah, which promotes the flourishing of human life. “*Die seit Schöpfungsbeginn sich im stetigen Lauf der Gestirne (Sonne) manifestierende Ordnung der Zeiten setzt sich fort in der das menschliche Leben fördernden Tora*” (Hossfeld & Zenger, 1993: 134). “As the sun illuminates the world from one end to the other, so the law illuminates [humanity] both religiously and morally” (Mowinckel, 1967: 91). The connection between creation and Torah is made explicit in the Decalogue, which includes the rationale for the sabbath day: “For in six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Yahweh blessed the sabbath day and made it holy” (Exodus 20:11). David Clines sees in Psalm 19:7-11 several allusions to the tree of knowledge of good and evil found in the creation story of Genesis (Genesis 2:9, 17; 3:5-17) (Clines, 1974: 8). These allusions form a further link between the themes of Torah and creation.



The Lord's instructions to Israel are described in concise, successive statements (vv. 7-9), using five different terms: Torah, testimony, precepts, commandment, and judgments. These five terms overlap in meaning, each one stressing a particular element of God's revelation to Israel. Following each identifying term is a descriptive qualifier and a statement of the effect that can be expected when a person follows that particular item of instruction.

1. Torah: "The Torah of Yahweh is perfect, restoring the soul" (v. 7a). "Torah" (תּוֹרָה) is often translated "law," but it is better understood as "guidance," "instruction," or "teaching" (Terrien, 2003, 211). The Torah of Yahweh is an umbrella term that refers here to the whole body of instruction that was handed down to Israel through Moses. Therefore, it encompasses and summarizes the four terms that follow. The adjective "perfect" (תּוֹמִים) means "complete" and "free of blemish" (Clines, 1993: VIII, 653). Its effect is to restore the soul, which means it enlivens, energizes, and causes the hearer to flourish. "It can revive an exhausted being" (Terrien, 2003: 211).

2. Testimony: "The testimony of Yahweh is trustworthy, making wise the inexperienced" (v. 7b). Yahweh's "testimony" (עֲדוּת) signifies his solemn witness to his covenant with Israel, "the stipulations of the Sinai covenant laid down in writing" (Köhler & Baumgartner, 2001: II, 791). Yahweh's testimony is "trustworthy," a verbal form that means "to be lasting, continue, be dependable, be faithful" (Jenni & Westermann, 1997: I, 135). Its effect is to give wisdom to the "naïve" (CEB), the "young," those who are "inexperienced" and need instruction but are "capable of learning" (Köhler & Baumgartner, 2001: II, 989).

3. Precepts: "The precepts of Yahweh are right, rejoicing the heart" (v. 8a). The "precepts of Yahweh" (פְּקוּדֵי) are regulations found in the Mosaic covenant, more specifically, regulations regarding sacrificial and other ceremonial requirements. The Lord's "precepts" are "right," signifying that they are "correct, fitting, and just" (Holladay, 1988: 148). Their effect is to create joy in the heart of those who adhere to them.

4. Commandment: "The commandment of Yahweh is pure, brightening the eyes" (v. 8b). The word "commandment" (מִצְוָה) refers to each of Yahweh's moral and spiritual requirements. The "commandment of Yahweh is pure," which means that it is uncontaminated, unmixed. It "brightens" or "enlightens" the eyes (Clines, 1993: I, 159-160), causing them to shine. Bright eyes are a sign of energy, life, and optimism.

5. Judgments: "The judgments of Yahweh are truth, they are righteous altogether" (v. 9b). The fifth term, "judgments" (מִשְׁפָּטִים) specifies the decisions of Yahweh regarding moral and ethical questions. Yahweh decides all questions of right and wrong, especially when members of the community are in conflict with each other. The word "truth" indicates "reliability," fidelity, and integrity (Holladay, 1988: 22). The judgments are "righteous," because they never err. They are always right; they always fall on the side of justice. Human judges may err, but Yahweh always delivers righteous judgments.

