

Religion and the Environment

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The End of Nature

Humans and the Natural World in the History of Creation

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Introduction

[1] Eschatology is a risky venture. While it may inspire hope in those who are oppressed by the troubles of this world, or motivate some to work toward the realization of this hope, its future orientation may lead others to reject or minimize present concerns, a charge often leveled against fundamentalist Christians in relation to the environment. Because we are living in the “end-times,” according to this fundamentalist eschatology, the destruction of the environment has no future significance other than perhaps signaling the coming of Jesus and the great apocalypse (see Scherer). Influenced by dispensationalism and a literalist reading of the Bible, many Christian fundamentalists believe that they will be raptured into heaven while those left behind suffer in the wars and natural catastrophes of the tribulation. At the end of the tribulation, Jesus will return to destroy the kingdom of the anti-Christ and establish his reign in a millennial kingdom on a transformed earth. In this scenario, the environment is but a stage for the heavenly drama, with no intrinsic relationship to the human beings who live within it. Does such an environment demand our attention, other than to know the signs of the times? Probably not. Do fundamentalist Christians ignore environmental concerns because of their belief in the imminent return of Jesus? Perhaps, but my suspicion is that much fewer fundamentalists fit into this stereotype than some environmental advocates would have us believe.

[2] James Watt, the much-maligned Secretary of the Interior during the Reagan administration, is often put forward as the champion of this view of fundamentalist Christian eschatology. He is reputed to have written in *The Saturday Evening Post* that the earth is “merely a temporary way station on the road to eternal life . . . The earth was put here by the Lord for His people to subdue and use for profitable purposes on their way to the hereafter.”¹ Similarly, at a congressional hearing, he is regularly quoted as saying: “God has given us [natural resources] to use. After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back.”² The problem, of course, is that Watt neither wrote nor said these statements. In fact, what he did write and say in these contexts is the direct opposite of what is attributed to him; he emphasized stewardship of the environment, which is a dominant biblical theme (cf. Bratton). I suspect that most Christian fundamentalists, like Watt, would also temper the implication of their eschatological beliefs for the environment with stewardship. Nevertheless, a future-oriented, otherworldly eschatology in which God saves us *from this world* may deter concern or care for the environment.

[3] Secular eschatologies regarding the environment hardly fare any better. Whereas the fundamentalist Christian eschatology may ignore the problems posed by the environmental crisis, secular eschatologies may leave its adherents in a state of despair, unable to effect any significant change. In his popular book, *The End of Nature*, Bill McKibben describes in dreadful detail how we have polluted and irreversibly altered our environment and the painful consequences that await us. For McKibben, we have reached the end of nature because the idea of nature is no longer possible – that is, the non-human world is no longer independent of humans and their activity. Our fingerprints are everywhere. We have become like God – indeed, we have replaced God – as the makers of the natural world. The role of a transcendent God in this scenario is ambiguous. At best, God remains silent as we wrestle with the consequences of our freewill. At worst, the end of nature means the death of God. In any case, we are left on our own, to confront alone the problems we have wrought, to live in a world of our own making. We may be like God, but we are certainly not God. We can destroy, but we are less successful at creating and building up. Secular eschatologies such as McKibben’s may be scientifically accurate and present plausible scenarios, but they do little to instill hope that we may overcome our environmental problems, human-made though they are.

[4] In contrast to the fundamentalist and secular eschatologies, the eschatology of the Hebrew Bible, when read critically in its historical context, provides a vision of the relationship between God, humans, and the rest of the natural world that can inspire hope and motivate action in regard to the environmental crisis. Unlike the fundamentalist eschatology, the Hebrew Bible links humans with the rest of the natural world. The environment is not simply a stage for the human (or divine) drama. The often-used

¹ A Google search found over 40 citations attributable to Watt; numerous other citations are undoubtedly found in traditional print sources. No statement like this was ever written by Watt.

