Ecological Hermeneutics

Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives

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An Ecological Reading of
Rom. 8.19-22: Possibilities and Hesitations

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Recent endeavour to rest ecological concern upon a biblical basis has asked a lot of a small passage in Romans 8 (vv. 19-22) where Paul makes reference to the groaning of creation. Whether Paul can be recruited for the ecological cause on so slender a base remains a question. Paul would doubtless be startled to discover all that has been wrung out of the tortured sentences and mysterious allusions in this text. His major concerns in the letter far more evidently bear upon such matters as the necessity of faith in the Gospel (rather than observance of the Mosaic law) for justification, and the fate of the bulk of Israel that has proved resistant to such faith. Interest in the fate of the non-human remainder of creation is at best tangential. When, then, we interpret this text in an ecological sense we are pushing it well beyond what would appear to be Paul’s main concerns, though not, I would argue, counter to the intent of the text. From a hermeneutical point of view, we are reading the text as Scripture. We are therefore engaging with it from a wider horizon of discourse, informed by the concerns peculiar to our own time, notably the global situation.

What has been missing in more recent enquiry into Rom. 8.18-22 is a consideration of it within the wider running context of Paul’s letter to Rome. Such a consideration can, I believe, enhance the hermeneutical possibilities of the text in the direction of ecological concern. In a recent book chapter and now in his published commentary on Romans (Jewett 2004; 2007: 508–10), Robert Jewett has offered a reading of Rom. 8.18-22 – and the corruption and redemption of creation which it mentions – within the context of the Roman imperial ideology, the most familiar element of which would be the celebrated Fourth Eclogue of Virgil. Harry Hahne has studied the passage from the perspective of the corruption and redemption of the natural world as a motif in Jewish apocalyptic literature (Hahne 2006). Both authors, from complementary directions, fill out the background to Paul’s rather sudden introduction of the non-human created world, and its longing and groaning, at this point in Romans 8. What I offer here is a consideration of the text within the broader argument of the letter itself and in respect to several themes that run throughout its length: the complex (‘overlap’) eschatology of believers’ present existence; the interplay of grace and sin, and the symbolic role of Adam as instrument
of sin; the consequences for ‘creation’ of human existence as embodied. It is from a wider view building upon consideration of these motifs that I propose to approach the references to ‘creation’ in Romans 8.

It is generally agreed that Paul states the theme of his letter to Rome in a lengthy statement describing the power of the Gospel in 1.16-17:

For I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God leading to salvation for everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed, from faith to faith, as it is written: ‘The person who is righteous by faith will live’ [Hab. 2.4].

This programmatic statement makes clear that the letter is primarily about ‘salvation’. It is a defence of the power of the Gospel – and the Gospel alone – to bring to salvation all who respond to it in faith, because through faith believers receive as gift the righteous status upon which salvation depends (Rom. 5.9-10; 10.9-13). In the light of our current concern the question that immediately presents itself is whether ‘salvation’ as here asserted includes the non-human remainder of creation or envisages human beings alone. Until recently, and especially as a consequence of the Reformation controversy, interpretation has hardly stopped to examine this question, so confident has been the assumption that Romans is all about how human individuals find salvation through the grace of God. Too rarely, perhaps, have interpreters paused to consider that human existence for Paul is embodied existence – something that, as Paul insists in 1 Corinthians 15, extends beyond the barrier of death. The difficulty of conceiving of a human bodily existence that did not in some sense relate to the non-human material remainder of creation as its necessary physical context suggests from the start that the ‘salvation’ thematically asserted as the objective of the Gospel must in some way include that non-human remainder within its scope. Nonetheless, Paul’s notion of salvation operates within a complex reconfiguring of post-biblical Jewish eschatology, to which we must now devote some attention.

