



# The Psalms and Creation Theology

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**H**istorical questions and covenant studies shaped most theological studies of the Older Testament in the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Recent decades, however, have witnessed a number of shifts in the discipline, including the embrace of creation as a central theme.<sup>2</sup>

The most complete statement of the importance of creation in the faith articulated in the Hebrew Scriptures is Terence Fretheim's *God and World in the Old Testament*.<sup>3</sup> He finds creation themes in many Hebrew texts. The Creator's relationship with all creatures—human and nonhuman—is central to the plot of the

<sup>1</sup> See W. H. Bellinger Jr., *Introducing Old Testament Theology: Creation, Covenant, and Prophecy in the Divine-Human Relationship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), xi–xii. “Older Testament” and “Hebrew Scriptures” will be used interchangeably in this article.

<sup>2</sup> See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962–1965); Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); Claus Westermann, *What Does the Old Testament Say about God?* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979); Paul Hanson, *Dynamic Transcendence: The Correlation of Confessional Heritage and Contemporary Experience in a Biblical Model of Divine Activity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); Samuel L. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000); Hans Heinrich Schmid, “Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation: ‘Creation Theology’ and the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology,” in *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 102–17. Schmid's scholarship is of signal importance. See also Leo G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

*A number of recent studies of the Old Testament literature have concentrated on the theme of creation as central to many of these books. A prime example is how an understanding of God's act of creation defines many of the individual psalms.*

Older Testament. All creatures have a vocation as part of creation. God blesses women and men and the creatures of the seas, the earth, and the skies with divine presence, making it possible to thrive and grow in the created order. The worship of the community feeds this life instructed by wisdom placed in creation by YHWH. The goal of the life of creation faith is none other than *shalom*.

I have come to the impact of creation in the theological perspective of the Older Testament by way of the Psalms. That is no surprise to my colleagues. My wife, Libby, says that no matter what the subject of my writing, it is always about the Psalms. And so it should be and is. I have suggested in several places that the Psalms are central to the theology of the Hebrew Scriptures, for in these songs, the ancient community sings its faith.

The five psalms I classify as Creation Psalms among the Psalms of Praise provide a beginning point: Psalms 8, 19, 65, 104, and 148. Consider first Psalms 8, 104, and 148 as texts that weave together theology, anthropology, and ecology.

## PSALM 8

This text is important in the movement of the Psalter as part of what I would call the first cluster of psalms in Book I. After five lament psalms, Psalm 8 is the first hymn of praise readers/hearers encounter. The form of the hymn is the classic three-part poem: an introduction, followed by the body of the hymn and concluding with a repetition of the introduction—a common strategy in Hebrew poetry. What is different here is that the introduction is not the standard call for the community to praise YHWH but is a direct statement of praise in the first person. It celebrates YHWH as glorious throughout all of creation. Contemporary readers need to remember that in ancient Israel's time, a name was more than an identifier such as "Bill" or "Libby." One's character and person were wrapped up in one's name. The opening line of Psalm 8 indicates that YHWH is present and active throughout creation, even above the heavens! In the ancient Near East, creation accounts commonly include the construction of a palace or citadel for the creator God. Here that tradition suggests a common biblical theme of weakness turned to strength: "Out of the mouth of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark" (v. 2).

The center of the psalm is all directly addressed to the Creator, and in these powerful poetic lines, the night sky represents the work of God's "fingers" in creating a vast and incomprehensible universe. The prayed poem of ten lines moves quickly to mere mortals in verse 4 and to the question of humanity's place in creation and its relationship with God. The NRSV's "human beings" and "mortals" identify humans. The first term is often associated with human frailty and the second, the children of *'adam*, carry the name's connection to *'adamah*, the earth. It is astonishing that in the vastness of creation, these lives hold a place in the divine care and attention. Verse 5 even proclaims that women and men are made but a little lower than God and crowned "with glory and honor." I suggest "God" as the best translation of *Elohim* here, mostly because I understand Psalm 8 to be

a poetic reflection on Genesis 1, what we have come to call the Priestly account of creation. And I think most everyone agrees that “God” is the appropriate translation in Genesis 1.<sup>4</sup>

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Psalm 8:4–6 reflects the Genesis proclamation that humans are created in the “image and likeness” of *Elohim*. There is a royal overtone to these verses in Psalm 8. Humans are God’s likeness. It is often the case in the ancient setting that royal persons have the task of taking care of the kingdom. God in this psalm “grants to humans the honor of caring for all of creation” as the shepherd-ruler cares for the kingdom. “‘Glory and honor’ suggest divine activity and presence in the world, demonstrated in human care for the creation.”<sup>5</sup> Verses 7–8 list creatures in God’s world and then come to a sudden stop, as if the list boggles the mind, and the psalm concludes as it began: “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.”

