# The Creation Theme in Genesis 1 and Psalm 104

Quite naturally, most readers (and indeed non-readers**)** of the Bible take Genesis 1—2 as embodying *the* Biblical attitude to creation, whereas in fact these two chapters (for all their distinctiveness from each other) embody but one aspect of the biblica1 picture. This may readily be seen from a cursory look at the creation theme as it appears in Job, Psalms, and Isaiah 40—55. By comparing Genesis 1 with Psalm 104, I hope to bring out the distinctivenessof both, and to see more clearly what they have in common.

## Their Purpose

Most obviously, Genesis 1 is addressed manward, Psalm 104 Godward . The oneis didactic, the other hymnic. The one seeks to arouse faith, the other to express worship.

Genesis 1 stands at 'the beginning’—of the Bible, of the Old Testament, of the Pentateuch, of the P narrative. The creation account forms the introduction to these; it needs to be seen in the light of them, and they in the light of it. Creation, von Rad has tirelessly affirmed, mustbe seen as the prolegomenon to redemption history, which is the Bible's central concern, 'substantiatingand emphasizing the power ofYahweh as the Lord of History (Weiser). Thus Genesis 1 sets a stage as wide as the universe for the history to be unfolded**,** though it is a history to become more and more particular. It asserts the sovereignty of God over the whole world, and thus provides a basis for that God’s working his will out for his chosen people and for the rest of the nations, on whom he also makes demands (cf. Amos 1--2 and 9:7-8).

Setting the creation story at the beginning of the redemption history involves warning Israel off from various false views of creation; Genesis 1 has a polemic intent. It opposes mythological views of creation by making creation an event within time, or at least at the beginning of time, within a historical scheme. And thus 'creation ... has once for all ceased to be myth (von Rad). Specifically, it opposes the dualism of mythology, asserting the creative sovereignty of God before mentioning the formless and void matter on which he set to work (cf. Childs’s treatment of Gen1:1-2 in *Myth and Reality in the OT*). Again, perhaps one may see implicit dismissal of the cult of sun and moon and stars, and of the unpleasant Babyloniansuggestion that man was created only to do the gods’ chores for them. God does not seek rest through man but shares rest with man.

This mentioning of God's rest at the end of creation leads us to a further purpose behind Genesis1, the etiological. As the Noah story explains the Israelite attitude to blood, and the Abraham story the Israelite practice of circumcision, the creation story explains the Old Testament emphasis on the weekly Sabbath. God's people are but following hie example, sharing his rest.

We may however regard Genesis 1 as etiological in a no re profound sense: indeed as providing the ultimate etiology, the answer to the question ‘Where did the world come from?’ It seems strange that Mowinckel can say that ‘Whether the Israelites before or in the age of Moses looked upon Yahweh as the God of creation , we do not know’; and even stranger that other scholars have doubted whether Israel ever thought of asking the ultimate etiological question until centuries later This *a priori* likelihood is made well nigh certain by the fact that all its neighbors had creation stories and made their chief god the creator (as is accurately reflected in Melchizedek's blessing, Gen 14:19-20). But further, von Rad acutely deduces from the OT's prohibition on images a fundamental and uniquely distinctive tenet of OT faith, that the conception of Yahweh as not one of the sustaining forces within the world, or the sum total of them, but as their creator, is as old as the Decalogue. There seems therefore no reason to doubt that part of the purpose of Genesis 1 is exactly what the ordinary reader always takes it to be—to give an answer to the question, 'Where did the world come from?’ This may indeed suggest some connection of Genesis 1 with wisdom circles.

The origin and purpose of Psalm 104 is perhaps simpler. It is clearly written to express the feelings of a man who is thrilled with the created world, and with the God he sees behind it. If there was such a thing as the 'New Year Festival’, then it will have been the kind of psalm that was used then. If Egyptian psalmody was known in Israel, then the Hymn to Aten may have been known to the author. But surely these verses with their authentic feeling express someone's genuine reaction to the world as he saw it for himself, reflected upon 'with an affectionate intimacy' (Weiser). He has no theological teaching to labor over, no axe to grind-only adoration to express. He starts not from questions people may be asking, but from answers he has intuitively seen. He declares not what God has to say about the world, but what the world has to say about God.

