

To 'Rule Over' and 'Subdue' the Creation

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In 1967, American Professor of History Lynn White published a highly influential article in the *Journal Science*, entitled 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis'. In this article, White argued that Christianity – particularly Western Christianity – is to blame for our ecological woes. According to White, 'Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen... It is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends'.¹

White traces the problem to two biblical principles. First, that the Bible grants to humanity a 'dominion' over nature, which has encouraged us to exploit nature for our own ends. Second, that the Bible privileges humanity – which alone is created in the image of God and alone will be redeemed – over the remainder of the creation. White argues that this leads to the conclusion that, since the non-human creation doesn't have an eternal 'soul', it doesn't matter what we do with it.

Whilst White has correctly identified some of the symptoms of our present ecological crisis, his diagnosis of the underlying disease is misdirected. He is right to say that there is an indifference to nature underlying much of Western civilization. However, though some have justified this indifference by an appeal to the Bible, such an appeal is in fact a misreading of the Bible's message. In this essay I seek to demonstrate that what Bible actually teaches about our relationship to the creation is fundamentally opposed to the kind of exploitation that White critiques. I will do this by examining what it means to 'rule over' and 'subdue' the creation in Gen 1:26-28.

In doing this, I take an approach to the biblical text which is very different to that employed by those who practice 'ecological hermeneutics'. Ecological hermeneutics seeks to retrieve the repressed voice of the nonhuman creation (including the Earth itself) from a biblical text. To do this, the interpreter must first identify and discount the anthropocentric bias in the text, identify instead with the nonhuman characters in the story, and attempt to retrieve their 'voice' which has been suppressed by the anthropocentrism of the text.

Norman Habel, of the University of Adelaide, is a key proponent of this approach. Habel detects a threefold anthropocentrism in Gen 1:26-28. First, the claim that humanity is made in the image of God puts it in a privileged position relative to the other creatures. Secondly, humanity is given a mandate to 'rule' over all other living creatures, and Habel argues that this rule 'involves the forceful exercise of power.' Finally, humanity is commanded to subdue the earth, and Habel argues that 'the verb 'subdue' (*kabash*) is also a term that reflects the exercise of force, and that there is no suggestion of stewardship or care in this term'.²

In accordance with his ecological hermeneutic, Habel then proceeds to identify with the non-human characters:

When we identify with nonhuman creatures in the narrative, we become aware of the gulf between human and nonhuman creatures in this text, and that the assumption derived from this text is that the human domination of nonhuman species is legitimate. From the perspective of our

nonhuman kin, the consequences that follow from such a position are unjust and inconsistent with the ecological reality of our planet.

As nonhuman kin we become aware that this text has been the basis for exploitation, oppression, and abuse of nature by arrogant humans. And in spite of claims to the contrary, as nonhuman readers we can readily see how this text has provided justification for a history of human domination of our kind.³

The final stage in Habel's approach is a retrieval of the voices of these characters which have been suppressed by the anthropocentrism of the text/author/reader. Habel argues that the Earth plays a 'lead role' in the rest of the narrative of Gen 1, but that this character has been suppressed in Gen 1:26-28. Habel reconstructs the voice of Earth based on 'the wider Gen 1 context and our current ecological awareness.' Habel suggests that the voice of Earth might be saying something like this:

I am Earth, the source of daily life for the flora and fauna that I have generated from within me. Sad to say, there is another story that has invaded my world: the story of the so-called god-image creatures called humans. Instead of recognizing that these god-image creatures are beings interdependent with Earth and other Earth creatures, this story claims that the god-image creatures belong to a superior ruling class or species, thereby demeaning their nonhuman kin and diminishing their value. Instead of respecting me as their home and life source, the god-image creatures claim a mandate to crush me like an enemy or a slave. My voice needs to be heard and the intrusive story about the humans in Gen 1:26-28 named for what it is from my perspective: the charter of a group of power hungry humans.⁴

The effect of Habel's ecological hermeneutic is that Gen 1:26-28 ceases to be a normative statement about humanity and its relationship to the nonhuman creation, and is instead nothing more than an anthropocentric assertion of superiority and power. The strength of Habel's argument depends on his claim that 'rule' and 'subdue' both involve a forceful exercise of power, with no suggestion of stewardship or care.⁵

This is the critical point at issue – what is the nature of humanity's mandate to 'rule over' and 'subdue' the creation? In this essay, I will analyse these themes in the Old Testament as they develop from Gen 1:26-28, and demonstrate that the mandate to 'rule over' and 'subdue' does not give humanity a licence to exploit the creation, but rather impose a God-given responsibility for the protection and care of this planet.

