

# CREATOR & CREATION



## Introduction

### The Bible and the Environment

#### A New Focus on the Bible

Examine any book published before 1970 on the interpretation of the Bible and chances are that it contains little or no information on the Bible's view of the natural world or the role of Israel's environment in shaping its religion and culture. This is not for lack of biblical references to the natural world. Indeed, the Bible is replete with such references. It begins with two creation stories in which the creation of the natural world is given as much attention as the creation of human beings. God's appearance in the Bible is repeatedly described with natural images. Numerous passages focus on the condition of the natural world, whether it will be conducive or hostile to life, and several psalms and passages of wisdom extol the splendor and complexity of the natural world. The natural world was neglected in biblical interpretation because biblical scholars had interpreted the Bible from an exclusively history-oriented, that is, human-oriented, perspective. Yahweh, the God of the Bible, was thought to be a God of human history. Unlike all other ancient Near Eastern gods, Yahweh acted in human affairs to save Israel and to guide human history according to his plan of salvation. The religion of Israel was thus considered to be a religion of history. The numerous biblical references to the natural world were either ignored or interpreted in reference to God's activity in history. Nature was the stage for the historical drama of salvation, or nature served as God's instrument in that drama, but the natural world was not considered to be significant in its own right.

The historical focus of biblical interpretation began to change in the 1970s. At the end of the preceding decade, the emerging public concern over the environmental crisis expressed itself in an assault on the relevance of the Bible. Because biblical scholars had neglected or historicized the biblical references to the natural world, the Bible was dismissed as detrimental to a stable and healthy environment. How could a biblical interpretation which devalues nature, subordinating it to human concerns, contribute to the preservation of the environment? Some critics even accused the Bible of fostering the current environmental crisis. Biblical scholars at last began to turn their attention to the Bible's view of the natural world. Rarely, however, did these scholars abandon their historical orientation or formulate a systematic interpretation of the role of the environment in the religion and culture of ancient Israel. Their initial concern was merely to defend the Bible by correcting what they perceived to be misinterpretations of particular biblical passages.

These attacks on the Bible have had an important effect on biblical interpretation. Although the environmentally concerned critics of the Bible have often failed to characterize accurately the Bible's view of the natural world, they have succeeded, often indirectly, in unmasking the interpretive biases that have led biblical scholars to neglect the natural world and its role within the religion and culture of ancient Israel. Biblical scholars have been too exclusively history-oriented in their interpretation of the Bible. Biblical scholars have too readily dismissed the natural world from being a significant factor in the development of Israel's religion and culture.

Today, over twenty years later, the situation is more positive. For an increasing number of scholars, the role of the environment must be taken into account in the interpretation of the Bible and the Israelite religion and culture from which it emerged. The frequent biblical references to the natural world, for example, are now recognized as the expression of an essential feature of the religion of Israel. No longer can these references to the natural world be ignored or historicized. No longer can the role which Israel's experience of the natural world played on the development of its religion and culture be neglected. Public awareness of the environmental crisis and the ensuing attacks on the Bible served to bring the ecology of Israel – that is, Israel's relationship to its environment – to the forefront of biblical interpretation.

In investigating the ecology of ancient Israel,<sup>1</sup> three issues appear to be central: First, the impact of the Israelites on their environment; second, the influence of the environment on the development of Israelite religion and culture; and third, Israelite attitudes toward nature (Hughes: 3). The first issue is the most difficult to address, and so has attracted the attention of only a few scholars (see the exceptional work by Hopkins, 1985, 1987). Not only did the Israelites inhabit the land of Palestine for a mere moment of human history, Palestine was subject to numerous military campaigns and was repeatedly exploited by neighboring peoples. The biblical literature itself is virtually silent on this issue. The human impact on the environment due specifically to the Israelites is difficult to discern. The second issue has recently received treatment by a number of scholars, especially those who employ the social sciences in their research. These scholars have demonstrated, for example, how the Palestinian environment both affected the formation of the state of Israel and shaped certain features of Israelite religion (notable examples include Frick; Hopkins, 1985; Meyers; Eilberg-Schwartz; Coote and Ord, 1991). The third issue has received the most attention. In response to the assault on the Bible by environmentally concerned critics, many scholars have investigated the biblical attitudes toward the natural world (Trible, 1971; Barr, 1972;

