

**LIVING WITH OTHER
CREATURES**

Green Exegesis and Theology

Richard Bauckham

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on these matters was always rewarding and I am sure assisted my thinking in ways I cannot now clearly distinguish.

When I first started thinking about 'green theology' such a subject scarcely existed. Now it is a flourishing field of research and debate. More importantly, perhaps, in the same period Christians have been 're-entering creation' (to borrow a phrase from Edward Echlin) and waking up to their ecological responsibilities. These essays will be of no value unless they make some contribution to Christian worship, Christian spirituality and Christian practice. The praise of God the Creator and Renewer of his whole creation and an end to the war of aggressive conquest that modern humanity has waged against God's other creatures are their goal.

I am writing this soon after the earthquake and tsunami that devastated northern Japan in March 2011. This situation has made me very aware that a major topic – that of natural disasters – lacks any detailed treatment in either Bible and Ecology or this present volume. It is a serious lack that perhaps I shall be able to remedy in the future. But, remembering that a sense of close relationship with nature, both as a delight and as a threat, is deeply rooted in Japanese culture, I should like to dedicate this book to my friends in Japan: Hideo and Michiko Okayama, Masanobu and Kaoru Endo, Paul and Chiharu Yokota, Takanori and Miyako Kobayashi, and Norio Yamaguchi.

*Richard Bauckham
Cambridge, 23 March 2011*

1.

The Human Place in Creation – a Biblical Overview

George Monbiot, an influential British writer on environmental matters, recently wrote that 'we inhabit the brief historical interlude between ecological constraint and ecological catastrophe'.¹ He meant that for most of human history (including the periods in which the Bible was written) humans lived within considerable restraints imposed on human life by their natural environment. Humans made use of their environment, of course, in various essential ways, most importantly farming, but their power over most of nature was severely limited. All that changed in the modern period, when the great western project of scientific-technological domination of nature was dedicated to the unlimited extension of human power over nature and its subjection to human use and benefit. This project continues. Only quite recently have we realized the potential of biotechnology to make unprecedented changes to the living world around us and to human nature itself.

At the same time we have become more and more aware that this attempt to subjugate nature to human purposes has had unforeseen and unwanted effects of huge and disastrous proportions. Climate change is the most obvious and the most immediately dangerous. What we thought was a process of ever-increasing human control over nature, the abolition of ecological constraints, has in fact set processes in motion that we are powerless to control. The brief historical interlude between ecological constraint and ecological catastrophe is very nearly over.

¹ George Monbiot, *Heat: How to Stop the Planet Burning* (2nd edn; London: Penguin, 2007), p. xxi.

From a Christian point of view what is obviously at stake here is the proper relationship between humans and the rest of God's creation. If Christians are to behave responsibly at this critical moment in the planet's history, we must reflect long and hard on how God intends us humans to relate to the rest of his creation on this earth. To see the world, as Christians do, as God's creation, to know ourselves to be creatures of God, put here to live among other creatures of God, must make a difference to the huge issues of lifestyle that are becoming unavoidable for everyone who has any sense of what is happening to our world.

This is perhaps even more necessary because in the last few decades it is Christianity that has often been blamed for the ecological crisis in which we now find ourselves. The modern project of dominating nature originated in the context of western Christian culture, which, it is claimed, promoted the idea that humans are fundamentally different from the rest of nature, that the rest of nature was made by God for human use, and that it is not only the human right, but the God-given task of humans to exploit the rest of creation for human benefit. As a historical account there is some truth in that charge, but only a very partial truth (as Chapter 2 will make clear). But it does suggest that the appropriate place for us to start a consideration of what the Bible has to say about all this is the first chapter of Genesis.²

Human Authority in Creation (Genesis 1:26–8)

To understand our place within creation Christians have most often gone to a rather obvious place: the narrative of God's creation of all creatures in the first chapter of the Bible. On the sixth day of the week of creation,

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 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

² The rest of this chapter summarizes the fuller treatment of these themes in my book, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd/Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2010).

