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## **THE CREATION THEME IN SELECTED PSALMS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

**T**he primary purpose of this study is to examine the creation theme in the book of Psalms as it relates to the larger context of individual psalms. Although creation is not considered the most significant theme, it is clearly present throughout the Psalms. As part of an overall look at the creation theme, the major focus of this study will be on creation as a supportive theme in the Psalms.

Some of the issues addressed in this study will include the following questions: Which themes use creation references in a secondary manner? How is the creation theme used? How does it influence and support the rest of the psalm? The psalmists often speak about the Creator and creation and use creation imagery or creation language. However, to classify a psalm as a “creation psalm” is difficult, since creation is rarely a main theme of the psalm, the only exception being Psalm 104, which is considered to be a creation psalm by most scholars.<sup>1</sup> Creation may not be the only theme in this psalm, but it seems to be the major theme. Therefore, Psalm 104 requires separate study and will be omitted

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1. Cas. J. A. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms* (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2005), 236.

in this chapter.<sup>2</sup> The psalms included will be limited to those in which a clear reference to creation can be noted.

## CLASSIFICATION OF THEMES RELATED TO CREATION

In examining the use of creation as a supportive theme in the book of Psalms, twelve different primary themes stood out. These can be further divided into three groups. Themes in the first group pertain to the *knowledge of God*. This is the most prominent use of the creation theme in the book of Psalms. In this group, creation is the reason to praise God; it describes who God is—more specifically, it portrays His power—and, finally, it shows that God as Creator is also the Sustainer of His creation.

The second group is a continuation of the theme of *God as Sustainer*, but it specifically deals with humans rather than the general creation. It starts with a description of human existence, clarifying the difference between God and humans. The second point portrays a God Who is different from His creation and at some points seemingly distant from His creation. After understanding the difference between being human and the seemingly distant Creator, creation shows that it is safe to trust in God Who is ready to bless His creation.

The last group delves further into the *relationship between God and humanity*. It is *based on the law of God*, which according to a supportive creation theme was established at the beginning by God, the Creator. After a description of the law, the creation theme gives God the right to judge as the One Who created everything and as the One Who set the rules in place so everything would work in perfect order. Creation is also used to show who the wicked are; however, it also shows that there is salvation and restoration emanating from God Who has the power to save.

The book of Psalms includes several other minor themes that are linked to the creation theme, such as joy or instructions about creation. It should be pointed out that the actual creation process is never the main theme of creation in the book of Psalms, the only arguable exception being Psalm 104. In the same way, creation is never used as a major theme throughout a psalm, again with the

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2. For a study of creation in Psalm 104, see the chapter “Creation in the Book of Psalms: Psalm 104” by Richard M. Davidson in this volume.

possible exception of Psalm 104. There are psalms (such as Ps. 8 or Ps. 29), which include major creation references; however, the main purpose of these large sections is not the actual creation process but one of the previously mentioned themes.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we can conclude that except for Psalm 104 there is no creation psalm but only psalms with creation as a secondary or even a tertiary theme.

## TWELVE THEMES ASSOCIATED WITH CREATION

### PRAISE OF GOD

God's praise is *the* central theme of the book of Psalms. While it is not necessarily found in every psalm, it is the most recurring theme in the entire book. There are eight different Hebrew terms in the psalms that express the idea of praise. Combined, they occur 186 times.<sup>4</sup> The poets not only exhorted the people but also every living thing to praise the Lord.<sup>5</sup> The praise of God is closely related to the book of Psalms as well as to creation. Solid evidence suggests that the praise of God is the central reason for the creation theme in the book of Psalms.<sup>6</sup> In fact, some scholars argue that outside Genesis 1 and 2, creation appears in the setting of praise.<sup>7</sup>

The praise of God may not always be a direct and immediate result of a creation reference, but it can be implied or found in the larger context of the Psalms. One example of a reference with the lack of specific praise of God is found in Psalm 119:73. In this verse, the psalmist calls on God the Creator to give him the understanding of the law. The immediate result of the creation reference is the Creator's ability to teach the writer His laws. The rest of the *yod* section of this acrostic psalm (which organizes every eight successive verses in a sequence based on the Hebrew alphabet) does not include any other references to the praise of God.

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3. Even though creation is not the main purpose, it is vital for the main theme. Psalmists often base their argument on creation; therefore, even as a secondary theme, it bears great significance on the meaning of the psalms.

4. W. Graham Scroggie, *A Guide to the Psalms*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 1995), 104.

5. James L. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 36.

6. See appendix.

7. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. John J. Scullion (CC; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1994), 94, 113.

However, in the introductory *'aleph* section, the psalmist says that learning God's law results in the praise of God (v. 7). Therefore, the psalmist's call on the Creator to give him understanding of the law should eventually result in praise. Only in a few other psalms can the praise of God be seen in this extended connection with creation. On the other hand, there are hymns of praise, which "summon the theme of creation in admiration for Yahweh,"<sup>8</sup> as well as kingship psalms, which use the creation motif to underline the fact that God is the Creator Who should be praised and worshiped.<sup>9</sup> The following examples show how creation is placed within the context of praise.

### Psalm 100

This is the only psalm with the title *mizmôr l'êtôdâ*, "psalm for thanksgiving." The structure of this psalm is very similar to that of 95:1–7a. It starts with a call to praise and then gives a reason for the praise, followed by another call and reason to praise. It is possible to interpret this as a reference to the creation of a nation; however, because of its close relationship with Psalm 95, it should also be understood in the context of the creation of humans. The following is a side-by-side comparison of these two psalms:

	Psalm 100	Psalm 95
<b>First appeal: Joy</b>	verses 1–2	verses 1–2
<b>First kî: Lord is God</b>	verse 3	verse 3
<b>God the Creator</b>	verse 3	verses 4–5
<b>Second appeal: Worship</b>	verse 4	verse 6
<b>Second kî: Loving God</b>	verse 5	verse 7a

In both psalms, references to creation are found in the middle of two calls to praise God.<sup>10</sup> Because of this central placement, the creation reference is connected to both calls to worship, emphasizing that God is the Maker of heaven and earth. Also, both psalms include the theme of thanksgiving. In Psalm 100, it is found in the second appeal, and in Psalm 95, it is part of the first appeal. Therefore, the praise of the Creator includes not only the admiration of

8. Samuel L. Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary*, ECC (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), 670.

9. John H. Eaton, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and New Translation* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 349.

10. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms*, 224.

His power but also the thanksgiving for His work. Worshiping the Creator is also a joyous occasion. Both psalms make reference to joyful singing or noise, as, for example, *rēn ānâ*, “joyful singing,” in Psalm 100:2, and *rûaʿ*, “raising a [joyful] sound,” in Psalm 95:2, which are used in the opening appeal of each psalm. This is an exuberant time when created beings give praise to their Creator. Both psalms exhibit a universal perspective and include the entire creation in their call to worship.<sup>11</sup> As will be further explored below, universality is an important feature of the creation references in the book of Psalms.

### **Psalm 148**

This psalm contains the most detailed call for all creation to praise God.<sup>12</sup> It starts with an appeal to the heavenly realms and to the sun, moon, and stars. In the psalms, this is always the order in which creation is presented. Heaven and things relating to heaven are mentioned first, followed by the earth. Praise always begins with a look at the sky, and the heavens are the first “telling of the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1).<sup>13</sup> They are to praise God just as all earthly things should praise God. The reason is stated in 148:5: “for He commanded and they were created.”<sup>14</sup> Part of worship is the realization that the heavens, which often cause people to stand in awe, are just a creation of God. He is the Creator not only of the earth but also of the heavens.

Continuing with verse 7, the psalmist turns to the earth. There, he follows the sequence of the creation week in Genesis 1, starting with water, dry land, trees, animals, and finishing with men and women, old and young. Mentioning the old with the young seems to evoke a sense of post-Edenic life. Most of the time, creation is presented from the perspective of a sinful world. Therefore, almost every reference to creation will include a reference or an allusion to the life-and-death cycle.

Creation extends praise to every created being. “The creator holds everything that he has made in a relationship to himself, with

11. *Ibid.*, 229.

