

## **ECO-THEOLOGICAL READING OF PSALM 104: IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIANS**

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates the eco-theological dimensions of Psalm 104 and its relevance for African Christians. The text's profound insights into the harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world have been overshadowed by more immediate personal concerns particularly in African Christian context. This oversight presents a dual challenge: firstly, the underexplored ecological dimensions of Psalm 104 within African Christian devotional practices, and secondly, the resulting gap in understanding the implications of such ecological teachings on contemporary environmental challenges. The problem addressed hinges on the need to explore how African Christians can engage their natural environment in the light of their faith against the background of contemporary ecological challenges, by the use of Psalm in their worship experience. The objective of the study is to theologically examine the ecological themes present in Psalm 104 and analyze their implications for environmental stewardship in the African context. A qualitative research method is employed, involving textual analysis of Psalm 104 to identify eco-theological themes and their implications. Data were thematically analyzed with focus on key motifs such as ecological spheres in Psalm 104, the interconnectedness of creation, and human responsibility. Findings reveal that Psalm 104 portrays God as the creator and sustainer of all things and emphasizes the interdependence and harmony within the natural world. The text underscores the importance of recognizing the role of humans as stewards of creation who are called to care for and protect the environment. The psalm vividly shows the eco-sapiential attribute of God in a manner that invites humans generally and African Christians in particular to recognize their role as stewards of the earth and to scale up their appreciation for the natural world. Therefore, recommendations are made for African Christians to integrate eco-theological principles into their spiritual and practical lives, promoting environmental conservation, sustainable living practices, and advocacy for ecological justice.*

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**Keywords:** Eco-theology, Psalm 104, Environmental Stewardship, African Christianity, Creation Care.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Bible is theological in focus and the starting point of its content is the creation activities of God. Therefore, the interdependence of creatures in the cosmos cannot be separated from the theology (or theologies) in the Bible.

It is remarkable that the creation narrative in Genesis 1, completed over six days, demonstrates a structured and poetic parallelism between the activities of the first three days and those of the corresponding last three days (Marlowe, 2016). This parallelism suggests that the creations of the first three days serve as foundations of the creations of the subsequent three days, highlighting the interconnectedness and interdependence within the created order. This pattern underscores an intrinsic harmony and purpose in the creation narrative, revealing an inherent eco-sapiential attribute of God. Beyond a mere literary device, this initial manifestation of wisdom demonstrates a holistic and intentional weaving together of various elements of creation, showcasing the profound wisdom of God through interconnected relationships among different aspects of the created order.

The creation accounts did not talk only about what God created but also talk about God's prescription for nurturing of the creation as the key responsibility of human being, who is the apex of creatures (Fawenu, 2020). Therefore, from the Bible perspective, ecology and theology are inseparable. Consequently, the current emphasis on the environment and its conservation/preservation is not alien to the Bible or Biblical scholarship. Reference to creation is not limited to the book of Genesis. Of particular interest is the Psalms. Several Psalms speak about creation and nature. In fact, according to Davidson (2015), references or allusions to creation appear in over 50 of the 150 psalms of the Psalter. However, they have been read, particularly within the worship life of the Church with less attention to issues of environmental care and concern especially by African Christians. Psalm 104 is closer to the Genesis 1 creation account in structure. However, while African Christians fervently embrace the Psalms for spiritual sustenance, they have often overlooked the ecological wisdom embedded in such a Psalm like 104. The scripture's profound insights into the harmonious relationship between humanity and the natural world have been overshadowed by more immediate personal concerns. This oversight presents a dual challenge: firstly, the underexplored ecological dimensions of Psalm 104 within African Christian devotional practices, and

secondly, the resulting gap in understanding the implications of such ecological teachings on contemporary environmental challenges.

This paper thus addresses this lacuna. By exploring the contents of Psalm 104 beyond just reading it as a Psalm of Praise to God regarding his sovereignty, the paper aims to unearth the Psalm's didactic elements, shedding light on the ecological responsibilities and interconnectedness of nature woven into its verses. The goal is to bridge the gap between the devotional use of Psalms and their profound ecological teachings and accentuate a perspective that could reshape African Christian engagement in environmental stewardship. Through this exploration, contribution is not only made to the scholarly discourse but also to the broader narrative of a bible-based environmental ethics in Africa.

Qualitative research method is employed, involving textual analysis of Psalm 104 to identify eco-theological themes and their implications. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis that focused on key motifs within the text. The Thesis of the paper is that beyond the conventional theology of the sovereignty of God that has been identified in Psalm 104, the specific category of the theology it projects is eco-theological in texture, eco-sapiential in essence, and it is valuable for advocacy on environmental stewardship in Africa.

## **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION**

Nwaigbo (2011) defines eco-theology as “a reflective theology of social responsibility with a view to save the earth and the universe from further destruction.” This theology begins from the understanding of the human person as a being created in the image and likeness of God and thus worthy of preserving and being preserved. It also understands the human person as a being amid other beings that are deserving of respect and preservation. Eco-theological interpretation of the Bible is largely an apologetic response to Lynn White's perspective that certain aspects of Western Christianity, specifically its anthropocentric view of nature, contributed to an environmental crisis (Kavusa, 2019; Ndifon, et al., 2008). White (1967) suggested that the biblical notion of

humanity having dominion over nature contributed to an exploitative attitude toward the environment. Eco-theology emerged essentially or in part as a response to this critique, seeking to reinterpret theological and biblical perspectives to emphasize environmental stewardship and ecological responsibility and establish that biblical traditions are eco-friendly. Eco-theology generally advocates for a more harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, drawing on biblical principles to harness biblical wisdom in support environmental care and sustainability.

