**Vesper #2 Creation in the Old Testament I**

“Paying Attention: Creation in the Old Testament—Finding God in Surprising Places”

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**Slide 1:**

The large lecture hall was already full, and people were waiting in anticipation for the speaker to begin her presentation. People had come a long way to hear her. They were eager to engage

with her ideas. As she was organizing her notes she realized something horrific. She could not

read a single word on the papers in front of her. Blurry lines, making no sense. She would have

to improvise, yet, this presentation was not in her mother tongue—she NEEDED those notes. Right at that moment she heard feet clanging down the middle aisle of the lecture hall. Her assistant made her way to the front and waved for her to come closer. ln her hands she held a

pair of glasses--her glasses. During the morning she had put the wrong set of glasses in her

bag. Suddenly everything became crystal clear.

**Slide 2:**

Creation is not only a big deal in Genesis, the most obvious place to look for it. It’s one of the

major theological topics of both Old and New Testaments. We may overlook that if we don't

pay close and careful attention. We need to look through the right lenses and will, suddenly,

see the importance and omnipresence of the theme in Scripture. For those of you who like

photography (and not just selfies), it’s like a macro shot. Something beautiful and intricate (though often small) becomes visible and its beauty and intricacy surprise us. Tonight, let’s be surprised and focus on the song book of the Old Testament.

**Slide 3:**

50 out of 150 psalms contain a clear reference to Creation.

Most of the times, references to creation are connected to other aspects of divine activity (such

as Israel’s election, the exodus, deliverance from trouble, God's providence, etc.)—it’s all interconnected.

**Slide 4:**

Psalm 104 begins like Psalm 103 ended: “Bless the Lord, oh my soul.” I can hear joy and trust in

this phrase. While the Psalm has no explicit reference to an author, its proximity to Psalm 103 attributed to David and the unique phrase beginning and ending both psalms suggests that David may have written both. Scholars have seen both literary beauty and theological depth in the psalm. William P. Brown, “The Lion, the Wicked, and the Wonder of it all: Psalm L04 and the Playful God,” *Journal for Preachers* 19.3 (2006): 1-5, notes: “Psalm 104 was composed with unabashed joy and freedom of ex-pression, and yet it exhibits a theological sophistication scarcely matched by any other psalm. Here, rigorous thinking and rapturous wonder find a compelling convergence. The world, as grand and manifold as it is, is inscribed with coherence and conviviality.”

**Slide 5:**

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| Day 1 | (Gen 1:3-5) | light | Ps 104:2a |
| Day 2 | (Gen 1:6-8) | firmament divides the water | Ps 104:2b-4 |
| Day 3 | (Gen 1:9-10)  (Gen 1:11-13 | land and water made distinct  vegetation and trees | Ps 104:5-9 (+ 10-13?)  Ps 104:14-17 (+ 18?) |
| Day 4 | (Gen 1:14-19) | luminaries as timekeepers | Ps 104:19-23 (+ 24) |
| Day 5 | (Gen 1:20-23) | creatures of sea and air | Ps 104:25-26 (sea only) |
| Day 6 | (Gen 1:24-28)  (Gen 1:29-31) | animals and man  food appointed for all creatures | Ps 104:21-24 (anticip.)  Ps 104:27-28 (+ 29-30) |
| Day 7 | (Gen 2:1-3) | glory of God; allusion to revelation give at Sinai, Sabbath | Ps 104:31-35 |

**Slide 6:**

Day 1 (vv. 1-2a): “O Lord my God, You are very great; You are clothed with splendor and

majesty, covering Yourself with light as with a cloak” (Ps 104:1-2a)

We get more information about the light, the first thing created. Our universe is not

anthropocentric (human in center), nor heliocentric (sun is the center), but theocentric

(centered in God)

**Slide 7:**

Day 2 (vv. 2b-4): Psalm 1044:2b-4 describes the creation of the firmament, with focus upon the

waters above (separated from the waters below, described in the next section), corresponding

to the second day of creation week (Gen 1:6-8). Utilizing poetic similes and metaphors and a

string of active participles, the psalmist depicts YHWH as the one who is “stretching out [the

atmospheric] heavens like a curtain, laying the beams of His upper chambers in the waters,

making the clouds His chariot, walking upon the wings of the wind, making the winds His

messengers, flaming fire His ministers.” That God was stretching out atmospheric heavens, and

not a solid dome, as often argued by scholars, has been demonstrated by Randall W. Younker

and Richard M. Davidson, “The Myth of the Solid Heavenly Dome: Another Look at the Hebrew

Term *raquia*,” *AUSS* 49 (2011): 125-47. By using imagery familiar to people living in the ANE at that time the psalmist uses polemics to emphasize YHWH as the Creator. No, it's not Baal riding on the clouds (as in Ugaritic texts)—it’s YHWH who truly controls nature because He made it.

