

For the Beauty of the Earth: Towards a Vision of Psalm 8 and *Laudato Si'*

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Abstract

In the midst of today's ecological and environmental crisis that threatens human life and the existence of the planet, many are striving to redefine the relationship between humans and nature. The ecological and environmental crisis is the result of complex problems such as industrial pollution, exploitation of natural resources, plastic waste, environmental contamination, aggressive deforestation and the effects of the use of heavy military weapons. The backside of the crisis is related to the moral and ethical problems arising from parasitical anthropocentrism, greed and recklessness. It has been argued in some quarters that Christian tradition influenced an anthropological anti-ecological approach. The purpose of this essay is to re-examine biblical anthropocentrism in the light of Psalm 8 in order to restate the biblical perspective of the proper relationship between humans and nature. This task will be carried out through a lively interaction with the papal encyclical on care for creation, *Laudato Si'*, in a bid to further emphasize the living relation between Sacred Scriptures and the magisterium.

Keywords: Environment, *Laudato Si'*, Pollution, Psalm 8.

1. Introduction

Among other themes, Psa 8 indeed extols the beauty of the earth.¹ A text of the Psalm sealed in a silicon disc in a message from Pope Paul VI is among various items like three golf balls, a family photo,

¹ The phrase, "For the beauty of the earth", is also the title of a Christian hymn composed by the English poet Folliott Sandford Pierpoint (1835-1917).

and large pieces of scientific equipment left on the moon in 1967 by the first crewed space mission, Apollo 11.² The text, which speaks of the grandeur of the earth, remains on the moon. Notwithstanding man's expeditions to other planets, the earth remains man's primary home and its protection is a God-given task, which can never be overemphasized. The care of the earth is a duty and responsibility given to man from the moment of creation: "Fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion [...] over every living thing" (Gen. 1:28). However, from creation till now, man has never been more shy of the benchmark of diligence and dutifulness as regards this honourable task. Pollution and contamination of the biosphere are on daily increase and governments seem helpless at the best and unconcerned at the worst about this self-destructive vice which already has cataclysmic effects on the human planet. Reports on the increasing effects of climate change on the planet continue to inundate the media with varied responses.

This essay seeks to exegetically explore and conduct a close reading of Psa 8, in a bid to pair the ancient voice of the psalm with the more contemporary submission of the papal encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, as a contribution to the currently heightened sensitivity to ecojustice and the care of 'our common home'.³ It begins with a general appraisal of psalms of praise in the psalter. Preliminary questions like dating, authorship, theme, and structure of Psa 8 are then examined. This is followed by an exegetical analysis of the psalm and also an exposition and general overview of *Laudato Si'*. Particular questions raised in the encyclical will be considered and responded to. Magisterial teaching without an appraisal of the existential situation will be a futile exercise. Hence, the analyses of Psa 8 and *Laudato Si'* will be followed by a brief review of the reality and extent of environmental degradation, especially in Nigeria. This would be followed by a theological appraisal and a final conclusion.

² See J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "The Book of Psalms", *NIB*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 710-711.

³ The term, 'common home' is in the sub-title of Pope Francis' encyclical letter, *Laudato Si'*.

2. Psalm 8: Preliminary Matters

Psa 8 and a couple of other psalms have been jointly termed ‘songs of praise’.⁴ In Hebrew, they are variously labelled *tehillah*, *mizmor*, *shir* and *shirah*. It has been established that no one uniform categorical schema can fit all the psalms of praise. Claus Westermann distinguished two basic forms of songs of praise (*tehillah*): narrative and descriptive.⁵ In grouping psalms of praise, Frank Crüsemann delineated three major categories: imperative hymns, hymnic participles, and hymns of an individual.⁶ Our psalm of interest, Psa 8, can be described as a hymn of an individual. This is evidenced by its use of the first person singular: “When I see the heavens, the work of your hands...” Nonetheless, Westermann’s classification of Psa 8 as “psalm of creation” might be a more suitable description.⁷ Other forms like wisdom corpus and laments have also been traced in the psalm.⁸ Peter Craigie admits the difficulty in fixing the original purpose of the psalm: whether for use in cult or not. Arguments for its probably cultic origins are supported by reference again, to the use of both singular and plural persons (‘I’ in v. 4 and ‘our’ in v. 2), which naturally expresses a communal worship.

The dating of Psa 8 has been misty since the contents of the psalm give little or no hint to aid an accurate dating. Though it is true that the psalm makes references to creation and Gen 1, there is nonetheless no firm evidence as regards the direction of influence (which preceded which). Some scholars have mooted the opinion that since the theme of creation is very present in the psalm, it must have been post-exilic, “on the assumption that

⁴ The other psalms of praise are 19A, 29, 33, 47, 65-66A, 68, 93, 96-99, 100, 104-106, 111, 113; 114; 117; 134-136; 145-150. See Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59, A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 43.

⁵ See Claus Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms*, as quoted in Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 43.

⁶ See Frank Crüsemann, *Studien zur Formgeschichte von Hymnus und Danklied in Israel*, WMANT 32 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirche, 1969), 294.

⁷ See Claus Westermann, *Der Psalter*, 78 as cited in Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1983), 106.

