



Eco-Theologian, Educator and Environmental Activist

Four Biblical Voices on our Relationship to Creation

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When people quote the Hebrew Bible, they often do so as if it were a single book with a single voice. But the Bible is not a book, it is a library. It has many books, written at different times by different individuals or groups with often very different ideas about God, humanity and the world. Even within some books like the book of Genesis, modern biblical scholarship has shown that there are multiple sources edited together. And within the Bible, a later source occasionally comments directly or indirectly on an earlier source, a technique scholars call intertextuality.

A case in point: Genesis 1:26-28 is often quoted to show that the “Bible” condones environmental exploitation by humanity because God creates humanity in God’s image and then commands them to “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on the earth.” Taken out of context, it appears that humanity has been given free rein over Creation, but that interpretation fails to understand that being created “in the image of God” does not mean that humans have the right to be God. As my teacher in ethics, the late [Rabbi Seymour Siegel](#) said, we are to imitate God, not impersonate God. We are the agents of



which is limited and carefully bounded by accountability. This is shown in the very next verses in which humans are only allowed to eat a vegetarian diet. Permission to eat meat is given only after the Flood. In addition to the original context, it is always important to see how a religious tradition later interpreted its sacred texts as the original meaning may have been understood very differently in later generations. And in the case of Genesis 1:26-28, the later Jewish and Christian traditions never interpreted these verses to refer to unqualified human permission to exploit Creation.

There are, in fact, at least four different models in the Hebrew Bible about the human relationship to Creation. Each voice comes from a different source and each one still has something to teach us today. I have called these four models: the Caretaker, the Farmer, the Citizen and the Creature.

The Caretaker

Genesis Chapter 1 is part of what modern biblical scholars call the Priestly or P source, which was probably written by priests from the Temple in Jerusalem and received its final form in the fifth century B.C.E., although many P texts in the Torah were originally written several centuries before that. This particular biblical voice sees humanity as the caretakers or stewards of Creation on behalf of God. They believed that Creation was “very good” in the sense of being harmoniously ordered at the beginning and it was only humanity who could maintain or destroy that order.

The Caretaker model is also expressed in Psalm 8 which is a poetic meditation on the reality of the power that humans have over the rest of God’s creatures. But it is also about humility and responsibility. The author of the psalm was standing outside at night looking at the millions of visible stars (which were celestial creatures in his cosmology) and wondering why God even notices humanity at all. The psalmist shows astonishment at the power of humans, which he characterizes as little less than the celestial creatures: Why should God have elevated such lowly creatures to such heights of power? The psalm expresses an underlying paradox that amazes the poet: the insignificance of humanity before the power and majesty of God, who has nonetheless granted humanity a divine-like control over the other creatures of the world. This power is reflected in the fact that humans have the ability to catch, to kill and to eat all categories of animal life, both wild and domesticated, birds and fish. This psalm speaks of the reality of human power and how that power sets us apart from all other creatures. It is the recognition of the effect we have had on every part of this world. There is no place and no creature that has not felt the presence of human power and it is naive of us to think otherwise.



to us today because humanity does have real power in the unprecedented reach of our technology to affect the environment. We must acknowledge that with this power comes what the philosopher [Hans Jonas](#) called an “imperative of responsibility” since all life, not only human life, is threatened by our misuse of our knowledge and technological skill.

The Farmer

The second model is found in Genesis 2. In this source, (called by biblical scholars J after the use of the divine name YHVH which was originally transliterated as Jehovah and probably written in the 10th century B.C.E. in Judea), God forms a human (in Hebrew: *adam*) from the earth (Hebrew: *adamah*). One biblical scholar suggested that *adam* should really be translated as “earthling” to show the intimate connection between human beings and the earth from which they come and to which they are connected by the need to cultivate the ground in order to live. The ground will also be the place they return to when they die (Genesis 3:19).

