

PSALM 104: GOD'S CREATION AND ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

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Summary: Psalm 104 teaches us how to have that positive attitude towards everything created and material. Throughout the history of the Church, many times has humanity fallen into temptation of treating everything material and bodily as negative and neglecting it. Today, in times of great environmental disasters, we should re-read again and again, very carefully, what the psalmist has to say. We just need to be, for what purpose we were created, priests of nature.

Key words: Psalm 104, Creation, Ecology, Ecological Crisis, Textual Analysis.

Preface

One of the most beloved and familiar of all the Psalms is, certainly, Ps. 104. This is a song about God, who is the Creator and Sustainer of all the universe and nature, which depends on His love and care to live and to survive.

Also, this is a very inspired, sensitive explanation, without any kind of sadness or discontent, but rather joyful and praise of thanksgiving.

At first glance, a noticeable similarity can be found between the creation story of Genesis and this text. Also, within this psalm one can find many allusions to various conceptions of the world which pervaded during this time among the surrounding nations (Calvin 1949: 146).

In this psalm, it is possible to see the so-called *Biblical conception* on the understanding of creation: that the world is good (Gen. 1); a precious gift; a sacred thing; which shows God's glory and majesty, and that should be preserved, embraced and carried on throughout the generations.

The whole Israelite poetic conception of creation "stands free over against nature as an object." The joy of God in His creation and the joy of all

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creatures will be perfected only if corruption and wickedness are put away (Calvin 1949: 146).

This psalm supports a very positive attitude towards nature seeing it as a whole.

The topic of this Graduate school is very much related to this psalm and also with today's ecological disasters such as floods, earthquakes, and so on. Therefore there are a lot of things about loving and preserving the creation to learn from the poem.

I) Introduction

There are many similarities between Ps. 103 and Ps. 104; both psalms begin and end with the same phrase: "Bless the lord, o my soul". However, Ps. 103 centers more on God's love and mercy, while Ps. 104 pays more attention to the creation. In spite of their differences both of these texts remind us that one cannot separate God's creation from God's redemptive and renewing activity in the world, for the world is the domain of God's redemptive love. Together Psalms 103 and 104 announce God's sovereignty.

Scholars have traditionally debated the origin and influence of Ps. 104. One of the debates is on its relation to Gen. 1, but there are no guarantees that one will find any similarities in structure with the 7-day-story of creation. Rather, this psalm illustrates sensitive reflections on the whole of God's original work.

On the other hand, there is a striking similarity between Ps. 104 and the Egyptian hymn of Amenhotep IV to Aten, the sun disc (Keck et al. 1994: 1096). While the direct influence of this Egyptian hymn on Ps. 104 is difficult to pinpoint, it is more likely that this psalm follows the familiar paradigm of cosmological ideas found in the ancient Near East, such as the Egyptian solar hymn or the Canaanite battle song that provides an account of struggle between the gods and the forces of water. In each case, all of these ideas are integrated to the faith of old Israel: Yahweh is God-Creator and that the elements of the cosmos are only objects of His work. Yahweh "made them all".

Structure:

The most conventional accepted methods of the division of this psalm are:

- 1) vv. 1–4 God and the heavens;
- 2) vv. 5–13 God and the earth (see vv. 5:13);
- 3) vv. 14–23 God and people;

4) vv. 24–30 all God's work;

5) vv. 31–35 conclusion: God's joy and human joy (Keck et al. 1994: 1097).

II) Textual Analysis

1) vv. 1–4. These verses affirm God's sovereignty, which is associated in verse 1a, "you are so great". In one metaphorical way, God's sovereignty is described through expressions, such as "honor/splendor" and "majesty", which are attributes of royalty. The reference to light, according to common biblical interpretation, is a synonym for God's presence and sovereignty, and this indicates the cosmic aspect of God's ruling (see 1. Tim. 6:16).

The description of God's activity begins with God establishing a dwelling place. The word "tent" is used in Exodus 26:2 to illustrate that God's house is not fixed. This image is only an illustration which suggests that God's "real home" goes beyond the confines of stationary structure. Just as a tent can be moved, God's dwelling place is not confined to one particular area. The tent-curtain symbolizes the heavens, which are stretched as a tent over the whole earth (Delitzsch 1955: 97). In 2. Sam. 7:6 or 1. Kings 8:27 the tent-curtain, the atmosphere of heaven is stretched like a tent over the Earth (Calvin 1949: 97).

