

Psalms 8 — What Is Man — The Excellent Name, the Work of Thy Fingers, and the Crown Set on a Little Lower Than the Gods

Psalm 8: a creation hymn of David, framed by the inclusio 'how excellent is thy name in all the earth' (vv. 1, 9). Standing under a night sky of moon and stars, the psalmist asks the great question of human worth — 'what is man, that thou art mindful of him?' — and answers it with a crown: God has made man a little lower than the angels (Hebrew Elohim) and given him dominion over the works of God's own hands. Superscription 'To the chief Musician upon Gittith, A Psalm of David'; the temple hymnbook of Israel, traditionally Davidic, c. 1000 BC.

The book of Psalms is Israel's hymnbook — a hundred and fifty songs collected for the temple, sung by choirs, prayed by pilgrims, memorized by the poor. It is the one book of the Old Testament written to be talked to God rather than *about* him. So the reading rules change here. We are not tracing a narrative or parsing a law code; we are learning a language of praise, and the way in is to notice how Hebrew poetry actually works. It does not rhyme sounds; it rhymes *thoughts*. A line makes a claim, and the next line either says it again in fresh words, sharpens it, or turns it — the technique scholars call parallelism, and once you hear it you cannot stop hearing it. "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" is one thought struck twice, the second strike deepening the first.

Hebrew Word Studies

***addir* (H117) / *shem* (H8034) (אָדיר / שֵׁם) — majestic, mighty, excellent, noble / name, renown, fame vv. 1, 9.** The two words that make the frame. *Addir* (H117) is not a mild "excellent" — it is the adjective for what overwhelms: the "mighty" waters of the sea (Ex. 15:10), the "noble" cedars of Lebanon, kings in their splendor. To call God's name *addir* is to call it majestic in the way a mountain or a flood is majestic — beyond managing, beyond arguing with. And what is *addir* here is not God's arm or throne but his *shem* (H8034), his "name." In Hebrew a name is never a mere label; it is the self made speakable, the reputation and character and presence of a person compressed into a word. To fear the name, to love the name, to take the name in vain — these are ways of dealing with the person. So when David says the *name* is majestic "in all the earth," he is saying the very identity of the covenant God has become the most weighty fact in creation, known past Israel's borders, "set" like glory above the sky. The psalm opens and closes on this line without a single word changed (vv. 1, 9) — the one thing that has grown, in the space between, is the reader, who now knows what that name has done for man. It is the same *shem* the Savior teaches us to hallow first of all — "Hallowed be thy name" (Matt. 6:9) — and the name in which every knee will finally bow (Philip. 2:10). Psalm 8 simply gets there first, and sets the whole song of human worth inside it.

***enosh* (H582) / *ben-adam* (H1121 / H120) (אָנוֹשׁ / בֶּן־אָדָם) — man (frail, mortal man) / son of man, son of Adam, earthing v. 4.** The great question of v. 4 turns entirely on which Hebrew words David chose for "man," and he chose the humblest ones. *Enosh* (H582) is man seen from the side of his weakness — the root is bound up with being frail, sick, incurable; it is man as the creature who fades, "as for man, his days are as grass" (Ps. 103:15). Not *ish* the strong one, not *adam* the dignified image-bearer named alone, but *enosh*, mortal and passing. The parallel phrase deepens it: *ben-adam* (H1121, "son of," plus H120, "Adam"), literally son of the man of dust, since *adam* is knit to *adamah*, the ground (Gen. 2:7). So the question stacks two words for smallness — frail-man and dust-man — precisely to make God's mindfulness astonishing. And here is the turn the whole Bible waits on: "Son of man" (*ben-adam*) becomes the title Jesus takes for himself more than any other, the name he wears through all four Gospels. When the Savior calls himself the Son of Man, he is claiming the frail, dust-born humanity of Psalm 8:4 — taking to himself the very smallness the psalm marvels God should notice — so that Hebrews can say he was "made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death" (Heb. 2:9). The word for our frailty became the name of our God. The question "what is man?" is answered, finally, by God becoming one.

***Elohim* (H430) (אֱלֹהִים) — God; gods, divine beings; (KJV here) angels v. 5.** This is the crux word of the psalm, and honesty requires laying it open. The KJV reads "a little lower than the angels," but the Hebrew word is *Elohim* (H430) — the plural form that is Israel's most common word for *God*, the identical word in "In the beginning God (*Elohim*) created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Grammatically the plural can carry the sense "gods," "divine beings," or the heavenly assembly, and it was the ancient Greek Septuagint that first rendered it "angels" (*angeloi*) — a softening the writer of Hebrews then quotes in Greek (Heb. 2:7), which is how "angels" reached the KJV. So both readings sit inside the word: man made "a little lower than the angels," and man made "a little lower than God." The Latter-day Saint reader has warrant to hear the fuller sense, for the same Psalter says it without ambiguity: "Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High" (Ps. 82:6) — words the Savior cited as unbreakable scripture (John 10:34–35). Read this way, v. 5 is the Old Testament's

highest statement of what man is: not a beast slightly elevated but a divine being slightly lowered — and the lowering is *me'at* (H4592), "a little," small and for a season. It is the doctrine the Restoration would proclaim in full: that the frail *enosh* of v. 4 is a child of God (Rom. 8:16), an heir of God (Rom. 8:17), destined not merely to be spared but to be crowned. The word will not be forced past what it says — man is made lower, and then crowned; the exaltation is God's gift, not man's possession. But the seed of the whole doctrine of divine potential is planted right here, in one plural noun the translators could not quite bring themselves to render at full strength.

atar (H5849) / mashal (H4910) (עָטַר / מָשַׁל) — **to crown, encircle, wreath / to rule, have dominion, govern vv. 5, 6.** The two royal verbs of the psalm's climax, and together they make man a king. *Atar* (H5849) means to encircle — it is used of an enemy army surrounding a city (1 Sam. 23:26), but its noblest use is the wreath set on a head: "thou hast crowned him with glory and honour" (v. 5), and "thou crownest the year with thy goodness" (Ps. 65:11). God does not merely spare the son of Adam; he coronates him, sets the *kabod* — the weight of glory that belongs to God himself — upon a mortal brow. And a crown implies a kingdom, which is what the second verb supplies: *mashal* (H4910), to rule, the standard Hebrew verb for the reign of kings and the governance of God. "Thou madest him to have dominion (*mashal*) over the works of thy hands" (v. 6) deliberately re-sounds the charter of Eden, where God said "let them have dominion" (Gen. 1:26). So man is both crowned (*atar*) and enthroned (*mashal*) — vice-regent over creation, ruling the works of God's hands in God's name. But the dominion is stewardship, not license: it is exercised over "the works of *thy* hands," answering always to the Owner whose name frames the song (vv. 1, 9). And Hebrews reminds us the crown and kingdom find their first true head in Christ, who is "crowned with glory and honour" (Heb. 2:9, quoting *atar*'s Greek) and who "must reign" until all is under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25). The king-making verbs describe Adam's charter, Christ's throne, and — in Christ — the disciple's destiny.

From the Chapter's Architecture

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