

Does the Genesis 'dominion mandate' in Psalm 8 only relate to Jesus as divine Messiah?

Nathanael Lewis

A recent creationist article by Isaacs challenged the traditional view that the 'dominion mandate' in Genesis 1 extends to all of humanity, even in a post-Fall world. After a brief summary of the article's main thesis—that Genesis 1 dominion was totally ceded to Satan at the Fall and that in defeating Satan, Jesus exercises a totally new dominion, we home in on one particular issue, that of Psalm 8. Contrary to Isaacs' assertion that it refers only to the Messiah, we show that it must refer to humanity as a whole and shows little or no sign of limiting itself to the situation before the Fall. Discussion of Paul's use of a phrase from Psalm 8 in 1 Corinthians 15 shows that he uses it primarily in reference to Jesus as the representative of a new humanity, and not—against Isaacs—as uniquely limited to describing the role of the Messiah.

Many creationists—and indeed other Christians—believe that God gave humankind an ongoing 'dominion mandate'. This is the idea that Genesis 1:26, 28, where God conceives of and creates the first human couple to 'subdue the earth' and to have dominion over, or to rule, "the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and all the animals that move along the ground", continues to apply to humanity as a whole, even though there might be some debate as to exactly how this works out after the Fall of humankind in Genesis 3.

Human mandate—in whose hands, when, and how?

Recently, however, this notion has been vigorously challenged in a creationist journal by Darek Isaacs in an article entitled 'Is there a dominion mandate?'¹ He uses as his foil a previous paper in this journal, 'Human Dominion and Reproduction', by Andrew Kulikovsky.² Isaacs' position in a nutshell is that Adam and Eve did have such a mandate, but that it was entirely lost at the Fall, from which time Satan had the dominion over animals and creation, including humankind. Jesus is now the one who has a new dominion, and to a secondary extent those who are 'in Him' share in it. Along the way he charges Kulikovsky with having deeply unbiblical notions about the nature of creation before the Fall. He uses such language as "this bizarre stance", "such a low view of God's creation" and concludes that "Ultimately, Kulikovsky's approach to man's dominion mirrors the original sin to exalt ourselves". I will leave to Kulikovsky or others to deal with Isaacs' challenge on this topic, except to say that Isaacs seems to considerably conflate the notions of some degree of resistance in pre-Fall creation with the notion of outright rebellion.

I am broadly sympathetic to Isaacs' emphasis on the role of Jesus in restoring the dominion mandate, but I want to focus here on one small section where Isaacs discusses all too briefly the interpretation of Psalm 8 in the light of Paul's use of one of its verses in 1 Corinthians 15.

After spending some time discussing incidents of attacks by wild animals on humans to challenge the idea that humans retain any kind of dominion over nature, Isaacs also discusses different variations on the idea of dominion. He cites a number of Scriptures which he claims support his view that Adam's dominion was entirely lost, that humanity was totally under the dominion of the law of sin and death, and that there is now a new dominion wielded by Jesus who defeated the previous rulers. Again, I don't have the time to go into a detailed discussion, but it does seem to me that Isaacs a) relies on a very particular notion of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments that not all will share and b) that he, too, readily conflates issues and ideas that should perhaps best be kept separate. (I am referring especially to the effects of the Fall and Paul's arguments about the role of the Law.)

However, his argument is by far the weakest when he touches on Psalm 8. Here is his argument quoted in full:

"Kulikovsky argues that mankind rules over creation, and that creation exists for the benefit of man. He wrote:

'As noted in a previous article, human beings are subject to God, while the rest of the creation is subject to mankind and exists for our benefit. In other words, God rules over mankind, who rules over the rest of creation.' (cf. Psalm 8) (Kulikovsky 2012, p. 46).

"But the Kulikovsky answer of man ruling over the Creation does not line up with the Bible.

He references Psalm chapter 8 as a proof text, but he misunderstands it. Psalm 8:6 states:

‘You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, ...’

“This passage is not about mankind; it is referring to the coming Jewish Messiah. This is confirmed by Rabbi Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:27 when he quotes Psalm 8:6 when he is speaking of the Messiah and the dominion that He has. Paul wrote:

‘For “He has put all things under His feet. ...”’

