



## *The 2008–2009 Word & World Lecture*

# Learning Our Place: The Agrarian Perspective of the Bible

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**T**he premise that informs everything I shall say is simply this: It is a mistake to view the Bible, as we generally do, as a purely spiritual book. It is equally a mistake to view the ecological crisis as a purely material or technological crisis, as we generally do. The Bible's own perspective is both material and spiritual, and because God is the Creator of everything that is, it therefore enables us to see the current crisis in its true dimensions: as a profound religious crisis, touching every aspect of our existence. The so-called environmental crisis is a massive disordering of our relationship with the God who created heaven and earth. Beginning in its first chapter, the Bible, in image after image, shows the exquisite design of God's creation. Thus, it invites us to accept our privileged and responsible status as creatures, equally material and spiritual, in the world that God has made. As far as we know, we are the only creatures who are made to be fully spiritual (and thus distinct from the animals) and at the same time fully material (and thus distinct from the angels). Truly accepting that unique status is the condition for our full humanity, as the Bible understands it. Our present crisis indicates that the most important cultural work we now have to do—as a people more or less fully habituated to industrial culture—is to become fully human.

*To be fully human in biblical perspective is to know our place: as creatures linked to all other creatures; and as creatures dependent on the health of the natural systems. The Bible is an agrarian book, and God's work as Farmer and Caretaker of the earth provides the ultimate model for human behavior.*

## LEARNING OUR PLACE

From a biblical perspective, being fully human means to know our place, in a double sense. First, we are to see ourselves within the created order—or, to use a venerable and expressive image, to see ourselves within the “great chain of being”—as uniquely powerful creatures whose lives are inextricably and complexly linked with those of other creatures. Second, knowing our place means accepting that our lives depend on the physical integrity of the places we inhabit, on the health of water and soil and the countless communities of creatures with whom we share those places; in short, we depend on the health of natural systems.

Knowing our place in that double sense is a subject that receives much attention from the biblical writers, although it has until recently received little close attention from biblical interpreters.<sup>1</sup> My aim here is to show how the Bible delineates many of the basic elements or principles of how we may live responsibly in our particular places; to use contemporary language, its perspective is genuinely agrarian, and even predominantly so. By that I mean more than the bare fact that most Israelites were farmers; that was hardly distinctive of Israel. Yet, what is distinctive about Israel’s scriptures is their consistent, subtle, and precise articulation of the core agrarian insight that the health of human communities and the health of what we call natural systems (the biblical writers call them “the work of God’s hands”) are indivisible. In other words, the Bible shows what it means for us to be “plain member[s] and citizen[s]” of what Aldo Leopold, one of the seminal thinkers of modern ecology, called “the land-community.”<sup>2</sup>

The biblical writers do not assume that heaven and earth as we know them are permanent entities (e.g., Ps 102:25–26), and that is part of their indispensable service to us, for they enable us to imagine a world drastically different—better, or very much worse—than the one we now see. They themselves face the worst, yet their perspective is ultimately hopeful. Second Isaiah, a prophet-poet whose theological vision centers on the unceasingly creative work of the God who “makes everything” (Isa 44:24, cf. 45:7), asserts that God has formed the world not as chaos but “for habitation” (45:18). On this beautifully and deliberately ordered earth, there is a place for every living thing, including us—an affirmation both encouraging and challenging, in this sixth great age of species extinction, with humans operating on the scale of “a geophysical force.”<sup>3</sup> We are challenged to recognize ourselves as the only earthly creature who must consciously accept its place, and the only one who can knowingly violate it. There is a place for us, if we can just learn our place.

Learning our place is the subject of the first few chapters of Genesis. In the first instance, that means seeing the world as God sees it, recognizing that the earth

<sup>1</sup>Professor Terence Fretheim has been a leader in effecting a change in this generation. See Terence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup>Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” in *A Sand County Almanac: With Other Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970) 240.

