

Visual Commentary: Psalm 148

Study Notes

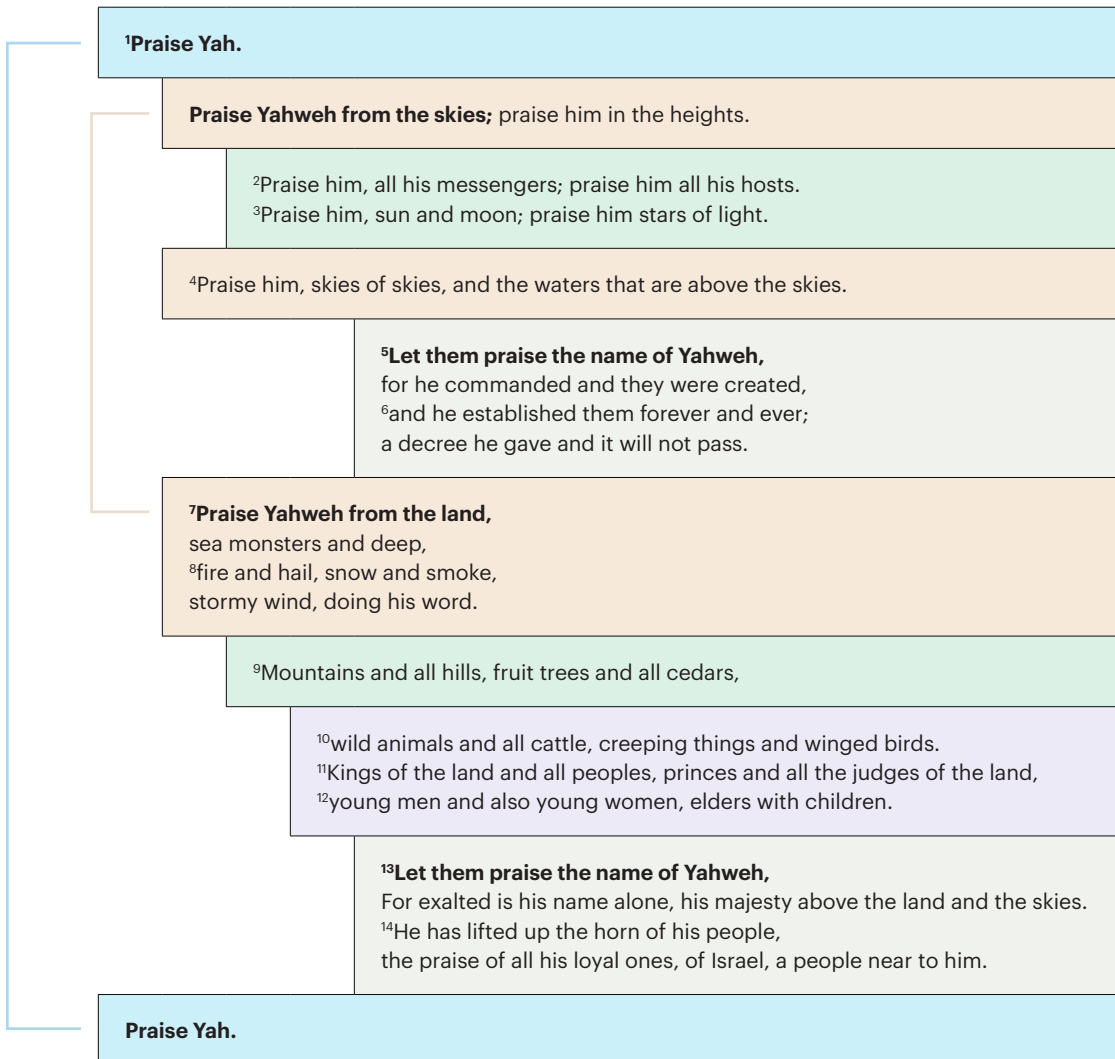
Psalm 148 is a poem in the final section of the book of Psalms. It’s a call for all of the cosmos, every part of creation, to praise Yahweh. And it points to one of the main focuses of the book of Psalms and the Hebrew Bible as whole—God’s promise to deliver his people from oppression, to “raise up a horn” for Israel. We look at this phrase and dig deeper into this brilliant work of poetry in our latest video, Visual Commentary: Psalm 148. Go deeper into the ideas from this video with these study notes.

