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To Nurture or to Trample on the Earth

A biblical reflection non violence against the environment

*A paper prepared for the Asian Women's Resource Centre Workshop, Seoul,
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Note: *In writing this paper, I have assumed that the reader will read the Bible passages referred to in **bold type**, or is already familiar with the stories they contain.*

Introduction

When I attended my first Asian women's theology conference, in Singapore in 1987, I was struck by the connection some women made between the violence which men do to the environment, and the violence which men commit against women. They argued that there is a relationship between the rape of women and rape of the land.

What they were talking about is that there are two quite different ways of acting towards "nature" and towards people. One way is to see the world, its living things, and its people as things which exist to be overpowered and used by "men". The other way is to see the world, its living things and people as being in relationship with one another and with us. It leads to actions based on respect and co-operation.

Many women would say that the first outlook is common among men, especially "first world", affluent men, who use the earth and other people to achieve their economic and political goals. It is what we might call an "instrumental" approach (the earth and people are "instruments" for those men to use). The second way is more characteristic of women. Women and the environment are both sources of life, provide hospitality for life and nurture life. It is a "relational" approach. Women's role as life-bearers and life-nurturers provides women with a basis for understanding environmental issues.

It is men who hold power in government and industry, and, on the whole, they act from the first perspective. Let me offer some examples from Australia, which seem to reflect the prevailing ideology. There are many enlightened men who as individuals would reject the attitudes in these examples. The problem is that when men function together, when they operate in government and business, the attitudes and values presented in my examples prevail. Patriarchal structures and outlook are inconsistent with concern for the environment.

Example 1: *The Boy who climbed windmills*

First I must explain the background. Agricultural products, produced on large, high technology farms with only a small workforce, are a major component of Australia's exports. For many years farmers have been struggling with low commodity prices in the international markets, coupled with high interest rates which have led to increased debt levels. Over the last few years, the value of the land, the asset used as security for borrowing money, has decreased. Many farmers have gone bankrupt.

In January 1992 at the Sydney Festival, there was a play produced with the sponsorship of the National Farmers Federation. It was called *The Boy who climbed windmills*, and it was about a farmer struggling against the land. The goal of the farmer seemed to be about conquering the spirit of the land, rather than about running a successful export business. He had to win. He had to subdue the land. He was obsessed with conquering the land. He was

terrified of it conquering him. His obsession led him to ignore all the financial and practical aspects of his farm.

This meant that the play did not tackle any of the justice issues facing Australian farmers. It ignored the struggle between city and rural ways of doing things. It ignored the struggle with international trade and finance, and the struggle to be efficient and competent financial managers in a situation where so many financial factors are beyond the control of the farmer.

The male struggle against the land was an obsession which over-rode all other issues, to the point of threatening the survival of the farmer, his family and his business.

What really worries me about this, is that the play was meant to promote understanding and acceptance of the farmers' viewpoint. I found myself becoming alienated from the experience of the farmer in the play, rather than empathising with him. I felt sympathy for the spirit of the land. Surely Australian farmers need to nurture the land, understand it, love it, and cooperate with it, rather than fighting a war of conquest against it? How can the land cooperate with farmers in producing crops, if farmers do not cooperate with the land instead of fighting it?

Example 2: The Western Tradition according to Hugh Morgan

Recently Hugh Morgan, an influential businessman in Australia and an outspoken person on behalf of Australian mining companies, wrote an article strongly critical of "Environmentalism".

In the article he claims to identify with Rex Connors, a politician from the 1970s, and goes on:

He wanted to build things. It is a very important part of the Western tradition, which is based on classical Greek values and thinking and on the Old and New Testaments, to want to build things - great cathedrals, opera houses, magnificent bridges, railway stations, even large dump trucks and front end loaders. These things are the results of carrying out the injunction given in the first chapter of Genesis, verse 28, to:

'Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it'.

I have quoted that text from time to time when speaking about environmentalism and the environmentalist movement and it has been fascinating to observe that, in doing so, I committed some sort of deeply offensive blasphemy.

For the true Environmentalist...Man is subordinate to Nature and the history of the Christian era is a history of gross impiety and sacrilege. Contemporary environmentalism, in its pure form, is as radical and uncompromising an attack on the entire structure of Western society as can be imagined. ¹

There are many problems with these comments I have quoted, and with his whole article.

His interpretation of the text seems to reflect his own approach to life and to nature, rather than a serious study of Scripture. As the head of a mining company, he sees the enormous "dump trucks" used to transport mined ore as the fulfilment of God's purpose in creating heaven and earth, plants and animals, and humankind. Yet some Australian indigenous women describe mining operations as an act of violence against their mother, the land.

His comments on building are hard to justify from Scripture, particularly as Genesis 11:1-9 is a direct challenge to the whole philosophy of building ever greater buildings.

Australian indigenous people would also question the value of the tradition he espouses. They did very little building before European invasion and see Western style buildings as cutting people off from the land and its life. They see our enormous buildings as harmful to our humanness and our spirituality. But he pays no attention to their viewpoint.

