

Religion, Science and the Environment

The Great Mississippi River: Restoring Balance
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CAN RELIGION HELP SAVE THE PLANET?
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Can religion help save the planet? In the Bible-based Church where I was brought up, religion was about saving me, not the planet, and it was a long time before I realised that there was more to Christianity than just saving me. Perhaps this is the first place where, as the title of our Symposium suggests, *we need to restore balance*. In many churches this is now happening.

Religion - any religion - shapes the world view of those who commit themselves to it, and my world view was shaped by the Bible as I had learned it in my church school and as I had heard it preached in church each Sunday. There are many Christians who can tell the same story.

I learned about God creating the world, that Adam was made in the image of God, that Adam was commanded to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and to have dominion over every living creature. For centuries, the Hebrew text was translated this way, and was understood, with some pride, as a description of Adam's power over the creation. He was its ruler, with a God-given duty to raise numerous children and the right to use the resources of the earth which had been given to him.

I also learned about the great covenants with Abraham, with Moses and with David, and I learned about the new covenant. Then I went on to further study of the Bible. I learned that the Old Testament was the history of the chosen people, and the New Testament was about my personal salvation.

This is another area where *we need to restore balance*. I, and many others, had been given less than half of the story. Creation, Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, David, and the other great heroes of the Bible, the story of Jesus and his disciples and how the Church spread out from Jerusalem - how was this relevant to the care of creation? Anyone who has ever had to preach about care of the creation, and to find a New Testament text, knows there is very little. 'Consider the lilies of the field' (Matt. 6.28) is not about creation care, but about trust in God to provide for us.

To restore a balanced picture of what the Bible teaches, we need to use the whole Bible and to rediscover its vision of creation. The Bible has a beautiful and sophisticated account of the creation and the role of human beings, but this is not set out in a single text. It has to be recovered from the whole of the Old Testament: from the poetry of the prophets and the sayings of the sages, from the rituals of the priests and the parables of the storytellers. Since the New Testament shares this view of the creation, it is the basis for Christian belief about the environment. But this has been neglected, and *the balance must be restored*.

For many years, biblical scholars emphasised the Bible as History. Syllabuses in schools and colleges made students learn about the kings and heroes of ancient Israel, illustrated by exciting archaeological finds. The covenant was presented in historical and political terms, its origin sought among the ancient Hittites. Looking back now at the books that were standard texts for students, they seem to have an underlying fear that any talk about creation, apart from Genesis, was tainted with fertility cults. The religion of the Old Testament was defined and presented as history - albeit salvation history - and the 'creation' elements were a foreign influence. There were other voices, but very few.

Much Protestant biblical scholarship is still under the influence of the enlightenment, with the rejection of any idea of divine revelation and, for biblical scholars, the development of the historical critical method, which still dominates the field. Johann Gabler's famous lecture in 1787¹ marked the parting of the ways: biblical theology had to be a purely historical discipline, assembling the opinions of the various writers in the Bible.

Thus it was that when people began to be aware of the environmental crisis, Bible-based churches did not have enough resources to teach about the creation. Furthermore, many biblical scholars did not consider that their work needed to be of any relevance or use to Christian communities. Forty years ago, the late Bishop Hugh Montefiore, for many years a member of this Symposium, said: 'It is small wonder that theology is regarded by so many as irrelevant if it does not concern itself with the real world in which we all live.'²

And about forty years ago too³, as people became aware of the state of the environment, the story of Adam and his role became an accusation against the Church. Adam's claim to special status as ruler of the earth, it was said, had caused the imminent crisis, and it was Christians, especially Protestant Christians, who had taught human beings that they had the right, or even the duty, to use the earth as they saw fit. To save the earth, it was argued, human beings would have to change how they thought of themselves. They were only a part of creation, part of the system, but had no special status or claims upon creation.

Now the dominion of Adam is indeed central to the biblical picture of human life, as is the belief that human beings are more than just animals. Here, the original Hebrew words in Genesis need to be carefully scrutinised. The first Christians described Jesus as the new Adam, the second Adam, but they had a very different idea of Adam's intended role in the creation and of how he 'ruled' when they claimed this for Jesus. Some of the recent proposals for understanding Adam, such as Adam the steward, or Adam the earth keeper, are useful for teaching, but they would have been unfamiliar to the first Christians.

If we can bring back into current discourse something of the biblical vision for creation as the first Christians knew it, something of their belief about Adam and the intended role for human beings, then Bible-based Christianity can do a lot to shape a way of thinking and living that will help to save the planet.

¹ In Altdorf March 30th 1787

² *The Question Mark*, London: Collins, 1969, p. 44

³ Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis' *Science* 155.3767 (1967) pp. 1203-07.

First, the covenant, which is a basic idea that takes many forms in the Bible. The most fundamental form, however, has been neglected, and so here is another area *where we need to restore balance*. The first covenant mentioned in the Bible, in the story of Noah, is the everlasting covenant, the covenant with every living creature (Gen. 9.16). Elsewhere this is called the covenant of peace, the covenant of wholeness and integrity.

They imagined the everlasting covenant as a system of bonds to keep the whole creation together in one system, and bind it to the Creator, the source of its life. Sin, by definition, was anything that broke a covenant bond, and the word translated 'iniquity' means, literally, distortion. If too many bonds were broken or distorted, the whole system would collapse. This is the origin of those terrifying pictures in the Apocalypse: stars falling, mountains moving, the sky rolled up like a scroll (Rev.6.12-4).

Human sin could destroy the creation. From its very beginning, this Symposium has said that harming the environment is a sin, a position deeply rooted in this neglected aspect of the covenant..

And what of Adam's role? The description in Genesis, that Adam was to subdue the earth and have dominion over every living thing, described Adam before his disobedience, before he had chosen to do things his own way. Those words, translated that way and taken out of context, have indeed contributed to the present state of crisis.

But how were they understood by the first Christians, when they proclaimed Jesus as the new Adam?

Let us focus on just one word: subdue, *kabaš*. The most common meaning, when used of human beings, is that they subdue, bind or harness (Num. 32.22; Jer. 34.11), but when used of the LORD it has a different, though related, sense. It means to bind up in the sense of heal and restore. The prophet Micah said that the LORD delights in love, he has compassion on us and 'binds up' our distortions (Mic.7.19). Love and compassion do not fit well with the idea of subjection.

Since Adam was created as the image of God, he was created to act with love and compassion, and to bind up the distortions, whatever was threatened the everlasting covenant. Adam had to keep its bonds secure.

One of the earliest Christian hymns, which St Paul quoted, describes Jesus as the new Adam: He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation,... and in him all things hold together.' (Col.1.15, 17). What else can this mean, other than that Adam, the image, was intended to hold all things together, to preserve the eternal covenant of creation?

So can religion help to save the planet? For a Bible-based Christian, the answer must be 'yes', but only if we first *restore the balance* in the way we read and teach the Bible.