



The Responsibility of Royalty: Genesis 1-11 and the Care of the Earth

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Twenty years after the first earth day in 1970, the Bible is again in the middle of the ecological discussion. Instead of naming a man or woman of the past year, the first issue of *Time* magazine for 1989 named the “Endangered Earth” the “Planet of the Year,” with a cover photograph of artist Christo’s globe choked in plastic and tied up with twine. In the course of the lead article, Gen 1:28 is quoted, with the following comment:

The idea of dominion could be interpreted as an invitation to use nature as a convenience. Thus the spread of Christianity, which is generally considered to have paved the way for the development of technology, may at the same time have carried the seeds of the wanton exploitation of nature that has often accompanied technological progress.¹

The introductory article in a special environmental issue of *Smithsonian* gives a partial quotation of the same biblical text. Wallace Stegner writes:

Our sanction to be a weed species living at the expense of every other species and of Earth itself can be found in the injunction God gave to newly created Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.”²

In his book on global warming, Bill McKibben reports:

In fact, to the degree that our dominant Judeo-Christian tradition is seen as saying anything about nature, it is usually seen as antienvironmentalist, as elevating man above all others. The Genesis story, with its emphasis upon domination...ap-

¹Thomas A. Sanction, *Time* 133 (January 2, 1989) 29-30.

²Wallace Stegner, “It all began with conservation,” *Smithsonian* 21 (April 1990) 35.

pears the perfect rationale for cutting down forests, running roads through every wild place, killing off snail darters.³

For those who have followed the discussion about the Bible and the environment since that first Earth Day, it seems indeed that we have heard this song before. The Judeo-Christian

tradition continues to be understood as anti-environmental, and the *locus classicus* for those making this charge continues to be the text about dominion in Gen 1.⁴

The focus of this essay will be on that “dominion” saying in Gen 1:26-28 in its context in Gen 1-11. What does “have dominion” mean in these chapters? What do they say about the relationship between humankind and the natural environment? And what does this mean for our own time, just past Earth Day II?

I. A DOMINION OF RESPONSIBILITY AND COMMONALITY

The events of the sixth day of creation are given the most space in the biblical account, springing the usual framework:

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures (*nephesh hayah*) of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind....God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground (*adamah*) of every kind....”

Then God said, “Let us make humankind (*adam*) in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Gen 1:24-28; NRSV margin in 1:26)

The name given to the human species in this first creation account immediately links that species to the earth. The Hebrew *adam*, translated “humankind,” is a play on *adamah*, the word for ground (see also 2:7). This linkage could be expressed with Latin derivatives by saying that humans are made from humus. Or, with Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, earthlings are made of earth.

Gen 1:28 reports the first command given to humankind. It is striking that this command does not have to do with their relationship to God, nor with their relationship to other human beings. Rather, it has to do with the relationship of this first human pair to the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and to all life that lives on the earth. The earthlings are told to “have dominion” (Hebrew, *rdh*) over these creatures, indeed over “all the earth.”

The lexicons translate the Hebrew verb *rdh* as “have dominion, rule, dominate” (Brown-Driver-Briggs), “tread” (Joel 4:13), or “rule, dominate” (Koehler-Baumgartner). The verb occurs nineteen times in passages clear of textual difficulty. It may refer to the rule of a master over a hired servant (Lev 25:43, 46, 53), the rule

³Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989) 74; in the pages that follow the author gives a more informed and sensitive estimate of the Bible and stewardship of the planet.

⁴See my article, “What does it mean to ‘have dominion over the earth?’” *dialog* 10 (1971) 221-223.

of chief officers over laborers (1 Kings 5:30; 9:23; 2 Chron 8:10), of one nation over another (Lev 26:17; Num 24:19; Isa 14:2, 6; Ezek 29:15; Ps 68:28; Neh 9:28), or of a king over his people (1 Kings 5:4; Ezek 34:4; Ps 72:8; Ps 110:2). Where the characteristics of the rule are given, humane treatment is mentioned; the master is charged not to rule “with harshness” (Lev 25:43, 46, 53). Only in Gen 1:26 and 28 does the verb indicate rule over an object other than people.

