

Is There a Dominion Mandate? Discussion: A Response to Darek Isaacs

Thomas D. Hennigan, Associate Professor of Organism Biology, Truett-McConnell College, Cleveland, Georgia.

I appreciate Darek Isaacs's paper (Isaacs 2013), because his alternative position causes both deeper reflection and discussion about a topic important to me. I have spent the better part of my life in the outdoors; camping, hiking, backpacking, and teaching wilderness survival skills. As a wildlife ecologist I have handled animals from flying squirrels to bats; bullfrogs to rattlesnakes; and wolves to bears, so I do not speak as one who is "insulated behind the non-biting pages of books and non-lethal pixels of computer screens" (Isaacs 2013, p.4). Mr. Isaacs and I have many points of agreement and he does a thorough job outlining the major theological issues below:

1. God created all things very good.
2. Adam was given dominion over the animal kind and they recognized that dominion.
3. The overall biblical meaning of dominion (Hebrew: *rādâ*) is accurate.
4. That God did not command us to command.
5. There was no struggle with the Creation prior to the Fall because God made everything "very good."
6. The struggle man has with nature is a consequence of the Fall.
7. Our relationships with creatures have negatively changed since the Fall.
8. Messiah claimed victory at the Cross and for those who give their life to him; they are transferred from the dominion of death to the dominion of Messiah.
9. Satan has limited control on this planet but greater is He that is in us (as believers) than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4).
10. That through faith in Messiah, it is possible to operate within His Dominion.

Where Mr. Isaacs and I disagree is his position that the dominion mandate is no longer applicable, especially with unbelievers, and his narrow application of the word "dominion." I can only speak for myself, but I have never understood dominion as humans having complete victory and domination in this world or that creatures must bow in submission to mankind. In my opinion, this is an extremely narrow application of *rādâ* and therefore the plethora of examples used to bolster his argument is only relevant if his narrow definition is correct. I agree

that Adam's (man's) dominion and relationship with both animals and the environment have negatively changed drastically since the Fall. But the changed relationships do not necessarily mean that ruling over the creatures of the earth is no longer applicable for today. Within the biblical definition of the word, having dominion or prevailing can be argued at a larger scale than discussing how animals or natural disasters kill individual people. There is no question that when I work with animals, I need to play by their rules, so that I don't get hurt and I don't hurt them. But with the proper safety procedures and human technology even the most dangerous creatures, like the polar bear or tiger, can be completely subdued so that their general health can be appraised and/or radio collars applied.

Part of his argument was to be cautious with regard to what it means to be made in God's image and likeness. It is true that exploring that concept has been pondered by people for centuries, because God does not detail all that bearing His image entails. However, it is possible to compare and contrast God's revealed attributes with men. As image bearers of Christ, isn't it consistent, with finite human dominion, that people can spend time thinking, care for the people and creatures that share this planet, have eternal spirits, imagine abstract ideas, design and create useful tools from those ideas, and then use those tools to safely (for both animal and researcher) render a polar bear, elephant, or lion incapable of harming them? Why would an ecologist go to these lengths with an animal? It is because they care about them. Why do they care? In most cases it is because man's ungodly dominion has globally affected their well-being, including the biggest and strongest. It is probable that man has been a primary factor in the extinction of many creatures that once walked the earth. If we have the technological know-how and power to affect the very existence of creatures and ecosystems on the planet, we also have the power to help them. Is that not considered limited dominion (ruling or prevailing)? Depending on how you look at the outcome (that is, causing extinction or bringing back animals from extinction) the bigger picture shows a broader definition of *rādâ* as a prevailing over the survival outcome of a particular species

or ecosystem, and would seem apropos here. These activities happen every day and mostly by people who are unbelievers.

Why would the following not be considered examples of dominion, both good and bad?

1. With the proper understanding and management techniques, ecologists can prevail over the death and disease of unhealthy forests and make them productive and healthy again.
2. In countries with proper medical treatment, human research has produced medicines that have prevailed against many scourges of history like malaria, small pox, and yellow fever that wiped out people by the millions. As image bearers does this not reflect God's compassion and desire to minimize suffering in a fallen world?
3. Many environmental naturalists think humans are the scourge of the globe because they detrimentally prevail over many organisms and cause global endangerment, extinction, and pollution events. They see an unfair advantage in mankind and are worried that we will destroy the planet.
4. Communities have harnessed energy from the sun, waterfalls, oil, natural gas, and geothermic activity in order to provide easy access to energy for people. This form of energy has helped people prevail against the hardships and heartaches of living in squalid, post-Fall survival conditions, where only fire was used as a heat, cooking, and light source.
5. Many communities have eliminated wild animal threats and have tamed the local environment enough to be mostly safe for children to play in.
6. There is no question that parasitism (long-term relationships between two separate organisms resulting in one being harmed while the other benefits) is a constant agricultural battle when trying to produce healthy crops. But long-term mutual relationships where both organisms benefit are far more common, such as the soil dwelling

mycorrhizal fungus relationships with plants. Researchers have learned to use these relationships in order to bioremediate lands destroyed by chemical pollution (Hennigan 2009).

The purpose of this response is not to provide an exhaustive rebuttal but to bring a biblical balance to the definition of dominion as applied in today's world. Man is definitely unique to this planet, and whether he knows it or not, can wreak great havoc or great good on a global scale. This is consistent, not with an absolute or infinite dominion, but limited dominion as image bearers of God.

The purpose of the church is to love one another in unity and to reflect that love to the unbelievers around us. In my experience one of the most difficult people groups to reach include the evolutionary, environmental naturalists. They see a problem with man's dominion over the planet, and are genuinely concerned with how man's power has the capability of wreaking extinctions and other havoc on a global scale. What an opportunity it is for biblical creation researchers, who are believers in Christ, to share the biblical basis for man's place on earth with these unbelievers. As we mirror the Creator and rule (while understanding our limitations) let us do it for the purposes of bringing increasing order, vitality, fruitfulness, and diversity to the earth, for the glory of God.

References

- Hennigan T. 2009. Toward an understanding of arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi. *Answers Research Journal* 2:21–27. Retrieved from <http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/arj/v2/n1/toward-understanding-arbuscular-mycorrhizal-fungi>.
- Isaacs, D. 2013. Is there a dominion mandate? *Answers Research Journal* 6: 1–16. Retrieved from <http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/arj/v6/n1/dominion-mandate>.