Therefore, core elements in eco-theological interpretation of biblical texts include reinterpreting human dominion over nature and environment by emphasizing creation care through re-examination of relevant biblical texts for a theological reflection on the interconnectedness of all life forms and the implications of environmental degradation from a Christian theological perspective. Consequently, eco-theological interpretation of biblical texts is a dynamic and evolving process that engages with scripture, theology, and ecological principles to inform a Christian response to environmental concerns.

## **PERSPECTIVES ON ECO-THEOLOGY**

A careful appraisal of the views of prominent scholars of eco-theology shows both points of convergence and divergence. Pertaining to the former, all scholars emphasize the interconnectedness of all living beings and the Earth. Berry (1999), McFague (1993), Boff (1997), Ruether (2000), and Fox (1988), share common concern for the delicate balance and interdependence within the natural world and affirm the sacredness of nature. They argue for the recognition of divine presence in creation, fostering a sense of reverence and responsibility towards the Earth (Edet et al., 2024). The scholars advocate a holistic spirituality that integrates ecological awareness with religious and ethical principles. This involves acknowledging the spiritual dimensions inherent in the natural world. They advocate for the development of environmental ethics grounded in religious and spiritual values. They call for responsible stewardship and ethical treatment of the environment.

On the divergence of their perspectives, while McFague (1993) and Fox (1988) propose an immanent embodied understanding of God within the world, Berry (1999) and Boff (1997) incorporate more pantheistic elements, blurring the lines between the divine and the created. Ruether (2000) on the other hand, tends to emphasize a more transcendent understanding of God. Also, their perspectives on biblical interpretation vary. McFague (1993) and Fox (1988) often employ metaphorical and symbolic readings of scripture to highlight ecological insights, while Berry (1999) and Boff (1997) integrate indigenous wisdom with a cosmic interpretation. Ruether (2000) brings feminist perspectives into her biblical hermeneutics. Boff (1997) emphasizes the importance of considering cultural context, especially in the global South, in shaping eco-theological perspectives. McFague (1993), Berry (1999), Ruether (2000), and Fox (1988) did not explicitly focus on this aspect in their works. Furthermore, Boff (1997) and Ruether (2000), with their background in liberation theology, emphasize justice and liberation as integral to eco-theology. Fox (1988), while also advocating for justice, places a stronger emphasis on mysticism and spiritual experience.

McFague (2000) and Fox (1988) lean towards biocentrism, emphasizing the intrinsic value of all living beings. Berry (1999) and Boff (1997), while recognizing the importance of humans within the Earth community, advocate for a balanced anthropocentrism. On the other hand, Ruether (2000) integrates a feminist eco-theological perspective, which includes considerations of gender justice. Despite these divergences, a common thread among these scholars is a deep concern for the Earth's well-being, recognition of the spiritual dimensions within nature, and a call for ethical and responsible engagement with the environment. Each scholar contributes a unique facet to the broader discourse on eco-theology, offering a rich and diverse set of perspectives that collectively enrich the conversation on humanity's relationship with the natural world.

Nevertheless, it is pertinent to state that there are scholars who have expressed reservations or critiques regarding certain ecological interpretations

of the Bible. Troster (2013) argues that traditional religions cannot be truly "green" in the face of the modern environmental crisis due to qualitative differences in technology and a radical shift in scientific knowledge about the natural world. He criticizes the "apologetic" response of some faith communities, arguing that simply practicing timeless religious virtues is inadequate for addressing the environmental crisis. Instead, he advocates for an "eco-theological" approach, which integrates new scientific perspectives on the natural world with traditional theological concepts. Eco-theology, in Troster's conception, involves a deep engagement with modern scientific knowledge, personal narratives, influences from eco-feminism, and methods such as retrieval, reinterpretation, and reconstruction of traditional religious elements.

### **ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGES FACING AFRICA**

Africa is a continent with diverse ecosystems and rich biodiversity, but it is not insulated against global ecological challenges that impact its environment, economy, and communities in a manner that seems to justify the perception of Africa as the ground zero of the climate crisis (Sonqwe 2024). These challenges stem from a combination of factors including climate change, population growth, deforestation, pollution, unsustainable agricultural practices, and over exploitation of natural resources (UNEP 2024). Therefore, Climate Change and Variability is a fundamental problem for Africa today (Nguyen 2024). Shifts in weather patterns across Africa, which has led to more frequent droughts, erratic rainfall, heat waves, and rising sea levels are plaguing many African countries, like Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Egypt, and Kenya etc. These changes affect agricultural productivity, water resources, and biodiversity, posing threats to food security and livelihoods.

Similarly, the rate of deforestation and land degradation in Africa is one of the highest in the world. This is due to intense but unsustainable agricultural practices, logging, charcoal production, and urban expansion. Deforestation has led to significant habitat loss, and soil erosion largely in eastern and southern regions and significantly too in western and central Africa regions of the continent, thus making Africa the leading continent of the world in terms of

forest area loss (Climate action 2024). Land degradation, due to overgrazing and poor agricultural practices, further exacerbates these issues. Furthermore, the intense forest loss has heightened the problem of desertification in Africa, particularly in the Sahel region. The rate of encroachment of deserts into arable land is frightening. Desertification has unavoidably affected food security and contributed to migration and conflicts over resources (Mbaye and Signé 2022).

