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See back cover for Table of Contents

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The Ecosapiential Theology of Psalms

Andrea L. Robinson

Ecosapiential theology articulates the connectedness of all elements within God's created order as presented in biblical wisdom literature. In a previous article, I explored the implications of an ecosapiential approach for modern believers and proposed that understanding ecosapiential theology can help to restore the divinely ordained relationship between God, humanity and the natural world.[1]

Through an examination of ecological themes in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, I proposed that each book offers slightly different yet complementary perspectives. Proverbs teaches that God orders his creation and sets boundaries to ensure its proper operation. Both the human and the natural world are endowed with a purpose and a role within the functioning whole. Rejection or transgression of the created order results in a destructive trajectory for the whole natural world, including humanity.

The wise teacher of Ecclesiastes explains that progress isn't inherently beneficial. A respect for the value and dignity of other creatures is more important than the values of consumption and comfort. The book of Job, meanwhile, vividly portrays an omniscient and omnipotent God who cares for every element of his creation. The intimate relationship between humans and God is counterbalanced by a non-anthropocentric view of God's relationship with his creation. Humans are not the centre of the universe, and God has purposes for his creation that sometimes have nothing to do with mankind.

All three books also teach that we experience a deeper understanding of self through nature. Human beings do not have a monopoly on wisdom. Ecosapiential wisdom teaches that creation can, in fact, impart wisdom to humans. Learning from God's creation may break through to hearts hardened to the natural world. Indeed, a proper response to the ecological teachings of

1 Andrea L. Robinson, 'The Ecosapiential Theology of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 41 (2017): 134–49.

Andrea L. Robinson (MA, ThM, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, USA) is currently a PhD candidate and adjunct instructor at the same school. Andrea also works at the Tel Gezer Water System excavation in Israel during the summers. The primary focus of her research is ecotheology and creation theology, spanning both Old and New Testaments, specifically with regard to the relationship between theology and ecology in wisdom literature, prophetic literature, and apocalyptic literature. In addition to her academic pursuits, Andrea is an ordained minister and occasional conference speaker.

biblical wisdom literature calls humanity to address abuses of the environment as well as the underlying spiritual causes.

The present article complements the previous one by illuminating the ecosapiential perspective of Psalms. An investigation of key psalms reveals that ecological references in the Psalter present God as creator and sustainer of the natural world with the intent of inspiring mankind towards a greater reverence for God and his creation. Such reverence, in turn, should stimulate individuals to engage in a more profound commitment to humanity's role as steward of the earth.

Due to the high frequency of ecological references in the Psalter, three representative psalms (8, 29 and 104) have been chosen for analysis. The three offer distinctive yet complementary perspectives on the relationship between God, mankind and the environment. Before examining each one individually, I will briefly discuss overarching themes.

I. The Problem and the Solution: Ecosapiential Perspectives

Biblical wisdom breaks down the division between sacred and secular. Through wisdom humans encounter the cosmic ordering power in creation in all areas of life.[2] Biblical wisdom shares with ancient Near Eastern (ANE) wisdom a conception that all of life is ordered by the divine.

In the ANE world, sacred and secular were one and the same,[3] but in the Bible, nature remains distinct from its creator. Humans may perceive God through nature, but nowhere is nature spiritualized. God is active in nature, but always distinct from it.

According to R. E. O. White, 'In the ancient world Israel alone kept healthily clear of Nature worship.'[4] In doing so, she also avoided the perversions that typically accompanied nature religions: the fertility rites of the Baal cult and sexualized worship of Greco-Roman religion.

Biblical wisdom is also distinctive in its claim that God is the source of all wisdom. Wisdom is the key to drawing near to God and his purpose for both individuals and all creation. Creation has intrinsic worth because it was created by God and is valuable to him. Creation has its own right, bestowed by God, to flourish and accomplish its created purpose.[5]

Nature's rights should not be denied or claimed in the self-interest of humans because such rights are given by the creator. Nonetheless, through technological advances, the rise of the experimental method, and the all-encompassing value of progress, science

2 Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 99; Gerhard Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, trans. James D. Martin (London: SCM, 1972), 71–73.

