Nature, Revelation, and Grace in Psalm 19: Towards a Theological Reading of Scripture

Benjamin D. Sommer
The Jewish Theological Seminary

Does biblical criticism have anything to contribute to a theologically engaged study of Scripture? The answer implicitly provided by many scholars, both within the guild of modern biblical scholarship and outside it, is clear: The biblical critic’s findings are irrelevant to constructive projects. These findings may be the product of intensive philological, comparative, and historical work, but they are no more connected to the tasks of the modern thinker than artifacts dug up by an archaeologist. Indeed (some theologically and literarily minded readers assume), biblical critics often produce work that impedes an interpreter who is oriented towards larger ideas. Those ideas, after all, emerge from textual wholes that are subtle, creative, and innovative, while biblical critics (these readers believe) have a penchant for dismembering texts or reducing them to hackneyed representatives of types of thinking or textual genres found elsewhere in the ancient Near East. As a result, not a few theologians and philosophers who attend to the Bible shun the work of biblical critics.¹

If there are constructive thinkers who regard biblical criticism as dry, overly technical, and insufficiently engaged with ideas, they sometimes do so on the basis of real evidence. Such evidence, however, hardly proves that historical, comparative, and philological work is incapable of producing results that are relevant to the humanities writ large. In what follows, I present a reading of one biblical poem to illustrate the tasks, resources, and pitfalls of modern biblical criticism. I provide examples of tools we can use to enter the thought-world of a song from the first millennium B.C.E. and models for putting that song in conversation with later habits of thought. I hope thus to show how biblical criticism at its best produces work that is useful for theologians and philosophers. Further, I offer an illustration of how biblical criticism can engage in dialogue with fields that have often shunned it—and that it has sometimes shunned as well. In pursuit of these aims, this essay integrates material from secondary works not typically cited together in a single piece of research, and it encourages a type of synthesis that is, alas, less common than it might be.

The poem in question, Psalm 19, raises an issue that has long interested theologians and philosophers: to what extent does knowledge of the divine originate from human observation of the natural world, and to what extent must this knowledge depend on a gift from God? Psalm 19 is widely (though, I shall argue, erroneously) viewed as being split between a section that deals exclusively with nature and one that speaks exclusively of revelation. Studying the links between the two parts of this psalm allows us to retrieve the way one biblical text addresses the tensions between reason, creation, and the universal on the one hand and revelation, grace, and the particular on the other. Working together, these two stanzas provide a dynamic but consistent view of how humans in general and Israelites in particular come to understand God. The psalm’s work of supplementation shows that in the allusive and concrete manner of ancient Near Eastern literature (rather than the abstract and propositional manner of most Western thought), the psalm proposes a distinction that was to play a major role in medieval and modern theology: to wit, the distinction between knowing about God’s attributes or characteristics, on the one hand, and knowing God and thus knowing God’s will, on the other.


The Text and Its Structure

The poem reads:  
2 The skies recount God’s splendor the expanse above proclaims his hands’ work.
3 One day utters a word to the next, one night conveys knowledge to another.
4 There is no speech, there are no words— their voice is not heard. [or: whose voice cannot be heard.]
5 Their sound goes through all the world, their words, to the end of the earth.
   In the skies he set a tent for the sun, 6 which is like a groom who comes out of his chamber, like a hero, delighted to run the course.
7 It rises at one end of the sky, and its circuit goes to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.
8 Yhwh’s teaching is whole, renewing life; Yhwh’s covenant is trustworthy, making the simpleminded wise;
9 Yhwh’s orders are fair, gladdening one’s mind; Yhwh’s command is bright, bringing light to one’s eyes;
10 Yhwh’s awe is pure, enduring forever; Yhwh’s judgments are true, they are always correct,
11 More desirable than gold, than quantities of platinum; 5 Sweeter than honey, than drippings from the comb.
12 Your servant, too, takes care with them; in obeying them there is great bounty.
13 Who can see his own errors? Cleanse me of what is hidden,
14 From presumption, too, guard your servant; Let them not rule over me; then shall I approach perfection and be cleansed of terrible sins.
15 May speech from my mouth and thoughts of my mind find acceptance before you, Yhwh, my rock and redeemer.


3 Translations throughout the article are my own unless otherwise noted; versification follows the Masoretic Text. In many translations, MT’s v. 2 is part of v. 1, and each following verse number in those translations is one lower than the MT’s verse number.
4 Or: “He...” Similarly, both occurrences of “its” later in this line could be read as “his.”
5 Literally, “fine gold.”
The opening nouns of the poem’s two stanzas, verses 2–7 and 8–15, announce their subjects. The first stanza is concerned with the sky and God’s handiwork: in short, with creation or nature. While the latter term is an anachronism (since there is no corresponding term in biblical Hebrew), the confluence of terms and themes found in the first stanza fits “nature” well, especially if we keep in mind that the stanza speaks especially of the natural world above the earth; these verses are concerned with astronomy and physics, rather than biology, geology, or ecology. The first word of the second stanza introduces its topic: תּוֹרָה (torah). This term has several meanings in biblical Hebrew: first of all “teaching” but also “law,” as well as “custom, normal way of behaving.” It often denotes a particular collection of teachings or laws—in other words, a book. (Some biblical authors use the term to refer to the book of Deuteronomy or an earlier version thereof, while others use it to refer to a book that combines Priestly and Deuteronomic laws—in other words, to the Pentateuch, whether in its current form or in an antecedent recension.) The five synonyms that begin the subsequent lines of the second stanza specify which meanings of torah are intended. The first of these synonyms, עדות, can refer in biblical Hebrew to a covenant or treaty, especially one in which a higher-ranking party imposes duties on a lower-ranking one. The presence of the term shows that “Yhwh’s torah” in our psalm means first of all a teaching from or about Yhwh that establishes a relationship in which humans owe obedience to Yhwh. Most of the remaining terms—orders, commands, judgments—put us firmly in the arena of law, of activities that God commands and humans carry out.

6 Stephen A. Geller writes: “If one limits the range of the term ‘nature’ to something like ‘the way things work, the ordering of things by God in a manner that humans can understand by observation,’ then the semantic range of ‘nature’ is covered, in a very general way, by the Hebrew term derek, ‘way, manner of acting’” (“Wisdom, Nature and Piety in Some Biblical Psalms,” in Riches Hidden in Secret Places: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of Thorkild Jacobsen [ed. Tzvi Abusch; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002] 101–21, at 101). It is this sense of “nature” that I intend throughout this essay.


8 For example, in 2 Kgs 22:8, and throughout the book of Deuteronomy itself.


10 The term is cognate to Akkadian adû (which occurs in Neo-Assyrian treaties) and old Aramaic עד. For a helpful discussion of the term’s nuances and its relationship to ברית, see Moshe Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” JAOS 90 (1970) 184–203, at 188–89, as well as Israel Knohl, The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School (trans. Jackie Feldman and Peretz Rodman; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 142–43, and further references there.

11 The term עדות can also mean “witness,” and this additional meaning may hint at the idea that torah provides evidence about Yhwh. The synonyms for torah in the following lines, however, do not pick up on this idea.
One term, however, stands apart from the other five: “Yhwh’s awe” at the beginning of verse 10. All the other terms are top-down; they involve a command, teaching, ruling, or judgment from God with which a human complies. “Awe before Yhwh” (or “the fear of Yhwh”), on the other hand, moves from humanity towards God, and consequently commentators have puzzled over it. Michael Carasik explains the problem away elegantly: according to a famous saying found several times in the Bible, the fear of Yhwh is the beginning, or the very essence, of wisdom (Ps 110:10, Prov 1:7 and 9:10; see further Isa 33:6 and Prov 15:33). It follows that the term in verse 10 stands for “wisdom.”