Consequently, biodiversity loss has become irresistible. The unique ecosystems of Africa and a wide variety of plant and animal species are being threatened today. Habitat loss, poaching, illegal wildlife trade, and climate change are contributing to a decline in biodiversity. This loss impacts ecosystem services and threatens the continent's ecological balance (Climateaction 2024). Equally, water Scarcity and Pollution is another formidable ecological challenge confronting the continent. Water scarcity is a critical issue in many parts of Africa, exacerbated by climate change, population growth, and poor water management. Pollution from industrial and agricultural sources further contaminates water bodies, affecting human health and aquatic life (Climate action 2024).

These myriad of ecological threat to the Africa Ecosystem and resultant effects on humans calls for concerted efforts from all stakeholders to achieving a mitigation in alignment with the sustainable development goals, hence the exploration of Psalm 104for relevant eco-theological themes.

#### **PERSPECTIVES ON PSALM 104**

Scholars hold diverse perspectives on Psalm 104, each offering unique insights and interpretations. This psalm is often recognized for its vivid depiction of God's creation and sustaining power over the natural world. Davidson (2015) opines that unlike in other chapters of the book of Psalms, where authors typically integrate their direct mentions and references to creation within a broader context of addressing various issues and themes, Psalm 104 distinctively and uniquely focuses entirely on God's creation of the world from start to finish. This is succinctly couched by Ross (2000) as follows:

Psalm 104 is a glorious Psalm in praise of God's marvelous creation and of His sustaining that creation...this Psalm portrays the Lord's power, wisdom, and goodness to all creation. The Psalmist spoke of God stretching out the heavens in light, His sovereign control of the deep, His adorning the earth as a dwelling place for man, His arranging night and day for life, and His preparing the sea for its life. He then praised God who gloriously reigns over creation and renews it by His Spirit. In view of this, the Psalmist prayed that God would purge sinners, who are out of harmony with creation.

Hence, Brown's (2022) description of it as "the most extensive psalm of creation in the Psalter" is well thought out. Miller (2000) and Barker (1986) emphasize the hymnic nature of Psalm 104, praising Yahweh as the creator and sustainer of the natural world. Miller sees it as a hymn of descriptive praise, while Barker distinguishes it as a majestic hymn focusing on God's role in creation. Davidson (2015) points out Psalm 104's distinctive focus solely on God's creation from start to finish, unlike other Psalms that integrate creation references into broader themes. Ross (2000) highlights the psalm's portrayal of God's power, wisdom, and goodness in creating and sustaining all things.

Motyer (1994) and VanGemeren (1994) draw parallels between Psalm 104 and Genesis 1, interpreting it as a creation rhapsody and praising God's greatness in ruling and sustaining His creation. Berlin (2005) identifies the psalm as a poetic retelling of the Genesis story, showcasing inner biblical interpretation. Similarly, Bullock (2018) connects creation themes in Psalms to Genesis, introducing wisdom and strength as additional dimensions of God's creative work. Brown (2022) appreciates Psalm 104 as the most extensive psalm of creation, while Davidson (2015) explores its inter-textual relationships with Genesis, introducing a unique "why" of creation. Davidson's emphasis on *creatio continua* distinguishes Psalm 104 from Genesis 1, highlighting God's ongoing care for creation. Osborn (2000) emphasizes human responsibility in stewardship within the broader dependence on God's care.

Brueggemann (1984) delves into the theological profundity of Psalm 104,



noting its focus on creation rather than the Creator. He appreciates the interconnectedness within creation and the psalmist's acknowledgment of dependence on God. Coetzee's (2008) unique perspective views Psalm 104 as an embodied history of Yahweh, linking human experience, bodily perception, and the poet's expression. This approach challenges an anthropocentric view, urging recognition of human participation in God's creation and history. Barker's (1986) divergent interpretation associates Psalm 104:6-9 with Noah's flood rather than Genesis 1. His conclusions highlight the psalm's unique theology, cosmology, and a broader cosmological perspective extending beyond Genesis 1. Essentially, there are varying interpretations of Psalm 104, addressing its hymnic nature, its relationship to Genesis, inter-textuality, and the theological depth of its creation narrative. Each perspective contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the profound themes of the psalm.

#### **PSALMS IN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY VIS-À-VIS THE VALUE OF PSALM 104**

Most of the extant scholarships on the use or interpretation of Psalms in Africa are selectively on imprecatory and lament Psalms. This portends a grave theological deficiency, under-exploration, and under- utilization of the rich theological, sapiential, and spiritual richness stocked up in this literary category of the holy writ. Some of such works include those of Adamo (2008), Ademiluka (2006), Gyanvi-Blay and Twumasi-Ankrah (2021) etc.

Solomon Olushola Ademiluka's (2006) study highlights the distinctive African usage of Psalms, particularly the imprecatory Psalms, beyond Sunday worship. Africans employ Psalms in conjunction with traditional techniques of African medicine and magic for protective, healing, and various purposes. The rationale for this usage is rooted in the perceived similarities between ancient Israelite and African cosmologies, especially as depicted in the Psalter. He emphasizes the shared aspects of traditional consciousness and the fear of enemies, common to both individual Israelites and traditional Africans. In this context, enemies mentioned in the Psalms are understood by Africans as

witches, sorcerers, and those harboring hatred against the individual. African Christians, notably prophets in African Independent Churches, actively use Psalms to protect against and counteract the perceived malevolent intentions of these enemies.

