

## Psalm 8 Translation Challenges

### Color key:

Key term/difficult word or phrase

Proper name

Important imagery

Figure of speech

Other important word

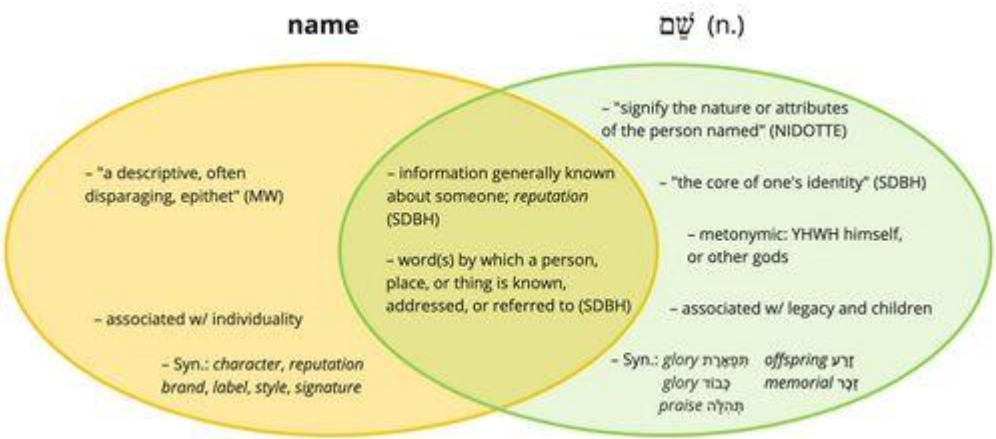
### CDBR's Close-but-Clear translation

- |  |    |   |
|--|----|---|
| <p>לְמַנְצַח עַל־הַגִּתִּית מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד:</p>  | 1  | For the director. On the gittith. A psalm by <b>David</b> .   |
| <p>יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מַה־אֲדִיר שְׁמֹךְ בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ<br/>אֲשֶׁר תִּגְהַ הַיּוֹדֶךָ עַל־הַשָּׁמַיִם:</p>  | 2  | <b>YHWH</b> , our <b>lord</b> , <b>how majestic</b> is your <b>name</b> in <b>all</b> the earth, you whose <b>glory</b> is <b>bestowed</b> on <b>the heavens</b> .                  |
| <p>מִפִּי עוֹלָלִים וַיִּנְקִים יִסְדֹּתָ עוֹ<br/>לְמַעַן צוֹרְרֶיךָ לְהַשְׁבִּית אוֹיֵב וּמִתְנַקֵּם:</p> | 3  | Out of the <b>mouths of nursing children</b> , you have founded a <b>fortress</b> , because of your <b>adversaries</b> , in order to <b>put an end</b> to a <b>vengeful enemy</b> . |
| <p>כִּי־אֲרִאָה שָׁמַיִךְ מַעֲשֵׂי אֲצַבְעֹתֶיךָ<br/>יָרַח וְכוכְבֵי־אֲשֶׁר כּוֹנְנֹתָה:</p>               | 4  | When I see <b>your heavens</b> , that which your fingers made, the <b>moon</b> and <b>stars</b> which you have established,   |
| <p>מַה־אֲנוּשׁ כִּי־תִזְכְּרֵנִי<br/>וּבֶן־אָדָם כִּי תִפְקְדֵנִי:</p>                                     | 5  | <b>what</b> is <b>mankind</b> that you should <b>consider</b> them, or a <b>human being</b> , that you should <b>be mindful of him</b> ?  |
| <p>וַתִּסְרְהוּ מִזַּעַט מַאֲלֵהֵם<br/>וַתְּכַבֵּד וַתְּקַדֵּם תַּעֲטִיבֵהוּ:</p>                          | 6  | And you <b>caused him to lack</b> being a <b>heavenly being</b> by a little, and you <b>crowned</b> him with <b>honour</b> and <b>majesty</b> .                                     |
| <p>תִּמְשִׁלֵהוּ בְּמַעֲשֵׂי יָדֶיךָ<br/>כָּל־שָׁתָה תַּחַת־רַגְלָיו:</p>                                  | 7  | You <b>caused him to rule</b> that which your hands made. You <b>placed everything under his feet</b> .   |
| <p>צֹאֵן וְאֵלֶפִים כָּלָם<br/>וְגַם בְּהֵמוֹת שָׂדֵי:</p>   | 8  | <b>Sheep</b> and <b>goats</b> and <b>cattle</b> – <b>all</b> of them, and even <b>wild animals</b> ,  |
| <p>צִפּוֹר שָׁמַיִם וְדָגֵי הַיָּם<br/>עֹבֵר אֶרְחֹת יָמַיִם:</p>  | 9  | <b>birds</b> in the sky and <b>fish</b> in the sea, that which traverses the paths of the sea.  |
| <p>יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מַה־אֲדִיר שְׁמֹךְ בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ:</p>  | 10 | <b>YHWH</b> , our lord, <b>how majestic</b> is your name in <b>all</b> the earth.   |

