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Beyond the Genesis Deadlock an Orthodox Re reading of Creation and the Rejection of Anthropocentrism

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Genesis creation narrative continues to play a significant role in contemporary discussions concerning religion, ecology, and humanity's relationship with the natural world. While modern interpretations often focus on the tension between biblical accounts and scientific explanations, the Eastern Orthodox tradition approaches Genesis primarily as a theological revelation concerning God, humanity, and creation. Drawing on the insights of the Church Fathers, understands the cosmos as a sacred reality whose value derives from its relationship with the Creator rather than its utility to human beings. Although humanity occupies a unique place within creation, this role is understood in terms of stewardship and responsibility rather than domination. Against this background, this article examines the Orthodox interpretation of Genesis and argues distinctive theological response to anthropocentric approaches by emphasizing the sacredness, interconnectedness, and divine purpose of all creation.

1.The need for a Reassessment of Anthropocentrism

The concept of anthropocentrism has become central to contemporary ecological discourse. Broadly understood, anthropocentrism refers to a worldview that places human beings at the centre of moral and cosmic significance, often evaluating nature primarily in terms of its usefulness to humanity. Environmental scholars have frequently identified such human-centred perspectives as contributing to ecological degradation and the exploitation of the natural world.

One of the most influential critiques of Christianity in this regard was advanced by Lynn White Jr., who argued that Western interpretations of the Genesis creation narrative encouraged a hierarchical relationship between humanity and nature. According to this view, the biblical command to exercise dominion over the earth contributed to the development of attitudes that justified human control and exploitation of the environment. Similar concerns have been echoed by contemporary ecological thinkers who criticize worldviews that reduce nature to a mere resource for human benefit.

These criticisms raise an important question: does the Genesis narrative itself promote anthropocentrism, or is this conclusion the result of particular historical and philosophical interpretations? Addressing this question requires a closer examination of alternative Christian traditions, especially the Eastern Orthodox understanding of creation, which presents a markedly different vision of humanity's relationship with the natural world. In contrast to interpretations that view Genesis as legitimizing human domination over nature, the Syriac tradition represented by St. Ephrem the Syrian presents creation as a symbolic and sacramental reality through which humanity encounters God. Humanity occupies a distinctive place within creation, yet remains part of the broader cosmic order established by the Creator [1].

The development of anthropocentric interpretations cannot be explained solely by reference to the biblical text itself. Rather, such readings emerged through a complex interaction of theological, philosophical, and cultural influences. In many contexts, readers approached Scripture through assumptions that reflected their own social and intellectual environments, resulting in interpretations that emphasized humanity's power over nature rather than its responsibility toward creation[2]. During the modern period, the rise of scientific rationalism, technological progress, and industrial expansion further reinforced attitudes of control and mastery over the natural world[3] Consequently, anthropocentrism should be understood not merely as a biblical teaching but as a historical interpretation shaped by broader intellectual and social developments.[3] This observation underscores the necessity of careful exegetical study, which seeks to interpret Scripture within its linguistic, literary, historical, and theological contexts rather than through assumptions derived from later cultural frameworks[4]. A responsible reading of Genesis therefore requires attention not only to the text itself but also to the history of its interpretation and the presuppositions that readers bring to it.

2. The Genesis Narrative: Dominion or Stewardship

Much of the criticism directed against the Genesis creation narrative centres on Genesis 1:26–28, where humanity is commanded to "have dominion" over the earth and its creatures. Environmental critics have often interpreted this passage as granting human beings unrestricted authority over nature, thereby encouraging attitudes of exploitation and ecological degradation. One of the most influential formulations of this critique was advanced by Lynn White Jr., who argued that Western Christianity's understanding of dominion contributed to the ecological crisis [4].

A closer examination of Genesis, however, suggests a more nuanced understanding. The concept of dominion cannot be separated from humanity's creation in the image of God, which implies responsibility rather than arbitrary power. Furthermore, Genesis 2:15 states that the human being was placed in the Garden of Eden "to till it and keep it." The Hebrew verbs ʿābad and šāmar carry

[1] Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise, trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), Hymns 5–6.
[2] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989), 269–306
[3] Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," Science 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–1207.
[4] Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," Science 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–1207.

the meanings of serving, cultivating, guarding, and preserving [5]. As Gordon Wenham observes, these terms indicate that humanity's relationship with creation is characterized by service and care rather than exploitation [6].Similarly, Nahum Sarna argues that the human vocation in Eden involves both cultivation and protection, reflecting a responsibility toward the created order [7]. These interpretations challenge readings of Genesis that identify the biblical narrative with a purely anthropocentric worldview and provide a foundation for understanding creation as a sacred trust entrusted to human stewardship.

