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II

Biblical and Theological Reflections

The deep roots of Christian environmental stewardship lie in oft-neglected elements of the biblical record. The Hebrew Scriptures reflect the concern of the Law for the land and its inhabitants, for the goodness of creation and the need for all living things to enjoy a Sabbath. Christian Scriptures draw out the meaning of a Christ whose divine work is for the sake of all creation. They lead to the expectation of a new creation in the kingdom of God. These profound dimensions of the biblical record are drawn together below in essays that confront contemporary culture with the ecological message of the Bible. Chris Wright surveys a number of biblical teachings on land, delineating what that relationship means for humanity and nonhuman creation. Reviewing the several threats to creation, Praveen Kapur sounds the call for Christian churches to wake up and address these issues out of the depth of their biblical faith. Loren Wilkinson, Thomas Finger, and Bruce Nicholls turn their attention (individually) to challenging elements of modern society and Christian responses to them. Wilkinson addresses the 'Gaia' spirituality now emerging from New Age and other movements, and invites us to embrace rather the new creation. Finger helpfully sketches some of the most important modern understandings of psychological, social, and ecological alienation, and of contemporary theological and spiritual responses to them. He then offers a biblically-based interpretation of alienation—including those sins that disrupt our relationship to the rest of creation—and finds an answer in the saving work of our Creator. Nicholls reviews the analyses of scientism, fundamentalism (among all faiths), humanism, Marxism, and the New Age movement, and commends rather a faith that reads creation through the eyes of the Creator. In their totality, these essays make a compelling case that evangelical Christians must be stewards of the creation entrusted to them by their Creator. **p. 153**

Biblical Reflections on Land

Chris Wright

GOD'S EARTH: REFLECTIONS FROM CREATION

This essay does not pretend to be a comprehensive study of the biblical teaching on the Earth or the land, but offers a number of reflections on that theme. Reflections on land obviously have to begin with the biblical theme of creation as it is found in the familiar texts of [Genesis 1–11](#), and also poetic texts such as [Pss. 33, 104](#), etc.

The Goodness of Creation

The goodness of creation is one of the most obvious points of [Genesis 1](#) and [2](#), in view of its repetition.¹ It sets the Hebrew account of creation in contrast to other Ancient Near Eastern accounts where powers and gods of the natural world are portrayed in various degrees of malevolence. Part of the meaning of the goodness of creation in the Bible is that it witnesses to the God who made it, reflecting something of God's character. (e.g. [Pss. 19, 29, 50:6, 66, 104, 148, Job 12:7–9, Acts 14:17, 17:27, Rom. 1:20](#)). Thus, it is fair to make an analogy to the text 'He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker' ([Prov. 14:31](#), cf. [17:5](#)), along the lines of 'He who destroys or degrades the earth dirties its reflection of its Maker'.

Creation, Distinct and Dependent The affirmation that God created the heavens and the Earth implies a fundamental ontological distinction between God as creator and everything created. This duality is essential to all biblical thought and to a Christian world view. It should not be confused with other kinds of unbiblical dualism (e.g. between body and soul). It stands against both monism and pantheism and thus is a major biblical point of contrast and polemic with a New Age spirituality that adopts a broadly monistic world view.

The Bible not only denies the idea of ontological identity between the world and God, it also denies the idea that the world is a self-sustaining biosystem. The 'Gaia hypothesis', as originally proposed by James E. Lovelock is a hypothesis about the interconnectedness of the [p. 154](#) whole biosphere.² Lovelock himself, while he suggested that the Earth seems to behave like a single organism, a huge living creature, did not personalize nature in the sense of regarding the whole biosphere as a divine being and indeed has rejected such religious metamorphoses of his work. But Gaia has certainly been taken that way in popular presentations of New Age thinking. The Earth itself is regarded as God.

The Bible, however, portrays the whole universe as separate from God and dependent on God for its existence and its sustenance. This is not to deny that God has built into the Earth an incredible capacity for renewal, recovery, balance, and adaptation. But the way all these systems work and interrelate is planned and sustained by God.³

The combination of these two points means that Christian ecological ethics need not be tarnished with some of the implicit or explicit pantheism of certain brands of 'Deep Green' ecology.⁴ Evangelicals are easily repelled by the radical politics of some green advocates or the New Age links of others, and then fall into ecological indifference or

¹ Ron Elsdon makes the theme of the goodness of creation the thread running through his survey of biblical material in both testaments on this issue in his book, *Green House Theology: Biblical Perspectives on Caring for Creation* (Tunbridge Wells: Monarch, 1992).

