

(UNIT 2) The Bible and the Environment 1: 'In the Beginning'

In the same way as the women's rights movement helped prepare the ground for feminist readings of the Bible, so a greater awareness of contemporary environmental concerns has provided the context for a fresh kind of interaction with the biblical tradition; even during the reasonably short life-span of the modern environmental movement, attempts made by ethicists and theologians at reading the Bible through a green lens have yielded a truly staggering volume of literature. It is, after all, only natural that, having been confronted with the potential for ecocatastrophe on an unprecedented scale, ecologically-minded scholars should seek to engage the biblical material in a bid to discern what (if anything at all) the individual texts might be able to offer a discussion of environmental issues.

While the importance of ecological engagement with the biblical tradition is now commonly recognized, it is Lynn White's excoriating critique of the Judeo-Christian 'dogma of creation' in a 1967 paper entitled, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', that is usually identified as providing the specific catalyst for the debate over the Bible's ecological legacy. To White's mind, the advent of the Christian faith, particularly in its triumph over pagan religion, initiated a dualism of humanity and nature, promulgating the alien notion that the human race existed above, and apart from, the rest of the created order. The biblical account of creation in Genesis 1-2, writes White, in fact legitimizes the exploitation of the natural world; its insistence that humans are created in the image of God, and thus share in God's transcendence of nature, actually set humanity in direct opposition to non-human creation. White's opinion of the environmental legacy of the Christian tradition is as uncompromising as it is controversial: 'Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen'.¹ As such, it 'bears a huge burden of guilt' for the contemporary ecological crisis.²

Though his analysis of the biblical creation myth remains controversial, the publication of White's paper provided a genuine watershed moment in the context of 20th century eco-theological discourse: the article is almost single-handedly responsible for instigating a long-standing debate about the ecological value of the biblical material. White's charge – that the Judeo-Christian tradition bears an innate anthropocentric bias that has paved the way for the ecological crisis – elicited a fierce response from scholars keen to demonstrate that the creation stories in Genesis not preserve or promote any 'anti-environmental' sentiment. More than this, it stimulated an intense interest in the environmental credentials of the biblical tradition as a whole. Many works of eco-theology composed in the wake of White's paper were written to show that the biblical texts *do* endorse a positive view of creation, and that these ancient writings can be viewed as a relevant and useful tool in generating an ethical stance with regard to green issues.

¹ L. White, Jr., 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis', *Science* 155 (1967), 1203-7, at 1205.

² White, 'The Historical Roots', 1206.

The Green Bible may be seen as the culmination of this kind of positive approach to the biblical tradition, and its publication is arguably the most momentous occurrence in the history of the Christian environmental movement to date. This recent edition of the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version) takes seriously its claim that the Bible functions as a 'powerful ecological handbook on how to live rightly on earth'.³ Accordingly, those verses considered to disclose some ecological wisdom are demarcated by green ink; over a thousand passages are highlighted in this way. The inference to be drawn, therefore, is that the individual biblical texts do not simply convey the occasional exhortation to environmental care, but that they are veritably chock-full with ecological insight and guidance, able to 'speak directly to how we should think and act as we confront the environmental crisis facing our planet'.⁴ Clearly, the committee of scholars responsible for *The Green Bible* have a quite different opinion of the ecological worth of the biblical material from critics such as Lynn White. What is more, White's charge of an all-pervasive anthropocentrism would appear hopelessly wide of the mark if the 'evidence' of the Green Bible is to be taken at face value; one of the stated aims of *The Green Bible* is to testify that the Bible *in its entirety* is bursting with ecological overtones. That is, it can be shown to tender a blueprint for human interaction with the earth, and delineate exactly the kind of role and responsibility humans are called to have in caring for God's creation.

One of the texts highlighted in *The Green Bible* is the so called 'dominion mandate', the command issued to the first humans by God in Gen. 1:26-28 to 'fill the earth and subdue (*kabash*) it; and have dominion (*radah*) over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'. These verses are frequently understood as advocating a need for humans to act as responsible stewards or managers of creation (contra White). Subscribers to the stewardship model duly reject a notion of 'dominion as exploitation'. To interpret the passage as a divine imperative to the exploitation of earth, they claim, is to misunderstand the imagery and symbolism at play. Quite the opposite: 'dominion means responsible stewardship'.⁵ Stewardship is a widely recurring theme across many Christian denominations and, for millions of Christian believers, is the key to theological engagement with ecological concerns.

However, it is doubtful whether the Bible can actually be shown to support a principle of stewardship at all, at least as far as the earth-human relationship is concerned. The idea that humanity has a responsibility to exercise care for non-human creation, that humans must act as divinely-appointed 'managers' of the earth, does not seem to be borne out by the biblical material. A brief inspection of the use of the verbs *kabash* and *radah* in the biblical texts reveals that a reading of Gen. 1 which acknowledges the supremacy of humanity over creation may actually be the more faithful to the passage's original meaning; other instances of these verbs in the Hebrew Bible indicate their overtly hostile connotations. On this evidence, the

³ C. B. DeWitt, 'Reading the Bible through a Green Lens', *The Green Bible* (London: HarperCollins, 2008), I-25.

⁴ From the preface to *The Green Bible*, I-15.

⁵ DeWitt, 'Reading the Bible through a Green Lens', *The Green Bible*, I-26.

reader might be justified in maintaining the view that Gen. 1: 26-28 does supply a mandate for human dominion over creation and that these verses do encourage the exploitation of the planet's resources to suit humanity's ends. In other words, Gen. 1:26-28, in its original context at least, does not look anywhere near as 'environmentally friendly' as purveyors of the stewardship model might like to think. The passage leaves a legacy that is infinitely more ambiguous than that.

Essential Reading

Before beginning your academic reading for this unit, you are advised to familiarise yourself with the Judeo-Christian creation stories. For these you will need to read **Genesis chapters 1-2** (note that the NRSV is the recommended English translation for scholarly study of the Bible). Once you have read Gen. 1-2, you may wish to consult pp. 30-33 of Fretheim's ***God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*** (available on Moodle as a PDF file – note that there are two versions of this on Moodle, one with page numbers and one without). These pages serve as a useful introduction to the text of Gen. 1-2, its composition, form, purpose etc.

With the Genesis creation stories fresh in mind, you are now in a position to read the infamous Lynn White article discussed above (**'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis'** – PDF file on Moodle). This should be followed by James Barr's 1972 paper **'Man and Nature – The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament'** (link on Moodle). Barr's paper is among the earliest responses to White's thesis and is fairly typical of the way in which scholars sought, at least initially, to defend the Genesis account (and, indeed, the biblical tradition as whole) from criticism over its ecological legacy. In a more recent essay (**'Reading the Bible through a Green Lens'** – link on Moodle), Calvin B. DeWitt adopts a similarly positive attitude towards the Bible and its ability to contribute to the formulation of a positive environmental ethic. Penned for inclusion in *The Green Bible*, the essay sets out eight biblical principles for creation care and, in so doing, aims to demonstrate the 'powerful environmental message' of the biblical texts.

The remainder of your reading for this unit focuses specifically on the so called 'dominion mandate' of Gen. 1:26-28 and the ideal of stewardship. The notion of stewardship continues to enjoy widespread support among Christians particularly, appearing as the conceptual cornerstone of reports and declarations published by various denominational working groups and initiatives. Links to two such reports/declarations are given on Moodle: the first by the Evangelical Climate Initiative (**'Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action'**) and the second by the International Theological Commission of the Roman Catholic Church (**'Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God'**).

Despite its pervasiveness, the idea that the original authors/editors of the biblical material wished to convey a principle of stewardship has, as explained above, been thrown into question in recent years. Certainly, scholarly opinion on the ecological potential of Gen. 1:26-

28 – the biblical basis for stewardship – remains sharply divided. For example, while Antoinette Collins writes that the passage expects creation maintenance to be undertaken ‘as a share in the God-like activity of responsible care’ (**‘Subdue and Conquer: An Ecological Perspective on Genesis 1:28’** – link on Moodle), Norman Habel understands the text to be ‘ecologically destructive, devaluing Earth and offering humans a God-given right to harness nature’ (***An Inconvenient Text*** – PDF file on Moodle, see chap. 1). A more balanced view of Gen. 1:26-28 is offered by John Rogerson who, while acknowledging the inherent violence of the passage’s language, concludes that the implication of these verses is softened when read within their wider narrative context (**‘The Creation Stories: Their Ecological Potential and Problems’** – PDF file on Moodle). A different approach again is taken by Richard Bauckham. In the first chapter of his book, ***Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*** (PDF file on Moodle, see chap. 1), Bauckham outlines the positive contribution of Gen. 1-2 to a discussion of green issues but notes the limitations of the stewardship model, emphasizing that the creation stories place human beings within the ‘community of creation’ and not over and above it. Together, these four essays provide a useful insight into the debate over the ecological legacy of the biblical creation stories, a controversy that has been raging since the publication of White’s thesis half a century ago.

Suggested Further Reading

In attempting to build on its recent AHRC-funded research project (**‘Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics’**), Exeter University has dedicated a section of its website to providing materials for secondary schools on Christian engagement with ecological concerns. These webpages offer an extremely lucid introduction to the Lynn White thesis and the notion of stewardship especially, and so are certainly worth a look (link on Moodle). There are also videos, links to further reading and other resources for you to peruse at your pleasure!