Faith, Action, and Climate Change—an Introduction

> "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."
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> Matt. 5:17–18

> "But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped."
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> Luke 16:17

In the Sermon on the Mount, as it appears in the book of Matthew, Jesus said he came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. The book of Luke expresses a similar adherence to the Law. What in English is translated by Christians as "the Law," Jesus called *Torah* in Hebrew and *Oraita* in Aramaic. Genesis through Deuteronomy, the first five books in the Christian and Hebrew Bibles, comprise the Torah.[1]

Genesis opens with the story of creation, revealing that everything that exists was created by God, and Genesis 1:28 finds God granting the created world to humankind to master and to rule. We are granted dominion over the animals, the fish, and the birds, but the land itself is not mentioned. We would be mistaken to view this as implicitly included, for in Exodus 19:5 God states: "Indeed, the whole earth is Mine."

This verse in Exodus complementing the "dominion" passage in Genesis provides just one example of the need to understand the teachings about God's creation in "the Law" collectively, that is, to draw conclusions from those verses when they are taken together. Each such verse provides its own

1. Torah in this instance refers to the part of Jewish Scripture in the books Genesis through Deuteronomy. Jewish Scripture includes thirty-nine books divided into the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, and the word "Torah" can refer to all of them or to the entirety of Jewish learning.

instruction within the context of its section and may also clarify a passage appearing elsewhere or significantly alter our understanding of it.

We can take this "collective" idea to its extreme when we ask how to summarize what Christians call the Old Testament. Jesus said: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matt. 7:12) A contemporary of Jesus, the first-century scholar Hillel said: "What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour; that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it."[2]

This book seeks first to develop a similar biblical unity, not for all of Genesis through Deuteronomy, but for its teachings about the natural world. When all the environmental-related verses are taken together, what overarching perspective emerges about how we are to interact with God's creation?

This question cries out for an answer as soon as we realize that our use of the natural world can be understood to be abusive and self-destructive. Can we find biblical cover for blasting the tops off mountains to mine for coal,[3] pouring toxins into rivers that then poison fish and corrupt drinking water, for sending toxic fumes into the atmosphere that foul the air we breathe and change the climate? People of faith strive to live in accord with biblical teachings and visit houses of worship to obtain reminders of what our sacred texts ask of us.

We are at a perilous moment in the history of humans on this planet, given the changes in our climate that are underway. The concentration of carbon dioxide (CO_2) in the atmosphere is now at a level not experienced in about three million years, due largely to the burning of fossil fuels. Continuing increases are predicted to bring devastatingly disruptive changes to our world: to humans and non-humans, to the air, to the water, the trees, and the land of this planet. Our descendants will not forgive us if we choose expediency over preserving a hospitable planet.

I believe people of faith can strengthen their connection to God, for I believe it has been weakened by ignoring teachings about creation care. We can do this, first, because we believe that for every troubling issue we

2. Babylonian Talmud, tractate Shabbath 31a, The Soncino Edition, Brooklyn, NY, 1961. *https://ia700507.us.archive.org/12/items/TheBabylonianTalmudcompleteSoncinoEnglishTranslation/The-Babylonian-Talmud-Complete-Soncino-English-Translation.pdf*

3. One could ask, do we need biblical cover for this element of coal mining? We would like to determine if our environmental practices harmonize with Scripture, and the chapter in Part I on "The Land" reveals that this practice does not.

confront, the Bible provides at least guidance, at best answers. In addition, we can do this because we are so numerous: 78.4 percent of American adults identify as Christians and 1.7 percent identify as Jews, according to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. The adult population of the U.S. (age eighteen and over) exceeds 237 million, according to the Kids Count program of The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Even if only 10 percent of that number were to consider themselves people of faith, 19 million people constitute a powerful force for change.

If we seek biblical guidance about environmental problems, then we must return our attention to the opening books of the Bible. (Teachings about God's creation are found primarily in Genesis through Deuteronomy, for the writers of the Gospels and the Epistles sought to convey the life and teachings of Jesus and his disciples, not to rewrite the Law.) It is reasonable, therefore, for one primarily drawn to the Old Testament to offer a perspective, for both Christians and Jews, on the environmental-related teachings in the Law Jesus said he came to fulfill, to the books Jews call the Torah.

While epiphany may be too strong a description, my first jolt of awakening with the Bible came at age twelve. I encountered a verse in Leviticus 19 mandating that the land must be harvested in ways that leave food for the poor and the stranger. This was such an accessible instruction: It was easy to understand and made clear that following it would provide food for the needy and benefit the community as a whole. That verse about our use of the land created in me an indelible affinity for this text.

In that same year, and succeeding ones through age nineteen, I was drawn to many other passages that linked use of the land and care of the needy, that gave regulations about the treatment of animals, and that prohibited cutting down food-bearing trees even in time of war. Perhaps most striking was the requirement in the Ten Commandments to let our cattle also rest on the Sabbath.

The enduring connection signaled by my interest in environmental verses and a favorite pastime was not apparent at the time: I would often ride my bike to a hillside dense with trees that overlooked the Hudson River north of New York City and spend long stretches of time just sitting under a leafy canopy looking at the water. The trees afforded me privacy and protection, in contrast to the turbulence experienced elsewhere. Other times, I would bike for hours around the city, often taking long breaks by the river to feel transported by its movement and to look at the distant Palisades on the New Jersey side. This pattern of biblical inquiry and respite

with the trees and river in my urban setting came to an abrupt end with the sudden death of my stepfather when I was nineteen. All my energy became focused on family needs and college courses.

By the mid-1980s, many years later, I was well into my professional career, having spent over a decade in aerospace engineering—working as what some now laughingly call a rocket scientist—and then made the transition to environmental work doing research on ways to minimize the heating, cooling, and lighting requirements of buildings. Except for a brief period of work exclusively in the computing industry, my professional career from the 1980s on involved energy and environmental issues, particularly how to reduce energy consumption in buildings and how improvements in building and appliance standards can reduce demands for electricity.

As well, by the mid-1980s, I returned to reviewing the large collection of verses about the land, animals, trees and, to my surprise, air, for pollution did exist in biblical times from tanneries and other sources. During this period, the national consciousness was gaining awareness of the gravity of environmental problems: The media had covered the Endangered Species Act, preserving biological diversity, recycling, the hole in the ozone layer, and CO_2 emissions that were leading to global warming, or what we now term climate change.

I began to think about whether this collection of biblical passages about the natural world related, in any explicit way, to current environmental problems. Not something tenuous, requiring a significant extrapolation from a verse, but explicitly. Where is something about recycling, air pollution, and endangered species? Concurrently, my analytical side was pushing me to gather together this collection of passages. That is, give a scientist a bunch of data, and one approach to understanding it is to see if the pieces fit together. Was there some core message, some overarching principle embodied in this collection of verses that spanned from Genesis to Deuteronomy?

Perhaps in a subconscious attempt to answer this question, I began offering talks in churches and synagogues about the Bible and the environment, some with friends who were ministers. When you teach, you learn.

Also at this time, I was a member of an organization whose mission was to urge members of churches and synagogues to align their personal and congregational activities in ways that harmonized with biblical teachings. In practice, our recommendations focused on building-energy audits, recycling, and organic gardening. We met with congregants and discussed the biblical connections to each of these. At several such meetings, when

talking about care of the land, we heard the observation that from the perspective of Genesis 1:28, the earth is ours to use as we wish.

> God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; 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."

It is comforting to interpret Genesis 1:28 as calling for stewardship of the earth, someone would say, but that is not really what the verse says. The passage seems fairly clear with "subdue" and "have dominion over." When I'd point to a verse about a link between harvesting the land and care of the needy, or a requirement about the treatment of animals, the reply was generally, yes, we do need to take care of the hungry, or we should not be cruel to animals, but Genesis 1:28 gives us the natural world for our use.

This is a tremendously convenient perspective to have. We could engage in all kinds of activities with respect to our environment, and take biblical cover in "have dominion over."

The damaging consequences of this, and support for the perspective of these congregants, were eloquently spelled out in a 1966 talk and 1967 publication by the historian Lynn White Jr. titled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis."[4] White wrote that our failure to deal with the environmental crisis upon us has its roots in Genesis 1:28, from which he gathered the perspective that "no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes." As a corollary, why would we have to change the way we exploit the natural world, despite the obvious damaging effects, if the Bible indicates it is ours to use as we wish?

