

Rediscovering the community of creation

Pat Bennett in conversation with Richard Bauckham

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All things which live below the sky,
Or move within the sea,
Are creatures of the Lord most high,
And brothers unto me.¹

PB: Welcome, Richard. We're going to be talking about the relationship of humans to the rest of creation and whether our Christian understandings of this are too limited, too thin – themes you've written about in *Bible and Ecology*.² You're known primarily as a scholar of the New Testament – a canon we don't necessarily associate with ecological concerns. Where does your interest in ecological themes in the Bible come from?

RB: I think I was rather ahead of the game in this because I was thinking and speaking about ecological issues in relation to theology in the 1980s, when not too many others had yet woken up to the importance of that dimension. I didn't publish anything until *Bible and Ecology*, but I had been thinking about its themes over quite a long period. I

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don't know quite what was behind my taking up the subject originally, but I probably always had a sense of the importance of the natural world, of the non-human creation, and of its value to God. I don't think I ever subscribed to the view that the whole of creation was merely made for human benefit.

PB: That sense of independent value is something that comes out strongly in your writing. But to start in a slightly different place: it's increasingly clear that we're living in a time of serious ecological crisis and that human behaviour is not just destroying the conditions necessary for our *own* flourishing, but also for the flourishing of many forms of life. We're facing the sixth mass extinction and the news about climate change is increasingly worrying: a recent report from a study tracking key indicators showed sixteen of those as either approaching or past designated tipping points and suggested that only addressing the root cause of 'overexploitation of the Earth' could effectively meet these challenges.³ In your writing, you speak of a crisis in our relationship as humans to the rest of the natural world, and while that can't be simplistically laid at the door of the Bible – we know it's also rooted in Renaissance and Enlightenment thinking – nevertheless it does seem that the way we've read, and indeed *continue* to read it, particularly Genesis, is not helpful. You argue in *Bible and Ecology* that we've made a fundamental error in limiting our understanding of our relationship with creation to just two verses in Genesis and say we need to put these 'back into a much larger context of the rich resources of scriptural treatment of the human relationship to other creatures',⁴ and that in so doing we'll rediscover, or discover for the first time, what you term 'the community of creation'. What other significant passages should we be attending to beyond Genesis, and how do you see them expanding our understanding of our place within that wider community of creation?

RB: First of all we need to put Genesis 1 within its context in the whole of the first five books of the Bible. There is Genesis 2, the flood narrative and some of the laws that were given to Israel about how they should treat the land. If we're looking to see what the command to have dominion over other living creatures means, other parts of the Pentateuch go some way towards spelling that out. Beyond that I



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think one of the most important passages is Psalm 104, which is a great creation psalm, depicting all sorts of different creatures living in the habitats that God has given to them. Here, basically, humans are simply one species among all the others. While there are certain exceptional things about them, there's no sense of them being set *above* other creatures. The main sense that you get from Psalm 104 is of the other creatures as our *fellow* creatures. We are all creatures of God – it's a horizontal take on our relationship with the creatures, as opposed to a vertical take. I think this is a key issue behind thinking about our relation to the rest of creation. If you take simply Genesis 1:26–28 (even out of its Genesis context), you get a purely vertical image of humans set above the rest of creation. But other passages of Scripture, such as Psalm 104, depict a horizontal relationship to the other creatures. Very often people have seen only the vertical relationship: God above, and below God, humans, and below humans, the rest of creation. It's as though we are mediating between God and the rest of creation. That picture was very dangerous, particularly in the modern era when the notion of God became dubious or rejected – then you simply have humans almost in the position of *God*, set above the rest of creation.

The reason we need the horizontal relationship that we can get from Psalm 104 among other places is, as Genesis 1, of course, itself makes perfectly clear, that we are creatures of God *alongside other creatures*. And that's where I get this image of the community of creation, which expresses, I think, the idea of the *interconnectedness* and the *interdependence* of the various creatures of God in relation to each other. That coheres very well with what modern ecological science has taught us about connection and dependence within different ecosystems. That we humans are very much in interconnection and interdependence with the rest of creation is really what I mean by the community of creation. Of course, different members of a community may have different roles within the community. I would see the dominion of Genesis 1:26 and 28 – the command given at creation to humans to have dominion over other living creatures – as our special role within the community of creation. So it doesn't lift us *out* of the community, it is a role *within* the community.

