

## **Rulers or Servants?: A Re-Reading of Psalm 8 Concerning the Place of Humankind in the Age of the Anthropocene**

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### **Abstract**

*With the Age of the Anthropocene and the clear signs of ecological destruction that have resulted from this rule of humans over the creation of God, it is essential that biblical scholars revisit the texts, both in the Old and the New Testament, that have so often been used to justify the superior position of humans over creation.*

*Within communities of faith and also within academic circles, the well-known Psalm 8 has often been used to underscore the role of mankind as rulers over creation. Coming from the field of biblical studies, I endeavour to do a re-reading of this Psalm that highlights the importance of an attitude of awe and humility rather than superiority. This will be done through in-depth exegesis of the psalm and will aim to offer a translation that accentuates a life-affirming attitude towards creation while still staying true to the text. Through exegesis, I will offer translation possibilities, hoping to provide hermeneutical tools for ministers who find themselves on the front line of preaching and teaching communities of faith about what it means to be responsible stewards and servants of the earth in crisis, instead of depleting and destroying her resources through arrogant domination.*

**Keywords:** Anthropocene; Psalm 8; Creation psalm; Ecological hermeneutics; Green reading

### **Introduction**

In an article that focuses on “theological reflections regarding the multi-disciplinary discourse on the so-called Anthropocene”, Conradie (forthcoming) underscores the importance “[of enhancing] Christian self-understanding on the basis of more profound biblical exegesis”. This article endeavours to be a contribution towards this end.

For this special collection with *Planetary Entanglement: Theology and the Anthropocene* as its theme, it seems fitting to start with Elizabeth Gedge’s (2019:511) assertion that “we cannot ignore the fact that our own entanglement in this living world is having fatal consequences for it”. The earth faces an environmental crisis because of the patterns and the habits of humans. In an effort to describe the current geological epoch that resulted from this human interaction with the earth and her resources, scientists have coined the term “Anthropocene” (Johnson Leese 2019). Rasmussen (2020:48) rightfully calls it the “Age of the Human” and argues that “the human imprint is everywhere, even where humans don’t live – in the high atmosphere, in the deep oceans, across polar ice caps and off into the future evolution” (see also Gedge 2019).

Considering the devastating impact that humans have on the ecology (see Rensberger 2014), not only in terms of resource depletion and species extinction but also in terms of

social justice<sup>1</sup>, Gedge (2019:512) poses the pressing question of how our religious understandings of ourselves, of God and of non-human nature can be revised in such a way as to “generate a powerful ethical response to the current anthropogenic ecological ills?” Conradie (forthcoming) argues for an “ecological reformation”, also in terms of our understanding of the biblical texts. The need to revisit our understanding of these ancient texts was first highlighted by the historian Lynn White, who, being a Christian himself, pointed out “how anthropocentric interpretations of Genesis 1 have given priority to humanity as uniquely made in God’s image and the endorsement ‘to have dominion over’ all the earth (Gen.1:26–28), a reading he claims exacerbated and accelerated exploitation of nature” (see Leese 2019:2).

In an effort to counter or at least balance out the message of Gen. 1:26–28, many Old Testament scholars have turned to Ps. 104. This psalm is viewed as an eco-friendly text, a creation psalm that emphasises the interrelatedness of all living beings on earth. Ps. 104 does not give humans a special position but rather views us as equal to the animals (Leese 2019:4; see also Gnusse 2021:4–14 and Stone 2019:2019:236–247). Other texts that are used to advocate for an eco-friendly reading are Gen. 2:4–3:24 and Job 38:1–42:6 (Gnusse 2021:168–174; Simkins 2014:403–411).

