Of Spirit, Of Soil:
Christian Relation to an Interconnected Natural World

Part I: The Roots

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Of Spirit, Of Soil

by

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Abstract:

Of Spirit, Of Soil is an ongoing literary non-fiction work that integrates biology, Biblical literature, theology, and philosophy to reimagine Christian creation care through a framework of relational eco-consciousness. Synthesizing Martin Buber's *I and Thou* with Aldo Leopold's *Land Ethic*, this project calls for a shift from viewing the nonhuman world as a resource, to a community of particular subjects. This renewed paradigm fosters a deeper, more authentic form of Christian creation care.

This work is divided into three sections: The Roots, The Rhizome, and The Shoots. It begins with foundational Biblical and theological analysis, extends to both Christian and secular figures who've lived out this framework, and concludes by addressing the practical implications of engaging with relational eco-consciousness.

This submission includes four chapters, comprising the entirety of *Part 1: The Roots*. Chapter 1 introduces the framework of relational eco-consciousness and explains its foundational sources. Chapter 2 examines the formation of the current Christian relationship to the Earthas rooted in mininterpration of Genesis 1:28, and analyzes the creation narratives alongside other Old Testament passages to reframe the concept of dominion. Chapter 3 explores dominion as modeled by Jesus Christ, using biblical exegesis of the Gospels to analyze His relationship with the natural world. Chapter 4 examines God's relationship with creation and how we are called into this, considering how we should act in light of God's future hopes for all of creation.

Of Spirit, Of Soil serves as both a scholarly contribution and a call to action, aiming to inspire Christians to redefine their relationship with the nonhuman world. The ultimate goal is to cultivate a revitalized wave of Christian Ecotheology, transforming the way Christians relate to and care for the natural world.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The wind is raw on my face, slicing flesh with each trod of my snowshoes. It's -30 degrees today, fresh snow transformed to ice with last night's ruthless freeze. As I meander through the thicket of pines, I duck under the long limbs that encircle me. I don't mind them, the branches. Ironically, their needled canopy is almost endearing. They swaddle me, shielding my skin from the icy sheet of oxygen that staggers my every move. Stumbling out from the greenery, I emerge at the edge of a frozen lake. As I lift my eyes across the horizon, a shallow dent in the snow comes into view. It's a human shaped dent, created by myself approximately one week ago. It's as if the icy freeze was not as merciless as I had first thought, preserving the remnants of my last visit—an extended invitation of sorts, beckoning my return.

In some ways, this day is like any other weekly visit to Lake Elaine. The jarringly frigid air, the oak and white pine towering above my little alcove in the snow—these are consistent. But something is different this time. A dense fog hangs in my head, a looming greyness that I can't quite grasp. It has somehow seeped out of my brain because I can feel the tension hanging in the air, firmly clinging to each molecule, each fleck of snow. It's as if the land knows—knows that this will be our last time together.

I stand there for just a moment before my knees buckle out from beneath me, my limp body collapsing to a kneel. Pressed up against the snow, a lone tear streaks down my face—a small blip of warmth, starkly at odds with the suffocating chill in the air. It's as if my warm tear is an offering, an apology, a thank you to this place. This tear holds a love letter, some intense entanglement of emotions and gratitude that can never, and will never truly be put into words.

I THE THAW AFTER THE FREEZE: RELATIONALITY IS BORN

The above scene took place in Land O' Lakes, Wisconsin. Nestled on the outskirts of this sleepy little town, one can follow a windy road into dense woodland and end up at a place called Conserve School. As an experienced-based school with an environmental focus, Conserve hosted 62 of us for the semester. A bunch of tree hugging highschoolers, you could find us burrowed into snow covered dormitories, or gallivanting around the grand hall dedicated to eating, classes, and activities. It was a place forged by a joy for learning, the outdoors, and pure adolescent frivolities, all enmeshed into something we called a community. For a short time, Conserve was home for me. That is, until the Covid-19 Pandemic struck the nation, abruptly shooting each of the 62 of us back into our monotonous, pre-conserve lives.

And so, my last visit to Lake Elaine was a sad one. Throughout the semester, I had gotten to know Elaine, to "know" in a way that preceded any preconceptions I had about what knowledge entails. Like clockwork, each Wednesday I would sit at this same section of her shore. Nuzzled in the snow, sipping a caffeinated bliss of coffee and Swiss Miss, I would take out my notebook and observe. Sketching out branches, I'd classify their lichen and any bark abnormalities. Or notating imprints in the snow, I'd attempt to identify which critters had visited my self-declared home base. Phone left at my bedside table, it was simply Elaine and I. I wrote questions, sometimes poems or liturgies too. It was a beautiful culmination of science and beauty, of wonder and truth. This place held me, and in a way, I'd like to think that I held her too.

The time spent at my "phenology spot" rimming the icy banks of Lake Elaine marked the beginning of a long road for me. A seemingly long road that I still feel as though I am just at the beginning of. Although I wasn't aware of it at the time, getting to know the particularity of this

place was the first time I recognized subjectivity within the nonhuman world. The trees I sat beneath, while they were consistently there, were far from stationary. Each time I visited they were new, changed in some way. Perhaps the wind had blown a branch to the ground, a warm spell had melted a layer of ice and revealed a new patch of bark, or a fresh snowfall had covered the previous week's discoveries. If I had been there longer, buds would have soon shot out from the restless twigs. I would've observed a new phase of their growth each week. Observing these changes, these trees were not simply an object of my fascination. They were changing, growing, moving, and alive. I began to consciously realize that these processes were occurring completely separate from humanity—they would have occurred whether I was there observing them or not. If this tree could nurture life as delicate as lichen between its branches, sprout buds and leaves, foster a home for a robin's nest, and somehow adapt to seasons ranging from high 90's to negative 30's—*this tree was not an object*.

Conserve was a time of forming life-long relationships with my new classmates and teachers. Yet, there was this rumbling of fragmented sentences within me, not even a fully formed thought, that this tree *also* had the potential to relate. The form of care that I had been trying to give to the land—restoration projects and environmental advocacy—while good, was inadequate, incomplete. There was something unique about a tree, about this tree, that I knew within me was intrinsically alive and invaluable, outside of any form of human use or interaction. There was a presence with this tree, an existence that while still unknown to me, was profound and real. It wasn't until years later that I gained the words to somewhat explain this idiosyncratic experience, this presence of a tree. This book is my attempt to share those words, to the best of my ability document what will always be beyond the scope of language. My intent is

to show that encounters like this one are not only real and tangible, but that having this type of relation with beings who are not human is part of the Christian calling.

I write this in full awareness that the "Christian opinion" on interaction with the nonhuman world is a steep gradient. Some think the Earth is to be dominated, fully under the control of humans through the dominion mandate in Genesis 1:28. Others have a stance of apathy toward the nonhuman, seeing human-human interaction as the primary focus of Christly love, not giving much thought to God's intention for our relation with other lifeforms. A third category sees the Earth as sacred, part of God's creation that we are called to protect, love, and tend to well. While this book would fall closest to the final category, it can't quite be classified in any of these boxes. If the spectrum were to be horizontal, this book ascends vertically. For those nearer to this final viewpoint, the term "creation care" has likely been encountered. But what does *care* really entail? Further yet, what does *creation* entail? How are we to tend to something so vastly beyond our understanding?

A parent seeking to care for their child speaks to them. Hopefully, the child can communicate their needs. If the child doesn't have the ability to articulate these needs clearly, the parent looks for verbal or non-verbal cues of distress, happiness—perhaps even hyperactivity or tiredness. A parent is, to some extent, innately familiar with what these different states of look like on their child, because they too experience these emotions. Similarly, we care for our friends, neighbors and colleagues through communication and social recognition of needs. But if this is the way we understand care to function, how can we extend this to beings who do not communicate and exist in the same way as us? While at times it's clear to see when a plant's soil has dried up, or a dog is barking next to their food bowl, cues and signals get more blurry and subjective the further this living being is from our experience and knowledge. I know how to

care for my beloved pothos who hang freely from my living room shelf. I look at them daily, checking their soil for proper moisture, examining each leaf for signs of distress. With some trial and error, I've learned they're best fed from the bottom. Sitting in bowls of water, the roots are able to suck up what moisture is needed, quenching their thirst perfectly and leaving the rest behind. My pothos have been alive and thriving for almost a year—this is only because I have taken the time to truly know these plants, allowing my experience to encounter theirs. This example, while simple, could be seen as the beginning to a framework of subjective relationality with the nonhuman. A parent can read every book about childcare, but it's not until they hold their baby in their arms that they will truly know what "care" for this child entails. This book calls for us to take this version of care seriously, consciously applying it to our relation with the nonhuman world.

Just as we are shaped and influenced by our interactions with other humans, the same concept applies to our interactions with nonhuman entities. Petting a dog on the sidewalk, mowing the lawn, sitting under a tree's cool canopy of shade, stepping on crunchy leaves each autumn: our lives are constantly enmeshed with the lives of nonhuman creation, most of the time thoroughly subconsciously. Our actions impact the nonhuman. And their actions or presence—whatever form this may take—impact us too. Our definition of care should follow suit of this mutual relation, taking on a deeper meaning—one that acknowledges the reality of our interconnected existences and takes seriously the possibility of encounter. Just as a parent cares for each of their children as unique individuals, we too should care for the nonhuman through the particularity of encounter, deepening the horizon of our "care" for those who do communicate in ways we are readily familiar with.

II MOMENTS OF ENCOUNTER: MARTIN BUBER

This language of encounter that I attempt to faithfully embody originates from a man named Martin Buber. Buber was a German-Jewish philosopher, activist, and Biblical translator. Becoming acquainted with the Jewish Orthodox movement of Hasidism, Buber advocated for *spiritual renewal* of the jewish people, voicing dissent against the dominant religious establishment and culture. His movement appealed to the emotions, involving joy, ecstatic prayer, song and dance, advocating for a more connected, reciprocal way of viewing all other lifeforms. Buber's experience with Hasidism led him to many of his ideas about encounters with "the other" discussed in his book, *I and thou*. Now translated more accurately to "I and You," this is Buber's most famous work, and the writing that this book draws heavily on.

According to Buber, we as humans have two "modes of operation," or ways that we interact with the world around us. This incorporates all beings, living and nonliving: the computer I'm writing this with, the tree I view through my window, and my roommate sitting on the couch. The two modes of operation are the "I-It" and the "I-You." At all times, we are either going about our lives within the I-It Sphere, or the I-You sphere. Most of the time this ends up being I-It, we use and essentially objectify everything around us, classifying value based on its use. Our society operates almost primarily under this lens—it's the way that all of our institutions were built. This leaves moments of I-you as fleeting.

For Buber, a moment of I-You is also called an *encounter*. Through a moment of grace, interrupting the normal flow of I-It, there are moments in which we can truly *be with* other beings. Buber claims that in this moment, one can be in full, uninterrupted relation with another being. This could be another human, a tree, or a rock. For Buber, nothing is beyond the

capabilities of encounter. Buber's most famous example is the tree. In a moment of relation, one sees the tree in its fullness.

Envisioning my tree back at Lake Elaine… I don't see the tree as another human, but I see all that it is like to be a tree. At the same time, I am encountering the tree, the tree is encountering me. I don't categorize the tree, looking at any knowledge I could have of its type or species, any preconceived notions about this tree are irrelevant. I see the tree in its particularity. I don't have a relation to all trees, or the whole world around that tree; it's an encounter with the being that is this specific tree. In seeing the tree for fully what—or who—that tree is, and the tree seeing me, we are in relation for a brief moment.

What's key here is that the tree is not seen as an object of dominion, but as a mutual subject. It's a clear reality that we are interconnected beings, stamped with the same seal of eternity. Each entity has unique needs, possibilities, functions—existence beyond any other's understanding. A distinct part of Buber's ideas is that he did not believe you could force these moments of encounter; they happen through the grace of God, when we're "open" to them.

It's important to note before continuation: this is a vast oversimplification of Buber's ideas, keeping this chapter brief and focused on introducing this book's central thesis. Buber was a complex, multifaceted thinker, and his ideas will be developed further and in more depth in *Part Two* of this text.

While this idea may seem a bit outlandish, I urge you to think back to times in nature you've been in pure awe, amazement, or captivated by an ecological process: watching the crashing of waves along a rocky bluff, feeling the twinge of frost as the season's snow falls, or perhaps you've been deep in a forest only the trees and birds as your company. Whether or not these experiences "count" as true Buberian moments of encounter, I do not know. But I think

they do hint at something that's lurking beneath the surface of our general consciousness. They draw us toward something deeper—the possibility for a non-transactional relation with the nonhuman. Or perhaps, they're even an indication of the interconnection that is already there.

III FORMATION OF A LAND ETHIC: ALDO LEOPOLD

While Buber's idea of encounter opens our minds to the possibility of a more profound relation, we are still left with a lack of framework. How can we tangibly enact something that can only be *given* by God? To contextualize Buber's ideas—creating a practical structure for relationality—we need something more. This brings us to another important figure in the synthesis of ideas that is this book. Aldo Leopold was an early environmental activist who laid much of the groundwork for the modern environmental movement. He's considered a forester, conservationist, nature writer, and philosopher, among numerous other titles. In his Essay *Land Ethic*, part of his larger work, *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold proposes a revolutionary way of thinking about the land. Like Buber, Leopold asserts that most of the time, we are commodifying the land. We use the land and degrade our ecosystems with little regard to anything but profit. He proposes a new way of thinking—a new way of *being*.

According to Leopold, ethics rest upon the individual being part of a community of individual parts. Our instincts, then, prompt us to compete for a place in the community. Beyond competing with and controlling others, ethics encourage us to cooperate with those around us. Leopold describes the process of creating a *land ethic* as enlarging the boundaries of our "regular ethics" to include soil, waters, plants, animals: collectively, the land. According to Leopold, the creation of a land ethic affirms the right for the land to have continued existence in a natural

state. With a land ethic, humans are no longer conquerors of the land, they become citizens—members of the same community. Leveling the hierarchy, conservation is redefined as "state of harmony between men [humans] and the land."

Creating a land ethic is creating an ecological consciousness. Convicting each individual, we are all responsible for the health of the land. He defines health here as the capacity to self-generate. If a portion of land has been burnt, destroyed, killed, or cut down beyond regeneration, we have not fulfilled our conviction as individuals living in tandem with the land. Leopold writes that something as important as a land ethic can never be written down. Humans and the land are constantly changing. Therefore, this needs to be a fluid ethic, firmly rooted with the capacity to evolve over time. Forming an ethic such as this is not easy—it's both an emotional and intellectual process, always a combination of both our experiences in the natural world, and the new knowledge we gain about how to best and most ethically care for the land.

IV A SYNTHESIS OF FRAMEWORKS: RELATIONAL ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS

Reading Leopold through a Buberian lens, I envision this ecological consciousness extending far beyond health, if not beyond, then deeper within. Perhaps, Buber would expand health to mean an all-encompassing, knowing care—one that can only come through encounters with the land itself. Maybe, what we are responsible for is allowing our bodily experiences with the nonhuman to inform the way we care for them.

All in all, the claim of this book is as follows; the best way to care for the Earth is by engaging with nonhuman creation on a relational level, pursuing a form of encounter that allows us to more fully understand the needs of each subject of creation. By allowing this mindset to

form within us a ***relational eco-consciousness***, it becomes our responsibility to engage with creation on this level. It becomes our Holy call to attempt to relate—and God willing—be graced with an authentic understanding of how to care for lives so different from our own. This type of care is distinctly part of the Christian call.

This book is modeled from a rhizomatous plant, the structure broken up into three parts. The idea of God beckoning us deeper into relation with all of creation is rooted in Biblical and theological analysis, both in the Old and New Testaments. *The Roots* delves into each of these, providing evidence that this is a viewpoint Christians should support. The rhizome is the underground stem of a plant, extending horizontally beneath the soil. This structure is key, especially because of its anchoring capabilities—providing structure and resilience for the community of plants. In the face of destruction or environmental stressors, up from the rhizome springs new nodes and shoots. Even if individual plants are lost, the rhizome continues to grow, spreading new life through the soil. *The Rhizome* of this book analyzes the community of leaders who strengthen the validity of this framework and extend its reach. Christian tradition, both past and present, hosts figures who exemplify relational eco-consciousness. Even further is an array of secular thinkers who live out these ideas, providing inspiration and practical ways to truly encounter creation in the present age.

While my aim is for everyone who picks up this text to be actively engaged with the ideas in each part, the final section of this book—*The shoots*—is where you as the reader are most involved. This section acknowledges that ideas are nothing without action. Analyzing both the barriers and benefits to embracing this thesis, this text ironically ends with a beginning, with the possibility for growth—*your growth*—shooting up from the idea of this text. Each shoot comes through a choice—the decision to engage with creation in a new, illuminating light,

deepening your definition of care. There are sociological barriers to the extension of the framework; this section acknowledges these. *The shoots* provide not just inspiration, but mechanisms to make the shift despite opposition.

The goal in establishing a relational eco-consciousness is not just to change your view of nature. While this is where it begins, it's far from the end. By fueling a spiritual conviction to care on a deeper, more relational level—our actions follow suit. Just as we are led to care for the poor, sick, and hungry, God calls us to this same, relational care for the land that is actively being degraded. We have a responsibility to strive for widespread, relational harmony. Just as we seek a world devoid of human suffering, we're called to work toward a world without pollution, deforestation or the depletion of our ecosystems—a land where humanity and Earthcoalesce in mutualistic flourishing.

Relation is tangible, ethicality is practical. To form this framework we need to be outside, enter into wild spaces, and be conscious of the nonhuman beings around us. This is a vital first step in prayerfully stiving to *know* them, in learning how to best serve the land. By starting with the creation we can touch, hear, and see, we come to realize the value of *all* creation—even the parts we will likely never come into contact with. It is no longer just the tree outside my window—I'm now concerned with each tree of the 200,000 acres of Amazon that will be burnt down today. I now feel the pain of each of the 190 sharks that were killed in the last 60 seconds—caught in industrial fishing nets, limp bodies thrown back into the sea as mere waste. I now feel responsible for the Tankersley River in Northeast Texas, for the 2.8 million pounds of toxins that were carelessly dumped into her waters this past year. I can no longer turn a blind eye to this violence and brutal destruction when I recognize these places as full of life, full of beings

capable of relation. Through the adoption of a relational eco-consciousness, it has become my Christian work to fight for solutions to these issues.