⁸ See Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 106.

creation-thought developed most fully in Israel during and after the exile.”⁹ Even this assumption remains highly contested.¹⁰

The central theme of Psa 8 can be described as “man’s uncomprehending but grateful recognition that God, whose dominion encompasses the entire universe, has installed within man divine-like powers of dominion over the natural world.”¹¹ Nahum Sarna writes: “the human race, vis-à-vis the animal kingdom, possesses God-like qualities which place it in a unique relationship with God . . . this psalmist proclaims the distinctively Israelite conviction that God, who created nature, has given humanity the power to control it.”¹²

As regards the structure, the psalm has been observed to have two unequal sections: vv. 1b-2 and vv. 3-8.¹³ It begins and ends with a declaration of praise (vv. 1a and 9).¹⁴ According to James Limburg, the central part of the psalm simply explains the reason for praise: vv. 1b-2 portend that God’s majesty on earth & heavens deserves praise. God is to be praised because he made the universe (vv. 3-4). And lastly he is to be praised because he has given dominion to humans (vv. 5-8).¹⁵ The chiasmic pattern of the psalm can be thus described:¹⁶

⁹ Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 106.

¹⁰ See, among others, Charles A. Briggs and Emilie G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, ICC, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1907), 61.

¹¹ Judah Kraut, “The Birds and the Babes: The Structure and Meaning of Psalm 8”, *JQR* 100.1 (2010): 16.

¹² Nahum M. Sarna, *Songs of the Heart*, NY 1993, 56-57 as quoted in Kraut, “The Birds and the Babes”, 16.

¹³ James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation Commentary*, (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 65.

¹⁴ James Limburg, “Who Cares for the Earth? Psalm Eight and the Environment”, *WW.Sup* 1 (1992): 46.

¹⁵ Limburg, “Who Cares for the Earth?”, 46.

¹⁶ Chiasmus can be described as the repetition of words, grammatical constructions, or concepts in reverse order. The chiasmic nature of the psalm has been often observed. The present structure reproduced is that of Robert L. Alden, “Chiasmic Psalms: A Study in the Mechanics of Semitic Poetry in Psalms 1-50,” *JETS* 17 (1974): 13. For the chiasmic structure of the psalm, see also Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 118-119; Kraut, “The Birds and the Babes”, 11.

A. Declaration of Praise	(v.1a)	<i>māh</i> ("how")	"majestic"
B. God's dominion	(vv.1b-3)	"the works of your fingers"	
C. Human meanness	(v.4)	<i>māh</i> ("how")	
C' Human greatness	(v.5)	glory and majesty	
B' Human beings' dominion	(vv.6-8)	"the works of your hands"	
A' Declaration of Praise	(v.9)	<i>māh</i> ("how")	"majestic"

From the table above, the chiastic pattern is A-B-C-C'-B'-A'. The opening verse and that which closes it is almost verbatim in wording. This is a form of *inclusio*.¹⁷ Furthermore, vv. 1b-3 are similar to vv. 6-8, with the repetition of the synonymous phrase, "the works of your fingers/hands". Moreover, they both speak of God's work.¹⁸ Verses 4-5, the middle section also exhibits an antithetical parallelism: man's lowly (v.4) and lofty status (v.5). The three usages of interrogative pronoun, *māh*, in vv. 1a, 4a and 9, further buttress the chiastic pattern of the psalm. As expected of a chiasmus, the emphasis is on the centre of the structure. It is no different in Psa 8, where the emphasis falls on vv. 4-5: "What is man, that you are mindful of him? [...] Yet You have made him but little lower than the angels."¹⁹

3. Exegetical Notes

Before an in-depth analysis of the verses of the psalm, some preliminary observations might be in place. There is a difference in the versification of the Masoretic text and many modern translations.²⁰ While the first line of the psalm is considered as its

¹⁷ For a similar observation, see also Rolf Jacobson – Beth Tanner, "Book One of the Psalter: Psalms 1–41", in Nancy L. DeClaisé-Walford – Rolf A. Jacobson – Beth L. Tanner, ed., *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 120.

¹⁸ See also Jun Kim, "Psalm 8: An Ecological Reading", *KJCS* 101 (2016): 13.

¹⁹ This translation is largely from the JPS version.

²⁰ The LXX and the Vulgate, together with many ancient versions, follow the versification of the MT in this case.

first verse in the Masoretic, it is classified as the ‘title’ of the psalm in many English versions.²¹

The reader has to remember that “titles” are common occurrences in the psalter. They are also known as superscripts. In fact, only 34 psalms in the psalter do not have titles. Psa 8 is not one of them. In the title, one finds a peculiar word, *gittîṭ*, which is a feminine adjective from the morpheme, *gaṭ*.²² Gath is the name of one of the five principal cities of the Philistines.²³ It also means, ‘wine-press’, a meaning which has influenced the suggestion that the psalm might be related to the celebration of the feast of the tabernacles.²⁴ Furthermore, an instrument, Gath, is so-called after the Philistine city. All these point to the musical finality of the psalm or at least, its rendition in a joyful context.

Verse one reads: O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. You have set your glory above the heavens (YHWH *’ādōnēnū māh-’addîr šimkā bəkol-hā’āreṣ ’āšer tənāh hōḏkā ‘al-haššāmāyim*).²⁵ The verse begins with a double proclamation, Lord

²¹ See, among others, NRSV, NJBR, NAB, NET. For the purpose of this essay, we follow the English versification.

