

**The Wisdom of Jesus**  
**Environmentalism and the Bible**  
By  
**Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof**  
**November 12, 2017**

Almost 15 years ago to the day, I heard the nation's high priest of the status quo, the fundamentalist preacher and cofounder of the Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell, in an unforgettable interview about Global Warming on CNN. "It was global cooling 30 years ago," he scoffed, "...and it's global warming now. And neither of us will be here 100 years from now to know what it is. But I can tell you our grandchildren will laugh at those who predicted global warming. We'll be cooler by then, if the lord hasn't returned... The fact is that there is no global warming." He then called global warming "a myth," bragged about driving a GM Suburban, and concluded by urging "everyone to go out and buy an SUV today."

Though he's now sitting on a cloud singing praises to God for all eternity (which sounds like hell to me), Falwell's troubling beliefs about humanity's relationship with the environment are still shared by many. These beliefs derive from the very real and widespread myth of anthropocentrism based on an interpretation of the *Genesis* story that places humanity at both the center and pinnacle of creation. As the only creature made in the "image and likeness" of the gods, the story goes, our very purpose, according to our creators, is to "fill the earth and subdue it; [and] have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."<sup>1</sup>

Among theologians this is known as the "dominion mandate," which some interpret to mean humans are commanded to control and exploit nature, while others argue it's based on a bad translation of a couple of ancient Hebrew words. For if it means we have an inherent right and duty to dominate all of nature, why does the story immediately contradict itself by forbidding us the right to eat from the tree of knowledge and restricting our access to the tree of life? If we have been commanded to dominate "every living thing," how can the very next command we are given restrict us from doing so?

This contradiction is one of the reasons some think the Hebrew word we translate as "dominion" in English, *râdâh*, which more literally translates, "tread down upon," could mean human beings were created, according to this myth, to walk the earth taking responsibility for its care and all living things. Made in the image and likeness of our creators, we give the gods the opportunity to incarnate, to embody themselves, upon the Earth. Given that most the words we have for human, *humus*, *pueblo*, *Adam*, also mean "earth," it makes more sense, at least to me, that our purpose, as imagined in this Hebrew origin myth, is to live like embodied gods treading humbly upon the Earth, caring for the environment and enjoying it.

But, whatever its original meaning shouldn't matter, given that it's just a three-thousand-year-old myth that a small group of people once invented to help explain their purpose in the world. Any rational and enlightened view of the world cannot accept such accounts as history

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:28

or science. To use the “dominion mandate” to justify our exploitation of the Earth and her natural resources, furthermore, ignores a treasure trove of Biblical material that calls upon us to cherish the Earth and be inspired by her.

The mistake so many make, unfortunately, is viewing the Bible as just that, as a cohesive book with a beginning, middle, and an end. The Bible, rather, as some have heard me say before, is a collection of various writings from different authors, written, edited, and rewritten over a period of more than a thousand years. Since *bible* means, “book,” it would be more accurate to call this ensemble of ancient transcripts, “The Binder.” In seeing it canonically, as one cohesive book, however, many feel they need find only one part, just one verse even, as all the justification they need to support any view they have. Seeing it as a binder of ancient writings, on the other hand, requires us to admit it represents many different, often contradictory, views and ideas. The story in *Genesis*, for instance, may well suggest we have every right to exploit and destroy our planet, but there are many contradictory writings in the Bible that suggest we most certainly do not.

Biblical scholars even have a name for this special category of writings—Wisdom Literature. They call it this, rather than something like “nature literature” or “earth writings,” because *Hokmah*, the Hebrew word translated as “wisdom” in English, is more akin to what we mean these days when we say, “Mother Nature.” For the ancient Hebrews, wisdom referred to the feminine manifestation of God in nature. Wisdom was a physical, tangible reality. This, I think, is the meaning of the story of Moses asking to see what Yahweh looks like. After explaining that it’s not possible for humans to fully comprehend God, Yahweh turns around and shows Moses his rear end. Yes, God mooned Moses! It’s a whimsical way of suggesting, though we can’t fully grasp all that is Divine, we can see what it leaves behind. We can experience the divine through the beauty of nature and the blessed reality of our physical condition and sensual experiences.

So, the point not to be missed, is that having wisdom, just as with being human, requires us to tread upon the earth—to cherish and appreciate our physical existence. Nowadays we tend to equate wisdom with thoughts and reason, with mental constructs composed of words, but even the Greek word, Φιλεωσοφια, meaning, “love of wisdom,” is the Φιλεω of σοφια, another feminine name. So, the original meaning of *wisdom* for our ancestors had to do with physics, not spirits, with *Hokmah*, *Sophia*, or, *μητηρ*, the Greek word for both “mother” and “matter”—Mother Matter, or, as we say, Mother Nature, divinity incarnate, the sacredness embodied, the invisible made beautiful in the cloak of creation. In the Book of Proverbs, upon establishing her gender by asking, “Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?”<sup>2</sup> Lady Wisdom, God’s companion and lover, speaks for herself;

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,  
the first of his acts of long ago.  
Ages ago I was set up, at the first,  
before the beginning of the earth...