Thus torah in Ps 19:8 refers both to behavioral torah (it means “law”) and to that torah that embodies wisdom (it also means “teaching”). And this torah is first of all a matter of covenant, a meaning that fits both the legal and pedagogical senses of the term. The laws and teachings in question are specifically Yhwh’s, which is to say, if I may use later Western terminology, that they are revealed laws and teaching. The wisdom in question can simply be referred to as “revelation,” if by that term we understand a teaching that is intentionally given by God to a human being or a human community and that would not have been fully knowable or discoverable by human beings on their own. We may add that in this poem, revelation is an act that creates a covenant and entails legal obligation.

These two stanzas are further differentiated from each other by several elements of poetic structure. Each stanza consists of two-part poetic lines that create a consistent rhythm throughout the poem. A change in rhythm occurs at the end of each stanza, however, where we find two three-part poetic lines. (I refer to the two or three constituent parts of a poetic line as a verset in what follows.) While some biblical poems alternate freely between two- and three-part lines, in this poem the alternation serves a specific purpose: to mark the end of one thematic and textual unit. Further, the sense that verse 8 begins a new stanza is reinforced by an abrupt shift in rhythm: at verse 8, we begin a section of six poetic lines, each consisting of five words. The syntax of these lines is identical, creating parallels not only within each line but from one line to the next and setting off these verses starkly from what precedes them.

[Notes]

12 The construct state for the other five terms indicates the idea “from”: תורת ה׳ means “a teaching from Yhwh,” מצות ה׳, “a commandment from Yhwh.” But in יראת ה׳ the construct state indicates “towards” or “for.” In grammatical terms: all the others are subjective constructs, while יראת ה׳ is an objective construct. Both are perfectly normal in Hebrew, but the presence of one outlier among six cases calls for exegetical attention.

13 Michael Carasik, who further points out, “Since this is at base a wisdom poem, part of the drill is to make the reader figure some of these things out” (personal communication concerning Psalm 19).

14 For this definition of revelation, see Keith Ward, Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World’s Religions (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) 16; see also 24 and 30.

15 Michael Fishbane suggests on thematic grounds that the poem has three parts: vv. 1–7 deal with creation; 8–11 with the Torah or revelation; and 12–15 with redemption (Text and Texture: Close Readings in Selected Biblical Texts [New York: Schocken, 1979] 84–90, 148). This three-part structure is satisfying to students of modern Jewish philosophy, especially of Hermann Cohen and
These stark differences have long been noted by modern scholars, many of whom have pronounced the two stanzas to be different and unrelated psalms altogether.\textsuperscript{16} One prominent scholar writes,

Ps. 19 is composed of two originally separate poems: (A) a morning hymn, praising the glory of ‘El in the heavens (v.\textsuperscript{2–5b}), and glorious movements of the sun (v.\textsuperscript{5c–7}); (B) a didactic poem, describing the excellence of the Law (v.\textsuperscript{8–11}), with a petition for absolution, restraint from sin, and acceptance in worship (v.\textsuperscript{12–15}).\textsuperscript{17}

This proposal is not inherently implausible; there are other cases in the book of Psalms in which a single chapter or psalm does not correspond to a single poetic composition. The clearest case involves Psalms 9 and 10, which together constitute a single poem that is an alphabetic acrostic. But on a literary level, this common suggestion about Psalm 19A and 19B as separate poems is altogether unlikely.

Franz Rosenzweig. But the border between the first and the second parts is sharp at both thematic and formal levels, while the movement from what Fishbane calls the second to the third is more fluid. The opening words of this third section, “Your servant, too, takes care with them,” connect directly to the lines that precede, since the antecedent of “them” in v. 12 is the teachings and laws of vv. 8–11. The third section’s theme, salvation, emerges only in v. 14 or the very last word of 13. The gradual emergence of the third part is also suggested by formal considerations. When we move from part one to part two, the parallelism changes drastically. In part one different lines contain various sorts of parallels, some phonological, some syntactic, some lexical. But as we enter part two, the parallelism is quite regular: the first verset of each line consists of a noun in the construct state, then God’s name, then an adjective, and the second verset repeatedly consists of a participle in the construct, and then the object of the participle. This structure begins to change a little in the fifth line in part two (v. 10aβ), where the participle is not in the construct, and the second word (יִשָּׁב) is not an object but an adverb. In 10b, the structure of the second verset dissolves a little further: the first word is a finite verb rather than a participle and the second an adverb (צדקו יחדו). Verse 11a breaks out of the structure that started at v. 8 altogether. The movement from one sort of parallelism to the other occurs over several lines and does not allow us to demarcate clearly a second and third stanza. Finally, the structuring use of the three-verset lines occurs only at the end of the first stanza and at the very end of the poem. Formal and thematic considerations, then, lead to the conclusion that this is a poem with two stanzas. One can plausibly argue, following Fishbane’s insight, that the second stanza contains two overlapping subsections, the second of which begins to focus more on the consequences of torah as opposed to torah itself. It is the stark difference between the first stanza and the second that concerns us here.


We shall see that the psalm is a single, highly integrated poem; its two stanzas are intimately related on the levels of theme, imagery, and intratextual allusion. Indeed, the crucial point the poem makes involves the relationship between the two stanzas.

Yhwh and the Sun

Before we turn to analyzing the relationship between the stanzas, however, it will be useful to leave the psalm for a few moments to discuss an aspect of ancient Israelite religion not well-known among nonspecialists: the worship of Yhwh, the God of Israel, as the sun. Several types of evidence convince biblical scholars that many Israelites equated Yhwh with the sun or viewed Yhwh as a solar deity. An example of such evidence is found in a Judean seal that was owned by one Ashna, an eighth-century B.C.E. courtier of King Ahaz (see illustration 1). The image on the seal recalls the scene depicted in the opening verses of Isaiah 6, in which the prophet reports that he saw Yhwh sitting enthroned as king, attended to by winged heavenly beings called סרפים or seraphs, a Hebrew term that refers to a type of snake— in Isaiah’s case, a flying, winged heavenly snake. In the seal in illustration 1, two seraphs (without wings, though note the winged seraphs in illustrations 2 and 3) surround a circle that wears a crown. Various scholars have recognized this circle as a symbolic representation of the Israelite God, Yhwh, as the sun disk. In both Isaiah’s vision and Ashna’s seal, Yhwh is represented as king; he sits enthroned in Isaiah’s vision and wears a crown in Ashna’s seal. In both he is surrounded by seraphs who attend him. The seal in illustration 2 depicts a winged seraph in the presence of a circle seated on some sort of pedestal; again, the circle is likely to be a symbolic representation of Yhwh. Similarly, J. C. Taylor has argued that Yhwh is portrayed symbolically as the sun, seated on a horse, on the uppermost tier of an Israelite cult stand found in Ta’anakh and dated to the tenth century B.C.E. (see illustration 4).

---

18 From Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 275. These seals were discovered in the first half of the twentieth century. My illustration 1 (which Keel and Uehlinger number as 273) was first published in Kurt Galling, “Beschriftete Bildsiegel des ersten Jahrtausends v. Chr. vornehmlich aus Syrien und Palästina. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der phönizischen Kunst,” ZDPV 64 (1941) 121–202, at 121. Illustration 2 (Keel and Uehlinger’s 274a) was first published in Olga Tufnell et al., Lachish III (Tell ed-Duweir): The Iron Age (2 vols.; London: Oxford University Press, 1953) plate 44A.

19 In light of the similarity between the two scenes, it is worth noting that Jerusalem in the 8th cent. B.C.E. was a very small town, that both Isaiah and Ashna lived during the reign of Ahaz, and that Isaiah enjoyed close connections to the royal court in which Ashna served (see Isaiah 7–9). Consequently, it is inconceivable that Isaiah and Ashna did not know each other.