²² The LXX has ληνῶν, which means wine-presses. The word also appears in the titles of Pss 81 and 84. See Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, Vol. 1, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 287, note 2.

²³ Joe D. Seger, “Gath”, ABD, II, 908.

²⁴ Deut 16:13-15 associates the feast of the Tabernacles with the wine-press.

²⁵ The phrase, *’āšer tənāh* (which you have set), in v. 1b, has been a *crux interpretum* in scholarship. The critical apparatus of BHS outrightly considers the phrase corrupt. The problem lies in the syntactical inappropriateness and contextual unsuitability of the phrase. As it stands, *tənāh* is either an imperative of the verb, *nāṭan* or its rare infinitive. Both ways, it does not sit well with the context. The LXX translates, ὅτι ἐπύρθη, “that was lifted up”. Two basic emendations have been proposed over time. The first joins the morphemes together (*’āšer* and *tənāh*) to produce a strange Piel *yiqtol* of the verb, *šāraṭ*, “I will adore your majesty”. The second preserves the verb, *nāṭan*, but emends it to *nāṭattāh*, “you have set” Qal *qatal* 2ms or *nittān*, Niphal participle, as seen in BHS critical apparatus. Cf. Hubert J. Keener, YHWH’s Subversive Order: Reconsidering the Structure and Thematic Development of the Eighth Psalm”, *PRSt* 40.4 (2013): 321-322; Kraut, “The Babes and the Birds”, 11-12. Cf. also Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 131; Mark S. Smith, “Psalm 8:2b-3”, CBQ 59 (1997): 37-41.

our Lord (*Adonai* 'ādōnênû). While the first is God's proper name, the second is better described as a title – our lord/governor.²⁶ The title is a royal one which when applied to God, expresses God's transcendent power.²⁷ God's name is similar to his majesty (v. 2c) since "the majesty of both God's person and creation are revealed to mankind in the divine name."²⁸ The title, "Our Lord", at once expresses the infinite and the finite, the transcendental and mortal. For while the term, YHWH, "the Lord", evokes God's immanence and transcendence, the possessive pronoun immediately indicates the relationship between humanity and God, because "humans are God's royal representatives amid creation."²⁹ Thus, the relationship between humanity and God forms the core of the psalm, as already demonstrated too by the structure.

The opening of Psalms 8 makes it unique in many ways. While other psalms normally begin with an invocation to praise God, the psalm begins with a direct address to God.³⁰ Though not a psalm of prayer for help, Psalms 8 uniquely begins with an invocation of God's name, in a passionate cry of praise.³¹ One may rightly ask, what made the psalmist break out in a direct address to God? The sight of the heavens, the moon and the stars sweeps the psalmist off his feet and they could not but break out in praise. The very elements that instigate the hymn of praise from the psalmist were objects of worship among their ancient Near Eastern neighbours: "In this pagan conception, the heavenly orbs were endowed with sentience, power, and identity."³²

The uniqueness of Psalms 8 is further demonstrated in its very second verse ("Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger"). Hans-Joachim Kraus emphatically submits that there is no parallel to this verse in the whole of the Hebrew Bible.³³

²⁶ Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 107.

²⁷ See DeClaissé-Walford et al., *The Book of Psalms*, 122.

²⁸ Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 107.

²⁹ DeClaissé-Walford et al., *The Book of Psalms*, 122.

³⁰ Cf. DeClaissé-Walford et al., *The Book of Psalms*, 122.

³¹ DeClaissé-Walford et al., *The Book of Psalms*, 122.

³² DeClaissé-Walford et al., *The Book of Psalms*, 123.

³³ Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 181.

The uniqueness of the verse even gives rise to the prevalent suggestion among scholars that it must need an emendation at the least or at most must have been an insertion or an addition.³⁴ The use of irony in this verse is very strong. The enemies of God and his haters are strong forces that oppose the work of God. Their great strength is neutralized by the weakest of all creatures: the stammering praise of children. The strength that an individual petitioner seeks in Psa 86:16-17 to overcome his enemies, is set up by the praise of children in Psa 8:2.³⁵ With the praise from the mouth of children, God sets up a bulwark to disperse the cacophony of his enemies. Craigie expresses it so well: “God may utilize the weak of this world, even the child, both to establish his strength [...] and at the same time ‘to put to rest’ the opposition of enemies.”³⁶

While the second verse ended on the negative note of God’s foe and avenger, the third begins with the beauty and splendour of his creation (which again is also hinted in the second verse, the lips of babes and infants). The defeat of the foes and avengers of God is accentuated in the third verse by the celestial grandeur, spread out before the singer’s eyes. God created the heavens and it remains the work of his hands.³⁷ It is not the work of adversary divinities. The contemplation of the nocturnal celestial scene leads to a perception. Kraus notes the revealing role that the preposition, *kî*, (“when”) plays in the transition from observation to perception: “in place of the consecutive clause ‘I must exclaim’, usually expected after the introductory *kî*, we have the exclamation itself, introduced by the astonished *māh*.”³⁸ The exclamation is that what is man that God is mindful of (that is, remembers) him.

³⁴ Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 181.

³⁵ See Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 182.

³⁶ Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 107.