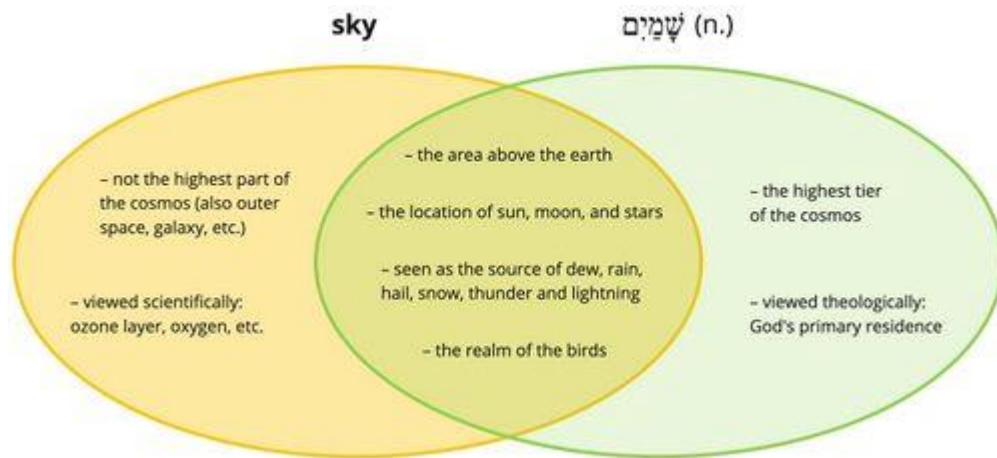
\*Note about this document: this is meant to be a quick-reference guide, giving an at-a-glance look at vital information about key words and phrases in this psalm. As such, it does not go into detail about how we arrived at our conclusions and recommendations; if you would like these details, please see the Verse-by-Verse notes for this psalm, and/or the information found in the various layer analyses, both of which can be found on our Wiki: psalms.cdbr.org.

**Key terms/difficult words**

- **Lord** --A *lord* (לַיְדוֹן) is someone (whether human or deity) who exercises authority over a people or place.<sup>[1]</sup> Kings could be called "lords" (e.g., Gen. 40:1; 1 Kgs 22:17; 1 Chron 12:20), and here in Ps. 8:2 the title assumes YHWH's kingship. Do not confuse this TITLE with God's actual NAME, which is YHWH--appearing just before in this verse.
- **Name**—YHWH's *name* (שֵׁם) is not only the word by which he is "known, addressed, or referred to," but also "the information generally known about him;"<sup>[2]</sup> *name* can signify "the nature or attributes of the person named."<sup>[1]</sup> Thus, to say that YHWH's *name* is majestic in all the earth is to say that YHWH is characterized by and known by his majesty which is on display throughout all the earth. See the Venn diagram below to see how our modern English understanding of *name* compares and contrasts with the ancient Hebrew understanding.



