CHAPTER 20

THE IMAGE OF GOD IN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

J. RICHARD MIDDLETON

The idea that human beings are made in the image of God (Latin *imago Dei*) is typically taken as grounding Christian interpersonal ethics (Middleton 2011). But does it ground ecological ethics? In particular, what are the implications of the *imago Dei* for thinking about the embeddedness of humanity in the ecosystems of the earth, with its myriad plant and animal species? Although it is sometimes claimed that the *imago Dei*, with its emphasis on human uniqueness and “dominion,” is antithetical to ecological sensitivity (White 1967; Habel 2006, 2008), this is not necessarily the case. Rather, a careful reading of the explicit (and implicit) references to humanity as *imago Dei* in the Bible yields a profound ecological perspective on the human condition. This perspective, moreover, provides guidance in thinking about normative relationships between humans and the nonhuman. In what follows, I focus on the Old Testament, primarily because it is the foundation of the New Testament reflection on the *imago Dei*, and also because of the paucity of knowledge of the Old Testament in the church (Strawn 2017).

**Human Uniqueness and the *Imago Dei***

While it is traditional to take the *imago Dei* to mean that humans are unique among creatures, especially that we are radically distinct from animals, this is not the primary point of the image in the Old Testament. Most contemporary Old Testament scholars understand the *imago Dei* not as certain capacities or features that distinguish humans from other animals, but as a calling or vocation, which involves representing and manifesting God’s presence and rule on earth by the way we live (Middleton 2020, 27–28).

Humans would, of course, need to have certain capacities or faculties (including rationality, language, and self-consciousness) in order to be able to fulfill the calling to image God. And the Bible does, in fact, distinguish humans from other animals in a fairly commonsense way. Not only are humans granted a certain responsibility for nonhuman animal life, and not vice versa, but nonhuman animals simply cannot meet the deepest human needs for interpersonal fellowship (Gen 2:20).
The Imago Dei as the Human Vocation

The idea of the imago Dei first occurs in the Bible in Genesis 1, where God is depicted as creating a complex, ordered world with humanity, both male and female, made in God's own "image" and "likeness" (parallel terms), granted a place of honor and responsibility in creation—to rule (or shepherd) animals and to care for the earth (Gen 1:26–28). Although there are not many explicit statements of humans created as imago Dei beyond Gen 1:26–28 (only Gen 5:1; 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9), this statement in the opening creation account (Gen 1:1–2:3) crystallizes the Bible's consistent vocational or missional view of humanity.

This vocational emphasis is evident in Genesis 2, where God plants a garden in Eden and places the first human there with the task of tilling/working and keeping/guarding the garden (2:15). Not only is agriculture portrayed as the first communal, cultural project of humanity, but since it is the Creator who first planted the garden (2:8), we could say that God initiated the first cultural project, thus setting a pattern for humans—created in the divine image—to follow.

Beyond continuing God's action vis-à-vis the garden, Genesis 2 further intimates the human status as imago Dei by its picture of God breathing into the human newly formed from the ground, which results in the human coming alive (Gen 2:7). This echoes the Mesopotamian ritual known as the mis pi or pit pi, the "washing of the mouth" or "opening of the mouth," which typically took place in a sacred grove beside a river (similar to the description of Eden). It was through this ancient ritual process that an inert wooden statue (a humanly constructed cult image) was thought to be vivified and transformed (even "transubstantiated") into a living breathing "image" of a god (Jacobsen 1987; Schüle 2005; McDowell 2015; Herring 2008). Thus, without explicitly using image language (as Genesis 1 does), Gen 2:7 portrays a similar understanding of humanity as the image of God on earth, a distinctive site of divine presence.

