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STEWARDS  
OF  
EDEN

WHAT  
SCRIPTURE SAYS  
ABOUT THE  
ENVIRONMENT  
AND WHY IT  
MATTERS



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

Taken from *Stewards of Eden* by Sandra L. Richter.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).



## CREATION AS GOD'S BLUEPRINT

*We all long for Eden, and we are constantly glimpsing it: our whole nature at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most human, is still soaked with the sense of exile.*

J. R. R. TOLKIEN, *THE LETTERS OF TOLKIEN*

I GAVE MY FIRST PUBLIC MESSAGE on the issue of environmental stewardship in 2005 at Asbury Theological Seminary's Kingdom Conference. Historically, the goal of this conference has been to engage students in larger conversations regarding Christian responsibility across the globe. Standard topics have included training for effective cross-cultural communication; messages from courageous Christian cross-cultural workers (aka "missionaries"); organizations such as Word Made Flesh and SEND International; and ministries committed to assisting orphans, refugees, and trafficked women. Never had Asbury's Kingdom Conference taken on environmentalism. But in 2005, under the courageous leadership of Professor Christine Pohl, the committee took the plunge. It was a tense moment for everyone. In central Kentucky in 2005, this was not a topic that "the church" talked about. At least

not from the pulpit. But being young and idealistic, I said yes to the event and dove into the task with a full heart. I was determined to reach my audience in a fashion that would engage and challenge without offending. And in the twenty-five minutes allotted to me, I preached my heart out. To my joy, my community responded with the same—wide-open hearts. The end result? This event launched a movement at Asbury that is *still* moving forward.

We definitely had our challenges. There was more than one accusation of “hippie do-gooder-ism,” there were lots of questions about finances and labor, and there was one particularly telling faculty meeting in which I had to actually *show* my colleagues where to find the numbers on the bottom of their plastic water bottles and explain what the numbers meant! But we moved forward, and we created one of the most effective institutional recycling programs I’ve ever seen.

The director of custodial services, Craig Reynolds, was a critical ally in this expedition into the unknown. Although he had not been socialized into institutional environmental commitments (we’re talking about Wilmore, Kentucky, here), when Craig became convinced of the moral imperative, he not only joined the team but also did the hard work of designing a financially advantageous response. Craig crunched the numbers and demonstrated that recycling our copious amounts of paper was cheaper than trashing it. He found that employing a company such as Shred-it resulted in a *reduction* in labor for his custodial staff. Together we found *permanent* solutions to our particular scenario. Then came Matthew and Nancy Sleeth (of Blessed Earth fame), who further educated the community on the topic and offered their time and resources. When President Timothy Tennent arrived in 2009, he brought the seminary to a new level, making it clear that the next phase of expansion would be organized with an eye on sustainability. As a result, after “a long obedience in the same direction,” this seminary has been transformed into a leading recycler in the region.

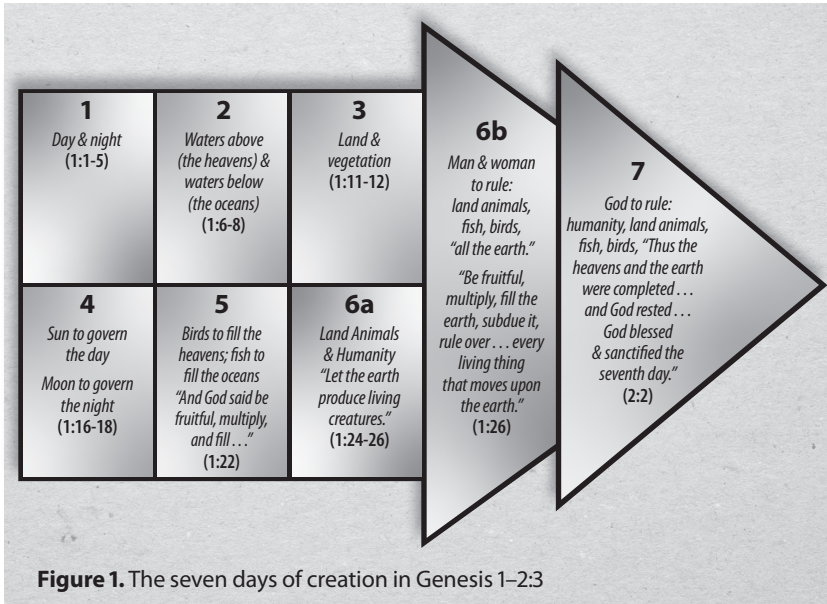
But as with so many efforts toward individual and systemic reform, the Asbury community was only able to respond to this challenge because the issue was addressed via the community's own value system. In this case, Asbury needed to hear a *biblical* argument as to why environmental stewardship matters to the kingdom.

