

Creation

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At Home in Creation

Scripture

Psalm 104 This great creation psalm celebrates the diversity of God’s creation, from the cosmic to the biological.

Prayer

Gracious God, we give you thanks for the beauty of the earth, for earth and all stars, for the goodness of your creation, for all things bright and beautiful. How manifold are your works, O LORD! How diverse are your creatures! You have made them all in your great wisdom. We praise you for the gift of life in all its forms. Help us to live according to your creative wisdom and creation’s goodness. In Christ’s name we ask this. Amen.

Introduction

Welcome to an exciting journey through some of the biblical perspectives on creation! Contrary to popular opinion, there is more than one account of creation in the Bible. There are, in fact, several dispersed through the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation. Like the four Gospels of the New Testament, each creation story in the Bible says something different about creation. But together they give vivid testimony to the richness and complexity of creation as understood by the ancient biblical authors.

To study creation in the Bible is timely, even urgent today. All around us we find evidence of creation’s degradation, from pollution to deforestation, from the overconsumption of natural resources to rising sea levels. We hear more and more about refugees forced to flee their homelands because of drought or flooding and about species becoming endangered or altogether extinct. Are we “running out of world”? Does the Bible have anything to say?

To some, the Bible and Christianity are culpable for the environmental crises that beset us. Some claim, for example, that the language of dominion in Genesis 1 gives license to exploit the earth’s resources. Regarding our Presbyterian roots, John Calvin

(1509–1564) has received his share of blame for regarding creation as fashioned by God solely for “man’s sake.”¹ Yet Calvin also regarded creation as the theater of God’s glory. In creation we behold God’s work and thereby come to know something of God’s gracious character. Calvin also described creation as “the mirror of [God’s] divinity” and as God’s garment. Thus even for Calvin, creation’s value greatly exceeds its usefulness for sustaining human life. The wonders of creation point to God’s glory. And so to begin our study of the creation texts, it is only appropriate to begin with one of Calvin’s favorite psalms, Psalm 104.

Joy to the World

Psalm 104 poetically celebrates the wonders of creation as the handiwork of God. The psalmist finds a kindred spirit in the biblical sage who exclaimed,

Three things are too wonderful for me;
four I do not understand;
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a [young woman].²
—Proverbs 30:18–19

Creation is filled with various creatures, from soaring eagles to slithering snakes to love-making humans, each exhibiting their own wondrous “ways.” Moreover, human inventions, such as seafaring ships, are also a source of wonder.

In Psalm 104, we find a more extensive list of wonders, all wrapped together in praise. The psalmist begins with praise of God (“Bless the LORD . . .”) and concludes with praise (v. 35). Thematically, God’s majesty opens the psalm, and from it everything else follows. God’s attributes of “honor and majesty” are likened to clothing. Visually striking is the image of light poetically associated with God’s “garment” (v. 2a). For the psalmist, there is something

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:181–82.

2. The NRSV translation of the last line is not entirely correct and has been appropriately emended.

divine about the radiant quality of light. A stream of Jewish tradition imagines God putting on a prayer shawl every morning at the break of dawn.

The rest of the psalm has to do with God's works in creation. God "stretches out the heavens like a tent" (v. 2b). In descending order, the psalm moves from the heavenly realm (vv. 2b–3a) to the meteorological (vv. 3b–4a) to the earthly (vv. 5–9). Each is established by God, beginning with God's own residence in heaven, God's habitat for divinity as it were. As for the earthly realm, God sets a boundary between the land and the waters, which have their own "appointed" place (v. 8b). From verse 10 on, God's provision for life takes center stage: water and food for the flourishing of all life, from the wild to the domestic to the human. God provides. God's "open hand" and renewing "breath" (or "spirit") are evocative images of God's providential care (vv. 28, 30). In addition to providing sustenance, God provides habitats for various creatures (e.g., vv. 12, 16–18, 22, 25–26).

In a spasm of praise, the psalmist requests that God's glory "endure forever" and that God "rejoice" in all creation (v. 31).

Creation is not simply something that happened back in the distant past; it is ongoing. God's manifold works continue to the present. In a spasm of praise, the psalmist requests that God's glory "endure forever" and that God "rejoice" in all creation (v. 31). As the world in all its diversity manifests God's glory, God has every right to enjoy it. And so God should, the psalmist claims.

All Things Bright, Beautiful, and Fearsome

What is the measure of God's magnificence and wisdom in the world? The psalmist is quite clear: it is creation's diversity (v. 24a). The manifold nature of God's handiwork is manifest in the range of diversity among God's creatures: wild asses (onagers), cattle, cedars, storks, mountain goats, coney, lions, humans, and the monster of them all, Leviathan. Each has its established habitat or niche: the trees are for the birds; high mountains, for wild goats (v. 18a); rocks, for the coney (v. 18b). (The coney here is not a rabbit, as is sometimes assumed, but the rock hyrax or *Procapra capensis*, a mammal that resembles a large guinea pig.) The lions have their lairs, and Leviathan has the sea (vv. 22, 25–26). The world is much more than "habitat for humanity." It is habitat for diversity.

