



The Proceedings of the International Conference on Creationism

Volume 8
Print Reference: Pages 95-102

Article 19

2018

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Recommended Citation

Barrick, W.D. 2018. Exegetical analysis of Psalm 104:8 and its possible implications for interpreting the geological record. In *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference on Creationism*, ed. J.H. Whitmore, pp. 95–102. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Creation Science Fellowship.



EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF PSALM 104:8 AND ITS POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERPRETING THE GEOLOGIC RECORD

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ABSTRACT

This paper performs a detailed exegesis of Psalm 104:8 and its context (Psalm 104:5–10) in the original Hebrew to identify the timing and nature of the events about which the psalmist writes. The exegetical analysis includes the text's poetic structure and devices, as well as its grammar and vocabulary. That interpretive process results in some significant implications. The analysis of Psalm 104:8 in its context supports a possible reference to a global cataclysmic Flood. Therefore, the psalmist's declaration that "The mountains rose; the valleys sank down" might correspond with tectonic activity during and after the Flood. "To the place which You established for them" indicates the configuration of the earth's surface after an uplift of mountains and lowering of valleys.

KEY WORDS

Psalm 104, creation, chaos, literary structure, "deep," "rebuke," Flood, Genesis, global tectonics, world rift system, continent(s), orogeny, ocean basins

INTRODUCTION

Flood models offered by creationists continue to require research and revision in two areas related, at least in part, to how one interprets Psalm 104:6–9. Oard and Reed (2017) speak of the need to identify "the mechanism by which land as large as continents rose and other areas up to the size of ocean basins sank" and "the mechanisms that created the surface features of the planet during and after the Flood" (p. 72). Later in their volume they bring Psalm 104 into their discussion of some potential mechanisms.

Like Snelling (2009, vol. 2, pp. 473–474, 752), Oard and Reed (2017, pp. 95, 171–172), associate Psalm 104:6–9 with vertical earth movements during and immediately following the biblical Flood. However, the vast majority of Bible commentators limit Psalm 104:6–9 to the event of creation, not to the Flood of Noah's time. Other creationists agree with most commentators and take Psalm 104 as a reference only to creation (cf. Northrup 1990, p. 187). Can a case be made for the minority interpretation of the biblical text? What are the exegetical evidences that might overturn the majority interpretation? On the one hand, if the text speaks only of creation, then biblical models depicting the geological events of the Flood must eliminate Psalm 104:6–9 from their argumentation. On the other hand, if exegetical analysis shows that the text refers to events related to the Flood, geologists must take the text into account in producing their Flood models.

In order to exegete the biblical text of Psalm 104, one must work with the original Hebrew. If the Hebrew does not support a particular interpretation, the exegete must discard that interpretation and proceed to a better and more supportable conclusion. Psalm 104:6–9 provides a few challenges since commentators have argued for two different positions regarding the text's historical reference. One approach concludes that the topic remains original creation as reflected in Genesis 1. A second approach, however, sees a change of reference to the Flood of Noah's time. Although the text could move from creation in verses 1–5 to the Flood in verses 6–9 or continue an unbroken description of creation throughout, it cannot take both of these paths simultaneously. The exegete must examine the structure, syntax, and vocabulary of these verses in order to accurately identify their meaning.

The difficulty of the interpretive problem causes some commentators to weave implied references to the Flood into Psalm 104:5–9 without noting any change from creation as the true topic. Grogan (2008) reaches just such a conclusion:

Verses 5–9 do not simply state but picture the ordering of the waters, and the reference to 'the deep' in verse 6 makes clear that this too is God's creation. 'Rebuke' does not here imply judgment, but simply makes vivid the portrayal of a Creator in absolute control of the elements. It is possible v. 9 not only echoes Gen 1:9–10, but also the postdiluvian promise of Gen 8:21–22; 9:8–17. (p. 174)

Analysis of the biblical text should move beyond the exegetical foundation to offer suggestions for scientific investigation of geological evidences related to a global Flood. As Gerstenberger (2001) notes: "We may say that a scientific interest of sorts informs the section under debate [vv. 5–23], while the preceding part (vv. 2–4), with its stereotypical participial expressions, is dedicated exclusively to the cosmic Overlord himself" (p. 223). Gerstenberger probably does not intend the science of geology in his "scientific interest of sorts." He most likely means that the referents of verses 5–23 can be observed in the current physical world. However, the very fact that present observations have a bearing on the psalmist's description should encourage readers to be alert to the physical evidences thus implied for either creation or Flood.

EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS

This exegetical study of Psalm 104:8 commences with a brief statement about the implications of literary genre and then examines the overall structure of the psalm. Context determines meaning and the literary structure of any biblical text reveals the flow of its contents within their immediate context. For the purpose of consistency, this study will cite the New American Standard Bible updated edition of 1995 (NASB95). When necessary the author may choose to offer an alternative translation in keeping with the Hebrew text. Following the structural analysis, the examination will continue with grammatical analysis and key word studies.

1. The Genre and Structure of Psalm 104

Although the issue of literary genre (literary type) has raised its head in the current evangelical debates over the historical reliability of Genesis 1 (e.g., Halton 2015), the matter affects how one understands Psalm 104 as well. Does poetic genre eliminate a text from being accurate and historical? According to P. Enns (2012), “narrative is not an automatic indication of historical veracity, either in the Bible or any other literature, ancient or modern” (p. 53). Exodus 15 (“the Song of Moses”), Judges 5 (“the Song of Deborah”), and Psalm 105 may be counted as historical texts. Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade” proves to be one of the most accurate historical accounts available on a particular battle in the Crimean War. J.K. Hoffmeier in Halton (2015) argues that history can be written “in a sober annalistic style, as an epic poem, or as a family genealogical history . . . The present-day western historian simply cannot dictate to an ancient culture how they should record their history” (p. 148). In actuality, the genre issue is nothing but a red herring.

Psalm 104’s structure allows (but does not demand) the first three strophes to present the topics of earth and water in regard to the creation (vv. 2–4), the Flood (vv. 5–9), and the post-Flood world (vv. 10–13). Kidner (1975) identifies the psalm’s strophes with the seven days of creation — thereby eliminating the Flood (p. 368). Others, like Boice (1996, p. 840) and Mays (1994, p. 331), disagree with such a strict pattern of days. As Barker (1986) observes,

the attempt to relegate the psalm to such strictures is artificial. Some emend the text to fit their preconceived structure, while others excuse sections that do not precisely fit the pattern on the basis of an exuberant style or poetic license. (p. 62)

Even though the full seven-day pattern proves absent in Psalm 104, Boice (1996) concludes,

the patterns are close enough to show that the psalmist had Genesis in mind as he worked on his composition. We will not be far wrong if we think of Psalm 104 as a poetic reflection on the more factual account in Genesis. (p. 840)

A number of literary elements contribute to the structure of Psalm 104:

verses 1–4

- verse 1: Tricolon. *Repetition of Psalm 103: 1a and 22b — refrain; see verse 35.* “Yahweh,” 2x. Second person (“You”) as a reference to God.
- verse 2: Hymnic participles, 2x. Second person (“You”) as a reference to God.
- verse 3: Tricolon. Hymnic participles, 3x.
- verse 4: Hymnic participle — “work” (‘āsāh).

verses 5–9

- verse 5: Commences with a third person verb (“established,” *yāsād*) and verses 5–9 continue to use the usual Hebrew verbs (both perfect and imperfect verb forms) a total of thirteen times (five perfects and eight imperfects). “Earth” (‘erets).
- verse 6: Second person (“You”) as a reference to God. “Cover” (*kāsā*); “mountains” (*hārīm*).
- verse 7: Second person (“You”) as a reference to God. Imperfect verb forms with the *nun* suffix (paragogic *nun*), 2x.
- verse 8: Second person (“You”) as a reference to God.

“Mountains” (*hārīm*); “established” (*yāsād*).

verse 9: Second person (“You”) as a reference to God.

Imperfect verb forms with the *nun* suffix (paragogic *nun*), 2x. “Cover” (*kāsā*); “earth” (‘erets). Chiasm.

verses 10–13

- verse 10: Hymnic participle. “Mountains” (*hārīm*). Imperfect verb form with the *nun* suffix (paragogic *nun*). Chiasm.
- verse 11: “Every beast of the field” (cp. vv. 12 and 20).
- verse 12: “The birds of the heavens” (cp. vv. 11 and 20).
- verse 13: Hymnic participle. “Mountains” (*hārīm*); “satisfy” (*sāva*); “work” (‘āsāh); “earth” (‘erets).

verses 14–18

- verse 14: Tricolon. Hymnic participle. “Man” (‘ādām) and “labor” (‘*vodāh*) — cp. verse 23. “Earth” (‘erets).
- verse 15: Tricolon. “Man’s heart” (‘*vav* ‘*nōsh*), 2x.
- verse 16: “Satisfy” (*sāva*); “Yahweh.”
- verse 17:
- verse 18: “Mountains” (*hārīm*).

verses 19–23

- verse 19: “Work” (‘āsāh).
- verse 20: “All the beasts of the forest” (cp. vv. 11, 12).
- verse 21:
- verse 22: Imperfect verb forms with the *nun* suffix (paragogic *nun*), 2x.
- verse 23: “Man” (‘ādām) and “labor” (‘*vodāh*) — cp. verse 14.

verses 24–26

- verse 24: Tricolon. Second person (“You”) as a reference to God. “Work” (‘āsāh), 2x. “Yahweh”; “earth” (‘erets).
- verse 25: Tricolon. Second person (“You”) as a reference to God.
- verse 26: Second person (“You”) as a reference to God. Imperfect verb form with the *nun* suffix (paragogic *nun*).

verses 27–30

- verse 27: Second person (“You”) as a reference to God. Imperfect verb form with the *nun* suffix (paragogic *nun*).
- verse 28: Second person (“You”) as a reference to God. Imperfect verb forms with the *nun* suffix (paragogic *nun*), 2x. “Satisfy” (*sāva*).
- verse 29: Tricolon. Second person (“You”) as a reference to God. Imperfect verb forms with the *nun* suffix (paragogic *nun*), 2x.
- verse 30: Second person (“You”) as a reference to God. Imperfect verb form with the *nun* suffix (paragogic *nun*).

verses 31–35

- verse 31: “Work” (‘āsāh); “Yahweh,” 2x.
- verse 32: Hymnic participle. “Earth” (‘erets); “mountains” (*hārīm*).
- verse 33: “Yahweh.”
- verse 34: “Yahweh.”
- verse 35: Tricolon. *Refrain as in verse 1.* “Earth” (‘erets); “Yah” (*hal’lū-yāh*).

