

What Does  
the Bible  
Say About... ?

# Creation

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# Creation

David G. Monaco

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David G. Monaco

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## Series Preface

The Bible remains the world's number one best-seller of all time. Millions of copies in more than two thousand languages and dialects are sold every year, yet how many are opened and read on a regular basis? Despite the impression the Bible's popularity might give, its riches are not easy to mine. Its message is not self-evident and is sometimes hard to relate to our daily lives.

This series addresses the need for a reliable guide to reading the Bible profitably. Each volume is designed to unlock the Bible's mysteries for the interested reader who asks, "What does the Bible say about...?" Each book addresses a timely theme in contemporary culture, based upon questions people are asking today, and explaining how the Bible can speak to these questions as reflected in both Old and New Testaments.

Ideal for individual or group study, each volume consists of short, concise chapters on a biblical theme in non-technical language, and in a style accessible to all. The expert authors have been chosen for their knowledge of the Bible. While taking into account current scholarship, they know how to explain the Bible's teaching in simple language. They are also able to relate the biblical message to the challenges of today's Church and society while avoiding a simplistic use of the biblical text for trying to "prove" a point or defend a position, which is called

“prooftexting”—an improper use of the Bible. The focus in these books is on a religious perspective, explaining what the Bible says, or does not say, about each theme. Short discussion questions invite sharing and reflection.

So, take up your Bible with confidence, and with your guide explore “what the Bible says about CREATION.”



## Introduction

Years ago, in Riverdale, New York, I met an older gentleman by the name of Father Thomas Berry, C.P. I found him to be very pleasant and gracious. He lived next door to a large retreat center in a house that was called the Riverdale Center for Religious Research, and I was quite impressed by the library of books that he had collected. Years later, a member of the local community there told me that, had a former China missionary not reinforced the main staircase with concrete, the weight of the books would probably have caused them to crash through the floors. As I got to know Tom and began to hear about him as a leading figure in ecological studies, I wasn't quite sure what to think.

His influence is put into nice perspective by the advertisement from Columbia University Press for the 2019 book *Thomas Berry: A Biography* by Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, and Andrew Angyal: "Thomas Berry (1914–2009) was one of the twentieth century's most prescient and profound thinkers. As a cultural historian, he sought a broader perspective on humanity's relationship to the earth in order to respond to the ecological and social challenges of our times."<sup>1</sup> I personally recall how he spoke of care of the earth, but honestly, his reference to himself as a "geologist" confused me. As a young man in my early twenties, I had not really spent a lot of time thinking about the wider world around me. I had, in my early teens, enjoyed camping out and the whole experience of nature, but the concept of dam-

age to such an environment had never really dawned on me, particularly on a more systemic level.

In later years, I became much more conscious of the fact that we, as a human species, have done a great deal of damage to this world in which we live, and that we are continuing to do so. I have traveled over much of the United States, through most of the countries of Europe, and less so in the Middle East, and have found myself disturbed by some of what I have seen. As a biblical scholar, I have a passion for antiquity. Given the years that I lived in Rome near an ancient Roman house, which I frequently visited and which was right under the basilica attached to my home, I have a deep love for archaeological treasures. The pollution in modern cities built over ancient ones, like Rome, London, and Athens, sometimes having devastating effects upon irreplaceable antiquities, has at times shocked me. Seeing the damage done by exhaust fumes to those treasures deeply saddens me. In my years living in Rome, it was painful to see how the stones of the Colosseum had turned almost black in places due to the pollution from cars when they were allowed to circle the structure. It is therefore quite heartening to see the great work that the Italians have done during recent years in cleaning so many of those stones. On a different note, I remember finding myself disgusted when, on one beach in the Middle East, we were told to avoid the water in an area where there was raw sewage leaking directly into the sea. Given my own personal skittishness, I avoided any contact with the water, period. These and similar experiences have opened my eyes to the concerns of a man like Father Tom.

