

# To Serve and Preserve

## The Bible calls us to dominion over creation. Or does it?

by Ched Myers

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*Life on Earth is actually decreasing. In the past 50 years, for the first time in 100 million years outside an ice age, the actual amount of living material has gone down, by 4 percent. God made all those fowl of the air and fish of the sea and great whales and beasts of the fields and herbs and fruits and creeping things, and by taking His place and manipulating genes we've turned around and subdued every damned one of them.... God set it up, we knocked it down. We are the winners. But why aren't we saying, "This is good!" – David Helton, 1991*

Origin stories matter. Our relationships with one another, God, and the Earth are deeply shaped by them. For most of human history on the planet, the various myths of beginnings told diverse stories of how God or the gods placed humans in a created world for vocational purposes. In Christendom, the Genesis creation story has functioned to shape culture and identity.

All this began to change, however, with powerful Enlightenment ideologies of positivism, capitalism, and rationalism that first challenged, then deconstructed, and eventually eclipsed the biblical tradition, replacing it with the heroic myth of Progress. This is our official civilization story today, mediated in myriad ways through discourses of science and popular culture alike.

We are told that the human journey dawned in a wilderness world, dangerous and brutal, characterized only by a struggle for survival. "Primitive" human beings were unproductive, uncivilized, and uninteresting. "History" finally commenced with the rise of the first civilizations (circa 4000 B.C.E.), recognizable to us by their concentrated populations, official religious cults, city-state organizations, standing armies, hierarchical politics, surplus economies US standard railroad gauge and separation from nature.

This origins story was a deliberate philosophical project begun in the 17th century by European architects of modernity such as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. They sought to unravel the last strands of human interdependence with nature, which was objectified, instrumentalized, and, most important, "de-spiritualized." This was necessary, as Douglas Meeks discussed in *God the Economist*, to pave the way for the privatization of commonwealth lands, the intensive accumulation of wealth through more efficient resource exploitation, and the radical reshaping of both culture and nature through social and industrial engineering.

By marginalizing (or banishing) God and exalting an autonomous and ingenious humanity, the Enlightenment produced a compelling historical fable about the nobility of civilization and its "redemption" of a deeply flawed natural world. One fragment of the Genesis tradition was preserved by the modernists, however: the divine commission of Genesis 1:28 giving humans "dominion" over creation and urging them to "fill and subdue the Earth." This convenient text subsequently received wide circulation to help rationalize and even mandate ecological destruction in the name of civilization's sovereignty.

The mainstream churches went along with this formula for most of two centuries, riding theological shotgun with the heady momentum of progress. More recently, however, they have become increasingly disillusioned with "dominion" theology, as they have recognized the profound contemporary ecological crisis. But the notion of humanity's ordained domination of nature persists, and ironically (given its roots in classic liberalism) is championed today by cultural and theological conservatives.

We see this in the Bush presidency, which has used religious justification for its aggressive resource exploitation and the largest rollback of environmental laws and regulations in history. Indeed, environmental issues are now part of the culture wars that divide North American churches and society, evidenced by the recently founded right-wing Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship, whose greenwashing aspiration, according to its Web site, is to "a world in which widespread economic freedom—which is integral to private, market economies—makes sound ecological stewardship available to ever greater numbers." Or as critic Bill Berkowitz says it, the ICES mission is to "harness scripture in the service of free-market environmentalism."

The misappropriation of Genesis 1:28 thus continues to be deeply consequential. Rather than conceding its interpretation to environmental imperialists, however, or throwing it out as hopelessly problematic, we would do well to re-place this text within its cultural and narrative context. Genesis 1-2 tells a very different story about the

relationship between human society and the rest of creation than the one we moderns tell ourselves. It offers old wisdom that, if heeded, may yet help us step back from the brink of ecological catastrophe.

THE TWO GENESIS accounts of creation draw on and reformulate a variety of ancient Near Eastern traditions. When read as a literary whole, Genesis 1-2 posits a world that is divinely beneficent and bountiful, in no need of human genius to improve or control it. Human beings are portrayed as deeply embedded in a living biosphere, with a divine appointment as caretaker.

