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## Man and Creation: Perspectives from the Psalms

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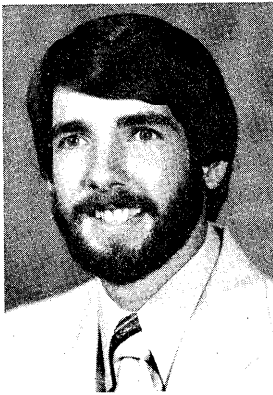
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# Man and Creation

## Perspectives from the Psalms

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Within their role as the hymns used in the worship activities of the temple, the Psalms spoke to many situations and circumstances in the lives of the Jewish people. The Psalms have been categorized by various commentators into a variety of schemes and arrangements, based on author, poetic style, subject matter, usage, and supposed time of composition. In this article, I hope to direct my attention to the several Psalms which have been included in the group known as the Psalms of Nature (8, 19, 29, 65, and 104) and to discuss some questions about these Psalms in the light of current situations. The questions which are of special interest to me are: 1) How do

these Psalms characterize nature? 2) What is the role of man within the framework of creation? and 3) How should we respond to nature in faith and in action?

In order to understand the psalmists' view of nature it is appropriate to first explore their relationship to nature. As a nation, the Jewish people were primarily peasants and farmers, and consequently they spent a great deal of their time directly involved with the land. Because agricultural tasks were the predominant daily activities, every person was close to the earth. Each individual was vividly aware of the earth and the influences of weather on the growth of plants and animals.

In his book, *Reflections on the Psalms*, C. S. Lewis describes this appreciation for nature.

The Psalmists, who are writing lyrics, not romances, naturally give us little landscape. What they do give us, far more sensuously and delightedly than anything I have seen in the Greek, is the very feel of the weather—weather seen with a real countryman's eyes, enjoyed almost as a vegetable might be supposed to enjoy it.<sup>1</sup>

Lewis then refers us to verses 9 through 13 of Psalm 65.

You care for the land and water  
it; you enrich it abundantly.  
The streams of God are filled with  
water to provide the people with  
grain, for so you have ordained it.  
You drench its furrows and level  
its ridges;  
you soften it with showers and  
bless its crops.  
You crown the year with your  
bounty, and your carts overflow  
with abundance.  
The grasslands of the desert  
overflow; the hills are clothed  
with gladness.  
The meadows are covered with  
flocks and the valleys are  
mantled with grain; they shout  
for joy and sing.

In addition to this appreciation and awareness, the psalmists demonstrate an intimate familiarity with natural phenomena. The psalmists make frequent use of metaphors based on natural examples. In Psalm 1, the faithful man is compared to the strong tree which is planted by a stream and is productive with fruit at harvest time.

The wicked man, however, is worth no more than the chaff which is useless after harvest and is blown away by the wind. Psalms 10 and 17 describe the wicked man also; in these instances, the wicked man is likened to a lion waiting under cover to ambush his victims.

The familiar verses of Psalm 23 utilize the picture of the sheep and the shepherd. The references to the green pastures and the quiet waters continue these images in an appropriate natural setting which shows David's understanding of the behavior and activity of sheep. Because sheep are rather timid creatures, they will approach only quiet waters and will quickly shy away from any water which is moving or turbulent.

One of the most well-known examples of these references to nature is found in Psalm 19, which begins

The heavens declare the glory of  
God; the skies proclaim the  
work of his hands

and continues

In the heavens he has pitched a  
tent for the sun, which is like a  
bridegroom coming forth from  
his pavilion, like a champion  
rejoicing to run his course.

It rises at one end of the heavens  
and makes its circuit to the  
other; nothing is hidden from  
its heat.

The Psalmist here has chosen another example from nature, this time to teach his reader a lesson about God. By likening God's work to the sun which provides the necessary energy, warmth, and light for the activities of the day, the Psalmist describes God's providence in terms easily understood by even the simplest farmer.

Underlying this delight and appreciation in nature is a concept which sets the Psalms apart from any other ancient literature and so-called "nature poetry" and makes the Psalms unique. The psalmists believed in one God, maker of heaven and earth. Nature and God were distinct: the One had made the other, the One ruled and the other obeyed.