This poetic piece of creation theology is beautifully simple but communicates astonishing and complicated realities. At the center of the poem is “the famous cry of amazement over” the divine singling out of women and men in “all” of God’s creation. Robert Alter has shown how the poetic lines slow to embody the strong, stately statement of divine care and attention to humans.<sup>6</sup> We also need to notice that the psalm begins and ends with God (theology), while the body of the psalm is about anthropology and intertwined also is ecology. It is clear that the psalm is theocentric; the place of humans in creation is a divine gift. Walter Brueggemann is right to say, “Human dominion in the body of the psalm and the praise of God at the edges of the psalm must be held together.”<sup>7</sup> Life and the world as exclusively the praise of God is not what the psalm imagines; neither is the use of human power to exploit the creation. The hope of Psalm 8 is that the praise of God in worship reminds us as humans that creation is a divine gift for which we are grateful as caregivers rather than exploiters. It is also important to remember that Psalm 8 follows psalms crowded with enemies and that more follow in Psalms 9–14. Humans suffer, and yet in Psalm 8, they are gifted with “glory and honor” in

<sup>4</sup> For a different view, see Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 122.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 59. See deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 127.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 120.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984) 37–38,

the vocation of caring for the creation. The text praises God as creator and calls all humans to the vocation of caring for God's amazing creation.

#### PSALM 104

The next creation psalm is a longer piece, Psalm 104. The thirty-five verses include ancient poetic imagery rejoicing in God's astonishing creation. As is characteristic of hymns of praise, the psalm begins and ends with the summons for hearers and readers to turn fully and exuberantly to the Creator.<sup>8</sup>

The psalm logs a delightful inventory of parts of creation. First are the heavens and the clouds and the winds (vv. 2–4), and then the earth watered appropriately by rains (vv. 5–9), and then the waters quenching the thirst of wildlife (vv. 10–11). Birds inhabit the air (vv. 12–13); cattle live on the grass (v. 14); and plants, wine, oil, and bread gladden and strengthen the human heart (vv. 14–15). Trees and mountains make an appearance (vv. 16–18), as do the sun and moon to mark the order of creation (vv. 19–23). Humans appear in verses 14, 15, and 23. Please note the coney in verse 18: Coneys (hyrax) are mammals often compared to rabbits; they look like a small guinea pig. I find it remarkable that they are tiny relatives of elephants. Verse 24 makes clear that all of this joyful inventory of the created order has come from YHWH. "The psalmist is smitten with the beauty, awesomeness, generativity, and ordered coherence of creation guaranteed by the creator."<sup>9</sup> This inventory celebrates the macrostructure of the abundant created order.

Then the celebration of creation turns to three particular images. First, the sea (vv. 25–26) is full of creatures, ships, and Leviathan—the sea monster who has become YHWH's play thing. The sea is often related to chaos, but here it has become not a threat but a thing for sport and enjoyment. Second is the fruitfulness of creation to feed "all" (vv. 27–28). Third, verses 29–30 emphasize the breath of God as life-giving. "Breath" in verse 29 and "spirit" in verse 30 are the same in Hebrew. Creation is dependent on the divine presence for life. The last verses of the psalm joyfully praise God as creator. The wonder of all of God's creation characterizes the poetic articulation of creation in Psalm 104. Then suddenly verse 35 jolts readers/hearers with a warning to sinners and the wicked; presumably, in this context they exploit God's creation rather than care for it and consider it with joy.

Clint McCann suggests, "The poet who wrote Psalm 104 was an environmentalist. The psalmist knew about the intricate interconnectedness and subtle interdependence of air, soil, water, plants, and animals, including humans."<sup>10</sup> As *'adam* is related to *'adamah*, ground, the word *human* is related to the Latin *humus*, soil. This confession of faith is in the context of praise of the Creator rather than some attempt to explain creation. Concern for the environment begins with

<sup>8</sup> See deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 780, on the close of the psalm.

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 446. See deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 776.

<sup>10</sup> J. Clinton McCann Jr., "Book of Psalms," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 1099.

