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INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE RELATIONSHIP OF HUMANKIND AMONG FISH, BIRDS AND CREEPING THINGS

ROGER S. NAM

INTRODUCTION

The account of the creation of humans, as described in Gen 1:26-28 has been the source of much consternation to ecologically minded Christians:

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.’

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘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.’¹

On the sixth day of creation, God mandates that humans “have dominion” (*radah*) over the fish, birds, quadrupeds and creeping things of the created order. Verse 28 repeats the mandate, and adds the parallel verb “to subdue” (*kavesh*) and excludes the quadrupeds. In his seminal essay “The Historic Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” (1967), historian Lynn White Jr. famously argued that these verses established a foundational dualism in the western world between humans and other created beings.² This purported dualism brought many to interpret these verses as a divine sanction for wide scale degradation of our environment. According to White, such a dualistic perspective produced Christians as unconcerned and detached from

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the wellness of the natural world, even understanding components of the world as mere resources for human consumption.

Since its publication, White's essay has received significant criticism in both his analysis and theological interpretation of Gen 1:26-28.³ Nevertheless, the language of human "dominion" in Gen 1:26-28 remains in the text, and has become even more troubling in light of the growing environmental crisis. The maligned passage creates a theological issue for the ecologically minded in regards to the stewardship of the earth. Specifically, what constitutes human beings "having dominion" over the created order?

In this paper, I will offer several observations through an intertextual reading of Gen 1:26-28 that may help to counter such a dualistic understanding between humans and animals. By intertextuality, I refer specifically to the early interpretive life of a biblical passage. The term assumes that sacred scripture, in line with the early Jewish traditions, reflect on an early process of interpretation and allusion throughout the development of biblical text. For this brief study, this paper highlights other portions of the Hebrew Bible that make explicit allusion to the relationship between humankind among fish, birds and creeping things through similar terms and found in Gen 1:26-28. These references help us understand how ancient Israel understood the command to "have dominion," and the relationship of humans to the rest of created order. First, I will investigate the issue of terminology for *radah* and *kavesh*, and suggest its proper semantic range within biblical text. Second, I will examine Gen 1:26-28 within the creation chapters, as well as intertextual allusions in Gen 9:6 via the crucial phrase, "For in his own image" to get a better sense of the function of this mandate. Third, I will see how prophetic announcements of Zeph 1:2, Ezek 38:20, and Hab 1:14 deal with the relationship between humans and the fish, birds and creeping things by reversing the creative act of God. My hope is that these observations may theologically challenge a dualistic understanding of humans against nature, and clarify a more balanced understanding of the role of humans within the created order.

TO "HAVE DOMINION"

Before turning to the interpretive life of Gen 1:26-28 in respect to humans and the rest of the created order, one should begin to look at the crucial predicates in Gen 1:26-28, *radah* and *kavesh*. Several scholars have tried to soften the meaning of "have dominion,"

declaring an interpretation more akin to “stewardship” or “minister.”⁴ Unfortunately, such a definition is unwarranted in biblical Hebrew, as the usage of *radah* is always violent and destructive. The Holiness Code makes several admonitions against *radah* on a fellow kin or laborer in regards for the disenfranchised physical safety, “You shall not *radah* them with harshness, but shall fear your God.”⁵ By referring to the captivity in Egypt, the text implies that to “have dominion” opens the concept of physical oppression suffered by the Israelites under the Egyptian slavery. The connection with “have dominion” and slavery also appears in Is 14:2, 1 Kgs 5:30; 9:23. The most graphic illustration of *radah* occurs in Joel 4:13, “Come and *radah*, for the winepress is full.” In this verse, the prophet calls for the people to physically stomp and crush the grapes, an image not compatible with the idea of neither stewardship, nor ministering. This picture of a physical beating of the grapes matches a variant Hebrew cognate *radad*, which refers to both physical hammering (“*Radad* the gold onto the cherubim,” 1 Kgs 6:32) and figurative subjugation (“*Radad* down nations before him, ungirding the loins of kings,” Is 45:1; cf. Is 41:2; Ps 144:2). The subjugation is brutally oppressive and one-sided.

