

"THE HEAVENS DECLARE THE GLORY OF GOD": THE LIMITS OF GENERAL REVELATION

JAMES K. HOFFMEIER

The relationship between general and special revelation has long been discussed in the history of the church. Romans 1 is the critical NT text which treats the former.¹ At the same time, Ps 19:1-6 is considered the OT *locus classicus* for the subject of general revelation. This psalm, in my opinion, has not always been used with care by those who have adopted a more inclusivistic soteriology. Based upon exegetical work on 19:2, and an investigation of this psalm as a literary unit, I will suggest some implications regarding the paramount question: what can be known about God from general and special revelation, especially in matters of salvation?

Beginning with Paul (Rom 10:18, which quotes Ps 19:4) to theologians of the present time, these verses stand at the center of most discussions about general revelation. Recently John Sanders, in his book, *No Other Name*, cites this passage, and Paul's usage of it, to argue for an inclusivist position, believing that salvation can ensue from general revelation? Interestingly, Sanders does not quote from or refer to any part of Ps 19:7-11, the focus of which is special revelation. In so doing, he is rather selectively appealing to the biblical evidence, and uses Ps 19:2-6 as a proof text that he evidently does not fully understand. On the other hand, Clark Pinnock comes to the same conclusion as Sanders in his book, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*,³ without any mention of Psalm 19. Pinnock avers,

Because of cosmic or general revelation, anyone can find God anywhere at anytime, because he has made himself and his revelation accessible to them.⁴

* James K. Hoffmeier is Professor of Old Testament and Near Eastern Archaeology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois.

¹ For some recent treatments of Romans 1 and general revelation, cf. Thomas C. Oden, "Without Excuse: Classic Christian Exegesis of General Revelation," *JETS* 41 / 1 (1998): 55-68; Dennis Johnson, "Between Two Wor(l)ds: Worldview and Observation I: The Use of General Revelation to Interpret Scripture, and Vice Versa," *JETS* 41/1 1998:69-84.

² (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 233-34.

³ (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 78-80, cf. chap. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

He accuses Karl Barth of being Christomonistic, saying, "Barth could only see God reaching out to people in and through Jesus. To maintain this position, of course, he had to ignore a good deal of scriptural material."⁵ On the latter point, one could say the same for Pinnock for completely overlooking Psalm 19 and Sanders, who ignores the latter half of the psalm.

Let us turn now to the psalm, which C. S. Lewis called "the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world."⁶ Most commentators recognize a three-fold division of this psalm:

- I. The Glory of God as revealed in Creation (vv. 2-6)
- II. The Perfect Law of Yahweh (vv. 7-11)
- III. The Psalmist's prayer (vv. 12-15)⁷

Meanwhile, some scholars see only a two-fold division of vv. 2-6 and vv. 7-15,⁸ but they believe that the "prayer" (vv. 12-15), which concludes the psalm, is thematically linked to the second part of the psalm.

Form critics classify the psalm as a "hymn to creation"⁹ or a "wisdom hymn," with the first two parts being a "hymn" and "wisdom poetry" respectively.¹⁰ Based on differences in style, metre, and language, the two parts are widely believed to have originally been two separate poems.¹¹ Because of the similarity in the imagery of the sun in part one and that of other Near Eastern solar hymns, a Canaanite original has been suggested as the source behind this pericope.¹² Despite this possibility, the psalm is regarded as having both thematic and liturgical unity,¹³ and thus constitutes a coherent unit.¹⁴ Bearing this unity in mind, one must look at the psalm as a whole to appreciate the relationship between the two sections before drawing theological conclusions about the role of general revelation in theology.

First, one must have a proper understanding of the poetic structure of the opening sentence of the psalm before interpreting it.

⁵ Ibid., 79.

⁶ *Reflections on the Psalms*, 63.

⁷ A. A. Anderson, *Psalms (1-72)* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 168-73; Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms* (Expositor's Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 178-84; and Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1972), 97-100.

⁸ P. C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1983), 179-80; M. Dahood, *Psalms 1-50 AB*; Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 121.

⁹ E. S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 1: Forms of the Old Testament Literature XIV* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 101-3.

