

Psalm 8 – human dignity and vulnerability

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Abstract

Psalm 8 contrasts the majesty of the deity with the question about humankind. Despite being proclaimed as a little lower or a little less than divine beings, the contrast itself indicates a level of vulnerability on the side of humankind. If my proposition is true, the question is what kind of vulnerability it is. What is the relationship between being a little lower than a divine being – having dominion over creation – and vulnerability? To answer this question, the psalm is read with the help of various interpretations. Then follows a discussion on vulnerability and the problem of invulnerability. The essay concludes that it is necessary to feel vulnerability and not shut down its feelings. Daily life involves engaging with situations that require openness to vulnerability.

Keywords

Psalm 8; vulnerability; invulnerability; human dignity; apartheid

1. Context, human dignity, norms of reading

In a recently published book on the Psalms in the series *texts@contexts* (see Brenner-Idan and Yee 2024) scholars were invited to show how their academic work, emic and etic, interact in their life, for example how their life choices and conditions articulate their scholarly choices, and vice versa (Brenner-Idan and Yee 2024: 2). Ultimately, the authors were asked to show how their interpretation of a psalm were conditioned by their lives and how it conditioned their life itself. The aim of the series *text@contexts* is to break through the chain that North-Atlantic and European scholarship unwittingly created as the only objective truth of the biblical text and to give space to other readings that are not necessarily from the North-Atlantic or

European context. It wants to legitimise the context (geographical, socio-political space) of the interpreter as a valid point of inquiry into the biblical text (Brenner-Idan & Yee 2024: x).

There were two readings of Psalm 8. One reading addresses ecology and stewardship, discussing Earth as a physical space that can be affected by various factors. The other reading deals with the similarity between the human and divine sovereignty – a humbling experience that renders the reader vulnerable. In each reading, the interpreter refers to his or her lived experience and the meaning that is attached to the word “dominion”.

In Psalm 8, like Psalm 104, a perfect world is created where there is no place for perpetrators and their implicated subjects (Snyman 2024:138–139). They, like Cain and Judas, are usually removed from the scene. Psalm 8 presupposes a harmonious order with human dignity. The word “dignity” entails that what is worthy of esteem and honour, someone or something that generates respect, or something of serious significance.

In ancient Europe, only a few people had dignity. Most were slaves and not worthy of dignity. The notion of dignity changed with the Enlightenment and modernity as Europeans started to engage people who looked very different from them. Those who differed from the main tenets of Christianity were regarded as without dignity.¹ People may thoughtfully argue that no human being has any prerogative over other human beings, selling it as a pious doctrine. Yet, presenting themselves is another story when they appear in full regalia of richness, money, and well-being. Their portraits fill European museums in the period called the Golden Age, the time of colonialism. Workers, slaves, and domestics merely form the background in many scenes.

Then came WWI and WWII. In both wars, human dignity only belonged to those in power. Only after the utter destruction and Holocaust of WWII, dignity became synonymous with humanity with the proposition of equality and equivalence (Leo van Doesberg 2011:7). It also focused

1 In a report to the synod of the GKSA in 1961 (ACTA 1961), despite its rather confusing formulation, it acknowledges that no human being has any prerogative over another human being. A few sentences later, though, it refers to black people in a paternalistic mode. It seems clear to me that a race epistemology is at work in the report, even when their morality tells them otherwise.

on individuality with the human individual called to account for his or her responsibility and duty as a free person. Just after WWII, the United Nations published its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognises in its preamble the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. While South Africa was hammering out a constitution with human rights as its foundation, a genocide in Rwanda occurred, killing a million people. And lately, the State of Israel looks like doing the same with the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. In the meantime, the USA tries to dominate the world by imposing tariffs on the rest of the world, not exercising dominion.

Of course, the apartheid regime's constitution in South Africa was at odds with the UN's declaration of human rights, but the constitution of 1996 took this idea of human dignity over in its chapter on the Bill of Rights.² Whereas the constitution declares human dignity to all who are living in South Africa, the memory of a time and a group of people who disregarded that maxim remains. In too many public discussions, the privilege that was bestowed on whiteness and concomitant racist tropes are visible. It is an epistemology that needs to change.