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. 1:26–8)³

This authority in creation, given by God to humans, has traditionally been known as the human dominion over creation. By virtue of their creation in God's image, humans in some sense represent within creation God's rule over his creatures. Very often this has been taken to mean that the rest of creation has been made by God solely for human use. Very often in the modern period it has been taken to mandate the scientific-technological project of achieving unlimited domination of nature.

In reaction against that, Christians sensitive to the ecological problems of recent decades have insisted that this is not a mandate for exploitation, but an appointment to stewardship. In other words, the human role in relation to other creatures is one of care and service, exercised on behalf of God and with accountability to God. Creation has value not just for our use, but also for itself and for God, and humans are to care for creation as something that has inherent value. That understanding of the human dominion as stewardship has, I think, been enormously helpful to Christians thinking out what God's purpose for us is in the present crisis.

However, I think we need to go further. Christian focus on this one text in Genesis 1, even when it is understood in terms of stewardship, is problematic for two reasons:

1. The neglect of the rest of Scripture. We need to read this text in its proper context in the rest of Scripture. That means both attending to ways in which the rest of Scripture provides important indications of how we should understand the dominion, and also recognizing that there are other key themes in Scripture that illuminate our relationship to other creatures. We need to take account of these other themes alongside the idea of dominion. They cannot be simply reduced to the idea of dominion.
2. What has been deeply wrong with much modern Christian reading of Genesis 1:26–8 is that it has considered the human relationship to nature in a purely vertical manner: a hierarchy in which humans are simply placed over the rest of creation, with power and authority over it. But humans are also related horizontally to other creatures, in

³ Biblical quotations in this chapter are from the NRSV.

the sense that we, like them, are creatures of God. To lift us out of creation and so out of our God-given embeddedness in creation has been the great ecological error of modernity, and so we urgently need to recover the biblical view of our solidarity with the rest of creation.

We shall begin with the context of Genesis 1:26–8 in the scriptural canon, though for our present purposes we shall limit this to the context within the first five books of the Bible, the Torah.

Human solidarity with the rest of creation

While the Genesis narratives significantly distinguish humans from the rest of creation, they also portray them as one creature among others. The *fundamental* relationship between humans and other creatures is their common creatureliness. In Genesis 2:7 God forms the first human from the earth, just as he does all other living creatures, flora and fauna. Adam's earthiness is emphasized by the wordplay between his name Adam and the Hebrew word for the ground, 'adamah. This earthiness of humans signifies a kinship with the earth itself and with other earthly creatures, plants and animals. Human life is embedded in the physical world with all that that implies of dependence on the natural systems of life.

While the seven-day creation account in Genesis 1 does not say that God made humans out of the ground, it makes a parallel point by dating the creation of humans to the sixth day of creation. The six days of creation are designed according to a scheme in which God first creates, on the first three days, the physical universe, and then, on the following three days, its inhabitants. On the first day God creates day and night, on the second the sea, on the third the dry land. The inhabitants of each sphere follow in the same order: on the fourth day, the heavenly bodies; on the fifth day, the sea creatures; and on the sixth day, the land creatures – all of the land creatures: animals, reptiles, insects, and humans. Humans do not get a day to themselves. They are, from the perspective of this scheme of creation, land creatures, though the rest of this account of their creation distinguishes them as special among the land creatures.

So it is a misreading of Genesis 1 itself to isolate the vertical dimension from the horizontal. According to Genesis, our creation in the image of God and the unique dominion given to us do not abolish our fundamental community with other creatures. The vertical does not cancel the horizontal.

Living in a theocentric creation

The seven-day creation narrative is often said, especially by those who hold it responsible for modern ecological destruction, to be anthropocentric. Humanity is the last and climactic creation of God. Surely this must mean that the rest has meaning and purpose only in relation to humanity. But, for one thing, to say that humans are the crown of creation is not the same as saying that the rest of creation exists solely for them. After each of God's acts of creation, the narrative tells us that God saw that it was good – good in itself, giving pleasure and satisfaction to God. God did not have to wait till he had created humans to see that the creation was good. God valued and values all the creatures he created. But also, secondly, the account is not anthropocentric, but *theocentric*. Its climax is not the creation of humans on the sixth day, but God's Sabbath rest, God's enjoyment of God's completed work on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2). Creation exists for God's glory.

