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# I: Technology and the Biblical Narrative: Creation and Mandate

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## Series Introduction

This is the first of a series of articles in which Knecht and Wyatt will explore the ways in which technology more generally, and Artificially Intelligent Technology more specifically, could be thought of and evaluated by those of faith. We emphatically try to be positive and constructive in our treatment of the issues, whilst remaining honest about the possible pitfalls and dangers of unfettered, uncritical technological advances. These articles are not meant to contribute to an academic conversation about these issues (the articles will be too broad in scope) but rather, they will outline some of the crucial aspects of engaging with these questions, aiming to help practitioners and workers in secular occupations and professions.

Our goal is to provide a rationale, a way of thinking, which will support Christian engagement in these fields. We are convinced that the Christian voice and its concern for the wellbeing of people and the world, has a unique contribution to make at this time of unprecedented technological advancement. The speed and direction of technological progress should not only be dependent on whether innovations are successful from a commercial or technical standpoint, but also whether the direction is a constructive and wholesome one. It is at this point that ethics and broader questions of individual, natural, and societal benefits and wellbeing should be on equal footing with the technological capabilities. We aim to make a case that technology should not be shunned by those of faith, but that proper attention should be given to those wider questions of human and societal flourishing.

## Article Introduction

One of the possible challenges of giving Biblical and Theological reflections on contemporary issues is that it often requires quite a bit of Biblical Theological preparatory

work, before you can say something useful about a contemporary issue like technology. This is the case also now. To be able to discuss Artificial Intelligence or other technological advancements, we must talk about several theological fundamentals: creation, fall, redemption, and the world to come. Only after we have done this, can we even begin to relate to the technological questions at hand with the Biblical story. In this first article, we will look at Creation and the Mandates given to humanity following God's creative work.

To elaborate a bit further, the Bible encompasses a grand narrative, a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The story starts 'before the foundation of the world' and it carries on through all the ups and downs, triumphs and catastrophes of human history and on into the new heaven and the new earth, into future eternity, described in biblical Hebrew as 'the ages of the ages.' When we read a narrative created by a human author, say a spy thriller or a crime whodunnit, it is a common experience that the full meaning of the story only becomes apparent in the final pages. If the author has done their job well, we often have a sudden start of realisation as we reach the final plot twist, "Oh that's why X happened...., that's the explanation for that character's behaviour." The meaning of the entire narrative is revealed only at the end, when the story is finished. The same is true for the grand story of the Bible. It is the ending, the consummation of the story, the final pages, which illuminate the entire narrative arc of history. It was Martin Luther who said 'We have to read the Bible forwards, but we can only understand it backwards.'

This is not to say that the episodes before the consummation are less important. Rather, keeping the end of the narrative arc—the re-creation of all that exists and an eternal existence with God—in mind will provide a hermeneutical key, a way of understanding, the rest of the story. This is a theme which we will return to repeatedly in this sequence of articles. At the same time, since the whole story of creation intentionally leads to this final end, earlier episodes (like the act of Creation, for instance) speak into, they shape how we understand the world to come.

In this article, we are going to begin with a lightning tour of this grand narrative of the Bible, focusing on one particular aspect of the story: Creation. To come back to the beginning of this introduction: only when we understand the greater narrative, the greater story, can one know how we partake in it. Or, as the great Christian thinker and theologian Lesslie Newbigin once said 'You have to indwell the story of the Bible as the true story of the whole world'.<sup>1</sup> We are called to see the narrative arc of the Bible, the big story, as the frame or context for our own little story.

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<sup>1</sup> See also: <https://newbiginresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/89dpa.pdf>

# Creation

Where better to begin than at the beginning? It is often underestimated how important it is, when thinking about basically anything theological, to first think about Creation: what it is, how it relates to God, how it was intended to function, and how human beings featured in it. The story of the world, the history of salvation, presupposes, it assumes, it needs a world to happen in. And that world, that canvas on which the history of the world is painted, has a beginning in God's decision to create.

Therefore, to reflect theologically on the importance of human activity, work, and technology will have to start with an account of creation itself: what is it, how does it relate to God himself, and what is the place of human beings in creation? So let us do that now. We would like to start in the New Testament. In Acts, we encounter Paul elaborating on God's act of creation:

*Acts 17: 24-26. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made by human hands. Nor is He served by human hands, as if He needed anything, because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man He made every nation of men, to inhabit the whole earth; and He determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their lands.*

Darrell Bock reflects on this passage, suggesting that Paul claims that “[h]uman hands do not serve God, since God needs nothing from humanity and gives to humanity life, breath, and all the things needed for life. God's grace in creation on behalf of all people is the point.”<sup>2</sup> Truly, all that exists finds its beginning in and goes back to the “creational activity of the God Paul proclaims.”<sup>3</sup> Creation relates to God in a manner of complete dependency: it does not constitute or uphold the existence and being of God (meaning, God is not dependent on the existence of creation). Rather, Creation is totally dependent, for all that it is, on the free act of God to ‘give life’ (in this sense, the dependence is a one-way street: Creation is completely dependent on God, but God is not dependent for his existence on the world).

