

Place of Humans in Creation: A Re-Reading of Psalm 8

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Abstract

The natural damage and global warming witnessed in the past two decades were forecasted over 50 years ago by the scholar Lynn White, who asserted that these environmental challenges stem from a misinterpretation of human dignity in the Holy Scripture. This study commences with an exploration of White's allegations, subsequently endeavoring to discern the authentic essence of human dignity from Psalm 8 and its positioning within the context of creation. The method used in this study is qualitative and comparative research methods through library research. The findings of this study underscore that a misapprehension of human dignity's essence can indeed lead to errors in the stewardship of nature. Conversely, when human dignity is accurately understood, the positive outcome entails the vigilant and responsible care of the natural environment.

Keywords: dominion; ecology; human dignity; nature; Psalm 8

1. Introduction

Psalm 8, with its eloquent verses and profound reflections, unveils the special greatness inherent in human dignity. Yet, within the majestic celebration of human dignity lies a nuanced complexity, for the awareness of this greatness is not without its attendant challenges and dilemmas. In 1967, Lynn White wrote an essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," which explores the historical and cultural factors that have contributed to the environmental challenges faced by contemporary society.¹ White argues that Western Christian attitudes toward nature and humanity's dominion over the natural world have played a significant role in the ecological crisis.

White contends that the Judeo-Christian tradition, particularly the Genesis narrative in the Bible, has influenced Western thinking by promoting the idea that humans have been

¹ Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science*, 10 (March 1967): 1203–1207.

granted dominion over nature. He asserted, “Formerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature.”² White’s argument is rooted in his observations of the prevailing Western Christian interpretation of Genesis 1. According to this reading, humans, as the culmination of God’s creation, are created in God’s image. A parallel theological nuance is also suggested in Psalm 8, where the psalmist poses the rhetorical question, “What are humans?” (Ps 8:4). This query finds its resolution in the subsequent verses, where the psalmist demonstrates that man is endowed with the power to rule over the works of God’s hand, placing all things at his feet.

A biased interpretation of the dimension of anthropocentrism, which places humans at the center of creation, according to Lynn White, contributes to the exploitation of nature for their own ends. However, it is crucial to further explore whether Psalm 8 and Genesis 1 initially conveyed such a perspective. To narrow the focus of this paper, I will examine the interpretation of Psalms 8:4-8, seeking answers to two pivotal questions: (1) What does Psalm 8:4-8 convey about human dignity? and (2) How can we place humans appropriately within ecocentric theology?

2. Research Method

This research employs qualitative and comparative research methods through library research. The utilization of comparative research aims to offer a comprehensive perspective on the theological interpretation of the dignity of human beings and their relationship with the environment. The investigation commences with an analysis of Psalm 8. Subsequently, additional verses in the Scripture are also provided to convey an objective understanding.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Human Dignity on Psalm 8:4-8³

Brueggemann expounds that Psalm 8 is a creation hymn that centers on the place of humans in God’s creation.⁴ In relation to the creation story, this psalm witnesses the dignity and worth that all humans have despite their fall. Therefore, he argues that the terms used for humans in verse 4, that are *’ēnôš* and *bēn ’ādām*, carry different tones and meanings. The first term, *’ēnôš* is often associated with human frailty.⁵ In the Bible, *’ēnôš* is first mentioned as the son of Seth (Gen 4:26) and represents the concept of human beings as mortals, vulnerable, and subject to the limitations of the flesh. When associated with the first member of the genealogy in Genesis 4, Adam, these two names share the same meaning: ‘human.’ Therefore, *’ēnôš*, or humanity, appears to be at the center of creation and is the subject of the psalmist’s reflection in Psalm 8:4, which poses the question, ‘What are *humans* that you are mindful of them?’ The second term, *bēn ’ādām*, translated as ‘the son of man,’ literally means

² Lynn White, Jr., 1205.

³ All the verses of Psalm 8 in this essay are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Bible.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, *Psalms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 59.

⁵ Susan Gillingham provides a slightly more neutral view by saying that “the word *’ēnôš* is a term used to describe all humankind as in Ps. 90:3 (Cf. Susan Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries: A Reception History Commentary on Psalms 1-72*, Volume 2 (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 79).

the descendants of *'ādām*, who originated from *'ādāmāh*, meaning earth or ground. Thus, the psalmist's question, "[What is] *a son of man* that you care for him?" (Ps 8:4b), could signify an inquiry into why God, the creator of the universe, would concern Himself with seemingly insignificant creatures known as humans.

