

How the Psalms Motivate Us to Marvel at Creation

A Bible Study for the Environmental Stewardship Study at WBU

By Scott R. Franklin

Key Passages: Psalm 19, 8, 104

Other Sources:

How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth (2nd Ed.), by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart (Zondervan, 1993)

Out of the Depths (3rd Ed.), by Bernhard W. Anderson with Steven Bishop (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000)

I. Introduction

A. Personal background in Environmental Stewardship

1. Tony Campolo – First introduce to me the “novel” concept that environmentalism can be based on a respect for the Creator not simply as a deification of nature.
2. Herb Grover – Through his presentation at the beginning of the term, coordinating of this Bible Study, and the hosting of guests Ed Brown and Craig Sorley.

B. My attachment to the Psalms

1. Eugene Peterson (Under the Unpredictable Plant) – Notable account of Jonah’s prayer as a compilation of learned Psalms.
“Prayer, which we often suppose is truest when most spontaneous – the raw expression of our human condition without contrivance or artifice – shows up in Jonah when he is in the rawest condition imaginable as learned.”
2. Mark D. Roberts (No Holds Barred) – Teaching me how to display unfiltered emotion and honesty with my Father in heaven by praying the Psalms

II. Exegeting the Psalms

A. Quote by Athanasius: “Most of scripture speaks *to* us while the Psalms speak *for* us.”

B. Psalms as Poetry

1. Warning – One needs to be careful of over-exegeting the Psalms by finding special meanings in every word or phrase, where the poet may have intended none.
2. Musical poems – evoke feelings rather than propositional thinking

3. Purposefully metaphorical – Look for intent of metaphor (Ex: Ps 23) – Does God want us to be and act like sheep, or want us to live a rural, pastoral life? Is it a treatise against city life? Of course not.

C. Psalms as Literature (Form Criticism)

1. Categories – 7 types (with overlap and have subcategories): Laments, Thanksgiving Psalms, Hymns of Praise, Salvation History Psalms, Psalms of Celebration and Affirmation, Wisdom Psalms, and Songs of Trust

2. Form based on type (Lament vs. Hymn)

- a. Psalm 3 is an example of a Lament. By carefully comparing lament psalms, scholars have been able to isolate six elements that appear in one way or another in virtually all of them: Address, Complaint, Trust, Deliverance, Assurance, and Praise.
- b. Psalm 8 is an example of a hymn. Similarly hymns of praise follow a specific pattern: Invocation (Call to Worship), Motivation for Praise, Refrain.

D. Benefits to Psalms

How does this portion of scripture contain words to God function for us as a Word from God?

1. Guide to worship
2. Relate honestly to God
3. Importance of reflection and meditation on things God has done for us.

E. Other Comments

1. Psalms do not guarantee a pleasant life
2. Despite harsh language, they do not condone acting in your anger. They do condone the honest expression of your emotions to God.

III. Hymns (A type of Psalm)

A. Definition: The hymn (Hebrew, *tehillah*) is concisely defined as “the song which extols the glory and greatness of Yhwh as it is revealed in nature and history, and particularly in Israel’s history”

B. Elements of a Hymn (see II.C.ii)

1. Introduction: Call to Worship
2. Main Section: The Motive for Praise
3. Recapitulation/Refrain

C. Three types

1. Hymns to God, who created (redeemed) Israel – Note that in many of the Psalms there is a strong connection between the concept of creation and redemption, in the sense that God created the nation of Israel by delivering them from Egypt. (Psalm 66:1-12, 100, 111, 114, 149)
2. Hymns to God, who created the world (Psalm 8, 19:1-6, 95:1-7a, 104, 148, 74:12-17, 89:5-18) – We will focus on a few of these.
3. Hymns to the Creator and Ruler of History (Psalm 33, 103, 113, 117, 145, 146, 147)

IV. Specific Psalms

A. Psalm 19 (a creation Psalm)

1. Composed of two distinct pieces: the first (vv. 1-6) is an old hymn that praises God, the creator, whose “glory” (radiance, splendor) is displayed in the heavens; the second part (vv. 7-14) is a meditation on the Torah (Law) in which the will of Yhwh, the God known in Israel’s history is revealed.

2. The first part

- a. Yhwh is not employed. “El” is used for God in v. 1 – Ancient Semitic title for “Father of the Gods”
- b. Vv 1 – 2 is an example of “synonymous parallelism” where we should be careful to recognize that the same point is being made in each phrase. The Psalmist is not bent on saying that the “heavens” do one thing and the “skies” another.
- c. Vv 3 – 4b. While the anthem is sung in the universal language of nature, it is a *silent* testimony that is not clearly comprehensible to any human being.
- d. Vv 4c-6. In these verses a deep human response to the wonder of being and of the majestic order of the cosmos is reinterpreted to express faith in the God who is not a power of nature (such as the deified sun) but is creator who transcends the cosmos.
- e. It is questionable whether the psalmist affirms that the heavens *reveal* God. The celestial phenomena display God’s *glory* and praise the Creator by functioning in the ordered whole, but they do not disclose who God is or God’s purpose.

What is the difference between “revealing God” and “displaying God’s glory”? Can the case be made that this psalm perhaps only does the former?

