

Jesus and Nature

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Introduction

Why is it important to probe the Gospel narratives with an eye to the question whether Jesus' mission of lifting the Curse involved the world of nature? We would answer that the human pillaging of the natural environment has reached a level that threatens Earth's very unique capacity to generate and sustain life any longer, and the failure of most Western churches to include care for nature and theological support of increased depredations by Christian Dispensationalists bear major responsibility for this global threat.

But how can the Church be held responsible when in the Gospel narratives Jesus is occupied with healing of human bodies and spirits and society's divisions and he turns his attention to nature only when it threatens human life in the form of wind and raging waves at sea?ⁱ Humans are not threatening nature in the Gospels as we do today. Besides for most of Christian history the focus of the Church is on whether or not a person's disembodied soul goes to heaven after death. In the New Testament there are few detailed directions for how one lives out life before one dies. We do find such directions in the collection of Scriptures Christians call the Old Testament; the message of the New Testament is that we should live by faith, not works. At least that is how Protestant Christians understand it.

New times bring new circumstances that raise new questions for people who look to a work like the Bible to better understand the world and how to live their lives. Because the Bible plays such an important role in the lives of so many Christians, the environmental crisis we face today presses us to ask whether Jesus' mission involved the world of nature to a greater degree than Christians have been aware. When we listen to or read anything, we are apt to hear what we are desiring or expecting to hear. Our expectations filter out much of what the speaker wishes to communicate. We don't wish to read into the Gospel accounts of Jesus' mission what is not there. So we shall try to be guided by the principles of good listening developed by scholars over many years. We shall draw on the work of scholars who have been putting this new and urgent question to the Bible over the past several decades.ⁱⁱ What follows is what we have gleaned from Mark's Gospel with their guidance. Our study of Jesus and Nature is in two parts.

In Part One we focus on stories in Mark in which Jesus' concern to heal the natural environment is at the surface level of the story. Part Two will attend to stories in which nature is not obvious but is deeply implicated. Because this is a work in progress, we hope in the future to include a third part that will focus on the vision Jesus shares with a few of his disciple just before his death, in which he foresees a catastrophic destruction of nature that will come about just before he returns as the Son of Man promised in the Book of Daniel to replace the destructive empires of the world with the gathering of all the world's diverse peoples into a world governed by the ruler he shows himself to be in Mark's Gospel.

The hope is that these studies will contribute to the efforts of modern critical scholarship to cut through powerful Church traditions that have obscured the role of nature in Jesus' mission

to the world and restore to the Church a clear understanding of its responsibility joining all those who are devoted to addressing today's environmental crisis as integral to its mission of bringing salvation to the world. Whether you are a Christian or not, it is vital to recognize that quietism on the part of a large portion of the Christian Church's and aggressive misogyny (*ge* or "*earth* hatred," deeply entangled with its misogyny) on the part of a smaller but politically aggressive portion of the American Christian Church are major culprits in the provocation and intensification of today's threat to earth's entire ecosystem and biosphere. Whether you are a Christian or not, you do well to understand how the Jesus we meet in Mark's narrative of Jesus' mission calls those who would follow him to concern themselves with healing this world and with addressing all the interrelated broken relationships in the world that are in desperate need of healing. Both Christians and people of other faiths who care about the Earth's capacity to continue to generate and sustain life can educate today's Christians in the broad focus of Jesus' mission and help recall the Church to the mission to which the one they called Teacher and Lord has called them.

Part One

Jesus' healing of the broken relationship between humans and the world of nature is most clearly in view in the image of Jesus in a restored harmonious relationship **with the wild beasts** in the story of his temptation in the wilderness (Mark 1:12-13).ⁱⁱⁱ In his comments on that story, Richard Bauckham makes the acute observation that before Jesus sets out on his ministry among human beings, he must secure his role as Messiah among the denizens of the non-human world of Satan, angels, and the wild beasts who occupy an ambiguous position between the two. In the wake of the curse in Genesis 3:14-15, wild beasts become a threat to humans. But in fulfilment of the vision in Isaiah 11:1-8 of a return to Eden inaugurated by the shoot from the stump of Jesse upon whom the Spirit of the Lord has come to rest, the harmony that reigned between humans and the wild beasts in Genesis 2:18-20 has been restored.^{iv}

But this is not the last we hear of the theme of the healing of nature in Mark. Three more stories illustrate Jesus' specific attention to nature as entangled in the spectrum of broken relationships resulting from the fall of humans from obedience to the will of the Creator for how to live life in this world.

In Mark 4:35-41, the story of Jesus and the disciples on **the storm-tossed sea**, Mark presents Jesus as one whose identification with the Creator makes possible the healing of environmental chaos in the same way his pleasing relationship with God as "beloved Son" opened the way to healing in the human realm of bodies, spirits and relationships. The story of the storm-tossed sea clearly alludes to celebrations of the Creator's stilling of the raging seas in several psalms with Jesus in the role of God by virtue of harmony with God.^v In both this story of Jesus and the psalms we meet the God who acts. For example, Ps 107:28-9:

In their distress they cried to the LORD,
who brought them out of their peril;
He hushed the storm to silence,
the waves of the sea were stilled.^{vi}

In Bauckham's words, "Something of the same kind of holistic vision of the world appears in the so-called nature miracles. At least some of these anticipate the transformation of human relationships with the non-human world in the renewed creation."^{vii}

Jesus also manifests his authority over life-threatening nature in Mark 6:45-52. The disciples are on the sea, being "tossed about"^{viii} by an adverse wind. Jesus comes to them **walking on the waves**, and when he gets into the boat the wind ceases. Jesus' intent to pass the disciples by (*parelthein*) has a strong reminiscence to God's promise to "pass by" (*pareleusomai* in the Greek translation) Moses in Exodus 33:19 and before Elijah in 1 Kings 19:11. His self-identification "it is I" (*ego eimi*) also recalls God's answer to Moses when Moses asks the name of the God who is addressing him in Exodus 3:14. Jesus' walking on the water could well then call to mind for Israelite listeners a strong tradition picturing God walking on the sea that appears in Job 9:8 and Sirach 24:5-6 with the word *peripateo* used of Jesus in Mark 6:48, as well as in Psalm 77:20 (76:20 in the Greek translation) and Isaiah 43:16; 51:9-10.^{ix}

Jesus' wilderness **feeding of the multitudes** in the desert is also a manifestation of his mission to heal the world in which the harmonious relationship between humans and nature had been broken. Mark 6:31-44 and 8:1-9 allude to the story in Exodus 16 of the giving of the manna in the wilderness after the Hebrew slaves had escaped from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. The motif of the giving of the manna continues to play a role as the Biblical narrative moves along,^x which suggests it would have been well known to Mark's Israelite listeners and available to come to mind as they listened to Mark's narrative.

