



Research article

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**CREATION'S SONGBOOK: PSALM 104: 1-13 AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL MANIFESTO**

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ABSTRACT



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Psalm 104, a hymn praising the Creator, intricately explores the wonders of the natural world reminiscent of the Genesis creation narrative in a structured format. This analysis delves into its form, setting, structure, interpretation, theological implications, environmentalism, and contextual relevance, particularly within the Indian cultural and spiritual framework. The psalmist's vivid imagery and theological reflections inspire reverence, gratitude, and a commitment to environmental stewardship. Psalm 104 emerges as a masterpiece across time that invites believers from diverse backgrounds to join in a collective symphony of praise for the Creator, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration in addressing environmental challenges. This exegesis explores the linguistic nuances, environmental implications, and theological significance of this Psalm delving into its potential connections with pre-Israelite traditions and its relevance in different cultural and religious contexts.

**Keywords:**

*Psalm 104, Creation, Structure, Interpretation, Theological implications, Environmentalism, Contextual relevance, Indian perspective, Interfaith dialogue, Cultural significance, Art and music.*



## Introduction

Psalms 104 is a majestic hymn that resonates through generations, inviting readers on a sacred voyage of awe and reverence for the Creator and His creation. Its intricate structure mirrors the first creation account in Genesis, while its vivid imagery portrays the marvels of the natural world, captivating both intellect and spirit. As we explore its verses, we uncover not only a poetic masterpiece but also a profound theological reflection on the interconnectedness of all life and the sustaining power of the Divine. From the opening lines, which adorn the Creator in honor and majesty, to the concluding verses that urge humanity to join in the symphony of praise, Psalm 104 leads us through a journey of divine creativity. Its exploration of light, sky, earth, water, and the myriad forms of life evokes a profound sense of wonder and gratitude. Additionally, the psalmist's environmental awareness challenges us to view caring for the Earth as an essential aspect of worship, urging us to become responsible stewards of this magnificent creation. As we explore Psalm 104, we will uncover its cultural and religious significance and its resonance with diverse traditions and spiritual perspectives. From its relevance in ancient creation hymns to its connection with contemporary environmental movements, Psalm 104 continues to call humanity to unite in praising the Creator, fostering mutual understanding and reverence for the wonders of the living universe.

## Hebrew Translation

1 בְּרַכֵּי נַפְשִׁי אֶת־יְהוָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי גְדֹלַת מְאֹד הוּד וְהַגֵּר לְבָשֶׁת

Bless my soul *Yahweh*. *Yahweh* my God, you are very great, you are clothed with honor and majesty.

2 עֲטָה אוֹר כַּשְׂלֵמָה נוֹמֶה שָׁמַיִם כַּפְּרִיעָה

Who cover [yourself] with light as [with] a garment; who stretch out the heavens like a curtain.

3 הַמְקַרְהָ בַּמַּיִם עַל־יְדֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם עֲבָיִם רְכֹבֹו הַמְהַלֵּךְ עַל־כַּנְפֵי־רוּחַ

He lays the beams of his upper chambers in the waters; Who makes the clouds his chariot, who walks on the wings of the wind.

4 עֲשֵׂה מְלַאכְיוֹ רוּחֹת מְשַׁרְתָּיו אֵשׁ לֶהֱט

Who makes winds his messengers, his ministers a flame of fire.

5 יִסַּד אֶרֶץ עַל־מְכוּנֶיהָ בַּל־תִּמְוֹט עוֹלָם וְעַד



He laid the foundations upon the earth of so that it should not be moved.

6 תהום כִּלְבוּשׁ כִּסִּיתוּ עַל־הָרִים גַּעְמָדוֹ מִיָּם

You covered the deep as [with] a garment; the waters stood above the mountains.

7 מִן־גַּעְרָתְךָ יִנְסוּן מִן־קוֹל רְעָמֶיךָ יִחַפְזוּן

At your rebuke they fled; at the voice of your thunder, they hastened away.

8 יַעֲלוּ הָרִים יֵרְדוּ בְּקַעֲוֹת אֶל־מְקוֹמָהּ | יִסְדַּתְּ לָהֶם

They ascended mountains, they descended into valleys to the place, which you founded for them.

9 גְּבוּל־שִׁמְתָּ בַל־יַעֲבְרוּן בַל־יִשְׁבּוּן לְכַסּוֹת הָאָרֶץ

You set a boundary that they may not pass over, that they may not return to cover the earth.

