THE STRUGGLE FOR AN ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY - AGAIN

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The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel, by Theodore Hiebert (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 210 pp.
The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible, by William P. Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 458pp.
The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age, by Norman Wirzba (Oxford University Press 2003), 240pp.

In 1970, in this journal, I wrote a report on a ground-breaking conference of theologians, environmentalists, and church leaders, entitled "The Struggle for an Ecological Theology: A Case in Point" (*Christian Century* 87(4 March 1970], pp. 275-77). By 1995, what had been a new, even unheard of, theological theme twenty-five years before, had become a major concern for the church and for many of its theologians, as a comprehensive, annotated bibliography, with 512 entries, published in that year, showed (*Ecology, Justice, and Christian Faith: A Critical Guide to the Literature,* ed. Peter W. Bakken et al. [Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995]). However, only 23 of those 512 entries focused on *biblical* interpretation. Biblical exegetes, it appears, had been slow to respond to ecological questions. Which was striking indeed, since much, if not all, of the discussion during the preceding two-and-one-half decades had been developed in response to the charge, most memorably launched by historian Lynn White, Jr., that Christianity is ecologically bankrupt, in large measure due to its dependence on the faith of the Bible!

With the wisdom of hindsight, we can discern some of the reasons for the apparent reluctance, even principled refusal, on the part of many biblical scholars to enter into this discussion. From the middle years of the twentieth century and for several decades thereafter, both Old and New Testament studies were dominated by a methodology that was self-consciously anthropocentric. Thus G. Ernest Wright famously juxtaposed the essence of Israel's faith, a religion of history, he maintained, born in the Exodus event and honed by Israel's desert wanderings, over against the

faith of the Canaanites, which he viewed as a religion of nature. Rudolph Bultmann, similarly, but in existentialist terms, memorably set the historical *(geschichtliche)* faith of the early Christian community over against the "objectifying," naturalizing faith of the religions in the church's Hellenistic environment. This kind of "history of salvation" (*Heilsgeschichte*) methodology dominated biblical studies for many years, both in Europe and North America, and is still presupposed by numerous biblical scholars today.

Thankfully, surely from the perspective of those who have been involved in discussions about ecological theology for some time, that situation has now begun to change dramatically. Indeed, with the publication of the scholarly works of Old Testament interpretation by Hiebert and Brown (who draw on the contributions of some of the aforementioned 23 publications), it is possible to speak of a revolution in biblical studies of ecological theology.

Hiebert shows how the Yahwist's "landscape" or native environment is the agrarian terrain of the biblical hill country. Hiebert maximizes the implications of a literal reading of "earth" in Genesis 2: Adam is *not* made from "the earth*"(eretz)* Hiebert stresses, but from the "arable soil," which is what the word *adamah* means. The story of Israel is thus read as a story of - farmers. Hence, he argues, "the claim that Israelite religion valued history while it devalued nature can no longer be derived from a formative desert experience."(p. 142) Serving and protecting the land, accordingly, belongs to Israel's innermost identity. This is reflected in the Yahwist's approach to Israel's rituals, in Hiebert's view: "Made by God from arable soil and commissioned by God to farm it, the worshiper offers the soil's produce as service to God, as an act, one might almost say, of self-definition."(p. 143). Strikingly, moreover, *cities* appear in the Yahwist's narrative as sites where "the great harvest festivals mandated in the Yahwist's liturgical calendar were celebrated."(p. 145) Hiebert has thus brilliantly set the dominant *Heilsgeschichte* hermeneutic of the twentieth century on its head. Whatever else it was, the religion of Israel, at least the religion of the Yahwist, *was* a religion of nature.

Brown adopts and adapts many of Hiebert's findings, but Brown broadens the scope of the inquiry. He shows how nature or the earth in its fulness was understood to be a player in its own

right, with its own moral claims, along with the human community, in the Divine drama of creation, redemption, and consummation of the world. Brown seeks to "rejoin what has been rent asunder," as he says, nature and history. To that end, with thoughtfill precision and expository richness, he explores the various and variegated theologies of the Priestly tradents, II Isaiah, the wisdom theology of Proverbs, and, perhaps most strikingly, the wilderness ethos of Job, as well as the land-theology of the Yahwist, all of which, he shows, work "to convey a thoroughly cosmic profile of God's reign of righteousness and peace." (pp. 409f.)

The emergence of this revolution in biblical studies, exemplified above all in the works of Hiebert and Brown, set the stage for the arresting theological argument of Norman Wirzba. His felicitously written study is perhaps the first major theological monograph which has been developed in conversation with the findings of Hiebert and Brown and with the work of other biblical scholars whose studies have moved in similar directions. As such, it merits our closest attention. Wirzba's work is also engaging, because of its dialogical character. It is a biblically informed work of theological reflection that is self-consciously correlated with the kind of questions that have preoccupied scientific students of ecology and agrarian thinkers for many years, above all the widely celebrated writings of the pioneering American ecologist, Aldo Leopold.

Wirzba teaches philosophy at Georgetown College in Kentucky. He has edited two previous volumes, which can be read as announcing what turns out to be his infectious agrarian enthusiasm: *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Washington: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2002) and *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003).