---

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 8:1

When he established the heavens, I was there,  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,  
when he made firm the skies above,  
when he established the fountains of the deep,  
when he assigned to the sea its limit,  
so that the waters might not transgress his command,  
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,  
then I was beside him like a master worker;  
and I was daily his delight,  
rejoicing before him always,  
rejoicing in his inhabited world  
and delighting in the human race.<sup>3</sup>

Like a womb giving birth to all that is, Wisdom claims her place at the beginning of all that is, as the Mother of everything real, the Earth, the sky, the rivers and sea, and all beings, including human beings, which she calls “delightful.” Wisdom literature praises creation, and does not view it, like many do, as a fallen, sinful, and shameful world. As is written in the Jewish *Book of Wisdom*, “She is the breath and power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore, nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, rejecting the anthropocentric view of a creation in which humanity has been given a dominion mandate, theologian Mathew Fox, the founder of Creation Spirituality, says, “I deny the prominence that the Western church has given to original sin. It has fed this anthropocentrism. It is so egoistic to think that religious experience begins with our sins. I believe [it] begins with awe and wonder.”<sup>5</sup>

It was such awe and wonder of the natural world that inspired the authors responsible for so much of the Wisdom literature in the collection of works we call the Bible. In the Hebrew Scriptures, these works include *Proverbs* and the *Book of Wisdom*, as we have seen, as well as *Psalms*, *Song of Songs*, and *Ecclesiastes*.

Of these, perhaps none is more earthy than the poetic *Song of Songs*, celebrating the erotic love and passion between two lovers. The Jews traditionally see it as a metaphor of the love between Yahweh and Israel, though it could as easily be a metaphor of the love between Yahweh and Lady Wisdom, between Heaven and Earth. “The beams of our houses are cedars, the rafters are firs,”<sup>6</sup> He says.

“I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys,”<sup>7</sup> she says. “Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.”<sup>8</sup>

To which he replies, “My dove in the cleft of the rock in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your voice let me hear your voice.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 8:22-31

<sup>4</sup> Book of Wisdom 7:25-26

<sup>5</sup> Fox, Mathew, *Wrestling with the Prophets*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1995, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Song of Songs 1:17

<sup>7</sup> Song of Songs 2:1

<sup>8</sup> Song of Songs 2:8

<sup>9</sup> Song of Songs 2:14

Although *Ecclesiastes*, upon which the Pete Seeger song, *Turn, Turn, Turn*, is based, deals as much with the suffering of life as its awe and wonder, its famous existential angst, that “Everything is meaningless,”<sup>10</sup> is based upon what its author experienced in nature, “To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.”<sup>11</sup> *Ecclesiastes* accepts the reality of both love and hate, war and peace, work and harvest, laughter and tears, and yet, somehow, in the end, that it’s all “beautiful,” as the author says, and that everyone should, “eat, drink, and enjoy all the good that comes”<sup>12</sup> from all our struggling. Such resignation toward the harsh realities of life, and the ability to find beauty and joy in the meaningless of it all anyway, comes, not from discovering an abstract philosophical idea, not from searching for an idea above it all, but from being down to Earth, from treading down upon it, and finding Wisdom in Mother Nature. “I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens,”<sup>13</sup> the author says.

*Psalms* also seems to be an attempt to cope with the harsh realities and uncertainties of life, mostly by singing praises to God in exchange for protection from evil and victory over one’s enemies. The psalms focus a lot on Heaven and upon God’s power and greatness, and doesn’t use as many nature metaphors as a lot of other Wisdom Literature. Yet, again, these psalms are ultimately about dealing with this life, about feeling safe and secure, even in seasons of hate, and war, and struggle, and tears. Yet, at its best, when we are under the care and protection of the psalter’s great and powerful god, we feel unafraid and content because we are surrounded by the serenity of Mother Nature.

The Lord is my Shepard, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
He leads me beside still waters,  
He restores my soul.  
He guides me along good paths for his name’s sake.  
Even though I walk through the darkest of valleys,  
I will fear not evil,  
For you are with me.  
Your rod and your staff, the comfort me.<sup>14</sup>

Because these writings make use of proverbs and parables, those Rabbis who spoke in proverbs and parables are considered Wisdom teachers. And no one mentioned in the entire Bible is better known to have used proverbs and parables than Jesus did in the Christian gospels. Not only is this true, but so much of what he is reported to have said seems to have been inspired directly by Mother Nature and her children, by Lady Wisdom and her creatures.

