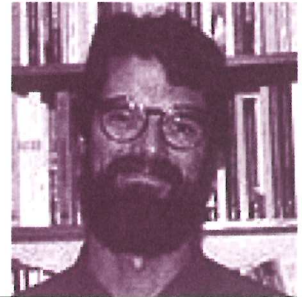


CONFESSION, THE EARTH, AND THE BIBLE

READING SCRIPTURE IN THE LIGHT OF CREATION

STEVEN BOUMA-PREDIGER



WE CHRISTIANS HAVE MUCH TO CONFESS. THE WORDS OF JAMES NASH DESERVE A FULL HEARING: “The fact is that Christianity – as interpreted and affirmed by billions of its adherents over the centuries and in official doctrines and theological exegeses – has been ecologically tainted ... The bottom line is that Christianity itself cannot escape an indictment for ecological negligence and abuse.”¹ Wendell Berry rightly states that “the indictment of Christianity by the anti-Christian conservationists is, in many respects, just”. Continuing, he observes, “Christian organisations, to this day, remain largely indifferent to the rape and plunder of the world and its traditional cultures. It is hardly too much to say that most Christian organisations are as happily indifferent to the ecological, cultural, and religious implications of industrial economies as are most industrial organisations.”²

Nash acknowledges that because “Christianity has done too little to discourage and too much to encourage the exploitation of nature ... ongoing repentance is warranted.”³ He is right. We Christians have been complicit in much ecological woe. The evidence to support this claim is clear, though I have no room to argue it here. We Christians cannot escape culpability for our ecological sins of omission and commission, neglect and abuse. Ongoing repentance is warranted.

Like Berry, however, I remain persuaded that there is merit in a distinction between authentic Christian faith and misunderstandings or perversions of it by Christians themselves. He insists, “however just it [the indictment of Christianity] may be, it does not come from an adequate understanding of the Bible and the cultural traditions that descend from the Bible”. This implies, he continues, “the making of very precise distinctions between biblical instruction and the behaviour of those peoples supposed to have been biblically instructed.” Given that there are “virtually catastrophic discrepancies between biblical instruction and Christian behaviour” – and not disreputable behaviour but “allegedly respectable Christian behaviour” – a distinction between biblical instruction and the behaviour of Christians is a legitimate and important distinction. Indeed, it is precisely because of this distinction that Berry concludes, “Our predicament now ... requires us to learn to read and understand the Bible in the light of the present fact of Creation.”⁴

But what would that look like? What might that mean? How exactly do we come to see the differences between our allegedly respectable behaviour and authentic biblical instruction? How do we learn to read

the Bible in the light of the present fact of a creation groaning in ecological travail?

Scripture holds much wisdom for shaping our ecological imagination. A biblically informed theology and ethic should shape how we live. I would like to illustrate this by examining a specific biblical text because as Paul Santmire rightly admits, one’s interpretive framework “can only be justified in terms of its legitimate exegetical fruits”.⁵ The hermeneutical proof is in the exegetical pudding. But before I do so, I must address, albeit briefly, the inescapable and important issue of interpretation.

THE USE AND ABUSE OF SCRIPTURE

We all read from somewhere. There is no view from nowhere. This is not a lamentable fact of our existence but simply an honest recognition of our inescapable finitude. What we see depends, in part, on where we stand. In addition, what we see is shaped by our self-seeking and pride. We are not only finite, we are also faulted. Such admissions, however, need not imply epistemic relativism. The fact that what we see is contingent on where we stand or influenced by inordinate pride does not necessarily entail that truth is “what our peers will let us get away with saying”.⁶ Truth is not endlessly malleable and conformable to one’s own dreams, desires, or quest for power. So while Paul Ricoeur’s three “masters of suspicion” (Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud) have much to teach us,⁷ the conclusion some draw from their writings – that “truth” is merely a fiction used by those in power to dominate the powerless – is unwarranted.

The proper view of human knowing lies somewhere between an objectivism that purports to offer “the only truth” (and is absolutely certain of possessing it) and a relativism that says, “anything goes” (often with, ironically, equal certitude). In other words, when reading texts, including the Bible, often there is more than one good reading, and almost always some readings are absolutely implausible. In each case arguments can be given, though they may not be persuasive to all.