³⁷ The psalm makes a generous use of metonymy: “mouths of babes” (v.2), “the work of your fingers” (v.3a), “all things under their feet” (v.6b). Other passages which express the divine origin of the heavens include Pss 33:6, 95:5, 102:25, 136:5.

³⁸ Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 182.

The fourth verse reads: “What are human beings that you remember him? And son of man that you care for him.”³⁹ In the face of the vast nocturnal sky with the moon and stars, so many beyond counting, how is God mindful of a single human soul? The preposition the singer uses strongly drives home the point. One would have expected the Hebrew preposition, *mî* (who), but the singer rather uses the preposition for inanimate objects, *māh* (what).⁴⁰ In the words of Rolf Jacobson, “[t]he resulting connotation is derisive: *What are measly human beings...*?”⁴¹ Two terms are used for human beings, the first is *’ēnôš*, and the second, *ben-’āḏām*. While the first has been noted to frequently express human frailty, the second emphasizes the fact that man is made from the earth, the soil and humus.⁴² Despite the lowliness of the human person, God keeps them in mind. Just as seen in the opening verse where the name of God revealed the creative power of God, so also here the singer “recognizes the mystery and wonder of human existence in the certainty taken to heart from God’s self-revelation: ‘He [God] thinks of me (*zākar*); he [God] takes care of me (*pāqad*)’.”⁴³

In the fifth verse, the seeming nothingness of man in comparison to the vastness and splendour of the celestial bodies is immediately rescued by noting that man was made little less than a god.⁴⁴ The analogy restores the dignity and importance of man.

³⁹ In Biblical Hebrew, the noun, *’ēnôš*, can either mean “all human beings” or a “single human being”. Though the succeeding verbal suffix is in the singular, the HALOT prefers “all human beings” as a better translation for this occurrence of the noun, *’ēnôš*. Cf. HALOT, I, 70.

⁴⁰ As noted earlier, the preposition, *māh*, appears strategically at the beginning, middle and end of the psalm, creating a centre in vv. 4&5, and thus accentuating the chiasmus already noted in the psalm’s structure.

⁴¹ DeClaissé-Walford et al., *The Book of Psalms*, 124.

⁴² Cf. Walter Brueggemann – William H. Bellinger Jr, *Psalms*, NCBC, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 59.

⁴³ Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, 182.

⁴⁴ Though *Elohim* is a traditional divine name, ancient versions translate the morpheme here in various ways. The LXX, Syriac, Targum and Vulgate translate “angels”, but Greek versions like Aquila and Symmachus translate “God”. Does Brevard Childs intend angels when he interprets it as “those divine beings which make up God’s court?” Cf. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 108; Brevard Childs, “Psalm 8 in

However, though the singer once more restores the dignity of man (a being little less than a god), he emphasizes the actions of God. In verses 5-6, he employs the second person singular in a direct address to what God has done: *You have made, you have crowned, you have given, you have put.*⁴⁵ This shows that the dignity and importance of man do not proceed from his power as one who is *little less than a god*. Rather, his dignity comes from what God has done for him.⁴⁶ The psalmist holds that God has crowned man with honour and glory and has given him dominion over the works of his hands. Rolf Jacobson rightly notes that the morphemes, *kāḇôḏ*, “glory”, *hāḏār*, “honour”; and the verbs, *‘āṭar*, “to crown” and *māšal*, “to make to rule” are all royal terms.⁴⁷

In verse 6b we read, “You have put all things under his feet”. Placing things under the feet has always been understood in the ancient world as a metaphor for authority given to a royalty.⁴⁸ The royal psalm, Psa 110:1 expresses the imagery more succinctly: “God says to the King, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.” Since man is made in the image and likeness of God, the glory and honour with which God crowns him is meant for service. In other words, man, under whose feet all things have been placed, is expected to care for creation the way God the creator would. What are the subjects of man’s dominion? In what way is he expected to exercise this dominion?

Verses 7 and 8 of Psa 8 go into details in a manner reminiscent of the first account of creation, Gen 1. Sheep, oxen, beasts, birds, fish, and creatures of the sea are named. Jacobson notes that the list is carefully knitted by the psalmist in a poetic strategy.⁴⁹ It is an outward movement from an organized and well-ordered human society to the sea, a “place of chaos least hospitable to human

the Context of the Christian Canon”, Interpretation 23 (1969): 22; Ross, *Psalms*, 288, n.9.

⁴⁵ See DeClaissé-Walford et al., *Psalms*, 124.

⁴⁶ See DeClaissé-Walford et al., *Psalms*, 124.

⁴⁷ DeClaissé-Walford et al., *Psalms*, 125.

⁴⁸ Cf. Alter, *Psalms*, 134. For the royal overtures in Psa 8, see Brueggemann – Bellinger Jr, *Psalms*, 59-60.

⁴⁹ DeClaissé-Walford et al., *Psalms*, 125.

society.”⁵⁰ The first animals, sheep and oxen, can be found within the human society and are domestic animals. The list, thus, moves from order to chaos, from human society to a realm which ought to be beyond man. Ironically, however, even that depth of the sea which is beyond man’s full knowledge, remains under the authority and dominion of man – it has been placed under his footstool.⁵¹

On the whole, Psa 8 is a psalm of praise which begins with the praise of God through the earth that he had made. The greatness, glory and honour of man is placed in context: they derive from God’s magnificence. Though all things have been placed under the feet of man, he remains a steward who is less than an angel. Man is the crown and the custodian of creation. This theme resonates again in the encyclical of the Supreme Pontiff, Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*.

