

Psalm 148, Pinnacle of the Psalms

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At auction in the United States on Tuesday, 26th November, 2013, one of eleven surviving copies of the first book ever printed in the American colonies was sold for US\$14.165 million. According to Sotheby's, this was "a new world record for any printed book at auction," surpassing the previous record of US\$11.5 million.¹ The book concerned is commonly called the Bay Psalm Book, produced by the young Puritan colony of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Its first edition appeared in 1640 in a print run of 1,700 copies. In keeping with other Protestant psalters from the period, this fresh translation from the Hebrew sought to produce a consistent metre for each psalm that would permit its singing in unison.²

It is striking that the highest priority for these Puritan settlers' nascent publishing efforts was an independent translation of Psalms from the Hebrew, rather than any other biblical book or classical writing, Christian or secular. Yet such a priority has precedents in Christian tradition. The Psalms played a central role in the Christian monastic tradition, such that the ideal exemplified in the Benedictine Rule was to recite the entire Psalter weekly.³ The basic component of such systems of spiritual disciplines from late patristic times was the 'Daily Office', a routine of prayer and psalmody running from Vigils in the wee hours of the morning to Compline prior to retiring at night. The office for daybreak in the Benedictine Rule was Lauds, a cycle of psalms that began with the penitential Psalm 51 and ended with Psalms 148–150. The name Lauds itself stems from the rendering of the Hebrew lemma *hālal*, the basis of

¹ "Rare Psalm Book Sells for Over \$15 Million," <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2013/11/27/rare-psalm-book-sells-over-15-million>. The title refers to the equivalent in Australian dollars.

² S. E. Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 158–159; W. L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 202–203. See the following reprint of the original: *A Literal Reprint of the Bay Psalm Book, being the Earliest New England Version of the Psalms and the First Book Printed in America* (Cambridge, MA: Charles B. Richardson, 1862 [1640]). <http://books.google.com.au/books?id=YDRGAAAAYAAJ>

³ Holladay, *Psalms*, 176–177; S. Terrien, *The Psalms* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

the repeated ‘hallelujahs’, by the Latin root *laudō*.⁴ Lauds still finished with Psalm 148 in the Roman Breviary of 1568, established by the Council of Trent.⁵ The same psalm or trio of psalms (148–150) features prominently in other liturgical traditions, Christian and Jewish, from the daily *Amidah* prayer detailed in the Jewish Mishnah to the practice of Lauds in the Ethiopic church.⁶

So the primary agenda for the birth of the new day, after repentance, was praise, and the purest praise to be found in Scripture appeared in Psalms 148–150, and in Psalm 148 in particular. This ample re-use in spiritual service is reflective of the impressive literary and theological qualities of Psalm 148 itself.

The Contexts of Psalm 148

Historical Setting

Many psalms sit very light to any specific historical setting and this in fact may have allowed them to more readily adapt to the spiritual needs of every age.⁷ This is definitely the case in regard to Psalm 148, as far as any deliberate reference goes. The single possible exception here is the fact that the ‘horn’ that Yahweh raises up in verse 14 has sometimes been understood as a reference to a specific deliverer or a specific event of deliverance. But even where so understood, investigations along historical lines have not established any firm historical setting for the psalm on this basis.⁸

It is nevertheless true to say that there is a scholarly consensus concerning the psalm’s time of origin. “Overwhelmingly, psalms scholarship is agreed on a postexilic date for Ps 148” and for Psalms 146–150 generally.⁹ This is argued at times on the basis of

⁴ Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries*, 52–53; Holladay, *Psalms*, 176.

⁵ Holladay, *Psalms*, 222–223. The second-last item in Lauds in the same breviary, immediately before Psalm 148, is The Song of the Three Young Men (or *Benedicite*, not to be confused with the *Benedictus*), which comes from the apocryphal addition to Daniel 3 and may show influences from Psalms 136 and 148.

⁶ Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries*, 43–45, 50.

⁷ Gerald H. Wilson, “The Shape of the Book of Psalms,” *Interpretation* 46/2 (1992), 138; J. Goldingay, *Psalms volume 1. Psalms 1–41* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 30–31.

⁸ Andrew J. Schmutzer and Randall X. Gauthier, “The identity of ‘horn’ in Psalm 148:14a: an exegetical investigation in the MT and LXX versions,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19/2 (2009), 162–163, 182–183; H.-J. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150* (trans. H. C. Oswald; Minneapolis, 1989 [*Psalmen*, 2 T., *Psalmen 60–150* (5th ed., Neukirchener, 1978).]), 564.

⁹ Schmutzer and Gauthier, “Identity,” 162. See the references offered there.

language,¹⁰ but I believe this consensus arises more from two dovetailing sets of evidence. The first is the general sense of (sporadic) historical movement within the Book of Psalms, for instance the feeling that one has moved from the Davidic dynasty around Psalm 72 to its collapse in Psalm 89 and on towards restoration from exile around Psalm 107. This is highly visible at ‘seams’ such as Ps 106:47–107:3.

While such a sense of movement through Judah’s history from pre-exilic to post-exilic times might be primarily an editorial achievement, this impression from internal evidence is reinforced by the second set of evidence that comes from external sources. In particular, the important Dead Sea Psalms scroll, 11QPs^a, is mostly composed of psalms found in Psalms 101–150 in our canon (plus Psalm 93), but also includes psalms from outside the Psalter and arranges those common to the Psalter in a radically different order to the familiar canonical one.¹¹ Other Qumran Psalms manuscript fragments, however, particularly those paralleling earlier parts of our Psalter, tend to support the biblical order.¹² This Qumran evidence, and 11QPs^a in particular, have given rise to “a new view of the stabilization process of the Psalter, in which stabilization occurred gradually from beginning to end with Pss 1–100 assuming relative fixity at a time when Pss 101–150 were still susceptible to rearrangement and supplementation.”¹³

Taken in combination, these lines of rather circumstantial evidence account for the quite dominant tendency to view Psalm 148 as appearing relatively late in the development of the book of Psalms, specifically in the post-exilic setting. A post-exilic setting might in fact mesh well with the sense of the Hebrew text of Ps 148:14 that Yahweh has (recently) acted to exalt the strength and dignity of his people, with two provisos: (1) that the post-exilic existence of the returned Jewish community does not always appear particularly exalted in biblical testimony about the post-exilic period, namely Haggai, Zechariah, Ezra and Nehemiah, and (2) we still have little

¹⁰ Delbert R. Hillers, “Study of Psalm 148,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40/3 (1978), 328.

¹¹ An example listing with some explanation is found in Gerald Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBL Dissertation Series 76; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 124–127. Note the one very distinct overlap between the sequence of psalms in this scroll and in the canonical Psalms: Psalms 121–132, the bulk of the ‘Songs of Ascent’, appear in the same order, suggesting that these songs (or most of them) may have already existed as a stable sub-collection in the given order.

¹² Wilson, *Editing*, 96–121.

¹³ Wilson, *Editing*, 73, and see 70–73.

direct evidence for the historical setting of Psalm 148 and should hold any posited setting very lightly.

Genre, Social Setting and Literary Antecedents

More common than attention to any specific historical setting has been the practice, based in form critical traditions, of identifying the genre of Psalm 148 and positing its cultural background. Psalm 148 is commonly labelled a 'hymn', a label whose appropriateness seems self-evident, and more specifically an 'imperative hymn', wherein praising subjects are impelled to praise the LORD.¹⁴

Mid-twentieth century biblical scholar Gerhard von Rad made an influential suggestion about the background to the literary form of Psalm 148. He drew parallels with certain Egyptian *onomastica*, lists of names of things that exist in the (Egyptian) world whose existence can be attributed (so the writers think) to Egyptian gods. The content of the *Onomasticon of Amenope* that relates to Psalm 148 is mostly oriented towards cosmic and physical phenomena, and the relevant content of the *Ramesseum Onomasticon* more toward classes of living creatures. However, both lists are long and, compared to Psalm 148, rather incoherent, showing little logical connection between categories, and sharing with the psalm only a general sympathy for list-making.¹⁵ Some scholars feel that hymns composed in honour of gods (especially the sun) in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Canaan offer better parallels, and the resemblances here are real.¹⁶ Others feel that study of hymnic traditions within the Old Testament (OT) itself offers more benefits to the researcher.¹⁷

¹⁴ Lothar Ruppert, "Aufforderung an die Schöpfung zum Lob Gottes : Zur Literar-, Form-, und Traditionskritik von Ps 148," in *Freude an der Weisung des Herrn* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1986), 275; E. S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 1, with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry* (FOTL; Grand Rapids, 1988), 17; E. S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (FOTL; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 451; Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 561. Gerstenberger is reluctant to divide the hymn categories too finely.

