

## Anthropology of Psalm 8\*

We cannot talk about the biblical anthropology in a strict sense because Holy Scripture does not contain teaching about man as such, but only deals with his relation to God<sup>1</sup>. We should rather talk about theological anthropology in the Bible. Similarly, Ps. 8 does not provide us with teaching about the structure of man nor the biological or philosophical meaning. Its central theme is God-the Creator and the relation of creation to the Creator who manifests his majesty in the world created by him, that is in man also. The exegetes usually amicably include this psalm to the so-called hymns, or songs in honour of God-Yahweh. They are different, however, at a more profound definition of its contents, genesis and objective. This explains why it is advisable to first make a short survey of the existing opinions on this theme, so that the subsequent assessment of the teaching of Ps. 8 about man could be possible.

### Contents, Genesis and Objective of Psalm

Many exegetes, such as R. Kittel, A. Weiser, H. J. Kraus, M. Dahood et al., advocate that love for God demonstrated to Him by the whole of created nature is the main content of the psalm<sup>2</sup>. The psalm, as A. Weiser states, combines admiration for the beauty of nature, in which it comprises a profound tribute to God, evincing himself in it<sup>3</sup>. Such a view brings God to the forefront as the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. Schmid, *Antropologie, Biblische A*, in: LThK, vol. 1 (1957) col. 604; L. Stachowiak, *Biblijna koncepcja człowieka*, in: *W nurcie zagadnień posoborowych*, vol. 2, Warsaw 1968, 209-226.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. Kittel, *Die Psalmen*, Leipzig-Erlangen 1922, 24-29; A. Weiser, *Die Psalmen*, vol. 1, Göttingen 1963, 94-98; H.J. Kraus, *Psalmen*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1966, 65-73; M. Dahood, *Psalms* 1-50, New York 1965, p 48-52.

<sup>3</sup> A. Weiser, op. cit., 96.

main element of the contents of this psalm, regarding other elements, including teaching about man also, as less important ones. Other scholars, such as E. Pannier and H. Renard, repeating the thesis of H. Gunkel, distinguish two central thoughts in this psalm: thoughts about God (verse 2-4) and thoughts about man (verse 5-9). F. Nötscher proceeds, clearly noticing three sections (lines?) in this piece of work: God, man and creation. These three sections combine in one cohesive whole, however, each of them develops the issues peculiar to itself and it could constitute the entirety by itself. In this view the teaching of Ps. 8 about man would claim special attention as something original, something ultimate<sup>4</sup>.

Among Polish scholars, Rev. A. Klawek primarily notices teaching about man in this psalm. Although he starts from a presumption that “psalm 8 celebrates the majesty of God’s name,” he also posits here the fact that “psalm contains contemplations about God’s attitude to man in a poetic form, about dignity of a human being, about favouring man among all other creatures. It is the examination of the idea of the Book of Genesis 1,26, where God says: ‘Let us create a man in our own image’. The second part takes these ideas almost literally.”<sup>5</sup> A.A. Anderson is of the opposite opinion. He states in his comment to psalms that Ps. 8 mainly emphasises creation, i.e. it loves God, the Creator in His works. The author refers to psalms 19, 104 and 139 of a similar content. If, however, man is mentioned in these psalms, then it is only because he belongs to divine works<sup>6</sup>. It seems, however, that “the dispute” about the contents of psalm 8 is solved best by M. Dahood who assumes that we may talk about man only with reference to God. Hence, Ps. 8 demonstrates who man is in the context of God. In his opinion, psalm celebrates an unlimited majesty of God (verses 2-5) and dignity and authority of man, honoured by God (verses 6-10)<sup>7</sup>.

This concise survey of the views and opinions of the exegetes enables us to conclude that God is a central figure in the whole of Ps. 8, and man is great only because he owes everything to God as a divine creature. Talking about man, Ps. 8 always shows him through the prism of his Creator and Lord. These conclusions will become more evident when we consider them in terms of genesis and objective of this psalm.

The claim of H. J. Kraus about a dependence of this hymn on Old Babylonian or Sumerian hymnic poetry, in which we also come across love for local

<sup>4</sup> Cf. E. Pannier, H. Renard, *Les Psaumes*, in: *La Sainte Bible*, vol. 5, Paris 1950; F. Nötscher, *Das Buch der Psalmen* (Echte Bibel), Würzburg 1959.

<sup>5</sup> A. Klawek, *Quam admirabile est nomen tuum*, RBL 1 (1948), 6ff.

<sup>6</sup> A.A. Anderson, *Psalms*, vol. 1, London 1972, 100-104.

