

# **Towards a Biblical Theology of Land and Environment**

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## **Introduction**

Examining many a biblical or theological dictionary, one could easily be led to believe that land and environment are not issues of great theological concern. However, the truth is that, right from the opening verse of Genesis through to the last chapter of Revelation, God is pictured as being active, with respect to both.

## **Land and Environment in the Creation Account**

The first chapter of Genesis pictures God as creating man's environment, and home place, and taking great pleasure in doing so. Throughout the description, there is an ascending order of creation. In the first three days, the basic forms of the created order are established: light, firmament (separating the "waters above" from the "waters beneath"), and dry land. In the next three days, each of these forms is, in turn, filled with substance. Thus, on the fourth day, sun, moon, and stars appear in the sphere of light; on the fifth day, the sea and air are filled with life; and, on the sixth day, the land creatures are formed, culminating with the creation of humankind.<sup>1</sup>

Man is here clearly portrayed as the crowning act of creation, for whom this whole created order has come into being. Thus, he is given dominion over it, and over all it contains.

Therefore, the creation account pictures God as being the great giver, from the very dawn of time. Man's whole environment, the very setting, in which his life is to be lived, is something unmerited by his worthiness or achievements. Instead, it has been provided in an act of sheer generosity on God's part.

Thus, land and environment become potent symbols of God's grace and love, proffered, not because of any attribute in the recipient, but solely because

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Leicester UK: IVP, 1967, pp. 45-46.

of the nature of the giver. In this way, the New Testament gospel of salvation, centring on the indescribable gift of Christ Jesus, and justification, apart from human merit, is anticipated in the gifts of land and environment.

However, the gifts of land and environment are not autonomous gifts, for they cannot be separated from the giver. With them, God also gives himself. This concept becomes plain, when it is considered that the account of creation week does not finish with the creation of man, but with the record of God resting on the seventh day. Gen 1 illustrates how the world was made for man, while Gen 2:1-3 illustrates how man, in turn, was made for God.

The purpose of God's rest needs to be clarified. Clearly, the rest is not for God's own benefit, for God does not grow weary or faint (Is 40:28). Rather, the rest appears to be for man's benefit. God is here indicating His desire to fellowship with man, and to enter into the stream of time to be with him. The gracious purpose of God, revealed in the incarnation, is thus anticipated. God is not the absentee landlord of the deists, but takes an active and ongoing interest in His creation.

It must be remembered that the last day of creation week is pictured as man's first full day of existence. Man has been placed in a perfect environment, but, from the start, he is to be shown that it can only truly satisfy, when relationship with God is given first priority.

Hence, it is made plain that, while man has dominion over the created order, his dominion is a borrowed dominion. The land is given to him, and was, indeed, created for him, but it is not a final personal possession. Rather, it is a trust from God, to whom he remains accountable for its management. His dominion over the environment remains valid, insofar as he continues to acknowledge God's dominion over him. Similarly, the corollary of man's rebellion against God, is the natural world's rebellion against man.

Therefore, with the gifts of land and environment, there come responsibilities and commandments. Man must till and keep the soil, and he is commanded to "be fruitful, and increase in number; and to fill the earth, and subdue it", and to "rule over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air, and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen 1:28). Likewise, man is commanded to show his acknowledgment of God's ultimate ownership of the world, by not eating of the fruit of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 2:16-17).

When man transgresses this specific command, the created order is quickly disrupted. Man becomes aware of the shame of his nakedness, even before God encounters the guilty pair (Gen 3:10-12). Furthermore, when God does appear, the pain of childbirth increases, the woman is subjected to the man's rulership, the ground is cursed with thorns (albeit for man's sake), man is condemned to return to the dust, and he is driven out of the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:16-23).

Thus, while the land and the environment, in the creation story, are free gifts of grace, in order for man to retain them, there are certain obligations he must fulfil. Therefore, the gifts of land and environment not only anticipate God's gift of grace in Jesus, they also anticipate the responsibilities, which that grace brings with it.

### **Land and Environment in the Noahic and Abrahamic Covenants**

In the creation account, God's covenant with man is directly linked with His gifts of land and environment, while man's transgression of the covenant is directly linked to the defilement, and even loss, of the land.

However, not only in the creation story, but right through the Old Testament, God's covenant is repeatedly linked with the gifts of land and environment, just as transgression is, likewise, repeatedly linked with the defilement and loss of the land.

Again, in later covenant settings, the language of the original creation is often borrowed to describe the new situation God is bringing to pass.

These facts can be seen in Genesis, itself, in the settings of the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants.