¹⁵ On the *onomastica*, see G. von Rad, "Hiob 38 und die altägyptische Weisheit," in *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (ed. G. Von Rad; München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1958), 262–266; Hillers, "Study of Psalm 148," 329–330; Ruppert, "Aufforderung," 288; Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 561–562; L. C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150* (rev. ed., Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville: Nelson, 2002), 392; Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 73 n. 17.

¹⁶ Hillers, "Study of Psalm 148," 332–334; Ruppert, "Aufforderung," 286–292. The advocacy of Canaanite precedents seems particularly attributable to F. Crüsemann: Ruppert, "Aufforderung," 289–292.

¹⁷ Hillers, "Study of Psalm 148," 331. See the discussion to follow.

It is popular for form-critical treatments to follow such genre analysis of Psalm 148 by commenting on its ‘cultic setting’.¹⁸ The social context for the use of such a hymn, Gunkel says, is the worship of the holy place, and he imagines a psalm like this one sung by a choir.¹⁹ More detailed suggestions involve the calls to praise being issued by worship leaders and the ‘rationale’ parts constituting a response by worshippers²⁰, but the lack of firm evidence undergirds the compulsory vagueness of Allen’s comment: “A cultic setting is generally ascribed to the hymn, without further specification of usage being possible.”²¹ To say that Psalm 148 was utilized in worship is both important and a case of stating the inevitable. Yet this psalm, unlike, say, Psalm 118, does not hint at the manner of its own use in worship. The quest to analyse social backgrounds so favoured by form criticism finds little to work with in this instance.

More helpful is an observation often made by form-critics about the internal make-up of the psalm, in that two common constituents of this genre appear in unusual proportion here. The call or summons to praise is the first of these vital components, while the other is the rationale for praise based in the LORD’s character, grandeur or actions.²² The psalm consists of a double cycle of call to praise (1b–5a)/rationale (5b–6)/call to praise (7–13a)/rationale (13b–14), wherein the twin calls to praise are expanded into lists of either spheres or (mostly) the occupants within those spheres that must offer praise.²³

Inner-Biblical Associations

This detailed recruitment of all parts of creation, animate and inanimate, to praise the LORD is something that marks out Psalm

¹⁸ Dominic Coad, “Creation’s Praise of God: An Ecological Theology of Non-Human and Human Being” (University of Exeter, Unpublished Ph.D. diss., 2010), 87–88.

¹⁹ H. Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (4th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1985 [1933]), 59, 66.

²⁰ Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2*, 451–452.

²¹ Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 393.

²² The first pair of terms is Gerstenberger’s: Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 1*, 17–18; Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2*, 449–451. See also C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 130–132. The second term is my own. Allen uses ‘grounds for praise’, Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 390.

²³ E.g., among many examples, Hillers, “Study of Psalm 148,” 327–328. In the definitive early form-critical treatment, Gunkel regarded this as an expansion of what was originally an introductory element: Gunkel, *Einleitung*, 36–37, 42.

148 as distinctive in the OT²⁴, though there are antecedents both within Psalms and elsewhere in the OT where natural arenas such as heavens, earth and seas, and occasionally their occupants, are called upon to praise the LORD.²⁵ Book 4 of the Psalms seems to carry an emphasis on universal praise; besides the references just cited, Ps 103:20–22 anticipates 148:1–4 by bidding the ‘heavenly hosts’ to praise, and while Psalm 104 does not have the same hortatory function, it still celebrates Yahweh’s maintenance of the created order in great detail.²⁶

Thus far we have encountered no clear literary dependence of Psalm 148 on another text, but there is one other biblical text sometimes suggested as a direct antecedent or model for this psalm: the account of the seven days of creation in Gen 1:1–2:4.²⁷ Some commentators come out strongly in favour of influence of the latter on the former, or at least the strong resemblances between the two²⁸, while others are more hesitant.²⁹ There is a suite of terminology common to the two passages, including ‘heavens and earth’, especially where artfully reversed at the conclusion of each passage (Gen 2:4b; Ps 148:13)³⁰; the use of the passive (niphal) form of *bārā* meaning ‘to be created’ (Gen 2:4a; Ps 148:5), and multiple terms from vv. 7–10 of the psalm.³¹

Yet there are differences as well, such as the explicit naming of sun and moon in Ps 148:3 in contrast to the careful avoidance of their names in Gen 1:14–18, or the atmospheric phenomena appearing in Ps 148:8 which find no real parallel in Genesis 1. More broadly, the order of the two series is not the same, contra the brief comments of Rogerson and McKay. It is not possible to clearly align our text’s

²⁴ Ruppert, “Aufforderung,” 282.

²⁵ E.g. Ps 96:1, 11–12; 97:1; 98:1, 7–9; 100:1; Isa 44:23; 49:13.

²⁶ See Ruppert, “Aufforderung,” 283, 293–294; Hillers, “Study of Psalm 148,” 331.

²⁷ See subsequent note on the place of Gen 2:4.

²⁸ Ruppert, “Aufforderung,” 293; F. L. Hossfeld and E. Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 639 (note that Zenger is the author of the commentary on Psalm 148); James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 445; A. Weiser, *The Psalms* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1962), 838.

²⁹ Hillers, “Study of Psalm 148,” 328. Despite Hillers’ citation of von Rad as advocating direct dependence, i.e. taking the opposite stance to his own, with the exception of citing a direct link at Ps 148:4, Gunkel seems to err on the side of caution also: Gunkel, *Einleitung*, 92.

³⁰ I would suggest that Gen 2:4 is not just a conclusion to Gen 1:1–2:3, since it contains the *tōlēdōt* formula that I am convinced functions as a heading in Genesis. Gen 2:4 has a ‘seam’ function that performs a ‘janus’ role in Genesis 1–3, referring both backwards and forwards in its context.

³¹ Ruppert, “Aufforderung,” 293. See the verse-by-verse commentary.

units in order with the contents of the creation week.³² We could certainly speak of the two texts' consistency of world-view, for example the apparently non-mythological portrayal of the ocean depths (*tēhōmôt*) and large sea animals (*tannînim*) in v. 7,³³ creation by command (v. 5), and the listing of humanity last among created things. Beyond that, it is possible that the seven-stanza structure represents a deliberate nod on the psalmist's part toward the Genesis creation account. Combined with the frequency of common terminology, this lends considerable weight to the argument for a conscious relationship between the texts.³⁴

The Placement of Psalm 148 in the Book of Psalms

The dominant new trend in Psalms scholarship in the last fifty years or so has been the perception of an intentional purpose behind the existing canonical shape of the Book of Psalms. This has constituted in part a reaction against the general form-critical tendency to regard the present arrangement of the Book of Psalms as merely a symptom of historical process, so that there are sub-groupings that bear witness to occasional collating efforts but little in the way of meaningful final shape or thematic flow.³⁵ The quest to understand the scattered genres found in Psalms operated as an alternative way to unveil a kind of order within the book based on various literary classes of psalms and their social uses. This approach has indeed borne fruit; it is helpful, after all, to recognise that Psalm 148 is a communal hymn that impels all 'beings' to participate in praise, and to compare this with analogous hymns within Psalms, e.g. Psalm 95:1–7b.³⁶

But the newer trend, probably sparked in part by the advocacy of canonical understanding by Brevard Childs in his 1979 *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*,³⁷ has been to seek meaning and, furthermore, editorial intention in the canonical shape of the whole

³² J. W. Rogerson and J. W. McKay, *Psalms 101–150* (The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 184–185.

³³ The degree of mythology remaining in the presentation of these and other entities in the psalm is disputed. See the commentary on vv. 7–8, below.

³⁴ Ruppert, "Aufforderung," 180.

³⁵ Gunkel, *Einleitung*, 435, 453–454; Wilson, *Editing*, 1–5.

³⁶ Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 131.

³⁷ For Childs' rather tentative movements from a form-critical background towards consideration of the canonical shape and editorial intention of Psalms, see Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 511–517, 520–523.

book, though not always to the exclusion of historical factors. Childs' student Gerald Wilson offered in his 1985 monograph *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* the seminal modern work advocating meaningful structure and sequence in the Book of Psalms.³⁸ Many publications taking a sympathetic stance have appeared since, indicating that the landscape of Psalms scholarship has changed for good since that time.³⁹

The approach has with good reason paid careful attention to the role of Psalm 1 as an introduction to the Psalter; Psalm 2 as either part of a joint introduction with Psalm 1 or else (as I think) an introduction to Books 1 and 2 of the Psalter; psalms at the 'seams' where the five Books meet, especially 72–73 and 89–90; intentional shaping within each Book; the psalm titles as clues to editorial perception and intention, and so forth.⁴⁰ Avoiding for present purposes the question of the degree of legitimacy of this perspective in general terms, it is relevant to ask about the implications of such a holistic stance for the final chapters of the Book of Psalms, the chapters surrounding Psalm 148.