'Ruling Over' and 'Subduing' the Creation in Genesis 1

Genesis 1 tells us that God made humanity in his image to 'rule over' and 'subdue' the creation. In Gen 1:26, God says 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over ... [all the animals]'. This is complemented by the command in verse 28 'to fill the earth and subdue it.' The critical question is – what exactly does it mean to 'rule over' the animals, and what exactly does it mean to 'subdue the earth'?

To answer that question, we need to examine how these themes, foundationally introduced in Gen 1, find expression in the unfolding story of the Bible.

The word for 'rule' used in Gen 1:26 is the Hebrew verb *radah*. The verb *radah* does not intrinsically carry the connotation of despotic rule.⁶ For despotic rule, Biblical Hebrew qualifies the verb with the word *perek* ('harshness').⁷ This qualified form does not appear in Genesis 1, which suggests that humanity is to exercise a benign, rather than despotic, rule.⁸ But when we seek to explore the nature of this benign rule, we run into a difficulty. The verb *radah* only occurs 22 times in the Hebrew Bible, and outside

of Genesis 1, it does not refer to ‘ruling’ over the created order. The other instances of the word do not provide sufficient data on which to base conclusions about what the word might mean in Gen 1:26.

However, there is another way to work out the meaning of *radah* in Gen 1:26, by means of a word which is a close semantic equivalent. Psalm 8:7-9 alludes to Gen 1:26, but in the process it replaces the word *radah* with its synonym *mashal*.⁹

Gen 1:26	Let them rule over (<i>radah</i>) the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.
Ps 8:6-8 (MT vv.7-9)	You made him ruler over (<i>mashal</i>) ... all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea...

The author of Psalm 8, one of the earliest exegetes of *radah* in Genesis 1, has understood the word to be synonymous to *mashal*. This connection allows us to use the *mashal* word group (for which there is more data to work with) to help inform our conclusions about the meaning of *radah* in Genesis 1.

When we examine the verb *mashal* (‘rule’) and its cognate nouns (esp. *memshalah* ‘dominion’), we can make the following three observations:¹⁰

1. God is the ‘ruler’ over all that he has made
‘...everything in heaven and earth is yours.... you are the ruler (***mashal***) of all things.’
(1 Chron 29:11-12)
2. He exercises that dominion by being loving to all he has made
‘...your dominion (***memshalah***) endures through all generations. The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made... The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing’ (Ps 145:13, 15-16)
3. God grants a ‘dominion’ over the creation to humanity.
‘You made him ruler over (***mashal***) over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet (Ps 8:6-8).

From this we can reasonably conclude that the kind of ‘rule’ over creation that humanity is given is to be patterned after God’s ‘rule’ – that is, a rule that protects and nurtures, not a despotic rule that exploits. Our rule over the creation is a delegated rule: we rule under God’s authority, to exercise a rule that is modelled on God’s rule.¹¹ By creating humanity to ‘rule over’ (*mashal* and hence *radah*) the creation, God has not granted to us an *absolute right* to exploit the creation for our own ends. Rather, he has delegated to us a *responsibility* to protect the creation and care for it.¹²