3 Harvey H. Guthrie, Jr., *Israel's Sacred Songs: A Study of Dominant Themes* (New York: Seabury, 1966), 91.

4 R. E. O. White, *A Christian Handbook to the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 14.

5 Howard A. Snyder and Joel Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace: Overcoming the Divorce between Earth and Heaven* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 154.

has been set over nature as the dominant entity.[6]

Yet the devaluation of nature is not a modern phenomenon; after all, 'there is nothing new under the sun' (Ecc 1:9). The Greek philosophy of Platonism tended to prize spirit over matter and exalt the spiritual world over the material world.[7] Platonic philosophy entered the church very early, most notably in the form of Gnosticism. Despite the early polemics against Gnostic philosophy, modern believers have frequently continued to devalue nature.[8]

Wisdom does not present a lofty, ethereal spirituality, but a theology of human experience. As part of the physical universe, humans are part of nature. Yet humans have the capacity to impact the web of creation in a more intense and pervasive manner than other creatures due to their image-bearing.[9] The *imago dei* relates humans to their creator and makes them 'morally responsible to him for fulfilling their calling in ruling the earth for his glory'.[10]

Humans reflect the image of God when they subdue the earth by moving all creation towards its fullest potential.[11] The dominion of humans should reflect God's dominion in a relationship of care rather than an economy of use.[12]

The Old Testament depicts the relation of mankind to his environment along two avenues. The first is the dominion model, in which humans are responsible for stewarding the earth. The second is the integration model, in which humans are one among many creatures. Both models are established in the opening chapters of the Bible and are found in parallel throughout. In Genesis 1, humans are one among many created entities, whereas in Genesis 2 humans are granted dominion.

When interpreters veer too far in either of these two directions, Scripture can be misunderstood and misapplied. Dominion has been distorted too often and abused 'in a radically anthropocentric manner'.[13] However, regarding humans as no more than beasts deni-

6 Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, NSCE (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 63.

7 Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 232, 265; Snyder and Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, 8–9.

8 N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 88, 197; Snyder and Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, 61.

9 Terrence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005), 19; Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Recovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 89–90.

10 D. C. Jones, 'Nature, Theology of', *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 817–18.

11 Terrence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters*, TECC (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 33; Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 94–95; Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, BTCB (Louisville, KY: Westminster, John Knox, 2015), 130; Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 122.

12 Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 18–19, distinguishes dominion over the land from dominion over creatures. Man subdues (*kbš*) the earth but only rules (*rdh*) creatures.

13 James Limburg, 'Down-to-Earth Theology: Psalm 104 and the Environment', *CTM* 21 (1994): 344.

grates their God-given rulership over the earth.

In the book of Psalms, both the anthropocentric dominion model and the ecocentric integration model can be found. Humans simultaneously take their place in the symphony of creation and rule over it, but God stands as sovereign over man and nature alike, as creator and sustainer. Psalmic refrains that praise God as creator often transition naturally into acknowledging God as the one who makes continued existence possible.[14]

In the Psalms, nature is the handiwork of and a reflection of God. Indeed, few works of ancient literature mirror the natural world in such detail as Psalms. The world was brought into existence by God; creation belongs to God because he created it. The world is sacred because of its intimate connection to God. In short, creation is the object of God's continual presence, love and provision and, as such, is included in his plan of redemption.[15]

II. Psalm 29

1. Ascribe to the Lord, O sons of the mighty;
   Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
2. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name,
   Worship the Lord in holy adornment.
3. The voice of the Lord is upon the waters,
   The glory of God thunders,
   The Lord is over many waters.
4. The voice of the Lord in strength,
   The voice of the Lord in majesty.
5. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars,
   The Lord shatters the cedars of Lebanon.
6. He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
   And Sirion like a young wild ox.
7. The voice of the Lord hews flames of fire,
8. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness,
   The Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
9. The voice of the Lord causes the deer to calve,
   And strips the forests bare,
   And in his temple everything says, 'Glory'.
10. The Lord sat as King at the flood,
    And the Lord will be seated as King forever.
11. The Lord will give strength to his people,
    The Lord will bless his people with peace.[16]

The literary setting of Psalm 29 is a thunderstorm, but the content is not limited to meteorological phenomena. Through the power of nature, the power of God is revealed. Everything in the visible world is rooted in the invisible power of God.[17] In the light of God's sovereignty, no fear is expressed regarding the violent storm.