By analogy, consider a symphony playing a musical score. Different conductors offer different interpretations, and some performances are better than others – more faithful to the score, more technically proficient, more creative. So judgments of quality are possible. To a trained ear some performances are clearly better than others. But while reasons can be given as to why some performances are superior to others, there may not be universal agreement over which one is “the

DR BOUMA-PREDIGER is Professor of Religion at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, USA. His publications include *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), which received an Award of Merit as one of the books of the year for 2001 from *Christianity Today*.

NOTES

- 1 James Nash, *Loving Nature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), p. 72.
- 2 Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), p. 94.
- 3 Nash, *Loving Nature*, pp. 72, 74.
- 4 Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community*, pp. 94–5.
- 5 H. Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), p. 31.
- 6 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1979), p. 176.
- 7 Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1974), p. 148. For a masterful example of learning from these masters, see Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Truth: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

The primary political task of the preacher is to help Christians know what it is to be faithful and to help them rightly envision the world.

NOTES

8 Willard Swartley offers perhaps the most detailed evidence of our finite and fallen readings of the Bible. In his illuminating volume *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1983), he documents how Christians through have used and abused Scripture when dealing with the four issues listed in the title of his book.

9 Bernhard Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), p. 134.

10 The Greek term *neos* is a temporal term that denotes that which is young, new in time, or previously non-existent. The term *kainos* is an eschatological term, having to do with the promise and realisation of the messianic age to come, and denotes something previously unknown or unprecedented, something with a new character. See Colin Brown (ed.), *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), pp. 669ff.

11 Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), p. 220. See also George Ladd, *Revelation*, p. 275, who affirms: "Throughout the entire Bible, the ultimate destiny of God's people is an earthly destiny ... biblical thought always places man on a redeemed earth, not in a heavenly realm removed from earthly existence."

12 As George Caird reminds us: "The word *skênê* (dwelling) has a long and important theological history. It is the word regularly used in the Septuagint for the Hebrew *mishkan* (tent), which was the symbol of God's abiding presence in the midst of Israel in the wilderness." *The Revelation of St John the Divine* (New York: Harper), p. 263.

13 Gonzales and Gonzales, *Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997), p. 138.

14 Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, pp. 279–80.

15 For more on this important issue, see Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

► best". The same can be said in regard to the reading of the Bible. Some readings are arguably better than others, but there may be disagreement over which is the best.⁸ While Scripture is infallible, our readings of it most certainly are not. Bernhard Anderson summarises the matter well: "Clearly, we read the Bible 'where we are' as people who are conditioned by the times in which we live and by the history that we share, including our philosophical heritage (capitalism and its Marxist counterpart) and our scientific outlook. This sober realisation does not, in my estimation, mire us in interpretive relativism ... To be sure, we come to the Scriptures in a particular time and place. But the words of Scripture, spoken or written in their own context, may criticise where we stand, limit our use of them, and challenge us with their strange social setting and theological horizon."⁹

So what does all this mean for reading the Bible "in the light of the present fact of creation"? It means, among other things, attempting to recover the biblical story beyond the distorting glasses of Western anthropocentrism. It means reading Scripture informed by the challenges we face as faithful followers of Jesus in an ecologically imperilled age.

A VISION OF GOD'S GOOD FUTURE

Disembodied spirits floating in the clouds. Angels playing harps. The earth destroyed and immortal souls clinging to the bosom of Jesus. These are only a few ideas about the future found in the minds of contemporary Christians. But do they adequately capture the biblical vision of the future? According to Scripture, what is the nature of the promised new age? What is the biblical portrayal of life to come, when God's purposes for creation are fulfilled?

To answer such questions let us turn to Revelation 21–22. To attempt a reading of this highly symbolic apocalyptic text is dangerous, and yet interpret it we must. As we shall see, this enigmatic last book of the Bible contains much insight and wisdom, especially as we in the twenty-first century, like our brothers and sisters of the first century, wrestle with the principalities and powers of our age. My questions are: What does this visually stunning text portray of life to come, when God's purposes for creation are fulfilled? What does God's promised new age look like? What does John's vision tell us about God's good future?