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ecclesiastes* 1:2

<sup>11</sup> *Ecclesiastes* 3:1

<sup>12</sup> *Ecclesiastes* 3:13

<sup>13</sup> *Ecclesiastes* 1:13

<sup>14</sup> *Psalms* 23:1-4

In *Mark*, the oldest of the four gospels, for example, Jesus is said to have even begun his ministry by going out into the wilderness with the wild animals for more than a month. For some, this may seem like an ascetic experience, by which he tried to deprive himself of physical, sensual comforts. But it could have as easily been an aesthetic experience, full emersion into the sensate world, through which he sought inspiration from the animals and the rest of nature, seeking communion with the creator by getting close to creation, to Mother Nature, Lady Wisdom, the womb of life?

This makes more sense to me given the kind of metaphors and allegories his teachings draw upon. For when he returned from the wilderness, he didn't talk about lack or sacrifice or suffering, he talked about the great wealth surrounding all of us. "I came that they may have life," he said, "and have it abundantly,"<sup>15</sup> and said we don't have to worry about the future because there's plenty to go around for everyone, that we need only ask for enough today, for our "daily bread." Why did he come to believe this is so? How can we trust he was right? Because during his rebirth in the wilderness he learned from the animals. "Look at the birds of the air,"<sup>16</sup> "consider he lilies of the field."<sup>17</sup> The birds do not sow, harvest, or store away, yet they are fed. The flowers do not toil are spin, yet they are clothed. Speaking of himself, he said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but [this Son of Man, this child of the human race, this human being] has nowhere to lay his head."<sup>18</sup> Jesus was homeless, and penniless, with nothing more than the clothes on his back. Yet he operated from a mindset of abundance rather than poverty. He considered himself rich, and looked at those who store treasure in barns and banks as impoverished in both body and soul.

Jesus' wisdom teachings, his parables and proverbs, are filled with creation metaphors. How are we to recognize genuine teachers? "You will know them by their fruits." he said, "Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but every bad tree bears bad fruit."<sup>19</sup> His *Parable of the Sower* tells of a man who scatters seed, some of which falls on the path and is eaten by birds; some of which fall on rocky ground where there isn't much soil and grows quickly, but is easily scorched by the sun when it grows; some of which fall among thorns and are choked out when they grow; and some that fall upon good soil and bring forth lots of grain. Whatever else this might mean, it's clear that Jesus saw the ground, the Earth, as good and necessary for growing and sustaining life.

His time in the wilderness didn't make him feel afraid or destitute, but alive and enriched. So, he didn't preach about sin and damnation. He didn't tell his followers sin is within you. He said, "Heaven is within you," "God is within you," and it is because of this innate goodness that we have, not the promise we will go to Heaven, but the power to create Heaven right here on Earth. No wonder his Wisdom went on to inspire subsequent Christian mystics to also seek divine inspiration by turning to the sensual, physical world, seeking the creator in

---

<sup>15</sup> John 10:10

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 6:26

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 6:28-29

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 8:20

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 7:16-17

the creation, in the here and now, not the sweet bye and bye. Meister Eckhart said, "Every creature is a word of God and a book about God."<sup>20</sup> Nature was his bible. Hildegard of Bingen said, "This Word manifests itself in every creature,"<sup>21</sup> because nature was her bible. Mechtild of Magdeburg said, "The truly wise person kneels at the feet of all creatures,"<sup>22</sup> because nature was her bible. As an old Rabbinic saying goes, "Creation is the infinite in the garb of the finite. To attend to Creation is to attend to God."<sup>23</sup> And after Saint John of the Cross escaped prison, he retreated into the wilds in search of, "That one burning in my heart," he wrote, as if composing a new Song of Songs for his divine lover. "O forests and woods, seeded by the hand of the Beloved; O green meadows, framed with flowers, did he pass through you?"<sup>24</sup> In her classic book on *Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill says, "The flowery garment of the world is for some mystics a medium of ineffable perception, a source of exalted joy, the veritable clothing of God."<sup>25</sup> For the mystic, she says, "The Uncreated light manifests Itself through created things."<sup>26</sup>

So, no, whatever the *Genesis* story meant by having "dominion" over and "subduing" the Earth, it is outweighed by the wealth of Wisdom Literature in the collection of writings we call the Bible. For anyone to use this single verse to justify our continued disregard for nature and the destruction of our planet, to disdain Lady Wisdom, to injure Mother Nature, to defile the creation in the very name of its Creator, is inexcusable. But we need not be Jewish or Christian, nor read the Bible, to find the kind of inspiration Jesus discovered. Like him, we need only turn to the same source of wisdom ourselves, to nature, to the beauty and abundance all around us to fall in love with the Earth and feel her love for us, to long for her health and wellness with the passion of a lover and the devotion of a child. For whether we are religious or secular, believers or atheists, Christians or humanists, we are all children of our mother the Earth. Let us tread softly upon her.

---

<sup>20</sup> Fox, Matthew, *Original Blessing*, Bear & Company, Santa Fe, NM, 1983, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 69.

<sup>23</sup> Fox, Matthew, *One River, Many Wells*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 2000p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> de Nicolás, p. 117f.

<sup>25</sup> Underhill, *ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.