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The Greening of the Papacy

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Back to Our Environmental Roots

How the Bible Serves to Ground Faith and Action in Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism

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Introduction

When, in the late 1970s, I began university teaching, we were sure we knew everything – and everything about everything. When it came to the environment, and the place of humans in it, there was East and there was West, and never ever would they meet. Thus it was in one of the first courses I ever taught: Introduction to Religion. When we reached the section on religion and the environment, our textbook displayed two images: one image, captioned as “typical” of the East, showed a pair of humans barely visible in a tableau dominated by trees, plants, flowers, and wild animals. Humans as part of nature, living in a luxuriant paradise. By contrast, large-scale humans dominated the “typical” picture from the West; only partially

visible in the background were the remnants of a desiccated and diminished nature. Humans apart from nature, nature blighted by the very humans who had become its masters.¹

The text that accompanied these images left no doubt that they were illustrative of vastly different views of nature: those in the East (China, India, Japan, among others) view humans as integral parts of and participants in nature, with which they maintained a harmonious existence; those of us who lived in the West tended to dominate nature, constantly pillaging what is, in our view, there only for our gratification and satisfaction. Some four decades later, such views appear naïve and simplistic. But the questions they raise remain starkly relevant to this day.

Among the powerful weapons of attack against the West, especially as wielded by the historian Lynn White Jr. was the Bible, as read (or misread) by generations of translators and interpreters. As traditionally understood, at the time of Creation humans were commanded to “subdue” and “have dominion” over all the rest of creation (so Genesis 1:28). Seen in this light, it is not surprising that Western, especially Christian, history overflows with examples of environmental degradation and destruction.

Genesis 1:28, given its “canonical” English rendering in the King James Bible – “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” – is one of the two or three most frequently discussed and dissected biblical directives about the environment and, in particular, the role of humans. The use of the King James Bible (KJB) throughout this paper recognizes the unique role of this translation within the context of English-language translations of the Bible and, more generally, within English literature. Despite its numerous revisions, updates, and re-packagings, and the production of more recent “formal equivalence” versions, the language of KJB largely retains its central role in this and similar discussions.

Chapter 1 of Genesis establishes an easily discernable hierarchical structure, with God at the top and the created beings at the bottom. Humans, although we are of course created also, seem to occupy a considerable, but not well defined territory, in the vast expanse that separates creator from created. It is within this context that humans received their divine mandate to bring order to the other living beings. Because this is envisioned as an arduous task, the verbs describing it are not gentle: “subdue,” “have dominion,” “rule over.” The phrase “have dominion over,” found in almost all English-language renderings of this verse, cogently captures the signification of the Hebrew root *rdh* (רדו).

There are several arguments in favor of this position. As it well known, for well over a century critical scholars have divided the first chapters of Genesis into a Priestly (P) account (Gen 1:1–2:4a) and a Yahwistic (J) account (Genesis 2:4b–3:24) (see Friedman). Among the marked differences in these two accounts might be the emphasis on dominion here versus a more caring concern on the part of humans in Genesis 2:15 (see below). Internally (that is,

¹ Portions of the introductory paragraphs of this article, as well as of the analysis of specific biblical passages, are taken or adapted from Greenspoon 2008.

within the P account), the subduing of the “chaos” of wild animals by humans would mirror God’s quelling of chaos in his initial acts of creation.

Such a mirror or parallel recalls that only of humans is it stated that they were created in God’s “image.” However we interpret this term, it does seem to illuminate a proposition of considerable significance: humans should act toward the rest of nature as God acts toward all of nature. It is in this light, I believe, that we can arrive at a more authentic understanding of the Hebrew, especially of the root *rdh* (רדה), by using the term “subdue” for the Hebrew root *kbš* (כבש) and “hold sway” for *rdh* (רדה). In this way, we are able to register a changed stance as humans and animals dwell together in increasing proximity and familiarity over an extended period of time. These renderings are not, however, found in any single version of the Bible with which I am familiar.

