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The Earth is the Lord's

A Biblical Response to
Environmental Issues



SERIES

Hilary Marlow

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Environmental Issues

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1

Introduction

In 2007 an Environment Agency survey of leading environmentalists and scientists asked them to name 50 things that will save the planet.

The role of faith communities and their leaders was listed second, 'It's time the world's faith groups reminded us we have a duty to restore and maintain the ecological balance of the planet. Christians, Muslims, Hindus and others already believe that it is morally wrong to damage the environment. The problem is that many people simply choose to ignore this.'¹

This surprising result is a wake up call for the church. Some Christians who are concerned about the environment might not see how this connects with worshipping God. Others might think that such things are best left to keen 'eco-warriors' in our churches. And many wonder what the Bible has to say about what is essentially a modern problem. This book will tackle some of these issues and suggest a biblical response to environmental issues by exploring a variety of Bible passages, some well known, others less familiar.

Many wonder what the Bible has to say about what is essentially a modern problem

There is no doubt that the problems facing the world are serious; global warming, water shortages, famines and floods will affect a large percentage of the world's population over the next 20 years. However, this book is not primarily about the scientific data and projections regarding climate change and other environmental issues. Similarly, the practical responses that individuals, nations and the international community need to make in order to reduce the scale of the problem is another huge area for discussion, and again not one that can be tackled in great depth here. You will find some practical suggestions and a list of useful websites and other resources on both these matters on the Grove Books website www.grovebooks.co.uk.

Rather, our starting point is with the Bible, not because it gives detailed guidance on reducing our carbon footprint, but because it offers a profound understanding of the world, God's relation to it and our place within it. Apart from a few often cited injunctions such as not taking a mother bird with its

eggs (Deut 22.6) and not chopping down fruit trees (Deut 20.19–20), the Bible offers little in the way of specific commandments relating to environmental sustainability.² However, it does offer principles for living in a way which brings honour to God as well as respecting his world, principles which permeate the whole biblical story. Before any of us can seriously engage from a Christian perspective with the hows and whys, and the dos and do nots of environmental concern, we need to understand some of these biblical principles. Let us start with three positive affirmations about God and the world:

- God is creator of all: ‘The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth’ (Isa 40.28).³
- It belongs to him and he is actively involved in sustaining it: ‘The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it’ (Psa 24.1); ‘You visit the earth and water it’ (Psa 65.9).
- God’s creation is good and pleasing to him: ‘Then God saw all that he had made, and indeed it was very good’ (Gen 1.31).

Countless Christians affirm this when they recite the Nicene Creed as part of their weekly act of worship:

We believe in one God,
the Father, the almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
and of all that is,
seen and unseen.⁴

Yet many have not made a connection between this statement of belief and the environmental problems that the world faces. The aim of this book is to help Christians think through what their Christian faith means in terms of the environment and human impact on it, and to provide discussion material for group work or personal reflection.

2

Celebrating God's World

As I write this I am sitting on the balcony of the A Rocha field study centre in Kenya, overlooking the stunning deep blue sea and white sand of the Indian Ocean and experiencing a range of unfamiliar sights, sounds and smells.

Enormous, colourful butterflies flutter in the shrubs alongside me, exotic bird calls and the singing of a hundred cicadas fill the air, and the blossoms on the frangipani tree give off a heady scent.

Being surrounded by so many unfamiliar and exotic plants and creatures prompts reflection on why God created such a beautiful and varied world. Is it, as many suggest (including some well-known theologians), in order to provide a home for human beings and the resources of fuel and food necessary for our survival?⁵ Such a human-centred perspective on God's world seems to take little account of the diversity, complexity and, to our minds, strangeness of much of the natural world, which is now accessible to us through a wealth of nature films and documentaries. But it also carries a more profound theological weakness affecting our view

If we see the world as existing purely for human benefit, we fail to take seriously the creation or its creator

of God as well as of the world, and can lead us to a self-centred and childish understanding of God as the one who always gives us whatever we want. If we see the rest of the world—the 'non-human creation'—as existing purely for human benefit, we fail to take seriously either the creation or its creator.⁶ Such attitudes have contributed to exploitative and damaging practices in many parts of the world, as human beings have tried to take what they regarded as their right, without regard for the consequences.

Creation in All its Diversity

In the Bible, particularly in some of the psalms and the wisdom literature, we find a different understanding of the world, one which focuses on God's goodness and creativity, rather than on human need.⁷ Psalm 104 proclaims, 'O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all;

the earth is full of your creatures' (v 24). The whole psalm is a hymn of praise to God as creator and sustainer of the world and a celebration of the wonder and diversity of his creation. Human life features briefly in this psalm (v 23), but is not the predominant theme. Rather, human beings are just one among many creatures who look to the Lord for life and sustenance (vv 27–30).

Notice several important things from this psalm which are echoed elsewhere in the Scriptures:

- The *creator God is distinct* and separate from his creation. This was just as important in the ancient Israelite context of polytheistic religion as it is in the contemporary world, where new spiritualities which focus on worshipping nature or the earth are prevalent.
- *God's plan and purpose* in creating permeates the psalm. This suggests a deliberation and care in the mind of the creator, which results in a creation with purpose and beauty (eg vv 10–13).
- *God's provision* of different habitats and foodstuffs, and of seasonal and daily cycles, is to enable the flourishing of all species, not just human ones (vv 14–22, 27–28; see also Ps 145.15–16, 147.9, Job 38.39–41). There is a sense of God's delight in creation in the spontaneity and exuberance of Leviathan 'frolicking' in the sea (v 26).

Although the science of ecology is a relatively modern discipline, there is no doubt that the psalmist understood something of habitats and food chains and that he regarded God as the source of the diversity of creation.

