

Eden: Moral Power of a Biblical Landscape

BY THEODORE HIEBERT

The most familiar of all biblical landscapes, the Garden of Eden, offers wisdom to reshape our values toward nature. No other story in our religious heritage so clearly shows that we are linked to our landscapes and that our work is to be in the service of nature's needs and orders.

The stresses of the landscapes in which we live are forcing all of us, regardless of our hometowns and politics and religions, to reconsider our actions and the impact they have on our neighborhoods. We have begun the search for a style of life that will restore these landscapes to health and sustain them so that we, our children, and our grandchildren will thrive in them. For us as Christians, such a search for a new way of being in the world—though it will involve the best science, politics, and public policy—can be aided greatly by a reexamination of our biblical landscapes. In the stories of these landscapes and the people that inhabit them lie values that have shaped us and that continue to challenge and remake us.

But before looking at how one of these biblical landscapes—the Garden of Eden—might influence and enrich our search for the proper human role in the environment, I want to mention a powerful and noble movement in biblical interpretation that has inadvertently muddied the waters of this search. Dominant throughout the twentieth century, this way of reading the Bible might be called the “sacred history” perspective. Its proponents have claimed that the genius of biblical faith is that it separated God from the processes of nature, with which the surrounding pagan religions associ-

ated God, and connected God instead with the processes of human history. Viewed from this perspective, biblical landscapes became merely the stage on which the great drama of human redemption was played out. They were not considered an essential participant in the biblical story.¹

This is a noble movement because its goals are so admirable. By its stress on history, it has aimed to show the biblical God's infinite care for humanity, its well-being, and its future. It has stressed that God is not an abstraction but a living presence within the ambiguities of human experience. It has freed God from human theological systems and emphasized God's freedom to act in new ways and to create new futures. Above all, it has identified God with social change, recognizing God's activity in historical events that dismantle repressive regimes and liberate the oppressed.

Unfortunately, the fine goals of this interpretive movement have been pursued at nature's expense. By playing history against nature, the historical contours of this perspective could be put into sharp focus and clearly delineated, but the moral landscape of creation was consequently neglected or wrongly devalued. Almost every biblical commentary and every biblical theology available in bookstores now shares this "sacred history" perspective to some extent. As a result, when environmental ethicists and theologians first turned to the biblical tradition to look for resources for a new ecological way of thinking, they were led to believe that biblical faith was essentially bankrupt in this regard.² And the Bible still has this reputation in many circles today. So when we reexamine our biblical landscapes we face two major challenges: understanding the original biblical environment and also reading against the grain of a century of well-intentioned but one-sided biblical interpretation of it.

To take up these challenges in a modest way, I would like to take a new look at one of the most familiar of all biblical landscapes, the Garden of Eden. Attributed to an anonymous author whom scholars have named the Yahwist, because of his preference for the divine name Yahweh (rendered LORD in the NRSV), this account of creation is widely regarded as the older of the two accounts at the beginning of Genesis. Because of its age and its place at the beginning of the Yahwist's narrative, it plays a foundational role in Israel's self-consciousness and in biblical theology. The questions I want to put to this particular story first are, what is the actual landscape that the story teller has in mind here and what is the human role in it? Only then can we say more about the values toward nature that are embedded in the account.

A good place to start such an investigation is the point in the story when God assigns the first human his first task on earth: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). Apparently the first human occupation is farming, to cultivate and take care of the garden. In fact this view of who humans are and

what they do runs through the entire story (and those that follow it). Assuming that human life and farming go hand in hand, the narrator describes the time before creation as the time when there were no farmers: “There was no one to till the ground” (2:5). Furthermore, the narrator recognizes that farming is to be the occupation—could we say, vocation?—of the human race from this time forward, even outside the garden: “The LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken” (3:23; cf. 3:17-19).

We have before us then what appears to be an agricultural landscape, in which the natural world and the human role in it is understood from the perspective of the ancient Israelite farmer.³ This agricultural landscape becomes more vivid, as a matter of fact, in other details in the story. One of these details is the creation of the first human being. God makes this first human “from the dust of the ground” (2:7). Biblical Hebrew, in fact, possesses different terms for different kinds of land; the term here translated “ground” is *adamah*. *Adamah* is always used by the Yahwist in this story (and in those that follow it) for arable land, the ground cultivated by Israelite farmers (e.g. 2:6, 9; 3:17, 19, 23). Thus humans are by nature, so to speak, farmers. They are made out of the very soil they cultivate.

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.⁴ 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.

