

The Biblical Landscape

BY STEVEN BOUMA - PREDIGER

What the Bible actually teaches is different from much “allegedly respectable Christian behavior” toward the earth. Three books are among the best recent research to display the ecological wisdom of Scripture. No one reading them can legitimately claim, as one contemporary theologian recently did, that we ought to put the Bible on the shelf for twenty or thirty years.

Wetlands Waning” declares the title of an article in my local news paper. Yesterday’s paper blared “Ozone Action Alert Today.” Last week it was global climate change, acid rain, and species extinction. And last month the paper reported unusually severe droughts in Florida and life-threatening floods in Minnesota. The litany of ecological worry and woe seemingly knows no end.

Many people place the blame for such ecological degradation at the feet of biblical religion. Judaism and Christianity are the culprits, they claim, because they foster and sanction the plunder of our planet. From British historian Arnold Toynbee to American novelist Wallace Stegner, the indictment of Christianity is pervasive. Well-known poet and novelist Wendell Berry, a Christian, concurs. Berry minces no words when he claims, “the indictment of Christianity by the anti-Christian conservationists is, in many respects, just.” He continues:

Christian organizations, to this day, remain largely indifferent to the rape and plunder of the world and its traditional cultures. It is hardly too much to say that most Christian organizations are as happily indifferent to the ecological, cultural, and religious implications of industrial economies as are most industrial organizations.¹

Insofar as Berry's claim is correct, we Christians have much to confess.

But that is not the end of the matter. Berry argues further, "however just [this indictment of Christianity] may be, it does not come from an adequate understanding of the Bible and the cultural traditions that descend from the Bible." There is quite a difference, he notes, between what the Bible actually teaches and "the behavior of those peoples supposed to have been biblically instructed." Indeed in our tradition there are "virtually catastrophic discrepancies between biblical instruction" and "allegedly respectable Christian behavior." It is precisely because of such discrepancies that Berry concludes, "Our predicament now [as Christians], I believe, requires us to learn to read and understand the Bible in the light of the present fact of Creation."²

Three books under review in this essay enable us to do precisely that: read and understand the Bible in light of the groaning of creation (to use St. Paul's words in Romans 8). *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible*, by William Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999; 458 pp., \$35.00), *God Who Creates: Essays in Honor of W. Sibley Towner*, edited by William Brown and S. Dean McBride (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000; 273 pp., \$24.00), and *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel*, by Theodore Hiebert (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996; 228 pp., \$49.95), are some of the best recent research to display the ecological wisdom of Scripture. No one reading these books can legitimately claim, as one contemporary theologian recently did, that we ought to put the Bible on the shelf for twenty or thirty years.

I should say up front that these tomes are not going to be easy reading for the mythical "person in the pew." Hiebert, Brown, and McBride are Old Testament profes-

sors, as are many of the contributors to the Brown and McBride edited volume, and thus there is much Hebrew in the text. However, while a few of the essays in *God Who Creates* and some of the material in *The Ethos of the Cosmos* may be unintelli-

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gible to those who do not know Hebrew, most of the time these books can be understood by those unfamiliar with guttural consonants and Hiphil verbs. In short, don't let the sight of Hebrew text (or occasionally Greek and Latin) scare you off. The reading is worth it. And for those who have competence in the biblical languages, the feast is even more delicious.

And what a feast it is. Insights abound as the authors give new and provocative readings of familiar texts and illumine obscure or difficult

texts. Indeed, these books are a treasure trove of insight into the biblical story. For example, in his careful study of the Old Testament William Brown highlights various ways in which five different biblical models of the cosmos, from the Priestly tradition, the Yahwist tradition, Second Isaiah, Proverbs, and Job, inform and shape a community ethic. In his words, “The way in which the cosmos is structured says something significant about the way in which the cultural, including moral, contours of the community have been and should be shaped” (p. 10). So the Priestly account of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:4, with its elaborate structure, evokes an ethos of order. No surprises here, for this has been noticed before by many interpreters. But Brown also points out how light, earth, and water all actively cooperate in the creative process, how not just diversity but webbed interconnectedness is part and parcel of the created order, and how creation reflects in time the order and beauty that the tabernacle and temple reflect in space.

With respect to the Yahwist creation account in Genesis 2:4ff, Brown, like many, points out the centrality of agriculture and arable land. We are *‘adam* made from the *‘adamah*, groundling born from the ground. But he also highlights the human vocation to tend and keep the garden that is the earth (2:15), the reversal of roles between human and ground as a result of the disruption of sin (Genesis 3), and Noah’s role as new Adam who plants a garden of grapes after the cleansing of the flood (Genesis 6-9). Moving beyond Genesis, Brown displays various parallels and inversions between the garden story in Genesis and the stories of the exodus and wilderness sojourn; he provides insight into the wonderful story of Balaam and his ass (Numbers 22-24), showing how it is in certain respects a mirror image of the garden of Eden narrative. Brown concludes that, according to the Yahwist tradition, humanity’s “very identity is bound up with the ground” so that “the man’s kinship is with both his companion and the ground” (pp. 220-221). This view of the cosmos, in short, evokes an ethos of ecological integrity.