To this list of five terms with their five qualifiers and their five effects is added a crucial element in Israel's covenant relationship to Yahweh: "The fear of Yahweh is clean, standing forever" (v. 9a). A number of commentators have observed that "fear of Yahweh" is grammatically an objective genitive (i.e. fear *toward* Yahweh, in contrast to the other five statements that are subjective genitives (i.e. Torah *from* Yahweh). I would suggest that the Hebrew grammar can bear the weight



of poetic double entendre. The “fear,” after all, originates from God’s display of power and holiness; therefore, perhaps the psalmist used the phrase as both objective and subjective.

The fear of Yahweh is the awe, reverence, and honor that is due to Yahweh on account of his sovereignty, his power, and his covenant relationship with Israel. The fear of God is an inner disposition or attitude of deep respect for God, an attitude that is partially generated by the observation of the heavens mentioned in the earlier part of the song. It symbolizes genuine devotion and true worship (Terrien, 2003, 212-213). The fear of anything other than God is tantamount to idolatry (e.g. Deuteronomy 6:12-14; Judges 6:10). The verb “to fear” is used in these biblical texts with the meaning “to worship,” “to reverence” and “to serve” (Clines, 1993: IV, 278). The word “clean” signifies the purity that is required before any person or thing can approach the presence of God (cf. Psalm 24:3-4) (Köhler & Baumgartner, 2001: I, 369). Because the fear of Yahweh is “clean,” it makes a person qualified to enter the sanctuary and to encounter Yahweh’s presence. Reverence for Yahweh, therefore, is the attitude that is necessary for faithful engagement with Yahweh’s Torah. The fact that the fear of Yahweh “stands forever” underlines the narrative quality of Torah, accompanying the narrative quality of creation mentioned above.

### ***Affection for the Torah (19:10-11)***

Not content just to describe the Torah’s many attributes and contributions, the Psalmist proceeds to praise the Torah’s desirability. The Torah appeals not only to the intellect and to the religious commitments of the hearer, but the Torah also garners the affections of the hearer, reaching deep into the heart and producing “happiness” (Terrien, 2003: 213). The Yahweh’s Torah, testimony, precepts, commandment, and judgments are worthy of affection, love, and attention for four reasons: they are valuable, enjoyable, advisable, and profitable.

Yahweh’s instructions are valuable: “More desirable are they than gold, much fine gold” (v. 10a). The allure of riches captures the hearts of many people, but the Torah brings more joy, more, peace, and more security than mountains of gold. The Torah, therefore, is “desirable,” that is, something worthy to be sought after and pursued (Jenni & Westerman, 1997: II, 434).

Yahweh’s instructions are enjoyable, because they are “sweeter than honey, even honey from the honeycomb” (v. 10b). Harking back to Psalm 1:2, where the psalmist declares that righteous people “delight” in the Torah of Yahweh, Psalm 19 now expresses the deep pleasure derived from hearing the word of Yahweh. The Torah is “sweeter” than the purest, freshest honey. This figure of speech has reference to taste (with smell implied), thus completing the psalm’s allusions to all five human senses. The other three senses are represented by hearing the heavens (vv. 1-4), feeling the sun’s heat (v. 6), and seeing with brightened eyes (v. 8). The inclusion of all five senses represents the “holistic perception” available through observation of nature and through reception of the Torah (Klouta, 2000: 182). Furthermore, the images of honey and gold can also allude to the psalm’s earlier mention of the sun, because “it is no accident that both of these substances, like the sun, are yellowish in color” (Lenzi, 2010: 465).

Structurally, v. 11 is the conclusion of the Torah section. The verse begins with a conjunction (ו), and it offers further commentary on the value of the Torah. Inasmuch as v. 12 has no grammatical connection to the previous line, it begins a new section. Obviously, the “warning” of v. 11 connects thematically to v. 12 as a link or hinge, but the concluding phrase, “great reward,” confirms that v. 11 belongs structurally with vv. 7-10.



