Twenty years after the first earth day in 1970, the Bible is again in the middle of the ecological discussion. Instead of naming a man or woman of the past year, the first issue of *Time* magazine for 1989 named the “Endangered Earth” the “Planet of the Year,” with a cover photograph of artist Christo’s globe choked in plastic and tied up with twine. In the course of the lead article, Gen 1:28 is quoted, with the following comment:

> The idea of dominion could be interpreted as an invitation to use nature as a convenience. Thus the spread of Christianity, which is generally considered to have paved the way for the development of technology, may at the same time have carried the seeds of the wanton exploitation of nature that has often accompanied technological progress.\(^1\)

The introductory article in a special environmental issue of *Smithsonian* gives a partial quotation of the same biblical text. Wallace Stegner writes:

> Our sanction to be a weed species living at the expense of every other species and of Earth itself can be found in the injunction God gave to newly created Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.”\(^2\)

In his book on global warming, Bill McKibben reports:

> In fact, to the degree that our dominant Judeo-Christian tradition is seen as saying anything about nature, it is usually seen as antienvironmentalist, as elevating man above all others. The Genesis story, with its emphasis upon domination...ap-


pears the perfect rationale for cutting down forests, running roads through every wild place, killing off snail darters.\(^3\)

For those who have followed the discussion about the Bible and the environment since that first Earth Day, it seems indeed that we have heard this song before. The Judeo-Christian
tradition continues to be understood as anti-environmental, and the *locus classicus* for those making this charge continues to be the text about dominion in Gen 1.4

The focus of this essay will be on that “dominion” saying in Gen 1:26-28 in its context in Gen 1-11. What does “have dominion” mean in these chapters? What do they say about the relationship between humankind and the natural environment? And what does this mean for our own time, just past Earth Day II?

I. A DOMINION OF RESPONSIBILITY AND COMMONALITY

The events of the sixth day of creation are given the most space in the biblical account, springing the usual framework:

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures (*nephesh hayah*) of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind....God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground (*adamah*) of every kind....”

Then God said, “Let us make humankind (*adam*) in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them, 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.” (Gen 1:24-28; NRSV margin in 1:26)

The name given to the human species in this first creation account immediately links that species to the earth. The Hebrew *adam*, translated “humankind,” is a play on *adamah*, the word for ground (see also 2:7). This linkage could be expressed with Latin derivatives by saying that humans are made from humus. Or, with Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, earthlings are made of earth.

Gen 1:28 reports the first command given to humankind. It is striking that this command does not have to do with their relationship to God, nor with their relationship to other human beings. Rather, it has to do with the relationship of this first human pair to the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and to all life that lives on the earth. The earthlings are told to “have dominion” (Hebrew, *rdh*) over these creatures, indeed over “all the earth.”

The lexicons translate the Hebrew verb *rdh* as “have dominion, rule, dominate” (Brown-Driver-Briggs), “tread” (Joel 4:13), or “rule, dominate” (Koehler-Baumgartner). The verb occurs nineteen times in passages clear of textual difficulty. It may refer to the rule of a master over a hired servant (Lev 25:43, 46, 53), the rule

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4See my article, “What does it mean to 'have dominion over the earth’?” *dialog* 10 (1971) 221-223.
of chief officers over laborers (1 Kings 5:30; 9:23; 2 Chron 8:10), of one nation over another
(Lev 26:17; Num 24:19; Isa 14:2, 6; Ezek 29:15; Ps 68:28; Neh 9:28), or of a king over his
people (1 Kings 5:4; Ezek 34:4; Ps 72:8; Ps 110:2). Where the characteristics of the rule are
given, humane treatment is mentioned; the master is charged not to rule “with harshness” (Lev
25:43, 46, 53). Only in Gen 1:26 and 28 does the verb indicate rule over an object other than
people.

Most of the occurrences of rdh are in political contexts, having to do with the rule of a
king or the rule of one nation over another, which would be exercised through a king. Solomon
“had dominion” over the west Euphrates territory and the results of his rule were peace (shalom)
and safety for those ruled (1 Kings 4:24-25; Hebrew 5:4-5).

Ps 72 prays that the king in Israel “have dominion (rdh) from sea to sea” (v. 8). The
prayer asks that his rule be accompanied by prosperity (shalom, v. 3) and that righteousness and
peace (shalom, v. 7) abound. The king is to have special concern for the poor and needy and
disadvantaged (vv. 2-4; 12-14).

