

# Environmental Christianity: insights from our Jewish heritage

*Christianity developed within the context of Judaism. Jesus affirmed the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures in his teaching, and there was a strong Jewish influence on the writing of the New Testament. As western Christianity developed it absorbed other influences, particularly those from classical Greek thought. Reclaiming some of the Jewish understanding of Jesus' first disciples can throw new light on our faith and how we can address contemporary environmental issues. This paper examines a series of issues in Christian environmental theology from this standpoint.*

## God created life

The starting point for any Christian or Jewish theology of the earth will involve the creation accounts in Genesis. For two centuries, evangelical Christians have primarily engaged with these texts scientifically and sought to defend them against enlightenment and evolutionary viewpoints. It is helpful to look beyond science and instead draw out the divine significance of the created order from the details of the text. In traditional Orthodox Jewish interpretation every word and letter in scripture has significance. In Matthew 5:18 there is evidence that this was established by the New Testament period. An Orthodox Jewish scholar, Nehama Leibowitz (1972) uses the same approach to explain a distinction between creatures and humans in creation. She points out that humans are not the earliest creatures to be blessed by God but that he first blessed the birds and fishes. The difference in the blessing is in one word in Hebrew: whereas with the animals, Genesis records that 'God said' (Gen 1:22), with humans 'God said *to them*' (Gen 1:28). Animals were simply given the ability to be fruitful, but humans were given a conscious ability to multiply and to exercise authority over the rest of creation.

Much has been written on the distinction between dominion and stewardship (see for example Cooper, 1990). Leibowitz's approach to the text leads us to take responsibility for the gift of decision-making. This gift is a part of being created in God's image, and Genesis places it within the context of our fruitfulness (population growth) and of our responsibility for the rest of creation. The conclusion therefore is that God, by creating us in his image, did not give a justification for the desecration of the rest of creation but rather gave us a responsibility for it. This view helpfully preserves a distinction between humans and other creatures within the context of our accountability to God for our care of creation.

The debate between stewardship and dominion is largely lacking in Jewish scholarship, simply because, for Jews, it is so very obvious that God placed humans on earth to care for it, rather than rule over it destructively (Solomon, 1992, p.26). What influences have there been on Christianity to make this such a major debate? The Early Church developed its theology from a range of influences including Greek thought. Augustine was originally a follower of Manichaeism, which argued for a dualism between good and evil. He was also influenced by Plato, who believed in a dualism between soul and body (Chadwick, 2001). Though he sought to distance himself from these approaches, many would argue that his teaching reflected these views, which became important influences on Western Christian thought. The biblical writers distinguished between God and creation, and also between humanity and the rest of creation.

It was the mix of these different types of dualism, and confusion between them that led Western Christianity at different times into the extremes of asceticism and the tendency to limit Christ's redemption to rescuing human souls from an 'evil' material world. If we re-emphasise the view that the earth has been created by God and, while distinct from him, is infused with his love, it is our personal responsibility to exercise our stewardship as careful and caring tenants.

## On the seventh day

In biblical times, Israel stood out among contemporary cultures in keeping the Sabbath. For them it was not simply a creation ordinance but it was part of creation itself. Sacks (1995, p.134) suggests an explanation: '*After six days, what did the universe lack? It lacked rest. So when the seventh day came, rest came and the universe was complete.*' This concept was completely alien to Greeks and when the Septuagint was written, Genesis 2:2 was changed from, '*On the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing,*' to '*On the sixth day.*' In taking creation as seven days and not six (whether one takes a literal or a literary view), we could conclude that God viewed the need for rest as an integral part of creation itself. This understanding might lead us to live life in a way that is more sustainable, both for ourselves and for the earth. The concept of rest underlies the rest of the Pentateuch: The Ten Commandments ask for rest for animals and servants as well as for the wealthy; and Leviticus 25 teaches a seven year and a fifty year complete rest for the land to enable it to replenish

itself. The Sabbath and Jubilee Years of Leviticus 25 also link creation sustainability to justice for all that God has made.

In the pressurised, target-meeting world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the principle of Sabbath is a call to work for sustainability as part of our worship of God. We are further called to seek freedom, rest and sustainability for the vulnerable. In the two-thirds World people often work without rest and the earth is not allowed to replenish itself because it is forced into providing cash crops for the West. As Christians we need to be standing against those commercial pressures and working for justice and sustainability for all of God's creation.

