

“Dawn Nothwehr combines depth of scholarship with depth of passion and prayer in a way that is simply breathtaking. *Ecological Footprints* positively *sings* with hope. While grim determination and even despair characterize all too many works on today’s (admittedly overwhelming) environmental crises, this book begins and ends with the conviction that we already have the spiritual resources we need in order to live sustainably on our fragile planet. At once prayerful, scholarly, and wonderfully practical, this book is exactly the ecotheology we need today.”

—Colleen Mary Carpenter  
Saint Catherine University  
Author of *Redeeming the Story:  
Women, Suffering, and Christ*

“*Ecological Footprints* is a hopeful and profound book, one we need today as we search for a way of living as responsible members of the community of life on Earth. Dawn Nothwehr invites the reader into a Christian ecological vision and practice that is inspired by the Scriptures and wonderfully enriched by the precious Franciscan tradition of Francis, Clare, Bonaventure, and Scotus.”

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Flinders University, South Australia  
Author of *How God Acts* and *Ecology  
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“*Ecological Footprints* is as vast and rich as Mother Earth. The book is comprehensive in content, exploring its ‘urgent issues’ in a clear, engaging manner. It is a book that can be read individually or with a group, in chapters or in its entirety. However grasped, the charges it outlines about the modern burdens of the earth are haunting and demand our action.”

—Ingrid J. Peterson, OSF  
Co-author of *The Franciscan Tradition*



# Ecological Footprints

An Essential Franciscan Guide  
for Faith and Sustainable Living

*Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF*



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## Preface

*“His highest aim, and foremost desire, and greatest intention was to pay heed to the Holy Gospel in all things and through all things, to follow the teachings of Our Lord Jesus Christ and to retrace his footsteps completely with all vigilance and all zeal and all desire of his soul and all the fervor of his heart.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“They entered the Order of the Lesser Ones, obliging themselves to follow, according to the particular grace given to them by God, the poverty and the footsteps of Christ and his most blessed servant, Francis.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“His whole aim, in public and in private, was to reproduce in himself and in others those footprints of Christ which had been covered over and forgotten.”<sup>3</sup>*

*“In the twelfth hundredth twenty sixth year of the Incarnation, on the fourth day before the Nones of October, the day he had foretold, having completed*

<sup>1</sup> *The Life of St. Francis* by Thomas of Celano (1228–1229), bk. I, chap. I, 88, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. I, *The Saint*, trans. and ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 1999), 131, emphasis added. Hereafter citations will follow this pattern: “Document Title” (date), chapter, section, line, in FAED, vol. I, *The Saint*, page number.

<sup>2</sup> *The Legend of the Three Companions* (1241–1247), chap. XVIII, 73, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. II, *The Founder*, trans. and ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 2000), 110, emphasis added. Hereafter citations will follow this pattern: “Document Title” (date), chapter, section, line, in FAED, vol. II, *The Founder*, page number.

<sup>3</sup> *The Tree of the Crucified Life of Jesus*, Book Five (Excerpts), by Umbertino DaCasale (1305), chap. III, 54, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. III, *The Prophet*, trans. and ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 2001), 148, emphasis added. Hereafter citations will follow this pattern: “Document Title” (date), chapter, section, line, in FAED, vol. III, *The Prophet*, page number.

*twenty years from the time he perfectly adhered to Christ, following in the footsteps and the life of the Apostles, the apostolic man Francis, freed from the fetters of mortal life, departed happily to Christ.”<sup>4</sup>*

I grew up in the “heartland” of southwestern Minnesota, one of the richest agricultural areas of the United States. Though my family did not live on a farm (all of my friends did), we lived in a storybook small town, in a comfortably large three-bedroom house, on a huge corner lot with all sorts of hedges, trees, and flowers strategically arranged around a vast grassy lawn. Each summer my parents planted a sprawling vegetable garden that my sister (five years my elder) and I were “forced” to help weed, tend, and ultimately harvest its produce. Though I would never admit it at that time, I actually *loved* working in the garden. I was quite awestruck by the fact that you could put this hard, flat, little yellow thing in the ground, and weeks later you could find a sweet corn plant in its place! Deep down I knew my mother was right when she proclaimed, “Only God can make the garden grow!” (I didn’t admit that to her until years later either!)

Some thirty years later I had the privilege of going on a pilgrimage to Assisi and the “Franciscan Holy Land” of Umbria, the region of Assisi, Italy, where St. Francis and St. Clare lived. As we journeyed from place to place, no one could miss the striking lush verdancy of the fertile fields of sunflowers and the vineyards that covered the rolling hills. As one spirited friar remarked, “Francis sure knew how to find the best real estate!” It was no wonder that St. Francis and St. Clare too saw—as I had seen—the vestiges of an incarnate God cradling them in love and mercy in that lush nest of creation.

