

We Are All Connected: Toward A Biblical Theology of Creation*

Richard D. Weis
Lexington Theological Seminary

Introduction

In the fourth chapter of the collected sayings of the prophet Hosea there is a speech that begins this way:

“God has a case
against the inhabitants of this land,
because there is no honesty and no goodness
and no obedience to God in the land.
False swearing, dishonesty, and murder,
and theft and adultery are rife;
crime follows upon crime!
As a result, the earth is withered:
everything that dwells on it languishes --
beasts of the field and birds of the sky --
even the fish of the sea perish” (adapted from the NJV)

These words were spoken over 2700 years ago, and yet they seem startlingly contemporary, don't they? We need go no further than the daily headlines to find contemporary stories of dishonest politicians and abuse of corporate power, of the manipulation of legal and political systems for the sake of profits, theft through Ponzi schemes and other

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forms of deception designed to accumulate wealth for the few at the expense of the many – to mention just a few of the present day equivalents to the crimes Hosea condemns. Looking historically, it's not hard to find story after story of the theft of land and the murder or enslavement of its inhabitants at the roots of American society and economy.

Hosea's closing lines about the fate of the earth and its creatures are also startlingly contemporary. On every side we learn of oil spills, over-use and contamination of scarce water resources, over-fishing and the collapse of fish stocks, the extinction of species due to habitat loss, the impact of invasive species, the loss of topsoil due to run-off from fields made vulnerable by dominant agricultural practices, "dead zones" in rivers, lakes and oceans, loss of prime farmland to suburban housing development – and I'm only naming environmental issues about which there is little dispute – never mind the impacts of global warming.

But far and away the most relevant dimension of Hosea's speech is a single two-word phrase, a conjunction, the Hebrew words *'al-ken*, here translated by "As a result." Hosea insists that the environmental catastrophe is caused by the social chaos he sees. Now we know from the language that he uses to describe the environmental distress that the catastrophe was a drought. Droughts in ancient Canaan were caused by the failure of the seasonal rainstorms to come off of the Mediterranean. From a scientific point of view there is no reason why the social crimes that Hosea condemns should prevent the arrival of the rains. So Hosea's speech is not grounded in some sort of observable connection between human behavior and environmental consequences such as we could trace between corporate and regulatory negligence and a deep-sea oil well spewing millions of barrels of oil into delicate ecosystems around the Gulf of Mexico. Instead his speech is grounded in a *theological* proposition, namely, that each and every creature on this planet is linked together in a single fabric of relationships, which, if torn and frayed at one end, will unravel at the other. In other words, we are *all* connected; . . . we are all *connected*.

This idea of our deep connectedness is also implicit in the human failings he rails against. In our highly individualistic society, we may be more inclined to think of these as crimes because they violate an abstract moral code, but for Hosea they are crimes because they violate, break and distort human relationships. These behaviors harm others by tearing at the fabric of relationships that sustains all. Even when we persuade ourselves otherwise, we are all connected; we are all related; our fates are bound up together. And the "we" is not just all human beings, but all creatures on the planet.

Ecological sciences, as they have developed in the last decades of the 20th century, have taught us this. So has chaos theory. Thus we might join Hosea in affirming this connectedness. Yet we wonder at how little our society's behavior changes in response to this scientific knowledge. In part this is because, while we know this *scientifically*, unlike Hosea we do not know it *theologically*. For Hosea this is a fundamental lens for reading reality, but it is not for us, and so the scientific knowledge is heard, but is not seen as having implications for us. It is even put up for debate as if it were a mere opinion. In this country the individual is sovereign, . . . and isolated. We do not really believe *theologically*, as a matter of fundamental perception of the world, as a matter of ultimate concern, that we are all connected, that we are all related. Instead we worship at the altar of unfettered individualism. And when we do think of "we" instead of "I," our "we" is a tribe, fearful, distrustful of outsiders, perhaps even an armed camp. This is the nexus of ideas I hope to illuminate with a few Biblical texts.

