

Hebrew Exegesis Paper:

Psalm 8

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Introduction

“What is man?” This most important, perennial question has occupied the thoughts of men, religious and philosophical alike, across all cultures and ages. In Psalm 8, David, the sweet psalmist of God’s people, recorded his own meditations upon the question. As we sound the depths of David’s profound reflections, we find that their underlying prophetic, Messianic meaning leads us to an answer to the very question they raise, which shall be explored and developed in the course of this paper.

I chose this psalm because of its theological significance to the New Testament. It is quoted three times: once by Jesus (Matthew 21:16), after the cleansing of the temple; once by Paul (1 Corinthians 15:27); and once by the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 2:6-8). Together, these citations make it clear that this psalm is spoken about Christ – his incarnation, exaltation, and dominion. However, from our standard English translations, it had not been obvious to me – in a way that it was to the writers of the New Testament and Christ himself – that this is so. When reading this psalm, my mind had always gone to Adam and his lowly, yet paradoxically exalted, position in the created order. Certainly, this is part of David’s reflection, but I wanted to understand if the original Hebrew text provided a different sense that would make a Christological reading more obvious, and as I will argue, it emphatically does.

Further, the use of Psalm 8 in the New Testament makes it a useful case study in the exegetical method of the New Testament writers. In modern scholarship, even within the evangelical tradition, many disdain interpretations of the Old Testament that are “overly-Christological” or “Christocentric.” Some advocate an extremely minimalistic allowance for Christological interpretation that only recognizes interpretations sanctioned explicitly by the New Testament as valid. Some go even further and wonder if the New Testament authors were doing responsible exegesis in how they saw, or “imagined,” Christ in certain texts. Their only

saving grace being that they were inspired infallibly by the Holy Spirit. Certainly, such scholars would deny that the exegetical method of the New Testament ought to be imitated by any outside the apostolic writers. My intention in this paper is to examine the legitimacy and robustness of the interpretation of Matthew, the Apostle Paul, and the author of Hebrews in their handling of this psalm as a case study.

Redemptive-Historical Analysis

In the progression of redemptive history, Psalm 8 takes our thoughts back to the very beginning of God's dealings with man. We are recalled both to his wonderful creation of man and to man's tragic fall into sin in the Garden. Although the psalm makes no explicit reference to Adam, besides the indirect reference to him via the "son of Adam," Adam is one of the main figures in David's meditations, which is unique among the Psalms.

The theme of creation runs throughout. The heavens are the work of God's fingers; God set the stars and moon in their place; God set man as the crowning glory of his creation and gave man dominion over the animals. The language of creation naturally draws our minds back to the story of creation in Genesis, but through his prose, David makes this connection explicit, particularly in his description of man's dominion in verses 8 and 9. In those verses, David lists the creatures over which man was given dominion, and the terms he uses and the order in which he presents them are closely linked to the list given in Genesis 1:26. In Psalm 8, the creatures of man's dominion are listed as follows: sheep (צֹנֶה), oxen (אֶלֶפִּים), beasts of the field (בְּהֵמוֹת שָׂדֵי), birds of the heavens (צִפּוֹר שָׁמַיִם), and fish of the sea (דְּגַי הַיָּם). In Genesis, after the creation of all of the creatures, God gives man dominion over them, saying: "Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea (דְּגַת הַיָּם) and over the birds of the heavens (עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם) and over the livestock

(חַיָּוָה, the same word as “beasts” in Psalm 8) and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Gen. 1:26).

Both texts use the same three basic categories of animals, and the terms used to describe them are the same or similar. It might seem that such a grouping into beasts, birds, and fish is common in Scripture, but the list of these three categories, with their respective domains (beasts of the field, birds of the air/heavens, and fish of the sea), is not common. Only four other places (there may be others that were missed in this search, but there cannot be many) list the animals of creation and their domains in this same way, and all of these instances are clearly making an intentional connection back to creation: Ezek. 29:4-5, 38:20, Hosea 4:3, Zeph. 1:3. For example, where Hosea gives this grouping of three, it is showing effect of sin upon creation in undoing of the goodness and fruitfulness that God had intended for it: “Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away” (Hos. 4:3).

As for the ordering of the animals, Psalm 8 reverses that of the order given in Genesis 1:26. This is not an accidental mistake but an intentional reordering. In Genesis, the order of God’s creation is telescoping toward the crowning creation of man, so the list of creatures moves toward man, beginning with those further removed from man’s regular dealings (the fish) to that over which his dominion is more apparent (the livestock or beasts). In Psalm 8, the purpose of the list in its context is to show the extent of the dominion of man, beginning with the domesticated animals, which more obviously fall under his dominion, to the fish of the sea. Instead of telescoping toward man, David is widening the scope outward away from him. This is the same intention behind Hosea’s ordering given above, where he desired to show the far-reaching extent of the effect of sin upon creation, going from man outward to the farthest reaches

of God’s visible creatures (“even the fish of the sea”). This connection in Psalm 8 to the story of creation and the Fall is an important and intentional backdrop to its prophetic message about the redemptive mission of the Messiah, as David parallels the dominion given to man and his creation mandate with the dominion given to the Messiah and his redemptive mandate.

Dating the psalm within the life of David seems to be impossible. We know from its heading that it is a psalm of David, but beyond that, we are not given many clues that might situate it within the events of his life. From the heading, we learn that the psalm was written for “the choirmaster,” “upon the Gittith.” From this, some have theorized that this psalm was used in temple worship. The choirmaster could have been someone in the service of temple worship who had been set up by David (see 1 Chronicles 25). If so, it would place the psalm latter in David’s life, after he had secured the kingdom, but this is not definitive.

