

Chapter 3

HUMAN DOMINION OVER CREATION?

An overview of Genesis 1–2

The opening words of the Hebrew scriptures, in the first book of the Jewish *Torah* and the Christian Bible, are “in the beginning” (Gen. 1:1). The story of the making of “the heavens and the earth” (ESV), with its canonical position at the opening of the scriptures, has of course been of enormous influence and underpins the Christian doctrine of creation. The story has also long been a focus for controversy and debate, particularly since the findings and theories of modern science began to call into question the value of Genesis 1–2 as any kind of historical or scientific account of the earth’s origins. In some Christian circles, more prominent in the USA than in Europe, the creation-evolution debate remains a topic of public disagreement with implications for educational policy. The more recent rise of ecological concerns has brought new challenges and questions to the interpretation of Genesis 1–2.

It has long been recognized that there are two accounts of the making of heaven and earth placed side-by-side in the final form of Genesis: 1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–25 (which continues on into Chapter 3). These two accounts have traditionally been assigned to two different sources, one reflecting priestly interests and convictions (P: 1:1–2:4a) the other the perspective of a so-called Yahwist, given the use of the divine name Yhwh in that source (J: 2:4b–25). Recent scholarship has seriously challenged the cogency of the established four-source theory of the Pentateuch (J, E, D, P), but it is at least clear enough that in Genesis 1 and 2 we have two different accounts of the creation.

The account in Genesis 1 begins with the earth “formless and empty”. Then, in response to God’s call, “let there be” (*fiat* in the Latin Vulgate), a series of events takes place by which the earth brings forth life. It is important to note how far these primal events are depicted as a process of separating, or ordering – something that probably reflects a priestly

concern. There is no hint here of the later doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* – creation out of nothing. Instead, God's creative work is a matter of bringing order, form and life to what was previously formless. Indeed, some Old Testament texts (e.g. Pss 74:12–17; 89:8–14) seem to depict God's work in creation as a battle with chaos, a *Chaoskampf*, in which God subdues mighty beasts and establishes order. It is hard to see that imagery explicitly in Genesis 1, though some have suggested it might lie in the background (see Fretheim 2005: 43–46).

First to emerge is light, which is separated from darkness to form day and night, each with their allotted time – evening, then morning, as darkness gives way to light, thus forming the first “day” in the six-day story of God's creative activity. The “lights” in the sky – with two “great lights”, one for the day, one for the night – appear later, after the land produces vegetation (vv. 14–18). The opening sequence continues with the making of an “expanse” or “canopy” which separates the waters into two, below and above the sky (or “heavens”) – a reflection of an ancient worldview in which there are waters beneath and above the sky. The Hebrew word *shamayim* can be translated sky or heaven(s), so we should always be wary assuming the kind of “spiritual” meaning that we might take from the word “heaven”. The opening of this account, describing the making of *et ha-shamayim w'et ha-arets*, is usually translated “the heavens and the earth”, but it might also be rendered “the sky and the earth”, as Norman Habel suggests (cf. Habel 2000b: 36, 41).

After the water “under the sky” has been gathered into one place, allowing dry ground to appear (vv. 9–10), then life begins to be made: vegetation (vv. 11–12); sea creatures and birds (vv. 20–21), then creatures that live on the land, classified into three broad types: livestock, wild animals, and animals that crawl on the ground (vv. 24–25). The culmination of these creative acts is the making of humanity (*adam*), the Hebrew word for a human being, which also, of course, becomes the proper name of the first man as the narrative of Genesis continues; vv. 26–30).

Uniquely, humanity – both male and female – is made in the image and likeness of God (vv. 26–27). Like the sea creatures and birds (though not the land-creatures, to whom this is not said), God blesses humanity with the command to “be fruitful and increase” (vv. 22, 28). But humanity also receives a much greater blessing and commission, to “rule” or “have dominion” (Heb verb: *radah*) over all living creatures and to “subdue” (Heb verb: *kabash*) the earth. Strikingly, though, given this mandate to rule, both humans and (land/sky) animals are given (only) plants for food: in

other words, the original creation as depicted in Genesis 1 is a herbivorous or vegetarian one. This is a theme we shall encounter again.