Domination as manipulative control is also presented in biblical hermeneutics and its epistemology. Cheryl Anderson (2009:31–32) alludes to a particular domination when she refers to the mythical norm of Bible reading, namely a white, male, heterosexual, Christian, middle-class, wealthy human being. Some of these elements are also part of my identity and context from which I read texts. The mythical norm has rightly come under the looking glass, as it no longer can be regarded as the norm, since different identities have different contexts and different intersections with one another. Yet, those who are used to reading with this norm currently experience what I would call a negative vulnerability, because their reading

2 See Louis Jonker (2010:594–596). He refers, *inter alia*, to a copy of the Cyrus cylinder that was presented to the United Nations by the Shah of Iran in 1971. In its acceptance, the then General-Secretary U-Thant considered the cylinder to be an ancient declaration of human rights by the Emperor Cyrus when he expressed his commitment to peace and respect for other civilisations (2010:595). The Nobel Peace Prize winner in 2003, Shirin Ebadi from Iran, in her acceptance speech, similarly referred to the Cyrus Cylinder as one of the most important documents to be studied in the history of human rights (Jonker 2010:595).

is questioned. They feel threatened, and when speaking out in an argument, they are quickly made off as fragile (cf. DiAngelo 2012:182).³

What if I tweak the norm a bit differently? Taking my lead from Athalya Brenner-Idan and Gale Yee, how would a gay, masculine, middle-class Christian, educated white man read Psalm 8? This norm is highly contextual and contested. The reader is also highly implicated by his past. He carries the burden of apartheid, since he is white and received all the privileges of whiteness and masculinity. He also transitioned from heteronormativity to homosexuality in his middle age. He is critical of Christianity, especially the sphere of Calvinism in which he grew up. With a Ph.D., he is educated but knows how little he knows. He retired with a middle-class pension while also losing some testosterone as he aged. He wants to uphold his dignity and to read the psalm with integrity, perhaps the last straw he can grasp in a discourse riddled with opposing and different identities.

Psalm 8 contrasts the majesty of the deity with the question about humankind. Despite being proclaimed as a little lower or a little less than divine beings, the contrast itself indicates a level of vulnerability on the side of humankind. If my proposition is true, the question is what kind of vulnerability it is. What is the relationship between being a little lower than a divine being – having dominion over creation – and vulnerability? To answer this question, let us first read the psalm and consider what others say, and then examine it in the light of vulnerability.

2. Reading Psalm 8

The focus on Psalm 8, especially on the relatively high status attributed to the human being in v. 5, has played an important background role in my identity deliberations around the topics of vulnerability, implicated subject, identity, the mythic biblical norm of interpretation and an ethics of interpretation. Verse 4 implies a humble humankind in the face of a majestic deity. Verse 5 argues that despite the sentiment behind the question

3 When one reads Judith Butler (2009) and George Yancy (2004, 2020), then I would argue not all white responses can be categorised as white fragility, but rather part of the mourning of the loss of (white) power.

of vulnerability, there is something worthwhile in a man and a woman. The human being is not to be depreciated (Hofman 2025:120).⁴

Verses 3-6 (SEB) read as follows:

³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
⁴what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?

⁵Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honour.

⁶You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet.

Verse 5 immediately implies a particular status that calls forth the creation of man and woman as a good and glorious image of the deity that exclaims honour and well-being. But over against the majesty of creation, its vulnerability is strongly etched against its gravitas: “a little lower than divine beings” with creation lying at its feet. The psalm creates a particular spatial image of the human being’s place in a three-tier reality with the deity on top, followed by divine beings and then the human being at whose feet creation lies.

The psalm constructs a space. According to the view of space by Gerald West, Sithembo Zwane and Helder Luis Carlos (2023:590), this would constitute an invited space with a deity and his creation. It is not a democratic space, but one where the laws are already fixed by the deity and followed by humankind. Its mechanisms of power do not favour democratic participatory power or deliberations on the biblical text that would fall outside the doctrinal parameters any church would have set. The result is the entrenching of dependency, fear and lack of privilege (2023:591). It is in a space like this that norms for biblical interpretation

4 The LXX and Vulgate refers to angels: “a little lower than angels.” However, the Masoretic text says it a bit differently: “You have made man nearly a god.” Hofman (2025:120) argues that there is no doubt that the human being is made aristocratic (in *adelstand*): “De mens is gekroond met schitterende, heerlijke attributen. God maakt hier de mens gewichtig, maar dan wel in relatie tot Hem. [...] De adeloom verplicht [...] niet worden opgevat als een willekeurige en tirannieke heerszucht en uitbuiting.”

can easily be masked and hidden, as is the case exemplified in the work of Cheryl Anderson (2009).

