

The way the world is meant to be

An interpretation of Genesis 1:26–29

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The biblical canon opens with a litany of creation. It is the first of a number of creation poems and stories in the Bible. Some are embedded in larger texts, as is the case in the book of Job. After thirty-seven chapters of wrestling with questions of disinterested righteousness, suffering, and the justice of God, the book changes tenor and in chapter 38 begins to voice an awe-inspiring description of past and ongoing creation wonders. Not the first but the 104th psalm turns its attention to God's role in the natural world.

Nor does Genesis 1 contain the oldest material in the Bible. That distinction belongs to the victory poems in Exodus 15 and Judges 5. So why does this particular creation story stand in first position in the Bible? What does its presence and content convey?

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A peaceful creation

Structurally, Genesis 1 begins with God creating the heavens and the earth and the things and beings that inhabit them. The creation work is set in a seven-day time frame, and it proceeds in a systematic and orderly fashion. Each thing is created in the order in which it is needed. After each day, the Creator reflects on the work and notes

that it is good. After finishing the project, God rests and thereby sets a precedent to be emulated by the human community.

Already this account is unique in its setting in the world of the eastern Mediterranean. Although it shares elements with other creation stories that emerged there (including the presence of the primordial sea), it rejects other elements. Other creation stories, such as Babylon's Enuma Elish, begin with the creation of the gods

and then recount the wars between the gods that end in the creation of humans and the things needed for human life and for the sustenance and happiness of the gods. The function of those stories is to support the political and social structures of the societies in which they were told.

In sharp contrast, Genesis 1 is noticeably lacking in violence and war. The way this story is told refutes theologies and ideologies that insist that violence (chaos) must precede change in the natural, political, or social worlds. This is a peaceful creation, always under the control of its Creator. But even in Genesis 1, the threat of a descent into chaos is present.

Male and female in God's image

In the opening chapter of Genesis, humans are the very last beings created, and their creation unfolds in a way unlike that of the other animals. God does not simply speak them into existence, and they are made in the divine image and likeness.

Pastors, scholars, and lay people have struggled with what it means to be made in the divine image. Some have suggested that the image of God refers to qualities that humans have, such as the ability to reason or exercise moral judgment. Others point to a transcendent quality in humans; their lives do not end when their physical bodies die. One of my professors, Walter Harrelson,

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would say that humans image God when they do the work of God in the world. In this thoroughly Hebraic way of thinking, image and likeness reside not in our being, as in Greek thought, but in our responding to the relationship that we have with God.

The text specifically mentions that humans are created as males and females. The other animals are also created as males and females, but this characteristic is only mentioned in connection with the creation of human beings. Perhaps it is specified of

humans in order to emphasize the next point: humans—both males and females—are assigned the same duties. God charges both equally with being fruitful and multiplying, filling the earth and taking care of it.

High mountains for the wild goats

Genesis 1 lacks any reference to political entities such as the nation or state or military. Ethnic groups, including Israel itself, are not mentioned. The human creation has no stratification of

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wealth, in which some have too much and others too little. The Creator provides all humans with the same sustenance, with plants, fruit, and seeds to eat. Green plants also serve as food for birds, animals, and creeping things. Carnivores and predators do not exist. Each of these factors removes reasons for divisions that cause humans and animals to form coalitions against one another and engage in destructive conflicts.

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they need for their existence. We can extrapolate from this statement that they also have a right to their habitats. The habitats provide the food that rightfully belongs to them. Psalm 104 enlarges on this idea:

*The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has its home in the fir trees.
The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the coney. (Ps. 104.16–18)¹*

The high mountains are not for humans; they are for the wild goats. When humans stray into these altitudes, they are invading goat territory and ought to respect the creatures that live there. Genesis 1 depicts a world created to be at peace with itself.

No limits on consumption?

In this creation account, the language of caring for the earth is expressed in terms that probably meant to the people of the ancient world something different from what we hear when we read the text. The Hebrew word for “subdue” (*kābash*) is harsh. This language has sometimes been understood to mean that

humans are free to exploit and ravage the earth for their own benefit. But *kābash* should be interpreted not according to its dictionary meaning but according to its ancient context.

In earlier times, humans were conscious of struggling with nature in order to sustain human life from generation to generation. Genesis 3, the story of the first man and the first woman, might be read in part as a contest between the humans and the animals (represented by the serpent) for control of the garden and its resources. The serpent initiates a conversation with a human by asking a question about food habits—because both animals and humans eat, and they eat a lot of the same things. Are the resources of the garden only for the humans? “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

The response, that humans may eat from every tree save one, would have been alarming to the serpent in the story. Will this new eating being demand and receive exclusive access to the garden’s resources? When humans are given access to every tree in the garden except one, they seize access to that one as well. They lay claim to all the resources of the Garden of Eden!

