

What do the heavens declare? On the Old Testament motif of God's beauty in creation

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The paradox in the famous declaration of Psalm 19 that the heavens 'narrate' the glory of God and that this message of nature is 'inaudible' prompts the question as to the sense of speaking about a striking divine appearance without words (pun intended). In the light of the equally paradoxical presence of the motif of not-seeing in Old Testament theophanies where God himself appears, it seems that wordless speaking and unseen beauty need to be examined in association with each other, especially because the theophanies of Exodus and 1 Kings associate the motifs of not-seeing and silence with both the appearance and the speaking of God. This article investigates the cluster of ideas in Psalm 19 in the light of the theophanies and other texts. It then proposes a way in which this may be understood, notably that God's own beauty is visible in that which he has created beautifully, that is, nature. It is argued that, if this proclaims God's כבוד, the latter must be a divine quality observable in nature.

Introduction

The famous opening of Psalm 19 contains a paradox often under-exposed or not recognised for the power it holds. The psalm's grand introductory proclamation is no less celebrated for being the subject of Johann Sebastian Bach's Cantata *Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes*, BWV 76 (1723), for being immortalised later by Joseph Haydn in his oratorio *Die Schöpfung*, Hob 21.2 (1798) and finally having its fame emphasised by Ludwig van Beethoven in the song cycle *Sechs Lieder von Gellert*, Opus 48.4 (1803). All three musical settings may suggest the idea long regarded as consensus in commentaries, annotated Bible versions and theological reflection generally, namely that divine revelation is manifested in nature as well as in God's word, usually understood to be the Torah or Scripture. But in none of the famous compositions it is clear what the magnificent first line essentially entails. Some lines after the opening statement Bach has the tenor voice proclaim that 'Nature and grace speak to all humans' and he lets the soprano call, 'Listen, you nations, to God's voice!' – leaving unclear *how* nature speaks and whether God's voice is to be heard in nature.¹ Haydn's first line is quite clear in that it closely follows the first line of the Hebrew text that 'The heavens tell God's glory', but he then ignores the motif of the spoken word.² In turn Beethoven's setting of the poetic adaptation by Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, narrows down nature's proclamation to the sounds that can be heard in nature, speaking as he does of the sound ('Schall') reverberating along the sky and the sea.³

This indistinctness can be clarified if one notices the *paradoxical* character of nature's wordless narration and the concomitant communication of God's splendour in ways other than verbal.

1.[Chorus:]

Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes
und die Feste verkündigt seiner Hände Werk.
Es ist keine Sprache noch Rede,
da man nicht ihre Stimme höre.

[Tenor:]

So lässt sich Gott nicht unbezeugt!
Natur und Gnade redt alle Menschen an:
Dies alles hat ja Gott getan,
Daß sich die Himmel regen
Und Geist und Körper sich bewegen.
Gott selbst hat sich zu euch geneiget
Und ruft durch Boten ohne Zahl:
Auf, kommt zu meinem Liebesmah!

[Soprano:]

Hört, ihr Völker, Gottes Stimme,
Eilt zu seinem Gnadenthron! [...]

2.Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes,
Und seiner Hände Werk
Zeigt an das Firmament.

3.Die Himmel rühmen des Ewigen Ehre,
Ihr Schall pflanzt seinen Namen fort.
Ihn rühmt der Erdkreis, ihn preisen die Meere;
Vernimm, o Mensch, ihr göttlich Wort! [...]

The prominence of sound ('Schall') in Beethoven's version becomes poignant in light of his growing deafness. Opus 48 was composed in the early months of 1802, shortly before he moved to Heiligenstadt (April 1802), where he wrote the famous Heiligenstadt Testament, in which he mentioned the possibility of suicide because of his increasing difficulty to hear (cf. Cooper 2008:120).

That reveals the close association of God's beauty and the beauty of creation referred to in the title of this article. We will proceed from my observation in another context⁴ that the terminology of God's beauty, tallying as it does with the Old Testament description of the beauty of kings, is also used to describe aspects of natural beauty.⁵

Two aspects in the texts

The two aspects intended here are the beauty of God and the beauty of nature, both of which occur often in the Old Testament. Their association in Psalm 19 can be considered a pivotal point for the investigation of either one. To this end I propose the hypothesis that God's beauty cannot be conceived of without the beauty of creation and that the beauty of creation in turn is derived from the beauty of God.

Seeing and 'hearing' in Psalm 19

Contrary to the near consensus of 20th century critical scholarship,⁶ Psalm 19 consists of three sections and not of two:

¹ To the leader. A Psalm of David.

² The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

³ Day pours forth *speech* to day,
and night gives notice to night.

⁴ There is *no speech*, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard.

⁵ Their **measuring-line** goes out through all the earth,
and their **milestones** are at the end of the world.

There he has put a tent for the *sun*,

⁶ which comes out like a bridegroom
from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

⁷ Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hidden from its heat.

⁸ *The law* of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decree of the Lord is firm, making
wise the simple;

⁹ the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is pure,
enlightening the eyes;

¹⁰ the fear of the Lord is pure,
it endures forever;

the ordinances of the Lord are true,
altogether they are righteous.

¹¹ They are more desirable than gold, than
much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey and drops of the comb.

I
a
b
II

¹² Also *your servant* lets himself be instructed by them;

in obedience to them there is great reward.

¹³ Errors – who can detect them?

Clear me from hidden faults.

¹⁴ also keep your servant away from the insolent;
do not let them rule over me.

Then I shall be blameless, and innocent
of great transgression.

