

The power of praise psalms to encourage awareness of ecological issues amongst worshippers

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The liturgy ought to sensitise believers anew to glorifying God as the Creator and the Recreator of the universe. The Book of Psalms may be used to great effect to sharpen the ecological awareness of believers. The topic is investigated on the basis of three creation psalms, namely Psalm 19, 104 and 148. In particular, it asks how the *praise* of the so-called creation psalms serves to alert believers not only to conserve nature in their own context, but also, together with nature, to praise God in word and deed? The fact that the ecological crisis directly concerns our earth, air and water, that is, our basic sustenance ought to lead worshippers in the worship service to serious reflection. The destruction of ecological systems has a direct effect on every other problem faced by plant, human and animal. The focus of Psalm 19 on the heavens puts air pollution, global warming and damage to the ozone layer on the agenda of every worship-service participant. In the songs of praise in Psalm 104 and 148, humans are seen as part of the artistic creation web which ought to be conserved.

Die krag van lofpsalms om bewustheid van ekologiese aangeleenthede by erediensdeelnemers aan te wakker. Die liturgie behoort opnuut 'n sensitiwiteit by gelowiges te skep om God as die Skepper én Herskepper van die heelal te verheerlik. Die psalms kan met groot vrug gebruik word om gelowiges se ekologiese bewussyn op te skerp. Die saak word aan die hand van drie skeppingspsalms ondersoek, naamlik Psalm 19, 104 en 148. Dit vra veral hoe die lof in hierdie sogenaamde skeppingspsalms daartoe bydra om gelowiges in hulle eie konteks op te skerp om nie net die natuur te bewaar nie, maar om deur die natuur God met woord en daad te verheerlik. Omdat die ekologiese krisis ons aarde, lug en water, met ander woorde ons basiese lewensmiddelle regstreeks raak, behoort aanbidders in die erediens ernstig oor hulle betrokkenheid by die ekologie te laat besin. Die verwoesting van ekologiese sisteme het 'n regstreekse uitwerking op alle ander probleme en nood wat deur plant, mens en dier ervaar word. Die klem van Psalm 19 op die hemelruim plaas lugbesoedeling, aardverwarming en die skade aan die osoonlaag op die agenda van elke deelnemer aan die erediens. In die lofliedere in Psalm 104 en 148 is die mens deel van die kunstige skeppingsweb wat bewaar behoort te word.

Introduction

Throughout his prolific academic career, Herrie van Rooy has shown a continual interest in the Book of Psalms. His particular focus on the Syrian psalms led to international recognition for his work. His exegetical involvement in the versification of the psalms in the years until 2001, deepened his love for the psalms. Therefore, this article on the praise of a few of the so-called praise psalms is dedicated to him.

It seems that praise to God by, and together with, creation seldom takes shape in narrative material. Praise is expressed in poetry – mostly exclusively associated with hymns and found mainly in the Book of Psalms and in the traditional sections of hymns in Isaiah 40–66 (Dahill 2012:7). The list of creation-related texts in psalms constitutes the core of praise to God by all the different elements and living creatures of the ecological universe. The relevant psalms celebrate the world in which we live today. In contrast to these psalms, many other spiritual songs and hymns do not praise the Lord for his creation and the beauty of life on earth; those are rather songs and music that want to carry believers away to the supra-mundane. As Witt (2012) argues:

At best, this world-denying repertoire has been a diversion. At worst, it has been a drug numbing us to the importance of God's work and our work alongside God and the rest of creation. (p. 18)

In liturgy, believers ought to be sensitised anew to glorify God, both as the Creator and Re-creator of the universe. Through liturgical acts, they should contribute to make society act more sensitively towards God's creation as Berry (2012) claims:

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We live in a community of creation within which we have special and distinctive roles, clearly expressed in Psalm 104 where its picture of an ecological creation belongs within its theocentric praise of God for his creation, a passage responded to in Psalm 148 and drawn upon by Jesus in Matthew 6:25–33. (p. 180)

The Book of Psalms could play an important role in sharpening believers' ecological awareness. McGann (2012) points out:

The Psalms, prayed liturgically, teach us that creation is already praising God, giving witness to God's bounteous care and inviting the human community into a great symbiosis of thanksgiving and praise. (p. 53)

The Gospels reveal Christ as someone who, throughout his life, used the cosmos as an example to make known the mysteries of God. His parables, which he presented liturgically, invited the audience to discover his grace in natural processes. By experiencing the limitations of an earthly human in life and in death, Jesus affirmed his bond with the cosmos by his words and deeds. McGann (2012) argues convincingly:

And he invites his followers to do likewise: to live frugally, sensitive to the needs of all in the web of life and to embrace limits so that the 'least of these' may flourish. (p. 55)

The investigation in this article focuses on the power of the psalms to increase believers' sensitivity to admiration for and conservation of creation, more specifically ecology. In particular, how can the *praise* of the so-called creation psalms serve to alert believers not only to conserve nature in their own context, but also, together with nature, to praise God in word and deed? Probably more than ten psalms may be identified as creation psalms (Warden 1993):

As the Psalms continue, praise comes increasingly to the forefront. Psalm 106 is the first to begin and end with 'Praise the Lord'. The phrase is a translation of one Hebrew word, 'Hallelujah'. Psalms 111–113 give themselves over wholly to the praises of the Almighty. (p. 102)

Firstly, a brief framework will be given of the threat to ecological systems. The influence the praise psalms may have on sensitising worshippers will then be investigated. Lastly, three psalms, namely Psalm 19, 104 and 148, will be selected from the creation psalms for the purpose of this discussion.

The threat to ecological systems and reaction to the threat

The fact that the ecological crisis directly concerns our earth, air and water, that is, our basic sustenance, ought to lead worshippers in the worship service to serious reflection. Why is this concern not addressed in its entirety in assemblies of congregations and in the personal worship of believers? The way in which we experience our bond and concern with our world, our environment, is frankly a life-and-death struggle. Every day, in various ways, we are provided with information on species threatened by extinction and the extent of the pollution of the air we are breathing and of the water we are

drinking. We hear about damage to the ozone layer which causes global heating. The disappearance of glaciers that feed large rivers or the effect of a small increase in the sea level on the low-lying rice fields of Asia, indicates that climatic changes are the most important threat to the human being of the 21st century (McGann 2012:50). The increase in global warming creates weather patterns that lead to destructive storms and flooding as well as droughts. A threatening water crisis is becoming all the more serious because of the pollution and the drainage of groundwater resources. More than one billion of the poorest people on earth do not have access to clean drinking water whilst almost one half of the world population has inadequate access to sanitation. McGann (*ibid*) paints the grim picture:

Pesticides present in foods, along with some 80,000 other synthetic chemicals that have gradually entered the food chain, are affecting an increase in human cancers and reproductive disorders and destroying populations of birds, fish, and other animals. (p. 54)

This destruction of ecological systems has a direct effect on every other problem faced by plant, human and animal. The clearest example is the massive problem of poverty and hunger in certain parts of Africa. This is partly due to the absence of acknowledging the intimate bond between human beings and the other creatures of God. If we find it difficult to perceive our individual lives as threatened, we are at least dimly aware that the lives of future generations rest in some direct ways upon decisions we make and policies we adopt (Tucker 1993:107).

When we seize more than our apportioned part of the earth by destroying the rain forests in the name of productivity, and when we treat the planet and its creatures as consumer goods and not as living beings, we commit ecological sins (Galbraith 2009:290). Edwards (2008) says:

We human beings have failed God in devastating forests, waterways, habitats and the atmosphere of our planet, but this makes it all the more important for us to build up the sense that the human community of this generation is called to an '*ecological conversion!*'. (p. 195)

Such an ecological conversion involves a new way of seeing, thinking, feeling and acting.

The danger is that the scope and complexity of the ecological crisis could be so overwhelming that it might lead to a feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness. Creation's groaning for final liberation, described by Paul in Romans 8, is intensified by what some have called ecocide: the widespread destruction of life through human greed, carelessness and unbridled consumptive practices (McGann 2012:55). The gospel of hope teaches that the world of God possesses unbelievable healing power and that change can take place within a single generation to the benefit of those who come after us. During the previous 30 years, most church groups in the world have become more conscious that steps should be initiated amongst church communities to stop the wave

of destroying the earth.¹ Unfortunately, the efforts have mostly been limited to a sermon on ecological responsibility and then only on certain occasions (Harries 2011:23). The liturgical use of Psalm 19, 104 and 148 in different ways can kindle new energy amongst church members.

The song of the heavens – Psalm 19

A unique structure

This post-exilic psalm (cf. Howell 2009:244) is unique in the Book of Psalms as it is connected to the beginning and the end of the book. The second part of the psalm (v. 8–15) reminds strongly of Psalm 1 (about the Torah), and as a creation psalm, the first part (Ps. 19:2–7) is reflected in Psalm 148 at the end of the Book of Psalms. Some of the other psalms also contain songs of praise concerning the Torah and creation, but it is only in Psalm 19 that both praises are found (Goldingay 2006:284). This is amongst others one of the reasons why this song of praise has been chosen from amongst the psalms that deal with creation.

Loader (2011) gives a clear exposition of the structure of Psalm 19:

There *are* two thought complexes, but these are organised in three sections. The first (vv. 1–6) evidently centres on nature and can be subdivided into two parts on respectively the wordless proclamation by celestial phenomena (vv. 1–4a) and the cyclical movements of the sun (vv. 4b–6). The second section (vv. 7–10) consists of nominal sentences describing different aspects of the law. The third strophe (vv. 11–14) also focuses on the law, but the relational dimension between the first person of the Torah-obeying individual and the second person of God introduces the prayer form in which God is spoken *to* as opposed to spoken *about*. So the first focal point is nature's divulging something about God and the second is the law establishing a relationship between the believer and God. (p. 2)

Although there are rhythmic and other differences between the three sections (e.g. *El* is used in the first section as God's name and *Yahweh* in the other sections), there are, nevertheless, similarities. The praise song starts with God in creation and moves through the Law of God to the pleadings of the human heart. Praise comes from two sources, the creation and the Torah. If the law of God is obeyed, the praise of nature will be heard (Loader 2011:4). This song of praise leads to a prayer (Ps 19:11–14). The cosmic order, represented by the sun (v. 1–6), is reflected in the ethical order taught by the Torah (v. 7–11). The sun is able to restore vitality, but the Law gives more; it gives life. The night imparts knowledge,

1. Over the past 30 years, all major branches of Christianity have thought about what it means to extend the saving work of Christ beyond individual human redemption. Pope John Paul II declared the great missionary St. Francis of Assisi the patron saint of ecology in 1979 and called for the laity to draw upon the power of the resurrection 'to restore to creation all its original value' (Harries 2011:22). In 1989, mainline Protestants and Orthodox churches, through the World Council of Churches, embraced the ideas of 'justice, peace, and the integrity of creation' as intrinsic to the nature of Christian witness. In 2004, evangelical leaders met at Sandy Cove, the town north-east of Maryland, and pledged to advance God's reign by making 'creation care a permanent dimension of our Christian discipleship' (Harries *ibid*:22). Recent opinion polls amongst evangelical Protestants show that earth-care is one of their top five priorities. Across many traditions, Christians in the 21st century believe that the wholeness and reconciliation desired by God include his creation (Robert 2011:123). Groups like the Episcopal Ecological Network, Presbyterians Caring for Creation and Interfaith Power and Light have worked hard to raise awareness concerning the need and reasons for preserving the natural environment (Harries *ibid*:22).

but the Law gives more; it gives wisdom to the inexperienced. Psalm 19:6c 'nothing is hidden from its heat' (King James translation [KJ21]) is thematically connected to verse 14: 'Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, my Strength and my Redeemer' (KJ21). In the same way, verse 6b 'and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof' (KJ21) is thematically connected to 13b: 'Then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent of the great transgression' (KJ21; Loader 2011:4). The Torah functions as the sun, like a conqueror defeating evil. Like the sun, the Torah exposes sin. Therefore, the poet prays that he may refrain from committing sin deliberately. The psalm ends with a dedication to God and an exclamation of belief: 'O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer' (New International Version [NIV]).

A unique song of praise of the heavens (especially the sun)

In verses 1 to 6, the focus is more on proclaimer and proclaiming than on the contents proclaimed. God is praised by the heavens, because the heavens radiate the glory of God's handiwork. Verses 3 to 4b are generally about the heavens' proclamation of the glory of God, and in verses 4c to 6, the focus is on the sun as the proclaimer (Goldingay 2006:286). In other parts of the Old Testament, *proclaiming* and *telling* are mostly associated with human proclamation. Here, the heavens with all the bodies, the sun, moon, stars and planets, are proclaiming.

In a parallel construction, the 'heavens' and 'firmament' (KJ21) or the 'heavens' and 'skies' (NIV) sing of the radiating glory of God. The second sentence in the parallelism 'and the firmament showeth his handiwork' (KJ21); 'the skies proclaim the work of his hands' (NIV) indicates in what way the proclamation takes place, namely that the elements of the heavens are doing what they were created for. The 'heavens' and 'firmament' ('skies') do not refer to an empty space, but to the beauty of the sun, moon, stars and planets. They are the artistic handiwork of God. These living heavenly bodies are bearing witness, proclaiming and telling. 'The glory which God has granted to creation as an image of his own glory is reflected back, as it were, given back to God as a confession' (Kraus 1993a:270). Because the story goes out to all peoples and tells about his greatness, wisdom and glory, God's name *El* is used here (as opposed to *Yahweh* in verses 8–15). The throne of God, and therefore his glory, is elevated above the heavens (Psalm 29:9, 10). Therefore, the heavens are a part of the creation that celebrates his glory.

Day and night are like two choirs performing in sequence without any interruption (Vos 2005:102). The concept of *pouring forth* ('pour forth' – NIV; 'babble', 'sparkle', 'tingle' are other possible translations) expresses that praise to God takes place in excited, enthusiastic proclamation. In observing the nocturnal heavens, knowledge is imparted ('display knowledge' – NIV) which means recognising the Creator in the beauty of the nocturnal heavens (Broyles 1999:108). The verbs in the first two verses indicate that the heavens

are not without feeling, but that they sing their message full of excitement. Space ('heavens') and time ('day' and 'night') share in this praise.

The surprise is that this proclamation is seemingly without words and that the voice of the heavens is inaudible. However, this line of thought is interrupted in verse 3, because in the first two verses (1 and 2) the proclamation is described by 'declare' (KJ21) or 'pour forth speech' (NIV), and in verse 4, their 'voice goes out' (NIV) over the whole earth. The words in verse 3 must be heard, but they are not entirely audible to the human ear. 'This inaudibility points to the autogenous analogy and mysterious witness of heaven and the firmament, which reaches far above man' (Vos 2005:103). The contents of the proclamation cannot be explained clinically and logically. 'At the boundaries there are enigmas and puzzles that are gaps in our knowledge' (Howell 2009:249).

The heavens are the giver of the message to the receiver, the entire earth. It crosses the earth to its corners and the beauty of the heavens is now described by the course of the sun over the whole earth. The sun appears from its mysterious hiding place like a bridegroom stepping from his bedroom, radiating with youth and especially joy. Joy and light belong together, and the rising sun brings joy. He rejoices in the far course that lies ahead of him; he is like a jubilant hero entering the race. All mythological references, such as the sun being a god, fall away as the section begins with God who provides a tent to the sun (Kraus 1993a:272). The sun is also the work of God's hands and part of the heavens which proclaim the glory of God. The sun here is the image of God's life-giving and life-sustaining strength.

The uniqueness of the praise in this psalm can be circumscribed in the following manner: 'It is not nature in general that does this proclaiming, but the heavens in particular, because of their particular capacity in their impressiveness to draw attention to God's honor' (Goldingay 2006:298). Moreover, the uniqueness of the praise emerges by means of at least two other phenomena. The first is the interplay between *see* and *hear*, *non-verbal* and *verbal* communication, as argued by Klouda (2000):

Visual communication which transmits a silent yet comprehensible message is placed in opposition to verbal communication described in terms of visual language. When the two aspects are combined, seeing and hearing comprise the counterparts of a holistic perception. (p. 182)

The first four verses (1–4b) describe visual revelation by using terminology that is usually associated with hearing whilst verses 4c to 6 are concentrating on visual phenomena only. The physical testimony of the heavens communicates an inaudible but visually perceptible message to the human being. The visual communication is universally comprehensible or 'is heard'. The visual display of the heavens is described by 'declare' and 'proclaim', and the words are heard, because a comprehensible testimony to the glory of God is given through visual observation (Klouda 2000:187).

The second unique characteristic of the praise concerns the beauty of God. On the one hand, the beauty of God cannot be comprehended apart from the beauty of the creation. On the other hand, the beauty of the creation is deduced from the beauty of God. In this regard, Loader (2011) argues:

If God's beauty is visible in that which he has created beautifully, it must mean that God is visible in nature. If nature thereby proclaims God's beauty, the latter must be a divine quality observable in nature. But this is no identification of God with nature in any pantheistic sense, which would be foreign to ancient Israelite and Jewish thought. (p. 3)

The heavens and the sun are not God, but they participate in the beauty of God.

Deductions from Psalm 19 for sensitising worship participants

The structure of the psalm, specifically the development from the radiation of the beauty in the heavens to the beauty and renewing power of the Torah and from there to the prayer of humiliation, provides guidelines for the admiration and conservation of God's creation. Obedience to and reverence for the Torah lead to admiration, respect and responsibility regarding creation. The prayer and confession in which the psalm culminates, also reflect the contents of the psalm. Obedience to the Torah and responsibility for creation can only be attained by a praying attitude.

The fact that the focus in this psalm is only on the heavens with its sun, moon, stars and planets, and not on plants, animals and human beings, leads to reflection on the pollution of the space spanning the earth. It therefore concerns air pollution, global warming, the ozone layer, et cetera. The brilliant glory of God of which the radiating sun tells and which it displays, is the point of departure here. Before serious attention is given to the practice of destroying nature, a change of heart should take place because of excitement and amazement about the heavens. In this respect, the liturgy has to fulfil an important function.

The song of the heavens celebrates God's glory which can be seen all over the world in two choirs: the choir of the day (sun) and the choir of the night (moon, starry night). The babbling, sparkling, joyful sounds are contagious and ought to create enthusiasm in worship participants when they sing the words and thus, as it were, interpret the inaudible voice of the creation. The beauty radiating from the heavens is an inaudible voice, because it transcends human understanding and humbles the believer, taking into account the humble place of the human in the brilliant creation. As God hears the moving song of praise to him, the human can liturgically participate in the praise through song and prayer.

The dominating tone of the song is characterised by the joy, the exuberant happiness with which the sun appears from its overnight abode and steps onto its course in jubilation. The observation of hearing and seeing indicates a holistic observation. The believer can observe with his or her eyes and ears of faith that the heavens are jubilant. Moreover,

he or she will sense why the heavens are proclaiming joy. This observation should not only inspire the believer to participate in praise, but also to refrain from polluting the heavens and to set to work to restore what has already been polluted. Eventually, the praise song of the heavens ought to be brought into the liturgy, verbally (using words) and even visually (using visual images), so that the worship participants can hear and see them.

The song from all corners of the creation – Psalm 104

Outline and structure

In contrast to creation or the heavens themselves celebrating the glory of God (Ps 19), God's glory, as observed in the comprehensive creation, is celebrated by a poet in Psalm 104. In his reflection on God's work, the poet regards the song as a gift to God with the purpose of bringing joy to the Lord. The poet also experiences joy in writing the song. 'Psalm 104 was composed with unabashed joy and freedom of expression, and yet it exhibits a theological sophistication scarcely matched by any other psalm' (Brown 2006:15).

The poet invites the participants in his song to see the world through a wide-angle lens in the same way that God saw 'everything' (KJ21) or 'all' (NIV) in Genesis 1:31. The psalmist cannot see everything as God did, but he presents a picture of everything seen from God's viewpoint: light, the celestial dome, water, wind, the earth, mountains, valleys, hills, wild animals, birds, plants, trees, the moon, the sun, people, the sea and animals from the sea. This list represents and illustrates 'everything' (McCann 2012:67). In Psalm 104 God is the King, the Creator as well as the Provider of life on earth. The psalm is entirely concerned with God's relationship with the world which means that the presence of God is experienced everywhere every day.

The psalm starts and ends with praise, and therefore it has a frame of praise, but in between it also presents descriptive praise. It might seem as if it is a song of an individual, but the conclusion consists of multiple praises. This structure indicates that the leader speaks individually whilst the congregation follows his lead. The progress in the psalm is not linear and logical as Miller (2000) points out:

As poetry, the psalm reflects the kind of freedom to repeat, return, and move in different directions, even if such freedom is exercised under tight controls in the mind and imagination of the poet. (p. 88)

In short, the structure of the psalm can be indicated thus (Limburg 1994:342–343; cf. Clifford 2003:147; Vos 2005:237):

- God and the heavens (v. 1–4)
- God and the earth: water (v. 5–9)
- God and the earth: water and habitat (v. 10–13)
- God and the earth: bread wine, oil and habitat (v. 14–18)
- God and the earth: sunset and sunrise (v. 19–24)
- God and the sea (v. 25–26)
- 'These all look to you to give them their food at the proper

time' (v. 27–30 – NIV)

- 'I will sing praise to my God as long as I live' (v. 33b, but also the entire v. 31–35 – NIV).

Psalm 104 relates to Psalm 103 by its praise. 'Psalm 103 reflects upon the greatness of God *vis-à-vis* his mercies and righteous judgements, whilst Psalm 104 reflects upon God's majesty as the ruler of the created order' (Swinson 2007:224; cf. Kraus 1993b:298).

Praise for the creative and providing power and glory of God

The focus first falls on the glory of God as person, and the praise flows from the admiration and respect for God. God's clothing is the light which God created first. Miller (2000) phrases it as follows:

There is something significant in seeing the first creative work of God as also characteristic of the being and nature of God. God and the world begin in light, and light is both God and God's creation. (p. 89)

Light symbolises life and salvation, the implication being that the Light (God is Light) is indescribably great and powerful. He is irradiated by royal light, and the elements of the creation such as light, the heavens, clouds, winds and fire are servants and instruments of God. God's inherent greatness and majesty are assumed in Psalm 104:1–4. Therefore, the emphasis is on the manifestation of these qualities in the creation or cosmos. We, who can for example only see the approaching clouds, are called upon to recognise the appearance of God's power in them.

From verse 5 to the end of Psalm 104, the poet celebrates the earth and the concept of the earth no less than seven times. The permanent stability of the earth bears testimony to the omnipotence of God. The creation of the earth is described in two phases. Firstly, great waters cover the earth, but the power of God's voice can cause the waters to flee. He lets his voice be heard and chaos is changed into order (Vos 2005:241). The water is moved to places where it can function in a constructive manner. God is completely in control of all the elements (Grogan 2008:174). God controls the fleeing water by placing it in a reservoir and making it available as a source to others. 'The deadly water chaos becomes a fountain of life that refreshes the animals of the field and the birds of the sky' (Kraus 1993b:300). God gives water to promote fertility. Where there are streams, there are also trees, and where there are trees, there are birds. The animals and birds add colour, sound and movement to the earth (Clifford 2003:149). In this scene, everything is moving: Water from fountains are flowing through valleys, wild animals are moving across plains to drink, birds are singing whilst they are building their nests.

God as the gardener is planting trees, and thus he intervenes in creation repeatedly. He provides food and life to animals and birds and even a habitat for wild goats and conies. In verses 14 and 15, there is a surprising turn. Limburg (1994) describes it thus:

Now, for the first time in the psalm, humans appear on the scene. The LORD gives them grain that yields bread for sustenance. One does not, however, live by bread alone! (Deut 8:3; Mt 4:4). The LORD also provides wine to add joy to life (Eccl 9:7; 10:19; Sir 40:20) and oil which contributes beauty and fragrance (Amos 6:6; Esther 2:12; Eccl 9:8). (p. 342)

In verse 19 the focus shifts from the living space that God created for animals, birds and people to the time that God created for his creatures. The moon and sun were created for specific functions, and therefore time is a gift of God – also to the human being. The lions get a suitable time for food and ask the food from God, almost as if in a prayer (Vos 2005:244). Even during the night, all life is dependent on God. In verse 24, the poet suddenly interrupts his line of thought by erupting in praise to God by means of a confession: In the fullness and sparkle of the creative work, the wisdom of God is shining. Goldingay (2008) adds to this argument:

If wisdom here has a particular connotation, perhaps it is that interwoven ecology that the psalm has persistently described. The world is a magnificent quilt in which every thread contributes to a whole, woven by a supremely skilled craft worker. (p. 191)

In addition, the sea is under God's control and bears testimony to his wisdom. The sea has lost its chaotic power, and it is now the habitat of many, the playground of the Leviathan (who is called a dangerous sea monster, see Job 3:8 and 40:20) and a surface on which ships may sail.

After the long list of God's creatures and the description of how he provides for them, verses 27–30 emphasise again that everything is dependent on God, specifically for food and life. He opens his hand and everything gratefully receives food. When God turns his face away, that is when he withdraws his presence, the life-sustaining systems of all creatures degenerate, and they die. When he sends his breath or Spirit, there is new life. He does it at the right time, because his timing is perfect.

In verses 31 to 35, the final praise follows. May the glory of the Lord be forever! It defines the place of the believer in the creation as one of praise-giving. The psalm ends on a cheerful and joyful note. The prayer of the poet is that his reflection, his praise in the poem, will be acceptable to God. The prayer of the poet is that God will find joy in his creation, as Brown (2006) indicates:

The second half of the verse (31) is highly unusual. Whereas the command to praise ('bless') God for the bounty of creation is given earlier in the psalm (v. 1), here the psalmist commends God's rejoicing in creation. Such language is rarely attributed to God, for it most often refers to *created* agency 'rejoicing' in or before the deity (Pss 9:2; 32:11; 96:11–13; 104:34). Here, however, the reverse applies: the creator rejoices in creation. (p. 16)

The involvement of God in his creation is also esthetical in nature. He may also use his omnipotence to order the new chaos caused by human beings by shaking the earth and the mountains. In his praise, the psalmist is also in contact with the real world and the reality of sin and godlessness. 'Verse

35 strikes a realistic note, recognising that sin has entered this perfect world and longing to see it banished' (Grogan 2008:175). Sins bring along pain to creation, because sinners exploit the creation by disrupting and destroying its fine harmony. Even the destruction of sinners is placed in God's hand.

The praise at the end of the psalm is a repetition of the praise at the beginning, except that the word *Hallelujah* is added now. This is the first time that this word is used for uttering praise in the Book of Psalms.

Psalm 104 is probably the most moving psalm of all the creation psalms, because, in contrast to the other creation psalms, the entire creation is celebrated here. Praise to God is heard from every corner of the universe, and nobody can resist becoming part of this choir (Vos 2005:250). In the midst of the realities of chaos, evil and destruction the poet sees the deeper and more enduring realities of the beauty, life and goodness of creation. Therefore, he cannot stop worshipping God. God himself also finds joy in the deeper realities of his work: 'God's "joy to the world" trumps even sin and death, it was for "the joy that was set before him" that Jesus endured the cross, "disregarding its shame" (Heb 12:2)' (Brown 2006:19).

Human beings are part of creation, of the earth and everything on it: domestic and wild animals, birds, trees, streams and mountains. Therefore, the song is not anthropocentric, but 'earthcentric'. Humans are seen as part of the greater whole. Yet, humans are able to exclaim 'Hallelujah!' as a climax to the praise. For this reason, this psalm is viewed as some of the greatest nature poetry of all times (Vos 2005:251). The worship-service participant can only respond to the deeds and gifts of God by daily praise to the Creator and continuous awareness of his or her dependence on the provision of God.

Deductions from Psalm 104 for sensitising worship-service participants

God is involved in creation through his creative and providing work and because he rejoices in the beauty of his creation. On the one hand, God's involvement brings about respect for God, because he is powerful to shake the earth, and on the other hand, it also creates amazement for the environment, animals, birds and the gift of water. Through liturgical celebration, worship participants may be reminded especially to point out and fight water pollution and to use water carefully themselves.

In the song of praise, the human being, as an ordinary creature, is seen as part of the artistic creation web like the rest of the creatures. Like all other creatures, humans are dependent on God, but they are set apart as those who may be destructors of the creative work because of their sins and godlessness. The entire creation sings. This includes humans who are in the privileged position to be able to sing the great hallelujah in comprehensible language.

In a surprising manner the sin against God and his handiwork is pointed out. The believer is now invited to plead with God to destroy sin and godlessness. This action should be attended to in prayers and other actions in the worship service. The extinction of certain life forms in creation causes damage and should be lamented liturgically.

The poet also celebrates God's gift of new life. Repeatedly, the worship-service participant is amazed by new life breaking out on the surface of the earth. The birth of birds, animals and humans must be celebrated liturgically. The Christian festival of Pentecost, as the festival of new life given to dead people, could be expanded liturgically to the celebration of new life in every creative work of God. It would give hope for the restoration of the ecology that God can also achieve through people.

The song that encourages the creation to praise – Psalm 148

Outline and structure

In the last few psalms of the Book of Psalms, praise fills the air. Every psalm from 146 to 150 begins and ends with 'Hallelujah, praise the Lord!' In Psalm 148, the call to praise is repeated 12 times. In the other psalms where there are calls to praise the Lord (e.g. Ps 100 and 117), the name of the group that is called upon to praise is briefly mentioned, and the focus is on the description of the divine actions that are the object of the praise. Clifford (2003) argues that:

Psalm 148, on the contrary, spends most of its time listing the invited groups. Verses 1–4 list the inhabitants of the heavenly world, and verses 7–12 list the inhabitants of the earthly world. (p. 311)

The reason for praise is only briefly mentioned in Psalm 148:5–6 and 13b by the conjunction *ki* [for] in the phrases 'for he commanded and they were created' (v. 5b) and 'for his name alone is exalted' (v. 13b). The poet uses the word *all* nine times to encourage the different elements of creation to praise God. The poet himself does not praise God (as in Psalm 104), nor does creation praise God (as in Psalm 19), but in Psalm 148 the poet calls upon creation and all creatures to bring praise to God. In this psalm, there are no clear indications for specific cult actions, but this post-exilic song was probably used for public worship (Kraus 1993b:561). The call upon creation to praise God can only be expressed in poetic language, because, just as in the image of the overarching rainbow, everything in creation is called upon to praise God. It is almost impossible to break the psalm up in different small parts, because it would detract from the whole just as it would detract from a rainbow if one would divide it into different sections. Angels, heavenly hosts, the sun, moon and stars, waters above the heavens, lightning, clouds, wind, sea animals, the depths of the ocean, mountains, hills, fruit trees, cedars, wild animals, domestic animals, kings, nations, young men and women, old people and children – all sing in one great choir.

Encouraging the heavenly and earthly choirs to praise by mouth

The first (Ps 148:1–6) of the two spheres that is called upon to glorify God is the heavens. 'In the heavens, heavenly beings ("angels", "his host") offer unceasing and perfect worship (cf. Ps 103)' (Clifford 2003:312). They are servants executing his will in the heavens and on earth. The sun, moon and stars are obedient to God. 'Sun moon and stars appear just as the impressive objects in the sky that they are' (Goldingay 2008:730). Therefore, they are called upon to praise God as the reason for the call to praise (v. 5, 6) is that God created them and gave them a special task. They exist only because of the actions of God, and only God has the power to end their existence.

Praise must not only come from the heavens. Therefore, the earth with its inhabitants is also called to praise (vv. 7–14). Lightning, hail, high winds, et cetera come from above, but they do their work on earth at the command of God, as Dominic (2009) argues:

'Mountains and all hills' and 'fruit trees and all cedars' are meant to stand for the whole earth and all its vegetation; similarly, 'beasts and all cattle' and 'creeping things' stand for wild and domestic animals, and reptiles, worms and insects respectively. (p. 183)

Eventually, the poet arrives at the call upon human beings to praise God from which a symbiosis between the praise of human beings and the rest of creation becomes clear. Special groups of people, men and women, young men and maidens, old people and children, are called upon to give praise. This list reminds of the promise of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in Joel 2:28. God assures the delicate balance in the world, because he brings everything into an intimate connection with each other. The poet puts into a bigger context of praise the call upon human beings to praise God.

In verse 13, the wake-up call for praise that glorifies and serves God alone and above all is repeated. 'The very nature of creation testifies to the majesty of the creator whose name stands over it. Praise therefore, is appropriate' (Goldingay 2008:734). The last verse of the psalm is a surprise, because it is both a contrast and a climax. 'He has raised up for his people a horn' (Ps. 148:14). The 'horn' has a military meaning. In the psalm, it refers to both rescue and protection when God raises his horn for his people. It concerns God's people: 'Only against Israel's devastation in the exile can this verse be understood, for it describes the restoration of Israel' (Clifford 2003:313). The climax of the psalm is that God's people are called by their special name in verse 14, namely 'a people near unto him' (KJ21) or 'the people close to his heart' (NIV). Although the Psalm calls upon the whole world to praise God, the intimate bond with the covenant people brings the praise into the public-worship liturgy of his people (Clifford 2003:313).

In this psalm, the heavens and earth are called upon to praise God as if they were two choirs performing an antiphony. For

this very reason, there are different indications in the psalm emphasising the poet's sensitivity to the world around him.

Fretheim (1987), taking note of every creature's capacity for praise, describes the ensuing variety thus:

Each entity has its own distinctiveness in its praising according to its intrinsic capacity and fitness, with varying degrees of complexity. But each is also part of the one world of God contributing to the whole. The model of the symphony orchestra comes to mind. Ecological considerations are immediately present, for if one member of the orchestra is incapacitated or missing altogether, the scope, complexity and intensity of the praise will be less than what it might be. Ecological sensitivity is for the sake of the praise of God and the witness it entails, indeed for God's own possibilities in the world. (p. 23)

The whole world was created liturgically so that everything should exalt God. The view in the psalm is that the world was created such that praise is an inherent part of it, not a response by human beings only. Thus, the sounds of the creation spring from the way in which God created everything. The music of the stars, the bubbling of water streams, the rhythmic wash of waves on the beach, the laughter of young people and the talk of the elderly – all of these reflect the nature with which God endowed his world and his creatures. Now, his creation is glorifying him by its very diverse nature. The patter of rain, the roar of a predator and the song of birds draw the attention to God and his artistic creation. God is involved in a relationship with his world although God is not identical to his creation. God is praised in the psalm as the Creator and King of the universe. The New Testament church as the covenant communion is called upon to praise Jesus Christ as the Head of creation (see Col. 1:15–18).

Deductions from Psalm 148 for sensitising worship-service participants

The call by human beings (the poet and, today, the congregation by means of singing, reading and listening to Psalm 148) upon the entirety of creation to praise God will wake up the worship-service participants in particular to observe, experience, protect and develop the exalting praise by creation.

The insight that there is a symbiosis between the praise by human beings and the rest of creation causes the praise by human beings to be seen in a bigger context. Insensitivity to the ecology has a negative bearing on the praise in the liturgy of the congregational assembly and the daily liturgy.

The assembly of the congregation as the covenant communion is unique in the sense that the congregation is God's people to whom he is close. Whilst the praise of the non-human creation consists of executing the purpose for which it had been created, namely the covenant people, it is a conscious and especially a public action. Public praise ought to be carried out from the congregational praise into society to exhort more people to ecological sensitivity.

In this psalm, ecological activity is directly connected to the praise by creation. 'That is, by the way in which human beings relate to ecological matters they can enhance or inhibit nature's response to God' (Fretheim 1987:29).

A few guidelines from Psalm 19, 104 and 148 for ecological sensitising

Liturgically, the necessary conditions for sensitising worship-service participants regarding the ecology ought to be spelled out in sermons and in prayers. The conditions are obedience to the Word of God and a plea for awareness of the value and the beauty of creation (Ps 19). Worship-service participants may participate in the hymn of the heavens through song and prayer, and thus proclaim the glory of God with one voice. The inaudible voice of the heavens (Ps 19) can therefore be interpreted.

Each liturgical act presents the possibility to stimulate admiration for the scope and greatness of the heavens and thus bring about a change of heart in believers. The focus on the heavens puts air pollution, global warming, damage to the ozone layer, et cetera on the agenda of every worship-service participant and of the congregation and church community as a whole (Ps 19).

The believers may perceive with their eyes and ears of faith what the heavens are proclaiming. Thus, they may put all their efforts into the work of restoring what has already been polluted. Eventually, the praise-song of the heavens ought to be introduced into the liturgy – by singing the words of praise so that the congregants may listen to the praise of the heavens, but also by displaying images that would visually proclaim the awesome beauty of creation (Ps 19).

God is involved in creation by his creative and providing work and because he rejoices in the beauty of his creation. This miracle ought to be confessed and proclaimed in the liturgy regularly (Ps 104).

In the song of praise, human beings are part of the artistic creation web just as all other creatures, but they are unique in a dual sense. On the one hand, they are the destructors of the creative work of God, and on the other hand, they are also in the privileged position that they may sing the great hallelujah in comprehensible language (Ps 104).

The sins and godlessness of the human being, which have a destructive effect on creation, ought to be brought to God in prayer and confession by the believer. The extinction of certain forms of life in the creation web causes damage and must be lamented liturgically. Through liturgical celebration, participants in worship may be reminded especially to point out and fight water pollution as well as to use water carefully themselves (Ps 104).

Also, God's gift of new life ought to be celebrated with amazement in liturgy. This may be done through prayer and song and may be developed liturgically to celebrate new life in every creative work of God (Ps 104).

Worship-service participants are called upon to praise God in all liturgical acts for his creation. The fact that the call to praise God is extended to the entire creation ought to wake up the congregation to observe the celebration of creation (Ps 148).

A wonderful symbiosis exists between the celebration of the human being and the rest of creation. Insensitivity regarding the ecology has a negative bearing on the celebration in the liturgy of the assembly of the congregation and the daily liturgy (Ps 148).

As the congregation is the covenant people of God, their praise is a conscious and especially a public action. Public praise ought to be carried out from the congregational celebration into society to encourage more people to ecological sensitivity (Ps 148).

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