

Biblical Origins of Environmental Ethics

Larry Schnapf

Schnapf LLC

Larry@schnapflaw.com

Traditional Views of Nature

- Anthropocentrism-
- Biocentrism-
- Theocentrism

Anthropcentrism

- We have treated Creation as raw materials to satisfy our desires and economic needs.
- Often leads to animal cruelty.
- treat Creation as a backdrop to the human drama of salvation (if Christians) or progress (if materialists)
- Inverts God-given responsibility for Creation to God-given right over Creation

- “The laws which should have made us better stewards, in fact, made us careless landlords. Instead of protecting resources, we have neglected them. Instead of using resources to build a strong nation . . . we have deprived America of the raw materials it needs” James Watt (1982)

Creation of Nature

Genesis 1:10 -26

- God created the land and seas and saw it was **good** (Gen. 1:10)
- God created plants and trees and saw that it was **good** (Gen 1:12)
- *"Let the water **teem** with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky ... And God saw that it was **good**" (Gen. 1:20-21)*

Creation of Nature Cont'd

- God blessed them by saying, "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the oceans. Let the birds multiply throughout the earth!" (Gen. 1: 23)
- "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.... and God saw that it was good" (Gen 1:25-26)

What does it mean that Creation was Good?

- Nature had value before humanity
- Nature manifest's God's glory on its own terms
- All things have an inherent value to God
- Rights of living things are based on inherent value to God, not value to humanity (e.g., "wild" animals).
- Animals have right to exist in their habitats

Human Creation Care Commands

Gen. 1:26-29

- "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them **rule (dominion)** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." (Gen. 1:26)
- and God said to them, "Be **fruitful and multiply**, and fill the earth, and **subdue it**; and **rule/(dominion)** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen. 1:28)
- Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. **They will be yours for food**. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I **give every green plant for food**." (Gen 1:29)

Image and likeness of God (Imago Dei)

- "image" (**tselem**) and "likeness" (**demut**)
- Not physical characteristic like blood and flesh
- sharing of some of God's attributes
 - Spiritual, moral, relational, rationale, emotional, creative

What Is Meant by Rule/Dominion?

- “And let them have” from “*Asah*”- humans bestowed or appointed with right of dominion
- "subdue" translated from "*kabash*"
 - Exercise of force to bring something resistant under control or bondage (e.g. draining wetlands, mountaintop mining, deforestation, herd culling)
 - Man’s dominion is limited by nature’s rights (be fruitful and multiply)

Dominion Cont'd

- In context, “subdue” more like taming uncultivated field, weeding a garden
- to continue God’s work of bringing order out of chaos

Dominion Cont'd

- Dominion translated from "*radah*".
 - Not despotic ruler who uses using them for his own ends, his own pleasure, his own prestige, his own wars (see Ezek 34:4)
 - Compare to "*perek*" ('harshness')
 - "Radah" replaced with "*mashal*" elsewhere in Bible (1 Chron. 29:12; Ps 8:6-8; Ps 145:13, 15-16)
 - must be understood in the context of the entire command of Genesis 1:27-28

Dominion Cont'd

- To rule as a righteous king, for the sake of the one ruled.
- Rule is to patterned after God's 'rule' – protects and nurtures, not license to exploit Creation

Dominion Cont'd

- Humans are created in God's image. We are to represent God's righteous rule on Earth.
- Our rule should not be at the cost of creation's ability to carry out its Biblical command to be **fruitful and multiply**.
- Not license to exploit Nature (JPS Torah Commentary)
- We cannot rule over something that has been driven into extinction

Human Creation Care Command

Gen 2:15

- The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to **work it and take care** of it.
- Other versions:
 - **till it and keep it**
 - **to cultivate it and keep it**

"Work" or "Tend"

- Original Hebrew Term "**Avad**"
 - Means not only to work or cultivate but also to serve and worship (e.g., to work for a master, to serve/worship a deity)
 - properly understood as service to God's Earth- a critical part of our relationship and worship with God

"Take care" or "Keep"

- **Shamar**- To watch or guard; safekeeping of something for someone else.
- **Shomrin**- guard property that does not belong to them but is entrusted to them
 - We are to help creation fulfill its mandate to be fruitful and multiply

Concept of Stewardship

- Stewardship- Similar to **Shamar**
 - Steward comes from old English words “Stig” or “House” and “Weard” or “warden”.
 - Originated from Greek “**Oikonomos**”
 - Stewardship is the taking care of something that belongs to someone else

Stewardship Cont'd.