The second dimension of the role that God gives to humanity in Gen 1 is to ‘subdue’ the creation. Like the word ‘rule’, the word ‘subdue’ also has a range of meanings in Biblical Hebrew, from ‘subjugate’ through to ‘tame’ – one might subdue a rebellion by executing the rebels, or one might subdue an unruly garden by a spot of weeding.¹³ The critical question to ask is what connotation the word takes in Gen 1. As with the word

for 'rule', this word for subdue (*kabash*) is relatively rare, and no other instance is directly analogous to its use here in Gen 1:28. In this case, the best way to determine its meaning is to examine how humanity fulfilled the Lord's command to 'subdue' the earth. We see the first example of this in Gen 2:15: *The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*

'Subduing' here looks like careful gardening. Adam is to work the ground to make it productive, by tending and caring for it. It is important that we recognise that the Garden of Eden – even in its pristine state – required humanity to work it. God's intention is *not* that humanity should have no impact on the created order, nor that the goal is to return things to their 'natural state'. Even prior to the disruption described in Genesis 3, humanity's actions were required to keep the garden from being unruly and unproductive. Gen 2:5 tells us that God did not send water to cause the plants to grow until there was a man to work the ground. These verses suggest that there is to be an interdependence between humanity and the 'ground' – humanity (*adam*) is made from the ground (*adamah*) and depends on the ground for the food to sustain him. But the ground also depends on the man to work and tend it.¹⁴

Humanity's responsibility to tend the creation takes on an added complication in the next chapter. Because of human sin in Genesis 3, the land is now under a curse – work is now 'painful toil', in a land that produces 'thorns and thistles'. Left untended, the 'garden' becomes a jungle - unruly and overgrown and unproductive.

As the story of the Bible unfolds, we see various examples of the need for the land to be 'subdued' by humanity. In Genesis 4, Cain works the soil and Abel tends flocks. In Exod 23:29, God explains that he intends to give his people the Promised Land in stages. God says that he will not drive out the inhabitants of the land in a single year '*because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you*'. God's plan for the salvation of his people respects the needs to keep the fields productive and to keep the wild animals at bay. No doubt God could have driven out the Canaanites all at once, but instead God pursues an option which is also in the best interests of a productive natural environment.

From these and other examples, it is clear that subduing the earth does not mean exploiting the earth for our own ends. To subdue the earth means to tend and care for the earth, keeping the weeds and wild animals at bay, and working at keeping the land productive.

Both 'ruling over' the earth and 'subduing' it are responsibilities given to us by God as his image bearers, as we share in God's rule over the earth.¹⁵ The Old Testament gives us a number of examples of how this responsibility to 'rule over' and 'subdue' the plants and animals works out in practice.

'Ruling Over' and 'Subduing' the Plants and Animals

One very important aspect of our relationship with the created order is that God has explicitly given it to us, to use for food. In Gen 1:29 humanity is granted permission to eat plants and grain, and in Gen 9 we see the same permission granted over animal life. The fact that God has to grant these rights explicitly demonstrates that humanity does not have absolute rights over the creation to do with it what we wish. If 'ruling over'

the creation meant that we could do anything to it, then God's explicit grant of the right to eat is redundant.

What we see in Genesis 1 and 9 further demonstrates that we are stewards over God's creation, not its absolute owners. We can do with the creation what God says we can do, but no more. For example, the Bible tells us that God has given us the animals for food and their skins for clothing. Breeding an animal for food is within the bounds of this, as is hunting animals for food, and perhaps even culling feral rabbits or cats in order to protect crops or animals – but there is no biblical mandate for intentional and unnecessary cruelty to animals. Humanity is not free to do what we please with animals. These animals belong to God, and as God's stewards we will be responsible before him for our use – or our abuse – of his creation.

Domestication of animals is part of our responsibilities as stewards over creation. It is not wrong to raise flocks and herds to serve our needs. But, again, notice that God expects us to treat our animals with the dignity that they deserve as God's creatures. The fourth commandment requires us to provide a Sabbath rest for working animals (Deut 5:14). The ox must not be muzzled while it treads out the grain (Deut 25:4). Prov 12:10 tells us '*A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal*'. If we act in cruelty towards that which God has created, we show contempt for God himself. This is an outworking of a robust theology of Creation. Proverbs 14:31 tells us that *He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker*. The same principle applies to all of God's creation. There is an inherent dignity to all created things, by virtue of the fact that they have been made by God. As Gen 1:31 affirms, all that God made was 'very good'. To treat the creation with contempt demonstrates contempt for the Creator.