Creation Perspective

One of the greatest creation poems in the Old Testament is found in the book of Job, after Job has persisted in his complaint against God despite the earnest but misguided counsel of his friends. God's answer to Job's sense of injustice and pain is to draw his attention to the rest of the creation (chapters 38–41). In a series of descriptions of the created world, God challenges Job to reassess his perspective on life in the light of the whole created order, not just his own problems, 'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?' he asks (38.4). In the verses that follow we see the creation from God's perspective and are invited to marvel at how little Job, or indeed we, even with our advanced scientific knowledge, can understand or control the workings of the weather, or the lifecycles of a myriad of species. These chapters proclaim the greatness and power of God the creator, but they also express a sense of wonder at the workings of the natural world. In the end all Job can do is humble himself before God and offer him worship (42.1–3).

Creation Reveals God's Glory

God's act of creation is an expression of something of his very nature—it reveals his own creativity. Just as an artist or musician or poet pours something of their very selves into the work they produce, so the creation bears something of the stamp of God.⁸ This is not to say that the creation itself is God. There is a clear distinction between regarding the natural world as divine (a characteristic of pantheism, the view that the universe or nature is divine, but not of biblical Christianity) and rediscovering the sacred nature of creation which leads us to worship the creator afresh.⁹

The Bible suggests that the creation reflects and reveals the glory of its creator. Psalm 19 tells us, 'the heavens declare the glory of God...day to day they pour forth speech' (vv 1–2). The angels in Isaiah's temple vision proclaim, 'Holy Holy Holy is the Lord...the whole contents (literally, 'fullness') of the earth is his glory' (Isa 6.3, author's translation). In Amos 4.13 and 5.8 the prophet invites people to understand what God is like—his all-powerful 'name'—by considering his creation. For the biblical authors, as for us, the natural world in all its diversity and splendour points to God, demonstrating something of his nature and qualities.¹⁰

Creation Worships God

The end of the book of Psalms proclaims, 'Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!' (Ps 150.6). This command to worship God is addressed not just to his human creation but to other animate life. In Ps 148 the exhortation is widened to include all creation—sun, moon and stars, sea creatures, mountains, trees and birds, all owe their existence to him, and so are to offer him praise. The psalmists are not concerned with *how* these various natural elements worship the Lord, but with the part that the whole earth plays in glorifying God. Most Christians understand that worshipping God is a core purpose of our human existence, but these Psalms and many others make it clear that this is something we share with the rest of creation, not something that distinguishes us from it.

Worshipping God is something we share with the rest of creation

A New Challenge

Reflecting like this on the purpose of the creator and the worship of his creation is not something many Christians give much time to. Often their thinking about creation begins (and ends) with the more familiar creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2, to which we shall return later in the book. What then are the implications and challenges for the church? First, we need to discover or

renew our own appreciation of God's world as individuals and as communities, whether that is in our own backyard or further afield.¹¹

Secondly, let us allow our enjoyment of the creation to lead to fresh and invigorated worship of the Lord who created it. Why not use Psalm 104 or another of the passages we have looked at as a meditation to focus your worship?

Finally, we need to be concerned for all that God has made and to ensure that it is not hampered from reflecting God's glory by our waste or wanton destruction.

For Further Discussion

Here are some questions to reflect on:

- What does the way we treat the earth say about our own relationship to God?
- What are the consequences when parts of God's creation are destroyed by human beings? Is this happening near where you live or work or worship? If so, what could you do about it?

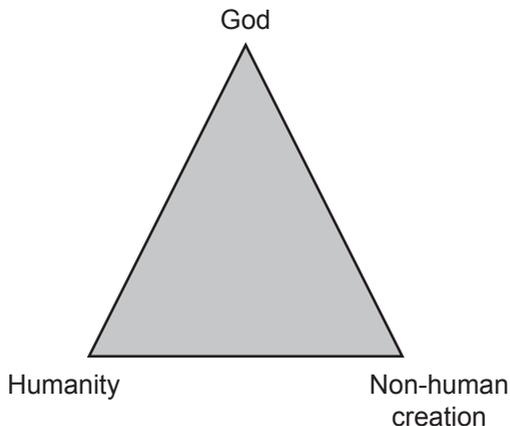
3

Creation in Relationship

The term 'ecology' describes the study of the relationships between living things and their habitats, including how human societies interact with the natural world.

You do not need to be an ecologist to notice the fascinating and often complex interaction between the English summer weather, the number of birds and insects in your garden (both predators and prey) and the wellbeing or otherwise of your vegetable patch! Of course, one of the problems now facing the world is that these relationships are under severe strain, often as a result of human activity and ignorance.

Most Christians are probably aware that the Bible is also concerned with relationships, but perhaps would think only in terms of God's relationship with human beings and our relationships with one another. But the Old Testament paints a bigger picture than this, which incorporates the whole of creation in relationship with God. Perhaps the easiest way to depict this is through the model of a triangle of relationships, whereby human society and the rest of creation interact with each other as well as with God:¹²



If we read the Scriptures with this triangular framework in mind we discover new and sometimes surprising insights into God's interaction with all of his

creation, both human and non-human, and particularly into the relationship between human beings and the natural world, which is often overlooked. In the rest of this chapter we shall look at some examples of this—mainly passages from the prophets which deal with the negative aspects of this interaction. More positive examples will follow in chapter six.

The Earth Mourns

The Old Testament prophets are particularly concerned with the effect that human behaviour has on the earth. A number of them describe it in terms of the earth or land ‘mourning,’ as drought or disaster has come upon the people of God.¹³ In Jeremiah 12, we are told that it is human sin which results in the land mourning and the grass withering, and the animals and birds being swept away (v 4). The prophet adds a further indictment at the end of the verse—that the inhabitants of the land have presumed God does not see what they have been up to. How wrong they are!

These ideas are more clearly elaborated in Isaiah 24 where the earth not only mourns but ‘lies polluted under its inhabitants, for they have transgressed laws, violated statutes and broken the everlasting covenant.’ The reference to laws and statutes suggests that prophet is thinking of Israel’s failure to live according to the commandments given her at Sinai (Exod 20–23). But the ‘everlasting covenant’ also reminds us of God’s covenant with Noah (Gen 9.16) which reaffirms the relationship between God, human beings and the whole of creation. What a telling picture Isaiah paints of today’s world, where human beings have literally as well as metaphorically polluted their lands, and where the earth is languishing under the abuses that we have subjected it to.

