

A Distinction between Word, Speech and Span

*Please note: this document is placed under **Essays Related to the Early Church**. Reason? For the simple reason that this category is less crowded with documents.*

The basis for this article is Psalm Nineteen, verses three and four, which run as follows: *“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.”* To understand them better, the first two verses of this psalm which precede them should be included: *“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.”* Because all four verses of this psalm are connected intimately, they will be considered as one unit.

So what prompted this article? Three things, all of a superficial nature, if you will, and more along the lines of first impressions. For some reason other, they kept coming to mind while I was pondering the four verses of Psalm Nineteen over a period of time. The first one is the actual season of this writing, about mid-August. This is when we experience pre-pre-autumnal weather even though it's still summer.¹ There's an excitement in the air peculiar to this season that had been missing for some months now, more precisely, since the onset of warmer weather in mid-spring. This translates into shorter days and brighter nights.

The second impression is more along societal lines. Stores are starting to fill with back-to-school stuff as well as talk about the impending football season. One drawback is the ever earlier items pertaining to Halloween. Everyone agrees that's pushing it. That means that Christmas advertising is right around the corner.

The third and final impression—actually linked closely with the first—is the Perseid meteorite shower also known as Saint Lawrence's Tears (a Roman martyr who was put to death on a grill!). The over all atmosphere which all three contribute to produce has been long awaited. However, there is a drawback. That consists in a perception that since this is an exciting time lasting roughly until around Christmas, time flies like at no other season. In sum, despite continued hot and humid weather, we anticipate that the sluggishness of summer is about to be shed when we'll enjoy more refreshing air. Thankfully the season I'm talking about consists of a full five

¹ A caveat, if you will. All the talk about climate change is putting a damper on such a wonderful experience; I wonder how long we'll have to enjoy it.

months of enjoyment which makes the other seven months worth slogging through. This pertains, of course, to New England where I live and have a special affinity.

Pardon just a little more waxing eloquently on this time of year. A welcome relief is that nights are not only longer but considerably brighter. During the warmer months when days are longer and dominated by the sun, we lose the fuller beauty of the night sky. We can see it, though, from time to time, but it's limited by additional factors as humid air, etc. Now with autumn coming, we look forward to rediscovering the vastness of what's out there. The above mentioned Perseid meteorite shower is a herald which gets the night show on the road, quite literally. Then there's a man made factor, the presence of high flying jets. Fortunately they don't detract from the grandeur of the night sky but add a certain mystique. From my position, most are headed northeast or towards Europe. You can't help but wonder what people on board are doing as they look forward to their destination. Yet as any traveler knows, for the most part it's not as romantic up there as it is down here. An added bonus—and this is a big one—is the distinct lack of bugs, especially mosquitoes. So with all this in mind, we can begin unpacking Psalm Nineteen's four verses.²

The overall impression you get from the four verses is that of a mighty choir chanting the Lord's praises. Some may say that automatically we humanize natural phenomena to make an essentially hostile world more manageable. That's partially right but more wrong. Instead, this is a manifestation of our poetic side which is more valuable than any scientific knowledge or the like. Thus we have every right to capitalize upon it which is so essential to reading the psalm verses at hand in the spirit of *lectio divina*. So to get outdoor and see the heavenly choir doing its thing and reading the verses go hand-in-hand in a marvelous fashion. We come away with a sentiment expressed perfectly in Baruch 3.34: "The stars shone in their watches and were glad; he called them, and they said, 'Here we are!' They shone with gladness for him who made them."

If we continue a bit with vs. 4 it reads (as part of the next verse) "In them he has set a tent for the sun." Obviously all life depends upon the sun. However, even if likened to a bridegroom, it hogs the sky and has a certain impersonal character compared with the ever-changing splendor of the night. Furthermore, the sun

² A text on this homepage about the Psalter exists where Psalm Nineteen is included (**Notes on the Psalms**). However, the document at hand is a deeper exposition or expanding of these four verses.

relentlessly beats down upon everyone and everything. “And there is nothing hid from its heat.” [vs. 6]. So despite being indispensable, the sun’s omnipresence does away with a sense of mystery with two exceptions, sunrise and sunset. In both the sun is making its appearance felt during the predawn and shortly bursts upon the scene at sunrise. At the other end is sunset where the sun bids adieu to the earth and decreases during twilight until once again it’s night³. So any relationship with the sun is like one with an omnipotent master, more along the lines of respect. We bid hello and goodbye at opposite ends of the day and despite being grateful for its presence, are glad it’s all-pervasive presence is gone. Surely the sun knows this, but being all-powerful, tolerates our puny attitude.