I agreed that viewing the Genesis verse as a summary of the environmental teachings constituted a major obstacle to meaningful corrective actions. I did not agree, however, that Genesis 1:28 summed up the environmental mandate in the Torah. Rather, I saw it as simply the first of many passages about our interactions with the natural world. What guiding principle could we extract from a collective view?

It would be several years before I arrived at a reasonable formulation of that guiding principle, but not too long until one perspective on the collection of environmental teachings became clear. This view is given in detail in

4. From *Science*, Vol. 155, No. 3767, March 10, 1967, 1203–1207. Reprinted with permission from AAAS.

Part I, and builds on the idea that Genesis 1:28 is just the first of many environmental-related verses; some of the passages clarify earlier ones and others offer new instructions. When the teachings in Genesis–Deuteronomy are taken together, we have the material for a genuine biblical bottom line about our interaction with God's creation. That bottom line serves as an alternative to the Genesis 1:28 interpretation.

The review of the environmental passages in Genesis–Deuteronomy includes relating each to its contemporary form. For example, the teachings about air pollution connect now to CO_2 and climate change, with predictions that, in faith-based terminology, they will devastate God's creation and afflict first and hardest "the least of these."[5] I do not believe, therefore, that people can remain indifferent to the ravaging of creation and still call themselves persons of faith. We can't have it both ways.

People driven more by science than faith are already mobilizing to slow climate change, and are joined by many who see the spiritual imperative as well. If they were joined by large numbers of those driven more by faith than science, who would proclaim the spiritual case for ending reliance on fossil fuels for energy, we would strengthen the movement to slow climate change and preserve a hospitable planet. The expression "preserve a hospitable planet" is not used for dramatic purposes—the stakes are really that high.

Slowing climate change means transforming our society—indeed, the world—from one which relies on coal and oil for energy to one that uses the radiation from the sun, the power of the wind, and nuclear energy. Rightly so, this seems like an enormous undertaking, but it is underway in this country and many others. The problem lies with the pace of change—it is far too slow to avoid the devastation that higher temperatures, furious storms, droughts, and water shortages will bring to the planet. The slow pace results, primarily, from impediments put in place by major corporations and those they influence. This will connect, as we will find, to a crucial insight of the twentieth-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a teaching that influenced the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership of the civil rights movement, and that offers guidance about a successful environmental rights movement: "Individual men may be moral in the sense that they are able to consider interests other than their own in determining problems of conduct, and are capable, on occasion, of preferring the advantages of

5. Matthew 25:40.

others to their own. . . . But . . . these achievements are more difficult, if not impossible, for human societies and social groups."[6]

In order to extend and deepen the discussion of the biblical teachings covered in Part I, each chapter includes questions suitable for a teen or adult class.

Parts II and III of the book respond to the question of what, specifically, can individuals and non-governmental organizations do to accelerate the movement from fossil fuels to energy sources free of greenhouse gas emissions. We can do an enormous amount through both advocacy and personal actions. We can advocate for closing a coal-fired power plant; not cutting down a grove of trees; and choosing wind power to generate electricity, rather than installing another gas turbine plant.

In addition, the move to renewable energy, and to nuclear energy, can be accelerated by the personal actions we take. Part III offers a number of specific suggestions, such as reducing energy use in our homes and businesses by buying energy-efficient products and using them in a non-wasteful manner; by purchasing a hybrid car; and by installing photovoltaic solar panels to provide electricity.

People of faith, motivated by religious beliefs, can bring this country to the tipping point of full engagement with climate change. In 2015, we still have time, though with CO_2 levels continuing to climb, we can reach a point where a climate catastrophe becomes unavoidable. Imagine people paddling a canoe to avoid a waterfall toward which a strong current is carrying them. At some point, depending on the speed of the current and proximity to the falls, no matter how fast they paddle, they are going over. We do not want to reach that point. In Part II, we will review highly credible plans to slow climate change and to stabilize our climate.

But first we will uncover clear biblical teachings urging us to act. It is past time that we put our beliefs into action. That is why two sections of this book include "A Call to Action" in their titles. More pages are devoted to this than the biblical aspects, though at its heart the work aims to answer the *why* and *what* questions: Why should people of faith feel an obligation to take on climate change, and what specifically can we do? May this work promote both dialogue and action.

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6. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), xi.