BECOMING HUMAN: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND ECOLOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY
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Where Hebrew verse numbers differ from the English (in the psalms), both are noted.

The Bible and the Earth

The take-home message from this lecture is simple, although it runs counter to widely shared understandings of both the Bible and the ecological crisis. It is this: While the Old Testament is not an ecological tract, nonetheless it offers indispensable insight into the sources of our current ecological crisis, as well as guidance toward wiser and more faithful ways participating as material creatures in God’s material creation.

Even people who are disposed to think that the Bible speaks truly about many aspects of human life might balk at that argument, on two grounds. First, isn’t the ecological crisis basically a technological crisis? How can an ancient text help us in a situation that has been shaped so largely by the industrialized practices and dramatic population growth of the twentieth century? Second, doesn’t the Bible offer spiritual truth? Our ecological problems are physical, economic, and social, and they require sophisticated scientific solutions. How can the Bible speak to these matters?

Those objections are important, because they bespeak our society’s “common-sense” tendency to separate the material and the spiritual as two distinct realms of experience. But the Bible’s own perspective is both material and spiritual; the wholeness (shalom) of the human heart and spirit is inseparable from the wellbeing (also shalom) of the physical world. Therefore it is noteworthy that some prominent scientists with no religious agenda likewise see that the
wellbeing of the earth depends on the integrity of the human heart. Thus Peter Vitousek, a terrestrial ecologist at Stanford University, has stated that we in this generation are for the first time challenged to find the will to change our behavior drastically, in order that life on our planet may continue to be viable and to some degree lovely. The will to make healthful change is the function of a heart possessed of shalom, wellbeing.

It is still rare to hear a theologian or a religious leader make a statement as radical as Vitousek’s. Translating his observation into biblical language, one might say that our heart is deceitful, sick (Jer. 17:9), and we must be healed if the world as we know it is to be saved. That sounds edgy, extreme to most of us, even though the prophet Jeremiah said precisely that some 2,600 years ago, when the world as he knew it collapsed. Jeremiah and other biblical writers saw the inevitable connection between the human heart and the state of the world – even its physical condition – and so they enable us to name the ecological crisis for what it is: a massive disordering of our relationship with the God who made heaven and earth. Because they saw that connection clearly, the Bible can be a source of healing in our present crisis, for both our hearts and our beleaguered planet.

I begin this evening with Psalm 36, for it speaks directly to the wickedness and self-deception of the human heart. The psalm begins with an image of how we make a “slick” way for ourselves, refusing to see how destructive is the path we have chosen (vv. 2-5, Eng. 1-4). Following this exposé of human self-deception, the psalmist lifts her sights and offers a sweeping vision of God’s relationship to the world:

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1 In a lecture at The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, June 2003.
O Lord, in the heavens is your steadfast love,
your faithfulness is to the clouds.
Your righteousness is like mighty mountains,
your acts of justice, a great deep.
Humans and animals you save, O LORD.

This is covenant language: righteousness, faithfulness, justice, and above all hesed, “steadfast love,” the basis of God’s covenant with Israel established at Sinai. But listen to the last line again: “Humans and animals you save, O LORD.” That line carries our imaginations back long before Sinai, to the beginning of the world, to God’s very first covenant, made through Noah “with all flesh” (Gen. 9:17). I have read this psalm dozens of times in my life, and I confess that I had never noticed that line until a few weeks ago. Probably I read past it because it runs counter to our dominant Western view that God is mainly or exclusively in the business of saving human souls, one by one. But now, standing under the grace of this Lectureship and the Kreitler family’s own commitment to the wellbeing of the whole created order, perhaps I am ready to hear the implications of that statement, which otherwise seems somewhat out of place in a psalm about the human propensity to self-deception.

“How is it that God’s saving regard for humans and animals alike is an answer (of sorts) to the condition of the human heart? The psalmist’s prayer continues thus:

Extend your hesed, your covenant-love, to those who know you,
and your righteousness to the upright of heart. (v. 11, Eng. 10)
“Extend your hesed to us” – the inference would seem to be that our sickly hearts are healed, they become upright, as we participate in God’s own covenantal commitment to creatures both human and non-human.

The psalms are the icons of the Bible, vibrant holy images that open like “windows into heaven,” as Eastern Orthodox theologians call them. One can also look through the window of this iconic psalm the other direction, from heaven into our world, and view it (at least a little) as God must do. One line in particular from our psalm offers a striking view: “For with you is the fountain of life” (v.10, Eng. 9). Humans and animals are equally “with [God]” as part of the great, interconnected flow of energy that here is called mĕqôr hayyîm, “the fountain of life.” The power of that metaphor is evident when we consider that the land of the Bible is semi-arid; on average, three or four years out of ten are drought years. In such a climate, life is unmistakably fragile. So the metaphor of the fountain is a vivid reminder that all biological life is a unity, and the health of every creature depends on God, no less directly than it depends on water. With an economy of expression of which only the best poets are capable, the psalmist thus sets forth the material and spiritual basis for the existence of the whole created order, human, animal, and mineral.

Learning to Be Creatures

I begin with a psalm because the Psalter is in a sense the base text for this Seminary community and the Anglican Communion as a whole; we pray some part of a psalm at every service. Presumably, these iconic texts are meant to change our way of being in this world. Psalm 36 reminds us that we are creatures among countless other creatures, our interdependent lives
flowing together in the presence of God. That is the condition of blessedness, and so we stand to be instructed by Archbishop Rowan Williams’ observation that the art of being creatures is now nearly lost among us.\(^2\) For the loudest and most authoritative voices in our society, including the advertising industry, have persuaded us that we are not creatures but autonomous beings, powerful and smart enough to bend the world to meet our present desires. But the perspective of the Bible is radically different, and ultimately more hopeful. All creatures together are “the work of God’s hands” (Psalm 138:8). God has formed the world, not as chaos, but “to be inhabited,” as the prophet Isaiah declares (45:18). There is a place on earth for every living thing—an affirmation both encouraging and sobering in this Sixth Great Age of Species Extinction.

Learning to be responsible creatures may be the most important cultural work we now have to do. “The whole creation is groaning,” writes the Apostle Paul (who was himself steeped in all these Scriptures I am citing). It “waits with keen expectation for the revealing of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19). “The children of God” are not heavenly creatures but humans, created “in God’s image” (Gen. 1:27).\(^3\) The whole created world is longing for *homo sapiens*, the creature that dares to call itself “wise,” to become fully human.

What it means to be fully human is the subject of the first few chapters of Genesis. In the first instance it means recognizing that the earth is neither a platform for human activity nor a repository of resources to be mined for our convenience. Far from being inert, the earth is living and responsive to God; it generates more life, putting forth vegetation in response to God’s


\(^3\) The resemblance between Adam and his son Seth is likewise designated by the phrase “in his image” (Gen. 5:3).
command (Gen. 1:11). Likewise, the “swarming” creatures of sea and sky produce offspring at God’s word. The great blessing, “Be fruitful and multiply,” is spoken to fish and birds on the fifth day (1:22)—before humans have even appeared and received the very same blessing (1:28). From God’s perspective, the flourishing of creation is surely not all about us.

It is a sad irony – in biblical language, it is a judgment on us – that fish and birds, those creatures whose fertility was first blessed by God, now constitute a large portion of the most endangered species. We have fallen short of God’s intention that we should enact our resemblance to God through the exercise of benevolent dominion over the creatures. Instead, through our greed we have turned into a curse God’s blessing of fruitfulness for the non-human creatures. From the perspective of the creation story, then, our truly human work lies still ahead of us.