14 Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms,* trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 127.

15 Christopher J. H. Wright, 'The World in the Bible', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 34 (2010): 207–19.

16 All scripture passages are translated by the author.

17 Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. Francis Bolton, 3 vols., BCOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 1:368.

The Psalmist sees God as enthroned above the tempest. Further, such great power is available as strength for God's people. White queries, 'Why do we imagine God is only in the peace, and never in the storm?'[18]

The psalm begins with a series of imperatives calling for praise to God. The verses that follow parallel the voice of God with powerful acts of the natural world. The term, *qôl*, is repeated seven times for poetic effect. Such repetition is rare in the psalter and should therefore receive close attention.

The sevenfold voice of Yahweh may be an intentional device used to express the omnipotence of God in creation.[19] The reference to the 'voice over many waters' also reinforces the connection to God's creative activity, as when his Spirit hovered over the primordial waters in Genesis 1:2.

Verses 5–9 express the wrathful side of God's glory. The voice of God shakes the created order and even the most imposing features totter at the sound. The 'flames of fire' in verse 7 are probably bolts of lightning that accompany the preceding thunder. These bolts serve as an accusative of means by which the wilderness is shaken.[20] The intensity of the violence may also imply an earthquake, which often accompanies a theophany.[21]

As the storm moves though the mountainous regions of Lebanon and Sirion, the psalm implies that God brings low what man finds impressive.[22] Such great violence occurs that the storm strips the cedars of Lebanon, which were famed for their strength and durability.

Rollin Walker laments that modern scientific understandings have caused man to lose a sense of awe over nature. We now understand lightning as the discharge of electricity caused by ionic build-up in a cloud. Yet why should such knowledge diminish man's appreciation of God's role? Instead, an understanding of the intricate processes that underlie natural phenomena should only increase man's wonder. As Psalm 8 also urges, man should regard God's handiwork with childlike jubilation.[23]

Verses 8 and 9 further develop the power of the divine voice in nature. Deserts, forests and their inhabitants are all in view.[24] Further, Yahweh's power over birth and death is on display. First, he causes the deer to calve. Then he 'strips the forests bare', which may contain a play on words. The verb *ḥśp* has the nuance of miscarriage, perhaps an intentional contrast with the idea of birth. The lines imply that God

18 White, *Christian Handbook*, 14.

19 Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, trans. J. R. Porter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 232; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:371.

20 Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I: 1–50*, AB 16 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 178.

21 Charles Augustus Briggs and Emily Grace Briggs, *The Book of Psalms*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1906), 1:253.

22 Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary on Books I and II of the Psalms* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 1973), 126.

23 Rollin H. Walker, *The Modern Message of the Psalms* (New York: Abingdon, 1938), 31.

24 The text implies that the storm's geographical path begins over the sea, travels over the mountainous region of Lebanon/Sirion, and then travels south through Israel to the wilderness beyond. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50,* WBC 19 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 247–48; Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 126.

has power over life and death, creation and destruction.

The final lines of the psalm direct the reader to the perceived seat of God's power: the temple. The verses probably refer to the heavenly temple, and the mythical setting evokes the idea of God enthroned over the primeval waters.[25] The floods may also have a mythical overtone as the audience of the psalm would have seen a re-enactment of the struggle between chaos and order in the storm.

The term 'flood' (*mbûl*) is significant because its only attestation in Scripture is Genesis 6–11. The implication is that even the most extreme natural disaster in history is not outside the sovereignty of God. Therefore, God is sovereign over the heavens, the earth, and even the most hostile elements of nature. Such an interpretation also explains the seemingly odd exclamation of 'glory' after he 'strips the forest bare'.

The most significant aspect of the temple is the presence of God. The psalm may imply that the source of God's power is himself, an idea already implied in verse 2, when worshippers ascribe to God the glory due to his name. Because his name represents his nature, the totality of creation and God's salvific action can be seen. Nothing in heaven or on earth can thwart God's purpose because he is sovereign over all. In the light of such power, Yahweh can easily give his people victory over their adversaries. Therefore, peace is the foreordained outcome.