Another central passage for determining the biblical attitude (or, better, biblical attitudes) toward the environment is Genesis 2:15, often touted as a corrective to Genesis 1:28. As I remarked above, Genesis 2:15 – “And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (in the King James Bible) – appears to stand in marked contrast to verse 28 from the previous chapter. Supporters of the Documentary Hypothesis see this as but one of many contrasts between the P and the J sources. However, we do not have to accept the Documentary Hypothesis or any other critical scholarly construct to discern these differences and perhaps even the reasons for them.

In this case, the second verb, *šmr* (שמר), demonstrates that there is here an emphasis on “caring” or “caring for” that is absent from Genesis 1. Although a translation of this verb by the term “keep” is perfectly appropriate in many biblical passages, it is not adequate in this context. I prefer “take care of,” found in versions popular with both Jews and Protestants, or one of its near synonyms. The first verb in the Hebrew is *‘bd* (עבד), which is from the common Hebrew root for “to work.” For that reason, the translation “to work” is, in my opinion, not only the simplest but the best rendering here.

Some English-language versions blur the distinctions that separate the two Hebrew roots, as, for example in “to take of it and look after it.” As we have seen, this procedure does not do justice to the Hebrew. Parallel to Genesis 1:28, here at Genesis 2:15 the text asks us to envision a process: both inside and, later, outside of the Garden of Eden, the earth does not easily yield its fruit – at least not initially. To be productive, humans must indeed “work” the land at first; later on, they must “take care of” it to insure that it not revert to its earlier, unproductive state. It is only humans who are entrusted with this task, which can appropriately be described as sacred.

All of this, as fascinating as it is (at least to me) in and of itself, is only prolegomenon, food for further reflection. And the further reflection I offer on this occasion consists of some forays into the use of these and related passages in Roman Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, and Judaism. “Forays,” by their nature, are tentative and partial. Thus, I do not aim for or claim full coverage. Rather, I set out examples.

Roman Catholicism

We begin, appropriately enough on this occasion and in this venue, with the Roman Catholic tradition. In his 2010 celebration of the World Day of Peace, Pope Benedict XVI states:

[S]eeing creation as God’s gift to humanity helps us understand our vocation and worth as human beings. With the Psalmist, we can exclaim with wonder: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars which you have established; what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” (Ps 8:4-5). Contemplating the beauty of creation inspires us to recognize the love of the Creator, that Love which “moves the sun and the other stars” (2009b: 2).

His reference to verses 4 and 5 of Psalm 8 (verses 3-4 in the KJB) lead to a consideration of the following couplet as well. Verses 6 and 7 (5 and 6 in the KJB) – “For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet” – raise the question of humankind’s status in the created order, a query that, as we have seen, arises in other contexts as well.

Focusing on the final verse, the root that is most often translated as “to have dominion” or “rule” is not the same root found in Genesis 1. Rather, in Psalm 8 the root *mšl* (משל) is used. As occasionally happens in biblical Hebrew, there are actually two roots with the same three consonants. One, from which the Hebrew name for the Book of Proverbs is derived, means “to compare, compose comparisons.” The other, which is the root present here, does connote “mastery” or “rule,” but typically without any suggestion of force or violence. Because of this nuance, we should seriously consider the rendering “put in charge,” which is found in some of the freer English-language versions. It seems to me that this term retains the hierarchical structure (seen also in Genesis 1) while not imposing hints of brutishness that other English terms could suggest.

The second part of the verse speaks of putting “all things” “under” the feet of humans. The Hebrew preposition used here is *tht* (תחת). This preposition does indeed most often mean “under,” which would accord with the idea of tight or total control by humans over the works/handiworks of God. But, as we just noted with respect to the root *mšl* (משל), the Psalmist may well not have envisioned such control. As I see it, the use of “at,” as in the New American Bible (used by English-speaking Roman Catholics in North America) and the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh, points in this direction. Laying something “at” a person’s feet is often associated with a gift; as such, it acknowledges that the recipient is in charge, but lacks the crushing imagery of putting something “under” another person’s feet. In my view, this change in the English rendering of a simple Hebrew preposition accords with what the Psalmist intended.