Ezekiel’s word in chapter 34 is directed against the kings (called “shepherds”) of Israel.
These politicians have been taking care of themselves, but, says the prophet, “with force and
harshness you have ruled (rdh)” (vv. 2-4). These kings are like shepherds who “have fed
themselves, and have not fed my sheep” (v. 8). In contrast to this prophetic indictment of the
faithless kings or “shepherds” of the nation is a picture of Yahweh the good shepherd. Yahweh
will seek out the lost, care for the injured and weak, and bring them home, where they will live in
peace (shalom) and security (vv. 11-31).

Thus when Gen 1 speaks about human beings exercising dominion over the earth and its
creatures, the language is drawn from the sphere of politics and the exercise of kingship as it
ought to be. This ideal model for the relationship between humankind (man and woman) and the
earth and its creatures is the king/people relationship. In passages where the same “have
dominion” verb occurs, the emphasis is on gentleness and on an active program of caring that
results in shalom. The first time humans are mentioned in the Bible, God regards them as royalty
(1:26). The first word spoken to the royal couple charges them with responsibility for the care of
the earth and its creatures, a caring that will lead to shalom (1:28).

Gen 1 also describes humans in terms of commonality with their natural environment,
especially with the animals. Animals and humans are both creatures of the sixth day. And both,
as Karl Barth once put it, are “referred to the same table for food” (vv. 29-30).

II. GEN 1-11: THE THEME CONTINUES

What does the remainder of the primeval history in Gen 1-11 say about the relationship
between humans and their natural environment? And how do these chapters help to understand
the charge to have dominion?

The second creation account in 2:4b-25 stresses the commonality between humans and
the rest of creation. The link between adam and adamah (1:25, 26) is explained: the earthling is
made from the ground or earth (the two terms are used as synonyms; 1:25 and 1:30). To get a
sense of the emphasis on human/earth linkage in this chapter, read through Genesis 2 substituting
“earthling” for “man” (adam in vv. 5, 7, 8, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25). The commonality
between humans and their
natural environment is also made explicit in the report that the trees and the animals are made from the same raw material as human beings (2:9, 19). The expression “living being” (nephesh hayah, 2:7) also relates the man to the animals, who are given that same designation in 1:24 (translated “living creatures”).

How should this earthling relate to the earth, the soil out of which he has come? The man is put in the garden “to till it and to keep it” (2:15). These two words describe the dual task of the farmer and of the entire society. The history of the techniques of agriculture may be summarized in the word “till” (literally, “work”). From the beginning, alongside the work of tilling has been the responsibility of “keeping” the land. This “keeping” is the same word used to describe the Lord’s caring relationship to a city (Ps 127:1; NRSV, “guard”) or to a people and an individual (Ps 121). The farmer and the community are called to till the land, and to care for it as well.

The Lord saw that the first man would be lonely on the earth, and that he ought to have a “helper as his partner” (2:18). The first attempt to provide companionship involved the making of animals and birds. These creatures are brought before the man, and he gives them names. The listings “beast of the field, birds of the air” and “cattle, birds of the air, beast of the field” recall the lists in Genesis 1:26 and 28. There it was said that the earthling was to “have dominion” over these creatures; here, since it is assumed that the name-giver has the ability to order, we see the working out of that exercising of dominion.

In sum: while the emphasis in Gen 2 is on human commonality with the earth and its creatures, the theme of responsibility for is evident in the charge to “keep” the earth and in the naming of the animals.

The commonality between the earthlings and the natural environment is evident in Gen 3. As an “animal of the field” (2:20; translated in 3:1 as “wild animal”), the serpent has been made of the same raw material as adam (2:19). In fact, communication between these two creatures is simply assumed! The ground is cursed and thus suffers because of human disobedience (3:17-18). This will not be the last time that the soil will suffer because of the action of humans! Finally, the human task is again stated in terms of tilling the ground and there is a double reminder of the earthling/earth relationship. The human was taken from the humus, and will one day return there (3:19, 23).

