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All God's Creatures: Reading Genesis on Human and Non-human Animals

The Christian tradition has barely begun reading Genesis after Darwin. We no longer read Genesis 1 with a pre-Copernican worldview, thinking our planet to be the centre of the universe. Most of us are happy to read the text as congruent with scientific theories of the origins of the universe in a big bang. But we continue to be resolutely pre-Darwinian in our reading of the creation narratives. We are still operating with understandings of the relationship between human beings and other creatures that are based on Aristotelian rather than Darwinian theories of the natural world. And our hermeneutics similarly and stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the consequences of recognizing that we are part of the created order, rather than suspended above it as some part-creature, part-divine hybrid. In this paper I will argue for the theological necessity of displacing the anthropocentric readings of Genesis that have become Christian orthodoxy and therefore to begin again the project of reading Genesis after Darwin with particular reference to our understanding of the relationship between human beings and other living things. In conclusion I will gesture towards the consequences of this project for central themes of Christian doctrine.¹

¹ I do not, of course, mean to claim that I am anything close to the first to notice this question. Among the many recent works to draw welcome attention to the issue and challenge Feuerbach's view that 'Nature, the world, has no value, no interest for Christians' (Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), 287) are Charles Birch, and

An Anthropocentric tradition

I begin with some orientation in pre-Darwinian readings of Genesis in relation to the created order apart from human beings. An

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interesting place to begin is with the first-century Jewish theologian Philo of Alexandria, both because of his influence on later Christian interpreters and because the position he outlines broadly characterizes Christian readings of this text until the eighteenth century.² In his text from AD 50, *De animalibus* ('On animals'), Philo discusses the question of whether animals possess reason. The form of the text is dialogic: Philo is in discussion with his apostate nephew Alexander. But the dialogue is of a particular kind: the first seventy-six sections of the text, out of a total of one hundred sections, is a monologue by Alexander, minutely detailing evidence of the purposive and apparently rational behaviour of spiders, bees, swallows, monkeys,

Lukas Fischer, *Living With the Animals: The Community of God's Creatures*, Risk Book Series No.77 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997); Celia Deane-Drummond, *The Ethics of Nature*, vol. New dimensions to religious ethics (Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Gary A. Kowalski, *The Bible According to Noah: Theology as if Animals Mattered* (New York: Lantern Books, 2001); Andrew Linzey, *Animal Gospel: Christian Faith as Though Animals Mattered* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998); Andrew Linzey, and Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *After Noah: Animals and the Liberation of Theology* (London: Mowbray, 1997); Andrew Linzey, *Creatures of the Same God: Explorations in Animal Theology* (Winchester: Winchester University Press, 2007); Charles Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (New York: Lantern Books, 2002); Paul Waldau, *The Specter of Speciesism: Buddhist and Christian Views of Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Stephen H. Webb, *Good Eating* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001); Stephen H Webb, *On God and Dogs: A Christian Theology of Compassion for Animals* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Robert N. Wennberg, *God, Humans, and Animals: An Invitation to Enlarge Our Moral Universe* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003); Donna Yarri, *The Ethics of Animal Experimentation: A Critical Analysis and Constructive Christian Proposal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). My point is that the standard reading of Genesis as placing human beings in a different theological category to the rest of creation persists in spite of this attention.

² For a valuable survey of the developments in theological thinking on this issue at the end of this period, see Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (London; New York: Penguin, 1984).

fawns, elephants, fish, tortoises, falcons — even oysters — alongside many others.³ The final quarter of the treatise is Philo's response: a brisk judgement that all these things are done naturally by the creatures, rather than by foresight: while their actions look similar to those of human beings, they are without thought and the complexity of their actions is attributable to the way they are designed, rather than their own rationality. He concludes that we should 'stop criticizing nature and committing sacrilege' because ascribing serious self-restraint to animals 'is to insult those whom nature has endowed with the best part'.⁴ In his commentary on the text, Abraham Terian finds in this conclusion the aim of the treatise: 'In spite of the title of the treatise and the frequent references to animals, the work as a whole is basically anthropological'.⁵ Philo is discussing animals in order to defend the Aristotelian distinction between humans and other animals on the basis of reason.