Tricolons (vv. 1, 14, 15, 24, 25, 35) and chiasms (vv. 9, 10) often mark the opening or closing of stanzas in Hebrew psalms (Watson 1986, pp. 183, 205). Several vocabulary repetitions in the structure above produce inclusios (envelope structures), which bracket sections by starting and ending a section with the same word, root, form, or construction (Watson 1986, pp. 284–285). Clusters of the same word or grammatical form can characterize a section (e.g., “mountains”/*hārīm* in vv. 10 and 13, imperfect verb forms with the *nun* suffix in vv. 27–30, and “Yahweh” in vv. 1 and 30–35). One inclusio (acting as a refrain) marks off the entire psalm (“Bless

the LORD, O my soul” — vv. 1, 2, 35), stressing the psalm’s unity; another (“established”) marks off verses 5–8; yet another (“man”/’*ādām* and “labor”/’*vodāh*) begins the fourth strophe (v. 14) and closes the fifth strophe (v. 23), bracketing and connecting two strophes.

Commentators almost universally recognize the structure reflected above (cf. Terrien 2003, pp. 711–718). Barker (1986, p. 64) adopts Allen’s (1990, p. 32) structural analysis, which consists of the following chiasmic arrangement producing emphasis on the central (C) section:

A	vv. 1–4
B	vv. 5–13
	<i>b</i> ₁ vv. 5–9
	<i>b</i> ₂ vv. 10–13
C	vv. 14–23
	<i>c</i> ₁ vv. 14–18
	<i>c</i> ₂ vv. 19–23
B’	vv. 24–30
	<i>b</i> ₁ vv. 24–26
	<i>b</i> ₂ vv. 27–30
A’	vv. 31–35

2. The Structure of Verses 5–9 and Implications for Verse 10

The previous structural analysis demonstrates that the second strophe ends with verse 9 and a new strophe begins with verse 10. The strophe (vv. 5–9) begins with a reference to “the earth” (’*erets*, v. 5), then switches to “the deep” (’*hōm*) emphatically placed at the beginning of verse 6. Such a placement could imply that “the deep” refers to something different from “the waters” in the previous verses — and, indeed, to a different event than that of creation. The second half of verse 6 places the adverbial accusative (“above the mountains”) first in word order for emphasis, thus providing a potential hint that “the deep” might refer to Genesis 7:11 rather than Genesis 1:2, and that the event could be the same as described in Genesis 7:19–20. Then, “Your rebuke” in verse 7 offers potential evidence for relating the event to the Flood rather than to creation.

The verb “established” (*yāsad*) opens verse 5 and closes verse 8 — both verbs taking as their direct objects either “the earth” or the two forms of dry land: “the mountains” and “the valleys.” In the following translation note the inclusio (literary bracketing) by means of the repetition of “established” (bold font), the independent subjects (underlined), and the plural verbs (arranged in vertical alignment) in verses 5–8 (the author’s own translation).

- 5 He **established the earth** upon its foundations;
It will not be moved forever and ever.
- 6 *With* the deep like a garment You covered it;
Over the mountains the waters stood.
- 7 At Your rebuke they fled;
At the sound of Your thunder they ran away.
- 8 The mountains rose;
the valleys descended —
To the place which You **established for them**.

In verse 9 the psalmist once again uses emphatic word order to place “boundary” (*gēvūl*) first in the sentence — an apparent juxtaposition with the earlier “deep” (’*hōm*) starting verse 6. This juxtaposition indicates that God appointed the “boundary” for the “deep,” whatever geographical entity that term might identify.

An articular participle (first participle since vv. 1–4), a new term for waters (“springs”), and a partial chiasm all signal the change of stanza at verse 10. Chiasms frequently occur in Hebrew psalms to

mark off stanzas (Watson 1986, p. 205).

3. Grammatical Analysis of Psalm 104:5–10

Examining the grammar and syntax of the text establishes the correct relationships between phrases, clauses, and sentences. Accurately establishing grammatical relationships provides the data required to determine the intent of the writer and the meaning of the vocabulary he employs. Grammatical analysis takes into account word order, which in biblical Hebrew can indicate emphasis. Care must be taken, however, in identifying emphatic constructions, since Hebrew poetry can shift word order to set up literary devices such as chiasm (mirror image inverted parallelism: *A-B-C-B-A*) or an acrostic (beginning a verse or line with a word selected to provide a letter of the alphabet presented consecutively — well-known in regard to Psalm 119, but no occurrence in Psalm 104).

The grammar of **verse 5** gives no evidence of anything out of the ordinary. The word order is perfectly normal. The first line’s use of the perfect form of the Hebrew verb indicates, by context, a past action with emphasis on the simple fact that God did indeed “establish” the earth at creation. The second line’s change to the imperfect form of the verb (“totter”) is consistent with the specific Hebrew negative (*bal*, “not”) and the progressive or continuing nature of the action as modified by the temporal adverbs (“forever and ever”). In addition, the imperfect form of the verb fits the result clause relationship (“so that”) between the two lines of the verse.

