

A PSALM BY A BLIND POET

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Psalm 19:1–6

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.
Day by day 'speech' pours forth,
and night after night 'knowledge' is made known.
There is no (human) speech, nor are there (human) words
without the sounds from the skies heard in the background.
The 'voice' of the firmament goes out through all the earth,
and the 'words' from space go to the end of the world.¹

Verily, in the skies *the scorching sun shines!*
He comes out like *a fire-carrier* from his canopy,
and, like a champion,² runs his course with joy.
His start is from the end of the heavens;
and his finish-line³ is the heavens' (other) end.
And nothing is hid from his heat.

(McDaniel)

C. S. Lewis (1958: 63), commenting on this psalms, stated
I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the
greatest lyrics in the world. First he thinks of the sky; how,
day after day, the pageantry we see there shows us the splen-
dor of the Creator. Then he thinks of the sun, the bridal
joyousness of its rising, the unimaginable speed of its daily
voyage from east to west. Finally of its heat; . . . the cloudless
blinding, tyrannous rays hammering the hills searching for
every cranny. The key phrase on which the whole poem de-
pends is "there is nothing hid from the heat thereof."

Weiser (1962: 198), who compared the authors of Psalm 8 and Psalm 19, was of a similar opinion, stating

The author of the latter is undoubtedly the greater artist. His insight, the result of great concentration, combines with his powerful metaphorical language to raise him to a status of a great poet who has stimulated the creative work of such eminent men as Goethe, Haydn, and Beethoven.

By way of contrast, Briggs (1906: 165), while acknowledging that the author of Psalm 19:1–6 (MT 19:2–7) “was a true poet,” considered 19:4 (MT) to be a prosaic gloss, stating,

The numerous attempts to get an appropriate meaning out of the verse have all failed to give satisfaction; as indeed they are all awkward and entirely out of place in a Ps. of such wonderful simplicity, terseness, and graphic power.

Although Lewis wrote of the *pageantry* of the psalm and Weiser wrote of the poet’s profound *vision* “to express in lyrical language the sentiments which the beauty of Nature has evoked in him” and how “the poet’s *vision* vivifies the inanimate things of nature,” (italics mine) the psalm lacks any hint of a visual experience of the psalmist. Mays (1995: 96) recognized this and commented, “It is all very mysterious and marvelous. The visible becomes vocal. Seeing is experienced as hearing.” Similarly, Terrien (2003: 210) noted, “The ear dominated the eye.”

In the absence of any hint of visual experiences—such as references to sunlight, a golden sun, a silver moon, crimson sunsets, blue skies, billowing clouds, or the star studded heavens, it is reasonable to assume that the poet who composed Psa 19:1–6 was blind. But, though blind, the psalmist was not deaf. When extolling the firmament and the heavens, the poet’s auditory experience was quite pronounced, with מְגִיד

and מִסְפָּרִים appearing in 1:2 (MT), אָמַר coming in 1:4 and 1:5, and קוֹלֵם found in 1:5. Although רוח “wind” and רָעַם “thunder” do not appear in these verses, the קוֹל in 1:5 is most likely a synonym of רָעַם—like the “thunder” appearing in twelve verses in the KJV for קוֹל.

In addition to the *heavens*, the *firmament*, the *day*, and the *night* being personified, the rumbling thunder and the howling winds from heaven were considered by this psalmist to be a language all of its own by which the glory of God was continually communicated to the people on earth. On the wind-swept hill or plain where the psalmist lived, no one could ignore or escape the continuous sound of the wind, day by day and night after night. It was a fact of life for the psalmist—perhaps more apparent to a blind poet—that all human speech is accompanied by these ‘wind instruments’: the howling in the firmament, the winds whispering from the heavens, and the rumblings of the stormy skies. For the blind psalmist, the aerial currents of sounds and scents spoke volumes in their own unique dialects.⁴

Commentators gifted with sight have failed to appreciate the voice of this poet who, though living in darkness, extolled the grandeur of the of the heavens based upon auditory, olfactory, and thermal sensations. The poet’s paean of praise was not a product of the imagination, but an expression of personal experience. In a more prosaic paraphrase the poet was making the point that there is no human speech, nor are there any human words articulated anywhere in the world without the concurrent ethereal sounds and scents in the background which make one aware of the glory of God.⁵ The shift from the poet’s focus on aural and auditory sensations to thermal sensations is made after 19:4a (MT 19:5a).