Among the scholars who are advocating for a “greener”<sup>2</sup> reading and interpretation of the texts, there are not many who choose to work with Psalm 8. While Psalm 8 is depicted as a creation psalm, the main reason for not using this psalm to address the ecological crisis that humanity is facing can be found in vs. 6–7, where mankind is given a superior position in creation and tasked to rule over it (Brown 2002:155). Just like Gen. 1:26–28, Psalm 8 has often been used to defend the superior position of humans over animals and the rest of creation. In our time of ecological crisis, these texts are problematic, since they have been (and often still are) used to support the exploitation of earth’s resources, rather than their protection.

In light of this, I want to take up the challenge to offer an eco-friendly, green reading of Psalm 8.

## Methodology

In the ensuing sections, I will offer a translation of Psalm 8, with an exegetical and hermeneutical discussion to follow. The psalm will be considered within its genre as a creation psalm. Furthermore, the intertextual link with Gen. 1:26–28, another text that witnesses to creation theology, will also be discussed.

After this discussion, I will focus on four approaches to ecological hermeneutics as presented by Leese (2019:4–11). Leese (2019:1) argues that “[t]he demands of our current context have challenged scholars to consider how religious anthropocentric worldviews have influenced historical readings of the Bible in ways that have

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<sup>1</sup> It is the poor, the underprivileged and the most vulnerable people who suffer most under the “human imprint” that is the major cause of climate change. See Gedge (2019:511) and Leese (2019:2). Another scholar who has written extensively on this issue is Elizabeth Johnson, (2014:256–257, 265) who explains how “[s]ocial justice and ecological degradation are two sides of the same coin, lack of respect for life. Both evils precipitate out from policies and lifestyles that reward the greed and selfishness of some to the disadvantage of many others”.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Brown (2010:20), who calls for a “Green Awakening”. Viviers (2017) sees Psalm 104 as “an expression of dark green religion”. Gedge (2019:514) discusses Rosemary Ruether who argues that “world religions are now ‘greening’”.

contributed to the crisis and constricted the ecological contours of the ancient texts”’. He then goes on to explain that the approaches that he proposes are based on “constructive and critical engagement of ancient texts in light of modern environmental challenges” (Leese 2019:1). These are four approaches that will be considered:

1. The need to *identify the anthropocentric bias* in biblical texts as well as in biblical interpretation. Leese (2019:4–5) stresses that this bias is especially prevalent in the Western Christian tradition, where the assumption that humans are the most important part of creation and that anything non-human is of lesser value prevails.
2. One of the outcomes to anthropocentric bias is an awareness of the *hierarchical structure* that becomes apparent in texts such as Gen 1:26–28 and Psalm 8. This structure is used to justify human dominion over the creation (Leese 2019:5–7).<sup>3</sup> Gedge (2019:512–513) refers to it as the “hierarchy of being” where “beings appear on a graduated hierarchy of value according to the degree to which they ‘participate’ in the properties of the Creator”. Once again, this structure is not merely evident in the ancient texts themselves but also often in how they are interpreted and translated.
3. Leese (2019:7) emphasises the importance of *listening to the voice of creation in the text and to the experts who speak on behalf of creation*, stating that “[t]his practice approaches all other-than-human-components of the universe as a “subject”, affirming creation’s intrinsic integrity and worth apart from any relationship with humanity”. There are many examples in the Psalter where creation itself is said to bring praise to God. The best example is perhaps Psalm 148, where the whole of creation is called to worship.

Besides listening to the voice of creation in the biblical texts, it is equally important to listen to the informed voices of scientists who speak on behalf of creation.<sup>4</sup>

4. The last approach concerns the *reconceptualisation of theological frameworks* (see Leese 2019:8–11). Here Leese urges us to recognise the need for reconceptualising the traditional understanding of frameworks such as soteriology, pneumatology and eschatology. He uses the work of Conradie as an example to show how the formulation of doctrines can be revisited with a greater sensitivity to ecological theology (see Conradie 2006).

I will explore how these approaches can further deepen our understanding of Psalm 8 in the current Age of the Anthropocene.

### **A re-reading of Psalm 8 (Author’s translation)**

To the director of music, according to the gittith<sup>5</sup>; a psalm of David.