² James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979). For a survey and critique of New Age ecological views and their influence on recent Christian thought, see Loren Wilkinson (ed.), *Earthkeeping in the Nineties: Stewardship of Creation* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 181–199, and *idem.*, 'New Age, New Consciousness and the New Creation', in W. Granberg-Michaelson (ed.), *Tending the Garden: Essays on the Gospel and the Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 6–29.

³ I have enjoyed immensely reading James Gleick, *Chaos: Making A New Science* (New York: Viking, 1987), with its fascinating account of the mysteries of living and dynamic systems, inorganic, organic, and human, and the progress being made in understanding some of their inner simplicities. Gleick refers in passing to Lovelock's hypothesis, but his book is not interested in the religious or philosophical aspects of its topic, but is a historical and descriptive account of 'chaos theory' in several branches of science.

⁴ Cf. Stephen Bishop, 'Green Theology and Deep Ecology: New Age or New Creation?', *Themelios* 16.3 (April 1991): 8–14.

conspiracy-hunting paranoia.⁵ Yet, distortions must be opposed with biblical truth rather than apathy or hostility.

Creation Desacralized

The distinctness of creation from God not only rules out monism, it also ruled out nature polytheism, which was much more prevalent in the cultural and religious environment of Israel. Nature itself and [p. 155](#) natural forces were desacralized in the faith of Israel. That is, they had no intrinsic divine power. Thus, on the one hand, the fertility cults of Canaan were rejected, because Israelites were taught that Yahweh provided the abundance of nature for them (e.g. [Hos. 2:8ff](#)), and on the other hand, the immensely powerful and influential astral deities of Babylon were unmasked as nothing more than created objects under Yahweh's authority ([Isa. 40:26](#)). In both cases, Israel's distinctive belief about creation brought them into severe cultural and political conflict with surrounding world-views. The Hebrew Bible certainly can be seen to inculcate respect and care for nonhuman creation, but it resists and reverses the tendency to sacralize or personalize it.⁶

Creation and Humanity It is not quite true to say that human beings were the climax of God's creation in [Genesis 1–2](#). The real zenith comes with God's own Sabbath rest as God entered into the enjoyment of God's 'very good' creation. Yet even 'the Sabbath was made for man', said Jesus. The Sabbath day, recurrent reminder of the deeper 'rest' that was and remains God's purpose for creation as a whole, is for human benefit, and in that respect mirrors the rest of creation.

It is important to note that the creation is not solely for human benefit. The Old Testament gives it value in relation to God directly, to glorify and to bring delight to God. Creation is good and beautiful independently of our presence within it and our ability to observe it. This is at least part of the thrust of the speech of God in [Job 38–39](#) with its majestic descriptions of created glories and curiosities, some of which are not even observed by humans, let alone for their direct benefit (cf. [Job 38:25ff](#)). It is also significant that in the creation [p. 156](#) narratives of [Genesis 1](#), the affirmation 'It is good' was not made by Adam and Eve, but by God. That is, the goodness of creation (including its beauty), is theologically and chronologically prior to human observation. It is something that God 'saw' before humanity was around to see it. So the goodness of creation is not merely a human reflective response to a pleasant view on a sunny day, but the seal of divine approval on the whole universe.

⁵ Cf. Constance Cumbey, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism* (Shreveport, LA: Huntingdon House, 1983), and Dave Hunt, *Peace, Prosperity and the Coming Holocaust* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1983).