Today I live in a large midwestern city. Though I must admit that there are many conveniences to city life, I have a real love-hate relationship with those environs. Everything is huge, impersonal, paved over, fast paced, human built, constantly in motion, competitive—often violent. For me the “saving grace” is the clearly demarcated park system that abuts Lake Michigan. There, there is some semblance of intimacy with the web of life; people actually smile and greet one another, there are trees, grass, flowers, and open sky, the lake stretches out to the horizon, and the rhythm of the waves lapping against the sands of extensive

<sup>4</sup> *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* by Thomas of Celano (1245–1247), bk. II, chap. CLXVI, 220, in FAED, vol. II, *The Founder*, 390, emphasis in the original.

beaches sets the tone and pace of more peaceful living. There is a sense of the sacred there, quite distinct from that found in all the cavernous cathedrals that dot numerous street corners in the sprawling metropolis. Yes, St. Francis was definitely on to something!

As Franciscan scholar Ingrid J. Peterson, OSF, notes, Franciscan spirituality “is sacramental in that all created things are also seen as signs pointing to God as creator.”<sup>5</sup> Francis knew this in various ways—as we do today—by observing the beauty and splendor of the natural world and in the loving ways we touch each other’s lives. But Giovanni Francesco di Bernardone was not always so aware! In fact, as we will elaborate in chapter 4, in his youth he was a carousing spoiled brat of an up-and-coming cloth merchant, who went off to war as a knight in the Crusades hoping to gain fame and fortune! But he soon discovered that none of that met his deepest heart’s desire. It was only after Giovanni embraced a leper and did a 360-degree about-face on his life’s journey that he found what he was looking for.

What he had been trashing in his early life was the reality that it is in truly caring for people and God’s creation that there is potential to arrive where he most desired to go—to the very heart of God. The carousing and the war making, the seeking fame and fortune, his use and abuse of people and creation, only pushed him along a path directly opposite of the way to intimacy with God, people, and all creation. So it was through joining his intuition, his appreciation of the beauty of the Umbrian landscape, with God’s grace that Giovanni Francesco di Bernardone became St. Francis of Assisi.

Francis’s deepest desire was to “follow in the footprints of Jesus.” But why follow “in the footprints”? There is an intimacy to be found in such activity. In practical terms, a footprint leaves a distinctive mark of the one who made it—a human person—on some material object such as soil, sand, or wet concrete. Forensic scientists can learn a lot from studying footprints: a person’s approximate height (a foot is about 15 percent of the length of a person’s height) or weight, depending on the size and depth of the impression. Footprints also have characteristics that are unique to each person: creases, flatness, horizontal or vertical ridges, or other deformities.

<sup>5</sup> Ingrid Peterson, “Franciscan Spirituality: The Footprints of Jesus in the Classroom and the Marketplace,” in *As Leaven to the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life*, ed. Thomas M. Landy (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 291.

While Francis was no forensic scientist, he knew that footprints marked the physical presence of a person in a particular time and place. To attempt to place one's foot in the footprints of another requires careful attention to the original form, and thus one needs to learn something about the author of those impressions. Also, by following footprints, one likely would eventually meet face to face with the one who made them. For Francis, the "footprints of Jesus" symbolized the reality of the incarnation—Jesus, the Word made flesh, the One who came to dwell among us as one of us! It was that intuition that attracted Francis. Jesus is indeed the pattern and model for our life in God, and with all others *in this world*. And because Jesus became part of this material world, everything and everyone is now deified, made whole, holy, and sacramental. Just as a painting or a sculpture reveals something of the artist who created it, so too everything in the cosmos speaks to us of God.

Thus, to know Jesus and to walk in his footprints is to make contact with the human face of God. Francis found the footprints of Jesus in the tiny feet of the Babe of Bethlehem—the incarnation. He saw the profound love of Christ in the feet pierced by nails on the cross—the redemption. In the eucharistic bread and wine, Francis perceived the life of Christ, sifted, refined, and poured out for us—the one who walked the roads of Nazareth, Galilee, and Jerusalem and who desires to remain intimately present to us and within us. And, most clearly in the Sacred Scriptures, Jesus the Word inspires, instructs, consoles, and empowers us to see his footprints at every turn each day.

Following in the footprints of Jesus demands that we be attentive and attuned to the world with all of our senses, for they are our point of contact with reality. The best way we can keep in touch with the creative Word is to also remain in touch with *this* world—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, stories, symbols, concepts, encounters with the sacraments, and human rituals. In these ways humans come to recognize they are part of the created universe and to continually renew and restore their relationships with each other, God, and the entire cosmos. Christ, as the firstborn of all creation, stands at the center of all of this (Col 1:15-20).

Jesus is at the heart of history, but he is also the transcendent Christ who is divine and lives at the heart of the Trinity. And he lives as the Cosmic Christ permeating the heart of the entire cosmos. In all of these ways, footprints are left for us to see. We need only become attentive, opening all of our senses to see, learn, and follow. If we are attentive to the footprints and to the person of Jesus, we will come to know our truest possibilities and potentials.