¹⁵ Let the words of my mouth be acceptable to you
and may the thought of my heart be before you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

III

The well-established view that the poem known as Psalm 19 in the Hebrew Bible consists of two sections, notably verses 2–7 (often called 'Psalm 19A') and verses 8–15 (often called 'Psalm 19B'),⁷ has been countered with several arguments developed by recent literary criticism. Hossfeld (1993:129) summarises these as: the exilic-postexilic concept of the heavens as a firmament, earth as a foundation, the sky as a tent, the transferring of sapiential attributes to the Torah (vv. 8–11), the identification of the fear of the Lord with wisdom (v. 10), and linguistic forms from a relatively late exilic time. It may be added that some of these also occur in the first section, usually thought to contain the older motifs.⁸

To be sure, there *are* two thought complexes, but these are organised in three sections.⁹ The first (vv. 2–7) evidently centres on nature and can be subdivided into two parts on respectively the wordless proclamation by celestial phenomena (I a, vv. 2–5a) and the cyclical movements of the sun (I b, vv. 5b–7). The second section (II, vv. 8–11) consists of nominal sentences describing different aspects of the law, which is repeatedly identified by a noun in the construct state and the Tetragrammaton in the genitive. The third strophe (III, vv. 12–15) also focuses on the law, but the relational dimension between the first person of the Torah-obeying individual and the second person of God introduces the prayer form in which God is spoken *to* as opposed to spoken *about*. So the first focal point is nature's divulging something about God and the second is the law establishing a relationship between the believer and God. Whereas the first is forged in two subsections of respectively four stichs about a form of proclamation by the heavens plus three stichs on the evidence of the sun, the second focal point is expressed in two main sections of equal length: five stichs on the law and five stichs on pious obedience to the law.

What interests us most for the purposes of this article is the first quatrain of the poem. Since there is no major difference of opinion that the psalm as a whole reflects a movement

7. For example, Kraus (1966:153) (from the perspective of form criticism, emphasising difference in origin) and Van Uchelen (1971:130) (from the perspective of literary criticism, emphasising text-immanent unity).

8. For example, the Aramaisms יורה (Pfeil/Pa'el, v. 3) and נלחם (v. 5); cf. below and Günther (1980:11f).

9. Delitzsch (1894:190) found 2x2 strophes, Böhl (1968:135–139) no less than eleven; Günther (1980:11–25) follows Delitzsch despite noticing inconsistencies in the latter's demarcation of stichs and hemistichs. Delitzsch counts hemistichs as lines, which enables him to submit two sections of fourteen lines, each consisting of two units of respectively eight and six lines. Much as I would like to accept this in the light of the sonnet-like octave plus sestet in Ecclesiastes 3:2–8, it cannot work to count verses 12 and 13 as one hemistich each, but verses 5 and 7 as three hemistichs each, in order to reach a symmetry of two octaves plus two sestets.

4. Loader (2011a:§1.2.1); examples of הדר and כבוד for kings: Psalms 21:6, 45:4–5; Daniel 4:27, 33; 5:18; cf. further Elliott (2009:1).

5. Examples of הדר and כבוד for natural phenomena: Leviticus 23:40; Deuteronomy 33:17; Isaiah 35:2; cf. Loader (2011a:§2.4.1.).

6. Cf. for instance Weiser (1965:201), Kraus (1966:154), Van Uchelen (1971:129).

from indirect revelation through nature to direct revelation through the Torah, then the question becomes all the more pressing: what is the indirect revelation like? What does it 'reveal' and how does it do so?

- The first to be noticed is the simple fact that the heavens 'tell'. פִּעֵל *Pi'el* usually takes the meaning of the *verba dicendi*¹⁰ and in verse 2 can therefore mean that the heavens speak about something, that is, narrate. But the verb can also mean 'to count down', 'to enumerate' and therefore 'to recount' not as a *verbum dicendi*, but in the literal sense of the term, that is, 'to catalogue'.¹¹
- Second, the parallel verb, נָדַד *Hiph'il*, has a similar profile in the Old Testament. It is often also a *verbum dicendi*¹² and in this text could therefore mean that the firmament tells the works of God's hands, that is, tells *about* them. But the verb can also mean 'to show', 'to make visible', 'to explain' and therefore 'to demonstrate'.¹³

In Psalm 19:2 both verbs may be taken in the narrative meaning ('tell'), but both may equally well be semantically ostentative ('show'). It is quite possible that we do not have to opt for one option to the complete exclusion of the other, for the verse may contain a subtle play on the semantic possibilities of the verbs in question. The Hebrew text translated as:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork

may just as well be rendered by:

The heavens are recounting / enumerating / showing the glory of God;
and the firmament demonstrates his handiwork.

In this verse the poet could have used one or both of the Old Testament verbs for vocal praise – dominant especially in the Psalms and in contexts referring to psalm singing – namely יָדָה *Hiph'il* and הִלֵּל *Pi'el*. Both can be used of God, of an attribute of God or of something other than God, be it a person or a deed.¹⁴ But he does not; on the contrary, he seems to avoid them studiously. Whereas 'produce sound vocally' is the diagnostic component in the semantics of the two typical hymnic verbs יָדָה and הִלֵּל, 'notify by demonstration' is the diagnostic component of the two verbs that are actually

10. For example, Exodus 9:16, Psalms 22:23, 102:22 (make known), Genesis 24:66, Exodus 10:2 (report); for further examples, see Kühlwein (1976:164–165).

