

Psalms 115:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

The heaven, even the heavens, are the LORD'S: but the earth hath he given to the children of men.

Analysis

The heaven, even the heavens, are the LORD'S: but the earth hath he given to the children of men. This verse articulates the biblical doctrine of delegated dominion. The dual reference to **heaven, even the heavens** (hashamayim shamayim l'Yahweh, הַשָּׁמַיִם שָׁמַיִם לַיהוָה) uses repetition for emphasis—all heavenly realms belong exclusively to God. This includes the atmospheric heavens, celestial heavens, and spiritual heavens (2 Corinthians 12:2).

But the earth hath he given to the children of men (veha'aretz natan livnei adam, וְהָאָרֶץ נָתַן לִבְנֵי-אָדָם) echoes the creation mandate: 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it' (Genesis 1:28). God retains ultimate ownership (Psalm 24:1, 'The earth is the LORD's') but grants humans stewardship, responsibility, and domain. This is delegated authority, not autonomous ownership.

The verse answers potential objection: if God made everything, why doesn't He fix everything? Answer: He gave earth to humans, making us responsible agents. Human sin brought corruption; human obedience enables flourishing. God governs from heaven while assigning earthly management to humanity. This sets up verse 17's crucial point about human responsibility to praise.

Historical Context

Ancient cosmology recognized heaven as God's dwelling place (1 Kings 8:30, Isaiah 66:1) and earth as humanity's domain. Yet earth remained God's property

(Leviticus 25:23, 'the land is mine'). Israel lived as tenants, stewards of God's land. The exile demonstrated that disobedience forfeited occupancy—God expelled them from His land. The return from exile renewed stewardship, but with sobering awareness that land tenure depends on covenant faithfulness. For Christians, this earthly stewardship anticipates inheriting the new earth (Matthew 5:5, Revelation 21:1).

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. How does understanding earth as 'given to' rather than 'owned by' humans affect environmental, economic, and political ethics?
2. What is your responsibility as a steward of the portion of earth (resources, relationships, opportunities) God has entrusted to you?
3. How does delegated dominion help explain the problem of evil without reducing God's sovereignty or human accountability?

Interlinear Text

שָׁמַיִם	שָׁמַיִם	לַיהוָה	! הָאָרֶץ	נָתַן
The heaven	The heaven	are the LORD'S	but the earth	hath he given
H8064	H8064	H3068	H776	H5414
לְבָנִי	אָדָם:			
to the children	of men			
H1121	H120			

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 8:6 (Parallel theme): Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet:

Psalms 89:11 (Parallel theme): The heavens are thine, the earth also is thine: as for the world and the fulness thereof, thou hast founded them.

Deuteronomy 32:8 (Parallel theme): When the most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel.

Psalms 144:5 (References Lord): Bow thy heavens, O LORD, and come down: touch the mountains, and they shall smoke.

Isaiah 66:1 (References Lord): Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest?