What’s Old About New Age
The Bible and Ecotheology

Dianne Bergant, C.S.A.

Many proponents of New Age have rejected the relevance of biblical religion for our time, particularly with regard to human relationship with nature. A critical return to central Old Testament passages reveals that our forebears raised many of the same ecological questions we struggle with today.

New Age” theology does not seem to be as prominent as it was twenty years ago. However, the World Wide Web boasts more than eight million sites pertaining to the “New Age Movement,” so aspects of it are still with us in various forms. It is difficult to determine an accurate, even an acceptable definition of this movement, because the elements of this composition have not been clearly determined by some recognized spokesperson. The absence of such authority is, in fact, a characteristic of the movement. However, various names have been associated with it: the famous Russian mystic Helena Blavatsky; Alice Bailey and the Theosophical Society; Marilyn Ferguson (The Aquarian Conspiracy, 1980), Fritjof Capra (The Tao of Physics, 1983), and psychologists such as Abraham Maslow, to name but a few.

The term “New Age” suggests that humanity stands at the threshold of a new era that must be ushered in by innovative, enlightened thinking. The movement appears to be a postmodern reaction to the scientific age when everything became objective and particularized. In contrast, “New Age” emphasizes the subjective

Dianne Bergant, C.S.A., is professor of biblical studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. She is the author of several books and numerous articles on biblical and lectionary topics. She is currently working in the areas of biblical interpretation, ecotheology, and other justice issues.
and the whole, and it shifts attention to nature, inner feelings, and a holistic perspective in social and political matters. It might be best described as a metanetwork, or network of networks, incorporating elements of Christianity, Kabbalah, Gnosticism, Eastern mysticism, Shamanism, as well as the occult. Its common manifestations usually include some form of the following tenets: an impersonal god; an eternal universe; the illusory nature of matter; the cyclical pattern of life; the necessity of reincarnations; the evolution of humankind into the divine; the unity of all religions; continuing revelations from beings beyond the world; the need for meditation or other consciousness-changing techniques; occult practices such as astrology, mediums, or channeling; vegetarianism and holistic health; pacifism; and global order.

Many of those embracing New Age thinking regarding the earth have been influenced by what has come to be known as the Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock), named after the Greek goddess of the earth. The hypothesis is an ecological theory that proposes that the living matter of planet Earth functions like a single self-organizing system. Some go a step further and hypothesize that all life-forms are part of one single living planetary being called Gaia. In this view, the atmosphere, the seas, and the terrestrial crust would be results of interventions carried out by Gaia through the coevolving diversity of living organisms. Much more speculative versions of the Gaia hypothesis, including all versions in which it is held that the earth is actually conscious or part of some universe-wide evolution, are currently held to be outside the bounds of science. However, some of these positions are still maintained in radical New Age thinking.

The New Age Movement has undeniably refocused our attention on the natural world at a time when people all over the world suffer from catastrophic tsunami waves, disastrous hurricanes, ruinous mudslides, consuming forest fires, to say nothing of global warming, toxic landfills, and contaminated waters. Some religious commentators have interpreted these disasters as just punishment by God for sexual immorality. More scientifically minded interpreters argue that anthropocentric greed and disdain for natural creation have disrupted the delicate balance of our ecosystem, thus endangering the life-systems needed for survival. In 1967, a brief but influential article by Lynn White Jr. appeared in the magazine Science entitled, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis.” In it, White claimed that arrogant anthropocentrism, fueled by the Bible’s antagonism toward nature, “bears a huge burden of guilt” for the contemporary environmental crisis.
New Age proponents, some popular spiritual writers among them, committed to an ecosensitive way of life, have joined this condemnation of biblical religion and turned to contemporary forms of animism, nature religions, or Wicca for their inspiration. Are they correct in their criticism? Does the Bible hold a genuine antagonistic attitude toward nature? Or should the blame for any apparent hostility be laid at the feet of some long-held interpretations of certain biblical passages? Furthermore, are the insights advanced by New Age thinking really new? Or might a careful look at biblical texts uncover themes previously overlooked? In a very insightful statement, Lynn White claimed: “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion.” At issue here is the manner in which one understands that religion.

