

The Role of Human Beings in the Cosmic Temple: The Intersection of Worldviews in Psalms 8 and 104¹

J. Richard Middleton
Northeastern Seminary at Roberts Wesleyan College

Abstract

Among the many psalms that refer to creation, Pss 8 and 104 stand out in being entirely devoted to this theme. Whereas Ps 8 highlights the prominent, even exalted, human role in the created order, Ps 104 contextualizes humanity as but one creature among many in a complex intertwined cosmos. Nevertheless, upon closer study, it becomes evident that both psalms share elements of a common worldview, including a remarkably similar view of what constitutes being human, a conception of the world as a cosmic temple, and a rejection of the motif of creation-by-combat against primordial enemies. An exploration of the diversity-in-unity of Pss 8 and 104 yields insights into how their common theological vision may address the human vocation of the use of power in a world understood as a sacred realm over which God is enthroned, yet into which evil has intruded.

After the opening chapters of Genesis, the Psalms contain more sustained reflections on creation than perhaps any other section of Scripture.² Although various psalms allude to creation, and others focus on creation in particular stanzas, Pss 8 and 104 are devoted entirely to this theme. However, there the similarities seem to end.

1 Earlier versions of this paper were given in the Book of Psalms Section of the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting, November 2009 in New Orleans; at the Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society annual meeting, March 2011, in Richmond, Ohio; and at the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies annual meeting, May 2011, at St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB. I am grateful for the feedback I received from attendees at these meetings.

2 A close runner-up would be Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40–55), with its fascinating interplay of creation as a motif of cosmic origination and as a motif of Israel's election and redemption. For a classic study, see Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Creative Redemption in Deutero-Isaiah* (Analecta Biblica 43; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1970).

Whereas Ps 8 has humans front and center as its basic thematic focus, Ps 104 mentions humans in only a few places, contextualizing them as but one creature among many in a complex intertwined cosmos. Further, Ps 8 highlights the prominent, even exalted, human role in the created order, elevated almost to the level of divinity (little lower than God) and given dominion over animals (8:4–8 [MT 8:5–8]).³ By contrast, Ps 104 typically treats humans on par with animals, pairing them with cattle in 104:14–15, with lions in 104:21–23, and with Leviathan in 104:26.

Psalm 104 even takes language used specifically of humans elsewhere in the Bible and applies this language to all living beings, as if humans and other animals were fundamentally indistinguishable. For example, the psalm's description (in 104:29b) of God gathering up the breath (רוח) of creatures, resulting in their return to the dust (אפר), seems to assume the conceptuality (and some of the language) of humans formed from the dust of the ground and enlivened by God's breath in Gen 2:7 (though a different word for *breath* is used here; נשמה). Likewise, the statement (in 104:29a) that when God hides (סתר) his face (פנים) creatures are terrified or dismayed (the Niphal stem of בהל) seems to echo the confession in Ps 30:7 (MT 30:8) that when God hid his face, the psalmist was terrified or dismayed (identical words for *hide*, *face*, and *terrify/dismay* are used in both texts). That such language can describe the relationship of animals to their creator in Ps 104 suggests that we are moving in a very different conceptuality from Ps 8, in which humans are portrayed as more akin to God and to the heavenly realm than to animals. So, on the surface, the vision of creation, and in particular of what it means to be human, could not seem more different between Pss 8 and 104.

Yet both psalms share significant similarities. Before turning to major conceptual similarities, let us start with the more obvious. At a purely technical and stylistic level, both psalms are typically classified as hymns; yet both are atypical for this genre in that they are articulated largely as second person address to God (whereas hymns typically address the congregation and speak of God in the third person).⁴

3 The verse numbering for the Hebrew of the Masoretic Text (MT) of Ps 8 is one higher than the English, since the MT counts the psalm superscription as v. 1, whereas English translations start verse numbering after the superscription. This essay will cite Ps 8 according to its English versification (the versification of Ps 104 is the same for Hebrew and English). All translations are the author's unless otherwise indicated.

4 Whereas psalms of thanksgiving address God directly in the second person and take the form of testimony for God's past deeds, hymns tend to speak of God in the third person and describe his characteristic actions in the present tense. Psalm 117, although highly compressed, is typical of the hymnic genre; in v. 1 the psalmist calls the listener to praise ("Praise the LORD, all you nations! / Extol him, all you peoples!" NRSV), and in v. 2 the psalmist gives the reason for praise ("For great is his steadfast love toward us, / and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever." NRSV). Some hymns, like Ps 104, have only a brief call to praise (v. 1a), with the rest of the psalm constituting the reason for praise, whereas others, like Ps 8, are entirely constituted by the reason for praise. By contrast, Ps 150 consists entirely of an extended call to praise, which makes perfect sense for the final psalm in the Psalter; the reasons for praise have already been given.