Ruling fellow-creatures – hierarchy qualified by community

I have stressed the importance of the horizontal relationship of humans with other creatures, our common creatureliness. This horizontal relationship with fellow-creatures is vital to the proper understanding of the vertical relationship of authority over others. Since Genesis 1 presents this authority as a kind of kingly rule, it is relevant to recall the only kind of human rule over other humans that the Old Testament approves. The book of Deuteronomy allows Israel to have a king of sorts, but it interprets this kingship in a way designed to subvert all ordinary notions of rule (17:14–20). If Israel must have a king, then the king must be a brother. He is a brother set over his brothers and sisters, but still a brother, and forbidden any of the ways in which rulers exalt themselves over and entrench their power over their subjects. His rule becomes tyranny the moment he forgets that the horizontal relationship of brother/sisterhood is primary, kingship secondary. Similarly, the human rule over other creatures will be tyrannous unless it is placed in the context of our more fundamental community with other creatures.

Ruling within the order of creation – sharing the earth

Returning to the Genesis 1 account of the week of creation, we should note that it presents a picture of a carefully ordered creation. The

der is already established before the creation of humans. The human dominion is not granted so that humans may violate that order and remake creation to their own design. It is taken for granted that the God-given order of the world should be respected by the human exercise of limited dominion within it. Moreover, the manner in which the account of the work of the sixth day ends is significant in a way rarely noticed. Having said to humanity that all kinds of vegetation are given them for food, God continues by *telling humanity* that he has given every kind of vegetation as food to all land animals: every animal, every bird, every creeping thing, every living thing (1:29–30). Why does God say this at this point, after the creation of humanity, and why does he say it to humans? Surely to stress that human use of the earth is not to compete with its use by other creatures. This is a massive restriction of the human dominion and chimes well with contemporary concerns. A similar point is made in Genesis 9, where God's covenant is made not only with Noah and his descendants but also with every living creature; it is for the sake of them all that God promises never again to destroy the earth in a universal deluge (Gen. 9:8–17). It is home for them all and they all have a stake in that covenant.

Preserving creation

One of the most obvious interpretations of the human dominion within the book of Genesis itself follows just a few chapters on from the creation account: the story of the flood (Gen. 6 – 8). In this story Noah is given by God the task of preserving other creatures – specifically preserving species – that would otherwise have perished. This is a form of caring responsibility for other creatures that has come spectacularly into its own again today.

Letting creation be

One further way in which the Torah provides interpretation of the Genesis dominion is the legislation for Israel's use of the land in the legal parts of the Pentateuch. How Israel is to use the land God gives her to live from is a key concern of the law of Moses. It involves Israel's use and enhancement of the land, but it also imposes strict limits, especially in the form of the Sabbatical institutions: the weekly Sabbath, the Sabbatical Year that recurs every seven years, and the Jubilee Year (the Sabbath of Sabbaths) that recurs every fifty years.

These are not just about good farming practice, but about keeping the economic drive in human life within its place and not letting it dominate the whole of life.

In Israel's land legislation, the human dominion is exercised as much in restraint as in active use. Particularly striking is the concern for wild animals. In the Sabbatical Year fields, vineyards and orchards are to be left to rest and lie fallow, 'so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat' (Exod. 23:11; similarly Lev. 25:7). Even within the cultivated part of the land, wild animals are expected to be able to live. This is a kind of symbol of respect for wilderness, reminding both ancient Israel and later readers of Scripture that dominion includes letting nature be itself. There is value that should be respected and preserved in the wild as well as in the humanly cultivated.

Summary

To summarize, when we read Genesis 1:26–8 in its biblical context, we see that the dominion, the God-given authority of humans within creation is:

- a. An authority to be exercised by caring responsibility, not domination;
- b. An authority to be exercised within a theocentric creation, not an anthropocentric one;
- c. An authority to be exercised by humans as one creature among others;
- d. A right to use other creatures for human life and flourishing, but only while respecting the order of creation and the right of other living beings also to life and flourishing;
- e. An authority to be exercised in letting wild nature be as well in intervening in it, an authority to be exercised as much in restraint as in intervention.