*The Overlap of the Ages*

Behind the argument that Paul develops in Romans is the sense shared with Jewish apocalyptic eschatology of two ages or ‘aeons’: the ‘present age’ and the ‘age to come’ (Byrne 1996: 20-21). In the present age the created world and human beings within it have become corrupted and dominated by sin, with a destiny to death and decay. How the world got into this state Paul does not explain, though he seems to presuppose in his readers awareness of a tradition, stemming ultimately from Genesis 3, in which the first human being, Adam, plays a significant role (Scroggs 1966; Levison 1988). This ‘present age’ stands under God’s wrath (Rom. 1.18; 5.9; cf. 1 Thess. 1.10), a wrath that is very soon to break out destructively and which is
already to some extent ‘revealed’ in the perverted state of human bodily existence (Rom. 1.18-32).¹

According to the Gospel, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, God has begun to establish upon earth a new age in which human beings can be rescued (‘saved’) from the present time and reclaimed for the original intent of the Creator. For Paul this divine rescue operation has not burst upon the world unannounced. It is the working out of a liberation proclaimed long ago in the Scriptures (Rom. 1.2). In fact, it fulfils a promise made to Abraham, to whom the originally universalist design of the Creator was announced and in whose person and responses to God its realization is prefigured (Rom. 4.1-23).²

What complicates things for Paul is the fact that, contrary to conventional Jewish apocalyptic expectation, these two ‘ages’ have not followed each other in orderly sequence; they in fact overlap and co-exist at the present time (Dunn 1998: 464). God has intervened in Christ to mount an eleventh hour rescue of the human situation before the full operation of divine wrath comes into play. The eschatological justification leading to entrance into the new age is available here and now for all who accept in faith the divine offer of righteousness made in the proclamation of the Gospel (Rom. 3.21-26). This means that, as far as relations with God are concerned and as attested by the gift of the Spirit, believers already live the life of the new age. As far as their bodily existence is concerned, however, they are still anchored in the present age. It is this situation of having to live currently in both ages that creates the spiritual and ethical dilemmas confronting the present life of believers that Paul addresses in Romans 5–8 (Byrne 1981).

Paul’s Sense of Life in the Body in Romans

In this part of the letter (Romans 5–8) Paul addresses three factors arising out of the continuing tug of the old age upon believers in their bodily life: first, suffering; then, mortality; and, third, the necessity and possibility of living righteously in the present ‘overlap’ time where people no longer live ‘under the law’. Paul addresses the issue of suffering in the first half of chapter 5 (vv. 1-11) and revisits it in the latter half of chapter 8 (vv. 18, 31-39). Suffering is not to be interpreted as an indication of God’s wrath. On the contrary, in the context of God’s action in giving up the Son for our justification (Rom. 4.25; 5.6-10; 8.32) and the union with Christ thereby established (Rom. 8.17), it is a sure index of hope: that God will bring to completion that saving work already begun at such cost (Gieniusz 1999). Likewise (Rom. 5.12-21), though

¹ On the hermeneutical and ethical issues raised for contemporary interpretation by Paul’s adherence to a conventional Hellenistic Jewish view linking idolatry and sexual perversion in pagan society, see Byrne 1996: 70.
² I leave aside here the huge issue for Paul arising out of how to account for Israel, the Sinai covenant, and the Law and the righteousness it purported to offer.
death has become a universally prevalent factor of human existence as a legacy of Adam's sin and the universal sinfulness thereby unleashed (Rom. 5.12), sin and death will not have the last word. In Christ, as counterpart to Adam ('Last Adam' [1 Cor. 15.45]), God has introduced into the world a 'much more' powerful legacy of righteousness leading to life (Rom. 5.15-17). Finally, whereas in the old era human existence had fallen under the grip of 'Sin' (hamartia) personified as an overbearing slavemaster imposing a fatal necessity to sin, through faith and their baptismal union with Christ, believers have been set free from such slavery and brought into a new obedience of righteousness leading to life (Rom. 6.1-23).