- **Bestowed (glory)**—(For a fuller discussion of this verb, see our exegetical feature [here](#).) In short, while some translations may render the verb as something like "praise", we do not find this to be the most likely interpretation. Rather, it is like an infinitive construct, meaning something like "the bestowing of your glory is on the heavens". Elsewhere in the Bible, the expression לְהַגְדִּיל עַל הוֹדוֹ ("to put glory on someone") refers to the bestowal of glory on someone (i.e., conferring authority on them to rule). In the context of Ps. 8 (which reflects on the creation story of Genesis 1), YHWH's bestowing glory on the heavens may refer to his creation of the sun, moon, and stars "to rule" the day and the night (cf. Gen. 1:16-18).
- **The heavens (v. 2)/your heavens (v. 4)**—The word is plural in Hebrew, but need not be translated in the plural. The Hebrew word שָׁמַיִם can mean both *sky* and *heaven(s)*—the Hebrews did not make a distinction like English does. See the Venn diagram below for a comparison and contrast of our modern English conception of *sky* and the Hebrew understanding of שָׁמַיִם.



UBS Handbook gives this advice for translating *heavens*: "Languages indicate space above the earth in very different ways. Some simply refer to everything as 'up', while others make such distinctions as (1) the area of clouds and (2) the area where the moon and stars are. In addition, many languages use figurative expressions to indicate the realm where God is said to be; for example, 'God's town,' 'God's house,' or 'the high home.' Here the term for sky should be the area where the moon and stars are thought to exist.

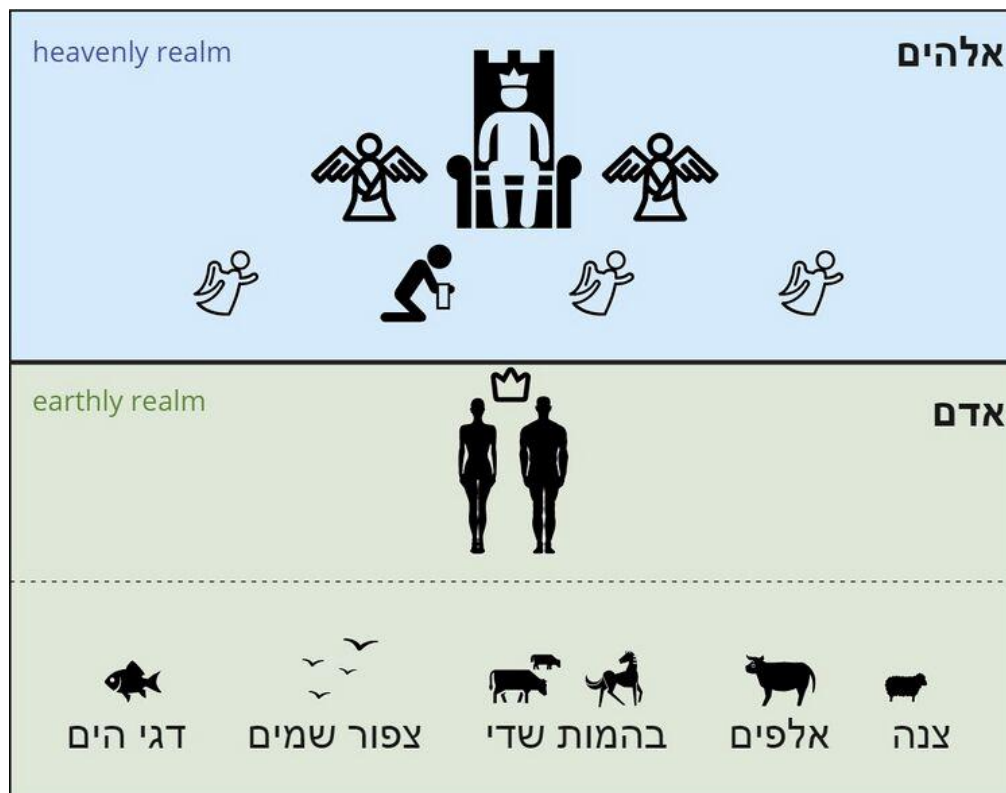
What does it mean to say *YHWH's majesty is bestowed "on the heavens"*? In numerous other passages in the Bible, the phrase means "to confer or transmit authority," usually of a king/leader to another king/leader. Thus, it is used here to speak of "heaven as the bearer and manifestation of the divine majesty,"<sup>[3]</sup> and perhaps of the dominion which YHWH has given to the heavenly bodies (cf. Gen. 1:16-18) or to divine beings.<sup>[4]</sup> Some translate the phrase "above the heavens" (ESV) or "higher than the heavens" (NLT) instead of "on the heavens"<sup>[1]</sup>. Yet, given the clear and consistent meaning elsewhere of *נָתַן הַיָּהוָה עַל* ("bestow glory on someone") as well as the fact the heavens become the object of marvel in v. 4f (which assumes that they are glorious), the interpretation "on the heavens" is to be preferred.<sup>[5]</sup> YHWH bestows "glory" (*תִּירָה*) on the heavens (v. 2) just as he bestows "glory" (*תִּירָה*) on humans (v. 6).