This very idea of creation, as found in the Old Testament, was radically different from pagan religions and the mythology of the ancient world. C.S. Lewis continues:

We take it for granted. Indeed I suspect that many people assume that some clear doctrine of creation underlies all religions: that in Paganism the gods, or one of the gods, usually created the world; even that religions normally begin by answering the questions "Who made the world?" In reality, creation, in any unambiguous sense, seems to be a surprisingly rare doctrine; and when stories about it occur in Paganism they are often religiously unimportant, not in the least central to the religions in which we find them. They are on the fringe where religion tails off into what was perhaps felt, even at the time, to be more like fairy-tale.<sup>2</sup>

The idea that nature is the created work of God has further implications for the psalmists. God's role is portrayed as sustainer and provider, as well as creator.

In his *Exposition of the Psalms*, H.C. Leupold commends extensively on the development of the doctrine of Yahweh as the creator of nature as it is found in the Psalms:

The writers of the Sacred Scripture with one accord regard the Lord as operative in all things great and small that transpire in the broad realm of what we call nature. Perhaps nowhere does this thought find clearer expression than in Psalm 65:9f where even the watering of the earth, the settling of the ridges and their softening with rain are attributed to the direct action of God. In this respect the view that the psalms hold of nature is all of one piece. The marvel of God's work is that it covers even areas such as these and is vast and comprehensive beyond even our boldest thoughts. The psalms abound in this approach to the realm of nature.<sup>3</sup>

In Psalm 104, verses 14 and 15 give another example of this providing care of God:

He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate--bringing forth food from the earth:  
wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart.

The provision of grass for the cattle is necessary to sustain their life and activity. To the Jewish farmer, the cattle provided not only meat and milk, but also traction power, fertilizer, fuel, and transportation. The care of livestock was an important task for which the psalmist gratefully acknowledges God's involvement.

Because the majority of agricultural activity was based on plant cultivation, the food that was brought "forth from the earth" was crucial for a

man's survival. It is interesting to note that the three items mentioned in verse 15 are the commodities which were the most nearly essential to daily life. Wine was important as a beverage to quench a man's thirst in the lands where good drinking water was not easily obtainable. The oil had several uses besides the evident role in cooking; it was utilized to make perfumed lotions, to combat skin dryness, to fuel lamps, and as medicine.<sup>4</sup> The role of bread as a daily source of nutrition and the energy necessary to carry on normal activities is obvious. In these verses, the psalmist openly gives God the credit for providing these three commodities, wine, oil, and grain, which were the most common agricultural products of early Palestine and essential for every man's daily activities.

The second topic which is addressed by the Psalms of Nature is the role of man, created by God as an element of creation, and the proper interaction of man with nature. Psalm 8 is often identified as one example of the Psalmist's answer to the questions about man and creation.

O Lord, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name in  
all the earth!

You have set your glory  
above the heavens.  
From the lips of children and infants  
you have ordained praise  
because of your enemies, to  
silence the foe and the avenger.

When I consider your heavens,  
the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars,  
which you have set in place,  
what is man that you are mindful  
of him, the son of man that  
you care for him?

You made him a little lower than  
the heavenly beings and  
crowned him with glory and  
honor.

You made him ruler over the  
works of your hands; you put  
everything under his feet;  
all flocks and herds,  
and the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the air,  
and the fish of the sea,  
all that swim the paths of the  
seas.

O Lord, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name in  
all the earth!

J.J. Stewart Perowne comments:

This eighth psalm describes the impressions produced on the heart of David as he gazed upon the heavens by night. In such a country as Palestine, in that clear atmosphere, "the moon and the stars" would appear with a splendour and a brilliancy of which we can scarcely conceive; and as he fixes his eyes upon them, awed and solemnized and yet attracted and inspired by the spectacle, he breaks forth into admiring acknowledgement of that God, who, as the God of Israel, has set His glory so conspicuously in the heavens, that it is seen of all eyes and confessed even by the lisping tongues of children. They praise Him, and their scarcely articulate homage is a rebuke to the wicked men who disregard or resist Him.