Believers have to live out this new situation, however, as 'flesh', and flesh is where they remain vulnerable to the still present threat of the slavemaster Sin. When Paul's argument takes an anthropological turn in Romans 7, it is not easy to get a grasp upon why he at times speaks about human existence as 'flesh' (Rom. 7.5, 14, 18, 25; 8.3-9 [passim], 12, 13) and at times as 'body' (Rom. 7.24; 8.10, 11, 13, 23). Flesh is clearly the more pejorative quantity. While it can refer simply to the physical aspect of human life (2 Cor. 12.7; Gal. 4.14), it more usually has overtones of vulnerability, leading to hostility to God and resistance to the Spirit (Rom. 8.6-8); as 'flesh' human beings have bad relationships: with God, with each other and with each one's own best interest. Human bodily existence is material but essentially relational: it is as sōma that believers relate to surrounding physical world and also to each other (Byrne 1983). Whereas as 'flesh' relating is always bad, as sōma it can go either way: in the direction of alienation from God and death, or, under the influence of the Spirit, in the direction of freedom and eternal life. So Paul can speak of our 'former self' (literally, 'our old man') being concruciﬁed with Christ in order to take away the 'body of sin', that is, presumably, to destroy our bodily subjection to Sin (Rom. 6.6); he can also urge his audience, not 'to allow Sin to reign in your mortal bodies' but to offer 'your members as instruments of righteousness to God' (Rom. 6.12).

In regard to this latter, positive aspiration, in Paul's view the Law is no help at all (Rom. 7.5); it simply anchors people in the conditions and slavery of the old age – a situation dramatically illustrated in the dilemma of the 'I' described in the latter part of chapter 7 (vv. 14-25). This comes to a climax with the plaintive cry: 'Who will deliver me from the body of this death?' (v. 24b), that is, from a bodily existence trapped in a servitude to Sin that will inevitably lead to (eternal) death.

In the first part of chapter 8, as a kind of answering second panel of a diptych, Paul describes the new possibility brought about by God's redemptive act in the sending of the Son (Byrne 1996: 213, 234–41). This has liberated human beings from the power of Sin dominating the flesh and created the possibility of living bodily life under the influence not of the flesh but of the Spirit (Rom. 8.1-4). In Rom. 8.12-13, Paul concludes on a kind of exhortatory note:

So then, my brothers (and sisters), we are people under an obligation – not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die. But, if in the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.
Why did Paul write (or dictate) in that penultimate phrase ‘deeds of the body’ – as though the body were the cause of all the trouble? Why did he not write, ‘deeds of the flesh’? Was it a lapse that Tertius (Rom. 16.22) did not advert to? Or did Paul mean ‘body’ under the negative aspect? Presuming that he did mean ‘body’, perhaps we have to understand here deeds that believers do in the body under its aspect of still being anchored in the conditions of the present age and still liable to be determined by it, that is, by its enslavement under Sin. We remember that in verse 3, Paul speaks of God in the Christ act having ‘condemned’ Sin in the flesh. This reference to Sin’s ‘outing’ and condemnation as the real villain is not necessarily the same thing as its complete removal or elimination.

Later in Romans 8, in the verse (v. 23) coming immediately after the passage that is our fine point of focus, Paul will speak of believers awaiting ‘the redemption of the body’. As is widely recognized, this phrase is not to be interpreted in a proto-Gnostic sense as redemption ‘from’ the body, as though bodily existence were the whole problem. Rather it refers to the redemption – that is, the costly liberation – of believers’ bodily existence from the continuing conditions of the present age: suffering, death and the threat of sin. The ‘cost’ may be physical death itself (cf. Rom. 8.10b). For Paul, however, death is not the end of life in the body but the gateway to bodily life fully under the influence of the Spirit (cf. 1 Corinthians 15): human existence as God intended from the start that it should be, patterned upon the risen humanity of Jesus (cf. Rom. 8.29).

In the meantime, as he begins the parenesis that brings to a conclusion the main body of his letter to Rome (12.1-15.13), Paul exhorts his audience to offer their bodies ‘as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, the worship you owe as rational beings’ (Rom. 12.1). Present bodily life, though vulnerable and mortal (Rom. 8.10), is capable of being lived out in a way totally pleasing and acceptable to God – a pattern of life regulated not by going back to the Law but through discernment of God’s will, and what is ‘good and acceptable and perfect’ (Rom. 12.2d). This discernment is made possible through believers’ not being conformed to this present age but transformed through the renewal of their mind (Rom. 12.2c). The exhortation recognizes that believers have to live their bodily life in the context of two ages but insists that they do not have to live determined by the conditions of the present one: with renewed ‘mind’ they can live in the present the values of the new.