In our globalized, terrorized, economically impoverished, and ecologically threatened world, we are often surrounded with the fallout from people treating others as so much chemistry or resources to be exploited for selfish profit and gain, and with impunity. In contrast to that, as Peterson reminds us, is to look at the world with the eyes of St. Francis and to see “the value of an object is never more important than the fact that it is a ‘vestige’ [footprint] of the divine, an object that enriches us spiritually by providing us with a contact with the presence of God.”<sup>6</sup>

For several decades, many scientists and theologians have agreed that at the root of the ecological crisis is a more profound spiritual crisis. In St. Francis’s terms, the “footprints of Christ have been covered over and forgotten.”<sup>7</sup> The sacred relationship among God, humans, otherkind, and the cosmos has given way to pillaging, plundering, raping, and otherwise exploiting our Sister, Mother Earth, and ultimately her children—especially the poor and vulnerable.

The good news is that things have not always been this way, and they need not continue to be so! As St. Bonaventure pointed out, God loved every bit of creation into life, with a unique love, and for its own sake. The purpose of creation is not to satiate human desires but rather for each element to find its own unique way to joy, peace, and fulfillment in loving, transforming union with God. Because of our distinct capacities as humans, we are to be the guardians, nurturers, and protectors of our sisters and brothers—human and otherkind.

But St. Francis also knew the value of penance. Today “following in the footprints of Jesus” also means confronting our own particular role in “covering over and forgetting” them. It is most sobering to realize that our ecological footprints, what we take for granted and consume daily, is effectively killing our sisters and brothers and the planet! Thus, I recommend that before you read further, you (1) calculate your carbon footprint at <http://coolclimate.berkeley.edu/carboncalculator>; (2) calculate your water-use footprint at <http://goblue.zerofootprint.net/?language=en>; and (3) read about your foodprint at <http://brighterplanet.com/research>.<sup>8</sup> Each of these web sites has helpful ideas for making

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>7</sup> *The Tree of the Crucified Life of Jesus*, Book Five (Excerpts), by Umberto DaCasale (1305), in FAED, vol. III, *The Prophet*, 148.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Kling and Ian Hough, “The American Carbon Foodprint: Understanding Your Food’s Impact on Climate Change,” Brighter Planet, Inc., 2010.

lifestyle changes toward living more sustainably.<sup>9</sup> Conversion of heart and habits was St. Francis's first step in following in the footprints of Jesus, and so too it must be ours. As we continue following, we will grow in our capacity to grasp how all things are revelations of God and divine actions in the natural world each day. We will come to cherish hospitality and presence in contrast to utilitarian objectification of people and other creatures.

Our deepest self-expression moves out of our spiritual center. Our vocational choices and daily actions ultimately reveal with great authority who we are in relationship with God. Indeed, our spiritual formation and status and will determine our environmental ethics and our ecojustice actions as well. Living sustainably on this earth must flow from a deep-seated conviction and confidence that God will provide for our need, but not for our greed. Such certainty can be found by following in the footprints of Jesus. Cathy Tisel Nelson composed and recorded the following song. It has become a kind of a theme song for my prayer and ecojustice activities. Cathy has given her permission for me to share it with you, and I hope you find it inspirational and helpful as you read this book.

Before I introduce the various sections of the book, something must be said about the meaning of "sustainability." The source and motivation for Christian concern for ecology and the environment is the belief that the earth is "the dwelling place of God." Early Christian communities understood the *oikumēnē* as "the whole inhabited globe." The *oikonomia tou theo* was known as "the economy of God," and it was an ancient way of speaking about the redemptive transformation of the world, brought to us through Christ incarnate. However, the 1987 United Nations–sponsored Brundtland Commission presumed that "sustainable development"<sup>10</sup> meant raising productivity, accumulation of goods, and technological innovations.<sup>11</sup> But that kind of thinking caused them to fail to address key sources of poverty—the exploitation of workers and the pillaging

<sup>9</sup> When I first worked through these calculations, I found that if everyone in the world lived as I live, it would take no less than 4.5 earths to sustain us! I have my work toward conversion before me!

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 66.

<sup>11</sup> James B. Martin-Schramm and Robert L. Stivers, *Christian Environmental Ethics: A Case Study Method* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 90, cite the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 8: the Brundtland Commission coined the term "sustainable

# In the Footprints of Jesus

Cathy Tisel Nelson

## Refrain

May we fol-low in the foot-prints of Je - sus Christ as we make our way\_\_ to You. In-ward-ly cleansed and en - light - ened, on fire with the Spir - it, may we fol-low in the foot-prints of Je - sus.\_\_\_\_\_ sus.\_\_\_\_\_ May we fol-low in the foot-prints of Je - sus.\_\_\_\_\_