12. Eaton, *The Psalms*, 480.

13. Scripture quotations in this chapter are taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. ([www.Lockman.org](http://www.Lockman.org))

14. The Hebrew verb used here is a *Nipʿal* form of *bārāʾ*, “to create.”

a commitment of his faithful love. In this relationship all created beings are called to look to him in trust and praise.”<sup>15</sup> God is not only the God of Israel Who delivered them from Egypt but also the God of all creation.

References to Egypt and the creation of Israel are also used as reasons for praise, but this praise is limited to the nation of Israel. However, when God is called the Creator of all, He should be praised not only by one group of people or only by a single nation but by all. Therefore, one of the reasons for using creation references in connection with the praise of God is to include every created being in the call to praise the Creator of heaven and earth, making its effects universal.

### **Psalm 33**

This psalm of praise includes clear reference to creation as the first motivation for praise (vv. 4–9). After the appeal to praise God with singing and the playing of instruments, the psalmist provides the reason for this joyful call. Because “the word of the LORD is upright” (v. 4). “The first motivation for praising Yahweh is grounded in his essential character.”<sup>16</sup> God’s word is faithful, loving righteousness and justice, showing His loving-kindness to the earth. The description of the word continues with its power to create. This description comprises four parallel lines (vv. 6, 9).

By word—heavens

By breath of His mouth—host (v. 6)

He spoke—it was done

He commanded—it stood (v. 9)

The word of the Lord has power and all the creation that the psalmist sees is the result of this word.

### **Psalm 92**

Psalm 92 is the only psalm that is clearly associated with the Sabbath. The superscription calls it “a Psalm, a Song for the Sabbath day.” This psalm’s connection to creation has been recognized by many

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15. Eaton, *The Psalms*, 481.

16. Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms: From Biblical Text to Contemporary Life*, vol. 1, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002), 557.

scholars.<sup>17</sup> It brings out two aspects of Sabbath worship and, at the same time, two aspects of the Creator. These are creation and redemption, corresponding to the two versions of the fourth commandment. As a concluding day of the six-day creation, God's rest on the seventh day signifies the completeness of God's "very good" creation. At the same time, it is the seventh day that points to the restoration of God's creation through His redeeming act, clearly seen in the history of Israel and foreshadowing the final eschatological restoration.

The first section (vv. 1–4) opens with joyous praise and thanksgiving. It is a call of praise,<sup>18</sup> which correlates to the theme of the day that God has consecrated and blessed.<sup>19</sup> In the final verse of this section (v. 4), the writer declares the reason for his gladness to be "what You have done" and "the works of Your hands." In other psalms, this Hebrew expression points back to creation.<sup>20</sup> The work of the Creator brings joy and gladness to the psalmist who expresses his adoration through praise and worship.

The second section (vv. 5–9) starts with the theme of creation, repeating the praise of God's "works." It is the understanding of these works that separates the intelligent from the "stupid man." Moving from verse 6 to 7, these "senseless" and "stupid" men become "the wicked."<sup>21</sup> Verse 7 introduces a new topic and a second Sabbath theme, which is redemption.<sup>22</sup> At this point, the Creator also becomes the Redeemer. In spite of the rapid expansion of the iniquity, the Creator is the Redeemer of His creation.

The last section (vv. 10–15) elaborates on the theme of God as Redeemer and Sustainer of His creation. The psalmist describes the power and willingness of God to help His creation and points to the eschatological restoration. As a result of the second theme of the Sabbath, in the last line of this psalm, the writer returns again to praise.

17. Richard M. Davidson, "The Sabbath in the Old Testament Psalms and Wisdom Literature," (paper, Symposium on the Sabbath, Universidad Adventista del Plata, October 13, 2010); Pinchas Kahn, "The Expanding Perspective of the Sabbath," *JBQ* 32 (2004): 243, 44; Nahum M. Sarna, "The Psalm for the Sabbath Day [Psalm 92]," *JBL* 81 (1962): 158–69.

18. The language of the psalm suggests a sanctuary worship setting. See Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, OTL (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1962), 614, 15.

19. Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Psalms*, vol. 3, ed. Franz Delitzsch and Carl Friedrich Keil, rev. ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 67.

20. References to "what you have done" include Psalm 77:12 and Psalm 143:5. References to the phrase "the works of Your hands" are found in Psalms 8:6; 19:1; 28:5; 102:25; 138:8; 143:5.

21. See later the discussion of theme 11: "Who Are the Wicked?"

22. Davidson, "The Sabbath in the Old Testament Psalms," 15–17.

## WHO IS GOD?

The creation theme can also be used as a means to reveal who God is. Knowledge of who God is often directly related to the praise of God. The psalms presented in the previous section would then fall into this category. They specified who God is, and as a result, they call all creation to praise Him. The answer to the question “Who is God?” in this case is limited only to the primary understanding of God as the Other, the Creator, the One Who is in contrast to everyone and everything else. More specific characteristics of God will be discussed later in the different themes.

The contrast between the Creator and creation is the primary purpose of the creation reference in showing who God is. God is in heaven, unlike His creation, which is associated with the earth. God is not dependent on food, sun, or other resources in order to exist. As the Creator, He existed prior to creation.

### Psalm 113

This psalm is the first in the group of so-called *Hallel* psalms.<sup>23</sup> Since most of them begin and end with a call to praise the Lord, their primary theme is the praise of God. Their many references to creation are a direct result of a close relationship between the praise of God and creation.

Psalm 113 is connected with the song of Hannah.<sup>24</sup> Parallels between these two songs are striking, particularly considering the fact that both use imagery of God as Creator. In Psalm 113, there are several allusions to creation beginning with a glance toward the heavens. Often in the book of Psalms, the phrase “the glory of God is above the heavens” is found in the context of creation; and so in this case, we can assume that verse 4 also alludes to creation. However, the first clear reference to creation begins with the question, “Who is like the Lord?” (v. 5). “The poet declares God’s incomparability (vv. 4–9), a theme focused on the question. Everything builds up to this question, and what follows answers it, without naming God.”<sup>25</sup> “Patterns of the basic ‘who-is-like’ formula recur throughout the Old Testament (e.g.,

23. Peter C. Craigie, “Psalm 113,” *Int* 39, no. 1 (1985): 70. The Hallel psalms comprise psalms 113 through 118.

24. Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return: Book V, Psalms 107–150*, JSOTSup, 258 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 161.

25. Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2001), 280.



Exod 15:11; Deut 3:24; Ps 35:10; Isa 40:12 ff.; 46:5; etc.) as a part of theological affirmations and in personal names. Both usages serve as reminders of the LORD'S uniqueness. There is no one like Yahweh!"<sup>26</sup>

The following verses describe who God is through the use of creation language. "He is enthroned on high" is a phrase which is often connected with El Elyon; He is the Maker of heaven and earth. This high place is not in the mountains; in fact, it is not even in the heavens. The Lord is portrayed as being above the heavens looking down on them (v. 6). He is the Creator of the earth but also of the heavens. The coupling of heaven and earth shows that "God is so exalted that there is no difference between the two in their relative distance to Him."<sup>27</sup> This incomparability "theme appears always in hymnic contexts and frequently in the Psalms."<sup>28</sup>

Verses 7 to 9 show two cases of the Creator God coming down to finite humans. God is the One Who "raises the poor from the dust," alluding to Genesis 2:7, where God formed a man out of this same substance. God also places this man with the rulers and princes. In a similar way, God designated humankind to rule over the rest of the creation (Gen. 1:28). The imagery of God as Creator ends in verse 9 with a barren woman who becomes a mother. In the creation story, God bestows all living beings with a blessing to "multiply" (Gen. 1:28). In the same way, the God of creation blesses a barren woman with children. These two cases imply "that Yahweh achieves where other gods cannot penetrate."<sup>29</sup>

In this psalm, God is both "transcendent and imminent; He is above the highest, and yet stoops to the lowest."<sup>30</sup> He is a God Who, as the Creator, is above His creation, but at the same time, He is concerned with His creation.<sup>31</sup> "Psalm 113 provides a natural theological entrance into two corollary truths about God, His transcendence and His immanence."<sup>32</sup> God the Creator is always the One Who is far, but at the same time, He is very close.

26. George J. Zemek, "Grandeur and Grace: God's Transcendence and Immanence in Psalm 113," *Master's Seminary Journal* 1, no. 2 (1990): 133.

27. Martin S. Rozenberg and Bernard M. Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms: A New Translation and Commentary* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1999), 727.