The term 'imprecatory' is used to describe the act of invoking evil upon somebody using Psalms. The significance of this imprecatory use of Psalms is underscored in the context of the contextualization of Christianity in Africa. It reflects the adaptation of biblical teachings to address the specific challenges and fears present in African traditional beliefs, demonstrating a syncretic approach to spirituality. In the paper titled "Reading Psalm 109 in African Christianity," David T. Adamo's (2008) Africentric interpretation, sees Psalm 109 as a prayer for justice and protection. This perspective introduces a nuanced understanding that diverges from the Western characterization of hate, vengeance, cursing, and violence. Instead, the Africentric view positions the psalm as a plea for God's intervention on behalf of the righteous and the poor. He emphasised on God fighting for the righteous and the poor, as opposed to relying on alternative practices like visiting witch doctors, herbalists, or seeking aid from other sources, in a manner that reflects a distinctive approach within the African Christian context.

Adamo (2018) did a similar interpretation of Psalm 23 in another paper titled, *Reading Psalm 23 in African context* where he stated that "African Christians read, sang, chanted, and inscribed this Psalm with a view to be protected on a dangerous journey on the road or on a flight or sea or when one is asleep at night to be healed of diseases, for provision at the time of need and to achieve success in life. That is the existential situation in Africa." Similarly, he maintained the same argument in another work titled, even though the Africentric approach may seem alien to substantial non-African scholars, it is unequivocally part of the existential challenges facing African people. He asserts that evidence from biblical archaeology show that in similar fashion as Africans, ancient Israelites used the book of Psalms for protection, healing, and success in life, according to ancient Near Eastern Cultures (Adamo, 2015).

Joseph Gyanvi-Blay and Emmanuel Twumasi-Ankrah (2021) explore the African reading of Psalm 24:3-6 and its implications for enforcing morality among Christians in Africa. The focus is on the entry requirements mentioned in the Psalm, emphasizing clean hands, pure hearts, avoidance of falsehood, and refraining from deceitful swearing. Highlighting the parallels between the beliefs of Ancient Israelites and Africans in their worship of Yahweh and Onyame, respectively, as monotheistic gods with a covenantal relationship with humanity, they argue that the priest or pastor, as the custodian of morality, must lead with integrity on the sacred hill of the Lord. The parallel between the Israelite cult of Yahweh and African traditional beliefs is drawn in the context of ritual purity as a prerequisite for entering sacred places. In both cases, defilement requires amends through sacrifice before entry. A notable difference highlighted is the Christian's emphasis on entering the temple with a remorseful heart, seeking forgiveness from the Christian God. The continuous need for moral purity is stressed, as Christians believe their bodies are the temple of God, requiring constant purity to maintain the divine presence. They suggest that contrary to the general Christian belief that blessings come through giving, in reality, blessings are attracted by observing moral or ritual purity.

Such interpretation that seeks to use the Psalms essentially for the purposes of fighting either physical or mystical enemies by emphasizing themes of adversity and strife, beclouds the value of Psalm 104 and its centrality in addressing the grave existential threat to humans and the entire wider web of nature.

## **ECO-THEOLOGICAL READING OF PSALM 104**

### **Background of Psalm 104**

Psalm 104 is one of the Psalms in book IV (Psalms 90-106) of the five books that the 150 Psalms is divided into. It is a Psalm in recognition of God as the creator of the living universe (Terrien, 2003). Praise Psalms characteristically call for the praise of God by flaunting his acts, attributes, and character. Such Psalms center on the role of God in history as the creator, sustainer, and

stabilizer of the universe. According to Grisanti (2011), “his care for the world gives His subjects the only reliable basis for hope and encouragement. These Psalms express great confidence in God’s sovereignty and incomparability.”

Regarding historical context, Psalm 104 is silent about its authorship, except that the LXX titled it as one of the Psalms of David. This makes some scholars categorize it as one of the anonymous collections of Psalms. Nevertheless, other scholars deepen their estimation of it by connecting it with the preceding Psalm 103 by principle of inclusion, thematic semblance, and grammatical similarity (Barker, 1986), although Vangemeren (2008) states that there is no internal ground for arguing that both psalms were written by the same author. Similarly, its origins are uncertain, but it is often associated with the post-exilic period or the Second Temple period and being a personal Psalm adopted for corporate liturgical purpose in Israel communal worship (Allen, 1983). Many scholars have pointed to its literary relationship to other similar ancient Near Eastern hymns thus Kidner (1975) suggests a possible Egyptian origin due to the various similarities between Ahkenaton's hymn and the Psalm. This is a view supported by Brueggemann (1984) because of the scarce mention of God in the Psalm. Terrien (2003) states pointedly that,

The acquaintance of the Psalmist with both the prayer of an Egyptian thinker, who wishes to unify the world of praise, and a Hebrew wise man, who introduces into worship the seven wonders of cosmogony, can hardly be doubted. Like the poet of Job, this poet is an international seeker of God in worldculture.

Similarly, others have suggested Canaanite’s origin of the hymn with Phoenicia been the conveyor of it to Israel (Dahood, 1970). The array of scholarly connection of the Psalm to different geographical areas of ANE presupposes a widespread and spontaneous possession of similar knowledge making it difficult to pin its origin to a particular place. Nevertheless, the obvious theological and cosmological distinctiveness of the Psalm suggest that the Psalmist could not have necessarily adopted the hymn from outside (K.H. Bernhardt, 1969). Therefore, it is very much appropriate to infer that the matter

of the appreciation of the grandeur of nature and its consequent stewardship is inherently and intrinsically woven to humans irrespective of race, ethnic affiliation, and geographical location and thus a further testament to the mystery of interconnectedness of God's creatures.