Now, as a student and professor of the Bible, I sometimes ask myself not so much what the biblical authors say about such environmental issues—because the devastating effects on the environment since the time of the Industrial Revolution would have been completely incomprehensible to them—but rather what they *would* have said. While they would probably not have been able to imagine our world as we know it, the basic principles that they teach us have enduring value and can offer us lessons on how to confront the challenges that face us today. It strikes me that there is some reticence, even among believers, to see how the Bible can teach us anything about the environment. Allow me, however, to propose something similar that few would question. The biblical writers could never have imagined the medical advances that we have seen just in the last century alone. Yet most believers would see that these writers' basic insights, guided by the Holy Spirit, are, in fact, a quite good and reliable guide for how we approach these new issues and challenges. I believe that the same can be said regarding biblical insights that can be applied to our care for the earth and all creation. For the authors of the Old and New Testaments, the world was created by God and created good. This insight alone can be a guide for us in this day and age as we face the results of our own misuse of the resources that God has placed at our disposal and strive to cherish and heal that world. So, get your Bibles ready or just read the quotes in the following pages—let's prepare to explore together the insights and teaching that the Bible has to offer about creation.



## Chapter One

### "Have Dominion" or "Subdue"?: A Problem of Interpretation

A problem? In the text? What would lead me to use such a term to begin our study? When you take a moment to reflect on the beauty of the natural world, what could be problematic—and what could possibly be problematic about the Bible? Before my knees started to give me problems, I was, for a time, an avid skier. While I occasionally enjoyed working up a little speed and even “getting a bit of air” (albeit very little, maybe just an inch or two), my greatest enjoyment was to find myself atop a mountain, pulling off to the side and just looking out at the magnificent beauty of the surrounding area, feeling that clean, crisp air fill my lungs. How can one not be moved? Even in a big city, a proverbial concrete jungle like New York, a city I love given that I come from the area, as one watches people enjoying even the smallest of parks, it is hard to imagine anyone not caring about the beauty of God’s created world. This situation is, however, not quite as simple as it may seem, and sometimes, well-meaning people of faith can be a big part of the problem.

## Creation Story Number One: The Roots of the Problem

Many, probably most, of us have read or heard the stories from Genesis. Most of us probably first heard them when we were children, and they have become quite familiar. It is often, nonetheless, a bit of a shock even for people familiar with those stories to think it through and to realize that there is not just one but two biblical accounts of God's creation of the world: Genesis 1:1—2:4a and 2:4b–25. We know them well enough to take them for granted as they stand, mistakenly taking them for one continuous story. Both passages may, then, be quite familiar to us, but it is often difficult for people to realize that they conflict in a number of respects.

Scholars reconcile this circumstance by speaking of the chapters as coming from two separate strands of ancient Israelite tradition, dating from separate eras. The first version, it is suggested, comes from Priestly circles (symbolized by "P"), where God is presented as majestic and creates merely by speaking: "Then God said 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). The second version, according to the theory, comes from a tradition called the "Yahwist" (seen by the use of Yahweh as the name for God but symbolized by "J" because of the German spelling of the name), a more colorful version in which God is portrayed as working with hands: "then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). Both versions

proclaim the same reality—the creation of the world and of the human person out of divine love—but they do so in clearly different ways.

In the first Creation account, God begins with the creation of the light, then moves on to separating the waters, creating the sky, then creating the dry land and the seas, after which God moves on to vegetation. After this the sun, moon, and stars follow. Next come the sea creatures and birds, then the land animals. Finally, before the Sabbath rest, God creates humankind, male and female, “in our image, according to our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). With that act of creation finished, God moves from seeing that not only all creation was good, to seeing that “indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). The second Creation account, which we will detail below, proceeds in a completely different manner.

For our purposes here, though, there is one specific passage that merits some reflection and that is really the crux of the issue (*italics added for emphasis*):

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.” God said, “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. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (Genesis 1:26–31)

Two key expressions (those italicized) demand clarification. What do “have dominion” and “subdue” actually mean? Here is our problem. According to an online dictionary, the definition of “dominion,” in law, is “supreme authority: sovereignty;”<sup>2</sup> while “subdue,” in this regard, means “to conquer and bring into subjection: vanquish; to bring under control especially by an exertion of the will.”<sup>3</sup> Taken at face value, it can therefore seem as if there are no limits, no controls, no end to what humanity can do with the earth and its resources based on this biblical charge. But this is a misreading of the text. As Pope Francis explains in his 2023 Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum*, “the world that surrounds us is not an object of exploitation,



unbridled use and unlimited ambition. Nor can we claim that nature is a mere 'setting' in which we develop our lives and our projects."<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the idea that the Bible grants us unlimited use of the earth is an argument that I, and likely many readers, have heard. I do not mean to imply that people who use this line of reasoning would say that it is our right actively to destroy the world as we know it. Rather, they would view climate activism as a species of fanaticism relying more on human terms and priorities than on God's perspective.

