

Psalms 19 — Two Books of One Author — The Heavens That Preach Without Words and the Law That Revives the Soul

Psalm 19: a psalm of David, in two joined hymns — the wordless witness of the skies to the glory of El (vv. 1–6) and the sixfold perfection of the torah of YHWH (vv. 7–11), closing in a prayer for cleansing from hidden and presumptuous sin and for acceptable words and meditation before the LORD, the psalmist's rock and redeemer (vv. 12–14).

Psalm 19 is a hymn of praise, and one of the most quietly astonishing things in the Psalter is what it praises. It does not begin with the psalmist's trouble, or Israel's enemies, or the temple. It begins with the sky. "The heavens declare the glory of God" — and for six verses David stands under the open dome of heaven and listens to a sermon that has no words. Then, without warning, the poem pivots to a second subject entirely: "The law of the LORD is perfect." Two hymns, apparently about two different things — the cosmos and the commandments — welded into one psalm. C. S. Lewis called it "the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world," and the greatness is exactly in that weld: the man who wrote it heard the same voice in the stars and in the scriptures.

Hebrew Word Studies

shamayim / El (H8064 / H410) (שָׁמַיִם / אֱלֹהִים) — the heavens, the skies / God — the ancient, broad name for deity v. 1. The psalm opens with the widest possible congregation and the widest possible name for God. *Shamayim* (H8064) is "the heavens" — the same word that stands over Genesis 1:1, "in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" — so verse 1 sends us straight back to the creation account whose glory it is praising. And the God whose glory the heavens declare is *El* (H410), not yet the covenant name. *El* is the oldest and broadest Semitic word for God, shared across the ancient Near East, the name available to any nation looking up at any sky. That is deliberate. In the first panel, where the audience is the whole earth and the preacher is the wordless cosmos, the psalm uses the name the whole earth could recognize. Only when the poem turns to the law — Israel's own special gift — will the name narrow to YHWH. Watch the seam: *El* preaches to everyone from the heavens; *YHWH* speaks the torah to his covenant people. One God, two books, two names — and the psalm knows exactly which name belongs to which revelation.

chathan (H2860) (חָתָן) — bridegroom, son-in-law — the man at his wedding v. 5. The rising sun is "as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber." *Chathan* is the bridegroom, the man on his wedding day — and the choice of image is doing more than describing brightness. A bridegroom's face at the wedding is scripture's picture of unguarded joy; Isaiah reaches for the same image for God's delight in his people, "as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee" (Isa. 62:5). By comparing the sun to a bridegroom, David loads the daily sunrise with gladness: the cosmos does not merely function, it *rejoices* to do what it was made for. And there is a New Testament harvest here — the Bridegroom becomes one of the Lord's own titles. John the Baptist calls Christ the bridegroom (Jn. 3:29); Jesus calls himself the bridegroom whose coming the wise virgins wait for (Matt. 25:1–10). The sun that runs its glad circuit "from the end of the heaven" and from which "nothing is hid" turns out to be a fitting emblem of the Light of the world, whose second coming the Doctrine and Covenants pictures with this very psalm's sunrise imagery — the Son of Man coming forth as plainly as the morning light. Creation's brightest preacher is, in the end, preaching Christ.

torah / edut / tamim (H8451 / H5715 / H8549) (תּוֹרָה / עֵדוּת / תָּמִים) — law, instruction, teaching / testimony, solemn witness / perfect, whole, without blemish v. 7. Three words open the second panel, and none of them means quite what English "law" suggests. *Torah* (H8451) does not primarily mean rules; its root is *yarah*, "to shoot an arrow, to point the way" — *torah* is *instruction*, teaching aimed like an arrow at a target, a father's guidance more than a courtroom's code. So "the *torah* of the LORD is perfect" praises not a rulebook but the whole direction-giving revelation of God. *Edut* (H5715) is "testimony" — from *ed*, a witness — the word for the covenant terms laid up in the ark (the "ark of the testimony," Ex. 25:22); God's word as sworn, solemn witness to who he is and what he requires. And *tamim* (H8549) — "perfect" — is the sacrificial word: it is what a lamb must be to be offered, "without blemish," *whole, complete, having integrity*. It is the word God speaks to Abraham, "walk before me, and be thou *tamim*" (Gen. 17:1), and the word for Noah, "perfect in his generations" (Gen. 6:9). So "the *torah* of the LORD is *tamim*" means the instruction of God is *whole* — nothing missing, nothing blemished, sound enough to build a life on. The Nephites inherited exactly this confidence in the word's wholeness and turned it into an invitation: "feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do" (2 Ne. 32:3). A perfect torah is a word you can eat.