In a volume of essays on ecology by Jewish scholars, it is a Jewish theologian, Arthur Waskow, who interprets the story of Israel's 40 years of wandering in the wilderness as Edenic time and the giving of the manna as a remedy to the curse of having to labor in a thorn- and thistle-infested earth in order to eat. He points out that eating manna requires barely any work at all, simply gathering what the earth provides; and on the Sabbath it requires absolutely no work, since enough was provided on the 6th day of the week to suffice for the 7th.^{xi} In this context he even explicitly refers to the Christian view that Jesus is "the new Adam," "one harmonious human being come to reverse the sin of Eden."^{xii}

Might Israel's gathering of the manna in Exodus 16 have echoed in the ears of Mark's listeners when they heard him both his stories with the gathering of the fragments left after the people ate enough to be satisfied? Gathering the fruits the earth produces without human labor, which is what Adam and Eve did when they lived in the Garden before they disobeyed the Creator and were driven out, contrasted sharply the development of agriculture that Israel encountered on a grand scale when exiled to Babylon and constituted a "war against the earth"^{xiii} by which humans produced far more food but at the cost of tying people to property, dividing the people into bosses and serfs, consolidating the land into large plantations owned by the few and worked by the many, and to the emergence of great empires that in turn developed great armies to protect the ownership of the great plantations.^{xiv} In Part Two of this essay on Jesus and Nature, we shall see that the agricultural economy lay at the root of the widespread physical and mental suffering of the masses to whom Jesus devoted his healing ministry.

Waskow goes on, however, to make a very important comment: “For Jews, Shabbat [with its practice of preparing the Sabbath meal the day before so that no one, female or male, slave nor free is obliged to work on the Sabbath] is the entire Garden once again, in the actual living practice in community of both Eden and *Mashiach* (Messiah).” This comment throws into relief three important things. The first is that, as one who lifts the Curse devolving from the Fall, Jesus is not doing something unique; he is extending the vocation of his people Israel to lift the curse of the need for people to labor in order to eat. He extends it by bringing it to bear on the 90% who have labored hard and are still hungry because so much of the food they raised was taken away from them through rapacious taxation by the 10% who maintain power through violence and the threat of violence. (More on that in Part Two.) When Sabbath practice is understood as one manifestation of the lifting of the Curse, that obliges people to be both hopeful and creative in finding other ways to make the lifting of that curse palpable in people’s lives.

The second is that a modern Jewish author appears to agree with Mark’s Jesus that this lifting of the Curse is not meant for Israel alone. Waskow points out that it is a “mixed multitude” that escaped from Egypt and became the people of Israel. This resonates with Jesus’ extension of the gift given to Israelites in Mark 6 to the Gentiles Mark 8. According to Waskow, “All those, of any people, who take and celebrate the time for restful reflection and renewal for *adam* and *Adamah* enter a covenant with God. . . .” Israel’s Sabbath practice is meant to be a catalyst for all people to search for ways of lifting the curse of eating without labor.^{xv}

The third thing for Christians and others to gain from this comment is that in Mark Jesus’ feeding of the multitudes does not bring to completion what God began first by the gift of the manna in the wilderness and then by instituting Sabbath practices in Israel that perpetuate this experience of the lifting of the curse of laboring to eat. The complete lifting of this curse would happen only at the future coming of the Son of Man. Meanwhile in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ followers would have to continue in the form of ongoing practices Israel’s vocation of lifting for all creation the curse of labor.

Nature as Thou, not It

In addition to the inclusion of these stories of the healing of nature in Jesus’ mission of bringing again to earth the kingdom of God as it is in heaven, two stories exhibit a relationship between Jesus and nature that is of critical significance for the human relationship with nature today. Since the birth of the Enlightenment, Western culture has come to regard nature as an object with no significance of its own apart from its instrumental value to humans. In Alfred North Whitehead’s words, “Nature became meaningless matter in motion” that lacks any moral standing and makes no moral claims about its well-being.^{xvi} Nature in the view of the modern West has become an It.

David Vincent Meconi brings to light a different view of nature articulated both in Mark and elsewhere in Israel’s scriptures. He notes the way Jesus in Mark 4:39 **calms the wind and the sea** by addressing them in a second-person imperative: “Quiet! Be still!” Jesus does not exercise his power “as the manipulations of an omnipotent vassal over a disposable subject, but as a second-person experience where the Lord speaks to his rambunctious creature as another.”^{xvii} This matches the way in Job 38 “God treats his creatures not as a distant strongman manipulates

mere ‘stuff’ clearly well below him. While God is entitled to treat his creatures however he sees fit, he instead engages his creature in a second-person discourse wherein God addresses water tenderly as a ‘you,’ as a ‘thou.’ In doing so, the divine lends the sea an identity and dignity that it does not have apart from God.”^{xviii}

This same second-person relationship manifests itself again in Mark 11:12-14 with a very different result. Jesus speaks to **the fig tree** in the second person: “May no one ever eat of *your* fruit again” [italics added]. Meconi comments, “The Creator expects his creatures to recognize him and even to respond to his own needs and desires.”^{xix}

Meconi suggests, “Perhaps it has taken the more modern threats of ecological disaster and our growing awareness of the earth’s fragility for the Church to begin to listen attentively to what Vatican II (1962-65) named the ‘discourse of creatures.’”^{xx} Healing all creation involves nature as well as humans, for the health of nature and the health of humanity are intricately intertwined. If in the story of the storm-tossed sea it is nature that threatens human life, both war and human sin have devastating consequences for the natural order in turn. (Jeremiah 4:19-22; Genesis 3:14-19) These two stories in Mark of the calming of the sea and the cursing of the fig tree exhibit an awareness characteristic of Israel’s traditions that the natural order as well as humanity has been granted a freedom by God to be either responsive to the Creator or unresponsive.

Final Notes on the Roots of Religious/Spiritual Hope

In *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*, Richard Bauckham offers the results of his comprehensive study of the role of nature in Israel’s understanding of its life in the world and its vision of redemption. He includes detailed explorations of passages that exhibit Israel’s keen awareness of the natural environment first in Israel’s scriptures and then in various compositions of the New Testament, which are all also the works of Israelites.^{xxi} He observes, “While it is not common for the New Testament to show interest *distinctively* in non-human creatures, it regularly *includes* them in the general category of the creation.” If Christian listeners do not have the non-human world in mind, they will fail to assume their inclusion in terms like “all things” and “the whole creation.”^{xxii}

But when listeners come to a hearing of Mark’s story with a deep sense of God as origin and presider over all creation,

- as Genesis declares in its opening words, “In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth,”
- as Christians confess with the words “maker of heaven and earth” in the Apostles’ and the Nicene Creeds,
- and as Muslims repeat in a widely memorized verse from the Qur’an known as the “Pedestal Verse,”^{xxiii}
- as well as with a clear understanding that when Adam and Eve turned away from their relationship with God their break with the Creator resulted in brokenness with the world of nature as well as with other humans,

they may be alert for signs that in announcing the breaking in of God’s Rule in a new and powerful way Jesus ushered in a comprehensive healing of creation. Humans repented and

turned back to God and demons were cast out, bodies healed, people fed, the ravages of nature calmed, and the divisions among people reconciled. Nothing was left out of Jesus' mission of bringing healing to the world. The coming of the Kingdom of God meant the healing of all creation.

Introduction to Part Two of Jesus and Nature

In this Part One of the essay Jesus and Nature in Mark, we have sought to identify and reflect on the stories in Mark in which Jesus' engagement with nature is on the surface of the stories. We belatedly note that we have not included every reference in Mark to the natural environment, most noticeably Jesus' seed parables in Mark 4. We have focused on Jesus' engagement with natural phenomena in ways that transform them for the benefit of humans. In Part Two, we shall excavate below the surface of other stories for engagements with the natural world that are implicit in what Jesus does.