Yahweh's instructions are advisable, because "your servant is warned by them" (v. 11a). Here, the benefits of the Torah are brought to bear on the individual worshiper. The speaker is identified as "your servant," a phrase that indicates humility, worship, and a lifestyle of commitment to Yahweh. The Hebrew term translated "warned" (VanGemeren, 1997, V, 1085), from the root *וזהר*, means to "be instructed, admonished, warned" (Brown, Driver, & Briggs, 1979: 264). The same root, however, can mean brightened or illuminated (Clines, 1993: III, 94), "to make clear" (Köhler and Baumgartner, 2001: I, 265). "Warning," then, is not a negative term in this context. The word connects to other aspects of the psalm, looking backward to the Torah' instruction and to its brightening of the eyes (perhaps also to the sun's brightness) and looking forward to the servant's prayer to be freed from "hidden" errors (v. 12). Oeming agrees and goes so far as to argue the "warned" in v. 12 is the "organizing center of the whole" psalm (2000: 136).

Yahweh's instructions are profitable: "in keeping them there is great reward" (v. 11b). Having noted the warnings that are provided in the Torah, the servant points to the "reward, recompense" (Clines, 1993: VI, 542), "wages" (Köhler & Baumgartner, 2001: II, 873) accruing to those who heed the warnings. The idea of "keeping" God's commandments, statutes, and teachings is central to the Mosaic covenant. Within the Decalogue, Yahweh includes the promise that he will be faithful to those who "love" him and "keep" his commandments (Exodus 20:6). Later, he adds to the promise, declaring that anyone who "keeps" his statutes and judgments will "find life through them" (Leviticus 18:5).

The portrait of the Torah that is painted in Psalm 19 reveals a beautiful, desirable, beneficial, and lifegiving covenant. Although the psalmist utilizes a number of legal terms that might be construed as signals of "the demanding, obligatory character of the revelation of the law in contrast to the revelation of the word of the glory" (Hossfeld & Zenger, 1993: 133), the glowing descriptions of the Torah subvert a legalistic view. Goldingay observes, "Christians are often enthusiastic about the glory of nature but see Moses' teaching as an oppressive bondage. Psalm 19 finds God's revelation in the cosmos rather frightening in its fieriness, but is full of joyful enthusiasm for YHWH's expectations. The psalm challenges Christian readers to see that YHWH's instructions are designed to be life-giving" (2006: I, 299). Goldingay is right. Inasmuch as the Torah is perfect, restorative, trustworthy, wisdom-giving, right, joy-producing, pure, enlightening, clean, truth, righteous, desirable, sweet, admonishing, and profitable, it is something worthy of our pursuit, worthy of our affection, and worthy of our study. The Torah offers knowledge of the truth, which has been revealed by the same God who created the heavens.

### **3. Knowledge gained through self-reflection (19:12-14)**

#### ***Discerning errors (19:12)***

The Torah's warning function leads to the servant's plea to be free of "errors" (Wagner, 1999: 249). The noun translated "errors" (*שְׁגִיאוֹת*) is difficult to define precisely because it occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible. The root in its verbal form, however, is fairly common, occurring twenty-one times; and it refers to sin that is "done inadvertently" (Hamilton, 1999: 904). These unintentional errors "can be due to misunderstanding, the subconscious, or simple inadvertence" (Ashburn, 1994: 247). The verb is used to describe sins of ignorance (Leviticus 4:2-4) and the wandering of sheep (Ezekiel 34:6). With these examples in mind, the noun in Psalm 19:12 represents what we might judge as "wanderings" or "straying from the path."

"Who can discern errors?" The word "discern" (*בִּינָה*) means to "understand, perceive," "notice" (Holladay, 1988: 38). The unintentional sins are "hidden" and "undiscovered" (Holladay, 1988:



261); therefore, the psalmist recognizes the need for God's help in perceiving them and uncovering them. The word "hidden," also found in v. 6, connects this third section of the psalm to the first section. Our secret selves are "illuminated by the Law as the most hidden corners of the earth are touched by the ardor of the sun" (Auffret, 2000: 42; Lenzi, 2010: 466).