Isaiah 11:1-9

A positive expression of the theological idea of the interconnectedness of all creatures on the planet can be found in the book of Isaiah. Listen, please, to this:

But a shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse,
a twig shall sprout from his stock.
The spirit of God shall alight upon him:
a spirit of wisdom and insight,
a spirit of counsel and valor,
a spirit of devotion and reverence for God.
He shall sense the truth by his reverence for God:
he shall not judge by what his eyes behold,
nor decide by what his ears perceive.
Thus he shall judge the poor with equity
and decide with justice for the lowly of the land.
He shall strike down a land with the rod of his mouth
and slay the wicked with the breath of his lips.
Justice shall be the belt of his loins,
and faithfulness the belt of his waist.
The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
the leopard lie down with the kid;
the calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together,
with a little boy to herd them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,

their young shall lie down together;
 and the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw.
 A babe shall play over a viper's hole,
 and an infant pass her hand over an adder's den.
 In all of my holy mountain
 nothing evil or vile shall be done;
 for the land shall be filled with devotion to God
 as water covers the sea (adapted from the NJV).

May I just check? Before hearing it in this context, how many of you thought of this as the foundation for a theology of creation or an ecological theology? . . . In the church we are protected against Isaiah 11:1-9 by a history of interpretation that includes its regular use in the Advent lectionary, and that appears in commentaries as characterizations of this passage as “messianic” and “eschatological.” This is a charming and beautiful picture that has inspired artists through the centuries. But those words “messianic” and “eschatological” tell us that this isn't about us and our reality; it's only about Christ and it's only about the End Times, something God will do miraculously at some point in the far future, almost a Never Never Land – a charming and beautiful fantasy as far as “real” life is concerned. And so we completely misunderstand Isaiah.

This is Isaiah's picture of what is possible if human governments, in his case the Davidic king, would rule in a way consistent with God's justice, that is, God's ordering of creation so that all creatures thrive in an interconnected web of relationships. If human governments would establish truly just – and by this I do not mean our idea of justice as fairness, but justice as I've just defined it – if human governments would establish truly just social relations, then the ecological fabric of creation would be healed and all creatures would thrive. We look at this and it makes no sense, because, unlike our experience of the speech of Hosea, we do not experience the world this way. We do not experience the world this way because we do not govern this way because our characterization of this passage as “messianic” and “eschatological” lets us off the hook for actually trying to live like this. Nevertheless, this is where the proposition that we are all connected leads us. Just as social injustice has ripple effects in the rest of creation, so does the establishment of a truly just society – one in which all are made whole.

Isaiah's speech contains a challenge to most human notions of governing that goes unnoticed because we do not read it within the culture of its times. It's found in this sentence:

“He shall strike down a land with the rod of his mouth
and slay the wicked with the breath of his lips.”

This refers to the accepted function of government to defend a society against threats to the well-being of its citizens. What is not immediately obvious to us is that it does so by creating deliberate counter imagery to the nearly universal iconography of kingship in the Isaiah’s world. Think simply of Psalm 2, which says to the Davidic king about the nations, “You shall smash them with a rod of iron.” Moreover, if you look at the great public images that kings in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia put up to illustrate their success in defending society, these are usually images of kings smashing their enemies with a mace or a sword, or spearing them, or shooting them full of arrows, or running them down with their chariot. They are images of violence, force, coercion. Isaiah’s speech takes up the language of that prevailing imagery of violent domination, and subverts it, and undoes it by making the instrument of government words, not weapons. Against this paradigm of governance by coercion and violence, Isaiah poses the paradigm of governance by winning words and persuasive speech – words that name the just ordering of relationships in which *all* are made whole so that *all* are moved to participate.

Down through history Christian readers of this text have misunderstood these lines. They have read them literally, so they seem weird, magical, messianic, eschatological. Indeed, you can find pictures through the ages of Christ at the second coming with a literal rod coming from his mouth. We’ve missed the challenge to our ways of living together, and so we’ve not experienced the promise.