This, right here, is where a widespread shift in environmental action begins. It is time for a change, an expansion—a *distinctly Christian* widening of our perspective of love, our conviction to care. We live in context in which the ecosystems that sustain our very being have become the oppressed among us, more than ever before in human history. Earth's soils, waterways and forests have been shouting out, but our heads are submerged beneath the murky waters of modernity's turmoil. Integrating relational eco-consciousness into the engarined sentiment of western culture, we can finally begin to lift our heads from the depths. And as we shake the water from our ears, we can tune our hearing to not just realize these cries, but understand the path to stopping them.

Chapter 2: Beyond Dominion

"You have to pull it out from the root Ally, or else it'll come right back."

Growing up in a gardening family, one of the first lessons I learned was how to weed. If you talk to anyone who grew up in the Midwest, they'll confirm that planting season is no joke. Cultivating a garden takes time, diligence, hard labor, and—some may even say—a touch of love. I grew up on wild blackberries, sweet cherry tomatoes, and sticky tomatillos—the phrase "a little dirt never hurt no one" was practically etched into my vocabulary out of the womb. As soon as I could walk, there was dirt trapped between my little toes, traversing the backyard garden each dewy summer morning, eager to see what new beginnings had emerged during my slumber.

My father's words have stuck with me after all these years, perhaps because of the way that rootedness has been such a powerful metaphor for me as I've navigated the challenges of young adulthood. Leaving my roots in Wisconsin, I grew a 3000-some-mile stem across the country, dropping new seeds in San Diego. Despite all the ways I saw new growth through this transition, my roots are still firmly planted back in the silty loam of Appleton, Wisconsin—the taste of a dirt-covered carrot still fresh on my tongue.

Lasting through essentially a six-month freeze, the roots of Wisconsin flora are a testament to deep rootedness. Roots are essential to a plant's survival. Not only do the roots draw nutrients up from the soil, providing a mechanism for the plant to grow and thrive, but they also provide stability. Over time, their reach extends further and further into the ground, establishing a firm foundation from which the shoot can spring forth—their downward mobility a type of parallel foreshadowing, casting light on the growth that is to come.

As powerful as the roots can be, improper rootedness can lead to excessive, abundant growth of undesired crops. An uncontrollable invasive destroying an ecosystem, weeds overcoming an untended garden—our world is filled with examples of this concept. The same is true for an idea, once it takes hold, its growth can expand rapidly—seeds spraying beyond the grasp of humanity's control. The claim of this chapter is as follows: modern, American Christianity is rooted in an improper interpretation of Genesis 1:28, often called the "dominion mandate."

> *"28 God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'"(Genesis 1:28).*

The aim of *The Roots* section as a whole is to get our hands thoroughly covered in the fertile loam that is the Bible—to root out the unruly invaders of misinterpretation, and plant new seeds in the freshly tilled ground. This chapter is the first step through those rickety garden gates. By taking a deeper look into (1) the underpinnings of current social and cultural framing around Christianity and the environment, (2) analyzing the surrounding context of the Genesis narratives, and lastly, (3) placing this Genesis framing within the context of the rest of the Old Testament in its entirety, we can effectively evaluate which lines of ideation are necessary for the flourishing of Christ's garden. This chapter—while aiming to eventually plant new seeds—does not attempt to create new interpretations. Rather, it attempts to uncover, perhaps even restore, what has always been there—to bring us back to our true roots, as Christians of the Word.

I THE ROOTS OF OUR CRISIS

To truly grasp the full length of a root, one often has to dig deep. This theological expedition spans all the way back to the beginnings of Western theological tradition. Due to a predominant focus on human salvation, interpretations back in the Patristic era (100-700 CE) reflected notions of anthropocentrism into commentaries on Genesis 1 and 2.[1] For example, classic commentaries interpreted Genesis 1:31 as God saying that the *human creature* was good, when the text here clearly refers to *all creation* as good.[2][3] This human-focused theology then carried into interpretations of Genesis 2 and 3. Commentaries brought over the term "subdue" from Genesis 1, heavily emphasizing Adam's dominion over the animals through naming them, but glazed over the theme of Adam as *from the earth*, indicated by the Hebrew word *Adamah*: "soil or earth."[4]

In addition to the predominant focus on human salvation, Douglas John Hall calls attention to the historical differences in human relation to the land, as important context behind this interpretation of Genesis. Hall notes that humans used to be a species "at the mercy of overwhelming natural forces." Hurricanes, tornados, storms, wild animals, the scarcity or abundance of rain—all of these natural forces were less understood during Biblical times, and there was not sufficient means for human protection and thriving in the midst of the more chaotic, potentially disastrous, natural forces. The context of human history has shifted:

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[1] Santmire, H. Paul. *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology*. Fortress Press, 2000. Pp. 35.
[2] Genesis 1:31: *"31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day."*
[3] Commentary by Ambrose, quoted in Santmire, H. Paul. *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology*. Fortress Press, 2000. Pp. 35.
[4] Santmire, H. Paul. *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology*. Fortress Press, 2000. Pp. 36.

technology, combined with human ambition to control nature, has created the ability for us to wreak substantial havoc and cause detrimental consequences on the natural world. Analyzing Genesis as modern readers, situated in a context of global environmental disaster, our interpretation of dominion should not operate out of this same framework of fear and necessary dominion.[5]

With this framework at the basis of Western Christian theology, it's not hard to see how interpretations of the "subdue" and "dominate" clauses in Genesis could spiral into the incentivization of environmental destruction for those who benefit—in the short term—from ignorance toward ecological concerns. It's also important to note that this framework isn't environmentally exclusive. Throughout recent human history, all destruction toward the other has been undergirded by this same, underlying framework of dominion and subjugation, of a necessarily violent need for control. Theologian Paul Santmire writes how these structures of dominion have supported the "degradation of the powerless (slavery, child labor)," "the genocidal mind (anti-semitism)," and the objectification of women.[6] All of these mirror the manipulation and exploitation of the Earth and its nonhuman creatures.

In his infamous article: "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," Lynn White Jr. argues that Christianity is responsible for the current state of environmental destruction. As "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen," White claims that Christianity's emphasis on human domination of the Earth has spread a harmful rhetoric that approves of, even incentivizes, the destruction of natural spaces. In White's view, the spread of Christianity has meant the spread

[5] Hall, Douglas John. *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World.* Fortress Press, 2003. Pp. 201-202.
[6] Santmire, H. Paul. *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology*. Fortress Press, 2000. Pp. 13.

of this ideology, with the ultimate result of the state of global ecological desolation we now find ourselves in the midst of.[7]

When White's article was first published, there was a wave of outrage from Christian scholars, with many of White's claims left without empirical evidence to back their bite. However, one thing that is missed by many who've attempted to deconstruct White's argument is that he is not necessarily attacking the Bible itself. He's simply saying that an interpretation of the specific Bible passages, specific to the Western context, has created destructive trends within our outlook on nature.[8] Given the ecologically destructive politics and practices of other religions and cultures, it seems unlikely that Christianity can be the *sole* cause of our current state of environmental catastrophe.[9] But ultimately, quite a few theologians—to some extent—agree with White, when reading his claims as a criticism of this spirit of dominion that Christianity has played a role in fostering.[10] A level of validity can be found in White's claim when we look at the state of environmental apathy so heavily present in the Western Christian Church today.

This specific, historically developed interpretation of Genesis 1:28—viewing dominion as a license for destruction—has become *rooted* in both the theologies and practices of many modern Christian denominations, specifically in North America. Furthering the issue is the common practice of connecting these notions from Genesis to Revelation, assuming that Jesus' eventual return and renewal of the Earth is sufficient reason to neglect any perceived environmental concern.[11] Climate change, deforestation, ocean acidification: the byproducts of

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[7] White, Lynn T., Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science*, vol. 155, no. 3767, 1967, pp. 1203–1207.
[8] Tucker, Gene M. "Rain on a Land Where No One Lives: The Hebrew Bible on the Environment." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 116, no. 1, Spring 1997, pp. 3.
[9] Santmire, H. Paul. *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology*. Fortress Press, 2000. Pp. 12.
[10] Santmire, H. Paul. *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology*. Fortress Press, 2000. Pp. 13.
[11] Koetje, Sara. "Green Christianity: A Response to 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.'" *Cultural Encounters*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2005, pp. 53.

human development are seen as either non-substantial or positive, considering the human progress and population growth they often support, and their "eventual disappearance" with the return of Christ in the age to come.[12] With these passages and their historical development as the basis of the modern Christian's environmental compass, Western Christian society has effectively been infected with a wholly skewed interpretation of Christian relation to the land.

It's important to note before continuing this section, that this has been a very brief overview of an extremely expansive area of research. I've simplified my analysis of such a nuanced topic, specifically focusing on White's line of argumentation, to focus my analysis for this submission to the Honor's Scholar Program. In future drafts, I plan to provide a more detailed analysis of the different viewpoints around the construction of current views of the environment in Western Christian society, and part II will expand on the other historical views of creation within the Church that are not as anthropocentric.

II SHINING A NEW LIGHT ON DOMINION

These modern notions of land dominion that culturally, socially, and historically formed are lacking in both theological depth and contextual analysis. By increasing our understanding of the context of Genesis surrounding 1:28, we can effectively broaden our picture of what it means to faithfully live in relation to the land.

Service to the Garden: Image bearers

[12] See Revelation 21:1–5 for more context on the "Creation of the new earth"

Often overshadowed by the keywords "dominion" and "subdue," are the clauses immediately leading up to these commands. Zooming out to put these words in context, it's clear that there are qualifiers to this so heavily emphasized mandate.

> *"26 Then God said, "Let us make humans **in our image, according to our likeness**, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."*
> *"27 So God created humans **in his image**,*
> *in the **image of God** he created them;*
> *male and female he created them."*
> *"28 God **blessed them**, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26-28).*

The bolded phrases in this pericope indicate two key items. One, that we were created in the "image and likeness" of God, and two, we are given this command as a *blessing*. These two items are establishing factors that come *before* God's mandate of our dominion, indicating that our responsibility is first and foremost to be God's blessed image bearers.[13] What does it mean to bear the image of God through our ecological choices, and to do so as a blessing? This is something that we'll delve into fully in Chapters 3 and 4—through our analysis of Jesus Christ as the ultimate model for dominion, and God's relation to *all* creation—but for now, it's safe to say that God's character is not one of reckless destruction and havoc for selfish gain. The current

[13] Collins, Antoinette. "Subdue and Conquer: An Ecological Perspective on Genesis 1:28." *Creation Is Groaning: Biblical and Theological Perspectives*, edited by Mary L. Coloe, Liturgical Press, 2013, pp. 19–32.

21st-century human-ecological relationship needs radical reshaping to align with both the character of God and God's human image, Jesus Christ.

Additionally, with such focus on Genesis 1:28, the supporting commands given in Genesis 2 are often left out of the narrative. Verse 15 reads: *"The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it."* The previous mandate of subdue and have dominion fits only within the context of till and keep. In English "till" often means to cultivate or to work, while "keep" here denotes intentional care, protection, and preservation.[14] Looking at the original text itself, this phrase comes from the Hebrew words *abad* and *shamar*. Now while *shamar* still has a similar definition of "to protect" or "to keep" in English, *abad* is the root of all Hebrew words related to service, with the verb form in Genesis 2:15 meaning "to serve.[15] This is a bit different than the English translation—instead of just working the land, the original text calls us to actually live in service toward the land. This is a radical concept, indicating a profound level of respect and reverence for the land.[16]

It's clear the definitions of these words, both through our English interpretations and the original Hebrew, imply mutual responsibility between human beings and nature.[17] When placed in the light of servitude, care, and intentional protection, the notion of "dominion" holds much less of a violent tone.[18] Instead, our relation to the natural world is that of a gardener—toes deep

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[14] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, sec. 67, Vatican Press, 2015.
[15] Commentator Rolf Bouma notes that "shamar" is the same word as the famous blessing over Israel: *May the Lord bless you and keep you*. Another key note is that the humans' placement in the garden is "prior to the fall, so there can be no claim that the work of gardening is the consequence of human sin." Bouma, Rolf. *A Science & Religion Commentary: Genesis 2:15.* The Ministry Theorem, Calvin Theological Seminary, 2012.
[16] Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 76. quoted in Santmire, H. Paul. *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology*. Fortress Press, 2000. Pp. 39.
[17] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, sec. 67, Vatican Press, 2015.
[18] A note on the translation of Genesis 1:28, relating to notions of violence within the word "dominion": When modern scholars are looking at specific words in the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, one way to get a fuller understanding of the meaning surrounding these words, is to look at the way they were translated at times closer to their sourcing. The Greek Septuagint, for example, was a version of the Old Testament translated for Greek speakers, far before any English version of the text was created. Looking at the Septuagint is often a practice that can be helpful for scholars to understand the original context and meaning surrounding the Hebrew words that were chosen by the authors of the Old Testament. When we take a closer look at the word we now read in our bibles as

in earth's humus, enmeshed in the web of relationality between each plant, each scampering critter.

This responsibility to till and keep is not just what humanity is called toward, but also something we're *responsible* for. If dominion is the responsibility of humanity, then the embrace of conservation for the flourishing of God's creation is a task that humans are answerable to God.[19] With this renewed framework of thought, I look back on my childhood garden experiences in a new light, considering that "gardening was the first occupation of primeval [human]."[20] It's no wonder that I felt so innately comfortable under the cover of tilled soil, entangled in the tendrils of cucumber vines—I was designed for the open-handed embrace of earth-keeping.

The Breath We Share

There's a distinct feeling that comes from hearing a bird's coo through an open window—their language we call a "song" echoing through the halls of our homes. There's a profound joy in coming home to the greeting of sloppy puppy kisses. Animals, both domesticated and wild, impact our lives—as we impact theirs—on the regular. It's not often, however, that we seriously consider how our very beings are connected, how our identities are shared as creatures of one creator. Continuing through the second creation story, an analysis of Genesis 2:7 in tandem with

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dominion in Genesis 1:28, the Hebrew word here is *radah*. Opening our Greek Septuagint translations, *radah* was translated in the septuagint to the Greek term *archete*. We see that the word *archete* does not have violent undertones, as we may imagine the word dominion does. Modern English translations of this word are "to regulate" or "to make a beginning." This analysis tells us that for Greek readers, it was humanity's job to recognize our role as key regulators of the Earth, to be facilitators of the beginnings of life that we see appearing everywhere around us. It was not a hierarchical or violent term until English translations made it so.

[19]Collins, Antoinette. "Subdue and Conquer: An Ecological Perspective on Genesis 1:28." *Creation Is Groaning: Biblical and Theological Perspectives*, edited by Mary L. Coloe, Liturgical Press, 2013, pp. 19–32.

[20] Barnes, Albert. *Barnes' Notes on the Bible* (1834), Internet Sacred Texts Archive, hosted on Bible Hub, *Genesis 2 Commentary*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/genesis/2-15.htm. Accessed [10 March 2025]. (Original commentary notes "man" which I've changed to "human" to stray from gender bias.)

Genesis 1, even further reveals the highly ecological underpinnings of the creation account—specifically relating to our shared nature with animals.

> *"7 Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).*

If we were reading this text in its original Hebrew form, what we'd observe is the term *nephesh* in place of "living being." This is substantial because *nephesh* is also used to describe not only humans but animals too, when they were created in Genesis 1 (v 20, 24, 30).

> *"20 And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of **living creatures**, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." 21 So God created the great sea monsters and every **living creature** that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good."*

> *"24 And God said, "Let the land produce **living creatures** according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so."*

> *"30 And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the **breath of life**, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so."*

Bolded above are all three instances of *nephesh* as applying to animals in Genesis 1.[21] The significance of this comparison can be found in the definition of *nephes*h. A thorough analysis of Hebrew lexicons, concordances, dictionaries, and encyclopedias, shows that *nephesh* can mean a wide variety of things in English. Some of these include: neck or throat, breath, living being, soul, life or the principle of life.[22] Given the wide variety of uses for this term, scholar Dr. Joachim Some analyzed the unifying factors between all of these definitions. Three of the factors I find most applicable to our analysis in this chapter are as follows:[23]

1) *Nephesh* is seen as the principle of life, the source of power, an element which gives energy and life-movement to human beings and animals.
2) *Nephesh* is an element which is abstract or spiritual, not material, as contrasted with *basar* "flesh" which is material, physical, concrete.
3) After death, *nephesh* returns to God; *nephesh* is immortal.

While the use of *nephesh* may differ throughout original Hebrew texts, it always is used in reference to this principle of energy, or life-movement that's within both humans and animals. This is something of a spiritual sense that transcends death, returning to God. This comparison in itself, provides some of the strongest evidence for the formation of a relational eco-consciousness. Created by the same dust, this same breath of life that God has anointed us with, exists within every being that crawls, flies, or swims upon this planet. This textual analysis fundamentally deconstructs the hierarchical structures of dominion that are used to promote and

[21] *"Nephesh – Englishman's Concordance." Bible Hub*, BibleHub.com, https://biblehub.com/hebrew/nefesh_5315.htm. Accessed [1 March 2025].
[22] Some, Joachim. "Translation of Nephesh: 'Breath,' 'Life,' 'Soul' Into the Dagara Language." *The Bible Translator*, vol. 46, no. 4, United Bible Societies, Oct. 1995, pp. 401.
[23] Three principles/findings are quoted directly from: Some, Joachim. "Translation of Nephesh: 'Breath,' 'Life,' 'Soul' Into the Dagara Language." *The Bible Translator*, vol. 46, no. 4, United Bible Societies, Oct. 1995, pp. 402.

weaponize our perceived "superiority" to nature. God, through the creation of different species, types, and kinds, gifted them each with unique abilities. A dog can hear four times more than humans—the peregrine falcon can fly at up to 190 miles per hour. A Cuvier's beaked Whale can hold its breath for over 4 hours underwater! Each species has unique giftings, ways of life that are different from ours. And yet, we all share in *nephesh*, sustained by the same creator, coexisting within the same interconnected ecosystems. No wonder we often find our interactions with birds, dogs, perhaps even whales, to be quite profound!