Contents

Literary Design of Psalm 148	2
Praise For the Lifted Horn	3
The Story of the Psalms	3
The Messiah King of Psalms 1-2	
The Story of the Fall: Books 1-3	
Hope in Restoration: Books 4-5	
Structure of the Final Book	
The Structure of Psalm 148	4
The Skies: Verses 1-6	
The Land: Verses 7-14	
Conclusion	8

Literary Design of Psalm 148

This psalm begins and ends with the phrase “Praise Yah.” This design gives us an idea of the purpose of this poem—it’s a praise song. And the rest of the poem points to why we should all join in the praise of Yahweh.



Praise For the Lifted Horn

The psalms are arranged to tell a story. And it's a story that ends with an invitation for all creation to praise Yahweh, the God of Israel. This is the theme of Psalm 148. It's in the center of the concluding section of Psalms. And in this poem, all creation is called to praise Yahweh because of his work of creation, and because he has *raised up the horn* of his people.

But what does this mean, "to raise up the horn of his people"?

The horn is really good news for the people of Israel, and it's the perfect conclusion to the story of the Psalms. Throughout Scripture, a raised horn is an image of a bull's horn lifted in victory after a battle. It's used throughout the Bible to talk about how God will bring victory to the afflicted and oppressed.

In the story of the Psalms, this victory comes through a messianic King, who we meet in the introduction. Let's do a quick overview of the story of the Psalms.

The Story of the Psalms

The Messiah King of Psalms 1-2

The Psalms begin with a two-part introduction (Psalms 1-2). Psalm 1 describes the blessing that those who follow Yahweh will experience. They'll live at peace and flourish, just like in the garden story of Genesis 1-2.

Psalm 2 reveals how this ideal will come about—through God raising up his messianic King. This King will follow God as a son, and he'll be victorious over the powerful rulers that stand up against Yahweh and oppress his people.

This description refers back to a promise God made to King David, that through his line, God's Kingdom would be established (2 Samuel 7).

The Story of the Fall: Books 1-3

The story of the Psalms traces the establishment, fall, and re-establishment of the kingdom of Israel.

In the first section of the Psalter, called Book 1, God rescues David from his affliction and raises him up as king. But then, in Books 2-3, the kingdom falls to enemy nations and the people are left without a king and without a home.

There's a sharp contrast between the ideal depicted in the introduction of the Psalms and the reality of human suffering and oppression. And so the king and the people sing lament songs. They cry out for God to rescue them. And they also sing songs of hope, asking God to fulfill his promises to David and send his Messiah to establish his Kingdom.

Hope in Restoration: Books 4-5

This hope is what Books 4 and 5 are all about. The people renew their trust in Yahweh as the true King (Book 4) who will bring about his Kingdom through a future messianic King (Book 5).

These books are full of psalms of praise for Yahweh and this ideal Kingdom. The entire story of the Psalms concludes with a grand finale of praise called the "final hallel," or final praise (Psalms 146-150).

Structure of the Final Book

The final hallel is made up of five psalms (Psalms 146-150), which each begin and end with the same word “hallelu-Yah.” This is Hebrew for “praise Yah,” short for “Yahweh.” Right in the middle, at the apex of this final hallel, is Psalm 148.

The Structure of Psalm 148

Psalm 148 is a song calling all creation to praise Yahweh, as it echoes back to the Genesis 1 story.

It begins and ends with “hallelu-Yah,” and then it’s broken up into two parts focusing on the skies (first half, vv. 1-6) and on the land (second half, vv. 7-14).

¹ Praise Yah.
Praise YHWH from the skies...
⁷ Praise YHWH from the land...
Praise Yah.

The Skies: Verses 1-6

The first half of the poem calls all the skies to praise Yahweh. Both spaces and their inhabitants are mentioned, recalling days one, two, and four of the Genesis story.

Genesis 1 Structure

Spaces	Inhabitants
Day 1: Light	Day 4: Sun, moon, and stars
Day 2: Skies and waters above	Day 5
Day 3	Day 6

On day two, the skies and the waters above the skies are called to praise.