<sup>7</sup> M. Dahood, *op. cit.*, 49.

deities (e.g. Ishkur, god of storm). Almost the same words are repeated in the hymn in favour of Ishkur as it occurs in Ps. 8 in relation to the greatness and magnificence of God's name.<sup>8</sup> Although it is very clear that Israel was developing under the influence of the cultures of neighbouring nations, however he clearly cuts ties with them, seeing his magnitude and historical role always in connection with God-Yahweh. For that reason many exegetes see the genesis of this psalm in the context of a religious cult of Israel. It is possible that the psalm could be written as a song for the festival of tents as an expression of gratitude to God for crops. It was probably sung during evening or night prayers which may be proved by a lack of any mention of the sun, and the mentioning of moon and stars: "when we look at your sky, at moon and stars, which you anchored in it" (verse 4). The statement that psalm 8 is the result of a personal afterthought of some unknown author about rich internal life seems to be the most convincing statement. Perhaps David was this author (although at present it may be extremely difficult to defend his authorship of this psalm). Somebody, who knew Jahwist and priestly stories about the creation of the world and man, permanently enriched by an oral tradition gave voice on their basis to their belief in God and man originating from God<sup>9</sup>.

### Theological Assumptions of the Psalm's Author

We can say that the anthropology of Ps. 8 or in the stricter sense the teaching of this psalm on man derives from religious or theological assumptions of the author. Man according to this piece of writing appears in the context of God and the world created by him as a small, meaningless creature. This claim may be inferred from the antithesis which is observed between line 2 and 5. The expression *mah adir* ("how magnificent," line 2) is contrasted with the expression *mah Enosh [...] uben adam* ("who a man is," line 5). God is great and His name is magnificent. However, man even compared to other creatures is small, weak and evanescent. In the Book of Job man does not know much about the world

<sup>8</sup> H.J. Kraus, op. cit., 67.

<sup>9</sup> The question concerns the dependence of Ps. 8 on a priestly story about the creation of man, the so-called 'P' document. It seems that even though document 'P' was created after the Babylonian captivity (6<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century), the contents included in it were transferred much earlier in a tradition from generation to generation. For this reason, they could be known yet in Davidic times or in slightly more recent times, that is, in times when this psalm was already written. Both authors were inspired by one and the same source, that is, from an oral tradition.

created by God and he is helpless towards Him. He cannot manage either the weather or rain. His smallness is noticeable even more in comparison with the animal world, towards which man turns out to be the weakest creature (Job 38:33-29; 39:1-30)<sup>10</sup>.

The smallness of man is also confirmed by two terms occurring in line 5: *Enosh* and *ben adam*. Anderson is of the opinion that the author of Ps. 7 used these terms deliberately to emphasise the weakness of human nature<sup>11</sup>. It is possible that the author knew the Jahwist document about creation and based on the expressions included in it specified his view on a man. *Sitz im Leben*, namely the situation in which the author of the psalm was in and the temporal scope in which he was writing were extremely important while specifying man. As mentioned above, line 4 indicates that the psalmist was looking at the sky and watching the moon and a countless number of flickering stars. This frightening silence of a summer night in the East provokes a man to a sad thought that he is a minor speck of dust in face of enormous space. Would God, having such a powerful world ahead, still like to think about a man?<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, the psalmist writes that God “remembers about a man” and “cares about him.” Both Hebrew words (*zakar* and *paqad*) have rich content. The word *zakar* appears 288 times in the Old Testament, including its extremely frequent use in cult. In a psalter, where it appears 44 times, on the one hand it means confident reference of man to God, on the other hand, however, it means God’s continual care about man’s issues. The term *paqad* is a synonym of this word in the sense of paying attention to someone, noticing him and becoming interested in him. In the theological meaning *paqad* expresses the idea that God despite the existence of enormous universe notices a man in it and is extremely interested in him. Man believing in God should not feel like a creature lost in the universe<sup>13</sup>.

A man is admittedly small, but God made him great, which is mentioned in line 6: “You, who made him slightly smaller than God.” The determination of its original wording and the theological content were the greatest difficulties

<sup>10</sup> Cf. S. Grzybek, *Księga Joba*, in: *Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu*, vol. 2, Poznań 1975, 462.

<sup>11</sup> A.A. Anderson, op. cit., 102.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. R. Kittel, op. cit., 26.

