



# What Does the Bible Teach About Our Relation to the Environment?

## T E N   K E Y   C O N C E P T S

In 1962, U.S. marine biologist Rachel Carson published the book *Silent Spring*, which focused on the harm caused by widespread use of chemical pesticides on the planet and its living organisms, particularly on birds.<sup>1</sup> Her book, which was widely read and discussed, launched the modern environmental movement.

A few years later, in 1967, the journal *Science* published the text of a conference lecture by medieval historian Lynn White, Jr., titled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” where he stated that “Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.”<sup>2</sup>

Although both Carson’s and White’s

*“The Lord would have us treat the earth as a precious treasure, lent us in trust.”*

—Ellen G. White, 1895.<sup>3</sup>

theses have been criticized,<sup>4</sup> the environmental movement has nevertheless continued to grow, and at times, has assumed quasi-religious characteristics.

Some Christians believe that since this world will be destroyed at Jesus’ second coming, we should not be overly concerned about what happens to our earthly home and its creatures. Other Christians are afraid that environmentalists give nature a higher status than God, its Creator and Sustainer, with the accompanying risk of nature worship.

How should Bible-believing Christians respond to environmental degradation? What do the Scriptures teach us about our responsibility toward our earthly home and its inhabitants? Adventist teachers and others involved in Christian education are frequently asked to respond to these questions. In doing so, we need to remember that the Bible presents a worldview outlining

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the origin, meaning, purpose, and destiny of God's creation and, in particular, human beings.<sup>5</sup>

### **WORLDVIEW IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR APPROACH TO THE ENVIRONMENT**

Because ideas have consequences, the biblical worldview has clear implications for the way we relate to our natural environment and its inhabitants. As philosopher Douglas Grootuis stated, "The Christian worldview neither deifies nature nor denigrates its worth. According to the Bible, creation is not divine and should never be worshiped. Yet it is neither intrinsically evil nor illusory, so it should be treated with respect."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the best approach to environmental responsibility is theocentric—not anthropocentric or ecocentric—and firmly anchored in the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

A careful reading of the Scriptures reveals that humans were placed by God in a dual relationship with the animals He created. On the one hand, we are expected to care for them as God cares for us. On the other hand, we share our creatureliness with them. We are distinctive among the other creatures, but have a degree of kinship with them since we all depend on Him for our existence and sustenance, and share the planet with them.<sup>8</sup>

The more significant concepts, based on the biblical worldview, on how Christians should relate to the natural environment and enhance human wellbeing, can be outlined as follows:

#### **1. God brought into existence, remains involved in, and cares about His entire creation.**

Like an accomplished artist who steps back to contemplate His masterpiece-in-progress, at each stage during the first week of human history the Creator evaluated the results of His work as "good" (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25).<sup>9</sup> And after He formed and gave life to the first man and woman, plac-

ing them in a perfect habitat surrounded by luxurious vegetation and living creatures of all kinds, He surveyed "all that he had made" and declared it "very good" (vs. 31). In fact, God twice blessed the living organisms He created on the fifth and sixth days (vss. 22, 26). He later gave specific instructions regarding the sabbatical rest that the soil required to recover its fertility, provided directions regarding the care of trees, birds, and beasts of burden (Leviticus 19:23; 26:3-5; Deuteron-

ible evidence of His creative and sustaining power (Isaiah 40:25, 26, 28; 45:12, 18). God's concern encompasses not only the wellbeing of the people of a large metropolis, but also their cattle (Jonah 4:10, 11). For those reasons, we should not wantonly destroy that which He created and sustains. In fact, according to the Bible, at the end of time God will bring severe judgment against those who "destroy the earth" (Revelation 11:18).



omy 20:19, 20; 22:6, 7; 25:4), and ensured that the food and rest were provided for both domestic and wild animals (Exodus 23:10-12; Job 38:39-41; Psalm 104:10, 11, 14, 21, 27, 28; 145:15, 16; 147:8, 9). God affirms His sole ownership of everything that exists (Job 41:11; Psalm 50:9-11) and points to the orderly cosmos as incontrovert-