### ***Willful sins (19:13)***

Humans often err unintentionally, but they also sin knowingly and willfully. The psalmist knows this, and having heard the warnings of the Torah, he discerns his true self, he then cries out to God, trusting that God will transform his thoughts and actions. Therefore, he asks God to "restrain" (Holladay, 1988: 118) him from "presumptuous, arrogant, impudent" sins (Clines, 1993: III, 81). He pleads with God that these sins will not "rule" (משל) over him.

When God restrains the psalmist from unintentional, hidden errors and restrains him from committing willful sins, then he will be "blameless" and "free of great transgression." To be "blameless" (תמים) is to be "complete" (Jenni & Westerman, 1997: 1424). It is the same Hebrew root that is used to describe the Torah in v. 7: "The Torah of Yahweh is perfect." The translation "blameless" is appropriate for v. 13 because the completeness or perfection in question is a moral completeness, a freedom from "great transgression" (i.e. rebellion against God's authority) (Livingston, 1999: II, 741). The word "free" (נקה), which occurs in vv. 12 and 13, could be translated "innocent" (NIV, NKJV, ESV, NRSV) (Jenni & Westerman, 1997, II, 764) or "clean" (LXX, VUL, CSB), but it also includes the idea of liberty (Holladay, 1988: 245), and the translation "free" is appropriate both for the imperative "free me" (v. 12) and for future tense "I shall be free" (v. 13). To be clear, the psalmist is not asking to be acquitted from "existent wrongdoing, even (or especially) secret or hidden wrongdoing" (Goldingay, 2006: I, 295); rather, he is asking God to prevent him from committing any sins in the future. God forgives and pardons the guilty, but he does not "acquit" them (Exodus 34:7). The psalmist is asking God to remove "the inclination to wrongdoing" (Goldingay, 2006: I, 295).

### ***Pleasing words (19:14a)***

To be freed from errors is a way of describing righteousness by using a negative—no errors equals perfection. The final verse of the psalm reverses the rhetoric by adopting a positive image. Instead of praying that he may have no errors, he prays that his words may be "pleasing" to God (v. 14). The Hebrew terms translated "words" (אמרים) and "utterance" (הגיון) both signify audible communication, although the "utterance" may be no more than a groan or a cry. It has been defined as "moan, growl, utter, speak, muse," (Brown, Driver, Briggs, 1979: 211) and "utter, mutter, moan (mourn, KJV), meditate, devise, plot;" (Wolf, 1999: I, 205), and it may be an example of onomatopoeia. The word carries a variety of meanings depending upon its syntactical role. Used intransitively, the verb "utter" can mean "moan" (Isaiah 16:7), "growl" (Isaiah 31:4), "coo" (Isaiah 38:14), or "mutter" (Isaiah 8:19), but in all cases the utterance is audible. Furthermore, the speech is not limited to words coming from the "mouth," but the psalmist acknowledges that utterances emerge from a deeper place—from the "heart." The mention of speech unifies the psalm, "stitching the opening and closing of the psalm tightly together," inasmuch as "words" (אמרים) harks back to vv. 2 and 3" (Wagner, 1999: 259).

The servant prays that his words and utterance may be "pleasing" (רצון) to God. The common translation "acceptable" (NKJV, NRSV, ESV) fails to capture the affective dimension of the Hebrew term (רצון), which denotes "desire," "favor" (Holladay, 1988: 345-46), "goodwill," and "delight" (Clines, 1993: VII, 545). Furthermore, the English "acceptable" can mean barely satisfactory or



adequate, a sense that does not fit the context of Psalm 19:14. Therefore, I chose the translation “pleasing.” The psalmist’s words are accepted by God not because they meet a bare minimum requirement but because they are pleasing to God.