¹ Hugh Morgan, managing Director of Western Mining Corporation, in *The Age* 31/12/92. Edited version of speech given to a (private) organisation called Council for the National Interest.

His article makes no reference to ecology as an empirical science and academic discipline. There is no reference to the needs of living organisms and the ecosystem. His comments reduce the environmental debate to an ideological battle, in which there is no need to understand the biological world and no awareness of our relationship to it. His comments on the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, are highly critical of the outcomes, but fail to address the biological needs which that conference attempted to address.

In developing a different approach from his, it is not as simple as saying that we must not mine the earth. Many of the things needed to satisfy basic human need in the modern world require metals which are mined. Even quite simple medical procedures, such as inoculation against disease, require metal needles and glass or plastic syringes.

Why is his article so offensive? It is because he raises mining and building to some sort of absolute good, as if this is the purpose for which God created humankind and the earth. Mr Morgan's comments appear to glorify industry and its products as ends in themselves. Only the wants of human beings are important in his eyes, and in this way he can justify whatever industrial "man" does to the earth and its creatures. He is unaware of the wonder of God's creation, blinded by his fascination with what man "builds".

It is noteworthy that Mr Morgan uses the sexist term "man". This suggests that he is as unwilling to hear the calls to end sexism as he is to heed the cries of Aboriginal people and environmentalists.

In the same way that men feel the need for power over women, they seem to feel the need for power over the land and its web of life. In the same way as they fail to value women as equals, they fail to value other forms of life.

Example 3: "No regrets" policies

Men seem to see environmental issues mainly in terms of economics and technology. In Australia, there is discussion of "environmentally sustainable development", but both major political parties are committed to what they call a "no regrets" policy.

To me, as a woman whose initial training was in the biological sciences, a "no regrets" policy suggests that we should behave in such a way that no one will later regret what we have done to the environment.

For the politicians and bureaucrats, however, "no regrets" refers to economics and commerce. The idea is that there should be "no regrets" about our economic development. We should never feel that we have made an unnecessary sacrifice of our economic development for the sake of the environment. It also includes the idea that we should not, as a nation, disadvantage ourselves compared to other nations. We should not let our concern for the environment lead to policies which put us at a disadvantage in international trade.

For example, business people keep telling us that we should not impose on business anti-pollution standards which are higher than those required in other countries, or any other policy which might impose extra costs.

This sort of attitude plagued UNCED (the United Nations Conference on environment and development, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992). The main concern of nations was that they be free to proceed with their economic agenda. This was true of both industrialised and less industrialised nations.

The less industrialised nations of the world have some excuse for such an attitude, because development seems to be the path towards the ending of poverty .

But the overall attitude is nevertheless a problem - the idea that the earth exists for human benefit, rather than for its own sake. Sun Ai Lee Park has pointed out in her paper at this workshop that environmental issues are important in Asia - they are not only a "Western" problem.

How do we move beyond violence to other species, to a way of life which values the earth and its biosphere² for their own sake? How do we cease to be totally human-centred and arrogant?

How do we do this in a way which nevertheless pursues justice and ensures that all people have access to the things which they need for life, and a decent standard of living?

How do we pursue justice in a way which prevents destruction of the environment, which is itself a form of injustice to the biosphere, and to future generations of people?

How do we do this in a way which does not use concern for the environment as a way of perpetrating the *status quo*, the present situation of terrible injustice in the global economy?

Example 4 Reconciling Environment and Economics ??

The tendency to see everything in economic terms is evident in a book I bought in 1991 called *Reconciling environment and economics*.³ As someone trained in biology, and as a Christian, I expected that "reconciling" meant holding together the perspectives of biologists and business, and finding ways of dealing with both concerns. The book, however, was written entirely from the viewpoint of economists and business people, without any indication of the biological perspective.

Mr Morgan's article, mentioned earlier, also makes absolutely no mention of any biological facts or issues.

This is a destructive, violent approach. It implies that we can ignore the land and its creatures, as if they have no identity, no life of their own. The people who use such an approach ignore the fact that we human beings are part of the web of life, the biosphere, the complex pattern of living creatures and the land, air, water, sea in which we all live.

In Australia, many business people and politicians seem to believe that concern for non-human life is "sentimental", "soft-headed", "emotional", out of touch with economic reality. Hugh Morgan goes further than this, seeing it as a plot to undermine Western civilisation. Implicit in this view is the idea that the primary values are material and economic values, and that life depends on economic progress - everything else is subordinate to this. The focus on economics becomes a form of violence to life.

These attitudes are not uniform throughout Australia. Australian diplomats played important roles in the preparatory talks leading to the UNCED conference in Rio de Janeiro in June this year, working hard to get international agreement on some substantial issues. However, the outlook of our politicians is evident in the fact that the Australian Prime Minister did not attend, not even for one day, even though most of his counterparts throughout the world did attend.

What does Genesis 1-3 really say about humankind's relationship to the rest of creation? Are we to trample the earth?

Genesis 1-3 has often been said to be about "creation and fall", about the entrance of original sin into the world. Given the violence which the environment is experiencing, we need to go back to these chapters and look in a new way at what they may be saying.