A refrain which runs throughout this creation account is God's seeing that what has been made is “good” (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Verse 31 sums up this theme with the declaration that “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (v. 31). Interestingly, this is not explicitly said about the making of humanity, nor is it a point that is made in the second creation account in Genesis 2. This declaration may not necessarily mean, in the context of this priestly writing, that the creation is regarded as morally good or perfect in all respects, as, for example, Calvin suggests: “perfectly good ... the highest perfection” (Calvin 1965 [1554]: 100). Instead, perhaps, what may be implied is that it is “good for achieving its purpose” (Rogerson 1991: 61; cf. Westermann 1974b: 229), “good” insofar as its harmonious and ordered existence “supported all life forms as God had made them” (Hartley 2000: 50). Gerhard von Rad, who suggests that the declaration “Behold, it was very good” could be “correctly translated ‘completely perfect’” goes on to note that this perfection “refers more to the wonderful properness and harmony than to the beauty of the entire cosmos” (von Rad 1963: 59).

The first creation account concludes with the account of God's rest on the seventh day, a story which no doubt serves as an aetiology or “explanation” for the origin and importance of the sabbath, perhaps again reflecting the priestly preoccupations of this version of the story.

The second creation story, which begins in Gen. 2:4b, is very different. The opening of the account lists all the things that had *not* yet appeared – no plants, no rain, no humans (v. 5). The first thing to happen is that a mist (or some kind of flood; the meaning of the Hebrew *ed* is obscure) comes up from the earth and waters the ground. Interestingly, there is no mention here of God commanding; this water simply arises “from the earth”. The first thing God is described as doing is forming the human (*adam*) from the dust of the ground (*adamah*). The word *play* in Hebrew here can hardly be reproduced in English, though Phyllis Trible's phrase “the human from the humus” captures it well (Trible 1993: 42); the human is “an earth creature” (Trible 1978: 77). In the account of Genesis 2, only the human is explicitly said to have had the “breath of life” breathed into him by God; thus he becomes a “living being” (*nefesh chayah*). Nonetheless, the other creatures are described using exactly the same terms: each is also a *nefesh chayah* (2:19; cf. Gen. 7:22, where all creatures on the land are described as those “in whose nostrils was the breath of life”, ESV).

The account of Genesis 2 has a more horticultural orientation than Genesis 1, perhaps reflecting the different circles that produced or shaped the various stories. In Genesis 2, the first thing God does with the human is to place him into the garden God has planted in order that he can "work it and keep it" (vv. 8, 15; cf. v. 5). The human is also commanded not to eat from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (v. 17), which, along with the tree of life (v. 9), stands in the middle of the garden.

Another important point in the story is God's decision that the human needs a "helper" (Heb: *ezer*), and that God will make one for him (v. 18). It is only now that we hear, almost incidentally, that God has already made the animals and birds (v. 19). All of these are brought to the *'adam* to name. This process of naming implies a certain status and power on the part of the human (cf. Mk 5:9). As Claus Westermann comments: "By giving the animals names, the man arranges them in his world" (Westermann 1988: 20). Yet none of these creatures is suitable as a helper; none "corresponds" to the human, or is "like" the *'adam* (as the Septuagint puts it). So the *'adam* is put into a deep sleep and a rib taken out, which God "builds" into a woman. The *'adam* welcomes this new creature, a helper fit for him, as "bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh" (v. 23). And for the first time in the Old Testament, the names which distinguish man from woman are introduced: she will be called *ishshah*, woman, for she was taken from *ish*, man (2:23; cf. Gen. 1:27, where different words describe humanity as "male and female"). The human, the *'adam*, has been divided into male and female. Again the story serves an aetiological purpose, explaining why it is that an *ish* leaves his father and mother to unite as "one flesh" with an *ishshah*, so providing an influential theological underpinning of the institution of marriage.

The problems of Genesis 1: Readings of recovery

For obvious reasons, these creation stories are of great relevance to any ecological engagement with the Bible: they describe God's making of the earth, and give some sense of the relationships and relative value among the various creatures. Within these stories undoubtedly the most influential and crucial text is the description of the creation of humanity in the priestly account of Genesis 1. In particular, the mandate given to humanity to "rule" the animals and "subdue" the earth (1:26, 28) may be seen as the key biblical text undergirding the kind of damaging anthropocentrism that Lynn White famously saw at the root of our modern ecological crisis (see

ch. 1). Among the most prominent themes in discussion has been the range of possible interpretations of this "dominion" text.