**Life from the Soil**

So being fully human means first, learning to be creatures among other creatures. Second, and related to that, it means recognizing our unbreakable bond with the land, the material base of life. One cannot go more than a few chapters in most of the Old Testament without seeing some vivid reference to land and its importance for humanity, beginning with the image of *adam* (humankind) formed from *adamah* (soil) in the second chapter of Genesis (v. 7). That wordplay, *adam* from *adamah* (captured surprisingly well by the English wordplay, “human from humus”), suggests a kind of familial connection; it is a subtle yet powerful reminder that the life of a people comes from its land.
We humans belong to the fertile earth more than it can ever belong to us. Because we have no life apart from the health of soil and water, we must care for them as one would care for a beloved family member. And so that first “genealogical” statement is followed quickly by a vocational one: “The LORD God took the man (adam) and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15). Those words could equally be translated, “…to serve it and observe it,” or “preserve it.” Work that is truly human begins with a careful, nurturing attention to the fertile earth; that is our first religious obligation.

All this was well known to the ancient Israelites, since the vast majority of them were farmers. And if one looks at the land of Israel through a farmer’s eyes, it is easy to see why that point should be made already in the second chapter of the Bible. Israelites occupied a fragile ecological niche, the uplands of Canaan (later Judah and Israel), much of which is marginal for agriculture. So they had little enough land to feed their own population, and none at all to misuse. Thin topsoil, periodic droughts, heavy winter rains, and strong winds meant that the Israelites were always contending with the threats of erosion and desertification. Moreover, those mountain slopes and small valleys constitute one of the world’s most varied agricultural landscapes. With patterns of wind, rain, and sun that change drastically over a small area, the country is hard to farm well and easy to ruin.

In order to “serve and preserve” the arable land, each farm family had to know their own small plot of land intimately, and perpetuate that knowledge through the generations. Young farmers, women and men alike, acquired from their elders crucial skills and very particular local
knowledge. The interconnectedness of people and land, of natural systems and human communities over a long period of time, may well be the chief “family value” reflected in the Old Testament. “Honor your father and mother” – those are among the best known words in the Bible, yet few of us are aware that the Fifth Commandment continues thus: “…so that your days may be long and that it may go well for you on the fertile-soil (adamah) that the LORD your God is giving you” (Deut. 5:16). Being fully human means honoring those who preceded us by living within the natural limits of the world, caring for the soil, and living wisely on the earth that they have bequeathed to us.

Our Suffering Earth

The Old Testament’s abiding concern for the health of the soil may seem completely irrelevant to modern readers. In the U.S., four-fifths of the population lives in cities; less than one percent consists of fulltime farmers. But every one of us eats, and so we all depend directly on the health of soil, even if we never think about it. Those who eat in North America depend upon the health of soil not only on the Great Plains but also in Brazil, Indonesia, Central America, and other places they have never seen. And most have no idea that the effects of our agricultural practices – the largest of all human industries – are catastrophic in every part of the world. Half our forests have been destroyed, a great part of them for industrial-scale agriculture. As for the soil on which human life depends, erosion rates outpace replacement rates by thirteen times, on average; already half the topsoil in Iowa is gone. Agriculture is the largest user of fresh water, and many rivers of all sizes have been drained upstream, so that their mouths are just dry gashes in the earth. Runoff from nitrogen fertilizer has produced the huge dead zone at the mouth of the
Mississippi, as well as countless others around the globe. The 2005 U.N.-sponsored Millennium Ecosystem Assessment asserts that industrial agriculture may be “the largest threat to biodiversity and ecosystem function of any single human activity.”⁴ We are literally consuming our planet, taking our food in a way that violates its natural systems.