11. For example, *Pi'el*: Psalms 22:18 (count down every visible element), 40:6 (enumerate great wonders [+ נָדַד]), Job 28:27 (count out, establish and examine what is seen), 38:37 (counting the clouds); *Qal*: Genesis 15:5 (counting the stars), 41:49 (uncountable masses), Ezra 1:8 (show by counting out), Psalm 56:9 (measure what is felt); for further examples, cf. Kühlwein (1976:165).

12. For example, *Hiph'il*: 1 Samuel 3:15, 27:11, Job 31:37; Deuteronomy 17:4, Ruth 2:11 (*Hoph'al*) etcetera.

13. For example Genesis 3:11 (show nakedness), Isaiah 21:2 (show a vision), also Judges 14:12 (explain a riddle) etcetera. So Westermann (1976:32) errs with his sweeping statement that נָדַד is always a matter of spoken words.

14. Examples include:
Hiph'il: Genesis 49:8, Psalm 49:19, Job 40:14 (with acc. other than God); Psalm 45:18, Genesis 29:35 (with acc. God); Psalms 30:5 and 97:12 (with לְ + קִישּׁוֹר [remembrance]), Nehemiah 11:17 – especially clear as technical term – and 12:24 (with לְ and referring to the singing a doxology), 1 Chronicles 16:8, 23:30, 25:3, 2 Chronicles 31:2; Psalms 6:6, 33:2, 75:2, 100:4 (with לְ and God).

Pi'el: Genesis 12:15, 2 Samuel 14:25, Proverbs 27:2, 28:4, 31:28 and 31, Can 6:9 (with object other than God, such as man, woman, person, deeds); Isaiah 38:18, Psalms 22:23f. and 27, 146:1f., and the whole of Psalms 148, 150 (with God as object); particularly as technical term for singing the Hallelujah in Nehemiah 12:24, 1 Chronicles 23:5, 2 Chronicles 5:13, 7:6, 8:14, 20:21, 29:30, 31:2.

used, namely נָדַד and נָגַד. Since the latter meaning is generic, it can include the former, but not vice versa. Choosing only the 'audible' option would mean to narrow down the statement (as in Beethoven's *Lied*).

In the light of the following two verses (3 and 4) this option is however impossible and the second interpretation becomes a necessity. But precisely because of the reference to words and sound in these verses, it is at the same time impossible to avoid considering or at least being aware of the first:

³ Day pours forth speech to day,
and night gives notice to night.

⁴ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard.

According to verse 3, one day 'pours forth' speech (נָגַד) to the next, but according to the very next line, there is no speech (אֵין-אִשְׁרָי). In the parallel hemistich of verse 4 this is unmistakably confirmed: 'their voice is not heard.' The third person plural suffix in קִלְמֹם can only refer to the days and the nights. So the days and nights divulge something that cannot be heard, which only leaves the possibility that this be observed visually. This, again, is confirmed by the verbs having two possibilities: נָבַט *Hiph'il* means 'to let bubble' or 'to pour forth' water or other fluids, but can also be used metonymically for delivering speech or song.¹⁵ An almost exact parallel occurs in Psalm 145:7, where the beauty of God's splendid glory and his works 'pour out' reminders of his goodness.¹⁶ The same principle goes for the Aramaism הוּחַ *Pi'el/Pa'el*, 'to show (physically)' and 'interpret', as well as 'to inform (verbally)'.¹⁷

In verse 5 we again encounter a word that can be understood in several ways, namely מִלֵּיהֶם. This can be the third person masculine plural suffix attached to the plural of מִלָּה, 'word', which can however also mean 'thing', 'topic' and can thus refer to something that is demonstrated.¹⁸ Another possibility is that the form מִלֵּיהֶם may be the suffix appended to מִיל, 'mile', the distance of 2000 cubits or a stone marking that distance, 'milestone' or 'signpost'.¹⁹ That would eliminate the need to suppose that קוֹמָם, 'their measuring chord' has to be emended to קוֹלְמָם, 'their voice', since the line would make perfect sense as a parallelistic reference to distance:

Their *measuring-line* goes out through all the earth,
and their *milestones* are at the end of the world.

15. *Qal* Proverbs 18:4 (said metaphorically of water); *Hiph'il* Proverbs 1:23, Sir 16:25 (said of spirit); Psalm 119:171 (of song); Psalm 78:2 (of riddles); Psalm 59:8 (of words, metaphorically of drooling dogs).

16. The third person plural subject in יְבִישׁוּ refers to God's beauty and his deeds in verse 5.

17. *הוּחַ* (Hebrew *Pi'el*, Aramaic *Pa'el* and *Aph'el*) 'show', 'interpret': Daniel 2:4 and 24, 5:7, 5:12, Deuteronomy 34:1 (Targ. *Pa'el* and *Aph'el*, object dinar and field); 'point the finger': Meg 16a (Hebrew *Pi'el*); 'inform verbally': Daniel 2:9 (parallel to tell a lie), Job 32:6, 10 and 17; Esther 2:22 (Targum *Pa'el*; Targum Sheni *Itpe'el* in a passive formulation, 'it was shown').

18. Both in Hebrew and Aramaic מִלָּה, מִלָּה, מִלָּה, מִלָּה, מִלָּה.

19. Yoma 6:4 and 8, Yalkut Deuteronomy 907 (Hebrew), Targ Yerushalmi Exodus 14:22 (Aramaic); cf. Jastrow (1950:773). Yet another possibility would be to regard מִלָּה as a variant of מִלָּה and relate it to the noun מִלָּה (or מִלָּה or מִלָּה), 'full extension'; this would fit the context well, but the absence of מ in the plural with suffix would pose a difficulty.

