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## The World as God's Property in Psalm 24:1-2 as the Source of Man's Right Attitude Towards Creation

Świat jako Boża własność w Ps 24,1-2 źródłem właściwej postawy człowieka wobec stworzenia

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**Abstract:** The ongoing discussion on various forums regarding human responsibility for the ecological state of the surrounding world, should include the voice of the word spoken in the Bible by God, the Creator of heaven and earth. For believers, this very voice has a decisive power, however, it has been neglected for so long and the effects that can be seen with the naked eye. The binding power of this word can become an important argument in that discussion and catalyst for actions in the area of environmental protection, to which Pope Francis draws so much attention. This paper joins the unanimous choir of nature defenders, and it aims at drawing the reader's attention to selected aspects of human relationship with the world, presented in the opening verses of Psalm 24. The passages provide a clear testimony to the biblical authors' awareness of both the dependence of the world - including man - on its Creator, and the essential moral implications of that fact. It may help us realize our responsibility for the world around us as well as the necessity to react whenever the positive interaction between man and the environment is at risk. That is how, the beauty and richness of creation can become a path to God, its Creator.

**Keywords:** Bible, Old Testament, Book of Psalms, biblical exegesis, ecology, morality, religion and ecology, Christianity and ecology

**Streszczenie:** W toczącej się na różnych forach dyskusji o odpowiedzialności człowieka za ekologiczny stan otaczającego świata na pewno nie może zabraknąć głosu słowa wypowiedzianego w Biblii przez Boga, Stwórcę nieba i ziemi. Dla ludzi wierzących ten właśnie głos posiada moc decydującą, a przecież tak długo lekceważoną, czego skutki widać gołym okiem. Zobowiązująca moc tego słowa może stać się ważnym argumentem i katalizatorem działań na rzecz ochrony środowiska, na co tak wielką uwagę zwraca papież Franciszek. Do zgodnego chóru obrońców przyrody dołącza niniejszy artykuł pragnąc zainteresować czytelnika niektórymi aspektami związków człowieka ze światem, uwidocznonymi w początkowych wersetach Ps 24. Są one znakomitym przykładem świadomości autorów biblijnych zarówno zależności świata - w tym człowieka - od jego Stwórcy, jak i koniecznych implikacji moralnych, które wynikają z tego faktu. Pomoże to głębiej uświadomić człowiekowi jego odpowiedzialność za otaczający świat i konieczność reagowania, gdy pozytywna interakcja między człowiekiem a środowiskiem jest naruszona. W ten sposób piękno i bogactwo stworzenia stać się może drogą do Boga, jego Stwórcy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Biblia, Stary Testament, Księga Psalmów, egzegeza biblijna, ekologia, moralność, religia i ekologia, chrześcijaństwo i ekologia

## Introduction

The Book of Psalms may be said to convey the entire theology of the Old Testament through an abundance of diverse individual texts, mainly in the form of prayer. The psalms in all their multitude of literary forms teach about adoration, gratitude, faith, hope, repentance for sins, love of God as well as His loyalty to people. Above all, however, they express human deep trust and love for Him. Regardless of whether addressed to an individual person or to a community, the psalms invariably wish to bring us closer to God, teach the right relationship to other people, but also to show and establish a proper relationship of man and the surrounding world. After all, the entire area of the Bible's influence encompasses the world that God created and entrusted to human care (Gen 1:26-28) at the same time laying down the fundamental principles of dealing with His creation according to His will. Being a part of that world, man has never been granted the right to exert autonomous power, independently of the Creator's will, nor was he allowed to make arbitrary decisions in the environment in which he was placed by God. This fact finds its confirmation in the well-thought-out arrangement of the text of Genesis 2:8-15, where the garden appears after the act of man's creation (Gen 2:7) and is presented as God's work with all its richness and clearly assigned role of each of the elements (Gen vv. 8-14). Moreover, the command to work (v. 15) includes both the possibility of properly understood interference in the environment (*l'ābēdā*, "to work, to serve") and the need to protect it from unreasonable, harmful exploitation (*l'sāmērā*, "to guard, look after, watch"). It should therefore come as no surprise that the Book of Psalms also makes its own contribution to the search for the answer to the question of how man should act in the world that was bestowed on him as a gift and that is designed to help him discover God's presence as well as His commitment to the salvation of His creature.

This paper aims to draw the reader's attention to some aspects of human relationship with the world, presented in the first two verses of the titular Psalm 24. Those passages provide a clear testimony to the Old Testament hagiographers' awareness of both the dependence of the world – including man – on its Creator, and the essential moral implications of that fact. Naturally, it is impossible to render the rich theology of the whole psalm as regards the discussed topic in just a few remarks presented below. However, the conclusions from the analysis of the verses of Psalm 24:1-2 will not be made solely on the base of its exegesis, but also include the theology of texts closely related to it, as well as the more general, Old Testament theology of creation. It may help us realize more fully our responsibility for the surrounding world as well the necessity to react, even at the lowest level of interpersonal, individual or social relations whenever the positive interaction between man and the environment is at risk. Moreover, it will help us gain a deeper appreciation of nature's magnificence, and thus better understand our own attitude towards its beauty, power, wealth, and above towards all the world, as the way to God, its Creator.

