

“Creation and Torah”

Psalm 19

Walter Brueggemann has commented that, “The Psalms are a strange literature to study...” (*The Message of the Psalms*, p. 9) Jim Mays has said that the Psalms are both Scripture and liturgy; that they were used by ancient Israel and the early church for instruction as well as worship. (*Psalms*, p. 36) So here’s the problem with these strange things: instruction is explained, told, diagramed. Liturgy is sung, prayed, experienced. Prose is pondered; poetry is felt.

Have you ever tried to explain a joke? Doesn’t work, does it? Mark Twain said, “Explaining a joke is like dissecting a frog: you understand it better, but the frog dies in the process.” Explaining a poem can be like that, explaining a psalm can be like that!

I don’t want to “kill” Psalm 19. But it does require some explanation. Let me give you an example. Back in the 1940s there was a hugely popular song entitled “Open the door, Richard!” by Louis Jordan. Some of you may remember Jordan as a jazz musician and songwriter, known as the “The King of the Jukebox.”

To this day Louis Jordan still ranks as the top black recording artist of all time in terms of the total number of weeks at #1—his records totaled 113 weeks in the #1 position (the runner-up is Stevie Wonder with 70 weeks). Jordan was extremely popular! “Open the door, Richard” was sung by, and danced to, by everyone.

In 1949, Walt Disney produced a Bugs Bunny movie-short it called “High Diving Hare” in which Yosemite Sam tried to force Bugs to jump from a very tall platform into a very small bucket of water. In one scene Sam is chasing Bugs and they come to a door. Sam yells “Open the door, open the door” and then turns to the audience and says, “You’ll notice I didn’t say Richard!” Yuk, yuk, yuk.

Without knowing about Louis Jordan’s song there is no way any of us would understand the humor in that scene. I don’t want to ruin Psalm 19 for you, but let me set it up for you so that when you read it—and hear it read—you will do so with the kind of understanding that allows you to “feel” what it conveys.

First of all, it is important to remember that what we have in English is a translation from the Hebrew. Poetry is notoriously difficult to translate! But rather than being written in rhyme, as is the case with some English poetry, Hebrew poetry was written so it could be chanted or sung in rhythm. This is why it is so easy to turn psalms into metrical hymns. Even in English this rhythm can be felt.

The dominant feature of most Hebrew poetry is known as parallelism. Very often the sense or content of a line or measure is restated in the line that follows. Psalm 19 begins, “The heavens declare the glory of God” that’s the first measure. “The skies proclaim the work of his hands” is the second line that repeats the thought of the first. Look at verses 7& 8: a series of parallel thoughts are expressed in the first half of each measure: “The

law of the Lord is perfect"... "the statues of the Lord are trustworthy"... "the precepts of the Lord are right"... "the commands of the Lord are radiant" all say the same thing--in parallel form. Law, statues, precepts, commands. And the second half of each measure does the same thing: "reviving the soul"... "making wise the simple"... "giving joy to the heart"... "giving light to the eyes."

In addition to features such as lines, measures, rhythm and parallelism the psalms contain "a high density of rhetorical devices. Similies, metaphors, idiomatic expressions, and hyperbole particularly are frequent." (*Psalms*, p. 6) There are two wonderful similies in verses 4 & 5 where the sun is described as a "bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion," and "like a champion rejoicing to run his course." At the very end of Psalm 19 God is called "my rock and my Redeemer." The metaphor "rock" surely signifies the permanence and stability of God's love and support and protection. "Redeemer" is also a metaphor: "a redeemer was a kinsman who buys back a family member who had fallen into slavery." (*Harper's*, p. 856)

Remember that poetry is the intentional use of indirect and evocative language. To say that God is solid and dependable and supportive is prose; to say that God is a rock is poetry. To say that God is one who grants freedom is prose; to say that God is a redeemer is poetry.

Leaving the background of Hebrew poetry behind, let's look at the Psalm directly.