### **HISTORICAL, THEOLOGICAL AND LITURGICAL SYNOPSIS ON PSALM 104**

Several scholars suggest that the psalm may have been composed in the context of the Jewish community's reflection on God's creative and sustaining power after the return from Babylonian exile. The returnees were rebuilding their lives, and this Psalm could serve as a celebration of God's ongoing role in the world. Therefore, nature and creation theology are the core themes of Psalm 104 as the hymn praises God as the Creator and Sustainer of the natural world. It echoes themes found in creation narratives, particularly in the book of Genesis. The psalmist obviously reflects on the majesty of God revealed in the beauty and order of the created universe. It is in the light of this that Terrien (2003) asserts that the first seven of the eight strophes of the Psalm align with the seven days of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:4a. Comparatively, the structure and content of Psalm 104 bear similarities to the Genesis creation account in chapters 1 and 2. Both describe the formation and sustaining of the natural world, emphasizing God's role as the cosmic architect and provider. However, in contrast with other ancient Near Eastern cosmologies, Psalm 104 stands out in its theological perspective, especially when compared to other ancient Near Eastern cosmologies that often portrayed gods in conflict or chaos preceding creation, thus making it better described as theogony (Walton 1989). In contrast, Psalm 104 presents a vision of God's ordered and harmonious creation.

Theologically, the psalm projects divine sovereignty, wisdom, and care for creation. God is depicted as the one who established the foundations of the earth, set boundaries for the seas, and provides for the needs of all living creatures. Furthermore, liturgically, it is historically established that Psalms, including Psalm 104, were an integral part of the worship practices in ancient

Israel. They were sung, recited, and used in various religious ceremonies. Psalm 104, with its focus on God's creative power and providence, likely played a role in liturgical celebrations and festivals (Waltke, Houston and Moore, 2010). Succinctly, Psalm 104 emerges from a historical context of post-exilic Jewish community reflection, celebrating God's creative and sustaining power. Its religious context places it within the broader tradition of Hebrew poetry and worship, where it serves as a hymn acknowledging the divine order and beauty in the natural world.

### **STRUCTURE OF PSALM 104**

Different scholars have structured the Psalm based on different criteria, such as literary structure or theological themes. For instance, Motyer (1994) structured it into four, while A. P. Ross (2000) structured it into five. Furthermore, possibly because of the emphasis on the complementary nature of the Psalm to the creation account of Genesis chapter one, Barker, and Kohlenberger (1994) made a seven-point structure from the Psalm. Similarly, in addition to the prelude (verse 1) and postlude, Terrien (2003) structured the Psalm into eight. Nevertheless, Psalm 104 can be structured based on thematic content and progression. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, it is structured into three as follows, with each section of the Psalm focusing on distinct aspects of the creation of God and his relationship with it.

- i. Psalm 104:1-9: This section focuses on the praise and celebration of God's sovereignty in creation, emphasizing His authority and control over the natural world.
- ii. Psalm 104:10-30: This is the longest section of the Psalm and describes in detail various aspects of God's creation, including the hydrosphere, biosphere, lithosphere, and the interconnectedness of nature. The section highlights how the wisdom of God is manifested in the intricate relationships between various elements of the natural world. It portrays how each component of creation relies on and supports others for sustenance and perpetuity, illustrating a harmonious balance designed and sanctioned by God. This emphasis

on interconnectedness underscores the Psalm's broader message of God's providential care and sovereignty over all creation.

iii. Psalm 104:31-35: The final section offers a conclusion to the Psalm, with a call for continuous praise and worship of God, acknowledging His continuous care for creation and the dependence of all living creatures on His provision.

Largely, dividing Psalm 104 in this way helps to highlight the different themes and aspects of creation that the Psalmist explores.

### **CATEGORIZATION OF ECOLOGICAL SPHERES IN PSALM 104**

Psalm 104 covers various ecological spheres, highlighting the interconnectedness and grandeur of the creation of God across different domains:

1. Atmosphere: The atmosphere is the layer of gases surrounding the Earth, primarily composed of nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide, and other trace gases. It plays a crucial role in regulating climate, weather patterns, and protecting life on Earth from harmful radiation (Kesler and Ohmoto, 2006). Psalm 104: 2 mentions God stretching out the heavens (שָׁמַיִם- *shamayim*) like a tent. Biblical usage of the term *shamayim* includes the physical heavens as well as heavens as the abode of God (TWOT 1980). The former is obviously the most contextually fitting for this Psalm. Therefore, *shamayim* refers to all that is above the earth, particularly all that makes up the atmosphere, including air, sky, the domain of rain, snow, thunder, and dew (Holladay 1988). A blend of the scientific and biblical description of the atmosphere aligns with God spreading *shamayim* like a tent for protection of the earth from harmful radiation in a manner that indicates His sovereignty over the atmospheric realm.

2. Hydrosphere: The hydrosphere refers to all the water on Earth, including oceans, rivers, lakes, groundwater, and water vapour in the atmosphere. It plays a vital role in shaping the surface of the earth, regulating climate, supporting ecosystems, and sustaining life (Kesler and Ohmoto, 2006). Psalm 104:3 describes God laying the beams of His chamber on the waters (מַיִם- *mayim*)

while verse 6 describes the waters standing above the mountains. *Mayim* essentially refers to water from various sources – above the earth, from the earth's surface, and from below the earth (Holladay 1988). The description of water in Psalm 104 aligns well with the scientific description of water in terms of location and function, but the Psalm relates the source to God who created all things and makes rain to fall at His own will (verse 13). Functionally, *mayim* fructifies the earth thereby gladdening the heart of man (TWOT 1980). Again, this illustrates God's control over the hydrosphere.

