

From Dignity to Disgrace: A Comparative Analysis of Psalms 8 and 14

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Abstract

This essay undertakes a comparative analysis of Psalms 8 and 14. Together, these hymns reveal that the Creator originally bestowed unparalleled dignity on human beings; yet, in their folly, the reprobates chose the path of indignity by rejecting God's existence and their ultimate accountability to their Creator. Moreover, an examination of both these poems discloses that in a future day, the Lord will judge the wicked and vindicate the upright. Put another way, while condemnation and doom are the fate of evildoers, eternal glory and honour are the destiny of the righteous.

1. Introduction

1.1. Setting

1.1.1. Key focus

This essay undertakes a comparative analysis of Psalms 8 and 14. The study uses a text-centred, inner-canonical, and integrative hermeneutic to engage these two passages in their literary, historical, and theological contexts.

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

1.1.2. Background

Each generation finds an abundance of discoveries in God's creation. In turn, these breakthroughs show how prolific are God's mighty acts; but each fresh insight brings additional challenges and responsibilities. For instance, as Psalm 8 reveals, the more material and spiritual blessings God gives human beings, the greater their obligation to exercise wise stewardship according to the Lord's commands recorded in the scriptures. Tragically, as Psalm 14 discloses, humankind's greatest failure seems to be a lack of gratitude.

1.1.3. Trends

On the one hand, the research literature dealing individually with Psalms 8 and 14 is abundant, including exegetical and theological commentaries, specialised monographs, and peer-reviewed journal articles. On the other hand, a thorough search through various research databases (e.g. WorldCat, Dissertation Abstracts, EBSCOhost, ATLA Religion, JSTOR, and Google Scholar) does not surface any literature in which a comparative analysis of these two psalms is undertaken to explore what they jointly reveal about the nature of humankind's response toward the Creator.

1.1.4. Objectives

As indicated in 1.1.3 and 1.2 (respectively), a gap exists in the scholarly literature involving a comparative analysis between Psalms 8 and 14. In the light of this gap, this study uses a text-centred, inner-canonical, and integrative hermeneutic to engage these two passages in their literary, historical, and theological contexts. The following is the core research problem to be explored: what do Psalms 8 and 14 reveal as the proper response of human beings toward their Creator? The central theoretical

argument is that it is most appropriate for human beings to express continuous thanks to God for all their Creator has done for them.

The specific research objectives this study will address are as follows: undertake a separate literary, historical, and theological overview of Psalms 8 and 14; embark on a section-by-section analysis of Psalms 8 and 14 using a text-centred, inner-canonical, and integrative hermeneutic; and provide a synthesis of the respective perspectives of Psalms 8 and 14 as they relate to the core research problem. The sections that follow correspond to the preceding objectives and provide an outline of what to expect in the remainder of the article.

1.1.5. Contribution to the field

This study fills a gap in the scholarly literature by undertaking a comparative analysis of Psalms 8 and 14. The essay's academic (theoretical) merit is in exploring what these two passages jointly reveal about humankind's response to the Creator. In terms of applied theology, the study concludes that it is most appropriate for human beings to express continuous thanks to God for what the Creator has done for them.

A comparative analysis of the preceding two songs indicates that people take the Creator's manifold gifts for granted. Frequently, they do not even acknowledge the Lord's daily provision for their needs. This ingratitude is inexcusable, for people could not survive without the air they breathe, the food they eat, or the water they drink, all of which come from the Creator. A biblically-based and theologically-informed examination of Psalms 8 and 14 reminds believers that God is supremely praiseworthy. Indeed, wherever they look, they find reasons to praise the Creator. Most of all, when the faith community considers what the Lord has done for them, they should submit to the great Ruler

of the universe. After all, God is the Author of life, whether physical or spiritual in nature.

1.2. Literature review

Aside from lexical terms treated in the following sections, there are no other key concepts requiring separate conceptual (theoretical) definitions to be supplied here. A critical review of the extant literature indicates that scholarly research on the topic of this study dealing with Psalms 8 and 14, has not been undertaken. This suggests a clear gap in the literature, which creates a sufficient warrant for the necessity of the present study. Due to the abundance of scholarly literature on Psalms 8 and 14 (including exegetical and theological commentaries, specialised monographs, and peer-reviewed journal articles), a selective, representative engagement of both psalms is conducted in the following sections to address the research objectives of the study.

2. The Prelude to Psalm 8

Of the 150 psalms, only 34 do not have titles. For the hymns that have them, these superscriptions indicate such things (in various combinations) as the author, type of psalm, musical notations, liturgical notations, and historical context. The psalms attributed to David contain many references to his life that seem to be taken from 2 Samuel. There are differing views as to the reliability of the headings. One option is that the titles were added later, and there is some evidence that these titles did change over time. In contrast, a second option maintains that the superscriptions were part of the psalms and should be regarded as an integral portion of the sacred text (cf. Broyles 1999:28–29; Bullock 1988:114, 117; Craigie 2004:33–34; Leupold 1969:6–7; McCann 1996:655–656; Smith 1996:190–191; Tate 2001:346–347).