So how does one mount a biblical argument on this topic? Like all issues of faith and praxis, to determine whether a value is biblical, it must be subjected to a survey of the biblical text. As interpreters and exegetes, we must ask the question: Do I see this particular value or precept *systematically* represented in the text as an expression of the reign and rule of God? Or is this value limited to a marginal representation in the Bible via the particularities of situational ethics? To make an argument that environmental concern is a kingdom value, the issue must rise to the level of the former—a consistent component of God's instructions to humanity, a regular attribute of God's communicated values and affections. And as all biblical theology starts in Eden, we must start our inquiry there as well.

### WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

In the opening chapter of Genesis, God reveals his blueprint for creation. A close reading of this chapter demonstrates that the questions the biblical author is attempting to answer are, Who is God? What is humanity? and Where do we all fit within this cosmic plan? In figure 1, we see that the reader is offered an answer to these questions via the literary framework of a perfect "week." Here the interdependence of the cosmos is laid out within seven days of creative activity, crowned by the final day, the Sabbath. Thus, on days one through three we are offered three habitats (or kingdoms): (1) the day and night, (2) the sea and heavens, and (3) the dry land. On days four through six, the inhabitants (or rulers) of these various realms of creation are put in their proper places as well: (4) the

sun and moon to rule the day and night, (5) the fish and birds to occupy the sea and sky, and (6a) the creatures who inhabit the dry land.<sup>1</sup>



As we consider the relationship between the first three days of Genesis’s creation song, which designate the habitats/kingdoms of creation, and the final four days, which identify the inhabitants/rulers of those same realms, we find a correlation that communicates place and authority. Therefore, on day four we read that God creates the “two great lights” to “govern” (or “be lord of”; Hebrew: *māšal*) the day and night (Gen 1:14-19). On day five we read that fish and birds are created to “be fruitful, multiply, and fill” the seas and skies (Gen 1:20-23). On day six the land creatures are created to occupy the dry land (Gen 1:24-25). But as we approach the sixth day, we find that the literary structure of the piece shifts dramatically. Why? To communicate the crucial role that this stanza holds in the larger piece. Even the most casual reader can see that this day is given the longest and most detailed description up to this point. Why



so much attention? Because this penultimate climax of Genesis 1 offers us the most breathtaking aspect of the Creator's work so far. On this day a *creature* is fashioned in the likeness of the Creator himself. On this day humanity (*ʿādām*) is created in the *image* of God.

Then God said, "Let us make humanity [*ʿādām*] in our image [*šelem*], according to our likeness; so that they may *rule* [Hebrew: *rādā*]<sup>2</sup> over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." (Gen 1:26)

The profound implications of humanity (*ʿādām*) being fashioned and animated as God's physical representatives on this planet cannot be overstated.<sup>3</sup> Both the biblical text and its ancient Near Eastern counterparts make it clear that for humanity to be named a *šelem* (image) is for humanity to be identified as the animate representation of God on this planet. In essence, woman and man are the embodiment of God's sovereignty in the created order. Here male and female are appointed as God's custodians, his stewards over a staggeringly complex and magnificent universe, *because* they are his royal representatives. Like the fish and birds, humanity is commanded to "be fruitful, multiply, and fill" their habitat. But because they are the image bearers of the Almighty, they are also commanded to "take possession of" (Hebrew: *kābas*), and "rule" (Hebrew: *rādā*) all of the previously named habitats and inhabitants of this amazing ecosphere as well:

God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth so that you may take possession of it [*kābas*].<sup>4</sup> Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens and every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen 1:28)

In the language of covenant, Yahweh has identified himself as the suzerain and *ʿādām* as his vassal. Moreover, Yahweh has identified Eden as the land grant he is offering to *ʿādām*.