*Human beings have
literally as well as
metaphorically polluted
their lands*

The clearest example of earth ‘mourning’ as a result of broken relationship is Hosea 4.1–3. Here the prophet starts by calling God’s people to recognize their shortcomings, ‘There is no faithfulness, no loving kindness and no knowledge of God in the land’ (v 1). As is so often the case in the Old Testament, when God is not honoured society suffers breakdown, so it is no surprise to read in the following verse that murder, theft, lying and adultery are rife (v 2). Hosea deliberately chooses a strong phrase to link this collapse of human society with the consequences in the natural world, ‘Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish, together with the wild animals, and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing’ (v 3). In Hosea’s mind there is a clear connection between environmental degradation, and human moral and spiritual failure.

Cause and Effect

These passages, and numerous others like them, highlight a fundamental principle, which the prophets are keen to point out—that of cause and effect. They understand better than we seem to that human attitudes and behaviour have consequences which are serious for other parts of God’s world as well as for themselves. Things are no different today. The lifestyles we lead and the way our societies conduct themselves have far-reaching and often devastating consequences for the rest of God’s creation. For us as Christians, the failing health of our planet is as much a matter for concern as urban deprivation and rising gun crime; they are both indicative of the loss of moral and spiritual compass which characterizes our society.

Justice and Righteousness

The link between God, human society and the natural world is articulated in very specific terms by prophets such as Micah, Amos and First Isaiah (chs 1–39). Each of them are well known for their condemnation of exploitative practices towards the poor and vulnerable, and their call for the re-establishment of justice and righteousness in society (Mic 6.8, 10–12; Amos 5.12–15, 8.4–6; Isa 1.16–17). In Hebrew these terms are relational, denoting not just equitable trading standards but the restoration of God’s purpose for human relationships, his *shalom* in the world. What is not so often noted is that the absence of these core values in society results in disruption to the land, including drought and failed harvests (Mic 6.15; Amos 5.11) and more widespread devastation of the physical landscape (Amos 8.7–8; Isa 1.7–9). If human beings neglect God’s fundamental principles of justice and righteousness there are consequences in the wider environment.

In our own context the link between environmental degradation and social justice is clear

In our own context the link between environmental degradation and social justice is also clear. Western affluent lifestyles and consumption patterns are contributing to the environmental degradation which impacts the poor and vulnerable in other societies. Global warming caused by carbon emissions from (predominantly) western countries is seriously affecting the crop yields of subsistence farmers the world over. Huge areas of tropical forest are being destroyed by multi-national corporations to plant mono-crops such as soya or palm oil which in turn feed our consumerism. If they were alive today, prophets like Amos and Micah would surely be speaking out against these abuses of justice and righteousness as vehemently as they challenged Israel for using dishonest weights.

God's Ways in the World

To a modern reader some of these prophetic critiques might seem to offer a very simplistic understanding of the way the world works, in which human behaviour is the only criterion for the flourishing of the natural order. Even worse, a superficial reading might suggest that God is behind modern-day natural disasters, such as the tsunami of Boxing Day 2004. To respond to this, we need to recognize that the ancient view of the world was very different from our own, and it would be anachronistic to try and read back our own

The cycle of death and decay is necessary for life

scientific understanding of the working of the world and causes of natural phenomena into the biblical texts. Ecologists today realize that the world is not a static system, in which natural processes operate according to a fixed, predetermined pattern, but one that is evolving in response to a complex range of variables. The cycle of death and decay is necessary for life, and the processes which give rise to natural disasters are often essential to the functioning of the planet we call earth.

The ancient Israelite view of how God acts within his creation is described in a very directly causal manner, in which the wind is God's messenger (Ps 104.4) and the eagle soars at his command (Job 39.26). For us, reconciling contemporary scientific understanding with belief in a creator God necessitates a rethinking of emphasis and vocabulary, as suggested by Vinoth Ramachandra:

The creator respects the integrity of his creation. The relationship between creator and creation cannot be described adequately in the language of 'controlling' and 'ruling.' There is also a 'letting-be,' a willingness to let the creation unfold in its own way and according to its intrinsic character.¹⁴

In another respect, however, the writers of the Old Testament seem to grasp some vital principles that we are often slow to understand today. They recognize the cyclical aspect of the world, whereby life operates around rhythms of sowing and harvesting, of birth and death, and where actions in one sphere can have far-reaching and often devastating effects in another. For them justice is not an individual thing but a communal responsibility. It is not to be equated with fairness, but rather a matter of maintaining divine order in the world. When this breaks down, a sense of balance, of *shalom*, is lost and the reaction is severe and drastic. This loss of equilibrium is one the world is experiencing now, at great cost to peoples and eco-systems. Rediscovering God's *shalom* in our own lives and bringing it into all our relationships is one of the greatest challenges we face as Christians.

True Worship

One final point to note about these prophetic critiques is that they are addressed to God's own people, who should of all people know better. The Israelites have assumed that their obedience to God can be demonstrated by fervently observing festivals and holy days, all the while continuing their unjust practices. Nothing could be further from the truth! Isaiah puts it graphically, 'Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile...I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity' (Isa 1.12–13; see also Amos 5.21–24; Mic 6.6–7). Worshipping God, according to the prophets, is far more than rituals and sacrifices. It involves righteous conduct in business and society. Anything less is condemned as hypocrisy. Likewise our worship, however devout, is meaningless and even offensive to the Lord unless it is accompanied by the right attitudes and behaviour—and that includes a concern for justice in the global context, which includes the way that we treat the whole environment.

