

Psalm 19: Total Eclipse

Introduction: Sun and Torah

Total solar eclipses are rare events. On average, they occur somewhere on Earth every 18 months. But they recur at any given place only once every 370 years. A total eclipse can only last for a maximum of 7 min 40 secs. Usually it is much shorter.

A total eclipse occurs when, from the perspective of a narrow band on the Earth's surface, the sun is completely obscured by the moon, leaving only the sun's corona visible. David describes a total eclipse in this psalm. This occurs when David sees an object totally obscuring the sun.

David describes the sun. In verse 4 he says, "*In the heavens [God] has pitched a tent for the sun.*" You've heard the old joke. How did the astronaut get to the sun? He went at night. Think how David goes on to describe this "tent for the sun." He compares it with a bridegroom's pavilion, a bridal chamber, and then speaks of how the sun rises at one end of the heavens. An ancient Mesopotamian prayer to the gods of the night explains the change from sunset to darkness by speaking of Shamash, the sun god, retiring to his chamber. Similarly, David pictures the sun retiring to its tent or bridal chamber at night, from which it rises with the energy and freshness of a sexually gratified bridegroom or "*like a champion rejoicing to run his course.*"

David's imagery is graphic, even raunchy. But when David states that God has pitched a tent in the heavens for the sun he is saying something very counter-cultural. For ancient Babylonians and Egyptians treated the sun as a deity, often directly addressing and worshipping it as a god. But David treats the sun as being under God's control.

How far can you see on a clear day? 150 million kilometres from here to the sun. C.S. Lewis identified verse 6 as the key clause in the whole psalm: "*there is none hidden from its heat*". This is the hinge of the psalm. Just as the sun dominates the daytime sky, so too God's law, Torah, dominates inner life. Neither are dispensable. There is no life on this planet without the sun; there is no true inner life without Torah.

Some describe this psalm as God's two books - the book of nature and the book of Scripture. Others speak of general revelation and special revelation. There are two key themes in both sections of this psalm - speech and light. In the first section of the psalm we have the resounding word and the luminous light of sky revelation. In the second section of the psalm we have the penetrating word and light of Torah-revelation. In the first half of the psalm we meet the lesser light, the sun, and in the second half of the psalm, the greater light, God's law or Torah.

The Sun Eclipsed by Torah

Deceased astrophysicist Carl Sagan said, "What I'm saying is, if God wanted to send us a message, and ancient writings were the only way he could think of doing it, he could have done a better job." David's differing viewpoint might appeal to astrophysicists. For everything David says about God's law was said by ancients about the sun. David presents a total eclipse. But it is not the moon but Torah that takes the sun's place.

"*The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul*" (v7a). Egyptian, Hittite and Mesopotamian literature variously describe the sun god as being perfect and having

life-giving power and able to even revive the dead. Indeed, Babylonian mythology portrayed Shamash, the sun god, passing through the underworld during the night and bringing light, food and drink to the dead.

"The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple" (v7b). The psalm begins with the heavens, the skies, declaring God's glory as Creator, day after day and night after night. All ancient people knew they could depend on the sun rising from its chamber every day. The Babylonians worshiped the sun god, Marduk. His wisdom consisted in his expertise in magic spells to ward off evil demons. God's statutes, by contrast, give true wisdom to the simple, the impressionable, gullible people. Torah teaches us what really matters in life and how we should live our lives.

"The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart" (v8a). Torah is "right" or "just". In Elam the sun god Nahhunte was also the god of law, truth and justice. The Hittites believed their sun god was the god of justice who daily sat in judgment over all living creatures. In Mesopotamia, Shamash, the sun god, was dubbed "judge of heaven and earth" and "the judge of the gods and of mankind." His name was invoked in the Mesopotamian law collections. Also, in the ancient world people worshiped the sun god as the source of joy. We all know how a glorious sunny day can lift our spirits. Egyptians sang to the sun god Re, "When you rise on the horizon of heaven, a cry of joy goes forth to you from all the people... In every place every heart swells with joy at your rising." However, Torah eclipses the sun in justice and as the source of joy.

"The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes" (v8b). An Egyptian hymn, speaking of the sun god Ra, states: "fine gold does not match your radiance." In Hebrew the word for the sun, which comes from a root meaning "brilliant" or "radiant" corresponds with the Semitic name given to the sun god by Mesopotamians, namely Shamash. The famous Buddhist Wheel of Life diagram will show the Buddha pointing to the sun which stands as the symbol of enlightenment. However, Torah eclipses the sun in radiance and as a source of enlightenment. It gives light to our eyes - we become "bright-eyed and bushy-tailed", our lives pulsating with purpose and vision, a glint in our eye and a spring in our step.

"The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever" (v9a). In the Bible "fear of the LORD" is consistently associated with God's identity as Judge. Torah embodies all that make us accountable to our Judge and so David calls it "the fear of the LORD." He describes this as pure. Akkadian legal documents use the expression "pure as the sun." A Mesopotamian hymn to Shamash states "By your pure word which is unchanging." But Torah eclipses the sun in purity and endurance.

"The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous" (v9b). Torah is "sure" or "true." Truth was the genius or guardian spirit of the Egyptian sun god. Torah eclipses the sun in truth and righteousness.

The sun is naturally associated with gold. The Egyptian god Re was known as the "golden sun disk" and said of himself "my skin is of pure gold." In Mesopotamian texts the name of the sun god Shamash is used as a synonym for gold. Gold sun disks were used as ornaments with the colour of the metal symbolising the sun. But it is Torah, not some sun god, which is "more precious than gold, than much pure gold".