For instance, the flood comes because human evil and violence have corrupted the earth (Gen 6:5, 11-12). However, hope remains on the other side of the judgment because Noah has found favour, or grace, in the eyes of the Lord (Gen 6:8). The flood is, in many respects, a reversal of creation, as the ordained separation between the "water above" and the "waters beneath" is abrogated, along with the separation between land and sea (Gen 7:11). However, there is a new creation, as the wind moves over the earth – just as God's Spirit did in the beginning – and the waters are once again separated, as are the land and the sea (Gen 8:2-3). Likewise, the original cycle of the days and seasons, established on the fourth day of creation, is now restored, for as long as the earth shall endure (Gen 8:22).

With this new creation, the command to “be fruitful, and increase in number, and fill the earth” is reiterated (Gen 9:2). New commands are given, in view of the new situation. For example, capital punishment for murder is instituted for the first time (Gen 9:6), one reason, seemingly being, is the belief that the shedding of the murderer’s blood will prevent future defilement of the earth through violence (cf. Num 35:33-34; 2 Sam 21:1-14).

The covenant with Abraham, likewise, centres on the multiplication of the future seed, and upon the gift of land. To Abraham’s seed, the land of Canaan is encompassed in these promises, for God promises that, through Abraham, “all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:2-3) – in reverse to the curse that came upon the whole human family at the fall. The New Testament uses the fact that Abraham was promised the world, as a gift of grace, as an Old Testament example of justification by faith (Rom 4:1-13).

### **Land and Environment in the Exodus Covenant**

It is in the context of the Exodus that the promise of land to Abraham is first pictured as being fulfilled (e.g., Ex 6:8). Here again, we see the patterns of a new creation, as the blowing of the wind once more separates the waters and divides the land from the sea, making way for the birth of the nation of Israel (Ex 14:21). It is also in the context of the Exodus that some of the clearest statements of the gift nature of the land are found: statements as clear in their expression of the doctrine of grace as any found in Paul’s writings (e.g., Deut 7:7-8; 9:5-6).

The fact that the land and the environment are only derived possessions, held on trust, is likewise repeatedly emphasised. It is God who really owns all the earth (Ex 19:5). For this reason, there are responsibilities attached to the reception of the gift, which, once more, are powerful types of the responsibilities, inherent in receiving the grace of the gospel. If the people will acknowledge the giver, through obedience, then the land and the environment will flourish, along with the people, as Eden is progressively restored. On the other hand, if the people disobey, then God will play no favourites. They will, as surely, perish from the land, as those “whom the Lord cast out” before them, for defiling it by the same sins (Lev 18:25-8).

Blessings for obedience include multiplication of Israel’s seed, an abundance of rain, crops and flocks; and health, long life, and protection from enemies. On the other hand, curses for disobedience include barrenness, drought, crop and flock failure; and disease, premature death, and defeat at the

hands of enemies, culminating in loss of the land, and fresh captivity (Deut 11:14-17, 28, 30).

In the context of the Sinai covenant, the Sabbath commandment, as recorded in Ex 20:8-11, reflects a special concern for the integrity of creation, and of ourselves, as part of that creation. The Sabbath here becomes a regular reminder that man's true value cannot be established in economic terms, but must be seen, instead, in terms of relationship with the Creator. Even the humblest members of society: the manservant and the maidservant, are not, primarily, economic resources, but human beings, with a right to rest and refreshment, just like their masters. Indeed, even the animals must be given rest, for they, too, as a part of creation, are God's, and have intrinsic value, and rights.

In addition, with the establishment of Israel as a nation, two specific land laws are given, in anticipation of Israel's entry into Canaan. Both the law of sabbatical rest, and the law of Jubilee, illustrate a profound realisation that the land is really God's, and is thus, man's, only on trust (see Lev 25).

Every seventh year, the land is to lie fallow in Sabbath rest, just as the people are to rest every seventh day. Whatever other meanings may be implicit in this symbol, one obvious one is the importance of preserving the fertility of the soil. Soil conservation is, then, a biblical issue.

Every 50th year, a year of Jubilee is to be proclaimed, in which all farming land is to be returned to its original owners. Clearly, since man did not create the land, he holds it only as a steward, and, therefore, has the responsibility to pass it on, intact, to future generations. It would be gross theft to sell out the divinely-ordained inheritance of the, as yet unborn, simply for present gain. Thus, when agricultural land is "sold" in the Old Testament, it is not, strictly speaking, the land, which is sold, but rather the use of it, to raise a certain number of crops, i.e., until the next Jubilee. The land, itself, is inalienable.

