Ecology and The Bible: The Dilemma of Dominion

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To explore the topic of ecology and the Bible, we need only turn to the first page of scripture-to Genesis, chapter 1. The prevailing view holds that in its final form this liturgy of creation was the work of Judean priests living in the Babylonian exile of the sixth century BCE. Their poetic composition gave voice and vision to an environmental theology over against the culture in which they were enslaved-over against the theology espoused in the great Babylonian creation story called the *Enuma Elish*, whose title comes from its first words, translated "when on high."

Full of violence, the *Enuma Elish* depicts a heavenly world of warring deities, male and female. From the beginning, chaos, which means both lack of order and evil, reigns. Attempts to control it are never completed and must be repeated year after year. Throughout their combat the gods resent work and long for rest, which means inactivity and sleep. So at the end, the chief god Marduk rests in a palace and is given 50 names of glory-only to have the whole story repeat itself in endless cycles. In the course, this violent world of gods impinges on earth in threatening ways. The victorious gods of the heavenly battles make "man" (not generic) from the blood of a defeated deity and deem "man" their "slave." He must work in order that they may rest.

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Over against the *Enuma Elish* stands Genesis 1. It does more, however, than react to or counter the Babylonian story. No matter what its context, it testifies to God the transcendent creator who deemed "very good" all that God made; that is, deemed "very good" the environment (the world and all therein). In other words, Genesis 1 gives us theological and ecological blessings. The blessings come through a beautifully structured liturgy of introduction, body, and conclusion.

1. Introduction

Beginning with the activity of God, the introductory clause uses the unique verb "create" (Hebrew *bara'*) of which, throughout the Bible, only God is the subject. Unlike the deities of the *Enuma Elish*, this God appears alone, without competitors and without sexuality. As traditionally translated, the seven word clause (in Hebrew) makes an absolute claim: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." But the absolute may not hold. The alternative translation, probably more accurate, yields a temporal clause: "When God began to create..." Similar in grammatical form to the opening of the *Enuma Elish*, it implies not the absolute beginning but rather the beginning of creation. "When God began to create the heavens and the earth..."

But immediately, unlike the *Enuma Elish*, Genesis drops the heavens to focus on the earth. Ecology is primary. Three references-chaos and desolation (*tohu wabohu*), darkness (*hoshek*), and primeval waters-indicate that God's creation of earth comes not out of nothing but rather out of pre-existent chaos. For certain, these references signal lack of order. But then comes the troubling question: Do they also hint at pre-existent evil? Is there evil with which God must contend in the divine acts of creating? Is God not all powerful and alone from "the beginning"? Is

there ecological struggle? For sure, we read of no battles with chaos. Nonetheless, this opening clause of the Bible is not as theologically tight as we might wish.

2. Body and Conclusion

From this temporal opening, "When, in the beginning...," we move into the body of the liturgy. Its structure is similarly temporal. Organized in seven days, each day begins with the words, "And God said." On days one, two, and three, God "said" into being (1) *light* separated from darkness; (2) the *firmament* (or dome) separating upper waters from lower waters; and (3) the *earth*(surrounded by the seas) putting forth vegetation. On days four, five, and six, God filled these structures. On day four, God filled the light of day one with the lights, greater and lesser plus the stars. They separate and rule day and night. On day five, God filled the firmament of day two with aquatic and aerial animals-fish and birds. And on "day the six" (so the Hebrew reads) God performed two tasks to fill the earth of day three. God brought forth animals of every kind, wild and domestic, and God created humankind to inhabit the earth and eat its produce.

As these six days progress, each becomes narratively longer than the preceding. "Day the six," then, on which animals and humans are created, is the most expansive of all. Amazingly, the vast cosmos-"the spacious firmament on high, with all the blue ethereal sky"-receives less emphasis than do earth and its creatures. (To this remarkable feature we shall return.)