Jesus and Nature

Part Two

The stories we examine in Part One of this essay involve the natural environment at the surface level of Mark's narrative. These stories speak explicitly of wild beasts, food for hungry people, and deliverance from chaotic seas. But what of the day-to-day struggles that defined the lives of those to whom Jesus directed most of his time and energy?

The Natural Environment Implicated Illness, Taxes, Debt

Many of Mark's stories tell of Jesus healing the sick and physically impaired and the mentally and spiritually traumatized. But why are they in physical and mental distress? Much of this suffering may surely be traced to having an insufficient amount of food: to being deprived of the fruits of the earth from which their bodies were created and are sustained by daily ingesting of earth's nutrients.

Why are they so deprived? It is not because they do not labor, although some do not get hired for labor (Matthew 20:1-15). In Jesus' world the primary source of deprivation of food and the suffering it brought was abusive taxation imposed by a political power that occupied the land by violence and that by ongoing coercion robbed the 90%^{xxiv} of the fruits of their labor to the point that they were left with barely enough on which to survive.^{xxv} Taxes in Jesus' world were not levied as in our world in order to provide services to the citizens like roads and health care and protection from internal and external danger, and to enrich communal life through such things as education and the support of the arts. Taxes in Jesus' day were put to work mainly to maintain an army that subjugated people and coerced them into forking over one half^{xxvi} to two thirds^{xxvii} of what they produced in order to fund the extravagant lifestyle of the 10% who held the power. The fruit of their labor was regularly cursed by devastating cloudbursts, hail, or drought that could reduce their harvest by half, but the taxes determined by the emperor in Rome were not reduced proportionally to the yield.^{xxviii} Likewise, living every day in the presence of an intimidating foreign army was often the source of much of the mental trauma as well.^{xxix} The army's job was to threaten you if you did not cooperate in giving up what you labored to produce, and to suppress revolt against such abuse. Do similar practices exist in our world to the advantage of a few and the disadvantage of the many?

Ruinous taxation was not the only source of poverty and malnourishment and mental trauma. The poor were often forced to go into debt that resulted in the seizure of their land by the wealthy and the need to rent back that same land to farm if they were to live.^{xxx} This aggravated the access of the poor to the world of nature and the fruits of the earth, which are clearly not the only thing people need to live but without which they do not live at all.

On the surface the stories of Jesus' acts of healing sickness and mental trauma do not name these conditions of taxation and foreign occupation. But to hear them without considering the deprivation of land and its fruits and without seeing in that deprivation the way the people's

suffering was embedded in unjust access to the natural environment, which is the source of embodied life, is to miss the fact that ecojustice was every bit as much an issue in the world in which Jesus carried out his ministry as it sadly is in our world.

The injustice to the poor consequent upon the way those who misuse their wealth and power and abuse the natural environment exacerbates the curse foreseen by the Creator in Genesis 3:17-19 of humans having to raise food in infertile soil by the sweat of their brow. They not only must labor in often inhospitable environmental conditions; they are now often the victims of the injustice of those who expropriate what they do produce and even the land in which they work to produce it. Today, in addition to low wages and inadequate benefits for the work people do, the abuse of the poor in relation to the land often takes the form of pollution of the air, the soil, and the water with toxic chemicals that people ingest by breathing, contact with the soil, drinking the water, or eating the fish that people catch from the rivers and streams. The polluters get wealthy and the poor pay the price for their wealth.

The Symptoms or the Malady?

It may appear that Jesus addresses only the symptoms and not the political and economic reason for physical and mental suffering. But he does address the source of the problem through two other prongs of his mission. One is his teaching about the right use of power and wealth, usually in the form of land and the fruits of the land. Another was his work of reconciling enemies who battle over who rules the land, and his dogged resistance to violent actions and language that perpetuated the violence in which the environmental deprivations of the poor were rooted.

Reordering Wealth & Power

For all the dearth of teaching in Mark compared to Matthew and Luke, there are a number of times that we hear Jesus explicitly state his view of wealth and power. In his explanation of the meaning of the parable of the seed and soils in Mark 4, he names the lure of riches as among the thorns that choke the word when it is sown (Mark 4:19). In 10:17-22 we hear of the rich man whose wealth in fact does choke out the word he asks to hear from Jesus. This is followed in 10:23-31 by Jesus' exasperation at the difficulty the rich have of entering the kingdom of God, followed by the disciples' question how anyone can be saved if the rich cannot. In response Jesus assures them that God is powerful enough to save even the wealthy, and his assurance that those who for the sake of following Jesus and preaching his Good News have left behind home and family and lands will receive 100-fold what they have given up in the New Age that Jesus is inaugurating. In 12:41-42 he declares the poor widow's two coins worth a penny to be a far greater gift than the large sums of the wealthy. Pondering well each of these teachings, as well as those that follow will benefit your appreciation of Jesus' vision of a world in which the will of the Creator God is done.

In 14:3-9 we hear an unusual variation on this theme. This is a story in which Jesus receives a gift of oil worth a year's wages poured on his head which he interprets to serve as the anointing of his body for burial. Even without hearing the outrage of those who witnessed this profligate extravagance, we may well share their reaction, especially in the light of Jesus'

teaching that preceded it. Did he not tell the rich man to sell all that he had and give it to the poor? Why did he not refuse this woman's gift, telling her to do the same? He responds that if we care about the poor, we can do good for them. The question whether we do is left hanging in the air. In spite of his receiving this extravagant gift that might have benefitted many poor people, one can hardly accuse him of exhorting people to do what he himself is unwilling to do. He has up to this point in his life devoted himself entirely to the poor and lived on a minimum of this world's goods, although he happily enjoy food and drink when others invited him to share what they had.

In 9:33-37 and 10:35-45 he teaches his disciples about **power**. In response to their express desire for greatness and power, he explains that greatness comes to those who are last of all and servants of all.

All this teaching would be in vain if throughout our hearing of Mark's narrative we had not been following a person who embodied in his own living what he taught with his words. He goes through his life with no possessions of his own. He happily eats the food provided by Simon Peter's mother-in-law (1:29-31), Levi the tax collector (2:15), Simon the leper (14:3), the many women who followed him and provided for him when he was in Galilee (15:41),^{xxx} and no doubt others who receive him into their homes as do other who receive his disciples when he sends them out to preach, cast out demons, and heal the sick (6:10). He models the life not of an ascetic but of one who relishes the material generosity of those with whom he shares his Good News of the Reign of God breaking in to the world and the fruits of that new and gracious regime.

Jesus vision for how the fruits of people's labor in the earth are distributed is implicit in his living and his teaching. His vision is intimately bound up with his view of power, which is to be sought not for one's own sake but in order to serve; and to serve as followers of the Son of Man is to serve the poor who are sick and traumatized because they have been deprived of their ancestral land and the fruits of their labor. Jesus makes no hard and fast rules to which all must conform. He leaves it to his listeners to figure out our own way. Several ways are modeled and taught with no one size fitting all. One man is told to give all his wealth to the poor and join those who have left all in order to follow Jesus (10:21). Those who witness the woman's anointing of Jesus are commended to act on their care for the poor (14:7); others model sharing what they have by inviting Jesus and his disciples to share their meals. All these ways eschew acquiring wealth at the expense of others and selfish consumption in place of sharing.