---

<sup>1</sup> Because ecology is a complex term, some definition is needed here. In its standard biological usage, ecology refers to the interrelationship between living things and their environment, and the study of this interrelationship. When applied to human societies, variously called human ecology or cultural ecology, ecology refers to how a society affects or is affected by its physical environment--the earth with its soil, water, and vegetation; the air and the weather; other living creatures (Hughes: 2-3) In this context, ecology is the "study of how and why humans use Nature, how they incorporate Nature into Society, and what they do to themselves, Nature, and Society in the process" (Bennett: 3).

Baker; Anderson, 1975, 1984a; Koch, 1979; Drumbell; Williamson; Malchow; Bergant). Nevertheless, no systematic interpretation of these attitudes has been presented.<sup>2</sup>

In this book I will offer a systematic interpretation of the attitudes, or values, which the ancient Israelites expressed toward the natural world by analyzing the worldview of the biblical writers and the values that ensued from it. To accomplish this task, I will employ two complementary models of cross-cultural analysis – a model of worldview analysis and a model of value orientations – which will highlight the worldview that is implicit in the biblical texts and the values that are rooted in it. By isolating the biblical writers' values toward their environment and placing them within the context of their worldview, this book will make a further contribution toward an ecology of ancient Israel.

Because the study of Israel's relationship to its environment has been neglected in biblical interpretation until recently, it is important to place this new focus in historical context in order to avoid some of the pitfalls of the past. Therefore, in the remainder of this introduction I will present the historical background of this study. An examination of two watershed figures in the history of modern biblical interpretation proves helpful in this regard.

---

### Human Dominion Over Nature: Lynn White

Lynn White is not a biblical scholar but an historian of medieval history, specializing in the development of technology. Nevertheless, in a frequently published essay entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," White argued that modern technology and science, the means by which we exploit the natural environment, can be traced ultimately to the biblical religion. He claimed that the religion of the Bible, with its idea of linear history and perpetual progress, disenchanting the natural world. Nature was transformed from a subject to be revered to an object to be used. "By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (1205). For Lynn White, the Bible's creation account most clearly and persuasively articulates Christianity's anthropocentrism. In the creation account, the first man

named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image (1205).

---

<sup>2</sup> Although Malchow's brief attempt to describe the Bible's view of the natural world is the most comprehensive, it is unsuccessful because he treats the biblical writers' views of nature in isolation. He identifies two contrasting and contradictory biblical views of nature: On the one hand, the natural world has been corrupted by human sin and can only be redeemed in the (prophetic literature); on the other hand, the natural world has remained good and humans can learn from it (wisdom literature). However, without analyzing the systemic worldview in which these views of nature are rooted, he is unable to explain their relationship or how they are contradictory.

White concluded that, according to the biblical text, “it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (1205).

Because, White argued, our modern science and technology grew out of the Christian attitude of humankind’s transcendence and superiority over nature, more science and more technology cannot solve our environmental problems. Rather, the Christian religion that is at the root of the problem and continues to justify human misuse of nature needs to be reformulated. White himself favored the theology of Saint Francis of Assisi, for Francis “tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God’s creatures” (1206). Nature is not simply material substance for human consumption; it is independent of humankind and was designed for the glorification of the creator. In contrast to the arrogance toward nature that White claimed characterizes orthodox Christianity, he argued that the Franciscan emphasis on the humility of the human species and the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature points us in the right direction in order to solve our environmental crisis.