## Verses

1. Feed - ing the hun - gry, shelt - 'ring the home - less,  
2. Friend to the strang - er, hope for the hope - less,  
3. Sim - ple our liv - ing, few our pos - ses - sions,  
4. With liv - ing wa - ters, You have re - freshed us;  
5. As we move for - ward in - to the fu - ture,  
1. set - ting the pris - on - er free.\_\_\_\_\_ Bring - ing Your jus - tice  
2. car - ing for all those in need.\_\_\_\_\_ Bring - ing Your jus - tice  
3. trust - ing in You for our needs.\_\_\_\_\_ May we re - mem - ber  
4. now we are filled with Your fire.\_\_\_\_\_ May we have cour - age,  
5. led by Your Spir - it, O God,\_\_\_\_\_ grant us a vis - ion,  
1. to all the earth, to all the earth, O God.\_\_\_\_\_  
2. to all the earth, to all the earth, O God.\_\_\_\_\_  
3. how we are called to serve You all our days.\_\_\_\_\_  
4. wis - dom and grace, to do Your will, O God.\_\_\_\_\_  
5. show us the way that brings us all to You.\_\_\_\_\_

of nature. Brundtland's notion of "sustainable development" is an oxymoron because its real focus was economic growth for its own sake, and the primary goal was profit making. This thinking has permeated the globalization of world markets through the present day.

By contrast, "sustainability" as it is defined in biology and ecology is "the trend of ecosystems toward equilibrium, sustained in the web of interdependencies and complementarities flourishing in ecosystems."<sup>12</sup> Genuine "sustainability" requires social and economic structures that support *social justice*—the right relationship between persons, roles, and institutions—and *ecological justice*, which is the right relationship with nature, sufficient access to resources, and the assurance of quality of life."<sup>13</sup>

A renewed vision of community is essential for interdependent sustainability.<sup>14</sup> Such a vision is found in early Christian sources, utilizing the rich meanings gleaned from the Greek root *oikos*. The habitability of the earth is the central reality that links "economy, ecology, and ecumenicity." "Economy in its Greek-root meaning is simply the ordering of the household for the sustenance of its members."<sup>15</sup> Theologian Larry Rasmussen explained the importance of this:

Economics is *eco* (habitat as the household) + *nomos* (the rules or law). Economics means knowing how things work and arranging these "home systems" (ecosystems) so that the material requirements of the household of life are met and sustained. The household is established as hospitable habitat. The basic task of any economy, then, is *the continuation of life*, though no economist has put it that way for ages. In fact, the kind of economics generating earth's present distress resulted from three decisive moves *away* from *oikos* economics . . . to consider nature as interchangeable parts . . . to generate affluence by expanding to new worlds . . . and to shift

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development" to mean development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

<sup>12</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 66.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>14</sup> See World Council of Churches, *Accelerated Climate Change: Sign of Peril, Test of Faith* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, cited in Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 144.

economic attention from the household and its community [sustainability] to the firm or corporation [profit making].<sup>16</sup>

In their 1991 statement *Renewing the Earth*, the US Catholic bishops made a similar point, defining *authentic development* this way: “It supports moderation and even austerity in the use of material resources . . . encourages a balanced view of human progress consistent with respect for nature . . . invites the development of alternative visions of the good society and the use of economic models with richer standards of well-being than material productivity alone . . . requires affluent nations to seek ways to reduce and restructure their over consumption of natural resources . . . [encourages] the proper use of both agricultural and industrial technologies, so that . . . technology benefits people and enhances the land.”<sup>17</sup>

My purpose in writing this book is to provide knowledge and motivation toward the spiritual renewal necessary to move us beyond the present environmental crises.<sup>18</sup> Here I unfold portions of the theological, spiritual, and ethical treasure trove the Christian tradition, and particularly Catholic and Franciscan traditions, has to offer for our efforts to achieve sustainable living. In part 1, I open the wonderful collection of texts that illuminate our understanding of God’s creation, first in the Hebrew Testament and then in the Christian Testament. In chapter 1, I show the importance of the relationship of the Christian doctrines of redemption and creation and their importance for how we form and shape environmental ethics and our own choices for sustainable living. Chapter 2 provides greater details about how Jesus’ life and ministry and the experiences of early Christians form even greater foundations for the linkages between the doctrines of creation and redemption. Here I give special attention to St. Bonaventure’s development of a hope-filled vision of the New Creation, and to rich new insights from scientific concepts of emergence and evolution.

In part 2, I examine the life of St. Francis and St. Clare, the founders of the Franciscan movement, as models for sustainable living. Chapter

<sup>16</sup> Rasmussen, *Earth Community*, 91–92.

<sup>17</sup> United States Catholic Conference, *Renewing the Earth*, part III, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/renewing-the-earth.cfm>, accessed December 23, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> This book is also an updating of my *Franciscan Theology of the Environment: An Introductory Reader* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 2002), now available from St. Anthony Messenger Press.

3 considers Clare's choice to "follow in the footprints of the poor Christ," her spirituality, and her *Form of Life* as a way marked by cosmic mutuality. Countering the common simplistic "birdbath images" of St Francis, chapter 4 unfolds the profound conversion that undergirds St. Francis's way of life, his concept of the kinship of creation, and its meaning for ecotheology and sustainable living today.