In light of this analysis of *nephesh*, it's clear that our relation to the natural world is one that reaches deeper than what's typical in the 21st century, industrialized West. The development of a relational eco-consciousness is a step toward recognizing our shared life, shared breath as creation. When we see all creatures around us as sharing in *nephesh*, we realize how the wide range of possibilities is to relate to the natural world with more authenticity and honor for the creator.

Christ as our Model for Dominion

In light of broadening our context around Genesis 1:28, how then, should we reformat our idea of dominion? It's clear that Biblical dominion as discussed in Genesis is not hierarchical and violent, but rather cultivating, relational, and rooted service toward the land. But our analysis thus far still leaves a gap in knowledge, or perhaps a lack of clarity, in what this type of relation to the land actually looks like in practice.

Luckily, as image bearers of the creator, we've been given the ultimate example of this image. Many Theologians, like Willis Jenkins, call attention to the fact that discussion of the

Genesis narrative all too often happens without including the New Testament. This, according to Jenkins, is something to lament "—as if Christians could make sense of the Garden directives apart from their fulfillment in Christ."[24]

When scholars do include New Testament exegesis in their analysis of the Genesis narratives, frequent reference is made to Christ as the ultimate model for dominion. By evaluating the way that Jesus exercises "dominion," we receive direct, tangible guidance on how to live out this unique responsibility we've been given amongst the rest of creation.[25]

Russell Moore adds another dimension to this discussion, in relation to the "be fruitful and multiply" clause within the dominion mandate: "Jesus, the One who fully restores human nature in his person, does not come to serve his own appetites but to serve others. The dominion over the creation is in the context of cultivation, and in the context of a mandate to be "fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28). Dominion, then, by definition, is done with future generations, with others, in view." The notion of service that's found in Genesis 2:15 command to *abad*, or serve, the land is reflected through Jesus' distinct characteristic of service. Lending to Moore's analysis, careful stewardship of the land not only honors the biblical call to serve the land in itself but also for the sake of all creation in generations to come. In summation, we view kingship through Jesus as "exercised not through domination, but through the humility of a suffering servant."[26]

While we'll fully develop this idea of Jesus as the exemplar for our ecological action in Chapter 3, it's important to note here that Christ's version of "domination," of one of deep relationality. Stepping into this type of relationality requires a conscious choice to reframe our

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[24] Jenkins, Willis. *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology*. Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 85.
[25]Moore, Russell D. "Heaven and Nature Sing: How Evangelical Theology Can Inform the Task of Environmental Protection (and Vice Versa)." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2014, pp. 571–588.
[26] Deane-Drummond, Celia. *Eco-theology.* Saint Mary's Press, 2008. Pp. 108.

mindsets, and listen. With open ears we feel echoes of desperation, calling for rescue from pollution, habitat destruction, soil depletion, excessive pesticide use… the list goes on. It is only by following the footsteps of Jesus in *relation*, that we become conscious of when our actions are not that of service, but of extreme disservice and harm.

III THROUGHOUT THE OLD TESTAMENT

After a thorough analysis of the ecological dimensions of Genesis, it's clear that a more full understanding of our call toward the Earthincludes dominion as a form of service and cultivation, following suit as image bearers of Christ. However, expanding the text to the rest of the Old Testament, is this same viewpoint—care, and relational stewardship—relayed anywhere else? The answer is decisively yes, particularly in the laws given from God to Israel.

Relation to Animals

The most obvious place to start in our analysis of the Old Testament laws is The Deuteronomic Code. As a reformation of the Torah, most scholars estimate the Deuteronomic Code was written sometime in the 7th century. What's important here is that certain laws were being reformed, many of these reformations resulting in greater protections for society's marginalized. As is the theme of this book, society's marginalized is not just limited to humans. One theme that's central throughout the code is compassion toward nonhuman creatures.[27] Specifically concerning livestock, Deuteronomy has specific commands for the care of domesticated animals:

[27] Katz, Eric. "Faith, God, and Nature: Judaism and Deep Ecology." *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*, edited by David L. Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, State University of New York Press, 2001, pp. 155.

1) *"14 But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you" (Deuteronomy 5:14).*
2) *"4 You shall not see your neighbor's donkey or ox fallen on the road and ignore it; you shall help to lift it up" (Deuteronomy 22:4).*
3) *"10 You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together" (Deuteronomy 22:10).*

From these commandments, we can see that Sabbath rest does not just apply to humanity, but livestock as well. It's also clear that animals fall within the reach of our call toward neighborly love for the other. The notion of *abad* toward the land in Genesis 2:15 echoes clearly through Deuteronomy 22:4, calling us to serve both our human neighbor and the livestock, by physically lifting them up when they've fallen. Lastly, Deuteronomy 22:10 shows us that animals of unequal strength should not be yoked together—notable because this type of yoking would cause pain to the weaker or smaller animal.[28] When read together, these verses show that God "extends the realm of moral consideration beyond the limits of the human community."[29]

But these laws don't stop at domesticated animals, they extend to wildlife as well—those beyond the bounds of human domestication.

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[28] Katz, Eric. "Faith, God, and Nature: Judaism and Deep Ecology." *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*, edited by David L. Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, State University of New York Press, 2001, pp. 155.
[29] Katz, Eric. "Faith, God, and Nature: Judaism and Deep Ecology." *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*, edited by David L. Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, State University of New York Press, 2001, pp. 155.

4) *"6 If you come on a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs, with the mother sitting on the fledglings or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. 7 Let the mother go, taking only the young for yourself, in order that it may go well with you and you may live long" (Deuteronomy 22:6-7).*

This verse establishes a certain care for animals still within the bounds of human contact, but beyond domestication. Commentator Robert Jamieson notes that this verse discourages "destructiveness and encourages a spirit of kind and compassionate tenderness to the tiniest creatures"[30] While animals of the wilderness are still primarily beyond the bounds of human influence and understanding,[31] the ones that we *do* come into contact with, we are to treat with the utmost respect and care. In light of the Deuteronomic code's focus on animals, Pope Francis writes: "Clearly, the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures."[32]

This section would be incomplete without touching on the most obvious point of pushback towards this claim that the Old Testament develops a lens of respect and care for animal creation: animal sacrifices. Not condemning, or completely outlawing the practice of animal sacrifices, may seem to cancel out any positive notions of animal care in the Old Testament. However, upon closer analysis, there are unexpected ecological undertones to the way that the Deuteronomic code represents animal sacrifices. Deuteronomy 15:19 is one example of this:

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[30] Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown. *A Commentary, Critical, Practical, and Explanatory on the Old and New Testaments.* 1882. Bible Hub, *Deuteronomy 22 Commentary*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/jfb/deuteronomy/22.htm. Accessed [11 Mar. 2025].
[31] Katz, Eric. "Faith, God, and Nature: Judaism and Deep Ecology." *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*, edited by David L. Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, State University of New York Press, 2001, pp. 160.
[32] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, sec. 68, Vatican Press, 2015.

5) *"19 "Every firstling male born of your herd and flock you shall consecrate to the LORD your God; you shall not do work with your firstling ox nor shear the firstling of your flock" (Deuteronomy 15:19).*

Scholar Dr. Sandra Richter provides commentary on this specific passage, explaining how the giving up of these animals indicates that nothing they had was theirs; it all belonged to Yahweh.[33] This theme of all creation belonging to God, and God alone, is echoed elsewhere in the Bible, such as Psalm 24:1. Reading Richter's commentary, I can't help but note the district connection between this line of reasoning and the concept of *Nephsh* discussed above. The herd, the flock, each of these creatures belongs to Yaweh in the same fashion as us, as *nephesh*—as creation. This passage also, while still "approving" of animal sacrifices, deconstructs the notion of non-human creation as purely an economic commodity. Oil rigs, factory farms, strip mines, coastal development; the ways in which we put the economic commodity of the natural world before its value as creation is endless. This command shows that the nonhuman world is not for our use, rather we share in mutual responsibility, and all share in the same identity as created by the Lord.

Additionally, it's important to note that animal sacrifices were a common practice at the time these texts were written. Thinking of the Old Testament as a record of Israel's development rather than a strict guidebook for life in the 21st century can be a helpful framing mechanism to understand passages like these that involve sacrifice, or other violent acts.[34] All of this takes place in the context of a fallen world, far from the original harmony of the garden, or the future

[33] Richter, Sandra L. *Stewards of Eden: What Scripture Says About the Environment and Why It Matters*. IVP Academic, 2020.
[34] Lodahl, Michael. Personal interview. 23 Oct. 2024.

harmony of the Kingdom to come. Isaiah 11 and multiple places throughout the Psalms show that God doesn't *want* there to be animal sacrifices, but they simply are part of the religious, social, and cultural context of Israel at this time.[35] It's clear that rather, God was working *with* the creatures and *with* humans where they're at in this time, in this context. This commandment, while not correcting the destructive practice of animal sacrifice, shows that God is urging humanity to recognize their shared nature as *nephesh*, all together as one creation. In this light, God can be seen as beckoning humanity away from violent domination and pride, and toward justice for creation—toward a deeper, love-filled relation with all of the natural world in its fullness.

Relation to The Land

This unearthing of the Old Testament land laws has left us with much insight into God's commandments for the animals. It would be a mistake to leave out the sections that also touch on the land itself, the plants, trees, and ecosystems in their entirety that were so integral to the Israelites' daily patterns and livelihoods. One passage in particular that denotes God's command for careful stewardship of the land comes in Leviticus 25.

1) *"The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, 2 "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a Sabbath for the Lord. 3 Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in their yield, 4 but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune*

[35] See Chapter 4 for further explanation of Isaiah 11:6-9 in relation to God's planned future harmony for all creation.

your vineyard. 5 You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. 6 You may eat what the land yields during its Sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you, 7 for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food" (Leviticus 25:1-7).

To provide some context, this portion of Leviticus was given to Moses on Mount Sinai and presents a concluding portion to the covenant laws of Leviticus.[36] Interpreting this passage through the lens of the land, we can observe that the sabbath is not a solely human construct, nor just a human/animal construct: the sabbath is given to *all* of creation. Just as humans and their livestock need rest from the work God has given them, the land needs time for regeneration, for the natural processes of the Earth to restore the soil and in turn, provide for future generations of *all kinds* of life.

Verses 6 and 7 specifically are crucial in an ecological analysis of this text. Scholars interpret these verses to mean that picking and eating whatever the land had grown naturally was allowed, but sowing, pruning, or harvesting was forbidden.[37] During this period of rest, the bountiful land was still going to be fruitful, and these fruits were not to be wasted. Instead, they were offered up as free gifts to the people and animals of the land, equally, as one interconnected system. How beautiful an image this is—the true roots of an ecologically interconnected society, freely supporting the whole through selfless service toward the other. I wonder what it would look like to have a year of jubilee in 21st-century America, to see communal love and gratitude take hold both socially and ecologically, intertwined together as one process.

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[36] Sklar, Jay. *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*. InterVarsity Press, 2014. Pp. 334.
[37] Sklar, Jay. *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*. InterVarsity Press, 2014. Pp. 337.

This same concept can be found upon examination of Exodus 23.

2) *"10 Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield, 11 but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow so that the poor of your people may eat, and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard and with your olive orchard. 12 "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest so that your ox and your donkey may have relief and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed" (Exodus 23:10-12).*

This passage is actually the original text that the Leviticus passage was quoted from.[38] What can we draw from this? The jubilee laws are not only mentioned once but restated in a wholly different set of texts within the canon. This being said, we can comfortably assume that these were by no chance just placed in the Bible, but had extreme importance and biblical significance both at the time of the text and now. It's no surprise that scholars consider the jubilee laws as evidence of the coming peace for all creation, such as mentioned above in passages like Isaiah 11.[39]

One last passage of importance within this thread of Old Testament land hermeneutics can be found in Deuteronomy 20:

3) *"19 If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them. Although you may take food*

[38] Richter, Sandra L. *Stewards of Eden: What Scripture Says About the Environment and Why It Matters*. IVP Academic, 2020. Pp. 22.
[39] Sklar, Jay. *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*. InterVarsity Press, 2014. Pp. 337.

> *from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you? 20 You may destroy only the trees that you know do not produce food; you may cut them down for use in building siegeworks against the town that makes war with you, until it falls" (Deuteronomy 20:19-20).*

While the purpose of this passage could still be seen to be anthropomorphic, focusing on human access to the fruit of these trees,[40] the notion of non-destruction, specifically applying to the natural world, is clear. This claim is supported by Jewish Law, in which there's a principle: *bal tashḥit*—"do not destroy," that's sourced from this very passage. This law is expanded past fruit trees to other forms of natural destruction and calls for the protection of natural resources.[41] This command to avoid needless destruction goes hand in hand with the notions of care, protection, and service that have been so prominently developed throughout this chapter.

CONCLUSION

After a close examination of the historical background behind the modern Christian's relation to the earth, both Genesis creation narratives and the Old Testament land laws, it's clear that a renewed interpretation of Genesis 1:28 is more necessary than ever before in human history. False presuppositions have led Christianity astray, but this does not mean there is no room for rectification, for a fuller understanding of our unique role as creatures of God's blessed earth.

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[40]Katz, Eric. "Faith, God, and Nature: Judaism and Deep Ecology." *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*, edited by David L. Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, State University of New York Press, 2001, pp. 155-156.

[41] Koplowitz-Breier, Anat. "The World Was Given Us to Fix It: Jewish American Women's Ecopoetry." *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture & Ecology*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2022, pp. 128.

Of Spirit, of soil. Adam himself, taken from the *adamah* and enlivened with the *nephesh* of God, was the first gardener. Jesus as the second, we are to follow in the footsteps of our garden predecessors. We've mistreated our inheritance, this garden, our home—but our identity in the spirit and in the soil remains steadfast.

My hope is that this chapter has, if anything, tilled the soil of our hearts—broken up the rocky ground of our pre-established structures and made room for a new plot. With fertile soil, the seeds of relational eco-consciousness can be planted, and eventually, bear the fruits of love, service, and relational care toward *all* the Earthand its creatures.

Chapter 3: Jesus: The Second Gardener

I will always remember the summer of 2022 as marked by the sorry condition of my knees: perpetually in a state of partial bruise. Hues of blue and purple were no stranger to my shins, adorning my knuckles like emerald rings, but my knees were, without a doubt, the worst of all victims. As a first-year intern at a private ecology firm, I spent this summer doing the brunt work of restoration ecology. From the crack of dawn, I found myself out in the brisk Wisconsin country: the ponds, fields, forests, and wetlands temporarily became my home. Most of my time consisted of weeding invasive species, but looking back to my favorite moments of the summer, each one occurred on a planting day. We worked in incredibly disturbed habitats, overrun with a disarray of plants far from their original homes, wiping out the key species that once brought biodiverse life to these areas. After the painstakingly long process of removing each invasive plant, our next step was bringing the natives back. Planting aquatic plants, trees, or shrubbery, we were the catalysts of new life in these desolated ecosystems, able to witness the beginnings of hope upending the unintended byproducts of human development.

One planting in particular remains to this day a clear image in my mind. Camped up along the east side of the Marquette River, my team spent a week amidst the thicket of forested wetland. The project was arduous; day by day we returned to the site, trekking up the riverbank with mid-sized ash, spruce, and elm. Hands encrusted with earth's raw matter, we'd dig trenches through the layers of humus, peat, clay, and silt.

But this task was not done frivolously: there's a specific art to digging a good tree bearing. After choosing a prime location, digging the hole just wide and deep enough, we'd delicately remove the sapling from its plastic holdings. I always felt a twinge of awe at the moment the delicate, stringing roots first touched the tousled soil. It was the beginning of new

life: flashing before my eyes was a slim glimpse into the coming of a new ecosystem—no longer infected by the parasitic byproducts of human misuse. There was a possibility for restoration, for the broken to be made whole again.

Reflecting back on these native plantings, I now see that they were perhaps so powerful to me because of the way they mirror Jesus. Entering into a suffering world, Jesus was destined to bring new life to a land rampant with sin—overgrown with the shrubbery of selfish misuse. Each time I planted a tree, it was the roots that touched the soil first. The roots learned the nature of the ground, weaving their way between layers of soil, rocks, and others of earth's treasures. The roots bonded a once nomadic sapling to the land, giving it a home to eventually provide life through its photosynthetic processes. In the same way, traversing through the thicket to become fully enmeshed in the humus of His own creation, Christ entered into the world to become its salvation:

> *"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" (Colossians 1:19-20).*

As a full participant in winter's harsh freeze, each long spring shower and summer harvest, Christ came not to observe but to *dwell within* creation.

The parallels between Jesus and the natural world have always been apparent to me, even before I could consciously put it into words. The cycle of ecological regeneration, the Earth miraculously producing life after forest fires, oil spills, utter ecological disasters—is a tangible

mirror of the reliance found in Christ's love. Ultimately, Christ embodies this metaphor of the tree in its fullest sense, dying a death that mirrors the swift chop of a lumberman's axe.

But just as the decomposition of broken branches, chopped trunks, and fallen leaves enrich the soil, bringing new life through their nutrients, Christ's death too is one that brought life. Amplifying the narrative that creation has been teaching us since long ago, Jesus represents the metaphor of "life from death" in its fullest sense—abundant life that abides in the Creator, and does so eternally.