The parallel command in Gen 1:28 further underscores the oppressive nature of “having dominion” with parallel verb “subdue” (*kavesh*). In almost every instance of its usage in the Hebrew Bible, “subdue” refers to an oppressive, political action. Num 32:22 (cf. Num 32:29), declares that the Lord will “subdue” the Canaanite inhabitants of the promised land before the entry of the people. 2 Sam 8:11 refers to the many foreign nations that David “subdues.” In Jer 34:11 (cf. 34:16), the word also refers to oppression of individuals, “Afterward they turned about and brought back the men and women they had set free, and *subdued* them into slavery again.” Similar to *rabah*, the usage of *kavesh* suggests physical, violent action.

Both terms affirm the violent and destructive nature of “having dominion,” and makes quite an obstacle for modern exegetes, who wish to soften the reading of Gen 1:26-28 to “ministering/stewarding.” But does the passage establish a dualism between the *imago dei* and all other living creatures? Below, I intend to argue that the biblical passage provides a complex response to such a seemingly simple question. By building and reworking Gen 1:26-28 with specific phrases and lexemes, the biblical writers recontextualize and reshape the call to dominion over the rest of the created order. As a result, these intertextual allusions to the sixth day of creation shatter any purported dualism between humans and non-human living creatures.

GENESIS 1:26-28 AND THE CREATION ACCOUNT

The creation of humans in Gen 1:26-28 distinguishes itself from the rest of the created order through several devices. Unlike the rest of Genesis 1, the passage begins with the first person plural introduction, “Let us make humans,” and not a creation by word, nor “Let the earth bring forth humans.” The usage of the verb *bara*’, repeated for the first time since the creation of the heavens and the earth in the very first verse of the chapter, further distinguishes the humans from the rest of the created order. Most significantly, Gen 1:26-28 places such a vision of holiness along the theologically pregnant phrase *imago dei* (*beselem elohim*). The crux of the phrase *imago dei* is deliberately elusive. Because the direct reference to the image of God is so rare in the Hebrew Bible, the mandate of humans to have dominion over the created order must be understood in light of this veiled reference.⁶ When parallel with *radah*, Gen 1:26-28 evokes kingly ideology in line with contemporary biblical and ancient Near Eastern parallels as displayed earlier. Consequently, the most natural reading is to consider this striking language of “have dominion,” in light on the royal ideology and the *imago dei*. God creates humans in his image, somehow associated with this image with the task of agency over the created order. The context of kingship makes it difficult to assess the theologically cryptic passage of Gen 1:26-28 to necessitate a strict, dualistic ontology between the humans and the birds, fish, creeping things and beasts.

The rest of the Primeval history further teases out the concept of the *imago dei* to disrupts any strict dualistic understanding of humans against the rest of the living creatures. The connection of the sixth day of creation has long been held in relationship to the post-diluvian mandate in Gen 9:1-7, as it shares similar phraseology to the P creation account, in particular to 1:26-28: “Living of the earth, birds of the sky, creeping things of the ground, fish of the sea” (9:2), “image of God” (9:6), “have dominion over it” (9:7). Undoubtedly, these common lexical terms deliberately connect Gen 9:1-7 back to 1:26-28. In his seminal work on inner-biblical exegesis, *Biblical Interpretation and Ancient Israel* (1985), Michael Fishbane contends that Gen 9:1-7 represents an aggadic transformation of a non-legal Pentateuchal tradition of Gen 1:26-28. Whereas in Gen 1:29, humans may only eat vegetation, Gen 9:3 expands this to include all living things. In creating new legal material, Genesis 9 does not negate,

but relies upon and expands the dietary restrictions on Gen 1:28.⁷ In Genesis 1, the following events occur: (a) creation of humans in the image of God; (b) human domination over the rest of the order; (c) divine blessing; (d) permission to eat vegetation. Fishbane notes that the order is modified to (c), (b), (d), and (a) then concludes with the direct reference to the *imago dei*. Within this sequence, Genesis 9 adds the major aggadic adjustment of verses 4-6a, restricting the conditions for eating meat. This declaration for humanity to “have dominion” over the created order in the *imago dei* does not create an ontological dualism, but within the intertextual discourse of Gen 9:1-7, the passage clarifies and expands the priestly vision of holiness necessitated in light of the chaos of the Noah incident in Genesis 9.