**Beginnings and Ends**

Many people concerned with the Bible’s attitude toward nature turn first to the creation narratives (Gen 1:1–2:4a; Gen 2:4a-24). It is as much an error to try to draw lines of correspondence between the days of creation and the ages of evolutionary change as it is to espouse a literal reading of these texts. The biblical authors were less interested in the specifics of how creation came about than in demonstrating that it came from one mysterious source of power and wisdom, that in many ways creatures are dependent upon each other, and that the entire created world is good. The creator is not perceived here as distant or disinterested. Divine providence is evident in the care with which each creature is brought forth and each habitat is designed. Contrary to Isaac Newton and the deists who followed him, the creator is not a divine watchmaker who simply wound up the universe and then left it to its own devices.

The language describing the royal character of the original couple in the first account (image of God; subdue and have dominion [Gen 1:26-28]) suggests accountability to God for their responsibility for the world in which they lived. The second account highlights the common origin from the ground of the man (2:7), the trees (v. 9), and the animals (v. 19). Furthermore, his relationship with that same ground is one of serving and guarding (v. 15). This passage provides opportunities for developing not only an ecosensitive mindset, but also one that is gender mutual. Incomplete without the woman, the man recognizes that she is one with him in both strength (bone) and weakness (flesh [2:23]). The final symbol of their commonality with the earth is seen in their return to it in death (3:19).

In some circles, apocalyptic eschatological literature has become very popular today. However, unlike many fundamentalists who read this material literally, predicting a violent end for sinners but a rapturous escape for the righteous, some
New Age or evolutionary thinkers dismiss such accounts as imaginary stories meant to frighten the naïve into conformity with prescribed religious standards. Actually, there is often very little difference in the way these two very different groups understand the Bible, for they both read the accounts literally. Their difference lies in the way they respond to their understanding. The first group maintains that their interpretation is genuine prophecy that will come to pass in their lifetime; the second reject that same interpretation as a fanciful tale.

Actually, while apocalyptic stories such as the description of the beasts in the book of Daniel (chapter 7) or the accounts of the end time (Matt 24:29; Mark 13:24; Luke 21:25-26) paint frightening pictures of natural horrors, they carry a deeper meaning. Apocalypses usually emerged at times of great anguish and unrest. The worldview behind them was in some way dualistic, claiming that the struggle in which the people found themselves was not merely historical, between social or political forces, but also cosmic, including cosmic realms and heavenly beings. In an apocalypse, good always triumphed over evil. Though such literature did include a future perspective, it was not one of future suffering, as fundamentalist reading might claim. Rather, the future held hope for a people already suffering.

The beasts in the book of Daniel represent the ancient empires of the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians, and the Greeks. The people for whom the book was written would have rejoiced in a story that described the demise of these enemy nations. The Gospel accounts of apocalyptic chaos grew out of the early Christians’ experience of Jerusalem’s destruction by the Romans. This devastation is followed by the appearance of the Son of Man who will inaugurate the age of fulfillment. Despite the horrors described in these apocalyptic accounts, the literature actually contained a positive message.

Prophetic Condemnation

The creation narratives, which portray nature as “good,” and the apocalyptic literature, which paints scenes of natural disaster, might be read anew. However, the obvious prophetic condemnation of the forces in nature cannot be denied. Still, a careful reading of such passages will help us understand the real focus of that condemnation.

The popular religion of the Canaanites, from which the Israelites emerged, emphasized the reproductive powers of nature and accorded them sexual characterizations. Thus, the male deity, usually a characterization of the rain or storm god, was thought to have impregnated the earth, and all vegetation sprang up from this union. Human beings believed that it was their responsibility to stimulate this god’s erotic interests by themselves engaging in sexual acts at the holy places. In this way, they thought they could guarantee fertility in the earth, in their flocks, and in the women of their households. Such practices operated according
to principles of sympathetic magic; the desired end would be replicated if the actions that generate it were copied. This kind of erotic religious thinking and behavior was condemned in Israel, not so much because of the sexual aspect involved, but because of the concept of God that it promoted. In this view, God is held captive by ritual behavior.

This way of thinking maintained that human beings could control divine actions by merely performing prescribed ceremonies. If the rites are performed correctly, God is obliged to provide what has been requested. Such a god is not supreme; such a god is not free; such a god exists exclusively for the sake of earthlings. It is clear that ancient Israelite religion could not hold such views. Israel’s condemnation of such nature rites frequently appears in its literature as condemnation of nature itself.