Now I don’t mean to suggest that Isaiah’s vision is literally correct about what creation would be if humans governed according to God’s paradigm of just governance. Isaiah is using the imagery of the creation stories in Genesis to evoke a picture of the world returned to God’s intentions. What that world would look like in our experience has yet to be discovered. The point is simply that, because all creatures are connected in a vast and complex web of relationships, establishing structures and relationships in human society that support the thriving of each and all will have corresponding consequences in the rest of creation.

Genesis 1

Another way to name the matter is to say that in the Western church at least we have made the mistake of reading Genesis 1 while ignoring Genesis 2. Here’s what I mean.

Genesis 1 is a cosmology in the form of a cosmogony. In other words, it is a story about the nature of the world that takes the form of a story of how the world came to be. One problem Western culture has struggled with in reading this text is a tendency to get hung up on the “how the world came to be” form of the story and to not attend enough to the “nature of the world” the story seeks to communicate.

When we focus on the nature of the world as we see it through this story, we see the world presented as a vast ordered space structured and created with the capacity to sustain the thriving of all the creatures who live in it – all the inhabitants of land, sky and sea. As the Hebrew word *tov*, translated “good,” signals, the world is a place of great beauty and great functionality, a place where all life can flourish. The connections that bind all life together in a single relational fabric are in the background, however. This picture of the world is much more that of an orderly structure in which each has its own place, and the relationships among all those creatures and those places are at best implicit.

In this story creation is assumed to require continuing work to maintain its capacity to support all life because God, who created it, delegates the on-going management of creation to humanity. This is depicted using metaphors of governance. In this story God is portrayed as the most powerful monarch imaginable – in fact, the ruler of the universe. With human rulers in the ancient world (and since) it was never enough for the ruler to say the word, but that had to be given to the secretary of implementing the ruler’s commands, who forwarded it to the assistant secretary in charge, who passed it on to the bureaucrat in charge of seeing to the implementation of commands, who gave it to a messenger, who delivered it to the supervisor of implementers who repeated the order to those who at last began the task of implementing the command – at least until the mandated break time. . . . In this story the ruler, God, gives a command, and – wham! – it happens, no delay, no intermediaries – instant and complete fulfilment. That in itself is pretty astonishing – not just by comparison with human rulers in the ancient world – but also in comparison with stories of other gods in the ancient world. But things take an even more astonishing turn near the story’s end. This wise and powerful ruler, who could control and run everything perfectly, invites an independent partner into the operation and delegates full responsibility and authority for the governance of creation to the human race.

Here’s where we in the church in the West get into trouble. We hear that language of subduing the earth and having dominion over the creatures of land, sky and sea, and we’re off and running. Historically, we have taken that language literally and assumed our role is

to dominate everything. A few of us went one step further and imagined we were to dominate everyone else. Even in modern times we read this story through our species-centered, self-centered lens and imagine it as a story of how God created the whole world as our playground, for us to dominate and enjoy as we wish. Lynn White made the point about the history of abuse of the earth flowing from this abuse of the text quite eloquently in a famous article in 1968.

There are a few clues in the text that this is a mis-reading. One is the metaphoric use of the governance language. The discourse of “subdue and dominate” was the language of the only form of government known to the Biblical writers, monarchy. These expressions pointed to the monarch’s role in creating and maintaining an orderly space within which society could thrive. If we don’t take the language literally, but rather as a *metaphor* for governance, we open the door to other approaches to achieve that end. The second is the language of “image of God,” which Christians in the West have tended to interpret with philosophical categories imported to the text. If we read Genesis 1 in its cultural context, however, we find only one place where this expression is used repeatedly: in Mesopotamia this epithet is applied to kings – and only kings – as a reflection of the gods delegating to the king the responsibility for the well-being of the community. Its use here has the same purpose, to reflect God’s delegation to humankind of responsibility for the well-being of creation, but that use is also absolutely revolutionary because the epithet is applied to all humans, rather than just a few. So it points toward a picture in which no one dominates. Finally, God’s very act of delegation, of inviting humans as free actors into a partnership in caring for creation, implies a very different approach to governance than domination and control.