When Philo turns to the interpretation of Genesis, he is similarly determinative about the qualitative difference between human beings and the rest of creation, this time giving it a theological significance. In his treatise on the creation of the world (*De opificio mundi*) he argues that the image of God in human beings is not physical but 'in respect of the Mind, the sovereign element of the soul ... for after the pattern of a single Mind ... the mind in each of those who successively came into being was moulded'.⁶ Later in the same work he asks why human beings were created last among the creatures and finds four reasons, each of which makes clear human superiority. First, just as the giver of a banquet ensures everything is prepared before the guests arrive, so God wanted human beings to experience a 'banquet and sacred display' of all the things intended for their use and enjoyment. Second, human beings were created last so it might be instructive to future generations that God provided abundantly for their ancestors. Third, God wanted to unite earth and heaven by

³ Philo of Alexandria, *De animalibus*, trans. Abraham Terian (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

⁴ Philo, *De animalibus*, §100.

⁵ Philo, *De animalibus*, §112.

⁶ Philo, *Philo*, Loeb Classical Library, vol. I, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker (London: Heinemann, 1929), *De opificio mundi*, §§ 23.

making heaven first and human beings last, since human beings are ‘a miniature heaven’. Finally, human beings had to arrive last, so that in appearing suddenly before the other animals

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they might be amazed, do homage to their master, and be tamed.⁷ Philo is no less bracing in his *Questions and Answers on Genesis*. He asks why the animals had to die in the flood, given that they are incapable of sin, and provides three answers. First, just as when a king is killed in battle, his military forces are struck down with him, so God decided that if the king of the animals were struck down, the animals should be destroyed too. Second, when a man’s head is cut off, no one complains that the rest of the body dies too. Since human beings are the head of the animals, it is not surprising that all other living things should be destroyed with him. Third, since the beasts were made for the ‘need and honour of man’, once human beings were destroyed, it was right for them to be killed too.⁸

Philo’s reading of Genesis in the light of Aristotelian natural philosophy was influential for Christian interpretation of the texts, and the qualitative division between human beings and other creatures on the basis of reason has set the parameters for Christian thought ever since. Augustine, for example, also found the image of God in the human mind — though he extends this in a trinitarian mode with a division between mind, love and knowledge⁹ — and thought that the lack of society in reason with the animals was grounds for the permissibility of killing them.¹⁰

Aquinas believes God is the last end of the universe, rather than human beings, but it

⁷ Philo, *De opificio mundi*, §§ 25–28.

⁸ Philo, *Supplementary Vol. I*, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker (London: Heinemann, 1929), bk. II, qu. 9.

⁹ Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, Philip Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995), bk. 9.

¹⁰ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), bk. 1, ch. 20, 33.

is only rational creatures that share fully in this end¹¹ and are made fully in the image of God.¹² Luther's commentary on Genesis agrees strikingly with Philo that we can discern God's provident care for humanity in making every part of creation with a view to its contribution to a splendid home for human beings.¹³ Calvin concurs that it is understanding and reason that separate human beings from 'brute animals', and echoes Philo's judgement that all things were created for the conveniences and necessities of human beings.¹⁴ In place of Philo's metaphor of a banquet, Calvin pictures creation as a theatre designed so that beholding the wonderful works of God, human beings might adore their author.¹⁵ Luther and Calvin concur that the image of God must be understood as what was original in Adam and restored in Christ, which Calvin understands as excellence in everything good, chiefly located in the human mind and heart but showing in every part.¹⁶

If we turn to modern interpreters of Genesis, we find a significant shift in understandings of the meaning of the image of God in recognition of inadequacies in previous accounts. There is consensus that the attempt to identify particular human faculties that image God is misguided: Wenham comments that in every case there is suspicion that the commentator is reading their own view about what is most significant about

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¹¹ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd, 1923), ch. 111–12.

¹² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Blackfriars, 1963), I.93.2.

¹³ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1–5*, Luther's Works, vol. I, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1958), 39.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Genesis*, edited and translated by John King (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 96.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Genesis*, 64.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Genesis*, 95. See J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005), 20–21, for a summary of Luther's and Calvin's positions.

human beings into the text.¹⁷ There is also an impressive consensus about how the image of God should be interpreted: commentators largely agree that it is the democratization of political terminology in a Mesopotamian context in which the king is called the image of God.¹⁸ While the explanation of the meaning of the image of God has been transformed, however, its function in demarcating a decisive division between human beings and other creatures remains the same. Brueggemann, for example, declaims the privileged status of human beings in terms comparable with Philo's: 'There is one way in which God is imaged in the world and only one: humanness! This is the only creature, the only part of creation, which discloses to us something about the reality of God.'¹⁹ Brueggemann suggests that God has a 'different, intimate relation' with human beings, with whom God has made a 'peculiarly intense commitment' and to whom God has granted 'marvellous freedom'.²⁰

While reason has been displaced from the Aristotelian worldview in modern accounts as demarcating the line between humans and all other living creatures, Brueggemann's language exemplifies the widespread retention of a view that human beings belong in a different theological category to other living things. It is this view that I take to be indicative of a reading of Genesis that is pre-Darwinian, for the reasons that follow.