To return to the papal message of January 2010:

Is it not true that what we call ‘nature’ in a cosmic sense has its origin in “a plan of love and truth”? . . . The *Book of Genesis*, in its very first pages, points

to the wise design of the cosmos: it comes forth from God's mind and finds its culmination in man and woman, made in the image and likeness of the Creator to "fill the earth" and to "have dominion over" it as "stewards" of God himself (cf. Gen 1:28). The harmony between the Creator, mankind and the created world, as described by Scripture, was disrupted by the sin of Adam and Eve, by man and woman, who wanted to take the place of God and refused to acknowledge that they were his creatures. As a result, the work of "exercising dominion" over the earth, "tilling it and keeping it," was also disrupted, and conflict arose within and between mankind and the rest of creation (cf. Gen 3:17-19). Human beings let themselves be mastered by selfishness; they misunderstood the meaning of God's command and exploited creation out of a desire to exercise absolute domination over it. But the true meaning of God's original command, as the *Book of Genesis* clearly shows, was not a simple conferral of authority, but rather a summons to responsibility. The wisdom of the ancients had recognized that nature is not at our disposal as "a heap of scattered refuse." Biblical Revelation made us see that nature is a gift of the Creator who gave it an inbuilt order and enabled man to draw from it the principles needed to "till it and keep it" (cf. Gen. 2:15). Everything that exists belongs to God, who has entrusted it to man, albeit not for his arbitrary use. . . Man thus has a duty to exercise responsible stewardship over creation, to care for it and cultivate it (2009b: 6).

To me, the most exciting part of this statement is the deft placement of Genesis 1:28 next to Genesis 2:15, so that "the work of 'exercising dominion' over the earth" is equivalent to or best exemplified by "tilling it and keeping it." By this singular and simple means, discordant notes that others perceive between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are harmonized. There is but one tune the "Biblemeister" composed: a melody marked by care and concern.

We find many of the same points, with reference to many of the same biblical passages, in the Pope's earlier encyclical letter, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009a). Among the additional relevant points in the encyclical letter are those found in section 50:

Human beings legitimately exercise a *responsible stewardship over nature*, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits and to cultivate it in new ways, with the assistance of advanced technologies. . . This means being committed to making joint decisions "after pondering responsibly the road to be taken, decisions aimed at strengthening that *covenant between human beings and the environment*, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying" (quoting John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*).

Although I do not know of a biblical "covenant" between human beings and the environment (as reference by John Paul II), something of a parallel is found in Hosea 2:18 (see also Genesis 9). For the most part, English versions – following the King James Bible, "And in that day will I make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven, and with the creeping things of the ground: and I will break the bow and

the sword and the battle out of the earth, and will make them to lie down safely” – retain the technical language of the Hebrew by speaking of “making [literally, cutting] a covenant.” In this way, the prophet Hosea affirms that God has made a covenant (the same Hebrew word, *brt* [ברת], describes the agreements or covenants made between God and Israel) with the animals, who are here described in language that recalls the creation in Genesis as well as the dietary laws of Leviticus 11. To me, this is an extraordinary statement.

This new covenant is made on behalf of Israel. With this phrase (“for them”), we can once again appreciate both the dignity that is ascribed even to the “creeping things” (in that they will be “covenant partners” with God) and the relative superiority of humans to “the beasts . . . the birds . . . and the creeping things” (the covenant is, after all, for the sake of Israel).

Protestant Christianity

It is, as I understand it, characteristic of Protestants, or at least (more) conservative Protestants, to cast a net, a wide net, to capture, as it were, as many biblical passages as possible to support or oppose a given point of view. Thus, we should not be surprised by what we find when looking at the webpage for Christians for Environmental Stewardship, where there is a listing of numerous biblical passages, deemed relevant, under several categories.

The discussion is headed by Psalms 24:1: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” It begins with the statement:

Christians for Environmental Stewardship is dedicated to reaching the Evangelical and Conservative Christian churches with a scriptural message of environmental stewardship. We measure our stewardship by healthy ecosystems and sustainable, responsible consumption. We are calling on all Christians to search the scriptures to better understand the heart of God in relation to his creation. The Bible says that God expects, even demands, that we be steward of his creation. Scripture is undisputable. God created the different species of plants and animals, blessed them, protected them, and made a covenant with them.

