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A BIBLICAL HERMENEUTIC FOR DOMINION:  
DOMINATION VS STEWARDSHIP

Nancy Opstad Weldon

*Abstract - In his encyclical, Laudato Si', Pope Francis argues that modern anthropocentrism has contributed to the valuing of technical thought over the dignity of the natural world with grave environmental consequences. Over a half-century earlier, Lynn White Jr. offered a similar criticism, stating that the dualism existing between humans and nature allows Christians to exploit nature for their own end. This paper turns to scripture to explore how an intertextual understanding of the original Hebrew may help reframe what it means for humans to have dominion over the natural world.*

Pope Francis' most recent encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, is inclusively addressed to every person living on this planet and calls for a conversation about how human actions are shaping our environmental future. Francis invites the Church and the world to recognize the environmental changes and challenges that face present and future generations while looking for new ways to address how we are to care for our common home. Within his chapter, "The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis," Francis discusses how modern anthropocentrism, the belief that human beings are the central or most significant species on the planet, has negatively affected our views on nature and has led to a misuse of the environment. He states that "an inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology" helped create a disordered view of human beings' relationship to the rest of the natural world.<sup>1</sup> I would like to compare Francis' thoughts to those of Lynn White, Jr., who offered a similar criticism of Christianity

nearly fifty years ago, then turn to the psalter to find sources where disordered views toward creation may have entered the tradition. Finally, we will turn again to Francis and White to discover what remedies they offer and then ask ourselves how we as Christians might reframe our stewardship of the natural world.

In his chapter, “The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis,” Francis introduces the notion that modern anthropocentrism has led to a valuing of technical thought over the dignity of the material world. Referring to the writing of Romano Guardini, a twentieth-century Catholic theologian and cultural critic, Francis argues that we prioritize technology at the expense of the natural world: “the technical mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere ‘given,’ as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape.”<sup>2</sup> In this mindset where advances in technology reign and the natural world is seen as a commodity, human beings lose a sense of themselves in the world and their own dignity. Francis sees that an “inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology” helped promote a wrong understanding of human beings’ relationship to the created world.<sup>3</sup> At times the Christian understanding of what it means to have dominion over the created world has been misrepresented as a “Promethean vision of mastery of the world” rather than acting as good stewards of the natural world.<sup>4</sup> Francis acknowledges that an improper reception of our responsibility for the natural world has contributed to the mindset that nature is to be used for the advancement of technology without regard for the harm it may cause the environment and the plants and creatures in it, including human beings. Once we behave with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our ecosystems start to crumble and “instead of carrying out his role as cooperator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature.”<sup>5</sup>

We turn to an earlier voice who echoes similar claims as Francis. In 1967, *Science* magazine published a controversial article by Lynn White, Jr. entitled, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*, in which he argues that the Western Christian worldview allows humankind to dominate and exploit the natural world.<sup>6</sup> Although the Industrial Revolution marked a fundamental turning point in our ecological history, a time in which technological progress was given priority at the expense and exploitation of the environment and its natural resources, White claims that this exploitive attitude had its roots in Christianity. White states that, “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by religion.”<sup>7</sup> He then critiques Christianity directly: “Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen...Man shares, in great measure, God’s transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions...not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for its proper ends.”<sup>8</sup> But where did this dualism of humans and nature come from within the Christian tradition? Turning to scripture and the psalter, Psalm 8 sings to the glory of creation as well as the role that God has given to human beings within creation. As we take an in-depth look at Psalm 8, perhaps we will uncover a potential place where this vein of Christian dualism between humans and nature has a root.

Psalm 8 is a hymn of synagogal community with an atypical format. Erhard Gerstenberger states that hymn psalms typically open with an invitation to praise (eg, Pss 33:1-3, 96:1-3; 105:1-5), but a call to worship is missing from Psalm 8 and instead begins with an invocation, “Yahweh, our Lord,” an introduction that is common in lament psalms.<sup>9</sup> Also structurally notable, the psalm is framed at the

