

SEIZING AN ALTERNATIVE

Toward an Ecological Civilization

June 4-7, 2015

**Section VI: Reimagining and Reinventing
the Wisdom Traditions: World Loyalty**

**Track 7: Reading the Bible for
the Sake of the World**

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Reading the Bible for the Sake of the World, Summary **By David Lull**

Brief Summary: *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation history, salvation in history, God's saving acts in history), which has dominated the theological interpretation of the Bible, trades on the Cartesian distinction between human history and the natural world. In that paradigm, salvation is for human beings. The natural world is, at best, the landscape on which human salvation occurs; at worst, the natural world is the place from which human beings are saved.

A new paradigm for biblical interpretation is needed if the Bible is to play a role in envisioning “an ecological civilization.” The needed new paradigm is one in which the world—land, water, air, and all living things—is included in God’s saving, tender care for “the world.” In this paradigm, images of “redemption” include the re-hydration and re-forestation of the land—that is, the restoration of the fertility of the land, so that it can supply the needs of sustainable life for all living things.

Human beings play a role in making God’s saving, tender care for the world effective by practicing sustainable agriculture and economic justice. Biblical traditions that are consistent with this paradigm are normative for critical examination of the rest of the Bible, for critical reflection on theological views of God and the world, and critical analysis of agricultural and economic practices.

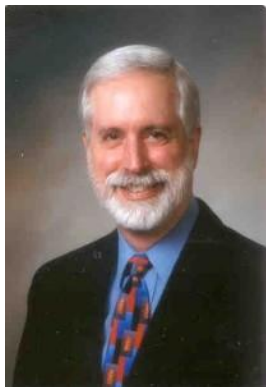
Paper Summaries:

The Bible and Economic Justice



“Shabbat: An Epistemological Principle for Holiness, Sustainability, and Justice in the Pentateuch” by Marvin A. Sweeney, Professor of Hebrew Bible, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont CA, and Academy for Jewish Religion- California, Los Angeles, USA.

Dr. Sweeney demonstrates that “the Shabbat serves as a holy epistemological principle for the formulation of law in the Pentateuch. Specifically, the Shabbat appears as a holy principle of creation itself in Gen 1:1–2:3, and it thereby serves as the template for conceptualizing the character of the land and creation at large and the basis for Israelite and Judean life within that creation and land. It serves as the basis for the covenant between Israel/Judah and YHWH, and it provides the foundations for the laws of festival observance and socio-economic justice in ancient Israel and Judah.” He also shows that “it informs the formulation of Israelite law codes from the time of the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century B.C.E., the Judean kingdom of King Josiah in the seventh century B.C.E., the post-Josian Judean kingdom in the late seventh and early sixth century B.C.E., and the post-exilic restoration of Nehemiah and Ezra in the fifth–fourth centuries B.C.E. The Shabbat’s principle of rest and holiness for all creation thereby provides a basis for conceiving the need and reality of the replenishment of creation as an inherent element of creation and human life within creation itself and as a basis for ensuring socio-economic justice for Israelite and Judean life within creation. Such an agenda has implications for the contemporary world as well.”



“The New Testament Gospels and Economic Justice” by David J. Lull, Professor Emeritus of New Testament, Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque IA, USA.

In contrast to theological interpretation of the gospels that tend to overlook embedded economic ideologies, Dr. Lull’s paper “explores selected passages in the gospels that (seem to) favor the poor, condemn the wealthy, or favor the wealthy. The purpose is to provoke critical reflection on the economic ideologies embedded in these texts and, in turn, to explore how they might provoke critical reflection on our own contemporary social, political, and economic realities, and how they might inform a moral economic vision for today. Texts that favor the poor and condemn the wealthy are well known and are, more or less, noncontroversial. Less known, and more controversial, are texts that favor the wealthy.” Dr. Lull’s paper discusses the latter at some length, focusing on Matthew 20.1-16, Mark 12.1-12, and Luke 16.1-13. “These three texts convey theological messages by trading on and inscribing an economic system rigged

by the powerful and wealthy for their own benefit. Because of the disastrous consequences of such economic systems, we cannot ignore the economic tropes of these and similar texts. On the contrary, we must subject them to a critical analysis that provokes critical reflection on the economic realities of our day that contribute to economic injustice and to the ecological crisis.”