For Further Reflection

- Read Hosea 4.1–3 again and think of ways in which that prophecy is relevant today. How does the relationship between God, society and the natural world break down in our own society and for what reasons?
- Look on the websites of aid agencies for information about the effect of environmental problems on the poor throughout the world. If you were Amos or Micah preaching in a market place or church service today, what would you have to say about this?

4

Creation and Humanity

We turn now to the beginning of Genesis—to some passages which you might have expected to be discussed at the start of this book.

The reason for leaving them until now is simply that the ideas outlined in the preceding two chapters—of creation's purpose being to reveal and glorify God, and of the interconnection between God, humanity and the natural world—are fundamental to understanding the Israelite stories of the origins of the world and of humanity.

The two creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 clearly present two different perspectives on the creation story. Genesis 1 is a stylized and repetitive description of the big picture—the whole world—whilst Genesis 2 focuses on a small part of that whole—human beings and animals. Despite (or perhaps because of) these differences, it is crucial that we read these chapters together, otherwise we run the risk of emphasizing one part of God's creation purposes at the expense of another.

Genesis 1

Genesis 1 sets out God's activity in the world in a series of stages or 'days,' and the author uses a number of recurrent phrases such as 'And God said,' or 'Let there be' to emphasize this structure. Six times we are told that 'God saw that it was good' (vv 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) and his final verdict on the whole of his handiwork is that it is 'very good' (v 31). The section that receives most attention, and attracts most heated debate, is the creation of human beings in vv 26–28. Here we are told that humankind, both male and female, are created 'in the image of God' and told to subdue and have dominion over the animals (vv 27–28). For many Christians this suggests that human beings are regarded as separate from creation, and totally distinct from other created beings. It is this attitude that has led, with some justification, to the accusation that Christianity is partly to blame for environmental problems.¹⁵ But notice that human beings are created on the same day (day six) as all the other land animals (vv 24–25) and that they share with these same land animals God's permission to draw their nourishment from the trees and plants he has created (vv 29–30).

Even the instruction to be fruitful and fill the earth is also given to other creatures (v 22). So human beings are very much created beings alongside all the others—part of God’s creation, not in any way superior to it. Rediscovering a sense of humility about our place as creatures in God’s world will help us consider more carefully the effect we have on the rest of the planet.

Made in God’s Image

At the start of the biblical narrative, human beings are placed firmly within the context of God’s whole creative purpose and are created, not in isolation from other species, but in a particular relationship with them and with God. This is expressed as being made by God ‘in his image and likeness’ (Gen 1.27).¹⁶

The early readers of Genesis would have recognized a connection between the phrase ‘image of God’ and aspects of the ancient Near Eastern understanding of kingship. In some ancient texts, the king is created in the image of the god as his representative, acting on behalf of the deity.¹⁷ Furthermore, in the ancient world, the responsibility of a king is to rule well over both people and land, and to represent the god to the people.¹⁸ This picture of kingship is clearly expressed in Psalm 72, which links together the king as guarantor of justice and righteousness in society with the well-being and fertility of the land.

In the ancient world, the responsibility of a king is to rule well over both people and land

It is this model of benevolent leadership that is behind Gen 1.26–27, and which continues in verse 28 using the language of ruling, as human beings are told that they will subdue and have dominion over other animals (v 28b). But these words form part of a divine blessing, rather than as many interpreters assume, a set of commands. God’s injunction to ‘be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’ (v 28a) is the same as that given to the fish and birds on day five of creation (v 22) and is an expression of his desire for the flourishing and fecundity of the creatures he has made. This is echoed in verses 29–30 which detail God’s provision of food for humans and animals alike.

What then do we make of ‘subdue [the earth], and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ (v 28b)? At its simplest level, this expresses what the earliest humans did as they moved from being hunter-gatherers to farmers, taming wilderness to grow crops and domesticating animals for food and transport. It also highlights a distinguishing feature of human beings which has become more pronounced as industrial and technological development has progressed—the capacity to fundamentally alter environments other than our own. However the intent of the creator was never for the wanton disregard

of other species or habitats which characterizes our society. Although the Hebrew words used in this verse, *kabash* ‘to subdue’ and *radah* ‘to rule, have dominion,’ are strong, they are not usually used in the Old Testament in a harsh and exploitative sense, as some critics suggest.¹⁹ Indeed, ruling harshly is expressly prohibited in Leviticus (Lev 25.43, 46), and the biblical ideal of kingly rule is far from that of despotic tyrant, as Psalm 72 demonstrates (see also Isa 11.1–10; Jer 23.5–6). In the New Testament this idea is epitomized in the depiction of Jesus as the servant-king (Phil 2.5–11; Jn 13.12–16; Matt 20.28). So human beings have a unique and divinely sanctioned responsibility to exercise just and peaceful leadership over other creatures.²⁰ Sadly, that picture is far from the present reality.

Genesis 2

In Genesis 2, the focus narrows to the formation of a single human being (*ha-adam*, ‘the human’) and his purpose in the wider creation.²¹ The earth is depicted as ground (*adamah*) without water and without vegetation (v 5–6), but once rain has fallen, the Lord God moulds the human from the dust of the ground and places him in a garden, the garden of Eden. This humble origin, graphically conveyed by the shared Hebrew root—*adam* from the *adamah*, human from the humus, is one that the human being shares with the vegetation (v 9) as well as with other animals (v 19). In today’s scientific terms, it is a reminder that we are just one of the carbon-based life forms which colonize this planet. Yet the responsibility given to the first human for naming the other animals (vv 19–20) is an indication that there is difference

as well as commonality between human and non-human.

There is difference as well as commonality between human and non-human

The human’s role in the garden is to tend and protect it (v 15). As some commentators have noted, the Hebrew words *abad* and *shamar*

often translated ‘to till and to keep’ could just as well be rendered ‘to serve and preserve.’ The depiction of Eden in these verses might draw on the tradition of Mesopotamian kings for cultivating royal parks, which is known to us from ancient carvings.²² If so, the first human is not just any old gardener, he is the royal gardener, answerable to the king himself, that is, to the Lord God (see v 16). Although the imagery is different from the first creation account, the common theme of kingship binds these two chapter together. In Genesis 1 our responsibility as human beings towards the rest of creation comes to the fore in the idea of servant kingship, ruling wisely and well over God’s world. Here in Genesis 2 it is the role of human beings as servants of the one great king, God himself, that is stressed, with our responsibility before God

for tending his garden, the earth, as an act of service and indeed worship towards him.