Those concerned to find in the Bible positive support for the contemporary ecological agenda, and others who have simply reacted against the Lynn White thesis, have sought, in various ways, to show that this text cannot be held responsible for legitimating any wide-ranging mandate for human exploitation of the earth, nor for its contemporary manifestations in scientific and technological mastery of nature. Nonetheless, this text proves one of the hardest to defend against the criticism that the Bible may generate a view of human superiority and vocation that insufficiently values the rest of the earth community.

Some of the works which defend Gen. 1:26–28 against the kind of criticisms implied by White are concerned to interpret the text in its ancient historical context. An early response to White was made by James Barr (1972), who argued that the Hebrew words used in Gen. 1:26–28 were not as "strong" as had often been suggested, and that the biblical foundations of the doctrine of creation "would tend ... away from a licence to exploit and towards a duty to respect and to protect" (p. 30). More broadly, Barr concludes that "there is much less direct connection between biblical faith and modern science than has been recently believed in some theological currents. The Jewish-Christian doctrine of creation is therefore much less responsible for the ecological crisis than is suggested by arguments such as those of Lynn White" (p. 30). Norbert Lohfink, without any reference to White but engaging with similar views in the German context, argues that the "blessing" of Gen. 1:28 refers to the divine plan for each nation to "take possession of their own regions", and for humans to domesticate animals in a way which establishes a form of peaceful co-existence (Lohfink 1994: 8, 12–13). Since the text has this kind of expansion of human civilization and domestication of animals in view, Lohfink argues, like Barr, that it is inappropriate to use it "to legitimate what humanity has inaugurated in modern times ... The Jewish-Christian doctrine of humanity ... regards human beings very highly, but it would never designate them as absolute rulers of the universe" (p. 17).

Bernhard Anderson highlights the stress in the creation account of Genesis 1 on bringing order; it describes the process by which earth "increasingly becomes an orderly habitation" (Anderson 1984: 158). Anderson agrees that the making of humanity does appear as the crown of the acts of creation, and notes that humans uniquely share the divine image (1:26). Yet, in the "overall pattern of the account ... the emphasis falls not so much on anthropology ... as on ecology, that is, the earthly habitation

which human beings share with other forms of 'living being'" (p. 158). Like Lohfink, Anderson suggests that human dominion is connected primarily with the idea of "population growth and diffusion," "the capacity to multiply and fill the earthly *oikos*" (pp. 159–60).

Another strategy is to place this difficult text into its wider literary context. Mark Brett, for example, offers a reading of Genesis 1–2 which suggests that this literary context itself mollifies the problematic implications of 1:26–31 (Brett 2000). Brett, like other writers, stresses how the concerns of the text reflect the ancient agrarian setting: possessing the land and domesticating animals can be seen as essential aspects of sustaining human life in such a setting, and the "dominion" over the animals may be seen as primarily related to real threats posed by wild animals and the desire to control or remove such threats to human wellbeing. With regard to Gen. 1:26–31, Brett, again along with many other writers, notes the use of language which reflects the ideology of kingly rule. Westermann comments that humanity is depicted here as exercising "sovereignty over the rest of creation. The verb used here [*radah*] means 'subjugate'; and is used particularly of the rule of kings" (Westermann 1988: 11; cf., e.g., Ps. 110:2). Brett argues that Gen. 1:26–31 can be seen as a *democratization* of this kingly-rule tradition, in that it portrays humanity as a whole as called to rule over the creatures (Brett 2000: 77–78; cf. Lohfink 1994: 4). The text thus represents "a polemical undermining of a role which is otherwise associated primarily with kings ... the democratizing tendency of Gen. 1:27–28 can be seen as anti-monarchic" (Brett 2000: 77). Brett goes on to examine the second creation account (Genesis 2) and sees this account, compared with that in Genesis 1, as more firmly placing human beings in kinship with all other creatures, rather than in a kingly relationship to them (pp. 80–82, etc.); thus, he argues, the editors of Genesis "have produced a text which potentially subverts the 'species supremacy' which lies behind the ecological crisis" (p. 86).

