

## What is man that God is mindful to him: An Exegesis of Psalm 8

Robert Siby<sup>1</sup>, Grace Fresania Kaparang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Klabat, Indonesia

rsiby@unklab.ac.id

### Abstract

*Even when human may choose to believe or not to believe in God, Psalm 8 bears witness the value of human being in God's eyes despite of the fall, sin and rebellion. The purpose of this paper is to go through the exegetical analysis as to seek appropriate understanding and application of Psalm 8 to the wondrous relationship of the Almighty God and frail human beings through historic-grammatical method of finding meaning, observing literary genre and context, structural analysis, and then looking for its spiritual and theological application. The conclusion of the study is that Psalm 8 is a hymn of praise and through meditation on the Name and glory of God reflected in His creation, Psalter asks the reader of the book of Psalm to experience the joyful praise and adoration to the creator of His mighty work of creation and of His attention to human beings. The grandeur of the heavens, the artistry of God, and the dignity of human beings tell the reader about the mighty God who deserve our praise and worship. Psalter let the earliest speech of a child can be heard in the grandeur of heavens (8:1c and 8:3a) and shows the frailty, weakness, and limitation of man (8:4a) in the middle of the fingers (8:3a) and the hands of God (8:6a). Both arrangements demonstrate that Human as created beings are not left without attention but are heard and cared of by God. Human beings are created to praise God, the creator, as their nature. Realizing human's frailty and nothingness, while powerful God is mindful of them in spite of the unbelieving and sin manifested to Him, human may truly praise the Lord with the Psalmist: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visit him?" "O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!" (Ps 8:4,1,9). The greater glory and holiness are given back to God, human dominion over creation once is taken, but through Jesus it was redeemed, and give hope to humanity further Glory in Him alone.*

### Keywords

almighty god; caring god; exegesis; human; psalms 8



### I. Introduction

Secularism is now on the rise, resulting in the formation of the world's newest major religion which is "no religion" (Bullard, 2016). A recent study from Pew Research Center on 4,700 adults find that 30% of Americans do not believe in the God of the Bible yet, three-quarter of the religious "nones" stated that they believe there is a higher power but not as God in the Bible (Pew Research Center Report, 2018). Hearing only the name of God, the gods or goddess of Greek or Roman mythology will come up to most people. Several gods and/or goddesses depicted as good looking, mighty and powerful, yet having temper or lust problems and tend to be harmful as they trying to destroy the world when their will were not obeyed by humans thus requiring sacrifices to appease the anger.

Several people then see God as fearful, potent and tyrannical Higher Being that nobody should not be messed-up with.

Whilst, in the world of believers, there is a significant shifting of people choose to walk away from God. One third of American adults believe in God but not as described in the Bible (Pew Research Center Report, 2018). Furthermore, millennials are the leaders in shifting away from religious affiliations (Mody, 2021). Great questions were asked: if God is loving, good and powerful, then why sin, evil and suffering exists? It always hard to praise God amidst of suffering and trials.

Even when human may choose to believe or not to believe in God, Psalm 8 bears witness of the worth of human in God's eyes being despite of the fall (Green, 2014) and rebellions. This passage had drawn great attention of bible scholars (Smith, 1997) and has been recognized by many scholars as the psalm of praises to God. "For its popularity among ancient and modern interpreters, Psalm 8 has always posed a number of difficult exegetical challenges" (Judah Kraut, 2009). The Psalm ends with the same exclamation as it begins. The praise that attributes to God as Creator is further described throughout the passage. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to go through the exegetical analysis as to seek appropriate understanding and application of the passage to the wondrous relationship of the Almighty God and frail human beings. The analysis begun by doing a study on certain keywords from the passage. At this step, the analysis is done by looking at the meaning from theological dictionary, lexicon and consultation to some bible commentaries. The next steps are looking of its broader meaning of the passage through study on literary genre and context, structural analysis, and then looking for its spiritual and theological application.

## II. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Psalms 8 in New King James Version

<sup>1</sup>O LORD, our Lord,  
How excellent *is* Your name in all the earth,  
Who have set Your glory above the heavens!  
<sup>2</sup>Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants  
You have <sup>ordained</sup> strength,  
Because of Your enemies,  
That You may silence the enemy and the avenger.  
<sup>3</sup>When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,  
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,  
<sup>4</sup>What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit<sup>e</sup> him  
<sup>5</sup>For You have made him a little lower than <sup>the</sup> angels,  
And You have crowned him with glory and honor.  
<sup>6</sup>You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands;  
You have put all *things* under his feet,  
<sup>7</sup>All sheep and oxen—  
Even the beasts of the field,  
<sup>8</sup>The birds of the air,  
And the fish of the sea  
That pass through the paths of the seas.  
<sup>9</sup>O LORD, our Lord,  
How excellent *is* Your name in all the earth!

