

THE CREATION THEME IN GENESIS 1, PSALM 104 AND JOB 38-42

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While the entire Bible is replete with references to Creation, three sources are especially noteworthy for their more detailed description: Genesis 1, Psalm 104, and Job 38-42. Each account serves a different purpose and uses a different style and language. However, they share in a depiction of God as the Creator and Sustainer of all life. In addition, each text maintains a universal character in that there is no mention of the Jewish people, their Torah, or their covenant with God.

PURPOSE OF THE TEXT

The account in Genesis 1 is the basis of the Creation story, declaring God to be the Creator and source of all life. The Creation, as recounted by the poet in Psalm 104, is a joyous paean to nature and its Creator. In the Book of Job, however, the Lord's display of the wonders of Creation is presented in order to enable Job to come to terms with his intense suffering by realizing that the ways of God are beyond human understanding.

DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE AND STYLE

Each of the three texts we will describe has its own special style and language in keeping with its purpose. The story in Genesis is told in sublime prose, lofty and majestic, the name of God appearing more than thirty times in Chapter 1 alone. Its presentation is schematic and methodical, and the centrality of the Creator in the creation process is manifest throughout.

Psalm 104 and Job, on the other hand, are written in a poetic style. Biblical poetry, in contrast to the later Hebrew poetry of *Selihot* and *Kinot*, is not composed in rhyme. Its hallmark is parallelism, marked by pairs, sometimes triplets, of phrases, in which the second phrase repeats or modifies the first phrase in different words.¹ One of many examples is Psalm 104:3, *Who makes the clouds His chariots, Who walks upon the wings of the wind*. By its very nature, this type of poetry requires the use of many synonyms.

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An additional feature of the poetry encountered in both Psalm 104 and Job is graphic imagery, examples of which will appear below. While no account of Creation can begin to convey a complete understanding of how God's world was created, both Job and Psalms provide imagery and metaphors to which the human mind can relate.

Additionally, whereas the Genesis narrative is written in the past tense, describing what once occurred, much of Psalm 104 and Job is set in the present tense, emphasizing the ongoing nature of the creative process.

DESCRIBING CREATION

GENESIS 1

The first chapter of Genesis constitutes the most basic source of the Creation story, answering the fundamental question as to how the world and all living things originated. The narrative takes the form of an orderly, chronological description of each day's creation, told almost exclusively in the past tense and suggesting that Creation was a once only occurrence at the beginning of time. In contrast to the Creation texts in Psalms and Job, Genesis only offers a limited description of how life will continue to be maintained on a daily basis and how the earth will bring forth food for all living things (Gen. 1:29-30). It ends with the statement that *God finished the work that He had been doing* (Gen. 2: 2).

Genesis presents us with a multiplicity of verbs describing the creation process. The first of these, *bara* (Gen. 1:1), was characterized by the thirteenth-century Bible commentator Nahmanides as denoting *yesh me-ayin* – creation *ex nihilo*. This initial process brought forth an amorphous mass from which all subsequent creation evolved. A second verb, *asah* ("made"), as in *God made* [va-ya'as] *the firmament* (Gen. 1:7), implies the formation of something from material already in existence. A third, *yatzar* ("form"), has a similar connotation. In the case of man, all three verbs are employed: *Let us make* [na'aseh] *man in our image* (Gen. 1:26); *And God created* [va-yivra] *man in His image* (Gen. 1:27); and *the Lord God formed* [va-yitzer] *man from the dust of the earth* (Gen. 2:7). Another verb, *amar*, from which the term *ma'amar* ("Divine utterance") derives, repeatedly occurs (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 14, 20, etc.) in the phrase *God said* [va-yomer Elohim], prompting the Mishnah

(*Avot* 5:1) to note that the world was created by means of "ten pronouncements."

An important theme of Creation, as depicted in Genesis, is *havdalah*, Division and Separation. Indeed, verbal forms such as *le-havdil* recur in the first chapter, denoting the establishment of harmony and order among all things created. They also imply the holding in check of potentially destructive elements, especially in the separation of water from land, as discussed below.