A highly influential approach which attempts to recover from biblical texts such as Gen. 1:28 a message compatible with, and of positive value to, the ecological agenda reinterprets the notion of human dominion in terms of a model of *stewardship*. This approach picks up the use of kingly language in Gen. 1:26–28 and interprets it within the broader treatment of kingship in the Old Testament. Kingly rule, it is argued, was not about domination and exploitation, at least in terms of the biblical "ideal". Westermann, for example, writing on Gen. 1:26–31, comments that "[a]ccording to the ancient view ... there is no suggestion of exploitation; on the contrary, the king is personally responsible for the well-being and prosperity of those he

rules. His rule serves the well-being of his subjects" (1988: 11). From this perspective, the language of rule and dominion can be read as implying a responsibility on the part of humans. Brennan Hill puts the point forcefully: "humans were created to act nobly in the place of the Creator ... this leaves no room for 'lording over' or 'mastering' humans or any other living things. Tragically, the passage has all too often been distorted and used to justify the domination of both human beings and nature" (Hill 1998: 38).

Treatments aiming to retrieve a positive sense of the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation outlined in Gen. 1:28 also highlight the repeated declarations earlier in Genesis 1, that creation is valuable, is "good" in God's sight even before humans appear (vv. 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31; Osborn 1993: 86). Also important to developing the theme of stewardship is the imagery of Genesis 2, where the human is placed in the garden "to till and keep it" (Gen. 2:15). Indeed, the "stewardship" model of humanity's relationship to the earth has become a central plank in many attempts to construct a biblical environmental ethic (see, e.g., Wilkinson *et al.* 1980; Granberg-Michaelson 1987b; Hall 1990 [1982]) and, more recently, in a realignment of major evangelical leaders and bodies behind a more environmentally-conscious vision of Christian responsibility, as expressed, e.g., in "An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation" (1994 [in Berry 2000: 17–22]) and the Evangelical Climate Initiative (2006). A similar stance is reflected in *The Green Bible*, published in 2008 (for a critique, see Horrell forthcoming b).

The reading strategy at work here can be related to the typology presented in Chapter 2: evangelicals who are committed to the environmental agenda need to show how the Bible can be read in an ecologically positive way, and need to defend texts like Gen. 1:26–28 against the charge that they legitimate aggressive human domination of the earth.

Yet questions have been raised about the value of the stewardship model for an environmental ethic (see, e.g., Palmer 1992; Bauckham 2000; Southgate 2006). While it may represent an implicit biblical model of the relationship between king and people (interpreted, it might be added, in a rather idealistic, even naïve, way), it may be questioned whether it is actually a biblical image specifically of the relationship of humans to creation, which is the crucial point for those who promote environmental stewardship as a Bible-based model of care for creation. As John Reumann points out, stewardship terminology is actually used rather little in the Bible (Reumann 1992: 7): "[t]here are virtually no Old Testament roots for what the New Testament and Church Fathers did with the *oikonomia* [stewardship] theme" (p. 16) and "[i]t cannot be claimed that *oikonomia* constitutes a

major New Testament theme" (p. 18). Moreover, where this does occur, it does not relate to human responsibility for non-human creation. Second, as Clare Palmer suggests, it is an image primarily based on financial and other forms of delegated responsibility and which contains various negative implications; the steward is someone given charge of the owner's property (see, e.g., Luke 16:1–8). "The political message encoded in stewardship," Palmer argues, "is one of power and oppression; of server and served" (Palmer 1992: 76). Moreover, various ecologically problematic assumptions seem to underlie the concept: "a strong sense of humanity's separation from the rest of the world"; the idea "that the natural world is a human resource, that humans are really in control of nature, that nature is dependent on humanity for its management" (pp. 77–78). In short, according to Palmer, it amounts to an anthropocentric and patronizing ethic (pp. 81–84). Richard Bauckham similarly asks whether:

the image of stewardship is still too freighted with the baggage of the modern project of technological domination of nature. Can we entirely free it of the implication that nature is always better off when managed by us, that nature needs our benevolent intrusions, that it is our job to turn the whole world into a well-tended garden inhabited by well-cared-for pets? (Bauckham 2002a: 172)

Another response to the argument that Genesis 1–2, and specifically 1:26–28, legitimizes human domination of the earth, of the kind that has fostered the modern scientific and technological project of mastering nature, is to insist that such an ideology is not so much a product of the text itself as of much later historical developments. This is precisely the argument, explicitly developed in response to White's charges, in Richard Bauckham's essay on "Human Authority in Creation" (Bauckham 2002a: 128–77; see also Harrison 1999, with similar conclusions).