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PB: And do you see that special role as being linked to us being, not *materially* different, but different because we alone are described as having ‘the image of God’. Is that what gives us that special function? And then how does that play out in a way which isn’t about authority to control, manipulate, and manage the earth?

RB: Well, first of all, there are two parts to the command in Genesis: one is to subdue the earth, and the other is to have dominion over other living creatures. I think the subduing of the earth refers mainly to farming, possibly to mining. It refers to the ways in which humans live *from* the earth. All creatures survive and flourish through the use of other created things. That’s part of the interdependence. And there’s nothing wrong with that.

PB: Isn’t subduing the earth a task that’s given to all animate creation?

RB: It’s linked to humans filling the earth (Genesis 1:28). When God creates the sea creatures, they are commanded to fill the seas, and the birds are commanded to fill the air (Genesis 1:22). Humans are commanded to fill the earth – and then the way we do that is through subduing it. Humans would not have filled the earth if we hadn’t invented farming. Agriculture is absolutely basic to the way the human race has been able to spread over the surface of the planet. But subduing the earth is something different from dominion over other living creatures. In the text of Genesis humans are given dominion over the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, other living creatures. That’s where I think we have given to us a *responsibility of care* for the rest of the living creation. It’s a royal image – it’s definitely *dominion* – and I think we need to go back to that literal meaning of the word in Genesis if we are to try to be faithful to the text. It is a *royal* vocation – but then if you look at how kings are understood in the Old Testament it’s very much a relationship of caring responsibility for their subjects.

PB: It’s a shepherding image isn’t it?

RB: The Old Testament is a bit ambivalent about kings because kingship can so often go wrong – it can become tyrannous and aggressive. But

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the only part of the Mosaic law that refers to the monarchy in Israel makes it clear that a king should remember that he is *one among his brothers and sisters*, so he should rule with a certain humility, and in solidarity with the rest of his fellow Israelites. So, transferring that to Genesis, if we are to carry out the command of dominion properly, we must do it by recognising our place in the community of creation, that it's an authority in relation to fellow creatures. We ourselves are creatures. If we forget that we and they are fellow creatures, then we will abuse the dominion.

PB: And from the way you've described it, the kingly aspect of dominion is also something which is properly and rightly there to temper our 'subduing'. For example, you mentioned mining – but rapacious mining for minerals, mining involving child labour, to feed our demand for technological goods is clearly way beyond what's laid out in Genesis, and even beyond what becomes accepted as part of the reimagining of creation after the flood – where although it clearly isn't what it was meant to be, there are still limits, certain boundaries to what is permissible, for example with respect to eating meat.

RB: Yes, I think that's true. And if you put it in an Old Testament context, clearly they do do some mining in the Old Testament world and they use the metals and stone, but on a very limited scale. And likewise with the question of how this verse has been interpreted in history, we have to remember that in, say, the medieval period, people assumed that the dominion was about the ordinary ways in which they were using the world. They did not take it as a mandate to expand human control of the world as much as possible. That's what starts with Francis Bacon in the sixteenth century and the modern enterprise of exploiting the world for human benefit. Of course, that was a humanitarian aim! But while it had an idealistic motive behind it, it's quite explicit in Francis Bacon, that the Genesis command is being read as a *project* which humanity is to carry on, so that science and technology become the means of achieving our dominion over the world.

PB: So would you say that we've lost that earlier sense of it as something to enable flourishing and that it's now become a project of greed,



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acquisition, stripping what we can? Would you root that, at least partly, in loss of our own sense of creatureliness?

RB: Yes, I think that's true. But to a large extent, the scientists are not to be blamed for the greed and the avarice and so on. There is a strong tradition of service to humanity running through the scientific tradition, and scientists have now woken up to the ecological issues as well. But I think there was a kind of hubris, an arrogance about how we had a right to exploit the world, but also an arrogance about the degree to which we could *control* our technological mastery of the world. And, of course, that's behind climate change which basically results from humans doing all sorts of things with unintended consequences – consequences that people couldn't foresee in things like the industrial revolution. The problem was a conviction that we could really get a grip on everything and deal with the consequences, as opposed to having a more humble, more realistic sense of the limits of human control – limits which mean that there may always be unintended consequences: technology on a big scale is always playing with fire.