¹⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis* (Word Bible Commentary 1-2; Waco: Word, 1987, 1994), vol. 1 30.

¹⁸ See, for example, Wenham, *Genesis*, 31; Victor P. Hamilton, *Genesis* (NICOT, 2 vols; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, 1995), vol. 1, 135; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 32; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (OTL; rev.ed., London: SCM, 1972), 58; and the detailed discussion in Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 93–145. Westermann is a dissenting voice, preferring Barth's interpretation of the image as counterpart to God: Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, trans. John J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1984), 146–58.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 32.

²⁰ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 31.

Attempts to reconcile human-separatism and evolution

Let us call a view (like Brueggemann's) that places human beings and other living things in different theological categories a 'human-separatist' view. My question is whether a human-separatist can also believe in human evolution: the theory that human beings evolved from other living creatures. It seems to me that there are two possible ways of reconciling the human-separatist view with belief in human evolution.

First, one could argue that human beings have developed so far beyond any other creature as to make them qualitatively different. The main problem with this line of argument in general is that it is hard to give content to exactly what constitutes this development while retaining its capacity to distinguish between humans and animals. For example, Keith Ward defends the Thomist view that human beings are the exclusive possessors of rational souls and that this is compatible with human evolution: 'we might say that, when the brain reaches a certain stage of complexity, the power of conceptual thought, of reasoning and thinking, begins to exist; and that is when a rational soul begins to be'.²¹ But what are we to understand by rationality here? It is commonly linked to capacities such as intelligence, the possession of beliefs and desires

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or autonomy and personhood, but recent studies of non-human species indicate that human beings differ from other creatures only in degree in relation to each of these

²¹ Keith Ward, *The Battle for the Soul: An Affirmation of Human Dignity and Value* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), 53.

capacities.²² The task of distinguishing between humans and other living things on the basis of rationality is so taxing that some have opted to make the distinction by definition: Jonathan Bennett defines rationality as ‘whatever it is that humans possess which marks them off, in respect of intellectual capacity, sharply and importantly from all other known species’.²³ The fact that Bennett is reduced to this strategy shows that the hope of a ‘sharp’ and ‘important’ line marking the difference between human beings and other species may be a forlorn one. Keith Ward concedes that if other living things apart from humans were found to be rational, they would also have to be granted the protection offered to humans.²⁴ He fails to account, however, for the complexities introduced if rationality is a matter of degree rather than an absolute category.

Other alternatives offered to distinguish reliably between humans and animals, such as self-consciousness or language, are similarly found on closer inspection to be matters of degree, which some creatures apart from humans possess in part.²⁵ In fact, even without the benefit of modern scientific evidence about the intelligence and self-consciousness of non-human creatures, Charles Darwin set out the key features of an argument against the assertion of a qualitative difference between human beings and other creatures in 1871, in *The Descent of Man*:

Nevertheless the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of kind. We have seen that the senses and intuitions, the various emotions and faculties, such as love,

²² See the discussion in Donna Yarri, *The Ethics of Animal Experimentation: A Critical Analysis and Constructive Christian Proposal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 21–55; Marc Bekoff, *Minding Animals: Awareness, Emotions, and Heart* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Carolyn A. Ristau (ed.), *Cognitive Ethology: The Minds of Other Animals* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991).

²³ Cited in Yarri, *Ethics of Animal Experimentation*, 33.

²⁴ Ward, *Battle for the Soul*, 152–3.