(a) What is an appropriate starting point in understanding these chapters?

I believe that the key to these chapters lies in chapter 3, in the so-called "curses" of verses 14-24. In the curses we have an assessment of life as human beings experience it. It is an experience of struggles with one another, with childbirth, and with other creatures.

When we start from Genesis 3, Genesis 1-3 seem to hold together, as a way of making sense of the struggle of human life. In the time when they were written, life was

² The biosphere is the web of life which surrounds the earth, on land, in oceans and in the air.

³ Bennett J and Block W *Reconciling environment and economics*., Australian Institute for Public Policy, Perth 1991 (the AIPP is a private "think tank" funded by business).

precarious. People lived only a brief lifespan, because of war, famine (caused by drought, flood, insect pests or war), disease, and attacks from wild animals. For ordinary people, life involved much pain, uncertainty and death. People had no sense of control over the way in which they lived, or the way in which the world operated. For much of the time, life must have appeared chaotic.

As the Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann puts it (if one can ignore the sexist language):

It was not the philosopher inquiring about his origins that spoke in the Creation narratives; it was man threatened by his surroundings. The background was an existential, not an intellectual problem.⁴

(b) The historic background - what was the Israelite experience of life and its struggles?

This chaos is evident when one reads the Old Testament.⁵ Famine is a common theme. It is the reason the Israelites went to Egypt⁶. Joseph rose to power in Egypt because he had a plan for dealing with a famine which Pharaoh's dream foretold⁷. Famine is the reason that Naomi and Elimelech went to Moab⁸. The prophet Joel describes a locust plague which destroys crops⁹. Water supplies were limited, and ownership of wells an important matter¹⁰.

Disease was a major killer. The people of Old Testament times were often victims of epidemics, which they sometimes ascribed to God's judgement¹¹. The reason for Naomi's bitter return to Israel is that her husband and two sons have died premature deaths, presumably from disease¹². Many of the Old Testament laws are about how to limit the spread of disease¹³.

The Old Testament histories and books of the prophets are full of allusions to war. Israel lived much of its history in fear of enemies, although the identity of the enemy changed over time. For the later part of the period of the Judges, and the early monarchy, the enemies were the Philistines and various other neighbouring peoples¹⁴. Following the death of Solomon, the nation of Israel split into two antagonistic nations, Israel (the Northern Kingdom) and Judah (the Southern Kingdom)¹⁵. This weakened both nations and made them targets of attack by surrounding nations. In later history the Assyrian empire expanded. Then the Babylonians took over. Both expanded by military means. First Israel and then Judah were victims of these empires. For many years they lived as occupied peoples, and many of their people were taken into exile in Babylon.^{16,17}

⁴ Westermann C *Creation* SPCK London 1971 (p11)

⁵ The workshop in Seoul, suggested that I provide more material about the Israelite experience of life, so I have inserted the following material. They also asked me to provide reference material. The best material is the Bible itself.

⁶ Genesis 42, 43

⁷ Genesis 41

⁸ Ruth

⁹ Joel 1: 4

¹⁰ eg Genesis 26:17-33

¹¹ eg Exodus 32:35; Numbers 11:33; 2 Samuel 24: 10-17

¹² Ruth 1:1-7

¹³ eg Leviticus 11-15

¹⁴ Judges 13 to 2 Samuel 24

¹⁵ 1 Kings 12 to 2 Kings 15

¹⁶ 2 Kings 15-25

There were also bandits, who threatened travellers ¹⁸.

The sense of chaos and threat to life is evident, for example, in the psalms of lament, where people express a sense of overwhelming struggle. It is also present in other writings, particularly the prophets, where people appear as pawns in the great events of history. While it took a prophet or psalm-writer to express such feelings clearly, what gave the prophecies and psalms meaning was that they related to the experience of people ¹⁹.

The book of Job is perhaps the most profound expression of this sense of chaos. Job's children are the victims of natural disasters and marauding bands ²⁰. Job himself suffers a disease which does not kill him, but makes life unbearable ²¹. Some of Job's speeches describe the chaotic nature of life in general²².

(c) Genesis 1-3 as part of the response to the experience of life 's struggles

Genesis 1:1-2:4 and 2:5ff were originally two separate stories about creation. Scholars think 2:5ff was written first, by an author often called the Yahwist, and that 1:1-2:4 was written later in Israel's history. My comments refer to the text as we now have it, after the various parts have been brought together by an editor or "redactor". ²³

Inevitably, the people of Old Testament times asked: is life meant to be such a struggle? Has God imposed such struggle upon us?

In Genesis 1-3 we have an answer to that question. Genesis 1-2 affirm that God gave the gift of life, the gift of the earth, the gift of relations between human beings. These are good gifts, an expression of God's love. In Genesis 3, the people then express one way of understanding what has happened to these gifts, and why life is no longer the way it was meant to be.