First, God's good future is earthy. It includes a renewed heaven and earth. This vision is of "a new heaven and a new earth", but the new here connotes new in quality,

in contrast to what is old.¹⁰ In keeping with the great vision of Isaiah 65, God's good future is of a renewed heaven and earth. Eugene Boring captures this sense: "Even though the first earth and the first heaven have passed away, the scene continues very much as a this-worldly scene ... [This] is an affirmation of the significance of this world and history, even after the new heaven and new earth arrive ... [God] does not junk the cosmos and start anew – he renews the old and brings it to fulfilment ... God does not make 'all new things', but 'all things new'." (Rev. 21.5).¹¹

Secondly, in God's good future God himself will dwell with us and all of our creaturely kin. In language reminiscent of John 1.14 and Ezekiel 37.27, the text declares that the home of God is among humans, that God will tent among us.¹² In language rooted deeply in the Old Testament (cf. Ex. 6.7; Lev. 26.12; Jer. 7.23; Ezek. 37.27), the text makes clear that in the holy city God will be known face to face, and we will belong to God, his name emblazoned on our foreheads. God will dwell with us.

This implies, thirdly, that in God's good future the separation between heaven and earth is overcome. The now distinct realms of heaven and earth are in the future braided together. The holy city comes down from heaven (Rev. 21.2, 10). Its arrival is no human achievement, its reality no product of human ingenuity. In the words of Justo and Catherine Gonzales: "No longer will there be a great separation between heaven and earth. It is not so much that the redeemed shall be taken to heaven but rather that God will come among us and be part of the new Jerusalem. In the incarnation of Christ, God came among human beings as one of them, but still in a hidden fashion. Now, in this new creation, God will not be hidden, but will come among redeemed humanity in a direct, unmediated way."¹³ God comes among us – heaven on earth. Then we shall see him face to face.

Fourthly, in God's good future evil and its consequences are no more. Seven (the perfect number) elements of the old order are no more. The sea, symbolic of primeval chaos and the abode of the beast, is no more. Death is no more. Mourning and crying and pain are no more (cf. Is. 65.19–20; Rev. 7.17). And all that is under God's curse is no more. The curse of Genesis 3 is repealed, so that, in the words of the old Christmas hymn, redemption extends "far as the curse is found". And night is no more. The realm of darkness and deception is banished. In sum, this apocalyptic vision vividly portrays a world of shalom.

Finally, in God's good future we will inhabit a most unusual city. There is no temple, no place set apart, for God. A person has replaced a building. Thus nothing in this city is profane, everything is sacred. All is for the service of God. And this city is a garden city. In this city flows the river of life, watering trees that line its banks. These trees provide 365 days a year, sustenance in every season, and their leaves are a healing balm for the nations. People of all kinds stream into this city, whose gates never close and whose light never ceases. Kings and paupers, friends and enemies – they all bring their glory and honour to the city. George Caird captures this important feature of John's vision: "Nothing from the old order which has value in the sight of God is debarred from entry into the new. John's heaven is no world-denying Nirvana, into which man may escape from the incurable ills of sublunary existence, but the seal of affirmation on the goodness of God's creation. The treasure that men find laid up in heaven turns out to be the treasures and wealth of the nations, the best they have known and loved on earth redeemed of all imperfections and transfigured by the radiance of God. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find a more eloquent statement than this of the all-embracing scope of God's redemptive work."¹⁴

What, then, does God's good future look like? These last chapters of Revelation show us an earthly vision of life made good and whole and right, because of God's grace. Heaven and earth are renewed and are one. God dwells with us, at home in creation. Evil and its minions are no more. All is fit to serve God. All is made new. It will be a world of shalom.

BIBLICAL VISION AND AUTHENTIC LIVING

Given our ecological neglect and abuse, ongoing repentance is warranted. We have much to confess. But repentance must involve the willingness to change. And authentic change comes when knowledge and love cast out ignorance and fear. We Christians must become persuaded that our faith calls us to care for the earth – that ecological obedience is integral to Christian faith. And that means we must learn to read the Bible with new eyes – open to its wisdom of how to live wisely and well on this our watery home planet.¹⁵ We must re-read Scripture attentive to its powerful ecological vision and how it calls us to develop and, if necessary, reshape our lives. May we be given the insight and courage to be the earth-keepers God made us to be. ■