<sup>3</sup>See Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* (New York: Knopf, 2002) 23.

is neither a platform for human activity nor a repository of resources to be mined for our convenience. Far from being inert, the earth is living and responsive to God. In response to the divine command—literally, “Let the earth grass forth grass” (Gen 1:11)<sup>4</sup>—the dry land generates life, putting forth vegetation that is itself capable of producing more life: “plants seeding seed, fruit trees making fruit of its own kind, with its seed in it.” The self-perpetuating fruitfulness of the created order, Leopold’s “biotic pyramid,”<sup>5</sup> is a pronounced emphasis of the first chapter of the Bible. Dietrich Bonhoeffer aptly sums up this moment: “There comes into being the life whose true nature it is to create further life.”<sup>6</sup>

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Likewise, the “swarming” creatures of sea and sky produce offspring at God’s word. The first divine blessing, “Be fruitful and multiply,” is spoken to fish and birds on the fifth day (Gen 1:22)—before humans have even appeared to receive the nearly identical blessing (Gen 1:28). Creation is *not* all about us, and that first utterance of the blessing of fruitfulness sets one clear condition for the fulfillment of our own blessing and charge: human fruitfulness, by definition, cannot hinder the divinely commanded thriving of the nonhuman creatures.

It is a sad irony, then, that in our age the earth’s fruitfulness is deeply and widely endangered, from multiple angles. Globally, some forty percent of arable soils have experienced significant or severe degradation, and plant biodiversity is greatly reduced, most drastically in the several “hot spots” that ring the center of the globe, regions that are naturally rich in species variety. The Levant and the uplands of Mesopotamia constitute such a region, which is why agriculture began there (perhaps among other places) some ten to twelve thousand years ago. The genetic richness of the region is reflected also in Gen 1, with its emphasis on “plants seeding seed.”<sup>7</sup>

The irony is sharpened by the fact that fish and birds, those creatures whose fertility was first blessed by God, are now among the more widely endangered species on the planet. In the United States alone, forty percent of fish species are threatened; “twenty common American meadow birds...have lost more than half their populations in forty years.”<sup>8</sup> MIT professor Stephen Meyer forecasts that over

<sup>4</sup>All translations are my own.

<sup>5</sup>See Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” 251–255.

<sup>6</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (New York: Macmillan, 1959) 31.

<sup>7</sup>For my extended reading of Gen 1, see Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 48–59.

<sup>8</sup>James Gustave Speth, *The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 38. He notes that seventy-five percent of fisheries worldwide are now overfished (34).

the next hundred years, “as many as half the earth’s species...will functionally if not completely disappear. The land and the oceans will continue to teem with life, but it will be a peculiarly homogenized assemblage of organisms unnaturally selected for their compatibility with one fundamental force: us.”<sup>9</sup> We have fallen short of God’s intention that we should enact our resemblance to God through the exercise of benevolent dominion over the creatures. Rather, through our greed we have turned into a curse God’s blessing of fruitfulness for the nonhuman creatures. From the perspective of the creation story, then, our truly *human* work lies still ahead of us.

### LIFE FROM THE SOIL

Learning our place means also understanding the full dimensions of our unbreakable bond with the soil, the material base of terrestrial life. The second chapter of Genesis speaks of God forming *’adam* (humankind) from *’adamah* (soil) in Gen 2:7. That Hebrew wordplay suggests a kind of familial connection; it is a subtle yet powerful reminder that the life of a people comes from its land. “Human from humus” neatly captures that derivation in English. Because we have no life apart from the health of soil and water, we must care for it as one would care for a beloved family member. And so that first “genealogical” statement is followed quickly by a vocational one: “The LORD God took the man (*’adam*) and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15).

Land care itself is the primary human obligation, and it is a specifically religious obligation. In fact, the verbs I have, following the NRSV, somewhat misleadingly translated “till...and keep” (*’abad* and *shamar*) are most often used to denote the service we owe to God. *’Abad* means to “work for” or “serve”; *shamar* means to “observe, keep, preserve,” as one observes the commandments, or keeps the holiness of the Sabbath. So God set the human being in the garden “to *serve* it (*’abad*) and *observe* it (*shamar*),” or else “*serve* it and *preserve* it.” Proper service to God begins with careful, nurturing service to the fertile earth: *observing* it, noticing the special characteristics of each place and each natural system, with an intention of *preserving* it. In our contemporary context, I know of no one who has better practiced and articulated that ethos of serving, observing, and preserving natural systems than has plant geneticist and farmer Wes Jackson, founder of the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas. The institute is pioneering a highly sophisticated program of “Natural Systems Agriculture,” which looks to nature as “mentor, model, and measure.” The goal is to develop commercial-scale agriculture that acts like an ecosystem.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Stephen Meyer, *The End of the Wild* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006) 4–5; cited by Speth, *Bridge at the End of the World*, 36.