The great evolutionary biologist J. B. S. Haldane (1892–1964) was once asked what biology could say about God. He allegedly replied, “I’m really not sure, except that the Creator, if he exists, must have an inordinate fondness of beetles.”³ Though beetles are not listed in the psalmist’s rather selective catalog of creatures, they easily could have been, along with tigers and bears. Instead of “Lions and tigers and bears! O my!” we have “Lions and tigers and bears, amen!” The psalmist celebrates the world of the wild and the God who provides for it all. Psalm 104 is God’s fanfare for the common creature.

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Two features of God’s creation are worth highlighting. First, in the psalm’s litany of creation even trees have standing: “the trees of the LORD,” which include “the cedars of Lebanon that [God] planted” (v. 16). The psalmist lingers admiringly over these mighty arbors, which in his day were the prized commodity of imperial regimes. Armies from Mesopotamia and Egypt would march westward, conquering cities and territories in their path, to get to these cedars, cut them down, and use the timber for various building projects. These trees once grew in dense forests on the slopes of Lebanon’s mountains. Few remain today. The psalmist prizes these trees not for their quality of wood but for their majestic stature and their hospitality: the cedars are literally for the birds!

Second, there is Leviathan. This monster of the deep, a biblical symbol of chaos, elicits God’s playful, rapturous joy, and like all creatures featured in Psalm 104, Leviathan too has its home in the created order. In biblical tradition, Leviathan is a mythical sea monster, the most fearsome creature of the deep (see Job 41 and session 4). Elsewhere in biblical tradition, Leviathan is slated for destruction by God (see Psalm 74:12–15; Isaiah 27:1). Leviathan is a creature not for play but for war: its defeat is considered a necessity for the world’s sake. Not so in Psalm 104. The psalm renders an entirely positive profile of this fearsome creature. No hint of combat is present. Instead of God’s mortal enemy, Leviathan is God’s lively playmate! Here, delight, rather than defeat, is God’s design for Leviathan. Leviathan brings out God’s playful side.

3. Quoted in David Beerling, *The Emerald Planet: How Plants Changed Earth’s History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), vi.

Humanity

The first reference to humanity comes rather late in the psalm, not until verse 14. In the psalm's litany of creatures, humanity is preceded by wild animals, birds, and even cattle. The psalmist recognizes that humanity has the unique capacity to cultivate what comes forth from the soil, particularly grains, grapes, and olives to be made into bread, wine, and oil. Agriculture is an essential part of human culture. The psalmist regards the cultivation of such crops as necessary for human flourishing. But the psalmist also recognizes them as gifts from God. The staples of the ancient Mediterranean diet come from plants that God has caused to grow. The psalmist's point is that the fruits of creation are not simply to be valued for their utility but also for our enjoyment in gratitude. Indeed, it might come as a surprise to find out that verse 15 was Calvin's favorite verse in the psalm: "wine to gladden the human heart. . . ." Here is what he said:

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In these words we are taught, that God not only provides for men's necessity . . . but that in his goodness [God] deals still more bountifully with them by cheering their hearts with wine and oil. Nature would certainly be satisfied with water to drink; and therefore the addition of wine is owing to God's superabundant liberality.⁴

Wine as a sign of God's "superabundant liberality"! But as Calvin was quick to point out, there is "nothing to which we are more prone than to abuse God's benefits by giving way to excess."⁵ Indeed! And so the rest of his commentary on this one verse, nearly 70 percent of it, is spent on the virtues of self-control and restraint. Put positively, God's generous liberality is not to be taken lightly, certainly not greedily. Moderation is a sign of gratitude.

Humanity does not appear again until verse 23 after a somewhat extended reflection on lions (vv. 20–22). According to the psalm, lions and humans share much in common: both have to make a living, and their main difference is that the lions happen to take the

4. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 4:155.

5. *Ibid.*, 156.

night shift! Day and night, the diurnal and the nocturnal, are all part of creation's natural rhythm, a rhythm in which each creature has its own time and place.

The final reference to humanity lies in the last verse, and it is not flattering. At its conclusion, the psalm exhorts God to vanquish the wicked (v. 35a). The psalm's cosmic scope, which includes even the monstrous Leviathan, has no room for the wicked. For many readers, such a grim ending ruins the psalm's wide-eyed wonder about the world. But for the ancient listener, this imprecation against the wicked made perfect sense in a world that was otherwise perceived as harmoniously vibrant, notwithstanding the one distinctly human glitch. By cursing the wicked, the psalmist has transferred the evil and chaos traditionally associated with mythically monstrous figures like Leviathan and placed them squarely on human shoulders. Conflict, the psalmist claims, is most savage, most cruel, and most wicked among human beasts. The psalmist describes a world in which the purveyors of chaos are not mythically theriomorphic—monsters made in the image of animals—but monstrously human.

Spiritual Practice

Find a place, perhaps a nearby park or simply a grove of trees, in which you can hear the sounds of birds. Early morning is the best time. Note the different sounds you hear. How do they interact? Silently thank God that nature continues to thrive, even right outside your home.

Questions for Reflection

How would you describe God in light of Psalm 104? What does it mean for God to enjoy creation? In what does God find joy? Is it hard to imagine God playing in creation?

Do you sense any concern underlying the psalmist's invitation for God to "rejoice" in creation? What do you think from the psalmist's perspective would cause God to cease enjoying creation? What might be the consequences?

According to the psalm, what is humanity's place in creation? What is our role? Are we living up to it today?