



What the Bible Says about Ecology

The Bible may not use terms such as “global warming” or “fossil fuels,” but it does teach us our place and responsibility in the Creation story, which can guide our actions today.

Introduction

Scripture was written millennia before modern ecological problems arose, yet its many discussions of the earth and the nonhuman world can help us better understand the ethics of environmental care that are built in to our faith tradition. Our ancient ancestors, including the Scripture’s writers, lived much closer to the ground than most of us do. A primarily subsistence-based form of agriculture, with fewer protections against natural events, cultivated attentiveness to nature’s rhythms and to the effects of human action on the rest of creation. Not everything we need to understand about the nonhuman world can be gleaned from Scripture. Still, by careful reading we can recognize that our calling to protect it from destruction is not simply prudent but faithful to our deepest religious tradition.

We Are Part of Creation’s Web

The magnificent creation poem in Genesis 1:1–2:3 was not written for modern creationist-evolutionist controversies. Rather it was composed in response to other ancient accounts that described ties among gods, humans, and earth’s elements such as sky, sea, and land. In this Israelite account, a benevolent God calls all things into being. Rhythms of speaking, making, time, and pleasure structure the poem. Humans do not appear until late on the sixth day, after other land animals. Long before we

appear, God takes pleasure in the light, sky, land, sea, sun, moon, and stars that frame our existence. Without reference to their human usefulness, God calls the various plants and animals “good.” The account clearly underscores our kinship with other beings and God’s delight in all creation.

Many are troubled by verse 26 and the command to “have dominion.” In a 1967 article titled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” medievalist Lynn White traced the history of Western environmental exploita-

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tion to the theology of domination commonly justified with this verse. But the word commonly interpreted from the Hebrew as “have dominion” more properly means “rule,” as a shepherd tends a flock. Shepherding metaphors were, in fact, frequently applied to both human and divine rulers. To rule well was to care for the flock, as God does in Psalm 23.

Psalm 72 describes a king’s rule. Using the same word as in Genesis 1:26, verse 8 says, “May he have dominion from sea to sea. . . .” Surrounding verses describe this rule as just, prosperous, peaceful, and attentive to the weak and helpless. In short, dominion meant nurturing the benefit of all and was not to be confused with

domination. Overextraction of natural resources, ruining of environments, extinction of species, and manipulation of the world for human gain is not dominion but a tyranny unintended by Genesis 1:26. Rather, humans, integral to the whole web of creation, are to promote prosperity for all, or at least not to pillage the world for human gain.

Psalms 104 likewise celebrates the natural systems God created: the careful placement of sky, land, and sea as habitats. Each animal has its environmental niche: for the birds, the trees; for wild goats, the mountains; for lions, the cover of night; and for humans, the light of day. Even our own existence is bounded by a time-share that gives safety and prosperity to both wild creatures and ourselves (vv. 21-23). According to Scripture, the place of humans in God's order is among the other created beings, and not in some separate compartment.

Sin Has Disrupted Our Relationship with the Earth

Genesis goes on to an account of alienation from this order. The story of early humans in Genesis 2-4 repeats the word *adamah* ("ground" or "soil") fourteen times (Gen. 2:5-7, 9, 19; 3:17, 19, 23; 4:2-3, 10-12, 14). Although these stories are traditionally seen as accounts of sin, the word "sin" appears only once (Gen. 4:7). More pervasive is concern for what happens to the soil through human activity. First, 2:7 says that humans (*adam*) are made from the soil (*adamah*). Plants and other animals likewise proceed from the ground (2:9, 19). The first human is responsible to "till and keep" the garden (2:15). The verbs here are everyday terms. The first verb most commonly means "work," when used without an object, as in "he worked in the garden." It can also mean "serve," when used with an object, as it is here. The second verb means not only "keep" but also "guard," "watch," and "preserve." We might therefore translate this phrase describing human vocation as "to serve and preserve the soil."

When the first humans violate the only limit God has imposed, by eating from the one forbidden tree, infertility results. Work becomes toil. Alienation from God becomes alienation from the land: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life . . ." (Gen. 3:17).

In the next generation, Cain violates his vocation to till the ground when in jealous rage he murders his brother, spilling his blood on the soil. His fate is not simply to

toil but to wander detached not only from God but from the land that was his home and sustenance. Long before modern problems of soil erosion and infertility, this story draws connections between human misdeeds and ecological destruction.

