

Greenness in the New Testament

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The Jewish thought-world which influenced Christ and the first Christians was holistic. The Bible and extra-biblical literature picture God as rejoicing in His creation. If we are properly to understand Jesus and his first followers it is necessary to understand that thought-world, including ancient mythologies which predate the Exile and were still current.

It is now commonly accepted that during Jesus's lifetime there was, even in Palestine, a varied spectrum of Jewishness, including different degrees of adherence to the Jerusalem establishment. Not everybody acclaimed Jesus's execution, and the conduct of persons like Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea and Jesus's own Galilean disciples (the women particularly) suggests pluralism. It has been suggested that it may have been not the gentiles but disaffected Galileans who first accused Jews of deicide or Christicide.¹

According to the gospels Jesus understood his mission in terms of a cosmic conflict with fallen angels who tormented human beings. There is a remnant of this ancient mythology in Genesis 6:2 'The sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose.' Christ and his contemporaries still lived in a world peopled by angels—good as well as bad. This mythology also included memories of ancient Jewish kingship. The good king moved between heaven and earth, maintained cosmic order, and was in conflict with the fallen angels and their monstrous offspring. The king, God's holy one, preserved the integrity of creation: humans, animals, plants, their habitats and the elements. Our best account of this mythology, so important for understanding Christ and his ecology, is almost certainly in *1 Enoch*².

There are further traces of these ideas in the psalms and prophets and in the New Testament itself. A good example of the holism familiar to Christ and the first Christians is Psalm 72. This prayer probably originated in ancient royal liturgies.³ Remarkably, rightness and justice extend to fields and hills, to all of creation:

Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness?

May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor!

(Ps 72:3—4)

We appreciate the New Testament better if we familiarize ourselves with pictures of a world wherein humans are not the only agents of cosmic disorder, but are to some extent victims of personal evil. This world of fallen angels permeates the New Testament. Luke has five different terms for them: devil, Satan, Beelzebub, demon and evil spirit.⁴ Christ, in conflict with these fallen 'sons of God', was the awaited holy one who bound evil, restored harmony and invited his followers to do likewise. The marauding 'hosts' dreaded the coming judge who would banish them from exploitation of creation. A trace of these ideas is to be discerned in first Isaiah:

On that day the Lord will punish
the host of heaven, in heaven,
and the kings of the earth, on the earth.
They will be gathered together
as prisoners in a pit;
they will be shut up in a prison.

(Is 24:21—22)

The fallen angels tempted humans to *hubris*: to manipulative knowledge of nature. Significantly, Mark opens his gospel in the desert, the mythological arena of demons. To the desert scapegoats were driven. In the desert good angels *bound* Azâzêl. We read in *1 Enoch*: 'The Lord said to Raphael: "Bind Azâzêl hand and foot, and cast him into the darkness: and make an opening in the desert."⁵. The fallen Azâzêl tempted humans to make weapons, interfere with plants, and to arrogant acts of technology.

After his trial by fallen angels in the desert Jesus lived in harmony with animals and with good angels. 'He was with the wild beasts', writes Mark, and the angels ministered to him' (Mk 1:2),⁶ an apparent allusion to the ideal king who secured *tzedaka* and *shalom*, the harmonious functioning of all creation.

According to the gospels, Jesus, after his experience in the wilderness, taught in the basalt synagogue at Capernaum, and in Capernaum too he expelled demons who, according to Mark, recognized him as the one who would bind them. 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' (Mk 1:24) The Jews awaited God's holy one who would bind evil and restore harmony, who would have power to bind the sea, the mythological place of disorder. Not surprisingly, therefore, when Jesus calmed the storm the disciples wondered: 'Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?' (Mk 4:41)

Christ did with the Gerasene demoniac what no-one else could do: he bound evil. 'No-one is able to bind him.' (Mk 5:3) In Luke, too, Christ bound evil spirits. 'If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.' (Lk 11:20) Also Matthew portrayed Christ—and his followers—as empowered to bind. The commission at Caesarea Philippi, before it was interpreted as

rabbinical mission or church jurisdiction, was to *bind* evil forces of disorder: 'Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.' (Mt 16:19)