25 Briggs, *Psalms*, 254; Dahood, *Psalms 1: 1–50*, 179; cf. Is 6:1–4.

III. Psalm 8

1. O Lord, our God, how mighty is your[26] name in all the earth;[27]
   I will worship your majesty above the heavens.
2. [28]From the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have established strength,
   Because of your enemies,
   To stop the enemy and vengeful one.
3. When I see your heavens, the works of your fingers,
   The moon and stars which you have established,
4. What is man that you are mindful of him,
   And the son of man that you have concern for him?
5. Yet, you make him a little lower than God,

26 The use of the second person here and throughout emphasizes the personal relationship between man, God and creation. Steven J. Kraftchick, 'Plac'd on This Isthmus of a Middle State: Reflections on Psalm 8 and Human Becoming', *Word and World* 35 (2015): 122.

27 To draw out the distinctions between perfect and imperfect verb forms, the perfects have been translated as past action with continuing effect, and the imperfects have been translated as present action.

28 This verse causes problems for translators. The primary problem is whether 'infants and babies' qualifies the preceding verse or the following lines. Dahood places the phrase at the end of verse 1, but most interpreters stay closer to the Masoretic Text. See Dahood, *Psalms 1: 1–50*, 49; Craigie, *Psalms 1–50,* 105; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:149; Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 260; Briggs, *Psalms*, 61. For a critical analysis of the various solutions, see J. Alberto Soggin, 'Textkritische Untersuchung von Ps 8:2–3 und 6', *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (1971): 565–71.

And with glory and majesty you crown him.
6. You give him rule over the works of your hands,
   All things you have set under his feet.
7. All sheep and oxen,
   And also the beasts of the field,
8. The birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea;
   Whatever passes through the paths of the seas.
9. O Lord, our God, how mighty is your name in all the earth.

The opening words of Psalm 8 form an inclusio that brackets the entire psalm.[29] The sovereignty of God over his creation is thus identified as the central theme. In the light of God's power, the relationship between creation, humanity and God is explicated as the Psalmist strives to answer the perennial question, 'What is man?'

The answer to the Psalmist's question is given in terms of man's place and function in the world. Humanity is higher than other living creatures but a little lower than God. Psalm 8 claims that God vests humans, who are insignificant in relation to the universe, with authority over the earth's creatures. As God cares for humans, humans care for creation. As creation is 'husbanded' by man, it is 'enriched and sustained by his presence'.[30]

The psalm also contrasts the glory of God with the glory of man. Man is sovereign over creatures, but God is sovereign over all creation. Delitzsch asserts, 'For the primary thought of the Psalm is this, that the God, whose glory the heavens reflect, has also glorified Himself in the earth and in man.' Not surprisingly, then, the psalm's description of the glory of God in man is often associated with Christ.[31]

The psalm begins by asserting that the God who is great in the heavens is also great in the earth below. Like Psalm 29, Psalm 8 invokes the name of the Lord, which calls into view the vast scope of his person and power, in the face of which the Psalmist can but babble like an infant.

Yahweh uses feeble instruments to overcome whatever might oppose his glorification. The wise and powerful remain unenlightened before God while seemingly facile infants are privy to his power. Redemption demands that man become as a child before God.[32]

What was hinted in verse 1 becomes more explicit in verses 3–4 as the psalm directs the reader to Genesis 1. The heavens are kept in place not by pillars or magical words, but by the power of Yahweh. The cosmos bears witness to his skill, wisdom, and power. The stars also contribute to the awesome effect.[33]

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29 Robert L. Alden goes further, arguing that the entire Psalm is structured chiastically in 'Chiastic Psalms: A Study in the Mechanics of Semitic Poetry in Psalms 1–50', *JETS* 17 (1974): 11–28; cf. Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms,* THOTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 52.

30 Kraftchick, 'Plac'd on This Isthmus of a Middle State', 123.

31 Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:156.

32 C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 92; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:157; cf. Matt 11:25; 18:3; 21:16.

33 Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett (New York: Seabury, 1978), 33.

