

**An Ethic of Mutuality:
some biblical perspectives as a basis and vision
for Sustainable Development**

John Olley¹

*“Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground”.*² These words at the beginning of the Bible have been used to justify the exploitation of the earth’s resources for human purposes – all is there for human benefit. With this understanding the Judeo-Christian heritage in developed countries has been seen to have caused environmental pollution and depletion of resources.³

Increasing awareness of environmental issues, limitations in resources, declining biodiversity and questions about appropriate development have led to the search for a more satisfactory ethic and a wide recognition that there is much more to say, both about the opening words and about wider biblical perspectives.⁴

Western Australia at the start of the third millennium is radically different to the world of the Bible, in terms of population, political and socio-economic structures and technology. And yet the Bible provides powerful images of possibilities. But not just “possibilities”: from the perspective of biblical faith they are visions of what is to be. As such they provide motivation

¹ Principal, Baptist Theological College of Western Australia , and Senior Lecturer in Old Testament Studies, Murdoch University.

² Genesis 1:28. All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

³ . Seminal in arguing this was the 1966 lecture to the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Washington by the historian, Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-07.

⁴ Literature is prolific! There has been major study within the World Council of Churches, under the umbrella theme of Justice Peace and the Integrity of Creation, while evangelical international conferences have been equally active throughout the 80s and 90s, both bringing together economists, scientists, politicians, sociologists, theologians, development workers, with people from both developed and developing nations. The journal *Transformation* (Oxford, UK) regularly publishes conference papers and reports.

for the present.⁵ They provide images of how the world can be different, but also speak of living the reality of human selfishness and the reality of divine enabling for the alternative.

Rule – for whose benefit?

The use of the command to “subdue and rule” is a good example of how biblical statements that support one’s own inclinations can be isolated, read out of context and without the checks and balances of other statements. In the world of ancient Mesopotamia (the region of modern Iraq) and certainly in the Bible the ideal was that a king’s rule was to be for the benefit of the ruled! Solomon was a wise king when all the people enjoyed peace and shared the prosperity, unlike the end of his reign which focused on self-aggrandizement.⁶ The image of “subdue” is certainly strong, suggesting positive actions, but actions not to exploit but to bring peace and harmony.

The parallel command given to humans to “till the ground” significantly uses a word elsewhere translated as “serve” while the linked phrase, “to keep it” has the image of guarding and watching over (as a shepherd “keeps” sheep, or as God “guards/protects” people).⁷

Both passages convey mutuality – humans are to benefit in the obtaining of food, while in turn people are responsible for care and protection of both animals and land. A further dimension is given in that people are made “like God” who enjoyed what he had made and are initially placed in the “garden of Eden”, a place of enjoyment. There is a combination of utility and enjoyment of the beauty of the rich variety of creation. The account of Genesis 1 is a movement from chaos and emptiness to ordered diversity and fullness. The repeated “of every kind” (traditionally “according to their kind”) is a statement about variety that is God sees is “good”: God enjoys the biodiversity, and humans are made to be like God.

⁵ Sadly some Christians have used visions of “a new heaven and a new earth” to justify present destruction – “it’s all going to be destroyed anyway”. In part this follows from a misinterpreting of phrases such as “the elements will be dissolved by fire” (2 Peter 3:10), failing to see that the imagery is the smelting of minerals, purifying and obtaining that which is of lasting value. Biblical visions of the future are to provide incentives to live those patterns now.

⁶ The contrast is between 1 Kings 3:28; 4:20 and the complaint of the people in 12:4.

⁷ Genesis 2:15. For God’s “keeping” see e.g., Psalm 121.

For me and mine – or mutual benefit?

The biblical writers knew the reality of human society – one where selfishness, violence, the desire to control and concern for oneself or one's group are endemic, alongside the potential for goodness and the development of both technology and music.⁸ The well-known narrative of Adam and Eve and of Cain and Abel describes self-centredness, with evasion of responsibility for one's own actions and the causing of pain and suffering to others. There is narrated the mystery that somehow human actions and pollution and violence to the earth are intertwined.

The narrative of the flood significantly includes all animals (not just domestic animals). In the covenant (God's promised commitment) after the flood, the diversity of animal life is specifically included on a par with human life.⁹ It seems that humans have to be reminded that animals are not just there for human benefit – both livestock and wild animals are included in God's promise of care.