God then plants a garden and places the human in it “to till it and tend it.” The verbs have a root meaning of work and protect but the verb for “work” (*l’ovdah*) can also mean “to serve.” Therefore, the earthling both works and serves the land as the source of all humanity’s life-giving sustenance. This original balance of working, serving and protecting the earth is disturbed after the disobedience of the humans in the story of the eating of the fruit of knowledge in Genesis 3. Humans are now punished by having to toil hard in order for the earth to give forth its produce. What was once guaranteed is now contingent on human behavior. In this model, the land is not an inert substance but alive and morally sensitive to human action. This moral responsiveness is found in the story of Cain and Abel where God says to Cain that “your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground!” (See also Leviticus 18:28 where the land will “spew” the people out for acts of immorality.)

In many other texts in the Hebrew Bible, the places where humans dwell are akin to a garden: settled, ordered, peaceful places of plenty. Outside of human cultivation is the “wilderness” (Hebrew *midbar*). This term does not have the positive connotation that we now often give it. In the Hebrew Bible it is often depicted as a place of disorder, deserts, demons, wild dangerous beasts and migratory brigands. The Prophets often connect the continuance of human settled order to human righteousness and warn that the settled places will become “wilderness” if society continues to oppress the poor and the powerless.



connection with the earth. Everything we eat and use ultimately comes from the earth. By eating the food grown in the earth we really are earthlings: the same substances that come from the earth make up our physical selves. So we really come from the earth and we will really go back to it when we die. Secondly, we can learn a kind of agrarian ideal: we have to live with the soil, not only exploit it. We must not only work it but serve it and protect it. Thirdly, we must learn that economic and political oppression are linked to environmental degradation. This has been found to be true time and time again across the world and helps to create conflict and social unrest. If we want to keep our gardens fruitful and sustainable, they must also be just.

The Citizen

If the first two models of human/creation relationship are stewardship models which privilege human welfare, the third and fourth models are more biocentrist or, from a theological perspective, creation-centered. A creation-centered model is a holistic, more universal model. Creation theology sees the universe as a place where humans are part of an order in which they do not necessarily have a prime place. Humanity is, in this model, part of a Creation community in which they are, to use [Aldo Leopold's](#) terms, citizens and not conquerors. The first kind of this paradigm can be called the Citizen model of the human/natural world relationship and is the religious counterpart to Aldo Leopold's [Land Ethic](#).

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The Citizen model, like the Caretaker and Farmer models, is an attempt to control human power over the natural world but starts from different initial principles.

Leopold's Land Ethic limits human power by tying humans to a larger ethical community



loss of biodiversity that he saw around him as a forester and conservationist. Leopold asserted that contemporary ethical theory is inadequate to protect the biosphere and must now be expanded to include non-human life and the landscape itself. He wrote:

“There is yet no ethic dealing with man’s relationship to the land, to the animals and plants which grow upon it ... The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, water, plants and animals or collectively the land. ... A land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.”

In this new ethical approach, something is right when it “preserves the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

A biblical version of the Land Ethic is found in Psalm 148. The psalm is a creation hymn, a poetic map of the universe. It reflects the Israelite cosmology of a three-part universe: God, heavens and earth, or heavens, earth and *Sheol* (the underworld). The psalm’s structure portrays Creation as divided between a heavenly choir and an earthly choir. The heavenly choir includes the sun, moon, planets and stars, whose role it is to praise God and to act as witnesses to a revelation of God. The earthly choir consists of the forces of the natural world, the landscape, animal life (both wild and domesticated) and all kinds of humans. They are copying the heavenly choir, uniting with them in the same role and singing the same song of praise to their Creator.

The universe reflected by Psalm 148 is a harmonious order in which humans have no primacy even if they have their own special place. They are part of the earthly choir and join in the activity of the heavenly choir in a unification of purpose. There is no dominant human power over the rest of Creation. Psalm 148 pictures human society as part of a community of worshippers, which includes animal life, the forces of the natural world, such as the weather, the landscape and the heavens. The purpose of this community and therefore the purpose of all life is the praise of God.