**Slide 8:**

Day 3 (vv. 5-18): Psalm 104:5-18 correspond to the third day of creation week (Gen 1:9-18),

which involved the gathering of the waters under heaven within divinely ordained boundaries,

the appearing of the dry ground, and the formation of vegetation on the earth. God is the

master builder with structure and no chaos. What God builds is perfect and will “not be moved

forever” (or totter, v. 5). The word “deep” in verse 6 connects to Gen 1:2, The “deep” here is compared to a piece of clothing which comports with the “unmythologized” understanding of the term in Gen 1.

**Slide 9:**

Day 3 continued: Psalm 104:6, 10 suggests that there were mountains and hills in God’s

Creation—before the flood (see also Prov 8:25,26; Ps 90:2). They may not have looked like this

(and I don't want to get into trouble with my geologist friends), but the biblical text is fairly clear regarding their existence, which would also allow rivers to flow towards the sea. Verse 9 may refer to a worldwide flood, thus extending more intertextual links to the primordial history recorded in Gen 1-11.

**Slide 10:**

Day 3 continued: Verses 14-17 move to a description of vegetation that was created on the

third day of creation week. Verse 14 describes the two main kinds of vegetation created by God: “The grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation [*‘eseb*] for the labor of man, so that he may bring forth food from the earth.” This harks back not only to the description of God’s creation of vegetation on the third day in Gen 1:11-12, but also alludes to the vegetarian diet provided for the land creatures that were created on the sixth day (Gen 1:29-30). Verses 16-17 turn from the edible vegetation to the majestic “trees of the Lord.” God’s care for the trees is underscored as they “drink their fill” [*saba‘* “become satisfied”], and these mighty trees, including the cedars of Lebanon and the fir trees, in turn demonstrate purposefulness in providing habitat for the birds, in anticipation of day 5.

**Slide 11:**

Day 4 (vv. 19-23): The psalmist describes in poetic language the heavenly bodies, but instead of

describing them as “greater light” and “lesser light” as in Gen 1 he uses their names, instead of

describing the sun first, the order is inverted, corresponding, most likely, to the familiar refrain

of Genesis 1 (“and there was evening and there was morning...”). Sun and moon are subject to

the Creator, for God “appointed” their rhythm, the sun “knows its going down” (v. 19). Verse 19

also underlines the function of both moon and sun-for establishing times and season. These seasons affect animals and human beings alike. Reference to labor (*aboda* in verse 23 echoes the description of human labor in Gen 2:15 (*abad*, same root).

**Slide 12:**

Day 5 (vv. 24-26): This day starts with an exuberant celebration of God’s creative work. “LORD,

how manifold are Your works! ln wisdom You have made them all. The earth is full of Your

possessions” (Ps. 104:24 NKJ). Proverbs 8 picks up this theme of the creative power of divine and personified wisdom.

Psalm L04:24-26 focuses on the fifth day of creation week in Gen 1-, during which God made

the birds of the air and the inhabitants of the sea (Gen 1:20-23). The creation of the birds is not

explicitly mentioned in this section, perhaps because they have already been referred to (twice)

in connection with the description of the purpose of the vegetation of the third day (vv. 12, 17).

The main emphasis of this section is upon the creatures of the sea. Fish and ships all move in the sea, including also Leviathan who is described as a playful created huge sea creature (see also Job 41).