Then there is the fact that both psalms are framed by a *verbatim inclusio*. In the case of Ps 8, vv. 1a and 9 are identical: “O YHWH, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.” In the case of Ps 104, the opening call to praise in v. 1, “Bless YHWH, O my soul,” is repeated at the end, in v. 35b, with the concluding addition of the communal call to praise: “Hallelujah!”—a plural imperative, meaning “praise Yah!” Granted, the LXX puts this final word as the opening of the following psalm; but assuming that it does in fact conclude Ps 104, this would be the only explicitly communal statement in Ps 104 since vv. 1 and 33–35 have the psalmist referring to himself in the first person singular. Likewise, Ps 8 takes a first person singular point of view (implicit throughout, but explicit in 8:3: “when I look at your heavens”); the only explicitly communal reference in Ps 8 is the word אֲדֹנָי (“our Lord”) in the *inclusio* (8:1a, 9).

Another similarity between the two psalms is found in the Hebrew terms used for humanity. Psalm 8 refers to humanity as בְּנֵי-אָדָם (8:4b), whereas Ps 104 simply uses אָדָם (104:14, 23); both psalms refer to humans as אֲנוּשׁ (8:4a; 104:15).

These similarities, though perhaps superficial, should at least incline us to consider whether there might not be a more substantial overlap of vision between the two psalms. I intend to explore three such sets of theological overlap between Pss 8 and 104.⁵ The substantive similarities between the two psalms involve answers they each give to three sets of fundamental worldview questions: (1) *Where are we?*—what is the nature of the created world in which humans find themselves; (2) *Who are we?*—what is the nature and function of humans in that world; and (3) the paired questions, *What’s wrong?*—what is the nature of evil—and, as a corollary, *What’s the remedy?*—how is evil to be dealt with.⁶

5 This essay is a work of theological interpretation, though this should not be taken to mean that the biblical text is made to conform to a set of preordained theological categories; rather the text’s own conceptual patterns are engaged by bringing the interpreter’s starting point into conversation with relevant literary details and historical context (to the extent this can be surmised), in order that the claims of the text might be heard in the contemporary situation. For a programmatic statement of what constitutes good theological interpretation of Scripture that is very close to my own, see William P. Brown, “Theological Interpretation: A Proposal,” in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen* (ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards; SBL Resources for Biblical Study 26; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 387–392 (full essay 387–405).

6 Brian Walsh and I first suggested these questions as foundational to all worldviews in *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1984), esp. ch. 2; we further developed them in relationship to postmodern culture in *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), esp. ch. 1. Although the present essay on Pss 8 and 104 was not written with these specific questions in mind, it soon became clear that the theological overlap between the psalms fit quite naturally under these rubrics.

The Nature of the Cosmos

First, what is the nature of the world in which humans find themselves? Both psalms are clear that this is *God's* world. Beyond explicit statements that YHWH stretched out or established the heavens (Ps 104:2; 8:3) and the earth (Ps 104:5), both psalms refer to creatures as God's works (מעשים); this term is found twice in Ps 8 (vv. 3, 7) and three times in Ps 104 (vv. 13, 24, 31). God's consequent ownership of creation is indicated by possessives (in the form of pronominal suffixes attached to nouns). Thus Ps 8 mentions "your heavens" in v. 3, and Ps 104 twice describes creatures as "your works" (104:13, 24) and once as "his works" (104:31).⁷ Psalm 104 also speaks of "the trees of YHWH" that he planted (104:16) and affirms in v. 24 that the earth is full of "your possessions" or "your creatures"—depending how we translate קנין.⁸

God's ownership of the world is also indicated by the statement at the start of Ps 8 that God's name is majestic in all the earth and that God's splendor is placed above the heavens (v. 1). Without denying the difference in focus between the two psalms, we might say that the phrase "all the earth" in Ps 8 succinctly summarizes the richly enumerated works of God in Ps 104, which are specified there as various earthly habitats, all teeming with living things.⁹ Additionally, the reference to God's splendor above the heavens (8:1) suggests that God's reputation is majestically visible throughout the cosmos. This is *God's* world and the creator's glorious presence is the divine signature writ large in the created order (perhaps as an artist signs her works).

However, more than simply asserting God's ownership of the cosmos, the two psalms envision the world as God's temple or sanctuary, consisting in the bipartite heaven and earth.¹⁰ This bipartite division is more than a trivial similarity of cosmology. Rather, both psalms envision YHWH enthroned in heaven (corresponding

7 Psalm 104 also uses עשה (the verbal root of מעשים; "works") for YHWH's activity as creator in v. 4 (God "makes" the winds his messengers), v. 19 (God "made" the sun for seasons), and v. 24 (God "made" all his works with wisdom).

8 There are also two occurrences in Ps 104 of חיתו, which looks like a possessive, but which scholars take to be an archaic construct form of חיה ("living being" or "animal"), used in poetic texts. The construct means "animal of" either the field (104:11) or the forest (104:20). John Day cites the occurrence of חיתו in Gen 1:24 as part of his argument that Gen 1 depends on Ps 104, since the Genesis reference is the sole occurrence of חיתו in a non-poetic text of the HB. See John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 35; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 52.

9 For a similar perception of Ps 8 as summarizing "in cameo-gem form the vast landscape" of Ps 104, see Robert North, "Psalm 8 as a Miniature of Psalm 104," in *The Psalms and Other Studies in the Old Testament* (ed. Jack C. Knight and Lawrence A. Sinclair; Nashotah, Wis.: Nashotah House Seminary, 1990), 2 (entire article 2–10).

