Liberation in the Midst of Futility and Destruction: Romans 8:19-22 and the Christian Vocation of Nourishing Life

by

Presian Renee Burroughs

Date: May 20, 2014

Approved:

Susan Eastman, Supervisor

________________________
Susan Eastman

________________________
Douglas Campbell

________________________
Ellen Davis

________________________
Norman Wirzba

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology in the Divinity School of Duke University

2014
ABSTRACT

Liberation in the Midst of Futility and Destruction: Romans 8:19-22 and the Christian Vocation of Nourishing Life

by

Presian Renee Burroughs

Date: May 20, 2014

Approved:

Susan Eastman, Supervisor

________________________

Susan Eastman

________________________

Douglas Campbell

________________________

Ellen Davis

________________________

Norman Wirzba

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology in the Divinity School of Duke University

2014
ABSTRACT

In an era of ecological upheaval that has led some scientists to declare that human activity has inaugurated a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, the apocalyptic theology of the Apostle Paul speaks a timely word of ethical and practical import. In his letter to the Roman Christians, Paul calls for a conversion of behavior that resonates with and lends theological substantiation to the urgent calls of ecologists, climatologists, and others concerned for the wellbeing of the entire ecosphere. With a fundamental belief in the God who creates, sustains, and resurrects life, Paul’s message in Romans 8:19-22 urges Christians to align their lives with the liberation that God intends for creation and that Jesus Christ has inaugurated through his life, death, and resurrection.

This dissertation examines Rom 8:19-22 in its literary, theological, imperial, and ecological contexts in order to illuminate the implications of Paul’s thought for contemporary Christian living. Laying a biblical and theological foundation, the first chapter delineates the ways in which Old Testament texts assume a “relational pyramid” in which Israel, the nations, and nonhuman creation relate with one another and with God in ways that affect the wellbeing of all. In this vision, the conditions and destinies of human and nonhuman members of creation interdepend. Presupposing such a view of the world, Paul indicates throughout Romans, and especially in Rom 8:19-22, that creation’s slavery to destruction results from human sin and that its liberation depends upon God’s liberation and glorification of humanity, an argument developed in my second chapter. While this interpretation parallels common understandings of Rom 8:19-22, the frequently muted voice of creation is magnified when we recognize that the nonhuman creation too acts as subject, aligning itself with God’s purposes, expectantly awaiting the
resurrection of humanity, and collectively groaning and laboring towards that resurrection, the apocalypse of the “sons of God.” Chapter three turns to relevant features of ancient Rome’s religious, political, and agricultural traditions. Like Paul, the Roman imperial mythos maintained that human activity affected the health of creation. Yet, in contrast to Paul, it declared that Augustus, the divinely favored son of god, had established an age of peace and had brought fertility and abundance to the natural world. This “Golden Age” depended upon military power and the exploitation of conquered people and land, as an investigation of the Roman grain trade reveals. By placing Roman rhetoric and practice in conversation with Paul, chapter four demonstrates how Paul’s vision of liberation subverts the Roman imperial mythos. The Epistle to the Romans insists that the empire’s practices are among those that enslave creation to destruction and that the fulfillment of God’s liberation will be established by Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, who will share his inheritance with his siblings, the children of God from all nations. In accord with their allegiance to Christ, his followers should live in ways that honor their relationships with human neighbors and also alleviate the destruction of creation, promote the flourishing of life and biodiversity, contribute to the wellbeing of creation’s vulnerable members, and render thanksgiving to God. Exhibiting Paul’s practical theology of creation and its powerful political bite, the fifth chapter examines and criticizes American industrial agriculture, particularly the growing of wheat in the Great Plains. In ways that parallel the Roman imperial myth, modern agriculture presents itself as liberating the world from famine through industrial power even as it masks the ways in which it binds creation to destruction. Inspired by the message of Romans, however, Christians find themselves called to unveil the powers of oppression and
nurture sustainable communities of liberty, peace, and flourishing in harmony with creation. They may begin to do this by supporting local, organic, and perennial forms of agriculture with the hope that farmers may rely less on fossil fuels, toxic chemicals, and expensive seeds. In so doing, humans presage the liberty and flourishing of the New Creation as they mitigate the epoch-shifting and life-destroying events of climate change and species extinction.
To my father, Steven Smyers, and his namesake,
Justus Steven Burroughs
CONTENTS

FIGURES ix

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS x

INTRODUCTION PERCEIVING THE WORLD 1

CHAPTER 1 GOD'S CREATION, GOD'S PEOPLE, & INHERITANCE OF THE COSMOS 44

CHAPTER 2 CHRIST JESUS, GOD'S CHILDREN, AND THE LIBERATION OF CREATION 81

CHAPTER 3 THE EMPEROR, THE GOLDEN AGE, AND NATURAL ABUNDANCE 148

CHAPTER 4 PAUL VERSUS EMPIRE ON THE STATE OF CREATION 188

CHAPTER 5 THE BODY, THE BREAD, AND THE BROKEN CREATION 218

BIBLIOGRAPHY 276

BIOGRAPHY 286
FIGURES

1.1. A Relational Pyramid 48

1.2. A Relational Pyramid with a Messiah-King as Mediator 63

5.1. “Competent Threshing Here Will Hasten the Thrashing Over There,” 1918 235

5.2. Paul Stahr, “Be Patriotic – sign your country’s pledge to save the food,” 1914-1918 237

5.3. Alexandre Hogue, *Erosion No. 2 – Mother Earth Laid Bare*, 1936 241
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I now stand at the end of an era – a personal era of longing and travail that, at moments, appeared to have no end. I find myself indescribably grateful to many.

Chief among those in Durham who have assisted me in my scholarly journey is Dr. Susan Eastman, my dissertation advisor. She has pressed me to hone my exegetical skills and has encouraged me to persevere in this labor, remarkably doing all this with amazing cheerfulness and timeliness. With wisdom and insight, Susan has helped me make sense of the jumbled mess of my thoughts at critical moments. She is truly a life giving “doctor-mother.”

Douglas Campbell has similarly shaped my thinking and sharpened my academic skills throughout my degree programs. Although this dissertation does not thoroughly engage his work, it assumes much of Douglas’s trenchant theological and hermeneutical perspectives. When I have disagreed with him (especially in my interpretation and use of Romans 1), I have done so with gratitude to him for taking pains in attempting to rectify me, as he might say.

Ellen Davis is an exemplary pedagogue, giving consistent attention to the details of the biblical text in her lectures and providing thorough feedback on written assignments. Although she was on sabbatical during the final year of this project, she read my chapters thoroughly and provided me with the encouragement I needed to complete it with confidence. Her work in the ecological interpretation of the bible has paved the way for my own multidisciplinary approach to the New Testament. I hope I might someday imitate her eloquence.
Norman Wirzba repeatedly bore with patience the times when I and the other Pauline scholars responded to his theological queries with an abrupt protest: “But that wasn’t Paul’s concern.” He kindly and persistently pressed me to consider the practical and theological implications of how industrial agriculture functions today. I only wish I could have done justice to his concerns and followed his suggestions for this iteration of my work. I anticipate shoring up the weaknesses of this project as best as I can in future revisions.

In addition to my excellent committee members, the faculty of Duke University, including Richard Hays, Joel Marcus, Stephen Chapman, Anathea Portier-Young, Fred Edie, Warren Smith, Stanley Hauerwas, Kavin Rowe, Melvin Peters, Ed Sanders, and Joshua Sosin, has kindly assisted me in my academic endeavors and contributed to my scholarly development. I thank them for their stimulating discussions and shining pedagogical examples. Additionally, I had the privilege of learning from Michael Gorman during his semester as a visiting scholar at Duke. He has become a mentor and a true friend. His gracious spirit, kindness, and honesty – in addition to his insights into the Christian scriptures and faith – are gifts to me and countless others. And before I attended Duke I learned the meaning of academic labor from another mentor and friend, Daniel Wallace, who allowed me to assist him in his text critical work in Münster, Germany.

My academic pursuits would not have been possible without the financial and professional support of the John Wesley Fellowship, a program of A Foundation for Theological Education (AFTE). I thank AFTE’s donors and board members for believing in my potential and investing in my work. By God’s grace, I shall endeavor to repay their generosity by faithfully teaching and embodying the truth of the gospel.
Although Duke Divinity School and Durham blessed me with too many friends to name, two among them stand out as particularly important to the successful “birth” of this dissertation: Celia Wolff and Laura Levens. They commiserated with my groaning and attended many hours of what seemed at the time to be hopeless laboring through coursework, language learning, and preliminary exams. It was a pleasure to rejoice with them in Durham after my defense.

Before my doctoral work at Duke, I received inspiration for this project from Judy Hartley. She mobilized efforts in establishing a Creation Care Team at Northside United Methodist Church in Atlanta, GA, during my time there as Local Missions Coordinator. In the process, I conceived of the idea that would eventually grow into this project. The opportunity of serving with Judy, in turn, led me to work at Georgia Interfaith Power & Light where I had the privilege of working with talented and devoted persons of faith towards the liberation of creation from the destructive forces of global warming.

In the final months of my labor, I received the encouragement and support of new friends in Berkeley, CA. The faculty – especially Dan Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, Susanna Singer, Mark Richardson, Alicia Vargas, and Steed Davidson – and students of Church Divinity School of the Pacific and Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary kindly listened as I attempted to crystalize my thoughts and provided me with new insights in the process. They also gave me inexpressible delight as I watched my husband flourish in his first year of teaching at their lovely institutions. I also thank them for modeling true Christian hospitality as they patiently doted on our active and curious son, Justus.

xii
I have been blessed for nearly two decades with the faithful and gracious friendship of four talented women: Ruthanne Crapo, Laurie Norris, Tiffany Clark, and Christa Agiro. Their wise counsel and Christ-like compassion and character have sustained me through seemingly insurmountable difficulties. I thank them for their enduring kindnesses.

Finally and most fundamentally, my family has made this endeavor possible. The love, talent, and care of my mother, Linda Smyers, has motivated me to strive for greater achievements and at times has talked me into saner aspirations. The tireless encouragement of my kind mother-in-law, Cindy Burroughs, has cheered me. My step-mother, Rita, and my father, Steve Smyers, have helped me achieve this goal with their decades of financial and emotional support. It is to my beloved farming father and his namesake, Justus Steven, that I dedicate this work.

Assisting me day in and day out, my dear husband of nearly a decade, Brad Burroughs, has himself endured severe labor pains as he has worked with me and supported me through my degree programs (MDiv and ThD) and the commencement of my academic career. I gain glimpses of God’s love through Brad’s steadfast affection and self-giving service everyday. It is my hope that I might similarly love and support him the rest of our lives.

Thanks be to God, Creator of Heaven and Earth.
INTRODUCTION

PERCEIVING THE WORLD

It’s the End of the World as We Know It. – R.E.M.¹

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly but on account of the one subjecting it in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from the slavery of destruction into the liberty of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation is collectively groaning and laboring even till now. – Paul the Apostle²

The world is on the cusp of a new era. Although Christians may hope this era will be marked by God’s glorious and peaceful dominion – the Kingdom of God, the New Creation – geologists tell us it will be an era marked by human presence and exploitation.

Since the nineteenth century,

[T]he sum of human activity through deforestation, agriculture, mining, transport, waterway ‘re-plumbing’, coastal trawling and climate change has produced an effect equivalent to the level of a geological climate event, such as seen in the transition between the Pleistocene and the Holocene.³

Humanity’s industrial ingenuity over the past two hundred years has ushered the earth into a new geological epoch: the Holocene has ended; the Anthropocene has begun.⁴

The Apostle Paul also perceived that he lived during an anthropogenic shift of epochs. He understood this shift, however, according to theological rather than geological

¹ R.E.M., It’s the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine) (I.R.S. Records).
² Romans 8:19-22. All scripture translations are author’s own unless otherwise noted.
⁴ In a recent issue devoted to the topic, the articles of Philosophical Transactions: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences provide increasing evidence that “anthropogenic influence on Earth, albeit only briefly sustained (to date) on geological time scales, is likely to have significant and long-lasting consequences. The Anthropocene, on current evidence, seems to show global change consistent with the suggestion that an epoch-scale boundary has been crossed within the last two centuries” [ibid., 840.]. The ways in which humans have changed the Earth’s sediment record, in particular, lead some scientists to designate contemporary history as part of a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene.
categories. The Old Age, marked by sin and death, was about to end. The New Age, marked by righteousness and life, had begun and was about to be established in full. For Paul, both ages were anthropogenic in nature, with Adam having introduced the first and Jesus Christ the second. Theologically speaking, we continue to live in both ages simultaneously. The effects of the Old Age exercise their powers over the world even as the Spirit of God pours out life-restoring power upon God’s creation. But we wait for that decisive moment when Jesus shall return to earth in glory, God’s people are resurrected, and the peaceful New Creation is consummated.

For this time of transition – a transition from the Old Age to the New, from the Holocene to the Anthropocene – we find three theological themes in Rom 8:19-22 that guide us towards the New Creation even in the midst of our contemporary ecological crisis. First, Romans as a whole and chapter 8 in particular suggest that the apocalyptic event of Jesus the Messiah has begun a liberative process that encompasses all of humanity and the rest of creation. Humanity’s liberation depends upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Firstborn from the dead, and shall ultimately be experienced when he and the Spirit of God resurrect all his siblings. The rest of creation shall receive its full liberty during this apocalyptic event, the resurrection of humanity. The preliminary liberation that human and other-than-human creation can enjoy between Christ’s resurrection and the resurrection of God’s children, however, graciously flows from the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit.

Second, Rom 8:19-22 demonstrates the theological assumption that, for Paul, human redemption cannot be separated from the redemption of all creation. Rather, as announced by Paul and earlier Jewish writings, the demise as well as the liberation of
humanity and the rest of creation integrally intertwine. Thirdly, the telos of God’s
redemption of humanity and the rest of creation brings life and liberty – liberty from sin,
futility, destruction, and death and liberty for service to God. In light of these theological
points, Rom 8:19-22 summons Christians to walk in line with the life-filled and liberative
New Creation that God has already begun in Christ and continues to establish by the
Spirit.

In order to elucidate these theological points, this dissertation brings into
correspondence four areas of research: biblical studies, historical investigation, ecology, and
ecological theology. Although other recent monographs examine Rom 8:19-22 in its
Jewish theological context and several articles consider it in relation to the Roman
imperial context, I here situate Rom 8:19-22 in both settings. My purpose in doing so is
to assist modern readers to hear Paul’s message about creation in its theological richness
and with its political bite. One aspect of Paul’s political bite, I shall argue, concerns the
ecological realities of the ancient Mediterranean. Since a primary role of the Roman
emperor was to secure and provide grain for the enormous urban population of Rome, the
imperial grain trade and the propaganda of a renewed Golden Age at the hands of the
emperor become key topics for us to consider as we delve into the historical context of
Romans. The empire portrayed its political dominion and the abundance it procured as

---

5 Two other monographs exist that consider Rom 8:19-22 in relation to ecology, but each primarily
describes the possible Old Testament and intertestamental sources behind Rom 8 [Harry Alan Hahne, The
Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Nature in Romans 8.19-22 and Jewish Apocalyptic Literature
(New York: T & T Clark, 2006); Olle Christoffersson, The Earnest Expectation of the Creature: The
Flood-Tradition as Matrix of Romans 8:18-27 (Stockhold, Sweden: Almqist & Wiksell International, 1990).] Articles interpreting Rom 8:19-22 in relation to their imperial context and in relation to ecological
realities include: Robert Jewett, “The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Reading Rom 8:18-23
within the Imperial Context,” in Paul and the Roman Imperial Order, ed. Richard A. Horsley (New York:
Trinity Press International, 2004) and Jeremy Punt, “Negotiating Creation in Imperial Times (Rm 8:18-
30),” HTS Theological Studies 69, no. 1 (2013).
beneficial to Rome and, more relevantly, a sign of the restored Golden Age even though the grain trade on which this abundance depended deleteriously affected colonized lands and people. We as Paul’s interpreters encounter something of an interpretive bridge between ancient Rome and modern America as we investigate America’s own agricultural, social, and ecological realities. Paul’s implicit critique of imperial lifestyles and worldviews and his explicit theological and ethical instruction to his audience provide us with a “moral vision” by which we might assess and redirect contemporary Christian living. Ultimately, the theological and contextual reading of Rom 8:19-22 espoused in these pages directs us to align our agricultural endeavors and eating practices with God’s intended and inaugurated liberation of creation.

Establishing a strong foundation on which to build my interpretation, this introduction summarizes the central aspects of our current ecological crisis as these result from human activity (0.1); key methodological assumptions I bring to the interpretation of Rom 8:19-22, including the political character of Paul’s letter and the analogical nature of appropriating scripture’s message for practical life today (0.2); the likely purposes of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome and the social, ethnic, and religious characteristics of his addressees (0.3); and the contributions of four recent eco-ethical interpretations of Rom 8:19-22 as a means of catapulting us into the details of this text (0.4).

---

0.1 THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT: ECOLOGY’S CONTRIBUTION

Although people – and all living things – have always depended upon the earth’s resources to grow, live, and reproduce, the particular ways in which many Americans now consume resources are qualitatively and quantitatively different from previous generations and nations. With the increase of powerful technologies, the fragmentation of society, and the decline in moral constraints to the accumulation and use of wealth in the United States, the consumption of natural resources has reached unprecedented and unsustainable limits. Many scientists argue that the present rates of consumption of the earth’s resources are irreversibly destructive to global and local ecosystems, which have led the earth into a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. More than ever in human history, modern industrial society has enslaved creation to destruction.

Fueling this destruction is an uninformed (or, more likely, misinformed) and relatively unrestrained consumer mentality that perceives all products as equally valid. Typical Americans do not think twice about buying a tomato in January, a banana in New York City, or a lobster in Iowa. We are captive to a culture and an industrial food system that coerces us to buy food that is not locally grown or in season. The ecological cost of a food system dependent on non-local and out-of-season foods that travel hundreds if not thousands of miles on vehicles burning fossil fuels is exorbitant, unsustainable, and ecologically destructive.

---

A non-local and industrial food system that masks the origins of its products also destroys the wellbeing of many of the world’s most vulnerable people. The apparently “innocent” purchase of a banana arises from and perpetuates socially and ecologically deleterious factors:

Banana workers in Central America were able, after decades of bloody struggle, to obtain union representation and a higher (but still low) standard of living and decent working conditions. These gains, have, of late, been undercut as banana plantations in Ecuador have come into production. Ecuador has few protections for organized labor and almost no union presence. The exploitation that results means that bananas are exported at a much lower cost.9

In addition to the workers’ unjust wages, this situation places increasing demand and stress upon Ecuadoran wilderness. The simple purchase of bananas entangles people in a disgusting yet often invisible web of poisonous economic and ecological realities.

The ways in which we produce and procure food today have contributed extensively to the ecological disease of global climate change. Most scientists recognize a connection between the phenomenon of global climate change – more specifically described as a global warming of 1 degree Fahrenheit since 1970 – and the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.10 The major air pollutants, having magnified by two-thirds the atmosphere’s “natural greenhouse effect,” come from the burning of fossil fuels.11 Humans are the first and only creatures to mine and drill for these nonrenewable fuels and burn them at ever increasing rates. They alone stand among God’s creatures as culpable for global warming.

---

9 Ibid., 185.
11 Northcott, 3.
The burning of such fuels directly supports privileged styles of living. It takes fossil fuels to heat and air condition homes; run computers; burn light bulbs; drive vehicles; transport food long distances; prepare and store food; provide telecommunications; produce merchandise, clothing, and buildings; and the list goes on. Such lifestyles of luxury and their dependence on fossil fuels have dire consequences for our global home as they contribute dramatically to the constant increase of greenhouse gasses and other pollutants in waters, soils, and air. Moreover, the structure of American communities and our standards of living drive our common journey into ecological degradation. Many Americans choose to live in suburbs several miles away from their workplaces and so are mostly dependent on some form of fossil-fuel-burning transportation. These people often do not grow their own food although they may live on arable land. They depend on farmers for their daily bread, their nutrition. However, most farmers in this country have converted to large cash crops to be sold to food processing plants. Huge quantities of particular crops, in turn, must travel from widely dispersed farms to centralized processing and packaging plants (with the packages often consisting of petroleum-based plastics). The sanitized, processed, and packaged products then travel yet again to grocery stores all over the country. Fresh fruits and vegetables also journey—frequently in refrigerated vehicles—hundreds of miles from agricultural

---

12 Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 162-163. Davis provides hopeful examples of the ways in which urban communities are beginning to grow their own foods. She goes on to suggest: “Those of us who live in metropolitan areas now face the challenge of learning to accept gladly the kind of compact dwelling spaces, centered growth, and mixed usage—combining homes, commerce, offices, and gardening in the same neighborhood—that will enable us to preserve open lands” [ibid., 163.].
centers (mostly in California and South America) to the thousands of urban, suburban, and rural grocery stores all over this country.

Stan Rowe highlights the ecological costs to wilderness of North America’s consumer lifestyle. “More than seventy threats to wilderness parks have been identified, most originating outside park boundaries: acid rain, mining, air and water pollution from pulp mills, urban encroachment, roads, sour-gas wells, deforestations, overgrazed rangelands, till agriculture, to name a few.”¹³ But we see the loss of wilderness in developing countries as well when, in order to feed, clothe, and shelter privileged foreigners, the land of subsistence farmers is confiscated for agribusiness. Consequently, the local people resort to clearing and farming “virgin” forests. Michael Northcott illustrates the complexity of this consumer network and its destruction of land, declaring, “When we buy coffee or tea, or tropical fruits, we buy them from Western companies who in turn buy them from landowners who keep millions of peasants poor and landless, who then migrate to slash and burn the forest whose loss we mourn.”¹⁴

Not only is the ecological crisis a result of what resources we use (and, correlatively, what pollutants we thereby release) but also a result of the vast quantities we consume. Many scientists agree that the U.S. and the rest of the world are facing limited and possibly insufficient resources for future generations of people and nonhuman species. Lester Brown summarizes some of the deleterious effects overconsumption imposes upon the world:

¹⁴ Northcott, 20.
We are cutting trees faster than they can regenerate, overgrazing rangelands and converting them into deserts, overpumping aquifers, and draining rivers dry. On our cropland, soil erosion exceeds new soil formation, slowly depriving soil of its inherent fertility. We are taking fish from the ocean faster than they can reproduce. We are releasing carbon dioxide (CO\textsubscript{2}) into the atmosphere faster than nature can absorb it, creating a greenhouse effect. As atmospheric CO\textsubscript{2} levels rise, so does the earth’s temperature. Habitat destruction and climate change are destroying plant and animal species far faster than new species can evolve, launching the first mass extinction since the one that eradicated the dinosaurs 65 million years ago.\textsuperscript{15}

As Brown implies, the consumption of fish or tree products is not problematic in and of itself. Rather, the ecological trouble comes when and after we have consumed too much.

As we extract plants, animals, minerals, and all types of living and nonliving things from the earth, we harm the natural balance of eco-systems and decrease the flourishing and variety of life God has created. Depicting the “balance of nature” as a biotic pyramid, Aldo Leopold argues, “the stability of the system proves it to be a highly organized structure. Its functioning depends on the co-operation and competition of its diverse parts.”\textsuperscript{16} Ecological stability rests on biological diversity, and “[a] thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”\textsuperscript{17} When we change one part of the ecosystem, the other parts are put in distress. Thus, “[a] healthy landscape cannot be judged in terms of the health of a limited number of species, but rather depends on the well-being of the whole, which includes each species in its relation to others over an extended period of time.”\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} Brown, Plan B: Rescuing a Planet under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble, 3.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 262.
However, American overconsumption depends on unsustainable uses of natural resources, especially in the production of food. Although healthy soil is the essential foundation of the biotic pyramid and the key ingredient to ecological stability, Americans have pushed their lands to overproduce in order to feed over-consumptive habits. One particularly egregious example of overconsumption is that people in the West receive, on average, 25% of their caloric intake from meat instead of vegetables. Yet, the earth can support such a diet for only 2.8 billion people rather than the earth’s roughly 7 billion, making this diet patently unsustainable and unjust.\(^{19}\) Nevertheless, agribusinesses underwrite this overextension of the earth’s carrying capacity through high-input and exploitative agricultural practices.

Wes Jackson describes the immediately “productive” but ultimately destructive practices of agribusiness, stating,

> U.S. government policies in the early 70’s under agriculture secretary Earl Butz encouraged fence-row-to-fence-row farming. Thousands of miles of shelter belts were pushed out, conservation projects of long standing were plowed and planted. In western Iowa, erosion leaped twenty-two percent in this short time.\(^ {20}\)

Industrial agriculture, though now more wary of topsoil loss, continues to sacrifice the holistic health of the ecosystem for the short-term gain of wealth through intensive, additive means. Wirzba explains:

> [A]gribusiness farmers assault the earth with poisons, fertilizers, and heavy equipment so as to “ensure” maximum crop yield. This capitalistically intensive form of farming is destructive of the soil and water upon which

\(^{19}\) Northcott, 27. Northcott also explains, “The United Nations Population Fund estimates that world food production can sustainably (that is without soil erosion, desertification, ground-water depletion, etc.) feed around 5.5 billion people with an adequate calorific intake if everyone was on a vegetarian diet.”

all farming depends. . . . These costs cannot be absorbed for long, and so agribusiness farming cannot be maintained over the long term.\footnote{Wirzba, 74. See also Northcott, 27.}

This brief introduction to the ecological conditions of our global home delves into highly complex and tangled factors. Chapter five shall further elucidate the ways in which industrial agriculture and modern American patterns of consumption perpetuate ecological degradation. By means of Rom 8:19-22 and the Jewish theological heritage on which Paul’s epistle stands, ethical criteria by which we might assess these anthropogenic forms of destruction shall be deployed in chapters four and five. Yet, we might ask how one develops such ethical criteria. To that thorny issue we now turn.

0.2 THE WORLD AS WE INTERPRET IT: AN ANALOGICAL METHODOLOGY

Since the focus of this study is directed towards relating Paul’s message in Rom 8:19-22 to contemporary Christian life in an ecologically threatened world, an interpretive process is necessary that relates Paul’s world (both actual and perceptual) to present-day realities. Such a process helps us recognize similarities as well as dissimilarities between the first century and the twenty-first century. Proceeding on the assumption that interpretation depends on a comparison of a text’s world and our world, the method employed in this dissertation is analogical and multidisciplinary. For, “[t]o ‘understand’ any text is to discover analogies between its words and our experience, between the world that it renders and the world that we know.”\footnote{Hays, The Moral Vision of the New Testament, 298. Paul Ricoeur similarly states, “the interpretation of the Book and the interpretation of life correspond and are mutually adjusted” [Paul Ricoeur, Essays on Biblical Interpretation, ed. Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 52.]. See also, Ernst}
A common strategy for interpreting biblical literature involves a study of the historical, social, political, and religious contexts surrounding and permeating the piece of literature. These contexts function to illuminate and create meanings, both for the original audiences and modern ones. This holistic context of a biblical book, therefore, influences the interpretation of a text at any particular historical moment. I believe it is especially important to attend to the moment of the text’s origin and reception since the lived realities surrounding a text’s creation and initial reception will assist us in understanding the author’s gospel message. Richard Hays argues similarly, stating:

The more accurately we understand the historical setting of 1st-century Palestine, the more precise and faithful will be our understanding of what the incarnate Word taught, did, and suffered. The more we know about the Mediterranean world of Greco-Roman antiquity, the more nuanced will be our understanding of the ways in which the NT’s epistles summoned their readers to a conversion of the imagination.

This dissertation focuses much of its attention, then, on elucidating Paul’s summons to a conversion of the imagination in light of the new, liberative reality of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, a reality that confronted his own world and continues to confront the world today.


23 Ernst Conradie suggests seven factors that ought to attend the study of the bible, including: “a) the world ‘behind’ the text, b) the text itself, c) the world ‘in front of’ the text, d) the contemporary context, e) the rhetorical context within which interpretation takes place, f) the so-called world ‘below’ the text (ideological distortions) and g) the act of contemporary appropriation” [Conradie: 305.]

24 This is not to say that the original context and meaning of a text (as reconstructed by a present-day biblical scholar!) are the sole arbiters of truth. I do not believe interpretations that did not or do not consider the text’s original context are invalid. However, I do think that a text’s original meaning and situation have something to contribute to a faithful reading of the text.

I would argue that in addition to considering social, historical, political, and religious aspects of the first century, biblical scholars ought to incorporate ecological characteristics of the time period, as best as they can know them, into their interpretations. Not only will attention to ecological conditions illuminate our appreciation of the bible’s original setting, it will provide that much more fodder for an analogical reading of the text for today’s ecological crisis. In essence, the more we know about the whole context of a biblical book and its initial reception, the more we can recognize analogies between the book’s original *Sitz im Leben* and our own, between the author’s original liberating good news and our own.

However, the process of establishing analogies between Paul’s context and our own does not lead directly to theological principles, let alone ethical mandates. A great deal of discernment and interpretation guides the movement from biblical exegesis to ecological ethics. We therefore need guideposts to illuminate our interpretive paths. In his essay entitled “Mapping the Field: Approaches to New Testament Ethics,” Richard Hays outlines six basic schools of thought in NT ethics. Although each of the six perspectives is helpful for understanding ethical readings of the NT, we will only delineate two of them for our purposes here.

The first relevant reading strategy is called “cultural critique of ideologies in the New Testament.”26 This strategy starts from a hermeneutic of suspicion and applies “some sort of intuitive or experientially-based knowledge of ‘ethics’ ” to the interpretation of the bible so that certain scriptural concepts or assumptions are discarded.

---

or re-construed. As we might expect, eco-ethical interpretations of the bible integrate – even if implicitly – insights from the ecological sciences, making use of modern scientific experiences of ecosystems and their understandings of ecosystem health and activities. David Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate identify three varieties of ideological criticism among those concerned with an ecological interpretation of the bible. The three sets of readers stand at different points along the spectrum of suspicion. The first group, “Resistance Type A,” suspects the bible of ecological maleficence and resists it on behalf of creational health. Such readers employ ecological teachings from outside the bible in order to establish a more ecologically sensitive ethic for Christians today. The second group, “Readings of Recovery,” suspects the bible itself very minimally and instead suspects the history of interpretation as promoting ecologically deleterious teachings and practices. Thus,

---

27 Ibid., 11. The Earth Bible project stands as an important example of recent ecological interpretations that apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to the biblical text. Ernst Conradie explains the approach of the Earth Bible project as critiquing the “anthropocentrism” of the bible but also retrieving liberative texts that point toward eco-justice [Conradie: 309]. Six interpretive principles guide this process: (1) “The universe, Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth / value”; (2) “Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival”; (3) Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice”; (4) “The universe, Earth and all its components, are part of a dynamic cosmic design within which each piece has a place in the overall goal of that design”; (5) “Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners, rather than rulers, to sustain a balanced and diverse Earth community”; (6) “Earth and its components not only suffer from injustices at the hands of humans, but actively resist them in the struggle for justice” [ibid., 310]. Conradie suggests that the Earth Bible principles function as a “small dogmatics” for ecological interpretation of the bible [ibid., 311]. In stark contrast to how I approach the interpretive task, the six principles avoid Creator / creation language in order to avoid assumptions about God and God’s existence so that people of any faith perspective can participate in the Earth Bible project [ibid., 311-312]. While I welcome conversations with those of other faith perspectives, I intentionally employ “God-talk” – and specifically a Christian’s dialect of God-talk – as an extension of my own situatedness in the Christian faith.

28 David G. Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate, Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 21-25.

29 For example, the Earth Bible Project assumes the following: the intrinsic worth of the universe, etc., the interconnectedness of all things, the Earth itself has a voice to raise against injustice, everything has a purpose and goal, humans are to partner with the Earth as custodians, and Earth suffers injustices but also resists injustices [ibid., 23].
the biblical texts can be a significant source of ecological wisdom – that they do not sanction an exploitative form of human dominion over the earth, do inculcate a sense of the goodness of the whole created order, and do convey a picture of redemption as encompassing ‘all things’ and not only human beings.\(^{30}\)

Casting their suspicions at contemporary cultures – cultures supposedly shaped by New Age beliefs and evolutionary sciences – the third group of readers, “Resistance Type B,” resists ecological readings of the bible.\(^{31}\) Dispensational theology may implicitly inform this group of interpreters since such theology “fosters” the view that ecological degradation is a sign of the end and so should be celebrated.\(^{32}\)

In addition to recognizing the ideological concerns that readers bring to the biblical text, my analysis employs a second reading strategy – the “metaphorical embodiment of narrative paradigms” – that understands “the Bible as a story that narrates God’s gracious action for the reconciliation of the world.”\(^{33}\) In this mode of ethical interpretation, interpreters discern a narrative in the bible and allow it to establish a “symbolic world in which we are to find our orientation and identity.”\(^{34}\) In this approach, the bible exercises formative power over the reader for his or her transformation.\(^{35}\) The particular symbolic world that the reader sees at work in a passage, however, affects the theological and ethical outcome of the interpretation. Thus, the entire process of analogical and ethical interpretation is fraught with ambiguity. We therefore approach the

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 16. Emphasis theirs.
\(^{31}\) Ibid., 25-30.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 27. Additionally, these interpreters are often uncomfortable with any theological interpretations in which humans are not recognized as of primary concern to God among God’s creation [ibid., 28.].
\(^{34}\) Ibid., 16.
\(^{35}\) Ibid.
hermeneutical task with humility and with the attempt to establish the strongest and most holistic reading as possible.

As I argue in chapter 1, seven themes rise to the surface in the biblical story:

1. Humans and the rest of creation are, by God’s design, interdependent.
2. Humans function as creation’s nurturers and as mediators between God and nonhuman creation.
3. Human sin and folly cause ecological degradation, violence, and destruction of life.
4. Nonhuman creation cooperates with God in creating and sustaining plant, animal, and human life.
5. Nonhuman creation acts in creative, judging, and agential ways.
6. God is the Creator that judges human and nonhuman creation for unjust and destructive acts.
7. God is at work in creation, leading humanity and nonhuman creation into the peaceful and flourishing communion of the New Creation.

While traditional theology stresses the parts that divine and human characters play in “God’s gracious action for the reconciliation of the world,”36 I contend that nonhuman creation too participates in this action and reconciliation. The seven themes, therefore, insist on a drama of salvation that tightly integrates human, nonhuman, and divine actors. In this drama, a symbolic world rises to the stage and beckons us to enter more fully into the richness and complexity of God’s story with the creation. By finding these themes at work in the Old Testament (as discussed in chapter 1) and Romans 8:19-22 (chapter 2), we become better attuned to God’s ongoing work of reconciliation and restoration of life in the world and how we align ourselves with (or against) that work.

While cultural critique and narrative interpretation are two reading styles that we encounter in ecological interpretations of Paul, four “modes of discourse” exist in

36 Ibid., 15.
scripture and in ethical interpretations of scripture. Hays names these modes of discourse as rules, principles, paradigms, and symbolic worlds.\(^{37}\) Rules refer to those passages in scripture that present the reader with “direct commandments or prohibitions of specific behaviors.”\(^{38}\) Principles—such as love, justice, or even fallenness—are “general frameworks of moral consideration by which particular decisions about action are to be governed.”\(^{39}\) Paradigms are “stories or summary accounts of characters who model exemplary conduct;” negative paradigms demonstrate what people are not to do.\(^{40}\) Finally, a symbolic world “creates the perceptual categories through which we interpret reality,” such as depictions of humanity, God, and – I would add – creation.\(^{41}\) We will keep these ethical categories in mind as we review our four interpretations of Rom 8:19-22 in section 0.4 below.

The critical and methodological contributions provided by liberation theology and praxis-oriented forms of interpretation also undergird my analysis of Rom 8:19-22. In an article correlating recent ecological approaches to biblical interpretation and theology with liberationist and praxis forms of Christian reflection, Daniel Ang succinctly presents several key aspects of these approaches and how they overlap. In short, ecological and liberationist hermeneutics share: (1) a similar hermeneutic of suspicion in which all texts, interpretations, and claims (even one’s own) are understood to be contextually embedded

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
\(^{39}\) Ibid.
\(^{40}\) Ibid. Approaching the NT in ways similar to Hays, Douglas Campbell understands Jesus as primary paradigm for human life and a portrait of God’s being. He states, “the story of Jesus, properly understood – and this also means detecting its connections with other important stories – is an irreducible element in Paul’s soteriology as it unfolds in Romans and Galatians” [Douglas A. Campbell, *The Quest for Paul’s Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 70.].
and thus possibly influenced by harmful or sinful presuppositions;\(^{42}\) (2) a common movement from practice to critical reflection to revised practice;\(^{43}\) (3) an “acute awareness of human responsibility to decide and act in commitment as a central feature of authentic and credible Christian theology;”\(^{44}\) and (4) a commitment to, or preferential option for, the perspectives and liberation of the oppressed, the “forgotten and exploited subjects of God’s world, in this instance the Earth or Earth community.”\(^{45}\) In sum, Ang suggests:

In both its suspicion and its emphasis on the gift of human agency, the new hermeneutic advocates a radical commitment to re-orient the theological endeavor, including the reception and re-reception of the biblical narrative, in order to break with and supplant the subordinationist understandings of, and dealings with, Earth as mere “usable creation.”\(^{46}\)

A praxis approach to the interpretive endeavor invites readers to be doers as they delve into an ecologically liberative reading of Paul, commit themselves to transformative action, engage in critical reflection, and grow into ever-deeper commitments to the liberation of all creation. From a Pauline theological perspective, we might understand this process as analogous to salvation: having experienced a foretaste of God’s liberation in Jesus Christ through the gift of the Spirit, Christians commit themselves (with the help of the Spirit) no longer to continue in sin, sustaining the hope that God will enable them to live justly and liberatively in accord with God’s New Creation. An important aspect of


\(^{43}\) Ibid., 29-30. The ecological movement in Christian circles arose from the practice or experience of ecological degradation and the growing awareness and critique thereof.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 36.

\(^{45}\) Ibid.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 37.
this process of sanctification involves human perception: the discerning perception of self, society, and history.

0.3 THE WORLD AS WE PERCEIVE IT: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In attempting to interpret Romans 8:19-22 in its theological, literary, and historical contexts, the exegete inevitably encounters divergent opinions on Paul’s relationship to the Roman Empire. Since this study explicitly considers Paul’s letter to Rome in relation to its imperial context, opposing views regarding Paul’s political stance vis-à-vis the empire may help us discern a reasonable way through this potential quagmire. Despite the danger of oversimplifying, we will consider the arguments made by two Pauline camps: (1) those who believe Paul had little to no concern for the empire’s activities, personalities, or messages and who consequently find it imprudent to read Paul’s letters as if they intentionally addressed such issues versus (2) those who believe Paul did indeed confront imperial activities, personalities, and messages and who encounter innumerable instances in which Paul, in more or less explicit ways, contrasts the Roman Empire with the Kingdom of God for the edification of his congregants.

In his SBL presentation, “Why the Roman Empire was Insignificant to Paul,” John Barclay asserts that Paul essentially depreciates the Roman Empire and its leaders by ignoring them.47 By focusing his attention and praise on God, Jesus, and the Spirit, Paul implicitly declares the impotence and insignificance of the empire. Barclay supports this claim by indicating that Paul fails to mention his own Roman citizenship in his

47 John Barclay, “Why the Roman Empire Was Insignificant to Paul,” in Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (San Diego, CA: 2007). Thanks are due to Susan Eastman for alerting me to this presentation and providing me with a manuscript of Barclay’s address.
letters, never points out that it was Rome who executed Jesus, never mentions Roman
gods or emperors by name, and does not characterize Rome as an evil power but instead
always describes the powers of this age in general terms. Nevertheless, Barclay admits
that Paul subverts the empire but does so by “relegat[ing] it to the ranks of a dependent
and derivative entity, denied both a name and a significant role in the story of the
world.” In fact, Paul asserts that governing powers – presumably, this includes Rome –
are servants of God (Rom 13). In sum, Barclay exhorts Pauline interpreters to resist the
urge to read his letters as discourses directly critiquing and countering the imperium.

Another group of scholars, in contrast to Barclay’s reserve, insist that Paul
interpreted and opposed Roman imperial claims for the benefit of his parishioners’
emerging faith in YHWH and faithfulness to the Lord Jesus. This acknowledgement of
the empire, however, does not mean that Paul focused on imperial issues. Rather, as Neil
Elliott explains, “The empire as such is never his direct target: his goal is to lay a claim
on the allegiance of his listeners with which the rival claims of empire inevitably
interfered.” Paul recognizes that Jesus’ new adherents frequently encounter competing
demands for their participation in imperial as well as local cults. Thus, Paul would not
have been silent on such matters but instead provided his congregants with the
theological and practical resources to remain faithful to the one true yet jealous God. A
number of textual features in Romans support this claim.

48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 3, 12.
50 Ibid., 9.
51 Ibid., 16-17.
In the introductory purpose statement of Paul’s letter to Rome, he announces that he desires to win “faithful obedience among the nations” (Rom 1:5).\(^{53}\) Paul consequently aspired to something that the Roman Empire also pursued.\(^{54}\) In taking Paul’s *propositio* seriously, then, we find the purpose of the letter to be overtly political. “The letter is directed toward a clear end. However courteous Paul’s tone, he speaks as the duly commissioned representative of a lord who is to be obeyed, and he writes to secure ‘faithful obedience among the nations’ to that lord.”\(^{55}\)

Nevertheless, in pursuing all peoples’ obedience to the Lord Jesus, Paul does not encourage or even condone violence or rebellion against Rome. Rather, Rom 13:1-7 indicates that the Roman Christians ought to submit to the current political rulers as God’s appointed leaders for the common good. Refusing to rebel, however, does not in turn lead to acquiescence. Elliott suggests Paul rejected two opposing possibilities: either (1) accommodation to Rome in which Christians accept its order without true justice or (2) rebellion against Rome in which Christians disrupt the prevailing political regime in order to establish a different form of justice and political control.\(^{56}\) Instead of hoping that disgruntled Christians would overthrow the unjust empire, Paul upheld the perspective that the Almighty God would ultimately judge all entities and place them under the reigning authority of Jesus Christ (Rom 15:12; Phil 2:10-11). James Harrison, who also reads Paul as engaging empire, summarizes this perspective:

Paul places the imperial ruler and his empire under the Kingdom of the risen, ascended and returning “Son of God in power” (Rom 1:4). He

---

\(^{53}\) Ibid. Elliott’s translation.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 25.

\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 45.
advocates submission to and honour of the imperial authorities (Rom 13:1-7), but transfers many of the ruler’s honours and prerogatives to the Body of Christ, with a view to winning the nations for Christ (1:5, 13-14; 15:8-12, 14-20, 28) and transforming through the Spirit of Christ the social relations of imperial society (12:1-15:32).57

In certain respects, the views of Barclay do not differ all that drastically from Elliott and Harrison. All three contend that Paul viewed the empire and its ruler as existing under the sovereign authority of the Creator God. The distinction arises when they interpret Paul’s purpose and message in relation (or not) to the imperium. Since, in my opinion, the resonances between the wording and images of Paul’s writings and those found in imperial proclamations, monuments, coinage, and activities are loud enough and recurrent enough to legitimate correlating Paul’s letters to the empire, I follow the discerning lead of Elliott and Harrison in this project.

Even while our discussion so far has primarily focused on whether Paul intended to address imperial issues in his letters or not, another dynamic strengthens our decision to consider connections between Romans and its socio-political context. Once the letter was out of Paul’s hands, its readers and auditors very likely interpreted his message in relation to imperial propaganda and events. Indeed, some members of the Roman congregations lived less than a mile from Augustus’ forum where the imperial message of peace and prosperity through the Roman emperor was proclaimed loud and clear (see Chapter 3.2.2).58 While the majority of the Roman Christians likely lived and worked in

---

57 James R. Harrison, Paul and the Imperial Authorities at Thessalonica and Rome: A Study in the Conflict of Ideology (Tübingen Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 36.
58 These members lived on the Aventine Hill and were likely the more wealthy and probably Jewish contingents of Rome’s early Christian community [ibid.; Robert Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, ed. Eldon Jay Epp, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 63.].
the swampy slums of Trastevere and Porta Capena\textsuperscript{59} where fewer imperial temples and shrines were built,\textsuperscript{60} they probably encountered imperial propaganda through coins, festivals, and imperial “triumphs” (parades of military victory). And even though many of the Roman congregants would have been illiterate, the imagery on monuments and coins communicated the claims of the empire clearly and forcefully, as will be discussed further in chapter 3.

In discussing the likelihood of political resonances emanating from Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome, we have alluded to the constituency of Paul’s Roman audience. Since the ways in which we conceive of this audience as well as Paul’s purpose in writing to the audience necessarily shape our interpretation of the letter, I will briefly sketch the perspectives assumed in this dissertation. The \textit{Sitz im Leben} of Romans as described by Robert Jewett, in my view the most convincing description of early Roman Christianity, will provide the broad outlines of this sketch.

Christianity in Rome likely arose in Jewish synagogues when Jewish converts to Messiah Jesus proclaimed the gospel among Jewish peers and Gentile God-fearers in Rome. The Jewish community in Rome had deep roots in the city long before the Christian message had reached Rome. Jews moved to Rome during the Diaspora when Babylon conquered Judea in the 6th century BCE, and even more Jews were brought to Rome as slaves and captives after Pompey conquered Judea in 63 BCE\textsuperscript{61} Although most Jews began their sojourn in Rome as slaves, many gained their freedom and even

\textsuperscript{59} Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 62.
\textsuperscript{61} Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 55.
citizenship, and an estimated fifteen to sixty thousand Jews lived in Rome by the time Paul wrote his letter in the 50s CE.\textsuperscript{62} Archaeological evidence suggests that most of the Jews during this period continued to speak Greek rather than Latin and many were poor and relatively uneducated.\textsuperscript{63} Religiously, the Jewish community had a certain level of legal freedom, in which they could gather for worship and education and even collect the yearly Temple offering that was sent to Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{64} Thus, Jews in Rome generally lived in relative peace within a potentially antagonistic religious environment.

However, in 49 CE Roman authorities interfered in Jewish synagogue life. According to Suetonius’ life of Emperor Claudius, “the emperor ‘expelled from Rome Jews who were constantly making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus.’ ”\textsuperscript{65} Although reconstructing the details of this situation is difficult, “[m]ost historians infer that this is a reference to agitation in Roman synagogues concerning Jesus as the Christ.”\textsuperscript{66} By correlating this extra-biblical information with Paul’s greetings in Rom 16 as well as Luke’s story of Priscilla and Aquila’s expulsion from Rome in Acts 18, we get a glimpse of what may have occurred in these early decades of the church. Jewish Christian leaders who proclaimed Jesus as the Christ distressed many Jews in Rome even while they convinced others, including Gentiles. Jews who remained unconvinced that Jesus was the Messiah responded to the Christians in such a way as to arouse the

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid. Additionally, Roman rulers as early as Julius Caesar gave Jews the freedom to practice their religion according to their own laws; this included running kosher markets (ibid., 56.).
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 59-60.
attention of Roman neighbors and imperial authorities. Since Jewish Christianity represented a new teaching within Judaism, its key leaders and teachers were reprimanded by the governing authorities and were expelled from the city. These leaders found refuge in a variety of locales to which the Apostle Paul traveled and wherein he ultimately encountered and befriended a significant number of Jewish Christians from Rome, as attested in Rom 16.

Of further import to our interpretation of Romans, however, are the after effects of Claudius’ edict in 49 CE. It is likely that once Jewish Christian leaders left Rome, remaining Jewish Christians removed themselves from the now unreceptive synagogues and met as small groups in homes. It is likely that during this time larger numbers of Gentiles joined the Christian movement and even rose to positions of leadership. When Claudius died in 54 CE and Emperor Nero lifted Claudius’ edict, formerly evicted Jewish Christian leaders could return to Rome. On their return, however, conflict likely ensued between Jewish Christian and Gentile Christian leaders and groups, and Paul addresses this problem directly in Rom 14-15 with his discourse on the “weak and strong.”

The exact composition of the Roman Christian congregations at the time of Paul’s letter is uncertain, but archeological and literary evidence suggests that most of the

---

67 This way of describing the situation obviously places the blame on the shoulders of the nonbelieving Jews as opposed to the Christians. This assumption is based on the depiction of early Christianity presented in much of the NT. However, it is possible that the Christians made such a raucous that the authorities noticed.

68 Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, 60. This includes Prisca and Aquila, but also possibly “Epainetos, Miriam, Andronikos and Junia, Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles, Herodion, Tryphaina, Tryphosa, Persis, and Rufus and his mother” [ibid.].

69 Ibid., 60-61.

70 Ibid., 59.

71 Ibid.
Christians in Rome were extremely poor and mostly of Gentile origin. Jewett claims, “it is clear that Christianity in Rome began with Jewish converts and that problematic relations between a Gentile majority and Jewish minority are in view throughout the letter.” In fact, Paul’s discussions in Romans make it plain that the Gentile majority was discriminating against the Jewish minority. Moreover, by stressing the impartial and merciful love and forgiveness of God, Paul writes to correct anti-Jewish and imperially influenced misconceptions of and prejudice against Jews. Paul consistently insists: God has not rejected the Jews, God’s chosen people; God remains faithful to the covenant.

In addition to this apologetic reason for writing Romans, Paul also writes in order to gain support for his longed-for and impending missionary enterprise, preaching the gospel to the westernmost “barbarians” of the Roman Empire, those living on the Iberian Peninsula, modern-day Spain. While it may seem strange to us that Paul would look to people in Rome for assistance in Spain, the historical relationship between Rome and Spain makes this request judicious. For centuries Romans – whether in the years of the republic or the empire – had been waging war in Spain, both against its inhabitants in order to control the peninsula and also against other Romans in civil wars fought on

---

72 Jewett points out the epistolary evidence of Rom 1:5, 13; 11:13 and 15:14-19 that indicates Paul addressed primarily a Gentile audience [ibid.].
73 Ibid., 70.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid. Elliott indicates that Roman people did not like Jews but probably had even more disgust towards them when they returned as exiles. They were very poor and could not get adequate food [Elliott, 20]. In contrast to Jewett, Elliott maintains that the antagonism between the Gentiles and Jews in Rome was the motivating factor for Paul’s letter rather than the mission to Spain.
76 For purposes of simplicity, I will use the admittedly anachronistic term “Spain” to refer to the three Roman provinces on the Iberian Peninsula.
Spanish lands.\textsuperscript{77} Thus, Rome caused considerable ecological and social devastation on the peninsula and also captured countless inhabitants, forcing them to be slaves both on the peninsula and back in Rome.\textsuperscript{78} It may well have been the case that members of the Christian communities in Rome had connections to Spain whether linguistic, social, or even political.\textsuperscript{79} Consequently,

[t]o elicit this support [for his mission], Paul needed to introduce his theology of mission, to dispel misunderstandings and allegations against his proclamation of the gospel, and to encourage the Roman congregations to overcome their imperialistic behavior toward one another, because it discredited the gospel of the impartial righteousness of God.\textsuperscript{80}

Paul’s purpose for writing Romans – to introduce himself and his gospel to the Roman Christians with the view of gaining their help for his Spanish mission – and the theology expressed throughout this letter remain inseparable. Paul’s apostolic calling presses him into the evangelistic service of all the nations, including the “nation” that lay on the westernmost border of the known world: Spain. And his mission is decidedly political, for he seeks the obedience of faith of all nations (Rom 1:5, 16:26). As Elliott explains,

[Paul’s] scenario of the nations turning in faithful obedience to Israel’s Messiah was a peculiarly Israelite vision, informed by Israel’s scriptures. Those scriptures explicitly identified the Messiah as the one “who rises to

\textsuperscript{77} After describing several hundred years of Rome’s conflict in Spain, especially the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey (much of which was fought in Spain), Jewett states, “The destruction of towns by Caesar and his adversaries was also substantial, and has left its mark not only in the literary record but in the archaeological evidence of destruction. Lands were confiscated and given to retiring legionnaires to establish colonies; survivors of sieges were enslaved; mines, vineyards, olive orchards, and industries were taken over by the government or given to Roman immigrants while their original owners were killed or enslaved. This pattern of local resistance, cultural conflict, and imperial exploitation had lasted for more than two and a half centuries before Paul began to make plans for a mission to Spain” [Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 78.].

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 77-78.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 75-77, 79.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 88.
rule the nations” (Isa 11:10), an irreducibly political phrase that Paul quotes at the climax of the chain of scriptures in Rom 15:7-13.  

If we combine Paul’s political declarations in Rom 1:5, 15:7-13, and 16:26 with his depiction of Abraham as the heir of the κόσμος (Rom 4:13) and the followers of Jesus the Messiah as heirs of God and children of Abraham (Rom 8:17; 4:11-12) (as discussed in 1.2.3), the letter to the Romans envisions a world in which Jesus reigns as the resurrected and righteous Lord while followers of Jesus – people of all nations – reign in life with Jesus and share their glorious liberty with creation.  

Paul’s was a political vision, to be sure. Such a world and such a reign necessarily bear practical implications for Christian life today. Before I propose my own constructive interpretation of Rom 8:19-22 and Paul’s creation theology, let us briefly consider the interpretations of four other sets of scholars.

0.4 THE WORLD AS SOME DECLARE IT: ETHICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF ROMANS 8:19-22

Romans 8:19-22 has often taken a leading role in Christian reflections on anthropogenic forms of ecological degradation and appropriate responses to this

---

81 Ibid. Although Rom 13 has been interpreted as indicating that Paul fully accepts Roman rule, Elliott suggests that Paul rejects two possibilities – both accommodation to Rome (acceptance of its order without true justice) as well as rebellion against Rome (upheaval of order in order to establish a new form of justice). Instead, Paul adheres to an ideal option – a new cosmic rule under the truly just Messiah [Elliott, 46-47.].

82 Similarly, W. D. Davies explains: “As his deliberateness grew, [Paul’s] work followed more and more the pattern laid down by the imperial government, but not because he had become the Christian counterpart of an imperial strategist. This was due merely to the fact that his work could thus be most efficiently executed. Thus, Spain, not Rome, was his goal in the West. Paul was thinking not of capturing the Empire but the whole known world . . . he was bent, whenever and wherever he could, on building the body of Christ” [W. D. Davies, The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 181-182.]. However, Davies interprets Paul’s theology as “aterritorial,” as diminishing the central place that inheritance of the particular land of Judea played in God’s covenant faithfulness. We shall return to this issue in 1.3.1.
degradation. Concerned to motivate sustainable and ecologically sound living, ecological theologians and New Testament scholars alike suggest that Paul teaches in Rom 8:19-22 that creation waits for humans to liberate it from futility and destruction. As far back as the 1960s, New Testament scholars proclaimed that this passage means that man [sic] is responsible before God for nature. As long as man refuses to play the part assigned him by God, so long the entire world of nature is frustrated and dislocated. It is only when man is truly fitting into his proper position as a son in relation to God his Father that the dislocations in the whole of nature will be reduced.83

Such a bald statement implies that people have the ability either to intensify or relieve nature’s frustration so that creation’s liberation is a simple matter of human will and action.84

More recently, biblical scholars have interpreted Rom 8:19-22 with greater attention to Paul’s theological perspectives. We turn now to four examples of eco-ethical interpretations that set the stage for the interpretive contributions of this dissertation. The first three sets of authors (0.4.1, 0.4.2, 0.4.3) generally display a positive posture towards the text (while at times critiquing and resisting elements in it) and therefore can be deemed readings of recovery that also deploy the passage for establishing a robust ecological ethic. The final interpreter also approaches the text with little suspicion but


84 For Luzia Rehman, Paul’s reference to groaning indicates that he intended his hearers to work towards liberation. Rehman claims that, rather than encouraging people to wait quietly for God’s salvation, Paul instead motivates them to resist forms of oppression. She explains, “Not to sigh quietly and practice patience is precisely the point here; the issue is to cry aloud, to protest, to demand abundant life and justice” [Luzia Sutter Rehman, “To Turn the Groaning into Labor: Romans 8.22-23,” in A Feminist Companion to Paul, ed. Amy-Jill Levine(New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 75.]. Taken at face value, this interpretation places the responsibility of liberation squarely on the shoulders of people, perhaps especially of oppressed people.
nevertheless resists those interpretations that would, in her opinion, elevate human agency too high (0.4.4.).

0.4.1  **David Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate**

Combining their biblical, scientific, and theological expertise, David Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate offer the insightful and timely book, *Greening Paul: Rereading the Apostle in a Time of Ecological Crisis*. Although their work extends beyond an eco-interpretation of Rom 8:19-22, I will focus here on that narrower contribution. Finding Paul’s reflections on creation in Rom 8:19-22 to refer to a larger narrative frame, they highlight three verbs in the text – “is waiting,” “was subjected,” and “will be liberated” – that sketch the trajectory of this narrative.\(^85\) Each verb represents three movements in the creational story, correlating with the present, past, and future, respectively.\(^86\) Paul’s phrase, “we know that,” indicates he and his audience shared a knowledge of a creational story that encompasses the past, present and future and holds ethical implications for human life now.\(^87\)

Understanding κτίσις, creation, to refer primarily to nonhuman creation, the authors argue that creation’s “bondage to decay” is a reference to a past moment in the creational narrative and “is a broader allusion to the unfolding story of Genesis 1-11, in

---

\(^85\) Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, 71. They draw on the work of Northrop Frye as developed by James F. Hopewell to interpret Paul’s narrative of creation in relation to the six categories of stories: comedy, romance, tragedy, irony, romantic comedy, and ironic tragedy [ibid., 55-57.]. They determine that Paul’s narrative in Rom 8:19-22 contains romantic elements (with the quest of Jesus and his siblings standing as a key theme) that also resist the comic and overly optimistic elements found in the imperial narrative (see 2.2) [ibid., 84.].

