

Exegetical Brief: Psalm 104:4—Winds Or Angels?

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According to the NIV translation, Psalm 104:4 speaks of the way in which God uses forces of nature, winds and fire, as his servants. According to Hebrews 1:7 this verse refers to the speed and brilliance of God's angels. Which interpretation is truer to the context of Psalm 104?

Psalm 104 is a review of the blessings we enjoy as a result of God's acts of creation. It is arranged according to the days of creation as recorded in Genesis 1. We begin with a translation of verses two to four, which describe day 2 of creation.

Hebrew Text Verses 2-4

בְּנֹטָה שְׂמִימִים פְּרִיעָה:²
הַמְקַרָּה בְּמִימִם עֲלִיּוֹתָיו הַשָּׁמַיִם רְכֹּבֹו הַמְהִלָּה עַל־פְּנֵי־רוּחַ:³
עָשָׂה מְלֹאכָיו רוּחוֹת מִשָּׂרְתָיו אֵשׁ לֵהֵט:⁴

He stretches out the heavens like a canopy. He is the one who lays beams on the waters [for] his upper chambers. He is the one who makes clouds his chariot. He is the one who travels on the wings of the wind. He makes his messengers winds, his ministers flaming fire.

The NIV translates verse 4, "He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants." According to this, God uses winds and lightning as his servants. This is, of course, true, but it does not appear to be the correct rendering of this verse. According to the translation adopted above (he makes his messengers winds, his ministers flaming fire) verse 4 refers to the speed and splendor of the angels. This translation is preferable to the rendering of the NIV because it is the translation accepted in Hebrews 1:7 (ὁ ποιῶν τοὺς ἀγγέλους αὐτοῦ πνεύματα καὶ τοὺς λειτουργοὺς αὐτοῦ πυρὸς φλόγα).

Furthermore, there are a number of difficulties with the NIV translation. In verse 3 the Hebrew word order (בְּנֹטָה שְׂמִימִים רְכֹּבֹו) leads the NIV to translate "he makes clouds his chariot." If the translators were consistent in their rendering of the same pattern of word order in verse 4 (עָשָׂה מְלֹאכָיו רוּחוֹת), the result would be "he makes his messengers winds." The Septuagint translation of verse 4 adopted by Hebrews 1:7, is thus acknowledged as a more natural rendering of this word order even by the NIV's handling of verse 3.

If one accepts the NIV interpretation and then translates verse 4 very literally the result is "he makes burning fire his servants." This transition from the singular "fire" to the plural "servants" is not very natural. We would expect "he makes fire his servant." We can, however, comfortably say "he makes his servants fire."

The strongest argument in favor of the NIV translation of verse 4 is that winds and flame creates a better synonymous parallel with verse 3, which refers to wind and clouds. This, however, creates a redundancy since the text then mentions wind twice. There is, in fact, nothing unusual about having verse 3 mention elements of the physical heavens and verse 4 jump to the spirits who inhabit the heavens since these two forces are often set side by side in Scripture. For example, the "hosts of heaven" may refer either to the stars or the angels, sometimes to both at the same time. In Job 38:7 (the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy) it is not clear if this verse contains two names for stars, two names for angels, or stars first and angels second. Compare also Psalm 148:2,3: "Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his heavenly hosts. Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars" and Psalm 18:9,10: "He parted the heavens and came down; dark clouds were under his feet. He mounted the cherubim and flew; he soared on the wings of the wind." The angels often appear in Scriptures as flaming men (Daniel 10:6). They are swift like the wind (Daniel 9:21).

The mention of angels in the beginning of Psalm 104 also ties in very well with the emphasis on angels in the conclusion of Psalm 103, the companion piece to this psalm.

The point of Psalm 104:4 as interpreted above agrees exactly with the point stressed in Hebrews 1:7: angels, great as they are, are God's created servants. They are not equal to his eternal Son. The interpretation of Psalm 104:4 given in Hebrews 1:7, the most natural reading of the Hebrew of this verse, and comparison of Psalm 104:4 with other passages of Scripture all militate against the NIV rendering of this verse.