

## ***The Bible and the Environment***

**F.F. Bruce**

[p.15]

### **I. The Cultural Mandate**

The creation narrative of Gen 1:1-2:4a tells how mankind was made in the image of God in order to exercise dominion over the earth and all the animal life upon it and how God gave them what is frequently called the "cultural mandate" to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion" (1:28).

Ecologists of our day have sometimes criticized the wording of this "mandate" and held it responsible for the misuse of natural resources that has now become (and rightly so) a matter of worldwide concern. For one thing, the command to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" has been thought to encourage overpopulation. For another, the command to "subdue" the earth has been thought to encourage ruthless exploitation. But the command to "be fruitful and multiply" had a positive relevance and justification in its own context of sparse population and should be appraised in that context. To quote it as though it constituted a divine ban on birth control in the vastly different circumstances of today is absurd. As for the command to "subdue" the earth the verb *kabas* is certainly a strong one, but anyone who has tackled the business of turning a builder's yard into a garden would probably agree that it is not too strong. In any case, however strong it is "subdue" does not mean "exploit." It is indeed the *motjuste* for the back-breaking work involved in transforming forest and wilderness into cultivable land.

### **II. Paradise Lost**

Even in the most fertile parts of the land of Israel in Biblical antiquity a subsistence could be wrested from the earth only by dint of men's toil and sweat. When cultivated the earth yielded not only the grain for which provision had been made by plowing and sowing but also other things, such as thorns and briars, for which no calculated provision had been made but that impeded the growth of the crops and made the task of reaping them more difficult. There was the recurring hazard of drought and famine, wild beasts were liable to ravage the sown land, and human enemies from beyond the frontiers might work greater havoc than wild beasts. Life was hard and life was short.

In the beginning, however, things were different, and hope was cherished that one day in the future they would be different again. The

[p.16]

primaeval narrative of Gen 2:4b-3:24 tells how the first man and woman lived in a well-watered garden that the Creator planted "in Eden, in the east," where every kind of fruitful tree grew spontaneously and provided food in abundance (2:8-17). But the serpent that lurks at the heart of every utopia was present in that first paradise and incited the woman to taste the fruit of the one tree—"the tree of the knowledge of good and evil"—which the Creator

had expressly forbidden them to eat on pain of death. She shared it with her husband, and the result was their expulsion from the garden. The way to the tree of life, the fruit of which would have enabled them to live forever, was barred to them. More than that, the man had to hear the sentence (3:17-19):

Cursed is the ground because of you;  
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;  
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you;  
and you shall eat the plants of the field.  
In the sweat of your face  
you shall eat bread  
till you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;  
you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return.

This was, indeed, man's familiar lot. As for woman, her sentence was the equally familiar lot of subservience to her husband and the pangs of childbearing.

Paradise was lost, but from time to time the hope of paradise regained—freedom from toil and pain and death—blazed up brightly. Some alleviation of the sentence was foreseen with the birth of Noah: "Out of the ground Yahweh has cursed," said his father, "this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands" (5:29)—for it was Noah who planted the first vineyard (9:20).

### III. THE PROMISED LAND

Among Noah's descendants are found not only the tower-builders of Babylon but also the pastoral family of Abraham, ancestor of the Israelites, who receives the divine promise of blessing, renown and the inheritance of the holy land. Abraham is the first man in Biblical history who is specially called and chosen by God—chosen, not that others apart from him might be excluded from the everlasting mercy but that others through him might be admitted to divine blessing. His descendants pursued a nomadic life in Canaan for three generations and then were driven by famine into Egypt where they remained for four generations, latterly enduring forced labor in the royal building-gangs until they were enabled to leave Egypt in circumstances that left them no option but to recognize the timely intervention of

[p.17]

the God of their fathers on their behalf. The Egyptian existence to which they had grown accustomed with its supplies of fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic (Num 11:5) was now replaced for a generation by life in the desert, mainly in and around the oasis of Kadesh Barnea. From there they struck camp and moved as settlers into the land where their ancestors had lived as nomads. In the desert, too, they entered into a solemn covenant with Yahweh, the God of their fathers—a covenant that was henceforth to be the basis of their religious, social and personal life.