Part 3 gives voice to St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, the university theologian who is the most authentic interpreter of the values and vision of St. Francis in terms of systematic theology. Bonaventure's vision holds that Christ stands at the center of creation. The Seraphic Doctor's work is deeply rooted in Scripture, is focused on the Trinity, and opens the way for conversations between science and theology. Part 4 introduces John Duns Scotus and his positive view of the incarnation of Christ as the one who is "God's Masterpiece." Sin was not the motive for the incarnation. Scotus shows us the intrinsic value of each particular being in creation—a challenge to the loss of biodiversity—and his ethics point us to economics and politics that lead to justice, peace, and sustainable living.

Part 5 is most demanding in that it confronts four critical issues of our day: global warming and climate change, the right to water, the right to food, and the need to convert to the use of renewable and sustainable energy sources. Chapter 7 tackles the daunting issues of global warming. Here St. Francis exemplifies a way to face the limits of life that can free us to make the urgent, immediate, and necessary changes to heal our planet. Chapter 8 unpacks the complexities of the global water crisis. There we turn to Catholic social teaching and the spirituality of St. Francis to show us a way forward for achieving a sustainable water supply. Chapter 9 invites us to awaken to our status as earth creatures. We are sojourners and guests in God's land, and we need to care for it in sustainable ways so that present and future generations can have sufficient and nutritious food. Eating is a moral activity! Finally, in chapter 10 we examine the intersections among our own lifestyles, our use of energy, and energy policies. Again, St. Francis shows us a way of life for a hope-filled future and for sustainable living, while St. Bonaventure's virtue ethics serve as our guide.

Each chapter includes a selection from the writings of Francis, Clare, Bonaventure, or Scotus. There is an extended reflection and application on the topic at hand, followed by questions for reflection and discussion. Suggestions for action are provided, along with a prayer and recommendations for further study. It is my sincere hope that in some small

way this work will assist us in returning to sustainable ways of living as a global family in justice, peace, and integrity so that there will be no one in need. To this end, to paraphrase St. Francis, I have done in part what is mine to do; may Christ continue to teach us what is ours!<sup>19</sup>

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The Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, February 11, 2012

<sup>19</sup> See *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* by Thomas of Celano (1245–1247), bk. II, chap. CLXII, 214, in FAED, vol. II, *The Founder*, 386. The original quote reads, “I have done *what is mine*; may Christ teach you what is yours!”





## Acknowledgments

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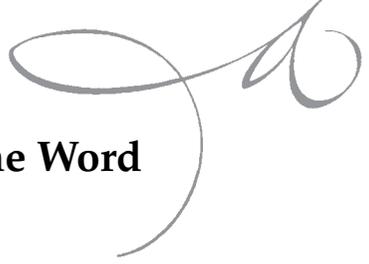
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## Part 1

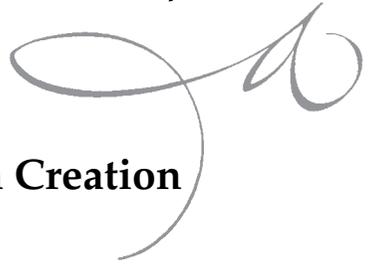
# **The Bible: Creation and the Word**





## Chapter 1

# **“In the Beginning . . .”: The Hebrew Testament on Creation and Redemption**



### **Introduction: St. Francis and St. Clare and the Scriptures**

It is said that St. Francis of Assisi had such great reverence for the Sacred Scriptures that he would pick up from the ground pieces of paper that contained any lettering on them. He reasoned that the letters on such scraps could, literally, be put together to form the texts of the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God.<sup>1</sup> A similar kind of reverence for the Bible can be seen in Clare’s *Second Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague*. Praying with the Scriptures and meditating on their message was very important for the Poor Ladies of San Damiano (the Poor Clares) as a means of following the example of Jesus, or as Clare put it, to “[hold] fast to the footprints (1 Pet 2:21) of Him to Whom you have merited to be joined as a Spouse.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis* (1228–1229), chap. XXIX, 82, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. I, *The Saint*, trans. and ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 1999), 251–52.

<sup>2</sup> Clare of Assisi, “Second Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague,” in *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*, trans. and ed. Regis J. Armstrong (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1993), 40.

One need not look far to realize the importance of Scripture in the lives of St. Francis and St. Clare.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, for Francis and Clare the sacred texts revealed Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word in whose footprints all must follow.<sup>4</sup> To follow in the footprints of Jesus meant to conform one's ways of being, thinking, and acting to the life, teachings, and example of Jesus. And so it is with this same respect that we, like St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi, begin our study of Franciscan understandings of the environment, with a focus on the Bible. We will see that the Hebrew Testament (Old Testament) and the Christian Scriptures (New Testament) are helpful for understanding in light of Christian faith the current discussions about ecology and the present threats to the world's natural environment.

