



# into the Melting Pot

*the question is more important than the answer*

Sunday 05 July 2015

## **How Green Is The Bible? – Robin Hamon**

### **What does the Bible really say about the environment?**

This session looks at the Bible and what it says about the environment. To highlight the importance of this topic, I'll begin with a statement that at first seems to undermine its significance: the Bible is primarily about people. What I mean by that is that the Bible talks about human issues, tells human stories and speaks truths to us as people. And as Christians we tend to read the Bible from a human perspective: Christian teaching both from the pulpit and indeed in small group sessions such as this tends to focus upon questions from a human perspective: we reflect and discuss the obedience, faithfulness, foolishness of the Bible's characters and ask questions such as can you imagine what character x must have felt? What would it have been like to have endured what happened to character y? What does the story of character z's experience mean for me as a Christian? As we'll see later, this human-centred approach to the Bible has dominated Western Christianity for the last two millennia, and there is little sign of this changing. But I believe that the Bible *also* talks prevalently and profoundly about the world in which we live and tonight I want to explore this topic with you and bring to the forefront the importance of the natural world underscored in the Bible. Before going any further, I should clarify the terms 'Bible' and 'Environment':

#### **Bible**

When I use the word 'Bible', I don't mean to refer the Bible as one single authoritative book. As you will be aware there are numerous English translations of the Bible, for example NRSV, KJV, NIV. Each of these translations has different purposes, strengths and weaknesses. I think that it is healthy for all Christians to be aware of these issues and use translations alongside each other. Furthermore, there is often the belief in Christian circles that the Bible in its original languages is infallible or inerrant, but even in these original languages, Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, there is no single version of these texts; the Hebrew Masoretic Text, Aleppo Codex, Leningrad Codex and Dead Sea Scrolls all differ. On a more detailed level still, the text of 1 Samuel is unintelligible at points (NRSV) and the Gospel of Mark has a number of endings (NRSV). I don't bring these issues to light to diminish the authority of the Bible, but because I want to encourage you all to be aware of these facts and to read whatever version of the Bible you have with the knowledge that other versions of the text exist and that they may differ in content and overall meaning to what you have in front of you. Perhaps a more helpful approach is not to ask 'what does the Bible say about...' but 'what can we learn from biblical texts about...'

#### **Environment**

When I use the word 'environment' I am of course referring to the natural world, the world in which we live. Currently, however, many scholars argue that it is useful to think that humanity is not separate from the rest of the world, but integrated within it. This is based upon one of Commoner's principles of ecology that states 'everything is connected to everything else'.

Traditionally, Westerners have spoken about 'wilderness' – an area untouched or perhaps unspoilt by human influence. Today, however, some ecological scholars argue that there is no true wilderness left on earth because everywhere has now been affected by climate change because of human actions. So I want to encourage you to think about the world as an integrated whole: humanity is not separate from the earth or nature, but intrinsically linked to it; dependent upon it and capable of bringing great benefit or great damage to it.

### **Context: The Bible and the environment in Western Theological tradition**

I also need to introduce some cultural context to this session. Crucially for what we're looking at today, traditional Western Biblical interpretation/Christian theology has, on the whole, been clouded by a sense of hierarchy of natural order:

- God
- Angelic beings
- Man
- Woman
- Nature
- Animals
- Plants
- Minerals

This perspective is rooted in *Greek* thinking, and has been attributed to originating from Aristotle.

How greatly do you think that this affects us as Western Christians reading the Bible today?

Consider gender splits within some churches, where the position of women in leadership or eldership is limited. Consider how wider Western society prioritises human life over animal life.

This Greek worldview would have shaped the perspective of the authors of the New Testament to a certain extent (think, for example about Eph 5:22; 'wives submit to your husbands') and has undoubtedly influenced the way in which the Bible has been interpreted in the Western tradition since.

### **So what can we learn from biblical texts about the environment?**

Firstly I believe that the Bible portrays the natural world in a variety of ways:

Are there any Bible verses or stories that you can think of that speak about the natural world?

- Splendour: Ps 104
- As a resource: Gen 1:28–29
- As sinful: Gen 6:7; Rom 8:18–24
- That it is controlled by God: Num 16
- That it is affected by our prayer: Act 16:16–40

Secondly, I believe that the Bible carries an overarching message about the natural world.

To illustrate this, I want us to look at 3 pieces of scripture.

Firstly, read Gen 1:1–2:4a. Whilst you read it, think to yourself what is this text saying about the environment. Try to read the text 'as it is': do not allow yourself to be influenced by what you may have learned about the text before. Pretend you are reading it for the first time and ask yourself what is this text saying about the natural world?