The Bible and Ecological Justice



“Process Theology, the Environment, and Fleeting Images in the Primeval History (Genesis 1-11)” by Robert K. Gnuse, Professor of the Humanities, Loyola University, New Orleans LA, USA.

Dr. Gnuse explores a process theological vision in which God is active immanently and symbolically, not only in human lives, but also in the total world environment. “The divine presence weaves humanity, nature, and the divine into a tightly interlocked web of dependencies.” In this web, humanity is supremely responsible for stewarding wisely the resources of the world as well as living in symbiotic harmony with the majestic created order. Biblical authors did not share our environmental concerns; they did not impart to us ready discourse for addressing the issues we face. Nevertheless, the Primeval History of Genesis 1-11 can inspire “a process theological vision of the environment as an arena of divine and human interaction and inter-dependence.”

The denizens of the sky and the oceans cooperate with God in the production of life (Gen 1:20, 24). Created by God to be givers of life, the oceans are experiencing “dead zones” devoid of fish life. The skies of our land are now filled with pollution, bringing us the life-giving oxygen for our bodies, but they now are tinged with carcinogens. As Genesis 1 tells the story, harmony should exist between God, nature, and humanity.

Humans are agents of God in the world charged with its care (Gen 1:26). Human beings share the sixth day of creation with the animals on the land, which unifies humans with other animals. As the last to be created, human beings are responsible for all that was created before them.

The biblical laws mandated population growth (Gen 1:28), but in the modern era biblical laws might mandate restraint, lest we overpopulate and impoverish life on our planet.

God gives the earth for food, not only to the humans, but also to the animals (Gen 1:29-30).

Because human beings came from the earth and because food for life comes from the earth (Gen 2:7), we must respect the earth, from which we came.

Humanity has a common origin with the animals: both are made out of the dust of the ground (Gen 2:8-9). English Bible translations, by naming humans “living souls” and animals “living creatures,” divide people from animals, whereas here the Bible portrays them as “kindred.”

Cain is cursed “from” the ground (Gen 4:11-12a), which is a double–entendre. Cain is to be taken away from farming, removed “from” the ground. In addition, the ground “curses” him with the presence of Abel’s blood in it: the ground bears testimony against him. Perhaps we can think of this “curse” as the earth’s testimony against abusive farming and other abuses of soil and land.

God makes a covenant not only with humanity, but also with the animal realm (Gen 9:9-10). Noah’s primary task was to save the animal world! Saving humanity was secondary and derivative.



“The Cosmogonies in a Social-Historical-Ecological Approach” by Ágabo Borges de Sousa, Adjunct Professor for General Philosophy, Universidade Estadual de Feira de Santana - UEFS, Bahia- Brazil.

Dr. Sousa acknowledges that the bible is linguistically, geographically, historically, philosophically, and culturally distant (different) from the way people view the world today. Nevertheless, two “principles” in the biblical “cosmogonies” (Genesis 1-2) are worth considering in today’s discussion about the plight of the planet. First, God’s instruction to be “fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1.28) was given to all living creatures. Second, as God’s image and likeness, humans are God’s representatives, charged with managing creation on God’s behalf. To subdue and have dominion refers to keeping creation from falling back into chaos. One prime means to do that is by cultivating the land (Gen 2.5, 15). However, humans subjected the earth to “futility” and “decay” (Rom 8.20-21).



In absentia: “Wisdom and the Whirlwind: Relating the Humane and the Implacable in Job and Ecotheology” by Marti J. Steussy, MacAllister-Petticrew Professor Emerita of Biblical Interpretation Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis IN, USA.