<sup>1</sup> Yahweh, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

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<sup>3</sup> Leese discusses this approach under the heading “*Awareness of Spirit-Nature Dualism*”.

<sup>4</sup> Two biblical scholars who have done important work in this regard, are Elizabeth Johnson in her book *Ask the beasts: Darwin and the God of love* (2014) and William Brown with his book *Seven pillars of creation: The Bible, science and the ecology of wonder* (2010).

<sup>5</sup> Meaning uncertain, probably a musical style or type of instrument. See Craigie (1998:105).

I will worship<sup>6</sup> your majesty above the heavens.

<sup>2</sup> From the mouths of children and nursing babies  
you have established a stronghold because of your enemies  
to silence the foe and the avenger.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> When I look at your heavens, the works of your fingers, the moon and the stars that  
you have established –

<sup>4</sup> What are human beings that you think of them,  
humankind that you care for them?

<sup>5</sup> Yet you have made them a little lower than the gods<sup>8</sup>,  
with glory and honour you have crowned them.

<sup>6</sup> You have given them dominion over<sup>9</sup> the works of your hands,  
you have placed everything under their feet:

<sup>7</sup> Flocks and cattle, all of them<sup>10</sup>, and also the wild animals of the field,

<sup>8</sup> the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Yahweh, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

### Exegetical discussion

Psalm 8 is a creation psalm set in the genre of a hymn of praise. It is, in fact, the first hymn of praise in the Psalter, following the introductory Psalms 1 and 2 and the laments in Psalms 3–7. This psalm “offers the only concentrated reflection in the Psalter on humanity’s place and role within the creation” (Bellinger and Bruegemann 2014:48; Brown 2002:156; Rensberger 2014:615).

Psalm 8 follows the typical three-part structure of psalms of praise, consisting of an introduction, a body (that focuses on creation and human’s role therein) and a conclusion that is a repetition of the introduction (Bellinger and Bruegemann 2014:58). This envelope structure determines the boundaries within which the message of Psalm 8 finds its deepest meaning: “Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (vss. 1, 9). Everything that is proclaimed within these boundaries must be understood in the light of this exclamation of praise that has God as its subject (Maré 2006:929).

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<sup>6</sup> The text is corrupt. See Craigie (1998:105), who identifies a hendiadys and joins two words (אשר תנה) into a single word (אשרתנה), reading it as a Piel imperfect (“to worship”). Also Brown (2002:155).

<sup>7</sup> While this verse may initially come as a surprise, it makes sense when we consider the creation theme. Brown (2002:157) calls to mind the “ancient mythos of cosmic struggle”. Many Ancient Near Eastern creation texts include the building of a stronghold when the act of creation is complete. This stronghold is meant to strengthen it against enemy forces. By giving babies the task of overcoming their enemies, the psalm illustrates how weakness is turned into strength. Moreover, this is done through the humble act of worship. See Bellinger and Brueggemann(2014:59) and Lawrie (2010:610).

Note that three different Biblical Hebrew words are used to describe the full range of enemies, here translated as “enemies”, “foe” and “avenger”.

<sup>8</sup> Like Brown (2002:156, 253), I understand אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) to refer to the divine council of divine beings. In Job 1–2, these members of the council are called “sons of God”.

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014:58) and Brown (2002:156).

<sup>10</sup> The repetitive use of כל (here translated as “everything” and “all of them”) in vss. 7 and 8 is noteworthy, since it stresses man’s dominion over *all* of creation. See also Maré (2006:929).

<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014:58).

In the ancient Biblical Hebrew texts, God's name referred to God's character (Bellinger and Bruegemann 2014:58). Craigie (1998:107) speaks of "God's revelation of himself". Therefore the name, the character of God, the way in which God reveals him/herself can be seen in *all* the earth. It is this revelation that embraces and holds together the entire creation that the psalmist witnesses about in Psalm 8.