²⁵ See Yarri, *Ethics of Animal Experimentation*, 27–32; 43–49.

memory, attention, curiosity, imitation, reason, &c., of which man boasts, may be found in an incipient, or even sometimes in a well-developed condition, in the lower animals. They are also capable of some inherited improvement, as we see in the domestic dog compared with the wolf or jackal. If it be maintained that certain powers, such as self-consciousness, abstraction, &c., are peculiar to man, it may well be that these are the incidental results of other highly-advanced intellectual faculties; and these again are mainly the result of the continued use of a highly developed language. At what age does the newborn infant possess the power of abstraction, or become self-conscious and reflect on its own existence? We cannot answer; nor can we answer in regard to the ascending organic scale. The half-art and half-instinct of language still bears the stamp of its gradual evolution.²⁶

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One might think it helpful to reach for the aid of emergence theory at this point. For example Arthur Peacocke characterizes evolution as a process

of *emergence*, for new forms of matter, and a hierarchy of organization of these forms, appear in the course of time. These new forms have new properties, behaviours and networks of relations which necessitate not only specific methods of investigation but also the development of epistemologically irreducible concepts in order to describe and refer to them. To these new organizations of matter it is, very often, possible to ascribe new levels of what can only be called ‘reality’ that is, the epistemology implies at

²⁶ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1871).

least a putative ontology. In other words new kinds of reality may be said to ‘emerge’ over time. Notably, on the surface of the Earth, new forms of *living* matter (that is living organisms) have come into existence by this continuous process—that is what we mean by evolution.²⁷

In the context of trying to find a reliable marker to establish a discontinuity between the human and non-human, however, this is all beside the point. My argument here is that we lack any identification of a capacity that human beings have and all other animals do not. Were we to discover such a capacity, emergence theory might help to explain how it could have evolved, but emergence theory does not help with the prior task of identification of a distinctively human marker.

An example may help our appreciation of the difficulty of distinguishing between human beings and other species in this way. In 1972 Francine Patterson began teaching sign language to a gorilla called Koko. Koko learned to use a vocabulary of over 1000 words, and was able to respond in sign language to questions asked in English with a receptive vocabulary of several thousand words.²⁸ Some of the conversations that have been recorded with Koko are predicable:

“What do gorillas like to do most?” “*Gorilla love eat good.*” Or, “What makes you happy?” “*Gorilla tree.*” “What makes you angry?” “*Work.*” “What do gorillas do when it’s dark?” “*Gorilla listen (pause), sleep.*”²⁹

Other responses are quite unexpected:

²⁷ Arthur Peacocke, ‘Biological Evolution—A Positive Theological Appraisal’, in *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger, and Francisco J. Ayala (eds.), (Vatican City State; Berkeley CA: Vatican Observatory and Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1998), 358.

²⁸ Francine Patterson and Wendy Gordon, ‘The Case For The Personhood Of Gorillas’ in Paola Cavalieri, and Peter Singer (eds.), *The Great Ape Project: Equality Beyond Humanity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 58–9.

²⁹ Patterson and Gordon, ‘Case for the Personhood of Gorillas’, 62.

“How did you sleep last night?” (expecting “fine,” “bad”; or some related response). “*Floor blanket*” (Koko sleeps on the floor with blankets). “How do you like your blankets to feel?” “*Hot Koko-love.*” “What happened?” (after an earthquake). “*Darn darn floor bad bite. Trouble trouble.*”³⁰

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Koko is able to make jokes: the following conversation followed her being shown a picture of a bird:

Koko: *That me.* (pointing to adult bird)

Barbara: Is that really you?

Koko: *Koko good bird.*

Barbara: I thought you were a gorilla.

Koko: *Koko bird.*

Barbara: Can you fly?

Koko: *Good.* (i.e., *yes*)

Barbara: Show me.

Koko: *Fake bird, clown.* (Koko laughs)

Barbara: You're teasing me. (Koko laughs.) What are you really?

Koko: *Gorilla Koko.*³¹

Perhaps most surprising are the conversations recorded with Koko about death:

When Koko was seven, one of her teachers asked, “When do gorillas die?” and she signed, “*Trouble, old.*” The teacher also asked, “Where do gorillas go when they die?” and Koko replied, “*Comfortable hole bye.*” When asked

³⁰ Patterson and Gordon, ‘Case for the Personhood of Gorillas’, 62.

³¹ Patterson and Gordon, ‘Case for the Personhood of Gorillas’, 66.

“How do gorillas feel when they die-happy, sad, afraid?” she signed,
“*Sleep*”.³²

In 1984 Koko’s favourite kitten, All Ball was run over by a car. When she was told of the kitten’s death, Koko cried. Four months later, the following conversation was recorded:

Penny: How did you feel when you lost Ball?

Koko: *Want*.

Penny: How did you feel when you lost him?

Koko: *Open trouble visit sorry*.