4. *Laudato Si’*

The second encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, was released in June 2015. Its focus retains great relevance. The document was so entitled with words from the ancient hymn, *Laudes Creaturarum*, scripted by the seraphic Umbrian stigmatist, St. Francis, as he lay on a sick bed in 1224. The encyclical is unique for many reasons: its revolutionary designation of the earth as “common home”, its attraction of a lot of reactions and responses from various spheres and circles: from theologians to scientists, Catholic and non-Catholic, religious and secular. Without doubt, the ecological theme of the encyclical has generated a great response and appraisal from many quarters. In fact, of all papal encyclicals in the last twenty years, it is evidently among the most responded to.⁵²

⁵⁰ DeClaissé-Walford et al., *Psalms*, 126.

⁵¹ DeClaissé-Walford et al., *Psalms*, 126.

⁵² On the revolution of terminology-change in the document, see Joshtrom I. Kureethadam, “From Environment to ‘Common Home’: A Significant Paradigm Shift in *Laudato Si’*”, *Salesianum* 78 (2016): 479-497. *Laudato Si’* has resulted in researches in sciences like Scripture, Social Teachings of the Church, Liturgy, Moral Theology, Anthropology, Cosmology, Ecological Studies, Philosophy, Political Science, Government Policy-Making Strategies, Economics, to mention but a few. The bibliography generated by the document is almost unprecedented with regards to other recent papal encyclicals – over 800 articles have been

The vastness of the document's response also derives from the wide spectrum of its designated audience: all people of good will.⁵³ The structure of *Laudato Si'* draws great interest. It is like a diptych that twice presents the situational description of the earth's pollution and its human causes (chapters one and three), and then the attendant response in the light of faith and integral ecology consolidated by education and spirituality (chapters two, four, five, and six). Pope Francis was careful to acknowledge the teachings of former Popes on the subject of the environment and care for the planet earth. Starting from *Pacem in Terris* of Pope John XXIII, he notes how his predecessors had variously clamoured for more care of the earth due to the incessant degradation and abuse of the heritage man received from God.

Pope John Paul II's *Redemptor Hominis* clamoured for an ecological conversion of man in the face of his consumerist attitude to creation, which has resulted in the debasement and destruction of the human environment. In *Centesimus Annus*, a key encyclical on Catholic social teaching, Pope John Paul II again advocated for a change in lifestyle and models of production in order to bring about an authentic human ecology.⁵⁴

Pope Benedict XVI would closely follow the desire of John Paul II in the concern for the effects of adverse human policies and activities on God's creation. He challenged a gathering of Italian students in 2011 to be "guardians of nature", underlining the syntony between respect for nature and respect for the human person.⁵⁵ Pope Benedict was described as 'the green pope' and the book, "The Garden of God: Toward a Human Ecology" well

published in peer-reviewed journals, only five years after its release. For the wide array of the study-application of the document, see Raymond Aina, ed., *Laudato Si': Views from the South*, APT 6 (2016): 1-170.

⁵³ See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 62.

⁵⁴ See Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 58.

⁵⁵ See Pope Benedict XVI address to Italian Students on November 28, 2011; https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20111128_sorella-natura.html. Accessed June 26, 2022.

highlights Pope Benedict's cumulative teaching on ecology and the need for man's responsible stewardship.⁵⁶

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis deals with various themes, ranging from pollution, climate change, throwaway culture, loss of biodiversity to global inequality, technology, globalization of technocracy and the crisis of modern anthropocentrism. The Pope discusses the creation of an integral ecology from environmental, economic, social, and cultural ecologies. He examines the principle of the common good and the need for dialogue on various levels on the care of the common home: dialogue in the international community, dialogue between politics and economy, religion and science and the need for transparency in decision-making.

In this essay, we shall not be embarking on a text-sequential exposition of the many themes contained in the encyclical. Rather, having given an overall purview of the major segments of the document, we shall concentrate on some burning issues raised by the document, especially the wrong attempt by some to read against the testimony of the Bible. This has resulted in a direct attack on the divine injunction in the first chapter of the Bible. Pope Francis broaches the matter explicitly: "We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man 'dominion' over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature."⁵⁷ Since the Supreme Pontiff specifically stated that Gen 1:28 was being misinterpreted as giving man the authority to abuse nature, we shall engage in a close reading of the verse in order to explore the meaning intended by the text and its literary context.

5. A Re-reading of Gen 1:28

Gen 1:28 is found in the first account of creation, which is commonly attributed to the priestly source as an exilic or post-

⁵⁶ See Pope Benedict XVI, (ed. by M. Morciano), *The Garden of God: Toward a Human Ecology*, (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2014).