Broken Relationships

The idyllic picture of Eden begins to unravel in Genesis 3 and the familiar story of the questioning, temptation and disobedience of the first human beings plays out. It is often noted that the Fall results in the fracturing of the friendship between human beings and God, and within human relationships, especially between men and women, but this is not the only connection that is broken. The human's relation to the ground from which he was formed is permanently and devastatingly altered. The pleasure of tending the royal garden is replaced by a struggle to make ends meet from the soil outside the garden. At one level this reflects the struggle to farm in the hostile and unpredictable conditions of ancient Israel. But it is also a poignant and prophetic reminder of what we have already noted—that human disobedience has consequences for the natural world and for the relationship between human and non-human creation.

Cursed From the Ground

The final banishment of the human from the garden 'to tend the ground from which he was taken' (Gen 3.23) marks the start of a new and troubled relationship between humanity and the earth as well as between human beings and their God. Almost immediately in Genesis 4 we read of a further example of the fractured and fragile nature of that three-way connection, as Cain kills his brother Abel in anger and jealousy after his offering is rejected by God (Gen 4.3–16). Although Cain attempts to deny responsibility, God is not fooled (v 9). Notice how the whole incident and its outcome is connected to the ground. Abel's blood cries out from the ground (v 10) and Cain is cursed from the ground, which has received Abel's blood (v 11). Cain's punishment is worse than that of the human of Genesis 2; the ground will no longer produce anything for him (v 12). In Cain's own words, 'Today you have driven me away from the soil' (v 13). What a graphic portrayal of our own fragmented relationship with the earth that we depend on for all our physical needs.

For Further Reflection

- In what ways have the broken relationships of Genesis 3 affected human relationships with the rest of creation in today's world?
- How can we honour God as king in the way that we tend and care for his earth? What might responsible leadership entail in practice?

5

Christ in Creation

So far we have focused on the Old Testament because that is where most of the specific material relating to the creation and our place within it can be found.

But this does not mean the New Testament is silent on these matters. In this chapter we will discuss the New Testament understanding of the relationship between God and his creation, in particular the significance of the person and work of Jesus Christ for the whole world, and the implications of this for our own lives. The teaching of Jesus and indeed of most of the New Testament presupposes a comprehensive understanding of the Old Testament—the Jewish Scriptures which formed Jesus’ religious upbringing. So the creation theology of the Old Testament which we have already discussed is part of the core Jewish framework within which Jesus lived and preached.

The Word as Creator (John 1)

At the start of John’s gospel the author ascribes the creation of all things to the incarnate son, the word of God (v 1–3). John is drawing on the Genesis 1 account of God speaking the world into existence, as is made clear by his opening phrase, ‘In the beginning was the word,’ (compare ‘In the beginning... God said’ Gen 1.1–3). John’s declaration of the physical reality and humanity of the messiah (v 14) is set within the framework of Christ as the creator of all and the giver of life (vv 1–4, 10, 18). Of all the New Testament writers, John makes greatest use of the term ‘world’ (*kosmos*), with a wide range of meanings. Although at times he clearly seems to use it to denote human beings (12.19), or even in contrast to new life offered by Jesus (15.18–19), here in John 1, as elsewhere in the gospel, it carries the broader meaning of the whole created order.²³ Rereading John’s gospel in the light of this reminds us that Jesus’ purpose and mission is not exclusively with human beings but with the whole of his creation. Even the familiar words of John 3.16 ‘For God so loved *the world* (*kosmos*) that he gave his only son’ take on a meaning far broader than just human salvation, especially if read in conjunction with the following verse (3.17), which echoes the creation language of John 1.

Jesus' Encounters with his Creation

The gospel accounts of Jesus' life illustrate his involvement with his creation in a number of different ways, from the supernatural to the ordinary. His birth is accompanied by strange appearances of heavenly bodies (Luke 2.13–14) and unusual stellar activity (Matt 2.9–10). In his ministry, Jesus draws his inspiration and illustrations from the natural world around him, using his creation both as an example and as a means of communicating his message. The parables are a prime example of this, drawing on familiar concepts and ideas from the world around, in a similar fashion to the Old Testament prophets who use metaphors from the natural world to illustrate their preaching. From the parable of the mustard seed (Matt 13.31) to that of the sower (Matt 13.1–9), Jesus invites his listeners to see God's truth revealed in his creation. This is made explicit in his instruction in the sermon on the mount to 'consider the birds of the air' (Matt 6.26)—a reminder to the disciples and to us that all of God's creation owes its existence to his provision and care.

Many of the miracles of Jesus are concerned with the natural world—it is entirely unsurprising that the creator of fish and grain should be able to feed a multitude from a few loaves and fishes, as well as heal human sickness. It is perhaps significant that in the gospel of John, both the first and last miracles of Jesus, changing the water into wine (Jn 2.1–11) and the huge catch of fish (Jn 21.4–12), involve the miraculous provision of food and drink, the fundamental necessities of life. We miss something of the richness of these events in Jesus' ministry if we view them only in terms of their spiritual significance. Jesus' engagement with the whole of his creation is part of the new kingdom which his coming into the world inaugurates and which will involve the renewal of the whole *kosmos*.

Jesus' engagement with the creation is part of the new kingdom which will involve the renewal of the kosmos.

Perhaps the miracle which speaks most powerfully of Jesus' relationship with his creation is the stilling of the storm.