10 For a discussion of cosmic temple imagery in Ps 104 and especially in Ps 8, see Mark S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 15, 16, 27, 30.

to the holy of holies of the earthly tabernacle or the Jerusalem temple), from which God rules the earth and is responsive to the needs of creatures.¹¹

This picture of the cosmos as temple, with heaven as God's throne room, is pervasive in the Bible and is found, for example, in Ps 11:4. "YHWH is in his holy temple; / YHWH's throne is in heaven. / His eyes see, his gaze examines human beings [בני אדם].” Additionally, Isa 66:1–2a combines the notion of the cosmos as temple with God's ownership of creation. “Thus says YHWH: / Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; / what is this house [that is, the temple] that you would build for me, / and where is my resting place? / All these things [that is, the cosmos] my hand has made, / and so all these things are mine, / says YHWH.”

The depiction of the world as God's temple is often accompanied by the notion of God's descent from the heavenly sanctuary to answer a supplicant's prayer (as in Ps 18:6–19). And Ps 148 aptly calls all creatures in heaven (146:1–6) and on earth (146:7–14) to render praise to their maker, as if together they constituted a host of worshipers in the cosmic sanctuary.¹²

When we turn to Ps 104 we find the explicit statement (in 104:3) that heaven is where God has constructed his abode (or “upper chambers” [עליות]), from which God waters the earth (104:13). However, not only does the creator dwell in heaven, Ps 104:3–4 envisions God clothed in the light of the sun, traveling on the clouds as a royal chariot, served by meteorological phenomena like winds and lightening, as if the heavens were a perpetual theophany of YHWH in his holy place.¹³

In Ps 8, the notion of the world as a temple is suggested initially by the statement that God's name is majestic in all the earth, which echoes the Deuteronomic motif of the temple as the place where YHWH has caused his name to dwell (Deut 12:5, 11; 14:23–24; Jer 7:11, 14). However, the temple imagery of Ps 8 is further evident in the notion of humans made almost divine (just short of אלהים), crowned with glory and splendor (כבוד ודדר), and installed as rulers over the various animal kingdoms (8:5–6). Not only does this suggest that humans are God's servants and ministers on earth, parallel to the angelic hosts serving God in heaven, but also that humanity assumes the role in the cosmos that a cult statue or image would

11 The notion of the cosmos as a temple is very common in the ancient Near East and is often found in the OT. See Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Cosmos, Temple, House: Building and Wisdom in Mesopotamia and Israel,” ch. 6 in *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel* (ed. Richard J. Clifford; Society of Biblical Literature Symposium 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2007), 67–90.

12 For a non-technical summary of the cosmos as temple, see J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), chap. 2: “Why Are We Here?”

13 This depiction of God is remarkably similar to the theophany of Ps 18:6–19, as YHWH descends from heaven to answer a supplicant's prayer for deliverance. For an analysis of this section of Psalm 18, see Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, chap. 4: “The Exodus as Paradigm of Salvation.”

have in a typical ancient Near Eastern temple—namely, as an earthly representation and mediation of divine rule and presence.¹⁴

Both psalms are also united in beginning with heaven (8:1, 3; 104:1–4) and then in shifting the focus resolutely to earth (8:4ff; 104:5ff), where the focus then remains for the rest of the psalm.

The Role of Humanity

This dominant focus on earthly reality in both psalms leads us to consider the role of humanity in the created order, since humans are clearly earth creatures. Both Pss 8 and 104 could agree with Ps 115:16 that “The heavens are the heavens of YHWH, / but the earth he has given to human beings [בני אדם].” However, Ps 104 might add: and *also* to the animals, birds, and trees!

Nevertheless, both psalms overlap in their understanding of what it means to be human in significant ways. Thus the human role and status in Ps 8, although certainly exalted, is qualified—indeed, relativized—by the liturgical *inclusio* of vv. 1a and 9, which gives priority to *God’s* glory manifest in the cosmos. Whatever honour and glory humans have, this is clearly derivative of the creator’s own majesty.

Indeed, the psalmist is amazed that humans have the status they do. What are human beings, he wonders, that God would pay attention to them and grant them such an exalted place in the world (8:4)? The high dignity humans possess in Ps 8 is not taken as a matter of course. Rather, it is attributed to YHWH’s gracious doing; it is the creator who has gifted humans with royal status and function on earth.

The fundamentally gifted nature of human life in Ps 8 coheres with the motif in Ps 104 that all creatures (humans included) exist and thrive because of God’s gracious, providential care. God waters the land (104:10–13) and provides habitat (104:12, 16–18), food (104:14–15, 21, 27–28), the diurnal cycle of night and day (104:19–23), and ultimately breath (104:29–30), to all living beings. In the case of humans, Ps 104 specifies that God’s gifts of plants (104:14) and daylight (104:23) enable them to engage in meaningful earthly work or labor (עבדה in 104:14; פעל ועבדה in 104:23).

The nature of human work constitutes another significant overlap between Pss 8 and 104. Although the human vocation in Ps 8 is portrayed in the seemingly exalted language of being crowned with glory, with concomitant rule over animals,

14 For the basis of the parallel between humanity as *imago Dei* and a cult statue in a temple, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), ch. 3. For a summary of the significance of this parallel for ethics, see Middleton, “Image of God,” in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (ed. Joel Green, Jacqueline Lapsley, Rebekah Miles, and Allen Verhey; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 394–397.

birds, and fish (8:5–6), the reality is much more mundane. This royal language refers to the human ability to domesticate animals and also possibly to hunting and fishing for food. The paradox is that these ordinary, earthly activities constitute precisely the royal-priestly service of humans in the cosmic temple.