Most of the occurrences of *rdh* are in political contexts, having to do with the rule of a king or the rule of one nation over another, which would be exercised through a king. Solomon “had dominion” over the west Euphrates territory and the results of his rule were peace (*shalom*) and safety for those ruled (1 Kings 4:24-25; Hebrew 5:4-5).

Ps 72 prays that the king in Israel “have dominion (*rdh*) from sea to sea” (v. 8). The prayer asks that his rule be accompanied by prosperity (*shalom*, v. 3) and that righteousness and peace (*shalom*, v. 7) abound. The king is to have special concern for the poor and needy and disadvantaged (vv. 2-4; 12-14).

Ezekiel’s word in chapter 34 is directed against the kings (called “shepherds”) of Israel. These politicians have been taking care of themselves, but, says the prophet, “with force and harshness you have ruled (*rdh*)” (vv. 2-4). These kings are like shepherds who “have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep” (v. 8). In contrast to this prophetic indictment of the faithless kings or “shepherds” of the nation is a picture of Yahweh the good shepherd. Yahweh will seek out the lost, care for the injured and weak, and bring them home, where they will live in peace (*shalom*) and security (vv. 11-31).

Thus when Gen 1 speaks about human beings exercising dominion over the earth and its creatures, the language is drawn from the sphere of politics and the exercise of kingship as it ought to be. This ideal model for the relationship between humankind (man and woman) and the earth and its creatures is the king/people relationship. In passages where the same “have dominion” verb occurs, the emphasis is on gentleness and on an active program of caring that results in *shalom*. The first time humans are mentioned in the Bible, God regards them as royalty (1:26). The first word spoken to the royal couple charges them with *responsibility* for the care of the earth and its creatures, a caring that will lead to *shalom* (1:28).

Gen 1 also describes humans in terms of *commonality* with their natural environment, especially with the animals. Animals and humans are both creatures of the sixth day. And both, as Karl Barth once put it, are “referred to the same table for food” (vv. 29-30).

II. GEN 1-11: THE THEME CONTINUES

What does the remainder of the primeval history in Gen 1-11 say about the relationship between humans and their natural environment? And how do these chapters help to understand the charge to have dominion?

The second creation account in 2:4b-25 stresses the commonality between humans and the rest of creation. The link between *adam* and *adamah* (1:25, 26) is explained: the earthling is made from the ground or earth (the two terms are used as synonyms; 1:25 and 1:30). To get a sense of the emphasis on human/earth linkage in this chapter, read through Genesis 2 substituting “earthling” for “man” (*adam* in vv. 5, 7, 8, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25). The commonality between humans and their

natural environment is also made explicit in the report that the trees and the animals are made from the same raw material as human beings (2:9, 19). The expression “living being” (*nephesh hayah*, 2:7) also relates the man to the animals, who are given that same designation in 1:24 (translated “living creatures”).

How should this earthling relate to the earth, the soil out of which he has come? The man is put in the garden “to till it and to keep it” (2:15). These two words describe the dual task of the farmer and of the entire society. The history of the techniques of agriculture may be summarized in the word “till” (literally, “work”). From the beginning, alongside the work of tilling has been the responsibility of “keeping” the land. This “keeping” is the same word used to describe the Lord’s caring relationship to a city (Ps 127:1; NRSV, “guard”) or to a people and an individual (Ps 121). The farmer and the community are called to till the land, and to care for it as well.

The Lord saw that the first man would be lonely on the earth, and that he ought to have a “helper as his partner” (2:18). The first attempt to provide companionship involved the making of animals and birds. These creatures are brought before the man, and he gives them names. The listings “beast of the field, birds of the air” and “cattle, birds of the air, beast of the field” recall the lists in Genesis 1:26 and 28. There it was said that the earthling was to “have dominion” over these creatures; here, since it is assumed that the name-giver has the ability to order, we see the working out of that exercising of dominion.

In sum: while the emphasis in Gen 2 is on human *commonality with* the earth and its creatures, the theme of *responsibility for* is evident in the charge to “keep” the earth and in the naming of the animals.

