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Invitation

The terms “ecological crisis” or “environmental problems” at heart refer to the troubled relationship between human beings and God’s creation. At one end of that relationship are secular issues such as climate change, endangered species, and toxic wastes, and at the other end are biblical teachings about the interrelationships among God, people, and nature.

The biblical interrelationships involving God’s creation are found primarily in the books Genesis through Deuteronomy, five books in the bibles of Christians and Jews. Some see the Bible as a text about God and a people, while it is rather a book about God, a people, and creation. The creation narrative occurs in Genesis, and the numerous aspects of the interrelationships between people and the created world are found in Genesis through Deuteronomy. If Christians and Jews seek biblical guidance about the environmental issues upon us, including climate change and its multiple ramifications, that guidance can be found most clearly in these five books.

Some, possibly surprising, examples include:

- Enabling cattle to rest on the Sabbath. In the Ten Commandments we find:

But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

Exod. 20:8–10;

- Not destroying food-bearing trees even in time of war:

If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down;

Deut. 20:19

- Allowing an animal to eat when hungry:

You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.

Deut. 25:4;

- Connecting use of the land with obligations to the needy—it's not just take, take, take:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the LORD your God.

Lev. 23:22

We will examine these and other individual biblical commandments that relate to the environment. In addition, we will develop a *collective* view of those commandments in order to understand *our latitude with respect to the natural world*. That is, looking at all of these verses together, Part I offers a perspective on the biblically based freedom given to Christians and Jews to interact with the animals, birds, fish, trees, land, water, and air that comprise the world.

The Genesis 1:28 verse, “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,’” has been interpreted as giving us great freedom with creation, as meaning we can do with the earth what we wish. But each time a verse such as one of the four above is encountered, it limits what we can do, and diminishes that freedom.

As we move from Genesis to Exodus to Leviticus to Numbers and finally to Deuteronomy and *develop a collective view* of the environmental teachings, that latitude steadily narrows. By the conclusion of Part I, we will discover how to formulate a biblically based synthesis corresponding to that resulting latitude.

That formulation, based on Genesis–Deuteronomy, would replace the one based on a single line in Genesis 1. Supplanting the idea that the earth and its resources are ours to use as we wish is vitally important. Some Christians and Jews look to the Bible as they form decisions about the appropriateness of human actions. A biblical teaching may not be the only criterion, but one of them. Yet, as long as we believe the Bible endorses a no-holds-barred attitude towards creation, we fail to bring an accurate biblical perspective to our decision-making process.

Some biblical commentators qualify their perspective by suggesting that Genesis 1:28 calls for stewardship of creation. While that appears reasonable, the interpretation must be inferred from the text, as it is not explicit in the verse. For people of faith who rely on explicit biblical teachings, the stewardship perspective may not carry persuasive force.

While this book is intended for Christians and Jews who hold the Bible sacred, the audience may be characterized in another way, given the recounting of God's words at the moment of revelation at Sinai:

I am making this covenant, sworn by an oath, not only with you who stand here with us today before the LORD our God, but also with those who are not here with us today.

Deut. 29:14–15

All of us were not standing physically at Sinai that day. It would appear, therefore, that God is continually offering this covenant to those not present at the historic Sinai. Each of us chooses to accept or decline this covenant. If we accept it, then we are part of the collective to whom the Bible speaks and the intended audience for this book.

Any reader questioning how a biblical inquiry can appeal to Christians and Jews equally, might be assuaged by the origin and meaning of the name "Israel": In the Jacob narrative in Genesis 32, Jacob prepares for a meeting with his estranged brother, Esau. Near nightfall, Jacob takes his wives, children, and possessions across the ford of the Jabbok River. The passage follows with: "Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." These provocative verses conclude with the man saying:

"What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

Gen. 32:27–28

The name "Israel" denotes one who strives, wrestles with beings divine and human. Many Christians and Jews of faith see ourselves doing this, contending daily with earthly matters and concurrently striving to live in harmony with the divine, as best we can discern that.¹ Thus, the book's audience embraces equally all those who understand themselves as such wrestlers.