On that tier, Yhwh is surrounded, as he is so often in biblical literature, by cherubs. These examples are representative of ancient Israelite representations of Yhwh; Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger have demonstrated that the portrayal of Yhwh as the sun is well attested in Israelite iconography.

Illustration 1
The seal of Ashna
Keel and Uehlinger, #273.
Image originally published in ZDPV 64 (1941) 121.
Image used with permission of the Deutsche Verein zur Erforschung Palästinas.

Illustration 2
The seal of Shefatyahu
Keel and Uehlinger, #274a.
Image used with permission of Fortress Press.

Illustration 3
The seal of Yahmalyahu
Keel and Uehlinger, #274b.
Image used with permission of Fortress Press.

Illustration 4
The Ta’anakh cult stand
Rendering by the artist Ellen Holtzblatt.
Image used with permission of the artist.

God and the World of Ancient Israel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 157; image used with permission of the artist, Ellen Holtzblatt. The Ta’anakh cult stand also appears in Keel and Uehlinger, Gods, 159, #184.

Yhwh is also represented by an empty space on the second tier from the bottom; thus this cult stand provides extremely early evidence of Israelite aniconism, the tendency not to sculpt or represent Yhwh’s body in any literal fashion, in consonance with Exod 20:4. Note, however, that the cult stand also provides clear evidence of Israelite polytheism, in contrast to Exod 20:3: the first and third tiers clearly portray the goddess Asherah.

With these archaeological artifacts in view, several biblical passages appear in a new light. Two passages, 2 Kgs 23:11 and Ezek 6:1–7/8:16, depict sun worship in the Jerusalem temple. The authors of Kings and the prophet Ezekiel regard this worship with horror, but the worshippers they condemn probably did not see themselves as worshiping a foreign deity. Rather, they may have intended to bow down to Yhwh as a sun-god, or in his manifestation or *avatāra* in the sun.\(^{23}\) 1 Kgs 23:11 further attests to a connection between the sun and horses in Yhwh’s temple, since it speaks of King Josiah destroying both “the horses that the kings of Judah dedicated to the sun at the entrance to Yhwh’s temple . . . and chariots of the sun.” This connection, also known among other sun deities in the ancient Mediterranean world such as Helios, explains why the sun disk in the Ta’anakh stand sits astride a horse. The association of Yhwh with the sun is known from Ps 84:10–12. The identification of Yhwh as a solar deity by many ancient Israelites has been argued persuasively by several biblical critics, including not only Taylor but also Mark Smith and Bernd Janowski.\(^{24}\)

The observation that many ancient Israelites equated Yhwh and the sun provides crucial background for understanding the relationship between the first and the second part of Psalm 19. The first stanza of the psalm uses language also found in prayers to sun deities in ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Hittite literature.\(^{25}\) For example, the reference to the sun as resembling a hero “who runs the course” recalls a motif found in Egyptian, Hittite, and Mesopotamian literature; Mesopotamian examples refer to the course as *arḫu/urḫu*, the Akkadian term cognate to the

\(^{23}\) On the usefulness of the Sanskrit concept of *avatāra* for understanding Israelite conceptions of Yhwh, see Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 15, 40–41, and 78.


\(^{25}\) See Nahum M. Sarna, “Psalm XIX and the Near Eastern Sun-God Literature,” in *Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies: Papers* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1967–1968) 1:171–75. While about half of Sarna’s parallels are too broad to be significant—they could have been used to adduce connections with many deities in addition to the sun-god—the remaining parallels are impressive and allow us to conclude that the psalm deliberately uses motifs drawn from ancient Near Eastern sun worship.
psalm’s term חֵמָה. The term חֵמָה in verse 7 can mean not only what I translated above, “its heat” (that is, the heat of the sun), but also “his sun” (that is, the sun that Yhwh created); this term, too, underscores the focus on the sun in the first half of the poem. The phrasing in that line (“nothing hidden from its heat / his sun”) recalls the all-knowing aspect of the sun deity, whose omniscience is a particular concern of ancient literature, presumably because the sun’s location high in the sky allows the sun deity to see everything on earth—and because at night it sees what is underneath, as well.

These references to the sun in the creation stanza are hardly surprising. Nahum Sarna has pointed out something much more intriguing: language associated with the sun is even more frequent in the Torah stanza. In the first line there we are told that Torah “renews life,” a phrase that recalls a frequent epithet of ancient sun deities; in a world without alarm clocks, it was the sun that awakened people each morning, drawing them back from the little death that is sleep. Similarly, the “bright” nature of Yhwh’s commandment in verse 9 (ברוחה) reflects an understandably widespread motif applied to the sun; this adjective is applied to the sun in both Israelite and Ugaritic literature. One need not be a scholar of ancient Near Eastern cultures to see that the description of the commandments as “bringing light to one’s eyes” in verse 9 can allude to the sun, as does the comparison of תּוֹרָה to gold and honey in verse 11. In fact, every single line in the paean to תּוֹרָה contains language reminiscent of the sun or sun-gods. And just as the first section contains a pun related to the sun (חֵמָה—the sun’s heat, or Yhwh’s sun), so too in the second section the poet relates, in verse 12:腿עֵבֶר נַעֲשֵׂהוּ—that is, the poet takes warning from the commandments or is careful about observing the obligations required by תּוֹרָה documents (several of which spell out the dire consequences of covenant infraction); but he also is “enlightened” or “bedazzled” by them. (Both senses of the root זה־ר are known in biblical Hebrew.)

26 Sarna, “Psalm XIX,” 1:172: רֶדָע אֱרָחָה שָּם וּאֵרֵשֵׁת, “the one who travels the courses of heaven and earth.”
27 See Taylor, Yahweh, 224.
29 See Song 6:10 (כמו־שחר יפה כלבנה ברוה כחמה) and a Ugaritic manumission letter in PRU 2:1005.2–3=UT 1005.2–3 (קְמָשׁ דָּבָר). The connection of ברה in v. 9 to the solar motif in v. 5 is noted in ibn Ezra’s commentary to v. 9; so also Mitchell Dahood, Psalms: Introduction, Translation, and Notes (3 vols.; AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966–1970) ad loc.
30 The importance of this phrase in linking the first and second parts of the poem is noted by Rashi in his comment to v. 8.
31 The sense of “brightness” is rare, occurring again only in three late texts: Ezek 8:2, Dan 12:3, and Sir 43:9 in the B MS from the Cairo Genizah. The praise of the Torah found in our second stanza is typical of postexilic literature, and this lends credence to the suggestion that the psalm is late; see, e.g., Kraus, Psalms 1–59, 269 (and, on this theme more generally, Alexander Rofé, “The Move towards the Study of Torah at the End of the Biblical Period: Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2; Isaiah 59:21,” in The Bible in Light of Its Interpreters: Memorial Volume for Sarah Kamin [ed. Sara Japhet;
These parallels between the first and second parts of the psalm suggest important conclusions regarding several issues: first, the psalm’s attitude towards sun worship; second, the unity of the psalm; and third, the main thematic thrust of the psalm.

An Anti-Pagan Polemic?