#### **2. God created the cosmos and life on this planet as an integrated and dynamic system.**

The orderly sequence of events that took place during that first week reveals the Creator's amazing intelligence and power, as can be seen in the interconnectedness of the Earth's ecosphere and the interrelation of our planet with the broader cosmos (Acts 17:24, 25; Romans 1:19, 20; Hebrews 11:3). The



first six days witnessed the appearance of light, the separation of the waters on the Earth from the waters in the atmosphere, the emergence of dry land, the genesis of all types of vegetation, the appearance of the Sun, the Moon, the planets, and the stars, the creation of birds and the water creatures, as well as of the land animals.<sup>10</sup> In Job and Psalms, God poetically describes His sustaining role in the regular operation of the universe and of life on this planet, and clearly indicates the interdependence of the global ecosystem He designed (Job 38:4-41; see also Psalm 65:9-13; 104:1-33). This means that when humans seriously damage one aspect of the created order, another facet may suffer the consequences, at times irreversibly. In view of the delicate balance and resiliency with which God endowed His creation, it is our privilege to foster and maintain it.

### 3. God gave humans the ability to make choices and to assume responsibility for their consequences.

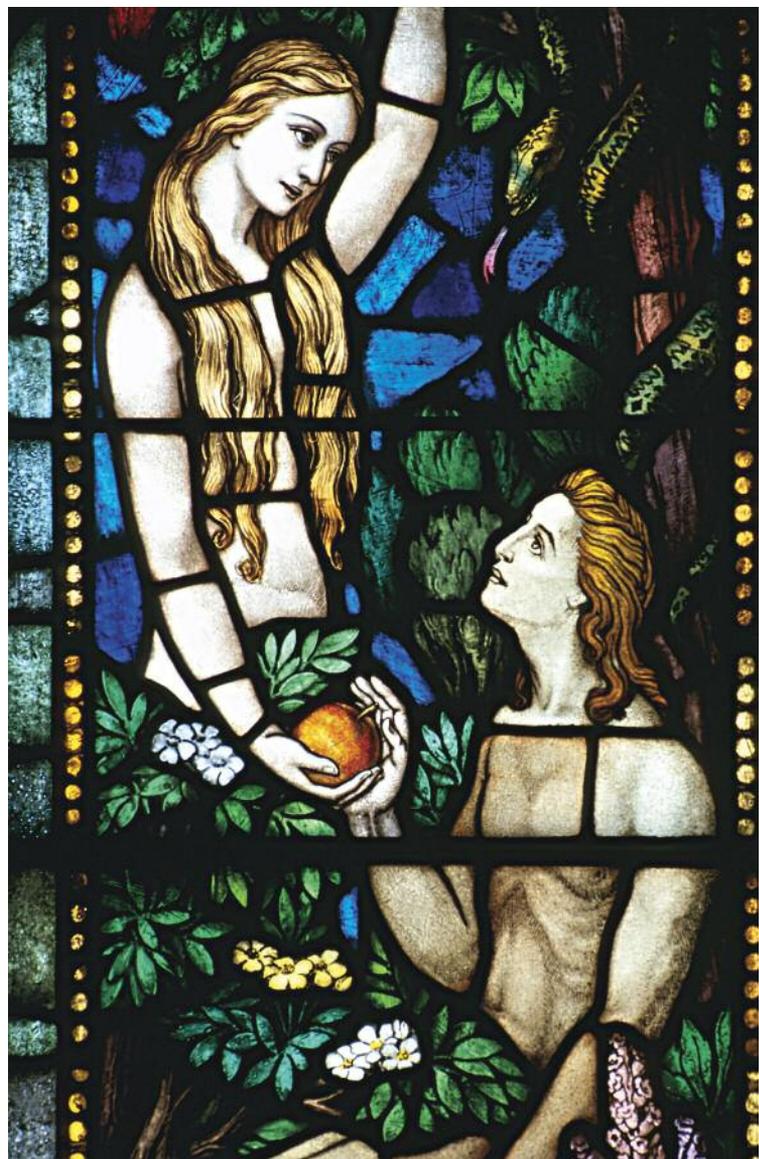
On the sixth day of the first week, as the crowning act of creation on this planet's ecosystem, God brought into existence Adam and Eve, fashioning them in the divine "image" and "likeness" (Genesis 1:26, 27; 2:21). Not only were they endowed with rationality, moral awareness, and the ability to speak, but also with the capacity to plan, choose, and otherwise act. In addition, God communicated to them the limits of their freedom and warned them of the dire consequences of disobedience (Genesis 2:16, 17). We still possess the ability to reason from cause to effect, to make decisions, and act upon them (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19; John 6:66-69; Revelation 3:20; 22:17). Some of the choices we make have an impact on fellow human beings, our natural environment, and its living or-

ganisms (Isaiah 24:4-6; Zechariah 11:1-3). Thus, we are accountable before the Creator.