If this is accepted, it is also unnecessary to emend the preposition ב by substituting ל , a reading probably attested by the translation of Aquila (**kai. eij teloj**). In verse 5a mention is therefore made of a distance encompassing the total span of the earth as measured out by God,²⁰ reaching from one end of the earth to the other where the border stones marking out the stretch would be. Therefore days and nights do not speak audibly, but there is significance in the fact that they are measured from the one end of the earth disk to the other. This in turn explains the close link with the next strophe (vv. 5b–7): מִשׁ is a spatial concept and refers to a point in space which must therefore be this outer post. There God has pitched a tent for the sun (cf. Is 40:22, 42:5, Job 9:8). The image would accordingly be that the sun disappears into the tent at the western edge of the earth, then moves under cover in the tent and goes round to come out on the eastern side next morning. The tent is therefore poetically pictured as a counter-heaven where the sun spends the night before coming out the front door to cover the distance to the back door once more. He rises and goes out, running his course to the other end (the same words יָצָא and קָצָה as in v. 5a), at which point the night takes over until the next morning, when the sun bridegroom appears and repeats the journey yet again. The first aspect of the message passed on from day to day and from night to night is thus the regular order of the celestial process, which cannot be heard but has a clear significance that can be seen and marvelled at. The other aspect of the message concerns that God who pitched the tent and thereby regulated the marvellously stable sequence of light and darkness or day and night. The prominent role of the sun in the strophe of verses 5b–7 hinges on the possibilities offered by the tent. Therefore its marvels and its beaming beauty testify to the splendour of the God who pitched the tent and therefore made it all possible.

20. This is exactly how קָצָה is used in Job 38:5, also in the context of God's wonderful work in creation, which includes measuring out the extent of the earth disc.

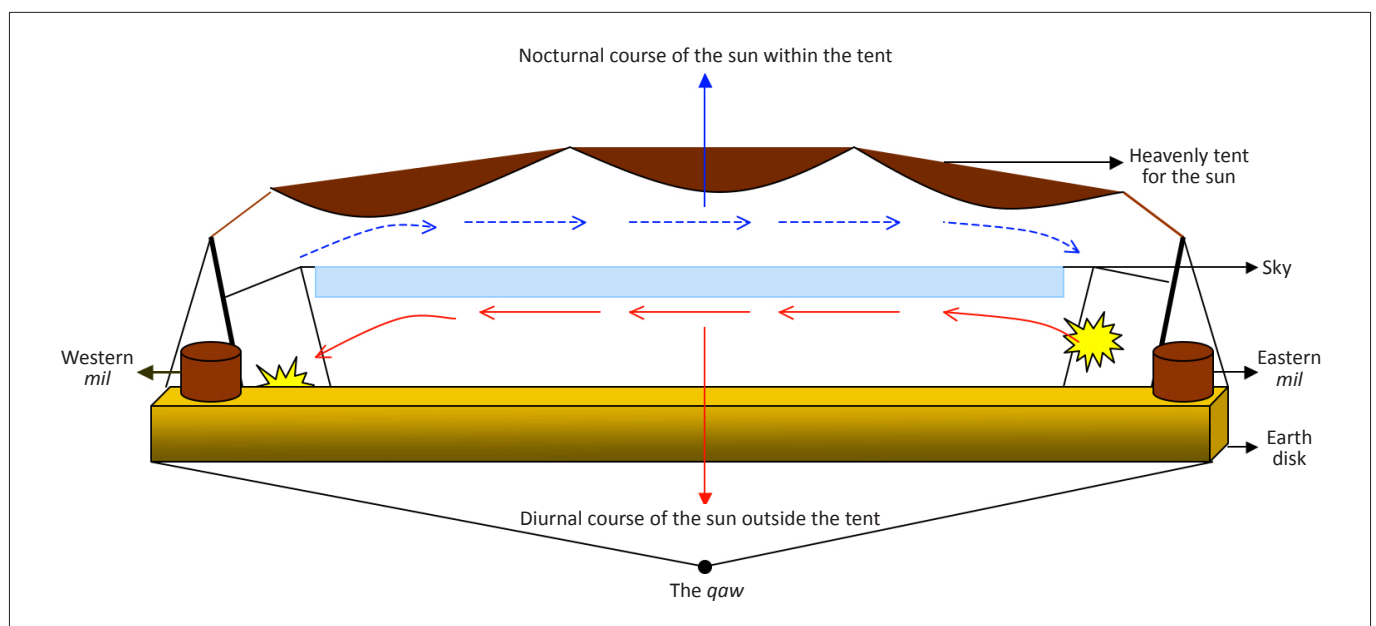
One step further brings us to the כְּבוֹד testified to by the marvels of the firmament. Disappearing at the western beacon stone an reappearing at the eastern one, covering the distance around the world twice a day, once in shining light and once in darkness, seen on one trip and unseen on the other, the unending warmth issuing forth from the sun's resources (v. 7) – all of this is a matter of majestic glory, that is, כְּבוֹד . The splendour proclaimed by the heavens is explicitly called *God's splendour*.

