

☪ FOREWORD ☪

Eco-Justice is the well being of all humankind on a thriving earth. It flows from our recognition that God is both Creator and Redeemer. It involves justice in human social relations coupled with the integrity of God's Creation. We will not have one without the other; we will either flourish together or suffer together as Romans 8 points out.

This paper was commissioned by the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Working Group following a symposium on the Biblical and theological foundations for eco-justice held at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. The Working Group felt it would be helpful if the current promising research and exploration of these issues could be pulled together in a short, accessible paper for use in the churches. The Environmental Justice Office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) agreed to publish the paper as a joint project. The Environmental Justice Office and the Environmental Eco-Justice Network jointly published the second edition.

The author, Carol Johnston, is a Presbyterian minister and Associate Professor of Theology and Culture at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana. She thanks Dr. Dieter Hessel, Director of the Program on Ecology, Justice and Faith; and Dr. Ted Hiebert, Professor of Hebrew Bible at McCormick Theological Seminary, for helpful editorial advice.

We offer this rich resource to you in hopes that you will be informed and inspired, and moved to action, as you read it.

William Somplatsky-Jarman
Associate for Environmental Justice
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)



BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR ECO-JUSTICE

INTRODUCTION:

The Human Vocation: Finding the Balance

*When I look at your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you
have established;
what are human beings that you
are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for
them?*

*Yet you have made them a little
lower than God,
and crowned them with glory
and honor.*

*You have given them dominion
over the works of your
hands;
you have put all things under
their feet...*

(Psalm 8:3-6)¹

When we look at the vastness of creation — the unimaginable span of a universe of billions of galaxies each with billions of stars — we cannot help but be awed at the immensity of it, and our comparative insignificance. Yet when we turn back to this planet earth, this great round ball of stardust out of which our bodies are made, we see that here we human beings, and no other species, carry the power of life and death over many other creatures. How can this be? What does it mean? What are we to do with our power — so great and yet so limited? What is our place in this vast universe?

These are questions raised by Psalm 8, and which the whole of the Bible answers. We set out to find theological foundations for eco-justice — for enacting economic justice in concert with environmental integrity. As Christians, we start with the Bible, to see how nature and economy fit into the Divine economy of creation and redemption. To our astonishment, what we find is far more than a smattering of relevant texts. From the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation, the biblical witness consistently and frequently affirms God's care for creation and each creature, especially the most vulnera-



ble — both human and non-human. Both covenantal and sacramental readings include provision for economic justice and environmental integrity, in a consistent ethic of holistic life. By following the Bible through from beginning to end, then, we can see how eco-justice is not just one more cause in a long string of causes, but the connector in which we human beings can see our proper place and find both liberation and balance through restored trust and communion with God and all our neighbors.

Genesis 1 and 2 present the special vocation of human beings in two ways. It is expressed in Genesis 1 as “having dominion” over the creatures of the earth, and in chapter 2 as “tilling and keeping” the garden in which they have been placed. These two origin stories have different implications — suggesting that we are to be enlightened rulers of other creatures on the one hand, and, on the other hand, we are to be careful gardeners within earth community. Their common theme is that humans are to foster the flourishing of all the creatures of the earth together. This is in flat contradiction to the way “dominion” has been understood in most of Christian history, particularly the Modern period.

The Fall disrupts this human vocation in ways that we will explore, but God acts again and again through the biblical witness to deal with persistent sin and to reestablish human beings in their vocation. We will see how this vocation is carefully limited: human beings continue to have direct responsibility for tilling what they need for sustenance, but there remains a large arena of wilderness and wild creatures that is God’s alone.

The story of Noah’s ark could be named the first endangered species project, in which God rescues the many species from the consequences of human sin, and begins again with the Rainbow Covenant. The Exodus is another rescue from a world of slavery (in which the environment as well is out of kilter), and Torah (which teaches “the Law”) is given to help the people learn how to live rightly in the new land with each other, with strangers, and with the other creatures.

When the people are living the covenanted life, the Wisdom literature helps them to learn from nature, to see their proper sphere in it, and to appreciate the larger cosmos in which God operates. When they stray from the covenant, the prophets call them to return to Torah and return to the vocation of living rightly with each other and the land — which along with poor and marginalized people suffers when the people sin, and flourishes when they are faithful. We will see how throughout the Hebrew Bible it is made clear that human beings and the other creatures either flourish together or suffer together.

When we read the New Testament, we find the Christian covenant to be consistent with the Hebraic covenant. In Jesus Christ



God acts once again to reestablish the human vocation, so that, as John 3:17 has it, “the cosmos might be saved.” According to John, this is the point of the incarnation, which with the resurrection is the ultimate affirmation of the value of creaturely life. Luke makes it clear that this vocation includes liberating the poor and suffering of the world, and reestablishing right relations with the land and nature (Luke 4:18-19). Mark tells us that Jesus commanded the disciples to “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (16:15). The author of Colossians reaffirms that human beings and the rest of the creatures either flourish together or suffer together; in Christ “all things hold together” (Col. 1:17), and through Christ “all things, whether on earth or in heaven” are reconciled to God (Col. 1:20a). Paul asserts that human salvation is connected to setting “creation free from its bondage to decay” (Romans 8:21). Paul also shows us how Jesus Christ reestablishes yet again the human vocation, by giving us the “ministry of reconciliation” as ambassadors for Christ in whom God is “reconciling the world (cosmos)” to Godself (II Cor. 5:18-20). And the ultimate image of salvation, the very last image in the Christian scriptures, is that of Revelation 22:2, where the new Jerusalem is established within a restored earth where human communities, God, and nature are reconciled at last.

Latin American and Black liberation theologians showed us that reading the Bible from the perspective of the poor and oppressed makes it impossible to miss the consistent ethic of justice and God’s special attention to the marginalized, vulnerable peoples of the world. We can no longer read the Bible and not see the centrality of justice. Similarly, when we read the Bible with the added dimension of the global environmental and social crisis, our eyes are opened to the fact that God’s special concern for the vulnerable does not stop with human beings, but includes all the creatures. So, we can no longer read the Bible without seeing that God’s justice is a matter of right relations between God, human beings, and all the creatures in order that all may flourish together on the earth. What liberation theologies have taught us about justice is reaffirmed, but broadened, and, quite literally, grounded in the earth itself.

Along with the understanding of justice and its importance, all the other basic teachings of Christian faith are also reaffirmed, broadened and grounded. We see in Revelation 22 that the point of incarnation and resurrection is not to enable individual souls eventually to escape from the earth, but to redeem and remake the earth itself for the sake of creation’s full flourishing. Whatever else it means, the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the *body*, rather than the continuation of a supposedly eternal soul, affirms the importance of creaturely, fleshly life and the complete dependence of that life on God. And it may be, as we explore what it means to imagine our salvation as including the fulfillment of the whole creation, that the doctrine of



the resurrection of the body will make more sense to us.

Sin itself — the condition of alienation from or mistrust of God — includes the impossibility of relating rightly to the rest of creation. Consequently, though we think we know good and evil, we continually make wrong choices that increase social injustice and end up damaging ecosystems. The atonement effected by Jesus on the cross — the restoration of trust between human beings and God, and so of “right relations,” or justification — includes the restoration of the possibility of right relations, or *shalom*, between human beings and the rest of the creatures.

What follows is an exercise in reading the Bible in the broadest possible way. It does not pretend to be careful, close exegesis in a technically scholarly sense. On the other hand, it is not a cursory reading, or an exercise in “proof-texting” to support a narrow perspective. Rather, we have asked ourselves, “When we put together what the Bible does have to say about nature and especially about eco-justice, what do we see? Are there larger patterns and issues that emerge?”

When we started, we thought we might be able to find many isolated biblical passages in which some attention to nature is given, but overall this subject might not be prominent. We are now convinced otherwise. God’s relationship with nature, and the human relationship with nature, is definitely a recurring biblical theme of great importance. In this review, one crucial theme or doctrinal point with respect to nature became especially clear, as an unexpected surprise. This theme contradicts the view commonly held by twentieth century Christians — that in the Bible, nature is only a stage on which divine history with humans takes place. Again and again throughout the biblical witness, the whole of creation (In Greek, the *cosmos*) is included not only in God’s sustaining care, but just as much in God’s redemptive work, and ultimately in the salvation God brings.