10 הַמְשַׁלַּח מַעֲיָנִים בְּנַחֲלִים בֵּין הָרִים יִהְיֶהוּן

He sends the springs into the valleys; they go between the mountains.

11 יִשְׁקוּ כָּל־חַיֵּי שָׂדֵי יִשְׁבְּרוּ פְּרָאִים צִמְאֵם

They give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst.

12 עֲלֵיהֶם עוֹף־הַשָּׁמַיִם יִשְׁכּוּן מִבֵּין עֲפָאִים יִתְנוּקוּן

Beside them the fowl of the heavens dwell; from between the branches, they let out their voices.

13 מִשְׁקָה הָרִים מִעֲלִיּוֹתָיו מִפְּרֵי מְעֻשָׂיֶיךָ תִּשְׂבַּע הָאָרֶץ

He waters the mountains from his upper chambers; from the fruit of your works the earth is satisfied.

## Form

Psalms 104 is a hymn praising the creator of the living universe, structured in seven strophes, corresponding to the seven days of creation in Genesis. Strophe I serve a dual purpose, first depicting the glorious Yahweh covered in light and then highlighting seven wonders of creation: the sky, earth, water, vegetation, moon, sun, and the great sea, emphasizing the eighth strophe, which differs by expressing three wishes - the joy of the Lord, the commitment to praise, and the removal of sinners. The meter shifts from 3+3 to 3+4 and 3+3+3.<sup>1</sup> Efforts have been made to identify linkages between strophic couplets (I and VIII; II

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms- Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Cambridge: Eerdmans Pub. Company, 2003), 710.



and VII; III and VI), underscoring the central importance of strophe V, focusing on the moon and the sun. Notably, the divine name Yahweh is used selectively, appearing in the prelude, postlude, strophe IV, Strophe VI, and Strophe VIII. The core of the poem communicates with the Deity without a specific name, adopting a meditative style (3rd person) rather than a prayerful tone (2nd person).<sup>2</sup> This distribution suggests a deliberate choice, possibly emphasizing the absolute independence of the Lord's creative activity with cosmic elements: light, sky, earth, water, clouds, winds, and fire. The use of the second person in prayer appears suitable for recalling emotional polytheistic myths and aspects of the world involving human endeavours.

### **Setting**

The uniform structure of Psalms 103 and 104 is notably remarkable, prompting the question of whether both psalms share the same author. However, it seems that they adhere to a traditional stylistic form, presenting two distinct psalms in a similar framework. When examining the context of Psalm 104, scholarly discussions often revolve around three main inquiries: What is the connection between Psalm 104 and pre-Israelite poems and transmissions? How should we interpret the psalm's references to Genesis 1? What relationship does Psalm 104 have with the festival cults of Israel? The discovery of the hymn to the sun of Amenhotep IV during the El Amarna excavations immediately drew attention to its parallels with specific sections of Psalm 104. According to Von Rad, "Psalm 104 is permeated with conceptions from the encyclopaedic science found in the natural science of the Egyptians." O. Eissfeldt suggests that the motifs of the Syro-Canaanite primeval flood myth should be considered in interpreting this Psalm. In the ongoing debate about the relationship between Psalm 104 and Genesis 1, a detailed investigation reveals only a modest presence of loose allusions. H. Gunkel notes, "We probably cannot assert that the author had Genesis 1 directly before him."<sup>3</sup> The Psalmist in Psalm 104 seems to draw from primeval themes of tradition quite freely, which are also found in Genesis 1. The festival cults in Israel might have served as occasions for passing on creative traditions from generation to

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<sup>2</sup> Terrien, *The Psalms- Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary...*, 710.

<sup>3</sup> For a brief explanation on the scholarly views of Von Rad, Eissfeldt and Gunkel, see Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150 A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 298.



generation, providing the psalmist with the source of his images and concepts.<sup>4</sup> While the praise of the Creator likely had its cultural context in the homage before King Yahweh in Israel's worship, the exact date of origin for the psalm remains undetermined. A pre-exilic origin is not ruled out.

