

The Bible And The Environment

by Jim Schicatano

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Gen. 1:28 NIV)

THE FIRST COMMAND

After God created the first man and woman, He commanded them to "be fruitful and increase in number." God thus instructed mankind to procreate and expand our population. A large population is needed to achieve God's second request: "Fill the earth and subdue it." This responsibility was reemphasized in two Psalms.

The highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to man. (Psalm 115:16 NIV)

You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: (Psalm 8:6 NIV)

In the first several chapters of the Bible, it is evident that man obeyed God's first command and engaged in much procreation. But our hearts were soon consumed by wicked and evil inclinations, and God lamented over having created us. At that time, when mankind was enslaved by sin, only Noah was found to be righteous (Genesis 6). Noah, his family, and the animals were saved from the Great Flood by constructing an ark made of gopher wood. When the ark finally rested upon dry ground and the animals were released, God issued a very familiar command to Noah and his family:

"Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the Earth" (Gen. 9:1 NIV)

This is the second time that God issued this command to mankind. We can imagine once again that man obeyed God and increased in number – human beings have never had a problem procreating. However, God also

instructed us once again to fill the Earth. Since that time, our inclination to procreate has certainly not diminished, however, it can be argued that we have filled the Earth – at least when we consider humanity's sphere of influence over the entire world.

It is regretful that our conquest of the Earth has not been more positive. God has given us the sacred and challenging responsibility to act as caretakers of our world. This is a special responsibility that only mankind received in the Creation Story. All of the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and the animals that populate the land are our responsibility. We are the custodians of the oceans, the mountains, the rain forests, the prairies, and even the atmosphere. God has granted to us, in a way, the ability to act as God. The planet Earth is ours to govern. Whether we choose to rule it wisely or selfishly and foolishly depends on us.

WHAT IT MEANS TO RULE

Where the NIV uses the word “*rule*” in this passage, the King James Version uses the phrase, “*have dominion.*” “*Rule*” or “*have dominion*” is the translation of the Hebrew word “*Radah.*”¹ Of *Radah*, Bible scholar Bruce Vawter notes:

*Dominion is not a license to caprice and tyranny but, in its best sense, a challenge to responsibility and the duty to make right prevail. If Genesis is attended to carefully, we see that it gives every encouragement to the present-day ecologist who believes that the earth has been delivered into man's hands as a sacred trust that he can perpetuate in a nature- or God-given order which he had been given the capacity to learn and improve upon.*²

If we consider the tremendous amount of pollution that we have unleashed upon the air, the water, and the land, it would be difficult to argue that we have not acted brashly and foolishly in our obligation. We have raped the land for its mineral wealth, and burned and cleared forests for roads, housing, and businesses. We have senselessly slaughtered entire species of animals to the brink of extinction. Factory smokestacks and gas emissions from fossil-fuel engines continue to pollute the air. Oil tanker accidents release tons of poisonous crude oil into the seas. We use the ocean as both a source of food and as a toilet and dump. We continually produce toxic waste, nuclear waste, and other garbage – often without any concern for their safe disposal.

Mankind has fared little better acting upon its own kind. Slavery and

caste systems have existed since the beginning of civilization. Civil wars and world wars are marking points on our historical record. Technological advancements have led to machine guns, tanks, fighter jets, submarines, battle ships, guided missiles, and drones – all of which have contributed to our increasing ability to annihilate each other both rapidly and efficiently. Nuclear weapons and chemical weapons have already been unleashed upon humanity, and the future holds “promise” for even greater and more impressive technological weapons of mass destruction.

We have virtually failed in our duty as custodians or guardians of the planet Earth. We have acted imprudently and selfishly, and ignored our responsibilities that God entrusted to us. Far too often, we have used the technology that we developed in a negative or detrimental manner.

Technology itself possesses no moral inclination; technology is a morally neutral commodity. It is not nature, which was created by God, nor the technology developed by mankind, that has led us down this path of persistent historical destruction, and the future ecological disasters that are being predicted. The problem lies exclusively in the disobedient and avarice nature of mankind.

That is something we must change if we are ever to fulfill the sacred responsibilities entrusted to us by God.

BIBLE VERSES CONCERNING THE ENVIRONMENT AND MAN’S DOMINION

God’s instructions to care for the land:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Gen. 2:15 NIV)

For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest. (Leviticus 25:3-5 NIV)

Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it. Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I,

the LORD, dwell among the Israelites. (Numbers 35:33-34 NIV)

When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them? However, you may cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees and use them to build siege works until the city at war with you falls. (Deuteronomy 20:19-20)

God's instructions to care for animals and beasts of burden:

If you see your fellow Israelite's ox or sheep straying, do not ignore it but be sure to take it back to its owner. If they do not live near you or if you do not know who owns it, take it home with you and keep it until they come looking for it. Then give it back. Do the same if you find their donkey or cloak or anything else they have lost. Do not ignore it. If you see your fellow Israelite's donkey or ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it. Help the owner get it to its feet. (Deuteronomy 22:1-4 NIV)

Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain. (Deuteronomy 25:4 NIV)

but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. (Exodus 20:10 NIV)

If anyone uncovers a pit or digs one and fails to cover it and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the one who opened the pit must pay the owner for the loss and take the dead animal in exchange. (Exodus 21:33-34 NIV)

If anyone's bull injures someone else's bull and it dies, the two parties are to sell the live one and divide both the money and the dead animal equally. However, if it was known that the

bull had the habit of goring, yet the owner did not keep it penned up, the owner must pay, animal for animal, and take the dead animal in exchange. (Exodus 21:35-36 NIV)

If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to return it. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help them with it. (Exodus 23:4-5 NIV)

For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest. Whatever the land yields during the sabbath year will be food for you – for yourself, your male and female servants, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you, as well as for your livestock and the wild animals in your land. Whatever the land produces may be eaten. (Leviticus 25:3-7 NIV)

The righteous care for the needs of their animals... (Proverbs 12:10 NIV)

Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herds; (Proverbs 27:23 NIV)

NOTES:

Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1977), pp.57-58

Ibid., p.59