The foundations of that house, "beams", are set on the waters. One must ask how anything could stand on water. How is it possible that clouds are chariots? On this kind of foundation, nothing can stand. A little later in vv. 3b–4. there is one possible answer. In that time, Canaanite mythology had a god named Baal who was commander of the winds, storms, clouds, rains, and all natural phenomena (Keck et al. 1994: 1097). In this verse, Baal is "dethroned"; Yahweh is declared sovereign over all of the elements, which are manifestations of God's creative activity. The worldview of this passage can be compared with the Hellenistic conception of the four eternal chaotic elements which created the whole universe.

2) vv. 5–13. The main topic of this section is that God is the Sustainer, Controller and Ruler of the waters. The symbol of water at that time had a very deep and important meaning. In that time, the Israelites were afraid of the water of seas or oceans connected with the soil. To them the sea was something unknown, unpredictable and dangerous, contrary to the Canaanite point of view, from which the sea was a god that represented chaotic power. Also, it is learned from the book of Daniel that the beast appeared from the chaotic ocean.

On the other hand, water in the form of a nature phenomenon called rain was very important. Waters flow down from the upper chambers or the

“appointed places” as springs of life to quench the thirst of any living creature. Once the waters are under control, they are no longer a threatening and chaotic force any more, but thanks to God, they become the source and sustainer of life. God ordered the chaotic waters into life by giving rivers and springs (v. 6). This is the hope of the psalmist- that waters will never cover the earth again (Keck et al. 1994: 55). “Everything is totally dependent upon God’s care” (Neufeld 1980).

3) vv. 14–23. For the first time, humankind appears in this poem. Here, the psalmist places people among other creatures, as a part of them (Benson 2001).

It is not like in the Genesis story, where humankind occupies a special place as the crown of creation and is a reflection of the image of God, in that the humankind is created and God provides bread for all creatures, including humanity. In this psalm, the human has its place in creation, and God provides food not only for people, but for all creatures. Even the plants and animals in the high mountains of Lebanon receive enough water for the sustaining (NABRE 2011). God satisfies all: birds, trees, goats, and lions.

We see that plants yield not only products for food, but also for pleasure and joy.

Creatures such as “the moon” and “the sun”, too, have their place and role in the universe. The two great heavenly bodies were widely worshiped in ancient times, but here they have been seen as the Lord’s creatures, who have been made to serve the whole creation (Keck et al. 1994: 555). God made the moon and the sun to regulate the actions of the animals and the work of human beings. These heavenly bodies designate the times: day and night, when every creature comes out for their “work“; animals to seek their food; people to work for their food. The day is designated for accomplishing tasks, and the night for rest (Benson 2001).

4) vv. 24–30. Again, these verses affirm that God is the one who orders the “chaotic waters” (vv. 25–26). These verses even affirm that the “great” sea, in all its power and mystery, is the handiwork of God. In vv. 1 God is also called “great”, but here it is made unmistakably clear who has real supremacy.

The creature “Leviathan”, is according to some Near East myths, a divine monster who lives in the sea. In Job. 41, this creature is an ancient type of crocodile or an enormous sea animal (Keck et al. 1994: 556). But here he is merely a harmless creature playing in the water.

Again, this psalm illustrates that everything depends on God. In due time, God provides food for each and every living creature. Food is a *gift*, in Exodus 16, it is referred to as “manna”. God not only gives food, but God also gives life to every creature (Genesis 1:2, 2:7.) The term “breath”, which is *ruah* in Hebrew, means the living spirit and renewing power of God.

By God's power, the chaotic waters are transformed into the living cosmos (Calvin 1949: 146). If it, the breath, is taken away, "they die and return to their dust". If God sends his spirit again, they are recreated. In addition, God's "face renews the face of the ground". The spirit of life in all creatures proceeds from God (Calvin 1949: 147).

Of course, the "breath of God" and "their breath" are not the same thing. Every identification of natures is avoided here. As in the vv. 1–4, some scholars see Him so connected with creation that God and creation are in fact synonyms; the forces of nature and God's sustainable forces are equal. This kind of pantheism is not present in Psalm 104. It is more than clear that natural forces and substances do not share the same substance with God (Benson 2001).