Lynn White’s essay caused an immediate sensation. Although White’s arguments were neither new nor complete, his treatise has been accepted, reprinted, and preached as gospel by innumerable environmental enthusiasts (Derr: 40-43). It has become the banner around which all those who need a convenient culprit for the crisis rally. Some Christian theologians have even taken up the charge that the biblical view of nature is responsible for the current crisis, and have provided further theological rationales to justify the charge. Gordon Kaufman, for instance, argues that the biblical anthropocentrism which White identifies as the root of the environmental crisis is intrinsic to Christian theology (349-59).

Despite the popularity and influence of White’s essay, there is no shortage of critics of its essential theses. Historians, on the one hand, argue that modern science and technology do not have their origin in the Christian, or biblical, worldview. Modern science can be traced back at least to the classical Greek culture. Moreover, Christianity and science have often had an antagonistic relationship (Sessions: 73-76; Barr, 1972: 18-19). Biblical scholars, on the other hand, argue that White’s interpretation of the creation account and the biblical view of nature inherent in it is distorted. He misunderstands what the Bible means by both “dominion” and “the image of God,” and has failed to read the texts in their own historical context (Trible, 1971; Barr, 1972; Anderson, 1975; Hiers: 43-45). The most damaging argument against White’s central thesis, however, is that destruction of the environment has not been nor is the exclusive prerogative of Christian cultures. Environmental abuse knows no race, creed, or gender. The human species is the only common denominator.

All over the globe and at all times in the past, men have pillaged nature and disturbed the ecological equilibrium, usually out of ignorance, but also because they have always been more concerned with immediate advantages than with long-range goals. Moreover, they could not foresee that they were preparing for ecological disasters, nor did they have a real choice of alternatives. If men are more destructive now than they were in the past, it is because there are more of them and because they have at their command

more powerful means of destruction, not because they have been influenced by the Bible (Dubos: 162).<sup>3</sup>

While it is true that Christian theology and the Bible have been used to justify exploitation of natural resources (some of the comments of a notorious former Secretary of the Interior, James Watts, come to mind), Christianity is not the culprit in the environmental crisis. The causes of the current crisis are complex and diverse.

The major factors in the emergence of antiecolological attitudes and actions were not Christian axioms, but rather population pressures, the development of expansionistic capitalism in the forms of commercialism and industrialization (particularly ship-building, glassworks, iron and copper smelting), the triumph of Cartesian mechanism in science (which meant the “death” of nature, since it represented the defeat of organic assumptions, and the victory of the view that nature is “dead,” inert particles moved by external forces), and the triumph of Francis Bacon’s notions of dominion as mastery over nature (Nash: 75).

White’s conclusions cannot be accepted.

Lynn White stands as a watershed figure in the history of biblical interpretation because his attack on the biblical tradition has forced biblical scholars to examine the Bible’s view of the natural world, and especially its presentation of humankind’s relationship to nature. By focusing on a few texts, White himself had accused the Bible of fostering a despot model of humankind’s role in the natural world: Humans were to have authority and power over nature so that they could use it as they saw fit. Biblical scholars, in response, have argued that the Bible more accurately promotes a stewardship model for understanding the human relationship to nature: Rather than exploit nature, humans are commissioned to care for the natural world. Unfortunately, biblical scholars have rarely moved beyond defending the biblical tradition from attack. Interpreting the Bible’s view of the natural world is still too often dominated by White’s agenda. Discussion of the relationship of humankind to nature usually is limited to those biblical passages employed by White himself. Biblical scholarship has thus failed to articulate adequately the biblical writers’ attitudes toward the natural world.

---

### **Creation Subordinate to Redemption: Gerhard von Rad**

If Lynn White misinterpreted the Bible’s view of the relationship between humans and the natural world, as biblical scholars have held, he can be excused, for he simply echoed the dominant position of biblical scholarship at that time. Compare, for example, Harvey Cox’s popular assessment of this relationship, published only two years before White’s famous essay:

Just after [God’s] creation man is given the crucial responsibility of naming the animals. He is their master and commander. It is his task to subdue the

---

<sup>3</sup> The invaluable study by Hughes outlines how the Greek and Roman attitudes toward nature, in particular, had destructive consequences for their environment.

earth. Nature is neither his brother nor his god. As such it offers him no salvation. When he looks up to the hills, Hebrew man turns from them and asks where he can gain strength. The answer is, Not from the hills, but from Yahweh, who *made* heaven and earth. For the Bible, neither man nor God is defined by his relationship to nature. This not only frees both of them for history, it also makes nature itself available for man's use (23).

Cox then went on to boast that the biblical disenchantment of the natural world provided the necessary precondition for the development of modern science and technology. From this perspective, White simply outlined the inherent dangers of such an interpretation.

Prior to the controversy generated by White's essay, biblical scholars largely ignored the role that the natural world played in the Bible; instead, they emphasized God's activity in and on behalf of human history. According to this interpretation, the Bible is concerned exclusively with human salvation: God acts in human history in judgment and in deliverance in order to guide that history towards its final consummation when God's people will be redeemed. As for the natural world, biblical scholars considered it to be merely the stage for the historical drama; it served as a passive instrument that God could utilize in the actualization of history's divine plan.

This history-oriented interpretation of the Bible is widespread and rooted deeply in biblical scholarship. It can be traced back directly as far as Hegel, who articulated in his philosophy of history a dichotomy between history and nature (Simkins: 3-10; compare Santmire); few biblical scholars have escaped its influence. This manner of interpretation is especially popular among scholars concerned to distinguish the biblical religion, which is characterized as a religion of history, from the so-called nature religions of Israel's Near Eastern neighbors (Kaufmann; Wright, 1952, 1957). Of the many prominent and influential scholars in this historical tradition (Childs, 1970: 13-87; Oden, 1987: 1-39), Gerhard von Rad stands out as a watershed figure in the interpretation of the role of the natural world in the Bible.

In a seminal essay, von Rad addressed the question of how the dominant faith of the Old Testament, based on the notion of election and therefore primarily concerned with redemption, is theologically related to the belief that Yahweh is also the creator (1984c). In answer to this question, von Rad stood firmly within the historical tradition: "Our main thesis was that in genuinely Yahwistic belief the doctrine of creation never attained to the stature of a relevant, independent doctrine. We found it invariably related, and indeed subordinated, to soteriological considerations" (1984c: 142). He based this conclusion on three observations from the biblical texts. First, neither Hosea nor Deuteronomy, books that attest to a vehement opposition against the so-called nature religion of the Canaanites, base their attack on the doctrine of creation. Instead of asserting that Yahweh is the originator and sustainer of the natural order, Hosea and the deuteronomic theologians preferred to recall Yahweh's historical acts of redemption on behalf of Israel. Second, in the passages that refer to both the doctrines of creation and redemption (Pss 33, 74, 89, 136, 148, and numerous passages in Isa 40-55), either the two doctrines stand side by side, unrelated to each other, or the belief in creation is wholly subordinate, so that "it is but a magnificent foil for the message of salvation, which thus appears the more powerful and the more worthy of

confidence” (1984c: 134). Finally, those passages that treat the doctrine of creation exclusively (Pss 8, 19, 104) contain conceptions and influences that are foreign to the heart of the biblical faith. According to von Rad, they most likely originated in late wisdom circles that were influenced by Egyptian thought.

In analyzing Israel’s belief in creation, von Rad gave attention to its theological structure rather than to its development. He admits that the early Israelites must have had a belief in creation from the beginning, but he denies that creation ever became a theologically significant doctrine:

Evidently a doctrine of creation was known in Canaan in extremely early times, and played a large part in the cultus in the pre-Israelite period through mythical representations of the struggle against primeval chaos. Yahwistic faith early absorbed these elements, but because of the exclusive commitment of Israel’s faith to historical salvation, the doctrine of creation was never able to attain to independent existence in its own right (1984c: 142).

Everywhere in the Bible, Israel’s belief in creation is theologically subordinate to Israel’s primary faith in redemption. Even the elaborate priestly creation account in Genesis 1, von Rad claims, does not present creation for its own sake but rather as the first stage in God’s redemptive history.

Although von Rad later somewhat modified his conclusions (1984b), his basic thesis that the doctrine of creation serves an ancillary function for Israel’s doctrine of redemption has remained dominant in biblical scholarship. The result of his study has been the further polarization of history and nature in biblical interpretation. If Israel’s faith is primarily concerned with the history of human redemption, why should scholars give attention to the role of nature in the Bible? What can it contribute toward understanding Israel’s faith? Even the biblical creation-faith itself is not so much about the natural world that God created but rather “an expression of confidence in the Creator’s power to save, of his rulership over the tumultuous forces of history” (Anderson, 1987: 99). Thus von Rad articulated a theological rationale that has served to justify neglect of the interrelationship between Israel and its environment.

A critique of von Rad’s interpretation of the biblical doctrine of creation will be presented in a following chapter. At this point I simply want to emphasize von Rad’s critical role in the history of biblical interpretation. Von Rad presupposed the long established dichotomy between history and nature, and from this perspective he viewed history as the arena of God’s activity. Consequently, even God’s activity in nature – such as in creation (God creating nature), blessing (God working through the processes of nature), and theophany (God appearing in nature) – was understood to have historical purposes. The natural world itself lacked any theological import. In subsequent discussion of the relationship between humans and nature, then, biblical scholars tended only to accentuate the dissimilarity between humankind and the natural world: The God of Israel had acted in history to free humankind from the constraints of nature. No longer were humans bound to the unchanging cycles of nature, for the historical activity of God made human progress and development possible. Humans were thus free to control nature rather than simply be

subject to it. It is in accord with this interpretation that Lynn White first raised the sound of alarm.

This brief historical sketch highlights the two main obstacles which any investigation of the ecology of ancient Israel, and of the Israelite attitudes toward nature in particular, must face. On the one hand, this focus flies in the face of an earlier, dominant wisdom of biblical scholarship that gave little attention to and found no role for the natural world in the religion and culture of ancient Israel. As a result, long held assumptions and conclusions of biblical interpretation must be reformulated. On the other hand, that work which has been done on the Bible's view of the natural world has been construed too often in defense of White's attack. Such treatments have been partial, and have often been driven by contemporary concerns. No systematic interpretation of the biblical values toward nature has yet been offered.

---

### The Israelites' Perception of Nature

Before I can turn to an examination of the values that the ancient Israelites expressed toward the natural world and the worldview in which they were rooted, one final issue needs to be addressed. Because the Hebrew language has no term for the abstract category of "nature," some biblical scholars have claimed that Israel had no concept of nature that would correspond to our modern idea of nature. Israelites instead used concrete expressions, such as "the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1) or "the earth and all that is in it" (Ps 24:1), to refer to the natural world. It would therefore be inappropriate, scholars have asserted, to apply our abstract concept of nature to the biblical texts. This statement by von Rad is typical:

We must not transfer uncritically our accustomed ways of thinking to Israel. We must, rather, face the exacting demand of thinking ourselves into ideas, in a 'view of life', which are unfamiliar to us. A beginning could already be made if we fully realized that Israel was not aware of this or that entity which we almost automatically take as objects of our search for knowledge, or at least always include in our thought processes as part of the given framework of that search. She did not differentiate between a 'life wisdom' that pertained to the social orders and a 'nature wisdom', because she was unable to objectify these spheres in the form of such abstractions. This can easily be shown in the case of the concept 'nature', a concept which has become so indispensable to us but of which Israel was quite definitely unaware. Indeed, if we use the term in the interpretation of Old Testament texts, then we falsify something that was quite specific to Israel's view (von Rad, 1972b: 71).

Certainly von Rad's warning that we cannot simply use our abstract concepts to interpret Israel's concrete beliefs is warranted, but did the Israelites really have a different conception of nature from our own?

In order to adequately address this issue, we must first distinguish between the various ways in which we use the term "nature." Of the numerous usages of "nature" listed in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, two definitions stand out as relevant for this discussion:

1. The creative and regulative physical power which is conceived of as operating in the physical world and as the immediate cause of all its phenomena.
2. The material world, or its collective objects or phenomena, the features and products of the earth itself, as contrasted with those of human civilization.