Verse 6 opens with the emphatic adverbial accusative “with the deep” (’*hōm*). Such a placement could imply that “the deep” refers back to “the waters” of verse 3, but potentially introduces a new event. The second person perfect form of the verb (“You covered”) returns to direct address just as the psalm had begun (v. 1). Direct address continues through the rest of this strophe (vv. 6–9). “You covered it” refers to God covering the earth (the antecedent for the pronominal suffix on “covered”). The use of a masculine suffix to refer back to the feminine noun “earth” (’*erets*) reflects a normal grammatical reality in Hebrew (cf. Joüon 2003, p. 551 §149*b*; Barker 1986, p. 75). The second half of verse 6 places the adverbial prepositional phrase (“above the mountains”) first in word order for emphasis, thus providing a clue that “the deep” refers to Genesis 7:11 rather than Genesis 1:2, and that the covering of the mountains is the same as described in Genesis 7:19–20.

Another emphatic adverbial prepositional phrase expressing instrumentality opens **verse 7** (“At Your rebuke”). The second half of the verse parallels the word order of the first half, placing “at the sound of Your thunder” first for equal emphasis. The psalmist uses the same imperfect verb form in both lines — a verb form with a final *nun* suffix (a paragogic *nun*), which he employs fifteen times in this psalm. This special verb form occurs when a writer prefers a fuller, emphatic form of the verb (cf. Joüon 2003, pp. 136–137 §44*e*). Sometimes the form indicates a deliberate archaism for poetic reasons. The context here, by using the verb “hurried away” (*chāfaz*), appears to use the verb forms for emphasis — the waters flee in terror, not merely in simple obedience (Lewis 1980, p. 310).

Although the Hebrew psalmist could be using the nouns in **verse 8** as adverbial accusatives of location, the context indicates normal word order with the nouns as subjects (cf. Barker 1986, p. 77). The psalmist maintains the imperfect form for the verbs, but drops the final *nun* suffix. This variation in the verb form signals a change of grammatical subject — from “waters” in verse 7, to “mountains” and “valleys” in verse 8. In addition, the closing verb (“established”) returns to a second person perfect form (see v. 6)

and repeats the root *yāsad* (see v. 5). Thus the psalmist brings the reader back to geomorphism — a focus on the land forms, rather than upon the waters.

Verse 9 opens with the direct object (“boundary”) in the emphatic first position in word order. “You set” continues the second person perfect with which verse 8 concluded. Then the psalmist returns to the final *nun* suffix forms of the Hebrew imperfect with the verbs “pass over” (this same verb occurs with the same meaning in regard to “the waters of Noah” in Isa. 54:9) and “return.” The imperfects with “waters” as subject distinguish verse 8 as a parenthetical comment — a parenthesis that explains how God set the boundary for the waters of the deep.

The strophe ends with verse 9 and a new one begins with **verse 10** (see above under **1. The Structure of Psalm 104**). The clearest indicator comes in the participle with a definite article as the first word of the verse. Six participles highlight the opening strophe of the psalm (vv. 1–4), but this is the first one since then. “Springs” acts as the direct object of the participle. The new term for waters likewise marks a change in strophe as well as topic. The *nun*-suffixed imperfect form of the verb (“flow”) agrees with the return to “waters”/“springs” as the subject matter. This change in verb form supports the argument for taking “mountains” and “valleys” as the subjects for the verbs in verse 8 since those verbs lack the *nun* suffix.

4. Analysis of Key Words

Establish (*yāsad*; vv. 5, 8): The root means “found” or “establish” (cf. Koehler and Baumgartner 1994–2000, p. 417). “The earth” frequently appears in the Psalms as the object of this verb along with God as the subject (Pss. 24:1–2; 78:69; 89:11 [Heb. 12]; 102:25 [Heb. 26]). As an architectural term the word is used metaphorically in creation texts in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Gilchrist 1980, p. 384; Schmidt 1997, p. 547).

Deep (*ʾhōm*; v. 6): Depending upon context, this Hebrew word usually refers to the “prymaeval ocean,” “flood,” or “depths of the ocean” (cf. Koehler and Baumgartner 1994–2000, p. 1691). Some scholars claim a reference to the pagan goddess Tiamat in the etymology of the Hebrew word, but such a connection rests upon “tendential exegesis” (Harris 1980, p. 966). *Tehom*-water “is simply a part of the earth, created by God” (Tsumura 2005, p. 143; cf. Barker 1986, 76; Grisanti 1997, pp. 275–276).

Cover (*kāsā*; v. 6): Moses uses this same verb to describe “the deeps” (*ʾhōmot*) covering the Egyptians at the Red Sea in Exodus 15:5, 10 and Psalm 78:53. But, the most significant occurrence comes in the Flood account at Genesis 7:19–20 in describing the mountains as “covered” (see discussion above under **3. Grammatical Analysis of Psalm 104:5–10**). Neither “cover” nor “mountains” appear in Genesis 1:2 or 1:9–10 (cf. Oard and Reed 2017, p. 171). The psalmist uses vocabulary and concepts from Genesis 7, not Genesis 1. Unfortunately, Harris (1980) takes the meaning of the verb to mean primarily “hide” and concludes that Genesis 7:19–20 “may merely mean that the mountains were hidden from view by the storm” (p. 449). However, the specified vertical measurement of “fifteen cubits higher” for the waters’ extent above the mountains makes this interpretation difficult to maintain. Mosier and Hill (2016) present an equally difficult view to defend when they suggest Genesis 7:19–20 might mean “the mountains were ‘drenched’ and that water rose to a depth of twenty feet *against* the mountains” (p. 27).