"The heavens" (*שָׁמַיִם*) at the end of v. 2b is parallel with "the earth" (*אֲרֶצְהָא*) at the end of v. 2a. Together, the pair "heaven" and "earth" refer to the entire created world (cf. Gen. 1:1) as the sphere of YHWH's lordship.

The phrase "your heavens" (*שָׁמַיִךָ*) in v. 4 refers to "the heavens which you created." Because "your heavens" sounds unnatural in English, translations often have "the heavens" (CEV, GNT, NET, NLT).

- **Mankind vs. human beings**—though these words are parallel in v. 5—and are synonyms—is there any difference in meaning between them? It can be said that *mankind* (*בְּנֵי אָדָם*) speaks of humans an entirety, a race; and *human beings* (*אֲנָשִׁים*) refers to individuals. Futato restates this verse as, "What are we as a race, not to mention as individuals, that you should have any concern for us?" What is more, to add to the kingship theme of the psalm—the phrase human beings is only used two other times in the Psalter, and both times they refer to royal persons (80:17 [18]; 146:3).<sup>[6]</sup>
- **Fortress**-- The word translated *fortress* (*צָרָה*) normally means *strength*, but here the verb *בָּנָה* requires us to understand *צָרָה* as a physical structure (*strength > stronghold*).<sup>[7]</sup> Verse 3 says that YHWH has founded a fortress (*צָרָה בָּנָה*).<sup>[7]</sup> The previous verse depicted YHWH as a king, and kings would build fortresses and fortifications to protect their kingdoms from attack (cf. 1 Kings 9:15ff; 2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chron 17:12).

- **Adversaries**--YHWH's *adversaries* may be either "historical persons and nations (Ps. 2:1-3) or mythological beings and disruptive cosmic forces (Ps. 74:13; 89:10; 93:3)."<sup>[8]</sup> For a number of reasons (see Psalm 8 Verse-by-Verse notes), the first view is probably correct, and the enemies probably refer to the enemies of God's people. While "foes" appear often in the Psalter, this is the first (and surprising) mention of *God's* foes. We should look at the reference to God's enemies in light of the context of the Psalter as a book. God's enemies are those who rebel against his rule and the rule of his anointed king (cf. Ps. 2).
- **Put an end to**--The *hiphil* of this verb is used some 40 times. When the patient is an inanimate object or an abstract noun, it usually means "cause to cease" (e.g. Ps. 46:10, Hos. 2:13; see DCH תבש *hiphil* 1a for more examples). The verb can also mean to "destroy" or "exterminate" (BDB, DCH 1e), especially when the patient is animate (e.g., 2 Kgs. 23:5, 11; Jer. 36:29; Amos 8:4; Ps. 119:119). This latter meaning of the verb fits the usage in Ps. 8:3, where the patient is animate ("vengeful enemy") (so BDB, DCH). Translations such as "silence" (NIV, NLT, NRSV; cf. CEV) and "still" (ESV) may be too weak. A better rendering might be "stop" (GNT), or, even better: "put an end to" (NET, JPS85; cf. LXX αναλυειν ["put down" NETS]).
- **Vengeful enemy**--(lit. "the enemy and the avenger" [ESV]) is probably, like *nursing children*, a *hendiadys* ("the vindictive enemy" [NET]).<sup>[9]</sup> *Hendiadys* is the expression of a single idea by two words connected with "and" <sup>[10]</sup>, such as *nice and warm* in English. This means that the *enemy* and the *avenger* are not two separate people; rather, they work together to create a single idea: a vengeful enemy.
- **Consider**—The Hebrew is literally *remember*, but here it means *to be concerned about*. Some languages translate this using an idiom, such as "to have a warm heart for" or "to feel in one's insides for." <sup>[11]</sup> This word is parallel to "be mindful of" in the next line.
- **Be mindful of him**—though the meaning of this verb is widely debated, we agree most with this perspective: "With God as Agent, פקד ["be mindful of"] expresses an intense personal attention, including careful inspection, which triggers appropriate action, whether positive (i.e., assistance) or negative (i.e., punishment)."<sup>[12]</sup> HALOT says: "1. to make a careful inspection... e. to be troubled about, be concerned for (Isa. 23:17; Jer. 23:2; Zech. 11:16; Ps. 8:5)."
- **Cause him to lack**—"to cause to be less" (SDBH); this verb is a causative of the verb "to lack". With the ׀ preposition on אֱלֹהִים, *heavenly beings*, finishing out this phrase, we can understand it literally as "You caused him to lack a little from the heavenly beings". Most English versions have something like, *you made him a little lower than the [heavenly beings]* (so ESV).
- **Heavenly being**—probably a "generic term for a supernatural being."<sup>[13]</sup> It refers to that class of beings which occupy the heavenly/spiritual realm (as opposed to the earthly realm), i.e. "superhuman beings including God and angels."<sup>[14]</sup> See visual below. While many translations interpret אֱלֹהִים as a third person reference to "God"/"YHWH",<sup>[15]</sup> this interpretation is unlikely because YHWH is the second person subject of the verb.



