

“Surely this is the gate of heaven!!” The Bible and Earth Spirituality

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You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your offerings of well-being... If you make for me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stones; for if you use a chisel upon it you profane it.
(Exodus 20:24-25)

I didn't grow up in the church. When I came to faith at age 18 I had no experience with the Bible, and I remember my first *connection* with it. I was reading about Jesus' feeding with the loaves and fishes, and was excited by the fact that what was left over was gathered up. I was passionately concerned for the environment, and thought we should all “re-use and recycle.” And this passage seemed to affirm that idea, to my delight.

“I guess this means that Christians are environmentalists!” I suggested naively to a friend from a fundamentalist church. He dismissed my take as innocent but wrongheaded, and proceeded to correct me with the properly spiritual meaning of the gospel passage. I was unpersuaded, feeling intuitively that surely scripture *must* articulate a concern for the environment--though I subsequently experienced most churches to be either hostile or ambivalent on such matters.

In college I dutifully read Lynn White's famous 1967 polemic “The Religious Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” which laid the blame for all environmental crimes at the door of Judeo-Christian monotheism. That modern Christendom had failed miserably to love and protect the earth seemed as unarguable as it was regrettable. What I found curious was White's contention that the Hebrew-Christian scriptures both inspired and justified such neglect.



Gloucester Cathedral "Green Man." Such carvings are found in cathedrals throughout northern Europe. They are believed to be symbols of pre-Christian Celtic-type nature spirituality that was still valued in medieval Christendom.

Three decades of biblical study have convinced me that it is not the Bible that hates nature, but rather the culture of modernity. But since that culture has

shaped how we read the Bible, I have experimented with a different assumption: namely, that the perception that scripture is "problematic" regarding contemporary environmental concerns has more to do with modern urban, non-earth-literate *readers* than with the *texts*. By exercising a "hermeneutics of suspicion" first toward *our own* alienation from nature, we are freer to approach the Bible as the revered wisdom of old, indigenous cultures which were far more dependent upon and attuned to the land than our own. This helps us look harder and listen better for strands of earth spirituality in the very tradition that has been accused of being hostile toward nature.

For example, let us suspend for a moment the shrill hermeneutic tradition that reads the garden of Eden story as justification for human exploitation and domination of the earth (a philosophical position, Doug Meeks has pointed out in God the Economist, that goes back to John Locke, not the Bible!). What we find in the account of creation is a portrait of human beings utterly and intimately embedded in and among the whole of living Gaia (Gen 1-2). Indeed, the moral tale of the Fall in Genesis 3 defines human sin as *alienation from the earth*. Not content with living from and with "everything that has the breath of life" (Gen 1:30), humans instead lusted after the "tree of knowledge"—a metaphor for our compulsion to try to re-engineer the "good" creation.

Thus the human vocation of "naming" creation (Gen 2:19ff) –that is, living in a loving relationship with it – is corrupted into the dominating role of "adjudicating" the world – a stance of control and instrumentality (Gen 3:4-5). This desire for power has truly generated the culture of death about which this ancient tale wisely warned us (Gen 2:17). [Note: To read more about Gen 1-3, particularly the question of human "dominion" over nature, see my article "To Serve and Preserve" in the March, 2004 **Sojourners**.]

In the primeval creation narrative this slow "descent into madness" culminates in the building of alienated and alienating metropolises such as Babel (Gen 11). In our own time the reach of Babel – that which we call "civilization" – has become lethal on a global scale. The real "plot" of the Bible, however, is about the liberation of humanity from this archetypal Babylonian captivity. It is thus no accident that right on the heels of Babel we meet Abram and Sarai, who are called to forsake "civilization" for the outlands of Canaan (Gen 11:31ff). This feral movement into spaces undomesticated by empire establishes the enduring counter-history of YHWH, from the Exodus journey of Israel to the discipleship journey of the church.



"Encampment of the Israelites at Mt. Sinai," Joseph Turner, 1836

The story of early Israel is *all about nature*. The narrative is full of wild landscapes: rocks and desert, rivers and springs, clouded peaks and pastured hills, caves and forests. YHWH is *comfortable* in Creation, appearing under oak trees to Abram (Gen 12:6f; 18:1), Gideon (Jud 6:11) and Elijah (I Kg 19:4; see 13:14). The voice of *this* God comes not to those at the center of civilizational power, but to Moses in a burning bush (Ex 3) and on a mountain top (Ex 19), and to Elijah in a desert ravine (I Kg 17:2ff) and a mountain cave

(19:10ff). Heroes of the community are "born" in rivers (Moses, Ex 2:3) and buried under oak trees (Deborah, Gen 35:8; Saul and his sons, I Sam 31:13).