Were we to have had that sort of cosmic humility – which I think the Book of Job gives us – then I think it would have enabled us to develop technology in a more nature-friendly way; and to see it in the context of our fellow-creatureliness with other creatures. If you think back to agriculture, what the farmer is doing is producing stuff from the soil, and this is a kind of *collaboration* with the natural world. When you prune your apple tree, it's not a destructive thing, it's actually helping the apple tree play a role which is natural to it. I think that's the key thing – it's *natural* to it. And that used to be the role of domestic animals when they were treated in a humane way. But when you get to factory farming all that goes, animals are not doing anything that is at all natural to do when they're confined like battery chickens, for example.

PB: You mentioned that sense of cosmic humility, which we would see if we read Job 38 and 39 – a long passage essentially about non-human creation – for which you give an extended exegesis in *Bible and Ecology*⁵...



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RB: ... And the whole point of it is that Job is not in control!

PB: Indeed! So it marries very well with what we're talking about here: that loss of control that either we don't yet realise or that we refuse to acknowledge because we're still thinking 'we can solve this problem by more technology'. But what you're saying is that we *won't* solve those things until, at least in part, we recover that sense of our true place within the world of creation. In *Bible and Ecology* you say that 'the most profound and life-changing way' in which we can do this is 'through the biblical theme of the worship all creation offers to God'.⁶ Why do you think that this shared sense of worship and praise is important? And how does it alter our sense of who and what we are in the wider creation?

RB: I think it has that effect because worship is an activity in which fundamentally we realise our creatureliness before God, in which we remind ourselves that God is God and we are his creatures. And if we worship alongside other creatures, the rest of creation, then we're doing something that recognises that we are fellow creatures of other creatures. In worship we are not exalted above the other creatures, we worship alongside them. The way it happens in the Psalms, I think, is that the rest of creation *helps us* to worship God – and that I think is a very important dimension that we could bring back into our worship in church or indeed our worship outside in natural environments.

PB: What are things that we could do to recover that sense of being part of the worship of all creation? Wendell Berry describes the Bible as a book which is 'best read and understood outdoors, and the farther outdoors the better'⁷ but do you think it's possible for us to have that different kind of attentiveness to the rest of creation? In this scientific age we're used to looking at things in a much more analytical way – we try to understand something. Obviously that's needed too in this ecological crisis but it's also sometimes hard to get out of that mode of thinking! What would help us to recognise and value the praise-giving of other creatures, or indeed of inanimate elements of creation?

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RB: Well, to give an example from services that I have had some involvement in: there are wonderful soundscapes online – recordings of all the natural sounds in a whole series of very different environments – and in a Eucharistic service we played one of those during the period when people were receiving communion. This is sometimes when churches have an anthem or music, but we had this soundscape instead, and people very, very much appreciated it. We did all sorts of other things in that service but this was the one that got the most comment. I think people actually *do* have a sense of the beauty and the wonder of nature – perhaps especially now after the experience of lockdown has impacted a lot of people’s sense of the created world around us. They like being out in the natural world and I don’t think it’s difficult to tap into that during worship as a way of enabling people to have a sense of the natural world around us. It’s rather like, for example, how in some parts of the worship service we remember the rest of the world, for example in our intercessions, recognising that we’re not some private little club, bringing in wider concerns.

But there are other ways also of doing this. In the Eucharistic liturgy – the traditional ones all have something like this in them, but the one that I’m remembering now is: ‘therefore with angels and archangels and with all who stand before you in earth and heaven’ – *all who stand before you in earth and heaven*. I don’t quite like that ‘stand’ because it may be intended to mean just humans on earth and angels in heaven. But a tweaking of those words could easily bring in a reference to the rest of the creation at the heart of the service when we’re moving into Communion.

PB: Do you think that there’s a possibility though that that could reintroduce the hierarchical into our sense of relationship? It might sound almost as though we are bringing in and offering to God the praise of creation – as though it weren’t capable of doing that itself.

