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"What are mortals that you are mindful of them?" A Reading of the Biblical Message about Human Being and Nature from the New Vision of Science and Ecology

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The author integrates the new scientific view of the universe with a rereading of the Genesis creation narratives. He introduces a reading of the human being as Vicar of God in light of "precomprehension" offered by science and the ecological crisis. New biblical interpretation of the unique role of humanity is compelled both by increased scientific knowledge of the cosmos and also by ecological destruction. In particular, the ecological crisis has emphasized that human domination of the world may destroy it. Interpreting Genesis from a New Testament viewpoint, particularly from the writings that announce a "new creation" performed by Jesus Christ, may remake the original mission of Vicar of God and lead Creation, affected by sin, to the new reality that it longs for.

Contemporary View of Nature as a Pre-comprehension[1] of the Biblical Message

In the contemporary context, one has to approach biblical messages regarding "nature" in light of the following fact: the contemporary view of the cosmos hardly coincides with a biblical cosmology. Contemporary biblical readings of nature vary considerably from those elaborated in the Holy Writ. One's "pre-judgment" today is very different from those of the biblical writers, because social context and exegetical methods vary throughout time. Actually, the variation in the scope of human understanding regarding nature has been so vastly increased over the past three centuries that biblical scholars and theologians have been forced to reconsider biblical assumptions regarding creation. The "Galileo Galilei case" [2] is paradigmatic of this contemporary reconsideration of the core of the biblical message and the temporality of the images where it has been transmitted. In the contemporary situation, two basic contexts need consideration: the development of science and technology, and the global ecological crisis.

A. The development of science and technology

Modern science presents an amazingly complex and varied image of the universe. The cosmos seems fathomless in both the macroscopic dimension (stars and galaxies billions of light-years away) and the microscopic one (subatomic particles and delicately balanced forces). Likewise, the life phenomenon seems to be something much older and less simple than the concept conceived by classic biology even a few decades ago. In other words, not much remains of the image of universe that humanity sustained either spontaneously or scientifically for thousands of years.

Moreover, it would also be suitable to consider the irruption of new technology. This is no longer a simple instrumental use of things—ages-old and improved through history—but a true superstructure of humanity that complements and, in many cases, replaces the tasks humans perform. Technology geometrically multiplies the potentiality of the individual, and in some extent, operates autonomously, independent of it own maker. This new reality is producing an enormous alteration of the cosmic stage where human beings live.

B. Global ecological crisis

Technological phenomena are directly linked to a new situation in Earth: the ecological crisis, involving, for example, the modification of nature's rhythms. Technology has affected all ecosystem processes. Indeed, there is no place without human impact. In the future, humanity will face a modification of climatic, physical, and biological planetary systems. One can assume that human activity will extend its effects to other planets, and in this way the evolving dynamism of human beings will invade other regions of the universe.[3]

Human beings are, then, generating a remarkable mutation in the surrounding nature. Thus, humans do not consider nature to be a fearful and amazing mystery anymore, but a truly well-documented and able-to-be-modified reality. This is the reason why there is a new view of nature and the position of humans within it. Consequently, a new understanding of the world as Creation, and the human mission in it, is compulsory. These two new hermeneutic pre-judgments have contributed to have a new reading of the biblical texts about Creation. These new readings are described in the sections that follow.

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Aspects of Creation in the Old and New Testaments:

A. The Hebrew Scriptures

1. The essential goodness of Creation

The two creation stories in Genesis show the same message regarding the ground and sense of the nature in two different ways. The story in Gen. 1:1-2: 4 presents Creation as having been activity developed in six days, with the seventh day devoted to the repose of the Creator. The gradual appearance of beings respects a certain ontological order: light first; water and air, second; dry earth and vegetation, third; stars, fourth; fish and birds, fifth; other animals and human beings, sixth. Human beings are, consequently, set in the universe as the culmination of Creation. A structured order is repeated daily: God spoke, and things came into existence, and God saw that they were good, and so passed one evening and morning.

Although this narration does not intend to be a phenomenological description of the creation process, it is possible to find several affirmations: God freely created the natural world, the order of nature is logical, every creature has an essential value, and humanity has preeminence over the rest of Creation.