⁵⁷ *Laudato Si'*, no. 67.

exilic document.⁵⁸ After creating the sea animals and birds on the fifth day, God made land animals and man. Immediately after the expression of the wish to create man in God's image and likeness, comes the plan to give him dominion over all the living beings that God had earlier made (cf. Gen 1:26). The verbal clause, "and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air" (*wəyirdû biddāṭ hayyām ûḥšôp*) in Gen 1:26 is repeated verbatim, with very minute variation, in Gen 1:28, our verse of interest.⁵⁹ The verb is *rāḏāh*, "to have dominion, to rule". In Joel 4:13, the verb means *to tread* the wine press. It also appears in Psa 72:8 and Sirach 44:3 with the nuance of "to rule". In this verse, it appears with the preposition, *beth*, "in, with, by". The verb appears frequently with this preposition especially in statements concerning kings.⁶⁰

As noted by Hans-Jürgen Zobel, the verb *rāḏāh*, as used in the Hebrew Bible, often has a personal subject, whereby the action is performed by a human person.⁶¹ Thus, the injunction to rule remains within the human sphere. Without undermining specific individuals who are subjects of the verb in passages like Jer. 5:31; Deut 20:20; 1 Kgs 9:23; the subject of the verb, as found in Gen 1:28, is also human persons in general in Joel 4:13. The object of rulership often include human individuals (Psa 110:2) and nations (Isa 14:2,6). The object in Gen 1:28 is the whole earth.

The second verb, *kāḥaš*, "to subdue", appears a total of 14 times in the Hebrew Bible.⁶² It has an equal distribution across the major sections of the Hebrew Bible (thrice in the Pentateuch, five times in historical books, four times in the prophetic books and once in Esther). It means to subjugate, but not violate (as used in Esther 7:8). According to Victor Hamilton, even though its usage in 2 Chr 28:10 and Neh 5:5 suggests violently and forcefully

⁵⁸ Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis*, AB, (New Haven: Doubleday, 1964), 8; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, IBC, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 22.

⁵⁹ The *waw* in v. 26 is pointed with *shewa* but a *shureq* in v. 28.

⁶⁰ See *TDOT* XIII, 333.

⁶¹ See *TDOT* XIII, 331.

⁶² Gen 1:28; Num 32:22,29; Josh 18:1; 2 Sam 8:11; 1 Chr 22:18; 2 Chr 9:18; 28:10; Neh 5:5; Esth 7:8; Jer 34:11,16; Mic 7:19; Zech 9:15.

subjecting someone to slavery, this nuance has to be expunged from its occurrence in Gen 1:28.⁶³ The taming of the land to make it yield more in the practice of agriculture is more likely its signification in Gen 1:28.

Unfortunately, Gen 1:28 has been wrongly cited by many in the past to justify the human abuse of the earth and its resources. Lynn White Jr. is among the protagonists of studies criticizing the account of Genesis as being responsible for destructive anthropocentrism, which has made grounds among religion-backed abusers of nature. Though written while the second Vatican council was in course, White's claims remain engaging: "Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes [...] *Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.*"⁶⁴

The fact that White's submission was republished many times after buttresses the attention that his anti-scriptural views received in the academic world.⁶⁵ The true interpretation of Gen 1:28 is that the royal powers of man over creation makes him a steward and not a blanket authorization to abuse creation. God's command to man to dominate is simply defining the right order among living beings. Just as the sun rules the day, and the moon the night, so also is man hierarchically above animals.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Gen 1:28 should not be read out of context. Gen 1:16.29 are two verses that are verbally, thematically and intrinsically linked to Gen 1:28. Again, dominion here can only be deciphered in the sense of the royal identity of man, made in the image and likeness of God, who loves the work of his hands and sees them as good.

⁶³ See Victor Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, NICOT, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 139.

⁶⁴ Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis", *Science* 155 (1967): 1205 (my emphasis).

⁶⁵ See Michael P. Nelson – Thomas J. Sauer, "The Long Reach of Lynn White Jr.'s 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis'", 2016, <https://ecoevocommunity.nature.com/posts/14041-the-long-reach-of-lynn-white-jr-s-the-historical-roots-of-our-ecologic-crisis>. Accessed June 24, 2022.

⁶⁶ See Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 159.

Furthermore, the command to subdue has been rightfully interpreted as pertaining to the tilling the earth and making it yield. This is contextually logical because God had first subjugated animals to man's dominion in Gen 1:26b. Hence, here in v. 28, the other part of creation is placed under man's rule: to till and keep the land.⁶⁷ This is further substantiated from the submissions of the ancient Mesopotamian epic, *Enuma Elish*. The royal aspect of man's creation in the image and likeness of God, is missing from the *Enuma Elish* account of creation whereby man was created from the blood of a fallen god, Kingu, and as an afterthought of Marduk.⁶⁸

6. Environmental Degradation

Environmental degradation is a reality in our world today. Man's attitude to creation has resulted in very damaging effects both to creation and man himself. In its very first chapter, *Laudato Si'* copiously describes the reality of environmental pollution. The Pope dwells on the tragedy of pollution, waste and what he terms, 'throwaway culture', which is widespread in many nations. The trickledown approach in world economy ensures the satisfaction of the rich at the expense of the poor. So much is thrown away and wasted even while so many are in great need and virtually living in abject poverty. Poverty has risen to alarming degrees in many parts of the world, especially the so-called 'global south'.⁶⁹ The immediate effects of environmental neglect are much more felt by the indigent than the privileged.⁷⁰

The challenge of constant provision of potable water and the decimation of biodiversity by human activities in various ways form part of the concern of *Laudato Si'*. Notwithstanding the evident importance of water for the survival of humanity, so many are left with dirty and undrinkable water in many parts of the

⁶⁷ See Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 139.