Just as Genesis 1:26-31 states that God created men and women in His image (*imago Dei*), Psalm 8:5 describes humans with royal overtones, "[God] crown him with glory and honor." In his book "Psalms Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics," Ben Witherington argues, "In any case, the image theology suggests humans have been uniquely made for personal relationship with God, and as persons like unto God they are able to share some of his majesty, both by being an image-bearer and by fulfilling the task of having dominion over the earth."⁶ Humans, fashioned in God's likeness and image, hold dominion over the works of the divine fingers. The psalmist praises, "You have given him rule over the works of your hands, put all things at his feet: all sheep and oxen, even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and whatever swims the paths of the seas" (Ps 8:4-8). This dominion does not imply permission to exploit and exhaust the creation's resources but rather signifies that God grants humans the honor of representing Him in caring for all of creation. Brueggemann explicitly states that "human dominion in the body of Psalm 8 and the praise of God at the edges of the psalm must be held together."⁷

Robert Alter provides an interesting review of the relationship between the story of creation in Genesis 1 and Psalm 8. He says that Psalm 8 is "a kind of summarizing poetic paraphrase of the account of creation in Genesis 1, man's God-given dominion over the created world."⁸ He continues by emphasizing the difference in their form as he writes,

Genesis 1, being narrative, reports creation as a sequence of acts—indeed, as a kind of regulated procession moving from the dividing of light and darkness and the making of heaven, earth, and sea to God's rest on the seventh day after the creation of the animal kingdom and of man. It is all forward movement, from origins through time to fulfillment. *Psalm 8* assumes as a background this narrative process but takes it up after its completion, and like many lyric poems it is the complex realization of one moment of perception: the speaker looking around at the created world and marveling at it, and *at man's place in it*.⁹

Alter argues that Psalm 8 is not a psalm that grants humans the legitimacy to exploit nature. He firmly states that human dominion is a gift from God, the Creator. Therefore, the 'envelope structure' of Psalm 8—the repetition in a refrain of the first line as the last—shows that "a perfect circle is closed: the majesty of God, affirmed at the beginning, is restated verbatim at the end, but with but with the sense accrued through the intervening eight lines of

⁶ Ben Witherington, *Psalms Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 52.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 37-38.

⁸ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, A Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2011), 146.

⁹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Poetry*, 147, emphasis added.

what concretely it means for His name to be majestic throughout the earth.”¹⁰ Additionally, he explains that the word ‘all’ in phrases like ‘all things’ and ‘all together’ signifies that everything is a gift from God, who has dominion over all—heaven and earth, angels and men, creatures of the field, air, and sea.¹¹ In the end, He places ‘all’ at the feet of man to be preserved.

Thus, when the psalmist places humans at the center of creation, he invites all of humanity to be grateful for the gift of life and dignity. This praise to God serves as a foundation for preserving nature, because, without remembering the Creator, humans may exploit nature greedily, thereby corrupting the psalmist’s hope and intention. Brueggemann states that it is not naïve to say that the first step in addressing the environmental crisis is to praise God, for praising God is the act of worship and mode of existence that reminds us that we human beings are not free to do whatever our science and technology enable us to do.¹² Praise stands in contrast to our culture’s tendency toward unrestrained exploitation.

Willis Jenkins, in his book “Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology,” says that the concept of dominion reminds humans that God has bestowed upon them the gift of creation, inviting them into friendship, giving all of the creation to glorify their Creator.¹³ The term ‘friendship’ signifies that God has appointed humans as His co-workers in caring for the creation placed under human feet (Psalm 8:6). This understanding sets the stage for a reflection on Psalm 8, which, generally filled with wonder and awe, meditates on God’s extraordinary creation. The psalm marvels at the divine care for both men and women, entrusting them with the weighty responsibility of stewarding the entirety of creation. In this context, human dignity becomes intricately tied to a divine commission to be stewards of the Earth.

Psalm 8:4-8 not only praises God as the creator of the vast universe but also acknowledges Him as the giver of life in its fullest expression. Consequently, human dignity is portrayed as a reflection of the image of God, emphasizing active participation in a cooperative relationship with the Creator towards nature. This relationship, as Jenkins suggests, should never be an attempt to greedily and selfishly exploit nature. On the contrary, it involves humans actively participating as stewards, caring for, protecting, and preserving the goodness inherent in every aspect of God’s creation. In this way, human dignity is portrayed not only as the image of God but also as God’s ongoing co-worker in the narrative of creation.

¹⁰ Robert Alter, *The Art of Poetry*, 148. Meanwhile according to Brueggemann, the envelope structure of Psalm 8 is about God and the body of the text is about human dominion. God (theology), humanity (anthropology), and creation (ecology) are intertwined, but the perspective of the psalm is theocentric rather than anthropocentric (Cf. Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, *Psalms*, 60-61)

¹¹ Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. Norton & Company, 2007), 92.

¹² Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, *Psalms*, 61.

¹³ Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christians Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 143.