As for the times of twilight at the onset of night, they are one of anticipation to behold the revelation of the mysteries overhead while the twilight at dawn creates nostalgia for leaving them behind. Scientifically we know that the starry realm is present during the daylight hours but is blotted out by the sun. However, that’s small consolation. Yet our faith in this knowledge of a reality we know is present but remains invisible carries us through to the coming evening twilight. This is especially helpful during summer’s long days. Perhaps a similar anticipation of the night wonders ties in with the origins of the Jewish Sabbath being at sunset or more specifically, awaiting the presence of the evening star. Once that’s seen, all is well. Sabbath has begun and remains until it’s visible again the following night. Even though this second manifestation signals the end of Sabbath, its presence suffices to carry through to the next Sabbath, a reminder of the coming rest. Not only that, this reminder will empower the intervening six days which are representative of the six days of creation.

Another point worth mentioning is that we all know how ancient peoples (Mayans, Babylonians, for example) had detailed knowledge of the night sky. They observed the movements of all that’s above with an extraordinary accuracy unaided by scientific instruments. The observations garnered were put to practical use such as telling time (moon phases) and when to plant crops, plus when to observe religious festivals. Those engaged in such activities followed a schedule opposite their fellow

3 Somewhere in his **Journal** Thoreau speaks of sunsets, especially winter ones. He says (and I paraphrase) that it’s more mysterious to walk following something (sunset) than to walk toward something (sunrise). For that reason Thoreau never set out toward the sunrise. Another point to consider. During his time people were rushing feverishly westward as the United States was expanding while he preferred to remain at home and not partake of what he’d most likely dub craziness. That puts his appreciation of sunset in even a better perspective.

citizens. They slept during the day and were up all night. One can just imagine their anticipation of nightfall. Many were situated in places with hot days and cool nights, so the clarity of the night sky was pretty much constant for their observations.

Continuing along, vss. 7-10 of Psalm Nineteen speak of the *Torah* of the Lord which like the sun, occupies a preeminent place. The ensuing adjectives—perfect, sure, right, clean and true—are all very well and fine. Yet like the sun, they can bear down upon us relentlessly during daylight hours and are moderated at night by the moon accompanied with the stars. The context, of course, is a desert environment where both the day and the night stand out with special clarity, un-obscured by clouds or fog. So despite the distinction between night and day, the two halves remain as one.

Vs. 1 speaks of two parts of the night sky, the heavens and the firmament, *shamaym* and *raqyah*. Often the former has the definite article “the” referring to the sun, moon and stars while firmament applies to the vault of the heavens; the sky. *Shamaym* is one of two things (the other is the earth) that God created on the first day or day one according to the very first verse of Genesis. As for *raqyah*, God created it on day two and is located in the midst of the waters; better, *tok* or the very center of the waters, this word having the preposition *b-* (in) prefaced to it. Such waters comprise the primeval “stuff” on which the Spirit (*Ruach*) of God was moving or hovering.

Note that this *raqyah* is simply isn’t placed *betok* the waters. Although not mentioned specifically, we can assume that the Spirit’s *rachaph* (also as to brood, to cherish) effects this. Once there, *raqyah* separates the waters, *badal* also as to distinguish, that is to say, those under it and those over it, *tachach* and *hal* (upon). With this more specific definition in mind, God called *raqyah shamym*, not the other way around, for there remain waters above *raqyah*. While restrained by *shamym*, always they remain a threat of breaking through which, thankfully, is remote. Regardless, this separation along with the potential of waters breaking through imparts a unique sense of excitement we obtain from viewing the night sky.