The attachment of the original owner to the land is so great that, even before the Jubilee, the original landowner has the right to reclaim the land if he, or more likely, a kinsman, raises the funds to compensate the purchaser for the crops that remain until Jubilee time.

Clearly the Jubilee is also meant to have a social impact, in preventing the progressive accumulation of God-given resources in the hands of a minority.

Obviously, while not every aspect of these laws, either could, or should, be applied today, there is a need to find ways of translating the principles behind them into contemporary action.

### **Land and Environment in the Prophets**

The prophets portray the sad fact that Israel, and later Judah, both choose the pathway of the covenant curses, rather than the covenant blessings, with often catastrophic environmental results (e.g., Hos 4:1-3).

The ultimate result of Israel's disobedience, is predicted to be a return to Egypt, with the sword raging against the cities, and the fortresses being destroyed (e.g., Hos 10:14; 11:5-6). These words find their primary fulfilment in the Assyrian captivity.

Likewise, it is predicted that Judah's rebellion will lead to the wasting and desolation of the land (Is 6:11-12), with briars and thorns replacing fields of vines (7:23-25), the land being burnt up (9:17-19), and the crops being uprooted early, only to be devoured by birds and beasts of prey (17:11; 18:5-6). Ezekiel, in harmony with Lev 26, predicts a fourfold scourge of sword, famine, wild beasts, and plagues (Ezek 14:21). These words find their primary fulfilment in the Babylonian captivity.

However, for both Israel and Judah, the promise is held forth for a second Exodus (e.g., Is 11:10-16), and a renewed creation, with the drying up of "Babylon's sea" (Jer 50:38) paralleling the creation of the dry land on the third day, the drying up of the waters after the flood, and the drying up of the Red Sea.

Once again, the land and the environment are central to the promised covenant renewal. The people will return to the land, but God's covenant will not just be with them, it will be "with the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air, and the creatures that move along the ground" (Hos 2:18). The rebellion of the animal creation will be replaced with natural harmony (Is 11:6-9; 65:25), while the desert, itself, will flourish with vegetation (35:1-2, 7). Even the Dead Sea will teem with fish (Ezek 47:1-12). The mountains will drip with new wine, the hills will flow with milk, and the ravines will run with water (Joel 3:18), while the crop-yield will be so abundant that the harvester

will still be harvesting when it is time for the ploughman to plough again, and the crushing of the grapes will still be going on when the time comes for the new vines to be planted (Amos 9:13).

In connection with the promises, and prayer for the restoration of the land, its nature, as a gift, is again made plain, in statements, which, once more, remarkably anticipate the New Testament teaching of salvation by grace (Hos 2:19, 23; 14:4-5; Mic 7:18-19; Dan 9:9, 16-19).

However, while the restoration of the land is an act of sheer grace, the gift, again, cannot be separated from the giver, and the continued reception of the blessings freely offered is still pictured in the post-exilic era, as being dependent upon obedient response to the Lord (Zech 1:2-6).

### **Land and Environment in the New Testament**

In the person of Jesus Christ, God's covenant reaches its climax, and the creation is again renewed. In Jesus' resurrection and exaltation, the dominion, originally entrusted to man over the creation, has now been restored (Heb 2:5-9). He, as the second Adam, is the new head of the human race, and while we await the final consummation of glory, the eye of faith beholds Him, even now, as the victor.

Matthew hints at the role of Jesus, as the beginning of a new creation, in His opening words, which may be rendered most literally as "a book of the genesis of Jesus Christ", while Luke's description of the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary, and "the power of the Most High" overshadowing her, is curiously reminiscent of the Spirit's hovering over the deep in the first creation (Luke 1:35).

However, it is John, in his gospel, who most plainly develops the theme of the new creation. His opening words are identical to those of Genesis: "in the beginning", and God is central to the first sentence of both. Early in the first chapter of Genesis, we have the creation of light (John 1:3-5), while early in the first chapter of John, the theme of Jesus, as light, is central (John 1:4-5). Adam is placed in a garden, while Jesus, as the second Adam, is crucified in a garden (John 19:41). Adam falls into a slumber, and has his side opened, that he might have a bride, while Jesus' side is opened, that He might have a bride, the church (John 19:34). In the beginning, God makes the world in six days, and rests on the seventh, while, in passion week, Christ, having completed His work of atonement on the sixth day, cried out, "it is finished" (19:30), and

rested in the tomb on the seventh day, before rising again on the first. Finally, Jesus' supremacy over the forces of nature, illustrated in Peter's miraculous catch of fish after the resurrection, points to Him as the one to whom Adam's lost dominion is now being restored (John 21:5-7).

