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*A Biblical Theology of Creation Care*

**Abstract**

This essay briefly considers the seemingly modern topic of creation-care through a biblical theological lens, asking the question: “Is environmentalism a Christian value?” Tracing the narrative of Redemption from the Garden to the New Jerusalem (with particular attention given to the norms of Israelite society as regards land tenure and creature care), this article demonstrates that biblical law from every era communicates a similar theme: the earth, its produce, and its inhabitants belong to God, not to humanity. Moreover, according to Scripture, humanity’s role as regards the creation is that of steward. God takes great pleasure in his creation, has provided for it, and his expectation is that his people will respect and protect it. This becomes a particularly pertinent message to the Church in that we are only beginning to ask the question of how our identity as the redeemed people of God impacts our care of God’s creation. This article attempts to address that question by allowing the cumulative voice of Scripture to be heard in light of current environmental attitudes and practices.

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In chapters thirty-eight and thirty-nine of the book that bears his name, Job is hammered with a series of questions from on high. The intent of this interrogation? To remind him that he is *creature* not *Creator*.

Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, or caused the dawn to know its place? . . . Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or have you walked in the recesses of the deep? . . . Is it by your understanding that the hawk soars, stretching his wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up, and makes his nest on high? (Job 38:12, 16; 39:26-27)

When I hear these questions voiced, I echo Job's response, surely not I. I can hardly understand these mysteries, let alone mimic or duplicate them. Only the Master of the Universe can do such things. Rather, I respond to these astounding aspects of creation with worship. As a daughter of Eve, I am so designed. When I stand at the ocean's edge, and feel the spray of its raging force on my face; when the wind silences me; when I am privileged to hold a wild creature in my hands or to watch the majesty of a hawk floating through the air, my heart cries out with the psalmist:

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth; you who has displayed your splendor above the heavens! (Psalm 8:1)

This is as it should be. But the Scriptures teach that there is a further response that God expects from those who call him "lord." The response of which I write is the believer's God-ordained duty of creation-care. The objective of this essay is to consider this seemingly modern topic through the lens of our ancient rule for faith and practice, the Bible. My goal is to provide a brief survey of a biblical theology of creation care, and to begin to answer the question: "Is environmentalism a Christian value?"

Let us begin at the beginning. In Genesis chapter one God reveals his plan for his creation. Here the interdependence of the cosmos is laid out within the literary framework of a perfect "week." On the seventh day, God is enthroned above his creation, and He rests. This communicates not only His complete satisfaction with what has gone before, but also that the perfect balance of God's ideal plan is dependent on the sovereignty of the Creator. Of great significance is the penultimate climax of the piece.

On the *sixth* day, a steward is enthroned, under the Creator but over the creation:

Then God said, 'Let us make humanity in our image, according to our likeness; and let them rule . . . .' (Gen 1:26)

Hence, whereas the outworking of God's ideal design is dependent on the sovereignty of the Creator, so too, it is the privilege and responsibility of the Creator's stewards to facilitate this ideal plan by means of living their lives as a reflection of God's image. This was God's perfect plan.

The role of the human stewards within the created order is specified in Genesis chapter two:

Then Yahweh Elohim took the human and put him into the garden of Eden to tend it (*'bd*) and guard it (*'šmr*). (Gen 2:15)

The larger message of these accounts is clear: the garden *belongs* to Yahweh, but *'ādām* (a collective term meaning "humanity") was given the privilege to rule and the responsibility to care for this garden under the sovereignty of their divine lord. And so God's ideal is initiated—a world in which *'ādām* would succeed in constructing the human civilization by directing and harnessing the abundant resources of the garden under the wise direction of their Creator. Here there would always be enough, progress would not necessitate pollution, expansion would not demand extinction. The privilege of the strong, would not necessitate the deprivation of the weak. And humanity would succeed in these goals *because of* the guiding wisdom of God.

But we all know the story; humanity rejected this perfect plan and chose autonomy instead. And because of the authority of their God-given position within the created order, *humanity's* choice cast the *entire cosmos* into disarray. As Romans 8 details, because of *'ādām*, even "the creation was subjected to futility" (Rom 8:20). We readily recognize the results of *'ādām* choice in the arena of human relationships: poverty, greed, violence, etc. Moreover, we recognize and embrace the role of the redeemed community to stand in opposition to those societal norms. But rarely, it seems, do we reflect upon the impact of our rebellion on the garden. And rarely, it seems, do we consider how the reality of redemption in our lives should redirect our attitude toward the same.