Penny: When he died, remember when Ball died, how did you feel?

Koko: *Red red red bad sorry Koko-love good*.³³

Recently, a gorilla named Michael, who had been Koko’s companion for 24 years died of natural causes. In the following weeks Koko frequently gave mournful cries, especially at night, and using sign language asked for the light to be left on when she went to bed.³⁴ While Koko’s use of language is exceptional, similar experiments have been done with chimpanzees and bonobos³⁵ and other studies have show dolphins to be capable of syntactical analysis.³⁶ Sceptics might argue that the behaviours are unconsciously cued by the researchers, the conversations recorded could

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³² Patterson and Gordon, ‘Case for the Personhood of Gorillas’, 67.

³³ Patterson and Gordon, ‘Case for the Personhood of Gorillas’, 67.

³⁴ The Gorilla Foundation, ‘Koko’s Mourning for Michael’ (Aug. 2, 2000) at http://www.koko.org/world/mourning_koko.html, cited in Adam Kolber,, ‘Standing Upright: The Moral and Legal Standing of Humans and Other Apes’, *Stanford Law Review* 54:1 (2001), 174.

³⁵ For a survey, see Kolber, ‘Standing Upright’, 170–4.

³⁶ Louis M. Herman, Stan A. Kuczaj, and Mark D. Holder, ‘Responses to Anomalous Gestural Sequences By a Language-Trained Dolphin: Evidence for Processing of Semantic Relations and Syntactic Information’, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 122:2 (1993), 184-94.

have been selected from a large number that were not considered meaningful, or that the apes are merely engaging in behaviour that leads to rewards. However, it is hard to discount the range and depth of the evidence that the apes are able to use language meaningfully, and hard to avoid the consequent disruption to what we previously considered an absolute distinction between human beings and other species.³⁷

We have seen, then, that the most frequently offered markers of difference — rationality, intelligence, and language — are unable to identify a qualitative difference between humans and other creatures. The example of Koko shows why: we have until recently substantially understated the capacities of our nearest relatives, the great apes. We could multiply discussion of putative distinguishing attributes almost indefinitely: we have seen that Brueggemann, for example, suggests that human beings have a qualitatively different capacity for relationship with God. Others have suggested that only human beings can have autonomy, personhood, morality or immorality. Once we have realized the fate of other proposed capacities, however, we are properly more sceptical about such loose appeals. It seems very likely that, as in the case of language and rationality, we have assumed rather than proved that the difference between human beings and other creatures is one of kind rather than degree. Until further evidence is adduced, we must accept the provisional conclusion that there is no distinctive human capacity that can be used to mark a qualitative difference between human beings and other species: as Darwin argued, the difference is one of degree. If we want to retain a human-separatist view that humans belong in a different theological category from other species, we cannot depend on natural attributes for its support.

³⁷ As late as 1968 Noam Chomsky was still arguing that Descartes was right that language was a 'species-specific human possession' (Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1968)).

There is a second way we could argue for the human-separatist position, however, which is not reliant on identifying a difference in kind between human beings and other living creatures. It argues that we do not need a natural difference to establish a theological difference. One version of this position is congruent with the consensus of Old Testament scholars that the image of God should be understood functionally, rather than metaphysically: what is distinctive about human beings is the task that God has chosen to assign them. God has made human beings to be God's image on earth: to rule over the other creatures in the same way that the sun and moon rule over the day and the night. It is this divine vocation for the human species that places them in a theologically different category, independent of arguments about their possession of distinctive characteristics. Alternatively, we could use the Barthian language of election: there was no qualitative distinction between Abraham and his fellow human beings, but through blessing him, God chose to elect

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the nation of Israel as the people of God. In the same way, we could say that of all the creatures, God chose to elect human beings and give them a particular status amidst creation. For Barth, this is closely linked to the doctrine of the incarnation:

Brueggemann states that in the incarnation 'the creator is "humanized" as the one who cares in costly ways for the world' citing Karl Barth for support.³⁸ Human beings may have evolved from other creatures, and therefore stand in a relationship of continuity rather than discontinuity with them, but God's identification of them as God's image on earth, and God's decision to dignify human beings above all other species through

³⁸ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 33.

the incarnation establishes the qualitative difference demarcating the human that it was hard to locate in a comparison of attributes.

