

The Bible As A Green Text?

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Abstract

With an increasing debate over human impact on the environment, can we look at how the environment can be treated through a Christian perspective? Pope Francis, in the Roman Catholic tradition, has paved the way with *Laudato Si* and given much to think about. Is the Bible fundamentally a ‘Green’ text? Have people been misinterpreting the message on how to care for the environment? This essay will examine what theologians have said in regards to the Bible and the environment and conclude that in the Bible we can find it to be a ‘Green’ text.

Keywords: Bible, Green, Environment

Introduction

There has been much debate on about the environment and over Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si*. A fundamental question needs to be asked: Is the Bible fundamentally a ‘green’ text?

299 Because God creates through wisdom, his creation is ordered: “You have arranged all things by measure and number and weight.” The universe, created in and by the eternal Word, the “image of the invisible God,” is destined for and addressed to man, himself created in the “image of God” and called to personal relationship with God. Our human understanding, which shares in the light of the divine intellect, can understand what God tells us by means of his creation, though not without great effort and only in a spirit of humility and respect before the Creator and his work. Because creation comes forth from God’s goodness, it shares in that goodness – “And God saw that it was good...very good.” – for God willed creation as a gift addressed to man, an inheritance destined for and entrusted to him. On many occasions the Church has had to defend the goodness of creation, including that of the physical world.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., 299.

What does it mean that the Church⁵⁵ has had to defend the goodness of creation, which includes the physical world? For many years I have heard sermons/homilies proclaiming “man’s”⁵⁶ superiority over all of God’s creation and how “man” has been put on this earth to subdue the earth and to have dominion over it.⁵⁷ Has that been taken out of context or misinterpreted?

This essay will address whether or not the Bible is fundamentally a ‘green’⁵⁸ text by examining different arguments regarding God’s intention for His creation.⁵⁹ This can be hard for many people, myself included, especially when one is raised with the typical image of man being put on this earth to subdue and dominate it. It becomes a little easier when one starts to think outside what one has typically been taught especially when listening to Walter Brueggemann.

I.

Brueggemann once wrote, “Biblical interpretation, done with imagination willing to risk ideological distortion, open to the inspiring spirit, is important. But it is important not because it might allow some to seize control of the church, but because it gives the world access to the good truth of the God who creates, redeems and consummates.”⁶⁰ So what is God really telling us about the environment and creation?

Jonathan Clatworthy wrote a piece on the implications of the doctrine of the fall, in which he pointed out that there have been many people who have blamed God for things that have gone wrong in nature. He points out

⁵⁵ In this essay, as a note, when I refer to the term “Church” I am referring to the Roman Catholic Church. I do not mean to insult anyone with this term who may refer to the term “Church” as the greater Christian community.

⁵⁶ With the term, “man’s” here I am also referring to all of humanity not just men.

⁵⁷ Gen. 1.28 (New American Bible): “God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

⁵⁸ The term ‘green’ here I am referring to refers to environmental issues that are prevalent today. To use the bible as a ‘green’ text means that one is recognizing that the bible is centered on preventing exploitation of all of creation.

⁵⁹ Another short note for this essay: out of respect for the Deity and the persons of the Trinity, I capitalize all references to God and members of the Trinity including pronouns. These are not typos. When they are not capitalized, it is only because I quote directly from texts and leave the words as they have been printed. Additionally, for a number of reasons, but mainly readability and convenience, I use the masculine pronouns to refer to God. This is not done to offend any readers who may prefer gender-neutral language. Also all biblical citations, unless otherwise noted, come from the New American Bible.

⁶⁰ Walter Brueggemann, “*Biblical Authority.*” in *Doing Right and Being Good: Catholic and Protestant Readings in Christian Ethics*, eds. David Oki and Peter R. Gathje (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), 46.

“Natural disasters are explained as God’s just punishment of human sin.”⁶¹ He also then goes on to point out that humanity should not blame God for disasters that happen or put any blame on God’s creation because the order of God’s creation was “good” and the cause of the problems can only lie in human sin or in what we have done to the earth.⁶² If this is the case, why is it that people have been taught that it is humanity that is and can do whatever it wants to the earth?⁶³ This has been a problem because of the current effects to our ecosystems and earth in general. It is important, then, to re-examine scripture to see that the Bible can be seen as promoting a ‘green’ balance with all of God’s creation.