Every time we, as humans, drive a species to extinction, we are stating that what God created, we can destroy. There is no scripture to support that view. Every time a species goes extinct, we are defaulting on the account that God has called us to manage. . . The Bible is clear that creation expresses God’s wisdom and power. Christians are called to be stewards, to nurture, to protect, to preserve His creation.

Under each of the following headings, the several biblical passages are listed (passages throughout listed in order found on website):

- “God Created the Earth and All of Nature in It”: Psalm 104:25, 30; John 1:3; Colossians 1:16-17’

- “God has a Relationship with All of His Creation”: Psalm 96:10-13; Isaiah 43:20-21; Deuteronomy 32:1-2; Job 37:14-18; Psalm 104:25, 27; Matthew 6:26;
- “God’s Power is Seen in Nature”: Joshua 2:11; Romans 1:20; Psalm 104:24;
- “God Calls All of His Creation to Worship”: Psalm 19:1; Isaiah 55:12-13; Nehemiah 9:6; Psalm 8:3-5; 1 Chronicles 16:7, 30-34; Revelation 5:13; Job 9:5-10;
- “God Teaches Humans through Nature”: Job 12:7-10; Romans 1:19-20; Isaiah 11:9;
- “God Expects Humans to be His Stewards with Nature”: Genesis 1:26; Leviticus 25:23-24; Ezekiel 34:2-4; Ezekiel 34:10; Ezekiel 34:17-18; Isaiah 24:4-6; Jeremiah 2:7; Luke 16:2, 10, 13; James 5:5; Mark 4:19; Revelation 11:18;
- “God expects Us to Obey Him in our Lifestyle”: Luke 12:15, 23, 34; Leviticus 26:3-4, 6;
- “God Expects Us to Obey His commands”: 1 Peter 3:17; Psalm 37:34; Exodus 23:2; Hebrews 10:30-31.

Following is a series of “facts” supported by biblical passages listed under the heading “Scriptural Defense of Endangered Species”:

- “Fact #1 God Created the Different Species of Plants and Animals”: Genesis 1:11-12 (God created plants); Genesis 1:20-21 (God created fish and birds); Genesis 1:24-25 (God created animals);
- “Fact #2 God Blessed the Different Species of Plants and Animals”: Genesis 1:22;
- “Fact #3 God Protected the Different Species”: Genesis 6:19-21; Genesis 7:8-10;
- “Fact #4 God Made an Eternal Covenant with the Different Species of Plants and Animals”: Genesis 9:8-9; Genesis 9:12-13.

I might challenge the inclusion of some of the passages – for example, the three from Ezekiel 34, where the language of “shepherding” is clearly meant to be applied to the political, and not the natural world. But overall this list is, in my view, full and meaningful.

The website concludes: “Scripture clearly states that God created, blessed, protected and made a covenant with the different species. As stewards of His creation, we are called to do no less. It is our scriptural and moral duty to protect species and their habitat.” The biblical passages listed in this website have many overlaps with other websites that serve a similar purpose (see, for example, the list compiled by Kelli Mahoney for Christian teens).

It is surely the case that for vast numbers of Protestants reliance on the Bible forms the basis for their beliefs about the environment and environmentalism. The resources cited above are obviously structured for those Protestants for whom the Bible is the un-mediated word of God, a word (or, rather, series of words) that is as centrally relevant today as when it was first uttered. Such individuals, or groups of such individuals, generally fall under the umbrella designation “evangelical.”

The same would be true for other theologically conservative Protestants, for whom the word maintains its immutability, but who draw a different set of conclusions from the biblical text. This group is highlighted in the *Guardian* story, with the headline, “The US Evangelicals Who Believe Environmentalism is a ‘Native Evil,’” followed by this bold-faced introduction: “The Cornwall Alliance, a prominent group of religious thinkers in the US, explains why it urges followers to ‘resist the Green Dragon’” (Hickman). From his perch in Manchester, the author of this article begins:

Watching from afar how the environmental debate plays out in the US can be perplexing for many onlookers. Arguably, nowhere in the so-called “culture war” between left and right so heavily fought.

What is often not fully absorbed by onlookers, though, is the underlying role that religious doctrine – or “pulpit power” – plays in the environmental debate in the US. On the one hand, you have the ‘Creation Care’ movement which is prevalent in some quarters of the Christian Church. On the other, particularly among evangelicals, you often see a vitriolic reaction aimed towards environmentalism. . .