- The position of steward is one of highest responsibilities under law.
 - a special, privileged servant and the “charge over the household” requires great care and continued supervision.
 - can rule with full power within its authority but oversteps its authority when it acts like an owner instead of an overseer.
- Akin to Grace (a gift that must be administered faithfully on God’s behalf).

Stewardship Cont'd

- Rabbinical Teachings
 - *Bal Tashhit* (Do not destroy)- Prohibition against wanton destruction or wasting of anything in Creation
 - **Za'ar baalei hayyim** (avoid imposing pain on living things without good reason)
 - **Tzedek**- Usually translated as righteous and refers to the proper order of life, particularly social order

What Kind of Dominion?

- when dominion is read together with stewardship, dominion is the exercise of kingship in the image of God/Christ.
- Implies service, sacrifice, and covenant
 - We should minimize the suffering of animals even if it comes at great costs to us.
 - We should not just prevent the worst, but promote the good.
 - When we make animals suffer harm or pain for our pleasure or entertainment when show a lack of generosity towards God and a lack of understanding of Grace

Summary of Created Order

- God owns the world.
- Creation has Own Value Independent of Humanity
- Humans are to rule over animals as God's agent
- Humans are given power by God. The test is how we exercise it.

NOAHIC COVENANT

- Noah is commanded to release the animals so that they may **multiply, be fruitful and multiply in number** (Gen 8:15)
- “ I will never again curse the ground because of man...and never again will I destroy every living things as I have done.” (Gen. 8: 21)
- “ Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood, never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” (Gen. 9:11)
- covenant is made with Noah and “every living creature on earth” is a rainbow (Gen. 9:12-17)

LAND ETHIC OF THE MOSAIC LAW

- Abrahamic Covenant- God gives Israel land as one of his good gifts (Gen. 15:18)
- God retains ownership of the land
- Covenantal Restrictions
 - “The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine, and you are but aliens and my tenants” (Lev. 25:23)
 - land was to be managed in a way that benefited society as a whole, sometimes at considerable economic expense to the landowner.
 - Particular emphasis on managing land for the benefit of the defenseless, human and non-human alike

Do Not Overwork the Land

- Sabbath Year (Lev 25:4-7; Exodus 23:10)
 - seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused.
 - what grows of its own accord during the Sabbath shall be food for all including the animals on the land
- Jubilee Year (Lev 25:8-11)
 - Every 49 years the land was to be returned to its original owners. Humans are not to sow or reap on the land and eat from it only what it produces

Other Restrictions on Land Use

- “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest...Leave them for the poor and alien”(Lev. 19:9-10)
- “Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life” Lev. (Lev. 19:16).
- Let the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.”(Exodus 23:10-12)

Land Restrictions

- “Do not pollute the land” (Num 35:33)
- Do Not Defile the land where you live and where I dwell for I, the Lord, dwell among the Israelites (Num 35:33)
- When laying siege to a city, do not destroy the trees...do not cut them down.(Deut 20:19)

God Cares How Animals Are Treated

- God expects us to treat our animals with the dignity that they deserve as God's creatures. Cruel practices are prohibited:
 - cooking a young goat in its mother's milk (Ex 34:26; Deut 14:21)
 - taking a mother bird and her young from a nest (Deut 22:6)
 - muzzling an ox to keep it from eating while it is treading out grain (Deut 25:4)
 - Mother cattle not to be slaughtered with their young on the same day (Lev. 22:28)
 - Animals are to be allowed rest. (Ex 23:12; Deut 5:14)
- the sheep (Lk 15:3-7)

Care of Animals Cont'd

- Caring for Animals is part of righteousness (Proverbs 12:10)
- true 'good shepherd' protects and feeds and cares for the flock

Application to Some Current Issues

- *“The government has not right to tell me how to use my land”*
- *“The United States Should Not Implement the Paris Treaty because it will damage economy”*

What Does This Mean To Lawyers?

- Inform our advice to clients
- Inform clients' conduct of business
- Inform our personal choices
 - Consider food choices (e.g., support sustainable and humane practices)
 - Reduce our personal carbon footprints
 - Reduce use of toxic chemicals
 - Reduce consumption and waste