The name of God is described as אָדִיר ("majestic"), an adjective that is often used in the context of kings (Bauermacher and Koeler 2000). Bellinger and Bruegemann (2014:58–59) also highlight the royal overtones here, and Lawrie (2010:609) points out that the framing verses group mankind with the rest of creation as "domain and subjects of the King". While the last phrase of v.1 is difficult to translate, it clearly attests to God's majesty in that he/she has set upon or above the heavens. Not only can God's majestic name be witnessed in all the earth, it also encompasses the heavens above.

Lawrie (2010:610) explains how the "children and nursing babies" of v. 2 represent humanity: "the 'babies of creation', who are given the task of subduing Yahweh's enemies... They do so by their praise of Yahweh, that is, humans rule, as it were, through the humility of worship."

In v. 3, the focus shifts to the psalmist's act of seeing. He bears witness to the heavens as created by God, poetically referring to the moon and the stars as "the works of God's fingers". Considering ancient pagan beliefs, Lawrie (2010:609) reminds us that Israel's neighbours worship these celestial bodies as deities, but for the God of Israel they are mere "'fingerwork' – a masterly touch".

Considering the little effort that it took God to create the vast heavens, it comes as no surprise that the psalmist is becoming increasingly aware of his own (and other humans') insignificance. When he looks up at this night sky tapestry, he is startled by the question: "What are human beings that you think of them, humankind that you care for them?" (v. 4). It is clear that the focus here is not on the greatness of humanity but rather on our smallness against the vast stage of creation.<sup>12</sup> This realisation then forms the point of departure for the often misused v. 5 and further, where humanity is described as "being (only) a little lower than the gods" (v. 5), as being "crowned with glory and honour" (v. 5), as being "given dominion over all the works of God's hands" (vss. 6–8). Therefore, when the psalmist witnesses in awe to the noble status of humanity, it is born from a place of deep humility.

Along with other scholars, Brown (2002:157) recognises the link between Ps. 8:6–8 and Gen. 1:26–28.<sup>13</sup> It is in this creation narrative where humankind is made in the image of God, blessed by the creator God and then tasked to rule over all the animals and creatures of the earth. The Biblical Hebrew lexeme used in Gen. 1:26 (רָדָה "to rule") is a synonym of מָשַׁל which is used in Ps. 8:6. Brown (2010:47) argues convincingly that the language in Gen. 1 "lacks all sense of exploitation". There is no sign in the text that points towards a competition for resources. To the contrary, "humanity's 'regime' over the world in Gen. 1 is constructive, even salutary, consonant with God's life-sustaining creation" (Brown 2010:47).

<sup>12</sup> Rensberger (2014:615) argues this point very well. Likewise, Brown (*Seeing the Psalms*, 156) states that "[t]he psalmist looks to the heavens only to find finitude and frailty as part of the human condition. Before the towering heights of heaven on which God's splendor rests, humankind shrivels in stature."

<sup>13</sup> See also Johnson (2014:263–266); Simkins (2014:403), and Lawrie, *The dialectic of human dignity* (2010:609), to name but a few.

This same message is echoed in Psalm 8. While it may be true that Psalm 8 has the place and role of humankind as its focus, “the primary actors in this psalm, are not human beings; the primary actor is God” (Hinson-Hasty 2005:393). It is God’s revelation in all the earth that holds the body of Psalm 8 together (vss. 1 and 9). It is God that “thinks of” and “cares for” humankind, even though we are so extremely small in relation to the expanse of the heavens (v. 4), and it is God who has given humankind a special place in creation, making them a little less than the gods and crowning them with honour and glory (v. 5), God who has given them dominion over all the works of God’s hands, placing everything under their feet (v. 6), all the flocks and the cattle along with the wild animals of the field (v. 7), the birds in the sky, as well as the fish in the sea and everything else that passes along the paths of the sea (v. 8).