Denunciation of fertility rites can be seen in the very first chapters of Israel’s national story. When Moses was too long on the mountain in conversation with God, the people below grew weary and prevailed upon Aaron to fashion them a golden calf (Exod 32). The calf or young bull was the symbol of Baal, the Canaanite god of fertility. Or again, the account of the contest held on Mount Carmel between the priests of Baal and the prophet Elijah illustrates the struggle that Yahwism faced in the agricultural society of that time. The question there was: Who controls the desperately needed rains, Baal or the God of Israel? Although the God of Israel won the day, Yahwism would have more battles to face in the future. The prophets would fight many of them.

The role played by nature in the religious consciousness of the people was the primary concern of the prophet Hosea. At issue here was not the sexual ritual itself, but the question of authority: Who controls the forces of nature? Hosea wanted to show that governance is in the hands of the God of Israel alone, and that this sovereign God was not bound to any ritual performance. This is shown by God’s withholding the blessings of the life forces; there is no grain or wine or oil. Nature itself is not an enemy; it is not condemned. On the contrary, it continues to be seen as a blessing, but now as a blessing withheld.

**Reward or Punishment**

Even a brief look at the biblical material will show that the whole of creation seems to be intimately linked with rewards and punishments meted out to
human beings by God. The very fertility of the land of promise, along with other instances of prosperity, appears to be dependent upon the obedience of the people. However, the natural productivity or devastation that is promised is not linked simply to the people’s specifically ecological behavior, for example, their disregard for the land or pollution of the water. Rather, nature flourishes or withers in relation to the broadest dimension of human conduct. This is a very common theme in the poetry. Either there is a moral order in the natural order of creation, or creation is merely a helpless instrument used by God to reward and/or punish.

The basis of the connection between morality and the natural order is ts’dâqâ, the Hebrew word for righteousness. The original meaning of the word is “to be straight,” “to conform to the norm.” In the tradition of ancient Israel, this norm is the nature and will of God. In reality, it is God who is righteous (Ps 145:17). Human beings are righteous to the extent that they conform to God’s will. Israel believed that God’s cosmic rule is rooted in righteousness, and the same principles govern the order on earth, because the same creator established all order in the beginning. Therefore, what happens on one plane has repercussions on another. Disruption of one facet of God’s created order affects the harmony of the entire system. Such a worldview holds that moral order and natural order are inherently interrelated. This explains why, in so much of the poetry of the Bible, the blossoming or withering of nature is depicted as God’s reward or punishment for human behavior.

Such a perception of reality may be too mechanical for contemporary believers whose worldview includes sophisticated scientific understanding. However, the ancients were not unlike those modern physicists who believe that all creation is in some way connected and who are in search of a grand unified theory that explains how the electromagnetic force, the strong and weak nuclear forces, and gravity may have originally been united (Davies; Hawking).

**Integrity of Creation**

In 1988 the World Council of Churches defined “integrity of creation” as “the value of all creatures in and for themselves, for one another, and for God, and their interconnectedness in a diverse whole that has unique value for God.” A definition such as this can be found in New Age writings. However, such ideas did not originate with the movement. They appear prominently in various biblical books, most obviously the book of Job.

The divine speeches (Job 38:1–40:2; 40:6–41:34) consist of a barrage of questions about Job’s knowledge of, or control over, aspects of the natural world. They direct Job’s attention to the design of the world and to some of the animals that inhabit it. God addresses none of the concerns of Job’s extensive complaints. Instead, God
unfolds the grandeur and mystery of much of the universe, but does this by daring Job to claim a prominence within it that belongs only to a creator or to a partner in creation. Although the questioning is about Job and his human competence, it is God’s creative imagination and comprehensive providence in creation that are revealed. In this way, God teaches Job that humans are not the center of the universe. However, it is precisely in the grandeur of the natural world that Job arrives at this realization.

When God refers to the structures and workings of the world and describes animal behaviors, there is a kind of pride and a sensitivity that bespeak both satisfaction in accomplishment and protective concern. This creator, who alone understands and manages the entire sweep of creation, invites Job to contemplate its resplendence and complexity to the extent that he is able.