Psa 19:5b–7 (MT)

לְשֶׁמֶשׁ שָׁם־אֱהָל בְּהֵם
 וְהוּא כְּחָתָן יֵצֵא מִחַפְתּוֹ
 יִשִּׁישׁ כְּגִבּוֹר לְרוּיִן אֶרֶח:
 מִקְצֵה הַשָּׁמַיִם מוֹצֵאוֹ וְתִקּוּפָתוֹ עַל־קִצְוֹתָם
 וְאֵינן נִסְתָּר מִחַמָּתוֹ

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun
 which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
 and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
 Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end
 of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

(NRS)

ἐν τῷ ἡλίῳ ἔθετο τὸ σκῆνωμα αὐτοῦ
 καὶ αὐτὸς ὡς νυμφίος ἐκπορευόμενος ἐκ παστοῦ αὐτοῦ
 ἀγαλλιάσεται ὡς γίγας δραμεῖν ὁδὸν αὐτοῦ
 ἀπ' ἄκρου τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἢ ἕξοδος αὐτοῦ
 καὶ τὸ κατάντημα αὐτοῦ ἕως ἄκρου τοῦ οὐρανοῦ
 καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ὃς ἀποκρυβήσεται τὴν θερμὴν αὐτοῦ

In the sun he has set his tabernacle;
 and he comes forth as a bridegroom out of his chamber:
 he will exult as a giant to run his course.
 His going forth is from the extremity of heaven,
 and his circuit to the other end of heaven:
 and no one shall be hidden from his heat.

The MT לְשֶׁמֶשׁ שָׁם־אֱהָל בְּהֵם has been misunderstood in tradition and by contemporary commentators. The Septuagint (cited above) and the Vulgate (*in sole posuit tabernaculum suum*) reflect a *Vorlage* reading בְּשֶׁמֶשׁ שָׁם אֱהָלוֹ, with the MT בְּהֵם conspicuously missing. Several commentators, including Weiser (1969: 199), needlessly emended the בְּהֵם to

בִּים so as to read “(God) set a tent for the sun in the sea.” Dahood (1966: 122) opted to translate the בָּהֶם “in them” as “from/after these” with the force of the conjunction “then.”

However, the בָּהֶם “in them” (i.e., the firmament and the heavens) should be retained as original, and the ל of לִשְׁמֹשׁ should be read as the emphatic ל “indeed, verily,” much like the ל in Lam 4:3, where לִאֲכָזֵר means “was indeed cruel.”⁶ Moreover, the MT שָׁם “he set” needs to be repointed as שָׁם “scorching” and read as the cognate of Arabic *سموم* (*samûm*) “a hot violent wind” (Lane 1972: 1420). Wehr (1979: 499) defined it as a hot sandstorm known as a *simoom*, which has become a loanword in English).⁷ Instead of reading the MT אָהֵל as אָהֵל “tent” it should be read as אָהֵל “shining,” the *Hiph^{el}* of which occurs in Job 25:5, עֲדֹנֵי הַיָּם יִאֲהִיל הֵן עֲדֹנֵי הַיָּם “if even the moon does not shine” (NKJ).⁸ Thus, the MT of 19:5b, לִשְׁמֹשׁ שָׁם אָהֵל בָּהֶם “for the sun he set his tabernacle in them” can be read as לִשְׁמֹשׁ שָׁם אָהֵל בָּהֶם “*Verily, the scorching sun is shining in them,*” i.e., in the heavens.

The poet’s seeming use of חָתָן “bridegroom” as a metaphor for the sun was given sexual connotations by Terrien (2003: 211) who stated

. . . the sun, a lively athlete, spends each night under the shelter of a tent Yahweh has set up for the rest and erotic play of his champion (v. 5c). The sexual aspect of Near Eastern myths is here reduced to a comparison with a young bridegroom who jumps, alert, from his nuptial couch. Nothing will escape his ardors.

However, if חָתָן in 19:6 (MT) really means “bridegroom,” it appears much more likely that the poet chose חָתָן because

of its aural proximity to הָתָה “to snatch up (fire, coals)” and מִחַתָּה “a fire-holder.” The MT הָתָן could be repointed as הָתָן (*scriptio defectiva* for הָתָן) “a fire-carrier,” in which case the original הָתָן would be to הָתָה what גָּאוֹן “pride” is to גָּאָה , what הַמּוֹן “noise” is to הָמָה , and what חֲזוֹן “vision” is to חֲזָה .⁹ Removing the simile of the “bridegroom” from 19:6 (MT) and restoring the “fire-carrier” motif is supported by 19:7b, $\text{וְיֵאֵין נִסְתָּר מִחַמַּתּוֹ}$, “and nothing is hidden from his heat,” i.e., “from the heat of the sun.”¹⁰ As might be expected, a blind psalmist would more likely speak about *solar heat* than about *sunlight*.

The removal of the “bridegroom” from this verse requires also the removal of any “wedding canopy” (NRS) or “nuptial couch” (Terrien). The חַוֵּפָה “canopy, chamber” is a cognate of Arabic *حَف / حَفِيف* (*ḥaffa / ḥafīf*) “to circuit, to surround, to enclose” and “to make (rustling) sounds (from running feet), or the whizzing sounds of wind” (Lane 1865: 597–598; Wehr 1979: 219). With these nuances of חַוֵּפָה in focus, the transition was easily made to the תִּקְוֵפָה “circuit” of the sun and a (noisy) *running* athlete. The psalmist made an association between solar heat and rustling winds, and experienced both as declarations of the glory of God.