The commonality between the earthlings and the natural environment is evident in Gen 3. As an “animal of the field” (2:20; translated in 3:1 as “wild animal”), the serpent has been made of the same raw material as *adam* (2:19). In fact, communication between these two creatures is simply assumed! The ground is cursed and thus suffers because of human disobedience (3:17-18). This will not be the last time that the soil will suffer because of the action of humans! Finally, the human task is again stated in terms of tilling the ground and there is a double reminder of the earthling/earth relationship. The human was taken from the humus, and will one day return there (3:19, 23).

The “tilling the ground” theme introduced in chapter 2 continues in 4. Cain is a farmer, a “tiller of the ground” (4:2). Killing his brother affects not only his relationship to God (who punishes him) and to others (who reject him) but also to the land he has farmed. Cain is cursed “from the ground”! (4:11). It is as if the land that had provided him with sustenance has now turned against him and will no longer respond to his efforts. The killer can no longer be a tiller. The farmer will lose the farm.

The flood story in Gen 6-9 exemplifies the themes of both commonality and responsibility in its portrayal of the human relationship to the environment. Human beings and the animals are in this together; both are dependent for survival upon the ark and the food stored in it (6:21). The same verb describes the exit of both from the ark (“went forth,” 8:18-19). The covenant promising no more whole-earth floods is made with Noah and his later descendants (9:9), but also with every living creature (*nephesh hayah*) that is with them (vv. 10, 12, 15, 16, 17). It is, says the Lord,

a covenant “between me and the earth” (13).

The responsibility-for-earth-care theme is illustrated when God speaks to Noah and his family and charges them with rounding up the animals (6:19-20) and with getting them out of the ark (8:15-19). The animal list in 6:19-20 as well as in 7:14, 21 and 8:17 recalls the listing in Gen 1:26-28. Gen 1 gave earthlings the command to “have dominion” over “living creatures of every kind”; here again the story tells how that command is being carried out. For Noah and his family to “have dominion” over these creatures means to rescue them, to nurture them, and finally to set them free to roam upon the earth.

There is a side of the exercise of that dominion that is jarring. After the flood, animals may be sacrificed (8:20) and even eaten as food. Now the animals live in “fear and dread” of humans (9:1-7). Just as human sin had disrupted the relationship to the land (Gen 3:17-19; 4:10-12), so the relationship to the animals has now changed.

To summarize: the themes of *responsibility for* as well as *commonality with* the earth and its creatures, introduced in Gen 1, continue to be heard in the remainder of the primeval history. Gen 2 balances the emphasis of Gen 1 by placing special emphasis on what the earthling has in common with the earth and its creatures. The dominion theme is given dramatic illustration in the flood story, which shows the human family acting as responsible royalty when they rescue, nurture, and then set free “the birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

Brief mention may be made of two texts outside of Gen 1-11. Ps 8:6-8 speaks of human dominion over the creatures of the land, sky, and sea, using the verb *msl* instead of *rdh*. The psalmist considers the exercise of this dominion a gift of God (v. 6) for which the psalmist gives praise (vv. 1, 8). And Solomon’s prayer in Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-2 indicates that the traditional description of humans exercising dominion over other creatures extends at least into the first century B. C.

III. HEARING THE BIBLICAL ADDRESS: A CONNECTEDNESS OF CARE

In its teaching and preaching of justification by grace through faith, the church continues to sound a clear gospel word about God and humankind. In its call for justice and peace, the church is speaking and acting in regard to right relationships among members of the human family. But what about the relationship between humankind and the small planet we all share, together with the other creatures of the earth, sky, and sea?

The urgency of the care of the environment has been forced upon us by the alarming events of the past years.⁵ Theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann, Paul

⁵In addition to the works cited in the notes above, see *State of the World 1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), produced by the Worldwatch Institute and presenting up-to-date information on global warming, water, air, the sea, solar power, and even a fascinating chapter on the bicycle, “vehicle for a small planet.” Note also *Scientific American* for September 1989, with the theme “Managing Planet Earth,” the special number of *Mother Earth News* for March/April 1990, and the current issues of *E: The Environmental Magazine*. The July/August 1990 issue of *The Catholic World* focuses on the theme, “Caring for the Endangered Earth,” and includes articles and bibliography. See, for example, “Spirituality and Ecology,” by Thomas Berry, which begins, “We have such a wonderful sense and feeling for the divine because we live in such a gorgeous world.” See also Berry’s eloquent statement, *The Dream of the Earth* (Sierra Club Books, 1988). C. Dean Freudenberger’s *Global Dust Bowl: Can We Stop the Destruction of the Land before It’s Too Late?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990) brings a global perspective,

