

Look Back | 9 Biblical Themes That Encourage Earth Care

Editor's note: This article [first appeared](#) on Dec. 6, 2010. At the time of publication, Humphreys was emeritus professor of divinity at Samford University. It is reposted today to call attention to the annual [Season of Creation](#) (Sept. 1 to Oct. 4).

Does the biblical teaching that human beings have dominion over the earth grant Westerners a license to exploit the planet?

Or are there biblical themes that encourage stewardship rather than exploitation?

I think such themes exist. Here are nine of them:

- The Earth is God's good creation.

The Genesis creation story makes it clear that God is the "Source ... of all that is" (Romans 11:36). God judged the creation to be "good," even "very good."

All the Bible confirms the words of the psalmist, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Psalms 24:1-2).

- The Earth was created by God for God, not just for the use of human beings.

This is a minor theme in the Bible, and it is easily overlooked, but it is there. Psalm 148 says, "Praise the Lord! ... Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!"

God's delight in creation, independent of its usefulness for human beings, is evident in the biblical story of Job. Part of God's response to Job (Job 38-39) was that the world does not exist just for the sake of human beings.

The Lord waters a valley and causes flowers to grow in it, which no human being will ever see.

- Human beings are the greatest of God's creations.

The Genesis creation story makes this point in several ways: Human beings are created last, they are given dominion over the rest of creation, they alone are made in the image of God, and into them alone God breathes the breath of life (Genesis 1:26, 2:7). The glory of human beings is celebrated also in Psalm 8.

- Human beings were created from the earth to live upon the earth.

Genesis says that God made the first human being from the dust of the earth and

called him Adam, a word which sounds like the Hebrew “adamah,” the word for “dust.”

The connectedness of human beings to the earth is one of the themes emphasized in modern ecology. This theme also qualifies the previous theme that human beings are God’s greatest creations. They are, but they also are dust.

- God has given the earth as a gift and blessing to human beings.

“Heaven belongs to the Lord alone, but he gave the earth to man,” wrote the psalmist (Psalms 115:16). It is God who has taught human beings how to farm the earth so that it will produce food (Isaiah 28:23-26).

- Appreciation for the created universe can help human beings know and praise God.

The classic statement of this idea is found in Psalm 19. “How clearly the sky reveals God’s glory! How plainly it shows what he has done! Each day announces it to the following day; each night repeats it to the next.”

The apostle Paul said, “We are here to announce the Good News, to turn you ... to the living God who made heaven, earth, sea and all that is in them. In the past, he allowed all people to go their own way. But he has always given evidence of his existence by the good things he does: he gives you rain from heaven and crops at the right times; he gives you food and fills your hearts with happiness” (Acts 14:15-17).

- God has entrusted human beings with caring for the earth.

Four verbs are used in Genesis. Genesis 1:28 says human beings are to fill the earth and to have dominion over its creatures. Genesis 2:15 says that Adam is to till the garden and to keep it.

Keeping the garden means protecting it and being responsible for its welfare. The biblical word for one who does this is steward, which means a manager, one entrusted with something who is to use it responsibly.

- Human beings and the earth are in serious trouble.

The Bible asserts an ecological crisis, and it attributes that crisis to human beings.

After the fall, the Lord said to Adam, “Because of what you have done, the ground will be under a curse.” After the flood, the Lord said to Noah, “All the animals, birds and fish will live in fear of you.”

Paul wrote that “all of creation groans with pain.” It should come as no surprise to people who read the Bible that human beings are the source of nature’s problem.

- God has acted to rescue both human beings and the earth.

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The story of God's acting to save human beings is the Bible's central message. What is easily overlooked is that God's intention to save includes all creation, not just human beings.

The prophet Isaiah described the peaceable kingdom in terms of environmental harmony. "Wolves and sheep will live together in peace, and leopards will lie down with young goats. Calves and lion cubs will feed together, and little children will take care of them" (Isaiah 11:6-7).

As wonderful as Isaiah's words are, Paul wrote the fullest affirmation of the redemption of all creation. "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:19-21).

Taken together, these nine themes refute any claim that the biblical teaching about human dominion over the earth is an authorization to exploit the created world.

The Bible does not treat the earth as an object to be studied objectively or as scenery to be admired aesthetically or as a machine to be operated profitably or as raw material to be used indiscriminately or as a victim to be exploited ruthlessly.

The Bible affirms the value of all creation, and it can underwrite a responsible environmental policy.