We cannot, of course, prove that the evangelists consciously associated Peter's commission with fertility symbolism, but is it accidental that, then as now, Mount Hermon and Banias (Caesarea Philippi) was rich in symbolism? The angels descended there. Enoch was commissioned there. The region is an ideal setting for the harmonious binding of all God's creatures within the cosmic covenant: the *mishpat* and *tzedaka* of men, animals, flora and habitats, rightness and *shalom* of all creatures, within creation, under the high God.⁷

The first Christians and, according to Mark 4:29, Jesus himself, were familiar with the book of Joel, one of the most holistic books in the canon. Indeed, Christians associate Joel with the very birth of the church: 'I will pour out my spirit on all flesh' is a prominent text in the Pentecost liturgy, and, according to Luke, inspired Peter's sermon in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14–36). In Joel humans, other life and the elements function in harmony under God. But when humans sin the entire covenant is broken. Human beings are alienated from themselves, and therefore all creation suffers. Joel's portrayal of sin is fundamental to the Bible: human sin is disorder, *hubris*, which brings its own nemesis. Even the weather is disrupted. And changes in weather bring cosmic suffering to humanity, plants and beasts.⁸

Jesus's parable of the seed growing quickly refers subtly to Joel: 'Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full.' (Joel 3:13) The Book of Joel is a particularly relevant book for this and any epoch when humans are tempted to abuse the rest of nature. *Hubris* can even affect the climate. The nemesis of climatic change, Joel teaches, includes famine:

The seed shrivels under the clods,
the storehouses are desolate;
the granaries are ruined
because the grain has failed.

(Joel 1:17)

Restoration of the cosmic covenant includes human beings, plants, animals *and even weather*: 'abundant rain, the early and latter rain as before' (Joel 2:33). When the evil forces are bound humans rejoice, the pastures turn from brown to green, beasts relax, olives put forth shoots, the fig and vine yield their natural harvest. Meditating on the picture of cosmic order and disorder in Joel helps to give us insight into the thought world of Christ and the first Christians, although four centuries separated them from that prophet. As Margaret Barker observes:

... the giving of the Spirit and the birth of the Church were closely bound up with Joel's vision of a renewal of the cosmic covenant, the restoration of all creation. Perhaps we should hear more about this in our Whitsun sermons.⁹

What, then, is our conclusion? First and foremost, that if we meditate only on parts of the New Testament that fit readily into our industrial thought-world we omit a good part of our canonical scriptures. The early Church considered Christ's description of Satan plummeting from the heavens as much inspired and canonical as his words about divorce. If we read the Bible too selectively we omit some of the most relevant passages on humankind's proper place within creation, on ecological sin and the restoration of harmony with nature. In Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer Christ asked that God's will be done on earth. The earth was involved in Jewish expectations which he shared.¹⁰

- 1 Robert Murray, "'Disaffected Judaism' and Early Christianity: Some Predisposing Factors', in J. Neusner & E.S. Frerichs eds., *To See Ourselves As Others See Us: Christians, Jews, Others in Late Antiquity*, Scholars Press, Chico, California, 1985, p. 265.
- 2 R.H. Charles tr., *The Book of Enoch*, SPCK, 1987, pp. 91f.
- 3 Robert Murray, 'The Bible on God's World and Our Place In It', *The Month*, Aug/Sept 1985, pp. 798—803.
- 4 Joseph Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian*, Geoffrey Chapman, 1987, pp. 146—148.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- 6 R.H. Charles tr., op. cit., p. 37.
- 7 cf. Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity*, SPCK, 1986, esp. pp. 8—70; also G.W.E. Nickelsburg, 'Enoch, Levi and Peter: Recipients of Revelation in Upper Galilee', *JBL*, 100 (1981), pp. 575—600.
- 8 Margaret Barker, *The Lost Prophet*, SPCK, 1988, pp. 84f.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 10 Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins*, SPCK, 1988, p. 135.



Don't forget the British Hostages in Beirut.