² Watt actually stated: “I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns, whatever it is we have to manage with a skill to leave the resources needed for future generations.” Unfortunately, when Watt is quoted correctly, usually only the first clause is cited, leaving an incorrect impression of his thought (see Watt 2005).

dichotomies of history-and-nature and culture-and-nature by which post-Enlightenment intellectual traditions have distinguished humans from nature are alien to the Hebrew Bible. The dichotomy in the Hebrew Bible is between the creator and the creation, and the latter consists of “the earth and what fills it, the world and those who dwell in it” (Psalm 24:1; cf. Isaiah 34:1). Humans are indeed singled out as the most prominent members of the creation, but their intrinsic relationship to the rest of creation is never severed (see Simkins 1994). Unlike the secular eschatologies, the Hebrew Bible instills hope by emphasizing God’s role in redemption. All of creation is in need of redemption, both humans and the natural world. Humans need to be redeemed from their evil inclination, and the natural world needs to be redeemed from the damages wrought on it by humans. Humans are not alone in addressing the environmental problems on this planet. As we work for the sustainability of the environment, we anticipate the final redemption when all of creation will be redeemed. In this essay, I will develop these characteristics of biblical eschatology by examining the relationship of humans and the natural world in the history of creation.

The Story of Creation

[5] The history of creation, like all histories, begins at a defined moment in time. For the biblical writers, the creation did not take place in the primordial, mythical past, but in historical time, linked to the present by a series of human generations. The time before creation was the time of the non-created world when life – human, animal, and vegetable – was not possible. Creation is not bringing matter into existence; matter exists before the creation. Rather, creation is about making a world habitable for life.

[6] Biblical scholars have long noted two distinct creation stories in the Bible: an early story (Genesis 2:4b–3:24) usually attributed to the Yahwist – a literary strand (J) that runs from Genesis through Numbers – and a later story (Genesis 1:1–2:4) attributed to the Priestly Writer (P) who produced the final form of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. It is important to examine these stories independently, not simply because each story presents a different view of creation, but also because the Priestly Writer makes use of the earlier story and thereby reinterprets it.

[7] The Yahwist creation story begins with a dry, barren earth: the earth had yet to produce pasturage or field crops (see Hiebert: 37). The text then gives two reasons for the earth’s uncreated state: God had not yet caused rain to fall on the earth, and there was no human to work the land (Genesis 2:5). In other words, the uncreated state of the world was not simply because of God’s inactivity, but also because of a lack of humans. Creation in the Yahwist story is a cooperative effort between God and humans: God chooses for the creation to be dependent upon humans. Working the land, bringing life to the barren desert, is a vital act of creation. So God begins the creation of the world by providing it what it lacks most: a human to till the land.

[8] The creation of the first human, *'adam*, is described in typical Near Eastern fashion as the birth of the creature from the earth, its mother. The *'adam* is formed out of dirt in the womb of the *'adama*, the land,³ is delivered by God who acts as midwife, and is enlivened as God

³ See Psalm 139:13, 15, in which the psalmist compares his mother’s womb to the depths of the earth where God fashioned him.

blows across his nostrils the breath of life (for a full development of the birth metaphors, see Simkins 1998: 39-44). The creation of the male *'adam* from the female *'adama* sets up an intrinsic relationship between them that is reciprocal: The human creature is dependent upon the land, like a child is dependent upon its mother, but the land is also dependent upon the human to work it. Only through human tillage and cultivation can the land produce.

[9] Following the creation of the *'adam*, God plants a garden and puts the *'adam* in it to tend it and keep it. In an attempt to find a suitable helper for the *'adam*, God creates the land animals and the birds just like he had created the *'adam*, but none correspond to the *'adam*. So, instead, God takes part of the *'adam* and builds from it another creature resulting in a corresponding pair – a man and a woman, or better, a husband (*'ish*) and a wife (*'ishsha*). If the creation at this point was not perfect, it was at least harmonious. The humans' basic needs were supplied by the garden and peace existed between all creatures. Eating the fruit of knowledge would change all this.

[10] The fruit of knowledge, which had been prohibited by God, made the humans “like God.” Perhaps it is only here that they can truly be called “human,” distinct from all the other creatures born from the land. In any case, their newly acquired status entails a number of negative consequences. First, the peace between humans and other creatures is disrupted. Symbolized most powerfully by the serpent, all creatures are cursed so that there is now enmity between animals and humans. Humans and animals are no longer of a kind; the new status of humans will enable them, for example, to eat and exploit animals. Second, the human couple is now aware of their own sexuality and will procreate, but such knowledge leads to distinct gender roles and painful childbirths. Third, the land itself is cursed because of the human acquisition of knowledge. Humans were created to work the land so that it would produce field crops, but now thorns and thistles will choke its produce. The larger context of the Yahwist narrative suggests that the curse on the land is tied to God withholding the rain that is necessary for the creation (see Genesis 5:29 and 8:21-22). God's essential role in watering the earth is praised in later psalms:

You visit the earth and water it,
 you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
 you provide the people with grain,
 for so you have prepared it.
You water its furrows abundantly,
 settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
 and blessing its growth.
You crown the year with bounty;
 your wagon tracks overflow with richness.
The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
 the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
 the valleys deck themselves with grain,
 they shout and sing together for joy (Psalm 65:9-13).