Nevertheless, it’s easy to see how our ancestors in the faith went astray because this perspective is largely present in the text by implication and because they had no other experience of governance than domination and control. Genesis 1 is a story of humankind being created for the sake of creation, not vice-versa, and being entrusted with the care of creation, with governing it so all creatures thrive. At the same time, what little it seems to say explicitly about how that governance, that care, should be exercised is subverted by the the implications of the delegation of responsibility. So Genesis 1 points to the question of how humanity is to exercise care of creation. Genesis 2 gives the answer.

Genesis 2

Genesis 2, when we ask what it tells us about the way the world is, shows a remarkable picture of how humanity might live amid creation so as to allow all the creatures of land, sky and sea to thrive. Whereas Genesis 1 thinks of the world in structural terms, Genesis 2 thinks of the world in relational terms. First, consider the creation of humans. The human being, *'adam* in Hebrew, is created out of the ground, *'adamah*, in order to till the ground which is unproductive without water and tillers. To put it in English we are earth creatures created from earth. We earth creatures are created because without us, and without rain, the earth cannot realize its creative potential for feeding those that live on it. So we are created *of* earth *for* earth in a symbiotic relation *with* earth from which we all thrive. Earth is not an object that we possess for our power or pleasure, but that with which our fate is inextricably entwined, from whom we come and for whom we live.

Second, animals are created in relation to the earth and to each other. The animals also are created out of the earth, and hence are related to it. They are created for partnership with humans and are brought to the human to enter into relationship, each relationship described in a name. Moreover, both humans and animals are described with the same Hebrew noun, *nephesh*. This word "*nephesh*" is almost universally rendered with "soul" in modern English translations, but that is simply incorrect. "Soul" is a Greek concept that was not part of the cultural vocabulary of the authors of the Hebrew Bible. "*Nephesh*" has an almost perfect match in meaning in the English word "self." Your "*nephesh*" is your "self," your very core, your very identity, what makes you you as distinct from all the rest of us. In Genesis 2 humans are "living selves" and so are animals. Before God we are all fellow creatures, all living selves. There is no value distinction among us, and no hierarchy on which to ground a structure of domination. Animals are not objects that we may own and dispose of according to our whim; they are our fellow inhabitants of earth, our partners in the fabric of creation.

Finally, the differentiation of the human into male and female uses some of the strongest relational language found anywhere in the Bible. Moreover, as is now well-known, this is language of equality and partnership, *not* of differential worth, or hierarchy, or domination. Indeed, one of the most striking things about Genesis 2 is that it weaves a tale of the great relational fabric that binds all of the creatures of earth

together, and at the same time gives us the Hebrew word for the distinct individual self. In this picture of the way the world is, we are each a distinct individual, but there can be no individualism because we are all related, human to human, and human to non-human. Before God we are all “living selves,” and also part of a single, tremendously complex relational fabric.

How does one live in a world like this? How does one care for a world like this? The clue is buried in the account of the naming of the animals in Genesis 2. Until about 30 years ago it seems nobody bothered actually to investigate the significance of the human naming the animals, that is, what was going on in this process. Everybody just assumed this was a process of dictation and control. Naming was assumed to be a process of determination of identity. Whatever the namer decided, that’s what the named was or became. So when the human named the animals in Genesis 2 this was understood as the human deciding what their identity would be – a form of control – of domination, really. About 25 years ago a scholar named George Ramsey (*CBQ* 50[1988] 24-35) did what somebody should have done a long time ago. He studied the use of the naming formula in the Hebrew Bible to see how people understood what was really going on in that process. He discovered that this is not a process of determination, but of discernment. The human, instead of defining the identity of each animal, discerns the identity they already have from God and names them so that identity is knowable, a prerequisite to right relationship. Before one can relate rightly to another one must discern the other’s true self. To try to define *for* another their identity, their true self, inevitably breaks relation.