Whereas Genesis 2 focuses on agriculture, Psalm 8 highlights animal husbandry as basic to the human vocation; humans are crowned with honor and glory and are granted rule over the works of God's hands, including various realms of animal life, on land, air, and sea (Ps 8:5–8). The domestication of animals and fishing for food (and perhaps hunting, though this was not common in ancient Israel) are here regarded as tasks of such dignity and privilege that through them humans manifest their position of being "little lower than God" (Ps 8:5), an expression that moves in the direction of the imago Dei.

Gen 1:26–28 combines the emphases of Genesis 2 and Psalm 8. Humans are created to "subdue" the earth (similar to tilling or working the garden in Genesis 2) and to rule the animal kingdom (as in Psalm 8). They are to accomplish these tasks precisely as God's representatives or delegates on earth, entrusted with a share in God's own rule—which is the upshot of being made in God's image (Gen 1:26–27).

The human task of exercising communal power in the world, initially applied to agriculture and the domestication of animals, results in the transformation of the earthly environment into a complex sociocultural world. Thus Genesis 4 reports the building of the first city (4:17) and mentions the invention of various cultural practices, such as nomadic livestock herding, musical instruments, and metal tools (4:20–22). All later human cultural
developments thus flow from the imago Dei. Ultimately, this biblical trajectory suggests that humans image God when they live in conformity to God's will in all their earthly life, as stewards of this world that God has entrusted to them.

**The Imago Dei as Critique of Ancient Near Eastern Royal Ideology**

This view of the importance of cultural development and its link to the imago Dei was not unique to Israel. In the ancient Near East (particularly in Egypt and Mesopotamia), certain human beings (usually kings, and sometimes priests) were thought to be the living image of the gods on earth, representing the gods' will and purpose through their cultic or political activities (Curtis 1984; Middleton 2005, 108–122).

In Mesopotamia, where agriculture was dependent on keeping the canal irrigation system from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers silt-free, we find myths that explain the creation of humans to do this job when the lower class of deities refused the task. *Atrahasis* is one of many Mesopotamian texts that consigns the masses of the Mesopotamian population to be bond-servants of the gods, tasked with providing them with housing (temples) and with food via daily sacrifices (from agricultural produce). This cultic service was organized by priests associated with the various temples, and ultimately by the Mesopotamian king, who was often viewed as the high priest of the national religion. Since both priests and the king functioned as mediators between the divine and human realms, both are designated the image of particular deities—though the imago Dei is more commonly applied to kings than priests (Middleton 2005, 148-173).

Against this background, Israel's creation accounts present a very different set of values. Instead of some elite person elevated to a hierarchical role over others, the entire human race is appointed to the privileged vocation of representing and mediating the divine presence in earthly life. This democratization of ancient Near Eastern royal ideology implies that all people are equally in the image of God. It, further, imbues the communal project of agriculture, and the resulting development of culture and civilization, with dignity and even sacredness.

While the notion of human dominion over the earth in Genesis 1 has often been found objectionable by contemporary ecologically minded readers, we must take into account that the text is delegitimizing an elitist social order, where the rule of the few over the many is grounded in creation. Instead, God's intent from the beginning was for a cooperative world of shalom, characterized by the communal, egalitarian use of power (allotted equally to male and female).

Although humans may certainly organize society with functional hierarchies of leadership, the radical equality implied by the Bible's use of the imago Dei means that such hierarchies are not innate; no human being is intrinsically superior to another. Thus, the imago Dei calls into question the inequities of patriarchy and all forms of discriminatory social structures that arise in history. The question is whether the imago Dei can also call into question the exploitation of the earth and its nonhuman inhabitants.
THE IMAGE OF GOD IN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

THE HUMAN ROLE AS IMAGO DEI IN THE COSMIC SANCTUARY

The other source of the idea of humans as God's image is the picture of the cosmos (heaven and earth) as a temple, or sanctuary—a sacred realm over which YHWH rules (Middleton 2013). In this picture, God's throne is in heaven above (a cosmic Holy of Holies), while humans have been granted the earth as their own proper realm (Ps 115:16). The earth is thus equivalent to the holy place, with humans as the image or icon in the cosmic sanctuary.