Given the nature of a space like this, a human being is particularly vulnerable when it oversteps its boundaries, causing others harm and injury. This can happen as follows: when a human being does not follow the rules set around the issue of dominion, he or she then becomes an implicated subject in need of reformation and readjustment to fulfil his mandate of dominion as proclaimed in the psalm. For example, if dominion becomes domination over people, such as women, different races than those who dominate, and different sexual orientations, harm and injury occur, physically and psychologically. How does one conceive of this three-levelled space when the perceived space limits participation? West et aliter (2023:592–3) provide an option: invent a space and invigorate it with a different production of space, one of defiance and resistance. It also concerns the production of a different knowledge about the human being's dignity and an acceptance of human vulnerability as a condition common to humanity.

I would opt to invigorate the space by enabling a community to energise around a specific problem or societal problems, or questions. I think this is what the book on Psalms in the series *texts@contexts* does. Nicole Tilford (2024:18–19) expresses her discomfort with the interpretation of verse 6 as dominion. She finds it a harsh term and would rather use stewardship. She refers to Genesis 1:26–28 where humanity is also given dominion over creation and told to subdue the earth. There, the Hebrew word implies violence in literally treading upon something. In Ancient Near Eastern iconography, kings are shown stepping on foreign people's heads.⁵ To subdue also has a military resonance. To her, Genesis 1:26–28 provides an “exalted portrait of humanity, but it is one in which humans are seemingly granted the freedom to rule over the rest of creation with an iron fist.” Psalm 8 uses a different word, which means to rule or have authority over something, like a king having authority over his people. Although the word used lacks force, the addition in verse 6b (“you have put all things under their feet” RSV), the allusion of a conquering king trampling over

5 Bosman (2010: 569) argues that the Priestly theological view broadened the perspective of the *imago Dei* from a focus on kings to all of humankind. He calls it a democratization of anthropology.

people is present. In the ensuing interpretation of the psalm since Early Christianity “dominion” imparts a meaning of negative interactions with the earth, giving people the right to do what they wish with the planet (2024:20). In contrast, following Pope Francis’s *Laudato si’* of 2015, she favours a careful stewardship of the earth and all life upon it, even when the encyclical does not mention Psalm 8. The encyclical celebrates creation and human life on earth and leads her to contemplate Psalm 8 in her role in creation and how her actions affect the world around her.⁶ Stewardship involves supervision over and taking care of something. It seems to me that it involves the recognition of vulnerability that results in careful management and oversight of the process so as not to harm something or keep it in the condition received.

Whereas Tilford softens the term dominion into a vulnerable stewardship, Landy’s reading introduces us to epistemic vulnerability, the human being that can never be the master subject, God. In the second reading by Francis Landy (Landy 2024:23–27), Psalm 8 brings him back to the Edenic space of Genesis 1–2. Adam, as a representative of humanity, rules and lives in a perfect world. But it is v. 6 that he finds sensational: “You have made them a little less than God and crowned them with honour and glory.” He feels like almost God, in terms of humility as well as wonder: “It appealed to me because of my sense that God was not being external to humanity, but an aspect of consciousness. But the niggling detail is the ‘almost’. There is a slight, but impassable, gap between humans and God.” The human attributes of honour and glory match Yahweh’s divinity and magnificence as per verse 1. The human’s sovereignty corresponds to God’s sovereignty. Two parallel lines, never to meet (2024:25). His Edenic space is unspoilt and idyllic, which makes him vulnerable or humble because there is always the possibility of vulnerability that brings to humanity that “little less” than the deity. But importantly, this sensibility is part of human consciousness. In other words, I would say it brings us close to an epistemic vulnerability

6 Tiana Bosman (2022: 6) argues similarly, but from a Protestant view: “God is the creator, the giver, the agent who bestows responsibility on humankind, and humans are (meant to be) the humble recipients of this task to rule as stewards in the creation of God. Read from this perspective, it becomes evident that the call to “dominate over” is directed to humans who know and acknowledge their humble place of insignificance and finitude in (not over) creation as well as their God-given calling and therefore to rule with care and servitude, not through exploitation.”

that takes into consideration how Christianity operated in the past in this regard.