Through toil and sweat, the man is able to subsist on the land, but his work is more laborious and the land is less productive without God's contribution. Later in Genesis 4, after Cain kills Abel, spilling his blood onto the land, he is cursed from the land, unable to farm at all. So he builds the first city.

[11] The Yahwist creation story presents a mixed message. On the one hand, the humans violate God's prohibition by eating the fruit of knowledge and gain a new, arguably higher status. They become like God, with the knowledge to create through procreation and agriculture. On the other hand, God does not seem too angry at the human couple's actions. The husband and wife do not die, as threatened by God, and most of the consequences that result from their new knowledge can be interpreted as inherent in their new status. The notable exception is the curse on the land, but even here the curse is only temporary: The curse on the land comes to an end with the flood and does not continue afterwards. What is unambiguous in the story, however, is the intrinsic relationship between humans and land – 'adam and 'adama – and the reality that human actions affect the rest of creation. By eating the fruit of knowledge, the human couple has altered the state of creation (which is the basic meaning of "curse"), and their lives will be more difficult and painful as a result.

[12] The Priestly Writer builds upon the Yahwist creation story. It seems likely that the Priestly Writer embraced the dominant themes of the earlier story – otherwise, presumably, it would not have been included in his narrative – but the Priestly Writer also wanted to emphasize his own contribution to understanding the creation. His creation story begins, not with a dry, barren earth, but with an abundance of water so that the earth was "formless and empty." In a seven-day scheme, God creates in six days, first by forming the world (separating light from darkness, the waters above from the waters below, and the land from the sea), and then by filling it (with the heavenly bodies, fish, birds, animals, and finally humans). All of God's creation is good and the creation of humans is very good. On the seventh day God rests.

[13] The Priestly creation story emphasizes the order and structure of creation, its inherent goodness, and the prominence of the Sabbath. Within the narration of the creation, however, most attention is given to the creation of humans. Their creation is unique in that they are created in the "image of God." Like the fish and the birds, they are blessed and commanded to "be fruitful and multiply." But unlike all other creatures, they are commanded to subdue the earth and rule (traditionally, "have dominion") over all living creatures. It is, of course, those features that distinguish humans from the rest of creation that have garnered the most remarks by scholars and commentators. Being made in the image of God and given dominion could suggest that humans reign as despots over the natural world (see White). Others would emphasize human stewardship. In either case, attention is rarely given to how the Priestly Writer is reinterpreting the earlier Yahwist creation story. Everything that the Priestly Writer states about the creation of humans corresponds to something in the Yahwist's narrative. Moreover, these correspondences relate to the human couple's new status, which was gained by eating the fruit of knowledge:

<i>Priestly Narrative</i>	<i>Yahwist Narrative</i>
“image of God”	Human couple become “like God” when they eat the fruit
“male and female”; “be fruitful and multiply”	Human couple become sexually aware after they eat the fruit and will procreate
“subdue the earth”	Humans are expelled from the garden to work the land, for which they were created.
“dominion” over all living creatures	Curse on the animals leading to enmity between humans and animals

The effect of the correspondences between the two narratives is to ameliorate the mixed message of the Yahwist creation story. Humans no longer gain a new status through disobeying God. Instead, humans were created with this status – they were created in the image of God. Nothing is gained by eating the forbidden fruit.