\(^86\) Ibid., 71.

\(^87\) Ibid.
which corruption affects all flesh.” This corruption or decay (φθορά), is not limited to the experience of death as might be concluded if Gen 3 alone were the intertext; rather, decay also connotes a sense of moral degradation. This particular intertextual interpretation promotes the ethical conclusion that ongoing human sin fuels the decay of creation while chemical decomposition remains a natural part of the created order. Moreover, in contrast to other interpreters, Horrell and company do not see a significant allusion to Adam or Gen 3 in Rom 8 by means of the term ματαιότης. They instead claim that the likeliest linguistic background to Paul’s use of “futility” is Ecclesiastes and the Wisdom tradition of the OT. With this background, the futility of Rom 8 points to creation’s inability to “achieve its purpose, or to emerge from the constant cycle of toil, suffering, and death,” the inherent processes of evolution.

In the present, the creation groans and is joined by the groaning of humanity and the Spirit. Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate suggest, “the groaning of creation is an ongoing characteristic of its current existence, though it has, according to Paul, reached a crucial moment of eschatological expectation.” Although the children of God groan in hope of their full adoption as God’s children (8:23), the creation groans for the future liberation in a more limited way since it could not have the same specific hope of adoption as God’s children. Along with creation’s present groaning, the creation also eagerly expects the

---

88 Ibid., 73, 75.
89 Ibid., 75.
90 Ibid., 76-77.
91 Ibid., 77.
92 Ibid., 79.
93 Ibid., 78.
94 Ibid., 79. While I agree that the creation does not hope and groan for adoption so that it will become God’s child itself, I shall argue that it is in fact groaning and laboring towards the ultimate adoption of humanity into God’s family, the resurrection of human beings into glory (see 2.7).
revelation of the sons of God, people who are “Christian believers.” In relation to 8:23, they suggest that redemption of bodies refers to resurrection, a resurrection sometimes described in the OT as resulting from the earth’s birthing and delivery of the dead into their resurrected state. In the future, creation will experience liberation from death and decay “by a process of renewal rather than by its destruction and re-creation.”

We see, then, that the authors ground their reflections on the “fact” that creation, according to Paul, is presently groaning and awaiting liberation. They argue that interpreters must keep this in mind so as not to expect creation to be in a different and unattainable stage in its story; we all continue to struggle. They consequently disagree with those interpreters – among whom Robert Jewett may arguably be grouped – who suggest that Christians are to work now to establish ultimate liberation for creation, emphasizing instead that creation’s liberation results from an act of God. Nevertheless, with regard to ethics – a Pauline ethics shaped in light of evolutionary science that has no place for a “Fall” – they suggest that

the freedom of the glory of the children of God becomes the realization of the potential in human beings, liberated by their participation in Christ. It was to make possible the liberation of that potential that creation was subjected to futility in hope. The final liberation of creation might then be taken to await human discovery of the significance of that potential, the effect of the freedom that comes from being not merely creaturely selves but self-transcended selves, after the example of Christ and in fellowship with him.

---

95 Ibid., 80. They note the tension within Rom 8 between the Christian’s apparent reception of the Spirit and adoption (8:9, 15) and the Christian’s expectant waiting for adoption (8:23).

96 Ibid., 80-81. In 2.7 I shall more fully substantiate and make use of this interpretation.

97 Ibid., 81.

98 Ibid., 132.

99 Ibid., 83.

100 Ibid., 138. They hold up the practice of vegetarianism as one way of living towards this liberation [ibid., 202-206]. The authors seem to deny that a presently-experienced change took place for creation’s liberation through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. Jesus Christ, through his life of other-regard,
When applying Rom 8:19-22, then, the authors do not in fact leave much room for a miraculous future act of God in resurrecting humanity but instead stress the ways in which human liberation in Christ enables people to change their behaviors now. Ultimately, Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate understand Paul’s story of creation as a means by which we (and the original audience) can “articulate a counter-narrative, a challenge to dominant economic and cultural narratives, a means to envisage communities in which a different story constructs a different sense of identity and undergirds different patterns of practice.”

While my own interpretation differs from that developed in Greening Paul, the approach the authors establish therein provide a helpful starting point for this dissertation in at least three ways. The interpreters carefully suggest possible Old Testament intertexts at work in and behind the passage. When expositing Rom 8:19-22, they recognize that the ultimate liberation of all creation comes through an act of God; they therefore attempt to avoid the claim that humans can establish this eschatological liberation even though humans are enabled to transcend selfish and destructive habits as they receive Christ’s liberation now. Moreover, they highlight the narrative elements in the passage and employ those elements in their ethical formulations. Nevertheless, as my own interpretation shall demonstrate, an even more theologically robust interpretation of Rom 8:19-22 is possible and requires reference to the narrative and theological framing of the entire letter. And although the authors hint at the apocalyptic events of Jesus’s life, death, functions as a positive paradigm for eco-ethical living. However, Adam does not function as a negative paradigm in their interpretation. The character of God’s intended eschaton, nevertheless, gives rise to eco-ethical implications for present human action in the world.

101 Ibid., 59.
and resurrection, they do not adequately indicate how these salvific events saturate the passage itself and influence its interpretation; in essence, they do not demonstrate how the Messiah’s salvific work has decisively changed the present and future condition and activity of creation.

0.4.2 Jonathan Moo

In his insightful article on Rom 8:19-22, Jonathan Moo finds intertextual links between Paul’s letter and Isaiah 24-27. Thus, he – like Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate – draws on a larger textual and symbolic world for his interpretation. Moo assumes that Paul “considers creation to be enslaved to the effects of ongoing human sin and divine judgment. This slavery itself can be considered the result of God’s decision to link the fate of the natural world and humankind through what Isa 24.5 calls an ‘eternal covenant.’”102 In supporting this claim, Moo clarifies and reinterprets the meanings of κτίσις, ματαιότης, and φθορά in relation to the Greek OT.

Moo argues that κτίσις specifically stands for nonhuman creation since the wording of Rom 8:19 and 21 implies that there is a distinction between humans (particularly, “believers”) and κτίσις in this passage.103 Taking Gen 3 as one of several intertexts, Moo interprets Paul’s discussion of death and creation’s subjection to futility

---

103 Ibid.
in Rom 5 and 8 as pointing back to the time of the curse described in Gen 3. Consequently, creation continues to suffer in the present.

Noting several OT semantic possibilities for the term ματαιότης and connecting Paul’s use of this term at Rom 1:21 and 8:20, Moo concludes that by means of this word Paul primarily refers to the emptiness and sinfulness that comes through idolatry. Additionally, he interprets φθορά (8:21) as decay or physical corruption rather than moral corruption since creation was subjected against its own will. Thus, in contrast to Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate who suggest that creation’s subjection is permanent in this age, Moo concludes that “the creation’s slavery to ‘ruin’ is a contingent slavery, such that it remains at the mercy of the effects of ongoing human sin and divine judgment.”

In a similar vein as Greening Paul, Moo notes that Paul’s statement, we know “that the entire creation groans and suffers birth pangs together” (8:22), implies that a common symbolic world unites Paul and his audience. In contrast to some interpreters who hold that Paul, in speaking of creation’s groaning and laboring, refers to a Jewish belief in “messianic woes,” Moo instead argues that Paul draws on the chronologically and scripturally prior teaching that creation suffers from human sin. This teaching,

---

104 Ibid., 76.
105 Ibid., 78. Moo notes that 4 Ezra similarly makes use of Gen 3 to explain present suffering and sin but also indicates that, in contrast to 4Ezra, Paul implies that “it is this very same subjected and enslaved creation that will participate in the freedom of the glory of the children of God” [ibid., 78-79.].
106 Ibid., 78.
107 Ibid., 81.
108 Ibid., 82.
109 Ibid. His translation.
110 Ibid.
Moo suggests, is found in Isa 24-27 in its reference to God’s “eternal covenant” with creation.  

Moo finds two ethical paradigms at work in Rom 8:19-22, a positive paradigm for ethical behavior in Christ and a negative paradigm for unethical, ecologically-degrading behavior in Adam, or sinful humanity. For, in the latter case, human sin “[intensifies]” the creation’s experience of futility; yet, in the former case, “the new human being, Christ,” reverses “the effects of this curse . . . through his defeat of death.” Not only does Christ provide freedom and glory for humans but also for nonhuman creation.

Regardless of tensions between the already and not-yet, between “resurrection life” now and the hoped-for future resurrection depicted in Romans, Moo suggests people may live in such a way that “κτίσις itself gains glimpses of its longed-for hope for freedom.” Although Moo’s ethical conclusions depend on a different construal of the implicit narrative framing Rom 8:19-22, they result in similar ethical claims as those found in Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate. Thus, although he displays moments of incredible optimism, Moo finally has to admit that the liberative actions of Christians are but glimpses of creation’s freedom.

---

111 Moo draws on the work of Sylvia Keesmaat, Katherine Hayes, and Laurie J. Braaten in setting up this conclusion (ibid., 83-84.). He helpfully enumerates “[a] number of thematic parallels with Rom 8.18-25 . . . including the suffering of the earth due to the Lord’s punishment of human sin, the personification of creation’s response to judgment, the promise that God’s glory will be revealed, the present waiting of the righteous in expectant hope, the use of birth pang imagery, the defeat of death, and the possibility of life beyond death. Each of these motifs can of course be found elsewhere, but nowhere are they all brought together and linked in quite the same way as they are in Isaiah 24-27” (ibid., 84-85.).

112 Ibid., 82-83.

113 Ibid., 88-89.

114 Ibid., 89.
0.4.3 Robert Jewett

In contrast to the previous two interpreters, Jewett considers the text of Rom 8:19-22 primarily in relation to “Greco-Roman ideas about the corruption and redemption of nature” rather than in relation to Jewish writings in his chapter entitled “The Corruption and Redemption of Creation.”\footnote{Jewett, “The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Reading Rom 8:18-23 within the Imperial Context,” 25. However, as will become apparent, he also attends to echoes within the Jewish scriptural corpus.} He suggests that Paul’s account of creation’s groaning and its slavery to decay subverts the common Greco-Roman account of nature. Jewett, therefore, finds a clash of two creation narratives – that of the Roman Empire and that of Paul’s evangelistic mission.

Jewett highlights the Roman writer Virgil, in particular, who believed that the Golden Age would be reinstuted through Caesar Augustus’ reign.\footnote{Ibid.} Agricultural abundance, livestock cooperation and fertility, and societal peace would mark this new Golden Age. Natural signs such as comets and religio-political symbols such as an altar graphically depicting the fertility of earth (the Ara Pacis) and coinage depicting Caesar Augustus with cornucopia in hand were used to communicate to the empire’s subjects that the Roman ruler had inaugurated the longed-for age of abundance.\footnote{Ibid., 26-27.}

Jewett contends that “[t]his imperial vision of the former corruption and current redemption of Mother Earth differs from Paul’s letter to the Romans at virtually every point and provides a suitable foil for reassessing the relevance of its argument.”\footnote{Ibid., 28-30.} While recognizing the implicit relationship between Paul’s letter to the Romans and the Roman
messages of *Pax Romana* (a peace that extends beyond humans to all of nature), Jewett argues that a true opposition obtains between these cultural and religious symbolic worlds.\(^\text{119}\)

This opposition is most clearly seen when the interpreter attends to the Jewish background to Romans. Arguing that Rom 8:20 echoes the Jewish symbolic world of Gen 3, Jewett concludes that Gen 3 with its account of “Adam’s fall” stands as a primary intertext to Rom 8.\(^\text{120}\) Therefore, the futility or “fruitlessness” hinted at in Rom 8:20 is a result of humans “acting out idolatrous desires to have unlimited dominion” (Rom 1:21) so that creation is inhibited (or “emptied”) from attaining its divine purposes for goodness and glory.\(^\text{121}\) Moreover, in contrast to Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate who believe humans cannot usher a suffering creation into ultimate liberation, Jewett argues that “[i]n a vision with extraordinary relevance for the modern world, Paul implies that the entire creation waits with bated breath for the emergence and empowerment of those who will take responsibility for its restoration, small groups of the *huioi tou theou*” (8:19).

Through the slow, arduous work of lifestyle changes, humans can stop sinning against creation and instead allow it to exist in God’s intended freedom. By understanding Rom 8:18-23 in the context of two symbolic worlds – those of Greco-Roman imperial culture and Old Testament Judaism – and by referring to the negative paradigm of fallen Adamic

\(^{119}\) Jewett notes, “Whereas the Roman cult touted piety and conquest as the means whereby the golden age was restored, Paul’s letter rejects salvation by works in all its forms. Whereas the Roman premise was that disorderly barbarians and rebels caused the corruption of nature, Paul argues that all humans reenact Adam’s fall. In place of imperial celebrations and administration as the hinge of the golden age, Paul touts the power of the gospel to convert the world. Moreover, as the wording of Rom 8:18-23 indicates, the natural world is far from idyllic, and it has certainly not been restored by the Roman imperium” [ibid., 31].

\(^{120}\) Ibid.

\(^{121}\) Ibid., 36-37. Note that in this reading, Adam functions as a negative paradigm.
humani
ty, Jewett draws strong ethical implications that call humans to ecologically-
liberative lives.

0.4.4 Beverly Gaventa

The interpretive work of Beverly Gaventa provides an instructive contrast to the
foregoing interpreters. In her chapter, “The Birthing of Creation,” she displays a stance of
resistance to ecological readings of Paul by declaring that Rom 8:19-22 provides little to
no explicit ethical implications for ecological care, since “there is nothing creation or
humanity can do to bring [God’s glorious apocalypse] to completion.”

In exegeting Rom 8:19-22, Gaventa argues that κτίσις refers both to humanity and
the rest of the created order. Additionally, she emphasizes the apocalyptic character of
Rom 8, assuming that “apocalypse” refers to God’s transformative invasion of the world
with the implication that both humanity and creation wait for God to act redemptively.

In explaining the birthing and groaning imagery in this passage, Gaventa notes that
creation in fact births nothing because it is captive to nothingness and still, like Paul,
“anticipates the reversal of Gen 3:17.” She buttresses this interpretation by closely
coordinating creation’s laboring with adoption, the redemption of our body (8:23).

---

123 In contrast to other interpreters, Gaventa explicitly argues that the “sons of God” of 8:14 (who appear to be believers living at the time of Paul’s writing) are different from the “sons of God” of 8:19 (who include future believers, especially Israel) [ibid., 55-56.].
124 Ibid., 56.
125 Ibid., 56-57. We note that Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate are in unstated agreement with Gaventa since they all contend that creation is in an on-going state of groaning.
126 Ibid., 53.
Thus, creation – a creation that includes present and future humans – cannot be its own agent of redemption since it stands in need of release from its captivity.\textsuperscript{127}

Gaventa argues that Rom 8 draws on the symbolic world sketched in Rom 1 that in turn depends on Gen 3. Such a symbolic world implies that creation’s subjection discussed in Rom 8 is related to humanity’s idolatry and sin outlined in Rom 1 and Gen 3.\textsuperscript{128} Even more, she contends that this creational subjection is still in effect, for “Paul understands that creation continues to be sold into slavery, despite the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the new life of believers.”\textsuperscript{129} Therefore, Gaventa assumes that a principle of fallenness is at work in Rom 8. This fallenness dictates the limits of human activity and therefore human ethical possibility or responsibility.

More than Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, Gaventa rightly emphasizes the symbolic world of apocalypticism and the apocalyptic references found in Rom 8. In interpreting Rom 8:22-23, she concludes that “the labor of giving birth that is introduced in v. 22 never comes to completion” and instead points to God’s future apocalyptic deliverance of creation as the only way in which creation might experience liberation.\textsuperscript{130} Although she attends to the apocalyptic character of this passage, in this article Gaventa makes no reference to Paul’s use of the phrase “until now” (ἀχροῦτοῦ νῦν) at the end of 8:22.\textsuperscript{131} In this verse, Paul writes, “We know that the whole creation is groaning and laboring

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[127] Ibid., 58.
\item[128] Ibid., 59.
\item[129] Ibid., 59-60.
\item[130] Ibid., 53. Emphasis hers.
\item[131] Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
together until now” (8:22). Although she includes this temporal marker in her initial quotation of Rom 8:18-23, Gaventa conveniently elides this phrase when she quotes and exegetes 8:22. As I shall argue in 2.7, the phrase “until now” indicates something significant about the timing of creation’s groaning and laboring. If Gaventa were to include this phrase in her exegesis, it would call into question the perpetuity of creation’s groaning and laboring that she assumes. By ignoring this important phrase, Gaventa bolsters her contention that the symbolic world of Gen 3 is still in effect for all creation even though much of Romans points to Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection as presently freeing creation – or at least believers – from the dominion of a Gen 3 world (see, for example, Rom 6:1-23; 8:10-17).

Despite the fact that she finds no interpretive significance in the phrase “until now,” Gaventa’s interpretation powerfully illuminates Paul’s theological, Christological, and apocalyptic perspectives. I have in fact found very few ecologically-minded expositors of Paul who adequately recognize the apocalyptic character of Paul’s writings and worldview. Gaventa also demonstrates the way in which Gen 3 stands as a powerful intertext, giving shape to Paul’s message in Rom 8. Her particular interpretation of how Gen 3 and Paul’s apocalyptic perspective affect the meaning of Rom 8, however, establishes a formidable obstacle to an eco-ethical interpretation of the passage. I shall argue that Gaventa’s interpretation is a slight misinterpretation that is easily redressed through attention to details not only in this passage but also the wider letter.

132 Author’s translation. Emphasis mine. Notice that the NRSV translates the present tense verbs as perfect: “has been groaning in labor pains.”
0.5 THE WORLD AS I INTERPRET IT: LIBERATION IN THE MIDST OF FUTILITY AND DESTRUCTION

With the help of these four sets of interpretations and others like them, this dissertation brings theological reflection, canonical interpretation, narrative and rhetorical criticisms, and ecological perception into conversation on the text of Rom 8:19-22. The broad outlines of Jewish apocalypticism and creation theology (chapter 1) inform my understanding of Paul’s message in Romans, having been helpfully limned by Gaventa and Moo, respectively. My work also benefits from the narrative interpretation of Rom 8:19-22 as articulated by Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate (chapter 2). Jewett’s insightful rendition of imperial propaganda stands as a jumping off point for my investigation of the Roman imperial context in chapter 3.

Throughout this dissertation I repeatedly ask, “What is the human relationship to nonhuman creation, as these members of creation stand in relation to God, the Creator?” In chapter 1, I address this question to the Old Testament on which Paul’s letter and theological imagination depend. My analysis of Rom 8:19-22, as it occurs in its epistolary context, demonstrates that Paul’s answer to this question grows out of the OT as well as his experience of and participation in the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (chapter 2). Chapter 3 considers how Roman history, religion, and politics portrayed the human relationship with nature and the gods, especially as this relationship related to the growing of grain. In order to understand Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome more holistically, chapter 4 places Rom 8:19-22 in direct conversation with its imperial context, deriving from this conversation a set of ethical criteria by which we might assess and direct our human relationships with the rest of God’s creation and with the Creator. Turning to modern human relationships with creation, chapter 5 considers
the deleterious effects of human activity in the American prairies, especially as these activities have focused upon grain agriculture. By means of the creation theology set forth in chapters 1 and 2 and the ethical criteria of chapter 4, this final chapter (chapter 5), critiques industrial forms of agriculture and points toward more faithful forms of growing and distributing grain for our daily bread.
I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. – Paul the Apostle

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. – Paul the Apostle

That the Apostle Paul is an inheritor and interpreter of the Jewish faith is beyond dispute. His self-presentation in explicit statements such as those cited above and the ways in which he constantly draws upon the rich nourishment of the Jewish scriptures clearly indicate that many of his hopes and assumptions are rooted in the OT and the Jewish faith. Yet in his letter writing, Paul does not often describe the theological worldview out of which he grows. Instead, he expects his audience – interpretive communities of primarily Gentile constituency – to plumb the depths of their inherited scriptures.

Especially when it comes to such rare topics in the Pauline corpus as “creation,” interpreters of Paul’s epistles must turn to the wider Jewish scriptural heritage in order to enter more fully into Paul’s perspectives on the network of relationships between God

---

1 Romans 11:1-2b. All scripture citations in chapter 1 are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.
2 Philippians 3:4b-7.
3 By referring to “Jewish faith” or “Judaism” I do not mean to imply that a monolithic religion called “Judaism” existed in Paul’s day or at any point in time. Many varieties of the Jewish faith existed and may have influenced Paul in more and less ways, with Pharisaic Judaism possibly being foremost among them.
and God’s creation. And even beyond scrutinizing Paul’s mind, the Christian attempt to construct a creation theology that bridges the experiences and theologies of the past with the crises and perspectives of the present requires us to consider the broader foundation on which Paul and the whole NT builds. Although the far-reaching implications of an OT creation theology in the interpretation of the NT remain outside the grasp of this dissertation, I here attempt to provide an overview of the key components of an OT creation theology for Pauline studies, particularly the study of Romans.

That foundation is highly varied, consisting of elements from very different historical, social, and even theological strata. Even so, the particular “stones” with which Paul built frequently originated from a few select locales, such as Genesis and Isaiah. Since my purpose in this dissertation is to sketch a particularly Pauline creation theology from Rom 8:19-22, I will concentrate this chapter on excavating those OT materials that most clearly shape Paul’s theological edifice. I will therefore narrow my scope by considering OT texts and concepts that appear in the Pauline corpus or to which Paul likely alludes. Nevertheless, I will at times broaden my gaze in order to depict the larger scriptural and theological context in order to provide a generous foundation on which Christians might develop their own modern creation theology. The key components of a creation theology, as one might expect, include God’s relationships with human and

---

4 While the centrality of “creation” in the OT has been disputed at various times and places (especially in twentieth century Germany), some scholars have demonstrated its importance throughout the OT. For example, the work of H. H. Schmid has radically deepened and broadened our views of creation and our constructions of a creational theology. He asserts: “All factors considered, the doctrine of creation, namely, the belief that God has created and is sustaining the order of the world in all its complexities, is not a peripheral theme of biblical theology but is plainly the fundamental theme. What Israel experienced in her history and what the early Christian community experienced in relation to Jesus is understood and interpreted in terms of this one basic theme” [H. H. Schmid, “Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation: ‘Creation Theology’ as the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology,” in Creation in the Old Testament, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 111.].
nonhuman creation and the reciprocal relationships between humans, nonhumans, and
God. By examining the OT with these relationships in view, seven core postulates rise to
the surface:\(^5\)

1. Humans and the rest of creation are, by God’s design, interdependent.
2. Humans function as creation’s nurturers and as mediators between God and nonhuman creation.
3. Human sin and folly cause ecological degradation, violence, and destruction of life.
4. Nonhuman creation cooperates with God in creating and sustaining plant, animal, and human life.
5. Nonhuman creation acts in creative, judging, and agential ways.
6. God is the Creator that judges human and nonhuman creation for unjust and destructive acts.
7. God is at work in creation, leading humanity and nonhuman creation into the peaceful and flourishing communion of the New Creation.

As chapter 2 will display, each of these postulates feeds into Paul’s understanding of creation, humanity’s relationship with creation, and God’s relationship with and intentions for creation.

### 1.1 A RELATIONAL PYRAMID: GOD’S INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

In a study of OT creation theology, we first recognize that the conceptual category “creation”\(^6\) encompasses all that is not God – humans, nonhuman living things, angelic beings, and material elements. The OT often employs terms such as land, wild

---


\(^6\) By using the term “creation,” I do not limit my reference to those passages that occur with the Hebrew or Greek terms for “creation.” Rather, my term “creation” stands for any member of the nonhuman, nonsupernatural creation.
beasts, and humans to describe the diverse members of this vast category. From the story of Jacob and his twelve sons on, the OT repeatedly subdivides humanity into Israel and the nations. While humans clearly are part of creation, the OT admittedly gives special attention to people and differentiates them from nonhuman counterparts. Although the Hebrew word bērīʾāh corresponding to the English term “creation” does not often occur in the OT, I here deploy “creation” as an inclusive heading for the various components of the nonhuman and human creation. When I specifically refer to the nonhuman members of the earth, I distinguish them from humans by the phrase “nonhuman creation.”

Theologically, by using the general term “creation” throughout this dissertation (whether or not I refer to the Greek term κτίς or the Hebrew bērīʾāh), I deliberately evoke Judeo-Christian beliefs in the Creator God. As Norman Wirzba so eloquently articulates,

a narration of the world as creation means that our descriptions of the world’s members and our telling of the meaning of the world’s movements must always be articulated with reference to God as the world’s source, sustenance, and end. Understood as creation, the world is not a random accident nor is it valueless matter waiting for us to give it significance. It is, rather, the concrete expression of God’s hospitable love making room for what is not God to be and to flourish.8

The naming of the ecosphere and all that is in and around it as “creation,” constitutes a statement of faith, value, and telos.

7 Although the English term “creation” occurs quite frequently in theological reflections and throughout this dissertation, the underlying Greek and Hebrew terms do not often appear in the biblical canon. In fact, the Hebrew noun bērīʾāh, meaning “creation,” occurs only at Num 16:30. The verbal form bārāʾ, “to create,” appears more frequently. Similarly, the Greek noun κτίς does not occur in the LXX but the verb (κτίζω) occurs several times. Remarkably, the Greek translation of Genesis employs the verb ποιέω in translating bārāʾ, “to create” (e.g., Gen 1:1, 21, 27; 2:3, 4).

Assuming these participants, the OT perceives an important relational configuration between God, Israel, the nations, and creation. The OT illustrates that God has relationships with each of these aggregates – Israel, the nations, and creation – and that each aggregate has relationships with all the others. Thus, God establishes and sustains relationships with Israel, the nations, and creation. Israel is in a reciprocal relationship with God and also relates to the nations and creation. The nations, in addition to their relationships with each other, Israel, and the rest of creation, experience a relationship with God – though perhaps in a more limited and mediated way than does Israel. Nonhuman creation itself relates with its Creator and its human counterparts. We might illustrate these inter-relationships with the following configuration (figure 1.1):

FIGURE 1.1. A Relational Pyramid

This complex of inter-relations reflects a typical worldview of the ancient Near East (ANE) and, as will be displayed in chapter 3, imperial Rome. H. H. Schmid argues

---

9 An argument could be made that immortal or supernatural beings ought to be included in this relational complex. However, since the angelic host receives far less attention in the OT than do Israel, the nations, and creation, we will leave this subset of created things aside.
that creational health and political order are highly integrated concepts in ancient thought.

He explains that

ancient Near Eastern cosmic, political, and social order find their unity under the concept of “creation.” . . . [Therefore,] an offence in the legal realm obviously has effects in the realm of nature (drought, famine) or in the political sphere (threat of the enemy). Law, nature, and politics are only aspects of one comprehensive order of creation.10

The theology of Isaiah helpfully illustrates this relational composite of God, Israel, the nations, and creation. James Luther Mays poignantly summarizes this reigning biblical worldview, stating:

Isaiah’s thought and speech about God are controlled by a vision that has three features. First, Adonai is a royal deity, a sovereign, exalted above earth, exalted above the nations. Second, Adonai has chosen Jerusalem as his city and called it Zion. It is the earthly seat of his reign, and the sphere in which his policy is to be observed. Third, as his human agent to represent his rule, Adonai has chosen the Davidic king and installed him as the anointed one. Simply put, Adonai is sovereign; there is a city of God; and there is a son of God. Isaiah understands God and God’s way with his people and the nations in terms of that primary vision.11

Mays pinpoints each of the relationships present in an OT creation theology, namely the relationships between God and Israel; God and the nations; and God and creation. These relationships, moreover, are not merely spiritual or invisible. As Israelite theology developed, the preeminent locale at and through which God was understood to relate to Israel, the nations, and creation was Jerusalem. Here too we have our initial glimpse of a Davidic king who is expected to play a significant role in God’s relationship with Israel, the nations, and creation. Such a portrait of God’s relationship with the created world exposes an underlying ANE “royal theology” at work in prominent OT passages.

10 Schmid, 105.
1.1.2 Royal Theology and the Relational Pyramid

“Royal theologies” in ANE societies, such as Mesopotamia and Israel, asserted that (certain) human beings acted as images of the divine. The phrase “image of God” designates the royal office or calling of human beings as God’s representatives and agents in the world, granted authorized power to share in God’s rule or administration of the earth’s resources and creatures.” 

Mesopotamian culture, in particular, held that the king, who was also priest, was the image of a god. As this king conquered cities and nations, he constructed images of himself, communicating to his new subjects his divinely instituted rule. Mesopotamian mythology proclaimed the Mesopotamian king as the supreme ruler and all others as his servants and heralded Mesopotamian culture and religion as superior to all others. Israelite theologians, however, resisted and subverted this marginalizing message especially in the creation story of Genesis 1. In *Liberating Image*, J. Richard Middleton proposes that every element of the account of human creation on the sixth day (image and rule, fertility and food) articulates a vision of the human role in the cosmos that is diametrically opposed to that of ancient Mesopotamia. In contrast to an ideology that claims that humans are created for a relationship of dependency, to meet divine need, God in Genesis 1 creates for the benefit of the creature, without explicitly asking for a direct return of any kind. And humans, in God’s image, I suggest, are expected to imitate this primal generosity in their own shared rule of the earth.

---

13 Ibid., 94.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 186-189.
16 Ibid., 211. He elsewhere notes, “The author of Genesis 1 (whenever he lived) was acquainted (in either oral or written form) with the Mesopotamian notion of the king as image of a god (as a particular crystallization of royal ideology) and that he intentionally challenged this notion with the claim that all humanity was made in God’s image” [ibid., 145].
Israel’s counter-narrative of creation’s origins in Gen 1, and chapters 1 through 11 more broadly, identified *all humans* as bearing the image of God, the Creator God who created not out of conflict and violence but out of power and generosity; these texts also depict humans as having the authority to rule over the earth and other creatures but not other human beings.¹⁷

By portraying humans as inhabiting a position of “dominion” in God’s creation, the Israelite creation account of Gen 1 maintains some elements of a royal theology, albeit in a democratized fashion, even as it resists some oppressive and dehumanizing elements of ANE cosmology. Genesis 1:26-28 indicates that all humans bear the image of God and thereby are commissioned to “have dominion” over living things (1:26 NRSV) and to “subdue” the earth (1:28 NRSV). Yet, what do human dominion and subduing of the earth entail? Does the image of God in all humans transfer the oppressive effects of a royal theology to a situation in which all human beings exercise nearly unrestrained power over the nonhuman creation? The textual features of Gen 1, in fact, do not follow this trend. Read rightly, Gen 1 indicates that human “dominion” entails service and that the nonhuman creation acts integrally in the creative process so that human creation bears not only the divine image but the earth’s image as well.

For centuries, the interpretation of Genesis 1:26 has caused great consternation among biblical scholars and theologians alike. The text states,

---
¹⁷ Ibid., 204-205, 269. Middleton highlights the fact that Israel’s primeval history also includes critique of human beings by portraying them as murderers and polluters of the earth (Gen 4, 6) [ibid., 219-220]. Moreover, he suggests that God shares power by inviting the nonhuman creation into God’s creative work [ibid., 287]. Robert Murray also suggests that the democratization of the image of God brought with it the responsibility to exercise justice [Robert Murray, *Cosmic Covenant: Biblical Themes of Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation* (Piscataway, NJ: Tigris, 2007), 98-99].
Then God said, “Let us make humankind 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 wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

Not only are the meanings of “image” and “likeness” fraught with linguistic difficulty, the specific subjects of the first person plural verb and pronouns of v 26 occur without explicit referents. To whom does God speak when saying, “let us make”?

A variety of proposals for making sense of the verb, “let us make,” have been offered, but none of them is entirely satisfactory. Many commentators assume that the cohortative presupposes a divine council with whom God confers in the creation of humanity. However, this interpretation depends primarily on data from outside Gen 1 and conflicts with the apparent theological and ideological perspectives of the text’s Priestly source (P). In contrast to this less-than-desirable situation, several textual features of Gen 1 instead suggest that God partners with the land and the sea in creating plants and animals and, so, may also partner with the land in the creation of humans.

Thus, exegetical evidence problematizes the common reading of the cohortative verb in Gen 1:26 as referring to a divine council and offers in its place an interpretation that

---

18 In his commentary on Genesis, Gordon Wenham helpfully outlines six common interpretations of the plural verb “let us make” [Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis I-15, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), 27-28.]. This first person plural verb may be: (1) an address to a divine council or heavenly court consisting of angels; (2) an address to Christ or members of the Trinity; (3) an address to other gods in a pantheon; (4) an instance of a “royal we”; (5) an address to God’s self for self-exhortation; or (6) an address to other members of a plural Godhead. Another possibility that is missing from Wenham’s list but mentioned by others is that the plural addresses some aspect(s) of creation such that creation acts as either an earthly council or as co-creator [David J. A. Cline, “The Image of God in Man,” Tyndale Bulletin 19, no. (1968): 64.; Victor P. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 133.].

appreciates the cooperative role of the land and water in the making of living things such that, in Gen 1:26, God in fact confers with an earthly “council” in the creation of human beings.

Throughout Genesis chapter 1, God speaks indirectly to various elements of creation by means of jussive verbs.²⁰ A pattern emerges from the jussives as these are or are not combined with descriptions of God’s activities in Gen 1. For the first three days of creation God elicits, by verbal invitation or command only,²¹ various members of creation into being and acting – light is brought into being, a dome is brought into being, the dome acts to separate waters, waters gather together, dry land appears, and the land sprouts green plants (Gen 1:3, 6, 11). The speaking of jussives alone produces these activities. On the other hand, in the following three days of creation (days four through six), God leads various members of creation into being and acting by means of both verbal invitation and divine action: the lights in the dome are invited into being, but we

---

²⁰ Eleven times in Gen 1 the Hebrew author makes use of jussives: Gen 1:3 “let there be light”; 1:6 “let there be a dome” and “let it separate”; 1:9 “let the waters . . . be gathered together” and “let the dry land appear”; 1:11 “let the earth put forth vegetation”; 1:14 “let there be lights”; 1:20 “let the water teem” and “let birds fly”; 1:24 “let the earth bring forth [land animals]”; and 1:26 “let them have dominion.”

²¹ Fretheim claims that the jussive verbs depict God as creating the heavens and the earth not by command but by invitation (Fretheim, God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation, 42-43.). However, Wenham understands the jussive verbs to be commands (Wenham, 6). Von Rad and Skinner emphasize the sovereignty of God in creating by word (Von Rad, 51-53.; Skinner, 7.). Sarna calls the jussive of 1:14 a “pronouncement” (Sarna, 9.). As a side note for future study, the Greek translations of Gen 1 do use imperative verbs, but these verbs – in keeping with the Hebrew – are third person rather than second person. The third person imperative verbs of the Greek translation occur in the aorist aspect, giving the activity an undefined time orientation; the activity could be ongoing or happen once. Daniel Wallace argues that the third person imperative may be used by a superior in addressing an inferior as a form of pleading [Daniel B. Wallace, Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament with Scripture, Subject, and Greek Word Indexes (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 487-488.]. Although English translations of the third person imperative often use the words “let so and so do such and such,” Wallace suggests that the Greek imperative typically maintains a stronger tone; it is not mere permission but command [ibid., 486.]. The differences between the Greek verbal system and the underlying Hebrew system do not alter the implications of the reading of Gen 1 proposed here. God’s addressees (“third person” members of creation) act in cooperation with God’s creative designs whether they are invited or commanded to do so.
are told that God also makes the lights (1:14, 16); the waters are invited to swarm with water creatures and birds are invited to fly over the land, but God creates both sea creatures and birds (1:20-21); and the land is invited to bring forth land creatures, even while God creates the land creatures (1:24-25). Here, then, God’s speaking of jussives to nonhuman elements and God’s creating activity effect these events. When animate forms of life are created, God not only verbally invites the water and land to produce these creatures, but God also acts to create them himself. Similarly, when God invites the lights of the sky into being, God works to create these celestial bodies himself. The text of Gen 1, therefore, indicates that the watery and earthy members of creation cooperate with God in the life-creating activities of making fish, birds, and land animals while the heavens work with God to create the heavenly lights.

Immediately after the land and God cooperate in the creation of land animals, God invites “us” to create humankind, speaking a cohortative instead of a jussive verb. The text reads, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (Gen 1:26). However, verse 27 explains that God creates humankind: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Commentators frequently argue that an audience previously unmentioned in this chapter, either divine or angelic beings, must be addressed in Gen 1:26 by the cohortative verb. Our study of the text thus far, however, highlights another possibility. The textual patterns emerging from days four and six indicate that God verbally commissions elements of creation to create but also involves himself in that creating. Thus, a loose parallelism exists between the creation of humans and all other animals, for God both
invites another (or others) to participate in the creation of living beings but also creates those beings himself. We might illustrate this parallelism in the following manner:

Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly . . . (1:20)
So God created the great sea monsters . . . and every winged bird (1:21)
Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind . . . (1:24)
God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind . . . (1:25)
Let us make humankind in our image . . . and let them have dominion . . . (1:26)
So God created humankind in his image . . . (1:27)

Such a structure gives us pause to reflect on whether our notorious cohortative at v 26 may in fact address the earth as a partner in the creative process. By focusing in greater detail on the immediate context of Gen 1:26 and those verses describing the sixth day of creation (1:24-31), this perspective becomes more plausible.

As noted already, the land is invited at 1:24 to produce living creatures. Even interpreters who stress that Gen 1 depicts God as creating without assistance or mediation acknowledge the land’s central role in the creation of animals here. For example, Nahum Sarna admits that Gen 1:24 describes “an exception to the norm that God’s word directly effectuates the desired product. Here the earth is depicted as the mediating element, implying that God endows it with generative powers that He now activates by His utterance.” With this recognition of the land’s productive capacity and activity in mind, we also note that the text declares that God made the animals and deemed them good (1:25). Both the land and God have a “hand” in making land animals on day six of creation.

Even so, some commentators see a strong distinction between the creation of animals and the creation of humans on day six. For, although Gen 1:22 declares that God

---

22 Sarna, 9.
56

blesses the fish of the sea and the birds of the air on day four and Gen 1:28 says God
blesses the humans, verses 24-25 do not explicitly state that land creatures are blessed by
God. Rather, the only blessing on day six appears at 1:28 and seems to address humans
alone. Interpreters have queried why – unlike their marine, avian, and human
counterparts – the land animals do not receive a blessing and a commission to be fruitful
and multiply.23 In response to this textual quandary, Sarna suggests that the absence of
the beatitude is based on God’s concern that competition over limited food resources
between animals and humans should not get too great.24 Can such an assumption be
sustained in light of other passages in the Priestly source?

As we examine the broader context of Genesis, we find that elsewhere in P land
animals are indeed expected to be fruitful and multiply. After the flood waters subside,
Genesis 8:17 declares that God commands Noah to bring the birds and land animals out
of the Ark so that they will be fruitful and multiply.25 Although the land animals do not
receive a direct blessing from the mouth of God, they are indirectly encouraged through
God’s commission to Noah to fill the earth, multiply, and be fruitful. Claus Westermann
suggests that at 8:17 “the blessing of fertility is renewed” to “all the animals.”26
Moreover, in his comments on 1:24-25, he admits that “[t]he blessing of the terrestrial
animals is not specifically mentioned; but as 8:17 makes clear, it also applies to them.”27
Since we find that land animals are expected to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the post-

24 Sarna, 11.
25 Interpreters point out that Gen 8:14-19 has its heritage in the P source. See, for example, Claus
Westermann, Genesis: A Practical Commentary, Text and Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987),
26 Westermann, 61-62. Emphasis added. Also, Philippe Guillaume, Land and Calendar: The Priestly
Document from Genesis 1 to Joshua 18 (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 16.
27 Westermann, 10.
diluvian earth,\textsuperscript{28} there is no strong warrant for thinking the final redactor of P is concerned to exclude a commission of fertility upon land animals in Gen 1.\textsuperscript{29} Therefore, we find no reason to see a strong disjunction between the creative events of day six, the creation of land animals first and then the creation of humans. Since Priestly texts recognize and promote a positive interdependence among land, land animals, and humans, no legitimate reason establishes an ideological or theological break between the creation of land animals and the creation of humans on the sixth day of creation. We should therefore interpret the creation events of the sixth day as a unit – the land is invited to produce land animals at the beginning of the day (1:24) and is also addressed in the cohortative invitation to create humans on that same day (1:26).

Thus, we find that an earthly council reading of Gen 1:26 and its cohortative verb, “let us make,” actually alleviates some of the interpretive tensions that a divine / heavenly council reading promotes. Four sets of reasons – sociological, source-critical, intertextual, and textual in nature – lead us to reject the divine council hypothesis.

Sociological: Characteristics of Gen 1 itself suggest that the final redactors of this passage wrote with careful opposition to polytheistic ANE religious beliefs. For example, in exegeting Gen 1:14-19, Wenham argues that the redactor specifically wrote in such a way as to resist the common ANE perspective that the sun and moon were divine. The

\textsuperscript{28} Since Wenham denies that the land animals were blessed in Gen 1, he suggests that 8:17 indicates, “The commands given originally just to the fish and the birds (1:20, 22) are here extended to all the land animals, one of many hints in this story that the post-flood era represents the start of a new creation” (Wenham, 187.).

\textsuperscript{29} Interestingly, Sarna assumes that even “animal” life was blessed at 1:22 in his comment on 8:17 even though, in his comments on 1:24-25, he has concerns over animals not being blessed on day six (Sarna, 11, 59.). There is no theological or textual reason to suggest that God’s blessing in Gen 1:28 cannot include a tacit blessing of land animals. Admittedly, the wording of Gen 1:28 does not explicitly include land animals since the content of the verse pertains to humans – their flourishing and ruling over the fish, birds, and land animals. Nevertheless, the blessing may loosely refer to all beings created on the sixth day.
Priestly author does not pay the sun and moon regard by naming them but instead generically refers to them as the greater and lesser lights, lights which God creates. Thus, the passage polemically teaches that – despite celestial bodies being “the most important gods in the pantheon” of ANE religions – “the sun, moon, and stars are created by God: they are creatures, not gods.”

From Gen 1 itself, then, we find reason to doubt that a divine or heavenly council was positively assumed in the writing of Gen 1:26.

Source-Critical: Although interpreters such as Randall Garr suggest that Gen 1:26 purposefully echoes a prior mythological source, several others maintain that such a purpose is inconsistent with the doctrine and carefulness displayed throughout the Priestly source. In fact, Garr himself acknowledges that the divine council reading “seems to violate Priestly doctrine. For if Gen 1:26 refers to a plurality of gods, elsewhere ‘P’ knows nothing of heavenly beings.” Similarly, Skinner states, “the very existence of angels is nowhere alluded to by P at all.” Thus, a unique and self-contradictory reference to a divine or heavenly council by means of the cohortative verb in P’s creation account appears quite unlikely.

Intertextual: As noted above, interpreters rightly refer to the wider canonical witness in interpreting Gen 1:26. I would argue, however, that interpreters allow texts outside Gen 1 and outside the P source to exercise greater determinative control over the meaning of Gen 1 than the immediate context exercises over itself. Although critical scholars claim that Gen 3:22 and possibly 11:7 flow from the J source, they suppose that

---

30 Wenham, 21. See also, Von Rad, 55.
32 Ibid., 90-91.
33 Skinner, 31.
the wording and meaning of these texts help determine the ultimate meaning of Gen 1:26, a text from the P source. For instance, von Rad supports his heavenly court reading by baldly asserting, “Proof for the correctness of this interpretation appears in Gen. 3:22, where the plural again occurs just as abruptly and yet obviously for the same reason.”

These texts (Gen 1:26 and Gen 3:22; 11:7) – though written in different time periods and with different theological perspectives – are assumed, without sufficient textual warrant, to point to the same theological reality. Similarly, interpreters make use of other OT texts to demonstrate that Gen 1 assumes the existence of a heavenly assembly. Yet, in so doing, they only prove the possibility that Gen 1 refers to a divine council but do not give clear, positive reasons for such an exegetical reality.

Textual: Although biblical scholars typically claim that a verse’s immediate context is of primary importance in determining the meaning of that verse, interpreters in favor of a heavenly / divine court reading of Gen 1:26 are slow to provide convincing textual support for their interpretation. The obvious reason, of course, is that a reference to a heavenly court or divine council in Gen 1 takes us by surprise, for heretofore God appears to be “alone” with the “other” of creation. Consequently, interpreters have necessarily fallen back on sociological, source-critical, and intertextual information to shed light on the strange wording at Gen 1:26.

With these factors in mind, we find that an earthly council – in particular, the land – does not conflict with the theology or content of the Priestly source, as does the
heavenly council reading. Put more positively, an earthly council reading actually resonates harmoniously with the immediate context of Gen 1 and intertexts throughout the OT. Most importantly, this interpretation flows from and establishes itself in the details of the passage under question.

The implications of approaching Gen 1:24-31 as a cohesive narrative are profound for theological and anthropological considerations. Although Gen 1:11-12, 21, 24-25 emphasize the way in which plants, fish, birds, and land animals are created after their “kind” by the activities of land and water, verses 26-27 indicate that God deliberately creates humans who bear the image and likeness of God, who are in a certain sense after the “kind” of divinity. Nevertheless, the creative work of water (with the result of fish and birds) and of land (with the result of land animals and humans) suggests that the consequent living things manifest something of their producer’s image—hydration or earthiness. Humans alone, however, are depicted as being in the image of both earth and God. The stress of verse 27 on the creation of humankind in his image (rather than “our” image), then, highlights the fact that humans uniquely bear the image of God. Consequently, the text of Gen 1:26 points to the dual nature of the human being.36 The human is a nexus of earth and heaven. Perhaps in relating humanity’s dual nature to its role as God’s image bearer, OT anthropology suggests that humans somehow stand between God and creation, mediating between God and nonhuman creation.

As image bearers on earth, humans represent and administer the rule of the one to whom their image refers, the Creator God. Humans, therefore, are to exercise dominion

36 This reading holds together two seemingly contradictory biblical perspectives on humanity: that humans are no different from animals (Eccl 3:19-20) and that humans are a little lower than gods (Psm 8:3-5).
over – or mastery among – the living creatures in a manner commensurate with their King. By suggesting that people “exercise mastery among” the rest of creation, I follow Ellen Davis’ insightful interpretation: “The Hebrew preposition can mean ‘among,’ and the verbal phrase as a whole may denote rule that is characterized by firmness rather than harshness (see Ps. 72:8).”\(^{37}\) Human beings’ “mastery among” God’s creatures, moreover, relates integrally to their reflection of God’s own being. For, “conformity to the image of God is the single enabling condition for the exercise of ‘mastery’ among the creatures.”\(^{38}\)

As discussed above, Gen 1 provides a democratizing notion of the image of God. Another strain of theology in the OT, however, presents the monarch as the image and son of God who acts as a primary mediator for Israel, the nations, and all creation. This perspective might succinctly be named a “royal theology.”

While all of humanity reflects the image of God and – in light of the foregoing reading of Gen 1:26-28 – the image of the earth, specially anointed humans function as mediators between God and the earth, according to many texts of the OT. These mediators have the roles of priests and kings. Thus, like their ANE contemporaries, Israelite people considered the king to have profound influence on the well being of his human subjects and the rest of creation. A peculiar relationship therefore existed between the activity of the Davidic “son of God” and the health of the created order.\(^{39}\)

---

\(^{37}\) Davis, 55. Here, Davis explains that the verbal form *r-d-h* conjures up images of shepherding.

\(^{38}\) Ibid. Although the image of God has become an important theological concern in Christian thinking, Davis notes that the OT refers to it only five times. In order to grasp the meaning of “image of God”, the reader must attend to the depictions of God that occur throughout the OT [ibid., 55-56.].

\(^{39}\) Several important OT passages portray the Davidic king as the “son of God.” In 2 Samuel 7:14, for example, God declares to David that God will be father to David’s ruling descendant: “I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.” Psalm 2 is a key Royal Psalm that presents God as saying to the anointed king, “you are my son.” The Psalm also points to Israel’s future sovereignty and rule over other nations. Psalm 2:7-9 states: “I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have
divinely instituted order of the cosmos, according to Robert Murray, places the king in a highly responsible and representative role in which his actions directly affect the health (or lack of health) of the created order. A king’s reign of justice and peace answers, from the human side, God’s eternal covenant with the earth. We find this representative relationship most clearly illustrated in Isaiah’s lively vision of the Davidic king who establishes justice and, as a result, ushers in creational peace and fertility (11:1-9), a text quoted by Paul in Rom 15:12. Isaiah exclaims:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. . . Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox (11:1, 5-7).

In light of this added mediatorial dimension, the relational pyramid described above must now incorporate the role of the king or messiah as one who maintains the integrity of the creational fabric through acts of righteousness (figure 1.2).

begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.’

40 Undergirding this relational complex is an assumption that what one does in this world matters. Righteousness elicits peace, fertility, and more righteousness. Injustice, oppression, and destruction warrant punishment and further destruction. Despite accepting the basic claims of this worldview – what we might call an act-consequence model of creation – Israel also recognized the ways in which appropriate consequences did not always follow correlating acts. The righteous and compassionate acts of Job did not automatically lead to consequences of life-long shalom. The wicked and violent acts of the Assyrian army did not immediately receive divine punishment and restraint. However, even when the expected consequences did not take place, Israel developed a belief that the consequences of their (and others’) acts would be met at least in the life hereafter.

41 “The Cosmic Covenant,” focuses on the biblical evidence for a belief which ancient Israel shared with neighbouring cultures, one well documented especially from Egypt to Mesopotamia: the belief in a divinely willed order harmoniously linking heaven and earth. . . Human collaboration in this task was effected by maintaining justice with mercy and by ritual actions, in which kings played the leading part” [Murray, xx.].
In addition to Isaiah 11, Psalm 72 also correlates a monarch’s role of executing righteousness with the integrity and flourishing of cosmic inter-relations.\textsuperscript{42} However, as we and ancient Israelites are well aware, creational relationships are not entirely marked by righteousness from their human side. Instead, humans often act in injustice and sin. An OT creational theology, therefore, also recognizes the need for reconciliation and even new creation. Reconciliation is effected in a number of ways, as we will consider

\textsuperscript{42} Psalm 72 illustrates the role of the king in the execution of righteousness and the maintenance of the creational order for fertility and peace: “Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more. May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. . . . He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight. Long may he live! . . . May there be abundance of grain in the land; may it wave on the tops of the mountains; may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field. May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun. May all nations be blessed in him; may they pronounce him happy. Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen” (Psm 72:1-8, 13-15a, 16-19 NRSV).
below, but ultimately the righteous mediation and leadership of an anointed one, the messiah, will establish the New Creation.

1.2 MEMBERS OF THE RELATIONAL PYRAMID

We now turn to consider in detail the primary elements of an OT creation theology, namely the relationships established between God and creation; God and the nations; God and Israel; Israel and creation; and Israel and the nations.\(^43\) This preliminary and necessarily simplified sketch of an OT creation theology provides several useful concepts for an interpretation of Paul and a construction of contemporary theology.

1.2.1 God and Creation

God’s relationship with creation extends into the primordial past beyond human reckoning. The OT, nonetheless, paints a portrait of what this relationship might have been like at the dawn of creation. As discussed above, God spoke to the elements of creation to arrange them and give them life (Gen 1). God even shaped the dirt of creation in making human beings (Gen 2). In response to God’s word and activity, the creation cooperated with God in creating plant, animal, and human life, and the entire creation was deemed “very good” (Gen 1:31). In this primordial world, God commissioned human and animal creatures to reproduce after their kind and depend only upon plant life for nourishment (Gen 1:29-30; 2:9, 16). God provided for the ongoing existence of land creatures through the mediation of Noah and his ark during the diluvial judgment (Gen 6-9). Strikingly, God even entered into a covenant with all living creatures after the flood,

\(^{43}\) A more thorough study would also include an investigation of the nations’ relationship with creation and vice versa.
promising never again to exterminate life in such a way (Gen 9:9-17). Only after this watery cataclysm did God allow humans and animals to eat the flesh of other animate creatures (excluding human flesh) (Gen 9:3). Even after these primordial events, the scriptures attest that God continues to maintain a nurturing and life-giving relationship with creation, providing food for the baby ravens (Job 38:41), breathing life into creatures (Psm 104:30), and renewing the face of the ground (Psm 104:30).

Creation itself relates, in turn, to God. Members of the created order praise God and are summoned to join in Israel’s worship and praise of God (Psm 148). Created things can communicate something of God’s character to human beings (Psm 36:6) and testify to God’s attributes, for “[t]he heavens proclaim his righteousness” (Psm 97:6). 44 The earth and heavens serve as God’s royal footstool and throne (Isa 66:1). Zion in particular is a holy place, God’s abode, and a place through which “God shines forth” (Psm 2:6; 9:11; 50:2). As these and other passages declare, a significant outcome of the nonhuman creation’s relationship with God is that it heralds God’s glory to all the inhabitants of the earth and heavens, especially humans (cf. Rom 1:20). Creation even acts in the divine courtroom as a witness against human corruption and abuse and is often an unwilling recipient of human violence (Hos 6:1-2; Deut 30:19; 31:28). Consequently, an important aspect of creation’s healthy existence is humanity’s embodiment of divine justice in the world, especially as administered by the messiah (Isa 11).

44 Fretheim, God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation, 256-258.
1.2.2 God and the Nations

As the Creator of all the earth and of the entire human race, God is depicted in the OT as the true God of all nations. God establishes a relationship of blessing with human beings from the outset, for God blesses them and commissions them to be fruitful and multiply throughout the earth (Gen 1:28). God extends mercy to the human race by sparing Noah and his family from extermination by the flood and by scattering rather than destroying humans at Babel (Gen 6-9; 11). A variety of texts depict God as interacting with – even hardening the heart of – the leaders of nations (Exod 4:21; 7:3; 14:4, 17; Dan 2:28; 4:37). Even more, God deems the Babylonian warlord and king, Nebuchadrezzar, to be a personal servant through whom God will carry out the punishment of God’s chosen people, Israel (Jer 25:9; Ezek 23:24; cf. Isa 45:1). God’s relationship with the nations, however, is not without accountability, for the Creator God will judge the ways in which the nations of the earth relate to God, Israel, and creation (Psm 7:8; 9:8; 67:4; 82:8; 98:9; 110:6; Isa 2:4; Joel 3; Mic 4:3).

Although the peoples of the world in some sense know God by means of the creation (Psm 97:6-7; Rom 1:20), they transgress God’s ways. People of all nations, including Israel, disrupt their relationships with God and creation. Through their transgression of God’s command (Gen 3) and their evil inclinations and rampant violence (Gen 4:10-16; 6:5-11), humankind grieves and infuriates God and repeatedly receives God’s just punishment (Gen 3:16-24; 6:7, 17). The nations do not only receive judgment, however, but also participate as witnesses in God’s judgment of Israel (Ezek 5). Despite human sinfulness, the OT scriptures hold forth the hope that the nations will ultimately learn the ways of peace and justice from the Creator God and thereby receive God’s
blessing as it is intended for all (Isa 2; 11; Mic 4). The means by which the nations receive this blessing, however, is through the mediation of Israel and its messiah-king (Mic 4; Isa 43). The nations, in fact, will one-day stream to Jerusalem in worship of YHWH (Isa 55:5; 56:6-8; 66:18-20).

1.2.3 God and Israel

After their banishment from the Garden of Eden (Gen 3), humans most fully experience the knowledge and blessing of God through God’s particular blessing of Abraham and, eventually, through the nation of Israel. At several points in the narrative of Genesis, God calls and blesses Abraham and promises to bless all people through him and his offspring (Gen 18:18-19; 22:18; 26:4). The first such announcement appears at Gen 12:1-3 and states,

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

We discover here two sides of our relational pyramid: God, Israel, and creation as one side and God, Israel, and the nations as the second side. We also find a two-pronged covenant between God and Abram. God promises to provide Abram with (1) descendants and (2) land, through which God will bless all people. Schmid suggests that this foundational promise of “increase, fortune, and prosperity” reflects a typical ANE perspective on what it means to be a nation.45 The national deity – here, YHWH –

provides land, the increase of the human population, and blessing for the constitution of a nation, Israel.

The covenant that God begins with Abram and extends to his descendants through Sarah is codified at Mt. Sinai / Mt. Horeb in the Sinaitic and Deuteronomic Covenants. God’s original promise to Abraham and the ongoing covenant with Israel includes the promise of land, provided that the people followed God’s ways (Gen 12:1, 7; Deut 5:33). The connection between Israel’s obedience to God’s stipulations and the consequent, successful relationships Israel has with the nations and with the land is best typified in Leviticus 26, which states: 46

If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land. And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword shall go through your land. You shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword . . . I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people (Lev 26:3-7; 11-12).