The “tilling the ground” theme introduced in chapter 2 continues in 4. Cain is a farmer, a “tiller of the ground” (4:2). Killing his brother affects not only his relationship to God (who punishes him) and to others (who reject him) but also to the land he has farmed. Cain is cursed “from the ground”! (4:11). It is as if the land that had provided him with sustenance has now turned against him and will no longer respond to his efforts. The killer can no longer be a tiller. The farmer will lose the farm.

The flood story in Gen 6-9 exemplifies the themes of both commonality and responsibility in its portrayal of the human relationship to the environment. Human beings and the animals are in this together; both are dependent for survival upon the ark and the food stored in it (6:21). The same verb describes the exit of both from the ark (“went forth,” 8:18-19). The covenant promising no more whole-earth floods is made with Noah and his later descendants (9:9), but also with every living creature (nephesh hayah) that is with them (vv. 10, 12, 15, 16, 17). It is, says the Lord,
a covenant “between me and the earth” (13).

The responsibility-for-earth-care theme is illustrated when God speaks to Noah and his family and charges them with rounding up the animals (6:19-20) and with getting them out of the ark (8:15-19). The animal list in 6:19-20 as well as in 7:14, 21 and 8:17 recalls the listing in Gen 1:26-28. Gen 1 gave earthlings the command to “have dominion” over “living creatures of every kind”; here again the story tells how that command is being carried out. For Noah and his family to “have dominion” over these creatures means to rescue them, to nurture them, and finally to set them free to roam upon the earth.

There is a side of the exercise of that dominion that is jarring. After the flood, animals may be sacrificed (8:20) and even eaten as food. Now the animals live in “fear and dread” of humans (9:1-7). Just as human sin had disrupted the relationship to the land (Gen 3:17-19; 4:10-12), so the relationship to the animals has now changed.

To summarize: the themes of responsibility for as well as commonality with the earth and its creatures, introduced in Gen 1, continue to be heard in the remainder of the primeval history. Gen 2 balances the emphasis of Gen 1 by placing special emphasis on what the earthling has in common with the earth and its creatures. The dominion theme is given dramatic illustration in the flood story, which shows the human family acting as responsible royalty when they rescue, nurture, and then set free “the birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

Brief mention may be made of two texts outside of Gen 1-11. Ps 8:6-8 speaks of human dominion over the creatures of the land, sky, and sea, using the verb ms/ instead of rdh. The psalmist considers the exercise of this dominion a gift of God (v. 6) for which the psalmist gives praise (vv. 1, 8). And Solomon’s prayer in Wisdom of Solomon 9:1-2 indicates that the traditional description of humans exercising dominion over other creatures extends at least into the first century B. C.

III. HEARING THE BIBLICAL ADDRESS: A CONNECTEDNESS OF CARE

In its teaching and preaching of justification by grace through faith, the church continues to sound a clear gospel word about God and humankind. In its call for justice and peace, the church is speaking and acting in regard to right relationships among members of the human family. But what about the relationship between humankind and the small planet we all share, together with the other creatures of the earth, sky, and sea?

The urgency of the care of the environment has been forced upon us by the alarming events of the past years.5 Theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann, Paul

5In addition to the works cited in the notes above, see State of the World 1990 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), produced by the Worldwatch Institute and presenting up-to-date information on global warming, water, air, the sea, solar power, and even a fascinating chapter on the bicycle, “vehicle for a small planet.” Note also Scientific American for September 1989, with the theme “Managing Planet Earth,” the special number of Mother Earth News for March/April 1990, and the current issues of E: The Environmental Magazine. The July/August 1990 issue of The Catholic World focuses on the theme, “Caring for the Endangered Earth,” and includes articles and bibliography. See, for example, “Spirituality and Ecology,” by Thomas Berry, which begins, “We have such a wonderful sense and feeling for the divine because we live in such a gorgeous world.” See also Berry’s eloquent statement, The Dream of the Earth (Sierra Club Books, 1988). C. Dean Freudenberger’s Global Dust Bowl: Can We Stop the Destruction of the Land before It’s Too Late? (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990) brings a global perspective,
Santmire, and Douglas John Hall have been focusing attention on the topic. The Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1983 introduced the theme, “Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation” into the ecumenical community. These topics were the major concern of the WCC’s World Convocation in Seoul, Korea, in March of 1990. The announced theme for the WCC’s assembly in Canberra, Australia, in February 1991 is “Come Holy Spirit—Renew the Whole Creation,” with the first subtheme, “Giver of Life—Sustain Your Creation.” The theme of the Lutheran World Federation assembly in Brazil in February of 1990 was “I have heard the cry of my people,” with one of the sub-themes, “...for a liberated creation.” The Presbyterian Eco-Justice Task Force has published a study, Keeping and Healing the Creation, that analyzes ecological problems and proposes “A Theology for Keeping and Healing.” Pope Paul’s homily for the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990, said that “peace demands of man a particular responsibility for all of creation.” The issue has given rise to a number of conferences and seminars in a variety of Christian traditions.