3. Lithosphere: The lithosphere is the solid outer layer of the Earth, consisting of the crust and uppermost part of the mantle. It encompasses various landforms such as mountains, hills, plateaus, valleys, minerals, and soil as well as the underlying solid rock beneath them. These landforms are formed through geological processes such as tectonic activity, erosion, and weathering, and they play a significant role in shaping the Earth's surface and providing habitats for various forms of life. References are made to the earth's foundations (verse 5), mountains and valleys (verses 6-9) as supportive of other creatures' sustenance and thus acknowledge God's authority over the lithosphere, the solid earth.

4. Biosphere: The biosphere encompasses all living organisms on Earth, including plants, animals, and microorganisms, as well as their habitats and ecosystems. It interacts with the atmosphere, hydrosphere, and lithosphere, playing a crucial role in regulating the climate of the earth, nutrient cycles, and biodiversity (Smil 2002). The Psalm depicts God providing water for the beasts of the field (verse 11), giving drink to the wild animals (verse 12), and causing grass to grow for livestock (verse 14), demonstrating His care for the biosphere and all living creatures.

5. Anthroposphere: The anthroposphere refers to the sphere of human influence on the earth, including human societies, cultures, cities, infrastructure, and activities. It encompasses the built environment, agricultural land, industrial areas, and waste disposal sites (Maurya, 2017). The anthroposphere interacts with the other earth spheres and significantly



impacts global environmental processes and sustainability. While not explicitly mentioned, human presence and activity are implied in the Psalm in its description of God providing food for humans from the earth (verse 14) and humans going out to work (verse 23), suggesting the integration of human beings within the ecological sphere.

The foregoing reveals a comprehensive portrayal of God's sovereignty and care across various ecological spheres in the Psalm with emphasis on the interdependence and interconnectedness of all aspects of creation.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE INTERCONNECTIVITY OF NATURE IN PSALM 104**

The emphasis of this segment of the paper is on the second section of the Psalm which covers verses 10-30. Verbs as action words and prepositions as relational words as well as Hebrew parallelism were used generously in Psalm 104 in manners that accentuate the interdependence of nature as initiated by the wisdom and power of God.

In verse 10: שָׁלַח (*shalach*—to send, to let loose, to send away) is presented in the *piel* masculine singular, hence הִשְׁלַח (hamshaleeach – he sent forth). The term is commonly used of God commissioning people or element of nature on a divine mission (TWOT, 1980). The *piel* form indicates a causation which points to God being the one that did the sending of מַעְיָן (*ma'ayaaniym* – springs or fountains of waters).

The use of synthetic parallelism in this verse, where the second line expands upon or develops the idea presented in the first line is remarkable. In the first line, the focus is on the action of God "sending forth springs in the valleys." This depicts a picture of God's active involvement in providing water sources in low-lying areas. The second line builds upon this image by describing the outcome of God's action: בֵּין הָרִים יְהִלְכֻם (beyn haariym yahaleekumn) "they flow between the mountains." Therefore, the flowing of the springs is highlighted, emphasizing their movement and the path they take, specifically between the elevated terrains represented by the mountains.

So, the verse portrays a vivid image of God's provision of water in the valleys, highlighting the interconnectedness of the natural world as water flows from higher to lower areas, sustaining life and demonstrating God's care for His creation.

In verse 11: שָׁלַח (shalah—give drink to, to irrigate) is presented *hiphil* imperfect third person masculine plural hence, יָשְׁקוּ (yashquw—they give drink to). The word is commonly used to express the giving of drink to both humans and animals as well as irrigating or watering the soil/ground (TWOT, 1980). The *hiphil*, which is used to express causative of the idea contains in a verb reinforces the interconnectivity of nature because the animals could drink because the fountains were available.

Like verse 10, synthetic parallelism is used in this verse. In the first line, the focus is on the action of water sources, the מַעְיָנוֹת (ma'ayaaniym – springs) providing drink to every חַי (chay) living creature of the שָׂדֶה (sadeh) field/ground. This emphasizes the universal provision of water to sustain the flora and the fauna. The second line elaborates on this by specifying a particular type of animal, פְּרָאִי (peraa'iym) the wild donkeys that quench/terminate (שָׁבַר-shabar) their thirst (צָמָא - tsama'). This specific example serves to illustrate the broader statement made in the first line, reinforcing the idea of God's provision of water for all creatures.

In verse 12 The parallelism here is synthetic with the first line describing how the birds of the heavens find their שְׁכָנָם (shakan) - dwelling places, while the second line adds detail by specifying that they sing among the branches (עֲפָאִי - 'aapaa'yim), obviously of trees that are being refreshed by the springs. Together, these lines paint a fuller picture of the birds' habitat and behaviour, demonstrating the interconnectedness of nature and God's provision for His creation.

Verse 13 contains a synonymous parallelism by which the repetition or restatement of the same idea or concept in different words or phrases in consecutive lines are made. The verse reads as follows: "He waters the mountains from his upper chambers; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of his work" (ESV).

