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Humanity: Texts and Contexts

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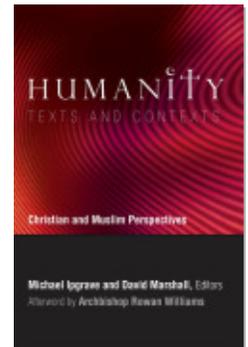
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CHAPTER NINE

Humanity and the Environment

9.1 Jeremiah 5:20–25; 18:13–17; Romans 8:18–23

Michael Northcott

Jeremiah 5 suggests a continuing confrontation between the chaotic powers of the primordial earth and the continuing ordering power of God. It also suggests a certain precariousness in the orders of creation. Creation is sustained in its beneficence by right relations between God and creatures, especially humans. It is threatened by abandonment of right relations, by injustice and idolatry.

This relational conception of humans and other creatures is covenantal in the books of Jeremiah and Genesis. Jeremiah uses the Hebrew word for covenant to describe God's ordering of night and day, and for God's blessing of the line of David and the Levites: "If you could annul my covenant of the day and my covenant of the night, so that daytime and night would not come at their due times, then might my covenant with David my servant be annulled."¹⁸²

The ordering of time and seasons, of oceans and rivers, of deserts and fertile plains, all belong to the matter of the covenant and to the human mandate of governance. The cosmic nature of covenant involves the duty to preserve the creation from chaos by practicing cosmic justice and the other virtues. When humans respect these covenantal relations of justice, then God will not again abandon the creation to destruction and flood as God did in the days of Noah: "While the earth lasts seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall never cease."¹⁸³

The cosmic covenant links the orders of creation with the worship and governance of the people of God. Thus, true worship sustains the order of creation whereas idolatry threatens the return of chaos. This relation between human social order and cosmic order is substantiated in the ritual texts in the Hebrew Bible, particularly the royal psalms.¹⁸⁴

True worship is performative and exemplary, and it sustains respect for created order. This is why the first commandment given to Moses is that the people of God are not to turn creatures into idols but to worship the true God. When the Creator is worshipped rightly, the creation is known and experienced as divine benison and is not used idolatrously or instrumentally. From true worship issue both moral order in human life and peace in creation. Analogously idolatry not only sustains injustice in divine and human relations but it produces disharmony and disorder in the land. Hence Jeremiah clearly

links ecological devastation and the abandonment of the worship and commands of the Lord. Because the people of Israel had turned from the Lord to worship other gods, their land, its mountains and streams, animals and crops, had been laid waste, polluted, and destroyed.¹⁸⁵

The prophetic reading of ecological breakdown recalls a conflict between the grand projects and large cities and large-scale farms of the late Hebrew monarchy. The pride of idolatrous kings denuded the valleys of great cedars for their massive building projects, and the wealthy grew rich while the poor went hungry. The land suffers and shares in the alienation that human corruption produces. The ecological devastation of the land is the consequence of the human rebellion against God and of the idolatry of other creatures. The prophet Jeremiah finds biological, moral, and spiritual significance in created order, and he identifies the pivotal moral responsibility of humans to tend and conserve the stability of the land and the cosmos and the welfare of creatures.

Moral responsibility of all life, including human life, is identified with the calling of all life forms to respond to God in praise and worship. This response of gratitude is a fundamental feature of creaturely being that is shared by all the creatures of the earth, humans and animals, landscapes, seas and mountains, earth, wind, fire, and rain. The psalmist charges all things with the first moral duty of the creation, to worship and praise the Creator, thereby establishing in as radical a fashion as any deep ecologist the moral agency of animals, and of nonsentient life forms and habitats. This moral responsibility to worship the Lord and reflect his glory may be said to be inherent in the beauty, fecundity, and order of the natural world. This response of worship and gratitude on the part of humans involves the active taking of initiatives in relation to the created order and to the Creator. Thus Adam and Eve are called upon not merely to be in the garden but to steward the earth and to replenish it, and not merely to observe the animals but to name them.

