

Glory to God! **An Exegetical Study of Psalm 8**

The incredible words of Psalm 8 thrust us backward to the time when God created the heavens, the earth, the creatures of land, sky, and sea, and finally, male and female in His image. Our attention is drawn to the scene prior to man's fall, when that first Adam was created good and upright, without sin. Still, the presence of enemies, foes, and avengers marks the sad fact of sin's entrance. Meanwhile, our thoughts are riveted forward to Christ, the second Adam, the one sinless Man whose redemptive work reverses the curse under which the whole creation now groans. We will closely examine the text and structure of Psalm 8 to understand its purpose and the response it calls forth in New Testament believers.

Text and Translation

Translation Notes: Verbs, Grammar, Text Critical Notes. Exhibits A and B describe all verbs uses and text critical notes. The text critical notes, in general, relate to matters that are relatively minor. For example, whether we say "heavens" (LXX) or "Your heavens" in verse 4, God is clearly the Creator behind the heavenly scene. Whether we translate as the "work" or "works" of God's fingers in that same verse, the sense remains unaffected.

At one point, however, our text critical analysis forces us to face a grammatical puzzle. The verb *natan* in the second verse

is rather obscure and troublesome to translate, having baffled many commentators. The imperative preceded by *asher* is noted as most probably corrupt, and other possibilities are suggested by the LXX (σὺ ἐπηρθῆ), other Greek versions, and the Latin. Thoughtful commentators have wrestled with the issue. Briggs leaves the imperative in place, proposing the relative pronoun to be a later scribal addition.¹ Craigie chooses the first person singular, one of the options in the text critical note, translating as "*I will worship Your majesty.*"² However, the aorist passive, in the third person singular (from the LXX), lends a translation that nicely intensifies the opening declaration of the majesty of God's name (contrary to the second person singular of the NASB). Craigie, similarly, sees a poetic correspondence between God's *name* and God's *majesty*, the latter being his perception of the major theme of the psalm.³ Kraus notes that the relative pronoun "can serve as the continuation of the hymnic description."⁴ The name of our Lord is majestic throughout the *earth*, and *furthermore*, His splendor is placed above the *heavens*.

The other verbs in this psalm pose relatively little trouble in the translation of the text. It is of interest to note Craigie's departure, in verses 6-7, from the normal past tense

¹ Briggs, p. 62.

² Craigie, p. 104.

³ Craigie, p. 107.

⁴ Kraus, p. 178.

translations of the verbs "crown" and "cause to rule." His future rendering of these terms, certainly a routine possibility for the imperfect, is justified by seeing a contrast between God's past accomplishments for man (using the perfect) and His future plans (using the imperfect).⁵ Although his argument has merit, such an interpretation seems to detract from the forceful picture painted for us of God's original creative acts, and specifically of man prior to the fall. Man indeed was crowned with glory and honor at creation. He was given dominion over the earth. The entrance of sin turned the tables, placing man under a curse such that we must now look *forward* to the time when all things are placed under the feet of *Christ*.

A chiasmic verb structure in verses 4-6 catches our attention:

Establish (v. 4)	pft (past)
Remember (v. 5)	impf (durative)
Attend to (v. 5)	impf (repetitive)
Cause to lack (v. 6)	wci (explanatory)
Crown (v. 6)	impf (used as pft - past)
Cause to rule (v. 6)	impf (used as pft - past)
Put, set (v. 7)	pft (past)

The two perfect verbs bracketing this little section draw our attention to God's establishing of the heavenlies, on the one hand, and His placing the earth under the feet of man. All of the intervening verbs concern God's gracious dealings with man. He condescends to remember and attend to man, insignificant as he

⁵ Craigie, p. 105.

seems within the grand scheme of God's creation. Even more than that, the psalmist explains, God has made him only a little lower than the heavenly beings, crowning him with glory and honor, causing him to rule over His other works.

Stichographic Translation:

Title: For the director of music. According to gittith. A psalm of David.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth,
Your splendor, which is displayed above the heavens!

From the mouth of infants and nursing babes You have
established strength,
Because of Your adversaries,
To make the enemy and the revengeful cease.