The picture of the cosmos as a temple is assumed in many biblical texts; it makes sense of many psalms where the psalmist's prayer for help ascends to God's throne in heaven, from which God descends (often in a theophany, as in Ps 18) to rescue the supplicant from distress. It is precisely this picture that grounds the critique in Isaiah 66 of those attempting to build (perhaps rebuild, after the exile) an earthly temple or "house" for God; that heaven is God's throne and earth is God's footstool means that the Creator has already built his own "house" or temple to dwell in (Isa 66:1–2).

The understanding of the world as a cosmic sanctuary also underlies Psalm 148, which calls all creatures in heaven and earth to praise YHWH. The call goes out to the heavenly beings, including angels, the heavenly bodies (sun, moon, stars), the highest heavens, and the waters above the heavens (148:1–4). Then the call goes to creatures on earth, including sea monsters and deep oceans; lightning, hail, snow, and wind; mountains and trees; animals and birds; and also humans (148:7–12). Psalm 148 portrays the entire creation (heaven and earth) as if it were a cosmic sanctuary populated with a host of creaturely worshipers. Humans (148:11–12) are just one of many sets of creatures called to worship God in the temple of creation.

Yet human worship is distinctive, in that it is predicated on being the image or icon of the Creator in the earthly realm. As was the function of images in ancient temples, it is the human task to make God's presence and power manifest from heaven to earth, so that earth may be infused with the divine presence. The communal development and transformation of earthly life (the cultural mandate), which is accomplished by God's human image, is thus not only a task of great dignity, whereby humans represent God's purposes on earth, it is a holy task, a sacred calling, which constitutes the appropriate liturgy or worship enjoined on humanity (Middleton 2014, 41–49).

Beyond human participation in the worship of all creation, as portrayed in Psalm 148, many other biblical texts assume significant continuity and interrelationship—even interdependence—between humans, other animals, and the earth.

AN ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN GENESIS 1

Lynn White famously claimed that the imago Dei in Genesis 1 implies an opposition between humans and God on one side and "nature" on the other (White 1967). But this is not the picture presented in the opening creation account. Apart from the fact that White's use of
“nature” is foreign to the Bible (“nature” does not become a designation for the nonhuman realm before the Renaissance), Genesis 1 has humans and other land animals created on the same day (day 6). Further, the food humans are granted (fruit trees with seeds; green plants with seeds) overlaps with the food given to birds and land animals (Gen 1:29–30).

Ellen Davis has noted that the spare, elegant style of Genesis 1 is interrupted by complex sentences about the growth of plants on the land (day 3) and the assignment of plants for food (at the end of day 6). Here the writer significantly slows down the exposition of the days of creation to give details about the nature of vegetation—especially grasses and fruit trees that have seeds in them. This botanical detail shows significant attention to the actual sort of plants characteristic of the land that Israel occupied (the highlands of the Levant) and illustrates an ancient awareness of the dependence of human life on the fruitfulness of the land. Thus, we find a significant ecological consciousness in the very text that assigns humans the exalted status of *imago Dei* (Davis 2009, 48–51).

As for the commission granted to humans in Genesis 1 to “rule” or “have dominion,” this is not likely to have had the ominous connotations for the ancients that it does for us today, with our technological advances. Theodore Hiebert notes that for preindustrial Israel such terminology would have meant simply “the human domestication and use of animals and plants and the human struggle to make the soil serve its farmers” (Hiebert 1996, 42).

Davis also suggests that it is not necessary to take the commission granted to humans in Genesis 1 in a hierarchical way. Although the Hebrew verb *râdâ* followed by the preposition *bê*, which precedes both animals and the earth in Gen 1:26 and 28, can mean rule/have dominion *over* (as it has traditionally been rendered), it could also mean exercise power *among* the animals or *in* the earth, thus allowing for a more ecologically minded reading (Davis 2009, 54–55).

