



A SCIENCE & RELIGION COMMENTARY

PSALM 148

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Among the many tasks associated with science, both ancient and modern, is separating the world into its constituent parts and ordering their relationships. The periodic table of the elements and Linnaean taxonomy are two such examples of modern science. These have their ancient corollaries in such things as the Greek elements (earth, air, fire, water, ether) or the biological divisions into clean and common animals for the Hebrews.

Psalm 148, although a Psalm for liturgical use and not “scientific” in the modern sense of the term, shares a root impulse with scientific endeavors. In Psalm 148 we discover a comprehensive call to all elements of the created world to praise their Creator. Such seems have been an impulse within the wisdom tradition of Hebrew scripture and other traditions as well. The compiling of lists in the ancient Near Eastern world was not unknown, although it was not common. In ancient Egypt, two such attempts at a catalog of nature are known. The *Ramesseum Onomasticon* contained some 320 items from nature; the *Onomasticon of Amenope* included over 600 (*Ancient Egyptian Onomastica* by Alan Gardiner is the definitive work on this subject). While a rudimentary structure can be discerned at the beginning of each list, the *onomastica* of Egypt soon degenerate into simple catalogs of items listed arbitrarily. They are neither commentaries nor sacred texts.

The Jewish tradition seems to have taken the *onomastica* to another level. Psalm 148 has a close parallel in the apocryphal text known as the *Song of the Three Young Men* (v28-68). Job 38 and Sirach 43 also share a similar lineage and pattern.

Psalm 148 balances artistically conflicting goals. On the one hand, it strives to be comprehensive, taking in the totality of the created world. On the other, it must specify particularities without omitting critical parts. It does so through the device of inclusive pairs (occasionally triplets) – the coupling of complementary aspects of a reality so as to name the whole. So sun, moon, and stars are the particulars of the heavens, which itself is paired with the earth to comprise the universe. Fruit trees and cedars take in wild and domesticated plants respectively; wild animals and cattle similarly for the animal world. The human world is segmented to accentuate the totality of humanity – old and young, male and female, rulers and common folk. Nothing in all creation escapes the call and obligation to praise the Creator.

Psalm 148 also serves as an antidote to one of the regrettable effects of the scientific revolution. The Newtonian revolution had the effect of reducing nature’s primary qualities to matter and motion. Lost was the sense of God’s sustaining relationship with all of life, which in turn responds to God with praise by its very being. As the Trappist monk Thomas Merton once wrote, “[a] tree gives praise to God by being a tree.” Psalm 148 reinvigorates nature in relationship to the God who called it into being.

Preaching Suggestions

In preaching on Psalm 148, four basic points should be made. First, the impulse to catalog and categorize the world has a sacred dimension. It is not devoid of worshipful aspect (see 2 Kings 4:29ff.). Second, humans are among the creatures to whom the call to praise goes forth. We are not exempt, but are expected to add our own praise. Third, humans do play a special role in creation's symphony of praise. We give the words to creation's song, the libretto to the symphony of praise. Finally, if creation exists to praise its Maker, humans should exercise great care not to interfere, mute, or destroy nature's ability to praise God, the Creator. Our task as caretakers of creation is to accentuate, not interfere with, the creation's capacity to praise God.