

- A** Introduction or *inclusio* (v. 1a): “Bless the Lord, O my soul”
- B** Day One (vv. 1b–2a): praise and theophany; “YHWH, my God”
- C** Day Two (vv. 2b–4): emphasis upon the wind, spirit, or breath (Heb. *rûaḥ*, two times)
- D** Day Three (vv. 5–18): emphasis upon the deep, sea waters, and the springs
- E** Day Four (vv. 19–24): moon, sun, and climactic exultation⁹⁰
- D'** Day Five (vv. 25, 26): emphasis upon the sea and its moving things
- C'** Day Six (vv. 27–30): emphasis upon the spirit or breath (Heb. *rûaḥ*, two times)
- B'** Day Seven (vv. 31–35a): theophany and praise; “YHWH, my God”
- A'** Conclusion or *inclusio* (v. 35b): “Bless the Lord, O my soul.” Coda: “Hallelujah.”

A THEOLOGY OF PSALM 104 AND ITS ADJACENT PSALMS

TWO MAJOR THEOLOGICAL THEMES: *CREATIO PRIMA AND CREATIO CONTINUA*

Two terms that stand out in bold relief in Psalm 104 are “works or made” (Heb. *ma'āśeh* and *āśâ*; vv. 4, 13, 19, 24 [two times], 31) and “satisfy” (Heb. *śāba'*; vv. 13, 16, 28). These constitute the two main theological points of the psalm: God’s initial “works” of creation (*creatio prima*) and His continual “satisfying” or providing for His creation (*creatio continua*). While other biblical creation accounts (such as Gen. 1) focus upon God’s initial creation, Psalm 104 is virtually

proposing). Still, another suggestion for symmetrical strophic couplings of the psalm’s eight strophes comes from Terrien, *Psalms*, 710, 11: I (Light) and VIII (Glory) (vv. 2–4, plus 31–34); II (Earth) and VII (Terrestrial Creatures) (vv. 5–9, plus 27–30); III (Spring and Rain) and VI (The Great Sea) (vv. 10–13, plus 24–26); and IV (Vegetation) and V (Night and Day) (vv. 14–18, plus 19–23). For discussion of the principle of concurrence, in which multiple structural patterns may be superimposed on each other in a single passage of Scripture by the biblical writer, see, for example, Henry van Dyke Parunak, “Structural Studies in Ezekiel” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1978), esp. 75, 76.

90. Note that the apex of the Psalm, verse 24, moves from a bicolon (3:3 meter) that predominates in the psalm to a tricolon (3:3:3 metrical pattern). The only other places where the poetic meter of the Psalm expands to tricolon are in verse 25 (4:4:3 metrical pattern), discussed above, and verse 29 (3:3:3 metrical pattern), where the psalmist depicts creatures’ expiration and return to dust in the section of the psalm describing the sixth day of creation.

unique in emphasizing God's continuing creation. In the assessment of Harrelson,

Here we confront a picture of creation different from any creation stories or motifs in the entire Hebrew Bible, so far as I can see. God the creator works continually at the task of creation. . . . All life depends at every moment upon the quickening spirit of God. There is no life without the divine breath. . . . [The psalmist in Psalm 104] is portraying a direct dependence of all things, all life, upon the active presence of God, in every moment, for all time.⁹¹

Psalm 104 uniquely and powerfully joins both the initial and the continual work of divine creation. As Patrick Miller remarks: "Surely no text of Scripture speaks more directly and in detail about the creation and about what God did and does in creation and in the sustaining of creation than does this psalm."⁹²

HISTORICITY AND LITERALITY OF THE GENESIS CREATION NARRATIVES

After affirming the theological importance of Psalm 104 as a creation text, Miller joins others who have argued that, since the psalm is written in poetry, its report of creation (or that of Gen. 1–2 either) is not to be interpreted literally, as really having happened as described: "Here [Psalm 104], however, there is no external report vulnerable to literal and scientific analysis. One cannot analyze Psalm 104 that way. It is poetry, and we know not to interpret poetry literally."⁹³

Hebrew poetry does indeed contain an abundance of imagery, which must be recognized and interpreted as such. But it is incorrect to conclude that after taking into account the obvious imagery involved, Hebrew poetry should not be interpreted literally. Quite the contrary, in the Hebrew Bible the poetic genre does not negate a literal interpretation of the events described (e.g., Exod. 15; Dan. 7; and some 40 percent of the Old Testament, which is in poetry). In fact, biblical writers often wrote in poetry to *underscore* what is literally and historically true.⁹⁴ The poetic representation of the seven days of creation

91. Harrelson, "On God's Care for the Earth," 21.

92. Miller, "Psalm 104," 96. For many of the insights in the paragraphs that follow on the theology of Psalm 104, I am particularly indebted to Miller (*ibid.*, 95–103), although I do not agree with his denial of the literality of creation as it is depicted in this psalm.

