

CREATOR & CREATION



Epilogue

The Bible and the Environmental Crisis

A Relevant Approach to the Bible?

Prior to 1970, modern biblical scholars gave little attention to the role of the natural world in the literature of the Bible and in the religion culture of ancient Israel. Too often it was assumed that the religion of Israel was a religion of history, and that the Bible focused exclusively on the relationship between God and humans. The natural world was viewed merely as the stage on which the human drama with God took place. The creation was split into nature and history (the human realm) with God's activity relegated to the latter. This approach is no longer acceptable. It is based on a modern conceptual dichotomy between history and nature that is foreign to the worldview of the ancient Israelites. Moreover, this approach, which was employed to articulate the relevance of Bible for the modern world (this was the agenda of the Biblical Theology Movement), proved to be myopic. In the context of the environmental crisis that began to attract wide public attention in the 1960s, numerous charges were made that the Bible not only fostered anti-environmental attitudes but was actually responsible for the current crisis. Suddenly, the Bible was labeled both irrelevant and dangerous, and biblical scholars scrambled to redeem the Bible from this assault.

That the Bible was regarded as an antagonist to a stable and healthy environment is understandable. References to the natural world in the Bible were either neglected or made subordinate to the Bible's concern for human salvation. How could a human-oriented, biblical religion contribute to the preservation of the natural environment? One theologian recently expressed a common sentiment:

Does the Bible say anything explicitly about nature that might be ecologically helpful now? The natural world is understood as God's creation, but I know of no biblical passages that urge any special respect. "Love your earthly mother" is not a biblical statement. . . . In sum, nature in the Bible is generally either regarded as a resource, or it fades into the background while, in the foreground, the significant drama of history is played out (Gulick: 183–84).

The problem, however, is not with the Bible itself but with the dominant scholarly interpretation of the Bible. Therefore, a new approach to the Bible, one that takes into consideration the role of the natural world, is needed. This book offers such an approach.

The Moral Dimension of the Environmental Crisis

Because concern over the environmental crisis triggered this new focus on the role of the natural world in the religion and culture of ancient Israel, it is appropriate at the end of this study to consider the role that the Bible might play in the discussion of the current crisis. The following presentation can only be cursory at best. I am an expert neither in the intricacy and complexity of the environment nor in ethical theory and application. I leave the specific task of applying the Bible to the environmental crisis to others more qualified. Nevertheless, in the remaining pages I will outline some of the basic issues of the current crisis, and suggest ways that Israel's worldview and values toward nature can make a positive contribution to these issues.

Although humans have adversely affected their natural environment throughout every age, the environmental crisis that we are experiencing at the end of the twentieth century is unique in its global scope.¹ No longer can God proclaim that the creation is good, for humans have polluted the heavens and the earth. We have poisoned the ground with hazardous chemicals ranging from the toxic wastes that leech out of our landfills to the pesticides and fertilizers that we use in an attempt to make the earth produce more than it is capable of sustaining. We have polluted the oceans and waterways by indiscriminately dumping into them industrial waste and sewage. The air we breathe, especially in our urban centers, is often unhealthy due to the smog produced by the hydrocarbons and other emissions from our automobiles. In order to avoid low-lying smog, our coal burning plants send their pollutants high into the air, but these pollutants, rich in sulfur dioxides and nitrous oxides, mix with moisture in the atmosphere and produce acid rain that kills vegetation, forests, and aquatic life. Through the use of synthetically derived chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), we have even dangerously depleted the ozone that protects us from the harmful ultraviolet radiation of the sun. Pollution, however, is not the only means by which humankind has adversely affected God's creation. We have become so numerous that we tax the earth's ability to sustain us. We consume more natural resources than the earth can reproduce and have threatened the precarious balance of our ecosystem. Acting as if the earth were our private domain, we have caused the extinction of countless animal and plant species.

One could extensively illustrate various facets of the environmental crisis in which we find ourselves, but this hardly seems necessary.² Is there anyone in our society unaware of the fact that we have polluted and corrupted our terrestrial home? Ecology and the environment have recently become hot topics. Everywhere we are reminded about what we

¹ There have, of course, been prior global environmental crises. The catastrophe that resulted in the extinction of the dinosaurs and the more recent ice ages are the most well known. The distinction of the current crisis is that it is the first global environmental crisis caused by humans.

