

# ECOLOGY, BIBLICAL THEOLOGY, AND METHODOLOGY: BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE ENVIRONMENT

by *Richard H. Hiers*

*Abstract.* Historian Lynn White, Jr.'s theory that the current ecological crisis derives from the biblical creation story still has its adherents. There is no single biblical viewpoint on ecology, nor were the biblical writers addressing twentieth-century problems. Yet the great weight of biblical tradition—including the Genesis creation narrative—represents God as caring actively for all living beings, and humanity as having not only dominion over, but also responsibility for the well-being of other creatures. The Bible gives no support to those who would exploit the earth's resources at the cost of destroying any species of life.

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Middle-aged readers may remember the excitement that greeted the appearance of Harvey Cox's book *The Secular City* back in 1965. This was the big splash that happened after *Honest to God* but just before the "death of God" and situation ethics controversies. One of Cox's many theses was that Western secularization had its roots in the Bible, notably in the biblical creation account, which distinguished humanity from nature and nature from the divine. This biblically grounded "disenchantment" of nature, he said, made it "available for man's use" (Cox 1965, 23). The way was now cleared for the development of science and technology, which, Cox assured us, was definitely a Good Thing. Thus biblical theology at last was recognized as queen mother (or grandmother) of science and technology.

However, we biblical theologues were not allowed to remain smug for long. The very next year historian Lynn White, Jr. delivered his famous lecture "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" later printed in *Science* magazine (White 1967). Well before the Club of Rome sounded the alarm in *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows 1972), White

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warned that ruthless treatment of nature by Western science and technology was threatening all life on planet earth with ecologic disaster.<sup>1</sup> The roots of this ruthlessness, White urged, go back to the exploitive attitude toward nature in Judaism and Christianity. For these consequences, White declared, "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" (White 1967, 1206).<sup>2</sup> This accusation came as rather a jolt even to those of us who teach in departments of religion and therefore can hardly be shocked at anything. We had grown accustomed to the charge that Christianity is too little concerned with earthly matters.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, since at least the eighteenth century, the cultured among the despisers had been telling the world that religion was the great enemy of science and human progress. At last, Cox had slipped us the good word that biblical faith was not only friend but also forbear to secularization and its charming offspring. Then, when it suddenly turned out that science and technology were a Bad Thing, along came White blaming religion for spawning them.

White's proposal at first seemed too preposterous to be taken seriously; yet, it continues to be cited as a reasonable explanation for the environmental crisis of our time (Findley and Farber 1981, 4).<sup>4</sup> Its popularity may partly derive from the fact that academic humanists generally are unwilling to attribute evil to nice, rational people (like themselves), and so find it convenient to blame religion when things go wrong in the world. Religion, of course, means things like the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the Salem witch trials. Perhaps suppression of Galileo will now have to be dropped from the customary litany, since on White's theory curbing Galileo would have been a Good Thing. Those of us who have had the opportunity to study the sources and history of Western religion are under some obligation to challenge simplistic distortions of religion popular in our time—an obligation not so much to religion as to truth. White's thesis also deserves attention because he is quite correct in recognizing that the environmental crisis does derive from attitudes and values. But what attitudes, and what values?

White assigns primary responsibility for Western man's exploitive and arrogant stance toward nature to "the Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation." That doctrine rests upon the creation story, which he summarizes as follows: "By gradual stages a loving and all-powerful God . . . created light and darkness, the heavenly 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*" (italics added)

(White 1967, 1205). Like other critically illiterate readers before him, White blurs together the P and J creation stories, thereby obscuring and omitting significant elements.<sup>5</sup> Passing over his confusion as to the sequence of events, we note that White's paraphrase culminates in the remarkable assertion that, according to Genesis, all creation was made solely to serve man's purposes. His summary is also noteworthy for what it omits, in particular God's repeated affirmation of the value of terrestrial being—animal, vegetable, and mineral—climaxing in the astoundingly world-and-life affirming declaration: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good." Saint Francis of Assisi, whom White admires as "the greatest radical in Christian history since Christ" (White 1967, 1206),<sup>6</sup> was not the only Christian or Jew whose faith and life give expression to such radical monotheism.<sup>7</sup>

Phyllis A. Bird recently has demonstrated that in the P story, the terms for subduing (*kabash*) and having dominion over (*radah*) other creatures are to be read in connection with God's blessing of all creatures which were commanded to "be fruitful and multiply" and fill the earth and sea (Gen. 1:22, 28). The P author, she writes, "knows that the earth will support human life only when it is brought under control—a condition distinguishing *adam* from the birds and sea creatures, who appear to be sustained by their environment rather than having to win life from it" (Bird 1981, 153; Barr 1974, 61-66).<sup>8</sup> Later P material at Genesis 8:17 makes it clear that not only humans but "all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" were meant to "be fruitful and multiply upon the earth." Mankind was to tend the garden (J), to control other creatures so as to find place among them (P), but the Genesis creation accounts fail to support White's claim that biblical man was to be "contemptuous" of nature, free to use it in accordance with his "slightest whim" (White 1967, 1206).<sup>9</sup> Both the P and J stories represent the newly created man and woman as vegetarians (1:29; 2:16). P even visualizes other creatures as, at first, vegetarians also (1:30), an idea reminiscent of the peaceable kindgom of the eleventh chapter of Isaiah. White's assertion that "no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes" is without basis in the biblical text.