By following the liturgical and also highly practical stipulations of Leviticus, God’s people would flourish in a land of agricultural abundance. Thus, the two-pronged Abrahamic covenant of land and progeny are here reconfigured as three elements of God’s blessings: creational fertility, national security, and divine presence.

God’s special relationship with Israel – and, by implication, God’s presence with the people – is repeatedly threatened by individual and corporate sins, through the unfaithfulness of God’s people (1 Ki 14:15-16; 2 Ki 17:22; Isa 1:4; Jer 11:10; Hos 14:1).

46 Cf., Davis, 83.
In order to maintain a healthy relationship with Israel despite sin, God provides the means of atonement through sacrifice and the mediation of the priestly cult (Lev 5:16). If left without appropriate atonement and repentance, however, the transgressions of Israel would lead to divine punishment. God’s punishment of Israel would be meted out in varying degrees of severity, ranging from sickness, crop failure, and civil unrest to war, destruction, and banishment from the land of promise (Deut 11:13-17; Hos 4:1-7). In the extreme case of Israel’s consistent infidelity and consequent exile, the nations themselves would perceive that God had punished Israel for its sins (Ezek 39:23). Israel’s due punishment, however, would nonetheless lead to its restoration. For, despite Israel’s unfaithfulness and unrighteousness, the OT testifies again and again to God’s faithfulness and righteousness in God’s covenant with Israel. God would one day summon the Israelite exiles back to their land, provide a messiah, and renew the creation.

Isaiah 11 famously illustrates the way in which God’s special election of Israel and its anointed leader persists through international turmoil and does not preclude God’s relationship with the nations but deepens it and even cultivates the context in which the New Creation comes into being. God’s relationship with Israel facilitates a healthy human-creation relationship through the just activity of the messiah, as Isaiah 11:1-10, 12 proclaims:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie
down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. . . He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

Isaiah’s portrait of the Davidic messiah paints him as the Spirit-filled, perfectly just, compassionate, and faithful leader, who shall establish such a remarkable reign of peace that former enemies – whether human or animal – live in peace with one another.

1.2.4 Israel and Creation

We have already noted some of the ways in which the OT depicts the interrelationship between creation, Israel, and YHWH. In particular, Israel’s obedience to God’s teaching – the “Torah” or law – elicits God’s sending of nourishing rains upon the land and the provision of abundant crops (Lev 26:1-13). However, in the case of Israel’s disobedience, the land will lie polluted (Isa 24:5). In response, the Lord can summon the mountains and hills, the earth and the heavens to act as judges and witnesses against . . .

---

47 NRSV. The Greek translation of 11:10 changes the Hebrew Vorlage in an important way: “On that day there shall be the root of Jesse and the one who rises to rule the nations. In him the nations shall hope, and his rest shall be glorious” [emphasis indicates translational change]. The omitted verses (vv 11, 13-16) are admittedly more militaristic than my reading of Romans allows. These verses state: “On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. . . The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart, the hostility of Judah shall be cut off; Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah, and Judah shall not be hostile towards Ephraim. But they shall swoop down on the backs of the Philistines in the west, together they shall plunder the people of the east. They shall put forth their hand against Edom and Moab, and the Ammonites shall obey them. And the LORD will utterly destroy the tongue of the sea of Egypt; and will wave his hand over the River with his scorching wind; and will split it into seven channels, and make a way to cross on foot; so there shall be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that is left of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt” (vv 11, 13-16).

48 Admittedly, Isaiah’s messiah also exacts fatal judgment on the wicked.
Israel in the divine courtroom (Hos 6:1-2; Deut 30:19; 31:28). In such a case, creation is an aggrieved member in a covenantal relationship, in its relationship with the people of Israel and with the Creator God.

Although Lev 26 quoted above begins with an explanation of God’s blessings for Israel’s obedience, it goes on to explain the just consequences of Israel’s disobedience to the Lord’s commands. If Israel acts in unfaithfulness and unrighteousness, God would allow pestilence, wild animals, and enemies to diminish its population and destroy its land (Lev 26:14-32). God would even cast Israel out of the Promised Land with the result that the land would finally receive its due rest (Lev 26:34, 43). Elsewhere in Leviticus the land itself “vomit[s] out its inhabitants” (Lev 18:25). As Ellen Davis astutely perceives, Leviticus portrays the land as a semi-autonomous moral agent. Though it can be victimized by its inhabitants, it remains accountable to God even for the defilement it suffers at human hands. Ultimately for the land, divine presence trumps human presence. The land, which retains its healthful instinct for God, must finally expel the unhealthful presence and make up the Sabbath years that Israel failed to observe.49

Yet even in this process of exile, God promises to remember the divine covenant with Abraham and Sarah and even to remember the land (Lev 26:42; see also Deut 11:12). God’s remembrance of the land actually directs God to preserve Israel during its exile so that the chosen people might be led back to the land of promise. We learn from Isaiah, moreover, that despite the land’s inclination to expel its abusive inhabitants, the land rejoices at the prospect of Israel’s salvation, at the remnant’s return from exile (Isa

49 Davis, 100.
The land and Israel, according to the divine intention set forth in the OT, have a mutually beneficial, symbiotic relationship.

### 1.2.5 Israel and the Nations

The OT has much to say about the relationship Israel is to have with the nations. Notwithstanding the topic’s prevalence and importance, we can only briefly consider this element of our relational pyramid here. An illustrative story of Israel’s potential role in its relationship with the nations occurs before Israel is even a nation. In Genesis 18-19, the great forefather of the nation, Abraham, acts as a mediator on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham pleads for the lives inhabiting these cities. The OT elsewhere proclaims that the nation of Israel is to function as a “priestly kingdom” (Exod 19:6) and as a light to the nations (Isa 42:6; 49:6; 60:3). The nations, in fact, will stream to Zion to learn of God’s righteous ways (Mic 4), especially as modeled by the Israelite messiah (Isa 11). Thus, although the OT stresses Israel’s special relationship with YHWH, it also stresses the fact that YHWH is the Creator God of all nations who intends to bless all nations through Israel. Thus, the particular relationship between God and Israel opens into a universal relationship between God and all nations.

### 1.3 Implications for a Pauline Creation Theology

The OT demonstrates that God’s relationships with Israel, the nations, and the rest of creation form a highly integrated complex. In this study, I suggest that the dynamics of

---

50 Fretheim, God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation, 250.
51 Conversely, Melchizedek, a person not related to Abraham, acts as a priest on behalf of Abraham (Gen 14).
52 This reading of Isa 42:6 depends on an understanding of the servant of God as being the nation of Israel.
the relational pyramid described above influence the Apostle Paul’s theological imagination. The terms Paul uses for the members of the complex often parallel the OT, with God, Israel, the nations (often translated as “Gentiles”), and nonhuman creation as the primary members of the pyramid. Paul differs from the OT, however, because of his personal experience, an experience of revelation (“apocalypse”). After Jesus reveals himself to him, Paul clearly perceives that Israel’s hoped-for messiah is the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. Paul consequently believes that this messiah has reconciled the created order to God and shall ultimately establish the “New Creation” through his mediating and atoning life, death, and resurrection (2 Cor 5; Rom 8; Gal 6). Although Paul often distinguishes “Israel” from “the nations” in his writings, he in fact believes that members of these two groups have been brought into a new, common group, namely the church or body of Christ (Gal 3; Rom 4-6).

God’s ongoing, faithful, and just relationship with Israel is of central concern to Paul in Romans. The righteousness of God (Rom 1:17; 2:5); God’s faithfulness despite human unfaithfulness (3:3-4); God’s justice despite God’s choice of some people but not others (9:11-18); God’s continuing faithfulness to Israel (11:1, 26); and God’s future judgment of all people (14:10-12) stand as key centerpieces to Paul’s argument. In conjunction with God’s righteousness and faithfulness, is God’s salvation of all humans – both Jew and Gentile – and of all creation (1:16; 3:29-30; 4:11-18; 10:12-13; 8:18-22). In keeping with the soteriology set forth in the OT, God provides a sacrifice of atonement for the forgiveness of sins but now does this through the unique self-giving death of his

---

53 Although all of Paul’s letters ought to be included in the development of a Pauline creation theology, we must here limit our reflections to his letter to the church in Rome. We shall here consider a few themes that appear most related to our foregoing examination of OT creation theology.
Son, Jesus Christ (3:25; 4:25; 5:8-11; 5:19; 8:32). Therefore, God’s intended righteousness extends to both Judeans and all nations by grace and through faith (3:24-28; 4:1-12; 5:1-2; 5:18; 9:24; 10:4). Paul emphasizes that such a salvation concords with God’s interactions with Israel (Rom 4) and demonstrates that God has not rejected the special people of God, Israel (11:1-6).

But in response to the offer of gracious salvation, God also requires people to demonstrate faithfulness and even the “obedience of faith” (1:5; 6:17; 11:26; 15:18; 16:19; 16:26). Christians – my shorthand for those following Christ – are to relate to God, each other, the nations, Israel, and all creation in righteousness and liberative love (6:22-23; 8:1-39; 11:22; 13; 15:27). Being conformed to the image of their elder brother, Messiah Jesus, the firstborn from the dead (8:29; Col 1:18), Christians are to present their bodies as living sacrifices to God (Rom 12:1). In this way, humans rightly exercise dominion in this life (5:17-18) and enter into the eternal glory of the resurrected life, the New Creation (1:4; 4:17; 4:24; 6:4; 7:4; 8:11; 8:23; 10:9; 11:16; 14:9). Christians’ reign ought to reflect the reign of their Creator and King, being characterized by justice, righteousness, and peace. Christians ought to live “peaceably with all” (Rom 12:18). The Christian relationship with the rest of creation, moreover, ought to ensure liberation and flourishing for all, “[f]or the creation expectantly awaits the apocalypse of the sons of God . . . in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from the slavery of destruction into the liberty of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:19, 20b, 21).54

54 Author’s translation.
1.3.1 Dominion and Inheritance of the Cosmos in Romans

While the foregoing discussion of Romans illustrates some of the ways in which Pauline thought builds upon an OT creation theology, Romans 4 strikingly places Paul’s constructive work in greater relief. In line with his argument that God justifies both the circumcised and the uncircumcised from faithfulness (3:30), Paul argues in chapter 4 that Abraham truly is the father of all the faithful, since this fulfills God’s original promise to Abraham that he would father many descendants. In Rom 4:16-18, Paul creates a collage from Genesis 17 and 15, passages that describe God’s two-pronged promise to Abraham: a promise of land and of progeny. But in Romans, Paul highlights Abraham’s fecundity while obscuring his inheritance of land. He explains,

> For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations” [Gen 17:5]) – in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “So numerous shall your descendants be” [Gen 15:5] (Rom 4:16-18 NRSV).

By so shaping the biblical story, Paul highlights the anthropological dimension of God’s promise in order to prove from Torah that the nations too are part of Abraham’s family. Meanwhile he appears to neglect the geographical dimension of the Abrahamic Covenant.55 Paul explicitly stresses that Abraham will have many heirs, and with a nice

---

55 As the discussion of Gen 15 and 17 illustrate, God’s promise has at least two aspects: the promise of many descendants and the promise of a specific plot of land. By describing the promise in terms of kosmos does Paul allude to an inheritance of physical land or of nations of people or simply the fathering of many descendants? Obviously, there cannot be nations of peoples without the land on which they live. And excepting a few possible desert places in the Mediterranean, there were no lands without human inhabitants. Land and humans go hand in hand in biblical thought (at least in this regard).
twist on the story, these heirs will be from many nations (rather than Abraham himself producing different nations via Ishmael and Isaac, as the Genesis story emphasizes). The heirs are not only his physical descendants who practice circumcision like their forefather, but also his spiritual descendants who walk in faith even apart from circumcision, as did Abraham (4:11-12; 16). Thus, Abraham is the father of all those of Abraham’s faith who are among the Judeans as well as the nations (4:16). And in whom does Abraham trust? In the God who makes the dead alive and calls into existence the things that do not exist (4:17; cf., 4:24). In light of God’s promises to Abraham that he would be father of many nations and the fact that the inheritance of the promise comes through faith rather than the law, Paul’s earlier claim in 3:30 holds true: “God is One, who justifies the circumcised from faith and the uncircumcised through the faith.” By the end of chapter 4, Paul has related Abraham’s faith to “our” faith since both Abraham and his true descendants share a faith in the same object, namely the God who makes the dead alive (ζωοποιοῦντος, 4:17, 4:24; 8:11). “Our” faith in the God who resurrected Jesus is counted as righteousness (4:23-25) just as Abraham’s faith was reckoned to him as righteousness (4:9).

In the process of so thoroughly stressing the anthropological side of God’s covenant, does Paul diminish or even reject its territorial aspect? In Genesis 15 God clearly promises both. God not only declares that Abram will have a biological heir but that he will inherit a particular land (τὴν γῆν ταύτην κληρονομήσαι, Gen 15:7). God’s promise of land – specifically the land spanning from the Nile to the Euphrates (Gen
15:18) – receives just as much stress in Genesis, if not more, as that of progeny. The Pentateuch repeatedly alludes to the Abrahamic covenant to reiterate Israel’s future inheritance of the land (e.g., Gen 28:4; Exod 23:30; Lev 20:24; Num 14:24; Deut 1:8). An alternative way in which the Greek OT describes the territorial promise is with the phrase “inherit nations” (κληρονομήσαι ἔθνη, Deut 9:1; Psm 110:6, LXX). The Old Testament, therefore, envisions Israel as inheriting not only a geographical region (γῆ) but also the political and social constituents (ἔθνη) of that region.

With Paul’s emphasis on God’s salvation of Jews and the nations in Romans, it would make sense for Paul to describe Abraham not only as “father of many nations” (Rom 4:17) but also as the inheritor of nations. But Paul instead explains that through righteousness of faith, the promise came to Abraham and his seed that he would be heir of the world (τὸ κληρονόμον αὐτὸν ἔναι κόσμου, 4:13). Paul chooses to employ this novel phrase (“novel” since κληρονόμεω does not occur in the same verse as κόσμος in the

---

56 The Greek translation of Genesis, where this promise of many descendants and a portion of land first occurs, repeatedly uses the verb κληρονομέω to express God’s promise of land (γῆ) to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 15:7, 8; 28:4). Two passages in Genesis report blessings on Abraham and the children of Rebekah so that they will inherit the cities (πόλεις) of those opposing them (22:17; 24:60). Following the pattern established in Genesis, the rest of the Pentateuch uses the word group κληρονομέω, inherit, to reiterate God’s promise of land (γῆ) to the descendants of Abraham and to describe their possession of that land (e.g., Exod 23:30; Lev 20:24; Num 14:24; Deut 1:8). In this context, the book of Numbers explains that Israel’s priests, Aaron, and his descendants would not inherit portions of land “since I [the LORD] am your portion and your inheritance [κληρονομία] in the midst of the sons of Israel” (Num 18:20). Repeatedly in the Pentateuch, the verb inherit occurs in conjunction with land (γῆ), and the latter term often describes a region of the earth, including its inhabitants.

In addition to inheriting the land, Israel inherits nations. Deuteronomy 9:1 declares: “Hear, O Israel: Thou goest this day across Jordan to inherit nations [κληρονομήσαι ἔθνη] greater and stronger than yourselves, cities great and walled up to heaven” [Lancelot Charles Brenton, ed. The Septuagint Version with Apocrypha: Greek and English (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1844)., emphasis added]. The Psalter as well correlates inheritance with the nations. A Royal Psalm declares that God will give the nations (ἔθνη) to the anointed of Israel if he merely asks God (2:8). While praising God for his righteousness and provisions, Psalm 111 declares that God grants his people (λαῷ) the inheritance of the nations (ἔθνων) (111:6; LXX 110:6).

57 See, for example, Psalms of Solomon 17-18. Harrison, 251-254.

58 Author’s translation of the Greek OT.

59 Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 907. Notice ἔθνη Isa 66:20 says the nations will bring all your
Greek OT) to describe God’s promise. It may be that Paul modifies the divine promise in order to give it a spiritual rather than political air. Perhaps dulling the political edge of this inheritance, Paul states that Abraham and his descendants inherit the world rather than “the nations” so that Christians in Rome may not engage in a political coup d’état.

In contrast to a few currents of anti-imperial sentiment among his Jewish compatriots, which used God’s territorial promise as a rallying cry for Jewish attempts at sovereignty in Palestine, Paul makes no explicit mention of the inheritance of land for God’s people.\(^{57}\) In Rom 9:4, Paul recounts that his Jewish compatriots received adoption, glory, covenants, law, liturgical service, promises, and the Messiah. Strikingly, he does not mention that they received the land or even an eschatological inheritance of the land, although “promises” may nonetheless allude to the promise of land. By being silent on the prominent OT theme of land, does Paul soften Jewish territorial claims? Does Paul consider God’s promise of Palestine as null and void, so that the inheritance of the κόσμος takes on simply spiritual overtones?

Answering this larger question requires us to review Paul’s apostolic mission and his claims about Jesus Christ. Isaiah 66:18-22 (LXX) provides a powerful intertext by which to consider Paul’s own mission. On behalf of God, the prophet declares:

I know their works and their logic. I come to gather together all the nations and languages. They will come and will see my glory. And I will set signs among them and will send out from them the ones having been saved in the nations, in Tarshish, Put, Lud, Meshech, Tubal-Cain, and in the Greek territories, and in the islands far away: the ones not having heard my name or seeing my glory. And they will proclaim my glory among the nations. And they will bring your brothers and sisters from all the nations, a gift to the Lord, with horses and chariots, in mule-drawn

\(^{57}\) See, for example, Psalms of Solomon 17-18. Harrison, 251-254.
covered wagons to the holy city Jerusalem, said the Lord, just as the children of Israel brought me their sacrifices with songs to the house of the Lord. And from them, I will choose for myself priests and Levites, said the Lord. For as the new heaven and new earth, which I am making, remain before me, says the Lord, thus also your seed and your name shall stand (Isa 66:18-22).

Perhaps in fulfillment of Isa 66:18-23, Paul portrays his mission as winning the allegiance (the obedience of faith) of the nations for Jesus Christ and of gathering up an offering of the nations for Jerusalem. Paul insists throughout the letter that Jesus is the rightful heir to David’s throne, the Son of God, and the ruler of the nations (Rom 1:3-4; 15:11). Messiah Jesus is consequently both the true king of Israel and the king of all nations. In other words, Jesus – the seed of Abraham – is king of the κόσμος, the κόσμος that stands under God’s judgment but also receives God’s gracious reconciliation and resurrection life (3:19; 11:15).

By declaring that Abraham is the inheritor of the κόσμος, Paul encapsulates but also expands God’s promises to Israel. In turn, Paul reframes the divine promise of Jewish sovereignty in Palestine as a dominion of the entire world by the Jewish Messiah, in keeping with the royal theology traced in 1.1. The reign of Christ is consequently pantzerritorial rather than aterritorial. Jesus is the Messiah “being God over all, blessed

---

58 Author’s translation of the Greek OT.
59 Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, 907. Notice that Isa 66:20 says the nations will bring all your kindred from all the nations – is Paul extending the idea of kindred to include non-Jews since these too are Abraham’s legitimate descendants by the Spirit? It seems as though Paul thinks that monetary offerings from the nations is representative of the nations themselves. By offering the goods from the earth in the form of money, they offer themselves. By carrying those monetary offerings to Jerusalem, Paul brings the nations there and consequently begins to fulfill the prophecy in Isa 66. In contrast to this interpretation, Ross Wagner finds no strong allusions to Isa 65-66 in Paul and thus questions whether these chapters influenced his eschatology and his sense of mission; he asks why Paul would not have quoted Isa 66:19 if it so heavily influenced him [J. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul “in Concert” in the Letter to the Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 215, fn 287].
60 Matthew Whelan suggested this terminology (personal communication, May 10, 2013).
for the ages! Amen” (9:5). Consequently, “Paul globalizes the promised inheritance: the promise of blessing the nations and the promise of the land have been merged as Paul reflects on the promise to Abraham that he would inherit not just the land but the entire world.”

This dominion – this instantiation of the Kingdom of God – does not exploit subjected lands and peoples for the luxuries of fine foods and drink but establishes righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17). The implications of Abraham’s inheritance of the κόσμος and Jesus’ cosmic rule for Christian practice are numerous and shall be discussed in chapters 4-5. But first we must consider in greater detail how Paul depicts the human relationship with the rest of creation and God’s work of liberation in Romans 8:19-22.

---

61 Author’s translation.
63 Drawing on the rich theologies of Orthodox Christian thinkers, Elizabeth Theokritoff states: “Before Christ, Chrysostom explains, the Jews were commanded to leave the earth alone and to offer sacrifices and pray in one place only, because the earth as a whole was defiled by pagan sacrifices. But since Christ has come and cleansed the whole inhabited earth, every place has become a place of prayer for us; the whole earth is now more holy than the Holy of Holies. . . Since Christ came into the world, his creation has become ‘secretly sacramental.’ When we consecrate a place or an object, when we dedicate it to sacred use, we are showing our readiness to lift the veil of secrecy” [Elizabeth Theokritoff, Living in God’s Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), 177].
Although Paul’s letter to the Romans focuses primarily on God’s gracious rectification and liberation of people from all nations, it glances briefly at the current condition and ultimate destiny of all creation as well. In light of Paul’s concern in even addressing creation’s liberation (brief though it is) and in light of current anthropogenic forms of ecological degradation, it is worthwhile posing three critical questions to this letter and 8:19-22 in particular. According to Rom 8:19-22, in conversation with its immediate epistolary context and its wider canonical context: (1) What is the nature of the relationships between humanity, the rest of creation, and God? (2) How does the redemptive work of Christ Jesus affect nonhuman creation, if at all? (3) And, what is God’s ultimate plan for nonhuman creation; what is creation’s telos? By raising these three questions, we examine the dynamics of the relational pyramid introduced in Chapter 1 but now do so with a concentrated focus on a Pauline creation theology.

Paul by no means answers these questions in sequential order or even in a straightforward manner, for the questions themselves intermingle and affect one another. Moreover, Paul’s short discourse on creation in Rom 8 presupposes and alludes to a wider theological framework, requiring the reader to read the entire letter attentively and in tune with the OT. Answering these questions, therefore, becomes complex. One could follow Paul’s implied narrative trajectory in a chronological fashion, moving from past, present, to future (as do Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, as discussed in 0.4.1). Or, one could arrange his answer in a topical manner, answering each question in turn. Or, one could organize her investigation in a verse-by-verse approach, following Paul’s rhetorical
flow. Since the questions I pose have answers that intertwine, I believe the most exegetically thorough approach will follow Paul’s own phrasing and logic, his rhetorical flow. Such an approach encourages the interpreter to attend to the immediate context for the ways in which it assists us in establishing contextually informed answers to our exegetical probes.

While understanding “creation” (κτίσις) to refer to nonhuman creation, I contend that Rom 8:19-22 both presupposes and elucidates an interdependent relationship between human creation and nonhuman creation with their health, histories, and futures affecting one another. This is the case, in part, because God placed humanity in a position of responsibility and representation over the rest of creation while also allowing for the possibility that humans would sin and fail in their divine calling as God’s image bearers. In their sinning, humans subjected the nonhuman creation to futility and destruction, limiting creation’s ability to fulfill its own divine calling to flourish and nurture life. Yet, even in humanity’s rebellion, God has not abandoned creation or humans but has continued to provide a means of reconciliation with God and even adoption into God’s family. God’s Son, Jesus the Messiah, makes reconciliation, liberation, and adoption available to all human beings. As a result of Jesus’ liberation of humans from slavery to sin and death into resurrection glory, the nonhuman creation too will ultimately experience liberation from the futility and destruction stemming from human sin. In God’s eschatological future, creation will freely glorify God and flourish in God’s presence as the New Creation.

---

1 Several scriptures attest to God’s ongoing care for and nourishment of animals, for example, Job 38:25-27, 38:39-39:30.
2 Adoption applies to humans rather than the nonhuman creation.
2.1 TRANSLATION OF ROMANS 8:18-23

18 For I deem the sufferings of the present time unworthy of comparison to the imminent glory to be apocalypted in us. 19 For the creation expectantly awaits the apocalypse of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly but on account of the one subjecting it in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from the slavery of destruction into the liberty of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation is collectively groaning and laboring even till now. 23 And not only creation, but also those having the first fruits of the Spirit, we and they groan in ourselves while awaiting adoption, the redemption of our body. 3

2.2 Κτίσις

While Paul’s focus in Romans is undoubtedly on human beings, he gives a degree of attention to the wider creation, κτίσις, at Rom 1:20, 25; 8:19, 20, 21, 22, 39. The specific components of the created order to which Paul refers in using the term κτίσις are notoriously difficult to ascertain. In his commentary on Romans, C. E. B. Cranfield helpfully lists the eight traditional interpretations of κτίσις as: “the whole creation, including mankind both believing and unbelieving and also the angels; all mankind; unbelieving mankind only; believers only; the angels only; sub-human nature together with the angels; sub-human nature together with mankind in general; sub-human nature only.” 4 From his perspective, κτίσις refers to “sub-human” elements of the created order, a conclusion based upon at least two suppositions. First, he considers the discussion of human groaning in 8:23 to be in contrast with and thus distinctive from the groaning of creation in 8:22. Second, he believes that humanity – including Adam and those represented by him – cannot be described as having been subjected to futility unwillingly

---

3 All scripture translations in this chapter are the author’s own unless otherwise noted.
since they willfully sinned (8:20; 3:23).\(^5\) A potential weakness of this definition of creation that Cranfield himself points out is that it – in tandem with 8:23 and the groaning of “we ourselves” – excludes unbelieving humans.\(^6\) He shores up this weakness by assuming that believing humanity could act as a representative first fruit of all humanity.\(^7\)

In contrast to Cranfield, Susan Eastman argues that κτίσις not only includes nonhuman creation but also “disobedient humanity.”\(^8\) In response to Cranfield’s second argument above, Eastman suggests that the futility to which creation was unwillingly subjected in fact accords with Paul’s depiction of humanity’s own fall. She finds support for this in Rom 1:21 where Paul uses passive verbs “became futile” and “became darkened” to describe the consequences of humanity’s failure to honor and give thanks to God. Thus, she concludes that the “futile thinking and darkened hearts are not chosen

\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Ibid., 412. See also James Dunn, who asserts the meaning of “creation” is somewhat unclear and that “[i]t is unlikely that Paul intended a precise definition (cf. v 39) but more than likely that his thought focused primarily on nonhuman creation” [James D. G. Dunn, Romans: 1-8, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 469.]
\(^7\) Cranfield, 412.
\(^8\) Susan Eastman, “Whose Apocalypse? The Identity of the Sons of God in Romans 8:19,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 2 (2002): 275. Eastman argues that “sons of God” primarily refers to those people who will one day be incorporated into God’s Kingdom but who are outside it now, namely, Israel. This implies that the unbelieving human component of “creation” refers particularly to Jews. According to Eastman, several distinctions occur between the character “creation” and the characters identified by the phrases “sons of God,” “children of God,” and “we ourselves” in vv 18-21. However, no clear semantic or syntactic markers differentiate the latter terms from one another – the “we” to whom Paul refers does not appear entirely distinct from “the sons of God” or “the children of God.” This is not to say that “sons of God” is entirely composed of “we” but that “we” and the future participants in God’s Kingdom are likely included in this phrase as well as in the phrase “children of God.” Further support for this reading comes from the fact that Paul discusses adoption into God’s family throughout this passage (vv 14-17). When he continues to write “sons/children of God” in v 18ff, he certainly includes the “we” and “you” to whom he has been writing. The “sons of God”, then, is a synecdoche representing all those who will be incorporated into the body of Christ, the Kingdom of God. With Paul’s emphasis throughout Romans on salvation being available to all, Paul can certainly have in mind here the future family of God that would include the “we” of his audience. Moreover, in light of the personification and apparent moral valence of creation in the Hebrew Bible, I find no obstacle in reading “creation” in a personified manner: creation longs for its liberation apart from unbelieving humanity in this passage.
conditions but unanticipated consequences of idolatry."\(^9\) All creation, human and nonhuman, then, was subjected to futility unwillingly.

In addition, Eastman recognizes a third factor that, depending on one’s interpretation of key prophetic passages, could support the “nonhuman creation only” perspective or the “nonhuman creation plus humanity” interpretation. The former perspective presupposes that Paul’s personification of nature in 8:19-22 aligns with elements of the Hebrew Bible. Cranfield argues, for example, that creation apart from humanity can be personified as eagerly awaiting, groaning, and laboring.\(^10\) The latter perspective, however, stresses the inseparable character of creation and humanity in the Psalms and Prophets such that they should not be separated in Rom 8. In considering Jeremiah 12:4,\(^11\) Eastman asserts:

\[
[T]he very fact that the mourning and rejoicing of “nature” are intimately intertwined with the fortunes of Israel weakens the argument for interpreting κτίσις as creation apart from humanity. To separate the voice of “nonhuman creation” from the human voices of these texts is to misread them. This implies that to exclude a human voice from the groaning of “creation” in Rom 8:22 is as erroneous as to exclude the natural world. Rather, Paul assumes the unity of “the whole creation,” which groans and suffers pangs of childbirth together – that is, as one. The unity of the suffering points to the unity of redemption.\(^12\)
\]

\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^10\) Cranfield, 412.
\(^11\) Jeremiah 12:4 reads, “How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither? For the wickedness of those who live in it the animals and the birds are swept away, and because people said, ‘He is blind to our ways’ “ (NRSV). To complicate matters, Jeremiah at times explicitly names the speaker on behalf of whom he writes, whether that “speaker” is God or Jerusalem, for instance. At other times, the identity of the speaker remains much more elusive [thanks are due to Ellen Davis for highlighting this issue]. In Jer 12:4, however, he specifically identifies the land as mourning. It mourns, to be sure, because of unrighteous human activity, but, in this case, does not mourn in chorus with human beings.
\(^12\) Eastman: 274.
In my view, however, while Eastman rightly perceives a crucial link between the people of Israel and its land, other textual features in Romans not only strengthen this link but also do so by way of distinguishing nonhuman creation from humans.

Several textual features suggest that Paul uses κτίσις in Rom 8:19-22 in a way that contrasts it with humanity. While Paul indeed describes κτίσις, those who have the first fruits of the Spirit, “we,” and the Spirit as all groaning (vv 22, 23, 26), he depicts only κτίσις as laboring. Linguistically, Paul thereby distinguishes the activities of κτίσις (i.e., groaning and laboring) from the activity of (redeemed) humanity and the Spirit (i.e., groaning).

Paul’s emphatic statement in v 23, “And not only [creation], but also those having the first fruits of the Spirit, we and they groan in ourselves while awaiting adoption, the redemption of our body,” further distinguishes a segment of humanity from κτίσις. Paul stresses that he and his audience (“we”) groan along with all those who have also experienced the Spirit’s adoptive and liberating power (8:2, 14-16), even though they continue to wait for the consummation of the Spirit’s redemptive power through resurrection or ζωοποίησις (8:11, 23). Thus, these humans await the actual experience of resurrection while κτίσις, as I shall argue below, awaits the result of this resurrection in the apocalypse of resurrected humanity (v 19). At that point, κτίσις will move into this glorious experience of redeemed humanity, receiving by extension the liberty and glory that God intends humans to inhabit (v 21). The cumulative force of these verses and their distinctions between κτίσις and the collective groups “we”, sons of God, and children of
God offers a strong case for considering κτίσις as including all members of creation minus (at least) redeemed humanity.\textsuperscript{13}

The question remains, however, whether κτίσις includes unredeemed humanity. The function of κτίσις in Rom 1:20 promotes the reading that κτίσις does not include the rest of humanity. There, Paul declares, “For God’s invisible character, namely, his eternal power and divinity, is observed from the creation of the world, being understood in the things made.” Creation, according to Paul, communicates aspects of God’s being and existence to humans even as they turn their eyes and hearts away.\textsuperscript{14} While in 8:38-39 Paul suggests there are created things that resist God and even war against God’s children, it seems from 1:20 and 8:19 that at least some aspects of creation align themselves with God. Thus, as Edward Adams contends regarding 1:20, “It is not the κτίσις which seduces and tempts human beings away from God. If human beings stand in an ambiguous relation to creation, it is due to their misperception and misappropriation of it, to their distortion of its true character.”\textsuperscript{15} In returning to chapter 8:19-22, we find κτίσις continuing to act (or Paul continuing to personify creation as acting) in accord with God. For example, creation anticipates the consummation of God’s salvation and therefore seems to ally itself with God’s purposes and desires (v 19). Creation also acts in line with the Spirit by groaning (vv 22, 26). Thus, in a letter where Paul describes rebellious and

\textsuperscript{13} While I have not referred explicitly to angelic beings, it seems as though they too could be included in nonhuman creation here. They too may experience a new kind of liberty and glory when humanity is fully redeemed from sin and death since the angelic beings, in Jewish-Christian understanding, often serve God by helping humans.

\textsuperscript{14} See further discussion of Rom 1 in Section 1.5.

\textsuperscript{15} Edward Adams, Constructing the World: A Study in Paul’s Cosmological Language (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 158.
unredeemed humanity as enemies of God (5:10), I would conclude from these uses of κτίσις that Paul employs this term in 8:19-22 to refer to nonhuman creation alone.\textsuperscript{16}

2.3 SUFFERING NOW IN LIGHT OF FUTURE GLORY

With this definition of creation in mind we now dive into our passage, recognizing that we land in the middle of a conversation. The immediate context of Rom 8:19-22 holds critical information that provides an interpretive grid by which to comprehend Paul’s brief discourse on creation. Up to this point in the letter, Paul has stressed the human story in which Abraham and all those who inherit the κόσμος with him receive their inheritance not through faithless observance of the law but through the righteousness of faith (1.3.1). This righteousness of faith comes to all people as a gift of God through Jesus Christ (4:13, 16, 24-25; 5:1-2, 8-10; 8:1). The Creator God who establishes right relationships with otherwise fractious people (“rectification”), is also the God who makes the dead alive, creates life in the first place, and enlivens bodies that are subject to death (ζωοποιοῦντος τούς νεκρούς, 4:17; ζωοποιήσει καὶ τὰ θνητὰ σώματα, 8:11). This is the Creator God who raised Jesus from the dead and gives the Spirit of life to abide in humans who otherwise are enslaved to sin and death (8:11, 2).\textsuperscript{17} Thus, God adopts them as children, making them heirs of God\textsuperscript{18} and co-heirs with Christ (8:15-17).

\textsuperscript{16} Nevertheless, I do recognize that at 8:39 by stating “anything else in all creation” (NRSV) Paul indicates that some created things oppose God or God’s people.

\textsuperscript{17} The indwelling of the Spirit has significant moral implications, as will be discussed in chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{18} By using the phrase χληρονόμων θεοῦ (8:17), Paul correlates all God’s people (Jews and Gentiles) with the Levitical priests. The book of Numbers explains that Israel’s priests, Aaron and his descendants, would not inherit portions of land “since I [the LORD] am your portion and your inheritance [χληρονόμια] in the midst of the sons of Israel” (Num 18:20). While those in Christ do not inherit a portion of the Promised Land but instead inherit God’s own presence, they also are co-heirs with the Messiah who is Lord over the entire κόσμος (1.3.1).
God’s ancient promise to Abraham described in Rom 4 finds full expression, then, in the Roman congregations (note the “you” language throughout chapter 8) since people of many nations have now become children and heirs of God and siblings of Jesus; consequently, they are also children and heirs of Abraham.

However, in attaining the status of child and heir of God, the Roman Christians do not immediately acquire lives of peace, abundance, and ease. Instead, like their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they suffer. Even so, they suffer with Christ (συμπάσχομεν) in order that they might be glorified with Christ (συνδοξασθῶμεν, 8:17). As this chapter shall exposit, Christian suffering with Christ and especially glorification with Christ hold the keys to the nonhuman creation’s future liberty.

Human glorification with Christ stands in the future and may have seemed to be an insignificant pipe-dream to the Roman Christians who faced tremendous forms of suffering. Paul insists, however, that the future glory outweighs the present sufferings. He declares: “For I deem the sufferings of the present time unworthy of comparison to the imminent glory to be apocalypsed in us” (8:18). Since the meaning of v 18 affects the understanding of the whole chapter, a more precise reading is necessary.

19 Understanding μέλλοντας as modifying δόξαν rather than the infinitive follows the future orientation of the passage (e.g., the future tenses of συνδοξασθῶμεν [v 17] and ἔλευθερωθῆσεται [v 21]), although a convincing case can also be made for correlating the participle with the infinitive so that the stress lies on the imminence of the apocalypse. While the NRSV translates the predicate of v 18 as “the glory about to be revealed to us” and Jewett renders it as “the future glory” to be revealed “for us” [Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 510.], I have suggested it read “the imminent glory to be apocalypsed in us.” I thereby follow Paul’s grammatical lead in having the accusative feminine participle, μέλλοντας, modify the noun rather than the infinitive (in contrast to the NRSV and in keeping with Jewett). Since the lexical meaning of the participle form of μέλλω is “future, to come” [Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and William Arndt, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 628.], Jewett’s translation is perfectly legitimate. Yet, given the cumulative force of Paul’s use of “now” throughout the letter as well as his belief that God’s work was so manifest already that he could describe the elect as glorified (past tense) in 8:30, I take the adjective “imminent” as most pertinent in this apocalyptically-oriented context. My choice of “in us” as opposed to “to” or “for” also relies on the sense of the immediate context. Since v 18 comes on the heels of Paul’s
interpretation of vv 19-22, we shall briefly examine a number of its concepts, including the nature of “suffering,” “the present time,” and the “imminent glory to be apocalypsed in us.”

While some interpreters and translators understand τὰ παθήματα as general “sufferings” that attend embodied human life, Paul’s precise wording suggests an alternative meaning. When we include the following phrase, “the present time,” in our interpretation of τὰ παθήματα, a more apocalyptic and eschatological meaning comes to the surface. Paul considers τὰ παθήματα τοῦ νῦν καιροῦ, “the sufferings of the now time,” incomparable to the coming glory. Throughout Romans, Paul often refers to the decisive time in which he lived as a time when Christians suffer with Christ but also reference to Christian glorification with Christ (v 17), the apocalypse of glory most reasonably concerns the transforming power that works within humans (and, as we will see, all creation) to lead them fully into resurrection glory in the future. “The imminent glory to be apocalypsed in us” consequently continues Paul’s emphasis on the human situation and God’s intention to transform it finally and completely.

NRSV, NKJ, NIV, NAS. The translators likely take their cue from the previous verse, in which Paul proclaims that Christians “suffer with Christ” (συµπάσχωµεν, 8:17). The implication here is that Christians are to endure persecutions and earthly pains for the sake of and in the manner of Jesus Christ. In his commentary on Romans, Douglas Moo suggests that the ‘sufferings of the present time’ are not only those ‘trials’ that are endured directly because of confession of Christ – for instance, persecution – but encompass the whole gamut of suffering, including things such as illness, bereavement, hunger, financial reverses, and death itself” [Douglas J. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1996), 511.]. Similarly, Jewett indicates that the Christians in Rome “had already experienced harassment and deportation and whose everyday life as members of the Roman underclass was anything but idyllic” [Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 509.]. Thus, these sufferings, according to Moo and Jewett, did not emanate from the so-called end-time tribulations.

Note, however, that Paul does not use θλίψις here, which would have given an even clearer sense of end time tribulations. Although I stress the eschatological character of these sufferings, I do not deny the broader implications of the term as it occurs in Romans. Paul’s use of παθήματα in Rom 7:5 where he uses the term to describe the life of sin that bore fruit for death, indicates that “sufferings” in 8:17-18 should include temptations and the evil at work in the Christian’s present unglorified members (7:14-23), in addition to forms of persecution. Romans 7:5 states: “For when we were in the flesh, the sufferings of sin worked in our members through the law in order that they bore fruit to death.” In the broader context, Paul has compared the life of bondage to sin that leads to death to the life of bondage to God that leads to righteousness and life. The sufferings here are “passions of sin” and are those malignant powers that work in direct opposition to the glory of God (7:14-20). A few verses later Paul declares that God sent the Son in the likeness of sinful flesh in order to condemn sin in the flesh (8:3). If we take this statement seriously, we must recognize that God’s redemptive plan entered the sinful situation in order to break its bonds from within.
experience God’s salvation “now.” Verses 18 and 22 share this term “now” (νῦν) and thus invite us to consider how Paul viewed the “now” time as it recurs in the letter to the Romans.

In a study of Paul’s use of νῦν throughout Romans, it becomes clear that, in Paul’s view, the salvation wrought in and through Christ has concrete effects on the present lives of the faithful. God has established reconciliation with people of all nations and has given them freedom from sin and forgiveness in Christ. These reconciled people, therefore, ought to live in righteousness now. Nonetheless, all is not well; God’s kingdom of peace and wholeness has not yet healed a warring and broken creation. Suffering still afflicts people everyday in this present time.

---

22 Throughout the letter, Paul emphasizes the present consequences of salvation in Christ. In the Pauline present, the righteousness of God has now been revealed apart from law and through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ (Rom 3:21-2). Since those in Christ have been justified, they are now certain to be saved from God’s wrath (5:9). And those in Christ now have a reconciled relationship with God through Christ and so can rejoice (5:11). Because the Roman Christians have been freed from sin, they must now give their bodies as slaves to righteousness for growth in sanctification (6:19). And since the Roman Christians have now been freed from sin and enslaved to God, they bear fruit towards sanctification and ultimately eternal life (6:22). Having died to what bound them, Paul and the Roman Christians are now “discharged” from the law (7:6). And the infamous “I” of Rom 7 now sins only because sin dwells in him, committing sin instead of doing the good he truly desires to do (7:16ff). But since Jesus Christ rescues people from their body of death (7:25), there is now no condemnation for people in Christ Jesus (8:1). And, yet, those in Christ suffer in the now time, even though these sufferings do not hold water compared to the glory ahead (8:18). Despite creation’s subjection to decay, the creation will indeed be liberated since we know that it is groaning and laboring together even till now (8:21-22). As God kept a remnant of faithful people alive during the days of Elijah, so even in the now time God has a remnant in Israel (11:5). The Gentile Christians in Rome were once disobedient to God but now have mercy because of Israel’s disobedience (11:30). Thus, the people of Israel are now disobedient so that the Gentiles might receive mercy and also so that they themselves will receive mercy (11:31). In consequence of their deliverance in Christ, the Roman Christians are to live lovingly towards all people since it is already the hour to wake from sleep, for now their salvation is nearer than when they first believed (13:9-11). And, finally, Paul commits the Roman Christians to the God who has now revealed (apocalypsed) the mystery of the gospel to the nations (Rom 16:25-26). (This word study examined the occurrences of νῦν and νῦνι, specifically.)

23 Harrison adds another interpretive dimension to the discussion of “now” to which we will turn in chapter 3. The phrases “in the eschatological fulfillment experienced in the present eschatological age, viewed from the perspective of the old covenant (3:26; 11:5) or the coming eschatological glory (8:18; 13:11). In either case, the imperial theology of the cycle of ages is decisively pinpricked” [Harrison, 117.]
By coupling 8:18 with Paul’s declaration in 13:11, “now our salvation is nearer than when we [first] believed,” we get the sense that Paul deems the consummation of redemption to be near. Thus, it is not unreasonable to conclude that Paul believed he and the Christians in Rome lived in the last days. Many New Testament authors – including Paul – believed that Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection inaugurated the end times or the tribulation period that would soon come to a close at the return of Christ. With specific reference to Rom 8:18, Dale Allison finds that “[t]he contrast with ‘the glory that is to be revealed to us’ together with the general eschatological orientation of 8:19-25 almost certainly imply [sic] that Paul here has in mind the sufferings of the final affliction – and these are ‘of this present time.’” While some may oppose or remain unconvinced by an interpretation that stresses end-time tribulations, the topic proves particularly relevant to our passage since Paul points to creation’s laboring in v 22 and such “laboring” could relate to the so-called “Birth Pangs of the Messiah” (2.7) We will return to this interpretive conundrum below when we consider v 22 in greater textual and contextual detail.

While Paul recognizes that he and his Roman congregants are caught up in a unique time of suffering, he remains confident that God’s ultimate salvation is near. This salvation entails resurrection, the apocalypse of God’s life-giving glory in us (v 18; also v 23). Throughout the OT and NT “glory” often refers to God’s magnificence, “God’s full presence” (e.g., Exod 33:18, 22; 29:43-45; Num 14:10; 1 Sam 4:21-22; Luke 2:9; Acts

25 Ibid., 63.
26 See, for example, Moo, “Romans 8.19-22 and Isaiah’s Cosmic Covenant,” 82-83.
Several features of Romans 8, however, give δόξα a more specific meaning. The phrase εἰς ἡµᾶς ("in, to, for us") locates the glory as acting on behalf of or residing in Christians. With Paul’s reference to glorification with Christ appearing the sentence before (v 17), the apocalypse of glory in v 18 most clearly depicts the event of resurrection when Jesus’ co-heirs will be glorified with him. Yet, that event in which God extends incorruptible life to already dead or dying humans does not only affect humanity. As we shall see in the following verses (vv 19-22), God’s apocalypse of glory "in us" carries positive, liberative implications for all creation. As J. C. Beker describes it, "the object of the Spirit’s activity and of the hope of the creation and Christians alike is the glory of God, that is, the triumph of God over all suffering in his created world." God’s gracious work of salvation involves not only humans but also nonhuman creation.

Since this imminent glory is the work of God, it will come in the form of an "apocalypse," a revelation originating in and from God. As an "apocalypse," the ultimate transformation of humanity (and, as we shall see, all creation) depends on God’s prerogative and power. Being sovereign over all time and space, God in Jesus Christ

---

28 Cranfield understands εἰς ἡµᾶς as not simply “for us” or “to us”; rather the terms together “are naturally understood as indicating where the revelation of the glory is to occur, the persons whose condition will be transformed by it” [Cranfield, 410.]. He also states, “the revelation of the glory will be, not something merely internal to us nor something brought about by our own activity, but something outwardly manifest as well as affecting our inward life, done to us by the decisive action of God” [ibid.].
30 Cf., Psalm 36:6: “Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep: you save humans and animals alike, O LORD.”
31 Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, 112.
32 John Collins indicates that “apocalyptic eschatology” may not always refer to an end of history, “[a]ll the apocalypses, however, involve a transcendent eschatology that looks for retribution beyond the
has brought creation to the cusp of the New Age with the resurrection of humanity about to be revealed (Rom 8:18-19).

2.4 ROMANS 8:19: CREATION’S EXPECTATION FOR AN IMMINENT RESURRECTION

The personal, communal, and temporary sufferings that Paul and his fellow Christians endure cannot compare with the glory of the cosmic, ubiquitous, and enduring liberation that is to come (vv 19-22). By using the term γάρ, “for,” between verses 18 and 19, Paul connects present human sufferings with the expectations of creation. “For” points to the supporting evidence from the entire creation that the future glory outweighs present suffering. In these verses Paul turns to the narrative of the wider creation beyond humanity to indicate that the future consummation of God’s salvation will indeed exceed our wildest dreams as well as transcend our most horrific sufferings (cf., v 35-36). At its core, this pericope declares that the entire created order will be liberated from its present captivity to destruction and futility as it steps into the glorified existence of God’s children.

A literal translation of v 19 states, “For the eager expectation of the creation awaits the apocalypse of the sons of God.” This awkward translation reflects the way in which the Greek text places “expectation” as the subject of the verb “await” (ἀποκαραδοκία τῆς κτίσεως . . . ἀπεκδέχεται). Most translators smooth out the wording by

bounds of history”; thus, some judgment is involved [John J. Collins, The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 9.] While Romans 8:18-39 refers only obliquely to an “end” of history, it explicitly describes the future judgment of those in Christ in vv 33-39 with the conclusion that the Judge is the suffering Messiah who intercedes for his brothers and sisters. We conclude, therefore, that Romans holds forth a form of apocalyptic eschatology, or as Collins suggests, Paul has affinities to apocalyptic eschatology [ibid.].
making κτίσις the subject of the action; thus, for example, “the creation waits with eager longing” (NRSV). Although Paul does not place κτίσις as the explicit subject of the verb, the syntax does not diminish Paul’s personification of creation here. For, in fact, it is elementary and obvious to declare that creation “waits.” The astounding piece of information in v 19 is that creation has expectations! By using the term ἀποκαραδοκία that combines “head” (κάρα) and “think, imagine” (δοκέω), Paul highlights the imaginative capacity by which creation awaits God’s future. With ἀποκαραδοκία as the topic of the sentence, the correlating verb ἀπεκδέχεται, “await eagerly,” gives the subject a tone of confidence: the creation’s confident expectation awaits the apocalypse of God’s sons. By awaiting the apocalypse of the sons of God, what specifically does creation expect?

Since Paul refers to a “future glory to be apocalysed in us” just the verse before, the context shapes the way in which we ought to interpret the apocalypse of the sons of God in v 19. By “awaiting” this apocalypse, the creation’s expectation perceives this event to be in the future. The “glory to be revealed” in v 18, moreover, suggests that the “apocalypse of the sons of God” is the future resurrection of humanity. Frank Matera explains, Paul “portrays the created world as consciously waiting for the general resurrection of the dead, when believers – finally raised from the dead – will be revealed for who they truly are: God’s sons and daughters.”

Robert Jewett, however, suggests that the ongoing conversion of persons to Jesus Christ is the apocalypse of the sons of God. He explains:

---

33 This term occurs only twice in the NT and only in Paul (Rom 8:19 and Phil 1:20) and does not occur in the LXX [Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, 112.].
In Paul’s case the avenue of divine action is the conversion of humans. So what the creation awaits with eager longing is the emergence of this triumph of divine righteousness (cf. Rom 1:17), which will begin to restore a rightful balance to the creation once again, overcoming the Adamic legacy of corruption and disorder that fell as a calamitous curse upon the ground (Gen 3:17-19). Paul concentrates on the transformed children of God rather than on specific actions and policies they may be led to follow in carrying out the ethic of transformation (Rom 12:1-2); he assumes that the renewed mind of such groups will be able to discern what God wills for the ecosystem. So the eager longing of the creation awaits the appearance of such transformed persons, knowing that the sources of ecological disorder will be addressed by them in due season.  

Although I agree with Jewett’s ethical impulse, I must disagree with his understanding of what the apocalypse of the sons of God entails. While Jewett makes no mention of the term ἀποκάλυψις nor interprets the phrase in an eschatological light in this section of the commentary, the immediate context and the eschatological tone of the letter as a whole demands that we consider “apocalypse of the sons of God” not simply as ordinary and ongoing revelations of new converts to Christ but as the ultimate revelation of resurrected Christians. Those who convert to Christ indeed experience a new form of life and liberty now, yet sin still permeates their lives and the world. Thus, as will become plain by the rest of this pericope, creation awaits the ultimate fulfillment of God’s redemptive purposes in the world that only the miracle of resurrection can accomplish.

Since the apocalypse of the sons of God refers to an event that occurs as the telos of God’s salvific work in the world, the group called the “sons of God,” rightly

35 Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 512.
36 In his monograph on Romans, Brendan Byrne succinctly asserts, “As sons of God ‘in Christ’ Christians are alive with his resurrection life. This is so despite the fact that the sonship status is as yet something awaiting public revelation. At present it is a hidden thing, attested only by the Spirit” [Brendan Byrne, “Sons of God” - “Seed of Abraham”: A Study of the Idea of the Sonship of God of All Christians in Paul against the Jewish Background (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1979), 213.].
understood, consists of all those who enter God’s eternal kingdom. Susan Eastman convincingly argues that the “sons of God” in 8:19 must include Jews:

The “apocalypse of the sons of God” begins to look like the full redemption of Jew and Gentile together, in fulfillment of God’s promises. This in turn begins to look like the apocalypse of the righteousness of God in the gospel – “the power of God for salvation for every one who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (1:16).

Thus, although Paul appears to refer to the Roman Christians as the “sons of God” in 8:14-15, we must not limit the referent in v 19 in such a way. The “sons of God” are all those revealed as God’s children at the end of time.

Following Paul’s eschatology outlined in 1 Thessalonians 4 (see 2.7 below), Jesus’ own parousia will trigger the resurrection of his siblings, the apocalypse of the sons of God. Yet, what else, if anything, could prompt this apocalypse? In keeping with our definition of apocalypse as something fully under God’s control, we first acknowledge that human action does not cause or directly precipitate the consummation of God’s salvation. Nevertheless, Paul’s discussion in Rom 11 hints at a possible catalyst.

Ross Wagner interprets Rom 11 as indicating that the ultimate conversion of Jews to Christ leads the creation into God’s full salvation. Romans 11:12-15 declares:

So I ask, have they [the Jewish people] stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry in order to

---

37 I purposely maintain Paul’s wording in v 19, namely “sons of God,” in order to highlight the linguistic connection between these children of God (whether male or female) and Jesus, the Son of God. I will also refer to this linguistic feature when I discuss the Roman emperor as the son of god in chapter 3.

38 Eastman: 272.

39 However, even this interpretation is faulty, for at v 14, Paul makes a general statement about any and all who are led by the Spirit of God. Such people are also sons of God.

40 The action of the God-human Jesus Christ stands as the one exception.
make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?\textsuperscript{41}

The last sentence implies that the belief of God’s people – the physical descendants of Abraham – prompts the resurrection. When we combine these verses with 11:25-26, the picture becomes that much clearer. There Paul states, “So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. \textit{And so all Israel will be saved.}”\textsuperscript{42} The upshot of these verses indicates that, in the words of Wagner, “the inclusion of ‘the rest’ of Israel will be the event that ushers in the restoration of the entire created order.”\textsuperscript{43}

The cumulative force of these texts suggests that Paul maintains the OT concept of Israel’s interdependent relationship with the land. He perceives a similar dynamic between all God’s people and the whole creation: creation’s redemption intimately intertwines with humanity’s redemption. Paul’s thoughts on creation in 8:20-22 confirm this perspective, describing even more fully how the destinies of humanity and creation mutually interdepend, not only in liberation but also in oppression and destruction.

\section*{2.5 ROMANS 8:20: CREATION’S SUBJECTION BY GOD AND HUMANITY}

With creation’s hope for an apocalypse clearly in view, Paul alludes to the reason why creation has such an expectation in the first place: creation was subjected to

\footnote{\textsuperscript{41} NRSV. Emphasis added.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{42} NRSV. Emphasis added.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{43} Wagner, 271. Again, I will note that Israel’s acceptance of Jesus as its Messiah will, in fact, be the \textit{penultimate} impetus for the resurrection. The \textit{ultimate} cause of the resurrection lies elsewhere. Paul declares in 1 Thessalonians that the return of Christ is the powerful, life-giving event that resurrects those in Christ (1 Thess 1:10, 3:13, 4:14-17).}
futility.\textsuperscript{44} By discussing creation’s past Paul cuts to the heart of our relational pyramid (1.1, figure 1.1) since this past demonstrates creation’s interdependent relationship with God and humans. The perverted relationships between humans and God and humans and creation disrupted the intended harmony and fecundity of God’s whole creation. But once God’s people are raised in resurrection glory and righteousness, all will be well. This reading of Rom 8:19-22 (and verse 20 specifically) draws upon the wider epistolary context and a selection of passages from Paul’s scriptures for its meaning. Thus Paul’s simple declaration: “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly but on account of the one subjecting it in hope,”\textsuperscript{45} (8:20) in fact presupposes a complex cosmological narrative and points forward to God’s intended future for creation.

Paul unfortunately alludes to this narrative in ambiguous terms, employing two passive forms of the verb υποτάσσω (one as a finite verb, υπετάγη, the other as a participle, υποτάξαντα), thereby leaving unstated how creation got into its futile condition. As James Dunn suggests, at 8:20 “Paul was attempting to convey too briefly a quite complicated point: that God subjected all things to Adam, and that included subjecting creation to fallen Adam, to share in his fallenness.”\textsuperscript{46} By placing this verse in conversation with its epistolary context and wider scriptural matrix, we find that Paul likely perceives two interrelated agents at work behind creation’s subjection. The narrative backgrounds of Gen 1 and 3 present God as the first agent, with God having

\textsuperscript{44} Cranfield, 413.
\textsuperscript{45} What specifically “in hope” modifies is up for debate. I here understand it to modify the participle “the one subjecting” rather than the finite verb “subjected.” This interpretation depends in part on contextual and narrative issues that will be outlined throughout this section.
\textsuperscript{46} Dunn, 471. Jewett similarly understands Paul’s explanation of creation’s subjected state as arising from the sin of Adam and its subjection in hope as referring to God’s decision to curse the land in Gen 3:17 [Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 514.].
subjected creation to human dominion and the potential negative effects thereof and with
God having pronounced a curse upon the land. But Paul’s account of Sin and Death
entering the world through Adam earlier in this epistle (Rom 5:12-21) foregrounds
humans as the second implied agent, with human sin having subjected creation to futile
attempts at fulfilling God’s commission to flourish.

While many interpreters understand God to be the sole agent responsible for
creation’s subjection to futility, Genesis chapters 1 and 3 in conversation with Romans
chapters 1, 5, and 8 indicate that both God and humans stand behind this subjection.47
One way in which we might paraphrase Rom 8:20 is by transforming Paul’s passive and
unspecified verbs into active ones with explicit subjects. Perhaps, then, we can read 8:20
as implying: “sinful human dominion subjected creation to futility as a result of God’s
prior subjection of creation to humanity.”48 Drawing from the Genesis creation
narratives, this reading maintains God as the ultimate cause and actor working in and
through creation while it also recognizes humanity as a proximate cause of creation’s
subjection.