### 4. God entrusted to humans the use, care, and expansion of the human domain of this planet's ecosystem.

The words of the creation record are clear: "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may

rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Genesis 1:26). God then "took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15; see also Psalm 8:3-8). These statements suggest three principles. First, the bountiful resources of creation were made available to hu-





mans for their sustenance and wellbeing. Second, humans should relate to the ecosphere with sensible care and concern (Deuteronomy 11:11-15; Proverbs 12:10; Hosea 2:18; Matthew 13:4; Luke 13:15). Third, humans would expand this inhabited ecosystem to eventually include the entire planet: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28).<sup>11</sup> As the descendants of the first couple, we are also expected to manage carefully that which has been entrusted to us, ensuring that we develop it wisely and pass it on enhanced to future generations.

### **5. Human disobedience and rebellion have damaged the ecosphere.**

Although God had created a harmonious habitat for Adam and Eve and surrounded them with beautiful creatures, their disobedience resulted in a dramatically altered natural environment. As a consequence, the first couple’s inner peace, mutual relationships, and wellbeing were fractured, and the suffering extended to the entire created order (Genesis 3:1-23). The list of the results is poignant: dysfunction, pain, illness, cruelty, predation, decay, and death. A few generations later, human moral degradation prompted God to cause a catastrophic global flood that eliminated most living organisms and drastically altered the Earth’s surface (Genesis 6-8). But following this massive disaster, God established a gracious covenant with Noah, his descendants, and even the animal groups that survived in the ark (Genesis 9:8-10).<sup>12</sup> Thus, what we observe today in humans and in nature does not reflect God’s original creation, but is instead a steadily decaying,<sup>13</sup> defaced reality.<sup>14</sup>

### **6. Jesus Christ—the divine Agent of creation—came to this world to redeem, teach, and heal.**

The second person of the Deity,

who brought the world and its ecosystem into existence (John 1:1-3, 14; Ephesians 3:9; Hebrew 1:2), came to this earth as a human 20 centuries ago in order “to seek and to save what was lost” and to respond to human need (Luke 19:10; John 5:17; 10:10). By taking human nature and living on this earth, Jesus dignified the entire creation.<sup>15</sup> In fact, He was born in a manger, accompanied by some of the animals He had originally created (Luke 2:7, 8, 12, 16). In His parables and illustrations, He revealed a thorough understanding of the natural world, from which He drew spiritual lessons—for example, the farmer working on different soils, the mustard seed, the lost sheep, the fig tree, and lightning (Luke 8:4-8; Matthew 13:31, 32; Luke 15:3-6; Matthew 24:32; Luke 17:24). Jesus called the attention of His hearers to the delicate beauty of the lilies of the field and reminded them that not even the sparrows “will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father” (Matthew 10:29, 31). Yet He stated that humans are “much more valuable” than “the birds of the air” (Matthew 6:26; Luke 12:7). Jesus also acknowledged, through a parable and a miracle, the actions of an evil agent that had distorted the original harmony and wholeness of creation (Matthew 13:24-28; Luke 13:16).<sup>16</sup> Thus, Jesus Christ modeled for us how to interact both with our fellow human beings and the rest of creation.

### **7. God endowed men and women with rationality and inventiveness to study, utilize, and enhance His creation.**

Since humans were designed in the Creator’s image and likeness, we are endowed with similar but limited abilities to observe, plan, and act within our environment (Genesis 2:15, 19, 20). Adam and Eve’s immediate descen-

dents, for example, raised cattle, worked the soil, fabricated tents, built cities, composed music, and manufactured tools (Genesis 4:2, 17, 20-22). Solomon, gifted by God with special wisdom, achieved renown for his careful study of the flora and fauna of his time and place (1 Kings 3:5-15; 4:29-34). By observation, trial and error, and ingenuity, the progeny of the first couple developed the mechanical, scientific, and technological innovations that characterize modern civilization. Regrettably, some of these advances have had a negative impact on the environment. Thus, when we study and also responsibly use natural resources to meet human need and promote sustainable development—enhancing human and animal wellbeing—we are utilizing our God-given talents for the benefit of His entire creation.

