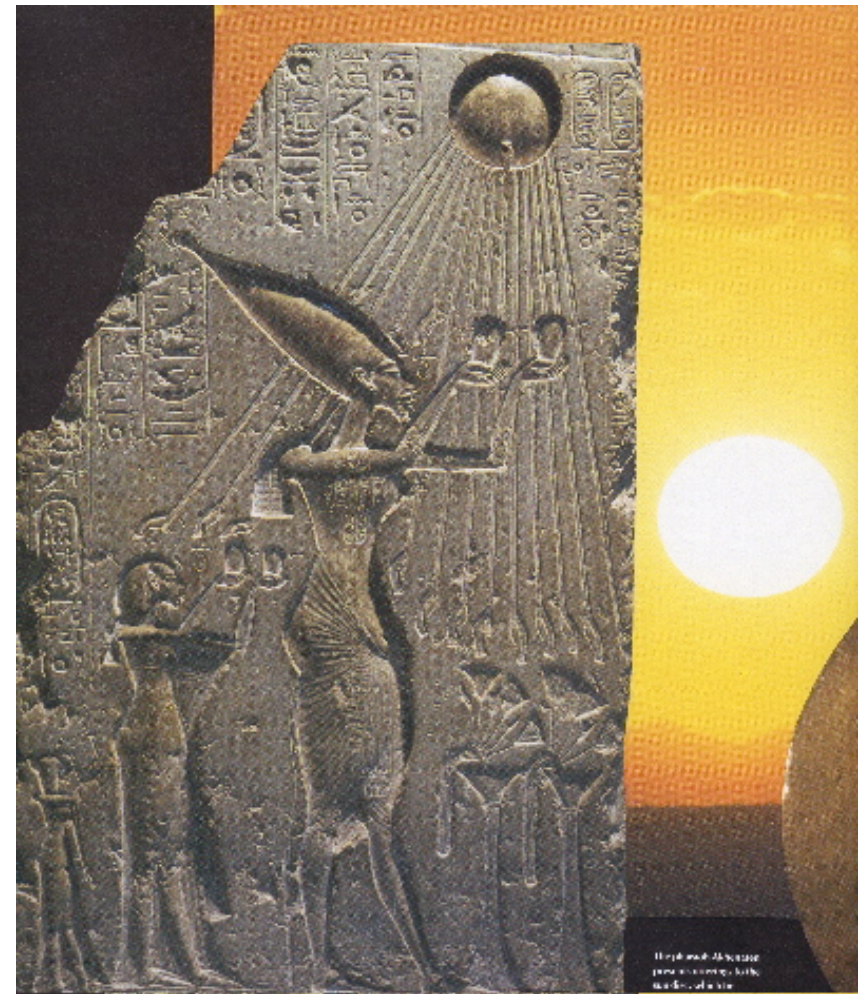
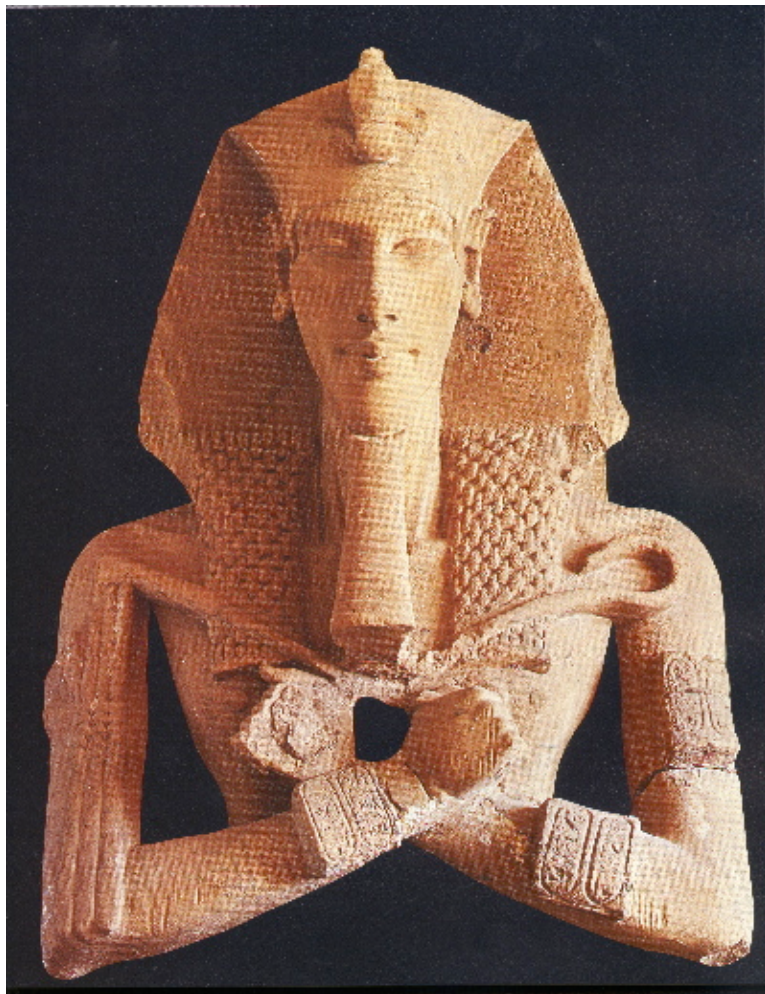


