

9) WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN? (Psalm 8)

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be human? No psalm can answer this fully, yet Psalm 8 addresses this question directly and, perhaps, more broadly than any other psalm, and maybe any passage in the bible. Being human is defined in relation to God and the rest of God's creation. Thus, there are ecological implications, a certain understanding of the role humans are called to play on this earth.

What psalm type is 8? It's primary role is the praise of God. The opening and closing verses are the same, indicating the clear focus of the psalm: "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" The repeated words of praise also indicate that this psalm was used liturgically as a hymn. The psalm is also unique in that it is addressed to God from beginning to end. It is not so much an invitation to praise God but a direct act of praising God from beginning to end.

TWO PARTS TO THE HYMN

1) vs. 1-2

These verses are not straightforward to understand. Scholars are unsure about how to translate and interpret the meaning.

- a) God's sovereignty is not only over the whole earth, but over the heavens and beyond the heavens (universe). Perhaps the idea here is that God's throne (or full presence) is above or beyond the heavens.
- b) The pre-scientific world view conceived of heaven and earth separated by a dome or "firmament." (Gen. 1:6-8) The role of the firmament was to hold back the waters from the earth so that life would be possible.
- c) Every utterance, even that of babes and infants, speaks to the glory of God's creativity, gift of life, possibility and fertility in every way.
- d) The "avenger and enemy" point to the forces of chaos that would threaten God's creation. Creation was generated out of the defeat of chaos. The difference between the biblical view and other ancient creation sagas from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan, is that there is no indication of a battle between God and contrary forces. Rather, God alone rules and God alone is master over creation.

2) vs. 3-8

- The hymn expresses wonder at the created order, but also ponders the role of humanity within that order.

3- the heavens are the sphere of God's cosmic rule. Where do we humans fit in?

4- The Hebrew words for humanity connote frailty and vulnerability. "Mortals" -"enosh" - has as its root meaning "to be in poor health." "Human beings – "Ben Adam" (son of "Adam" or humanity) - has as its root meaning "adamah" or ground/soil, indicating that humans are finite creatures, made of dust and returning to dust eventually (Gen. 3:19). The intention in vs. 3-4 is to contrast the vastness and infinity of God to the weakness and frailty of God's creation. A paraphrase of vs. 4 would be this: What is so special about these puny creatures that you would pay attention to them?

The intended answer is: nothing is all that special. Compared to God, humans have nothing to brag about. They are limited in knowledge and ability, and in the end, they are swallowed up in the ground from which they have come.

Yet, vs. 5 begins to tell us that God has given humans a unique place in the created order. God, the cosmic ruler, has given humans an "office" in God's kingdom. Humans are made a little lower than "God" or "angels" or "divine beings." The Hebrew word "Elohim" is plural and may refer to members of God's heavenly court. Regardless of the exact meaning of Elohim, however, the point is that humans have been given a great place of honour in God's creation.

Vs. 6-8 define the expanse of human dominion. Humans are in charge of the "works of God's hands" (i.e. animals of all kinds, on land, in the air, in the waters). Ps. 115:16 makes a similar point. The heavens are God's but the earth has been given over to human responsibility. The language of "dominion" as a description of the role of humanity is also referenced in Genesis 1: 26-28, 2: 19-20.

This dominion is important in that it imitates God's role as creator and ruler in smaller scale. If humans are made in God's image (as Genesis states) than just as God mastered chaos and brought forth creation, humans are given the power over creation to bring forth civilization and tend the garden.

In the ancient world, particularly in Egyptian texts, the king alone bears the divine image of the gods and, therefore, is uniquely God's representative on earth. Psalm 8 transfers this role to all humans. In the Psalms, the Davidic king or Messiah is promised dominion over all nations, just as humanity is promised dominion over all living creatures. The problem for the messiah is the chaos of history and human society. The problem for humanity is the chaos of the wilderness, of nature and the earth.

MODERN DAY QUESTION

Psalm 8 seems to assign unlimited power to humanity to rule over God's creation. Some, in fact, blame this psalm and passages in Genesis for our current environmental crisis (David Suzuki has been one who has done this). People can read "dominion" as "domination." This can provide justification for the stronger to rule over the weaker by coercion, "for their own good," as the rationale of colonialism goes. This thinking has also extended itself in humanity's attitudes to nature.

There are at least two options for how to read the biblical texts. The first option is to simply insist that the dominion = domination interpretation is false. The second option is to argue that Psalm 8 and Genesis 1:26-28 must be read alongside other texts of the

bible (e.g. Genesis 2: 4-25) that insist just as strongly that human beings are but earthly dust, totally dependent on God for the good use of their limited powers.

ANSWER TO THE QUESTION

1) A fuller answer to the question and accusation can be found within Psalm 8 itself. Vs. 1,9 are quite explicit that the earth is the Lord's! Human dominion is framed, determined and limited by the ultimate rule of God over all creation. The earth belongs to God. We cannot "own" it. Humans are tenants on this earth (as we are discovering in the earth's rebellion against our abuse of it). Even though this view may not overturn our "rights" to private property, "ownership" in the ultimate sense is not determined by a deed.

2) Any rule on the earth, be it of a mere human or a king, should be a just rule. Stewardship implies accountability. Many passages in the bible point to the failure of human beings to take stock of such accountability.

3) Psalm 8:4 is alluded to in other biblical texts and puts the meaning of the verse in perspective. Psalm 144:3 emphasizes the fleetingness of human life and our total dependence on God for the essentials. Job 7:17 emphasizes that while humans may have a special role to play in creation, such a role is more often a burden and curse than a blessing. Job prefers to be a lesser creature, burdened with less responsibility. The Babel story in Genesis 11 also offers a severe judgment on human pride in the blind presumption of autonomy and control so precious to modern people as much as to some ancient peoples. Human glory falls as quickly as it rises, and all human accomplishments are fragile to dissolution.

Finally, in Hebrews 2: 5-9, humans are warned that they are not placed on this earth to do as they please. Christ has come to take on our rule of the world, and because he bears our responsibility, we are inspired to follow him and rest in him. In Jesus, dominion does not equate to domination. God's ultimate desire for us is to serve and care, to be creative in finding ways to co-operate, to listen, to include, and to nurture life, even at great personal cost. Christ is our forgiveness and our path to conversion in our relationships with each other and the earth.