Bible exhorts us to serve creation, not oppress it

What is the biblical basis for action on climate change? Anne Elvey and Mark Brett consider this vital question for Christians as world leaders meet in Copenhagen from 7-18 December for the United Nations Conference on Climate Change.

When Christians consider contemporary ecological concerns, we come as human creatures in relationship not only with the Creator but also with all other creatures. In the doctrine of the incarnation, we recognise that the Creator is embedded with the creation, and correspondingly that humans, animals, plants, soil, air, earth, skies, seas, moons, planets and stars are interrelated in a cosmos enlivened by the being of God (Acts 17:28; Ps 104:30). Nevertheless, many of us often think and act as if we are separate from, and independent of, the creation on which we depend, which also proclaims with us the righteousness of God (Ps 97:6).

While there have been significant fluctuations in climate in earth’s past, most climate scientists agree that the contemporary events of climate change are to a great extent the result of human action. Already, rises in global temperatures have affected local climates, habitats of some endangered species, and precipitated the phenomenon of climate refugees from vulnerable areas in the Pacific, such as Kiribati.

Moreover, development workers are finding that their time and resources are increasingly being taken up in responses to the emergencies created by extreme weather events, such as Tsunamis, earthquakes and major floods.

Many individuals have made important changes in behaviours relating to transport and power. But consolidated responses at local, national and international levels remain essential.

Representatives of governments and NGOs will meet in Copenhagen this month to try to agree on strategies to mitigate the worst effects of climate change. How can an understanding of the human vocation in creation help us to engage responsibly, not only in terms of our individual use of things, but in this wider context of national legislation and international negotiation?

Some have suggested that a key biblical theme for human vocation in creation is the fashioning of humankind in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27); human beings share, in one sense, in the sovereignty of God (Gen 1:28).

The Book of Job brings another voice to this understanding of divine sovereignty and human vocation in creation. When, in Job 38, God finally responds to Job who has cried out in his suffering, it is as if God were to say to the people of the Pacific islands, who have just experienced the overwhelming power of the sea, that they should consider the impossibility of issuing commands to the ocean (Job 38:8-16). Later, God tells Job that he cannot domesticate Leviathan (Job 41). With some poetic ambiguity, the text fuses images of fearsome creatures from the cultural imagination of the day, natural creatures of the sea and dragons, to insist that there are dimensions of the created order over which Job has no control. Harpoons, arrows or swords cannot pierce this animal’s hide (41:7, 26–29). This great sea monster cannot be turned into a servant or pet (41:4–5), nor an object of commercial profit-making (41:6). The NIV translation makes the point: “Any hope of subduing him is false” (41:9).
This translation is also ironic, since the word “subdue” is the one that is usually chosen to translate Gen 1:28: “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.” Does God’s blessing in Genesis 1 turn out to be a hoax? Has God deceived humankind into thinking that we are sovereign over all creation, only to expose our weakness in the face of the great creatures of the sea? At the end of Job 41, instead of humankind, the mysterious ocean beast is sovereign: “He looks down on all that are haughty; he is king over all that are proud” (41:34). Here is a puzzle. We have two quite different biblical approaches to the human vocation in creation: the first suggests that humans should rule over other creatures, but in Job’s theology of creation, this is impossible.

The poetry of Job 38 depicts the sea as an unruly child who needs to be given boundaries (38:10). Here, the “limits” for the sea are in Hebrew literally “statutes”. In the poem, God tells Job that the natural world is given laws and statutes, just as humans are given laws and statutes. The natural world has its own God-given order, and human beings do not have free reign to lord it over creation.

The biblical theology of sovereignty, it should be remembered, comes out of a context where the ancient Hebrews found themselves more often than not subject to imperial overlords—whether Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, or Persian. In these settings, divine sovereignty can be understood as the context for, and frequently counter to, the sovereignty of nations. There is always the risk, though, that in imagining sovereignty, we reproduce the patterns of self-interest and oppression exercised by empires. The Gospels address this risk. While speaking in terms of masters and slaves, they re-imagine the category of lordship.

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus criticizes the way Gentile rulers behave as tyrants, lording it over their people (Mark 10:42; Luke 22:25; Matt 20:25). The disciples are to act otherwise, not “ruling” and “subduing” but “serving” one another (Mark 10:43; Luke 22:26; Matt 20:26). In John’s gospel, Jesus enacts Luke’s description of “the leader as one who serves”, when he washes the feet of the disciples (Luke 22:26; John 13:4–5, 12–17; see also, Phil 2:7) and then teaches, “You also ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14). This discourse of mutual service forms one side of the frame for the Eucharistic covenant in Luke (22:14–27).

The Eucharist, in which the elements of bread and wine, divine creation and human co-creation, are blessed, broken and shared, is part of a long biblical tradition of covenant. Moreover, the first covenant in the Bible is not just with human beings; it is with every living creature on earth, including the wild animals (Gen 9:10) who will never be brought under human rule. Genesis 9 tells us not to get above ourselves because God has a concern for every creature. While we are not God and cannot control everything, human responsibility to creation is in some measure god-like. But if we want to imitate God’s rule, then we need to understand the nature of divine sovereignty—suffering love, justice, and abundance in creation. The gospel parables of the rule of God depict this gracious abundance in contexts of human participation in creation (e.g. Luke 13:18–21).

As servants rather than rulers, we need to find our place within the context of global realities. That is as true for our vocation in creation as it is for our vocation in human communities. The first humans were placed in the primeval garden “to serve and preserve” it, according to Gen. 2:15. We have some sense from climate scientists concerning both the human part in causing the contemporary phenomenon of climate change and what we might do, exercising due prudence, to best serve and preserve creation in our time. That we may not know all of the science (or that some of us may not be convinced by it) is not a warrant to ignore the consequences of climate change on those whom it most affects, including our neighbours in the Pacific. What we can know is that the whole created order is sacred, and imbued with the spirit of God, as Psalm 104:30 says. Job 38 and 41 call us to an attitude of humility in the face of what we do not know about Earth’s climate. A biblical account of participation in divine sovereignty as a participation in divine service of creation may also call many of us to repentance, when we recognise our own failures “to serve and preserve”.

In Romans 8, Paul brings the whole creation (not only the human part) into the story of God’s action in Christ. Paul’s interpretation of Genesis 1–3, and his figuring of Christ as the new Adam in Romans 5, is implicit in Romans 8. The New Testament scholar Brendan Byrne (“Creation Groaning” in Habel, ed., Readings from the Perspective of Earth) argues that Paul sets two stories in tension here: a sin story and a grace story, and proposes that rather than being “sin-driven”, the human role in creation can be “grace-filled”. Creation does not simply serve Paul’s vocation as “a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1). Creation is bound up in the narrative of divine faithfulness that Paul proclaims. This is cause for hope, but a hope that does not know (literally, “see”) what is to come (Romans 8:24–25). For Paul, our future and the future of creation are interconnected; hope in this future returns us to responsibility in the present.
As our government prepares to participate in the Copenhagen conference on Climate Change, we need to consider our own openness to the grace story that might enable our participation in God’s faithfulness to creation: “When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth” (Gen 9:16). Is not the human vocation in creation to be an enabling part of this covenant, in the messy places where agreements between nations affect living creatures of all flesh? Then we may “proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15).

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