¹⁰ Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 179.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Gerstenberger, *Psalms*; Anderson, *Psalms*, 167; J. Morgenstern, "Psalm 8 and 19A," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 19 (1945-46): 515.

¹³ Gerstenberger, *Psalms*; Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*.

¹⁴ J. W. Rogerson and J. W. McKay, *Psalms 1-50* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 86.

It reads, "The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the works of his hands." This sentence is chiasmic in nature, but this aspect is completely lost in modern translations.¹⁵ The following rendition better reflects the Hebrew word order even though it requires changing the voice of the second verb.

The Heavens declare the glory of God,
the work of his hands are proclaimed in the sky.

A the heavens
B declare
C the glory of God
C' the work of his hands
B' proclaim
A' the sky

The A B C C' B' A' pattern in the Hebrew alerts the reader to the close relationship between the two statements, and that "the glory of God" and its counterpart "the works of his hands," are the focal point of the verse. In light of this structural observation, two important exegetical issues need to be explored. First, why is the term *El*, not *Elohim* or the divine name, *YHWH*, used here? Second, what is the "the glory of God" (*kēbod 'el*) and what does it tell us about general revelation?

The use of *El*, rather than the fuller form *Elohim* for God, has contributed to the argument that this is a Canaanite hymn to *El*, the creator god of the Ugaritic pantheon.¹⁶ Even if this is the case, the psalmist certainly understands *El* to be equated with *El-Shadday* or *YHWH*. However, *El* is used with such frequency in the Psalms (e.g., 5:4; 7:6, 11; 10:11-12; 16:1; 17:6; 18:2, 30, 32, 47; 22:1) that one can hardly conclude that each occurrence of the shortened form, *El*, means that a Canaanite original lies behind the hymn. Clearly, the terms *El* and *Elohim* are used interchangeably in the OT, especially in poetic literature like the Psalms.¹⁷

The word "glory," *kabod*, has a wide range of meanings. It appears to derive from the word for liver, *kabed*, which is a dense and heavy organ--hence the meaning "heavy."¹⁸ Just as in English, the idea of "weighty" leads to the concept of importance, respect, and glory.¹⁹ Bound up in this word is the idea of something which "catches the eye" and impresses the viewer.²⁰ Gerhard Von Rad puts it this way: *kabod* is "that asset which makes peoples or individuals, and even objects, impressive, and usually this is understood as

¹⁵ Van Gemeren, *Psalms*, 179.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 179 n. 5.

¹⁷ "Names of God in the OT," *ABD* 4:1006.

¹⁸ *TWOT* 426-28.

¹⁹ Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 2:30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

something that can be perceived or expressed."²¹ Consequently Isaiah can speak of the glory of Jacob (Isa 17:4) and Kedar (21:16), when referring to a people.

Throughout the OT, the expression the "Glory of the Lord [*YHWH*]" is ubiquitous, and is generally associated with God's revelation at Mt. Sinai (Exod 24:16-17), in which "the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai" (Exod 19:20). It was the same "glory of *YHWH*" that resided in the Tabernacle beginning in Exod 40:34 and subsequently in Solomon's Temple (1 Kgs 8:10-11). It is important to note that never in these contexts is the variant expression, "Glory of God," used. "Glory of God" does not occur in the Psalter, except in 19:1.

Prov 25:2 compares the glory of the king with that of God. Clearly, the king's glory, or impressiveness, is not being elevated to the same level as divine revelation, i.e., *YHWH's* glory that is in the Holy of Holies. Therefore it appears that the "glory of God" in Prov 25:2 is not to be equated with the expression "glory of *YHWH*." Only when we get to the sixth century writings of Ezekiel are the two expressions used synonymously, but even then the idiom is qualified by "the glory of the God of Israel" (cf. Ezek 1:28; 3:12, 23 [uses *YHWH*]; 10:19; 11:22-23 [uses *Elohim*]).

From this discussion two observations can be made:

- 1) The "glory of God," which is associated with general revelation in Psalm 19, is not synonymous with "the glory of *YHWH*" which is identified with special revelation.
- 2) The structure of Ps 19:2 shows that "glory of God" is equated with "the work of his hands." Naturally, his works "reflect positively upon the Maker," says the late Peter Craigie, and, he continues, "that reflection may open up an awareness and knowledge of God, the Creator, who by his hands created a glory beyond the comprehension of the human mind."²²

From these observations, I conclude that the revelation of God that is apprehended by looking at the expanse of the heavens, or any part of God's creation, is limited to providing veiled information about God, but not what is necessary to know God in any intimate or salvific sense.

By way of analogy, one can marvel at the Pieta in the Vatican, be impressed with the exquisite execution of the sculpting and its life-like qualities, and conclude that the artist was a true master. However, even with the trained eye of an art historian, careful scrutiny of this masterpiece does not by itself inform the viewer of

²¹ Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962), 1:239.

²² Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 180.

the identity of the artist. While one may conclude that the artist was indeed skillful, little else can be ascertained about the master artist--such as his name or what kind of person he was.

Commenting on this psalm and what we can learn about God through his creation, John Calvin wrote,

While the heavens bear witness concerning God, their testimony does not lead men so far as that thereby they learn truly to fear him, and acquire a well-grounded knowledge of him; it serves only to render them inexcusable.²³

While I agree with Calvin on this point, there is a positive dimension of general revelation. The psalm, when taken as a whole, suggests that general revelation, i.e., God's creation, points the beholder of "the work of his hands" to special revelation. Because of the limited nature of general revelation, God provides special revelation to complement and complete creational revelation. This interconnection between the two is what Craigie argues for when he declares:

To the sensitive, 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. In this hymn of praise, it is not the primary purpose of the psalmist to draw upon nature as a vehicle of revelation, or as a source of the knowledge of God apart from the revelation in law (Torah); 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.²⁴

Undoubtedly, this is why the psalmist turns to the law of *YHWH*, the primary means of special revelation in the OT era.

The following section begins with "The Law of the Lord is perfect." In the second paragraph, the divine name occurs six times, and a seventh is found in the closing prayer. The absence of the divine name in the opening section as compared with its ubiquity in 19:7-11 is poignant. The use of *YHWH* is frequently associated with God as covenant maker. There is often a distinction made in the OT between God, the creator of the cosmos (as in Genesis 1), and *YHWH*, who is more intimately involved with his creation (contrast Gen 2:4ff). In Exod 3:14, the only time there is an attempt to elucidate the meaning of *YHWH*, as C. J. H. Wright notes, "Yahweh's character and acts as Israel's redeeming, covenant God, not His role as Creator, are indicated."²⁵ The use of *El* or *Elohim*, and not *YHWH*

²³ *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (trans. James Anderson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 1:317.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:181.

²⁵ C. J. H. Wright, "God, Names of," *ISBE* 2:507.

in 19:2, reflects the qualitative difference the psalmist sees between general and special revelation. As Derek Kidner observes,

In this section (7-14) the revealed name of God, Yahweh (the Lord), is heard seven times; earlier, true to the theme of general revelation, only the least specific term for God (*El*) was used, and only once.²⁶

YHWH's Torah is "perfect," *t^emima*, a word associated with sacrificial animals and indicating the quality of being free from defect.²⁷ In the following verses, other aspects of divine revelation are given and its benefits to the individual who is opened to it. These include: the statutes of the LORD (v. 7); the precepts and commands of the LORD (v. 8); the fear of LORD (v. 9); and the ordinances of the LORD (v. 10). The terminology of this section, especially "making wise the simple," "enlightening the eyes," and "fear," consciously connect God's revelation in the Torah to wisdom²⁸ The conclusion is obvious--the true source of wisdom is found in God's special revelation in Scripture. This of course is in contrast to Adam and Eve, who thought that they could be enlightened (i.e., eyes opened) and gain knowledge by eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil. David Clines has convincingly shown that the second part of Psalm 19 uses the very terms and expressions found in the Fall narrative of Genesis 3 "to assert the superiority of the law to the tree of knowledge as a means of obtaining wisdom."²⁹

The same positive affirmations made regarding Scripture in Ps 19:7-10 are also applied to *YHWH* himself. Leslie Allen has shown that "What is postulated of Yahweh in Ps. 18 is in three cases applied to his Torah in Ps. 19, in chiasitic order."³⁰ In Ps 18:26-30 *YHWH* is said to be "pure," "light," and "perfect." Regarding the Law (19:7-9), these attributes are found in reverse order. The juxtaposition of these two psalms is no accident, and the chiasitic order is no coincidence. Rather, the correspondence shows that the very character of *YHWH* is found in the written revelation. The same, however, is not extended to "the work of his hands."