⁶ It is important to distinguish between personalizing and personifying nature. The Old Testament frequently personifies nature as a rhetorical device, a figure of speech, for greater effect. For example, the heavens and earth are summoned to bear witness to God's address to his people (e.g. [Deut. 30:19, 32:1, Isa. 1:2, Ps. 50:1–6](#)), they declare his glory ([Ps. 19](#)), they rejoice at his judgement ([Pss. 96:13, 98:7–9](#)). Most vividly, the land itself 'vomited out' the previous inhabitants for their wickedness, and did the same to the Israelites when they followed suit ([Lev. 18:25–28](#)). But the point of this rhetorical personification of nature is to underline either the personal character of the God who created it and is active in and through it, or to express the personal and moral nature of human beings' relation to God. It is not ascribing personhood to nature or natural forces in themselves. In fact, to personalize nature in that way results in both de-personalizing God and de-moralizing the relationship between humanity and God. To accord to creation the personal status and honor that is due only to God (or derivatively to humans who bear his image) is a form of idolatry as ancient as the fall itself (cf. [Rom. 1:21–2](#)), though now given new characteristically twentieth century dress in the New Age movements.

The Bible does recognize the uniqueness of human beings, however, both in the fact that they alone have been made in God's own image, and in the fact that God explicitly gives human beings a position of priority within creation ([Gen. 1:29](#), [2:9ff](#), [Pss. 65:9](#), [104:15](#), etc.). Indeed, there is a view in science known as 'the anthropic principle' that suggests that the initial conditions at the origin of the universe—as these are understood within Big Bang theory—had to be precisely set in order to produce the relatively recent conditions in which human life on planet Earth has been possible, with its incredible potential for discovering what those initial conditions actually were.⁷

This principle need not be derided as the kind of anthropocentrism that gives us license to abuse, neglect, or destroy the natural environment. The accusations of Lynn White, Jr.,⁸ and others may be justified to some extent in regard to the arrogance of Christian cultures towards creation. But they are not justified biblically.

On the other hand, the anthropic principle gives biblical legitimacy to the priority of human beings within the created order. Rejected as 'speciesism' by some deep ecologists, this principle has to be maintained by Christian ethics in relation to environmental issues and the emotive question of animal rights. The uniqueness of human beings by virtue of their definitive nature as the image of God means that wherever a conflict exists between human needs and those of other animate or inanimate parts of creation—a conflict that cannot be satisfactorily resolved by meeting the needs of both simultaneously—then human beings take priority. This raises enormous issues of justice as well as environmental ethics, as the Rio Earth Summit highlighted. From a Christian point of view, it is this principle that makes the conflict, in some contexts, between developmental and environmental objectives so sharp.

Servanthood The word *stewardship* is commonly misused either as [p. 157](#) appeals for money (in Christian circles) or as a sanitizing euphemism for unscrupulous exploitation of resources (in non-Christian circles). The term *servanthood* reflects two biblical truths: first, that Christ, as Lord of creation exercised his Lordship historically through becoming a servant, so dominion through servanthood is both biblical and Christlike; second, that God's instruction to the man he placed in the garden in Eden was literally 'to serve it and keep it' ([Gen. 2:15](#)). Humans have been given dominion over the rest of creation, but it is to be exercised by serving creation on God's behalf.

God entrusted the Earth to human management ([Gen. 1:28](#), [2:15](#)) and has not revoked the trust deed, in spite of the mess we have made of it. The concept of 'dominion' has been misunderstood (as mentioned above), but biblically it includes both responsibility for the Earth and its non-human resources (cf. the concern for trees and animals in Old Testament law, e.g. [Deut. 20:19ff](#), [22:1–4](#), [6](#), [25:1](#)) and the exercise of justice in human economic relationships.

Elsewhere, I have suggested four basic principles that are threaded through the economic understanding of stewardship (in its proper sense) in the Old Testament:

1. shared access to natural resources (in view of the fact that the Earth was given to humanity as a whole)
2. the right and responsibility of productive work
3. the expectation of growth and the naturalness of exchange and trade

⁷ Stephen Hawking discusses various versions of the anthropic principle (though he disagrees with them) in *A Brief History of Time* (London: Bantam Press, 1988), 124ff.

⁸ 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', *Science* 155 (1967) 1203–1207.

