Biblical Theology in Crisis

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in genuine theological reflection. The third chapter wrestles with the problem of taking seriously the context of the canon when there is no explicit reference to an Old Testament text within the New Testament by which to be guided. The final chapter is an attempt at constructive theology that reflects in a disciplined way on a Biblical topic from within the framework of the two Testaments.

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PSALM 8 IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHRISTIAN CANON

1. O Lord, our Lord,
   how majestic is thy name in all the earth!
   Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted
2. by the mouth of babes and infants,
   thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes,
   to still the enemy and the avenger.
3. When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
   the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
4. what is man that thou art mindful of him,
   and the son of man that thou dost care for him?
5. Yet thou hast made him little less than God,
   and dost crown him with glory and honor.
6. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands;
   thou hast put all things under his feet,
7. all sheep and oxen and also the beasts of the field,
8. the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
   whatever passes along the paths of the sea.

9. O Lord, our Lord,
how majestic is thy name in all the earth!
(Ps. 8.)

I

The first task is to determine, as well as possible, how this psalm functioned within its Old Testament setting. What did it mean to the ancient Hebrew people? Regardless of whatever else we shall want to do with the psalm, the responsibility rests upon the interpreter for dealing accurately with the passage within its Old Testament context. Otherwise the witness of the whole canon is impaired.

The psalm is a good example of what Gunkel described as a hymn, and represents the basic form in which Israel expressed her worship of praise to God. Briefly stated, the hymn consists of three major parts. There is an introduction, followed by a brief transition that leads to the body of the hymn, and a conclusion. The psalmist moves from the initial address to God in the vocative to an exclamation of praise to God's majesty: "How excellent is thy name in all the earth!" The verses that follow are more difficult and we shall skip over vs. 1b-2 at first because their interpretation does not affect the major problem at hand. The actual body of the psalm begins in v. 3 and extends through v. 8. Looking at the heavens at night, the psalmist breaks forth into praise of God who has established man within his creation. The poem concludes with a return to the refrain of the introduction.

Much of the content of the psalm is familiar from earlier parts of the Bible. In spite of the specific reference to his nightly meditation, the psalmist did not create his material simply from the inspiration of the moment, but was dependent on the tradition of the Priestly writer, which is reflected in Gen., ch. 1. Because Ps. 8 is an obvious reference to this body of tradition, it is important to see how the psalmist made use

of this material. There were various possibilities that the poet could have used to praise God's great power. He could have spoken of the effortless control by which God ruled his world. Again, he might have chosen to emphasize the magnitude of the accomplishment of creation or even to describe the harmony of the product. However, the poet focuses on only one aspect of this creation tradition, namely, the role of man in his relation to God the Creator. Although in Gen., ch. 1, the creation of man was not the culmination of the account, it is nevertheless apparent that the creation of man did form a special act of self-reflection on the part of God which distinguished it from the creation of the rest of the world. Man bears the image of God—admittedly a difficult verse—and with the image also the blessing and imperative of subduing the earth and exercising dominion over it.

Now the psalmist goes beyond the Genesis tradition in reflecting on the position that God has given man. When he observes the magnitude of God's creative power seen in the heavens, the moon and the stars in their overwhelming splendor, a spontaneous reaction grips him. How insignificant then is man! His confession that man is lord of the creation and his recognition of the vastness of the creation clash in his mind. Yet the exciting part of this reaction is the fact that the experience does not call forth a wave of skepticism. Rather, in the light of his experience and the apparent contradiction between that which he confesses and that which he sees, the psalmist breaks forth in praise and adoration. First, he affirms that man has indeed been given dominion over all things. In the words of the tradition, he has been made little less than the Elohim, those divine beings which make up God's court. This is clearly a reference to the image of God. Secondly, he testifies that his position within the creation rests on an act of divine grace. The psalm, therefore, is neither a eulogy on mankind after the pattern of Hamlet's soliloquy nor an expression of praise to the creation itself, but above all, a hymn to God the Creator

who placed man lord over all. "How majestic is *thy* name in all the earth!" In his name God has disclosed to men what he is like. For this psalmist there is no rupture between the creation and the Creator. Man can know God in the works of his hand.