Psalm 148 and Leopold’s Land Ethic emphasis the interconnectedness of all life in one moral community. From the recognition of belonging to that community arises an ethical imperative. In Leopold, this interconnectedness is derived from the common evolutionary origins of all living creatures and their ecological interaction with the environment. In Psalm 148 the interconnectedness is derived from the common origins of all Creation



with the whole choir of Creation.

The Creature

The final model is what I call the Creature model. From this perspective, humans have neither primacy nor even a special place in God's eyes. This is the most biocentrist and radical perspective in the Hebrew Bible and is found in only two sources, which stress humanity naiveté and arrogance.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes 3:17-21 the author says:

"So I decided, as regards men, to dissociate them [from] the divine beings and to face the fact that they are beasts. For in respect of the fate of man and the fate of beast, they have one and the same fate: as the one dies so dies the other and both have the same life breath; man has no superiority over beast, since both amount to nothing. Both go to the same place; both came from dust and both return to dust."

According to most biblical scholars, the author is responding directly to Psalm 8 and its picture of humanity as little less than the celestial beings and being radically different than animals. Here humans and beasts are the same: they come from the earth, they live, they die and then they return to the earth. This is an example of the intertextuality that I mentioned earlier. The author is rejecting the Caretaker model of humanity and asserting that we are the same as any other creature. One of the radical challenges that Darwinism made to traditional religious views of humanity was essentially the same: There is no qualitative difference between all species of life. They all evolved from the same original organisms. Modern genetics has shown us how close that relationship is. For example, humans and their primate cousins, the chimpanzees, have some 98 percent of the same genetic structure. This knowledge is important for us to realize in forming an environmental ethic as it replaces human arrogance with a sense of our real connection to all life.

In the Book of Job in chapters 38-42 there is another version of the Creature model. These chapters, which come near the end of the Book of Job, are God's speeches to Job out of a tempest. They are the climax to a work that is a meditation on the nature of evil in the world. The Book of Job is a parable about a pious man whose piety is tested by God through the loss of all his possessions, his children and his health. Job's friends come and give him conventional explanations for his suffering. He demonstrates that the traditional



from God for this injustice and, finally, God appears in a tempest to answer him.

But God does not directly address Job's objections. Instead, God asks a series of rhetorical questions about whether Job can match divine power and wisdom in creating and sustaining the world. The speeches are magnificent poetic evocations of the breadth, diversity and terrible beauty of God's creative power. Humans or human society are not even mentioned in these speeches. In the final chapter (42), Job admits his ignorance and limited perspective about God, accepts his suffering and is silenced. God then rewards him with the restoration of his wealth and the birth of new children. Job eventually dies "old and contented."

These final chapters have been subject to numerous interpretations. Whatever the meaning of God's answer to Job, it seems evident that God is trying to demonstrate to Job that divine providence is radically different from the conventional theology Job believed in and expected to work. Concerning these chapters, biblical scholar [Jon D. Levenson](#) concluded, "The brunt of that harangue is that creation is a wondrous and mysterious place that baffles human assumptions and expectations because it not anthropocentric but theocentric" (*Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p.155-6).

Chapters 38-41 are powerful responses to human arrogance and myopic anthropocentrism. The author of Job is telling us that we are not always the center of God's concern and that we can never understand fully the workings of God's universe or the nature of God. We can, however, find deep spiritual nourishment in the contemplation of Creation. By contemplating the "wondrous and mysterious place" that is Creation; we can look beyond ourselves and be brought to a better understanding of perspective on the universe.

These four voices from the Hebrew Bible can be seen as complimentary not contradictory. The editors of the biblical canon evidentially found it important to include them all as they must have resonated with the community that found these works to be sacred. Today, we need not choose one over the other but understand how the wisdom they represent can still teach us to care for Creation in humility and love as the most primary expression of God's revelation.

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