[14] Characteristics of humans, being in the image of God, include subduing (*kabash*) the earth and ruling (*rada*) over other creatures. Although these terms come from the political and military sphere and often have violent connotations, their meaning here is governed by the context. It should be noted, for example, that ruling over the animals does not include eating them – at least not yet. The dominant context, however, is that of Sabbath. Humans rest on the seventh day because God rested on the seventh day of creation. This all seems rather mundane and irrelevant to human dominion until one realizes that the Sabbath, for the Priestly Writer, is the symbol of the Sinai covenant: Keeping the Sabbath is the symbol of Israel’s obligation to keep all the laws of the covenant (see Exodus 31:12-17). By structuring the creation around Sabbath, and by further connecting the Sabbath with the Sinai covenant, the Priestly Writer has ascribed cosmological significance to human activities, which are judged in relation to the law (cf. Levenson: 127). When humans live and act according to the law, they maintain the creation. But humans destroy the creation when they act contrary to the law. Thus, subduing the earth should be an act of creation, much like working the land in the Yahwist’s story. Similarly, the appropriate ruling over other creatures should be distinguished by its benevolence. As the image of God, human actions continue the creative work of God. Whether such human characteristics of “subduing” and “ruling” are creative or destructive, however, is largely determined by humans themselves.

The Ambiguous Status of Humankind

[15] Together, the Yahwist and Priestly creation stories present the ambiguous status of humankind. On the one hand, humans are set apart from the rest of creation. They are in the image of God, like God in their abilities to create. On the other hand, they are wholly creatures of the dirt, unable to escape their intrinsic relationship to the land. Humans may be like God, but they are certainly not God, and confusion between these two states is often the problem in the biblical tradition.

[16] One passage that exults in the lofty status of humans is Psalm 8. Reflecting elements of the Priestly creation story, the psalmist exults in the extraordinary status of humans:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you take care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas (8:3-8).

Humans indeed have a lofty status! But the glory and honor of humans extolled in this psalm is at odds with so much of the biblical tradition and our own experience. In the Genesis stories following the creation, for example, human violence so corrupts the world that God destroys it with flood and begins again. Psalm 8 itself is placed in the context of Psalms 7-10, in which the psalmist pleads for God's justice and deliverance in the midst of human violence and oppression:

Rise up, O LORD! Do not let mortals prevail;
let the nations be judged before you.
Put them in fear, O LORD;
let the nations know that they are only human (9:19-20).

In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor –
let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.
For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart,
those greedy for gain curse and renounce the LORD.
In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, "God will not seek it out";
all their thoughts are, "There is no God" (10:2-4).

So much for human glory and honor! Human dominion over creation has become a self-serving dominion of some humans over others. Psalm 8 is not a triumphal hymn, celebrating human ascendancy to near-God status. Rather, it is a hymn expressing the psalmist's amazement that, given the human condition, God has bestowed such status on us. But in its context, the psalm expresses an eschatological tension. The reality of the human condition makes clear that our divine-given status is not yet realized. The practice of human dominion is often not creative. Humans are "between creation and realization, living an unfulfilled destiny in a flawed and perverted way" (Mays: 34).

[17] Although both creation stories emphasize the role of humans in creation, neither envisions that humans can act independently from God. Humans might be able to till the land, according to the Yahwist story, but without God's contribution of rain, their work will not be efficacious. Humans are only "like God"; they are still dependent upon God's creative activity. Thus, Moses warns the Israelites, who are about to enter the land that God is giving them, not to boast in their own prosperity:

When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself forgetting the LORD your God. . . He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna. . . Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” But remember the LORD you God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth . . .” (Deuteronomy 8:12-18).

Moreover, Moses frames this warning, in typical Deuteronomic fashion, with the injunction to keep all of God’s commandments, ordinances, and statutes, lest the people surely perish (Deuteronomy 8:11, 19-20). Obedience to God has become the precondition for human actions to be creative. We may be “like God,” but we are still dirt creatures whose existence is dependent upon God. Indeed, when Qohelet is faced with the disparities of justice – an issue raised by the very linkage of prosperity and obedience – he recognizes that humans are no different than animals:

I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work. I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go on to one place; all are from dust, and all turn to dust again (Ecclesiastes 3:16-20).

This text is riddled with problems, but at base it seems to suggest that human injustice is an indication that humans are no better than animals. God’s justice will be certain in God’s own time, but human injustice is a test that demonstrates how we are not like God.

[18] The Priestly writer emphasizes human dependence on God by linking the creation of humans in the image of God to the Sinai covenant through observance of the Sabbath. As the image of God, humans carry on the work of creation in this world, but only if they are faithful to the covenant. The covenant is a formal relationship between God and his people, Israel. It details Israel’s obligations to God – in the form of various types of laws – in response to God’s actions on behalf of Israel (God redeemed Israel from bondage in Egypt and is giving Israel the land promised to their ancestors). Stated in the formulation of the covenant are the consequences of Israel’s behavior:

If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land. . .