On this interpretation, Genesis 1-3, indeed Genesis 1-11, become a story of the way in which blessing and struggle intertwine with one another throughout human life.²⁴

In holding onto that affirmation in the face of chaos, the community of faith expressed hope - a sense that in human life, God's blessing still has a place. So Genesis 1 tells the story of how God gives form, substance and life to the original formless void of Genesis 1:1.

¹⁷ I have given Biblical references to one version of history in the Old Testament. In most English translations of the Bible, a survey of the headings to various chapters and sub-chapters is enough to see these trends of history. Other versions of the history can be found in the Old Testament, in Chronicles and in the books of the prophets.

Any good Bible Atlas or history of Israel will provide further background. However, it is the basic themes of the history, rather than the details, which justify my comments about the experience of life in Israel. Examples of reference works which are useful are:
Aharoni Y and Avi-Yonah M *The Macmillan Bible Atlas* New York and London, 1968
Anderson B *The Living World of the Old Testament* (also published in USA as *Understanding the Old Testament*), Longman, London 1967; also later editions.
Bright, J *A History of Israel*, SCM, London.

¹⁸ eg Judges 5: 6 ; according to most commentators, this is the reason the "caravans ceased". Also, 2 Kings 13: 21

¹⁹ eg Habbakuk 1

²⁰ Job 1:13-19

²¹ Job 2:7-9 and Job 3

²² eg Job 12, 21, 24

²³ For details, see an introduction such as Kaiser: *Introduction to the Old Testament*, or a Commentary on Genesis such as Vawter, B *On Genesis*

²⁴ Westermann C *Creation* explains this in some detail.

As they faced a world which could fill them with fear, they affirmed its awesome wonder and beauty . God made this world and called it good. So "God saw that it was good" is the constant refrain of Genesis 1.

As they faced the chaos of human life, the community of faith affirmed its sense of order in the universe. There are two separate creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, the first in Genesis 1:1 - 2:4, and the second in Genesis 2:5-25. Both these stories reflect this sense of order.

As they struggled to gain a living from the soil, they affirmed that humankind, *ʿadam* had a close relationship with the earth, *ʿadamah* , 2:7. We can make a parallel word-play in English: the human is made from the humus (humus being the rich organic matter in the soil).

As they faced a world where famine was common, either from crop failure or the ravages of war, they affirmed the abundance of food which God had provided. This is conveyed in several ways. Genesis 1:11-13 tells of the creation of plants and how they bear fruit. Genesis 1:29 tells of how God gave to humankind and the animals all the plants for food. The image of the garden in Genesis 2: 8-15 is an image of abundance.

As they faced a world which threatened them with death they affirmed that God gave humankind this world to live in. The story of creation is the story of birth and life and the continuity of life. Plants are meant to reproduce (1: 12) The command of God to animals, birds, and sea creatures (1: 22) and to humankind (1: 28) is to be fruitful and to multiply.

As they faced creatures on land and sea which seemed awesome and dangerous, they affirmed that both the creatures and human beings are part of God's creation. They are all made during the six days of creation, and pronounced good.

As they faced their own apparent powerlessness in the face of this world, its creatures and its unpredictability, they affirmed that human beings have power. The power comes through being in the image of God (1: 26-28) and through human intellect, the capacity to speak words and name things, which give us the capacity to plan our lives and reflect on what is happening around us (2: 19-20).

As they faced the limits of human strength, and the need for rest, they affirmed that rest too was good. Rest and recuperation can be a time for enjoyment of life, even for God (2: 1-4).

As they faced the pain of human relationships, and the pain of childbirth, they affirmed that life was meant to be something better than the struggle and pain which man causes woman. In 1:28 they affirm that both man and woman are in the image of God. In 2: 7, there is no male (Hebrew : *'ish*,) but only an earth creature (Hebrew: *ʿadam*,) formed from the earth (Hebrew *ʿadamah*, . Man (Hebrew *'ish*,) only comes into being (2: 23 and 24) when he recognises the woman (Hebrew *'ishah*,) as being of the same substance ("bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" 2:23). The male form of creature remains only an earth creature (*ʿadam* in verse 22 and 23) until it recognises the similarity of woman to itself. One might conclude that the essence of masculinity, in this tradition, is the capacity to recognise the similarity and relatedness of woman and man! In both creation stories, the emphasis is on the similarity, not the differences.

Genesis 1 and 2, imply that three relationships were originally positive: the relationship of the human being to other creatures, the relationship of the human being to the environment, the relationship of the human beings, male and female, to one another. All the struggles which now mar these relationships are the result of something which happened after God's creative work was complete; God cannot be blamed for the problems. Genesis 3 is an expression of this belief. I will discuss its meaning below in section (e).

(d) What is the meaning of power over the world which God gives humankind in Genesis 1: 28?

The comments of Hugh Morgan quoted early in this paper are an example of the way Western culture has misused this verse and the Judeo-Christian tradition to justify its destructive materialism.

In this verse God gives men and women five commands: be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it and have dominion over all its living creatures. The words which appear to give humankind power are the words for subdue (Hebrew *kabash*) and rule over (Hebrew: *radah*). The last two words are responsible for the question about the nature of power which God has given humankind.