In this situation, it is instructive to notice that the Bible presents the first human sin as an eating violation. God sets a limit on consumption, and the humans choose to override it. God responds with a question both indignant and incredulous: “From the tree that I commanded you \textit{not} to eat from it – you \textit{ate}??!!” (Gen. 3:11). The immediate result of this first violation is that the ground itself is “accursed” (Gen. 3:18). It sprouts “thorns and thistles,” a clear sign of desiccated, eroded land – that is, of fragile land that has been mistreated. Is God’s cursing of the soil for human misbehavior merely arbitrary – a typical gesture of the “grumpy God of the Old Testament”? A group of young farmers with whom I studied this passage opened my eyes to what any ordinary Israelite would have seen in it: “It’s obvious: when humans are disconnected from God, the soil will be the first to suffer.” They had no theological training, yet these farmers immediately intuited something my urbanized students and I had missed: beginning here and continuing throughout the Old Testament, land degradation (e.g., Lev. 26:18-20, Deut. 28:15-18) is a sure sign that humans have turned away from God. Conversely, the flourishing of the land (e.g., Lev. 26:3-6, 10; Deut. 28:2-5, 11-12; Isaiah 35; Psalms 65, 72) marks a return to God. In short, the Old Testament represents the condition of the land as the single best index of human responsiveness to God.

It would be overly literal to interpret every natural disaster, every drought or crop failure as a sign of God’s judgment. But the Bible uses story form and evocative language to express profound truths about the order of creation. The truth we should not miss in these passages is that *adam* and *adamah*, humanity and fertile soil, are bound together; there can be no long-term flourishing of the one without the other. As the young farmers saw, human dysfunction evidences itself in the natural order.

**Intimacy with Our Place on Earth**

The Old Testament bespeaks throughout an intimacy with land that is inseparable from Israel’s intimacy with God. Indeed, intimacy with land may be the single most important religious difference between the biblical writers and ourselves, for so many of us have been formed by an urbanized culture that treats the earth as an abstraction and therefore imagines that God has only “spiritual” concerns.

Learning any form of intimacy is heart-work, best practiced on a daily basis. Certainly this is true of intimacy with God and the things of God. And so I conclude this lecture by turning back to our daily prayer book, the psalms. As I have said, the psalms repeatedly celebrate the world as “the work of [God’s] hands” (Pss. 19:2, Eng. 1, and that marks them as profoundly counter-cultural in our modern context. They bespeak an ethos of valuing what God has made, and caring for it. Such an ethos is almost directly opposed to our own cultural habit of depredation and waste.
So here is an icon we would do well to ponder: Psalm 65, which gives a detailed picture of God the Farmer, humble Caretaker of the earth. Aptly for us, the psalm begins as a confession of sin: “Our sins are stronger than we are” (v. 4, Eng. 3). We can all say that, witnessing the degradation to which we are party. The palmist does not wallow, however, but rather turns in awe to what God has done, beginning with creation: “He sets the mountains with his strength” (vv. 6-7, Eng. 5-6). Quickly the psalmist moves from the beginning of the world to the present moment: the One who “set” the mountains on their foundations now “sets” (the same Hebrew word) the seed in the grain heads (v.10, Eng. 9). These are twin acts of land care, at macro and micro levels. Then God labors over the field, watering its furrows, smoothing the ridges, “melt[ing]” the sun-baked soil with showers, “bless[ing] its growth” (v. 11, Eng. 10). And the earth responds eagerly to God’s loving care:

…your wagon tracks drip ripeness.

They drip, the pastures of the wilderness,
And the hills are girded with joy.

Meadows are clothed with the flocks
and valleys cover themselves with grain.

They shout out; they even sing. (vv. 12-14, Eng. 11-13)

What an astonishing picture of God’s care for the world: the Creator of heaven and earth viewed as a hardworking but gratified farmer, hot and dirty no doubt, driving home a wagonload of grain. Certainly such a surprising image of God has something vital to say to us who are formed in God’s image. In a word, it has power to humble those who read and pray it – literally to root us in the humus, the soil on which all life depends. The psalm shows us what medieval
theologians called *creatio continua*, God’s continual creation and preservation of the world. As we confess, “Our sins are stronger than we are,” the psalms offer the possibility that we may be healed by the holy, exacting, and ultimately joyful labor of earth care. God does it season in and season out, year after year, and so must we.

**FOR FURTHER READING**