The Canaanites' way of life was integrated with the climate and seasonal pattern of their land. When the Israelites arrived they found the climate and seasonal pattern quite different from

what they had known recently in the wilderness and before that in Egypt. In Egypt fertility depended on the annual rise of the Nile, while in Canaan it depended on the regular fall of rain, if they asked the Canaanites how the regular rainfall could be ensured, they would be told that the Baal-cult served that very purpose. Baal (Hadad) was the rain-god who fertilized the earth and made the crops grow. But the Baal-cult and similar forms of fertility worship were irreconcilable with the ethical principles implicit in Israel's covenant with Yahweh, alongside whom no other god could have any place. Israel had to learn that Yahweh was Lord of the sown land as much as of the desert, of the valleys as much as of the mountains. The promised land, they were told, was "a land which Yahweh your God cares for; the eyes of Yahweh your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year." It was by loving and serving Yahweh that they could be sure of the gift of seasonal rain, gather in their grain, wine and oil, and have grass for their cattle (Deut 11:10ff.). When harvest came, it was to Yahweh that the firstfruits were to be presented in acknowledgment of his goodness (26:1-11). But this was a difficult lesson to learn. When they indulged in Baal worship on a national scale in the reign of Ahab, Baal was hit where it hurt him most—in his reputation. When Yahweh withheld the rain for three years, Baal (rain-god though he was) could do nothing about it, and when the long period of drought came to an end it was Yahweh, not Baal, who sent rain once more (1 Kings 17-18). Even so, the prophecy of Hosea a century later shows how slow Israel was to understand that it was Yahweh who gave grain, wine and oil "and who lavished upon her silver and gold which they used for Baal" (Hos 2:8). This time it was not merely by drought but by exile that the lesson had to be learned.

More radical even than prophets like Elijah and Hosea were the Rechabites, who were so convinced that an agricultural economy was a menace to true religion that they renounced that economy. They represented a conservative and puritan movement in Israel, like the Wahhabi at a later date in Islam. They were noted for their exceptional zeal as devotees of Yahweh and (like Israel in wilderness days) lived in tents, not houses. They sowed no seed, planted no vineyards and drank no wine, but followed

[p.20]

In Deuteronomy the seventh year is called the year of "release"—not only because bondservants were given their release then but also because there was to be a general remission of debts "at the end of every seven years" (15:1-6). For all the humanitarian intention of this enactment, it could work only in a very charitable society. The Deuteronomic law realizes this and adds the admonition that a creditor must not withhold a loan from his needy fellow Israelite because "the seventh year, the year of release, is near" and the chance of its being repaid is slender. "You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him; because for this Yahweh your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake" (15:9-10). The reluctance that the legislator foresaw proved only too real, especially in the changed economic situation of the post-exilic age. Accordingly toward the end of the first century B.C. Hillel (founder of the rabbinical school that bore his name) instituted a provision called the *prozbul*. This was to the effect that if a borrower and lender, before the execution of a loan, made a declaration before the court that the law of release of debts should not apply to it, the debt was not subject to cancellation in the seventh year.

The covenant law also prescribed that arable land should lie fallow every seventh year: "For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild beasts may eat. You shall do likewise with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard" (Exod 23:10-11). This provision guarded against the exhaustion of the soil by too-intensive cultivation. It was repeated and elaborated in the "law of holiness" (Lev 25:1-6, 20-22), where the promise is made that the sixth year will supply a surplus of grain and fruit, enough to cover not only the fallow seventh year but the next two years as well. "When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating old produce; until the ninth year, when its produce comes in, you shall eat the old" (25:22).