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### PSALM 148

Psalm 148 appears in the fivefold doxological conclusion to the Hebrew Psalter. This hymn of praise follows the standard structure for psalms of praise with an introduction calling the worshipping community to praise, followed by the basis for the praise, and then concluding with a renewed call to praise. What is distinctive in this text is that the calls to praise dominate the worship poem. Consider the psalm in two movements, verses 1–6 and verses 7–14. Between the two movements the effect is a universal call to praise of the Creator, the one who also makes life possible for the worshipping community.

The psalm begins and ends with the byword of the hymns of praise in the Psalter, *Hallelujah*, an imperative call to praise YHWH. This call to praise is so dominant in the first movement of praise (vv. 1–6) that it overwhelms and demands attention. The first verse begins with a kind of geography of praise, in the heavens and the heights, and then moves to those called to praise, angels who make up a host of heaven. Angels are messengers; no wings, feathers, or harps here. Then another kind of heavenly host is called to praise: sun, moon, stars, and sky. Rain-water comes from above the sky. The basis for the praise is that YHWH created all these heavenly hosts. Their creation is by command, likely an allusion to Genesis 1 and the divine fiats there. The parts of creation are made and ordered—order out of chaos—an essential basis for life.

The second movement of praise (vv. 7–14) renews the imperative call to praise, *Hallelujah*, now from the earth. The sea monsters and depths of the seas, fire, hail, snow, frost, and wind are now called to praise. The Creator orders the stormy wind. The poetic imagery moves through the creation with mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedar trees, wild and domestic animals, creepy-crawlers, and birds. All of creation is called to praise; perhaps this list also is attuned to the Priestly creation account in Genesis 1. Verse 11 moves to humans in delineating those called to praise: kings, princes, “all rulers of the earth.” All people are called to praise: women and men, young and old, and rulers. The call to praise is universal.<sup>11</sup> The basis for this praise is the name and glory of YHWH—that is, the reputation and presence and activity of YHWH even “above earth and heaven.”

<sup>11</sup> deClaisé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 1004.

YHWH is like no other, and so all are called to praise the incomparable deity. The concluding verse narrows the focus to the covenant relationship of YHWH and ancient Israel. The “horn” YHWH has established for the people is a symbol of strength for the covenant community. In terms of social setting, these concluding poems of the Psalter are keenly aware of the aftermath of the sixth-century forced migration to Babylon and the need for divine care and strength for the community as it seeks to move forward.

Psalm 148 passionately summons the community to praise YHWH as creator and ruler of all. The Creator cares for all of the universe and for the ancient covenant community Israel. All of creation—the beautiful, the simple, the suffering, the strong—all are summoned to praise of the Creator. The incomparability of YHWH and the covenant relationship with Israel are also included. This all-encompassing call to praise anticipates the concluding call to praise in the Psalter: “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord” (150:6). This unrelenting call to praise YHWH suggests a celebration of the reign of YHWH over all. Such a poetic word is good news to a reduced community still struggling with the aftermath of defeat and exile, in which chaos is knocking at the door.

In his latest volume, *Deep Calls to Deep: The Psalms in Dialogue amid Disruption*, William Brown suggests that the three texts on which I have commented are in dialogue about anthropology.<sup>12</sup> Psalm 8 characterizes humans as at the top of creation’s heap in terms of the *imago Dei*, enjoying the gift of gratitude in caring for the garden of creation. In Psalm 104, women and men are basically another example of the creations God has brought into being and for whom God provides. Brown suggests that Psalm 148 constructs a bridge between these two creation hymns in calling all—the heavenly host and the earthly host—to the praise of the Creator who rules over all. The psalm concludes with an emphatic call for human praise, especially from the worshipping community. Brown’s interpretation of Psalms 8 and 104 seems reasonable to me; I am still thinking about how Psalm 148 could function as a bridge between these two texts.

## PSALMS 19 AND 65

C. S. Lewis wrote of Psalm 19, “I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world.”<sup>13</sup> It is distinctive as a psalm. The first six verses are about creation as the realm of divine revelation; verses 7–10 narrow the focus to praise of the delightful divine gift of *torah*, God’s covenant instruction; the final four verses petition that the words addressed to YHWH as “my rock and my redeemer” will be “acceptable,” the same term used for the divine acceptance of sacrifices in the Pentateuch.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> William P. Brown, *Deep Calls to Deep: The Psalms in Dialogue amid Disruption* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2021), 60–75. Compare David Rensberger, “Ecological Use of the Psalms,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 608–20.