Day seven (following a literary pattern similar to that in the *Enuma Elish*) concludes the body of the liturgy. On this day God "rested." Though on the surface the motif of divine resting resonates with the ending of the *Enuma Elish*, these two

accounts differ significantly. In the *Enuma Elish* divine rest opposes work; in Genesis 1 divine rest completes work (so Heschel). It does not come after work; rather, it fulfills work. It is not inactivity but a special kind of activity. Moreover, this rest happens in time, not in space on a day, not in a palace. The verb "bless" underscores the difference. As on day five, God worked to "bless" aquatic and aerial creatures and on "day the six" God worked to "bless" humankind, so on day seven God worked to "bless" the day itself. God set that day apart as "holy," with a blessing that secures the entire creation. In this resting, God's work of creation ends. Unlike the creation in the *Enuma Elish*, it does not have to be repeated. It is finished, once and for all. Accordingly, exiled Jews, unlike their Babylonian captors, need not fear that the environment is unstable. Ecology resides in harmonious rest.

Throughout this majestic account runs the divine judgment "good"(*tob*). Seven times-that number of perfection-appears the evaluation, "And God saw that it was good" and, on the seventh, "very good." Three meanings obtain in this adjective. (1) A pragmatic judgment: The creative works of God perform as God intended. They do what they are supposed to do. Light, for example, becomes light and not something else. "And it was so." Creation fulfills its purpose and so it is "good." (2) "Good" renders an aesthetic judgment. The cosmos, with all therein, is beautiful. God, the supreme artist, brought forth an earth that delights the eye, truly pleasing the beholder. (3) "Good" conveys moral judgment. Everything God created is "good," i.e., not evil. Indeed, the word "evil," with its corollaries of discord and violence, never appears in the Genesis liturgy. Parenthetically, however, we may wonder if the absence of the word does not draw attention to it. What is not said may threaten by omission.

Pragmatic, aesthetic, and moral: Overall, the environment

that God created works as intended, manifests beauty, and exudes ethical integrity. Emphatically these meanings climax when, on day the six, God saw everything that God had made and, lo, "it was very good." Genesis 1 avows ecological bliss. It gives us a green earth. And who among us would not choose this liturgy, rather than the *Enuma Elish*, for our environmental narrative? How can anyone find problems with it?

Traditionally, Judaism and Christianity have not found problems with it. Indeed, Genesis 1 has inspired a theology of triumph and thanksgiving that embraces the environment. Through it ecology and the Bible resonate.

For the beauty of the earth
For the glory of the skies
For the love that from our birth
Over and around us lies:
God of all, to you we raise
this, our hymn of grateful praise.

But wait. The exegesis is not finished. Look around. Do we see the beauty of the earth? All too often we see garbage dumps-piles of clutter and debris all over the earth. Do we see the glory of the skies? All too often, we see a polluted canopy. If we are honest, we must temper our hymns of ecological triumph and turn to confession.

For the clutter of the earth
For the smog-filled skies above
For the mess that scars our birth,
Spoiling now the work of love,
God of all, to you we frame
this, our dirge of guilt and shame.

3. Problem

How did we get in this predicament? Whence comes the ecological mess of our world? However complex the answers, let us consider one pivotal problem that resides in Genesis 1. The problem occurs on "day the six." On this longest of days, the day of most words, God first assigns earth the task of making the animals, domestic and wild(1:24). "Let the earth bring forth creatures of every kind." Here earth becomes God's agent. Nature carries responsibilities on behalf of God. Second, on this day occurs the making of humankind. For that special task God involves the heavenly hosts: "Let us," intones God, "make *'adam* (humankind) in our image (*selem*), after our likeness (*demut*)." In all of creation the words "image" and "likeness" pertain only to humankind. Accordingly, humankind stands apart, exalted as the representative (the image) of God on earth. As surrogate, steward, viceroy, or plenipotentiary, humankind represents God on earth.

Continuing, God moves the human vocabulary from the singular 'adam to the plural, "Let them [not him] have dominion (*radah*) over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the domestic animals and over the wild animals and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (1:26). Dominion over the earth and its inhabitants: With this vocabulary God gives humankind great power. Thereby, "dominion" emerges as the first of two words that signal trouble for the ecological bliss of Genesis 1. (More later.)

