

The Noachic Covenant's Impact on Caring for Creation

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Can the post-Flood narrative in Genesis 8:20–9:21 bring additional insight regarding environmental ethics? What differences exist between the creation mandate that God gave to Adam and the mandate that He gives to Noah? What bearing did the stipulations of the Noachic Covenant have on the relationship of Noah and his descendants to the restored earth? How does the covenant's pre-Israel setting indicate the scope of its impact? How does the fear of mankind affect the creation and how might it complicate their care for creation? How do the dietary instructions relate to mankind's care for the earth's flora and fauna? Does God's promise not to use a deluge to destroy all life again imply any pattern for mankind to follow in caring for the earth and all it contains? These are questions that come to mind as we read the text and seek to come to grips with its theological implications.

Potential Environmental Elements in the Text

Sacrifices

Noah initiated post-Flood worship by building the first altar to be mentioned in the biblical text (Gen 8:20). The sacrifices themselves indicate that Noah continues the tradition of sacrifice that Abel practiced (4:4). The text implies divine approval in God's command for Noah to take into the ark clean animals by sevens (7:2). The deaths and burning of these sacrificed animals result in God saying to Himself, "I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done" (8:21).¹ In other words, God allowed, no, instructed mankind to destroy some animals in a managed worship environment.

Constancy of Seasons

God promises that the environment will remain stable in the alternation of times to sow and harvest crops (8:22). The variable climate will not again become what it was during the Flood year. The creation's solar cycle of day and night will continue (cp. 1:14–16). This implies that God desires to provide a climatic environment suitable to the preservation of plant, animal, and human life on the planet. That, in turn, implies that such preservation provides a model for mankind in his vice-regency: they must follow practices that contribute to the preservation of a stable environment.

¹ All Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Updated* (1995; repr., Anaheim, CA: Foundation Publications, 2003) unless identified otherwise.

As Ross states, the Noachian covenant ensures “the stability of life and of nature.”² The covenant guarantees that all life (כָּל חַיָּוָה, 9:16) can depend upon the constancy in the natural order (8:22):

While the earth remains,
Seedtime and harvest,
And cold and heat,
And summer and winter,
And day and night
Shall not cease.

If the animals are all to fulfill the divine mandate to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, they would need to exist in large numbers. Mankind should not do anything to prevent the animals from fulfilling these commands. Indeed, the kind of intentional, managed care that Noah provided on the ark should continue outside the ark over the full surface of the planet.

Repetition of the Creation Mandate

“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (9:1) reiterates 1:28 minus the following: “and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” In place of the rulership clause, the post-Flood mandate speaks of the fear and terror every animal on the land and in the air will have for mankind (9:2). Mankind’s relationship to the animals becomes more complicated following the Flood. The complication offered challenges to retaining the role of a caretaker or vice-regent over the animals.

“Into your hand they are given” expresses the dominion mankind will still exercise over earth’s faunal inhabitants. The text itself indicates that the passive Niphal verb (“are given”) should be considered a divine passive, since God is the stated agent in the following verse (“I give all to you,” 9:3). God gives these animals to human beings specifically for food, just as He had previously given edible plants to them for food (cp. 1:29–30; 6:21). According to the biblical record, ruling over the animals from the sixth day of creation onward did not allow Adam and Eve to eat them. Goldingay offers an interesting, though perhaps unsupportable, viewpoint that beyond denying the animals as food for mankind, the first pair’s rule over the animals included keeping them from eating one another.³ Killing and eating the animals produces a fear of human beings. Such fear did not exist in the creation order. Although we might agree that the biblical record regarding eating meat changed the diet of mankind, we might not go so far as Goldingay to say that the practice of eating meat is “barbaric,”⁴ since God Himself gave permission to Noah and his descendants to harvest animals for food.

² Allen Ross and John N. Oswalt, *Genesis, Exodus*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary 1 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2008), 78.

³ John Goldingay, *Israel's Life*, Old Testament Theology 3 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 624.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 142: “Not being distance from animal slaughter by the supermarket, Israelites might be aware of the ongoing ambiguity of eating meat: it is nice and Yhwh allows it, but it is barbaric.”

The Value of Life

During God's instructions concerning the eating of animals for food, He addresses the matter of blood (9:4–6). The restrictions regarding the blood of the animals slain for food reveal the value that God places upon those animals. Observing the restriction on eating the blood of those animals results in a person's keen awareness that each and every animal represents a life valued by their Creator (9:4). Gentry and Wellums concur that the restriction encourages respect for all life and remind us that "God remains the Lord of life."⁵

It bears mentioning here that at least one commentator thinks that the animals allowed for meat in Genesis 9 included primarily the wild animals, just as the plants that were granted for food were wild plants (1:29–30; cf. 3:18). Domestic plants and animals may have been considered already legitimate sources of food.⁶ For the sake of time and space, I will not pursue this question here.