I have suggested three alternate construals of this second defence of the human-separatist position on the basis of vocation, election and the incarnation. In relation to vocation based in an interpretation of the image of God, there seems no serious theological objection to the view that God has given human beings a particular role with respect to the created order. But it seems to me that by itself, the attribution of a particular vocation for human beings is insufficient to ground the qualitative distinction that the human-separatist position requires. Our task and responsibility before God is no doubt particular to the place we find ourselves within God's creation, but the Bible repeatedly affirms that all creation participates in the praise of God and each living thing has a part in God's purposes.³⁹ Paul's egalitarian vision of the diversity of tasks and capacities of the members of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12) together with Martin Luther's affirmation of a wide range of human vocations of equal status⁴⁰ and Jesus' reinterpretation of lordship as servanthood should give us pause before we judge that the vocation God has granted to human beings creates a difference in theological status between them and the rest of the creation. The vocation given by God to human beings denotes particularity rather than separation from other species.

If we were to picture God's action in making human beings in God's image as election, however, we would certainly succeed in making the human-separatist case. Through its election by God, Israel is separated from the other nations and given a particular privilege and status. While its election may be to bring light to all nations

³⁹ See, for example, Psalm 148, God's speech to Job, chs 38–41, or Paul's evocation of the whole of creation groaning for redemption in Romans 8.

⁴⁰ For a survey of this topic in Luther's thought, see Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 36–42.

(Isa 51:4), God's election sets it apart and places it in a unique relationship with God that is a good parallel with the special relationship Brueggemann pictures between God and humankind. The difficulty with this argument is that we have no biblical or other grounds for believing that God has elected human beings to a particular status that makes them qualitatively different in theological terms to other living creatures.

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Brueggemann's arguments are based on Barth's affirmations about the particular dignity of the human, which are in turn based on his interpretation of doctrine of the incarnation. The argument for the human-separatist view on the basis of God's election of human beings therefore stands or falls with the argument from the incarnation, to which I now turn.

One of the central tenets of Barth's theological project is the affirmation that God is 'for' human beings. Barth echoes Calvin's judgement in affirming that 'the universe is created as a theatre for God's dealings with man and man's dealings with God'.⁴¹ For Barth all Christian theology must be understood through the person of Jesus Christ and creation is merely the external basis of the covenant of grace God establishes through Christ with human beings.⁴² In Christ, 'God is *human*'.⁴³ It is hard to envisage a higher or more absolute distinction that could be established between human beings and the rest of creation. Put this way, the qualitative theological

⁴¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II/2, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 94.

⁴² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III/1, trans. J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 94–228.

⁴³ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. Thomas Wieser and John Newton (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1960), 51.

distinction between human beings and all other living things seems glaringly and blindingly obvious.

There is, however, no theological necessity in construing God's purposes in creation and the meaning of the incarnation in the way Barth does, and good reasons to doubt his judgement. In relation to his assertion that human beings were God's sole end in creating the universe, we must recognize that there are no biblical or other reasons for narrowing God's purposes in the creation and redemption of the universe merely to the human. As we have seen, this seemed obvious to Philo and Calvin, and they are in the company of a great many others, but there are significant biblical elements that stand in the way of such a narrow interpretation of God's intentions in creation and redemption. In Genesis 1, God pronounces what he makes on each day good with no reference to its fitness for human purposes, and assigns to human beings the task of governing the rest of the created order, rather than becoming spectators, consumers or disposers of it. God's speech to Job reminds him of the incomprehensible diversity of creation, including elements such as Behemoth and Leviathan whose existence is a threat to humankind, rather than a service to it (Job 38–41). In the New Testament, in his letters to the Corinthians and Colossians, Paul affirms the significance of God's redemptive work for the whole of creation.⁴⁴

Barth's argument that the incarnation represents God's privileging of the human, seems persuasive until we reflect on attempts earlier in the Christian tradition to particularize the significance of the incarnation. The Acts of the Apostles narrates a dispute between those among the first Christians who thought that Gentiles must conform to Jewish law to become members of the church, and those who thought that

⁴⁴ Rom. 8: 19–23; Col. 1: 15–20. See below for a further discussion of these texts as they impact on interpretation of the incarnation.

the Gentiles should be admitted without precondition, in fulfilment of prophecies that foretold that all peoples

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would come to worship the Lord (Acts 15). If the church had chosen the former position, it would have decided in effect that the best description of the incarnation was that God became a Jew; instead its decision resulted in the declaration at the Council of Nicaea that God became human. The church therefore broadened its understanding of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ from Jewish human to human. Arguably, however, the church did not fully appreciate the significance of its affirmation at Nicaea: one way of understanding the struggle of women in the church in the intervening 1700 years is that the church was frequently operating on the understanding that in Jesus Christ God became a male human being.⁴⁵ The past century has seen a debate in some ways similar to the one that preceded the admission of the Gentiles: the discussion of whether women can participate in the church as women on equal terms with men. In parallel with the Gentile case, we can restate the case for equality as the assertion that the best understanding of the incarnation is to avoid particularizing the maleness of Christ and instead opt for an inclusive rendering, deliberately affirming for the first time that in Christ God became simply human.