Rebuke (*gēʾārāh*; v. 7): Since this word presents a strongly negative and destructive concept, creation is an unlikely reference (cf.

Liedke 1997, pp. 322–323, who defines “rebuke” as scolding that results in a destructive outcome — not a mere threat, but concrete negative action). This noun occurs in Proverbs 13:1, 8; 17:10; Ecclesiastes 7:5; Job 26:11; Psalms 18:15 (Heb. 16; a repetition of 2 Sam. 22:16); 76:6 (Heb. 7); 80:16 (Heb. 17); and Isaiah 30:17; 50:2; 51:20; 66:15. The term fits best with the Flood event, since God in His wrath judged the world by means of the Flood — creation does not involve divine judgment. Hartley (1997), however, insists on keeping creation as the context in Psalm 104 (p. 885). Interestingly, an infinitive form of the root *gāʾar* occurs in Isaiah 54:9 in which God explains that the “waters of Noah” would never again “pass over” (NASB95 translates this verb as “flood”) the earth. The “rebuke” in Isaiah 54:9, however, refers to God not rebuking Israel — perhaps a play on Psalm 104:7?

Hurry away (*chāfaz*; v. 7): Parallel to “flee,” this verb depicts fleeing in terror, rather than simple obedience (cf. Koehler and Baumgartner 1994–2000, p. 339; Lewis 1980, p. 310). Tomasino (1997) identifies the root’s primary reference to be “to a mental state, ranging from a fearful despair to an outright panic” (p. 229).

Valley (*biqʾāh*; v. 8): Koehler and Baumgartner (1994–2000) define the word as a reference to a “valley-plain wide U-shaped valley with gentle sides” (p. 150). Care must be taken to avoid accepting their definition as geologically technical, but it is clear that this kind of broad valley contrasts with the narrower valleys formed by the wadis in the near eastern landscape or by the steep valleys characteristic of many mountain ranges (cf. Rasmussen 1997, p. 704). The word has become most familiar in the name of the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon.

Boundary (*gēvūl*; v. 9): *Gēvūl* refers to any boundary by which a territory can be demarcated or a barrier (rim, fence, shore) by which something is limited (cf. Koehler and Baumgartner 1994–2000, p. 171).

Return (*shūv*; v. 9): Sometimes the use of “return” implies a modifying “again,” because the root meaning of this verb includes motion back to a point of origin (cf. Koehler and Baumgartner 1994–2000, p. 1429). *Shūv* also occurs in a construction that can indicate “coming and going” to describe the gradual decrease of water level after the Flood in Genesis 8:3 (cf. Barrick 2008, pp. 269–272).

Spring (*maʾyān*; v. 10): By this word the text refers to the source of water or headwaters (cf. Koehler and Baumgartner 1994–2000, p. 612). It denotes water flowing from “an opening in a hillside or valley” (Schultz 1980, p. 663).

Valley (*nachal*; v. 10): In contrast to *biqʾāh* in verse 8, this term denotes wadis, gorges, or perennial streams (cf. Koehler and Baumgartner 1994–2000, p. 687; Ross 1997, p. 47). These are the locations from which the “springs” flow.

CREATION OR FLOOD?

The structural, grammatical, and word study analyses point to the Flood as the historical event referred to by Psalm 104:6–9, rather than creation. The discussion now turns to a consideration of the variant interpretations, their potential sources, and their implications. According to Boice (1996), the final verse of the second strophe contains “a clear reference to the Flood of Noah’s day and to God’s promise that ‘never again will [the waters] cover the earth’ (v. 9)” (p. 841). Even Spurgeon (n.d.), believed that the text of Psalm 104 implies a reference to Noah’s Flood:

That bound has once been passed, but it shall never be so again. The deluge was caused by the suspension of the

divine mandate which held the floods in check: they knew their old supremacy, and hastened to reassert it, but now the covenant promise for ever prevents a return of that carnival of waters, that revolt of the waves: ought we not rather to call it that impetuous rush of the indignant floods to avenge the injured honour of their King, whom men had offended? (p. 304)

One of the more conservative and dependable commentators on Psalms concludes that verses 6–8 refer to the Flood (Alexander 1864, pp. 421–422). Alexander’s key argument involves the use of “rebuke” in verse 7, which he parallels with God’s wrathful rebuke in Psalms 18:15 and 76:6, as well as Isaiah 50:2. Although he takes the subject of the verbs in verse 8 to be “waters,” he insists that they consist of the Flood waters so that the psalmist “founds the statement of a general truth on that of a particular event” (viz., the Flood) (p. 422). By this means verse 9 forms a natural transition to the present (post-Flood) general description in verse 10. Kidner (1975) identifies everything from verse 10 on as “the hospitable earth that was the end-product of this separation of seas and dry land” (p. 370) at creation. He thus eliminates any reference to the Flood.