### ***Praise of Yahweh (19:14b)***

Until the last line of Psalm 19, God is praised only indirectly (Gerstenberger, 1988: 101). The heavens declare God’s “glory;” the sun illustrates God’s universal reach; the Torah affirms God’s life-giving covenant, and the prayer reveals God’s power to sanctify his servant. Finally, however, the psalmist composes a doxology, affirming God directly: “O Yahweh, my rock and my redeemer” (v. 14b). Thus, Psalm 19 begins with creation and concludes with redemption, two prominent themes in the book of Psalms. This final address to God makes seven times that the name “Yahweh” is mentioned in Psalm 19, a repetition that may allude to the seven days of creation (Cooley, 2014: 177). The metaphor of God as a “rock” (צור) is common in the Old Testament, and it normally symbolizes God’s protective and salvific role as refuge (Psalm 18:2; 31:2), defense (Psalm 27:5; 62:2), and strength (Psalm 62:7). It “emphasizes the principles of strength, might, and power” (Klouda, 2000: 190). It is also possible to infer that “rock” corresponds to creation and “redeemer” corresponds to Torah. Because the word “rock” (צור) is derived from the verb “to form, to shape” (יצור), it alludes to creation of the world (Genesis 2:7, 8; Psalm 74:17; 95:5; Isaiah 45:18) and to the creation of Israel (Isaiah 43:1). “Thus the psalmist recognizes God as the One who brought him into existence, and who continues to create and shape him through His Torah (Ashburn, 1994: 248; Ross, 2011: 486).”

Moreover, Yahweh is the psalmist’s “redeemer” (גאל), a highly significant title for God in Old Testament thought. In Psalms, the kinsman redeemer implies a personal relationship, which causes God to save the psalmist from death and to save Israel from Egypt and from exile (Briggs and Briggs, 1969 I, 175-176). Israel’s identity as a people is rooted in the story of redemption from Egyptian bondage, a story that begins with God’s promise: “I am Yahweh, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians ... and I will redeem (גאל) you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments” (Exodus 6:6). The Lord fulfilled his promise to redeem Israel, and then he granted Israel the covenant as embodied in the Torah. The concluding description of God as “redeemer” suggests that God’s revelation through nature and through Torah has a redemptive purpose that is realized as the people of God see, hear, and receive that revelation.

## **Implications of Psalm 19**

### **Psalm 19 challenges polytheism.**

Creation theology is crucial to Israel’s worship. In ancient Near Eastern religions, the sun, moon, and stars were deities; but, from the outset, the Hebrew Bible insists that the heavenly bodies are creations of Yahweh (Genesis 1:1-19). Even the sun, the most powerful of the heavenly bodies, is not a god. In Psalm 19, “*Der ehemalige Sonnengott ist zur Kreatur des Schöpfergottes depotenziert*” (Hossfeld & Zenger, 1993: 133). The heavenly bodies are not worthy of worship, because they are created by Yahweh. Accordingly, the heavenly bodies do not compete with God as objects of worship; rather, their role is to glorify their creator (YHWH) and to enhance Israel’s worship of Yahweh.

Yahweh demands exclusive worship; therefore, the creaturely nature of heavenly objects is essential to Old Testament theology, because people of Israel were tempted continually to



worship the gods of Canaan, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. Before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, Moses warned them, saying, “And beware, lest you lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them” (Deuteronomy 4:19 NASB; cf. Deuteronomy 17:3 and Zephaniah 1:5).

### **Psalm 19 challenges naturalism.**

The importance of creation theology does not always register with modern western peoples, partly because they are not typically tempted to deify the sun, moon, and stars. Unfortunately, a modern person is more likely to succumb to the equally dangerous heresy of naturalism, which not only rejects the deity of heavenly objects but also rejects belief in any deity whatever. Naturalism is a philosophical idea or belief that only natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces operate in the world. Stated another way, it is a theory denying that an event or object has a supernatural significance specifically: the doctrine that scientific laws are adequate to account for all phenomena.

The widespread acceptance of naturalism among scientists is the primary reason for Christian suspicions regarding the validity of scientific inquiry. Obviously, when science becomes subservient to naturalism, it also becomes incompatible with Christianity and any other theistic belief. On the one hand, scientists need to understand that to many Christians science is synonymous with naturalism; therefore, all science is suspect. On the other hand, Christians need to understand that science and naturalism are not the same thing and that not all scientists are naturalists. Pentecostal theologian Ray C. Robles explains: “Science needs to be *situated*, not overcome, or succumbed to” (2022: 208).