**Glimpses of the Image of God in Other Creatures in Genesis 1**

Even being created in God’s image does not imply an absolute distinction between humans and other creatures. True, only humans are explicitly *saîd* to be created in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:26–27). However, a careful reader of Genesis 1 would notice that various nonhuman creatures are rhetorically *portrayed* as similar to God (Middleton 2005, 287–289).

First, given that God engages in acts of *separation* on the first three days in Genesis 1 (separating light from dark; waters above from waters below; waters below from dry land), we should note that the purpose of the firmament (*râqì‘a*) on day 2 is to *separate* the waters above from the waters below (Gen 1:6). The firmament’s function thus images and continues God’s own creative activity (in many ancient Sumerian creation accounts, *separation* is a typical divine action at creation). And one of the purposes of the sun and moon on day 4 is to *separate* light from dark and day from night (Gen 1:14, 18), thus imaging and continuing God’s creative work of separating light from dark on day 1.

Likewise, given that God engages in acts of *filling* on days 4 through 6 (filling the heavens with luminaries; the waters with fish; the air with birds; the land with animals), it is
The image of God in ecological perspective

significant that God grants fertility to creatures that live in the air and water and calls them (just as he does humans) to multiply and fill the world (Gen 1:22, 28); thus both humans and animals image God’s own creative activity. The same is true of the land or earth (ēreṣ), which is called by God in Genesis 1:11 to be covered with vegetation (an act of filling). Indeed, whereas no human action takes place until Genesis 2, the land/earth fulfills its calling within the parameters of the opening creation account (Gen 1:12)—the only creature to actually do so.

Finally, it isn’t only humans who are like God, the ultimate Ruler of the cosmos, in being given dominion. The sun and moon are also granted rule over day and night (Gen 1:16). True, the verb here for rule (māšal) is different from the verb used for human dominion (rādā) in Genesis 1:26 and 28; yet māšal is used for human rule in Psalm 8:6. Thus we find this parallel: whereas the luminaries represent (and share in) God’s dominion in the heavens, humans represent (and share in) God’s dominion on earth.

God’s use of creative power as the model for human dominion

According to the Genesis 1 creation account, which is the immediate context for the first mention of the imago Dei, God creates without vanquishing any primordial forces of chaos (in contrast to ancient Near Eastern creation myths like Enuma Elish), since this would enshrine violence as original and normative. Instead, God peaceably develops the initial unformed watery mass (Gen 1:2) into a complex, well-constructed world. Not only is each stage of this creative process portrayed as good (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), but when creation is complete it is very good (1:31). By implication, the human use of power in God’s image is also to be non-violent and developmental.

In ancient Near Eastern religious practice sacrifices were understood as providing food for the gods and were thought to be necessary to guarantee the fertility of crops and flocks on earth. However, the God of Genesis freely blesses animals and humans with perpetual fertility (1:22, 28) and grants food to both for their sustenance (1:29–30). Most significantly, the Creator does not hoard power as sovereign ruler of the cosmos, but gladly assigns humanity a share in ruling the earth as his representatives (1:26–28). God’s own generous exercise of power for the benefit of creatures thus provides the most important model for the human exercise of power. This suggests that the human “rule” vis-à-vis the earth and the nonhuman creatures is to be characterized by generosity and care.

An ecological consciousness in Genesis 2

Although Genesis 2 portrays the human as a site of divine presence (parallel to a consecrated cult statue in Mesopotamian ritual), which serves to emphasize the dignity and sacredness of the human status, the text also portrays the human (ādām) as formed from the dust of the ground/soil (ādāmā). This emphasis on the mundane origins of humanity is conveyed by
a Hebrew pun or wordplay, to which various equivalent English puns have been suggested, such as the *groundling* from the *ground*, the *earth creature* from the *earth*, the *human* from the *humus* (Brown 2010, 81).