Genesis 1:26–28 was reinterpreted through a framework very different from that which the text itself represents, Bauckham suggests, when it was read by early Christian interpreters through the lens of Greek philosophy. From this source came ideas of human uniqueness and superiority over nature, a utilitarian understanding of the world, a view of dominion as "the right to make use of all creatures for human benefit" (p. 135), a strongly hierarchical view of the world, and a distinction between humans as rational and animals as irrational, and therefore not needing or deserving considerations of justice (pp. 133–38).

Yet even this view, prevalent in the medieval period, was not, Bauckham argues, "sufficient to authorise ... the modern project of technological

domination of nature" (p. 141). This was because, despite this view of human supremacy, "dominion was understood as a static fact, not a mandate for extension, and the world was understood as created ready and adapted to human use, not requiring large-scale technological modification" (p. 141). This early interpretation of the Genesis mandate is thus to be sharply distinguished "from the interpretation of the dominion that accompanied the rise of the modern project of technological domination of nature" (p. 141).

Moreover, the view of human dominion in this period was set firmly within a *theocentric* perspective: humanity's "vertical" position of dominance over nature was sharply qualified by a sense of its "horizontal" relationship with all creatures who relate to the Creator (pp. 141–42). These important qualifications fell away with the Renaissance interpretation of human dominion: "When any sense of the value of creation for God and of a common creatureliness in which humans share was lost, the idea of human dominion would acquire quite new significance" (p. 142).

Thus Bauckham traces the birth of "the modern project of unlimited domination of nature" to sixteenth-century Renaissance humanism, in which appeals to Gen. 1:26–28, etc. were not infrequently found. "The attitudes that have led to the contemporary ecological crisis can be traced back to this source, but no further" (p. 157). The ideological underpinnings of this project developed further with Francis Bacon (1561–1626), one of the founding figures of modern science. "Central to Bacon's vision of scientific progress is his understanding of the goal of science as the implementation of the God-given human dominion over nature, which Bacon himself presents as the meaning of Genesis 1:28" (p. 159). Hence, dominion comes to be seen not as a static description of what is the case, but rather as a "historical task" (p. 160). Humans come to "play the role of God in relation to the world" (p. 167). So, according to Bauckham:

the ideological roots of the modern Western project of aggressive domination of nature are to be found in a traditional interpretation of the human dominion over nature that drew on Greek rather than biblical sources and was subsequently, in the Renaissance, removed from its broader context in a Christian understanding of creation. (p. 165)

In essence, the claim here is that the problem lies not with the biblical text but only with the ways it was misinterpreted, first through the lens of essentially non-biblical Greek ideas and then much later in the context of Renaissance views of human possibilities and progress. Indeed, Bauckham

suggests, biblical themes such as the placing of humanity *within* the community of creation, and the praise of God by all creation, offer the basis for a positive environmental ethic and a theological framework within which dominion can be much more positively interpreted (see Bauckham 2002a: 176–77; Bauckham 2002b).

Other studies of the history of interpretation of Gen. 1:26–28 too have concluded that, in the pre-modern period, there was no particular interest in interpreting the text as a mandate for aggressive domination of nature for human ends. Only when science and technology began to make such aims conceivable, it seems, did that particular kind of view of human dominion begin to emerge (see Baranzke and Lamberty-Zielinski 1995; Harrison 1999). However, questions remain – to which we will return below – concerning the extent to which such conclusions resolve the difficulties of Gen. 1:26–28 and its (ongoing) influence.

Resistant readings of Gen. 1:26–28

While many biblical scholars and theologians have thus sought to defend Gen. 1:26–28 against the criticisms levelled at it by those following Lynn White, others have taken a different stance. Some members of the Earth Bible Team, committed to reading biblical texts in the light of ecojustice principles (see ch. 2), find this Genesis text guilty as charged. Norman Habel, main editor of the Earth Bible series, is concerned to confront what he regards as the naïve assumption evident in many works of ecotheology “that the Bible is environmentally friendly” (Habel 2000a: 30). He argues, for example, that Gen. 1:26–28 cannot be read in a positive, earth-friendly way:

The verb *kabash* (“to subdue”) not only confirms the status of humans as having power over Earth; it also points to harsh control. Subduing the land meant crushing opposing forces. There is nothing gentle about *kabash* ... The orientation of the human story (Gen. 1:26–28) is overtly hierarchical: humans are authorized to rule other creatures and to subdue Earth. (Habel 2000b: 46–47)

For Habel, the story of the making of humanity (Gen. 1:26–31) disrupts and conflicts with the story of the making of Earth – capitalized as a character by Habel (Gen. 1:1–25). In the opening verses of Genesis, life emerges through a fruitful collaboration between God and Earth; here the Earth is a partner in the story, a willing actor in the generation of living things. With the creation of humanity, however, that partnership is

changed; now Earth is to be dominated and ruled from above by humanity. Reading “from the perspective of Earth” – a central concern of the Earth Bible series – this is a damaging and unfortunate story, which does not support the kind of ecojustice principles to which the Team is committed (see also Habel 2001a: 180–84).