Let us consider Israel, who stands as the first model of God's relationship with a redeemed people. Israel is reminded over and over again that the good land they are about to receive is a gift. Although they are invited to abide upon the land with joy and productivity, it will never

truly be theirs. As in the garden, God owns the land; it is humanity's privilege to live upon it. Not only does Yahweh retain the right to reclaim His land, He makes it very clear that the land will be distributed to whom *He* chooses. As a result, the citizens of Israel are not allowed to abuse each other or the land by means of the self-serving acquisition and sale of real estate (Lev 25:13-17; 23; cf. Isa 5:8). Even the produce of the land belongs to Yahweh. As is reiterated throughout the laws of the first fruits, the tithe, and the gleaning laws, it is Yahweh's expectation that the Israelites will not exhaust the produce of the land in their quest for economic success (e.g. Deut. 14:22-28; 18:1-5; Exod 23:19; Lev 19:9-10). Rather Yahweh commands that Israel reserve a portion of the produce of the land for the marginalized among them.

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap the corners of your field; the remnant of the harvest you will not gather. But you will leave what remains for the needy and the immigrant. I am Yahweh your God. (Lev. 23:22)

Moreover, Yahweh commands that the land itself be given a sabbath such that it might be able to replenish itself.

But during the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath rest, a sabbath belonging to Yahweh; you shall not sow your field nor prune your vineyard. Your harvest's after growth you shall not reap, and the grapes of your untrimmed vines you shall not gather . . . Rather the sabbath (growth) of the land shall be your food: belonging to you, your male servant, your female servant, your hired man, your temporary resident, and the immigrants among you. Even your beast and the wild animal that is in your land shall have all its crops to eat. (Lev. 25:4-7)

In contrast to the consumer culture in which we live, Leviticus teaches that it is not acceptable to take from the land everything you *can*. Rather, God's people are commanded to leave enough so that the land is able to replenish itself for future harvests and future generations—even though such methods would significantly cut into the farmer's short-term, agricultural profits. Why? “Because I am the Lord, says Yahweh.” In other words, because this is Yahweh's land and Yahweh's produce and Yahweh intends that his land be fruitful for the next generation of tenants. Moreover, it is apparent that Yahweh intends a portion of his harvest to be distributed to the voiceless among his people: the slave, the refugee, the domestic animal, and the wild creature. In sum, these Israelite laws communicate that *economic growth* is not a viable excuse for the abuse of the

land, the abuse of the poor, or the abuse of wild creatures. I wonder what those stripping Canada of its boreal forests for paper production (at a current rate of five acres a minute<sup>1</sup>), those creating lunar landscapes in Eastern Kentucky by means of “mountain top removal” coal mining,<sup>2</sup> or the factory “farmers” who have achieved near-constant production made possible only by the intensive application of pesticides and caustic chemical fertilizers<sup>3</sup> might say about God’s law to Israel? I wonder what God might have to say to those of us who are growing rich from these endeavors?

Even in the midst of the crisis of warfare, God’s people are commanded to treat God’s gift with care. Deut. 20:19 states:

When you besiege a city a long time, to make war against it in order to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them; you may eat from them but you shall not cut them down. For is the tree of the field a man that it should be besieged by you?

Hence, in Israel, even national security was not a viable excuse for the abuse of the earth or the magnificent flora He has designed to reside upon it.

And what do the Scriptures teach regarding the creatures that inhabit this planet with us? Perhaps the most visible message is found in the account of the great flood. Although God judges the world because of its corruption, he *rescues* animal kind along with humankind. He also makes his recreational covenant with “every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth” (Gen 9:10-11). *All flesh* is deemed worthy of God’s deliverance and His ongoing covenant. In the elegant verse of Psalm 104 and the Whirlwind speeches of the Book of Job cited above, we hear the poetic celebration of the beauty and dignity of the wild animal *and* its habitat.