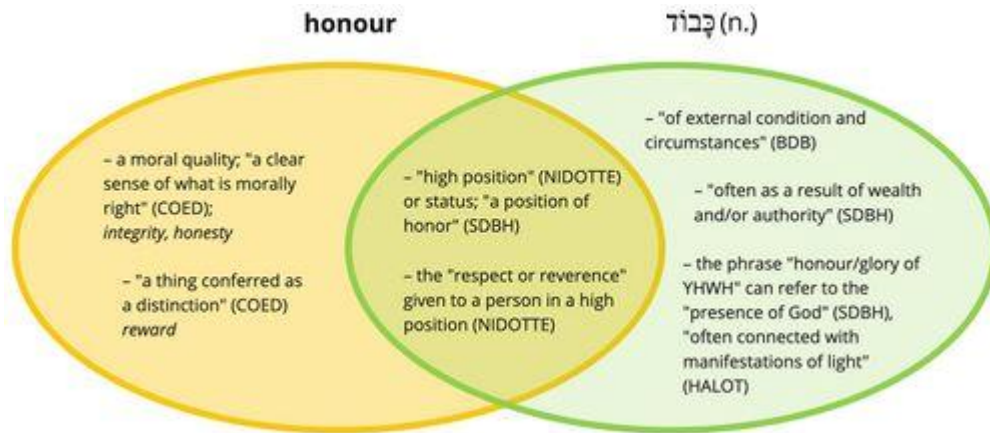
### Figure of speech

- **Placed under his feet**--To place something (or someone) under someone's feet is an expression of conferring authority and control, often used in the context of kings. When the Israelites conquered the five Amorite kings, Joshua ordered his commanders to put their feet on the necks of the conquered kings. In Ps. 110, God says to the king, "Sit at my right hand while I make your enemies your footstool." If the target language has a figurative phrase that has a similar meaning, translators can use it here, rather than translating the Hebrew phrase literally.