### **Psalm 19 situates science**

I would suggest that Psalm 19 addresses the situating or orienting of science in at least four ways.

First, Psalm 19 invites our careful and disciplined observation of the heavens. The powerful image of the heavens “recounting the glory of God” is an implicit invitation to all of humanity to look up and gaze at the stars and to listen intently to the message that they speak. Their speech, however, is without sound; therefore, the message must be discerned, not with the ears but with the eyes. We hear the message through our observations. Psalm 19 is consistent with other Old Testament texts, written in a pre-scientific age, which encourage investigation and observation of the creation. The sufferer Job advised his friends:

Just ask the animals, and they will teach you.  
Ask the birds of the sky, and they will tell you.  
Speak to the earth, and it will instruct you.  
Let the fish in the sea speak to you (Job 12:7-8 NLT).

Second, Psalm 19 subverts the modern scientific model of subject–object relationships. Although the psalm invites observation and supports scientific inquiry, it challenges some presuppositions. In the natural sciences, the scientist is the subject and the cosmos is the object of study. The scientist examines creation with telescope and microscope, while the object of study is unaware of the process. The stars, the moon, and the sun are not sentient; they have no will, no volition, no intentions. They are lifeless objects. Reversing the modern approach, the poetry of Psalm 19 makes the “heavens” the subject. The heavens are personified, and they speak. Humans become



the object—listening, observing, and learning from creation. Of course, this reversal of subject and object is theological rather than methodological, inasmuch as the heavens do not literally speak or act. It is important, however, that we recognize the theological import of Psalm 19:1-6. Because the heavens are portrayed as speaking and because God created the heavens to do just that, even our observations are, in truth, gifts from God that we receive through God's grace.

Third, Psalm 19 indicates that observation reveals more than a knowledge of creation—it reveals a knowledge of God. The heavens do not recount their own glory; rather, they recount God's glory. Scientists study creation in order to learn more about creation, but that is not the point of Psalm 19:1-6. The psalmist insists that by observing the heavens, the sky, and the sun, humans can know something about God. It is not without significance that Psalm 19 posits a God who desires to be known by humanity. Karl Barth comments, "We must begin with the fact that there is a readiness of God to be known ... In His essence, as it is turned to us in His activity, He is so constituted that He can be known by us" (2004: II, 65).

Fourth, the knowledge of God that can be gained through observation of the heavens is incomplete. The heavens provide a knowledge of God's "glory" but not a full knowledge of God's being, character, and attributes. The knowledge of God that is revealed in creation is but a preface, a foreshadowing of the fuller revelation that comes in the Torah (vv. 7-11).

Furthermore, not everyone has the ability to recognize God's glory in the heavens. Discerning God's glory requires a certain measure of faith. The seraphim cry out, "The whole earth is full of [God's] glory" (Isaiah 6:3); yet can we see the glory as clearly as the seraphim see it? Similarly, rainbows appear in the sky, but some animals are unable to distinguish the colors. The glory of God is reflected in the heavens, just as the light of the sun reflects from the moon. Ancient peoples saw moonlight, but they did not recognize it as sunlight. They believed the moon itself was a source of light. However, advances in astronomy made by the Greeks in the fifth century BCE demonstrated that the moon reflects sunlight. In the same way that the light reflected from the moon reveals the brilliance of the sun, studying the heavens reveals the brilliance of God; but some people do not have the discernment necessary to see God's glory. God desires to make himself known to humanity; therefore, God created humanity with the faculties necessary to see the divine glory in creation. However, some people have "eyes to see, but do not see, and ears to hear but do not hear" (Ezekiel 12:2). These are the same people who, when offered light, "loved darkness rather than light" (John 3:19). Therefore, contrary to the insistence of some apologists, creation alone is not sufficient to prove the existence of God. Psalm 19 is not an apologetic for the existence of God; instead, it is an invitation to the worship of God. Nowhere does the psalm argue for the existence of God; rather, it assumes it.

