

IS THE BIBLE GREEN? READING SCRIPTURE ECOLOGICALLY

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1. Introduction

An audience such as this, because of the nature of the conference, is full of the converted and committed: convinced that the Christian faith can and must be practised in a way that expresses an ecological commitment to the sustaining and flourishing of all the diversity of creation. You are convinced – perhaps for a variety of differing reasons – that the Christian tradition can support and nurture ecological commitment and action.

To what extent does the Bible support and teach this kind of ecological Christian faith? The Bible's influence and authority is understood differently in different Christian denominations and traditions, so the influence of the Bible on Christians' ecological convictions varies. But there would be common ground in regarding the Bible as a foundational and canonical document, which is important as a source to shape Christian faith and conduct.

2. Is the Bible 'green'?

From being a somewhat fringe concern on the public and political map, environmental issues have in recent years become prominently established as perhaps the most urgent subject of global concern. Although there are sceptics, it is increasingly difficult to deny the issues of climate change, species extinction, and so on, and difficult to doubt that human action is a primary cause of such problems. There is a range of reasons to explain the causes of environmental degradation (technology, increasing consumption, a large human population, etc.), but religion is also important in shaping our "worldview" – our attitudes and beliefs concerning ourselves, our role and purpose, in relation to all that is around us.

Unsurprisingly, in the context of growing awareness of such problems, there have been many efforts to present the Bible's teaching as supportive of ecological commitment, to promote a green reading of the Bible. The recently published "Green Bible" (HarperCollins, 2008) is an example of such efforts. According to the Preface:

Our role in creation's care may be a new question unique to our place in history, but the Bible turns out to be amazingly relevant. In fact, it is almost as if it were waiting for this moment to speak to us. With over a thousand references to the earth and caring for creation in the Bible, the message is clear: all in God's creation – nature, animals, humanity – are inextricably linked to one another. As God cares for all of creation, so we cannot love one dimension without caring for the others. We are called to care for all God has made (p. I-15)

In a nutshell, I want to argue in this talk that the Bible is not a green book, or at least, not straightforwardly or unambiguously 'green'. As on other issues – such as women's equality, slavery, war and violence – it is ambivalent and diverse, leaving a complex legacy. What this also means is that *interpretation* of the Bible is crucial.

3. Lynn White's critique of Christianity

A good way to begin to think about these issues is to return to one of the most famous and most cited contributions to the whole ecotheological debate: 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', published in the journal *Science* in 1967 by the medieval historian Lynn White Jr. White provocatively argued that the Christian worldview, rooted in the creation stories and the notion of humanity made in God's image, represented the most anthropocentric (human-centred) religion the world has ever seen, introduced a dualism between humanity and nature, and established the notion that it was God's will that humanity exploit nature to serve human interests. Thus Christianity, according to White, bears 'a huge burden of guilt' for introducing this Western worldview that has permitted and promoted the active and aggressive conquest of nature to serve human ends. It is worth noting that White does not want to reject religion:

Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny — that is, by religion... More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one (White 1967: 1205-206).

He ends his article by proposing St Francis of Assisi as a patron saint for ecologists.

There has been much debate about White's argument, which many would reject. But it is a useful starting point because of the way it provocatively suggests that the Christian tradition – and the Bible in particular – may not have left a positive legacy so far as human attitudes to the environment are concerned. Without citing biblical texts as such, White points us to the creation stories as potentially problematic.

4. Is Genesis 1 to blame? 'Dominion' over the earth.

White's criticism of Christianity implicitly highlighted Genesis 1.26-28 as a particular problem. This text appears to give humanity a God-given right to rule and use the earth for our benefit. Around the time of the rise of modern science (15th-16th centuries onwards), this text did inspire a sense of the 'vocation' to comprehend and control nature. Even some recent ecologically committed scholars, such as Norman Habel, see this text as problematic:

The verb *kabash* ('to subdue') not only confirms the status of humans as having power over Earth; it also points to harsh control. Subduing the land meant crushing opposing forces. There is nothing gentle about *kabash*... The orientation of the human story (Gen. 1.26-28) is overtly hierarchical: humans are authorized to rule other creatures and to subdue Earth (Habel 2000: 46-47)

5. Re-reading Genesis as 'stewardship'

More recently, many Christian environmentalists have sought to reinterpret this potentially problematic legacy by describing human responsibility as *stewardship*: this is a central concept in much environmental ethics and theology, especially in evangelical circles. Sometimes people write as if the Bible, and Genesis 1-2 in particular, directly instructs us to be stewards of the earth. Other readings are seen as misunderstandings, which we can now correct. One of the 'Trail Guide' Bible studies in *The Green Bible*, for example, deals with the theme of stewardship, stating that we 'are meant to live... as stewards of creation'. The questions for reflection indicate that the image of dominion has been liable to be 'misunderstood'. Indeed, '[t]his stewardship role', we are told, 'is important enough that it is mentioned several times in the creation narrative' (p. 1226).