When I consider Your heavens,
The work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,
What is man, that You take thought of him?
The son of man, that You care for him?

Yet You have made him a little lower than the heavenly
beings,
And You crown him with glory and majesty
You cause him to rule over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet,
All sheep and oxen,
And also the beasts of the field,
The birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
Whatever passes through the paths of the seas.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!

Notes on the Translation. The above begins with the NASB translation, updating for archaic verb and second person pronoun forms. The second colon of verse 1, as previously discussed, has been reworded according to an analysis of the Masoretic Text

critical notes. In addition, verse 5 has been amended to translate *Elohim* as "heavenly beings" rather than "God" (NASB). There is certainly no clear agreement evident on this point. Even Calvin, ever conscious of the Creator-creature distinction, would have us translate "God" as this juncture. Despite the New Testament quotation using "angels," Calvin notes that Jewish interpreters have universally opted for "God."⁶ Certainly the Hebrew *Elohim*, though frequently a clear reference to God, is subject to differing translations in various contexts. It is used for "gods" in Psalms 86:8, 97:7, and 136:2. Man is created in the image of God (*Elohim*) in Genesis 1:26-27. Certainly Psalm 8 alludes to the creation of man in God's image. However, since the inspired writer to the Hebrews renders the term unmistakably as "angels," and because we want to guard the vast distinction between God the Creator and man the creature, this latter option seems preferable.

Parallelism and Poetic Structure. Following is a detailed analysis of the poetic techniques employed in the construction of Psalm 8, noting particularly the use of semantic parallelism.

Verse 1. This verse is a poetic line, a bicolon where we see intensification. In the first colon, the majesty of God's name is displayed throughout the *earth*. In the second colon, His splendor is greater yet, being displayed even above the *heavens*. Note the ellipsis here, as the phrase "how majestic" is not repeated in the second colon.

⁶ Calvin, p. 102-103.

Verse 2. This line is a tricolon, declaring in the first place that God has established strength from the mouth of infants and babes. The second colon gives more specific information about His reason; it is because of His adversaries. The third and final colon gives even further clarity about His purpose; He intends to cause these enemies to cease.

Verse 3. This poetic line (tricolon) utilizes a powerful synecdoche, describing God's skillful, detailed creative activity as the work of His *fingers*. Since fingers are a rather small part of the body, this metaphor highlights the awesome nature of God's majesty. Yet fingers can be the instrument of great artistic skill, such as encountered in a concert pianist; here is the tenor probably intended by this particular vehicle (fingers). The third colon moves from the general ("heavens") to the specifics, moon and stars. The absence of the sun has led some commentators to view this psalm as a night hymn. Perhaps it is, but we might again find here a synecdoche; the "moon and stars" represent the entire expanse of the heavens.

Verse 4. This line, another bicolon, employs two terms for "man" and two verbs that describe God's continuing, providential care over him. The change of verbs is an intensification of God's activity. Not only does God take thought of man, "remember" him; He actively attends to him and cares for him. Notice again the ellipsis, with the phrase "what is" being omitted from the second colon.

Verse 5. Here again is a poetic line, a bicolon. God has made man, His image bearer, a little lower than the heavenly beings. This thought intensifies in the second colon, as we learn that God has crowned him with glory and honor!

Verse 6. Two colons in this line give more information about *how* God has crowned man with glory and honor. God has done this by causing man to rule over His other creative works. Complementing this ruling position is God's placing of everything under man's feet, as stated in the second colon.

Verses 7-8. Here we move from the general, "all things," to the specifics, described in four phrases. Even these specifics, however, are representative of the whole.

Verse 9. We end with a monocolon that repeats the first colon of verse (line) 1. This *inclusio* serves to frame the psalm in a strong declaration of God's great glory.

Genre

Hymn. This psalm is unmistakably a hymn of praise, one that follows the typical hymnic structure described by Longman. There is an initial call to praise, followed by an expansion of the reasons for that praise, then concluding with a further call. In this instance, the reverence evoked by the psalm is heightened by the poetic *inclusio*, an exact repetition of the call to praise.⁷ God is praised for who He is, in the description of His name as "majestic in all the earth." More specifically, however, this psalm praises God as the *Creator* who has bestowed His infinite goodness and blessings on man, the creature who bears His image. God is praised for the manner in which He entered the life of man, giving him an honored place of dominion over His other creatures. Praise is not only the beginning word, but as in the Psalter as a whole, and in the life of faith, it is also the *final* word.