Ps 24:1-2:

<sup>1</sup> *The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it;*

<sup>2</sup> *for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.<sup>1</sup>*

Verses 1–2 proclaim the identity of the Owner, and therefore the Ruler of the inhabited world, along with the justification for this claim (Sumpter 2015, 84). They present initial glorification of God by which the psalmist acknowledges the fact that the whole earth<sup>2</sup> and everything on it

<sup>1</sup> English translation of the text based on *The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Catholic Edition (NRSV – CE)*: <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Catholic-Edition-NRSVCE-Bible/> [access 7.01.2023].

<sup>2</sup> *'ereš* is understood as the whole of the world, i.e., in today's sense of the word, the globe (Sommer 2010, 496).



belongs to the Lord because He made it all.<sup>3</sup> The holy name of God gains importance here, because it is mentioned in the very beginning and fulfils a twofold task: Yahweh is the divine Owner of the entire visible world (v. 1) because it is He who called it into existence (v. 2). The context of the entire statement may be the praise of the Israelites' victory in some unspecified battle, followed by a thanksgiving procession to the temple. In this context, the praise of the Lord's sovereignty over all things in the world would serve as a special strengthening of the valour of His people in the battle against their enemies. However, it may also be read the other way around – which seems even more likely – that in celebrating the victory over Israel's enemies, the whole people recollect the fact that they are victorious by the power of Him who has sovereign control over all creation (Ross 2011, 577). This awareness must constitute the major foundation of the faith of the chosen people: He who is the God of Israel, as the only God, is also the Ruler of the whole earth and all its inhabitants. This is how an extremely important exchange of goods between God and His people takes place: victory in battle leads to the deepest worship of Him who granted this victory, while in return for this praise He is ready to support the warriors of the nation in subsequent skirmishes with pagan enemies. Not all exegetes agree with the thesis about the liturgical purpose of the psalm claiming that the hymn praises God's kingship in a more general way and regardless of specific circumstances (Goldingay 2006, 357). God is King because He created everything, but above all He wants to rule over people who open themselves to Him by living a pure and honest life before Him. He is God and through covenant also the Redeemer

<sup>3</sup> This is extremely important, especially during the Babylonian exile, as can be seen in the theology of Isaiah 40-66, written for Israelites overwhelmed by the burden of their situation and completely helpless, exposed to the temptation of returning to idolatry in a foreign land (Childs 1992, 387–388).

of His elect, to whom He reveals Himself as the Divine Warrior (VanGemeren 2008, 257).

Notwithstanding the motives underlying the content of the psalm,<sup>4</sup> one thing that remains of major importance here is the claim of His complete and absolute dominion over the world that He created thus excluding any other deities or powers wishing to share this dominion with Him. The profession of the oneness of God is of great importance here precisely because the pagans, when worshiping their own deities after their victories, persist and strengthen themselves in the attitude of lying. For the Israelites, there are simply no other gods. Thus, the Psalmist's faith in the reign of one God over everything that fills the earth reveals the cardinal truth of the faith of the chosen people. Three aspects of creation are outlined in the development of the theological thought: the earth ready to receive life (v. 1a) – the inhabited earth (v. 1b) – the established, solid earth (v. 2) (Kidner 1978, 113). Such a view reflects the belief in the ancient, three-partite world, divided into the heavens, i.e., the place of God's residence, the earth – the place of residence of people, animals and plants, and the underworld, filled with the ocean or waters of chaos (Sakkie 1994, 193-218; Janowski 2001, 3-26). Since access to the first and third world is impossible, the author's attention is focused on the world in which man lives and acts. He tries to convince the reader that the earth in the present form is the exclusive work of its Creator.

