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What Hath Man Wrought? Subduing, Dominion, and Cultural Location

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THE FOLLOWING MIGHT BE TERMED AN EXEGETICAL CASE STUDY, IF THAT IS NOT hopelessly to mix genres beyond recognition. It shows what can happen when African Christians are allowed to speak for themselves in ways that bring us new insights concerning old problems. The general discussion concerns the Gen 1 command to subdue and have dominion. How we understand those words will depend to a great extent upon our own cultural location.

Occasionally, out of our concern to provide a hearing for the voices of the unrepresented, we may be overly quick to try to speak for them. For this reason, since I am interacting with an African writer, I will be including more direct quotations than often is done in order that his voice might be heard. Before entering into that

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The discussion of dominion and the environment dare not forget the qualitative difference between veneration and fear. Whether or not the scars of that fear yet remain in our own corporate memories, we have all "been there, done that." We can never go back.

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conversation, however, I begin with a rather different voice, which both introduces our theme and acts as something of a foil for the conversation that follows.

I. The Demon of Dominion

In his award-winning novel, *Ishmael*,[1] Daniel Quinn challenges the foundational beliefs of agriculturally-based "man"-centered cultures and adds his voice to others that suggest that macro-ecological disaster lies ahead. The only solution for us, and for creatures which share the planet with us, is to turn our backs on the arrogant agro-centeredness of our own culture and return to simpler values, that is, those of the less environmentally destructive cultures that we have almost obliterated.

Among the major heavies in Quinn's eminently readable and thought-provoking book are "religious myths," which, he suggests, give an approving nod to an aggressive and eco-abrasive style of life. Early on, Ishmael, a modern character who functions as The Teacher over and against the story's Learner foil, notes, "The religions of your culture aren't reticent about it. Man is the end product of creation. Man is the creature for whom all the rest was made: this world, this solar system, this galaxy, the universe itself."[2] He goes on: "Of course man is conquering space and the atom and the deserts and the oceans and the elements. According to your mythology, this is what he was *born* to do....The world was made for man, and man was made to conquer and rule it."[3]

At issue here, of course, is the matter of "dominion." Much use is made of the first four chapters of Genesis, and Gen 1:28 clearly lies at the heart of the discussion in ways that will be familiar to many: "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." Quinn is not the first to suggest that this command, and by implication the "Judeo-Christian tradition," permits and even advocates the "rape of the environment." In his classic 1967 essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,"[4] Lynn White, Jr., writes:

> Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends....Hence, we shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.[5]

[1]Daniel Quinn, *Ishmael* (New York: Bantam/Turner, 1992). In 1991, the novel won the Turner Tomorrow Fellowship, established by Ted Turner to encourage authors to seek "creative and positive solutions to global problems." See Alan D. Thornhill and Daniel Quinn, "Meet Daniel Quinn...," n.p. [cited 6 December 2000]. Online: http://www.ishmael.com/origins/dq.

[2]Quinn, *Ishmael*, 57.

[3]Ibid., 74.

[4]Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," in *The Environmental Handbook*, ed. Garrett De Bell (New York: Ballantine/Friends of the Earth, 1970) 12-26; reprinted from *Science* 155 (10 March 1967) 1203-1207.

[5]Ibid., 20, 25.

One might question the use of the word "dualism" here, and quibble about absolutisms such as "no reason," but the general point is clear: if humanity is the pinnacle of creation, and indeed the whole purpose thereof, then all "lower" species must figuratively stand aside. Quinn becomes even more specific, and focuses upon the development of agriculture as the crux of the problem. As agricultural societies become dominant, pastoralists must retreat and may even be killed—thus the story of Cain and Abel, Quinn tells us. And if pastoralists may be removed, then certainly any "lower" species that interferes with agricultural production may also be eliminated, whether that species be insect or forest.[6]

Those who engage in such aggressive environmental depredation are described by Quinn as the Takers. These are set over and against traditional hunter-gatherer cultures, which are given the gentler name Leavers. And of course it is the Leavers who are seen as the ideal, living in quiet harmony with their environment, venerating nature, taking only what they need for survival, and not threatening the existence of other equal (not lower) species.