4. justice in the sharing and use of the products of human effort.⁹

Earth Under Curse: the Fall The biblical description of the entrance of sin and evil into human life significantly includes its effect in the realm of the human relation to the Earth, and particularly the soil. I do not enter here into the debate as to whether the fall of humanity can be said to be responsible for all the phenomena in nature that humans regard as threatening or catastrophic.¹⁰ But the event described in [p. 158 Genesis 3](#) is portrayed as having radically distorted and fractured our relationship with the Earth itself, and—as Paul points out ([Rom. 8:20ff](#)), probably echoing Ecclesiastes—as having frustrated the creation’s function in relation to God. In my view, much Christian thinking about the Earth does not take sufficient account of the biblical reality of God’s curse upon it. Perhaps it is an evangelical discomfort with God being associated with anything ‘not nice’. It is easier to lay all the blame on the devil. Perhaps there is also a lack of familiarity with Ecclesiastes.

Earth Under Covenant: Noah Much other Christian thinking about the Earth too readily jumps on the band-wagon of doom and gloom, as if the fate of the entire cosmos depended on which deodorant spray we use. This is to ignore the tremendous significance of the covenant with Noah. God has entered into a covenant commitment with all life to preserve the necessary conditions for life on the planet, explicitly not just human life ([Gen. 8:21ff, 9:8–17](#)). How long God will continue to do so is not stated, except that it will be ‘as long as the earth endures’. The point is that the future of the planet rests finally in God’s hands, not ours.

This is not meant to induce complacency or indifference to urgent environmental issues. As human beings we could contrive to destroy much of the planet or to render it virtually uninhabitable. But such a catastrophe (if it ever takes place), will not be outside the sovereign will and power of God and God’s purpose in history. We live not only on a cursed Earth, but also on a covenanted Earth, and we must cope with the tension. It is tragic that the rainbow has been hijacked as a New Age symbol when it could and should be the symbol of positive, hope-filled Christian affirmation about our world.

ISRAEL’S LAND: REFLECTIONS FROM REDEMPTION

Noah: Prototype of New Creation

Noah got his name (echoes of ‘comfort’ and ‘rest’) because of his father Lamech’s longing for God to lift the curse from the Earth ([Gen. 5:29](#)). This is a clue to the earliest biblical understanding of what salvation should mean. If the effect of sin was to blight and belabor human existence on the Earth by laying it under curse, then this antediluvian longing points to the answer: let God remove the curse from the Earth. The answer is not to let human beings escape to heaven somewhere, leaving the Earth behind. The consistent biblical hope (from Genesis to Revelation), is that God should do something with the Earth so that we can once again dwell upon it in ‘rest’, with God. The Bible speaks predominantly of God coming here, not of us going somewhere else. [p. 159](#)

⁹ See Chris Wright, *An Eye for an Eye* (Downers Grove, IL: Inner Varsity Press, 1983), ch. 4.

¹⁰ This is a deep and complex issue that the Au Sable Forum itself was not able to resolve. One question is whether the curse on the Earth is ontological (i.e. affects the very nature of the cosmos as it now is), or functional (i.e. affecting only our human moral relationships with the Earth and God). Another question is whether features of nature that we as human beings find unpleasant—such as carnivorous species—are the result of the fall or were always part of the way things were long before humans existed, let alone sinned. Cf. the response to Stephen Bishop’s article by Michael Roberts in *Themelios* 17 (October 1991):16.

Lamech did not see the answer to the wish he made on Noah's birthday. In biblical reckoning, he missed it by five years, and was probably glad for it. But when it came, it was an act of simultaneous judgment and salvation that in both dimensions included the natural creation along with human beings. The flood is a prototype of both sides of God's response to the cursed Earth: destruction and renewal. An old sinful world perished. A new world began as Noah's family and his animal menagerie stepped out onto Mount Ararat. The echoes of the creation narrative are strong in [Gen. 8:17](#). It was, of course, still the old world not yet washed clean of its sin, as the narrative quickly shows. But the whole story becomes the sign not only of God's commitment to life on Earth while it lasts (in the covenant tied up with its rainbow ribbon), but also of the coming final judgment and renewal: the new creation (cf. [2 Pet. 3](#)).