### 1. Dependence of creation on God

Undoubtedly, this feature of the surrounding world should be the starting point for any reflection on that world's nature and functioning. Throughout the ages, people seem to have completely forgotten that the created world does not belong to them,

<sup>4</sup> It is generally considered to belong to works of a doxological nature, to glorify God, who calls everything else into existence. (Waltke and Yu 2007, 204, 536).

and that they can never claim to be its owner. The text shows Yahweh as the Lord of creation, emphasizing the cosmic dimension of His reign. He is the owner of what He creates Himself. Many texts showing God's right to things and people, place Him in the centre of such statements and thus create a strong impression that this right is the most important in the entire analysed text.<sup>5</sup> In the same way, the author of v. 1 of the psalm wants to proclaim God's inalienable right to rule over all that He Himself has brought into existence and life. This title of ownership belongs only to God, as according to the biblical texts, no one has the power to create or make anything.<sup>6</sup> So this title of God's ownership must be proclaimed as the foundation of the believer's awareness in his relationship with the surrounding world. In no way does the world belong to man, who himself is only a part of it, even if that part is truly unique.<sup>7</sup> It is worth paying attention to the meaning of the phrase *l'JHWH hā'āres*, "for the Lord (is) the earth", emphasizing the permanence and immutability of the order of ownership established in this phrase.<sup>8</sup> The doctrine of creation conveyed in v. 1 thus provided a justification for further statements influencing the lives of Israelites, such as

5 Exod 9:29; 19:5; Lev 27:30; Deut 10:14; 26:3; 1 Sam 2:8; 1 Chr 16:23; Ps 98:4; 100:1, etc.

6 The theology of Genesis 1 emphasizes the creation of subsequent natural niches solely by the power of God's word in the terminological scheme: "and God said – and it was done".

7 The theology of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 clearly differs in its approach towards the relationship between man and the world. While in the older description of Genesis 2 the world was created for man, in the earlier, poetic account of Genesis 1 man is only one of its elements, although it is undoubtedly the crowning achievement of all creation, as the only one able to consciously adore its Creator.

8 Particle *l'*, "for" in the Bible indicates someone's right to something or explicit ownership, such as Gen 8:20; 12:7-8; 13:18; 44:17; Exod 3:18; 5:3; 20:17; Num 6:2.5; Josh 17:1.6.8.11.18; Judg 10:4; 1 Sam 1:2-3; 2 Sam 23:16; Ps 22:29; 29:1-2; 33:2; 76:12, etc. (Gerstenberger 1988, 117).

the theology of salvation, the commandment to be faithful to God, obey His law and define social relations according to His recommendations (Jenson 1999, 3).

How is God's ownership of the earth manifested? It seems plausible now to take a cursory glance at v. 2 of the psalm, which emphasizes the truth about the creation of the earth by God. It is this truth that is the most important factor in recognizing His ownership of all creation. It is He who called it into existence, formed it and established it. If we ask about the purpose of all these acts, we must take into account both God's glory and readiness of the earth for human use. Such an interpretation of the text is suggested by the mention of waters (rivers) vital to sustaining life. In any case, all these works remain in the exclusive domain of God, who created the earth out of void and darkness, according to the theology of Genesis 1-2. The outward form of the earth and of the human world is the consequence of God's decision, because He made them according to the eternal designs of His infinite wisdom. He has thus become the sole, complete and absolute owner, and no one can thus grant people right to any part of the world (Ps 89:11-12).<sup>9</sup> Verse 2 also reveals the truth that God made everything in a way that no one else could. The earth and the world are the creation of His omnipotence, because they continue, although – in line with ancient beliefs – it is based on water, i.e., a liquid element, assumably weak and unstable. The author probably wants to point out that the world in its entirety is built on divine omnipotence rather than on some solid foundation that could suffice to bear the weight of the whole earth. According to Genesis 1:9-10, the waters that initially covered the earth and made it uninhabitable were later moved

9 Broadly about the theological relationship of Ps 24 with Ps 89 (Botha 2010, 51-56). A three-partite structure of the universe is presented in vv. 9-11: the sea (vv. 9-10), the sky (vv. 11), and the earth/dry land (vv. 11). Thus, God's supremacy extends to all universe (Ramantswana 2014, 565).

to their own place so that dry land could emerge, thus allowing to fill the world with all kinds of beings (Lemański 2013, 156).<sup>10</sup> God continues and perpetuates His support by His omnipotence. While successive generations of people pass away, the earth once created remains forever (Koh 1,4).<sup>11</sup> Divine providence constantly accompanies the work of creation (Ps 119:90). It follows that God brought the world into existence to ultimately establish life, and not chaos, in it (Sumpter 2015, 91). In turn, the foundation of the earth on rivers should remind us of the fragility of all earthly realities that without the strengthening power of God are unable to provide the necessary support to any of the creatures.<sup>12</sup>

The divine act of creation is broken down into two synonymous action verbs: *jāsad*, “to establish, to form” and *kûn*, “set up, prepare”, which were each time preceded by two appropriate prepositional phrases: *‘al-jāmîm*, “on the waters/seas” and *‘al-n<sup>e</sup>hārôt*, “on rivers”.<sup>13</sup> It seems that the position of nouns *jām* and *nāhar* next to each other is not accidental, but may constitute a polemic with Canaanite beliefs according to which Jam and Nahar are two powerful nature deities.<sup>14</sup> For this reason,

<sup>10</sup> A broad exegesis of separation as part of God's creative activity is given by: (Karczewski 2008, 5-16).