The presence throughout the psalm of language recalling prayers to the sun from throughout the ancient Near East directs our attention to the psalm’s attitude towards sun worship. Sarna argues that the psalm “is an anti-pagan polemic, specifically, an anti-sun-god polemic, that has made use of the standard terminology of the Near Eastern sun-god literature to combat the Sun cult ideologically and to glorify God and his Torah.”32 Mark Smith, however, cogently rejects the idea that the psalm is a polemic against the worship of the sun: “Psalms 19 has no overtones of polemic against solar worship. On the contrary, the sun and the torah serve analogous functions of witnessing to the God of the sun and the torah. Even if a polemic lay behind Psalm 19, as Sarna argues, it well may be that the solar practice was indigenous.”33

Smith is correct to point out that the psalm does not engage in a rhetoric of polemic. It does not attack any beliefs or practices explicitly, in contrast to the specific references and the highly argumentative tone in texts that assail Israelite polytheism in Isaiah 40–48, Jeremiah, or Hosea, for example.34 Unlike, say, Genesis 1 or Gen 6:1–4, the psalm does not subvert language traditionally used by a pagan opponent, thus undermining that language and implicitly attacking the ideas it usually supports.35 Nonetheless, the parallels that Sarna adduces are numerous and consistent; they must have a purpose. By applying phrasing associated with solar deities first to the sun and then, with even greater frequency, to torah, the psalm

---


33 Mark S. Smith, “‘Seeing God’ in the Psalms: The Background to the Beatific Vision in the Hebrew Bible,” CBQ 50 (1988) 171–83, at 178 n. 28. Similarly, Taylor argues that the psalm, far from being an anti-solar polemic, stresses continuity between Yhwh and the sun (Yahweh, 222). His reading fits the poem at least as well as Sarna’s.


does not combat Israelites who were worshipping the wrong deity—Shamash rather than Yhwh, or Shamash alongside Yhwh. Instead, Psalm 19 argues against the identification of Yhwh with the sun, an identification that was quite widespread in ancient Israel, to judge from archaeological evidence and from biblical texts that the archaeological record suggests we should read in new ways (or rather, very old ways recovered anew). The psalm presents its correction of popular notions of Yhwh’s nature by stressing that both sun and torah are Yhwh’s creations, which attest to Yhwh’s greatness. In the parallel projects of enlightenment that the sun and Yhwh’s torah perform, both reflect a greater source of light, and it is that source who deserves the ultimate loyalty. This subtle polemic is already hinted at in the poem’s opening line, which refers to God’s kabod (kabod: “Yhwh’s splendor” or “Yhwh’s glory”). Biblical texts often use this word as a technical term referring to the fiery or intensely bright body of God. Priestly texts even assert the identity of Yhwh and the kabod. In light of this identification of God and a blinding or lethal brightness comparable to fire, one can understand that Israelites may have noted a similarity between the kabod and the sun; some may have proceeded to equate the kabod—which is to say, Yhwh—and the sun. Our poet plays with this notion by explicitly introducing the motif of the kabod and subsequently describing the sun as a different thing. The poet informs us that the sky tells of God’s kabod, not that the sky contains it. Each morning the sky allows us to see a created thing that intimates the nature of the true kabod not visible to us.

The psalm does not direct a complaint against Israelite polytheists. Rather, it attends to a subtler problem: Israelites who pray to the right God the wrong way. The worship of such Israelites unintentionally belittles Yhwh. To regard Yhwh

---

1:17–28. For an intra-Israelite polemic that adopts its opponent’s language in order to deflate it, see Moshe Weinfeld, “God the Creator in Gen. 1 and the Prophecy of Second Isaiah,” Tarbiz 37 (1968) 105–32 [Hebrew].

36 On this theme of reflected light, see ibn Ezra’s commentary to v. 9.


39 For comparison of the kabod with fire, see, e.g., Exod 24:17 and Num 9:15. Jacob Milgrom points out that with the use of the word “like” in these verses, P makes clear that the kabod is not made of fire; rather, fire is the closest word P can think of to describe the unique, otherworldly substance of which the kabod consists (Leviticus 1–16; A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary [AB; New York: Doubleday, 1991] 575).

40 A similar teaching is attributed to Rabbi Avin from Gen. Rab. 17.5 and its parallels in rabbinic and kabbalistic literature (for which see Midrash Bereshit Rabba [ed. Jehudah Theodor and Chanoch Albeck; 3 vols.; Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965] 1:157 n. 1 [Hebrew]): “The lesser version of the supernal light is the sun. The lesser version of the supernal wisdom is Torah.”
as Hebrew Helios is to fail to understand who and what Yhwh really is. It is not apostasy but monotheism gone awry that the psalm criticizes—and for this reason the psalm is more interesting for modern Jews and Christians than the anti-pagan polemics found elsewhere in Scripture. After all, the sin of many modern Jews and Christians is hardly that they believe in too many gods. But the danger of taking a gift from God and turning it into a sort of idol that ultimately obscures the Giver and the Giver’s teachings endures in contemporary Judaism and Christianity. If the psalm polemicizes not against polytheism (worshipping foreign gods like Shamash) but against improperly equating Yhwh and the sun, then it warns that the mere intention to address the one God is not enough; there are wrong ways to worship the right God.\footnote{For the possibility that incorrect intention can convert Jewish prayer into idolatry, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, \textit{Idolatry} (trans. Naomi Goldblum; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 186–201. It is against this internal, monotheistic idolatry (or at least idolatry rooted in genuine monotheism) that Psalm 19 provides a warning. The contrast between this approach and the attitude of the “sovereign self” among modern Jews is striking. I borrow the term “sovereign self” from Steven Martin Cohen and Arnold Eisen, \textit{The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) 2 and passim.}

\section*{The Psalm’s Unity}

As Sarna points out, the presence of solar motifs throughout the psalm shows it to be a single, well-integrated composition.\footnote{Sarna, “Psalm XIX,” 1:171.} It is no coincidence that both parts of the psalm draw from the same field of motifs and language; and it is significant that the sun language is more prevalent in the stanza that does not describe nature. The poet uses these motifs especially where they are more arresting and thought-provoking.\footnote{An additional verbal connection between the two stanzas is the word נסתר in vv. 7 and 13; our sins may be hidden from others, and even from ourselves, but never from God. This parallel is noted by Otto Schroeder, “Zu Psalm 19,” \textit{ZAW} 34 (1914) 69–70, at 70, as well as by Fishbane, \textit{Text and Texture}, 88; Jon Levenson, “The Theologies of Commandment in Biblical Israel,” \textit{HTR} 73 (1980) 17–33, at 29; and Taylor, \textit{Yahweh}, 225.} Further, the confluence of themes presented by the poem’s two stanzas is a typical one for ancient Near Eastern literature. Otto Schroeder pointed out a century ago that attention to sun-god literature from ancient Mesopotamia belies the notion that the respective themes of the two stanzas indicate that they are separate literary works, and Lorentz Dürr took this argument for the psalm’s unity even further.\footnote{Schroeder, “Psalm 19”; Dürr, “Psalm 19.”}

\footnote{For the possibility that incorrect intention can convert Jewish prayer into idolatry, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, \textit{Idolatry} (trans. Naomi Goldblum; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 186–201. It is against this internal, monotheistic idolatry (or at least idolatry rooted in genuine monotheism) that Psalm 19 provides a warning. The contrast between this approach and the attitude of the “sovereign self” among modern Jews is striking. I borrow the term “sovereign self” from Steven Martin Cohen and Arnold Eisen, \textit{The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) 2 and passim.}

For the ancient Orient, sun and justice, law and lawgiving are directly bound together. . . . \textit{The main activity of the sun-god in the ancient Orient is a judicial one, and . . . thus in verses 8ff. [that is, in the \textit{torah} stanza of Psalm 19] we are entirely in the sphere of the sun-god. . . . Sun or sun-god and justice belong together. . . .} It is always the case [in ancient Near Eastern hymns to the sun-god] that first of all his exit from the mountains is praised, and then
there follows the transition to “Judge of heaven and earth,” before whom “justice stands on the right and truth on the left,” or “before whom justice and judgement sit enthroned.”