Torah is also "sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb". Possibly, the golden colour of honey encourages this metaphor. A hymn to the Egyptian sun god Re calls him "possessor of sweetness" and says, "The sweetness of thee is in the northern sky", while a Hittite hymn states that the sun god Ishtanu's "message is sweet to everyone." But the ultimate source of sweetness is not sun-like, golden honey but Torah.

The second half of the psalm is the greater light, Torah, described as "law", "statutes", "precepts" and "ordinances." These are all different ways of speaking about God's revealed will. So David says, "*By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward*" (v11). David immensely values the way God's will warns him of danger and guides him in a path that leads to such great blessing.

This psalm is about total eclipse - how God's revealed will, Torah, eclipses the sun. It is only those like David who know God through Torah who are able to look above at the skies, the heavens, and see them for what they truly are - the signed masterpieces of our Creator, the one we call, like David "*O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer*" (v14b). Realising this let's have a closer look at verses 1-4:

Extra Terrestrial Communication

SETI stands for the *Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence*. Since the 1960s radio telescopes have repeatedly tried to pick up any radiowaves being transmitted by other intelligent life-forms somewhere in space. None have succeeded, including the longest running SETI projects, Phoenix and Serendip, based in Puerto Rico. Believers in extra terrestrial intelligent life appeal to the sheer complexity of the task, namely that there are more than 100 billion stars in our galaxy alone, spread over an expanse of almost 100,000 light-years. Others think another method is needed. A new telescope at Oak Ridge Observatory in Harvard stands to receive nanosecond light pulses that an intelligent civilization on some farflung planet might be sending our way.

King David was tuned in to these extraterrestrial messages. This is what he said, "*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.*" When David speaks of the day and night skies communicating a message he has in mind everything that is in the universe up and above the earth, an extraterrestrial message indeed.

There is extraterrestrial life in the universe and messages are being transmitted to earth every day and night to every corner of the world. To receive these messages we don't need telescopes in Puerto Rico to pick up radiowaves nor a telescope in Harvard to pick up nanosecond light pulses. As verse 2 informs us, this message involves a daily pouring forth of speech and a nightly imparting of knowledge. And since "*there is no [human] speech or language in which this voice is not heard*", we are dealing with a message communicated in a language that gets round the problem of having to translate from Chinese into Indonesian or Spanish into Arabic. If we received a message from extraterrestrial life from outer space, we would still need to decode it and translate it into our own language. But the speech of which David speaks is a universal language intelligible to all regardless of which language they speak.

Strongly associated with SETI was the late astrophysicist Carl Sagan, who said, "The idea that God is an oversized white male with a flowing beard who sits in the sky and tallies the fall of every sparrow is ludicrous. But if by God one means the set of physical laws that govern the universe, then clearly there is such a God. This God is emotionally unsatisfying... it does not make much sense to pray to the law of gravity." Sagan was an atheist, a man ready to listen to messages from intelligent extraterrestrial life elsewhere in the universe, but deaf to the speech the universe was voicing to him every day and every night wherever he traveled on Earth.

What is the message that the universe out there is communicating to everyone on earth? "*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*" Every nanosecond the universe is proclaiming to us that God created it, declaring to us that God is the great and glorious sovereign Creator.

Obviously, there are a lot of people on the face of the globe who are not tuned in to this message. And it is a frequency problem, the frequency with which people suppress the truth and deliberately close their ears, like Sagan. Paul is probably alluding to Psalm 19:1-4 in Romans 1:20:

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

There is no philosophical argument presupposed here because Paul bluntly indicates the problem is not intellectual, but moral. Whatever logical or rational arguments people raise against the idea of God being the Creator are irrelevant. It's not that people *can't* know God but that they *won't* know God.

Torah-Led Godliness

Those of us who see the glory of the Lord in his creation do so because like David we already know Jesus as our "Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer", because we already know him through his Word. As such we can't claim to be morally superior. So in verse 12 David asks, "*Who can discern his errors?*" Sin is so deeply engrained in your nature, in mine, that often we are not even aware of it. David's response is not to whip himself into a frenzy of fresh exertion. He simply prays, "*Forgive my hidden faults.*" David is under grace, not law. It is because he depends on God's grace for forgiveness he can have a healthy, positive view of the law. However, the Jewish people as a whole depended on the law, not God's grace and so Jesus castigate the teachers of the law of his day as unmarked graves and as those who made people think of the law as a huge, crushing burden.

David deliberately eclipses the sun with Torah. He attacks ancient idolatry. For David this is "the great transgression" - idolatry. Direct and deliberate defiance of God is deadly dangerous, clearly putting us on the slippery slide to outright idolatry. So he continues in verse 13, "*Keep your servant also from wilful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of [THE] great transgression.*"

David concludes this psalm: "*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer*" (v14). David longs to think in a God-glorifying way. When we share this disposition we too learn how good and pleasing and perfect God's will is. Like David we discover that the knowledge of God's will revives our soul, invigorating it like energy-giving food giving

fresh vitality to our tired body. The knowledge of God's revealed will makes us wise, helping us see what really matters. It also brings joy to our heart for there is nothing more satisfying than to know God is pleased with us.

What is the sun in your life without which you have nothing? Make sure it is God's revealed will. The application is not simply to carve out time in your program to read and study God's word. We are dealing here with an attitude not a discipline, as helpful as the latter undoubtedly is. We must look to the Lord to give us that David-like disposition that treasures God's word precisely because we delight in doing God's will and seeking to live a life that pleases him. May God's word be your sun!