<sup>11</sup> This becomes all the more evident since man, the master of creation, has a shorter life span than creation itself. The length of his life depends entirely on God's support (Filipiak 1973, 83).

<sup>12</sup> Not only to people, which is always the most noticeable because they are aware of it, but also to animals (Ps 36:6; 104:27-29; 136:25; 145:15-16; 147:9; Job 36:31; 38:41).

<sup>13</sup> The exegetes point out that the translation *‘al-n<sup>e</sup>hārôt*, “on the rivers” is not adequate. This expression is also translated by some as “ocean currents” (Dahood 1966, 151).

<sup>14</sup> These deities, the Prince of the Waters and the Judge of the Streams, were powerful forces operating above and below the surface of the earth in Canaanite myths. For the Israelites, however, they were just forces of nature that God had created and completely controlled since the foundation of the earth (Ross 2011, 578). It is worth emphasizing that the direct connection of *jāsad* with *jāmîm* and *kûn* with *nāhar* appe-

the psalmist could distinguish them as servants of God's sovereignty to emphasize that when the Israelites defeated the Canaanites in battle, the Lord Himself demonstrated His sovereignty over their gods as well. In this way, no Canaanite deities can compete with His authority or even act independently of His will.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the juxtaposition of both the above-mentioned verbs shows its great theology in the light of the very close verse from Proverbs 3:19, which mentions the creation of the earth (*jāsad ‘ereš*) and the foundation of the heavens (*kônên šāmajîm*) through God's wisdom and His reason. This means that the entire creation is a perfect work in God's design and this perfection is manifested in countless forms of life, the richness of the land and the laws working in nature (Botha 2010, 49-50).

The truth about the creation of the earth is expanded upon in subsequent psalms (Ps 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3) by other hagiographers, who perceive that fact as the major title of God's right to ownership of the earth. Because of His omnipotence, He also has the freedom to do on it anything that He deems good (Ps 135:6), which may even awe people (46:9). The earth will always fear His power (Ps 33:8; 96:9; 102:16), most likely at the moment of His theophany, because He retains full power over the earth at all times (Ps 10:13; 47:3; 83:19; 97:1; 5:9; 99:1; 148:13), He can judge it anytime (Ps 50:1; 96:13; 98:9; 105:7; 109:15), while often showing His kindness to it (Ps 85:2; 119:64). Thanks to Him, the earth bears fruit in its season (Ps 85:13).

ars only in the discussed psalm, which strengthens the thesis that the author intentionally combined them in the anti-Canaanite context to show the complete supremacy of the God of Israel (Sarna 1993, 122-123; Cross 1973, 93).

<sup>15</sup> In the Old Testament one can find the motif of God's struggle with the waters of primordial chaos as an element of creating His complete power over the created world. Therefore, verses 1-2 of the main psalm can be considered as one great cry of victory over the chaos present in the world of the Canaanites. (Day 1995, 37-38).

As God's property, the earth is graciously given to people (Ps 115:16),<sup>16</sup> destined forever for His faithful servants (Ps 37:34), whom He can make happy at any time (Ps 41:3) and ensure the return of those who are lost (Ps 22:28). However, the wicked will perish on it (Ps 37:9; 104:35; 147:6). All these manifestations of God's work on the earth prove that He considers it His property and reserves the full right to do what He deems appropriate at a given moment, both towards the earth and the people who inhabit it. It can be concluded that everything ultimately aims at instilling in human consciousness the awareness of the real, complete, eternal and effective supremacy of God over the earth and man. Exegetes see this supremacy in the whole sequence of His acts towards the earth, when there appears the divine: thought – speech – crop – dominion – creation – building – organizing – shaping – planning.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. Filling the earth

### 2.1. Material goods given by God

While writing about what in v. 1 of the psalm constitutes this fullness (*m<sup>e</sup>lô'*) of the earth, the hagiographer means not only what is visible at first glance, i.e., the land, various spaces and natural niches, plants and fruits of trees, all forest animals, and cattle on countless hills, cultivated lands, places of human habitation, but also what can be extracted from the interior of the planet. This fullness also includes the countless forms of life that exist or may later appear on the face of the earth. The same general and unspecified meaning of *m<sup>e</sup>lô'* also appears in Psalm 89:12. However, Psalm 24:1 puts emphasis on the complete dependence of all elements of the world on God, because He Himself *jāsad*, “established” it, which is also stated by the author in v. 2 of the main psalm (Venter 2005, 537-539).