He is the one who sends forth the springs into the wadis; between the mountains they flow; giving drink to each of his wild creatures.  
(Ps. 104:10)

Do you know the time the mountain goats give birth? Have you watched the calving of the deer? ... Who sent out the wild donkey free? Who loosed the bonds of the swift donkey, to whom I gave the wilderness for a home, and the salt land for his dwelling place?  
(Job 39:1, 5-6)

These passages demonstrate that even in a fallen world, God rejoices in the beauty and balance of His creation. Moreover, God has designed the created order *so that* His wild creatures will have the food, water, and habitat

that they need to survive and prosper. It is Yahweh who “sent out the wild donkey free” and “gave to him the wilderness for a home” (Job 39:5-6). It is by *His* understanding that the hawk soars “stretching out his wings toward the south,” and it is by His command that the eagle nests in the high country (Job 39:26-27). Since any environmentalist would say that the single greatest cause of the extinction of animal species is the reckless destruction of their habitat—and we in America are presently devouring nearly 2 million acres a year for the noble quest of urban sprawl<sup>4</sup>—the fact that the wild animals’ habitat was designed and given to them by God should give us pause.<sup>5</sup>

In Israel’s era, Yahweh promulgates laws that protect both the domestic creatures who serve Israel, and the wild creatures who inhabit the promised land with Israel. According to Deut 25:4, an Israelite shall not muzzle the ox while he drags the threshing sledge for his master. In other words, the beast who serves us should be allowed the opportunity to enjoy its life and work, even if it cuts into our profits a bit. How would this deuteronomic law reflect on the billions of animals who currently serve us in America’s factory farms? Creatures who spend their *lives* stacked one atop the next in row upon row of tiny wire cages, immersed in their own feces, confined in windowless warehouses, *never* seeing the light of day? Creatures who are force-fed food to the point that their internal organs fail, who are sustained in such crowded and filthy conditions that any semblance of a natural life is stripped from them, and enormous doses of antibiotics are necessary to control infection.<sup>6</sup> Is this what Yahweh intended for the creatures He entrusted to *’ādām*?

Consider as well the complex levitical legal structures that accompany the slaughtering of animals. Israel was certainly allowed to slaughter and eat the animals they raised, but any domestic animal had to be taken before the priest *first*. According to Leviticus 17, this practice was to serve in part as a sign that its *nepeš* its *life* has been considered.<sup>7</sup> In Israel, the life of the animal was valuable; it was not to be taken without thought, or without mercy.<sup>8</sup> Reflect upon these laws in comparison with the assembly line approach we employ in the raising, slaughtering, and mass marketing of animal flesh in America.<sup>9</sup> I am horrified to report that current practice is such that the animals we eat are slaughtered in such massive numbers that the slaughter houses cannot even ensure that they are dead before dismemberment begins.<sup>10</sup> Have you ever considered the *life* of the styrofoam and cellophane packaged chicken parts you purchase at Walmart every week? Israel was constrained to do so, by levitical law.

As for the wild animals, Deut 22:6-7 commands:

If you happen upon a bird’s nest in front of you in the road, or in

a tree, or upon the ground, with young ones or eggs, and the mother sitting upon the young or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother (who is sitting) upon the young. Rather, you will shoo the mother away, and the young you may take for yourself, in order that it may be well with you and that you may prolong your days.

Thus Israel is instructed that if they killed off the wild creatures without a thought as to the creatures' ability to replenish their populations, it would *not* "be well" with Israel in the land. I believe the same would apply to us.

All of these laws of land, tree, and creature communicate a similar theme: the land, its produce, and its inhabitants belong to God, not humanity. God takes pleasure in His creation. He has designed it, provided for it, and His expectation is that His people will respect and protect it. If I were to summarize the message of the Old Testament regarding creation-care into a single proverb it would be this: *The earth is the Lord's and all it contains; you may make use of it in your need, but you shall not abuse it in your greed.*

And what of the New Testament? The realities of land tenure and creature-care are not as visible in the New Testament as they are in the Old. This is due in part to the more urban audience of the New Testament texts, and in part to the New Testament's focus on its most central objective—revealing the character of the new 'Adām, and explaining how it is that his brethren might live in this present world as "citizens of another kingdom." Still, the message of the garden continues to reverberate in its new context: "For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by Him and for Him" (Col 1:16). Rather than the Old Covenant message changing with the New, it is reinforced.

