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FOUR ASPECTS OF HOW LAND IS PERCEIVED IN THE BIBLE

Most contemporary North Americans have been socialized to see and value the earthy terrain around them in terms of private possession, economic exploitation, and commodification. But in stark contrast to the cosmology of modernity, the Bible does not understood land as "real estate"—*ever*. Instead, we can identify at least four major characteristics of land in the biblical tradition: as mother of life; as abundant sustainer of living beings; as altar for worship of the Creator; and as home place.

1. **Mother**. In the second Genesis creation account we are told that the human being (Heb. *'adam*) is formed from the "topsoil" (Heb. *'adamah*, Gen. 2:7)—a wordplay that is tellingly preserved in the English "human/humus." Scripture is unembarrassed and straightforward: we are birthed from the earth (as are all flora and fauna, Gen. 2:9,19). This spiritual and material understanding has been embraced both by old indigenous cultures and the new biological sciences, but ignored by Christians for too long.
2. **Sustainer**. In this same creation tale the earth (Heb. *'eretz,* 2:6), is called a "garden" (Heb. *gan,* 2:8). Elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures this term is used to describe not only fertile terrain (Dt 11:10; Is. 51:3; Jer 31:12), but also a woman's pleasures (Song of Sol. 4). This garden (LXX Gk. *paradeisos*) provides everything human beings find "delightful" (Gen 2:9). The adjective *tov,* according to Richard Lowery, "expresses God's intense pleasure at creation's every detail. It is God's cosmic WOW" (2000:86). This divine assessment appears as an emphatic, ecstatic refrain in the first Creation account (1:4,10,12,18,21,25), *before* humans arrive on the scene (thus undermining the common accusation that the Genesis tradition is overly anthropocentric). Lowery also points out that the verb *bara'*, reserved exclusively in the Bible for God's creative activity, can also mean "to be fat" (e.g. Gen 27:28; 41:2ff); the earth embodies a "rich and lavish overflow of goodness, abundant and life giving at its very core" (ibid). This contrasts sharply with Enlightenment notions of "natural scarcity" and the presumption that the earth has no intrinsic value until humans re-engineer it into something "useful." Yet biblically, abundance is contingent upon human beings remaining obedient to their vocation to "serve and preserve" Creation (2:15; Myers, 2004). To neglect stewardship and "take too much" of the divine gift is to reckon with disaster (see e.g. Num 11:31-35; Lev 25-26)—a hard word to our own historical moment. At the same time, eschatological redemption is most often imagined in scripture as the *restoration* of the land, such as the prophetic visions of YHWH's reforestating of the desertified Levant (Is 35:1f; 41:17-20), and even more remarkably, of wild flora and fauna reinhabiting the ruins of imperial cities (Is 13:19-22; Myers, 2007).

3. **Altar**. The land is the primary locus for worship in the earliest traditions of scripture. Torah's first account of an encounter with God outside Eden occurs upon Abram's defection from empire to the marginal desert lands of Canaan (Gen 12:6f). He arrives at an oak described in Hebrew as *'elon moreh*—a teacher or oracle giver. It is here under this "tree of life" that God first tells Abram of his future in this land—and here that Abram builds the Bible's first altar (similar encounters take place in Gen 18:1ff; Jud 6:11; and I Kg 19:4). Of particular significance is the often overlooked "eleventh commandment" of Ex 20:24f:

   > 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.

   No work of human hands (much less technology) can improve on Creation; nature is thus the *most* appropriate setting for worship of YHWH. When the people forget this, "teaching trees" and "listening stones" bear witness against them (see Josh 24:27). Such earth-based communion hardly bespeaks of a biblical hostility to nature, as is so often claimed by the tradition's critics.

4. **Home**. Genesis 3 narrates how humans abandon their symbiotic relationship with the "garden" (Gen 3:23f) for the re-engineered landscapes of the city (4:17) and eventually of empire (11:1ff). The subsequent covenantal narrative of scripture articulates a dialectic between the *homelessness* brought about by human alienation from the land and attempts by God to bring the people back *home* to it. When in Exodus, dispossessed people are promised land; when in exile, a return (Is 40:1ff; 65:21ff; see Brueggemann, 1977). In short, the biblical narrative begins with a myth about a garden-home that is lost, and concludes with a myth of that garden-home's restoration (Rev 22:1f).

These four characteristics weave throughout the Hebrew Bible, as well as through the life of Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet of the wilderness tradition. Preaching on these themes invites the audience to remember these ancient lessons about belonging, communion and responsibility, and to act courageously in the teeth of our historic present ecological crisis.

"The question that must be addressed," contends Wendell Berry, "is not how to care for the planet, but how to care for each of the planet's millions of human and natural neighborhoods, each of its millions of small pieces and parcels of land, each one of which is in some precious way different from all the others" (1987:18). It may be, then, that the challenge for creation preaching is not so much one of *cosmology* as of *geography*. We need a theology of "re-place-ment" (see Myers, 1994:336ff).

Only love for specific land—what Hawaiians call *aloha 'aina*—can motivate us to struggle on its behalf. Place-based discourse is still marginal in mainstream political and theological discourse, but we are beginning to see a shift from anthropocentric to "biocentric" theory and "re-inhabitory politics." Poet and environmental activist Gary Snyder sums up the task succinctly:

The usual focus of attention for most Americans is the human society

> itself with its problems and its successes, its icons and symbols. With the exception of most Native Americans and a few non-natives who have given their hearts to the place, the land we all live on is simply taken for granted--and proper relation to it is not taken as part of "citizenship." But after two centuries of national history, people are beginning to wake up and notice that the United States is located on a landscape with a severe, spectacular, spacey, wildly demanding, and ecstatic narrative to be learned. Its natural communities are each unique, and each of us, whether we like it or not--in the city or countryside--live in one of them. When enough people get that picture, our political life will begin to change, and it will be the beginning of the next phase of American life, coming to live on "Turtle Island." (1992:97)

Rediscovering love for place can help the church overcome the alienation resulting from our geographical and cultural displacement, and restore a sense of identity from which we can struggle for ecological reinhabitation and renewal. In the promise of Isaiah, "The surviving remnant of Judah shall again take root downward and bear fruit upward" (Is 37:31).

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