Although the creation theme is prominent, there are royal elements that enter into the analysis of this psalm's genre. Not only is God the Creator of man; He is also the great King who has given man the kingly function of ruling over the rest of creation.

One commentator identifies Psalm 8 as an *evening* hymn due to the description of God's heavens as moon and stars, excluding the

sun. Although this point is not critical to interpretation, it is often in the quiet stillness of the night, when the workday has ceased, that even unbelievers pause to reflect on the awesome expanse of the heavens.

Cultic Function. The alternation between singular and plural forms drives us to inquire about the function of this psalm in Israel's community worship. Kraus views it as the "song of praise of an individual framed by choral verses (refrain)." Kraus sees elements of lament, thanksgiving, and wisdom (parallel to Psalm 90) in this psalm.⁸ Its theme, however, is so central to Israel's tradition that it would serve Israel's temple worship on many occasions. No specific historical events are narrated; rather, it is general and appropriate for the entire congregation.⁹ In addition, it was associated with Ascension Day in the early Christian church.¹⁰ In view of the initial salutation, to "our Lord," community cultic use appears most plausible.

Immediate Context - Psalm 7 and 9. The hymn genre of Psalm 8 gives it a context among other hymns within the Psalter. As we have seen, its general structure is quite similar to that of others hymns. The immediately surrounding context, however, is another level of context that must not be overlooked.

⁷ Longman, p. 77, 107.

⁸ Kraus, p. 179.

⁹ Briggs, p. 62.

¹⁰ Craigie, p. 106.

In Psalm 7, the writer pleads with God for refuge and salvation from his enemies or adversaries. His confession is one of innocence, asking God to lay his *glory* in the dust if that confession is false. Perhaps it is these very adversaries who are subdued by the praise arising from a most unlikely source, the mouth of tiny children. The establishment of man's God-given *glory*, which the psalmist is willing to "lay in the dust," is declared with power in Psalm 8.

Psalm 9 shifts us to the thanksgiving genre. If we consider the three Psalms (7, 8, 9) sequentially, it appears that God has answered the cry for relief. The enemies have now stumbled and turned back (note the repetition of the verb from 8:2), possibly foiled by praise emanating from the nursery. Psalm 9 moves on to declare God's praises as deliverer, complementing the praise given Him as Creator in Psalm 8.

Outline of Text:

Title

For the director of music. According to gittith. A psalm of David.

I. Glory to God!

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth,
Your splendor, which is displayed above the heavens!

From the mouth of infants and nursing babes You have
established strength,

Because of Your adversaries,

To make the enemy and the revengeful cease.

IIA. Man's Insignificance

When I consider Your heavens,

The work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,
What is man, that You take thought of him?
The son of man, that You care for him?

IIB. Man's Honored Role

Yet You have made him a little lower than the heavenly
beings,

And You crown him with glory and majesty
You cause him to rule over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet,
All sheep and oxen,
And also the beasts of the field,
The birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
Whatever passes through the paths of the seas.

III. Glory to God!

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!

Commentary. At the outset, we must recognize the broad covenantal context of this psalm. It is not merely addressed to *the* Lord, but personally and specifically to *our* Lord. The God whose majesty fills both heaven and earth has established a covenantal relationship with man, His image bearer. Man's honored position in the covenant is detailed in the body of the psalm, framed by a resounding declaration that the ultimate glory and honor belong to God, our Creator and King. Man's chief purpose, indeed, is to *glorify God* and enjoy Him forever.

God's glory is the overarching theme of this psalm. His creation of man, in His image, and His placement of man in an honored position of dominion over the earth, is ultimately designed for His own eternal glory. Before considering details, we must recognize the broad structure of this psalm. In a

nutshell, Psalm 8 considers *God and man*. It begins and ends with the glory of God. Sandwiched in between are two sections related to man. Man's existence is transient and apparently insignificant when compared to the awesome expanse of God's creation, yet God has prepared for him an honored role as the guardian and ruler over His other works. Because of the fall, however, we must look forward to Christ for the fulfillment of that position.