In Mark's account (Mk 4.35–41) the fragility and weakness of the disciples, many of whom are fishermen, is evident. They are powerless and afraid in the face of one of the great storms which spring up without warning on the lake (v 37). Jesus is sleeping—a very human response to a long day of ministry. Yet when he is woken from his sleep, he rebukes the elements with a clear and effective authority. The disciples, who undoubtedly know the scriptural traditions of God subduing the waters of chaos at the creation of the world (Ps 104.7, Job 26.12), recognize that such authority could only be that of the creator, 'Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?' In this brief account Mark establishes Jesus' relationship with his creation, bypassing the

human characters in the story and leaving them virtually speechless, and in so doing confirms to them his divinity.

Just as at his birth, the physical earth has a part to play in the events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. When the Lord of creation dies, the natural world is disrupted by eclipse (Matt 27.45), and earthquake (Matt 27.51). Likewise, an earthquake accompanies the rolling of the stone from the grave three days later (Matt 28.2). Jesus' interaction with his creation and its response to his birth, death and resurrection is a reminder that the gospel story is concerned with the whole created order, not solely with human beings.

Christ as God's Image (Colossians 1)

This emphasis is echoed by some of the epistle writers, in particular the letter to the Colossians. The hymn of Colossians 1.15–20 makes at least three clear declarations about Christ: he is creator; he is sustainer; and he is redeemer of the world. Christ is affirmed as the one in whom and through whom and for whom everything is created (vv 15–16). He is both God's human representative on earth (v 15) *and* the one who holds the universe together (v 17).²⁴ The repetition of 'all things' (*ta panta*) five times in these few verses establishes Christ as Lord over all his creation (v 18–19) and as the one whose death on the cross reconciles all creation, not just human beings, to God (v 20). The redemptive act of Christ accomplishes more than human salvation; it has the power to put right all the broken relationships of Genesis 3. The letter goes on to talk about Christian response to this salvation, as the writer urges a transformation in his readers' own attitudes and actions (vv 21–23, 2.6–7).

Christ's role in sustaining his creation echoes the Old Testament belief that God is actively involved in the world he has made. But, some might say, if Christ as the image of God sustains and redeems the universe which he created,

then will he not ensure its continuation and flourishing until his return? So does this not absolve us from worrying about the state of the planet? Not so! God is committed to sustaining the earth through Christ, and calls us to be of the same mind. The Christian life is not meant to be lived passively, waiting for

God is committed to sustaining the earth through Christ, and calls us to be of the same mind

God to act, but to be working with him. This is made clear later in the letter when, in an exhortation to godly behaviour, the author uses 'image of God' language to describe those who are being renewed in Christ (3.10). The delegated responsibility given to humankind, as part of this image of God in us, is to participate in Christ's sustaining and redemptive purposes for his world. See the end of chapter six for questions for further reflection.

6

Hope and Redemption

The gospel story is not solely concerned with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

According to the gospel authors, these events inaugurate a new beginning, the kingdom of heaven come to earth (Matt 10.7), the rule of God in the present, not at some distant future time (Luke 8.10). Christian hope is concerned with life here and now, as well as looking forward to a future with Christ. Both the present outworking of God's kingdom on earth and the promised establishment of a new heaven and new earth are concerned with the whole of creation, not just with human beings. This involves restoration of the material world, not the separation of spiritual from physical, mind from matter, which characterizes Greek dualistic philosophy.

Hope and Restoration

Chapters three and four of this book considered some of the ways that the Old Testament describes the breakdown in relationships—between human beings and God and within human society, and the effect that this has on the rest of creation. In this chapter we will look at passages which offer the possibility of hope and restoration, and note how this involves the whole of creation.

The first covenant between God and his world is recorded in Genesis 9, when God promises to Noah that a flood will never again destroy all creatures. The covenant is with 'every living creature' (v 10), not just with the humans in the story, and, to make sure Noah has got the message, this is reiterated a further four times in the following verses (vv 12, 15, 16, 17). This is a promise for the here and now, one which marks a new beginning for the human race and one which assures Noah of God's involvement with and concern for his world. The book of Hosea echoes this when the Lord promises to restore Israel to a right relationship with him as his 'wife' by establishing a covenant with all living things—animals, birds and fish (Hos 2.18–19), not just with his people. This message of future hope with which Hosea 2 ends is set in deliberate contrast with the present reality of the earth mourning as a result of Israel's sin which we have already discussed (Hos 4.1–3).

The possibility of hope and restoration involves the whole of creation

Other biblical prophets, in particular Isaiah, temper their messages of gloom and punishment with visions of restoration and renewal, of the whole creation, not just of human society. In Isaiah 29.17–21 the restoration of the non-human creation is portrayed as a return to fruitfulness—of both field and forest (v 17)—and this is coupled with the end of injustice in society (v 20–21). The outpouring of the ‘spirit from on high’ in Isaiah 32.15 brings flourishing and fruitfulness to the wilderness as well as justice, righteousness and peace for the human population (vv 16–17). In Isaiah 35 the coming of the Lord brings rejuvenation of the natural world (vv 1–2) as well as healing of the blind, deaf and lame (vv 5–6). Mourning will be turned to joy, as both the wilderness (vv 1–2) and the people (v 10) rejoice before God.

The renewal of creation is a crucial part of the messianic promise of Isaiah 11. This is an idyllic picture in two parts, in which a ruler from David’s line ushers in a reign of justice and righteousness for the poor and judgment for the wicked (vv 1–5), and where peace and harmony is established between predatory and poisonous animals and their prey (vv 6–8). It is difficult to see how this might fit in a literal sense with contemporary understandings of ecology and cycles of predation. But, like the Genesis 1 account of creation, it is not meant to be read

*The renewal of creation
is a crucial part of the
messianic promise of
Isaiah*

literally. Rather it is dramatic picture language depicting the restoration of relationships and coming of peace, *shalom*, in the whole of the created order, including the establishment of harmony between wild and domestic animals, and wild animals with human beings. The restoration of God’s order under the banner of justice and righteousness includes the whole of his creation.