Even so, the sabbatical year may not always have been observed with the care that was originally intended. There is a hint in 2 Chr 36:21 that the land of Judah was allowed to remain desolate for the seventy years of the Babylonian exile in order that it might "enjoy the sabbaths" that it had not been allowed to enjoy for a long time—490 years, presumably (i.e., since the inception of the monarchy), if the reckoning is intended- to be exact. However that may be, the sabbatical year was observed throughout the period of the Second Commonwealth. As late as the middle of the first century A.D. the famine in Judaea of which we read in Acts 11:28-30 was the more severe because seedtime and harvest had to be suspended during the sabbatical year A.D. 47/48.

In addition to reaffirming the covenant law of the sabbatical year, the "law of holiness" applies the sabbatical principle to heptads of years as well as to years: the law of jubilee, laid down in Lev 25:8-17. This law provides

[p.21]

that after seven sabbatical periods (49 years) the land is to lie fallow in the fiftieth year and that each smallholder is to reoccupy his original family property when that year comes round. The *prima facie* meaning of the law is that the year after the seventh sabbatical year was also to be a sabbatical year, to be inaugurated and observed with special solemnity. The question then arises whether the next jubilee period began with that fiftieth year or (as one might suppose) with the year following it. If with the latter, then there was no correlation of the jubilee periods with the sabbatical periods. Perhaps the late pre-Christian Book of Jubilees (which arranges the narrative from the creation to the giving of the law and the entry into Canaan in fifty jubilees) correctly interprets the year of jubilee as the forty-ninth year—in which case the seventh in each series of sabbatical years was celebrated as an extra-special sabbatical year—although, as has been said, that is not the natural way to understand Lev 25:8 *if*. But in fact the historical evidence suggests that the jubilee legislation remained an ideal and was never put into practice—although it was later to find an echo in the preaching of Jesus (Luke 4:19).

Even so, the principle that land should not be perpetually alienated from the group that owned it was firmly entrenched in Israelite law. The land was ultimately Yahweh's. Those who possessed it received it from him as a heritage, and it was not for them to dispose of it at random. "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me. In all the country you possess, you shall allow the redemption of land which has been sold" (Lev 25:23-24). If a man (like Zelophehad) had daughters but no sons,

the daughters inherited his land on condition that they married within the tribe (Num 36:1-12). So also Naboth's refusal to sell his vineyard to King Ahab was based on Israel's religious law: "Yahweh forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers" (1 Kgs 21:3). And Ahab, who was as much bound by the law as Naboth was, felt himself obliged to accept Naboth's refusal—with however ill a grace—until Jezebel, who had been brought up in a different culture, took matters into her own hands and procured for her husband by foul means what could not be procured by fair means.

But in the next generations the wealthier classes in Israel were able to do by legal process what Ahab found impossible, foreclosing on mortgages at advantageous opportunities, incorporating their poorer neighbors' smallholdings into their own estates and reducing those neighbors to the status of serfs on what had once been their own patrimony, thus anticipating Oliver Goldsmith's words:

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,  
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.

The day came, as the contemporary prophets warned, when those fertile acres were turned through invasion and exile into desolate tracts from

[p.22]

which, among the briers and thorns, pastoralists scraped a bare subsistence through their cattle that grazed there.

## **V. THE HOPE OF PARADISE REGAINED**

It was in that period of economic oppression and impending invasion that a new hope of "paradise regained" began to arise. A popular form of this hope had existed for generations in the expectation of "the day of Yahweh"—the day when Yahweh would vindicate his cause and right all wrongs. Because of a facile assumption that Yahweh's cause and his people's cause were identical and that his "day" would mark their triumph and the downfall of their enemies, Amos and the prophets who came after him had to emphasize that when Yahweh bestirred himself to put down injustice he would put it down in his own people first and that Israel would therefore find the day of Yahweh to be "darkness, and not light" (Amos 5:18).

