

The Mandate to Dominate

'God intended the land for sheep, not for trees'

Hamilton Spectator, 1879

Refusing to be conscripted into the Prussian army, my great grandfather Wilhelm Habel immigrated to Australia from Germany in the 1840s and established a farm between two lakes, one saltwater and the other freshwater. His farm was on the saltwater lake. The freshwater lake, which was less than half a mile away, had been cleared of all trees up to the water's edge. Wilhelm, who had a genuine bond with nature, decided to plant native Australian trees around the second lake and restore the lake to life. Within a week, the local farmers had pulled up every tree. The local newspaper reported that 'God intended the land for sheep not for trees'. Not to be denied, Wilhelm was eventually elected to the local council and had the land around the lake preserved as a natural park. One letter to the editor declared this action to be 'an extravagant appropriation of crown lands'.

The attitude of these Australian farmers is typical of the way settlers throughout the Western world viewed their relationship with the land. It was God's will that they should clear the land and make it productive. It was God's will that the trees of the forests should be felled and make way for human progress. It was God's will that human beings transform the landscape into farms, mines and roads. After all, the wild west had to be tamed, the outback had to be conquered and nature had to be harnessed!

What were the sources of this belief that nature be harnessed in this way? Sheep are important, but why, in our Christian heritage, does the human drive to transform the landscape for human ends take precedence over even the God-given order of creation?

One source, I suggest, was an inconvenient text called the Bible!

An underlying source of this popular belief seems to be the mandate to dominate in Gen 1:26-28. I recognise that there may have been many other factors involved in the development of our Western drive to exploit nature, and I appreciate that the Bible has been used in many ways to

support many different causes and attitudes. However, we also need to acknowledge that there has been a long line of interpreters who have found that the Genesis 1 mandate to dominate, and similar biblical texts, are grounds for humans harnessing and exploiting nature.

I also recognise also that many scholars in recent years have sought to soften the mandate to dominate in Genesis by interpreting it as a compassionate commission to sustain the planet. The text itself and its interpretation over the centuries, however, leave little doubt in my mind that the Genesis text is indeed a mandate to dominate. The vast majority of interpretations over the centuries are anthropocentric: they are human centred, viewing humans as the culmination of creation and thereby devaluing any other subjects in the text.

Gen 1:26–28, I would argue, is a grey text—a text that is ecologically destructive, devaluing Earth and offering humans a God-given right to harness nature.

The text reads:

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind 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 wild animals of the Earth and over every creeping things 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 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 1:26–28)

There are three dimensions of this passage that make it grey: the image of God; the mandate to dominate living creatures; and the commission to subdue Earth. I will discuss these three dimensions in detail below.

The Genesis context

On each of the preceding days of creation in Genesis 1, the narrator simply announces the creative impulse as a self-reflection of God. God says, 'Let there be light' and there is light. God says, 'Let Earth

bring forth' and Earth brings forth. The context of Genesis 1 is a primal narrative in which Earth is a major character who emerges from out of the deep on the third day.¹

With the creation of humans, however, a new element is introduced which signals a creation of a different order. God, in concert with unidentified others, says 'Let us make...'. The decision to create humans is a shared decision presumably with a heavenly council. This radical change in God's way of operating highlights the significance of this act as climactic when viewed from an anthropocentric perspective where the interests of humans are primary.

The processes employed by God in the creation of the domains of nature normally involved the separation of existing parts of the primal world consisting of darkness and water, or the generation of a new domain from an existing domain. Thus light is separated from darkness, waters are separated from waters, and day is separated from night on days one, two, three and four. On days three, five and six, fauna and flora are generated from the land, the waters and the atmosphere. Earth is a partner with God in producing these creatures. They are Earth-born!²

The image of God

With the creation of humankind, however, no connection is made with any existing domain of the primal or created order. Humans do not emerge from an existing domain of nature as do other living creatures. Instead, humans are made by God using a totally different process. They are made using an image (Hebrew *tselēm*). Other living creatures are Earth-born, while humans are image-modelled. In this grey text, humans are **not** portrayed as part of Earth or originating from Earth in any way.

Interpretations of the image of God (*imago dei*) in this text are legion and cannot be explored in detail here. A long tradition that goes back to figures like Philo, who was influenced by dualistic Platonic thought, promotes the idea that the image refers to a non-physical dimension of humans: mind, reason, consciousness or a spiritual core.³ The usual meaning of the Hebrew word for image (*tselēm*), however, is something

1. Norman Habel, 'Geophany: the Earth Story in Genesis One', in Norman Habel & Shirley Wurst, eds, *The Earth Story in Genesis* (The Earth Bible 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 34–48.