Another way we know of Francis's deep regard for the Scriptures is through his *Testament*, the document he gave the first Franciscan friars in which he explained his most important teachings. Further, St. Francis regarded the Gospel itself as the very center of the Rule for the Friars and the Poor Ladies.<sup>5</sup> Clare and the Poor Ladies of Assisi joined Francis in taking up a life in pursuit of Gospel perfection.<sup>6</sup> The daily practice of the Poor Ladies included times in which they meditated together on the Scriptures. And then they engaged in the ordinary tasks of living in community and assisting the poor—practicing and integrating the insights they gained through their contemplation, the Word that had grasped their heart.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, it is rare to find something written by St. Francis or St. Clare that does not include at least a paraphrase of some portion of a biblical text. Given that Francis and Clare lived in thirteenth-century Assisi, Italy, we find that they often understood the biblical texts as a narrative or

<sup>3</sup> For works by Francis, see the three volumes of *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*. For works by Clare, see *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*.

<sup>4</sup> Francis of Assisi, "A Letter to Brother Leo" (1224–1226), in FAED, vol. I, *The Saint*, 122–23.

<sup>5</sup> See Francis of Assisi, "The Undated Writings—The Admonitions," VII, in FAED, vol. I, *The Saint*, 132. See also Francis of Assisi, "The Testament" (1226), 14–15, in FAED, vol. I, *The Saint*, 124–27. In addition, see Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady, trans. and eds., *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 4, 12, 17–18, 108n2.

<sup>6</sup> See Armstrong and Brady, trans. and eds., *Francis and Clare*, 170, 172, 178.

<sup>7</sup> See Ingrid J. Peterson, *Clare of Assisi: A Bibliographical Study* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 279, 283–84.

story of faith, in a literal<sup>8</sup> or analogical<sup>9</sup> sense, and as a means of providing authority to what they say concerning the topic at hand.<sup>10</sup> At that time, they lacked the tools developed by more recent Scripture scholars for gaining a deeper understanding of the Bible. Both Francis and Clare are "at home" with Scripture as one is comfortable with a good friend. Unfortunately, we have more of St. Francis's writings than we have of St. Clare's, so most of what we say here will be from his perspective.<sup>11</sup> However, there is plenty of evidence that Clare had a lot of influence on how Francis thought.<sup>12</sup>

Within the various works of Francis and Clare—prayers, letters, poems, the rules for the first, second, and third Franciscan orders, etc.—we find extensive use of scriptural texts that show God as the Creator of the universe and how God is revealed through the natural world.<sup>13</sup> Intuitively, Francis wove this revelation from Scripture together with his personal knowledge of Jesus the Christ Incarnate, the One who became part of the material world and through whom the world was brought into existence.

For Francis, who was very familiar with the natural beauty of the Umbrian region around Assisi, Italy, who knew much of the Bible from memory, and who had an intimate relationship with Jesus, it seemed quite clear that the Bible tells one story of God's relationship to the world.

<sup>8</sup> The literal sense of Scripture refers to a way of interpreting the biblical texts stressing the obvious common meaning of each word in light of the kind of work (poem, song, historical record, etc.) it is. *Litera* is the Latin word for "letter."

<sup>9</sup> The analogical sense of Scripture is a way of interpreting the biblical texts by finding a symbolic meaning for the words concerning human destiny or purpose (beyond the literal meaning). *Anagein* is the Greek word for "to refer."

<sup>10</sup> Thomas of Celano, *The Major Legend of St. Francis of Assisi* (1260–1263), chap. X, 2, in FAED, vol. II, *The Founder*, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellmann, and William J. Short (New York: New City Press, 2000), 613.

<sup>11</sup> For an explanation of this situation, see Margaret Carney, "Franciscan Women and the Theological Enterprise," in *The History of Franciscan Theology*, ed. Kenan B. Osborne (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 1994), 331–45, especially 333.

<sup>12</sup> See Ingrid J. Peterson, *Clare of Assisi: A Biographical Study*.

<sup>13</sup> For a small sampling of such texts, see Francis of Assisi, "The Later Admonition and Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance," 61; Francis of Assisi, "Exhortation to the Praise of God," 138; Francis of Assisi, "The Praises to Be Said at All the Hours," 161; and Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis* (1228–1229), chap. XXIX, 80–81, in FAED, vol. I, *The Saint*, 49, 138, 161–62, 250–51. See also Thomas of Celano, *The Major Legend of St. Francis* (1260–1263), chap. VIII, in FAED, vol. II, *The Founder*, 586–95.

This relationship began from the first moment of creation; it continued through the many moments when people rejected and then returned to God and through God's many promises and covenants with people. That story came to a climax in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Today theologians talk about this reality as the connection between the Christian doctrines of creation and redemption. Unfortunately, what was so obvious for St. Francis was not always so for theologians and the church, and it was nearly lost.