These ancient traditions portray a God who not only *can*, but *should* be encountered through the Creation. Abraham plants a tree and calls on the name of YHWH (Gen 21:33). Torah enjoins the community to celebrate the harvest by dancing while waving branches from all the local flora (Lev 23:40). Jacob has a vision of heaven while sleeping in the open desert, his head on a dreaming stone. And when he awakens from this extraordinary "nature epiphany," Jacob confesses that the wilderness is YHWH's abode:

Surely YHWH was in this place--and I did not know it! ...How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God, the gate of heaven!" (Gen 28:16-17).

Such ecstatic communion hardly bespeaks of a biblical hostility to nature.



Jacob's Dream, Jusepe de Ribera, 1639.

The overlooked commandment of Ex 20:24f, cited at the outset of this article, perhaps best reflects the spirituality of early Israel (see also Deut 27:1-8). Thought by scholars to be one of the oldest literary strands in the Hebrew Bible, these instructions to build a simple altar of stone implies that nature is perfectly adequate as a setting for the worship of YHWH. Moreover, the text is emphatic that no work of human hands (much less of human technology) can "improve" on what God has made. Thus Joshua seals the covenant of the Israelite people not only with words of the Law, but also by setting up a large

stone under an oak tree while exclaiming: "See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of YHWH..." (Josh 24:27). To modern eyes this scenario is bizarre; but to indigenous sentiments, it makes perfect sense.

To be sure, Israel abandoned the "spirituality of the unhewn stone," along with so many other characteristics of its wilderness faith. King David aspired to "civilization," and a massive temple was built by Solomon. The biblical narrator reports (no doubt ironically) that this cultic edifice had a massive foundation made of "dressed stone" cut by slave labor (I Kg 5:13-18). Still, this sanctuary, however much a departure from Jacob's desert altar, was nevertheless itself richly adorned with nature symbols, such as carvings of local flora (I Kg 6:18,29) and fauna (7:29).



The warning against building altars of "hewn stone" also represents the basis for the biblical critique of idolatry. It is important to correct a popular misapprehension of this tradition: it is primarily concerned with *manufactured* fetishes, not with pantheistic tendencies. We see this clearly in the classic prophetic polemic of Isaiah 44:9-20. The proper human relationship to a tree is to lovingly nurture it, then to use it wisely (i.e. for fuel or furniture). As in indigenous cultures, forestry is described here as relational, not industrial. The problem arises only when the tree is re-engineered into an image, which in turn is attributed with saving power. This

suggests that Christians ought to be much more suspicious of the commodity fetishism intrinsic to the modern capitalist market (in which advertising promises products that have the power to make us happy or build our self-esteem) than of contemporary neo-paganism (however goofy the latter may sometimes be).

Ancient Israel's avoidance of Canaanite shrines, which were often located in local grottos or on hilltops, was rooted in the fact that these cultic centers represented the primary "media" of political and economic control by the Egyptian empire through its gods. The biblical injunction to worship the undomesticated Creator, *not* nature-gods who were in the service of the imperial ideology, was a crucial form of resistance:

When you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them

and serve them, things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven. For YHWH has taken you and brought you out of the iron-smelter, out of Egypt... (Dt 4:19f).

Whereas the cosmos-according-to-empire was, like Pharaoh, a Power to "serve," the true God was a liberator of slaves, and offers the Creation as a gift to all people.

Idolatry is a problem in the Bible, but nature is not. In addition to talking bushes, listening stones and sacred trees, the Bible offers numerous paeans to Creation as a mirror of the glory of the Creator, most notably in Psalm 104 and Job 38-41. Indeed, YHWH is imagined as a roaring lion (Hos 11:10), a nursing eagle (Dt 32:11) and an angry mother bear (Hos 13:8). Some of the Hebrew tribes seem to have animal totems: Joseph is "like an ox" and Gad "lives like a lion" (Dt 33:17,20). And Israel's ritual life is in tune with the seasons (i.e. the harvest festivals of Lev 23) and the lunar cycles: "Raise a song, sound the tambourine, the sweet lyre with the harp; blow the trumpet at the new moon, at the full moon, on our festal day" (Ps 81:3).

But in the realism of scripture, Creation is also "fallen"; there is no romanticization, since nature can also be an adversary. It is significant that Pharaoh's empire buckles under a Divine siege of natural disasters (the "plagues" of Ex 7-10). As in all tribal societies, there are tales of dangerous adventures with wild animals, from Jonah's whale to Daniel's lions. And the sea, replete with monsters (e.g. Is 27:1), seemed a particularly scary place to the tribes of hill-country Israel (witness Noah's flood). The Hebrew prophets, meanwhile, recognized that the natural world was out of balance, and envisioned the reconciliation of creation, as in Isaiah's famous vision of peace between wolves and lambs and between cows and bears (Is 11:6-9). The numerous prophetic references to the day when the "wilderness blossoms abundantly" (e.g. Is 35:1f, 41:17-20) is not eschatological wishful thinking but acknowledgment that deforestation had led to desertification, which could be reversed if and when humans return from an exploitive to a symbiotic relationship with nature.



