

“The “Goodness” of all Creation”: The Christian Bible and the Environment

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Environmental issues have dominated the political, social and cultural discourse for well over a decade, with only a few organisations and individuals yet to be convinced that the current ecological crisis is *the* most significant challenge facing the world today and that it requires reflection and action on a global scale.

Given the prominence and urgency of all matters related to climate change, what role – many ask – does Christianity and its institutions play within the current debate? Some Church leaders have certainly been vociferous in voicing their concerns. In his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis attributed global warming directly to human activity, declaring that ‘the Earth, our home, is beginning to look like an immense pile of filth’. Nevertheless, the Christian Church has also been severely criticised for not playing a more prominent role and for not taking more decisive action. As one commentator recently noted, ‘The churches are latecomers into the world of conservation. They have had to be pushed, shoved and cajoled into noticing that “God’s creation” is going down the plughole, and going rapidly. They have had to be argued with and debated with to allow a shift away from an almost totally human centred understanding of God in creation’ (Martin Palmer).

It has even been proposed that the Church has not only been plagued by inactivity, but that its biblical and theological teachings have been instrumental in decades of environmental vandalism. As long ago as 1967, in what has since become a classic article, the historian Lynne White argued that the worldview developed in Western Christianity has ‘legitimated and encouraged humanity’s aggressive project to dominate and exploit nature’. Christianity, claimed White, is an irredeemably anthropocentric or human-centred religion, one which adopts an arrogant and wholly superior attitude towards the natural world. The Judaeo-Christian tradition has, moreover, been accused of ‘dismembering’ the world, by maintaining a firm distinction between humanity and its non-human inhabitants. A strict dualism between flesh and spirit, between all things material and spiritual, thus prompted Saint Augustine to claim that there is no place for nature in the kingdom of God, only spiritual beings and eternal souls. It is frequently suggested that the emphasis in Christian teaching is so much on God’s transcendence, on his otherworldliness, that the orientation towards nature found in other religions stands, ultimately, in stark contrast to the Christian evaluation of human history (alone) as the locus of divine activity.

These criticisms are, unsurprisingly, being subjected to close scrutiny by contemporary Christian theologians and biblical scholars, who are primarily concerned with one question: is the Christian tradition really underpinned by such an ecologically negative worldview? More specifically they ask: does the Christian Bible – the Old and New Testaments – promote human exploitation and manipulation of the created world? In a move towards developing a ‘greener’ and more eco-friendly theology, questions are asked as to what the Bible might be able to contribute to the debate on the current environmental crisis. What kind of views of the earth are presented in the Bible? How does it relate humanity to non-human life? And what kind of relationships are envisaged between God, humanity and the rest of the earth community?

One possible approach, in an attempt to answer these questions, is to search the Bible for some valuable resources that can promote an environmental ethic and basis for action. This approach, often labelled a strategy of ‘recovery’, seeks to retrieve those ecological gemstones that may have lain hidden or have been misinterpreted by generations of interpreters of the biblical text. The overarching aim, then, is to rescue the Bible from the accusation that it is shaped by a human-centred worldview which seeks to legitimize aggressive domination of the natural world. However, it is not enough – or legitimate – simply to ask ‘what the Bible says’, as though one can gather together all the relevant biblical passages and showcase their ‘green’ content. Bringing the Bible into dialogue with environmental issues must also acknowledge the diversity of the biblical material and the ambivalent nature of some of its most well-known passages. For this reason, biblical scholars are increasingly concerned with identifying those doctrinal keys that are the product of the attempt to construct a relationship between three entities: text, tradition, and context. Bringing all three elements into central focus enables interpreters to identify and work responsibly with those biblical texts that relativize the importance of humanity and also stress the inclusion of all creation in God’s plan for the world.

A major aspect of this biblically-informed ecological lens is that it looks anew at what the Bible teaches about God as creator. This is where the biblical story begins, in the Book of Genesis, and where it also ends, in the Book of Revelation. From beginning to end, the ancient writers are concerned with the world that God made, declaring that *everything* has its place in God’s creative activity. The Book of Genesis even includes two creation accounts, the first being an orderly account of God’s creative acts of speech over six days: ‘God said, “Let there be light”, and there was light’.

But while all created beings are said to possess 'life' or 'breath', only humanity (in Hebrew, *adam*) is described as having been made in the image of God. What does it mean to be created in God's image? In the first chapter of Genesis the answer is embedded in God's command: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion....over every living thing that moves upon the earth' (1:28). Does this imply that humanity is given complete freedom to do as it will with all non-human forms of life? The divine command certainly points to human authority and control over creation, but the narrative's central focus is God's sovereignty over the whole cosmos: the world was not made for the benefit of humanity so that it could exert its superiority over everything else; the world was made, according to Genesis, for the glory of God. All created beings, including human beings, are to be answerable to God, and the detailed description of God bringing into existence all forms of life – animals and birds, plants and trees – serves to emphasize that humanity is one part – not the sum total – of God's creative plan. One Jewish rabbi, writing during the second century CE, perceptively recognized the potential dangers of humanity's exalted estimation of its role in the world: he commented that God had deliberately created all other things *before* he created Adam, the first human being, otherwise Adam would have claimed to have created them all.