Where early Christians, Francis and Clare, and medieval theologians such as Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus saw the created world as a "second book of revelation" that was enhanced and explained in the Scriptures, the numerous connections to the natural world found in the Bible were grossly neglected in the telling of the story of salvation in modern times. There was a strong emphasis on the "saving of souls," and the natural world beyond humanity was seen as unimportant. Only when it seemed that scientific theories conflicted with a literal reading of the Bible (e.g., Galileo and the heliocentric universe, or Charles Darwin and his theory of biological evolution) did the church and Christian theologians deal with scientific matters. It was left to science to deal with the natural world. Some Catholic Scripture scholars developed a theory of "special revelation" and joined debates of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and attempted to defend the literal reading of the Bible against biological evolution. They claimed that God acted directly to create every new species. Another debate centered on the meaning of Genesis 1:28 concerning humans having "dominion over all living creatures."

Two important developments took place to help the church and Catholic Scripture scholars return to more authentic ways of understanding the Bible in relation to the environment, ecology, and the whole creation. In 1943 Pius XII published an encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*,<sup>14</sup> that directed biblical scholars to use ancient language studies (Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, and other languages of the original ancient biblical manuscripts) and other modes of modern biblical criticism to interpret the Scriptures. The second development was the publication of *Dei Verbum*, The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican

<sup>14</sup> An encyclical is a pastoral teaching document circulated to the whole church by the pope. See Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_30091943\\_divino-afflante-spiritu\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_30091943_divino-afflante-spiritu_en.html), accessed July 11, 2010.

Council (1965), which stressed that Sacred Scripture, taken together with the church's tradition, is the supreme rule of Catholic faith.<sup>15</sup> These developments brought new opportunities for conversations between science and religion. It quickly became evident that where science seeks to explain the workings of the universe, religion and the Bible address the meaning of the universe; it is in God that the ultimate meaning of all creatures is found. There is no conflict between religion and science. Today we have the benefit of some 850 more years (beyond the lifetimes of St. Francis and St. Clare) of Scripture scholarship to assist us in discovering the relationship between biblical wisdom and questions of our day. As we seek to uncover a Franciscan theology of the environment, we need to follow Francis and Clare and utilize Scripture as a major source.

## The Unity of the Stories of Creation and Redemption

When Christians think about the environment, ecology, or the natural world, the story of creation in Genesis usually comes to mind. But, as we will see, there are several creation accounts in the Bible, and other texts in books such as Job, Sirach, Proverbs, and Wisdom show how creation is connected to the bigger story of redemption, the major focus of the Bible. Taken together, these stories give us a rich and deep vision of the thoroughgoing relationship of God, humans, living beings, and nonliving beings in the entire universe.

Indeed, it is important to recall that the God who created is the same God who redeems. "And this God creates not only Israel, but all other peoples and the whole world in which human history is enacted."<sup>16</sup> If

<sup>15</sup> See *Dei Verbum*, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html), accessed July 11, 2010. *Dei Verbum* presents three broad principles for interpreting biblical texts: (1) the primary message of any biblical text is the meaning intended by its author(s); therefore, the language, history, and culture of the Bible must be studied (no. 12); (2) it is important to examine themes in light of how the Bible as a whole treats them; and (3) taking into account the entire tradition of the church, the interpreter should study how a particular passage was used and understood in the earlier life of the church (no. 12). These three principles of biblical interpretation affirm Roman Catholicism as an ever-evolving tradition concerned with illuminating and responding to the changing signs of the times.

<sup>16</sup> Zachary Hayes, *A Window to the Divine: A Study of Christian Creation Theology* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1997), 18.

we are to understand what the Bible has to say about environmental and ecological issues, we need to see how the biblical texts deal with the interactions between God, humans, living, and nonliving beings. Clearly, for the Hebrew Testament writers, the only divine being was God. Yet everything God created was “good and beautiful” (Gen 1; Hebrew = *tob*), capable of revealing something about the creator; was to be shared among the creatures; and was respected because it was “of God.” Second, there was no absolute separation between the spiritual and the material because “The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Ps 24:1). Humans and all creation are to serve God and follow the divine commandments. Human service to God is not enslavement but a loving covenanted relationship for the flourishing of the entire creation. Various expressions of the covenant are woven through the whole Bible, but especially in the Hebrew Testament. The Hebrew Testament also shows God as the origin of goodness and life, while evil and sin originate in history where human beings have not responded to God.<sup>17</sup>

## Creation and Redemption in Genesis 1–11

Even though today the Hebrew Testament begins with the creation stories of Genesis, the older of the two creation narratives in Genesis is the one found in Genesis 2:4b-25. Scripture scholars refer to this version as the Yahwist source, and they think it was written about 1010–930 BCE. God is the main character in this story. A human being is formed by God out of the mud of the earth, and God breathes the very breath of life (Hebrew = *rûah*) into its nostrils, making it a living person (v. 7).<sup>18</sup> This creature was needy, so God placed it in the Garden of Eden, a lush place of plenty, and directed the person to cultivate and care for it (v. 15). God also created the animals, and the animals and the humans share in the status of being “living souls” or “living creatures” (Hebrew = *nefesh chayah*).<sup>19</sup> Further, the human is asked to give the animals names and find a companion among them (v. 19). This act of naming was considered

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> See also Ps 104:30; Eccl 3:19, 21; and Gen 1:24-26.

