

Groan but not as those who have no hope

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Attention to the overarching narrative structure of the Christian Bible raises serious questions about anthropocentric and even geocentric readings. Humanity and its environment are both important, of course. They feature prominently throughout Scripture. However, from Genesis to Revelation the centre of attention is elsewhere: the Bible is all about God. Which is simply to say that any Christian account of environmental issues must operate unapologetically as a *theological* perspective. Furthermore, precisely because the God who is both Alpha and Omega has made himself known supremely in the person of his Son — it is Jesus Christ to whom the Old Testament scriptures testify and it is as witnesses to his resurrection moved by his Spirit that the apostles and their associates write what is now the New Testament — this theological perspective must be unremittingly *Christological*.¹ ‘All things were created through him and for him’ (Col 1:16).

What follows is an exploration of how Romans 8:18–23, identified as one of the most important biblical passages for a Christian environmentalism,² provides critical resources for a distinctively Christian contribution to the contemporary ecological discussion. This passage should not simply be extracted from its surrounding context and pressed into the service of a contemporary agenda. It is situated as part of an integrated argument, not one first and foremost about ecological issues, but rather representing Paul’s exposition of the gospel he has been taking to the nations and its consequences for the young congregation in Rome. Among the theological and existential challenges to that confidence which is the birthright of those justified by faith (Rom 5:1–2) is the reality of suffering — the suffering of believers that is echoed in various ways in the community and the environment in which they live. In the face of such suffering how can Paul say that those in Christ, who are led by the Spirit, are ‘heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ’ (Rom 8:17)? The movement through present

suffering to future glory, once again echoed in the experience of ‘the creation itself’ (Rom 8:21), is Paul’s answer to that challenge. He is building towards one of the most memorable climaxes in his entire literary corpus:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom 8:38–39).³

Creation’s Critical Contingency

In this context the references to ‘the creation’ (5x in Rom 8:18–23) are not merely incidental. Paul’s major point here is that just as the fall into sin had consequences not only for the first man and woman and their progeny but also for the environment in which they would now live, so too the redemption and restoration of men and women in Christ cannot help but have repercussions that extend far wider than simply to those immediately involved. However, before we return to this leading idea, it is worth pausing to ensure a rather obvious element of the discussion is not overlooked.

This text (and many others) places the world around us in relation to God by its use of the category of ‘creation’. Whatever else might be said about our environment, it is the result of the creative activity of God and so manifests a fundamental contingency, a contingency which, far from undermining the integrity of the creation, demands that it be taken seriously. As T. F. Torrance famously put it,

The doctrine of the creation of the world out of nothing, of course, had its roots in the Old Testament and the Jewish understanding of the one God, who is the source of all that is outside himself, and who remains transcendent Lord over all that he has made, so that if he were to withdraw his creative and upholding presence from the creation it would lapse back into chaos and sheer nothingness. This teaching carried with it both a conception of the free (non-necessary)

relation of God to the world, by which its contingent nature is constituted, and a unitary outlook upon the world creatively regulated by God's Word ...

However, it was Christian theology which radicalized and deepened the notion of contingency and gave reality to the notion of contingent intelligibility ... The incarnation made it clear that the physical world, far from being alien or foreign to God, was affirmed by God as real even for himself. The submission of the incarnate Son of God to its creaturely limits, conditions, and objectives, carried with it an obligation to respect the empirical world in an hitherto undreamed of measure.⁴

This contingency is not a liability that the creation must simply bear even though it is not in its best interests. All things come into being as the word of God is borne over the face of the waters by the Spirit of God (Gen 1:1–3) and they are sustained by the Son's 'word of power' (Heb 1:3). This profound and never-ending contingency is itself a guarantee of creation's reality and of its continuing integrity. Once again our attention is drawn from the Genesis narrative of creation to the incarnation of the Son. The eternal Son's entry into the world, his assumption, at the deepest possible levels, of a genuine humanity which cannot help but be genuine creatureliness, does not bring an end to the creation's dependence upon the Creator, but highlights it in a new way. The incarnation demonstrates how this notion of contingency can exist side by side with a relationship between God and the created order that can now be spoken of, with appropriate caution, as in some way 'internal' to the creation itself.⁵ Taking this insight seriously, we can conclude with Augustine and Colin Gunton that 'the Son's ontological but necessary relation to the Father grounds the world's contingency'.⁶

However, we must avoid any suggestion of a reciprocal dependence on the part of God. As Torrance continued,

The world needs God to be what it is, but God does not need the world to be what he is, the eternally self-existent God who is not dependent on anything other than himself. There is thus an asymmetrical relation between God and the

world, characterized by perfect freedom on God's part and sheer dependence on the world's part.⁷