93. *Ibid.*

94. Often in Scripture when something of special importance is being stated, the writer or speaker breaks forth into poetry! Note already in Genesis 1 through 3 the poetic summary of

in Psalm 104 does not negate the literality and historicity of the Genesis creation week any more than the poetic representation of the Exodus in Psalms 105 and 106 negates the literality and historicity of the Exodus events or the poetic representation of the Babylonian captivity in Psalm 137 negates the literality and historicity of the exile.⁹⁵

PURPOSEFULNESS, BEAUTY, AND JOY OF CREATION

Psalm 104 not only assumes and builds upon the literality of the Genesis creation accounts but reaffirms and amplifies the sense of orderliness and purposefulness that emerges from Genesis 1 and 2. Everything is created “in wisdom” (v. 24), in an orderly way, and has its purpose. The psalm also underscores and develops the sense of beauty and pleasure that God’s orderly, purposeful creation brings, not only to His creatures but also to God Himself. This is already implied in Genesis 1, as God proclaims His works good and beautiful (the meaning of the Heb. *tôb*), but it comes into full expression in the exquisitely wrought turns of phrases and plenitude of imagery in Psalm 104, climaxing with the exclamation: “Let the LORD be glad in His works” (v. 31). This aesthetic, pleasurable quality of God’s creation also contains an element of joy (note the threefold use of *sāmah*, “be glad,” in vv. 15, 31, 34b)⁹⁶ and even playfulness (Heb. *sāhaq*, “sport/play,” in reference to the Leviathan of v. 26).

POST-FALL PERSPECTIVE

At the same time, Psalm 104 often describes God’s created world from the perspective of how it functions after the Fall. Notice, for example, the reference to rainfall from God’s upper chambers (v. 13), in contrast to the mist that rose from the ground in pre-Fall Eden (Gen. 2:5, 6); the existence of predatory activity on the part of animals (vv. 20, 21), in contrast to the original vegetarian diet of all animals (Gen. 1:29, 30); the cultivation of the earth by humans at labor (vv. 14, 23; cf. Gen. 3:18), in contrast to the pre-Fall tending and keeping of the trees and plants in the Garden of Eden (2:8–15); and the existence of sinners and wicked people who need to be consumed (v. 35; cf.

God’s creation of humanity (Gen. 1:27), the record of the clearly poetic, ecstatic utterance of the first man after the creation of woman (Gen. 2:23), and God’s legal sentence upon the guilty after the Fall (Gen. 3:14–19).

95. See Davidson, “Biblical Account of Origins,” 10–19, for evidence supporting the literality of the seven-day creation week in the Genesis creation narratives.

96. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 295, titles this psalm “Joy in God’s Creation.”

Gen. 3), in contrast to a perfect world without sin in pre-Fall Eden (Gen. 1, 2). These references of the psalmist are not to be taken as contradicting the picture presented in Genesis 1 and 2; they are in keeping with the psalmist's poetic strategy to blend his depiction of the seven days of creation week with a view of God's continued preservation in its post-Fall condition. The psalmist does not teach death and predation before sin, as some have claimed.

HUMAN INTERDEPENDENCE AND INTEGRATION WITH THE REST OF CREATION

One especially surprising theological feature of the psalm comes in its depiction of humans within the scheme of creation. Unlike Psalm 8, which builds upon Genesis 1:26–28 and emphasizes humanity's God-given dominion over the rest of creation, Psalm 104 emphasizes that all sensate beings whom God has created share this world together.

There is a clear distinction between humankind and the different animals, but they are talked about in parallel ways as creatures of the world God has made. Humankind assumes not a central or special place but an integral part of the whole. . . . There is thus no language of domination, no *imago dei* that sets human beings apart from or puts them in rule over the other beasts. . . . While bypassing all the complex issues of the interrelationships among these "creatures," the psalm assumes a world in which they are all present, all in their place, all doing their work, and all provided for by God's goodness.⁹⁷

Psalm 104 does not deny the model of dominion that is highlighted in Genesis 1 and Psalm 8, but it stresses what may be called the model of integration.⁹⁸ Harrelson goes even further than integration when he describes the intrinsic importance of other created things apart from humankind: "I know of no more direct word in the Bible about the independent significance of things and creatures on which man does not depend for life. . . . God has interest in badgers and wild goats and storks for their own sakes. He has interest in trees and mountains and rock-cairns that simply serve non-human purposes. . . . *God* cares for *His* earth!"⁹⁹

97. Miller, "Psalm 104," 99.

98. James Limburg, "Down-to-Earth Theology: Psalm 104 and the Environment," *CurTM* 21, no. 5 (1994): 344, 45.

99. Harrelson, "On God's Care for the Earth," 20.