This interest in creation as an independent theme in OT thought is often said to be of late and foreign origin in Israel. Such an assertion needs qualifying.

(1) Although it is true that creation is not the central concern of the OT, neither is it true that creation is subordinate to God's action in history. Both of these are subordinate to the theme of 'What is God doing now? And what is he going to do?' Either creation or past history may be adduced in relation to this.

(2) While the OT does talk about creation no less than about redemption, this seems only congruous with a situation in which redemption became necessary and was provided. It is what distinguishes Israel from the nations, who have only creation to talk about. But to speak of creation as secondary in Israel's faith is dangerous, because it may be felt to be superfluous—which it is certainly not. (All that has been said under this point is true also of the NT.)

(3) It is true that normally Israel's worship and ethics are grounded in redemption, while those of the nations are grounded in creation (again this is true of the NT).What is distinctive of our psalm is the application of creation to *Israel’s* worship (for a parallel in the sphere of ethics, cf. Prov 14:31). Before we categorize this psalm as outside mainstream Yahwism, however (not that the faith of the OT is too narrow to embrace it if we should do that), we ought to take note of that the fact that the author consistently refers to 'my God' and to Yahweh . Does this not suggest that it is as a member of Yahweh’s own chosen people that he looks at creation, and that it is the redeemer of Israel whom he sees behind it? And surely this was the attitude of whoever linked this psalm with the one that precedes it in the Psalter, so that in the two of them 'History and Nature render their concurrent testimony’ (Kirkpatrick).

(4) A final reservation regarding the suggestion that the attitude to creation expressed in Psalm 104 came very late to Israel's faith stems from the simple fact that we are talking about a psalm; for as von Rad points out, hymnic statements, unlike what is theologically didactic, presuppose the reader's knowledge of and agreement with what is receiving liturgical expression. Surely this means that Psalm 104 cannot be embodying a doctrine and attitude novel to Israel.

Indeed (if we may draw together some threads at this point**)** Psalm 104 and Genesis 1 seem to have this in common, that they give expression to the belief as old as Yahwism itself that the God of Israel is the creator of all that exists; therefore, worship him (Ps 104), trust him and obey him (Gen 1) .

## Their Teaching

It will be convenient to look first at the nature, and then at the result, of God’s creative activity.

Creation, according to Genesis 1 was a historical event—rather, aseries of events. The writer's desire to relate it to redemption history makes him picture it as an entirely past matter, initiated and finished at the beginning of time. This phrase, 'in the beginning, is probably itself intended to relate creation to redemption history (cf. Isa 44:6 and Köhler's description ofcreation as an eschatological event). Again a further reason for picturing creation as a series of acts begun and ended is the desire to link man’s rest at the end of his week's work with God's.

In Psalm 104, in contrast, only verses 7-9 seem to refer to creation as past history, and the stress is on the created world as the writer sees it now, upheld and maintained by the God who is glorified by it. Without the balance of the history God’s activity that it leads into, Genesis 1 might seem deistic; Psalm 104 has within itself the balance of God's original creation and the world 1ying ever open to God and within his grasp. Both share a dynamic view of God's relationship with the world—it is as misleading to speak of the creation as a self-existent cosmos as it is to speak of history as the product ofimpersonal causes and effects. There is no such thing as natural selection or natural law—only God's original and continuing creation.

In line with their stress on past and present activity is the emphasis in Genesis 1 on the transcendence and in Psalm 104 on the immanence of God. In Genesis 1, all God has to do is speak, and worlds come into existence; and by picturing it thus, the writer sets off the creation sharply from the creator. There is complete discontinuity between the two. The creator is the undisputed master and possessor of the creation. In this picture there if no place for resistance towards the creator on the part of any of his materials, nor place for any of the creatures robbing the creator of any ofhis worship.

