

The genesis of environmentalism

The same Bible sometimes blamed for degradation of the natural world also calls upon us to be good stewards of the Earth

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In 1967, historian Lynn White Jr. ignited a firestorm that burns still today. In a widely discussed article titled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," he laid a charge at the doorstep of the Judeo-Christian community: The Bible is responsible for the world's environmental degradation.

The Bible and its story of creation, he argued, sowed the seeds of the destructive mandate that animates Western civilization. Humans were given the right, the calling, by God to "be fruitful and multiply, fill the Earth and master it." Charged by this narrative, the Western world has taken "dominion" to be one of the highest callings of human existence. In such a view, the Earth and all its vast resources are mere fuel and fodder for our delight and consumption, whether fruitful or frivolous.

The faith community has spilled much ink debunking White, arguing that "mastery" and "dominion" here do not mean exploitation of the world's goodness but rather benevolent caretaking, stewardship.

I think that is a better, truer and richer reading of the text, but I also believe there is a stronger way to respond to White.

I accept the basic critique of White's charge that the world's first humans, the man and woman in Genesis One, were given the task to master the natural world around them. Isn't that what any of us would have wanted if we were thrown naked and naïve into a great wilderness? Imagine the raw vulnerability of early humanity: no civilization; no one to receive or protect them; no ancestors to learn from; no cultural, historical, scientific or technological traditions or resources to draw upon; no place of refuge to huddle in while they figured things out. From the very first moment of existence, they were vulnerable, dinner for any passing large carnivore, munchies for viruses and bacteria. They were cold when the sun went down, hot when it came up. Hungry all the time, not knowing what to eat and what to avoid.

That is the picture of earliest humanity that the Bible presents, and that is not unlike the first thousands of years of human existence. The world was so big, and we were so small. The world was so powerful and we were so weak. Our task was to survive, and if possible, thrive. We did what needed to be done — we were so insignificant against the vastness of the Earth that the world readily absorbed our various missteps and mistreatments.

No longer. Today, almost unimaginably, we have completed the call of Genesis One. We have been fruitful and multiplied, filled the Earth and mastered much of it. We have become a geophysical force. While once we worried about how the Earth could hurt us, now we must worry about how we are hurting the Earth.

The question is: What do we do now? What do we do when the call of Genesis One has been fulfilled? The answer, quite simply, is to turn the page and read Genesis Two.

Here is the story of the Garden of Eden. Here, humanity is presented not as a vulnerable creature struggling against a vast expanse of all-consuming wildness but as partner with God, called into being so that we may tend to the care and improvement of a needy world: "When the Lord God made the earth and heaven, no shrub was yet in the field ... for God had not yet sent rain, and there was no human to work the soil. So God took the human he had formed and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to protect it."

Here the roles are reversed: It is the land that is vulnerable, bereft of the gift of the renewing resources of nature and man, in need of a wise and caring humanity.

If Genesis One speaks of a world with directions that seemed to read: "Take, use, discard, repeat," Genesis Two speaks of a world with directions that read: "Use with care. Leave the Earth in a better state than the one in which you found it." That challenge creates a new narrative and demands a new role for humanity to play in the destiny of the Earth.

Those who are fearful of being consumed by the elements do not have the luxury of worrying about tomorrow. But those who have turned the tables on nature, who excel in its mastery and consume it in excess, have slipped out of the story of Genesis One and passed into the pages of Genesis Two.

For the developed world, and all of us in it, humanity's early privileges of Genesis One have given way to today's obligations of Genesis Two. That is the narrative, the calling, of our time.

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