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Adam, dust of the Earth: A Paradise received and incomplete in the Biblical accounts of creation. Some philological observations on the creation accounts

Jean Koulagna¹

Biblical reflection on climate and environmental issues is nowadays such a common topic in the field of systematic theology that it sometimes appears to have almost become a matter of fashion in terms of ethics. In these circumstances, it is rather uncomfortable to enter into this serious discussion. The risk is twofold: it consists of either reading texts with prior dogmatic or ethical assumptions², or endlessly repeating what has already been said or acknowledged, including in both hermeneutical and theological contexts. The question is therefore: what Biblical exegesis could I offer without falling into this trap, and how could I avoid appearing as some alien with regard to conventional discourse?

To begin with, I should note that the word “climate” does not exist as such in the Hebrew Bible. This does not mean that the Old Testament does not deal with climate or climate change and environment issues. There are more than mere allusions to this matter when the Bible mentions rain, heat, winter, summer, the sun, etc. Many passages deal with the subject, but the creation narratives in Genesis and hymns in the book of Psalms provide various viewpoints concerning the relationship between human beings and their environment and the impact of their actions on climate.

In this essay, I neither aim to engage in Biblical hermeneutics, nor in environmental or ecotheology. Neither do I aim to discuss the exegetical meaning of Scripture referred to as “difficult” with reference to environment/climate issues – which would seem redundant in view of state-of-the-art research. I will rather offer a few philological observations on both creation narratives in Genesis: Genesis 1:1-2:4a, traditionally assumed to be of Priestly origin (6th BCE), and Genesis 2:4b-25, assumed to be of Yahwistic origin (10th-9th BCE). The mythical origin of these Biblical primeval narratives has often been emphasized. I am aware of the fact that they are loaded with a long exegetical and hermeneutical tradition with reference to environment issues. Nevertheless, a close analysis of some key words and

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² There are many examples of this: R. David, 1994. “L’exégèse des récits bibliques de la création, miroir d’un questionnement”, *Théologiques*, vol. 2/1, 45-60; S. Petit, 1977. « Christianisme et nature, une histoire ambiguë », *Courrier de l’environnement*, N° 31, 23-28; K.L. Bloomquist & R. Machila, 2009. *God, Creation and Climate Change: A resource for reflection and discussion*, Geneva: LWF; D. Horrell, 2010. *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology*, London: Equinox; R.P. McLaughlin, 2011. “A Meatless Dominion: Genesis 1 and the Ideal of Vegetarianism”, *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Vol. 47/3, 144-154; W. Hammink, 2012. “Mother Nature and the Heavenly Father: Christianity and the Environment in a Globalized World”, *Macalester/Maastricht Essays*, vol. 30, 63-83; GD. Werner & E. Jeglitzka (eds), 2016. *Eco-Theology, Climate Justice and Food Security: Theological Education and Christian Leadership Development*, Geneva: Globethics.net Global No. 14; A. Valjarević, D. Valjarević and Z. Stanojević-Ristić, 2018. “Climate Changes Science and the Holy Bible Texts”, *European Journal of Science and Theology*, Vol.14, No.6, 55-62; etc.

phrases is likely to disclose further historical perspectives that might shed a new light on the orientation of each narrative.

My aim is to invite theologians and ethicists to come down for a while and examine these texts in their respective contextual settings. I will emphasize the fact that there is no univocal biblical stand on environment and climate issues, but rather a polyphony of voices reflecting a variety of socio-political and economical contexts. In other words, there is no systematic orientation that could be drawn from biblical texts, especially not from the biblical accounts of the creation. This may explain the fact that we can come across a wide range of ethical and hermeneutical conclusions as well as their opposites, based on Scripture.

Neither do I entertain the idea of contributing anything strictly new to this conversation (the book of Qohelet says there is nothing new under the sun), nor am I tempted by any form of climato-scepticism. I will only attempt to draw one's attention to the multi-vocal Biblical tradition and offer a few hypothetical explanations based on the passages' own respective contexts. My approach will consist of a few philological observations about the creation accounts in Genesis without any attempt to draw theological or moral conclusions. This will be the content of the second and third parts of this presentation. The fourth and last part, rather than drawing theological conclusions from these observations, will raise questions about our relationship, as believers and committed readers, vis-à-vis these texts. In other words, it will not be a matter of elaborating a systematic theology based on the said texts, but of questioning ourselves, in our own context (or our various contexts), about the place where we choose to stand.

Though both accounts argue that God is the author of everything and present humans as the pinnacle of creation, they reflect completely different worldviews, especially with regard to our place and role as humans within the creation. In my view, there is no compelling need to reconcile them for hermeneutical, theological, or ethical reasons.