Putting Us in Our Place (Job 38 – 39)

Perhaps the strongest biblical antidote to the hubris that in modern times has so often attended ideas of dominion or stewardship is God's answer to Job out of the whirlwind.

Chapters 38 – 39 of the book of Job are in fact the longest passage about the non-human creation in the Bible, a fact which should surely

have guaranteed them a larger place than they have had in discussion of biblical views of creation. But they are also potent poetry. Bill McKibben has called them 'the first great piece of modern nature writing', and claimed that nothing quite comparable with their appreciation of wild nature is to be found subsequently until the writings of John Muir.⁴ He may be right.

Most of the book of Job consists of a debate between Job and his friends about the moral order of the world. Surely the all-powerful, all-wise, perfectly righteous God will order the world so that people get what they deserve? This theme of God's ordering of the world is the obvious point of connexion with what God, when he finally intervenes in the debate, says in answer to Job. But God's speeches approach the matter from an entirely different angle. God invites Job into a vast panorama of the cosmos, taking Job on a sort of imaginative tour of his creation, all the time buffeting Job with questions. Virtually every sentence is a question. Just a few of them will give the flavour of the whole:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? (38:4)

Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades,
or loose the cords of Orion?

Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season,
or can you guide the Bear with its children? (38:31-2)

Can you hunt the prey for the lion,
or satisfy the appetite of the young lions? (38:39-40)

Is the wild ox willing to serve you?
Will it spend the night at your crib?

Can you tie it in the furrow with ropes,
or will it harrow the valleys after you? (39:9-10)

These chapters need to be read slowly and imaginatively in order to receive their full impact.

The effect is to deconstruct and reorder Job's whole view of the world. God puts Job in his place. He draws Job's attention to creatures over which he plainly does not exercise dominion. The point is that Job has no bearing on the value or purpose of their existence for their own sake and for God's sake. Job is not the unique reference point for all God's purposes in his creation. The lesson is to teach Job his place

⁴ Bill McKibben, *The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 57-8.

as one creature among others. The effect is rather like that of one of David Attenborough's great wildlife documentaries, which leave one stunned by the staggering diversity and complexity of creation. Even if we can now answer one or two of God's questions to Job (such as 39:1: 'Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?'), the answers only give way to countless new questions. We are still as ignorant as we are knowledgeable about the rest of creation on this planet, not to mention the rest of God's universe. That we are capable of managing the planet should be as absurd to us as it was to Job. What we are all too capable of is destroying much of it.

Humanity within the Community of Creation

In the introduction to this chapter I was critical of the way too much interpretation of Genesis 1:26-8 isolates it from the rest of Scripture and from the relevance other parts of Scripture may have to understanding the human relationship with other creatures. We have made a start in remedying that by looking at ways in which that text's context in the Torah helps us to understand what the human dominion means. We have also seen, from Job, that the Bible contains a powerful antidote to the hubris engendered by an arrogant and exaggerated view of ourselves as wielding some kind of godlike sovereignty over the rest of God's creation - as though it were our creation, not God's. God's answer to Job puts us in our place as a creature among other creatures and in a cosmos that has its own meaning and value independently of us.

In order to develop further the sense in which we need to complement the idea of dominion with a much stronger sense of co-creatureliness, I shall introduce two further biblical themes that deserve our attention alongside the Genesis dominion. These themes help us to put the Genesis dominion itself in its place as one of several ways in which the Bible understands humans to be related to the rest of creation. Crucially, these two themes develop what I have called the horizontal relationship of humans to other creatures as fellow-creatures. They help us to balance the vertical with the horizontal.