<sup>13</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), 63.

<sup>14</sup> See deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 204, on the psalm’s structure.

Consider verses 1–6, centered on creation. The remarkable first verse tells us that the sky proclaims God’s presence and activity in the world. In striking imagery, verses 2–4 understand the days and nights of God’s creation to declare knowledge to the entirety of the earth even though there are no words. Creation is revelatory even if one is hard of hearing. The end of verse 4 makes a transition to a focus on the sun as a center point of creation. The poet offers a joyous image of the sun as a groom in a wedding canopy provided by *El*. He comes forth in strength and runs the whole circuit of the heavens to light the day. Even if one cannot see, one can feel the heat of the sun and its revelation. The creation reveals the handiwork of the divine. Two things to note: First, the name of the Babylonian sun god is Shamash, and the Hebrew for “sun” is *shemesh*—the same consonants. The poet has crafted a polemic that while Babylonians worship the sun, the ancient covenant community of Israel worships the God who created the sun. Second, in the ancient Near East, the sun was often associated with order and justice, providing an important transition to the theme of the psalm’s second section emphasizing the gift of *torah* as direction for living in righteousness—that is, a right divine-human relationship initiated by YHWH and demonstrated in right relationships with the covenant community.<sup>15</sup> I suggest that reading Psalm 19 as one revelatory poem that is both creation psalm and *torah* psalm places creation solidly in the tradition of ancient Israel’s theological perspectives commending YHWH as the God who delivers, blesses, and speaks. Psalm 19:1–6 artfully conjures beautiful imagery of the creation as God’s extravagant gift for the human community and the animal community to enjoy and sustain.

Psalm 65 revels in the joy that *Elohim* is creator and redeemer. The creator orders the earth and the redeemer forgives sin and delivers from trouble; the creator and redeemer are one. Praise of the creator and redeemer is central to covenant faith, and verses 1–5 emphasize that both creation and deliverance are doxological matters in temple worship. The remainder of the psalm centers on God as joyful creator of all. Verses 6–8 praise the divine curbing of the powers of chaos. Verse 7 speaks of both the roaring of the chaotic seas and “the tumult of the peoples” as threatening the order of creation and viable life in it. Verses 9–11 turn to life-giving water. Ancient Israel lived in an arid climate always in need of the divine gift of rain. The Creator gives bountiful harvest with the rain. The “wagon tracks” imagine carts bringing home the plentiful harvest. The two concluding verses revel in the luxuriant harvest and its abundant joy. The divine name is not actually mentioned, but it clearly undergirds this celebration of shouting and singing in the praise of God as creator and redeemer. The order of creation is a divine gift that astonishes and dazzles and brings doxology to the temple. The extravagance of God’s world brings the congregation’s rhetorical extravagance.<sup>16</sup> It is important that the praise of God in Psalm 65 holds together redemption and creation. The

<sup>15</sup> Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 101. See also deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Book of Psalms*, 208–9.

<sup>16</sup> Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 285.

creator of the ancient worshipping community of Israel is also the creator of the world. Doxology is in praise of God's creation and God's redemption. Creation is again held firmly in ancient Israel's faith tradition.

These Creation Psalms articulate a vision of life with creation faith and worshipping community at its center. The psalms call people of faith to relish and care for creation. "It is not naïve to say that the first step in addressing the environmental crisis is to praise God, for praising God is that act of worship and mode of existence that reminds us that we human beings are not free to do whatever our science and technology enable us to do. Praise flies in the face of our culture's tendency to unrestrained exploitation."<sup>17</sup> Technology is a gift of the human imagination deriving from the Creator, and its use for the good of the creation and the human community is laudable. Its exploitative use in line with our society's militant consumerism flies in the face of these psalms' call to care for all of creation. Human and animal creatures are starving because of insufficient political and moral will to distribute food justly. We already face a climate crisis. I expect most of those reading these words live comfortable lives; we will not be spared as the climate crisis progresses. The perspective of creation theology in the Psalms invites us, calls us, to involvement in rejoicing in the dazzling and amazing creation in which we live and to care for God's creation and all its creatures.

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Creation in the Psalms is more about doxology than about explanation, more about care than consumption, more about wonder than profit. ⊕

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<sup>17</sup> J. Clinton McCann Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 59.