Being formed from the ground is something humans share with other animals (Gen 2:7, 19)—all are equally earth creatures. Further, both humans and nonhuman animals are designated by the identical phrase *nepeš hayyah* (Gen 2:7, 19; also Gen 1:20, 24, and 30). The KJV renders this “living soul” in 2:7 and “living creature” in 2:19, perhaps to distinguish humans from animals (the NIV and NRSV likewise distinguish *nepeš hayyah* as “living being” in 2:7 from “living creature” in 2:19). However, this terminology actually serves to designate the commonality of humans and animals as animate organisms. To be animate means to be enlivened by God’s breath or spirit, something true of both humans (Gen 2:7) and animals (Gen 7:15, 22; also Ps 104:29–30). Possessing divine breath/spirit is not something distinctive to humanity in the Bible.

Just as the removal of God’s spirit/breath results in the death of animals (Ps 104:29–30), so humans are likewise mortal creatures, dependent on God for life. In Genesis 2 human mortality is conveyed through the metaphor of being formed from the *dust* of the ground (Middleton 2017). That dust is a symbol of mortality is clear from Gen 3:19, which speaks of returning to the ground, “for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Likewise, the poignant reference to human mortality in Ps 103:14 uses the very words “formed” and “dust” found in Genesis 2:7. In the New Testament, Paul alludes to Genesis 2 by referring to Adam as a “man of dust,” which he takes to mean that he was created mortal (1 Cor 15:42–49).

Yet, despite significant commonality with animals, and our rootedness in the ground/soil, humans in Genesis 2 have a unique ecological role to play in engendering the flourishing of Eden. The narrative opens by noting the importance of both water for the garden—which is obvious—and a human to work the ground—which is perhaps less obvious (Gen 2:5–8). This suggests that the garden is not equivalent to “nature”; rather, God intended human participation and agency in working the land and cultivating its vegetation. Since the tending of the garden is conveyed in Gen 2:15 by verbs for working (*ābad*) and also for guarding or protecting (*šāmar*), this indicates an ancient awareness of the possibility of both helpful and harmful agricultural practices.

And since these verbs may describe (in other contexts) temple service (*ābad*) and guarding sacred space or keeping the Torah (*šāmar*), we may overhear connotations of sacredness in the use of these verbs for the agricultural task. These connotations of sacredness further nuance the picture of the fundamental human interrelationship with, yet distinctive role within, the ecosystems of earth.

**THE DIGNITY AND LIMITS OF HUMANITY IN PSALMS 8 AND 104**

Beyond Genesis, both Psalms 8 and 104 evince a similar understanding of humanity as having a unique role within a broader ecological order (Middleton 2013). On the surface, an ecological consciousness seems to be absent from Psalm 8, which describes humans in
a manner similar to Genesis 1—they are just lower than God/the gods, crowned with glory and honor, and granted rule over various categories of animals (8:5–8). This would seem to elevate humans above other animal species. It certainly assumes a distinctive role for humanity.

But this role does not involve an absolute statement of human power. Rather, the human role and status in Psalm 8 is qualified by a liturgical inclusio in verses 1a and 9, which gives priority to God’s glory manifest in the cosmos. Whatever honor and glory humans have, this is framed by, and derivative of, the Creator’s own majesty. Further, the psalmist is amazed that humans have the status they do (8:4). The high dignity humans possess is not taken as a matter of course. Rather, it is attributed to YHWH’s gracious doing; it is the Creator who has gifted humans with royal status and function on earth.

The giftedness of life is something humans share with other creatures in Psalm 104. This psalm is famous for its ecologically-minded description of humans as simply one among a variety of other creatures, all sustained by the gracious provision of God. The Creator waters the land (104:10–13) and provides habitat (104:12, 16–18), food (104:14–15, 21, 27–28), the diurnal cycle of night and day (104:19–23), and ultimately breath (104:29–30), to all living beings—including humans. It is also significant that Psalm 104 never mentions humans without pairing them with some form of animal life—whether cattle, sea creatures (especially Leviathan), or lions (104:14–15, 21–23, 26). Thus it is not usually thought that Psalm 104 conceives humans in a manner approaching the imago Dei.