---

47 Many interpreters find this theology and anthropology unsettling. To make a more palatable
interpretation, some interpreters turn to Paul’s prepositional phrase “in hope.” Since creation was subjected
“in hope,” so the logic goes, it must have been subjected by God. Cranfield asserts it is unreasonable to
understand “the one subjecting” as humanity since it is unlikely that a human could have actually subjected
all creation to futility, let alone done so with hope of its liberation. Instead he concludes that such “an
authoritative action” “could not be effected by Adam or man in general or Satan, but only by God”
[Cranfield, 414.]. Yet, if Paul truly relies on Gen 1-3 for his creation theology, as many commentators –
and even Cranfield himself – assume, we must consider the full implications of humanity’s God-given
dominion over creation and its power to influence the experience and character of that creation [cf., ibid.,
413-414.; Dunn, 470.; Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 512.; Morna Hooker, From Adam to Christ: Essays
on Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 77ff.].

48 I have left out “not willingly but” since this seems to modify creation more than an implied agent of
the passive verb in Paul’s rendering of the verse. Also, another way to think about the verse is to
understand “futility” as a synecdoche for defunct human dominion.
As discussed in 1.1.2, an ancient Jewish creation theology considers human beings to be in a unique position of responsibility and influence over the rest of creation. Genesis 1:26-28 most clearly sets forth this relationship by declaring,

Then God said, “Let us make humankind 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 wild animals of 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.”

Several key phrases in this passage establish an archetypal Jewish-Christian cosmology that underlies Paul’s thought in Rom 8:19-22. God created humans “in his image” (vv 26-27), setting them apart in a special way from all the rest of the creatures. God also commissions humans with the exceptional task of exercising “dominion” over the animals of the earth. Finally, God commands humans to flourish, fill the earth, and “subdue it.” Verse 22 also testifies that God commissions other living things to be fruitful and multiply. Genesis 1 (as well as Gen 2:4-15) paints a picture of a bountiful, harmonious, and flourishing creation. While each of the phrases noted here have vexed interpreters for centuries, the basic worldview they communicate aligns with the royal theologies of the OT – such as those portrayed by Psalm 72 and Isaiah 11 – that assume

49 NRSV. See also Psm 8:5-8.
50 Note that God creates all humans in the image of God according to this creation story. This counters other ANE cosmologies that would identify only the king or the ruling classes of society as the deity’s image bearers.
51 Note that, according to the Hebrew text, humans have dominion over living and moving creatures: fish, birds, and land animals (Gen 1:26). However, the Greek text adds a καί between “wild animals” and “all the earth” so that this version places humans in dominion over not only living creatures but also over all the land or earth.
humans have a great deal of power over the rest of creation. They exercise such extensive power that what they do affects the health and wellbeing of the nonhuman creation.

Such a reading of Gen 1:26-28 finds confirmation as we turn to Gen 3. There we encounter the man and woman, whom God had created, transgressing God’s prohibition that they eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:17; 3:6, 11). The account in Gen 3 places another created being, the snake, squarely in the middle of this drama. The snake provokes or encourages the woman to eat the fruit. Its act of deceiving her appears to place it in opposition to God and God’s designs in the otherwise good creation. Therefore, in the Gen 3 story, it is a created thing outside of humanity that initiates the fateful decline into sin. As a result of their disobedience, several undesirable consequences follow, including (among others): the woman will have great difficulty in childbearing (πληθυνῶ τὰς λύπας σου καὶ τὸν στεναγμὸν σου, ἐν λύπαις τέξῃ τέκνα, 3:16); the man will harvest produce from the soil after much toil and will ultimately become part of the fertile soil again through death and decomposition (3:17-19); and the fertile soil itself receives a curse so that it readily produces thorns and thistles rather than the edible fruit of plants with which it was originally created (3:17-18; 1:11-12, 29; 2:9).52 Thus, Genesis 3 stresses the theme that human action – whether righteous or sinful – affects the wellbeing of the rest of creation, and creation’s own condition affects human wellbeing. This two-way relationship is nicely captured by the term “interdependence.”

In my view, Paul’s anthropology and creation theology grow out of this scriptural soil. Romans chapter 5 narratively (though not linguistically) establishes its roots in

52 I follow Ellen Davis here in translating the Hebrew term ădāmāh encountered repeatedly in Gen 2-3 as “fertile soil” or “soil” instead of “ground” or “land” [Davis, 29-41]. In so doing, I emphasize the agricultural context in which these stories occur: a garden tended by God.
Genesis 3. Drawing from Genesis, Paul explains that human demise came through the one representative human being, Adam. In contrast to Gen 3, Paul’s account focuses upon the action of Adam alone rather than the actions of the snake, the woman, and Adam. After describing Adam’s dreadful sin, Paul presents “Sin” as a power outside human beings that influences them to sin (5:21). Even still, Paul affirms that Adam and the rest of humanity acted in sin or transgression (5:12). Adam’s transgression opened the gate to the reign of Sin and Death (5:21; 6:6; and 5:14, 17, respectively). Humans, consequently, became slaves of sin, and this slavery results in death (6:6, 16).

Although Paul does not use βασιλεύω (to reign) or a cognate of δουλεύω (to serve) at 8:20 as he does in chapters 5-6, he employs the latter term in 8:21. There, creation is described as being in slavery to destruction (v 21). While the connections are not exact, the parallels between the narrative trajectories of Rom 8:19-22, 5:12-6:23, and Gen 3:16-19 are bold enough to make apparent a common cosmology (see 1.1-1.2). Thus, Paul’s description of death entering the human experience through Adam’s sin (5:12) implies that he considered death (at least for humanity) to be an undesirable, unoriginal phenomenon. Yet how does Paul portray the consequences of humanity’s sin as they affect the nonhuman creation?

---

53 Following orthodox Christian theology, I exclude Jesus from this assessment: Jesus did not act in sin.

54 He instead uses the term ὑποτάσσω “to subject.”
2.5.2 Subjection to Futility

Explaining that creation was subjected to futility (τῇ ματαιότητι), Paul indicates that creation entered a condition or a relationship that hindered its purpose and progress. Since the following subordinate phrase states, “not willingly but on account of the one subjecting it,” it seems most likely that creation experienced futility because of the action or decision of another entity, such as humanity, God or both, as already discussed above.

In their ecologically oriented interpretation of this passage, David Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate argue that Paul echoes Ecclesiastes and the Wisdom tradition of the Greek OT by employing the term μάταιος, “futility.” This linguistic context, they contend, points to creation’s ongoing inability to “achieve its purpose, or to emerge from the constant cycle of toil, suffering, and death.” While Romans linguistically corresponds to Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiastes in turn echoes Genesis. Rather than limiting our gaze to Ecclesiastes, two sets of details direct our attention to the book of Genesis by way of Romans: (1) Paul links his argument about sin’s ubiquitous

55 The term ματαιότητι by which Paul describes creation’s subjected state offers several lexical and contextual meanings. The noun’s typical semantic range includes “emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness” [Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, 621]. Cranfield helpfully lists the gamut of interpretations occurring amongst biblical scholars, including: ματαιότητι as analogous to φθοράς, “decay” (v 21); ματαιότητι meaning mutability whereas φθοράς denoting mortality; τῇ ματαιότητι referring to actual people with the result that “creation was subjected to vain humanity;” or τῇ ματαιότητι denoting a god or “celestial powers” (c.f., Gal 4:9) [Cranfield, 413].

56 Emphasis added.

57 They stress that the word group μάταιος occurs only in Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes in the Greek OT. The recurrent use of “futility” in Ecclesiastes holds great interpretive weight in their reading of Romans 8:20. They point especially to Eccl 3:19 where futility is defined by the equally ubiquitous experience of death whether by humans or animals [Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, 77]. In contrast to those who stress Genesis as a narrative background to Rom 8:19-22, Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate eschew this evolutionarily impossible connection between the so-called “Fall” story of Adam (Gen 1-3) and creation’s subjection to futility [ibid., 75-77].

nature in Rom 5 to the narrative of Gen 3 (as already discussed in 2.5.1 above); and (2) Paul creates a linguistic tie between Rom 8:20 and 1:21 by using the lexeme μάταιος, and Rom 1:21, in turn, echoes the so-called “Fall” narrative of Gen 3.

In addition to a common narrative thread that ties together Rom 8:19-22, 5:12-6:23, and Gen 3:16-19 (as discussed in 2.5.1 above), the common term μάταιος connects Rom 8:20 to 1:21. Romans 1:21, in turn, may reflect the narrative fabric of Gen 3:16-19. Romans 8:20 speaks of creation’s subjection to futility (τῇ ματαιότητι), and 1:21 employs the verbal form of “futility” when Paul explains that humans did not thank or glorify God and, so, “became futile” (ἐματαιώθησαν).59 This epistolary echo leads some readers to conclude “that the thought [in Rom 8:20] is of subjection to man’s idolatry which exploits the sub-human creation for its own purposes.”60

Assuming the lexical link between Rom 1 and 8, Morna Hooker examines the intertextual connections between Rom 1:18-25 and Gen 3 and suggests that the sequence of sin in Rom 1 mimics that of Genesis. When Adam sought to become wise by eating the fruit, he actually became a fool and lost knowledge (Rom 1:22).61 Adam did not give glory to God and so lost his own glory.62 Hooker explains that Adam rejected God’s truth in favor of trusting or giving “allegiance” to the snake, and, in a sense, worshiped the created thing rather than the Creator (1:25).63 Thus, in the words of Hooker echoing Paul,

59 This was the case even though creation pointed to God’s power and divinity (1:20). Humans obstinately turned away from God.
60 Cranfield, 413. Jonathan Moo also understands this phrase in relation to human idolatry and the emptiness and sinfulness that idolatry entails [Moo, “Romans 8.19-22 and Isaiah’s Cosmic Covenant,” 81.].
61 Hooker, 77. Note that in her discussion of foolishness in this context, she references Rom 1:21 rather than 1:22.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
Adam traded “his own reflection of the glory of God for the image of corruption” through his idolatry. Applying the meaning of ἐματαιῶθησαν “he became futile,” to the nominal cognate that occurs in 8:20, Hooker explains,

[i]t is significant that the noun is used there [Rom 8:20] of the futility to which the creation has been subjected as a result of man’s sin; from this futility it will be set free as a direct consequence of the freedom arising from the glorified state of the children of God, who are conformed to the image of Christ.

The plight of Adam – and by extension, all humanity, as Paul declares in Rom 3:23 – is the loss or defacement of the image of the glory of God. Such a plight results in the futility experienced by all creation.

Similarly, Cranfield interprets Rom 8:20 with his so-called “simplest and most straightforward interpretation” in which ματαιότητι means the “ineffectiveness of that which does not attain its goal.” He expands this “straightforward” denotation, by concluding, “the sub-human creation has been subjected to the frustration of not being able properly to fulfil the purpose of its existence, God having appointed that without man [sic] it should not be made perfect.” Cranfield’s “straightforward” interpretation, however, presupposes a particular cosmology shaped by Genesis to which our discussion

---

64 Ibid., 77, 83.
65 Ibid., 80. Hooker discusses an underlying assumption of this argument: that image and glory are closely related terms in Paul (cf. 1 Cor 11:7) which often occur together in his writings [ibid., 83].
66 Ibid.
67 While the general narrative-like flow of Rom 1:18-25 may well map onto Genesis 3 and Adam’s so-called “Fall,” Paul’s thoughts in this pericope could describe many religious traditions and societies. Robert Jewett contends that Paul stresses that all peoples, not just refined Greco-Roman society or theologically-educated Jews, had access to God’s self-revelation from the creation [Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 154-155]. James Dunn indicates that at 1:20 Paul uses Greek philosophical language (that was also adopted by Hellenistic Judaism) to connect with his Roman audience. Paul expects his readers to agree that the created world points to an invisible reality, namely God [Dunn, 57-58]. Douglas Moo argues that Paul indicates that “much of [God] and much about him can be seen through the things he has made” [Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, 105].
68 Cranfield, 413.
69 Ibid., 413-414.
thus far has pointed. That cosmology helps us make sense not only of creation’s subjection but also its expectation of resurrected humanity and its future liberation into the glory of God’s children (8:19, 21).

To reiterate: a particularly Pauline cosmology (rather than one that might be acceptable to modern evolutionary scientists) maintains that God created the world in such a way that humans exercise immense power over the rest of creation so that in their sinning, they brought (and bring) about the subjection of creation to futility. On the one hand, humans subjected creation since in their acts of transgression they are the proximate cause of creation’s subjection. Yet, on the other hand, Gen 1-3\textsuperscript{70} clearly maintain God as the ultimate cause whose decisive power subjected creation to humanity and, by implication, to the effects of human sin. Textually and contextually, we must content ourselves with the ambiguity to which Paul’s use of passive verbs subjects us.

The biblical narrative, as I have argued, clarifies this ambiguity by explaining that creation was subjected to futility \textit{both} by the original agency of God and the later sinful activity of humanity.\textsuperscript{71} With creation subjected to the oversight of human beings who are themselves enslaved to sin, it is no wonder that Paul describes creation’s subjection as “futile” or “fruitless,” since sinful humans cannot execute their dominion in accordance with God’s glorious purposes. Verse 20, with its allusion to Gen 3, therefore makes it

\textsuperscript{70} As we look back to Gen 1 as our subtext, we find that creation – even before humanity’s fall to sin – was subject to the care of humanity. As soon as God pronounces the divine intention to make humankind in God’s image, God also declares that humans will have dominion over all other living things (Gen 1:26). (The verb form translated by the NRSV as “let them have dominion” is the qal imperfect with an \textit{implied} jussive sense. It is understood from this verse that at least God intends for humanity to have dominion.) Ultimately, creation was subject to humanity on account of God’s design in Gen 1.

\textsuperscript{71} Although it is not a clear parallel, perhaps 1 Cor 15:23-28 portrays a similar interplay of agents standing behind passive verbs. Jesus Christ appears to be ruling over and subjecting all things to himself and to God even as God subjects all things to Jesus Christ.
clearer why creation waits so desperately for the coming presence of glorified humanity: “fallen” humanity subjects creation in a manner that is futile; resurrected (or, standing again) humanity will reign over creation in a manner that bears the fruit of liberty, glory, and fecundity.

2.6 ROMANS 8:21: CREATION’S FUTURE LIBERATION FROM SLAVERY

Although God established creation in such a way as to allow for the possibility of sin and its consequences of destruction and death, God nevertheless intends a very different future for all creation. Paul most clearly describes this future in 8:21, exclaiming, “the creation itself will be liberated from the slavery of destruction into the liberty of the glory of the children of God.” While the majority of Paul’s letter thus far has explained the ways in which God liberates humans, Paul here declares that creation as a whole is destined for liberation. While creation’s liberation depends primarily upon the New Creation that Jesus Christ has begun in his death and resurrection, it secondarily depends upon the death (to sin) and the resurrection (in righteousness and glory) of Jesus’ siblings, the children of God.

Before considering the nature of creation’s liberation, the condition from which creation will be liberated calls for our attention. In addition to its being subjected to the futility of humanity’s sinful leadership (v 20), creation also exists in a state of bondage, awaiting liberation as v 21 explains. Creation’s liberation entails release from a form of

72 Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, 83. By using the term “fallen,” I do not suggest that Paul has a theological account of “the Fall” as that which developed in the centuries that followed. However, Paul does use the verb πίπτω, “to fall,” in order to indicate that a person or group of people may “fall” from a well-ordered relationship with God into a misshapen one (cf., Rom 11:11, 22; 14:4).
slavery Paul calls φθοράς. While I have chosen to translate this term as “destruction,” it can also refer to physical decay or moral corruption.\(^\text{73}\) In light of Greek OT usage, echoes in the letter to the Romans, as well as contextual information, an accurate translation of φθοράς in Rom 8:21 must connote the ability to be killed, destroyed, and subjected to physical decay.\(^\text{74}\)

The nominal and verbal forms of φθορά and φθείρω appear in prominent passages of the Greek OT and frequently mean physical destruction and killing as opposed to natural deterioration. Notably, in Gen 6 God plans to destroy (καταφθείρω, 6:13) all living things on the earth because the earth was destroyed (ἐφθάρη, 6:11) and all flesh had destroyed (κατέφθειρεν, 6:12) its way on the earth (Gen 6:11, 12, 13, 17). Isaiah 24 also explains that God will destroy (καταφθείρει, 24:1) the inhabited world because its inhabitants have sinned (Isa 24:1, 3, 4-6). These passages depict God or humans as killing life on earth and thus endow the term φθείρω and its cognates with the sense of active destruction.\(^\text{75}\)

Paul uses φθορά and its cognates not only in this active sense but also to refer to the passive process of decomposition. In his discussion of resurrection in 1 Cor 15, Paul employs the term φθορά to refer to decomposition, describing the mortal body as corruptible, or able to decay, and the resurrected body as incorruptible (ἀφθαρσία) (v 42). In his letter to the Romans, Paul similarly uses a cognate of φθορά, namely φθαρτός.

---

\(^{73}\) This term ranges in meaning from “breakdown of organic matter” to “inward depravity” to “total destruction of an entity” and is translated in the NRSV as “decay” [ibid., 1054-1055].

\(^{74}\) Jonathan Moo comes to a similar conclusion [Moo, “Romans 8.19-22 and Isaiah’s Cosmic Covenant,” 78].

\(^{75}\) Plants are also destroyed by locusts (Exod 10:15).
Romans 1:23 explains that people “exchanged the glory of the indestructible God (ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ) for a poor copy of an image of a destructible (φθαρτοῦ) human and birds and tetrapods and reptiles.”

By using the adjective (in)destructible instead of (in)corruptible here, I make clear Paul’s precise connotation, namely physical rather than moral corruptibility. On a more active note, 1 Corinthians 3:17 proclaims that God will destroy (φθείρει) those people who destroy God’s temple. Here, Paul employs the verb to refer to the act of killing or destroying rather than to a mortal state of being.

In returning to Romans 8, the most appropriate denotation of φθορά for 8:21 refers to physical rather than moral corruptibility. However, does the term connote the passive process of decay or the active practice of destruction? In the first instance, we would translate the phrase as “slavery of decay,” in the second, “slavery of destruction.” The first is a statement of ontology, highlighting that living members of creation die and undergo chemical decomposition. The second translation is a relational statement that points to a situation in which one thing is destroyed by another or is under the constant pressure of another.

76 Author’s translation. People – whether the Hebrews in the desert who worshipped the golden calf or the pagans throughout the nations – succumbed to idolatry (Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 160-161). Any worship of a corruptible/destructible person or animal and his or her image is deemed, in Judeo-Christian perspective, powerless and pointless. Even the powerful Roman emperor, the heralded son of a god, would succumb to death, and his body would rot. Yet, the imperial cult forged ahead in its misguided ways, exhorting all those within and beyond the Roman Empire to worship the emperor by way of his image. The Empire therefore failed to glorify the incorruptible God and his Son, who though he died did not decay since he was resurrected and glorified. By their idolatry, then, people worship and liturgically serve the creation (κτίσει) instead of the Creator (κτίσαντα), the Blessed One (1:25).

77 Physical rather than moral corruptibility is indicated since Paul includes birds, tetrapods, and reptiles in his list of things that humans worshiped.

78 Thus, my interpretation differs from that of Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate who, in conversation with Gen 1-11, understand “bondage of decay” to include moral degradation – not simply mortality [Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, 75.]. However, my interpretation parallels Jonathan Moo’s interpretation that φθορά means physical corruption rather than moral corruption; but Moo looks to Isa 24-27 and Paul’s statement that creation was subjected against its own will for support [Moo, “Romans 8.19-22 and Isaiah’s Cosmic Covenant,” 82.].

79 Some interpreters understand this phrase to point to the natural processes of death in a world governed by evolution [See, for example, Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, 74-75.].
threat of being destroyed. Although these two nuances are interrelated, slavery of destruction, I would argue, allows for both connotations (since destruction naturally entails decay) and best captures the wider implication of the passage. In light of the OT passages cited above, creation’s slavery to destruction conjures up images of the oppressive killing of life that happens on earth, killing that may in fact rouse God to intervene with punishment or liberation. In this light, Paul characterizes creation as enslaved to untimely or excessive destruction and implies this is the case, at least in part, because of human action. Yet, in light of Paul’s emphasis on human resurrection in Rom 8, creation’s slavery of destruction also entails physical decomposition. Since the Spirit’s work of “making alive” (ζωοποιήσει; 8:11) refers specifically to the resurrection of destructible human beings, resurrected humans at least will no longer experience corruption of the body, physical decay. But 8:21 indicates that nonhuman creation too will be liberated from the slavery of destruction. What might this liberation entail?

On the basis of the creation theology sketched in chapter 1, the creation’s liberation from the slavery of destruction involves a relational change in which living things do not kill other creatures, at least in certain circumstances. Whether this liberty entails no killing at all or no unnecessary killing is difficult to ascertain. It is worth remembering Isaiah’s vision of the New Creation, quoted in 1.2.3, in which predators sit pacifically with their prey (Isa 11:6; 65:25). Paul may have envisioned the future New

---

80 Excessive and untimely destruction also takes place because of nonhuman creatures (i.e., swarms of locusts in Exod 10), nonliving creation (i.e., earthquakes), and even God (Gen 6; Isa 24).
81 Cranfield contends that φθορά refers to “moral corruption resulting from idolatry” and that “the bondage of decay” denotes “creation’s bondage to man’s corrupt abuse of it” [Cranfield, 413.]
82 Are plants included in the category “creature”? It would seem from the OT that plants were not considered creatures or living things since they did not have “the breath of life” in them. Perhaps, then, plants will be killed and eaten in the New Creation.
Creation through Isaianic lenses that were themselves shaped by the creation narratives of Genesis. God’s first commands to living creatures instructed them to eat plants (Gen 1:29-30; 2:9, 16), and only after the flood did God’s covenant with humans (and presumably other living creatures) stipulate that they could kill nonhuman creatures for food (9:3).

Might liberation from slavery to destruction involve physical incorruptibility, the ability to resist decay for all creation as well? Will any form of life – whether plant or animal – die and decay in God’s New Creation? From an ecological and practical perspective, we cannot begin to imagine an earthly system that does not depend upon the natural cycles of energy and nutrient flow that require death and decay. Even so, by analogy, we must remember that the earliest followers of Jesus could not imagine that the chosen Messiah would suffer and die. Yet, suffer and die he did. But decompose he did not. His resurrection from the dead began a new form of life and inaugurated the New Creation. It is likely the case that we simply may not be able to comprehend the realities of the New Creation, on this side of the eschaton.

Yet Paul’s thoughts prod us on in our musings. His bold words in Rom 8:21, “the creation itself will be liberated from the slavery of destruction into the liberty of the glory of the children of God,” highlight the creation’s movement into the human situation. Creation will leave its present state of slavery and will enter the newly established liberty of resurrected humanity. Rather than humans being led into the promised land of the New Creation, the New Creation will be led into the liberating promised existence of glorified

---

83 This assumption is strengthened indirectly since God declares that God will judge the living creature that kills a human, implying that animals could kill other animals for food without recompense (Gen 9:5).
humanity. In the meantime, however, creation is now the slave that needs to be led out of captivity by and with liberated humanity.

According to Paul, human liberation actually involves a new form of servitude: slavery to God and righteousness. Romans chapter 6 most clearly depicts humanity’s new liberty from “the law of sin and death” (cf., 8:2). Since sin will not rule over those in Christ (6:14), they have been liberated (ἐλευθερώθησαν) from sin’s tyranny and are enslaved to righteousness and to God (6:18, 22).84 Death no longer rules over those who die vicariously through baptism into Christ’s death since they, like Christ, will rise from death in resurrection life (5:17; 6:3-9). Their service in righteousness – now freed from the fear of death – reaps the fruit of holiness that leads to or is completed in eternal life (6:22; 8:11-17).

Thinking back to our relational pyramid, we may understand human righteousness as finding expression in just acts towards and on behalf of all the members of the pyramid, so that – in a sense – God’s slaves also serve the Messiah, Israel, the nations, and creation. Such a notion finds confirmation in Paul’s self-presentation in Rom 1:1, 9-11, 14 where Paul proclaims,

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ . . . For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God’s will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you . . . I am a

---

84 Although Paul does not describe God explicitly as liberating creation, he does declare that God has rescued/liberated people (the Spirit liberates in 8:2; God is the implied agent of liberation in 6:18, 22). This concords with 8:24 and the depiction of those in Christ as being saved by God. Kirk suggests, “The restoration of creation begins with the resurrection of Christ. In this he is the second Adam, determining the future of creation and of the humanity which God sets over it” [Kirk, 142].
debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.\(^\text{85}\)

Paul invites the Roman Christians to conform their lives to this Christ-like service, asking them even to offer their bodies as living sacrifices in service (\(\text{λατρείαν}\)) to God (12:1) and to serve (\(\text{δουλεύοντες}\)) the Lord (12:11). Again, Pauline conceptions of liberty entail service and faithfulness to the Creator God, God’s Messiah, and—as Rom 8:19-22 implies—God’s entire creation. Yet, when we hear Paul declare that creation will be \textit{liberated}, he invites us to consider whether creation’s own liberty will also involve service.

Describing the nonhuman creation’s liberation, which I have argued is what Rom 8:21 addresses, requires us to draw implications from a variety of scriptures. To begin with Paul’s letter, we can surmise that creation will effectively communicate to its fellow creatures the power and divinity of the Creator God (Rom 1:20). Moving outside Romans, the scriptures imply that all creation will be able to offer God unhindered praise: the heavens will declare the glory of God, mountains and hills will sing, trees will clap for their Creator, and rocks will cry out in praise of the Lord (Psm 19:1; Isa 55:12; Luke 19:40). Thus, like the human members of creation, the whole creation will rightly worship the Lord. Even more, since Paul describes creation as being liberated into the liberty of God’s children, creation does not appear to move out from under human dominion. Rather, creation’s liberty—like Christian liberty—will entail service, service

\(^{85}\) NRSV. Emphasis added. In Rom 1:9 Paul explains that he serves God with the term \(\text{λατρεύω}\). Paul would also “serve” Israel, his kinsman, as a mediating sacrifice if it would do any good for their reconciliation with God (9:1-3).
in God’s ongoing work of “making alive” (ζωοποίησις; Rom 4:17; 8:11) and thus service in supporting life, including human life.

Yet, what might be the nature of eschatological life? The creation narratives of Genesis lead us to surmise even more about the future liberty of created things. In fulfillment of God’s commission, the entire earth will flourish with life (Gen 1:22, 28). Perhaps, like the intended pre-flood world, creatures will live only by eating plant life (which admittedly entails death of a living thing and assumes processes of decomposition) (cf., Gen 9:3). Most spectacularly of all, perhaps creation will be free from the threat of destruction and the possibility of decay (Rom 8:21). While this last implication may appear overly fanciful, we can return to Paul’s text to find that creation ultimately will enter the liberty of the glory of resurrected humanity, indicating that creation too may participate in a form of glorification.

Since Paul believes creation will experience an exodus, of sorts, from its present slavery and will journey into the liberty of the glory of the children of God, it is worth considering the meaning of “glory” by examining the immediate context. Just three verses earlier, Paul writes that present sufferings do not compare with the future glory to be apocalypsed in “us” (8:18). Of course, just before this statement, Paul writes that the children of God are co-heirs of Christ, suffering with him and being glorified with him (8:17). Glorification with Christ is further fleshed out in 8:29, where Paul proclaims that those whom God foreknew, God predestined to be conformed to the Son’s image in order that he would be the firstborn among many siblings. Even more striking than being conformed to Christ is Paul’s declaration that those whom God justified God also
glorified (8:30). By using the aorist tense of δοξάζω, Paul demonstrates his supreme confidence in God’s faithfulness to complete the work of New Creation. From this context, “the liberty of the glory of the children of God,” then, appears to involve the resurrected, or glorified, existence that God’s children, Jesus’ siblings, will fully enjoy in the eschaton.

While we have only drawn preliminary inferences about the nature of creation’s liberation, we have continually hit upon a truth that speaks strongly in 8:21. The health and wellbeing of creation and humanity intertwine. J. R. Daniel Kirk nicely captures the theological trajectory of this passage and its ultimate destination in the New Creation:

The interconnections between sonship, image-bearing, rule, and the ruled creation going the way of the ruler, help tie together various threads in Romans 8. There, where the restoration of glory in the resurrection is couched in terms of conformity to the image of Christ, the whole creation finds itself included in the work of redemption. The logic required by the passage is along the lines of this: (1) Jesus, being raised, is the son/image-bearer of God; (2) as such, Jesus is the one who rules the created order on God’s behalf (cf. Rom 10:9); (3) redeemed humanity will go the way of its ruler, being conformed to his image in resurrection; therefore (4) creation, too, over which humanity was placed, will participate in eschatological redemption when humanity itself is raised.

Like Paul and his theological forebears, Kirk here assumes that God has placed humanity over creation in such a way as to rule it with Jesus Christ. Since resurrected and glorified humanity will live and rule in righteousness, creation will experience its liberation from the slavery of destruction because it will have entered the consummated liberty of God’s glorified children and their just rule.

86 Kirk explains: “In being raised from the dead (and glorified), Christ was set apart as son of God (1:4), thereby introducing him into a state of image-bearing that is his as the first member of a new humanity which rules over the creation on God’s behalf – as was the purpose of original humanity, created as it was in the image and glory of God” [Kirk, 143.].
87 Ibid., 149.
As Paul envisions humans participating with Christ in his life, death, resurrection, and glorification, he also believes in their ability to live in righteousness even now before glorification since the Spirit continually works in them (Rom 6:1-14; 7:4; 8:1-11; 12:1-21; 14:17-19). Thus, humans inhabited by the Spirit have the opportunity no longer to carry out their dominion over creation in a manner of futility (8:20). Ultimately glorified humans – and even, in a limited sense, rectified humans on their way to being glorified – will be able to rule, tend, and care for God’s creation in fruitfulness, bearing not the fruit of futility but the fruit of the Spirit.

We can imagine this possibility as we, with Paul, associate Jesus Christ with the Messiah of Isa 11. As noted in 1.1.2, Paul quotes Isa 11:10 at Rom 15:12, writing, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.” In light of our discussion of royal theology in chapter 1, the implication of Isa 11 becomes apparent: the righteous ruler ushers in universal peace, not only between Judeans and Gentiles but also between humans and creatures and between predators and prey. The apocalypse of Jesus, the Messiah, breaks the power of the age of futility and invites creation into an age of liberty.

However, although the Messiah has provided atonement and the possibility of resurrection life in his first advent, we still await his return and the fulfillment of glorification. Notably, creation awaits this glorious consummation by anticipating the apocalypse of all the Messiah’s brothers and sisters who will bear Jesus’ divine, glorified image when they are resurrected (Rom 8:18, 19, 29). Although the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ brought liberation from the law of sin and death to humanity (8:2), the full experience of that glorious liberty awaits the return of this resurrected
Messiah when God resurrects glorified humanity. Only then will humanity carry out its dominion over creation as God intended. Only then will creation experience freedom from destruction and freedom for service to God in the divine commission to be fruitful and multiply.

Before we exalt too enthusiastically in visions of Kingdom come, Paul reminds us that the peace and liberty that Messiah Jesus brings have not yet fully healed the created order. The whole creation, in addition to redeemed humanity, still awaits the consummation of God’s salvation and of Jesus’ righteous reign.

2.7 ROMANS 8:22: CREATION’S LABORING FOR DELIVERANCE

After delighting in the glorious prospect of the creation being liberated from destructive forms of bondage (8:21), Paul provides reasoned proof for this eschatological expectation, declaring, “For we know that the whole creation is collectively groaning and laboring even till now” (8:22).88 By his use of the verb “we know” (οἴδαμεν), Paul indicates that there is something about the Christian story or the human experience that causes “us” to know of creation’s groaning and laboring. “Although a sensitive person could perceive the suffering of nature, only the eyes of faith in light of divine revelation can see that the suffering of creation is the travail of birth, not the agony of death.”89

What exactly Paul assumed he and his audience understood about creation’s experience “until now” encourages debate among biblical scholars and ecological interpreters today. For the most part, however, interpreters have left uninterrogated the metaphor of

88 Note that Paul now indicates that it is “all,” πᾶσα, creation that is the topic of conversation.
parturition in this verse and have not explicitly addressed whether creation’s collective
groaning and laboring leads to a positive outcome or “offspring,” if you will.

Some commentators do make use of birthing imagery in their own interpretation
of the passage and thereby imply that creation’s laboring finds its end in a positive
outcome. Cranfield suggests that creation’s laboring has a telos: creation’s “painful
condition is not to no purpose but will have a worthwhile issue.” ⁹⁰ However, he fails to
specify what that “worthwhile issue” might be. More recent commentators provide
suggestive statements identifying the “worthwhile issue” of creation’s groaning and
laboring as the new age or New Creation. Explaining the “‘now’ of eschatological
salvation” as a time when “the process of salvation is being worked out (cf. 3:21; 7:6;
8:1), with the present labor pains giving promise of the cosmic birth of the new age,”
Dunn identifies the telos of creation’s labor as God’s New Creation. ⁹¹ Nevertheless, it
appears that creation does not give birth in some mysterious or metaphorical way to some
thing or state of being. Rather, creation’s laboring, for Dunn, stands as a sign or
guarantee of the end. Frank Matera comes close to stating that the creation gives birth by
understanding Paul’s choice of verbs as “portray[ing] the whole of creation as
participating in a common agony as it awaits the birth of a new age.” ⁹² Even still, creation
does not itself give birth, but rather suffers in ways akin to birth pangs as it waits for
deliverance into the new age. Each of these interpreters understands creation’s laboring in
relation to the eschatological tenor of the passage and its repeated references to
resurrection. Thus, they agree that the “worthwhile issue” is the New Creation: the

⁹⁰ Cranfield, 416.
⁹¹ Dunn, 473. See also Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, 518.
⁹² Matera, 201.
creation agonizes in ways analogous to childbirth (thus, metaphorically) but does so with the hope of a positive outcome, deliverance into God’s New Creation that will accompany the resurrection of humanity. The specific ways in which creation relates to this birth and birthing process remain to be interrogated further.

Attempting to clarify creation’s role in the birth of the New Creation, Beverly Gaventa boldly declares: the creation births “[e]xactly nothing, because creation itself is captive to nothingness, to ‘futility.’”93 She highlights the fact that the “offspring” for which creation labors is actually an adopted people, the redemption of a corporate body, the resurrection of humanity (Rom 8:23). “It seems odd to imagine a woman in labor who cries out with longing for adoption.”94 Rather, “creation longs for . . . God’s action, not its own.”95 She rightly indicates that Paul’s anthropology as set out in Romans portrays humanity and all creation as enslaved to Sin and Death and in need of God’s gracious and powerful redemption through Jesus Christ. Yet she insists that the whole of creation “continues to be sold into slavery, despite the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the new life of believers,” as evidenced by the many forces that oppose and war against God and God’s people listed in 8:35-39.96 Thus, for Gaventa, creation’s collective groaning and laboring stands as a pure metaphor for the agonies of the present time in which a cosmic battle is being waged.97 The birth imagery merely highlights the painful ways in which creation (including humanity) awaits God’s future liberation, apart from any supporting human or nonhuman endeavor.

93 Gaventa, 57.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., 60. Emphasis added.
97 Ibid., 61.
While I do not deny that creation continues in bondage to destruction (8:21), I would object to Gaventa’s assertion that creation “continues to be sold into slavery, despite the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Indeed, I would argue for a much more robust Christology in suggesting that Jesus’ resurrection redeemed, “bought back,” the whole creation from the enslaving powers of sin and death (Rom 3:24; 6:18), but those powers have yet to release their former slaves, so to speak. In connection with my interpretation of Rom 8:20-1, in which I highlighted humanity’s role in the subjection of creation to futility, creation’s ongoing bondage to destruction is exacerbated by human sin as it collaborates with the powers of destruction, all to the creation’s detriment. Moreover, although those with the first fruits of the Spirit do await adoption, we must recognize that adoption too stands as a metaphor. Adoption refers to the process in which humans become fully God’s children in resurrection glory.

The fact that Paul does not provide a direct object for the verb “laboring” may lead some to agree with Gaventa: creation may simply be a suffering spectator in God’s drama of liberation and New Creation. The image of childbirth, in this view, merely captures the paradox with which Paul wrestles in this chapter, namely hope in the midst of suffering. Like a woman who suffers the pangs of labor contractions with the abiding hope that she and her baby will soon be delivered into a joyful coexistence, the whole creation suffers in agonizing ways in the present time as it awaits God’s deliverance of it and resurrected humanity into a peaceable coexistence in the New Creation. The key difference in such a simile between the reality of childbirth and the creation’s experience is that creation in fact does not labor, it bypasses the painful yet productive activity of

98 Ibid., 60.
undergoing contractions and bearing down and instead waits for God to intervene, to stop its suffering, and to do something entirely new. It does not itself participate in the powerful work of laboring in order to give birth to life-filled offspring. As a spectator of the divine drama, creation has unwavering hope in its imminent deliverance because of God’s work. Thus, the nonhuman creation groans in pain under its bondage to destruction and its subjection to futility as it *awaits* the consummation of God’s New Creation at the Spirit’s resurrection of God’s children.

Such is the most conspicuous interpretation of Rom 8:22. But can we say more? Do the fertile soils of Judeo-Christian apocalyptic texts, watered with Paul’s Christology and creation theology, nurture even bolder claims about creation’s role in the end-times and the resurrection? Do the seven core postulates derived from the OT creation theology outlined in chapter 1 allow us to see the passage in multiple dimensions as we look for creation’s activity and listen for the nonhuman voice in this passage? I suggest they do. Yet, by suggesting that creation actively participates in God’s work of New Creation and resurrection, I do not claim that Paul necessarily had this in mind but instead that his particular metaphor – as it stands in relation to several Jewish texts and its own epistolary context – advances this conclusion. Allowing ourselves to go beyond what Paul might have intended and gazing anew at the passage through lenses sensitized to the nonhuman creation, we may envision greater fruit being born out of Paul’s birthing imagery. My investigation of Rom 8:22 demonstrates six claims and conclusions, summarized briefly here and explained in greater detail below (2.7.1-2.7.6):
1. The claim that “creation may be in labor, but creation does not give birth” rests on shaky lexical and grammatical grounds.\(^9\) The verb ὡδίνω, on which Paul builds his verb συνωδίνει (“collectively labors”), typically occurs as an intransitive verb and refers to the process of laboring rather than the result of delivery. Paul’s semantic focus in 8:22, therefore, is on the process of labor rather than on the goal. The possibility that the nonhuman creation may be involved in both a laboring process and a birthing process remains open.

2. The temporal “location” in which creation’s collective groaning and laboring take place is the Messianic Age, the Age begun by Jesus’ liberative life, death, and resurrection. By describing creation’s groaning and laboring as happening “until now,” Paul has left us clues that lead us to the epoch-shifting event of Jesus’ resurrection that inaugurated the Messianic Age. Creation’s groaning and laboring, then, function as a sign of the Messianic Age so that this metaphorical activity also points toward the consummation of God’s salvation in the imminent resurrection of all Jesus’ siblings. Thus, creation’s laboring closely relates to humanity’s resurrection and finds its telos in that resurrection and the New Creation that follows.

3. The immediate epistolary context of Rom 8:22 correlates resurrection with new birth. By identifying Jesus as the firstborn (8:29), Paul applies child-birthing imagery to Jesus’ inaugurating resurrection. Jesus’ resurrection, moreover, is correlated with the resurrection of all those in Christ at 8:17. Thus, the discussion of the nonhuman creation in 8:19-22 is bookended by a reference to Jesus’ resurrection and by the promise that

\(^9\) Ibid., 62.
those who suffer with Christ will be glorified with him in their own resurrection (8:29, 17, 23).

4. A lexical analysis of στενάζω and ὀδίνω indicates that by coordinating the present tense, active voice verbs of groaning and laboring in a passage rife with apocalyptic expectation and hope, Paul uses these verbs to describe creation’s hope of imminent deliverance even in the midst of agonizing pain. Although together these verbs may refer either metaphorically or literally to the painful processes of laboring in childbirth, ὀδίνω occasionally describes a miraculous situation in which God’s life-giving power provides offspring in spite of a woman’s (or a city’s) barrenness, lack of laboring, or instantaneous laboring and delivering (e.g., Isa 54:1; 66:7-9). In such cases, God’s life-creating activity is magnified in and through human or nonhuman creation.

5. Isaiah 66:8 portrays the earth as laboring and the city of Zion as miraculously birthing many children all at once despite its apparent barrenness. This text highlights the nonhuman creation’s active agency (in coordination with God’s own gracious and miraculous work) in such a way that encourages readers of Rom 8:22 to understand the whole nonhuman creation as involved – through its laboring – in the “miraculous birth” that will take place at the resurrection of humanity and the consummation of God’s New Creation, the New Heaven and New Earth (Isa 66:8, 22).

6. Paul’s explanation of the process of resurrection, as adduced from other Pauline texts, depicts resurrected humans as moving from the ground up, thereby subtly involving the nonhuman creation in this eschatological event. Moreover, two Jewish pseudipigraphical works, 1 Enoch 51:1 and 4 Ezra 7:32, portray the nonhuman creation as delivering dead bodies to God at the resurrection.
The confluence of Jewish texts, Jewish-Christian eschatology, and Christology on which these six claims ride suggests that creation’s groaning and laboring until now allude to the resurrection of the Firstborn Son of God and the yet-to-be-born children of God. Let us turn now to a more thorough overview of these six claims.

2.7.1 The Intransitive Nature of Laboring

Some might argue that since Paul does not provide a direct object for the verb συνωδίνει in 8:22, the possibility that creation labors towards some “worthwhile issue,” to use Cranfield’s phrase, is highly unlikely. Because ὄδινω can occur with a direct object but does not take one in 8:22 indicates to some that creation births nothing. As J. Louis Martyn claims in his commentary on Galatians, “in its metaphorical use the verb [ὁδίνω] usually lacks the direct object, providing only a picture of suffering comparable to that of a woman in labor, and thus useful even to refer to anguish experienced by a man,” or, in this case nonhuman creation.\(^{100}\) Even more, ὄδινω rarely occurs in its metaphorical sense with a direct object, but it does occur in this manner a few times in the scriptures.\(^{101}\)

A detailed analysis of ὄδινω, “labor,” as it occurs in the Greek OT and NT, however, demonstrates that even when it is used literally ὄδινω rarely takes its own direct object, that is, without an intervening transitive verb such as τίκτω, “bear.”\(^{102}\) Thus, as it

---


\(^{101}\) Ibid.

\(^{102}\) The few instances in which ὄδινω occurs in the Greek OT with its own direct object include: Psalm 7:15 (metaphorical); Song of Songs 8:5 (literal); and Isaiah 51:2 (literal). More often, the metaphorical use of ὄδινω appears with no direct object at all: Hab 3:10; Isaiah 26:18; Micah 4:10; Isaiah 45:10; Jeremiah 30:16 (LXX). Literal uses of ὄδινω also appear more often without a direct object: Isaiah 26:17; 54:1; 66:7, 8; Jeremiah 4:31. In Isaiah 23:4 ὄδινω occurs as one of the verbs in a compound predicate that takes a direct object; however, τίκτω appears between ὄδινω and the direct object.
occurs in the Greek OT and NT, ὠδίνω denotes the laboring process rather than the delivery itself, functioning most naturally as an intransitive verb. However, when semantic focus is upon the actual delivery of an offspring (whether literal or metaphorical), the verb τίκτω is most often used and occurs as a transitive verb with a direct object. Consequently, the argument that creation births “exactly nothing” cannot be sustained by references to the lack of a direct object for συνωδίνει. Not only is this an argument from silence, but it also fails to recognize the nuances and typical usages of the verb.

2.7.2 Groaning and Laboring in the Messianic Age

In assessing Paul’s meaning in 8:22, we must consider the temporal “location” of creation’s activity. Markedly, the NRSV translates the verbs as if they were in the perfect tense and describing the same activity, “the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.” Such a translation expresses two assumptions: (1) the verbs work together to describe one activity, namely “groaning in labor pains”; and (2) creation has

---

In the NT, ὠδίνω and its compounds occur only at Rom 8:22; Gal 4:19, 27; and Rev 12:2. Only Gal 4:19 provides a direct object for the verb, which, as Martyn indicates, functions metaphorically. Galatians 4:27 and Rev 12:2 use ὠδίνω in literal ways without direct objects and Rom 8:22 uses the verb metaphorically, again, without a direct object. However, τίκτω often appears with a direct object: Matt 1:21, 23, 25; Luke 1:31, 2:7, 11; Heb 6:7; James 1:15 (metaphorical use); Rev 12:4, 5, 13. Τίκτω also occurs without a direct object: Luke 1:57; John 16:21; Gal 4:27; Rev 12:2.

103 Too many examples of a direct object (usually in terms relating to offspring) occur with the verb τίκτω in the Greek OT to be listed here in full, especially since this construction appears in many stories that read almost like genealogies and in which the mothers are mentioned (cf., especially, Gen 30, 36; 1 Chron 1, 2; 7). Other examples in which a direct object occurs with literal instances of τίκτω include: Gen 3:16, 4:1, 2, 17, 20, 22, 25; 16:11, 15, 16; 17:19; Exod 2:2, 22; Lev 12:2; 5; Deut 28:57; Judges 8:31; Ruth 4:15, 17; 1 Sam 1:20; 2 Sam 11:27; 1 Kings 13:2; Hosea 1:3, 6, 8; Isaiah 7:14, 66:7; Jeremiah 15:10. Even when used metaphorically, τίκτω often occurs with a direct object (e.g., Num 11:12; Psalm 7:15; Prov 10:23; Isaiah 59:4; 66:8; Ezekiel 23:4). Yet, it can also occur without a direct object (e.g., Isaiah 13:8; 26:18). The text of Hebrews 6:7 is noteworthy as it has land (γῆ) giving birth (τίκτουσα) to grass.

104 NRSV. Emphasis added.
acted in such a way for time immemorial: it “has been groaning in labor pains.” The first interpretive issue will be considered in 2.7.4 below. For now, we shall consider the temporal sense of the verse by examining the phrase ἄχρι τοῦ νῦν.

As already presented in my translation of v 22, I find Paul’s use of the present tense verbs to be noteworthy and important. Of course, the complicating textual feature that has led scholars to translate the verb with the perfect tense is Paul’s inclusion of the phrase “until now.” No other NT text coordinates a present tense verb with the phrase “until now” (ἄχρι τοῦ νῦν). We therefore are left to infer what this construction might mean.

Several NT texts do coordinate present tense verbs with the term “until” (ἄχρι) but do so without the additional word “now.” These passages fall into two main semantic groups. The term “until” in group one points to the end of the present action. Thus, for example, Gal 4:2 states, “but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father.” The “date set by the father” refers to a future event that will bring the existence under guardians and trustees to an end. If we interpret Rom 8:22 similarly, we would conclude that creation’s groaning and laboring will cease at the “now” time, for it groans and labors until now. Whether this “now” refers to a present or a future event remains undetermined.

The second group of texts that coordinates present tense verbs with “until” emphasizes the ongoing and lingering nature of the present action. For example, 1 Cor 4:11 explains, “To [or, until] the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly

---

105 NRSV. Emphasis added.
clothed and beaten and homeless.” 106 Here, Paul describes his conditions of suffering in ministry that continue even into the present time (and, apparently, began relatively recently, sometime after Paul became a follower of Jesus the Messiah, ἀχρι τῆς ἀρτὶ ὥρας). 107 If we understand Rom 8:22 accordingly, we would translate the verse as follows: “the whole creation is [and continues] groaning and laboring together even till now.”

A third option does not change the previous translation of the verse but interprets its elements with special attention to Paul’s reference to “now.” Taking seriously Paul’s description of creation’s present and ongoing groaning and laboring together, we attend to the possibility that something important has happened in the “now.” The extended discussion of “now” in the comment on v 18 above (2.3) invites us to interpret time in a particularly Pauline fashion. Paul’s understanding of “now” (vv 18, 22) is informed by a recent event – the apocalyptic life, death, and resurrection of Christ. 108 Paul’s confidence in Jesus’ own resurrection assures him that creation’s liberation (v 21) and humanity’s

106 NRSV.
107 Acts 2:29 explains that King David died and was buried and that his tomb is (and continues to be) with us up to this day. First Corinthians 15:25 is a bit more ambiguous, stating: “For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (NRSV). Once the enemies are defeated or subjected, does Christ stop reigning? Or does his reign continue? Second Corinthians 3:14 indicates that a certain condition continues into the present: “Indeed, to this very day [ἀχρι γὰρ τῆς σήμερον ἡμέρας], when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside” (NRSV). Although Phil 1:5 does not have a present tense verb occurring near ἀχρι, the verse does contain the same phrase as Rom 8:22, namely, ἀχρι τῶν νῦν. Here, Paul delights that the Philippians have been “sharing in the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil 1:5 NRSV). Clearly, the Philippians continue to share in the gospel into the present, into the “now,” of Paul’s writing this letter.
108 Although they do not develop an apocalyptic reading of Rom 8:19-22 to the same degree as I do, Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate do recognize the decisive moment in which Paul wrote: “This story is not simply linear, or steadily progressive: it is punctuated by key moments of which the coming of Christ is the definitive, climactic moment, which shows that the story is in its final chapter” [Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, 53. Emphasis theirs].
resurrection (vv 18, 19, 21, 23) are sure to come. Consequently, all creation groans and labors together in a particular time, “until now,” a time that has been decisively shaped by redemption in Jesus. Creation groans and labors in the Messianic Age.

2.7.3 Jesus, the Firstborn of Many Siblings

Taking the maternal metaphor to its farthest reaches, we might regard the laboring creation as having already given birth to the firstborn of multiples, the firstborn in this case being Jesus the Christ (8:29). God predestined those called according to his purpose to “share the form (σύμμορφος) of the image (εἰκόνας) of his son, in order that he might be firstborn (πρωτότοκον) with many siblings” (8:28-29). The term “image,” εἰκών, echoes not only the creation narrative of Gen 1:26-27 but also Paul’s earlier reference to humanity’s lethal exchange: “they exchanged the glory of the indestructible God for the likeness of an image (εἰκόνας) of a destructible human, and of birds, and of tetrapods, and of reptiles” (1:23; see 2.5.2 above). Thus, 8:29 points to God’s gracious rectification of this dreadful affair: humans may now be conformed to Jesus’ image, following him into

---

109 The semantic trajectory of Rom 8:18-23, then, moves from (1) Paul’s confident assessment that present sufferings cannot compare with future glory to (2) the temporally determined reasons for this confidence. Reason one (2a) involves creation’s own expectations for a better future when resurrected humanity is revealed (vv 19-21). The prospect that all creation will be free from destruction is indeed glorious and minimizes the Christian’s present sufferings in comparison. Paul’s discussion of creation’s current state of subjection and slavery is simply a sub-topic of the overall point Paul makes in chapter 8; that discussion explains why humanity’s own liberation will affect creation’s liberation. Reason two (2b) depends on the Christian conviction that even while creation is groaning and laboring, those who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan and eagerly await resurrection too (vv 22-23). God’s salvific work in the world has begun a process of liberation in which humans and creation can trust for its completion. But in the mean time, humans can take comfort in the initial harvest (“first fruits”) of the process, the indwelling of the Spirit of God and the ongoing laboring of the creation (vv 23, 10-16, 22).

110 My interpretation differs from that of Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate who, although they recognize creation has “reached a crucial moment of eschatological expectation,” suggest creation’s groaning and laboring has been ongoing and a “forward-looking anguish” [Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, 78]. Moo also interprets creation’s groaning and laboring as a form of suffering but stresses that it is caused by sinful human action [Moo, “Romans 8.19-22 and Isaiah’s Cosmic Covenant,” 83-85.] Cf., Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 516-518.
resurrection, into indestructible glory. The themes of resurrection and its consequent
glory saturate Rom 8.

Moreover, birth imagery is employed for this theme of resurrection. Jesus is the
firstborn, πρωτότοκον. While πρωτότοκος literally refers to the child who is the firstborn
of a mother’s womb and more broadly refers to the “special status enjoyed by a firstborn
son as heir apparent in Israel,”\(^{111}\) the term as it occurs in Rom 8:29 takes on a
metaphorical meaning by referring to Jesus’ resurrection as the first birth of the New
Creation. Jesus stands as the firstborn from the dead – even the firstborn of all creation –
to quote Col 1:18 and 1:15, respectively.\(^{112}\) Thus, as employed in Rom 8:29, πρωτότοκος
refers to Jesus “as the firstborn of a new humanity which is to be glorified.”\(^{113}\)

Connecting 8:29 with Paul’s confident assertion in 8:17 that those who suffer with
Christ will be glorified with him and, in turn, correlating these themes with his
declaration that creation will be liberated into the liberty of the glory of the children of
God (8:21), it is clear that throughout this passage Paul has in view the “new birth” of
resurrection, the “imminent glory to be apocalypsed in us” (8:18; see 2.3). Resurrection
and glory therefore surround and penetrate Paul’s reflections about “creation” in 8:19-22.
Birthing imagery, furthermore, attends these themes of resurrection and glory. Where
does this complex of ideas lead us as we consider creation’s groaning and laboring until
now?

\(^{111}\) Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, 894.
\(^{112}\) While the authorship of Colossians is debated, I take this letter to be at least an early interpretation
of Paul’s original writings if not one of his own writings.
\(^{113}\) Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, 894.
In the literal delivery of multiples, an intermission takes place between births. Thus, as applied to our passage, although the firstborn has been delivered from the realm of the dead, the birth of his many siblings is yet to occur. An intermission stands between the resurrections of the firstborn and the siblings. While early Christian eschatology expected this intermission to be brief, history has shown it to be a so-called “extended intermission.” Thus, while creation has presented the firstborn of the dead, it is still groaning and laboring until the rest of Jesus’ siblings are born into resurrection glory. In this reading, then, the creation’s collective groaning and laboring communicate to God’s people that God, by means of the “making alive” Spirit (ζωοποιήσει, 8:11), is about to act decisively to liberate them and all creation from opposing and oppressive forces (cf. Rom 8:31-39) by consummating the New Creation begun in Jesus’ own inaugurating birth into resurrection glory. Even more, the nonhuman creation does not stand alone in its groaning, laboring, and waiting. Humans and the Spirit of God stand in solidarity with the whole creation by their own active groaning.\(^\text{114}\) In fact, the Spirit who makes alive works through the physical mediation of the nonhuman creation to resurrect the dead.

While this may be a creative reading of the passage, we may ask whether any linguistic or intertextual warrants exist for its bold claims. There are several.

\(^{114}\) “Given the way Paul here also describes both the groaning of believers (v. 23) and the groaning with believers of the Spirit (v. 26), it seems most likely that he here depicts the creation as also bound up with humanity and the Spirit in a solidarity of shared groaning, and, similarly, a shared hope” [Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, 82.]. While I concur with this interpretation, I would also highlight the different understanding of the “shared hope” that I maintain. I would suggest that creation and redeemed humans hope for the same thing, humanity’s resurrection. Yet, I agree with the authors that the nonhuman creation will not experience that resurrection in the exact same way that humans will.
2.7.4 Groaning in the Processes of Labor

The verb choices of Paul’s birthing imagery in 8:22 provide us with interesting and productive corollaries in the wider Christian canon. In its Greek OT appearances, the word group στενάζω is not often correlated with the process of childbearing but more frequently refers to lamenting or groaning under various forms of oppression. However, when it is coordinated with childbearing terms, the semantic range of στενάζω narrows so that it means groan rather than lament.\footnote{Paul’s compound verb συστενάζει occurs only here in the biblical canon. Classically it derives from the verb στενάζω, which in turn derives from the root verb στένω [Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), 744.; Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, 942, 978-979.]. While the root verb στένω simply means “to moan, sigh, groan,” στενάζω connotes an intensified state of affairs: “to sigh often, sigh deeply” [Liddell and Scott, 744.]. The prefix σύν adds the concept “with” or “together,” leading to the definitions presented in the text above. It denotes “to lament with” or “to groan together with” [Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, 978.]. While the activities of groaning and lamenting may sound similar to the auditor’s ear, they differ in practice. BDAG notes this difference by providing two entries for στενάζω, the first with the definition “to express oneself involuntarily in the face of an undesirable circumstance” and the second with the definition “to express discontent” as a “figurative extension of 1” [ibid., 942.]. Lamenting intentionally expresses one’s discontent with current circumstances so that the sounds of groaning often voice metaphorical or emotional pain, communicating one’s wish to have painful circumstances removed. Groaning, however, implies that the actor is experiencing literal or physical pain and suffering. The verb συστενάζει as it occurs in Rom 8:22 (as well as the verb στενάζομαι in v 24 and the noun στεναγμός in v 26) can thereby signify the undefined activity of groaning or the more nuanced and intentional activity of lamenting.