RB: Yes, I would not like that to be the implication, but actually, I don’t think it is, because I don’t think that way about the worship of angels. There’s no sense here in which we mediate the worship of angels to God. They are doing it all the time – that’s what angels are for! What you have is the sense of a cosmic choir praising God, and that’s the



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point in which we join in with it. So if you can see that cosmic choir as including the angels and including all the creatures of the Earth, then there's this sense that worship isn't something we just start doing off our own bat – worship is *going on* in the whole cosmos and what happens is that we join in with it.

PB: Yes. You say that 'all creatures give glory to God simply by being themselves and fulfilling their God-given roles in God's creation'.⁸ We sometimes differentiate worship as a special activity that we *do* – but your point here seems to be that it happens simply by our *being*, and in our own unique *thingness* – what Manley Hopkins would call our 'inscape' I guess: 'What I dó is me: for that I came'.⁹ It's there in Merton too, isn't it? There's a lovely passage where he talks about the special clumsy beauty of *this* colt – on this day, in this field, under these clouds – as being consecrated, declaring the glory of God¹⁰ – and maybe that sense is something we do indeed need to recover. But while it's easy to speak of certain animals, or a beautiful sunset, lovely flowers, a magnificent waterfall, etc giving praise to God by being 'what they are', it's less easy to say that about other things: for example you could say that the Covid-19 coronavirus is perfectly expressing its particular character. Is there a way, within this limited, less than perfect creation, that we can still see things like that as also participating in the praise of God?

RB: Well, it's difficult to talk about the coronavirus because we actually still don't really know how the epidemic started. There is a possibility that it originated as an artificial creation in the virology institute in Wuhan, in which case it would be an example of humans tampering with the natural world. The other possibility is it came from animals through meat markets: coronaviruses live in bats, and other viruses of that kind have jumped to humans from animals. In the animals they are harmless. It's when these things jump to humans that they can become destructive. It's rather like, for example, volcanoes: we think volcanoes are very destructive, but they're only destructive if humans are living near them. So a lot of these things that we see as natural disasters are only so because we are there and they affect us. Another thing about coronavirus is that one reason it became a pandemic affecting almost every part of the world was modern



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communications – without flights, it would have taken very much longer, if at all, to reach the rest of the world. The ability for such viruses to spread is one of the downsides of global communications.

PB: Which comes back to your theme earlier about interconnectedness and its consequences. But just to go back to recapturing that sense of our being part of a community of creation and part of the praise of creation: you've mentioned some things we could do liturgically. Are there other things we could be doing alongside that? If we spent more time with some of these other passages in the Bible you talk about in the book; or engaging with other nature writers or poets, perhaps? I mean, we have St Francis, someone who realised this sense of connection, of our fraternity with the created world – though sadly we have perhaps domesticated him and drawn the radicalism of that perception somewhat. I'm just wondering whether there are other things that we could be doing or reading ...

RB: You can think about ways in which people experience and appreciate nature – and one obvious example is nature documentaries such as those by David Attenborough. They don't just inform; they impart a sense of the wonder of the natural world. So if you absorb that sort of documentary, those ways of presenting parts of the natural world that we could never experience individually for ourselves, and if you do so as someone who worships God, then you can take that into your experience of God. You can watch a documentary and at the end of it, praise God for it. Then I think of other things like the 'weather watchers' whose photos are shown as part of BBC weather bulletins. It's so easy now with phone cameras to snap and share a beautiful scene – and the very activity of doing that, taking the photo, is a way of appreciating the natural world. It could be accompanied by praising God for it. So I think we need to think about the ways in which people get close to the natural world and appreciate it and how, if we are Christians, that becomes part of a life lived in praise of God.

We spoke earlier of how creatures worship God simply by being themselves and doing their God-given things. Humans are unique in that we consciously think about it and verbalise it. In that we're doing something that's appropriate to *our* species: we're the only creatures who can do that. But it's also quite a standard theme in Christian



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thinking that verbalised worship is a kind of *focusing* of our worship. Actually the whole of our lives ought to be a kind of worship of God, so there's sense in which a lot of the time we are praising God in the way that the other creatures also do.