This asymmetry must also be taken seriously. The creation is not part of God, nor required by God in any sense. Only the Son and the Spirit are 'of the same being' (*homoousios*) as the Father. Once again the incarnation is helpful here. The eternal Son is incarnate, genuinely entering into the conditions of createdness while remaining undiminished as God at the level of being. Divinity and humanity are united in his person without compromise to either nature and yet, as the so-called Athanasian Creed makes clear, there is a definite 'direction' to this union: 'not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh: but by taking of the Manhood into God'. In contrast, the created order into which the Son comes is never itself divinised, always remaining the product of God's free and sovereign decision to bring into being something other than himself. Creation is not an emanation of God's being.

Nothing, apart from God himself, is self-generating or self-sustaining and nothing, again apart from him, is an end in itself. Just so, the act of creation as it is presented in Scripture necessarily entails purpose or teleology. This is the import of the refrain in Genesis 1 'And God saw that it was good' (Gen 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). These words represent, not so much an aesthetic or even moral judgement in the way the term 'good' is popularly used today, as God's own assessment that his handiwork conforms to his intention and is suitable for his purpose. God's decision to create was certainly not necessary, but neither was it capricious or accidental. There is a goal to which all things are heading and, while humanity and the wider creation must reach it together, in the final analysis its shape and achievement is not determined by either of these participants.

Here is a substantial challenge to any suggestion that humanity can secure by itself the 'long-term sustainability' of the environment. This language suggests a closed system where prudential management of resources provides its own guarantees. It represents a particularly potent example of how the neglect of a proper theological frame leaves contemporary environmentalism seriously deficient. Furthermore, without such a frame environmental

decisions often appear quite arbitrary. On what basis must one species' survival be preferred over another's? Or if no such preference is tolerable, why, given the history of the planet's biodiversity, must all species currently roaming it be preserved at almost any cost? Why must significant temperature variation and its consequences be avoided? On what grounds might we argue that the Ice Age or the demise of the dinosaurs or even a plague of locusts is a disaster? A Christian perspective on creation, with its entailment of both contingency and teleology, opens up the possibility of answers to such questions in a way that an environmental discussion that neglects or even excludes theological considerations cannot coherently provide. In addition, a Christian theology of creation has important implications for any consideration of the extent to which the future is determined by human decision and action. Christoph Schwöbel has made this point as clearly as anybody:

[T]he preservation or restoration of creation cannot be a human task if this creation is continuously created and preserved by God who brought it into being in the first place. Theologically, creation, including the sustaining and preserving of creation is a divine and not a human work. Therefore, creation is not in the same sense a field of human action as, for instance, politics, science or business. While it is proper, and indeed necessary to speak of the ethics of politics, of science or of business ethics, the term ethics of creation contains a dangerous ambiguity. It seems that the same absolutism of human action which has characterised the human exploitation of creation is now returning in the guise of rescuing it. The search for relevance, so it appears, comes into conflict with fundamental dogmatic tenets of a Christian theology of creation. What seems to be needed is not an ethics of creation, but an *ethic of createdness* which is informed by a *theology of creation*.⁸

There are salutary warnings here. The theological category of 'creation' cannot simply be a gloss to an argument constructed on very different premises. The Christian perspective is different not just wider. But also, this theological framing of the ecological discussion does not inexorably lead to an abandonment of our responsibility to live as creatures who receive our environment as a gift of the benevolent Creator. How we treat the world around us is properly conditioned by our prior relationship with the God who made it. There is no licence

here for aggressive, unprincipled and unrestrained exploitation. Having recognised this critical backdrop to our discussion, it is time to return to a key resource for a genuinely Christian perspective on this issue, the teaching of Scripture in Romans 8:18–23.

Creation's Unwanted Futility

The leading sentence in this intriguing paragraph locates the reality of suffering now against the backdrop of a tension between the present and the future. This tension had already been alluded to by Paul's designation of the children of God as heirs, indeed fellow-heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17). There is an inheritance which lies in the future for those who have been baptized into Christ (6:3) and who now have the Spirit of Christ (8:9). Yet as the Christ entered into his glorious inheritance via suffering, so believers too can expect to suffer with him in a very real way — one is reminded of the martyr Ignatius' expectation of very real lions with very real teeth⁹ — before entering into a glory which renders that suffering insignificant (v. 17).