The weak and the wise. Because God's purpose is His own glory, which He shares with no one, Scripture often faces us with His use of what the world considers weak and ineffective. God makes foolish the "wisdom of the wise" (Isaiah 29:14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25). He chose the weak little nation of Israel to display His love and power (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). The apostle Paul learned the sufficiency of God's grace at the point of his own weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). Thus it is not surprising that the mouth of *infants*, God's tiniest and weakest image bearers, would be used to turn back His arrogant adversaries, "to lay their intolerable pride in the dust."¹¹

Awe meditation on God's creation. The awesome vastness of the heavens is powerfully underscored by describing it as the works of God's *fingers*. At this point, man's prideful autonomy is laid in the dust! Yet man, created in God's image, is capable of pondering his position and reflecting on the works of his Creator.

Man's insignificance. The crucial question, "what is man," occurs elsewhere.¹² In Psalm 144:3, man's life is compared to a breath (see also James 4:14). The transience of man's life emerges again when the question is asked in Job 7:17, this time in the context of a desperate plea for relief. We are reminded of the brevity of human life, and also the fact of the fall. Yet simultaneously we are astonished that God, the eternal, transcendent Creator, is mindful of man and cares for the details of his life.

Two parallel Hebrew words are used to denote mankind. *Enosh* occurs most frequently in poetic texts, particularly Job. It is often considered to have the nuance of emphasizing man's frailty.¹³ The term *adam* is easily recognized as the name of the first man, Adam, created from the dust of the earth. Both of these words contribute to a recognition of the Creator-creature distinction. Yet as we continue, we learn that the awesome Creator has endowed His image bearer with an honored position as His earthly representative, exercising dominion over the other creatures of the land, sky, and sea.

Man's God-given stewardship. Whether we translate "a little lower than God," or "a little lower than the angels," the context inevitably draws us to reflect on the original creation of man in

¹¹ Calvin, p. 97.

¹² Kidner, p. 67, points these out.

God's image. The divine instructions of Genesis 1:28 are echoed in this allusion to the creation scene. While God is clearly praised as the transcendent Creator of the heavens and earth, man is honored when he receives this delegated mastery over God's other creatures. We are reminded here of the covenantal nature of the relationship between God and man. God is the sovereign king who establishes the covenant; man is the vassal king who is obligated to fulfill certain divinely ordained responsibilities. Calvin notes the arrangement of the world for the comfort and happiness of man, and yet, this beautiful order is thrown into confusion by the fall.¹⁴ Only our christological examination of this passage can enable us to understand the full reality of this psalm. At present, we see the entire creation groaning (Romans 8:22), with God's honored image bearer in a state of bondage rather than dominion.

God's ultimate glory. The praise and glory of God is always the last word. In these few verses we have a mini-eschatology that begins and concludes with *His* honor and glory. The mention of God's *name* brings to mind the fact and necessity of divine revelation, in order that man might have knowledge of God's plan and role for him:

"It was the name and the revelation which came through the name that transformed mankind's sense of universal

¹³ Kraus, p. 182; Calvin, p. 100.

¹⁴ Calvin, p. 106.

insignificance into an awareness of the divine and significant plan."¹⁵

Nevertheless, the spotlight remains on God. Man's life is purposeful, honorable, and significant only in the context of service, worship, and giving glory to God. This psalm highlights the relationship of Creator and creature, yet consistently exalts and glorifies God.

Christological Perspective

Aside from the mention of enemies in the early verses of Psalm 8, we are presented with a puzzling picture of man's dominion, one that fails to match our everyday experience. Just turn on the news! Man is more *ruled by*, rather than *ruler over*, God's creation. The writer to the Hebrews, quoting Psalm 8, explicitly notes (2:8) that we do not presently see its fulfillment. Look around; all things are *not now* subject to man. A little biblical reflection brings us quickly to the roots of this sorry scenario. Man has fallen into sin, failing to exercise the dominion given to him by God--in fact, *commanded* by God--in Genesis 1:28. The desperate efforts toward ecology in the late twentieth century highlight man's failure and inability to rectify the situation. Man is hopelessly enslaved. Who will deliver him from this wretched estate?