Only 14 verses. Notice that the first six verses have the same theme: creation's testimony to the creator. *The heavens declare... the skies proclaim... they pour forth speech... they display... their voice goes out...* In other words, the world witnesses to God. Creation manifests the glory of its Creator. The sun is an example of this glory. God has set it under the canopy of the skies: *it rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other.* Furthermore, *nothing is hidden from its heat.* (What else would you expect from a poet who lived on the edge of a desert?)

But this isn't simply a psalm of creation. It moves, it progresses. The next five verses extol the torah of God, the teaching, the instruction, the tradition. Look at the parallel designations for torah: law, statues, precepts, commands, ordinances. Each term for torah is followed by a phrase that names a benefit or some other quality to keeping the torah: it revives, it makes wise, gives joy, gives light, is sweet. Torah is more desirable than wealth or the richest food.

We are meant by the poet to make connections between creation and torah. This is what all good poetry does: it evokes, it generates, it teases our minds into interactive thought. The creator of the universe is the one who gives the torah. The sun's warmth benefits all life, the torah is also life-giving and sustaining. The speech of creation is silent; the speech of torah is heard. Descriptions from creation—*honey from the comb*—are used of the torah. And on and on it goes: emotion and life being draw from us, stirred up within us. We cannot help but respond to this psalm.

Still it continues to move. There are three more verses which are set up by verse eleven: *By them* (i.e. torah, the teachings of God) *is your servant warned*. “Warn” may be an unfortunate choice here. I’ve been reading from the New International Version. “Warn” can mean “to make aware of harm or danger” but it can also mean “to notify or apprise.” That’s the usage here: the torah apprises the servant of God that there is great reward in keeping torah.

Now, as it nears its ending, the psalm becomes a prayer: *forgive my hidden faults*. The poem has progressed from the praise of God in creation to praise for the teachings of God in torah to an individual prayer for help even as the tense has gone from “the grammatical third person, making statements about God revealing himself in creation and in torah, to the second person, addressing God—you, “your servant,” to the eventual use of the first person, “me” and “my.” *May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord...* (see Exegesis of Psalm 19 by Corey Keating, 2001)

On February 5, 1956 C.S. Lewis penned a letter to Mary Van Deusen:

I am so glad you took to Psalm 34. My other great favorite is 19. First, the mere glory of nature. Then the disinfectant, inexorable sun beating down on the desert and ‘nothing hid from the heat thereof’ (Ps 19:6). There – implicit, not stated – the imaginative identification of that heat and light with the ‘undefiled’ law, the ‘clean’ fear of the Lord, searching every cranny. Then the characteristically Jewish feeling that the Law is not only obligatory but beautiful, ravishing: delighting the heart, better than gold, sweeter than honey. Only after that, the (more Christian like) self examination and humble petition.

As usual, Lewis points to the heart of the matter: why does the Psalmist conclude with, *May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord?* It is a prayer, a prayer that asks what the writer knew was not always true: his words and his meditations were not pleasing to God, would that they were! The heart of the matter is forgiveness. *Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight.* From the glory of nature to the undefiled law to humble petition. Contemplation of creation and torah both tend to “put us in our place” and lead us to issues of guilt and forgiveness.

Buechner says that “guilt is the responsibility for wrongdoing.” Furthermore, “Apart from the wrong we are each of us responsible for personally, in a sense no wrong is done anywhere which we are not all of us responsible for collectively. With or without knowing it, either through what we have done or what we have failed to do, we have all helped create the kind of world mess that makes wrongdoing inevitable.” (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 39)

And then he comments on forgiveness: “When somebody you’ve wronged forgives you, you’re spared the dull and self-diminishing throb of a guilty conscience. When you forgive somebody who has wronged you, you’re spared the dismal corrosion of bitterness

and wounded pride. For both parties, forgiveness means the freedom again to be at peace inside their own skins and to be glad in each other's presence." (p. 33)

In the opening scene of *The Lord of the Rings*, Bilbo Baggins tells his nephew, "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to."

It's a marvelous—and potentially life-changing thing—to read a psalm: there's no knowing where you might be swept off it.