In this verse, the first line describes how God waters (מַשְׁקֵה – *masqeh*: to cause to drink water, irrigate) the mountains from his upper chambers (אֲלִיָּיָהּ – *aliyyah*: a figurative language for the sky), while the second line restates the same idea using different wording: the earth is satisfied (סָבָא – *saba'*) with the fruit of his work. Both lines convey the concept of God's provision of water to sustain the land and its inhabitants, but they do so using different expressions. This parallelism serves to emphasize and reinforce the theme of God's care and provision for all of creation. Also, it depicts how God's provision of water extends to both mountains and the earth, sustaining life and nourishing the land. This verse underscores the interconnectedness of different elements of creation and highlights the essential role of water in sustaining the natural world.

Verses 14-15 pays more attention to the anthroposphere, where God supplies the needs of humankind indirectly through providing fodder for the cattle and directly through supplying people with food (Barker & Kohlenberger, 1994).

Synthetic parallelism is used in the two verses as the thought builds up for further elaboration of the idea presented in the first line. In verse 14, the first line focuses on vegetation providing food for animals, while the second line expands on this idea by specifying that the plants are specifically cultivated by humans for their sustenance. Therefore, the use of the phrase לַעֲבֹדֶת הָאָדָם וְעֶשֶׂב (w<sup>a</sup>*'eeseb la<sup>a</sup>bodat haa'aadam*). It should be noted that the choice of English word to translate עֲבֹדָה (*'abodah* – labour, service, work) in this verse seems slippery. Consequently, some English version like King James Version, American Standard Version, and New Century Version are anthropocentric in the translation of the verse to suggest that the vegetation is to serve human interest. However, other versions like New International Version, Revised Standard Version, and New American Standard Bible are more eco-friendly in their rendering to suggest that humans have stewardship responsibility to nature and must subscribe to dignity of labour so as to feed. The word עֲבֹדָה (*'abodah*) from עָבַד (*'abad*) which describes the job a husbandman, points back to the agricultural responsibility given to Adam in Genesis 2:15.

Verse 15 further emphasizes the provision of food for humans through vegetation, specifically mentioning wine that gladdens the heart and oil that makes the face shine. This elaborates on the concept introduced in verse 14, emphasizing the diverse ways in which plants sustain human life and well-being. Together, these verses depict the interconnectedness of nature, where vegetation serves as a source of sustenance for both animals and humans, illustrating God's provision for all living creatures, with emphasis on human stewardship to keep vegetation productively sustainable.

Furthermore, verses 19-23 point to the interconnectedness of climatic elements fostered by the cyclical functions of the moon and the sun to create favourable times for the activities of both wild animals and humans.

Therefore, the prepositional phrase in verse 20 בְּ-לַיְלָהּ כָּל-חַיַּת הַיָּבֵשׁ עָרְוָה (in which all the beasts of the forest creep around) asserts further that different aspects of nature are interdependent. The relational word here is a preposition-based Hebrew particle, בְּ- (bow) which is derived from the inseparable preposition הָ (be) with diverse usage including a relation to place or to time (TWOT 1980), hence the various translation of it in English versions as “wherein - KJV, in which - NASB, when - NLT, the time when- CJB.” The statement describes that the making of darkness provided the appropriate and favourable whether condition and time for the wild animals to hunt for their meal. Therefore, in the ecosystem of the wild, beasts are eco-wise to hunt at an appropriate time, and that is the חֹשֶׁךְ (choshek) night.

Sequel to verse 20, verses 21 and 22 used the activities of the lion for hunting to explain the thoughts of verse 20. So, synthetic parallelism was used in which the first part describes a specific action of the lions—they roar (שָׁאָג - *sha'ag*) for their prey (תִּרְפָּה - *tereph*), which is their natural hunting behaviour. The second part complements this by attributing the provision of their food (אָכַל - *'okel*) to God, thereby expanding the initial observation of natural behaviour with a theological insight into God's provision for all creatures. This type of parallelism deepens the meaning of the verse by connecting the natural world's behaviour with divine activity, emphasizing the belief that God sustains all life.

In verse 22, as the sun returns, nocturnal activities cease. The lions retreat to their den (מֶ'וֹנָה – *me'onah*) – a habitat mapped out for their kind within the ecosystem for refuge and rest. This transition from night to day highlights the orderly nature of creation, where even the most ferocious creatures adhere to the rhythm set by the movement of the sun and the moon.

In verse 23, focus shifts to human activity, paralleling the nocturnal activities of animals with the diurnal rhythms of human life. With the sunrise, humans begin their day's work, continuing until the setting of the sun marks the time for rest. So, if man does not trespass into nocturnal operations, he should not fall prey to the ferocious wild beasts.

### **IMPLICATIONS OF THE ECO-THEOLOGICAL READING OF THE PSALM FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIANS**

An eco-theological reading of Psalm 104 for African Christians has profound implications, particularly in a continent that faces significant environmental challenges. These implications span theological reflection, ethical action, and communal identity.

*Theological Reflection on God's Creation:* Psalm 104's vivid imagery of God as the Creator and Sustainer of life invites African Christians to reflect on the sacredness of the natural world. It challenges the community to view environmental stewardship not as a secular agenda but as a divine mandate, recognizing the handiwork of God in the intricacy and beauty of creation. This perspective fosters a deeper theological appreciation for nature as a manifestation of the glory and wisdom of God. In reality, this conception is not alien to Africans generally. Many times, it is a response to the observable grandeur of God's creative act that provokes worship among Africans. Therefore, Kokoma (2005) asserts that, "Worship in an "African" context is inherently dynamic, encompassing the full spectrum of experiences within creation. As individuals, our expressions of worship are influenced and shaped by our environments—including ecological, cultural, socio-political, historical, and contemporary factors." To Africans and for Africans, the environment plays a

significant role in shaping expressions of worship. For example, rituals and ceremonies may be influenced by the natural landscape, seasonal changes, cultural traditions, historical events, and current societal contexts. Also, the idea that African worship incorporates the entirety of creation's experience underscores a deep connection with the natural world. This perspective aligns with many indigenous African belief systems, where nature is often considered sacred and inseparable from spiritual practices. The inclusion of ecological, cultural, socio-political, historical, and contemporary element suggests a comprehensive and inclusive approach to worship. This dynamic nature of worship aligns with the celebration of God's creative power highlighted in Psalm 104, where the grandeur of God's creative acts is emphasized, portraying the beauty and diversity of the natural world as a manifestation of divine wisdom and power, as articulated in verses 1-2.