¹⁵ Craigie, p. 109.

Fulfillment of the purpose of Psalm 8. The writer to the Hebrews doesn't leave us in despair. The description of man's exalted status, "made a little lower than the angels," is pictured here as the *humiliation* of Jesus Christ (2:9), who is *God* in the flesh. In His humiliation on the cross, He accomplished the redemption of His people and was crowned, at His resurrection, with the glory and honor forfeited by the first Adam at the fall (see also Revelation 4:11, 5:12-13). Man's sin placed him in subjection, under a curse. Christ's redemptive works places all things properly under *His* feet. The apostle Paul recognizes this when he quotes Psalm 8:6 in 1 Corinthians 15:27 and alludes to the same passage in Ephesians 1:22.

Redemption of the whole creation. Man's sin had cosmic consequences. So does his redemption. At present, the entire creation groans (Romans 8:22), having been placed under a curse at the fall (Genesis 3:17-29). The creation is not properly subject to and managed by man. Christ's redemptive work reverses this situation. When all things have finally been subjected under *His* feet, and the last enemy (death) is defeated (1 Corinthians 15:26), the creation will be liberated from its lengthy term of bondage (Romans 8:23; Colossians 1:20). We anticipate a *new* heaven and earth as the result of redemption (Revelation 21:1ff; 2 Peter 3:10-13).

Restoration of the image of God. Psalm 8 strongly alludes to man's creation in the image of God when the psalmist describes man's governing role. There is a sense in which that image is retained in spite of sin. Man continues to think and to make moral decisions. He retains moral agency even having lost moral excellence. The New Testament, particularly in the Pauline epistles, affirms the restoration of God's image in the redeemed. The believer is renewed in the image of his Creator (Colossians 3:10). Specifically, this renewal is in terms of moral excellence, in righteousness, holiness, and truth (Ephesians 4:22-24). Restoration of God's image is grounded in the truth that Christ is the *true* image of God, in fact the *exact representation* of His divine nature (Hebrews 1:3; see also Colossians 1:15).

The Christian's Response

The ultimate purpose of Psalm 8 mirrors the purpose of man: to glorify God. Man, the crown of creation, was to glorify God as image bearer, ruling wisely over God's other works. As we have seen, Christ alone ultimately fulfills that purpose. As redeemed people, how shall we live in response to this truth?

Stewardship. In spite of man's sin, God has graciously given many good gifts (Psalm 65:5-13, 104, 145:9 and 15-16; James 1:17; Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:35-36; Acts 14:16-17). As redeemed people who seek to worship the Creator, our biblical response to Psalm 8 is to exercise proper stewardship over God's generous gifts. In

caring for the creation, but not *worshipping* it, we glorify the Creator.

Relationships. We glorify God not only by our care of His other creative works, but also in our relationships to other image bearers. Based on the image of God in man, James instructs us to edify--not curse--our fellow man (James 3:9-10).

Self-esteem? Many today cite Psalm 8 as support for the modern psychological self-esteem movement.¹⁶ Such an interpretation fails to consider the full teaching of Scripture concerning the condition of man, pressing foreign ideas onto the text. Even the structure of the psalm, beginning and concluding with the praise of *God's* name, reminds us that it is *His* glory, not our own, that is the overriding theme. Man praises and esteems *God* for having created him and honored him with the position of ruling over His other works. In the face of such honor, man's sin is all the more glaring.

Far from a proof-text for self-esteem, Psalm 8 should heighten our humility as well as our gratitude to God for His glorious work of redemption. Our response must be one that centers on *His* glory, not man in his fallen state.

