

THE BIBLE: GOOD OR BAD NEWS FOR THE ENVIRONMENT?

1 OCCASION: What occasions this question is (1) the rising awareness that humanity is increasingly bad news for the environment. We are depleting, diluting, & polluting earth's resources at unsustainable rates, rates increasing as "undeveloped" areas of the world are becoming developed, & "developed" areas are becoming even more developed. Other contributors to the question are (2) the parallel romanticizing of undeveloped ("aboriginal" or "primitive") cultures, as in the film "Dances with Wolves" (#2484), & (3) aggressive antiChristian missionizing by (a) secular humanists (working most successfully in our public schools) & (b) neoBuddhists (as, eg, the Cambridge Buddhist Center's "Religion and Ecology" concluding this Saturday--the religion hidden in the formal title "The Boston Research Center for the 21st Century"--see the excellent CAPE COD TIMES coverage, esp. Mar.4 & 20). Finally (4), Apollo 17 let humanity see earth, the whole earth, for the first time--an awesome pure white-blue-green marble set in black velvet, celebrated by an on-board astronaut's reading of the creation story at the beginning of the Bible, the story that implies a human task by telling us (though the astronaut did not read as far as Gn.1.31) that earth, according to the Creator, is "**very good**").

2 "Finders, keepers," children say. The Bible in effect says "**Maker, Keeper**": "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, / the world, and those who live in it; / for he has founded it...." (Ps.24.1 NRSV). Owner's rights & duties. We're only renters, or at best leasers; & when by death we vacate the property, we are to leave it in at least as good condition as we found it. (One simple way Loree & I have done this is by improving the soil of every piece of real estate we have "owned.")

If the renter/lesser *fails* to maintain the property, the Owner has legal recourse: abusing the property (the environment) is, finally, not an option. The Owner will get you, the property will turn on you (the environment will become unfavorable to human life, as indeed it is becoming).

3 In the Bible--alone among the world's scriptures (& in Christianity alone among the world's religions)--**God affirms earth** by beaming himself down, once & for all (all time & all peoples), to earth (Jn.1.14). In some religions--eg, Hinduism & Buddhism--the pious beam themselves out of earthly-earthy relationships (though not so much in their neo- [ie, Christianity-influenced] forms). And in some--esp. gnosticisms--devotees beam themselves up out of earth, nature (as the 39 "Heaven's Gate"ers who last week suicided from their bodies ["vehicles," "containers"]).

By contrast, the Bible/Christianity is **triply grounded**: (1) Creation/earth as "very good" (Gn.1.31); (2) Incarnation, the peak of revelation, as the Creator become the Redeemer by becoming a human being within the powers & limits of nature; & (3) Consummation as God's will done "on earth as it is in heaven" (as we Christians continually say in the Lord's Prayer). The universe is God's natural story, & we who affirm God (including Jesus himself) are God's historical story: history is a part of, as well as apart from, nature/biosphere/environment.

4 Though God-created, God-maintained, God-inhabited, God-visited, & God-invaded, the environment/nature/biosphere/earth is **not God**. The denial makes science, & thus also technology, possible. Only in this narrow & indirect sense can the Bible be said to be bad news for the environment. Note here a common hypocrisy: enjoying the fruits of technology, & blaming the roots on the Bible, which never says we should treat nature as though we had owner's rights to control it. (Gn.1.26-28 is a command of the Dominus [Lord] that we, "male and female," exercise *under*-"dominion," as stewards/trustees of the Owner, not as independent entrepreneurs free to rape & waste.)

5 The Bible condemns the **Luciferian urge** (Is.14.12-14: "I will make myself like the Most High") to play God, to take over & work our will on the world. For this evil & sin, rape is the most fitting analogy: a relationship intended for love & fruitfulness is debased into demonic denial of love & its beneficence. Yet some would condemn the Bible for failing to condemn what it specifically *does* condemn--so strong is the will to disbelieve. (Eg, when Loree's brother Carl Gangwish patiently explained to AUDUBON MAGAZINE the biblical doctrine of "dominion" as stewardship, the ensuing article accused him of using the Bible to justify lording it over the earth!)