2. The connection between nature and humanity

A second story of creation is presented in Gen. 2:4b-25. This story, attributed to the Yahwist tradition, describes the event of creation in a more anthropological and picturesque way. The main emphasis of this passage is to place humanity at the center of the creation design. The human being was modeled out of clay as a potter shapes a vase; the Creator placed humans into a garden that was specially created for them. After God created the garden and the animals, God then required humans to establish a relationship with nature by asking Adam and Eve to name and care for the animals and the garden.

3. The cosmic traces of sin

The subsequent problem of sin and its social and cosmic consequences are introduced several times in the book of Genesis. The references about the animosity between the serpent and the female, on the one hand (Gen. 3:14-16), and the resistance of the earth to the work of the male, on the other (Gen. 3:17-19), attempt to explain the new relation between human beings and the rest of the creatures after the fall of humanity. In addition, the story of the Deluge culminates with a new

cosmic alliance between God and all living beings, with the rainbow as a sign (Gen. 9:8-17). These passages reflect disturbances introduced into a natural world by human beings. The narrations do not intend to explain conflict in nature, e.g., meteorological phenomena or the survival of the strongest individuals and species; rather, they show a very deep relationship between humanity and the rest of the universe. This complicated relationship includes the extension of the mystery of evil, originated in the human heart, to the natural cosmic order.

4. The human relationship to the cosmos

Psalm 8 places the human being in reference to the cosmos:

> O Lord, our Sovereign,
> how majestic is your name in all the earth!
>
> You have set your glory above the heavens.
> Out of the mouths of babes and infants
> you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
> to silence the enemy and the avenger.
>
> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
> the moon and the stars that you have established;
> what are human beings that your are mindful of them,
> mortals that you care for them?
>
> You have made them a little lower than God,
> and crowned them with glory and honor.
> You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
> you put all things under their feet:
> all sheep and oxen,
> and also the beasts of the field,
> the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
> whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
>
> O Lord, our Sovereign,
> how majestic is your name in all the earth![4]

The author of this psalm, in a spirit of admiration before the created universe, situates human beings at the center of the cosmos and endows them with monarchical powers. The question of human significance is introduced through the wonder caused by the beauty and complexity of the world: if the universe is so wonderful, human beings have to be even more amazing in order for God to place them in positions of power. Yet human power is limited. Divine providence, held by God over humanity, can be perceived through the overwhelming beauty of the natural world.

B. The New Testament

The New Testament goes deep into some of the same subjects introduced in the Hebrew Scriptures. Here, Jesus, the Christ, plays a central role in the history of the cosmos.

1. The human relationship to the cosmos

According to the New Testament, the word by which God had created everything is the eternal *Logos*. John's Gospel says that the word which God spoke to make the universe has personal and divine entity: For example, John 1:3 indicates that the word is *someone* of God, *a person* who is, on the one hand, an instrument and, on the other, God's own self that had designed and given existence to all the cosmos. Further, John 1: 14 indicates that the *Logos* is the same Son that took our flesh and lived among us. This intervention of the creator *Logos* over the world is a new introduction into the biblical text.

2. The Incarnation of the Son

The Incarnation contains implicit points about nature. The act of incarnation endows corporealty with positive attributes. In fact, incarnation confirms the essential goodness of all the creation, including the material. John's Gospel and other subsequent authors, such as Ireneus of Lyon,[5] regarded deep consequences for the different aspects of the Christian mystery. Ireneus discussed the Christian Gnostic theories, in which matter was conceived as the last level of degradation of the first principle of reality. Thus, for Christian Gnosticism, the Incarnation was not a soteriological action, but a negative event. The passion of Christ would not have been real and, thus, would have been without consequence for the whole of human life.

3. Human beings as masters of creation

The interpretation of the phrase, "human beings as masters of creation" has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly debate.[6] According to Gen. 1:26-30, God created men and women in his "image and likeness," thereby granting power over the whole creation. Humans were given the power to populate and the power to dominate creation. The second narration shows the same idea by the metaphor of taking care of the garden, although it also introduces the issue of the conflict present in it after the sin (cf., Gen. 2:4b-3:24). In the last century, some philosophers and theologians began to criticize the interpretation that the West gave of it during many centuries; they claimed that such interpretations inspired human abuse of nature. They understood that the expression "master" (*dominum*) had been used to mean "exploiter."