Conversely, although Ps 104 mentions humans along with other living creatures, there are important distinctions between humans and the various creatures with which they are paired. Although the parallel between the hunting of lions and the work of humans in Ps 104:21–23 does not specify the nature of this work, the other pairings are suggestive. Thus, God gives grass to cattle and plants to humans as food in Ps 104:14; but whereas cattle simply eat the grass, humans transform the plants God gives (i.e., wheat, olives, and grapes) into bread, oil, and wine for their own sustenance and enjoyment (104:15). Human productive labor, by which we harness and even change our environment, is also evident in the ships that are paired with Leviathan in Ps 104:26. The result of human labor is the lumber, craftsmanship, and navigational skills necessary for fishing and for ocean-going commerce, something beyond the pale of the other living creatures that fill the sea.

In fact, it could be argued that the agricultural production and the other forms of technical expertise assumed in Ps 104 actually outstrip the mere governance of animals attributed to humans in Ps 8 (which, on the surface, seems to have a more highly exalted picture of humanity). Thus Ps 104 assumes (even if it does not highlight) that humans by their work have tremendous power to shape their world, a fact that does not in any way contradict the vision of an ecologically entwined creation portrayed in the psalm—just as the power and the dignity attributed to humanity does not contradict the priority given to God’s glory in both psalms.

It is noteworthy that the characteristic human activity in Ps 104 (עבדה; 104:14, 23) resonates with the human vocation in Gen 2, which involves working (עבד) the ground (Gen 2:5) or the garden (Gen 2:15). The human role in Ps 8, by contrast, resonates with Gen 1, both in its royal idiom (rule over animals) and in the cognate ideas of humans made “little less than אלהים” (Ps 8:6) and of humans created “in the image of אלהים” (Gen 1:26–27). That the differing visions of the human role in Pss 8 and 104 are not antithetical is seen in the fact that the ancient editor of Genesis did not see Gen 1 (an analogue to Ps 8) as contradictory to Gen 2 (an analogue to Ps 104); the one was placed as an introduction to the other. Indeed, Gen 1 actually combines *both* ideas of the human calling; in Gen 1:28 humans are granted the twin tasks of animal husbandry (ruling the animals) and of agriculture (subduing the earth).¹⁵

¹⁵ Theodore Hiebert is correct to note that, “In the preindustrial age of biblical Israel, it is impossible that the Priestly writer had more in mind in these concepts of dominion and subjection than the human domestication and use of animals and plants and the human struggle to make the soil

If we read the overlapping vision of the human vocation articulated in Pss 8 and 104 together with the shared assumption of these psalms that the world is a cosmic temple, a profound understanding of reality emerges. All the earth is holy ground or sacred space, intimately connected with heaven, the seat of God's throne. Indeed, the fact that God dwells in heaven is an articulation of immanence as much as transcendence, since the creator has chosen to inhabit creation.¹⁶

In this context, the ordinary, mundane, earthly work of human beings becomes, in both psalms, divine service or priestly liturgy offered to the creator in gratitude for existence itself.¹⁷ This picture demolishes medieval and modern sacred/secular distinctions often made in the Christian theological tradition.¹⁸ Just as lions, mountains, and stars praise God simply by being lions, mountains, and stars, so humans exalt their creator simply by being human, engaging in ordinary productive activities, rooted in the communal vocation of working of the ground, and thereby developing cultural patterns of life that glorify God.¹⁹

And if, as Mark Smith suggests in *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1*, God functions as the priest par excellence in this cosmic temple, utilizing divine creative power to bless creatures with life and vitality,²⁰ so humans on earth are to image their creator, using their technical skill in shaping their earthly environment in a manner that contributes to the flourishing of all creatures with which they come into contact. Indeed, if humans are the cult statue or image in the cosmic temple, their mundane endeavors on earth are meant to mediate the presence of the creator from the heavenly holy of holies (where this presence is concentrated) to the earthly realm, till the world is filled with the glory (כבוד) of God as the waters cover the sea (blending Num 14:21 with Isa 11:9 and Hab 2:14).²¹

serve its farmers." Hiebert, "Re-Imaging Nature: Shifts in Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* 50 (1996): 42 (entire article 36–46).