3. Orthodox reading of the creation Narrative

The Orthodox tradition approaches the creation narrative of Genesis not merely as an account of the origin of the world but as a theological revelation of God's relationship with creation. The world is understood as a free gift of divine love, brought into existence by God and declared "very good" (Gen. 1:31) [8]. In this perspective, creation possesses intrinsic worth because it reflects the wisdom and glory of its Creator[9]. Humanity, though created in the image and likeness of God, is not portrayed as an autonomous ruler over nature but as a steward entrusted with the care and preservation of God's creation [10]. Orthodox theology further emphasizes the sacramental character of the cosmos, viewing the material world as a means through which divine presence and grace are manifested[11]. This understanding is reflected in the writings of the Church Fathers. St. Basil the Great interprets the order and beauty of creation as signs of divine wisdom, while St. Ephrem the Syrian presents nature as a symbolic and revelatory reality through which human beings encounter God[12] .Consequently, an Orthodox reading of the creation narrative challenges exploitative interpretations of dominion and instead promotes a vision of responsible stewardship, communion, and reverence for the entire created order.

4. St. Ephrem the Syrian and the Sacramentality of Creation

Among the Church Fathers, St. Ephrem the Syrian offers one of the most profound theological visions of creation. Unlike approaches that view the natural world merely as a collection of

[5] The Hebrew verbs ʿābad (עָבַד) and šāmar (שָׁמַר) in Genesis 2:15 are commonly translated as "to serve/cultivate" and "to keep/guard." See The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, ed. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000), s.vv. "עבד" and "שמר."

[6] Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 1–15, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 67.

[7] Nahum M. Sarna, Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 20.

[8] Basil the Great, Hexaemeron, Homily I.2.

[9] John Zizioulas, Preserving God's Creation: Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology (London: King's College Centre for Theology, Religion and Culture, 2005), 11–18.

[10] Kallistos Ware, "Through the Creation to the Creator," in The Orthodox Way (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 56–72.

[11] Alexander Schmemann, For the Life of the World (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 14–20.

[12] Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise, trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), Hymns 5–6.

material objects existing for human use, Ephrem understands creation as a symbolic and sacramental reality through which God reveals Himself[13]. For Ephrem, the created order is filled with divine meaning; nature functions as a living testimony to the wisdom, beauty, and generosity of the Creator[14]. Creation is therefore not simply an environment inhabited by human beings but a sacred reality that invites contemplation and participation in the divine mystery.

A central theme in Ephrem's writings is the idea that the visible world serves as a mirror of invisible truths. In his Hymns on Paradise, he portrays Paradise not merely as a historical location but as a theological symbol revealing the harmony that exists between God, humanity, and the rest of creation[15]. The natural world possesses a pedagogical function, teaching humanity about divine realities and directing the human mind toward the Creator. Consequently, nature cannot be reduced to an instrument of human satisfaction, for it possesses a value that derives from its relationship with God.

This vision also challenges radical forms of anthropocentrism. Although Ephrem acknowledges the unique dignity of human beings, he does not place humanity outside or above the created order. Rather, humanity exists within a cosmic community whose ultimate purpose is the glorification of God[16]. The relationship between human beings and nature is therefore characterized by mutual dependence and shared participation in the divine economy. Human beings are called not to dominate creation but to recognize its sacred character and to exercise responsible stewardship over it.

The sacramental vision of creation found in Ephrem's theology provides an important resource for contemporary ecological reflection. By presenting the natural world as a manifestation of divine wisdom and a means of encountering God, Ephrem encourages attitudes of reverence, gratitude, and care toward the environment[17]. His theology demonstrates that the Christian tradition contains resources for overcoming exploitative approaches to nature and for fostering a more holistic understanding of humanity's place within creation.