Yet, as inspiring as the cosmos is, astronomical entities pale in comparison with God himself. In the light of God's great power, man would seem to be nothing. The amazing truth that God is mindful of humans despite their smallness amidst the vast cosmos brings the Psalmist to exultation.

Verse 5 begins a new flow of thought as the Psalmist hints at the *imago dei* in man.[34] The splendour of God is on display as man bears God's image. Being created in the image of God, man is nearly divine. The crowning of verse 5 signals the 'manifestation and completion' of the king's enthronement in his temple. In ANE thought, a king's dwelling could be constructed only after his adversaries are subdued.[35] However, in Psalm 8 no more effort is needed to subdue enemies than the squealing of babies, which in effect requires no effort at all.

Man is thus created to be a king over his territory, the earth. That man is made in the image of God and crowned with glory indicates that he is endowed with sovereignty over the earth's creatures. The series of imperfect verbs followed by the perfect may provide a subtle reference to what God has accomplished through man in the past and what he will continue to do in the future.[36] The phrase, 'set under his feet', in verse 6 is a paraphrase of Genesis 1:26–28 and the most explicit reference to the creation account thus far. Man's created purpose is to rule as God's regent over the earth.

The dominion of man over nature is one of the greatest human callings.[37] Westermann asserts that all modern technological capabilities pale in comparison to man's calling to steward the earth. He also suggests that man may be failing in this calling in view of the number of animal species that have become extinct.[38] Modern interpreters would be wise to consider what kind of rule humans are currently engaging in—that of a benevolent sovereign or a brutal despot.

Through the incarnation, Christ provided the ideal model of kingship. It is thus suitable that verses 4–6 are often associated with Christ, who himself quoted from the psalm.[39] The christological significance was quite foreign to the original context, but when viewed through the lens of Christ 'it is a natural development for the thought of the Psalm'.[40] All the power that Jesus provided for his followers is described here in Psalm 8.[41]

Although man rules over every living thing, God's sovereignty remains central. The creatures described in verses 7–8 evoke the categories of creation. The inventory of created beings functions as praise of the creative power of Yahweh. Thus, the psalm re-

34 Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 215.

35 Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 258–59, asserts that the crowning was considered the climax and most important moment in an enthronement ceremony. See also Dahood, *Psalms 1: 1–50*, 50–51; Ps 89:11–12.

36 Craigie, *Psalms*, 105–6.

37 Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 264.

38 Briggs, *Psalms*, 64; Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 264; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:155.

39 Ps 8:2 in Mt 21:15–16; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:156.

40 Craigie, *Psalms*, 110.

41 Walker, *The Modern Message of the Psalms*, 39.

turns to precisely where it began, with the power of God.

IV. Psalm 104

(This psalm is not reproduced here because of its greater length.)

Like Psalm 8, Psalm 104 is bracketed by an inclusio. The phrase, 'bless the Lord', provides an immediate indication of the psalm's purpose, which is praise. More specifically, it declares God's greatness through a biological and ecological lens. Fred Gottlieb asserts; 'The poet's beautiful description of the valleys, mountains, and streams illustrates the Divine harmony throughout nature.'[42]

A subsidiary purpose of the psalm is to express the hope that those far from God will take note of his greatness and turn to him. Contemplating the beauty of creation prompts man to glorify the creator and enter into deeper fellowship with him. The psalm provides a panoramic view of the heavens, the earth, the water, and the inhabitants of creation as all join together in praise of the creator.[43]

An echo of the seven days of creation can be identified as the psalm progresses. The opening verses introduce light, while the closing verses provide an allusion to the divine Sabbath. However, creation is not presented in the orderly manner of Genesis 1–2. Rather, the psalm co-mingles all of finished creation.[44]

Of the three psalms analysed in this article, Psalm 104 is the most ecocentric, regarding humans as one among the many creatures cared for by God. The world is a shared home for a vast array of life forms, each of which has a divinely established place. In Psalm 104, humans are part of creation, not above it.[45]

Verses 1–9 survey the first two days of creation: the division of light from dark and the separation of the firmament from the water.[46] Present participles are utilized throughout, possibly to imply that what began at creation continues as God sustains the world. Numerous spatial terms are also present, emphasizing God's omnipresence throughout creation.[47]

Verses 5–11 may evoke the ANE idea of creation via divine defeat of chaos.[48] In the ANE, waters were the embodiment of chaos, and verse 6 implies that primordial waters fled from God's voice. The post-flood narrative may also be in view. In verse 9, God re-

42 Fred Gottlieb, 'The Creation Theme in Genesis 1, Psalm 104 and Job 38–42', *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 44 (2016): 32.