But difficulties remain:

- Stewardship terminology does not appear in Genesis 1, and is actually used rather little in the Bible, and never to define, explicitly, what the human relationship to creation ought to be.
- Some also argue that it is a problematic basis for environmental ethics (e.g. Clare Palmer): it implies humanity's separation from the rest of the world, the idea 'that the natural world is a human resource, that humans are really in control of nature, that nature is dependent on humanity for its management' (Palmer 1992: 77-78).

6. More difficulties in the Bible: eschatological visions of an imminent End

Also difficult are some of the biblical visions of the future, with their images of cosmic destruction, the rescue of believers, and the coming of a new heavens and a new earth (e.g. Joel 2.30-3.21; Mark 13; 2 Peter 3.10-13; Revelation 21-22). Why care for the earth if it is soon to be destroyed, and if God's plan is to rescue a small number of faithful humans and grant them eternal life in heaven? Some Christians anticipate a 'rapture' of Christians from the earth, prior to a time of great tribulation, and expect an imminent return of Christ. Such beliefs can suggest that preserving and caring for the earth is not a priority for Christians, and have probably influenced anti-environmental policies and decisions (especially in the USA). Evangelism to save individuals is seen as a higher priority. The "Green Dragon" project, for example, sees environmentalism as a great (satanic) threat to true Christian faith, warning believers against it.

It is not surprising, then, that a conservation biologist, David Orr, has suggested that 'belief in the imminence of the end times tends to make evangelicals careless stewards of our forests, soils, wildlife, air, water, seas and climate' (Orr 2005: 291).

7. Reclaiming the vision: transformation not destruction

Christian environmentalists have sought to reclaim such texts and traditions by arguing that they do not envisage the destruction of the earth but rather its transformation: God is in the process of making all things new, and this implies that humans should indeed care for creation. Thomas Finger, an evangelical writer, argues that '[i]f the present creation will not be destroyed but renewed, it would seem important to care for it today' (Finger 1998: 1).

Yet again, there remain questions about whether all the texts can be reinterpreted in this way, and whether this entirely solves the difficulties. Is salvation "beyond" this world compatible with the salvation "of" this world? Does an ecological vision automatically imply the salvation of everything, including every person?

What of the early Christians' apparent belief that the end would be very soon? And if God will redeem the earth and transform it to a renewed creation, do we need to worry about the impact of our own actions?

8. Highlighting other biblical texts: new resources for environmental ethics?

Another important strategy in the light of our environmental problems and concerns is to focus on different biblical texts – texts which seem to offer more potential for an environmentally positive vision. These texts suggest that the Bible might help to resource a theology which challenges the traditional preoccupation with the salvation of human beings, and stresses the ways in which the whole cosmos is bound up along with humanity in God's saving purposes. There is a wide range of biblical texts (as well as aspects of the somewhat difficult texts mentioned above) to which ecotheological writers have drawn attention:

Genesis 1-2: repeatedly declare creation 'good', and depict humans and animals as originally herbivores – the violence of predation is absent from creation at the start (Gen 1.29-30). Genesis 2 depicts humanity as made from the dust, a living creature like all the other animals.

Genesis 9.1-17: the (so-called) covenant with Noah, is actually and explicitly a covenant made with every living creature, and with the earth itself (see verses 10-17). According to this text, the whole earth is bound in covenant relationship with God, not just an elect segment of humanity.

Psalms: offer grand and poetic depictions of the whole created order as a manifestation of God's glory (e.g., Psalms 19.1-6; 104) and as called to express praise to God (e.g., Psalms 96.11-12; 148). (See also the *Benedicite* found in the Greek additions to Daniel.)

Job 38.1–42.6: the divine speeches at the close of the book emphasise Job's insignificance, his ignorance, and lists the diverse wonders of creation. Creation, it seems, has its own intrinsic value and relation to God, without there being any sense that it exists for the benefit or welfare of human beings. Note how Job, apparently, gets the point (40.4-5; 42.1-6).