These themes—light and justice, or sun and law—often appear together in both Mesopotamian and Israelite literature. Dürr points out that in the prologue to Ḫammurapi’s laws, lawgiving and enlightening the land are mentioned in the same lines, and that Ḫammurapi compares his own legislative and judicial work as king to the rising of the sun-god, Shamash (Code of Ḫammurapi i:32–44; and see also in the epilogue xlvii:79–xlviii:2). Dürr further notes the connection of light/sunrise with law/justice in many biblical verses: for example, Hos 6:5, Zeph 3:5, Mic 7:9, Ps 37:6, Isa 51:4, 58:8, 62:1, Mal 3:20, and Prov 4:18 (whose vocabulary is especially reminiscent of our psalm) and 6:23. Several of these include the root סע (“coming out, going forth,” vv. 5, 6, and 7), just as many of the Akkadian texts that associate justice and light/sun contain the cognate verb aṣû. The same confluence of themes we find in Psalm 19 is evident in the great Hymn to Shamash and in Ashurbanipal’s Prayer to Shamash. If, say, Prov 4:18 or Code of Ḫammurapi i:32–44 are by single authors, then there is no reason to doubt that Psalm 19 is by a single author as well.

Further, Michael Carasik takes Sarna’s argument for the unity of the poem a step further by pointing out: “There are not merely ‘sun’ words in the second part, but also ‘word’ words in the first part.” He refers to terms in the first stanza such as ספּוֹרִים (recount), מגד (proclaims), יבּיע אָמִר (utters a word), דעת (conveys knowledge), דָּבָרִים (words), and מֵאָמֵרִים (their words). We have seen that the torah stanza (we might even say: the “text” stanza, since torah in ancient Israel, in the senses of both law or of teaching, was found in texts, whether oral or written) is replete with nature terminology; so too, the “nature” stanza is full of terminology.

45 Dürr, “Psalm 19,” 41–42. See further Schroeder, “Psalm 19,” 70.
46 These themes continue to appear together in Hebrew poetry of the rabbinic era—for example, in the piyyut recited in rabbinic liturgy for Saturday morning (אָל אֲדֹנָי על רַגָּל וְאֵין נִצַּב).
47 Dürr, “Psalm 19,” 44–45.
48 This final parallel from Proverbs is adduced by Rashi on our psalm.
49 Dürr, “Psalm 19,” 45–47.
52 Carasik, personal communication.
taken from the world of the text. This mirror imaging connects parts one and two of the poem and reveals them to be in dialogue with each other. This dialogue, I submit, is the very heart of the poem. The crucial question, then, is not whether but how the two sections relate to each other. What comment does the nature stanza make about torah, and the torah stanza about nature?

Nature and Revelation

Having established that the psalm is a unity with two distinct sections, we must explore how the stanzas relate to each other. Doing so leads us to the main concern of the psalm: the connection between nature and torah as disparate expressions of God’s glory. One can come to know God through observing the world God created, and one can come to know God by observing God’s laws, but these two different senses of “observing”—watching and obeying—lead to two kinds of relationship. Phrased in terms of knowledge, the issue the psalm raises involves the distinction between two types of disclosure of the divine: one that takes place constantly and impersonally in nature, and another that takes place when God as person conveys teachings or demands to a human being or a human community. Phrased in terms of relationship, the psalm’s question is whether and to what extent a connection between God and a human being or a human community must involve covenant and law, and to what extent and in what ways such a relationship can exist without the institutions listed in the second stanza.

These questions have attracted interest not only from biblical scholars but from theologians, among them Karl Barth. A core question for Barth’s massive theological project in his fourteen-volume Church Dogmatics is whether there is “a knowability of God independent of His revelation” and whether this knowability is affirmed by the Bible itself. In addressing this question, Barth finds the Psalms—and in particular Psalms 8, 19, and 104—especially relevant. (Romans, in particular 1:18–25, also plays a crucial role for Barth; he often looks at Psalm 19 through his own, somewhat idiosyncratic, reading of Romans 1.) Barth points out that with the exception of Psalms 8 and 104, whenever a psalm talks of God as manifested

---

53 As a result, as Jonathan Grossman of Bar-Ilan University points out to me, the psalm presents the roots of revelation as already present in creation. This notion of revelation as distinct from but rooted in creation would play a major role in the work of Franz Rosenzweig. On the embedded nature of each concept in the other, see Franz Rosenzweig, The Star of Redemption (trans. William W. Hallo; Boston: Beacon, 1972) 131–40, as well as Stéphane Mosés, System and Revelation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig (trans. Catherine Tihanyi; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992) 86–89, and Yehoyada Amir, Reason out of Faith: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2004) 144–45 and 145 n. 2 [Hebrew].


through or glorified by nature, the psalm also speaks of the God of Israel (or at least the psalmist uses terms like “justice” or other terminology that implies the notions of law, covenant, or revelation).56 “The witness of man in the cosmos,” he avers, “does not come about independently, but in utter co-ordination with and subordination to the witness of the speaking and acting of God in the people and among the men of the people of Israel.”57

Barth defends this line of reasoning with reference to Psalm 19:

In itself and as such the text of the cosmos is, indeed, mute, as it says expressly in Ps. 19.3 [MT 4]: ‘Without speech, without words and with inaudible voice’ one day speaks to another and one night declares to another. . . . It is because and as God speaks and acts in Israel that man in the cosmos . . . can now know and remember that whatever he . . . knows as the wisdom and power and goodness and righteousness of God is simply an exact reflection of the wisdom and power and goodness and righteousness which he has known before in God’s speaking and acting in Israel. . . . We do not see the features of any other god than the God of Sinai and Zion declared in the main line.58

Here, however, Barth overstates the evidence from the psalm. “It is because . . . God speaks . . . in Israel that man . . . can now know and remember that . . . which he has known before in God’s speaking and acting in Israel,” Barth maintains, but “now” and “before” are not evident in the psalm. On the contrary, the psalm discusses knowledge that comes from the Torah after it discusses knowledge from nature.

For Barth, nature does not, on its own, teach anything; nature is mute. This interpretation (which is also found in the commentary of the biblical scholar Hans-Joachim Kraus59) depends on a particular reading of verse 4, one of the verses in the nature stanza that emphasizes what Carasik calls “’word’ words”: איניעלובים והלואים ומשלמה כלול. There are two ways of translating this verse:

(a) There is no speech, and there are no words; their voice is not heard.

(b) There is no speech, and there are no words, whose voice cannot be heard.

These two translations result from two understandings of the term בְלָא and the syntax of the verse; suffice it to say that both are linguistically legitimate understandings.60 This is the case even though they present opposite ideas: according to (a), the

56 Ibid., 2.1:107.
57 Ibid., 2.1:108.
58 Ibid., 2.1:112.
59 Kraus, Psalms 1–59, 271 and 275–76.
60 The word בְּלָא allows two understandings: 1) בְּלָא can serve as an adverb that negates a finite verb (see HALOT, s.v. בְּלָא def. 2), and it can substitute for the negative particles אֵין and רָאָי in poetry (see BDB, 115, and HALOT, s.v. בְּלָא def. 6). In our verse, בְּלָא modifies the participle נְשָׁע; since it is a poetic verse, we can understand בְּלָא to substitute for אֵין, which normally negates participles. This reading of בְּלָא simply echoes אֵין, and the versets are semantically parallel. 2) בְּלָא can also serve as a preposition meaning “without,” followed by a noun or a participle. If בְּלָא means “without” before the participle נְשָׁע here,
heavenly bodies make no sounds, while according to (b) the heavenly bodies make no sounds that are not heard—i.e., they do make sounds, and people perceive them. Barth understands the verse according to translation (a), as does Kraus, and their interpretations proceed from that understanding. It seems to me that this is a questionable exegetical strategy for several reasons.

