

# Two Languages

BY GREG C. EARWOOD

We must become bilingual, fluent in the two languages of creation and torah. The speech of creation is visual, a kind of “sign language.” In very different language the torah instructs us in the wisdom of the LORD. From the psalmist we learn that creation and torah join together in testimony to the LORD God. They speak different languages, but have the same intent. One interprets the other, yet both point to the same God.

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## *Psalm 19*

**D**arkness still covered the earth on the mid-October morning and traffic was sparse on the interstate as I drove to preach in the 8:30 a.m. worship at First Baptist Church, London. A small bee hovered close to the Bible lying on the front seat and diverted my attention briefly. Obviously a student of Scripture, the bee seemed to know that God’s words are “sweeter than honey” (Psalm 19:10).

But words other than Scripture were being spoken that morning.

Before I reached the mountains of south central Kentucky, the orange hues of dawn were appearing in the east. The sun peeked over the horizon, rising from its resting place to provide light after the darkness of the previous night. Then in brightness it highlighted the trees in their autumn clothes—yellows, reds, and oranges mixed among the evergreens. Climbing higher, the sun bounced in brilliant reflection off the lake whose waters

ran near the boundary of the roadside. All of this beauty against the backdrop of a cloudless blue sky.

Kathleen Norris, in her book *Dakota*, tells of an elementary school girl who moved from Louisiana to North Dakota and observed, “The sky is full of blue and full of the mind of God.”

On my Sunday morning trip the blue sky articulated a message that seemed to originate in the mind of God. “The heavens are telling the glory of God,” the psalmist declared long ago, “and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (19:10); their voices join in unison to re-present continuously what God has done. The psalmist affirms that the language of creation is a testimony of praise and wonder, not in the sense of a full revelation of God, but as witness to the Creator.

To describe creation’s testimony requires expansive images like those in Psalm 19. Unlike a scientific model that reduces creation to its lowest common denominator, sparse causality, here we find imaginative language: the heavens are a storyteller recounting the splendor of God and the firmament is a preacher announcing God’s creative work. Their message resonates with the opening story of creation in Genesis and matches its poetic rhythm, symmetry, and intent. In the worship liturgy of Genesis 1, God used speech to create the cosmos:

*Words bringing order out of disorder,  
Separating light from darkness,  
Dividing waters with a dome.  
Words giving names to unnamed,  
Day, Night, Sky, Land, Seas,  
Then plants, lights, creatures, animals.  
Words proclaiming them Good.  
Humankind in the image of God,  
Blessing for filling and tending.  
Words for everything: Very Good!*

In Psalm 19 the created order is delivering an eloquent speech. Resounding the creative words of God, the heavens joyfully proclaim God’s glorious work. Day and Night join the ancient liturgy, the Night in antiphonal response to Day: “Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge” (19:2). The orderly routine of Day and Night, Night and Day, expands the testimony toward an awareness of God.

Yet note the difficulty for the psalmist (and for a preacher) in describing how this language functions: “There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (19:3-4). While there are words, they are inaudible to human ears. The speech of creation is visual; it may be

seen as a kind of “sign language.” Its enigmatic presentation is similar to the language of one whose hands and arms form word-symbols for people who cannot hear spoken words. Even those of us who do not know sign language can appreciate its beauty and be uplifted emotionally when we observe a skilled interpreter in worship. But to persons fluent in those signs the beautiful motions communicate meaning and significance.

Signs always point beyond themselves to something or someone else.

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Creation’s signs witness to the Creator, not as proofs for God’s existence, but as visual aids. Because creation is being re-presented day by day, 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).

The psalmist, like the Apostle, calls for more than creation appreciation and a heightened sense of awe. The psalmist wants us to see creation’s significance in the whole of God’s work. Psalm 19 is not a hymn about *nature*. Heavens telling, firmament proclaiming, daytime speech, nighttime knowledge, words voiced to the end of the world, all of these are the visible world enabling our understanding of the invisible.

The temptation for modern preachers is to go where the text does not go by castigating the congregation for not being more “awe-full” with regard to nature. I am tempted to speak negatively about those who are “deaf” to creation; they are like the man in the car commercial who is engrossed in reading his new car manual while his female companion drives to a picture perfect wonder of nature. But the psalm is a hymn of praise that focuses our attention on the majestic message of creation visible in the celestial realm. Having seen, we are encouraged to join in praise, “This is my Father’s world and to my listening ears all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres.”