### **Structure**

The imperative statements at the beginning and end of the psalm set the tone for a hymn of praise, emphasizing the acknowledgment of God's majesty in various verses like 1, 24, 31, and 32. The praise initially centres on the Creator in verses 2-30, while a reflection on the Lord's role in history is echoed in verse 35. The psalm extols the Creator of both heaven in verses 2-4 and earth in verse 5, drawing parallels with the Genesis creation account in verses 6-9. The author explores diverse aspects of creation, including mountains, valleys, and springs in verses 8-10, land animals in verses 11-12, 17-18, rain and plants in verses 13-16, sun and moon, day and night in verses 16-23, human beings in verses 14-15, 23 and the sea, ships, and marine life in verses 25-26.<sup>5</sup> This detailed exploration culminates in an awe-inspired praise for the Creator, recognizing God's provision of life-sustaining food for all His creatures. The psalm's structure is marked by a series of participles, suggesting a conventional descriptive hymn of praise.<sup>6</sup> The speaker systematically catalogues remarkable features of creation, attributing them all to Yahweh.

### **Interpretation**

In the first verse of this Psalm, the opening line, nearly identical to the closing line, appears somewhat disconnected from the rest and could be considered an afterthought. There is a common understanding that Hebrew verbs typically express an action rather than a state. In this instance, when the psalmist declares, "You are very great. You are clothed with honour and majesty," it is not necessarily the poet celebrating God's eternal and unchanging greatness. Instead, the focus is on the manifestation of God's greatness, akin to the assumption of a new robe of imperial majesty during the creation of the world. Honor and majesty are attributes associated with a king, and the same royal qualities are ascribed to

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<sup>4</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150 A Commentary...*, 299.

<sup>5</sup> Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans publishing company, 1989), 247.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg pub. Company, 1984), 32



God, as seen in similar references in Psalms 8:1, 21:5, and 96:6.<sup>7</sup> As God is depicted as a mighty monarch, the customary elements associated with earthly kings, such as robes, palaces, chariots, and court attendants, are metaphorically applied to emphasize the divine majesty.

In verse 2, this concise passage mirrors the creative work of the first day, where light, the inaugural element, is likened to God's robe - revealing while also concealing the divine presence. It is acknowledged that nothing can perfectly capture the essence of God's nature (I John 1:5; I Timothy 6:16). Maclaren eloquently notes, "The uncreated Light, who is darkness to our eyes, arrays Himself in created light, while it veils Him."<sup>8</sup> Light, being universally diffused, serves as a vital condition for life, a source of joy, and a symbol of purity. The verse also metaphorically describes the expanse of the sky as a tent-curtain stretched out over the earth. With a simple divine command, God effortlessly spreads out the heavens, akin to a person pitching a tent. Noteworthy in this verse are the two present participles, "covering" and "stretching," implying that the original act of creation is perceived as an ongoing process in the continual maintenance of the universe.<sup>9</sup> An important observation lies in the shift from the second person in verses 2 to 3. The use of the second person seamlessly transitions into the third, a shift that the Hebrew language does not consider irregular. It's worth noting that the NRSV translates all forms into the second person.

In verse 3, a striking paradox is employed to describe the Creator laying the beams of His upper chambers within the waters. This poetic imagery portrays God constructing His concealed dwelling on the enigmatic reservoir of waters envisioned by the ancient Hebrews to exist above the firmament (Genesis 1:7; Psalm 29:3). The concept is akin to a person building "upper chambers" on the roof of their house for ventilation and privacy.<sup>10</sup> This line echoes a sentiment found in Amos 9:6, where it is stated, "He that buildeth his upper chambers in the heavens." The storm cloud and tempest are symbolic manifestations of God's advent, as seen in various biblical references such as Psalm 18:10, Isaiah 19:1, Daniel 7:13, and Matthew 24:30.

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<sup>7</sup> H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of The Psalms* (Secunderabad: OM books, 2003), 723.

<sup>8</sup> Leupold quotes Maclaren in *Exposition of The Psalms...*, 724.

<sup>9</sup> A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 606.

<sup>10</sup> Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms...*, 606.