### Important imagery

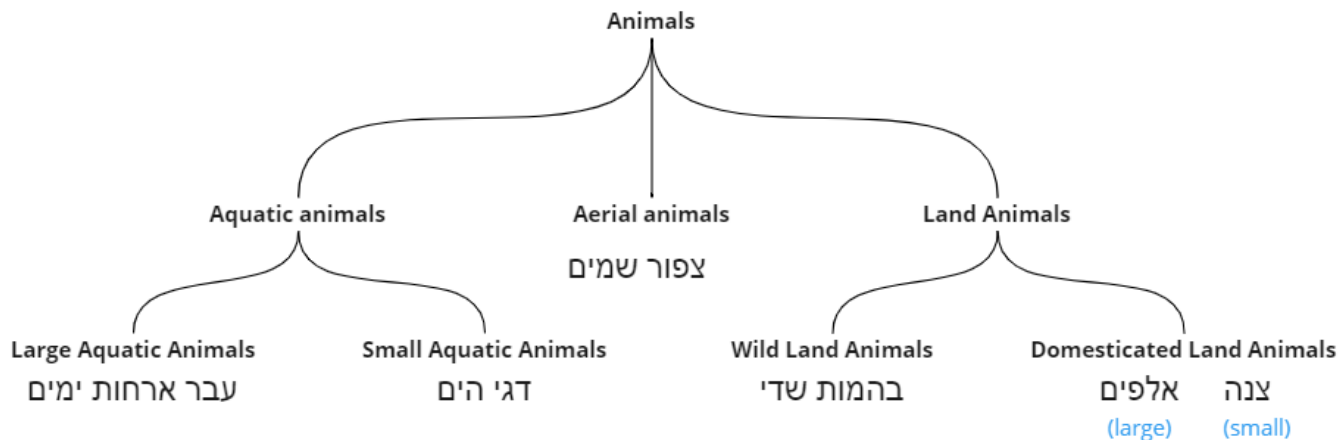
- **Kingship terms (majestic, glory, fortress/strength, crowned, honour, majesty, caused to rule) (vv. 2, 3, 6 and 7)**—The nouns and adjective in this group--*majestic, glory, fortress/strength, honour, and majesty*--are 5 Hebrew words for royal qualities, giving the whole psalm a unified theme of kingship. All of these are strong words indicating strength, power, and glory associated with God as King, Creator, and Divine Warrior. They each have shades of meaning, but they refer to essentially the same royal qualities. The two verbs—*crowned* and *caused to rule*—also have royal associations. Translators might consider using word choice, discourse features, or performance qualities to emphasize these words in their translation.
  - **Majestic** (אַדִּיר): in v. 2a and 10 is used to describe the majesty of kings (Ps. 136:18). It indicates what is mighty/powerful, hence magnificent/majestic/splendid/stately.
  - **Glory** (תִּירָה): in v. 2b; also used to describe the majesty of kings (Pss. 21:6; 45:4). It can be thought of as *glory* as seen "from the [perspective] of its far resounding announcement of itself."<sup>[16]</sup>

- **Fortress/strength** (רַב): The word translated *fortress* (רַב) normally means *strength*, but here the verb רָבַח requires us to understand רַב as a physical structure (*strength* > *stronghold*). Kings would build fortresses and fortifications to protect their kingdoms from attack (cf. 1 Kings 9:15ff; 2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chron 17:12)
- **Honour** (קִבוּד): "the manifestation of *glory* described from the [perspective] of its weightiness and fulness."<sup>[16]</sup> In this psalm, it refers to the "high position" which YHWH has granted humans and includes the "respect or reverence" given to those in such a position.<sup>[11]</sup> The Venn diagram below shows how our modern English conception of *honour* compares and contrasts with the Ancient Hebrew understanding of קִבוּד.