#### REFLECTIONS ON METHODOLOGY

What then is the biblical perspective on the environment? To ask about the biblical perspective on any contemporary policy matter necessarily raises important methodological questions. Like civil rights and social security, ecology was not a topic within range of vision in biblical times. This does not mean that relevant expressions may not be found, but it does mean that we are unlikely to learn much either from isolated

proof tests or from the lack of definitive statements. For instance, biblical tradition contains no precise counterpart to our fourteenth amendment Equal Protection Clause; yet there are commandments requiring that the claims of rich and poor be heard impartially (Lev. 19:15), that aliens be accorded the same rights as natives (Lev. 19:33f.), and that escaped slaves be allowed to dwell where they please (Deut. 23:15f.). Obviously there was no social security system in biblical times; yet there were mandatory gleaning provisions for meeting basic needs of the poor, the widow, the fatherless, and the sojourner (Lev. 19:9f.; Deut. 24:19-21), and there was the example of early Christian communitarian arrangements in Jerusalem (Acts 4:32-35). No one, including biblical literalists among the religious, political right, proposes to transplant these ancient institutions directly into our society. Yet clearly the same basic moral concerns underlying these biblical commands and practices can be actualized in such modern forms as desegregated public schools, Aid to Dependent Children, and food stamps. Likewise, much in the biblical tradition may be relevant to current ecological concerns, even though no biblical texts deal specifically with permissible sulfur dioxide emission rates or toxic waste disposal.

Another methodological question to be considered before examining the biblical evidence is what we mean by biblical perspective. Not all biblical communities and writers adhered to the same beliefs and values. Some texts, for example, indicate that there were those who felt that aliens *should* be denied equal treatment (e.g., Deut. 23:3; Ezra 9:1f.). The Bible does not present a unified, codified perspective. How then does one locate "the biblical" position on a given question? One strategy popular among both proponents and disparagers of religion is to seize upon a congenial proof text and ignore all conflicting indications elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> Another is to formulate the desired doctrinal generalization and then attribute it to the Bible after the fashion of Billy Graham's familiar invocation: "The Bible says. . ." Interior Secretary James Watt's famous remark explaining why he wished to open nearly 800 million acres of federally owned land for immediate corporate exploitation is of the latter type: "My responsibility is to follow the Scriptures which call upon us to occupy the land until Jesus returns" (Watt 1981, 41). The Secretary's theory evidently was that since the Lord might come at any time now, we (i.e., American industry) had better grab what we can while we can—a version of "work for the night is coming" that bears only faint resemblance to any of the New Testament "stewardship" parables.

Watt's statement illustrates another often neglected methodological consideration: for whom is the biblical perspective (if identified) nor-

mative? Although Israel and Judah were at one time nations, neither of them was the United States. Although Christians (born again or otherwise) may hold public office, the New Testament is not a source book for American public policy. Even though many make the leap for authority (if not of faith) without apparent misgiving, it does not necessarily follow that New Testament writings set down for the edification and encouragement of first and early second-century Christians in the northeastern Mediterranean world provide programmatic direction for Christians living in America nineteen hundred years later. Clearly, the biblical writers were not thinking of us or the issues of our time. Perhaps this is just as well, since we would have good reason to reject, for instance, the once purportedly divinely ordained *herem* (Deut. 20:16-18) and the imminent apocalyptic expectation that informs much of the New Testament world view. There is no need to suppose that we were meant to be saddled with biblical commands or concepts that were formulated by and for other people long ago in vastly different circumstances than ours. Nevertheless, various Zero Population Growth advocates sometimes reproach the Bible (or God) for commanding Adam to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Yet as Bird points out, this was a “word for the beginning” of the human story, not one that purports to be universal or valid for all later times in human history (Bird 1981, 157). In its P narrative context, this command does no more than legitimate what mankind had already done in the aftermath of the flood (Gen. 10, esp. v. 32). Even though it came to expression in its own times and places, biblical faith may mean something to use if we share at least some elements of that faith, so that we somehow recognize the God affirmed there as the one we have found to give meaning and direction in our own lives. But we cannot accept uncritically everything the biblical writers have to say. It is not only that the world we know differs from theirs; it is also the case that some biblical understandings are incompatible with the God we have come to trust.<sup>11</sup>

As indicated earlier, we recognize that there may be more than one biblical perspective on a given matter. There may be majority and minority reports. To try to identify a perspective at all, it is necessary first to articulate themes that come to expression in the biblical material itself. Then it may be possible to take these as hypotheses, testing them to see to what extent they are corroborated and how consistently they are maintained throughout the whole of biblical tradition. We might plausibly begin with the Genesis creation stories.