5. Reassessing Anthropocentrism through Orthodox Theology

The contemporary ecological crisis has prompted scholars to reconsider anthropocentric interpretations of the human relationship with nature. Critics such as Lynn White Jr. argued that

[13] Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise, trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), Hymns 5–6.

[14] Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Faith, trans. Jeffrey Wickes (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), Hymn 16.

[15] Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise, trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), Hymn 11.

[16] Sebastian Brock, The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), 37–54.

[17] Robert Murray, Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004), 97–120.

the Judeo-Christian tradition encouraged environmental exploitation by granting humanity dominion over the earth[18]. However, Orthodox theology offers a different perspective. While affirming the unique dignity of human beings as bearers of the image of God, the Orthodox tradition rejects the notion that humanity possesses absolute authority over creation[19]. Human beings are instead understood as priests and stewards of creation, called to offer the world back to God in thanksgiving and responsible care[20]. From this perspective, dominion is interpreted not as domination but as service. The command to "subdue" and "have dominion" in Genesis is balanced by the vocation to "till and keep" the garden (Gen. 2:15), indicating responsibility rather than exploitation[21].The Church Fathers consistently emphasize that humanity's role within creation is one of guardianship and cooperation with the divine purpose. St. Ephrem the Syrian, for example, portrays humanity as part of a harmonious cosmic order in which all creatures bear witness to God's glory[22].

This Orthodox vision has significant ecological implications. If creation is understood as God's gift and a manifestation of divine wisdom, then environmental degradation becomes not merely a practical problem but also a spiritual and moral failure. Ecological responsibility emerges as an essential dimension of Christian discipleship, calling believers to cultivate reverence, restraint, and care for the created world[23] Thus, Orthodox theology provides a compelling framework for reassessing anthropocentrism and promoting a stewardship-centered ethic capable of addressing contemporary environmental challenges.

II. CONCLUSION

The contemporary ecological crisis has raised important questions concerning the relationship between humanity and the natural world, leading many scholars to reassess anthropocentric interpretations of the biblical creation narrative. While critics such as Lynn White Jr. have argued that Christianity contributed to environmental degradation through its emphasis on human dominion, a careful examination of Genesis reveals a more nuanced understanding. The biblical account presents humanity not merely as ruler but also as caretaker, entrusted with the responsibility of preserving and nurturing God's creation.

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[18] Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” Science 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–1207.

[19] John D. Zizioulas, Preserving God's Creation: Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology (London: King's College Centre for Theology, Religion and Culture, 2005), 15–18.

[20] Alexander Schmemann, For the Life of the World (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 14–20.

[21] Ellen F. Davis, Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 29–45.

[22] Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Paradise, trans. Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), Hymns 5–6.

[23] Kallistos Ware, “Through the Creation to the Creator,” in The Orthodox Way (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 56–72.

The Orthodox tradition further develops this perspective by emphasizing the goodness, sacredness, and interconnectedness of all creation. Viewing the world as a gift of divine love and a manifestation of God's wisdom, Orthodox theology rejects exploitative attitudes toward nature and instead promotes stewardship, reverence, and responsible care. The writings of the Church Fathers, particularly St. Ephrem the Syrian, highlight the symbolic and sacramental character of creation, portraying humanity as part of a harmonious cosmic order rather than as an autonomous master over it.

At the same time, this study underscores the importance of sound exegetical methodology in the interpretation of Scripture. Biblical passages cannot be adequately understood through isolated or literalistic readings detached from their linguistic, literary, historical, and theological contexts. The interpretation of key terms such as "dominion" in Genesis requires careful attention to the original text and its broader canonical framework. Exegetical study, together with the interpretative insights of the Christian tradition, helps prevent misreadings that may justify exploitation of the natural world. Therefore, an Orthodox reading of the creation narrative demonstrates that the Bible, when interpreted responsibly, does not endorse destructive domination over nature but calls humanity to a vocation of stewardship, communion, and service within God's creation.

Thus, Orthodox theology offers a constructive response to contemporary ecological concerns by affirming both the unique dignity of the human person and humanity's responsibility toward the whole community of creation. Such a vision invites a renewed relationship with the natural world, grounded in gratitude to the Creator and informed by careful biblical interpretation.