⁶⁸ See Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 140.

⁶⁹ For an acute analysis of rising poverty in global south, see, among others, Diana Mitlin and David Satterthwaite, *Urban Poverty in the Global South: Scale and Nature*, (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁷⁰ See Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, nos. 39-52, esp. no. 49.

world, due to the activities of industries and illegal or uncontrolled mining. Potable water has been made scarce in many communities dealing with environmental pollution. On this issue, Pope Francis writes:

Every day, unsafe water results in many deaths and the spread of water-related diseases, including those caused by microorganisms and chemical substances. Dysentery and cholera, linked to inadequate hygiene and water supplies, are a significant cause of suffering and of infant mortality.⁷¹

Closely linked to the concern for potable water is the growing deforestation going on in many parts of the world. Trees constitute an important aspect of biodiversity and are necessary for flood control, production of oxygen and formation of habitats for lots of wildlife. They make up about thirty percent of the world's land area. Unfortunately, the felling of trees and aggressive and uncontrolled deforestation has become a feature of many continents. These activities have concomitant effects on wildlife, weather patterns, ecosystems, and ultimately the world's climate. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis again strongly laments the ongoing destruction of the ecosystem through deforestation:

The ecosystems of tropical forests possess an enormously complex biodiversity which is almost impossible to appreciate fully, yet when these forests are burned down or levelled for purposes of cultivation, within the space of a few years countless species are lost and the areas frequently become arid wastelands.⁷²

In order to better situate and concretize the global claims of *Laudato Si'*, we wish to further examine the matter specifically in the Nigerian context.

7. Environmental Degradation in Nigeria

The Nigerian ecosystem has been systematically and consistently polluted for many decades. This unfortunate situation has a lot of

⁷¹ *Laudato Si'*, no. 29.

⁷² *Laudato Si'*, no. 38.

implications for the African continent, bearing in mind that Nigeria has the largest population in the continent.⁷³ Nigeria has suffered from lack of adequate government policies on preservation of the ecosystem and protection of wildlife. There is no strict implementation of the few extant laws on the protection of the ecosystem.

Air pollution has reached unimaginable levels in many urban areas of Nigeria. Mega cities like Lagos, Kano, Port-Harcourt and Abuja are ace places in various forms of environmental pollution.⁷⁴ Ambient pollution is said to be caused by pollutants such as ozone, air toxics, sulfur oxides, nitrogen oxides, to mention but a few.⁷⁵ Road transport is said to be among the leading causes of air pollution in the country. The great prevalence of automobiles and vehicles that are aged and not roadworthy result in high levels of biomass fuel burning and particulate matter (PM) which is not safe for the environment and even human persons. The lack of adequate public transport system has caused a great number of citizens to put their vehicles on the roads. The inefficiency and neglect of bodies that ought to monitor the road worthiness of cars have contributed in no small measure to the increase of automobiles, which produce high levels of pollutants on the highways.

Keenly following the automobile pollution is the emission from industries and companies that produce cement, chemicals, and furniture to mention but a few. These industries release high levels of pollutant gases into the air and this has caused no little damage to the health of not just those who live in the area but also those who work in those companies. Little attention is given to safety measures and according to a research carried out in Lagos, “In the Odogunyan site known for its iron smelting factories, a PM_{2.5} concentration of 1 770 µg/m³ was recorded in a period of

⁷³ According to the digital media company, Worldometer, Nigerian population is 216 million as at June 2022. See <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/nigeria-population/> Accessed June 20, 2022.

⁷⁴ See <https://blogs.worldbank.org/africacan/air-pollution-silent-killer-lagos> Accessed June 22, 2022.

⁷⁵ See <https://blogs.worldbank.org/africacan/air-pollution-silent-killer-lagos> Accessed June 23, 2022.

twenty-four hours – seventy times higher than the WHO guideline.”⁷⁶ Other forms of environmental pollution in Nigeria include microplastic degradation and the huge scandal from the Oil and Gas Industry which has resulted in the loss of entire biolife and destruction of communities especially in the Delta region of the country. Life has been made unbearable for many in the region who practically depend upon fishing for livelihood. According to Amnesty International, “Since 2014 Eni has reported 820 spills in the Niger Delta, with 26,286 barrels lost. Since 2011, Shell has reported 1,010 spills, with 110,535 barrels lost. That's about seven Olympic swimming pools.”⁷⁷ The spill continues and life is made further unbearable for citizens living already in abject poverty.

These pollutions have resulted in huge loss of human lives. With 150 fatalities per every 100,000 people, Nigeria is said to have the largest number of deaths due to air pollution in Africa.⁷⁸ These disturbing figures are closely followed by high infant mortality due to air-pollution related pneumonia. According to a UNICEF report, almost 185 children under the age of five die daily from pneumonia caused by air pollution. In 2019 alone, about 67,416 Nigerian children under the age of five were said to have died due to air pollution-related pneumonia, while another 49,591 Nigerian children under-five were said to have died from household-specific air pollution-related pneumonia in the same year.⁷⁹

8. Theological Implications

With man's destructive habits, creation has been constantly corroded by its custodian. The order of creation is inverted by

⁷⁶ See <https://blogs.worldbank.org/african/air-pollution-silent-killer-lagos> Accessed June 23, 2022.