2. Habel, 'Geophany', 34–48.

3. David Fergusson, *The Cosmos and the Creator: An Introduction to the Theology of Creation* (London: SPCK, 1998), 13.

concrete and visible, for example, a statue of a deity (2Kgs 11:18; Dan 3:1) or a picture on a wall (Ezek 23:14).

A careful reading of the text reveals that the usual Hebrew verb for 'create' (*bara'*) is not used for the creation of humans. Instead, like an artisan, God 'makes' (*asah*) a God-image as one would make a model. The same verb is used for 'making images' in several other texts. The Philistine priests, for example, give the order to 'make images of the mice' that were ravaging the land (1Sam 6:5; cf Ezek 7:20).

Probably, for readers in the ancient world, the use of the same verb for humans being made in the image of God and the making of physical images would have suggested that human beings were believed to represent God—that is, to 'image God'. The image of the king was frequently erected to announce to the world that this territory was under the rule of that king; the image represented the king. In the same way, humans created in the image of the deity-as-king would be viewed as royal representatives of the ruling deity.⁴ As representatives of the divine ruler, the humans could exercise power over nature and conquer it as any king of the ancient world might do.

In numerous readings of this text, however, biblical scholars and theologians have tended to avoid recognising the very physical dimension of the divine action; rather, they discern a higher dimension for humans that somehow makes human beings belong to an even higher order. As a consequence, traditional readings of the text have fostered a strong anthropocentric approach. That is, these readings have fostered a tendency for humans to play God by identifying with a dimension of God that they believe they can emulate or express. Sibley Towner goes so far as to claim this text makes humans 'clones of God' and 'prime ministers of the King of the universe'—but without the right to 'play God'.⁵ His reading is boldly anthropocentric. Dean McBride even speaks of humans as the presence of God in the cosmos. He writes:

The particular purpose of their creation is 'theophanic': to represent or mediate the sovereign presence of the deities

4. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 58.

5. Sibley Towner, 'The Future of Nature', in *Interpretation* 50 (1996), 35.

6. Dean S. McBride, 'Divine Protocol: Genesis 1.1–2.3 as Prologue to the Pentateuch', in William Brown & S Dean McBride, eds, *God Who Creates* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 16.

within the central nave of the cosmic temple just as cult images were supposed to do in conventional sanctuaries.

Whatever the precise interpretation of the image of God that church leaders or scholars may have endorsed in the past, it has almost always provided a justification for proclaiming the superiority of human beings over all other animate or inanimate domains of Earth. The image of God clearly separates humans from the rest of nature, gives them a status that justifies their claim to be superior beings and, in so doing, devalues the rest of creation.

The mandate to dominate

Precisely because human beings are made in the image of God, they are given the mandate to dominate all living creatures. Lest there be any question about what creatures are involved, the text delineates a wide range of representative living things: fish, birds, domestic animals, wild animals and creeping things. Humans are given the authority to rule as God's representative over all living things in nature.

As Towner⁷ points out, the logic of the text is clear: 'Let us make humankind (*adam*) in our image, according to our likeness, so that they may have dominion'. Being made in God's image is not associated with the capacity of humans to communicate with God in some way, but with the role of exercising dominion over creatures and subduing Earth.

The stance of this grey text is quite explicit: humans are created in God's image so that they may have dominion!

In recent discussions about this text, there has been considerable debate about the Hebrew term *rada* which has been rendered 'rule' or 'have dominion'. Normally *rada* is what kings and taskmasters do (1Kgs 4:24; 5:16): dominate their subjects and their enemies. As it stands, the text is decidedly grey; it declares that humans are given a mandate to dominate all other living creatures. That function, it would seem, devalues these creatures and justifies forceful human acts of subjugation.

In this text, there is no indication of kinship between human beings and any other living beings, nor any connection between humans and

7. Towner, 'Nature', 348.

Earth as the domain from which they are made or emerge. Humans and Earth are represented as separate, belonging to two discrete domains!

The god-images known as humans are blessed like other creatures with the power of reproduction. For humans, however, this blessing also means a capacity to 'fill' Earth and so 'subdue' it. The act of filling Earth suggests that Earth is the domain where humans are to rule. Fish may fill the seas (Gen 1:22) but humans fill Earth, the domain where the Earth-born creatures already live. 'Filling' Earth sounds like a takeover. This is confirmed with the final mandate: 'subdue' Earth!