Isaiah 11.6-9; 65.25: A prophetic vision of the eschatological future or messianic age: the establishment of righteousness implies peace and wellbeing for the animal world as well as good news for oppressed humans. (The idea of a non-violent animal and human world recalls the depiction in Genesis 1.29-30.)

Matthew 6.25-34//Luke 12.22-31: Jesus's famous references to God's care for birds and flowers are often taken to indicate concern for nature on the part of Jesus. (However, he is mainly concerned to illustrate how much more God cares for humans.)

Romans 8.19-23: Paul depicts the whole creation as bound up with the suffering of humanity, longing for the eschatological revelation of the sons of God. This passage provides the most substantial New Testament support for the idea that God's saving purposes encompass the whole creation, not just humanity.

Colossians 1.15-20: stresses that God's redemption in Christ encompasses *all things*.

Revelation 21–22: God makes all things new. Is this a positive ecological vision with which the biblical story culminates – the promise of transformation and redemption for the whole creation? Or does it depict something less eco-friendly – note, for example, that the new Jerusalem is a massively *urban* construction (Revelation 21.12-21)?

None of these texts gives a blueprint for creation theology or environmental ethics. But they do help to generate a positive vision of the value, beauty, and ultimate worth of the whole earth. This can perhaps inspire and undergird a positive ecological stance and committed environmental action.

9. Dealing with an ambivalent legacy: the unavoidable need for interpretation

The Bible, then, offers some material which emphasises the intrinsic value of all creation and its inclusion in God's saving purposes. But it is hard to claim that the Bible offers a clear or consistent message about the need to value and preserve the environment. This is unsurprising: on other issues of ethical concern – like slavery, the equality of women, and so on – the Bible also bequeaths an ambivalent legacy, which Christians and scholars have interpreted and argued about in various ways.

Despite lots of material which seems to claim that the Bible "says" or "teaches" this or that, there is always and inevitably interpretation going on when such claims are made. The South African theologian Ernst Conradie talks about doctrinal keys or constructs as the way in which biblical interpretation operates. We read the text – a product of a very different and ancient world – in our own context, shaped by our own convictions and priorities. Certain key motifs or ideas help to focus the biblical material, to bring certain

themes and texts to the centre, while pushing others to the margin. This is the process by which new (and ever-changing) meanings are constructed, relevant to the situation in which we find ourselves.

The history of biblical interpretation demonstrates a similar process at work through the ages: Augustine argued that the scriptures centred on love for God and love for neighbour, and that anyone who read them otherwise had not grasped their true concern. Luther found in Paul's letters a doctrine of justification by faith that became the theological centre of the Protestant gospel. He read the Bible in the light of that doctrine, even though that meant some texts being regarded as of dubious value (e.g. James). Liberation theologians read the Bible in the light of their social experience, and find God's liberation of the poor to be the central story (now James looks much better!). In each case, though this is not always acknowledged, the Bible is read in the light of the challenges of a contemporary context, which leads to certain themes or ideas becoming key, and others being marginalised, even criticised.

Our contemporary context, with its pressing environmental challenges, suggests the need for a fresh reading of the Bible, and a reconfiguration of the Christian tradition. Instead of focusing on humanity's importance and future salvation, we might draw on certain biblical texts to stress how God has entered into covenant with the whole earth, calls the whole universe in all its diversity to praise, and promises to liberate the whole creation from suffering and decay

So, in conclusion, the two phrases in my title point to two different ways of thinking about what the Bible is and offers:

- Is the Bible green? Well, in a sense, no: it doesn't consistently teach an eco-friendly message but contains a diversity of material, some of which is rather problematic from an ecological perspective.
- As on other issues, it is a question of how the Bible is *interpreted*, and being open about the fact that contemporary concerns and priorities shape the way we read and make sense of the Bible.
- The Bible does offer much material that can be fruitful for developing an ecological theology and ethics. Scripture can be *read* ecologically.
- The challenge for Christians is to show how the Bible, and the range of post-biblical Christian traditions, can be interpreted afresh – reconfigured – in our contemporary context, and can provide a strong basis for environmental ethical action.

10. References and Further Reading

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For information on the Exeter project, see: <http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/theology/research/projects/uses/>

For further web-based study materials, constructed with sixth-form teachers in view, see:

<http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/theology/research/projects/beyondstewardship/>