It is at this point that Paul begins to speak about creation, or more precisely the 'eager longing' (*apokaradokia*) of the creation (v. 19). The eschatological revelation of 'the sons of God' is a matter of concern far beyond the confines of the human race. The day which brings God's own acknowledgement of those who are his is something for which the creation itself waits (*apekdechetai*). The reason for this intense interest is clear — the future of the world is tied to the future of those God has redeemed in Christ.¹⁰ This part of the Christian confession is, of course, not shared by secular environmentalists. Yet such is the significance of what has been done in Christ, and of those who have become part of what God has done in Christ, that the creation itself is restless in anticipation of the final consummation of God's saving purpose.

One of the most important contributions of this passage to the ecological debate emerges in this context as part of Paul's explanation of the creation's restlessness. The creation waits

restlessly for the revelation of the sons of God because it was subjected to futility (v. 20). Its current disorder is no accident. Nor is it simply a matter of natural processes — this subjection did not come about willingly. It is the result of an intentional act. The passive, ‘was subjected’ (*hupetagē*), indicates the one who has acted in this way is God.¹¹ God is ‘the one who subjected it’ (*ho hupotaxas*). This does not mean that men and women are mere observers of this phenomenon. It is in interaction with humanity that the futility to which creation has been subjected is most manifest. Indeed, in the context of Romans 8, not to mention the argument of the entire epistle, it is clear that the judgment in which the creation shares is a judgment against human sin. Nevertheless, the judge who has issued this sentence is the loving creator himself and for that very reason we are right to expect that this is not the end.¹²

The obvious allusion here is to the narrative of the Fall in Genesis 3, to which Paul has already made reference in Romans 1, 3 and 5.¹³ The human attempt at autonomy, from the very moment the attempt was made, began to unravel the network of relations which constitutes created reality: ‘cursed is the ground because of you’ (Gen. 3:17). Later Jewish tradition had made much of this theme and the hope of redemption that was attached to it from the very beginning:

... when Adam transgressed my commandments, the creation was judged: then the ways in this aeon became narrow and sad and laborious, miserable and bad, full of danger and great impending miseries; but the ways of the great aeon are wide and sure and they bear the fruit of life. (2 Esd 7:11–13)

What is the nature of this ‘futility’ to which creation is now subjected by an act of divine judgment? In the light of what has been said about the teleology which is entailed in the very notion of ‘creation’, it means at root an inability to attain the ends for which it was made, to be ‘very good’ in the sense of Genesis 1.¹⁴ Chrysostom and many of the early commentators on this text understood this in terms of the corruption and mortality which characterises all created life on this side of the Fall.¹⁵ On such a reading Paul himself explains what he means

when he subsequently speaks of creation's 'bondage to corruption' (v. 21). However, there may be more that can be said. It has been suggested that this subjection could also be seen in terms of the rule of malign spiritual forces in the cosmos, the principalities and powers which oppose the purposes of God but which have been decisively defeated at the cross.¹⁶ Perhaps most pertinent to our current interests, there may be a suggestion here that the creation was subjected to the dominion of fallen humanity in a way that almost inevitably plays itself out in destructive exploitation: 'Creation [is] involved in decay by human inability after the Fall to exercise rightful dominion'.¹⁷ If this is indeed the case, then here is an added reason why the revelation of the sons of God is of such interest to the creation itself. As Bill Dumbrell puts it, 'Humanity must be first transformed, for only a transformed humanity can administer God's order in a New Creation'.¹⁸

It is this subjection to futility, with its attendant 'bondage to corruption' which explains Paul's most evocative expression in this passage: 'the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now' (v. 22). It is not difficult to grasp the basic meaning of the metaphor: the anguish of the moment will soon be transformed into joy.¹⁹ In this way the image captures the main point that Paul is trying to make in these sentences. However, in this context Paul may well have been echoing a familiar theme: 'the birth-pangs of the Messiah' which in the light of Paul's use of the image in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 should be understood in terms of the coming 'Day of the Lord'. Once again Christological considerations are not far from view. It is only in the coming Day of the Lord that the ecological disorder, which Paul describes here as the anguish of creation, will be finally resolved. But until then that disorder is both genuine and intense and, we should add, exacerbated by human irresponsibility. The ecological crisis of which we are a part is ultimately irredeemable apart from divine intervention because it is inextricable from the perversity of the human refusal to act responsibly as creatures accountable to the Creator.

Creation's Glorious Future

And yet there is hope. To insist upon the reality of creation's anguish, and upon our human inability to secure a different future because we are both the cause and intensifier of the problem, is not to say that entropy is the ultimate reality and dissolution or destruction the only final outcome. The note of hope has been rung repeatedly throughout this brief passage. In the first instance we are talking about 'creation'. It seems implausible that the one who acted to create on such a scale and in such intricate detail should abandon or be thwarted in the purposes for which he made all things in the first place. He summoned the universe into existence and so it is hardly likely that something as absurd as humanity's attempt to establish itself outside and apart from his word should derail his purposes indefinitely. Secondly, as we noticed along the way, the very mention of God signals hope, since his constancy and benevolence are attested throughout Scripture, not least in the writings of Paul. Thirdly, the image of birth-pains draws its strength from the normal expectation that these give way to an incredible joy which casts them in an entirely different light (Jn 16:21).

