



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Eden: Moral Power of a Biblical Landscape
(*Moral Landscape of Creation*, pp. 9-16)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Sin's Landscape
(*Moral Landscape of Creation*, pp. 38-39)

📖 Isolation
(*Moral Landscape of Creation*, pp. 40-41)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
PO Box 97361

Waco, TX 76798-7361

Phone 1-866-298-2325

www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2001 The Center for Christian Ethics

Eden: A Moral Landscape

In the Eden story, we are made from and called to serve the land. How do the values of interrelationship and dependence in this story challenge and enrich our view of our place in the world?

Prayer†

Creator God, you have entrusted the earth to our keeping. Help us to give you a good account of our management: to keep the earth generously and thoughtfully, even as you keep us rich in Christian living. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Genesis 2:4b-24

Responsive Reading†

When we are blind to the mystery of our landscape,
And forget it is God's handiwork;

When we are careless with its plants and animals,

And forget they are God's creatures;

When we are unkind to those who work with us,

And forget they are God's children;

When we are careless about our work,

And forget we are God's co-workers;

When we mistreat the earth,

And forget we are God's stewards;

God, forgive us.

Reflection

Throughout the Garden of Eden story, human life and farming go hand in hand. Before the creation "there was no one to till the ground" (Genesis 2:5); then God creates human beings to be farmers (2:15) and farming remains our calling, even outside the garden (3:23; cf. 3:17-19). Details in the story vividly express our close relationship to the landscape:

- ▶ *Interrelationship.* God makes the human, *adam*, from arable land, *adamah* (2:7; the same word, "ground," is in 2:6, 9; 3:17, 19, 23). We are farmers by nature, made out of the very soil we cultivate. "I know of no statement in our entire religious heritage," Hiebert says, "that so categorically asserts that we are linked to our landscapes and this linkage is a part of the divine order of creation." We share a close relationship with other living things because God forms plants (2:9) and animals (2:19) from the same topsoil. This relationship is clearer in Hebrew because the same phrase, *nephesh chayyah* ("living being"), describes the human and the animals at creation (2:7, 19). Furthermore, God identifies the animals as helpers and brings them forward to be named (2:18-20). "Much has been made of humans asserting power over the animals by naming them, but namers in the Bible can be either more or less powerful than those they name," Hiebert notes. "The naming described in Eden is the naming that is possible only when living shoulder to shoulder with the animal world, as did the ancient Israelite farmer."



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2001 The Center for Christian Ethics

▶ *Dependence.* The Garden is an ideal farm landscape with a constant source of water (2:6), plenty of fertile soil, and every species of fruit tree imaginable (2:9). God appoints humans to “till” (literally “serve”) the arable land (2:5, 15, 3:23). How did the same Hebrew verb come to mean both “cultivate” and “serve”? “Just as servants are dependent upon masters, subjects upon kings, and people upon God,” Hiebert suggests, “so the farmer must have sensed his absolute dependence upon the soil.... In the land’s health lay the human future. Thus the biblical farmer believed his work, the human’s work, to be in the service of nature’s needs and orders.”

For most people the instruction in 1:26-28 to subdue the earth and have dominion over its creatures is *the* biblical teaching about our role in the world. However, the Garden of Eden story offers another perspective: we are called to *serve* rather than rule the earth. This enriches our view of the earth and our place in it:

- ▶ God created us as a part of an interconnected web of life. All creatures are interrelated and, together with the environment in which they live, function as a unified whole.
- ▶ As servants rather than managers of this web of life, our well-being depends upon our serving the needs, requirements, and well-being of the whole environment. The danger of thinking of ourselves as managers is that, regarding ourselves as dominant, we lose this sense of humility and dependence and of the restraint demanded of us by our landscapes.
- ▶ We live by what farmers grow. This demands that we be thoughtful about what we eat, the health of our agricultural economy, and the well-being of our farmers and our farming communities. Our lives depend upon our collective support for a wise, productive, and sustainable agriculture.

Study Questions

1. Many people today live in a city or town, rather than on a farm. How does the Eden narrative relate to their experience?
2. In what ways, discovered by environmental scientists, are we interrelated with and dependent on our landscapes?
3. After making the human from topsoil, God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (2:7). How might this image be drawn from a farmer’s experience (see p. 11 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*)? If this image suggests that God is like a farmer, then what are its implications for us?
4. Contrast the landscapes in Michelangelo’s *Original Sin and Expulsion From the Garden of Eden* and Ezekiel’s *Eve Hearing the Voice*, on pp. 38 and 40 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*, with the description of Eden (Genesis 2:4b-10). In these artists’ interpretations, how has our sin changed the Garden’s landscape?
5. How does your local community fail to *serve* its landscape?