One intriguing theory proposed by Jewish tradition is that David wrote this psalm when he returned the ark to Jerusalem after it had been kept in Obed-edom’s house for three months (2 Samuel 6:12-14). The term “the Gittith” (תְּהִיִּית), it is argued, is another name for the ark, which it received from Obed-edom’s nationality – he was a Gittite (גִּיטִי) (2 Samuel 6:10).¹ Although I believe this theory is tenuous, hanging as it does primarily on this meaning of the Gittith, I will add one additional possible connection. The use of *zav* to capture the vigorous nature of worship, which will be elaborated below, is found both in this psalm (Psalm 8:3) and in the story of the worship before the ark upon its return (2 Samuel 6:14 and 1 Chronicles 13:8). In both of the latter texts, we are told that David danced before the Lord with all of his *zav*, or “might.” In other places where this Hebrew word is used, it almost always refers to physical strength, though it

¹ Avrohom Chaim Feuer, *Tehillim / Psalms: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources*, Two Volume edition, vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1977), 121.

does sometimes also convey mental or spiritual strength. Thus, these two contexts are either the only or of a very few that make this link between strength and worship. Still, nothing else in the psalm makes any reference to the return of the ark or worship before the ark, so while intriguing, this theory must be held loosely if at all.

My own theory, which I also hold loosely, is that David wrote this psalm while on a military campaign. David speaks in the psalm of the foes of God (Ps. 8:3) and the word *יָרָא* generally carries the connotation of physical battle. Perhaps David wrote this psalm while out on a campaign, encamped under the stars above, which became the inspiration for his meditation upon God's glory. Furthermore, the climactic verse of the psalm (Ps. 8:5) is nearly identical to Ps. 144:3, and there David ponders the question explicitly within the context of war. He speaks there of the Lord training his hands for war, specifically against foreigners (Ps. 144:10-11). However, the thrust of Psalm 8 is not about war or battle but worship and creation, despite the textual connection to Psalm 144, so even if it were written in the context of a military campaign, this context does not impinge significantly upon the interpretation of the psalm.

Last, we must return briefly to the term “the Gittith” (הַגִּתִּית) in the heading, because many have made much of this term, though it is mostly speculation and there is no settled interpretation. The phrase *עַל־הַגִּתִּית* is also found in the headings of Psalms 81 and 84, though there does not appear to be any thematic similarity between these three psalms from which we might infer a meaning. Some believe it to refer to a musical instrument, hence the theory above of use in temple worship.² Others have translated it as a plural form of winepress (גֶּת), including some Jewish commentators and, most notably, the Septuagint.³ Augustine, relying upon the

² Feuer, *Tehillim*, vol. 1, 122.

³ Feuer, *Tehillim*, vol. 1, 122.

Septuagint, makes much of the concept of a winepress, as an image of God refining his Church, in the intention of this psalm.⁴ However, rather than following any of these speculations, we ought, with Calvin, to accept that the meaning of the word is lost, like other musical terms such as “Selah,” but trust that its meaning is of little to no relevance to the interpretation text of the psalm.⁵

Literary Analysis

The genre of Psalm 8 is praise. As in many of the Psalms, there is latent wisdom embedded in it – in this case, David is pointing us to the wisdom found in meditating upon our humble estate, especially in light of our fallen nature, which leads to humility, but also, ultimately, to exaltation, when we then consider the exaltation of human nature by the incarnation of the Messiah. However, the main thrust of the psalm is praise and wonder. The psalm begins with an exclamation, almost an involuntary one, of praise (“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”). David then leads us through a line of mediation of God’s wonderful works, from creation to redemption, which culminates in a reiteration of the very same exclamation of praise.

This repetition of the same exclamation at the beginning and end of the psalm forms an *inclusio* that bookends and frames the psalm. Its effect is to reveal the positive feedback or reinforcement that praise and wonder can have upon further praise and wonder. David begins with this exclamation, perhaps without a conscious understanding of why, but as he works

⁴ Philip Schaff and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *St. Augustin: Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 8, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 27–28.

⁵ John Calvin, “Commentary on the Book of Psalms,” in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 4, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 93.

through his reasoning and lays it down in words, it leads him to even deeper wonder, climaxing with the wonder at God's exaltation of man, leading him, full circle, back to praise and wonder at God. This structure teaches two important truths: that praise and reflection upon God's majesty and goodness begets further praise; and that understanding the glory of God and understanding his condescending love toward man are intimately linked.

This *inclusio* frames the structure of the psalm and also, by the symmetry it creates, helps to point us to the psalm's apex: verse 5. That is the point at which David's meditation reaches its supreme sense of wonder, as he is led to ponder the ultimate question: "What is man that you are mindful of him?" The preceding meditation builds toward that question, and the following lines further elaborate David's reasons for amazement at the exalted state of man, despite his lowly nature.

Further reinforcing this structure is the repetition of the interrogative particle (מָה) in these three key verses. In the opening and closing *inclusio* verses, David wonders at God's glory displayed throughout creation and asks God: מָה־אֱדִיר שְׁמֶךָ, literally "What is the majesty of your name?" or "What majesty is your name?" The translation "How majestic is your name?" is similar, but not equivalent, and it obscures the connection to the question to verse 5. There, David contrasts the wonder of the majesty of God to the wonder of his care for man, when he asks: מָה־אֱנוֹשׁ כִּי־תִזְכְּרֶנּוּ, "What is man that you are mindful of him?" In this way, these three questions act as delineations of the psalm, with verses 2 and 10 the boundaries and verse 5 the center.

The repetition of the question of "what is?" also helps to connect David's wonder over God's majesty with his wonder of the nature and estate of man, as the two are intimately related. The glory of God shown in creation is enough to make him wonder, but the exalted state that

God has given man, despite his lowly nature, is even more cause for amazement. Mare puts it well: “The eye and ear of the reader are through the use of this particle immediately drawn to the centre and the boundaries of the psalm. Thus, Yahweh’s majesty forms the boundaries in which humanity finds its place of glory through its God-appointed position of rulership. Therefore, the question of ‘What is man?’ cannot be separated from the question ‘Who is God?’”⁶ This important theological insight, of the connection between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves, is that which Calvin articulated so well in the opening of his Institutes.