God is the creator, the giver, the agent who bestows responsibility on humankind, and humans are (meant to be) the humble recipients of this task to rule as stewards in the creation of God. Read from this perspective, it becomes evident that the call to “dominate over” is directed to humans who know and acknowledge their humble place of insignificance and finitude in (not over) creation as well as their God-given calling and therefore to rule with care and servitude, not through exploitation.

### **Psalm 8 in the light of Leese’s four approaches to ecological hermeneutics**

This section explores Psalm 8 in the light of Leese’s four eco-sensitive approaches to biblical hermeneutics:

1. ***Identifying the anthropocentric bias in Psalm 8:*** Leese rightfully argues that biblical texts are both *anthropotopic* (with humanity as its main theme) and *androcentric* (with male persons as the main theme) (Leese 2019:4). The androcentric bias of Psalm 8 is clear in the Biblical Hebrew terminology, where all references to humankind are grammatically masculine.<sup>14</sup> It is also evident in the history of interpretation and translation.<sup>15</sup>

In her article *Female and Royal Humanity? An African Woman’s Meditation on Psalm 8*, Masenya (2014:489–501) proposes a rereading of the psalm that “reveals the equality and royalty of all human beings irrespective of their gender”. She maintains that when Psalm 8 is read within an African-South-African context, the notion to dominate over the creation can be seen as a call to all human beings (male and female) in positions of power to “exercise their queenship/kingship” in the context of ‘humility, concern and care’ (Masenya 2014:500).

Regarding the anthropocentric bias in Psalm 8, Brown (2002:156) states that “humankind is placed unreservedly at the top of the hierarchy of dominion”. This seems to be a strong statement in favour of an anthropocentric reading; however, Brown (2002:157) continues as follows: “Invested with royal prerogative and

<sup>14</sup> All references to God in the text are also masculine. This is not only true of Psalm 8 but throughout the history of interpretation. The commentary on Psalm 8:2 by Craigie serves as a case in point where God is referred to in the masculine: “God’s revelation of *himself*” (See Craigie 1998:107).

<sup>15</sup> While some Bible translations are gender inclusive in their translation of Ps 8:4, many still adhere to the direct translation of the masculine forms, even if scholars agree that the terms should be gender inclusive. See, for example, the RSV, NIV, New Jerusalem Bible and the Afrikaans Bible translations of the text.

responsibility, human beings are ‘stand-ins’ for divine lordship”. Similarly Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014:58) maintain that Psalm 8 focus on the place of humankind, but they then qualify this by stating that it is about humanity’s place in God’s creation, making it clear that God is the creator, the active agent, of all of creation, also of humankind. This brings us back to Hinson-Hasty, who argues that ultimately God, not humanity, is the primary actor in Psalm 8. Simkins makes a valuable contribution to the topic of ecological hermeneutics by challenging the anthropocentric reading of the Bible. He reasons that the Bible is rather a product of a theocentric worldview and should be read from this perspective:

Humans may be singled out in the Bible for particular attention, but they are not separated out from the natural world in which they live. In the theocentric worldview of the Bible, humans and all other creatures are dependent upon God for creation and subsistence, and all alike are valuable to God as part of his creation... A non-anthropocentric reading of the Bible – putting humans in their place – provides an appropriate framework for valuing the natural world, not simply as resources for human use, but rather as the creation of God. (Simkins 2014:397)

2. ***The hierarchical structure in Psalm 8:*** This approach links directly to the previous one. Leese (2019:6) aptly refers to it as the “socially constructed reality of hierarchical dualism” which, in Psalm 8, presupposes a hierarchy where God as creator is transcendent over all other things; humans are the subjects, the rulers of all things and the earth is the “object of conquest” or the “commodity for consumption” that is at the disposal of the human rulers.

When we read the text through eco-sensitive lenses, we see what Brown sees: humans are “stand-ins” for God, called from a place of awe and humility (Simkins’ “putting humans in their place”) to first and foremost know their humble position, and from there to rule with responsibility, as stewards, as caretakers of God’s creation.<sup>16</sup> The dominion of humankind should be enacted through servanthood. Johnson (2014:258) advocates for a “deep spiritual conversion to the Earth”, a turning that “grasps the presence of the Giver of life in, with and under the ecological community of species. Moving from denial that allows us to slack off under the weight of ignorance, it opens our eyes to the global impact of our everyday actions.”