Psalm 104: Creation reveals God's Beauty



Psalm 104 (103) (Mode 2. 5...31 / 4.....32)

This psalm may have connections with an Egyptian Hymn to the sun god, Aten [Akhenaten - the 'heretical' monotheist pharaoh of 14th century].



- Psalm 104 extols the greatness of the Creator as revealed by his presence and action in creation.

I bless the Lord with all my soul.

Lord my God, how wonderful you are.

You are clothed with beauty and majesty,
wrapped in a mantle of light.

‘Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures’(verse 24).

‘I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being’(verse 33).

‘Listen to me, my faithful children, and blossom like a rose growing by a stream of water. Send out fragrance like incense, and put forth blossoms like a lily. Scatter the fragrance, and sing a hymn of praise; bless the Lord for all his works’(Sirach 39:12-14).

You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
establish your dwelling above the rains.

You make the clouds your chariot,
and ride on the wings of the wind.

[Hebrews 1:7]

You make the storm your herald.

The lightning carries out your will.

You set the earth on its foundations.

It will never be shaken.

You cover it with the ocean as with a garment.

The waters rise up to assault the mountains.

When you rebuke the waters they flee;

at the rumble of your thunder they take to flight.

The mountains rise high and the valleys sink down;
each to its appointed place.

You set a boundary that the waters may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

You make rivers gush forth from their springs;
they flow between the hills,
giving drink to the wild animals.

The wild asses quench their thirst.

The birds of the air nest near the streams,
and sing among the branches.

From your lofty abode you water the hills.
The ground drinks its fill of your gift.
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants through human labour.

We are to produce food from the fields,
wine to gladden the heart,
oil to make the face shine,
and bread for bodily strength.

The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that God planted.

Birds nest in their branches.

On the tree-top the stork has its home.

High mountains are for the wild goats;

rocks are a refuge for the hyrax. [small mammal]

You make the moon to mark the seasons.

The sun knows its time for setting.

You make darkness, and it is night,

when all the animals of the forest come out.

The young lions roar to you
as they search for their prey.
At the rising of the sun they withdraw,
and go to rest in their dens.

We go out to our work
and labour until evening.

Compare these lines from the Egyptian hymn to Aton

‘When you set in the western horizon,
the land is in darkness, in the manner of death.

They sleep in a room with heads wrapped up,
nor sees one eye the other.

All their goods which are under their heads
might be stolen,

but they would not perceive it.

Every lion is come forth from its den;
all creeping things, they sting.

Darkness is a shroud and the earth is in stillness,
for he who made them rests in his horizon.

Lord, how manifold are your works!
Everything you have done is masterly;
the earth is full
of your wonderful creatures.

Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
filled with fish past counting.
There ships ply their trade,
and Leviathan that you made for play.

Compare the following from the hymn to Aton

‘The ships are sailing north and south as well,
for every way is open at your appearance.
The fish in the river dart before your face;
your rays are in the midst of the great green sea.’

All these creatures look to you
to give them their food in due season.

When you provide it, they feed.

When you open wide your hand, they have their fill.

When you hide your face, they are dismayed.

When you take away their breath,
they die and return to dust.

You send forth your breath, they are created,
and you renew the face of the earth.

May the glory of the Lord endure for ever.
May the Lord rejoice in creation.
One look from God and the earth trembles.
One touch, and the mountains erupt.