The Hebrew verb *kabash* ('subdue') has all the connotations of heavy-handed control. 'Crushing under foot' (Mic 7:19) and 'subjugating' the land of Canaan (Josh 18:1) are typical images that reflect the oppressive dimension of the verb and its consistency with the verb *rada*, to rule. In addition, this verb is associated with subduing a woman to rape her (Esth 7:9; Neh 5:5), an association that clearly reflects a connotation of forced domination of Earth. Of course, the belief that humans have 'raped Earth' has been acknowledged by many well into the twentieth century.

In a detailed critical scholarly analysis of the image of God in Gen 1:26–8, Garr⁸ maintains

kabash (subdue) is a harsh term that empowers, in this case, human beings to control, occupy, and subjugate a vast area by an exercise of mighty force. The 'image' entitles humankind to achieve decisive victory over the entire natural world. Stated differently, humankind will act like a victorious king over a conquered land.

Daniel Hillel is a *bone fide* ecologist. In an appendix to his recent work *The Natural History of the Bible*, Hillel recognises that this text can be construed as 'a divine ordination of humans to dominate Earth and to use every nonliving and living thing on it for their own purposes, without restraint or reservation'.⁹

8. Randall W Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness. Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 171.

9. Daniel Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible. An Environmental Exploration of the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 242.

Earth in this grey text is a domain to be overpowered by those creatures who bear God's image. The mandate to 'subdue' provides a justification for de-powering and devaluing not only Earth creatures but also Earth itself.

Reinforcing the mandate

We might well expect, after the debacle of the flood and the declaration that humans are corrupt and sinful, that their status as creatures bearing God's image would be downgraded. On the contrary, after the flood subsides and before God makes a promise to humans, animals and Earth never again to destroy Earth with a flood, God reinforces the mandate for humans to dominate the animal world, albeit with certain modifications.

Humans are to continue multiplying and filling Earth in order to control it. Their relationship with living creatures, however, changes somewhat: now it is made explicit that all living creatures will be terrified of their human overlords. God's edict:

The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, and on everything that creeps on the ground and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. (Gen 9:2)

This edict is grey indeed. The reinforcement of the mandate is clear: 'Into your hand I have delivered them!'. To be 'in the hand' of someone is to be under his or her control. Humans are given unequivocal dominion of the animal world—a dominion that also reflects an increased alienation between humans and other living creatures.

This increased alienation seems decidedly unfair. Why should these creatures suffer additional anxiety in their relationships with humans? Humans were the primary source of the corruption of life that led to the flood in the first place. Yet, in the wake of the flood, the relative worth and standing of nonhuman creatures has dropped even further.

From the perspective of the wider Earth community this mandate seems, once more, to be an unjust decree from God. The hierarchy of relationships established in Gen 1:26–28 now becomes entrenched. God is apparently concerned first of all with the role of humans rather than

justice for nonhuman creatures. The mandate to dominate from Genesis 1 is here given God's seal of approval.

In addition, this mandate is now the basis for killing animals for food; previously, it seems, both animals and humans ate vegetation (Gen 1:29–20). The blood, however, is not to be eaten: it is to be acknowledged as belonging to God. The sharp differentiation between humans and other living creatures is further endorsed by the fact the humans are not to be killed like animals. Why? Precisely because humans are made in the image of God! To kill a human is to destroy an image of God!

The image of God which justifies the mandate to dominate in Genesis 1 persists in the post-Flood world of new beginnings and reinforces the superiority of humans over all animal life.

Celebrating the mandate

The full force of the mandate to dominate is felt in a widely celebrated poem, namely, Psalm 8. This psalm is popular in Christian worship and the inspiration for quite a number of chants and hymns. Through such repetition, the mandate to dominate continues to be celebrated in the worship—and faith—of many Christian communities.

The relevant section of the Psalm 8 reads:

You have made them (humans) a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them **dominion** over the work of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
(Ps 8:5–8)

As with the mandate to dominate in Gen 1:26–28, in Psalm 8 humans are depicted as connected with God in a special way—and disconnected from the rest of creation. The royal language elevates humans to the status of lordship over the natural world. Their dominion extends not only to all kinds of living things on the land, in the sea and in the air, but also to all the work of God's hands. Nothing is excluded: humans reign supreme over all of creation in Psalm 8!

This celebration of the mandate to dominate is a grey text indeed.