## 2.2 Keywords Analysis

### a. Name (שם)

In Hebrew thought, names are “indicative of the nature of the person” (Tesh & Zorn, 1999). Consequently, the majesty here praised attaches to God himself, not just to his name. Name denotes “standing and reputation” (Eccl. 7:21), “being and power” (Job 1:21) of the beholder (Bibleworks, שם). Therefore, “just as one’s own name presents one to others, so the divine name presents God to the world,” (Clifford, 2003) of His standing, reputation, existence, and power. “The divine name (*sem*) on earth (v.1b) is parallel to the divine splendor (*hod*) in heaven (v. 1c). The same word pair occurs in 148:13, ‘Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his *name* alone is exalted; his *glory* is above earth and heaven.’ Since both heaven and earth belong to the Lord therefore all of them express divine splendor (Clifford, 2003). “All creation reveals the power and glory of God’s name” (Rom 1:20). Since the power of speech, in God’s earthly creation, is reserved to man alone (Tesh & Zorn, 1999), Gaebelien (1991) also suggests that “only God’s people know how to respond to this revelation of his majesty in nature, because he has revealed his ‘name’ to them (Exod. 3:14-15).” Knowing the name of God is reflected on the way we praise Him.

### b. Mighty (עזיר)

‘Majesty’ refers to God as surpassing all that is. His name is above all others. Emphasis is given to this ‘beyond-ness’ of God. The very heart of the worshiper needs to be filled with a sense of the glory of God (Tesh & Zorn, 1999). The ‘majesty’ of Yahweh’s name radiates from his work on earth and heaven. The word ‘majestic’ (*adder*, ‘mighty’) is a royal attribute denoting “His victories” (Exod. 15:6), “His might in judgment” (1 Sam 4:8; Ps 76:4), “His law” (Isa 42:21), and “His rule over creation” (Ps 8:1, 9; 93:4) (Gaebelien, 1991). Mighty is the name of God, because it is the nature of Him as reflect on His acts of creation, government, and judgment.

### c. Infants and Nursing Babes (על עולל ינק)

According to Wilson, the use of this image of vulnerability and dependence is to create a dramatic contrast with the presumed power of those who oppose God and his faithful ones. Therefore, Mighty Yahweh, whose majestic power and glory are displayed throughout the creation, is able to build the innocent weakness of these dependent babes into a powerful opposition to his enemies (Wilson, 2002). It is probably described as a “poetic hyperbole” as Mays suggests (Mays, 1994).

Gaebelien further states that the discordant note sounded by the enemies in his creation is silenced by the praise of children. Regardless of how the wicked assert themselves, they cannot outdo the evidence of God’s glory on earth and in heaven. The sound of the children is concrete evidence of God’s fortress on earth. The continuity of the human race is God’s way of assuring the ultimate glorification of an earth populated with a new humanity (Hab 2:14). The sound of opposition is silenced by the babbling and chatter of children. What a contrast! What a king! (Gaebelien, 1991). “This demonstrates that man is unique, a rational being, thinking, reasoning, and able to express his thoughts. It is thus that he is made in the image of God. The earliest speech of a child, therefore, testifies to the creative power of God, and thus puts on shame any enemy of God who would withhold praise from the Creator (Tesh & Zorn, 1999).”

#### d. Fingers (אֶצְבָּע)

The word fingers are used to express the creative power of God, the “works and writings” (Bibleworks אֲשֶׁר) of God (Ex 8:15; 31:18). “All the creatures of earth are His handiwork. God has fashioned the entire universe by His own labor with His hands, which attests to His supreme power and glory” (Morgernstern, 1945). “All this wondrous display the psalmist recognizes as the creative artwork of Yahweh. “It is in fact Yahweh’s heaven that the psalmist stands beneath. It is his possession by right of creation, as the possessive pronouns (“your heaven”; “your fingers”) show” (Tesh & Zorn, 1999). Therefore “the works of Thy fingers” alludes God’s *ownership* over all the creatures of heaven and earth—the whole universe and His *authorship* and character.