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<sup>2</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, ECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 565-6. Craig Keener reflects further on Paul's claim here in the context of the wider Greek philosophical tradition: Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, volume 3: 15:1-23:35 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 2636-9.

<sup>3</sup> Eckhard J Schnabel, *Acts, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 731.

Therefore, the first and most important aspect of Creation is that it must be thought of as God's free and gratuitous gift. Creation does not exist necessarily. That is, it did not need to exist. 'Before' God decided to create, there was nothing that we would call a 'creature.'<sup>4</sup> There was no matter out of which God decided to create (God is not merely a shaper of matter) nor did he decide to turn towards a Creation that already existed. Creation—understood as the calling into being of all that is not God—goes solely and completely back to the decision of God to create. This is where the Church doctrine of the *creatio ex nihilo* goes back to: God created 'out of nothing, *ex nihilo*', for nothing creaturely existed before God's creative act. Hence, Creation is a gift, a gift from God. A gift, because God himself did not need to create—he fully and completely is who he is, even without creation. But God wanted to create, freely and graciously.<sup>5</sup>

The whole of creation was made by God, for God himself. Everything that exists has no other goal but to declare God, the Creator, as Lord. It is in that place of gracious reception of God's life-giving grace and faithful submission to his Lordship that creation was supposed to exist. God's acts of creation did not intend to call into being a world which, from that moment onwards, is supposed to follow its own devices. The whole of Creation is called to exist and to recognise its utter dependence on him.

## Creation Mandates

We already hinted at some of these ideas, but in the process of creation, God gave humanity, in Adam and Eve, mandates—guiding principles for their existence on earth. Yes, it is very important for all of us to recognise our fundamental dependence on God, but above and beyond that most basic idea, the beginning of Genesis tells us more about humanity's task on earth. In the very first chapter of Genesis (1:28), God shows that he decided to create man and woman with the task to 'subdue', 'be fruitful and multiply' and to 'rule over' all that God has made. Clearly, these are very important callings or tasks. How can this first call to be fruitful, multiply, rule, and subdue be understood? Let us read the relevant section in Genesis 1:

*Genesis 1:26-28: Then God said: "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all creatures that move along*

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<sup>4</sup> Temporal terminology in this sense is not meant to suggest that 'time' existed eternally with God.

<sup>5</sup> John Webster, "Trinity and Creation," in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, volume 1 (London, et al: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 83: "The task of the Christian doctrine of creation is rational contemplation of the Holy Trinity in the outward work of love by which God established and ordered creaturely reality, a work issuing from the infinite uncreated and wholly realized movement of God's life in himself."

*the ground.” [...] God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creature that crawls upon the earth.”*

First of all, this text shows that multiplication is a good and is part of humanity's initial calling. Second, and possibly more challenging in the current climate (pun intended), being called to rule over and subdue Creation might need a bit more explanation.

More widely considered, the word 'subdue' (כבש) in the Old Testament is often used in the context of battles, conquering a power standing over against you.<sup>6</sup> However, as Terrence E. Fretheim observes, “While the verb may involve coercive aspects in inter-human relationships (see Num 32:22, 29), no enemies are in view here.” For Fretheim, the meaning of the call to 'subdue' should be understood along the lines of Genesis 2:5 and 2:15: it is a call for “particular cultivation” and “bring the world along to its fullest creational potential.”<sup>7</sup> John Day, following J. Barr, further suggests that humanity should only subdue the earth and rule the animals.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, 'rule' is used in a rather straightforward manner, meaning 'to stand over' and 'lead'. Even though God is described as the sole Creator of all that exists, the idea that humanity is created in the Image of God (*Imago Dei*) is connected to the call on Adam and Eve to rule over that which God had made. Amazingly, God deputises the rule over creation to humanity: with regards to the ruling of creation, we are God's deputies. However, the content of that rule cannot under any circumstances be thought of as one of exploitation or abuse. Fretheim, again, suggests that “A study of the word *have dominion* (רדה) reveals that it must be understood in terms of care-giving, even nurturing, not exploitation. As the Image of God, human beings should relate to the non-human as God relates to them.”<sup>9</sup>

I hope it has become clear that, whenever applying the terminology of “rule and subdue” to describe humanity's God-ordained relationship with creation, one needs to be careful not to jump over the proper context of the creation-account given in Genesis when giving an explanation of that ruling and subduing. Yes, we are called to rule and subdue, but, to speak with the words of Walter Brueggemann, “the task of 'dominion' does not have to do with exploitation and abuse.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Numeri 32:29, Isaiah 45:1, 1 Chronicles. 17:10, Psalm 81:14, Micah 7:19.

<sup>7</sup> Terrence E Fretheim, “Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 1: General & Old Testament Articles, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus* (Nashville, KY: Abingdon Press, 1994), 345-6.

<sup>8</sup> John Day, *From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1-11* (London et al: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 15-6.