When thinking of God’s creation, one can immediately jump to the creation stories found in the book of Genesis. It is in the book of Genesis that one first starts to see God’s intention for His creation as well as an inclination towards the Bible being a ‘green’ text. It is interesting to note that when one looks at the order of creation, one can start to see where God might be addressing the ranking of importance in creation.

Ellen Davis once made the point that it was the land that came first in God’s plan of creation. She also made the point that it is humanity that needs both God and the land in order to survive and it is when that balance is upset, there are dire consequences, for example when humanity over uses land for farming humans suffer from land degradation and crops yield little harvest and there is not enough food for people etc.⁶⁴ In one of the Old Testament stories of creation, one can see that God puts great emphasis on His creation where He sees what He has created and calls it Good. God is pleased with the way in which creation is unblemished and preserved. That is why God intended for “mankind” to be stewards of the land and not just people to dominate and do what it pleases with the land.

If one examines the second creation story found in the Genesis account, one can see not only the order of creation but also that God had

⁶¹ Jonathan Clatworthy, “Let the Fall Down: the environmental implications of the Doctrine of the Fall,” *Ecotheology*, vol. 4 (1998): 32.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ As a note: This concept of doing whatever one wants to the earth or the interpretation of “subduing” the earth can be found in many communities in the US. I am not claiming that it is an official teaching that is sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church or other Christian denominations, but only that it has been taught in various ways over the years. An example of this can be seen in the US Mormon faith tradition and can be seen in a piece written by Brigham Young academic Hugh Nibley and his experience with the concept of subduing the earth and its meaning. For more information please see: Hugh W. Nibley, *Man’s Dominion, or Subduing the Earth*, <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/books/?bookid=49&chapid=301>

⁶⁴ Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, culture, and agriculture: an Agrarian reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 28-33.

made Adam from the earth. In *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, it shows that the second Genesis creation story was one that deals primarily with humanity and sustaining humanity through agricultural environment.⁶⁵ God creates man out of the earth, the earth that is to sustain him. God makes Adam part of the natural order but it is not until God gives Adam the divine breath that he becomes a living being and is given dominion over the creation which, according to the *Oxford Companion*, in Genesis 1 Man being made in the Image of God signifies Man as a caretaker in the Garden and being responsible for creation and to the Maker.⁶⁶ The story stresses that man, earth, God, and all of creation have a mutual, complementary need to live in unity. One cannot dominate the other and vice versa. Adam is to be a steward of the land and creation since he is made in the image and likeness of God and God cares for His creation.

Calvin B. DeWitt makes the case that Adam was to be a steward of the Garden in the Genesis account. Using the Genesis 2.15 account, he explains that the words to “till” and “keep it” conveyed a meaning of serving in the garden since the Garden had been planted by the Creator and not Adam. As a result, the garden was to serve as a biosphere to reciprocate being served by Adam by also serving mankind.⁶⁷ There is a harmony that is seen in the Genesis account, a give and take relationship that is taking place. This can also be seen in the Genesis 1 command by God to “be fruitful and multiply.”

There are quite a few people, that I have encountered, that have used the argument that God told humanity that it should “be fruitful and multiply” and that because of this humanity had a special role in creation. This, however, according to DeWitt was not what God had intended. It is important to note, according to DeWitt, that God had not given this command to humans first but in fact given to the fish and birds in Gen. 1:20-22.⁶⁸ It is not until several verses later, more specifically verse 28, where God finally tells humanity to “be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion.”⁶⁹

It is this quote, in my experience, that has caused much misinterpretation over what the Bible was actually saying. DeWitt points out that God had blessed the earth so that all of His creation would flourish with abundance and diversity and more specifically he points out that the word “fill” did not mean what is traditionally thought to mean, i.e. for humanity to

⁶⁵ Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, s.v. “Creation.” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 140-141

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Calvin B. DeWitt, “Biodiversity and the Bible,” *Global Biodiversity* 6, no. 4 (1997): 14.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid. & Genesis 1:28 (New American Bible)

dominate and take over.⁷⁰ It had in fact been used in regards to flourishing instead of overpopulation and is part of fulfilling God's plan for creation. Humanity is placed in the garden, and on the earth, to take care of the balance that is formed by God because all things are related together and to the creator.