The presumably oldest account, Genesis 2:4b-25

Let's look at Gen 2:8.

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וַיִּצְרָא יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה... וַיִּקַּח וַיִּשְׂמְרָהּ וַיִּשְׂמְרָהּ וַיִּשְׂמְרָהּ וַיִּשְׂמְרָהּ וַיִּשְׂמְרָהּ

Then the LORD God formed man, dust from the ground... Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. (adapted NAS).

LXX

καὶ ἔπλασεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον χοῦν ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς... καὶ ἔλαβεν κύριος ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον ὃν ἔπλασεν καὶ ἔθετο αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ ἐργάζεσθαι αὐτὸν καὶ φυλάσσειν.

And God formed the man, dust from the earth... And the Lord God took the man whom he had formed and put him in the orchard to till and keep it. (NETS).

Two points should be emphasized. The first point is that man is described as dust from the soil (עֹפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה). The focus is not on man's origin (from the dust of the earth) as expressed in the majority of our modern Biblical versions, but rather on man's identification with the Earth. Our modern versions are influenced by the Latin Vulgate (*de limo terrae* –

(מעפר מן־האדמה). In my view, he is rather dust from the soil, meaning that on the one hand he is tied to that soil in a kind of family relationship (some will call the Earth “our sister”), and he can be swept by the wind (he is fragile) on the other.

The second point is that he has to cultivate and keep the garden. The word עבד also means to serve. By associating serving and keeping, the author gives the garden a royal image: kings are served and guarded. Might it be that the Earth is viewed as an image of God, or is it that man is image of God by doing the same job as God as a gardener? Furthermore, the verb to “place” is נוח, and expresses the idea of leaving, depositing, or resting: God makes man to rest in the garden. But should we perhaps understand this verb more in the sense of establishing, since the remaining of the sentence points at a role to play, an activity: “to cultivate it (literally serve it) and keep it”. In the cultures in which the Yahwist narrative is grounded, God was represented as a gardener, and Eden as a place of delight. Gérard Siegwald wrote:

“This mythical story concerning the living environment means that the soil that carries the wild field, when it is seen in the light of the creator God, becomes the place of the garden: the field turns into a garden (...). In other words, it is rich with a creation potential that the creator God has put in it, and not only with a potential, but also with a realization of this potential ...”³

Some other key details can be observed. Animals are formed in the same way as man (the same verb יצר is used) in v. 19. The Greek equivalent πλάσσω in the Septuagint denotes a manual activity, either artisanal or artistic (the adjective “plastic” often qualifying arts such as sculpture, architecture, drawing and painting, is derived from this verb). This is why man can name (or call) animals; that is, he can communicate with them and have them as companions: man and animals are related.⁴ Hence the link between the naming of animals and a need for a *vis-à-vis* (not only a helper) like himself (v. 20). This need comes from the relationship with his environment.

The rural context in which the interaction with the Earth is a harmonious one could to a certain extent explain the worldview described above. Several sociological and anthropological studies have focused on the social organization of ancient Israel.⁵ They have shown that life during the Bronze and Iron Ages, in particular Iron II that corresponds to the United Monarchy, was essentially rural, with agriculture as the main activity and an economy promoting social equality. The methodology of these studies is based on the “three irreducible elements” as described by Kolb and Snead:⁶ social reproduction, subsistence

³ G. Siegwald, 2005. *Dogmatique pour la catholicité évangélique, vol. 4 : L'affirmation de la foi*, Genève: Labor et Fides, 201-204. The translation is mine.

⁴ A. Wénin, 2007. *D'Adam à Abraham ou les errances de l'humain*, Paris: Cerf, 58.

⁵ R. Redfield, 1953. *The Primitive World and Its Transformations*. Ithaca: Cornell University; E.L. Wolf, 1955. “Types of Latin American Peasantry: A Preliminary Discussion”, *American Anthropologist* 57: 452-71. G.M. Schwartz & S.E. Falconer (eds), 1994. *Archaeological Views from the Countryside: Village Communities in Early Complex Societies*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution; Id., 1994. “Rural Approaches to Social Complexity”, *Archaeological Views from the Countryside: Village Communities in Early Complex Societies*, G. M. Schwartz and S. E. Falconer (eds), Washington: Smithsonian Institution; M.J. Kolb & J.E. Snead, 1997. “It's a Small World After All: Comparative Analyses of Community Organization in Archaeology”. *American Antiquity* 62: 609, etc.