Departing Hymn: “Morning Has Broken”

† Adapted from Plough Sunday liturgy developed by Peterborough Diocesan Council for the Countryside, Crick, England (www.crick.org.uk/rural).

Eden: A Moral Landscape

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Genesis 3:1-24
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Discuss Gen. 2:4b-24	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss Gen. 2:4b-24	Discuss Genesis 3:1-24
Questions 1 and 5	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To appreciate the importance of farming in the Garden of Eden narrative.
2. To reflect on the relationship we share with the landscape and its creatures.
3. To begin to reflect on what it means to *serve* the earth.
4. To recognize how sin distorts the landscape and our relationship to its creatures.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Moral Landscape of Creation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and the suggested articles before the group meeting. Locate the hymn “Morning Has Broken” in your hymnbook, or select an alternate hymn.

Begin with a Story

“After making the first human from topsoil, God ‘breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,’ and the human being came to life (2:7). This colorful image itself likely comes from life on the Israelite farm, as was suggested to me once by Richard Austin, author of *Hope for the Land: Nature in the Bible*, and a farmer himself. In the moments after a lamb or a kid or a calf is born, if it cannot start breathing on its own, the farmer blows into its nostrils to bring it to life. Thus this narrator describes God’s own behavior when God first brought humans to life in terms of an experience with which Israelite farmers were intimately familiar: breathing life into the newborn.” (*Moral Landscape of Creation*, p. 11)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently, and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Arrange for a group member to read aloud Genesis 2:4b-24 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins, and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Members will be familiar with this wonderful story of the Garden of Eden. What features of the story did they only just notice when they heard it read again? Perhaps they will mention details of the landscape (Genesis 2:5-6, 8-10); that God *plants* the garden; that the living creatures are presented as helpers to Adam; that the human is described as a farmer. Call attention to how human life and farming go hand in hand throughout the story. Ask a member to read Genesis 3:23 and then 3:17-19.

- ▶ *Interrelationship.* Make the point that human beings share a close relationship with the topsoil and with plants and animals. This is clearer in Hebrew than in many English translations. Discuss the better translations of *adam* and *adamah* reviewed by Hiebert on p. 12 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*.
- ▶ *Dependence.* Ask a member to read Genesis 2:4b-8, 15, but replace “till” with “serve.” Discuss Hiebert’s suggestion about how the same Hebrew word came to mean both “cultivate” and “serve” (*Moral Landscape of Creation*, p. 14)

Ask members to reflect upon how the notion of serving the landscape adds to their understanding of stewardship. How does it challenge the usual understanding of subduing the earth and having dominion over its creatures? Ask them to react to the three bulleted points: (1) God created us as a part of an interconnected web of life; (2) As servants rather than managers of this web of life, our well-being depends upon behavior that serves the needs, requirements, and well-being of the whole environment; and (3) Like our biblical ancestors, we live by what farmers grow.

Study Questions

1. Members might describe particular experiences through which they learn to value their landscape—through classroom study, nature walks, or vacations. Perhaps they have become aware of how city life isolates many of us from food preparation, dependence on weather patterns, and understanding of the lives and needs of creatures. Does your congregation’s worship often mention dependence on the landscape?
2. Ask members to brainstorm some ways in which we are interrelated with our landscapes. Prompt a member who is active in an environmental group to report on this. You will find many ideas in your newspaper or in the Web resources described in *Becoming Better Gardeners*, on pp. 69-71 of *Moral Landscape of Creation*.
3. Reflect on Richard Austin’s suggestion in the “Begin with a Story” section above. Look for verses that describe God as a farmer (e.g., Genesis 2:8,9; 3:8). One implication is that God created us to treat the earth just as would God, with attention, knowledge, and care.
4. The analyses of the artwork on pp. 39 and 41 give some hints. Members might list the elements of the Garden (described in Genesis 2:8-10,19) that are missing in these images.
5. Focus attention on the immediate community before branching out to state or national issues. Members might mention farming practices, unregulated development of suburbs or businesses, abandonment of portions of their city, water or air quality problems, or loss of habitat for animals by logging, farming, or other development practices.

Departing Hymn

Distribute hymnbooks with “Morning Has Broken.” If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.