What I have been trying to uncover in this review of Paul’s wider argument in Romans is a context that makes Paul’s sudden appeal to ‘creation’ in the middle of chapter 8 somewhat less surprising. In the context of his continuing consciousness of human existence as bodily existence and hence of related existence, including relation to the non-human created world, that reference, when it occurs, becomes less anomalous. All through this part of Romans Paul has been dealing with the issues and dilemmas created by the overlap of the ages and the necessity for believers of living a bodily life within the opposing ‘tugs’ of those two ages.
The Groaning of Creation: Rom. 8.19-22

The passage that is the specific object of our enquiry occurs at a point where Paul, pursuing his overall case for hope in the present ‘overlap’ situation (Romans 5–8), explicitly confronts once more (cf. Rom. 5.1–4) the phenomenon of suffering. After an opening thematic assertion (v. 18) to the effect that the sufferings of the present time pale into insignificance (literally, ‘do not bear comparison’) with ‘the glory that is to be revealed in us’, the small passage on ‘creation’ appears as the first of three subsections each of which features a subject that ‘groans’: ‘creation’ [vv. 19-22]; ‘ourselves’ [vv. 23-25]; ‘the Spirit’ [vv. 26-27]). In each case the ‘groaning’ is not simply a negative reaction to pain. It provides grounds for hope in the sense of expressing a ‘divine restlessness’ with the present state of affairs, offering a well-founded anticipation of a much better situation (‘glory’) soon to come (Byrne 1996: 255). Paul rounds off the ‘groaning’ sequence by evoking the sense of believers’ being caught up in the inexorable unfolding of God’s salvific plan (vv. 28-30).

The logical flow in the sequence making up the first ‘groaning’ passage (vv. 19-22) is not at all that obvious at first glance. Paul works to his conclusion, the groaning of creation (v. 22), by first (v. 19) pointing to an eager longing on the part of creation, and then, in a litte parenthesis (vv. 20-21), explains why creation has this eager longing, which expresses itself in a groaning (v. 22) that he sees to be the outward manifestation of hope. Along with most interpreters, I take ‘creation’ (ktisis) here to refer to the non-human remainder of creation (Byrne 1996: 255-56; Hahne 2006: 176–81). Paul’s argument then rests upon a biblical and post-biblical tradition, stemming ultimately from Gen. 1.26-28, that sees creation in this sense as intimately bound up with the fate of human beings for good and for ill. When human beings fail, that failure redounds negatively upon creation (cf. Gen. 3.17-19; 4 Ezra 7.11-12; 9.19-20). Conversely, human restoration will be reflected in a transformation of the non-human created world (cf. Isa. 11.6-9; 43.19-21; 55.12-13; Ezek. 34.25-31; Hos. 2.18; Zech. 8.12; 1 Enoch 45.4-5; 51.4-5; 4 Ezra 8.51-54; 2 Apoc. Bar. 29.1-8; Byrne 1996: 256; Hahne 2006: 35–168). It is on the basis of this ‘common fate’ that Paul, personifying ‘creation’, can speak of its ‘eager longing’ (apokaradokia) for the revelation of the sons (and daughters) of God’ (v. 19), that is, for the outward manifestation in risen glory of the filial status in regard to God of those who already, as beneficiaries of Christ’s redemptive act, experience the reality of that status in a hidden way (Rom. 8.15-16, 23; Gal. 3.26-28; Byrne 1996: 257).

The background to this eager expectation on the part of creation is explained in the little parenthesis making up Rom. 8.20-21. Most interpreters find in the reference to creation’s ‘subjection to futility’ an allusion to the element of the second creation story Gen 2.4b–3.24 where the earth is cursed as a consequence (and punishment) for Adam’s sin (Gen. 3.17-19). ‘Futility’ (mataiotés) has the general sense of ‘worthlessness’, ‘purposelessness’ (BDAG: 621). It is difficult to pinpoint precisely what Paul means by ‘futility’ in the context under discussion, though it is probably safest to see the term retaining its basic sense of ‘inability to attain its
true purpose' (Cranfield 1975: 413–14). The motif occurs elsewhere in Paul (in the form of the cognate verb in the passive) only in Rom. 1.21 (with an echo in Eph. 4.17) in regard to the human lapse into idolatry (worshipping the creature rather than the Creator [v 24]). In Rom. 1.21, however, it is the human side of the interaction (the mind) that becomes ‘futile’ rather than the objective created world, as in Rom. 8.20. What is common to both occurrences is the sense that because of human failure something – the human mind in the first case, the non-human created world in the second – has been frustrated from attaining its true purpose. In Gen. 3.17-19 the consequence of YHWH’s cursing of the earth is that what had previously been a garden providing all manner of delightful food for the human couple without any labour on their part has been rendered a difficult and harsh terrain from which they have to wrest their food with wearying toil and effort. In other words, the kind of harmonious relationship between human beings and the natural world proper to life in a garden has been replaced by one more redolent of situations where the two are virtually in conflict. In this sense it is perhaps not drawing too long a bow to relate the subjection to ‘futility’ in Rom. 8.20 to the contemporary sense of environmental degradation – at least in the context of the wider Adamic ‘sin story’ that, as I shall argue, runs through the central chapters of the letter.