28. James Luther Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1994), 361.

29. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, 160.

30. Scroggie, *A Guide to the Psalms*, vol. 3, 108.

31. Mays, *Psalms*, 362.

32. Zemek, "Grandeur and Grace," 131.

## Psalm 90

This is a psalm ascribed to Moses. Because the meter is not uniform, its form is difficult to reconstruct.<sup>33</sup> However, as noted by Vos, “Despite textual and critical problems, the psalm is highly artistic in its composition.”<sup>34</sup> He divides this psalm into four sections:<sup>35</sup>

- 1–2 The invocation of God
- 3–10 The petitioner expressing need
- 11–16 Prayer asking for God’s intervention
- 17 Prospect of future salvation

The primary purpose of this psalm is to illustrate “God’s greatness.”<sup>36</sup> Even though the psalm should also be understood as a prayer for God’s mercy, it starts with the recognition of who God is. It seems that recognizing God and understanding *who* He is take priority over the resolution of the need.<sup>37</sup>

The psalm starts with an invocation. In it, the psalmist contrasts the eternal nature of God with the limits surrounding humans. They return to dust from which they were created (Gen. 3:19), but He is eternal. “The glorification of His eternal power vaults into the sphere of precreation.”<sup>38</sup> Reference to the “birth of mountains” does not only indicate that God is their Creator but shows that God was present at the time they were created; He was present before everything was created. “Keel infers that when the psalms speak of the mountains, they emphasize Yahweh’s superiority over them (Psalm 89:12; 97:4–5; 104:32; 121:1–2),” observes Vos.<sup>39</sup> The contrast between the Creator God and the mountains seems to have “dethroned the mountains as gods.”<sup>40</sup>

“The poet seeks to convey the thought that God is the most ancient of all and preceded all other creations.”<sup>41</sup> This can be observed in the structure of verses 1 and 2.

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33. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150: A Commentary*, CC, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1993), 214.

34. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms*, 129.

35. *Ibid.*, 128.

36. Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms*, 567.

37. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms*, 128, 29.

38. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 215.

39. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms*, 134.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms*, 570.

- A. You are Lord
  - B *Time*: “all generations”
  - C *Place*: “mountains”
  - C *Place*: “earth and the world”
  - B *Time*: “everlasting”
- A “You are God”<sup>42</sup>

These verses express “the sovereignty and eternity of the God of Israel.”<sup>43</sup> However, as with most psalms involving creation themes, the psalm “does not deal with Israel in any particular way; it treats the human condition as a whole, is general in nature, striking a universal note.”<sup>44</sup>

### GOD’S POWER

God is almighty; He is different from the gods created by humankind. Even though humans were given the honor and privilege to rule the earth, God is the Maker of them; He is much greater and even indescribable to us. And so how are we able to comprehend this greatness of El Elyon? The psalmists often use the creation theme in order to present a clearer picture of the vastness, greatness, and power of God. As already demonstrated, this greatness can be seen in His eternal nature and in His contrast to creation. In addition to being different and eternal, He is also powerful enough to create and rule His creation. When God’s power is described, it is often in the context of His love and support for His creation.

### Psalm 74

Psalm 74 is a lament describing the absence and silence of God. The center of this psalm of Asaph contains allusions to creation (vv. 12–17), which recall “God’s power in creation and the Exodus.”<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, this power is closely related to the salvation of God, which is the subject matter of the psalmist. “The hymnic glorification in the framework of a prayer song includes an appeal to God and at the same time trust in Yahweh’s salvific power.”<sup>46</sup> Creation is

42. Based on Schaefer, *Psalms*, 225.

43. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 215.

44. Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms*, 568.

45. Schaefer, *Psalms*, 181.

46. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 99.

mixed with allusions to the Exodus, which is a common technique in the psalms. Creation and Exodus often go together as a single theme. They both result in the creation of people.<sup>47</sup> Many scholars have tried to distinguish between these two themes; however, as Kraus correctly pointed out, this is not necessarily a question of “either-or.”<sup>48</sup> Both of these themes became part of Israel’s experience and became part of who God is. He is not the God of one or the other, but the God of *all* creation and the God of the Exodus.

In verses 12 to 17, the song of petition is interrupted by a description of God’s might.<sup>49</sup> Also, the structure of the psalm changes from plural “us” to the singular “my.”<sup>50</sup> It is clearly distinguished from the rest of the psalm. While being forsaken by God, the people hold on to His creative power. This section is characterized by the repetition of *’attâ*, “you.” It starts with the expression “God is my king.” This shows an intimate relationship between God and His creation.<sup>51</sup> The first image of a powerful God is associated with water. God by His strength divides the seas (v. 13a) and breaks the heads of the sea monsters (v. 13b). In Ugaritic literature, these are personified by the sea god Yam.<sup>52</sup> In this psalm God is not struggling with this “god” but, by His power, crushes it.<sup>53</sup> He also crushes Leviathan,<sup>54</sup> an animal that is predominantly used as a symbol of immense power.<sup>55</sup> God is the conqueror of “primeval forces.”<sup>56</sup> Verse 14 returns to the imagery of water. All the rivers and springs are subject to God’s power. He, as the Creator, is stronger than any part of His creation. The last two verses describe lights (v. 16) marking the boundaries for the earth and the seasons (v. 17). “The sequence between light and darkness reflects the Hebrew usage of placing the evening at the beginning of the new

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47. In the first creation, it is the line of Adam, or human beings; while in the Exodus, creation refers to the establishment of the line of Abraham, or the nation of Israel.

48. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 99.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Terrien, *The Psalms*, 540.

51. Schaefer, *Psalms*, 183.

52. Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms*, 454.

53. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction*, 24.

54. This is sometimes used in connection with the deity Yam. If this is the case in this context, it represents another reference to God overpowering other gods.

55. Mark W. Hamilton, “In the Shadow of Leviathan: Kingship in the Book of Job,” *ResQ* 45, no. 1–2 (2003): 36; John N. Day, “God and Leviathan in Isaiah 27:1,” *BSac* 155, no. 620 (1998): 429.

56. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 101.

day.”<sup>57</sup> These are the works of God’s hands, the result of His power. “The ultimate of God’s supreme might is depicted in His ability to manipulate and control nature.”<sup>58</sup> They operate according to the boundaries set by the Lord.

## Psalm 89

The psalm of Ethan the Ezrahite includes at least six clear references to creation. The section that is most evidently tied to the theme of the power of God is found in verses 9 to 13, which describe the power of God’s arm and right hand. They are both in construct form with the noun, often translated as “strength,” “power,” or “might.” This powerful hand of God rules over the surging sea (v. 9) and scatters the enemies (v. 10)—everything is created by Him (vv. 11–12a). Therefore, creation is a symbol of His power. In line with other psalms, these references to creation are preceded by the question “who is like You?” (v. 8). As George J. Zemek has observed, the “Who is like?” formula is often used in the Old Testament and reveals God’s uniqueness.<sup>59</sup> In this psalm God’s power is a reason for humanity to praise God while, at the same time, also marking the source of the blessing.

## GOD AS SUSTAINER

The power of God is not the only reason for praise and trust. Even though He is all powerful and able to do as He wishes, these attributes are not the only reasons that people are drawn to Him. Knowing only His power would result in “fear.”<sup>60</sup> However, the power of God is closely associated with God’s ability to sustain His creation. Knowing God as Sustainer causes people to “fear” Him because of His love. With His ability to create, He must also possess the ability to sustain that which He has created. Though Psalm 104 was not included in this research, it is one of the best examples of the amalgamation of creation and God’s

57. Terrien, *The Psalms*, 541.

58. Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms*, 454.

59. Zemek, “Grandeur and Grace,” 133.

60. The Hebrew verb *yārēʿ* has the basic meaning of “fear or trembling.” However, when used in connection with YHWH, it becomes a technical term, which connotes reverence, awe, and even knowledge of God. It is the result of the presence of the Creator, the all-powerful and loving God, which leads the God-fearer to worship and loving obedience. Therefore, “to fear the Lord” is a positive term describing the relationship between a human being and his Creator. See Robert L. Cate, “The Fear of the Lord in the Old Testament,” *TTE* 35 (1987): 41–55; H. F. Fuhs, “אָרַע *yārēʿ*,” in *TDOT*, vol. 6, 297–315.

work of nurturing His creation. The following examples will include the psalms that highlight creation in the context of an image of God providing for His creation.