Following God's hortatory proposal, using the ordinary verb "make" (i.e., "Let us make..."), comes the narrator's declarative, using the verb unique to God, "create."

> So God created humankind (*'adam*) in God's image;

In the image of God created God "it."
Male and female created God them.

Male and female (*zakar uneqeba*) are the image of God. How different from the "savage slave male" of the *Enuma Elish* how different from hierarchies of sexuality that would subordinate female to male; how different from role divisions between the sexes. Male and female in the image of God [not as God but as God's image] gives us gender identity without prejudice. Further, apart from gender, the poem leaves open the identity of 'adam. It does not specify race, ethnicity, class, or any comparable category. To the contrary, it embraces all humankind. Further, no natural context or substance (e.g., no blood of a rebellious god) accompanies this divine act. Even though we may connect the word 'adam with the dust of the earth, thereby yielding a ecological bent to the creation of the human, in the liturgy the method and the material remain mysteries.

Humankind in the image of God male and female: God blessed them and spoke directly to them in assigning responsibilities:

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.

The troubling word "dominion"(*radah*) reappears, along with its parallel "subdue"(*kabas*)-the second word that disturbs the ecological bliss of Genesis 1.

Problems with the verbs "have dominion" and "subdue" abound when we look at their uses elsewhere in the Bible. Occurring some 27 times, the Hebrew word translated "dominion" carries predominantly negative meanings: to have power, especially over enemies. Most often associated with royal

power, the verb denotes the use of force accompanied by violence and destruction (e.g., Deut 20:20; 1 Kgs 5:30, 9:23; Neh 9:28). The verb also describes treading or trampling the winepress (Joel 3:13), an action of coercion even if with good results. Never does God appear as subject or object of this verb, though God does use it to authorize human activity. When in Genesis God gives to humankind dominion over the earth, the negative meanings of the verb elsewhere would hardly commend it here. Might not dominion undercut ecological bliss?

Similarly, the parallel verb "subdue" conveys the use of force. Its occurrences range from military conquests of land and people (e.g., Num 32:22, 29; Josh 18:1; Zech 9:15; 1 Chron 22:18) to abstract conditions (Mic 7:19) to individual predicaments of enslavement and, in one instance, to sexual assault (Esth 7:8; cf. Neh 5:5). Like the verb "dominion," the verb "subdue" carries predominantly negative meanings. It signifies violence and exploitation.

Given these disturbing meanings, what can we say about the two verbs as God uses them in Genesis 1? Do they give humankind license to exploit, rape, and savage the earth? Do they suggest a hostile earth full of threatening creatures? Do they authorize destruction of the environment? Drawing upon the parallels cited in the Bible, we might well reach that conclusion. Drawing upon their context in Genesis, however, we might well not.

The contextual approach returns us to the adjective "good." "Everything God created, lo, it was very good." Within this pragmatic, aesthetic, and ethical context appear the verbs "have dominion" and "subdue." Do these verbs, with their negative meanings elsewhere in the Bible, subvert this context of the "good" or does this context subvert the negative meaning of these verbs? Do these verbs give humankind permission to rape the earth and its non-human creatures or do they exhort us

to preserve the goodness of the earth? Do they authorize license or delegate responsibility? In raising such questions, we encounter the dilemma of dominion.

This enduring dilemma relates also to the issue of the separation of humankind from nature. One interpretation holds that to have dominion and subdue the earth sets humankind apart from nature and so sets it against nature. The counter interpretation turns again to context. It observes, first, that a motif of separation runs throughout creation in Genesis; it is not limited to humankind versus nature. For example, the firmament separates the waters from the waters; the dry land separates the waters under the heaven; the lights separate day from night. Moreover, plants and fruit trees, fish and birds, animals and creeping things are separated from one another. They are separated sometimes by days and by the phrase "each according to its kind." If the vocabulary of dominion and subdue sets humankind apart from nature, such separation reflects the entire creation. Separation does not in itself set humankind over against nature.