These examples make clear that the boundaries demarcating the significance of the incarnation have been contested in the Christian tradition, and have had to be redrawn in order to reflect a sufficiently inclusive understanding of God's purposes. If it is the case that the church has been led to progressively broader understandings of

⁴⁵ The classic statement of this concern is Rosemary Radford Ruether's chapter 'Can a Male Savior Save Women?' in *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM, 2002), 116–38.

the significance of the incarnation, it seems to me that the doctrine of the incarnation need not demarcate an absolute distinction between human beings and the rest of creation. If we have widened our understanding from God becoming a Jewish male human, to male human, to human, there seems no barrier to broadening our view one step further in claiming that the incarnation is best understood as God becoming a creature. In fact, this is less of an innovation than it seems: in Paul's letter to the Colossians he links the creation of all things in Christ, the holding together of all things in Christ, and the reconciling of all things in Christ through the cross (Col 1:13–20), pointing to an understanding of the incarnation as Christ becoming a representative of 'all things'. Similarly, if we recognize with Paul in Romans 8 that not just human beings but the whole of creation is groaning in need of God's redemption, and we also take account of Gregory of Nazianzus's famous dictum about the incarnation that what Christ did not assume, he did not heal,⁴⁶ then we are in urgent need of an understanding of the incarnation that sees it as fundamentally the assumption of creation by its creator. If this is the case, however, we no longer have grounds for using the incarnation to demarcate an absolute distinction between human beings and other creatures.

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Conclusion: against human-separatism

I have argued that Christian readings of Genesis 1 remain pre-Darwinian, in taking a human-separatist view that posits a qualitative theological difference between human beings and other species of living things. I identified two arguments supporting a

⁴⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Letter 101*, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series 2, vol. 7 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 440.

human-separatist view in an evolutionary context. The first was that human beings have evolved so far beyond other species as to constitute a new category of living thing supporting a theological judgement of a difference in kind, and I argued in response that recent studies of great apes have shown the truth of Darwin's judgement that the difference between human beings and other creatures is of degree only. The second argument I considered was that there is a theological basis for a discontinuity between human beings and other species, irrespective of their respective attributes. The candidates for this theological basis I considered here were the functional interpretation of the image of God as task and vocation, the idea that God has elected the human species, and the doctrine of the incarnation. I agreed that God assigns human beings a particular task by God, but suggested that this was insufficient to ground the claim that they had become qualitatively different from other creatures as a result. I showed that the concept of human election was dependent on the incarnation, and finally I argued that the doctrine of the incarnation need not and should not be interpreted in such a way as to establish a discontinuity between human beings and other creatures.

My argument therefore is that the human-separatist view that posits a qualitative theological distinction between human beings and other species is incompatible with the belief that human beings evolved from other animals. Such a view remains pre-Darwinian in its reading of Genesis, and fails to appreciate the full consequences of what the Darwinian revolution means for Christian theology. We therefore stand in need of a reading of Genesis that fully recognizes the relationship of continuity between human beings and other creatures. In closing, I want to identify briefly three key implications of this conclusion.

First, I do not believe that to recognize that the work of Darwin demands a new reading of Genesis is necessarily to allow scientific understandings to determine theological conclusions. When Christians were first challenged by those inside and outside the church affirming the equality of women, they engaged in a reappraisal of their readings of scripture and the outworking of it in the Christian tradition. They decided that texts such as Gen 1:27 and Gal 3:28 could be read as affirming the equality of women and men. As a result, after significant and lengthy internal debates, many churches

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recognized that the internal and external challenges were in harmony with a strand already present in the Christian tradition that had previously received inadequate attention. This was not a case, therefore, merely of secular ideals forcing a theological accommodation, but of Christians hearing a prophetic voice alerting them to the need to reappraise what they had received. In the case of slavery, the challenge was similar, though some Christians were quicker to recognize that the internal logic of their faith commitments necessitated moral and political change. I suggest that Darwin's theory of evolution is a similar prophetic calling to the church to revisit and re-evaluate its theological heritage, and recognize that continuity between human beings and other creatures is deeply embedded in biblical teaching and the Christian tradition. It is the affirmation of God as creator of all things which makes clearest the essential relationship between all God's creatures, and I have already indicated key parts of the biblical witness that strongly affirm this view.