For the biblical text to claim that human beings are created in God's image does suggest that they are deemed to have a special purpose: if it is God who has dominion and power, humanity was created to represent that power on earth. It is as though God were proclaiming: 'Let there be someone enough like ourselves to be able to understand what we were about in creating the world'. This means that humanity is called upon to reflect and imitate those attributes belonging to God and which are revealed by him – love, justice, and his pleasure in creation, in that after each creative act God declares that all is 'good': 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good' (1:31). As his representatives on earth, humanity's responsibility is to care for and protect the world on God's behalf and to do so in a wise, just and loving manner.

In the second creation account, recorded in the second chapter of Genesis, it is precisely this communion between humanity and the earth that is highlighted. Here Adam's primary function is to be the head gardener: 'The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it' (2:15). Stewardship, in this respect, involves cultivating and nurturing the land – protecting the garden and encouraging it to be fruitful. This, it is claimed, is the divinely ordained and highest form of human experience, because the earth and its produce are nothing less than the source of life.

The overarching message of the biblical creation accounts, therefore, is that all created beings are dependent on God and that this is what underpins the unity between all forms of life. The dilemma, of course, is that humanity then proceeds to misuse its God-given authority, and, as a result of the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the garden, the harmony – the *shalom* – between God, humanity and nature is destroyed. Disobedience and abandonment lead to disorder and the earth loses its productiveness. The struggles and woes of humanity are, at the same time, those of the natural world.

And yet, God does not give up on his creation. The interconnectedness of humanity and the rest of the earth community returns in the story of the Flood, that well-known account of human sinfulness and its destructive effects upon the environment. If both humanity and the earth are the objects of divine judgement at the end of Genesis 3, both now become the recipients of divine promise. The story of the Flood stresses God's unceasing care for his creation, while the protection of Noah, his family and all animals in the ark serves as a microcosm or ecological parables of life on earth: all created beings, two of each species, dwelling together in a confined space, seeking shelter from the threat of water. And then, after the flood, God establishes a covenant not only with Noah but 'with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you' (9:10). In both creation and covenant, humanity is inextricably bound with the earth's non-human inhabitants.

This notion of interconnectedness also reappears in the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament gospels, drawing upon Jesus' own upbringing in a rural community where life is shaped by the productiveness or otherwise of the land. Jesus' images of planting and harvesting, caring for one's flock, all function as his vivid illustrations of God's presence in the context and content of everyday life. In the New Testament the inseparability of the human and natural worlds is also extended to embrace final salvation and deliverance. The early Christian vision of new life in Jesus, rooted in apocalyptic Judaism, is modelled closely on the earthly environment and, for that reason, it provides a useful resource for Christian ecotheology. The entire creation, claims the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, is to participate in the promise and hope of future salvation: 'Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (8:19-21). Both humanity and the rest of the earth community share a common fate, one which is inextricably linked to the restoration of the harmony originally intended by God. This is why Paul speaks of Jesus as the 'second Adam' (I Cor. 15:45-47), the one who brings about the restoration of the garden of Eden.

It is also why the author of the Book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, similarly recounts visions of 'paradise regained': a new heaven and a new earth at the end of time (21:1). He sees the river of life, 'bright as crystal', flowing through a garden with the tree of life at its centre. This can only be the garden of Eden restored (22:1-3) - all that God intended from the very beginning. The potentiality of creation is realized in an ecologically inspiring vision of final restoration and perfection.

This presentation has only been able to scratch the surface of the biblical material that can be drawn upon to offer a religious response to the environmental crisis facing our fragile world. There is no doubt that the texts in question have been (and continue to be) distorted and misinterpreted in certain circles, with the Bible unjustifiably being manipulated in an attempt to separate, even alienate, humanity from the fate of the environment. Rediscovering the greenness of the garden of Eden does not, moreover, necessarily involve falling into the trap of pantheism and the worship of nature, because the overarching message of the Christian Bible is that everything exists through and for God.

There is, of course, no escaping the fact that the biblical narrative centres primarily on questions about human existence, and that the non-human world is, to a large extent, depicted as reliant on the activity and representation of humans. Given, therefore, that the Bible recognizes that both humanity and the natural world are inextricably bound together in relation, but that it is human concerns that set the agenda for environmental damage and its protection, all facets of a biblically-informed ecotheology must place human responsibilities and actions in the world at the centre of its environmental ethic and vision for the future.