The way that God employs questions in the speeches should not be overlooked. These are not requests for information. They are ironic questions that serve to correct Job’s shortsighted perception of his ability to grasp some of the mysteries of life. They are rhetorical questions meant to lead Job to a depth greater than the information mere answers would provide. The marvel of this questioning approach is seen in its ability to bring Job to wisdom despite, or perhaps because of, its indirectness. God asks questions about nature and Job gains insight into human limitation.

Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of this representation of God is the medium of the theophany. God is manifested through the natural world. The artistry of God can be seen in the splendor of the universe; God’s wisdom, in its delicate balance; God’s imagination, in its diversity; God’s providence, in its inherent fruitfulness. The natural world was not only born of the creativity of God, it also bears the features of this creativity. Every property of creation mirrors something of the creator. It is not enough to say that creation is the medium through which God is revealed. In a very real sense, the medium is itself the revelation. In his final response, Job testifies to having seen something of God, not merely the wonders of creation.

The book of Job demonstrates the profound human struggle between anthropology and cosmology. It pits the search for understanding against the enormity of the universe in such a way that the human spirit is enraptured and not broken. The commonplace yet strangely unfamiliar natural world awakens amazement at its wonders and leaves the humbled gazer aghast. Having called on God to put things right in his life, Job was led by the magnitude of creation to see that he

Cosmology does not defeat anthropology; it opens its arms to welcome back its prodigal child.
could not fathom the laws by which God governs. In the end, cosmology does not defeat anthropology; it opens its arms to welcome back its prodigal child.

**Children of the Universe**

In his poem *Desiderata*, Max Ehrmann states: “You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars.” People today have come to see that they are not “over and against” nature, but embedded in it, in the very creative matrix that has given them life and that continues to give life to new forms of genetic codes and, therefore, to new species through what is called “natural selection.” Furthermore, nature is embedded in human beings who are truly children of the universe, made of the same stuff as are the mountains and the rain, the sand and the stars. They are governed by the laws of life and growth and death, as are the birds and the fish and the grass of the field. They thrive in the warmth of and through the agency of the sun, as does every other living thing. They come from the earth as from a mother, and they are nourished from this same source of life.

This is more than poetry. New scientific insights and the resulting appreciation for the integrity of creation have begun a transformation of our anthropological perspectives that many regard as truly revolutionary. No longer is humankind thought to be the center of the universe. No longer is human ingenuity accorded free reign over the rest of the natural world. No longer are rights over nature claimed without an accompanying acknowledgment of human responsibilities. The long-established anthropocentric perspective is crumbling, and women and men are struggling to fashion a new model for understanding their place in the universe.

Without attributing a scientific mentality to the ancient Israelites, a similar sense of interconnectedness can be found in some of its poetry. In the Song of Songs, the natural world is not merely the stage upon which the drama of human love is played, the props of which can be set up and dismantled once a scene is completed. Rather, human love is an expression of the natural world. It is born because of it and as a part of it. It is an aspect of the allurement that is at the heart of the macrocosmic universe. Lovers look into each other’s eyes and there glimpse the passion of creation. As they applaud each other’s body employing figures of speech, the lovers are also enhancing their appreciation of the world with the eyes of love. That is the way metaphors function; though two very different objects are connected by a single characteristic, within the metaphor itself, each object adding dimension of meaning to the other. In the Song of Songs, as the lovers describe their experience of each other’s body, they are investing their experience of creation with the love that has left them spellbound.
Is the Bible really detrimental to contemporary ecosensitivity? This essay has attempted to answer that question in the negative. In many ways, historical-critical examination of some of the ecologically troublesome biblical passages has uncovered the cultural limitations of their discourse. Israelite royal theology, the character of apocalyptic imagery, religious resistance to false worship, ancient poetic style, and a prescientific worldview must be examined in order to discover the original meaning of these passages. When such examination is undertaken, one might discover that the ancient Israelites struggled with many of the same ecological questions that face people today: What is our place in the universe? Where do we come from? Where are we going? Does the rest of natural creation have any value in itself? The same old questions are being asked today. We may not come up with the same answers, because we live with a significantly different worldview. On the other hand, we might discover that there is a lot of the “old” in “New Age” thinking.

References