Identifying the apex of the psalm at verse 5 gives some ground to debate how to divide the psalm into strophes. Commonly, the major divisions are as follows: verses 2 and 3 are David’s initial meditations upon God’s glory in creation; verses 4 and 5 are the transition to the reflection upon man; verses 6 through 9 describe the wonderful and exalted status of man; and the final verse repeats David’s initial exclamation of praise. Some would argue for separating verse 2a into its own line, given its repetition at the end in verse 10. The Masoretic accents give some support of such an idea, since the main break in verse 2 is at the end of the first colon, “in all the earth,” which is marked with an *atnach*. However, there is a parallelism between the earth and the heaven in the bicolon that constitutes verse 2, which ought not to be disjointed.

The only significant question then is the assignment of verse 4 – should it be grouped with verse 5, or should it be grouped with the preceding strophe, leaving verse 5 by itself? The opening ׀ of verse 4 is commonly translated “when,” which assumes that the question posed in verse 5 is a response to the action being committed in verse 4, namely, observing the glory of God in the stars and moon above. Since, however, ׀ can be translated as “for” or “because,” it

⁶ Leonard P. Mare, “The Messianic Interpretation of Psalm 8:4-6 and Hebrews 2:6-9, Part I,” in *Psalms and Hebrews: Studies in Reception*, Paperback edition, ed. Dirk J. Human and Gert J. Steyn, Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies 527 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 102.

can be argued that this verse is not necessarily linked, grammatically at least, to verse 5. Calvin noted that some Greek and Latin fathers read verses 4 and 5 this way, though he preferred to keep them together. There are good reasons for either choice, however, since the question in verse 5 is more powerful as a stand-alone verse, I am inclined toward this division.

It is difficult to infer an intention behind the placement of this psalm within the Psalter. Given that the psalm has a strong reference to the created state of Adam and his dominion, it is fitting that it would be near the beginning. The early psalms of the Psalter, within books I and II – especially Psalms 2, 20, 21, 24, 45, and 72 – set up the vision of the ideal king, the Messiah, and so this psalm, as a vision of the Messiah and his domain, has further reason to be within this grouping.

An intriguing theory posits that the ordering of the first seven psalms, with their alternating pattern of morning and evening references, are intended match the days of creation. This theory would support the related theory that the five books of the Psalter parallel the five books of the Pentateuch. If this is so, then Psalm 8 could be the capstone to this small pattern within the opening of the Psalter, just as the creation of man is the capstone to the creation story. Certainly, David was deliberate in his allusion to the creation story, as was shown, with explicit textual connections. However, the step to saying that this psalm was part of an opening set of psalm that together parallel the creation story is much further. It is an intriguing direction for further study.

Whatever the reason may be for the placement of Psalm 8 after the preceding seven, Robertson argues an interesting theory as to the placement of Psalms 9 and 10 (which together form a single acrostic psalm) immediately after it. Robertson has argued there is an intentional

pairing in the Psalter of creation psalms preceding acrostic psalms.⁷ He admits that any reasoning behind this pattern is obscure, but suggests that it could be that the orderliness of the acrostic psalms further emphasizes the orderliness of God's creation. However, the examples he gives of "creation" psalms (Pss. 24 and 33) have little creation imagery, and it seems incorrect to categorize them as "creation" psalms. Furthermore, Psalm 19 is very similar in content to Psalm 8, with its wonder at God's glory in creation, but it is not followed by an acrostic.

Still, there is some further evidence of a possible intentional pairing of Psalms 8, 9, and 10, namely, the use of the peculiar word אָנוֹשׁ for man found in all three psalms. This term occurs forty two times in the Old Testament, including thirteen times in the Psalms, eighteen times in Job, and eight times Isaiah.⁸ As we shall see, the word is used in Psalm 8 to convey the lowliness and frailty of man, which is also the sense intended in Psalms 9 and 10. Both of those psalms conclude with a plea that God humble and subdue אָנוֹשׁ. Psalm 9 concludes with verses 19 and 20 asking that God "let not אָנוֹשׁ prevail...let the nations know that they are but אָנוֹשׁ!" Psalm 10 concludes with verse 19 asking that God do justice to the oppressed "so that אָנוֹשׁ who is of the earth may strike terror no more." Of the other ten times that this word is used in the Psalter, not all uses connote the lowliness of man in comparison to God, as in Pss. 8, 9, and 10. It could be that David, having recognized the lowly estate of man, then turns to asking God to impress that same humility upon his enemies, who exalt themselves, even over God, rather understand that God exalts the humble.

⁷ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2015), 80.

⁸ Gerhard Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds., *Theological Dictionary of The Old Testament*, rev. ed, vol. 1, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 346.

Translation

Psalm 8

To the choirmaster, upon the Gittith; a psalm of David.

O LORD, our Lord, what is the splendor of your name in all the earth?

You have even set your glory above the heavens!

From the mouths of babies and nursing infants you have brought forth praise,

On account of your foes, to silence the enemy and avenger.

Yes, I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers – the moon and stars which you have set in place.

What is frail man, that you are mindful of him?

And the son of Adam that you visit him?

And you have lowered him, for a little while, below the angels, but you have crowned him with glory and honor.

You have given him dominion over the work of your hands; you have put all 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 moves through the waters.

O LORD, our Lord, what is the splendor of your name in all the earth?

Verse 1

We previously considered the translation of the word הַגִּתִּית when investigating the historical context of the psalm, and as was concluded, we have no solid theory of the meaning and it is therefore best to simply transliterate it.

Verse 2

The two colons of this verse each present a significant issue of translation. The first colon presents the challenge of translating the interrogative particle (מַה־) in a way that captures its repetition as a means of framing the psalm, as discussed above. Thus, the translation of this colon is intimately tied to the translation of verse 5. To highlight that connection, I have translated it in all instances as “what is?” as in: “What is the splendor of your name?” This is admittedly awkward in English, but more faithful to the question David is asking than the common translation: “How majestic is your name?” In English, this sounds almost like a mere exclamation of praise than a sincere question. It seems to function rhetorically, but if it is sincere, the question implies that David is longing to know the extent of God’s majesty – how vast and wide it is. Admittedly, the qualifiers “in all the earth” and “above the heavens” seem to imply such a question, but I believe David’s question is not ultimately about extent but about derivation. What is it that gives God’s name such glory? Is it the stars and moon above? The creation of man? As will be developed in the theological analysis, the greatest manifestation of God’s glory, in all the cosmos, is his work of redemption through his Messiah, which is the underlying message of the psalm.