As the fortunes of the dynasty of David sank, men looked back to the age of David and Solomon and envisaged the new age as a restoration of the vanished glories of that age under a coming ruler of the same dynasty, "great David's greater son." David's reign in fact had been one of military expansion, and when Solomon succeeded to his father's empire—extending from the Egyptian frontier to the Euphrates—he expended his wealth on the maintenance of an elaborate court for the sake of which his subjects had to supply forced labor for one month out of every three. Yet in retrospect his reign appeared as a golden age: "Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy" (1 Kgs 4:20). Such a time of peace would be reinaugurated under the coming ruler (Ps 72:7-8):

In his days may righteousness flourish

and peace abound, till the moon be no more!  
May he have dominion from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth!

With the peace were associated fertility and prosperity (72:16):

May there be abundance of grain in the land;  
on the tops of the mountains may it wave;  
may its fruit be like Lebanon;  
and may men blossom forth from the cities  
like the grass of the field!

Isaiah sees this state of righteousness and peace extending to the wild beasts (Isa 11:6-9):

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,  
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid.

[p.23]

They shall not hurt or destroy  
in all my holy mountain;  
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of Yahweh  
as the waters cover the sea.

When exile came the prophets encouraged their fellow countrymen with the assurance that it would not last forever. Restoration would come, and in some strands of prophetic encouragement this restoration was linked with the expectation of the son of David, who would "reign as king and deal wisely" and "execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is the name by which he will be called: 'Yahweh is our righteousness'" (Jer 23:5-6; cf. 33:14-16).

The joyful anticipation of return from exile is reflected in a revival of natural fertility and human well-being (Isa 35:1, 5-6, 10):

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly  
and rejoice with joy and singing.  
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then shall the lame man leap like a hart  
and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness  
and streams in the desert. .  
And the ransomed of Yahweh shall return  
and come to Zion with singing; .  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

The theme of the healing of blind, deaf, lame and dumb is taken up later, in no merely figurative sense, in the gospel narratives of Jesus' ministry, which marks the inauguration of the new jubilee, "the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:19, 21; cf. 7:22), with a message of release from a deadlier exile than the Babylonian—release from estrangement from God and accordingly restoration to one's true home in him.

## VI. PROGRAM FOR THE NEW COMMONWEALTH

More prosaically than the prophets just quoted, Ezekiel presents his blueprint for the new commonwealth that is to be established after the return (Ezekiel 40-48). The land of Israel is to be a holy land, the quintessence of its holiness being concentrated in the sanctuary. The land is divided into twelve parallel zones, each stretching from the Mediterranean to the Jordan, for the twelve tribes. Between the seven northern zones and the five southern zones a "holy district" is set apart for Yahweh, about

[p.24]

seven miles long from west to east by about five-and-a-half miles broad from north to south. Throughout the blueprint this setting apart of special sections symbolizes the holiness that is to characterize the new common wealth. Within the "holy district" a central square on a side of five hundred cubits is set aside for the temple area. A "green belt" fifty cubits wide around this square separates it from the surrounding territory, which is allocated to the priests. To the north of the priests' allocation is that of the Levites. To the south of the "holy district" is the holy city with the open country assigned to it. The holy city belongs to the whole nation, not to any one tribe. The superior holiness of the temple is emphasized by its being completely separate from the city. Two zones on either side of the "holy district" and the city area—a western zone bordering on the Mediterranean and an eastern zone bordering on the Jordan—are set aside as "crown lands." They are the portion of the "prince" of the house of David. The prince has no share in the priestly privileges. His lay status is unambiguous. The one vestige of sacral kingship reserved to him is the right to enter the temple by the east gate "to eat bread before Yahweh" (Ezek 44:3). But this falls far short of the privilege of his ancestor David, who went into the tent-shrine that housed the sacred ark in his day and "sat before Yahweh" (2 Sam 7:18).

A liberal note is struck with regard to resident aliens: They and their families are permitted to live among the Israelites and enjoy their inheritance in the tribal territory in which they reside. It may be that here the Hebrew term for "resident aliens" (*gērîm*) approximates its later sense of "proselytes": If they choose to share the Israelites' religion and way of life they are to be welcomed and made to feel at home (Ezek 47:22-23).