In Wilson's own model, Psalms 146–150 constitute a kind of hallelujah chorus that concludes, not Book 5, but the entire Psalter. But his focus is on what he regards as the twin frames of the major part of the book, Psalms 2 and 144 and then Psalms 1 and 145. Wilson rightly draws attention to the way the kingly implications of the final set of psalms with Davidic titles, 138–145, are met very soon in the concluding hallel psalms with the exhortation, "Do not put your trust in princes/In mortal men, who cannot save," (146:3), and, "The LORD reigns forever," so that Yahweh's kingship is

³⁸ For Wilson's conclusions at that stage of his research, see Wilson, *Editing*, 209–228. A brief, updated analysis with helpful diagrams is Gerald H. Wilson, "Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalms," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (ed. J. Clinton McCann; JSOTSup 159; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993). For biographical background on Wilson, see <http://www.thesacredpage.com/2006/03/gerald-wilsons-contribution.html>.

³⁹ Examples are numerous, but typical of sympathetic treatments is J. C. McCann (ed.), *The Shape and Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter*, (JSOTSup 159; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993). An example of scepticism towards perceptions of intentional unity is Norman Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book* (JSOTSup 222; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996).

⁴⁰ The literature is considerable, but a snapshot may be found in David M. Howard, Jr., "The Psalms and Current Study," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (ed. D. Firth and P. S. Johnston; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005), 24–29. See in the same volume, Gerald H. Wilson, "The Structure of the Psalter," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (ed. D. Firth and P. S. Johnston; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2005), 229–240.

emphasized over that of any hoped-for Davidic king.⁴¹ He also sees the praise of Psalms 146–150 as an answer to the agenda set by the final verse of Psalm 145 as the psalmist challenges both himself and “every creature” to praise Yahweh.⁴² But his schema seems in practice to leave these psalms rather neglected, their climactic significance acknowledged but left aside from the main investigation.⁴³ One unanswered question is whether the positioning of Psalm 148 in its context is significant for its meaning.

There are literary features that help to unify Psalms 146–150. The most obvious is the *hallû-yāh* frame around each of these psalms, a feature only found otherwise in Psalms 113 and 135.⁴⁴ The general impression as one reads through the Psalter, finding single uses of *hallû-yāh* in Psalms 104–106, at the end of Book 4, then further uses in Psalms 111–117 and 135–136, and then, following the final Davidic group, in 146–150, is of a gathering chorus of praise. The intense use of *hallû-yāh* in Psalms 148 and 150 creates a sense of climax for this gathering chorus. As Wilson observed, it is possible to see the final line of Psalm 145 as announcing a praise agenda for the hallel psalms: “Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever,”⁴⁵ while its first line and second-last line both declare the ‘praise’ of Yahweh using the corresponding noun, *tēhillā*.

Then there are specific resonances between neighbouring psalms within these five. We should firstly note that Psalms 145 and 146 are linked by alignments of language concerning the lifting-up of the downcast (145:14; 146:8), provision of food (145:15–16; 146:7), protection of the vulnerable (*šômēr*, 145:20a; 146:9a) and judgment of the wicked (145:20b; 146:9b), all functions expected of a righteous king, and embedded in twin psalms emphasizing the kingship of Yahweh.⁴⁶ So we should not posit any radical break

⁴¹ Wilson, *Editing*, 226–227; David M. Howard, “Editorial Activity in the Hebrew Psalter: A State-of-the-Field Survey,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (ed. J. Clinton McCann; JSOTSup 159; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 63. Scripture quotations, where not my own translations, are taken from NIV®, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

⁴² Wilson, *Editing*, 193.

⁴³ Note the way Psalms 146–150 do not appear in Wilson’s diagram of Book 5, and hardly in the associated discussion, in Wilson, “Shaping the Psalter,” 80–82.

⁴⁴ Psalms 104–106, 115–117 only have *hallû-yāh* at the end, and Psalms 111–112 only at the beginning.

⁴⁵ Gordon Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed: Praying and Praising with the Psalms* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 71.

⁴⁶ Nancy L. deClaisé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 100.

between Psalms 146–150 and what precedes. Then Psalm 147 picks up the Zion reference in 146:10 and speaks in 147:2 of the restoration of Jerusalem and the regathering of the exiles, making the post-exilic historical setting of this psalm series virtually indisputable. In keeping with Psalms 145–146, we read that “The LORD sustains the humble, but casts the wicked to the ground” (147:6).⁴⁷ While carrying a clear creation theme over from Psalm 146 in connection with the stars in v. 4, and turning to cold phenomena in vv. 15–18 in preparation for 148:8⁴⁸, Psalm 147 maintains its particular focus on Israel at regular intervals throughout (vv. 12–14, 19–20).

At the other end of Psalm 148, whose tone is mostly universal, the sudden turn back to focus on Israel in 148:14, with the use of the notable expression *ḥāsīdīm*, ‘saints’, prepares the way for the strong particularity of Psalm 149⁴⁹, which immediately refers to the *ḥāsīdīm* again in v. 1 and retains this focus on Israel’s righteous to the identical final word, *ḥāsīdīm*, before the exiting *hallū-yāh* frame. Pss 148:14 and 149:1 also share the key term *tēhillā* already mentioned.⁵⁰ Then Ps 149:3 exhorts praise with dancing (*māhōl*), timbrel (*tōp*) and harp (*kinnōr*), while Ps 150:3b–4a features the same three terms in reverse order. Psalm 150 also shares other things with Psalm 148 besides abundant use of the verb *hālal*, particularly a focus on the heavens at the beginning of each psalm and the sense of universality expressed by the final verse of Psalm 150, “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.”⁵¹

To what degree some of these links within Psalms 146–150 are deliberate is hard to establish, and similarly, to what degree they are the work of editor/s of the book as opposed to original psalm authors.⁵² Certainly the sheer consistency of the opening and closing *hallū-yāh* framing otherwise rather distinct psalms seems

⁴⁷ Compare 145:20; 146:9.

⁴⁸ S. E. Gillingham, “Entering and Leaving the Psalter,” in *Let Us Go Up to Zion* (ed. Iain W. Provan and Mark J. Boda; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 385–386.

⁴⁹ See deClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*, 101–102.

⁵⁰ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 630, 635, 639; Gillingham, “Entering and Leaving,” 386.

⁵¹ Various writers expound the links between Psalms 149–150 and Psalms 1–2; I would agree with Susan Gillingham that Psalms 2 and 149 share in common the theme of the submission of the nations to the kingship of Yahweh, while Psalm 150 functions not as a frame with Psalm 1 so much as a climax to the swelling praises of the book as a whole: Gillingham, “Entering and Leaving,” 387–393.

⁵² Zenger, for instance, sees the ending of Psalm 148:14 as a deliberate editorial addition to aid the transition to Psalm 149: Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 635, 638.

editorial, and the absence of some of these in the Septuagint (LXX) and other versions confirms the impression that this outermost structure came late in the piece. To my eye the sequence of these five psalms does not seem to be the only meaningful one that could have been chosen, though Psalm 150 is, as Brueggemann points out, eminently suitable for its position. He aptly calls it “the most extreme and unqualified statement of unfettered praise in the Old Testament.”⁵³ A more appropriate ending for the Psalter is hard to imagine. But as I will argue in my conclusion, Psalm 148 at the centre of these final hallelujah psalms has a certain pride of place and represents the pinnacle of the book.

The Structure of Psalm 148

One ‘sacred canon’ of ancient Near Eastern (ANE) backgrounds is the idea that the ANE cosmology was tripartite, and this sometimes imposes too heavy an interpretive burden on OT Scripture, including Psalm 148. In a classic example, Dahood classifies vv. 1–6 as concerned with the heavens, v. 7 as concerned with the ‘nether world’, and vv. 8–13b as concerned with the terrestrial world, before a final historical reflection in vv. 13c–14.⁵⁴ In fact, Othmar Keel has shown from ANE analogues that a bipartite, ‘heaven-and-earth’ formula is “at least as significant as the longer tripartite formula”, displaying a world-picture that is arguably at its base bipartite.⁵⁵ Psalm 148 clearly plays a significant part in Keel’s treatment; he believes that the psalm’s structure matches an ancient conception of the cosmos in bipartite terms.⁵⁶

This leads us to the structure of Psalm 148. In such a highly ordered, carefully constructed psalm, there is no mistaking the key parallel structures. “Praise the LORD from the heavens” (1a) and “Praise the LORD from the earth” (7a) are clearly parallel openings to their respective sections, just as the twin “Let them praise the

⁵³ W. Brueggemann, “Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 50 (1991), 67.