### Psalm 65

Psalm 65 is David's song of praise. Without ceasing, it praises God for His works.<sup>61</sup> It begins with praise and is followed by the blessing of the elected, themes which are often found together in the context of creation. This psalm can be divided into three parts:

1. God in the temple (vv. 1–4)
2. God of the world (vv. 5–8)
3. God of the earth (vv. 9–13)<sup>62</sup>

The structure of this psalm echoes the author's priorities regarding his relationship with God, his praise of God, followed by the forgiveness of sins, God's acts of redemption, and ending with God as the cosmic Farmer. The first reference to creation is found in verse 6. It is a description of God's power, connecting the previously examined theme with a new theme that starts in verse 9. The break between verses 1 through 8 and 9 through 13 is also shown by looking at the meter. Whereas verses 1 through 8 are based on a three-plus-three meter, verses 9 through 13 have an uneven form. Based on the content, scholars recognize two separate sections of Psalm 65.<sup>63</sup>

Verses 9 through 13 are allusions to day three of creation week (Gen. 1:9–13). Considered to be the best "*Harvest Song* ever written,"<sup>64</sup> it describes everything "in terms of excess."<sup>65</sup> It starts with the provision of water, similar to the separation of water in Genesis 1:9–10. Verse 9 speaks about "the stream of God," which is a poetical reference to "the mythical source for rain."<sup>66</sup> This is followed by references to grain, pastures, and meadows. In the Genesis creation account, God commanded and the newly created land produced vegetation, plants, and trees. In Psalm 65 God provides food for people and animals. The entire ecosystem works in harmony because of His willingness to care for His creation. It is not the result of chance but

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61. Mays, *Psalms*, 219.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 27.

64. Scroggie, *A Guide to the Psalms*, vol. 2, 88.

65. Wilson, *Psalms*, 1:908.

66. Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms*, 389.

of divine love. “God is the very sustainer of life.”<sup>67</sup> These references to agriculture “emphasize Yahweh’s role in assuring a bountiful harvest and in bringing joy to replace tears.”<sup>68</sup> The God of creation is depicted as a caring God who seems to be working in order for living beings to survive.<sup>69</sup>

### **Psalm 147**

Psalm 147 includes four clear references to creation. In verses 8 and 9, God is described as provider for His creation. Similar to Psalm 65, the main reference is to the third day of creation and is placed in the post-Flood world with references to rain. All the creation references, which are associated with the sustaining acts of God, are connected with the post-Flood world. God Who provided at the time of creation is the God Who is still providing at the time of the post-Flood world. He provides food not only for Israel or humans but also for the cattle and young ravens (v. 9). This reference to other living beings is also a common feature of other creation references. God the Creator is not exclusively the God of Israel, but He is the God of all creation. Therefore, unless clearly stated, all references to God as Creator should be understood in the universal sense. This fact, in connection with the sustaining acts of God, is clearly seen in Psalm 145:15–16, where all the living things are looking to God for their food.

### **WHO ARE WE?**

As pointed out in the introduction, the second major group of four themes focuses on the relationship between the Creator and creation. These themes are often interchangeable and, at times, overlap with the previous four themes. Who we are is closely linked to who God is. Trust in God is directly connected to knowing God as the Sustainer. God’s capacity to bless is closely associated with His power to bless.

### **Psalm 8**

Psalm 8 is often referred to as a “song of creation.”<sup>70</sup> It comes very close to being a creation psalm, with most verses dedicated to

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67. Ibid.

68. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction*, 73.

69. Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1, 909.

70. James H. Waltner, *Psalms*, Believers Church Bible Commentary, ed. Elmer A. Martens and Willard M. Swartley (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 2006), 61.

creation; however, clearly seen in the *inclusio*, its main focus is the praise of God.<sup>71</sup> The psalm has the following structure:

- A The praise of God (v. 2ab)
- B Creation that gives praise to God (vv. 2c–3)
- C<sup>1</sup> The fragility of humanity (vv. 4–5)
- C<sup>2</sup> The greatness of humanity (vv. 6–7)
- B Creation that serves humanity (vv. 7–8)
- A The praise of God (v. 9)<sup>72</sup>

The artistry of this direct address to God is hidden in the contrast between two *mâ*—“how” and “what”—questions as they relate to creation and to each other. The first *mâ* in “*how* majestic is Your name” underlines God’s awesome power displayed in His creation. The theology of name dominates this psalm. In this context, “LORD” “really means, ‘He who causes to be’ (Exodus 3:15–16).”<sup>73</sup> The second *mâ* in “*what* is man” (v. 4) highlights the insignificance of human beings but, at the same time, their importance in God’s eyes.<sup>74</sup>

Enveloped by the praise of God in verses 1, 2, and 9, the main section (vv. 3–8) describes the creation account with humanity as its central figure. The praise starts with a look to the sky. Description of these great heavenly bodies underlines the marvel over God’s involvement and interest in humankind. Humans are weak and small in comparison to the rest of creation. Humans are *’ēnôš*, the Hebrew term denoting “weakness and frailty.”<sup>75</sup>

The psalms often describe the insignificance of humanity, but this particular psalm goes beyond that by adding the idea of importance, which is a result of humanity’s relationship to God. It is not due to humanity’s work or achievements but represents God’s gift of power over creation. Without God, humankind is insignificant, physically inferior to many other created beings, yet with God, they are elevated to the role of rulers.

Following the marvel over humanity’s dominion, the writer provides a list of created beings subject to humankind. These are

71. Mitchell J. Dahood, *Psalms 1 (1–50)*, AB, 16 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 49.

72. See Terrien, *The Psalms*, 126.

73. *Ibid.*, 127.

74. Wenceslaus Mkeni Urassa, *Psalm 8 and Its Christological Re-Interpretations in the New Testament Context: An Inter-Contextual Study in Biblical Hermeneutics*, European University Studies Series XXIII, Theology (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 51.

75. Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1, 204.



presented in the reverse order of the Genesis creation account, a stylistic feature that further highlights the central role of humans in creation. Without verses 1, 2, and 9, this psalm would seem to be an elevation and a tribute to humankind; however, the introduction and conclusion use the theme of creation and the description of humans to further emphasize the praise of God.

### Psalm 139

Psalm 139 is a highly personal depiction of the intimacy between David and his Creator.<sup>76</sup> James Luther Mays calls it “the most personal expression in Scripture of the Old Testament’s radical monotheism.”<sup>77</sup> Verses 13 through 16 point to the amazing way God created humans. It is written as a confession of the psalmist expressing his amazement over his own intricate body. Reference to the mother’s womb implies the post-creation creative work of God, but the depths of the earth<sup>78</sup> seem to be placed in the same position, perhaps alluding to God’s formation of Adam out of the dust of the ground. God is forming the human body in a mother’s womb but also in the depths of the earth. This seeming contradiction is a result of the poetic language.<sup>79</sup> In this section, there are references to the formation of a skeleton (v. 15), allusions to veins and arteries, and descriptions of an embryo before it becomes a fully developed body.<sup>80</sup>

The most important aspect of this text is its confirmation that a plan existed before creation. This is the central point of this section.<sup>81</sup> God saw and had a plan before He started creating. Therefore, humans are not an accident but a result of God’s careful plan. This awe over the intricate design of the human body is interrupted by a spontaneous expression of praise in verse 14. Excitement over God’s amazing work could also be the reason for the variation of

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76. Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms*, 880.

77. Mays, *Psalms*, 425.

78. The “mother’s womb,” the “secret place,” and the “depth of the earth” are most likely referring to the same thing. The theme is introduced in verse 13, which is followed by an exclamation of praise. Verse 15 returns to the theme of birth and the formation with new names for this place where the human body is formed. The “secret place” and the “depth of the earth” probably refer to the darkness of a mother’s womb. See Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms*, 885.

79. Terrien, *The Psalms*, 877.

80. Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms*, 885.

81. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 517.

the meter. It may “correspond to emotional fluctuations on the poet’s part.”<sup>82</sup> As previously indicated, praise is a direct response to creation. When psalmists consider the works of God’s hands, their first response is praise.