The first of them I call 'humanity within the community of creation'. The Bible fully recognizes the extent to which nature is a living whole to which human beings along with other creatures belong, sharing the earth with other creatures of God, participating, for good or ill, in the interconnectedness of the whole. In Genesis 9, as I have already mentioned, the covenant God makes after the flood is not

only with Noah and his descendants but also with every living creature: it is for the sake of them all that God promises there will never again be a universal deluge. But the great creation psalm, Psalm 104, is probably the most effective biblical portrayal of God's creation as a community of creatures.

In some ways Psalm 104 resembles Job 38 – 39. Both begin with poetic evocations of God's initial creation of the world, more like each other than either is like Genesis 1, and both move smoothly from there into a panoramic view of the parts and members of creation. Both deny humans a place of supremacy or exceptionality. But Psalm 104 puts us in our place in the world in a much gentler way than God's answer to Job. Here there is no sense that human hubris needs shattering. Rather there is a sense that within the praise of God for his creation we fall naturally into the place he has given us alongside his other creatures.

In Psalm 104 we see creation as a community of many living creatures, each with their place in the world given them by God their Creator, each given by God the means of sustenance for their different forms of life. It is a wonderfully diverse creation, and within this diversity humans appear simply as one of the many kinds of living creatures for whom God provides. What gives wholeness to this reading of the world is not human mastery of it or the value humans set on it, not (in contemporary terms) globalization, but the value of all created things for God. This is a theocentric, not an anthropocentric world. God's own rejoicing in his works (v. 31) funds the psalmist's own rejoicing (v. 34), as he praises God, not merely for human life and creation's benefits for humans, but for God's glory seen in the whole creation. In a different way from Job's, the psalmist is taken out of himself, lifted out of the limited human preoccupations that dominate most of our lives, by his contemplation of the rest of God's plenitude of creatures.

Psalm 104 is one of several biblical passages that state that God provides for all living creatures (Ps. 147:9,15–16; Job 38:19–41; Matt. 6:26). In these passages there is the implication that the resources of the earth are sufficient for all, provided creatures live within created limits. This theme of God's provision was taken up by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, when he compared humanity with the birds and the wild flowers (Matt. 6:25–34). Here we find that Jesus has very much made his own the psalmist's understanding of the world as a common home for living creatures, in which God provides for all their needs. The consequence Jesus draws – from the psalmist's vision of the world to advice

on how his disciples should live – is that we need have no ar about day-to-day material needs, but should live by radical faith in the Father's provision for us. Because the generous and wise Creator takes care of all these things for us, we are free to give our attention instead to seeking God's kingdom and God's righteousness in the world.

Jesus holds up for us the example of the birds, for whom God provides, as he does for all his creatures. But Jesus adds a reflection not in the psalm: 'Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them' (Matt. 6:26). Interpretations of this verse have varied from supposing that Jesus contrasts the birds, who do not work, with people, who do – if God feeds even the idle birds, how much more will he provide for people who work hard for their living? – to, alternatively, supposing that Jesus compares the birds, who do not work, with his disciples, who do not work either. The point is probably neither of these. Rather it is that, because the birds do not have to labour to process their food from nature, but just eat it as they find it, their dependence on the Creator's provision is the more immediate and obvious. Humans, pre-occupied with the daily toil of supplying their basic needs, may easily suppose that it is up to them to supply themselves with food. This is the root of the anxiety about basic needs that Jesus is showing to be unnecessary. The way humans get their food allows them to focus on their own efforts and to neglect the fact that, much more fundamentally, they are dependent, like the birds, on the resources of creation without which no one could sow, reap or gather into barns. The illusion is even easier in modern urban life. But the birds, in their more obvious dependence on the Creator, remind us that ultimately we are no less dependent on the Creator.

Of course, Jesus was speaking of basic needs. The presuppositions of his theology are very far from the wasteful excess and the constant manufacture of new needs and wants in contemporary consumer society. Jesus intended to liberate his disciples from that anxious insecurity about basic needs that drives people to feel that they never have enough. But in our society that instinctive human anxiety about having enough to survive has long been superseded by the drive to ever-increasing affluence and obsessive anxiety to maintain an ever-rising standard of living. It is this obsessive consumption that is depleting the resources of nature and depriving both other species and many humans of the means even to survive.

Belonging to the community of creation must for us mean living within limits, and the psalmist and Jesus assist us to do so, both by

reminding us of our place within the community of God's creatures and by encouraging us to recognize God's caring provision for all his creatures. (This theme is explored more fully in Chapter 6.)

The Praise of God by All Creation

Arguably the most profound and life-changing way in which we can recover our place in the world as creatures alongside our fellow-creatures is through the biblical theme of the worship that all creation offers to God. There are many passages in the Psalms (e.g. Ps. 19:1-3; 97:6; 98:7-8; and especially 148) that depict all God's creatures worshipping him, and the theme is taken up in the New Testament too (Phil. 2:10; Rev. 5:13). According to the Bible, all creatures, animate and inanimate, worship God. This is not, as modern biblical interpreters have sometimes supposed, merely a poetic fancy or some kind of animism that endows all creatures with consciousness. The creation worships God just by being itself, as God made it, existing for God's glory. Only humans desist from worshipping God; other creatures, without having to think about it, do so all the time. A lily does not need to do anything specific in order to praise God; still less need it be conscious of anything. Simply by being and growing it praises God. It is distinctively human to bring praise to conscious expression in words, but the creatures remind us that this distinctively human form of praise is worthless unless, like them, we also live our whole lives to the glory of God.

It is indeed distinctively human to bring praise to conscious expression in words, but the Bible does not make of this the notion that the other creatures somehow need us to voice their praise for them. That idea, that we are called to act as priests to nature, mediating, as it were, between nature and God, is quite often found in recent Christian writing, but in my view it intrudes our inveterate sense of superiority exactly where the Bible will not allow it. Rather than supposing that other creatures need us to enable them to worship, we should think of the rest of creation assisting our worship. In Psalm 148, which is the fullest example of a psalm in which all creatures are called upon to praise their Creator, the praise begins with the angels and descends, through the heavenly bodies and the weather, to the creatures of earth, reaching humans only at the end of the whole movement. This order is not designed to make us inferior to all the other creatures, but it does give us the sense of a cosmos of creatures

glorifying God already, before we ourselves join in. There is a whole universe of praise, a continuous anthem of glory, happening all around us if we choose to notice it. Attending to it can catch us up into the praise of the God who created all things and is reflected in all his creatures.

The key point is that, implicit in these depictions of the worship of creation, is the intrinsic value of all creatures, in the theocentric sense of the value given them by their Creator and offered back to him in praise. In this context, our place is beside our fellow-creatures as fellow-worshippers. In the praise in which we gratefully confess ourselves creatures of God there is no place for hierarchy. Creatureliness levels us all before the otherness of the Creator. It would be very good if we could restore to our Christian worship today something that was more common in the Christianity of the past: ways of consciously situating our own worship within the worship that all our fellow-creatures constantly give to God. Nothing could better restore our sense of creatureliness, and our recognition that the rest of creation is not mere material for us to use by making it into something more useful to us, but a creation that exists for the glory of God, as we are called to do. (The subject of creation's praise of God is treated more fully in Chapter 7.)

This idea of worshipping our Creator along with all the other creatures really has nothing in common with nature worship, of which some modern Christians seem to be pathologically afraid. It is true that in the biblical tradition nature has been de-divinized. It is not divine, but God's creation. But that does not make it nothing more than material for human use. Nature has been reduced to stuff that we can do with as we wish, not by the Bible, but by the modern age, with its rejection of God and its instrumentalizing of nature. The Bible has de-divinized nature, but it has not de-sacralized nature. Nature remains sacred in the sense that it belongs to God, exists for the glory of God, even reflects the glory of God, as humans also do. The respect, even the reverence, that other creatures inspire in us is just as it should be. It leads us not to worship creation (something that is scarcely a serious danger in the contemporary western world) but to worship with creation. According to chapter 5 of the book of Revelation, the goal of God's creative and redemptive work is achieved when every creature in heaven, on earth, under the earth and in the sea joins in a harmony of praise to God and the Lamb (5:13).