

Holy Trinity, Old Testament (Psalm), Year C

THE NAME OF GOD

Psalm 8

Holy Trinity

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

1 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. 2 Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. 3 When I look at your heavens, and the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; 4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? 5 You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. 6 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, 7 all sheep and oxen, 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 seas. 9 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Author's Note: In verses 1 and 9, the all-capitalized LORD translates the Hebrew word YHWH which is the proper name of God as revealed to Moses (see Exod. 3). Literally speaking, the name YHWH derives from the verb "to be" and signifies something like "I am" or "I cause to be" or "I will be there." Septuagint, the c. 250 BCE Greek translation of the scriptures that was translated by Jews (who should know), here reads "Kyrie," the vocative form of "kyrios." This is the normal Greek word for "lord" and refers to one who has authority, whether a master or king or god. The vocative of YHWH/Kyrie is rendered by the NRSV

in caps as “O LORD.” But due to the general nature of the term “lord” in lower case, and especially since Jesus is often referred to as Lord, I prefer here the Hebrew YHWH, usually pronounced as “Yahweh.” As for the word translated by NRSV as “Sovereign” (a kingly word signifying absolute authority), the Hebrew word behind it reads “Lord” (here using uppercase “L” because God is clearly referenced). It is retained in Septuagint as “kyrios” and in the RSV (despite the visual confusion wrought by the combination of LORD and Lord). My preference here is also for “Lord” because, like the proper name YHWH, it is less interpretative. Thus, the address to God in verses 1 and 9 is: “YHWH our Lord!” Even so, as the analysis will show, God’s “name” however specific does not exhaust the identity of God.

DIAGNOSIS: God’s Name as Indicator of God’s Dominion

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Which God?

From the outset, Israel’s God was set over against all other gods, those other gods being more or less local divinities. True, Israel’s God was also localized, but localized more in reference to the people of Israel than to the Ark of the Covenant or the Land or the Temple. The people, of course, are the elected ones: the progeny of Abraham and all the promises attached to them. Israel’s God is thus not some entity separate from his people but always in relation to his people, though always radically different. At a minimum this God is for Israel “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob [aka Israel].” This God, whose specific name is YHWH, is the Lord of history—of Calling and Promise, of Exodus and Sinai, of Wilderness and Land, of Judges and Kings, of Home and of Exile, of Death and of Life—and as it turns out, as Israel experienced especially during her Babylonian Exile, is Lord “in all the earth” and “above the heavens” (v. 1), before whom there are no others. By “the work of his fingers” (v. 3) on earth and in the heavens, YHWH has authority over every aspect in creation. Although the name YHWH

already suggests God's unlimited creativity and dominion, there is evidently much more to Israel's God than is indicated merely by God's name.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): "Our" Lord
Psalm 8 is exclusively a song of praise to YHWH's "glory" and "majesty" (vv. 1, 9). Yet there is already a hint in the possessive pronoun "our" Sovereign/Lord that Israel is the chief beneficiary of YHWH's authority and handiwork. Nonetheless, the psalm is directed not so much to Israel apart from the rest of creation, as it is to YHWH's whole creation of which Israel is but a part. Within this dialectic of createdness and chosenness, the psalm adjures Israel's "enemies," "foes," and "avengers" (v. 2) to consider well which God-YHWH is his name—it is against whom they are contending. On the surface it would seem that Israel is faithful to YHWH while their foes are not. As a song of praise without any corresponding lament, this is to be expected. But in that little word "our," is there not a smugness, born of chosenness, that nonetheless recognizes that there are still enemies out there to be reckoned with? True, Israel still has foes but even these foes are under the authority of YHWH; indeed they are YHWH's foes just as much as Israel's. But what about the enemy within? There, too, is a foe that constantly fights against YHWH by refusing the humility inherent in both createdness and chosenness.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): "Our" Enemy
In verse 5 we read that humans were created "a little lower than God." (That translation does not adequately express Israel's humility before YHWH. Instead of "God" here, the Hebrew reads "elohim," a general word for "god" but in the plural, "gods"; that is, quasi-divine creatures under the lordship of YHWH that Septuagint translated as "angels.") Humans were not created as gods or as angels but as "mortals" (v. 4, another tricky translation) who are subject to death. That is the point. If our

failure to be humble before YHWH is unfixable for us (call it sin), then death is our Creator's way of avenging it, of calling it to a full stop. For even death is subject to the authority of the Lord of all creation. In view especially of the crucifixion of Jesus (and here we must dare even to say "our" crucifixion of Jesus) this means, inescapably, that YHWH "our" God, in his glory and majesty, is "our" Enemy and Foe and Avenger, from whom no promethean effort on our part can deliver us.

PROGNOSIS: The Dominion of God as Indicator of God's Name

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): "Our" Savior

God wills to have dominion over creation! To that end—so that the whole creation does not end in death—YHWH, true to his name, invested himself wholly in his creation. In Jesus of Nazareth, YHWH personally yoked himself to creation by taking death into himself, and extinguished it upon the cross. In so doing, Jesus in the power of the Spirit "put all things under his feet" (v. 6), and by his resurrection from the dead destroyed creation's "last enemy which is death" (1 Cor. 15:26). The resurrected body of Jesus is a new creation not subject to sin and death but subject to YHWH only. In Jesus, YHWH's comprehensive embrace of creation fulfills all his promises. Since in Jesus we see the mercy of YHWH in full effect, just as in Jesus YHWH's wrath upon sin and death is in full effect, God's proper name is expanded in meaning exponentially. God's name is YHWH, but in view of Jesus it now means that YHWH's dominion over creation has been brought to fulfillment in a singular new creation.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Trusting in YHWH

If Jesus has indeed been raised from the dead, then a new creation has been brought into reality. And that new creation is the Spirit of Jesus working in us to produce faith in YHWH—how else to describe it? The new creation, in which neither death nor YHWH is our enemy, is brought about by a trinity of God's

saving activity that we experience as faith or trust: in YHWH, in Jesus, in the Spirit. Although the Church has traditionally spoken of “faith in Jesus” to encompass this experience, and to name this triune activity as “Father-Son-Spirit,” it is wholly appropriate on the basis of Step 4 to summarize our experience of God-in-Christ as “trusting in YHWH.” By retaining the name YHWH to refer to the one and only God, we name the God who, from the outset, has covenanted with creation and with Israel and with the Church, to bring creation to fulfillment in the resurrected body of Jesus.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Soli Deo Gloria!

To YHWH alone the glory! Creation and new creation is the single unfolding story of YHWH’s promissory relationship to Israel in its dual mode of createdness and chosenness. In a world where there are countless religions and countless gods, to identify the triunity of God as YHWH (the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and yes of Paul also) is to magnify God’s proper name to include his new-creative activities in Jesus and the Spirit—in tune with YHWH’s majesty and glory being praised in Psalm 8. And of course, lest it go unsaid, faith in YHWH includes that activity of the Spirit that is manifest not only in praise but in love; for YHWH’s power, as vast as it is, “is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). To YHWH alone the glory!