In the story, the garden’s owner expels the humans because they do not get it: they do not understand that the resources of the garden are not for their exclusive consumption. The resources of the garden are meant to be shared by all eating beings. Notice that the animals are not expelled. Their leader (in my interpretation), the serpent, is punished but not thrown out of the garden. When pitted against the humans in this early contest, the animal kingdom won.²

Natural forces and human control

Here in Indiana we don’t worry that animals will kill our children while they are playing outside. Years ago, our predecessors exterminated the wolves, bears, and other large predators that inhabited the territories we call home. Those European settlers also drained nearly all the wetlands, to provide more land for farming and to eliminate breeding grounds for mosquitoes and thereby reduce the risks of mosquito-borne illness. Most of us live in sturdy houses that protect us from the elements, and from poisonous snakes and disease-carrying rats. Most of us live in areas that are not flood prone—or if they are, levies have been built to keep

the waters at bay. If our crops fail because of drought or a swarm of locusts, we do not starve, because we can afford to import food from the far corners of the globe. We have subdued, to a large extent, the acres under our control. From time to time, though, we are still reminded that some of nature's forces—earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, wild fires—elude our control.

Imagine living in earlier times, when people had less control over nature. For most of human history, people dreamed of subduing the earth but only succeeded in very limited ways. Agriculture was one early success story. Humans noticed that plants grew where seeds fell. People discovered that they could plant the seeds in another place, and they would grow there too. This discovery permitted humans to settle down. They wanted a surer source of meat and animal products. Rather than chasing a wild gazelle around in a hunt, they domesticated more docile animals that could be led to slaughter without resistance.

But cultivated land did not always yield its bounty. There were years of too little rain, and seasons when the earth simply stopped bearing. Other years saw too much rain, and the topsoil washed away. Domesticated animals were killed by wild animals or died from disease. Birds ate berries that had been carefully cultivated for human consumption. Lifespans were short, and many died of accidents, in childbirth, and from infectious diseases. Humans knew that subduing the earth was not an easy task. At times, that possibility seemed more dream than reality.

Responsible dominion

Some of us idealize the past, imagining a time when humans exercised care for the earth and never took more than they needed. To be sure, when resources were scarce, people often husbanded them carefully. But when resources were abundant, people—even ancient ones—tended to be wasteful. A year and a half ago, I visited the village of Copan Ruinas (“the ruins of Copan”) in the mountains of Honduras. Though economically poor, Honduras is one of the most lush and beautiful countries in the world. The name of the village derives from the archaeological site adjacent to it. The ruins became ruins in the ninth century AD when the local Mayan elite devastated the area by cutting down every tree and removing all vegetation, in order to create

palaces and temples and open plazas for their ceremonies and amusements. When the land had been denuded and made unsuitable for growing food, the ordinary folk moved away. Environmental devastation is not a new development.

When we Canadians and Americans read the Bible, we need to take account of how our world has changed and how our current circumstances impel us to exercise responsibilities that were not ours as serfs and slaves or as naked apes among the carnivores. Today few places on earth remain where human life is possible but not present. The pressures of a burgeoning population push us to find sustainable ways to meet the needs of all with the earth's limited resources. To do so requires that we be responsible stewards of land, sea, and air. Having dominion over the birds, the fish, and everything that moves means that we need to make the earth habitable for all.

We depend on nature for our survival as a species. Destroying it will ultimately lead to our demise. What will happen when we

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have cut down all the rainforests, and their oxygen-producing and air-cleaning capacities are eliminated, when the snows disappear from Mt. Kilimanjaro and the polar icecaps melt, causing the earth to absorb rather than reflect light and heat? What will happen when the fish of the sea are so filled with mercury that our children cannot eat them without damaging their brains, and when the water that we drink is contaminated with pesticides from runoff and powerful drugs that were poured into sinks and flushed down toilets?

Now we have a greater ability to know the effects of our actions, because scientists and environmentalists document the connections in ways that were not possible earlier. Computer models help us envision a bleak future that will come to pass if we do not take actions to reverse our course.

Having been made aware of environmental issues, and remembering the instruction to take care of the earth, many of us are starting to look at our lifestyles to see how they might be modified for sustainability and health. We purchase locally grown foods in order to save energy and benefit the producers, and because

eating fresher food is healthier and more enjoyable. We recycle, knowing that some of the earth's resources are disappearing forever. We turn down the thermostat in winter and turn it up in summer. And we look at the larger picture. We marshal our political means (the right to vote, to speak out, to assemble, to petition, to run for office), and our social, spiritual, and economic resources, in order to fulfill our responsibilities to rule the earth and make it the kind of place where humans and animals can live. In so doing, we resist the temptation to act as if we can lay exclusive claim to the resources of this planet, we honor the Creator's intention to provide habitats in which all can thrive, and we image God in doing God's work in the world.

Notes

¹ Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

² See Wilma Bailey, "Through the Eyes of a Serpent: A Political/Economic/Ecological Interpretation of Genesis 3," *Encounter* 67, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 81–86.

About the author

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