### **Psalm 19 asserts God's power**

To those who have the capacity to see it, the glory of God is visible in the heavens. However, the knowledge of God that may be obtained from observing the heavens is limited. Nevertheless, a number of God's attributes are visible. First, I would suggest that the expanse of the universe, the brightness of the sun, the mystery of the stars, and the effect of the moon all reveal the power of God. This is the inference that the Apostle Paul makes in Romans 1:20, when he states that the creation makes known God's "eternal power and divinity." The psalmist's statement that the sky shows "the work of [God's] hands" (Psalm 19:1) is a clear reference to God as creator (cf. Psalm 95:5; Isaiah 40:12). Regarding the sky, Barth writes, "by its existence and durability it proclaims its creation by God, and therefore its origin in His wisdom and omnipotence, and therefore His



refusal to will chaos and His protest against it, and His decision and capacity to uphold the cosmos” (2004: III, 139).

### **Psalm 19 inspires awe, wonder, and worship**

Everyone can paint, but not everyone can paint a masterpiece. God not only created the cosmos; he created it a masterpiece. The psalmist declares that God “made the heavens with skill, For His lovingkindness is everlasting” (Psalm 136:5 NASB). God’s artistic skill evokes aesthetic appreciation: “Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them” (Psalm 111:2 NRSV). When the heavens recount the “glory of God,” they are displaying both God’s power and God’s artistry. The universe is filled with wonder and beauty; therefore, Psalm 19 is an invitation not only to scientific observation but also to aesthetic appreciation.

Almost 200 years ago, the famous French cardiologist Claude Bernard published groundbreaking studies of the human heart. Aware of the traditional poetic function of the heart as the seat of the emotions, Bernard argued that his physiological studies would not violate the poetic truths associated with the heart. He insisted that there can be no contradiction between the “truth of the scientist and the truth of the poet” (1865: 237). He recognized the deep anxiety that some people experience toward science, because they fear that science is eliminating awe and eradicating wonder. Bernard argued just the opposite, insisting that a scientific understanding of creation’s complexities should increase our sense of amazement and admiration (1865: 251). He argued further that science, art, poetry, and philosophy are mutually enriching and that science does not “kill inspiration” He writes, “*La science ne contredit point les observations et les données de l’art, et je ne saurais admettre l’opinion de ceux qui croient que le positivisme scientifique doit tuer l’inspiration. Suivant moi, c’est le contraire qui arrivera nécessairement. L’artiste trouvera dans la science des bases plus stables, et le savant puisera dans l’art une intuition plus assurée.*” (1865: 252).

If situated properly (as Robles argues), science does not diminish wonder and mystery. The fact that we understand the refraction of light as it strikes a water droplet does not make the rainbow any less beautiful and moving. Also, we know what happens in a solar eclipse, but that knowledge did not prevent my wife Karen and me from standing awestruck in 2017 as the moon blotted out the light from the sun. It was an amazing experience. Wonder and awe are enhanced by the Holy Spirit as we observe the cosmos with faith. Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong writes,

Apart from such Spirit-given eyes of faith, the narrative of the natural history of the world can be, has been, and will be told from an increasing number of (natural scientific) interpretations. But when understood in faith from the redemptive-eschatological perspective of final theological causation, the story of creation of the world comes alive with the breath of (the Spirit of) God, even as the many tongues of the various disciplines can be seen to illuminate different facets of the Creator’s artistic work (Yong, 2011: 96).