⁵⁴ M. Dahood, *Psalms* (3 vols., vol. 3, Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1970), 352. Dahood himself seems puzzled by the dissymmetry of his own scheme on pp. 353–354. See also Coad, “Creation’s Praise of God,” 83.

⁵⁵ Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Ancient World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, 1997 [1972]), 30. Arguably tripartite formulae in the OT would be Exod 20:11; Ps 33:6–8; 96:11.

⁵⁶ Keel, *Symbolism*, 26, 30, 40; J. Goldingay, *Psalms volume 3. Psalms 90–150* (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 728.

name of the LORD, for [rationale]” constructions (5a, 13a) clearly correspond. Between these pivotal points, vv. 1–4 consist (after the opening *hallû-yāh*) of a series of seven imperative ‘hallel’ compelling praise from heavenly entities, before the exhortation (what is known in Hebrew grammar as a ‘jussive’ form of *hālal*) with rationale in vv. 5–6. Then vv. 7–12 consist, after the initial imperative hallel, of a tumbling rush of twenty-three earthly entities (in the grammatical role of ‘vocatives’) who are likewise bidden to praise the LORD. Then follows another exhortation to praise beginning in v. 13a, beginning with the same jussive form of *hālal*. That the total number of units, seven + twenty-three, adds up to thirty seems deliberate. The finely-gearred structure of the entire psalm suggests that an element like this was not left to chance, but expresses the completeness of the praising assembly by means of a numerological device.⁵⁷

The clear correspondences just identified lead many commentators to posit a psalm of two main sections, vv. 1–6 and 7–14.⁵⁸ To incorporate the entire content of the psalm, this proposal sees the first section as culminating in twin bicola (vv. 5–6) and the second section more fully in twin tricola (vv. 13–14), an arrangement that satisfies me.⁵⁹ One variant on this arrangement is to offset all or part of v. 14 from the rest. Hence Hillers affirms the bipartite structure of the psalm, but treats v. 14 as “a brief appendix” or “closing petition.”⁶⁰ A redaction-critical version posits that part or

⁵⁷ Ruppert, “Aufforderung,” 279–280; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 632; Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2*, 447, 449–450; Pierre Auffret, *La sagesse a bâti sa maison* (Orbis biblicus et orientalis 49; Fribourg/Göttingen: Éditions universitaires/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 390–391, 393, 399. It seems possible to carry numerology too far; without properly grasping all the principles of Duane Christensen’s ‘logoprosodic analysis’ method, something is wrong when its outcome is a seven-strophe structure that neglects the clear correspondences between vv. 1–6 and vv. 7–12 and finds as the ‘meaningful centre’ of the psalm, through syllable-counting, the term ‘and mist’ [or ‘smoke’] (*wēqîṭôr*) from v. 8: Duane L. Christensen, “Psalm 148:1–14: Translation, Logoprosodic Analysis, and Observations,” http://www.bibal.net/04/proso/psalms-ii/pdf/dlc_ps148-001-f.pdf.

⁵⁸ F. Delitzsch, *Psalms* (trans. F. Bolton, Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes 5; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1871), 404, 406–407; Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 390–392; Auffret, *La sagesse*, 385–387; Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 561.

⁵⁹ Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 390–392; Auffret, *La sagesse*, 385–387; Évyode Beaucamp and J.-P. de Relles, “Le chorale de la création en marche: Psaume 148,” *Bible et vie chrétienne* 72 (1966), 31–32.

⁶⁰ Hillers, “Study of Psalm 148,” 327.

all of v. 14 is likely to have been a later subscription or a redactor's attempt to integrate Psalms 148 and 149.⁶¹

It is also helpful to outline the psalm more finely in terms of its poetic structure. Each of the first twelve verses consists of a poetic line of two balanced halves, called a 'bicolon', while as mentioned above vv. 13–14 both arguably consist in our Hebrew texts of three parts in balance, or tricola. Typically each colon in these combinations has three 'beats' or stressed syllables, so that even to read the Hebrew text gives an impression of great regularity.⁶²

It is possible furthermore to arrange these bicola and the final two tricola in pairs, which results in a psalm composed of six quatrains (four-line stanzas) and an extended final stanza. This is reasonably well supported by the content of the psalm, where, for instance, the sixth stanza (vv. 11–12) would consist of classes of humans, and the third and seventh stanzas (vv. 5–6, 13–14) of rationales for praise. None of the paired verses sit poorly together. Such a combination into (mostly) quatrains yields seven units of which the seventh is climactic, and in terms of the bipartite structure, breaks down into three and four stanzas respectively.⁶³ When combined with the creation theme that dominates the psalm, it is a short step to find here a deliberate structural allusion to the seven days of the creation week.⁶⁴

Commentary

Stanza 1: vv. 1–2

Praise the LORD.

Praise the LORD from the heavens;

Praise him in the highest places.

Praise him, all his emissaries;

Praise him, all his forces.

⁶¹ Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2*, 447, 450–451; Ruppert, "Aufforderung," 277–278; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 630, 635, 638–639. No-one that I have found follows R. A. F. MacKenzie's proposal that v. 14b–c belongs as a title to Psalm 149. R. A. F. MacKenzie, "Ps 148:14bc: Conclusion or Title?" *Biblica* 51/2 (1970), 221–224; Hillers, "Study of Psalm 148," 328. Kidner thinks instead that Ps 148:14 inspired Psalm 149: Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1975), 489.

⁶² A rabbinic reading is available at <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/mp3/t26e8.mp3>.

⁶³ Terrien, *The Psalms*, 917–919; Beaucamp and de Relles, "Le chorale de la création," 31–32.

⁶⁴ Ruppert, "Aufforderung," 279–280; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 632.

We have discussed the fact that the initial *hallû-yāh* functions at a kind of trans-psalm level, binding together Psalms 146–150 and culminating the spasmodic series of hallel psalms that appears late in the Book of Psalms. It is an entirely consistent opening for Psalm 148, which uses the pertinent verbal root *hālāl* twelve times including these framing hallelujahs at its two ends, a frequency only exceeded in the OT by Psalm 150 (13x).

Verse 1 proper also begins with the imperative *hallû*, and in this first instance makes the object of praise explicit, ‘the LORD’ (or Yahweh), as the framing term *hallû-yāh* does, but now using the fuller holy name. The second imperative “praise him” simply uses the pronominal suffix to refer to the LORD, beginning a pattern that will persist through verse 4. This verse does not immediately invoke praising agents, but calls for praise from or in the heavenly sphere (here taking *hasšāmayim*, ‘the heavens’, and *mērômîm*, ‘the highest places’, as synonyms).⁶⁵

Verse 2 then moves to invoke the praise of beings that reside in the heavens. The word translated ‘emissaries’ here is *mal’ākîm*, often rendered ‘angels’ or ‘messengers’, the former term by now compromised by centuries of accreted popular conception. Again we meet immediately with a synonym, *šēbā’āyw*, traditionally rendered ‘hosts’.⁶⁶ I have opted for ‘forces’, permitting a mildly military connotation, conscious that ‘hosts’ has fallen out of present-day English usage. The image is probably the numerous ranks of soldiers and servants that an ancient monarch could assemble at need; and the LORD is the ultimate monarch. Holladay affirms that in the post-exilic setting of this psalm, it is indeed angels, i.e. spiritual beings on a lower tier than deity, that would have been in the writer’s mind.⁶⁷ Just as a human monarch

⁶⁵ There is no perfect English equivalent for *šāmayim*: ‘heaven/s’ most often denotes an unseen, transcendent realm, the divine realm, in modern English, while ‘sky’ is a purely physical term. While I believe that some distinction between physical heavens and spiritual heavens is already emerging in OT times, *šāmayim* can cover both, making the translator’s decision difficult.

⁶⁶ The plural is actually the ‘qere’ reading in the Leningrad Codex that lies behind the standard Hebrew text, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS), at this point. The text itself reads as singular, ‘his force’ (= the ‘kethiv’).