Much of this debate seems to centre on the interpretation of one of the most contentious verses in the Bible – the so-called Dominion Mandate, or Genesis 1:28 [which is then quoted according to the KJB].

According to Hickman, the Cornwall Alliance, an organization in the United States, has been established as “a coalition of clergy, theologians, religious leaders, scientists, academics, and policy experts committed to bringing a balanced Biblical view of stewardship to the critical issues of environment and development.” One of its publications is titled *Resisting the Green Dragon: Dominion not Death*. Hickman lists among its major points, all of which are said to have biblical underpinnings: “We humans are special creatures, in a class of our own, quite separate from, and superior to, trees and animals. . . Savage wolves have come to be among the church. . . No one can serve two masters. . . So called ‘natural’ or wilderness areas are not hospitable to men, and God does not consider this a good or natural state. . . Christians must resist Green overtures to recast true religion, nor allow themselves to be prey for teachers of pagan heresies. . .”

The spokesperson of the Cornwall Alliance explains to Hickman why the Alliance is attacking environmentalism: “We look at the environmental movement . . . [as] a clear rejection of Biblical teaching that humanity should have dominion. . . Environmentalism, as a movement, is an alternative world view and a substitute for Christianity.” When asked why the Dominion Mandate should take precedence over all else, the spokesperson replies: “The positive reason is simply the placement of that sentence in the overall text of scripture. Genesis 1:28 comes at the climax of the first chapter. . . Its placement there makes it, hermeneutically, a very important verse for our understanding of the role of Mankind from the beginning of scripture.” Along these lines, “growth is always spoken of in positive terms,” and this again is seen in keeping with – that is, consistent with – biblical teachings.

This article, which covers five pages online, is followed by 20 pages of comments, much of it heated (to say the least) – and this excludes any “comment [that] was removed by a

moderator because it didn't abide by our community standards." I hasten to add that I am not attempting to provide in-depth coverage or analysis of the Cornwall Alliance, but simply to focus on its understanding of what God, through his text, commands us, as his creation, to do – or not do. Its conclusions do, from its perspective, constitute its understanding of “a balanced Biblical view of stewardship” – or at least that is the way I read the material. I should also note that some of the group's teachings have the support of some Roman Catholics and Jews; nonetheless, its leadership and targeted audience are clearly conservative Protestant.

Judaism

Within Judaism, we are less likely than within Roman Catholicism to meet with theological reflection or, as with Protestants, the proliferation of biblical verses. Rather, a characteristic way of interpreting and appropriating biblical material for Jews is midrash.

A satisfactory definition or description of the term “midrash” is as elusive as any within the study of Judaism. Rather than rehearse or recite the arguments on all sides, I prefer to affirm five aspects of midrash that I find invaluable when exploring this topic (see Greenspoon 2009):

- First, midrash is a form of exegesis; it follows the biblical text. Many points of midrashic interpretation seem, at best, far-fetched to us and connected only slightly, if at all, to a given biblical passage. That, however, is our perspective. It is up to us to look for the connections that might otherwise elude us.
- Second, midrash appears to have been (and, for some, continues to be) prompted or precipitated by what are perceived as gaps, inconsistencies, or other difficulties in the Hebrew text. For the practitioner of midrash, the biblical text was purposefully composed in such a way that careful readers would on occasion stop in their tracks and seek to answer questions that the text poses. The sources for such a response are varied, but nothing is considered more valuable than the biblical text itself: in any of a variety of ways, one or more other passages can be called upon to fill a gap, explain an apparent inconsistency, or solve any of a myriad of other problems.
- Third, for the most part, midrashic exegesis or elaboration centers on narrative passages. To put it another way, although a good deal of midrash relates to issues of ethics and morality, it is not typically formulated as a legal pronouncement.
- As a result, fourth, there is rarely a “correct” midrash of a given passage over against a “wrong” one. In other words, the connective thread can lead in many directions to and from a given passage, and the import of such connections is almost always multivalent.
- Fifth, those responsible for classical midrash (as is true for those producing midrash today) kept at least one eye on the world contemporary with them, even as they cast their other eye on a world that was earlier than and different from their own. Since circumstances were different in different Jewish communities, we should look at midrashic texts as multi-layered.