McCurdy translated and made additions to Moll’s German commentary on Psalms 73–150 as part of Lange’s commentary series in 1872. McCurdy received linguistic and exegetical help from the great Princeton Seminary Hebrew scholar W.H. Green. Zondervan’s reprint of the new edition in 1960 made the monumental series more readily available for current Bible students. According to Moll and McCurdy (1872, 1960), verse 8a (“Mountains rose up, valleys sank down”) should be understood as parenthetical, explaining how “the place” (v. 8b) was prepared for the retreating waters when the earth was created:

Before Thy rebuke they fled,
Before Thy voice of thunder they trembled away —
Mountains rose up, valleys sank down —
To the place, which thou didst establish for them. (p. 529)

However, Moll (1872, 1960) explains his reason for making the event creation rather than the Flood as follows: “The mountains are as old as the earth, and the waters which originally covered it” (p. 529). In other words, there is no room in his thinking for a catastrophic, global Flood that would have destroyed the pre-Flood mountains. This same mindset might undergird the majority of Psalms commentaries as well as the way commentators limit Psalm 104 to the creation event alone. Uniformitarianism associates the rising of the mountains and sinking of the valleys with the means by which the present natural order reflects creation — i.e., the present is the key to the past — a past without a catastrophic, global Flood. But, if the rising of the mountains and the sinking of the valleys produced the current natural state (which they did according to scholars like Moll, McCurdy, and Green), such tectonic activity must have taken place during or immediately following the Flood (cf. Barker 1986, p. 78).

Ross (2014) argues that verse 9 provides evidence that the biblical Flood could not have been global. He takes the reference as a description of God’s raising of continents and making the oceans on Day 3 of creation. In addition, Ross equates Psalm 104:9 with Proverbs 8:29 (“He set for the sea its boundary”; p. 147). This association ignores the absence of the word *gʿvūl* in Proverbs 8:29 — instead, it uses *choq* (literally, “limit” or “regulation”; cf. Koehler and Baumgartner 1994–2000, p. 346). Ross could have responded with Jeremiah 5:22 in which both *gʿvūl* and *choq* occur

to characterize the purpose of the sand on the seashores. However, Jeremiah 5:22 speaks of the present post-Flood earth, not the Day 3 earth.

Evidence supporting reference to the Flood rather than to creation includes the following elements in Psalm 104:6–10:

- “Above the mountains” in verse 6 parallels Genesis 7:20’s description of the waters prevailing fifteen cubits higher than the mountains.
- “Rebuke” (Hebrew root *gaʿar*) in verse 7 presents a strongly negative and destructive concept that militates against creation as the reference. This term fits best with the Flood event, since God in His wrath judged the world by means of the Flood.
- “Fled” and “hurried away” in verse 7 imply fleeing in terror, rather than simple obedience (Lewis 1980, p. 310).
- Verse 8 rounds out the stanza by specifying the formation of mountains and valleys. The simplest grammatical understanding takes the mountains and valleys as the subjects of the verbs, not “waters,” which is at a distance incompatible with being the subject of the two verbs. And, the verbs do not follow the same form as verbs clearly taking the waters as subject (no final *nun* forms in v. 8).
- “Boundary” occurs in the first position in the sentence (v. 9), for emphasis. God set a boundary or limit for the waters as a result of the activities of verse 8.
- The return to a second person perfect form of the verb in verse 9 provides a marker for introducing the new topic and looking at the next stage in the description of the earth — the post-Flood world.
- God set the boundary to prevent the waters from returning (the verb can also be translated as “return again”) to cover the earth. If this refers to the third day of creation, the boundary clearly failed or was breached during the Flood. That would frustrate or nullify God’s work or purpose in placing the boundary. However, due to His own promise in Genesis 9:8–17, those waters will never again cover the earth as they did during the Flood (cf. Barker 1986, 79).
- Verse 10’s description applies to the post-Flood world the readers can observe for themselves. In fact, the remainder of the psalm continues this present-time description of the world in which the psalmist’s readers live.

TEXT AND TRANSLATION OF PSALM 104:8

Some readers might continue to object to placing Psalm 104:8’s event at, during, or after the Flood because of the majority of commentators, a potential textual issue in verse 8, and/or the variety of translations of the verse. Spurgeon (N.d.), for example, took “the waters” as subject of the verbs in this verse,

The vanquished waters are henceforth obedient. “*They go up by the mountains,*” climbing in the form of clouds even to the summits of the Alps. “*They go down by the valleys unto the place which thou hast founded for them:*” they are as willing to descend in rain, and brooks, and torrents as they were eager to ascend in mists. (p. 304)

Making the same textual and translation decision, Lawson (2006) writes, “These waters **flowed over the mountains** and then ran **down into the valleys**. In this stage, God put the topography of the earth in its place” (p. 155).

The Greek Septuagint (Psalm 103 in its numbering) uses the accusative case, rather than nominative, for both “mountains” (ὄρη, *orē*) and “plains” (πεδία, *pedia*): “They go up to the mountains, and down to the plains.” Another early example, the Aramaic Targum,

makes “waters” the subject of the verbs in Psalm 104:8 (Stec 2004, p. 188). However, Stec (2004) observes that the Targum stands at odds with the Masoretic Text (p. 188n3).