⁶⁷ Holladay, *Psalms*, 61. This makes the concept somewhat less fraught than the difficult ‘sons of God’ in Gen 6:2–4; Job 1:6; 2:1; Ps 29:1.

would have a large court of attendants at his command, so it is in the court of the heavenly King.⁶⁸

This call to the heavenly assemblies to participate in praise has a precedent in Ps 103:20–21.⁶⁹ From a literary point of view it is worth pointing out already that the two cola of verse 1 rhyme, as do the two cola of verse 2, although rhyme is less significant in Hebrew verse than English verse.⁷⁰

Stanza 2: vv. 3–4

Praise him, sun and moon;
 Praise him, all shining stars.
 Praise him, heavens of the heavens,
 And waters above the heavens.

The focus in verse 3 remains on praising entities in the heavenly realm, but has moved from what we would regard as animate, though spiritual, beings, to inanimate beings: sun, moon and stars. It is important to remember, though, that in the ancient world the line between animate and inanimate beings in the heavens was not so clearly drawn. Augustine's meditations on Psalm 148 in his handbook for the Christian life, the *Enchiridion*, reveals his uncertainty about whether the sun, moon and 'other stars' ought to be included among the various ranks of angels, or whether, as "some believe," they are "merely luminous bodies, without either sensation or intelligence."⁷¹ Though the parallelism with 'emissaries' (*mal'ākīm*) in verse 2 encouraged us to see the 'forces' (*šēbā'āyw*, 'hosts') in the same verse as animate beings, the very uncertain distinction between animate and inanimate in heavenly entities means that sun, moon and stars could well fall within the categories of verse 2.⁷² We notice again that, unlike Gen 1:14–19,

⁶⁸ H.-J. Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (trans. K. Crim; Minneapolis, 1986 [Theologie der Psalmen, 1979]), 49; Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; London: SCM Press, 1967), 2:194–202.

⁶⁹ Ruppert, "Aufforderung," 283; Allan E. Harman, *Commentary on the Psalms* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 1998), 450.

⁷⁰ Rhyme is both less necessary in Hebrew, and more likely accidental due to the limited number of noun ending possibilities. In essence, play in the sound of word-endings is common in Hebrew poetry but not limited to line endings at all. W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (JSOTSup 26; Sheffield, 1986), 229–234.

⁷¹ Quoted in Quentin F. Wesselschmidt, *Psalms 51–150* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Thomas C. Oden; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), 423.

⁷² Certainly *šēbā'āyw*, 'hosts' or 'forces' includes reference to the heavenly bodies that we regard as physical in Gen 2:1. On the overlap in the conception of stars and angels in the OT, see Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 406; Eichrodt, *Theology*, 2:196.

there is no apparent nervousness about dignifying sun and moon with names here; but they clearly do obeisance to the LORD.

It is hard to sufficiently express the sonic qualities of verse 4. Counting doubled letters, the Hebrew features six ‘sh’ sounds and nine ‘m’ sounds, a pronounced use of the poetic device called ‘consonance’, or similarity of consonant sounds.⁷³ Consonance is really more important in Hebrew poetry than (the closely related) rhyme, while this verse features both, since both cola end with ‘the heavens’ (*haššāmayim*). The ‘sh’ and ‘m’ sounds here recall ‘sun’ (*šemeš*) in verse 3 and anticipate the more important ‘name’ (*šēm*) of Yahweh in verse 5, yielding an extended sound play reminiscent of the sea surging on a stony shore.⁷⁴ Furthermore, there is an inversion of sounds at the halfway point between the two cola also, yielding a chiasmus of sound or palindrome effect that covers all but the outermost terms.⁷⁵ Such devices are an integral part of crafting and communicating meaning in biblical poetry, and at a more subtle level, also in prose.

The concepts in this verse are challenging for the modern reader. The nearest we can approach the concept of heavens above nearer heavens is the distinction between ‘sky’ and ‘outer space’, and this is not unhelpful. However, it remains a strictly physical pairing, whereas the concepts here are inclusive of a spiritual realm also. And what the waters above the skies could be is quite perplexing. One common solution is to regard them as the clouds⁷⁶, but this is emphatically *not* the psalmist’s idea, as convenient as it would be for us. Genesis 1 presents the sun and moon as embedded *in* the ‘firmament’ (*rāqia*) in some sense, while it is there to separate the higher waters from the more familiar lower waters—with the result that the ‘upper waters’ are portrayed as beyond the orbit of sun and moon! And these upper waters cannot have been some primordial

⁷³ This would be a good time to access the audio of this verse at <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/mp3/t26e8.mp3> to experience this. Listen for these ‘sh’ and ‘m’ sounds early in the reading.

⁷⁴ Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 242–245; Auffret, *La sagesse*, 390.

⁷⁵ Auffret, *La sagesse*, 388–389. This palindromic or ‘envelope structure’ in the sound in this verse may have required the abandoning of the otherwise quite regular rhythm (almost ‘metre’) in this psalm. Most cola in the psalm have three beats, as already mentioned, but this verse is 3–4, and I know of no manuscript evidence that offers a 3–3 alternative. Watson comments that, though it is unsettling for the Westerner, Hebrew verse tends to periodically break up an otherwise consistent rhythmic poetic pattern in this way: Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 98.

⁷⁶ E.g. Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, 487–488.

vapour canopy that collapsed, because they are here called upon to praise Yahweh, implying that they still exist, like the *rāqīa* ‘itself’ (Ps 150:1), for the psalmist.

Let me clarify the world-picture involved here if I can. Much has been written about this, but drawing on comments made about ancient worldviews by Peter Harrison,⁷⁷ I would suggest that the psalmist’s worldview (and that of both Old and New Testaments) assumes a correspondence between ‘earth’ and ‘heaven’, or human and divine realms, with the heavenly realm situated above the earthly. Just as the heavenly King has a court of attendants analogous to human emperors, and a heavenly throne (Ps 103:19; 123:1; Heb 8:1; 12:2), and heaven has (or is) a sanctuary (Ps 150:1a; Heb 8:2), so the heavenly realm has, I am suggesting, its waters corresponding to our oceans, and which may be understood to enclose our terrestrial skies (hence their blue colour).⁷⁸ Then this heavenly realm would have its own skies, the ‘heavens of the heavens’ (v. 4a). I take as confirmation of this proposal that in verse 8, atmospheric phenomena do not belong to the heavenly realm, addressed in 148:1–4, but to the earthly sphere.⁷⁹

With this reference to the highest heights of the heavenly realm, inarticulate agents of praise as in v. 3, both the psalmist’s survey of seven praising agents in vv. 2–4 and his seven imperative calls to praise in 1–4 are complete,⁸⁰ implying the call of everything that exists in the heavens to praise the LORD.⁸¹

Stanza 3: vv. 5–6

Let them praise the LORD’s name;
For he commanded and they were created.

⁷⁷ Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 13–17, etc.

⁷⁸ Keel, *Symbolism*, 36. The Egyptian picture on the same page clearly shows that the heavens (presented in Egyptian conception as a woman), complete with embedded stars, can be sailed upon by the boat that carries the sun, clearly demonstrating its watery nature.

⁷⁹ It may be objected that I am reading a Platonist model into the ancient Hebrew cosmology at this point, but the two are not absolutely different. The Hebrew concept seems to me less developed or philosophically construed, and more obviously ‘vertical’ in its physical understanding of the cosmic hierarchy, but has in common with Platonism the idea of correspondences between heavenly and earthly spheres.

⁸⁰ The initial, framing *hallū yāh* can legitimately be discounted for this counting purpose as editorial, meaning that the artistry of the original song did not include it in the number of these imperatives.

⁸¹ Watson describes the form of these two lists of entities in 148:1–6 and 7–12 as ‘meristic lists’, intended to be all-embracing: Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 322.

He set them up to last forever and ever,
 He made a decree and it never becomes obsolete.

These two verses form the climax of the first major section of Psalm 148. Having named first the sphere of praise (v. 1) and the agents of praise (vv. 2–4), the psalmist offers the rationale for the praise that the heavens' occupants must give. 'Let them praise' represents a different, jussive form of *hālāl* in contrast to the preceding seven (or eight) imperatives. The rationale here is creation-based, and particularly the way their creation represented unquestioning and unchanging compliance to his royal will. We are reminded of the irrevocable "laws of the Medes and the Persians" in Dan 6:8, 12, 15, and indeed the likely historical setting of this psalm matches the explicit setting of the events in that chapter of Daniel. We may assume that our psalmist knows all about absolute monarchy. If Yahweh wants a world, at this point a heavenly world, he gets it, and that permanently. Commentators like to highlight the word for 'created' here, *bārā'*, which is the same word used in Gen 1:1 and related contexts. Although it does not always refer to physical creation, it always has God as its subject in OT Scripture in the active (qal) stem, just as Yahweh is clearly the understood agent of this passive, niph'al form (*nibrā'û*).⁸² The resemblance of this form to the one found in Gen 2:4 has already been noted.