Kabash kabash appears only 8 times in the Old Testament²⁵. In 2 Samuel 8:11, it refers to King David having subdued the nations. In 2 Chronicles 28:10 it refers to reducing women and children to slavery. It has a similar meaning in Jeremiah 34: 11 and 16. In Zechariah 9:15 and Micah 7:19 it means trampling something underfoot. In Esther 7:8 it refers to assaulting the queen (with the connotation that he intends to rape her). Brown, Driver and Briggs²⁶ give the meaning as *subdue, bring into bondage*. Holloway gives the meaning of the word as to subject (someone), to make subservient.²⁷

However, this range of meanings does not make sense in this context. Are we really to believe that God looked at creation, proclaimed that everything he had made was very good, and then ordered humankind to trample it underfoot or to enslave it? It makes much more sense to recognise that most Hebrew words have a range of meanings in English, to recognise that this word refers to some sense of power over creation, and then to derive its meaning from its context.

The other Hebrew word used here, *radah*, has the meaning *have dominion, rule, dominate* ²⁸, or to rule or to govern. ²⁹ In Leviticus 25: 43 and 46 the Israelites are told not to rule (*radah*) with harshness, which suggests that this word may have carried a connotation of harshness.

The commentators offer little help with these words. Von Rad ignores the questions now being raised about the nature of power implied by *radah* and *kabash*, simply noting they are strong expressions of dominion.³⁰

Vawter comments on *radah* that it is a word "of some vehemence: it does not imply some kind of benign presidency over a docile and pacific nature" ³¹. Vawter argues, however, that *radah* reflects the kingly ideals found in passages such as Isaiah 11: 3-5. Westermann ³² takes a similar approach, but fails even to mention the particular words involved.

Von Rad, Vawter, and Westermann avoid the problems of the words used by choosing instead to discuss Israelite concepts of kingship, arguing that human beings should exercise a responsible attitude towards the earth. Power is to be used for stewardship not destruction.

²⁵ Armstrong T A, Busby D L and Carr C F, *A Reader's Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids (Michigan) 1980 - data for the qal form.

²⁶ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford UP, 1972

²⁷Holloway W L, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids (Michigan)1971.

²⁸ Brown, Driver and Briggs

²⁹ Holloway, *Lexicon*

³⁰ *Genesis* SCM London 1963

³¹ *On Genesis*, p57

³² *Creation*, see page 51ff

While I agree with their conclusions about how humans ought to use their power, their argument is invalid because they have not confronted the exegetical issues raised by the terminology used in these verses. *Radah* is not used in Isaiah 11:3-5 (which Vawter refers to) or the other passages which most explicitly express the Israelite traditions of kingship. The words for kingly rule in such passages are the much more common *malak* (used in qal form over 250 times in the Old Testament) and *mashal* (used in qal form over 70 times). (*Radah* is used in qal form only 22 times.) Moreover, when Yahweh is described as king *melek* the cognate verb is of course *malak*, and it is from Yahweh's kingship that the ideals of human kingship derive. Thus the approach taken by von Rad, Vawter and Westermann appears inadequate.

It is unclear why *kabash* and *radah* are used to convey the idea of humankind's power over creation. However, the very rareness of these words in the Old Testament requires that we pay careful heed to their context, rather than assuming their meaning.

In seeking to understand the meaning of these commands, we need to take account of another factor in this story. Genesis 1: 26-28 says that God created humankind in his *tselem* (statue, image, model) and *demuth* (pattern, form, shape, image). That is, in Israelite religion, human beings replace the idols of other religions; we represent God. When people look at one another, they should see something of the nature of God.³³

To understand the power which God gives to humankind, we must look at the context in which 1:28 occurs. The meaning depends on that context. The power is the outcome of the process of creation and must be consistent with that process.

What then is the meaning of the command to subdue the earth and rule over it?

In the context of Genesis 1, a sense of wonder and awe would guide humankind's use of power. Human power would be exercised with the understanding that humankind is only one part of God's creation, all of which is valuable. God made us in God's image, and the way in which we use our power over creation should reflect God's nature and God's attitude towards creation. We know that God considers creation good, and sustains that creation. God did not create this world to exploit it, but to love it, and calls us to do likewise. Like God, humankind has the power of life and death, but like God, humankind is to use that power for life, not for death.

This is consistent with the impression given in Genesis 2. The earth is a garden and humankind is the gardener. Gardeners have absolute power of life and death over the plants within their garden; they can uproot things or fertilise and water them. When one tramples heedlessly over the garden, instead of cultivating it, one ceases to be a gardener. The role of the gardener is to cultivate, protect and tend the garden, so that it may live and blossom.

It is when humankind uses its power in this way, to cultivate, protect and tend the earth, that we fulfil our role as rulers over the earth, who represent God to the whole of creation.

(e) What is the significance of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" in Genesis 2-3?