6 Please re-read this Thinksheet's title, then reverse it: Is **environmentalism** (one aspect of 3a in §1) good or bad news for the Bible/Christianity/God? As you can see in Carl's experience, bad news. The Bible is for the environment & against environmentalism's spiritual hocus-pocus, its resacralizing, remythologizing, re-enchantment of "nature." Now note the correlation of §3 (nature is "not God") & §4 (human beings, as sinners, try to "play God").

Against such Luciferian environmentalism (the passive form of earth-centered atheism, as materialistic consumerism is the active form), the Bible warns against **idolatry**, which is worshiping some self-selected sacred as though it were (what only God is, viz) holy. In #2332 ("I Pledge Allegiance to Planet Earth: The Holy Task of Selecting the Site for the Sacred"), I say (§6) "If we construe it aright for our time, the gospel will be **good news to humanity in the biosphere** as it is already good news to the person in community. But the opposite is true of Christianity as the traditional packaging of the gospel: on balance, Christianity comes off as an enemy of the biosphere, for it is compassionately addicted to humanity, to what here-&-now is happening to born & unborn human individuals." New occasions teach new duties; & our anthropocentric (humanity-centered) myopia needs, by corrective lenses, the vision of the biosphere (the species-in-nature, as we're learning to view the individual-in-community [ie, the "person," not the isolated individual])....An example of myopia in need of correction: fetolatry (as in Islam & Catholicism)--sacralizing (making inviolable) the fetus, in blindness to the fact that without abortion (which is tragic), "the quality of both human life & the environment is doomed to decline [which is even more tragic; #2086.4]."

7 While utopian idealism, a secularization of the biblical hope, *seems* to be good news for the environment, **biblical realism** is so. To blame the biosphere's woes on Western technology, & praise primitives as models against "the West" (meaning Christianity, in cultic competition among the religions), combines superficial analysis with the Enlightenment's romanticizing of (Rousseau) the "noble savage." Two considerations seldom factored into the debate:

(1) Primitives, meaning here pretechnologized societies, are less bad news to the environment not as a matter of kind but only of degree. Nomads "solve" their pollution problems simply by moving away from their offal & garbage. Settled peoples, from centuries of mindless deforestation, suffer destructive floods. Besides being bad news to their environments, they have failed to be the good news to themselves that a greater distance from nature (as in "the West") would have made possible: they are "underdeveloped" in more senses than the technological. All true, in spite of the fact that "the West" is in some ways overdeveloped.

(2) The Bible's deeper-wider analysis of the ecological crisis includes (a) **amnesia** (forgetting who God is, & thus whose the earth is); (b) **idolatry** ("worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator," Ro.1.18-25; cp. false worship, Lev.18.24-25: "thus the land became defiled"); & (3) natural-law **determinism**, in contrast to the Christian conviction that the earth is "groaning" (Ro.8.18-25) from more than materialistic hypertrophy (notice, in vv.12-17, "debtors" & "heirs"). We are --says the Bible--bad news to the environment for more reasons than one. And we can't become better news unless our situation-definition is comprehensive: superficial analysis in, superficial "solutions" out.

8 The '96 Society of Biblical Literature presidential address (1-17 SBL Spr/97) **corrects distortions** in present-day perceptions of what the Bible has to say about the environment: the Bible shows "more appreciation of what we call nature than has been recognized." Keeping nature related to God, it calls nature "creation"; & it views creation theocentrically (from the Creator's viewpoint), not anthropocentrically (from ours). Ps.8 is not about our being superior to the rest of nature; rather, "the starry heavens above and human responsibility are awesome"; our "special human role emphasizes responsibilities and not rights"--our "frailty" & "the limits of our authority."....God is "active in but distinct from the world," which is "good" not in itself but "because it is God's creation."--Gene M. Tucker; typical of today's Bible scholars.

9 We Christians see Father, Son, & Holy Spirit at work in creation/nature/history. Eg, Christ was/is at work in creation (Ro.11.36; 1Cor.8.6; Col.1.16-17; Heb.1.2; Jn.1.1-3), in resurrection (1Cor.15), & in the renewal of the earth by direct divine action (again, the Lord's Prayer; &, eg, Rev.21-22).