- 16 On this seminal point, see Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 37; also Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 26. See also John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 3: *Psalms 90–150* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 198.
- 17 See L. William Countryman, *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse, 1999), chap. 1: "The Priesthood of Humanity," for a beautiful, evocative study, utilizing sacramental language, of the fundamental priesthood that comes with being human (equivalent to *imago Dei*) and that underlies both the Christian notion of the priesthood of the believer and the derivative priesthood of the pastoral ministry.
- 18 For analysis and critique of the sacred/secular distinction, see Walsh and Middleton, *The Transforming Vision*, chs. 6 and 7.
- 19 Various parallels between humans and the non-human are found elsewhere in Scripture. Although humans are given the task to rule (רדה) the earth in Gen 1:26–28, the sun and moon are to govern (משל) day and night in Gen 1:16–18; משל is the verb for human rule over the works of God's hands in Pss 8:6. Whereas humans, like Abraham (Gen 22:1), Moses (Exod 3:4), or Isaiah (Isa 6:8), respond to God's call with "Here I am!" (הנני), the lightening bolts respond with "Here we are!" (הננו) when their creator calls them (Job 38:35).
- 20 Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1*, 4, 32.
- 21 God's intent to fill the cosmos with his glory/presence by the mediation of humanity is addressed,

One fascinating aspect of human power in Ps 104 is revealed by the fact that the psalm itself is a work of human poesis. Paradoxically, it is *humans* who can articulate the point of view in a poetic work (an example of literary עבדה) that humans are simply one among the many sorts of creatures in God's world—thus proving decisively they are *not*.²²

More than that, the psalmist (in 104:34) wants God to be pleased with his musings or meditation (שיח). Even though the term שיח (as verb or noun) can refer to the inner turmoil of lament (Pss 55:2, 17; 64:1; 77:3, 6, 12; 142:2; Job 7:11, 13; 9:27; 10:1; 21:4; 23:2), meditating on the Torah (Ps 119:15, 23, 48, 78, 97, 99), or calling to mind God's mighty deeds of salvation (Judg 5:10; Pss 105:2; 143:5; 145:5; Prov 6:22), here it refers to the psalmist's reflections about God's creative works.²³ It is precisely these reflections or musings of the psalmist that have given rise to the literary work we know as Ps 104.²⁴ This literary work is the psalmist's עבדה, which reflects, even as it articulates, God's own creative works (מעשים)—an implicit *imago Dei* motif.²⁵

Ultimately, the writer of Ps 104 wants God to rejoice in God's own works (מעשים; 104:31), motivated, no doubt, by the depiction of creation in the psalm. Thus Ps 104, which on the surface portrays humans as relatively indistinguishable from other creatures, assumes that a human work of poesis has the power to move God to rejoice in creation.²⁶ "After all, I rejoice in YHWH," the psalmist says in 104:34, again adumbrating an *imago Dei* motif.²⁷ Furthermore, this psalmist's rejoicing in YHWH has resulted in the construction of a psalm in which many of *us* rejoice.

The Status (and Removal) of Evil

There is, however, one thing that prevents God from rejoicing in God's works, namely, the presence of evil in the world. Evil in Ps 104, however, is not found in

at various junctures of the overarching biblical story, in Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, ch. 2 (creation), ch. 5 (OT prophetic expectation), and ch. 8 (the New Jerusalem).

22 This is not to deny that humans are creatures, but to affirm that even in Ps 104 there is something distinctive about the human creature.

23 On the broad range of meanings of שיח, including the above biblical references (which are just a sampling), see J. Gerald Janzen, *When Prayer Takes Place: Forays into a Biblical World* (ed. Brent A. Strawn and Patrick D. Miller; Eugene, Or.: Cascade, 2012), 70–72 (from chap. 5: "Prayer as Self Address: The Case of Hannah").

24 In Ps 8, likewise, the psalmist's musings about the place and the role of humanity in the cosmos (8:3–4) led to the creation of the written work.

25 Both עבדה and מעשה (plural מעשים) are synonyms.

26 On the psalm itself as the ground of God's rejoicing, see William P. Brown, "The Lion, the Wicked, and the Wonder of It All: Psalm 104 and the Playful God," *Journal for Preachers* 29/3 (2006): 15–16 (entire article 15–20).

27 "After all" tries to get at the emphatic sense of אַנְכִי ("as for me") which begins the line in v. 34b.

the traditional mythic notion of pre-existing forces of chaos—like the primordial deep or sea monsters—that have to be overcome in order to establish the world.

In ancient Near Eastern myth, as reflected in the Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish* and the Ugaritic Baal cycle, creation is ordered by the violent conquest of evil powers. In the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, the god Marduk (in the Assyrian version, the god Asshur) slays the ocean/dragon Tiamat and constructs the cosmos out of her dismembered corpse.²⁸ In the Baal cycle of myths (from ancient Ugarit), in order to re-establish the cosmos in its annual cycle, Baal conquers a deity known as Yam (Sea) or Nahar (River) and also Lotan (or Litan), the fleeing and twisting Serpent (cognate to Hebrew Leviathan).²⁹ In another text from Ugarit, the goddess Anat claims to have vanquished Sea/River and the Dragon/twisting Serpent.³⁰ Israelite versions of creation-by-combat show up in biblical texts such as Job 26:7–14, Ps 74:12–17, and Ps 89:5–14.³¹

The combat myth, however, is noticeably absent from Pss 8 and 104. In the first place, the waters in Ps 104 are not pre-existent forces that oppose God; rather it is *God* who initially covers the earth with the deep (104:6). Whereas Gen 1:2 simply assumes the presence of the water-covered earth (without explanation), Ps 104 goes considerably beyond this by assigning to the creator responsibility for the initial watery state of the world (a trajectory that leads to Ps 95:5, which says that God actually *made* the sea).³²