*Ethical Implications for Environmental Stewardship:* The Psalm emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all creatures, which can inspire a sense of responsibility towards the environment. African Christians are called to act as caretakers of the Earth, protecting it from degradation and exploitation. This entails practical actions like conservation efforts, sustainable agriculture, and advocacy against practices that harm the environment. It places environmental care within the moral and ethical framework of Christian discipleship.

*Communal and Cultural Identity:* Many African societies have a strong sense of community and a deep connection to their land and environment. An eco-theological reading of Psalm 104 can reinforce these connections, offering a biblical foundation for cultural practices that respect and preserve the natural world. It can also encourage communities to reclaim and integrate traditional ecological knowledge with Christian stewardship principles, fostering a unique African Christian eco-theology. Again, this too resonates well with the African cosmology of the pre-colonial Africa, which is premised on a worldview that emphasized a symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment,

including plants, animals, celestial bodies, and the land (Kanu 2021). It is a symbiotic relationship that involved mutual preservation, where humans safeguarded the environment, and the secure environment provided for and ensured the safety of humans. Cosmological understanding included three interconnected worlds: the heavens, the earth, and the subterranean realm (Awajiusuk 2010; Owa, 2024). This worldview fostered a sense of interconnectedness, portraying humans as integral parts of creation. The belief that all elements of nature, living and non-living, were manifestations of spiritual forces led Africans to treat them as sacred. According to Alokwu (2011), this inseparable bond between visible and invisible aspects of nature shaped how Africans perceived, interacted with, and utilized their environment, influencing a harmonious and moderated approach to nature.

*Response to Environmental Challenges:* Africa faces numerous environmental challenges, including climate change, deforestation, and water scarcity. An eco-theological interpretation of Psalm 104 can motivate African Christians to engage in environmental activism and sustainability projects. It presents an opportunity for the church in Africa to lead in addressing environmental issues, advocating for policies that protect creation, and providing practical solutions that benefit both people and the planet.

*Eschatological Hope and Ecological Concern:* Lastly, Psalm 104, with its celebration of God's creation, provides an eschatological hope that the redemption from God covers all of creation (Eneji, et al., 2024). This broadens the Christian hope to include the restoration of the Earth, offering a counter-narrative to despair and apathy towards environmental degradation. This should encourage African Christians to participate in God's ongoing work of renewal, embodying hope through environmental conservation and advocacy. In essence, an eco-theological reading of Psalm 104 for African Christians should not only deepen their spiritual connection to God but also empowers them to take concrete actions in caring for the Earth as an integral part of their faith practice. It weaves together the threads of spirituality, community, and sustainability into a holistic Christian response to environmental challenges.

## **CONCLUSION**

The eco-theological reading of Psalm 104 offers profound insights into the interconnectedness and interdependence within the created order, as well as the divine wisdom and sovereignty manifested in the natural world. Through a careful examination of the text, we have seen how the Psalmist celebrates God's creative power, wisdom, and provision, depicting a harmonious relationship between humanity and the rest of creation.

Furthermore, the parallels drawn between the creation narrative of Genesis 1 and the themes present in Psalm 104 highlight the consistent theological emphasis on the interconnectedness of all living things and the divine intentionality behind their creation and existence. This eco-sapiential attribute of God invites humans generally and African Christians in particular to recognize their role as stewards of the earth and to scale up their appreciation for the natural world. As African Christians engage with Psalm 104 from an eco-theological perspective, it is pertinent that they embrace a holistic understanding of creation that acknowledges the sacredness of all life and the interconnectedness of ecological, cultural, and spiritual realities. By integrating these insights into their faith and practice, African Christians can contribute to the flourishing of both human communities and the wider web of life on Earth.

The findings of the study underscore the importance of Psalm 104 in promoting an eco-theological consciousness among African Christians, thus the recommendations that they more actively incorporate principles of environmental stewardship into both their spiritual practices and daily lives. This involves embracing sustainable living practices, such as conserving resources and minimizing environmental impact, and advocating for policies and actions that promote ecological justice. This will help to cultivate a community that not only respects and preserves nature but also actively works towards rectifying environmental injustices that unduly affect the vulnerable.

Furthermore, it is recommended that church leaders and educators emphasize the theological basis for environmental stewardship, drawing on Psalm 104's depiction of a world intricately designed and lovingly sustained by



God. This can help nurture a theological ethos that views environmental concerns not as peripheral but as central to Christian faith and practice. Moreover, the study highlights how Psalm 104 can serve as a catalyst for a deeper, more meaningful appreciation of nature's role within God's creation. By promoting such an appreciation, African Christians are encouraged to develop a more profound commitment to environmental stewardship, recognizing their role in preserving the integrity of the earth for present and future generations. This approach not only aligns with global efforts towards sustainability but also deepens the spiritual experience of individuals and communities, enriching their faith through active engagements with the world around them.

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