The first account (Genesis 1:1-2:4a) is structured around the Creator's repeated pronouncements that each layer of the world is "fantastic." The Hebrew word *tov* connotes intense delight, what Old Testament theologian Richard Lowery in *Sabbath and Jubilee* calls "God's cosmic WOW." The divine assessment pertains even before humans arrive on the scene, putting to rest the accusation that this tradition is overly anthropocentric.

Lowery points out that the verb *bara'*, reserved exclusively in the Bible for God's creative activity, can also mean "to be fat" (Genesis 27:28; 41:2ff). "God creates a fat world, a rich and lavish overflow of goodness, abundant and life-giving at its very core," he writes. This *essential* richness of creation contrasts sharply with Enlightenment notions of "natural scarcity," and the presumption that the Earth has no intrinsic value until humans re-engineer it into something "useful."

In the second creation account (Genesis 2:4b-25) this world is called a "garden" (*gan*), which elsewhere connotes fertile terrain (as in Isaiah 51:3), but which also is a euphemism for a woman's pleasures (Song of Solomon 4). The garden provides everything the human being might delight in. The human (*'adam*) is formed from the "topsoil" (*'adamah*, 2:7)—a wordplay that is preserved in the English "human/humus." But so are all the other flora and fauna (2:9, 19), with whom the human's association is intimate and relational: "whatever *'adam* called each living being, that was its name" (2:19). This same intimacy is signaled in another wordplay by the creation of "woman" (*ishshah*) from the body of "man" (*ish*)—a relationship not of hierarchy but of profound solidarity.

It is only in this narrative context that Genesis 1:28 can be properly interpreted. A divine council (1:26; the metaphor is of a royal court) decides to create humanity. Lowery stresses that the council is choosing to pass on to humans God's *own* vocation of loving stewardship of this delightful world. "In marked contrast to other ancient Near Eastern creation myths, where humans are created as slaves to do the cosmic grunt work so the gods can live in leisure, Genesis says that human beings are...created in the image of God and given the mandate to establish and preserve life-giving order."

Israel's ideal of the compassionate ruler (Isaiah 11:1-9) is being invoked here. But the Bible is clear that ours is a secondary and dependent sovereignty (a concept expressed poignantly in Psalm 8). Humans have received the world as a gift from the Creator and must never mistake it for a possession (Leviticus 25:23). Genesis goes on to remind us that the gift can be revoked, at least partially. In only two other places is the divine council convened. In Genesis 3:22 it decides to expel the human being from the garden. And in Genesis 11:5-9 it takes action to "deconstruct" the Tower of Babel (which symbolized the archetypal project of civilization) in favor of the original vision of a dispersed, tribal humanity living in diverse bioregions. The concern in both cases is that humanity has traded its vocation of careful stewardship for a fantasy of omnipotence.

THE COMMISSIONING text of 1:28 begins with the well-known invitation to "be fruitful and multiply." The word *parah* refers to the reproductive capacity of plants (Isaiah 17:6), animals (Genesis 8:17), and humans (Exodus 1:7) alike. But the exact invitation has already been made to the other creatures as well (Genesis 1:22), a sharp reminder that *homo sapiens* is not the sole tenant on the Earth. This refrain emphasizes that the creation is not static but dynamic, ever regenerating, spreading fecundity. Even after the Fall, life may continue through this sustaining reproductive grace: The invitation is reiterated in the Noahic covenant, again to both animals (Genesis 8:17) and humans (9:1,7). Faithful caretaking must thus value these life forces *above all else*.

Another wordplay associates the summons to "multiply" (*rabah*) and to "rule" (*radah*). Lowery reminds us that these metaphors arise out of early Israel's "highly localized subsistence-oriented household agriculture," in which the primary task was to conserve the fertility of the land for the next generation—not to plunder it for short-term gain. Yet because the early Israelites were eking out a living on marginal and drought-plagued land, this task often felt like a wrestling match with the elements. It is in this sense that we should interpret the phrase "fill the land and subdue it," which has fueled modern theologies of domination.

These verbs cut two ways in scripture. Humans can fill (*male'*) creation with life, or with exploitation and death. After the Fall, the diagnosis that drives God to quash emergent civilization is that "the land was corrupted...and filled with violence" (Genesis 6:11). Similarly, the use of the Hebrew verb *kabash* here (which usually refers to

the subjection of enemies) seems to acknowledge that the "footprint" of settled human societies is intrinsically heavy upon the Earth. We use, we displace, we clear, we domesticate; our impact is greater than any other creature. Thus it anticipates the wider narrative of Genesis, which understands agricultural "toil" to be a product not of creation but of the Fall.