God has not given us the animals to be mere cogs in our money making machines. In our western society, the 'good shepherd' is the one who can maximise the return on investment from the flock, generating the highest yield of fleece or meat for the lowest price. If one sheep gets lost, that shepherd would write this off as an acceptable operating expense! God values his creation very differently. The true 'good shepherd' is the one who protects and feeds and cares for the flock, even laying down his life for the sheep (Lk 15:3-7, cf. Jn 10:11). God *has not* given us the animals so that we might exploit them. This has implications for our agricultural production techniques. If the cheapest eggs or chicken, for example, are only be achievable through production techniques that are cruel or degrading, then Christians should be the first to say 'That is unacceptable, because we are not treating God's creation with the dignity it deserves'. Even though we are raising an animal in order to kill it for food, it does matter how we treat the animal while it lives.¹⁶

The Bible also gives us a framework for thinking about how we are to use the plants of the earth. In Lev 25, God tells his people to give their fields a year off every seventh year. That is, periodically they were to let the land lie fallow. Modern farming practice recognises the need to do this. If you just sow and reap without a break, the nutrients are sucked out of the land, and the land becomes unproductive. God established a pattern of use for the land to ensure that the land be productive for generations to come, rather than let one owner maximise their own crops at the expense of future owners of the land. We see a similar concern for sustainable agriculture in Deuteronomy 20, where God prohibits the felling of fruit trees around a city in times of war, because of the long term effects of those actions. We could summarise this principle as follows –

use it, but don't use it up. God has made for us a bounteous world, which is capable of producing more than enough food for all its inhabitants – human and animal. God expects us to use his creation for this purpose, but not to so use it that we reduce its capacity to produce for the next generation.

To Care for All the Earth

From the way in which the biblical mandate to 'rule' and 'subdue' is worked out in the Old Testament, it is clear that the Bible's message is not the cause of our current ecological crisis. Both 'ruling over' the earth and 'subduing' it are responsibilities given to us by God. Many of our present ecological woes have arisen because humanity has inverted our God-given *responsibility for* the creation into a God-given *right over* the creation. Where Christians have misread (and are misreading) the Bible to justify our abuse of the planet, we need to acknowledge this and repent.

A Christian response to the current ecological problems might be along the following lines.

First, we have a responsibility to address these issues. Our current environmental problems are *not* someone else's problem. That is not necessarily to accept Lynn White's assessment that Christians are the specific cause of the problem any more than the rest of the industrialised West. But we need to be part of the solution, because this is intrinsic to our God-given role of stewards of his creation – we have a duty to care for and protect that creation. It seems to be undeniable that humanity has had a very negative impact on our world through our consumption of carbon fuels, to such an extent that we have to take steps now to redress this.

Secondly, when we evaluate our continuing impact on the planet, the Bible encourages us to think in terms of sustainable development. Our goal should be to use the resources of the world in such a way that we leave it intact for future generations to enjoy – use it, don't use it up! This will probably mean that we will have to accept higher prices (or lower profits), in order to bring about a better outcome for the environment. We need to choose between selfishness and love – choosing to love our neighbours as yet unborn, by bequeathing to them a functioning planet, rather than one scarred and corrupted by our selfishness.

The third implication is that we need to admit – and repent of – the true cause of our ecological woes. The underlying cause of our current problems is not the mandate in Gen 1:26-28, but human greed. It is our rampant desire for consumption that is the mark of Western society, and this is the ultimate cause of our environmental problems. It is our greed that has led us to justify the rape and pillaging of planet earth. To the extent that Christians have been a part of this, we need to repent, and instead to learn the secret of contentment. Through the ages, Christians have rejected wastefulness, and these are habits that we need to re-learn.