43 Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 3:156; Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 248.

44 Gottlieb, 'The Creation Theme', 29; Limburg, 'Down-to-Earth Theology', 340; Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 247; White, *A Christian Handbook*, 157; William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 141.

45 Richard Bauckham, 'Stewardship and Relationship', in *The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action*, ed. R. J. Berry (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 99–106.

46 Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 3:128. On the other hand, Leslie Allen, *Psalms 101–150,* WBC 21 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 26, argues that the light is not a reference to creation, but an aspect of God's self-manifestation.

47 In (*bə*), between (*bên*), over (*'l*), among (*mbên*).

48 Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 3:130–31; Dahood, *Psalms III: 101–150*, 36; Gottlieb, 'The Creation Theme', 32; Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 26.

strains the waters, just as he promised in his covenant with Noah.

Further, God's promise to preserve creation was made not just with Noah, but with all life on earth (Gen 8:21–22; 9:8–17). In Psalm 104, the waters have been not only subdued but turned into life-giving sustenance. Yet underlying the joyous refrain is the implication that the watery chaos could return if God withdrew his hand.

Verses 10–18 move to the third day of creation, during which God provides suitable habitats for living creatures. The world's present-day functioning is described as the Psalmist moves beyond Genesis 1 to his own time. Such functionality is portrayed as a harmonious co-existence between all elements of creation.

The verses further imply that God's provision of nourishment for man and animals goes together.[49] Nevertheless, the idea of God's provision is accompanied by the possibility of famine and drought. Just as the removal of God's hand could re-introduce chaos, so also the removal of his provision could result in deprivation and death.

Man's enjoyment of nature is depicted in verses 14–15. The bountiful earth contrasts with the cursed ground of Genesis 3:17–18. The anti-parallel continues in Psalm 104:23, where labour is portrayed as a natural part of God's established order rather than a punishment for sin. The Psalmist implies that the earth is productive when man works in accordance with God's order.

The psalm may even be portraying something of a utopian state, wherein the presence of God is fully present in creation. The Lord doesn't just give humans enough to live, but provides wine to add joy to life. He also provides oil to add fragrance and beauty, as well as to enhance the 'savouriness and nutritiveness' of food.[50]

The comments about oil and wine and the description of the cedars of Lebanon imply that creation should be enjoyed in its own right, apart from simple questions of provision. The great trees were a valuable resource for building projects in the ancient world. However, the trees are praised not for their usefulness to humans, 'but for their majestic stature and their hospitality: the cedars are literally for the birds!'[51]

In verse 19, the Psalmist progresses to the fourth day of creation. After the previous discussion of living space, the rhythm of time is now in focus. The earth shares in its creator's quality of reliability.[52] The sun and moon demarcate chronological rhythms, but nothing more. Samuel Terrien asserts that the portrayal of the sun is in stark contrast to ANE solar worship. According to the Psalmist's perspective, the sun plays the role 'of an obedient slave who knows exactly the moment when he must get off the stage'.[53]

49 Limburg, 'Down-to-Earth Theology', 342; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 3:131–32; Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 249–50; White, *A Christian Handbook*, 158; Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 132–37.

50 Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 3:132; cf. Limburg, 'Down-to-Earth Theology', 342.

51 White, *A Christian Handbook*, 146.

52 Wright, 'The World in the Bible', 210.

53 Samuel L. Terrien, 'Creation, Cultus, and Faith in the Psalter', *Theological Education* 2 (1966): 116–28.

All created things work in accordance with their design and in accordance with each other. Beasts seek their provision by night, and man works during the day. In contrast to the anthropocentrism of Psalm 8, Psalm 104 portrays the animal kingdom as sustained by God. Lions seek their food directly from God, while man works for his own provision.