An alternative representation of David’s thought could be to ask: “What is the *nature* of the splendor of your name?” It matches David’s question about man: “What is the nature and inherent worth of man that you remember him?” However, I have chosen not to add any additional words to the translation, and I believe the question “What is the splendor of your name?” is grammatically correct, though slightly awkward, and is equivalent in its sense.

In the second colon, we encounter the notoriously difficult phrase אֲשֶׁר תִּנֶּה. Whatever the root of תִּנֶּה may be, it appears to be in the imperative, which seems grammatically impossible.⁹ The critical apparatus of the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* suggests that this phrase is corrupted, noting that the Septuagint, Syriac, and Jerome all give different translations. They suggest that the second word of the phrase was originally נָתַן, which means “to give.” In contrast, Calvin believed the root was תָּנָה, appearing here in the infinitive mood, meaning, then, to “place or to set.”¹⁰ [Calvin, pg. 94-95] In this case, אֲשֶׁר could mean something like “even,” instead of functioning as a relative participle. I have chosen to follow Calvin’s thinking.

Verse 3

The translation of verse 3 is straightforward. However, there is one difficulty in reconciling a literal translation with Jesus’ quotation of this verse after entering Jerusalem when the crowds were praising him. There, he interchanged the word “strength” with “praise” (“Out of the mouths of babies and nursing infants you have prepared praise,” Matt. 21:16). The Septuagint gives the same translation. Is this within the lexical range of the noun עֹז? Was Jesus misled by a possible mistranslation in the Septuagint? Or was he giving his own, valid, divinely inspired interpretation? The common, literal translation of “strength” is certainly valid, but I have chosen to render it as “praise,” because I believe that Jesus is giving the fuller thrust of the concept behind the word within its context. The justification for this interpretation touches on the theological concepts of the psalm, so I have reserved that analysis for the theological section below.

⁹ Mare, “Psalms and Hebrews,” 101.

¹⁰ Calvin, “Commentary on the Psalms,” 94–95.

I have chosen to translate לְהַשְׁכִּית as “to silence.” The root is שָׁבַת, from which we get “Sabbath,” as in, to rest and to bring to completion. David is trying to say that God’s glory will bring the contests of God’s enemies against him to an end, not merely for a time, but completely. Some translate the word as “to still.” However, I think the translation “to silence” is better, because it connects back to the mouths of the infants who praise God; the opening of their mouth, pouring forth praise, shuts the mouth of the enemy, silencing them.

A final note of interest about this verse is the use of מְנַקֵּם (“avenger”) and אוֹיֵב (“enemy”) in the singular at the conclusion of the verse, whereas צוֹרְרֶיךָ (“your foes”) is plural. A word search revealed that the only other place where נִקָּם is used in noun form is in Ps. 44:16, where it is also in the singular and is also paired with “enemy” (אֹיֵב וּמְנַקֵּם). This occurrence is also noted by the Masorah Parva, though its location is not given. The significance of the singular form of these words will be further considered in the theological analysis.

Verse 4

As noted above when determining the division of this psalm into strophes, there is some disagreement about the translation of כִּי at the opening of this verse and, consequently, the relationship of this verse to the following. It is commonly translated as “when?” in English, and the Septuagint renders it the same. However, this translation necessitates that this verse connect to the following, in order to conclude the thought. Conceptually, there is certainly a link between David’s mediation of the stars and moon in the highest heaven and the lowly estate of man upon the earth below, as Calvin argues.¹¹ However, making this connection so strong in the translation risks obfuscating the central, climactic moment of the deep question in the following verse.

¹¹ Calvin, “Commentary on the Psalms,” 99.

Furthermore, כֵּן has a wide lexical range, giving us many other options for translation. Since I think this literary feature is crucial to the structure of the psalm, I have chosen to translate it as “yes,” as in “indeed,” which is within its range of meaning. I believe this makes clear that it is the culminating point of his meditation upon God’s glory in creation, which the following verses lead up to. Certainly, within the line of David’s thought, it is connected to both the preceding and following verses, but I prefer to emphasize the connection to the preceding line of meditation so as to then emphasize the suddenness of the jump to David’s reflection upon the nature of man that follows.

Some translate אֶצְבְּעֵיךָ as “your hands”, but “your fingers” is the literal meaning. “Hands” connotes the power of God, whereas “fingers” connotes the intimacy and holiness of God’s work, harkening back to God’s writing of the Law upon the tablets with his fingers (Exodus 8:19). I believe both are valid, but I prefer to stick with the literal translation.

כֵּן has a wide range of meanings, but generally, it means to “fashion, fix, or establish.” David is not amazed merely by God’s creation of the stars and moon but also by their orderly, secure placement within the heavens. He is wondering at the orderliness of God’s creation, as displayed in the heavens. The idea of “setting” the moon and stars in their place connects back to verse 2, in which God “set” his glory in the heavens. Although the Hebrew words are different, I believe the link of thought is valid. Calvin gives a similar sense, using “arrange.”¹²

Verse 5

This is the pivotal, climactic verse. There are no textual difficulties with translating this verse, but there is a massively important decision to be made in translating the two words for

¹² Calvin, “Commentary on the Psalms,” 99.

man: אָנִישׁ and בְּנ־אָדָם. Commonly, these are both translated using the same generic word of “man.” This is true both of English and the Septuagint Greek (ἄνθρωπος). Unfortunately, this misses the synonymous parallelism of these two clauses.

The word אָנִישׁ is used specifically to convey man’s frailty. Thus, David is reflecting not simply upon man as an ontologically small creature within the vastness of God’s cosmos, but especially upon man as frail, weak, and lowly. The pairing of this word with בְּנ־אָדָם further emphasizes man as not only physically weak, in comparison to the strength of God, but as fallen and sinful. David does not refer to Adam as he was in his original created state, but to the son of Adam, all of whom now bear the inherited fallen nature that Adam incurred by his sin.