However, the hope which transforms the perspective of those who suffer is not just something to be inferred from such hints within this passage. Paul is explicit that God subjected the creation to futility 'in hope' (v. 20). Entirely in keeping with the character of 'the one who subjected it', there is a larger, positive goal to which even this futility itself is pointing. As one commentator puts it, 'the very decree of subjection is given in the context of hope'.²⁰

Once again the most obvious allusion is to the Fall narrative of Genesis 3, and in particular the anticipation of the gospel in verse 15, to which Paul will allude once more at the very end of his letter (Rom. 16:20). In the midst of the curse, which came as a result of the rebellion of the first man and woman, lay the promise of deliverance through a descendant of the woman. The undoing of the tragic consequences of the fall into sin is tied to the emergence of a deliverer. Paul's Christological perspective is evident once more: all hope, for the descendants of Adam and Eve and for the environment which twists and turns in anguish around them, is only to be found in him.

The nature of the creation's hope and its inextricable connection with the future God has planned for those who are his is spelt out in a most wonderful way in verse 21: 'that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God'. The use of the vocabulary of freedom twice in this sentence (*eleutherōthēsetai*, *eleutherian*) highlights both the imposed nature of creation's current situation — its bondage or slavery to corruption — and the powerful intervention of the liberator.²¹ Significant here is the observation that this is one of Paul's favourite images of salvation in Christ. Earlier in the chapter Paul had spoken of how 'the law of the Spirit of life has set you free (*ēleutherōsen*) in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death' (Rom 8:2).²² The deliverance of the creation from futility and the realisation of its eager expectation will be misunderstood if they are not put in this critical context — the freedom of the glory of the children of God which is inseparable from the future the Father has prepared for the Son. This glorious freedom is the inheritance Paul had been speaking about in verse 17.

The Contribution of Roman 8:18–23 to Contemporary Ecological Discussion

Romans 8 does not directly address our responsibility to care for the environment in which God has placed us. Other parts of Scripture must be considered if we are to develop an ethic of createdness informed by a theology of creation along the lines suggested by Schwöbel. Responsible living as God's creatures, who receive the world around us as a gift, is a proper biblical grounding for ecological activism. However, Romans 8 places all such activity in the wider frame. The disorder of creation is not simply a natural phenomenon, it is a consequence of the human pursuit of autonomy which characterises us all. This disorder ought not to be trivialised or dismissed as part of a resurgence of our endemic anthropocentrism. It is disorder and futility on the largest imaginable scale and it will only effectively be addressed by that action of God which brings about the final revelation of the sons of God, the glorious liberty of the children of God. Any ecological discussion which omits or excludes this theological frame is bound to be reductionistic and hence deficient. For in ultimate terms, the current and

future condition of the planet cannot be separated from our response to the living God and the salvation offered in Christ alone. The groaning of the creation is an echo and is echoed in the groaning of those creatures already redeemed in Christ. But we and the creation do not groan as those without hope.²³

Discussion Questions

1. What deeper responsibility for the decay of the planet does the Bible sheet home to men and women?
2. How might we practically involve ourselves in responsible stewardship while making clear that we do not believe we are the saviours of the planet?
3. How might the perspective of Romans 8, especially the link between creation's future liberation and the redemption of human beings in Christ, help us to modify secular environmentalism in an authentically Christian way?