But who is ‘the subduer’ (ton hypotaxanta) ‘on account of’ (dia) whom creation, against its own will (ouch hekousa) underwent subjection to futility (v. 20b)? While most interpreters recognize an ‘Adamic’ aura behind the elusive references in this text, a minority find here a precise reference to Adam, or to humankind as represented by him (Byrne 1996: 258, 260–61). However, the unmistakable divine passive in the reference to subjection hypetage earlier in the verse and the fact that God is certainly the agent of the cursing of the earth according to Gen. 3.17-19 have led most to see here a reference to God – even though such a reference does put a strain upon the dia ton . . . phrase, which has then to be understood in a rarely occurring instrumental sense rather than in the causal sense that it far more normally has (Fitzmyer 1993: 508). Within the overall allusion to the so-called ‘Fall’ story and hence the sin of Adam, what seems to be uppermost in Paul’s mind is responsibility for the bringing about of the negative situation (the subjection of creation to ‘futility’). He wants to deflect this responsibility from creation, which neither wanted it (ouch hekousa) nor deserved it. The subjection came about as a consequence of human sin and as punishment for that sin. Perhaps in trying to wrest meaning from Paul’s highly cryptic phrases here we can offer some distinctions in regard to ‘causality’ for the ‘subjection’: God was the agent of the subjection (the hypotaxanta corresponding to the divine passive in hypetage); Adam was its cause in the sense of meriting this punishment; creation, as the instrument of the divine retribution, was compelled to be the innocent victim in the entire transaction.

In ‘compensation’, so to speak, for its being required to play this retributory role, God gave creation the ‘hope’ spelled out in v. 21 (reading hoti at the start of the statement in a declaratory sense: Byrne 1996: 261). That is, creation would be set free from its bondage to decay (‘futility’) to share in the ‘freedom’ (from such bondage)
associated with the glory of the children of God. On the solidarity or ‘common fate’ principle linking it with human beings, the non-human creation cherished the hope that when the fall of human beings would be reversed and they (or at least some) would attain the likeness to God (‘glory’) that was the original intent of the Creator in their regard, and it also would share this freedom and glory from corruption and decay.

It is in view of this hope given it by God that creation awaits with ‘eager longing’ the revelation of God’s sons (and daughters) (v. 19), a revelation that will occur when the status of divine filiation now attested only through the Spirit (Rom. 8.14-16) will be made externally manifest through the liberation of human bodily existence (the awaited ‘redemption of the body’ [v. 23]) in resurrection. The reversal of human beings’ bondage to mortality (‘decay’) and attainment of the ‘glory’ that was the Creator’s original intent in their regard will signal to creation that its own time for liberation has arrived.

Having explained why creation has this eager longing, Paul can now (v. 22) round off this first stage of his argument for hope by pointing to its ‘groaning’ manifestation as an object of common knowledge (οἴδαμεν γὰρ). Ever since the ‘Fall’ (cf. Gen. 3.17-19) right up to the present (αἰχρὶ τοῦ ποταμοῦ), the entire non-human creation has been groaning, not simply because it has had to bear the consequences of Adam’s sin, but also in view of the hope that the Creator bestowed upon it when ‘subjecting it to futility’ as a way of punishing human sin. It is suffering but not suffering to no purpose. As in the case of the suffering of the justified as expressed in Rom. 5.3-5, it is suffering a suffering redolent of hope.