In short, in the first two stories of human activity, overstepping of limits, illicit desire, rage, jealousy, and competitiveness cause successive losses. Humans who were made as integral parts of creation's web become alienated from God, one another, and the earth. Traditionally Christians have been quick to see the religious and social losses. But ironically, readers have missed seeing environmental alienation here, as if we were too distanced to notice it. Today as ecological issues increasingly take the foreground, Scripture's wise warnings become clearer.

We Are Called to Responsible Care

In Exodus, Moses leads the people from Egypt into the wilderness, where, like Cain, they wander without opportunity to farm. But God provides manna for them to eat. This manna trains them in certain behaviors toward their food supply (Exod. 16:4). They can gather for only one day's meals. They never have too little, but any excess quickly rots. All have enough and only enough, and none can exploit by hoarding food (16:18). But every seventh day the manna does not appear, and the previous day's food stays fresh so that they may take a Sabbath rest.

At Mount Sinai, Moses brings the Israelites the Ten Commandments and many other laws to govern their future life. Continuity can be seen between the ways of manna and the rules for eating well in the promised land. First, the land belongs ultimately to God; humans are only its tenants (Lev. 25:23). They cannot do with it what they wish for private economic gain. As in the wilderness, everyone has a right to food. Generosity to the disadvantaged is expected from those who prosper. Those who reap grain and gather from trees and vines must leave some behind for the landless poor and aliens to glean (Lev. 19:9-10).

In addition, a Sabbath rest comes every seventh day, not only for householders and their families, but for employees and livestock (Exod. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-14). The land also enjoys sabbatical years. Every seventh year it is not sown but allowed to rest, and impoverished humans and wild animals may eat what grows on

its own (Exod. 23:10–11). Humane treatment of animals is also detailed. Oxen are allowed to eat as they work (Deut. 25:4), and animals who are lost or in distress must be helped, even if they belong to others (Exod. 23:4, 5). Animals may be eaten after worshipful sacrifice, not slaughtered wantonly (Lev. 1–7). As Proverbs 12:10 summarizes, “The righteous know the needs of their animals, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.” In

Ethical questions are raised over meat industry practices such as overcrowding animals or confining them to small pens and cages. We have also questioned cutting off the beaks of chicks and the tails of pigs and cows without anesthesia. Using food that is cheap or convenient but unsuitable for animal diets has also been criticized for ethical reasons. Premature deaths result from the stress of all these factors. In addition, the manure produced

in large feedlots often overwhelms the ability to distribute it; it ends up not only polluting the air with methane and noxious smells but also flowing into streams or crops. While consumers are often ignorant about these practices, we can choose to

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short, the wilderness story elaborates an ethic for land use, economic and environmental justice, and care for the soil and for nonhuman species. Respect for Creator and creation is expected. Health of soil and species is promoted. Exploitation for personal gain at the expense of others, both human and nonhuman, is disallowed.

Agriculturalists once spoke of “husbandry,” that is, careful management of resources. “Animal husbandry” refers to cultivating, breeding, and caring for livestock. In the short run, such attentiveness cannot compete with monetary profits, but in the long run it yields more prosperity. For instance, a thirty-year-old tree next to the house may yield more immediate profit if it is cut for lumber, but then it will be gone. Caring for the tree’s health is more time-consuming, but it yields long-term gains in shade and shelter, as well as beauty, while storing and growing its lumber for future use.

Many current agribusiness practices develop wealth for a few—not necessarily farmers—at the expense of wellbeing for land, air, water, plants, animals, and ordinary humans. Numerous questions have been raised concerning overuse of petroleum fertilizers (causing runoff into streams and rivers and killing aquatic life), erosive soil practices, overuse of pesticides that poison helpful vegetation and animals, requirements for larger and more expensive machinery to maintain large farm operations while driving smaller farmers out of business, and reliance on single crops that enrich seed and feed companies while increasing risks for farmers.

educate ourselves and decide whether or not to participate in them. It would be difficult to envision God as a trusted and caring shepherd who treated animals in this way.

Some farmers in the United States and the world are moving toward smaller-scale, diversified farms, selling directly to consumers as a response to the agricultural problems that have developed in the past generation. The ethic practiced in such operations resembles not just the Golden Rule but the wilderness rule of leaving the land in better shape for others than it was found.

Visions of the Future

Fossil fuels developed underground and undersea over the course of millennia, long before humans existed. Petroleum, natural gas, and coal are the concentrated remains of early plants and animals. They might be called stored, concentrated sun power. Until the early 1800s the value of these resources was undeveloped. Once they were discovered, they powered the industrial revolution and most development since.