As a means of emphasizing the value of animal life, God also tells Noah that human blood is even more valuable. Mankind may kill animals for sacrifice and for food, but no animal may kill a human being without God holding that animal accountable (9:5). In addition, if a human slays another human, that person will be held accountable, because "in the image of God He made man" (9:6). The contrast elevates man above beast not only in regard to human dominion, but in regard to their comparative value in the Creator's estimation.

Restatement of the Post-Flood Mandate

Once again, as in 9:1, God issues imperatives for Noah and his family: "As for you, be fruitful and multiply; populate the earth abundantly [שִׁרְצוּ בְּאֲרֶז] and multiply in it" (9:7). The expansion focuses on the aspect of building a burgeoning and ever-increasing human population on the surface of the planet. The anthropological focus is obvious. Earth was created for mankind, not for the animals. The animals were created for mankind, not mankind for the animals.⁷

Covenant Stipulations

In 9:8–17 God reveals the specifics of the covenant which He had promised before the Flood to establish with Noah (see 6:18). The very fact that God makes this covenant with the animals as well as with Noah's descendants draws attention to the value the Creator places upon terrestrial life. God obligates Himself to His commitment at creation to preserve, provide for, and rule over all that He has made.⁸ The rainbow becomes, not only a sign of the Noachic Covenant,

⁵ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellums, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 166.

⁶ John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 342–43.

⁷ This writer recommends Hugh Ross, *Hidden Treasures in the Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011) for his description of the delicate created balance designed by God for the interaction of human beings and animals with mutual benefits.

⁸ Gentry and Wellums, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 161.

but of the constancy of the divinely-established environment making the planet hospitable to life in all its amazing forms.⁹

Initiating the Repopulation of the Planet

From the descendants of Noah the whole earth has been repopulated accompanied by the scattering of mankind across the surface of the planet (9:19, נִפְצָרָה). Shem, Ham, and Japheth obeyed the divine mandate. As for Noah, he had evidently surpassed his reproductive years and settled down to become “a man of the soil” (אִישׁ אֲדָמָה, 9:20). He planted a vineyard and partook of its fruits, including the wine he produced (9:21). This was within the realm of mankind’s dominion and displayed one of the means by which the flora of the planet would continue to be part of the human diet.

Theological and Environmental Implications

Coming on the heels of the earth’s greatest destructive event, the Noachic Covenant provides a window on God’s intent for the restored creation as well as how mankind should rule over it and use it. In the last decade of the twentieth century a variety of evangelical Christians and Jews adopted Noah’s ark as a conceptual and theological vehicle to garner support for the Endangered Species Act.¹⁰ Noah’s fulfillment of God’s command to build an ark for the preservation of animal life presents an example of a godly man caring for animal life that God had placed within his keeping. According to Waltke, “the ark represents the social hierarchy God intends.”¹¹ Noah and his family tended to the needs of the animals confined to the ark during the Flood. The animals, in turn, appear to have submitted to their masters. Beyond human beings caring for the animals to preserve their lives, the means of preserving them bears testimony of God’s desire not to extinguish the kinds of animals He had created. If God commits Himself to their preservation, Waltke asks, “how much more must the creature honor that commitment?”¹²

In our own day some conservationists go to extremes that involve radical ecological activism. However, Noah’s example does not tend to such extremes. Noah and the ark depict a sane and careful conservation of the environment. Indeed, Waltke points to the immense amount of wood that Noah used to build the ark. Noah’s God-given mandate to preserve animal life

⁹ For a fuller discussion of the Noachic Covenant as a theological covenant, see Irvin A. Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants; The Noachic Covenant and the Priestly Covenant,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 173–89 (esp., 183–86).

¹⁰ The Jewish group goes under the moniker Noah Alliance, which maintains an internet website at <http://noahalliedvoices.org/resources/jewish.htm> (accessed 1 Sept 2012). The Christian equivalent is the Restoring Eden website: <http://restoringeden.org/getinvolved/protect/get-involved-in-endangered-species-efforts> (accessed 1 Sept 2012). See Jonathan Adler, ed., *Rebuilding the Ark: New Perspectives on Endangered Species Act Reform* (AEI Press, 2011).

¹¹ Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 302.