Yet for all the commonality of humans with nonhuman species, Psalm 104 fundamentally distinguishes humans from other creatures by their work or labor. The parallel between the nighttime hunting of lions and the daytime work of humans does not give details about the nature of human work (104:21–23). But other pairings of humans with animals reveal aspects of human distinctiveness.

God provides grass for cattle and gives humans plants for their food (104:14). But whereas cattle simply eat the grass they are given, humans utilize forms of agricultural craft to transform plants (wheat, olives, and grapes) into bread, oil, and wine, for their own sustenance and enjoyment (104:15). Humans, unlike other animals, engage in productive labor, by which they harness and transform their environment.

In the case of the pairing of humans (in their ships) with Leviathan in 104:26, the commonality goes beyond the fact that both are found on the wide ocean. God is said to have “formed” (yāšar) Leviathan (104:26), the very same verb used for God’s creation of the first human in Genesis 2:7. Yet human distinctiveness is evident in the assumption that humans construct seagoing vessels and develop navigational skills necessary for fishing and for oceangoing commerce. This is quite beyond the pale of the other living creatures that fill the sea.

This leads to a surprising comparison with Psalm 8. Although the human vocation in Psalm 8 is portrayed in the seemingly exalted language of exercising rule over animals, birds, and fish (8:5–6), the reality is much more mundane. This royal metaphor refers to no more than the domestication of animals (and possibly fishing). The agricultural production of oil, bread, and wine, along with the other forms of technical expertise assumed in Psalm 104, goes far beyond the mere governance of animals attributed to humans in Psalm 8 (which, on the surface, seems to have a more highly exalted picture of humanity). Thus Psalm 104 actually assumes that humans by their work have tremendous power to shape their world, a fact that does not in any way contradict the vision of an ecologically entwined
Prophetic Visions of the Disruption of the Natural Order

There are many texts in the Prophetic literature that illustrate the close linkage between the moral and cosmic orders. Some of these texts portray the suffering, even mourning, of the land and its nonhuman inhabitants because of Israel’s sin (Hayes 2002; Marlow 2009, 133–137, 137, 145, 152, 171–172, 190–191, 201–203). A paradigmatic example is the oracle in Hosea 4, which indicts the human inhabitants of the land for their sins (4:1–2), then adds:

Therefore the land mourns,
and all who live in it languish;
together with the wild animals
and the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea are perishing.

Indeed, the impact of human sin on the nonhuman world is so severe in Jer 4:23–25 that it is envisioned as a reversion of creation to the tohû vābōhû of Gen 1:2. And the text goes on to speak of the mourning of the land as a consequence of God’s judgment (Jer 4:26–28), using the same verb for “mourn” (ābal) found in Hosea 4.

The Healing of the Non-Human World in the Prophets

But along with prophetic texts that portray the negative impact of human action on the nonhuman world are texts that envision the healing of the nonhuman world as part and parcel of human salvation. Thus, according to Amos 9:13, when God restores the fortunes of Israel and re-establishes them in the land after the exile (9:14–15), this will be accompanied by such extravagant fruitfulness that the mountains will drip sweet wine (a vivid picture found also in Joel 3:18 [MT 4:18]).

Many other texts depict the flourishing of the land and its vegetation as Israel returns from exile—both during the return journey from Babylon and when the people resettle the land (Isa 35:1–2, 6b–7, 55:12–13; Ezek 34:26–29, 36:8–11, 34–35a, 47:1–12; Joel 2:23–24, 3:18 [MT 4:18]; Amos 9:13; Zech 8:12, 14:8). Isa 35:1–2 even goes so far as to describe the flourishing of the wilderness as equivalent to its rejoicing.