² For a presentation of the various aspects of the environmental crisis, see McDonagh (17-59), McKibben (3-91), Freudenberger (35-83), Nash (23-63), and Gore.

have done to our planet. There has been an explosion of literature on the subject in bookstores and at newsstands, and rarely does a week go by without reference to the environmental crisis in the news media. The growing number of environmental groups repeatedly issue warnings of the destruction of this or that ecosystem, and seek to marshal political clout in order to influence public policy. The environmental crisis has even had an impact on the structures of government, including departments devoted to protecting the natural environment on the state and national level, and programs such as mandatory recycling on the local level. Although the extent of the environmental crisis is often debated, few would question its existence.

The environmental crisis is primarily a human problem (Nash: 89). Although a number of factors have contributed to the current crisis – including environmental factors such as the climate, topsoil, terrain, and animal species of a given region – the overriding factors can be traced to our use of technology, our social systems and the demands they place on the environment, and our worldview (see the discussion of the human-environment relations model in Chapter One). Humans have been unable or unwilling to live within the natural limits of the environment. Our actions have impacted the environment so that it is unable to sustain our standard of living, or our social system, without being further altered. Our interrelationship with the environment resembles the trajectory of a downward spiral: Developing human social systems place increasing demands on the environment that the environment is increasingly unable to absorb.

As a human problem, the environmental crisis has a moral dimension. Human beings have created the crisis, and it is our actions that “adversely affect the good of humans and otherkind in our relationships” (Nash: 23). Humans are also responsible for alleviating the crisis. Consequently, environmental concern falls within the domain of religion as well as science. Religion can provide us with a symbolic perception of the world. Whereas science can teach us about the diverse ecosystems in which we live, religion can provide us with the moral motivation to live within the constraints of those ecosystems. In a recent statement entitled “Preserving and Cherishing the Earth: An Appeal for Joint Commitment in Science and Religion,” a group of prominent scientists, headed by Carl Sagan, emphasized the critical role that needs to be played by both science and religion:

As scientists, many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred. At the same time, a much wider and deeper understanding of science and technology is needed. If we do not understand the problem, it is unlikely we will be able to fix it. Thus there is a vital role for both religion and science.

The response of world religions to the environmental crisis has been positive. From every corner of the globe religious leaders have emphasized how their faith calls its adherents to revere and care for the natural world. This is equally true for Christianity. Theologians have stressed the intrinsic value that the Christian faith ascribes to the natural world, and how humans themselves are called to act in the world as benevolent stewards

rather than as despots who exploit nature for their own ends.³ The Bible, however, is rarely called upon to address the problems of the environmental crisis. The Bible is neglected because many ecologically concerned Christians – especially theologians – believe that either the Bible offers no insights for resolving our present crisis, or the Bible is part of the problem, contributing to the environmental crisis. In most cases a few individual passages have been singled out as anthropocentric and thus interpreted as supportive of human exploitation of nature. This is unfortunate; it is “proof-texting of the worst sort” (Nash: 75). Our study of ancient Israel’s worldview and values toward nature, however, does not support this common interpretation.

The Biblical Worldview

If religion is a critical ingredient of any solution to the environmental crisis, then the Bible’s contribution must be considered, for it is at the heart of the Christian faith, serving as the foundation for Christian thought and practice. Furthermore, it is our contention that the Bible has a valuable contribution to make, for the Bible presents us with a worldview that recognizes both the intrinsic worth of the natural world and the special position of human beings within the natural world. According to the Israelite worldview, both humans and the rest of the natural world share the same status as parts of the creation of God. Both humans and nature are dependent upon God for existence, and both as the result of God’s creative activity are intrinsically valuable.⁴ Nevertheless, humans are exceptional in creation. The Bible uses the metaphors of the “image of God” and the “knowledge of good and evil” to articulate the unique ability of humans to transcend their creaturely status and to act like the creator. Humans can transform the natural world for their own purposes; they can create culture. Yet despite their exceptional character, humans can never escape their natural limits. Humans are ultimately bound to nature; they are affected by the corruption of nature, and die like all natural beings.