Verse 4 is pivotal for exegesis, and certain translations, like the American version, align with the Septuagint, as referenced in Hebrews 1:7, altering “flaming fire” to “flame of fire.” The Greek, like the Hebrew, remains ambiguous, as the word for angels can simply mean messengers, and spirits may denote winds. The construction of the verse has sparked much debate. One interpretation, retaining the construction of the LXX, suggests a rendering like “who makes his angels winds, His ministers a flaming fire.” In this view, Yahweh reveals Godself in the works of creation, clothing spiritual agents and ministers with the forms of physical phenomena, such as wind and lightning. This may evoke a concept similar to the cherubic chariot in Ezekiel 1.<sup>11</sup> The Targum, employing a similar construction, paraphrases, “who makes his messengers swift as winds, his ministers strong as fire,” but this explanation might lose connection with the preceding verses. Alternatively, some argue that the context necessitates the rendering, “who makes winds his messengers, flaming fire his ministers.” Here, as clouds represent God’s chariot, winds and lightning become God’s messengers and servants - mighty forces of nature employed to carry out God’s commands. However, this rendering faces grammatical objections due to the word order. Another possible interpretation is, “who makes his messengers of winds, His ministers of flaming fire.” This suggests that God forms messengers and ministers from winds and lightning, utilizing them for divine purposes. While conveying a similar sense to the previous interpretation, this rendering avoids grammatical challenges. Among these interpretations, the initial one discussed appears more closely aligned with the text and context.<sup>12</sup> Some argue that this verse may refer to a historical event, such as the one in Exodus 14:19, where God, from His “thick cloud,” shielded Israel from the Egyptians by interposing the cloud of His presence between His people and the enemy.

Verses 5 and 6 draw a comparison, likening the earth to a structure erected on solid foundations, a concept found in other biblical passages like Job 38:6 and Proverbs 8:29. However, a contrasting viewpoint is presented in Job 26:7, where God is depicted as suspending the earth in space, hanging upon nothing. In verse 6, while the language may seem reminiscent of the flood account in Genesis 7:19-20, the focus is not on the flood itself

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<sup>11</sup> S.R Driver & C.A. Briggs, *A critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Book of Psalms* (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1907), 332.

<sup>12</sup> Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms...*, 606.





but on the earth's original state. The mention of the "great deep" (tehom) appears to allude to the vast seas, which are described as spread out upon the surface of the earth "as a garment."<sup>13</sup> This imagery suggests that the earth, though already formed with hills and valleys, was enveloped in the abyss of waters, covering even the highest mountains.

Verses 8-11 depict the rebuke of God, characterized as a divine command delivered with a thunderous voice, as seen in Psalm 18:15. The narrative emphasizes the continuous and perfect control maintained by God over everything. Some scholars propose following the Revised Versions, which treat verse 8 as a parenthesis providing the outcome of this divine command. In this interpretation, mountains and valleys emerge as the waters recede to their designated locations. This grammatical approach is plausible and seems to describe the tumultuous movement of the waters as the great deep is disrupted, and they seek their appointed places. A boundary is established for the waters, ensuring that they never completely get out of control.

In verses 12 and 13, the text describes how beside the springs and streams, trees thrive, providing a home for birds whose songs of praise to their Creator resonate from their branches. The mention of Palestine as a land of mountains and valleys emphasizes its reliance on the rain from heaven for drinking water, as noted in Deuteronomy 11:11.<sup>14</sup> The poet's focus is not primarily on inaccessible mountain peaks but rather on the upland corn fields, nourished by the rain sent down by God from His upper chambers, as mentioned in verse 3. Similarly, the valleys are watered by streams.

## **Theological Implications**

Psalm 104 contributes significantly to the theological framework of creation, environmental stewardship, human responsibility, and the worship of the Creator. It invites believers to contemplate the divine majesty displayed in the natural world and to respond with reverence, gratitude, and a commitment to care for God's creation. As the narrative approaches its climax, the writing style departs from its concise formality, revealing a touch of poetic

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<sup>13</sup> Leupold, *Exposition of The Psalms...*, 726.

<sup>14</sup> Leupold, *Exposition of The Psalms...*, 726.





sentiment that suggests the passage is influenced by an ancient creation hymn. The distinctive features of this concluding segment include:<sup>15</sup>

1. Instead of a simple jussive form, there is the use of the cohortative, indicating either self-deliberation or consultation with other divine beings.
2. In contrast to the lower animals, each created according to its own kind, man is uniquely made in the image of God.
3. Man is designated as the leader of creation, entrusted with the rule over the earth and all the living creatures that have been brought into existence thus far.