One recent ecological interpretation of Rom 8:22 argues that Paul intends to connote lamentation by his use of συστενάζει. Although Laurie Braaten admits that the OT rarely uses the verb στενάζω to describe the earth as lamenting (instead the verb πενθέω is used), he concludes: “Paul employed a well known biblical concept in Romans 8:22 – the entire creation is groaning in lament because of a history of ongoing human sin and an accompanying divine judgment” [Laurie J. Braaten, “All Creation Groans: Romans 8:22 in Light of the Biblical Sources” Horizons in Biblical Theology 28, no. (2006): 152-153.]. In order to assess Braaten’s interpretation and determine whether συστενάζει means groan or lament, we must examine the biblical occurrences of the στενάζω word group in the Greek OT. Moreover, since Paul places the verb συστενάζει within the same predicate as συστενάζω, we must consider these verbs together, particularly in texts that also coordinate these terms. The verb συστενάζει occurs only in the NT at Rom 8:22. Moreover, only at Rom 8:22 does the NT associate the activity of στενάζω with a child birthing term (ωθίνω).

The lexeme στενάζω occurs in several noteworthy texts of the Greek OT. The first such occurrence is at Gen 3:16 where God declares that he will increase woman’s pain and groaning (στεναγμόν) in the bearing of children (τέκνα) because she transgressed God’s command by eating the forbidden fruit. The term does not occur again until Exodus, when God hears the groaning (στεναγμόν) of the Hebrews whom the Egyptians enslaved (Exod 2:23-24; 6:5). God then remembers the covenant with Abraham, delivering the people from their bondage. Similarly, at Judges 2:18, we learn that God sends a judge to
In looking back to the Greek translation of Paul’s scriptures, we find Genesis 3:16 is the first passage correlating “groan” with a childbearing term, in this case, τίκτω. Not until the prophets do we encounter verses with the two lexemes, στενάζω and ὤδίνω, that Paul employs in Rom 8:22. For example, Isaiah 21:2-3 places στενάζω in close proximity to the noun ὤδίν, describing a situation in which the prophet groans at the visions of destruction he sees, thereby experiencing pangs as of a woman in labor. The prophet’s groans and labor pains refer to a metaphorical situation in which the prophet’s experience is similar to that of a woman in labor.

Jeremiah 4:31 also combines our two key terms in a metaphorical fashion. Jeremiah weeps,

Because I heard a voice as of one laboring in childbirth (ὠδίνουσης), your groaning (στεναγμοῦ) as of a woman delivering the firstborn (προτοτοκούσης): the voice of daughter Zion. It shall become weak, and she shall let her hands droop, saying, “Woe am I, for my voice fails on account of those having been killed.”

deliver his people whenever they groaned under various forms of oppression. Similarly Psalm 11:6 (LXX; Psm 12:5 MT) depicts God rising up to save those people who groan (στεναγμοῦ) under various forms of oppression, proclaiming, “From the misery of the poor and from the groaning of the day-laborers, now I will rise, says the Lord, I will appoint salvation, I will speak boldly in it” (author’s translation). In addition to the term “groaning”, the Greek translation of Psm 11:6 employs νῦν, “now,” and the verb ἀνίστημι, “I rise” to describe God’s quick response to the oppression of the poor. It is interesting that this Psalm makes it appear as though God dwells in the same conditions as the poor and day-laborers. It is as though God experiences their oppression and ultimately decides to rise from it. (Note the semantic overlap between “rise” and “resurrect.” See Rom 1:4; 6:5; 15:12 for Paul’s use of the verbal and nominal form of ἀνίστημι.) The Judean exiles, bereaved of their homeland, likewise undergo oppression but, as Isaiah 35:10 and 51:11 herald, when God brings the Judeans back to Zion they will rejoice and no longer groan (στεναγμοῖς).

The first passage in the Greek OT that identifies the nonhuman creation as groaning is Job 31:38. Job declares: “If my land has cried out (ἐστέναξεν) against me, and its furrows have wept together; if I have eaten its yield without payment, and caused the death of its owners; let thorns grow instead of wheat, and foul weeds instead of barley” (31:38-40; NRSV). Job here reckons that the land can indeed groan or lament and, in terms reminiscent of Genesis 3, that a just punishment for crimes against the land and its human owners and workers would entail inedible weeds growing in place of edible grains.

116 Isaiah 21:2-3 and Jeremiah 4:31 and 22:23 are the only texts in the LXX that contain the word groups associated with στενάζω and ὤδίνω within 500 words of each other.

117 Author’s translation.
Here, daughter Zion represents those people who encounter the violence of foreign aggression in a manner similar to that of a woman who groans and labors but is hard pressed to deliver her first child. Her life – or her hope for a flourishing life – fails in the face of so much death. Earlier in this “prophecy of judgment”\textsuperscript{118} the Lord announces, “The whole land (\(\gamma\eta\)) shall be desert, but I shall surely not finish it off. On account of these things let the land lament (\(\pi\nu\theta\epsilon\iota\omega\ \eta\ \gamma\eta\)), and let the heavens above become dark. For, I have spoken, and I shall not repent. I have purposed, and I shall not turn back from it” (4:27-28).\textsuperscript{119} In these verses, Jeremiah, on behalf of the Lord, describes the earth as mourning or lamenting, using the verb \(\pi\nu\theta\epsilon\omega\), a word group that frequently describes grieving and mourning but does not refer to the anguish associated with the process of childbearing in the Greek OT.

While the word group \(\pi\nu\theta\epsilon\omega\) has a narrow semantic range (specifically referring to expressions of grief),\textsuperscript{120} the word group \(\sigma\tau\epsilon\nu\alpha\zeta\omega\) offers a much wider spectrum of meanings. As with all language, the context determines the specific connotation in any given situation. When the context denotes experiences of grief, \(\sigma\tau\epsilon\nu\alpha\zeta\omega\) most appropriately means, “to complain,”\textsuperscript{121} lament, or to groan because of negative circumstances in the hopes of changing them. But when \(\sigma\tau\epsilon\nu\alpha\zeta\omega\) occurs alongside depictions of childbearing – whether literal or metaphorical – it connotes “groaning,” a

\textsuperscript{119} Author’s translation.
\textsuperscript{120} BDAG gives only two definitions for the verb \(\pi\nu\theta\epsilon\omega\), the intransitive “to experience sadness as the result of some condition or circumstance” and the transitive “to engage in mourning for one who is dead” [Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, 795].
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 942.
verbal expression of pain and distress. In light of Paul’s overall optimism in this pericope (for example, his strong conviction that creation eagerly anticipates the apocalypse), συστενάζει cannot legitimately carry a thoroughly pessimistic tone. Creation is not mourning as if the end of life has come (cf. Jer 4:31); it eagerly anticipates the resurrection of God’s children and the liberty that resurrection will bring. Creation may indeed groan in agony under experiences of harsh oppression, as would a woman in the midst of childbearing. Yet, the immediate context colors this anguish with imperturbable hope. The successful “birth” of God’s resurrected children and the consequent “delivery” of the nonhuman creation into the glorious liberty of these children are certain, for Jesus the firstborn has already opened the passage leading from death to resurrection life.

Thus, it may be that for creation, as any midwife would confirm, groaning during labor and delivery is in fact positive and productive; groaning helps to move the process along. Even more, by employing the same root word in describing the groaning of creation, of redeemed humanity, and of the Spirit (vv 22, 23, 26), Paul groups these diverse actors into a common activity and cause. Just as a midwife or partner might groan with a laboring and groaning woman (both as a means of coaching and as an expression of the hard work involved in assisting childbirth), humans and the Spirit groan with the

---

122 This is all the more the case since Paul coordinates συστενάζει with συνωδίνει, a construct that narrows the semantic range of συστενάζει. I therefore disagree with Braaten by interpreting συστενάζει in Rom 8:22 not as “lament” but as “groan.”

123 One implication of this reading of Rom 8:22 is that it identifies creation’s groaning and laboring to be distinct from its subjection to futility and its slavery to destruction. Many interpreters, in contrast, find the laboring metaphor to extend the images of suffering already at work in the passage. My interpretation instead highlights creation’s activity and potential agency (by means of its groaning and laboring) in connection with God’s work of liberation.
laboring creation toward the resurrection (“the redemption of our body,” 8:23). Groaning
does not itself fully relieve the intense pain, but it does provide a helpful outlet for the
pain and expresses to others that the moments of painful yet productive contractions have
come. As of yet, however, we have not discovered how creation’s groaning and laboring
might be productive. Let us turn now to consider the verb “labor.”

With the connotation of συστενάζει established, the definition of συνωδίνει, may
seem obvious and simple: “labor together.” However, while “labor” in English can
denote any kind of work, the Greek term refers only to the process of childbirth, whether
literal or metaphorical.124 Even finer points of interpretation appear as we turn to a
biblical exposition of the verb “labor,” particularly the wide range of actors who may
undergo labor and the surprising possibility that nonhuman creation may give miraculous
birth to a resurrected humanity and, in turn, to a New Creation.

The verb ὠδίνω can refer to literal birth-pains “associated with giving birth” or to
the experience of suffering, as a metaphorical application of the verb.125 In her chapter on
Gal 4:19 in which Paul applies the verb ὠδίνω to his own ministry, Eastman helpfully
describes further aspects of this term, noting the ways in which it is employed in the
Greek OT. Focusing on those passages that use ὠδίνω in metaphorical ways, she
highlights several typical subjects of the verb: “Israel’s enemies,” “Israel or daughter
Zion,” a prophet; the Lord; or a prophet and the Lord together.126 These entities or groups

124 Moreover, from my study of ὠδίνω and τίκτω, it appears that ὠδίνω denotes the process of laboring
in childbirth while τίκτω more specifically refers to delivery of the child.
125 Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, 1102.
126 Susan Eastman, Recovering Paul’s Mother Tongue: Language and Theology in Galatians (Grand
Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 114.
of people suffer in a variety of ways due to numerous circumstances, yet their suffering can all be likened to the pain that accompanies childbirth.

In a miraculous situation, however, a barren woman (and, metaphorically, barren Zion) may forego the painful processes of labor and yet deliver live offspring. Noting Paul’s reference to labor in Gal 4:19 and his quotation of Isa 54:1 in Gal 4:27, Eastman examines two texts in Isaiah (54:1 and 66:7-9) that describe the miraculous situation in which a woman bears a child but does not endure the pains of labor in order to do so. She concludes: “these texts develop the motif of the barren mother who miraculously becomes the mother of a multitude . . . [they] use the metaphor of miraculous birth to emphasize God’s power and faithfulness over against human weakness.”

Eastman goes on to explain that while Paul labors so that Christ might be formed in the Galatian Christians, God also is at work in and through Paul’s labor. Thus, “Paul’s ‘labor’ represents God’s ‘labor,’ both as intense anguish on behalf of God’s people and as creative power bringing the new creation to birth.” By underscoring the ideas of miraculous birth, the combined agency of God and a creature, and the New Creation, Eastman skillfully recognizes the nuances of these texts and points the way forward for our interpretation of Rom 8. Before returning to Rom 8, however, a deeper investigation

---

127 Ibid., 115-116.
128 Ibid., 120-121. In contrast to the Isaiah texts, the combined labor of Paul and God does not work immediately or without pain but involves the suffering of ministry and depends upon the suffering of Christ on the cross [ibid., 121].
129 Ibid., 120-121. As with so many texts in Isaiah, the people of God are invited to trust in God’s sure deliverance in Isa 42:13-16 (LXX). In describing this passage, Eastman declares, “in [Isaiah] 42:14 the image of God as a travelling mother serves double duty, evoking both the anguish of apocalyptic warfare and devastation, and divine action that is destructive and creative on a cosmic scale. This double assurance of God’s power and empathy gives certainty to the promise of divine renewal, even in the midst of destruction. The time for birth is at hand – who can restrain the creative power of God?” [ibid., 123].
of Isa 66 mentioned in passing above will prove illuminating for Paul’s depiction of creation’s laboring.

2.7.5 The Laboring Earth in the Greek Old Testament

Isaiah 66:8 is the only verse in the Greek OT where nonhuman creation, in this case γῆ (land or earth), is the subject of the verb ὡδίνω. Within its larger context, this verse provides its readers with hope in the midst of suffering and devastation. Isaiah 66:7-10 proclaims:

Before the laboring woman delivers (ὡδίνουσαν τεκεῖν), before the pains of laboring (τὸν πόνον τῶν ὡδίνων) come, she escapes and delivers (ἐξέφυγεν καὶ ἔτεκεν) a male. Who has heard of such as this, and who has seen it? Can earth labor in one day (ἦ ὡδίνεν γῆ ἐν μιᾷ ἡμέρᾳ), or can a nation be born (ἐτέχθη ἐθνος) at once, that Zion labored and delivered her children (ὡδίνεν καὶ ἔτεκεν Σιων τὰ παιδία αὐτῆς)? But I have given this expectation, and you did not remember me, says the Lord. Consider, do I not make both the one who begets and the infertile woman, says God? Rejoice, Jerusalem! Make a feast-day in Jerusalem all those who love her! Rejoice in joy, all of you mourning (πενθεῖτε) over her.

Here Zion, or Jerusalem, is personified as a woman who gives birth to a whole people in an instant and apart from the typical signs of labor and delivery. Beyond the abnormal image of depicting nonhuman elements (i.e., the land) and a geographical location (i.e., Zion) as laboring and then delivering live human offspring, Trito-Isaiah’s metaphor entails thoroughly unnatural and even miraculous elements. God must be at work to preserve the descendants of Abraham through their exile, bring them back to their homeland (Isa 66:20), and thus repopulate the once bereaved Jerusalem.130

In his commentary on Isaiah 40-66, John Oswalt explains, “Gone will be the days when [Jerusalem] was stripped and barren, when its children were slaughtered, and when it seemed impossible that it could ever give birth again. Now its children will spring to life effortlessly, and a future of fecundity and laughter stretches endlessly ahead.”

Despite the language expressing instantaneous birth or salvation in the text, Oswalt suggests understanding this passage as pointing towards any possible “number of events in redemption history;” for example, “[t]he day will come when Christ, Isaiah’s Servant/Messiah, will break through the skies, and in a single moment Zion will give birth to a brand-new people, a people forever set free from the curse of sin.”

Depending primarily on the Hebrew text in this interpretation, Oswalt highlights the way in which the passage depicts the surreal image of a land (or, more generally, “earth”) being born. But the Greek translation provides an even bolder portrait of nonhuman activity in which the land actually labors.

Since the Apostle Paul and the early Christians would have been most familiar with the Greek translations of Isaiah, our gaze must turn to that text, as best as we can ascertain it. As noted, the Greek translation of Isa 66:8 differs from the Hebrew wording in a startling way. The Hebrew Vorlage employs a passive verb, reading, “Shall earth

---

131 Ibid., 674.
132 Ibid., 675.
133 Several interesting textual variants exist for the Greek text of Isa 66:8. The most interesting is the text attributed to Symmachus (as found in Origen’s Hexapla). Whereas the Göttingen text reads εἰ ὄδηγε γῆ ἐν μιᾷ ἡμέρᾳ, “if earth labors in one day,” Symmachus reads ἀρα ὄδηγησε γῆ ἐν μιᾷ ἡμέρᾳ, “then will earth labor in one day?” [Joseph Ziegler, Isaias, ed. Societas Litterarum Gottingensis, Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum, vol. 14 (Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1939), 366.] This early witness of the Greek OT places the verb in the future tense but retains the active voice of the Greek tradition (as opposed to the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible). Another textual difference that occurs as a correction to the text of Codex Sinaiticus is the replacement of γῆ with γυνή. The corrector, it may be presumed, found it disconcerting or abnormal to consider the land as “laboring” [ibid.].

139
be born in one day.” In contrast, the Greek presents “earth” as the subject of an active verb “labor” (ὦδίνεν). Thus, it reads: ἥ ὦδίνεν γῆ ἐν µιᾷ ἡµέρᾳ, “Did earth labor in one day?” Such a translation clearly portrays the nonhuman creation (specifically the land) as an active agent that metaphorically labors yet miraculously gives rise to real progeny.

This unique text in the Greek OT where the earth labors occurs in a context in which the Lord: (1) will gather all the nations so that they behold his glory (Isa 66:18-19); (2) receives the Israelite exiles from the nations as though they were priests (vv 20-21); and (3) makes a New Heaven and New Earth that remains ever before him just as the descendants of Israel shall remain (v 22). As discussed in 1.3.1 above, Isa 66 clearly holds concerns that parallel Paul’s own theological, soteriological, and, indeed, ecological concerns. Although the connection is not certain, Paul may draw inspiration from Isa 66:20 in one aspect of his mission: taking up a collection from among the nations in honor of God and on behalf of God’s people in Jerusalem (Rom 15:16). If this is the case, Paul’s knowledge of Isa 66:8 and the earth’s laboring portrayed there becomes more likely and more strongly undergirds the reading of Rom 8:22 proposed here.

The question remains, however, whether we can conceive of the creation as giving birth to a resurrected people, not by means of a literal uterus and birth canal but...
perhaps by means of such “travails” as earthquakes, through which tombs are opened, dirt is removed, and seas are divided. While no extant OT or NT text gives definitive support for a Jewish-Christian belief in the earth giving birth to resurrected humanity, on NT and two intertestamental passages suggest such an event.136

2.7.6 Resurrection from the Ground Up

With the foregoing intertextual and theological claims in place, the connection between creation’s laboring and humanity’s resurrection appear interconnected, if not interdependent. The nonhuman creation, more particularly the land, participates in God’s work of resurrection, a resurrection of humanity that will lead to the deliverance of the nonhuman creation as well. This reading of 8:22, in turn, sheds light on the beginning of our passage: creation eagerly longs for the apocalypse of God’s children because

---

136 An additional intertext appears in Isaiah. In a chapter discussing the salvation of the Lord in the face of evildoers in the land, the prophet describes the people of God as being in labor and the earth as ultimately uncovering the dead (Isa 26:17, 21 LXX). The English translation of Isa 26:16-21 (LXX) reads: “Lord, in affliction I remembered thee; thy chastening was to us with small affliction. And as a woman in travail draws nigh to be delivered, and cries out in her pain; so have we been to thy beloved. We have conceived, O Lord, because of thy fear, and have been in pain, and have brought forth the breath of thy salvation, which we have wrought upon the earth: we shall not fall, but all that dwell upon the land shall fall. The dead shall rise, and they that are in the tombs shall be raised, and they that are in the earth shall rejoice: for the dew from thee is healing to them: but the land of the ungodly shall perish. Go, my people, enter into thy closets, shut thy door, hide thyself for a little season, until the anger of the Lord have passed away. For, behold, the Lord is bringing wrath from his holy place upon the dwellers on the earth: the earth also shall disclose her blood, and shall not cover her slain” [Brenton, ed., 859-860.].

To highlight a few aspects of this complex passage, we note the people of God labored and gave birth (ὅδεινήσαμεν καὶ επέκομεν) to the “breath of your salvation in the land” (26:18). Then, the text gives testimony to belief in a resurrection of the dead, explaining that the dead will rise (ἀναστήσονται οἱ νεκροί, 26:19). Moreover, as the Lord brings judgment on the inhabitants of the earth, the earth itself “will disclose [ἀνακαλύψει] its blood and will not cover [εὐ κατακαλύψει] the ones having been killed” (Isa 26:21). Thus, in this text, the earth participates in the eschaton by presenting the remains of violence and murder to the Lord; it offers up the dead to God. Ezekiel 37:12-13 also testifies to a hope of resurrection. God will open the tombs of the dead and bring forth the dead into new and resurrected life in the land. The following verse then promises that God will give God’s Spirit to the people (37:14).
creation’s own liberative destiny depends upon humanity’s ultimate salvation. The relationship between earth’s present laboring and humanity’s future resurrection, however, requires further probing. We may rightly ask where and how the apocalypse of God’s children first occurs.

According to numerous biblical passages, resurrection frequently occurs at tombs, near the surface of the earth (Matt 27:50-54; 28:1-6; Luke 24:1-5; John 19:42-20:1; Ezekiel 37:1-14). Even Paul’s majestic depiction of the resurrection in 1 Thess 4:16-17 implies that the dead will first be revealed in their resurrected state near the earth. They will rise and then ascend to meet the Risen Jesus in the clouds:

For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thess 4:16-17 NRSV).

The *parousia* of the Lord Jesus moves from the heavens downward but the apocalypse of resurrected humanity moves from the earth upward. Thus, creation — the land in particular — is not a mere spectator of the apocalypse of the children of God but an important participant in it.

Two pseudepigraphical works also attest to the land holding and bearing forth the dead. A chapter of the Similitudes in *1 Enoch* (likely composed during the first century CE) explains, “Sheol will return all the deposits [the dead] which she had received” (51:1). Another late first or early second century text, *4 Ezra*, refers to the earth giving

---

137 I understand “apocalypse of God’s sons” (8:19) to refer to the ultimate resurrection of humanity, as discussed in 2.4 above.

forth the dead at the end of time, after the Messianic Age. *Fourth Ezra* 7:32 declares, “And the earth shall give up those who are asleep in it; and the chambers shall give up the souls which have been committed to them.”

In a later chapter, this text establishes an analogy between a woman who bears forth a son and the earth that also bears forth children (10:10, 14). Both the woman and the earth have reason to mourn over the death of their children (10:9, 11).

While it is impossible to determine whether Paul knew of *1 Enoch* or if his later interpreters read *1 Enoch* and *4 Ezra*, their existence and the content of their texts provide evidence of a relevant and possibly common perspective in first century Judaism. Further evidence of this trope lies in the Greek alterations of Isa 66:8, as discussed above (2.7.6) with the *land* giving birth in one day. Metaphorically speaking, intertestamental Jewish eschatology may have portrayed the earth as both a tomb and a womb, as a keeper of the dead and a bearer of those who would soon be resurrected.

As we connect this extant Jewish trope of the land releasing the dead with Paul’s apocalyptic perspective, we may rightly understand creation’s groaning and laboring as arising from a special historical moment – the moment soon after the resurrection of Jesus and just before the resurrection of humanity when God will fully establish God’s Kingdom on earth. It would therefore be appropriate to deem these groanings and

---


140 The text reads: “And from the beginning all have been born of her, and others will come; and behold, almost all go to perdition, and a multitude of them are destined for destruction” (v 10); “As you brought forth in sorrow, so the earth also has from the beginning given her fruit, that is, man, to him who made her” (v 14) (ibid., 546.).
laborings as “Messianic Woes” or “Birth-pangs of the Messiah.”"\(^{141}\) Dale Allison believes Paul’s use of συνωδίνει “confirms this assertion, for the imagery of birth was traditionally associated with the great tribulation.”\(^{142}\) Even Beverly Gaventa – who, as we reviewed in 0.4.4 and 2.7, considers creation’s laboring in Rom 8:22 to be futile – asserts in her commentary on Romans that the image of birth-pangs is “a metaphor for the period of strife and travail that ushers in a new age (see, e.g., Isa. 13:8; Jer. 4:31).”\(^{143}\) However, in her interpretation, the gospel (rather than creation) functions in a maternal way since the gospel “ushers in a new age by means of ‘groaning in labor pains.’”\(^{144}\) Similarly, Ernst Käsemann claims, “Paul viewed his own time as the hour of the Messiah’s birth-pangs, in which the new creation emerges from the old world through the Christian proclamation. Spirits, powers and dominions part eschatologically at the crossroads of the gospel.”\(^{145}\)

While I do not deny the gospel is the powerful force pushing God’s creation along towards birth into the New Creation, I also suggest that Rom 8:19-22 portrays the nonhuman creation as a central actor in this process. The foregoing NT, OT, and

\(^{141}\) In his study of Rom 8:19-22 in relation to Jewish apocalyptic literature, Harry Alan Hahne argues that Rom 8:22 does not fit the “Birth-Pangs of the Messiah” (BPM) category. He acknowledges that Rom 8 and BPM texts all refer to eschatological suffering. However, he claims that Rom 8:19-22 does not follow the BPM model that has “intense cosmic tribulation [occurring] over a short period prior to the coming of the Messiah” [Hahne, 204]. He bases this interpretation on three suppositions: (1) the phrase “until now” in Rom 8:22 indicates “the creation suffers throughout the age from the fall to the end times;” (2) Jewish literature focuses on human suffering rather than nonhuman suffering whereas Paul refers to creation’s suffering; and (3) later Jewish texts use BPM images to discuss the messianic age, and this does not seem to be Paul’s focus in Rom 8 [ibid., 204-205.]. In response to Hahne’s interpretation of “until now,” I refer the reader to my argument that this phrase does not refer to an activity that has taken place since the “Fall” but since the first advent of Jesus Christ. The latter two arguments do not reasonably allow Paul to adjust the BPM trope in light of new and unexpected information, namely the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Messiah. Additionally, I would argue that the phrase “groaning and laboring” does not function as a synonym for “suffering.” Rather, it points to the nonhuman creation’s activity of giving up the dead to God in God’s powerful work of “making alive” (Rom 8:11).

\(^{142}\) Allison, 63.


\(^{144}\) Ibid.

inter testamental passages (though few), with their testimony to nonhuman members of creation as laboring, encourage us to take Paul’s pregnant phrase at face value (rather than rephrase it by replacing “creation” with “gospel”). Without diminishing God’s ultimate life-giving power in the eschatological resurrection of humanity, then, I advocate for a reading that acknowledges the nonhuman creation as a central participant and a laboring actor in this process. Creation’s metaphorical laboring participates in the Spirit’s work of ἐκκατονταπλούς, of making people alive (8:11). Even as those who have the first fruits of the Spirit and the Spirit itself groan with nonhuman creation, the creation labors with the empowering guidance of the Spirit to bring about the resurrection of a corporate body, the redemption of God’s people (8:22-3, 26).

2.8 CONCLUSION

While the interpretations set forth in this chapter may appear to point in different directions – in particular, the seemingly incommensurable ideas that humans are to alleviate nonhuman creation’s slavery even as this nonhuman creation labors toward and ultimately delivers forth resurrected humanity – I believe they accurately reflect the theological and practical complexities within the Christian scriptures. In chapter one, I suggested that the OT presents us with seven postulates regarding a “relational pyramid.” I find each of these postulates echoed in Paul’s letter to the Romans:

1. Humans and the rest of creation are, by God’s design, interdependent.
2. Humans function as creation’s nurturers and as mediators between God and nonhuman creation.
3. Human sin and folly cause ecological degradation, violence, and destruction of life.
4. Nonhuman creation cooperates with God in creating and sustaining plant, animal, and human life.
5. Nonhuman creation acts in creative, judging, and agential ways.
6. God is the Creator that judges human and nonhuman creation for unjust and destructive acts.
7. God is at work in creation, leading humanity and nonhuman creation into the peaceful and flourishing communion of the New Creation.

The creation theology portrayed through these postulates maintains the seemingly paradoxical belief in the responsibility, culpability, and agential capacity of both human creation and nonhuman creation. I maintain, however, that the capacity for life manifested in humans and the rest of creation originates in the life-creating and life-restoring power of God. Thus, as God is in the process of making creation alive (ζωοποίησις, 4:17; 8:11), humans align themselves with God’s liberation by decreasing their destructive activities in the world. Meanwhile, nonhuman creation not only endures its oppressive situation but also presses forward to its liberation as it awaits and labors with God towards the resurrection that shall result in the New Creation.

By keeping in view the nonhuman creation’s God-given capacity for life, we humans are humbled so that we do not perceive ourselves as the liberators of the world, as those of greatest worth or importance, or as those with the wisdom and power to save. On the other hand, illuminating the ways in which we humans enslave creation to destruction, reminds us that our actions can and do negatively and devastatingly affect all members of creation. Both elements together teach us that salvation is embodied, directed towards all God’s creation, and is the gracious work of the Creator God.

Such a worldview stands in contrast to the imperial mythos of Paul’s time, as we shall see in chapters 3-4. It also calls into question the assumptions and practices attending a modern American worldview, as we shall consider analogically in Chapter 5.
Since those in Christ already experience aspects of liberation now, Paul’s gospel holds tremendous transformative power for our current ecological crisis. As we shall examine in chapters 4-5, human liberation now (though limited) and the ultimate liberation of nonhuman creation taking place in the eschaton point toward practical and potent eco-ethical implications for daily American life.
By writing to the Christians in Rome, Paul proclaims the gospel of God to people living in the heart of the Roman Empire. The characteristics, messages, and practices of this vast empire are complex, and the modern interpreter’s distance from them creates an intellectual chasm that is difficult to bridge. Yet, interpreting Paul’s letter as an historically situated document requires us to build a bridge, however simple and incomplete. As we cross this bridge and venture into the first century Mediterranean Basin, we bring several questions, drawn from the relational pyramid laid out in our first chapter: (1) What is the relationship between Roman people and nature,¹ both at a conventional level and a more official, imperial level? (2) What are the characteristic relationships between Roman people and the gods and between the gods and nature? (3) What is the relationship between the Roman Empire and “barbarians,” or other nations? In each of these questions, we also ask how imperial media and actions portrayed these three sets of relationships. Before we venture forth into the cultures and socio-political practices of the Roman Empire, we must first survey the ecology of the region as a form of attending to “place” (0.2).

¹ In this chapter, I generally use the term “nature” rather than “creation” in order to reflect a more Roman rather than Judeo-Christian worldview.
3.1 THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN

Investigating the human relationship with nature in the Roman Empire requires at least a brief survey of the key ecological features of the Mediterranean.\(^2\) At a popular level, people often define “the Mediterranean” as an ecologically unified region that shares the same basic weather pattern: “hot dry summers and mild rainy winters.”\(^3\) However, as historians Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell demonstrate repeatedly in their momentous tome, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, the climate – let alone the geography, soil conditions, plant life, and human cultures – of the Mediterranean region is highly diverse. Yet, in many ways this climatic diversity acts to unify the Mediterranean basin. Even more, the Roman Empire effectively unified it politically, if only for a few centuries. Thus, in this attempt to describe the ecosystems in which the Roman Empire thrived and the Apostle Paul ministered, we must remember the inherent complexity of the topic and keep at the forefront of our minds that this “region” consists of several types of microregions, complicating easy generalizations and conclusions.

Despite these caveats, approaching the Mediterranean as a unified region is reasonable for our studies since only during the Roman Empire has “even a significant part of the sea and its hinterlands . . . constituted anything remotely like a political unity.”\(^4\) In addition to political unity in imperial times, the region shares a geological

---

\(^2\) Regions such as Britain and Germany, which lie outside the Mediterranean, will not be considered since these areas did not contribute significantly to the food economy of Rome.


\(^4\) Ibid., 23.
history and a sea that unify the region by creating a highly variable climate.\(^5\) Varying season-to-season and year-to-year, the region’s erratic climate makes agricultural activity highly susceptible to crop failure.\(^6\) Since the primary limiting factor in Mediterranean farming is water, changes in rainfall – whether in the mountains or on the plains – can significantly alter crop productivity. In addition to the vulnerability and variability unifying the region, the Mediterranean’s diversity of microregions actually gives the whole basin a resilience by which it has historically withstood widespread ecological catastrophe.\(^7\)

In tandem with weather conditions, the steep terrain and thin soils of Italy poses serious agricultural challenges to Roman farmers.\(^8\) The movement of groundwater causes “soil-creep and regolith instability,” with regolith referring to the soil, rocks, and other ground materials that lie above the bedrock. Strong rains and rushing waters create gullies and remove precious topsoil. Water movement leaves hillsides barren of topsoil and valleys saturated with too much water for cultivation.\(^9\) By means of terracing, ancient Romans attempted to reduce erosion and capture water necessary for their crops.\(^10\) If too

\(^5\) Ibid., 78-79.
\(^6\) Ibid., 78.
\(^7\) Ibid., 302.
\(^8\) Such is the case in many places throughout the Mediterranean.
\(^9\) Horden and Purcell describe Latium’s agricultural conditions thus: “The volcanic soils are far from uniformly fertile. Many are very thin and unretentive of water; others – and this is also true of the alluvial soils – tend to be too sticky and waterlogged for the light ploughs which have been customary. These difficulties are compounded by hydrology. The rainfall is abundant but varies considerably from year to year in quantity and distribution. It is naturally highest on the mountains where it is least used, and in any case falls most often at the end of the agricultural year in torrents that can be enormously destructive. So the soils, which might, with irrigation, be fertile, and the water itself, are both available. But irrigation is extremely difficult. On the ridges the soils are too thin and dry; the slopes are too steep; and the valley bottoms are too wet. In addition, the force of the run-off causes soil erosion and maintains the steep sides of the gullies, which separate one locality from another to a surprising extent” (Horden and Purcell, 59, 61.).
\(^10\) Although it is often assumed that ancient Romans did not replace the fertility of their soils, there is evidence that manure was sometimes applied in the imperial period (ibid., 234.).
little labor or economic resource led farmers to neglect the terraces, however, the ultimate effect of terracing “may markedly increase the rate of degradation of the landscape,” although assessing this process is highly complex.\textsuperscript{11} Ultimately, as with any ecological niche, there is a dynamic relationship between humans and the environment. Not only do humans transform and affect the environment, but also “all human landscapes are constantly being altered by non-human agency.”\textsuperscript{12} Wealthy Romans, nevertheless, attempted to surmount the adverse effects of nonhuman activity and “demonstrate power over nature through the creation of highly visible capital-intensive projects,” for example terracing and irrigation.\textsuperscript{13}

Mediterranean farmers who depended directly on the land for their livelihood\textsuperscript{14} responded to agricultural vulnerability with a common strategy: diversification.\textsuperscript{15} They planted and tended a variety of crops suited to the diverse terrain at their disposal, however large or small, central or marginal to farming. Roman agronomist Columella insisted in the first century CE that farmers “should keep in store [various] kinds of wheat and emmer because it is unusual indeed to find a property which is situated so that we can make do with a single type of seed: some waterlogged or arid part is sure to get in the

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 235.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 236-237.
\textsuperscript{14} I follow Horden and Purcell in avoiding the designation “subsistence farmers” for describing people with few economic, agricultural, or political choices since “subsistence” would not have been their goal but would have been their occasional experience due to problematic growing conditions (whether wrought by human or nonhuman agents).
\textsuperscript{15} Horden and Purcell highlight just how vulnerable Mediterranean farmers are and the great extent to which this vulnerability is exacerbated by social injustice: “in Mediterranean history food crisis has not been caused by demographic growth’s outstripping carrying capacity (however that might reasonably be defined). In the Mediterranean environment \textit{any} population exceeds carrying capacity in a bad year . . . there have been no ecological paradises. The failures are the result of accident, war – and social injustice” (Horden and Purcell, 267. Emphasis theirs.)
way” (On Agriculture, 2.6.4). Polycultures increase the chance that farmers would reap at least some harvest despite unfavorable weather conditions since plants ranging from xerophilic (“dry-loving”) to hydrophilic (“water-loving”) would be sown. Even in the midst of a planting season, farmers respond to unusual weather in dynamic ways, planting millet, for example, when winter rains are too scarce for other cereals. A vital agricultural maxim for the Mediterranean declares therefore: “monoculture entails starvation in a year when circumstances conspire against the product. Spread the risk by exploiting as many different ecological niches with as many products as possible.”

Although growing a variety of crops, including cereals, olives, grapes, nuts, and vegetables, established a buffer against catastrophe, Mediterranean people also depended on local and regional trade to meet their needs. The Mediterranean Sea provided exceptional connectivity in a time when overland travel was slow and arduous. Roman engineers recognized the importance of water travel by establishing a road system that took “the shortest distance between two prominent seamarks or navigable rivers.” As will be discussed in greater detail below, the city of Rome depended heavily on imported maritime goods from its provinces, especially North Africa and Egypt.

A primary way in which Mediterranean peoples met their caloric requirements was by consuming grains. Scholars estimate that cereals, for example wheat and barley,

---

16 Ibid., 202.
17 Ibid. During sparse harvests or before harvests came in people often gathered herbs and wild plants for food. They would also eat starfish, tortoises, and livestock animals to carry them through times of dearth [ibid., 181.].
18 Ibid., 263. Elsewhere the authors claim: “Subsistence monocultures bring disaster in most Mediterranean environments” [ibid., 201.].
19 Ibid., 79-80.
20 Ibid., 126.
likely provided 65-70% of people’s nutritional needs.\textsuperscript{21} Compared to other Mediterranean food sources, grain crops require less human labor and allow for a greater range of planting techniques.\textsuperscript{22} Farmers could choose from a range of cereal species, each of which offered several varieties.\textsuperscript{23} While cereals are susceptible to ruin at all stages of their development and storage, they also accommodate a vast range of processing possibilities.\textsuperscript{24} “Whether milled, as flour, parboiled, as bulgur, turned into pasta, porridge, trachana . . . or some sorts of bread, cake or biscuit, cereals offer very greatly enhanced storage and transportation potential” compared to other crops.\textsuperscript{25} Common farmers could store cereal grains for future seed in “hermetically sealed underground” storage facilities.\textsuperscript{26} Wealthy farmers or landholders, in contrast, stored grains in above ground storehouses in order to display their great wealth. In fact, Horden and Purcell indicate that “[s]torage buildings often reflect a monocultural regime imposed from ‘above’ for the benefit of consumers far away.”\textsuperscript{27} Wealthy landowners also fortified such storehouses against thieving and often used the facilities as redistribution centers for the region.\textsuperscript{28}

Since cereals accommodated storage and transportation more easily than other products, they played a central role in trade. However, as Horden and Purcell poignantly

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 201.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 202.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 201.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 204.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. The authors mention as evidence “Roman villas on their high platforms composed of storerooms, the granaries of tax-grain in Hellenistic cities or Roman ports” and “granaries of the major settlements of Hellenistic Sicily.” Cf. Livy, \textit{History}, 24.21.11-12.
explain, the grain trade of the Roman Empire, or of most any regime, was not always
politically and economically innocent.

[A]lthough there are no doubt many roughly egalitarian exchanges, redistribution does not take place by some ecological magic. It is usually mediated through the control exercised by the powerful – landlords, entrepreneurs, or officials – who seek out the areas of shortfall in order to dispose advantageously of what they have accumulated. There is a nexus here between, on one hand, the control of what is readily stored and redistributed (and counted, calibrated and measured in the process) and, on the other, the exercise of ultimately exploitative control, whether the mechanism be share-cropping, slave labour, rent, tribute, religious offerings, tax or market-controlled sale.29

Wheat, in particular, was more suitable than emmer and barley for redistribution so that it became the preeminent crop for human consumption even in microregions that were better suited for growing the latter.30 Again, local farmers did not freely choose to plant monocultures of wheat but were pressured to do so by those with greater political and economic power.31

The aforementioned characteristics of the Mediterranean place – its geography, climate, topography, and botany – nurtured particular forms of human expression, whether agricultural, religious, or political. Roman religious traditions gave people a cultic means of responding to unreliable climatic and agricultural features, inviting them to perceive such variability as under the direction of supernatural powers.32 The region’s ecological vulnerability also encouraged ancient peoples – most successfully, the Romans

29 Ibid., 206.
30 Ibid. The authors indicate that emmer was “well fitted to the wetter conditions of Italian hills, and barley, much better adapted to the semi-arid areas.”
31 For example, Sicilian “producers faced irksome pressure to increase wheat production” during “the last two centuries B.C.” rather than continue their regular production and exportation of barley to Rome. “The resentment caused by that pressure fuelled public disorder by the beginning of the first century B.C.” [ibid., 207].
32 Ibid., 411.
– to extend their control over more agriculturally stable areas, such as Egypt, North Africa, and the Black Sea region. It is to these religious and political contingencies that we now turn.

3.2 RELIGIO-POLITICAL CONSTRUCTS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

At the inception of the Roman Empire, Roman advocates of Caesar Augustus claimed that through his political leadership Augustus generated natural fertility and abundance. Virgil and Horace, in particular, heralded Augustus as the divinely favored son of god who wielded his political agency to establish an age of peace and prosperity, the Golden Age. In addition to such poetic praise, Augustus and his imperial descendants promoted and propagated a similar message through art, building campaigns, and coinage. Augustus and subsequent emperors also demonstrated their control over natural abundance through action, most notably by supplying plentiful grain for the Roman populace. Through the provision of daily bread, Rome’s emperor demonstrated that, as a divine son, he had subdued a recalcitrant human and nonhuman world so that it would peacefully, willingly, and abundantly provide for the gloriously cultured people of Rome.

Alongside the imperial narrative of plenty stood a slightly contrasting account of Rome’s agricultural security. This more realistic and agricultural account took the realities of farming life seriously. No matter who was emperor, the Roman people faced the harsh realities of agricultural vulnerabilities, such as crop failures, pests, unfavorable weather conditions, and social unrest. Roman farmers, urbanites, and priests responded to these vulnerabilities by petitioning and sacrificing to the gods in order to secure divine favor for profitable crop conditions and outcomes.
The two narratives— the imperial and the agricultural— were not mutually exclusive, however. They intersected at important points. One obvious point of intersection concerns the emperor himself, who participated in the cultic ceremonies undergirding agriculture and depended on priests to perform the necessary rituals in line with the Roman liturgical calendar. The emperor, as well as the poets who lauded him, recognized that the prosperity of the city of Rome depended on the favor of the gods and on Rome’s dominion over the known world.

In order better to understand Roman perspectives on the relational pyramid connecting humans, nature, and the gods, we shall sketch the broad outlines of what I call the “imperial” and “agricultural” narratives. Since the religious activities of everyday Rome regarding agriculture chronologically precede the empire and the emperor’s activities, we shall begin there.

3.2.1 The Agricultural Myth in the Roman Cult

While Roman religious traditions held forth no one, determinative cosmogony, the general Roman assumption held that the cosmos developed out of already existing materials, sometimes with the efforts or oversight of divine beings.33 For example, Ovid’s Metamorphoses (8 BCE), the “most prominent” Latin cosmogony, explains that the world evolved out of chaos, following various steps of the separation of elements and then the creation of “living beings: celestial bodies, gods, animals (69-75), lastly humanity (76-88).”34 Although Ovid’s story presents an uncertain beginning to humanity,

34 Ibid.
it clearly distinguishes humans from animals and associates them with the gods. Ovid declares:

And, that no region might be without its own forms of animate life, the stars and divine forms occupied the floor of heaven, the sea fell to the shining fishes for their home, earth received the beasts, and the mobile air the birds. A living creature of finer stuff than these, more capable of lofty thought, one who could have dominion over all the rest, was lacking yet. Then man was born: whether the god who made all else, designing a more perfect world, made man of his own divine substance, or whether the new earth, but lately drawn away from heavenly ether, retained still some elements of its kindred sky – that earth which the son of Iapetus mixed with fresh, running water, and moulded into the form of the all-controlling gods. And, though all other animals are prone, and fix their gaze upon the earth, he gave to man an uplifted face and bade him stand erect and turn his eyes to heaven. So, then, the earth, which had but lately been a rough and formless thing, was changed and clothed itself with forms of men before unknown (Ov. Met. 72-88).35

According to Ovid, humans are distinct from other animate beings by their ability to think, their inclination to wonder at the vast heavens, their “divine substance,” and their commission to exercise dominion over the rest of earth’s creatures.

Ovid’s account of the world’s primordial past indicates, moreover, that the earth’s earliest days were effortlessly fertile:

Golden was that first age, which, with no one to compel, without law, of its own will, kept faith and did the right. . . The earth herself, without compulsion, untouched by hoe or plowshare, of herself gave all things needful. . . Anon the earth, untilled, brought forth her stores of grain, and the fields, though unfallowed, grew white with heavy, bearded wheat (Ov. Met. 89-90, 101-101, 109-110).

The age of gold, an age ruled by the god Saturn, consisted of peace, abundance, an obedient and fecund earth, and humans who were “content with food which came with no one’s seeking” (Ov. Met. 103). But the Golden Age faded when “Saturn had been

banished to the dark land of death, and the world was under the sway of Jove [Jupiter]” (Ov. Met. 113-114) so that the age turned to silver, the Silver Age devolved to an age of brass, and finally to an age of iron (Ov. Met. 114, 125, 127). People followed greedy passions, destroying each other and digging up soils in pursuit of iron and gold (Ov. Met.128-143).

By tracing the evolution of human society in such a way, Ovid implicitly frowns upon the violence that people inflict upon each other and the earth. He also envisions a different reality, one in which humans live peaceably with one another and the earth while nature serves human needs with abundance and without resistance. When we turn to the imperial myth of renewal below (3.2.2), we shall find these themes echoed and magnified. First, however, we shall survey Roman religious responses to the countervailing forces people met when attempting to achieve such abundance through agriculture.

The routine sacrifices and rites of both the rural and urban Roman populace concerned the manipulation of nonhuman entities. Although not discussing the religious aspects of agriculture per se, Cicero grasps the vulnerability and impotence of farmers in the face of natural processes, admitting: “Farming is throughout a thing whose profits depend not on intelligence and industry but on those most uncertain things, wind and weather” (2 Verr. 3.227).36

---

Since Romans recognized that growing food involved factors out of their control, every step of the agricultural process required a religious rite. Classicist Robert Turcan explains:

The peasant who knows the cycle of tasks to be done to ensure that the seed germinates, the shoot forms, the ear ripens undamaged, and that the crop is harvested, threshed, garnered, and stored, invokes in turn the qualified deities who are appropriate to the successful outcome of each process.\(^{37}\)

While Romans recognized the devastating effects that nonhuman organisms, weather patterns, and soil conditions could have on their crops, they identified supernatural beings as those who controlled and animated these aspects of nature.\(^{38}\)

While corporate, public religious rites may have differed in certain respects from more private, familial rites, Turcan demonstrates that public Roman religion built upon and grew out of familial practices.\(^{39}\) While every Roman domicile had Lares (guardian deities), Penates (household deities), and a hearth on which offerings were made, the city of Rome too “had its Lares, Penates and focal hearth.”\(^{40}\) Family worship functioned as a microcosm of what developed into the macrocosm of corporate, civil worship. For example, just as the woman of the house would ceremonially tend the hearth’s fire, so too

---

\(^{38}\) In addition to the agriculturally-related practices considered in this section, Romans viewed nature as a mouthpiece of the gods since natural processes could communicate important information about the imminent future. By performing the correct ritual in response to natural events, Romans expressed to their gods that they had received the divine message sent through the events [ibid., 6.] Turcan indicates, “A fire, a plague of locusts, an epidemic or an outbreak of animal sickness, lightning (whether striking a man, a herd or a temple), an earthquake (especially if it moved the heads of idols), a crevasse opening, a lake or lagoon overflowing, were prodigies to be ‘expiated’ by an appropriate ceremonial” [ibid.].

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 12, 14.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 51.
the Vestal virgins in Rome would religiously keep the fire of the civic hearth burning and offer on it appropriate sacrifices.\footnote{Ibid., 58.} However,

[\textit{t}em\textsubscript{e}m\textsubscript{p}les or simple sacred areas, like the Volcanal at the foot of the Capitol, established a different form of piety from that of the domestic hearth, and involved the solidarity of the Romans in a ritual which, without upsetting that of the \textit{gens} \textsubscript{family}, transcended it to the benefit of national well-being.\footnote{Ibid., 51.}

Civic as well as domestic religious activities were integrated into the daily life of Rome. “Hardly a day passed when the Roman in Rome had no civic or judiciary obligations in which the gods had a share.”\footnote{Ibid., 59.}

Although the theory behind specific rites in agricultural festivals were not always understood by first-century Romans, “there was probably never a time when the city of Rome ceased to think of agricultural concerns as central to its way of life.”\footnote{Beard, North, and Price, 46.} Agriculture, far from being a merely secular activity, necessarily involved the gods, since deities possessed the land and held sway over natural forces. Although Romans certainly altered their natural environments, they regarded these environments with a certain level of respect. Romans viewed natural places more as the domain and property of the gods than of humans. For example, when a Roman cleared a forest, he obtained the divine favor of the god or goddess who “owned” the land by sacrificing a pig.\footnote{Turcan, 39.}

Nevertheless, Romans certainly transformed the natural landscape and even perceived this endeavor as subduing nature. Through various means, powerful Roman elites (such as senators and emperors) came to possess large swaths of productive

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Ibid., 58.}
\item \footnote{Ibid., 51.}
\item \footnote{Ibid., 59.}
\item \footnote{Beard, North, and Price, 46.}
\item \footnote{Turcan, 39.}
\end{itemize}}
landscapes throughout the empire. These wealthy landholders controlled the productive activities on their lands from afar. Often these activities involved intensifying agriculture (whether by increased labor, technology, or cultivation) and the growing of a monoculture destined for exportation and sale. From the perspective of the Roman elites, they consequently engaged in “improving” the land and gave helpful patronage to local inhabitants. In order to protect amassed goods, estate owners constructed fortified storehouses.

This confiscation of lands at times displaced human populations, requiring them to depend on other sources of food and, by implication, to cultivate lands that were not currently cultivated or not cultivated as intensively. Even if inhabitants were not displaced from Roman landholdings, they likely increased their agricultural efforts by cultivating marginal areas in order to meet the demands of the owner as well as their own food requirements. The ecological impacts of these secondary effects of Roman control, however, remain unquantifiable.

---

46 Horden and Purcell detail the effects of such large landholdings: “Wielding power simultaneously in more than one microregion encourages centralizing of storage, the provision of expensive or unfamiliar techniques, the systematizing of access to external redistribution, and the redeployment of assets between the different parts of the holding. Latifundism of this kind is associated with technical change, compelled mobility of the labour-force, and the shifting pattern of local abatement and intensification” (Horden and Purcell, 283.).

47 Ibid., 265.

48 Ibid., 263-264, 229.

49 Ibid., 277.

50 Ibid., 283.

51 Horden and Purcell note, “The idea that a whole community had been replaced by an estate was a commonplace of the literary tradition” (ibid., 280.).

52 Dennis P. Kehoe, The Economics of Agriculture on Roman Imperial Estates in North Africa (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), 227-228. In addition to private and imperial landholdings, religious groups, for example the Vestal Virgins of Rome, controlled large landholdings and thus directed the production and distribution of goods. Regarding Roman cultic landholdings, Horden and Purcell explain, “Acting as proxy for the gods, temples behaved like private rentiers. In so doing, moreover, they
The religious and civic calendar of Rome demonstrates the extent to which Romans honored and feared the activities of nonhuman (usually perceived as supernatural) entities in the processes of agriculture. The following paragraphs highlight a few annual and corporate Roman religious rites pertaining to agriculture and occurring in Rome.

The Romans held the festival *Sementivae* in January to celebrate the sowing of seed throughout the late fall and early winter months in rural areas. In February, a series of rites – including animal sacrifice – took place apparently in order to foster “human and animal fertility in the agro-urban community.” From April 12-19, the Romans recognized the goddess of grain, Ceres, and the goddess of Earth, Tellus, with the festivals called *Cerialia* and *Fordicidia*. During *Fordicidia* (April 15), priests sacrificed a pregnant cow, with the calf being cut out and burned separately on the altar fire. By the end of the month (April 25), the priest of Quirinus offered sacrifices to the goddess Robigo (“Rust”) in order to ward off the devastating crop rust (a fungus probably of the order Pucciniales that still aggravates farmers today). According to Ovid, the priest would plead,

> Cruel Robigo, do not injure the young wheat; let its tender tip quiver on the surface of the ground. I beg you allow the crop, nurtured under

---

53 Beard, North, and Price, 45.
54 Turcan, 65.
55 *Ibid.*, 68. Horden and Purcell explain that during the fifth century BCE the Romans built the Temple of Ceres. In so doing they heralded this Greek goddess as one who “protects against food crisis” by means of an imported agricultural good [Horden and Purcell, 427.]. The cult of Ceres necessarily highlights the Roman dependence on other lands for essential food.
56 Turcan, 69.; Beard, North, and Price, 45.
57 Turcan, 69. (In 2011, a new “Field Crops Rust Symposium” was held in response to the increased threat of rusts on crops [http://www.apsnet.org/meetings/topicalmeetings/fcrs2011/Pages/default.aspx]).
heaven’s propitious stars, to grow until it is ripe for harvest. Yours is no gentle power. The wheat which you have marked, the sorrowful farmer counts as already lost. Neither winds nor rain harm the wheat so much, nor does the nip of the white-glistening frost so fade it, as when the sun scorches the wet stalks. Then is the occasion for your anger, dread goddess. Forbear, I pray you, and take your rough hands from the harvest; and do not harm the farmer’s work. It is enough that you have the power to do harm (Fasti IV.911-922).58

On May 1, Romans prayed to Bona Dea (“Good Goddess”) for the protection of Rome against earthquakes.59 Since May represented a time of growth, a three-day festival celebrated Dea Dia, the goddess of growth.60 During this festival, members of the Arval Fraternity sacrificed to a number of supernatural figures in order to secure abundant crops.61 Since winter cereal crops ripened in May, two rituals in June related to the selling of grain and the transformation of grain into bread.62 When farmers sold their spring crops, including grain, they sang praises to Fors Fortuna.63 On June 9, bakers and millers honored the goddess of fire, Vesta, since she provided the fire by which to bake bread.64 Moreover, on this day, the millers allowed the donkeys that powered the grain mills to have a day of rest.65

The change of weather from the cool and damp of spring to the dryness of summer called for rituals relating to decreased water resources in July and for

59 Turcan, 70.
60 Ibid. Horden and Purcell explain that this festival of Dea Dia took place 6 miles from Rome. Many inhabitants of Rome traveled to the festival by means of the Tiber River [Horden and Purcell, 436.].
61 Turcan, 71.
62 Ibid., 72.
63 Ibid., 73.
64 Ibid., 74.
65 Ibid.
propitiating Vulcan, the god of fire who could burn crops, in August. The priests of Jupiter offered the first fruits of the grape vine on August 9 in order to sanctify the harvest. On August 21, the god Consus enjoyed a typically ‘cereal’ environment, with Seia, Segeta (Segestia), Messia, goddesses of seedtime and crops, as well as Tutulina who watched over their preservation. Consus was patron of the garnering of crops, and Ops was the goddess of fertility and plenty, her day being celebrated four days later (25) at the Opiconsivia.

At the end of the month (27 August), Romans observed a solemn day in order to ward off Volturnus, a devastating wind that could scorch the ripening grapes. September brought great festivity with the celebration of the Roman Games in which food and animals played important roles for feasting and horse racing. The month of October brought the end of the grape harvest, and Romans celebrated with a “fruity beverage of a must ‘treated’ with old wine.” They also heralded the increase in water by decorating wells and springs in honor of the god Fontus or Fons on October 13. November again was a time of festivals, while December, in certain respects, “was the crowning point of all that had been gained from the agricultural season.” On December 5, villagers rested their oxen and rejoiced in dancing, “trampling the earth that had made [them] work so hard.” Several days later (December 13) the Romans honored Ceres and Tellus in connection

---

66 Ibid., 76-77.
67 Ibid., 76.
68 Ibid., 77.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 78.
71 Ibid., 79.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., 80.
74 Ibid.
with the end of fall planting. Viewing the products of the earth as not entirely their own, Romans “asked the god [Ops] who had looked after the harvested grain for the right to take part of it from the barns for sowing and eating.” They also petitioned Ops to oversee the sale of grain in the marketplace on December 19. With December ending in celebration of Saturn during the sumptuous feasting of *Saturnalia*, Romans rejoiced in their “fruitfulness, food production and consumption” at the end of the civil year.

This limited selection of the annual Roman liturgical cycle reveals several important perspectives on the human, nonhuman, and divine complex. First, Romans recognized the fragility of life on earth, of depending on soil, water, air, plants, and animals for their survival. They believed each of these contingencies was under the guidance or control of divine beings. Thus, secondly, Romans – at least ceremonially – did not view the earth and its resources as immediately their own. Rather, the gods granted the land and its fruits to the people in response to their proper and pious petitioning. Thirdly, agricultural success, therefore, depended upon correct human behavior and the favor of the gods in the face of malevolent or at least indifferent nonhuman forces. By participating in familial as well as civil religious activities, Romans recognized and embodied their vulnerable and highly dependent relationship to the nonhuman creation. As we shall discover in the following section, the Roman emperor also participated in these activities and even functioned as a role model of piety and as a priestly mediator on behalf of the entire empire.

---

75 Ibid., 81.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 82.
3.2.2 The Imperial Myth of Roman Abundance

While the Roman agricultural narrative articulates a vision of human prosperity that depends upon personal and societal piety and the favor of the gods, the imperial myth focuses this vision on the person of the emperor. The emperor, as supreme patron and representative of the Roman people, secures agricultural success through his own piety and ministrations. Although all Romans must honor the gods for their social wellbeing, literary works from Virgil, Horace, and Augustus himself, as well as lithographic messages in the form of imperial monuments, testify that the emperor exercises the greatest power in establishing the prosperity of the Roman people.

In his *Eclogues* ("Selections"), which he wrote after Julius Caesar’s assassination (44 BCE), during the tumultuous times around 37 BCE, and possibly in honor of "Pollio’s accession to the consulate," Virgil articulates a Roman hope for a better era. Although later Christian interpreters would read Virgil’s poem through millennial and messianic lenses, in its original Roman context the poem expresses hope in a cyclical (rather than penultimate) renewal of former glories. Virgil hopes that this renewal would come from the wise leadership of an unnamed man whom some historians identify

---

81 Virgil, 10. Len Krisak points out that although Virgil saw the Golden Age emerging, he would not have thought of this age as never ending (as would be in Christian eschatology) or as untainted by the characteristics of the Silver, Bronze, or Iron Ages. He explains: “traces (vestigia) of the crime-ridden Iron Age, for instance, overlap with the commencement of the Golden, which is destined in the grand scheme of things to give way in its turn to Silver” [ibid.].