The final stanza of the creation song introduces the ultimate climax of both the week and the message—the Sabbath day (Gen 2:1-3). This seventh day is set apart; it is sacred; it is holy. This day communicates that the universe in all of its breathtaking symmetry is finished, that the Creator is pleased, and as an expression of his good pleasure God has seated himself on his throne to revel in the beauty before him. Most important to us, the seventh day communicates that the perfect balance of this splendid and synergetic system is dependent on the sovereignty of the Creator.<sup>5</sup> And as God is enthroned over all the vastness of our universe on the *seventh* day, humanity's installation on the *sixth* day announces that man and woman have been appointed as the stewards of God's vast cosmos. This message is reiterated in Psalm 8, when a worshiper standing millennia beyond the dawn of creation reiterates the wonder of humanity's place in the cosmos:

When I consider your heavens,  
 the work of your fingers,  
 the moon, and the stars that you have fixed in place.  
 What is humanity that you should remember him?  
 Or the son of *'ādām* that you should care for him?  
 You have made them [humanity]  
 a little lower than the angels  
 and crowned them with glory and splendor,  
 You have made them lord [Hebrew: *māšāl*]<sup>6</sup> over the works of  
     your hands,  
 You have placed everything under their feet  
 Flocks and oxen, all of them!  
 Even the wild creatures of the field!  
 The birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,  
 whatever passes through the paths of the seas!  
 O Yahweh, our Lord,  
 how majestic is your name in all the earth. (Ps 8:3-9)



The message in both texts is explicit. Whereas the ongoing flourishing of the created order is dependent on the sovereignty of the Creator, it is the privilege and responsibility of the Creator's stewards (that would be us) to facilitate this ideal plan by ruling in his stead. How? Like the other inhabitants of the earth, sky, and sea, the children of Adam are to "be fruitful, multiply, and fill" the earth. But as the ones made in God's image, we are also given authority over all the spheres whose creation precedes the sixth day. And like any vassal who has been offered a land grant by his suzerain,<sup>7</sup> humanity is commanded to "take possession" of this vast universe per the instructions of his sovereign lord (Gen 1:28).<sup>8</sup> In sum, humanity plays a critical role in God's blueprint for the flourishing of this majestic ecosphere in which we find ourselves. Yahweh is indeed the ultimate sovereign, but humanity has been created as his representative to serve as custodian and steward, enacting the Creator's will by living our lives as *a reflection of God's image*. We have received our authority from the Creator. We rule as he would rule. We are stewards, not kings.

Genesis 2:15 specifies humanity's task further:

Then Yahweh Elohim took the human and put him into the garden of Eden to tend it [*lě'obdāh*]<sup>9</sup> and to guard it [*lěšomrāh*].<sup>10</sup>

In this second creation account, the message is repeated: the garden belongs to Yahweh, but human beings have been given the privilege to rule and the responsibility to care for this garden under the authority of their divine lord. This was the ideal plan—a world in which humanity (*'ādām*) would succeed in building human civilization in the midst of God's kingdom by directing and harnessing the amazing resources of this planet under the wise direction of their Creator. Moreover, as those made in the image of God, humanity is literally "installed" in the garden for this very task.<sup>11</sup> Here there would always be enough. Progress would not necessitate pollution. Expansion would not require extinction. The privilege of the strong would not demand the deprivation of the weak.