"But from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat" Genesis 2:17

There have been several scholarly suggestions about what it means to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in **Genesis 2-3**. I find most convincing the view that says that it means knowledge of everything, both what is good, and what is evil.³⁴ This leads to the story in chapter 3 being interpreted as meaning that knowledge can endanger and destroy relationships. Knowledge can have evil, as well as good, consequences. Humankind eats

³³ I am grateful to Dr William Dumbrell for this suggestion, during Biblical exegesis classes at Sydney University.

³⁴ Westermann, *Creation* page 93

of the tree of knowledge of good and evil when they think that knowledge can enable them to ignore their human limits.

The author of these chapters, part of the "Yahwistic" strand of Genesis 1-11, wrote in a period when knowledge was flowering - probably Solomon's reign.³⁵ It appeared to be a period of development of technological and scientific knowledge (within the ancient limits of such disciplines) - knowledge of living things, knowledge of building techniques, knowledge of other places and cultures through trade, diplomacy, and even the exchange of writings, although these were comparatively rare. Those responsible for the male traditions of Old Testament times believed that such knowledge constituted "wisdom". They considered Solomon to have been the patron of such "wisdom".³⁶

So Genesis 3 becomes a comment on the dangers of human knowledge, when it seeks to know everything, or assumes it knows everything, both good and evil. The ancient story is also the modern story: when human beings are too confident that they understand life and the world, they lose control, they damage relationships, they end up feeling alienated from one another and from the world (the garden) in which they live.

According to the tradition in **1 Kings 8:10**, Solomon indulged in great building works and trading programs. Solomon's wisdom was legendary in the Ancient Near East, and measured up to the high standards set by the Queen of Sheba, in the wisdom contest held during her trading mission to his court.

Solomon's society was the sort of society envisaged in Genesis 11:1-9, which thought that it could construct buildings so great that it could storm heaven itself. When Solomon died, his son chose a similar but more extreme approach, and the Kingdom was torn into two (**1 Kings 12**). Solomon's wisdom had not taken account of the human cost which was involved in achieving material wealth, particularly the requirement of forced labour which so angered the people. Solomon's wisdom had become distorted by materialism. This is what Solomon's son Rehoboam inherited, and his tyrannical attitude ensured that the damage already done to society quickly became obvious. The emphasis on knowledge, technology, trade, scientific, economic and material advancement, had led to alienation in society. This is the danger the Yahwist saw, and warned about in the parts of his writings in Genesis 1-11.³⁷

It is a warning that humankind needs to hear and to heed today. When we pursue the knowledge of everything both good and bad, we engage in a dangerous occupation. Humankind, in its pursuit of knowledge, has taken on enormous power. Much of the damage which is done to relationships of people with one another, and people with the earth, comes from the obsession with knowledge in the form of technology and industrialisation. Too often people think of the benefits, so-called "economic development", but ignore or are ignorant of the costs. Too often people assume that human beings can do all things and accomplish all things, and that there should be no limits to economic and technological progress.

That does not mean we should be anti-intellectual, or anti-scientific, or anti-change and anti-development. However, we do need to evaluate the way knowledge is used. We should challenge those who reap great benefit from technology and industrialisation, while imposing enormous costs on other people and the environment.

Does Psalm 8 justify human violence against creation?

Like Genesis 1-3, **Psalm 8** raises questions about the nature of humankind's rightful power over the earth. Environmentalists have claimed both as the basis of Western attitudes that the earth exists for humankind to exploit.

³⁵ Most introductions to the Old Testament will give some explanation about the Yahwist.

³⁶ The Old Testament itself depicts Solomon's era in this way (1 Kings 3-11; 1 Chronicles 28 - 2 Chronicles 9)). More material about this can be found in any good book on the history of Israel, or commentary on 1 Kings or Chronicles.

³⁷ Genesis 1:1-2:4, and some other parts of Genesis 1-11 were written by later authors.

Psalm 8 : 6-8 says :

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all the sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

The word which means "you have given them dominion" is the hiphil form of the verb *mashal*. In this form it appears only three times in the Old Testament, and means to make (someone) lord or master (over something).³⁸

However, this psalm does NOT say that God gives humankind the right to do what we like. It does NOT say that we have the right to destroy. "Dominion" is not the same thing as the right to destructive exploitation. Rather, the psalm recognises that we have enormous power - power little less than God ³⁹(verse 5), power which we can use for evil or for good.

We hold the power of life and death over God's creatures. This is confirmed by all the research on how the environment is being destroyed. It is an awesome power. There is a natural cycle of life and death, growth and decay. Indeed, one might say that death is necessary for life to continue. But human destruction is different from this natural cycle of life and death. Human destruction interferes with the natural cycle, and with the natural relationships between different species and types of organisms. So the psalmist is right to attribute to humankind great power over creation.

As in Genesis 1, the reference to human power in this psalm occurs in the context of describing how wonderful creation is, and praising God the Creator (Psalm 8: 1-4,9). It does not make sense to believe that the psalmist would proclaim the glory of creation (verses 1-2), express amazement that God pays any attention to humankind (3-4), then say that God has given humankind the right to destroy that creation (5-8), and then praise God again (9). We must assume that the psalmist is consistent in his or her thinking.