Read alone then share what you think within your group.

Crucial to this text is Gen 1:28 (NRSV): God said to humankind 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

So, if we understand this literally, humankind has the God-given right to exploit the whole of the earth's resources. So perhaps we don't have to care for the environment at all? It is ours to do what we want with?

Some eco-theologians have suggested that the Hebrew words translated as 'subdue' *kabash* and 'dominion', *radah*, may have carried different connotations in their original language, so in Hebrew this passage actually meant something like 'be responsible stewards over the...'

This assumption about *kabash* and *radah* is simply not correct and inconsistent with the instances in which these words are used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.

What we must do, then, is to understand this verse in context. The worldview of the ancient Hebrews, the authors of Genesis, was very different to ours. For the ancient Hebrew people, the natural world was created by God *fully* adapted for immediate use by humanity. And this makes sense if you consider that these originally-nomadic pastoralists lived self-sufficiently and in a *sustainable* manner off the land. The idea of being fruitful, multiplying, filling the earth and utilising its resources was both compatible *and* responsible within the ancient Hebrew's world. It was not until the industrial revolution when humans began consuming fossil fuels at an accelerated rate that the idea of exerting dominion over the world's natural resources became a dangerous proposition.

Today, the way we live in the West, and indeed the manner in which many nations are developing, is causing devastating effects upon our planet because we are overusing the limited resources available. A literal understanding of this key verse, Gen 1:28, is no longer helpful, and indeed very different in terms of the meaning *intended* by the original author(s)/redactors(s) of Genesis, who wrote at a time when humanity was living sustainably within the natural world.

## **Romans 8**

Now let us adopt the same reading approach as before and look at Rom 8:18–23.

Remember how we looked at the hierarchical Greek worldview earlier; here we have a great example of this as humanity and nature, 'creation', are separated from each other by the author. Rom 8:20 states that the natural world is subject to 'bondage' and 'decay', and these are analogous to the concepts of sin and death experienced by humanity. Romans 8 talks about the salvation of humanity in terms of eschatological redemption, i.e. the world ending; Jesus returns and, in simple terms, makes everything right. We will look at Revelation next, but what is often overlooked in Romans 8 is that it speaks not only about humanity, but also about the *whole* of the natural world anticipating some kind of salvation.

What on earth does this mean? Well, if we continue the comparison between humans and nature in these verses, mainstream Christians believe (according to the Apostle's Creed) that Jesus is going to 'return to judge the living and the dead'. On this basis, Christians generally place a high value on human life and want to reach out and enrich the lives of people around them now, in preference to doing nothing and waiting for Jesus to come back and judge everyone. This is evident in the prolific work of the church in evangelism, social action, charity work, overseas aid, donations, community spiritedness etc. In contrast, Christians seem to place less priority on enriching the natural world, we seem happy to do nothing about nature and wait for Jesus to return and redeem it, as it is promised in Rom 8:21.

NT Wright offers a comparison: if a friend approaches you and says they are struggling with temptation, as a Christian, you would probably not respond by saying, don't worry, Jesus is going to return and redeem everything. Instead you would probably do what you could to help them with the issue. Conversely, if we believe that the natural world is created in the image of God, or even just by God, we seemingly have a duty to bring about signs of the coming redemption both humanity and nature. We have a duty to look after the natural world which we inhabit.

## **Revelation 21:1–4, 9–22:5**

For the final time tonight, read at this passage asking yourself the question what does this text say about the natural world? How does it depict the relationship between nature and humanity?

Revelation is notoriously complex from a theological perspective, but I think that it is reasonable to conclude the following:

(1) Like Romans 8, Revelation 21 says Jesus is coming back. Jesus is returning to earth, 'not to take us all up to heaven', but to redeem the whole of creation from the state it is in so that we can exist alongside God in the natural world as he intended it to be.

(2) The redemption of creation brings healing, 'no tears', no pain, the natural world is healed from all damage caused to it. How much damage do you think humanity is currently causing the environment?

(3) In Genesis 2–3, we start with the story of humanity in a garden. In Revelation, we are left with the image of a garden city. This garden city represents a peaceful vision for the future where humanity and nature can dwell alongside each other in what we may describe today as a sustainable manner – the actions of humanity have no detrimental effect upon nature.

I will finish with two questions:

How close do you think humanity is currently to this vision of living peacefully alongside the natural world?

What can Christians do to live more sustainably alongside nature?