According to the title of Psalm 8, David authored it. The psalms were penned over a long period and collected for worship as early as the reign of David. The titles at the beginning of most psalms identify several writers, though the Hebrew can also mean that the hymn belonged to the person or was about that person. David's ability as a musician, his interest in corporate worship, and the subject matter of numerous psalms make him a possible author of some of the hymns, including Psalm 8. The phrase 'for the director of music'² suggests that this song is from an early collection of hymns used in temple worship. It is also possible that when the psalm was used in the Hebrew liturgy, the leader of the Levitical choir spoke it before the assembly of worshipers (cf. Anderson 1983:48; Delitzsch 1982:148–149; Kidner 1973:40; Perowne 1989:84; Terrien 2003:30; Urassa 1998:34; VanGemeren 1991:34; Wilson 2002:150).

The Hebrew noun rendered 'gittith' (which is also found in the headings of Psalms 81 and 84) was probably a liturgical word and may have referred to a musical style or type of stringed instrument. One suggestion is that it was a harp or lyre associated with Gath in Philistia. Some manuscripts have the word translated as 'winepress'. This has led to the conjecture that Psalm 8 was associated in some way with the vintage festival at the Feast of Tabernacles (cf. Goldingay 2006b:154; Koehler and Baumgartner 2001:206–207; O'Connell 1997:904; Tate 2001:344; Wolf 1980:361). The prologue (v. 1a) and epilogue (v. 2) of this song (which would be vv. 2a and 10, respectively, in Hebrew texts and the Tanakh translation) suggest that it was a hymn of praise. The interior of the psalm, however, focuses on God's sovereign ordering of the creation. It is for this reason that some classify this

² Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (2011 update).

hymn as a nature psalm (or song of creation; cf. Chisholm 1991:303; Craigie 2004:106; Glenn 1982:40; Jacob 1958:148; Kraus 1988:45).

3. The Declaration of What God Has Done (Ps 8:1–2)

This hymn extols both God's glory and the God-given dignity of human beings. Unlike the anonymously-written Psalm 104, the author did not draw upon the six days of creation to form the literary structure for the song (cf. Gen 1:3–31); rather, the composer wrote out of personal experience concerning reality. Throughout the nine verses of Psalm 8, the songwriter praised God, all the while referring to the author's own sense of wonder over the Lord's powerful ordering of creation. One discerns that the psalmist composed this hymn while standing on a balcony and gazing into the sky at night—the same sky the author no doubt had studied and pondered while tending a herd of sheep or while on the run from an adversary. The occasion may have pushed to the back of the composer's mind the day-to-day affairs of administering the Israelite kingdom, while bringing to the forefront deeper thoughts such as the majesty of God and the origin of life.

In the Old Testament era, there was no pollution or bright lights from nearby cities to obstruct a person's view of the sky. Thus, while the author did not have the benefit of a powerful telescope, it was still possible to grasp something of the vastness of space. Even today, scientists speak of stars as being trillions of miles away from earth and describe the cosmos—by some estimates consisting of 300 billion stars and 50 billion planets in the Milky Way galaxy (out of an estimated 100 billion galaxies in the entire observable universe)—in terms that at times can seem hard to comprehend (cf. Lioy 2011:13; Mays 1994:513; Walker 2006:8, 27; Weiser 1962:142; Wilson 2002:203). Admittedly, no one really knows the original circumstances leading up to the

author's writing of this song, but it is not hard to imagine. Many people today can recall times when they gazed up into the sky on a clear night and saw countless stars extending from one end of the horizon to the other. If this was the case for the composer of Psalm 8, one can only infer how 'puny and insignificant' (Glenn 1982:41) this person must have felt against the immense expanse of the heavens above which God's glory appeared (v. 1).

Two different Hebrew words are rendered 'Lord' in the first verse, with the initial term being Yahweh. This is the personal name for God used by the Israelites to emphasise that God is the 'holy one, the majestic one ... who speaks and then acts' (Goldingay 2006a:22; cf. Exod 3:1–15; Lev 19:2; Isa 6:1–5). The second term is Adonai, and places emphasis on God's supreme and unchallenged authority (cf. Baker 2003:364; Block 2005:340–341; Oswalt 2008:247). It is no wonder that the author of Psalm 8 declared that the name of the all-glorious one was 'majestic ... in all the earth!' (v. 1) 'Majestic' renders a Hebrew adjective that can also be translated as 'glorious', 'powerful', or 'delightful' (cf. Brown, Driver and Briggs 1985:12; Coppes 1980:13; Koehler and Baumgartner 2001:13; McCann 1996:711). In the scriptures, the name of the Lord was considered a reflection of the divine reputation and character, as well as attesting to the Creator's manifold attributes (cf. Exod 3:13; Jdg 13:17; Ps 7:17; Anderson 1983:101; Craigie 2004:107; Delitzsch 1982:149; Leupold 1969:102). Furthermore, since in Old Testament thought, the name of the Lord is often equated with the divine presence, Psalm 8:1 could be loosely rendered, 'Yahweh, our Lord, how delightful is your Presence throughout the entire cosmos!' (cf. Caird 1980:77–78; Jacob 1958:84; Terrien 2003:128; Urassa 1998:35; VanGemeren 1991:110; Wilson 2002:200).

This psalm ends with the same words as it begins, giving the entire hymn a reverential tone. These words of praise to the name of God form a literary frame (or *inclusio*) for its central subject—praise from humankind, whom God has made to reflect the divine majesty (cf. Guthrie 2007:944; Kidner 1973:68; Kraut 2010:18; Waltke and Yu 2007:124). Here, it is revealed that people count for something in God's eyes. They are important and valuable—not just because the Lord created them, but also because the Father sent the Son to redeem them and give them eternal life. When believers visibly give thanks to God for being gracious to them, they declare to the unsaved that the Lord is their Creator and Sustainer. Believers bear witness to the truth that every person needs God for present life and future hope. The words of praise and gratitude the redeemed utter to the Creator might encourage the unsaved to consider the truths of the Messiah and turn to him in faith for new life and eternal joy.