כְּבוֹד is one of eleven nouns used in the Old Testament for 'beauty'.²¹ It means a splendid appearance that overwhelms the observer²² and is frequently used to express this attribute of God. That attribute of humans which overwhelms others when they are impressed by them, *a fortiori* overwhelms the onlookers when they are impressed by God. Therefore it is no surprise to find that the words used to express this are used for God, nature and people alike. A corollary may be found in Psalm 8, where the same motif frames the whole poem in calling God's essential presence 'majestic / beautiful / overwhelming on all the earth'. To say this, must mean the divine beauty is seen on earth. I submit that this is what we have in Psalm 19 as well. The unheard 'narration' of כְּבוֹד can only be a visible כְּבוֹד . Being paralleled as it is by 'the works of his hands' that are also said to 'tell' in the sky, it must mean that the impressive beauty of nature *is* the impressive beauty of God. In other words, God's beauty is carried by visible natural phenomena. They are tasked to exhibit God's beauty. Therefore nature shares God's beauty. For this reason I am quite happy to agree with Oeming²³ that God's beauty is imparted to nature, but I would also insist on an important

21. The other ten nouns are: יָפִי ('beauty'), טֵבַר ('beauty'), טִפְפִּירָה ('beauty'), הוֹד ('glory'), הוֹרֵר ('splendour'), תְּפִאִיחָה ('splendour'), טֵב ('beauty', 'splendour'), חֵן ('charm'), יָגֵם ('loveliness'), אֲדִירָה ('magnificence').

22. Cf. Loader (2004:254 and 2011:§ C [forthcoming], 2011a:§1; Elliott [2009:1]).

23. Oeming (2004:961). By the same token, it may sound safe when he claims (with reference to human-made cult images) that 'no worldly beauty' can portray God. But if God imparts his beauty to all creation ('an alles Geschaffene', says Oeming himself), this beauty in all creation *does* reflect God's beauty and therefore himself.



Source: ©Cinéma Humain Graphics

FIGURE 1: Graphic representation of Psalm 19:5–7.

rider: God's beauty is imparted to the human being in a special sense, since the testifying character of natural beauty is not identical with being God's image, which is reserved only for humans.²⁴

The answer to the question posed in the title of this article is therefore: the heavens declare that God is beautiful by being so themselves. A dynamic translation can therefore be: 'The heavens reflect the beauty of God.' The reason why the poet is so overwhelmed by the heavens, the sun and the cyclical wonder of light and darkness, is that beauty by definition overwhelms.

Parts II and III of Psalm 19 concern the Torah. The focus shifts to the law of God and to the relationship of humans with God in terms of this law. This is not such an abrupt jump to a completely other topic as it may seem at first sight (and as accepted almost axiomatically in traditional historical criticism²⁵). The motif of seeing in Part I is now counterbalanced by the motif of hearing in Parts II and III. This may be welcome to those who subscribe to the doctrine of 'revelation by nature and Scripture', but the reason why the psalm is indeed to be interpreted in these terms is not dogmatics, but the association of the motifs of audibility and visibility in the psalm:

- Firstly, the motif of audibility is present in the negated form. No sound is heard, so there is a paradoxical use of non-audibility to represent visibility.
- Secondly, the consistent ambivalence of the terms used to express 'tell'/'catalogue' (ספר), 'word'/'thing' or 'milestone' (מילה), 'inform'/'point out' (הודיע), 'bubbling forth' (נבע) speech or physical matter, forces the consideration that the inaudibly beautiful message of nature does somehow require an audible word to explain it.
- This, as a matter of fact, is what the psalm itself offers by using poetic words to not only describe the beauty we see in nature, but to comment on it so that the hearer notices the meaning of the astro-physical events in the sky.

The Torah-related parts of the psalm in verses 5b–15, demonstrating as they do the same psalmic interest in the Law as Psalms 1 and 119, are therefore by no means just stapled on to a 'nature psalm', but are deeply integrated with it. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that the two strophes of Part I (vv. 2–5a) were carefully integrated with the Torah sections II and III. That would explain diachronically why the first part with its 'older' Ancient Near Eastern hymnic interest in the sun contains 'later' language such as Aramaisms (הודיע and מילה) as well as 'late' motifs (such as the tent motif and the designation of heaven as a רִקיעַ).²⁶ This is put into further perspective by the fact that not only are motifs from the 'Torah' parts of Psalm 19 found several times in the Torah Psalms 1 and 119,²⁷ but also motifs from

24.Cf. Loader (2011:§ 2.2b [forthcoming]).

25.Cf. Kraus (1966:153).

26.Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger (1993:129).

27.For example, the Torah as a joy (Ps 19:9 // 119:14, 47, 70, 162), as pure (Ps 19:9, 10 // Ps 119:9) and as a light (Ps 19:9 // Ps 119:105); the Torah as gold (Ps 19:11 // Ps 119:72); the Torah as sweet as honey (Ps 19:11 // Ps 119:103); speaking the Torah (Ps 19:8 // Ps 119:72); עֲנֵב 'ending', 'end' (Ps 19:12 // Ps 119:33, 112); reward for obedience to the Torah (Ps 19:12 // Ps 119:165); prayer for help in matters of obedience to the Torah (Ps 19:13, 14 // Ps 119 *passim*); the speaker as עֲבֵדךָ (Ps 19:12, 14 // Ps 119:17, 23, 38, 65, 84, 122, 124, 125, 176) etcetera.

the 'nature' part of Psalm 19 occur in the Torah poems, where they are thoroughly integrated with the law theme.²⁸ Whether or not 'older' materials as discovered by the time-honoured Old Testament subdiscipline of form history can be identified in the first verses of the psalm, the composition of the poem is thoroughly integrated and not only a matter of two originally independent poems being pasted onto each other. Without expounding the whole psalm in detail – which would go beyond the scope and intention of this article – it may therefore be said that *the assertion of Psalm 19 is that nature and Torah reciprocally attest the one God* categorically called El (v. 2) and identified as Yahweh (vv. 8ff.). To recognise the God of Israel in the Creator God, to know his will and to be able to live accordingly, *one needs to hear the Torah*, God's intelligibly spoken word.²⁹ But in order to appreciate the greatness and majesty of the speaking God,³⁰ *one needs to see his beauty*, and that can only be perceived in his creation. The reciprocity of these two perspectives is so profound that it is impossible to separate them by dislodging verses 2–7 from verses 8–15.