The final biblical redactors found it appropriate to order the biblical material so as to begin with the two creation stories. Taken together, these suggest several themes or hypotheses: first, that God (or YHWH

God) was the Creator of all that is; second, that God values all created beings as good; third, that humans have a special kinship with other, particularly land-going creatures; but that, fourth, humanity was to have dominion over all other beings, both as master, controlling them for the sake of human survival, and implicitly as caretaker, having responsibility for their well-being; and, fifth, that man (Adam) was to “till and keep” the land in which he was placed as life-tenant, not as owner in fee simple. To a remarkable extent the biblical traditions that follow the two Genesis creation stories corroborate these hypotheses.

#### GOD AS CREATOR AND VALUER OF ALL THAT IS

One of the late Yale New Testament Professor Paul Shubert's favorite reminiscences concerned the delicate doctrinal question put to him by a conservative ordination committee: What was the role of God in creating the world? Shubert's answer: “The only one!” Although the biblical “creation faith” may not have been consciously elaborated before the time of Second Isaiah (ca. 540 B.C.E.), there was no place for cosmic or metaphysical dualism in earlier traditions. Neither the J nor the later P creation narratives betray significant vestiges of the Babylonian story about Marduk killing Tiamat. God is represented as giving life, not taking it at the creation.<sup>12</sup> A later echo of the Tiamat story appears in the apocalyptic fragment about slaying the serpent(s) Leviathan and/or the sea dragon (Isa. 27:1), a later trajectory of which appears in intertestamental anticipation of eating the flesh of Leviathan (and Behemoth) in the messianic age.<sup>13</sup> Contrast with this, however, YHWH's words of praise for Behemoth, the first of his works, and for Leviathan in Job, chapters 40-41. Here these invincible creatures were said to have rightful dominion over earth and sea. Contrast also the great “fish” in Jonah, represented in Christian catacomb art as a twisting sea serpent, which acts at YHWH's command to effectuate His beneficent purposes.<sup>14</sup> See also the Psalmist's marvelously naive statement that YHWH created the great, wide sea for Leviathan to sport in (Ps. 104:25f.). Numerous later texts reaffirm that YHWH is the one who created the earth, humankind, and all other creatures and beings.<sup>15</sup>

YHWH's care for the creation which he brought forth is expressed thematically in his first response to Job in chapters 38-39. Here, as in the first chapter of Genesis, it is clear that God's creatures were meant to exist, whether or not they were useful to humans, for example, the mountain goat and the wild ass “to whom I have given the steppe for his home” (Job 39:5-6). All the earth is full of God's creatures; the sea teems with innumerable living beings “both great and small” (Ps. 104:24-25). The mountains produce food for Behemoth and there “all the wild

beasts play" (Job 40:20). God's creatures, along with all creation, praise him: sea monsters, fruit trees and cedars, "beasts and . . . cattle, creeping things and flying birds" (Ps. 148). The most elaborated expression of this theme is in the Song of the Three Young Men, verses 35-60. Psalm 150:6 sums it all up: "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!" Not only are other creatures to praise or bless the Lord; they may pray to him for deliverance in time of need. Thus, in the story of Jonah, the king of Nineveh calls on man *and beast* to fast, be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God (3:7f.). Earlier in the story YHWH had spoken to the great fish, which heard and obeyed. The story ends, of course, with YHWH's statement of concern not only for the people of Nineveh but also for its many cattle (compare Gen. 8:1). Again, in the first reply to Job, YHWH refers to young ravens that "cry to God" for food.<sup>16</sup> It is YHWH who provides food for all flesh.<sup>17</sup> If humanity has dominion, it is qualified by recognition that there is a higher dominion, that of YHWH, which he exercises for the welfare not only of humans but also for the whole of creation.<sup>18</sup> After the flood God's covenant was not with Noah alone but with "every living creature" with him "for all future generations" (Gen. 9:8-17).