The term I have translated as 'becomes obsolete', *ya'ābôr*, can be construed in two main ways. If it is understood in a transitive sense, it can mean to cross or transgress a boundary.⁸³ Interestingly, this meaning applies in certain creation or providence-related contexts in company with the noun here translated 'decree' (*hoq*), namely Job 14:5, Prov 8:29 and Jer 5:22. Each of these uses is relevant but slightly different, but all support this transitive sense of crossing a limit or boundary. The alternative is the intransitive sense, 'to pass away' (hence 'become obsolete'), which is used (negatively) of the 'laws of the Medes and Persians' in Esth 1:19 and of the Feast of Purim in Esth 9:27–28, though not with *hoq* per

⁸² On this verb's use in reference to creation, see G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (trans. D. M. G. Stalker; 2 vols.; Edinburgh/London: Oliver & Boyd, 1962, 1965 [Theologie des Alten Testaments, 1957, 1960.]), 1:142; Eichrodt, *Theology*, 2:103; Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, 36, 63.

⁸³ William L. Holladay (ed.), *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 263; Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs (eds.), *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 717. This discussion pertains to the qal stem of this verb.

se.⁸⁴ The former, transitive sense therefore has stronger precedent in Scripture, but is a little more difficult grammatically in Ps 148:6 since an explicit subject for the verb is lacking in 6b. I have therefore taken the simpler option of understanding *hoq*, ‘decree’, as the subject and the verb as intransitive.⁸⁵ In effect, God has decreed that the heavenly realm and its occupants should exist, and so they will for as long as his will decrees.⁸⁶

Stanza 4: vv. 7–8

Praise the LORD from the earth:
Huge aquatic animals and all vast depths,
Fire and hail, snow and smoke,
Violent wind performing his command;

Corresponding to the address to the heavens’ occupants in verse 1, verse 7a initiates the second major section in this psalm, turning the address to terrestrial things.⁸⁷ More quickly than in verse 1, the listing of entities of earth begins, and they will come at a rapid-fire pace in vv. 7b–12, without the intervening verbal imperative, *hallû*, seen in vv. 1–4a. So *hā’āreṣ* (the earth) identifies the new domain, and 7b immediately names the first two occupants, *tannînim* and *têhômôt*. These terms pertain to the oceans, but rather than being treated as the third part of a tripartite cosmos, the oceans are included under the broader category ‘earth’ here, as already discussed. Both terms have mythological overtones in ANE literary analogues and in certain OT texts,⁸⁸ but here and in most OT occurrences, especially in the case of *têhôm*, appear devoid of any mythological overtones, and act as descriptors of natural

⁸⁴ Brown, Driver, and Briggs (eds.), *Lexicon*, 718.

⁸⁵ If the Hebrew term *ya’ăbôr* were recast as either a plural or instead as passive, the transitive meaning would become viable, but there is no textual support for the change. LXX’s *pareleusetai* is supportive of the intransitive meaning. See Hillers, “Study of Psalm 148,” 326. Holladay thinks both meanings are intended(!): Holladay, *Psalms*, 60, 325.

⁸⁶ The idea that the laws of the Medes and Persians in Daniel 6 and Esther 1 cannot be rescinded even by the emperor himself, once decreed, is a separate problem.

⁸⁷ I have mentioned Dahood’s translation of *hā’āreṣ* here, normally ‘the earth’, as ‘the nether world’, following an earlier suggestion by Cross & Freedman based on ANE analogues: Dahood, *Psalms*, 351, 353. But the clearly bipartite structure of the psalm and the plainly terrestrial nature of the contents of vv. 8–12 show that this idea has waylaid Dahood’s handling of this psalm.

⁸⁸ For *tannînim*, see Ps 74:13; Isa 27:1; 51:9, and perhaps Job 7:12. Elsewhere it can mean a variety of snake (Exod 7:9–12; Deut 32:33) or crocodile (Jer 51:34; Ezek 29:3; 32:2). *Têhômôt* or the singular *têhôm* has been since about 1900 often associated by scholars with Tiamat from Mesopotamian myth. It does occur in theophanic passages (Ps 77:16; Isa 51:10; Hab 3:10), although many such uses refer in their contexts to the exodus event.

phenomena.⁸⁹ So while commentaries influenced by the ‘history-of-religions’ tradition tend to perceive a mythological element in this psalm⁹⁰, many recent commentators acknowledge that, as with Genesis 1, such associations as once existed are now ‘dead links’, and the terms thoroughly ‘demythologized’.⁹¹

Verse 8 adopts a 4–4 rhythm, unique in the psalm, in order to pile up terms related to atmospheric phenomena. Some of the terms present challenges; while ‘hail’ and ‘snow’ seem clear from their OT use and match each other well, recalling 147:16–17, ‘fire’ and ‘smoke’ are more debatable. My choice of these terms works on the assumption that the two are meant to match one another in an inverted or envelope structure. However, *qîṭôr* is rarely attested in the OT, and LXX’s *krystallos* may reflect a different Hebrew term, *qerah*, meaning ‘frost’ or ‘ice’. However, I would opt with Alter to read *qîṭôr* and take the meaning that is normal for it in its other contexts (esp. Gen 19:28), ‘smoke’;⁹² *’ēš* would then retain its more common meaning, ‘fire’ (although ‘lightning’ is certainly a permissible meaning), the two together possibly suggesting volcanic phenomena.⁹³ The remainder of verse 8 is clearer, while we ought not to miss the clear message that natural phenomena take place in obedience to the command (*dābār*) of the heavenly King.⁹⁴

Stanza 5: vv. 9–10

Mountains and all hills,
Fruit trees and all cedars,
Animals wild and domestic,
Those that crawl and birds on the wing

Having already named seven earthly entities in quick succession, phenomena of ocean and sky, the second major section (or strophe) of Psalm 148 moves now to a properly terrestrial domain. Rhythmically these verses return to a 3–3 bicolon structure, and Auffret rightly identifies a rhythmic match between lines one and

⁸⁹ The same is true where each term occurs in Genesis 1 (1:2 for *tēhōm*, 1:21 for *tannînim*).

⁹⁰ Gunkel, *Einleitung*, 92; Weiser, *The Psalms*, 838; Terrien, *The Psalms*, 921. Kraus begins this way and backtracks: Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 563.

⁹¹ Coad, “Creation’s Praise of God,” 85–86; Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 637; Goldingay, *Psalms volume 3. Psalms 90–150*, 732.

⁹² R. Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2009), 510; Hilliers, “Study of Psalm 148,” 326.

⁹³ Here, for a change, I agree with Dahood, *Psalms*, 354.

⁹⁴ Compare Ps 147:15, 18.

three of this stanza, while the rhythms of lines two and four seem deliberately reversed.⁹⁵

We are in the department of Days Three and Five–Six of the creation week, and some of these terms reflect equivalents in Genesis 1. Identical terms are ‘fruit trees’ (*’ēš pēri*), ‘wild animals’ (*ḥayyâ*), ‘domestic animals’ (*bēhēmâ*), and ‘crawling animals’ (*remeš*) (Gen 1:11, 24–25; Ps 148:9b–10). “Birds on the wing” (*šippôr kânāp*) is similar to *’ôp kânāp* in Gen 1:21. Zenger thinks these and other correspondences are intentional on the author’s part, and we must admit that this accumulation of terms is strongly suggestive.⁹⁶

‘Mountains’ and ‘hills’ are not specifically mentioned in Genesis 1 but are certainly well attested in OT meditations on creation, often symbolizing a kind of permanence that whispers the eternity of God (Gen 49:26; Deut 33:15; Job 26:14; Pss 36:6; 125:2). And like the classes of animals, ‘fruit trees’ represents domesticated trees, while ‘cedars’ (*’ārāzîm*) is quite possibly broader than a single tree species and may stand for the tall, undomesticated forest tree.⁹⁷ All of the creatures mentioned here are still inarticulate, but the movement, as generally in Genesis 1, is from inanimate to animate but inarticulate; articulate praise will soon follow.

Stanza 6: vv. 11–12

Kings of the earth and all peoples,
Princes and all governors of the earth,
Both young men and young women,
Elders and youngsters together:

The terms in this stanza are also carefully arranged. The inverted arrangement in the bicolon of verse 11 is clear in English translation, with the outer terms being roughly synonymous and complemented by *’ereš*, ‘earth’, which is of course a theme word for this second section of the psalm. ‘Princes’ (*šārîm*), by contrast, is not equivalent in meaning to the very general ‘peoples’ (*lě’ummîm*), but a certain resemblance in sound warrants the use of alliteration in the translation above. The focus emerging from verse 11 is one on humans in elite positions, and there is an international feel that

⁹⁵ Auffret, *La sagesse*, 392.

