

It is the locusts that make this moment in history seem so biblical. The plague of locusts is one of the 10 catastrophes visited upon the Egyptians in the Book of Exodus. The images of the vast and relentless swarms that have rampaged through Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya, infesting hundreds of thousands of hectares of crops, pasture and forest, seem to take us back to the ancient Egypt of Moses and the pharaoh, bringing the myth horribly alive.

And though we do not (yet) have rivers of blood or invasions of frogs, we do have the fierce storms and the apocalyptic wildfires and the recurrent floods – and of course the plague of Covid-19.

These disasters are not all directly related to each other: the virus and the locusts are special bonuses added to the climate-related adversities. But even apart from the human misery they bring, they do have something fundamental in common. If these events had come together at almost any time and in almost any culture in the pre-modern world, people would have agreed on what they meant: God is angry with us. We have done something bad and we are being punished for it.

Most of us don't think like that anymore. We tend to agree with the great polemicist of the Enlightenment, Voltaire, who responded to the terrible earthquake that destroyed Lisbon, and killed tens of thousands of its inhabitants, in 1755 by taunting those who believed it was God's punishment for sin with the mangled bodies of the innocent dead:

And can you then impute a sinful deed
To babes who on their mothers' bosoms bleed?

As Voltaire was suggesting, the idea that catastrophes are the work of divine providence was cruel and stupid. In Irish history, for example, it influenced some of the worst of the official British responses to the Great Hunger (God's way of teaching the Irish continence).

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But it did at least have one virtue: it reminded us that there are limits to human control of the world. The point of the biblical story of the plagues of Egypt is that the pharaoh thinks he is all powerful. He thinks the world obeys his will and that there is nothing higher than his commands. It seems rather mean of God to use the poor unfortunate people of Egypt to show him otherwise, but that's how these lessons tend to be delivered in mythic stories.

Lords of creation

The counter-myth of modernity, on the other hand, is that we humans are indeed the lords of creation. Beginning in Europe about 500 years ago, an ideology of limitless domination took hold. Religious

change emphasised the idea that humans are outside of and above the natural world, building on God's alleged instruction to Adam in the Book of Genesis to subdue the Earth and all its creatures.

(In fact, as biblical scholars have long pointed out, the divine injunction is that humans must care for (abad) and cultivate (shamar) the Garden of Eden. The first word means "to serve", the second is best translated as "to keep" or "to preserve".)

The "discovery" of the New World laid open vast new territories (and indigenous peoples who could be seen as merely "natural" and therefore not fully human) to be claimed, controlled, dominated, exploited and physically transformed. The scientific revolution seemed to open up the possibility that all the forces of the physical universe, whether seen or unseen, could be understood, categorised and shaped to serve human needs.

We are now living with the logical culmination of this idea. In August 2016, the International Geological Congress formally ruled that we are now in a new era, the Anthropocene. We had been in the Holocene epoch, which lasted for roughly 12,000 years, from the end of the last ice age. This was the eon in which all human civilisation developed. But we are not in it anymore.

We have made a new Earth but we still have to live on the old one

The Anthropocene is the term coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 to denote the new geological era in which many conditions and processes on Earth are profoundly altered by the impact of humans. It is defined as "the period of Earth's history during which humans have a decisive influence on the state, dynamics and future of the Earth system".

We have made a new world, one in which there is no longer a clear distinction between humanity and nature.

The coronavirus, in a sense, "knows" this. It is exploiting the opportunities opened up by the dawn of the Anthropocene. It has used our systems of control over the animal world as a pathway to travel between species. And it has taken a trip on our hyper-globalised networks of exchange, using human suitcases to transport itself with astonishing rapidity around the world.

Dramatic manifestation

Our bodies are its ticket to ride on planes, ships, trains and buses. Of course, there is nothing new about possible pandemics. But the speed of the spread of this coronavirus is a dramatic manifestation of the nature of the new epoch.

And like the wildfires and the floods, the virus has exposed the great weakness within the human triumph. We are providence now, but we are far from divine. We have made a new Earth but we still have to live on the old one. We have not come nearly as far as we like to imagine from the Egypt of Moses and the pharaoh and the 10 calamities.

We can't stop floodwaters from drowning our fields and streets or fire from consuming farms and forests. We can't even make tiny viruses just go away and leave us alone. We can't stop floating strands of RNA, invisible to our naked eyes, from stilling the hubbub of our vast cities and bringing our great economic systems to a halt.

There is something bitterly apt in the fact that coronaviruses take their name from the Latin corona, a crown. Their form is that of the traditional human symbol of dominion and domination.

They come to tell us that they are as much kings of the world as we are. We are not enslaved to nature anymore – but we are not its masters either. We have made a world in which it is not God who punishes us for our misdeeds. We do that entirely for ourselves.

The price for our victory is that we have made an Earth that is subject, not just to our genius, but to our foolishness, our rapacity and our inability to imagine consequences until they are lapping at our doors. It took us millenniums to acquire the pride of conquerors. We have only a few decades to learn the humility of survivors.