

Human Rule Over Nature in Genesis 1: A Better Understanding

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Abstract

A clearer understanding of the divine command for people to rule over creation in Gen 1:26, 28 reveals that true rule is wise stewardship, not rapacious domination as Lynn White suggested years ago. A consideration of ancient Near Eastern texts as well as other biblical texts will lead us to this more environmentally sensitive perception.

Keywords: *rada*, rule, stewardship, Genesis 1, Lynn White, environment, dominion

“The problem is not with the Bible, it’s with how people interpret it.” –nameless little old lady talking to a college student (me) in a Kansas City movie theater in the fall of 1963.

There has been much discussion over the concept of human “rule” over nature, especially in the light of what is said in Genesis 1. There the man and the woman are given the authority to “rule” over the animals. Genesis 1:26, 28 reads as follows,

(26) *“Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” . . . (28) “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.”*

What we must immediately observe is that humankind is supposed to “subdue” the earth and have “dominion” over the animals. Some might suggest that these are simply parallel verbs with the same meaning. Most commentators, however, suggest that there is a difference. “Subdue” might refer to the cultivation of the ground, taking meadowlands and turning them into farm fields, while “have dominion” might imply a form of rule over the animals. Whatever the meaning of “dominion” over the animals might be, great debate has been engendered over the nuance of interpretation (Bauckham 2011: 226-27). It should also be noted that human beings are created on the same day as the animals, which implies to some commentators that the biblical text is telling us that human beings and animals are of the same ilk (Bouma-Prediger: 63-64). If we are indeed portrayed as being one with the animal realm, we are reminded of some of the most basic teachings of evolutionary theory.

The accusing finger of modern intellectuals, however, have pointed at these passages in the biblical text for inspiring the rape of the environment that has occurred in the modern era. These passages, so we are told, have depersonalized nature and placed it at the disposal of human technology and greed resulting in its frequent degradation and destruction. The most representative of these accusations has been made by Lynn White in his famous or infamous article, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155, 3767 (1967): 1203-07. Lynn White has been refuted or at least qualified many times, too often to quote all the sources here. But a few observations might at least be made: 1) White and others used the Bible very selectively, quoting Genesis 1 and ignoring so many other positive biblical views about the created order, especially in the Psalms. 2) The Bible does not teach the dualism of mind and body that White claims it does, it has a holistic view of human beings. Dualism entered Christian thought, sometimes heretically as with the Gnostics, in the second century CE. 3) The Christian tradition has much creation affirming thought and language. Even White admits that to be the case, specifically with Francis of Assisi. 4) Christians were not the only, nor the first, to degrade the environment.

Plato (fourth century BCE) and already mentions the horrible deforestation and dessication of the land in the classical Greek era (Bouma-Prediger: 65-76). Meso-Americans destroyed their soil and had to migrate to new areas in Central America; folks in the Indus Valley (modern Pakistan) deforested the hills causing erosion and subsequent flooding to silt up their irrigation canals and destroy their civilizations (and creating a desert as a side-effect). These were the polytheists whom White praised as having a better world view toward nature. Oops, you really goofed on that one, White, especially for a historian! White should have simply blamed human greed and materialism, which is really the common factor (Bouma-Prediger: 71-71).

Richard Bauckham highlights the teachings of classical philosophers used by Christian theologians after the Renaissance. He focuses especially on Francis Bacon (1561-1626) whose empirical worldview formed the basis for modern intellectual understandings of the world, which may really inspire the harsh understanding of “rule” in Genesis 1 (Bauckham 2002: 128-77; 2010: 18, 31; 2011: 20-24, 47-55). Lynn White’s critique is valid only insofar as he observes the misuse of the biblical text in the modern age, but he has clearly overlooked much of what has been said by more sensitive individuals in the Christian tradition (Bauckham: 19). At an earlier point in the discussion Bernhard Anderson said even more strongly that modern secular world views have overthrown the teachings of the Bible and religious values with the interpretation that justifies domination instead of appropriate rule (Anderson 1994: 133).

Though Lynn White’s article has been the object of many scholarly responses and rebuttals, especially by biblical scholars, it has tremendous staying power. Last year I heard a conference paper read which in blaise fashion assumed that Lynn White had definitely demonstrated how the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition was the primary reason for the destructive treatment of the environment in western culture. Even White’s more nuanced presentation of the issues was not acknowledged. Thus, the debate continues, and a critical response such as mine, is not outdated or unnecessary. As I attempted to speak in response to the presenter at this conference, I was merely told by this young scholar that I did not know what I was talking about. I so very much agree with Christopher Wright’s characterization of Lynn White’s essay as the “contemporary ecological mythology,” for it has the staying power of a myth that requires no serious empirical backing (Wright: 228). People will arrogantly quote White and brook no critical response.