The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament points out that when the phrase בְּנ־אָדָם is used, it is frequently in parallel with אָנִישׁ.¹³ In all of these instances of parallelism, the clear intention is to emphasize either the fallen nature of man or his mortality (see Isaiah 13:12, 51:12, 56:2; Ps. 73:5, 90:3; Job 25:5 and 36:25). The example of Job 25:3-5 demonstrates this connotation clearly and, in fact, parallels the thought of David here in Ps. 8 closely:

How then can אָנִישׁ be in the right before God?
How can he who is born of woman be pure?
Behold, even the moon is not bright,
and the stars are not pure in his eyes;
how much less אָנִישׁ, who is a maggot,
and בְּנ־אָדָם, who is a worm!”

This parallel passage, with its similar reference to the moon and stars as a contrast to man, also hints at a use of their allusion that is latent, but not explicit, in David’s mind – that is, the brightness and purity of these heavenly bodies, along with their orderliness, in contrast to man’s defilement and disorder since the Fall. It is also notable that in such parallelisms, “son” is always

¹³ Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *TDOT*, vol. 1., 347.

coupled with “Adam” and not with אָנוֹשׁ.¹⁴ The phrase בֶּן־אָנוֹשׁ occurs only once in the Old Testament (Ps. 144:3). This supports the interpretation that “son of Adam” is a heightening of אָנוֹשׁ; otherwise, why would “son” never be interchanged between them? This heightening, we can therefore infer, is meant to consciously link man’s sinful fallen nature to our inheritance from Adam as our covenant head.

Thus, in the parallelism of this verse, there is a heightening from the first colon to the second. אָנוֹשׁ connotes man’s frailty; בֶּן־אָדָם further connotes the essence of the problem – man’s sinful nature. I disagree with commentaries like those of Goldingay who assert that “there is little difference between the implications of ‘mortal’ and ‘human being’ (*enos, ben-adam*).”¹⁵ But simultaneous with this downward esteem of man in David’s mind is his heightened awareness of God’s intimate concern for him. David wonders that God “remembers” (זָכַר) frail man, but what is even more amazing is that God “attends to” or “visits” him (פָּקַד). I have chosen to translate פָּקַד as “visit,” rather than “care,” because it emphasizes the heightening of the parallelism. The transition from “remember” – to be in God’s mind – to action – “visiting” man – is more powerful than God’s general “care” for man. Furthermore, the word “visit” draws out the Messianic interpretation behind the psalm, and the ultimate wonder of God’s majesty displayed in the incarnation, which will be discussed more in the theological analysis.

It must be noted that when the author of Hebrews quotes this verse in his epistle (Heb. 2:6), he, like the Septuagint, uses the generic Greek word ἄνθρωπος for man. This could be simply a deficiency in the Greek language in having a word for man that denotes his fallen nature. However, given that the author’s intention is to highlight specifically the Messianic

¹⁴ Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *TDOT*, vol. 1, 347.

¹⁵ John Goldingay, *Psalms: Psalms 1-41*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 158.

meaning of the psalm, viewing the “man” described as Christ, who was not fallen, there is not a deficiency in its translation. Whether or not the author followed the Septuagint in translating “man” is beside the point, since *ἄνθρωπος* is sufficient for the meaning he intended to draw out. The problem with the Septuagint is that, if it is treated as the sole authoritative Old Testament version, the poetic nature and meaning of this parallelism is lost from the canon of Scripture, whereas, with the Hebrew Old Testament paired with the quotation in Hebrews, we have access to both the full range of meaning in the original Hebrew as well as the inspired Messianic interpretation that is drawn out of the psalm by the author of Hebrews.

Verse 6

Verse 6, specifically the first colon, is the most crucial verse for the psalm’s Messianic interpretation. All three of the terms in the first colon – along with the *waw* consecutives that bracket it – present consequential decisions in the translation process, and so we shall work through each.

The consequence of the translation of the *waw* conjunction at the start of this verse should not be overlooked. There are several options: the ESV translates it as “yet;” the KJV translates it as “for;” and the Septuagint dropped the copula, as did the author of Hebrews. The choice of “yet” implies that the lofty position that God has given man – a little lower than the angels – is remarkable to David, given man’s low estate. It implies that David would expect man not to have such a high place, and that God, in placing him there, is elevating him beyond what his natural frame would warrant. But this translation has two problems. For one, the direction of the elevation of man implied by this choice is incongruent with the meaning of the following word (*חסר*), which means “to deprive, diminish, or make one lack something.” This verb implies

that the “man” was actually in a higher state formerly, but was diminished to a state “lower than the angels,” presumably due to the sinful nature he inherited and not anything inherent to his original creation. This raises the second problem: the Messianic interpretation of this psalm. The Messiah’s trajectory in the incarnation is downward, toward the lowly estate of man, which his being “lower than the angels.” The choice of “yet” makes the trajectory upward, exalting man. This exaltation comes later in the verse, with the crowing of man with glory and honor, but only after the downward lowering of the “son of Man” in the incarnation.

I have chosen to translate the *waw* consecutive with “and.” There is meant to be a connection in thought between David’s reflection upon God’s care for man and his lowering of man. This act is in fact part of God’s concern, as we shall see in the Messianic interpretation explored below. But “for” is not correct, because the “lowering” in verse 6 is not the cause of man’s lowliness observed in verse 5. Although, Calvin, in his commentary, observes a ׀ at the opening of the verse, which he translates as “for,” which could represent a different manuscript tradition. Ignoring the *waw* consecutive altogether is acceptable, as the author of Hebrews has done, but I have chosen to keep it to maintain the link with the preceding meditation in verse 5 and to keep more closely to a literal translation.

The next *waw* should be the disjunctive of the line of thought, which is why have translated it with “but.” It is not the act of diminishing man’s state to below that of the angels that is the exaltation of man from his lowly state, but rather, it is God’s act of crowning him with glory and honor, after his time of deprivation below the angels, that is his exaltation, hence the disjunction. The Septuagint, Syriac, and Jerome all dropped this copula, as noted by the critical apparatus, as did the author of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews makes the contrast explicit with his Christological interpretation, so the copula is not strictly necessary for his interpretation.