God is creator, not destroyer. The psalmist surely is rejoicing in our capacity to share in God's creative power and to use our power for life. Our "dominion" comes because we are in the image of God; God made us to share in God's creative work, not to destroy what God has made.

Often human beings have denied that we have the power to destroy, and in doing so have ended up using it for evil. Species die, ecosystems die, because we deny that we have power. In this way, we have developed a culture of violence and death - pointless death, meaningless death. We have ripped apart the web of life.

We have denied our praise of the creator by killing God's creation. As Genesis 3 points out, the alienation extends even to our feeling alienated from God. Our culture of violence has divorced our spirituality from our words, so that we can believe that we praise the Creator, even while we justify exploiting and destroying God's creation.

The statement of our power in Psalm 8 is therefore very important. We need to recognise our power, if we are to repent of its misuse and to learn to use it responsibly. We need to recognise the inconsistency between what we claim to believe, and the way we live.

We need to recognise when human beings use powerful knowledge for destruction, and when they use it to enhance life. We must no longer assume that knowledge is always constructive and life-enhancing. Instead, we must work for the change which is required to ensure that in future knowledge is used in constructive and life-enhancing ways.

³⁸ Holloway, *Lexicon...*

³⁹ I am grateful to Mary Henning, an elder in my parish of the Uniting Church in Australia, for this suggestion about the meaning.

We need to remember in this and many psalms, the whole creation is described as praising God. We have no right to use our power to silence the praise of our Creator.

Proverbs 8 - the feminine figure of wisdom and its connection with creation.

We need to move away from male ideas of knowledge as information and deduction, science and technology. Within the Bible, there are two strands of wisdom. There is the male strand, represented by Solomon (see earlier in this article) and by the sort of cunning-wisdom which Amnon used to trap his sister Tamar and rape her, in **2 Samuel 13**. Then there is the feminine strand of wisdom, represented by the wise woman of Tekoa, who tried to preserve the unity of Israel (**1 Samuel 14**) and the wise woman of Abel-Beth-Machah (**2 Samuel 20**)⁴⁰ who saved her town from destruction by men who could think of only military solutions, and saved King David from someone who was trying to usurp his throne. No doubt it is such images of life-giving wisdom which led to wisdom being portrayed as a feminine figure in Proverbs 1-8. We need to move from male ideas of wisdom as simply practical knowledge or cunning, and recover these feminine ideas of wisdom as the understanding which enables us to protect and nurture life.

In **Proverbs 8**, the feminine figure of wisdom cries out her message to all who would listen, to all who would be wise.

Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginnings of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth-
When he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him like a little child (some translations: master workman)
and I was daily his delight.
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and laughing at (delighting in) the human race.

(Proverbs 8: 23-31, NRSV⁴¹, except for "little child" in place of "master workman" in verse 30 and "laughing at" instead of "delighting in" in verse 31)

Wisdom is inherent in creation.
Wisdom recognises God's hand in creation - all that is comes from and belongs to God.
Wisdom points us to creation.
Wisdom sees the wonders of the design of creation.

⁴⁰ Male commentators seem to fail to understand these stories, and make negative comments about the women. I explored the tradition of feminine wisdom in the Old Testament as part of my thesis: *Eshet Hayil (lyjAtva) - Woman of Substance*, prepared as part of the requirements for Bachelor of Divinity with Honours, Sydney University, 1979 (unpublished. Copy in AWRC library). A summary is published as "Old Testament Responses to Patriarchy" (based on BD Honours thesis), in *Trinity Occasional Papers* 1984 3: 1 pp 46-62.

⁴¹ NRSV *The Holy Bible* New Revised Standard Version, Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1989

Wisdom is a small child who enjoys creation and who recognises that humankind is only one part of creation. All is made by God; all is to be delighted in.

The end verses of this passage puzzle many scholars. The Hebrew suggests a little child, dancing around, pointing her finger and laughing.

They cannot cope with wisdom as a little child. Yet it is often children who have a sense of wonder which we lose as we grow older. It is only as we recover that sense of wonder at creation that we will live wisely with creation.

The scholars, it seems, cannot cope with wisdom laughing at human beings. Yet we desperately need to learn to laugh at ourselves, our false values, our pretentiousness, if we are to see ourselves in the proper perspective as only a part of creation, as creatures who should know we are less than God. When we learn that humility, we may recognise the evil of our destructive lifestyle.

This ties in with Psalm 8, in which other living things are not "lesser beings", but the works of God's hands (Psalm 8: 6). We face a choice. We can see ourselves as lower than God, and decide to be respectful of what God has created, or we can see ourselves as only a little lower than God, and challenge God by destroying his creation.

Both Psalm 8 and Proverbs 8 pose for us the question: how seriously do we take ourselves? In what way do we take ourselves seriously? Do we see the absurdity and the danger of our pretentiousness, when we take the future of the earth and all its creatures into our own hands, instead of respecting the whole creation of which we are only a part?

What would it mean to see our danger, our power and our absurdity?