beginning and end with praise for God: “Our Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (v. 1,9). Within this framework of praise and with great movement, the psalmist takes us from the earthly realm to the heavenly realm and back again. We begin with praise for God in all the earth (v. 1), then enemies are silenced by the mouth of babes and infants (v. 2); the psalm reaches its apex as our eyes look upward to the moon and the stars which God’s fingers have established in the heavens (v. 3a). Humans are at the center of this order of creation, just lower than God who has crowned them with glory and honor (v. 3b). Even the structure of the psalm reinforces human centrality in creation since the verses describing the placement of humans within the created order are located at the structural center of psalm. We should keep in mind that this hymn, while affirming the creator of the heavens and earth, is also meant to offer comfort and a sense of elevated place to humans in a created order that often causes fear and uncertainty.<sup>10</sup> In fact, it may have served as a nighttime prayer as a way to overcome fear and oppression since it seems to suggest a nighttime or pre-dawn setting.<sup>11</sup>

It is worth taking time to consider the biblical anthropology set forth in this psalm and how we are to interpret the psalmist’s question, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them?” Marvin Tate argues that this is the central question of the psalm (v. 4).<sup>12</sup> The question speaks to the amazement that God, who placed the moon and the stars in the heavens, is concerned with humanity. Tate argues that the psalmist uses three “remarkable” divine qualities to establish the status of humanity. First, human beings have been made a little lower than God (v. 5a). Different translations of this verse expose a difficulty interpreting the meaning of *’elōhīm*. For example, the Revised Standard Version, New American Standard Bible and New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) have “you have made him/ them a little less than God” and the NRSV has a footnote giving the

option of “or the divine beings or angels.” The Jerusalem Bible, New English Bible and the Revised English Bible have “made a little less than a god” while the King James Version and New American Bible have “a little less/lower than the angels,” which follows the Septuagint and the Vulgate in translating *’elōhīm* as “angels.” Tate states that modern commentators have generally preferred “God,” but is quite apparent that there have been varying opinions about the translation of *’elōhīm* over the centuries. Although there has been no clear consensus on the interpretation of *’elōhīm*, we can say that translators and commentators are concerned about where to place humanity in relation to God – as beings somewhere less than God – and are aware this placement will have ramifications for biblical anthropology. When we are mindful that humans are less than God – exactly where may be debatable – this invokes a sense of humility and accountability to God the Creator who gave human beings their first vocation: care of creation (Gen.1).

Continuing with Tate’s discussion of the second quality of divine endowment used to establish the status of humanity, we see that humanity is “crowned with glory and honor” (v. 5b). These paired words in Hebrew, *kābōd wēhādār*, strongly invoke images of royalty and kingship and are also found in Ps 145:12 in reference to the kingship of Yahweh.<sup>13</sup> Tate also notes that the Hebrew word for honor, *hādār*, is used in Ps 104:1 in relation to creation as well as a quality given to earthly kings (Pss 21:5; 45:2-3).<sup>14</sup> Considering the various uses of the paired words, it appears that the psalmist wishes to associate humanity with royalty, with both earthly and divine qualities, which is in keeping with the previous placement of humanity as somewhere less than God and above creation.

After crowning humanity with glory and honor, humans are given a third divine quality with the commission to have “dominion over the works of your hands” (v. 6a) and “you have put all things under their feet” (v. 6b). There is common language between verses

6-8 and Genesis 1-2 where humanity is blessed by God and encouraged to “be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth” and also to “subdue and have dominion over” all living creatures of the sea, air and earth (Ps 8:5-8, Gen 1:28-30). Within Psalm 8 we see that the status of humans is marked by these qualities of divine endowment: placement in the order of creation just lower than the divine, crowned with royal qualities of glory and honor with a commission to have dominion over creation. However, as Francis and White argue, an improper reception of what is meant by “dominion” contributes to a posture of “domination” over the natural world with a resulting negative effect on both humankind and nature. How might an understanding of the meaning of the Hebrew words, *kābaś*, *rādāh* and *māśal* offer a corrective for the interpretation of “dominion” as “domination?”