The first term of the verse, which we have already alluded to, is the second person, masculine, perfect form of **חסר**, “you have lowered/diminished him.” This meaning is obscured by the common translation into English as “you have made him lower.” This gives the sense that this lower state was inherent to man at creation, which only compounds the confusion of the reference to the “son of Adam,” as sinful man, in the preceding verse, and not “Adam” himself in his original nature. Rather, the Hebrew word **חסר** means that the “man” was lowered in status by God. This nuance of meaning must be retained to clarify the Messianic interpretation of the psalm, which is highly obscured without it.

Does the author of Hebrews retain this nuance of meaning in the Greek? The Hebrew word is translated there as **ἡλαττωσας**, which the Lexham Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament defines as either “to make lower,” as in “to cause to be lower” and not “to create lower,” or “to become less.” The only other instance of this Greek form is John 3:30 (“He must increase, but I must decrease.”), which does not mean that John was to be “created” lower, but rather that he was to “become” lower, from a prior, higher state in which he existed. Thus, it is fair to infer that the translation given in Hebrews is equivalent to the Hebrew word **חסר** with its nuance. It is worth noting that the Septuagint uses the same word as in Hebrews. Thus, in my translation, I have tried to capture this meaning with the phrase “have lowered him.”

The next term is **מְעַט**, which commonly means “a little,” but can also have a temporal dimension, meaning “for a brief time.” If no knowledge was had of the Christological meaning behind this psalm, it would be understandable to translate this as merely “a little,” leaving out the temporal dimension. Without the underlying Christological meaning, the temporal dimension of being made lower than the angels “for a brief time” would be hard to square. The common interpretation of this psalm as referring to Adam in the Garden does not comport with a temporal

dimension to his state below the angels. With this temporal dimension, it would beg a significant theological question that it then does not answer: When will Adam's "lowering" be lifted? This can only be answered with the Christological interpretation that the author of Hebrews provides, but the common translation, along with the common interpretation of referent of the psalm being Adam, makes such an answer seem jarring and out of place with the rest of the psalm, in a way that it is not in the Hebrew. Thus, as in the Septuagint translation and the translation of the author of Hebrews, I have made the temporal dimension of טַעַן explicit.

The last, but certainly not the least, interpretative challenge of this verse is the translation of אֱלֹהִים. Does it mean "God" or "heavenly beings" (i.e. "angels")? In this controversial instance of the word, we have the help of the divine inspiration of the epistle to the Hebrews, which translates it as "angels." Though even this may not be sufficient to make a definitive judgment. Calvin thought that the epistle merely gave one aspect of the range of meaning of the word and did not thereby exclude referring it to God.¹⁶ Others, such as John Owen, went so far as to say it was irreligious to translate it any other way than the epistle.¹⁷

Apart from the guidance of the epistle, are there contextual or theological constraints that ought to guide our translation? Choosing "God" makes the Christological thrust of the psalm more obvious. Christ was made, for a time, in an estate below that of his divine nature, in that he took on human form. What this translation loses is the ability to apply the text to ourselves. We were not lowered below God, as if we were equal to him at some prior point. Nor will our subsequent elevated status be equal to him. However, if the word is translated as "angels," the relationships of status still hold true for Christ and are also true for believers. This will be

¹⁶ Calvin, "Commentary on the Psalms," 102–103.

¹⁷ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 19, ed. William H. Goold (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 339.

expounded upon in the theological analysis below, but as for the translation, to make the psalm relevant to us and not only Christ, I believe it should be translated as “angels.”

Verse 7

Having transitioned to the elevated status of man, this verse elaborates upon the nature of that status. One issue of translation is the inclusion, or not, of a *waw* consecutive at the opening of the verse, which is absent from the Masoretic text but is suggested by the critical apparatus. The presence of a *waw* consecutive would change the tense from imperfect to perfect, and thus God’s act of giving man dominion would be changed from an ongoing act to one that is completed. However, I do not believe the addition of the *waw* consecutive to be necessary. Man’s dominion, and even Christ’s dominion, is one that is continually sustained and ordained by God. It was not definitively completed at creation, because God had the prerogative to revoke it after the Fall. In application to Christ, the ongoing action of his receiving dominion, conveyed by the imperfect tense, reflects the already-but-not-yet nature of Christ’s kingship in this interim before his second coming. He has already been given dominion, but there is still a day in which it will be more fully consummated, as is alluded to in the argumentation of the epistle to the Hebrews (Heb. 2:8).

Verses 8 and 9

These two verses list the domain of man, making use of the same three categories of creatures mentioned in the creation story, over which Adam was given dominion originally, as was described above. They do not present any textual challenges.

Verse 10

Verse 10 is merely a repeat of verse 2a.

Theological Analysis

The Messiah, the Incarnation, and Man's Humiliation and Exaltation

The author of Hebrews forces us to reckon with the Messianic overtones and interpretation of this psalm. As was argued above, in the justification of the suggested translation, several aspects of common English translations obscure this interpretation, causing undue suspicion of the epistle writer's handling of the text. With an understanding of the Messianic overtones in the original Hebrew, we can now work through its Messianic message.

It has been shown that Psalm 8 has explicit textual links to Adam's original created position, and reflection upon this elevated status of man at the creation is certainly part of David's amazement. However, it is not all of David's amazement nor is it his primary wonder. What most amazes David is God's exaltation of man from out of the lowly, frail, sinful state into which he was lowered after the Fall. David is amazed that God cares for and visits humanity, not simply because man is so small relative to the grandeur of the cosmos, but because of his inherited a sinful nature – he is not merely אִישׁ but אָנוּשׁ; he is not אָדָם but בְּנֵי-אָדָם.