### **Covenant: blessings and curses**

Many Christians in the twentieth century did not address environmental issues because they were not seen as 'gospel centred.' By reclaiming a positive view of the earth we also find ourselves called to be a prophetic voice. One of the strongest biblical themes that has continued in both Christianity and Judaism is that of covenant. This is the view that God chose a people for his own and brought them into a specific relationship with him. This covenant relationship implies responsibilities.

In the Old Testament, the keeping or breaking of the covenant resulted in blessings and curses, and many of these concerned our relationship with the land. Deuteronomy 28 sets them out and they encompass the fruitfulness of the land as well as rain and drought. The prophet Hosea challenges his hearers with the consequences of their lifestyles:

*'There is no faithfulness, no love, no acknowledgment of God in the land. ...Because of this the land mourns, and all who live in it waste away; the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying.'* Hosea 4:1,3 (NIV).

We too are in a covenant relationship and have a responsibility to live with an awareness of blessings or curses for our actions towards God's earth. We are also called to speak against others who would misuse God's earth, and warn them of the consequences of their actions.

### **Blessings and shalom**

Blessings are a two-way concept in Jewish thought, God blesses us and we bless God for all that he has provided for us. Our blessings towards God are a part of the daily rhythm of life in Jewish tradition. There are blessings for everything from the moment people wake up to the moment they lie down to sleep. Each blessing is directed towards God for his goodness towards us, and most start with the words, 'Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe...' Many of these blessings are in gratitude for the wonders of creation and they serve to place us in a continuous state of thankfulness to God for all that he has made.

Living life in a daily rhythm of blessings and a weekly rhythm of Sabbath takes spirituality one-step further and that is to understand the full meaning of 'shalom.' This is the Hebrew word for 'peace' but it means far more than the English translation. It can best be described as the state of well-being and of harmony. If this is applied to our relationship to the environment we find a parallel in the concepts of equilibrium and homeostasis. An ecosystem could be regarded as in shalom when it is stable and self-sustaining. This stability is not incompatible with human activity – many European habitats have been adapted by humans over many generations and farmed in balance with nature. Sadly recent changes in agriculture mean these adapted ecosystems are often under threat. Other environments, such as Antarctica, have remained in isolation from direct human contact but are now in great danger of being degraded. Living in shalom encourages us to change our activities so that they are in balance with the rhythms of the world around us. This not only affects our agricultural practice but also our use of the earth in industry, our approach to pollution, population, and especially our extraction and use of fossil fuels.

### **The biblical year**

The annual rhythm of life on earth was a central component of biblical worship. There was an annual festival cycle, following the rhythm of the seasons that is embedded in the Old and New Testaments. It centres around three main festival periods: Passover in the spring, Pentecost in early summer and Tabernacles in the autumn (Hodson 2000). Each remembers an aspect of the salvation history of the people of Israel but every festival also has an integral harvest component. In combining harvest and salvation, the ancient Hebrews took a holistic approach to their faith into their regular festival times of worship.

Christians can find rich material for worship in the festival cycle. These are times when the whole community gathers to thank God for his blessings, through his provision from the earth, and his salvation through his sovereign acts in history. For the last of these festivals, Tabernacles, worshippers make temporary huts, or booths, with branches for roofs from which they hang many kinds of fruit. During the eight days of the festival, families eat in their booth and sometimes sleep there. This very graphically reminds us of our collective dependence on God to sustain us through the bountifulness of the earth.

Of the more minor Jewish festivals, Tu b'Shvat, or the 'New Year of Trees' has taken on renewed significance in modern Judaism. This has arisen because of the general increase in environmental awareness, and from the practical need to plant trees in Israel, which had been badly deforested. The origins of the festival come from the need to set a

date to ascertain the age of trees for tithing purposes. A date in late winter was chosen when the sap begins to flow. This determined years when fruit was left on the tree or harvested, for offerings or for the owner. We are responsible to future generations for trees as they can take many years to grow. The Talmud tells a parable about two men:

*‘One day [a man] was journeying on the road and he saw [another] man planting a carob tree; he asked him, How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit? The man replied: Seventy years. He then further asked him: Are you certain that you will live another seventy years? The man replied: I found [ready grown] carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted these for me so I too plant these for my children. (Soncino Talmud, Ta’anith 23a).*

A holistic approach encourages us not only to express our faith in our attitudes to other people and to the earth, but also in our responsibility to future generations.