#### e. Man (אָנוּשׁ)

This word refers to man as a mortal being. The thought is of his frailty, of humanity with all its weaknesses and limitations. How could God be mindful or concerned at all, about such a one who is no more than a bit of chaff in the entire universe? That You care for him. While the KJV’s translation here carries the literal meaning, i.e., “That thou visit him,” the Hebrew term means to visit for a purpose, in this case benevolent concern. This is the basis for the translation “care for him” found in some versions, including the NIV. That God would even take thought of such an insignificant creature is cause for wonder. How marvelous that he cares!” (Wilson, 2002). The psalmist intentionally uses the word *enos* as to stress the distance the psalmist experience between the glorious creator God, Yahweh, and his far less significant and less powerful human creatures (Wilson, 2002). Furthermore, according to Wilson, in spite of the incredible chasm that separates humans and their God, God is still mindful of humans and has the will, purpose, and incredible gifting for our lives. He tells further that out of sight is not out of God’s mind as far as humans are concerned. In the world of human kings, a peasant subject might languish unknown and uncared for in the furthest of the empire, but Yahweh remains mindful of all those whom he has made for a purpose.

### III. Result and Discussion

#### 3.1 Literary Genre and Context

“Psalm 8 introduces us to the first experience of joyful praise and adoration in the Psalter” (Wilson, 2002). For our purpose we shall consider it as a *hymn of praise* and, more particularly, a hymn of *creation praise* (Gaebelien, 1991). Psalm 8 is the first hymn in the Psalter (Clifford, 2003). It is a hymn of praise in the Psalter, and thus it is generally recognized as a hymn of praise (Mays, 1994). “It is the only hymn in the Old Testament composed completely as direct address to God. It begins and concludes with an exclamation of adoration” (Mays, 1994). “As in many hymns, the opening verse is repeated at the end of the poem” (Clifford, 2003). “The psalm closes, as it began, praising the majesty of the Lord” (Tesh & Zorn, 1999). Brueggemann (1984) treats this psalm together with Psalms 33, 104, and 145 as “Songs of Creation” (pp. 29-38). “Psalm 8 portrays glorious creator and wonderful creature” (Clifford, 2003). Psalm 8 seems to deal with a common theme, the majesty of God as revealed in the various phenomena of nature. It seems to have a direct literary contact with the biblical creation story, particularly as recorded in Gen. 1.1-2.4 (Morgernstern, 1945). “Psalm 8 is a perennial favorite in the Psalter for its remarkable sense of wonder—at the grandeur of the heavens, the artistry of God, and the dignity of human beings” (Clifford, 2003). Lastly, the psalmist in Psalms 8 “proclaims a desire to serve Yahweh’s heavenly power/victory by appealing to humanity’s

status as God's images (Gen 1:27) and accepting the role of Yahweh's new servant (Isa 55:3), as a priest/minister of God (Isa 61:1-6; cf Isa 42:1)" (Fredrickson, 2020).

### 3.2 Literary Structure

Psalm 8 begins and concludes with an exclamation of adoration to God (Mays, 1994). It begins and ends with the astonished exclamation (Wilson, 2002). "The introductory and concluding ascriptions of praise form an inclusion within which the glory of the Creator is the object of celebration" (Gaebelein, 1991). Within the inclusion of great power, the psalmist proclaims the central message of wondrous awe, Gerald Wilson proposes that the psalm contains three section between the two markers: (1) praise of the majestic power and protection of Yahweh displayed in creation (vv. 1b-2); (2) recognition of human frailty in the light of God's creative power (vv. 3-4); and (3) astonished acceptance of divine empowerment of humans and their resultant responsibility (vv. 5-8); (Wilson, 2002). Pierre Auffret as cited by (Gaebelein, 1991) also proposes the similar structure:

- A. Ascription of Praise (v.1a),
- B. The Glory of the Great King (vv. 1b-2),
- C. God's Interest in Man (vv. 3-4),
- C'. Man's Derived Glory (v. 5),
- B'. Man's Glory as Ruler (vv. 6-8), and
- A'. Concluding Ascription of Praise (v.9).