The need for Jesus' mission of healing and exorcism resulted from the manner of land management that was the normal way of kings but violated the peculiar way Israel's Torah spelled out for Israel's kings. The absolute foundation for kingship in Israel was that the land was a gift of God, and the king was to manage the land as a gift entrusted to him but never possessed by him. It is not meant for the king's self-security but for the brother or sister. In Deuteronomy 17:14-20 God stipulates that the king must be a brother devoted primarily not to administration but to the study of the Torah that keeps him grounded in Israel's peculiar vision for its communal life. Before he anoints Saul as Israel's first king, Samuel warns Israel about what kings not grounded in the Torah do:^{xxxii}

He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your menservants and maidservants, and the best of your cattle and your asses, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. (1 Samuel 8:14-17)

This quite well describes the system under the kings in Jesus' day that generated the conditions of the Israelite people to whom Jesus devoted his healing ministry. The Hebrew prophets Isaiah and Micah condemn this system of acquisition (Isaiah 5:8-10; Micah 2:1-2) Jesus acted to alleviate the suffering of those who suffered from this system. His teaching about wealth and power is deeply indebted to Israel's Torah and prophets.

Healing Divisions

Whose land is it?

The root cause of the people's deprivation is the way humans divide themselves into factions that engage in violent conflict with one another in order to dominate and rob those they defeat and subjugate of their land and what they produce from the land, so that they are traumatized and insufficiently nourished to maintain physical health. In addition to healing those who suffer sickness, physical impairment, and spiritual and mental trauma because those in power take by force the fruits of the earth for which they have labored, Jesus devotes himself to healing the divisions among humans that lead to the conflicts through which the winners dominate and bring suffering upon the losers.

To address the sufferings of subjected Israelites of Jesus' day, various groups instigated violent revolt. These revolts were consistently put down, their participants executed by mass crucifixion. Jesus himself was crucified between two men who are called *lestai*, often inaccurately translated "thieves" but meaning "revolutionaries."^{xxxiii} Jesus resolutely eschewed violence that perpetuated the cycle of violence division; but this did not mean he advocated passivity in the face of abuse. He clearly taught putting one's imagination to work to engage in resistance of a non-violent kind.^{xxxiv} And while his teaching included no design for an alternative to the present structure of government, he taught by both words and deeds behaviors that implied a new economic and political agenda to government however it was designed.^{xxxv}

If the Reign of God was breaking in upon the earth, earthly government would implicitly become servants of the Creator, whose Torah and prophets instructed the wealthy and powerful to cease and desist from abusive practices that exacerbated the struggle of the multitudes to eke out adequate nourishment from an often inhospitable earth. Such a change in the behavior of the wealthy cannot happen without a change of mind, which is the meaning of *metanoia*, the Greek term used by Jesus in Mark 1:15 for what people would need to do if they trusted his Good News that the Reign of God was breaking in upon the earth. According to the Torah of Israel's God, every seven Sabbaths of years, that is, every 50 years, called a time of Jubilee, the wealthy were commanded to give up the land they had acquired from others, rendering them poor. The land belonged to God, and according to the story in the book of Joshua (12-19) God had distributed the land to the various tribes. If people had to sell their ancestral land, it could not be sold

permanently. In the Jubilee year it had to be returned to those to whom God gave it. (Leviticus 25:8-23) The Jewish theologian Arthur Waskow explains the mindset to which God called the people:

The Jubilee . . . does not ask for the rich to give their land away in fear or guilt; it does not ask the wretched of the earth and the prisoners of starvation to rise in rage to take back the land from the swollen rich.

Instead, the Jubilee proclaims a “release,” a Shabbat, for everyone. A release for the rich as well as the poor. The rich are released from working, bossing, increasing production – and from others’ envy of them. The poor are released from working, from hunger, from humiliation and despair – and from others’ pity of them. Both the rich and the poor are seen as fully human, as counterparts to be encountered, not as enemies or victims to be feared or hated.^{xxxvi}

This vision, while most likely never put into practice, depicts well how land would be managed in a world returned to the Rule of the Creator God of Israel. Conversion to the view that the land belonged to God, was distributed by God among the people, and was to be returned to the people to whom God gave it if at some point the original owners had needed to sell it in order to survive, would entail an attitude towards wealth and its proper use that would transform the way rich and poor related to each other and undermine the reasons for humans to divide into groups in violent competition with one another over land and the wealth it could generate.

Making Rivals a Team^{xxxvii}

Jesus’ mission of bringing together people who were in conflict over the land and its wealth would most likely have provoked violence against him. He included in the inner circle of his followers both a freedom fighter devoted to revolt against the Romans and a tax collector who got rich by collaborating with the rulers against their own people.^{xxxviii} He devoted his time to tax collectors and other sinners.^{xxxix} Associating with people whom others hate stirs distrust. It invites the accusation that a person is selling out to the enemy, even secretly in bed with them, aiding them in their efforts to take over. The typical approach of people who experience some form of loss is to view themselves as victims and identify some other group as their oppressors.^{xl} A demagogue, interested only in personal power, then capitalizes on people’s hostility, offering himself as champion of the oppressed and attacking the perceived oppressor by every rhetorical means imaginable: name-calling, slander, accusations of lying. As one who did things that made him very popular among the downtrodden, it would have been tempting for him to become their champion against their oppressors, in this way perpetuating and exacerbating the division. Jesus clearly resisted that temptation even when engaged in conflict with his opponents.^{xli}

Jesus’ consistent strategy in responding to his opponents is to stick to the issues and to arguing on the basis of scripture that they also embrace (Mark 2:25-26), or by pointing to everyday experience (Mark 2:19-22), or by means of shared argumentative strategies like “from the lesser to the greater” (Luke 13:15-16). He also firmly rejects power when it is offered to him. We see this most explicitly in the Gospel according to John. In John 2:23-25 the “signs” that Jesus performs lead people to believe in him. This is a perfect opportunity to acquire power, but

Jesus rejects it. In John 6:14-15 the people again respond with belief to one of his “signs.” When he perceives that they want to make him king – what more could a person thirsting for power want? – he makes himself scarce. When the people go looking for him and find him, he appeals for their belief, but instead of telling them what they want to hear continually says things that turn them away (John 6:41, 52-60, 66).

A Less Divided Society

The revolutionary changes implied in Jesus’ ministry of mediating to the world the vision of Israel’s God for the world God created became manifest over the course of the next three centuries after his death as his followers lived by the empowering belief in his resurrected presence. Over the course of those three centuries, as a result of the practices of Jesus’ followers Roman society underwent a transformation that overcame significant human divisions. Laborers and the poor were accorded the same dignity as the wealthy instead of disdained as expendable. Female infants were not thrown out with the trash. Wives were not a man’s property to bear him children but persons who, while still to be subordinate were to be loved as the husband loved his own body (Ephesians 5:28). Violence was often met without violent response.^{xlii} Hints of these changes may clearly be seen in our extant witnesses to the life of some of the very earliest communities of followers, Paul’s letters. In 1 Corinthians he castigates the wealthy members of the community for gobbling the food they were able to bring with them before the poor members arrived. He counsels those who pride themselves on their freedom to eat food sacrificed to idols on a festival day, perhaps the only meat they would get, to be respectful of those new converts who still struggled with eating such food. At the beginning of the letter he questions whether those the world regards as wise are the truly wise.