I will sing to my Lord as long as I live.
I will sing praise to my God.
While I have breath to do so,
may my meditation be pleasing to God.

For I delight in the Lord.

May sinners disappear from the earth.

May the wicked be no more.

I bless you, my Lord! Alleluia!

Theme 1. Creation reveals God's work.

‘Heaven and earth are full of your glory.’

(Isaiah 6:3; in the liturgy of the Mass)

‘From the greatness and beauty of created things
comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.’

(Wisdom 13:5; see Romans 1:20)

Gerard Manley Hopkins : God's Grandeur (1877)

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell:

the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

Gerard Manley Hopkins : God's Grandeur (1877)

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings.

Theme 2. The Transcendent God is continually present and acting in creation as Lord. It is interesting to contrast this with the theme of Sabbath rest in the Book of Genesis.

Theme 3. Human beings work in harmony with the rhythms of creation, intelligently and creatively.

‘People go out to their work and to their labour until the evening’(verse 23)

Theme 4. Sharing in God's delight in his creation.

The author is a contemplative: he is attentive to the sacred in the inter-connectedness of things.

He is a poet, working with language to share what he recognises to be beyond comprehensive expression.

Theme 5 is expressed well in the following words from the Preacher:

‘All have the same breath’(Ecclesiastes 3:19).

‘When you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground’(Psalm 104:29-30).

Theme 6. Creation reveals the beauty of the Creator. Praying it as Christians we contemplate Jesus, God’s focal word, the perfect expression of divine beauty.

‘The Windhover’ Gerard M. Hopkins 1877,
just before his ordination, and dedicated ‘To Christ our Lord’.

I caught this morning, morning’s minion, king-
dom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,
in his riding
of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
high there, how he rung upon the rein of the wimpling wing
in his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
as a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend; the hurl and
gliding
rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
stirred for a bird, - the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

‘The Windhover’ Gerard M. Hopkins 1877,
just before his ordination, and dedicated ‘To Christ our Lord’.

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah, my dear,
fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

We might reflect also upon the following stanzas and the accompanying commentary from ‘The Spiritual Canticle’ of John of the Cross.

Stanza 4 O woods and thickets
planted by the hand of my Beloved!
O green meadow,
coated, bright, with flowers,
Tell me, has he passed by you?

Stanza 5 Pouring out a thousand graces,
He passed these groves in haste;
And having looked at them,
with his image alone
He clothed them in beauty.

Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle 5,4

St. Paul says: The Son of God is the splendour of his glory and the image of his substance (Hebrews 1:3).

It should be known that only with this figure, his Son, did God look at all things, that is, he communicated to them their natural being and many natural graces and gifts, and made them complete and perfect, as it is said in Genesis: God looked at all things that he made, and they were very good (Genesis 1:31).

To look and behold that they were very good was to make them very good in the Word, his Son.

Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle 5,4 continued

Not only by looking at them did he communicate natural being and graces, as we said, but also with this image of his Son alone, he clothed them in beauty by imparting to them supernatural being. This he did when he became man and elevated human nature in the beauty of God, and consequently all creatures, since in human nature he was united with them all. Accordingly the Son of God proclaimed: If I be lifted up from the earth, I will elevate all things to myself (John 12:32). And in this elevation of all things through the Incarnation of his Son and through the glory of his resurrection according to the flesh not only did the Father beautify creatures partially, but, we can say, he clothed them entirely in beauty and dignity.

Stanza 14 My Beloved is the mountains,
and lonely wooded valleys,
strange islands,
and resounding rivers,
the whistling of love-stirring breezes

Stanza 15 The tranquil night
at the time of the rising dawn,
silent music,
sounding solitude,
the supper that refreshes, and deepens love.

‘This spiritual flight denotes a high state and union of love, in which, after much spiritual exercise, the soul is placed by God. This state is called spiritual espousal with the Word, the Son of God’(Commentary).

‘I have heard of you by word of mouth,
but now my eyes see you’(Job 42:5).

‘I stand at the door and knock; if you open I will enter
and sup with you, and you with me’(Revelation 3:20).

The seventh theme concerns sin.

May sinners disappear from the earth.

May the wicked be no more.

The psalmist longs to see the end of sin, for it is sin
that obscures the glory of God by soiling creation.