With this distinction made between *raqyah* and *shamym*, we can see more clearly that each has two manners of expression, telling and proclaiming (*saphar* and *nagad*), both being in the present tense. This heavenly chatter is going on during the day just as much as when the sun blots out their activity. The former has more to do

with writing or inscribing (that is, as a scribe taking dictation) whereas the latter is in the process of bringing to light in order to proclaim openly. As for the object of their chattering, it's glory and handiwork, *kavod* and *mahaseh*. The former fundamentally means heaviness or weightiness and the latter, something that is done or accomplished (from the common verb *hasah*, to do as to make). As for the heavens or *shamym*, they seem to be those luminous bodies inserted within the firmament or *raqyah*, the place from which they do their writing, of inscribing a message or document about the divine *kavod*. As for *raqyah* or dome-shaped inverted bowl, its job is to proclaim or *nagad* this *kavod*, *kavod* which is being written...not in the past but as ever present.

Vs. 2 moves on to the two parts of the twenty-four hour cycle, day-to-day and night-to-night. As for the first which consists in getting from one day (*yom*) to the next, we have to pass through the night (*layil*). The same applies to getting from one night to the next. Note the difference: to the day belongs the verb *navah* and to the night belongs *chavah*. The former implies a bubbling or boil up as from beneath, of erupting to the surface whereas the latter, a breathing forth which is more subdued than the former. The noun *'omer* is associated with *navah*, the common word for speech or word, and the noun *dahath* is associated with *chavah*, knowledge in the intimate sense. With all this in mind, we can say that the transition from day (through night) to the next day is a process of word bubbling up (*navah*→*'omer*). The transition from night (through day) to the next night is a process of breathing forth knowledge (*chavah*→*dahath*). Such are the two modes of how we experience what's most basic to our daily lives. Unfortunately for most of us it goes by without much reflection. We're too engaged in other things.

By delineating the two transitions above, we can see that the heavens and the firmament are seething with activity. No small wonder the ancients loved staying up at night observing them. Such seemingly restless activity is carried out in complete silence, quite a revelation, for all too often we identify activity with noise. To top it off, the ancients weren't bothered by light pollution let alone jets flying overhead. And so vs. 3 is quick to point out that there's no speech, words or voice, three words obviously having something to do with speaking.

What's involved is as follows: *'omer* commonly as speech, *davar* or word as expression (not unlike the Greek *logos*) and *qol*, the human voice responsible for uttering the first two. The psalmist realizes that no human attribute can apply to the

heavens and firmament. In fact, they transcend anything we or any created being could utter. However, they are endowed with what vs. 4 call calls a voice, more properly a *qav* or rope as used to measure something⁴. Thus this *qav* is the real organ of divine communication, if you will, of interest here. The ancients perceived it clearly, *qav* being employed to measure out or structure their lives.

With this in mind, is it possible to transfer...translate?...the speech and word (*omer* and *davar*) belonging to what we behold at night to such a line for measurement? If so, is it a viable instrument, and what do we measure with it? The Psalm verse has two instances of “in” or *b-*. The first is relative to the earth or *‘erets*, land for habitation and in the Bible often is synonymous with the nation of Israel. The second *b-* is relative not just to the world or *tevel* (the inhabited earth) but to its end or *qetseh* which also can apply to the whole or sum of anything.

That means the that the heavens and firmament (*shamym* and *raqyah*) which are above measure out from their position both *‘erets* and the *qetseh* of *tevel*. They do this not by remaining isolated far above us but by being in (*b-*) the two. The result? The two aspects of the sky above reach down, measure out these two places of human habitation and inform them with their non-earthly presence. They do this all the time, of course, but during the day the sun in all its splendor hogs the sky. Only at night do the heavens and firmament make this informing more present to us. In order to perceive this we require neither speech nor word to articulate it but *qav*, a kind of measuring line which we make as our own. That means through nightly observation we insert this *qav* into our memories after having marveled at it and carry it throughout the day when the sun dominates our lives.

Having spelled out the two halves of the twenty-four hour cycle informing our lives, we can take the presence of heaven and firmament, representative of transcendent reality, and “measure out” our lives according to their dictates, their *saphar* and *nagad* noted several paragraphs above. Again—and this is important to realize—there’s no speech nor word involved in such measuring. The *qav* involved is an ever present reality which can be applied to how we comport ourselves. This actually is what this short essay is about.