Then, after covering the earth with the deep, in Ps 104, God rebukes the waters, so they recede, thus allowing dry land to appear (similar to the third day of creation in Gen 1). Given that God is the one who first brought the waters to cover the earth, the word “rebuke” (גערה) in 104:7 (like the image of the waters fleeing)

28 Marduk's battle with Tiamat is recounted in *Enuma Elish*, Tablet 4, lines 65–122, and the construction of the cosmos out of her corpse begins in Tablet 4, line 123, and continues to Tablet 5, line 66. Not only is the world constructed out of the dead body of Tiamat in *Enuma Elish*, but humans are also created from the blood of Qingu, the slain spouse of Tiamat (*Enuma Elish*, Tablet 6, lines 1–38). For a translation of *Enuma Elish*, see Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, vol. 1 (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1993), 351–402. An exposition of *Enuma Elish*, including its significance in ancient Mesopotamia, is given in Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 160–167.

29 Baal's battle with Sea/River is recounted on Tablet 2, column 4, lines 9–30 (see the translation in *Stories from Ancient Canaan* [ed. and trans. Michael D. Coogan and Mark S. Smith; 2nd ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2012], 114–115). Baal's battle with Lotan/Litan is mentioned on Tablet 5, column 1, lines 1–5 (translation: *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, 139).

30 Anat's battle is mentioned on Tablet 3, column 3, lines 38–42 (translation: *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, 120). On the relationship of Baal's and Anat's victories, see Alberto R. W. Green, *The Storm-God in the Ancient Near East* (Biblical and Judaic Studies 8; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 183–184.

31 For the significance of creation-by-combat in these biblical texts, see Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, chap. 6: “Created in the Image of a Violent God?” A shorter version of this chapter was published, with the same title, in *Interpretation* 58 (2004): 341–355.

32 For a superb literary, contextual, theological exposition of Ps 95, see Brown, “Theological Interpretation,” 392–403.

is simply a poetic figure, suggesting thunder (the voice of God in the roar of the storm); there is no cosmic battle here.³³

However, if evil is not located in the primordial waters, neither is it found in the sea monster Leviathan, another traditional symbol for the primordial forces of chaos. Rather, Leviathan is paired with ships in Ps 104, both of which are found traveling the world's oceans (104:26). Moreover, whereas in the combat myth the deity does not create the forces of chaos (they are primordial forces opposing cosmic order), Leviathan is specifically said to be “formed” (יצר) by God, which is the same verb used for the creation of humans from the dust in Gen 2:7.³⁴ Not only is there no conflict with Leviathan suggested, God formed this beast to play or sport (שחק) in the ocean (104:26), leading to the famous formulation of Jon Levenson that here Leviathan is God's “rubber ducky.”³⁵

Evil according to Ps 104 is not even found in predatory beasts like lions; they are simply viewed as the nocturnal equivalent of humans, each engaging in their characteristic activity in the diurnal cycle (lions hunt at night and humans work during the day, according to 104:23).³⁶

Instead, the real predators in Ps 104 are the wicked; it is sinful human beings who are the true threat to the harmony of God's creation. This is why the psalmist concludes with a wish that they disappear from the earth (104:35), the only explicit

33 Although Ps 104:6 may seem to be recounting the waters covering the mountains in the great flood of Gen 7:19–20, in context it more likely refers to the initial covering of the earth with water (assumed in Gen 1:2); thus Ps 104:7–9 depicts not the receding of the waters after the flood, but (in context) the separation of land from water recounted in Gen 1:9. For a similar judgment, see Goldingay, *Psalms* 3:185.

34 This observation brings to mind YHWH's comment to Job that he made (עשה) Behemoth along with Job (Job 40:15). Like Ps 104, YHWH's speeches to Job are often misread as decentering humanity (YHWH's second speech is often also misread as presenting Behemoth and Leviathan as chaotic opponents of God). However, the fact that the creator of the universe appears in a personal theophany to one lone sufferer belies the notion of human decentering. Furthermore, since both Behemoth and Leviathan are exalted as mighty works of God in the speeches from the whirlwind, the explicit comparison of Job with Behemoth in 40:15 (and the implicit comparison of Job with Leviathan) suggests God's positive view of humanity—in stark contrast to the view of Job's friends (who consistently denigrate him). I have argued that YHWH's second speech in Job is specifically meant to uplift the sufferer; Middleton, “Does God Come to Praise Job or to Bury Him? The Function of YHWH's Second Speech from the Whirlwind in Job 40:6–41:34 [MT 41:26]” (unpublished paper, given as the Peter C. Craigie Memorial Lecture at the University of Calgary, November 1, 2005).

35 Cited in Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (rev. ed.; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 17 (attributed to one of his students). Although the final word of v. 26 (בו) can be taken to mean that God made Leviathan to play “in it” (that is, the sea), it might mean that God made Leviathan to play “with it/him” (this interpretation is evident in the NJPS). According to one Jewish tradition (*Abodah Zarah*, in the Babylonian Talmud), God plays with Leviathan for three hours each day!