The Covenant with Abraham

Given this biblical emphasis upon the renewal of the Earth, it is not surprising that the covenant promise that actually launched the word of redemption in history included land in its terms. In purely statistical terms, land is clearly the dominant note in the ancestral promise. Out of forty-six references to the promise to Judea in Genesis, only seven do not mention the land while twenty-nine refer solely to it (e.g. [Gen. 28:4](#), wherein the blessing of Abraham is simply possession of the land).¹¹

There is thus a continuity and consistency in the total biblical story. [Genesis 1–11](#) shows humanity on God's Earth, but living in a state of alienation from it and longing for restoration and the removal of the curse from the land. The concluding vision of Scripture looks to a new creation in which God will once again dwell with redeemed humanity. The foundational redemptive covenant of grace with Abraham, therefore, includes land in order to make particular and local what will ultimately be universal—blessing not only to all nations but also to the whole Earth itself. [p. 160](#)

Israel's Land as Microcosm of the Earth

It follows from the above point that Canaan, as the land of Israel, has to be viewed in the light of the universality of the Abrahamic covenant as well as its particularity. That is, while the historical gift of the land to the tribes of Israel is certainly described in the Old Testament as the direct action of God in faithfulness to his promise to Abraham, that promise had as its ultimate scope the blessing of all nations. Its other two main ingredients have that in view: posterity (the fact that Abraham would become a nation, which would be the vehicle of God's blessing to the nations); and relationship (the special covenant relationship between God and Israel, which the Old Testament envisages being ultimately extended to the nations). The land element has to be viewed consistently in the same universal context. Israel possessed its land as part of its mission in relation to the rest of the nations and as part of God's redemptive intention for the whole Earth. That is a vitally important point concerning the concept of election.

Now this link between the land of Israel and the whole Earth can be viewed eschatologically. But in my view it is also vitally important as the basis for a *paradigmatic* understanding of the relevance of Old Testament Israel to other cultures and societies separated by history and geography. Israel was created and commissioned to be 'a light to the nations'. There was, therefore, a sense in which everything connected with them was exemplary in principle. The gifts of land to live in and law to live by were intrinsic to

¹¹ A detailed survey of the material is given by G. von Rad, 'The Promised Land and Yahweh's Land in the Hexateuch', in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: SCM, 1966) and (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984), 79–93.

the way God shaped Israel to be a model people. The particulars of Israel's social, economic, and political structures must be read in light of the universal goal of their existence in the first place. I believe this to be an important hermeneutical principle that helps to unlock the relevance of the Old Testament for our own ethical construction—in many areas, including ecology.¹² p. 161

Among the clearest parallels between creation teaching about the whole Earth and Israel's theology of their land are the twin themes of divine ownership and divine gift. The creation basis of Old Testament teaching gives us two complementary truths about the Earth: on the one hand, it belongs to God who made it ([Ps. 24:1](#), [89:11](#), [95:4ff](#), [Jer. 27:4ff](#), [1 Chron. 29:11](#)); on the other hand, it has been given and entrusted to human beings ([Pss. 115:16](#), [8:6](#), [Gen. 1:28–30](#)). God, as ultimate owner, thus retains the right of moral control over how the Earth is used. As we saw above, human beings, as stewards and managers, are accountable to God for the care and use of the Earth and all its resources.

Israel's system of land tenure embodied the same two principles. On the one hand, the land was God's gift to Israel, an essential part of the promise to Abraham and a tangible proof of his faithfulness. As their 'inheritance',¹³ it was at the heart of their covenant relationship to Yahweh. On the other hand, the land was still owned by God ([Lev. 25:23](#)), so that as divine landlord he retained authority over how it should be used. Hence Israel's whole economic system was subject to God's moral critique. The paradigmatic connection between Israel as a society and the rest of humanity means that we can make positive use of Israel's comprehensive and detailed laws and institutions concerning the distribution and use of land in our own efforts to think biblically about economic and environmental ethics in our day. This gives us a broader and richer set of resources, with a greater degree of practical specificity and sharpness, than the application of the creation principle of stewardship alone. While fundamental and challenging, that principle is higher up the ladder of abstraction, whereas the specific land economics of Israel are at ground level.