3. ***Listening to the voice of creation in Psalm 8:*** Through this approach, Leese (2019:7) acknowledges “creation’s capacity to reflect God’s glory”. While Leese primarily has the texts in mind where creation is personified and the heavens, the

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<sup>16</sup> See previous point. Van Urk-Coster (2021:357) argues this point compellingly when she reasons that “it appears possible to subscribe to unique human image bearing, without the anthropocentric and exploitive overtones that might have accompanied the notion for much of the past... It can even be a moral danger to deny the centrality of humans in the creaturely world, in view of the earth-changing powers that we have gained (and that we should use in responsible manners). In any case, the notion of *imago Dei* implies that we are ever accountable to a higher, divine power (i.e. YHWH) and should know our place as humans.”

sun, moon and stars, the sea creatures, the fire, hail, snow and wind, the mountains, the trees and the animals can all praise God alongside the humans (see, for example, Ps. 148), Psalm 8 encourages a different sensory awakening. In Psalm 8, we do not hear the voice of creation, but we see and are awestruck by the view of the heavens, the works of God's fingers, the moon and the stars (v. 3). It is this visual experience of the vastness of the heavens that causes the psalmist to realise his and all of humanity's insignificance.<sup>17</sup> It is this witnessing act of the heavens and the heavenly bodies (by merely being visible) that reminds humankind of their place on the one hand, and also of their responsibility on the other.

4. *The reconceptualisation of theological frameworks:* Conradie (2020:8) underscores the importance of reading and interpreting biblical texts with an ecological hermeneutics. For Conradie (2020:8) it is about "finding ways of telling the story of God's work in the world". Conradie (2020:10) then distinguishes between seven crucial chapters of the story, namely "1) creation in the beginning, 2) ongoing creation throughout evolutionary history, 3) the emergence of humanity, its rise and fall, 4) providence (common grace), 5) the particular history of salvation, 6) the formation of the church, its upbuilding, ministries and missions and 7) the consummation of God's work".

Important theological aspects to consider are the identity and the character of God (Conradie 2020:10). It is equally important to consider our identity as humans. Conradie (forthcoming) rightfully asks "what does it mean to become human in the 'Anthropocene'?"

In our exposition of Psalm 8, it has become clear that this text highlights the identity and character of God as the creator, whose name is majestic in all the earth. It is this creator God that "thinks of" insignificant human beings and cares so much that God has made them only a little less than the gods. Moreover, by the decision of this creator God, humans are given dominion over the works of God's hands, to rule responsibly, to take care of all of creation.

God's work, as well as humanity's place within it, must be viewed through a universal frame of reference. This is the message of the envelope structure of Psalm 8, where the psalmist witness ends as it began: "Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

## Conclusion

Within the broader theme of *Planetary Entanglement: Theology and the Anthropocene*, it is of the utmost importance that we also attend to the translation and interpretation of biblical texts, since many of these texts have been (and still are) used as grounds for arguing that humankind has a superior position over creation and that creation is therefore at the disposal of the needs (and greeds!) of humanity. In this paper, I revisited one such Old Testament text, Psalm 8. I provided a translation that, together with the explanatory notes, will hopefully contribute to a "greener", more eco-friendly

<sup>17</sup> Also see Johnson, *Ask the beasts* (2014:40–44). In her discussion of Darwin's work and seeing the relation with the creator God of love, she comments on our role as "beholders" of creation.

interpretation of this psalm. I explored the four approaches to ecological hermeneutics as proposed by Johnson Leese and showed how these approaches can assist us in our attempt to read Psalm 8 from a position of awe and humility within God's creation rather than a position of power and domination over God's creation.

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