The author of Psalm 8 recognised that whenever God is revealed, whether above the heavens or upon the earth, the majesty of the divine is unveiled. Praise to the Creator is chanted on high and echoed from cradle and nursery. This praise is a sufficient answer to God's opponents, among whom Weiser (1962:141) includes 'skeptics and atheists'. What is sweeter than the songs of children? The hearts of believers are uplifted when they hear young people singing praises to the Lord. The Creator is worthy of such adoration, and God sees to it that even helpless 'children and infants' (Ps 8:2) draw the world's attention to the Creator. Tate (2001:351) observes that the emphasis is not on the 'babbling, gurgling speech of infants' muting the 'enemy and the avenger'; instead, it is that the 'name of Yahweh' being uttered through 'human speech, even when inarticulate, manifests the presence and might of God'. Guthrie and Quinn (2006:236) add that the Lord of the cosmos is 'able to build up a people of weakness as a force to

oppose his enemies'. Accordingly, as Psalm 14 makes clear (to be considered at length below), while the unbelieving world rejects the rule of God, the forces of darkness cannot silence exuberant praise, regardless of how hard they try.

During the final week of Jesus' earthly ministry (AD 30), he quoted the Septuagint version of Psalm 8:2. He did so in response to the religious authorities, who complained that some children in the temple courts were singing praise to Jesus as the descendant of David (cf. France 2007: 789–790; Keener 1999:502–503; Nolland 2005:847–848; Turner 2008:500–501). The chief priests and scribes were enraged over what they perceived to be inappropriate conduct and asked the Messiah about the children's praises (Matt 21:15–16). The implication is that Jesus was wrong for not stopping them. Jesus, who admitted to hearing the praises, referred his critics to Psalm 8:2, and in this way, defended the children against the religious leaders. The boys and girls had spoken more wisely about the Lord than did the chief priests and scribes, and the youngsters were to be commended for doing this. Indeed, at times, God uses naturally weak instruments to manifest the eternal glory, make known his ineffable name, and conquer seemingly implacable enemies (cf. 1 Cor 1:27; Blomberg 2007:69–70; Guthrie 1981:158; Marshall 2004:108; Schreiner 2008:127–128; Thielman 2005:94, 98, 183).

4. The Affirmation of Humanity's Unique Status and Role (Ps 8:3–9)

As the author once more gazed into the heavens, it was appropriate to consider one's place in the grand scheme of creation. Did people matter to God? Was Israel's ruler important and valuable, especially when compared to the seemingly infinite array of heavenly bodies? The

composer recognised that what could be seen in the sky was the work of God's 'fingers' (Ps 8:3). Of course, the songwriter knew that God did not have literal fingers; but in lavish poetic style, the psalmist used a vivid figure of speech to describe God as the master craftsman and divine artisan of the cosmos (cf. 19:1–6; 33:6; 102:25; 104:19–23; 136:5). Goldingay (2006b:158) points out that at the dawn of creation, 'God did not merely utter orders and leave someone else to do the work'; instead, the Lord 'became personally involved in the most delicate and intricate way'.

Psalm 8:4 indicates that the heavens belonged to God, for the Creator had made them. Readers also learn that the Lord set all the solar bodies in exactly the right place for humanity's benefit. Ultimately, it takes faith to acknowledge that even the observable universe, with its ostensibly endless distances, is the work of God. As Hebrews 11:3 says, 'By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible'. Two specific thoughts especially impressed the composer of Psalm 8. One was the magnificent glory of God as it was reflected in the clear, starry night. The other thought was the utter amazement that the Lord, in all his glory, would even be mindful and considerate of the human aspect of creation—so much so as to crown people with distinction and eminence and to give them lord-like stewardship over the rest of creation. For the most part, the author admitted that these two thoughts were practically beyond human comprehension.

To respect God's majesty, people must compare themselves to his greatness. That is what the songwriter did when he asked, 'What is mankind that you are mindful of them?' (Ps. 8:4; cf. Job 7:17; 25:4–6; Ps 144:3–4). In Psalm 8:4, the singular form of the Hebrew noun translated 'mankind' collectively refers to all human beings regardless of gender (cf. Gen 1:26–27; Guthrie 1981:273; Hughes 1977:85; Morris

1981:23; Schreiner 2008:213). The composer's use of the phrase 'human beings' (Ps 8:4) could also be rendered 'son of man' and looks upon each and every person as a mere mortal who seems to be inconsequential and transitory (cf. Anderson 1983:103; Guthrie and Quinn 2006:236; McCann 1996:711; Urassa 1998:37, 51; VanGemeran 1991:112). If the entire universe appears microscopic in the sight of the Creator, how much less must be the importance of humanity? To feel small like this is a healthy way to get back to an objective sense of reality. Admittedly, God does not want people of faith to become transfixed on their smallness; rather, the Creator wants everyone to humbly turn their eyes of faith to him, for he alone is infinite and eternal.