Creation Values in Redeemed Economics When we turn to examine the details of Israel's economic legislation, it is possible to see how so much of it was geared to restoring the creation values referred to above. In a fallen world, such a restoration cannot be total, so one finds the same kind of tension in Old Testament economics between the ideal and the given reality that is also there in other aspects of p. 162 Hebrew law and ethics (e.g. on divorce, slavery, etc.). Thus, taking up each of the four principles referred to:¹⁴

¹² This understanding has been pivotal in my own reflection on Old Testament ethics. Cf. *Living as the People of God*, USA title: *An Eye for an Eye*, ch. 2. Recently I tried to summarize the point thus: Given Israel's role in relation to God's purpose for the nations, and given the law's function in relation to that mission of Israel (e.g. [Ex. 19:3–6](#), [Deut. 4:1–8](#)), we can see that the law was designed (along with many other aspects of Israel's historical experience), to mould and shape Israel in certain clearly defined directions, within their own historico-cultural context. That overall social shape, with its legal and institutional structures, ethical norms and values and theological undergirding, thus becomes the model or paradigm intended to have a relevance and application beyond the geographical, historical and cultural borders of Israel itself. The particularity of Israel then becomes not a hindrance to universal application, but serves it. My point is that this paradigmatic nature of Israel is not just a hermeneutical tool devised by us retrospectively, but, theologically speaking, was part of God's design in creating and shaping Israel as he did in the first place.

¹³ The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament: A Survey of Approaches', Part II, *Tyndale Bulletin* 43.2 (1992).

¹⁴ Detailed discussion of the points following will be found in *Living as the People of God* (An Eye for an Eye), 76–87. For a fuller and more technical study of Israel's economic system, cf. my *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, Paternoster, 1990). Israel's economic history has received several specific investigations recently, including: J. A. Dearman, *Property Rights in the Eighth-Century Prophets: The Conflict and its Background* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988);

1. Shared access to and use of the land and its resources was built into the initial distribution of the land among the tribes at the time of the settlement. The purpose was made very clear that each tribe, clan, and family should have sufficient according to its size and needs ([Num. 26:52–56](#), [Josh. 13–19](#)).
2. The right and responsibility of productive work are reflected in the sizable number of laws concerning working humans and animals, slaves, hired labor, conditions of work, treatment by employers, payment, Sabbath and festival rest, etc. (e.g. [Ex. 21:1–6](#), [20ff](#), [26ff](#), [Job. 31:14](#), [Lev. 25:39ff](#), [43](#), [Lev. 19:13](#), [Deut. 24:14ff](#), [Jer. 22:13](#), [Ex. 20:11](#), [23:12](#), [Isa. 58:3–14](#), [Deut. 25:4](#)).
3. Economic growth in material goods and provisions is both validated and put under careful control and critique, from the tenth commandment ('You shall not covet') on. The same chapter of Deuteronomy points to the God-given goal of abundance and sufficiency ([8:7–10](#)), and the dangers of excessive surplus ([8:11–18](#)). Of great practical effect in Israel throughout its whole biblical history (as far as the evidence shows), was the principle of inalienability of family land. Land itself was not to be treated as a commercial commodity for private speculation and profit. It could not be bought or sold, except within kinship groups ([Lev. 25:23ff](#)). The story of Naboth ([1 Kings 21](#)) and its context shows that the violation of this principle involved a capitulation to a foreign religious world-view on the one hand and the invasion of gross rural injustice on the other.
4. Justice in the use and distribution of the product of economic activity is also a major concern of Old Testament law. There can be all kinds of non-normative reasons why some people become wealthier and others poorer. The Old Testament law seeks to redress the economic balance by structural measures aimed at the control of debt, especially ([Ex. 22:25](#), [Lev. 25:36ff](#), [Deut. 23:19ff](#), [p. 163](#) [Deut. 24:6, 10](#)), and other tactics to relieve poverty and to restore the poor to dignified participation in the community—gleaning rights ([Lev. 19:9ff](#), [Deut. 24:19–22](#)), storage and distribution of the triennial tithe ([Deut. 14:22–27](#), [26:12ff](#)), the sabbatical year ([Ex. 23:11](#), [Lev. 25:6ff](#), [Deut. 15:13](#)) jubilee year ([Lev. 25:8ff](#)) etc. All of this was part of the structure of Israel's economic system, to encourage justice and compassion in the ordinary vicissitudes of a functioning economy.¹⁵ There is an even more violent reaction of the Old Testament to poverty and injustice caused by direct oppression and greed—i.e. the economic message of the prophets.