¹² *Ibid.*

superseded the preservation of the forests. Activists might call for an end to cutting down trees, but Noah's example calls for "responsible management."¹³

Human Vice-Regency

God mandated that mankind caringly rule over the earth and its creatures. Mankind's vice-regency comprises a major aspect of how we should exhibit the image of God. Dempster, in his *Dominion and Dynasty*,¹⁴ disappointingly skips over Genesis 8:20–9:21 in his survey of OT theology regarding the concept of dominion. He provides only a brief two-paragraph discussion of the use of "covenant" following the Flood.¹⁵ Instead of noting the significance of the covenant to mankind's dominion, Dempster gets distracted by the concept of the rainbow being God's discarded weapon "in the first unilateral disarmament treaty!"¹⁶ Nevertheless, Dempster recognizes that the global rule that the Creator expected Adam and Eve to exercise relates to their being made in God's image.¹⁷

Grasping the significance of the Noachic Covenant and its implications both theologically and ecologically, Bernhard Anderson of Princeton offers some significant insights in his *From Creation to New Creation*.¹⁸ In fact, he refers to the Noachic Covenant as "the ecological covenant."¹⁹ He commences with a caveat:

It would be wrong to suppose that one can simply turn to the Bible to find a solution to the ecological dilemma. When understood in the full context of Israel's creation theology, however, the biblical motif of human dominion over nature calls into question present practices of exploitation and summons people to a new responsibility.²⁰

In the post-Flood world, mankind receives a new mandate for ruling over creation (9:1–7). This mandate, in the words of Gentry and Wellums, indicates that "The human community must express obedient sonship in faithful love to the creator God and rule over the creation with humble Servanthood and responsible stewardship."²¹ According to Brueggemann, this rule, like the one given in 1:26, requires God's vice-regents "to bring the other creatures to fullness."²² Earlier in his commentary he explained exactly what he means by this "fullness." Mankind's rule

¹³ Ibid., 303. We must remember that the earth's forests were themselves about to be destroyed by the global flood, so it would be unwise to carry this argument too far. It would be possible, following this line of argumentation, to say, "Let's use up all of the forests—they're going to burn anyway along with all the earth when God destroys the present heavens and the present earth in judgment" (see 2 Pet 3:11–13).

¹⁴ Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Ibid., 72–73.

¹⁶ Ibid., 73. There is absolutely no biblical basis for inserting such a concept into the biblical text and it merely serves to demonstrate how some interpreters will go to extraordinary lengths to read the white spaces rather than the text itself.

¹⁷ Ibid., 59.

¹⁸ Bernhard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

¹⁹ Ibid., 25.

²⁰ Ibid., 131.

²¹ Gentry and Wellums, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 174.

²² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation (1982; repr., Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 83.

reflects the dominance of a caring shepherd king. Such dominion has nothing in common with exploitation or abuse. "It has to do with securing the well-being of every other creature and bringing the promise of each to full fruition."²³ The greatest example of a shepherd king is Jesus Himself, who taught that the one who rules must be one who serves. In fact, the shepherd even lays down his life for the sheep. "The human person is ordained over the remainder of creation but for its profit, well-being, and enhancement. The role of the human person is to see to it that the creation becomes fully the creation willed by God."²⁴

Divine Restoration as a Pattern for Human Management

The biblical text clearly implies a sense of divine order in the realms of environment (the reclamation of the land surface from the waters of the Flood and establishing boundaries for those waters; cf. Ps 104:9), animal life, and humanity. Returning to the creation ordinances provides stability and indicates a new beginning through which Noah and his family might continue to worship and serve God according to His righteous order. Such stability not only manifests God's own care for His creation, but also gives mankind a pattern of stewardship to be followed. No individual or group of individuals should seek to do anything that would disrupt the divinely established post-Flood order. Mankind's role as protector does not eliminate the use of natural resources for advancing human civilization, but it does demand that they act as conservators who preserve the resources, rather than allow them to be depleted more than necessary for maintaining the welfare of the human community. As Anderson explains,

Thus the special status of humankind as the image of God is a call to responsibility, not only in relation to other humans but also in relation to nature. Human dominion is not to be exercised wantonly but wisely and benevolently so that it may be, in some degree, the sign of God's rule over the creation.²⁵

A later illustration of this principle of conservation arises in Moses' instruction regarding the hunter and his prey in Deuteronomy 22:6–7 (NASU),

⁶ If you happen to come upon a bird's nest along the way, in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs, and the mother sitting on the young or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young; ⁷ you shall certainly let the mother go, but the young you may take for yourself, in order that it may be well with you and that you may prolong your days.