In several other psalms the noun *m<sup>e</sup>lô'* takes on a more specific meaning. Thus, Psalm 50:12-13 focuses more on the world of animals bred for consumption, mainly goats and calves. God reproaches the inaccuracy of Israelites' thinking since they treated Him as pagan gods, who were daily given food and were thus made dependent on the kindness of their subjects who fed them. In order to correct this misconception, the author, in the name of God, states that even if that was the case, He, in turn, would never ask His people to feed Him, because the whole earth and whatever fills it belongs to Him, especially all animals that live on it. In this statement, the author narrows down the meaning of *m<sup>e</sup>lô'* to animals only because of the context of the statement, but the noun has a much broader meaning. In Psalm 65:10, the river of God is full (*mālē'*) of waters, undoubtedly the greatest good in the usually dry subtropical land, thirsty for water. This filling with water is an unmistakable sign of God's care for the whole earth and His benevolence towards it. Due to abundance of water, grains could grow (v. 10b), the earth was loosened and levelled (v. 11a), and its crops blessed (v. 11b) (Goldingay 2007, 281-282). In turn, in Psalm 104:24 the author expresses his delight in the multiplicity of God's creatures, that constitutes a visible sign of His wisdom. This linking of their abundance (*māl<sup>e</sup>'ā*) in every area of earthly life with God's wisdom may refer not so much to their multiplicity but to the perfect harmony among them. Nothing that exists is in a state of contradiction or conflict with other elements (Goldingay 2008, 191). On the contrary, they all work together to create a wonderful mosaic of diversity. In Psalm 144:13, this fullness is again narrowed down to the food in storehouses that are filled (*m<sup>e</sup>lē'im*) with produce of every kind (v. 13a) and in countless flocks of fertile animals. This must bring joy and evoke a sense of gratitude towards God who

<sup>16</sup> Which evidently means the divine assumption that humanity will live according to the laws given by the Owner (Goldingay 2003, 115).

<sup>17</sup> God's creative work is seen in this way by, among others, John Goldingay (2003, 42-130).

is so gracious to His worshipers.<sup>18</sup> Some of the above examples allow to understand the word *m<sup>e</sup>lō'* both as richness and fullness of the elements that make up the layout of the land, as well as the whole of the living world, especially the one that is intended for the good of man.

Consequently, the whole earth, both land, water and air as well as everything that exists in them, that is: fish of the sea, birds of the air, animals of the field, all plants growing from the earth, are all a wealth given by God. What was defined at the very beginning of God's work will last forever and will never change. This order cannot be reversed by any power. The biblical account of the earth allows us to conclude that the material world is not less important to God than the heavenly one where He dwells. The same power that He exercises in the spheres of heaven, He also exercises over all the earth, deciding to give the dominion over it to men. The difference is that in heaven God wields absolute and undivided power, while on earth He has decided to share it with man (Ps 115:16).<sup>19</sup> The power of human intervention on the earth extends to the very depths of the earth, including the ores and minerals that man may come across.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, this shows God's great trust in man, but on the other, it means that people cannot claim any right to an autonomous power independent of God's will. Any such inclination must be judged as an abuse of power and disregard for God's right to sovereignty over the earth.

Although v. 1 of the main psalm does not strictly state that all are destined for man, the author wants to emphasize that those goods are meant to be used by man for his development. This can be easily deduced

from the very fact that the text is addressed to man. It is to be read and meditated on by those who use these goods on a daily basis. The awareness that man is only the steward of goods that do not belong to him *per se* allows both to pay homage and show gratitude to the One who is their rightful Owner, and to understand and reflect upon his personal relationship to them. The proper use of those goods assumes respect for their value, rejection of selfish exploitation for excessive enrichment, and ability to share them with those who do not have access to them. In the opinion of the psalmist, God gave the earth to people, while still keeping all its richness and diversity for Himself, and man is only supposed to assume on it the role of a tenant or user.

As the earth is full of God's riches, so is the immensity of the sea with all its contents. All regions of the earth's world belong to the Lord, everything is under His eye, everything is in His hand. Psalm 96:11 combines as many as three most important niches of creation: heaven, earth and sea, and it is precisely it that is defined as *m<sup>e</sup>lō'ō*, "its contents". It is possible that the hagiographer wants to remind the reader that it is as rich a living environment as the air overflowing with birds and the earth with its rich land and multiplicity of life forms. Psalm 98:7 also presents a similar vision of the sea, when it refers in the same way to "its contents", although in this case the noise of sea waters is emphasized as an element of the great symphony of the whole world in honour of God. From this it can be concluded that any disturbance in nature will also spoil the beauty of the glory it gives to its God.

## 2.2. Man-made goods

Some commentators go a little further in the exegesis of Psalm 24:1, saying that it is not only about what people have received as gifts from God, but it is also about what they have produced themselves by toil and using their own skills to meet their needs. Such a statement can easily be justified in two ways. Humans themselves, by the fact

<sup>18</sup> Especially when in such excellent conditions it can have a positive effect on procreation (Terrien 2003, 900).