Another writer in the series, Howard Wallace, is similarly unconvinced by attempts to recover a positive reading of Gen. 1:28: “The roots of any modern ecological problems to which an emphasis on Gen. 1:28 and human domination of creation has contributed, would thus seem to be embedded in the biblical text itself and its own internal means of interpretation” (Wallace 2000: 56). In other words, Wallace essentially sides with White insofar as Gen. 1:26–28 is indeed seen as implicated in causing the ecological problems that have stemmed from aggressive human exploitation of the earth.

The idea that humanity is made in the image of God, despite its huge influence, is actually rather rare in the Old Testament, found primarily in these opening chapters of Genesis (1:26–27; 5:3; 9:6; cf. Wisd 2:23). The other place in the Old Testament where a similar idea is expressed, linked with a strong statement about humanity’s dominion over the earth, is in Psalm 8 (cf. Hill 1998: 37): “Yet you have made them [human beings] a little lower than God [Heb *’elohim*], and crowned them with glory and honour. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet” (Ps. 8:5–6). Keith Carley, also writing in the Earth Bible series, offers a similarly critical treatment of this text. According to Carley, this Psalm represents “an apology for human domination” which does not conform to the ecojustice principles. The model of domination which the Psalm presents and legitimizes – “a classic expression”, Carley suggests, “of the dominating male ego” – has been a cause of suffering for too long, and needs to be rejected (Carley 2000: 122).

Following the classification of different reading strategies presented in Chapter 2, and specifically recalling the two types of “resistance”, it can be seen that these writers represent a reading of the text which exposes and resists what is taken to be its negative impact, given a commitment to principles of ecojustice. The other type of resistance is also evident in some Christian writing, namely a resistance to the modern environmental agenda. Calvin Beisner, for example, agrees with Habel and others that the Hebrew words *kabash* (“subdue”) and *radah* (“rule”) convey “strong, forceful subjugation” (Beisner 1997: 103; cf. 178 n. 21). In other words, Beisner agrees that Gen. 1:26–28 (among other texts) does place humanity in a position of authority over the earth. But for Beisner this is not a problem;

on the contrary, it is an important element of the biblical Christian worldview. Beisner sees human subjugation of nature as a crucial task, restoring and redeeming nature from its curse, turning it from wilderness into garden so that it might "meet man's needs – and the needs of other creatures as well – more fully than it naturally would" (p. 104). While environmentalists celebrate the beauty of wildernesses and seek to protect them, Beisner points to the biblical texts that depict wilderness as a sign of God's curse (pp. 117–28). Insofar as the environmental movement rejects this biblical doctrine of God-given human dominion, it should itself, Beisner suggests, be rejected as un-Christian.

Conclusion

There have been a variety of readings of Genesis 1–2, and specifically of Gen. 1:26–28, in response to the kind of critical issues opened up especially by White's classic article. Some writers, as we have seen, argue that the text cannot originally have meant anything like what White's thesis takes it to mean. Others develop a "stewardship" reading of the imagery of dominion, insisting that any use of it to legitimate human exploitation of the earth is a "distortion" of its true meaning (Hill 1998: 38, 42). Yet others, such as Habel, insist that the crucial dominion text cannot be so easily brought into congruity with an ecological perspective. Indeed, it should be clear that the text is at least open to a range of readings, and its language of rule and dominion can certainly imply ruthless and forceful domination as well as more benevolent forms of authority. Gen. 1:26–28 cannot easily be rescued or recovered for an environmental biblical theology.