In an article concerning the attitude of some Christians regarding the concept of climate change, *Newsweek* feature writer Kashmira Gander notes:

Some evangelicals argue that global warming is of little concern when the end times are approaching. Indeed, it could even be proof of it. Bible verses are also pointed to as evidence humans are required to subdue Earth, that God is in control, and global warming is part of His plan. Others see it as a liberal hoax and a means to push folks away from religion towards the government.<sup>5</sup>

The idea that global warming could be seen as a sign of the end times is particularly problematic in that, for some Christians, it would have an eerily "positive" role in bringing on the end of the present age.

The latter point has an additional, though one might say opposite, problematic aspect because there are those who would view such a role through a much darker lens. Lisa Vox, a historian and author of the book *Existential Threats: American Apocalyptic Beliefs in the Technological Era*, notes that “When scientists began sounding the alarm over climate change in the 1980s, conservative evangelicals, who had been somewhat accepting of environmentalism in the 1970s, became convinced that the Antichrist would use the fear of climate change to seize power.”<sup>6</sup> Such an attitude would put environmental activism in a decidedly negative light, viewing it, effectively, along the lines of the service of Satan and thus practically “canonizing” the denial that there is any problem whatsoever.

In recent years, I have been impressed with the number of young people from across the political spectrum who have dedicated themselves to advocating for more responsible policies regarding the environment. What is profoundly disconcerting to me, however, is how frequently one finds adults, not, as they should, commending these activists for their energy, enthusiasm, dedication, and the example that they can actually give to us as adults, but rather attacking them in the press or on social media. I find it especially disturbing to see how some of these same adults couch this cavalier attitude toward what we human beings have done to the limited resources of the planet in the above biblical terms of what amounts to a “right” to do whatever we wish precisely because God commanded us to “have dominion” and to “subdue the earth.”

## The Second Biblical Reflection on Creation

As noted above, the tenor and details of the second Creation account (Genesis 2:4b–25) are quite different from the first. We begin with a stream rising up to water the ground, “then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7). The Hebrew verb for God’s action of “forming” is the same one used in the Bible for how a potter works clay. This gives us a beautiful vision in the text of God getting in there with the hands in order to do the work. This tactile sense continues with the amazing image of God breathing “the breath of life” right into the very nostrils of the man.

God then plants a garden in Eden and puts the man there. God makes fruit trees rise up along with the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which will figure strongly in the third chapter of Genesis from a negative perspective. The man is placed in the garden in order “to till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15), a text to which we will return shortly. He is also told by God that he may eat the fruit of any tree except that of the knowledge of good and evil. The formation of other living creatures begins in Genesis 2:18, where it is God who notices that the man is in need of a partner. God starts with the animals of the field and the birds, but no partner is found until God places the man in a deep sleep, removes one of his ribs, and creates the woman, leading to the man’s words: “This at last is bone of my bones / and flesh of my flesh; / this one shall be called Woman, / for out of Man this one was taken” (Genesis

2:23). The subsequent verse concerning the two becoming “one flesh” will figure in the New Testament in Jesus’ teaching on marriage in Matthew 19:5 and in Ephesians 5:31 regarding the exhortation for Christian husbands to love their wives. The account ends with the man and the woman in the garden, naked and unashamed.

As noted above, these two accounts of Creation in the Old Testament differ in details, in tenor, and in approach to the same reality. However, any conflicting sense did not seem to stop the final editors of the Bible from leaving both in as they stand. This may just be a clue as to how to understand appropriately the commands to “have dominion” and to “subdue the earth.” The two Creation accounts need to be taken in relation to one another in order to avoid an interpretation that does violence to the fact that this is, regardless of how one understands “have dominion” and “subdue,” ultimately God’s creation, not ours. Pope Francis puts it beautifully in his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si’*:

Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to “till and keep” the garden of the world (cf. *Gen* 2:15). “Tilling” refers to cultivating, ploughing

or working, while "keeping" means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature.<sup>7</sup>

One of the problems with taking an overly literal, fundamentalist view of the Scriptures is that it is too easy to absolutize one text, as some have done with the Genesis commands "have dominion" and "subdue," while not recognizing other texts that would seem to contradict, or at least act as a counterbalance to, those very texts.