The New Testament also contains suggestions as to God's care for his creation. God feeds the birds of the air and adorns the grass of the fields with lilies (Matt. 6:28-30). He does not forget a single sparrow (Lk 12:6); sparrows and sheep are precious to God, although Jesus' followers are more so (Matt. 10:31; 12:12).<sup>19</sup> In contrast, we have the story of the legion of demons that invaded the herd of unfortunate swine (Mk. 5:1-13). Whether or not the story is dominical or reflects Jewish animus toward pagan pig farmers, it is part of New Testament tradition. So is Saint Paul's reported dispatch of the campfire viper (Acts 28:2-6). In the messianic age, children might play near asps and adders (Isa. 11:8-9), for then, it seems, the ancient enmity between the serpent and the seed of woman (Gen. 3:15) would be ended. Although Paul believed that the whole creation was travailing toward a new birth (Rom. 8:22-25), he evidently was not prepared to go so far as the snake handlers of the Markan addendum (Mark 16:18) who possibly believed that the new age had come. Paul and later New Testament writers are silent as to the value of other living things. It is unclear whether this silence represents a shift toward a more anthropocentric belief.<sup>20</sup> Their attitude toward the world was undoubtedly influenced by the pervasive notion that it had come under the sway of the Evil One (e.g., 1 Jn. 5:19) and was soon to pass away (e.g., Lk. 21:33) or yield to the heavenly commonwealth (e.g., Phil. 3:20). Did Jesus (or Mark) understand his sojourn in the wilderness with "the wild beasts" as an anticipatory actualization of the peaceable kingdom (Mk. 1:13)? We do not know.

KINSHIP AND HARMONY BETWEEN HUMANS AND  
OTHER CREATURES: FIRST AND LAST THINGS

Religious fundamentalist and secular humanist pretensions to infinite qualitative superiority notwithstanding, biblical tradition typically sees humanity as co-creature with other living things. In the P creation story, humans and other land creatures were all brought forth on the sixth day. In the J version humans and other animals alike were formed from the moistened dust of the ground. As YHWH later put it to Job, "Behold the hippopotamus, whom I made as I made you" (40:15). Given this initial kinship, it is not surprising that some of the great prophetic visions of restored existence in the messianic age look for *shalom* between and among all living things: "I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; And I will . . . make you lie down in safety" (Hos. 2:18). Isaiah's portrayal of the peaceable kingdom is more detailed. Our children's affection for animals seems resonant with the harmony of life with life in the longed-for new age:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,  
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall feed;  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.  
They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain;  
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:6-9).

Greenpeace and Defenders of Wildlife could not ask for more. The Messiah himself was expected to come riding an ass's colt.<sup>21</sup> In the new age, there would be shelter for all the birds of the air and beasts of the fields.<sup>22</sup>

Even Qoheleth affirms the kinship of man and beast, though, characteristically, in dour contemplation of their common nature and destiny: "I said in my heart with regard to the sons of men that God is testing them to show that they are but beasts. For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts."<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Second Isaiah acknowledges that all flesh is grass; yet all flesh together would see the glory of YHWH (Isa. 40:5f.).

The companionship of humans with other life forms is also expressed in another series of ancient interactions. Both in the J and the P versions of the flood story, God determines to blot out both "man and



beast,” “creeping things and birds of the air,” in short, “all flesh” (Gen. 6:7, 13). Yet as the Noah story unfolds, God also decides to make a new beginning for “all flesh” (Gen. 6:19, 7:13-16). In the ark, as now on board spaceship earth, it was literally a matter of “all being in it together.” But after the flood, not only were humans separated and alienated from one another: man and beast went their separate ways as well. In J, as soon as the animal passengers disembark, Noah takes “of every clean animal and of every clean bird” and sacrifices them as burnt offerings (Gen. 8:20). The P version tells that now all other life forms will fear and dread man, for they are to be food for him (Gen. 9:1-3). No longer was creation at peace. But companionship in being was not entirely ended either.

#### HUMANITY AND OTHER LIVING THINGS

Like other peoples, the Israelites went through various stages—from nomadic to more settled agricultural and then to more or less urban modes of life. In all of these stages they related to animals, both wild and domestic, and to the land in various ways. White’s thesis is that Israelite (or Jewish) and later Christian ways of so relating were peculiarly exploitive and arrogant. (Interestingly, although White observes that “the monster mammals” of the Pleistocene period may have been exterminated in consequence of man’s hunting techniques, he does not mention that this development necessarily antedated any possible pernicious Israelite or Christian influence by several millenia [White 1967, 1203].)

What kinds of norms do govern interactions between humans, other life forms, and the environment in biblical tradition? H. Richard Niebuhr used to suggest that the first basic movement of ethics is appreciation: awareness and affirmation on the part of one being for another. Both Psalms and Proverbs disclose a sense of wonder and amazement about the created world and other life forms. Eagles, serpents, ants—especially admired for their prudence and industry (Prov. 6:6-8)—badgers, locusts, lizards, lions, cocks, and he-goats—and sometimes comparable human phenomena—are among the marvels that fascinated the sages (Prov. 30:18f., 24-31). Something like this same sense of wonder and appreciation pervades YHWH’s first speech to Job (chaps. 38-39) and many of the psalms, particularly Psalm 104.<sup>24</sup> Likewise the world of the Canticles abounds with images of delightful creatures and plants.