But as the Poet gazes on into the liquid depths of that starry sky

there comes upon him with overwhelming force the sense of his own insignificance. In sight of all that vastness, before all that evidence of creative power, how insignificant is man! "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" is the natural utterance of the heart—What is man, man in his frailty, his littleness, his sin? What in the sight of Him, who made those heavens and planted in them those glittering orbs? This is the first feeling, but it is immediately swallowed up in another—the consciousness of man's true greatness, in nature all but Divine, of the seed-royal of the Second Adam, of highest lineage and dignity, crowned and sceptered as a king; "Thou hast put all things under his feet." This is the principal thought, not man's littleness, but his greatness. This subject is boldly but briefly handled, and then the Psalm is brought to a fitting close with the same ascription of praise with which it opened.<sup>5</sup>

In the perspective of Psalm 8, man is suddenly set apart from the rest of nature. Although his existence was part of the original activity of creation, man is suddenly placed in a unique position. Man is the object of God's love, and that, even more than the God-given qualities of self-awareness, thought, and moral responsibility, sets man apart from all the rest of the creation.<sup>6</sup>

Because man is set apart from the rest of creation, his responses to creation and its God should also be unique. The basic understanding of the psalmists, that nature as we know it is the result of the creation activity of God, helps us to develop an appropriate response to nature in both faith and action.

Our faith response to God is aided by the psalmist's descriptions of God the Creator and his creative activity in nature. The psalmists view nature and natural phenomena as manifestations of God and symbols of his being rather than as entirely independent events or incidental settings for his activity.

The Psalms describe to the reader a picture of nature which is full of examples showing the presence of God as well as the created energies which serve Him.

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Perowne continues:

Nature is never regarded, whether in her aspect of terror or of grace, whether in her tumult or her repose, as an end in herself. The sense of God's presence of which the Psalmist is so profoundly conscious in his own spiritual life is that which gives its glory and its meaning to the natural world. There is a vivid realization of that presence as of a presence which fills the world, and from which there is no escape; there is a closeness to God, as of One who holds and

compasses us about (Ps. 124), in the minds of the inspired minstrels of Israel, which, if it is characteristic of the Semitic races at large, is certainly in an emphatic degree characteristic of the Hebrews. The feeling lends its colouring to their poetry. Nature is full of God; Nature is the theatre of His glory. All admiration of Nature in a rightly tuned heart is a confession of that glory. To such a heart there can be no praise of Nature apart from the praise of God.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps Psalm 29 is one of the best examples of this type of psalm-writing. This Psalm provides a magnificent and dramatic account of a thunderstorm. As the thunderstorm moves across the landscape, the Psalmist depicts the peals of the thunder, the flash of the lightning, and the forces of the rain and the wind in verses 3 through 9:

The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.

The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic.

The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox.

The voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning.

The voice of the Lord shakes the desert; the Lord shakes the Desert of Kadesh.

The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. And in his temple all cry, "Glory!"

Although the Psalmist draws his imagery from examples of natural phenomena, the focus is on the voice of the Lord. The Psalmist does not describe the storm out of his sheer delight in atmospheric disturbance; his purpose is to portray an image of God which would convey to his readers a sense of the power and majesty of God.

Another result of viewing nature as God's created work is that the psalmist sees nature not merely as simple fact, but as an achievement. This is perhaps the reason for the delight in nature which was discussed earlier. Psalm 136 compares the creation of the world to the deliverance of Israel from Egypt; both were great achievements and vic-

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tories which showed the power and majesty of God. The psalmist also views these achievements in creation as direct reflections of the character of the Creator. Psalm 33:4-9 is an example of this:

For the word of the Lord is right and true; he is faithful in all he does.

The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.

By the word of the Lord were the

heavens made, their starry  
hosts by the breath of his  
mouth.

He gathers the waters of the sea  
into jars; he puts the deep into  
storehouses.

Let all the earth fear the Lord;  
let all the people of the world  
revere him.

For he spoke, and it came to be;  
he commanded, and it stood  
firm.

The Psalmist echoes these thoughts in  
Psalm 65, verses 6 and 7, as he ad-  
dresses a God

Who formed the mountains by  
your power, having armed your  
self with strength,  
Who stilled the roaring of the  
seas....

It is evident that the psalmists  
perceived the created work of  
God as the best available  
representation of God. The use  
of the descriptive terms which  
are presented as examples from  
nature would accomplish the  
dual purpose of developing an  
image of the Creator God and  
his attributes as well as  
providing this image in terms  
easily understood by the com-  
mon people of the Jewish  
nation.