### **Psalms 90 and 113**

Both of these psalms have already been analyzed in connection with the question of *who* God is; however, they also show who people are in contrast to God. The main feature of these psalms is their description of a short life and their association with dust and ashes. This theme of a short life is the result of sin. God created people to live forever in the Garden of Eden, but after sin entered the world, their connection with the Creator and the source of life was severely damaged. Looking back at creation from the perspective of a sinful state of being, life is limited by the substances out of which people were created. Even though the result of creation was “very good,” sin caused a return to the pre-creation state. In spite of humanity’s diminished longevity, both psalms allude to the hope that the Lord will bless them through their children and through His presence. These psalms illustrate an important feature of creation, which is found in Genesis 3. Because the psalmists viewed the creation from the post-Fall perspective, they often mix the perfect world of Genesis 1 and 2 with the decaying world of Genesis 3.

### **THE DISTANCE OF GOD**

Clearly, God is very different from His creation.<sup>83</sup> He is not limited by space, sustenance, or even time. This sometimes leads to a seemingly large chasm between God and humanity. The theme of a distant God is predominantly found in the lament psalms. In these psalms, the writers express their feelings regarding the lack of a sense of God’s presence in their lives.

### **Psalm 89**

As already noted, Psalm 89 includes a reference to creation in support of the theme of the power of God. This psalm is composed in

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82. Terrien, *The Psalms*, 874, points out that the substantial variety in meter is not necessarily a valid reason for assuming a plurality of authors, as some scholars have suggested.

83. See the previous “Who Is God?” section.

seven strophes.<sup>84</sup> It begins with praise of God for His faithfulness, but it ends with a lament over suffering and pain. Toward the end of this psalm, Ethan turns from praise to the realization that God is punishing the people for their wickedness. This punishment is seen as God's rejection, anger, and renunciation of the covenant. The climax is found in verse 49, "which sums up the whole: 'Where are your former deeds of loyalty which you swore to David in your faithfulness?'"<sup>85</sup>

Verses 46 to 48 are separated from the rest of the text by the use of the term *selah*. They start with a question regarding the length of God's anger. It is a call to God to return to His people. Ethan then asks God for the reason why He created humans. Even though this psalm is closely connected to the covenant and the covenant people, when the creation theme is expressed, it has a very universal tone. The people are called *bēnê 'ādām*, "sons of man," and not sons of Abraham or sons of Israel. This appeal to God to give the psalmist a reason for his existence comes from the understanding that God originally had a plan for humanity.<sup>86</sup> However, sin created a gap between God and His creation. This culminated in the apparent "absence" of God. This theme of an absent God is found in numerous psalms, often in relationship with God's creation. In this psalm, it is used as an appeal to God to act and remember His creation. It seems as if the writer is afraid that he is not going to witness God's deliverance. For him, "the human perception of God's goodness ends with their death without exception."<sup>87</sup> Even in distress and with feelings of separation, the psalmist admits that he is a created being.

## TRUST IN GOD

Another important connection to creation is found in the theme of trust. It is often combined with the salvation theme and salvation history. Trust in God is one of the main themes in the psalms, but it is often a result of creation.

### Psalm 146

Psalm 146 is the first of the final section of Hallel psalms. Its overall theme is the praise of God, but in the middle, it elaborates on

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84. Terrien, *The Psalms*, 635.

85. Mays, *Psalms*, 283.

86. See the previous "Who Are We?" section.

87. Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms*, 564.

a theme of trust. This trust then turns into help, which comes from the Creator, which then prompts the praise of God.

“The structure of Psalm 146 reflects the pattern of the *hymn*.”<sup>88</sup> It starts and concludes with calls to praise the Lord, but it also includes instructions and reasons for the praise. It can be divided into two major groups, each then subdivided into two sections:

- A Praise and trust (vv. 1–4)
  - B Whom to praise (vv. 1, 2)
    - C Whom not to trust (vv. 3, 4)
- A Trust and praise (vv. 5–10)
  - C Whom to trust (vv. 5–9)
    - B Whom to praise (v. 10)

Another way to divide this psalm is to recognize the first and final verses as an *inclusio*,<sup>89</sup> which would then make the middle section a call to trust the Lord. In a way, this psalm “is framed between a prelude and a postlude declaring the poet’s intention to praise the Lord.”<sup>90</sup>

- Hallel’s introduction (vv. 1, 2)
  - A Whom not to trust (v. 3a)
    - B Why are they? (vv. 3b, 4)
      - A Blessing over those who hope in the Lord (v. 5)
        - B Who is He? (vv. 6–9)

Hallel’s conclusion

From this outline, it can be observed that the author uses an introverted parallelism. “The body of the hymn thus gives instruction about the wrong and right way [to praise the LORD] (cf. Psalm 1). The wrong way is putting trust in human leaders; the right way is to trust the LORD for help and hope.”<sup>91</sup> This conclusion can then be tied to the creation reference, which further assures the reader of the trustworthy source of help.

The interesting feature of this psalm is its use of the possessive pronoun in connection with God. There is a move from “*my* God” to

88. James Limburg, *Psalms*, Westminster Bible Companion, ed. Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 494.

89. Terrien does not see a clear division.

90. Terrien, *The Psalms*, 909.

91. Mays, *Psalms*, 440.

“his God” and eventually to “your God.”<sup>92</sup> The last verse of this psalm states that God is a God for “all generations.” Therefore, through the careful use of different pronouns, this psalm clearly applies to every person, not just a specific group of people. This key feature associated with the creation theme has already been observed in other psalms.

**Verses 1 and 2: Call to praise the Lord:** The psalm starts with a double exhortation to praise the Lord. The psalmist is urging himself to praise God. This call is immediately followed by an assurance that the author or the singer will praise the Lord. It is a promise to praise the Lord as long as the person remains alive. This theme of life and death is then expanded upon in the following section.

**Verses 3 and 4: Whom not to trust:** As pointed out in the structure of this psalm, verses 3 and 4 are an admonition and an explanation regarding whom not to trust. Verse 3 starts with words “do not trust in princes,” followed by “in mortal man.” Several translations add “nor” between “princes” and “mortal man.” This conjunction is not found in the Hebrew text and was redacted from the LXX addition of *kai*, “and,” in its translation. However, these two phrases should be viewed as a parallel thought, which is developed in the following verses. The “princes” and the “mortal men” are the same group of people. They are only “mortal man who cannot save” (JPS). Therefore, just as the author, these princes have a life that will come to an end.<sup>93</sup> The following are the four reasons why not to trust in “mortal man”:

1. There is no salvation in him.
2. His spirit departs.
3. He returns to earth.
4. His thoughts perish.

This psalm is clearly saying that even the princes with all their riches and glory are but humans, who rely on the Lord for their power, just as any other “mortal man.” Calling the creation story “Israel’s myth of human beginnings,” James L. Crenshaw points to the connection between verses 3 and 4 and the Genesis creation account.<sup>94</sup> However, it is not only found in chapter three but also in humankind’s being given stewardship over the earth.

92. Terrien, *The Psalms*, 911.

93. See the earlier “Who Are We?” section.

94. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction*, 104.

**Verses 5 through 9: Source of happiness:** This section starts with the word “blessed,” meaning happy. It is the last occurrence of this word in the book of Psalms.<sup>95</sup> This happiness is based on help and hope. God is the Helper, but He is also the object of hope, bringing together the present and the future aspects of His blessing.<sup>96</sup> This section is written in an apparent structure. After the two-line introduction, there are five lines, four of which begin with the word “who.” They describe God as the Maker of heaven, earth, and the sea, who keeps faith, executes justice, and gives food. “Permanence and power alone are not the grounds for trust. Trust is also founded on character, so the LORD’s character is epitomized in a phrase (6c).”<sup>97</sup>

These “who” lines are followed by five lines beginning with “the LORD” and concluding with two additional lines. The first section describes God as the Creator, Almighty, all-powerful Judge, and Sustainer. The second part speaks about a God who is concerned with prisoners, the blind, strangers, the fatherless, and widows. It can be divided into the following descriptions of God’s character:

- A Frees the prisoners
- B Opens the eyes of the blind
- C Raises those who are bowed down
  - Loves the righteous
- A Preserves the strangers
- B Supports the fatherless
- C Supports the widow
  - Frustrates the way of the wicked

The Lord loves the righteous, but at the same time, He hates the wicked. “The Lord would not be God if He did not deal with evil and evil-doers.”<sup>98</sup> The meaning of the word *‘āwat* is “to make crooked or to bend”; God prevents the way of the wicked from reaching its goal. “Ten lines are devoted to detailing the Divine compassion for men, but one line is enough to indicate His attitude towards the wicked.”<sup>99</sup> This section is focused on the goodness of the Creator toward His

95. The term is found twenty-six times in the Psalms, the first usage being in Psalm 1:1.

96. Scroggie, *A Guide to the Psalms*, vol. 4, 123.

97. Mays, *Psalms*, 441.

98. Scroggie, *A Guide to the Psalms*, vol. 4, 125.

99. *Ibid.*

creation, but it includes a description of the way the Creator deals with a corrupted creation.