First, Barth’s reading stands or falls with his translation of verse 4. Basing an interpretation on a verse that could mean one thing or its opposite is a dubious undertaking. Further, while both translations are linguistically possible, contextual considerations suggest that translation (b) is stronger. Barth’s reading of verse 4, according to which the heavenly bodies make no noise that humans can hear, contradicts the very next poetic line, “Their קְו carries throughout the earth, their words to the end of the world” (v. 5). One might understand the word קְו to mean something one hears: “music” (so, e.g., NJPS and NEB), “sound” (Kraus), or “call” (Dahood). Alternatively, one can follow the medieval interpreters ibn Ezra and Radaq in understanding the term to refer to a visual phenomenon in the night sky that humans perceive with their eyes rather than their ears. Alan Cooper suggests that קְו can mean “line” in the sense of “the linear ‘course’ that the heavenly bodies follow”; by invariably following these courses, the heavenly bodies attest to the order and perfection of creation. In whatever understanding of קְו one adopts,
verse 5 makes clear that some sign the heavenly bodies make reaches the ends of
the universe. This sign carries meaning; the psalmist tells us that it functions as
the heavenly bodies’ “words” (מליהם). Consequently, verse 5 challenges Barth’s
characterization of the heavenly bodies as noncommunicative.67 Finally, if we
were to accept Barth’s assertion that nature according to the psalm provides no
information to humanity, or that it is impossible for us to understand what nature
conveys, then we would be forced to regard the majestic opening lines of the poem
as ironic: if the skies tell of God’s splendor, they do so pointlessly, for no person
hears or sees their message. The tone of the poem does not support this reading,
and it is unlikely that the poet devotes the impressive language of the first six lines
to a tale devoid of sound, signifying nothing.

This psalm, in Barth’s reading, presents a rejection of natural theology; it denies
that we can know something true and useful about God by observing nature. In his
reading, the psalm asserts the superiority and necessity of revelational theology.
Real knowledge of God results only from God’s specific gift in time to specific
people. More broadly, for Barth natural theology is suspect because (he believes) it
depends on human action and allows insufficient place for grace, while revelation
and covenant are manifestations of grace: for a neoorthodox Calvinist, the point
about the event at Sinai that prefigures the event at Golgotha is that both embody
God’s gift freely given, whereas natural theology implies humanity’s idolatrous
self-confidence. But the notion of revelation’s superiority and self-sufficiency
is not only a Calvinist reading of the psalm; one finds something similar among
medieval Jewish thinkers who interpret the opening words of the second stanza
(תורת ה׳ תמימה—“Yhwh’s Torah is perfect/whole”) to mean, as Nahmanides puts it
in his commentary to Lev 4:25, that God’s Torah “lacks nothing and has nothing

67 One might attempt to defend Barth’s reading by suggesting that v. 5 specifies the information
from v. 4 without entirely contradicting it: the heavens’ קול (voice) is not heard, but their קגו is;
their דברים (words) are not heard, but their מילים (another term meaning “words”) are. In this case,
the point may be that we human beings cannot fully hear or understand their message, but we can
perceive some part of it. Even in this case, however, something gets through from the heavenly
bodies to us, and this is precisely what Barth wants to deny.

Alternatively, we might call ibn Ezra and Radaq to Barth’s defense. Those commentators argue
that we hear nothing from the heavens—we do see a kind of writing in the heavens that we can
study in the form of astronomy. Thus the heavens provide humanity with some information, albeit
taken in through the eye, aided by our faculty of reason, rather than through the ear. In the end
this reading supports Barth’s preferred translation (viz., translation [a]) but goes against Barth’s
insistence that the heavenly bodies communicate nothing whatsoever.

For a different argument on behalf of translation (b), see the detailed treatment in Barr, “Do
We Perceive,” 13–15.
superfluous.” In this sort of reading, natural theology can, at best, aid a person’s understanding of revelation, but it provides no knowledge on its own. Thus Barth maintains:

For now [after revelation, i.e., after the birth, life, and death of Jesus Christ] the self-witness of creation can also speak and tell of what God says, and therefore speak as from God Himself, praising and glorifying Him: ‘The heavens declare the glory of God; the firmament sheweth his handiwork’ (Ps 19.1 [2 mr]). To be sure, ‘there is no speech or language,’ i.e., they have no power to do it of themselves. But they acquire this power. The final and trustworthy thing which they cannot say of themselves concerning their being and existence, they now say as they reflect the eternal light of God, as they answer His word and as they correspond to His truth.

But this is not at all clear in Psalm 19. The first part of the psalm could stand on its own (if one continues reading, one sees that the second stanza expands on motifs from the first; but one could stop at the end of the stanza with a feeling that it forms a brief but complete whole), and the sort of knowledge the first stanza describes could subsist by itself. This knowledge emerges prior to the revelational section of the psalm, which suggests not that nature helps the believer understand an earlier revelation but that revelation supplements the natural knowledge. This natural knowledge existed without the supplement until the Israelite nation arrived at Mount Sinai, or until we arrived at verse 8 in our reading. Nothing in the psalm suggests that sky, firmament, sun, and stars respond to the revelation in the form of the w/Word; such a response would require them to be subsequent to the w/Word, when in the psalm they are prior to it. Whatever the sky and firmament are doing, they have power to do it on their own, even if the second half of the psalm shows that there is another power they lack.

68 On this theme among medieval Jewish philosophers and exegetes, see Cooper, “Creation.” Cooper discusses the quotation from Nahmanides on p. 20. For earlier rabbinic readings that try to erase nature from the psalm, regarding the luminaries of the first stanza as merely ciphers for the Torah, see the passages from Pesiq. Rab. and S. Eli. Rab. discussed by Cooper on 27–28.

69 Barth, CD, 3.1:164.

70 It seems fair to state that Barth’s refusal to countenance any role for natural law drives his reading of Psalm 19. It is not enough for him to deny the possibility that natural theology and revelational theology complement each other; he insists that revelational theology cannot even represent an advance over natural theology, since that would allow some place for natural theology. For a respectful critique on this point from a Jewish viewpoint that advocates a “minimalist natural law theory,” see David Novak, “Karl Barth on Divine Command: A Jewish Response,” in idem, Talking with Christians: Musings of a Jewish Theologian (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005) 127–45, esp. 143–45. For another perspective that resembles Barth’s but is rather more textually sensitive, see Thomas Krüger, “Gesetz und Weisheit im Pentateuch,” in Auf den Spuren der schriftgelehrten Weisen. Festschrift für Johannes Marböck anlässlich seiner Emeritierung (ed. Imtraud Fischer, Ursula Rapp, and Johannes Schiller; BZAW 331; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003) 1–12; Krüger argues that for some biblical authors, including especially those responsible for Deuteronomy, wisdom, even in its most universal form, can only come from God as a gift and can be fully appreciated only through the observance of the law. Krüger successfully demonstrates that for some biblical authors, there is
A very different reading of the psalm appears in the work of James Barr. Where Karl Barth regards the second part of the psalm as superseding or effectively erasing the first, James Barr sees the relationship between the two parts of the psalm as complementary:71

God makes himself known in two complementary ways, first through the great works of creation which control the world, and secondly through his special communication exemplified by his law. The two channels of natural and revealed theology are here very properly to be seen. . . . As everyone on earth receives the heat of the sun, we are entitled to conclude, so everyone on earth receives the language of the heavens or some impression of it.72

Barr moves beyond the complementary reading, however, when he suggests that even the second part of the psalm can be understood as referring to God’s revelation through nature rather than God’s revelation through teaching, law, or covenant that God vouchsafed to specific human beings. Commenting on verse 8, which begins the torah stanza, Barr asks what torah the psalm intends to speak of. He argues against the assumption that we should see torah in verse 8 specifically as Moses’s Torah:

One can of course make that identification but the text does not require it. It is possible to read the text in another way, taking these as general terms for divine ‘instruction’ which may be available and accessible: it is not necessarily limited to the specific materials of the Mosaic Law. It is more like the instruction of a parent, notably a mother (Prov. 1.8, 6.20), or Wisdom’s own instruction, directly given. If this is so, then both parts of the poem form a fine unity in their expression of a universal communication of praise of God from the heavens and instruction from the deity for humanity. Taken this way, it definitely looks positively towards something like natural theology.73

With this suggestion Barr presents a mirror image of Barth’s reading: if the teaching of the second stanza is identical to the natural theology of the first, then natural theology erases revelational theology, just as for Barth the message of the psalm is that revelational theology eclipses natural theology. But the language throughout the first part of the second stanza testifies against Barr’s proposal. The

71 This resembles what Cooper calls the analogical reading of the psalm found in the work of the fifteenth-century philosopher Isaac Arama; see Cooper, “Creation,” 28.