While, Tesh and Zorn (1999) structures the passage of the glory of God and the dignity of man into three sections: (1) God's glory and majesty (8:1-2), (2) the insignificance of man (8:3-4), and (3) the exalted status given to man (8:5-9). He adds that "God, as Creator, is the Sovereign of the Universe. But he has chosen to share his sovereignty on earth with man! What a privilege leads to marvelous achievement. Man is able to tap sources of energy that can bring blessing and freedom from drudgery" (Tesh & Zorn, 1999). Further, "because of the uniqueness of man, he alone of all God's creatures can enter into the plan and purposes of God and with intelligence to fulfill them. Without man there would be no sufficient purpose for the existence of the earth, just as there would be no purpose for beautiful vistas if there were no appreciative eyes to behold them" (Tesh & Zorn, 1999).

### 3.3 Theological and Spiritual Application

"The significance of Psalm 8 lies in its approach to Creation. The psalm is a corrective to the speculative and/or scientific approach to Creation. The biblical account of Creation is phenomenal (focuses on effects rather than causes) and was intended to help Israel to praise Yahweh as the sole Creator of everything in heaven, on earth, and in the sea. The created universe and the account of Creation (Gen 1:1-2:3) should evoke praise of the wonderful Creator" (Gaebelein, 1991).

In regards of that, the Psalm revealed the position of God and man. God is the Creator while men are created. God is mighty while men are considered as weak as babes and nursing infants. The next truth is that having full knowledge that men are weak and tend to sin, yet God is mindful of them, and even visit them. How powerful yet caring our God is! It is not like other gods and goddesses depicted by other religion! Furthermore, God do not borrow to anyone of His sovereignty while man was given dominion by God and not of themselves. Nothing that man have except of from God. By the true knowledge of how powerful yet caring God is and the nothingness and frailty of human beings, human



may truly praise the Lord with the Psalmist: “What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visit him?” “O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!” (Ps 8:4,1,9).

In regards of that, the Psalm revealed the position of God and man. God is the Creator while men are created. God is mighty while men are considered as weak as babes and nursing infants. The next truth is that having full knowledge that men are weak and tend to sin, yet God is mindful of them, and even visit them. How powerful yet caring our God is! It is not like other gods and goddesses depicted by other religion! Furthermore, God do not borrow to anyone of His sovereignty while man was given dominion by God and not of themselves. Nothing that man have except of from God. By the true knowledge of how powerful yet caring God is and the nothingness and frailty of human beings, human may truly praise the Lord with the Psalmist: “What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visit him?” “O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!” (Ps 8:4,1,9).

“This makes Jesus’ quotation of Ps 8:2 (Matt 21:16) as a rebuke against the chief priests and the teachers of the law even more poignant! Children were shouting in the temple area: “Hosana to the Son of David!” Here it shown that even children recognized and welcomed his Messiah-ship, but not so the religious leaders. They were indignant. Jesus confirmed the children’s praise by responding to them: “Yes, have you never read, ‘From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise.’” Have they never read? They knew it by heart, but they refused to praise the One whom God had sent, the Messiah!” (Tesh & Zorn, 1999). Furthermore, Jesus said in Matthew 11:25: “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.” “The NT applies the glory of man to the Messiah, as he has subjected everything to himself (Heb 2:6-9; cf. 1 Cor 15:27; Eph 1:22). In Jesus’ victory the Christian has received the glorious renewal the psalmist speaks of (Heb 2:10-11)! Though the psalm is not messianic in the narrow sense, it has a messianic application in that Jesus is fully man and has realized God’s expectation of man in perfect obedience and holiness. Those who belong to the Messiah have received greater glory and holiness than did God’s people in the OT. Hence the significance of the cultural mandate and man’s dominion over God’s creation are not lessened. The Father expects an even more responsible involvement with his creation by his children in Jesus Christ.” (Gaebelein, 1991).

“The understanding of the human being in the New Testament is Christocentric. Its view is formed by the fact that Jesus Christ, the new Adam, who identified himself with the race and represents it in his person, has risen from the dead to an exaltation of glory and honor” (Mays, 1994). “Psalm 8 was interpreted in the light of Christ. The eschatological potential of the psalm was brought to clear expression. The question of the relation between the office of the anointed king and the royal rule of the human race was given an answer. “We do not yet see everything in subjection to him [man],” says the Letter to the Hebrews, “but we do see Jesus” (Heb. 2:5-9)” (Gaebelein, 1991). “It is by the reign of God in and through Christ that all things will be finally made subject to the sovereignty of God. Through Christ the perfect correspondence of human dominion to God is fulfilled (1 Cor. 15:20-28; Eph. 1:16-23).” “So, Christians, as they praise the Lord with this psalm, will do so in penitence and hope, remembering that “the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.” (Rom.8:19)” (Gaebelein, 1991). “When the psalmist describes God as crowning humans with glory, the implication is that through their unique relationship to Yahweh humans come to share in their own

inner being the image and essence of the creator that belies their outward appearance of weakness and insignificance” (Wilson, 2002).