<sup>13</sup> According to Anderson, the theological sense of this word referring to a man would generally justify the application of the psalm to Jesus Christ, who descended to the depths of human experience, and at the same time he ascended to the tops to control the entire creation. Cf. A.A. Anderson, op. cit., 103.

in this verse. One and the other caused many problems, although it is seemingly simple. TM, and Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion and *Hexapla* by Origen suggest such a translation: “slightly smaller than God” (in Hebrew: *meath me Elohim*). LXX, the Syrian translation, the Vulgate and different targumim have the following equivalent: “from angels” (Greek: *par’ angelus*). It seems that the translation by LXX is not contradictory with the original Hebrew text. Many exegetes regard them as even quite appropriate commentary to the Hebrew original<sup>14</sup>. E. Pannier is of the opinion (which is also observable in the dictionary by E. Jenni – C. Westermann) that the word “*elohim*” in Hebrew, regardless of the fact that it means God’s own name, it is still used in a broader sense to describe high-ranking people, e.g. judges, kings (Ps. 82, 1. 6), angels (Ps. 97, 7) as well as national gods (Ps. 86, 8)<sup>15</sup>. The Israelites believed that there are intermediate beings, heavenly creatures between the only God and people, created in the image of God<sup>16</sup>. There are mentions about them in many parts in the Bible (3 Kings 22, 19; Job 1, 6; Is 6, 1-3, etc.). The psalmist probably signifies these creatures when stating that man is slightly shorter than them.

Certain stylistic reasons resulting from the structure of line 6 also enforces this opinion. The psalmist addresses God in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person in the first half of this line: “You made him (that is, a man) a little smaller.” The question may be suggested, from whom? If the author thought about the only, true God, then he would say: “you made him slightly smaller than you.”

The psalmist settled, however, for the statement: “You made him slightly smaller than heavenly creatures,” that is such creatures which surround God’s throne in heaven. Many contemporary Biblicists and philologists give such an interpretation, among others, Kraus, Anderson and Dahood. Anderson claims that acknowledging man as slightly smaller than God would be a contradiction of the contents of line 3 and 4: “From children’s mouths, from babies’ mouths You make enormous glory to show it to your opponents to tame an enemy, a powerful enemy.” Dahood clearly assumes that a man is not smaller than God in this psalm, but than heavenly creatures. Therefore, he explains it in line 6 as follows: “You made him (placed) slightly lower than gods.” He adds, in his comment, that the expression “gods” (*elohim*) means members of a heavenly court of Yahweh, that is these creatures which surround God’s throne in heaven. Only some authors are in favour of the old interpretation that man was created by

<sup>14</sup> Cf. H. Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, Göttingen 126, 28. Many contemporary exegetes repeat this after Gunkel.

<sup>15</sup> E. Pannier, H. Renard, op. cit., 86.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. G.v. Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. 1, Berlin 1963, 159.

God as slightly smaller than Him<sup>17</sup>. Did the Israelites, at the time of the writing of Ps. 8, believe in the existence of angels or (intermediate beings between God and man)? It seems so. We need to distinguish a tradition which preached this thesis from its formal preparation in writing. Assuming this fact, we may say that the translation of LXX does not lower or distort the meaning of TM, but on the contrary it constitutes a perfect commentary to it and the only acceptable translation.

Although man in relation to God and the entire heavenly court is a shorter being, he is the tallest being among the living creatures on earth, the king of the entire created world. This idea is included in the words: “you crowned him with dignity and glory” (line 6 b), literally: “you crowned him with fame (*kabod*) and glory (*hadar*).” These two expressions symbolise the royal power of man, as it is present in the royal psalms (21, 6; 45, 4; 96, 6; 29, 1; 104, 1). They define the *status* of man on earth. God who is king in heaven wanted man to be king on earth, wielding this authority on His behalf and by His order. The fact that God appointed man to be a king is regarded by the exegetes as a comment to the ideas expressed in the Book of Genesis 1, 26-28, where he talks about man created in the image and likeness of God. In view of Ps. 8 this image and likeness should be understood as the royal power of man. Man is king of the earth, and by this he becomes similar to God. In the line discussed, similar to line 8, Yahweh, the Creator and Lord of the world, transfers the entire world to man as king appointed by God to rule it<sup>18</sup>. From this perspective, man may be regarded as the greatest being on earth.

However, does man really hold complete royal power? In .7 he says that God transfers everything to his feet. What does the word “everything” (*kol*) mean? Does it refer only to all creatures mentioned in line 8 and 9 or also to other people, e.g. those who we read about in Ps. 110,1: “Sit down at my right hand until I put your enemies as an ottoman for your feet”? The psalm does not refer to the enthronement of the entity in the sense of appointing him king in a specific place and time, but it means man as humankind and contemplates over his relation to the world created by his relation to God. The author attempts at balancing proportions between God, the heavenly court, man and the entire material world. Man not because of his merits or special attributes, but due to Divine mercy is ruler and lord of the created world. The enumeration of different animals, although incomplete, is to symbolise the power of man not only over

<sup>17</sup> Cf. F. Nötscher, op. cit., 27.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. H.J. Kraus, op. cit., 70.

animals, but also over all living creatures. There is a certain analogy to animals enumerated in the Book of Genesis 1, 20-24, which allows us to suppose that the author of Ps. 8 knew the priestly story and gave voice to it in his piece of writing. He approved of, together with the authors of the Jahwist story and the 'P' document, the authority of man over the entire world created.