Words such as “image of God,” “likeness of God,” and “rule” were words used primarily to describe kings in ancient Israel and especially in Mesopotamia. In particular, “image of God” was an ancient metaphor used to describe Mesopotamian kings as imbued with the divine and exercising universal rule on behalf of the gods. Such kings demonstrated this “rule” by creating gardens for plants and animals, by planting exotic and beautiful tress in them, and by overseeing the construction of irrigation canals to bring about the crop yield that would sustain people and animals. Kings often portrayed themselves as gardeners (Green: 272). Mesopotamian kings saw themselves as mastering the chaos of the desert and the wilderness. Their “rule” brought order out of chaos and sustained life. In the seventh century BCE, not too long before the biblical texts were generated, the Ammonite king, Amminadab, claimed as his accomplishments the creation of vineyards, gardens, irrigation channels, and a water reservoir (Green: 272). Ammon was just across the Jordan River from Jerusalem. Koheleth 2:4-6 attributes fictionally to Solomon the creation of vineyards, gardens and parks, fruit trees, and water pools. The concept of “rule” included many creative and generative actions.

In parallel fashion the man and the woman are placed in a garden in Genesis 2–3. Perhaps, the garden story is meant to reinforce the imagery of kingship associated with the man and the woman, for they, too, tend the garden and make it beautiful and fruitful. (Presumably, they had to leave rather shortly after they got there, so they didn’t get the opportunity to do these things. Most likely very soon after the creation of the woman, the two of them looked at each other and said, “Let’s go check out that tree we’re not supposed to mess with.” They were children, you realize. They had to leave the garden so quickly that God never had a chance to show them how the John Deere tractor worked.)

If you evoke the image of the man and the woman entering into the garden, or perhaps we should say the very young man and very young woman, you should evoke the image of the people who first heard this story. They were simple farmers in the highlands of Palestine trying to eke out a living for themselves and their children by farming and animal husbandry. This story invited them to view their humble plot of land as a garden entrusted to them for the sake of their own survival. Words like “rule” and “subdue” mean to use the earth in simple fashion for the sake of “survival” (Wright: 228).

The land, and the animals, were a gift entrusted to them for their simple livelihoods. Do not think of a John Deere tractor clearing the land for the building of their commercial farm and dairy operation. Think of simple highland Jewish peasants.

It is the biblical word “rule” that has brought the bulk of the criticism upon the biblical text. In Mesopotamian texts the Akkadian word was *redu* or *radadu*, which can mean to “rule” or “pursue.” The word is frequently used with royalty who “rule” (1 Kgs 4:24; Ps 8:5, 6; 72:8; 110:2; Isa 14:2). It covers a range of activities from conquering and ruling foreign nations to stewarding plants, animals and irrigation canals (Zobel: 13:330). In Hebrew the verb form occurs 27 times; it means “rule” 24 times and “seize” 3 times. It may be used to describe the rule of a master over a servant (Lev 25:43, 46, 53), the rule of officers over workmen (1 Kgs 5:30; 9:23; 2 Chron 8:10), the rule of one nation over another (Lev 26:17; Num 24:19; Isa 14:2, 6; Ezek 29:15; Ps 68:28; Neh 9:28), or a king over the people (1 Kgs 5:4; Ezek 34:4; Ps 72:8; Ps 110:2). Representative examples include: Num 24:19 that says Jacob will someday have dominion over his enemies; 1 Kgs 5:4 wherein Solomon rules over his own nation; Ps 72:8 which declares that Solomon will rule from shore to shore; Lam 1:13; 110:2 in which the king exercises royal dominion over foreign or hostile nations; Isa 14:5 wherein the king of Babylon rules in anger; and Ezek 29:15 which declares that Egypt will never rule over the nations, all of which are passages that imply supremacy and sometimes control. In Joel 4:13 rule means to tread the grapes in the vineyard; that is truly oppressive. However, other passages provide a different nuance: 1 Kgs 9:23; 2 Chron 8:10 imply administrative control by royal bureaucrats (which might not be too nice); Ps 68:28 declares that God rules on Israel’s behalf; and Ezek 34:4 speaks of how good shepherds rule the people. Then, of course, there are the usages in Lev 25:43, 46, 53 which declares that we should not rule with harshness (Zobel: 330-34; Hamilton: 138). Since the adverb “harshly” has been added to the expression “rule harshly,” some have concluded that the word *rada* does not necessarily mean to rule with severity by itself but must have such a qualifying adverb connected to it (Gregor: 135, 143). Thus, there is a range of meaning in the word *rada* which implies that we need to take the context of the usage of the word into account for translation and interpretation purposes. The majority of the passages seem to emphasize gentleness and caring in the process of ruling, so one may receive the impression in Genesis 1 that the man and the woman are entrusted with responsible royal rule over the earth and its creatures (Limburg: 126).