<sup>19</sup> Man himself, however, is never able to reach God and only from His goodness can he take over part of the power over the earth (Goldingay 2008, 333-334).

<sup>20</sup> cf. e.g., Gen 2:11-12; Exod 28:20; 39:13; Deut 8:9; 33:25; Josh 22:8; 1 Chr 22:14; Job 28:2.16; Ezek 28:13.



of belonging to the world of creatures, are God's work. Therefore, all products of their work, by definition, belong to God as the One who brought them to life, gave them reason and the ability to make anything and who decides on the length of their effective activity. Man's ability to conquer the earth implies harnessing or appropriating its rich resources, but also protecting them (Gen 2:15). Man's rule over all living creatures does not mean a consent to their unjustified exploitation, but it is a kind of contract with God to take care of His works. Apart from that, an important contribution to this affiliation is the fact that the matter from which all the goods of human ingenuity can arise is also the work of God. Man does not have the ability to "create" something out of nothing, but only to process what he has at his disposal, and what he received as a gift from God's. Beginning with the most basic source of nourishment, he is given the necessary plant food (Gen 1:29-31) and animal food (Gen 9:3). The above-mentioned ores and minerals significantly expand the creative possibilities of man based on God's "supplies" of appropriate materials. From the very beginning of their existence, people learned to use the many lasting goods of the earth for their activities, such as iron, copper, bronze, gold, silver, etc.<sup>21</sup> Good examples, although not exhaustive, of such activity of using the goods of the earth are: the construction of a wooden ark by Noah (Gen 6:14), the Tower of Babel built of bricks (Gen 11:3), slave labour of the Israelites for the Egyptians in the production of bricks (Exod 1:14; 5:7-8.16), the construction of cities (Isa 9:9) or precious stone products (Ezek 28:13; Job 28:6). This activity can also include the construction of stone altars (Josh 8:31; Isa 27:9), a palace by David (2 Sam 5:11; 1 Chr 29:2) and a temple by Solomon based on Lebanese cedars (1 Kgs 5:20.22-24) and stones (1 Kgs 5:29.31; 6:7).

<sup>21</sup> among others Gen 4:22; Deut 3:11; 27:5; Josh 17:16.18; 22:8; Judg 1:19; 4:3.13; 1 Sam 17:7; 2 Sam 12:31; 2 Kgs 6:5; Isa 60:17.

All of the above examples, although not all depicted in the Bible, clearly point to the fact that the "material" of human activity leading to the production of new goods on earth is the God-given reason together with natural materials, that appeared on earth by God's will at the time of world's creation. This observation allows us to confirm the truth expressed by the statement of the author of Psalm 24:1 that literally everything that fills the earth should ultimately be considered God's property, either directly or indirectly.

### 3. World

Apart from the basic term *'ereš*, "earth", the author of v. 1 used yet another, *tēbēl*, "world".<sup>22</sup> In most cases, this term appears in the poetic texts of the Old Testament, especially in the psalms. The exegesis of this noun first points to the context of God's creative work. This world, therefore, appears as the exclusive work of God's design and will, and must therefore be considered His exclusive possession. Due to a large number of verses containing the term *tēbēl* the present study I narrowed down to a brief discussion of the psalms.<sup>23</sup> In Psalm 9:9, this term refers to a world inhabited by people whose conduct will be justly judged by God (Kraus 1988, 195). So, it may mean both an inhabited area and those who inhabit it. For it will be judged by God, which narrows down the semantic scope of *tēbēl* to the human world in Psalms 96:13 and 98:9.<sup>24</sup> However,

<sup>22</sup> As an uninhabited or dry world in opposition to the part that inhabits it (Sarna 1993, 242 n. 108).

<sup>23</sup> Broader presentation (Fabry and van Meeteren 2015, 559-562) Generally, according to the wisdom current, this term takes on a cosmic dimension meaning the world inhabited by all people (Job 37:12; Prov 8:3), to whom the Creator remains faithful at all times, without divisions into nationality, material status, place of residence or even religion (Terrien 2003, 246).

<sup>24</sup> Such a judgment will result in the terrible fate of the sinner expelled from *tēbēl* (Hi 18,18) and the wicked punished for their sins (Isa 13:11). One of them is the unknown ruler destroying human dwellings (Isa 14:17) and therefore he will not any more take *tēbēl* in his inheritance (Isa 14:21). The word *tēbēl* meaning the world of men, cf. also Isa 24:4; 34:1.

