



Living on the Land : Imaging Our Ways

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Each of us carries with us certain images about our relationship to God, to each other, and to the world in which we live. More than any rules of behavior, code of ethics, or formal theology, these images influence the way we act and relate to the world about us. Not only are these images determinative of our action and feelings; they also influence the way we receive and assimilate new information and new stimuli. This is why one person perceives certain data or experiences as relevant “fact” while a second person sees that same data as irrelevant or supporting an entirely different conclusion. These images also profoundly affect the way we understand biblical passages and the way we do theology.

Included in these perceptions of reality are our images of the land. More than any well thought out theology, these images shape the way we live on and with the land. They affect how we use land and how we feel toward it. This is not to suggest that these images cannot be reshaped by formal theological reflection. We need to be conscious, however, of the influence and determinative power of these images before we can develop a helpful theology of the land or a land ethic.

These images or perceptions of land and our relationship to it are often an accumulation of impressions and experiences collected over a considerable period of time, including the time we devote to formal education. Our proximity to the land and our vocation are particularly important factors in shaping our images of the land. A farmer working the soil is going to hold a very different view of the land than a manager who spends his or her day in a thirtieth floor executive suite. A rancher’s perception of land is often different than a farmer’s. Among the factors which shape our images of land there are also particularly graphic or dramatic experiences which radically alter our perceptions of reality. In many instances, probably more frequently than we are aware, these images are shaped by the literature we read, the stories we are told, the pictures we see, and the sounds we hear. It is important, therefore, that we give particular attention to the influence of literature, art, and music in shaping our perceptions of the land.

Behind our images of land lie the more basic images we hold of our relationship to created order or to what we sometimes call “nature.” Our understanding of the relationship between human culture and the created order, or the “good earth,” is largely determinative in how we image the land. In fact, the use of the term “land” in itself betrays a certain human image of the created world. Land as a concept is part of a world in which certain social implications and

political boundaries have been imposed on the earth by human culture. If we are to understand our images of land, therefore, it is necessary to take note also of the basic images we have of created order or the earth itself.

Basically, our images of the land fall into four broad categories. These four basic images are land as hostile wilderness, land as resource for human development, land as life-giving partner, and land as paradox. We need to recognize at the outset that not all images of land fit neatly into one of these four categories or groups. In real life most images of the land fall between these groups or are a mixture of two or more. Nevertheless, for purposes of analysis these groupings can be helpful and give us some clarity in understanding where we are coming from, offering us clues for greater integrity and consistency in our theology of the land.

I. LAND AS HOSTILE WILDERNESS

The dominant theme behind this image of land is that nature is hostile, that land must be subdued if it is to be a suitable environment for human existence. Wilderness, in particular, is evil and a threat to human civilization which must be isolated, conquered, or paved over. The ultimate expression of human achievement for those who hold this view is the model city where land is only the spot on which the city is built and where trees and grass may have a place, but only where humans decide they may be.

Over the past 150 years, many of those who hold this image of land have been or are addicted to technology. From their perspective, the purpose of earth science or agricultural science is not to gain insight into the nature of land or discover its beauty, but to learn instead how nature can be controlled and land subdued. Although this image of land has some of its roots in the Puritan idea of taming the wilderness, it never really flourished in colonial America, probably because of the Puritans' general appreciation for the gift of God's creation and the feeling that God had placed some hidden order in nature. The flowering of this image of land took place in the United States during the middle and latter decades of the 19th century with westward expansion and the industrial revolution. The mass production of barbed wire and windmills, the development of large agricultural machinery and the transcontinental railroads all contributed to the idea that what previously had been considered the Great American Desert now could be conquered. This conquest of land in the Upper Great Plains by powerful persons and institutions has been effectively and sympathetically chronicled by Hiram Drache in *The Day of the Bonanza* (Danville, Ill.: Interstate, 1964) and *The Challenge of the Prairie* (Danville, Ill.: Interstate, 1970).

In many ways, the Columbian Exposition in Chicago at the end of the century was an appropriate celebration of the dominant images of the age. While some attention was given to the country's land base, the emphasis was clearly

on the triumphs of human technology. One of the centerpieces of the exposition was the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building noteworthy chiefly for its enormous size, containing forty-four acres of floor space within its walls, and its engineering marvels. Even one of the claims to fame for the Horticultural Building was that it likely was the largest hothouse ever built.