### **Labor and the Fall**

Genesis 3:17-19 tells how *'adam* was relegated to painful labor because the gift of *'adamah* is now compromised. There is both political and historical memory operating here about how "original abundance" was lost. Tribal Israel had been driven to the Palestinian highlands and its dry, rocky soil because imperial civilizations such as Egypt and Babylon controlled the fertile lowlands. Genesis identifies the "curse" of agriculture with the origins of such aggressive, colonizing civilizations. Cain the farmer murders the pastoralist Abel, and then builds the first city (Genesis 4:2,17). The cities become kingdoms, and the kingdoms become predatory in the spirit of Nimrod (10:8-14). We know that indeed the domestication of plants and animals, beginning around 10,000 B.C.E., led inexorably to the rise of the first city-states several millennia later. In this sense, Genesis preserves the old suspicion of hunter-gatherer cultures (based on their universal experience) toward civilization: Societies that "subdue" the land for agricultural production ultimately subdue others as peasant labor.

But in Genesis 1:28, human rule over the rest of creation does not connote this kind of subjection. It doesn't even include *eating* the fauna (which isn't allowed until the Noahic "concession" of 9:2-5). Indeed, the very next verse, 1:29, reminds us that humans must share with "every other thing that has the breath of life" the Earth's flora. This idea of our interdependence with non-human species is developed later in the Ark story (6:19-21; 7:13-16; 8:1, 17-19).

To rule the Earth, therefore, in a way that destroys its fertility or renders other species extinct represents the paramount biblical example of *bad government*. We can find traces of this conviction in several subsequent texts: the Deuteronomist's prohibition of eating both mother and young prey (Deuteronomy 22:6); Isaiah's fierce criticism of Assyria's denuding of old-growth cedar forests in Lebanon (Isaiah 37:24); and Ezekiel's denunciation of the river-polluting cattle ranches of Pharaoh (Ezekiel 32:13f).

One final piece to the Genesis creation story contrasts sharply with modern theologies of production and instrumentality. The only work done in the garden is the conjuring of life (in the Bible only God "creates"; humans "make"). And there are limits even to God's work, which ceases on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2f). The intention was a cosmic Sabbath, that all beings might enjoy the delightful world forever. It signals a crucial lesson: The flip side of natural abundance is self-limitation. This lesson is later pressed upon Israel in the institution of Sabbath practice, with a particular emphasis on constraining how much people "gather" of the divine gift of sustenance (Exodus 16:4-30).

The human vocation is summarized in Genesis 2:15: The human being is to "till and keep" (*'abad* and *shamar*). Outside the Eden story *'abad* connotes servitude, not management, while *shamar* is used for conservancy of life or observance of covenant. So the phrase is better translated "serve and preserve"—this is what it means to "rule" faithfully. The account closes with a stunning portrait of primal creation, however unintelligible it may be to modern readers: The human beings are naked and "uncivilized," and there is nothing in the garden to be ashamed of (2:25). It was all good. But *'adam* grasped the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and we began to imagine we could make things better. So the balance of the primeval narrative (Genesis 3-11) is a warning tale that identifies the Fall with our alienation from the Earth, its creatures, and the Creator, and goes on to offer a withering critique of civilization and its discontents.

NOTHING IN GENESIS 1-2 coheres with the once-prevalent and still persistent interpretation of "dominion" that sanctions environmental destruction in the name of progress. Quite the contrary: The biblical tale of creation finds wide resonance with other primal origin stories found among indigenous peoples the world over, in which "the people" emerge from the earth, the other beings are all relatives, and stewardship means thinking ahead seven generations. Such stories articulate the most ancient human cosmology: We are tightly woven together with the rest of creation and the Spirit world in a symbiotic relationship.

The modern myth of our "lordship" over nature clearly will not serve a sustainable future. Perhaps the older, wiser creation story of Genesis, when more carefully handled, will restore to us the instructive "memory" of where we came from, so we can turn around from where we are headed.

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