It is natural to interpret the ‘groaning together’ (σύστεναζεῖ) of ‘all creation’ in the sense of a response to the pain inflicted upon the earth by (sinful) human misuse. While there is no need from an exegetical point of view to exclude the sense of a groaning in response to injury and pain, the wider flow of the argument in Rom. 8.18-30 as a whole favours understanding this ‘groaning’ (along with the later references to the groaning of ‘ourselves’ [v. 23] and the ‘inexpressible groans’ of the Spirit [v. 26]) primarily as an index of hope (Byrne 1996: 255; Hahne 2006: 202–203). Hence, when ecologically attuned present-day readers find in the ‘groaning’ of creation a response to the pain inflicted upon the earth by (sinful) human misuse, there is need for some nuance and clarification. Neither in the ‘Fall’ story of Gen. 3.17-19 nor in the apparent allusion to it behind Rom. 8.20-21 is there any suggestion of direct human action in respect of creation in a destructive sense. Adam’s sin, while it may involve reaching out to a forbidden creature (Gen. 2.16-17; 3.6), was essentially an act of disobedience towards God. In the Genesis myth and the tradition stemming from it the ‘subjection’ inflicted upon creation came about as an action of God designed to punish human beings for their sin. There is no ‘straight line’ between human action and the effect upon the non-human created world. The punitive causality, if one may speak in such terms, runs through God.
Such being the case, a reading of Rom. 8.19-22 that wishes to derive from the text a reflection upon destructive human behaviour in regard to the non-human creation will have to do so on the basis of a somewhat broader view of human sinfulness and its consequences according to Paul. Besides the focus upon grace and faith, Paul’s letter to Rome offers a sustained and sophisticated analysis of human sin, which in its central chapters it portrays under the image of a slavery from which humans are powerless to escape. The Adamic aura hovering about Rom. 8.19-22 draws this text into association with the Adamic allusions that first become explicit in connection with the onset of sin and death in Rom. 5.12-21, but which run far more widely beneath the surface of the argument. Adam was significant for Paul not simply as the individual who fathered the race but also as representative symbol of unredeemed human existence, enslaved to selfishness as the radical core of sin and, in consequence, relating poorly both to God and to the wider created world. ‘In Adam’ Paul sees told the ‘sin story’ of the human race, over against which God’s action in the Christ-event has counterpoised a (much more powerful) ‘grace story’ (Byrne 2003). Throughout a substantial block of the argument in Romans (5.12-8.4) Paul portrays sin (hamartia) as a tyrant slavemaster into whose grip Adam has delivered the human race, the consequence being an ineluctable compulsion to sin that can only be broken by God’s act in Christ (Rom. 8.3-4).

It is in this wider sense, I believe, that the Adamic allusions in Rom. 8.19-22 can most properly be related to ecological concern. In the ‘overlap of the ages’ situation where human bodily life continues to be anchored in the conditions of the ‘old age’, vulnerable to weakness (‘flesh’), suffering and death, the Adamic ‘sin story’ continues to exert its tug upon human beings. While, as the imagery suggests, Paul is more interested in the radical core of sinfulness rather than its outward manifestation in specific acts, there is no reason why ecological misbehaviour and abuse of the environment, whether on an individual or communal scale, should not be seen as outward manifestations of what he would recognize as a radical slavery to ‘Sin’.

The ‘Grace Story’ in Relation to Creation

So much for the negative. But what of the positive? As is widely recognized, Paul’s negative allusions to the Adam story and to the onset of sin and death that it encapsulates, serve as a foil over against which to assert the superior force (the ‘much more’ [pollō mallon]: Rom. 5.9, 10, 15, 17; cf. 20b) of the grace story told in Christ, which is the basis of hope. Is it possible to relate this story, focused upon Christ as ‘Last Adam’ (cf. 1 Cor. 15.45), to a positive future for the world resting again on human bodily solidarity with the non-human creation?