Beyond appreciation or recognition of the worthiness of other beings is the ethic of active caring or positive responsiveness. The flood story is prototypical not only of God’s care for all living beings—those, at all events, which would constitute the new beginning afterwards—but

also of man's affirmative action on behalf of other living creatures. The ark story goes beyond simply providing for human needs. The P version has Noah bringing on board one pair of "all flesh in which there was the breath of life." The P writers were aware that not only "clean animals"—those fit for Jewish consumption—but all others, whether edible or otherwise beneficial to humans or not—were beneficiaries of the Voyage of the Ark. The J version likewise provides for the survival of all species and not only of those destined for sacrificial purposes (Gen. 7:2-4). Here purposes beyond humanity's clearly were being served. Noah might have been Saint Francis's patron saint. His actions in getting all those animals safely on the ark, providing for them during the voyage, and turning them loose again afterwards could be a further clue to what P tradition meant by saying that humanity was to have dominion over other creatures.

Other traditions also mentions humanity's dominion, but in terms more suggestive of subjugation (Ps. 8:6-8; 91:13). In the New Testament such expressions refer to the power of Jesus' followers over demonic beings (e.g., Luke 10:19f.) and ultimately to God's assertion of dominion over all things (1 Cor. 15:25-28). In historical Israel as in other societies dominion often took the form of domestication. Dogs appear somewhat incidentally in both the Old and New Testaments, for example, the dog that tags along with Tobias and Raphael and the dogs that lick Lazarus's sores—possibly in contrast to the rich man's inattention (Luke 16). Oxen, asses, sheep, and undifferentiated "cattle" are frequently on hand. The ox's and ass's recognition of their master is contrasted favorably with the Israelites's failure to know theirs (Isa. 1:3). The story of Balaam's ass, which sees the angel and rebukes her owner for unfairly beating her, is a particularly intriguing instance of interaction between man and beast.<sup>25</sup> Wild animals also act on behalf of human protagonists, for example, the ravens that feed Elijah in the wilderness (1 Kings 17:6) and the great fish that rescues Jonah and thus plays its part in the later deliverance of Nineveh's people—as well as its "much cattle" (Jon. 4:11).

Several biblical laws and other declarations pertain to humane treatment of animals. Lost animals are to be returned, and those that have fallen are to be helped up (Deut. 22:1-5), even if they belong to one's enemy (Ex. 23:4f.). A man, of course, is to have regard for the life of his own beast (Prov. 12:10). Oxen treading grain are to be left unmuzzled (Deut. 25:4). Conceivably, the famous prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother's milk (Ex. 23:19) reflects humane considerations (cf. Gaster 1981, 1:253-54). Conservation interests undoubtedly inform the requirement that a nesting bird be let go (Deut. 22:6f.). A late Isaianic passage compares slaughtering an ox to killing a person

(Isa. 66:3). The Deuteronomic Code prohibits wanton destruction of trees, even in time of war: "Are the trees in the field men that they should be besieged by you?"<sup>26</sup> In the New Testament Jesus implicitly commends those who would help their sheep or ox or ass out of a pit, even if doing so might call for "working" on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:11; Luke 14:5). Caring for one's animals, of course, is good husbandry as well as humane practice (Prov. 27:23-27; Sir. 7:22). Throughout the biblical period the Sabbath was to be a day of rest not only for humans but also for their cattle (Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14), meaning, presumably, all their domestic or farm animals. Even the wild beasts were to be remembered: they were to have what was left in fields and orchards every seventh year when they lay fallow (Ex. 23:10f.; Lev. 25:6f.).

#### SACRIFICE

The sacrificial offering of certain domestic animals—and of tithes of grain or first fruits—seems contrary to sound environmental practice. Apart from humane considerations, it wastes food and economic resources. Yet in ancient Israel, it was clearly understood that all life—human and otherwise—and all produce are from God and belong to him (Ex. 22:29f.). The idea that sacrifice of an animal could replace that of a child (Gen. 22) or propitiate for human offense (e.g., Lev. 19:20-22) at all events attests a sense of kinship between humans and animals. This sense may have eroded considerably by the time of the Priestly Code, which seems to assume that God desired innumerable and continuous offerings of sacrificial animals.<sup>27</sup> Both prophets and psalmists, however, denounced sacrificial slaughter and other offerings. God, the source of all being, did not desire or require sacrifice. The classical declarations of Amos 5:21-24, Hosea 6:6 and Isaiah 1:11-17 are familiar. Third Isaiah, too, may have proclaimed that YHWH opposed all kinds of sacrifices (Isa. 66:1-3).<sup>28</sup> Amos (5:25) and Jeremiah (7:21-23) maintained that YHWH never did ordain sacrifices. According to the Psalmist, YHWH announced that he did not reprove people for having offered sacrifices, but he wanted no more of them:

I will accept no bull from your house,  
nor he-goat from your folds.  
For every beast of the forest is mine,  
the cattle on a thousand hills.  
I know all the birds of the air,  
and all that moves in the field is mine.  
If I were hungry, I would not tell you;  
for the world and all that is in it is mine.  
Do I eat the flesh of bulls,  
or drink the blood of goats?  
Make thanksgiving your sacrifice to God. . . (Ps. 50:8-14).<sup>29</sup>

Jews and Christians eventually did abandon sacrificial offerings, though not until the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D.