This epistemic vulnerability leads to a further question: how should one be human amongst other humans? Masenya (2014:500) uses an example of male domination in her understanding of Psalm 8. She uses the depiction of humanity in Psalm 8 as a little less than god to rehabilitate the status of female humanity to that of royal or aristocracy, but in the process, she does not redefine dominion into a softer exercise of power. In her lived narrated experience, there is a woman, Hosi N’wamitwa, whose succession to her father was disputed based on gender. Her capacities and full humanity were contested in a context where traditional leadership in African rural communities (invited spaces) is still in the hands of men. Masenya (2014:495–7) indicates certain elements in the Psalm are interpreted within a male hierarchical system. Firstly, the deity himself, Yahweh, is a male Israelite deity portrayed in what she defines as kingly language. The references to human beings, babies and infants in v. 2, coupled with the military language in the section, are a further indication of the focus on masculinity. She thought that the mention of babies and infants would have introduced women to the psalm. The comparison with the deity, attributing to Enosh or son of man god-like attributes, is understood by Masenya (2014:497) as a basic male prerogative: dominion becomes invested with authority to rule over others.

Masenya deals with hierarchical space. How does she overcome it? The late David Clines (1968: 95) comes to her rescue when he stated that the notion of the image of God does not refer to male humanity only, but also to female humanity. As several other scholars do, she uses Genesis 1:26–28 where the *imago dei* is understood not in terms of masculinity, but as human, male and female (2014:498).⁷ She understands the Hebrew word used in Psalm 8, *enosh*, as a generic term for humanity. It has the connotation of negative vulnerability in terms of weakness, wretchedness and mortality. *Ben adam* is also used with *enosh*, son of man. Masenya thus prefers to use *adam* in

7 See for example Hendrik Bosman (2010:569) with reference to the notion of being created in the image of God: “The image of God in every man and woman is a source of dignity and worth of all people. The *imago Dei* establishes a niche for humankind in creation that impacts on how we understand ourselves and interact with one another, as well as with the rest of creation.”

the sense of a human being, irrespective of gender. It is thus human beings, male and female, who have been given dominion over creation. The regal character is reinforced with the image of all things under their feet, as is the case with the portrayals of Egyptian rulers. Masenya wants to overcome vulnerability in a negative sense by pulling women up to the same level as the male patriarchy, in other words, to have their power.

Johan Coetzee (2006) employs the topic of embodiment in his reading of Psalm 8.⁸ The notion of embodiment allows him to think about humanity in more general terms in the psalm. The human body is central in the cosmos with the deity above and creation at the feet of humankind (2006:1137): “Through bodily involvement with Yahweh’s heavenly and earthly works, the psalmist experiences communion with God and with his creation.” The psalm constructs a three-tier reality: the sky or heaven above that rests on the mountains serving as pillars, which are grounded on a flat piece of earth floating on water (cf. Spangenberg 2021:6).

Central to the psalm are verses 5–6. Verse 5, after referring to God and the creation of the firmament as a bulwark against his foes and the praise given to him in his majesty, the question is asked what is man that God thinks about and cares for him. Verse 6 answers that man is created a little less than God and crowned with honour and glory. And then follows a list of the dominion over which man should rule.

Coetzee (2006:1129) describes the human body as functioning within a space when in a specific position. In an upright position, the body signifies action, assurance, control, and stature, whereas in a prone position it signifies submission (2006:1129). A vertical position with the axes of high and low suggests superiority and inferiority. In Psalm 8, the firmament (high) implies the divine, whereas the feet of the son of man, the lowest part of the body, are associated with insignificance and dirt. With the firmament above and the beasts, birds, fish and sea below, a mythical space is formed in the psalm as sky and land.

8 See Coetzee (2006:112–150 for a structural analysis of Psalm 8 in which he indicates vv. 5–6 as a parallel and linking the previous as well as the following verses, framed by a praise of the name of Yahweh in vv. 2 and 10.