⁶ M.J. Kolb & J.E. Snead, 1997: 611.

production and community self-identification. In an article entitled "The Rural Community in Ancient Israel during Iron Age II", Avraham Faust describes rural life during the Iron II Age from an archaeological point of view, in particular based on a study of storehouses and methods of storage.⁷ His conclusions largely confirm those of previous studies, although he recognizes that survival at the time was not merely based on a subsistence economy; there are elements pointing to the beginning of a capitalist organization of the economy, at least⁸. In such a context, humans had a different awareness of their responsibilities towards the environment.

The opening account, Genesis 1:1-2:4

With regard to the relationship between man and the earth, Gen 1:28 gives another insight.

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וַיְבָרֵךְ אֱתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ
אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹשְׁתָּהּ וּרְדוּ בְּדָגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל־
חַי הָרֶמֶשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ

And God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (NAS).

LXX

καὶ ἠύλόγησεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς λέγων
αὐξάνεσθε καὶ πληθύνεσθε καὶ
πληρώσατε τὴν γῆν καὶ κατακυριεύσατε
αὐτῆς καὶ ἄρχετε τῶν ἰχθύων τῆς
θαλάσσης καὶ τῶν πετεινῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ
καὶ πάντων τῶν κτηνῶν καὶ πάσης τῆς γῆς
καὶ πάντων τῶν ἔρπετων τῶν ἔρπόντων
ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς

And God blessed them, saying: "Increase and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and all the cattle and all the earth and all the creeping things that creep upon the earth." (NETS)

Two main verbs are used with some emphasis: כבש and רדה. כבש is not very common in the Hebrew Bible (only 12 times). It always means to trample, to subdue, in the sense of enslaving, and is used to describe the domination of a people over another (Num 32:29; Josh 18:1; 2 Sam 8:11), or the dominion of God on an alien people (Num 32:22). It therefore always denotes war and violence. Its Greek equivalent κατακυριεύω literally means exercising lordship and can mean to govern.

רדה almost has the same meaning of to trample, to dominate, with the connotation of oppression, thus of violence (either physical or psychological). In Leviticus this verb is often followed by the qualification: "with brutality" (בְּפָרֶךְ – Lev 25:43-53). The Targums use respectively תקף (to conquer) and שלט (to have power on, to prevail, to oppress) to render the two verbs. The Neofiti Targum uses כבש and שלט from the military vocabulary, and respectively meaning to conquer and to exercise power.

Both verbs denote man taking over (in a military way); the Earth and all that is in it are to serve him, because of his being an image of God. Already in v. 26, God conceived human

⁷ A. Faust, 2000: 25.

⁸ Ibid., 32.

beings to be in his own image and according to his likeness. The word צֶלֶם , which is translated by "image", literally means "shadow" and is equivalent to the Greek εἰκών. It refers to the shadow or image of a father upon his son (Gen 5:3), or of God upon man (Gen 1:26; 9:6). As for דְּמוּת , which is equivalent to ὁμοίωμα and ὁμοίωσις in Greek, it means "reproduction", "imitation", a copy of an object accompanied by a drawing (2 K 16:10). The two terms are used simultaneously and often for each other. The endowment of authority over the rest of the animal creation (v. 28) is based on identity, more precisely on this resemblance of human beings to their creator, a resemblance of power. It is by virtue of this image and this resemblance that human beings can exercise their authority over the rest of the creation, particularly animals.

The vocabulary is rather harsh, and hard to hear. It belongs to the military sociolect.⁹ One might argue that this is related to the exilic and postexilic contexts. At least two hypotheses can be formulated. The first is a psychological transposition of what happened to Israel after 722 BCE. Israel and Judah successively underwent two dramatic events: the fall of Samaria in 722 and the Babylonian deportation and exile (597, 587-538 BCE), then followed by the Persian domination (539-333 BCE). Those events and similar experiences may explain the violent vocabulary, the register of language being that of military domination to describe the place and role of human beings in the creation.

The second hypothesis is that of the reconstruction context. During their stay in Babylon, the Israelites discovered a "modern" civilisation with a form of production and consumption economy.¹⁰ It should be emphasized that the returnees were born or educated in Babylon. Not only were they influenced by a sense of power (either political or economic), it was actually built into their character. In such a context, the reconstruction of their country was not simply a religious affair; it was also political and economic. Upon coming home, they found a deeply impoverished population, and "they lacked any special prominence vis-à-vis their neighbours".¹¹ That meant taking possession of the land, especially by the *beney haggollah* (versus the *beney ha'areç* who had not experienced the exile and were despised), and developing a production economy, other than one of subsistence only.