1. Rabbi Arthur Waskow indelibly characterized this striving in books titled *Godwrestling* and *Godwrestling Round 2*.

One of the issues with which we wrestle is climate change. The prevailing view asserts that climate change arises, at least in part, from emitting heat-trapping gases into the atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels. Data recorded for more than fifty years reveal an undeniable buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, and other gases are heat-trapping, meaning that they reflect back to earth some of the heat that would normally vent into the atmosphere, just like the glass in a greenhouse reflects back into the building some of the heat that would otherwise escape into the air.

Evidence of this effect is both abundant and alarming:

- unprecedented melting of the polar ice caps, Greenland's ice sheet, and glaciers;
- increasing average temperature of the Earth over decades;
- changes in coral reefs and other marine life due to increasing water temperature;
- effects on migratory birds and marine life due to warmer air and water temperatures.

One additional predicted outcome is a rise in sea levels, which will adversely affect millions of people, animals, birds, and aquatic life that dwell in coastal regions, and entire island populations. Is there anything in the Bible that prescribes particular behavior regarding the release of gases and fumes that adversely affect others? Indeed, tanneries and other enterprises contributed to air pollution in ancient times, and we will see in later chapters the responses from religious authorities.

But when many Christians and Jews look to the Bible for instructions about our interactions with the natural world, we find it difficult to move past the Genesis 1:28 verse. That's our dominant view—that we rule God's creation and can do with it as we wish.

The historian Lynn White Jr., in a luminous 1966 address and 1967 publication titled *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*,² cited Genesis 1:28 as the root of our crisis. White wrote:

. . . Christianity inherited from Judaism not only a concept of time as non-repetitive and linear but also a striking story of creation. By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God had created light and darkness, the heavenly

2. *Science*, March 10, 1967, 1203–7.

bodies, the earth and all its plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Finally, God created Adam and, as an afterthought, Eve to keep man from being lonely. Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes.

But Christianity inherited a Bible from Judaism, not just the opening chapters of Genesis. The "Law" for Jesus and for the writers of the Gospels was minimally Genesis–Deuteronomy, which contain a host of commandments regarding appropriate behavior with God's creation. The authors of the Gospels and the Epistles did not reformulate teachings in that area, but focused on the life and teachings of Jesus and his disciples.

With the focus in the Gospels on Jesus, and decisions by early church fathers that separated Christianity from Judaism (consider the names *Old Testament* and *New Testament*), the portions of the Bible that deal with our obligations to nature received less attention. The creation story itself remained compelling, and its concluding verse in Genesis 1:28 became the primary reference to the environment. In short, with this shift, Christianity lost touch with many teachings embraced by Jesus.³ As we find in Matthew's recounting of the Sermon on the Mount:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. 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. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Matt. 5:17–19a

This book takes the position that the laws of which Jesus spoke require renewed attention to guide the responses of Christians to the environmental crisis upon us. This does not mean that regardless of our present faith we begin following all these teachings, but that the clear understanding they express of the interdependence between humans and the natural world must shape our responses.

3. Lectionary readings do provide a continuing contact with "the Law," but do not generally stimulate study comparable to New Testament teachings.

While some American political leaders remain strongly influenced by the corporate energy sector, many citizens have been persuaded by the environmental damage that has occurred and predictions of what will occur from climate change. Perhaps people can be further motivated to engage this issue vigorously by becoming attentive to the laws Jesus sought to fulfill. By doing so, Christians and Jews find common cause and together advance creation care as part of their spiritual work in the world. A united effort by both faiths played a major role in establishing integration in America (after a slow start), and a joint effort could again have a transformative effect, this time upon the entire planet. Indeed, Part II does suggest another “rights” movement, an environmental rights movement, again led by clergy and driven by people of faith to save our world from the most destructive consequences of climate change.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss how the author broadens the audience for the book. Would you find yourself comfortable in this conversation regardless of your religious affiliation?
2. How does the expression “God wrestlers” affect your understanding of the name “Israel”?
3. Discuss your interpretation of Genesis 1:28.
4. Discuss the quotes from Lynn White Jr.’s essay and the author’s comments.