**Verse 10: Conclusion:** The first half of this verse is a summary of the whole psalm. The Lord is King to all creation in contrast to the princes in verse 3. “The kingship of the Lord (v. 10) is shown to involve his creating of all, his frustrating of the wicked, and above all, his salvation, healing and care of all the humble in their need.”<sup>100</sup> The last verse concludes with another hallelujah statement. This praise of God is a direct result of the previous verses.

## DIVINE BLESSING

Blessing and creation go together not only in the book of Psalms but also in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. In the Garden of Eden, God pronounced the first blessings over animals, over humans, and even over a time. When this creation blessing is applied to humans, it often results in an increase of descendants, clearly relating to the original Genesis blessing. Furthermore, this blessing prompts the praise of God from whom all these blessings flow. Specific texts that stand out use what scholars refer to as “a cultic-blessing formula.” The following texts are included in this category: Psalms 115:14–16; 121:1, 2; 124:8; 134; 146:5, 6a.

## Psalm 115

Psalm 115 is part of the first of the Hallel psalms, which include Psalms 113 to 118. It describes people who seem to be in a state of distress. Even though their adversaries may appear to be stronger, this psalm presents a major and paramount difference between God’s people and their adversaries, namely, their God, “Maker of heaven and earth,” v. 15. The psalm begins with a comparison between God and the other gods. The result is a call for Israel, the house of Aaron, and those who fear the Lord to trust God, making this psalm and the following blessing all-inclusive. The second half of the psalm (vv. 12–16) is a blessing, which includes a cultic-blessing formula.

**Confidence in God’s blessing (vv. 12, 13):** These two verses give assurance that the God of the heavens is a God Who cares for His creation by blessing it. This includes Israel, the house of Aaron, and those who fear the Lord. The assumption that this last group is very broad is

100. Eaton, *The Psalms*, 476.

deduced from the clarification that this includes “the small together with the great.” “In this blessing, all the members of the community are included.”<sup>101</sup> The original blessing pronounced by God during the creation week was not in any way associated with Israel or the land of Israel, since at that time, neither of them existed. This point, however, stands on the understanding of the origin of the following blessing.<sup>102</sup>

**Theme of creation (vv. 14–16):** Verses 14 to 16 are joined by their recollection of the creation story. Norman C. Habel proposes that verse 15 is a Canaanite cultic phrase of blessing.<sup>103</sup> It cannot be denied that there are similarities between earlier inscriptions found in and around the land of Israel, but what Habel misses is the connection of this phrase to Genesis 1 and 2, which are pre-Israel and pre-Canaan accounts of creation. The blessing begins with the promise of children. This was important during the postexilic period,<sup>104</sup> since the people were few in number. However, if this blessing is compared with the Genesis creation account, it is easy to notice that God the Creator pronounced the same blessing over His creation. This creation blessing was not exclusively for humans (Gen. 1:28) but also included fish and birds of the air (Gen. 1:22).

Verse 15 describes God as “Maker of heaven and earth.” In the Genesis story, God “made” the expanse (Gen. 1:7), the two great lights (v. 16), animals (v. 25), and humans (v. 26). The creation story in Genesis 1 ends with a statement that “all that He had made” was very good. Verse 15 summarizes this by stating that God is the Maker of everything. He is the Creator. “This is not a god who cannot do anything, like the gods described in verses 4–7, but the God who made the heavens and the earth (v. 15).”<sup>105</sup> In the Old Testament, the combination of the words “heaven” and “earth” is often another way of saying “everything.” Beginning with Genesis 1:1, the phrase “heavens and the earth” is used as the object of God’s creation. What this first statement in the Bible is saying is that God is the Creator of everything, and as such, He is referred to in Psalm 115:15.

101. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 382; see Jeremiah 6:13; 16:6; 31:34; and Jonah 3:5.

102. Many scholars believe that this blessing originated in Canaanite cultic rituals. In this way, they limit this blessing to the land of Israel; however, the text clearly shows that this blessing echoes creation, expanding its influence on the entire creation.

103. Norman C. Habel, “Yahweh, Maker of Heaven and Earth’: A Study in Tradition Criticism,” *JBL* 91, no. 3 (1972): 324.

104. Most scholars locate this psalm during the postexilic period.

105. Limburg, *Psalms*, 395.



The last verse of this creation blessing is referring back to Genesis 1:28. Not only is this blessing promising fruitfulness in inhabiting the earth, but it also speaks about humans as rulers of the earth. Verse 16 makes a distinction between heaven and earth by asserting that heaven is the space where the Lord rules, while earth is the place where humankind functions as ruler. The first half of this verse refers back to verse 3. In it, the Lord is found to be in heaven, possibly emphasizing His authority. He is able to do “whatever He pleases.” In contrast to Him, people are given the earth.

### **GOD’S LAW**

Together with the praise of God, God’s law is one of the major themes of the book of Psalms. It often goes together with God’s privilege to judge, the description of the wicked, and the theme of salvation and restoration. Together these four themes comprise the final focus of this study. After looking at God’s power portrayed in the past and His interaction with humankind in the present, this last section highlights the message of hope and joy in the future. In spite of the present troubles, through the law and God’s implementation of this law in combination with His love and mercy, the psalmists look at life confidently and positively.

### **Psalm 119**

The acrostic Psalm 119 is the longest poetic composition focusing upon law. In addition to numerous allusions to creation, it has two clear direct references to creation. The first one is found in verse 73 and the second in verses 90 and 91. Both are placed in the context of the law, but their primary themes are different.

Verse 73 is a confession that God’s hands formed the psalmist. This entire *yod* section underscores “the intimate relation between the poet and God.”<sup>106</sup> This is not the first time a similar statement has been made, but this is the only time this phrase is put within the context of the law in the book of Psalms. We should remember that the creation of humanity is not presented in a negative way (Job 10:8; Psalm 89). Because God is the Creator, the psalmist is asking for understanding of the law. This request for understanding is the result of God’s ability to give it. “The great Creator is the

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106. Schaefer, *Psalms*, 294.

best Teacher.”<sup>107</sup> Terrien points out, “The poet of this psalm finds joy in remembering his having been made and fashioned by the God who now corrects him.”<sup>108</sup> Because God established the law and created the psalmist, He is able to help the writer understand the law, and this fact brings joy to the writer. Martin S. Rozenberg concludes that God created humankind to “learn and practice God’s laws as a guide in perfecting the world.”<sup>109</sup>

Verse 89 begins the lamed section with a statement that the word of the Lord is “settled in heaven.” In the following verse, the psalmist uses a creation reference. The Lord “established the earth” and it *‘āmad*, “stands.” The verb *‘āmad* is repeated in the next line. It says that “they” stand according to God’s ordinances or judgments. At creation, God placed His laws that stand forever and are a guide for all creation. These laws are “enduring, like heaven and earth.”<sup>110</sup> It is interesting to notice that when creation is connected to humanity it often results in an ephemeral predicament; however, when creation is seen in connection with God or His law it is emphasizing the eternal quality of both.

## **GOD AS JUDGE**

God is not only the Creator but also the Originator of the law. He established the rules, and as such, He has the authority to judge those who do not live according to His rules. In this category, the creation references give God the authority to judge His creation. God has the right to judge, not because He was given this right from some other entity but because He established everything. Furthermore, God’s judgment is often associated with joy and, as such, is viewed very positively by the psalmists.