“His angels,” or “his hosts,” which are also called the sun, moon, and stars of light, are called to praise on days one and four.

¹Praise Yah.
Praise Yahweh from the skies
...heights
² ...angels
...hosts
³ ...sun and moon
...stars and light
⁴ ...skies of skies
...waters above the skies

Then comes the reason for praise.

*Let them praise the name of Yahweh,
for he commanded and they were created,
and he established them forever and ever;
a decree he gave and it will not pass.*

Yahweh is the ruling creator—the King to be praised even by the highest skies.

¹Praise Yah.
Praise Yahweh from the skies.
⁵ Let them praise the name of Yahweh,
for he commanded and they were created,
⁶ and he established them forever and ever;
a decree he gave and it will not pass.

The Land: Verses 7-14

The second half of the psalm then calls all from the land to praise Yahweh. This section mirrors the call for those from the skies to praise by echoing the opening phrase: “Praise Yahweh from the *land*.”

¹ Praise Yah.	
	Praise YHWH from the skies...
	⁷ Praise YHWH from the land...
Praise Yah.	

Here, the outer limits of the earthly realm are first called to praise. These are the forces of de-creation and chaos: the sea monsters, the deep, fire and hail, snow and smoke, stormy wind. The point is that Yahweh is King over it all.

Then, we move in closer to the land—to the hills and the trees, the spaces of the land. And then we zoom in even closer to the land’s *inhabitants*, the animals and humans.

What stands out here is the description of the humans. It takes up the most space and is inclusive of everyone.

⁷ Praise Yahweh from the land ,	
	Chaos...
	Land...
	Animals...
	¹¹ Kings of the land and all peoples, princes and all the judges of the land,
	¹² Young men and also young women, elders with children.

Just as the call for the skies to praise Yahweh echoed days one, two, and four of creation, so now the call for the land to praise echoes days three, five, and six with its mention of the land and the trees (day three), fish and birds (day five), and animals and humans (day six).

Spaces	Inhabitants
Day 1: Light	Day 4: Sun, moon, and stars
Day 2: Skies and waters above	Day 5: Fish and birds
Day 3: Land and trees	Day 6: Animals and humans

⁷Praise Yahweh from the land,
sea monsters and deep,
⁸ fire and hail, snow and smoke,
stormy wind, doing his word,
⁹ mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars,
¹⁰ wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and winged birds,
¹¹ kings of the land and all peoples, princes and all the judges of the land,
¹² young men and also young women, elders with children.

All that Yahweh has created is invited to praise him. The reason for praise in the second half of the song begins like the first, with praise for Yahweh, the exalted creator (v. 17):

*Exalted is his name alone
his majesty, above the land and the skies.*

This is a summary of the whole poem so far—he is the King over all. This is a reminder to Israel that even in their distress and suffering, Yahweh is still King. But there’s more. Because he is the true King, he will act on behalf of the oppressed. This is where the horn comes in.

*He has lifted up the horn of his people,
the praise of all his loyal ones, of Israel, a people near to him.*

¹Praise Yah.
Praise Yahweh from the skies;
⁵ let them praise the name of Yahweh.
⁷Praise Yahweh from the land;
¹³ let them praise the name of Yahweh,
for exalted is his name alone, his majesty above the land and the skies.
¹⁴ He has lifted up the horn of his people,
the praise of all his loyal ones, of Israel, a people near to him.
Praise Yah.

Conclusion

Remember earlier how we were talking about the “raised horn” symbolizing victory for the afflicted? Psalm 148 is saying that Yahweh will bring victory to his people. But how?

We have to look at this psalm in the context of the whole Hebrew Bible and the story of the Psalms. Psalm 148 is the culmination of the whole storyline of the Psalms.

It’s a story that begins with the hope of an ideal Davidic king to come, and it then traces the rise and fall of the Davidic kingdom. The story of the Psalms ends with renewed hope in God as King and trust that he will fulfill his promises.

Psalm 148 confirms that God will raise up his Messiah to bring victory for the oppressed: “He will raise the horn of his people.” And all creation will praise Yahweh, from the highest of the skies to the lowest of the Earth.