The crowning event on Day 6 is the creation of man "in the image of God," with the mandate to rule over all the animals. This superiority of man and his ability to control and conquer is not apparent in the other texts, where man is but an integral part in the overall pattern of nature.

The concluding event in the Genesis 1 narrative is the declaration that God was satisfied with His work, He *found it very good* (Gen. 1:31), followed by His sanctification of the Sabbath, the (seventh) day on which He rested. No direct mention of the Sabbath can be found in Psalm 104 or Job.

PSALM 104

Although there are frequent allusions to Creation in the Book of Psalms, it is one specific hymn (Ps. 104) that has been designated *the* Creation psalm in both Jewish and secular literature.² *Barekhi Nafshi*, as this psalm is known from its opening words, is a joyous song of praise to nature and its Creator. It is a virtual catalogue of everything God created, encompassing all the beauty and wonders of heaven and earth. The words *Barekhi nafshi – Bless the Lord, O my soul* – at the beginning and the end of the psalm serve as a kind of parenthetical framework, and their first-person expression integrates the poet into the text.

While the poem does not refer to the creation of mankind or any being other than Leviathan (104:26), the Creator-creature relationship is unmistakable, especially where the continued existence of life forms is shown to depend on God's action (104:29). Whereas Genesis tells of the Lord breathing life into man's nostrils, enabling him to become a living soul (Gen 2:7), Psalm 104 depicts this as a continuing process, the Lord's withdrawal of His breath resulting in death: *Take away their breath, they perish and turn again into dust* (104:29). Yet death may also bring renewal: *Send back Your breath, they are created . . .* (104:30). Thus the Creator of the world is also its Sustainer.³

The events of Creation are recalled poetically, in a free and exuberant style, their order reflecting man's perception of things as he goes about his normal activities, rather than the day-by-day sequence found in Genesis. Much of the language used is in the present tense, to emphasize that Creation is an ongoing process. God continues to manage His world in all its breadth and in its minutest details. This is reflected in the words *You renew the face of the earth* (104:30), which are paraphrased in the Morning service as "Who in His goodness continually renews the work of Creation, day after day."

Psalms 104 describes the first day of creation metaphorically, God cloaking Himself with light, as with a garment (104:2). In portraying the division of the waters on Day 2 of Creation (Gen. 1:6), the psalmist evokes the image of a building erected on a solid foundation: *Who lays the beams of His upper chambers in the waters* (104:3).

The formation of dry land, described in Genesis with the words *Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area* (Gen. 1:9), has its parallel in the more allegorical phrase *At Your rebuke they fled* (Ps. 104:7). The waters covering the face of the earth are described in biblical literature as rebellious and haughty, and in literature of the ancient Near East as the embodiment of Chaos. Thus, God's setting of boundaries to the waters by means of the sands of the seashore is interpreted as His triumph over Chaos.⁴ Note the corresponding verses in Psalm 104:9, *You set a bound which they should not pass*, and in Job 38:11, *You shall come so far and no farther*. The implication is that Chaos would return if God's perpetual activity as Creator were suspended. Once again, we find in Psalm 104 the idea of God as the constant Sustainer as well as the Creator. Our psalm further suggests that the threatening waters have not been eliminated, but have rather been turned into springs that enable the wild asses and other beasts to slake their thirst. Verse 12 manifests the joyous nature of these springs, for *The birds of the sky dwell beside them and sing among the foliage*. The waters of the primeval flood have been appointed their fixed places: from the celestial waters comes the rain, from the terrestrial waters flow the springs. The poet's beautiful description of the valleys, mountains, and streams illustrates the Divine harmony throughout nature.

The growth of vegetation on Day 3 (Gen. 1:11) is expressed in Psalm 104:14 as *Who causes the grass to sprout*. Among the things that the earth

yields is bread, that indispensable food which *sustains the heart of man*, as well as oil and wine for his enjoyment (104:15). This contrasts with the Genesis narrative, where man's quest for sustenance is seen as a painful process: *By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat* (Gen. 3:19). Note also that in Psalm 104:23 labor is viewed as a natural aspect of human activity rather than a necessary evil resulting from man's sin.