3.2. Place of Humans Within Ecocentric Theology

Placing humans at the center of ecocentric theology also entails establishing a relationship between humans and all other creations. Despite being endowed with the likeness of the Creator's image; humanity needs to realize that it is not a master but a steward in service to the Creator's plan. Psalm 8:6 states, "You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet." This verse can be interpreted in ecocentric terms as recognizing a responsibility or stewardship role for humans within creation. Ecocentric theology aligns with the idea that humans are entrusted with caring for nature, emphasizing responsibility and fostering respectful interactions with the environment. Jürgen Moltmann, in his book *'God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation,'* asserts, "The human being does not merely live in the world like other living things. He does not merely dominate the world and use it. He is also able to discern the world in full awareness as God's creation, to understand it as a sacrament of God's hidden presence, and to appreciate it as a communication of God's fellowship"¹⁴

By viewing other creations as signs of God's hidden presence, humans are invited to realize their dignity. Despite being bestowed with special dignity, crowned 'with glory and honor' (Psalm 8:5), humans are not called to enter creation as 'princes' or 'masters.' Instead, they are invited by God to become integral members of creation, sharing thanksgiving with the Creator. Moltmann perceives this as a liberating existential experience.¹⁵ It is said to be existential because by realizing the place of humans in all of God's creation, humans interpret the dignity that God has given, which the psalmist admires and asks with gratitude, "What are humans that you are aware of them?" (Ps 8:4). Furthermore, it is said to be liberating because by entering the community of God's creation, humans are no longer enslaved by the desire to dominate and exploit, but are free to use God's gifts with gratitude and responsibility, as God in His goodness provides the life of every one of His creations in the world.

In relation to ecocentric theology, Psalm 8 provides a precise description of humans, who are said to have dominion. The psalmist declares, "You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet" (Ps 8:6). It is crucial to remember that God is the active force and source behind these actions ("You have given... You have put"). Ben Witherington emphasized, "We are not discussing human accomplishment or what humans deserve, but rather the plan and gift of God. We were meant and made to be rulers over all the works of God's hands." Thus, it becomes clear that the dominion referred to by the psalmist in 8:6 is not synonymous with domination. This psalm does not remind us that we have taken the great power and privilege granted to us by God and often used it to exalt ourselves and serve our own ends. The focus of this psalm is to showcase the majesty of God and His generosity, which has given humans dominion, rather than on how "dominion has become domination; rule has become ruin; subordination in the

¹⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, translated by Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1985), 70-71.

¹⁵ Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, 36

divine purpose has become subjection to human sinfulness.”¹⁶

In an ecocentric framework, Psalm 8 reminds us of our status as humans in the midst of all of God’s creation. Goldingay asserts that “we can say ‘human being’ only after we have learned to say ‘God’.”¹⁷ This implies that the understanding of dominion arises in the right context and avoids becoming domination only when humans incorporate God into their lives. Humanity ‘fell’ in Genesis 1 because their disobedience toward God does not stop Him from crowning humans with glory and honor (Ps 8:5). Nevertheless, humans can repeatedly ‘fall’ by making the mistake of disobeying God, leading to the sin of greed. It is at this juncture that dominion transforms into domination.

Thomas Aquinas argues that the argument in Psalm 8, and in other verses in the Bible when expounding the strong dominion of humans, serves two purposes.¹⁸ First, dominion refers to the *naturale desiderium* of humans for a supernatural end or the moral ecology of sanctification. Secondly, dominion awakens humans to the ongoing task of labor, and through their work, humans glorify God while God sanctifies them. In his theology, Thomas interprets dominion not as domination or coercive rule but as a sanctifying participation in the joyful labor of appreciating God through creation.¹⁹ By assigning names to all of creation, humans acquaint themselves with each creature, and through the attending grace of God, they refine their understanding, using it to offer praise to God. Gradually, humans learn to find joy in God through the act of praising Him within their dominion over creation. In this context, humans and their dominion over creatures align with the original intention of the psalmist.

4. Conclusion

In response to White Lynn’s criticism in the introduction of this essay, which posits Judeo-Christian theology as the primary cause of natural destruction due to excessive respect for human dignity, this essay presents two opposing arguments to Lynn’s viewpoint. First, while it is true that humans are endowed with special dignity by God, this dignity does not automatically emerge as the main cause of natural damage through excessive exploitation by humans. The psalmist in Psalm 8 illustrates that the profound dignity of humans, created in the image of God, encourages humans to recognize the call to friendship with God and embrace their noble role as God’s co-workers in the task of protecting and preserving nature.

Second, humans’ place in creation means a special role in preventing dominion from turning into domination. This dominion does not imply permission to exploit nature because, in principle, the psalmist in Psalm 8 describes humans as having a special dignity within an envelope structure that prevents human actions from deviating outside of God’s original plan—namely, to make everything good. By granting dominion over creation, humans, as God’s co-workers, carry out this responsibility with wisdom and humility.

In the end, everything written in Psalm 8 and in other parts of Scripture that places

¹⁶ Ben Witherington, *Psalms Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics*, 84.

¹⁷ John Goldingay, *Psalms. Vol 1: Psalms 1-41* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2006), 163.

¹⁸ Cf. Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christians Theology*, 135-136, quoting Thomas, “*In Psalmos, super 8*” (ST Suppl. 9I. I).

¹⁹ Cf. Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christians Theology*, 136.

humans above the rest of creation should be read as an invitation to sanctify nature from everything that is evil. Humans' greatest mistake is when they choose not to participate in God's plan of sanctification and take on the role of the destroyer. Humans' position in creation always begins with an intimate relationship with God and ends with a longing for eternal union with God because He has created men and women in His image and called them in friendship as God's co-workers to preserve nature.

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