



Articulating an Ethic of God's Creation

*“The Earth is God's and all that is in it;
Thou shall not destroy the earth nor despoil the life thereon.”*

- The slogan of Christian and Jewish Creation Care

SINCE THE EARLIEST DAYS OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT, its leaders have sought a succinct and comprehensive ethic of the environment. For thoughtful Christians and Jews the Scriptures already provide this ethic. This ethic is written plainly across many books and passages, but nowhere is it made explicit. Like the environment around us, this key to a right attitude toward Creation is dispersed throughout the entire Bible.

The ethics and worldview of Western civilization derive primarily from the Ten Commandments. These ten principles express the core values of Western society. Because values shape society, and because the power to affect the natural world for good or ill has grown exponentially in recent centuries, the time has come to clarify our human responsibility for the care of the Earth that is only partially conveyed in the Ten Commandments.

The rationale for this action is simple. Humans have three great relationships: to God, to one another, and to the land. The serious ecological problems facing the world demonstrate a need to raise awareness of our human responsibilities for this third great relationship. This is necessary so that civilization might better comprehend the moral mandate to address environmental problems.

An examination of the Bible, especially its first five books – Genesis through Deuteronomy – reveals that the rabbis from ancient times identified 613 different commands. These were divided into three sets of obligations: duties to God, duties to neighbor, and duties to the land. When Moses descended Mount Sinai, the rabbis teach that the Ten Commandments did not comprise the entire revelation. These other teachings, equally referred to as commandments, are interspersed throughout the books of Moses. Of these 613 commandments, 200 address behavior that relates to the natural world. These commandments are further divide into 89 mandates and 111 prohibitions; these deal with issues such as food purity, water quality, trees and the use of land, and they require a recognition of the sacredness and integrated nature of creation. Significantly they repeatedly and explicitly forbid any desecration or misuse of the land.

The overriding implication of these two hundred commands is that God is central to Creation and that everything within it belongs first to God. Therefore whatever belongs to God must not be defiled, degraded or destroyed. A right relationship to God presumes a right relationship to the land. This determination repeatedly appears in Scripture and is based upon explicit biblical citations and

requirements that humans not destroy the earth nor despoil its life.

The 413 other commandments that do not refer to the natural world are equally significant because they emphasize human responsibility to remember God and to respect one another. Thus the 613 commandments in their aggregate represent a seamless and integrated worldview that establishes a Law for human behavior so that human society and all Creation might flourish in harmony.

Jesus affirms this Mosaic Law and commends this codification of responsibility to God for care of Creation to all who follow him. For Christians and Jews alike, therefore, our responsibility to God is summed up in this two-part phrase:

*The Earth is God's and all that is in it; Thou shall not
destroy the earth nor despoil the life thereon.*

This ethic of the environment accomplishes four tasks: (1) It summarizes human responsibility to God to care for the land and all that is in it. (2) It provides a moral test of whether or not an action is right before God. (3) It establishes an easily communicated spiritual and religious basis for a sustainable and just society. (4) It reveals a vision of how society must transform its attitudes in order to integrate itself into the ecosystem of the planet.

To accomplish these goals, the National Religious Coalition on Creation Care has adopted and promotes as its slogan this summation of the Biblical message in its relation to the Earth. It urges all individuals, religious institutions and government leaders to reflect on this ethic of the environment in determining the rightness of actions that are under consideration.

Adopted unanimously
February, 2006