Moreover, the ultimate miracle of the New Covenant is that in Christ, all of the cosmos will at last be liberated. As Paul elaborates in Romans 8, it is not only 'ādām who anxiously awaits "the revealing of the sons of God," but all of creation as well.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Rom 8: 19-21).

Why does *creation* anxiously long for the revealing of the sons of God? Because at the *parousia* creation will at last be freed from the chaos of 'ādām's rebellion, it too will be healed from the effects of sin. John the Revelator offers us a glimpse of the master plan in chapters twenty-one

and twenty-two of his book. Here what we name “heaven” is identified as “a new heaven and a new earth” where the cosmic river is free to flow, and the tree of life has multiplied such that it lines the street of the city (Rev 21:1; 22:1-2). In other words, “heaven” is not only Eden-restored, “heaven” is this very earth, healed of its scars and washed clean of its diseases. And the fact that Romans 8 speaks of the believer’s bodily resurrection (the ultimate expression of one’s identity as the redeemed child of God) in concert with the resurrection of the creation, speaks volumes regarding the intrinsic value that God places upon this planet and its creatures. These are not simply intended as objects for our consumption.

In light of this biblical testimony, where should Christians position themselves regarding creation-care? Of all the voices and all the “facts” that are presently calling for our allegiance in the arena of philosophical, theological, and political environmental thought, there is one voice I believe every Christian wants to hear—that of Scripture. And of all the messages regarding creation-care that might be attributed to the Bible, one seems incontrovertible to me: the garden and its creatures are not ours, they are His. At the dawn of creation, *’adām* was appointed to care for the garden, specifically to tend it (*’bd*) and to defend it (*šmr* Gen 2:15). Our fallen race has instead chosen to use its superior gifts to exploit and to abuse. In our greed we have taken what we wanted with no concern (often no thought) as to what the consequences of our behavior might be upon God’s good gift. The statistics are staggering: countless waterways poisoned, thousands of species lost, millions of acres decimated, unfathomable quantities of trash. Humanity was created and commanded to *serve* and to *protect*, yet humanity has instead *ravaged* the garden. And like the results of *’adām*’s choice in the arena of human relationships, in the arena of our relationship with creation, the results are all around us.

But God’s people are called to be different. In this fallen world, the role of the redeemed community is to live our lives as an expression of another Kingdom, to reorient our values to those of our heavenly Father, to live our lives as Adam and Eve should have, as Jesus Christ has. Our calling is to demonstrate with our *lives* “what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). What is the will of God regarding creation?

Then Yahweh Elohim took the human and put him into the garden of Eden to tend it (*’bd*) and to protect it (*šmr*). (Gen. 2:15)

How then can we avoid this message, that it is our responsibility as redeemed humanity to live in such a way that the intentional stewardship of God’s creation is evident in our lives?

Give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and

glory. Lord, in your mercy. Hear our prayer.

## Endnotes

1. Jeff Hull, "The Final Frontier," *Audubon* (Sept-Oct 2005), 46: "The advocacy group Forest Ethics reports that about half of the paper [is] used to print magazines, newsprint, and the 17 billion catalogues produced annually in the United States...."

2. Mountaintop removal (MTR) is a relatively new form of coal mining that requires the targeted site to be clear cut and then leveled by the use of explosives in order to reach the minerals desired. Demolition may extend as far as 1,000 feet below the surface. The "overburden" (the vegetation, topsoil, rock, etc.) is typically dumped into surrounding valleys ("Mountain Top Removal," n.p. [cited 30 August 2006]. Online: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mountaintop\\_removal.htm](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mountaintop_removal.htm)).

Due to the need to dump the "overburden," 6,700 "valley fills" were approved in central Appalachia between 1985 and 2001 and "[t]he U.S. EPA estimates that over 700 miles of healthy streams have been completely buried by mountaintop removal and thousands more have been damaged (Erik Reece, "Moving Mountains," *Orion* [Jan/Feb 2006]. Cited 30 August 2006. Online: <http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2006/02/16/reece.htm>). The environmental results of this method are literally devastating. Water tables under the mountain are eliminated, surrounding ground water is frequently poisoned by the coal slurry byproduct, and the potential for the re-growth of forests or any type of plant life larger than grasses is rendered improbable (*ibid.*). The rationale for MTR is money. MTR is lucrative for coal companies because the utilization of explosives and large machinery significantly reduces the need for workers.