While the above texts speak of the flourishing of the land and plants, some prophetic texts portray a new relationship between humans and wild animals, such that they will live in peace—a clear reversal of the covenant curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Ezek 34:25–28 (which interweaves the flourishing of the land with protection from animal attack) speaks of a “covenant of peace” (Ezek 34:25), but may actually envision the absence of wild animals.

Isa 11:6–9 and 65:25, however, suggest that bears, wolves, leopards, lions, and poisonous snakes will coexist along with human settlements, harming neither people nor livestock. The result, declares YHWH, is that “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain” (Isa
distinctive phrasing) as mediating the consequences of human action (Fretheim 2005, 70, 81, 159, 165, 170).

The positive side of human power is seen in Noah's rescuing of animals from destruction by taking them on the ark (Gen 6:19–22). In contrast to his violent generation, Noah is portrayed as a righteous man (Gen 6:8, 9), and so exercises the life-enhancing dominion associated with the imago Dei, by preserving rather than destroying living creatures.

**The Human-Earth Relationship in the Torah**

This realism about the power humans have to affect the nonhuman is the basis of the covenant sanctions listed as blessings and curses in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. Israel's Torah is grounded in a fundamental contrast between two opposing ways or paths, described as life and death, and these are linked to the choice between obedience and disobedience to God's laws, commandments, statutes, decrees, or ordinances. If God's people will follow this Torah, they will be blessed with the fullness of life; but if they turn away from divine instruction, they will experience the curses of the covenant.

According to Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, obedience to God's Torah leads to blessing across a broad spectrum of daily life (Lev 26:3–13; Deut 28:1–14). This blessing includes the birth of children and the fruitfulness of crops and herds, with regular rains to fertilize the land, and a life without fear of attack by wild animals or human enemies. Here we should particularly note that the fruitfulness of the land and positive human–animal relationships are linked to human moral behavior.

On the other hand, disobedience will lead to being cursed in equally comprehensive ways, some of which are the very opposite of the blessings previously listed (Deut 28:15–19). Both Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 portray the consequences of disobedience in terms of disease, drought, social disorder, robbery, violence, attack by enemies and by wild animals, and finally exile—being ejected from the land of promise (Lev 26:14–39; Deut 28:20–68).

Two of the specific impacts of human disobedience are particularly relevant to our topic. Not only is it the case that "your land shall not yield its produce, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit" (Lev 26:20), but wild animals "shall bereave you of your children and destroy your livestock; they shall make you few in number, and your roads shall be deserted" (Lev 26:22).

The list of covenantal blessings and curses clearly demonstrates the assumption of a link between the moral and cosmic orders, so that when the human community is in harmony with God's design their earthly life (including the nonhuman world) flourishes, but when they go against God's intent for flourishing this affects also the earthly environment, to the extent that the land will vomit out its inhabitants (Lev 18:24–28, 20:22). The linkage of cosmic and moral orders is grounded in Genesis 3, where human sin results in a curse on the ground, explained as a resistance of the ground to human efforts to eke a living from it (Gen 3:17); and exile from the land of Israel matches expulsion from the garden (Gen 3:23).

Most fundamentally, however, this linkage is grounded in the assumption that humans really do have the power to impact the earth (positively or negatively)—an idea articulated in Genesis 1 as the imago Dei.
THE IMAGO DEI IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The *imago Dei* is, however, explicitly appealed to by both Paul and other New Testament writers, sometimes with reference to human creation (1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9), but more typically designating Jesus and the church.

As the Second Adam, Jesus is the paradigm *imago Dei* (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3; 2 Cor 4:4–6), in whose earthly life God's presence and character were decisively manifested (John 14:9). By his obedience (even to death), Jesus fulfilled what the first Adam compromised by disobedience (Rom 5:12–19).