Bauckman also makes that point clear, in regards to stewardship that it was when man decided to disobey God's plan and harmony that things started to go awry. It was when man decided to not exercise its role of responsible care for all of God's creation that the harmony in the Garden started to break down and get worse.⁷¹ God had given man all the food it needed in the Garden, which was primarily a vegetarian diet.⁷² It wasn't until after the fall that man needed to kill for food and thereby bring violence into God's creation.⁷³ God created harmony out of chaos in the Garden and it was man who brought chaos back into creation.

Sean McDonagh also writes about the role that humanity is to play in God's creation. He points out "many modern biblical scholars insist that the Divine command cannot be interpreted as a licence for humans to change and transform the natural world according to any human whim or fancy."⁷⁴ Humans are to be good stewards of the earth, taking care of God's creation making sure that there is a healthy balance. Using Ted F. Peters he writes "that originally the commission was, in fact, a challenge to human beings to imitate God's loving kindness and faithfulness and act as is viceroy in relationship with the non-human component of the earth."⁷⁵ Those who are viceroys are to be honest and just and not exploit the subjects of the King.

Even the psalms point out how a just King is to act where in Ps 72:4-7 (New American Bible) a King must defend the poor, and in verse 6-7 one can see that the King has to be in union with the whole of creation. Verses 6-7 state, "May he be like the rain coming down upon the fields, like showers watering the earth, that abundance may flourish in his days, great bounty, till the moon be no more."⁷⁶ A good King is to have a reciprocal relationship with creation in order for it to yield abundance for the people.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the community of Creation* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 23-24.

⁷² This image of humans being primarily vegetarian and eating a vegetarian diet is also held by Sean McDonagh where he makes the point that "at the dawn of creation humans were expected to be vegetarian; plants are the only food permitted to both animals and humans (Gen 1:29)." For more on this please see Sean McDonagh, *The greening of the Church* (London: Orbis Books, 1990), 119.

⁷³ Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the community of Creation*, 23-24.

⁷⁴ Sean McDonagh, *The greening of the Church* (London: Orbis Books, 1990), 119

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Psalm 72. 4-7 (New American Bible)

The earth is to be protected by the King, as well as the people. He is to mimic the good Sheppard who cares for his flock in Ezekiel 34.⁷⁷

In addition to the creation accounts in the Old Testament, there are several other parts that can be seen as showing the bible as being a ‘green’ text. The book of Deuteronomy speaks, in several places, in regards to taking care of God’s creation. In Deuteronomy chapter 22, there are several verses that speak of taking care of animals. In Deuteronomy 22: 1-4 (New American Bible) one can see reference to caring for various parts of creation. In verses 1-4 one can see that one is not allowed to simply leave an animal alone once it has gone astray or even become injured. One is to take it in and take care of it, until the rightful owner comes to claim it. “You shall not see your kinsman’s ox or sheep driven astray without showing concern about it...you shall not see your kinsman’s ass or ox foundering on the road without showing concern about it; see to it that you help him lift it up.”⁷⁸ Many today would simply leave the animal to die without thinking twice, yet one can see that that goes against what one should do.

One can also see care for animal through the concept of fruitfulness, written about by DeWitt, in Deuteronomy 22:6 (New American Bible). This passage shows that, in order for the animals to be “fruitful and multiply,” humans or humanity must do what it can to protect them and help them fulfil that command by God. “If, while walking along, you chance upon a bird’s nest with young birds or eggs in it, in any tree or on the ground, and the mother bird is sitting on them, you shall not take away the mother bird along with her brood; you shall let her go...”⁷⁹ DeWitt points out that this passage speaks of preserving the lineage of species. The mother is not to be harmed so that she may produce more offspring and therefore continue with God’s call/command to “be fruitful and multiply.”⁸⁰

DeWitt also points out that fruitfulness can be seen in the Psalms as well as Ezekiel. In Psalms, particularly Psalm 23 where one can see in verses 1-2 that there is reference made to man being given permission to use the land by God. “The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack. In green pastures you let me graze; to safe waters you lead me.”⁸¹ The fact that one is allowed to graze implies that one does not have ownership and therefore must take care or be careful of what one is being allowed to do. Just like when a colleague would ask to borrow a power tool, one would expect it to be taken care of and returned in the condition that it was lent. The same can

⁷⁷ McDonagh, *The greening of the Church*, 119

⁷⁸ Deuteronomy 22. 1& 4 (New American Bible)

⁷⁹ Deuteronomy 22.6 (New American Bible)

⁸⁰ Calvin B. DeWitt, “Biodiversity and the Bible,” 15.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, & Psalm 23.1-2 (New American Bible)

be said for God and this passage; we are to take care of the land that we are allowed to graze through.