5) vv. 31–35. This part has a very "Doxological" character. The psalmist's wish is that God's rule will last forever. "Glory" in this passage is associated with God's rule and presence. The psalmist hopes that his praise will last forever and tries to give the whole of himself to God's praise. Our whole lives are meant to be for the praise of God. He hopes that his whole life will in some way become some kind of a reflection of God's whole work and intention for the renewal of the life of the world.

III) Intertextual Analysis

I choose here two verses which are connected with other parts and books of the Bible.

- 1) vv. 4: God is the Sustainer of natural phenomena;
- 2) vv. 14 and 27: God gives food.

1) vv. 4: "You make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers."

The sovereignty of God is depicted very clearly in this passage. He is the Master of all the universe and its powers and forces. His rule is absolute over every natural phenomenon, such as: winds, storms, seas, fires, etc. In the epistle of Paul to the Hebrews 1:7, the same picture is portrayed: "Appointing the winds his messengers and flames of fire his servants."

We have the same image in St. Gospels according to Mathew 8:24–27 and Luke 8:24–25, describing the same event with Jesus and his disciples at sea.

As in Mathew 8:24–27: "And then he stood up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm." In Luke instead of a sea there is "rough water", and the last verse, 25b, is practically identical: "And they subsided and it was calm again."

2) vv. 14 and 27: “You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth,” and “These all look to you to give them their food in due season.”

The similarities are more than obvious in the Psalms 145 and 147.

In Ps. 145:15 we read: “All look to you in hope and you feed them with the food of the season.”

In Ps. 147:7–8 we read: “He veils the sky with clouds, and provides the earth with rain, makes grass grow on the hills and plants for people to use, gives fodder to cattle and to young ravens when they cry.”

The food in form of bread and wine is basic element in human life. Throughout the Christian perspective, they are “food” for eternal life as the Holy Body of Christ.

Plants produce wine and oil, a source of “strength”, “gladness” and “shine”. Oil, from a symbolic perspective, plays an important part in sacramental life. It is the symbol of Spirit; God’s Spirit which gives gifts that we need in spiritual life and in the fight with “fallen angels”. Like in the old times, the fighter was oiled all over his body before the battle to prevent the enemy from catching him easily. Oil is also a symbol of priesthood and royalty.

In the Old testament all priests and kings were anointed by God’s servants by the hands of prophets; who possessed of that same Spirit upon them.

Of course, God does not provide food only for humans, but for all creatures. God satisfies trees – “God’s trees”. All creatures are involved in the food chain, and among them humankind, as well. Everything in nature is connected to and depends on each other. Therefore, if one part of creation is not in harmony with all the others, the whole creation will suffer.

I underlined the words “to use” – not to misuse. Man is not here, on the earth, to “dominate” (Gen. 1), in terms of exploitation and consumption of nature. He is here to protect and cultivate this same nature, to be the “gardener” of nature together with God.

Food is a gift from God, just as in Exodus 16, “manna” is the gift from Heaven.

IV) Worldviews of Creation

1) A Historical Overview

According to Greek thought, the Universe is eternal in its very nature. The elements, of which world consists are perpetual matter, changing forms and phenomena. For Plato it is just the “shadow” of the real, spiritual reality.

So therefore, everything material is not worthy and should be avoided as a negative form of existence. Gnosticism and Manichaeism developed

out of the Greek philosophical framework. For them everything material was considered evil and should be overcome by spiritual realm, which was the only true reality.

Origen, who was influenced by this worldview, saw everything material as degradation. So, natural realities, even bodies, have an explicitly negative form. Nothing of this world is worthy, nearly all is more or less dangerous.

Augustine himself was influenced by Neo-Platonism; he believed that only spiritual things such as the soul would survive in Heavenly Kingdom. There is no place for material things in Paradise, such as the body or a tree or a stone.

Protestantism, and especially the **Puritans**, made use of the first book of the Genesis' creation story to justify human domination over the natural world. The **Calvinists** did the same, and this has contributed to the contemporary view, that human beings have the right to exploit natural resources; to dominate the natural order (Quinn 1994: 83).

All of these ideas have had influence to what we today call, "Western culture".

Concerning all this historical "heritage" an ideal of Western culture, today, has become "*the pursuit of happiness*" – it is even enshrined in the US Constitution (Zizioulas 1994: 28).