Creation Set Free

This vision for all creation carries forward into the New Testament as well. Romans 8 reminds us that the whole creation groans as it waits for the revelation of God’s children (vv 18–23). In writing these verses it is likely that Paul is referring to Isaiah 24 and the idea that the earth mourns as a result of human sin, as well as looking to the reversal of the curses in Genesis 3.²⁵ He then looks forward to the coming liberation of the whole creation as a result of the redemption of our human bodies. Here, as in the gospels, the new beginning, the kingdom of God, has begun and yet is not fully completed. When that happens, the whole of God’s world will obtain freedom and glory (v 21). This is not the ethereal picture of disembodied spirits sitting on clouds strumming harps, beloved of some cartoonists. It is a very ‘earthed’ reality, which involves the restoration of the creation, including humanity, to all that God intended for it.

New Heaven, New Earth

In the book of Revelation, we read the final glorious picture of a new heaven and a new earth, and of God coming down to make his home with human beings (Rev 21.1–3). Again, this is not some immaterial existence, but a renewed and restored physical world, where pain, mourning and death will have ceased (v 4). The flourishing of all creation is symbolized by the abundance of the tree of life, which provides food and healing for all (22.2).

Earlier in the book, in descriptions of worship before the throne of God, it is because of his acts of creation that he is acclaimed as worthy of glory, honour and power (4.11). In the next chapter, along with the four living creatures and the angelic beings, it is ‘all creatures in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea’ that join in singing praise to the Lamb (5.13). These verses suggest a continuation and perfection of the purposefulness of the whole creation which we have already seen foreshadowed in the Old Testament. In another worship song before the throne the twenty-four elders proclaim that God’s time of judgment and reward has come, including a time ‘for destroying those who destroy the earth’ (11.18). It is not God’s intention to wipe out his own creation, though it appears he will punish those who do!

A Fiery End?

Some critics of environmental action quote from 2 Peter 3 to argue that this world is destined to be destroyed in the final judgment, and therefore we should not be concerned with its present state. Indeed, some extreme views even advocate speeding the return of Christ by using up the earth’s resources. In the light of all the other Scriptures we have considered, it is hard to see how this view can be true to the whole biblical picture. So how then do we understand 2 Peter 3.3–13?

- The imagery of burning by fire (vv 7, 12) does not necessarily indicate destruction, but in other New Testament writings, including that of Peter himself, signifies purification (1 Pet 1.7, 1 Cor 3.13).
- The comparison with the Genesis flood in v 6 is instructive, for clearly it was not the whole earth which was destroyed then. Just as the reason behind the flood is that ‘the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth’ (Gen 6.5), so too in the coming judgment of God it is human attitudes and actions that will be called to account (v 7).
- In verse 13 the phrase ‘new heavens and new earth’ is almost identical to that in Rev 21.1. In both cases the Greek word for new (*kainos*) suggests something which surpasses and perfects that which has

gone before, rather than replacing it with something completely brand new and different.

New Creature, New Creation

2 Corinthians 5.17 uses the same word as 2 Peter 3 to tell us that when someone comes to Christ, new creation (*kaine ktisis*) results.²⁶ This does not involve the complete obliteration of the old person but rather a new beginning and a remaking into what God intended them to be. Being part of God's new creation now, and looking forward to the final fulfilment of it in the age to come, do not absolve us from responsibilities towards the rest of creation. Rather, by rediscovering our God-given mandate to rule wisely over his world, and to care for and protect his garden as our worship of him, we become involved in bringing the kingdom of God to earth as Jesus taught us to pray, 'your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven' (Matt 6.10).

For Further Reflection

On Chapter 5

- Read one of the four gospels making a note of every reference to the world/earth and parts of it (apart from human beings), and reflect on what you found unexpected, interesting or challenging.
- If Christ's concern for his whole creation is not just that he upholds it, but that he also redeems it by his death, how then should we live in that creation now? Later in the letter, the Colossians are encouraged to 'clothe' themselves with various attributes: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, love etc (3.12–14). How might putting on these characteristics affect the way we treat the environment?

On Chapter 6

- As we have seen, the Bible often talks about the new creation using figurative or picture language, largely because it is outside the experience of the biblical authors, and ours. What of these pictures do you find easiest to understand and why? What aspects of God's renewed creation do you look forward to the most?
- Some Christians do not think much about the future, nor do they embrace change willingly. All too often churches are slow to respond to contemporary challenges and are more concerned with keeping things as they are now. What do you think will happen if the church continues to adopt a 'business as usual' approach in the face of escalating environmental challenges?

Conclusion—So Now What?

This booklet has touched briefly on various aspects of biblical teaching about creation and our part within it, in response to the environmental issues that we are facing.

Hopefully it will inspire you to read other parts of the Scriptures with these perspectives in mind. But above all, I hope this book will spur you to reflection and action on how we should live as responsible Christians in the world. Understanding the biblical principles of interrelationship—between God, human beings and the rest of his creation—is one thing. Applying them to our daily lives is another. But this is part of our creation calling and responsibility. It involves thinking seriously about the practical outworking of our Christian commitment and worship in the way we treat other people, especially the poor, and the way we live in God’s world which is now under so much stress. If ever there was an issue on which Christians need to take action, and do so quickly, this is it.

Following Christ

Following Christ involves being prepared to change and be changed, and to allow his Spirit to renew us and inspire us. Being concerned about environmental issues is a core part of such Christian discipleship, not an optional extra. So it is fitting at the end of this book to reflect on the implications of discipleship in the context of the current environmental situation.

Obedience to Christ includes:

- *repentance*: choosing to turn from wasteful and harmful patterns of consumption and renouncing the greed and materialism which characterizes our society;
- *humility and self-giving*: learning to live within boundaries and to place limits on our behaviour, aware that we do not own the earth, but are called to serve and protect it;
- *setting an example*: showing by the way we live that our values are different from society around us, and demonstrating the power of

Christ to transform individuals, societies and the whole of God's creation;

- *speaking out*: on behalf of the poor and marginalized, those who suffer most as a result of global warming due to our Western lifestyles.