“In fact, in the book of Job, God, Himself went through great lengths to point out how man does not rule over creation:

‘Can you draw out Leviathan with a hook,
Or snare his tongue with a line which you lower?
Can you put a reed through his nose,
Or pierce his jaw with a hook?
Will he make many supplications to you?
Will he speak softly to you?
Will he make a covenant with you?
Will you take him as a servant forever? (Job 41:1–4)
Lay your hand on him;
Remember the battle—
Never do it again! (Job 41:8)’

“The entire point the Lord made to Job is that man is wholly impotent to rule this creature, even while using extreme force. The Lord tells Job, that the very thing Kulikovsky is arguing for, is the very thing man is powerless to do. It is evident that sin fundamentally changed the dominion relationship between man and beast and man no longer rules over the beast.”³

Has Kulikovsky (along with a huge number of bible students both ancient and modern) indeed misunderstood the meaning of Psalm 8, and does Paul’s use of Psalm 8 mean that it can only apply to the Messiah, Jesus? And is Isaacs’ generalized application of Job 41 exegetically valid and sufficient to overrule the conventional interpretation of Psalm 8?

Parsing Psalm 8

Psalm 8 is a short psalm of praise focusing on the glory and majesty of God as shown in his creation and sovereignty and on the nature and position of humankind. It just doesn’t make sense if Isaacs’ assertion that it only refers to the promised Messiah is correct. After meditating on God’s creation displayed in the heavens in verse 3, the psalmist cannot fathom why God is at all concerned with mere human beings, a sentiment which would not make sense at all if the psalmist had the divine Messiah in mind. Yes, there could be some ambiguity, in that we can legitimately translate the reference to humans in a general sense (human kind) or an individualistic sense (‘a son of man’ / ‘a human being’), an ambiguity Paul

uses in his argument, but there is no hint in the Psalm itself that a specific individual, let alone the Messiah, is in mind.

Applying the first line of verse 5 to Jesus hardly makes sense either, unless you refer solely to his incarnation. “You have made him a little lower than God” applied to the Son would cause all sorts of Christological, Trinitarian and other doctrinal issues (and that’s without considering the option that “God” in this passage should be read as ‘angels’, not ‘God’, or indeed the fact that the word for “lower”—Hebrew *chaser*—is from a root meaning ‘lacking, devoid, diminish, cut short’!).⁴

Perhaps more to the point, verses 6–8 unequivocally point to Genesis 1, where the same three broad categories of land, sea, and flying creatures are used, as well as the same notion of human rule over these creatures. The psalm contains no hint of some radical abrogation of the Genesis 1 ‘dominion mandate’, although it could be argued that this is caused by its nature as a short psalm, not a theological treatise. Either way, Isaacs’ bald claim that “This passage is not about mankind; it is referring to the coming Jewish Messiah” is utterly unwarranted by the content of the psalm.

As for the Job passage, can we validly take this to mean that any reference to human dominion in Genesis or Psalm 8 must only refer to before the Fall? Consider that the wider context here is God correcting aspects of Job’s attitude by challenging him on issues of knowledge and power that only the Sovereign Creator God can have (Job 38–41 as a whole). The emphasis is on a man’s weakness as against God’s strength and power. But even if we grant that we must read wider implications into the verses concerning inability to subdue a great creature like Leviathan, does this mean that any notion of ongoing human dominion is necessarily completely denied? The answer must be no. After all, the divine pronouncements in Genesis 3 imply a radical disordering of the created order, but not a complete abrogation. The soil still produces crops and plants, and the man and his wife still relate to each other, even if not as before. There are any number of ways to conceive some form of continuing dominion mandate, just as the vast majority of theologians believe that the image of God remains in fallen humanity, even though marred and broken.

In short, with an exegetical hop, skip, and a jump, Isaacs has ignored context and made a passage concerned with a specific situation and person universal, and unduly limited a passage universal in scope.

