

# Reading Scripture Greenly

BY PRESIAN BURROUGHS

Three recent works reviewed here can help us develop a biblically inspired ecological consciousness. Although they consider different combinations of biblical texts, they ultimately agree that the Scriptures teach us to live now in accordance with the fullness of God's new creation.

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**W**hat does it mean to read Scripture "greenly"? For Ellen Davis it means immersing ourselves in the agrarian sensibilities of biblical writers while staying abreast of current ecological issues. Richard Bauckham's reading rejects the modern assumption that we can master nature and highlights instead the humble place of humans in a community of creation. Cherryl Hunt, David Horrell, and Christopher Southgate read Scripture greenly by using the tools of narrative theory and natural science to construct an ethical paradigm appropriate for our present ecological situation.

Conversing primarily with Old Testament authors and contemporary agrarians, Ellen Davis's *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 252 pp., \$27.00) suggests that we will see the world as the ancient Israelites did and consequently interpret the Bible more accurately if we reimagine our relationship with the earth in agrarian ways. Since agrarians recognize that our lives depend upon a healthy ecosystem, they emphasize that sustainable living requires habits that support the wellbeing of all things. Davis claims that the Torah takes this principle a step farther by making sustainable living a theological matter: God required Israel to live carefully on the land of promise, otherwise Israel would experience not only ecological degradation but, ultimately, exile from its land.

Highlighting passages in Jeremiah and Isaiah, Davis demonstrates that the Bible understands humans to be a "covenanted unity" with the rest of creation. Like contemporary agrarians, the biblical writers have an "abiding awareness of their place," which influenced them to "attend to the physical

means of human existence, the chief of those being arable land” (p. 26) (see, for example, Deuteronomy 11:10-12). In biblical and agrarian writings such land care comprises four elements. First, the “land comes first” so that humans must adjust to the needs and natural workings of the land, recognizing it as partner. Second, true wisdom accepts that we depend on God’s guidance and grace in order to live sustainably. Third, all creation is finite and our existence is necessarily material in nature. Finally, farmland is not a commodity but a priceless gift entrusted to communities who care for it even as they derive sustenance from it (cf. Leviticus 25).

In contrast to these tenets of agrarianism, the food system of the ancient world often functioned as a means of power. Ancient Egypt and monarchial Israel, like corporations and industrialized nations today, controlled the production and distribution of food so that the people at the top gained the greatest profit. This is a stark contradiction of the manna economy of Exodus, which teaches that God generously provides enough for everyone and demands appropriate actions in response. Practically, the manna economy invites Israel to “engage in two concrete practices of restraint, namely, eschewing excess and keeping Sabbath” (p. 75).

The story of King Ahab and Naboth in 1 Kings 21 leads Davis to reflect not only on who controls earth’s produce but who is entrusted with its land. Treating the land as a commodity, King Ahab attempted to purchase the ancestral land of Naboth, whereas Naboth respected the land as covenantal inheritance. Here and elsewhere the Old Testament espouses an economy in which plots are given to family groups who maintain the land, subsist on and sometimes profit from it, and then pass it on to descendants, ensuring the perpetual health of people and land. In connection to contemporary agriculture, Davis argues that decentralized, family-owned farms are both more productive and more biblically sanctioned than centralized, corporation-owned farms.

Yet how might such farming square with an increasingly urbanized world? Addressing this question, Davis looks to The Song of Songs. While Jerusalem elites became increasingly prosperous by controlling the countryside, Song of Songs 8:11-12 subtly critiques their agricultural practice of not directly caring for their vineyards. Instead, the passage lauds a form of agriculture in which families attentively care for the land. Although it stretches our imagination to envision ecologically faithful urban life, Davis argues that there are signs of hope in the growing trend of urban agriculture, city planning done with the surrounding bioregion in mind, and the use of sewage as “an agricultural asset” (p. 161). Furthermore, she envisions a time when we protect farmland by supporting local family farms and eschewing the luxury of suburban homes that eat up farmland. Throughout her book, Davis demonstrates that biblical authors understood “how completely the health of human lives and cultures is bound up with care of the land and just distribution of its bounty” (p. 180).



Conversing with Old Testament and New Testament authors and contemporary eco-theologians in *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010, 176 pp., \$24.95), Richard Bauckham focuses on how the Bible depicts humanity's relationship with the wider creation and the consequent implications of this relationship for ecological care. By reflecting on Genesis and the Mosaic law, he suggests that human "dominion" over creation does not mean total control over its processes since God established creation to be self-regulating. Rather, in Genesis and Exodus, he sees a model of stewardship in which human beings self-restrainedly care for and rely upon creation. In part, this includes reserving room and resources for other creatures. Since God designates herbage to be food for all living things (Genesis 1:30) and commands the people of Israel to allow wild animals to feed from their resting fields (Exodus 23:11), Bauckham contends that humans are not to "fill" the land so extensively that other creatures cannot also abide there.