Texts such as Gen. 1:26–28 are, always and inevitably, open to a range of different readings. Competing readings – mandate for human domination, or call to responsible stewardship? – are often presented as arguments about the "real" meaning of the text in its original historical context. Bauckham's argument, in a sense, is concerned to show that ecologically damaging attitudes stemmed from Renaissance ideas and cannot be traced back to the text itself. Yet the biblical texts can and do sustain a variety of readings, readings which arise from and are shaped by changing historical circumstances and specific readerly locations. Historical studies are valuable in highlighting the original context of the text, thus showing how its concerns and foci were very different from those of the later contexts in which it has been interpreted. Yet debates about different interpretations cannot be resolved simply by trying to determine the original meaning or intention of the text, nor by showing how certain interpretations reflect

the influence of later ideological frameworks, since all interpretations are, in various ways, products of a particular set of historical, ideological, theological and ethical convictions.

The Baconian interpretation of Gen. 1:26–28 as a mandate for the active implementation of a programme of human dominion arose within a context of new discovery and immense optimism about the possibilities of science. The evangelical interpretation of Gen. 1:26–28 as a call for responsible stewardship of nature arises within a context of growing awareness of the negative impact of human activity on the planet's ecosystems, and a more chastened sense of the limits and dangers – as well as the positive benefits – of science. Neither interpretation can simply be declared a false reading of this text. Or, put differently, both interpretations are, in a sense, "distortions" of the text, since both make of it something rather different from what its own content and context imply.

Since the text can thus be read and appropriated in various ways, a crucial question rapidly emerges: Why should we read the text one way rather than another; why we should view it through one interpretative lens rather than a different one? The alternatives are partly to be judged through careful exegesis and historical study, since these can help us to see how some readings simply represent implausible ways to construe the Hebrew text. Yet an equally crucial part of the task is to argue, on theological and ethical grounds, and given the contemporary context we inhabit, why one approach is better than another. Also important is to question which texts and images should be of central influence, and which should be marginalized. Genesis 1 has, for various reasons, exerted huge influence on the Christian doctrine of creation and of humanity – uniquely made in the image of God. In an age dominated by ecological concerns and problems, other texts might offer more fruitful resources and might have a claim to be brought to the centre of a biblical theology.

The opening chapters of Genesis, then, offer an ambivalent legacy to an environmental reading of the Bible. Some aspects of their content may be important to an ecological theology (such as the insistence on the goodness of all creation) or suggestive for contemporary ethics (such as the depiction of a non-violent, vegetarian creation). But other aspects, especially in the crucial dominion text (Gen. 1:26–28), are at least open to a reading which supports a sense of humanity's unique value and right to use the planet for its benefit. Right at the outset of our studies of biblical texts, then, we see that it is not easy to sustain the claim that the Bible has a consistent or obviously "green" message. Rather, there are complex questions about how

to interpret and to weigh various ambivalent texts and how to deal constructively with their equally ambivalent legacies.

Further reading

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Chapter 4

THE “FALL” AND THE FLOOD: A COVENANT WITH ALL THE EARTH

A curse on the ground: Human disobedience and its consequences

In the Christian tradition, the story told in Genesis 3, after the two accounts of creation in the opening chapters, is regarded as the story of the Fall. This is a crucial moment, a misstep in the history of humankind, when through Adam’s (and Eve’s) disobedience sin enters the world and with it the sentence of condemnation and death. Henceforth, humans are marked by the propensity to sin, enslaved under its power. Adam’s “original sin” defines the character and fate of the human race, which stands in need of redemption.

It is important to note at the outset of this chapter, then, that this is not exactly how the narrative of Genesis 3 presents things, and that the focus on the Fall as a defining moment in the history of humankind is not found in the Hebrew scriptures. There are no direct references to Genesis 3 elsewhere in the Old Testament (Bruggemann 1982: 41; Fretheim 2005: 321, n. 1), though there are some close parallels in Ezek. 28:11–19; this oracle against the king of Tyre describes him as blameless in Eden (vv. 12–15), until unrighteousness was found in him (vv. 15–19; see Rogerson 1991: 65–66). As Claus Westermann puts it: “The Old Testament knows nothing of a narrative which says that man sank into a state of corruption, that from that moment on he was ‘fallen man’” (Westermann 1974a: 89). Walter Bruggemann comments similarly: “The text is commonly treated as the account of *‘the fall’*. Nothing could be more remote from the narrative itself ... In general, the Old Testament does not assume such a ‘fall’” (Bruggemann 1982: 41). Later Jewish literature did begin to develop this idea, seeing Adam and/or Eve as the original sinner(s), through whom the universal disease of sin and the consequent punishment of death entered the world. For example, the *Wisdom of Solomon* (probably first century BCE) states that “through the devil’s envy death entered the world”