The words of an American historian, Lynn White, seem to be right when she says: "It is God's will that man exploits nature for his proper ends.... Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (White 2002: 7).

Concerning the above-mentioned, the highest good in Ethics is the happiness of consuming and the fulfillment of one's bodily appetites. Everything that disturbs this pursuit is a kind of sin against human happiness.

We all begin to think that the world exists only to satisfy our every desire and wish. But "the world is not there to satisfy our desires and offer us pleasure; it is here for a higher purpose" (Zizioulas 1994: 29).

2) Judeo-biblical Conception

The creation of the world as a whole has been seen as an *event*. Suddenly, everything appears from a state of non-being unto existence, the so-called idea of *creation ex nihilo*. This implies that the world is a precious gift, which can be seen as good (Gen. 1) and worthy to survive and live in God's Kingdom. God creates the world because of love, because He wants to give existence to something that never before existed; He wants to have a relationship and dialogue with his creatures. The fact that the world is created and that he exists, also means that the same world is a product of freedom and love, and that he could not exist at all. This bears an attitude and belief

of deep thanksgiving to his Creator. The belief that every creature of God is created for communion with God is good when it is received with thanksgiving (1. Timothy 4:3–4), which leads to respect for creation out of respect for its Creator. Therefore it does not fashion an idol out of creation itself.

The person who loves the creator of a given work cannot be disrespectful towards it nor maliciously harm it, but certainly does a person not worship it while disregarding the Creator (Romans 1:21). Rather, by honoring the creation, one honors its Creator.

“Sin against nature, therefore, is serious not only because it involves disrespect towards a divine gift, but also – and mainly – because it renders the human being incapable of fulfilling his relational nature. Human individualism goes hand-in-hand with sin against nature: ecological crisis bear eloquent witness to that” (Yannaras 1991: 49).

Sin distorts this relationship. Sin includes both a willful turning away from God and the systematic destruction of God’s creation. It is a struggle to renounce my egocentric tendency to see everything as neutral objects, subject to my needs and desires. I transpose the axis of my life from my ego to my relationship with the world that is surrounding me. That’s why I am beginning to respect what surrounds me, my relationship with the world becomes then an indirect relationship with God.

Through direct contact with the creation, deriving its being from God, we partake in its sacredness (Yannaras 1991: 51).

In this way, human beings are also co-creators with God: in partnership with God we “re-create” the world. So there should be a priestly character to everyday life, offering to God his creation: “For all and on behalf of all” – as we say in every Liturgy.

V) Conclusion

Instead of summarizing the whole paper, I would propose some short thoughts:

— Every Liturgy-Eucharist of the Church contains prayers of thanksgiving to God for creation. In Greek the verb *eucharisto* – εὐχαριστώ – means to thank someone for something. **Ethos** of thanksgiving and doxology should become part of our daily lives just as in Psalm 104; “I will sing praise to my God while I have being”.

— Everything that exists is thanks to God’s love, which sustains all beings.

— Having that *ethos of thanksgiving and doxology*, we will have different usages of the world; different attitudes towards creation. We will utilize the resources of the earth in ways that are beneficial to all.

— This Psalm teaches us how to have that positive attitude towards everything created and material. Throughout the history of the Church, many times has humanity fallen into temptation of treating everything material and bodily as negative and neglecting it. Even the saints regarded this material world as something to escape out of.

— Today, in times of great environmental disasters, we should re-read again and again, very carefully, what the psalmist has to say; that He is the Lord and Master of nature; that He is the Sustainer and Giver of food and life, but eternal life as well.

— We just need to be, for what purpose we were created, *priests of nature*.

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Примљено: 22. 5. 2017.

Исправљено: 11. 7. 2017.

Одобрено: 31. 7. 2017.

ПСЛАМ 103: БОЖИЈА ТВОРЕВИНА И ЕКОЛОШКА КРИЗА

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Апстракт: Псалм 103 нас учи како да имамо исправан став према свему створеном и материјалном. Кроз историју, у Цркви су се најчешће јављали непажљиви ставови према свему што је материјално и телесно. Данас, у доба велике еколошке кризе, требало би да изнова пажљиво ишчитавамо речи псалмописца и да изражимо његову поруку. Заправо би требало да будемо оно за шта јесмо створени – свештеници творевине.

Кључне речи: Псалм 103, творевина, екологија, еколошка криза, текстуална анализа.