<sup>10</sup>On Jackson’s Natural Systems Agriculture, see (among other publications) Wes Jackson, *Altars of Unhewn Stone: Science and the Earth* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987). Information on the Land Institute and publications by Land Institute authors may be found at [www.landinstitute.org](http://www.landinstitute.org), accessed 14 November 2008.

The need to serve and preserve the soil in its fertility was well known to the ancient Israelites, and if one looks at the land of Israel through a farmer's eyes, it is easy to see why that "garden ethos" is established already in the second chapter of the Bible. The highlands of Canaan (later Israel and Judah) are a fragile ecological zone, much of which is marginal for agriculture. Thin topsoil, periodic droughts, heavy winter rains, and strong winds meant that the upland farmers were always contending with the threats of erosion and desertification. Moreover, those mountain slopes and small valleys constitute one of the world's most varied agricultural landscapes. With patterns of wind, rain, and sun that change drastically over a small area, each Israelite farm family had to know their own small plot of land intimately and, further, to perpetuate that particularized knowledge through the generations. The need for deep, localized knowledge of the land is why Israel favored endogamy, as Carol Meyers has shown, and also why it insisted that land belonged not to individuals but to families, through their generations.<sup>11</sup>

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The interconnectedness of people and land, of natural systems and human communities over a long period of time, may well be the chief "family value" reflected in the Old Testament. "Honor your father and mother" are among the best-known words in the Bible, yet few of us are aware that the Fifth Commandment continues thus: "...so that your days may be long and that it may go well for you on the fertile-soil (*'adamah*) that the LORD your God is giving you" (Deut 5:16).<sup>11</sup> Being fully human means honoring those who preceded us by living within the natural limits of the world, caring for the soil, and living wisely on the earth that they have bequeathed to us.

#### OUR SUFFERING EARTH

The Old Testament's abiding concern for the health of the soil may seem completely irrelevant to us today. In the United States, less than one percent of the population consists of full-time farmers. But every one of us eats, and so we all depend directly on the health of soil, even if we never think about it. Those who eat in North America depend on the health of soil, not only on the Great Plains, but also in Brazil, Indonesia, Central America, and other places they have never seen. And most have no idea that the effects of our agricultural practices—the largest of all human industries—are catastrophic in every part of the world. Half our forests

<sup>11</sup>On endogamy, see Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 185–186. On the system of land inheritance and its ecological and theological significance in linking families to land, see Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 101–119.

have been destroyed, a great part of them for industrial-scale agriculture. As for the soil on which human life depends, erosion rates currently outpace replacement rates by thirteen times on the average. Industrial agriculture is a major consumer of fossil fuels and the largest user of fresh water (seventy percent), and many rivers of all sizes have been drained so that they no longer reach their mouths. Run-off from nitrogen fertilizer has produced the huge dead zone at the mouth of the Mississippi, as well as hundreds of others, less notorious, around the globe. We are literally consuming our planet, taking our food in a way that violates its natural systems.

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In this situation, it is instructive that the Bible presents the first human sin as an eating violation. God sets a limit on consumption, and the humans choose to override it. God responds with a question both indignant and incredulous: “From the tree that I commanded you *not* to eat from it—you *ate*??!!” (Gen 3:11). The immediate result of this first violation is that the ground itself is “accursed” (Gen 3:18). It sprouts “thorns and thistles,” a clear sign of desiccated, eroded land—of fragile land that has been mistreated. Is God’s cursing of the soil for human misbehavior merely arbitrary—a typical gesture of the reputedly grumpy God of the Old Testament? When I studied this passage with a group of young farmers and soil scientists at the Land Institute, they responded as perhaps any ordinary Israelite would have done: “It’s obvious: when humans are disconnected from God, the soil will be the first to suffer.” They had no theological training, yet these farmers immediately intuited something my urbanized students and I had missed: beginning here and continuing throughout the Old Testament, land degradation (e.g., Lev 26:18–20; Deut 28:15–18) is a sure sign that humans have turned away from God. Conversely, the flourishing of the land (e.g., Lev 26:3–6, 10; Deut 28:2–5, 11–12; Isa 35; Pss 65; 72) marks a return to God. In short, the Old Testament represents the condition of the land as the single best index of human responsiveness to God.