⁷⁷ Amnesty International, “Niger-Delta Negligence. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/03/niger-delta-oil-spills-decoders/> Accessed June 24, 2022.

⁷⁸ Diana Dopheide, “Dealing with Air Pollution in Nigeria”, <https://borgenproject.org/dealing-with-air-pollution-in-nigeria/> Accessed June 24, 2022.

⁷⁹ See <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/press-releases/nigeria-has-highest-number-air-pollution-related-child-pneumonia-deaths-world>. Accessed June 24, 2022.

man's insistence on creating more profit even at the expense of extensive environmental pollution. Aesthetics is a core part of God's work. The beauty of creation is not only physical, but also beneficial. The comment of the narrator in the first account of creation on the goodness of God's work is threatened by the best of God's art. The sheer number of animals that have become endangered due to poaching and uncontrolled hunting, the decimation of forests for the sake of profit, the wide expanse of bushes that are set on fire by arsonists, the release of poisonous gases by industries without any concern for their effect on nature have systematically and consistently altered the beauty of God's piece of art.

Just like corruption, however, an attack on the work of God is suicidal. In sabotaging nature and being careless and reckless in his relations with creation, man embarks on a project of self-destruction. The planet has been set in a careful balance not only to praise the work of God, but also to preserve the life of man. The effects of climate change are real. It has been termed the biggest health threat facing humanity.⁸⁰ With rising temperatures, rapid desertification, increased cases of flash floods and landslides, the effects of man's deleterious activities continue to create conflicts, forced emigrations, diseases and deaths.

The effective reaction to save creation is cooperation with the redemptive work of Christ. Just as the whole of creation had been groaning in pangs of pain before the advent of Christ (see Rom 8:22), man should align with the redemptive intention of Christ to glorify the work of the Father by caring for creation. Excessive attention can never be paid to the reduction of pollution in every sector and by every means and resource. There should be a Christlike care for that which God has placed in man's charge. Creative anthropocentrism is the appropriate approach to the current threat to man's existence. Even though all things have been placed under man's feet (Gen 1:26,28; Psa 8:6), man should realize his authority is received and must be exercised according to the mind of the giver. The royalty of humanity's creation in the

⁸⁰ See <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>. Accessed June 25, 2022.

image and likeness of God cannot be separated from the image of the servant-king which Christ came to establish by his incarnation. Though man's royalty grants him power, yet it also places a huge responsibility on his shoulders: the care of creation.

Pope Francis' encyclical was inspired by the canticle of Saint Francis. In the spirit of *Laudato Si'*, man's abuse of creation continues because he has refused to view himself as a part of creation. In the medieval canticle, *Laudato Si'*, Saint Francis praises creation and considers creatures as brothers and sisters of man. The earth is termed 'mother', the sun 'brother', and the moon 'sister'. In this canticle, Saint Francis recognizes the beauty of the earth, its fruitfulness and the great gift God has given to man in creation. Above all, the seraphic saint does not place himself above the gift of creation, but rather sees them as siblings from the same Parent. Precise knowledge of this fundamental truth would save humanity from self-destruction. The dissolution of familial ties and continual fratricide embarked upon by man in his destruction of nature has resulted in man's re-echo of Cain's wrong retort to the primordial question, "Where is your brother?" (Gen 4:9).

9. Conclusion

In this essay, we have sought to conduct a close reading of Psalms 8 and juxtapose it with the core submissions of the papal encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. We also attempted to answer some particular biblical questions raised in the encyclical. We have been able to bring out the central position of man in the order of creation and his great responsibility as the tiller of the garden of God, the earth. We have looked at the reality of ecological pollution and the inversion of God's original plan for man and the earth.

It remains true that the communion between man and nature, which the Pope draws attention to in *Laudato Si'*, also involves an ecclesial implication. The communion between man and nature is not exclusive to the communion between Christ and the Church, because indeed, the whole of creation groans for salvation. The Church cannot be unbothered about the fate of God's handiwork, for the Church herself was born from the side of Christ and is God's family. The communion and right relationship between man and

nature sought by *Laudato Si'* is an extension of the implications of the identity of the Church as an assembly (*qāhal*) in communion with triune God. The ecclesiastical dimensions of the ecological concern are further reiterated in the liturgical life of the Church. What the Church offers in every eucharistic celebration is bread and wine, fruits of the earth and work of human hands. In other words, the Church daily offers the material world to God.⁸¹ Time and matter are sanctified because creation remains God's gift to man.

The binary demand of Psalms 8 and *Laudato Si'* is the urgent need for man to realize his original identity and swiftly move to repair the damage done to creation. It is a clarion call to change of lifestyle in order to better reflect an acute awareness of the real dangers of ecological degradation. Ecojustice demands that nature should be better respected and rewarded. Conscious planting of trees and evasion to habits that harm habitats should be urgently embraced. There should be a thorough education of the young as regards the dangers of global warming, greenhouse gases and the need to be more conscious of consumerist attitudes which have caused more harm than good. Unless eco-friendly policies are implemented and respected by all and sundry, it remains a dream if there would be starry skies to stare at with eyes free of smog and air to inhale with lungs rid of mould spores.

⁸¹ See John Zizioulas, "A Comment on Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si'*", *GOTR* 60:3-4 (2015): 187.