We have skipped over a discussion of the several lines that separate the initial introduction from the body of the psalm. Let us return briefly to see what we can make of them. "Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted by the mouth of babes and infants, thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes, to still the enemy and the avenger." If one looks into a modern commentary, or even an ancient one for that matter, he will be immediately made aware of the long history of difficulty that these verses have caused. First of all, the text is in some disorder and many suggestions have been made to amend it, either by following the reading of the versions or by reading a different Hebrew text. Certain commentators suggest a translation that differs considerably from the RSV: "Thou hast a stronghold planted with thy foes in mind to make an end to the enemy and him who claims revenge." [1] Such a suggestion has much to commend it. However, the exegetical problem remains essentially the same. There is no clear evidence in the Old Testament to give us a lead on how to interpret these verses. Obviously one can easily read a theological meaning into them. For example, one can say that the minds of children have an openness to God that is not there later on. Or one can understand it as suggesting that the apparently weak vehicle, such as children, serves God as a stronghold against man's foolish pretension. This is not to imply that these are in error, but only that such familiar interpretations can claim little exegetical warrant from the Old Testament. Therefore, it is a sound principle to work from the clearer portions and later attempt to place these more difficult verses in the larger context that emerges.

To summarize: In this hymn the psalmist moves to affirm

man's place as lord of the creation because of the will of God. The psalm is a praise to God the Creator who in his infinite wisdom and power has placed man at the head of his creation.

II

We turn now to the use of this psalm in the New Testament, where it is quoted explicitly a number of times. It appears in Matt. 21:16 with its parallels, again in I Cor. 15:27 and possibly Eph. 1:22, and finally in an extended reference in Heb. 2:6 ff. An examination of these passages will indicate that there is a wide variety in the use of the psalm which is characteristic of the New Testament. Our attention will focus on the one occurrence in Hebrews because it offers an extended and detailed interpretation. Even more important, the function of the psalm in its New Testament setting is totally different from that in its original one.

The first thing to notice is that the book of Hebrews is no longer making reference to the Hebrew psalm, but is dependent on the Septuagint. A closer look at the Greek translation of the psalm indicates that some important changes have taken place. The issue is not that the Greek writer has misunderstood the psalm or that he has mistranslated it by introducing tendentious elements. Rather, the very nature of translation from one language into another has effected a change. This alteration results more from the fact that words that had a wide semantic range in Hebrew are often rendered in Greek with words of a more limited range. Or the reverse—words that in Hebrew have a narrow scope are rendered in Greek with words that are more inclusive in meaning. The Greek translates vs. 5-6 as follows: "What is man that thou art mindful of him, or the son of man that thou carest for him? Thou didst make him for a little lower than the angels and hast crowned him with glory and honor." There are two changes from the Hebrew that strike one immediately. First, whereas

the Hebrew has: "Thou hast made him little less than God," the Septuagint has rendered it: "a little lower than the angels." In the Hebrew the word for God (*ĕlōhīm*) is somewhat ambiguous. Elohim is the general Semitic name for God, but it is also the name for that class of heavenly beings which serves God, especially in his court. The Greek translator has offered an interpretation, but one that does not in itself do an injustice to the Hebrew. Second, the Hebrew word "a little" has been translated by a literal Greek correspondent. However, the Greek appears to have a more specific connotation than does the Hebrew. The Greek word more frequently designates a temporal distinction of "for a little time" (cf. Acts 5:34). However, the Septuagint still remains unclear whether the designation in v. 5 is one of time or of degree.

The important exegetical move is evident when one sees what the writer of the Hebrews has done with the Septuagint translation of Ps. 8. The translation made possible a new direction of interpretation that had not been available to the reader of the Hebrew text. The Hebrew had stated that man in his exalted position lacked only a little from being a god himself. The Greek now opened the possibility of understanding this lack as a temporal distinction, "to lack for a little time." The writer of Hebrews seizes upon this new avenue as a means of elaborating his understanding of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In the Hebrew text the juxtaposition of "man" and "son of man" in v. 4 illustrates a common technique of Hebrew parallelism with no distinction being suggested. But for the New Testament writer the term takes on a new meaning when read in the light of Jesus, the Son of Man. Taking this as his lead, the writer proceeds to read into the psalm a full Christology. In his humiliation the Son of Man was made a little lower than the angels for a while, but then he was crowned with honor in his exaltation. Thus for Hebrews, the problem of understanding Ps. 8 is an entirely different one. The tension does not arise between man as ruler of the creation and man in his insignificance, but rather from the obvious fact that man does not have control of the world. It is not now in subjection to him. "As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him." (Heb. 2:8.) The writer of Hebrews makes the point that man in his actual state has not fulfilled the promise of the psalmist. Taking this then as his clue, he moves into his Christological confession: We see rather "Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor . . . , so that . . . he might taste death for every one." As the Exalted One, Jesus has already assumed Lordship over the new age, "the world to come" (v. 5). For this Christian writer the ancient psalm is a testimony to the life and death of the Incarnate One whom God acknowledged as the representative for mankind.

Again to summarize: The New Testament writer, working on the basis of the Greek Old Testament text, has been able to move his interpretation into an entirely different direction from that of the Hebrew Old Testament. The psalm becomes a Christological proof text for the Son of Man who for a short time was humiliated, but who was then exalted by God to become the representative for every man.