From beneath the temple threshold a stream of water emerges and flows down the Kidron valley in ever-increasing volume until it reaches the Dead Sea and makes its salt water fresh so that it teems with fish. On either side of the river fruit trees spring up, producing fresh fruit month by month (47:1-12).

This picture gives concrete form to a concept that first comes to expression in pre-exilic times. Jerusalem, unlike most of the great cities of the Near East, stood on no river, but what their rivers were to other cities Yahweh was to Jerusalem (Ps 46:4-5):

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy habitation of the Most High:  
God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved;  
God will help her right early.

Again, when Yahweh had protected the city against Sennacherib's threats, his deliverance was acknowledged in similar terms (Isa 33:21-22):

There Yahweh in majesty will be for us  
a place of broad rivers and streams,

[p.25]

where no galley with oars can go  
nor stately ship can pass.  
For Yahweh is our judge, Yahweh is our ruler,  
Yahweh is our king; he will save us.

If then Yahweh is the source of his people's life and refreshment, this finds pictorial expression in the stream that flows from his sanctuary. Joel 3:18 tells how, on the day of deliverance,

the mountains shall drip sweet wine,  
and the hills shall flow with milk,  
and all the stream-beds of Judah shall flow with water;  
and a fountain shall come forth from the house of Yahweh  
and water the valley of Shittim.

And another post-exilic prophet tells how half of the living waters from Jerusalem will flow to the Mediterranean and half to the Gulf of Aqaba (Zech 14:8). If it be asked how the contours of the land will permit this, the answer is that Jerusalem will stand as a city on a hill while the surrounding territory will be "turned into a plain"—the result, no doubt, of the earthquake that is to split the Mount of Olives in two (14:4-5, 10).

In the sequel, the survivors of the surrounding nations go up to Jerusalem annually to worship the God of Israel at the Feast of Tabernacles. The original purpose of this festival is implied in the threat that any nation that defaults in this respect will be deprived of rain. (The Egyptians, whose land was watered by the Nile and not by rain falling on it, would be punished by plague instead of drought.)

This association of the Feast of Tabernacles with rain underlies the ceremony of the water-pouring that was observed in the early morning of the first seven days of the feast. The ceremony of water-pouring provides in turn the background of Jesus' proclamation on the eighth day, "the great day of the feast," six months before his passion: "If any one thirst, let him come to me, and let him drink who believes in me. As the scripture has said, 'Out of his

heart shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37-38). The evangelist explains these words as a reference to the Spirit, who would be given to believers after Jesus was "glorified" (7:38).

## VII. THE AGE OF THE SECOND TEMPLE

Ezekiel's blueprint for the new commonwealth was to remain an ideal. There was indeed a return of exiles and the temple was rebuilt in Jerusalem, but it was a modest structure as compared with that of Ezekiel's vision. The new Jewish state did not stretch from Syria to the Egyptian frontier or from the Mediterranean to the Jordan. It comprised a few square miles around Jerusalem. It was, as a contemporary prophet said, "the day of small things" (Zech 4:10). There was indeed some optimistic expectation

[p.26]

that internal strife would cause the Persian empire to collapse so that the new Israel would regain independence and extend to its ancient limits, but no such collapse took place. When the Persian empire fell at last (331 B.C.), it was merged in the new empire of Alexander the Great and his successors, and the Jewish state continued to be a tributary to a superior power.

Yet for several generations it enjoyed peaceful conditions—conditions that are reflected in some of the wisdom literature. It also enjoyed a high degree of internal autonomy as a "temple-state" under the theocratic administration of the Zadokite high priests. One OT writer comes very near to regarding this state of affairs as the realization of the ideal. This is the "Chronicler" who, writing toward the end of the Persian empire, brings together much ancient material with more recent genealogies and the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah and retells the story of his people from the perspective of his own day. The people of Yahweh dwell in safety, as they once did in Solomon's day, "every man under his vine and under his fig tree" (1 Kgs 4:25). They worship Yahweh and live as his people according to the Law of Moses and the liturgy of David. The reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah have cleansed them from ritual defilement. They have kept at bay the compromising blandishments of their Samaritan neighbors. Was not this the golden age? Could the future promise anything better—unless indeed it were the re-establishment of David's royal dynasty?