The Original Human Vocation

Caring for the Garden as God Cares for Creation

The opening account in Genesis 1 — a poetic liturgy of creation that moves from chaos to cosmos² — shows us the proper place of human beings. The vast universe and all the other creatures come first, and God sees their goodness apart from any human presence or role (Gen. 1:1-25). This larger context of the universe, in which human beings are finally placed but which is immensely greater than any human sphere of activity or responsibility, is important. In the Bible we are reminded of it often. It is true that human beings are given “dominion” (verse 28) over all the creatures of the earth (not just those in the garden of Eden, which does not come into the story until chapter 2) and told to “subdue it.” Yet dominion does not include killing and eating animals for food, for in the very next verse, 29, only plants with seed and fruit are given to them to eat. Having dominion and subduing the earth also cannot include being “fruitful and multiplying” at the expense of other creatures, for they *also* are commanded to be fruitful and multiply (verse 22).

After the flood in the story of Noah, permission to eat meat is granted (8:17, 9:3-5, a permission that is later carefully restricted by the Levitical Code), but the command to all creatures to “be fruitful and multiply” is reaffirmed. In the end it is clear that “dominion” is only one of the ways the human role is described, and at no time can a careful reading construe it as giving human beings license to do as they please with the rest of creation — or even with the sphere they are given “to till and to keep.” Likewise, subduing the earth has more in common with the way God restrains chaos to bring forth an ordered biosphere, than it has with contemporary notions of exploitation.³ The continued use of “dominion” as an excuse for the rampant destruction of species and ecosystems is a scandal.

The second creation account, in Genesis 2, gives human beings a garden to care for, which is a very limited sphere of responsibility compared to the whole creation. And when they leave the garden, they are eventually established on their own lands, but, as we later learn from the Torah, even within those lands human beings are given limits to what they do, in order to allow for the life of wild creatures as well as for human beings who don’t have adequate access to the land.

It is true that the Bible is largely about human responsibility *vis-a-vis* God and neighbors (including non-human neighbors), so there is not as much attention focused on the relations of God with other creatures and the rest of the cosmos apart from human beings. But what is there is very clear. It is God who creates, sustains, liberates and redeems all creatures. No human being has any power to give life, sus-



tain it, or redeem it. But we do have power to “husband,” or care for, ecosystems and other creatures, and we have great power to disrupt them. Insofar as human beings do exercise power or “dominion” over other creatures, it should imitate this creative, redeeming God. According to Job and the Psalmists, God cares for *all* the creatures, regardless of their usefulness to human beings. One of the best places to see this, and the human place in Creation, is Psalm 104. That Psalm begins by describing the larger cosmos and the role of God as creator and ruler who establishes order and keeps back chaos (1-9). Then it moves to the wild lands and then cultivated lands and back to wild creatures:

*You make springs gush forth
in the valleys;
they blow between the hills,
giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their
thirst.*

*By the streams the birds of the
air have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.
From your lofty abode you water
the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the
fruit of your work.*

*You cause the grass to grow for
the cattle,
and plants for people to use,
to bring forth food from the earth,
and wine to gladden the
human heart,
oil to make the face shine,
and bread to strengthen the
human heart. ...*

*The high mountains are for
the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the
coney.*

*You make darkness, and it is
night,
when all the animals of the
forest come creeping out.*

*The young lions roar for their
prey,
seeking their food from God*

(Psalm 104:10-15,18, 20, 21)



Here we see how God relates to the wild creatures independently of human beings, and for their own sake. God gives them “habitations” of their own, apart from the land used by humans, and cares for them in their own sphere of life. Repeatedly the Bible affirms God’s care for all the creatures, declaring that God saves “humans and animals alike” (Psalm 36:6c), and God owns and “knows” all creatures:

*I will not accept a bull from your
house,
or goats from your folds.
For every wild animal of the forest
is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.
I know all the birds of the air,
and all that moves in the field
is mine.
If I were hungry, I would not
tell you,
for the world and all that is in
it is mine.*

(Psalm 50:9-12)

We also see this very vividly portrayed in several places in the Book of Job. When God speaks to Job out of the whirlwind, Job is asked:

*Where were you when I laid the
foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have
understanding. ...
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang
together
and all the heavenly beings
shouted for joy?*

(Job 38:4,6-7)

God goes on to ask Job what he knows about creation, and what he or other human beings have to do with wild creatures such as *behe-moth* (hippopotamus) or *leviathan* (whale, Job 40-41).

There can be no doubt that for the Bible human “dominion” is limited and meant to be imitative of the dominion exercised by God — one of care for both domestic and wild creatures in their appropriate habitats, for the sake of the mutual flourishing of all species. The human vocation of “tilling and keeping” the garden (Gen. 2:15) is also one of imitation of the God who brings forth a multitude of different



kinds of creatures who live in healthy ecosystems. Nowhere does the Bible provide any kind of image of trying to expand the “garden,” or human habitation, to take over the whole earth and crowd out the habitats of wild creatures. Wilderness not only always remains, it is a sacred (while also frightening) place where people go to find God (cf. 1 Kings 19: Elijah meeting God in the wilderness, and Luke 4: the temptations of Jesus).

Now that we have established how the original human vocation described in Genesis 1 and 2 — to have dominion and to till and keep the garden — is a finite arena of responsibility that presumes care of the other creatures for their own sake, let us take a closer look *within* that proper sphere of human activity.



The Human Vocation Lost and Reestablished:

Judgments and Blessings

The first creation story, 1:1-2:3, tells how human beings, male and female, were made last, and in the *image* of God to be given dominion over all the other creatures. They were thus to *represent* God on earth to the other creatures, to exercise ruling power over them — for the sake of all creatures. The human beings *and* all the other creatures that breathe are given the green plants for their food (1:29-30); clearly the plants are meant to be shared.

The second creation story, 2:4-24, gives us much more detail about the nature and purpose of the humans within earth community. The representative human being, the *adam*, is made from the earth, *adamah*, and is given life when God breathes life into the earth creature. Every human being is made from *humus*, and embodies spirit, as, in turn, does every species of animal. The earth creature, or the *adam*, is placed in the garden of Eden “to till and to keep it” (2:15), and is given permission to eat of every tree except the tree of “the knowledge of good and evil” (2:16-17).

So the original human vocation is to “till and keep” the garden: to till, or grow plants, and to keep, or care for, what is there. Why not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Perhaps because they needed to look to God to help them distinguish good and evil; apart from their trust in God they could not get it right.

God determines that the earth creature needs help, and so makes all the animals and brings them to the human being to name them (2:20a). But none of the animals proved a proper “helper as his partner” (2:20b), so God provides a “helper” to be *beside* the earth creature — making Eve from Adam’s side (2:21-22). The word used for “helper” is used once to refer to the woman human being — here designated as helper of the man earth creature. Typically, in the Hebrew Bible, “helper” refers to God in relation to humankind. Clearly, a “helper” is not subordinant, but a full partner.

The man and the woman live together in the garden, tilling and keeping it, until tempted by the serpent, who tells them that if they disobey and eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they will not die, but “be like God.” So they taste the forbidden fruit, “the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked...” (3:7). For the first time they become self-aware. They hear God coming and hide themselves in fear. When God learns of their disobedience, God pronounces the consequences: fear between serpents and all other creatures, especially humans; difficulty in childbearing and subordination to Adam for Eve; and finally difficulty for Adam in raising food,



because “cursed is the ground because of you” (3:14-19).

What are we to make of this? Many modern interpreters, most notably Friederich Schleiermacher, have argued that the only way human beings could “grow up” and leave the “dreaming” state of innocence was to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and so the “fall” was a good thing. Others dismiss the story as a myth that is no longer helpful, since we human beings have indeed “grown up.” But suppose we read the story as a condensation of a deep truth about the human condition — what then does it tell us?