“Though this section turns on the question of a human about the human species, the whole is composed of statements about what the Lord does. That is very important. The hymnic function of praise is not deserted for a moment. The reflection is voiced in the idiom of worship” (Mays, 1994). “Since all mankind are sinners “we do not see everything subject to him [sinful humanity], but we see Jesus [perfect humanity, man as man was meant to be!]” (Heb 2:8b-9a). Only in Jesus do we see the subjection of all things” (Tesh & Zorn, 1999). “The Apostle Paul says the same thing essentially, only he presents Jesus as our “first-fruits,” the first human to so live as to experience the subjection of all things under his feet (1 Cor 15:22-28).” “It is clear that Psalm 8 is used in the New Testament messianically and only secondarily “in Christ” do we fulfill the dominion mandate. One day we will be like Jesus!” (Tesh & Zorn, 1999).

#### IV. Conclusion

Psalm 8 is a hymn of praise; it is a hymn of creation praise. Through meditation on the Name and glory of God reflected in His creation, Psalter asks the reader of the book of Psalm to experience the joyful praise and adoration to the creator of His mighty work of creation and of His attention to human beings. The grandeur of the heavens, the artistry of God, and the dignity of human beings tell the reader about the mighty God who deserve our praise and worship.

Psalter let the earliest speech of a child can be heard in the grandeur of heavens (8:1c and 8:3a) and shows the frailty, weakness, and limitation of man (8:4a) in the middle of the fingers (8:3a) and the hands of God (8:6a). Both arrangements demonstrate that Human as created beings are not left without attention but are heard and cared of by God. Human beings are created to praise God, the creator, as their nature. Realizing human’s frailty and nothingness, while powerful God is mindful of them in spite of the unbelieving and sin manifested to Him, human may truly praise the Lord with the Psalmist: “What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visit him?” “O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!” (Ps 8:4,1,9). The phrase “son of man” is clearly representing the fact that Jesus Christ, which is God Himself willingly condescended the new Adam (frail and weak human being), who identified himself with the race and died to restore the exaltation of glory and honor for human sake. The greater glory and holiness are given back to God, human dominion over creation once are taken, but through Jesus it was redeemed, and give hope to humanity further Glory in Him alone.

#### References

Bibleworks אֶצְבָּע

Bibleworks, שָׁם

Bibleworks יָנֵק (עוֹלָל) עַל

Bibleworks (אֶצְבָּע)

Bibleworks (אֶצְבָּע)

Brueggemann, W. (1984). The message of the Psalms: a theological commentary: Brueggemann, Walter : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming: Internet Archive. Augsburg. <https://archive.org/details/messageofpsalmst0000brue>

Bullard, G. (2016). The World’s Newest Major Religion: No Religion. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/160422-atheism-agnostic->

secular-nones-rising-religion

- Clifford, R. (2003). Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries: Psalms 73–150. Abingdon Press.
- Fredrickson, M. (2020). Digital Commons @ ACU Let Me Serve Your Majesty : Psalm 8.
- Gaebelein, F. E. (1991). The Expositor's Bible Commentary. MI: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Green, D. (2014). Westminster Theological Seminary - Psalm 8. <https://dev.wts.edu/resources/articles/green.html#n2>
- Judah Kraut. (2009). The Birds and the Babes: The Structure and Meaning of Psalm 8. *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 100(1), 10–24. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.0.0077>
- Mays, J. L. (1994). Interpretation, Psalms, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. John Knox Press.
- Mody, S. (2021, December 29). Millennials lead shift away from organized religion as pandemic tests faith. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/12/29/millennials-lead-shift-away-from-organized-religion-as-pandemic-tests-faith.html>
- Morgernstern, J. (1945). Psalms 8 and 19a. *Hebrew Union College Annual* 19, 491–523.
- Pew Research Center Report. (2018). When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean? <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/>
- Smith, M. (1997). Psalm 8:2b-3: New Proposals for Old Problems on JSTOR. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 59(4), 637–641. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43723108>
- Tesh, S. E., & Zorn, W. D. (1999). The College Press NIV Commentary, Psalms. College Press Publishing House.
- Wilson, G. H. (2002). The NIV Application Commentary on Psalm, Vol. 1. Zondervan.