

INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 13 · 2015 · Pages vii-xv

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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AN EXHORTATION TO STUDY GOD’S TWO “BOOKS”

Daniel C. Peterson

From the birth of modern science at the end of the sixteenth century, Galileo famously believed that God had written two books — the scriptures and the Book of Nature. The scriptures, he contended, should be interpreted by scholars and theologians, whereas the Book of Nature was the province of scientists:

Philosophy [by which he intended nature, or natural philosophy, or what we today would call science] is written in that great book which ever lies before our eyes — I mean the universe — but we cannot understand it if we do not first learn the language and grasp the symbols, in which it is written. This book is written in the mathematical language, and the symbols are triangles, circles, and other geometrical figures, without whose help it is impossible to comprehend a single word of it; without which one wanders in vain through a dark labyrinth.¹

At the cutting edge, of course, he’s right. There is certainly a unique role in the study of scripture for the special expertise of those who have mastered the relevant history and archaeology and acquired the relevant languages, just as there is an irreplaceable role, in the study of the natural world, for those who have devoted years to learning advanced mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology.

1 Galileo Galilei, *Opere Complete di G. Gl*, 15 vols., Firenze, 1842, ff, as quoted in E.A. Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003), 75.

But the scriptures suggest that ordinary people, non-specialists, can also profitably devote their attention to both written revelation and the “book” or revelation potentially provided by the natural world that surrounds us all — and that they should, in fact, do so.

I’ve recently been reading, with intense interest, a stimulating book by the Protestant theologian Robert K. Johnston, entitled *God’s Wider Presence: Reconsidering General Revelation*.² (I expect that I’ll mention this thought-provoking volume in a number of things that I intend to write over the next year or so.)

Professor Johnston points to Psalm 19 as one of the biblical texts that suggest the possibility of learning about God from sources beyond the written canon of scripture. Here is how that psalm reads in the King James Version of the Bible:

- 1 The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.
- 2 Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.
- 3 There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.
- 4 Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun,
- 5 Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race.
- 6 His going forth is from the end of the heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it: and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof.
- 7 The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.
- 8 The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the

2 Robert K. Johnston, *God’s Wider Presence: Reconsidering General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014). My debt in this brief essay to Professor Johnston’s discussion is fundamental.

heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure,
enlightening the eyes.

9 The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever:
the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous
altogether.

10 More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than
much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the
honeycomb.

11 Moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in
keeping of them there is great reward.

12 Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me
from secret faults.

13 Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous
sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall
I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great
transgression.

14 Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation
of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my
strength, and my redeemer.

“Most commentators consider vv. 1–6 and 7–14 of Psalm 19 originally to have been two independent psalms,” writes Willem Prinsloo, but “at present the psalm is viewed as forming a cohesive and meaningful unit.”³ “The justification for joining the two poems,” writes John W. Baigent,

would seem to be that both deal with the revelation of
the divine nature: the character of God is to be seen
not only in the pages of Scripture but also in the book

3 Willem S. Prinsloo, “The Psalms,” in James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2003), 379. Compare F. F. Bruce, ed., *The International Bible Commentary* (Basingstoke and Grand Rapids: Marshall Pickering/Zondervan, 1986): 569; Reginald C. Fuller, Leonard Johnston, and Conleth Kearns, eds., *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (Nashville and New York: Thomas Nelson, 1975), 448; Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 1:579; James L. Mays, ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 443.

of Nature. As B[ernard]. Ramm says, ‘If the Author of Nature and Scripture are the same God, then the two books of God must eventually recite the same story.’⁴

“The entire psalm,” comments Carroll Stuhlmueller, “holds together primarily through the image of splendid light across the universe and within the law.”⁵ In other words, both nature and scripture — or, perhaps better, both nature and direct divine communication — are or can be sources of revelation from and about God.

I want to examine Psalm 19 briefly here. To do so, I choose the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible for the sake of improved clarity, and, breaking the psalm into the two parts that, as I’ve noted above, were almost certainly composed separately, I treat those parts in reverse order.

The author of the second portion of the psalm praises the revealed scripture given to Israel:

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. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. (19:7–11)

Throughout the original Hebrew of these five verses, he uses the specifically Israelite name *Yahweh* (or *Jehovah*, typically translated as *Lord*) to refer to God.⁶ This is fitting, since he is

4 John W. Baigent and Leslie C. Allen, “The Psalms,” in Bruce, *The International Bible Commentary*, 569. Baigent is citing Bernard Ramm’s 1964 book *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*.

5 Carroll Stuhlmueller, “Psalms,” in Mays, *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, 442–443.

6 In the ancient Greek Septuagint translation of the psalm, these occurrences of *Yahweh* are rendered by *kurios*, or “Lord.”

writing about the scriptural revelation given specifically and uniquely to Israel.