John Calvin claimed that the “fall” happened before the fruit was touched. It happened when they no longer believed or trusted God’s word.⁴ What might have happened, in the context of the story, if Adam and Eve, rather than trusting the serpent and disobeying God, instead sought God out and asked for God’s side of the story the serpent was telling? God had brought them to life and given them everything they needed, showing them nothing but love and care — and at the first question from another creature, they lost their trust in God and disobeyed without even asking God what was going on. As a consequence, they did indeed gain some “knowledge of good and evil” and a power of independent judgment, but apart from a relationship of trust with God, their knowledge was — and human knowledge is — flawed. And so all our relationships are twisted: between men and women, between humans and other creatures, and above all between humans and God. When we don’t trust God, we also don’t trust the natural processes of God’s creation, and so instead of learning from them and working with them, we try to control them or ignore them. We see how this is true again and again in the environmental crisis, as we discover how actions taken, sometimes from good intentions, backfire because we did not know that what we thought was good (e.g., using CFCs not realizing they would destroy the ozone layer, or developing hybrid seeds that would be fertilizer-dependent and less resilient) would have terrible consequences.

But despite the seeming hopelessness of the fallen human condition, the Bible shows us how God always acts to help human beings pick up and start again, and so reestablishes the human vocation to live rightly in earth community. According to the story, Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden of Eden, and sent out to live in the wider and more dangerous world, where they are “to till the ground from which [Adam] was taken” (3:23b). But before sending them out, God makes them protective clothing. And God remains closely involved with them and their children; it is still God’s creation that they live in, and, despite their disobedience, human beings are still God’s own creatures, made in God’s image.

In another crucial story for eco-justice, Noah is ordered to save two of every species from the great flood that comes because of human



violence (Gen. 6:11). Afterwards, God commands Noah to bring all the creatures out of the ark, “so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth” (8:17). Then God makes a new covenant with Noah and all the other creatures together (9:8-17), lifting the “curse” on the ground that was pronounced in the story of the Fall (8:21b) and promising “between me and you and every living creature” (9:12) never again to destroy the earth with a flood, but rather

*As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest, cold and
heat,
summer and winter, day and
night,
shall not cease.*

(Gen. 8:22)

God sets the rainbow in the sky as a reminder of this promise, and human beings get another chance on the earth.



The Vocation of Israel: Living Rightly in the Land

From Egypt to Canaan: Lessons of Slavery and Liberation

So far we have concentrated on the early Genesis stories about the origins of humankind (chapters 1-11). These narratives express much truth about the human situation, but they do not really show us the concreteness of human history in relation to God. The ancient history of the Hebrews really begins with Abraham, and reaches its crucial core with the Exodus of the people of Moses out of slavery, their establishment in the land of Canaan, and the gift of *Torah*, or righteous law, given them by God to enable them to live rightly in relation to the land and its creatures, including human beings who are foreigners.

These narratives and law books in the five books of Moses are laden with insights for eco-justice — so much so that we can only touch on some of the central issues here. We will concentrate on some of the insights that are perhaps less well known.

According to the Genesis account, Joseph, though sold into Egypt by his brothers to be a slave, ended up a minister in Pharaoh's government, second only to Pharaoh himself. His foresight enabled Egypt to prepare for seven years of famine by storing grain. When the famine came, he was able to sell the grain widely, until no one had any money left, then he took their livestock, then their cattle, and finally their land:

All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other. (Genesis 47:20b-21)

Ironically, it was not many generations later that the descendants of Joseph's own family became enslaved in Egypt (Exodus 1:8-14), because they had grown numerous and powerful and were perceived as a threat. Consequently, a new Pharaoh, "who did not know Joseph" (1:8b), set out to oppress the Israelites and "deal shrewdly with them" to impoverish and eventually enslave them.⁵

This memory of oppression in Egypt is crucial for understanding what happened when the Hebrew people finally escaped from Pharaoh and "returned" to Canaan, from where Joseph had come. Some social-scientific studies of archeological evidence⁶ indicates that the takeover of Canaan involved the Hebrews bringing down a corrupt and oppressive urban class and establishing a more just society. In any case, however it came about, once the Hebrews escaped from Egypt in the Exodus they began the process of transformation from a slave mentality to a free people, and the society they established in



Canaan was that of free farmers working their own land in self-sustaining communities.

Beginning with the Ten Commandments, the Hebrews receive guidance on how to live as a community that maintains right relationships with God, neighbors, strangers, and the land and its creatures. The Levitical code is full of specific injunctions about these matters: from leaving food in the fields at harvest for the poor and the wild animals to glean, to allowing the ox to eat as it treads out the grain. But the central orienting rule, the one that the whole subsequent life of Israel to this day has revolved around, is the Sabbath:

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work — you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the seventh day and consecrated it. (Exodus 20:8-11)

The Sabbath, more than any other single religious practice, has functioned in Judaism (and to some extent in Christianity) to keep life balanced. Its essence is to refrain from changing the world one day out of seven, to honor God the creator and God's own enjoyment of what God made. Negatively, it helps mitigate the exploitation of servants and domestic animals by mandating rest for them, and helps compulsive workers to do the same for themselves. Positively, it allows the entire community, as a *community*, to relax and let go of trying to control life, and instead enjoy and commune with creation, with each other, and with God. It brings into the covenantal life a sacramental dimension of communion with God and creation through the Sabbath peace, or the *shalom* of God.

The Sabbath ethic is the single most important provision for sustaining the community in right relations. But even when basic laws are kept, communities inevitably get out of balance over the long term, and the *Torah* includes corrective steps as well, by extending the concept of Sabbath. Leviticus 25 is a key chapter for seeing how justice for both vulnerable people and the land is ensured:

...in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord... You may eat what the land yields during its sabbath...; for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food. (Lev. 25:4a, 6a, 7)

... And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. (10)



... You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely. The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill... (18-19a)

... The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land. (23-24)

If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next of kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold. ... But if there is not sufficient means to recover it, what was sold shall remain with the purchaser until the year of jubilee; in the jubilee it shall be released, and the property shall be returned. (25, 28)

... If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then they and their children with them shall be free of your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property. For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold. You shall not rule over them with harshness, but shall fear your God. (39-43)

Here we have detailed instructions — adapted to the social/cultural realities of the day — about how to live as a covenant community under God. Slavery is a fact, but members of the community, who have been freed by God from slavery in Egypt, are not to be reenslaved. That people get into debt and lose their land is also acknowledged, but provision is made for reclaiming the land. The lesson for us today is of course not that we should do the same things in the same way, but that every society must make provision for the periodic restoration of just relations among its members with respect to the things that get out of balance over time. And certainly land reform that redistributes land after it has gotten concentrated into a few hands is of central importance. So is rest for the land, to restore its fertility and maintain its health for the generations. Finally, debts are to be forgiven periodically, and forcing members of the community into debt through usurious loans is forbidden; people must not be deprived of their means of livelihood.

And what will happen if the people follow all these rules and live together within God's covenant with them? The next chapter, Leviticus 26, spells out the promise:

If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. ... you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land. (Lev. 26:3-4, 5b)



The Levitical code implies that if the community will treat its members and its land, along with servants, livestock, and the wild animals that live around them, with care and equity, they will all prosper *together*. (In Deuteronomy 11:11-17 the promise includes “rain for the land in its season, the early rain and the later rain.” Interestingly, when the forests of Israel were cut, one of the rainy seasons was curtailed. When at last, centuries later, Israelis replanted forests, the second rainy season returned.)

But if they did not obey, both the community and the land would suffer:

...if you will not obey me, your land shall not yield its produce... your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste... Then the land shall enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate. ...It shall have the rest it did not have on your sabbaths when you were living on it.
(Leviticus 26:20a, 33b-34A, 35)

The Life of the Covenant Community: Psalms and Wisdom and Other Writings

As the Hebrews moved into and settled in the land, the biblical texts tell the story of how they established themselves, fought with the Philistines, became a kingdom, and gradually changed from the original vision of a relatively self-sufficient agricultural community. This history has a great deal to teach us, which we will examine in the next section. But in the midst of the historical drama the people established an ongoing community life that included reflections on the natural world all around, and the Bible also reflects this experience.

The Psalms in particular are filled with observations about nature and God. Psalm 1 compares observation of the law of the Lord with natural processes: “They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither” (Psalm 1:3). The Psalms take for granted that human beings have much to learn from nature, and that human life lived well follows natural patterns established by the Creator for all creatures. There is also a wonderful tradition of viewing all of creation as participating in the praise and glorification of God. In other words, covenantal and sacramental themes are interwoven in the Psalms with respect to both social justice and nature.

