

# *Caring For Creation – The Biblical Basis*

George W. Fisher

As they become increasingly aware of environmental issues, many churches are beginning to wonder how they can contribute to the dialog on those issues, asking what they can say that secular groups like the Chesapeake Bay Foundation or the Sierra Club aren't already saying. A careful look at the biblical texts that inform our tradition suggests that churches can say a lot. The accompanying sheet is a kind of road map through key biblical texts that can inform our perspective on environmental issues. This morning I will walk you quickly through that roadmap, leaving plenty of time for discussion at the end.

The obvious place to begin is with texts like the creation stories and Psalm 104. Those texts are crucial. They reframe our reflection on environmental issues by affirming that what we call the "environment" is God's creation, and they challenge us to ask what that might mean. This brief account will focus on texts that explore that question of what it means that God is the creator of all that is.

As I see it, the key texts are those that shape the Biblical understanding of the covenantal relationship between land, humans, and God. Thirty years ago, Walter Brueggemann's book *The Land* showed how the grand biblical narratives – the expulsion from the Garden, Abram's trek to Canaan, the Exodus, the Exile, and Jesus' portrayal of God's Kingdom – how those stories all shape the Bible's covenantal understanding of land and of how humans are called to live in the land. That covenantal context gives the church a unique way of speaking on environmental issues, one that can fundamentally transform the conversation.

There are many ways of working our way through those narratives, but Deuteronomy is a good place to begin. A major theme of Deuteronomy is that God's covenantal gift of the land came with a warning: the Israelites were not to forget God's commandments; if they did, they would lose the land. Deut 8 could not be clearer:

*... the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing. Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ... If you do forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. (Deut 8:7-19)*

The key commandments the text refers to are two: first, that the Israelites were to love the Lord, the giver of the land, with all of their hearts; second, they were to ground their use of the land in justice and only justice. Or, as Leviticus put it, they were to love their neighbors as themselves.

We often interpret those mandates to pursue justice and to love our neighbors as referring only to social justice and human neighbors. Those are obviously important themes of the Bible. But Exodus and Leviticus remind us that the land and the creatures of the land are to also be treated justly. We tend to forget that requirement because modernity has led us to see land as a commodity that we are free to buy, sell, or simply abandon whenever doing so seems economically expedient. Commercial agriculture sees land as nothing but dirt.

The Biblical understanding of land is much more sophisticated. Deuteronomy 30 put it sharply: land is the source of life and prosperity, landlessness the source of death and adversity. With fertile land, the Israelites would flourish. Without it, they would die.

That understanding emerged from centuries of wandering through the ecological mosaic of the Ancient Near East. It was sharpened by difficulties the Israelites encountered in farming the hill country of Judea. The soil was thin and easily eroded. The rain was sparse and came in the winter, the wrong time of year. And those winter storms could be ferocious, quickly stripping the land of the topsoil that meant life. The challenge was to persuade that winter rain to soak into the soil so that it could water summer crops. There must have been many failures, but in the end the Israelites learned how to farm even that difficult land: how to prevent erosion by terracing the hills; how to replace lost nutrients by fertilizing with animal wastes; and how to keep the soil loose and permeable by allowing the land to lie fallow on a regular basis.

All of this taught the Israelites that they couldn't flourish unless the land flourished as well. That's a profound insight, expressed by dozens of Biblical texts. Isaiah, for example, expresses human flourishing in wonderfully rich images of the land:

*For you shall go out in joy,  
and be led back in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before you  
shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field  
shall clap their hands.* (Isa 55:12)

The prophet Joel captured the human tragedy of famine in devastatingly graphic terms:

*The fields are devastated,  
the ground mourns;  
for the grain is destroyed,  
the wine dries up,  
the oil fails.* (Joel 1:10)

Those passages are partly metaphor, of course, but they also express the hard fact that agrarian people *do* go hungry when the land doesn't flourish. That understanding led the

Israelites to see land not as a *token* of the covenant, but as *partner* in covenant. That sense of partnership with the land led the Israelites to see the deep connections between what we would today call social justice and environmental justice. We were, in a sense, to love all our neighbors, the natural neighbors as well as the human neighbors.