by the same judgment of God, Israel will spread throughout all of *tēbēl* (Isa 27:6). In the theophanic verse Psalm 18:16 *tēbēl* reacts with horror to the intervention of an angry, divine warrior, thus revealing its foundations. In this way, it reveals its complete helplessness against the power and terribleness of his Creator (Kraus 1988, 261-262). In Psalm 19:5 *tēbēl* was used as a term parallel to *'ereš* and both the "world" and the "earth" are the space of spreading God's glory, probably through a strike of a lightning, although there is no mention of it *explicitly*. However, it is easy to guess that the power and loudness of the thunder make all that exists in the world awe at the greatness of God.<sup>25</sup> The same reaction of fear and trembling of *tēbēl* to the thunder of a lightning is described in Psalm 77:19 and 97:4.<sup>26</sup> In accordance with Psalm 89:12, heaven, earth and *tēbēl* were created by God in His creative act, undoubtedly constituting a visible sign of His greatness and omnipotence (Kraus 1989, 206). Ps 90:2 also mentions the creation of *'ereš* and *tēbēl* at a certain time, emphasizing especially the eternity of God creating them.<sup>27</sup> Stability of *tēbēl* confirmed by powerful divine action, is affirmed in Psalm 93:1 and 96:10.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. Its inhabitants

A dozen more texts link *tēbēl* and *jōš'ēhīm*, "inhabitants" as in the discussed v. 1 of the main psalm. In 1 Samuel 2:8 there appears

<sup>25</sup> By combining the element of light and joy (Kraus 1988, 272).

<sup>26</sup> This is supposed to be the authors' reaction to the widespread, Canaanite worship of Baal, the god of storms. Yahweh is much more powerful (Kraus 1989, 117).

<sup>27</sup> The same idea of God, the creator of *tēbēl*, can also be found in Job 34:13, albeit in the form of a rhetorical question, and Proverbs 8:26. In Proverbs 8:31, Jer 10:12, and 51:15, *tēbēl* is a visible sign of God's wisdom, most likely through its own harmony and the coherent action of each of its elements. In turn, Job 37:12 emphasizes the complete obedience of all elements of *tēbēl* to divine commands, mentioning especially the sun.

<sup>28</sup> See also 1 Chr 16:30.

a statement about His complete sovereignty in acting especially for the poor and humiliated, whom He places among the other inhabitants, especially those ennobled (v. 1a). He can do this precisely because the foundations of the earth belong to Him and He has placed *tēbēl* (v. 1b) on them. The text pays special attention to two types of God's work: specific, towards a group of people, and general, towards the whole, huge and surrounding world (Botha 2010, 48). God is a God of actions, both inconspicuous as well as great and spectacular. According to Psalm 33:8, the whole earth and all inhabitants of *tēbēl* are to fear Him. It is, obviously, not the fear of awe or terror aroused by one's own wickedness, but the awe and wonder at the greatness and magnificence of the One who does things absolutely beyond the power of men: creating the heavens and angels by the power of His word alone (v. 6.9), ordering the seas (v. 7) and thwarting the plans of the pagans and enemies of Israel (v. 10) (Kraus 1988, 376). No man or community is capable of doing such things and creating such phenomena. This evokes the feelings of deference, respect and esteem (Terrien 2003, 298). The roaring sea as well as the actions of human *tēbēl* are to become part of the great praise of the Lord by all creation in accordance with Psalm 98:7.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, man is to turn completely towards the One who sustains his life and guarantees him all the conditions for his existence, who, having offered him his salvation (v. 3), will finally appear as a just judge (v. 9). The text of Isaiah 18:3, which is difficult to interpret, probably encourages a change in the behaviour of the people of Ethiopia, who send their emissaries to Egypt begging for help against the Assyrian empire (vv. 1-2). However, nothing like this will happen, because it is not in human power to stand against God's plan. Only trust in Him guarantees peace and certainty

<sup>29</sup> Again, it is about expressing the joy of God's victory over the waters of primordial chaos (Terrien 2003, 684).

in the midst of doubt and fear because He overcomes all odds anyway (vv. 4-6). That is why all the people of *tēbēl* are to wait for the sign from Him, heralding the beginning of His works (Brzegowy 2014, 169-173). In Isaiah 26:9, the emphasis is on the justice of God's judgments, thanks to which both the author of the verse and all the inhabitants of *tēbēl* learn justice (Smith 2007, 446). In v. 18 of the same chapter, the hagiographer states the ineffective and unsuccessful activities of the members of the chosen people, which, despite the scale of their effort, did not bring the desired effects (vv. 17-18a), especially as regards the population of *tēbēl* (v. 18b) (Smith 2007, 450-451). The verse of Lam 4:12 mentions the terrifying and not previously believed by any of the inhabitants of *tēbēl* invasion of Judah and Jerusalem by foreign armies. For no one wanted to believe that God could allow His city and temple to be destroyed (Garrett and House 2004, 443-444). However, this happened as a result of hardness and stubbornness in sin of the people who refused to convert despite the warnings of the prophets (Korzec 2021, 136). Finally, the verse Na 1:5, belonging to the context of vv. 1-6, depicts the terror of all the inhabitants of *tēbēl* at the sight of the power of angry God ruthlessly destroying the capital of the hated Assyrian empire. The inhabitants are all the more terrified because in reaction to His mighty theophany, even the mountains and hills, as well as the whole earth tremble with fear. (Barker and Bailey 1999, 175-176).