Psalm 72 deserves special attention for its attribution of “dominion” and “rule” to the king. This song may help us define what biblical authors may have intended royal rulership to entail. In Ps 74:8 the king is said to have “dominion” from sea to sea. In verses 1-7 we gain insight as to what such royal rule entails. The king judges with righteousness and judges the poor with justice (v. 2). The king defends the cause of the poor and delivers the needy (v. 3). He is like rain that falls on newly cut grass (v. 6). He delivers the needy and the poor (v. 12), pities the weak (v. 13), saves the needy (v. 13), and redeems all these people from oppression and violence (v. 14). This is not a tyrannical rule. I believe that we should read Genesis through the lens of Psalm 72 (Wenham: 33; Hamilton: 138).

As we consider the context in which the word “rule,” as well as the word “subdue,” are used, we must observe what the man and the woman subsequently do. The first and most obvious observation that must be made is that they apparently are vegetarians. The text reads in Gen 1:29,

“See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.”

Immediately after they are told to rule, the man and the woman are commissioned to have a vegetarian diet (Day: 15). Vegetarianism is not the sign of rapacious human being despoiling the planet. The text implies a harmonious relationship should exist between people and the world environment (Horrell 2010: 27). Even Marc Brett, who views the image of rule in Genesis as violent subordination still observes that the motif of vegetarianism demonstrates significant reservations in the meaning of “rule” (Brett: 13). Ute Neumann-Gorsolke additionally points out the concept of vegetarianism is not found in Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts and that adds depth of meaning to the imagery here in the biblical text. She further suggests that vegetarianism is mandated here to affirm the equality of animals and humans before God (Neumann-Gorsolke: 233, 349-50).

Norman Habel, however, is reluctant to be so positive, for he notes the the word *rada* is also paired with the word *kabash*, a seldom used word that means “subdue” and carries a very oppressive concept of domination. It has the nuance of the exercise of force, as when Joshua subdues the Canaanites (Josh 18:1), and this gives a dark meaning to the concept of *rada* (Habel 2000a: 25-37; 2000b: 46-47; 2008: 6).

Habel believes we must disown this passage in the light of our modern understandings, and from a faithfulness to the “green” reading of the biblical text, which views passages from the perspective of earth. I suppose that means we must “demythologize,” in a certain sense, that passage from the mid-first millennium BCE. I, however, concur with Catherine Keller who finds it “more effectual to reinterpret the dominion than to denounce it” (Keller: 8). Rather than undercut the Bible, we must use it and critically and thus effectively to proclaim a message of environmental responsibility.

Richard Bauckham provides a good counter to Habel’s argument. He notes that when the word *kabash* is used in Gen 1:28 it is in reference to the land, and elsewhere in the biblical text when this word is used in reference to land (Num 32:22, 29; Jos 18:1; 1 Chron 22:18), it means to occupy to take possession. He believes therefore that Gen 1:28 commissions humanity to engage in agriculture, not some form of domination and suppression, but in a respectful use of the land that creates productive land for human well-being (Bauckham 2010: 16-17; 2011: 226-27).

In the greater context of Genesis 1-3 it should also be pointed out that in Genesis 2-3 the man and the woman live in the garden and eat fruit from the trees (except for one). They are clearly vegetarians in this account also; there is no evidence of a barbeque. They are gardeners, and the image of a gardener is the image of someone living in harmony with the plant world, as well as the animal world within the garden. Furthermore, in Gen 2:19-20 the man names all the animals, an act of co-creation and ordering by the man, who is graciously permitted by God to assist in this divine process. Since God is creating these animals in order to find a “helper” for the man, one can hardly call the naming process an act of tyrannical rule. Thus, the man and woman are vegetarians and they live in a garden presumably with the animals they have “named.” The use of the word in the context of these three chapters qualifies the meaning of the word *rada* so that we can in no way view it as violent rule or conquest. We must also observe that it also mollifies the word *kabash*, or “subdue,” a word used in conjunction with the word for rule in Genesis 1.