If this was "paradise regained" it was doomed to be lost again. The post-exilic temple-state was abolished by Antiochus Epiphanes, who during the years 168-164 B.C. did his best to wipe out the distinctive features of Jewish religious identity. Thanks to the valor of Judas Maccabaeus with his brothers of the Hasmonaeon family and their followers, his attempt was defeated. Indeed their successful struggle was followed by nearly eighty years of national independence under a Hasmonaeon dynasty of priest-kings (142-63 B.C.). At an early stage in this period of independence some Jews were disposed to think that the kingdom of God had been established on earth: John Hyrcanus (135-104 B.C.), one of the earlier Hasmonaeon rulers, was believed to combine in his own person the prophetic charisma together with priesthood and monarchy and thus to be almost a messianic figure. Some of his admirers indeed were willing to transfer the ancient hopes reposed in a prince of the house of David to one of the tribe of Levi (to which the Hasmonaeons, a family of priestly descent, belonged).

But very many Jews, and especially the more pious sections of the population, could not see in the establishment of this dynasty the bringing in of everlasting righteousness. The uprooting of the peaceful temple-state by Antiochus Epiphanes led a number of them to conclude that the long-expected age of righteousness and peace could be inaugurated only by the direct intervention of God, through which his obedient worshipers would receive world dominion and their ungodly oppressors would be destroyed. This hope found vividly pictorial expression in the apocalyptic literature

[p.27]

that flourished for the next two or three centuries. It was reinforced when the later Hasmonaeans imitating their Gentile neighbors, proved to be oppressive despots in their own turn. Any tendency to identify their regime with the messianic age was quickly dissipated. Instead they were denounced as usurpers who had misappropriated the Zadokite high-priesthood or "laid waste the throne of David." The former charge was pressed by the community of Qumran, northwest of the Dead Sea, while the latter charge is voiced in the Psalms of Solomon, a collection of hymns proceeding from another group that, about the middle of the first century B.C., was ardently "looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38).

Early in the Hasmonaeon period the Qumran community was organized as a miniature Israel in the wilderness, not indeed to embody there and then the conditions of utopia but to prepare itself to be God's chosen instrument when the hour struck—as it surely must soon—for him to execute judgment and establish his kingdom. His kingdom, when it came, would involve the maintenance of righteousness and peace (all the unrighteous having been exterminated) under a Zadokite priest and a prince of David's line in a new Jerusalem with a purified sanctuary and acceptable sacrifices. The Psalms of Solomon contain an eager prayer for the advent of the son of David and of the golden age that he will introduce.

The overthrow of the Hasmonaeon dynasty by the Romans (63 B.C.) was hailed by both the groups mentioned (and by others) as divine vengeance on a tyrannous house, but no one imagined that the Roman occupation would inaugurate the kingdom of God. On the contrary it intensified the hope of divine intervention. We hear this note of hope struck in the canticles of Luke's nativity narrative in the NT, emanating from the pious circle into which John the Baptist and Jesus were born—especially the *Magnificat*, celebrating the putting down of the mighty from their thrones and the exalting of the humble and meek, and the *Benedictus*, proclaiming that God's raising up "a horn of salvation" for his people in the house of his servant David meant

that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,  
might serve him without fear,  
in holiness and righteousness before him  
all the days of our life.