**Slide 13:**

Day 6 (vv. 27-30): This is the section where the poet describes God's provision for their food

(see discussion above). ln this section, the psalmist refers back to that depiction: “They all wait

for You to give them their food in due season. You give to them, they gather it up; You open

Your hand, they are satisfied [*sabar* as in v. 13l with good [*tob*]” (vv. 27-28). The word “good”

[*tob*] harks back to the repeated refrain in Gen 1 and 2 that what God created was truly “good” and in particular to the sixth day of creation where the term is used by God twice (Gen 1:25,

31). A crucial aspect of the sixth day emphasized by the psalmist in this stanza of Psalm 104 is God giving life to humans and land animals by filling them with His breath, as described in Gen 2:7. Verse 30 highlights a very important concept, already implicit in Gen 1 and 2. Every birth is a tiny echo of God's original creation involving creative activity (*bara'*) and his Spirit.

**Slide 14:**

Day 7 (vv. 31-35): This “sabbatic meditation” begins with the poet’s wish: “May the glory of the

Lord endure forever; May the Lord rejoice in His works” (v. 31). The psalmist wishes that the

glory of God, which He has put upon His creatures, and which is reflected and echoed back by

them to Him, may continue forever. There is also an eschatological implication of the sabbatical meditation, in the poet’s linkage of rejoicing in creation with the destruction of the wicked. God’s return always implies both emotions—joy (of the redeemed) and fear due to the destruction of the wicked. Sinai (and the Sabbath in the 10 Commandments) is referenced in verse 32. Doukhan also points to the fact that both the introduction and conclusion of Psalm 104 (vv. 1, 33, and nowhere else in the Psalm) bring together the two names employed for God in Gen 1 and 2, *Elohim* (used alone only in Gen 1:1-2:4a and together with the Tetragrammaton in Gen 2:4b-25) and *Yhwh* (used with *Elohim* in Gen 2:4b-25), which may imply the poet’s recognition of the unity and complementarity of the two accounts of creation in Gen 1-2.

Verse 32 is a picture of a theophany.

**Slide 15:**

Theology of Psalm 104:

1. **Two important theological themes: God is the Creator—and He continues to do His creative work in the world as He provides (*creatio continua* in vv. 27-30).**

While other biblical creation accounts (such as Gen 1) focus upon God’s initial creation, Psalm 104 is virtually unique in emphasizing God’s continuing creation.

1. **Historicity and literality of Genesis creation**

The poetic representation of the seven days of creation in Psalm 104 does not negate the literality/historicity of the Genesis creation week, any more than the poetic representation of the exodus in Psalms 105-106 negates the literality/historicity of the exodus events. Poetry does not equal non-historicity but a unique angle and mnemonic effect.

1. **Psalm emphasizes the joy and beauty of creation**

The psalm also underscores and develops the sense of beauty and pleasure that God’s orderly, purposeful creation brings, not only to his creatures, but to God Himself.

1. **Post-fall perspective included**

At the same time, Psalm 104 often describes God’s created world from the perspective of how it functions after the fall. Notice, e.g., the reference to rainfall from God’s upper chambers (v. 13), in contrast to the mist that rose from the ground in pre-fall Eden (Gen 2:5-6).

1. **Humans are an interdependent part of God’s creation**

One especially surprising theological feature of the psalm comes in its depiction of humans within the scheme of creation. Psalm 104 emphasizes that all beings whom God has created share this world together—and effect the world.

1. **Ecology matters to God**

The psalm describes the interdependence of natural phenomena in such a way as to highlight what we would today speak of in ecological terms. Psalm 104 affirms fundamental biblical principles of environmental concern, such as: the goodness of God's creation; God's active and unceasing sustaining of the world's existence at both macro and micro levels; his generous and loving care for both humans and the rest of the animals, birds, and fish.

The events of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. were incredibly traumatic for God’s people. Imagine the questions in your mind if you would see the Babylonian armies plundering Jerusalem and destroying God’s temple on Mount Zion. How can God allow something like this? Where will the journey go now? We cannot see beyond the next bend in life’s journey—and neither could they.

**Slide 16:**

When we use the right lenses and read Scripture carefully we do not only discover information. We can discern joy and beauty and recognize that we all are part of God’s creative design, disregarding of race, ethnicity, age or gender. We are part of God’s creation and as such we are invited to care for this creation and recognize God’s continued engagement and care for this world. We can only respond in the same way as did David: “Bless the Lord, o my soul! Praise the Lord” (Ps 104:35).

**In preparing for this presentation I have enormously benefitted from Richard M. Davidson, “The Creation Theme in Psalm 104,” in *The Genesis Creation Account and Its Reverberation in the Old Testament*, ed. Gerald A. Klingbeil (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2015), 149-188.**