Regarding the creation of the "great luminaries" (sun and moon), Genesis 1:14 explains that they function *to separate day from night* and to *serve as signs for the set times – the days and the years*. Here, the Psalmist (104:19-23) points to the order and harmony built into Creation, since nighttime is for the animals, whereas daytime, when animals sleep, is for man to pursue his quest for food.

The emergence of sea creatures is described in Genesis 1:20 as taking place in *the waters*, whereas in Psalm 104:25 it is *the sea, vast and wide*, where living things without number can swarm. This gives the impression that primordial, chaotic waters, the *tehom* of Genesis 1:2, have now become the site of further creation. The divisions stressed in Genesis between chaos and order are presented in Psalms as forming part of a harmonious creation once they have been set in their appropriate boundaries. Even the fearsome Leviathan is described as God's plaything (104: 26).

The constant refrain in Genesis 1, *And the Lord saw that it was good*, is expressed in this psalm with the more poetic and effusive words, *May the Lord rejoice in His works!* (104:31).

JOB

A graphic account of Creation constitutes the bulk of the last four chapters of the Book of Job. Job remonstrates with God, challenging Him to explain, as if in a court of law, what transgressions should have merited his severe punishment. God rejects the arena of a law court, choosing instead to demonstrate to Job the wonders of Creation

The narrative reaches its climax in Job 38:1, as the Lord appears to Job *out of the whirlwind*. In the course of four Divine speeches, the longest in the Bible, God exhibits before Job the majestic events of Creation and challenges him to even begin to understand His world. Job is thereby made aware of his

true stature and forced to realize that it is not his place to question God's rectitude or wisdom.

In order to better understand the portrayal of Creation in chapters 38 to 42, we must first examine chapter 3, in which Job gives vent to his intense suffering in the most pitiful terms. The description of his lament serves as a basis for the later chapters of the book. Having refused his wife's advice to blaspheme God (Job 2:9-10; the euphemistic term *bless* appears instead), he curses the day of his birth, fervently wishing that he had never been conceived. Job yearns for a thorough overturning of Creation, saying, for example, *Let there be darkness* (3:4), as if to negate the very first bidding of the Creator, *Let there be light*.⁵ With an exquisite touch of imagery the author expresses this call for darkness as *May it not see the glimmerings of the dawn* (3:9), comparing the first light of day to the eyelids of a person just awakening. In his profound agony, Job seems to regard himself as the center of Creation. The Lord's speeches in chapters 38 and 39 will force him to realize that God, not he, is the true center of Creation. Wishing for an end to his life, Job speaks longingly of Sheol, that netherworld of oblivion where the mighty and the lowly together find some tranquillity (3:13-19). The Lord will tell Job (38:17) that he has no real concept of Sheol, saying, *Have the gates of death been revealed to you?*

With God's appearance *out of the whirlwind*, to unfold before Job the vast panorama of Creation, we encounter the book's poetry at its most sublime. By means of some thirty rhetorical questions, the Lord challenges Job to try to comprehend the exclusive realm of the Divine. His initial question summarizes all that follow: *Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?* (38:4). Far from being able to replicate these mighty acts, Job cannot even begin to comprehend them. The phrase *be-yosdi aretz* ("when I laid the foundations of the earth") recalls one in Psalm 104:8. Could it be that certain phrases in Job refer deliberately and ironically to the joyous portrayal of Creation in Psalm 104? All of the Lord's questions deal with acts beyond the realm of human comprehension, and to each of them He demands an answer. With biting sarcasm, He says: *Surely you know, for you were born then, and the number of your days is many!* (38:21).