Now, though, we turn to the first six verses of the psalm as it exists today:

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. (19:1-2)

This passage contains the only occurrence of a divine title in the six verses of the other component part of today's Psalm 19. And it isn't *Yahweh*. Instead, it's *El* — a more general title for God, with related synonyms commonly appearing across the languages of the ancient Semitic world (and continuing, today, in the Arabic *Allah*).⁷ This, too, is appropriate, since, in alluding to a kind of revelation conveyed by nature, which is equally available and accessible to all of humankind around the world ("that great book which ever is before our eyes," as Galileo put it), the writer of these verses is speaking about a universal divine disclosure to people beyond the confines of Israel.

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)

The revelation available in nature, in other words, is a different kind of revelation than that embodied in the scriptures — precisely because, as a matter of fact, it doesn't *use* words. Yet it conveys an important message, or complex of messages. Robert Johnston uses an image from the late poet and novelist John Updike — who was (somewhat surprisingly, given the topics he often addressed) a devout Christian who wouldn't have minded being used for such a purpose — to explain this: The revelation of nature, Johnston says, comes as "supernatural

7 The Septuagint has *theos*.

mail,” bearing “the signature: decisive but illegible” of the divine.⁸

Of course, the “signature” may be “decisive” only to those equipped with eyes to see. “To the sensitive,” the British biblical scholar Peter Craigie wrote regarding this psalm,

the heavenly praise of God’s glory may be an overwhelming experience, whereas to the insensitive, sky is simply sky and stars only stars; they point to nothing beyond. ... Indeed, there is more than a suggestion that the reflection of God’s praise in the universe is perceptible only to those already sensitive to God’s revelation and purpose.⁹

I’m not sure, personally, where Professor Craigie detected that “more than a suggestion” in the text of Psalm 19. I find nothing of the sort. But I don’t disagree with Craigie’s fundamental point. It’s entirely possible to watch a sunset without seeing in it a sign of transcendence and a hint of the divine. Many millions of people plainly do that every day. What religious believers regard as a miracle, committed unbelievers can and do reject as the result of merely natural factors.¹⁰ And, more directly to the point, unbelievers commonly dismiss the revelations recorded in scripture as merely human creations.

Clearly, though, the compiler of Psalm 19 as we have it today wanted his hearers and readers to understand that both scripture and the world as a whole can convey important divine understanding to those prepared to look and listen. In fact,

8 Johnston, *God’s Wider Presence*, 67, is citing John Updike, “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car,” in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (New York: Random House/Fawcett, 1963).

9 Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 181. Craigie was a superb scholar who taught for most of his career in Canada; I still remember very clearly reading the news of his tragic death — far too young, at the age of forty-seven — in a 1985 automobile accident.

10 The differing explanations given by Moroni and Zerahemnah in Alma 44:1–10 for the former’s defeat of the latter provide a clear example of this very common phenomenon.

the final three verses of this component of the psalm offer an example of what an observer of nature can come to understand:

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. (19:4–6)

The religions of many of Israel's neighbors regarded the sun as a god and sometimes as the chief god of their respective divine hierarchies. The sun was venerated under such names as *Shamash* (in the Akkadian, Assyrian, and Babylonian pantheons; compare the modern Hebrew and Arabic equivalents of English *sun*, *shemesh* and *shams*), *Ra* or *Re*, and, during the fourteenth-century-BC monotheistic reform of the pharaoh Akhenaten, *Aten*. In these verses, however, it is El who has set up a tent in the heavens, and appointed a course, for the sun, whose obedience to the divine decree offers yet another reason, in the psalmist's view, for venerating the true God.¹¹

Psalm 19 ends with a kind of three-verse personal application. Even, or perhaps especially, in the face of the two great sources of revelation that he's now identified, the psalmist/editor acknowledges his own incapacity, and that of humans more generally, and implores divine assistance to overcome it.

But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. (19:12–14)

¹¹ Likewise, the creation of sun and moon narrated in Genesis 1 would probably have been read by ancient residents of the Near East as, among other things, an implicit statement of their subordinate and non-divine character.

Robert Johnston's reading of these final verses of Psalm 19 is perceptive. "Uniting in one paean of praise two types of revelation that otherwise might seem distinct," he observes,

and grounding each on its own solid footing, the psalmist ends with a prayer that recognizes both his own inadequacy and the mystery of God that remains. He hopes his words and his murmurings (two responses paralleling the two kinds of revelation he has experienced) will be acceptable to God (v. 14), who remains beyond him.¹²

We who are actively engaged in the work of The Interpreter Foundation understand that God remains far beyond any human efforts to do theology and to understand scripture, just as he transcends human efforts to build shrines to him by stacking bricks, boards, and stone. "Will God indeed dwell on the earth?" asked Solomon at the dedication of the temple that he had built. And, with becoming humility, he answered his own question: "Behold," he said, "the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?"¹³

But the building of temples is obedience to God. And fallible human scholarship is part of an overall attempt to "serve him with all [our] heart, might, mind and strength."¹⁴ We don't confuse it with religion; it doesn't supplant whole-souled discipleship. But it can be, and we hope that it will be, part of an acceptable offering unto God.

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¹² Johnston, *God's Wider Presence*, 67.

¹³ 1 Kings 8:27.

¹⁴ Doctrine and Covenants 4:2.

on both Islamic and Mormon subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled Muhammad: Prophet of God (Eerdmans, 2007).