According to Dr. Steussy, “Theologians and biblical scholars interested in ecology have turned to Job early and often. The reasons are not hard to discern. First and most obviously, the book’s whirlwind speeches (Job 38-41) are the Bible’s most sustained celebration of nature. Not only that, but they are represented as God’s own words and appear deliberately designed to underscore God’s delight in and involvement with the nonhuman world, over against expectations that God’s central business is to reward human virtue and

punish human vice. Furthermore, the nature spoken of in these speeches is recognizably that of the world we live in: we hear of vultures and lions that (unlike those in the idealized worlds of Genesis 1 and Isaiah 11) eat meat. Second, Job is among the biblical books which explicitly recognize land stewardship as a central requirement of righteousness, most notably in the culminating stanza of Job's 'oath of innocence' (Job 31:38-40 CEB). Third, the book's poetry repeatedly represents earth and earth's nonhuman creatures as having voices, knowledge, and agency (although on this point Job has plenty of biblical company).



“From the Wilderness Prophetic Tradition to Watershed Discipleship” by Ched Myers, activist biblical scholar and theologian from the Ventura River Watershed of southern California (<http://www.chedmyers.org/>).

Dr. Myers believes “Christian communities that intentionally re-place their work and witness in their respective watersheds can make an enormous contribution to the wider historic struggle to reverse our march toward carbon oblivion. In the process, we just might recover the incarnational soul of a faith tradition that too often has tended toward Docetism and androcentric presumptions of autonomy from, yet entitlement to, creation. Watershed Discipleship seeks to heal these dysfunctional legacies. I believe that the core biblical witness understands our human vocation to be one of apprenticeship and service to the community of Creation. To recover this vocation we must, to use our metaphorical theme, reinhabit the prophetic vision of the river of life.” Dr. Myers explores water/watershed images from Genesis to Revelation and proposes that they provide neglected but central biblical images of redemption as the re-hydration and re-forestation of the land.



“Teaching the Bible in Seminaries for the Sake of the World” by Theodore Hiebert, Francis A. McGaw Professor of Old Testament, Dean of Faculty and Vice President for Academic Affairs, McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago IL, USA.

Dr. Hiebert makes one point about “why we should teach the Bible in seminaries for the sake of the world and how we should go about it, and that point is this: the world is at the heart of biblical thought. The world in its physical entirety is the context from which biblical thinkers engage reality as a whole: it’s the context in which God and God’s character is conceived, it’s the context in which the human vocation and human flourishing is viewed, and it’s the context in which all of life and its relationship to us and to God is understood. Everything I want to say today is really an elaboration of the centrality of the world in biblical thought and the importance of this for our thinking and behaving today. So our task is nothing less than finding a new way of reading the Bible. If we understand how central the world is for biblical thought and if we

teach this clearly in our seminaries, we can make a major contribution to an alternative consciousness and toward an ecological civilization. We can help future religious leaders take the world seriously and see it as the core of what it means for them and for their communities to be authentically religious.”



“What, if Anything, Does the New Testament Contribute to the Current Environmental Crisis? Is it a ‘Green’ Book?” by Dennis R. MacDonald, Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont CA, USA.

Dr. MacDonald argues that, “Whether because of Jewish apocalypticism or Greek cosmological dualism, or both, the New Testament seems ill-equipped to address our crisis and at times has worsened it. On the other hand, I have tried to show that modern Christians may take guidance, in part, from the moral vision of Jesus, as we find it in the lost Gospel Q. The Logoi of

Jesus presents Jesus as a critic of wealth and a humanizer of law, in order to protect the poor and other socially marginal people, who may have benefitted less from the mistreatment of the planet. Surely it is time for Christians to expand our understanding of salvation to include the saving of Earth and its inhabitants, human and otherwise. This perspective may be foreign to the authors of the New Testament, but I can’t imagine that they, the author of the Logoi of Jesus, or Jesus would mind. Indeed, they would be disappointed if we did not.”