### **8. God instructed humans regarding the principles that foster wellness, even in a fallen, imperfect world.**

God designed Adam and Eve’s diet to consist of seeds and fruits: “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food,” while the animals were to feed on plants (Genesis 1:29, 30). After the Fall, herbs were added to the human diet (3:18, 19), and following the Flood, God specified the types of animals, birds, and fish whose flesh humans could eat, with the proviso that their life-blood should be drained off (Genesis 9:3, 4; Leviticus 17:10-14).<sup>17</sup> Later, He specifically identified the animals whose flesh was suitable for human consumption<sup>18</sup> but stipulated that the fat should be removed from the meat (Deuteronomy 14:3-20; Leviticus 3:17; 11:1-47). The Scriptures also recommend simplicity, regularity, and economy in eating and drinking (Ecclesiastes 10:17; John 6:10-13; 1 Corinthians 10:31), as well



as a trustful attitude based on God's assurance that He cares for us (Matthew 6:25-34). Contact with the natural environment can enhance our physical and mental health. Ultimately, the way we treat our bodies is important because God created us as integrated units (Luke 10:25-28; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 10:15, 16), chooses to dwell in us through His Spirit, and it is through our brain perceptions that He interacts with us (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17). Thus, God encourages us to follow those wise principles and enjoy their benefits.

**9. God set aside the seventh day of the week as a special time to rest, renew, and remember.**

After completing His creative work on Planet Earth, God rested on this day not because He was tired but to provide a healthy pause in the weekly cycle for the benefit of humans and animals (Genesis 2:2, 3; Exodus 20:8-11; 31:17). This occurred thousands of years before the Israelites emerged as a nation. In fact, Jesus declared that this day was specially designated to promote the wellbeing of men and women all through time, regardless of their religious convictions (Mark 2:27). Above all, when we rest on the seventh-day Sabbath, we acknowledge who the Creator is.

**10. God will bring about a total renewal and restoration of this planet and its ecosphere when Jesus returns to earth.**

As indicated above, the current condition of the planet and its inhabitants is not what the Creator designed and intended at the beginning. The Bible states that, because of the Fall, "the whole creation has been groaning . . . up to the present time" (Romans 8:22) and that our decaying environ-

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ment will reach a point of no return (Isaiah 51:6; 2 Peter 10-13). The Scriptures also predict a future time when harmony between humans and animals will be restored (Isaiah 11:5-9) and a "new heaven and a new earth" will be their habitation (Revelation 21:1, 3-5). This planet, then, will be our habitat for eternity once God recreates what was damaged and lost by human disobedience, carelessness, and abuse. Such a perspective, while maintaining our responsibility toward other humans and the natural environment, gives us hope in an imperfect world.

**Conclusion**

The Scriptures offer clear guidance for those who wish to cooperate with God and be responsible caretakers of

this planet's ecosphere.<sup>19</sup> We are to creatively interact with nature, using our resources frugally, promoting balanced conservation and health, restoring wherever we can, and making our planet thrive while we await the total re-creation and *shalom* that God has promised. ✍

This article is adapted from a chapter in the new book *Entrusted: Christians and Environmental Care* (Adventus, 2013), and is printed with permission from the editors and publisher. For more information about the book, see <http://www.adventus21.com>.



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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962.
2. *Science*, 155:3767 (March 10, 1967), available at <http://www.zbi.ee/~kalevi/white.htm>. Accessed June 26, 2013.
3. This quotation is part of a letter Ellen G. White wrote from Cooranbong, Australia, on August 27, 1895. The context reads as follows: "Pure, practical religion will be manifested in treating the earth as God's treasure-house. The more intelligent a man becomes, the more should religious influence be radiating from him. And the Lord would have us treat the earth as a precious treasure, lent us in trust" (*Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1923], p. 245.)
4. For example, on Carson, see J. Gordon Edwards, available at <http://www.21stcenturysciencetech.com/articles/summ02/Carson.html>. Accessed June 26, 2013. On White, see Lewis W. Moncrief, "The Cultural Basis for Our Environmental Crisis," *Science* 170:3957 (October 1970):508-512; Ben A. Menteer and Robert E. Manning, "An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White's 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,'" *Organization & Environment* 18:2 (June 2005):163-176.
5. On worldviews, see Humberto M. Rasi, "Why Do Different Scientists Interpret Reality Differently?" *Ministry* 83:9 (September 2011):16-20.
6. Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2011), p. 113.
7. See Andrew J. Hoffman and Lloyd E. Sandelands, "Getting Right With Nature: Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism, and Theocentrism," *Organization & Environment* 18:2 (June 2005): 141-162.
8. See Richard Bauckham, *Living With Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2011), pages 4, 5, 223.