Obviously, if people took seriously the passages of Scripture which I have examined in this article, they would approach life differently from the way taken in the examples given in the introduction to this paper.

We would have a sense of thankfulness for the whole of creation, and honour our fellow creatures as part of the one community of life created by God. We would recognise that woman and man is in the image of God, and of the same substance, and work together in partnership.

In the following comments I write as an Australian, one of the moderately affluent in a nation of 17 million people which consumes as much as 1 billion Africans would consume.⁴² I suspect that what I say is relevant to industrialised nations of Asia. For less industrialised nations, the Biblical principles are the same but the implications for change are different because of their different situation.

If we took these biblical traditions seriously, we would learn what to value and what to give up. We would see our wants and our ambitions in perspective - and be more willing to limit them because we would recognise our pretentiousness. We would find ways to end the global injustice whereby the rich cling to their privileged position (President Bush: "the USA way of life is not up for negotiation" at UNCED). The rich nations would live less well, so that poorer nations might live more well. The rich nations would pay the economic costs of caring for the environment, so that the poor nations had the financial means to improve the life of their people.

We would recognise that what is valuable about human beings is not the power to destroy but the power to create. We would find ways of becoming a creative society, in the spiritual rather than material sense. We would seek balance between material and spiritual in all societies, and would recognise that global economic justice requires sacrifice of over-consumption by the rich, rather than sacrifice of the environment or the poor.

⁴² Richard Eckersley, keynote address in *Report of the National Churches Conference on the Environment*, Sydney 1990.

We would learn to be compassionate, both towards our fellow human beings around the world, and towards non-human creatures. As we felt the groaning of creation⁴³ we would recognise our role in causing the pain, and seek to ease that pain, instead of continuing and worsening it.

If we changed in these ways, if we followed these paths, then we would reassess the way resources are used. If that seems unrealistic, then consider the fact that a very large percentage of the world's resources, about \$ 1 trillion, goes into armaments each year. That means an enormous amount of resources from the earth, and human resources, are being channelled into destruction. Military industry destroys and pollutes the earth to absolutely no good purpose. We are absurd creatures, and we need to assess what is funny absurdity, and what is dangerous absurdity. The Bible calls humankind to a new ethic.

Christ's relationship to creation

If we are to end violence against the environment, then we need also to rethink our Christology and recognise the cosmic Christ, the Christ who relates to the cosmos, the whole world, and not merely to human beings.

Colossians 1: 15-21 is one example of this theme in the New Testament.

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers - all things have been created through him and **for him**, He himself is before all things and all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and **through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven**, by making peace through the blood of his cross. ⁴⁴

If we are to have a Christian environmental ethic, then we must recognise that **Christ reconciles the whole creation to God**. God has heeded the groaning of creation (Romans 8). God does not love us alone, but all that God has created. Our ethics and our lifestyle should reflect this awareness of the Cosmic Christ - how can we destroy what Christ has reconciled to God, except where our own life is at stake? Dare we sacrifice the creation for which Christ died, merely to satisfy our desires?

Conclusion

Genesis 13, Psalm 8, Proverbs 8, Colossians 1, all reflect a "whole earth" perspective. Their authors stand back from their immediate situation, and set it in the wider perspective of time and space. They reflect a sense of humility, of proportion, which is not narrow, individualistic or purely human-centred. They express a sense of oneness with the rest of creation, and a sense of wonder and awe as one looks at creation. They recognise our power for good or evil, and provide the perspectives necessary for appropriate use of that power. They rejoice in life, non-human as well as human.

We are called to share that joy and to live in a way which continues that joy. As women we know that when one rejoices in something or someone, one nurtures and cares for them, rather than using and exploiting them. In the same way that we demand that children be fed, we must demand that nature itself be nurtured.

When we adopt such a perspective, our own lives appear differently.

It seems to me that our role as women and as Christian women is to inject some of these perspectives into debate. The role of men is to question the male approach which tramples

⁴³ Romans 8:19

⁴⁴NRSV *The Holy Bible* New Revised Standard Version, Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1989

the earth, to learn how to live in a more nurturing way and to learn how to express that more nurturing approach in the actions of business and government.

In Australia, the challenge is to recognise the need to consume less, but to share that consumption more equitably. I believe that in all nations, the challenge is to assess what aspects of industrialisation bring benefit to life, and what aspects of industrialisation damage life.

It is not appropriate that industrialised nations cling to their patterns of over-consumption while expecting other nations to make do with less. Rather there has to be a change in our understanding of life and justice, so that there is more equitable sharing of the earth's resources among human kind, but also so that humankind respects the rights of other forms of life.

We are called upon to set our human endeavours in perspective, and to work with the rest of creation, rather than invading, conquering, destroying it.

A concluding prayer

We need to continue the prayer of the church around the world, which rose to its crescendo in Canberra in 1991, at the World Council of Churches Assembly. We must let it mould our lifestyle and not merely warm our heart:

Come Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation

Giver of life sustain your creation

Spirit of truth, set us free

Spirit of unity, reconcile your people

Holy Spirit, transform and sanctify us.

Amen

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