72 Barr, Biblical Faith, 87–88. A fine summary of what we may call the complementary reading appears also in Levenson, “Theologies of Commandment,” 29: “What nature expresses about God in a continual wordless monologue (vv 2–7) is of the same order as the verbal revelation of Torah. The commandments are . . . to human society what the regularities of the heavenly bodies are to what they govern. . . . The analogue to the Torah the psalmist observes is not drawn from human society, but from the regularities of nature, not from history, but from the norms of astronomy.”

73 Barr, Biblical Faith, 88.
synonyms for the word *torah*—covenant, commandments, orders, laws—point toward a *torah* that encompasses a pact and includes legislation. If it is not Moses’s Torah to which the psalm refers, then it is something very similar. The catalogue of nomistic synonyms in verses 8–10 could refer to some law book other than the Pentateuch—say, to the *Shulhan Arukh* or to the Qur’an. But they could not possibly refer to a book concerned with divinity but not with divine commands—say, to David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* or Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*. The stark stylistic contrasts between the two stanzas underscore the fact that they pertain to different types of wisdom.

Even Barr’s more modest proposal that revelational/covenantal theology complements natural theology fails to attend to some aspects of the psalm. The terms used for God in the two sections carry considerable importance in this regard. The first stanza refers to God with the Hebrew term יְהוָּה (*Yhwh*). The second stanza calls God יְהוָּה יִשָּׁרֵא ולְמָרָא (*Yhwh*, personal name). The difference is significant. *’El* is a Hebrew word that simply means “god.” It is a noun, not a name; more specifically, it is a job title. *Yhwh*, on the other hand, is God’s personal name. Thus, as Michael Fishbane points out, “In this objective, impersonal section [vv. 2–7] God is called El, which suggests a certain majestic austerity and contrasts with the sevenfold usage of the personal divine name YHWH in the succeeding sections, where the life of mankind is more directly engaged.”74 To refer to a being by the being’s job title suggests respect but distance. To refer to the person by name evinces a personal relationship. The sense of distance in the first stanza is reinforced by the fact that it refers to God only once, in the first line, while the sense of intimacy in the second is confirmed by the fact that it uses God’s personal name freely, a total of seven times. From observing nature, then, one knows about God. From observing the terms of God’s covenant, one begins not just to know about God but to know God. In addition, many Semitic nations shared the word *’el*; that term or some very close cognate means “god” in the languages of the Israelites’ near and far neighbors in Phoenicia, Edom, Moab, the Aramaean kingdoms, Babylonia, and Assyria.75 But the name *Yhwh* was peculiar to the Israelites; a few debatable exceptions notwithstanding, it was not


75 One might object to my characterization of the term *’el* as a noun rather than a name by pointing out that the head of the Canaanite pantheon in the second millennium b.c.e. was simply called *El*. Of course it is always possible that a job description or a standard epithet can come to function like a name; thus many people refer to the sage from Asbury Park not only as “Bruce” but as “the Boss”—which in this context is not a job title that theoretically could be applied to others but a term unique to him (Him?). As a result of this phenomenon, the job title *’el* came to function in Middle and Late Bronze Age Canaan as a sort of name, and it is possible that echoes of this verbal transformation endured into the Iron Age in Israel. Even in that case, however, the noun-cum-name *El* did not connote the particularity or intimacy of the personal name *Yhwh* because it was used so widely by so many nations, in contrast to *Yhwh*, which was a name and only a name.
used outside Israel. Consequently, we may speak of the knowledge of God in the first stanza as universal and the relationship with God in the second as particular.

The pointed use of different terms for God in the two stanzas overturns Karl Barth’s attempt to deny the possibility that nature provides genuine knowledge of God, even as it undermines James Barr’s proposal that the two types of connection to God in the psalm are complementary. The psalm makes clear that God really is ‘el, and one can learn truths from creation about the Creator’s majesty. The knowledge that comes from nature is valid; but it is also limited. It does not draw one into intimacy with God; it does not provide any ethical or moral directive. The Torah goes further than nature, supplementing it without superseding it. This is made explicit in verse 11, which tells us that the Torah and commandments are “More desirable than gold, than quantities of platinum; Sweeter than honey, than drippings from the comb.” Gold is the color of the sun and an epithet of sun deities, who are also associated with sweetness in the ancient Near East. Here the second stanza not only compares the Torah to the sun; it tells us that the Torah is better than the sun. This is not (contra Barth) a polemic against natural theology, but it does (contra Barr) set up a hierarchy in which both nature and the Torah are important, but the Torah is more precious. (This supplementary position, which

76 Scholars have suggested occasional occurrences of this name outside Israel. Frank Moore Cross argues that a similar term was used as an epithet in the second millennium among Amorites and that the term as a divine name in Israel may have evolved from that epithet (especially if the Israelites’ ancestors included Amorites who migrated into Canaan; Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973] 60–75). A different approach appears in Smith, Origins, 145–46; Smith provides an up-to-date and sympathetic review of scholarship suggesting that Yhwh was originally a tribal god of groups located south of the earliest Israelites. Stephanie Dalley suggests that the name appears in northern Syria in the eighth century B.C.E. (“Yahweh in Hamath in the 8th Century BC: Cuneiform Material and Historical Deductions,” VT 40 [1990] 21–32). This last case may involve worship transported from an Israelite setting, however, and in any event the evidence from Hamath does not indicate any widespread worship of this deity there. See Ziony Zevit, “Yahweh Worship and Worshippers in 8th-Century Syria,” VT 41 (1991) 363–66; and the balanced but critical evaluation in Patrick D. Miller, The Religion of Ancient Israel (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 214 n.17. These cases are at best rare and hardly overturn the claim I make above. For a review of this divine name outside Israel and its possible southern provenance, see Karel van der Toorn, “Yahweh,” in DDD, 1712–30, at 1712–17. If Azize is correct, then a few Phoenicians may have worshipped Yhwh as a solar deity, but Azize points out that they seem to have picked up this worship from their Israelite neighbors (Phoenician Solar Theology, 244–45 and 252–57).

77 Delitzsch notes the psalm’s move from calling God El “in accordance with His relationship to the world as a Being possessed of power” to the “covenantal name” Yhwh (Psalms, 1:346).