III

The point to be stressed is that the psalm clearly functions in two distinct ways. We have oversimplified a number of issues in order to allow this one problem to emerge in all its clarity. What is now our exegetical move? The fact that the New Testament has read such a different and—in the minds of many—strange interpretation into an Old Testament psalm has convinced many that one should not attempt to relate these two entirely different points of view. In all honesty the Biblical interpreter should stick with the Old Testament and its original meaning. Most Old Testament commentators do just that! One should have no objection to this position within

a clearly defined context. If the interpreter is content with simply describing what the psalmist believed, then it is sufficient to remain within the world of the Old Testament. However, if one wants to use the psalm in some broader fashion, if one is concerned to speak *theologically* about the content of the psalmist's faith, the simple descriptive task is not adequate. Certainly not for Christian theology! We are no longer in the community of Israel. We no longer have the temple in which to bring our praises to God. There is a break that separates, not only a Christian, but also any modern man from the world of the Old Testament. It is usually at this point that those who insist most vigorously on working from only the Old Testament context make a transition. They introduce some other framework by which to move from the world of the Old Testament to the world of modern man. For systematic theologians the overarching categories are frequently philosophical. The same is often the case for Biblical scholars even when cloaked under the guise of a theory of history. From the point of view of Christian theology it seems highly dubious that one can speak meaningfully of man and his relationship to God and the creation without speaking Christologically. This position is not a simplistic "Christomonism," but a theological conviction held in common by Christian theologians from Augustine to Calvin, and beyond.

The history of interpretation illustrates how consistently interpreters have tried to use the New Testament's interpretation, particularly that of Hebrews, as the key to the Old Testament psalm. For example, in Luther, one sees an attempt to find in the psalm only Christian teaching. Summarizing his exegesis, he says: "Thus the Holy Spirit through the prophet David instructs us . . . about the following topics: Christ; the two natures in Christ, His divine and human nature . . . Christ's dominion and kingdom . . . and of Christ's resurrection, exaltation, and glorification." [2] Now the objection to this type of traditional interpretation is that in its endeavor to deal

seriously with the New Testament as Christian Scriptures, it has obliterated the Old Testament. No longer is one able to hear the original witness of the psalm; he hears only the content of the New Testament revelation. Surely something is wrong with an interpretation that is no longer concerned to hear the Old Testament on its own terms.

Calvin has a more interesting interpretation of the psalm. Characteristically he is concerned that the witness of the Old Testament is not lost in a Christianization of the old covenant. Therefore, he attempts to join together the two witnesses while at the same time recognizing the peculiarities of each. According to Calvin, both Old and New Testaments are speaking of the same *doctrine*. The task of the Biblical interpreter is to harmonize and fit them into a larger whole. Calvin reads into the psalm the doctrine of the fall of mankind and suggests as the context for the Hebrew psalm the ideal state of man before his disobedience in the Garden of Eden. The difficulties of this position are entirely obvious. A dogmatic context has been constructed from material outside both texts which fits the various parts into a whole foreign to both.

Our own hermeneutical suggestion is that the Christian interpreter, first of all, commit himself only to hearing both witnesses as clearly as possible, but then in relation to one another. To seek a relation between Old and New Testaments is to take seriously the church's confession of a canon of Scripture, and to reject an appeal to a "canon within the canon." The acknowledgment of the role of the canon in interpretation serves in staking out the area of theological reflection. It establishes a context that differs from both that of the Old Testament and that of the New Testament when seen in isolation from one another. To change the metaphor, the recognition of the canon influences which instruments are playing in the orchestra, but it does not determine the composition. This decision cannot be predetermined. One simply must listen. Secondly, the challenge to the Christian theologian is to penetrate

these texts of Scripture and grapple with the reality that called both of them forth. Can we use both of these sets of testimony to guide us to God himself and to speak of his creation? In our opinion, this is the goal of interpretation as a discipline of the Christian church. Let us then move from the descriptive task to the constructive, reflective task of interpreting Ps. 8.

IV

The Old Testament witnesses to the apparent insignificance of man in the creation and yet the place of honor that has been given him. The New Testament writer of Hebrews testifies that man has not possession of the world; everything is not in subjection to him. Rather, the author finds in the psalm a witness to the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus through whose suffering man's salvation was won. How is it possible to make any meaningful bridges between these divergent witnesses? Are they even talking about the same issue? Many interpreters are convinced that the New Testament is not really interpreting the Old Testament, but merely using or even abusing it. The charge is that this is an arbitary reading in of Christology that is fundamentally alien to the intent of the psalm. Is this really so? Do the two witnesses have nothing in common?