This image of human conquest over land and over nature also received ample support in

the literature of the times with its tales of industrial progress, personal triumph over poverty and the land, the conquest of the West, and industrial utopias. In his utopian novel of 1888, *Looking Backward* (reprinted, New York: Random House, 1982), author Edward Bellamy anticipated a host of twentieth century dreamer-planners who would dot the landscape with model cities in which nature exists in harmony with human purposes. When land could not be conquered by technology, it was often subdued by sentimentalizing it in popular art and music. The prints of Currier and Ives, for example, often present a romanticized version of the land where nature and industrial progress live side-by-side in near perfect harmony. The songs of the day frequently popularized the countryside as a pleasant place to bike, drive, or have a picnic, but not as a place to live and labor. It was a countryside without bugs and without human tears.

It would be misleading to suggest that these attitudes toward conquest of the land, of reliance on technology, and of romanticizing nature died with the turn of the century. I live in an area where some of the world's largest coal fired energy conversion plants are located and where huge tractors are used to till the earth. There is something awesome about these massive hulks lurking on the skyline which inspires a strange kind of reverence for and worship of human technology, and a corresponding depreciation of land.

The romanticizing of land and nature also has continued into the latter half of this century in popular art and literature, especially in the electronic media with its nature programs which show a wild kingdom without smells, extremes of temperature, or unconquerable dangers.

It is not very difficult to criticize this image of land and nature from a biblical perspective. Very few examples of this image of land exist in biblical literature. In a few instances, Scripture views wilderness as a place of disorder and, therefore, a place of evil. In general, however, both the Old and New Testament view of created order is positive, even to the point of seeing creation as suffering with humankind and participating in its redemption. Surely that is not a picture of a hostile creation waiting to be subdued.

II. LAND AS LIFE-GIVING PARTNER

If those who are addicted to a conquest model in relationship to the land see wilderness as a threat, then many of those who hold a more positive view of nature often regard wilderness as paradise, a source of renewal and life, a place of re-creation, an opportunity to experience peace and harmony. From this perspective, the highest culture is that which is in harmony with nature and with the land. Many who hold this view would prefer not to speak about land because of its connotations of human impositions, speaking instead about the earth or Mother Nature.

Like its counterpart on the opposite end of the spectrum, this image about land also has been with us from colonial days, and before-in the everyday life and religion of the Native American. To those who lived on this land before the white man, human beings were not seen as above the land, but as a part of it, involved in the total partnership of life. This was evident in their religious practices, their art, and their burial ceremonies.

This tradition also has been perpetuated, however, among those who invaded the land, in the "scientific observations" of Jonathan Edwards, the poems of Walt Whitman, and the writings of Henry Thoreau. More recently the same image of land has been held up by conservationist Aldo Leopold in *Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University, 1966), by paleontologist

Loren Eiseley in works like *The Immense Journey* (New York: Random House, 1957), and contemporary author and poet Annie Dillard in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). The views of poet-teacher-farmer Wendell Berry about the need for wilderness tend toward this image as does Virginia Stem Owens' enchantment with color, light, and smell in her collection of essays entitled *A Taste of Creation* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1980).

In its extreme forms, it is not difficult to criticize the tendencies toward pantheism and a cult of nature in this image of the land. When one holds this image of the land, it is easy to fall into the trap of replacing the creator with creation. Like its counterpart, holders of this image frequently subscribe to a naive and romanticized picture of the natural world. Beginning at the opposite end of the continuum, they find strange bedfellows with those who seek to subdue nature by creating their own artificial world of peace and harmony.

In its milder forms, however, this image can be a helpful corrective to the conquest model. Strangely enough, especially to those of us who have been influenced by neo-orthodoxy, forms of this image of creation and the land do exist in the Bible. We are grateful to Walter Brueggemann for demonstrating in his book, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), that land is a theological category in much of the Old Testament and that Israel's relationship to the land is essential to Israel's identity. The liberal use of illustrative material from nature in the Psalms, in the wisdom of the sages, and in certain parables of Jesus also ought to give us pause before we discard this positive image of land and creation outright. In the endless arguments among Job and his friends, and in the speech from the whirlwind, the wisdom of nature is frequently held up as worthy of human consideration. In Chapter 8 of Proverbs, personal, social, and created order are pictured as being all of one piece, having their source in Wisdom, the first-born of creation.

III. LAND AS RESOURCE FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Standing somewhere between the image of land as life-giving partner and the image of land as something to be conquered and subdued, is a view which sees land primarily as a resource for human development. It does not see land as something hostile to the human endeavor, but as something to be improved upon. In some sense it is an image of partnership between human beings and the land, but a partnership in which humans are the senior and controlling partners. While those who hold this view of the land are not necessarily addicted to

technology like their more radical counterparts, they usually subscribe to theories that always leave room for continuous growth and improvement.