The picture of an older and simpler way of life is quite alluring. Who among those of us hailing from the frenetic, supercharged cultures of western civilization has not had moments of doubt, wondering if life in a cave—or at least in a mountain cabin—with a good knife and a bow and arrow would not be sustainable and preferable to the race we daily run? It was with this question, in the larger context of the challenges of *Ishmael*, echoing in my psyche that I then turned to a seminary senior paper for which I had been chosen as one of the readers.

II. Dominion Reconsidered

Peter Elisa Sheiza graduated with his Bachelor of Divinity degree from Makumira University College in 1999. For his B.D. thesis he chose the topic, "The Role of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania North-Eastern Diocese in Environmental Conservation with Reference to Genesis 1:28 and 2:15: A Case Study in Lushoto District."[7] Beyond that rather turgid title lay a paper with some rather unexpected turns. As is frequently the case with B.D. theses at Makumira, the project involved not only library research but also—as the words "case study" imply—the gathering of sociological data. Sheiza is from the Lushoto District in northeastern Tanzania, a mountainous area known for its beauty. The area has suffered environmental degradation in recent decades, however, and Sheiza used his internship year to gather material for his thesis.

[6]See also the structural arrangement of Barbara Kingsolver's recent *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998). The first of her seven major sections is significantly called "Genesis" and bears Gen 1:28 on its title page. Considering her somewhat cynical and often ironic portrayal of Christianity, it is not surprising that Nathan Price's first great poisonwood comeuppance would be the result of his attempt to dominate (not merely cultivate) the soil in the same way he dominates, and ultimately devastates, his family.

[7]Peter Elisa Sheiza, "The Role of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania North-Eastern Diocese in Environmental Conservation with Reference to Genesis 1:28 and 2:15: A Case Study in Lushoto District" (B.D. thesis, Makumira University College, Usa River, Tanzania, 1999). Page numbers in parentheses refer to this thesis.

1. Dominion out of control

What Sheiza discovered was the rather predictable carnage inflicted by a burgeoning population hemmed in by limited land resources. Deforestation had led to erosion, and the erosion had joined the detritus of human society to produce polluted water resources. Although Sheiza had never heard of White, Quinn, or *Ishmael*, his description of an environment under siege by an aggressive agricultural community rather closely parallels the observations of the latter.

In Sheiza's area, people have employed agricultural methods that have been very hard on the land. He quotes Elia Zahabu, a post-graduate agricultural student, who observes that "almost 90% of agricultural activities in Lushoto do not use well-defined farming practices such as terraces, contour farming and the like" (9). And even when modern techniques have been utilized, they have often been misapplied. Sheiza mentions the "misuse of industrial fertilizers," and notes that, as a result, "in most cases, they have positive effects in the first season, but later on it is impossible to produce crops without applying [them]" (9).

On the other hand, at least part of what was taking place was the result of traditional, not modern or western, influences. It is not only the clearing of fields that results in the deforestation: "Debarking trees is a normal action at Shume. Bark from trees is used as roofing material. For a small two or three room house more than thirty trees are endangered" (9).

Sheiza began to interview the elders of the community to determine the type of environmental and attitudinal changes that had taken place. Increased population was, of course, one contributing factor, but there was more. A sea change of attitude had taken place over the past several generations. The elders could remember a different age in which animism had a larger and more protective role to play in the lives of the society. For instance, large trees or sacred groves of trees had been used as places of worship and general communication with God. In general, trees could be cut down but only after offering a sacrifice of a goat, sheep, or hen. "Failure to do so endangered one's life" (14). And even then, only one person in the village was authorized actually to cut the tree (13). In addition, "traditionally, it was rare to visit thick forests without any specific purpose. There was the fear of spirits, hence forest fires were not so common as they are nowadays" (14). A similar situation appertained with regard to water resources. Sheiza interviewed an elder named Guga who questioned whether modern education was truly proving beneficial:

> Traditionally, water sources were highly protected. There were specific times to visit water sources...and only adults were normally involved in going to fetch water. Guga says:
>
> > We had a time table to visit some important areas such as water sources, mainly early in the morning and late in the evening. But nowadays things go on without any fear. If this is the education that you possess, maybe we were better educated than you are. (15)[8]

[8]The quotation was from elder Said Guga of Bumbuli-Ugungua.