Psalm 148:6 declares that everything  
created is firmly fixed in place by “a  
decree that will never pass away.”

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evident that the psalmists perceived the  
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and his attributes as well as providing  
this image in terms easily understood  
by the common people of the Jewish  
nation.

There is one final characteristic of  
the psalmists' view of nature and it is  
probably the most important facet of  
the understanding that nature is the  
creative work of God. This idea is best  
explained by C.S. Lewis:

The Jews, like nearly all the an-  
cients, were agricultural and ap-  
proached Nature with a gar-  
dener's and a farmer's interest,  
concerned with rain, with grass  
“for the service of man”, wine to  
cheer man up and olive-oil to  
make his face shine—to make it  
look, as Homer says somewhere,  
like a peeled onion (104:14, 15).  
But we find them led beyond  
this. Their gusto, or even  
gratitude, embraces things that  
are no use to man. In the great  
Psalm devoted to Nature, from  
which I have earlier quoted (104),  
we have not only the useful cat-  
tle, the cheering vine, and the  
nourishing corn. We have  
springs where the wild asses  
quench their thirst (11), fir trees  
for the storks (17), hill country for  
the wild goats and the “conies”  
(perhaps marmots, 18), finally  
even the lions (21); even with a  
glance far out to sea, where no  
Jew willingly went, the great  
whales playing, enjoying them-  
selves (36).

Of course this appreciation of,  
almost this sympathy with,  
creatures useless or hurtful or



wholly irrelevant to man, is not our modern “kindness to animals”. That is a virtue easily practised by those who have never, tired and hungry, had to work with animals for a bare living, and who inhabit a country where all dangerous wild beasts have been exterminated. The Jewish feeling, however, is vivid, fresh, and impartial. In Norse stories a pestilent creature such as a dragon tends to be conceived as the enemy not only of men but of gods. In classical stories, more disquietingly, it tends to be sent by a god for the destruction of men whom he has a grudge against. The Psalmist’s clear objective view—noting the lions and the whales side by side with men and men’s cattle—is unusual. And I think it is certainly reached through the idea of God as Creator and sustainer of all. In Psalm 104:21, the point about the lions is that they, like us, “wait upon” God at feeding time (27). It is the same in 147:9, though the raven was an unclean bird to Jews, God “feedeth the young ravens that call upon him.” The thought which gives these creatures a place in the Psalmist’s gusto for nature is surely obvious. They are our fellow-dependents; we all, lions, storks, ravens, whales—live, as our fathers said, “at God’s charges”, and the mention of all equally redounds to His praise.<sup>8</sup>

If we pause to regard nature around us and the treatment of the environment by men, it soon becomes apparent that we have lost the psalmists’ attitude toward nature and creation. The current en-

vironmental crises—chemical pollution, soil erosion, and acres vanishing from agricultural production and moving into urban and industrial uses—all point an accusing finger at our current land-use policies. The questions of soil conservation and land stewardship to maintain a non-renewable resource have been shrugged off in deference to the idea of land as a commodity which can be exploited for the maximum economic return to the current title-holder. Perhaps we have been inundated by our economic system and the dream that “more and bigger is better”; but we are not irrevocably committed to continuing in that tradition.

The psalmists, above all else, attempt to teach us one thing about nature; it is the created work of God—for us to enjoy and for us to learn about God himself and about our role as members in creation. We must be careful to pay attention to these lessons from the Psalms; and, in the context of the attitudes and knowledge which we gain, we should approach nature once again—not as owners, but as stewards—in delight, awe, and appreciation for the created work of God which surrounds us.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc, 1958), p.77.

<sup>2</sup>Lewis, p. 78.

<sup>3</sup>H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959), pp. 23-24.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Alden, *Psalms, Volume 3, Songs of Discipleship* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), p. 15.

<sup>5</sup>J.J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, in Zondervan Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p. 150.

<sup>6</sup>E.M. Blaiklock, *Commentary on the Psalms-I. Psalms for Living* (Philadelphia: A.J. Holman Co., 1977), p. 39.

<sup>7</sup>Perowne, p. 149.

<sup>8</sup>Lewis, pp. 83-85.