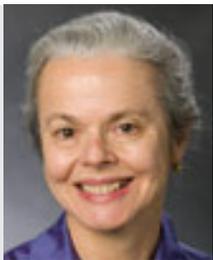




# A living creature: A biblical perspective on land care and use

We need a new paradigm for our understanding of the earth as our current approach to food production and land sovereignty is unsustainable. Ellen Davis considers biblically informed, practical alternatives.



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This year we have experienced a cataclysmic, humanly induced violation of a terrestrial boundary, the ocean floor – probably the worst in history thus far. If we are wise, we will not simply get over the Gulf Coast oil disaster and continue thinking and acting just as we did before. For if we have learned anything at all from this tragically predictable accident, it is that the earth is not as we had believed it to be. Having watched it bleed for months, we are better able to see that the earth is not a machine; nor is it a convenient repository of useful goods. Journalist Naomi Klein comments: 'After 400 years of being declared dead, and in the middle of so much death, the Earth is coming alive.'<sup>1</sup>

So as I sit to write about a biblical perspective on our regnant practices of food production, in this year of our Lord 2010, the first thought that comes to mind is how deeply connected is the oil disaster to the way we eat. Those two phenomena are *connected in practice*, in that oil is now indispensable to the way food comes to most people on my continent and increasingly around the world. We eat from an industrial system that is itself hungry for oil; in 2000, the food industry consumed some 10 per cent of the total energy used in the USA,<sup>2</sup> the vast majority of which comes from petroleum. It is used for the production of the chemical fertilisers that hybridised or genetically modified seeds require, for the operation of industrial-scale tractors and other heavy farm machinery, and for transporting food products hundreds or thousands of miles to processing plants or slaughterhouses and on to market – now standard practice, regardless of whether the same food item is produced and could be processed regionally and locally.

The wound in the ocean floor and our dominant food production practices are also *connected ideologically*, in that both reflect a profound misunderstanding of the created order and the human place in it. That misunderstanding is in the first instance not scientific but theological; indeed, as I shall try to show, it represents a misreading of the Bible.

It might seem fanciful to suggest that people concerned about food production read the Bible, whether well or poorly, in any great numbers. Yet, having spoken about food issues in diverse settings and countries over the last several years, I have been surprised to find that even those who do not habitually read the Bible care what it says. Perhaps there is a kind of practical theism that informs the thinking of those who deal daily with the essential means of life. Especially they care when they realise (often with surprise) how much the Bible has to say about maintaining adequate food and water supplies, about protecting the fertile soil and, at the same time, the economic viability of farming communities – all matters of vulnerability, urgency and, indeed, danger in our current era of industrialised agriculture.

The basic principle that informs all biblical thought about land use and care dovetails with Naomi Klein's observation about a living world, although it should be stated in explicitly theological terms: *The earth is a living creature, with its own integrity in the sight of its creator*. That the earth is alive is evident already from the first chapter of the Bible, where it receives a direct divine summons: 'Let the earth "grass" grass [*tadshe' ha'aretz deshe*]'; this unprecedented event calls for a

new Hebrew verb, '[to] grass'. 'And it was so; the earth brought forth grass, herbage seeding seed each in its own kind, and trees making fruit which had its seed in it, each of its own kind, and God saw how good it was' (Gen 1.11–12). Thus one creature produces the food that will sustain all the others, and God rejoices to see the well-regulated, self-perpetuating system unfold. As theologian Michael Welker observes, 'The creature's own activity as a constitutive element in the process of creation is seen in harmony with God's action.'<sup>3</sup> Thus the earth is not merely an 'it' in God's sight; rather, to use terminology made famous by Martin Buber, the earth is a 'thou'. It is a creature to be addressed and not just manipulated, one which proves capable of active, even willing response to the creator. Accordingly, the psalms (96–98) show the earth rejoicing in God's just reign and judgement, and Colossians, clearly composed under the influence of Genesis 1, affirms that the gospel which Paul serves 'has been proclaimed 'in [the hearing of]

animals. Presumably we are to take note of the inherent food-sufficiency of the world and perpetuate it. Moreover, in an otherwise terse account, the repeated emphasis on the wealth of 'seed' (vv. 11,12,29) is striking. Indeed, multiple repetitions of this word point to the most important biological fact about the land of the Bible: the unusually wide range of nutritious plants indigenous to the uplands of the Middle East, especially the large-grained cereals and legumes that made that region a cradle of agriculture some ten to twelve millennia ago.<sup>5</sup>

It would seem then that the first chapter of the Bible addresses humans as food producers, and more broadly as those responsible for heeding and maintaining the fruitfulness of what we call 'natural systems', although the biblical writers call them 'the work of God's hands'. That this is indeed part of what it means to enact God's image and exercise skilled mastery is confirmed by a passage such as Isaiah 28, which shows the farmer planting wisely under God's tutelage, and especially by Psalm 65, which portrays God as a farmer at harvest-time, driving home a loaded wagon through fields 'clothed in flocks and wrapped in grain ... They shout out; they even sing!' (v. 14).