Brought together are the protection of diversity and a concern for the well-being of all animals. There is recognition of human violence (with both animals and other humans as victims) and so there is a restriction to killing that is necessary for food. Again there is mutuality: people can benefit from animals, but they are also to care for all living creatures.

Protecting the Future and Embracing All People

Biblical laws express a vision of shared benefits. Land is a trust, not a commodity. Humans are tenants of God's land. Various laws recognise the vicissitudes of economic and climatic conditions, but seek to give expression to long-term protection of the economic well-being of all extended families throughout the generations.

There are laws concerning leaving land fallow, so that it continues to be fertile, and in not over-exploiting so that those who are poor can share. Part of being "holy" (which to the modern ear sounds religious!) is:

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.¹⁰

⁸ The whole of Genesis chapter 4 illustrates.

⁹ Genesis 9:8-17.

¹⁰ Leviticus 19:9-10.

Alongside a vision of economic growth and prosperity so that there is no poverty “if only you will diligently observe this whole commandment” is the practical reality that “there will never cease to be some in need” (or traditionally, “the poor you always have with you”) – and so “open your hand to the poor and needy”!¹¹ People will not always do what is right, and so corrective action is needed.

Biblical accounts, in history, the prophets and the New Testament, demonstrate that reality was far short from the vision. After all, it is those with power and clout that implement laws, and vested interests have always been present. There is injustice and exploitation, and so there is encouragement of all, both leaders and the general populace, to seek to correct the injustices of the system.

The vision of economic growth with enough for all – if all share - surfaces in surprising contexts. The description of God providing food (“manna”) to a people travelling in the infertile wilderness is that people were to take only enough for themselves, each day – and if they took too much it went bad. Centuries later in the New Testament Paul uses this to talk of Christians sharing material resources, “that there may be equality”.¹² The response to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was that people spontaneously shared.¹³ Two hundred years later the comment was made that, in contrast to surrounding society, “everything is common with us, except our wives”.¹⁴ The vision of shared prosperity inspired people to action.

Two Kinds of Socio-economic Development

The Bible affirms the benefits that can accrue from technology and urbanization. But there is also an awareness of the dangers: technological development may focus on weapons, and cities may exclude.

In particular there is a typology of two kinds of cities, represented by Babylon and Jerusalem. Babylon is first mentioned in the tower of Babel story – a people whose focus is on self-preservation and their own reputation, their own benefit to the exclusion of others¹⁵ The final

¹¹ Deuteronomy 15:1-11.

¹² Exodus 16:16-20; 2 Corinthians 8:13-15.

¹³ Acts 2:44-; 4:32-34.

¹⁴ Tertullian, *Apology* 39.11.

¹⁵ Genesis 11:4. A “city” is a settlement that has walls.

description (a veiled allusion to Rome, the centre of the powerful empire) conveys a sense of wonder at the wealth that comes from being a world power:

gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots,

but the end gives the chilling cost, “human bodies and souls”.¹⁶

The contrast is Jerusalem, also described in Revelation as wealthy, with its walls and buildings being of rich jewels and gold. But its gates are open, and a river flows from it, surrounded by trees that bring healing to all nations. Elsewhere the vision of the new Jerusalem is of leaders and citizens alike being concerned to do what is right and just for all.

Two cities, two visions: one with a technology which brings wealth to a few, and death to the rest; the other with technology with a human face, which sees justice and doing what is right as prior¹⁷ (and not the result). The focus is on all people, not just “my group”.

The Bible does not provide rules but does shape values. It gives visions of possibilities that are rooted in the realities of human behaviour. In the central message of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ it provides both the possibilities of new beginnings, forgiving and overcoming the errors and self-centredness of the past, and the power for moving ahead alternatively with a development that has mutuality at its core – shared concerns for the well-being of all, especially the powerless, and shared prosperity. A mutuality that recognises that humans, animals and the land are all part of God’s creation and sustainable development respects all the partners. But the all-embracing vision of growth for all through mutuality is given in contexts that express the realities of human self-interest. It is a call for all who hear to live this way now, even when others do not.

¹⁶ Revelation 18:11-13

¹⁷ Psalm 72 is a prayer for the reign of a new leader, culminating in prosperity. Significantly peace and economic prosperity is a *result* of care for the weak and powerless (not the reverse order, where “social welfare” is a benefit carried out by a nation that has put economic development as the priority).