### **Environmentalism in Psalm 104**

According to Clinton McCann, this psalm serves as a foundation for environmentalism, suggesting that the poet who composed it had a strong environmentalist perspective. The psalmist demonstrated an understanding of the intricate interconnectedness and subtle interdependence of air, soil, water, plants, and animals, including humans. The poet recognized a profound truth reflected in the etymological connection between the Hebrew words for humanity ‘adam’ and ground ‘adamah’ - human beings are indeed creatures of the earth. This same truth is evident in the etymological connection between the English word “human” and the Latin word “humus,” meaning ‘soil’.<sup>16</sup> However, as a society, we seem to have forgotten our roots, both etymological and physical. Reflecting on this reality prompts questions about ecology and our attitude toward the environment. The psalmist’s example suggests that our efforts to care for the environment should be viewed as a song of praise for the God who insists on the orderliness of creation.<sup>17</sup> The challenge presented is to see nature not merely as another problem to solve but as another voice contributing to the grand chorus of praise to God. Taking inspiration from the psalmist, it becomes evident that environmental concern begins with praising God. While this may seem overly simplistic and scientifically naive, such a starting point, rooted in the conviction that the world belongs to God, is

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed reading on the theological implications, see John Skinner, *A critical and exegetical commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930), 30.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Brueggemann & William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 448.

<sup>17</sup> John F. Craghan, *Psalms for all Seasons* (Bangalore: IJA publications, 1996), 14.



essential to counter our arrogant assumption that we alone can save the world.<sup>18</sup> Psalm 104 asserts that God has meticulously arranged and provided for the sustenance of the world. Addressing the environmental crisis requires nothing less than praising God, elevating God, and humbling ourselves. Another insight from the reflections on this psalm is the psalmist's assumption that human labour is not a curse or mere drudgery but an integral part of God's overarching plan of creation. The psalm encourages us to view our work, regardless of its nature, as another means of praising the Creator.<sup>19</sup> To execute our tasks in a manner that serves all of creation is to embody the essence of praise outlined in this psalm.

### Contextual Relevance

In Indian context, the reading and interpretation of Psalm 104 can resonate strongly with the rich cultural and spiritual traditions of the country. The reverence for nature and the interconnectedness of all living beings are themes that align with various philosophical and religious perspectives in India.

1. The hymn-like structure of Psalm 104 can find parallels in the ancient Vedic hymns, where nature is often praised and revered. The concept of divine order and cosmic balance is central to both traditions. The rhythmic and poetic nature of the psalm may evoke the oral traditions of chanting found in Vedic recitations.

2. In Hinduism, the interconnectedness of the elements and the divine presence in nature resonate strongly with Psalm 104. The portrayal of God clothing Godself in light, spreading out the heavens, and controlling the forces of nature aligns with the Hindu understanding of the divine as immanent in the world. The reverence for mountains, rivers, and the cycle of seasons in the psalm can find echoes in Hindu practices and mythology.

3. India has a long history of appreciating the environment as sacred. The psalm's environmentalism, with its emphasis on the Creator's care for the land, water, and all living beings, can be seen as a call to uphold the sacredness of nature. This resonates with the Hindu concept of dharma, which includes the ethical duty to protect and preserve the environment.

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<sup>18</sup> Brueggemann & Bellinger, *Psalms...*, 448.

<sup>19</sup> Craghan, *Psalms for all Seasons* (Bangalore: IJA publications, 1996), 14.



4. Drawing connections between Psalm 104 and Indian festivals, such as Diwali (festival of lights) or Holi (festival of colours), can enhance the cultural relevance. The psalm's emphasis on light, creation, and joy aligns with the themes of these festivals, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil and the celebration of life.

5. Psalm 104 can be a point of intersection in interfaith dialogue, fostering conversations between Christians and adherents of various Indian religions. Exploring the commonalities in the appreciation of nature and the divine can contribute to mutual understanding and collaboration in addressing environmental challenges.

6. Interpreting the psalm in the context of Indian art, music, and dance can provide additional layers of meaning. Artists may find inspiration in visually representing the psalm's imagery, and musicians and dancers can express its themes through their respective art forms.

## Conclusion

Psalm 104 emerges not only as a poetic masterpiece but also as a profound theological reflection on the interconnectedness of all creation and the Creator's sustaining power. We witness in this the psalmist's keen observations of the natural world, expressing both awe and gratitude. The environmentalism embedded in the psalm challenges believers to approach the care of the Earth as an integral aspect of worship. Beyond its cultural and religious implications, Psalm 104 beckons individuals from diverse backgrounds to join in a collective symphony of praise for the Creator and, in doing so, find a common ground that transcends boundaries. As the psalm continues to echo through various traditions, it remains a timeless testament to the enduring beauty and orderliness of the Creator's work, inviting humanity to embrace its role as stewards of this awe-inspiring creation.

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