<sup>9</sup> Fretheim, “Genesis,” 346.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 1982), 32.

To once again underline the fundamental task for Adam and Eve in the garden, we read in Genesis 2:5 and 2:15 that creation's growth and multiplication (the whole of creation, not just that of humanity), which God had called for in Gen. 1, is made contingent, by God, on the cultivating activity of humanity. The call in Gen. 2 to 'cultivate' or 'keep' is meant to further flesh out the concepts of 'rule' and 'subdue' in Gen. 1. Adam and Eve were placed in the garden to continue the creation of order, initiated by God, and to stand over creation so that it might flourish, multiply, and grow, as God had instructed.

With regards to us being creatures who are wholly dependent on the grace of God to uphold and sustain us, we are simply one among the rest of creation. This image is beautifully painted in Psalm 148, where the Psalmist calls the whole of creation to praise and worship of the Lord God. Here, Kings and Peoples, the young and the old, are mentioned right next to all the other creatures God has made. However, although humanity is called to worship the Lord alongside the rest of creation, Gen. 1 and 2 clearly indicate that there is a particular task for humanity, as opposed to all other creatures: humanity is called to rule and subdue, to cultivate and tend as to allow and help the whole of God's world to fulfil its fundamental task—to flourish, grow, and glorify the Lord. After that, we can only join Nehemiah in exclaiming:

*Nehemiah 9:6 "You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you."*

## Craftmanship & Creation

As we saw before in Genesis, humanity is called to cultivate Creation, as an extension of its call to subdue and rule. This task is so important that Genesis 2 even observes that without that work, and without God's sending of rain, nothing grew. In this ability to shape, to maintain, to be creative, to cultivate, there is a clear connection with who God shows himself to be at the beginning of the Bible. From the very start, the image of craftsmanship jumps from the page. The Creator God himself is depicted as a dedicated and meticulous craftsman: he speaks, and beautiful, ordered, rhythmic things come into being. In the language of the first two chapters of Genesis, God is a worker, and he imprints the cyclical pattern of work and rest onto his Creation.

As we read in Genesis 2:2-3:

*By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.*

And so, when God creates human beings in his own image, creatures made out of flesh intended to reflect his own character and nature, he also designed humanity to represent him within creation. The mandates discussed above, capture this role. It is therefore not surprising that human beings are created to work, to take on the divine role of caring, tending, cultivating, and governing the rest of creation. To repeat:

*So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created the male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground".*

Humanity is placed on earth to take the raw potential present within creation and use our God-given creativity and ability to cultivate to bring out something new and wonderful. To illustrate this, the Bible preacher John Stott used to tell the story of the gardener who was showing the pastor of the local church round the gardener's beautifully tended garden, resplendent with flowers of different colours. The pastor, being a pious man, exclaimed, "O the wonders of the Lord's handiwork!" The gardener was not best pleased, "You should have seen this here garden when the Good Lord had it to himself..." Clearly there is truth to this story: creation is beautiful, powerful, and good in itself, but the cultivation of human beings adds something too, contributing to the flourishing of creation.

The divine Creator has invested almost limitless potential within the material creation, but it is human creativity which helps to actualise that potential. In one sense, the sculpture is already there embedded within the unworked rock, but it is the imagination, creativity, and skill of the human craftsman, which brings the precise form into existence. We are put on this earth to take the raw potential present within creation and use our God-given creativity to bring out something new and wonderful. In this sense all human craftsmanship is carried out *Coram Deo* (before the face of God).

This is not to suggest that human creativity is some kind of bastion of human capacity unaffected by sin and the fall: like human reason and will, creativity is completely dependent on God's grace to function well. In other words, the creativity, the ability to cultivate and nurture, is in need of God's blessing. A biblical theme that underlines this, is the fact that the Holy Spirit is seen to inspire human craftsmanship. In Exodus 35:31-35, it is the Holy Spirit who famously inspires Bezalel, the craftsman:

*"with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills— to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic crafts. And he has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others. He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as engravers, designers,*

*embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers—all of them skilled workers and designers.”*

Both the Tabernacle and Solomon’s Temple represent the pinnacle of human craftsmanship, orientated to the worship of God. In our human ability to shape, to cultivate, to work with the created world, we reflect something of the great Craftsman. This, in itself, is a fundamental human good.

## Conclusion

This was a very brief introduction to the beginning of Scripture’s narrative arc: Creation. A couple take aways should be noted: first and foremost, the fact that Creation finds its beginning in God. Creation exists because it was intended and wanted by the Creator God: Creation has a goal, an end, a telos. Part of this goal is for the humanity, the world, the cosmos, to flourish and do well. Humanity has crucial part to play in this flourishing: it was created to steward and cultivate, to rule and subdue, that which God had created. Exercising this inherently human ability to co-create and cultivate, grounded in the creativity and craftsmanship of God, is one of our most fundamental callings. When speaking about technology, as we will later, we must continue to see this ability as a good and as part of how we are all called to work for the flourishing of the world.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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