Four midrashim – the first three on Genesis 1 – relating to the environment are discussed below.

1. “For Every Thing, a Purpose”

From *Midrash B’raishet Rabbah*: “Even things that humans may regard as completely superfluous to the creation of the world, such as fleas, gnats, and flies, even they too are included in the creation of the world, and the Holy Blessed One [that is, God] carries out the divine purpose through every [living] thing, even though a snake, a scorpion, a gnat, or a frog.” As Rabbi Bradley Artson, a modern Jewish interpreter, observes:

It is no coincidence that the rabbis [responsible for this *midrash*] choose animals that repel most human beings. We don’t hang up pictures of fleas or gnats on our refrigerator doors or draw their images on greeting cards. What poet rhapsodizes about the beauty and grace of a frog? Too often, we presume to judge the **worth** of Creation by its appeal to our human perspective. The *midrash* insists that this criterion is insufficient. The world does not exist merely to please us. . . The standards of value therefore come not from us, but from God. . . [It is dangerous] when we coddle our egocentric insistence that the world should answer to human standards and human utility (8).

2. “Man, the Last-Comer”

The world was made for man, though he was the last-comer among its creatures. This was design. He was to find all things ready for him. God was the host who prepared dainty dishes, set the table, and then led His guest to his seat. At the same time man’s late appearance on earth is to convey an admonition to humility. Let him beware of being proud, lest he invite the retort that the gnat is older than he (Ginzberg: 49).

This midrash both complements and supplements the first one. In both, there is the insistence that humans not pridefully account themselves superior to other living beings, especially those that we consider as nuisances, such as the gnat, or as dangers, like the snake or scorpion. The standards of evaluation and judgment that really matter derive from God, not from humans.

The second midrash looks specifically at the order of creation not just to the more general magnitude of creation. The creation of humanity as the last of God’s actions does bestow on us a certain status, a uniqueness that is explicitly, if somewhat enigmatically, referred to as our having been created in God’s image. But this analogy – humans as the honored guests for whom everything at the table was prepared – carries with it a significant danger; namely, that we will assume that we have an innate superiority over everything at the table, which we are then free to use (or abuse) as we see fit.

It is at this point that the double message, if you will, of the title given to this midrash, “Man, the Last-Comer,” comes to the fore: for if we are the last of the created beings, then everything else, gnats included, are older than us. Or, looked at another way, there was a

time, if only a brief time, when gnats and snakes and frogs existed, but humans did not. We are the Last-Comers, but we are also the Late-Comers.

Since everything God created is dear to him, even when that is not the case for us, it is incumbent upon humans to take the divine perspective in our dealings with fellow living beings. Thus, these two midrashim help define our identity and our uniqueness within the created world we inhabit.

3. "All Things Praise the Lord"

"Whatever God created has value." Even the animals and the insects that seem useless and noxious at first sight have a vocation to fulfill. The snail trailing a moist streak after it as it crawls, and so using up its vitality, serves as a remedy for boils. The sting of a hornet is healed by the house-fly crushed and applied to the wound. The gnat, feeble creature, taking in food but never secreting it, is a specific against the poison of a viper, and this venomous reptile itself cures eruptions, while the lizard is the antidote to the scorpion (Ginzberg: 42-43).

This extended midrash expands at great length and detail on the expression or saying with which it opens, "Whatever God created has value." These words in turn remind us of the teachings of the first two midrashim we looked at above.

This first paragraph, devoted as it is to the proposition that "all creatures serve man and contribute to his comfort" (see below), is of dubious science and, if you will, theology. Not only are modern medical researchers not likely to find validity in what appear to be home or folk remedies, but, more importantly, other midrashim and teachings within Judaism specifically separate the value of a created being in God's eyes from its contributions to human safety or comfort. Nonetheless, such "proofs" continue in the next paragraph, which is even longer and more detailed.