Jeremiah argued that the peoples of Israel and Judah had been exiled because they failed to worship the Lord, and to respect his justice in relation to the land and their neighbors. According to Isaiah, the restoration of the land will involve the recovery by every household of the means to livelihood and mutual sufficiency, for God's justice confers on every household the means to meet the basic needs of life and to provide for the flourishing of children and for security in old age.¹⁸⁶

The restoration of true worship, and of justice in human society, also contributes to the restoration of nature as the peaceable kingdom of shalom and ecological harmony. This is why Saint Paul suggests in Romans that humans play a role in frustrating the *telos* of the cosmos to freely worship God, and that the salvation of humans in Christ involves the restoration of freedom to all creatures in their relation to God.¹⁸⁷

In this way the original shalom of the first creation, which was despoiled by human rebellion, is restored. From the hope of shalom flow the themes of cosmic restoration and redemption as well as the ideals of the law tradition concerning the treatment of domestic and wild animals, the tending of the land, the care of the poor and widows, and restraints on economic power and oppression by which Israel in exile was to aspire to the goodness and grace of the original creation, and in response to which Yahweh

would restore the fortunes of Israel and the fertility of the land. Hence Isaiah envisages a recovery of the original peace between all creatures so that

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together
 The lion shall eat straw like the ox,
 But the serpent—its food shall be dust.
 They shall not hurt or destroy
 On all my holy mountain says the Lord.¹⁸⁸

In the new creation described in the book of Revelation, creation is restored in such a way that the forces of chaos—in particular the sea and the ships that use the sea to trade and to enslave the land and its creatures—are finally bound, and the orientation of creation to the worship and vision of God is realized by all creatures.¹⁸⁹

Jeremiah 5:20–25

²⁰Declare this in the house of Jacob,
 proclaim it in Judah:

²¹Hear this, O foolish and senseless people,
 who have eyes, but do not see,
 who have ears, but do not hear.

²²Do you not fear me? says the Lord;
 Do you not tremble before me?
 I placed the sand as a boundary for the sea,
 a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass;
 though the waves toss, they cannot prevail,
 though they roar, they cannot pass over it.

²³But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart;
 they have turned aside and gone away.

²⁴They do not say in their hearts,
 “Let us fear the Lord our God,
 who gives the rain in its season,
 the autumn rain and the spring rain,
 and keeps for us
 the weeks appointed for the harvest.”

²⁵Your iniquities have turned these away,
 and your sins have deprived you of good.

Jeremiah 18:13–17

¹³Therefore, thus says the Lord:

Ask among the nations:
 Who has heard the like of this?
 The virgin Israel has done
 a most horrible thing.

¹⁴Does the snow of Lebanon leave
 the crags of Sirion?

Do the mountain waters run dry,
the cold flowing streams?
¹⁵But my people have forgotten me,
they burn offerings to a delusion;
they have stumbled in their ways,
in the ancient roads,
and have gone into bypaths,
not the highway,
¹⁶making their land a horror,
a thing to be hissed at forever.
All who pass by it are horrified
and shake their heads.
¹⁷Like the wind from the east,
I will scatter them before the enemy.
I will show them my back, not my face,
on the day of their calamity.

Romans 8:18–23

¹⁸I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; ²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

9.2 *al-An‘ām* 6:141–42; 6:38; *al-Rūm* 30:41, *al-Naḥl* 16:112

Mohamed Yunus Yasin

“Gardens of diversity”: *al-An‘ām* 6:141–42

Ecology (from the word meaning “household” in Greek) is the study of the relationships of plants and animals to their physical (e.g., heat, light, water, atmosphere) and biological environment, forming a complex interlocking chain or web crucial for life on the planet. Thus, the environment is not merely one component but complex interlocking relationships between all components. For example, sugar is sweet, yet its components—carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen atoms—are tasteless. As another analogy, coal is made of carbon, and water is made of hydrogen and oxygen, yet coal and water together do not produce sugar. Thus, the environment that we sense with our five senses is a complex web of combinations of all its components and their set of multifaceted relationships.

Modern humans are destroying these systems by breaking the linkages that make up this web; in modern times, the frequency of these “breaks” in the web is alarming. The breaking and mending of these complex links is a natural system of disintegration and regeneration happening in perfect balance. However, this balance is being lost due to our own greed, hastened by modern innovations in science and technology: the breaks in the web are happening faster than nature’s ability to mend them. The solution to this problem would require a complete shift in the paradigm of our modern perception and translation of reality and the sciences.