Interestingly, according to Walt Kaiser's tabulation,²⁶ these verses close the section of Moses' exposition of the sixth commandment regarding homicide (Deut 19:1–22:8). The reader is reminded that the Noachic Covenant also addresses the issue of homicide (Gen 9:5–6). One topic is related to the other. The extrapolation of the value of human life to apply the principle to the

²³ Ibid., 32.

²⁴ Ibid., 33.

²⁵ Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation*, 130.

²⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 129. Kaiser bases his configuration of the divisions on Stephen A. Kaufman, "The Structure of the Deuteronomic Law," *MAARAV* 1 (1978–79): 105–58. See, also, Eugene Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, NAC 4 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 31, *passim*; Gary H. Hall, *Deuteronomy*, College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2000), 31–32; and Michael A. Grisanti, "Deuteronomy," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., 13 vols., ed. by Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 610.

value of animal life anticipates the extrapolation by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount whereby he identifies angry words as a violation of the sixth commandment (Matt 5:21–22). In other words, the letter of the law does not express the totality of each statute's theological implications.²⁷ So, too, the divine mandate for repopulating the earth ought not to be read without understanding its implications beyond a physical expansion of the human population on the planet. The spirit of the mandate includes

- management of animal resources for sacrificial purposes,
- preservation of the constant climatic elements of the environment,
- recognition of the fear animals have for human beings,
- manifestation of the value of animal life used for food purposes,
- tilling the soil for the production of food products, and
- management of plant resources (e.g., forests) for the preservation of both human and animal life.

Conclusion

No matter how each one of us might choose to apply the implications of the Noachic Covenant, the biblical propositions are certainly applicable to environmental issues. Some will doubtless take the biblical mandate to extremes unsupported by the plain reading of Scripture. Others will ignore the biblical mandate, deeming it outmoded and old-fashioned. A rational and responsible middle road exists that it would behoove believers individually and corporately to walk.

As imitators of God (cf. Eph 5:1), we must also desire the preservation of life and pursue policies and actions that demonstrate our dedication to that task. In doing so, we must always keep in mind the higher value of human life, just as God revealed to Noah and his family in Genesis 9. As vice-regents on this planet, we must exploit (in a good sense)²⁸ the planet's resources for worship (more related to our buildings of worship rather than to sacrifices, thanks to the final sacrifice of Christ), for food, and for the preservation of life. This demands thoughtful and caring management of the environment, plant life, and animal life.

Fortunately, we in America live in an age of environmental awareness, despite the abuse heaped upon it by litterers and polluters. Unfortunately, we live in a land that is less aware, even seemingly oblivious, to the need for demonstrating a higher value on human life. Instead, we rebelliously ignore God's mandate for capital punishment and we slaughter unborn infants by the millions. These actions are not just irresponsible, they fly in the face of God and His direct demands. Preservation of the environment does not prohibit cutting down any trees and certainly does not prohibit the eating of meat. Paul wrote to Timothy, regarding abstaining from certain

²⁷ Grisanti, "Deuteronomy," 674 points to the statement in Deut 22:7 ("in order that it may go well with you and that you may prolong your days") as an indication that the stipulation regarding protecting a potential long-term source of food demonstrates "that some covenantal demands that at first glance might not seem far-reaching in fact have great importance."

²⁸ Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*, Mentor (Geanies House, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 230 states that "we human beings are supposed to employ earth's resources (exploit is not too strong a word) for our own service."

foods, “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim 4:4–5). We should take note of this theological truth as we sit down to our Thanksgiving season tables with their abundance of food.

Does the Noachic Covenant offer any information or instruction in regard to the issue of global warming? Yes, it does. First, we must remember that God has established the cycles of our climatic environment (Gen 8:22) and He declared that those cycles will continue under His control “while the earth remains.” Culver cites this text as evidence that God wills to preserve the earth. He goes on to state, “The garish threats of extinction proposed in the pages of the Sunday newspapers may safely be ignored, as also some of the less rational predictions of the environmentalists.”²⁹ Second, as vice-regents we should not act in any way that would cause unnecessary harm to the environment that might result in some form of abnormal variation in the climate. Extreme deforestation without proper management and preservation of adequate forests exemplifies one abuse needing correction. Air and water pollution should be kept to a minimum, even if neither has any substantial effect on global warming or global cooling.

Ultimately, the biblical mandate demands responsible management of our planet’s resources for worship and for the appreciation and preservation of life. May we each seek to glorify God, as imperfect as we are, in being caring stewards and vice-regents of the world with which God has gifted us.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.