Brown offers similar insights with respect to Isaiah 40-55, Proverbs, and Job, shedding light especially on the enigmatic chapters 38-41 of Job. After surveying five models of the cosmos—cosmic sanctuary, garden community, temple garden, cosmic domicile, wild and wondrous wasteland—he concludes that despite their diversity they share these themes: that “God is creator and sustainer of all life” and “the cosmos is meant to be a place of abundant and equitable provision” (pp. 406-407). Brown rarely moves from biblically informed ethos to explicit ethic, but his conclusion leaves little doubt as to the shape of such an ethic: ultimately we are, to borrow from Aldo Leopold, all members of the same biotic community.

The volume edited by Brown and McBride likewise gives us much food for thought. As with most edited collections, some essays offer more lucid prose, careful analysis, and penetrating exegesis than others. The collection

as a whole is, however, quite good and provides many exegetical insights. For example, James Luther Mays shows how Psalm 29 envisions the world as a theater of God's glory and how Psalm 65 portrays the earth as God's farm. Patrick Miller points out the many evocative parallels between Psalm 104 and Genesis 1, noting how the natural world is envisioned as a home for all creatures great and small. Karen Pidcock-Lester describes how Job is humbled and curiously comforted by the creating, sustaining, whirlwind of a God Who is in love with the wideness and wildness of the world.

Steven Tuell investigates the connections between the mysterious rivers of Eden, described in Genesis 2, and the glory-giving river of Ezekiel 47. David Bartlett explores the motif of new creation in the Pauline letters, concluding that what Paul proclaims is not just individual reconciliation with God but "the world reconciled to God—a cosmos created anew" (p. 231). John Carroll, in his study of Revelation, claims, "the future John images brings about the restoration of the beauty and grandeur of the original creation. The old world may seek to escape God, but God will not give it up" (p. 259). Carroll concludes, "this visionary work does not undermine but strongly supports responsible ecological engagement by people of faith" (p. 257). Such is the conclusion drawn from each of these works: an informed reading of the Bible encourages and promotes responsible care for the earth and its creatures, human and nonhuman.

Theodore Hiebert's clearly written and insightful monograph is perhaps the best of the bunch, for it brims with insights gained from a careful reading of the Old Testament, especially the Yahwist tradition (after the Hebrew divine name Yahweh). For example, Hiebert points out the centrality of arable ground (*'adamah*) in the worldview of the ancient Israelites, the importance of divine curse and blessing in the plot of the biblical narrative, the emphasis on particular features of the landscape at sacred places (Shechem, Bethel, Hebron), and the crucial role of agriculture in the life and thought of the early Jewish community. Given both the importance of this strand of the biblical tradition and the challenges facing us on our planet, Hiebert argues for "a recovery of the Yahwist's modest view of the human place within the world" (p. 159), that is, a recovery of a view in which we humans see ourselves not as rulers or even as stewards, but rather as servants.

Collectively these authors present a very different perspective on how the Bible views humans, the natural world, and God. Biblical faith is not only about human history but rather envelops all the earth. Christian faith is essentially earthy and earthly.

The cumulative aftereffect of these books is nothing less than a “tectonic shift in emphasis” that “[challenges] core theological assumptions about the nature of divine providence and the scope of theological ethics,” to use the words of Brown and McBride. This change “marks nothing short of a paradigm shift from a once exclusive stress upon the mighty interventions of God in history to God’s formative and sustaining ways in creation” (p. xi). To be more specific, Brown and McBride argue that the Bible “presents nature and redemption, history and creation, as a seamless whole, never to be rent asunder,” so that “just as it marks the beginning of the biblical drama, the affirmation of God as creator is the starting point for defining Christian faith” (p. xv).

In short, these authors present a very different perspective on how the Bible, and the Old Testament especially, views humans, the natural world, and God. Biblical faith is not only about human history but rather envelops all the earth, for human history and culture are inescapably rooted in the history of the natural world. Christian faith is essentially earthy and earthly.

If you are a Christian who takes the Bible seriously, these books are for you. Or if you eat, breathe, or care about your kids’ future, these books are for you. Perhaps especially if you are a pastor or educator, these books are for you. For the message of Scripture is quite clear, if we have the eyes to see. We ought to be very concerned about the earth and what we are doing to it. And if we were more concerned, then maybe the wetlands would be waxing, the ozone would be up in the stratosphere where it belongs, and the symphony of creation would better sing its praise to God.

NOTES

1 Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), p. 94.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.



STEVEN BOUMA-PREDIGER

is Associate Professor of Theology at Hope College in Hope, Michigan.