Typical Israelite farms were nowhere nearly as lush and fertile as the Garden of Eden. Perched on rocky mountain slopes, they were small subsistence farms combining the cultivation of grains and fruits with the raising of sheep and goats. Life on them was difficult and precarious, limited as they were by too little good soil and unpredictable rainfall. When

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the author of the Eden narrative describes this primeval garden, he is therefore describing the Mediterranean farmer's ideal landscape, a landscape with a constant source of water (2:6), plenty of fertile soil, and every species of fruit tree imaginable (2:9). But even in this idealistic setting and the story about it, the actual agricultural perspective of the story teller is present. So too are the values toward nature cultivated in that agricultural

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world. Let us take a look at two of those values.

The first is a deep belief in the interrelationship between people and their landscape. The most vivid expression of this value is the creation of humans from the very landscape they inhabit (2:7), which we have just examined above. The point of this account, that humans and their landscape are part of one common reality, is clear in English but even more obvious in Hebrew. As we have already seen, the Hebrew term for the

arable ground out of which the first human is made is *adamah*. If we recognize as well that the Hebrew term for the human made out of *adamah* is *adam*, then we can see how the Hebrew language itself expresses the very identity between the landscape and its people that this creation story narrates.

Recent interpreters have tried to capture in an English translation this connection in the Hebrew language between *adamah* and *adam*, between the landscape and its people. For the creation of *adam* from *adamah*, they have suggested "earthling" from "earth" or "human" from "humus," both appealing attempts to relay this original sense of relationship. To these I would add "farmer" from "farmland," since in this story *adamah* is after all arable soil and since the human, *adam*, is after all a farmer. I know of no statement in our entire religious heritage that so categorically asserts that we are linked to our landscapes and this linkage is a part of the divine order of creation.

The same kind of close interrelationship between people and their landscape described in this image is seen by the Yahwist also in the relationship between people and the other life with which they share their

landscape. This connection is made clear when God creates all other kinds of life out of the same stuff, *adamah* (arable land), from which God made humans: first the plants (2:9), and then the animals (2:19). By these parallel creative acts, the story links all of life to its landscape and to each other. All life has its origin and basic nature in the same stuff, and that stuff is the arable land, which lay at the heart of the Yahwist's agricultural landscape.

The common nature shared by people and animals in the Eden narrative is again partly lost to us in our English translations. Only this time the reason is not the limitations of our English vocabulary but the powerful influence of the recent "sacred history" movement of biblical interpretation. The very same Hebrew phrase, *nephesh chayyah*, is used to describe the human being at creation (2:7) and the animals at creation (2:19). Yet our translators render this phrase "living being" when used of humans and "living creature" when used of animals (NRSV). The difference here is toned down considerably from the KJV's "living soul" and "living creature," but it still draws a clear line between humans and other life that the biblical author did not draw. And the only explanation I can give for this line is that our modern translators want to make a distinction between humans and the natural world that biblical writers themselves did not want to make. As a result we have introduced our own "sacred history" theology into the biblical text itself.

The special relationship shared by humans and the animals after creation is described further when God identifies the animals as helpers and brings them forward to be named (2:18-20). Life on the typical Israelite farm would have been inconceivable without the wild and domestic partners of the animal world. Oxen plowed, donkeys carried heavy loads, and sheep and goats provided wool and milk. 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. 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. The closest modern example I can give for the kind of intimate knowledge of, and respect for, the animal world upon which the naming in the garden of Eden depends are the essays of a contemporary farmer, David Kline, in *Great Possessions* and *Scratching the Woodchuck*.⁵ These vignettes of the profuse animal life on a 120 acre farm in northeastern Ohio are expressions of reverence and humility, not power. They serve to remind most of us modern readers how much we have lost the sense of our interrelationship with nature, which was simply part of being human in our biblical heritage.

A second foundational value expressed in the story of the Garden of Eden is the dependence of human life upon the landscape in which it lives. The points in the story where such dependence is most directly expressed are those places where the task of farming is mentioned: God appoints hu-

mans to “till” the ground (2:5, 15, 3:23). Here again, I am sorry to say, our English vocabulary fails us. For in fact the Hebrew word translated “till” is the ordinary Hebrew word meaning “serve.” It is used throughout the Bible for the work people render to their superiors: servants serve masters, subjects serve kings, and people serve God. So, literally, the farmer “serves” (tills) the arable land.

How it is that such a word was selected in the mists of history as the word for cultivation is a question in which no commentary on Genesis is much interested, as far as I am aware. But it has intrigued me for some time. Such choices can hardly be accidents, and the use of “serve” for cultivation must reflect the biblical farmer’s real sense of his relationship to the land he farms. Just as servants are dependent upon masters, subjects upon kings, and people upon God, so the farmer must have sensed his absolute dependence upon the soil. He knew his health and life and those of his family and animals were tied directly to the soil’s fertility and bounty. 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.