The theological core of the book draws upon Psalm 104 and Matthew 6:25-33 to demonstrate that the Bible places humans within a community of creation. Adopting a community-of-creation mentality, humans are to live within limits so that all creatures have access to God's "generous extravagance" and, as Psalm 148 powerfully envisions, continue their activity of praising God "simply by being themselves and fulfilling their God-given roles in God's creation" (pp. 67, 79). The Bible presents humans as "eminent members and citizens" of the creation community (p. 91) but also chief perpetrators of the degradation over which creation mourns (Jeremiah 4; 12; Hosea 4). The Apostle Paul takes up this prophetic picture of creation mourning over the human destruction of creation in Romans 8:22. Like the prophets before him (cf. Isaiah 32; 35; 51; Amos 9; Joel 3), Paul hopes for a time when God will restore creation by eliminating human sin and sin's consequent ecological devastation. The ethical implication Bauckham draws from God's ultimate salvation of the entire creation is that we are to "anticipate" now what God intends for the future by living peaceably with all creation.

In his reflection on the Bible's grand narrative of salvation, Bauckham concludes that Scripture manifests a quadrilateral of relationships among God, humanity, and animate and inanimate nonhuman creation. He claims that although the New Testament does not often focus on nonhuman creation, it assumes the theological heritage of the Old Testament and views nonhuman creation through a Christological lens. For example, as illustrated by such texts as Colossians 1 and John 1, Jesus' incarnation and resurrection teach us that God does not intend to free humans from their materiality but perfect them in it. "For the biblical meta-narrative, history is the story of humans in relationship with the rest of creation.... God's purpose in history and in the eschatological future does not abstract humans from nature, but

heals the human relationship with nature” (p. 150).



In *Greening Paul: Reading the Apostle Paul in a Time of Ecological Crisis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010, 334 pp., \$34.95), David G. Horrell, Cherryl Hunt, and Christopher Southgate attempt to discern the cosmological narratives contained in Paul’s writings, compare these narratives to those found in contemporary eco-theologies and science, and develop a well-reasoned, Pauline narrative arc that inspires responsible ecological ethics. They do this in the belief that a Pauline story of creation can “be a means to articulate a counter-narrative, a challenge to dominant economic and cultural narratives, a means to envisage communities in which a different story constructs a different sense of identity and undergirds different patterns of practice” (p. 59). The authors examine the stories told by Romans 8:19-23 and Colossians 1:15-20, identifying three movements of Paul’s creational narrative: creation, reconciliation, and new creation. These movements in turn inform a reconstructed Pauline theology that highlights creation’s eschatological future.

Three verbs in Romans 8:19-23 — “is waiting,” “was subjected,” and “will be liberated” — set the trajectory of creation’s narrative, referring to present, past, and future moments respectively. Reflecting some characteristics of a tragedy, this narrative maintains that creation now suffers but will be liberated in the future. The focus here is neither upon the tragic state nor its causes but rather “on the divine action that leads both humans and non-human creation to freedom and glory” (p. 83). Although creation’s liberation results from an act of God, the interpreters suggest that through Christ humans now have the opportunity and responsibility to live in concert with the liberation of the eschatological future.

Emphasizing reconciliation rather than new creation, the narrative outlined in Colossians 1:15-20 also includes a past, present, and future. In the past, creation took place in and through Christ. After an implied rupture, Christ’s death reconciled all things to God, and his experience as firstborn from the dead inaugurated the resurrection. At present, Christ reigns over all things, is the head of the body, and brings peace while the faithful live with Christ and have been buried and raised with him. Returning in the future, Christ will have first place in an implied new creation and everything will find its goal in him.

These interpretations of Colossians and Romans highlight two aspects of God’s salvific purposes: the reconciliation of all things and the liberation of creation from decay and death. Nonetheless, Horrell et al. maintain these texts are not transparently eco-ethical. To formulate an eco-ethic they relate the biblical passages to contemporary science. Acknowledging that their revised Pauline account of creation is different from what Paul had in mind, they take crucial cues from evolutionary biology. Their reconstructed Pau-

line narrative consequently does not include a “Fall” since death, decay, and predation have been integral to Earth from the dawn of evolution. Rather than intrusions, these experiences of mortality are central to evolution, inherent to creation, and even established by God as a subjection to futility. Evolution also set the conditions in which, once humanity became capable of self-transcendence, the Incarnation finally took place. By transcending his own desires and living for God and others, Jesus Christ opened the way for all people to achieve self-transcendence. Although science has no place for eschatology, the authors retain the Pauline hope of a new creation miraculously established by God that is without death or decay. While humans have no power to usher in the new creation, they do have the possibility as redeemed members of creation “to act in wise and healing ways impossible for other species” (p. 137).

Ultimately, Horrell et al. conclude that God calls people to self-emptying lifestyles for the sake of others. It is only through this form of selfless suffering that people attain the glorification God has in store for them. Following Christ’s reconciliatory purposes and limiting their aspirations, appetites, and acquisitions, Christians can reduce extinction rates, help threatened species, and ensure all creatures can flourish. While we perhaps cannot yet escape the use of pesticides and pharmaceuticals to protect humanity, the authors encourage us to reduce the killing of animals through vegetarianism. Still, they allow that meat raised humanely and sustainably on small farms is faithful to the arc of God’s redemptive story.



These three works contribute positively to a green reading of Scripture and assist the Christian community as it develops a biblically inspired ecological consciousness. For people interested in the Bible’s presentation of creation as community, Bauckham’s work is most synthetic and accessible. Readers wanting to delve deeply into individual texts and complex interpretive factors around ecological issues will benefit from the contributions of Davis (for the Old Testament) and Horrell, Hunt, and Southgate (for the Pauline epistles). Although each book considers different combinations of biblical texts, they ultimately agree that the Scriptures teach us to live now in accordance with the fullness of God’s new creation.



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