As I journeyed closer to London, the sun played hide and seek in the mountains. It reminded me of Ken Chafin’s playful and insightful poem, “Multiple Sunrises”:

Today, I watched the sun  
come up six times  
between Louisville  
and Lexington.

It was a ball of orange  
hanging in the mist,  
a picture a child might  
draw with a crayon.

Each time I dipped  
into a dark canyon  
dug by a creek, then  
topped the hill again  
--another sunrise.

I wished for a camera,  
had just these two eyes,  
wished to be a painter,  
have only my memory.

The psalmist saw it this way: "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" (19:4b-6). In contrast to the sun deities of ancient (and today's New Age) religions, the psalmist proclaims the God who sets the sun in place for its celebrated arrival and daily run across the sky. Neither the sun nor any part of creation is a god to be worshipped, but all serve their purposes under the direction of the Creator God. The sun, though it is not treated as a god, is personified as a bridegroom and a strong runner.

The dawning sun, like a bridegroom greeting the morning after his wedding in anticipation of a joyful new life, rises eagerly to mark a fresh beginning. Every morning the newness of Genesis 1 is re-created. Sunrise bears witness to the Creator's continuing handiwork; God is present to offer new opportunities, possibilities, and beginnings.

Then the psalmist portrays the sun as a vigorous runner repeating a well-planned workout. In the county park near my home is a two-mile path designed for walkers and runners. Every day folks repeat this circular route for exercise or pleasure, or both. Some run with agonizing pain on their faces, but others with satisfied smiles of joy. So the sun starts its routine and "runs its course with joy." Its daily exercise contributes not only to the beauty of creation, but also to the rhythm of life on the earth; the sun speaks of an orderly world created by an orderly God. As constant as

the sun in coming up and running its course everyday, God is steadfast and persevering in the intentional goodness of creation.

Without warning, the heavenly witness of creation (19:1-6) gives way to the “sweeter than honey” words of torah (19:7-13). In very different language the torah instructs us in the wisdom of the LORD. The majestic “music of the spheres” shifts abruptly to a drum beat cadence in 19:7-9:

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul;  
 the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;  
 the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;  
 the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes.  
 the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever;  
 the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

No longer an artistic “sign” language, this is the didactic “legal” language of the Torah. (Rather than the usual translation “law,” I prefer the Hebrew term “torah” which means instruction pointing to the way of life. Though torah may prescribe necessary boundaries, it is not meant to be narrow and restrictive as we usually think of law. The words of torah, though verbal, are expansive like the speech of creation.)

Once again we are invited to march in step with the rhythm of life:

*The instruction of the LORD is complete, renewing our minds.  
 The testimony of the LORD is faithful, assuring our witness.  
 The promises of the LORD are sure, anchoring our souls.  
 The good news of the LORD is true, giving peace to our lives.  
 The love of the LORD is steadfast, filling our hearts.  
 The torah of the LORD: Very Good!*

These words point beyond themselves to the LORD whose instruction is rewarding to people who follow the path of life. From the psalmist we learn that creation and torah join together in testimony to the LORD God. They speak different languages, but have the same intent. One interprets the other, yet both point to the same God.

The psalmist encourages us to become bilingual. With two distinct parts Psalm 19 teaches the wisdom of being fluent in the two languages of creation and torah. 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 the majestic prologue speaks the languages of creation and torah. Furthermore, we hear those languages of Psalm 19 spoken in the knowledge of the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ:

*Creator*: “In the beginning was the Word.... He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him”(John 1:1a, 2—3a).

*Light and darkness.* “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (1:4-5).

*Testimony.* “[John] came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him” (1:7).

*Glory.* “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (1:14).

*Torah.* “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17).

*Invisible/Visible.* “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (1:18).

This gospel’s own sign language is the Word made flesh, the One who uniquely reflects the glory of the God of creation and torah.

On my October morning drive I listened to the beauty of creation’s non-verbal witness to the Creator. Later, in First Baptist Church, London, we gathered together to hear torah-like instruction in the hymns and anthems, prayers and offerings, and sermon with sign language interpretation. Worship shifted from one language to the other.

Here is the benediction offered by the psalmist who has heard both languages. Listen to its closing significance: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer” (19:14).

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