In his own day the political and economic implications of what Jesus was doing presented a danger to the existing system that sustained the power and wealth gap between the few and the many. If they followed the way of Israel’s Torah and prophets implicit in Jesus’ behavior and teaching, they stood to lose, and they saw this. And so when Jesus entered Jerusalem in his parody of military conquest of the city and laid claim to the Temple of the city’s god,^{xliii} they acted to protect their vested interests in the system of domination and they eliminated him. If it strikes us as quite ridiculous that the powerful felt so threatened by a man who clearly rejected violence as a strategy for achieving what he was advocating, we might consider the reaction of many American Christians to proposals for government programs and tax reform that distribute wealth more equitably among all.^{xliv}

Ecojustice

What do we learn when we probe the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ mission as people committed to ecojustice? Our technology and the way we have been employing it to meet human needs and the boundless desires bred by western culture have generated a crisis many are still denying, others acknowledge with a sense of hopelessness, and still others determined to avert as much as possible. So for us ecojustice is first of all a just relationship to planet Earth’s ecosphere itself. The challenge is to care for Earth’s life-generating and sustaining environment as intrinsically precious apart from the impact of its degradation on human life. The world of nature that may be unique to the planet where we live and move and have our being has enjoyed millions of years of

life long before humans ever appeared on the scene. It is unjust for us to destroy it apart from the fact that if we do we destroy our human selves.

In the Gospel account we find no evidence that Jesus included care for the natural environment as an entity threatened by humans. But in his parables about various sorts of seeds and soils, it is clear that he did count on it as producing its fruits without human assistance. He simply did not see humans as threatening its ability to do so. His acts of quieting the wind and the sea addressed the way nature threatens humans, not humans nature. His acts of feeding hungry people and healing their physical and mental traumas were made necessary by two factors: first, that people who labored in the earth to grow food often had to do so under adverse conditions, like hail storms and drought; and secondly, that people in positions of power exacerbated their struggle by establishing control over their land, robbing the workers of half to two thirds of what they produced to support their lavish lifestyle, and leaving the workers with barely enough to survive so that they were hungry, became malnourished and ill.

Jesus' attention to the hunger and resulting suffering of the people of Palestine led us to investigate not only the reasons for their suffering in abusive political and economic practices of the imperial system governing his people. It also led us to investigate the traditions of Israel in which he was formed. What we found was that Israel's Torah taught an ecological vision of just land distribution and a view of kingship that honored and fostered that vision, and that two of Israel's prophets, Isaiah and Micah, explicitly spoke out against those who violated that vision.

All of what we have called to attention this far paints a picture of a nation and a Jesus who were concerned about human issues arising from the embeddedness of their lives in nature. They were issues of ecojustice, of how nature was to be treated and was just for all people.

Ecojustice for Jesus' Followers Today

What does it mean for people today to carrying forward Jesus' commitment to ecojustice? Beginning about half a century ago people have been recognizing that our culture has developed ways of using the gifts of natural to satisfy desires that nature cannot sustain. We have also recognized that the great disparity in what rich and poor nations consume from nature cannot be reduced only by bringing consumption in poor nations to the current level of the rich nations. Human activity has risen to a level that disrupts the delicate balance of earth's ecosystem the system. The result is that the ecosystem is undergoing changes that bring suffering to many. Some have the wherewithal to compensate for this disruptive activity and continue to benefit from the practices that cause it while others, especially the poor, suffer. While the specific forms of abusive behavior have changed from what they were in Jesus' world, they still favor the wealthier and put the poor at a disadvantage. Consequently, the mission of Jesus' followers is the same: care of the poor suffering from the abuse of nature. Despite the differences, the question why the "haves" have what we have and what we do with it is the same: Is what we have a gift that enables us to care for those who lack, as Jesus and his people Israel taught? Do our divisions into those who have more and those with less lead us to engage in conflict? Or do we strive to reconcile our divided communities as Jesus did?

As we in our time are waking up to the fact that the unique power we humans have as a species is such that we can destroy the ecosystem's very ability to generate and sustain life, we are realizing that nature has a life of its own that we must respect or it will respond to the way we treat it that destroy us instead. What we are learning in our time is something that human cultures assumed until the modern era, when we developed technology that deluded us into thinking we could do anything we like to the natural environment with no consequences we could not in turn control.

It may be humbling to discover that people in an earlier time possessed a view of nature that we must relearn. To cite an example: In the scriptures of Israel that nurtured Jesus' vision of God's coming Rule, Israel's God tells the people that the natural environment from which they draw their life has a life of its own and needs times and seasons to rest from serving human demands. The weekly Sabbath itself is a time for rest, not only for humans but for their animals and for the soil in which they daily toil as well. In Leviticus 2:24 God extends the Sabbath for the land beyond one day a week: "But in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of Sabbath-ceasing *for the land*." Jewish theologian Arthur Waskow comments, "Not for the sake of humanity alone comes restfulness but for the earth as well."^{xlv} God goes on in Leviticus to warn,

If you do not obey Me and do not observe all these commandments, . . . I will make desolate, I Myself, the land . . . Then shall the land make up for its sabbath years throughout the time it is desolate. (25:14, 32, 34)

Again, Waskow observes, "The earth does rest. If you rest with it, celebrating joyfully, then all is joyful. But if you try to prevent it from resting, it will rest anyway – upon your head. Through feminine, drought, exile, desolation, it *will* rest."^{xlvi} Israel's God also places clear limits on how humans may behave towards what the earth produces. One of the most telling limits is specified in Deuteronomy 20:19-20:

When you are at war with a city and have to lay siege to it for a long time before you capture it, you shall not destroy (*lo tashchit*) its trees by putting an ax to them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are the trees of the field human beings, that they should be included in your siege? However, those trees which you know are not fruit trees you may destroy. You may cut them down to build siegeworks against the city that is waging war with you, until it falls.

This passage in Deuteronomy is the basis for the Rabbinic doctrine of *bal tashchit* that greatly expanded the prohibition to forbid the wasting of natural resources as well as humanly produced objects.^{xlvii}

In Islamic tradition Muhammed also explicitly limits the use of natural resources. The fact that this is not merely a necessity arising from scarcity but reflects the Prophet's grounding in Israel's view of God and the world is clear from a *hadith*, a saying of the prophet not in the Qur'an, that tells the following story:

"God's Messenger appeared while Sa'ad was performing the ablutions. When he saw that Sa'ad was using a lot of water, he intervened saying:

‘What is this? You are wasting water.’
Sa’ad replies asking:
“Can there be wastefulness while performing the ablutions?” To which God’s
Messenger replied:
“Yes, even if you perform them on the bank of a rushing river.”^{xlviii}

The Church, the network of various communities that have sought to carry on Jesus’ mission for the past two millennia even to this very day, has in its Western expression not done well in attending to the world of nature as in need of redemption from the impact of human sinfulness every bit as much as humans are in need of being delivered from our sinful ways.