⁹⁶ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 632, 636–638; Alter, *Book of Psalms*, 509.

⁹⁷ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner (eds.), *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:86.

makes sense in terms of a Persian-era setting. While we have noted that the sequence of entities in the psalm does not directly match that found in Genesis 1, the move to humans here in stanza six is still reminiscent of that creation account.

What we notice, then, about verse 12 in terms of content is the shift from the powerful to ordinary classes of people. That everyone is included is expressed in twin ‘merisms’, expressions intended to cover the entirety of a class by naming its extremes—male and female rather self-evidently, and then those towards the younger and older ends of the human spectrum, all expressed in rhythmic symmetry in the Hebrew. With twenty-three earthly entities’ praise (vv. 7–12) to match that of seven heavenly entities (vv. 2–4), the roster of thirty is complete, having moved incrementally and poetically from the outermost extremes of the cosmos to the centre of human society, the ordinary person in all his and her variety. If there is any sense of progress in importance within this list, it culminates not in the king but in the commoner and the child.

Stanza 7: vv. 13–14

Let them praise the LORD’s name,
For his name alone is lifted to the highest;
His majesty over earth and heavens.

And he raised up a horn for his people,
[A point of] praise for all his loyal ones,
For the Israelites, who enjoy his close presence.

This is the most debated part of the psalm in terms of structure and possible editing. I have chosen to read this as a pair of tricola, with Auffret, Allen, Alter and others⁹⁸, yielding a deliberately longer ‘rationale’ for praise in comparison to verses 5–6, in view of its greater importance. Understood this way, the first tricolon (v. 13) is designed to undergird the praise of earth and its inhabitants in particular, although “earth and heavens” moves to embrace both classes of praising agents in reverse order in a deliberate framing device. There is no entity that has been named, not even the ‘highest heavens’ of verse 4b or the ‘highest places’ of verse 1b, that can match the exaltation (*nišgāb*, here “lifted to the highest”) of the

⁹⁸ Auffret, *La sagesse*, 386; Alter, *Book of Psalms*, 511; Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 389; Beaucamp and de Relles, “Le chorale de la création,” 32; Terrien, *The Psalms*. BHS arranges this section as three bicola, with considerable support, e.g. J. P. Fokkelman, *The Psalms in Form: The Hebrew Psalter in its Poetic Shape* (Leiden: Deo, 2003), 153, 172. Issues relating to possible editing are discussed in the introduction.

LORD's name, which is played off against 'heavens' (*šāmāyim*) doubly here, to the advantage of 'name' (*šēm*), as it was in verses 4–5. Indeed, Kraus emphasizes the name of the LORD as the central motif of this psalm.⁹⁹ Sun, moon, stars and heavenly powers, ocean depths (*tēhōmôt*) and sea monsters (*tannînîm*) might be worshipped as deities in other cultures; here they are bound to offer worship to their Creator. The rationale for praise here is no longer their createdness and obedient permanence, as it was in 5b–6, but is now Yahweh's exaltedness in relation to them.

But then in the final verse the rationale changes. Praise has been anchored in creation, then recently exaltation, and now its rationale is redemption.¹⁰⁰ Gunkel identified this move as characteristic of the hymns in Psalms, and it accords well with the twin poles of Christian theology, creation and redemption.¹⁰¹ The past tense translation, "he raised up," is guided by the vowel points of *wayyārem* in the Masoretic (Hebrew) text, which imply a completed action, perhaps with the end of exile in mind. If reprinted as an imperfect form, *wēyārēm*,¹⁰² we have in view a future redemptive action, in terms very like those found in 1 Sam 2:10, at the climax of Hannah's song. That verse is highly susceptible to messianic interpretation, and the LXX, perhaps under influence from that context, also reads the form as imperfect here, and therefore probably inferring messianic connotations. It is hard to choose between the two here, given that the text was purely consonantal for so long, but messianic expectation gathered pace in the period between the Testaments, and LXX's construal may exemplify that trend.

Another interpretive question here concerns 'praise' (*tēhillā*), the cognate noun of the 'hallel' verbs so abundantly used early in this psalm. Is it praise directed *to* Israel, or praise *from* Israel to God? The LORD might be inherently more worthy of praise, but if we retain a place for the intention of the writer in establishing the meaning of our text, there is a structural aspect of this verse that

⁹⁹ Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 563–564; Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, 20–22, 32–33. Gunkel identifies this way of referring to Yahweh as a feature of the hymns: Gunkel, *Einleitung*, 41, 49. The exaltation of the LORD's name is celebrated (again using the root *sgb*) in Isa 12:4, and of LORD generally, in Isa 2:11, 17; 33:5.

¹⁰⁰ In neighbouring psalms personal redemption or rescue from harm, or more so God's delivering nature, forms a rationale for praise (Pss 146:7–9; 147:6; 149:4), but here the corporate redemption and care of Israel is in view.

¹⁰¹ Gunkel, *Einleitung*, 51.

¹⁰² The vowel points formally entered the Hebrew text tradition long after the consonants.

deserves attention. Amongst the varieties of parallelism seen in Hebrew poetry is what is called ‘stepped parallelism’, wherein the first element of several in a colon is elided (left out) but assumed in the second colon, permitting further development of subsequent unit(s), and this elision/expansion process may proceed further in the case of a third colon.¹⁰³ Verse 14 is a clear example:¹⁰⁴

Verb	Object	Beneficiary ¹⁰⁵	Appositional Phrase
<i>And he raised up</i>	<i>a horn</i>	<i>for his people</i>	
	<i>[A point of] praise</i>	<i>for all his loyal ones</i>	
		<i>For the Israelites</i>	<i>who enjoy his close presence</i>

It is clear that the retention of the sense of the initial elements of the earlier cola without explicit restatement makes room for further development of later elements while the same overall length and rhythm is maintained for each colon.

The raising of the ‘horn’ for Israel most likely originally connoted the restoration of her dignity and reputation in the world, meaning that the ‘praise’ would be that directed to Israel from other nations. But because it might be that Yahweh has given Israel *cause* to praise Him, I have chosen augmenting words (‘a point of’) that leave the understanding somewhat open-ended.¹⁰⁶ The ‘horn’ may not refer to a specific person or asset, since this OT expression often stands figuratively for power and renown, e.g. Ps 89:17, 24.¹⁰⁷ Yet there is specificity about the appropriation of this OT concept in Luke 1:69:

¹⁰³ Alastair G. Hunter, *An Introduction to the Psalms* (T&T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies; London: T & T Clark, 2008), 15. It is described a little differently than I have in Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 150–151.

¹⁰⁴ Auffret, *La sagesse*, 394.

¹⁰⁵ This is a semantic term; see <http://www-01.sil.org/linguistics/GlossaryOfLinguisticTerms/WhatIsABeneficiaryAsASemanticR.htm> Formally these are prepositional phrases, but in syntactical terms they might be described as ‘benefactive datives’ introduced by the ‘lamed of interest’ (or more broadly, as ‘adverbial modifiers’): B. K. Waltke and K. M. O’Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 75, 207–208.

¹⁰⁶ The possibilities are explored fairly thoroughly in Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 630. One writer concludes that it is Yahweh’s praise for his people that is seen here: Duane Warden, “All Things Praise Him (Psalm 148),” *Restoration Quarterly* 35/2 (1993), 107.

¹⁰⁷ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 409; Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 390, 394; Terrien, *The Psalms*, 921. See especially Schmutzer and Gauthier, “Identity,” 161–164, 180–183. I have cited the English verse reference location.

“He has raised a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.” References such as this one and Ps 18:3 were evidently soon thought of in specific, messianic terms, if not originally so intended.

There is also specificity about the way this psalm finishes. Prior to the final, fitting ‘hallelujah’, the focus of what was mostly a psalm of such universal scope has closed in on the one people of Yahweh’s intimacy—from the generality of creation to the particularity of election. This brings us to consider in closing the meaning of the psalm overall.

The Significance of Psalm 148

For such a creation-focused hymn, it is odd how little attention Psalm 148 garners in many treatments of creation themes in the Psalms.¹⁰⁸ It is true that the emphasis here is on creation as a *fait accompli*, as an existing order, rather than on the work of creation, apart from verses 5b–6. It certainly is a valuable insight into a post-exilic Jewish cosmology, as explored in our introduction. But it is more than that. It is a valuable contribution to a biblical theology of creation, one with many resonances with, if not deliberate allusions to, the supreme biblical creation text, Gen 1:1–2:3.