A Grain of Mustard?

Sometimes the sheer size and complexity of the problem can seem so overwhelming that it is tempting to think that nothing we do or say is really going to make any difference. But such hopelessness runs counter to our Christian belief in a good God who cares for his creation, and is working to bring to fruition his new future. The mustard seed theology of Tom Sine reminds us that throughout history, God has chosen to work through the small and insignificant in order to bring about change in his world (1 Cor 1.27–29), and he is still doing so today. Sine writes

God calls us to hope and action...So welcome to the conspiracy of the insignificant, invisible and incomprehensible! God wants to use your small contribution to join others in transforming his world today and tomorrow. If together we can rediscover a vision of the future of God and realize how he would use our lives to manifest that future...if we can incarnate the celebrative future of God in our lives and communities of faith...if we can initiate a renaissance of Christian creativity and imagine wholly new ways to compassionately respond to tomorrow's challenges...God will make a greater difference through our lives than we can imagine.²⁷

Will you join me in becoming part of God's future for his world?

Further Resources

Here are the websites of some key Christian organizations. You will find suggestions for further reading plus other resources for information and practical action on the Grove website (www.grovebooks.co.uk).

A Rocha: An international Christian conservation organization which works with local communities on conservation and sustainability initiatives (www.arocha.org)

Christian Ecology Link: A multi-denominational UK organization which provides resources for people concerned about the environment (www.christian-ecology.org.uk)

Eco-congregation: An ecumenical programme helping churches respond to environmental issues in the church, in the lives of individuals, and in the local and global community (www.ecocongregation.org.uk)

John Ray Initiative: An educational charity bringing together scientific and Christian understandings of the environment (www.jri.org.uk)

Living Lightly 24.1: A Rocha UK's website, offering practical challenges and help to live a new lifestyle commitment based around Psalm 24.1 and God's ownership of the earth (www.livinglightly24-1.org.uk)

Operation Noah: A climate change campaign founded by Christian Ecology Link with support from British churches (www.operation-noah.org)

Notes

- 1 Environment Agency, *50 Things That Will Save the Planet*, www.environment-agency.gov.uk/yourenv
- 2 Even these texts are arguably more to do with economic than environmental sustainability.
- 3 All Scripture citations are from NRSV unless otherwise stated.
- 4 *Common Worship*, 2000.
- 5 For example Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol I, *xiv* 2; *xiv* 22. This is not to detract from Calvin's view that all creation reflects God's wisdom and goodness (as in *Institutes* Vol I, *xiv* 21).
- 6 The phrase 'non-human creation,' although cumbersome, is the best way of denoting everything else that God created.
- 7 The term wisdom literature denotes Job, Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes.
- 8 Of course science has provided coherent explanations for many natural phenomena (though there is still a lot to discover). Understanding the workings of the world from a scientific point of view does not detract from or conflict with a Christian perspective which sees the working of God's hand behind the ongoing physical evolution of the universe.
- 9 C J H Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2004) pp 111–112.
- 10 The extent to which God can be known through a rational understanding of the world (natural theology) is a matter of theological debate which cannot be entered into here.
- 11 One group of churches near where I live reintroduced the celebration of

- Rogantide, where parishioners walk around the boundaries of their parish. They turned it into a creation walk and finished with an open-air service on the green.
- 12 Adapted from Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, pp 103–05.
 - 13 In the Old Testament the Hebrew word *ha-aretz* can signify either the land (whether a specific country or a plot of ground) or the whole earth.
 - 14 V Ramachandra, *Tsunami Tragedy: Where was God?* <http://en.arochoa.org/thought/index2.html> (accessed 09/06/08).
 - 15 This is the argument of the well-known and highly influential article by Lynn White (Lynn White Jr, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,' *Science* 155, no 3767 (1967)).
 - 16 The meaning of this enigmatic phrase 'image of God,' which only occurs three times in the Old Testament (Gen 1, Gen 5 and Gen 9) has been much debated by Jewish and Christian theologians (see the discussion in the commentaries by Wenham and Westermann: G Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987); C Westermann, *Genesis 1–11. A Commentary*, trans J Scullion (London: SPCK, 1984 (Ger 1974)). Here we are concerned solely with its meaning within the context of Genesis, not with later interpretations.
 - 17 See D Clines, 'Humanity as the Image of God,' *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 475–80, reprinted in *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays 1967–1998* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1998); J Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005).
 - 18 The Code of Hammurabi, James B Pritchard, *Ancient near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) p 164.
 - 19 White, 'Historical Roots,' see also A Toynbee, 'The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis,' in *Ecology and Religion in History*, eds D Spring and E Spring (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).
 - 20 See Wright, *OT Ethics*, pp 118–26.
 - 21 It is not until at least Genesis 4.25 that *ha-adam* 'the human' becomes the proper name Adam (see NRSV in contrast to the NIV's abrupt transition to Adam in 2.20).
 - 22 For example, see the Assyrian reliefs of Ashurbanipal from the 7th century BC, which can be seen in the British Museum.
 - 23 In v 10 John seems to use the word to mean two different things—the whole creation and the human beings who did not acknowledge Jesus, an ambiguity noted by commentators (such as L Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICOT Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, pp 84–85).
 - 24 See also Heb 1.1–3.
 - 25 J Moo, 'Romans 8.19–22 and Isaiah's Cosmic Covenant,' *NTS* 54 (2008).
 - 26 The Greek is enigmatic—a literal translation of the phrase would be 'If anyone is in Christ: new creation!'
 - 27 T Sine, *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy: You Can Make a Difference in Tomorrow's Troubled World* (Marc Europe, 1981) p 14.

Caring for the creation is an integral part of following Christ—yet many Christians fail to see this.

Looking at a range of texts and themes in Old and New Testaments, this study shows how the whole of the non-human created order is included in the biblical vision of God's restoration. It includes questions for reflection and points to resources for practical action.



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