Hence the “lowered” status that he incurred. Humans relate to angels in different ways, some of which elevate us above them and some of which, especially since the Fall, seat us below them. Ontologically, we were created below them, as our nature is not as noble as theirs, but in terms of dominion, we were created above them. The visible world was not put under their dominion, but humanity's. The opening chapters of Genesis seat humanity as the pinnacle of

God's creation. Humans were made in the image of God, but angels were not. Moreover, angels were charged by God with the mission of serving his redemptive purposes toward humanity, and not the other way around (Heb. 1:14). These latter dimensions of our relationship to angels are what was diminished by the fall into sin. Humanity forfeited its dominion by the Fall. The image of God within us was marred. Our status as God's crowning creation was jeopardized. Thus, we all have been diminished below the status of angels, in these respects, from that was once higher.

But how is it that God has restored us from our fallen nature and raised us back up to a position of honor? The Messianic teaching of this psalm provides the answer. Verses 6 and 7 are essentially a summary of the trajectory of the humiliation and exaltation of Christ. His humiliation was his descent to our lowly condition (WLC #46) – he who was by nature far greater than the angels condescended to a status below them – which was the means by which we could then be raised back up. Our being made low was the consequence of sin; his being made low was the freewill act of grace to “visit” (פָּקַד) us in our need. His exaltation was his being raised back up (he was made only for a brief time lower than the angels) and ascending to the Father, whence he received from him the kingdom, being crowned with glory and honor, from where he executes his session, all things being put under his feet (WLC #51).

This is, in fact, the ultimate source of wonder of the psalm: not that God cares for man, though he is so small; nor that God cares for man, though he is so fallen; but that God cared for small, fallen man by visiting him, that is, by lowering himself through the incarnation to bring about our redemption and exaltation. This is the splendor of God's name that is so wonderful to David. David is drawn into praise by the reflection of God's glory in creation, but he is led to a greater amazement of God's glory when he considers his work of redemption through his Messiah. This is the most wonderful and powerful display of God's glory, greater than that which

anything in creation can reveal. It is the glory of God displayed in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). John Owen summarized it well: “It was not the outward state and condition of mankind in the world, which, since the entrance of sin, is sad and deplorable, that excites this admiration in the psalmist, but his mind is intent upon the mystery of the grace, wisdom, and love of God in the person of the Messiah.”¹⁸

Furthermore, this is the link between the two uses of the interrogative particle. The meditation upon “What is man that you are mindful of him?” answers to the question “What is the splendor of your name?” Hence, the repetition of this question at the end of the psalm. After his deeper reflections upon the glory displayed in the redemptive work of the Messiah, David has come to a deeper understanding of the nature of the majesty of God’s name and simultaneously a deeper sense of wonder.

Moreover, God has not merely restored us to our original position as the crowning achievement of his creation. Through the incarnation, God has exalted humanity to an even higher level than ever was attainable for Adam, even had he not sinned. In the incarnation, human nature was united to the divine forever. There is no greater honor that could be conferred upon humanity. No other created nature, not even that of the angels, has received such honor. No other rank of creature has experienced such acts of love from God. Not that our nature has been heightened in any sense beyond what is natural to it. Rather, it has been honored, beyond any measure Adam could have obtained. And it has been perfected in Christ, to a level to which Adam could not attain, but not beyond its original created capacity.

The Nature of Worship

¹⁸ Owen, *Works*, vol. 19, 338.

Psalm 8, with its focus upon praising God for his glory, also provides insight into the nature of true worship. As mentioned in the translation of verse 3, Jesus quoted this verse when he was confronted by the scribes and chief priests in Jerusalem, who were indignant that the blind, the lame, and children were praising him. It was asserted that in translating רָא as “praise,” Jesus was revealing the thrust of the psalm, better than the literal translation of the word as “strength,” which is common. The reasoning for Jesus’ translation reveals insight into the nature of true worship.

This insight is that there is a war being fought for our worship, and it requires strength. The literal meaning of רָא as “strength” conveys this sense of physical might or protection, which connects with the description that follows of God stilling the enemy and avenger. But to focus on a physical battle would miss the overarching battle over worship. God’s war with his enemies described in the psalm is a war of worship. God is able to silence his enemies by physically subduing them, by striking them down, but he can also silence them by the majesty of his glory, before which all are speechless. David’s insight is that God is so glorious and powerful, that even the weakest things of the earth – nursing infants, the weakest member of the family of frail humanity – show forth God’s glory so powerfully and innately, that they involuntarily silence the enemies of God, just as the cries of infants pours forth involuntarily from their mouth.

The context in which Jesus quotes this verse gives further elucidation. In the background is the battle of worship with the scribes and chief priests, who are offended, perhaps out of jealousy, that people are directing praise to Jesus, crying “Hosanna to the Son of David!” It is to their shame that the weak members of the frail family of man – not only children, but also the blind and the lame – recognize the glory of Jesus, while they do not. Moreover, in citing this passage, it is a rebuke directed at them. In the psalm, the effect of the praise of infants is to

“silence the enemy and the avenger.” Jesus is implying that their offense reveals that they are siding with God’s enemies. In fact, they are siding with “the enemy,” “the avenger,” that is, the devil himself. As noted above, it is intriguing that the terms for “enemy” and “avenger” are singular. It reminds us that there is one ultimate enemy of God and his people, and he is the one who is battling the war against us for our worship.

Last, the connection between רַב and praise, made by Christ in his quotation of it, conveys the vigorous nature of worship. Worship requires strength. Jesus summarizes obedience to the first table of the Law, quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5, in the command to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” In the Hebrew, the word rendered “strength” is רַב, which is usually used as an adverb, to mean “very” or “exceedingly,” and rarely in a substantive form as it is here, but the translation “with all your strength” is within the range of what is intended. The thrust is that we are commanded to love and worship God vigorously, with all that we have, all that is within us, all of our resources, and that includes our strength or might, whether physical, mental, or spiritual. When David brought the Ark back to Jerusalem after it had been in Jerusalem, he and all of Israel worshipped the Lord, and they did so vigorously. They shouted. They blew trumpets. They made numerous sacrifices. And David leapt and danced before the Lord with all his might. The point is that worship should exercise all that is within us – our physical strength, yes, as when David danced, but also all of our faculties, to their utmost.