In the book of the Prophet Haggai, the Israelites who returned from exile are blamed for their reluctance to rebuild the Temple of the Lord. A passage from the very beginning of the book describes their relentless efforts to reconstruct the economy based on individual property (Hag 1:6): "*You have sown much, but harvest little; you eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes.*" (NAS). The people of Israel were struggling for the rebirth of their nation but also trying to take revenge on a land that, to a certain extent, they implicitly considered to have failed to keep its promises. It was therefore necessary for them, the postexilic Israel, to take possession of this land and of its contents, to ensure total domination over the beings that inhabited it, to exercise human supremacy over the entire creation and to develop a theology claiming the legitimacy of such supremacy: man is the image of God, he is therefore god. The kings in

⁹ R.L. Harris, et al., 1980, 1999. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. electronic ed. Chicago: Moody Press, S. 430

¹⁰ Th. Hiebert, 1996. "Rethinking Dominion Theology", *Direction*, vol. 25/2, 16-25, web version in <https://directionjournal.org/25/2/rethinking-dominion-theology.html>.

¹¹ J.L. Huddleston, 2011. *The Beginning of the End: The Eschatology of Genesis*, PhD dissertation, Duke University, 314.

whose name Israel, then Judah, were deported, legitimized their behavior by the fact that they were considered to be gods. This could be interpreted as a reverse rereading of the story of the curse of the soil in Gen 3:17-19.¹²

I should further add that the text is of priestly origin. The religious reconstruction had also developed an economy of sacrifice¹³, in particular bloody sacrifices that required the power of humans over animals to be legitimized, although none of the animals mentioned in Gen 1:28 were intended for sacrifice. In such a context, to dominate and rule means to take control and ensure some regulation as well, hence to take care, in order to serve the religious economy in place.

A few hermeneutical and ethical observations and questions, and concluding remarks

What, then, can we do with this polyphonic and contradictory situation in the Bible? Do we need to choose where to go from here? Is it possible to construct Biblical climate and environment hermeneutics without pushing the texts too far? I will not risk giving any normative theological or ethical answer. Let us just make three general observations and raise a few questions.

First, concerning the meaning of the Protestant “Sola Scriptura” with regard to new contemporary issues (climate and the environment are among them): how do we treat Biblical material in order to find answers to some of our new questions? On the one hand, there is a risk of fundamentalism, and of a no-reference system on the other. How could we let God talk to us without imposing dogmatic or ideological hermeneutics, either *pro-*, or *contra-*environmentalism?

Second, the priestly account ends with the Sabbath (Gen 2:2-3). In spite of its anthropocentric orientation, the priestly creation account (Gen 1:1-2:4) ends with the Sabbath as the last act of creation. God worked six days, rested on the seventh day and created the Sabbath as an institution on that same day. In the Decalogue in Exodus 20, this will become the reason why the Israelites should rest once a week. Not them and their slaves only, but also their animals (Exod 20:8-11). From the point of view of redactional criticism, one can argue that the end of the priestly account could be a late glossy addition, but this is hardly convincing. The composition work seems to have a liturgical purpose. The Sabbath, the sabbatical year and the jubilee point to some limitation of the ruthless exploitation of natural resources and also, to some extent, to ecological and climatic attention.

Third, we can find some alternative passages throughout the Old Testament. In Psalm 8 for example, the Earth is intended to proclaim God’s might. In that context, man, who is described as nearly nothing with regard to the infinite universe (מִה־אֲנוּשׁ “who is man?”) and nearly god with regard to his responsibility (וַתִּתְּכֶם אֱלֹהִים – lit. “you made him miss [to be god/gr. to be angels]”) (v. 5), holds a key role in the way the Earth will proclaim God’s might. The responsibility he is given comes across in the use of the verb מָשַׁל (to administrate, to be

¹² Ibid., 306-307.

¹³ T. Ghose, 2013. Animal Sacrifice Powered Ancient Jerusalem's Economy, web doc., <https://www.livescience.com/39307-jerusalem-animal-sacrifice-found.html>, consulted on March 18th, 2020; A. Keddie, 2019. Chapter 4: “Economy of the Sacred”, Religion and Economics in the Roman East, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 152-196.

leader), not those from Genesis 1 nor מלך (to be a king – because only God is the king of creation).

The polyphony of writers is an essential element of Biblical texts. This is true for environment and climate issues, as it is also for many others. Our hermeneutical approach in order to find answers to some of our contemporary questions invites us to respect these multiple voices, even though we do not necessarily understand some of the contradictions they hold. Despite different orientations and accents due to their respective contexts, the Biblical accounts of creation have in common the fact that they show an important interest in caring for the Earth and therefore draw our attention to our own understanding of what it means to turn it into a paradise. The call for climate care is therefore also polyphonic.