mippaz / debash (H6337 / H1706) (מִפָּאז / דְּבַשׁ) — fine gold, refined gold / honey v. 10. David reaches for the two most desirable substances in his world to say the word of God outweighs them. *Paz* (H6337) is not ordinary gold (that is *zahav*, which stands earlier in the verse) — it is *refined* gold, gold purified and beaten fine, the most valuable form of the most valuable metal. So the verse escalates: more desirable than gold, than even *fine* gold — than the very best the treasury holds. And *debash* (H1706) is honey — here specifically "honey and the honeycomb," honey at its freshest, dripping from the comb before it is even gathered. Honey was the Promised Land's own emblem of abundance, the land "flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8); it was what strengthened Jonathan's eyes in the field (1 Sam. 14:27) — a striking echo, since here the commandment "enlightens the eyes" (v. 8). The pairing of gold and honey says the word of God satisfies both the appetite for worth and the appetite for pleasure at once: it is the treasure you would sell everything to own and the sweetness you would never tire of tasting. Little wonder Ezekiel is told to eat the scroll and finds it "in my mouth as honey for sweetness" (Ezek. 3:3), or that John eats the little book and tastes the same (Rev. 10:9–10). To feast on the word is to find it, literally, the sweetest thing there is.

zed (H2086) (זֶד) — presumptuous, proud, insolent — the willful, defiant sinner v. 13. "Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins." *Zed* comes from the root *zud / zid*, "to boil up, to seethe, to act with proud insolence" — the same root behind the pot of stew Jacob boiled (*wayyazed*) in Genesis 25:29. A *zed* sin is not a stumble; it is a sin that boils over on purpose, done in defiant pride against known light. The Mosaic law drew exactly this line: sins of ignorance could be covered by sacrifice, but the person who sinned "presumptuously" (*b'yad ramah*, "with a high hand," Num. 15:30) had, in effect, blasphemed — there was no ordinary offering for it. So David's two petitions in verses 12–13 map the whole terrain the law itself mapped: cleanse me from the *hidden* faults I cannot see, and keep me back from the *high-handed* sins I might choose. What he fears about the *zed* sin is precise — that it will "have *dominion*" over him, that the proud sin will become the ruling sin. It is the very danger the Lord names to Cain: "sin lieth at the door... and thou shalt rule over him" (Gen. 4:7) — master it, or it masters you. David asks the safer thing: not to be left to rule his sins alone, but to be *kept back* by a stronger hand before pride ever boils over.

tsur (H6697) (צֹר) — rock, cliff, boulder — a place of strength and shelter v. 14. The psalm's last breath names God "my strength," and the Hebrew is *tsur* (H6697) — not abstract strength but *rock*: a cliff, a crag, the solid stone you build on and hide behind. It is one of the Old Testament's tenderest names for God. Moses' farewell song returns to it again and again — "He is the Rock, his work is perfect" (Deut. 32:4), a verse that even reuses Psalm 19's word *tamim*, "perfect" — and Hannah prays "neither is there any rock like our God" (1 Sam. 2:2). To end on *tsur* is to say that the God whose law is perfect and whose heavens preach is also *immovable* — the one fixed thing to stand on when everything else in a life is shifting sand. The New Testament hears the Messiah in this rock: Christ is "that spiritual Rock that followed them" in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:4), the stone the builders rejected become the head of the corner. Helaman gives his sons the same counsel in almost the same image: "remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation" (Hel. 5:12). It is no accident that David's *tsur* (rock) and his *go'el* (redeemer) sit side by side in the final line — for the Latter-day Saint the two names have become one Person: the Rock is the Redeemer.

From the Chapter's Architecture

Notice too the quiet threads the poet runs across the seam to prove the two panels are one poem. The sun enlightens the earth (v. 4–6); the commandment enlightens the eyes (v. 8). Nothing is hid from the sun's heat (v. 6); nothing is hid from the law's light, which exposes even the psalmist's secret faults (v. 12). The heavens are full of speech and words (vv. 2–4); the psalm ends with the psalmist's own words (v. 14). And the law is tamim, "perfect" (v. 7); the cleansed man becomes tamim, "upright" (v. 13). These are not two hymns clumsily stitched — they are one meditation on one truth: that the God who wrote the heavens wrote the law, and both books, read honestly, lead the same reader to the same knees. This is genuine Hebrew parallelism doing structural work; I see no formal chiasm here, and I will not manufacture one — the artistry is the diptych and its bridging threads, not a mirror-symmetry.