Second, the counter interpretation observes that while Genesis 1 sets humankind apart from nature, it also depicts humankind within nature. For example, both animals and humankind are objects of the same divine verb, "create." Moreover, God created them on the same day and God decreed that they eat the same food. Animals and human beings share vocabulary, time, and table. Again, as on "day five" God blesses the fish and the birds and instructs them to multiply, similarly on "day the six" God blesses humankind, male and female, and instructs them to multiply. Divine blessing, along with procreation, connects animals and humans. If apart from nature, humankind is also a part of nature.

Nonetheless, the distinction of dominion, reserved only for humankind, perdures. In the context of the whole creation, this

verb, along with "subdue," belongs to a hierarchy of harmony, with humankind at the top. Harmony helps to clarify the meaning of dominion as responsibility, not as domination. Further, the motif of responsibility runs throughout the liturgy. The firmament is responsible for controlling the waters. The greater light is responsible for ruling the day and the lesser light the night. The earth is responsible for producing vegetation and fruit. Both water and earth God charges to "bring forth living creatures." Responsibility for the sake of order and harmony marks creation at many levels. This feature illuminates, even as it tempers, the dominion given to humankind. Neither absolute nor all encompassing, the dominion of humankind does not include, for example, control over the firmament and the lights. Nor does it permit humankind to kill and eat animal flesh.

Text and context in Genesis 1 both affirm and limit dominion. To exercise dominion within the limits of the "good" is to do the work of God in the world. To exercise dominion in the world is to "image" transcendent goodness. To exercise dominion is to live in harmony with the rest of creation. To exercise dominion is to take responsibility for that harmony. Repeatedly, the text and context of Genesis 1 disavows misuses of dominion. Theology and ecology unite.

4. No Triumphal Ending

Nonetheless, the affirmation that theology and ecology work in harmony throughout Genesis 1 does not permit a triumphal ending to our reflections. As optimistic as Genesis may appear, fragments, glimpses, and hints of chaos survive in it. The watery abyss, present at the beginning, before creation, never disappears completely. The primeval darkness (*hoshek*) remains after the

creation of light. Never called "good," it survives to become the night. Moreover, darkness maintains sequential priority in the formula that concludes each of days one through six: "there was evening and there was morning." Lastly, even the repeated emphasis on "good" may harbor the suspicion that evil lurks. What is said may disclose what is not said. Why, for instance, is the word "good" absent in reference to day two, the making of the firmament?

All in all, the magnificent and majestic environment portrayed throughout Genesis 1 knows limits. Though theology and ecology work in harmony, they are not absolutely fixed. Though abundantly blessed, the cosmos is not totally secure from the threat of chaos-a threat both endemic and acquired. In grappling with latter-the acquired threat-we male and female created in the image of God bear no small responsibility. When, in the seventh century BCE, the prophet Jeremiah meditated on this threat, he tied it to divine judgment upon a foolish and stupid people-a people lacking in understanding and refusing to do good; a people who hardly manifest the image of God. The failure of this people led Jeremiah to envision the un-writing of Genesis 1. He foresaw the destruction of the environment in a return to pre-existent chaos.

> I looked on the earth and lo it was *tohu wabohu*(chaos and desolation; cf. Gen 1);
> and to the heavens and they gave no light.
> I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
> and all the hills moved to and fro.
> I looked, and lo there was no one at all,
> and all the birds of the air had fled.
> I looked, and lo the fruitful land was a desert,
> and all the cities were laid in ruins
> before the LORD, before God's fierce anger. (Jer 4:23-26)

Without a commitment to stewardship for the cleansing of

the heavens and the earth, the responsibility given to humankind to exercise dominion may well be our undoing. Do we make dominion a blessing, as God intended, or a curse, as Jeremiah perceived? Looking around, how can we not see that the hour is late and we are not saved. The grass withers and the flower fades. The greening of the earth shrinks; the polluting of the cosmos abounds. The environment weeps, for, lo, all is not "very good," nor even "good." Have the warring gods of the *Enuma Elish* returned? If we continue in our ways, what environmental narrative will we tell?