4 Note the following two examples: 1) “Going on eastward with a *qav* in his hand, the man measured a thousand cubits and then led me through the water” [Ezk 47.3]. 2) “And he who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city (the heavenly Jerusalem) and its gates and walls.”

So the reflections presented thus far require some expansion. Practically speaking, it's helpful to go outdoors on a clear morning before sunrise or better, before light appears on the horizon. In this way we can get acquainted with the night sky, allowing it's presence sink into us. Then as light begins to take hold from the east, we watch the stars (and sometimes the moon and planets, usually Venus and Mars) fade ever so slowly until the last star is swallowed up by the fuller presence of light. The same can be done at evening as Jews do to observe the ongoing Sabbath. However, here we're more concerned with the former. Reason? We wish to carry memory of the starry firmament from the night into the day. Although it's present, as noted already, our perception of the firmament is succumbed by the sun. The best part is that even though we may lose awareness of the firmament's presence overhead which remains just as real as at night, we can be certain that evening is coming when we'll behold it once more. Enough of these alterations inures us to loss versus presence. The two happen so regularly that over a period of time we get acclimatized to them being one and the same.

This alternation as applied to our own lives can be put in terms of sleeping and being awake, that is, night and day. Often the former is associated with the workings of our unconscious. All very fine and intriguing but ultimately a waste of time, for we can get only so much mileage from it. However, the real communication—the *saphar* and *nagad* by the heavens and firmament—works at a deeper level than this. Again, the two verbs are representative of divine reality communicating itself to us by that overarching line or *qav* which remains silent. This *qav* is independent of speech whether we're sleeping with dreams (sleeping without dreams is included as well) or fully awake as during the day.

At the same time *qav* is identified with words: “and their words to the end of the world” [vs. 4]. Here *milah* is used in the plural, a poetic form of *davar* or word-as-expression with regard to the heavens and firmament. These two stretch out from above to below in an all-encompassing fashion. In this way they fill the world or *tevel* usually associated with the inhabited earth and akin to the Greek *oikonome*. The way they do this to *tevel* is by falling down by reason of their own weight, if you will. Thus the presence of the *qav* from the heavens and firmament press against us relentlessly whether we're aware of it or not, we whether we're sleeping (dreaming or not) or awake.

Getting back to the night sky in all its splendor, we see this pressing activity mediated through *qav* in plain sight. You'd have to be blind to miss it, yet it's all too common with our preoccupations. What we behold is a whole myriad of heavenly bodies so different from the sun's overwhelming presence during the day. As we know, many ancient cultures worshiped the sun as a divinity. Nothing in our experience can better represent full wakefulness. The logical conclusion is that the sun, of course, is divine. As for the night time when most of us are asleep, the way we detect having experienced deep sleep is by the restfulness we feel upon awakening. Yes, dreams can be remembered, but what about this state when our mental faculties are suspended as in deep sleep?

Recalling our experience, we have a definite sense that “nothing” had been present to us. Deep sleep is close to being knocked out cold. It's an analogue to that time when *saphar* and *nagad* inform us of their presence through their *qav*, we being unaware of their presence while it's going on. Still, they leave an imprint which is unforgettable and unlike any other experience. The secret *qav*, if you will, imparts the message that of all the three familiar states, that of deep sleep is the most real. This is quite a paradox because normally we think just the opposite is true.

This difficult to nail down reality haunts by gnawing at our awareness through the three common stages just delineated. We feel its presence more profoundly than anything the night sky or daylight conveys though the former is more conducive to revealing, again getting back to that *qav* which supplants *saphar* and *nagad*, telling and proclaiming. In essence this presence is awareness in and by itself. It supersedes everything we identify with, even ourselves as individual persons. Essentially it's impersonal which at first glance can make us uneasy because we put so much emphasis upon that which is personal. Yet staying with it is quite liberating.

So the task at hand consists of coming to grips with this ever-present impersonal component in our lives. We have a symbol of it in that *qav* or line minus speech, for to speak implies a person doing it. Fortunately in case we forget about it—and this is bound to happen—we can look forward to going out this evening and seeing it. Again, to quote Baruch: “The stars shone in their watches and were glad; he called them, and they said, ‘Here we are!’ They shone with gladness for him who made them” [3.34].

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