#### THE LAND

Like Adam, many of his descendants were tillers of the soil (Gen. 4:2; 9:20). Others were herdsman, craftsmen, and, in time, city folk. Job protested that, among other good deeds, he had cared for his land (31:38), and Sirach commended farm work, which was “created by the Most High” (Sir. 7:15). We do not hear that any of the biblical people created dustbowl, killer smogs, acid rain, or toxic dump sites. The wisdom writers (apart from dissenters like Job and Qoheleth) did assert that the righteous would prosper; yet there are no biblical spokesmen for heedless exploitation of natural resources or even for Pareto optimality curves.

Nevertheless, ecology-minded critics lay present-day exploitation at the door of biblical tradition: “Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us” (Leopold 1970, viii). What Aldo Leopold meant by “Abrahamic” is spelled out two hundred pages later: “Abraham knew exactly what the land was for: it was to drip milk and honey into Abraham’s mouth” (Leopold 1970, 204-5). Like White, Leopold credits biblical religion with more influence than is due. It is true, of course, that various traditions report that YHWH promised Abraham the land, for example, Genesis 12:7 and 13:14-18. But nothing in biblical tradition suggests that Abraham was authorized to exploit or abuse the land; nor is there any indication that he did so—or that he even contemplated enjoyment of its milk and honey.<sup>30</sup> Walter Brueggemann has demonstrated that the basic biblical viewpoint on land is much more positive (Brueggemann 1977). Both in Israel and in the early Christian community it was clear that only those faithful to God’s purposes would retain or inherit the blessings of life in the land.<sup>31</sup>

Ultimately and always the land—the whole earth—is YHWH’s (Ps. 24:1). The Covenant Code stipulated that the land should “rest and lie fallow” every seventh year (Ex. 23:10), a requirement continued and extended in the Holiness Code (Lev. 25). When God’s people violate the covenant, the land “mourns,” and its human inhabitants, together with beasts of the field, birds of the air, and fish of the sea, languish and fail.<sup>32</sup> In history as in the prehistorical days of Noah, human beings, the land, and other living things are still “in it together.” The land is not for humans to do with as they please; it is YHWH’s to do with as he will (Jer. 27:5). It is YHWH who provides for its verdure and bounty (Ps. 65:9-13; 147:8f.). And it is YHWH who in time to come, the

prophets believed, would transform the land and bring about the real green revolution in the coming age, which the whole creation would share in peace.<sup>33</sup> Then human domination would be consummated in the form of a little child leading the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion, and playing over the hole of the asp.

#### EXPLOITIVE HUMANISM, IDOLATRY, AND BIBLICAL MONOTHEISM

With characteristic acerbity Albert Schweitzer wrote of Western philosophy: "Just as the housewife who has scrubbed out the parlor takes care that the door is kept shut so that the dog may not get in and spoil the work she has done by the marks of his paws, so do European thinkers watch carefully that no animals run about in the fields of their ethics" (Schweitzer 1960, 297).<sup>34</sup> The same might be said about much of Western theology.<sup>35</sup> White was right to that extent, but he is right to that extent only because such theology has ignored or neglected its biblical roots. In part, perhaps, this neglect stems from Christian theology's quasi-Marcionite aversion to the Old Testament in which the world of material being is consistently affirmed as God's and therefore good.

Our creationist friends, on the other hand, may be right in objecting to strictly secular scientific instruction, but not because—as they assert—creationism is better than science. Rather, secular scientism, even when conjoined with humanistic faith,<sup>36</sup> tends to close rather than open the eyes and minds of students to the dignity and value of manifold living beings.<sup>37</sup> Secular humanism, by definition, makes humanity the measure of all things. What is good is understood in terms of what is good for humanity. Yet creationists, too, like much of mainstream Judaism and Christianity, tend to give humankind an exclusive place in the realm of created being. It is not clear that anthropocentrism is less idolatrous in the context of religious humanism than in secular humanism. Biblical faith, in contrast to both, points to the transcendent God as source and valuer of all that is—and has been and will be. In the context of such faith human beings need not strive anxiously to establish their place in the sun by devaluating other life forms or by pretending to be at the center of the universe. That the world is our oyster is humanist, not biblical doctrine. Exploitive humanism, in the final analysis, is a corruption of the biblical reverence for being, much as nationalism and racism are corruptions of humanism (Niebuhr 1960, 64-77).