In verses 24–30, the Psalmist moves to the fifth and sixth days of Genesis 1, in which God created living beings. The Lord is praised as a custodian of the order established from the beginning. Even death is portrayed as part of the natural cycle, not as something evil. Thus, the rhythm of life and death is added to the rhythm of the luminaries. Both are a part of creation.

The Psalmist also pauses to marvel at the Lord and his works. Through wisdom, creation was established, and through wisdom God continues to sustain creation. Wisdom, as a divine attribute, is also an attribute of the earth insofar as creation reflects God.[54] Thus, through the innate wisdom present in nature, man can see something of God.

In verse 25, the waters of chaos contribute to creation rather than threatening it.[55] The sea contains swarms of creatures as well as a playful Leviathan. Then as now, the Leviathan had the reputation of a fearful sea monster,[56] associated with combat and destruction rather than play. However, in Psalm 104 the fearsome beast frolics playfully in the sea as one among many creatures. It is depicted as a created being, not a mythical monster.[57] God does not struggle with the representative of chaos but enjoys its play and possibly even plays with it.[58] The imposing Leviathan seems to serve no purpose aside from providing joy to his creator. Even the chiasm of verses 24–25 evokes the playfulness of the sea with the rocking back and forth from 'here' to 'there'.

The contrast between the Leviathan below the water and the ships above is striking. The vulnerability of man is on display as he ventures into the realm of the great monster. Yet God has subdued the threat of chaos, and no danger is present.[59]

In verses 29–30, the breath of life in animals continues to challenge an anthropocentric worldview. Theodore Hiebert contends that in glossing *rûḥ* as 'spirit' interpreters have created a false dichotomy 'between spirit and matter, between body and soul, between human and nonhuman'.[60] The

54 Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 155–56; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 3:134; Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 250.

55 Gottlieb, 'The Creation Theme', 33.

56 See Ps 74:12–15; Is 27:1; Job 41.

57 Allen, in *Psalms 101–150*, 27, postulates that the creature might be a whale.

58 Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 149; Limburg, 'Down-to-Earth Theology', 343.

59 Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 71.

60 Theodore Hiebert's position verges upon pantheism. He writes; 'In fact, [*rûḥ*] not only signifies that humans and the rest of nature are inseparable; it also claims that the atmosphere and respiration are really aspects of God's own being and therefore sacred. It dissolves the sharp distinction between creator and creation that Western theologians have so staunchly defended.' Although his theology is extreme, he correctly identifies a modern dichotomy between matter and spirit that the OT does not promote; Hiebert, 'Air, the First Sacred Thing: The Conception of *rûḥ* in the Hebrew Scriptures', in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter

concept of *rûḥ* in the Hebrew Bible indicates that the authors of the Scriptures held a deep appreciation for the interconnectedness of all life and the environment upon which it depends. Numerous biblical passages, most notably the creation account, equate God's breath with creaturely life.[61] Life is both initiated and continued by God's breath. Psalm 104:29 describes the inverse: the withdrawal of God's breath results in death.[62]

The Psalmist reaches day seven of creation with a meditation on the divine Sabbath in verses 31–35. The phrase, 'Let the Lord rejoice in his works', should probably be read in parallel with the conclusion of the creation account, in which the Lord rested and looked upon his creation with pleasure (Gen 1:31; 2:1–3).[63] Continuing the utopian impression, creation is sustained by God's joy in the created order. Such theology seemingly stands in contrast to the covenant of Genesis 8–9, in which the continuation of creation rests upon the restraint of God's anger (Gen 8:21; 9:11, 15).

Verses 32–35 take on a sombre tone as the destructive power of God is on display. Yahweh's ability to casually touch a smoking mountain (i.e. a volcano) is an image of his imperviability.[64] The verses may also portray a theophany, wherein God's presence is so powerful that a physical manifestation occurs. The darker side of God's power has already been alluded to in the flaming fire of verse 4 and the thunderous voice of verse 7. Such undercurrents remind hearers that Yahweh is not a God to be trifled with. His fearsome side is simply one aspect of his continuing involvement in the world. As Psalm 29 demonstrates, even destructive events are not beyond his control.