36 Even the night is said to be appointed (שם) by YHWH (104:20); it is not regarded as a chaotic force antithetical to creation, but is part of the order of creation (the diurnal cycle) that serves nocturnal creatures; thus God made (עשה) the moon (104:19). Similarly, Ps 8 views the night sky positively and says that God established (בן) both moon and stars (8:3).

acknowledgement of evil in the entire psalm.³⁷ This serves to confirm the immense power humans have, belied by their depiction in this otherwise idyllic psalm. It is humans alone who have the power to impede creation's functioning (something not even Leviathan can do).³⁸

The wish for the disappearance of the wicked—literally, their being “finished” (תָּמַם) from the earth—finds its parallel in Ps 8:2, which speaks of causing the enemy to “cease” or “stop” (שָׁבַת).³⁹ In both psalms there is a realistic recognition that whatever opposes God's purposes for earthly flourishing needs to be removed. Picking up on the language of each psalm, we could say that when the wicked are finished (תָּמַם), God's purposes for the world will finally be complete (תָּמַם), or that when God's enemies have ceased (שָׁבַת), then creation can truly enter its Sabbath rest (שָׁבַת).⁴⁰

However, not only are humans so powerful, according to Ps 104, that they can impede God's purposes for creation—and so prevent God rejoicing in his works—they are also, in the vision of Ps 8, God's chosen defense against evil.

Like Ps 104, Ps 8 does not envision any primordial evil forces that need to be subdued for creation to be established. True, Ps 8 may allude to the *Chaoskampf* in its explicit mention of the enemy, the foe, and the avenger in v. 2. This motif, though, is radically transformed in that God is said to establish strength or a stronghold (עָז) against these enemies not by the expected primordial battle, but by the mouth of babes and infants.⁴¹ Even though there are significant interpretive issues with v. 2 (such as whether the enemies are envisioned as human or as supra-human forces), its thrust seems relatively clear.⁴² The enemies of God's cre-

37 We thus need to qualify Goldingay's absolute-sounding statements that “the psalm is radically accepting of the way the world is” (*Psalms* 3:190) or that the “world is a magnificent quilt in which every thread contributes to a whole” (*Psalms* 3:191). Note that when he comes to v. 35, Goldingay himself admits that “the psalm makes explicit the need that the world be purged of sinner and faithless” (*Psalms* 3:198).

38 It is anticipation of the mention of sinners/the wicked in 104:35 that leads the psalmist to affirm that when God “looks at the earth . . . it trembles [רָעַד]” (104:32); this is astounding in light of the psalmist's earlier affirmation (104:5) that God established the earth on its foundations so that “it will not be shaken [מוֹט].” Evil can destabilize (but not destroy) God's good creation.

39 The reference to “silencing” the enemy, found in some translations (NRSV; NIV; NLT), is contextual, derived from the contrast with the “mouth” of babes and infants.

40 The eschatological elimination of evil (more precisely, rendering it inert or inoperative; καταργεω) is mentioned in 1 Cor 15:24–26, followed immediately in v. 27 by a reference to Ps 8:6. Hebrews 3:7–4:11 links God's rest on the seventh day in Gen 2:1–2 with Ps 95:7–11 in order to speak of an eschatological “rest” for the people of God, which the wicked shall not enter. It would not be too much to say that Ps 104 suggests an eschatological Sabbath (without evil) for all creation.

41 On the role of the *mouth* in the depiction of enemies in various psalms, see Øystein Lund, “From the Mouth of Babes and Infants You Have Established Strength,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 11/1 (1997): 80 (entire article 78–99).

42 For a summary of the state of scholarship on enemies in the psalms, see the entry on “Enemies” in James H. Waltner, *Psalms* (Believers Church Bible Commentary; Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 2006), 750–751 (available online: http://globalanabaptism.com/mediawiki/index.php/Enemies_in_Psalms).

ation are overcome not by what is traditionally thought of as a conquest or battle, but rather by human weakness, symbolized by babies.⁴³

Indeed, it is possible that the “mouth” of babes and infants suggests it is human *praise* that overcomes evil (this the interpretation of the LXX, quoted in Matt 21:16).⁴⁴ In that case, there would be a further connection between the two psalms: perhaps the praiseful musings of the psalmist in 104 (and also in Ps 8) constitute precisely the babbling that comes from the mouth of babes. These psalms themselves could be viewed as a stronghold against evil.⁴⁵

Whether or not *praise* is intended by Ps 8:2, there is still a significant parallel *within* Ps 8 between God’s work of silencing enemies by the mouth of babes and infants and God’s work of fixing the heavenly bodies in place by God’s “fingers,” rather than by God’s “hands,” which would be the expected word.⁴⁶ In both cases, God’s parallel works—on earth and in heaven—of establishing the world occur by unexpected (and particularly *delicate*) means. These means are also non-violent.⁴⁷

Indeed, it would not be too much of a stretch to say that the trajectory of Ps 8:2 leads ultimately to a babe in Bethlehem—whose life as an infant was sought by the vengeful foe Herod (Matt 2:16); who was predicted, at his dedication in the temple, to cause the rising and falling of many (Luke 2:34); who as an adult encouraged children to approach him and said that the kingdom of God was for them (Matt 9:14; Mark 10:14; Luke 18:16); and who, in the weakness of crucifixion at the hands of evil, manifested God’s power to decisively overcome evil—resulting in his resurrection from the dead and in his exaltation above every power in heaven and on earth (Eph 1:20–22).

43 Lund argues that the mouth of babies is a reference to the breath of life that God gives them at birth, which functions as the power to resist death; Lund, “From the Mouth of Babes and Infants,” 86.

44 The power of praise is evident in Acts 16, when Paul and Silas sing praises while in prison at Philippi; the narrative tells of the prison doors falling open, with the jailer being terrified and the city rulers pleading with them to leave.

45 Significantly, God is said to be the strength (יָ) of his people in Exod 15:2; Pss 28:7–8; 46:1; 118:14; Isa 12:2. It is therefore appropriate that people, made in the divine image, are the source of the strength (יָ) that God appoints to oppose evil.

46 Although God’s “fingers” are the instrument of creation in 8:3, it is God’s “hands” in 8:6 (see also Isa 66:2a).

47 Given the claim that God’s power is manifest from the mouth of babies, perhaps we could press further and ask about those who are not able to speak, either because of lived trauma or genetic inheritance. Can we say that among the disabled (whether vocally or otherwise), God’s power is manifest in weakness? Here I may need to qualify, without turning away from, my own emphasis on human agency as central to the *imago Dei* in *The Liberating Image*. Perhaps that work focused too resolutely on the image as responsible calling and not enough on the image as divine gift to be exercised in varying degrees, depending on the possibilities of our (often limited) circumstances.

Reflections on Human Power and the Vocation of Teaching

Now, I have no intention of dismissing or downplaying the very real differences in emphasis between Pss 8 and 104. However, it is possible to hyper-focus on the differences between these two psalms to the exclusion of what they have in common. The point is that not all differences (even theological differences) are mutually exclusive. Certainly, some theological claims are incompatible at both logical and ethical levels (that is, besides involving genuine logical contradictories, one cannot coherently live out the ethical stances implicit in both sets of claims). I myself have argued that the creation-by-combat motif (found, for example, in Pss 74 and 89) is both logically and ethically incompatible with the vision of original shalom found in Gen 1 (and in Pss 8 and 104).⁴⁸ The differences in emphasis between Pss 8 and 104, however, occur within a shared, coherent theological vision, issuing in a shared, equally coherent ethical stance.

This study of Pss 8 and 104 has focused on the vision of humanity in God's world that Pss 8 and 104 disclose. I could certainly have addressed in more detail the understanding of the non-human creation found in Ps 104, an important topic in its own right.⁴⁹ My point, however, was to examine the shared vision of these psalms, and this led to highlighting the role of human beings in the world.

The vision of humanity disclosed in Pss 8 and 104 matters for me as a biblical scholar and as a teacher, and not simply because I want to communicate this vision to my students. I certainly want to do that. The shared theological vision of Pss 8 and 104 impacts my own life by challenging me—as a teacher of Scripture—to give up my often implicit sense of superiority in relation to “ordinary” people who read and study the Bible. It calls me to acknowledge that the vocation of biblical scholar is but one of many ways to be human in God's world; all forms of work (עבודה) have equal value to the God whose world this is—if this עבודה is enacted in wisdom accompanied by humility and respect for others.⁵⁰

But the vision of being human in Pss 8 and 104 also calls me to honestly acknowledge the tremendous power I have as a theological educator—for good or for ill. If, like all humans, academic theologians and biblical scholars are priests in God's cosmic sanctuary, vehicles of divine mediation in a holy world—yet a world terribly corrupted and compromised by evil—then we are charged with mani-

48 Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, ch. 6. For further analysis of the ethical vision of Gen 1 beyond the question of the combat myth, see ch. 7 (“Creation Founded in Love”).

49 This is typically the focus of commentaries and essays on Ps 104. See especially Arthur Walker-Jones, “Psalm 104: A Celebration of the *Vanua*,” in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and Prophets* (ed. Norman C. Habel; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press; Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2006), 84–97; the essay attends to “earth with its diverse cast of characters” (92) throughout the psalm.

50 Our work should evidence humility and respect both for other persons and for the non-human world.

festing the divine presence and blessing on earth by our עבדה, our faithful academic service.

Theological educators have an ethical responsibility particularly to our students, who are fellow human co-workers in this holy world. By the exercise of our academic expertise in the classroom (and, for some of us, in the church), we have the ability to enact predatory modes of power to the detriment of God's other human creatures.⁵¹ Thus the important warning about becoming teachers in Jas 3:1 is grounded in an explanation that the tongue, though seemingly insignificant, can enact great evil (3:1–8). However, James goes on to note that the tongue can also be used for good (3:9–10).

Teachers, in other words, have the power to close down the world or to open up avenues of blessing and shalom by our teaching and our mentoring of students. If the mouth of babes and infants can stop the foe and the avenger (Ps 8:2), and if even the stones can cry out in praise (Luke 19:40), what might the vocation of teaching contribute to establishing God's purposes for life and flourishing? Of course, our lips, like those of the prophet Isaiah, will have to be cleansed, perhaps even with burning coals (Isa 6:5–7).

We would be wise, however, never to underestimate the power of honest and faithful theological musings in our writing and in the classroom. Could we dare believe that even from the mouths of theologians and biblical scholars God might establish strength—indeed, a stronghold against evil?

⁵¹ Countryman, *Living on the Border of the Holy*, is extremely insightful about the possibility of abusing priestly power by those exercising leadership (ch. 1).