Traditional sciences used to revolve around the life sciences, for life is the central motive in the story of Creation. Modern sciences, conversely, revolve around physics and have relegated life sciences to be a substudy of physics. Descartes maintained that all philosophy was like a tree, with metaphysics the roots, physics the trunk, and all other sciences the branches. While traditional life sciences are more intuitive, holistic, and cyclical, and they emphasize cooperation, physical sciences are more rational, reductionist, and linear, and they emphasize dominion and control. Furthermore, traditional life sciences focus more on interactions, patterns, and relations between components that make up the whole: the sum is often more than, and different from, the parts. Physical sciences, conversely, focus on the components as a means to understand the whole. However, with the discovery of DNA, life sciences have become more like physical sciences in their method of inquiry. This method has thus seeped into all forms of knowledge in one way or the other. Although reductionist thinking is useful for some purposes, it is not suitable for thinking of our relationship with the environment because the environment is a living, self-generating system.

“Nations like unto yourself”: *al-An‘ām* 6:38

The study of ecology focuses mostly on biodiversity, which can be defined as the variation of life forms within a given natural system. The term “diversity” includes the totality

of genes, species, and ecosystems of a region, embracing genetic diversity (genes within a species), species diversity (diversity among species), and ecosystem diversity (diversity within the ecosystem). Each can be viewed as a nation unto itself, surviving, self-regulating, and living with each other.

Because Islam recognizes that each species “is of its own nation,” if each nation has a right to exist, do not the many nations of the animals and plants have a right to existence beside us? Do these “other types” of nations also praise the Almighty and worship their Creator each in their own way? If God has created humanity in tribes so we may know and respect each other, why should we not get to know and respect other nations of species that He has created too, as Solomon did?¹⁹⁰

Biodiversity is the Creator’s scheme for one diverse group aiding another, a sort of cooperation of nations for the continuation of life on the planet. Higher biodiversity also helps control the spread of certain diseases—for example, a virus will have to adapt itself to every new species it invades. Modern intensive monoculture, which destroys biodiversity as a result of linear and reductionist thinking, has contributed to several agricultural disasters in history, as, for example, the Irish potato famine shows. In 1847, when hundreds of thousands were dying, food worth seventeen million pounds was exported from Ireland under the protection of British troops. Thus, the Irish died not just because of monoculture, but as a result of extortionate rent, the pursuit of profit, and an economic theory focused on domination: this was indeed corruption created by humanity.

“Corruption has appeared in the land”: *al-Rūm* 30:41

There have been at least five mass extinctions in the history of the planet, the most recent of which, occurring about sixty five million years ago, wiped out the nonavian dinosaurs. The emergence of humans has now sparked a new wave of extinction caused primarily by the impact of humans on the environment. The last century, with the Industrial Revolution coming into full force, saw an erosion of biodiversity at an alarming rate. Some scientists estimate that there is a loss of up to 140,000 species per year, indicating our current unsustainable practices. A species becomes extinct when the last existing member of that species dies. Extinction is imminent when there are not enough individuals in a specified area able to reproduce. Some of the factors contributing to the loss of biodiversity are overpopulation, deforestation, pollution (air pollution, water pollution, soil contamination), and climate change. We essentially “destroy the tillage and the stock” because we are not pleased with what God has created, but in the long term, we are only digging our own grave: “And some men there are whose saying upon the present world pleases thee, and such a one calls on God to witness what is in his heart, yet he is most stubborn in altercation, and when he turns his back, he hastens about the earth, to do corruption there and to destroy the tillage and the stock; and God loves not corruption; and when it is said to him, ‘Fear God,’ vainglory seizes him in his sin. So Gehenna shall be enough for him—how evil a cradling!”¹⁹¹

Biodiversity provides for variety in foods, shelter, and clothing for humans. Although about 80 percent of our food supply comes from just twenty kinds of plants, humans

“use” and need at least forty thousand species of plants and animals a day. Biodiversity is also a source of medicine for people, especially traditional societies. A large proportion of modern drugs (about 40 percent) are directly or indirectly derived from biological sources; in most cases these medicines cannot presently be synthesized in a laboratory. Biodiversity also provides the ecosystem with its own “maintenance services” for regulating the chemistry of our atmosphere and water supply, recycling nutrients, and providing fertile soils. The Gaia theory, promoted by James Lovelock, maintains that life on the planet actually helps regulate its temperature and its atmospheric makeup. Do we not give thanks to Him who has subjugated so much of His creation on earth for us?¹⁹²

Many traditional cultural groups view themselves as an integral part of the natural world, show it respect, and recognize the services provided by other living and nonliving entities in the environment. A conservation ethic is an ethic of resource use, allocation, exploitation, and protection. Its primary focus is upon maintaining the health of the natural world: its forests, habitats, fisheries and biological diversity. The consumer conservation ethic is sometimes expressed by the so-called four Rs: rethink, reduce, reuse, and recycle. The principal value underlying most expressions of conservation ethics is that the natural world has intrinsic and intangible worth along with its utilitarian value.