The author seemed to turn his eyes to God in verse 5 when it is noted that God made human beings 'a little lower than the angels' (that is, supernatural beings occupying the heavenly realms; cf. Gen 1:26–27; 3:5, 22; Job 1:6; 38:7; Pss 29:1; 82:1, 6; 89:5–7; 98:7; 138:1). The phrase can also be rendered 'a little lower than God' (cf. Pss 3:7; 4:1; 5:2; 7:1, 2, 9, 11; Chisholm 1991:259; Glenn 1982:42; Kraut 2010:16, 23; Smith 1993:137, 238; Waltke and Yu 2007:219). This would ascribe even more dignity to people than being compared with angels. Furthermore, one rendition of Hebrews 2:7 (based on the Septuagint) understands the phrase translated 'a little' in Psalm 8:5 to mean 'for a little while' (cf. Goldingay 2006b:161; Kidner 1973:67; Perowne 1989:155). This connotation implies that believers, when glorified in heaven at the end of the age, will be higher in rank than the angels. In stepping back from these interpretative options, it is clear that God has crowned humankind with 'glory and honour'. This insight could not be obtained by looking at the sky or by any other part of nature. The psalmist wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The author knew that, despite humanity's apparent unimportance in the universe, people

are in fact highly valued by God. Their dignity stems from their being made in the image of God and designated as royal stewards and guardians over the entire creation (cf. Gen 1:26–27; Brueggemann 1997:452; Dyrness 1977:83; Guthrie 2007:945; Urassa 1998:54–55).

Tragically, humanity has not lived up to God's original mandate. People do not rule the world; instead, it appears at times as if the world has people under its firm control. While God intended people to live and govern the world as vice-regents under his authority, they have rejected that position, choosing instead to go the way of sin, following the plan of God's archenemy, the devil. As a result, people find themselves no longer truly free, but instead enslaved to the masters they have chosen, namely, sin and the devil (cf. Heb 2:14, 17). Also, tragically, those two entities brought humanity into further subjection to death itself (cf. vv. 14–15). Despite the transgressions of the first humans long ago (cf. Gen 3:1–19), all people bear vestiges of God's image (cf. Gen 5:1; 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9). Moreover, followers of the Messiah are in the process of having the image of God fully restored in them (cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Col 3:10). Therefore, Psalm 8:5 not only applies to the earliest humans, whom God created, but also applies to all their physical descendants.

Furthermore, Hebrews 2 applies the psalmist's words to the incarnate Saviour (cf. John 1:14, 18, 49; Dyrness 1977:234; Jacob 1958:327, 342; Smith 1993:424–425; Waltke and Yu 2007:91, 133, 222). Jesus is portrayed as the last (or second) Adam and representative human being (cf. Rom 5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:20–28; Eph 1:22; Bruce 1985:35–36; Hughes 1977:84; Lane 1991:47; Leupold 1969:101; Perowne 1989:150; Westcott 1980:42). The writer of Hebrews 2 explained that when the earliest humans disobeyed the Creator, this impaired the ability of people to be the vice-regents God originally intended. On the one hand, believers recognise that not everything is subject to humanity. On the

other hand, through the eyes of faith, believers are able to ‘see Jesus’ (v. 9), who fulfilled the theological ideal the psalmist described. Specifically, all things are subject to the Messiah, including the world to come. To fulfill the ideal, Jesus had to become a real human being. Like other people, Jesus was ‘made lower than the angels for a little while’. Hence, though Jesus is fully divine, Jesus also became fully human. As the incarnate God, Jesus did not sin; rather, he obeyed the Creator even to the point of dying for the sins of humanity. For the Son’s obedience, the Father crowned him ‘with glory and honour’. The resurrected and exalted Son now sits on the throne in heaven at the right hand of the Father (cf. 1:3; Craddock 1998:38; Guthrie 2007:947; Ladd 1997:620, 624–627; Morris 1981:24).

Because humans are the only living beings made in God’s image, the Creator put them in charge of everything else (cf. Gen 1:26–30). As Psalm 8:6–8 reveals, the human race has dominion over ‘subhuman creatures and nature’ (Witherington and Hyatt 2004:234). The implication is that people have the right to use nature to meet their legitimate needs, while, at the same time fulfilling their God-given responsibility to take care of the planet. This truth is reinforced by the Hebrew verb translated ‘rulers’ in verse 6. The word conveys the idea of oversight, administration, and government, with the extent of the authority dependent on the context in which the term is used (cf. Gross 1998:68; Nel 1997:1137; Soggin 1997:689–690). As God’s chosen people, the Israelites were privileged to experience many wonderful provisions. For instance, God promised the nation’s ancestor, Abraham, that future descendants would be too numerous to count, even though he and his wife, Sarah, were well beyond their childbearing years. Then Abraham and Sarah experienced one of God’s great miracles, and a child named Isaac was born. Later, Isaac became the parent of Jacob. Together, these luminaries became the patriarchs of Israel, the founding

leaders of an entire nation bound up in intimate relationship to God (cf. Kistemaker 1995:64).

In permitting humanity to have dominion over creation, God intended for people to exercise control over the non-human realm and other natural forces upon the earth. This involves more than merely taming other living beings. Additionally, God created the animal kingdom (in a manner of speaking) and the resources of the earth to serve the genuine needs of humanity. While the sin of the first humans has marred the dominion somewhat, the role of humanity is still one of great dignity, and it far exceeds the other created entities existing on earth. When believers candidly consider these truths, they sense a great opportunity to honour and please God. After all, the Lord has given the redeemed everything to bless them and provide for all their needs. Of course, believers require great wisdom in being responsible stewards and guardians over God's creation. After all, it is the Lord's handiwork and the redeemed are not at liberty to despoil it for selfish ends (cf. Brueggemann 1997:461; Kaiser 2008:361; Mays 1994:515; McCann 1996:671; Tate 2001:356–357; Wilson 2002:208).