DEVELOPING AN ECOLOGICAL CHRISTOLOGY

Another reason I find it fitting to open with a parallel between Jesus and trees is how closely related Jesus was to the natural world during his time on earth. In the mechanical hum of the 21st century, industrialization has effectively cleaved a large portion of the human population from our past ways of close relation to the earth. We oftentimes forget that Jesus, in his full humanity, went through life in close contact with, and relation to the land.

When we, as 21st-century humans, are asking how we are to live justly and love fully in this fallen world, we look to Christ as our example. Looking at how to interpret the Genesis mandates and how to live concerning the land, Christ should also be our model to follow. Throughout the Bible, we see Jesus revealed as the ultimate model of servitude. This was not only service to humans but to the wider context of *all creation*.[42] Analyzing the biblical texts surrounding Christ through a distinctly ecological hermeneutic involves opening our ears to the

[42] See Jey J. Kanagaraj's interpretation of Paul's speech in Act as portraying Jesus as the ultimate model of servitude. "From Eco-theology to Christology: Luke's Portrayal of Paul's Missionary Speech in Athens." Swedish Missiological Themes, vol. 99, no. 1, 2011.

"silent voice"[43] of creation throughout the gospels. Reading with specific attention to the ecological context, symbolism, and reference to the natural world, can effectively allow us to discover how Jesus's (1) birth and upbringing, (2) fruitful ministry, (3) death and resurrection, each reveal a Jesus who is profoundly connected to the land. Christ not only commanded attention to and respect for the land but lived in close relation to nonhuman entities—relation that we too, have the ability to strive towards.

The Jordan River is an important marker throughout the Bible—an active participant in the story of the Israelites crossing into the promised land (Joshua 3-4), the parting of the Jordan by Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2:1-14), and Naaman's healing of leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-14). Moving into the New Testament, it's no surprise that we find the gospel of Mark opening with the setting of the Jordan River. As John the Baptist emerges from the wilderness crying: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight,"[44] he proceeds to enter the Jordan and begin baptisms in Jesus' name.[45] With this, the Jordan continues its symbolic nature in the grand scheme of the Bible: just as the river opens Jesus's story, Jesus opens a new path—one could even say a new river.[46] Christ paves a way of total love, profound humility, and radical servitude for all others around us, this *other* being far from just the humans in our midst.

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[43] See Michael Trainor's illustration of allowing the "silent voice" of creation to surface through an ecological reading of Luke. Trainor, Michael. "'Heaven on Earth': Ecological Nuances from Luke's Gospel." *Phronema*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2016, pp. 42.

[44] Mark 1:3

[45] John, clothed with camel's hair and a leather belt, diet of locusts, and wild honey (Mark 1:6) represents the epitome of sustenance from God in the wilderness. God's provision for John through the raw materials of the earth, was only made possible first by his sustenance of the natural ecosystems of the wilderness John resided in. *Berean Study Bible*. Bible Hub, https://biblehub.com/matthew/3-4.htm. Accessed [20 Feb. 2025].

[46] Smith Matthews, Stephanie. *The Bible, Environment, and Creation Care: Ecological Interpretation of Scripture*, Point Loma Nazarene University, 16 Jan. 2024, Classroom Lecture.

I FROM SEED TO SAPLING

While I grew up with a home garden, I can't say that gardening has ever been my primary food source. This isn't out of the ordinary, as only 35% of Americans grow any type of food at home, and a far smaller percentage actually use home gardening as their main supply of food.[47] This concept of disconnection from the source of our food is relatively new in human history. Jesus, on the other hand, was born into a rural-urban world that was "saturated by environmental concerns especially over the availability of grain and a good harvest."[48] Demands for grain were increasing during Jesus' time on earth, causing social unrest as peasant lands were forcefully taken over for the growth of the agricultural sector.[49] Ecological concerns were not foreign in biblical times. Like us, people's concerns and well-being were distinctly connected to the land, the key difference between then and now is that they—living so closely to the land—acknowledged this connection more than the majority of Western civilization does today.

This piece of context is important to keep in mind as we journey through Jesus's story with an ecological perspective—not only was He born into an ecologically dependent world, but one that experienced ecological concerns on a very personal level. Examining different accounts of Jesus' story, this is also the context of each author's life. Entering into this same framework of immense environmental connection is key to understanding the gospels from an ecological hermeneutic.

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[47] Bir, Courtney, Nicole Olynk Widmar, Elizabeth Schlesinger-Devlin, and Ambarish Lulay. *Personal Gardens: Who Is Growing Their Own in the U.S.?* Purdue University Extension, Dec. 2018, https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/EC/EC-814-W.pdf.

[48] Trainor, Michael. "'Heaven on Earth': Ecological Nuances from Luke's Gospel." *Phronema*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2016, pp. 44.

[49] Landsberger, Henry. "Peasant Unrest: Themes and Variations." *Rural Protest: Peasant Movements and Social Change*, edited by Henry Landsberger, Barnes & Noble, 1973. Qtd. in Trainor, Michael. "'Heaven on Earth': Ecological Nuances from Luke's Gospel." *Phronema*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2016, pp. 44.

Jesus' Birth

> *"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room" (Luke 2:7).*

The image of Jesus' birth is familiar to many of us. Reenacted each Christmas, we can envision the stable with sheep, goats, and various farm animals—all surrounding a measly manger holding newborn Jesus. Often emphasized in this narrative is the sheer humility of the situation, poor conditions sharply contrasting the ultimate kingliness of Jesus. While this is an important point, it often overshadows the distinctly ecological implications of Jesus being born in this context.

Referenced again in Luke 2:12, the cloth and manager are distinct signs, used by the angels to identify Jesus to the shepherds who are to go find him. This hints at the fact that there may be deeper significance to the cloth and the manager—Michael Trainor offers an analysis of what this significance may be. Three times in Luke 2, it's stated that Jesus was placed in a manger (2:7, 12, 16). Managers at this time were made of limestone—raw material of the earth—and animals were quite literally tied to them.[50] Given the rocky nature of the countryside, it's likely that this manger was located in a grotto or cave, further implying that Jesus was born in close proximity to the natural world.[51]

Adding onto this, Trainor points out that twice we hear of Jesus as wrapped in cloth (2:7, 12). Cloth in biblical times was often made of flax, wool, or goat's hair, and is mentioned

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[50] Trainor, Michael. "'Heaven on Earth': Ecological Nuances from Luke's Gospel." *Phronema*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2016, pp. 48.

[51] Jamieson, Robert, Andrew Fausset, and David Brown. *A Commentary, Critical, Practical, and Explanatory on the Old and New Testaments*. Bible Hub, *Luke 2 Commentary,* https://biblehub.com/commentaries/luke/2-7.htm. Accessed [24 Feb. 2025].

frequently in the gospels. Clothing was vital for not just protection from Earth's elements, but for identity as well. Trainor writes: "His wrapping of the child in Earth's natural fabric acts as a cocoon or womb that embraces and surrounds the child and becomes a "sign" to which the shepherds and Luke's auditors are invited to attend. The clothing, Earth's gift, embraces the child and identifies him as one with Earth."[52] Jesus, born in a rocky cave, lying in an animal trough whilst wrapped in Earth's gifts, is effectively tied to the Earth through His birth.

This is of utmost relevance considering that Jesus was born right into the middle of ecological unrest, and the announcement of His birth in itself was significant in defining Jesus' relation to the land. In addition to the conflicts over grain mentioned previously, division between shepherds and peasants was a prominent ecological and social concern within the context of Jesus' birth. While both the shepherds and peasants of the time shared a utilitarian view of the land, the shepherds were often acting on behalf of the elite whom they worked for. Both regarding the land as theirs or their master's, there was often violence and heavy conflict between these two land-dwelling people groups.[53] This is significant as in Luke's account, we see that the birth of Jesus is announced to *all*: shepherds, peasants, and city-dwellers alike. This shows us that Jesus' death presented "a vision of social harmony linked to a renewal of the land. Rather than being the stage on which economic and political battles were waged, the land could be the place of divine blessing and grace for all people."[54] Even in the first moments of his life, Jesus' close relation to the land was bringing peace, harmony, and well-being to social and ecological conflicts, bringing all people—and creatures—together as one.

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[52] Trainor, Michael. "'Heaven on Earth': Ecological Nuances from Luke's Gospel." *Phronema*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2016, pp. 50.
[53] Deane-Drummond, Celia. *Eco-theology.* Saint Mary's Press, 2008. pp.109.
[54] Deane-Drummond, Celia. *Eco-theology.* Saint Mary's Press, 2008. pp.110.

Growing up in Nazareth

The Bible doesn't tell us extensive amounts about Jesus' young life, but we can use historical and cultural cues to fill in the gaps of what Jesus' life would've been like. Edward Elchin, using socio-historical information about ancient Jerusalem, fills in the gaps to reconstruct a picture of Jesus' childhood. This narrative retelling gives us a glimpse into what Jesus' early life may have been like:

> "With imagination we may place ourselves in hilly Nazareth with its few hundred families and their sheep and goats, oxen, cattle and donkeys. In those green and brown and stony hills we may imaginatively observe the growing Jesus (Lk. 2.40, 52) learning, especially from his mother, about the useful elder trees, the scattered Tabor oaks and Aleppo pine, the nettle, bramble, mallow, and startling yellow chrysanthemums of April, the galaxy of weeds and herbs and wild flowers which he later compared to Solomon's attire. Grapes grow and grow in Nazareth's old town, their branches nourished by the everlasting vine. Jesus wondered at their rapid growth, their ripening in the burning sun, and their harsh winter pruning, he learned about apples, almonds and pomegranates, he saw figs swarming from rocks offering two, even three crops of dripping sweetness."[55]

While this is primarily a thought exercise, Elchin's analysis demonstrates the normalities of near-eastern living in Jesus' day—ecology ingrained within the tasks of everyday life. This

[55] Edward P. Echlin, *Earth Spirituality: Jesus at the Centre* (John Hunt Publishing, 1999), 55, as quoted in David G. Horrell et al., eds., *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2010, pp. 72.

assumption that Jesus lived a childhood in tune with nature is confirmed by biblical scholars and historians. For example, commentators studying the story of Jesus in the temple at age 12 (Luke 2:41-52), when drawing conclusions from this story, note that Jesus "had been deeply impressed by the lessons of nature."[56] Exposed to a deeply ecological way of life, it's a fitting conclusion that these upbringings were highly influential in forming Jesus for his ministry to come.[57]

II JESUS' FRUITFUL MINISTRY

Jesus' earth-bound birth and upbringing in an agrarian society set the stage for a distinctly ecological ministry: (1) His use of the natural world in the parables, (2) oftentimes also showing creation's inherent value, and lastly, (3) His harmony and presence with nature, all reveal distinctly ecological undertones to the gospel narratives. This section will delve into all three of these aspects of Jesus' ministry, furthering our understanding of the model Jesus sets for human relation to the natural world.

The Parables: Nature as Instructor

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[56] *"The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges."* Bible Hub, *Luke 2 Commentary*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/cambridge/luke/2.htm. Accessed [1 Mar. 2025].

[57] We can see evidence of this by looking at the three regions of Galilee that Jesus' ministry was centered in: Lower, Upper, and the Valley. Each of these regions had a distinct micro-climate, as well as a distinct cultural context surrounding the ecology. (Freyne, Sean. *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean: A New Reading of the Jesus Story.* T&T Clark, 2004, pp. 40, as quoted in David G. Horrell et al., eds., *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2010, pp. 71.) Scholars such as Sean Freyne have pointed out that Jesus' teachings in these areas seem to have been influenced by the differing locational, cultural opinions around the natural world. One example given by Freyne is the use of "the sea" in Matthew and Mark reflecting the attitude of indifference toward the lake of Galilee, whereas the calming of the storm was preached to a context of those whose livelihoods depended on the waters; to them the sea was an abyssal aspect of nature that treated as largely dangerous and unpredictable. (David G. Horrell et al., eds., *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2010, pp. 71.) All this to say, Jesus' teachings clearly reflect the ecological awareness that was garnered through growing up in a carpentry family, humbly living an ecologically sound life in the hills of Nazareth.

Jesus' parables were central to his life and ministry here on Earth. The parables are unique because they're a teaching method, but not a direct, authoritative one. They were a creative way for Jesus to avoid being attacked directly by the law, but still educate and equip his followers—then and for generations to come. We can see that the parables had radical social, economic, and political implications.[58] They first transformed the lives of Jesus' followers, then continued to shape and reform society as each message was translated into the material world. Consistently throughout the gospels, Jesus upends societal practices, advocating for the creation of a new world order; each parable reflects this central thread. "The wisdom that Jesus preached and practiced is "radical" in the sense that it is based upon a familial relationship with a God of boundless, compassionate love."[59] This familial relation, in all its radicalness, does not stop with humanity—part of the new world order is a new way of relation with *all* creation.

It's no surprise that many of Jesus' parables contain nature. As described previously, Jesus was preaching to a society largely in tune with the natural world. Teaching through what they knew, from what He knew, Jesus effectively brings the natural world into the conversation. Richard Rohr points out that Jesus' authority was so radically different from the Scribes and Pharisees because He doesn't quote scripture or encyclicals. Instead, He uses nature as an authority. "He points to clouds, sunsets, sparrows, lilies, corn in the field, leaves unfolding, several kinds of seeds, oxen in a ditch! Nature instructs us everywhere. Look and learn how to see. Look and see the rhythm, the seasons, the life and death of things. That's your teaching."[60] Even parables that don't indicate anything particular about nature's value, carry a profound

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[58] Webster, Douglas D. The Parables: Jesus's Friendly Subversive Speech, *Kregel Academic*, 2021.
[59] Edwards, Denis. *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology*. Orbis Books, 1995. Pp. 45.
[60] Rohr, Richard, O.F.M. Simplicity: The Art of Living. New York: Crossroad, 1992. Qt in: Barnhill, David Landis, and Roger S. Gottlieb, editors. *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground.* State University of New York Press, 2001. ProQuest Ebook Central.

significance in giving nature the role of instructor: the natural world becomes an active participant in this conversation of Christ's transformation of the created world.

Celia Deane-Drummond articulated this concept perfectly when she wrote: "Jesus' saying goes further in that humanity is invited to learn about the providential care of God by close attention to the non-human world. Jesus' vision is one that includes all creatures."[61] Through the authority of Christ himself, nature becomes the communicator of Jesus' new vision—one of goodness, peace, and radical hope for *all* creation.

The Parables: Creation's Inherent Value

Beyond the parables' implicit emphasis on nature's value through the repeated use of nature as a teacher, there are multiple parables that explicitly point to creation's value. One particularly well-known parable that demonstrates this point can be found in Matthew 6:

> *"26 Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life?[l] 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not clothe you—you of little faith?" (Matthew 6:26-30)*

[61] Deane-Drummond, Celia. *Eco-theology.* Saint Mary's Press, 2008. pp.109.

God's provision extends beyond the reach of human hands, and far beyond the grasp of human minds—Jesus uses the parables as a mechanism for making this known. "In talking with his disciples, Jesus would invite them to recognize the paternal relationship God has with all his creatures. With moving tenderness He would remind them that each one of them is important in God's eyes."[62] Each creature has immense intrinsic value, worthy of care from their creator. Although not in the same fashion, God provides for birds, lilies, and humans, each in their likeness. Our creator is one who values *all* creation and provides care, unique to each subject in their particularity.

Beyond simply demonstrating that God cares for the natural world, this parable can be seen as an invitation to reorient our lives,[63] to replace our worries with trust in God's providence. This reorientation of faith extends past the individual level, perhaps even inviting us to reorient ourselves toward a relational eco-consciousness.

One strong piece of evidence for this can be found in verse 28. The word that we here translate as "consider" [the lilies of the field] is actually the Greek word *katamanthanō.* *Katamanthanō* occurs only once in the entire New Testament, implying: "careful studying with a view to learning."[64] The choice of *Katamanthanō* indicates that one should be considering the flowers not just at face value, but *carefully* studying them. I'd like to think this study includes both how they function, and perhaps even a deeper level of study—one with the aim of *learning* in a different way than purely gaining technical knowledge of the plant's workings. Perhaps this

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[62] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, sec. 96, Vatican Press, 2015.
[63]The "Do not worry" portion of this parable has often been misused, improperly quoted as a reason to simply not help provide provisions for those in need, because "God will provide." Anna-Case Winters points out that this dismissal of worry is not a license for irresponsibility but an occasion for reorienting ourselves. This reorientation, this book aims to demonstrate, extends to humanity's relationship with the natural world. Case-Winters, Anna. *Matthew.* 1st ed., Westminster John Knox Press, 2015., pp. 93.
[64]Hill, David, and John T. Carroll. *The New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew; Luke: A Commentary.* Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2012.

"view to learning" indicates a learning similar to how we'd learn about a friend or family member—someone who longs to be *known*. Since this unique word is used only in reference to non-human creation, we're commissioned with a unique task when it comes to the natural world around us. This careful studying may indicate a greater relationality to the flower than what initially meets the eye.

Another parable that leads us down this similar line of reasoning is *The Parable of the Mustard Seed*, found in Matthew 13.

> *"31 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32 it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches" (Matthew 13:31-32).*

This parable is a powerful notion of Jesus' ecological leanings through two key points: the non-exclusivity of God's kingdom, and the notion of our interconnection to the natural world. Today, mustard is a small, annual plant. In the context of first-century Palestine, the mustard plant, starting as but a grain, grew to be 8 to 12 feet tall.[65] Growing this large likely due to the warm climate, Hebrew writers tell of the mustard plant as one that they could climb like a fig tree, with it often taking several years for the tree to bear fruit.[66] Many scholars commenting on

[65] Hill, David, and John T. Carroll. *The New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew; Luke: A Commentary.* Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2012.
[66] Barnes, Albert. *Barnes' Notes on the Bible* (1834), Internet Sacred Texts Archive, hosted on Bible Hub, *Matthew 13 Commentary*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/matthew/13.htm. Accessed [26 Feb. 2025].

this parable note its parallel to the Christian church, starting as but a seed but growing to be a widespread movement, bearing beautiful fruit across the nations.[67]

What's important to note here is the inclusion of the "birds of the air" in verse 32; the mustard tree extends a home, food, and shelter to nonhumans of the land. Robert Jamieson poses the question of whether, besides the growth of the kingdom, the inclusion of the birds here is used to illustrate the "shelter, repose and blessedness it is destined to afford to the nations of the world."[68] David Hill would likely confirm this analysis. He notes that in apocalyptic and rabbinic literature, 'the birds of heaven' stand for Gentile nations, this parable perhaps serving as an indication that the Kingdom of God is not exclusive.[69] All this to say, with the parable of the mustard seed indicating that the kingdom of heaven is growing, destined to provide shelter and respite to a non-exclusive kingdom of God, it's plausible that the use of birds in this illustration is perhaps an indication that this non-exclusivity extends even further than gentile nations, to *all* of the created world.