And humanity would succeed in this calling because of the guiding wisdom of their God. As I am wont to say in my classes, God's ever-expanding universe was offered to his children such that they might always be captivated by its profound complexity, its fierce beauty, and its fragile balance. We were *designed* to love what God loves, and we were commissioned to seek the stars.

But we all know the story: humanity rejected this perfect plan and chose autonomy instead. And because of the authority of humanity's God-given position within creation, all creation paid the price for humanity's choice. Because of *'ādām*, even "the creation was subjected to futility [or "frustration"]" (Rom 8:20).<sup>12</sup> In the words of New Testament scholar Douglas Moo, because of *'ādām*'s choice, the planet itself has been "unable to attain the purpose for which it was created."<sup>13</sup> As I discuss in my book *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament*, the curse enacted by humanity's rebellion is not simply a list of random penalties—it is a *reversal* of God's originally intended blessings.<sup>14</sup> Those made in the image of God and designed to live eternally will now die like the animals. The earth, designed to serve, will now devour (Gen 3:19). The act of birth will now produce death (Gen 3:16). Adam's labor, which was intended to bring security to his family, will now be undermined by the very resources designed to provide for him (Gen 3:17-19). In other words, the perfect balance of Eden, portrayed in the seven-day structure of Genesis 1, has been flipped upside down because of the rebellion of those who were appointed to lead. The treason of God's chosen stewards has consigned all under their authority to frustration and death. This because although Adam and Eve had the authority to *make* this choice, they did not have the agency to hold the cosmos in check after making it. In an instant, God's perfect world became *'ādām*'s broken world—full of conflict, want, death, anxiety, and violence. And because of humanity's strategic place in God's plan, not only did this twisted existence become Adam and Eve's inheritance—it became the inheritance of all placed under their rule.<sup>15</sup>

### WHAT WILL WE SAY?

In my experience, the body of Christ readily recognizes the disastrous effects of the fall in the arena of human relationships. Corrupt and abusive governments, bigotry and violence, the oppression of the weak and the deprivation of the voiceless—no one needs to tell the informed believer (or even most unbelievers) that these realities were not God's original intent for humanity. Nor, in my experience, does anyone need to tell the committed Christian that it is the responsibility of the church to take a proactive stand against these distortions of God's good plan. History teaches us that, at its best, the church has been among the first to identify the effects of the fall on human society and has often been the first to respond. There is a reason that most of the relief organizations, homeless shelters, hospitals, and orphanages on this planet have the words *Christian*, *salvation*, *mission*, *Baptist*, *saint*, or *cross* in their titles.<sup>16</sup> As Bishop Swanson of the New York City Tract Society stated in 1859 when faced with the unbearable conditions in the urban slums of an emerging America, "The Church of Christ must grope her way into the alleys and courts and purlieus of the city, and up the broken staircase, and into the bare room, and beside the loathsome sufferer. . . . For she was organized, commissioned, and equipped for the moral renovation of the world."<sup>17</sup>

This imprint of God's character in the heart of the true believer is why the first abolitionists were Christians; why Martin Luther King Jr. was a Baptist preacher; and why the Union Rescue Mission (currently the largest private homeless shelter in the United States) has housed itself in the bowels of LA's Skid Row since 1891.<sup>18</sup> We see the impact of humanity's rebellion and we know that we are called as Christians to be light, salt, and leaven in the midst of a bruised and broken world. But rarely, it seems, do we as Christians reflect on the effects of humanity's rebellion *on the garden*. And rarely, it seems, do we consider how the reality of redemption in our lives should redirect our attitude toward

the same. Surely if the ultimate objective of our God is to reconcile the world to himself *through us*, this topic deserves to be on the table as well. (2 Cor 5:17-21).

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What aspect of this chapter affected you the most? What was the most troubling, the most inspiring, or the most convicting?
2. In your church community, what are the main roadblocks to environmental concern and action?
3. In your own life (do your best to be transparent) what are the main roadblocks to environmental concern and action?



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