Militant atheists claim that humans are no more valuable than any other form of life; but Psalm 8 plainly contradicts that opinion. God has bestowed on humans more significance than any other part of the visible creation. Because of their sin, no member of the human race has perfectly achieved the dignity God wanted people to have. That is why the Father sent his Son to put things right and to restore creation to glory and honor. In fact, as Hebrews 2:6–8 reveals, Psalm 8:4–6 finds ultimate fulfillment in the Messiah. It is because of Jesus that regenerate humanity will be able to realise its appointed destiny over the creation. Indeed, as Lane (1991:48) avers, it is in the person of the Messiah that the 'primal glory and sovereignty are restored' (cf. Fanning 1994:378–379; Guthrie 1981:79, 226, 363, 629, 671, 840; Marshall 2004:607,

618, 623–624; Schreiner 2008:110–111, 216, 230, 382, 386; Thielman 2005:398, 592–593, 716).

The author of Psalm 8 concluded the ‘poetic commentary on the creation of man and woman’ (Hilber 2009:327) with another powerful affirmation of God’s glory. The composer’s prelude resulted in a proper frame of mind to consider God’s creation works; and the songwriter’s postlude was the basis for the exclamation of ‘how majestic’ (v. 9) God’s name (i.e. the divine reputation and character) was ‘in all the earth.’ Even though the bulk of Psalm 8 describes humanity and its dominion over the earth, the first verse as well as the last makes it clear that the author wrote this psalm as an act of worship and praise to God as the sovereign Creator.

5. The Prelude to Psalm 14

Like Psalm 8, the superscription to Psalm 14 states that it is for the ‘director of music’. Accordingly, this song was intended for use in temple worship. Such worship could have included participants repeating the hymn in unison, as well as the leader of the Levitical choir declaring the words of the song as part of an extended liturgy (cf. 1 Chr 23:5, 30; 25:1, 6–8; Neh 11:17). In the superscription to Psalm 14, the Hebrew phrase rendered ‘of David’ could mean that the psalm was written by the monarch, penned by others on the ruler’s behalf, or contained information that pertained specifically to the head of state (cf. Goldingay 2006b:27; Kidner 1973:33; Kraus 1988:22–23; Perowne 1989:93; Smith 1996:187; Weiser 1962:96–97; Wilson 2002:20–21).

The song denounces the folly of those who ignore God. Verses 1–3 comment on the universality of evil in the world; verses 4–6 reveal that God would one day judge the wicked; and verse 7 records a petition for

God's deliverance of Israel. In this regard, the hymn is closely parallel in wording and perspective to Psalm 53. One key contrast is that in verses where Psalm 14 favours the covenant name, *Yahweh* (rendered 'the LORD'), Psalm 53 exclusively uses the more generic reference, *Elohim* (rendered 'God'; cf. Broyles 1999:5–6, 88, 235; Bullock 1988:115; Caird 1980:73; Smith 1993:116–117, 299; Tate 1990:41; Waltke and Yu 2007:883–884). Furthermore, Psalms 14:5–6 and 53:5, respectively, are considerably different in wording, even though they are comparable in theological emphasis.

The preceding literary distinctions notwithstanding, each hymn is referred to as a 'sapiential meditation' (Terrien 2003:164) or wisdom poem (cf. Anderson 1983:130; Irvine 1995:463; McCann 1996:729). For instance, each is characterised by a meditative, didactic quality in which the psalmist examines the tendency of the impious to live as if God did not exist. Moreover, the songwriter denounced the evil committed by the wicked. In this regard, Psalms 14 and 53 provide a stark contrast to Psalm 8, which spotlights the privileged status of humanity over creation. Though God originally intended human beings to serve as vice-regents, their individual and collective lives have been characterised by moral depravity.

6. The Universality of Evil (Ps 14:1–3)

Psalm 14 begins with a reference to the 'fool' (v. 1). The underlying Hebrew adjective refers, not to those who are cognitively impaired, but to a particular group of individuals who are senseless, godless, and perverse (cf. Deut 32:6; 1 Sam 25:25; 2 Sam 13:13; Ps 74:18, 22; Brueggemann 1997:699; Marböck 1998:163–164; Pan 1997:12; Sæbø 1997a:711–712). There are additional Old Testament passages that shed light on the spiritual and moral insensitivity of fools. These individuals

have nothing but contempt for the name and ways of God (cf. Ps 74:18). While fools might portray themselves as being intelligent and enlightened, in their ignorance, they continually scoff at the Lord (cf. v. 22). Their minds, being filled with nonsense, are inclined toward wickedness (cf. Isa 32:5–6). They are vulgar and surly in public (cf. Prov 30:22).

According to Psalm 14:1, the impious reason in their hearts (i.e. the source of their thoughts, emotions, aspirations, and endeavours; cf. Clifford 2002:89; Guthrie 1981:168; Lower 2009:71; Smith 1993:261, 264, 270; Tate 1990:43) that either God does not exist or the notion of the divine is irrelevant to their lives (cf. 10:4; 36:1). McCann (1996:729) clarifies that this ‘failure to acknowledge God’ eventually leads to ‘misplaced priorities and misguided behavior’. Because the irreligious spurn the knowledge of God and persist in their evil ways, they incur divine judgment. In effect, they choose God’s condemnation instead of God’s favour (cf. Prov 1:7, 20–27). Indeed, though they might prosper for a season from their ill-gotten gain (cf. Ps 10:6, 11, 13), they will lose it in the end (cf. Jer 17:11).