The son of man in v. 5 forms the centre of the psalm with heaven above and earth at his feet. With the body in a vertical position and the head looking up, the deity is associated with the sky or heaven, with the weakest of all proclaiming God's majesty. Humanity, made a little less like God, denotes status in terms of space. They are lower than gods but higher than nature, and nonetheless royal with delegated power from Yahweh (2006:1132). The focus is not on the essence of the human being, but his or her structured bodily presence, "a metaphorical projection to reign, to exercise dominion" (2006:1132). This is what it means to be almost like God or a little less than God or heavenly beings. The Psalm attributes to humankind a pivotal position (2006:1133) in the space provided by the cosmos with God above and earth below: it is in the top position of a hierarchy of dominion analogous to the deity and heaven. It is a ranked relationship with all living beings other than humans (2006:1135).⁹ But it is a vulnerable position. Babies and infants provide a bulwark against the enemies of Yahweh, whereas the office of dominion and the act of ruling operate as a measure against hostility on earth (2006:1135). But whereas the deity reveals a particular vulnerability towards the son of man (being mindful of and caring for them), Coetzee (2006:1136) sees not an analogous behaviour of humankind towards earth and its creatures. Compassion only exists between the deity and humanity and vice versa, and between humanity and smaller social circles, but it is not extended to the animal world.

It is as if dominion receives the meaning of invulnerability. This led to the exploitation of creation, as it was merely to the benefit of humankind. Within Christianity, it also led to the demythologising of nature (no spirits, no ancestors). The position of dominion ascribed to the human being in Psalm 8 reflects to some scholars, a significant position in the hierarchy. For example, according to Liroy (2013:217) the fact that the psalm relates human beings to a little lower than God means they have more dignity than angels, a position they will finally obtain at the fulfilment of time. Human dignity stems from being made in the image of God, which makes them royal stewards and guardians over the entire creation (2013:218). Later, he argues (2013:220) that God bestowed on humans more significance than any part

9 Zenger (1987:201–211) supports the idea of humanity as vulnerable. The metaphor of babies and infants proclaiming the majesty of Yahweh alludes to the enemies of the deity with the babies and infants the "[die] leidenden und verfolgten Gemeinde".

of creation. Creation serves the needs of humanity. Lioy acknowledges that humanity has not done a good job of its dominionship, but despite the fall he argues the role of humanity is still one of great dignity (2013:220). His aim is against militant atheists to whom he ascribes invulnerability by claiming that humanity is not more valuable than any other form of life. To him, Jesus will regenerate humanity to realise its role of dominion properly.

On the issue of invulnerability, according to Mays (1994:66), Yahweh is portrayed as the divine cosmic monarch to whom the earth and all on and in it belongs. Yahweh mastered the chaos and created the world. The deity appears invulnerable. Hossfeld and Zenger (1993:79) make it more real by alluding to the geography of the time as the powers of chaos in the enemies of the people of Israel who fought against them and Yahweh. Enosh, the son of man, in turn has been endowed with royal traits of honour and glory, making him a little less than God. The term “dominion” relates to the royal rank, “the likeness [...] in the correspondence in the sovereignty system.” (Mays 1994:67). God overcomes chaos and creates; humankind is given the vocation of mastering what the deity created to bring forth civilisation (1994:69): “Being human means being ordained and installed in a right and responsibility within the divine sovereignty.” It is a power and capacity to order and shape creation into a habitat, a liveable space. The regency has an ideal and normative dimension (1994:69): dominion relates to responsibility and corresponds to the sovereignty of the deity as creator. The legitimacy of the dominion depends on the correspondence to the deity and the subordination of what is at humanity’s feet. Mays makes a strong point (1994:70) that dominion should not result in domination and subordination to subjection (cf. Weber 2001: 74). Vulnerability as harm and injury would then enter the scene.

The latter seemed to have happened (and is still happening) to the surrounding peoples of Israel: The Ancient Near Eastern concept of a human being was, according to Hossfeldt and Zenger (1993:79), that a human is the slave of the deity, kings and the high priest. In this sense the psalm is revolutionary, as it ascribes a near god-like position to the human being and invest him or her with a level of invulnerability with “quasi-göttliche und königliche ‘Menschenwürde’, die den Menschen für den Weltherrscher-Gott liebenswürdig macht und die dieser Schützt, muss

er sich nicht erkämpfen, sie ist ihm von JHWH mit seinem Mensch-Sein, so zerbrechlich und gefährdet es sein mag, gegeben.” Humankind appears to be invulnerable, but in fact it is the opposite.

Vulnerability is linked to finitude, fallibility, and ultimate dependence (Mays 1994: 68). Mays (1994:68) argues the psalm recognises the finiteness of humanity, its unimportance and limits, leading humankind to awe and wonder at creation and not to a feeling of being lost in the cosmos. According to Hossfeldt and Zenger (1993: 80), the dominion of the human being over creation does not mean dominion over other people, especially the poor, because psalms in general (3–14) remind us that Yahweh is mindful of them. Beat Weber (2001: 73) says it forcefully: “der Mensch als unverdient Begnadeter und hoch Erhobener”. He tempers that position somewhat in the structure of the poem, where he matches God’s majesty (verse 3) with the divine legitimacy of humanity’s dominion over creation (vv. 6-7). The attribute of god-like is to him “unwesentlich”. Similarly, Ridderbos (1955:72) warns that interpreters should not misunderstand the god-like attribute to humanity. He argues that the psalm is not about the dominion as such, but that God thought it good to provide humanity with that attribute. Human dominion is only possible when Yahweh is involved.

3. Vulnerability

Dominion in apartheid South Africa was interpreted by South African neo-Calvinism in such a way that it affirmed white European racist beliefs and domination (Spangenberg 2020:3). It acted as a defence mechanism for a white minority in the face of the indigenous African inhabitants. The post-flood story of Noah was interpreted to suggest that Shem and Japheth advanced civilisation, while Ham did not, with his descendants supposedly becoming Africans.

The descendants of Shem and Japheth became the Europeans and Asians. Subsequently, the belief was in Europe that Christianity is superior to all religions and that Europeans were more civilised than the people in Africa who worshipped pagan gods. The royal rank attributed to humankind became that of a master subject. According to Spangenberg (2020:4), the notion of superiority became associated with skin colour, so that white

European Christianity surpassed coloured Christianity.¹⁰ Whiteness got associated with purity, virtue and Jesus Christ and blackness with impurity, evil and the devil.

With the separation of the black and white racial spheres, a reductively negative vulnerability for the black others was created. That vulnerability was disavowed, and the blackness associated with it was disidentified. Vulnerability within the black sphere is a hindrance and a weakness which will never be overcome. For themselves, South African whiteness created a sphere of invulnerability by wilfully refusing to experience black vulnerability in their posture of sovereignty or dominion over nature. In their sphere, they maintain what Erinn Gilson (2016:75) calls “a certain kind of subjectivity privilege in capitalist socioeconomic systems, namely that of the prototypical arrogantly self-sufficient, independent, invulnerable master subject.”

Apartheid invulnerability had to be continuously shored up by laws to shield the white sphere from the inconvenient, disadvantageous and uncomfortable aspects of vulnerability. The structural power dynamics at work ensured that knowledge that was deemed unimportant, were not sought whilst the white sphere’s interests, beliefs and theories obscured knowledge so that it would not be recognized (Gilson 2016:76). It was in the interest of the white sphere that certain kinds of knowledge (the vulnerability of blackness) were kept away from the general public. It was a deeply rooted, wilful ignorance that was fostered and produced.

The pursuit of invulnerability also touches the body in the way the body’s appearance and function are regulated. The human body is the primary

10 A report on racial relations from the GKSA in 1961 makes for contradictory reading in this regard. It rejects racial chauvinism and argues that the only ground for discrimination is (Christian?) faith because these other belief systems are a danger to the kingdom of God. But on the next page the report argues that whilst it is not a sin to mix blood, it is a sin not to keep your people’s identity (Algemene Sinode van die GKSA 1961:29–30): “Gesien egter die feit dat volgens die Woord van God volkere en tale tot die einde sal bly bestaan kan dit ook nie as sonde bestempel word as ’n ras of ’n volk daarna streef om sy identiteit te bewaar nie, veral nie as daar geen regte van ander aangetas word nie. Trouens, dit moet as sonde beskou word as ’n volk sy volksidentiteit prysgee, daarmee sy eie roeping versaak en die gedagte van verskeidenheid geweld aandoen.” Sylvia Wynter (2003) provides a historical overview of how Western hermeneutics developed into this mythic norm for Biblical interpretation.

locus of vulnerability. Thus, in its pursuit of invulnerability, the body is controlled to be strong, fit, trim, taut, youthful (Gilson 2016:83) and serving its purpose. The body can be mastered and controlled in the same way humans master and control animals. The body is just an object that can be manipulated. It presents an outer appearance that conveys an image of the self that is strong, competent and impermeable, just a lesser being than divine beings. Invulnerability implies the body can choose and exercise control wilfully, acting with normality. The implication is a closed-off body to anything that can make one vulnerable. Hence, dominion is of utmost importance.