*The heavens are telling the glory
of God;
and the firmament proclaims
his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,*



*and night to night declares
knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there
words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through
all the earth,
and their words to the end
of the world.
The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are
sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are
right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is
clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever
the ordinances of the Lord are
true and righteous altogether.*

(Psalm 19: 1-4, 7-8a, 9b)

The first part of Psalm 19 observes how the creation testifies to God, giving those who can see it “knowledge” of God’s handiwork and the glory of God reflected in it. The natural world has no “speech,” yet their voice is everywhere. The second part of the Psalm switches to “the law of the Lord” and how it helps people to find wisdom and righteousness. An editor of the Oxford NRSV Bible thinks that the second part was added “to counterbalance...the almost pagan emphasis upon the revelation of God in nature” (note by Robert C. Dentan, p. 688 OT). But what if the Psalmist thinks the two are linked: that the glory of God and the wisdom of God are revealed in both nature and the Law, but because human beings are “deaf” to the voices of nature, we especially need the Law to help us since it makes “wise the simple”?

Psalm 37 links natural “law” and justice in a different way — one that harks back to the promises of Deuteronomy and Leviticus:

*Do not fret because of the wicked;
do not be envious of
wrongdoers,
for they will soon fade like the
grass,*



*and wither like the green herb.
Trust in the Lord, and do good;
so you will live in the land,
and enjoy security.
Refrain from anger, and forsake
wrath.
Do not fret — it leads only to
evil.
For the wicked shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the
Lord shall inherit the land.
Yet a little while, and the wicked
will be no more...
But the meek shall inherit the
land,
and delight themselves in
abundant prosperity.
The wicked draw the sword and
bend their bows
to bring down the poor and
needy,
to kill those who walk
uprightly;
their sword shall enter their own
heart,
and their bows shall be broken.
Better is the little that a righteous
person has
than the abundance of many
wicked.*

*The Lord knows the days of the
blameless,
and their heritage will abide
forever;
they are not put to shame in evil
times,
in the days of famine they have
abundance.
For the Lord loves justice;
he will not forsake his faithful
ones.*

(Psalm 37:1-3, 8b-9, 14-15b, 18-19, 28)

Why is it “the meek” who shall inherit the land? Because they are not too proud to place their trust in God rather than themselves, to



share with people in need, and to learn from and rely on the Law. The “wicked” try to gain security by oppressing the poor, ignoring justice and the Law — and of course, the Lord God. It is very interesting that the Psalm asserts that the meek will do all right when famine comes to the land, but the wicked will perish. It is a basic community law: those who share generously what they have can survive together when times are bad, but those who arrogantly try to gather everything to themselves are left alone, with none to help them. When too many refuse to share in solidarity, the community is fragmented, and its members end up preying on each other. Poor communities have known this for generations.

Part and parcel of trusting God is the doing of justice and the trusting of others in the community — and God — to provide what is needed for sustenance through the abundance of nature. This is beautifully expressed in Psalm 36:

*Your steadfast love, O Lord,
extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds,
... you save humans and animals
alike O Lord.
For with you is the fountain of
life;
in your light we see light.*

(Psalm 36:5-6,9)

Because God can be relied upon, so can nature. And so does all of nature respond with gratitude and praise, and with abundance of life to share:

*The pastures of the wilderness
overflow,
the hills gird themselves with
joy,
the meadows clothe themselves
with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with
grain,
they shout and sing together with
joy.*

(Psalm 65:12-13)

In addition to the Psalms, the book of Proverbs is notable for the way it focuses on the ongoing life of the community and how to cultivate long term living in relation to God, other humans, and nature. It seems to take for granted that human beings can read the “book of



nature” to learn how God intends them to live:

*Go to the ant, you lazybones;
consider its ways, and be wise.
Without having any chief
or officer or ruler,
it prepares its food in summer,
and gathers its sustenance in
harvest.*

(Prov. 6:6-8)

Since God made the cosmos by means of “Wisdom” (Prov. 3:19), Wisdom along with Torah is the key to knowing how to live rightly. The insights given by Wisdom are not only about the meaning of the whole cosmos, but they also help ordinary individuals to live their daily lives, even with respect to the most prosaic of activities:

*When he established the heavens,
I was there,
when he drew a circle on the
face of the deep . . .
when he assigned to the sea its
limit,
so that the waters might not
transgress his command . . .
then I was beside him, like a
master worker...
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human
race.*

*And now, my children, listen to
me:
happy are those who keep my
ways.
Hear instruction and be wise,
and do not neglect it.
. . . she calls
from the highest places in the
town,
“You that are simple, turn in
here!”
. . . Lay aside immaturity, and live,
and walk in the way of insight.*

(Prov. 8:27-33; 9:3b-4, 6)

The homely advice in Proverbs, distilled sayings for the “simple”



to memorize and live by, is derived from the same source as the deepest secrets of the universe, and mediated to human beings by means of “Wisdom” and the book of nature. But other books of the “writings” go far beyond practical advice. In the Song of Songs we see the enjoyment of God’s creation celebrated in the dialogue of the two lovers and their enjoyment of the beautiful things around them and in each other. The simplest things partake of the most sublime, and the basics of material life are transformed by what we might call the divine eros, the Incarnate Spirit.

Finally, the Wisdom books of Ecclesiastes and Job explore aspects of the whole of life, including the mysteries of death and evil. While the lovers in the Song of Songs enjoy the beauties of youth and health, the wise *Qoheleth* ponders the ephemeral nature of finite life and the certainty of death in Ecclesiastes. Job pushes deeper than Ecclesiastes, with the righteous Job refusing to give up until God answers Job’s question about his unjust suffering. Like Proverbs, the book of Job takes for granted that humans can read the book of nature and learn how to live, but it reminds us not to focus solely on the small things that we can grasp, and so lose sight of the limits of human knowledge and activity, and the awesome power and glory of God — which we also read in nature. Human beings can and should look down to learn from the industrious ants, and look up to the singing of the morning stars, the exploding of suns. We should read the “book of nature” to learn better how to live life in tune with the rhythms God has created, and how wondrous and intricate a gift each form of life is, including ours. But we should also be reminded of how tenuous that life really is, and how little power we have. Indeed, we can learn of the mysteries of life and death, and our own helplessness and dependence on God, from both small creatures and cosmic events:

*But ask the animals, and they
will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they
will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth, and
they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will
declare to you.
Who among all these does not
know
that the hand of the Lord has
done this?
In his hand is the life of every
living thing
and the breath of every human
being.*

(Job 12:7-10)



Calling the Community Back to the Covenant: The Prophets

If there is anywhere in the Bible in which nature can be called “merely” a stage on which God’s doings with human beings are acted out, the Prophets would seem to be the place. Intent on the history of Israel, the books of the Prophets focus on the breaking of the covenantal relationship with God through idolatry and social injustice and political unfaith, and proclaim how God would act to abolish the idolatry, rectify the injustice, and reestablish Israel in righteousness. The goings on between God, the prophets, the kings, and the peoples of Israel and Judah are so complicated and dramatic, it is easy to understand how one of the main characters in the drama is constantly taken for granted — the land itself.

Yet when we look closely at the content of the prophets’ messages, the land recurs consistently as a central ingredient. The relationship of the Jews with the land and nature, good and bad, is at the heart of God’s covenantal relationship with the people. When the people fall away from the covenant, their relationship with the land is affected. Idolatrous pride, human selfishness, and social injustice pervert the three-fold relationship between God, Israel, and the land, causing suffering for nature as well as people.

When the kings eventually led the people into political unfaith, and they tried to stand on their own against the greater powers of the Middle East, the land was conquered, further abused and despoiled, and the people separated from it. The land was such an important part of the covenant that to this day in Judaism the relationship of the people with the land of Israel is perceived to be intrinsic to their identity and integrity. In the Hebrew Bible itself, redemption is understood to involve restoration of the covenant relationship with both God and the land; when God reestablishes justice, the people will be brought back to dwell in the land.