Before going on to discuss Paul’s use of Psalm 8 in 1 Corinthians 15, let us consider one more use of the psalms in Isaacs’ article. A few paragraphs down, he says :

“Kulikovsky also argues that, in a post-Fall world, that ownership over something must mean control over something. Again, this is fallacious. One does not mean the other. Kulikovsky cites Psalm 115:6 [sic, v. 16] that states the Creation was given to man (which happened in the pre-Fall Creation). From there he concludes, without considering any context of the Fall, that man has control over creation.”⁵

Implicit in Isaacs' line of arguing here—as elsewhere—is that any reference to something like a dominion mandate must only refer to the pre-Fall world. Does Psalm 115 indicate this is the case here? Once again, it is hard to say for sure, as these are psalms of praise, not theological exercises, but what context we have strongly hints not. In the pre-Fall world there was no death, and no idolatry. Yet the context of Psalm 115 is precisely these things. The first half of the psalm concerns itself with the sheer foolishness of idolatry in light of God's glory. More tellingly, perhaps, the key verse

“The highest heavens belong to the Lord,
but the earth he has given to mankind”

is immediately followed by reference to the dead (v. 17), without any hint that the former verse only applies to former times, and the latter only to later (current) times. Also, the parallel phrase in v. 16 about the heavens can hardly be taken to refer to the heavens only belonging to the Lord sometime in the past.

Correct on Corinthians?

Isaacs justifies his assertion that

“This passage is not about mankind; it is referring to the coming Jewish Messiah”

by claiming that his view is “confirmed by Rabbi Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:27 when he quotes Psalm 8:6 when he is speaking of the Messiah and the dominion that He has. Paul wrote:

‘For “He has put all things under His feet ...”’

We have already seen that Psalm 8 gives no indication that it only applies to the promised Messiah—quite the opposite, in fact. But does Paul's use of this verse change the game? Is Isaacs correct to say Paul's use of the verse means we really should take it as only referring to the Messiah?

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul is making a sustained argument about the resurrection of the dead to refute false notions that had arisen in the church in Corinth—namely that there is no resurrection from the dead. First Paul cites the traditions passed down to him about Christ's Resurrection, including the large number of eyewitnesses (vv. 1–11). He then points out that if there is no resurrection at all, then Christ could not have been raised from the dead, and all Christian belief would be in vain (vv. 12–20).

We then come to the passage in which Paul uses Psalm 8, and how he starts is very significant. Verse 21 reads, “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.” In other words, it is precisely Jesus' nature as a human that is primarily in view here, as the first-fruits of redeemed human resurrection at the end of the age. And this is why Paul's use of Psalm 8, which refers to humans, is so apt and appropriate. It is as the ‘head’ of redeemed humanity that Jesus puts all things under his feet, although Paul, typically, expands the Psalm 8 reference cosmically to refer to far more than just rule over animals in creation (just

as, for instance, in Romans 4:24 he appears to expand the promise of the land of Canaan to Abraham into a promise of the whole world). Implicit in Paul's use of Psalm 8 is a sense of continuity, not radical discontinuity, which is what Isaacs appears to infer. Consider: which is an exegetically trained Jewish rabbi like Paul most likely to do—use a verse with due consideration for its context, including its clear reference back to Genesis, and its continuity with other verses that speak of the ongoing role of humans in the realm God has assigned to them, or take such a verse out of context and totally ignore its clear reference to humanity and to Genesis? Yes, in Paul's vision Jesus, as the divine Son of God, does do more than just restore dominion à la Eden and the pre-Fall era, but it is precisely because He represents humanity to God that Paul uses this verse. After Jesus returns and his saints with him (v. 23) he reigns until all things that are in rebellion against God's perfect plan are defeated. Then God the Son, who has clothed himself in human nature, with this same humanity restored in Himself to its rightful role, places all of restored human nature and creation in proper submission to God the Father.

It is precisely because Psalm 8 refers to humanity in general that it is so appropriate to Paul's arguments about the human Jesus, the first-fruits of human resurrection. Contrary to Isaacs' blunt assertion, Paul's use of this verse does not mean that we cannot apply Psalm 8 to humanity as a whole.

This critique does not particularly weaken Isaacs' points about some kind of renewal of dominion in the person and work of Jesus, but it does severely undermine his absolutist conclusion that “the dominion mandate, which states that all mankind has a standing command or order to have dominion over the earth, due to the dominion granted to Adam, is not a biblically supported idea.”

References

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5. Isaacs, ref. 1, online article search for ‘Psalm’—6th example out of 6.

Nathanael Lewis has an M. Theol. (Hons) from the University of St Andrews, Scotland. He has been a member of the Creation Matters North East (CMNE) committee, for whom he has also spoken on the necessary impacts of theistic evolution on the nature of God. He has also given talks at Messianic Jewish conferences on Genesis and the Patriarchs, and on the days of Genesis 1.