- **Majesty** (רָדָה): This word can be understood like *glory*, but *glory* as seen "from the [perspective] of its brilliancy, majesty, and beauty".<sup>[16]</sup>
- **Crowned** (עָטָה): The wearing of a crown symbolizes the right to rule (cf. 2 Kings 11:12; cf. 2 Sam. 12:26-31)—here, specifically humankind's right to rule over creation. "In the psalms, as in the Egyptian pictures, the king is crowned directly by God (Pss 21:3b; 132:18; cf. also 89:39). The crown signifies the manifestation and completion of the king's election (cf. Pss 5:12; 8:5; 103:4)" (Keel 1997:259). For translation, UBS Handbook recommends translating with a phrase such as "you made him to be like a king and gave him glory and greatness" or "you gave him power to rule and gave him splendor and honor."
- **Caused to rule** (חָשַׁל): This is the causative form of *to rule/to reign over/to have authority over*<sup>[2]</sup>.
- **Mouths of nursing children (v. 2)**—*nursing children* represent the weakest and most vulnerable part of the human race (cf. 1 Sam. 15:3; 22:29; Jer. 44:7; Lam. 1:16; Joel 2:16). In ancient Israel, "nursing children" may have included children up to three years of age.<sup>[17]</sup> The parallels between vv. 2-3 and vv. 4-5 suggest that the nursing children (v. 3) stand figuratively for all of humanity (v. 5), of which they are the weakest part. Thus, "we may take 'babes and infants' as a metaphor for the weak and inherently helpless condition of human beings."<sup>[18]</sup> More specifically, the nursing children may be an image of Israel and her kings.<sup>[19]</sup>
  - **Mouth** (פִּי) is metaphorical for speech. It is through the helpless cries of children (metaphorical for the desperate prayers of his people) that YHWH protects his people.
- **Animals (vv. 8-9)**— These verses list three basic categories of animals: (1) land animals, domestic and wild (v. 8), (2) birds (v. 9aα), (3) fish (v. 9aβb). See visual below. This taxonomy closely resembles the list of animals in Gen. 1:26-28, though the two passages use slightly different terminology (עוֹף vs צְפוּר for "birds" and שְׂדֵי vs חַיָּה for "wild animals"): (1) land animals, domestic and wild (2) birds, (3) fish. The parallels between Gen. 1:26-28 and Ps. 8 lead Waltke to conclude that "Psalm 8 is Genesis 1:26-28

set to music."<sup>[20]</sup> There are some slight differences between the two lists, however. Some of the terms used for wild animals (בְּהֵמוֹת) and birds (צִפּוֹר) in Ps. 8 are normally used for domestic creatures, and these words may have been chosen in order to affirm the fact that these creatures are subject to humans.<sup>[21]</sup>



The movement from domestic animals in the a-line of v. 8 to wild animals in the b-line continues the poetic feature started in the previous verse (See Psalm 8 Poetic Features video). "Having descended to earth, the psalmist now changes directions and describes a horizontal vector that moves outward from human society: sheep and oxen → beasts of the field → birds → fish → whatever passes the paths of the seas."<sup>[22]</sup>

- Sheep/goats/cattle: These 3 animals refer to the group of animals known by the Hebrews as domestic animals, or animals owned and used for work for humans. Translators can use a generic term for such animals, if such a term exists; if not, naming 2 or 3 typical animals that belong to this class (as our Close-but-Clear has done) is an option.
- Wild animals: In contrast to domestic animals, this group of animals lives in the wild, and are known in some languages as *forest animals* or *bush animals*. "In Israelite legal, narrative, and prophetic texts, animals are often recognized as being threats to human beings (e.g., Lev 26:22; Deut 28:26; 1 Kgs 13:24; 2 Kgs 2:24; Isa 18:6; Jer 15:3)."<sup>[70]</sup> Thus, wild animals are sometimes used to depict the enemies of God's people (e.g., Pss 7:3; 10:9; 17:12; 22:13, 17, 22; 68:30; 80:14.<sup>[23]</sup>)
- Birds: a general term denoting those animals that fly
- Fish: a general term denoting small sea creatures
- That which traverses the path of the sea: Larger sea creatures (including sea monsters)
- **Heavens/moon/stars (v. 4)**—The reference to these celestial bodies of the moon and stars (comprising *the heavens*) are partly metaphorical for heavenly beings (cf. Job 38:7; Rev. 1:20; cf. [COS 1:181](#)); the psalmist is in awe at the majesty of the celestial bodies, because as we are told in v.2, YHWH has bestowed glory/majesty on them. The fact that the sun is not mentioned suggests that David is gazing at the night sky. In the ancient world, stars were associated with divine beings<sup>[24]</sup> and some people worshipped the moon and stars (cf. Deut. 4:19; 17:3). Here, they are called *that which your fingers made* (so NET; literally "the work of your fingers" [NIV, NLT]). Together these concepts build the image of the heavenly realm (see image above, under "heavenly being").