Environmental scientists have shown that there are two fundamental problems with overuse of fossil fuel. The first is limited supply. As fossil fuels are tapped for ever-increasing demand, they are already becoming increasingly difficult to find and extract. When the energy needed for extraction exceeds the energy gained, what remains will be unavailable, and humans will need to diminish our use, gain greater efficiency, and reclaim renewable sources of energy such as sunlight, wind power, and geothermal energy from the warmth underground.

The other problem environmental scientists point to is the prospect of global climate change. Many believe that this is caused by the reintroduction into the atmosphere of carbon dioxide and other gases that had been sequestered in fossil fuels. Nearly all scientists agree that this change is already happening, as demonstrated by swiftly melting icecaps and glaciers, rising temperatures and sea levels, and the deaths and extinctions of creatures whose habitats are changing faster than they can adapt.

Some people doubt that humans can make such radical changes in the environment. A reasonable response in this case might be prudence. Though we doubt that our house will catch fire, we still buy fire insurance and install smoke detectors. Petroleum and coal companies naturally have a vested interest in retaining trust in their products, yet even they are increasingly investing in renewable energy. It only makes financial and ethical sense to do so.

Some Christians respond to environmental destruction by saying that since our real home is in heaven, it does not matter what we do with this one. Some even claim that the world is ending soon. Yet this claim has been made in every century since Jesus' time. Individual human lives are brief, but if our descendants are likely to remain here throughout their lifetimes, it makes sense to leave them a world in which they can prosper. Martin Luther was once asked what he would do if the world were ending tomorrow, and he responded, "I would plant a tree today."

Biblical writers obviously had no knowledge of fossil fuels and their potential to change civilization, which until the industrial revolution was fueled by the power of the sun and derivative powers such as wind, water, and muscle energy fueled by foods. Yet they did understand that humans could wreak environmental havoc. Wars and conquests left the countryside scarred; cities destroyed reverted to wilderness; trees indiscriminately removed left bare hills. Mesopotamians had already desiccated their land through salt introduced by irrigation, and much is still desert. The cedars of Lebanon, celebrated for their majesty, were already being clear-cut and nearly eradicated, as they remain today.

Many prophets spoke of desolated landscapes. These were not seen as natural or desirable processes but as resulting from heedless destruction. According to Isaiah 24:4–5, "The earth dries up and withers, the world lan-

guishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant." Leviticus 26 envisions prosperity for those who follow divine wishes and destruction for those who disregard them, culminating in removal from the land so that it might enjoy the rest and restoration it did not receive at its inhabitants' hands. Although most people today do not see divine wrath as the immediate cause of human destruction, we are still wise to respect natural laws of cause and effect.

Destruction was not the biblical ideal. Most writers envisioned continuity on this earth, a world renewed through care for society, respect for God, and regard for nature. Micah 4:1–4, for instance, envisions nations learning the ways of peace from God and converting their weapons into farming tools so that "they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid" (Mic. 4:4). Isaiah 65:17–25 speaks of a "new heavens and new earth." This is not eternity but a restored habitat on earth, in which infant mortality is no longer seen and old people live a hundred years, in which people build houses and live in them, plant vineyards, and eat their fruit, enjoying the work of their hands. Even the wild animals coexist peacefully, the wolf with the lamb, the lion with the ox. Healthy societies envisioned by biblical writers prosper in harmony with healthy environments.

God Calls Humans to Wise Moderation

Environmental destruction often accompanies desire for material wealth. Micah and other biblical writers recognized that abundant life had little to do with wealth, but rather with living harmoniously with God and the world around us. Middle-class Americans, once thrifty, have learned to consume goods at rates historically unknown outside of kings' palaces. Unfortunately, we know that the earth can simply not provide, much less sustain, this sort of lifestyle for all human beings.

Psychological studies show that food security is necessary to human well-being, but much beyond this contributes less and less to happiness. Instead, an overabundance of choices and possessions leads to anxiety, even to physical symptoms some have called "Affluenza." Many now suffer overwork and exhaustion from paying for large houses, status-symbol cars,

and consumer items that satisfy only during the act of purchasing.

Proverbs 30:8–9 sums up the distinction between necessities and luxuries:

Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the food that I need,
or I shall be full, and deny you,
and say, "Who is the LORD?"
or I shall be poor, and steal,
and profane the name of my God.

Scripture says much about the greed driving such systems, preventing people from living joyfully and sustainably. As Jesus said: "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or

be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matt. 6:24).

Scripture teaches about the abundance built in to creation. Human resourcefulness has formed both creative cultures and frightening environmental problems. For the future of all species, including our own, mindfulness about our place in creation and the limits the earth imposes are paramount to prosperity.

About the Writer

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