Much in the biblical tradition—enough, perhaps, to be called the biblical perspective—regards God's good earth as the dwelling place not only for humans but also for all creatures, great and small, "useful" to us or not, until that time when the peace and fellowship of life with life is perfectly established in the new age. Then "they shall not hurt or

destroy." In the meantime, there is no biblical warrant for degrading the earth or destroying other life species.

#### NOTES

1. The report by the Council on Environmental Quality, *The Global 2000 Report to the President* (1980), indicates that threats of pollution and resource depletion now identified pose a greater and more immediate threat to the continuation of plant, animal, and human life than *The Limits of Growth* suggested. It was Rachel Carson, of course, who first drew attention to the environmental crisis in *Silent Spring* (1962), which she dedicated to Albert Schweitzer. For an account of early reactions to Carson's book, see Frank Graham, Jr. (1970).

2. Other explanations have also been suggested. Barry Commoner has collected a number of them (1972, 1-6) and proposes that several factors are involved, in particular "drastic changes in the technology of agriculture and industrial production and transportation," along with social, economic, and political forces (1972, vi-viii, 9-10). Cf., Carson (1962, 297): "The 'control of nature' is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man."

3. "The trouble with Jesus," Brand Blanshard once said, "is that he had no interest in science" (Blanshard 1955).

4. White's theory has been adopted by numerous otherwise alert environmentalists and historians, but has also been subjected to searching criticism (Barr 1974, 48-75; Derr 1975b, 39-45).

A few examples may illustrate the extent of the ecological crisis. In 1972 an estimated 200 million gallons of raw or inadequately treated sewage and waste were discharged every day into Lake Michigan, just in the vicinity of Milwaukee (Illinois v. City of Milwaukee, 406 U.S. 91 [1972]). In 1975, United States electrical power plants discharged over 18 million tons of sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere (Sierra Club v. Costle, 657 F.2d 298 [D.C. Cir. 1981]). In 1980 the world's forests were disappearing at the rate of 18 to 20 million hectares (equivalent to half the size of California) every year (Council on Environmental Quality 1980, 1:2). At the same time desertification was claiming 6 million hectares (equivalent to the state of Maine) of range and farmland per year (Council on Environmental Quality 1980, 1:32). Between 1980 and 2000 approximately one fifth (or some 500,000) of the world's plant and animal species are expected to become extinct (Council on Environmental Quality 1980, 2:402). As to present and imminent perils from toxic chemicals, see Regenstein (1982).

5. Biblical scholarship has long distinguished between J and P material in Genesis. The "P" or Priestly tradition uses the divine name Elohim, translated as God, and typically emphasizes proper observance of ceremonial requirements. The "J" material employs the divine name YHWH, transliterated by German scholars as Jahweh (hence the symbol "J"), and translated in the Revised Standard Version as The LORD. The P and J writers were also collectors and editors of earlier tradition. The P writers are generally dated in the fifth century B.C.E., the J writer (or writers) some 500 years earlier. The P creation story appears in Genesis 1:1-2:4a; the J account is in Genesis 2:4b-25.

One way White blurs the two creation stories is that he neglected to note that in the J account God made man for the purpose of tilling the soil (Gen. 2:4-7, 15) and other living beings for the purpose of providing him with fit helpers (Gen. 2:18f.). In P; man and woman were made simultaneously "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:27).

6. White marvels that Saint Francis did not perish at the stake for his heresy.

7. Augustine of Hippo is one early example. "Although Augustine believes that all things, all visible creatures in particular, are created as a blessing for humanity, this by no means exhausts their *raison d'être*. Human utility is not the sole reason for the existence of all visible things in the hierarchy. Rather, for Augustine, the most fundamental *telos* of the whole creation is beauty, and the glorification of the God who wills such a magnificent community of being, every part of which has its own divinely validated integrity"

(Santmyre 1980, 177). Jonathan Edwards is another significant example (Niebuhr 1960, 31-37, 126). Albert Schweitzer and Martin Buber are obvious modern examples.

8. Barr argues that the *radah* and *kabash* passages do not imply exploitation of nature.

9. Having decided that the biblical perspective was a Bad Thing, White evidently did not feel it necessary to relate his commentary to any particular text. We shall observe other instances of analysis by indignation.

10. People concerned about overpopulation sometimes argue that the present situation somehow derives from the biblical injunction, "Be fruitful and multiply," as if this text summarized the message of biblical faith to the modern world (see Bird 1981, 157).

11. H. Richard Niebuhr occasionally quoted George Santayana's rejoinder to doctrinaire claims: "I do not believe you. God is Great." Those who affirm the validity of biblical faith need not go outside the canon to say the same thing in response to expressions of tribal faith that may be found within biblical tradition (see Niebuhr 1960, 49-63).