*Cedars of
Lebanon,*
by Edward
Lear, 1862

Unlike modernity, the Bible is not at war with nature. In fact, there are surprising attempts to constrain the ecocidal tendency of human beings, who in our insecurity try to "tame" nature. Examples are the Deuteronomist's prohibition of eating both mother and young birds that have been hunted as game (Dt 22:6), or the remarkable rule of warfare: "If you besiege a town for a long time... you must not destroy its trees... Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you?" (Dt 20:19-20). Isaiah excoriates the imperial king Sennacharib for clear-cutting the cedars of Lebanon (Is 37:23f), and makes the remarkable claim that the forests will celebrate the downfall of empire, singing: "Since you were laid low no one comes to cut us down" (Is. 14:8)! [Note: See my "'The Cedar has fallen!' The Prophetic Word vs. Imperial Clear-cutting," in *Earth and Word: Classic Sermons on Saving the Planet*, edited by David Rhoads (Continuum).]

The gospels carry on this tradition. Jesus receives his commissioning through ritual immersion in a river, and then seeks to re-animate the liberation journey by embarking on a kind of vision quest into the wilderness (Mt 3:13-4:11). As in the Old Story, significant gospel moments occur atop a mountain (Mk 9:2-9) and on the sea (Mk 4:35-41), in fields (Mk 2:23-27) and gardens (Jn 18:1). Jesus invites us to learn about reality from seeds (Mk 4), trees (Mk 13:28), birds (Lk 12:24) and rain (Mt 5:45).

Indeed, Jesus intensifies the ancient dichotomy between nature and civilization in his observations about the "great economy" of creation (Lk 12:22-31). "Consider the lilies, how they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these" (12:27). Often trivialized as a sort of "St. Francis" moment, this text is utterly subversive in Jesus' claim that the apex of Israelite national power (that hewn-stone Temple of Solomon) was, in the eyes of God, *of less consequence than one wild flower!* Yikes, what if he means it?

These texts suggest that the Bible can hardly be accused of promoting contempt for the natural world. Of course, like ancient Israel, the church in the modern era has fallen prey to the seduction of civilizations. We have given in to the "perverted gospel" (Gal 1:7) of technological capitalism, which values forests primarily in terms of board-feet, rivers in terms of gigawatts and mountains in terms of ski resorts. It is hardly surprising therefore that so many of those who are struggling to reconnect with nature and to defend the environment have turned to neo-pagan spiritualities and so-called "new cosmologies" (which are in fact quite ancient).

I understand the reaction; I just don't think it is helpful or accurate to blame the Judeo-Christian tradition for the present global ecological crisis. The fact that Christianity, around the time of the Enlightenment, began to dance around the golden calf of Progress while abandoning its roots in the land-based

culture of the Bible makes the church a legitimate target, if an easy one. But is it the *right* culprit?



*Cross, Fahan Mura
Donegal, Ireland,
ca. 600-800 CE.*

The far more formidable enemy of the land is global capitalism itself, which *demand*s the objectification and commodification of nature in ways that the pre-capitalist Judeo-Christian tradition simply never could have. Christianity may have been complicit in the ascendancy of capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries, but as the 20th century has shown, it has also been one of secularized capitalism's victims. This is not to excuse the church, but rather to suggest that Christians must take a hard look at the Faustian bargain we made with capitalist modernity.

Fortunately, calls to move from the notion of "domination over" to "stewardship of" the earth are now increasingly common in Christian theologies, stressing the inherent value of Creation over its utility. We should certainly be in conversation with the "deep ecology" philosophers as well as with the eclectic "creation spirituality" movement in our attempts to recover earth symbols and spirit in the church. But we probably do not so much need to seek a new cosmology as to re-claim the biblical one. It is the mechanistic, instrumentalist worldview of capitalist

modernity that has put us at war with creation, not the Bible. At the same time, we must ensure that this new orientation inspires concrete politico-economic struggle in defense of the land, and not merely escape into suburban nature-mysticism (a trend in creation spirituality that is all too reminiscent of 19th century bourgeois transcendentalism).

May we be given eyes to see, like John of Patmos, that the true "city of God" is a place where the river of Life runs right down Main Street, and where the Tree of Life erupts right through the asphalt, for the healing of the nations (Rev 22:1-2).

Note: This is an updated version of an article that first appeared in the October 1998 issue of The Witness.