The Paradise of God is well-titled, because the biblical theme of "the garden" shapes the entire discussion. Introduced thoughtfully, this study sets forth a carefully cultivated argument. In chapter one, Wirzba draws especially on the insightful exegesis of Hiebert, showing that the theme "the arable soil *(adamah)* unifies the Yahwist's theology in Genesis 2 and beyond, and that the teaching about the Sabbath, announced in Genesis 1 by the Priestly tradents, gives biblical

thought about creation a profound and thoroughgoing ecological and indeed eschatological character, as well as a pronounced emphasis on justice. In chapter two Wirzba explains how human culture, in contrast, notwithstanding its many progressive elements, generally represents the sinful denial of God's good creation, most dramatically in the modem era, as the machinations of human aggrandizement have eclipsed the agrarian life and produced an abstracting, godless world of dominance, exploitation, and death. In this context, Wirzba argues in chapter three, the agrarian and scientific discipline of ecology, exemplified especially by the writings of Leopold, can make a critically important difference for us, helping us to envision an "ecological ethic" and "a garden aesthetic." These ecological insights can then be brought together with the garden theology of Genesis 2, as Wirzba successfully does in chapter four, in order to set forth a new vision of humans as the servants - rather than as the stewards or the citizens - of creation: now we can see that humans are placed in the garden not to till and keep the earth (misleading translations), but to serve and care for the land. All this, in Wirzba's view, summarized in his strong concluding chapter, finally makes possible the vision of a new kind of "culture of creation," a world of justice for all creatures and hope for an earth that will be shaped by a "Sabbath economy" that then can be a joyfully celebrated in a feast of the whole creation.

This accessible and clearly argued book can instructively and profitably be read by general readers, in particular by university students, pastors, and many church lay leaders. It should also command the attention of academic theologians and other scholars who are concerned with ecological issues more generally, since it is a sophisticated essay in quest of theological understanding and it is developed in conversation with the insights of agrarian thought and scientific ecology.

On the other hand, impressive as it is, the book should also be read as a *partial* statement, precisely because of its consistent and often compelling agrarian focus. Although the Sabbath-theology of Genesis 1 is of formative significance for Wirzba's argument, it is the land-theology of Genesis 2 which most fundamentally undergirds his argument, theologically. Which leaves his discussion, for the most part, firmly rooted in the garden, as his title indicates. There is, of course, more to biblical theology than paradise and its immediate aftermath. This is not to

it is a matter of emphasis. Wirzba is well aware of the claims of the entire biblical narrative, especially the New Testament witness to the new creation in Christ and to the redemption of the entire creation through Christ. But such themes do not play prominent roles in this study. Sometimes they are scarcely visible. Can one, however, really have a biblically informed theology of creation without giving a commanding position to the New Testament testimony about the Cross and Resurrection? Think in particular about the apostolic witness to Christ's victory over radical evil, sin, and death. This is a topic which clearly matters to Wirzba, but it receives only marginal attention in his discussion. Wirzba is aware of the dangers of romanticizing the agrarian life and he is profoundly concerned with issues of social justice and ecological integrity on a global scale. But without addressing head on the issues of sin and violence and death in the seemingly godforsaken city and in the awesome and sometimes awful wilderness, how much can an agrarian theology really command our allegiance today? Without a pronounced christological witness, likewise, can an agrarian theology fully convince us that the sinful principalities and powers of death and violence have been folly overcome and that therefore we can really rejoice in the biblical promise of an eschatological Sabbath and eagerly work to embody that promise in our global economy?

One cannot fault Wirzba too much at this point, however, since the revolution in biblical studies signaled by the works of Hiebert and Brown in Old Testament studies has not really had any kind of pervasive resonance in New Testament studies, for reasons about which we might speculate here if space permitted. Not that the New Testament is not ripe for this kind of scholarly investigation. Thus, for example, the major, tightly argued study by Edward Adams, *Constructing the World: A Study in Paul's Cosmological Language* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), convincingly refutes the anthropocentric history-versus-nature hermeneutic of Bultmann and his followers and thus paves the way for an interpretation of Paul's theology that is cosmic in scope and in continuity with the Old Testament trajectories studied by Hiebert and Brown. Absent works by New Testament scholars themselves, moreover, theologians like Joseph Sittier, Colin Gunton, and Juergen Moltmann have shown in their own terms how the theology of the New Testament as a whole can, and perhaps should, be read in cosmic terms. (See my own account of the emergence of "cosmic christology" in late 20th century theology and my reflections

about the cosmic vision of Ephesians, "'So That He Might Fill All Things': Comprehending the Cosmic Love of Christ," *dialog* 42:3 [fall 2003], pp. 257-278).

Reading Wirzba's work, then, as the first major ecological theology that has been written in response to the revolution in biblical studies that has emerged from the labors of scholars like Hiebert and Brown, this conclusion is unavoidable: the struggle for an ecological theology that is fully conversant with the biblical witness and fully correlated with our situation of cultural and ecological crisis must continue. On the other hand, as Werzba has insightfully harvested many of the fruits of Hiebert's and Brown's seminal studies, we can be grateful for his own creative theological labors in this field. He has taken us one large step toward a goal that has been before us at least since 1970.

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