Similar comments were made concerning soil conservation. Again, increased population is a major contributing factor, since in former generations it was possible to allow a field to lie fallow for several agricultural seasons. But beyond that, there were again spiritual considerations. In former times, "places with special purpose were preserved by imposing some bylaws to avoid destruction. Places considered to be sacred maintained their natural state because it was totally prohibited to conduct any activity apart from the intended one" (16).

What brought about the change? In one of the most thought-provoking sections of the paper, Sheiza makes the following observation:

> With regard to spiritual matters among the Shambala, I was privileged to visit a traditional worship place called Kijewa. Kijewa is an important traditional place which is about 7 km from Mlalo. Kijewa is at the top of a small hill. The main role of this place is for offering sacrifices to God through good ancestors. Nothing was allowed to be shifted from Kijewa Forest. Everything that belongs to that place was considered to be holy. In my interview with [Musa Msagati of] nearby Ngwelo-Kaya, he had this comment:
>
> > No one was allowed to cut a tree at Kijewa Forest. No cultivation was allowed near or in the forest; even taking soil for making mud (a building material) was strictly prohibited. The appearance was really attractive, not like now after the intrusion of foreign religions (i.e., Christianity and Islam). We were really enjoying God's creation. (12)

It is almost uncanny how closely the comments of the village elders seem to follow the observations of Lynn White, Jr.:

> In antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit....Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.[9]

Having thus surveyed the problem, Sheiza returned to Makumira to reflect upon what he had heard.

2. Dominion and serving

After outlining what he saw in the villages, Sheiza turned to the exegetical portion of his paper. It could well be described as "word and world," in that the way he now approaches Gen 1 and 2 is decidedly influenced by what he experienced in conversations with elders and villagers. He begins with a consideration of Gen 1:28, and to some extent follows the reasoning we find in White and Quinn. At three major points, however, he differs rather markedly. First of all, he sees the heart of the problem being freedom from old fears and taboos rather than a following through of the command to have dominion. Sheiza rejects any oversimplifica-

[9]White, "Historical Roots," 20-21.

tion that simply lays anti-creational acts at the feet of the command to have dominion without further reflection. Indeed, "cutting trees aimlessly and burning forests are destruction not dominion" (20).

Second, he makes the important move to Gen 2:15: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." This move is not new; it has been done before.[10] And, of course, the point is that "subdue...and have dominion" is not the only command concerning creation in Genesis (and thus in "the Judeo-Christian tradition"). One must balance acts of dominion with acts of tilling and keeping, words that can also be translated "serving and guarding."[11] Failure to do so—referring only to Gen 1:28, rather than including Gen 2:15 in the discussion—brings about results typical of selective exegesis. Indeed, by so doing, White and Lynn are able to make Genesis appear to be the central problem rather than recognizing the problem as being certain misinterpretations of Genesis. Of this, I shall have more to say below.

Third, Sheiza makes an observation that too quickly gets lost or even dismissed in the (western) discussion. Immediately after his conversation with Musa Msagati, above, in which attitudinal changes are laid at the feet of Islam and Christianity, Sheiza writes, "The fear of the so called 'sacred' place has made possible the survival of natural trees, thus maintaining God's creation. However, the fear had made people to be slaves instead of being free as God's people" (12).[12]

Sheiza makes this observation casually, without "preaching," several times throughout his paper. For him, it is a given, something which hardly needs to be said. Prior to the coming of the gospel, people lived in fear, and this was not a good thing. On this, too, I will have more to say below, because, for those of us from the west, this point is often *not* a given, and needs to be explained to us. Perhaps the "simpler" life was not quite as simple and peaceful as we would like to believe.