Appropriating this aspect of the biblical worldview into discussion of the environmental crisis is straightforward. This worldview emphasizes the oneness that we share with the rest of the natural world, and thus compels us to care and preserve our natural environment. Similarly, the recognition that we are exceptional frees us from the bondage of nature. We need not passively accept all that nature hands us – disease, pestilence, drought, flood, and other aspects of nature that threaten human life. We have the power to shape the natural world so that it is more suitable to human habitation. The difficulty, of course, is balancing our development of culture with care and preservation of nature. We must turn to the sciences and other disciplines to establish the limits of each, but the biblical worldview emphasizes that both are essential aspects of any environmental agenda.

Other aspects of the biblical worldview are more difficult to appropriate into the context of the current crisis. An important consequence of this worldview’s integral link

³ Admittedly, this is a recent development in Christian theology (Santmire: 3-7).

⁴ Value, of course, is not of one kind. Something can have economic value, scientific value, recreational value, or sacramental value, to name just a few kinds of value. On the various values of the natural world, see Rolston and LaBar.

between humans and the natural world is that human actions have ramifications in nature. This in itself is not problematic, but the Bible gives this connection a moral tone. When the Israelites follow the commands of God's covenant, such as, for example, by worshipping Yahweh alone or by observing the Sabbath, the earth will flourish with life. When they reject God's commands by following their own desires, the land will become sterile. The people's sins cause the disintegration of creation, or the ritual pollution of the land. Can such a morally based dimension of the biblical worldview be relevant to modern environmentalist issues? The problem with this worldview is summed up by a scholar who is otherwise in favor of the Bible's contribution to environmentalism:

A society which explains destruction of pasturage as the result of God's anger over idolatry or insincerity in Temple sacrifices rather than as the direct outcome of climatic fluctuation or overgrazing may have little to offer modern resource management. Few environmentalists today believe that environmental deterioration results from oppression of widows and orphans. Moreover, the Bible's environmental imagery, blessings, and curses refer specifically to one small piece of Middle Eastern territory with its own unique ecological geography. Biblical environmental messages may be very difficult to translate to other places where the climate and agricultural economy are quite different (Kay, 1988: 327).

In order to translate these aspects of biblical worldview into an environmentally relevant theology, we must guard against two similar yet opposite dangers: literalism and anachronism. Literalism would deny the metaphorical and mythic character of the biblical texts. It would strip the words of their symbolic referents, reducing them to expressions of mundane reality. Such a literal understanding of the biblical texts would prove to be irrelevant to modern environmental issues because it would presuppose a world that is at odds with the world of contemporary experience. Human sin as a rejection of the commands of God does not pollute the land. It does not bring drought on the land, nor cause the earth to withhold its produce. Similarly, human acts of faithfulness to God do not necessarily correspond to a productive and healthy environment.

Anachronism would deny that our world, our ideas, and our problems are different from those of the ancient Israelites. It would read the biblical texts from the perspective of our own concerns. This approach clearly makes the biblical texts more attractive for use in contemporary issues, but it lacks consideration for the biblical writers (it denies that they could think differently from us) and disregards a sense of history (it denies that things change over time and will continue to do so). Our understanding of the pollution of the land is not what the biblical writers meant by stating that human sin pollutes the land. Similarly, the environmentalists' warnings of coming ecological catastrophes are not equivalent to the prophets' threats of a cosmic collapse. The biblical writers did not envision our current environmental crisis, nor should we expect them to have addressed it.

The biblical references describing the integral link between humans and the natural world are relevant to modern environmental issues when they are interpreted at the metaphorical and mythic level. The biblical worldview can offer us a symbolic perception of the world. At this level the Bible emphasizes the mutual interdependence that human beings

have with the rest of nature. We are dependent upon the natural environment for survival, and although culture enables us to overcome many of the limits of the natural world, it does not free us entirely from the constraints of nature nor from our own natural limits. As a result, our fate is integrally linked to the fate of the natural world. By destroying the environment, we are ultimately destroying ourselves. Similarly, nature is dependent upon humankind. The biblical worldview cannot envision a creation without humans (Frymer-Kensky, 1987a: 236). Although some environmentalists maintain that the earth does not need humans, the biblical worldview implies that humans are as valuable to the environment as any of the numerous species that face extinction. We are part of nature, and our extinction also would be a loss to the splendor of the natural world.