The Church has become enamored with the story of salvation taught by Platonic philosophy. According to that story, salvation for individuals in a heaven that serves as an alternative to earth and to which their disembodied souls migrate when their body dies. In some Christian traditions, particularly those that have adopted the mantra “Salvation by faith, not works” – which is heretical in that it is only part of the message of the Reformers – this evolved into a view of Christian mission that is limited to persuading people to believe in Jesus as the only way to get to heaven. Attention to the conditions of people while they live out their lives on earth are frequently narrowed to the realms of sexual practices and the use of drugs and alcohol.

The story of Jesus’ mission told in the Gospels, which Christians like Mark saw as the final chapter in the story of Israel that unfolds over the course of the entire Christian Bible, is a very different story that this story of going to heaven after we die. It is from beginning to end the story of the salvation of God’s good Earth from the Curse introduced into the life of the Earth by human sin. The Creator’s first step in bringing healing to the earth was the calling into being the people of Israel to whom God gave the gift of the Torah to guide them in caring for Earth and all its creatures, both human and non-human. It is vital for the future of life on Planet Earth that the Church return to Israel’s understanding of salvation as the *healing of all creation*. In the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2-3, the Curse in Genesis 3:14-19 articulates the problem that generates the plot of the narrative that runs through the entire Christian Bible. The Curse identifies the broad range of relationships that are broken when humans do not listen to the voice either of the Creator or of creation itself.

The voice that tempts us to think that we can manage life in this world on our own, that we are an autonomous agent in an otherwise “dull affair, soundless, scentless, colorless: merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly,” the view of the influential 17th century English philosophy from whose work much of the modern western view of the world evolved, has gotten us into a crisis that is the most comprehensive crisis the human species has achieved. For the Church to be faithful to the mission to which Jesus called his followers, Christian must listen anew to his joyful announcement that, in the midst of this world being torn apart by human violence, the Reign of God is breaking. Jesus calls us all to repent, to change their way of thinking, to trust this Good News, and then devote themselves to Jesus’ multidimensional ministry of lifting the Curse that the human turn away from the Creator and the creation to themselves has perpetrated upon this Good Earth.

We are a unique species. We are equipped with a brain that can consciously register and reasonably assess how we are exercising our dominion over nature. We also possess an unfathomable desire for knowledge and an imagination that can envision ways to bring healing where there is brokenness. Throughout the history of our species we have exhibited an undaunted drive to accomplish things that seem impossible. We are a resourceful species. While tiny parts of this finely tuned globe in which our lives are embedded can rock the entire system, like the COVID19 virus succeeded by its Delta variant, tiny changes, like the ingenious development of a new kind of vaccine, can also catalyze the process of healing. What Catherine Keller calls an “apocalypse habit” leads many Christians today to observe the great challenges of our time and conclude that the end of our world is upon us. But Jesus’ vision of increasing world travail is not the end of our world but the birth of God’s Rule as he has taught it throughout his time on earth. We can also learn from Jesus in Mark that when we face challenges like those before us, we can respond as he did: confront them with Israel’s vision of the Creator’s way of bringing healing, by changing our minds and ways, by dedicating the wealth of our material and spiritual resources to the world’s most suffering human and non-human creatures.

The first form of healing in Mark’s narrative is the healing of the broken relationship between him as a human and the wild beasts that God created so we would not be lonely. The healing of that relationship, broken according to Genesis 3:15, sets the stage for all the healing that is to come. It is a good place for us to start. While bees, for example, may seem to be an insignificant creature among the millions that have evolved, we now know that this one species is the key to so much else. In using our imagination for how to preserve the bees we find ourselves needing to widen our vision to take in the entire system in which they play their vital role. This is what we have been missing in our modern culture. We have drawn upon one natural resource that we imagined how to put to use without regard for how extracting it would impact everything and every person around it. This wider vision is what we are in the process of recovering.

Who can encourage us to we do not lose heart? For Christians, the obvious answer is Jesus, who lived so long ago but who rose from the dead to be alive among us today. For people of other faiths it is other leaders to whom they look. Many people without a religious faith also find reasons to be encouraged. This is the task to which Pope Francis calls Christians in his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si’*: to join all who for any reason are striving to bring healing to this hurting world in using our unique capacities as a species to bring not more destruction but healing. As Judy Cannato observes in *Field of Compassion*, we are faced today with great challenges; but we are also a resourceful species.^{xlix} Our capacity for destructiveness has manifested itself in our day with perhaps greater clarity than ever before. But our history as a species is also the history of our capacity for doing good and for resourcefulness in seeking to do it. Which path shall we take?

Upon entering the Promised Land Moses’ successor Joshua challenged the Israelites, “Choose this day whom you shall serve” (Joshua 22:15). This is the challenge for each of us today. Mark’s Jesus is among those religious leaders who challenge us to serve not ourselves but the needy of this world. For us that clearly includes not only needy humans but a needy world of nature. Jesus also assures his followers that the giving of oneself to others is the path of the

greatest joy. Whatever our gifts, they are just that, gifts. And our greatest joy will come for us when we share them with others. May it be so!

ⁱ Donald E. Gowan notes that according to Isaiah 24:4-6 the earth itself suffers under a curse perpetrated by human sin. In Romans 8:19-23 Paul speaks of creation groaning in travail without specifying the source of that suffering. Paul promises God's intention to redeem it as well as humans. Gowan then surveys apocalyptic literature for texts that focus on the fall and redemption of the material world, not as it affects human life but in its own right. Some texts simply revel in the wonders of creation as revelations of God's glory and sovereignty in contrast to human rebelliousness and transitoriness. The elements of nature as obedient servants of God can then also be agents of judgment. Sometimes the entire earth is destroyed as punishment of humans, though not because it is hopelessly corrupt. In the time of restoration after judgment, the material world may be restored to provide blessing for the righteous humans in the new age.

In some texts human sin is a curse upon the material world to be overcome; but more often the transformation of nature is not the lifting of a curse perpetrated by human sin but simply a form of rich blessing for the righteous.

Gowan says he expected to find a strong tradition about a fallen world in need of redemption growing out of Genesis 3:17 and a creative development of Isaiah 11:6-9 but found neither. He concludes that Genesis 3:17, Isaiah 11:6-9, Romans 8:19-23, Colossians 1:15-20 and other such texts "represent a thin strand of tradition in the Scriptures and did not produce a strong response in the literature of the Intertestamental Period or in the subsequent history of the synagogue or the church. Remarkably enough, it seems that only in the 1970's and 80's has it become possible for us to realize how important they are." ("The Fall and Redemption of the Material World in Apocalyptic Literature." *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 7, no. 2 (December 1985): 83-103.)