The two halves of Psalm 19 clearly distinguish what can be known about God from general revelation (part 1) and from special revelation (part 2). The prayer which concludes the psalm is also directed to *YHWH*, who is called "my Rock and my Redeemer" (v. 14). The term "Redeemer" is *go'el*, which is associated with the redemption of a family member from enslavement or debt, as in the story of Ruth where Boaz acts as "kinsman-redeemer" (Ruth 3:12-13;

²⁶ Kidner, *Psalms*, 99.

²⁷ Anderson, *Psalms*, 171.

²⁸ Rogerson and McKay, *Psalms*, 88; Van Gemeren, *Psalms*, 184-6; and D. J. A. Clines, "The Tree of Knowledge and the Law of the Lord," VT 24 (1974): 8-14.

²⁹ Clines, "The Tree of Knowledge," 8.

³⁰ Leslie Allen, "David as Exemplar of Spirituality: The Redactional Function of Psalm 19," *Bib* 67 (1986): 544-46.

4:1-4). But more significantly, this term takes on a salvific dimension in the exodus from Egypt when God declares to Moses,

Therefore, say to the Israelites: "I am the LORD and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them and will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment." (Exod 6:6)

The association of the divine name in this psalm, first with the law (19:7), and then with the salvific terms in v. 14, suggests that salvation derives from a covenant relationship with YHWH. Mention has already been made to Allen's drawing a connection between Psalms 18 and 19. I should like to suggest yet another link in the soteriology of the two. Ps 19:14 reads, "O LORD my Rock and my Redeemer," while Ps 18:46 lauds, "The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be God my Savior." Thus both psalms attach salvific terms to God as the psalmist's rock.

In closing, let us return to Clines's structural comparison between the three parts of the psalm and the Creation-Fall narrative of Genesis 1-3. He believes that the "background" of Ps 19:2-6 is Genesis 1, i.e., Creation, and that 19:7-11 is connected to Genesis 2-3.³¹ He then wonders if the prayer of 19:12-15 is not a reflection on the Fall itself, especially when the psalmist asks for forgiveness and mentions "great transgression" (v. 13). I believe this suggestion has merit because it is YHWH in Gen 3:8 who pursues sinful humanity. His cry "Where are you" has "all the marks of grace."³²

By looking at Psalm 19 as a whole, it appears the intent is to show that from creation one can only obtain an impression of God, whereas through special revelation a clearer picture is obtained. So maintains VanGemeren,

The revelation of God's law is clearer than the revelation in nature. Nature "declares," "proclaims," "pours forth," and "displays" the revelation of God's majesty, wisdom and power. However, the revelation of the law is greater. It is greater because it is given by the covenant God, whose name is Yahweh.³³

I conclude, then, that Psalm 19 does not support an inclusivistic view of salvation based on general revelation, as Pinnock and Sanders aver. However, this beautiful psalm shows the important interplay between the two forms of revelation, and how special revelation is necessary to make general revelation result in salvation because fallen, sinful humans can not comprehend the inaudible message of natural revelation.

This tendency is precisely the problem addressed by Paul in Rom 1:18-21. He sadly observes that people "exchanged the glory of

³¹ Clines, "The Tree of Knowledge," 12-13.

³² Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1967), 70.

³³ VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 181.

the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (1:23). Then he continues, "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator" (1:25). While the people Paul wrote about knew something about God through general revelation, they did not have a saving knowledge of the LORD. Similarly, we in the Christian academic community must be careful to avoid the folly of the people described by Paul. We run the risk of creating intellectual idols, if we place general and special revelation on the same plane and think salvific knowledge can be apprehended from the inaudible message in nature rather than only from his written Word, and/or the incarnate Logos.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Trinity Journal
2065 Half Day Rd.
Deerfield, IL 60015
www.tiu.edu/trinityjournal/index.html

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu