The Bible: A Guidebook for Harmony?

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Given the seriousness of the situation facing Earth and its inhabitants – the ecological crisis represents what is surely *the* most formidable challenge that humankind is likely to be faced with in the twenty-first century – there is a real and pressing need for a drastic re-assessment of humanity's relationship to the natural world; only once this is undertaken will the crisis truly begin to be resolved. What is required, in other words, is a collective *metanoia*: a radical change in worldview from one clouded by a sense of human beings' superiority and special status to one, in the words of eco-theologian Norman Habel, 'where ecology conditions our thinking'.[1] In short, a worldview shaped by ecology will not elevate or extol certain of the planet's living beings (namely, *human* beings) to the detriment or disadvantage of others, but will acknowledge and appreciate Earth/the cosmos for what it is: a wondrous network of complementary familial relationships. This I define as *harmony*. Becoming aligned with such an understanding of existence on Earth demands, of course, that the Bible be read in a fundamentally different way, that is, from the perspective of fellow members of the Earth community. The question that follows is whether or not the biblical texts, when read in this way, can be said to support or affirm an ecology-oriented worldview. Whatever the answer received, this ecological approach to the Bible must be considered a necessary and worthwhile enterprise; contemporary concern over the perceived threats to the natural world, coupled with the massive influence which the Bible continues to exert over hundreds of millions of Christians around the globe, means that what the biblical texts 'say', or are purported to say, in relation to the natural world cannot easily be ignored.

In the same way, then, as the women's rights movement helped prepare the ground for feminist readings of the Bible – or, for that matter, in the same way as debilitating socio-political conditions in Latin America led to the development of liberation theology – so a greater awareness of contemporary environmental concerns has provided the context for a fresh kind of interaction with the biblical tradition. Even during the reasonably short life-span of the modern environmental movement, attempts made by ethicists and theologians at reading the Bible through a green lens have yielded a truly staggering volume of literature. It is,

after all, only natural that, having been confronted with the potential for ecocatastrophe on an unprecedented scale, ecologically-minded scholars should seek to engage biblical material in a bid to discern what (if anything at all) the individual texts might be able to offer a discussion of environmental issues.

While the importance of ecological engagement with the biblical tradition is now commonly recognised, it is Lynn White's excoriating critique of the Judeo-Christian 'dogma of creation' in a 1967 paper entitled 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', that is usually identified as providing the specific catalyst for the debate over the Bible's ecological legacy.[2] To White's mind, the advent of the Christian faith, particularly in its triumph over pagan religion, initiated a dualism of humanity and nature, promulgating the alien notion that the human race existed above, and apart from, the rest of the created order. The biblical account of creation in Genesis 1-2, writes White, in fact legitimises the exploitation of the natural world; its insistence that humans are created in the image of God, and thus share in God's transcendence of nature, actually set humanity in direct opposition to non-human creation. White's opinion of the environmental legacy of the Christian tradition is as uncompromising as it is controversial: 'Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen'.[3] As such, it 'bears a huge burden of guilt' for the contemporary ecological crisis.[4]

Though his analysis of the biblical creation myth remains controversial, the publication of White's paper provided a genuine watershed moment in the context of twentieth century eco-theological discourse: the article is almost single-handedly responsible for instigating a long-standing debate about the ecological value of the biblical material. White's charge – that the Judeo-Christian tradition bears an innate anthropocentric bias that has paved the way for the ecological crisis – elicited a fierce response from scholars keen to demonstrate that the creation story in Genesis does not preserve or promote any 'anti-environmental' sentiment. More than this, it stimulated an intense interest in the environmental credentials of the biblical tradition as a whole. Many works of eco-theology composed in the wake of White's paper were written to show that the biblical texts *do* endorse a positive view of creation, and that these ancient writings *can* be viewed as a relevant and useful tool in generating an ethical stance with regard to green issues.

The Green Bible may be seen as the culmination of this kind of positive approach to the biblical tradition, and its publication is arguably the most momentous occurrence in the history of the Christian environmental movement to date. This recent edition of the New Revised Standard Version takes seriously its claim that the Bible functions as a 'powerful ecological handbook on how to live rightly

on earth'.[5] Accordingly, those verses considered to disclose some ecological wisdom are demarcated by green ink; over a thousand passages are highlighted in this way. The inference to be drawn, therefore, is that the individual biblical texts do not simply convey the occasional exhortation to environmental care, but that they are veritably chock-full with ecological insight and guidance, able to 'speak directly to how we should think and act as we confront the environmental crisis facing our planet'.[6] Clearly, the committee of scholars responsible for *The Green Bible* have a quite different opinion of the ecological worth of the biblical material from critics such as Lynn White. What is more, White's charge of an all-pervasive anthropocentrism would appear hopelessly wide of the mark if the 'evidence' of *The Green Bible* is to be taken at face value; one of the stated aims of *The Green Bible* is to testify that the Bible *in its entirety* is bursting with ecological overtones. That is, it can be shown to tender a blueprint for human interaction with the Earth and delineate exactly the kind of role and responsibility humans are called to have in caring for God's creation.

One of the texts highlighted in *The Green Bible*, and a useful illustration of the way in which Christians have strived to ground burgeoning ecological sensitivities in an appeal to biblical material, is the so called 'dominion mandate', the command issued to the first humans by God in Genesis 1:26-28 to 'fill the earth and subdue it (כבש); and have dominion (רדה) over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'. These verses are frequently understood by both scholars and lay people as advocating a need for humans to act as responsible stewards or managers of creation. Subscribers to the stewardship model duly reject a notion of 'dominion as exploitation'. To interpret the passage as a divine imperative to the exploitation of Earth, they claim, is to misunderstand the imagery and symbolism at play. Quite the opposite: 'dominion means responsible stewardship'.[7] Stewardship is a widely recurring theme across many Christian denominations and, for millions of Christian believers, is the key to theological engagement with ecological concerns. Upheld as a principal tenet (particularly in Protestant evangelical attempts at formulating an ethical stance towards environmental issues), it is a trope that has resurfaced time and again, often in the declarations and statements issued by organisations such as the Evangelical Climate Initiative and the Evangelical Environmental Network. The pre-eminence of the stewardship model among evangelicals may justifiably be attributed to the fact that it allows the Christian to maintain a high view of the authority and sovereignty of scripture; this approach preserves a formative and definitive role for the Bible – acknowledged by evangelicals as the inerrant word

of God – in articulating a thoroughgoing biblical ecological ethic. The 2006 declaration published by the ECI, for example, states:

> Christians, noting the fact that most of the climate change problem is human induced, are reminded that when God made humanity he commissioned us to exercise stewardship over the earth and its creatures. Climate change is the latest evidence of our failure to exercise proper stewardship, and constitutes a critical opportunity for us to do better (Gen.1:26-28).[8]

However, it is doubtful whether the Bible can actually be shown to support a principle of stewardship at all, at least as far as the Earth-human relationship is concerned. The idea that humanity has a responsibility to exercise care for non-human creation, that humans must act as divinely-appointed 'managers' of the Earth, is not borne out by the biblical material. A brief inspection of the use of the verbs שבכ and הדר in the biblical texts reveals that a reading of Genesis 1 which acknowledges the supremacy of humanity over creation may actually be the more faithful to the passage's original meaning: other instances of these verbs indicate their overtly hostile connotations. The word שבכ, translated in the NRSV as 'subdue', is repeatedly used in the sense of 'subjugate', while הדר denotes 'rule' and 'domination'.[9] On this evidence, the reader might be justified in maintaining the view that Genesis 1: 26-28 does supply a mandate for human dominion over creation and that these verses do encourage the exploitation of the planet's resources to suit humanity's ends. In other words, Genesis 1:26-28, in its original context at least, does not look anywhere near as 'environmentally friendly' as purveyors of the stewardship model might like to think. The passage leaves a legacy that is infinitely more ambiguous that that.[10]

Of course, Genesis 1:26-28 is not the only biblical passage to have had aspersions cast on its ecological credentials. A number of texts, in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, have proven particularly problematic to eco-theologians keen to demonstrate the ecological worth of the biblical tradition. More often than not, these are the texts which – at least on a superficial reading – appear to portend great disaster upon the Earth as a part of their eschatological outlook. Joel, for example, imagines the Sun turned to darkness and the Moon turned to blood on the 'great and terrible day of the LORD' (2:30-32); the Synoptic Gospels envisage ecological and social meltdown as a concomitant of the coming of the Son of Man (Mark 13; Matthew 24:1-44; Luke 21:5-36); 2 Peter 3:7-13 warns of an impending conflagration that will consume the elements; while imag-

es of divinely-sanctioned ecological catastrophe abound in the book of Revelation (8:6-9:21; 16). What is more, these images of environmental collapse tend to be accompanied by the anticipation of a new creation or new Earth, a dwelling place radically different in character from the old, and significantly better in quality (e.g. 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21-22). Given such eschatological expectation, extracting any sizeable nuggets of ecological wisdom from this type of biblical material can be a laborious task. After all, what possible motivation to environmental care can there be for the believer if the current Earth is destined for the proverbial scrapheap, ready to be replaced by a superior model?

That is not to say that there have been no attempts to recover some ecologically positive meaning from these texts. Usually, this approach involves placing some emphasis on the renewal or transformation of the present Earth, together with the continuity between this world and the one to come, as opposed to its complete dissolution and re-creation. Ernest Lucas typifies this thinking when he suggests that the use of the adjective καινός rather than νέος in the phrase 'new heavens and a new earth' in 2 Peter 3:13 points to 'renewal through transformation, not a total destruction of the old and its replacement by something quite different'.[11] It should be said, however, that the difficulties associated with eschatological texts like 2 Peter 3 have proven too great for some. Barbara Rossing, for example, rejects 2 Peter 3 as ultimately unhelpful in generating biblically-informed attitudes towards the environment, calling it 'the most ecologically problematic chapter in the entire New Testament'.[12]

It would appear, then, that there are serious problems in indiscriminately viewing the biblical tradition as uniformly 'green'. Certainly, an unreserved commitment to the idea of an 'eco-friendly' Bible, exhibited in *The Green Bible* for example, appears misguided, if not completely naïve.[13] It is certainly worth remembering that the Bible is not a collection of eco-centric documents; its texts do not bear the weight of twenty-first century concern over the state of the environment or the well-being of Earth. With that in mind, it is probably healthier to exercise a level of scepticism when assessing the ecological value of the biblical material. In other words, ecological engagement with the Bible must begin with the suspicion that the Bible does not necessarily provide a useful foundation for the construction of a responsible environmental ethic. It involves the admission that the ecological orientations of most texts are more ambivalent than many recent studies have been willing to concede, and that the Bible may, for the sake of harmony (i.e. aligning one's actions with an ecology-oriented worldview), require a label other than 'eco-friendly': the one marked 'bio-hazard'.

NOTES

1. N. Habel, *An Inconvenient Text* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2009), p. 41.
2. L. White, Jr., 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis', *Science,* 155 (1967): 1203-7.
3. White, 'The Historical Roots', p. 1205.
4. White, 'The Historical Roots', p. 1206.
5. DeWitt, 'Reading the Bible through a Green Lens', *The Green Bible* (London: HarperCollins, 2008), pp. I-25.
6. Preface to *The Green Bible*, I-15.
7. C. B. DeWitt, 'Reading the Bible through a Green Lens', *The Green Bible*, I-26. Former US Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, encapsulates this standpoint when he writes: 'The Bible commands conservation – that we as Christians be careful stewards of the land and resources entrusted to us by the Creator'. See J. Watt, 'The Religious Left's Lies', *The Washington Post* (Saturday, May 21 2005).
8. 'Statement of the Evangelical Climate Initiative: CLAIM 3: Christian Moral Convictions Demand Our Response to the Climate Change Problem', http://www.christiansandclimate.org/statement/ [accessed 1 July 2018].
9. For שבכ as 'subjugate' see 14 occurrences in all (e.g. Jos. 18:1; 2 Sam. 8:11; 1 Chron. 22:18; Neh. 5:5; Jer. 34:11; Zech. 9:15) and for הדר as denotes 'rule' and 'domination' see 24 occurrences (e.g. Lev. 26:17; Num. 24:19; Judg. 5:13; 1 Kgs. 4:24; Neh. 9:28; Isa. 14:2). See J.W. Rogerson, 'The Creation Stories: Their Ecological Potential and Problems', *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, eds. D. G. Horrell, C. Hunt, C. Southgate and F. Stavrakopoulou (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 21-31, at 25.
10. For a more sustained critique of the stewardship model, see C. Palmer, 'Stewardship: A Case Study in Environmental Ethics', *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, ed. R. J. Berry (London: T & T Clark, 2006), pp. 63-75. See also within the same collection of essays: R. Attfield, 'Environmental Sensitivity and Critiques of Stewardship', pp. 76-91; J. Lovelock, 'The Fallible Concept of Stewardship of the Earth', pp. 106-111.
11. E. Lucas, 'The New Testament Teaching on the Environment', *Transformation*, 16:3, p. 97.
12. B. R. Rossing, 'Hastening the Day When the Earth Will Burn? Global Warming, Revelation and 2 Peter 3', *Compassionate Eschatology: The Future as Friend*, eds. T. Grimsrud and M. Hardin (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), p. 89.
13. For criticisms specific to *The Green Bible* itself, see D. G. Horrell, '*The Green Bible*: A Timely Idea Deeply Flawed', *Expository Times,* 121 (2010), pp. 180-86.