See the web site "Appalachian Voices" for a grassroots perspective on the profound impact this mining method is having upon the lives, income, property, and health of the poor in Appalachia who are forced to live with the impact of this shameful practice ([http://www.appvoices.org/index.php?/site/mtr\\_overview/.htm](http://www.appvoices.org/index.php?/site/mtr_overview/.htm)).

3. There are a plethora of websites that address the issue of pesticide and fertilizer use in American farming. One might start with the National Resource Defense Council at <http://www.nrdc.org/health/pesticides/olgpesticides.asp>.

4. One estimate for general land consumption is 365 acres per hour ("Smart Growth/Sprawl," n.p. [cited 31 August 2006]. Online: <http://www.nrdc.org/cities/smartGrowth/default.asp.htm>). The American Farmland Trust estimates that more than one million of those acres are agricultural land ("America's Agricultural Land is at Risk," n.p. [cited 31 August 2006]. Online: <http://www.farmland.org/programs/protection/default.asp.htm>).

5. One of the most devastating results of urban sprawl in the United States has been the destruction of wetlands. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports that roughly 58,500 acres of wetlands are being destroyed annually ("Clean Water and Wetlands," Sierra Club n.p. Online: <http://www.sierraclub.org/wetlands/htm>). Yet wetlands serve an array of critical roles in the survival of every species on this planet—birds are particularly dependent upon the swamps and marshlands that humans too often consider wasted space. For a focused introduction to this far ranging problem see Audubon's special issue "America's River," an exposé of the abuse of the mighty Mississippi River and its impact (May-June 2006).

6. See the Humane Society's "The Dirty Six: The Worst Practices in the Agribusiness," n.p. (cited 28 August 2006). Online: [www.hsus.org/farm\\_animals/factory\\_farms.htm](http://www.hsus.org/farm_animals/factory_farms.htm).

7. See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (CC. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 184-92 for further discussion. Note that 17:4 states that "bloodguiltiness" (i.e. murder) will be upon the person who slaughters without taking the animal before the priest.

8. Regarding the method of slaughter detailed in the Talmud, Milgrom states: "All of these [details] clearly demonstrate the perfection of a slaughtering technique whose purpose is to render the animal immediately unconscious with a minimum of suffering." As regards the secular slaughterer, Milgrom further summarizes: "Moreover, by virtue of his training and piety, his soul shall never be torpedied by his incessant butchery but kept ever sensitive to the magnitude of the divine concession in allowing him to bring death to living things" (Leviticus, 105-106).

9. The abuses to which domesticated animals are routinely subjected on factory farms are nearly too horrific to report, and most Americans find it more comfortable not to ask questions. Few of us realize that animals used in agriculture have almost no legal protection. Rather, they are viewed as vehicles of production and commerce. Speaking of farm animals in America, the website for the Humane Society of the United States reports: "these animals aren't afforded any legal protection while on the farm. More than 95% of them—birds—aren't even included in the regulations implementing the federal Humane Methods of Slaughter Act, which requires other animals to be rendered insensible to pain before they are killed ("Factory Farms," n.p. [cited 29 August 2006]. Online: [http://www.hsus.org/farm\\_animals/factory\\_farms.htm](http://www.hsus.org/farm_animals/factory_farms.htm)).

For current methods of slaughter in the United States, see Matthew Scully's excruciatingly honest and crushingly well-researched account of what the animals we eat endure in the raising, delivery, and slaughter process (*Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* [New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002], 247-86).

10. "38 million cows and calves are slaughtered annually in the United States. Ten years ago the typical American slaughter plant operated at 50 kills per hour. Now, at newer plants, it is 300-400 per hour ... As Martin Fuentes, an IBP worker, told *Washington Post* reporter Joby Warrick in 2001, 'The line is never stopped simply because an animal is alive.' Ramon Moren, "whose job is to cut off the hooves of strung-up cattle passing by at 309 an hour" reports that although the cattle are supposed to be dead when they reach him, often are not: "They blink. they make noises. The head moves, the eyes are open and still looking around. They die piece by piece" (Scully, *Dominion*, 284).