But if you will not obey me, and do not observe all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and abhor my ordinances, so that you will not observe all my commandments, and you break my covenant, I in turn will do this to

you: I will bring terror on you; consumption and fever that waste the eyes and cause life to pine away. You shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. . . I will break your proud glory, and I will make your sky like iron and your earth like copper. Your strength shall be spent to no purpose: your land shall not yield its produce, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit (Leviticus 26: 3-5, 14-20).

Two observations are noteworthy in this context. First, the covenant establishes a causal connection between human behavior and the state of creation. If Israel is faithful to the covenant, that is, keeps God's commandments, then creation will blossom for the Israelites: Their land, trees, and vines will produce an abundance of food. However, if the Israelites disregard the covenant and fail to keep God's commandments, then the creation will decay: The earth will withhold its produce and even human life will wither. The creation experiences the consequences of human behavior. Second, the causal connection is not automatic; it is initiated by God. One could argue that God uses the creation to reward or punish the Israelites (see Kay 1988), but this interpretation misses the larger context of covenant. The laws of the covenant and the intrinsic blessings and curses are rooted in the order of creation; they are an expression of the structure of creation (see Knight; Koch 1983). The Priestly Writer uses the observance of the Sabbath to ground the covenant in the creation. As the creator, God simply initiates the inherent consequences of human actions, and by doing such proclaims himself to be the creator. Human actions are creative only when they participate in God's creative activity.

[19] Because human behavior is linked with the state of creation, the prophets can invoke the creation to indict Israel:

Here the word of the LORD, O people of Israel;
for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or loyalty,
and no knowledge of God in the land.
Swearing, lying, and murder,
and stealing and adultery break out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed.
Therefore the land mourns,
and all who live in it languish;
together with the wild animals
and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are perishing (Hosea 4:1-3).

The connection between human behavior and the state of creation is even more apparent in the prophecies of Jeremiah. Jeremiah claims that a drought that is scorching Judah is the result of the sins of the people and as such is testifying against them (14:1-9). In fact, the sins of the people against God are so great, that Jeremiah, in language reminiscent of the Priestly creation story, envisions the collapse of the creation:

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.

I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.
I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,
and all the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins
before the LORD, before his fierce anger (4:23-26).

[20] Some scholars have interpreted these and similar prophetic statements to mean that humans, through their sin, have forfeited their sovereignty over the natural world (see Kay 1989: 225-26). Such an interpretation is possible if we assume that the destruction of the natural world is imposed on humans as divine punishment, but this is not likely. Humans still remain sovereign over all other creatures by virtue of their being “like God.” Humans are still commanded to “subdue the earth,” but humans have used their unique status not to create but to destroy. The destruction of the natural world is inherent in the Israelites’ sins, and for this reason may serve as an indictment against them.

[21] Up to this point we have focused on the role and impact of humans on the natural world. This is appropriate because the biblical tradition does focus on humans, not as distinct from creation but as part of it, albeit an ambiguously exalted part, as emphasized in the Yahwist and Priestly creation stories. A few biblical traditions, however, are not so anthropocentric. In Psalm 104, for example, the psalmist gives exclusive praise to God for the creation. Human work is subsumed in the order of creation (104:23); humans are simply creatures whom God feeds (104:14, 27-30). Nevertheless, after detailing many of the wondrous creations of God, the psalm ends on a rather ominous note:

Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
and let the wicked be no more (104:35).

Humans may still pose a threat to God’s good creation. The consequences of their sins reverberate throughout the creation, and thus the psalmist prays that such sinners will be no more. Of course, given the rest of the biblical tradition, the psalmist is essentially asking for human genocide. Sin is the one thing all humans seem to have in common! But in the context of the hymn, humans are the only blight on God’s creation. Not that humans are not wondrously made or can participate in God’s creation, but humans have the potential, which too often becomes actual, of damaging and corrupting the creation. So in the context of God’s spectacular creation, the psalmist prays for God to remove any threat to it lest the creation diminish in its grandeur.