The Prophets incorporate insights from the Wisdom tradition, hearkening back to the assumption that the people should know what is taught by the natural world as well as the Torah. For example, the book of Isaiah begins by asserting:

*I reared children and brought
them up,
but they have rebelled against
me.
The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master’s crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.
Ah sinful nation,*



*people laden with iniquity,
offspring who do evil,
children who deal corruptly,
who have forsaken the Lord,
who have despised the Holy
One of Israel,
who are utterly estranged!*

*Your country lies desolate,
your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence
aliens devour your land;
it is desolate, as overthrown by
foreigners.*

(Isaiah 1:2b-4, 7)

What has brought about this terrible situation? Isaiah goes on to assert that prayers and sacrifices are not what God wants — in fact, they have become offensive, because “your hands are full of blood” (Isa. 1:15). No, what God wants is for the people to:

*cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.*

(Isaiah 16b-17)

Isaiah promises that if the people do this and so show their obedience, they will “eat the good of the land” (19). But instead the rulers fill the land with alien culture and luxuries and with instruments of war and with idols made of rare and precious metals (2:5-8). These are all elements of the growing power of a ruling elite which is alienated from the people, the land, and most of all, from God. The result of this disregard for the covenant and its provision for the common good will be the disintegration of the community, until the “people will be oppressed, everyone by another and everyone by a neighbor” (3:5). Isaiah goes on, proclaiming that while some live in luxury, God is angry, and wants to know “What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?” (3:15).

Intrinsic to the injustice that Isaiah decries is mistreatment of the land, including its social misuse:

*he expected justice,
but saw bloodshed;*



*righteousness,
but heard a cry!
Ah, you who join house to house,
who add field to field,
until there is room for no one but
you,
and you are left to live alone
in the midst of the land!
. . . ten acres of vineyard shall
yield but one bath,
and a homer of seed shall yield
a mere ephah*

(Isaiah 5:7b-8, 10)

Isaiah here is describing a social dynamic that has been repeated many times across the world. When land ownership becomes concentrated in the hands of a few who exploit it for profit without regard to the future, the community suffers and the land itself loses fertility. It seems clear that Isaiah understood this dynamic to be an ingredient in the downfall of Israel.

In the midst of this very practical denunciation of the eco-injustices of Israel, the book of Isaiah inserts a vision that is traditionally seen as more “sacramental” in character than “covenantal.”⁷⁷ At the beginning of chapter 6 “in the year that King Uzziah died,” the prophet has the famous vision of himself before the throne of the Lord and surrounded by angels who sang, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3). Notice that this heavenly hymn, the basis for the climatic moment of the classic Christian celebration of the eucharist, mentions only “earth” as full of God’s glory, and not heaven. And the consequence of this moment of transcendent experience of the glory of God revealed in the “whole earth” is Isaiah being sent to declare that Israel will be destroyed “Until . . . the land is utterly desolate” (6:11). It would seem that sacramental communion with God is impossible when the people and the earth are destroyed by injustice. Perhaps because the capacity of the earth to manifest the glory of God is diminished and even crippled.

The book of Isaiah, and indeed the prophets as a whole, continue in this manner, constantly juxtaposing idolatry, social injustice, political unfaith, and consequent destruction of the land and people. At the same time, the prophets recur constantly to visions of *shalom* — of life within a restored covenantal relationship with God, and these visions include the restoration of Israel to a healthy relationship with the land and nature. The most famous of all of these visions is of course the messianic “Peaceable Kingdom” in chapter 11, in which the chosen savior will “decide with equity for the meek of the earth,” “kill the



wicked,” and restore “knowledge of the Lord” to the whole earth, so that all the creatures will live in peace together.

One of the recurring themes throughout the prophets, which is continued in the Christian scriptures, is that of the “day of the Lord.” It is depicted as the time when God will finally rise up to destroy the wicked and restore justice and peace. Much of the focus is on what will happen to the “wicked,” as in e.g., “I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, and lay low the insolence of tyrants” (Isa. 13:11). But there is also a recurring note about nature as well:

*The whole earth is at rest and
quiet;
they break forth into singing.
The cypresses exult over you,
the cedars of Lebanon, saying,
“Since you were laid low,
no one comes to cut us down.”*

*All the kings of the nations lie in
glory,
each in his own tomb;
but you are cast out, away from
your grave . . .
You will not be joined with them
in burial,
because you have destroyed
your land,
you have killed your people.*

(Isaiah 14:7-8,18-19a, 20)

Similarly, in Habbakuk, the reason given for the destruction wrought by the Day of the Lord is “because of human bloodshed and violence to the earth” (Habb. 2:8 and 17).

This violence to humans and the earth is given vivid description in Hosea:

*There is no faithfulness or
loyalty,
and no knowledge of God in the
land.
Swearing, lying, and murder,
and stealing and adultery break
out;
bloodshed follows bloodshed.
Therefore the land mourns,
and all who live in it languish;*



*together with the wild animals
and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are
perishing.*

(Hosea 4:1-3)

And the prophets often include very concrete abuses in their litany of sins, utilizing them as metaphors for the larger abuses committed by whole societies. For instance, in Ezekiel the Lord complains:

Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet? (Ezekiel 34:18-19)

Micah condemns those who “covet fields, and seize them; houses and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance” (Micah 2:2). Hosea says that the “princes of Judah have become like those who remove the landmark” (Hosea 5:10), and Amos denounces the ways the powerful cheat the people of their land through usurious loans that cannot be repaid:

*because they sell the righteous for
silver,
and the needy for a pair of
sandals —
they who trample the head of the
poor into the dust of the
earth,
and push the afflicted out of the
way . . .*

(Amos 2:6b-7a)

Gradually, a land that had been settled with widespread self-sufficient farming by relative social equality which protected the common good shifts toward an economy oriented to the export of wine, olive oil, and wheat in order to import luxury goods for an urban elite. This destroys the covenant between God, the people, and the land because it divides the people against each other and damages the land until the community disintegrates and becomes easy prey for outside forces.⁸

The prophets consider disaster to be inevitable, and it does indeed come about. But that is not the last word. The prophetic witness never stopped with *denunciation*; it never left the people bereft of hope. Yes, the prophets denounced the injustice and idolatry they saw all around them. Yes they described with fiery words the coming Day of the Lord, the fearful day of judgment. But authentic prophecy also



always included the *annunciation* of restoration, the vision that the destruction was part of the consequence of the sin of the people, but also part of what was required to restore justice and righteousness. They described again and again how justice would be carried out, and the people would be restored into their covenantal relationship with God, each other, and the land. In Isaiah it is the “Peaceable Kingdom.” In Jeremiah it is the “heart of flesh” God brings about to replace the “heart of stone” that has devastated the people and the land.

When would-be prophets denounce injustice without also announcing concretely what justice means, the people are left with no idea of how to change. Instead of galvanizing people to work for justice, prophetic denunciation more often results in leaving people paralyzed with guilt and overwhelmed with a feeling of helplessness. By contrast, in the words of the original prophets themselves, we see the fullness of faithful witness at work, in which the people are called to return to the best of their own traditions and identity, and restore the covenantal justice that they know is possible in light of their own history.

Ezekiel has one of the most important of these annunciations of the coming restoration and new beginning for Israel. He describes at length his vision of the new Jerusalem (chapters 40-48), in which the land and nature are very much part of the restored covenant. A river of fresh water flows out of the temple, and:

Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish . . . It will become fresh . . . But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they are to be left for salt. On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. . . Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing. (Eze. 47:9-12)

The land will be restored with a fecundity of life, diverse and healthy, and giving health to the people, as nature has always been intended to do. Unlike the Peaceable Kingdom in Isaiah and the vision of the Dry Bones earlier in Ezekiel, this vision of the life of the restored covenant is very concrete and descriptive of the natural world. For Christians it is very significant that this particular vision forms the basis for the picture of salvation at the end of our Bible, in Revelation 22.



Continuity in Christianity

When we come to the books peculiar to the Christian tradition, we find a thoroughgoing continuity with those of the Hebrew scriptures. In the Gospel of Luke we find Jesus beginning his ministry by reading from Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon
me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the
poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release
to the captives
and recovery of sight to the
blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's
favor.*

(Luke 4:18-19)

As we have seen in Ezekiel's vision, the restoration of the covenant will be accompanied by healing, and prophetic writings as a whole declare that justice will be done and the oppressed will be liberated from bondage. But this proclamation pushes even further back, into the Torah itself, when Jesus sets out to "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" — the year of Jubilee described in Leviticus 25, the year in which debts are forgiven, slaves go free, land reform is carried out, and the fields are given a Sabbath rest for the health of the soil. This is a concrete prescription for restoring the health of earth community, human and natural, and reaffirming a common good that is inclusive of the natural world. Here in Luke Jesus proclaims this restoration to be central to his ministry.