3. Relevance to a study of Environmental stewardship

- a. When we deface creation, we deface that which displays the glory of God. Deification of nature is sinful but the sanctification, as in the temple of God, is a way to display God’s glory
- b. Nature is not enough to reveal God’s character and His intent on being involved in the lives of his people. While environmental stewardship is a viable element of the mission of the church it does not replace the most important mission: the special revelation of God in Christ Jesus. (Ed Brown’s reasoning for the immanence of this mission as the crisis status of environmental disasters)

B. Psalm 8 (The Majestic Name)

1. Follows for mentioned above in III.C.

- a. Invocation (vv. 1 – 2) – “Yhwh, our Sovereign” whose name is great throughout the whole earth.

- b. Motive for Praise (vv. 3 -8) – The Psalmist is overwhelmed with a sense of the relatively ephemeral and frail character of human beings and wonders why the Creator pays any attention to such infinitesimally tiny creatures. Such an insignificant creature, yet one who is elevated to a high role in the Creator’s cosmic administration!
 - c. Refrain (vv. 9) – The psalm is rounded off by sounding the note struck at the beginning.
2. Revolutionary idea: The view of human dominion over nature is revolutionary when measured against ancient religions that portrayed gods as forces within the cosmos and that regarded human life as embraced within the order of creation. Humans, though related to their natural environment, stand over against nature in freedom as creatures.
3. Relevance to a study of Environmental stewardship
- a. Question: Where is the line between dominion and exploitation? Isn't it determined by cost benefit analysis?
Jesus was a carpenter not a farmer.
 - b. The other side of this picture is the biblical portrayal of the risk that God has taken in elevating human beings to a high role of responsibility in the creation. The biblical narrative shows that the position of dominion over the natural world may tempt human beings to assert their independence and to use their God-given freedom in such a manner that the earth becomes a scene of exploitation, warfare and chaos. This is the fundamental problem to which the opening chapters of the Bible are addressed: human grandeur and human misery, the high calling and the lost opportunity.

C. Psalm 104

1. A borrowed hymn? At points this psalm displays a striking resemblance in style and content to the “Hymn to the Aton,” composed by Akhenaton, the reforming Egyptian king of the fourteenth century, B.C. Moreover, the poet has made use of the myth of the Creator’s subduing the powers of chaos, which was known in Mesopotamia and particularly, in the Canaanite literature of the 14th century B.C.
2. Form
- a. Invocation (v. 1) – begins with an invocation addressed to the poet’s *nefesh* (self or being): “Praise God, O my being”. All the powers of one’s being in their psychosomatic unity are invited to join in praising God. Similar in Psalm 103
 - b. Motive for Praise (vv. 2 – 30) – contained in seven strophes which follow the sequence of the Genesis story.
 - a. Strophe 1: vv. 2 – 4 ; Genesis 1:6-8
 - b. Strophe 2: vv. 5 – 9; Genesis 1:9-10
 - c. Strophe 3: vv. 10 – 13; Implied in Genesis 1:6-10

- d. Strophe 4: vv. 14 – 18; Genesis 1:11-12
- e. Strophe 5: vv. 19 – 23; Genesis 1:14-18
- f. Strophe 6: vv. 24 – 26; Genesis 1:20-22
- g. Strophe 7: vv. 27 – 30; Genesis 1:24 -30

c. Recapitulation (vv 35b)

3. Interesting Observations (to me)

- a. In the Genesis creation story, the waters are not regarded as hostile. But in Psalm 104, they are adversaries; God rebukes them and they flee (v.7). God sets a boundary so they are held back and then... they obey. The waters of chaos are not eliminated but are assigned their place in the wonderful order of creation.
- b. The psalmist proceeds to meditate on the wonderful diversity of God's creation. Over and over there is an emphasis on the interconnectedness and order of creation.
The mathematician's psalm?
- c. The emphasis on human supremacy from Psalm 8 is lacking in this Psalm. Instead the poet stresses the equality of humans and animals that together depend on the creator.
- d. vv. 27 – 30. Verbs refer to continuing actions. "When you give to them (over and over again) they gather it up (not once but frequently)." At the beginning of the Psalm, he speaks of creation as a past event but at the climax is another revolutionary idea. Creation is not just an event that occurred in the beginning, as in the Genesis creation story, but is God's continuing activity of sustaining creatures and holding everything in being. The cosmos is NOT a self-sustaining entity perpetuated through its own internally operating dynamic. If God were to "hide is face" then every being would languish and fall back into chaos. – Of course this is language of poetry, not science. It very well may be that the laws of science that hold creation together are that very presence of God sustaining creation.
- e. Goodness of God's creation: Everything in this psalm proclaims the goodness of creation until the very end, a melancholy note struck briefly, "May sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more"

4. Relevance to a study of Environmental stewardship

- a. There is order inherent in God's creation that we must care not to disrupt.
- b. We are part of the interconnectedness of creation. Though given dominion, we must understand our place within creation.
- c. Sin mars creation and its goodness.
- d. To reiterate something discussed in an earlier study: to deface creation is to become a stumbling block as we prevent the meditation of God's people upon the beauty and order of creation.

- V. Recapitulation of the Benefit of the Psalms
 - A. Guide to worship – Pray directly or interpret into our own words
 - B. Relate honestly to God
 - C. Importance of reflection and meditation on things God has done for us.