



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 **Two Languages**
(*Moral Landscape of Creation*, pp. 30-35)

Suggested Article:

📖 **The Glory Robe of God**
(*Moral Landscape of Creation*, pp. 75-81)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University

PO Box 97361

Waco, TX 76798-7361

Phone 1-866-298-2325

www.ChristianEthics.ws

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Two Languages

The speech of creation is a kind of “sign language” and very different from the language of torah which instructs us in the wisdom of the LORD. From Psalm 19 we learn that one language interprets the other, yet both point to the same God.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 19; John 1:1-18

Reflection

The psalmist celebrates the wisdom of being fluent in the two languages of creation and torah. In the expansive opening images, the heavens are a storyteller and the firmament is a preacher announcing God’s creative work (19:1-4a). God created the cosmos with speech in Genesis 1; now the orderly and beautiful progress of the created order from day to day and night to night is re-sounding those words. This language of creation is:

- ▶ *a testimony of praise and wonder*: “In God’s sight and hearing,” says Hoezee, “the physical cosmos is like a symphony of praise.... [The psalmist asks us] to tune our hearing to recognize in the cadence of creation something of what God hears.”
- ▶ *not a full revelation of God, but a witness to the Creator*: “Because creation is being re-presented day by day,” Earwood writes, “we catch a glimpse of the ongoing work of the Creator. The Apostle Paul understood this when he argued, ‘Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made’ (Romans 1:20).”

Abruptly the witness of creation (19:1-6) gives way to the “sweeter than honey” words of torah (19:7-13). The Hebrew word *torah* means “instruction pointing to the way of life.” Though it may prescribe necessary boundaries, torah is not as narrow as we usually think of law. Rather, like the speech of creation, Torah is expansive and its words point beyond themselves to the LORD whose instruction is rewarding to people who follow the path of life.

Interpreting the glory of God in creation and torah, which is never a simple task, is made more problematic by our own moral faults, self-deception, and pride (19:12-13). Consequently, in the coda to this psalm (19:14) the poet pleads not for better skills to interpret God, but to be interpreted and judged truly by the Author of the two languages.

Through the witness of both creation and torah we are drawn into a deeper understanding of the LORD God. The writer of the Gospel of John has learned this lesson, for its majestic prologue echoes the two languages of creation and torah: *creation* (John 1:1a, 2-3a); *light and darkness* (1:4-5); *testimony* (1:7); *glory* (1:14); *Torah* (1:17); and *invisible/visible* (1:18).

To the psalmist’s question of how we can know the glory of God, the gospel responds that Jesus, the person who came to live among us, is the Word made flesh. When we look at Jesus and



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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his life, he uniquely reflects the glory, mercy, and truth of the God of creation and torah (1:14).

Study Questions

1. Psalm 19:4b-6 demonstrates how to avoid a pantheistic view that deifies nature and invites us to worship it. How does the psalmist personify the sun, yet not deify it as commonly done in ancient Near Eastern (and today's New Age) religions?
2. In light of Psalm 19, comment on C. S. Lewis' testimony: "Nature never taught me that there exists a God of glory and infinite majesty. I had to learn that in other ways. But nature gave the word *glory* a meaning for me. I still do not know where else I could have found one."
3. Describing how the language of creation functions is difficult (Psalm 19:3-4). While there are 'words,' they are inaudible to human ears. In what ways might the language of creation be something like "sign language" (*Moral Landscape of Creation*, p. 32)?
4. If the physical cosmos actively praises God in what Scott Hoezee calls the "ecology of praise," then should we embrace the preservation of species and their habitats "as keeping all of the members of God's choir in place" (*Moral Landscape of Creation*, p. 76)?

Departing Hymn: "All Things Praise Thee" (verses 1, 2, and 5)

All things praise Thee, Lord most high,
heaven and earth and sea and sky,
all were for Thy glory made,
that Thy greatness thus displayed
should all worship bring to Thee;
all things praise Thee—Lord, may we!

All things praise Thee—night to night
sings in silent hymns of light;
all things praise Thee—day to day
chants Thy power in burning ray;
time and space are praising Thee,
all things praise Thee—Lord, may we!

All things praise Thee—gracious Lord,
Great Creator, powerful Word,
Omnipresent Spirit, now
at Thy feet we humbly bow;
lift our hearts in praise to Thee;
all things praise Thee—Lord, may we!