At the same time, Jesus is attentive to everyday life. He takes the Wisdom traditions about nature very much for granted in his many parables and teachings, frequently using nature to illustrate his points, and reminding people that God cares for the smallest creatures, from the sparrows to the lilies of the fields. Jesus very much trusts God to see to God's creation, and provide what is needed for life, and he frequently urges the people not to be anxious about their daily needs, but to trust God and share with each other. This Wisdom orientation, in which the ordinary things of the natural world are shown to be revelatory of the things of God, is taken to its culminating form when Jesus tells the disciples at the Last Supper to break bread and drink wine, "remembering" him.



It is very tempting to focus on one or the other of these aspects of the teachings of Jesus: what we might call the prophetic, liberation teachings on the one hand, and the wisdom, sacramental teachings on the other. But that would be to miss how the two are related. It is always a mistake to denigrate the sacramental side of life as too mundane and unimportant while focusing on the prophetic as more urgent. For as Jesus talks about the basic things of daily life — the sparrows, the baking of bread, the drinking of wine with friends — he is showing us intimations of the greatest good of all, the reign of God and restored communion with God. At the same time, focusing on the sacramental while ignoring the prophetic is equally problematic. It leads to a sentimentalizing of the status quo which cannot lead to more complete restoration of right relations and deeper communion, so that both justice and communion are ultimately frustrated. Jesus himself was both a prophet of liberation and a priest who connected daily life with God. Neither is enough by itself. It takes both the prophetic and the sacramental to move us towards the Reign of God and the fulfillment of our lives in restored communion with God.

Two more aspects of the New Testament witness are important to eco-justice. The first has to do with the familiar teaching that Jesus is the “second Adam,” and the second is the doctrine, less familiar in Western than in Eastern Christianity, that Jesus’ work involves the redemption of the whole creation.

Jesus as the “second Adam” restores human beings to their vocation to participate with God in tending the creation for the sake of its flourishing, but this time through the work of reconciliation. The theological idea that Jesus is the “second Adam” who makes right what the first Adam did wrong is a very old one. The doctrine usually emphasizes the obedience of Christ in contrast to the disobedience of Adam, so that while sin came into the world through the human being (Adam), and all his offspring ever after are slaves to sin, Jesus restores righteousness and makes it possible for his followers to be justified in the sight of God and so be liberated. From an ecojustice perspective, the most interesting and illuminating aspect of this doctrine has to do with the human vocation. As we have seen, in Genesis the original human vocation is to “till and keep” the garden, and to be a steward of the other creatures, caring for them as God does, for the mutual flourishing of all life. When the man and the woman in the garden of Eden broke trust with God and tried to know “good and evil” for themselves, they lost their vocation. Yet throughout the Hebrew scriptures, God acts to restore the human beings in their vocation, giving them *Torah* to guide them in how to live rightly on the land and with each other, and sending the prophets to call them back into the covenant life when they stray from it.

In the gospels we see many instances of how Jesus’ ministry is in



continuity with this tradition. Over and over he proclaims the coming Reign of God, and in Luke 4, as we have seen, he shows us how the Reign will be holistic in reestablishing the people in the covenantal life. He insists that he has not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it. He proclaims that “the meek” shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). Might that not mean those humble enough to learn from God and God’s nature, rather than trying to “know good and evil” for themselves?

Jesus himself seems perfectly in tune with nature as well as with God, giving him a power of healing and of providing for the needs of others that does not go against “natural laws” so much as it restores natural balance in the lives of those he helps. Jesus’ trust in God and God’s world is so perfect, he became angry at the disciples when they woke him during the storm that threatened to drown them: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (Mark 4:40). Jesus is not angry with the disciples because they did not have faith enough to still the storm themselves, but because they did not trust God enough to be serene, as he was, even in the midst of a storm. They did not trust God to be with them, even if the boat sank — even if they drowned. Such trust is the foundation for life and death, and it was the restoration of that kind of trust that Jesus reestablished on the cross, when he himself trusted God with his death.

As he reestablishes the relationship of trust, Jesus reestablishes the human vocation. In the midst of this great story, the overarching drama of redemption, we find a revelatory detail. In John’s resurrection narrative, Mary Magdalene discovers that the tomb is empty. Through her tears she tells two angels that the body of her lord has been taken away:

When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him . . . (John 20:14-15a)

What if Mary was not wrong?

What if Jesus is *the* Gardener?

We might say that throughout the Gospel of John, “tilling and keeping” the whole of creation is the “vocation” of the divine *Logos*, the Word of God who is made flesh in Jesus Christ.

There are a number of key places throughout the New Testament in which the whole of creation is included in redemption and salvation. In the “Great Commission” itself, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus orders the disciples to “Go into all the world (the whole *cosmos*) and proclaim the good news to the whole creation (every created being)” (Mark 16:15). The Greek here is quite explicit. In John 3:16 we have the



famous proclamation that “God so loved the world (*cosmos*) that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Rarely do those who emphasize this proclamation in order to preach the salvation of individual human souls focus on how God loves the world (*cosmos*), and even more rarely do they add verse 17: “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world (*cosmos*) to condemn the world, but in order that the world (*cosmos*) might be saved through him.”

What are only intimations in the Gospels are much more developed in Paul’s letters and the other Epistles. In Romans Paul describes the “glory about to be revealed to us” as including “the creation,” and proclaims that “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:18-21). Human sin has caused the creatures to be “subject to futility” (v. 20), but the restoration brought about by Christ will gain for all the creatures the same freedom as gained by God’s human children. In Ephesians it is proclaimed that God’s intention, in the “fullness of time,” is to “gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10). And in Colossians is the great Christic hymn⁹ that sums up the gospel:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:15-20)

All things are created through Christ, all things “hold together” in Christ, and all things are reconciled in Christ.

And what is the human role in this great cosmic drama of the redemption of all things? According to Paul, it is nothing less than an expansion of the original human vocation to include all creation as participant in Christ’s work of reconciliation:

*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world (*cosmos*) to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ . . . (II Corinthians 5:17-20)*

Just as in Genesis the original human beings were given the



image of God to represent God to the rest of the creatures, so in Paul the restored human beings, the body of Christ, are to be “ambassadors for Christ” to other human beings and the other creatures within our purview.

The end result of this vocational activity, the achievement of salvation for the whole creation, is described in the very last chapter in the Bible, Revelation 22. Granted, Revelation is much more difficult to interpret than any other book in the Bible. But new work indicates that there is material in Revelation which coincides with an eco-justice perspective. What does it mean when, in Revelation 11:18, the 24 elders praise God and sing that God’s “wrath has come,” and the time for . . . “destroying those who destroy the earth”? Then, after all the turmoil, all destructive forces have been overcome and the creation destroyed and renewed, Revelation ends with a description of the new creation in which a new and perfect Jerusalem is “coming down out of heaven” to earth. God comes to dwell in the midst of the new Jerusalem, and so there is no longer need of a temple, but “the river of the water of life” will flow from the throne of God through the city, and the “tree of life” will grow beside it, and “the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2).

This cryptic description assumes the more developed vision that we have already seen in Ezekiel 47. Notice that both Jerusalem and God come down from heaven, intimating that in the end, it is heaven that will be abandoned, not the earth! Nor is nature done away with; rather, it is restored into intimate relation with God and human beings through the river of the water of life and the tree of life. “Healing” comes through this restored relationship, via the “leaves of the tree.” And the healing is for “the nations” — the peoples of the earth as communities, not individuals in isolation from each other. At the same time, human beings do *not* go back to the lost Garden of Eden; it is the human construct, the city, that is finally reconciled to God and nature. So the human vocation is restored, but also expanded, and the last image of salvation in the Bible is of a completed and fulfilled creation, with God, human communities, and nature all reconciled in the *shalom* of the new City of Peace, Jerusalem.¹⁰



Theological Leads from the Biblical Texts

Upon re-reading the Bible to see what is there that relates to nature and economy, or eco-justice, our eyes are opened to how important creation is to the whole of the biblical witness. In this light, basic Christian doctrines take on new meaning. We can only sketch some implications here, to add our contribution to what many are already doing in thinking freshly about our faith, and we hope that theologians and others interested in thinking theologically will carry the work further.

