



Psalm 8 - Divine Majesty and Human Dignity

To the leader: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of David.

Introduction

This is a hymn of praise, enabling the Lord's people to celebrate their privileged place in the created order, which speaks of the glorious Creator. Genesis Chapters 1-2 lie behind the words here, especially in presenting mankind as the pinnacle of the creation week, as the rulers over the animal world, and as the object of God's special attention. At the same time, the mention of foes, the enemy, and the avenger (v.2), as well as the covenantal name Lord (v.1 and v.9), show that readers cannot ignore Genesis Chapter 3 and God's plan for fallen mankind.

Although the psalm is covenantal, and thus specifically for Israelite voices to sing, it nevertheless speaks of man in general terms, including all humanity. Israel's calling was to be the first fruits of restored humanity; thus the Israelite worshipper could embrace his dignity and seek to live worthily of it. This points the way to understanding how Hebrews 2:6-8 uses vv.4-6: Jesus, as the Davidic king, is the ideal Israelite, and thus the ideal human being, in this case by being crowned with glory and honour after his suffering on behalf of mankind.

The Hebrew word Gittith appearing in the title phrase also occurs at the beginning of Psalm 81 and 84. It is often left untranslated, i.e. according to the Gittith, although some translators have sought to relate the term to a Hebrew word meaning '(wine) press' or to the Philistine city of Gath. In any case, the phrase is assumed to refer to a musical mode, a particular musical instrument, or even a particular well-known melody to the tune of which the designated psalms might be sung.

Psalm 8:1-2 - God's Majestic Name.

The opening words set the theme of the psalm, which v.9 then repeats. The majesty of God's name, i.e. his revealed character, is seen in the dignity he gives to mankind within the rest of his creation.

- ¹ O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.

Psalm 8:1

O Lord, our Sovereign is also translated as O Lord, our Lord. Here David recognised both the covenant name of God and the position of Yahweh to his people as their king. It was a simple, straightforward, and common way of saying that 'Our God is our Master.' The covenant name Lord was given specifically to Israel, but it is majestic in all the earth, even if not all people acknowledge it. Paul was one who most certainly did: <<*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name*>> (Ephesians 3:14-15).

You have set your glory above the heavens. At the same time, the earth was not enough to measure the glory and excellence of God: <<*Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth*>> (Psalm 57:5), and: <<*God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah. His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise*>> (Habakkuk 3:3). His glory is above everything that has been created.

- ² Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

Psalm 8:2

Perhaps the babes and infants are the people of Israel, seen as weak in comparison with the mighty unbelieving Gentiles, here your foes, and the enemy and the avenger. It is through these insignificant mouths that God reveals his majesty to the world.

The Greek translation of the Septuagint rightly interprets bulwark as 'strength attributed to God in song or 'praise', as seen in: <<*Jesus said to them, 'Yes; have you never read, "Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself"?'>> (Matthew 21:16)*

To silence the enemy and the avenger. The reason why God displays his strength in unlikely vessels is because it works to silence the enemy: <<*In your steadfast love cut off my enemies, and destroy all my adversaries, for I am your servant*>> (Psalm 143:12); Satan and his fellow adversaries have nothing to say when God works so mightily in an otherwise weak person. One dramatic example of this is the story of Job. In it, God silenced the accusations of Satan against both God and Job by the way that he sustained Job with his unseen hand in the mist of profound weakness.

By quoting this passage, as recorded in Matthew 21:15-16, Jesus told his accusers who he was and who they were. Since the babes and nursing infants praise God in Psalm 8, Jesus identified himself as God. In this, Jesus also identified the indignant scribes and teachers as the enemy and avenger described in this psalm.

Psalm 8:3-8 - Man's Place in the Created Order.

This section falls into two parts: first, the psalmist beholds the countless stars and the bright moon, and marvels at God's interest in mankind (vv.3-4); second, he marvels at the dominion God has given to mankind (vv.5-8).

- ³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
- ⁴ what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?

Psalm 8:3-4

When I look at your heavens. David knew the value of simply considering the glory of God's creation. He knew what it was like to look up into the starry sky and consider what a great God had made this vast, wonderful universe. With the naked eye, one can see about 5,000 stars. With a four-inch telescope one can see about two million stars. With a 200-inch mirror of a great observatory, one can see more than a billion stars. The universe is so big that if one were to travel at the speed of light, it would take 40 billion years to traverse it. By considering the heavens the greatness of God can be clearly seen. These great heavenly objects such as the moon and the stars are the work of God's fingers: <<*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding*>> (Job 38:4), and: <<*Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands*>> (Psalm 102:25).

It is astonishing that the God who is great enough to have made the heavens can take notice of mere humans; but he goes beyond taking notice: he is mindful of

them, he cares for them. God's greatness does not mean remoteness but rather an eye for detail, no matter how small.

Mortals that you care for them. Other translations replace mortals with **Son of man** and take this to refer to the coming Messiah. However, by using the poetic method of repetition, David is repeating the idea in a stronger way. Mortal or **Son of man** is a title that emphasises the 'humanness' of man, and it might be said that cares for them is even stronger than are mindful of them. As noted in the introduction, Jesus is the ideal human being and therefore the ideal one whose sacrificial death provided sanctification for the rest.

⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.

Psalm 8:5

Yet you have made them a little lower than God. God is also translated as **the heavenly beings**. The Hebrew *'elohim* could mean 'the gods,' that is, the angels in the heavenly court, or it could mean God himself. The ESV translation takes the first option, agreeing with the Greek of the Septuagint, as quoted in Hebrews 2:7, whereas the NRSVA takes the latter.

Those who favour a purely christological interpretation translate the statement in the singular from them to him, doing so again in the following statement but this is unnecessary as Jesus is the ideal representative of all humankind.

Crowned them with glory and honour describes mankind as God's kingly representative: <<*who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy*>> (Psalm 103:4), with one who will be King of kings and Lord of lords.

⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

Psalm 8:6-8

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands. These verses echo: <<*Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the*

birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth'>> (Genesis 1:26). God had placed all things in the charge of humankind.

Put all things under their feet. Paul combines this with the explicitly messianic Psalm 110:1 in 1 Corinthians 15:25-27 as confirmed by Ephesians 1:22, reflecting an approach similar to that of Hebrews 2:6-9.

Psalm 8:9 - God's Majestic Name.

Serving as an envelope, the closing lines repeat v.1 and link it with Psalms 7:17 and 9:2.

⁹ O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Psalm 8:9

Verse 9 ends the psalm as it began, placing God as Lord of everything.