The best expression of this model of the relationship between land and human endeavor is the soil conservation movement. The soil conservation tradition and the literature associated with it are examples of the intelligent and effective caring activity which can result from a commitment to become partners with the land in the production of food and other life-sustaining activities.

At its worst, however, this image of the land can result in a consumptive relationship with creation. When land resists its "improvements," the temptation is to become as manipulative of creation as those who hold the first image. A simplistic version of this image is that the world has been put here exclusively for human development, and that consideration for other creatures is of little importance in human plans. In recent years, one of the most vocal and articulate proponents

for this image of land has been former Secretary of the Interior James Watt. It isn't only in the speeches of James Watt that we are bombarded with this image, however, for it is a favorite image for those who tie human development to the development of land and natural resources.

Those who hold this image of land frequently refer to Genesis 1 and 2 for support. A more careful reading of these chapters suggests, however, that the stewardship of creation and land given to humankind is not for the sake of human beings alone, but for the sake of other creatures and the whole of creation itself. Humankind is given dominion over creation not only that creation can be used for human benefit, but also that order can be kept for the benefit of all of creation. As those who serve as king in Israel on behalf of the people, those who are made in the image of God serve on behalf of creation.

IV. LAND AS PARADOX

Also standing between the extremes on either end of the spectrum is an image of land and our relationship to it which places special emphasis on the paradoxes present in that relationship. The persons who hold this view also perceive the relationship as a partnership, but a partnership fraught with ambiguity and difficulties, a partnership in which there are no designated lifetime senior partners. Wilderness is a place for human renewal, but it can also be a threat to personal well-being and human culture. Land is a source of human nourishment and life, but often it is a stubborn and contrary partner in yielding up that nourishment as well. In other words, land and its attendant agents are experienced as both ally and enemy. To those who work with it, land is both a merciful gift of God and a capricious taskmaster.

Persons who hold this image of land usually pride themselves on their realism. They are realistic about both the changing face of creation and human ability to completely subdue it. In *A Taste of Creation*, Virginia Owens remarks that the faces of the ranchers she knows are not mobile with emotion over the changing seasons like the bird watchers; the ranchers have experienced too many Wyoming winters to be turned on by every display of nature. The same ambiguity about the land is found in the literature about the struggles of immigrant farmers on the plains. Both Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (New York:

Harper & Row, 1937) and Lois Hudson's *Bones of Plenty* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962) chronicle the tension between land as a source of roots and the price land often extracts for establishing those roots.

The biblical stories of Israel's struggles for and with the land carry similar images. Land is both a gift of God and a temptation to power independent of God. Other biblical sources support this view of the land and created order. Genesis 2 and 3 deal directly with the paradoxes of human knowledge and ability in relationship to creation. The human quest for knowledge is both blessing and curse. Job 28 celebrates the marvels of human technology which can reduce streams to trickles and construct mines deep in the earth in distant places. The same poem, however, cautions against believing that the ultimate secret of life can be found in nature or human technology.

Probably the most helpful exposition of this image in Scripture is Romans 8:18-25. From the context it is quite clear that Paul did not intend this passage to be a primary source for a theology of creation or a theology of the land. Nevertheless, this passage contains helpful images

of our relationship to creation and, consequently, to land. This passage is also helpful in understanding the nature of the curses imposed on creation in Genesis 3. The ambiguity and brokenness of creation is clearly acknowledged. Yet this brokenness and ambiguity is the very source of creation's partnership with us. That which did not "sin" and could have held itself aloof from struggle and brokenness has been designated by God to be a partner with us in our struggles. That which often seems to be a source of alienation and ambiguity is also our unity. Under the cross, the curses on creation and the land in Genesis 3 are a sign that we do not struggle alone. As the land and the rest of creation struggles in our brokenness, so also will creation participate in our redemption.

V. RESHAPING OUR IMAGES OF LAND

It is obvious that no one image of the land is adequate for every time and place. Like our theology, our images of land change in response to our circumstances and our understanding of what has been revealed. The question about adequate images of land is a question about the appropriateness of our images for the age in which we live and their faithfulness to biblical images. There is little doubt in my own mind that a view of land as a hostile enemy to be conquered is neither very appropriate to our day nor very biblical. But there are other images which are biblical, useful, and appropriate. We have discussed three of these images in this essay.

What is probably needed most is an openness to allowing our personal and corporate images of the land to be tested and reshaped by biblical images, by engagement with the land, and by literature and art which takes land seriously. We need to hold up in the church literature and art which will enable us to see new visions. Old theological formulas ought not be permitted to blind us to the vivid images of land in Scripture and in the literature and art of other people. Once we are willing to test our present images and open ourselves to new visions and images, we will then be ready to begin work on a theology of the land which is biblical and helpful for the age in which we live.