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Norman C. Habel & Vicky Balabanski., ed. *The Earth Story in the New Testament*. Edited by Norman C. Habel, Earth Bible Commentary. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002. In one of the essays in this volume, "Good News - for the Earth? Reflection on Mark 1:1-5," 28-43, William Loder offers an abundance of insights about the ecological settings of Mark's stories. He also sounds warnings about how some of the stories exhibit a disregard of the cost to nature of the benefits to humans, for example, the destruction of a herd of 2000 pigs when Jesus permits the legion of demons possessing a man to enter the pigs so that they go mad and rush down the bank into the sea where they drown. This story among others in the Bible, he cautions us, are "symptomatic of a world view that can disregard natural processes. . . . Too often . . . they encourage a stance that sees Earth as an obstacle, to be subordinated to human (and divine) purposes without regard to the consequences. But it need not be so." (41) In this vein he also reports on how Mark's Gospel was a favorite of the early Christian Gnostics, who interpreted Mark's story of Jesus' baptism to mean that "the heavenly dropped into Jesus at his baptism, endured being on Earth to inform its inhabitants of how to escape, and flitted back to heaven just before or just after the crucifixion, leaving an earthly corpse on the cross." (31) Loder goes on to argue that in contrast to the Gnostic reading, Mark's Gospel is clearly aimed at showing the way to live in the world, not how to get out of it. Loder concludes his exposition by affirming that "Jesus' mission of God's reign remains at some point undefined in Mark's Gospel, but it appears to take its origins in hopes for restoration of Israel, and, often connected with that, involves both the inclusion of all peoples and the renewal of all creation through the gift of the Spirit. While not identified as such in the prologue nor in Mark's Gospel, this hope includes more than human beings and, when fully embraced, celebrates the restoration and renewal of the whole creation." (43)

ⁱⁱⁱ The Qur'an shares with Israel the view that animals have intrinsic value and are not commodities for human consumption to be treated in any way that works to meet our desires. Besides verses that prohibit the eating of animals killed under certain conditions and prescriptions for how to slaughter in a humane way, *The Cattle* 6:38 makes it clear that animals have a value to God as well as to humans, indeed that they as well as humans are created to enjoy an enduring life in relationship with their creature: "There is no creature that crawls upon the earth, nor bird that flies upon its wings, but that they are communities like yourselves – We have neglected nothing in the Book – and they shall be

gathered unto their Lord in the end.”

^{iv} Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010) 127-30.

^v See also Psalms 65:8; 89:10 and the psalm that Jonah sings from the belly of the sea monster in Jonah 1:15.

^{vi} See also Psalm 65:8; 89:10. Listeners may also be reminded of the story of Jonah 1:4-16. Jonah like Jesus is asleep as the storm rages. The sailors wake him up and exhort him to call upon his God so they don't perish. When at Jonah's insistence they throw him into the sea, and the sea ceased its raging. In Job 38:8-11 also God claims sovereignty over the sea:

Who shut within doors the sea,
When it burst forth from the womb,
When I made the clouds its garment
and thick darkness its swaddling bands?
When I set limits for it
and fastened the bar of its door,
And said: Thus far shall you come but no farther,
and here shall your proud waves stop?

^{vii} Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 167.

^{viii} NABRE translation. The Greek word is *basanizomenous*, which *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000) explains as “to subject to severe distress,” offering the translation “harassed.”

^{ix} Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000) 432.

^x Numbers 11, Deuteronomy 8, Joshua 5:12, Nehemiah 9:20, and Psalm 78:24.

^{xi} Arthur Waskow, “Earth, Social Justice, and Social Transformation: The Spirals of Sabbatical Release.” *Torah of the Earth: Exploring 4,000 Years of Ecology in Jewish Thought*, Arthur Waskow, ed. (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2000), 72.

^{xii} Waskow, 75.

^{xiii} Waskow, 74.

^{xiv} Waskow, 77.

^{xv} Waskow, 74-75.

^{xvi} Dawn M. Nothwehr, “Bonaventure of Bagnoregio's *imitatio Christi* as an Agapistic Virtue Ethics.” In *On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016) 132.

^{xvii} David Vincent Meconi, “Establishing an I-Thou Relationship between Creator and Creature.” In *On Earth as It Is in Heaven: Cultivating a Contemporary Theology of Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016) 277-8.

^{xviii} Meconi, “Establishing an I-Thou Relationship between Creator and Creature,” 276.

^{xix} Meconi, “Establishing an I-Thou Relationship between Creator and Creature,” 278.

^{xx} Meconi, “Establishing an I-Thou Relationship between Creator and Creature,” 279.

^{xxi} If Luke was born a Gentile, as tradition has it and many scholars defend, his purported mentor, St. Paul, had thoroughly “converted his imagination” to be among those Gentiles he was calling “to understand their identity anew in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ – a gospel message comprehensible only in relation to the larger narrative of God's dealings with Israel.” (Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 5). His Gospel is saturated with allusions to Israel's scriptures and assumes the knowledge of those scriptures and the story of the world they both tell and assume on the part of both him and his listeners.

^{xxii} Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology*, 142.

^{xxiii} Verse 255 in the Surah “The Cow”: “Unto Him belongs whatsoever is in heavens and whatsoever is on the earth.” *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015) 110.

Jesus and Nature, Part Two

^{xxiv} For the percentages in this paragraph, see Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 8.

^{xxv} William Loder, “Good News - for the Earth? Reflection on Mark 1:1-5.” *The Earth Story in the New Testament*, edited by Norman C. Habel and Vicky Balabanski. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2012, 40: “Under the meaning dressed up by religious systems, Jesus is able to see both earth's issues and God's issues. He is able to be good news to those severed from their connection to the land and by exploitative landlords and the leaching occupation of the Romans and their local henchman.”

^{xxvi} Sakari Häkkinen, “Poverty in First-Century Galilee.” *Herv. teol. stud. [online]*, (Pretoria, 2016) 4: The rulers were the heads of the empire and the centralised states, whereas the governing class formed the local administration. Together these privileged elite, very few in numbers, drew its wealth from the products of peasants and herders, craftsmen and traders. These products funded a lavish lifestyle for the ruling class and its priests, scribes and bureaucrats, as well as palaces, temples, fortifications, monuments and a forceful army. Members of the imperial ruling class enjoyed a comfortable and privileged standard of living without engaging in any productive labour on behalf of society and with no obligation to those they ruled other than to assure that they were able to produce sufficient wealth to sustain the rulers in their privilege (Citing Norman K. Gottwald, “Early Israel as an anti-imperial community,” 10-11, describing Egypt, Assyrian, and Babylon in a way that fits the Roman Empire). It has been estimated that at least half of the annual production went to the urban elite, no less than a quarter to the ruling class and approximately the same to the local governing class (Citing G. E. Lenski, *Power and privilege: A theory of social stratification*, 220).” See also Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 3: “In the overwhelming majority of cases, wealth was land turned by labor into food, which, in the case of the rich, was turned into sufficient money to be turned into privilege and power.” Also page 13.

^{xxvii} Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 13: “Altogether, by the time the tax collector in the land owner parenthesis who were often one of the same person parenthesis had passed by, there was not much left for the farmer it is usually calculated that, with rent and taxes deducted, the farmers would have to face the coming year with under one third of the harvest on which they had labored.”

^{xxviii} Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 12-13: The Mediterranean was notorious for its unstable climactic conditions. Flattening cloudbursts, random scything by hailstorms, and by the perpetual menace of prolonged drought and of “dry” winters were the norm and produced “harvest shocks” that could cause harvests to vary by over 50 percent from year to year. “It was these harvest shocks that all too often tipped the balance toward misery, debt, and dependence in a rural population that had to produce enough to raise the money needed to pay their rents and taxes.”