It would be overly literal to interpret every natural disaster, every drought or crop failure, as a sign of God’s judgment. Nonetheless, the Bible uses story form and evocative language to express profound truths about the order of creation. The truth we should not miss in these passages is that *'adam* and *'adamah*, humanity and fertile soil, are bound together; there can be no long-term flourishing of the one without the other. As the farmers at the Land Institute saw, human dysfunction at the level of the family invariably evidences itself in the local biotic community. Now, when dysfunction is operative at the level of the global species, should we be surprised that the whole natural order is disrupted?

## RESTRAINT, THE CONDITION FOR JUSTICE

From one perspective, the presence of that forbidden tree smack in the middle of Eden makes no sense at all. Who would put a two-year-old in a playroom with a shiny red truck in the middle of the floor, and leave with the parting instruction: “Don’t play with the red truck”? Yet from another perspective, it is the most logical thing in the world. Indeed, the forbidden tree points to the logic that undergirds the world. The Bible, starting in Gen 2, refuses to endorse our modern view that the ideal human condition (“Eden”) is to take whatever we want, without regard for limits. Thus the tree of knowledge of good and evil symbolizes the fact that to learn our human place entails living by the practice of restraint.

Because they fail to practice restraint, the man and woman must leave the garden; they “fall” into our familiar world of strife, frustration, suffering, and death. Outside Eden, humans are no longer privileged to live in the immediate presence of God; the fulfillment of God’s intention for us and therefore for all creation is, it seems, deferred, and likely jeopardized. Yet our place in the created order remains the same as it was in the garden: we are still meant to care for the other creatures, including the earth, and practice restraint in our material lives.

The notion that limiting material consumption is essential to our life with God receives little attention in our culture, at least from mainstream religion. Yet the importance of practicing such restraint is a very common theme throughout the Bible, and especially in Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy). The fact that restraint is emphasized there, in the foundational books of the Bible, indicates that it is fundamental to our formation as the people of God, indispensable to the practice of justice among us. Readers of the New Testament might note that when the apostle, Paul, sums up the whole of biblical faith for the Roman governor, Felix, he does so with three basic concepts: “justice, self-restraint, and the coming judgment” (Acts 24:25).

I suspect that we have overlooked the centrality of the Bible’s teaching about restraint largely because it is inconvenient for us personally, as well as challenging to the national economy. But to be fair to ourselves, anyone who looks up “restraint” in a biblical concordance will not find many entries. For the biblical writers generally offer moral instruction indirectly and artfully: they tell stories, sketch vignettes, offer powerful symbols to stimulate our religious imaginations. Notably, some of the most important biblical evocations of restraint occur in passages that are central to both Jewish and Christian traditions through the centuries. Therefore they lend themselves to fresh exploration in our time, with an eye to their ecological import.

One of these is the manna story (Exod 16), a second instance of God setting a limit on food consumption. Many Christians draw unwittingly upon that story each day, as they pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt 6:11, cf. Luke 11:3). In that first story of the Israelites once they have crossed the Red Sea, God promises to heal these escaped slaves of “all the sickness” of Egypt (Exod 15:26) and sustain

them with “bread from the sky” (16:4), provided they observe just two ground rules: First, every household can collect only what it requires for a single day. Manna has absolutely no shelf life; if anyone tries to keep it overnight, it rots—except on Sabbath. So the second rule is that everyone stays home on Sabbath and eats leftover manna; every Israelite is to relax in the holy presence of God. Of course, some don’t get it: they take more than they need; they go out to collect on Sabbath. And these seemingly minor infractions enrage Moses and God, though one might have expected them to be more tolerant of escaped slaves trying to secure their food supply. But the manna discipline is nonnegotiable, for this is how Israel is meant to learn the “moral economy” of life with God. It is an economy of sufficiency and restraint, one in which the whole community regularly stops—something our own economy never does—and recognizes that God alone grants the means of subsistence.

