A common perception is that the Bible shows little concern for our relationship to nature and has perhaps even encourages its exploitation. This perception is often supported by reference to the biblical commands to "subdue" the earth and "have dominion" over all living things (Genesis 1:28), which are interpreted to mean that human beings can treat the non-human world in whatever way they please. This interpretation of Genesis 1:28 and the perception that the Bible has little else to say about our relation to the earth have led many people to reject the Bible as a resource for developing a sound environmental ethic.
The view that the Bible has fostered the exploitation of nature is expressed in an influential and often-cited article by Lynn White entitled, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis."  

Although several scholars have exposed weaknesses of White's position, elements of his argument still prevail in discussions about the Bible and the environment. Alluding to verses in Genesis 1-2, White claims they emphasize that God planned creation "explicitly for [human] benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve [human] purposes."

For White, Christianity accepted this biblical view of creation, fostering the attitude that human beings transcend nature and may exploit it. He argues that this attitude has shaped the development of modern Western science and technology, which have posed threats to our environment. He concludes that
Christianity therefore "bears a huge burden of guilt" for our ecological crisis.

Such interpretations of the Bible and our growing environmental problems have prompted scholars to analyze carefully the biblical view of nature. In contrast to common assumptions, they are discovering that the Bible contains insights that can help form the basis of a sound environmental ethic. Although interpretations of particular passages may vary, they indicate that the Bible affirms the goodness and intrinsic value of all living things; it points out commonalities between human beings and other living things; and it contains the mandate that we treat the natural world with care and respect. Such insights provide powerful
grounds for environmental responsibility. This brief essay introduces some of the important biblical passages that have implications for environmental ethics.

Genesis 1-11 contains several fundamental ideas about the natural world and our place in it. For example, the opening verses of Genesis clearly state that God is the source of all life and that creation is good. Furthermore, the formation of Adam from "the dust of the ground" (Genesis 2:7) highlights the connection between human beings and the earth because adam, the word for "human being," is a play on adamah, the word for "ground" or "earth." The story of Noah and the flood illustrates God's concern for all creatures because it states
that God made the covenant not just with human beings but with "every living thing" and that God desires all creatures to "be fruitful and multiply." The ideas that God is the source of all life, that creation is good, that human beings are connected to the earth, and that God is concerned for all creatures strongly suggest that we are to value and respect the earth and its many forms of life.

Several recent interpretations have shown that Genesis 1:28 and 2:15 call human beings to preserve and protect the earth and its creatures. James Limburg, for example, interprets Genesis 1:28 in this way on the basis
of a careful study of the Hebrew word, radah, which is usually translated as "to have dominion" or "to rule." By examining the use of this word in other passages in the Old Testament, he finds it is most often used in political contexts to speak about the rule of a king or a nation. Limburg discovers that when the characteristics of the rule are discussed, the biblical texts emphasize a humane and compassionate rule that displays responsibility for others and that results in peace and prosperity. He therefore concludes that Genesis 1:28 does not advocate tyrannical exploitation of nature but rather
Many of the Psalms, such as Psalm 8, 104, and 148, reaffirm the goodness of creation and provide additional insights into our relation to nature. For example, according to Terence Fretheim, many of the Psalms indicate that God is active in nature and intimately involved in every aspect of the natural order. Furthermore, the Psalms suggest that all creatures, not merely human beings, witness to the glory of
God. The language of Psalm 148 even seems to suggest that "it is only as all creatures of God join together in the chorus of praise that the elements of the natural order or human beings witness to God as they ought."

7 This insight implicitly calls human beings "to relate to the natural order in such a way that nature's praise might show forth with greater clarity."

8
Insights relevant to an understanding of our relation to the natural world are also found in Wisdom literature. It emphasizes the importance of nature as a medium of God's revelation, for it presupposes that God's wisdom can be revealed through observation of the natural world. At the same time it points out the tremendous diversity and ultimate mystery of God's creation. Other wisdom texts, such as God's first speech from
the whirlwind (Job 38 39), indicate that God takes great delight in non-human creatures and did not create them for human benefit alone. Such passages all imply that human beings need to respect nature, to recognize the intrinsic value of its many creatures, to learn from it, and to preserve its incredible diversity.

Passages from letters of the New Testament, such as Romans 8:18-25, Colossians
1:15-23, 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, and Ephesians 1:10, indicate that Christ's redemptive power affects the whole creation. The passage from Romans reveals that Paul had a universal vision of the "liberation of all the creatures of nature, along with human beings" through Christ's death.  

Colossians 1:15-23 also claims that all things will be reconciled through Christ. Even if readers disagree about the nature of
this universal reconciliation, the passages express God's concern for the whole creation and suggest that we, in turn, should respect God's handiwork.

All of the biblical passages that command us to love our neighbor also have strong implications for environmental responsibility, even if one does not extend the notion of "neighbor" to include non-human creatures, as some
theologians have done. As we better understand the dimensions of our environmental problems, it is clear that they are often connected to social injustices. We cannot adequately show love to our neighbors, therefore, without taking into account the environmental problems that affect them.

The passages outlined above and many others11 provide very strong grounds for
respecting nature and its creatures and for living in ways that preserve and protect them. Although certainly not all elements of the Bible depict our relation to the natural world in this way, the Bible clearly contains ample grounds for environmental responsibility. It provides valuable insights for building the foundations of an environmental ethic that, if lived out, can help solve today's environmental problems.
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Notes


2. For an understanding of

3. White, p. 1205.

4. For more detailed discussions of Genesis, see,

5. Limburg, "The Responsibility of Royalty."


8. Ibid.

9. See, for example, Bruce Malchow, "Nature from God's


Biblical Perspectives on the Environment,"
Zygon


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Care of the Earth Tina B. Krause, ed. (Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1994).