With regard to the first definition, the ancient Israelites would have simply labeled this power “God” (Robinson, 1946: 1). God was understood to be the creative and regulative force in the world; God was the immediate cause of all phenomena in this world. The ancient Israelites had no conception of a natural force independent of God.

In relation to the second definition, however, the Israelites undoubtedly shared our recognition of the natural world as something material and non-human. The fact that they used concrete expressions rather than an abstract concept to communicate this recognition is inconsequential. Nevertheless, it is useful to distinguish between how the Israelites experienced the natural world and how they discussed or understood their experience. Although this distinction is not always clear cut in that experience is often affected by understanding, it serves the heuristic purpose of clarifying what is at issue in our investigation. For instance, it is inconceivable that the Israelites would have experienced a rain shower or the heat from a fire differently from us, but it would not be unexpected if they attributed a particular significance to these aspects of nature that we do not. Certainly, the ancient Israelites were aware of the regularities of the natural world – the falling of objects toward the earth, the behavior of animals, the course of the sun and moon, the seasonal cycle – even though they did not formulate “natural laws” (Rogerson, 1977: 67-73).

Israel’s experience of nature, of course, was determined by its own peculiar environment. The Israelites experienced the adversity of Palestine’s rugged terrain, the barrenness of Judah’s desert, the vastness of the Mediterranean, and the fertility of the lowlands and valleys. They experienced a climate that oscillated between a hot dry summer and a mild wet winter. They experienced earthquakes, thunderstorms, and sirocco winds. They experienced a wide range of plants and animals that were at home in the eastern Mediterranean environment. In fact, the ancient Israelites experienced the natural world in much the same way as people who live in the land of Israel today (Ben-Yoseph; Lipshitz and Waisel; Drori and Horowitz).<sup>4</sup> Although their experience of nature was different from our own in that they lived in a different environment, it was not significantly so. If the Israelites had a different conception of nature from our modern idea, undoubtedly it was in their understanding of their experience of the natural world rather than in their experience itself.

---

## Overview

The Israelites’ understanding of the natural world was shaped directly by their values toward nature and the worldview in which those values were rooted. In the following chapters, I will present an interpretation of the ancient Israelites’ worldview and values

---

<sup>4</sup> For detailed studies of Israel’s environment, see Baly, Aharoni, and Hopkins (1985).

toward nature. In Chapter One, I will place this investigation within the context of ecology, and outline the two primary models that will facilitate this investigation: a model of worldview dynamics and a model of value orientations. Because the biblical writers did not explicitly articulate their worldview or their values toward nature which are derived from it, it is necessary to construct a model of their worldview that can account for the biblical texts as if they were predicated on this worldview. To this end, creation myths and metaphors are especially helpful for they encode the fundamental assumptions of a culture – they focus on the relationship between God, humans, and the natural world that is essential to a worldview, and the basis for values toward nature. By first examining creation metaphors in the Bible and in the comparative ancient Near Eastern literature, I will construct in Chapters Two and Three a model of the basic Israelite worldview.

In Chapter Four I will outline the range of the Israelites' values toward nature by further examining the interrelationship of the central worldview components – God, humans, and the natural world – through the specific topics of theophany and covenant. By taking into account the different orientations resulting from ingroup/outgroup dynamics, the diverse Israelite values toward nature can be integrated into a single model of the Israelite worldview. Chapters Five and Six will treat the creation myths of Genesis and their reflection in the prophetic corpus. These chapters will complete the construction of the model of the Israelite's worldview by analyzing the values toward the natural world expressed in this literature.

Finally, because concern over the environmental crisis served as a catalyst for this new focus on the role of the natural world in the religion and culture of Israel, at the end of this study I will consider the role that the Bible might play in the discussion of the current crisis. Although the ancient Israelite worldview and values toward nature are culturally specific, they present a symbolic perception of reality that may serve to critique our values toward and treatment of the natural environment.