“Ecological Undercurrents in New Testament Eschatology: A Process- Hermeneutical Reading” by Russell Pregeant, Professor Emeritus of Religion, Curry College, Milton MA, USA.

Dr. Pregeant begins with the observation that “What the Bible means depends in large part upon how we choose to read it. Whether we view the New Testament as an eco-friendly resource, an enemy of the earth, or a set of documents that are basically useless in the struggle to save the planet is to some extent a function of our implicit or explicit hermeneutical perspective.” He does not suggest that “the writings of the New Testament mean whatever we deem them to mean.” His point, rather, is that the New Testament writings “are overflowing with an abundance of potential meanings. I therefore understand the interpreter’s task as neither merely to enshrine the dominant strains of meaning nor to twist the texts to produce preconceived results. It is rather to identify, sort out, and evaluate the various strains in a process of ‘negotiating’ an interpretation that serves a specific purpose.” Dr. Pregeant’s “goal in this paper is three-fold: first, to outline in brief a hermeneutical method based largely upon Alfred North Whitehead’s understanding of language; second, to employ this method in evaluating the New Testament’s potential as a resource in the ecological movement; and third, to make a practical proposal for involving biblically-based faith

communities more deeply in reflecting on the question of how to read the Bible and in using the Bible as a resource for ecological activism.

The Bible and Empires



“The Product of Empire and the Production of Empire: An Examination of the Bible and Empire” by Steed Vernyl Davidson, Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible, McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago IL, USA.

“The relationship between the Bible and empires is as fraught as the relationship between the reader and the Bible. Is the Bible a product of empires or a critical cog in the machinery that supports and maintains empires, whether secular empires that thrive of upon religious justification or otherworldly empires that mimic earthly configurations? The answer to the question derives in part from the answer to the other question of whether readers read the Bible and therefore produce the text in every reading/ interpretation or whether the Bible produces its readers. Far from being a set of speculative questions, these questions enquire into the competing claims about a collection of books that at once serves as the inspiration and template for global domination and also provides the impetus for liberation. This paper makes the claim that the Bible contains both impulses, however, both are true but they do not share the same stake in defining the Bible. The imperial character of the Bible stands out more than its anti-imperial tendencies. The narrative shape, contents, mode of production, reception, interpretation, and use of the biblical texts offer support and legitimation to the idea of empire. Admittedly, the Bible is an imperial text, yet it is not simply or only an imperial text. The axiomatic postmodern tenet that totalizing systems are not totalizing may apply here. However, the issue with the Bible rests with more than the limitations of the Bible’s totalizing claims and goes to the lack of coherence evident in the idea of the Bible. Instead of a single product that reflects a uniformed point of view, the Bible works best as a scattered collection of thoughts and ideas that don’t always cohere or even agree in every detail. While various historical- critical methodologies offer reasonable explanations for the internal contradictions of the Bible, these do not fully account for the deposition seen in the biblical texts to support the system of empire that operates under the belief that empire can be a tool for good if only wielded by the right hands.”



“The Empire against the People: Biblical Keys to Understand this Conflict” by Néstor Oscar Míguez, Professor of Bible, Instituto Universitario ISEDET, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Dr. Míguez argues that “Empires are a kind of power structure that has as its end to subjugate and exploit the people and nature. It sees people only as an object of exploitation and control, and creation as a deposit of endless resources at their hand. On the opposite side, a people is always a subject that

is willing to exist, but in internal tension, an incompleteness in search of fullness, a split longing for unity. People are also those who are denied in their existence, the excluded searching to express a different understanding of the sense of human life in its plenitude and diversity. The South American aboriginals understand people and creation as the place for 'good living.' That is, a 'people' (populum) is a community that can only be complete by the inclusion of everyone and in harmonic and responsible relationship with the whole of creation, while empires consider themselves complete in their power, and thus contend also with God. Jesus was crucified because he challenged not only the Roman Empire and its local allies, but the spirit of Empires, by the creation of a new people (a new creation in Christ, in Paul's words)."