Grenz (2000:30) observes that the tendency for people to question the ‘reality of God is not new’. Nevertheless, the ‘intellectual atheism of modern Western philosophy’ (i.e. a strictly naturalistic and mechanistic interpretation of the world) did not exist in the ancient Near East. The Greek philosophers Epicurus (341–271 BC) and Democritus (c. 460–c. 370 BC), and the Roman poet Lucretius (c. 95–c. 55 BC), are often identified as the first atheist writers of antiquity (cf. Abrahams *et al.* 2007:670; Frame 2007:1–3; Kohler and Hirsch 2002; Mohler 2008; Ward 2006:76–77).

According to Grenz (2000:30), the ‘scepticism’ of ‘thinkers’ in the Old Testament era stiffened their resolve to live as if the notion of God was

a fabrication. Here one finds the 'moral or practical denial of God's existence'. In short, these are 'atheists unawares', that is, 'secularists in practice who live in a world without windows to the supernatural' (Guinness 2008:12). Craigie (2004:126) refers to the latter as 'functional atheists', namely, individuals who might 'admit the theoretical possibility' of God's existence, but who demonstrate by their 'speech and behavior' that any notion of the divine is vacuous. Regardless of whether one is considering the practical or intellectual forms of atheism, scripture remains unchanged. Anyone who wants to approach the Creator must affirm that God 'exists' (Heb 11:6) and 'rewards those who earnestly seek' him.

The songwriter was withering in describing the ungodly. For instance, they are said to be 'corrupt' (Ps 14:1), 'vile' in their 'deeds', and infamous for their reprehensible acts. The Hebrew verb rendered 'corrupt' refers to abhorrent, detestable endeavours (cf. Brown *et al.* 1985:1073; Gerstenberger 1997:1428; Grisanti 1997:314). 'Vile' translates a noun that denotes wanton practices (cf. Carpenter 1997:423; Roth 2001:142; Schultz 1980:670). Such rampant sinfulness traces its origins back to the earliest humans. When they sinned against God, the negative consequences of their transgression were passed on to all their biological progeny and affected them at the deepest level of their being (cf. Rom 5:12). Genesis 6:1 notes that, as the population of the human race began to increase, people's thoughts were consumed with sin. Verse 5 emphasises that the descendants of the earliest humans were single-minded, even eager, in their pursuit of evil, while verse 11 adds that earth's inhabitants were 'corrupt' and guilty of inhumane acts (cf. Delitzsch 1982:204–205; Kidner 1973:79; Perowne 1989:184; Smith 1996:229; VanGemeren 1991:144–145; Waltke and Yu 2007:277, 279).

Psalm 14 reveals that the impious of the songwriter's day were just as brutal in their mistreatment of others. Verse 2 depicts the sovereign

Creator of the universe peering down from the celestial abode as ‘witness and judge’ (VanGemeren 1991:144) on the human race to determine whether there were any individuals who ‘understand’ (cf. 33:13–14). The word ‘understand’ is a translation of a Hebrew verb that refers to those who are characterised by prudence, insight, and discernment (cf. Fretheim 1997:1243; Koenen 2004:115; Sæbø 1997b:1270). Specifically, these are individuals who have a reverent fear of the Lord (cf. Prov 1:7). This respect for Yahweh is what sets biblical wisdom apart from all its worldly counterparts. The preceding foundational truth is repeated throughout the sapiential literature of the Old Testament (cf. Job 28:28; Ps 111:10; Prov 9:10; 15:33; Eccl 12:13).

Since the dawn of humanity, there have been individuals who seek to be morally upright. Even so, scripture reveals that no one can claim to always be good, continuously do what is best, and never commit any sin (cf. 1 Kgs 8:46; Ps 143:2; Prov 20:9; Eccl 7:20). In fact, according to Psalm 14:3, everyone has rejected God by either consciously or subconsciously turning aside from the path of righteousness. Moreover, from the Lord’s morally perfect and holy perspective, all human beings are ‘corrupt’. The latter renders a Hebrew verb that points to deep-seated ethical perversion and filth (cf. Baker 1997:410; Brown *et al.* 1985:47; Koehler and Baumgartner 2001:54). God’s verdict is that, aside from the Messiah, not one person who has ever lived does what is right.

Cranfield (1975:192) notes that an ‘abridgement and adaptation’ of the Septuagint translation of Psalm 14:1–3 (cf. 53:1–3) appears in Romans 3:10–12, where it is declared that every member of the human race stood condemned before God. In verse 9, it is asked whether the religious were any better off than the impious. The direct response is, ‘Not at all!’ (or, ‘Not by any means!’). Everyone, regardless of race,

ethnicity, or gender, was under the hegemony of sin and deserved to be expelled from God's presence (cf. Moo 1996:198, 202; Murray 1984:102–103; Schreiner 1998:166; Wright 2002:457). This theological truth is validated by the inclusion in verses 10–18 of several quotes or paraphrases of Old Testament passages (cf. Pss 5:9; 10:7; 14:1–3; 36:1; 53:1–3; 140:3; Isa 59:7–8). As Morris (1988:166) explains, in ancient times, it was 'common rabbinical practice' to thread scripture verses together, like 'pearls' on a string, to make an argument.