### Characteristic Features of Teaching Ps. 8 about Man

We may pose another question here, namely where the author of Ps. 8 draws inspiration on his opinions about man. It seems that he referred to the general view on man among his contemporaries. The cases of man were the main subject of interest of all ancient nations. It was almost amicably assumed that a man has something from the deity because divine blood flows in him and the gods created him out of their own beauty. For this reason, he became similar to the gods and is very precious to them<sup>19</sup>. These ideas were probably reflected in Ps. 8. Regardless of this fact, the author submitted the synthesis of all opinions about a man, familiar to him, both biblical and extra-Biblical ones. The idea of greatness and power and the power of men related to it dominates in them.

Lack of mention about the defeat and sin of man may be explained by this. Although the author mentions that man is weak as the son of earth (*Enosh*) moulded from clay (*ben adam*) then, however, man is great in the author's eyes. It is difficult to assume that the author of this psalm did not know the contents of the Book of Genesis 3, since he knew well the Book of Genesis 2. He intentionally omitted the information about sinful man. He did this because it did not harmonize with the general thematic assumptions of the piece of writing. He planned his psalm as a unified whole, aiming at loving God and elevating man. Due to the fact that man may be great only in combination with a great and majestic God, this explains why the author combined the statements of God and man in his psalm. Man, aware of his smallness and nothingness, regards the fact that the powerful and majestic God, Creator of universe, wanted to contact him, as a great mercy. He realises that in his existence, life and action is dependent on God. He also knows that he gets to know himself only in God and by God.

The subsequent conclusion is that man belongs to the Divine world. God remembers about him, cares for him because man is a part of the world, which belongs entirely to God. The idea of complete dependence of man on God is not

<sup>19</sup> Cf. W. Zimmerli, *Das Menschenbild des Alten Testaments*, TExH 14 (1949).



unfamiliar to the author. As once, God “decorated the world created by him (the Book of Genesis 1, 3-24), he also “decorates” man now. The two incomprehensible words *kabod* and *hadar* constitute the best evidence of this. The exegetes conjecture differently on the issue of their relevant contents, but the statement that man thanks to kindness and the love of God carries His image in himself is probably closest to truth. He rightfully boasts that he is similar to God. We may say that thanks to this image man is fully honoured and decorated by God.

Eventually, however, a man is a great mystery for the psalmist, particularly in the context of universe and a powerful God living over it. Similarly, it is both extremely difficult to examine the world and permeate God and we cannot fully examine and permeate a man either. Only the Creator knows this mystery.

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We may eventually pose the question if the psalmist tells us about a man contemporary to him or about a man from the future. Several texts of the New Testament and statements of the fathers of the Church seem to favour the latter from these solutions, noticing Messianic reminiscences in Ps. 8. In Hbr 2, 6-8 they are almost literally quoted in line 5, 6 and 7b from this psalm, referring to Jesus Christ. The author of the letter is of the opinion that Christ as “Son of Man” (Dan 7, 14), temporarily supple, who accepted the form of a servant, becoming similar to humans (Philippians 2, 7), called *Enosh* and *ben adam* in Ps. 8, 5, was elevated now to the dignity of a king and everything was transferred to His feet. Christ’s elevation as a king is also emphasised by Saint Paul the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 15, 27 and in Ephesians 1, 22, where he also quotes the words “everything was transferred to his feet” (Ps. 8, 7b) and refers them to the loved and elevated Christ. The exegetes’ opinion in this matter is quite homogeneous. Although some of them (e.g. F. Nötscher) assume that in Hbr 2, 6-8 the sense adjusted to Ps. 8 is meant, then, however most of them are in favour of the literal, even the historical sense of this psalm. The psalm describes a man of the present, a specific man, who living in profound belief in God sees the objective and essence of his existence only in Him<sup>20</sup>. This man realises his smallness but he is simultaneously aware of his own greatness which results not from his merits and achievements but from the fact that he, as a Divine being, permanently takes advantage of Divine care and mercy.

<sup>20</sup> Kraus states that there are no traces of eschatological-Messianic thinking in Ps. 8, as if the afore-mentioned texts of the New Testament were to suggest that. H. J. Kraus, op. cit., 72.