Almost all Israelites were farmers, and almost all of us are not, at least in the fully industrialised West. But all of us eat and, shockingly, that is probably the single most destructive thing we do on a daily basis. For we are enmeshed in a catastrophic food production system; according to the 2005 United Nations-sponsored Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, agriculture as currently practiced may constitute the 'largest threat to biodiversity and ecosystem function of any single human activity'.<sup>6</sup> It is also a major threat to economic and political democracy; sociologist and political scientist James Scott compares the functioning of industrial agriculture to that of a 'totalising state'.<sup>7</sup>

It would be difficult to design a food system with operating principles more fundamentally opposed to the biblical vision for land use and care than are those of industrialised agriculture. Genesis 1 celebrates a world rich in plant diversity, 'each of its own kind'; by contrast, nearly exclusive dependence on hybrids has drastically reduced the seed base for all major food crops to a few closely related strains that produce maximally but only with high chemical and irrigation inputs. Again, the creation story suggests that humans have an innate kinship with the soil; we are *adam* formed from *adamah*, humans from humus (Gen 2.7); the first work given to humans in Eden is to 'serve and preserve' the fertile earth (Gen 2.15). By contrast, our agricultural practices result in erosion rates that vastly exceed replacement, in widespread chemical toxification of soil and water sources, in great rivers such as the Colorado running dry far short of their mouths, and hundreds or thousands of dead zones in coastal areas around the world.

Once again, the biblical writers envision Israel as a nation of small independent farmers, living on their land from generation to generation. Arable land could

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every creature [or, 'the whole creation'] under heaven' (Col 1.23).

This biblical view of a living, responsive creation would seem to challenge the conventional modern view of what it means for humans to 'have dominion over' their fellow creatures. Certainly in the context of Genesis 1, dominion exercised by the one species made in God's image is meant to be a source of fruitfulness for the others. In our current cultural context, in which 'dominion' is so readily confused with 'domination', the imposition of brute force with no benefit conferred, I would suggest that the charge is more adequately rendered: 'Let them *exercise skilled mastery* among the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and every life-form that creeps upon the earth' (Gen 1.28). These are, of course, precisely the creatures which were blessed and charged to 'be fruitful and multiply' on the fifth day (Gen 1.22), before humans had been created and similarly blessed; surely their prior blessing conditions the exercise of our own. Welker's further comment is apt: 'God creates by bringing different creaturely realms into fruitful associations of interdependent relations that promote life.'<sup>4</sup>

Our exercise of skilled mastery must also be understood in light of the statement that follows immediately, about divine provision of food for all creatures (vv. 29–30). Oddly, neither the Christian theological tradition nor modern commentators has drawn a strong connection between the two, although juxtaposition is the most common way the biblical writers link ideas. So within the creation story itself, the only specification of what it might mean for humans to live as the *imago Dei* follows from God's delineation of the primordial food chains: grains and tree-fruit for humans, other vegetation for

### Notes

1. Naomi Klein, 'A Hole in the World', *The Nation* 291/2 (12 July 2010), p. 20.

2. See [www.sustainabletable.org/issues/energy/](http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/energy/)

3. Michael Welker, *Creation and Reality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 13.

4. Welker, *Creation and Reality*, p. 13.

5. See my discussion in *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 48–53.

6. Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being, vol. 1, Current State and Trends* (Washington, DC: Island, 2005), p. 777.