In contrast, vulnerability is thought to be a vice, because to be affected by what is irrelevant or what will create bias hinders the command of the self. According to Gilson (2016:85), invulnerability is the master model for humanity that is currently presumed in the dominant culture. It is based on exclusion and domination by a white, largely male elite that is sexist, racist, classist and ableist. Here enters the mythical norm of Biblical interpretation. Insistence on its normativity is interpreted as a sign of invulnerability. But with it comes a self-deception to retain privilege through wilful ignorance. Ignorance paves the way for oppression in its failure to contextualise the self or to recognise its relational dimension.

A denial of vulnerability and its relationality maintains the oppressive status quo: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. In white masculinity oppression does not only consist of rejection of foreign and devalued others, but also through the production of and adherence to norms that structure the repudiation of others, like gays and women, inciting people to attain the normative ideal (Gilson 2016:92). Common practices and habits solidify the oppression, meaning that the disavowal of vulnerability is deeply seated in the mundane and daily activities.

Interpreting dominion in Psalm 8 with the idea of a human being a little less than a divine being, with creation at its feet, paves the way for abuse of creation, either nature and its various attributes, or other people who can be exploited and marginalised. It is perhaps with this kind of interpretation that the world could have been colonised by various peoples at different

times. When such a colonisation turned bad, it was because of cultural imperialism where the coloniser put its foot on the colonised.

To overcome this oppressiveness of invulnerability of the powerful, Gilson (2016:93) suggests the notion of epistemic vulnerability as a resource for an ethical response and a political resistance to oppression. Vulnerability in its most profound and general sense is openness to being affected and changed (Gilson 2016:93). It undoes ignorance: “Undoing ignorance involves cultivating the attitude of one who is epistemically vulnerable rather than that of a masterful, invulnerable knower who has nothing to learn from others or for whom others are merely vehicles for the transmission of information.” Epistemic vulnerability is vital to everyone, even the oppressing invulnerable, because the intersectional nature of difference and the interlocking nature of oppressions reveal that everyone has lapses and gaps in experience, failures to attune to the alterations we need to make in our knowledge.

Gilson (2016:94) suggests the following features for an epistemic vulnerability: (a) It is open to not knowing and not considered a weakness; (b) the openness to not knowing is also an openness to be wrong yet venture ideas and beliefs nonetheless; (c) it is the ability to put oneself in a position in which one does not know, is foreign to and completely unsettling to be; (d) it calls attention to the affective and bodily dimensions of knowledge since it is corporeal and allows one to sink oneself into unfamiliar situations effectuating rehabilitation by immersing the self in alternate patterns; (e) the rehabilitation caused by epistemic vulnerability results in an openness to altering ideas and beliefs, as well as the self and the sense of the self.

In reading Psalm 8, vulnerability will be required from me, partly situated in the mythic norm of biblical interpretation (white, male, homosexual, Christian, middle class, wealthy), the following:

1. A recognition of whiteness and the role it played in the history of South Africa, as well as a recognition that my racial identity intersects with other identities. The human being is a little lower than God, meaning human beings in all their richness, colours and cultures and geographies.

2. A realisation that masculinity provided me with privileges with which I could become what I did, and that femininity had a tougher time getting that same recognition and privilege. The human being, a little lower than God, includes women, the source of life, as birthing canals for humanity, of which men are also a part.
3. I am a homosexual, so the negativity I experience towards my sexual orientation and my masculinity impacts me on a personal level. I do not have or want dominion over other sexualities either.
4. Acknowledgement of my own Christianity within a particular culture forced me to become more relative towards other religions. There is a need to shift the focus from being the only true religion towards a religion that respects humanity and creation. Religion relates to human dignity and not to a master subject.
5. I am middle-class, and my thinking and values are influenced by it. Psalm 8 does not justify my religion, class, gender or race. It makes me more aware of them and forces me as a reader to value the same in others who differ from me in these instances. It demands that I be open to the poor, the worker class, blue-collar workers and white-collar workers. It also demands I honour, but also critique, the business class. When I am in the spaces of the others, I need to value their systems and customs and traditions.