The biblical text pointedly contends that: no one is righteous (Rom 3:10); no one understands or seeks God (v. 11); all have turned away (v. 12a); no one does good (v. 12b); they are deceitful (v. 13); their hearts are full of cursing and bitterness (v. 14); they are quick to shed blood (v. 15); ruin and misery mark their ways (v. 16); they do not know the way of peace (v. 17); and they have no fear of God (v. 18). These vices can be seen, in varying degrees, in every descendant of the first humans who has ever lived. In truth, before coming to faith in the Messiah, everyone is rightly categorised as God's enemy (cf. Rom 5:10; Col 1:21).

The biblical text reinforces its argument by mentioning specific parts of the human body. This is done to emphasise the totality of sin's devastating effect within people—including the throat, tongue, and lips (Rom 3:13), the mouth (v. 14), the feet (v. 15), and the eyes (v. 18). In brief, the whole person is metaphysically infected; that is, no part of human nature remains unsullied by sin. By using such imagery, these verses set forth the doctrine of total depravity. This does not mean that every human being is as bad as they can be; rather, it means that every aspect of the human existence has been corrupted by sin. The point in verse 18 is particularly important. The failure of both the religious and the impious to fear God was a grievous offence, since reverence for the Lord is the mark of a godly person. Tragically, the legacy of the human

race is one of arrogance and folly (cf. Thielman 2005:352–353, 476–477; Waltke and Yu 2007:278).

Verse 23 puts a theological fine point on the preceding truths. The text states that no matter whom people are or what they do, they are all saved in the same way. This is because all human beings are guilty of disobeying God. The verse has in mind two aspects of sin: overt transgression and failure to do what is right. People are all blameworthy on both counts. Regardless of what they attempt—no matter how noble it might be—they still fall short of God’s glorious standard. The Greek verb translated ‘fall short’ is in the present tense to indicate ongoing action. The tragedy is that human beings are always and continuously deficient of God’s glory. The noun rendered ‘glory’ refers not just to God’s magnificent presence, but also to the outward display of divine attributes, including God’s goodness, righteousness, and holiness (cf. Aalen 1986:46; Danker 2000:257; Louw and Nida 1989:696, 736; Spicq 1994:369–370). In brief, human sin separates all people from God and excludes them from enjoying manifestations of his glory.

7. The Divine Judgment of the Wicked (Ps 14:4–6)

The composer rhetorically asked whether ‘evildoers’ (Ps 14:4) were ignorant of the fact that God would one day judge them. This verse is referring to those who were guilty of committing iniquity and creating anguish in the lives of their victims. Though the wicked might intellectually understand the concept of divine judgment, they typically behaved as if it was a hollow truth. The psalmist noted that the reprobate violently and shamelessly exploited others. Indeed, it was as routine for malefactors to do so as devouring a piece of bread. In their arrogance and unbelief, they saw no need to call out to the Lord for help, especially since they presumed they would never experience any

calamity (cf. 10:6; cf. Broyles 1999:89; Clifford 2002:90; Irvine 1995:465; Kraus 1988:222; Terrien 2003:165; Wilson 2002:289).

The author foresaw a situation in which the unrighteous were gripped with fear, all due to the absence of God's sustaining presence in their lives. In contrast, the Lord preserved the 'righteous' (14:5). The righteous referred to members of the covenant community who heeded the Mosaic Law in every area of their lives, whether public or private, sacred or secular in nature. Instead of exploiting others, the upright trusted in God and followed his will. Even when the wicked tried to thwart and humiliate the 'plans' (v. 6) of the afflicted, the Lord came to their defence. In doing so, the divine warrior proved to be their 'refuge' or protection (cf. 46:1; 61:3; 62:7–8; 71:7; 73:28; 91:2, 9). As Weiser (1962:166) surmises, people of faith discern from this outcome that 'human sin is revealed—and confounded—by the reality of God'.

It was noted earlier that part of 53:5 is different in wording, even though it is comparable in theological emphasis, to 14:5–6. As in the case of the latter, the songwriter of 53:5 envisioned the impious being paralysed by dread and completely terrified even in the most benign of situations. This was a fitting outcome, given that the oppressors 'attacked' God's people. The Hebrew verb translated 'attacked' denotes a battle in which the assailants encamped around their victims to lay siege to their city (cf. Brown *et al.* 1985:333; Hamilton 1980:300; Helfmeyer 1986:8–9). The Lord's response was to bring about the demise of the godless. Then, the Creator desecrated them by allowing their corpses to be consumed by ravenous carnivores, which 'scattered the bones' and left them to decay. In ancient times, such an ignominious end for the dead was considered a 'severe infliction of torment upon their disembodied spirits' (Hilber 2009:436; cf. Ps 141:7; Isa 14:18–20; Jer 8:1–2). Moreover, God's contempt for the unrighteous was the reason his people were able to humiliate the impious in battle (Ps 53:5).