What of the nature of its creation theology? How does it cast the triangular relationship between God, nature and humanity? The present climate in biblical studies is highly suspicious of a ‘speciesism’ that would accord preferential status to human beings within God’s created order. Concerning creation in Genesis 1, Ellen van Wolde questions the idea that humans appear last in the creation week because they are most important, instead positing a network of relationships between created things that share equal status.¹⁰⁹ More militantly, Norman Habel reads the same account as emphasizing “the intrinsic value of Earth as the centre of the cosmos and the source of life.” The appearance of humans

¹⁰⁸ There is isolated mention of Psalm 148 in James L. Mays, “‘Maker of Heaven and Earth’: Creation in the Psalms,” in *God Who Creates* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 86. It seems to rate no mention at all in Richard J. Clifford, “Creation in the Psalms,” in *Creation in the Biblical Traditions* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1992), 57–69. William Brown’s recent work on the creation theme in the OT mentions the psalm in a single endnote: William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 282.

¹⁰⁹ Ellen van Wolde, “Facing the Earth: Primaevial History in a New Perspective,” in *The World of Genesis* (ed. Philip R. Davies and David J. A. Clines; JSOTSup 257; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 25–27.

produces an inevitable, “radical conflict” between Earth and humans.¹¹⁰ Nature would be fine if only we were not here! Talk about a ‘Gnostic return in modernity’!¹¹¹ It is the creation of humans that becomes the Fall. The triangle is broken. Not all ‘ecotheology’ is so cynical; some would simply search Scripture more carefully for a theology of nature, or refute the Lynn White thesis that Judaeo-Christian biblical belief is primarily responsible for modern over-exploitation of nature by refuting the idea that biblical creation teaching is skewed in an anthropocentric direction.¹¹²

The strong nature focus of Psalm 148 attracts those concerned to discover an eco-friendly theology. It presents humans as one class of created beings among many that praises God.¹¹³ “Here all creatures, including ourselves, are simply fellow-creatures expressing the theocentricity of the created world, each in our own created way, differently but in complementarity.”¹¹⁴ Fretheim, opposing anthropocentrism in theology, perceives here “a symbiosis of praise; every element in all of God’s creation is called to praise together, and the response of one affects the response of the other.”¹¹⁵ Bauckham, furthermore, is keen to emphasize that Psalm 148 denies that creation is mute but for the priestly mediating role of humans in articulating praise on its behalf. “Creation praises God very well without us.”¹¹⁶ Beaucamp and de Relles instead see a greater role for humans as leaders of the creation symphony of praise “by delegation”.¹¹⁷ So creation is not mute without humans, but humans are graciously granted the right to lead the chorus. This is, I believe, the subtle implication of the placement of humans last

¹¹⁰ Norman C. Habel, “Geophany: The Earth Story in Genesis 1,” in *The Earth Story in Genesis* (ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 45–46.

¹¹¹ Here I am borrowing the title of Cyril O’Regan, *Gnostic Return in Modernity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001).

¹¹² Richard Bauckham, “Joining Creation’s Praise of God,” *Ecotheology* 7/1 (2002), 46–47; Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967), 3–4.

¹¹³ Margot Kässmann, “Covenant, Praise and Justice in Creation: Five Bible Studies,” in *Ecotheology* (Maryknoll, NY/Geneva: Orbis/WCC Pubns, 1994), 36.

¹¹⁴ Bauckham, “Joining Creation’s Praise of God,” 48.

¹¹⁵ Terence E. Fretheim, “Nature’s Praise of God in the Psalms,” *Ex Auditu* 3 (1987), 28. See pp. 16–17 for the complaint about anthropocentrism.

¹¹⁶ Bauckham, “Joining Creation’s Praise of God,” 49–51, quote on latter page.

¹¹⁷ Beaucamp and de Relles, “Le chorale de la création,” 34.

in the list of created beings in Psalm 148, and the analogy holds for the similarly climactic structure of Gen 1:1–2:3.

An associated question here is whether creation's praise in this psalm is a metaphorical idea, or whether creation does in some sense have an actual 'voice'. A more traditional evangelical position is that the call to praise is rhetorical. "This hymn that features rhetorical calls to the elements of creation to praise their God is an expression of the praiseworthiness of Yahweh."¹¹⁸ Fretheim resists this as a premature domestication of the text, but also warns of the existence of a contrasting position tending to animism or panpsychism—that the earth, Gaia-like, is alive, or that 'mind' permeates nature.¹¹⁹ The team behind the Earth Bible project, in their opening essay to the volume on the Psalms and Prophets, take from Psalm 148 and like texts that creation can really address God in praise. Interpreted against the preceding context, there seems to be some kind of opening for panpsychism implied.¹²⁰

The middle position recently advocated by several evangelicals is that creation's praise in Psalm 148 is real, not just a rhetorical way of calling humans to praise God more enthusiastically, yet is not meant to be a return to animism:

The passages about creation's praise are, of course, metaphorical: they attribute to non-human creatures the human practice of praising God in human language. But the reality to which they point is that all creatures bring glory to God simply by being themselves and fulfilling their God-given roles in God's creation.¹²¹

Perhaps I can clarify just a little further. Psalm 19:1–4a puts it even more strongly, not just invoking creation to praise God but saying that it already does. It is not in the sense of verbal communication, as 19:3 makes clear¹²²; it is in the sense of glorifying God, which is to say that inanimate creation praises God *to us* more than to God.

¹¹⁸ Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 395. See also Goldingay, *Psalms volume 3. Psalms 90–150*, 735.

¹¹⁹ Fretheim, "Nature's Praise," 22–23 and 20, respectively. Very similar is Coad, "Creation's Praise of God," 87–89.

¹²⁰ The Earth Bible Team, "The Voice of Earth: More than Metaphor?" in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets* (ed. Norman C. Habel; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 25–27.

¹²¹ Bauckham, "Joining Creation's Praise of God," 47. See also Fretheim, "Nature's Praise," 26–28; Coad, "Creation's Praise of God," 89.

¹²² Here the 2011 NIV has improved the translation found in the 1984 edition.

By their splendour and majesty, created things allude to the far greater splendour and majesty of the LORD.¹²³

Can we justify according Psalm 148 a privileged place within the final five hymns that close and climax the Psalter, as my title would imply? Psalms 146–150 manifest a fascinating theological tension between the universal and the particular, between Yahweh’s sovereign rule over all creation and his selective redemption of the ‘faithful ones’ (*ḥāsīdīm*) of Zion. Psalm 146 seems to balance the themes. Psalm 147, while still mindful of creation, tips the balance towards the particular election of Israel. Following the mostly universal Psalm 148, Psalm 149 is very particular indeed, to be followed again, finally, by the universality of Psalm 150.¹²⁴ To borrow the words of Matt 22:14, the effect is an oscillation: “Many are called—but few are chosen—but many are called—but few are chosen...but (finally) many *are* called.” Like many scriptural paradoxes, we cannot cut this theological Gordian knot; we actually need to retain the tension to retain the truths involved. But I am encouraged that the Book of Psalms finishes on the note, “many are called.”¹²⁵ Psalm 150 expresses this theme last, at the denouement of the book, but Psalm 148 expresses it fullest and best.¹²⁶ Theologically profound and artistically superb, Psalm 148 stands out even among its peers, the final hallel psalms, as “a fine climax of praise.”¹²⁷

For additional resources relating to this psalm, including visual content, please go to: <https://firstthreequarters.wordpress.com/2014/01/21/special-features-of-psalm-148-english-text-version/>

¹²³ Ps 148:13; Job 26:14.

¹²⁴ This is especially true if the ‘sanctuary’ (*qōdes̄*) in view in 150:1 is the heavenly one, rather than a temple structure (if one existed when the psalm was penned) in Jerusalem.

¹²⁵ Wenham, *Psalter Reclaimed*, 185–186.

¹²⁶ It nonetheless retains an admonitory note: all things are bidden to praise... what if any should refuse?

¹²⁷ M. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return (Book V, Psalms 107–150)* (JSOTSup 258; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 293. Terrien says, “Psalm 148 goes beyond other hymns in that it unites distance and intimacy.” Terrien, *The Psalms*, 922. Alter calls it “one of the most majestic of these six concluding psalms of praise.” Alter, *Book of Psalms*, 509. See again Wenham, *Psalter Reclaimed*, 186.