Seeing and not-seeing in the Sinai theophanies

Collateral corroboration for this interpretation can be found in Old Testament stories of theophanies. We begin by considering Exodus 19–20 and 33–34 which may be called the Sinai chapters *par excellence*, since here Moses receives the Torah, the centre of which is made up by the 'ten words' of the Decalogue written twice by God. Then we turn to 1 Kings 19, where the prophet Elijah is confronted with God's splendour.

The Sinai narrative

Israel arrives at Sinai, the mountain of God's revelation. They see natural phenomena: cloud, fire, smoke and lightning. These are the signs that God has come down from his abode. But in this case too we have a seeming inconsistency or even inner contradiction. Here it consists of the paradox found at the beginning of Psalm 19, only stood on its head. Whereas in the psalm it was a matter of *not* hearing what would be expected to be heard, of the explicit mention of words going out and the equally explicit denial that there are any words to hear at all, here it is a matter of seeing and not seeing at the same time.

- First of all, there is a remarkable formulation in Exodus 19:9:

I am about to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak to you.

28.God's word or, respectively, 'words' about God are fixed in the heavens, שָׁמַיִם (Ps 119:89 // Ps 19:2); God's wonders (Ps 119:27 // Ps 19:2-7a); the verb נִבֵּן for the bubbling forth of thoughts (Ps 119:171 // Ps 19:6); day and night (Ps 19:3 // Ps 1:2, 119:55, 147f., albeit with different focus). Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger (2008:377) on the Torah as creative word *i.o.* in Psalm 119, and on the Torah as 'blueprint' for creation in Proverbs 8 and Sir 24. It is clear that the relevance for creation of the Torah or word is thoroughly combinable with the nature motif, for example, in Psalms 33:6, 9 and Isaiah 48:13.

29.Torah as a spoken word has a clear profile in Psalm 19. However, it is also attested in the great Torah Psalm 119 – where it is not only logically important, but also in terms of the lexemes chosen for it. On terms for 'word' such as דְּבַר and אִמְרָה to indicate the Torah in Psalm 119, cf. Hossfeld & Zenger (2008:352).

30.Not for the purposes of a theodicy to absolve him from injustice for punishing people who have never heard of him (cf. the argument of Paul in Rm 1:20 and 10:18).

God appears, but conceals himself at the same time. Then the purpose of this paradoxical appearance-so-as-not-to-be-seen is given. God *appears* so that Israel may *hear* him speaking (בְּעִבּוֹר יִשְׁמַע הָעָם בְּדַבְרֵי עֲמֹךָ) whilst not seeing him. Israel should hear God's Torah and they should notice his majestic presence in the phenomena of nature, but despite appearing he himself remains hidden by the same phenomena that reveal him.

- Secondly, in verses 16–19 the appearance of God is again said to be accompanied by awesome natural events, he is again hidden from the view, but he speaks 'loudly' (בְּקוֹל).
- In verse 21 the danger of 'breaking through' to God in order to see (לִרְאוֹת) is repeated in another prohibition.
- In Exodus 20 the Decalogue is framed on one side by the introduction that God '*spoke all these words and said*' (וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאַמֵּר) and on the other by a repetition of his *presence* accompanied by fearsome natural events (v. 18).
- The listening motif is repeated in verse 19 with the injunction that Moses be the intermediary to interpret God's words to them so that they can hear, but do not have to listen to God personally whilst the theophany is taking place.
- In verse 21 this is underlined by stressing the invisibility of God because of 'the thick cloud in which God was' (אֲשֶׁר־שָׁם הָאֱלֹהִים).
- The remarkable relationship between seeing/not-seeing and hearing is once more emphasised by the noteworthy formulation in verse 22:

You yourselves have *seen* that I have *spoken* to you (אַתֶּם רִאִיתֶם כִּי מִן־שְׁמַיִם דִּבַּרְתִּי עִמָּכֶם).

Even if this is taken as an idiomatic expression, it remains a strong marker of the context where the relationship of hearing the Torah and 'seeing the unseen' (cf. Heb 11:27!) follows the same logic as hearing the silence of Psalm 19:4.

- In Exodus 33–34 these motifs are again present: the concealing cloud plus God's speaking to Moses (Ex 33:9).
- The tension in God's speaking to Moses 'face to face' (hear and see, cf. the next bullet), is heightened by Moses' mediating the word to Israel (Ex 33:11).
- Moses speaks face to face with God, but then still wishes to see God's beauty (כְּבֹד, Ex 33:18). The wish is only partially granted, for God sets him in a crevice and only allows him to see his majestic beauty (שֵׁנִי) from behind (v. 19), but denies him seeing God's face because no human can see his face and live (vv. 20–23).
- This theophany is not only partial as far as Moses and the Israelites see and do not see, but is also twice accompanied by God's voice as part of his appearance. In Exodus 33:19 and 34:6–7 God himself calls out his name as well as the 'little credo' about his compassion, lovingkindness and justice,³¹ thereby revealing verbally all there is to know about the identity and character of this God.³²

31. This element is also found in Psalm 145:8, in a context where the works of God (v. 5) praise his splendour (see par. 3.1).