That connection is explicit in the sabbatical laws of Exodus and Leviticus, which make two extraordinary demands: first, the land was to be allowed to rest, to lie fallow one year in seven; second, crops growing at the edges of the field were not to be harvested, but left for the poor, those who had no land. Think for a minute how counter-intuitive those requirements must have seemed to a people always living on the edge of hunger. The temptation to use all of the land all of the time, and to gather in all of the crops must have been extraordinarily strong. Commercial agriculture today does exactly that by doing everything possible to maximize the yield. But the Israelites lived in a land which was easily ruined by cultivating too intensely, and they learned that the land needed to be treated gently, and cared for carefully and lovingly, and that the resources of the land had to be shared with all, even with the poor and the migrant laborers. The covenant applied to all. No exceptions.

That understanding led them to see the covenant as a sacred trust between land, people, and God. One of the richest expressions of that sacred trust emerges from the Hebrew word *nahālā*, usually translated ‘inheritance’, ‘heritage’, or ‘legacy’. But none of those translations capture the richness of the Hebrew.

*Nahālā* refers to the land that sustains a nation or a people and carries a sense of duty to tend the land lovingly so that it can be passed on to sustain future generations, a mandate that we would call generational justice today. That act of caring for the land gave Israel and its people a sense of being rooted in authentic relationship with the land, a rootedness that turned the task of tending the land into a vocation that conferred identity and meaning, and gave life purpose.

That vocation applied at three distinct levels: national, tribal, and personal. The Promised Land was Israel’s national *na□ālā*. The territory allocated to each tribe was that tribe’s *na□ālā*, their portion of the Promised Land. The land allocated to each family was that family’s *na□ālā*, the family farm. The profound importance of preserving a family’s *na□ālā* is captured by Naboth’s refusal to sell his ancestral vineyard, even to the king, and by Jeremiah’s redemption of his cousin’s field at Anathoth even when Jerusalem was under siege.

That understanding of *na□ālā* is a central theme of the Book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah begins by portraying the covenant as God’s welcoming the Israelites to God’s *na□ālā*, God’s own ancestral land. But the Israelites abused God’s hospitality by living in ways that were unjust, ways contrary to Torah, ways that desecrated the land. Time and again God offered to forgive the people if they would only repent and live faithfully. But they refused, and so God’s commitment to the land required that the Israelites be exiled. But exile was not the end of the covenant. It was intended to be a sabbatical to reconsecrate the land and people, a time of fallowing for land and people. God promised that after that sabbatical, he would bring his people back to his *na□ālā*, a promise expressed in wonderfully evocative language. Jeremiah’s God said:

*I am going to gather [my people] from all the lands to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath. I will bring them back to this place, and I will settle them in safety. They shall be my people, and I will be their God. ... I will make an everlasting covenant with them, ... and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.* (Jer 32:37-38)

That promise, echoed by all the major prophets, forms the essential background to understanding the New Testament. By the first century, the Jewish people had been back from Babylon for 500 years. They had expected to be living once again in God's *na'ālā*, blessed by God's *shalom*. Instead, they found themselves in the Empire of Rome, under the *Pax Romana*. N. T. Wright and other New Testament scholars have argued persuasively that we need to hear Jesus' message as a response to the people's anguished questions of why God had not yet kept his promise.

Jesus' core message – the heart of his teaching, the point of his parables, the meaning of his healings – his whole point was that the Kingdom of God was at hand. In that first century context, Jesus' message of the kingdom meant that God's promise spoken through the prophets was finally about to be fulfilled. It meant the end of Roman rule and unjust taxes. It meant the flourishing of God's people living and giving thanks once again in God's *na'ālā*, God's kingdom, God's ancestral land.

Seen from that perspective, Jesus' message of the Kingdom was echoing the ancient scriptural understanding of land as the source of human flourishing, and was calling people to use that blessing, that land, justly, sharing it with all, and preserving it for future generations.

Our task today is remarkably similar. The Israelites lived in a fragile land. They quickly learned the need to care for the land and the poor of the land. We live in a more robust environment, and until recently it seemed that we could ignore biblical mandates about how to live with God's creation. But our collective impact on the global environmental system has increased catastrophically in the last half century, and we now find ourselves in a situation much like that of the Israelites. To continue to flourish, we must read the signs of nature and of society as accurately as the prophets and Jesus did. We must find ways of living that enable all to flourish – the ecological community and the human community, especially the least of both communities.

The church can make a huge contribution to public discourse on the environment by articulating and modeling that ancient wisdom. As we do, perhaps we can begin to sense what Jesus had in mind when he urged us, in all three of the synoptic gospels, to repent and to believe that God's kingdom was coming near, about to emerge on Earth, as it had in heaven.

January 25, 2009