[22] Whereas Psalm 104 marginalizes the role of humans in the natural world, the speeches of God in Job declare humans to be irrelevant. In response to Job’s accusations that God has not properly governed the world, God addresses Job with a litany of rhetorical questions on the creation (Job 38:4–39:30). Job, who thought that God should give attention to his innocent suffering, that God should give an account of his negligence, is silenced in the encounter between the splendors of creation and his own human limits (cf. Crenshaw). Humans may have a lofty position within the creation, but the creation does not revolve around them. For much of the creation, humans simply have no role (see Tucker 1997: 12-16).

The Redemption of Creation

[23] Where does this discussion leave us? Humans were created in the image of God; they are like God in their abilities to create, especially through procreation and agriculture. They are blessed and given the commands to subdue the earth and rule over other creatures, but within the limits of God's covenant. Humans have an intrinsic relationship to the land, which defines, in part, how they are not like God. Humans are dirt creatures and share the fate of all other creatures. Finally, human behavior has consequences – both positively and negatively – for the rest of creation.

[24] The story of humans in the Bible, from Adam and Eve, through Abraham, Moses, and David, to the prophets used to be called, and often still is, “salvation history.” It was viewed as the history of God's relationship with humans, and especially Israel, and the prophets proclaimed God's coming salvation, which was understood primarily in historical, human terms. The problem with this understanding is that it is incomplete. God's relationship is with more than just humans, for humans are simply part of the creation. God's prophesied redemption includes the whole creation. Humans are in need of redemption because of their evil inclination⁴ and rebellion against God's covenant. But the rest of creation also needs to be redeemed. Not because it is evil or against God, but because it has been corrupted by human sin (see Rolston). No text illustrates God's redemption of creation more clearly than Hosea 1-2.

[25] The prophecy begins with God instructing Hosea to marry a whore and have children of whoredom because “the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD” (1:2). How does a land commit whoredom? Clearly it cannot, and commentators have correctly interpreted “land” to be a metonym for the people who live on the land – namely, Israel. It is the Israelites who have whored after other gods. But the text is more complicated than this. Hosea's adulterous wife, who represents the land as a metonym of the people, has children who also represent the people. Further, in Hosea 2 it becomes clear that the author really has in mind the land of Israel, and in Hosea 2:8 it is the children (the presumed antecedent of “they”) who used the land's silver and gold for Baal. Thus, Hosea has set up a complicated metaphorical relationship. His adulterous wife and children are metaphorical of the land and people of Israel (see also Braaten), who have an intrinsic relationship comparable to the *'adam* and the *'adama* in the Yahwist creation story: the people are born from and affect the condition of the land. It is indeed the people of Israel – the children – who have violated God's covenant by worshipping other gods, but Hosea transfers their acts to the land to emphasize the consequences of their crimes for the creation. Because the Israelites have worshipped other gods in the land, the land itself has been defiled like an adulterous wife. Hosea's metaphor works only because he and his readers understand the intrinsic relationship between the people and their land.

⁴ The human evil inclination is a primary theme of the Yahwist's story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:1-16. It is the defining characteristic of the human condition. In Genesis 6:5-7, the human inclination towards evil is given as the reason that God destroyed humans in the flood. But in Genesis 8:21, God acknowledges humans' evil inclination and so promises never to curse the ground or destroy all living creatures again. The Yahwist views the evil inclination as inherent to humans.

[26] Hosea's metaphor is quite powerful. Adultery was the "great sin" in the ancient Near East, disrupting the most fundamental bonds of the society: the bond between a husband and his wife, and by metaphorical extension, the bond between a patron and his client, the king and his subjects, and God and his people. No Israelite could hear it and not understand God's right to exact judgment. So, Hosea declares, God will execute judgment on the land and her children:

I will strip her naked
and expose her as in the day she was born,
and make her like a wilderness,
and turn her into a parched land,
and kill her with thirst.
Upon her children also I will have no pity,
because they are children of whoredom.
For their mother has played the whore;
she who conceived them has acted shamefully.
For she said, "I will go after my lovers;
they give me my bread and my water,
my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink" (2:3-5).

With images reminiscent of the Yahwist creation story, God will transform the fruitful land into a barren desert, as it was before creation. The land believed that it was her lovers – the Baals – who supplied all her bounty because it was the Baals who were being worshipped within her borders by her children.

She did not know
that it was I who gave her
the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and lavished upon her silver
and gold that they used for Baal (2:8).