In the New Testament, the promise of grace is, of course, perceived to include much more than simply the possession of the land, *per se*. For instance, the writer of Hebrews argues, from Ps 95, the typology of the primordial Sabbath, and the experience of Israel in Joshua's day, that the promise always was meant to point to something deeper than just land, even, ultimately, to the rest of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Heb 3:7-4:11).

This broader understanding is, thus, not seen as contradictory to the Old Testament, but rather as implicit in it. For this reason, the writer of Hebrews can identify the hope of the faithful of the Old Testament, for a promised land, with the hope of the faithful of the Christian age (Heb 11:13-16, 40). Hence also, Jesus can reiterate the promise of Ps 37:11 that the "meek shall inherit the earth" (Matt 5:5).

The place for the land and the environment, then, is as important in the New Testament hope as in that of the Old Testament. For instance, the thrust of the description of the new heavens and the new earth in Rev 21 and 22 seems to be that all of which was lost of the Edenic land and environment has now been restored.

The chief difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament perspectives seems to be in the way that the renewal of the land and the environment is to be achieved. In the New Testament, there seems, no longer, to be any realistic hope of a gradual transformation of the old order into the new, in contrast to much of the Old Testament. Instead, a sharp apocalyptic division of the ages is envisaged, with this world destroyed by fire, that a new one might be created from the ashes (e.g., 2 Pet 3:7-13; cf. Is 65:17-20 and Rev 21:1-8).

Of course, the new age is a present reality in Jesus Christ, in whom the "not yet" of future hope is anticipated in the "now" of faith. The present is, therefore, most definitely not devoid of meaning. However, present physical possession of land, down here in this world, is no longer as central to the present experience of the covenant as it seems to have been in the Old Testament. For the church, hope is focused on the Jerusalem above, rather than on the present city of Jerusalem (Gal 4:25-26). Genuine worship is a



matter of truth and spirit, rather than of holy places (John 4:21-24), and the presence of Christ is the source of rest (Matt 11:28-30).

It might be tempting to conclude, therefore, that the New Testament apocalyptic perspective diminishes the importance of stewardship of the land and the environment – and, indeed, many Christian groups, with an apocalyptic emphasis, have seemed to pay scant regard to such issues.

However, the truth is that such a viewpoint ignores the very rationale behind some of the most apocalyptic portions of the New Testament. Rev 11:18, for instance, speaks of the time coming for “destroying those who destroy the earth”. It is the defilement of the land and the environment – whether through sin, in general, or through direct neglect of the resources entrusted to us – which is to bring down the wrath of heaven upon the world.

This fact becomes even plainer if the unfolding of the mysterious apocalyptic scroll of Rev. 5 is understood in terms of a kinsman’s redemption of a forfeited inheritance (cf. Jer 32:6-16).<sup>2</sup> As the scroll is opened, the covenant curses of war, famine, plague, and beasts are fulfilled anew, with perhaps the same intention as in parallel Old Testament prophecies and narrative: namely, the casting out of those who, through transgression of the covenant, can no longer legally claim a share of the land (Rev 6:3-8; Lev 26:14-26; Ezek 14:21). This action is taken so that the rightful heirs may rule over the earth instead (Rev 5:9-10). So it is, that the meek, who alone can be trusted to care for the land and its resources, shall indeed inherit the earth.

## **Conclusions**

Throughout the Old Testament, land and the environment are both viewed as divine gifts, which, fittingly, represent the gracious nature of God’s covenant. However, they are always gifts, given only on trust, and so, as freely as they might be received, continued retention of them always entails the fulfilment of certain basic responsibilities. Therefore, they represent both the privileges and responsibilities inherent in grace.

In the New Testament, the hope of a restored land and environment is, ultimately, as central to the covenant as in the Old Testament. However, the present possession of land, here on earth, today, is not considered as important as in the Old Testament, for the new earth is no longer conceived of as coming

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<sup>2</sup> Desmond Ford, *Crisis!*, 3 vols, Newcastle CA: Desmond Ford Publications, 1982, vol 2, pp. 328-329.

about by the gradual transformation of the old. Instead, it comes about by a fiery apocalyptic sweeping away of the old, to make way for the new. The heavenly Jerusalem and land, where the future victory is already now enshrined, in the person of Christ, is the focus of present attention.

Nevertheless, this fact does not diminish the importance of continued faithful stewardship of land and the environment, here and now. On the contrary, one of the chief reasons for the coming destruction of the world is human defilement of the land. Therefore, it remains vital for Christians today to continue to seek contemporary ways of expressing the divine concern for land and the environment

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