George W. Conder, Appendix to the Leeds Hymn Book, 1874
Suggested tune: DIX

Two Languages

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Study Psalm 19	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1 or 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To realize that God speaks to us through the beauty and order of creation.
2. To understand that the language of torah, God's instruction, helps us to interpret this speech of creation.
3. To see how the New Testament views Jesus as the Word of creation and torah.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Moral Landscape of Creation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and the suggested article before the group meeting. Ask your musician to locate the popular tune DIX in your hymnal (used for the hymn "For the Beauty of the Earth") or at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a story

Read Ken Chafin's poem "Multiple Sunrises" on p. 33 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. After voicing common concerns of the group, ask the members to read aloud the first verse of the hymn "All Things Praise Thee" as a conclusion to the prayer time.

Scripture Reading

Ask two members to read Psalm 19 from a modern translation in this way: (First Reader) 19:1-6; (Second) 19:7-13; (Unison) 19:14. Ask a member to read John 1:1-18 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The two readers have emphasized the structure of Psalm 19: a hymn to God as creator (19:1-6), a hymn to God as giver of torah (19:7-13), and a concluding prayer (19:14). Perhaps the concluding prayer was part of the second hymn. In this context, however, it is a request that God examine both of these hymns ("the words of my mouth") and the singer ("the meditation of my heart").

The first hymn celebrates the fact that the physical world, especially its beauty and order, proclaims God's glory. Members may react in several ways to this hymn. One response is to accept its claim and then brainstorm other aspects of the physical world that give us insight into God's glory. Another is to note that the physical world sends mixed signals, for it also contains ugliness and apparent disorder that cause us to doubt God's goodness. A third response is to doubt that the universe says anything at all about its creator.

The psalmist does not think we can learn everything from the physical world that we want or need to know about God. This is evident in two passages. First, many scholars think that verses 4b-6 are a hymn borrowed from an ancient culture that worshipped the sun, but deftly changed by the psalmist into a praise to Yahweh, creator of heaven and earth. If so, then the psalmist recognizes that people, misinterpreting the 'words' of the physical world, can be led into idolatrous worship of nature.

Second, the psalmist has added the second hymn (19:7-13) to interpret the first. God communicates more directly through torah (“law”), decrees, precepts, commandments, fear, and ordinances. These are not six separate things, but six ways of using our human language to point to God’s life-giving way. Notice that our speech is inadequate to capture the thick and rich reality of God’s communication in torah. The psalmist does not experience torah as a burden, but as wonderful beyond any simple description: it revives our souls, puts joy in our hearts, enables us to see clearly, is just and right, and endures forever. No gold is more valuable, and no honey is sweeter.

Many who are familiar with the prologue to John’s gospel may not have noticed its many allusions to both the speech of creation and of torah. The claim that “the Word (creation, torah) became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14) becomes even more startling and remarkable. John means the Author of the texts (of creation and torah) is present in Jesus Christ.

Study Questions

1. We personify the sun in our everyday language when we speak of it as rising and setting, peeking above the hills, dancing on the waves, and so on. Notice how the psalmist personifies the sun as a bridegroom and a strong runner, but without treating it as a god. The psalmist says that the LORD God sets the sun in place for its celebrated arrival and daily run across the sky.
2. Lewis is saying that the language of creation cannot replace the language of torah. While creation’s speech is not primary, it can help us to understand and appreciate the language of torah instruction.
3. Earwood suggests these similarities: (1) most of us respond to “the speech of creation,” like we do to sign language, primarily through our visual experience; (2) even when we cannot understand the meaning of creation (or sign language), we can appreciate the beauty and be uplifted emotionally by the created order (or the motions of a skilled interpreter); (3) we can become fluent, through years of training, in interpreting the meaning of the created order (sign language).
4. Hoeszee says, “In the preservation of the physical cosmos we are helping to preserve and perpetuate what to God is a most beautiful song of praise.” Christians have a tapestry of reasons to care for the creation, which includes these catalogued by Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth* (Baker Academic, 2001): (1) the earth is “on loan from our children,” (2) it is more pleasurable to live simply, (3) animals have rights, (3) because creatures and habitats are good in themselves, we have duties to care them, (4) our ability to flourish is interdependent with other creatures and the landscape, (5) “God says so,” (6) “God’s concerns are our concerns,” and (7) caring for creation is our appropriate, grateful response to God’s care for us. Hoeszee’s view is an instance of the sixth (or seventh) reason. It does not supplant the other reasons in the tapestry, but it does have much independent weight for us.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.