166
as Pollio.\textsuperscript{82} He highlights the remarkable character of his hope by noting the shadow side of contemporary life, which involves sin, fear, and strife:

Leading us, you’ll erase all traces of our sins  
Remaining, freeing earth from endless fear and strife (Verg. Ecl. 4.13-14).\textsuperscript{83}

Through the new leader’s exercise of political leadership, the earth’s sufferings – both of human and natural origin – would cease and would transform into experiences of peace.

Beyond cessation of strife, Virgil looks forward to the greater natural fruitfulness he believes Rome’s new leader will establish. The new leader would transform not only human warfare into peace but also nature’s reluctance to give its bounty into generous offerings brought freely to people. This ruler would thereby usher in an era of local food security.

All by themselves, the goats shall bring milk-swollen udders  
Home, and herds faced with mighty lions shall not shudder. . .

The sailing merchants and their pine-built ships will stop.  
There’ll be no trading goods; all lands will bear all crops.  
The soil will never suffer hoe, nor vine the hook (Verg. Ecl. 4.21-22, 38-40).

Although admittedly poetic in their ideal picture of a paradisiacal future, these verses illustrate a Roman dream of human forgiveness and leisure in the midst of natural peace, abundance, and ease that echoes the mythology of Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses}.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{82} Galinsky, 92. Arguing against sweeping claims that this poem set the agenda for Augustan art and politics, Galinsky explains that Virgil later developed the themes present in the fourth Eclogue into a more politically robust ideology [ibid., 93.].

\textsuperscript{83} Virgil, 31.

\textsuperscript{84} Virgil saw in the expansive Roman Empire the return of the Golden Age, a Greco-Roman mythic age when “humans lived in tranquil harmony with themselves and the gods, while the Earth, in satisfaction, was fruitful of her own accord” [David Castriota, \textit{The Ara Pacis Augustae and the Imagery of Abundance in Later Greek and Early Roman Imperial Art} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 124.]. Castriota’s comparison of Virgil to his likely Greek sources (such as Hesiod and Aratos) indicates that
So total is the Golden Age that even the soil is spared the violence of tilling. Virgil empathetically perceives agricultural work from the perspective of the soil, envisioning a day when it will no longer “suffer” the wounds of the hoe. Agriculture and animal husbandry – in this account – are acts of human violence committed against soil, plants, and animals, the victims of forced productivity. In place of this oppressive situation, Virgil’s renewed Golden Age brings peace and rest to humans while nonhumans – such as goats and land – actively and willingly serve people by giving them nourishment. No longer will humans impose their will upon animals, plants, and soil since these members of nature will have their natural activities oriented towards the good of humankind. Such a transformation of the ecological order depends, in Virgil’s vision, on the ministrations of Rome’s leaders. Thus, through the activities of a human politician, the daily activities of inanimate and animate entities will be transformed so that they abundantly and unrestrainedly serve human needs.

Several years after writing the *Eclogues*, during the political unrest that attended the era between the assassination of Julius Caesar and the accession of Augustus to *princeps*, Virgil alters his tone. He now paints with a palate colored by the sad realities of political unrest and the vulnerabilities of rural life. This new depiction coheres more with the agricultural view of life sketched above than with the imperial myth that would soon develop in earnest. During a time when politicians confiscated the lands of rural farmers Virgil developed a story of salvation or regeneration whereas the latter only considered the fall or degradation of creaturely life [ibid., 125-126.] Moreover, since Virgil likely related Augustus’s success to the empowerment from Apollos, Virgil’s literary work is a religious one. We find that Virgil was in fact writing a soteriology for creation, a salvation that was mediated by the Roman emperor [ibid., 5.]. Karl Galinsky disagrees, asserting that “nowhere is it suggested that he [Pollio] shall be the sole ruler or that Rome’s salvation will depend on one” [Galinsky, 92.].
in order to favor faithful adherents, Virgil wrote the Georgics ("Farming").\textsuperscript{85} The political injustice of land redistribution may have touched Virgil personally, since his own farming family may have lost its land to Antony, who allegedly confiscated it in order to reward his soldiers. Later, after writing Georgics, "Virgil supposedly regained it through the influence of acquaintances who were well connected to Octavian," the man who would soon take the name Augustus.\textsuperscript{86}

Instead of envisioning the provision of food without human work, as in the fourth Eclogue, Virgil more realistically depicts human labor as "the only barrier between the farmer and ruin" in the Georgics.\textsuperscript{87} Common human agents, such as farmers, work ceaselessly in order to survive in the face of antagonistic nonhuman entities, whether birds, weeds, lack of sunlight, or the gods.\textsuperscript{88} Even circumspect and prayerful labor cannot

\textsuperscript{85} Virgil, Georgics: A Poem of the Land, trans., Kimberly Johnson (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), xiii. Virgil dedicated this poem on farming to his patron "Maecenas (70-8 B.C.), a wealthy diplomat and one of Octavian’s chief ministers" [ibid., xvii.].

\textsuperscript{86} Johnson points out: "Even if this story is not true, Virgil certainly knew farm families who had been made landless and homeless" [ibid., xvi.].

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., xvi.

\textsuperscript{88} This is especially the case since harsh Father Jupiter (in contrast to generous Saturn) controlled the world in this toilsome way for the edification of humanity: "And yet, though seasoned men and oxen struggle thus to turn the soil, still the fractious gander spoils their work, or Thracian cranes, or bitter-leaved chicory, or shade harms the crops. The Father himself willed the way of husbandry to be severe, first stirred by ingenuity the fields, honing mortal skill with tribulation, and suffered not his realm to laze in lumpish sloth . . . Toil subdued the earth, relentless toil, and the prick of dearth in hardship [Verg. G. 1.119-24, 1.45-46].

In contrast to the fourth Eclogue, Virgil considers the toilsome labor of humans and animals from the perspective of the vulnerable farmer with little attention to political heroes or the sufferings of the soil. Yet, soil remains an agent with the fields acting as humanity’s pedagogue, “honing mortal skill with tribulation.” Galinsky explains that in the Georgics “men depend on their own efforts, though under the aegis of helpful gods like Ceres [Verg. G. 1.147]. These efforts are unceasing [Verg. G. 1.145-46], driven as they are by want and need, two stimuli for civilization that were singled out by numerous writers before and after Vergil” [Galinsky, 95.]. The Georgics, therefore, depicts the renewed Golden Age as “based on agricultural labor” [Verg. G. 2.536-40] as well as warfare so that “[j]ust as the farmer’s peace is based on labor, so the pax Romana is based on conquest and war” [ibid., 95-96. Emphasis his.]. In other words, the "underlying thesis of the Georgics is that agriculture is the underpinning of civilization" [Virgil, Georgics: A Poem of the Land, xviii.]. Such a vision nicely supports the Roman project of world dominion although it is not itself a "political polemic" [ibid., xvi.].
“keep the random blows of nature from wrecking his enterprises.” The farmer must endure such liabilities, and no political leader can fully alleviate them.

In response to Augustus’ ascent to supreme power in 27 BCE, Virgil created a hopeful epic – the *Aeneid* – that points to the peace and prosperity that would come in the late Roman Republic. Taking a more explicitly political stance in the *Aeneid*, Virgil lauds Augustus for establishing peace in the previously fractious and warring Republic. In fact, Augustus Caesar is portrayed as a son of god who will usher in the Golden Age:

> Here is the man, he’s here! Time and again you’ve heard his coming promised – Caesar Augustus! Son of a god, he will bring back the Age of Gold to the Latian fields where Saturn once held sway. . . (Verg. A. 6.913-916)

In contrast to the praises for Rome’s unnamed leader in the fourth *Eclogue*, the *Aeneid* explicitly identifies Augustus as the one destined to renew Rome’s Golden Age of prosperity.

> The Roman assertion that a supreme political leader effects natural fertility also finds expression in the writings of Horace. He explicitly proclaims that Augustus had brought about an abundant supply of food and a remarkable time of peace:

> Your rule, Augustus, Has brought bounty to our fields, restored To our gods those standards stripped from proud Parthian columns, closed the iron doors To the temple of war. . . (Hor. Carm. 4.15).

---

90 Dunstan describes Virgil as “[i]ntensely patriotic” while at the same time rejecting “any role as a crude purveyor of imperial propaganda;” “Virgil shared Augustus’ view that the ongoing process of restoring traditional values and principles would produce a harmonious social order” [Dunstan, 265.].
It is as if Augustus himself transformed infertile fields into fertile ones. Yet, the political
tenor of the passage indicates greater realism than magical fertility. Horace correlates the
fields’ new bounty with a renewal of piety and the expansion of Rome’s borders. For
Augustus

Reined in the recklessness of those who would swerve
From the straight course, banished wickedness,
And called us back to those ancient ways
By which the Latin name,

The power of Rome, the fame and majesty
Of her empire have been gloriously extended
From where the bright sun first rises
Even to its westernmost bed.

While Caesar stands guard, no turmoil at home,
No arms abroad can unbalance the peace,
And no wrath that forges swords
Shall beset our cities (Hor. Carm. 4.15).

According to Horace, Rome’s political dominion and its concomitant social peace result
in agricultural prosperity.

While poetry fashions an emperor who magically alters soils and weather patterns
and prevents the destructive forces of pests, history describes Augustus as a man who
brought plenty through his extensive control of the Mediterranean region, particularly
Egypt and North Africa. Under Augustus, Rome strengthened its control over these
productive regions through taxation and the appropriation of produce. Another practical
way in which Augustus restored plenty to the farms closer to Rome was through the
political peace he established. Augustus created a stable and secure society such that
farmers could tend their lands more effectively while also reaping the rewards of their
labor by maintaining possession of greater portions of their harvests (rather than
relinquishing them to armies or thieves). The political and social peace of the Pax Romana promoted the agricultural productivity of Roman farms, since men no longer served as soldiers but farmers.93

In his Res Gestae Divi Augusti (“The Deeds of the Divine Augustus”), Augustus recounts his life’s work of establishing peace and prosperity for the Roman people. Tiberius, Augustus’ heir and successor to the seat of emperor, inscribed the Res Gestae in both Latin and Greek on Augustus’ mausoleum in Rome and on sacred monuments throughout the Empire.94 Remnants of one such inscription exist in Pisidian Antioch, a city the Apostle Paul visited on his missionary journeys.95

The Res Gestae convey important elements of how Augustus perceived himself and his activities. Since Augustus ruled in a time when the power of the senate declined and his own imperial power increased, he carefully depicts his rule as based upon authority rather than power. Authority (auctoritas) in the Roman sense does not impose itself upon others but rises organically from social interactions. As Karl Galinsky explains, “auctoritas is something that is granted not by statute but by the esteem of one’s fellow citizens.”96 Augustus claims:

In my sixth and seventh consulships [28 and 27 BCE], when I had extinguished the flames of civil war, after receiving by universal consent the absolute control of affairs, I transferred the republic from my own control to the will of the senate and the Roman people. For this service on my part I was given the title of Augustus by decree of the senate, and the

---

96 Galinsky, 14.
doorposts of my house were covered with laurels by public act, and a civic crown was fixed above my door, and a golden shield was placed in the Curia Julia whose inscription testified that the senate and the Roman people gave me this in recognition of my valour, my clemency, my justice (δικαιοσύνην), and my piety (εὐσέβειαν). After that time I took precedence of all in rank, but of power (ἐξουσίας) I possessed no more than those who were my colleagues in any magistracy (Aug. RG 34). 97

Veiling his true power and employing what is now termed “political double speak,” Augustus portrays his leadership as flowing not from force but merely from the esteem given him by the people and from his personal qualities, qualities of righteousness (justice) and piety in particular.

Throughout the decline of the republic and during the civil wars to which Augustus brought an end, Roman public religion decayed. Augustus boasts for three paragraphs in Res Gestae about the many building and renovation campaigns he funded for sacred sites. One summary statement declares, “In my sixth consulship, in accordance with a decree of the senate, I rebuilt in the city eighty-two temples of the gods, omitting none which at that time stood in need of repair” (Aug. RG 20). 98 For Augustus and the Roman people, political security went hand in hand with religious devotion and piety.

Not only were sacred sites and temples dilapidated during the republic’s decline, a variety of priesthoods were at times left vacant. 99 Thus, Augustus exhibited his piety not only in his renovation of buildings but also in the revitalization of the Roman cult. Unlike his political predecessors and colleagues, Augustus belonged “to all four major priesthoods,” 100 including the pontiffs, augurs (those who took auspices for social and

---

97 Augustus, 399-401.
98 Ibid., 376-379.
99 Galinsky, 289.
100 Ibid., 313.
political activities), *quindecimviri* (“guardians of the Sibylline Books”\(^{101}\)), and *fetials* (those who “controlled and performed the rituals” of war).\(^{102}\) Augustus’ relationship to the Arval Fraternity (a college of priests), in particular, illustrates important features of his role in Roman religion and its influence on agriculture.

The Arval Fraternity (a brotherhood of the arable field), during the republican era, was an inconspicuous religious order that made “public sacrifices so that the fields bear fruit.”\(^{103}\) The order’s activities illustrate the intimate connection between public and private worship, for the fraternity “performed once a year at the public level the kind of ritual the Roman farmer would conduct privately with his *familia*. That was the Ambarvalia, a procession around the boundaries of the field (cf. Tib. 2.1).”\(^{104}\) By joining this society and appointing other elite citizens to its ranks, Augustus elevated the activities of the fraternity and its cultic worship of Dea Dia (the goddess of growth) to a more public and institutional level. The fraternity, after Augustus’ death, also honored the late emperor and priest by incorporating holy days in honor of *divus Augustus* into its ritual calendar.\(^{105}\)

As a priest in the Arval Fraternity, Augustus interceded on behalf of the Roman people for agricultural success. He acted as a spiritual mediator in order to transform

---


\(^{102}\) Ibid., 26, 18. In his *Res Gestae*, Augustus declares: “I have been pontifex maximus [ἀρχιερεύς], augur, a member of the fifteen commissioners for performing sacred rites, one of the seven for sacred feasts, an arval brother, a *sodalis Titius*, a fetial priest” (Aug. RG 7).

\(^{103}\) Galinsky, 292. Cf. Varro 1.1.5. Robert Turcan describes the Arval fraternity as “a group of twelve members whose duty was ritually to promote the crop fertility of the arable fields or *arva*. The Arval Brothers therefore wore as their major insignia a crown of wheat-ears bound by a white ribbon” [Turcan, 57.].

\(^{104}\) Galinsky, 292. Horden and Purcell explain the purposes of this ceremony as such: “Processional rituals such as the *Ambarvalia* in the Roman countryside reinforced property boundaries, and were as much concerned with ownership as with productivity” (Horden and Purcell, 430.).

\(^{105}\) Galinsky, 293.
potentially adverse agricultural conditions into beneficial ones. By his acts of piety and sacrifice, he obligated the deities to allow the good and restrain the bad contingencies of agriculture. In so doing, Augustus upheld “the traditional values of an agricultural society in the midst of a time of intellectual and material sophistication.”

Even in times of crop failure or shortage, the Roman emperor often appeared to generate agricultural abundance by giving free grain to the masses of Rome. Augustus avows in *Res Gestae*, “I did not decline at a time of the greatest scarcity of grain the charge of the grain-supply, which I so administered that, within a few days, I freed [ἐλευθερώσατι] the entire people, at my own expense from the fear and danger in which they were” (Aug. RG 5). Even more, he emphasizes the fact that he gave money and grain to Roman plebs:

in my eleventh consulship I made twelve distributions of food from grain bought at my own expense . . . These largesses of mine reached a number of persons never less than two hundred and fifty thousand. . . When consul for the thirteenth time I gave sixty denarii apiece to the plebs who were then receiving public grain; these were a little more than two hundred thousand persons (Aug. RG 15).

As chief patron (πατέρα πατρίδος, RG 35), the emperor presented himself as the powerful agent who transformed his people’s experience of dearth into plenty, testifying in a concrete fashion to the imperial myth of a politically wrought abundance.

It is not just modern cynics who would suspect that Augustus’ generous provision of grain was motivated by political aims. In fact, Tacitus, the late first century historian

---

106 Ibid.
107 Although there is a lacuna at the point where the monument reads “grain-supply,” the editors of the text have deemed it likely that it originally read “frumenti,” the free supply of grain. This food supply will be discussed below.
108 Augustus, 401.
who found fault with the early emperors, believed the same, stating: “Augustus won over the soldiers with gifts, the populace with cheap corn, and all men with the sweets of repose, and so grew greater by degrees, while he concentrated in himself the functions of the Senate, the magistrates, and the laws.” While with Tacitus we may question Augustus’ motives for providing reliable supplies of grain to Rome, more central to the concerns of this study is how Augustus provided large quantities of grain.

Although the elite received produce from their rural Italian estates and people in Rome could buy Italian-grown grain at markets, the majority of Rome’s grain supply issued from North Africa and Egypt during imperial times. Both North Africa and Egypt produced large harvests of grain and were obliged to relinquish much of that produce to their Roman overlords in the form of taxes and forced purchases. In 30 BCE, after his defeat of Antony, Augustus brought Egypt under direct imperial control,

---

109 Dunstan, 278.
110 Elliott and Reasoner, eds., Documents and Images for the Study of Paul, 163.
111 An important source of grain was the private estates owned by inhabitants of Rome. Such owners would have the produce of their estates shipped to their urban dwellings – at least in some measure [Erdkamp, 120.]. Moreover, Erdkamp explains that grain from the province of Sicily played a much smaller role than grain from North Africa and Egypt but was a more proximate source. As a tithe-paying province, Sicily was obligated to Rome in two ways: first, it had to pay a tax from its grain crops, amounting to an imperial income of 9% of Sicily’s grain harvest from taxed locales. The official tax rate was 10%, but the tax collector would collect 10% of that amount, leaving the government with 9% of the produce from “tithe-paying communities” (ibid., 215.). Second, Sicily had to sell grain to Rome in two different arrangements (the first involved about 3,000,000 modii of grain at 3 HS (sestertii) per modius and the second involved about 800,000 modii at 3.5 HS) (ibid., 214.). Erdkamp claims, then, that the Roman government received 20% of Sicily’s grain harvest by these means, a total of 6,850,000 modii of grain (ibid., 216.). Possibly about one third of this total (2,283,333) reached Rome itself with most of the rest supplying the Roman military and government officials (ibid., 217.).


113 Large swaths of North Africa were owned by emperors. Erdkamp explains: “The imperial estates were originally the private possessions of Augustus and his successors, which were gradually enlarged by means of annexation from foreign enemies, confiscation and inheritance” [Erdkamp, 221.].
and this province was “treated as the personal domain of the emperor.” At the same time, Africa swore allegiance to Augustus. By such means, the capital city obtained the grain necessary to support its population, which approached one million people during the first centuries BCE and CE. Consequently, whether or not they were aware of it, Rome’s masses directly depended on the empire’s control of these regions for their daily bread.

By controlling Egypt and much of North Africa, the emperor proved himself to be the supreme patron and cultivator of Rome’s apparent fertility and prosperity by routinely providing grain through the frumentationes, “the free distributions of grain,” as testified in the Res Gestae quoted above. Although classicists debate the exact figures and logistics involved in these distributions, it is possible to sketch a rather coherent picture of the process. Even before Augustus, Julius Caesar had introduced the frumentationes to the Roman populace. G. E. Rickman indicates that during Julius’ and Augustus’ reigns, the frumentationes “rose to the point where they were being issued, even if only briefly, to some 320,000 recipients at the rate of 5 modii per month. For these men alone more than 19 million modii a year were needed, that is over 120,000 tons.” The total annual grain requirement in Rome ranged between 30 and 60 million modii. Taking 40 million modii as a median figure, Rome’s total grain need would have amounted to roughly

---

114 See Aug. RG 27 [Augustus, 391, fn b.].
115 Aug. RG 25.
116 Erdkamp, 207.
117 Rickman: 263.
118 Ibid.
119 Dennis Kehoe gives the lower figure of 30 million [Kehoe, 4.]; Lionel Casson gives the higher figure of 60 million [Casson: 21.]; G. E. Rickman suggests 40 million [Rickman: 263.]; and Paul Erdkamp proposes 30 to 40 million [Erdkamp, 230-235.].
250,000 tons of grain per year,\textsuperscript{120} which means that the \textit{frumentationes} provided somewhere between 32\% and 63\% of Rome’s grain needs, with the rest of its requirements being met through the market and rural estates. Depending on the size of the ships used to transport this grain, between 800 and 4000 ships consequently serviced the grain trade.\textsuperscript{121}

By means of the \textit{frumentationes}, the emperor could publically display the Golden Age of natural fertility that he had introduced. Although one might expect that Rome administered the free grain to the most needy of its inhabitants, this was in fact \textit{not} the case. Instead, in developing the list of \textit{plebs frumentaria}, “[o]nly residents of Rome were considered, while slaves, women and (at least until Trajan) children under age eleven (or perhaps fourteen) were excluded.”\textsuperscript{122} Thus, Rome’s most vulnerable did not benefit from the \textit{frumentationes}.

One might also expect that the imperial government would protect the agricultural interests of its local farmers, but instead “[t]here were no export bonuses or import barriers”; local farmers competed on a level playing field with the large shipments of provincial grain.\textsuperscript{123} Rather than concerning themselves with the economic wellbeing of local farmers, Roman leaders simply worried about providing food for Rome’s

\textsuperscript{120} Rickman: 263.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.\ Several important physical properties of grain made its transportation and storage precarious. For instance, when wheat lies in a pile, it can shift and flow almost like a liquid, exerting a great deal of force in a rocking ship; harvested wheat also breathes, taking in oxygen and releasing carbon dioxide, water, and heat; and wheat stays well preserved when it is kept at about 60 degrees Fahrenheit and at less than 15\% moisture content. By these physical characteristics, wheat exercised a type of agency by requiring humans to transport and store it in careful and special ways so that boats would not capsize and fires would not kindle [ibid., 261.].

\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Cura Annonae}. While it can be argued that slaves were less vulnerable than free men since their owners would be sure to feed them, it still holds that women and children in Rome were the most vulnerable members of society.

\textsuperscript{123} Erdkamp, 5.
inhabitants, no matter the food’s origin. The ultimate goal remained the provision of
food for the hardiest of Rome’s populace and, consequently, the prevention of its unrest.

Even though the benefits of Rome’s apparent fertility extended only to a
particular segment of the population, the message of fertility was expressed to all sectors
of society. Augustan claims to political peace and natural abundance found expression
not only in literature but also in public art forms. In renovating the city of Rome,
Augustus had abundant opportunities for communicating his triumphant message in
material form through his building campaigns. Marble monuments appeared throughout
the city and included such masterpieces as the “Altar of Peace.” In 9 BCE, Augustus and
the Roman Senate unveiled this striking altar, the *Ara Pacis Augustae*, just northeast of
the Pantheon in the northwest section of Rome. The Roman state dedicated this altar “to
the Pax Augusta, the era of peace and stability established by the reign of Augustus.”

Through the figural and floral reliefs on its sides and walls, the monument tells a
story of the Roman Republic (later to become the Roman Empire) and the apparently
legitimate and divinely ordained rise of Augustus to the primary seat of power as *princeps*.
As an observer retraces the footsteps the Emperor took at the dedication ceremony, she
reads a lithographic story of Rome:

The early republic, founded by Romulus, was a golden age of peace,
prosperity, and piety. The era of the late republic, the era that Augustus
has ushered out, was one of war and of impiety in which sacrifices were

---

124 One testament to this concern comes from the statesmen, Pliny the Younger, who “praised Trajan’s
policy of building roads and improving harbours, but he did so in the context of Rome’s grain supply”
[ibid.]. Modern scholars explain: “Agriculture, unlike warfare, was not the direct responsibility of the state.
Nonetheless, the religious institutions of Rome were much concerned with agricultural success – on which,
ievitably, the security and prosperity of the city rested. The calendar of festivals contains rituals connected
with grain-crops, with wine-production and with animal husbandry” [Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of
Rome: A History*, 45.].
125 Castriota, 3.
no longer sacred but mundane. In contrast to this, the new Rome founded by Augustus, son of a god and descendant of Aeneas, is again a time of peace and prosperity in which piety is the ultimate virtue.¹²⁶

At the eastern entrance to the inner altar, the wall to the left of the doorway portrays a motherly figure that is both fertile and repose. This woman sits in contrast to the woman of the right panel. There, the victorious goddess Roma sits erect and alert with weapons of war. The more tranquil woman on the left, who sits holding two babies on her lap, surrounded by symbols of fecundity, is almost impossible to identify and is likely a composite figure comprised of, at least, Venus, Ceres [goddess of cereal grains], Tellus [goddess of Earth], and Pax. Whoever she may be, it is clear that she represents peace and fertility.¹²⁷

As the altar celebrates “Augustus’ return from Spain and Gaul after pacifying the region,” the relief of a peaceful and fecund Mother Earth could be seen to represent in visual form Horace’s literary claim that Augustus had “restored to farms their plentiful crops” (Odes 4.15).¹²⁸ The juxtaposition of victorious, warring Roma with pacific “Mother Earth” conveys the message that by dominating barbarians, the empire brings prosperity to the inhabited world.¹²⁹

Although the human yet god-like figures sculpted on the altar are likely to draw the attention of most observers, recent scholars have highlighted the importance of flora to the monument’s message. Some scholars describe the floral friezes “as a visual embodiment of the returning Golden Age, a new era of blessedness in which the limitless

¹²⁷ Ibid.
¹²⁸ Elliott and Reasoner, eds., Documents and Images for the Study of Paul, 124.
flowering of the earth is contingent upon the efficacious presence of a divinely appointed sovereign, Augustus himself. The flowering vines growing in orderly yet abundant fashion at the base of all the figural reliefs, communicates in visual form the twin themes of political leadership and natural fertility.

The newly re-sculpted landscape of Rome proclaimed loud and clear the Augustan gospel of peace in a language understood by literate and illiterate alike.

Poetry touting a new golden age found concrete expression in the sparkling materials of the new buildings. Simply, Augustan propaganda was pervasive in the city, and in the lives of all residents. . . all were able to comprehend the Augustan system of ideas and ideals. For example, learned observers interpreted the intricate mythological figures carved on the Ara Pacis, while the uneducated surely appreciated the accessible and universal message of prosperity depicted by the carvings of lush plants.

Through his building campaigns, Augustus expressed a clear imperial message and transformed the Roman landscape. Ironically, however, the very buildings that lauded Augustus for bringing natural harmony and abundance exacted a tremendous toll upon the earth. The new infusion of marble into Rome during the late first centuries BCE and throughout the first century CE came from Luna, a large quarry on the northwestern coast of Italy. Transported by ships to the port at Ostia, the marble was then taken up the river Tiber to Rome, “where special wharves were constructed to receive it.” Art historian Diana Kleiner explains, “[i]t was the full-scale exploitation of the Luna quarries in the

---

130 Castriota, 5.
age of Augustus that made possible the emperor’s boast that he had found Rome to be a city of brick and transformed it into a city of marble (Suet., Aug., 28).”

While Augustus’ roles as chief patron and high priest illuminate the religious and cultural landscape to which the Apostle Paul wrote and the wider Mediterranean regime in which he walked and ministered, Augustus’ elevation not only as a son of god but also a god himself also shaped everyday imperial life. As a grandnephew to Julius Caesar, Octavian (later Augustus) was adopted as Julius’ son and rightful heir. After Julius’ death, the senate declared in 42 BCE that Julius had ascended to the gods as a god. Julius’ adopted son consequently claimed to be *divi filius*, “son of a god.” During his reign, Augustus indicated to his associates that he also expected, at his death, to ascend to heaven as a god. After his death a “senior senator (who was said to have been handsomely rewarded for his pains, to the tune of a million sesterces, by Augustus’ widow Livia) declared on oath to the senate that he had actually seen Augustus ascending to heaven” (cf., Suetonius, *Augustus* 100.4).

During his life, moreover, followers of Augustus portrayed him as a living god, present with the people, even while he resisted this honor explicitly. The name

---

133 Ibid.
136 As a point of interest, the phrase “sons of God” in Rom 8:19 is *filiorum Dei* in the Vulgate (and in 8:21 “children of God” occurs as *filiorum Dei* [http://www.latinvulgate.com/lv/verse.aspx?t=1&b=6&c=8].
137 Augustus hinted that he would like “to live long and to come as close to divine status as possible” in his inaugural speech on Jan 13, 27 BCE [Galinsky, 312.].
139 Like Hellenistic kings, who were perceived to be gods that were nearer to the people than the gods on Mount Olympus, “‘Augustus’ was synonymous with being god present, *praesens deus*” [Galinsky, 316.]. Galinsky explains Augustus’ resistance to divinization on pp. 317-319.
Augustus, which the Senate bestowed upon him in 27 BCE, has religious and divine overtones. “The etymology is ultimately based on the root *augos* that connotes the power, bestowed divinely, to foster growth; an Augustus, therefore, is ‘the holder of that power, one who awakens life and dispenses blessings.’” As a divinely empowered being, Augustus wielded the god-like powers of fertility, growth, and life. It is to be noted, however, that Augustus’ status as a “god” has greater nuance in Latin than in Greek or English. While *deus* described the official gods of the pantheon, *divus* was ascribed to the emperor as a kind of honorary god.

Over time, especially in the Greek east and municipal (rather than provincial) cities, an emperor cult developed. Whether to convey gratitude to Augustus for freeing them from Antony’s excessive taxes or simply to honor the emperor, cities and their wealthy members built sacred sites for the divine Augustus. For example, the cities of Pergamum and Nicomedia established temples and worship practices for the gods Augustus and Roma.

While declining divine honors in his home peninsula, Augustus maintained a different stance towards the cultic practices of Roman citizens who lived in the provinces. He and his successors (except Caligula) allowed citizens to honor them because of their good deeds but refused to be worshipped. Instead of receiving worship directly, Augustus allowed his status to be elevated by association, for he permitted Roman citizens to dedicate a temple not only to Roma but also to Divus Julius in Nicaea and

---

140 Ibid.
141 Ibid., 322.
142 Ibid., 327.
143 Ibid., 322.
144 Ibid.
Paradoxically, although proper Romans tended to spurn overt emperor worship, they also criticized those emperors who rejected the honors of divinization. Augustus’ successor, Tiberius, forbade “the province of Outer Spain to build a temple for him and Livia.” Such a move indicated to his contemporaries that Tiberius did not think himself worthy of divinity and did not even aspire to be a god. In the Roman worldview, emperors should at least hope to ascend to the gods and thereby accept the honors highlighting their intimate relationship to the divine.

Intertwining the claims that the emperor brought political and natural peace, this Augustan narrative served as a paradigm for later emperors in the Julio-Claudian line. Most especially, these emperors emphasized the Augustan themes of divine sonship and natural abundance. The important imperial theme of divine sonship found expression in Virgil’s *Aeneid* quoted above, and this theme merits closer consideration. With Augustus having become *divus Augustus* after his death, his own adopted son Tiberius took the title “son of the Divine Augustus.”

The close ties between a divinely favored and descended potentate and natural abundance appeared to unravel, however, during the reigns of Caligula and Claudius (37-41 and 41-54 CE, respectively). Although Augustus had highlighted his essential role in alleviating starvation through the supply of grain to the masses, Caligula notably failed to

---

145 Ibid.
146 Ibid., 330.
148 Elliott and Reasoner, eds., *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul*, 141. The editors indicate that only “Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, Vespasian, Titus, and Nerva were deified in the first century” [ibid.]. However, Dunstan notes in his description of Tiberius’ reign that the senators chose not to deify Tiberius [Dunstan, 285].
do so. Instead, he purposely closed the *horrea*, where registered persons picked up their free grain, and thereby “decree[d] hunger to the populace.”

At other times the failure of Roman provision resulted not from parsimony but from natural causes. During Claudius’s reign, Rome suffered from several years of crop failure and grain shortage. Claudius consequently took extreme measures to entice ship owners to transport grain throughout the stormy winter months by promising them that he would pay for damages to ships and lost goods. Additionally, Claudius exerted much effort to expedite Rome’s reception of grain. This effort “included the construction of new harbor facilities at the mouth of the Tiber and an associated canal that accelerated the discharge of dangerous floodwaters and made possible the passage of larger ships to facilitate the supply of grain to Rome.” Thus, although Claudius reigned at a time when nature exercised itself in ways that subverted the imperial claim of abundance, the emperor responded with powerful transformative action in order to maintain, as much as possible, the subterfuge that he generated natural abundance.

After his adoptive father Claudius died and was divinized, Emperor Nero heralded himself “son of the divine Claudius, descendant of Tiberius Caesar Augustus and Germanicus Caesar, [themselves] sons of the divine Augustus.” While Nero astutely associated himself with his divine, imperial fathers, he elevated himself above his two immediate predecessors in the eyes of the people (at least initially) by successfully increasing Rome’s grain stores. Early in Nero’s reign, a member of his court

---

150 Ibid., 245.
151 Dunstan, 288.
152 Elliott and Reasoner, eds., *Documents and Images for the Study of Paul*, 144. The editors cite *Inscriptiones Graecae* 5.1.1450.
could exclaim: “Amid untroubled peace, the Golden Age springs to a second birth.”

The twin Augustan themes of natural abundance and political leadership thus held hands once again during Nero’s early reign.

Subsequent to building up his grain stores, Nero demonstrated his plentiful provision of grain in an ostentatious display of waste. When the Roman people feared grain shortages after a violent storm destroyed 200 ships at Rome’s sea harbor and fire consumed another 100 boats on the Tiber River, Nero responded by dumping spoiled grain meant for the populace into the river. With this gesture of extravagance Nero sought to communicate to Rome that he had already secured more than enough grain for its people. Thus, in comparison to his predecessors, Nero more effectively displayed the Augustan pretense that an imperial leader brought natural abundance.

---

153 Ibid., 147. The editors quote Eclogue 1, 37 by Calpurnius Siculus.
154 Erdkamp, 244.
155 Ibid., 243, 244 fn 177. However, the weeklong fire in Rome in July of 64 CE aroused new troubles for Nero, for a number of landholding nobility, and even for Christians. Since Nero was not in Rome when the fire took place, he “hastened back and undertook vigorous measures not only to provide temporary shelter and food for the homeless but also to rebuild the city in accordance with a new code requiring greater fireproofing” [Dunstan, 292.]. Meanwhile, rather than return the land to its former occupants, Nero cleared the rubble, built a majestic palace, and developed extravagant parks with “meadows, woodlands, vineyards, and pastures stocked with large varieties of domestic and wild animals” for himself [ibid., 293.]. Landholding citizens responded in outrage, blaming Nero for purposely starting the fire so that he might confiscate the properties. Nero cunningly deflected these charges by claiming that impious Christians had set the fire [ibid.]. Nero consequently administered gruesome persecution on Christians, “with some torn apart by beasts in the amphitheater, others nailed to crosses, and still others smeared with pitch and employed as living torches to illuminate evening games in the imperial gardens and the Vatican circus” [ibid.].

The fire in Rome resulted in additional trouble for Nero in Judea. In order to support his rebuilding efforts in Rome, he confiscated the riches from provincial temple treasuries [ibid., 292.]. One such temple was that of the Jews in Jerusalem, where civil and religious unrest already stirred. Many Judeans, most especially the Zealots, responded to Roman occupation of their land with great animosity. “The hatred intensified in May 66, when the procurator, Gessius Florus, removed money from the Temple treasury to pay for the reconstruction in Rome. Spearheaded by the Zealots, the guerilla warfare erupted into widespread rebellion” [ibid., 296.]. (Dunstan also notes that during the time of growing unrest in Judea there was famine.) The Jewish Revolt ensued, ending finally in 70 CE after significant loss of life and sacred space and with Judea still under Roman rule.
While Nero’s provision of grain seemed to appear out of nowhere and resulted in abundance for the Roman populace, it in fact depended on the exploitation of provinces and the extraction of their produce. In addition to inheriting the extensive estates already possessed by the Julio-Claudian house, Nero confiscated the Egyptian landholdings of Seneca, “whose possessions in Egypt were surpassed only by those of Nero himself.”\textsuperscript{156} He also expanded his ownership in North Africa by appropriating the “estates of six great landowners, who, according to Pliny, owned half of the province.”\textsuperscript{157} Nero not only appropriated the land of these elite Roman citizens, he murdered them in order to preserve and extend the imperial image of abundance.\textsuperscript{158}

Such were the eco-political conditions of the Mediterranean region and the tactics of its overlord – the imperial “son of god” – when Paul corresponded with the Christians in Rome. How we might interpret Paul’s message in light of these realities is the substance of chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{156} Erdkamp, 221.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{158} Kehoe, 11.
CHAPTER 4

PAUL VERSUS EMPIRE ON THE STATE OF CREATION

Whereas the Roman cult touted piety and conquest as the means whereby the golden age was restored, Paul’s letter rejects salvation by works in all its forms. Whereas the Roman premise was that disorderly barbarians and rebels caused the corruption of nature, Paul argues that all humans reenact Adam’s fall. In place of imperial celebrations and administration as the hinge of the golden age, Paul touts the power of the gospel to convert the world. Moreover, as the wording of Rom 8:18-23 indicates, the natural world is far from idyllic, and it has certainly not been restored by the Roman imperium. – Robert Jewett

In concert with Robert Jewett, it is my contention that Paul’s Christology and creation theology point toward an alternative reality that opposes Roman imperial mythology in noteworthy ways. Rising out of Paul’s theology are seven ethical implications that call some of the practices and prejudices of empire into question. In order to enumerate these implications, this chapter shall compare and contrast the apparent presuppositions that undergird the imperial and Pauline theologies of creation, highlighting the ways in which Paul and his audience (now including modern readers) may envision an alternative reality: the Kingdom of God, the New Creation. As an alternative reality, the New Creation provides us with four criteria by which we may assess our relationships with nonhuman creation and the Creator God.

---

4.1 PAULINE AND IMPERIAL WORLDVIEWS & PRACTICES IN CONVERSATION

Although theological and practical views of the relationships between and among divine and created entities intertwine, we shall here review and evaluate them according to the rubric of the relational pyramid presented in chapter 1. We shall consider the Pauline and Roman imperial conceptions of (1) the relationship between God/gods and nonhuman creation; (2) the relationship between God/gods and human creatures and the consequent relationships between humans, including the perceived and actual relationships between Rome, subjugated nations, and barbarians and the relationship between Israel and the nations; and (3) the relationship between human and nonhuman creation. In the process of bringing my depictions of Paul and the Roman Empire into conversation, we shall ponder ways in which Paul paints a startling picture of alternative ways of being in the world, especially as those ways affect the health and flourishing of God’s entire creation.

4.1.1 The Relationship between God(s) and Nonhuman Creation

As discussed in 3.2.1, typical Roman religious beliefs held that divine beings related closely with the natural world. This close relationship had its foundation in the world’s origins, since Romans generally believed the gods had formed the natural world out of pre-existent materials in various ways. Thus, the earth was understood to be the domain of the gods. In fact, natural spaces were inhabited, possessed, and even controlled by the gods such that natural processes were perceived by Romans to be under the

---

2 Merkt.
auspices of a god or several (often competing) gods. During epochs in which the god Saturn held sway, the earth prospered under conditions of peace and fertility. In times of dearth and societal unrest, the Roman people looked longingly back to Saturn’s ages of gold and looked forward to their return. Along these lines, the gods were understood to have special relationships with particular places and their inhabitants. Thus, as the fortunes and territorial boundaries of the Roman people expanded, their patron gods and goddesses were understood to be blessing the religiously scrupulous Romans while at the same time showing themselves to be superior to the gods of subjugated peoples.

At the same time that the gods exercised intimate control over the natural world, Romans understood the nonhuman creation itself as exercising its own sort of agency; wind and weather, for example, were seen as drastically affecting the wellbeing of humans as well as animals and plants (Cicero, 2 Verr. 3.227). In an idyllic view of the world, animals would willingly submit to the husbandry demands of people, but in reality, animals often resisted human service (Virgil, Eclogues 4.21). The natural world, moreover, affected the disposition of the gods by means of sacrifice: the lives of animals and the fruit of plants, when rightly offered to the gods, could propitiate the wrath of gods and win their favor on behalf of their human supplicants.

A Jewish-Christian and Pauline creation theology, in contrast, believes one God, the God of Israel, made the entire creation. As Paul’s inherited scriptures indicate, this One Creator God regards all creation as good, full of life and life-giving seed (Gen 1:29-30).  

---

3 Turcan, 39-43.  
4 Ibid., 38. Turcan notes that different land formations – such as plains or hills – had their own respective gods.  
5 Ibid., 3.
Although drought, pestilence, and other unfavorable ecological conditions may at times impinge upon the fruitfulness and flourishing of the earth and its creatures, the Judeo-Christian theology we sketched in chapter 1 maintains that God provides nourishing rains, food for wild animals, and agricultural blessings in support of the persistent flourishing of the world. God’s care for wild animals and plants transcends human activity even while human activity can negatively affect the livelihood of these organisms. Fundamentally, the Creator God stands over the creation as its sovereign, both causing natural phenomena to take place and allowing natural processes to occur.

The creation’s relationship to God, in turn, is often one of praise and glorification. According to a psalmist and Paul, God’s creation proclaims the glory of God and directs all people to the everlasting power and deity of the Creator (Psm 19:1-4; Rom 1:20). Before the death of Jesus Christ, the appropriate offering and sacrifice of created things to God atoned for human sin and reconciled the creation and the Creator. The ultimate atonement, according to Christian theology, comes through the creaturely and embodied life, sacrificial death, and life-restoring resurrection of the divine-human Jesus Christ. After this salvific event, nonhuman creation further testifies to the unseen reality of God through its expectant waiting and its timely groaning and laboring, somehow perceiving that its God-given and impending liberation is at hand (Rom 8:19, 22). Nonhuman creation grasps that God will act soon to consummate the liberty begun in the life, death, and resurrection of its Lord, Jesus Christ. As will be discussed further below, the truly just and truly pious descendant of David and Son of God, Jesus Christ, overcame the enslaving powers of sin and death so that creation might experience liberation (1:3-4;
5:17-18). Jesus is Lord of both the living and the dead and will lead all creation into the blessedness of eternal life and creational peace at his glorious coming (14:8).

But until that happens, until Jesus the Messiah returns in ultimate victory, Paul’s theology recognizes that creation suffers. Living things succumb to timely and untimely deaths. Animals and plants attempt to flourish but often do so in futility because of anthropogenic constraints. Paul and those who follow his lead, therefore, recognize the creation’s ghastly state of affairs and openly confess the ways in which they (and humans generally) frustrate creation’s flourishing and are implicated in the untimely destruction of life. Thus, Paul’s depiction of the creation – as suffering at the hands of sinful humans – speaks a word of critique against the sinful and exploitative ways of empire and human society. His message subverts the imperial propaganda that the Roman emperor had established a new age of natural prosperity as proclaimed loud and clear through artwork, poetry, and festivals.

Yet in tandem with this incisive word of critique, Paul’s creation theology proclaims a gospel of hope, exalted life, and peace. God invites all creation to experience the new reality of freedom from sin and death and to enter into God’s New Creation. Although the details of this new reality for nonhuman creation remain unclear in Paul’s writings, the reflections sketched in 2.6 suggest that the nonhuman creation’s experience of the liberty of the glory of God’s children will entail the flourishing of creation as God intended: peace among creatures, even between predators and prey, and perhaps also everlasting life for animals. Although this portrait of the New Creation does not depict nonhuman creatures as primarily serving the interests of humans (as does Virgil’s poetic vision), it does present the nonhuman creation as serving the Creator first and foremost.
and humanity secondarily and indirectly, since the pacified animals (e.g., lions and wolves) are former predators of people’s livestock (e.g., calves and lambs).

Paul’s creation theology, as I have presented it, does not strip the nonhuman creation of its own purposes and perhaps even its own agency, despite its role of service. Romans 8:19-22 portrays the nonhuman creation as an active participant and partner in establishing the creation, the resurrection, and, by implication, the New Creation. As indicated by Gen 1, creation cooperates with God in the formation of life: the earth sprouts forth seeding plants, brings forth the living souls (ψυχὴν ζωσάν) of land creatures, and co-creates humanity in the earth’s and God’s image (Gen 1:11-12, 24, 26); and the waters bring forth the living souls (ψυχῶν ζωσῶν) of creeping things and birds (1:20).

From our exposition of Rom 8:22 (2.7), it also appears that the nonhuman creation cooperates with God in the re-creation of life, the process of transforming dead bodies into resurrected and glorified people. While the Spirit is the one who makes alive (8:11, ζωοποιήσει), the nonhuman creation participates in an integral way by offering up the dead for this miraculous work of God.

Thus, although Christians may be inclined to perceive the nonhuman creation’s primary purpose to be the service of human life, the theological reflections offered in this dissertation indicate that the nonhuman creation is an accountable and capable partner of God in the creation, provision, and new creation of life. Nonhuman creation, moreover, is a recipient of God’s salvation in and through Jesus Christ. With these thoughts in mind, let us now turn to how imperial and Pauline rhetoric compare in their portrayal of the relationship between divine beings and humans.
4.1.2 The Relationship between God(s) and Human Creation

One of the clearest ways in which the relationship between the gods and the Roman people influenced the nonhuman creation was in the Roman claim to rule the Mediterranean basin: Roman political and military leaders claimed that the gods had chosen Rome to rule *mare nostrum*, “our sea.” Julius Caesar forged the link between the gods and chosen humans by highlighting his family’s tradition that the *Julii* had directly descended from the goddess Venus. To make this tie clear to all, Julius built a temple dedicated to “Venus Genetrix (the ancestor)” in his forum. After his death and spiritual ascension, Julius himself was recognized as a god (*divus Julius*), as discussed in 3.2.2. Claiming to be sons of gods, then, Julius’ line of adopted sons could presumably rest assured as long as *divus Julius* and goddess Venus had their way in the divine council: the favor of the gods legitimated Julio-Claudian rule over Rome and the entire known world.

Augustus, Julius’ first heir to rule as emperor, further advanced the intimate connection between the Roman emperor and the will of the gods by taking on several prominent priestly positions (3.2.2). Through his piety, Augustus secured the success of military campaigns and agricultural seasons, mediating the blessings of salutary gods, restraining the fury of antagonistic gods, and ultimately establishing an era of peace and prosperity for Rome. Thus, in terms of the relational pyramid laid out in 1.1.2 and in the eyes of many in the empire, the Roman emperor successfully acted as the mediator between the gods and the Romans and even between the gods and the previously uncivilized peoples whom he had subjugated.

---

Nonetheless, as our discussion of the agricultural realities of Italy and the agriculturally oriented liturgies of Roman religion reveals (3.1, 3.2.1), nature can be hostile and unreliable especially in human agricultural endeavors. Humans are constantly vulnerable to malnutrition, starvation, and destruction. Both malevolent and benevolent gods wield power over nature and humanity, forcing people to offer prayers and sacrifices at the right time and in the right manner with constant vigilance. Only by means of such acts of piety could people move the deities and the forces of nature for their own benefit. And under the leadership and priesthood of one supremely pious person, the imperial son of god, people everywhere could enjoy nature’s peace and plenty that had been secured by the religious, diplomatic, and military might of the Roman Empire.

As an extension of the gods’ favor upon Rome and its people, Rome would rule over other people and their lands. While some conquered peoples did not welcome Rome’s political dominion, others saw it as having been ordained by their own gods. We find the latter perspective in Josephus’ account of the Jewish War (J.W.) with Rome in which he recognizes Rome’s right to rule Palestine. After describing Procurator Florus’ decision to take money from the Temple treasury in Jerusalem and the ensuing bloody massacre (J.W. 2.293-344), Josephus reports a long speech by King Agrippa II that attempts to convince the Jewish people not to instigate a war with Rome (J.W. 2.345-401). Agrippa points to Rome’s great success in controlling an expansive empire and in subduing people of much greater resource than those in Palestine, thereby hoping to

convince the Jewish people to submit to Roman authority once again. As a Jewish ruler, then, Agrippa acts as a mouthpiece for Rome’s worthiness and right to rule the world. He even claims that the Jewish people’s own God had enabled Rome to control “so vast an empire” (J.W. 2.391).

In addition to claiming that YHWH had given Rome political control over many peoples, Agrippa suggests that Rome had every right to receive agricultural produce and other treasures from conquered lands and to determine the future and fortune of those lands. In describing the people of Gaul who were protected by intimidating mountains, Agrippa explains,

But, though encompassed by such formidable barriers, though swarming with a population of three hundred and five nations, possessing, so to say, in their native soil the springs of prosperity and irrigating well-nigh the whole world with the overflow of their products, the Gauls are yet content to be treated as a source of revenue to the Romans and to have their own prosperous fortune meted out to them at their hands. (J.W. 2.372-372)

Again, with reference to the people of Africa, Agrippa declares that the Roman Empire had so won their loyalty and obedience that they

besides their annual produce, which feed for eight months of the year the populace of Rome, over and above this pay tribute of all kinds and ungrudgingly devote their contributions to the service of the empire, far from seeing, as do you, an outrage in the orders which they receive, although but one legion is quartered among them. (J.W. 2.383)

Agrippa’s point, so it would seem, is that those in Palestine should overlook the supposed offense of Florus, relinquish their hopes for national sovereignty and justice, and welcome Roman rule once again.

Yet, as highlighted in 1.2.5 and 1.3.1, the Jewish people had their own corpus of texts that promised them political sovereignty and justice at the behest of their God. The
prophetic book of Isaiah repeatedly declares that Israel will be a light to the nations. But Isaiah’s vision goes beyond mere witness by claiming that Israel’s descendants shall *inherit* nations (Isa 54:3). While describing the atoning effects of the suffering servant, Trito-Isaiah announces that this servant “shall inherit many and distribute the plunder of the strong” (Isa 53:12 NRSV). The text of Isa 49:22-23 even more strikingly depicts God’s people, the people of Israel, in positions of power and dominion over other nations: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Behold, I raise my hand to the nations . . . they shall prostrate themselves upon the face of the earth before you, and they shall lick the dust of your feet.’” Similarly, the intertestamental book entitled “Jubilees” keeps Isaiah’s vision of international affairs alive during times of foreign occupation in the Second Temple period. Echoing Abraham’s blessing of Jacob in Genesis, Jubilees 22:11 declares: “May the L ORD give you righteous seed, and may he sanctify some of your sons in the midst of the earth. May the nations serve you, and all the nations bow down before your seed” (Jubilees 22:11). Thus, the sacred scriptures of Israel and the developing theologies of Second Temple Judaism stress Israel’s destiny to rule a vast territory with the result that the rulers and peoples of surrounding nations shall submit to Israel’s sovereign, albeit just, dominion. It goes without saying that such a destiny would impinge upon Roman imperial control of Palestine and its neighboring regions. For, even if the fulfillment of this destiny depends upon an apocalyptic act of God, it communicates to the Jewish people that things are not as they should be.

---

8 Author’s translation of the Greek OT.
We find, then, that the proclamations of Rome conflict with the prophecies of Judea, even though some Judeans—such as Agrippa II—recognized Roman rule as the legitimate and God-ordained government during that time. As we continue to place the Apostle Paul in conversation with the Roman Empire, we may rightly wonder how he navigated the ideological and socio-political conflicts between his Jewish heritage and imperial assertions. Before examining Paul’s understanding of Israel’s relationship with the nations, however, we must first review his view of God’s relationship with humanity, and by extension, Israel.

Within the religio-political context of supposed Roman superiority and utmost piety, Paul proclaims a different story of God’s relationship with humanity. First and foremost, Paul proclaims YHWH to be the one true God and Sovereign over the entire creation.\(^{10}\) By implication, Paul understands divine blessing to depend primarily upon God’s grace rather than human piety and worthiness.\(^{11}\)

Along with holding forth this central theological difference, Paul articulates a Christology that clashes with Roman imperial claims about the mediating and beneficial role of the emperor. YHWH’s grace is manifested in the sending of his Son, Jesus Christ, to reconcile God’s enemies (weak humans) and save them (5:6-10, 16). In so stressing God’s grace, however, we must not overlook the way in which the righteous living and dying of the human Jesus procured salvation (5:18-21). Jesus’ own righteous piety led not to divinely blessed military victories but to service and a divestment of power. Jesus

---

\(^{10}\) Whether or not he viewed Venus and the other so-called deities to be real spiritual beings or simply religious constructs is tangential and far too complex for our concerns here.  
\(^{11}\) Yet piety—or in Pauline terminology, righteousness—was nevertheless expected of God’s people. The means by which people achieve righteousness, however, is entirely dependent on God’s grace.
mediated between God and wayward creatures not by offering the lives of sacrificial animals but his own life on the cross. The peace that Jesus established was not simply a temporary political armistice but an ongoing reconciliation with God that would ultimately result in a New Creation. Thus, in the eyes of Paul and those who follow him, Jesus rather than Caesar is the true mediator between humanity and God.

While we cannot know for certain how Paul perceived the imperial authority of the Julio-Claudian line, we can be certain that he viewed Jesus as the rightful descendant of King David, the promised and long-awaited Jewish Messiah, the chosen Son of God who would rule the entire creation in power and righteousness (Rom 14:9-11; 15:12). Jesus’ bodily resurrection (rather than mere spiritual ascent), proved to Paul that Jesus truly is the Son of God for whom he should testify throughout the world in order to gain the loyalty of all the nations (Rom 1:3-4).\(^\text{12}\)

While Paul’s mission could appear to be a political coup d’etat, it nevertheless eschews political take-over (Rom 13:1-7). Paul’s apocalyptic fervor places him in the delicate position of active reliance on God: Paul waits for an imminent disclosure of the Lord Jesus Christ when he will return to earth and establish his kingdom in full; but, as he waits, Paul actively proclaims the liberating new life, new political gathering (ἐκκλησία), and New Creation inaugurated by Jesus Christ so that as many as possible might be prepared for the consummation of Jesus’ great kingdom. The loyalties, religious devotions, and even the daily practices of the Christians in the Roman Empire did not directly threaten the governance of the empire but did undermine the imperial gospel of

\(\text{12} \) Of course, I am side-stepping highly debated theological issues regarding Jesus’ divinity, whether he was adopted as God’s Son into divinity or eternally existent as a member of the Godhead.
Pax Romana and subvert its oppressive and unjust strategies by embodying (as much as possible) the truly just and peaceful reign of God through Jesus the Messiah and the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{13}

By testifying to a risen and ruling Jesus Christ, Paul markedly proclaims a Jewish Savior, the Messiah. Thus, even as it tested the boundaries of Second Temple Jewish scriptures and practices by honoring a crucified Messiah and by fully incorporating uncircumcised males into the ἐκκλησία, Paul’s apostolic mission, from a Christian perspective, faithfully extends God’s ancient promises to the Jewish people. As noted already in 1.2.3, even while God’s covenant with Israel emphasizes God’s election of the descendants of Abraham – particularly those of his son Isaac – numerous passages also highlight God’s desire for people of all nations to receive God’s blessing (Exod 19:6; Isa 49:6; 60:3). As a follower of the crucified but risen Messiah, Paul insists that God fulfills this desire through Jesus Christ. God’s election and blessings now extend to people of all the nations through the faithfulness of Jesus, so that all people might be considered Abraham’s descendants (Rom 8:28-30; 3:29-30; 4:11-12, 17-18).

As the mediator between the Creator God and all descendants of Adam and of Abraham (the father of many nations, Rom 4:13), Jesus the Son of God could rightly demand the obedience of all nations through his emissaries, such as Paul (Rom 5:12-14; 200

\textsuperscript{13} In rendering Paul’s relationship with the empire in this way, I follow the helpful interpretive lead of Kavin Rowe. In discussing the political implications of Acts, Rowe claims: “Christianity is not a bid to take over the state. The Christian mission does not seek, that is, to become the new Rome by means of a direct assault upon the present polity. Rather, it claims to be a living witness to the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel and aims in Corinth simply to testify to Jews and gentiles that the Christ was Jesus and to baptize those who believe in his resurrection (18:5-8)” [Christopher Kavin Rowe, World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 61-62.]. Even though the practices of the early Christians denied that Caesar was lord (even while they also witnessed to an alternative way of being in the world), these Christians followed their Lord Jesus Christ into martyrdom rather than attempting to save themselves or take over the state.
1:5-6). By his clear-sighted judgment and self-giving justice, Jesus most fully represents the just God and thereby fulfills the heart of Jewish Messianic expectations (Isa 11). Yet, even in his role as David’s ruling son, Jesus did not lead a revolt against Rome in order to take back Abraham’s geographical inheritance for his descendants. Rather, Jesus submitted in humility to Jewish and Roman authorities, rejecting coercion and violence while choosing self-giving love. Following this pattern, Paul too rejects the violence and subjugation that typifies imperial regimes and instead gains the obedience of faith of all nations through proclamation, service, and signs of wonder by the Holy Spirit (Rom 15:19). 14 In the words of Douglas Campbell, the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham assumes “the Spirit is creating Christians at the behest of the Father but using the template (literally ‘image’) of the Son (see v. 29). What the Son has done, and where he has been, is what Christians are currently being ‘mapped onto’ by the activity of the Spirit.” 15 Paul’s Christology, then, establishes a paradigm by which we might discern eco-ethical behaviors today.