This view of the human role in the world has been practically forgotten, lying as it does in the long shadow of the beautiful and regal account of creation in Genesis 1 that precedes it. In that companion account of creation, long attributed by scholars to Israel’s priests, humans are, as almost everyone knows, told to “have dominion” over the animal world and to “subdue” the earth (1:26-28). These words put humans in just the opposite position in their landscape when compared to the account of creation in the garden of Eden. Instead of serving their landscape, they are instructed to rule it. The terms “have dominion” and “subdue” are used elsewhere in the Bible primarily for the rule of kings and of those who exercise authority and power over others. Examples can be given of such rule exercised kindly or harshly, but regardless of its character, such dominion views humans as their landscape’s rulers rather than its servants.

For most people the image of dominion in Genesis 1 is *the* biblical teaching about the human role in the natural world. The question for them is not whether other biblical perspectives might be considered, but how this single teaching is to be understood and followed. In the intense study of Genesis 1 undertaken to answer this question, the English word “steward” has been chosen to represent and explain the role assigned people in Genesis 1. Though it does not itself occur in this creation text, the term “steward” does capture its central idea: humans are created as God’s representatives to oversee the world of nature. As stewards, they are to exercise authority as God directs them to do so.

There are so many appealing things about this image that the words “steward” and “stewardship” have become the primary way of talking

about the human role in nature, both in the church and in society.⁶ Moreover, many good works and new initiatives have been launched under the banner of stewardship. But the notion of stewardship, and its view of the human role in the natural world, is not the whole biblical testimony about creation. How might our view of the earth and our place in it be challenged and enriched by recovering the values of dependence and interrelationship present in the agricultural perspective of the Eden narrative?

First, the Garden of Eden story reminds us that we were created as a part of an interconnected web of life. Preindustrial biblical farmers, who lived in intimate contact with their landscapes, recognized in their own way a basic principle emerging from the best ecological science today: people are part of complex ecosystems in which all forms of life are interrelated and, together with the environment in which they live, function as a unified whole. The Yahwist's view that all life is linked by its very nature to the land and to other life provides us with an integrative way of thinking about our place in the world much different from the "sacred history" theology that has controlled so much recent biblical study and interpretation.

Second, the Eden narrative repositions us within this web of life, at least when compared to the priestly account of creation that is so much more familiar to us. It tells us that humans are their ecosystem's servants rather than its managers. It emphasizes human dependence over human dominance. The great value of this perspective is that it takes the natural world (the whole ecosystem) rather than us humans (a single part of it) as its point of orientation. It

claims that our well-being depends upon behavior that serves the needs, requirements, and well-being of the whole environment of which we are a part. This is a central theme running through the literature and language of the ecologists I most admire. "Creation provides a place for hu-

mans, but it is greater than humanity and within it even great men are small," writes Wendell Berry. "Such humility is the consequence of an accurate insight, ecological in its bearing, not a pious deference to 'spiritual' value."⁷ The ever present, though perhaps not inevitable, danger of the image of ourselves as stewards is that, regarding ourselves as dominant, we lose this sense of humility and dependence and of the restraint demanded of us by our landscapes.

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Finally, the agricultural perspective of the garden story brings back to our attention the fact that we are all farmers, not by our occupations but by our consumption. We all live by what farmers grow. A friend of mine, Tim Weiskel, reminds us that there is no such thing as a post-agricultural society.⁸ Should not our meal to meal dependence on what our farmers grow demand of us all more thoughtfulness about the way we eat, about the health of our agricultural economy, and about the well-being of our farmers and our farming communities? We shall not all become farmers like our biblical ancestors, but our lives, no less than theirs, depend upon our collective support for a wise, productive, and sustainable agriculture.

NOTES

1 Two influential spokesmen for this movement in biblical theology and interpretation were G. Ernest Wright (e.g. *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* [London: SCM Press, 1952]) and Gerhard von Rad (e.g. "The Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other essays* [London: SCM Press, 1966], 131-143).

2 Two very different examples are George Hendry's opening chapter in *Theology of Nature* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980) and an article by Kenneth Woodward in *Newsweek* magazine (June 5, 1989).

3 I have tried to lay out the details of the agricultural landscape of the Yahwist in the Garden of Eden and the stories that follow in *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

4 Richard Cartwright Austin, *Hope for the Land: Nature in the Bible* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988). This suggestion was made in a personal communication.

5 David Kline, *Great Possessions: An Amish Farmer's Journal* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), *Scratching the Woodchuck: Nature on an Amish Farm* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1997).

6 An example is the study on human responsibility in nature that John Douglas Hall wrote for the National Council of Churches's Commission on Stewardship, entitled *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986).

7. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986), 98.

8. Tim Weiskel is the director of the Harvard Seminar on Environmental Values.



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