The most obvious, and perhaps most radical, difference our re-reading of the Bible makes is in understanding salvation. While the fate of individual human souls is certainly of great importance, it is clearly a mistake to focus solely on individual salvation as if it were possible apart from community and the rest of creation. The Eastern Orthodox, rightly, have “always” (as they are so fond of putting it), emphasized that salvation includes the whole cosmos, and no individual is fully saved until the cosmos reaches its fulfillment in Christ.¹¹

This image of the inclusion of creation in salvation is not a sudden change from the rest of the biblical witness about creation. Throughout the biblical texts human beings are intimately and inherently related to God, to each other, and to the rest of creation. We are created that way, and the quality of that set of relationships are what sin, death, and judgment, covenant and communion, and ultimately redemption are all about.

Consequently, it is no accident that human beings feel such a strong kinship with nature, and are so easily drawn into worshipping elements of nature. We feel keenly the alienation that sin has brought into the world and into our lives, and our yearning for closeness to nature is a manifestation of our longing for restoration of what we know instinctively is meant to be. This is the reason that “New Age” and traditionalist religions are so fascinating to many people, and indeed it is true that we have much to learn from these religious traditions that do a much better job than Christianity has in teaching people how to be close to the rest of the “creatures.” The misuse by Christians of the meaning of “dominion” and the consequent teaching that the creation exists solely to serve human beings has caused a great deal of damage, and contributed to the environmental crisis we have today. It is no wonder that so many people have turned away from Christian faith and sought to get closer to God through a direct relationship with nature.

Nevertheless, Christians know that because of sin, we continually get our relationship with nature wrong. It is not just that we fall into exploiting nature for our own security and even greed, though many



human beings and societies do just that. It is also the case that, in our alienation from God, when we reach for intimacy with nature, even when we intend nothing but good, we usually get it wrong. We end up worshipping what we should be joining with in the worship of God. The Reformers rightly emphasized that human beings are intended to “glorify God”; what they did not emphasize, despite their close reading of the Psalms, is that *the whole creation* is intended to glorify God. And this is our right relationship with nature — to recognize our intimate relationships with all of God’s beloved creation, and join together to glorify God in all that we do and become.

The doctrine of sin, then, far from being diminished, is reaffirmed as we understand it better when we look at it from an ecojustice perspective. Apart from trusting in God, human beings live trapped between fearful efforts and prideful attempts to secure their own lives. Apart from a right relationship with God, in which we look to God and God’s creation to teach us how to live, we cannot get “right” what is good and what is evil. So we try to gain control of life and avoid death, and we find ourselves either at war with nature or worshipping it. Even our attempts to study nature get twisted, so that for a long time in the West we thought that nature is like a machine, and for an even longer time we thought that nature was created by God in a rigid pattern into which everything is supposed to fit by design, with no freedom and no change possible. Many still believe these things, despite the contrary evidence of both the biblical witness and contemporary science. If we know anything for sure by our own experience, it is that human sin affects every aspect of life, spilling over to affect the rest of creation, as Paul asserts in Romans 8.

Nevertheless, and contrary to some who use sin as an excuse for doing nothing about the rampant exploitation of nature and other human beings, the biblical witness is also clear that God does not leave human beings helpless in the face of sin. Steadfastly, God provides ways for human beings to live in relatively just communities and to care for the land and nature around them. Even the “apocalyptic” elements of the Bible are about God acting to bring injustice to an end and set things right again. Far from being an escape from “this world” and its finitude, redemption in both Jewish and Christian witness involves the reestablishment of human beings in right relationship, or “righteousness” and “justice,” with God, each other, and the land. At the core, this reestablishment overcomes barriers of distrust and the consequent chasm of injustice and guilt.

Christians find this “core” with utmost clarity and effectiveness in the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross is the ultimate act of trust in which all barriers between God and human beings are overcome. At the same time, the doctrines of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are resounding affirmations of concrete, creaturely life. The Son



of God does not come to us as a spiritual manifestation of God, but a finite, mortal human being. In Eastern Orthodox tradition, following the early theologian Irenaeus, the incarnation would have happened even if the Fall had never happened, and there were no sin in the world. Because of sin, the incarnation is also a rescue mission, but it is much more than that — it is God’s affirmation of God’s creation and its beauty.

As we have seen, the life of Jesus recounted in the gospels is a story of one who lives life in tune with God and nature. Creaturely life is affirmed in everything Jesus does, from providing food for the multitudes as well as teaching, to healing the bodies of the sick, and even to enjoying eating and drinking with “publicans and sinners.” As Jesus goes about his ministry, proclaiming the Reign of God, and teaching and healing the people, he lives a life, firmly rooted in his time and place, that is both prophetic and sacramental. And the means he gives us to follow him are also both prophetic and sacramental, as we celebrate together his continuing life-giving presence with us through Word and Sacrament. With our bodies we hear the Word, are baptized into the larger Body, are strengthened together with bread and wine shared, and are called out to be the hands and feet of Christ in a hurting world. These ordinary earthly, bodily things are the very stuff of Life for us, connecting us to God and each other and all of creation.

It is significant that when the cross comes to him, Jesus does not go to it as a fanatic or martyr, defiant and even rejoicing. He goes to it as one who loves his life on earth and very much does not want to suffer agony and death — and yet who trusts God enough to go through with it. Jesus trusts God even in the midst of the greatest agony of all, and the deepest core of the work of atonement, the agony of experiencing abandonment by God.

And then there is the biggest surprise and the strangest doctrine of all, the resurrection. In a dualistic world in which we are culturally conditioned to believe that spirit is very much opposed to matter, it is hard enough to believe that God would come to us in the Incarnation. But what are we to make of the resurrection of the body? It is not so much that a dead body might be resuscitated — that is implausible to us but conceivable. The problem is, then what? What does a physical body have to do with heaven, which we have always believed is a spiritual place that has nothing to do with material life? The doctrine of the resurrection is inconvenient and difficult to grasp *both* for those who want to believe in a life after death for an eternal soul, and for those who want to limit their faith to the material, visible, sensory world of this earthly life.

Anyone reading our eco-justice interpretation of the biblical witness to this point might think that we are reading it as meaning that this “earthly” life is all there is. And indeed that would not be hard to



do, if one forgets that God is always transcendent as well as immanent, and God's creation is always far vaster and far beyond anything we can imagine. Even the part of the cosmos visible to us is stunning in its vastness. What exists beyond our ken, beyond our limited sight and understanding? The biblical witness does not spend much time with what exists beyond the mortal life we know, but it does assume its existence and its importance. In the Gospels Jesus speaks of going to "my Father" and preparing a place for us there. And Paul writes eloquently of what the resurrection of the body is all about in I Corinthians 15. Certainly, whatever the resurrection is about, it is not about the resuscitation of a corpse. At the same time, it is more, much more, than the continuation of a spirit, or "ghost." As Paul puts it, it is a great *change*, and whatever else happens, we can say that it involves the fulfillment of our lives in communion with God and the rest of creation in a way that affirms the inter-connection of the spiritual and the material.

Perhaps one reason we have so much trouble with the resurrection is our single-minded modern preoccupation with individual selves in isolation from others. Each of us wants to know, what will happen to *me*? But the core of salvation is the attainment of our true, fullest selves in communion with others and God. How that comes about in the midst of the "new creation" in which nothing good is lost and the whole cosmos is fulfilled, we don't know. But it is a promise worth staking one's life on. We learn to live by the promise through participating in the life of this world and of the church, the ecumenical household of faith, or Body of Christ. Above all, it is a promise that invites us to live for its fulfillment, and that leads to our fulfillment. So let us take up anew our human vocation to care for everykind where we are within the created world, and to "witness" to the reconciliation of earth community accomplished by God in Jesus Christ.

ADDITIONAL READING

RESTORING CREATION For Ecology and Justice, A Report Adopted By The 202nd General Assembly (1990), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1990. Order from Presbyterian Distribution Services at (800) 524-2612. Ask for PDS #OGA-90-002. \$1.50 plus shipping/handling

Creation in Crisis: Responding to God's Covenant by Shantilal P. Bhagat, Church of the Brethren, faithQuest series by Brethren Press, Elgin, IL.

We Are Home: A Spirituality of the Environment by Shannon Jung, Paulist Press, New York, NY, 1993.