Psalm Summary and Application to the Church

The primary concern of the psalm is to understand and make known the glory of God. How do we understand it more deeply? Can we know it fully? Where is his glory found? The

discovery that David makes through his meditation is that his glory is most wonderfully displayed through his work of redeeming his people and specifically through the incarnation. David began his meditation by considering the glory of God displayed in creation – the heavens, the moon and stars, the works of his hands – which is the first glimpse that any man has of his glory. However, if we long to perceive the greater depths of his glory, we ought to look to his work of redemption and the incarnation. God’s majesty and power is shown forth more fully there than in any work of creation.

This insight is instructive for us in our walk of faith now and as we contemplate the nature of our blessedness in eternity. While we wander under the stars here on earth in our pilgrim journey, we ought to continually seek to sound the depths of the wonder of God’s redemptive work. Certainly, as we study and reflect upon God’s creation, we appreciate more his beauty and majesty. But creation will never reveal the wonder of God’s goodness, love, and glory as does Scripture, as it sets before us the mystery of God’s redemptive work.

Furthermore, the path to comprehending God’s glory will always be through comprehending the wonder of the redemptive work and incarnation of the Messiah. Some traditions conceive of eternal blessedness as beholding the pure, naked essence of God and his glory thereby. A primary function of the incarnation in such theological schemes is to elevate man beyond his original constitution to be capable of beholding God’s essence, since man cannot gaze upon God’s nature and live. However, even in heaven, our perception of the glory of God will always be “in the face of Jesus Christ,” that is, his person and work. The incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection were not simply bumps in the road on the way back to beholding the naked essence of God. These acts of God were the greatest displays of his glory, and so they will be to us even in eternity.

A second, primary teaching of this psalm is the dominion of the Messiah. Other places in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, speak of the Messiah's reign. Psalm 72 pictures the nature of it. Psalm 2 prophesies of its extent over the nations of the earth. Psalm 8, however, is unique in teaching its universal extent, not over nations only, but over all creation, both visible and invisible. In two places in the New Testament (Heb. 2 and 1 Cor. 15) where this point is argued, this Psalm is referenced. At least to the New Testament authors, this psalm provides the clearest teaching on the matter, with its description of "all things" being placed under the Messiah's feet.

As the church awaits the return of Christ and his final coronation day, it lives in the already-not-yet state of this kingdom. Already, Christ, as God, rules over all things, but as the author of Hebrews reminds us, referencing this psalm, "we do not yet see everything in subjection to him" (Heb. 2:8). When we look around, we can see the pervasiveness and power of evil everywhere. We can be tempted to doubt that God is truly in control and despair of him ever subduing evil. But the author of Hebrews also exhorts us that we must continue to wait with patience, we must continue to remain faithful, for the day of the Lord, when all things are finally set under his feet, is surely coming soon.

Sermon Outline

- I. Introduction
 - a. Did you ever have the experience as a kid of being the last person picked for a team?
 - b. Do you feel like that in life? Like you are unseen?
 - c. We want to know that we are loved, that we are on someone else's mind

- i. As a kid, I hated that my mother would always want to know my whereabouts, but now, as a parent, I understand that it was because she loved me and I am always on her mind, even when not there physically

d. *Homiletical point: You are small and frail, but through Christ, you are known and honored*

II. We are small

a. God's grandeur in creation

- i. Have you ever seen the stars on a clear night? Not something we get to see here in Western PA
- ii. My trip to Hawaii – I saw the stars in all their vibrancy; made me feel small

b. We need to learn that we are small – that the world does not revolve around us

c. God is busy upholding the world; does he really see little me?

III. We are frail

a. David's wonder is not just that we are small, and yet special to God, but that we are frail, broken, sinful

- i. Hebrew word conveys not just "humanity" but "frail humanity"
- ii. Does God really give thought to lowly, sinful men such as us?

b. Do you ever wonder that question?

- i. Loneliness, depression, health concerns – you wonder if God even sees
- ii. Or you think: "I am too sinful; God doesn't want to look at me."

1. You want to hide from God, like Adam and Eve in the Garden

2. Or you think, if God does see you, it's only as a judge, not as a loving Father

IV. We are known

- a. God does see us
 - i. Ps. 139 – “You are acquainted with all my ways; you know my lying down and my rising.”
- b. He not only sees us, he *visits* us
 - i. Example: Have you ever been sick or depressed, and someone came and visited you? In a hospital? In a time of grief?
 - ii. Greatest manifestation of this care – the Incarnation
 - iii. God saw our plight – he saw us in our frail, lowly, sinful state – and he came to us
- c. The psalm's true wonder and amazement
 - i. That God saw and came to lowly, sinful man
 - ii. That he himself became a lowly man like us

V. We are honored

- a. And now, our status has been lifted
 - i. If you are a child of God, you are not a lowly, nobody – you are an heir of the King of the universe
 1. Raised back to our status as God's crowning creation – to execute dominion over his creation properly, as we were made to
 2. But more than that, you have God *living in you*

- a. To no other part of his creation – the whole cosmos – has
he shown so much love and honor – that he took their
nature to himself, *forever*
- b. Jesus will forever be a man like us, to walk and talk with
us, to fellowship with us – we will one day sit down at a
table with God himself and talk with him
 - i. Sometimes, I don't feel "blessed" to be a human
being – with all of our frailty and weaknesses, but
think how blessed we truly are
 - ii. Not because of anything *intrinsic* to us – nothing in you or me that
warrants or deserves such an exalted status

VI. Conclusion

- a. When you are feeling lowly
 - i. Remember that God sees you
 - ii. Remember that he not only sees you, but came to you – Incarnation
 - iii. Remember that he continues to come to you
 - 1. He lives within you
 - 2. He watches over you
 - 3. He brings grace to every moment of need
 - iv. Remember that out of every distress and affliction, he will raise you up

Honor Code

I, Benjamin Chidester have written this paper exclusively for OT730. If this paper, in part or full, was submitted previously in another context, I have received permission from the course professor to use it for this assignment. While I may have received editing or proofreading advice, I made all corrections myself. I have cited each paraphrase, quotation, and borrowed idea that I included in this paper.

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