As *imago Dei*, Jesus both modeled—by his life and death—the compassionate use of power on behalf of others (Phil 2:5–11) and explicitly contrasted the sort of power his followers were to exercise from the oppressive rule of pagan tyrants (Mark 10:42–44); after all, even "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). While this is not explicitly applied to the exercise of human power vis-à-vis the earth, there are clearly ecological implications, especially given the documented deforestation and desertification practiced by Roman tyrants (Rossing 2000).

Through his resurrection, Jesus has overcome sin and death and become the head of an international community of Jew and gentile, understood as the "new humanity" renewed in the image of God (Eph 4:24; Col 3:9–10). Mandated to grow into the stature of Christ (Eph 4:13), the church's telos is to be fully conformed to the likeness of its Lord (1 John 3:2), which will include the resurrection of the body (1 Cor 15:49).

The church as *imago Dei* is analogous to the church as God's temple (1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21), indwelt by the Holy Spirit (both images and temples were sites of divine presence in the ancient world). The presence of the Spirit in the church is a foretaste of the promised future, when "all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD" (Num 14:21) and God will be "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). Both *imago Dei* and temple portray the vocation of the people of God as mediators of the divine presence on earth.

THE NEW JERUSALEM AS A SYMBOL OF ECOLOGICAL HOPE

The fullest symbol of this divine presence is the vision of the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven, at the end of the book of Revelation (21:2). The vision begins by proclaiming a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1). Instead of saving human beings out of their earthly environment, the vision speaks of the removal of the curse (Rev 22:3), which reverses Gen 3:17 and allows God's dwelling to be fully manifest on earth (Rev 21:3). Indeed, God's throne is no longer in heaven (as is standard in the Old Testament), but is permanently established on the renewed earth (Rev 22:3).

The New Jerusalem is a complex figure, signifying both redeemed people and holy city (Rev 21:2, 9–10)—it represents the people of God in their communal, urban character (there is no redemption of isolated individuals here). The city needs no temple (Rev 21:22), because
God and the lamb, who are in the midst of the city, are its temple. Furthermore, the city is a cube (Rev 21:16), which is the distinctive shape of the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple (1 Kgs 6:20; Ezek 41:4). The New Jerusalem is thus the concentrated center of God’s presence in the temple of renewed creation (Middleton 2014, 168–172).

The urban character of the New Jerusalem lays to rest escapist visions of going “back to nature” or returning to the garden. Rather, motifs from Eden are intertwined with the description of the city—including the tree of life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations, and the water of life flowing from God’s throne (Rev 22:1–2). And whereas there was (presumably unworked) gold in Eden (Gen 2:12), the gold in the New Jerusalem has been transformed by human labor and craft (Rev 21:18, 21). The city is a harmony of nature and culture—an environmentally friendly city. The cultural mandate and the imago Dei are thus fulfilled in this vision of the renewal of communal urban culture, a righteous embodied polis (Rossing 2000).

The human activity that contributes to the city—including the glory of kings and nations that are brought into it (Rev 21:24, 26)—involves the exercise of power and agency associated with the imago Dei. Thus, those ransomed by Christ from all tribes and nations will reign as God’s priests on the earth (Rev 5:9–10); indeed, they will reign on earth forever (Rev 22:5). This fulfills the beatitude where Jesus affirms: “Blessed are the meek / for they will inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5).

There is thus amazing coherence in the Bible’s vision of the human purpose, from the initial assignment of dominion in Genesis 1 to the redeemed exercise of this dominion in Revelation 22. The Bible has from the start understood the human vocation to involve developing the earth and unfolding its sociocultural possibilities. The only question was how we would do this—the imago Dei always had the potential for the abuse of power or its responsible and compassionate use. The consistent biblical vision of the human role in the cosmos, stretching from creation to eschaton, centered on the Messiah whose exercise of dominion brought salvation for both people and the earth, may empower the church to live as imago Dei with ecological responsibility in a precarious time.

References