Not only do all creatures serve man, and contribute to his comfort, but also God "teacheth us through the beasts of the earth, and maketh us wise through the fowls of heaven." He endowed many animals with admirable moral qualities as a pattern for man. If the Torah had not been revealed to us, we might have learnt regard for the decencies of life from the cat, who covers her excrement with earth; regard for the property of others from the ants, who never encroach upon one another's stores; and regard for decorous conduct from the cock, who, when he desires to unite with the hen, promises to buy her a cloak long enough to reach to the ground, and when the hen reminds him of his promise, he shakes his comb and says, "May I be deprived of my comb, if I do not buy it when I have the means." The grasshopper also has a lesson to teach to man. All the summer through it sings, until its belly bursts, and death claims it. Though it knows the fate that awaits it, yet it sings on. So man should do his duty toward God, no matter what the consequences. The stork should be taken as a model in two respects. He guards the purity of his family life zealously, and toward his fellows he is compassionate and merciful. Even the frog can be the teacher

of man. By the side of the water there lives a species of animals which subsist off aquatic creatures alone. When the frog notices that one of them is hungry, he goes to it of his own accord, and offers himself as food, thus fulfilling the injunction, “If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink” (Ginzberg: 43).

The proposition that we humans can learn a great deal, from etiquette through morality, on the basis of observing interactions among animals – and that this would be the case even if the Torah had not been revealed – may at first seem radical. However, it is wholly within the tradition of Wisdom, in this case especially as it is exemplified in the biblical book of Proverbs. For it is in the book of Proverbs that we are urged to observe the workings of nature as manifestations of God’s teaching and providence.

Although this may be seen as yet another example of nature’s usefulness primarily with respect to humans, it is not actually the case here. What the animals are described as doing (whether or not this accords with scientific or even casual observation of what animals actually do) has full value and makes complete sense within the context of the barnyard, the pond, or the forest. In addition, these actions yield significant lessons to humans, but only to humans who are willing to take the time and make the effort to observe and to contemplate.

It would, I think, not be going too far at all to add “to preserve” to the traits necessary for observant and contemplative humans. For it is only when and if we are willing to preserve the communities and the environments nature has established that we are positioned to learn and apply the lessons offered to us.

The whole of creation was called into existence by God unto His glory, and each creature has its own hymn of praise wherewith to extol the Creator. Heaven and earth, Paradise and hell, desert and field, rivers and seas – all have their own way of paying homage to God. The hymn of the earth is, “From the uttermost part of the earth have we heard songs, glory to the Righteous.” The sea exclaims, “Above the voices of many waters, the mighty breakers of the sea, the Lord on high is mighty.”

Also the celestial bodies and the elements proclaim the praise of their Creator – the sun, moon, and stars, the clouds and the winds, lightning and dew. The sun says, “The sun and moon stood still in their habitation, at the light of Thine arrows as they went, at the shining of Thy glittering spear”; and the stars sing, “Thou art the Lord, even Thou alone; Thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all things that are thereon, the seas and all that is in them, and Thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth Thee.”

Every plant, furthermore, has a song of praise. The fruitful tree sings, “Then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy, before the Lord, for He cometh; for He cometh to judge the earth”; and the ears of grain on the field sing, “The pastures are covered with flocks; the valleys also are covered over with corn; they shout for joy, they also sing.”

Great among singers of praise are the birds, and greatest among them is the cock. When God at midnight goes to the pious in Paradise, all the trees therein break out into adoration, and their songs awaken the cock, who begins in turn to praise God. Seven times he crows, each time reciting a verse. The first verse is: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in. Who is the King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle." The second verse: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; yea, lift them up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory." The third: "Arise, ye righteous, and occupy yourselves with the Torah, that your reward may be abundant in the world hereafter." The fourth: "I have waited for Thy salvation, O Lord!" The fifth: "How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?" The sixth: "Love not sleep, lest thou come to poverty; open thine eyes, and thou shalt be satisfied with bread." And the seventh verse sung by the cock runs: "It is time to work for the Lord, for they have made void Thy law . . ."

Yea, the dumb fishes know how to proclaim the praise of their Lord. "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters," they say, "the God of glory thundereth, even the Lord upon many waters"; while the frog exclaims, "Blessed be the name of the glory of His kingdom forever and ever."