This notion of ecological inclusion within God's kingdom seems like a valid conclusion to draw considering this parable's distinct notions of interconnection. The planter first plants the seed and then tends to it—waiting patiently for growth. Only after *years* of diligent care does the plant begin to produce fruit, and provide a home for the goldfinches and linnets.[70] Through a culmination of climatic warmth, fertile soil, proper rainfall, and careful attention from the sower—a flourishing home is produced. The mustard seed symbolically and miraculously grows

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[67] Barnes, Albert. *Barnes' Notes on the Bible* (1834), Internet Sacred Texts Archive, hosted on Bible Hub, *Matthew 13 Commentary*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/matthew/13.htm. Accessed [26 Feb. 2025].
[68] Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown. *A Commentary, Critical, Practical, and Explanatory on the Old and New Testaments.* 1882. Bible Hub, *Matthew 13 Commentary*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/jfb/matthew/13.htm. Accessed [26 Feb. 2025].
[69] Hill, David, and John T. Carroll. *The New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew; Luke: A Commentary.* Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2012.
[70] The Pulpit Commentary notes that in ancient Palestine, flocks of Goldfinches and linnets would often make homes within the mustard trees. *The Pulpit Commentary.* Electronic Database. BibleSoft, 2001–2010. Bible Hub, *Matthew 13 Commentary*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/pulpit/matthew/13.htm. Accessed [26 Feb. 2025].

from but a small grain to a life-filled subject of the earth: providing for both the human, birds, and the land as a whole. This distinct interconnection demonstrates once again, Jesus upending systems as we know them. The relationship between sower and mustard seed is not one in which the plant is objectified, merely planted for the human gain of its fruit—this parable tells us a new story about humanity's relation to that in which they plant.

Distinctly Relational: Jesus' Presence with Creation

While Jesus' words spoke plenty for the restoration of creation, His actions spoke louder. Jesus walked about the Earth as fully human, and yet He had a relationship with the nonhuman world that was distinctly divine. Observing Jesus' interactions reveals the divine calling on our own lives to live in renewed relation with the natural world.

One frequent example of Jesus' profound presence in the natural world can be found in His prayer patterns. Jesus is frequently cited as leaving the crowds for the wilderness, retreating to wild spaces as a place of prayer:

> *"15 But now more than ever the word about Jesus[c] spread abroad; many crowds were gathering to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. 16 Meanwhile, he would slip away to deserted places and pray"(Luke 5:16).*

In Matthew 13:14 also, Jesus goes into the wilderness after hearing of the death of John the Baptist, and Matthew 14:23 tells of Jesus' retreat up the mountain, alone for prayer.

This is a part of Jesus many of us can relate to—finding God's voice in the creaking

chorus of a windy day in the pines, a stream's gentle rush, or the croak of a passing toad. Humanity's buzz is dulled and then muted by the harmony of creation, so much so that prayer becomes more raw, more authentic. It's as if the creator has somehow been drawn into the wilderness, or perhaps it was us who were beckoned by the creator's defining presence, already there in the midst of the unknown. Needless to say, the wilderness is a place where humanity can often find deep connection with the creator. But for Jesus, this connection appears to extend beyond just presence with God, and perhaps even relationality with other created beings in the wild. In Mark's account of Jesus' temptation, Jesus is described as *with* the wild animals:

> *"12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him" (Mark 1:12-13).*

The wild beasts likely being referred to here would've included bears, jackals, wolves, and hyenas.[71] But Jesus, spending over a month among the most feared animals of the secluded wilderness, "neither feared them nor was injured by them. He dwelt amongst them as Adam lived with them in his state of innocence in Paradise."[72] This type of abiding harmony with the created world seems to indicate something profound about Jesus' vision for *our* relation with the natural world.

Noting Jesus' presence in Mark as *with* the wild animals, Celia Deane-Drummond writes: "this may possibly be an allusion to such a future kingdom… the Jesus of the Gospels seemed to

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[71] Vincent. Marvin R., *Vincent's Word Studies* (1886), Internet Sacred Texts Archive, hosted on Bible Hub, *Mark 1 Commentary*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/vws/mark/1.htm. Accessed [1 Mar. 2025].

[72] *The Pulpit Commentary.* Electronic Database. BibleSoft, 2001–2010. Bible Hub, *Mark 1 Commentary*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/pulpit/mark/1.htm. Accessed [1 Mar. 2025].

have in mind the future restoration of a community of creation."[73] Simultaneously alluding both back to Adam and forwards to the future restoration of the kingdom, Jesus' peaceful presence amidst the natural world leaves us with a clear message: *strive for harmony with creation*. The harmony that existed in the beginning of creation, and is yet to come in the future kingdom, is something humanity should be aiming toward—choosing to thoroughly reorient our actions with the harmony of the created world in mind.

Harmony with creation is clearly a common thread in Jesus' ministry, as three of the four gospels tell us of Jesus calming the seas amidst a storm (Matthew 8:23–27, Mark 4:35–41, Luke 8:22–25). This harmony didn't go unnoticed; it was distinct and drew attention from everyone who witnessed it: "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?" (Matthew 8:27).[74] This story goes in tandem with Jesus walking on water (Matthew 14:22–33, Mark 6:45–52, John 6:16–21), symbolizing once again Jesus' presence with creation in a way that indicates a deeply relational equilibrium between the creator and *all* creation, personified through the being of Jesus Christ. Being the only account that mentions Peter's role, Matthew's account of this event is particularly helpful in understanding the potential ecological significance behind these environmentally harmonious acts of Jesus. Not only do these verses tell us of Jesus' deeply connected way of being with nature, but also the *immense power* that's found in this relationship.

> *"28 Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' 29 He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and,*

[73] Deane-Drummond, Celia. *Eco-theology.* Saint Mary's Press, 2008. pp.109.
[74] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, sec. 98, Vatican Press, 2015.

> *beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' 32 When they got into the boat, the wind ceased" (Matthew 14:28-32).*

Through both divine command and human faith, Peter momentarily partakes in this unified relationship with the natural world. I see this powerful story as symbolic of Jesus' invitation for us to follow in his ecologically grounded footsteps, to—like Peter—step into uncharted territories with faith, knowing that the spirit will guide each pace we take forward in relational care for natural beings. One could perhaps even say, the deepening of our own relational-ecoconiousnesses.

Jesus: The Ecologist

After reading the ministry of Jesus with ears for the silent voice of creation, it's not so far-fetched an idea that Jesus himself was, in a way, an ecologist. John E. Carroll makes this very argument by looking at how rooted Jesus' teachings are in the denial of excess pride. Carroll writes:

> "Christ's gospel is very clear on the question of pride as a serious sin, and the connection of pride to the destruction of creation and one another is quite explicit. If these, among others, are the basic teachings of Christ, then Jesus Christ has had to have been an ecologist, a practitioner of ecological thought. If Catholics and other Christians claim to be followers of Christ and of Christ's gospel, then they must at heart be ecologists, be ecologically minded and ecologically sensitive."[75]

[75] Carroll, John E. "Catholicism and Deep Ecology." *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Ground*, edited by David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, State University of New York Press, 2001, pp. 172.

Going on to cite the Sermon on the Mount as a "strong ecological document," Carroll draws attention to its notions of nonviolence and non-control, simplicity, and denial of greed. It's clear that Jesus' teachings paint a renewed vision of how to act in a world that's unmistakably ecological. Denying our need for greed and dominative control, for excess rather than the simple, Jesus calls for a radical shift toward ecological respect, care, and harmony.

This radical worldview is not just spoken about, but tangibly enacted through Jesus' servitude. Willis Jenkins makes the argument that Christ's attitude of loving service toward the least of these demonstrates a model for stewardship today. Mirroring this ultimate servitude, when we live lives full of faithful care of nature, we are essentially moving *towards* God in the here and now.[76] Looking to Jesus as our model of stewardship, to Christ as the original author of ecological guidelines, we find loving, relational care at the heart of it all. Jesus lived an ecological life filled with direct relation to the natural world. As mirrors of Christ, we are called to do the same, being everyday ecologists, acting out of loving care toward each of our neighbors—human or otherwise.

III AN EARTHLY DEATH & RESURRECTION

With His ministry serving as such a powerful example of ecological connectivity and care, Jesus' death and resurrection too, weave together a multitude of ecological threads.

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[76] Jenkins, Willis. *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

An Unexpected Entry: The Colt and the Stones

Nearing his death, Jesus famously calls for an unlikely animal to be his transportation into the city: a colt. With two gospels confirming this unique entry of Jesus (Matthew 21:2, Luke 19:30), there appears to be significance here. While perhaps alluding to the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, it's plausible that the significance of the colt goes further, perhaps even having ecological importance.[77] Jesus calling for a colt, specifically one that has not been ridden by a human, appears to indicate a distinct and intentional involvement in these crucial last steps of Jesus' mission. "This creature of creation is untethered and released from servitude by Jesus' command to become an agent of discipleship as it, with Jesus' "whole multitude of disciples" (Luke 19:37b), accompanies Jesus into the city."[78]

The colt as an active disciple, I see as a mirror image of the vision of the peaceful kingdom we prophesied throughout passages like Isaiah 11:6–9 and Hosea 2:18. In a Kingdom where: *"The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox"(Isaiah 11:7),* all animals appear to be active agents of the kingdom. Involving not a kingly horse and chariot, but a mere donkey—not even of riding status—Christ's entry into death is symbolic of the kingdom to come.

On the path down from Mount Olivet, Jesus is welcomed into the city with cries of praise from his disciples. In response to the Pharisee's criticism of this overwhelming praise, Jesus replies: *"I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out"(Luke 19:40).* Biblical commentators tie this verse as a reference to Habakkuk 2:11: *"The very stones will cry out from*

[77] John Gill comments that while not explicitly referenced by Matthew or Luke's narration of Jesus calling for the colt, this account parallels the Prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Gill, John. *Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible.* 1746–1763. Bible Hub, *Luke 19 Commentary*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/gill/luke/19.htm. Accessed [1 Mar. 2025].

[78] Trainor, Michael. "'Heaven on Earth': Ecological Nuances from Luke's Gospel." *Phronema*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2016, pp. 52.

the wall, and the rafter will respond from the woodwork," noting that this passage in Habakkuk is referring to the condemnation of both greediness, cruelty, and destruction.[79] Looking further into the context of Habakkuk 2, an analysis of the entire section titled "Woes of the Wicked," spanning from Habakkuk 2:6-20, alludes to this use of stones and wood as not only a metaphor of humanity's cruelty and destruction of one another but as extending to the destruction of the earth. I source this conclusion in verse 17. Referring to the destruction of cedars of Lebanon and the violent slaughter of cattle upon the hills of Lebanon, this passage explicitly refers to violence against the earth.[80]

> *"For the violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you;*
> *the destruction of the animals will terrify you—*
> *because of human bloodshed and violence to the earth,*
> *to cities and all who live in them" (Habakkuk 2:17).*

Ultimately what does all of this analysis of Habakkuk tell us? During this key moment of his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus involves the natural world in his mission. Giving voice to nonhuman cries of both joy and pain, He uses this moment to bring emphasis to the condemnation of violence against the earth. Reading the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem through an ecological hermeneutic, it's apparent that Jesus' humble yet triumphant entry was done in conversation with the natural world. The colt and the stones were working as Jesus' vessels, as agents of discipleship, standing alongside His human disciples to welcome Him into the city.

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[79] *"The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges."* Bible Hub, *Luke 19 Commentary*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/cambridge/luke/19.htm. Accessed [1 Mar. 2025].
[80] Ellicott, Charles J., *Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers* (1878), Bible Hub, *Habakkuk 2 Commentary*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/habakkuk/2.htm. Accessed [1 Mar. 2025].

Death Upon Flesh of the Earth

As victorious as this entry into the city is, it's not long before the law has caught up to Him and Jesus' final hour has come. Luke 22:41 tells us that in the moments before Jesus' arrest, He withdraws from the crowd to pray, alone, kneeling on the ground. "This gesture of kneeling connects him implicitly with the primordial element of creation. Earth's soil (*adamah* in Hebrew). Creation's *adamah* links with Earth's child whom Luke describes early in the gospel as the "Son of Adam (Luke 3:38)."[81] In this last act of solitary communion with God, Jesus is physically in contact with the Earth, drawing parallels to the very first human, made from dust itself.

This line of symbolic parallelism between the original creation narrative, Jesus, and the Earth extends past this moment into the actual moment of death itself. Looking back to Genesis 4:10, there are clear parallels between Jesus' death and the soil, connecting to the murder of Abel.

> *"10 And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen, your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! 11 And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand" (Genesis 4:10).*

His blood, too, reaching the soil, Jesus' death shines a new light on the death of Abel, the "curse" of the ground now *healed* through Jesus' blood—a renewed promise for the coming of new life. This parallel is well developed in other parts of the Bible, such as Hebrews 12:24: *"and*

[81] Trainor, Michael. "'Heaven on Earth': Ecological Nuances from Luke's Gospel." *Phronema*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2016, pp. 53.

to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." Hebrew commentators note that while Abel's blood cried out for vengeance, "[Christ's] blood speaks with greater power, and speaks not for wrath but for purification and atonement."[82]

How does all of this connect back to the land and our relation to it? Both the original creation and the beginning of the *new* creation in Christ, are forged by direct, physical relation between human beings and the land. It is the shedding of blood that the land "opens its mouth to" and forges this curse of vengeance, and then, is a necessary actor in the process of purification, of reversal of the curse in the name of new life. The land is an active participant in both creation stories—the land is essential to both the fall and new life springing up from the ashes.

This idea of the land as an essential participant in the resurrection story extends all the way to the tomb. Drawing parallels between the beginning and end of Jesus' life, Michael Trainor speaks of Jesus's death as intimately connected to the earthly reciprocals that bear him. "In birth and death, Jesus is surrounded by Earth. The manger and the tomb are more than receptacles to bear the body of the living and now-dead Jesus… Both anticipate the life that will emerge."[83] Not only is the Earth binding glue between the two creation stories, but it's a distinct link between Jesus' own beginning and end. Encapsulating His entire story, it's the Earth that bears witness, that extends its generous hand to deliver the new life found in Christ.

Remembering this chapter's metaphoric comparison to Jesus as a tree, I'd see it a waste to pass by this section without bringing attention to an obvious observation: Jesus' cross itself was made

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[82] Ellicott, Charles J., *Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers* (1878), Bible Hub, *Hebrews 12 Commentary*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/hebrews/12.htm. Accessed [1 Mar. 2025].
[83] Trainor, Michael. "'Heaven on Earth': Ecological Nuances from Luke's Gospel." *Phronema*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2016, pp. 56.

from the very flesh of a tree. From the EarthHe came, to EarthHe was nailed, hung, and crucified.

While no gospel account details what specific type of lumber was used for the cross, the biblical significance of trees denoting sacredness is clear. For example, Isaiah 60:13 speaks of the cyprus, plane, and pine as key elements in the building of the temple. *"The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will glorify where my feet rest."* Whether used for building materials, or for adorning the courts of the temple, trees were used as notation of sacredness.[84] This said it doesn't come as a surprise that the cross, quite possibly the most widespread icon of sacredness within the Christian tradition today, is symbolic of Jesus' connection to the land. Tree axed to the ground, sawed, sanded, and nailed perpendicular, the cross itself echos death—an inherent foreshadowing perhaps, a corpse bearing witness to its successor. Through His crucifixion upon the shadow of life that was once within a tree, Jesus himself reveals rootedness as crucial to the Christian mission.

Resurrection & New Life

> *"40 They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. 41 Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid" (John 19:40-41).*

[84] Commentators note that while either is feasible, their use as building materials is more likely. *"The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges,"* Bible Hub, *Isaiah 60 Commentary*, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/cambridge/isaiah/60.htm. Accessed [1 Mar. 2025].

> *"14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away" (John 20:14-15).*

Reading the resurrection story through ecological Christology, the emphasis on Jesus' tomb as in the garden (John 19:41), and then subsequently, Mary mistaking Jesus to be a gardener (John 20:15), both tell us that Jesus' resurrection holds key cosmic significance ecologically. Gardens are symbolic of the ongoing nature of creation and recreation. In a garden, death is not the end of life, but the beginning of the next season of growth—flourishing new life just around the corner. Gardens show us life and death as not stagnant processes but as lending to one another, each key in the cycle of regeneration, vital for birth, for creation.[85]

Born among livestock, sealed in a tomb of Earth's raw glory, and found risen among flourishing plant life, Jesus' life was not just lived among the Earth—his ministry was forged through the bounty of ecological connection. From beginning to end, Jesus was truly *with* creation, in all senses of the word. This being said, the garden seems to be a fitting place for the conclusion of Christ's earthly chapter. Was Mary's identification of Jesus a mistake, or was John specifically drawing us to this image of Jesus for a reason? Jeannine Brown finds the latter to be true, writing: "It may be that John wants his reader to hear *what is right* about this misidentification. Jesus is analogous to the first gardener, Adam. He is the new Adam of the new

[85] Alexander MacLaren finds it fitting that Jesus would be buried in a garden, considering the life-bringing qualities that are found in a garden: "The garden's careless wealth of beauty and joy continues unconcerned whatever befalls us. 'One generation cometh and another goeth, but the earth abideth for ever.'" MacLaren, Alexander. Expositions of Holy Scripture. S.S. Scranton, 1900. Internet Sacred Texts Archive, hosted on Bible Hub, John 19 Commentary, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/maclaren/john/19.htm. Accessed [2 Mar. 2025].

creation."[86] Given the parallels between Adam and Jesus drawn elsewhere in the gospels (such as Mark 1:12-13), this analysis appears to fit well within the ecological context.