While the overall tone of the psalm has been joyous, in the final verses the Psalmist acknowledges the reality of sin and wickedness in the world. Limburg explains that the mention of sinners 'is an indication that the Psalmist's theology is down-to-earth, revelling and rejoicing in God's good gifts but also aware of the pain and hurt that people, even God's people, must endure'.[65] As the Psalmist hopes that God himself will take pleasure in creation, he concomitantly wishes that those who take pleasure in wickedness will perish. Sinners are contrary to God's purposes for his good creation. Bauckham points out that human sin is the greatest distinction between humankind and its environment. The real dangers in creation are not imaginary chaos monsters, but monstrous humans.[66]

V. Conclusion

Each of these three psalms offers a different perspective on the relationship between God, man and nature. Psalm

Trudinger, SBLSS 46 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 9–20.

61 Gen 2:4; cf. Zech 12:1; Is 42:5; Job 12:10; 33:4; Ezek 37.

62 Cf. Ecc 12:7.

63 Grogan, *Psalms*, 175; John Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 3:194.

64 Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*, 218; Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, 249–51.

65 Limburg, 'Down-to-Earth Theology', 344.

66 Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 70; Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation*, 145; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 3:136.

29 provides the most theocentric viewpoint, depicting God's power through the medium of a violent thunderstorm. God is explicitly described as king over the flood and king forever.[67]

Because Yahweh is king, he has power over all nature and that which it contains. The power of God inspires reverence and helps creation understand her proper place in relation to the creator. Both man and nature are insignificant before Yahweh's might. Nonetheless, God's presence is available for his people. Those who submit to God are granted both strength and peace.

Psalm 8 is the most anthropocentric of the three. The Psalmist queries, 'Who is man?' and finds his answer in nature. In the light of the majesty of creation, man is as weak as an infant before God. Unexpectedly, then, man also finds that he has been appointed king over creation, serving as God's regent. Unlike Psalm 29, where only God is described as king, in Psalm 8 man is the ruler of creation. The bestowal of such an undeserved role should thus inspire humans toward greater reverence for the creator and for the purpose granted to them.

Although Psalm 104 is primarily theocentric, ecological issues emerge more clearly than in the other two psalms. The Psalmist describes the glory and beauty of God's creation with great wonder, but the natural world is never divinized or made equal to the creator. Instead, creation, when fully submitted to God's created purpose, flourishes like the Garden of Eden. At the opposite end of the spectrum, sin and wickedness are contrary to God's created order.

Based on the ecosapiential theology of Psalms, the underlying cause of environmental degradation is man's failure to submit to God's sovereignty. Instead of the prideful sin portrayed in Genesis 3, Psalm 104 describes a world where man and nature harmoniously co-exist.

Whereas Psalm 8 identifies man as king, Psalm 104 describes the kind of king that man should be. The psalm reminds man that his own existence has more in common with plant and animal life than with God. Man is a part of the natural world, whether he acknowledges his place or not. In the New Testament, Christ himself provided an ideal model for man's 'kingship' in the incarnation. Ruling in God's image, man should care humbly for the natural world as an integral part of creation.

Psalm 104 also reminds hearers that ruling over the earth is not just a vocation of functionality, but also one of joy and beauty. Unfortunately, as Brown points out, 'We are destroying precisely that which the Psalmist celebrates and commends to God's enjoyment: habitats and their diverse inhabitants.'[68] Moreover, destruction of the natural world is also harmful to humanity. Given the evidence that we can draw closer to God through experiencing the wonders of creation, is the increasing destruction of the natural world also increasing the rift between God and man?

God's sovereignty over creation is the primary ecosapiential message

67 Yahweh is not explicitly called king over the flood, but the line's parallelism implies this.

68 Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation,* 159.

conveyed in the selected psalms. Each one alludes to God's creative activity and emphasizes his continuing activity in the natural world. God is seen as delighting in creation, even the elements that man perceives as fearful.

To form an accurate portrait of man's place in creation, the dominion model of Psalm 8 must be balanced with the integration model of Psalm 104. Brown aptly summarizes: 'God's delight in creation requires reciprocal engagement on the part of the creature.'[69] Man should assume his rightful task of ruling over creation, but with full submission to God. Viewing creation through the eyes of God—recognizing its beauty and wonder—should inspire man to be the kind of ruler he was created to be.

69 Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation,* 159.