In approaching this set of problems one needs to establish a somewhat larger basis from which to reflect. How does the Old Testament as a whole see the problem between man as a creation of God and man living life as it actually is? What is the relationship between man as the lord of creation and man as a human being, limited in time and space, formed in communities, striving to maintain his life? The Old Testament is filled with reflections on this problem. The issue is not so much that man is constantly seeking to wrench himself free from God and to become divine himself, but rather that Hebrew man finds himself so overwhelmed by the powers of the world as to threaten any sense of his special role in God's creation.

The psalms are filled with human struggle to maintain a life of faith among the dangers of everyday existence. The complaint psalms particularly oscillate between the confession that all things are in God's control and a protest against the actual state of affairs in which the psalmist is slowly being ground to pieces. Specifically in The Book of Job one has articulated in the most terrifying fashion the threat that a man experiences in relation to his basic existence. Job acknowledges man as a creation of God, even using Israel's traditional vocabulary. In ch. 7 he addresses God: "I loathe my life; I would not live for ever. Let me alone, for my days are a breath. What is man, that thou dost make so much of him, and that thou dost set thy mind upon him, dost visit him every morning, and test him every moment?"

It is interesting to hear in this Job complaint the same vocabulary of Ps. 8. "What is man, that thou makest so much of him?" (Cf. Ps. 144:3b.) But the amazing thing is the change in its function. For Job, God's visitation is no longer a sign of God's grace. It has become part of his affliction. Life in its grim actuality is only a "vale of tears." The presence of God serves only to remind him of his insignificance. Israel's confession of a special place in the creation has become a burden. Job reflects on the tension between life as it actually is lived and the religious tradition of man's special place in the creation. The issue is not that he is driven into the position of thinking that God does not exist, or that God is dead, but that man is dead and lacks utterly any value. "Let me alone that I may swallow my spittle."

A similar threat is seen in the book of Ecclesiastes (ch. 3:11) in which again the writer is caught in the hard realities of human life as he experiences it. He writes: "He [God] has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end." Therefore, the writer questions the advantage that man has over the beasts. "For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the

same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over all the beasts. . . . All go to one place."

Now it is only when one hears the confession of Ps. 8 in this light that one can begin to make sense of what the New Testament writer is doing. He affirms with the psalmist in the face of the threats of life that man's role in the creation is not simply an idea or wishful thinking on his part. The writer of Hebrews is not divorced from human suffering. He knows man who is threatened with the agony of everyday existence. But he comes face-to-face with the problem of man's promised role and man as he really is by testifying to God's work in Jesus, the Son of Man. Only when one understands man in the light of the man, Jesus Christ, can he see what God intended humanity to be—not a man who was freed from the threats of daily life, but one who himself entered for a while into the full sufferings of humanity in order to bring life to all men. This is to say, the New Testament now sees the basic problem that lies behind the Old Testament witness in the light of Jesus Christ, and gives its own clear witness. First, the psalmist was right in confessing that man has a special role in God's creation. It was because God so loved this world that he sent his Son. Secondly, the way by which man attains his position of honor is through suffering and death. There is a chasm that separates him from his intended role in the creation. He has floundered and lost himself, and has succumbed to the threats of the world. Finally, the New Testament writer points to the way of hope. Because of what Jesus as the "pioneer of salvation" (Heb. 2:10) has done in bringing into fulfillment the new world to come, the invitation is extended for man to enter into the full honor of his rightful estate as son of God. If we read the Old Testament from the light of the New Testament in the context of Christian faith, we confess that in Jesus Christ true manhood has already appeared.

However, it is equally important to read this New Testament confession in the light of the Old Testament. The reverse movement of the dialectic belongs to theological reflection in the context of the canon. If we subject the witness of Hebrews to the testimony of the Hebrew psalm, we are reminded that the redemption in the man Jesus is not an escape from the world of human affairs. The "world to come" of Heb. 2:5 must retain its essential continuity with the created world of Ps. 8. The psalmist's confession, "How majestic is God's name in all the world," is an essential part of the redemption in Christ. The Old Testament witness prevents the New Testament's testimony from moving toward the Gnostic heresy. What Christ achieved was not an escape for the pious, but a redemption of the world—not a gathering together of the saints, but a salvation for all men. Whatever redemption means in the full context of Christian faith, both Old and New Testaments, it has universal implications. It is cosmic in its dimensions. Because of the man Jesus Christ, all the creation will confess: "How majestic is thy name in all the world."

The challenge of the Christian interpreter in our day is to hear the full range of notes within all of Scripture, to wrestle with the theological implication of this Biblical witness, and above all, to come to grips with the agony of our age before a living God who still speaks through the prophets and apostles.