CONCLUSION

As readers of the gospels, we can leave this chapter with newfound clarity on the Genesis mandates. In the previous chapter, we established dominion with Jesus as our model for kingship. Not only do the findings in this Chapter from Jesus' life support this analysis, but they give us a tangible application of such overarching, broad claims as "have dominion" and "till and keep." How do these commands apply to the human context? We are given Jesus as our model. With Adam as the keeper of the first creation, Jesus, coming to transform the world, becomes the keeper of the new creation. In Him, we find clarity on how to live amid the new creation in its entirety. We find that now, the "Natural world cannot be considered apart from incarnation."[87] Our interactions with the Earth can be formatted within the context of Jesus' life, outlined by His interrelation to the creatures, flora, and elements—one of distinctly relational providence and love.

A key part of this loving, deeply relational framework that Jesus exemplifies is servitude. "The lordship of Jesus, after all, characterizes dominion as self-giving service, nothing at all like willful hegemony. Stewards, therefore, follow in the way of the one who in obedience to the will of God humbled himself into the form of a servant, even unto death."[88] When we take the framework of Christ's ultimate servitude and use this as our model for dominion, our relationship

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[86] Brown, Jeannine. The Gospels as Stories: A Narrative Approach to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020. Part 4, Chapter 7.
[87] Rossi, Vincent. "Christian Ecology is Cosmic Christology." *Epiphany*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1988, pp. 52-62.
[88] Jenkins, Willis. *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology*. Oxford University Press, 2008. pp.86.

with the Earth is radically transformed. Looking at each way Jesus—through the entirety of his life—conducted himself in close relation with the land, using his teachings as a mechanism for care for the natural world to shine, servitude extended to the nonhuman world doesn't seem so far-fetched of a concept.

Denis Edwards in his book: *Jesus the Wisdom of God*, puts this concept into words quite beautifully. "This vulnerable and foolish love identifies with suffering creation in order to bring liberation and healing. The cross of Jesus is not only the foolishness of divine love but also the "power" of that love at work, filled with liberating resurrection life, with the promise of justice for the poor of Earth and the transformation of all creatures."[89] Ultimately, in both Jesus' life and death together as one, there is transformative power, a power that radically shook the world as it was known and brought a wide set of hope-filled promises. Leaving the concept of the reconciliation of all creation for Chapter 4, we'll end this chapter on this notion of Jesus' power to bring life from death, to bring power to the weak, and hope to the hopeless. This power is one that we who call ourselves followers of Christ are anointed with, giving us the potential to be vessels of servitude and hope for the natural world when we conduct ourselves with the care and compassion of intentional relation. It's here where our relational eco-consciousness is formed, forged through the nails of the cross upon which true hope for creation was born.

[89] Edwards, Denis. *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005. Pp. 77.

Chapter 4: A Living Ecological Eschatology

The clock strikes 3:15pm. The combination of that ear-piercing bell followed by the eruptive roar of rampant kids is my signal; the day is finally over. The year is 2013. As I sweep my papers into my backpack with the flick of an arm, all I can think about is the thrilling journey home I'm about to embark upon. Decked out in my hot pink roller skates, not only am I the fastest kid in the fifth grade, I've got style too.

The mile-long expedition is all that I hoped for and more, cars and picket fences are but a blur as I round each corner. With the sturdy maple of my front yard almost in sight, my finish line is approaching. In the blur of delirium and expectancy for the home stretch, I fail to notice a bump in the sidewalk, concrete bent and cracked upwards. There is nothing to stop me from barreling into the sky as my wheels hit the cement ridge of death. With a jolt of gravity's karma, my left knee bashes into hard ground. So close to home, my journey has come to an unexpected halt.

I still have a faint scar etched into my right knee. Through the pain, blood, and excessive tears, I doubt I was thinking much about the cause of this fall. But looking back on this incident, I realize that what likely caused this concrete ridge in the sidewalk was pressure from an upward-growing root of a nearby tree, many of which were sprinkled along the sidewalk of this road I took home every day.

I wish I would've realized then what I do now—the roots are undoubtedly the most important part of the tree. The lively sugar maple, oak, and katsura trees that line my block, flooding the streets with vibrant yellows and reds each autumn, providing shade through each hot summer as I chomped on cucumbers and watermelon, supporting my daily breath through their

photosynthetic functioning—they need roots to survive. The city of Appleton's choice to construct a neat alignment of concrete squares between my home and school was not done in conversation with these trees. I now see my stumble over this root as a startling implication of reality; the reality that we, as humans, are not in sync with the communications of the natural world we live within. Roots, however vital for the structure, support, and functions of the living entity, go virtually unnoticed until humans are abruptly exposed to them. When roots present themselves to us in a way that jolts us into recognition of their existence, we have no choice but to acknowledge the inconvenient truth that the roots are irrefutably necessary for the thriving of the whole.

The roots of relational eco-consciousness deeply saturate the pages of the Bible. We've established this through a reanalysis of Genesis 1:28, and venture into both the Old Testament (Chapter 2) and the life of Jesus as our true model for relation to the land (Chapter 3). While these have helped to form a renewed posture towards interaction with nonhuman creation, there is still a line of thought we've yet to examine fully.

> *What is God's relation to nonhuman creation? What does God envision for the future of not just humanity, but all of creation? Most of all, how should the answers to these questions affect our own interactions with the nonhuman world?*

As humans, we have the unique ability to rationally examine the characteristics of God through the Bible, and use this information to shape our interactions with others. This concept is often actualized through our interactions with other humans, but not nearly as much with our

relation with nonhuman creation. To engage with God's view of creation (in the now and the not-yet), this section will answer the above questions with three key points.

1) *Creation itself—and the Spirit's involvement within creation—will always lie outside of our comprehension*.

I am prefacing this chapter by first establishing that there is an aspect of mystery to both God's relation to creation, and ours. We have studied, and continue to study the natural world extensively, but academics will never equate to encounter. Science can create amazing avenues toward better care of ecosystems—increasing technical knowledge of the mechanisms that allow nonhuman organisms to thrive. The problem comes in when science is used to dismiss the formative knowledge found through encounters. Recognizing the existence of multiple, intrinsically different yet useful forms of knowledge leaves room for deeper analysis of what it means to "understand" the natural world. And even more importantly, this leads us to recognition that the true wealth of understanding will never belong to us. With the abyss of our unknowing established, the second key point highlights what we *do* know.

2) *God has a profound relationship with the natural world, indicated by God's joy and ongoing nature.*

The Bible reveals the exuberantly joyful nature of the Creator—creation as an *ongoing* expression of joyfulness in the world. God's joy is *foundational* for creation, consistently

reflecting a relational care that is present in all circumstances, desiring the flourishing of all life together.

Roots anchoring even further in the soil, the Bible gives insight into God's desired relation between humanity and the nonhuman world.

3) *God calls humanity to recognize their distinct interconnection to the natural world.*

All of creation—human and nonhuman alike—are living parts of one, grand salvation narrative. In light of this, we're called to radically transform our relational frameworks, connecting with creation in a way that embeds seeds for tomorrow's hope, in the soil of today.

I CREATION: THE DEPTHS OF UNKNOWING

Job 38-39: The Lord Answers Job

38 1 Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

2 "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
3 Gird up your loins like a man;
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

4 "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
6 On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
7 when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

8 “Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb,
9 when I made the clouds its garment
and thick darkness its swaddling band,
10 and prescribed bounds for it,
and set bars and doors,
11 and said, ‘Thus far shall you come and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?

12 “Have you commanded the morning since your days began
and caused the dawn to know its place,
13 so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,
and the wicked be shaken out of it?
14 It is changed like clay under the seal,
and it is dyed like a garment.
15 Light is withheld from the wicked,
and their uplifted arm is broken.

16 “Have you entered into the springs of the sea
or walked in the recesses of the deep?
17 Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?
18 Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?
Declare, if you know all this.

19 “Where is the way to the dwelling of light,
and where is the place of darkness,
20 that you may take it to its territory
and that you may discern the paths to its home?
21 Surely you know, for you were born then,
and the number of your days is great!

22 “Have you entered the storehouses of the snow,
or have you seen the storehouses of the hail,
23 which I have reserved for the time of trouble,
for the day of battle and war?
24 What is the way to the place where the light is distributed
or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?

25 “Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain
and a way for the thunderbolt,
26 to bring rain on a land where no one lives,
on the desert, which is empty of human life,

27 to satisfy the waste and desolate land,
and to make the ground put forth grass?

28 “Has the rain a father,
or who has fathered the drops of dew?
29 From whose womb did the ice come forth,
and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?
30 The waters become hard like stone,
and the face of the deep is frozen.

31 “Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades
or loose the cords of Orion?
32 Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season,
or can you guide the Bear with its children?
33 Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?
Can you establish their rule on the earth?

34 “Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,
so that a flood of waters may cover you?
35 Can you send forth lightnings, so that they may go
and say to you, ‘Here we are’?
36 Who has put wisdom in the inward parts
or given understanding to the mind?
37 Who has the wisdom to number the clouds?
Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens
38 when the dust runs into a mass
and the clods cling together?

39 “Can you hunt the prey for the lion
or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,
40 when they crouch in their dens
or lie in wait in their covert?
41 Who provides for the raven its prey,
when its young ones cry to God
and wander about for lack of food?

39 1 “Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?
Do you observe the calving of the deer?
2 Can you number the months that they fulfill,
and do you know the time when they give birth,
3 when they crouch to give birth to their offspring
and are delivered of their young?
4 Their young ones become strong; they grow up in the open;
they go forth and do not return to them.

5 “Who has let the wild ass go free?
Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass,
6 to which I have given the steppe for its home,
the salt land for its dwelling place?
7 It scorns the tumult of the city;
it does not hear the shouts of the driver.
8 It ranges the mountains as its pasture,
and it searches after every green thing.

9 “Is the wild ox willing to serve you?
Will it spend the night at your crib?
10 Can you tie it in the furrow with ropes,
or will it harrow the valleys after you?
11 Will you depend on it because its strength is great,
and will you hand over your labor to it?
12 Do you have faith in it that it will return
and bring your grain to your threshing floor?

13 “The ostrich’s wings flap wildly,
though its pinions lack plumage.
14 For it leaves its eggs to the earth
and lets them be warmed on the ground,
15 forgetting that a foot may crush them
and that a wild animal may trample them.
16 It deals cruelly with its young, as if they were not its own;
though its labor should be in vain, yet it has no fear;
17 because God has made it forget wisdom
and given it no share in understanding.
18 When it spreads its plumes aloft,
it laughs at the horse and its rider.

19 “Do you give the horse its might?
Do you clothe its neck with mane?
20 Do you make it leap like the locust?
Its majestic snorting is terrible.
21 It paws violently, exults mightily;
it goes out to meet the weapons.
22 It laughs at fear and is not dismayed;
it does not turn back from the sword.
23 Upon it rattle the quiver,
the flashing spear, and the javelin.
24 With fierceness and rage it swallows the ground;
it cannot stand still at the sound of the trumpet.

25 When the trumpet sounds, it says ‘Aha!’
From a distance it smells the battle,
the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.

26 “Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars
and spreads its wings toward the south?
27 Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up
and makes its nest on high?
28 It lives on the rock and makes its home
in the fastness of the rocky crag.
29 From there it spies the prey;
its eyes see it from far away.
30 Its young ones suck up blood,
and where the slain are, there it is.”

When I came to this abrupt fall on my roller skates, I could only see the concrete ridge that tripped me. I did not realize that beneath the surface was a vast, interconnected system that was in fact life-giving and vital to the ecosystem that my community was a part of. Job’s interaction with God demonstrates this same concept. As humans, even the most extensive study will still result in a less than full view of the vast interconnection that underscores all life as we know it.

In Chapters 38-39, Job has experienced the death and destruction of nearly everything in his life, and is looking to God for answers. His extreme experience results in rather harsh questioning of God, receiving in return a response of a similar tone.[90] On first glance, it appears to be two full chapters of God completely demolishing Job’s sense of entitlement. Through rhetorical questioning, God asks Job a series of “you” questions concerning Job’s severely limited knowledge of the workings of the universe. Have you comprehended the expanse of the

[90] Bowes comments that “God has listened to Job throughout the dialogues and noted Job's often arrogant and contentious attitude. Thus, he takes a rather harsh approach toward Job, just like he did with Jeremiah.” Bowes, Andy W. “Job: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition.” *New Beacon Bible Commentary,* Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2018, p. 368.

Earth(38:18)? Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, so that a flood of waters may cover you (38:34)? Is the wild ox willing to serve you (39:9)?

God also asks similar questions with the opener as "who," the answer of which is obviously God. Who has the wisdom to number the clouds (38:37)? Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb (38:8)? Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain and a way for the thunderbolt (38:25)?

The purpose of this response, however drawn out and harsh it may seem, is actually to lead Job into the understanding "that God's power and wisdom in creating and sustaining his creation are far beyond human understanding."[91] By asking rhetorical questions rather than harshly scolding Job, we see God's character as a helpful teacher, not a harsh punisher.[92] Providing a long list of God's all-knowing power, God brings Job to answer his own questions in Chapter 42. Here, Job declares that he has "uttered what he did not understand (42:3)" but ends with saying that now "my eye sees you (42:5)."

James Johnson makes the argument that these chapters are aimed to help Job recognize God's "kind providence as it is wonderfully applied to God's lesser creatures" and also that "his own humanity is more valuable to God than the lives of wild animals."[93] What's lacking in Johnson's analysis is that in this entire speech to Job, God never once speaks of the animals as lesser. In fact, I would claim the opposite. God's long explanation of the universe's secrets forces Job to level himself with nonhuman creation. God's ultimate control over the inner workings of the universe applies equally to Job and the rest of creation. God's movement, whether deemed "positive" or "negative" by humanity's subjective standards, is not limited to humankind. Further

[91] Bowes, Andy W. "Job: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition." *New Beacon Bible Commentary,* Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2018, p. 368.
[92] Ortlund, Eric. "God's Joy in Creation in the Book of Job." *Presbyterion,* vol. 47, no. 1, 2021, p. 12.
[93] Johnson, J. J. S. "Doxological Biodiversity in Job, Chapter 39: God's Wisdom and Providence as the Caring Creator, Exhibited in the Creation Ecology of Wildlife Pairs." *Creation Research Society Quarterly,* vol. 57, no. 4, 2021, p. 286.

evidence of this can be found in verses 13-18 when God speaks of the Ostrich. Describing this bird's unruly fearlessness when there are in fact many things to fear, the text reads: "because God has made it forget wisdom and given it no share in understanding (39:17)." The emphasis on lack of understanding within these chapters guides Job, and us, to the profundity of the fact that we *share* this lack with the nonhuman world. Ironically, one could perhaps even say in absence we are connected, through lack we are whole.

This being said, I would tend to agree more with theologian Fredrick Gottlieb, who states that when Job is confronted with his lack of knowledge of the nonhuman world, "Job is thus forced to realize that God's providence extends to all creatures, and that His involvement in the governing of the world is a continual process."[94] It's in the midst of this inexplicable governing of the world that we are called, not to understand it all, but to be active participants in God's processes. By recognizing God's providence and jurisdiction over all creation, we too can take part in the protection and care of each living entity we share this common home with.

Returning to the idea of God as a teacher, my hope is to write this chapter in light of this characteristic. While much of biblical and theological work in the academic world can be seen as "questioning" God in some sense, the aim here is thoughtful analysis with minds open to learning from both the text, and the Spirit that empowered the text. Just as God led Job back to peace, knowing that God is the ultimate sustainer, we too can keep this knowledge alive and present with us as we grapple with the ultimately unattainable task of analyzing God's relation to creation.[95]

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[94] Gottlieb, Freema. "The Creation Theme in Genesis 1, Psalm 104, and Job 38-42." *Jewish Bible Quarterly,* vol. 44, no. 1, 2016, p. 35.

[95] Gottlieb notes: "Ultimately, Job's encounter with Creation leads him to exclaim, *I had heard You with my ears, but now I see You with my eyes! (42:5)*. Finally contrite, he declares: "I repent," which can also mean "I have been comforted." I am to do all analysis in this book in light of Job's repentance; remembering that ultimately, the knowledge that we are not meant to have all the knowledge, can be our comfort. Gottlieb, Freema. "The Creation Theme in Genesis 1, Psalm 104, and Job 38-42." *Jewish Bible Quarterly,* vol. 44, no. 1, 2016, p. 35-36.

II CREATOR: JOYFUL RELATIONALITY

Psalm 104: God the Creator and Provider

God the Creator and Provider
1 Bless the Lord, O my soul.
O Lord my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honor and majesty,
2 wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent;
3 you set the beams of your chambers on the waters;
you make the clouds your chariot;
you ride on the wings of the wind;
4 you make the winds your messengers,
fire and flame your ministers.

5 You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.
6 You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
7 At your rebuke they flee;
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.
8 They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys,
to the place that you appointed for them.
9 You set a boundary that they may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

10 You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
11 giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.
12 By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.
13 From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

14 You cause the grass to grow for the cattle
and plants for people to cultivate,
to bring forth food from the earth
15 and wine to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine
and bread to strengthen the human heart.
16 The trees of the field are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
17 In them the birds build their nests;

the stork has its home in the fir trees.
18 The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the coneys.
19 You have made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting.
20 You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
21 The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.
22 When the sun rises, they withdraw
and lie down in their dens.
23 People go out to their work
and to their labor until the evening.