## **Psalm 96**

As in most of the psalms, God’s judgment is seen as a positive thing. All of creation—including the heavens, seas, trees, and fields—rejoices because God is coming to judge the world. The first reference to God as Creator is found in verse 5. In this verse, God is contrasted with other gods. He is not like them; He is not an idol,

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107. Scroggie, *A Guide to the Psalms*, vol. 3, 182.

108. Terrien, *The Psalms*, 801.

109. Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms*, 783.

110. Terrien, *The Psalms*, 802.

because He “made the heavens.” There is no mention of earth. It is as if the psalmist is talking only about the heavenly realm. In this sphere, often associated with the divine dwelling place, only God reigns; He is the One Who created it. The second reference to creation is found in verse 10. This time the heavens are omitted, and God is described as the One Who established the world. It starts with the statement *YHWH mālak*, “the LORD reigns,” followed by the observation, “the world is firmly established.” The whole verse, then, has the following structure:

Imperative: *Say* among the nations

**A** The Lord reigns

**B** He created the world

**B** His creation will last

**A** His reign will be just

God is the Ruler and Judge. He is the Ruler, because He created everything, and as Creator-King, He has the right to judge all creation. In this verse, the first two and the last two statements go together, and at the same time, the first and the last are connected just as the middle is also connected. God reigns as the Creator, and at the same time, His creation “will not be moved,” because He will judge it. God the King is also God the Judge Who created a lasting and unmovable world.

### **WHO ARE THE WICKED?**

Because the psalms were written in a context tainted by sin, they reflect the presence of sin and sinful nature. The psalmists, who often struggled to keep the law, frequently ask for forgiveness and, at the same time, are subject to the results of sin in this world. However, in contrast to the psalmists—who, in spite of their sinful state, fear God—there are those who are called “wicked.” The “cursing” psalms in particular often depict a loathsome and shocking picture of their destiny. The psalmists ask for forgiveness, yet they call for punishment of the wicked. Who are these wicked people? In addition to saying that the wicked are in opposition to the psalmist, the author often assumes that the reader knows what the definition of the wicked is. Several psalms clarify who the wicked are, and some use the creation theme in their argument.

## Psalm 73

This psalm shows the personal inner struggle of the writer due to the effects of the wicked. It is not necessarily because they oppress him, but as this psalm clearly shows, because the psalmist is envious of them. It concludes with a theme of praise and victory over the wicked. Verse 9 includes a short categorization of the wicked by using an allusion to creation. Wicked people do not consider God the Creator; they disregard His law and even His power as the Creator. This is strengthened by questioning His power. Other psalms also include similar questions in connection with God as the Creator. Therefore, in the book of Psalms, the rejection of creation and God's work of creation is a sign of wickedness.

### GOD AS SAVIOR AND HELPER

References to creation often appear in the larger context of salvation; however, these two themes are usually not combined together in the immediate context. In most instances, creation and salvation in the Psalms are connected through another theme. There are some occurrences when God's help and creation are put together, though usually in the larger context of blessing.

## Psalm 121

Psalm 121 is the first of the Songs of Ascent, or pilgrimage psalms, that employs the phrase "Who made heaven and earth." This rare phrase is used three times in these psalms.<sup>111</sup> The main themes of the Songs of Ascent are the greatness of God, His creative power, His help, and His act of sustaining His creation.<sup>112</sup> "The theme of dependence on the LORD in a hostile world is a recurring feature of the Songs of Ascents."<sup>113</sup>

The major theme of Psalm 121 is help through creation. By this, the writer shows that the Lord has the power and willingness to help His people. As has been noted by Vos, "The stem of the verb ([*šāmar*-keeper]) can be regarded as *Leitword*. It occurs six times in this poem."<sup>114</sup> According to Crenshaw, "The notion of watching over

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111. Compare Psalms 121, 124, and 134.

112. Limburg, *Psalms*, 423.

113. Mays, *Psalms*, 390.

114. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms*, 254.

someone . . . pervades Psalm 121, echoing numerous references to divine protection.”<sup>115</sup>

The writer of this psalm uses the poetic strategy of an unanswered question. Progression holds the tension of the psalm until the end. “The tension created in verse 1b by this question is not completely resolved in verse 2. It is only fully answered in verses 3–8.”<sup>116</sup> Therefore, verses 3 to 8 are in a way an expansion of the answer given in verse 2.<sup>117</sup> Verses 3 to 8 describe a progression from uncertainty to certainty, from anxiety to confidence.<sup>118</sup> “Divine help is first *proclaimed* (1, 2) and then *promised* (3–8).”<sup>119</sup> The development of the psalms can be divided into three parts:

1. The Lord, “who made heaven and earth.”
2. The Lord is the Sustainer of Israel.
3. The Lord will sustain you.

Divine protection and the six-fold repetition of the word *šāmar*, “to keep, to preserve,” provide the overall unity of this psalm. It begins in first person singular form. Both verses 1 and 2 include “my” help. In verse 3, the voice changes to second person singular. It seems like a different speaker is addressing the first person. Most commentators see the setting of this psalm as a dialogue between “a father and his son going up to Jerusalem for the pilgrim festival (Seybold), or a priest blessing a pilgrim going back home from the feast (Gunkel, Mowinckel, Weiser, Kraus, Anderson, Allen), or a group of pilgrims encouraging one another *en route* (Kirkpatrick, Jacquet).”<sup>120</sup>

**Verses 1 and 2: Introduction of the trust in the Lord:** The psalm starts with the image of mountains. However, the reader has no clear idea where these mountains are located. This is followed by the even stranger phrase, “from where shall my help come,” which can be taken as a question or a statement. In parallel to that stands verse 2, beginning with the statement that “help comes from the LORD.” Moreover, this Lord “made heaven and earth.”

115. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction*, 21.

116. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms*, 256.

117. *Ibid.*

118. *Ibid.*, 254.

119. Scroggie, *A Guide to the Psalms*, vol. 3, 205.

120. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, 42.

Before we go any further, we should establish which mountains the psalmist is referring to.<sup>121</sup>

There are three major ways of interpreting the reference to these mountains. First of all, there is a literal explanation.<sup>122</sup> In this view, the mountains referred to in Psalm 121 are real mountains surrounding Jerusalem, which must be crossed in order to gain access to the city. The people who cross these treacherous pathways encounter numerous dangers on the way.

The second view sees the mountains as a symbol for a place where God lives. In this interpretation, the second half of verse 1 is not taken as a question but a statement, to which the next line connects.<sup>123</sup> In this way, the psalm has an ascending structure, in which one theme is developed in the next sentence.<sup>124</sup>

The last major interpretation views the mountains as a metaphor for a dwelling place of other gods.<sup>125</sup> “The hilltops were the seats of ancient sanctuaries, inherited from the Canaanites, which were strongly condemned (Lev 26:30; Ps 78:58).”<sup>126</sup> It was quite common that the nations built their “high places” and sanctuaries on the mountains. Verse 2 avers a negative response. It looks to the right source of help—namely, the Lord.

Another possible explanation of this quandary comes by combining the first and last view.<sup>127</sup> In this way, the mountains are a symbol of other gods but, at the same time, are literal mountains, isolated and dangerous, yet a place where the Lord will continue His protection. This use of the plural form for the mountains in the blessing and help context is further supported by Genesis 49:26, where the blessing surpasses or swells over the mountains. In other words, mountains are used as a contrast to the greatness of the coming blessing. As Habel notes, they are not the “source of

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121. For further study see John T. Willis, “An Attempt to Decipher Psalm 121:1b,” *CBQ* 52, no. 2 (1990): 241–51. Willis analyzes a number of possibilities in his article, which are not all presented in this study. He comes to the same conclusion that is presented in this study. First, he recognizes that verse 2 is not synonymous (244) but “stands in sharp contrast to” verse 1 (245). Secondly, he sees that the question is rhetorical (250) rather than part of a dialogue (246–47). This solution takes into consideration the context of the psalm and does not require any alteration of the Hebrew text.

122. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms*, 255.

123. Mays, *Psalms*, 389.

124. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction*, 20.

125. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms*, 255.

126. Terrien, *The Psalms*, 811.

127. Scroggie, *A Guide to the Psalms*, vol. 3, 206.

divine aid and blessing (Gen 49:26)."<sup>128</sup> Similarly, Psalm 121 uses mountains in contrast to the real blessing.