Gilson (2016: 96) concludes:

[T]he ideal of invulnerability is defined by the sense of immutability that attends, the sense that this state of affairs is “just the way things are” and will always be, that being impermeable just is what it means to be autonomous, active, in control, successful, and good. In contrast, to be epistemically vulnerable is to be open to the revision of the self and conceptions of the self – past, present, and future – since such alteration both comes from changes in what one knows and precipitates such changes in knowledge. Thus, it is through the cultivation of habits of epistemic vulnerability that we begin to dissipate those deeply ingrained habits of invulnerability.

When vulnerability is understood in a reductively negative way, it becomes complicit in oppression and prolongs inequality. When vulnerability is

distinguished by social differences, such as gender, race, sexual orientation, class, ability, socioeconomic circumstances, or any mundane features of everyday life, it perpetuates arrogance, oppression and denial of responsibility (Gilson 2016:177). An ethics of vulnerability, in contrast, is defined by responsiveness to vulnerability itself, to the self and others, and by a critical disposition that questions the way we think about vulnerability and how it is framed. It displaces the ideals of self-sufficiency, masterful control, certainty, and introduces one to interdependence, uncertainty and ambiguity (2016:178). It asks for a revision of the self.

Most importantly, experiencing vulnerability is itself central to the formulation of an ethical response to vulnerability. One cannot understand vulnerability through cognitive acknowledgement, but only by undergoing, sensing, seeing and feeling vulnerability – embodied, imaginative capacities (2016:178). One has to feel vulnerable and not shut down such feelings. Everyday life becomes a practice in experiencing vulnerability. Within this frame of mind, how would one interpret Psalm 8:5–6?

4. Conclusion

The question that was asked at the beginning of the essay was what the relationship is between being a little lower than a divine being, having dominion over creation, and vulnerability. To answer that question, the essay looked at a reading of the psalm and especially what other people said about. It then looked at the issue of vulnerability.

In a theological practice, Psalm 8 aims to strengthen the vulnerable, the disparaged and the weak, as they seem to form the bulwark against Yahweh's enemies. Anderson (1992:102–3) reads the question asked in v. 4 (What is man?) as a contrastive point to the majesty and power of God. This contrast forces him to understand man as puny and the title son of man with a sense of human frailty. The human being is part of the created space, but it seems that within this vast universal space, there are spaces whose intersections indicate that not everybody belongs to every invented space. The differentiation between these intersecting invented spaces went so far as to make humanity a prerequisite for participation. With it arrives the power to deny participation, which was put to good use in the apartheid period of South Africa and is still being used in some church structures.

Coetzee's interpretation of embodiment in Psalm 8 and its location within the created realm lay out spatiality in the Psalmist's thinking. The three-tier reality from which it operates no longer functions, but the production of space produces and reproduces an intricate web of relationships or an intersectionality. It is noteworthy that, regarding dominion and the power of exclusion, Psalm 8:5–6 can only be interpreted in an act of thought when ideology from the reader's side is brought into consideration. And here would be the choice: sovereignty in the own space versus human dignity, invulnerability versus vulnerability. An ethics of vulnerability aims at breaking down domination's invulnerability.

I think this is what Masenya tried to do. Psalm 8's rendering of a three-tier reality with the human being suspended between the deity and creation can speak into that delicate balance in which dominion affirms human dignity. Given the role of the Bill of Human Rights in the South African Constitution, the meaning of rank attributed to the reference to the status of the human being makes sense for the time when the psalm was written, when people were divided into ranks and hierarchical positions. In an equal society, the rank in the psalm adds to the insistence of human dignity for everyone and not specific persons.

For example, in terms of the mythic norm as defined earlier for reading the Bible, the issue of human dignity will confront the reader if a reading allows for an indignant comprehension of a biblical text. This would be the case with readings that allow the human being's foot to be on creation and creatures, as is the case with colonialism and capitalist economic systems.

Similarly, the issue of human dignity would also remind a reader as an implicated subject of these abuses and misuses of the text. The author of this essay is such an implicated reader. I have read and studied the psalm, knowing full well where I came from. I want to embrace the dignity the psalm ascribes to the human being, but knowing my history, I know I was and still am part of a system that denies dignity to other people. I hope this knowledge becomes engraved in my epistemology so that it keeps me vulnerable, that is, open to changing my thinking and behaviour. I am vulnerable, not fragile.

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