Thus, God will take back all his produce so that her children will no longer be able to participate in their festivals to the Baals. In pragmatic terms, God will cease and desist from further creating, much like when God withheld the rain by cursing the land in the Yahwist creation story.

[27] God's judgment on the land is presented as a divorce, but the divorce is never finalized. Instead, God will woo her back. Hosea's prophecy of redemption is difficult to interpret in part because the referent for the metaphorical wife of God vacillates between the land and the people of Israel. To the land, God will give "her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope," but Israel will respond as in her youth "when she came out of the land of Egypt" (2:15). Hosea's mixing of metaphors is probably due to the intrinsic relationship between the land and the people – they are not easily distinguishable. In any case, God's redemption encompasses both the land and the people:

I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of
the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the

sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife forever . . .

On that day I will answer, says the LORD,
I will answer the heavens
and they shall answer the earth;
and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and they shall answer Jezreel;
and I will sow him for myself in the land . . . (2:18-23).

[28] God's redemption of creation involves two reconciliations. First, God will establish a covenant to reconcile humans with the animal kingdom. Many commentators have interpreted the covenant with the animals to refer to the reversal of the curse on the animals in Genesis 3: The enmity between humans and animals is reconciled; the creation becomes what it should have been. Although such an interpretation is possible, it is not persuasive in this context. An apt parallel to this covenant in Ezekiel may be instructive. In that context, the prophet also envisions the redemption of creation, but for him redemption includes the removal of wild animals:

I will make with them [the people] a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely (34:25).

This makes sense in light of the role of wild animals in the formulation of the covenant. Wild animals are included in God's judgments, if the people fail to keep the laws. Wild animals may be part of God's creation,⁵ but they are also a threat to human creation. In the context of Hosea, the wild animals function in two capacities: they suffer the environmental consequences caused by Israel's sins (4:3), and they devour the land's vines and fig trees, as God withdraws his sustaining contribution to the creation. The covenant with the animal kingdom in Hosea may simply be the reconciliation of the hostilities that were provoked by Israel's sins. The relationship between the human and animal worlds is not otherwise transformed (see Tucker 2000).

[29] Second, God's redemption will reconcile the fractured relationship between himself and his wife – the land and the people of Israel. God initiates the reconciliation and so rejuvenates the ecological web that unites the land and its people. In our terms, God is the "force of nature" that brings redemption to the creation (Koch 1979: 47). With images reflective of the Yahwist creation story, God will cause rain to once again fall on the land, which will produce its crops to sustain the human community. And the human community

⁵ In the Priestly creation story, wild animals are not distinguished from the animals created on the fifth and sixth day – animals that are pronounced good. The Yahwist creation story presents a more complicated picture. All animals were created from the earth by God as potential helpers for the *'adam*, but the animals are also cursed by the human acquisition of knowledge. The resulting enmity separates the animal kingdom from the human world. Domesticated animals, however, transcend this divide. They are the result of human creation, and thus are part of the human community, though exploited as mere animals. In the speech of God in Job, wild animals are simply God's creation that humans cannot control or understand.

will sprout up from the land in which God has sown it.⁶ But unlike the Yahwist story, no role for humans is mentioned. The redemption of creation is God's work alone.

[30] The eschatological vision in Hosea (and many of the other prophets) is wholly historical; it envisions a restoration of creation, not its transformation into something different. Other prophetic texts, however, envision a new creation that is not bound by nature. In Isaiah 11, the prophet foresees a utopian world in which predation will no longer exist:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea (11:6-9).

Is the end of predation a reasonable hope, or even a preferred hope? Probably not. Is not the natural world as it is, "red in tooth and claw," the best of all possible worlds? Probably. How then can we understand such an unrealistic and unlikely vision?

[31] Isaiah's vision is rooted in the royal theology of Jerusalem, which integrated the belief that the Davidic king is the son of God and as such is the representative of God on earth, and that Zion, the city of Jerusalem, is the unique dwelling place of God and the center of the creation. According to this theology, the king is an agent of God's justice and righteousness, and will bring prosperity to the people and abundance to the creation. These attributes of the king are reflected in Psalm 72:

May he judge the people with righteousness,
and our poor with justice.
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness. . .
May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.
In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more. . .
May there be an abundance of grain in the land;
may it wave on the tops of the mountains;
may its fruit be like Lebanon;
and may people blossom in the cities

⁶ For the ancient Israelites (and other Near Eastern peoples), procreation and agriculture belong to the same metaphorical concept. Procreation is understood in terms of agriculture (see Simkins 1998).

like the grass of the field (72:2-3, 6-7, 16).