Santmire, and Douglas John Hall have been focusing attention on the topic.⁶ The Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1983 introduced the theme, “Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation” into the ecumenical community. These topics were the major concern of the WCC’s World Convocation in Seoul, Korea, in March of 1990.⁷ The announced theme for the WCC’s assembly in Canberra, Australia, in February 1991 is “Come Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation,” with the first subtheme, “Giver of Life—Sustain Your Creation.”⁸ The theme of the Lutheran World Federation assembly in Brazil in February of 1990 was “I have heard the cry of my people,” with one of the sub-themes, “...for a liberated creation.”⁹ The Presbyterian Eco-Justice Task Force has published a study, *Keeping and Healing the Creation*, that analyzes ecological problems and proposes “A Theology for Keeping and Healing.”¹⁰ Pope Paul’s homily for the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990, said that “peace demands of man a particular responsibility for all of creation.”¹¹ The issue has given rise to a number of conferences and seminars in a variety of Christian traditions.¹²

Despite the flood of publications from theologians and ecclesiastical committees on ecological themes, few studies deal with the biblical texts in their historical and literary contexts.¹³ Claus Westermann has reminded us that the first page of the Bible speaks about God and the birds, the fish, the forests, and the earth. “A God who is understood only as the god of humankind is no longer the God of the Bible.”¹⁴

In view of the urgency of the ecological crisis, the time has come for the churches to consider what the Bible says about our connectedness to the natural

⁶Moltmann’s recent study, *Creating a Just Future* (London: SCM Press, 1989), contains an excellent section, “The Ecological Situation...”; see also his *God in Creation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), as well as his introductory essay in this issue. Santmire has published a number of helpful books and articles on the theme; among the more recent, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); see also his “Healing the Protestant Mind: Beyond the Theology of Human Dominion,” a paper presented at the Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, in March, 1990. Douglas John Hall, in *Thinking the Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), asks “What happened along the way to the Bible’s own exegesis of the meaning of dominion in terms of human stewardship of the creation?” (p. 222).

⁷See Affirmations VII and VIII in Document 19, “Justice, Peace, Integrity of Creation” (Geneva: WCC, 1990).

⁸For a good orientation to official church statements, see Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, “Preserving the Earth,” *Canada Lutheran* 5 (July/August 1989) 6-9; note also the collection of essays edited by him, *Tending the Garden* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

⁹“There are, also in the perspective of creation, obligations which rest particularly on the Christian churches. In proclaiming the Gospel, they should stubbornly affirm the dignity of God’s earth...,” *I Have Heard the Cry of My People*, Study Book (Geneva: LWF, 1989), 44; for further documents, see LW Information Release 8/60, February 1990.

¹⁰Louisville: Presbyterian Church, USA, 1989.

¹¹*L’Osservatore Romano* 8 (January 1990) 2.

¹²See, for example, *Bewährung der Schöpfung: Kirche Unterwegs in die 90er Jahre* from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria (Munich: Claudius Verlag, 1989) which reports on the meeting of the Landessynod in April of 1989. Included is a helpful Bible study on Gen 1-3 by Joerg Jeremias. Also, *Christian Ecology: Building an Environmental Ethic for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Frederick W. Krueger (San Francisco: The North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology, 1988).

¹³The documents produced by churches and ecumenical groups tend to deal with brief biblical texts in

isolation; the works of Hall and Santmire, for example, deal with biblical materials but do not focus exegetically on the “dominion” theme.

¹⁴*Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974) 176. Westermann’s is the best commentary for ecological issues; see also his other writings on the creation theme.

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world and our calling to care for the earth. A careful listening to Genesis, the psalms, and the wisdom literature (for starters) would inform our thinking and invigorate our preaching and teaching. Such a listening would help us to understand the first word from God addressed to our species, on the first page of the Bible. That word addresses us as royalty, charging us to “have dominion” over the earth and its creatures and assigning us the responsibility for the care of this small and fragile planet we call home.¹⁵

¹⁵I wish to thank my colleague, C. Dean Freudenberger, for reading through this manuscript and making a number of suggestions.