The Environment & the Christian: What Can We Learn from the New Testament? by Calvin B. DeWitt, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1991.



After Nature's Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology, edited by Dieter T. Hessel, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1992.

Earth Community, Earth Ethics by Larry L. Rasmussen, World Council of Churches Publications and Orbis Books, 1996.

Earth Habitat: Eco-Justice and the Church's Response edited by Dieter T. Hessel and Larry L. Rasmussen, Augsburg Fortress, 2001.

Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Ecology from a Planet in Peril by Sallie McFague, Augsburg Fortress, 2001.

Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor by Leonardo Boff, Orbis Books, 1997.

Theology for Earth Community edited by Dieter T. Hessel, Orbis Books, 1996.

Ecotheology: Voices from South and North edited by David G. Hallman, World Council of Churches Publications and Orbis Books, 1994.

Christian Environmental Ethics: A Case Method Approach by Robert L. Stivers and James B. Martin-Schramm, Orbis Books, 2003.

The Greening of Faith: God, the Environment and the Good Life edited by John E. Carroll, Paul Brockelman, and Mary Westfall, University Press of New England, 1997.

Ministering With The Earth by Mary Elizabeth Moore, Chalice Press, 1998.

Simpler Living, Compassionate Life edited and compiled by Michael Schut, Living the Good News Books, 1999.



For Information On Caring for God's Creation:

Environmental Ministries, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),
www.pcusa.org/environment

Presbyterians for Earth Care, a grassroots fellowship of people caring
for God's creation, *www.presbyearthcare.org*

Eco-Justice Working Group of the National Council of Churches of
Christ, an ecumenical environmental ministry, *www.nccecojustice.org*

National Religious Partnership for the Environment, *www.nrpe.org*

North American Coalition for Christianity and Ecology, *www.nacce.org*

New Community Project, *www.newcommunityproject.org*

Interfaith Power and Light, *www.interfaithpowerandlight.org*

Regional Organizations Also with Congregational Resources:

Earth Ministry, Seattle, WA, *www.earthministry.org*

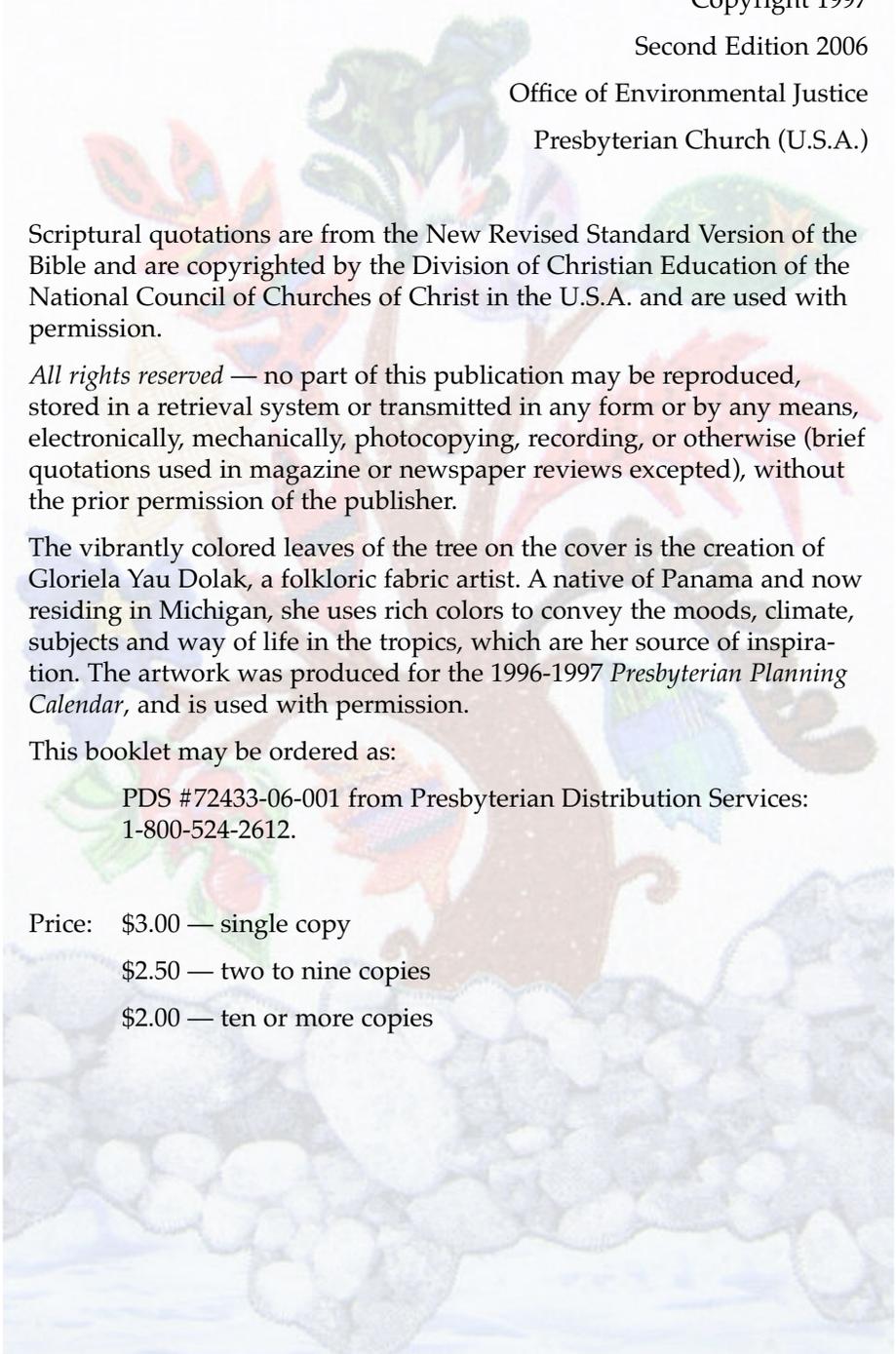
Web of Creation, Chicago, IL, *www.webofcreation.org*

Eco-Justice Ministries, Denver, CO, *www.eco-justice.org*



NOTES

- 1 *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, edited by Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- 2 See Phyllis Trible, "Clues in the Text," *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978, pp. 12ff.
- 3 See Frederick Ravid, "Kebash: The Marital Commandment to Subdue the Earth," *Epiphany Journal* (Winter 1987, pp. 66-70). Ravid argues that kebash, or "subdue," also means "to preserve, conserve, constrain, discipline and refine," and the purpose is to promote fruitfulness and flourishing.
- 4 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, called Genesis*. Translated by John King, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 151.
- 5 See M. Douglas Meeks, "God and Land," *Agriculture and Human Values* (Fall 1985) II:4, pp. 21-27.
- 6 One of the best-known studies is *The Tribes of Yahweh*, by Norman Gottwald. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979.
- 7 For a concise explanation of the covenantal and sacramental traditions, see *Gaia & God*, by Rosemary Radford Ruether. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992, Chs. 8 & 9.
- 8 See Marvin L. Chaney, "Bitter Bounty: The Dynamics of Political Economy Critiqued by the Eighth-Century Prophets," *Reformed Faith and Economics*, edited by Robert L. Stivers (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989).
- 9 For an explanation of the "cosmic Christology" expressed in the ancient hymn in Colossians, see George Kehm, "The New Story: Redemption as Fulfillment of Creation" in *After Nature's Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology*, edited by Dieter T. Hessel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 102-03, and Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1995), pp. 77-80.
- 10 This is further developed in "Economics, Ecojustice, and the Doctrine of God" by Carol Johnston, *After Nature's Revolt: Eco-Justice and Theology*, edited by Dieter T. Hessel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).
- 11 See Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin, 1963), p. 239.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol Johnston is a Presbyterian minister and Associate Professor of Theology and Culture at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana. She also directs Lifelong Theological Education at the seminary.

She earned her doctorate from Claremont Graduate School, and focused her dissertation on "A Theological History of Economics: Basic Assumptions & Values." She has written extensively on economics, social ethics and ecological integrity. Her seminary training was at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

An active participant in the life of the church, Johnston was a member of the Task Force which developed the comprehensive social policy on eco-justice adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1990.

She has also served as an Evaluation Coordinator for the Lilly Endowment Religion Division in 1991-1996, while teaching environmental theology and ethics at Christian Theological Seminary.