78 As ibn Ezra puts it in his comment to v. 2, “One who knows the [stars’] circuits has knowledge of the Most High.”

79 On gold and sweetness as standard epithets of sun deities, see Sarna, “Psalm XIX,” 1:175.

80 The notion that nature provides a revelation that prepares the way for a supplementary revelation in the Torah or in Christ reappears later in the work of Jewish and Christian theologians. See Rosenzweig, Star, 161, and Novak, Natural Law, 145 and 185. On this theme in the work of Abraham Joshua Heschel, see Shai Held, Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013) 100–105.
posits a role for both general or natural revelation and for a more particular and specific revelation through grace is of course associated especially with Catholic teaching, particularly in the Thomistic traditions.\(^{81}\)

Further, the two sections differ in the ways they relate to human effort and divine grace. Knowledge about God in the first stanza requires action on humanity’s part: we must turn to creation, observe it, think about what we perceive, and come to conclusions. The relationship with God in the second stanza, on the other hand, requires God to turn to humanity. In the first stanza God is object, while in the second God is subject. For this reason the valid but limited knowledge that comes from nature is not rightly termed revelation, if by that term we intend a willful act of disclosure on God’s part, for revelation in that sense entails election.\(^{82}\) This contrast becomes more pointed in the very last verse of the poem, which opens us up to dialogue and redemption, for here the speaker, now addressing God directly, refers to the deity as גאל, Redeemer.\(^{83}\) God’s turning to us in the Torah at the beginning of the second stanza is what allows us to begin speaking to God towards the end of that stanza, starting at verse 12. Creation does not yet do this on its own. Consequently, the second part of the second stanza intimates a crucial way in which knowing God goes beyond knowing about God. Further, as Hillel Ben-Sasson points out, relationship with God opens up new realms for human

---


83 I thank Jonathan Grossman for stimulating my thinking in this regard.
beings that involve both morality and the possibility of happiness, for it is when the speaker addresses God that these issues become prominent:

A relationship with The Other thus enables ethical relationships to another, any other. It also sets the horizon of pleasure, and joy (v.11), which are hardly possible in the neutral observation of nature’s splendor. . . . Human reaction is possible only when a subjective divine gesture reaches out to it; the regulatory course of nature might provoke awe and splendor, but not joy.84

To be sure, many a scientist would disagree: some human beings take pleasure from observing nature. But the psalm does not address that possibility. For the psalmist, observing nature yields awe and perhaps what Rudolph Otto calls creature-consciousness,85 but not joy. Pleasure appears in the psalm at verse 11 (“More desirable . . . Sweeter”), as the psalm turns in verses 13–14 from God’s communication of law to the ethical action entailed by the psalmist’s attempt, in consonance with that law, to avoid sin.

The two stanzas do not, then, provide us with functional equivalents. Rather, what happens in the second stanza adds something new and valuable to what happens in the first. It follows that the two-part structure of this poem recapitulates the dynamics of the ancient Hebrew poetic line. Both James Kugel and Robert Alter have pointed out that the second verset of a parallel line in biblical poetry echoes but modifies the first, often by a logic of “intensification” (Alter’s term); the structure of the parallel line is not simply one of equivalence, but is (in Kugel’s words) “A, and what’s more, B.”86 These phrases describe how the second stanza of Psalm 19 relates to the first, and thus they sum up the core theology of this poem. The second stanza moves us from knowledge of God to relationship with God, from proposition to covenant, from reasoning to deed, from observation to joy, from speculation to law, from detachment to grace.

Apologia Pro Vita Sua

We have seen four possible readings of Psalm 19 as a unified poem, all of which focus on the relationship between the two stanzas and the worlds they represent: one stresses revelation and grace while disparaging natural theology; one sees the whole poem as championing natural theology; one sees the two modes of connecting

84 Hillel Ben-Sasson, personal communication concerning Psalm 19.
86 See James Kugel, The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981) 1–58 (the phrase I quote comes from the title of ch. 1), and Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Poetry (New York: Basic Books, 1985) 3–26 (the term quoted is from p. 11). On the idea that the second half of the psalm corresponds to the idea of “what’s more, B,” see Nahmanides’s comment on the psalm: “After saying ‘the heavens proclaim the glory of God’, the psalm continues in praise of Torah, which proclaims the praise of God even more than the aforementioned heavens, sun, moon, and stars” (cited in Cooper, “Creation,” 23).
with God as complementary; and what I have presented as the strongest reading sees revelation as supplementing natural theology in valuable ways. The supplementary reading of the psalm that I have endorsed here is not a new one. As Alan Cooper has shown, medieval Jewish thinkers including Nahmanides, Bahya ben Asher, and Meiri present similar readings. The essential idea I propose is stated by ibn Ezra in his comment to verse 8:

Up until this point the psalm explains how an intelligent person can find proof of divinity and how he can recognize God’s works. At this point, David says there is more evidence, of greater value and more reliable: God’s Torah and decrees, precepts, instructions, the fear of him and his judgments.

In fact, a core message of the poem—that creation is worthy of our attention, and more specifically that what moderns and medievals call astronomy is worthy of our religious attention—plays a major role not only in ibn Ezra’s commentary on the psalm but in his own vocation as a poet.

Qohelet famously tells us that there is nothing new under the sun. Given the parallel between sun and Torah in Psalm 19, it is not surprising to learn that there is nothing new in the study of Torah either. I have not proposed any new reading in this essay. Rather, I have provided new arguments for an old one, and in doing so I have attempted to display several tools and types of reasoning employed by biblical critics. Any one of the tools and any one of the questions I asked along the way might seem far-removed from the weighty issues that interest a person who wants to engage Hebrew Scripture on a theological or philosophical level. Indeed, when one reads the secondary literature produced by biblical critics, one often finds work that asks only one of these questions or employs only one of the tools. The results of such work give the field of biblical criticism the reputation among some literary and theological readers of being narrow or pedantic. When, however, we employ these tools and questions to put biblical texts in dialogue with later thinkers, we are able to recover the way ancient Israelite thinkers grappled with core questions that also concern philosophers. While biblical texts are not philosophical in their methods of inquiry or their styles of discourse, they address

---

88 On this theme in ibn Ezra’s exegetical and poetic work, see Israel Levin, Avraham ibn Ezra: Shirim (Tel Aviv: Haim Rubin Press of Tel Aviv University, 2011) 208–9 [Hebrew]. This topic is central for the medieval Sephardic poets generally; one thinks, above all, of ibn Gabirol’s masterwork, Keter Malkhut, which is thematically quite close to Psalm 19.
89 Qoh 1:9.
90 For a programmatic attempt to describe such a dialogue between biblical scholarship and theology or even philosophy of religion, see Benjamin D. Sommer, “Dialogical Biblical Theology: A Jewish Approach to Reading Scripture Theologically,” in Biblical Theology: Introducing the Conversation (ed. Leo G. Perdue, Robert Morgan, and Benjamin D. Sommer; Library of Biblical Theology; Nashville: Abingdon, 2009) 1–53 and 265–85. For a critique of the form of historicism that pervades the field and prevents scholars from recognizing attempts by biblical texts to address
questions of philosophical importance: What can it mean to know God? What is the role of God as subject and as object in God’s interaction with humanity? How can one think about universalism, particularity, grace, covenant, and law? Because biblical criticism affords us access to the biblical authors’ thinking on these issues, it contributes to much wider projects. This is the case not only in the work of biblical critics who specialize in theological and literary approaches, but also when one combines the work of biblical theologians and literary critics on the one hand with archaeological, philological, comparative, and historical approaches on the other—that is, with the sort of work that some theological or philosophical readers of Scripture view as irrelevant. Psalm 19 provides not only a case study but a model for this dialogue among varied approaches, for it is precisely when one attempts to supplement one approach with another that torah becomes whole.


91 In creating this dialogue among biblical and post-biblical thinkers, I reenact Hermann Cohen’s attempt “to demonstrate how a non-philosophical literary text could contain modes of understanding which had been formulated in a systematic, conceptual fashion only by later philosophy.” I take this description of Cohen’s project from Eliezer Schweid, “Hermann Cohen’s Biblical Exegesis,” in “Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums.” Tradition und Ursprungsdenken in Hermann Cohens Spätwerk (ed. Helmut Holzhey, Gabriel Motzkin, and Hartwig Wiedebach; Philosophische Texte und Studien 55; Hildesheim: Olms, 2000) 359–79, at 359.