

The Literary Structure of Psalm 19

By [Chris G. Peck](#)

Chris G. Peck, BSE, MABS, is married to Sharon E. and they have one child, a boy. Chris was born in Kansas; has lived in six other states or protectorates of the USA, and in 2010 began living and helping translate Bibles in Papua New Guinea. He enjoys sightseeing, natural or man-made wonders.

Aided by the work and word choices of Bruce Waltke shown in “Speaking The Truth in Love” p 369-372ff, and Nils Lund, on many pages in “Chiasmus In The New Testament” the general discovery of the structure of Psalm 19 is this:

Verses 1-6 match the first aspect of verse 14; verses 7-11 match the second aspect of verse 14 and verses 12-13 match the third aspect of verse 14. So, the center of the Psalm could be said to fall where verse 13 ends and 14 begins. The rest of verse 14 is a denouement.

Verses 1-6 point out that the “words” of creation bespeak the glory of God, and the first aspect of verse 14 says, “Let the words of my mouth...” Verses 7-11 teach of the heart strength and vitality that come from obeying the law and the second aspect of verse 14 says, “...and the meditations of my heart...” Verses 12-13 are the Psalmist’s cry not to sin and the third aspect of verse 14 read, “...be acceptable in your sight...”

Indeed, Psalm 19 shows high literary structure; though it may not be able to be defined as a chiasm per se, verse one within itself shows to be a chiasm, and though the scope of analysis here has not been exhaustive, a tentative position is that verse three also is within itself a chiasm. This is held because verses two and four are each clearly straightly parallel; so verse three is believed to be inversely parallel matching verse one’s inverse parallelism.

So, the readers of this Psalm had and have before them something like a chiasm. Again, it goes beyond the scope here to speak about comparisons with all chiasms in Scripture or at least in the Hebrew Bible, but perhaps not all structured Biblical Hebrew writing is perfectly balanced, the same or nearly the same number of words or thoughts on each side of middle.

Further, verses 7-11 hold a chiastic-like middle in verse 9a. Indeed, “the fear of the LORD is pure...” is a phrase set off by itself from the rest of the set of verses. There are four nouns in verses seven and eight, according to Waltke and the NIV at least: law, stipulations, regulations and commands – each related to instruction, and after “the fear of the LORD...”

13. Also, hold back your servant from insolent men,
Let them [that is, their influence to sin] not rule over me.
Then I will retain integrity,
And be free from the punishment for blatant transgression.

14. Let the words of my mouth and
The meditation of my heart
Be acceptable in your sight –
O LORD,
my Rock and my Redeemer.

For the director of music.”

Notes:

The author of this article, because of chiastic studies and Habakkuk chapter 3, holds to superscript and postscript inclusio of the Psalms. The Hebrew word order, chiastic inclusio with denouement of Psalm 87 being:

“Of the sons of Korah
A Psalm
A Song...
A Song
A Psalm

Of the sons of Korah
For the director of music. According to mahalath leannoth.”

And, the beginning of Psalms 88 and 89 being each, “A maskil...”*

Further on Psalm 19, in the study of verse one, though the first word of this verse, “heavens” matches the last word, “skies” and “declare” and “proclaim” match, and the middle statements match, God’s glory is equivalent to but is more than the work of His hands. We know from other Scripture that God’s glory is self generated and that God is the LORD of glory, telling glory what to do, when to arise, what it is and is not; how far it goes “here” and how far “there,” and on and on. From 4c through 6 is a statement that the sun screams loudly God’s glory - maybe in faithfulness. The sun never stops shining. Can you not hear creation shouting loudly every time you feel the sun’s heat – and that’s all the time. God is faithful or God faithfully cares to heat our world for us. The never-ending heat would be deafening if it weren’t so pleasant and sustaining.

And, verse 1 is seven words in Hebrew. This could also support the argument that verse 3 is not chiastic but straightly parallel like 2 and 4 and verse 1 is special unto itself.

Pastorally, may humans declare the glory of God, let their heart be knit to the LORD, in purity, by way of his laws of instruction, and feel forgiven, pleasing to God in Christ.

*Proudly and without fear, I call many “friend” and carry Bible versions that do not translate Scripture this way.

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