Ecology and the Bible set before us the dilemma of dominion. The outcome depends upon right choices by us-the exercise of responsibility to preserve the goodness of creation. What story will endure-a story of creation or of destruction? The answer lies in human responsibility.

<주요어>

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<초록>

성서와 생태

-"다스리라"는 축복에 대한 재해석-

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이 논문은 성서에 대한 생태 성서 신학적 성찰의 출발점이 되고 있는 창세기 1장의 창조 본문, 특히 1장 28절의 "땅을 정복하고 다스리라(dominion)"는 하나님의 축복 명령은 하나님께서 보시기에 "좋았더라"는 문맥과 맥락 안에서 재해석하고 있다. 창세기의 창조는 고대 메소포타미아의 창조 서사시인 에누마 엘리쉬와 달리 창조의 선함과 아름다움을 찬양하고 있으며 창조 과정에서의 어떠한 폭력적 요소도 담고 있지 않다. 인간 창조 이후 "정복하고 다스리라"는 하나님의 축복 명령은 그 단어들 자체로는 지배와 통치를 통한 억압과 폭력의 여지를 담고 있다. 따라서 "다스리라"는 하나님의 명령을 그 단어의 뜻만 가지고 해석한다면 축복이 될 수 없다. 하나님께서 창조하신 후 보시기에 좋았더라고 말했던 문맥에서 이해될 때 "다스리라"는 명령은 선하고 아름다운 창조와 이를 유지하기 위한 제한된 명령으로 풀이되며 창세기 1장은 비로소 우리에게 신학적으로나 생태학적으로나 축복의 본문이 된다. 그럼에도 창조 이전의 혼돈과 암흑의 상태는 세상의 악함을 전제로 하고 있으며 다스리라는 명령이 다른 본문에서 억압과 폭력의 맥락에서 쓰인 점 등이 이 명령을 선한 창조의 상황에서 해석하는 데 딜레마가 되고 있다. 다스리라는 명령이 창조 질서를 유지하는 긍정적이고 책임적인 명령이 되기 위해서는 우리의 책임적 응답이 뒤따라야 하며 인간은 통치권이 주어졌지만 그 통치권은 창조의 선함을 지키고 보호하

는 선에서 그 권한을 부여받고 행사하도록 부름 받은 것임을 기억해야 할 것이다.

<Abstract>

Ecology and The Bible: The Dilemma of Dominion

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The present article examines the meaning of the divine command, "have dominion(radah)" in Genesis 1 and its ecological significance. Genesis 1 illustrates the environment that God created works as intended, manifests beauty, and exudes ethical integrity. Yet, the troubling word "dominion"(*radah*), along with its parallel "subdue"(*kabas*), disturbs the ecological bliss of Genesis 1 because of the negative connotation of those two words, that is to have power, especially over enemies. The contextual approach returns us to the adjective "good." "Everything God created, lo, it was very good." Within this pragmatic, aesthetic, and ethical context appear the verbs "have dominion" and "subdue." The question arises if these verbs, with their negative meanings elsewhere in the Bible, subvert this context of the "good" or does this context subvert the negative meaning of these verbs and if these verbs give humankind permission to rape the earth and its non-human creatures or do they exhort us to preserve the goodness of the earth. In raising such questions, we encounter the dilemma of dominion.

This enduring dilemma relates also to the issue of the separation of humankind from nature. Text and context in Genesis 1 both affirm and limit dominion. To exercise dominion within the limits of the "good" is to do the work of God in the world.

To exercise dominion in the world is to "image" transcendent goodness. To exercise dominion is to live in harmony with the rest of creation. To exercise dominion is to take responsibility for that harmony. Also the text and context of Genesis 1 disavows misuses of dominion. Theology and ecology unite. Ecology and the Bible set before us the dilemma of dominion. The outcome depends upon right choices by us-the exercise of responsibility to preserve the goodness of creation. What story will endure-a story of creation or of destruction? The answer lies in human responsibility.