Psalm 104 stresses the immanence of God—each aspect of the created world reflects some aspect of the creator’s greatness honor, majesty, wisdom, glory. There is never any doubt, however, that the psalmist worships not nature but the God behind nature, on whom nature depends and without whom it dissolves.

It is instructive to compare both Genesis 1 and Psalm 104 with the Aten hymn. Aten seems to be identified with one of the elements within creation, precisely one which Israel regarded as but part of the work of the God who is independent of creation though active, involved, and revealed in it. And Aten, though the greatest God, is not supreme over all, for he nightly leaves men at the mercy of darkness; while Yahweh's extends not only to darkness (Ps 104:19-21) but even to death (verse 29).

Von Rad sees a problem in this doctrine of creation with its universalistic tendency because it must be in tension with the OT’s doctrine of history which tends to particularism. But in fact creation too is particularistic in that God works in providence for his people in their everyday experience of the world, while history is universalistic in that God is working out a plan in history that embraces all men.

We turn now to the picture of the created world given us by Genesis 1 and Psalm 104. There are several points of contrast:

(1) Genesis 1 is really closer to the wisdom outlook than Psalm 104 in its technical interest in the 'how' of creation. It offers much more of a long cool look at the creative process and its end result than the psalm, which is more interested in the manifold, unsystematic glory of it a11.

(2) Genesis 1 stresses the purposefulness of creation reaching its climax in man. In Psalm 104 man has a place within the whole, but the rest of the creation is seen much more as an end in itself, or rather as providing glory for God and not just an environment for man.

(3) Perhaps P is austere, the psalmist an extrovert, but while both expect man to work, only the latter expects him to enjoy himself (verse 15)!

(4) The perfection of God’s creation is explicit in Genesis 1, implicit in Psalm 104. The former goes on to explain the spoiling of the world in a later chapter; the latter acknowledges the incongruity of human wickedness in this world and prays for it to be dealt with. Indeed, verse 35 looks like the psalm’s climax (one might compare those of Ps 139 and the Song of Deborah), even if it is a gloss.

## Their Style and Language

It is sometimes said that Genesis 1 is poetic, not least by people who are concerned to defend its accuracy. By the side of Psalm 104, however, it is revealed as positively matter-of-fact and down-to-earth. Imaginative in one sense it may be—that is, clearly the writer has no eye-witness testimony to rely on, so he has to rely on his own ideas; but in line with his intention of providing a historical prologue to the redemption history, he writes what he regards as cold, sober facts, catalogued according to a chronistic scheme.

In contrast with this, Psalm 104 reflects its conception not in the study but in the open air. It is the creation of an artist, not a historian. It is highly figurative and poetic, full of vivid and specific detail, described as seen.

A particularly interesting, though difficult, contrast is the passages’ respective use of mythological language. I have suggested above, following Childs, that if Genesis 1:1-2 reflects mythological ideas it is in order to oppose them, to set Yahwistic belief over against them. The writer has a conscious relationship with the myths, which are for him, still a live issue. If this is the case, then a study of the myths is very relevant to understanding Genesis 1:1-2; that it is the case is supported by the fact that the latter verse with its mythological flavor stands in such isolation from the rest of the chapter, which is utterly unmythological, factual, and straightforward.

In contrast, the mythologica1 language of Psalm 104, in such a poetic, figurative piece seems rather highly allusive, even unconscious. It takes its natural place alongside other figurative language and is no more genuinely mythologica1 than Milton's later use of the same biblica1 ideas. It would be rather wooden to read Tiamat into verse 7, the chaos monster into verse 26. The difference between these two passages shows how the Bible's use of all kinds of symbolic language must be treated case by case on its merits if we are to understand it as the writers intended.