The Bible places this mutual interdependence of humans and nature within a moral framework: Humans adversely affect the natural world when they sin against the commands of God. But these commands are not arbitrary. At the symbolic level, they are an expression of God's righteousness and justice manifested in the order of creation. Perhaps the modern environmental discussion could benefit from this aspect of the biblical texts. Is destruction of the environment a moral concern? Are those who actively participate in destroying the creation sinning against God the creator? If so, what abuse of the environment constitutes sin? The current environmental crisis is typically presented in either an anthropocentric (the concern for the future of human life) or biocentric (the concern for all types of life) perspective. Such a discussion could place the current crisis in a theocentric (the concern for God) perspective, and symbolically ascribe moral significance to our actions in relation to the environment.

Eschatological Values

An axiom of the environmental movement has been that a society's treatment of the environment is determined by its values toward the natural world. The historical evidence, however, does not support this presumption. Rarely does a society have a homogeneous view of the natural world, and its values toward nature are rarely applicable to all ecological niches. The ancient Israelites, for example, embrace all three value orientations, but each in relation to a particular group and under different circumstances. Moreover, societies tend to be inconsistent, even contradictory, in their treatment of the environment in relation to their attitudes toward the environment. Societies with benevolent attitudes toward the environment have damaged the environment on the same scale as societies with apparently callous attitudes.⁵ The causes of the environmental crisis are too complex to be traced to

⁵ Environmentalists and theologians alike have criticized the dominant mastery-over-nature orientation of Westerners as destructive to the ecosystem. Indeed, this orientation can foster exploitation, but it should be noted that other value orientations are equally problematic when misappropriated. Consider the conclusion of an Asian theologian:

Many of our Asian cultures stress the theme of harmony in nature and the need for man to live in harmony with nature. If, however, along with this emphasis, we do not recover for Asia the biblical emphasis of the special position given to man in creation and the responsibility given to him to maintain order and peace, the idea of harmony in nature would at best be a romantic notion and at worst be the basis for a fatalism which allows nature and its laws, as, for example, astrology and the terror manifestations in nature, to control man (Niles: 79-80).

values toward the natural world (Tuan; Dubos: 153–61; Kay, 1985). This conclusion is confirmed by the model of human-environment relations (figure 1). Human values toward nature (part of the worldview component) cannot be separated from the social system and the use of technology. A new, benevolent attitude toward nature is insufficient by itself to solve the environmental crisis. It must be accompanied by changes in the social system and our use of technology.

The biblical worldview and values toward nature might serve as a catalyst for transforming our social systems and use of technology. Their emphasis on the harmony between humans and nature within a moral framework can provide us with a sacred perception of the world. We should live within the constraints and limits of the natural environment because they demarcate the order of creation established by God. Unfortunately, this solution to the environmental crisis is neither realistic nor will it be ultimately successful. In an increasingly pluralistic society, a consensus on worldviews and values toward nature is not likely to occur. Moreover, the current environmental crisis exhibits an overall loss of human control in human-environment relations. Our social systems have become semiautonomous; they generate their own needs and values; they place demands on us in addition to the environment. Consequently, our worldview and values toward nature do not readily correspond to our treatment of the environment. The lack of social and moral consensus further contributes to our loss of control (Bennett: 68).

The biblical texts place humankind's symbolic corruption of nature in an eschatological context. According to the Bible, all of creation stands in need of God's redemption. This includes not only humankind, but also the natural world. Human sin permeates the creation, and humans are inclined towards evil, continually refusing to follow the ways of God. The Bible, therefore, offers a theological explanation for the incongruity between a society's attitude toward nature and their treatment of the environment. The ultimate problem is human nature. The ultimate solution is the redemption of God. The biblical worldview and values toward nature offer an eschatological perspective that symbolically places the environmental crisis in a larger, ultimate context (compare Schwarz; Muratore).

The Bible stands in judgment over all human efforts to recreate the natural world. Such efforts are valuable, and indeed we are called to them, but such efforts will not be ultimately successful any more than our efforts to free the world from war, poverty, and suffering. These ideals are worth striving for, but the history of humankind demonstrates that they are not human realities. The biblical texts, however, offer hope beyond our human failures. Because it is based on the premise that God is the creator, the Bible includes the hope that God will redeem us and the rest of the world in a new creation. Humans will be transformed so that we are inclined to follow God's commands, and the natural world which has been polluted through human sin will be recreated. The eschatological dimension of the biblical worldview thus calls us to care for the natural environment in anticipation of God's coming redemption of creation rather than in restoration of what has been lost. The biblical worldview generates eschatological values. Our actions on behalf of the environment foreshadow and participate in God's own future redemptive acts on behalf of a new creation.