What can be concluded based on the above remarks? In the biblical texts, *tēbēl* is understood in two ways: as the world in the geographical and physical sense, as a place where people live, or as people who inhabit it. It is also a place of the theophanic manifestation of the greatness of God, who positively or negatively affects the lives of its inhabitants. Moreover, it is completely dependent and subject to the will of God, and it is unable to oppose that will in any way.

## Conclusions

The above-conducted analysis of the verses of Psalm 24:1-2 was shown against the background of the theology of texts closely related to it, as well as the more general, Old Testament theology of creation. However, in order to avoid gathering anything only loosely connected with the topic, it is necessary to impose certain boundaries, which are defined by the area of the theology of these two verses. The first and most important conclusion is the fact that God is the only source of existence of all beings apart from Himself and a sign of His opening to the "outside" of Himself. The act of creation or bringing anything into existence, constitutes the essence of all His activity. While He Himself remains perfectly and completely independent of His creation, He sustains everything in existence and in acting. He is knowable through the visible outcomes of his activity, revealing his fundamental features: wisdom, omnipotence, beauty and goodness. Only God rules everything, thus calling everything into existence is the most important argument for His oneness and exclusivity. There is no deity but Him!

The sense of existence of everything depends on His will, that is, on the purpose for which it is created, and in all stages fulfilling this purpose. He takes delight in everything that He brings into the world. Each element of creation has its place and assigned purpose. This statement refers both to the immense waters and the whole of earth, as well as to small plants or individual animals, because God's delight in them is independent of their size.<sup>30</sup> When He defines the nature and way of acting of each creature as well as the area of its existence, He ensures that no thing contradicts

<sup>30</sup> Such a link between this greatness and the detailed character of every law of nature is shown especially in the description of Genesis 1:14-16, where creation is elevated above the earth itself, understood as a planet: huge galaxies are governed by laws on a complete and partial scale, in relation to each of the stars and planets that they encompass (Callaham 2021, 9).

one another. Therefore, each of the species occupies its own natural niche. No species appears by chance, and all have their own sense and significance for the whole. There is not the slightest collision in their functioning. He himself provides them with all the conditions necessary for life and reproduction.

The richness of all forms of the earth's landscape and living beings results from the inner richness of God Himself. The earth's obedience to God's commands (Gen 1:13b) makes it possible to define the life potential of all beings, which introduces immediate and permanent order and harmony in their mutual relations. This reveals His care for the intended positive effect. The appearance of individual beings on earth allows us to see their value independent of their usefulness for man. They are all essential elements necessary to fill the world.

Man must be aware of the purposeful nature of his own existence in the world. He is both part of the whole of the created world and a unique being through his reason and the possibility of planned activities. He should always feel needed by the world, although this need will only bear fruit as in a positive and creative relationship with the rest of the world. This will happen when man recognizes his own dependence on the Creator, discovers and recognizes His laws governing the created world. It is also a fundamental command to remember that man is the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27), combined with the need to discover in one's own life everything that makes man similar to God. What is also important is the truth of man's existential dependence on the rest of creation, however, in his actions he remains independent of that creation. In the likeness of God, man in his action towards the world should manifest his qualities: wisdom, openness and goodness. This will only take place when man accepts God's right to ownership of the world and thus his own dependence on God in his existence and activity. Maintaining the awareness of his

own superiority over all other beings, man, following the example of the Creator, must give the right to existence and life to all positive forms of creation making it the foundation of all his other rights. He will then retain much longer his own right to use the goods of the world for his development.

D.M. Rhoads and B.R. Rossing formulated important – as it seems – theses of pro-ecological action based on the foundation on faith:

- a. the missionary vocation must be enriched with an important element of care for the world around us, which requires redefining the preached kerygma, teaching, testimony and formation of individual communities;
- b. endangered nature must become subject of Christian solidarity, just as this solidarity is expressed towards the oppressed, the exploited, the marginalized, the poor, the sick, the elderly, women and people of different races;
- c. concern for the whole of the surrounding world is the basis of our vocation as human beings, as well as the commandment to love God and neighbour;
- d. God, as the Creator, calls upon humanity to work in partnership with Him to save and restore the balance of all life forms on earth (Rhoads and Rossing 2010).

Therefore, the moral command to act always for the common good, not only for the human good, but also for the good of the entire planet, makes an exceptionally strong message. Individual needs can never prevail over the common good. It is for this purpose that God brought the earth into existence together with all that fills it: the world and its inhabitants.

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