Various scholars have thus said word *rada* should not be understood here as violent rule, but rather have more positive meanings. Bruce Vawter spoke of how dominion was a “challenge to responsibility and the duty to make right prevail” not only in nature but in society. The earth, in particular, has been given to humanity as a “sacred trust” in which human beings can learn from it; it is not for exploitation (Vawter: 58-59). James Barr believes the word implies a duty to “respect and protect” (Barr: 9-32). Walter Brueggemann observes that dominion here is like that of a shepherd who tends and feeds the flock of the shepherd king of Ezekiel 34, so that the term does not describe exploitation, but of “securing the well being of every other creature” (Brueggemann: 32). If “dominion” over the animals turns into “exploitation,” or were they to be treated according to human “whim,” then humanity forfeits the kingly role granted by God, says Claus Westermann (Westermann: 159). Bernhard Anderson views the word as a commission to order and organize things in the world (Anderson 1984: 158). Similarly Hans-Jürgen Zobel believes the word means to effectively put the earth to good use; the commission to rule is a blessing and power to bring positive consequences for the “ruled” animals because our rule is done in humane fashion (Zobel: 335). Gordon Wenham speaks of how we must rule like the benevolent king treating the animals as God would treat them (Wenham: 33). David Williams observes that our “rule” over the world is limited by the sovereignty of God, who “rules” over us (Williams: 51-65). Norbert Lohfink believes the word betokens the domestication of animals and the peaceful co-existence of people and animals (Lohfink: 8, 12-13). Brennan Hill declares the text tells us that humans take God’s place in ruling creation and we should therefore act nobly without mastering or dominating other humans or any living creatures as well (Hill: 38). Though Mark Brett views the primary purpose of Gen 1:26 to affirm human equality in ruling the cosmos by democratizing the ancient kingly tradition, he suggests that it also implies that all people should take responsibility for ruling the created order equitably (Brett: 77-78). Daniel Block declares that if we are made in the “image of God,” then we are vice-regents who must care for the world as God would care for it, and we must “rule” as good kings are meant to rule according to the guidelines of Psalm 72 and Deut 17:14-20 (Block: 128-29). Bauckham makes the point that “rule” in the Bible is a term which describes what kings do, but Deut 17:14-20 defines the rule of kings as rule of a brother over his other brothers, thus implying a degree of equality. The word “rule” in the Bible thus does not denote harshness; rather, it denotes “care and service” and “a role of caring responsibility, not exploitation” (Bauckham 2011: 3-5, 228). Bauckham maintains that the biblical text promotes a healthy view of human responsibility for the environment; we are to rule as God would rule the creation. It is the later interpretations of the text that produce a bad view of human responsibility particularly in the post-renaissance era (Bauckham 2002: 128-77; 2010: 18, 31; 2011: 20-24, 47-55).

Theodore Hiebert exposit that humanity should rule the world the way God rules it, that is, sensibly and with an appreciation for the “beauty” of the world, for God saw that it was “good” (Hiebert: 3-16).

Prior to this modern age, the beliefs of early Christians and the teachings of famous saints, Francis of Assisi in particular, saw humanity more in a symbiotic relationship with the animal realm (Bauckham 2011: 29-42). Bauckham observes how Jesus’ teachings reflect his positive relationship with the animal realm. The famous passage in Mk 1:13 that speaks of Jesus with the wild animals in the wilderness after his temptation is interpreted by Bauckham to mean that the animals at first were enemies but then made peaceful by Jesus’ presence (Bauckham 2011: 64-132). Thus, the imperialistic interpretation of “rule” in Genesis 1 appears to be a modern interpretation or misinterpretation of the text.

John Chryssavgis and Frederick Krueger point out that the mandate to “rule” the animal realm imposes upon us an obligation and a vocation to treat the created order as God would, and this is reinforced by the imperative in Gen 2:15 to “keep” the garden. The word “keep” can mean to “guard” or “protect” and implies a strong mandate to care for nature and not rule it brutally (Chryssavgis and Krueger: 233-34). Thus, these authors might well conclude with John Day, “. . . it is clear that no ruthless dominion is intended at all, but rather a benign rule over the natural order, what we should nowadays refer to as stewardship over creation” (Day: 15. Cf. also Barr: 9-32; Rütterswörden: 81, 130; Neumann-Gersolke; Rogerson: 21-31).