32. For the ramifications of this creedal-type summary of God's mercy-cum-justice, cf. Spieckermann (2004:7). Houtman (2000:707) rightly sees a connection between Exodus 34:6–7 and Exodus 33:19a, 22. Whether the former is a clarification of the latter and an expansion of Exodus 34:5 or whether one should also draw into the calculation the other aspects of the last verses of Exodus 33, one could concur with Houtman that '[t]he emphasis is not on the seeing of YHWH and the

Repeatedly the motifs of seeing and hearing are used, associated, paradoxically applied, and mutually influence each other – importantly, with explicit mention of God's beauty by means of two synonymous nouns. Here the whole context of seeing and hearing is, as in Psalm 19, that of recognising God in nature and then hearing the Torah.

Elijah at Mount Horeb

A second Sinai narrative is the story of the prophet Elijah at Sinai or Horeb (1 Ki 19). Here the motifs are not as markedly prominent as in the case of Exodus, but the elements are there nevertheless.

Having fled to Mount Horeb, the prophet first hears the word of God (1 Ki 19:9). The word commands him to go out and experience a theophany (v. 11).³³ This again consists of overwhelming natural phenomena such as wind, an earthquake and fire, in none of which God was present, despite the fact that it is clearly stated that God passed before him whilst these phenomena were taking place. The similarity (though not identity) of the paradoxical combination of appearance and concealment in Exodus is apparent. Only when silence sets in, God gives the prophet his commands (vv. 13ff.). This happens whilst Elijah covers his face so as *not* to see God. The noun used here is again interestingly ambiguous: דְּמָמָה can mean 'silence' as well as 'soft-spoken word' or 'whisper'. So, in this case too we have seeing and not-seeing in association with hearing and not-hearing.³⁴ The trimmings of the motifs are different in Psalm 19, and the Exodus and Elijah narratives, but their inner logic are consistent.

All of this provides the substantiation to argue that silence and words in association with seeing God only in a way mediated by natural phenomena is a well-established theme for expressing the idea of revelation in several strands of the Old Testament. The focal point of this is expressed most prominently in Psalm 19, clearly in the Exodus narratives, and implied in the Elijah story: what is proclaimed by the heavens or nature, is the overwhelming beauty of God's awesome splendour. That is what carries his word.

(Footnote 32 continues...)

visible presentation of his qualities (33:19a), but on the audible presentation (33:19b). Perhaps the scope should be broadened to include all of the last verses of chapter 33 and the first verses of chapter 34, in which the motif of humans *not* being allowed to see God is strongly underlined. Houtman's formulation could be adapted slightly to say, 'the emphasis is *on not* seeing YHWH' instead of 'the emphasis is *not on* [the] seeing [of] YHWH'. This would represent an important focal difference and would even better serve Houtman's purpose of highlighting the importance of the audible word in the context of a visual appearance by God.

33. Already Montgomery and Gehman (1960:313) find that this scene 'may have been modelled after the Mosaic tradition (Ex 19:20, etc.)'. They also group God's 'face', 'glory', 'name' and 'word' together so as to present them as subtly different from God's *persona propria* (Montgomery & Gehman 1960:314). Although this distinction is somewhat woolly (God's glory and/or beauty and his face have very much to do with his physical visibility, which is why Elijah had to cover his face), the association of God's splendid appearance and his word is meaningful.

34. Würthwein (1984:230) calls the 'sound of a thin whisper/silence' (קוֹל דְּמָמָה רִקָּה) 'die "hörbare" Stille', that is, 'the "audible" silence', and finds it the essential aspect of the scene. Although he does not expand, this would be compatible with the thesis of a paradox that I propose not only in this case, but also in the others where hearing or not-hearing and seeing or not-seeing occur. Despite the support of Lust (1975:110–115) for the thesis of De Boer (1951:179) that we here have to do with 'a thin petrifying sound' as opposed to 'a still small voice', the fact that it is a קוֹל and that the word heard by the prophet immediately afterwards is also called a קוֹל adds to the probability that we here have a similar paradox as the seeing or not-seeing in the rest of the theophany and in those of the Exodus narratives, as well as a similar paradox to the hearing or not-hearing of Psalms 19. That is in my opinion the answer to the remark by Brongers (1967:196) that 'the sound of a thin (soft) silence' is in fact a *contradictio in terminis*.

An overview of God's beauty in other texts

Having reached this point, it now remains only to show that the motif of God's beauty is not an isolated motif in the three texts we have examined, but is present all over the Old Testament in such a variety of contexts and functions that it is not surprising to find it performing such a pivotal function as carrying God's revelation.

Explicit use of the motif in other psalms

In other psalms God's beauty is frequently mentioned:

- A particularly clear instance is to be seen in Psalm 145. Whereas verse 4 has a parallelism on one *generation* making known God's work to the next, its thought structure is closely reminiscent of Psalm 19:3, where one day attests the message to the next and in parallelism one night does so to the next:

Day pours forth speech to day,
and night gives notice to night.

and in Psalm 145:4

Generation praises your works to generation,
and they tell about your mighty deeds.

But this goes further in that verse 5 lists a little catalogue of synonyms for God's beautiful splendour (הוד, כבוד, הדר) about which the poet wishes to 'talk' or 'sing praise' (Hiph'il שיה). In verses 10–12 we again encounter a passage where both God's works and his pious people (כל-מעשך והסודך), praise (ידה), make known (Hiph'il ידע), tell (אמר) and speak (דבר) about his glory, splendour and power. The conceptual difference with Psalm 19 is that the recounting of God's splendour is done by things (God's works) and by human word of mouth alike (Ps 145), whereas the works of God in nature are the silent witnesses of his beauty (Ps 19). The point of similarity between the two is that Psalm 19 supplements the silent testimony of God's works by the audible Torah.