The book of Ezekiel also makes reference to how the land is to be treated. If one examines Ezekiel 34.18 (New American Bible) one can see how responsibility has to play a role in preserving what we have in creation. “Was it not enough for you to graze on the best pasture, that you had to trample the rest of your pastures with your feet? Was it not enough for you to drink the clearest water, that you had to foul the remainder with your feet?”⁸² DeWitt points out that this passage means that people are to be responsible when they feed and or use creation, to be responsible so as to not destroy the fruitfulness of creation.⁸³ One can even see how this could disregard for God’s creation could anger God. In Ezekiel 36 verse 5 it is written, “Truly, with burning jealousy I speak against the rest of the nations who with wholehearted joy and utter contempt have considered my land their possession to be delivered out to plunder.” Here one can see that God does not approve of His creation being taken and used in ways that He does not approve of.

The final point of this essay, to show that the bible can be used as a ‘green’ text, makes reference to the use of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was given, according to DeWitt, “to protect the land from relentless exploitation, to help the soil, the heart of the land, rejuvenate. The law allows nature to restore itself. The scriptures warn that failure to give the land its rest will result in the land no longer supporting people and they will be driven off.”⁸⁴ There are many instances where similar practices take place throughout the world. In the United States, this has been an issue that many do not truly accept and has been a tradition that is no longer being supported by biblical citation, due to the false understanding of separation of church and state.⁸⁵ Despite this, it is evident throughout the Old Testament that humanity is to take care of the land and not abuse it.

Conclusion

Walter Brueggemann once wrote, “The Bible is not a fixed, frozen, readily exhausted read; it is rather, a “script,” always reread, through which

⁸² Ezekiel 34.18 (New American Bible)

⁸³ DeWitt, “Biodiversity and the Bible,” 15.

⁸⁴ Ibid. & Leviticus 26.34-35 (New American Bible)

⁸⁵ I make reference here to several U.S. States’ hunting laws which prohibit hunting and farming on Sunday. The laws date back to colonial times and the bible is not cited as being the source which has led to people disagreeing with the law and wanting it abolished. Please see Richard G. Vaught, *Getting the facts on prohibition of hunting on Sundays*, <http://www.tidewaternews.com/2011/07/02/getting-the-facts-on-prohibition-of-hunting-on-sundays/>.

the Spirit makes all things new.”⁸⁶ By focusing on the environment and how the Bible can help us see that we really need to be stewards of the land, the Catechism quote #299 can start to make sense. Humanity has abused the text and the land as a result; it is only now that one can see how the Church⁸⁷ has started to show that the text can be seen as a ‘green’ text.

Bradley wrote, “Once we really grasp this idea of the Pleroma or fullness of God’s creation and the significance of every part of it to him then we can surely no longer go on destroying the whales, cutting down the tropical rain forests or turning the good earth into dust bowls and deserts.”⁸⁸ God has intended for humanity to see His creation as a good and beautiful creation, one that needs to be respected and protected. It is a reciprocal relationship that must be understood and that can be done by looking to the scriptures. “The bible writers envisaged the whole creation – the visible natural world, human society and the invisible world of the angels – bound in a network of bonds known as the ‘eternal covenant’, where ‘covenant’ means binding together, and ‘eternal’ has its original meaning as the timeless but constant presence of God.”⁸⁹

God is not just the God of humanity but of all of creation. It is humanity that has caused great tragedies in the environment not God for God sees all His creation as good. If we are to live in accordance with God’s plan, we need to re-examine the bible as a ‘green’ text and accept that it promotes protecting creation so that all may live in harmony. It is only then that we will be able to see that God has intended for all to live in unity and embrace the diverse creation, which God proclaimed good.

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⁸⁶ Brueggemann, “*Biblical Authority*.” 41.

⁸⁷ In 1993 a partnership among several religious denominations in the US was made in which the US Catholic Church was a part of. They came together to address the state of the environment and to recognize the responsibility that they share as being stewards of the earth and people of the book. For more on this note see: Calvin B. DeWitt, “Biodiversity and the Bible,” 13.

⁸⁸ Ian Bradley, *God is Green* (Darton: Longman & Todd, 1990), 32.

⁸⁹ Margaret Barker, “The earth is the Lord’s: the biblical view of the environment,” *International journal for the study of the Christian church*, vol 8(3) (2008): 195.

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