24 O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
25 There is the sea, great and wide;
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.
26 There go the ships
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

27 These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;
28 when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
29 When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
30 When you send forth your spirit, they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.

31 May the glory of the Lord endure forever;
may the Lord rejoice in his works—
32 who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke.
33 I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
34 May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the Lord.
35 Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
and let the wicked be no more.
Bless the Lord, O my soul.
Praise the Lord!

While the inner workings and expressions of creation are ultimately beyond our comprehension, and always will be, we are given portions of the Bible that hint at God's joyful relationship with creation. The first step to understanding this relationship is recognition that we were created by a God of joy, this is reflected through both humanity and our interactions with the nonhuman world. The blissful smile of a mother when their child returns after months away, the first laugh of a newborn baby, sitting on a park bench watching people just be human: it's not difficult to find ways that humanity in itself is a reflection of joy. Glimpses of the Creator's ultimate, all-encompassing joy are momentarily revealed through our encounters with one another. The same is true for our interactions with nonhuman creation. The sense of awe that all but envelops us as we watch a sunset, or the feeling that ensues when we hear a puppy bark for the first time—human encounter with nonhuman creation provides momentary revelation of divine joy. But what about God's relation to creation—if joy is so clearly declared through creatures' interactions with one another, wouldn't it make sense for God's relation to Creation to be distinctly joyful as well?

Psalm 104 answers this with a firm yes, providing evidence for joy as the basis for God's relation to *all* creation. While we can see allusions to creation all throughout the Psalms, Psalm 104 has been widely identified in both the Jewish and Christian traditions as "The Creation Psalm."[96] In this Psalm, God very evidently rejoices in God's creation. Joy is not just an option, but a *necessity* for the functioning of the cosmos as it stands.[97] This conclusion leads to a

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[96] Gottlieb, Freema. "The Creation Theme in Genesis 1, Psalm 104, and Job 38-42." *Jewish Bible Quarterly,* vol. 44, no. 1, 2016, p. 31.

[97] See William Brown's comment: "[If] the creator were to stop enjoying creation, the cosmos would suffer collapse… The possibility of cosmic demise in the psalm is attributed not to divine wrath against a resistant or hostile creation but to something seemingly more benign, namely, to God's abstaining from joy." Brown, William. "Psalm 104." In *And God Saw That It Was Good,* edited by Frederick Gaiser and Mark Throntveit, Luther Seminary, 2006. Quoted in Reveley, Nelson. "Psalm 104:10–34." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible & Theology,* vol. 73, no. 3, July 2019, pp. 292–93.

multitude of implications for what it means to also be a people who, like their creator, rejoice in relational encounters with creation.

Defining Joy

Joy. As common of a word as this is for us joy is—biblically—not something that is not a normal occurrence in descriptions of God. Oftentimes the words for "to delight" and "to be pleased" are used in reference to God, but scholarly consensus tells us that the hebrew word: יִשְׂמַח (“to be joyful”) signals a more deeper, more profound joy than what is found in delight or pleasing. We only see יִשְׂמַח used in reference to God twice in the entire Hebrew canon, once being Psalm 104 verse 31: "*May the Lord rejoice in his works.*"[98] This verb, used in reference to creation, shows us that the level of delight God takes in creation is something uncommon and thoroughly remarkable. As will be developed further in this section, God goes above and beyond the basic provisions of nonhuman creation. This verb's appearance here indicates the reason for these actions—God is uniquely delighted by nonhuman creation. Joy is the foundation of this relationship.

But tangibly, what does this delight actually look like? What in the text shows us that this is not just a chance wording, but God really does have a heightened, ecstatically joyful relation with the nonhuman world?

Creator: Provider of Home

One way that we see this joy actualized is through the concept of *home*. Psalm 104 specifically notes God's provision of home for creatures of the nonhuman world: fields of grass

[98] William Brown notes that the only other time in the Hebrew canon that יִשְׂמַח is used in reference to God is in Isa 9:17, which is "textually suspect." Brown, William P. "Joy and the Art of Cosmic Maintenance: An Ecology of Play in Psalm 104." *Word & World. Supplement Series,* no. 5, 2006, p. 34.

for the cattle (v14), fir trees for the stork (v17), mountains for the goats and rocks for the rabbits (v18). God first and foremost creates and protects homes for these creatures because "Home serves as both boundary and basis for flourishing."[99] Home is a concept that humans have a pretty good grasp of. While home looks different for each individual, having a place (or community) where one can be secure, rest, and receive nourishment is *essential* for development into flourishing children of the creator. Psalm 104 is evidence that God both recognizes and responds to this same need for home within nonhuman species.

As the first step to establishing a home, safety is a must. All of the rest of these aspects of a true home—nourishment, comfort, rest—hinge upon basic protection of the being. For evidence of God developing refuges of safety for the nonhuman world, we need look no further than verses 17-18: "*In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees. The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coneys."* Here we see that the shelter (mahsê) is implied for storks, wild goats, and coneys; safety is the overall focus of this stanza.[100] But once again, home goes beyond the basics, and God provides for these alternate needs as well. One verse in which we can see God extending a joyful hand past safety into comfort is verse 9. "*You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth*." Scholarly analysis tells us that this verse is in reference to God's promise to never bring another worldwide flood in Genesis 9:11.[101] Not only does this establish God as one who keeps promises, but also that God desires for all creation to be in a state of peace and confidence of his provision, comfortably operating in these ecosystems with no possibility of the

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[99] Brown, William P. "Joy and the Art of Cosmic Maintenance: An Ecology of Play in Psalm 104." *Word & World. Supplement Series,* no. 5, 2006, p. 28.

[100]Thompson, David, Beth Ross, and A. Varughese. *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition.* New Beacon Bible Commentary, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2020, p. 194.

[101]Limburg, James. "Down-to-Earth Theology: Psalm 104 and the Environment." *Currents in Theology and Mission,* vol. 21, no. 5, 1994, p. 342.

future being wiped away from them. Just as this promise provides comfort to us that our lives will not be destroyed in another flood, this verse is an indication that God extends this comfort to all the creatures that roam, swim, stand, and grow on this immeasurably complex planet.[102]

We know that this provision of home, through and beyond safety, is completed from the basis of Joy. A home indicates a loving relationship between entities where the one given the home is deeply valued and loved: think about your children, pets, and other loved ones. It's only through יִשְׂמַח, this uniquely keen joy, that one would give and sustain a home to another being. This sense of joy is then mirrored back from the creation: *"By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches (v12)."* God, with a joy of unfathomable depths for creation, forms homes in which some of this joy might shine through—whether that be through a frolic or dance, perhaps laughter, or even jovial chirping among the abundance of habitable branches.

I've referenced humans many times in this section. This is not only to contextualize these ideas within familiar concepts, but also to lay the groundwork for a distinct parallel reflected here: *All* of our lives are characterized by dependence on God. *Give us today our daily bread* (Matt 6:11), parallels directly to… *These all look to you to give them their food in due season* (v27).[103] Psalms 104 shows us that this provision of home is mutual. But more

[102] Looking specifically at the storks of verse 18, Thompson notes that storks are a migratory bird; they nest and hatch eggs in Europe before passing through Israel in the Autumn to spend the Winter in Africa. This context serves as evidence that God cares and provides for creation through the movement of life, the spirit active within each place a creature calls "home." This depiction of God "with us" though the journey of life also serves as a powerful metaphor for movement within humankind. Thompson, David, Beth Ross, and A. Varughese. *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition.* New Beacon Bible Commentary, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2020, p. 193.

[103] Hossfeld notes that verse 27 "is unique in that waiting/hoping is extended to both humans and animals. The creatures are dependent on God for their food, that is, they are the recipients of God's gifts. The expression "in his/due time" designates regular processes in creation, as, for example, in Deut 11:14 and Ps 1:3." Hossfeld, Frank-Lothar, and Erich Zenger. *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101-150.* Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, Fortress Press, 2011, p. 56.

importantly—beyond mutuality—our homes are *profoundly interconnected*. Through God's joyful establishment of homes for nonhuman creatures, humans too are provided with a home. God's meticulous creation of such interconnected ecosystems—networks in which organisms can *only* live through their relation to other species, in which the survival of one often links to the flourishing of the whole—it's these systems that provide humans with the resources and natural services needed for our sustenance. The flourishing of ecosystems in necessary to physically build our homes; the cabin I write this from could only have been built with the wood from a flourishing forest—soil replenished with nitrogen and phosphorus through the decomposition of fallen leaves, broken branches and animal feces—key predators keeping the population of herbivorous creatures from consuming excess vegetation. But not only resources, the natural services provided by ecosystems are key to our survival as well! The provision of freshwater is only possible with healthy wetlands to filter out sediment and nutrients, replenishing aquifers with clean groundwater for humans to tap. It's an item of prior question, and I would make the claim that that's intentional. Without humanity, nature would thrive—without nature, humanity would not be existent.

There's a popular line of argumentation—rooted in this misinterpretation of Genesis 1:28—that all of this may be true, but it's only for humanity's use. Yes, God must sustain nature first, but God only does this as a mechanism for humanity to exist. To this I would argue that this entire section is evidence of the contrary, of a joyful, relational God is elated in encounters with and provision for the nonhuman world. This is a God who's sustenance extends to biomes humans lacking humans altogether—joy physically embodied as showers of rain unto wilderness

canopies.[104] God's care for the natural world and God's provision for humanity are densely interconnected, providing a concept of home that will always bring both humanity and nature into the depths of its entanglement.

Creator: Present in the Process

Psalm 104 also demonstrates creation as *ongoing*. This concept is key as it demonstrates that God's joy toward creation was not a one time act, done after the time of creation. Rather, this joy is something continuous, the spirit's presence with creation at all moments. This passage mirrors Genesis' depiction of the creation through God's breath (Gen 2:7), indicating the same, continuous involvement of the spirit with creation: *"when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created," (v29-30).* This parallel demonstrates God's intimate relation to creation. Just in the phrase "take away their breath" implies God's initial presence *within* their breath. A God whose Spirit is the mechanism of the being's creation—whose spirit then remains within the being through each breath until the last—is an immensely relational God. God's creation can function as a noun, but also as a verb, the act of creation continuing in your every breath upon these pages. Creation is continuous, the spirit's presence never ceasing: "thus the Creator of the world is also its Sustainer."[105]

Expanding on this concept of such an intimately present Spirit, the second half of verse 30 reads: "*When you send forth your spirit,[g] they are created, and you renew the face of the ground."* Some scholars interpret this verse as an indication that in times of environmental

[104] Jerome Creach makes the argument that in Job 38, specific emphasis on rain falling in the wilderness—where there are no humans—indicates that God's providence is everywhere. God does not abandon the wilderness, it's where God *dwells*. Creach, Jerome. "Wilderness as Sanctuary: An Ecological Reading of Psalm 104:16-18." Conference presentation, 2024 SBL Annual Meeting, 28 Nov. 2024, San Diego, CA.
[105] Gottlieb, Freema. "The Creation Theme in Genesis 1, Psalm 104, and Job 38-42." *Jewish Bible Quarterly,* vol. 44, no. 1, 2016, p. 32.

desolation, God does not abandon God's creatures. God's breath continues to be "gathered up and held" for the next generation of creation to come.[106] We see this concept ring true in the success stories of ecosystem restoration and regeneration: the wildlife haven that's become of the Chernobyl disaster, the return of sea otters to the site of the Exxon Valdez Oil spill, or the restoration of Yellowstone's riverbanks through a wolf reintroduction program. These examples of nature's resilience are directly correlated to the Spirit's consistent, deeply involved presence in all creation—moving as if needles within the depths of this abyssal web of interconnectedness, poking holes for the light of joy to shine through once more.

Creator: The Open-handed Farmer

It's clear that Psalm 104 demonstrates a clear framework of God's immense relationality with creation: through the provision of homes, and God's ongoing presence with nonhuman beings, we are shown a God who cares for his creation with a deep joy beyond our comprehension.. Descriptions of God–gushing forth springs (v10), growing grass for the cattle (14) and both planting and watering the trees[107] (16)–give us a depiction of a God who takes a present, active role in the flourishing of creation not with a clenched fist, but an open, loving hand. One could even see this Psalm as a depiction of God as a farmer,[108] cultivating the land with nourishment, providing for the many needs of God's animals. Verse 28 specifically helps paint this image… *when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.* This verse provides a captivating

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[106]Thompson, David, Beth Ross, and A. Varughese. *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition.* New Beacon Bible Commentary, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2020, p. 196.

[107] For more on the significance of the cedars of Lebanon refer to Ps 92:13 and Ezk 17:3, 31:3. Hossfeld, Frank-Lothar, and Erich Zenger. *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101-150.* Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, Fortress Press, 2011, p. 53.

[108] For more on God as a farmer see Limburg, James. "Down-to-Earth Theology: Psalm 104 and the Environment." *Currents in Theology and Mission,* vol. 21, no. 5, 1994, p. 341.

image of God, hands open—a physical embodiment of the sustenance provided from the Creator to their creation. This verse in itself can be seen as evidence for God's encounter with creation. Not only does God desire for creation to flourish through proper nutrition, God desires to *encounter* each animal, to be an active participant in the nourishment of their bodies.

This past December, I visited my home in Wisconsin and ended up spending some time at a family friend's farm; two twin brothers who never married, and happily run the family farm together. Turns out that the week prior, one of their cows had given birth, and they were in the process of feeding the newborn when we arrived. Taking a bottle of warm milk, they hand-fed the baby calf. Offering the task to me, they watched with quiet smiles as I did the same. I find this to be a compelling depiction of God in this role: a serene farmer, spending a chilled December evening out in the Stable. The warm smile of the brothers is paralleled as God, too, hands the task of tangible provision through encounter to his beloved humans on earth.

The call of this book is to take the bottle willingly, to choose to nurture rather than degrade and destroy. Just as the calf needs us, we need the calf: to breathe oxygen rather than carbon monoxide, to eat nutrient-rich foods over micro-plastics and pesticides, to drink fresh water rather than a sludged runoff of heavy metals. If God takes joy in the flourishing and the provision of creation, and we have been given a chance to participate—even just minutely—in this provision, we too should be ecstatic at this possibility, jumping at the chance to actively join God in the irradiant task that is provision.

III HUMANITY: A CALL TO CONNECTION

While the open-handed farmer is a captivating portrayal of this open invitation to partake in provision, this is still but an image. Where do we see textual support for God *calling* us to relate to creation on a more comprehensive level, to follow in God's footsteps in this joyfully present provision? This section answers just that, enlivening our motivation to enact relationality in our everyday lives.

Romans 8: Future Glory

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in[n] hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Mark 16: Jesus Commissions the Disciples

14 Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table, and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.[c] ***15 And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news[d] to the whole creation****. 16 The one who believes and is baptized will be saved, but the one who does not believe will be condemned. 17 And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; 18 they will pick up snakes,[e] and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover."*

Together We Groan, Together We Rise

Flying across the sidewalk in my blazing pink roller skates, I distinctly remember the scrape of hard concrete—followed by a swift blur as I rolled into a grassy ditch. Thankful for the bed of weeds cushioning my fall, consideration of the impact *I* was having on the grass never crossed my mind. There's a decent chance I could've landed on a patch of *Arabidopsis thaliana*, commonly known as mouse-ear thale-cress. This species, considered a weed due to its invasive spread all across North America, is common along ditches and waysides in rural Wisconsin.[109] It was recently discovered that these common little plants can actually distinguish when they're being touched, releasing calcium waves throughout their cells at different speeds depending on the amount of pressure being applied.[110] Just as the wound to my knee was sending indicators of pain to my brain, plants can also signal distress within themselves.

Our understanding of pain and suffering is relatively limited to the human experience. We can all think of times we've experienced pain: physical, emotional or both, in a variety of different circumstances. But when's the last time you've thought about the response of a tree to being cut down, a plant being stepped on, or an animal being slaughtered? There's a distinct inevitability to this suffering; we cannot be functioning human beings without sustaining ourselves by taking the lives of other beings, be this plant or animal. Stated well by Alfred North Whitehead: "*Life is Robbery."*[111] Coming to terms with this has been one of the biggest contemplations of my adult life. But ultimately, the end result of this contemplation is that just as we suffer, so does the rest of creation. Although the materialization of our "suffering" looks different in terms of situation, chemicals released, etc, we share in the fact that we all do suffer.

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[109] Native Plant Trust. "Arabidopsis thaliana (Thale Cress)." *Go Botany,* Native Plant Trust, accessed 15 Nov. 2024, https://gobotany.nativeplanttrust.org/species/arabidopsis/thaliana/.
[110]Mudrilov, Mikhail, Maria Ladeynova, Maria Grinberg, Irina Balalaeva, and Victor Vodeneev. "Electrical Signaling of Plants under Abiotic Stressors: Transmission of Stimulus-Specific Information." *International Journal of Molecular Sciences,* vol. 22, no. 19, 2021, article 10715, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijms221910715.
[111] Whitehead, Alfred. *Process and Reality.* The Free Press, 1929, p. 105.

Romans 8 is key when it comes to biblical analysis of collective suffering. This passage has been extremely influential for creation care and ecotheology movements within Christianity,[112] particularly because of its use of the term κτίσις (ktisis) in Greek. κτίσις is used 19 times in the New Testament,[113] with Greek scholarly consensus leading us to the widely accepted translation that κτίσις refers to nonhuman creation.[114] It's debated whether κτίσις means *just* nonhuman creation, or includes human creation as well, but in the context of the above passage, the former seems to be the case, given that humans are introduced as a separate subject in verse 23.[115] This concept is key, as verses 19-22 establish that *nonhuman creation* specifically is in eager longing, subject to futility, in hope of obtaining freedom, groaning together.[116] Verse 19 specifically uses the Greek word ἀποκαραδοκία (apokaradokia), translated in English to "eager longing"… "*For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God."* Scholarly consensus is that this Greek word can be defined as straining forward toward an eagerly and "confidently awaited" event.[117] This verb is not one of stagnancy. Just as humans have faith in our eventual salvation through Christ's return, Romans 8:19 gives us reason to believe that *nonhuman creation* also holds this concept with confidence. While the text doesn't give us specifics of what this looks like for each particular nonhuman species, or any for that

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[112] Gregory P. Fewster writes, "Of a more practical nature are the environmental sensitivities raised by many authors. For several years much of the hermeneutical work on Romans 8 (notwithstanding commentaries) has had an ecological thrust. While the specific conclusions of various articles have been diverse, there remains a very strong ecological biblical theology that drives and sustains these exegetical decisions." Fewster, Gregory P. *Creation Language in Romans 8: A Study in Monosemy.* BRILL, 2013, p. 10.