GENESIS 1:26-28 IN PROPHETIC TEXTS

The interpretive life of Gen 1:26-28 continues in three other places in the Hebrew Bible: Zeph 1:3, Ezek 38:20, and Hab 1:14.⁸ All three texts allude to the idea of creation and they deliberately recontextualize the lemma of the created order in Gen 1:26-28. All three texts do not suggest any sort of human-nature dualism, but rather a holistic grouping of all created beings alongside each other. Within three distinct pronouncements, these prophets allude to a dismantling of the created order and give a sovereign reversal of any human and nature dualism of Gen 1:26-28.

Zephaniah 1 offers a prophetic judgment of creation reversal. Purporting to the late seventh century, the prophet condemns the Jerusalem temple, juxtaposing it alongside Nineveh:

I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth says the LORD. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will make the wicked stumble. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth says the LORD.

In this pronouncement, YHWH will gather all the things of the earth, pairing both humans and beasts as well as both birds and fish. The reference to the temple in verse seven as “this place” displays the ideal of the Jerusalem temple as Edenic.⁹ The allusions are even stronger to the creation motif, in that the prophet reverses the order of creation to humans, beasts, birds, fish (cf. the opposite order in Gen 1:20-26). Zephaniah does not mention the distinguished *imago dei*, but rather,

all livings this are “swept” (*‘asap*, cf. Gen 8:21) from the “face of the earth” (twice in Zeph 1:2-3; Gen 6:7; 7:4; 8:8). They are to be “cut off” (*karat*, Zeph 1:3; cf. Gen 6:7). Michael De Roche notices the interplay of verbs between the Zephaniah oracle and the P account of creation.¹⁰ The hiphil of *karat* produces assonance with the qal prefix forms of *bara’*, significant as the verb describes the making of humans in Gen 1:27. Also, De Roche argues that the *‘asap* infinitive absolute in 1:2 alludes to the multiple infinitival usages of *‘asah* in Gen 2:4.¹¹ The verbal elements are bound within the inclusion of “from the face of the earth,” to tie the punishment to the Genesis deluge (Gen 6:7; 7:4; 8:8). By deliberately invoking the language of Gen 1:26-28, Zephaniah powerfully portends a reversal of creation. More broadly, the intertextual allusion to creation counters any dualistic notion of humans against the rest of the created beings. Both humans and animals stand vulnerable to God’s judgment.

The oracle against Gog in Ezek 38:18-23 thematically builds on both Gen 1:26-28 and the Zephaniah 1 prophecy. The intertextual allusion to the earlier Zephaniah 1 passage is deliberate and strategic at the beginning of the oracle, “My wrath will be aroused with my anger. For in my jealousy, in the fire of my fury I have spoken.”¹² William Tooman notes that only Ezekiel and Zephaniah combine the lexical terms “jealousy,” “fire” and “fury” to express the anger of God (Zeph 1:18; 3:8).¹³ He concludes that Ezekiel 38 reworked this specific prophetic announcement and built a proto-apocalyptic vision with a universal significance. He refers to the Gog oracles as a “thematic pastiche,” building around three *Vorlage* texts, but containing numerous additional expansions.

One of the significant expansions involves a reversal of creation, which strikes directly against the dualistic vision of a Genesis 1 creation. In this vision of war, YHWH creates an earthquake, and as a result, in Ezek 38:20:

The fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the animals of the field, and all creeping things that creep on the ground, and all human beings that are on the face of the earth, shall quake at my presence, and the mountains shall be thrown down, and the cliffs shall fall, and every wall shall tumble to the ground.

The intertextuality is clear as Ezekiel 38 and Genesis 1 are the only two places of the Bible that contain this listing of creatures in this particular order. But for Ezekiel, this prophetic vision clearly implies

no dualism between humans and created order, but rather both are modified with the specific Hebrew terms “each...on the ground” (Ezek 38:20), recalling the specific interlocution of Genesis 1. These oracles against Gog do not prescribe human dominion, but they are at the mercy of the dominion of sovereign Lord along with the other created beings. The reuse of Gen 1:26-28, as well as the implicit source of Zephaniah 1 augments and re-contextualizes the place of humans and other created things on a level plain, both subject to the wrath of God.