The verbs used in Genesis, *kābaś* (“have dominion/rule” or “make subservient”) and *rādāh* (“subdue”), both have strong meaning in the context of kingship.<sup>15</sup> *Kābaś* has harsh contexts, meaning to “subjugate” as of slaves (Jer 34:11) or a country (Num 32:22-29) and of a woman in a sexual sense (Esth 7:8).<sup>16</sup> Because such meanings have strong dominating tones it is apparent why some interpretations of these verses advocate that human beings have a mandate to dominate and even exploit the natural world. Tate argues, however, that context should be kept in mind and suggests reading Psalm 8 through the lens of Genesis 1-2.<sup>17</sup> In Genesis 1:16-18 conjugating *māśal* as the infinitive construct means “to rule over,” and describes the two heavenly bodies: “God made the two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night – and the stars.” In this instance, “to rule over” does not imply domination but the implementation of a God-given role reflecting the inherent goodness of God. In Genesis 1, God’s actions serve a model for how humans are to behave in the world. God brings forth creation from chaos and darkness, providing a place where all creatures can live in a context of goodness and beauty. There is

no room for exploitation because God does not model domination or subjugation. *Māṣal* is also found in Psalm 8:6a as a causative conjunction meaning “to allow or cause to rule over”: You have given them dominion over the works of your hands. Here God’s action also serves as an example, showing us that God allows humans to engage with the natural world in an elevated role. Yet as we engage in the care of creation, we are to remain mindful that we are entrusted with the work of God’s hands.

If we accept the idea that Christianity has to some degree promoted a dominating attitude toward the environment as Francis and White suggest, how do we go forward in a conversation about the effects of human action on the environment as *Laudato Si’* calls us to? White states that, “More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecological crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.”<sup>18</sup> White points us toward Saint Francis of Assisi, saying that the key to understanding Saint Francis is his belief in the virtue of humility – not merely for the individual but for man as a species.<sup>19</sup> Turning back to Psalm 8, its overall structure evokes a sense of humility: the psalm begins and ends with praise to God. Humans may be at the center of the psalm, but fear of the Lord prompts praise for the One who silences the enemy and the avenger (v. 2) as well as creates the heavens and all of the creatures contained in it. Perhaps when we read Psalm 8, if we remember that God is the beginning and end of not only this hymn, but of all things, we will be filled with a deeper sense of humility about our role within creation, a role that was assigned to humanity by the Alpha and Omega.

Pope Francis, too, speaks of Saint Francis in his encyclical as a model for responsible stewardship of the environment, yet he offers additional reflections on how the sacraments may serve as mediators of supernatural life to heal the dualism between humans and nature.<sup>20</sup> When we worship God as a community in the liturgy



and in the sacraments, we are “invited to embrace the world on a different plane. Water, oil, fire and colors are taken up in all of the symbolic power and incorporated in our act of praise.”<sup>21</sup> As hands bless, water pours onto a child at baptism, and the Paschal candle is lit, the natural and supernatural world commingle in these liturgical and sacramental encounters and there is no room or need for domination.

Pope Francis calls the members of this world to begin a conversation about the role that humans play in affecting our environment and find ways to care for our common home, a conversation that has been in progress for over a half-century as seen in the writings of Lynn White. A way of opening this conversation may be to examine ourselves and discern what attitudes we hold toward the environment. Do we think that God has entrusted us to dominate or serve as stewards of the environment? At first many of us would reflexively reply that we desire to be stewards. But when we reflect more deeply, might we then again ask ourselves, how do my specific choices and actions either dominate or steward the environment? Who are the people who benefit or lose from my choices and actions? Meditating on the common language of Genesis 1-2 and Psalm 8 may prompt additional insights into the way we individually and collectively manage our role as stewards. White suggests that we reflect on Saint Francis’ unique posture of humility. Pope Francis, a man of humility himself, invites us to enter into the liturgy and sacraments by being mindful of the ways nature and the natural world commingle in symbolic ways with the divine. Thankfully, our Christian tradition provides us with rich opportunities to reflect on our role as stewards of creation and how we might care for our common home.

*Notes:*

1. Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (*On Care for Our Common Home*), English trans. (Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015), sec. 116.
2. *Ibid.*, 115.
3. *Ibid.*, 116.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 117.
6. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science*, 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967):1203–1207.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 1205.
9. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms Part I*, (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1988), 67-68.
10. Marvin E. Tate, "An Exposition of Psalm 8," *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 28(2001):344.
11. *Ibid.*, 346. The sun is absent from a description of the heavens in v. 3.
12. *Ibid.*, 354.
13. *Ibid.*, 355.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 356-357.
18. White, 1207.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Francis, sec. 235.
21. *Ibid.*