### **A new heaven and a new earth**

*‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.’ Revelation 21:1 (NRSV)*

Eschatology can be a fairly contentious issue in Christian debate. It is important because the way we view the future of the earth determines how we treat it today. Some Christians, perhaps influenced by modern consumerism, believe that if this earth is destined for destruction, and we will get ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ there is very little need to care for the present one!

This is not a logical conclusion. Jesus gave much practical teaching for everyday living in our present lives as well as opening the way to eternal life. An understanding of Old Testament idioms in Revelation gives us a clue that we can go further than this and perhaps expect a renewed earth rather than a completely different one.

Revelation 21:1 uses rabbinic methods of interpretation to cite Old Testament passages and also to link two passages together with a common theme. These methods are frequently used in the New Testament and there are examples of their use by the Gospel writers and in the epistles. A single phrase will take readers back to a whole passage of scripture and two words or phrases, especially if they are uncommon, will provide two passages that bring extra insight when placed together.

In Revelation 21:1 the two words or phrases are ‘new heaven(s) and a new earth’ and ‘passed away.’ The first of these phrases occurs twice in the Old Testament in Isaiah 65:17 and Isaiah 66:22, which are part of one main passage about an ideal world in the messianic age. The second term ‘pass away’ is one word in Greek and appears in Psalm 37:36 in the Septuagint. If we place these passages from Isaiah

and Psalms alongside each other we will see that the common theme is that of ‘inheritance.’ Both are talking about the end times and see it as a time when the wicked will have passed away (rather than the whole universe) and the righteous will have inherited the land. The newness of both the heavens and the earth come from their freedom from corruption and wickedness. The passages put together provide an image of our earth redeemed and renewed, and of God’s people, both of Israel and of the nations, enjoying untold blessing in the land of their inheritance. These people freed from the pain, death, hunger and injustice of the old order gather to worship in a redeemed Jerusalem.

The final phrase in Revelation 21:1, ‘and there was no longer any sea,’ is another Hebrew idiom. Sea is associated with fear and judgement in Old Testament thought. No more sea symbolically implies the end of judgement when wickedness is no more.

If this approach to the passage is valid then we cannot view our present earth as a temporary and disposable commodity. Instead we have to look soberly at these two Old Testament passages and realise that unjust actions to the earth and to the earth’s people will be judged by God and have no place in Christ’s future kingdom. An Old Testament approach to Revelation 21:1 leads us to discover that our present earth is our inheritance from God and to look eagerly toward the time when it will be properly restored and made new.

### **Creation groaning**

If the heavens and the earth are to be restored rather than replaced, some may still argue that our actions towards it are still not significant because it will eventually be made perfect again. The phrase ‘creation groaning’ in Romans 8:22 can also be understood in the light of Hebraic Apocalyptic. This passage assumes a Hebraic world-view, where humans are not separate from creation and that both have suffered as a result of human sin. Paul foresees a time when the creation will be liberated from this bondage and also experience redemption. This again draws on images used in Isaiah. The word used to describe the groaning of creation is one frequently applied to childbirth, and this is a Hebrew idiom for the judgement preceding liberation at the end of the age (Enoch 45:4).

Humans receive new life and are born again through Christ’s redemption and yet we will not come into the fullness of that in our present lives. From Romans 8 we learn that the rest of creation will one day also be restored and released from its bondage resulting from human sin.

Just as we do not carry on acting wrongly in our personal lives and in our actions towards others because we know we are forgiven, so we should also not inflict further groaning on creation because it will one day be restored. As generations of

Christians have sought to relieve the pain of humanity, so we should also work to relieve the damage to the earth.

## Conclusion

In our search for a biblical theology of the environment, we can learn much from Jewish sources and approaches. Having gained these insights, it is important to use them to enable us to care for creation more fully within the will of our creator.

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(See also: <http://www.hodsons.org/Afeastofseasons>)

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## Other resources

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Tirosh-Samuelson, H. (2002) *Judaism and Ecology: created world and revealed world*, Massachusetts: Centre for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School.

*The Centre for the Study of World Religions now have a large research site for religion and ecology. For the Jewish and Christian sections see:*

<http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/religion>

<http://www.hds.harvard.edu/cswr/research/ecology>

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The *John Ray Initiative* promotes responsible environmental stewardship in accordance with Christian principles and the wise use of science and technology. JRI organises seminars and disseminates information on environmental stewardship.

Inspiration for JRI is taken from John Ray (1627-1705), English naturalist, Christian theologian and first biological systematist of modern times, preceding Carl Linnaeus.

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