12. See also Wisd. Sol. 1:13-14: "God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things that they might exist. . . ."

13. 2 Baruch 29; cf. Ps. 74:14. Curiously, the only expressly dualistic parallel to the slaying of Tiamat is in Second Isaiah (Isa. 51:9).

14. See also Amos 9:3.

15. E.g. Pss. 65:9-13; 104:5-30, 121:2, 136:5-9; Jer. 27:5; Amos 5:8.

16. Job 38:41. See also Ps. 147:9.

17. Pss. 104:27-28, 136:25; Joel 2:21-22.

18. See also Bell and the Dragon, v. 5.

19. See also Ps. 84:3.

20. Paul's reinterpretation of Deut. 25:4 suggests that this may be the case. "It is written in the law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.' Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our own sake?" (1 Cor. 9:9-10). One recent writer, for whose viewpoint the Sierra Club claims no responsibility, finds worse than silence in the New Testament: "The New Testament became one of the world's most antiorganic and antisensuous masterpieces of abstract ideology, flecked with raw, ragtag bits of obscure patriarchal genealogy and fixation on vengeance and tribal war" (Shepard 1982, 80). Shepard evidently draws this information from a deep reservoir of indignation and animus.

21. Zech. 9:9; Gen. 49:10-12.

22. Ezek. 17:22-23; cf. Ezek. 31:13; Matt. 13:31-32.

23. Eccles. 3:18-19. See also Ps. 49:20.

24. For an analysis of Ps. 104 see Steck (1980, 79-89).

25. Num. 22:21-30. The angel then reproaches Balaam for beating the ass, pointing out that Balaam owes her his life (Num. 22:32-34).

26. Deut. 20:19-20. But see Isa. 2:12-17: the too-tall trees of Lebanon and Bashan will be brought low for their "pride." Cf., Job 38:11.

27. Desacralization—of the sort that Harvey Cox celebrated but Lynn White deplored—did occur with respect to animal sacrifice, probably in connection with the Deuteronomic reform of the seventh century B.C.E. Prior to the reform, when an animal was to be killed for food, it was taken to the local shrine and offered to God. The Deuteronomic reformers, eager to close the local shrines where other gods were served, provided that sacrifices should be offered only in Jerusalem (Deut. 12:10-14). Thereafter, animals might be slaughtered for food without religious ceremony (Deut. 12:20-22). White might wish to trace the current devastating conversion of Brazilian tropical rain forests into grazing lands for beef cattle to the Deuteronomic reform. It may be doubted, however, whether McDonald's ("billions and billions served") corporate policy has been shaped to any extent by religious considerations.

28. Other exilic or postexilic prophets, however, did commend the offering of sacrifices; e.g., Ezek. 46; Haggai, Mal. 1.

29. See also Ps. 40:6.

30. Leopold somewhat ambiguously concedes that "individuals since the days of Ezekiel and Isaiah" opposed despoilation of the land. (Leopold 1970, 203).

31. See, e.g., Deut. 8:1-20; Matt. 5:3-12. Brueggemann's otherwise excellent study could be criticized, however, for being human-centered. The place of nonhuman creatures in biblical land tradition is not examined. Isaiah 11:6-9 is not even mentioned. Georges Florovsky's brilliant reflections on creation suffer from the same defect (1976, vol. 3). See, however, Wendell Berry's "biblical argument for ecological and agricultural responsibility" (1981, 267-81). Berry notes that numerous biblical passages and practices indicate concern for the well-being and preservation of nonhuman inhabitants of the land.

32. Hos. 4:1-3; see also Jer. 12:4.

33. See, e.g., Amos 9:13-14; Joel 3:18; Ezek. 47:1-12.

34. Schweitzer devotes this entire volume to explication of the meaning and significance of what he calls the philosophy or ethic of reverence for life. For an appreciative account of Schweitzer's thought in this connection, see Ice (1971, 99-125).

35. Several notable exceptions that may be useful in courses on ethics and the environment have appeared in recent years, e.g., Abrecht (1979, 34-43); Barbour (1972); Derr (1975a); Nelson (1980, 67-88); and Steck (1980). A generation ago Niebuhr articulated a theological basis for an ethic affirming the value of all living beings (1960). James M. Gustafson has recently intimated that his reflections are moving in a similar direction (1981, 1:310, 314, 336-37). See also Beach (1979, 93-95).

36. Those who affirm the meaning and value of human life sometimes prefer to suppose that such devotion is derived from nature or rational premises. It is, in fact, a form of faith, as Niebuhr has demonstrated. To the extent that it is mere humanism, it excludes other living beings from the realm of valued existence or sees value in other beings only to the extent that they are good for humans. See Niebuhr (1960, 24-37).

37. See Erich Fromm's discussion of the pattern of "cerebral thinking" (1981, 134-39).

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