The case for human lordship is not argued, but is taken for granted and made the subject of joyful celebration. In so doing, I would argue, the natural world is again devalued: nature is placed 'under the feet' of humans, and thereby assumes the position of a slave or a defeated foe. What could be more degrading!

Some scholars have sought to soften the harsh role of humans announced in this text. Limburg¹⁰, for example, attempts an ecological reading that focuses on the royal responsibilities of humankind who are to reign like shepherds. But as Carley¹¹ and others have shown, the role of kings—who were often called shepherds in the ancient world—was brutal and far from caring. To be under the feet of kings and to lick their feet (Ps 72:8) is hardly an expression of Earth-care.

Admittedly, the author of the book of Job dares to undermine the text of Psalm 8 somewhat by declaring that humans, with their sad and empty lives, are the real slaves on Earth (Job 7:1–2). God, he insists, sets God's mind on humans every morning to harass and hound them (Job 7:17–19). Job's experience of reality is precisely the opposite of the relationship with God depicted in Psalm 8. Job also accuses God of using his wisdom to 'overthrow Earth' (Job 12:13–15). Job's 'alternative orientation', however, was generally ignored in Christian worship. Celebrating the mandate to dominate in work and worship was the prevailing mindset.

The challenge

Whether we like it or not, and whether or not we wish to modify the reading of these texts in some way, the mandate to dominate remains a serious grey text in the Bible. My reading, I would contend, is an honest analysis of the text reflecting the anthropocentric way most interpreters over the centuries have viewed its message and meaning. I believe we need to face the force of this passage and ask ourselves how we plan to deal with the challenge it poses in the current environmental crisis. I believe we need to avoid the temptation of more recent interpreters to re-read these texts as if the mandate to dominate was really a way

10. James Limburg, 'Who Cares for the Earth? Psalm Eight and the Environment', in AJ Hultgren et al, eds, *All Things New* (WWS Series 1; St Paul: Lutheran Theological Seminary, 1991), 50.

11. Keith Carley, 'An Apology for Domination', in Norman Habel & Shirley Wurst, eds, *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (The Earth Bible 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 119.

of saying humans need to sustain the planet or be compassionate with creation. In chapter 6 I explore what fresh insights a green reading of this text in context might reveal.

Meanwhile, the mandate to dominate remains a crucial grey passage in an inconvenient text called the Bible.

The mandate to dominate and subdue Earth was a living force among early settlers. A nineteenth century poem by Frank Masters (an elder in a Christian congregation in Driver River, South Australia) 'The Pioneers'¹² clearly illustrates the mandate to dominate:

It was the over-flow Westward of the mainland expansion
That surged first to the plains of this goodly land,
Then tackled scrub (clearing) with roller and axe,
An exodus obedient to great Biblical command:
'Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth
And subdue it!' with its accompanied blessing.

The Mighty Acts of God

'When the rainbow is in the clouds I will see it and remember.'

Genesis 9:16

The elusive nature of the rainbow has long fascinated me. In the early 1980s I would drive to the university and park my car facing into the West. Often in winter there would be a rainbow or two suspended in the clouds to the West—a sign, I supposed, to jog God's memory.

On one occasion, as I drove to my usual parking spot, I was astounded to see a white rainbow—or to be more precise, there was a bright white arch across the clouds precisely where the rainbow normally hung. What was happening? The science lecturers at the university said I was 'seeing things' and would not believe me. What would God be thinking if the 'remind me' rainbow suddenly turned white? What kind of twist in the ecosystem produces a white rainbow?

According to Genesis 9, the rainbow was created to remind God that God has a covenant with all creatures on Earth and with Earth itself. A basic promise within that covenant is that God will never again destroy Earth with a flood—a promise that apparently represents a reversal of God's previous way of operating.

Hans Walter Wolff, a mentor of mine, used to say that the rainbow was originally understood as God's bow: a weapon God had hung up in the sky to signify peace with Earth.

Students of the Bible have, in the context of the environmental crisis, cited this covenant as a clear indication of God's continued concern for creation and God's compassion for Earth. The inference is that God has a covenant bond with Earth and consequently that God places a high value on Earth and the domains of nature. A further inference is that humans should follow in God's wake and reflect a similar covenantal attitude of care for creation—whatever the colour of the rainbow in the sky!

Does the story of God's relationship with the domains of Earth in subsequent texts of the Old Testament support this reading? Does God's covenant with creation restrain God from inflicting further destructive

12. Janice Clements, *Arno Bay and District 1883–1983* (Arno Bay Centenary Committee, 1982), 195.