The vision of Isaiah's "peaceable kingdom" is set the context of an eschatological Davidic king – the shoot "from the stump of Jesse" (11:1-5). It will be a consequence of the new king's reign in justice and righteousness, and it will be centered in Zion.

[32] Some scholars have argued that the thrust of the vision is simply that the messianic era will be characterized by peace, even among the animals (see Gowan). But animal-on-animal violence is not an issue elsewhere in biblical thought. Animal violence is only a concern when it involves the human community (see the references to wild animals discussed above). It is important to note in this vision that the animals are grouped in pairs – a wild animal and a domestic animal. Because domestic animals are essentially members of the human community (they are raised by humans for humans), the vision ultimately proclaims peace between the human and animal worlds (cf. Kaiser: 160-61). The messianic era will entail a transformation of creation. The relationship between humans and animals will be restored to the peace that existed prior to human disobedience against God. The enmity between humans and animals will be redeemed so that a child need not fear the dangers of a serpent.

[33] Another possible interpretation should be noted. Genesis 1:29-30 suggests that both humans and animals had a vegetarian diet at creation (see the extensive discussion in Westerman: 161-65). After the flood, which in the Priestly tradition had been precipitated by violence, God makes provision for the human consumption of animals (Genesis 9:3-4). Given this, it is possible that Isaiah was aware of a tradition in which animals were originally vegetarian and he envisions a return to this vegetarian diet. The difficulty with this interpretation is the fact that Isaiah does seem to be aware of the Yahwist creation story or an earlier tradition, and this story does not have a vegetarian outlook: God sheds animal blood in making clothes for the humans out of skins, and the distinction between clean and unclean animals in relation at the time of the flood presupposes the consumption of meat.

Implications of the Biblical Eschatology

[34] Where do we go from here? Does this biblical eschatology have any relevance to our present environmental concerns? Lynn White, who argued that a medieval reading of the biblical creation stories and the Christian view it generated was the historical roots of our ecological crisis, did not really give up on the biblical tradition. By embracing St. Francis as the patron saint of ecologists, he was also embracing the Psalter in which Francis was steeped. And White also declared: "What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is, by religion" (1205). Our "nature and destiny" is what the biblical eschatology is all about. The biblical eschatology that we have described here embeds humans in the natural world and links our destiny to that of the rest of the natural world.

[35] It is not certain that White is correct that people's thinking about ecological relationships shapes their behavior toward the environment. There is clearly evidence to the contrary (see Tuan); many other factors are involved (see Sherkat and Ellison). Nevertheless, religion *can* shape how people respond to environmental concerns. The Evangelical Climate Initiative, for example, represents a political shift by many prominent Evangelical leaders to

support initiatives fighting global warming. Their rationale? The science supporting human-induced climate change is convincing *and* the Bible calls us to care for the creation. This much, at least, is encouraging.

[36] The implications of the biblical eschatology for addressing the environmental crisis are complex. The claims of the biblical eschatology are neither scientific nor historical. We cannot simply take comfort in the hope that God will restore the earth at the end. Instead, the biblical eschatology gives us a moral vision:

The value of these texts lies not in their capacity to predict cosmic or human history in advance – that they cannot do – but in their capacity to *shape* our behavior now toward each other and the other denizens of the earthly ecosystem (Towner: 31).

It tells us about God, God's character, and God's intention for the creation. It tells us about humans and human character, and our relationship to the rest of creation. It can provide hope and motivation in working toward a sustainable world.

[37] Let me conclude by briefly noting a fundamental implication of the biblical eschatology. Because humans are fully embedded in the creation, the biblical tradition cannot envision the redemption of humans apart from the redemption of the entire creation. The future of humans and the natural world are bound together. This means that environmental activism must also concern itself with issues of social justice, and social justice cannot achieve its goals until ecology is taken into account. In the New Testament, Paul wrestles with how to understand the significance of the redemption wrought by Jesus. Steeped in the biblical eschatology, Paul cannot understand human redemption without the redemption of creation:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it [namely, humans], in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Romans 8:19-21).

Both humans and the environment are in need of redemption, and only as both are addressed will healing and redemption come to the creation.

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