- In Psalm 104 the glory of creation is as obvious as can be expected in a creation psalm. The same nouns for God's magnificent beauty and splendour are used (vv. 1 and 31, הוד, הדר, and כבוד). The fact that the impressive phenomena of nature make up the bulk of the hymn to the honour of God eloquently illustrates (if the pun of the adverb is excused) the fact that they manifest his magnificence.
- God's beauty can also appear in the temple, which is what the poet of Psalm 27:4 straightforwardly expresses in the wish to live in the house of the Lord his whole life long 'to see the loveliness of Yahweh' (להוזהר בנעם-יהוה). Here the noun נעם clearly indicates that God's beauty is experienced as 'loveliness' or 'attractiveness' and that the impressive splendour which so overwhelms the poets is an aesthetical experience.
- According to Psalm 90:17, God's נעם can also come upon the community of the faithful. This is a noteworthy wish with which, of all things, a psalm on human frailty ends. In this context it must have a concrete meaning, which confirms the closeness of a beautiful appearance and glory. It also confirms the possibility that God's beauty can be imparted to people.³⁵

35.Cf. Oeming (2004:961), who makes the inclusive claim that God distributes of his beauty 'to all creation'.

- This can even be the case with places, as Psalm 50:2 states: the perfect beauty (יפי) of Jerusalem is associated with God's beautiful radiance.³⁶

The use of the motif in prophetic literature

God's beauty is also attested in prophetic literature, several times – but not exclusively – in association with the beauty of Jerusalem or nature:

- In Isaiah 35:2 God's beauty (הדר) is associated with the beauty (כבוד and הדר) of the Lebanon and Mount Carmel as well as with the Sharon Plain. This makes the aesthetic aspect of the connection between God's splendour and nature unmistakable.
- Similarly, the relationship between God's action and Israel's beauty (הוד) is described as a phenomenon of nature in Hosea 14:6–7.
- Although not identical, the beauty of the covenant between God and Israel as presented in Zechariah 11:7 is clearly related to these ideas. The concept of a beautiful (נעם) covenant is preserved also in the negative use of the motif as termination of the covenant.³⁷

The use of the motif in wisdom literature

In the sapiential literature several poems present nature's impressive beauty as a perspective on the enigmatic power of God:

- The divine speech in Job 38ff. shows a deep admiration for the natural order, the profundity of which can only be wondered at in awe. Since only God understands his handiwork, humans can only marvel at it. The structure of the carefully constructed poem mirrors the deeply thought out order of God's creation. The profound harmony manifests the character of the beautiful as that which impresses absolutely – just as every individual work of art produced by God's creative activity.³⁸
- The natural order is likewise found 'beautiful' by Ecclesiastes (יפה, Ec 3:11) and is appreciated as a testimony to God's unfathomableness. However, in his case it leads to a negative result. This is clear from the sombre pessimism of every context in which the motif occurs in this book. The prime examples are Ecclesiastes 3 (cf. v. 11b and the surrounding context, for instance vv. 9 and 19–21). Even the opening poem (Ec 1:2–11) is full of admiration for the fascinating nature, but leads to resignation (v. 8).³⁹

So many instances in so many literary genres of the Old Testament attest to the fact that the cluster of ideas in Psalm 19, unique as they are in the specific form in which they occur, are not isolated. If, conversely, the exposition of Psalm 19 offered above is seen against the backdrop of the other texts in the Pentateuch, the Former and Latter Prophets as well as in the Writings, Psalm 19 becomes the centre of concentric circles of evidence around it. Then a conclusion pointing in quite another direction is warranted.

36.Cf. further Psalms 8:1–10, 46:5, 48:3, 76:5, 90:17, 93:4, 97:6, 139:13–16.

37.Cf. further Isaiah 33:20f., Ezekiel 17:23, 31:3, 9.

38.Cf. Psalm 139:13–16.

39.Cf. further Proverbs 5:19, Job 12:7–9, 28:1ff.

Conclusion

In the Old Testament God's beauty is no secondary theme, says Reinhold Gestrich, that is, not limited to terminology for worship purposes.⁴⁰ On the contrary, it is a dominant theme in several literary genres and tradition complexes. We have found that God's beauty is asserted in such a way by nature that the natural phenomena actually proclaim him. If his own beauty is visible and can be experienced in nature, then nature partakes of God's beauty. If God's beauty is visible in that which he has created beautifully, it must mean that God is visible in nature. If nature thereby proclaims God's כבוד, the latter must be a divine quality observable in nature. But this is no identification of God with nature in any pantheistic sense, which would be foreign to ancient Israelite and Jewish thought. The counterpart of nature's 'mute' voice is the necessity for its inaudible testimony to be expounded by God's Torah. This is very prominent in the composition of Psalm 19 as well as in the combination of seeing and hearing and their paradoxical relationship to the counter-concepts of not-seeing and not-hearing we have frequently encountered. Nature, then, is not God, but takes part in God's beauty. Therefore it can impart his beauty. Nature does what the spoken word of Torah alone cannot do: it carries the very power of overwhelming impressiveness which gives the Torah its compelling force. On the other hand, the Torah does what nature alone cannot do: it identifies the source of this overwhelming beauty as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Israel.

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40.Gestrich (2008:92) uses the terms 'Nebengeschäft' and 'Anbetungstitel'.

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