The Line between Human Morality and Ecological Health

The land functioned like a moral and spiritual barometer in the Old Testament. Much prophetic anger is directed at economic injustice and oppression in which the abuse and misuse of the land is dominant. On the one hand, Israel fell into the kind of nature polytheism that characterized the Canaanite view of the land, and thus compromised their unique covenant relationship with Yahweh. On the other hand, they allowed economic practices in the use of land (mostly associated with the monarchy), that eventually polarized the nation into a wealthy land-owning elite and an oppressed peasant population. In other words, the land stood at the junction of the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of covenant relationships. The combination of idolatry and injustice is still

Robert Gnuse, *You Shall Not Steal: Community and Property in the Biblical Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985).

¹⁵ A very thorough survey of this material is provided by John Mason, 'Biblical Teaching and Assisting the Poor', *Transformation* 4.2 (1987): 1–14.

much in evidence in our own world, (although we are careful and comprehensive in our evaluation of what constitutes each).

Sometimes the specifically ecological aspect of the covenant is brought into focus. [Psalm 72](#), for example, positively looks for environmental and economic well-being as a by-product of just and benevolent government. Conversely, [Hosea 4:1–3](#) climaxes the list of social evils with the observation that nature itself is suffering the consequences of injustice.¹⁶ [Habakkuk 2](#), in the midst of a series of woes against the Babylonian excesses, includes gross environmental damage along with the normal victims of war.

The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, and your destruction of animals will terrify you. For you have shed man's blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them ([Hab. 2:1](#)). p. 164

'Lebanon' almost certainly is a figure for forests, as the parallel with 'animals' suggests.

The American deforestation of vast areas of Vietnam in the course of that war, and the Iraqi ecological atrocities in the Gulf War give the ancient prophetic text a chilling relevance.¹⁷

Jesus' Lordship and the Goodness of Creation

Turning briefly to the New Testament,¹⁸ the incarnation itself affirmed and vindicated the goodness of creation. We must take note of the highly positive attitude of Jesus to nature, both in his direct teaching and in his parables (e.g. [Matt. 6:26ff.](#), [10:29](#), etc.). His miracles of calming the storm and walking on the sea demonstrate not merely the power of the Creator, but specifically that power in relation to the element of creation normally associated in Old Testament thought with the chaotic, uncontrollable forces of nature: the sea. This reality makes sense of the astonished question of his disciples ([Matt. 8:27](#)).

ATONEMENT, RESURRECTION, AND CREATION

Paul affirms that through the atoning death of Jesus on the cross, 'all things' in creation have been reconciled to God ([Col. 1:20](#)). The scope of Christ's redeeming work is thus as universal as the scope of his creating and sustaining work ([Col. 1:16ff](#)). Likewise, the resurrection is not only the vindication of the whole created order,¹⁹ but the first-fruits of a new creation.

NEW CREATION AND REFLECTIONS FROM ESCHATOLOGY

As the prophets spoke about the devastating loss of land that came upon Israel in the early sixth century B.C.E., and then enabled Israel to see beyond it to a restored relationship

¹⁶ I think the text is going further than a mere personification of nature in response to a broken covenant.

¹⁷ Ron Elsdon, *Green House Theology: Biblical Perspectives on Caring for Creation* (Tunbridge Wells: Monarch, 1992), 102–107, gives some staggering statistics in relation to these two wars alone. This book is an excellent survey of the subject.

¹⁸ The inadequacy of this New Testament section of the paper can be rectified by the excellent book edited by Calvin DeWitt, *The Environment And the Christian: What Can We Learn from the New Testament?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991).

¹⁹ A point strongly developed by Oliver O'Donovan in *Resurrection and Moral Order*, (Leicester, England: Inter Varsity Press, 1986).

with God, it was the land itself [P. 165](#) that stood at the fulcrum of their message.²⁰ Thus, in [Jeremiah 30–34](#), [Isaiah 40–55](#), and [Ezekiel 36–48](#), to name just the major text blocks, the promised restoration of Israel after the time of judgment is expressed in terms of return to the land. There are many new dimensions to this fresh promise, but it never evaporates into the spiritual stratosphere. Land was still part of God’s redemptive package for Israel in the centuries before Christ.