7. James C Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 8.

not be sold on the open market in ancient Israel; it was regarded, not as a commodity, but as a gift-in-trust from God. This arrangement was intended to provide long-term economic protection for farm families and also protection for the land itself. The land of Israel altogether constitutes a highly variable and fragile ecological niche, which can be farmed successfully only by those who know it intimately and respect its needs. By contrast, in industrialised culture, most arable land is now owned by multinational corporations, worked by migrants or tenant farmers, and managed with the aim of providing short-term profit for the corporations, regardless of the actual cost to local communities and the land itself. Nothing could be farther from the intention of Torah, the great Teaching that is meant to establish an equitable law for the people Israel: 'that you may live long on the fertile soil that YHWH pledged to your ancestors, to give to them and their seed, a land oozing with milk and honey' (Deut 11.9). As Torah and the rest of the Bible makes clear, the land was given for the sake of righteousness; both the land and its fertility can be forfeited through moral failure (Lev 26.19–33; Deut 11.17; Jer 14; Amos 4; etc.). Apt here is Margaret Barker's proposal that 'sustainability' is a close equivalent of the biblical concept of righteousness,<sup>8</sup> which denotes a comprehensive state of right relationship: moral, economic and ecological.

A biblically informed analysis of our prevailing practices of land use and food production makes it clear that things must change, if we are not to suffer the worst possible consequences of our heedlessness. The book of Revelation suggests what those might be, with the prophetic declaration that brings an end to the world as we know it: 'the time [has come] ... for destroying those who destroy the earth' (11.18). Revelation's central theme is that the reign of evil is approaching its end. Identified as a 'prophecy' (Rev 1.3), the book calls its readers to recognise the extent to which we ourselves may participate in destructive actions and systems, and through that recognition to change. In sum, we are called to participate in God's *new creation*, which constitutes the second theme of Revelation. Contrary to the popular view of the book, the promise of a new creation points first to the practice of righteousness (in all its dimensions) in this world; future visions have an ethical motivation.<sup>9</sup> Therefore it is appropriate to ask what kind of land use and food production practices might be congruent with the Bible's culminating vision of a world where the river of life runs 'bright as crystal' and beside it the tree of life, with health-giving leaves, bears fruit year-round (Rev 22.1–2).

That question has no pat answer, but a number of relatively new initiatives deserve attention from this perspective, for they hold promise for realising greater faithfulness in eating. Among these I would include the proliferation of farmers' markets and membership farms or CSAs (community-supported agriculture), which increase profits for farmers. Moreover, CSAs give consumers a direct stake in the harvest, thus promoting

increased awareness of the extent to which we all eat by the grace of God and the patient faithfulness with which land is tended. 'Faithfulness springs up from the earth', says the psalmist (Ps 85.11), and we might see signs of that in community gardens planted on church lands, especially those that provide immigrants with land access and tool- and seed-sharing opportunities, or nutritious food and skills training for urban adolescents and the rural poor.

Long-term faithfulness to land and community is evidenced in various forms of legal trust arrangements that protect family farms from commercial 'development', including corporation agriculture. This is a modern analogue to the Israelite social institution of *nahalah*, which prescribed that arable land be

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treated not as a commodity or a royal possession (see the story of Naboth and Ahab in 1 Kings 21), but as an intergenerational trust held by farm families. Again, concern for perpetuating the irreplaceable inheritances of land fertility and seed stock are evidenced in a scientific initiative such as the model of Natural Systems Agriculture, based on perennial grains grown in polyculture ('agriculture that works like an ecosystem'), now under development by the Land Institute in Kansas. Another encouraging sign is the seed bank run by ECHO (Educational Concerns for Hunger) in Florida, which supports diversified agriculture in the tropical regions whose genetic wealth has been so badly depleted through two or three generations of industrialised agriculture, with its characteristically narrow base of hybridised plant stock.

Now we must awaken, quickly and fully, from our long slumber and see the earth as the living creature it is – vulnerable to damage yet still capable of giving glory to God. In short, we must embrace the vision of Psalm 85, which recognises that both God's faithfulness and our own are evidenced in the fruitfulness of the earth. With an ear bent toward God, the psalmist prays that the people may turn from their folly, 'so that glory may dwell in our land ... Yes, YHWH will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will precede him, and may he set his steps on the path!' (vv. 9,12–13).

Can we even begin to imagine a faithfulness so fully realised that the fertile earth invites the Divine Farmer to walk upon it – as God once walked in Eden – in the path marked out by 'righteousness' (sustainability)? That is a vision which holds healing power for 'the whole creation under heaven'.

8. Margaret Barker, *Creation: A Biblical Vision for the Environment* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), p. 144.

9. On Revelation, see Brian Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (New Testament Library, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), p. 18. On the ethical import of biblical visions of the new creation, see Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).