The negative understanding of the relationship between mountains and the question in verse 1 is further supported by the use of introverted parallelism in verse 2:

- A Contemplation of creation: The hills
- B Question: From where shall my help come?
- B Answer: From the LORD
- A Contemplation of creation: The Creator<sup>129</sup>

Both verses are joined together by *anadiplosis*, which is a poetic device “in which a word in the last part of a stich (‘my help’) is repeated in the first part of the following stich.”<sup>130</sup>

The phrase “who made heaven and earth,” in this case, is used in contrast to the mountains. Mountains are only part of creation, but the help comes from the Creator. This phrase “points to the maker rather than to what is made.”<sup>131</sup> God’s character can be seen in His creation, but help and blessing come only from the original source—He “who made heaven and earth.” This formula is therefore used as “an appropriate explanatory synonym for ‘almighty.’”<sup>132</sup> It is the El Elyon of Melchizedek, who is powerful enough to help and to protect.

**Verses 3 and 4:** Verses 1 and 2 are linked by the use of the first person singular form and by another *anadiplosis*. This same technique is also used in verses 3 and 4, strengthening the argument for an inverted parallelism in verses 1 and 2.

- A He will protect you from slipping.
- B He will not sleep.
- A He will keep Israel.
- B He will not sleep.

**Verses 5 through 8:** The conclusion of this psalm is the description of God’s protection through the use of the repetition of the tetragrammaton. “The deliberate placement of the Name Yahweh . . . serves

128. Habel, “Yahweh, Maker of Heaven and Earth,” 329.

129. Scroggie, *A Guide to the Psalms*, vol. 3, 205.

130. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms*, 35.

131. Mays, *Psalms*, 391.

132. *Ibid.*

to direct the emphasis to Yahweh's actions."<sup>133</sup> Verse 5 starts this conclusion by stating who God is, and the following three verses describe the result of God's protection. Verse 6 "elaborates on the statement, 'the Lord is your shade' and so, it would appear that verses 5 and 6 are connected to one another."<sup>134</sup> Verse 6 is written chiasmatically, as seen in the following example:

- A By day
- B The sun
- C No harm
- B' The moon
- A' By night

"The sun and the moon, which were often given divine powers in other religions, are demythologised and deprived of their power."<sup>135</sup> They are not able to perform the often divine act of smiting (or striking) those that are protected by God.<sup>136</sup>

The phrase "your going out and your coming in" extends the protection to all aspects of life.<sup>137</sup> This all-inclusive protection will last forever as affirmed by the last phrase of this psalm.

Affirmation that God is the Creator is key in resolving the seeming absence of help. "The answer to the poet's question as to where help comes from begins with the confession that Yahweh is the Creator."<sup>138</sup> Help can come "only from the Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth."<sup>139</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

### CONCLUSIONS

This study examined twelve creation themes found in the book of Psalms. It should be noted that these are not the only themes but represent the primary and most clearly seen uses of the creation

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133. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms*, 254.

134. *Ibid.*

135. *Ibid.*, 257.

136. Gerald A. Klingbeil, "'Sun' and 'Moon' in Psalm 121:6: Some Notes on Their Context and Meaning," in *To Understand the Scriptures: Essays in Honor of William H. Shea*, ed. David Merling (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Institute of Archaeology, Siegfried H. Horn Archaeological Museum, and Andrews University, 1997), 37, 38.

137. Scroggie, *A Guide to the Psalms*, vol. 3, 208.

138. See Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms*, 257; Mays, *Psalms*, 391.

139. Eaton, *The Psalms*, 425.



theme. They are not summarized in this conclusion; rather, this conclusion serves as a summary of the overall implications of the use of creation in the book of Psalms, which could then be compared with the rest of the Hebrew Bible.

The first observation is that the use of creation language widens the scope of the text. Suddenly, the text no longer speaks to only a specific group of people but to *all* nations and often includes even animals or other parts of creation.

Second, creation themes always carry the subtext of praise and are often interrupted by spontaneous expressions of worship. It is a direct response to creation. When the psalmists consider the works of God's hands, their first response is praise.

Third, the psalmists refer to creation as a historical fact. These writers believed that creation took place at the beginning and was a result of God's hand or God's word. Those who do not recognize creation as God's handiwork are called wicked.

Fourth, creation is never perceived as an accident. Even when the psalmist questions the reasons for creation, God assures him of a greater plan.

Fifth, creation is always looked at from the perspective of a sinful world. It is entwined with the life-death cycle and with imagery of a fallen planet and, thus, usually represents a post-Flood world.

Sixth, it is interesting to notice that when creation is linked with humanity, it often emphasizes the fleeting state of being; however, when creation is seen in connection with God or His law, it highlights the eternal quality of both.

Seventh, the Exodus story is often incorporated within the creation story. They are both the result of God's power and, therefore, evoke praise as a response.

Finally, in comparison with other ancient Near Eastern religions, creation theology in the Psalms emphasizes monotheism. Objects, such as the sun, moon, stars, or seas, are turned into created servants of God who not only do as He says but also give Him praise.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GENESIS CREATION ACCOUNT**

As demonstrated in this study, the book of Psalms includes numerous allusions to and echoes of the Genesis creation account. The numerous creation themes discovered in the Psalms clearly underline the theological thrust of the Hebrew Bible. Creation and

a Creator are assumed. However, one wonders, what does the book of Psalms add to the biblical concept of creation? How did the psalmists understand the beginnings of our world? What follows is a succinct commentary on these questions based on the presented material.

First of all, from the reading the Psalms, it is very clear that the authors believed in a literal creation that happened through the word of God (especially as noted in Ps. 33 and Ps. 104). Furthermore, God completed the entire creation; everything is part of His work. The psalmists leave no place for chance or an accident. God is the One Who gave life and set the world in place.

Creation week, as such, is not clearly seen in the book of Psalms, aside from the implication of such a progression of creation in Psalm 104 (which falls outside the focus of this study and has been dealt with in a separate chapter). On the other hand, there is also no indication of anything different from a literal seven-day creation as described in Genesis 1. In the Psalms, the God of creation is a God of blessing. These blessings are immediate. In this way, God's power to create is seen in events that are sudden and immediate. Therefore, it could be argued that, on the basis of present events, God created in the past in the same way. Therefore, the Psalms in an indirect way support the seven-day literal creation.

The main addition to the Genesis account is God's sustaining power over His creation. This does not mean that creation was not finished in seven days; rather, it suggests that God did not excuse Himself after He finished His creation but continued to be a caring Father and Sustainer. All the occurrences of the creation theme in the Psalms are tied to present reality. The Genesis account ends with the seventh day. God saw that everything was very good—and rested. The narrative continues by describing the entrance of sin, followed by God's immediate commencement of the process of saving a fallen world. He is present in the narratives, but the narratives do not stress His creative power. On the other hand, God continues to maintain His creation in the book of Psalms. He continues to create and renew a chaotic world. Many psalms refer to this God as a Sustainer. This is not a God Who created physical substance and then stepped out to see what would happen. The psalmists stress that God's ongoing creative power is evident in a newborn child, in a growing plant that is being watered by the rain, and even through

anomalies in the natural world. In this way, the psalmists illustrate the fact that the world was created by God in the beginning and is being sustained by Him until the end.

The Psalms never give any credence to a mythical creation. Creation is not based on metaphorical or symbolic ideas but on solid facts. These facts could be seen by the psalmists and can still be seen today. Literal creation in the psalms is based on present reality. Therefore, the book of Psalms strengthens and builds on the historical force of creation, which was already established in Genesis.

Humans are the wonderful work of God's hands. They exhibit God's wisdom. It is this understanding that causes the psalmists to praise and worship. Humankind has been set apart from other aspects of creation, but at the same time, all creatures have been created by the same Hand of the Creator.

Finally, the psalmists used creation themes to express their wonder over God's greatness. They do not satisfy the reader with absolute answers. They themselves admit that there are mysteries which cannot be understood easily. They cannot explain every detail of God's creation; they can only marvel at the way it works. Thus, the book of Psalms suggests that not every event, every act, or every matter can be explained by scientific observation. There are complexities that only God can understand. There are areas where His power is seen, but this power cannot be explained by study or observation. Ultimately, the psalmists leave the reader with a need to believe in God the Creator.