Chapter 38 focuses on the creation and maintenance of the inanimate world, the breadth and depth of the earth, the sea, the dawn. Contrary to Job's

belief, the Creator, after completing His work, did not leave the management of His world to the laws of nature or to happenstance. The Lord's speeches impress on Job His unceasing care for the world in its entirety, as well as His intimate involvement in the lives of all His creatures. With God's rhetorical question as to whether Job *ever commanded the day to break* (38:12), the author clearly points to Creation as an ongoing process of renewal, a theme we noted in Psalm 104.

That psalm uses the imagery and metaphors of construction in its portrayal of Creation, and so does God's account in the Book of Job. Here, the imagery suggests the planning of an architect: taking measurements, stretching lines, and laying cornerstones (38:5-6). Elsewhere, we encounter the poetic but seemingly incongruous phrase, *He suspended the earth over emptiness* (26:7).

In addition, the author uses another type of imagery – that of human birth – in depicting the creation of the world, as when the sea *broke forth and issued out of the womb* (38:8). In a figure of speech recalling Psalm 104:6, *You covered it with the deep, as with a garment*, Job 38:9 reads: *When I made the cloud its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling-band*. This imagery, likening Creation to birth, sharply contrasts with Job's wish to die and for Creation to revert to darkness.

The joyful song of nature in praise of God, so prominent in Psalm 104, is also found here, as in the phrase *When the morning stars sang [be-ran] together* (38:7). Note that the word *ran* is God's direct refutation of Job's wish to end all happiness: *Let no joyful sound [renanah] be heard in it* (Job 3:7).

Continuing His discourse in chapters 39 and 40, God shows how Creation is revealed in the animal kingdom, not only to demonstrate His providence but as a challenge: can Job explain the ways and secrets of the animal kingdom? These secrets are known only to God! Job is thus forced to realize that God's providence extends to all creatures, and that His involvement in the governing of the world is a continual process.

Following more than 30 chapters concerned with the theodicy problem (Why do the righteous suffer and the evil prosper?), both Job and the reader might well expect that the Lord's revelation to Job will provide an answer to that great mystery. This does not occur. Yet Job's experience of being taken, as it were, behind the scenes of God's Creation enables him to become recon-

ciled to his suffering and to find peace of mind in the conviction that God's ways are far beyond the limits of human comprehension. Ultimately, Job's encounter with Creation leads him to exclaim, *I had heard You with my ears, but now I see You with my eyes!* (42:5). Finally contrite, he declares *nihamti*, "I repent," which can also mean "I have been comforted."

CONCLUSION

Three biblical texts describing Creation, as seen in Genesis 1, Psalm 104 and Job 38-42, have been investigated and contrasted. In the Genesis narrative we read of God's labors in bringing the world into being, and of His satisfaction with these accomplishments. In Psalm 104, the writer is very much part of the narrative when he describes Creation and the natural world. Contemplating the splendors of Creation prompts him to glorify the Creator. Similarly, Job's viewing of Creation leads him to appreciate God's magnitude. Here it is God Himself who shows Job the wonders of His universe. Whereas the Genesis 1 narrative focuses on order and the separation of various opposing elements, Psalm 104 places greater emphasis on the joy and harmony of the created world, as well as on God's role as the Sustainer of everything He created. These themes are also found in the Book of Job, where the emphasis is on man's inability to comprehend God's ways. While differing markedly in style, language, and purpose, each text is universal in its presentation, each glorifying God as the One and only Creator of all being.

NOTES

1. Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra – Sefer Tehillim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990) pp. 28-33.
2. W. A. Lategan, *The Theological Dialectic of Creation and Death in Hebrew Bible Traditions* (doctoral thesis, University of Groningen, 2009), section 2.5.3.
3. Lategan, *ibid.*, section 2.5.2.2
4. Michael Carasik, *The Bible's Many Voices* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2014) pp. 316-319. This is graphically depicted in Psalm 74:13-15.
5. A remarkably similar account of the undoing of Creation and the return of the earth to nothingness is found in Jeremiah 4:23-26. The prophet also curses the day of his birth in language virtually identical to that found in the Book of Job (Jer. 20:14-15).