8. The Petition for God's Deliverance of Israel (Ps 14:7)

The composer petitioned God to deliver the covenant community from evil. The songwriter envisioned the victory arising out of 'Zion' (Ps 14:7). Zion is first mentioned in 2 Samuel 5:7 as a Jebusite fortress on a hill. After being captured by David, this fortress was called the City of David. Here, Israel's monarch brought the ark of the covenant, thereby making the hill a sacred site (6:10–12; cf. Batey 2000:559; Clifford 1972:131; Eliav 2005:2–3; Groves 2005:1022; Klouda 2008:936; Strong 1997:1314; Wilson 2002:290). Later, in Israelite theology, Zion became a 'symbol of security and refuge' (Ollenburger 1987:65–66), that is, the place where the ever-present Creator defended the righteous by vanquishing their foes (cf. Pss 9:1–20; 10:1–18; 20:1–9; 24:1–10; 46:1–11; 48:1–14; 76:1–12; 89:1–18; 93:1–5). Zion was regarded as the Lord's 'holy mountain' (Isa 11:9; cf. Pss 2:6; 3:4; 20:2; 87:1–2; 99:1–3, 9; 128:5; 132:13; 134:3), which is also known as the 'mountain of your inheritance' (Exod 15:17), the consecrated spot reserved for the Lord's own 'dwelling', and the 'city of God' (Ps 87:3; cf. Barker 1991:69; McKelvey 1969:11; Roberts 1982:100; Kraus 1988:72–73).

In that future day of deliverance anticipated by the composer, the Lord would bring the chosen people back from their captivity and restore their well-being. Psalm 14:7 collectively refers to the elect as 'Jacob', who rejoices, and 'Israel', who is filled with gladness (cf. Gen 32:28). The victorious reign of God is also echoed in Psalm 10:16–18. The songwriter expressed confidence in the Lord by using words that are reminiscent of the speech recorded in Exodus 15:18 (which commemorate God's deliverance of the Hebrews from Pharaoh). Psalm 10:16 declares that Yahweh is the eternal, sovereign monarch, who drives out the godless from the Promised Land. This statement looked forward to a day when the chosen people would be in sole possession of

Israel. The psalmist affirmed that not only did God hear the author's prayers, but also all the cries uttered by the helpless. Furthermore, as the Creator responded to their petitions, they were comforted by his presence (v. 17). While the Lord vindicated the cause of those who were orphaned and maltreated, God would bring the wicked to ruin. The Creator would prevent these 'mere earthly mortals' (v. 18) from harassing and tormenting the covenant community (cf. Pss 49:12, 20; 56:4, 11; 62:9; 78:39; 103:14–16; 118:6; 144:4; Isa 31:3; Jer 17:5). Indeed, the Lord sealed the tragic end of the wicked.

9. Conclusion

An examination of Psalm 8 indicates that the all-glorious Lord has bestowed unparalleled dignity on human beings. At the dawn of history, the Creator, who powerfully ordered the cosmos and now sustains it, decreed that the first humans and their descendants were to serve as the Lord's vice-regents over everything that exists in the world. The poet admitted that people are mere mortals, who seem especially puny and inconsequential against the backdrop of the vast and mysterious universe. Nevertheless, during this present age, the sovereign Ruler has placed human beings a little lower in rank than the angels. Moreover, the Creator has given people governing authority over the non-human realm and other natural forces upon the earth. In light of all God has done for humanity, it is appropriate for them to express continuous thanks to the Creator.

Psalm 14 provides a strong counterpoint to Psalm 8. The songwriter revealed that people have not lived up to their God-given potential. Instead of experiencing the dignity of being the Creator's stewards over the world, they have opted for the disgrace of wallowing in sin. In addition, rather than affirm God as their Lord, they deliberately reason

that either God does not exist or the notion of the divine is irrelevant to their lives. Theologically speaking, they are intellectual, moral, and practical atheists. Moreover, regardless of how sophisticated and accomplished they might be in their personal and professional lives, from God's perspective, they are spiritually and morally bankrupt and thus, fools.

Because the impious deny the existence of God in their attitudes and actions, they have minimal incentive to live in a virtuous and upright manner. In extreme cases, they maltreat the impoverished and exploit the disadvantaged. Rather than seeking to accomplish anything beneficial with their God-given abilities and talents, the reprobate immerse themselves in heinous schemes. They demonstrate by their thoughts and deeds that they are depraved and corrupt. Even in those instances where the degenerate act as if they are enlightened and shrewd, the Creator regards them as being ignorant of his will and ways. Especially insidious is their assumption that since God allegedly does not exist, the notion of being accountable to a supreme being is a figment of a superstitious imagination. The poet revealed that in a future day, the Lord would condemn the wicked and vindicate the upright. Put another way, while a tragic end would be the fate of evildoers, unending joy would be the destiny of the righteous.

Together, then, in contrasting ways, Psalms 8 and 14 remind believers that God is worthy of their adoration, for the Creator both made and sustains them. This truth is also taught in the New Testament. In Matthew 6:25–33, Jesus urged the disciples not to worry about where they would get food to eat, water to drink, or clothes to wear. The Saviour indicated that the Creator would graciously provide what they needed, just as God supplied the birds of the air and the lilies that

carpeted the fields of Palestine. The Lord would do even more for believers, whom the divine supremely valued.

Moreover, as Paul addressed the philosophers of Athens, he declared that God made the world and everything in it and that the Lord gives life and breath to every creature (Acts 17:24–25). The apostle made it clear that this sovereign Creator determines the various eras of history and the limits of each nation's territory (v. 26). Paul also said that this great God gives people the ability to live, move about, and become responsible citizens in their communities (v. 28). Finally, James 1:17 reveals that every good thing, every generous action, and every perfect gift comes from the Creator of the lights of heaven. In short, every aspect of people's lives is under God's loving care. Consequently, the Lord, who is all-powerful, all-wise, and all-knowing, deserves nothing less than humanity's highest praise.

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