## Other important words

- **All/everything (כֹּל) (vv. 2, 5, 7, and 8)**—The repetition of this word might represent the universality/totality of divine and human dominion. It is used twice in the outer edges of the psalm to refer to the scope of God's dominion (vv.2b, 10b) and twice in the body of the psalm to refer to the scope of humanity's dominion (vv.7b-8a). Alter identifies כֹּל as "the chief thematic key-word of the psalm. [God's] dominion is over all, heaven and earth, angels and men and creatures of the field and air and sea, and he places 'all' at the feet of man."<sup>[25]</sup>
- **How/what (מָה) (vv. 2, 5, and 10)**-- the particle serves as question marker in v. 5 ("What is mankind...?" מָה אֲנוֹשׁ); in vv. 2 and 10, it "functions as an introduction to an exclamation in which a speaker usually expresses a value judgment about something"<sup>[3]</sup> (*How\_!*). The rhetorical question at the center of the psalm, v. 5, echoes the rhetorical question at the beginning and end of the psalm (vv. 2 and 10), "how majestic...!" (מָה אֲדִיר). But whereas the rhetorical question in vv. 2 and 10 conveys a positive value judgment about YHWH's majesty, the rhetorical question in v. 5 conveys a contrasting negative value judgment about humanity.<sup>[26]</sup>

### Proper names

- **David (v.1)**--The Hebrew name means "uncle", or "beloved". If the phonetics of "David" (DAY-vid) as it is said in English (or dah-VEED as in Hebrew or other languages) do not work well in your language, consider adjusting some of the sounds/letters to sound more natural to your language. Some languages add a prefix or suffix to a name to designate a king or another rank or position of honor. How to translate/transliterate proper names is an important issue that is concerned with the tension between domestication and foreignization of a Bible translation: do we change the Hebrew or LWC names to sound more natural in our language, or do we preserve the Hebrew/LWC names in order to be closer to the source text?
- **YHWH (vv. 2 and 10)**-- how you decide to translate the names and titles of God is a complex issue; see the "Names and Titles of God" document for a more detailed explanation of the 3 main references for God in the Old Testament

### References

1. NIDOTTE
2. SDBH
3. BHRG §42.3.6, citing Ps. 8:2/10 as an example.
4. Waltke 2010:261
5. Several translations reflect this interpretation: "you have covered the heavens with your majesty" (CSB; cf. ELB); "you reveal your majesty in the heavens above" (NET; cf. NIV, CEV; LUT; HFA, NGU).
6. Futato, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*
7. Cf. NRSV, NIV, GNB, REB, CEV, NJB, RVR95, DHH, EÜ, ZÜR
8. Rogerson and McKay 1977:42
9. Cf. Baethgen 1904:21; Brown Seeing the Psalms, 2002:155.
10. Oxford Languages Dictionary
11. UBS Handbook
12. Stephen W. Boyd, "The Binyamin (Verbal Stems)," in *Where Shall Wisdom be Found?* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 120-125. Cf. HALOT: "1. to make a careful inspection... e. to be troubled about, be concerned for (Isa. 23:17; Jer. 23:2; Zech. 11:16; Ps. 8:5)."
13. SDBH. Cf. LXX, Peshitta, Jerome, Targum, along with a number of modern translations
14. BDB
15. E.g., Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion, Jerome; RSV, ASV, CSB, NASB, NLT, NVI, DELUT, SCH51, EÜ, LS1910, HPP
16. Keil & Delitzsch
17. Cf. 2 Macc. 7:27



18. Tate 351. Cf. Benjamin Sommer (1993:79)
19. Waltke 2010:262
20. Waltke 2010:272
21. Cf. Whitekettle 2006:763-4
22. Jacobson 2014; cf. Whitekettle 2006:757-761
23. Cf. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 2002:137-144
24. Cf. Job 38:7; Rev. 1:20; cf. COS I:181, line 54 of the Ugaritic text "Dawn and Dusk" ["prepare (a gift) for great Shapsu and for the immutable stars"]
25. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 119
26. BHRG §42.3.6