Contemporary ecological sensibility has moved to a new reading of the creation narrations of the Genesis texts. Biblical scholars and theologians see a contradiction between two main points in the text: the human mission as master of creation, and the destruction of Creation at the hands of humanity. In addition, they criticize some ideas historically attached to the biblical narrations such as: (1) the illuminist philosophy regarding humanity as almighty and directed toward unlimited progress; and (2) Darwinist/capitalist considerations that only the most intelligent and powerful beings will survive. These conceptions are a distortion of the biblical messages. The centrality of humans in biblical texts exists in order that they may perfect the universe, not destroy it. Yet some of the biblical mandates, such as the order that humans populate the Earth, need new interpretations. Today, individuals are consciously aware of the limitations of our planet, and they are responsible for using that knowledge wisely. It is impossible for the Earth to sustain 100 billion people; therefore, the commandment to fill the Earth must be reconsidered.

4. The New Creation

Theologians, with a more sensitive view of the environmental disturbance process, are rethinking the mission to care for the world, together with St. Paul's writing on the "new creation." In fact, in Romans 8:20-22, Paul says that Creation was wounded by original sin, and so it was introduced in a situation of slavery (vs. 21), inflicting such sufferings "as a woman in labor undergoes" (vs. 22). Nevertheless, it maintains the hope of participation in the glorious freedom of God's children (vss. 20-21). This hope is based in the presence of the Holy Spirit in those who believe. The Spirit claims to update or confirm redemption in the very bodies of believers (vs. 22). Thus, according to St. Paul, all nature hopes for fulfillment. But this hope has as framework the Incarnation of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit in all believers. They were made "God's children" through the death and resurrection of Christ and the interior action of the Spirit of God. In this way, they are transformed into "new creatures," "pneumatic beings," and have the spiritual ability to work for a new creation.[7]

Humans can change the despotic way of living their vocation as Creation's masters. They can accept the new forces put into their hearts by the Lord of the universe, in order to guide their abilities toward the construction of the complete Creation according to God's initial dream.

This means that humans, at least as a possibility, are able to go back to their original mission of the Hebrew Scriptures, and they have new forces to do it. There is a new situation in history and in Creation after the event

of Christ: humans can change the despotic way of living their vocation as Creation's masters. They can accept the new forces put into their hearts by the Lord of the universe, in order to guide their abilities toward the construction of the complete Creation according to God's initial dream. In other words, humans can once again take on the original mission of God's Vicar, to carry the universe into its final destiny, and they have the forces to do it.

Conclusion

The Bible does not present an ecological theology, strictly speaking. It does, however, present the basis for a last consideration of nature and the sense of the whole universe after the new creation performed by Christ and updated by the Holy Spirit. It indicates that human sin enslaved nature. Nature now depends on humans, as God's Vicars, to act on behalf of creation. Such action is made possible through the incarnate God now present through the Holy Spirit. Through the power of the Spirit, nature can truly hope for a complete restoration. Humanity is tied to nature and the destiny of the natural world depends on human intervention.

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Endnotes:

1. The use of the expression "pre-comprehension" is inspired by the work of Hans Georg Gadamer. According to this philosopher the reader always approaches a text with a preconceptual understanding. This idea is necessary for every act of comprehension. According to Gadamer, the interpreter approaches the texts not as if they were a *tabula rasa*, but with his or her own pre-comprehension (*Vorverständnis*), i.e., with pre-judgments (*Vorurteile*). Thus, pre-comprehension does not have a negative meaning. It is just important to remove it in order to read the text with-

out an idea that may change its essential meaning. See Gadamer.

2. When Galileo Galilei proposed the heliocentric theory, many theologians of the Roman Catholic Church reacted against him because they thought that such a theory contradicted the biblical creation narrative. See de Gennaro, pp. 54, 98.

3. See Panikkar, p. 218.

4. Altered to make the text gender-inclusive.

5. The date and place of Ireneus's birth are unknown, but he died in Lyon in 208. Cf. Meiss.

6. According to Lynn White, Christian theology established the dualism between human being and nature, but also insisted on the idea that the exploitation of nature by humans is will of God. See White, and Clifford.

7. Cf. Eph 4 and 24; Col 3 and 10.

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