9. All Bible texts in this article and its endnotes are from the New International Version. Scripture quotations credited to NIV are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

10. This intricate interdependence of the global ecosystem makes it less likely that the functional components of the ecosystem were added one at a time over long ages. See, for example, Henry Zuill, "Ecology, Biodiversity, and Creation: A View From the Top," *College and University Dialogue* 12:3 (2000), pages 7-9, 32. For the interdependence of processes at the cellular level, see Michael J. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

11. The original Hebrew word *radah* translated in verse 26 as "rule over" could also be translated as "have dominion" or "reign." In verse 28, the original word is *kabash* = "to subdue, to bring into submission."

12. The extensive fossiliferous layers of the Earth's surface seem to provide evidence of this cataclysmic event, which rapidly buried huge masses of vegetation and countless living organisms. See, for example, Ariel A. Roth, *Origins: Linking Science and Scripture* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1998), pages 147-232; and L. James Gibson and Humberto M. Rasi, eds., *Understanding Creation: Answers to Questions on Faith and Science* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 2011), pages 123-166.

13. Geneticist John C. Sanford provides strong evidence that deleterious genetic mutations accumulate through time and that the overall fitness of the human race is decreasing by about 0.00001 percent with each generation. See his book, *Genetic Entropy & the Mystery of the Genome*, 2nd ed. (Lima, N.Y.: Elim Publishing, 2005), pages 149 and 150.

14. Recognition of the terrible effects of the Fall and the Flood on this planet's ecosphere is essential to adequately understand the natural world as we observe it today. Charles Darwin did not take these factors into account as he proposed a naturalistic explanation for the origin and development of living organisms. See, for example, his statements in *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (London: John Murray, 1859), pages 200, 201, 243, 244. Darwin was even more explicit in a letter to Asa Gray, on May 22, 1860: "There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice. Not believing this, I see no necessity in the belief that the eye was expressly designed.

On the other hand I cannot anyhow be contented to view this wonderful universe & especially the nature of man, & to conclude that everything is the result of brute force. I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance. Not that this notion *at all* satisfies me, I feel most deeply that the whole subject is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton.—Let each man hope & believe what he can": <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-2814>. Retrieved June 26, 2013. It is also possible that the death of Annie, his beloved 10-year-old daughter, in 1851 may have confirmed Darwin's suspicions regarding an indifferent or nonexistent God. See Randal Keynes, *Annie's Box: Charles Darwin, His Daughter and Human Evolution* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001). Richard Dawkins has proposed that the evidence of design in nature reveals an evil creator. See his book *Climbing Mount Improbable* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

15. Mark mentions an intriguing detail of Jesus' experience during His 40 days in the desert, just before He triumphed over Satan's temptations and began His ministry: "He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him" (Mark 1:13). Was Jesus there in the peaceable company of some of the animals He had created, even protected by them?

16. It is also possible that Satan may have further damaged the Earth and its creatures by manipulating some aspects of the natural world, whose operation he has observed and understands.

17. The change in diet after the Flood apparently was a factor in the considerable reduction of the human lifespan. Compare the hundreds of years that men (and women) lived before this catastrophe and after, contrasting Genesis 5 and 9:28 with Genesis 11:10-26, 32; 23:1; 25:7; 35:28; and Psalm 90:10.

18. God had already distinguished between the "clean" and "unclean" animals prior to the Flood, directing Noah to bring into the ark seven pairs of the former and two pairs of the latter (Genesis 7:2, 3).

19. The Seventh Fundamental Belief of Seventh-day Adventists, addressing the nature of human beings, closes with the words: "Created for the glory of God, they are called to love Him and one another, and to care for their environment" (*Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* [Silver Spring, Md.: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988]), page 78.