As Sheiza concludes his paper, he puts the two Genesis texts together in such a way as to harmonize "dominion" and "protection":

> The environment needs proper conservation and care for the benefit of mankind and other creatures. Mankind is not the only creature that has the right to use God's creation...; other creatures for example animals also have the right. [Humanity] is free yet responsible to take care of God's creation. (37)

Sheiza then goes on to make a number of practical and responsible suggestions, some of which, such as birth control, are not overly popular in his own context. A number of recommendations have to do with planning and cooperation between church and government, since the church in Tanzania is still a force to be reckoned

[10]Sheiza at this point deals with standard commentaries on Genesis by Terence Fretheim, Victor P. Hamilton, Gerhard von Rad, and Gordon J. Wenham.

[11]Indeed, the word עבד (*'abad*, till or serve) is also used in the sense of "worship," as is most clearly seen in Exodus where a major question is whether Israel is going to *'abad* (serve) Pharaoh or *'abad* (worship) the Lord.

[12]Sheiza uses the phrase "natural trees" to distinguish trees growing "naturally" in forest areas from those which have been planted by villagers.

with in terms of influencing policy. Again, family planning is mentioned, along with proscription of deforestation and programs for replanting trees in areas where trees have been cut down. And, in a culture in which the actions of leaders still have a great influence, Sheiza calls upon church leaders to be seen engaging publicly in acts of responsible dominion and conservation.

III. Two Reflections

I conclude with two reflections. These are personal, not found directly in Sheiza's paper, but certainly influenced by his thoughts as well as those of others living in an African context.

1. Subduing, dominion, and cultural location

The first has to do with understanding the command to "subdue...and have dominion." Especially over the past fifty years, and particularly in technologically developed societies, these words have fallen on hard times. Over the past century, it has become actually possible for us to "subdue...and have dominion" over many of the forces of nature. We have developed machines that decrease the sweat of our brow as we plow fields or travel to the office—though at the cost of our air quality. We have developed large reservoirs and pumping systems to reduce urban water shortages—though often at the expense of the surrounding human and animal communities, which lay in areas now dammed up. We have developed "clean" high-tech industries—only to discover that "the smoke stacks were buried underground," i.e., in terms of dangerous chemicals that manage to leach their way into the soil through the damaged walls of holding tanks.

But it was not always so. The balance was not always tipped so strongly in the direction of humanity in the confrontation between people and nature. Indeed, it is only recently that we have become such a threat and have developed our great and polluting machines. One needs only read a novel such as Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth* to realize how often in the past, and how recently, it has been nature that has emerged victorious. And in places such as Africa this is still the case today. In almost every confrontation between people and nature in Africa today, it is still people who lose. Now this is not to advocate a turn away from our environmental concern. We dare not do so. But it is to recognize that for most of human history, the call to "subdue and have dominion" has been simply a call to survive. For most of the people of the world even today, nature is yet a fearsome thing, and their lives can indeed be seen as a struggle—often a losing struggle—to gain dominion. Not total dominion, perhaps, but enough to feed a family.

Today even that is changing, of course. Now there is the sad irony of developing countries just starting to enter an early technological stage at a time when the west has "gotten religion" about environmental responsibility. International attempts are made to prevent or shut down entry-level industries that tend to be polluting, and there is little sympathy for the facts that (1) such industries are most

often found in the developing world, (2) it was with just such environmentally abrasive technologies that the west got its own start a century ago, and (3) developing countries have often paid dearly (in their eyes) for these hand-me-down technologies that the west has been only too eager to sell and then criticize. As a westerner, I find it hard to answer those around me who suspect us of a "pull up the ladder" attitude: now that we have gotten ours, we want to prevent them getting theirs.

So the issue of "subdue and have dominion" is not a simple one; theological and moral issues seldom are. And my goal here is merely to allow Gen 1-2 to be heard in its proper context, and to raise the issue of responsibility to the world at large, a world that would like to share in the abundance we in the west enjoy.