Even while Paul’s message entailed submission to Jesus the Lord, the gospel he proclaims also identifies Jesus’ followers as the Lord’s siblings, co-sufferers, and co-heirs. All those with the indwelling Spirit of Christ are children of God. Thus, it is not

---

14 We might wonder, however, whether heads of households that converted to Christianity might have coerced other household members to participate in Christian practices in order that they might neglect former religious devotions.

15 Campbell, 77. To be sure, Paul does not propose that Christians simply follow Jesus by their own strength. Campbell explains: “Just as Jesus faithfully endured suffering to the point of death and then received a triumphant and glorious resurrection, so too Christians who maintain their loyalty to God and to Christ until the end will receive a resurrection. Moreover, in so doing, God is not asking them to imitate Christ – perhaps an impossible task – so much as to inhabit or to indwell him. That is, any such endurance through duress is evidence that the Spirit of God is actively reshaping the Christian into the likeness of Christ, and that they are therefore already part of the story, a story that will result in eschatological salvation!” [Campbell, 93].
only the emperor and his few relatives that are related to a deity. Any member of human society (whether nobility or slave) could become a child of the one true God accomplished through the adoption of the Spirit (8:15). God’s children, moreover, do not take on a family resemblance of their Father through sexual generation but through the Spirit-infused process of glorification and conformation to their elder sibling, Jesus Christ (8:29). Thus, in contrast to Roman society that occasionally allowed slaves and freedmen of low descent to gain their freedom and hold positions of honor, the Christian congregations to which Paul ministered level the social playing field, at least in theory. All participants became children of God, inhabited by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9), and siblings of Jesus whether or not they remained slaves or nobility in Roman society. Even more, God promises these children, these descendants of Abraham, an inheritance of the κόσμος. Yet, what might have been the socio-political and ecological ramifications of such an inheritance?

As discussed in 1.3.1, Paul’s declaration that Abraham (with his seed) would be heir of the κόσμος (4:13) and Paul’s conviction that Jesus – seed of David and Abraham – rises to rule the nations combine in exponential ways so that God’s ancient promise of a parcel of land from the Nile to the Euphrates expands to include the entire earth, the κόσμος. As God’s heirs and Jesus’ co-heirs, God’s children too will inherit the κόσμος in spite of all evidence to the contrary. As Mark Forman succinctly puts it: “Those who are ‘in Christ’ (8:1) and are ‘conformed to the image of his Son’ (29b) and are ‘heirs with
Christ’ are the ones who will one day ‘inherit the world’ (4:13) and have dominion over it, as was originally intended (8:29, 32, 34, 37-39).”

By integrating the reading of Gen 1:26-28 given in chapter 1.1.2 into the present discussion, we are reminded that human dominion and divine image bearing are circumscribed by humanity’s intimate and organic connections to the earth. Humans simultaneously bear two images – that of God and that of Earth. As inheritors of the κόσμος, people do not inherit something foreign or inferior to them; they inherit a realm on which they currently depend for daily bread and every moment’s breath.

As we further integrate our reading of Romans, we find that this inheritance becomes a reality in the New Creation, once humanity is resurrected in glory and the nonhuman creation is liberated. As discussed in 2.6, the nonhuman creation is liberated into the glorious liberty of God’s children (8:21). It is as if the inheritance is not free to be inherited until the heirs properly reflect the image of the Son of God (8:29). Conformation to Jesus’ image takes place, moreover, through suffering with Christ and being raised in glory with him (8:17). Consequently, it is not for God’s children to take their inheritance, the κόσμος. Rather, they await God’s apocalyptic deliverance even as they suffer with Christ from persecutions, the effects of sin, and their own denial of self for the benefit of others and in honor of God (8:19; 6:11-13; 12:13-21).

Nevertheless, even as they wait for God to prepare them and the creation for the glory of the New Creation, God’s children allow their concern for the future inheritance

---

17 The church’s developing Christology held that Jesus Christ is both creature and God, so that we might say he perfectly bears the images of Earth and God.
to direct their actions now so that they nurture the wellbeing and flourishing of the entire creation. They do not attempt to take control of the entire earth, but – as they model ecologically beneficial ways of living and also witness to the determinative reality of New Creation in Christ – they attempt to persuade all people to live in line with the wellbeing of the whole creation in view. Following their apostolic and pastoral leaders who modeled costly forms of service, Christians serve God in ways that align with God’s work of New Creation (Rom 8:19-22; 12; 14:13-23; 15:8; cf. 2 Thes 3:6-13).

The newly reconciled relationships between God and humans lead to practical and ethical changes of behavior. Those now enlivened by the Holy Spirit, who died to sin and have been raised to service to God, are called to live into the liberty of the New Creation (Romans 8:2, 6:11, 22; 8:21-23). This liberty entails freedom from the fear of death, whether death at the hands of human enemies or as the result of natural or supernatural forces (8:35-39). The hope of eternal life with God empowers those enlivened with the Spirit to give their daily bread to their enemies (Rom 12:20); to forego eating foods that destroy the life or faith of another person (14:20); to pursue justice, peace, and joy rather than the gratification of alimentary cravings (14:17); to live at peace with all (12:16, 18); and to live into their glorious liberty as the children of God, a liberty that the nonhuman creation too is meant to enjoy (8:21).

4.1.3 The Relationship between Human and Nonhuman Creation

As expressed in the words and images of imperial poets, sculptors, and coin makers, Augustus and his imperial descendants positively transformed humanity’s relationship with nature (3.2.2). In particular, the renewed Golden Age that Augustus and, later, Nero established for the Roman people entailed a near miraculous change in
livestock and fields: once reluctant animals and lands become willing and abundant producers of human foods. Under the careful political and liturgical administration of the Roman emperor, people of all imperial lands have their daily bread. Commoners and nobility alike heard and perhaps believed these claims as they repeatedly encountered the numismatic, lithic, and cultic media of the empire.

Yet, as our investigation of Rome’s grain trade demonstrates, the reality of the empire’s so-called renewed Golden Ages (under Augustus and then Nero) provided great wealth and consistent food only for the few and doled out basic grain rations for men but not for the most vulnerable in the imperial city. Moreover, the empire secured this so-called prosperity by coercing people to submit themselves to imperial rule and by exploiting their natural resources. Those on the underside of imperial power likely recognized the dissonance between imperial rhetoric and socio-environmental reality. Paul’s letter to the Romans testifies to this.

Speaking a word of truth and perhaps confrontation in this imperial context, Paul implicitly acknowledges that the human-nonhuman creational complex is not as the empire claimed. For creation, in fact, exists in subjection to futility and in slavery to destruction under the administration of unrighteous humans (Rom 8:20-21; 1:18; 3:10; 5:18-19; 6:13). Injustices and untimely deaths occur, often because of human activity. God’s image-bearers in the world consistently mutilate divinely mandated ways of being, turning away from gracious and hospitable being-with-others to violence and even murder (Gen 1:26; 3-6; Rom 1:29; 3:15-17). Even more, people turn their backs on the Creator God and devote themselves to so-called gods and unworthy objects of worship despite creation’s constant testimony to God’s being (Rom 1:21-23). People undergo all
sorts of suffering and even inflict suffering on other members of creation, and all creatures ultimately succumb to death (Romans 8:18; 1:29; 5:12). In this system – a system God created in grace and for life – sin and death appear to reign and enslave (6:6, 12-13, 23; 7:5, 13, 20, 23; 8:20-21). The good creation is enslaved to destruction (8:21) and all hope appears lost.

Yet even as he unmasks the devastating reality of creational existence under sin, Paul proclaims a new and in-breaking gospel of liberation. All shall be made well at the glorious apocalypse of God’s children when the perfect reign of the truly just one, Jesus Christ, shall be consummated and all God’s people will live in glorious liberty, liberty even from sin and death (15:12; 8:19-21; 1 Cor 15:24-28). Only at that point – once the mediating and atoning work of Jesus the Lord and the resurrecting power of the Spirit take full effect – shall the human-nonhuman relationship be fully rectified.

This rectified human-nonhuman relationship admittedly builds upon a hierarchical view of the created world in which humans “reign” over the nonhuman creation. Although we may recoil at such a hierarchical form of theology, we must nonetheless recognize with many ecologists that a form of human “dominion” – more accurately, “active management” – may well help the ecosphere regain its vitality. Ellen Davis notes:

A Stanford team of terrestrial ecologists concludes its survey of grievous and even disastrous conditions with the paradoxical statement that precisely because our activities are causing “rapid, novel, and substantial changes” in ecosystems, “maintaining the diversity of ‘wild’ species and the functioning of ‘wild’ ecosystems will require increasing human involvement.”

---

18 Davis, 54-5.
Such involvement may be considered a form of service.

If, as I claim in 1.3 and 2.6, Isaiah’s visions of New Creation inform Paul, then alimentary changes of predators serve human husbandry interests since these predators lie peacefully and non-aggressively with livestock prey. Accordingly, nonhuman creation continues to serve humans in the New Creation. In this way, Paul’s view of creation and the Roman imperial views of nature correspond. Yet, as explained in 2.6, self-sacrificing service to others distinguishes a Pauline worldview from that of Rome. Therefore, even while humans receive the nourishing service of the nonhuman creation, nonhuman creation too receives the nurturing care of human service in God’s New Creation. Thus, while Judeo-Christian eschatology envisions the nonhuman creation as serving the interests of humans even as it flourishes, the primordial creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 and the eschatological vision of Isa 11 portray humans too as serving the nonhuman creation.

Even as Paul’s theology stresses the telos of God’s work in the world, it nevertheless remains this-worldly. We might say that his eschatology informs and determines his practical theology, his ethics. He expresses this most clearly in chapter 6 when he declares that Jesus’ saving grace does not excuse people from living in righteousness now (Rom 6:1-4). Because they have died and risen with Christ through baptism and because of the eternal life to come, Christians are to walk in newness of life now, as 6:3-5 attests:

---

19 If we were to include the Gospels in our discussion, we would also note that the resurrected Jesus participates in the ongoing death of the old creation by eating fish, making a portrayal of the New Creation more complex (Luke 24:41-43).
What shall we conclude, then? Shall we continue in sin in order that grace might multiply? Heck no! The ones who have died to sin, how shall they still live in it? Or are you ignorant that as many of us that were baptized into Messiah Jesus, we were baptized into his death? Therefore, we were put in the tomb with him through this baptism into death, in order that just as the Messiah was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, thus also we might walk in new life. For if we have become conformed to the likeness of his death, so also shall we be conformed to his resurrection (6:3-5).

For Paul, participation in Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection empowers and obligates people to live in righteousness now according to the new life of resurrection. The future goal of Christian faith – glorious resurrection life – necessarily shapes ethical behavior now. Shall we continue in sin? As Richard Hays renders it: “Hell no!” To make it even clearer, Paul specifies some of the practical implications of participation with Christ in 6:11-13, commanding,

Reckon yourselves dead to sin but living for God in Messiah Jesus. Therefore, do not allow sin to rule over your dying body so that you obey its passions. Do not offer your embodied selves as tools of injustice for sin, but offer yourselves to God as those alive from the dead and your embodied selves as tools of righteousness for God.

Although Paul does not draw out the ethical implications of his creation theology in Rom 8, we might follow the logic of Rom 6 in attempting to do so. Since the Spirit of life has liberated those in Christ from their slavery to the law of sin and death (Rom 8:2), we might ask: “Shall we continue in sin and death by enslaving the rest of God’s creation to untimely destruction?” Pauline Christians might respond, “Heck no! Now, in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the possibility exists for us to break the cycle of violence and destruction that plagues the world – at least to a limited extent. Just as we

---


208
cooperate with God in the process of sanctification, we cooperate with God in the liberation of creation.”

Beyond Romans chapters 6 and 8, we find further eco-ethical signposts in chapter 12. The new life into which Paul’s Christology, pneumatology, eschatology, and creation theology invite Christians is a life of eco-ethical “critical consciousness”21 and of self-restraint on behalf of the wellbeing of all. What if, in pursuing a common life with all others, we Christians lead the way in following Paul’s advice in chapter 12?

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (12:18-21 NRSV).

A great deal of ecological damage is done because of war, greed, and prejudice. War decimates crops and wilderness, removes many of the land’s caretakers from their homes, and intensifies agriculture in those regions surrounding places of conflict in support of war efforts. These are just a few of the innumerable negative effects of war. As we follow Paul’s gaze to the wider nonhuman creation, however, we begin to see how embodying God’s truthfulness, reconciliation, grace, and peace benefits not only humans but nonhuman creation as well. Promoting peace in places of conflict (with conflict often taking place because of the unjust distribution of natural resources) would hopefully mitigate ecological destruction. Additionally, embodying the gracious and indiscriminate hospitality to which Paul directs Christians by asking them to share their food and water

21 By “critical consciousness” Freire means “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” [Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York: Continuum, 2000), 35.]. I would add “ecological” contradictions as well.
with others – even those now construed as enemies – would restrain the ecological degradation taking place because of injustice, war, hatred, greed, and economic disparity.

Although Roman Christians were not waging war with one another, impassioned tensions divided them. Scrupulous Christians – whether Jewish or Gentile in origin – avoided buying and eating meat from Roman markets since it was not kosher. Less exacting Christians recognized all food as coming from the One Creator God and ate this meat without a second thought.

Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living (14:6-9 NRSV).

These verses encourage God’s people to express gratitude for the material blessings of the earth and to trust in the Lord of life.

But Paul goes further than asking the “weak” and the “strong” to be thankful for their food. He has a word for the so-called “strong,” who claim to be followers of the self-giving Christ:

If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. The faith that you have, have as your

---

22 Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 835.
own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve (14:15-22 NRSV).

Here, Paul gestures toward one practical way in which God’s people might manifest their participation in Christ: living with such other-regard\textsuperscript{23} that they adjust something as seemingly innocuous as their eating habits. Paul exhorts Christ-followers to live according to a principle of life or vitality by avoiding those activities that destroy the work of God.

As will be discussed more fully in chapter 5, modern agricultural regimes inflict great injuries upon our human brothers and sisters and our nonhuman neighbors. It is nearly impossible, by our eating, for us not to injure one for whom Christ died. Yet, as we alert ourselves to the realities of our global food economy and adjust our agricultural and eating practices to conform to the health and wellbeing of all creation, we may more fully inhabit and make manifest God’s Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy for all.

In consonance with the Roman religious sensibility that humans did not directly possess the earth and its produce, Paul too understands the earth’s bounty as gift. Of course, Rome and Paul disagreed over the identity of the giver(s), with Paul believing that the Creator God graciously provides the means for abundant harvests (even for the unrighteous), eliciting thanks from God’s people (Rom 14:6). As he explains to his congregation in Corinth,

\begin{quotation}
[T]he one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, “He scatters abroad,
\end{quotation}

\textsuperscript{23} Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, 175-179.
he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness (2 Cor 9:6-10 NRSV).

While Paul here indicates that God invites people to give portions of their produce (whether literal or metaphorical) to God in support of those who lack, he also implies that the character of this giving differs from the Roman cultic ethos. It would seem from our overview of Roman religious practices in chapter 3 that Romans offered sacrifices to the gods in order to propitiate their wrath or secure their blessings so that the natural world might be controlled and agricultural success ensured. In contrast, and in keeping with his Jewish heritage, Paul appears to understand the agricultural endeavor to be under the constant benevolent care of the creation’s one Lord. God’s natural order of things appears to be a system of grace and abundance.

Yet, even while we recognize the foundational role of grace in a Judeo-Christian creation theology, we must not overlook the ways in which this tradition also highlights the negative effects human activities have on this system. In order to restrain human wrongdoing and encourage right relations with creation, God repeatedly expresses specific commands throughout the OT – commands spanning and even integrating liturgical and agricultural life – so that God’s people might live sustainably (for the long-term) in the land. Since agriculture depends on human endeavor, agricultural flourishing flows not only from God’s grace but also from human faithfulness to God’s commands.

Within this system, however, several passages in the Pauline corpus suggest that anti-God forces complicate and threaten God’s purposes of life and flourishing. Death and multitudinous forms of suffering still plague people and all creation (8:17-18, 35-39).
Thus, natural disasters, sicknesses, crop failures, and deaths cannot be directly correlated with human sin or divine wrath even as these eventualities might provoke us to consider the ways in which exploitative and unscrupulous human activities might be implicated in them.

4.2 PAULINE ECO-ETHICAL CONCERNS

In reading Paul’s letter to the Romans, we do not find specific instructions regarding agricultural practices. However, the shape of his theology – his account of human sin and its consequences of futility and destruction for nonhuman creation and his confidence that God will lead the nonhuman creation into the liberty of glory that God’s children will experience in the New Creation – teach us two valuable principles. (1) We humans must vigilantly discern the ways in which our actions thwart the flourishing of God’s entire creation and bring unnecessary, untimely, and unhealthy destruction to its members. In response to this discernment, we must foster human actions that instead support the flourishing of God’s creation. Because God will liberate nonhuman creation, (2) we must constantly include God’s liberative intentions for the nonhuman creation in our practical and ethical deliberations. The ultimate “work of God” is creational liberation; we ought not destroy that work (Rom 14:20). Consequently, embodied Christian life moves with God’s Spirit towards greater ecological justice and thriving, towards the New Creation.

The theological and practical vision set forth in Paul’s epistle to the Romans also directs our gaze to at least seven ecological and ethical concerns and their implications:
1. The nonhuman creation participates in God’s ongoing work of creating life. Since the nonhuman creation aligns itself with God in the efforts of resurrection, or ζωοποίησις (making alive), and also directs people to praise the Creator God, Christians do not conceive of themselves as creation’s saviors. They approach the formidable effort of liberating creation from its anthropogenic slaveries to destruction with great humility, dependence on God, and respect for nonhuman creation’s God-given propensity for life.

2. The nonhuman creation is the means by which God provides for all living things. By implication, then, we vigilantly render thanks to God for the gifts of creation. We also protect and support creation’s ongoing ability to provide life-giving nourishment and shelter to all organisms.

3. The material creation is also the means by which God saves humanity and nonhuman creation from the oppressing forces of sin and death. It is through the embodied life, death, and resurrection of the divine human, Jesus Christ, that humans are liberated and glorified and also through the embodied resurrection of humanity that nonhuman creation experiences its liberty of glory.

In light of these points, then, Christians might give special attention to the sacrament of eucharist, not only in regularly participating in it but also in ensuring that the elements of bread and wine have been grown and processed in ecologically healthy ways. We thereby recognize the interconnections between the world as it exists now, after Jesus’ resurrection, and the world as it will exist in the future, after the resurrection of all God’s children. As Elizabeth Theokrittoff so eloquently explains from an Eastern Orthodox perspective: “When we offer products of the earth as Eucharist and receive them back from their Creator as the food of incorruption, we are recognizing that the
creation of the world and its ultimate transformation are both part of the same movement, the same divine plan.”

4. The entire creation – both human and nonhuman – suffers under multitudinous forms of oppression and destruction. With Paul, we acknowledge that evil forces beyond human being and doing – forces that oppose God and lead to death – threaten the wellbeing of the nonhuman and human creation. Yet, also with Paul, we recognize the ways in which human activity threatens the wellbeing of the creation and each of its members.

5. The anthropogenic forms of subjection to futility (a less-than-flourishing-life) and of slavery to destruction that God’s creation experiences testify to human greed, arrogance, hatred,\footnote{25 Including hatred of self.} and injustice. In this regard, Christians must discern and acknowledge the witness of the oppressed; confess the ways in which they have been implicated in these forms of oppression; and by the Spirit’s power, the personal resolve to continue in sin no longer, and the community’s cooperation in the work of ζωοποίησις, act in ways that lead to the flourishing of the creation as a whole. We acknowledge, however, that we too are still caught up in systems of oppression. We ultimately depend on God’s final liberation of creation, which will establish true justice and peace.

6. In connection with the Sitz im Leben proposed in the introduction (0.3) and Paul’s charge to the Roman Christians in Romans 14, Christians live out their christoform existence most faithfully by supporting the wellbeing of the most vulnerable and disregarded of human and nonhuman creation. Following Jesus Christ involves Christians

\footnote{24 Theokritoff, 42.}
in lives of self-giving for the sake of others. As Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate suggest in their reflections on Rom 8:19-22 and Col 1:15-20, Christians follow their Lord by limiting their aspirations, appetites, and acquisitions as an expression of other-regard.\textsuperscript{26}

7. Following Paul’s attention toward the nonhuman creation, Christians attune themselves to the voices and activities of the earth and, in particular, their local ecosystems. They keep in mind the nonhuman creation’s capacity for lifefulness, approaching creation as learners and giving serious attention to the “genius of place.”\textsuperscript{27} Christians allow themselves to be instructed by natural (nonhuman) forms of wisdom gained over millennia in the diverse ecosystems in which they live. They thereby attempt to live in harmony with that wisdom as best they can.

From these seven implications, we might derive four sets of criteria that shall assist us as we turn to the practical matters of how we procure our food. Each set contains both an ideal and also a more achievable criterion.

1a. Does the human activity alleviate the destruction of creation?
1b. Does the human activity avoid increasing creation’s destruction?
2a. Does the human activity promote the flourishing of life and biodiversity?
2b. Does the human activity refrain from diminishing biodiversity and the flourishing of created life?
3a. Does the human activity contribute to the wellbeing of the most vulnerable members of the ecosphere (both animate and inanimate participants in creation)?
3b. Does the human activity avoid hurting the most vulnerable of the ecosphere?

\textsuperscript{26} Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate, 197-199.
\textsuperscript{27} Cf., Wes Jackson, Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010).
A fourth criterion cannot be quantified and depends more on personal proclivities and faith sensibilities than the previous three criteria, but it remains important to note:

4a. Does the human activity elicit thanksgiving to God and recognition of Jesus as Lord?

4b. Does the human activity encourage (or, at least, not undermine) people’s impulse to render thanks to God and give glory to Jesus Christ?

While each of these criteria leave practical implications unspecified, they remind us of the arc of God’s activity in and with creation and direct us towards proper responses to God’s life-giving work. It is left to our common discernment to determine what counts as “destruction of creation”: the killing of bugs in the process of harvesting vegetables, grains, or fruit; the obliteration of entire ecosystems through nuclear bombs; or something between these extremes? The criteria nonetheless help us assess and reimage our human relationships with the rest of God’s creation and with God. Thus, with these seven eco-ethical concerns in mind and the four ethical criteria in hand, we now turn to examine and assess modern ecological realities and, in particular, the growing of grain in the United States.
CHAPTER 5

THE BODY, THE BREAD, AND THE BROKEN CREATION

If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. – Paul the Apostle

The creation itself will be liberated from the slavery of destruction into the liberty of the glory of the children of God. – Paul the Apostle

As we attempt to apply the Pauline creation theology set forth in chapters 1-4 to our embodied existence on earth today, we face an overwhelming set of ecological problems vying for our attention. Paul’s emphasis on Jesus’ own fleshly life and our embodied participation in it, both now and in the eschatological future, provides the theological grounds in which we might sow the seeds of creational liberation from excessive destruction. Liturgically speaking, the embodied life of Jesus and his atoning death coalesce in the meaning and practice of the eucharist (cf., 1 Cor 11:23-28). By way of reflecting theologically and practically upon the broken body of Jesus Christ offered in

---

1 Romans 14:15-21 NRSV.
2 Romans 8:21. Author’s translation. Translations in this chapter are author’s own unless otherwise noted.
3 First Corinthians 11:23b-28 states, “The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (NRSV).
the eucharist and Paul’s invitation to Christians to live in congruent forms of self-giving service to others (e.g., Rom 12:1-21; 14:15-21; 15:1-13), we shall consider in this chapter how our procuring of wheat for bread maims and breaks the “body” of creation. In so doing, we shall mimic the journey we took through Roman imperial relationships with nature in chapter 3 as we trace the history of U.S. agriculture and the practices surrounding the grain trade, particularly the growing of wheat in the Great Plains. Along this journey, we shall discover an interconnected web of deleterious causes and effects in which we are all implicated. Although this journey could lead us only to despair, current research at The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas provides us with a glimmer of hope. We shall complete our journey, therefore, on a positive note, outlining several possibilities for how Christians might decrease anthropogenic forms of destruction, foster the flourishing of creation, attend to the needs of creation’s vulnerable members, and render thanks to the Creator and Sustainer of life through their transformed eating practices.

In order to focus our gaze in this vast field of enquiry, we shall employ the four ethical criteria gleaned from our discussion of Romans in chapter 4. Expressed in their ideal forms, the criteria ask us whether a human activity (1) alleviates the destruction of the creation; (2) promotes flourishing of life and biodiversity; (3) enhances the wellbeing of creation’s most vulnerable members; and (4) elicits thanksgiving to God and glorification of Jesus Christ as Lord. To identify these criteria more succinctly, we shall employ the following phrases: liberation from destruction, flourishing and biodiversity, wellbeing of the vulnerable, and gratitude to the Creator God and the creation. These phrases shall help us recognize those ways in which our eating practices do and do not align with the Pauline vision of life laid out in this dissertation.
Undergirding this Pauline vision are the Christian doctrines of incarnation and resurrection. Although a theology of incarnation would not come to full theological fruition for centuries after Paul’s death, some of its key ethical implications are apparent in Romans. That God chooses to save creation through a divine-human, Jesus Christ, is clear from Rom 5. In fact,

God entered into interdependent and mortal flesh so that people might participate in God’s perfect and communal life. In the mutual in-dwelling of earth and heaven that Christological life is, creaturely life becomes what God has wanted from the beginning. It becomes the occasion for Sabbath delight.  

Salvation and Sabbath delight—contrary to the effects of disordered human inclinations—entails self-emptying, service to others, and faith in the God who makes the dead alive. The paradigmatic lives of Jesus and Abraham flesh out the skeleton of Paul’s ethical exhortations in chapters 12-15 to his Christian family in Rome. Were we to look outside Romans—perhaps especially to Philippians 2:5-11—we would find these incarnational themes all the more clearly.

In contrast to this embryonic form of incarnational theology, a theology of resurrection rises maturely out of Paul’s letters. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead in a true—yet different—creaturely body opens the way for the resurrection of all the dead and clearly indicates that death presently is an enslaving power about to be defeated (Rom 5:17, 21; 8:35-39; 1 Cor 15:25, 42-44, 53-56). God intends liberation from death and destruction and glorious life in communion with God, Holy Spirit, and Lord Jesus for the whole creation. Thus, God’s ultimate work of resurrection and New Creation

---

establish a standard by which we assess our embodied lives now. Michael Northcott says it well in *The Environment & Christian Ethics*:

> It is only from the perspective of the resurrection that we can see the creation truly for what it is, which is the product of the holy will of God whose plan is to restore its goodness, wholeness and harmony, and to draw it towards its final end in complete relationality with and reflection of the goodness of God.\(^5\)

As will become clear in this chapter, the ways in which the American food industry functions today depends upon and promotes self-indulgent and excessive forms of eating and food production and thereby often injures humans and the wider creation under the guises of health, fertility, and food security. But alternative networks of food production are on the rise, giving us a vision for created life that embodies more fully the glorious liberty of God’s children.

### 5.1 A GOLDEN AGE AT HIGH COST

In his second treatise on government, John Locke articulates a presupposition about the nonhuman creation that has powerfully formed generations of Europeans and Americans. Explaining the role of government and the establishment of personal property rights, Locke argues that undeveloped or uncultivated lands are nearly worthless. Human labor, however, improves the land and gleans value from it by taking its natural resources and directing them to human use and economic gain. He states,

> labour makes the far greatest part of the value of things we enjoy in this world: and the ground which produces the materials, is scarce to be reckoned in, as any, or at most, but a very small part of it; so little, that even amongst us, land that is left wholly to nature, that hath no improvement of pasturage, tillage, or planting, is called, as indeed it is,

---

\(^5\) Northcott, 202.
waste; and we shall find the benefit of it amount to little more than nothing. . . It is labour then which puts the greatest part of value upon land, without which it would scarcely be worth any thing: it is to that we owe the greatest part of all its useful products.  

Rather than recognize humanity’s utter dependence on the “ground which produces the materials” and render thanksgiving for its vitality, Locke displays the modern European hubris that people add value to the nonhuman creation rather than vice versa. We might infer from Locke’s perspective that the cultivator of wild lands performs a beneficent act by possessing, inhabiting, and cultivating otherwise wasted space.

Such rhetoric shaped colonial perspectives on land-use for decades. As Roderick Nash helpfully elucidates, American colonization and expansion followed a Lockean logic but added a layer of theological justification. Using God’s commission to humanity to subdue and have dominion on earth (Gen 1:26, 28), British colonists and, later, American settlers explained their entrance into new territories as divinely ordained. Thus, as Nash notes, “‘There can be no doubt,’ declared Lewis Cass, soldier and senator from Michigan, in 1830, ‘that the Creator intended the earth should be reclaimed from a state of nature and cultivated.’ ” The subduing and “settling” of North America has been, from its start, narrated theologically as a mandate from God even though today many Americans do not recall this narrative.

---

6 Emphasis original. John Locke, Chapter 5: Of Property, ed. Thomas Hollis, in The Two Treatises of Civil Government (London: A. Millar et al., 1764), paragraphs 42-43. Locke also notes: “I think it will be but a very modest computation to say, that of the products of the earth useful to the life of man nine tenths are the effects of labour: nay, if we will rightly estimate things as they come to our use, and cast up the several expences about them, what in them is purely owing to nature, and what to labour, we shall find, that in most of them ninety-nine hundredths are wholly to be put on the account of labour” [ibid., paragraph 40].

The American work ethic typified by Benjamin Franklin amplified the colonizing effects of Locke’s utilitarian view of creation and the “divinely ordained” role of (Euro-American) people in colonizing North America. Franklin encouraged Americans to work diligently so that they might produce enough goods to meet the demands of business and family, with extra to boot. In his *The Way to Wealth*, Franklin poetically exclaims,

What though you have found no treasure, nor has any rich relation left you a legacy, diligence is the mother of good luck, as Poor Richard says, and God gives all things to industry. Then plough deep, while sluggards sleep, and you shall have corn to sell and to keep.  

Underlying Franklin’s quip is the assumption that the products and money people work to produce and earn are rightly their own and that God’s creation is a storehouse of resources waiting to be raided.

Although the characteristics of hard work and thrift in connection with sowing and reaping could remain virtues when most of America’s population was intimately connected with particular parcels of land and was dependent upon the slow progress of human and horse-powered agriculture, the revolutionary changes that engine power brought to agricultural production made hard work and thrift more ambiguous, if not dangerous, traits. Coupled with the sense that humans add value to an otherwise “wasted” wilderness, hard work and engine power become forces of nature; they move into high gear the human propensity to exploit the earth. In light of these cultural and instrumental factors, we can admit with Wendell Berry that “[w]e are all to some extent products of an exploitative society, and it would be foolish and self-defeating to pretend that we do no

---

bear its stamp.” All people are potentially both exploiters and nurturers, but their social locations press them to reflect one way of being over the other.

Although countless Christians have heard God’s declaration, “let them have dominion” (Gen 1:26, 28), as justifying the use – and, at times, the exploitation – of the earth’s resources, our study of Gen 1:26-28 reminds us that any dominion must accord with God’s own dominion (1.1.2). Throughout our survey of the OT we have encountered God as one who nurtures life. Our exposition of Rom 8:19-22 in its epistolary and literary contexts has further revealed that God is one who “makes alive” and liberates creation from destruction and futility. God carries out the creative act and the divine rule of creation in ways that nurture life and flourishing.9 So too, the Earth co-creates, sustains, and nurtures life. Thus, as we appropriately reflect God’s image (and the image of Jesus Christ) and simultaneously bear the Earth’s image, we humans – as members of creation – act to nurture the life and flourishing of all creation and meanwhile resist exploitative ways. Applying this perspective to agriculture, we realize:

To eat with theological appreciation presupposes reverence for creation as the work of God’s hands. It entails spiritual formation in which we allow God the Gardener (Genesis 2:8) to conform us to his image as the one who looks after and provides for creatures. In this work we learn where and who we are by becoming tillers and keepers of God’s edible garden (Genesis 2:15).10

---

9 In more theologically mature language, Norman Wirzba suggests: “from a Christian point of view what food is and why eating matters are best understood in terms of God’s own Trinitarian life of gift and sacrifice, hospitality and communion, care and celebration. Trinitarian theology asserts that all reality is communion – the giving and receiving of gifts – because it has its source and sustenance in the eternal Triune love described by theologians as perichoresis, a making room within oneself for another to be. This means that nothing in creation exists by itself, in terms of itself, or for itself. Creatures are marked from beginning to end by the need to receive the gifts of nurture. Inspired by Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we have the opportunity to turn our homes into places of hospitality and ourselves into nurture for others. At its best, eating is a sharing and welcoming movement that makes room for others” [Wirzba, Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating, xii.].

10 Ibid., xiii.
As God’s Spirit graciously conforms us to God’s own image as the nurturing Gardener, our lives presage the liberty of glory into which God shall ultimately lead creation.

However, human societies have developed their own images into which they press human being and doing. Without regard to the ongoing wellbeing of the most vulnerable and of the whole of creation (or, on a small scale, an ecosystem), people have the propensity to exploit other humans and other-than-humans for the benefit of self and the few. Keeping in mind that in all places and at all times we have the potential to disfigure the good into something destructive, the images “nurturer” and “exploiter” epitomize two distinctive ways of being, two worldviews. Wendell Berry explains,

> [t]he exploiter is a specialist, an expert; the nurturer is not. The standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care. The exploiter’s goal is money, profit; the nurturer’s goal is health – his land’s health, his own, his family’s, his community’s, his country’s. Whereas the exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer asks a question that is much more complex and difficult: What is its carrying capacity? (That is: How much can be taken from it without diminishing it? What can it produce dependably for an indefinite time?)

As any society can confess, the line is fine between exploitation and sustainable, nurturing use. While Berry and his agrarian colleagues insist that sustainable, small-scale farming grows out of a particular set of values, others temper their potential idealism by arguing that small-scale farmers are not inherently morally superior to large-scale farmers. Instead, some contend that American agricultural history demonstrates that most, if not all, farmers place their own economic interests above the long-term health of

---

the ecosystem, even if these interests only allow families to live at subsistence levels.12

This argument brings to mind the insightful and colorful words of Stanley Hauerwas when he considers the Beatitudes of Matthew 5. Although people may idealize or romanticize people who are poor, Hauerwas points out that “being poor may mean you’re humbled, . . . but it is also likely to make you mean, envious, and a thorough shit.”13

Being a small-scale farmer may mean you alleviate the destruction of creation, nurture biodiversity, and support the wellbeing of the most vulnerable, but it could also mean that you exploit and degrade your small piece of land in order to eek out a living.

Communities of formation and transformation are necessary, as Berry and other agrarians would agree, in order to create the situation in which farmers – whether small-scale or larger-scale – might take the economically risky but ecologically healthy steps towards sustainable forms of agriculture. Although I hope my work will contribute to this positive transformation, at present, it only gestures toward ways in which Christian communities can take an integral place in this process.

As an overview of American agricultural history illustrates, American exploitation, urbanization (namely, the population’s movement away from intimate connections with the natural processes of planting and reaping), and commodification of creation have led to increased ecological destruction, decreased biodiversity, precarious forms of wellbeing among the vulnerable, and a diminished sense of gratitude for the gifts of life from Creator and creation. In other words:

The consequent disembidding of human social structures from the limits and needs of the land, and the loss of a widespread awareness of the relationality between nature and human life, is a key feature in the modern abuse of the natural world, and may also be linked to a more general demise of virtue in human relations as well as relations with nature in modern urbanised societies.\textsuperscript{14}

The journey of American agriculture leads us from farm to city, from east to west, and through the vast prairies that once supported countless herds of buffalo and thousands of native peoples but now, having been “improved,” stand as America’s deteriorating heartland, its grain fields.

5.2 A HISTORY OF WHEAT AGRICULTURE IN THE GREAT PLAINS

From the earliest days of the British colonization of North America, wheat functioned as a primary (and non-native) crop.\textsuperscript{15} By the 1840s, wheat agriculture expanded from the eastern seaboard to the heart of North America, the prairies. At this point, people of European descent settled – or, perhaps I should write, “invaded” – the Plains and pushed Native Americans off their vast lands and onto fringe territories, inflicting ongoing social destruction and degradation on whole nations of peoples for

\textsuperscript{14} Northcott, 40.

\textsuperscript{15} Wheat served as a staple crop and even became a cash crop in areas such as Virginia and Maryland in colonial America [Hurt, 47-48.]. By the time of the American Revolution and just after, wheat was the principal crop in Virginia, and the growing urban populations of Alexandria and Richmond increased demand for wheat and, therefore, maintained wheat’s high prices [ibid., 91.]. The climate and soil conditions of New England did not favor wheat agriculture. Thomas Jefferson lauded wheat agriculture as a crop that “‘diffuses plenty and happiness among the whole’” while tobacco growing – important in the mid-Atlantic – was “‘a culture productive of infinite wretchedness’” [ibid., 79.]. The American Revolution brought a lasting blight to the production of wheat in America: the introduction of the Hessian fly. This fly and its larvae entered the North American continent via the straw bedding of horses brought with German troops. The larvae eat the roots of sprouting wheat plants in the fall. However, farmers discovered that if they planted their wheat “after the first hard frost,” the flies that laid larval eggs would already be dead so that the threat of larval presence was removed [ibid., 113.]. Because the Napoleonic Wars spanning from 1795-1815 increased the demand and price for wheat in British colonies, farmers in the Northeast engaged in wheat production even though black stem rust threatened the wheat plant more severely there than in the South [ibid., 96-97].
centuries to come. Prior to that time, Native Americans of the Great Plains depended on hunting, gathering, and – wherever water was sufficient – cultivating corn, beans, squash, sunflowers, and tobacco for their livelihoods.\textsuperscript{16}

In contrast and with less attention to place, the Euro-American settlers of the Great Plains unwittingly sowed the seeds of environmental degradation by means of their agricultural practices. Without fully appreciating the fragility of the Plains as a semi-arid to arid ecosystem, farmers plowed up the native grasses that resiliently weathered the storms of prairie life. The native grasses, with their tough and deep root systems intact throughout the year, protected the soil from wind and water erosion. As Wes Jackson observes, on “South Dakota prairies, west of the Missouri, if the original vegetative structure is plowed, a steep reduction in carrying capacity will shortly follow” since essential nutrients will flow out of soil and down the rivers.\textsuperscript{17} Without attention to “place” but with the pride and power of the plow, farmers turned up the rich but fragile soil of the Plains.\textsuperscript{18} In more water abundant areas farmers at times planted corn, but wheat “became a primary crop for ‘subduing the prairies.’”\textsuperscript{19} The increased supply of wheat from the prairies brought down the price of wheat on the east coast, and eastern

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 145-146.
\textsuperscript{17} Jackson, Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture, 28.
\textsuperscript{18} Wes Jackson helpfully points to John Wesley Powell who studied the Great Plains and provided the nation with prescient yet unobserved advice about the Plains in which the region would be divided in plots of about 2,560 acres in deference to the fragility of the region [Jackson, \textit{New Roots for Agriculture}, 43]. However, Congress ignored his wisdom and established unsustainable plots of 160 acres per family in the Homestead Act of 1889 [Hurt, 181.]. On a different topic, the “tough prairie lands proved difficult to plow, and farmers often hired breaking teams to turn the sod at rates of $2 to $5 per acre” [ibid., 130].
\textsuperscript{19} Hurt, 130. In some places farmers planted corn and potato plants first since these crops “helped break down the fibrous root system of prairie grass” [ibid.].
farmers adjusted by planting different crops, such as vegetables and fruits, destined for nearby growing urban centers.\textsuperscript{20}

In a time before strong farming implements and powerful tractors, tough prairie lands limited the amount of acreage wheat farmers might be able to plant in a season. Moreover, harvest time required extensive human labor in a very small window of time and, therefore, also restricted the number of acres farmers could reasonably sow. It was not until the development of a more effective and affordable plow by John Deere in the 1830s, a seed planter ("grain drill") by Moses and Samuel Pennock in 1841, and a reaper by Obed Hussey in the 1830s that a farmer could greatly expand wheat production by means of horsepower.\textsuperscript{21} A reaper, however, left the cut grain stalks on the ground. The invention of self-rake reapers, sheaf binders, and threshing and winnowing machines would soon further reduce the human power needed in the production of wheat.

Especially during the Civil War when labor was scarce but demand and prices for wheat were high, reapers – many of which were self-rake reapers – harvested "70 percent of the wheat in the West" and continued to increase in popularity after the war.\textsuperscript{22} Because the first combines (an implement that "combined the functions of a reaper with a threshing machine and winnower") were extremely heavy and expensive, requiring at least sixteen horses for power and $500 for purchase in the 1850s, they were highly impracticable until the technological breakthrough of steam engines and, even more

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 136-143.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 196.
importantly, the tractor.\textsuperscript{23} By the 1870s, steam engines replaced many horse-powered thresher in the threshing of wheat, and by “1929, Great Plains farmers harvested approximately 75 percent of their winter wheat with combines.”\textsuperscript{24} “Combines” in this instance were implements that cut, raked, and threshed wheat and were individually powered by gasoline engines as tractors pulled them along vast fields of wheat.\textsuperscript{25}

As farm tool companies increased the efficiency, maneuverability, and diverse applications of the tractor, farmers recognized the apparent advantages of tractor power over horsepower. In addition to their initial purchase price, horses required constant feeding whether or not they were engaged in farm work, and each horse depended upon about 5 acres of cropland for its yearly food supply.\textsuperscript{26} Tractors, on the other hand, did not depend on the output of cropland for nourishment, could work tirelessly at any time of day or night, and were not bothered by hot weather conditions or insects.\textsuperscript{27}

However, distinct disadvantages came with tractor use. Due to their weight, tractors compacted the soil. Because they could plow so many acres in little time, tractors drastically increased the amount of land left vulnerable to soil erosion during unfavorable weather conditions.\textsuperscript{28} The increased production that tractors facilitated benefited the economy in times of war (since demand and prices were high) but harmed farmers’ economic situation (especially that of small-scale farmers) in times of peace and surplus

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 145-146, 246-248. These figures refer to Hiram Moore’s combine. Other combines of this era used forty horses!
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 202, 252.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 252.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 245.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 245-246.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 358.
(when supply was high and prices low). As the decades pressed on, the ecological problems of air pollution and global climate change, stemming, in part, from petroleum-based agriculture, would become increasingly apparent. Expensive tractor power also induced many farmers to specialize by planting one type of crop (call a monoculture).

Thus, the tractor

became the key to the mechanization of the farm; it also helped cause the industrialization of agriculture and the technological revolution that led to the modern agribusiness industry. Moreover, the tractor helped end farming as a way of life. When a farmer purchased a tractor and equipment specially designed to meet the draft capabilities of this new implement, he often borrowed from the bank . . . The diversified farms of the past required a greater variety of implements than one-crop agriculture, but tractors and accompanying implements required a larger capital investment. Consequently, farmers who bought tractors increasingly concentrated on the production of one or two crops such as wheat, corn, sorghum grains.

These pros and cons of tractor farming make this technological breakthrough an ambivalent, if not a patently unsustainable, means of human survival.

Tractors and the changes in agricultural practice they represent also portend a devolving sense of community between farmer and ecosystem and an increasing power on the part of humans to transform that ecosystem, often for the worse. Even if tractors do not harm the land beyond repair (though they do add to air pollution), they diminish the farmers’ sense of intimacy with and knowledge of the land. In a letter from Wendell Berry to Wes Jackson regarding Jackson’s *New Roots for Agriculture*, Berry avers:

---

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 357.
31 As discussed briefly in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, the effects of modern agriculture, especially as it depends on tractor power, are devastating for the ecosphere. To make our extravagant use of fossil fuels apparent, Jackson provides an illustration: in 2010, a person who was 22 years old would have “lived through over half of all the oil ever burned” [Jackson, *Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture*, 6].

231
As one who has farmed with both tractors and [draft] teams, I would insist (to you; I would be more cautious, at present, in a public statement) that with the use of a tractor certain vital excitements, pleasures, and sensitivities are lost. How much numb metal can we put between ourselves and our land and still know where we are and what we are doing? Working with a tractor is damned dulling and boring. It is like making love in boxing gloves.\textsuperscript{32}

While tractor power and new implements expanded crop acreage, more suitable varieties of wheat also increased yields. In 1898, Mark Alfred Carleton traveled throughout Eurasia in search of better varieties of wheat, having already encountered a promising variety among Russian Mennonites living in the Great Plains of the U.S. Carleton sought “a variety that would ripen despite extreme weather conditions – wheat that was not only frost resistant but ice-storm resistant.”\textsuperscript{33} In returning to the U.S., Carleton introduced “twenty-three new cereals” to the agricultural community.\textsuperscript{34} After testing the new varieties against standard varieties, he found that hard winter wheat from Siberia best endured the intense weather conditions of the Plains. “By 1914, half of the U.S. annual yield of winter wheat was Carleton’s variety, more than eighty million bushels.”\textsuperscript{35}

Despite these “advancements” and the fact that the United States sits on some of the most fertile land in the world,\textsuperscript{36} many Americans were (and still are)

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 35. As a daughter of a gentleman farmer, I occasionally had the opportunity to use tractors (both with and without cabs) to disk (smooth) fields in preparation for planting. I can attest that the vibrations of the steering wheel numb one’s hands and the dull roar of the engine can beckon one into a sort of inattentive trance.

\textsuperscript{33} Frederick Kaufman, Bet the Farm: How Food Stopped Being Food (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012), 229.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 230.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} The Great Plains are so fertile because geological events brought to the surface minerals necessary for plants. As glaciers moved across Canada, scraping off helpful nutrients and placing them in the middle
undernourished. By the end of the nineteenth century, the U.S. government recognized
this problem and took an active role in addressing it. The USDA encouraged Americans
to eat a larger variety of foods in order to increase the uptake of essential nutrients.

In the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, the U.S.
government’s involvement in its citizens’ nutrition could generally be applauded.
However, by the latter half of the twentieth century, the government’s disinterested
concern for the true health of its members came into doubt. Powerful food corporations
and interested parties (e.g., the National Cattlemen’s Association) increasingly swayed
the USDA to obfuscate its dietary suggestions to the American public. Although medical
and nutritional scientists had become increasingly convinced that diets rich in vegetables,
fruits, and grains rather than meats were most conducive to health, meat industries
convinced the USDA to replace “the statement ‘reduce consumption of meat’ with the
less offensive ‘choose meats, poultry, and fish which will reduce saturated fat intake’ ” in
its 1977 Dietary Goals for the United States. Providing economic advantage for their
bank accounts, many food corporations and certain interest groups work vigorously to

37 In my future research, I intend to address the complex and abhorrent food injustices that prevail in
modern agriculture and the distribution of food [cf., Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi, Food Justice
(Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2010).].
38 Marion Nestle, Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health (Berkeley:
University of California Press, 2002), 32-34.
39 Ibid., 42. Similarly, in 1979, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare published “Healthy
People, a report from the surgeon general” that “advised eating more complex carbohydrates, more fish,
and more poultry but less of the usual culprits (calories, saturated fat, cholesterol, salt, and sugar) and also
less red meat” [ibid., 43.]. Raising the ire of the meat industry, which ardently protested the implications of
this report, “Healthy People became the last federal publication to explicitly advise ‘eat less red meat’ ”; later
governmental advice would come in the more positive form of suggesting people eat lean meat [ibid.].
convince the government to send the American population the message that they should “eat more.”

As became increasingly evident in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the experience of war hastened the movement away from human-powered agriculture to horse-powered and, then, engine-powered machinery. As agricultural historian R. Daniel Hurt explains,

The Civil War . . . stimulated the mechanization of agriculture as northern farmers rapidly shifted from handpowered to horsepowerd implements. During the war years, agriculture rapidly expanded into the Great Plains and Far West. Farmers increasingly specialized, often with a single crop. They gave less attention to self-sufficiency and more to producing a commodity for sale in a market economy. This specialization often tied farmers to bankers, railroads, and businessmen in a way that often caused bitterness and encouraged organization and protest.

Despite some problems that attended agricultural specialization and expansion in the late 1800s and early 1900s, farming generally became a highly lucrative way of life (especially for those who could afford expensive new technologies and vast acreage). In fact, some agriculturalists and historians deem the years from 1909-1914 (or even 1880-1920) the “Golden Age for American Agriculture.”

40 Ibid., 36. This message may be sent through dietary guidelines, as illustrated here, or through public policies, such as crop subsidies. Nestle explains: “the U.S. food supply is so abundant that it contains enough to feed everyone in the country nearly twice over – even after exports are considered. . . The food industry must compete fiercely for every dollar spent on food, and food companies expend extraordinary resources to develop and market products that will sell, regardless of their effect on nutritional status or waistlines. To satisfy stockholders, food companies must convince people to eat more of their products or to eat their products instead of those of competitors. They do so through advertising and public relations, of course, but also by working tirelessly to convince government officials, nutrition professionals, and the media that their products promote health – or at least do no harm” [ibid., 1.].

41 Hurt, 165.

With the first technological revolution in place (the creation of strong horse-drawn agricultural equipment), agriculture steamed into its second revolution: the development of engine-powered agricultural technologies. As already noted above, since labor was scarce but demand and prices for wheat were high during times of war, World War I sped the costly transition from horse-powered harvesters and threshers to gasoline-powered combine farming.\textsuperscript{43} International affairs encouraged farmers to be as productive and efficient as possible in their harvesting and processing of wheat. The unholy alliance between agriculture and war is nicely illustrated by a cartoon on the front page of the May 16, 1918 edition of \textit{Farm Implement News} (figure 5.1).\textsuperscript{44}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure5.1.png}
\caption{“Competent Threshing Here Will Hasten the Thrashing Over There”}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{43} Hurt, 251.
\textsuperscript{44} Thanks to R. Daniel Hurt for providing this image from his personal library.
The caption under the cartoon – “Competent Threshing Here Will Hasten the Thrashing Over There” – expresses the American belief that efficient and abundant food production in the U.S. would significantly improve Allied attempts at winning the war against Germany. Since war in Europe interrupted agricultural production there, the Allied soldiers and civilians in Europe depended upon large amounts of produce, especially wheat, from the U.S. in order to survive and prevail. Thus, we find that war somewhere intensifies agriculture elsewhere.

President Woodrow Wilson and his colleagues in the USDA and the newly formed U.S. Food Administration began an intense campaign to encourage American farmers to produce more wheat for overseas use and more alternative grains and foods for consumption in the U.S.\(^\text{45}\) The government also rallied stateside Americans to reduce their consumption of foods needed in Europe by adjusting their diets to depend more fully upon potatoes, rice, and corn rather than wheat.\(^\text{46}\) In order to facilitate these transitions in dietary habits, the Food Administration developed weekly meal schedules for families, suggesting that eleven out of twenty-one of each week’s meals be made without wheat.\(^\text{47}\) Moreover, the U.S. Food Administration suggested seven ways in which families could help the war effort by their home food practices: “use local foodstuffs to avoid unnecessary transportation of goods; use perishable foods to save staples; eliminate waste in all possible ways; conserve wheat; conserve meats, fats, and sugars; increase the use of milk and milk products; and set forth the principles underlying adequate feeding

\(^{45}\) Rae Katherine Eighmey, “‘Food Will Win the War’: Minnesota Conservation Efforts, 1917-18,” *Minnesota History* 59, no. 7 (2005): 274.
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 279-284.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., 279. Nine of the twenty-one were to be eaten without meat.
for health.”  

A poster published by the USDA described common ways in which Americans needlessly wasted food and encouraged them to conserve food and thereby money. One poignant motto on this poster reads: “Demonstrate thrift in your home: Make saving, rather than spending, your social standard.” Another poster portrays a female figure entreating her audience to associate true patriotism with food conservation (figure 5.2).

![Poster image](image)

**FIGURE 5.2.** Paul Stahr, “Be Patriotic – sign your country’s pledge to save the food,” 1914-1918. Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

The effectiveness of this WWI campaign demonstrates the ways in which the American population (at least at that time) was willing to make self-restraining sacrifices on behalf of a worldwide effort, though this effort admittedly involved the killing of people and the harming of ecosystems. For those who recall the terrorist attacks of

---

48 Ibid., 278-279.
49 Ibid., 275.
50 Ibid., 283.
51 In addition to conservation, the U.S. government of WWI asked citizens to increase their food security and self-reliance by becoming food producers. Americans were encouraged to grow their own food in vegetable and fruit gardens and to preserve as much of the produce for winter consumption as possible [ibid., 274.]. Local organizations, schools, county fairs, and government extension agencies assisted in
September 11, 2001 and President George W. Bush’s call on Americans to maintain confidence in the U.S. economy by continuing their daily lives as usual, the changes from 1917 to 2001 in attitude, action, and perspective on economic life in the U.S. are startling, although the factors in each situation are admittedly quite different and complex. At the time of WWI, the response to international threat was conservation on the part of American families; at the turn of the twenty-first century and in an increasingly consumer society, the response is continued consumption rather than conservation. We may rightly wonder what worldwide effort – or, more likely, conflict – would elicit ecologically healthy forms of self-restraint among the world’s consumer societies.

Once the First World War had ended, hunger did not. President Wilson communicated the ongoing food needs in Europe through U.S. Food Administration posters that read: “Hunger does not breed reform; it breeds madness and all the ugly distemper that makes an ordered life impossible. The future belongs to those who prove

these efforts by providing education opportunities and demonstrations. Recipes circulated in magazines and newspapers for making “Liberty Bread,” breads using less white wheat flour and more cornmeal, oatmeal, and dark flours (including whole wheat flour, an uncommon ingredient in breads at that time) [ibid., 278-279]. In the face of increasing prices, the state of Minnesota attempted to prevent profiteering among businesses by publishing in newspapers the wholesale prices of staple goods and the maximum retail prices allowed for the sale of related products. Such measures promoted fair market values in times of scarcity [ibid., 285]. They also helped to secure the wellbeing of Americans who did not have the financial capacity to buy staple foods at exorbitant, unregulated wartime prices. During WWII, the U.S. administration applied different tactics than those used in WWI, but it expressed a similar overall message. In 1946, the USDA created its Food for Growth: Food for Freedom nutrition guide that stated, “In time of emergency, you need to eat less of scarce foods, more of the plentiful. Food is needed to feed the hungry – don’t waste it” [Nestle, 36].

52 George W. Bush, Address to the Nation (Washington, D.C.: Congress, September 20, 2001). Towards the end of his speech, Bush explains what the American people could do in response to the terror of the 9-11 attacks. In addition to providing continued support to the people grieving their losses and to the rebuilding efforts, he states: “I ask your continued participation and confidence in the American economy. Terrorists attacked a symbol of American prosperity. They did not touch its source. America is successful because of the hard work, and creativity, and enterprise of our people. These were the true strengths of our economy before September 11th, and they are our strengths today.”
themselves the true friends of mankind.” The director of the University of Minnesota’s agricultural extension division, Professor A. D. Wilson, understood this international situation as requiring the ongoing agricultural efforts of Americans. He declared, “‘Peace will bring added responsibilities to America as the food source of the world . . . Now we must feed hundreds of millions’” even “‘hungry Germans.’” While this benevolent sense of international responsibility looked after the wellbeing of hungry people across the globe, it did so (and continues to do so) at the expense of soil fertility, biodiversity, and the health of the ecosphere. Such a situation highlights the real and perplexing challenge of providing for human needs without sacrificing ecological health.

Despite the foreign food aid provided by U.S. farmers after WWI, agricultural products met decreasing demands, decreasing prices, but high supplies since farmers had so effectively increased their acreage and output of wheat during WWI. Crop prices therefore dropped markedly after the war. In response, farmers continued expanding wheat production by plowing still more lands in an effort to increase sales and income.

As Hurt explains:

New technology, war, and depressed prices stimulated Great Plains farmers to break 32 million acres of sod between 1909 and 1929 for new wheat lands. . . During the years of adequate precipitation, almost all of these acres were harvested, but in dry years nearly complete abandonment prevailed. In the Great Plains, where crops need every drop of moisture that falls, a deficiency of only a few inches can mean the difference between a bountiful harvest and economic disaster. When drought struck the region during the early 1930s, it caused crop failure and encouraged farmers to abandon land unprotected by vegetative cover. The prevailing winds, averaging 10 to 12 miles per hour throughout the region, increased

---

53 Eighmey: 285.
54 Ibid.
55 Hurt, 234.
evaporation, weathered the soil, and brought dust storms to the southern Great Plains in January 1932.\textsuperscript{56}

Having not anticipated the region’s natural cycle between dry and water abundant years, Great Plains farmers catalyzed the horrific events of the Dust Bowl by means of intensified agricultural efforts.