This counterbalancing of texts is, in fact, not an uncommon phenomenon in the Old Testament. A good example is the attitude toward certain non-Israelites in the whole sweep of the Old Testament text. In Deuteronomy chapter 23, for example, Moabites and Ammonites would seem to be shut out and denied any possible entry into the community of ancient Israel. Deuteronomy 23:3–6 makes this stance crystal clear:

No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. (Yet the LORD your God refused to heed Balaam; the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because

the LORD your God loved you.) You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live.

The entire book of Ruth, though, shows how a loyal and true Moabite woman could not only become a faithful believer in the God of Israel, but, according to the text, also the great-grandmother of King David.

Another example is that of the ancient city of Nineveh. In the Old Testament, the Assyrians are one of the key enemies of Israel. Nahum cries out against Nineveh “Ah! City of bloodshed, / utterly deceitful, full of booty— / no end to the plunder!” (Nahum 3:1). Given that the Assyrians wipe out the northern kingdom of Israel, Jonah’s reticence to preach to the Ninevites in the capital city, and his anger at God’s forgiveness toward them, is understandable to the ancient reader or anyone familiar with the story. But as I am fond of saying in my classes, this puts the reader in the very unfortunate position of having to make a choice: siding with Jonah or siding with God.

Unfortunately, people have read biblical texts in isolation for a long time and will probably continue to do so, despite what scholars, teachers, or students of the Bible may say. The Bible has been, and continues to be, misused by people who read it inaccurately, pull an isolated quote out of here or there, and conveniently ignore that there are biblical texts that tell of God being almost disgusted by what people have done to each other based on a distortion of the biblical text.

If we look back just a few centuries in our Christian history, we can think of the concept of the so-called "divine right" of kings and princes utilized to excuse literally any level of barbarity or cruelty. They cited a text like Romans 13:1–2, which reads: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment." Or even 1 Peter 2:17, which exhorts, "Fear God. Honor the emperor"—which is particularly interesting as 1 Peter is probably written in a time in which the Christian community has already witnessed imperial persecution.

Those pushing such a perspective were, of course, not acknowledging the more basic rules of treatment of others, scathing prophetic texts against the wealthy and powerful, and texts blasting the elite. The Letter of James is particularly pointed in this regard, as one can see most notably in 2:6, which asks, "Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?" Or the particularly harsh text in 5:1 which tells the rich to "weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you." When put into context with the excesses of the Middle Ages, for example, regarding the aforementioned "divine right of kings and princes," one wonders if they had ever even heard of the Letter of James.

Closer to home here in the United States, where it took a brutal and painful Civil War to correct the situation, one thinks of the enslavement of African peoples being justified

because of the cursing of the “sons of Ham” in Genesis 9:22–27. The precise line in verse 25 reads “Cursed be Canaan; / lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.” This comment is all the stranger regarding this argument, as the Canaanites were actually Semites. People were using a distorted reading of historiography as literal history (not to mention ignoring any concept of genetic science) and choosing to ignore totally the reality of respecting the innumerable places in the Old Testament, in particular, and the Bible, in general, that would undercut the whole position on slavery. To give just two examples: Following the command to release a slave after six years of service, we read “And when you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the LORD your God has blessed you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today” (Deuteronomy 15:13–15). Second, over and against such a barbaric and totally love-deprived institution, Jesus gave a command of love so great as to charge us even to “Love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44).

So, reading texts in the light of others with a different perspective can be quite beneficial and can avoid taking an approach that is too one-sided. In the case of the Creation accounts of Genesis, as Pope Francis notes, reading Genesis chapter 1 in the light of Genesis chapter 2 helps to nurture a greater balance that makes better sense of the commands



"have dominion" and "subdue." Taking such a position can help to shift us from viewing the world as ours to use and exploit however we see fit in having dominion and subduing it, to looking at our role as caretakers of God's creation, as responsible stewards of this wonderful world with which God has gifted us.

If we begin to view our role in creation as that of being responsible stewards of God, we can see a whole new world of opportunities opening up, along with a variety of challenges. One dynamic we may overlook that I consider inherent in this concept is the idea that viewing ourselves, as such, enhances our dignity as God's agents. At the same time, though, it is a challenge and a responsibility.

#### For Reflection:

- How do you interpret the expression "subdue the earth"?
- Based on the Genesis Creation accounts, what should our attitude toward the totality of God's creation actually be?

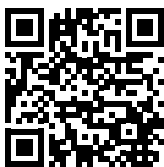


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