This is exactly the governance implied by Isaiah 11. By discerning and respecting the identity of the other “true selves” who are our fellow creatures, we can live in, and tend to, the fabric of relationships that sustain all life on the planet. But to do that we must first acknowledge two things: that all life on this planet is a distinct “living self” before God; and that we are all related. We care for the planet and all life on it not by controlling and dominating others or by treating others as objects for our pleasure and power, but by accepting and living in our relatedness and partnership with each other, and respecting each other’s individual selfhood.

Contemporary Implications

As is often the case, if we want to be serious about shaping our lives by the Gospel, we find ourselves at odds with significant dimensions of North American political, economic and media culture.

The hardest work we may have to do is the work to be done between our ears – on the assumptions and images of the way the world is and what it means to be human that are in our head – assumptions and images that lead us to look at Isaiah 11 and say “messianic” and “eschatological,” or to look at Genesis 2 and say “ideal and unreal.”

We live in a society where the dominant culture teaches us explicitly and implicitly that to be truly human is to be:

- Self-sufficient, standing alone, protective of "ours" -- what under an earlier president was called “the ownership society”
- Competitive -- "Who dies with the most toys wins"
- Acquisitive, accumulative -- "Grab all the gusto you can get"
- There is no limit to the satisfaction of our desires -- "A world without boundaries"
- Our spirit is nourished and our worth is measured by what we possess -- "Pontiac is fuel for the soul"
- All in all, to be human is to be a consumer

In such a world other creatures, including other humans, become simply objects for our pleasure, or for our self-advancement and self-aggrandizement. In such a world humans are not made for the sake of creation, as part of creation, to partner in cultivating the well-being of all creatures. Instead creation is made for us to use as we please.

To actually live in accord with the idea that all creatures on this earth are connected in a single complex web of relationships, we need to change our stance amid that cultural world, moving:

From seeing ourselves as utterly independent, autonomous individuals;

From viewing others from the standpoint of competition;

From seeking to acquire and accumulate as much as we possibly can;

From accepting no limit to the satisfaction of our desires;

From being and seeing ourselves as consumers;

To seeing ourselves as interdependent to such an extent that we cannot truly thrive until each and all thrive;

To viewing others from the standpoint of collaboration;

To sharing our surplus so each and all have enough;

To accepting whatever limits are necessary so that all creatures may live;

To taking full responsibility for the well-being of all creatures and all creation;

<p>From seeing ourselves as entitled to be in charge, to be dominant, to define who others are and will be, to use others as we see fit;</p>	<p>To seeing ourselves as part of the fabric of creation, discerning and respecting the identity of all others, seeing ourselves and all creatures as bound together in a single interdependent web of life.</p>
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These changes in perspective and identity are necessary going forward, and living out their consequences will be both difficult and life-giving. However, we also recognize that relationships that are broken or damaged or distorted are not mended simply by right relating going forward. Something has to be done about the damage, even if one can never return to the exact place before the damage was done. Here the relational metaphors of the Biblical witness open important and powerful doors for us. They allow us to raise questions about what must be done to heal relationships and individuals, what recompense or reparation or restoration is needed to make the fabric of relationships and the creatures in them whole again. They allow us to consider the terms and requirements for reconciliation, not only those needed in human relationships to restore fractured community, but within the inter-species community of creation. Obviously, a lot needs to be done to say what this means in concrete action, but these texts point us to a vocabulary and set of lenses to think these things through.

There are many ways that we could use this perspective to both critique our self-understandings and our behaviors as individuals and as a society, as well as to point us to what must be done to turn around the growing catastrophe, but the core seems quite simple. “We” are all creatures on the planet, and “we” are all related. We cannot pretend any longer that the fate of all these others does not affect us or is none of our concern because our fates are inextricably intertwined. We will all thrive together or we will all perish. To thrive together, we must unlearn the ways of domination, control, and objectification, and re-learn the ways of discernment, respect, collaboration and looking out for all our relatives.