If it were a theological necessity to affirm human-separatism we would be faced with an unwelcome choice between creationism — as the only way to undergird theological affirmations that human beings are a different kind of creature — and atheistic Darwinism. Happily, this is not the case. Just as Christianity came to realize in a post-Copernican context that displacing the planet earth from the centre of the solar system need not mean discarding Genesis 1 from the scriptural canon, so we in a post-Darwinian context must realize that displacing human beings from a separate theological category of creature can prompt us to better readings of the Genesis creation narrative.

Second, however, I do not want to understate the theological challenge of moving beyond the human-separatist position that I have argued is unsustainable. For me this is exemplified most clearly in the words of Psalm 8 that claim God has made human beings a little lower than God and put all things under their feet (vv. 5–6). This assertion of the human-separatist view has strong affinities with Genesis 1 and alongside other texts will clearly have to be read differently if I am right that this position is untenable. My initial proposal here is that we recognize that these and similar texts are proclamations of good news to God's people in exile, desperately in need of reassurance that God remains God and that God values human beings and will not abandon them. Brueggemann makes this point with respect to Genesis 1, and it is instructive that the verses I have cited from Psalm 8 follow the psalmist's pondering of the majesty of God's creation and questioning why human beings should have any significance from a divine point of view. In his commentary on Genesis, Calvin quickly discounts apparent challenges from contemporary scientific views that recognize the moon merely reflects the sun's light, and in any case is very much smaller than Saturn, which is not mentioned at all. He

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says that Genesis is an account of what is visible, and does not attempt 'to soar above the heavens'.⁴⁷ Where Brueggemann pictures Genesis as good news for exiles, Calvin therefore sees Genesis 1 as telling the story of the creation of the universe from a human point of view.

Now in relation to this point we could quickly respond that we can never obtain any other point of view than the human, but it might be that telling the human story in particular ways has significant and negative consequences for our appreciation of other parts of God's creation. The twelfth century Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides is interesting on this point. In contradiction to the Jewish tradition and his earlier views, which both followed Philo in seeing human beings as the end of creation, Maimonides insisted that God intended all creatures for their own sake. He illustrates his point in this way: to think that the world was created for humankind is like a man in a city thinking that the final end of the city's ruler is to keep his house safe at night: from his point of view it looks like this, but once we have seen the bigger picture the man's view is obviously ridiculous.⁴⁸ My sense is that some of the texts and traditions we have received are understandably concerned to render the world theologically intelligible to human beings and announce to them the good news that they are of infinite importance to their creator. In the light of what Darwin has taught us, however, it is necessary for us to recognize that God's purposes are not exhausted in the creation and redemption of human beings: just as there are other citizens in the city in Maimonides's parable, so there are other creatures as well over

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Genesis*, 85.

⁴⁸ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 3:13.

whom God's providential care also extends. It is this change of perspective, very much akin to that God demanded of Job, which will guide the hermeneutical and theological innovations we need to make in response to a rediscovery of our solidarity with God's other creatures.

Third, we need to recognize that rereading Genesis 1 in the way I am proposing will have implications for our practice as well as our doctrine. It cannot be otherwise: if we take the view that God's sole aim in creating the universe was the redemption of human beings, we will have justification for using all parts of creation for whatever we need and want as Calvin recommends. If we take the human-separatist view, we will place human beings in a different moral category from other creatures to match their qualitative theological difference, and therefore appropriately give far less regard to the well-being of non-human creatures. If we reject these doctrinal views, we will need to rethink our ethics, too. Even given his view that the universe was established for human beings, Barth saw the killing of animals as 'something which is at least very similar to homicide' and which is legitimate only under the pressure of necessity.⁴⁹ Once we have departed from Barth in recognizing

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our decisive solidarity with all God's creatures in creation and redemption, we will have to ask even more seriously concerning our responsibilities to our fellow creatures.

⁴⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III/4, trans. A. T. MacKay et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 350–5.

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