Weiser (1962: 199) thought that the psalmist had reworked “with remarkable freedom and ease” (1) an “ancient mythical idea of the abode which the Sun-god has built for himself,” (2) the “widespread mythological idea that the Sun-god rests during the night in the sea, lying in the arms of his beloved,” and (3) a mythological “image of the champion who delights

in contest.” However, philology rather than mythology provides the better clues for recovering the original meaning of the poem. Replacing the “bridegroom” and “warrior” with a “fire-carrier” and a “star runner” (no pun intended), removes erotic nuances and military overtones.

The poet’s lexicon for the communications coming from the skies included **אמר** “speech” (vss. 3, 4), **דעת** “knowledge” (v. 3), **דברים** “words” (v. 4), **קול** “sound” (v. 4), **קוה** “voice” (v. 5) and **מלים** utterances (v. 5). These six synonyms are matched by six synonyms for the communications received directly from Yahweh, spelled out in 19:8–10, which are **תורה** “law,” **עדות** “testimony,” **פקוד** “precept,” **מצוה** “commandment,” **אמרה** “word” (for MT **יררת** “fear”), and **משפט** “judgment.”

The statement in 19:8b (English text), “the commandment of Yahweh is pure, enlightening the eyes,” was unlikely to have been made by a blind person. If 19:1–6 was written by a blind person, as proposed in this study, 19:7–14 was indeed a separate poem, as argued by a number of commentators like Briggs (1906: 162), who stated,

Ps. 19 is composed of two originally separate poems: (A) a morning hymn, praising the glory of ³El in the heavens (v.^{2-5b}), the glorious movements of the sun (v.^{5c-7}); (B) a didactic poem, describing the excellence of the Law (v.⁸⁻¹¹), with a petition for absolution, restraint from sin, and acceptance in worship (v.¹²⁻¹⁵).

Weiser’s concluding remark (1962: 200) on 19:1–6 is especially noteworthy if these verses were composed by a blind

psalmist, “The comprehensiveness of the poet’s belief in God thus enables him to grasp the true meaning and significance of those phenomena [in the heavens and the firmament] to which anxious and prejudiced minds turn a blind eye.”

NOTES

1. This is *not* to suggest that the psalmist knew about solar winds or anticipated radio astronomy.
2. Following here the NJB and the NIB. Note also the NAB which translated גִּבּוֹר as “athlete.”
3. For this meaning of קָוָה / קִוְּהָ, compare Job 1:5,

וַיְהִי כִּי הִקְיִפוּ יְמֵי הַמִּשְׁתֶּה
καὶ ὡς ἂν συνετελέσθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ πότου
and when the days of the feast had run their course.

4. The following brief report from ABCNews.com about the visit of Pope John Paul II to the Jordan River on March 22, 2000 illustrates the point:

A windswept crowd of thousands listened to the pope recite a reading and deliver prepared remarks during the brief ceremony. “On the banks of the River Jordan, you [God] raised up John the Baptist, a voice crying in the wilderness . . . to prepare the way of the Lord, to herald the coming of Jesus,” the pope said, his soft voice all but drowned out by the strong gusts of wind.

5. The MT קָוָה “their line” (KJV) or “their voice, sound” (Septuagint, Vulgate) or “their chord = music” (BDB 876) is probably a *double entendre* involving (1) קָוָה stem II, “to call, to proclaim,” as advocated by Barth (1893: 29, followed by Dahood 1965:

121–122), and (2) קָוָה, stem III, the cognate of Arabic *قوة / قوی* (*qawiya/quwwat*) “to be strong, strength, power, might, force” (Lane 1893: 2997). The Septuagint’s φθόγγος “voice” reflects the meaning of stem II. The widely recognized מִלֵּיהֶם “their words” can be added to the above list of auditory terms in this passage.

6. See McDaniel 1968: 206–207; 2000: 11, 20, 156, 181–182, 211; 2003: 95–96, 129–130; 144, 148, 203, 224, 230, 324, and 332.

7. The ע"ע stem שָׁמַם would be analogous to תָּמַם which has the lengthened adjective תָּמִים and the shorter תָּם, both meaning “complete, sound” (BDB 1070). The שָׂם “scorching” is to שָׂמוֹם what תָּם is to תָּמִים.

8. This אֶהַל would be a by-form of הֶהַל, stem I, “to shine” (BDB 14, KBS I: 19, citing Driver AJSL 52: 161).

9. See GKC 85^u for nouns with a ך affixed. For *scriptio defectiva* of nouns in this class, note הַמְּנִים in Joel 4:14, הַמְּנָה in Ezek 29:19, and הַרְּבֹן in I Sam 13:21 and הַרְּבֹנֹת in Ecc 2:11.

10. The universal and timeless heat of the sun cannot be convincingly likened to the episodic and sporadic heat of erotic passion found in myth or in reality.