Humility and Gratitude: The gravity of sin and the glory of redemption. When man's original state is compared with the

¹⁶ Bullock, p. 131, is one commentator who falls into this trap. Kraus, p. 185, even goes so far as to deny the doctrine of original sin.

present reality, the gravity of his sin is clearly exposed. Man was to rule over creation, yet always with delegated authority, submitting to God as Creator and King. Sin separated man from God, destroyed His image in the sense of moral excellence, and placed man in a cursed position of bondage. Recognition of the height from which he has fallen should *humble* man, highlighting the gravity of his sin. John Murray summarizes it well:

"Man conceived of as in the image of God, so far from toning down the doctrine of total depravity, points rather to its gravity, intensity, and irreversibility."¹⁷

At the same time, the glory of redemption is even more emphatic. Recognizing the full impact of sin draws us to glorify God for His gracious redemptive work. Simultaneously, Psalm 8 thrusts us back to creation, prior to sin, and ahead to redemption, when sin is overwhelmingly conquered through the work of Christ. In a nutshell, our response must be: Glory to God!

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¹⁷ Murray, p. 39.

Exhibit A
Verb Use - Psalm 8

8:1 piel ptc (act as director)
Substantive (1211) = choir director

8:2 qal impv (give, set)
See textual note. Imperative doesn't make sense. Probably perfect used for an action in the past (112c).

8:3 qal ptc (suck)
Substantive (1211) = sucklings

8:3 piel pft (found, establish)
Action in the past (112c)

8:3 qal ptc (show hostility)
Substantive (1211) = enemies, or
Attributive (121i) = those showing hostility

8:3 hiph infc (destroy, remove)
With preposition *lamed*, expressing the purpose of an action
(1241 -- infinitive construct)

8:3 qal ptc (be hostile to)
Substantive (1211) = enemies, or
Attributive (121i) = showing hostility

8:3 hith ptc (avenge oneself)
Substantive (1211) = avengers, or
Attributive (121i) = those avenging themselves

8:4 qal impf (see)
Repetitive action (113c1)

8:4 pol pft (establish)
Past action (112c)

8:5 qal impf (remember) (interrogative)
Durative (113c2); God continually remembers and cares for (next verb) His creatures.

8:5 qal impf (attend to, visit)
Repetitive (113c1); God's providential, continuing care over His creatures.

Exhibit A (continued)

8:6 piel wci (cause to lack) (indicative)
Action in the past; does not have the sense of succession here,
but rather has explanatory value following the questions about
God's attention to man (118j).

8:6 piel impf (crown)
No iterative or durative aspect; has same value as qatal (113h --
cites this verse as example)

8:7 hiph impf (cause to rule)
See above; I think the two verbs go together.

8:7 qal pft (put, set)
Action in the past (112c)

8:9 qal ptc (pass over)
Attributive (121Bi) = whatever passes through the seas

Exhibit B Text Critical Notes

8:1 LXX and Jerome's old Latin translation have plural (gittith); likewise Psalm 81:1 and 84:1. This is a minor matter.

8:2 a-a (corrupt)

LXX: *οτι επηρθη*

σ' (Jerome's old Latin): *οσ εταξασ*

djhbt qui dedisti (whom you have given)

Probably the verb *natan* or *natanah*. See discussion in the body of the paper. This text critical note causes the most problems in translation.

8:3a Syriac version of OT *tsbwhtk* gloriam tuam.

Hebrew word for strength rather than praise.

8:3b Jerome's old Latin has the first person singular suffix, reading "my enemies" rather than "Your enemies." There is insufficient evidence to accept this change. "Your enemies" is equivalent to "God's enemies," and that makes more sense in the context.

8:4a Syriac version of the Old Testament has the third person plural (rather than first person singular) on the verb (see). First person makes more sense in the context; the psalmist is contemplating God's works.

8:4b LXX omits the second person singular suffix on heavens.

8:4c Many Hebrew manuscripts from the Cairo Geniza have the singular, rather than plural, for the "works of Your fingers."

8:6a LXX, Syriac, and Jerome's old Latin omit copula (vav).

8:7a Compare the LXX and Syriac: WCI used for the verb *mashal* (hiphil, "cause to rule over"). This is not a major issue, but the imperfect preserves the chiasm observed in the verbs.

8:7b Many manuscripts (Syriac) have singular rather than plural for the "works of Your hands."

8:7c Compare 2:2b.

8:8a Several manuscripts have different letters on "sheep," adding an aleph following the nun.

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