Similarly, Habakkuk 1 confronts the alleged dualism of the created order of Gen 1:26-28. In the oracle, the human enemies use created beings to overrun human invention as they “laugh at all fortresses.” As a result Habakkuk 1:14-15 complains to God:

You have made people like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. The enemy brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net, he gathers them in his seine; so he rejoices and exults.

The prophet makes his case by using the specific terms from Gen 1:26-28 (“fish of the sea, creeping things”) as well as words from the rest of Genesis 1 (“to make”), but using these terms to disrupt the concept of human dominion. In fact, every single lexeme from Hab 1:14 is found in Genesis 1.¹⁴ By reworking an authoritative text, Habakkuk protests that the Babylonians have dominion over the people of YHWH, and overturns the dualistic categorization of the humans against the created order. Instead of humans being created in the *imago dei*, they are made “like” the created order. The early interpreters at Qumran accepted this grouping of humans with the rest of creation, as Persher Habakkuk takes this Babylonian oracle of destruction and reworks it to apply to the Romans (*kittim*).¹⁵

In all three examples, the humans are placed in a category alongside the other created beings. This prophetic discourse alludes to the lofty position of the humans as *imago dei* in the sixth day of creation and uproots it. The priestly vision of Gen 1:26-28, gives way to later descriptions of humans bound with the rest of creation and true dominion given to the sovereign God.

CONCLUSION

The perceived dualistic implications of Gen 1:26-28 have brought great harm in the West's Judeo-Christian ethos in regards to stewardship of the earth. As a sacred text, the early interpreters of this passage could not ignore nor censure the clear reading of "dominion" and "subjugation" by humans to the rest of creation, as the tradition was sacred and authoritative. But instead, later prophetic interpreters in turn looked to reinterpret the relationship of humans among fish, birds, beasts and creeping things according to their more present realities. Each of these prophets reverse the dominion from humans back to the sovereign God, thereby necessitating a more holistic view of created beings, whether fish, birds, beasts, creeping things or humans.

The non-dualistic understanding of P's created beings is evident in this early biblical intertextuality as well as in earlier Jewish interpretation.¹⁶ It is with the advent of technology and a manifest destiny of production in the post-industrial revolution world alongside the concept of material dualism, which eventually brought forth White's observation on the destructive understanding of the sixth day. But the intertextuality over Gen 1:26-28 occurred multiple millennia before both the invention of steam power and the writings of Descartes. It would be better to imagine a world with neither to avoid dualistic thinking on humans and nature on the basis of the creation account.

ENDNOTES

1. All quotations, unless noted, are from the NRSV.
2. Lynn White, Jr. "The Historic Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967), 1206.
3. For a summary of the debates on the interpretation of White's article, see Mary Ruth Windham, "An Examination of the Relationship between Humans and Animals in the Hebrew Bible" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 2012), 12-18.
4. James Barr, "Man and Nature: The Ecological Controversy of the Old Testament." *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* (55) 1972, 21-22.
5. Lev 25:43; cf. 46, 53.
6. The phrase only appears five times in the Bible, three times in Gen 1:26-27, as well as Gen 5:1; 9:6.
7. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 320.

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8. Many passages throughout all genres of the Hebrew Bible further comment on the relationship between humans and the created order, but only these three prophetic passages utilize specific lemmas and lexical items from Gen 1:26-28; for more comprehensive survey of texts comparing the relationship of humans to the created order, see Windham, "Humans and Animals", 90-189.
9. Jon D. Levenson, "The Temple and the World," *The Journal of Religion* 64 (1984): 275-298.
10. Michael DeRoche, "Zephaniah I 2-3: The 'Sweeping' of Creation," *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (1980): 104-109.
11. DeRoche, "Zephaniah I 2-3," 106-108.
12. Ezek 38:19-20.
13. William A. Tooman, "Transformation of Israel's Hope: The Reuse of Scripture in the Gog Oracles" in *Transforming Visions: Transformation of Text, Tradition, and Theology in Ezekiel* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 50-110.
14. Francis Anderson, *Habakkuk* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 184.
15. 1QpHab V:11-15.
16. The early Jewish understanding of Gen 1:26-28 begins the post-biblical attempt at salvaging the theology of "having dominion." Most notably, Genesis Rabbah re-vocalizes *radah* to the Hebrew root *yarad* and determines that "humans have come down (from other created beings)," *Gen Rab* 8:11.