[113]Bible Hub. "Strong's Greek: 2937. κτίσις (ktisis)." *Bible Hub,* accessed 15 Nov. 2024, https://biblehub.com/greek/strongs_2937.htm.

[114] Jewett, Robert. *Romans: Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible.* Fortress Press, 2007, p. 511.

[115] Hubbard, David A., and James D. G. Dunn. *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 1-8.* Vol. 38a, Word Books Publisher, 1988, p. 472.

[116] Hubbard notes that the concept of the natural order inescapably facing decay would have been a concept familiar to Greek audiences. Hubbard, David A., and James D. G. Dunn. *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 1-8.* Vol. 38a, Word Books Publisher, 1988, p. 472.

[117] Hubbard, David A., and James D. G. Dunn. *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 1-8.* Vol. 38a, Word Books Publisher, 1988, p. 469.

matter, ἀποκαραδοκία implies that humans are not the only species capable of longing, of awaiting, of desiring to be free from pains and tribulations.

This narrative strengthens as we move into verse 23. While verses 19-22 solely describe the afflictions of nonhuman creation, verse 23 brings humans into the scene: *"and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies."* The text *explicitly* links our sufferings together, presenting them as one part of one cohesive narrative. What's more, analyzing this ending phase: "redemption of our bodies," provides evidence for an *even stronger* portrayal of our sufferings as one. Upon closer examination, the Greek that's used here is: Ἀπολύτρωσιν τοῦ σώματος ἡμῶν.[118]

Ἀπολύτρωσιν	redemption
τοῦ	Of the
σώματος	body
ἡμῶν	Of us

While I've chosen to stay consistent with the NRSV translation for this book—in which the translation is plural, bodies—given this breakdown of the Greek, many translations relay this phrase to the singular: "redemption of *our body*."[119] This grammatical shift by Paul, if intentional, would appear to indicate an interrelated whole of creation—*our body* as the entire

[118] Bible Hub. "Romans 8:23 - Interlinear Text." *Bible Hub,* https://biblehub.com/text/romans/8-23.htm. Accessed 15 Nov. 2024.

[119] See Robert Jewett's commentary on the english translation to redemption: "Paul's verb [Ἀπολύτρωσιν] ordinarily has a military connotation, referring to the redemption of captives or prisoners of war either by victory or paying a ransom. Whereas in the Roman context only persons with status and means could hope for that kind of redemption, here Paul speaks of all members of the community who share in the groaning as well as in future release." Jewett, Robert. *Romans: Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible.* Fortress Press, 2007, p. 519.

body of creation, human and nonhuman alike—rather than the resurrection of the human body in an individual sense, detached from the rest of creation.[120] It's reasonable to conclude that this grammatical shift was indeed intentional, when we consider the context of this entire pericope. The section begins with four verses extensively establishing this process of both nonhuman agony and aspiration. Humans only enter as a secondary clause, seemingly in addition to the already established condition of the natural world. This establishment of one, resurrected body of creation not only underscores the ecological undertones we already see in this text, but also lines up with beliefs at the time: it was a common ancient idea that the world was a living organism.[121] All this said, the idea that Paul is indicating a collective resurrection of *one body of creation*, seems to reasonably follow both the narrative of this pericope, and the cultural context. Ultimately, whether you choose to view this passage within the scope of body, or bodies, the message is still clear as day: just as we are bound together by our mutual reliance on God, we are inexplicably linked through our suffering at the hands of earthly decay. In one mournful, yet sublime song, it is with one another that we cry out.

But what really does "suffering" mean in this context? Is this groaning rather indicative of the ways we as humans inflict suffering on the nonhuman world through our actions? Given that this letter was written in a time far before the context of the industrial revolution, climate change, deforestation—and all of the other ways the human species has sufficiently caused ecological damage through purely anthropocentric accords—it's not likely that human exploitation of the natural world was Paul's original focus at the time. Along another line of thought, is suffering then inherent to the design of nature itself? Are the predator-prey

[120] Lodahl, Michael (Professor of Theology and World Religion at Point Loma Nazarene University). Personal conversation, Oct. 2024.
[121] Jewett, Robert. *Romans: Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible.* Fortress Press, 2007, p. 512.

relationships we see in the natural world reflected in this collective groaning of creation? While some claim that the natural order was by intelligent design, each ecosystem intricately and purposefully woven together by the creator, I can't help but struggle with the idea of God *intentionally* weaving suffering and violence as inherent to nonhuman relations.

No matter which of these perspectives you align with, I think theologian Ernst Käsemann was right on target with his analysis that we can understand Paul's theology in terms of "Christ's redemption of the whole world by creating a new cosmic order that replaces the old one."[122] Whether it was God's design for ecosystems on Earth to function in a way that's inherently violent—or whenever something has gone terribly wrong as a result of the fall—it's clear that God's redemptive plan is one that restructures all life on Earth as we know it. Nonhuman creation is not a passive object, nor simply a backdrop for the grand scheme of human existence. No, rather Paul's theology in Romans 8 shows us that the nonhuman world *demands* acknowledgement of its equal placement within this eschaton of renewal in the age yet-to-come.

Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff has a captivating way of drawing practical application from this idea—much of his work is either inspired by, or in direct reference to Romans 8. Boff writes: "Liberation theology and ecological discourse have something in common: they start from two bleeding wounds… Both have as their starting point a cry: the cry of the poor for life, freedom, and beauty, and the cry of the Earth groaning under oppression. Both seek liberation."[123] Boff later expands on this idea further, explaining how liberation for the Earthcan only be done through a new covenant between the Earth and human beings. He refers to this new relationship as "brotherly or sisterly."[124] This type of language *strongly* lends to a

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[122]Käsemann, Ernst. *Commentary on Romans.* Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Eerdmans, 1980, p. 459. Quoted in Mavulu, Joseph. "The Groaning Creation: An Exegetical Study on Romans 8:19-23." In *God and Creation,* edited by R. L. Reed and D. K. Ngaruiya, Langham Global Library, 2019, pp. 69-82.
[123] Boff, Leonardo. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor.* Orbis Books, 1997.
[124] Boff, Leonardo. *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor.* Orbis Books, 1997.

framework of relational eco-consciousness. Seeing our relationship with the Earth as a covenant—vowing to treat the Earth as our very own family—this is an arresting form of relationality. Perhaps it's by taking this shared affliction seriously that groaning is able to be a transformative factor in realigning our notions of relation.

This all said, these frameworks are nothing if left within the realm of thought. I agree with theologian Joseph Mavulu's claim that we cannot mistake Paul's theology as an excuse to sit back and wait for the eschaton to unfold.[125] Paul's writing in Romans 8 serves as an active call for us to not only acknowledge creation's role in the salvation narrative, but also to live our lives in solidarity with the suffering of the nonhuman world—recognition's purpose as a guide into action. Taking solidarity seriously entails a relational approach, one that sets aside our assumed ability to fully grasp this suffering. I will have full knowledge of my mother's suffering—never fully grasp her experience of losing her brother under abrupt, tragic circumstances. I can offer a shoulder to my best friend, lying forlorn in her hospital bed, but I don't understand the complicated muddle of emotions awaiting results from a cancer recurrence test. While we can never fully grasp the experiences of our loved ones, presence, attentive listening, seeking to understand despite ample knowledge that we never really will—these are the first, extremely necessary steps toward faithful care. By attuning our ears to the unique cries of creation, intentionally spending not just in, but *within* creation, we can take an active role in meaningfully assisting these ecosystems that ceaselessly support our daily breath. Proper conservation and restoration spring forth from *with*in, not around, nor above. Peace and healing are possible for

[125]Mavulu, Joseph. "The Groaning Creation: An Exegetical Study on Romans 8:19-23." In *God and Creation,* edited by R. L. Reed and D. K. Ngaruiya, Langham Global Library, 2019, pp. 69-82, p. 79.

each ecosystem in affliction—living in the way relational eco-consciousness entails a welcoming of this possibility, embracing the impossibility of encounter.

"To All Creation"

The Book of Mark has 16 chapters: each one a key to this narrative that is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But the funny thing about narratives is that whereas the middle details can get muddled, we're always left remembering the end—it's human nature to cling to the last of what we're given. It's clear that in Jesus' narrative, we're left with an ending not to be forgotten—a clear declaration that the page has been turned, the pen now left within the hesitant clutch of humanity's clammy hands.

Mark 16:15 parallels the Great Commission given to the disciples in Matthew (Matt 28:18-20).[126] However, differentiating the accounts of this command is the end of the verse, Mark's version clearly stating: *"the whole creation*." Once again, we have an occurrence of κτίσις, the same term that indicates the groaning of the nonhuman world in Romans 8. Here, given the context of the following verses indicating believing, casting out demons, and speaking in tongues, κτίσις appears to encompass *all of creation*—human and nonhuman alike.[127] The specific selection of this world κτίσις, especially in the context of such an important ending note to Jesus' narrative, serves as an indication that this good news is not exclusive to humanity.

Many have fought back on the translation of this text, suggesting other explanations for the choice of κτίσις, dissuaded from this idea that the commission could be expanded upon further than just for humans. An example of this is scholar Michael Cahill. In his English

[126] Metzger, Bruce M., and Craig A. Evans. *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27-16:20.* Vol. 34b, Word Books Publisher, 2015, p. 549.
[127] Evans notes that some translations do translate this to "to every creature" rather than all creation, seeming to prefer this translation. Metzger, Bruce M., and Craig A. Evans. *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27-16:20.* Vol. 34b, Word Books Publisher, 2015, p. 549.

translation of one of the earliest commentaries on Mark, Cahill notes that: ""Creature" presented a problem for the [original] commentator, as it seemed to suggest preaching to inanimate creation."[128] To deal with this "problem," the original commentator suggests that the use of κτίσις was only used to demonstrate the idea that "human being is said to be the world on a small scale."[129] I disagree with this translation, suggesting we accept instead that what Cahill notes is simply as it seems: the verse *is* suggesting that preaching to nonhuman creation. Instead of grasping in the dark for a creative "solution," could we instead consider the idea that eschatology expands beyond humanity? Could we consider that the good news of Christ's resurrection is immensely more powerful, more widely encompassing than an anthropocentric view would typically imagine?

I specifically kept this passage from the previous chapter—despite its sole focus on Jesus—for the purpose of placing it here, in conversation with Romans 8. These passages, when read in tandem with one another, provide strong evidence for an ecological eschatology, for the inclusion of the nonhuman world within our framework for comprehending both our mission on earth, and our hopes for the age to come. We are told not once, but on two separate occasions now that Jesus' promise, this word of life, is most definitely not exclusively anthropocentric. This being the case, potential hesitation over what Jesus actually meant here—tangibly, for His disciples—can still be expected. While you may not be convinced that Jesus is calling for us to literally go preach to rocks and birds,[130] I'm convinced that "proclaiming the good news" to creation can look a multitude of different ways. The way we interpret a tangible enactment of this phrase hinges on one key question and its answer: *Why would there be a need to proclaim or*

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[128] *The First Commentary on Mark: An Annotated Translation.* Translated by Michael Cahill, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 131.
[129] *The First Commentary on Mark: An Annotated Translation.* Translated by Michael Cahill, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 131.
[130] See chapter 5 for more on St. Francis of Assisi, who actually preached to birds and other animals.

spread news to a particular group of individuals? Only if the good news is *applicable* to them. This being said, following the line of analysis from Romans 8 that the resurrection of the body includes *all* of creation, then Jesus' words in Matthew 16 are our call to treat it as such! This is not just a mere passing thought, but a direct command from the Lord—the very *last* command he left humans with before being "*taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God* (v19)." Jesus used his last human breaths to call humans into recognition of the nonhuman world as part of His body, as *worthy* recipients of a profound version of provision, of an immensely relational love.

IV A LIVING ECOLOGICAL ESCHATOLOGY

Genesis 9:8-17

8 *Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him,* ***9*** *"As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you* ***10*** *and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.* ***11*** *I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."* ***12*** *God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:* ***13*** *I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.* ***14*** *When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds,* ***15*** *I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh, and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.* ***16*** *When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."* ***17*** *God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."*

Isaiah 11:6-9

6 The wolf shall live with the lamb;
the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together,
and a little child shall lead them.
7 The cow and the bear shall graze;
their young shall lie down together;

and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
9 They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

The past sections have hinted at this phrase, *ecological eschatology*, but you may be wondering, what does this phrase even entail? Eschatology is defined as: "the part of theology concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind."[131] When we add the clause ecological onto this term, we can start by switching the phrase "humankind" to "all of creation." This term asks a question: *What does the coming age look like for the entities of creation who do not speak, who do not make free-willed decisions in the same light as humanity?* This is a key question, but I see it as key mainly because it leads us into the *second* way we can view the concept of ecological eschatology: as seeking a newfound understanding of how we can *presently* live in, and with creation. Sallie Mcfague accurately describes this alternative take on ecological eschatology as: "the breaking in of new possibilities, of hope for a new creation. Living from a vision for a different present based upon a new future."[132] After first coming to the conclusion that creation does play a substantial role in God's greater plan for the future of the universe, we are then called to live into this renewed future, to seek avenues for the entrance of peace, of true *shalom*. Connecting the sabbath rest of God on the seventh day to the redemption of all creation, Paul Santmire writes: "we are living in the sixth day, awaiting the dawning of the final fulfillment of the whole creation—the day of perfect universal peace, shalom."[133]

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[131]Oxford University Press. *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "eschatology," accessed Dec. 2024, https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/.
[132]McFague, Sallie. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology.* Augsburg Fortress, 1993, p. 198.
[133] Santmire, H. Paul. *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology*. Fortress Press, 2000. Pp. 36.

The Bible gives direction as to what this day of universal peace will look like. Specifically in terms of nonhuman creation—Isaiah 11 is the most prominent of examples. This passage places emphasis not only on humanity's peace with all beings, but also creation's peace altogether: predator and prey relationships seemingly dissolved. Another passage that echoes similar themes can be found in Genesis 9, where God creates a covenant with both humans and animals—*all* flesh on earth, promising never again to bring a flood to destroy creation. When put in conversation with one another, these passages show that God desires *shalom* for all creation. Bonded as one created world, God promises that He is with us in our suffering, that He is not out to destroy us, but will instead bring reconciliation from the ashes of our violent relations, a transcendent peace of *all* creation, through the blood of Christ alone. In other words, "the divine will for the future of the whole creation is emphatically proclaimed to be shalom, a will which is sealed by the divine covenant with all creatures."[134]

CONCLUSION

God's relation to the nonhuman world and its being is abyssal; even this rather lengthy analysis of Psalm 104 barely scratches the surface of the depth of God's joy—the reach of God's provision and presence. But just as the farmer extends a warm bottle, this joy does not end with God. Romans 8 and Mark 16 call us to wholly recognize the nonhuman world as actively present within the lofty narrative of salvation. Effectively, "anthropological soteriology is no longer a

[134] Santmire, H. Paul. *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology*. Fortress Press, 2000. Pp. 37.

viable option."[135]—the framework in which we consider both suffering and redemption is expanded to not just humanity, but the cosmos in its entirety.[136]

This weighty realization should empower us to continue God's diligent work of loving creation through intentional relation, to take the bottle with willing hands. God's profoundly joyful relationality was seemingly created to be continued, infiltrating *all beings* as a navigation mechanism, a gently ebbing current within the dense sea of interconnection that invisibly ties us together. These perceived moments of encounter—human or nonhuman—are living proof that relationality was built into our nature, that each of us has the ability to live out a relational eco-consciousness. It's through this divinely potentiated relation that we can strive toward the shalom God has promised us as creation, recognizing the vastness of this peace that is to transcend us all.

We began this chapter with my blundering encounter with a root. For a brief moment, our lives came into contact in an abrupt, quite violent fashion. But this vastly complex organism was not intending to hurt me. This tree was merely existing as a living being with needs: the need to expand, to grow, to support itself—and in these needs, in turn, supported mine. It's quite fascinating, looking back on it, that what supported my daily breath is also what knocked it clear out of me. I think this is often the case with the ideas we need most: the most substantial frameworks are the ones that knock us off our feet, abruptly alerting us to their existence in a way that makes us immediately question whether the pavement was ever really smooth at all.

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[135] Fewster, Gregory P. *Creation Language in Romans 8: A Study in Monosemy.* BRILL, 2013, p. 9.

[136] See Robert Jewett's commentary on the personification of creation groaning: "This personification of creation is parallel to what Olle Christofresson has detected in an apocalyptic treatment of the flood tradition (1 En. 7.6) where Earthtakes on human qualities as it lays accusation against its believers." Romans: Hermeneia- A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, Fortress press, 2007, *511-512*

It boils down to life. Just as I was abruptly shot into the recognition of life by the lifeform itself, we're called to recognize the nonhuman world for its *aliveness*: life as the basis for our interconnection, and for our partnership in the mission of soteriology. When we recognize God as joyfully relational, and situate this within the promised salvation for all Creation: it's clear that God intends for us to see creation as *alive*, to see the world in its entirety as a living narrative that humanity is included within, not ascended above. A relational eco-consciousness is found through the *enlivening* of ecological eschatology, actively seeking peace in a way that recognizes our innate ability to relate to all beings stamped with the same seal of our Creator. By following God's relation to the nonhuman world, and using this truth to embody our eschatology, we can succeed in bringing pieces of the eschaton into the everyday.

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