God’s glory that is displayed in the heavens and God’s instruction that is revealed in the Torah generate in the hearer of the psalm a deep appreciation and a motivation to worship God. Although the psalm does not praise God directly until its final line, the entirety of Psalm 19 implicitly praises God, because the creation glorifies God, and the Torah exalts God’s teachings. “Thus in praising the law the psalm praises the God who is revealed in that law” (Weiser, 1962: 202). Worship evoked as well by the “deep undercurrent of joy” (Grogan, 2008: 67-68) that runs throughout the psalm. As we noted above, the character of God’s instruction is wholly life-giving



and life-affirming, so that the hearer is motivated to magnify the Lord and to love the Lord's instruction. The psalmist's affection for the Torah is implied in his glowing descriptions of the Torah's attributes and benefits. The Lord's instruction is not a burden to be endured, but it is a blessing to be enjoyed. It is more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey (v. 10).

### **Psalm 19 encourages moral and spiritual formation**

Last but not least, I would agree with Wagner, who argues that psalmist's prayer (vv. 12-14) "serves as the climax and goal of the entire psalm" (1999: 248). The psalm begins with the expanse of the cosmos, narrows its focus to the movement of the sun, narrows further to the teachings of the Torah, then finally zooms in on the individual "servant." Beholding God's glory in creation and hearing God's word through the Torah provide the orientation that is necessary for "self-recognition" (Gerstenberger, 1988: 102), which will enable us to grow in moral and spiritual development. Psalm 19 invites us to discover ourselves, and this truth may be the most elusive to both scientist and theologian. Scholars are experts when it comes to analyzing an object from a distance, but they often are mere amateurs when tasked with self-exploration. Like the psalmist we must be concerned to correct our "errors" (v. 12) in the light of God's "warnings" (v. 11) so that we may be free from "great transgression" (v. 13). The perfections of the universe and the perfections of the Torah motivate the hearer toward perfection of character and action.

The foundation of this moral and spiritual development is humility. Samuel Terrien asserts that Psalm 19 is "a subtle confession of human self-deification" (2003: 214). Observing the grandeur of creation, the vastness of the universe, the perfection of the Lord's teachings, and the carefulness of God's dealings with humanity, moves the psalmist to recognize his smallness, his limitations, his weaknesses, and his mortality. Humility is generated by consideration of the cosmos. Elsewhere the psalmist writes: "When I observe Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You set in place, what is man?" (Psalm 8:3 CSB). The Old Testament character Job sensed the same kind of human limitations; and in rebuke of his critics' arrogance, he asked, "Can you direct the movement of the stars?" (Job 38:31 NLT).

Compared to the heavens, humans are small and insignificant. We tend to think very highly of ourselves, as if our actions, our thoughts, and our accomplishments are the most significant things that ever happened. However, each human life is but a moment in the continuum of human history. History spans the changes that have come from the industrial revolution, the invention of engines, airplanes, and other technological marvels. Moreover, if the history of the universe were a 500-page novel, then the 45,000 years of recorded human history would not constitute a chapter, or a page, or a sentence—not even a word. Compared to the story of the universe, all of recorded human history would be equivalent only to the last letter of the last word on the last page. Humility.

### **Conclusion**

Psalm 19 calls upon its audience to receive three kinds of knowledge: knowledge gained by observation (vv. 1-6), knowledge gained through Torah study (vv. 7-11), and knowledge gained through self-examination (vv. 12-14). The voice of creation speaks of the majesty and power of God. The voice of the Torah speaks in terms of covenant, ethics, and human response to God. The voice of the human heart speaks of integrity, faithfulness, and affections. J.A. Loader (2011: 8) explains the value of both creation and Torah:



Nature does what the spoken word of Torah alone cannot do: it carries the very power of overwhelming impressiveness which gives the Torah its compelling force. On the other hand, the Torah does what nature alone cannot do: it identifies the source of this overwhelming beauty as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Israel.

Although I have outlined Psalm 19 in terms of three sources of knowledge—observation, revelation, and self-reflection—the song itself insists that God is ultimately the source of each kind of knowledge. We may learn from the cosmos only because it “speaks.” We may learn from the Torah only because God “instructs.” We may learn about ourselves only when God enables us to “discern” our erring ways. Therefore, all knowledge is a gift of God; and all knowledge of God is a self-disclosure from God to his creatures, with whom God desires to share a living relationship (Bakon, 1993: 142).

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