In several respects things are even more tricky here than in the negative case, where, as I pointed out, neither Paul in Rom. 8.19-21 nor the Genesis text lying
behind it envisaged direct human agency for ill upon the non-human world. The 'grace story' is precisely grace: the gift of God made concrete in the life and especially the sacrificial self-gift in death of Jesus Christ (Rom. 5.15; 17). In respect of that gift, which is in effect the 'new creation' (2 Cor. 5.18; Gal. 6.15), human beings can 'do' nothing: all they can do is to open themselves up to receive through faith the justification that it offers and the promise of salvation that it holds out (Rom. 1.16-17; 3.21-26; 4.21-25; 5.1; 10.5-13).

Pure receptivity is not the whole story, however. Faith may be the sole channel of justification (Rom. 3.28) but Paul also insists that in the 'overlap of the ages' era, while living in the 'space' between justification and the salvation still to come, believers must live a life of 'obedience' (Rom. 6.1-7.6). This is not an obedience to the Law, but an obedience which is really the self-sacrificing obedience of Christ (Rom. 5.19; Phil. 2.8) welling up within them as a consequence of their baptismal union with him (Rom. 6.4, 11; cf. Rom. 15.1-3). In this way there is 'fulfilled' (plerōthē) within them 'the righteous requirement of the Law' as they 'walk' not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8.4). As I have argued elsewhere (Byrne 1981: 569, 576), the passive 'fulfilled' here carefully preserves the divine initiative, the sense that all Christian obedience is the product of the Spirit's working within the believer the continuing obedience of Christ. At the same time, the righteousness created in this way as a response to grace does lead to 'salvation' (Rom. 1.16-17), as believers, in accordance with Paul's exhortation, 'offer their members (melē) as 'instruments (hopla) of righteousness' to God (Rom. 6.13). 'Members' takes up the reference to 'mortal body' in the preceding verse ('Let not then Sin reign in your mortal body . . .' [v. 12]), making it clear that Paul has in mind the bodily life of believers in the 'overlap' era. Such human bodily life, though not fully 'redeemed' (Rom. 8.23), can nonetheless be part of the 'new creation' (2 Cor. 5.17) that is being brought into being through the action of the Spirit.

In this sense, I believe, it is possible to speak of an Adamic existence relating— as a response to grace—to the non-human created world in a positive, unselfish, non-exploitative way on the model of the 'Last Adam' (1 Cor. 15.45), who did not 'please himself' (Rom. 15.3; Phil. 2.6-8). Once again, as in the negative case, it is necessary to read the specific text (Rom. 8.19-22) within a general awareness of Paul's sense of life in the body and in the context of the wider flow of his letter to Rome. In this way a positive reading can emerge to balance the negative side of the story.

'Balance', however, is not quite accurate, since throughout the letter Paul has insisted upon the 'superiority' of the grace side at the expense of sin (Rom. 5.6-11; 5.15-21; cf. 8.31-32). It is because of the 'much more' stemming from God's act in Christ that there is hope for salvation, the central affirmation of Romans 5-8, and indeed of the letter as a whole. Can the 'salvation' in question, for which there is hope, include the non-human created world? Since for Paul it does involve the bodily life of human beings it must surely do so. Also, unlike other Pauline passages where the motif of resurrection is more explicit, 'the passage implies the redemption and transformation of the present material world, rather than the destruction of the world.
and the creation of a new one' (Hahne 2006: 208; cf. Byrne 2000: 201–202). It would, then, be exegetically naïve, as well as hermeneutically irresponsible, to conclude that even if human beings destroy the world, God will ultimately recreate or rescue it.

On the basis, however, that human action impinges upon the world for good (as a response to grace) and for ill (as a manifestation of captivity to sin), we can acknowledge that, in Pauline terms, the future of the world (salvation) does to some extent lie in human hands. It is not simply God's gift and it remains ours to lose. Hope for the future in this sense takes human action into account. It remains hope in God but it is also hope in the prevailing power of God's grace working through, not around or above human cooperation. If righteousness for Paul is ultimately about fidelity – divine and human – then Paul's exhortation to believers that they offer 'their members as instruments of righteousness to God' (Rom. 6.13) can be taken as, in part at least, an encouragement to behave not only responsibly towards the environment but with an unselfish, non-exploitative fidelity that mirrors and indeed is an extension of the divine fidelity (righteousness) behind the entire Christ-event (cf. 2 Cor. 5.21). In this way, I believe, we may include the future of the world in the broad sweep of the Gospel as proclaimed by Paul in Romans.

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