Despite the flood of publications from theologians and ecclesiastical committees on ecological themes, few studies deal with the biblical texts in their historical and literary contexts. Claus Westermann has reminded us that the first page of the Bible speaks about God and the birds, the fish, the forests, and the earth. “A God who is understood only as the god of humankind is no longer the God of the Bible.”

In view of the urgency of the ecological crisis, the time has come for the churches to consider what the Bible says about our connectedness to the natural world.
isolation; the works of Hall and Santmire, for example, deal with biblical materials but do not focus exegetically on the “dominion” theme.

14 *Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974) 176. Westermann’s is the best commentary for ecological issues; see also his other writings on the creation theme.

world and our calling to care for the earth. A careful listening to Genesis, the psalms, and the wisdom literature (for starters) would inform our thinking and invigorate our preaching and teaching. Such a listening would help us to understand the first word from God addressed to our species, on the first page of the Bible. That word addresses us as royalty, charging us to “have dominion” over the earth and its creatures and assigning us the responsibility for the care of this small and fragile planet we call home.15

15 I wish to thank my colleague, C. Dean Freudenberger, for reading through this manuscript and making a number of suggestions.
In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”, and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the expanse.” And God said, “Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after its kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so. And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after its kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after its kind: and God saw that it was good. And the evening and the morning were the third day. And God said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth: and it was so. And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth. Genesis continues by emphasizing the materiality of the world. The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters (Gen. 1:2). The nascent creation, though still formless, has the material dimensions of space (the deep) and matter (waters), and God is fully engaged with this materiality (wind from God swept over the face of the waters). No battle with the forces of chaos threatens to undo the creation. Later, when God chooses to share creative responsibility with human beings, we know that this is God’s choice, not a necessity. Whatever people may do to mar the creation or render the earth unfit for life’s fullness, God has infinitely greater power to redeem and restore.
Genesis 1 to 11 in particular, contain numerous important principles that have left their mark on world history and will remain meaningful until the end of the age. Several terms and expressions of the first chapters of God’s Word return in the last few chapters of the Revelation, which describes the ultimate goal of God’s dealings with the earth. After the initial description of the earliest history of mankind until the building of the tower of Babel, the book of Genesis focuses on the origins of. To create is used only for the original beginning of the heavens and the earth, the creation of animal life, and the creation of man (Gen. 1:1,21,27). The verbs to make and to form indicate the shaping of existing matter. (Genesis 1:11-12). On the third day God allows the earth to produce plants through germination (sprouting) and growth until seeds are produced. The Hebrew word dasha refers to a plant that sprouts from a seed until the seedling turns green.12 This verb tells us that God used processes identical to what we see on the earth today. Many people believe that the text about day 4 says that God created the Sun, moon and stars on the fourth day. This is not what the text actually says, so let's read it again. Then God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years; (Genesis 1:14). and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth"; and it was so. The universal history of Genesis 1-11 portrays God’s relationship to the world and to humankind with broad and bold theological strokes that transverse a landscape rich in literary detail and historical texture.[1] I refer to these chapters as universal history rather than the traditional primeval history because the content is so clearly intended to provide a â€œuniversal openingâ€ that serves. In Genesis 1, God speaks and order reigns in the heavens and the earth. In Genesis 11, the Lord takes from humans the ability to speak to one another and disorder and disarray begin to characterize the human community. In between these narratives; there is never an overt decision by God to give humans the ability to speak. Genesis 1:12 The earth produced vegetation: seed-bearing plants according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. Genesis 2:5 Now no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth, nor had any plant of the field sprouted; for the L ORD God had not yet sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to cultivate the ground. Genesis 2:9,16 And out of the ground made the L ORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil Psalm 1:3 And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. Lexicon.