The Sabbath commandment itself may be the central biblical symbol of restraint and justice. It is the most frequently reiterated commandment in the Bible and in Jewish tradition the most important. Sabbath sets a limit on work, and so, as the manna story suggests, it bears closely on how we value the material goods that God has given. According to the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments, Sabbath is the great memorial of creation; it is time to take our hands off the controls and honor God as Maker of “the heaven and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them” (Exod 20:11). In complementary fashion, Deuteronomy treats Sabbath as a commemoration of the exodus (Deut 5:15), as time to realize our true identity, not as slaves or slave drivers, but as members of a community settled in a God-granted land, settled in social and economic health. Everyone in the Israelite household or township—servant or slave, sojourner, child, master or mistress—is to keep Sabbath as a time of refreshment. Even the ox and the ass take the day off with their human work-partners.

Some legal prescriptions in Leviticus and Deuteronomy show a concern for animal welfare and “environmental ethics” that is startling in an ancient text, calling upon Israel to practice restraint in consumption or destruction of the natural world:

When you come upon a bird’s nest on the road, on any tree, or on the ground—fledglings or eggs and the mother roosting over the fledglings or over the eggs—do not take the mother in addition to the young. Be sure to let the mother go, and the young take for yourself, in order that it may go well for you, and you may prolong [your] life. (Deut 22:6–7)

An ox or a flock-animal—it and its young—you shall not slaughter in a single day. (Lev 22:28)

When you lay siege to a city for many days while making war against it, in order to capture it, do not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Yes, eat from them, but do not cut them down—for are the trees of the field human, that they should withdraw from you into the siege-fortification? (Deut 20:19)



That is a telling question; the trees, though not human, are like humans, living things, vulnerable and precious. Fruit-bearing trees in particular—those that Gen 1 celebrates—must not become collateral damage in war.

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From passages such as these, centuries of rabbinic tradition have derived several key ethical principles that prohibit various forms of cruelty to animals, including species destruction, and further, they forbid wanton destruction or waste of any kind. It is instructive for Christians as well as Jews that rabbinic tradition identifies abuse of God’s creatures as akin to idolatry, for it violates God’s “first and most general call” to humankind: “I lent them to you for wise use only; never forget that I lent them to you. As soon as you use them unwisely..., you commit treachery against My world, you commit murder and robbery against My property...!”<sup>12</sup> The implication is stunning. Using what God has made with wise restraint is the essential condition for justice, not only what we now call “ecojustice” but even justice toward God!

#### COVENANT AND THE EARTH COMMUNITY

These prescriptions for justice come from the covenant made at Sinai, the great “Teaching” (Torah) that occupies the second half of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy—probably the part of the Bible least known to Christians. From an ecological perspective (among others), that is a shame, because these books develop, more fully than any others, an “earthy” vision for responsible life in community. Here it is rare to read more than a few verses without being reminded of the concrete conditions, the limitations and difficulties of life in an agrarian community. So what does one do if a neighbor’s ox falls on the road, or if a farmer has an ox that is known to be dangerous and yet does nothing to restrain it? (See Deut 22:4 and Exod 21:28–36.) How often should the fields be left fallow? (See Exod 23:10–11.) What about the poor in the community, who have no land? How will they get food and gainful employment? (See Lev 19:9–10; Deut 23:24–25; 24:19–22.)

If many Christians find this part of the Bible boring, perhaps that is because we do not appreciate the important fact that Israel knows nothing of religious obligation or spiritual experience that is abstracted from the daily business of living responsibly in community with others. The strength of covenant relationship evi-

<sup>12</sup>Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb* #56, cited by Daniel Swartz, “Jews, Jewish Texts, and Nature: A Brief History,” in *To Till and to Tend: A Guide to Jewish Environmental Study and Action* (New York: The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, 1995) III:13–14.

dences itself “on the ground,” in concrete practices: caring for neighbors and outsiders (“sojourners”), caring for the earth and sharing its bounty, caring also for the domestic animals upon whom we depend, while not exploiting the wild creatures. Obedience to God means remembering that the land itself and all the life it yields is a gift—not an outright gift but a trust, placed in our hands on the condition that we use each good thing wisely and gratefully. Otherwise, as Israel knew well, all that God has given can be lost.