Some commentators associate verse 8 with Genesis 1:9 (“Then God said, ‘Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, ...’”; cf. Ross 2016, p. 249). However, the numeral “one” does not occur in Psalm 104:8. The singular “place” (*m^cqōm*) can speak of both mountains and valleys since the singular in Hebrew can have a collective reference with regard to species (cf. Joüon 2003, p. 498 §135c). In other words, “place” is the species for which “mountains” and “valleys” are members. This verse closes with a relative clause using “this/that” (*zeh*) as the relative particle and the relative clause adjectivally modifying the noun “place”: “the place which You established for them” (cf. Waltke and O’Connor 1990, p. 313n20 §17.4d).

Some insist that “waters” must be the antecedent to “them” (“for them”; *lamed* preposition plus third masculine plural pronominal suffix) at the end of the verse (cf. Barker 1986, p. 78; Kraus 1993, p. 297). However, the fact that “mountains” is a masculine plural noun, even though “valleys” is feminine plural, negates the argument. In Hebrew, when a compound antecedent of two genders occurs, the preferred agreement for the pronoun is masculine plural — a characteristic also of adjectives modifying nouns of two different genders (cf. Joüon 2003, pp. 549 §148a, 551 §149b; Waltke and O’Connor 1990, pp. 258 §14.2d, 302 §16.4b). This grammatical fact also eliminates the view taking verse 8a as parenthetical, since verse 8b continues the description without any such interruption of the flow.

Psalm 104’s structure, literary devices, grammar, and word studies support the preservation of the simplest understanding of the Hebrew text in verse 8: “The mountains rose; the valleys sank down.” The internal evidence contravenes the ancient versions’ translation choice. Quite a number of modern English translations stick with the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible: Geneva Bible (1599), Douay-Rheims (1899), American Standard Version (ASV, 1901), Revised Standard Version (RSV, 1952, 1971), New American Standard Bible (NASB, 1977; and Updated 1995), New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh (NJPS, 1985), New English Translation (NET, 1996–2006), New Century Version (NCV, 2005), New Living Translation (NLT, 1996, 2007), Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB, 1999, 2009), and English Standard Version (ESV, 2016) (cf. Oard and Reed 2017, p. 172).

THE ROLE OF CHAOS IN CREATION

Part of the reason so many commentators go with the creation event, despite the occurrence of “rebuke,” involves their preconceived notion that creation was really a battle between God and some form of chaos. For example, Keel (1978) associates Psalm 104 with pagan myths regarding gods conquering chaos or chaos monsters at creation:

Until it was conquered by a god (Ps 104:7–8), the dynamic Chaos harnessed in the sea and tempest was free . . . and ruled the earth (Ps 104:6). . . . In these sharply dualistic conceptions, creation is undergirded by the (provisional) victory of the god, who embodies light and order (cf. Ps 104:9; Job 7:12; Jer 5:22).” (p. 50)

Note how he admits that such a view might presuppose a dualism of matter and God. In addition, Keel (1978) writes,

He has set a bound which the waters of Chaos (the void) may not pass (Ps 104:9). Should they succeed now and

again in shaking the foundations of the earth, Yahweh immediately intervenes and establishes it anew (cf. Pss 11:3; 46:3; 75:3; 82:5). Since he has established it and maintains it, the earth, with all that moves on it, belongs to Yahweh (Pss 24:1; 78:69; 89:11; 93; 96:10; 104:5). (p. 55)

Unfortunately, many scholars view Genesis 1 and Psalm 104 as nothing more than myth (cf. Terrien 2003, p. 710). In fact, Terrien (2003) goes so far as to accuse the psalmist of “unwittingly, symbolically,” subscribing to “speculations on an uncreated *tohu-bohu* (Gen 1:3)” (p. 714) — in other words, dualism. Many evangelical scholars have signed on to this mythological approach, although attempting to strip it of dualism. Broyles (1999) concludes that the psalmist’s “imagery portrays the waters as God’s opponent, and thus stems not from Genesis 1 but from the tradition of the divine king and God of the skies” (p. 399). Another evangelical Psalms scholar who sees a divine conflict with chaos in Psalm 104 (and Genesis 1) is Davidson (1998):

Verses 5–9 draw on the mythological creation theme of conflict between the forces of chaos symbolized by ‘the deep’ and ‘the waters’ Such forces proved powerless to stand in the way of the creative purposes of the LORD who laid the unshakable foundations of the earth (cf. 24:2; 102:25). Rebuked, they fled to become mountain springs and rivers in the valleys, recognizing the boundaries within which they must flow. (p. 340)

Such an approach to the biblical text ignores distinct differences between the cosmologies of believing Israelites and unbelieving pagan peoples. Biblical writers did not depend upon pagan literature to present theological truth. Two recent extensive evaluations of the concept of *Chaoskampf* in the biblical accounts of creation reach the conclusion that the biblical writers do not adhere to the concept (cf. Scurlock and Beal 2013; Tsumura 2005). As Tsumura (2005) observes, “And, most significantly, Baal never created anything. Thus the Canaanite *Chaoskampf* myth has nothing to do with the creation of the universe or even of a part of it” (p. 144). In fact, biblical descriptions of the Flood also provide no allusion to the myth concerning a conflict with a watery chaos (cf. Harland 1996, p. 95). Collins (2006) declares, “There is no indication that ‘the deep’ is any opponent of God; indeed, in the rest of the Bible it does his bidding and praises him” (p. 54). That summation applies equally to any reference to “the deep” in Psalm 104, whether the reference is to creation or the Flood.