Endnotes

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- ¹ This perspective was foundational in Jürgen Moltmann's 1984/5 Gifford Lectures: 'So a Christian doctrine of creation is a view of the world in the light of Jesus the Messiah.' J. Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (trans. By M. Kohl; London: SCM, 1985), pp. 4–5. Arguably, Moltmann's emphasis on all creation as 'indwelt by the Spirit' tends to undermine the Christological focus with which he began and allows him to move in the direction of a kind of panentheism (p. 13).
 - ² M. A. Bullmore, 'The For Most Important Biblical Passages for a Christian Environmentalism', *Trinity Journal* 19NS (1998), pp. 159–161.
 - ³ Paul will then address the next obvious objection to the gospel as he has expounded it: how can we rely upon the promises of God when the Jews received similar promises and appear to have lost them (NB Rom 9:6). There is an almost inexorable logic to Paul's argument in this epistle which must be respected as we seek to apply Paul's teaching to situations quite different from the one he was addressing.
 - ⁴ T. F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), pp. 32, 33.
 - ⁵ This is a point made repeatedly by Colin Gunton: 'At the centre of this many-sided matter is the question of Christology ... It was Christology which enabled theology to conceive of a relation of God to the world, of eternity to time, in which the two are *both* contingently *and* internally, rather than necessarily and externally related. (If this had been maintained, deism and pantheism would never have been as plausible as they have been at different times.)' C. E. Gunton, 'Introduction', in C. E. Gunton (ed.), *The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), p. 4. Gunton's own extended discussion of Christology in relation to the doctrine of creation is to be found in C. E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation: The 1991 Didsbury Lectures* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992).
 - ⁶ C. E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 75. Gunton is discussing Augustine's treatment of *creatio ex nihilo* in *Confessions* 12.7.
 - ⁷ Torrance, *Order*, p. 34.

- 8 C. Schwöbel, 'God, Creation and the Christian Community: The Dogmatic Basis of a Christian Ethic of Createdness', in C. E. Gunton (ed.), *The Doctrine of Creation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), p. 150 (emphasis original).
- 9 Ignatius, *To the Romans*, 4.
- 10 Schwöbel spells this out further with reference to Colossians 1:17 and Ephesians 1:10 — 'The recognition of the eschatological ultimacy of salvation leads to an understanding of creation as mediated by, integrated in and ordered towards Christ. Schwöbel, 'God, Creation and the Christian Community', p. 159. See also W. J. Dumbrell, *Romans: A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), p. 91 — 'Creation's decay developed from the human Fall, and its release from corruption will thus develop from the freeing of the children of God in the eschaton.'
- 11 Note the parallel, this time with aorist active (*hupetaxen*) in 1 Cor. 15:27. For this reason Brendan Byrne's suggestion that the 'subduer' is 'a reference to Adam, or more generally, to humankind' is unconvincing. B. Byrne, 'Creation Groaning: An Earth Bible Reading of Romans 8:18–22', in N. C. Habel (ed.), *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p.199.
- 12 'Now, He who has subjected the creature is God: and thence emerges hope.' K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (6th edn. trans. By E. C. Hoskyns; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 309.
- 13 The attempt by Marie Turner to suggest, in the interests of ecofeminism, that the Wisdom of Solomon is a convincing alternative to Genesis 1–3 as the critical background to Paul's argument in Romans 8, is surprisingly light on evidence relating directly to verses 18–23 and remains tendentious at critical points. M. Turner, 'God's Design: The Death of Creation? An Ecojustice Reading of Romans 8.18–30 in the Light of Wisdom 1–2', in N. C. Habel & S. Wurst (eds), *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 168–178.
- 14 C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: Volume I* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), p. 413; Dumbrell, *Romans*, p. 91.
- 15 For a collection of early commentators who take this view, including Chrysostom, Pelagius, and Theodoret of Cyr, see G. L. Bray (ed.), *Romans*, (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VI; Downers Grove: IVP 1998), pp. 224–225.
- 16 F. F. Bruce, *Romans* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; rev. edn. Leicester: IVP, 1985), p. 163.
- 17 Dumbrell, *Romans*, p. 91. Dumbrell continues, 'Creation at present is in bondage to 'decay' brought about by our mismanagement of our world. The Fall indirectly affected creation since by the Fall creation was subjected to human determination within which there were always distortions, which led creation away from the fulfillment of divine objectives.' It might reasonably be asked whether his suggestion that 'The Fall indirectly affected creation' does justice to the text of Genesis 3:17–18, but his point about the ongoing complicity of humanity in the futility of creation is well worth considering.
- 18 Dumbrell, *Romans*, p. 91.
- 19 We need not go as far as Brendan Byrne to suggest 'creation's groaning is actually positive aspiration' and 'the outward, observable manifestation of this hope'. Byrne, 'Creation Groaning', pp. 198, 200. More precisely, the hope is located in the person and promise of God, especially the promised revelation of the sons of God. The genuinely tense existence of the creation in the Last Days should not be resolved too quickly.
- 20 D. J. Moo, *Romans 1–8* (Wycliffe Bible Commentary; Chicago: Moody, 1991), p. 553.
- 21 Moo remarks that the expression *eleutherōthēsetai ... eis tēn eleutherian* is 'unusual and striking'. Moo, *Romans 1–8*, p. 554.
- 22 cf. Rom. 6:18, 20, 22; 7:3.
- 23 The allusion here and in the title is to 1 Thess. 4:13, where Christians are encouraged to grieve, but not 'as others do who have no hope'.