



## Psalm 8 and ‘anthropo-eccentricity’

Luke Taylor SJ

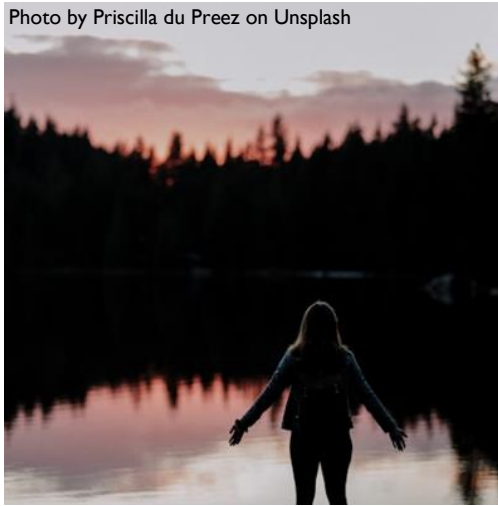
In this Season of Creation, we are invited to ‘hope and act with creation’ – but what exactly is humanity’s place within the created order? Luke Taylor SJ ponders what kind of answer to that question we might arrive at by reflecting on Psalm 8.

Anthropocentrism – the view that human beings are the centre of the universe – has fallen on hard times. Long ago, Copernicus banished the earth from the centre of the solar system. More recently, theological anthropocentrism – the belief that human beings are divinely gifted in ways that other species are not – has been blamed for widespread ecological degradation.<sup>1</sup> How might an ecologically committed Christian respond? What, after all, is our place in the great scheme of things?

Biblical wisdom counsels us neither to hanker nostalgically for the apex of an imagined great chain of being, nor to capitulate prematurely to the demeaning materialist demotion of humankind to cosmic accident. Psalm 8 offers a more daring and perennial paradox: human beings are indeed dust, yet dust touched by divinity – a simultaneous centring and decentering of humankind which I call ‘anthropo-eccentricity’.

Psalm 8 echoes in Christian aural memory. ‘When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers . . . what are human beings that you are mindful of them?’ (Psalm 8:3, NRSV) These words came to my mind spontaneously on a bike voyage across South America. Ringed by the vanishing vastness of the pampas at dusk, I felt utterly dwarfed – at once elated and alarmed – by the gigantic panoply of stars continuing on their ancient ways above me. In that giddy and disconcerting moment, the words of the Psalmist felt spoken *to, in and through* as much as *by* me. ‘When I look at your heavens . . . what am *I* that you are mindful of *me*?!’

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On a momentous public occasion, the 1969 [moon landing](#), Buzz Aldrin was moved to quote the same psalm. In literature, it forms the skeleton of Hamlet’s great soliloquy, ‘What a Piece of Work is a Man’. Musically, Psalm 8 has inspired settings including the much-loved hymn, ‘How Great Thou Art’. For long centuries, worshippers have read, chanted, sung and commented upon Psalm 8’s familiar phrases. Jews hear it

on the high and holy feast of Rosh Hashanah. Catholics hear it at least six times in the annual turning of the liturgy. Those who pray the Divine Office mouth its phrases every second week.

The psalm is formally perfect. It begins and ends with balanced outbursts of theophany: ‘O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!’ (vv. 1, 9) Between these bookends, it progresses hierarchically downwards: from the Lord’s ‘glory above the heavens’ (v. 1), to the heavens themselves, including the moon and the stars (v. 3); from the domestic ‘beasts of the field’, including ‘sheep and oxen’ on the land’s surface (v. 7), to the wild creatures, ‘birds ... and fish’ (v. 8), in the surrounding air and sea. At the exact midpoint of this order, in verses 4-5, is humankind.

How are we to understand this centrality? It does not consist in any intrinsic power in humankind. The Psalmist, as we already noted, feels utterly puny in comparison to the planetary bodies (v. 4). The uniquely human dignity is not so much spoken at any point of the psalm as bespoken throughout it: it consists of existing in conscious and reverent

relationship with God. Humankind is special, not in our bodily makeup, and not by virtue of our geographical or cosmic location, but in our capacity to know and love God. Something like this is signalled by a proverbial and yet enigmatic verse which intrudes on the tidy order of the psalm's progress. 'From the mouths of babes and infants / You have founded a bulwark because of your foes, / To silence the enemy and the avenger' (v. 2). Might these 'babes and infants' stand for humankind generally, as weak as a toddler and yet capable of lisping God's praise?

It is precisely because humankind so totally lacks intrinsic power that the following assertion stuns: 'Yet you have made them a little lower than God' (v. 5). The Septuagint toned down this staggering statement by translating *Elohim* as 'angels' rather than 'God', but incorrectly. Nearer the mark is the Midrash commentary which imagines angels posing the question to God incredulously: 'what are human beings that You are mindful of them?'<sup>2</sup> How can this insignificant latecomer possibly be clothed with divine 'glory and honour' (v. 5)? How can he inherit the 'dominion' (v. 6) proper to God alone?

These questions are partially answered by invoking a familiar biblical paradox: God chooses weak things to shame the strong (1 Cor. 1:27). Biblical scholars detect in the 'enemy' an echo of the chaos monster of near eastern mythology. Patristic commentators gloss the mysterious 'enemy' as Satan. Other commentators understand the enemy to indicate the cruel power of human tyrants. In each of these cases, biblical wisdom remembers that a mere child can overcome the monster – as a youthful David, the traditional author of the psalm, overcame Goliath – if God is on the child's side.

For Christians, however, the riddle of humankind's position in the order of things is only fully disclosed in Christ. The writer of the letter to the [Hebrews](#) reads Psalm 8 prophetically, as referring to Jesus's incarnation and ascension. Psalm 8 says that humankind was created 'a little lower than the angels'; Jesus, too, during his earthly life, 'for a little while was made lower than the angels' (Heb. 2:9). Psalm 8 states that God 'put all things under their feet'; this is not yet true of humankind generally, but it is true of the risen and presently ruling Jesus (Heb. 2:8-9).

In Jesus, we recognise the inseparability of human dignity and humility. The abuse of humankind's technological power to wreak ecological destruction has made us understandably suspicious of arrogant notions of human centrality. Yet self-aggrandisement was always inimical to an authentically theistic and especially Christian sense of self. If Christ lowered himself to raise us up, we can only reign with Christ by, in our turn, lowering ourselves in service: service that heals and tends – rather than exploits – the earth and our neighbour. Jesus remains the sun at the centre; we the eccentric planets drawn into his orbit.

*Luke Taylor SJ, a Jesuit of the British Province, is currently studying theology at Boston College.*

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<sup>1</sup> The classic article is Lynn White Jr., 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis', *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-7.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Cooper, 'Psalm 8 as a Case Study in "Embedded" Jewish Commentary', in *The Power of Psalms in Post-Biblical Judaism: Liturgy, Ritual and Community*, ed. Claudia D. Bergmann et al. (Boston: Brill, 2023), p. 204.