



A SCIENCE & RELIGION COMMENTARY

GENESIS 1:22, 28

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22 God blessed [fish and birds], saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."

28 God blessed humankind, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

Genesis 1:28 is frequently referred to as the cultural or creation mandate, an interpretation that perceives in the text a divine command to populate the earth and bring it into submission. As so interpreted, there are no significant scientific overtones except insofar as submission might entail use of scientific knowledge to gain mastery over nature. Francis Bacon's famous maxim that 'Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed' is in this vein. One must study nature in order to make it do one's bidding.

The cultural/creation mandate interpretation is open to critique at two levels. On the procreative level, the enjoiner to fruitfulness and multiplication is not reserved for humans alone. The same language is addressed to fish and birds on the fifth day of creation, and while it is not expressly directed to terrestrial animals on the morning of the sixth day, it could easily be extended to them without exegetical error. Fruitfulness and the capacity to multiply are expectations of life in general, not just human life. Population growth of one species should not unduly inhibit or diminish the procreation of others.

There is also a textual critique regarding interpreting this text as a command. The verb forms used to express God's utterances in Genesis 1 (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 22, 24, 28) are a form of imperative known as jussive, but it is not a typical command. In fact, when coupled as it is in vv. 22 and 28 with the verb for blessing, the statement which follows is the content of the blessing. The best interpretation would be "God bless them by saying, Let them be fruitful and multiply . . ." In other words, God blesses life by placing within God's creatures a principle of procreation and fecundity which makes life to abound as a matter of course within nature.

In terms of contemporary biological and ecological sciences, two observations can be made. First, population dynamics have become the subject of scientific investigation since the time of Robert Malthus, with a corresponding dark side to the blessing mentioned in Genesis. The limits to population are resource limits; death and disease are the check on procreative potential. Mathematical modeling of population dynamics indicates that under differing conditions populations can rise exponentially, achieve a relative stasis, or operate chaotically, with significant fluctuations over short time frames.

Second, science has verified the human capacity to dramatically impact reproductive rates and the relative numbers of a given species. In other words, humans have the ability to diminish or extinguish the procreative principle that God implanted within creatures.

Preaching Suggestions

The first chapter of Genesis gives an impressive description of creation, especially its orderliness and beauty. God starts out so meticulously. Light and dark definitively separate day from night. Earth and water and air cleanly divide into land and ocean and firmament, each having their appointed place. God places sun, moon, and stars with such precision and regularity we keep time by them. All these nice, orderly touches are the work of a managerial God, an attention-to-details God, a God who likes things in their proper place.

And then the fifth day dawns. God turns to creation with a maniacal glint in the eye, waves a magic wand over wind and waves and says “let the waters teem . . .” God implants a blessing – a divine principle of fruitfulness, of fecundity. And suddenly now there is a potency of life implanted within creation by the words of blessings, and it means creation is ready to break out in life at any moment. The blessing of fecundity is the wild card in creation. A managerial God gives way to a maniacal God, a God who delights in a creation ready to find the slightest opening, the slightest window of opportunity and some form of life will find a way to get its foot in the door.

Annie Dillard’s chapter on fecundity in her Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* contains a myriad of examples. The preaching point of these texts falls solidly in the creation – fall – redemption pattern of human responsibility. God creates a blessed world slanted toward life and diversity. Human rebellion threatens

to turn the blessing into curse (for example, extinction and endangered species, unwanted pregnancies and abortions). Redeemed humanity commits itself to keeping the blessing a blessing.