PB: Which very much brings us back to something we touched on at the beginning: when we are living in a way which is also part of the divine mandate of how humans should *be* in the world, and you alluded to some of the Old Testament directions about justice, hospitality, caring for the disadvantaged, etc. All of those things then *also* become part of our own creaturely worship of God because we're doing, we are *being*, as we were intended to be.

RB: Can I just come back to this point about reading the Bible apart from just Genesis 1? I think one of the things that happened in the modern period is that people, very largely because we increasingly lived in urban contexts which increasingly look like human-made worlds, got to read the Bible as though it is just about God and humans. It would be more helpful if we instead get in our minds a triangular model that has, at the three corners of the triangle, God, humans and the non-human creation. The sides of the triangle represent the relationships between those three. With a model like that, we will find that the non-human creation crops up all the time in Scripture. That's only to be expected, since these writings are by people who were engaging with the natural world in their daily life. But we have screened all that out as being not culturally relevant to us, and supposed that the real thing is only about us and God. So actually, as well as going to those key passages, which I think are very important, we can also simply raise our awareness of the other creatures in the whole Bible.

PB: Do you think that some of that is related to larger metanarratives about salvation, which have tended to become, at least in some expressions of Christianity, very individualistic? Also perhaps one that says that we are saved *out* of this world and thus it is simply a preamble to something better? Even if we don't consciously subscribe to that it's easy to lose sight of the fact that the whole of creation is also involved in the story of salvation. We have focused mainly on the Old Testament in this conversation but of course the



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biblical narrative runs, as you say, ‘from creation to new creation’.¹¹ So, just very briefly as we come to the end of our time, how do you see the New Testament speaking to these themes which we’ve been discussing? And, perhaps even more importantly, how can this further expansion of our understanding help us as Christians to live well, in accordance with God’s purposes, in this time of ecological crisis?

RB: The last point is a very, very big question! I think one of the most powerful passages is the famous passage about Christ in Colossians 1:15–20. It’s often called a hymn and it certainly has a poetic structure with two stanzas: the first about Christ in creation; the second about Christ and salvation or new creation. The first one is a kind of *retelling* of Genesis 1 putting Christ into the picture. The second is about the new creation through Christ, and it ends up saying that the purpose of God, in Christ, is to reconcile all things to himself, things in heaven and things on earth, reconciling them through the blood of his cross. What that is clearly saying is that the scope of salvation is as wide as the scope of creation – that’s why the two stanzas are in parallel – and that even the cross is part of God’s purpose of reconciling the whole creation, not merely humans. Because it’s a rather poetic passage, people think we needn’t take it too seriously, but poetry is often a way of saying something that is very seriously meant.

How should this affect our own relationship to the non-human creation? Well, it teaches us, as I think I started off by saying, that God values *the whole of creation* – that I think is very clear. And he values it so much that his purpose is to renew the creation, to heal all the disruptions and divisions, the rubbish we’re doing to creation, causing suffering to each other; to heal all of that in a new creative transformation of the world which will take into God’s eternity everything that is of value in the created world. We don’t know how that can be done – it’s beyond our imagination – but I think that’s where we are all heading. So we should be treating creation as something that has great value to God, something God loves. And, as it were, doing our own little bit – as far as we can – to contribute to that healing of the relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world.



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PB: That's a very good note to end on, I think. Thank you, Richard.

Notes

- ¹ Edward Brailsford, “All Things Which Live Below the Sky” (1935), https://hymnary.org/text/all_things_which_live_below_the_sky.
- ² Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010).
- ³ William J. Ripple, Christopher Wolf, Thomas M. Newsome, et al., “World Scientists’ Warning of a Climate Emergency 2021”, *BioScience*, biab079, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biab079>.
- ⁴ Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 7.
- ⁵ Bauckham, 37–63.
- ⁶ Bauckham, 76.
- ⁷ Wendell Berry, “Christianity and the Survival of Creation”, in *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 103.
- ⁸ Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 79.
- ⁹ From “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”, in Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose* (London: Penguin Books, 1953), 51. ‘Inscapè’ is a term invented by Hopkins to describe the characteristics which give each thing its own unique identity and differentiation. This identity is not static but dynamically enacted – embodied – in the particular way each individual thing lives and is.
- ¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (London: Burns and Oates, 1962), 30.
- ¹¹ Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology*, 143.