However, the origins of biological conservation can be traced to philosophical and religious beliefs that see humanity as a part of nature, not as above it. Conserving natural resources and the environment is not a recent concern but has deep cultural roots with the protection of nature. The Torah proposes the concept of the “Sabbatical Year,” a period whereby the fields are left fallow, presumably to rejuvenate the soil, an ancient form of the ecological practice of crop rotation. Taoist and Shinto philosophies likewise encourage recognition of special sites, and Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism grant sacred values to animals and places. Primal religions also ascribe sacred values to sites such as forests, lakes, and mountains.

“A city with its provision allocated”: *al-Nahl* 16:112

The earth is like a large city, secure and in a complex interactive balance. God has created provision for all its inhabitants and has connected them with one another in the web of life. However, did He create enough to feed humanity’s unending hunger and greed? It is this very greed that motivates humans to create death when there was once life, and that will result in us tasting hunger one day when we diminish the earth’s capacity to produce enough food, clean air, drinkable water, and the energy that keeps us warm at night.¹⁹³ If we have experienced the Irish potato famine, may we not experience a world food famine as well?

The recognition of humanity as part of nature and as its “vicegerent” is in line with the oneness and unity of God, which recognizes the unity of nature and gives us a unity of meaning, and thus a unity of direction, which ultimately should lead us to our unity in action. God does not create in parts but in a whole, complete, and in perfect balance.

A Muslim has an obligation to practice *khilāfa* (“stewardship”) over nature. This can be seen from the Arabic *hima*, meaning “inviolable zones” set aside solely for the conservation of their natural habitat—typically, fields, wildlife, and forests. This word has a different meaning from *ḥarām*, the purpose of which is to protect areas for more immediate human purposes. The selection of *hima* in traditional Islam was a religious rather than a community obligation, and was often the responsibility of religious scholars. There were traditionally five types of *hima* reserves: areas where grazing of domestic animals was prohibited; areas where grazing was restricted to certain seasons; beekeeping reserves where grazing was restricted during flowering; forest areas where cutting of trees was forbidden; and reserves managed for the welfare of a particular village, town, or tribe.

Have these concepts been forgotten by modern Muslims? Is there a need to revive and expand this concept, or have we forgotten God’s laws, like many before us? Is there a sense of *hima* relevant to our times? For example, instead of beekeeping reserves, we might prioritize animal sanctuaries over housing developments, or protect water reserves from factory spill off. Who will select such new areas: would it be scholars, as in the past, or bankers and politicians, as in the present?

How does a wounded organism regenerate to exactly the same structure as before? How does an egg turn into a living being? God has created each species alike, and yet each individual within them is unique. Has He not created gardens and filled them with diverse crops and in abundance? Do we treat these cohabitants with care, or are we wasteful with His creation?

al-An‘ām 6:141–42

¹⁴¹It is He who produces gardens trellised, and untrellised, palm-trees, and crops diverse in produce, olives, pomegranates, like each to each, and each unlike to each. Eat of their fruits when they fructify, and pay the due thereof on the day of its harvest; and be not prodigal; God loves not the prodigal. ¹⁴²And of the cattle, for burthen and for slaughter, eat of what God has provided you; and follow not the steps of Satan; he is a manifest foe to you.

al-An‘ām 6:38

³⁸No creature is there crawling on the earth, no bird flying with its wings, but they are nations like unto yourselves. We have neglected nothing in the Book; then to their Lord they shall be mustered.

al-Rūm 30:41

⁴¹Corruption has appeared in the land and sea, for that men’s own hands have earned, that He may let them taste some part of that which they have done, that haply so they may return.

al-Naḥl 16:112

¹¹²God has struck a similitude: a city that was secure, at rest, its provision coming to it easefully from every place, then it was unthankful for the blessings of God; so God let it taste the garment of hunger and of fear, for the things that they were working.

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