Future Blessing and Nature

One feature of these and other texts (e.g. [Amos 9:13–15](#)), is the vision of a renewed nature, echoing Eden itself in abundance and beauty. This was decidedly not merely a return to the land as it was, which would have been a tough assignment for the tiny post-exilic restoration community, fraught with many disappointments. As Israel’s eschatology sought to express its conception of God’s ultimate purposes, it turned to God’s original purpose, namely a good and perfect Earth available for human enjoyment and blessing.

New Creation

The climax of Old Testament eschatological vision regarding creation is found in [Isaiah 65–66](#). The words, ‘Behold, I am creating new heavens and a new Earth’ ([Isa. 65:17](#)), introduce a wonderful section that portrays God’s new world as a place that is joyful, life-fulfilling, with guaranteed work-satisfaction, and is environmentally safe! It is a vision that puts most New Age dreams in the shade. This, and related passages are the Old Testament foundation for the New Testament hope. This hope is far from rejecting or denying the Earth as such or envisaging us floating off to some place else. Rather, it looks forward to a new, redeemed creation, ([Rom. 8:18ff.](#)), in which righteousness will [p. 166](#) dwell after purging judgment ([2 Pet. 3:10–13](#)),²¹ because God will dwell there with the people ([Rev. 21:1–4](#)).

Eschatology and Ecology

Finally, as Francis Bridger points out, the eschatological orientation of all biblical ethics has the important consequence of protecting our ecological concern from becoming either purely anthropocentric or pantheistically Earth-centered.

The primary argument for ecological responsibility lies in the connection between old and new creation. We are called to be stewards of the Earth by virtue of our orientation to the Edenic command of the Creator and also because of our orientation to the future. In acting to preserve and enhance the created order, we are pointing to the coming rule of God in Christ.

Ecological ethics are not, therefore, anthropocentric: they testify to the vindicating acts of God in creation and redemption. Paradoxically, the fact that it is God who will bring about a new order of creation at the end, and that we are merely erecting signposts to that

²⁰ Still the best survey of this whole theme, with constant suggestive attention to its contemporary relevance, is Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). Various aspects of the issue are explored in my *God’s People in God’s Land* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990).

²¹ At the end of [2 Pet. 3:10](#), I prefer the textual reading that the Earth ‘will be found’ to the emendation reflected in several English translations ‘will be burned up’. I also find Bauckham’s interpretation of this convincing, namely, that the Earth will be ‘found out’, i.e., exposed and laid bare (cf. NI-1 before God’s judgement so that the wicked and all their works will no longer be able to hide or find any protection. Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Word, 1983, pp. 316–322). The purpose of the conflagration described in these verses is not the destruction of the cosmos per se, but rather its purging and new creation.

future, need not act as a disincentive. Rather, it frees us from the burden of ethical and technological autonomy and makes it clear that human claims to sovereignty are relative. The knowledge that it is God's world, that our efforts are not directed toward the construction of an ideal utopia, but that we are (under God), building bridgeheads of the kingdom, serves to humble us and to bring us to the place of ethical obedience.²²

We might finish, however, with a poem more in the genre of the prophets and psalmists.

The time of rest, the promised Sabbath comes! ...
Rivers of gladness water all the earth,
And clothe all climes with beauty. The reproach
Of barrenness is past. The fruitful field
Laughs with abundance; and the land, once lean [p. 167](#)
Or fertile only in its own disgrace,
Exults to see its thistly curse repeal'd.
The various seasons woven into one,
And that one season an eternal spring,
The garden fears no blight, and needs no fence,
For there is none to covet, all are full.
The lion, and the lizzard, and the bear
Graze with the fearless flocks ...
One song employs all nations, and all cry,
'Worthy the Lamb, for He was slain for us!'
The dwellers in the vales and on the rocks
Shout to each other, and the mountain tops
From distant mountains catch the flying joy,
Till, nation after nation taught the strain,
Earth rolls the rapturous Hosanna round.²³

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Let There Be Life: Theological foundations for the Care and Keeping of Creation

Praveen (Sunil) Kapur

²² Francis Bridger, 'Ecology and Eschatology: A Neglected Dimension', *Tyndale Bulletin* 41.2 (1990:290–301). This article was a response and addition to an earlier one by Donald A. Hay, 'Christians in the Global Greenhouse', 1–7-kli 41.1 (1990): 109–127.

²³ William Cowper, 'The Task', Book 6, lines 733, 763–744, 791–797.