Conclusion

Genesis 1:26-28 calls on us to recognise God as the ruler of this world, who has put us in charge of this creation as his stewards, to tend and care for it, and to whom we will one day give an account. We may need to repent of attitudes of cruelty to his creatures or

indifference to his creation, and to repent of insatiable greed which has fuelled excessive consumption to the detriment of our environment. We need to do our bit to be part of the solution to the problems of our planet, as part of the responsibilities of Christian stewardship. And, finally, we should praise the God who has given us this bounteous planet for our needs, and seek to share with justice the resources of the world with all peoples.

Questions for Discussion

Why should Christians have a concern for the creation?

How are we failing to exercise our responsibility to care for the creation and care for it?
What should we be doing differently?

In what ways does humanity's greed contribute to the exploitation of the planet?

¹ L. White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', *Science* 155 (1967), pp. 1203-07.

² N. C. Habel, 'Introducing Ecological Hermeneutics' in *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman C. Habel and Peter L. Trudinger (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008): pp. 1-8, p. 6.

³ Habel, 'Introducing', p. 7.

⁴ Habel, 'Introducing', p. 8.

⁵ See Habel, N. C. Habel, 'Playing God or Playing Earth? An Ecological Reading of Genesis 1:26-28' in *"And God Saw That It Was Good": Essays on Creation and God in Honor of Terence E. Fretheim*, ed. Frederick J. Gaiser and Mark A. Throntveit (Saint Paul, Minn.: Word & World Luther Seminary, 2006): pp. 33-41.

⁶ So also M. A. Bullmore, 'The Four Most Important Biblical Passages for a Christian Environmentalism', *Trinity Journal* 19 (1998), pp. 139-62. Contra Habel, 'Playing God or Playing Earth? An Ecological Reading of Genesis 1:26-28'.

⁷ The full construction is *radah* + *beit* preposition + *perak* (literally, 'to rule in harshness'). See Lev 25:43, Lev 25:46, Lev 25:53, and Ezek 34:4. Cf. Isa 14:6 which uses a different construction to the same effect to denote 'rule in anger'.

⁸ See further W. Dryness, 'Stewardship of the Earth in the Old Testament' in *Tending the Garden: Essays on the Gospel and the Earth*, ed. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987): pp. 50-65 and J. Limburg, 'The Responsibility of Royalty: Genesis 1-11 and the Care of the Earth', *Word & World* 11 (1991), pp. 124-30.

⁹ For another example of substitution with this pair of words, compare the way in which Ps 72:8 ('he will rule [*radah*]...') is echoed in Zech 9:10 ('His rule [*noun cognate of mashaal*] will be ...').

¹⁰ The Hebrew word *mashaal* has a similar range of meaning to *radah*, including both benign and despotic rule. This is apparent in the various uses of this word in the surrounding context: Gen 1:18 describes the heavenly luminaries which 'rule' (in the benign sense of 'govern') the day and night, whilst Gen 3:16 and 4:7 depict a 'rule' which is domination. The analysis of the *mashaal* word group in this essay focuses on those instances where it relates to a 'rule' over the created order.

¹¹ This is part of what it means to be made 'in the image of God' (Gen 1:26). God rules over his creation, and he has made us his image to exercise a rule over creation patterned after his rule.

¹² For another example of the use of Psalm 8 to interpret Gen 1, see B. W. Anderson, "'Subdue the Earth'" What Does It Mean?' *Bible Review* 8 (1992), pp. 4.

¹³ 'Subduing' in Num 32:22,29, and Josh 18:1 means driving out the Canaanites by killing them, whereas in 2 Sam 8:11, 1 Chr 22:18, 2 Chr 28:10, Neh 5:5, Esth 7:8 and Jer 34:11 the word means bringing people into subjugation.

¹⁴ See similarly A. Sloane, *At Home in a Strange Land: Using the Old Testament in Christian Ethics* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), pp. 154.

¹⁵ So likewise R. J. Bauckham, 'First Steps to a Theology of Nature', *Evangelical Quarterly* 58 (1986), pp. 229-44 at pp. 233-35.

¹⁶ See further Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (St. Martin's Press, 2002).