At Sinai, Israel begins to reciprocate God’s own covenant commitment, first made to Noah and his descendants and through them to “every living creature that is with you, for all future generations” (Gen 9:12). Again at Sinai, God makes it clear that the divine commitment is not just to human beings: “I shall remember my Jacob-covenant, and yes, my Isaac-covenant, and yes, my Abraham-covenant I shall remember—and the land I shall remember” (Lev 26:42). Surely that is one of the most under-interpreted lines in the Bible; perhaps finally in our generation its time has come; it is found in one of the greenest books in the Bible. The whole Sinai covenant marks a key juncture in the re-remembering of covenant community; God and land and people are drawn together in a theological version of Aldo Leopold’s “land-community.”

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#### THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PROPHETS

The prophets look at human behavior in relation to creation from the perspective of God’s covenant commitments. Their perspective is profoundly realistic and at the same time visionary as it stretches from the earliest generations to the end of the world. Consider this passage from Isaiah, where the prophet envisions the ancient covenant with the earth being broken, not from God’s side, but from the side of its human inhabitants.

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants,  
for they have transgressed laws,  
violated the statutes,  
broken the everlasting covenant.  
Therefore a curse devours the earth,  
and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt. (Isa 24:4–6)

Sadly, some Christians still cling to the notion that we can knowingly act in ways that severely damage the created order, possibly hastening the end of the world as we know it, and yet not be judged harshly for it. However, that view stands in direct opposition to the prophetic tradition, as a growing number of evangelical

leaders have clearly stated. Maybe the most concise and potent expression of the conviction that we will be judged for our treatment of the created order is in the book of Revelation, when the twenty-four elders fall before the throne of God and sing: “The time has come for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants the prophets, the saints and all who fear your name..., and for destroying those who destroy the earth” (Rev 11:18, emphasis added). Perhaps only now can we appreciate the full import of these prophetic visions, twenty centuries and more after they were recorded.

### INTIMACY WITH OUR PLACE ON EARTH

What should be apparent from this brief agrarian survey of the Bible is that Israelites learned about God in and from the land they knew so well. Intimacy with land may be the single most important *religious* difference between the biblical writers and ourselves, since so many of us have been formed by an urbanized culture that treats the earth as an abstraction and therefore imagines that God has only “spiritual” concerns.

Learning any form of intimacy is heart-work, best practiced on a daily basis. Certainly this is true of intimacy with God and the things of God. For guidance in that work, Jews and Christians have traditionally looked to the Psalms: one hundred fifty poem-prayers, each of which speaks to a moment or facet of our life with God. The Psalms celebrate the world as the work of God’s hands; they mourn its brokenness as the result of human sin. Although many of them witness to the reality of profound despair (e.g., Pss 88; 130), the book as a whole tends toward hope—more explicitly, toward praise. The Hebrew name for the book of Psalms is *Te-hillim*, “praises.” These prayers aim at restoring all creation to its proper function of praising God: “My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and *all flesh* will bless his holy name forever and ever” (Ps 145:21). “All flesh” is a subtle allusion to God’s covenant through Noah with the earth and all its creatures, the “everlasting covenant” that humans have subsequently violated (Isa 24:5). Now the psalmist commits to praying and singing the world back to God.

Psalms 65 gives a detailed picture of God the Farmer and humble Caretaker of the earth. The One who “set” the mountains on their foundations now gives exquisite attention to “setting” the grain in abundance (vv. 6, 9). God waters the furrows, smoothes the ridges, “melts” the sun-baked soil with showers, “blesses its growth” (v. 10). And the earth responds eagerly to God’s loving care:

...your wagon tracks overflow with richness.  
The pastures of the wilderness overflow,  
the hills gird themselves with joy.  
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,  
the valleys deck themselves with grain,  
they shout and sing together for joy. (vv. 11–14)

The psalmist offers an astonishing picture of God’s care for the world: the

Creator of heaven and earth viewed as a hardworking but gratified farmer, hot and dirty no doubt, driving home a wagonload of grain. Certainly such a surprising image of God has something vital to say to us who are formed in God's image. It offers us the blessing of humility, literally, of rootedness in the humus, the soil on which all life depends. Thus Psalm 65 is an icon, a powerful and holy image of the God-given, exacting, and ultimately joyful work of earth care. God does it, and so must we. ⊕

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