But in Jesus' own ministry no stress is laid on the promises associated with the dynasty of David. The kingdom of God, he announced, was present in measure in his works of mercy and power. It was manifested wherever God's will was done and it was bestowed on the poor in spirit, even when—or perhaps especially when—they endured persecution for

righteousness' sake (Matt 5:3, 10). But it would not come "with power" until the Son of Man had suffered and been rejected (Mark 8:31-9:1). There are some promises in Jesus' teaching that might be given a utopian

[p.28]

interpretation—e.g. his promise that the twelve, because they had remained with him throughout his trials, would eat and drink at his table when his kingdom was established "and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:28-30)—but these promises must be taken along with his other statements to the effect that in his kingdom the highest honor consists in the lowliest service, according to the example set by the Son of Man himself (Mark 10:42-45).

In retrospect we may identify the coming of the kingdom of God "with power" with the outpouring of the Spirit of God on the day of Pentecost, which launched the Christian Church on its career (Acts 2:1 ff.). But the Church in the world has shown few indeed of the features conventionally associated with utopia. Among the other secular standards that Jesus turned upside down must be included the traditional conception of the golden age. The Church "militant here on earth," however, is not the final goal of God's eternal purpose. Rather, as the present fellowship of those who have through Christ been reconciled to God and to one another, it is God's pilot scheme and chosen agency for the reconciled universe to be achieved in the fullness of time, when all things in heaven and on earth will be united in Christ (Eph 1:9-10).

### **VIII. THE GOAL OF CREATION**

There are few more penetrating treatments of our theme in the NT than Paul's comments in Rom 8:19-24 on the cosmic aspects of the redemption that Christ has procured for his people. By faith they enjoy this redemption in measure here and now, but they will enjoy it in fullness on the day of resurrection when they enter into that heritage of glory of which the indwelling Spirit is the present seal and earnest. But on that day it is not only they who will experience liberation and fulfillment:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves... groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.

In saying that the creation was subjected to "futility" or "vanity" Paul might conceivably have had at the back of his mind the refrain of Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity." But this state, he affirms, is but temporary. Just as man falls short of the divine glory for which he was made, so creation as a whole is prevented from attaining the end for which it was brought into being. Like man, creation must be redeemed—because, like man, creation has undergone a fall. Paul may have thought of the

[p.29]

cursing of the ground because of man's sin in Gen 3:17-18, but he probably had something more than this in view: the malign influence of rebellious "principalities and powers," now doomed to defeat because of Christ's victory on the cross (cf. 1 Cor 15:24-28).

In any case, something in the nature of a cosmic fall is demanded by any world outlook that attempts to do justice to the Biblical doctrine of creation and to the facts of life as we know them. Man is part of nature, and the "nature" of which he forms part was created "good" and has been involved in the frustration and futility that is manifested outstandingly in human sinfulness—but it will ultimately be redeemed. It is not by accident that the redemption of nature coincides, according to Paul, with the redemption of man's body, that part of his being that belongs to the material order. Man was put in charge of the "lower creation" and involved it with him in his fall. Through the redemptive work of the "second man" the entail of the fall is broken, not only for man himself but for the creation that is dependent on him. Even now man, who by selfish exploitation can turn the good earth into a dust bowl, can by responsible trusteeship make the desert blossom like the rose. What then would be the effect of a completely redeemed humanity on the creation entrusted to its care? The Christian will neither hold that at present "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds" nor write the world off as belonging to the devil. The world is God's world, and God will be glorified in all his works. And when God is glorified, his creatures are blessed

If words mean anything, these words of Paul denote not the annihilation of the present material universe and its replacement by a universe entirely new but the transformation of the present universe so that it will fulfill the purpose for which God created it. Here we have the echo of an OT hope—the creation of "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells," as it is put in an apocalyptic passage in 2 Pet 3:13, where the language of Isa 65:17; 66:22 is quoted. Apocalyptic language in which "the heavens will pass away with a loud noise and the elements will be dissolved with fire" (2 Pet 3:10) is to be understood in the light of more prosaic statements such as Paul's and not *vice versa*.

With the manifestation of Christ, that is to say, the image of God in man will be fully revealed. And man's environment, no longer selfishly exploited but responsibly administered, will reflect the well-being of man himself.