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An Analysis of the Citation of Psalm Eight and Forty in the Book of Hebrews

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by

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Introduction

The Book of Psalms is a beautiful collection of songs written by King David and others. They are primarily about the worship of Yahweh but express many things including joy, longing, despair, outrage, and wonder. The writer of the Book of Hebrews cites Psalm 8 and Psalm 40 in his work and uses them to establish the mission of Jesus Christ and His relationship to mankind. These psalms, written by King David, are songs celebrating Yahweh and His relationship with His human imagers. Through the insight of the writer of the Book of Hebrews, both Psalms show the current insufficient state of creation and the glorious change that has started and will continue through the reign of Jesus Christ.

Psalm 8:4-8

Psalm 8 is part of a mini cluster made up of psalms 7 through 9. The other two psalms are laments while eight is a celebration. Together they form a poetic triptych moving from lament to hymn of praise to lament. Amid horrible things, it reminds the faithful of why Yahweh will intervene of their behalf.¹ Psalm 8 itself deals with man's status in creation. At first man seems insignificant when compared to the vastness of the universe and the psalmist intentionally creates a feeling of despair to make the good news that follows that much greater. Yahweh created mankind to be His imagers, a status that places them just a little below the Heavenly Host. As such mankind is given dominion over the Earth and the Earth's other inhabitants.² As stated in James 3:7, only man can tame everything other than himself. In addition, of all the creatures of

¹ Hilbert James Keener, *Canonical Exegesis of Psalm 8: YHWH's Maintenance of the Created Order through Divine Reversal* Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013, 69-71.

² Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 2nd ed., vol. 19 Nashville, TN: Nelson Reference & Electric, 2004, 108.

the physical world, only man can question his place in the universe.³ The answer to that question cannot be found in observing the physical world or in natural philosophy, but only through special revelation from Yahweh.⁴

The Masoretic version of Psalm 8: 4-6 uses the word *elohim* which identifies a member of the spiritual realm. In the Old Testament it is used to identify Yahweh, members of His Heavenly Host, the spirit of a deceased human, and even demons.⁵ The LXX uses the word *angelos*, or *angel*. There is not really a difference in the texts as by the time the LXX was written, the word *angelos* had been used to group together all the spiritual beings that were still loyal to Yahweh. In a similar fashion those spiritual beings in rebellion were grouped under the term *demon*. Therefore, the current state of mankind is one just below that of spiritual beings loyal to Yahweh.⁶

Hebrews 2:5-9

The second chapter of the Book of Hebrews moves from the current creation and discusses the new creation that has begun but will come to full fruition in the eschaton. Deuteronomy 32:8 tells that after the rebellion of mankind at the Tower of Babel, Yahweh split humanity into nations and placed them under the dominion of *elohim*.⁷ Psalm 82 relates that those heavenly beings also rebelled and have been sentenced to die like men.⁸ In the world to come, the world will be ruled by Christ and His followers who have been glorified and are no

³ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15 Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973, 84.

⁴ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 108.

⁵ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, First Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015, 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁷ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, vol. 47B Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 1991, 45.

⁸ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 352.

longer lesser than the elohim.⁹ Hebrews 2:5-8 cites Psalm 8:4-6 to provide a contrast. Where man was made an imager of Yahweh and crowned with glory, he fell short of his purpose through sins. Alternately, the phrase “son of man” references what mankind was supposed to be and whose purpose is fulfilled through Jesus Christ.¹⁰

Hebrews 2:8 provides an instance of “already but not yet” by stating that some things are already under His dominion yet. However, Christ has been “crowned with glory and honor” and will fully come into His kingdom in the world to come. In verse 9 Christ is inserted into the cited verses as one who was for a time made a little lesser than the angels. Unlike other men who died in sin, Christ is triumphant over death.¹¹ There has been discussion over the use of the Greek instead of the Hebrew elohim as a showing of humility as elohim can refer to Yahweh and the writer of Hebrews did not want to make such a close comparison of man and Him.¹² However, as stated previously the term angel is used in the Greek to refer to any faithful spiritual being and is used as a translation of the word elohim.

Psalm 40:6-8

Psalm 40 is a composite psalm made up of two independent units. Verses 6-8 are part of the first unit which runs from verses 2-12.¹³ The psalm before it is a victory hymn and leads into the king trying to appropriately celebrate the victory. However, the animal sacrifices are not enough. Also, as a king of Yahweh’s people, he has specific duties dictated in Deuteronomy 17:14-20 which the verse mentions as the scroll.¹⁴

⁹ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 45.

¹⁰ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15 Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983, 88.

¹¹ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 48-49.

¹² Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 108.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 313.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 315.

The Masoretic text and the LXX differ in verse 6. In the Masoretic, the king is given an open ear. In the LXX he is given a body. Some connect the opening of the ear to boring a hole in the ear of a servant.¹⁵ Under the Law, Hebrew servants who had served six years and wanted to remain with their master had their ear pierced to signify they were a servant for life (Exod 21:2-6).¹⁶ However, this does not work grammatically as the verse in Psalms says ears and with servants only one ear was pierced. Alternately, the Masoretic could be corrupted such as the Hebrew word was not ears but two words meaning a body. According to David Turpie, the best solution is that the LXX translated the two ears as representing the whole body.¹⁷

Hebrews 10:5-9

The author of Hebrews cites Psalm 40:6-8 but states that Christ is the focus of the verses. In this context they become His mission on earth as he is the perfect Davidic king. The word “consequently” links Christ as better than the sacrifice of bulls and goats. The LXX is cited so that it reads “but a body you have prepared for me” (Heb. 10:5). That body is sacrificed in the crucifixion as the perfect offering for the sins of mankind.¹⁸

¹⁵ David Calman Turpie, *The Old Testament in the New: A Contribution to Biblical Criticism and Interpretation* London, England: William and Norgate, 1868, 120.

¹⁶ Unless otherwise stated, Bible verse references are sourced from *ESV: Study Bible: English Standard Version* Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016.

¹⁷ David Calman Turpie, *The Old Testament in the New*, 121.

¹⁸ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 15 Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983, 205-206.

Through His mission, Christ abolished the sacrificial system which was only meant to be temporary.¹⁹ The first system was an imperfect system for accessing Yahweh as it had to be repeated regularly. This system foreshadowed Christ's perfect sacrifice which only occurred once and has given believers eternal access to Yahweh.²⁰ In showing this the author also dispels a tendency in Judaism which had been to treat the sacrificial system as an end unto itself, even though it is stated in Psalm 40 that it was insufficient.²¹

Conclusion

Through the use of the psalms, the author of the Book of Hebrews showed that the systems of rule and sacrifice that had been in place since the inception of Israel were temporary and insufficient to fulfil mankind's role as an imager of Yahweh. Though created lesser than the angels and requiring repeated sacrifices due to sin, believers in Christ have the start of a transformation that will make them greater and allow them to follow beneath the firstborn of creation in ruling the Earth and having an eternal relationship with Him.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

²⁰ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, vol. 47B Dallas, TX: Word, Incorporated, 1991, 259-260.

²¹ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, 205-206.

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