^{xxix} Ched Myers, *Bind the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) 191-193, points out all the Roman military imagery in the story of Jesus' exorcism of the man in the land of the Gerasenes who is possessed by a “legion” of demons, not only “legion” but the Greek words for “herd,” “dismissed,” and “charged.” He goes on to refer to the work of another scholar, P. Hollenbach, so interprets the man's possession to be a response to the tension between hatred for the Roman oppressor and the need to repress that hatred, a tension that drives the man mad. The demon-possessed man, he says, “represents collective anxiety over Roman imperialism . . . in which the community's anguish over its subjugation is repressed and then turned in on itself.”

^{xxx} K. C. Hanson & Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998, 106-113.

^{xxxi} Mark delays mentioning that women as well as men followed Jesus during his time in Galilee until almost the very end of his narrative. There are different views of why he may have done this. Some view this as a sign of his reluctance to credit women as among his followers. In Joan Connell and Adam Bartholomew, *Healing All Creation*, Chapter 4 we follow Richard Horsley in tracing in Mark's narrative a subplot according to which women emerge over the course of the Gospel from the restrictive norms of ancient patriarchal culture as they take personal initiative to relate to Jesus as his equals. This culminates in Mark 15:41 where Mark attributes to them the two central marks of discipleship to which he called his male disciples, following and *diakonia*. After all the male disciples have fled, the only people left exhibiting these marks are the women, who Mark now tells us have been among Jesus' entourage all along. Luke 8:1-3 has a different narrative strategy and includes them by personal name in his account of Jesus' work in Galilee. Luke clarifies the meaning of *diakonia* by adding the phrase *ek ton hyparchonton*, "out of their resources." Amy L. Wordelman, "Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the New Testament," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, eds. Carol A Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 482-88, provides a summary of the social and economic position of women in the Roman Empire during the New Testament period. These women in both Mark's and Luke's accounts clearly had the independence to follow Jesus instead of remaining at home. They were perhaps widows who had inherited property from their husbands, and their *diakonia* was in the form of contributing their property to support Jesus' travelling band of disciples that included women as well as men.

^{xxxii} Brueggemann, Walter. *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*. 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 69-74.

^{xxxiii} The NABRE translates *lestai* correctly in this context.

^{xxxiv} Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 175-193.

^{xxxv} Hanson & Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, 117: "while the theological interests of the evangelists in the early church have obscured it to some extent, Jesus and the early Jesus tradition offered a potent critique of political economy and an alternative vision for ordering material human relationships. Jesus alternative is first and foremost an expression of non-elite interests and aspirations." Farzeed Zakaria in *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: Norton, 2003) makes the point that important values can be supported or suppressed by various forms of government.

^{xxxvi} Arthur Waskow, "Earth, Social Justice, and Social Transformation: The Spirals of Sabbatical Release." *Torah of the Earth: Exploring 4,000 Years of Ecology in Jewish Thought*, Arthur Waskow, ed. (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2000), 79-80.

^{xxxvii} This phrase is indebted to the title of Doris Kearns Goodwin book *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*.

^{xxxviii} Luke's story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10 provides a vivid example of a tax collector who exploited his position to defraud his own people.

^{xxxix} See Connell and Bartholomew, *Healing All Creation*, 74-75.

^{xl} Catherine Keller describes what she labels an "apocalypse habit" effected by the composition that stands at the end of the Christian Bible and brings to a climax the narrative generated by the order of the entire corpus. She summarizes the traits of this habit. While she is describing a narrative structure that permeates Western Christianity, it characterizes the way most if not all revolutionary groups perceive their present and future position in relation to those against whom they are in revolt, including revolutionary groups in Israel of Jesus' day. The prophet John who composed the Christian drew on the same traditional sources as many of them did, especially the books of Ezekiel and Daniel. We are arguing here that Jesus did not share that apocalyptic habit but offered an alternative rarely perceived or

followed. See Keller, Catherine. *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 11.

^{xli} According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus eschews any inclination employ the methods of demagogues. He does not rouse the hatred of the poor against the wealthy and powerful. He does not initiate controversy with them. When they confront him, in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, he does not incite hatred by calling his opponents names except for two labels, hypocrite and “whited sepulcher” (Matthew 23:27). These labels objectively name his perception that they present themselves in one way but behave in another.

In the Gospel according to John he resorts to only one accusation that amounts to name-calling and does so only once. In John 8:44 he tells the Judaeans who had come to believe in him (8:31), “You are of your father the devil and will to carry out the desires of your father.” This exception proves the rule. He does it only once. It is not a rhetorical strategy of his mission such as demagogues employ to arouse the hostility of his political base against their purported enemy.

^{xlii} Papandrea, Michael Aquilina and James L. *Seven Revolutions: How Christianity Changed the World and Can Change It Again*. New York: Image, 2015.

^{xliii} Connell and Bartholomew, *Healing All Creation*, 76-79.

^{xliv} Christians are so accustomed to celebrating Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday as part of the Holy Week cycle leading to Easter that they perhaps have a hard time registering what an odd yet provocative thing this was to do. It is a form of prophetic symbolism, symbolic in that it is not practical on the level of what it mocks, namely violent conquest, yet aims at something very practical on the level of the effectiveness of its rejection of violence. Jesus is aiming to reshape government on a very different set of values. Think of how American government was based on liberty and justice for all (all white people?) as opposed to the power of an aristocracy to extort wealth from the underclasses. To understand what Jesus was claiming is the Creator’s will for how people live in this world we must remember Jesus’ entire earthly work: his implicit critique of a tax system that robbed workers of the fruits of their labor and their land so that the 10% could squander what they had taken by force of conquest and coercion; responding to women as equal to him as a man, glimmerings of which we can detect in the genuine letters of Paul and very early historical records of the Church (Connell and Bartholomew, *Healing All Creation*, 51-70); love for, prayer for, and imaginative non-violent resistance to the violence of enemies (Walter Wink, 175-193). If those in power in Jerusalem had received Jesus as Israel’s Messiah instead of rejecting and killing him, they would have agreed to a radical change in politics and economics, rooted in a way of interpreting Israel’s religious traditions that Jesus was advocating, ways that set his followers off from other Israelite sects but could have led to creative and fruitful engagement among the sects if all sides could commit themselves to it.

^{xlv} “Earth, Social Justice, and Social Transformation,” *Torah of the Earth*, 76.

^{xlvi} “Earth, Social Justice, and Social Transformation,” *Torah of the Earth*, 78.

^{xlvii} See Waskow, *Torah of the Earth*, 87, 109-115. Modern ecofeminists such as Yvone Gebara and Elizabeth Johnson observe the way both women and nature most often symbolized as female are targets in modern warfare. See Connell and Bartholomew, *Healing All Creation*, 111-112.

^{xlviii} Ibrahim Özdemir, “Towards an Understanding of Environmental Ethics from a Qur’anic Perspective. *Islam and Ecology*, Richard C. Foltz et al, eds. 14-15.

^{xlix} Judy Cannato, *Field of Compassion: How the New Cosmology Is Transforming Spiritual Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2010) 4.