POTENTIAL GEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

As a theologian, not a geologist, this writer can only suggest some possible implications that geologists might consider as they seek and evaluate evidence in the light of the biblical text of Psalm 104. This paper assumes the factuality of a global, catastrophic Flood in Noah’s day by which the earth’s surface was significantly altered. In at least one model the Flood’s dynamics scoured thousands of feet of surface and redeposited the material as thousands of vertical feet of water-borne sediments resting on pre-Flood rock (cf. Snelling 2009, vol. 1, p. 281).

1. Large-Scale Crustal Displacement and Orogeny

If the Masoretic Text can be accepted as the original reading for Psalm 104:8, there should be some geological evidence demonstrating nearly simultaneous mountain uplifts and the depression of broad valleys and ocean basins during the late and post-Flood timeframes. Some interpreters of Psalm 104:8 reject the text as a reference to the Flood. Instead, they believe post-Flood mountains correspond closely to the pre-Flood mountains (e.g.,

Lanser 2010, p. 4). In order to support this specific view, Lanser takes Psalm 104:8 as contemporary with Genesis 1:9. He identifies the movement as the flow of primeval waters off the uplift of the original continent at the time of creation, rather than the movement of Flood waters. Lanser (2010) summarizes his study thus:

Therefore, when Gen. 8:5 speaks of the tops of the mountains becoming visible as the Flood waters decreased, these are the tops of the same mountains which were inundated in Gen. 7:19-20. They are not newly erected mountains. And it follows that the landmass which was inundated by the Flood directly corresponds to the landmasses we now have. None permanently sank into the sea, nor did former sea floor rise to become a present continent. (p. 12)

Such a conclusion stands in opposition to Flood models that display major orogenic activity during and after the Flood. The view also has repercussions on the current state of the earth's crust and its geophysical features. For example, Lanser's conclusion severely reduces the degree of violence by which the Flood destroyed the surface of the earth. It might also affect our understanding of the amount of water required to cover pre-Flood mountain masses equivalent to post-Flood mountains. However, the biblical evidence (including Ps. 104:8) contradicts any gentle destruction of the pre-Flood earth that might leave basic geophysical features in place. Thus, biblical evidence does not support identifying pre-Flood geographical features with current features.

2. Ocean Margins and Change from Catastrophic Surface Erosion

Geologists should find evidence in the geological record related to the late and, especially, post-Flood eras that indicates stabilizing ocean margins and slowing surface erosion. Some scholars believe that Psalm 104:8 depicts a random back-and-forth movement of Flood waters receding from the mountains (e.g., Allen 1983, p. 27). The text, however, describes movement of the earth's crust, which might imply major movements of water. In other words, tectonic activity provides the stimulus for aquatic movement, as argued by Snelling (2009, vol. 2, pp. 473–474).

3. Clear Three-Era Geologic Boundaries

Psalm 104:10–35 parallels the post-Flood world as described in Genesis 8:15–9:17 (cf. Snelling 2009, vol. 1, pp. 281–283). If the psalmist wrote with this period of time in mind, omission of earth's history from Genesis 1:9–8:14 would be unlikely. Very few commentators, if any, have taken the time to consider the implications of such a major omission. Geologists, on the other hand, could expect to see in the rock record clear demarcations between pre-Flood, Flood, and post-Flood earth history. Given the biblical description of its globality and violence, the geologic evidence for the Flood should be major.

4. Absence of Global Catastrophic Chaos in Pre-Flood/Creation

Geologists following biblical details should not expect any evidence indicating global catastrophic chaotic conditions on the earth's surface from the beginning of creation. With the uplifting of dry land out of the global ocean on the third day of creation, some evidence of geological chaos might be expected. However, it will not be as global or as severe as geological chaos relating to the catastrophic and violent nature of the Flood. At some points in the geological record, both Flood sediments and pre-Flood geological structures should show evidence of the Flood's extreme violence, tectonic and volcanic activity, as well as occasional more localized chaotic currents in the deluge's mudflows.

CONCLUSION

Psalm 104:8 identifies a tectonic event or series of events best related to the Noahic Flood and occurring either during, near the end, or after the Flood. Exegetical analysis of the Hebrew text supports this interpretation based upon the structure, grammar, and vocabulary of the psalm. Psalm 104:6–9 reveal a greater affinity to Genesis 7 than to Genesis 1. Psalm 104 does not limit itself to creation. The psalmist writes of three major eras in earth history: creation (vv. 1–5), Flood (vv. 6–9), and post-Flood (vv. 10–35). Proponents of creation as the event involved in these verses tend to ignore the details of the Hebrew text or to come under the influence of uniformitarian preconceptions or to reveal an over-emphasis on pagan myths depicting creation as a battle between God and chaos. “The mountains rose, the valleys sank down — to the place which You established for them” remains the best translation for verse 8.

This interpretation of the biblical text validates a search for geological evidence for large-scale crustal displacement and orogeny. Evidence should also be present in the geologic record regarding the stabilization of ocean margins and differentiating degrees of surface erosion. Geologic boundaries for three major periods of earth history should also appear: pre-Flood, Flood, and post-Flood. Lastly, evidence in the geologic record should provide a relatively orderly and irenic creation record as compared to the extensive and extreme violence and chaos of the mechanisms involved in the Noahic Flood's initiation, progress, and after-effects.

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