In Genesis all human beings are endowed with the “image of God” thereby eschewing the tyranny of kings and declaring all people to be kings. Humanity is in that “image of God” because we “rule” over creation wisely. We are to rule as good kings. We are not to use the earth for our own personal needs; we are to steward and to provide for the animals and the plants. Royal imagery is used to emphasize how all humanity is to rule the world on God’s behalf. If all humans have royal status to rule on God’s behalf, they must rule gently and wisely (Gregor: 143). God’s elevation of humanity in Genesis 1 does not entitle us to exercise power in unlimited fashion to exploit nature’s resources, says Bernhard Anderson, but rather we are meant to live in the prepared peaceful kingdom with no killing of animals (or people). Resources are put at human disposal “not to exploit and ravish but to explore, to enjoy.” (Anderson 1994: 33, 130, 155). We are the agents of God in the world who nurture the world in a care-giving fashion; nurturing is true rule (Vawter: 58-59; Westermann 152; Kselman: 87; Wenham: 30-38; Fretheim 346; Löning and Zenger: 1007-08; Miller: 325-27; Middleton: 40-41). Richard Bauckham adds that we are to rule on God’s “behalf” not “instead” of God, that is, we must live in a dynamic, symbiotic relationship with our environment, not going forth to correct it or coerce it to what we believe is the appropriate level of existence (Bauckham 2010: 30-31). It provides a mandate for stewardship, “care and service, exercised on behalf of God and with accountability to God” (Bauckham 2011: 3).

Our creation on day six is significant symbolically. We share that day of creation with the animals on the land, which unifies us with them. Being created together on the last day indicates our interdependence with the animals. We also share the land, which was created on day three, so that we share the same “table” upon which God places food for us to eat (Anderson 1994: 130, 155). But we have so trashed the environment in which both we and the animals live that perhaps we need to be sent away from the “table” and go hungry (which we may do by the end of this century with our despoilation of the environment). We must take note that the biblical text speaks of how God has created the plants as food for the animals immediately after God has said the same for human beings. Pairing these two statements of human and animal food provision clearly pairs people and animals as kindred folk. But as we are the last to be created, we then become responsible for all that was created before us; that is what it means to be the “crown of creation.” People are to rule according to the divinely established order of creation found in the sequence of the six days.

A process theologian would speak of God’s incarnation in us, a God involved in the process through the human creatures. We are not naturally superior to the animals; the “image” is a gift from God that elevates us (McKeown: 282). This is an insight that we badly need today, as we pillage and pollute our modern world, and as global warming threatens to seriously endanger human life. It appears that nature is fighting back at our horrible mismanagement. Nature is rebelling against its “kings” who have become “tyrants.”

These royal descriptions should be understood as a “commission” or a “responsibility,” not just an inherent characteristic or privilege of our nature. We are not to struggle with the earth but to struggle for the earth so that it is a life-giving place (Löning and Zenger: 111; Miller: 325; Cotter: 18).

If we recall that the Bible forbids making images of God, then the fact that the man and the woman are in the image of God is rather significant, for they alone are the only acceptable symbols of the divine presence in the world. That tells us that we have the responsibility to act wisely, like God, in the world (van Wolde: 25-31; Brodie: 136).

Royal imagery also is used, in part, to declare that because the man and the woman rule over creation, they do not live in fear of the forces of nature, as so many people did in the ancient world, who offered up sacrifices to avert the destructive phenomena of nature. People are free and no longer part of a deterministic process in the cosmos that affects their actions; they are free from fate. Likewise, in the New Testament Col 1:13–16 speaks of how we are free from the cosmic powers. But if we are free, we must act responsibly with our freedom and no longer blame the forces around us for what we might do.

Rada is a word that can be debated by scholars in many ways. Too many critics have seen the word in negative fashion as a form of harsh tyranny, thus justifying the human imperialism that we have exhibited over nature and the animal realm for so many years. But there is a different and deeper way of perceiving this word, one which encourages humanity to act with noble stewardship over the animal and plant realm which has been entrusted to all human beings by God. One that can inspire us to act in a more positive fashion before it is too late. Perhaps, if we take more seriously this positive mode of understanding the concept we might “rule” the world wisely and avert the environmental disaster that we are bringing upon ourselves.

Author’s Bio

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