2. Fear, truth, and freedom

My second reflection has to do with the issue of fear and freedom. I return to Sheiza's observation, noted above: "The fear of the so called 'sacred place' has made possible the survival of natural trees, thus maintaining God's creation. However, the fear had made people to be slaves instead of being free as God's people" (12).

Later, he writes:

> The notion of places being sacred forced the Shambala to preserve those areas. However, such fear has caused people to be oppressed by their own environment, [and so] they failed to enjoy God's creation due to their fear. (36)

Clearly, the popular image of simple folk living in quiet harmony with their environment does not tell the whole story. These people are not simple—we find among them the same passions and jealousies and quests for meaning that drive us—and their lives are not simply spent in harmonious veneration of nature. Rather, they are sometimes dominated by fear.

The transition from fear to freedom was made so long ago in our western cultures that we have forgotten it. It is no longer a part of our corporate memory. We certainly fear the destruction of earthquakes and tornadoes, but we no longer look upon them as demonic forces. They are powerful, but they are impersonal and not malevolent in a purposeful sense. It is all too easy for those of us living in the post-enlightenment "comfort" of the western world to minimize the enervating effects of living in a state of fear, at the mercy of a threatening spiritual world that must always be appeased. For Sheiza and others who have "been there, done that, got the t-shirt," there is no desire to go back.

It was in contemplating this very point that I was suddenly struck by a new and truly radical sense of Jesus' words in John 8:32: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Whatever the original context for those words, it cannot be denied that the gospel indeed brings the power to set free, the power to release people who have lived in mortal fear of a dark world of spirits. That conversation usually begins not with a denial of a demonic world—a denial that would

simply destroy one's credibility before people for whom previous encounters with that world have been all too real. Rather, the conversation begins with the simple observation, "Christ is more powerful than any spirit or demon." Whether, or how far, the conversation then needs to move beyond that opening salvo will depend upon the conversationalists. But it is a world-changing conviction of the same caliber as the early confession, "Jesus is Lord." It indeed has the power to set free.

Sheiza's paper cannot, of course, be seen as a response to the complex novel by Daniel Quinn mentioned at the beginning of this article. For one thing, Sheiza was not aware of the novel when he wrote, and was not seeking to engage it. For another, Quinn raises a number of other thought-provoking challenges that go beyond the discussion undertaken so far. His book should be read.

At the same time, it is important for those like White and Quinn, who seek to alert us to the true arrogance and presumptuousness of our (western) culture, to deal with all the data. The book of Genesis is indeed part of the discussion, not only because it is common to Jew and Christian and, to a lesser extent, to Muslim, but also because it is one of the foundation stones of western culture even for the secularist. Our very language and metaphors are laden with images from the Bible. Dealing honestly with Genesis and the environment means considering both Gen 1 and Gen 2. As Sheiza notes—and as others have noted—there is a necessary balance, even tension, between the subduing and dominion of Gen 1 and the serving and protecting of Gen 2. They must be taken together; to use just Gen 1 is to set up a straw man.

Beyond this, however, what Sheiza's paper does—and that which makes it both useful and suggestive—is to allow a developing culture to speak for itself rather than merely be spoken for by outsiders who may overlook, oversimplify, idealize, and romanticize. There are no pristine cultures, pure and untouched by sin—or fear. The gospel does—really does—set free, and those who have in the past borne it from one culture to another have indeed brought true good news and freedom, whatever else they may also have brought "in, with, and under" that good news.

Yes, cultural imperialism has been real. Awful things have been done in the name of Christ, and still are today. But, as Sheiza and the elders of his community would tell us, going back is not an option. Those among us in the west who speak, whether romantically or polemically, of simpler cultures that were better off without us have valid points to make. But that which must not be forgotten in the discussion is the qualitative difference between veneration and fear. Whether or not the ancient scars of that fear yet remain in our corporate memories, we have all "been there, done that." We can never go back. ⊕