Contemptible though they are, even the reptiles give praise unto their Creator. The mouse extols God with the words: "Howbeit Thou art just in all that is come upon me; for Thou hast dealt truly, but I have done wickedly." And the cat sings: "Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord" (Ginzberg: 44-46).

This last section, the lengthiest that I am including, strikes me as especially fascinating for the great detail into which it goes to demonstrate how grateful all of creation is for its status as one of God's beings. This is true for everything from the sun and the moon to the reptiles and the cats. Even hell "has its own hymn of praise wherewith to extol the Creator."

There are a number of reasons why a midrashist (that is, a composer or compiler of midrashim) might wish to expound at such great length on this theme. First might be to establish the dignity that adheres in all of the created universe. To praise God, especially in word written and performed by each species, endows that species, and all its exemplars, with worth in God's eyes and, we should hope, in ours as well. When even "things" like pastures and clouds are animated with the ability to praise God, we are reminded that those, all those, who occupy this world with us are deserving of our respect and our regard.

Second, this extended list of God's creations leads us to recognize that in the universe there are essentially two sorts of being: Creator and created. God is the sole creator; everyone and everything else is created. In societies that tended to worship the forces of nature as deities rather than as manifestations of deity, such a lesson would have been especially relevant. But even for us today it is worthwhile to keep in mind the kindred status that we share with the rest of nature.

Third, we cannot help but note that the list includes just about everyone and everything except humans. But surely humans are not exempt from the requirement, and from the desire, that they praise God as their creator. In fact, the very eloquence attributed to the otherwise mute plants and animals should spur us to praise God in words and emulate God in actions.

4. "Consider God's Doing!"

A Related Ecological message is found in *Midrash Rabbah to Ecclesiastes*:

Consider God's doing! Who can straighten what has been twisted?" (Eccl 7:13). When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: "Look at my works! See how beautiful they are – how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it."

As a modern Jewish commentator, Lawrence Troster, observes: "The popularity of this midrash is connected to the concept of *tikkun olam*. *Tikkun olam*, the perfecting or the repairing of the world, has become a major theme in modern Jewish social-justice theology. It is usually spoken of as a partnership between humanity and God" (187).

Whether or not we are entirely comfortable with these words attributed to God, "For your sake I created them all," we recognize the lasting validity of the sentiment that God voices next, "See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it." From the perspective of the Midrash to Ecclesiastes, this is the answer to the question, "Who can straighten what has been twisted?" Repairing the world can occur only at the initiative of humans. We can speak of this as a "partnership," but this partnership must be activated by humans. Without us, God will not intervene.

Conclusion

In myriad ways and in myriad passages the biblical text speaks of the environment and of the place of humans within it. It may well be that some of these passages are in tension with others. In one way or another, it is the role of religion – or better, biblical exegeses within given religious traditions – to ease this tension or to use it to create more varied and deeper understandings.

It is at this point that we can resolve to learn from each other. It is observable and not necessarily lamentable that Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jews do not read the Bible in precisely the same way, even when they share the same or similarly worded texts. However, rather than viewing differing reading and interpretive traditions as threats or causes for concern, we can seek to find common themes and threads that will allow us, as people of faith, to unite in our efforts to preserve the environment from further degradation and to return us to our proper relationship with God and with the rest of nature.

We know, alas we know all too well, that no one group and no one point of view have a monopoly on biblical interpretation. According to some, all interpretations are created equal; it is unlikely, however, that, in our heart of hearts, we hold this proposition to be true. Some views really are outside the pale, beneath contempt, not worthy of serious consideration.

Here again, Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jews must acknowledge that not only do they not always agree with others outside of their faith community, but that they also do not always agree with those within their community. Interpretations of Scripture that seek to deny human responsibility, divine providence, or human-and-divine potential for improvement should be held up to most serious scrutiny, wherever they appear and by whomever they are espoused. Since such views do not accord with the authentic teachings of Christians or Jews, they should be opposed as proper readings of the text and exposed as inappropriate exemplars for action.

Separating the wheat from the chaff, to return one last time to a biblical and an agricultural image, is never easy, whether on the farm or in the pew. But that difficulty cannot deter or detain. The world, and the word, depends on us.

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