Although the stock market crash of 1929 introduced the entire nation to economic depression, the farming community had already experienced its own depression for nearly a decade. Food prices – which had been profitably high before and during World War I – plummeted in 1920 once hostilities were over and world peace had taken root. Ironically, war rather than peace manifested itself as more economically profitable, at least in this regard. Just after the war, “[i]n 1921, farm prices averaged 67 percent of parity,” parity in this case referring to the price of crops during the “Golden Age of American Agriculture” from 1909 to 1914.\textsuperscript{57} By the time of the Great Depression, the U.S. government increasingly took on regulatory powers in response to the environmental and economic droughts of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Although farmers and their representatives had been pushing for federal regulation for many years, it was not until 1929 that the federal government legislated economic changes that would regulate the market through the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929. This act “authorized the federal government to loan $500 million to agricultural cooperatives so that these organizations could purchase price-depressing surpluses to keep them off the market.”\textsuperscript{58} Such an act was necessary because the surplus food made

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 235.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 263. Bean and Bollinger: 253.
\textsuperscript{58} Hurt, 268.
possible by technological advances actually hurt farmers and the land by lowering crop prices while heightening ecological degradation. By the time severe drought hit the Great Plains in 1931, wheat could not grow in the parched soils and so left them unprotected from wind erosion. In 1934 alone “a dust storm removed an estimated 300 million tons of soil from the Great Plains,” in the area now known as the “Dust Bowl.” Alexander Hogue powerfully captures the destruction and desecration of this era in his painting, Erosion No. 2, “Mother Earth Laid Bare” (1936) (figure 5.3):

FIGURE 5.3. Alexandre Hogue, *Erosion No. 2 – Mother Earth Laid Bare*, 1936, oil on canvas. Courtesy of The Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma.  

---

59 Ibid., 300.
Increased federal aid was necessary to help farmers weather this storm. Franklin Delano Roosevelt led the federal government in regulating agriculture and its related economy more extensively than ever before. In 1933 the Agricultural Adjustment Act aimed to help farmers in their desperate circumstances by paying them not to produce “seven basic commodities – wheat, cotton, corn, hogs, rice, tobacco, and dairy products.” By paying farmers to reduce acreage and production in these basic commodities, the federal government hoped to reduce the surpluses and increase prices to the levels based on prices for the period 1909-1914. The unsettling paradox of having too much produce in the fields and livestock yards while many in the U.S. went penniless and hungry haunted American society.

However, the U.S. began remediying this negative situation under the leadership of the USDA. In order to mitigate the ecological degradation taking place because of drought and economic depression, the federal government developed programs encouraging farmers to protect and even rebuild their soils. By 1935, the USDA assisted farmers in “soil-conservation practices such as terracing, reseeding native grasses, and contour plowing” with loaned money from the Soil Conservation Service. The Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, part of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1938, paid farmers to replace cash crops with those crops that would build up soil, this instead of simply allowing the former cash crop fields to sit unplanted and consequently more susceptible to wind erosion. The AAA of 1938 empowered the

---

61 Hurt, 288.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 290.
64 Ibid., 292.
government to pay farmers for reducing their cash crop acreage and “provided crop insurance, marketing controls, and price-supporting loans;” consequently, the AAA of 1938 laid “the foundation for American agricultural policy on price-support and acreage-reduction programs.”

The terrible drought conditions of the 30s ended as World War II vamped up demands and prices for wheat. Great Plains wheat farmers responded by cultivating more acres, including those recently protected by native grasses. Not only did farmers increase crop production through cultivating more soil, they increasingly used “hybrid seeds, pesticides, insecticides, fertilizer, and mechanization” in order to increase yield. During this time, farmers in the Mid-West increased their production despite soil exhaustion by applying chemical fertilizers.

Ironically, the process that initially made highly destructive bombs for war now empowered farmers to supplement the soil’s fertility by artificial means. The Haber-Bosch process, in particular, made nitrogen fertilizers readily available. This high-energy process combines unreactive atmospheric nitrogen with hydrogen, making ammonia (NH₃). Ammonia then functions as the chemical feedstock for making a wide variety of chemical fertilizers and other products, such as nylon. As Michael Pollan wryly notes: “The chemical fertilizer industry (along with that of pesticides, which are based on

---

65 Ibid., 291.
66 Ibid., 303. Hurt notes that during WWII, “[f]armers recognized that expanded production would enable them to reap large profits from wartime prices and that tractors provided the means to cultivate more acreage. With the aid of tractors, farmers increased corn and wheat production by more than 9 and 2 million acres, respectively, during the war years. By 1945 30.5 percent of the farmers in the United States used tractors” [ibid., 317].
67 Ibid., 321.
68 Jackson, Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture, 79.
poison gases developed for the war) is the product of the government’s effort to convert its war machine to peacetime purposes."\textsuperscript{70} Although nitrogen fertilizers facilitated the growing yields of agriculture, the intervening decades have shown that dropping such fertility bombs on our soils has created devastating ecological side effects, such as hypoxic dead zones in oceans.\textsuperscript{71} Despite creational destruction, this agricultural practice has gone unchanged (though has become more regulated), for “[h]igh yields dazzle us and give us an illusion that we are sophisticated on the subject of agronomics.”\textsuperscript{72} By the 1950s, American farmers “applied newly developed pesticides, such as DDT,” so that “most farmers believed the postwar chemical industry had created a ‘golden age.’”\textsuperscript{73} Yet, attending these increases in production and technology was a devastating decline in the farming population and in ecological health.

\textsuperscript{70} Pollan, 41. Pollan explains: “The great turning point in the modern history of corn, which in turn marks a key turning point in the industrialization of our food, can be dated with some precision to the day in 1947 when the huge munitions plant at Muscle Shoals, Alabama, switched over to making chemical fertilizer. After the war the government had found itself with a tremendous surplus of ammonium nitrate, the principal ingredient in the making of explosives. Ammonium nitrate also happens to be an excellent source of nitrogen for plants... Hybrid corn is the greediest of plants, consuming more fertilizer than any crop” [ibid.].

\textsuperscript{71} Jackson, Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture, 79. Dead zones have become common examples of anthropogenic destruction of life. The dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico – the second largest hypoxic area in the world’s waters – is an area with high concentrations of fertilizer run-off that make algae grow at fast rates [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration NOAA, “Dead Zone” Is a More Common Term for Hypoxia” http://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/deadzone.html.]. When the algae die, oxygen is used in the process of decomposition. This process, therefore, takes the limited amounts of oxygen from the water that fish and other animals need for life. “Every summer for more than 30 years high nitrogen levels at the Mississippi River Delta have caused a dead zone where the water empties into the Gulf of Mexico. This dead zone, in which oxygen levels are too low for animals to survive, covered more that 8000 square miles (more than 20,000 km2) of ocean in 2001” [National Earth Science Teachers Association NESTA, “Fertilizing the Earth with Nitrogen” http://www.windows2universe.org/earth/climate/nitrogen_fertilizer.html.]. Dead zones are all over the world, in fact, “[t]here are about 150 dead zones in the world’s oceans. Almost all of them are located at the mouths of rivers where fertilizers and other nutrient sources like sewage and livestock waste are added to the seawater” [ibid.]. Dead zones are places where God’s swarming creatures cannot survive.

\textsuperscript{72} Jackson, Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture.

\textsuperscript{73} Hurt, 300.
The boom in agriculture during the 40s because of favorable environmental and economic conditions (including war!) did not last, and by 1950 another drought hit the Plains with its concomitant soil erosion. Nevertheless, due to the governmental safety nets put in place during the 30s, the drought of the 50s did not subject farmers to the same economic free-fall, as did that of the 30s. In fact, Great Plains farmers weathered the storm tolerably well, having learned how to protect their lands during times of drought and choosing to spend some of the profits made during the boom of the 40s to dig deep wells for irrigation. Now that electricity, gasoline-powered engines, and other technologies were available to pump water efficiently from underground aquifers, such as the Ogallala, farmers could irrigate their fields when rain levels were too low. By the latter half of the twentieth century, water originating from reservoirs in the northern and aquifers in the southern Great Plains could irrigate large sections – up to 640 acres! – of flat land by means of center-pivot sprinklers. Irrigation of semi-arid lands in the Great Plains enabled farmers to grow the more lucrative crops of corn, sugar beets, alfalfa, and cotton rather than the heartier, less water-dependent crops of wheat and sorghum.

We now know – even more fully than did people then – that the “fossil” waters of deep aquifers and the fossil fuels that facilitate their use in agriculture are in highly limited and ever decreasing supply. Today deep-water pumps are running dry, “making it

---

74 Ibid., 304.
75 Ibid., 306.
76 Ibid. The drought in the Great Plains during the early and mid-1950s, as noted above, did not bring economic disaster to farmers, as had the Dust Bowl of the 30s, even though the drought of the 50s was more expansive [ibid., 339].
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
more and more difficult to support rapid growth in food production.”

In the United States,

[overpumping is widespread, and the overpumping of the vast Ogallala or High Plains aquifer – essentially a fossil aquifer that extends from southern South Dakota through Nebraska, Kansas, eastern Colorado, Oklahoma, and Texas – is a matter of national concern. In the southern Great Plains, irrigated area has shrunk by 24 percent since 1980 as wells have gone dry.]

The situation has become an ugly Catch-22: farmers need the income that high yield, irrigated crops bring in order to keep this expensive system running even as the aquifers dry up, while lower yield, dry farming that does not require expensive irrigation simply cannot bring in the income necessary for farmers to keep their land and cannot provide farmers the security that irrigation gives in times of drought.

As already noted, war usually increases crop prices and the end of war makes prices plummet. By the 1940s and 50s, however, the U.S. government quickly regulated the difficult economic transition from wartime to peace. New forms of regulation developed after World War II and the Korean War, the Marshall Plan of 1948 and the Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954, respectively, allowed the U.S. government to help farmers maintain relatively comfortable post-war income levels by purchasing surplus crops in the form of foreign aid on behalf of those countries in need of food. However, such plans did not encourage or assist farmers in decreasing

---

80 Ibid., 101.
81 Hurt, 340.
82 Ibid., 323-324.
production and thereby facilitated the ongoing exploitation of American soils. Hurt contends:

By the mid-1950s, then, the problem of overproduction, high price supports, and increased operating costs continued to plague the American farmer. Between 1951 and 1956, for example, agricultural prices declined 23 percent, and operating costs increased or remained the same. Farmers responded by trying to produce as much as possible on their restricted acres with heavy applications of fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. This solution not only made the problem worse but created new difficulties for agriculture and the environment.83

The expansion of agriculture in the 50s was attended by the decline of the Soil Conservation Service (begun in response to the Dust Bowl) and thereby removed the salubrious and conservationist constraints on land-use. In fact, the SCS “was phased out in the late 1950s” perhaps because of the nature of the 1950s, which included a great acceleration in the use of fossil fuel. It was an era of great complacency, too, in America. Technology was solving our problems. Everything was going to be bigger and better, and the opportunities were limitless. It was not a time when many were inclined to listen to the dire warnings of a few who happened to be reading different signs of the time.84

Unfortunately such cultural, agricultural, economic, and ecological patterns would continue into the second half of the twentieth century.

The high costs of production (due in part to irrigation, mechanization, and the purchase of chemicals and seeds) encourage farmers to reduce their labor costs. This situation further facilitates the decline of rural America: more and more families leave the small communities of the Mid-West and Great Plains.85 Of course, agriculture is not

83 Ibid., 325.
84 Jackson, Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture, 125.
85 Hurt, 343-344; 358. Wendell Berry sadly notes: “For a long time, the news from everywhere in rural America has been almost unrelievedly bad: bankruptcy, foreclosure, depression, suicide, the departure of
entirely to blame. Big box stores increasingly replace local general stores, reducing employment possibilities in small towns. In fact,

most small towns in America’s grain belt are severely underpopulated. Many are virtually ghost towns, with no school, post office, or grocery store. Most farmers who have managed to stay on the land do so as renters or low-paid employees of the multi-national corporations; the term “bioserf” has been coined to describe their situation.

Even so, farmers and their spouses depend heavily on income from part-time and full-time jobs off the farm to supplement their inadequate agricultural income. In such a demoralizing and dismal economic situation, some farmers resort to suicide in order to escape their oppressive servitude. More and more farming families leave their farms and migrate to urban centers for employment.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the U.S. government regulated agriculture in ever decreasing ways because of its own economic squeeze and the pressure it received from lobbyist groups, especially from agribusinesses and large-scale farmers. Paradoxically, while farmers desired greater freedom from governmental regulation, they also recognized the clear economic and security advantages of price supports and, so, continued to desire government aid. In order to cut costs, President Reagan’s administration increased the export of crop produce while it decreased price-

the young, the loneliness of the old, soil loss, soil degradation, chemical pollution, the loss of genetic and specific diversity, the extinction or threatened extinction of species, the depletion of aquifers, stream degradation, the loss of wilderness, strip mining, clear-cutting, population loss, the loss of supporting economies, the deaths of towns” [Wendell Berry, Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community: Eight Essays (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 5.].

86 Hurt, 344.
87 Davis, 105.
88 Hurt, 372-373.
89 Davis explains, “In both the United States and Britain, the suicide rate among farmers is twice that of the general population; in other parts of the world it may be even higher. Rural residents experience significantly higher rates of depression and mental disorder, and studies have shown ‘exceptionally large increases’ in the incidence of substance abuse and domestic violence” [Davis, 105.].
90 Hurt, 375.
support programs for farmers. Moreover, even as farmers found they needed more income support from the government or from their sales, urban consumers vied for lower food costs. Several congressional acts attempted to solve the problem of too much supply and too low prices during the 80s and 90s, but “[b]y the early 1990s . . . [the Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act] had not solved the problems of an imbalance of supply and demand, an inadequate income for family farmers, or an escalating national debt.”91 Farmers consistently found that their output costs exceeded their income from crops.92 This national state of affairs has led many farmers to “increase production to lower unit costs” and to follow the motto, “Get bigger, get better, or get out.”93 Yet the higher productivity made available through technologies and high-cost inputs simply intensifies the problem of over production and ecological degradation. By the end of the twentieth century, this form of farming had become an economically unsustainable endeavor for many small-scale agriculturalists; those who stay in the business supplement their income with outside employment or grow their farming enterprises to massive proportions.94

As a concrete example of the increasing gap between the market price of processed foods and the wholesale price of ingredients, Hurt explains:

Bread averaged 79 cents per loaf in 1995 but 87 cents in 1997, even though the cost of wheat per loaf dropped from 6 cents to 5 cents. The USDA attributed the increase in food prices to escalating labor costs;

---

91 Ibid., 356.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid., 374.
94 Ibid., 375. Hurt explains, “the cost-price squeeze became the most important reason for the rapid decline in the number of farms” in the U.S. [ibid.]. For example, in 1990, for every $1.50 received for farm products, the farmer spent $1.71 in farming costs [ibid.]. Hurt indicates that 75 percent of “all farmers earned less than $50,000; after they paid expenses, they averaged a net of a bout $16,000” in 1990 in the US [ibid., 376].
wages and salaries accounted for 49 percent of the cost of processing and manufacturing food by the late 1990s.95

The processing and manufacturing of foods takes place off the farm, thereby removing from the hands of the farmers the increased income that processed foods bring and placing it into the hands of business owners.96 This is seen most clearly in vertical and horizontal integration in which one corporation establishes “control of the production, processing, marketing, and distribution of some agricultural commodities.”97 A farmer who signs a contract with such an agribusiness acquires a certain measure of security since he or she is guaranteed a specific price for agricultural products and receives the loans necessary to purchase equipment, seed, and chemicals.98 However, such a farmer loses a great deal of decision-making freedom and incurs increasing amounts of debt.99 Meanwhile, vertically integrated and high profit agribusinesses buy out competing companies, creating a monopoly situation in which one company owns seeds, farming implements, and chemicals.100 The agribusiness profits while many farmers languish and ecosystems deteriorate from over-use and misuse.

95 Ibid., 398.
96 However, it must be acknowledged that food manufacturing provides employment opportunities to people and, so, provides income to other workers.
97 Hurt, 388.
98 Pollan gives an apt example of vertical integration and its power over government: “Though the companies won’t say it, it has been estimated that Cargill and ADM together probably buy somewhere near a third of all the corn grown in America. These two companies now guide corn’s path at every step of the way: They provide the pesticide and fertilizer to farmers; operate most of America’s grain elevators . . .; broker and ship most of the exports; perform the wet and dry milling; feed the livestock and then slaughter the corn-fattened animals; distill the ethanol; and manufacture the high-fructose corn syrup and the numberless other fractions derived from number 2 field corn. Oh, yes – and help write many of the rules that govern this whole game, for Cargill and ADM exert considerable influence over U.S. agricultural policies. . . Cargill is the biggest privately held corporation in the world” [Pollan, 63.].
99 Hurt, 388.
100 Ibid., 390. Unfortunately due to time constraints in describing recent scientific technologies in agriculture, I have left unopened the Pandora’s box of Genetically Modified Organisms. Briefly, I note that biotechnologies work to develop crops that have greater yields, nutritional values, pest-resistance, drought-
Although rising prices are caused, in part, because of rising farming input costs, several other sets of factors contribute to this global problem. As Lester Brown explains in *Full Planet, Empty Plates*,

> We are entering a new era of rising food prices and spreading hunger. On the demand side of the food equation, population growth, rising affluence, and the conversion of food into fuel for cars are combining to raise consumption by record amounts. On the supply side, extreme soil erosion, growing water shortages, and the earth’s rising temperatures are making it more difficult to expand production. Unless we can reverse such trends, food prices will continue to rise and hunger will continue to spread, eventually bringing down our social system.\(^{101}\)

Each set of factors mentioned by Brown merits further attention.

That the world’s human population has increased astronomically over the past century is old news. That this growing population requires increasing amounts of food is also obvious. What is less apparent is that the increasing affluence of many of the world’s population greatly magnifies food demands. This is the case because people with greater financial resource have the ability and often the preference to eat more meat. The production of meat requires grain. But for each pound of meat produced at least double that amount of grain is needed as feed. In fact, “[a] steer in a feedlot requires 7 pounds of grain for each pound of weight gain. For pork, each pound of additional live weight requires 3.5 pounds. For poultry, it is just over 2.”\(^{102}\) Livestock animals necessarily burn calories to live even as they develop muscle tissue for human consumption. Therefore,

---

2. Ibid., 31.
the meat industry – as it depends on corn-fed animals in Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) – is inherently inefficient even though it may be nutritious and delicious.\textsuperscript{103}

As long as people eat moderate amounts of meat, however, alternative forms of meat production and consumption may prove viable for the world’s population. More nutritious, delicious, and ecologically healthy than CAFOs are perennially based forms of meat production: grass fed, free-range livestock. Animals that feed and relieve themselves in the fields and forests of polyculture landscapes participate in the natural and healthful cycles of nutrient and energy transformation. This highly efficient system that remains in tune with natural ecosystems provides necessary nutrition for humans and, in the process, builds up soil structure and fertility. Michael Pollan, nicely illustrates this possibility by describing the work of Joel Salatin and his Polyface Farm.

By the end of the season Salatin’s grasses will have been transformed by his animals into some 25,000 pounds of beef, 50,000 pounds of pork, 12,000 broilers, 800 turkeys, 500 rabbits, and 30,000 dozen eggs. This is an astounding cornucopia of food to draw from a hundred acres of pasture, yet what is perhaps still more astonishing is the fact that this pasture will be in no way diminished by the process – in fact, it will be the better for it, lusher, more fertile, even springier underfoot (this thanks to the increased earthworm traffic). Salatin’s audacious bet is that feeding ourselves from nature need not be a zero-sum proposition, one in which if there is more for us at the end of the season then there must be less for nature – less topsoil, less fertility, less life.\textsuperscript{104}

Despite the possibility of sustainable forms of meat production, Americans must reckon with the significant economic, ecological, and social costs that the consumption of

\textsuperscript{103} Both Brown and Nestle note, however, that meat consumption is only healthy up to a certain point. Those countries wherein people have the longest life expectancies eat moderate amounts of meat [ibid., 35.; Nestle, 6.].

\textsuperscript{104} Pollan, 126-127.
meat imposes upon the world. The difference between eating grain directly or indirectly can be illustrated by comparing a typical Indian diet with an American one. In India, “annual grain consumption totals 380 pounds per person” with most of that grain being consumed directly by people.\(^{105}\) In contrast, an American “consumes roughly 1,400 pounds of grain per year, four fifths of it indirectly in the form of meat, milk, and eggs. Thus the total grain consumption per person in the United States is nearly four times that in India.”\(^{106}\) More and more grain-hungry animals destined for human bellies are being raised to feed the world’s rising human population but also to satisfy the growing appetites of individuals.

World consumption of meat climbed from just under 50 million tons in 1950 to 280 million tons in 2010, more than a fivefold increase. Meanwhile, consumption per person went from 38 pounds to 88 pounds a year. This growth in consumption during this 60-year span was concentrated in the industrial and newly industrializing countries.\(^{107}\)

Overall, global grain consumption has risen dramatically over the past two decades. An average of 21 million tons was produced between 1990-2005 but an average of 45 million tons from 2005-2011.\(^{108}\) This increase, however, is not due to rising human populations and rising meat consumption alone.

The rise in global grain demand stems also from the new hunger that motorized vehicles represent. “In 2011, The United States harvested nearly 400 million tons of

\(^{105}\) Brown, Full Planet, Empty Plates: The New Geopolitics of Food Scarcity, 30.
\(^{106}\) Ibid.
\(^{107}\) Ibid., 25.
\(^{108}\) Ibid., 10. Brown states, “Worldwide, roughly 35 percent of the 2.3-billion-ton annual grain harvest is used for feed” [ibid., 32.].
grain. Of this, 127 million tons (32 percent) went to ethanol distilleries.109 But the production of ethanol requires exorbitant amounts of grain.

The grain required to fill a 25-gallon fuel tank of a sport utility vehicle with ethanol just once would feed one person for a whole year. The grain turned into ethanol in the United States in 2011 could have fed, at average world consumption levels, some 400 million people. But even if the entire U.S. grain harvest were turned into ethanol, it would only satisfy 18 percent of current gasoline demand.110

Although the production and use of ethanol, as opposed to petroleum, has its benefits (such as reduced pollution and, perhaps, reduced dependence on fossil fuels), it unjustly increases food prices and decreases the grain available for human consumption.

The rise in food prices and the limitation of food access for millions of people is an abhorrent social justice issue. Up until 1997, the number of hungry people in the world had been declining but since that time has been on the rise.111 As in the days of the Roman Empire, children are the first to suffer from hunger. Despite the so-called “Green Revolution” that took root in India a half century ago, Brown explains that today, “[a]s a result of chronic hunger, 48 percent of all children in India are stunted physically and mentally. They are undersized, underweight, and likely to have IQs that are on average 10-15 points lower than those of well-nourished children.”112

Following Brown, let us turn from the issues involving increased demand on food resources to consider three important reasons for the decreasing supply of grain. (1) Soil fertility is declining across the globe at alarming rates. “Now, nearly a third of the

---

109 Ibid., 9.
110 Ibid., 38.
111 Ibid., 7.
112 Ibid., 8. He also states, “In a hungry world, it is children who suffer the most. Rising world food prices are leaving millions of children dangerously hungry.”
world’s cropland is losing topsoil faster than new soil is forming, reducing the land’s inherent fertility. Soil that was formed on a geological time scale is being lost on a human time scale.” In order to restore fertility, agriculturalists resort to applying chemical fertilizers. The returns in fertility, however, diminish over time, requiring ever-increasing applications of fertilizer.

At the end of World War II, Illinois farms averaged 50 bushels of corn per acre. Twenty years later these same farms produced 95 bushels per acre, almost a doubling in yield. But in 1945 those fields ‘consumed’ only 10,000 tons of chemical fertilizer compared to 400,000 tons twenty years later. The near doubling in production required a 40-fold increase in the application of the energy-intensive fertilizer product.

As Brown indicates, “[w]orld fertilizer use climbed from 14 million tons in 1950 to 177 million tons in 2010, helping to boost the world grain harvest nearly fourfold.” A devastating and unintended consequence of fertilizer use involves the destruction of aquatic ecosystems.

Soil fertility loss continually threatens the world. Erosion stands as the chief culprit of topsoil loss, being caused either by wind or water when soils lie bare from plowing or drought. Silt accumulates when water carries soil to rivers and oceans, diminishing the volume of bodies of water and threatening natural ecosystems. Two massive and modern dust bowls – one in “northwestern China and Western Mongolia” and the other spanning the African Sahel – are threatening lives and agricultural

---

113 Ibid., 46.
114 Jackson, New Roots for Agriculture, 24.
115 Brown, Full Planet, Empty Plates: The New Geopolitics of Food Scarcity, 77. To its credit, the U.S. uses less fertilizer than does China even though the former has higher yields. This is due, in part, to the fact that U.S. farmers plant soybeans – nitrogen fixers – in rotation with grain crops so that they reduce the need for artificial fertilizers [ibid., 77-78.].
116 Ibid., 46.
productivity.\textsuperscript{117} In fact, desertification across the globe is on the rise, having increased from an annual 600 square miles of land becoming desert between 1950 and 1975 to an annual 1,390 square miles at the turn of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{118}

The global food situation becomes even bleaker when we consider (2) diminishing water resources. Life as we know it requires water, and healthy adults drink about 4 liters of water everyday and indirectly consume 2,000 liters of water through their food intake.\textsuperscript{119} Since agriculture requires a great deal of water, in fact, “70 percent of world water use is for irrigation,” shortages in water shall lead to food shortages.\textsuperscript{120}

The U.S. is losing millions of acres of irrigated farmland as aquifers run low, glacial and snow fed rivers run dry, and as urban centers increase their demands for water.\textsuperscript{121} Such is the dismal case across the globe because modern agriculture has so greatly depended upon irrigation for its success.\textsuperscript{122}

The world’s decreasing supply of grain stems also from (3) the fact that agricultural production has hit a yield ceiling.

Between 1950 and 1990, the world grain yield increased by an average of 2.2 percent a year. From 1990 to 2011, the annual rise slowed to 1.3

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 48. \\
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 48-49. \\
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 56. \\
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 57. \\
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 66. “In early 2012, a release from the University of Zurich’s World Glacier Monitoring Service indicated that 2010 was the twenty-first consecutive year of glacier retreat.” Brown goes on to state, “nowhere does melting threaten world food security more than in the glaciers of the Himalayas and on the Tibetan Plateau that feed the major rivers of India and China” [ibid., 86.]. \\
\textsuperscript{122} “Roughly 40 percent of the world grain harvest is grown on irrigated land. The rest is rainfed. . . In China, four fifths of the grain harvest comes from irrigated land. For India it is three fifths, and for the United States, only one fifth. Asia, where rice is the staple food, totally dominates the world irrigated area” [ibid., 58].
percent. In some agriculturally advanced countries, the dramatic climb in yields has come to an end as yields have plateaued.\textsuperscript{123}

Once farmers have established ideal amounts of fertility and water in their soils, the remaining factors that limit plant productivity – climate and a plant’s photosynthetic capabilities – stand outside the farmers’ control.\textsuperscript{124}

While Brown emphasizes concrete factors such as supply and demand in raising food prices, more intangible forces also work behind the scenes: forces of the market economy. Hard red spring, the type of wheat most commonly used in bread because of its high protein content, caught the attention of the world when its market price doubled on the Minneapolis Grain Exchange (MGEX) in 2008.\textsuperscript{125} Frederick Kaufman explains, “Hard red spring had long traded between three and six dollars per sixty-pound bushel, but from 2005 to 2008 Minneapolis wheat broke record after record as its price doubled, then doubled again.”\textsuperscript{126} By February 25, 2008, “the price of hard red spring surged 29 percent and closed at a record twenty-four dollars per bushel, roughly quadruple the highest number it had ever reached.”\textsuperscript{127} While price spikes like this often occur when supplies are low but demand is high, supply of hard red spring in 2008 was the largest it

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 79. For example, “In France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, wheat yields have been flat for more than a decade. Eight tons per hectare appears to be the biological upper limit for wheat yields in the United Kingdom and Germany” [ibid.].

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 80. Although global climate change is closely associated with agricultural practices and productivity, time and space constraints have prevented me from giving this important topic its due. I will note, however, that “A 2009 report published by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences . . . concluded that if atmospheric CO\textsubscript{2} climbs from the current level of 391 parts per million (ppm) to above 450 ppm, the world will face irreversible dry-season rainfall reductions in several regions. The study likened the conditions to those of the U.S. Dust Bowl era of the 1930s” [ibid., 89].

\textsuperscript{125} Kaufman, 223. Kaufman explains the different types of wheat and their relationships with trading centers and their diverse destinies in food stuffs thus; “whereas Minneapolis traded the contract in hard red spring, Kansas City traded in hard red winter and Chicago in soft red winter – both of which have a lower protein content than Minneapolis wheat, are less expensive, and are more likely to be incorporated into a brownie mix than into a baguette. High protein content makes Minneapolis wheat elite” [ibid., 235].

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 224.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
had been in history.\textsuperscript{128} Why, then, the high price? While the answers of decreasing supply and increasing demand that Brown presents reflect global realities, more fully answering this question leads us into the virtual yet highly powerful vortex of market forces.

For financially comfortable people, increases in the price of wheat and consequently of bread may go generally unnoticed. However, those with little or no extra income not only notice the price change but also suffer because of it.\textsuperscript{129} Thus, understanding (and hopefully reversing) the forces behind wheat’s price hike is no mere academic endeavor. It is a matter of life and death for millions of people.

Although the U.S. government and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) had successfully kept wheat at relatively stable prices in the twentieth century, new government and CFTC policies and banking ventures unsettled this stability at the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{130} The origins of this instability, as Kaufman explains, appeared in 1991 as a new form of investment – the commodity index. The commodity index was created by the masterminds of Goldman Sachs, who

selected eighteen commodifiable ingredients and contrived an elixir that included cattle, coffee, cocoa, corn, hogs, and a couple of varieties of wheat. They weighted the investment value of each element, blended and commingled the parts into sums, then reduced what had been a complicated system of speculation and hedging into a mathematical formula that could be expressed as a single manifestation, to be known henceforth as the Goldman Sachs Commodity Index (GSCI).\textsuperscript{131}

Although the CFTC limited to five thousand the number of wheat futures contracts that an investment firm could hold (in order to prevent speculation and consequent volatile

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 237.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 226.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 212-214. In the twentieth century, CFTC “set limits on the number of wheat futures contracts that could be held by speculators” [ibid., 211.].
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 210.
\end{flushleft}
market conditions), by 2001 the CFTC had changed its tune. “It issued something called a position-limit exemption to six commodity index traders” so that their “index funds would be permitted to hold as many as 130,000 wheat futures contracts at a time.”132

Investment in commodity index funds skyrocketed. “[F]rom 2003 to 2008, the volume of commodity index fund speculation increased by 1,900 percent.”133 In 2008, investment in food commodities went from $55 million to $318 million in a couple months.134 Everyone wanted a piece of the pie. “Some grain transnationals had anticipated the effects of the commodity index funds. Cargill attributed its 86 percent jump in annual profits to commodity trading.”135 From the perspective of investment firms and grain trading corporations, the advent of commodity indexes heralded good news.136

Yet, as is so often the case, those on the underside of the economy suffered. As investment in wheat futures contracts increased, the price of real wheat and real bread shot through the roof.137 “As $200 billion new dollars plunked into commodities, 250 million new people descended into poverty. From 2005 to 2008 the worldwide price of

132 Ibid., 211.
133 Ibid., 225.
134 Ibid., 220.
135 Ibid., 226.
136 Ibid., 250. One might think the good news extended to the farmers, with increased grain prices leading to increased income in farmers’ pockets. No such luck. Just as market prices increased, the cost of all the “ingredients” for grain production (seeds, fertilizer, fuel) also escalated.
137 Kaufman explains, “The index funds may never have held a single bushel of actual wheat, but they were hoarding staggering quantities of wheat futures – billions of promises to buy, not one of them ever to be fulfilled. The dreaded market corner had emerged not from a shortage in the wheat supply but from a much rarer economic occurrence, a shock to the system inspired by the ceaseless call of food indexes for wheat that did not exist and would never need to exist. . . The investment instrument itself – the index – had taken over and created the effects of a traditional corner” [ibid., 243-244].
food rose 80 percent.\textsuperscript{138} People around the globe felt the effects of high food prices, and civil unrest mounted in the Middle East and Africa.\textsuperscript{139} What might have appeared to investors as a socially benign but financially profitable growth in commodity indexes turned out to be a deadly cancer for the world’s poor. And this cancer would return with a vengeance in 2011.\textsuperscript{140} Until such tumors are removed from the socio-economic bodies of the world and the difficult ecological problems discussed by Brown are reduced, we can expect deadly food prices to continue to loom over our common future.

Although some people creating and investing in commodity index funds may think it an ethically neutral activity, even a corporate official at MGEX admits: “[two principles that govern the movement of grain markets [are] ‘fear and greed.’ ”\textsuperscript{141} It would appear that greed has the threatening potential to rear its ugly head in even more vicious ways in the future. Although nations including the U.S. have traditionally maintained grain reserves in case of need, “in 1993 the international General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade put an end to grain reserves as a government responsibility. The 1996 farm bill abolished the grain reserve of the United States.”\textsuperscript{142} By 2003, the U.S. food reserve held only 8 hours worth of soybeans and 5 hours worth of corn; one former USDA administrator told Kaufman: “‘Our current reserve is in the hands of multinational grain

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 226. Kaufman also notes: “The year 2008 witnessed the greatest wheat crop in human history. That year also witnessed the greatest number of starving people in human history. And 2008 witnessed a historic run on the price of hard red spring wheat” [ibid., 237.].

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 227-229; 250-251. Brown notes that in 2011, “high food prices helped fuel the Arab Spring” [Brown, Full Planet, Empty Plates: The New Geopolitics of Food Scarcity, 3.].

\textsuperscript{140} Kaufman, 248. Kaufman proclaims: “For the second time in three years, food was more expensive than it had ever been in all of human history” [ibid.].

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 231.

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 248.
corporations. . . We are only one disaster away from being in their hands.’ “\(^{143}\) Although from 1986 to 2001 the world had 107 days worth of the previous year’s grain when the new harvest appeared, global grain stores “averaged only 74 days of consumption, a drop of one third” between 2002 and 2011.\(^{144}\) Decreasing government regulation of multinational agribusinesses and financial firms, disappearing grain reserves, diminishing topsoil and water resources, an increasing world population, and escalating food prices have led the world into several recent food crises with countless more haunting our future.

In reflecting theologically and eco-ethically upon this alarming global situation, the ethical criteria developed in chapter 4 assist our assessment. Modern agricultural practices, food industries, and overly unrestrained economic and corporate forces combine their powers over human societies and the nonhuman creation in deleterious and destructive ways. The Lockean “waste” of the once unsettled American prairies has increasingly become a true wasteland because of unwise agricultural efforts. America’s production and trade of wheat, in fact, fails at least three of our four Pauline criteria. (1) It leads to the destruction of creation – of soil fertility, atmospheric balance, and aquatic health, to name a few examples. (2) The current form of wheat production also decreases biodiversity (in soils and waters, especially) and the flourishing of life.\(^{145}\) (3) American

---

\(^{143}\) Ibid., 247.

\(^{144}\) Brown, Full Planet, Empty Plates: The New Geopolitics of Food Scarcity, 5.

\(^{145}\) Although I have not focused upon this topic at length in this chapter, evidence suggests that “[a]s we turn fertile ground into large-scale, industrial farms growing only a single crop, the variety of plant life in our ecosystems shrinks. Pollution of the air, water, and soil profoundly affects the millions and billions of other creatures with whom humanity shares this planet” [Kevin J. O’Brien, An Ethics of Biodiversity: Christianity, Ecology, and the Variety of Life (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 4-5]. Also, Jackson, Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture, 87, 186.
grain trade – as it stands captive to corporate and market forces – also limits (if not harms) the wellbeing of the world’s most vulnerable: children, women, and low income people (to say nothing of nonhuman species). (4) It may, in turn, lessen the gratitude and praise to God that people today may render.¹⁴⁶

This present state of affairs demands attention and action. Alternative forms of agriculture are necessary for humanity and creation’s liberation from excessive and untimely destruction. New forms of agriculture must take the wellbeing of the whole of creation into account. In such a scenario, it behooves Christian communities to take an active role in procuring, distributing, and storing grain, not for abhorrent economic gain at the cost of people’s lives or at the expense of ecological health but for the sake of the hungry now and the hungry in the future. Yet, unfortunately, corruption, fear, and greed could mutate even such noble ecclesial attempts to circumvent the imperialistic effects of global commodities investment and the upending effects of global climate change.¹⁴⁷ Paul’s vision of liberated creation, therefore, must remain at the center of our ethical and practical deliberations as we submit our minds and bodies to God so that they might be conformed to Jesus Christ rather than the forces of destruction (Rom 12:1-2).

5.3 THE BREAD OF LIFE: AN AGRARIAN ALTERNATIVE

When it comes to agriculture, it is here we have a chance to square the food-producing part of our economy with nature’s economy, a real economy that features material recycling and runs on contemporary sunlight. I believe it is here that we can begin to explore the possibilities

¹⁴⁶ Wirzba concurs that in modern agriculture, “food ceases to speak as the grace of God. Eating ceases to be the occasion through which we experience life as a membership of belonging, responsibility, and gratitude” [Wirzba, Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating, xiv.].
¹⁴⁷ Perhaps a sobering reminder would curb our greed: “The benefit of wheat is not cash. The benefit of wheat is bread, and the benefit of bread is life” [Kaufman, 253.].
of a different economic order, this time of the renewable variety. Of course, more is on our plate than food if we are to be secure. Economics is about more than bookkeeping. It should now be clear that we, in the industrial societies in particular, have been cooking the books to falsify the deficit spending we have imposed on our ecosphere. Perhaps a new agriculture based on the way nature’s ecosystems and nature’s economies have worked over millennia can point the way.  

As a scientist and farmer, Wes Jackson has spent decades collaborating with creation in the hopes of discovering a new model for human food production, a model that takes its shape from ecologically beneficial and productive natural ecosystems. By assuming the status of learner, Jackson looks to nature rather than technology for answers. In so doing, he has discovered that the missing link in sustainable agriculture is the development of perennial crops and has worked with countless others across the globe to find and breed perennial varieties of wheat, sorghum, legumes, oilseeds, rice, and corn so that agriculture might be redeemed from the ground up. 

Since thriving terrestrial ecosystems depend primarily on a variety of perennial rather than annual herbaceous species, these ecosystems maintain and even build the fertile soil on which they grow. Jackson studies the native prairie ecosystems of the Great Plains, where perennial plants have strong and permanent root systems that hold soils in place even during dry windstorms or the deluge of rainstorms. More efficiently than annual grasses, perennials absorb precious nutrients found deep in the ground and incorporate these nutrients into their tissues, allowing animals and insects to gain access to their life-supporting nutrients. As Jackson explains:

> essentially all of nature’s land-based ecosystems feature perennials. This has to do with the fact that only twenty-some elements represented on the

---

148 Jackson, Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture, 17.
149 Ibid., 156-158.
periodic chart in our science classrooms go into all of earth’s organisms. And importantly, only four of these building blocks circulate in the atmospheric commons. The rest are in the soil, and they are all water-soluble. Managing these elements and water is accomplished by a diversity of roots below the surface.\textsuperscript{150}

Of all their herbaceous relatives, perennial plants most effectively facilitate the natural cycles of nutrient and energy flow on which life depends.

Yet, ever since the birth of agriculture, the primary components of the human diet have come from annual plants. Even now, when Americans consume larger percentages of meat, we directly or indirectly “obtain at least two-thirds of our total calories from grains and oilseed crops, none of them perennial.”\textsuperscript{151} Much of the wheat and corn on which the U.S. and world’s populations depend are grown in the Great Plains. This region contains the best topsoils in the world, yet a growing body of research demonstrates conclusively that the cultivation of annual crops there is degrading soils, rendering water unfit to drink, rolling back biodiversity, spreading toxic chemicals, and even creating a hypoxic, or “dead,” zone hundreds of miles downstream in the Gulf of Mexico.\textsuperscript{152}

Such is the case throughout the world where industrial farming practices are employed; in fact, the Millennium Ecosystems Assessment maintains, “agriculture is the ‘largest threat to biodiversity and ecosystem function of any single human activity.’”\textsuperscript{153} The challenge, then, is to reinvent agriculture so that humans may not only survive on earth but thrive

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 151. Carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen come from the atmosphere; phosphorus, potassium, iodine, sulphur, calcium, iron, manganese, and others come from the soil [ibid., 131.].
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 154.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 186. Jackson refers to Aldo Leopold, the great early ecologist, who understood that “when we disrupt the diverse integration of species (as we do with farming), the ecosystem will decline – which means that the harvest of contemporary sunlight also will decline, for without the soil-sponsored nutrients, land plants are unable to capture the carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen bound together in water and carbon dioxide afloat in the atmospheric commons and store the sun’s energy through photosynthesis” [ibid., 30.].
along with the rest of God’s life-filled creation, especially since we know from Paul and Christian theology that our destinies intertwine.

Jackson and those who work with him at The Land Institute believe that perennial-based agriculture gives us this new way forward. If perennial crops are grown, “a farm will no longer have to be an ecological sacrifice zone; rather, it will provide food and at the same time protect soils, water, and biodiversity.” This is the case because of five powerful characteristics of perennial plants:

1. They diminish runoff and soil erosion because their strong root systems are not plowed up.
2. Their roots are deeper and can reach nutrients and water that annuals cannot obtain.
3. Their roots create good, granular soil structure at a faster rate than annuals.
4. They grow above ground herbage earlier and faster in the growing season than annuals. They also remain alive and continue to photosynthesize after harvest when their annual counterparts would be dead. This means that perennial plants have a greater capacity for sequestering carbon, a process that has become essential for reducing the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.
5. They provide a context in which a wider variety of organisms – including nitrogen fixers – may thrive than do annual crops.

In addition to these positive aspects of perennial crop production, at least three other benefits come to mind, especially in light of our foregoing investigation of modern agriculture. (1) The fact that perennial crops do not require annual plowing and planting, as do annuals, prevents thousands of barrels of fuel from being burned. This helpfully addresses the world’s escalating global climate change crisis caused by fossil fuel use. (2) Since farmers need not replant these crops each year, they are liberated from the annual expense of purchasing seed (often from multinational corporations). (3) Since perennial

---

154 Ibid., 156.
155 Ibid., 162.
plants secure and also make available more soil nutrients than do their annual
counterparts (both because they are not plowed up and because their roots reach more
deeply into the ground), they require fewer (or no) additions of chemical fertilizer. This
further frees farmers from the heavy financial burdens that industrial farming demands.
(4) Since the grain grown from perennial varieties stands outside the traditional grain
market, farmers and consumers are not captive to the market forces driving up
conventional grain prices.

The perennial wheat variety that Jackson and The Land Institute have developed
over recent years is named Kernza™. Some of its nutritional qualities are “superior to
those of annual wheat,” making it a strong competitor to reigning annual varieties.156 For
example, since Kernza has smaller seeds, “more bran, which means more fiber,” as well
as “more minerals and more of some vitamins” are available in Kernza flour than
traditional wheat flour.157 Since Kernza is an entirely different species from those sold
by traditional seed companies, it does not easily cross-pollinate with annual wheat
crops.158 This allows farmers to bypass the potentially hazardous threat of infringing
upon corporations’ seed patents. Moreover, farmers who desire to transition to a
perennial wheat crop of Kernza would not face large startup costs since it “yields well in
the first year or two.”159

156 Ibid., 156. Jackson does not specify what these qualities are. However, I have asked for this
information from the Land Institute.
157 Lee DeHaan, “Email Message to Author,” (Apr 4-8, 2014).
158 Ibid. Additionally, farmers can successfully plant Kernza in fields that have been treated with
conventional chemical applications (as long as they would not hurt grass). Kernza appears to grow well
across a wide geographical region, mostly in the north where humidity is lower than in the southeast.
DeHaan explains, “We have grown it in KS, UT, MN, IA, IL, MI, and NY. It can grow most places, but
yields are better in the north. It can develop a bacterial disease in high humidity” [Ibid.].
159 Ibid.
However, Kernza as it has developed thus far features several weaknesses. Foremost of these is that it is not yet ready for large-scale production. The Land Institute would like to continue improving and testing Kernza and other perennial wheat varieties before it releases them to the farming public.\textsuperscript{160} Since the farmer would grow Kernza outside the typical market system, he or she would have to find and depend upon an alternative market that pays a profitable price.\textsuperscript{161} Additionally, Kernza does not have the high gluten content that makes hard red spring, in particular, so successful as bread flour. However, “[b]reeding to increase gluten quality is planned, but that will take at least a decade. Right now, it can be used in a mix with wheat flour to make bread, or alone to make muffins, pancakes, cookies, etc.”\textsuperscript{162} The potential for developing a perennial wheat variety that functions effectively for baking our daily bread remains open. We – and creation – eagerly await its revelation.

Perennial crops hold great potential for alleviating anthropogenic forms of ecological degradation and destruction. They also support greater biodiversity and the flourishing of life than do the annual varieties used in modern agriculture. While the extent to which perennial agriculture may contribute to the world’s most vulnerable members remains unclear, it has great potential to do so for at least two reasons. (1) Farmers need not purchase seed annually or expend the money and energy to plow and sow annually. (2) Polyculture perennial crops, having greater resistance to drought and insects, provide more reliable harvests in a time of climate change. Perennial agriculture,

\textsuperscript{160} Dehaan indicates: “We have plenty of farmer interest, but we’ve had to put off planting on farms until we can be sure that the grains are strong perennials and yield well” [ibid.].
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
moreover, may engender greater thanks and praise to God as God’s image bearers rightly nurture the flourishing of creation in its entirety and decrease anthropogenic forms of destruction.

5.4 CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES, PERENNIAL WHEAT, & THE EUCHARIST

The transition to perennial-based agriculture on a global scale appears daunting if not impossible. Seed corporations and their many allies in the corporate, political, and financial world have vested interests in maintaining their grip on the profit they receive from conventional farmers who annually purchase and produce seeds. Because of this interest, very little research money is available to scientists who attempt to develop reliable and productive perennial crops.

Beyond the systemic barriers to perennial agriculture stands the intimidating barrier of misinformation. The variety present in grocery markets purposely veils ecological realities. As Michael Pollan suggests:

Naturalists regard biodiversity as a measure of a landscape’s health, and the modern supermarket’s devotion to variety and choice would seem to reflect, perhaps even promote, precisely that sort of ecological vigor... The great edifice of variety and choice that is an American supermarket turns out to rest on a remarkably narrow biological foundation comprised of a tiny group of plants that is dominated by a single species: *Zea mays*, the giant tropical grass most Americans know as corn.¹⁶³

It is the calling of Christian leaders and laypersons to lift the veil so that we might see behind the apparent variety of groceries and restaurants to the destruction of ecosphere, biodiversity, and societal wellbeing. Like Paul, we must resist the dominant socio-

¹⁶³ Pollan, 17-18.
political narrative that would have us believe we have created an age of fertility and peace through military and industrial might. We must instead speak again and again of the more truthful narrative of creation’s anthropogenic bondage to destruction and of the more hopeful narrative of creation’s imminent liberation at the hands of God. As Fred Bahnson and Norman Wirzba poignantly explain,

We live amid two competing narratives. One is the abundant kingdom Jesus brought, where all receive enough and often there is abundance. The second narrative for most of us, however, is not scarcity but a glamorous and alluring kind of abundance. I call it the abundant mirage. Nowhere are these two competing narratives more manifest than in the way we eat.\(^{164}\)

Yet, Christians ought not merely lift the veil but participate in transforming the ecological mess that stands behind the veil. Fear of the unknown may nevertheless attend us as we contemplate alternative forms of agriculture and ask such valid questions as: How well will perennial crops grow? How will they taste? Can they feed the world’s growing population? Our knowledge of creation’s current state of affairs, as briefly and inadequately described heretofore, helps us push beyond the veil. We know that conventional crop yields are declining because of decreasing soil fertility and water access. We also know that Kernza has proven itself to yield competitive amounts of wheat without the compromise to creational health.\(^{165}\) We know that small-scale, polyculture, intensive forms of agriculture, such as that of Polyface Farm, provide

---


\(^{165}\) Jackson explains, “There is sufficient evidence that ‘reasonable reference yields’ of annual crops can be matched on high-quality lands and exceeded on poor-quality lands by diverse perennial systems with fewer negative impacts” [Jackson, *Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture*, 165].
promising models for feeding the world’s hungry. In applying our criteria of alleviating destruction, increasing biodiversity, supporting the wellbeing of the most vulnerable, and encouraging thanksgiving to Creator and creation, we come to a simple conclusion: we must rally behind perennial agricultural efforts.

Practically speaking, how might Christians helpfully support perennial agriculture, the growing of perennial wheat in particular? My answer to this question comes in the form of a vision, a vision that involves connectional churches like the United Methodist Church (UMC). Since the UMC has administrative and communication networks ready at hand, it can effectively get the word out about alternative agricultural networks and can help mobilize ecologically sound farming practices.

In coalition with a variety of efforts, including political advocacy, sustainable agriculture research and development, personal lifestyle changes, and international sustainable agriculture activities, churches might collaboratively adopt or sponsor individual farmers, since farmers stand in very vulnerable positions in this transition (in part, due to debt but also their need for a reliable market). Together, churches (rather than corporations) would contract with farmers to purchase their grain at affordable yet profitable prices. The contracts would provide the financial security that farmers need (no matter crop yield) and the food security that church members and the people they serve (including low-income persons) require. This “perennial bread cooperative,” as I will call it, mimics the model of community supported agriculture (CSA) relationships.

---

166 One significant challenge not discussed in this short chapter, however, is the high economic cost of such food as compared to conventional food, especially for those without discretionary income.
Local millers and bakers would benefit from these ecclesial-pastoral relationships since consumers would need the grain to be milled and, perhaps, baked into delicious and nutritious foods. Thus, rather than the jobs and profits of these enterprises benefiting large manufacturing businesses far removed from farmer and consumer, the perennial bread cooperative would revitalize local businesses and communities. Local millers, moreover, might function as local grain reserves, providing communities with a small but significant measure of protection in times of dearth and high market prices.

At first, churches might commit to purchase enough grain for weekly or monthly communion bread. Eventually (and, ideally, initially) churches and their congregants would purchase grain products (breads, cereals, granola bars, etc.) for use in homes, soup kitchens, and congregational meals. As more people participate in this alternative, perennial market and as more products become available, so too more farmers would be invited to transition out of annual into perennial wheat farming.

I imagine the UMC would promote this perennial bread cooperative but would not administrate it. Thus, a business – preferably one that is not-for-profit – is necessary to facilitate the cooperation between farmer, miller, baker, and consumer. Such a business – in addition to having a positive figure on its bottom line so that it might expand its work – must ever seek a positive figure on the triple bottom line.167

---

167 Another way to conceptualize a triple bottom line is as three pillars. “The EU formulated the three pillars of sustainability at its Copenhagen Summit and with the Treaty of Amsterdam of 1997. Known as the ‘three-pillar model of sustainability,’ the principle states that sustainability not only comprises the natural heritage we pass on to the next generation but also the economic achievements and social institutions of our society, such as democratic political participation or peaceful conflict resolution. Sustainable development thus rests on an ecological, an economic and a social pillar. If one of the pillars gives way, the 'sustainability building’ will collapse” [Pascal Bader, “Sustainability – from Principle to Practice,” (March 2008). http://www.goethe.de/ges/umw/dos/nac/den/en3106180.htm.]. See also, Larch Maxey, “Can We Sustain Sustainable Agriculture? Learning from Small-Scale Producer-Suppliers in
includes not only economic profit but also social and ecological profits. Thus, the perennial bread cooperative would pay its employees and farmers living wages and would choose zero emissions practices, for example. The business (and the clientele it serves) could take a biblical tithing model to its sales as well. Perhaps for every nine products sold it could give one product to a low-income person or family (thus, one tenth of its products would go to those in need). First and foremost the health and wellbeing of all creation – human and nonhuman – would be in view. Since perennial bread will not require the sacrifice of ecological health for its production, our offering of this bread to God in the Eucharist will represent the one intended sacrifice: that of Jesus Christ.

As congregants and pastors become more fully connected to farmers through perennial bread cooperatives and other CSA relationships, they also re-establish their integral connections to place, water, land, sun, and life. As Theokritoff suggests:

In communities divorced from agriculture, where few in the congregation have ever made bread, let alone grown and harvested wheat, it is perhaps not surprising that the Eucharist is regarded less as something we offer than as something we receive. Yet the essence of the service has not changed. . . We offer back to God his own gifts (since nothing in the world is our own), accompanied by the only thing that is properly ours: our praise, blessing, and thanksgiving. In the eucharistic Gifts, our gratitude is given in tangible form. And in return, we receive God’s Gift of himself in tangible form.


168 Our food system should help the most vulnerable of people, people who have little to no access to arable land, clean water, healthy food, or money. We as Christians might help communities in our own nation gain greater access to healthy and affordable food not only through political advocacy but also by means of working with communities to establish local gardens and food co-operatives. More globally, Christians might assist communities in developing countries to establish sustainable, dependable, and affordable farming practices through perennial agriculture and by maintaining local crop varieties. I hope to study the issues of food access, security, and justice in relation to a Pauline eco-ethics more fully in the future.

Although the eucharistic celebration forefronts human activity and agency, Theokritoff suggests that it also presupposes the activities of countless other nonhuman members of creation. It is humbling to remember that

[the eucharistic bread, which is a human offering, is totally dependent on the activity of yeasts, the physical and chemical processes that provide nutrients to the soil, and the unremitting labor of microorganisms that create humus, to name but a few essential contributors. On a purely physical level, the Eucharist is a cosmic celebration on an awe-inspiring scale. We are the ones who literally make the “offering,” since offering is a conscious activity. But by analogy, we could see the bread and wine as also being the “offering” of all the creatures involved in their making: of the rocks and plants and bacteria without which there would be no soil, and indeed the cosmic dust of which the earth is composed. Without us, the product of these creatures’ activity would not be offered to God in thankfulness; but without them, there would be nothing for us to offer.170

The celebration of the Eucharist invites all into a cosmic communion and can presage the liberation for all the cosmos that is to come in the New Creation.

Keeping in mind the essential role of soil and countless other nonhuman “ingredients” that go into food production as we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, we may rightly be reminded of our own origins in the soil. As God tells the guilty Adam: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat your bread until you shall return to the earth, out of which you were taken, since you are earth and into earth you shall go” (Gen 3:19).171

In the process of ingesting the earthly elements of Eucharist, as these are attended by the presence of the Holy Spirit who makes the elements “the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood,” we contemplate our

170 Ibid., 193-194. Similarly, Wirzba declares, “Good, healthy soil is not dead but teeming with life. Death decays into it and reemerges as new life, all because of the astoundingly complex and mostly invisible work of billions of bacteria and microorganisms. Without their work our world would be overwhelmed by the corpses and stench of death. Soil is a marvel and a mystery that we have not yet even begun to comprehend” [Wirzba, Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating, 13.]

171 Author’s translation of the Greek OT text.
mortality; Jesus Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection; and our participation in his suffering, crucifixion, resurrection, and glorification. We thereby also more fully embody our origins and inhabit our futures as perfected image bearers, bearing not only the image of God but also the image of Earth. And together with the earth – with God’s entire creation – we shall be liberated into God’s glorious future.

Such a gospel of liberation – liberation from sin and death and liberation for righteousness – powerfully opposes those forces that would seek to enslave and deform us. The dominant culture in the U.S. would have us believe we humans are meant to be unrestrained consumers.

Capitalism’s increasingly globalized story . . . describes human beings as customers and producers and increasingly narrates their relationships in market terms; it tends to depict human interaction with the nonhuman world in terms of resources, prices, market value; it has a very particular understanding of “freedom.”

Admittedly, people and all living things necessarily “consume” the earth’s resources; yet, the excessive degradation and destruction that often attends this consumption is not necessary.

Hopefully it has become increasingly evident throughout this dissertation that Rom 8:19-22 inspires us to pursue forms of consumption that alleviate the destruction of creation, promote biodiversity and the flourishing of life, enhance the wellbeing of creation’s vulnerable members, and engender expressions of thanksgiving to God. In short, that

the Pauline story can be a means to articulate a counter-narrative, a challenge to dominant economic and cultural narratives, a means to

---

envisage communities in which a different story constructs a different sense of identity and undergirds different patterns of practice.\textsuperscript{174}

The identity into which Rom 8:19-22 presses Christians is the image of Jesus Christ, who is himself the perfect manifestation of God and earth and who liberates creation from its slavery to destruction at the resurrection of all God’s children.

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


*Cura Annonae*. Edited by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, Brill’s New Pauly: Brill Online, 2012.


DeHaan, Lee. “Email Message to Author.” Apr 4-8, 2014.


Presian Renee (Smyers) Burroughs was born December 23, 1975 in Akron, Ohio. She attended Cedarville College and received a Bachelor of Arts in Biology, Secondary Education, and Bible in December 1998. She then pursued a Master of Linguistics and Exegesis at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia, and graduated in April 2001. After assisting Daniel Wallace in New Testament textual criticism in Münster, Germany, she enrolled at Duke Divinity School, earning a Master of Divinity in May 2006. Thereafter, Presian attended Candler School of Theology from 2006 to 2007 as a non-degree student in support of United Methodist ordination requirements.


Presian is a member of the Society of Biblical Literature. She has been honored to receive the Edgar B. Fisher Memorial Grant, Th.D. Fellowship, John Wesley Fellowship, Martha A. Andrews Scholarship, James Jones Scholarship, McMurry Richey Scholarship, Lawlor Award, AuSable Fellowship, and the Bible Department Award.