<sup>19</sup> Jeanne Kay, “Concepts of Nature in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Franciscan Theology of the Environment: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Dawn M. Nothwehr (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 2002), 27.

an act of intimacy, of creating an orderly bond and caring relationship between the human and the other creatures.

According to Scripture scholars, the Genesis 1 account, often called the "Days of Creation," is dated about the sixth century BCE and is authored by the Priestly writer. This is an example of what Franciscan theologian Zachary Hayes calls "a physical cosmology which manifest clear parallels with the accounts of origins in other religions of the ancient world, though these elements have been shaped and reformed by the confrontation with Israel's own religious experience."<sup>20</sup> This account contains God's directives to humans to "subdue" the earth and to have "dominion over" it. In keeping with proper methods of biblical interpretation, we need to understand this text in its original setting and then see what meaning it can have for us today. The Priestly writer stressed Israel's belief that God created order out of chaos, and this story includes a day of rest for praising that God. We need to recall that this text was written when Israel was being held captive in Babylon.

The Genesis 1 story is very similar to the Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*,<sup>21</sup> but the differences are most significant.<sup>22</sup> In the *Enuma Elish*, there is a horrible battle in which the goddess Tiamat is killed as an act of vengeance by the god Marduk. Her carcass is then used by Marduk to create the world. By contrast, the God of Israel creates order out of chaos by simply speaking a word. In fact, the Spirit of God, the *rûah* of God, moves over the waters, giving the life energy to all of creation (v. 2). In Genesis, the heavenly bodies and the fertility of the natural world are simply creatures of God, whereas the Babylonians considered them sacred. In the *Enuma Elish*, humans were created from the blood of an evil god, killed by other gods, and thus became slaves of the gods. In Genesis 1:26-27, the sixth day saw the creation of humans and animals, and God called them "very good, beautiful" (Hebrew = *tob*). Humans need to remember their common creaturely status *with* the animals, as St. Francis did, and respect them accordingly.

The Hebrew Testament tells us that humans were created in God's "image and likeness" (Gen 1:26-27). According to Scripture scholar Claus

<sup>20</sup> Zachary Hayes, *A Window to the Divine*, 20–21.

<sup>21</sup> See Bernard W. Anderson, *Creation versus Chaos: The Reinterpretation of Mystical Symbolism in the Bible* (New York: Association Press, 1967). Also see Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

<sup>22</sup> Susan Power Bratton, "Christian Ecotheology and the Hebrew Scriptures," in *Franciscan Theology of the Environment: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Nothwehr, 51–52.

Westermann, this reflects language used by ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian kings, who were considered representatives of their gods or as trustees of the gods' possessions.<sup>23</sup> This understanding was a source of dignity for the exiled Jewish people, who could thus see themselves as entrusted with the privilege of representing God and as delegated to care for creation as God cares for it. But more significantly, this indicated the spiritual capacity of the humans that enables them to relate to God in a distinct way. However, humans remain creatures among others of God's creation.<sup>24</sup>

After declaring humans to be made in the image of God, the text states: "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (Gen 1:28).

In Genesis, the creation of humans is for the service of living creatures with which humans share an earthly kinship. To keep the meaning of "subdue" and "dominion" in perspective, it is helpful to recall that these stories were written during the Neolithic Age, when likely little was known about egalitarian relationships. So humans (Hebrew = *adam*) are to rule over the biota (Gen 2:19), the Leviathan over the sea (Job 40:25-32; 41:1-22), and the Behemoth over the land (Job 40:15-24). But all of those "ruling" are ultimately accountable to God, who is their Creator, the loving God of the covenant.

Scripture scholars have shown how all of the creatures are involved with different kinds of relationships with each other.<sup>25</sup> The human role of "dominion" is held in perspective by the "mocking of the human inability to understand nature beyond that which has been domesticated."<sup>26</sup> The plants and animals empathize with human joys and sorrows.<sup>27</sup> Isaiah 34-35 exemplifies how nature chastises humans, sympathizes with them, and also rejoices in their redemption. "And the streams of Edom shall

<sup>23</sup> See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974), 153.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Power Bratton, "Christian Ecotheology and the Hebrew Scriptures," 56.

<sup>25</sup> See Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967). See Gen 1:30; Ps 104:14-20; 145:16; 147:8-9; Job 38:39-41; Job 39:1-8, 28.

<sup>26</sup> See Jeanne Kay, "Concepts of Nature in the Hebrew Bible," 29. See Job 38:25-27; 39:9-12; and Eccl 11:5.

<sup>27</sup> See Joel 1:12; Amos 1:2; Jonah 3:7-7; and Isa 14:7-8.

be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch. . . . The hawk and the hedgehog shall possess it; the owl and the raven shall live in it. . . . Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses. . . . Wildcats shall meet with hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other. . . . There too the buzzards shall gather, each one with its mate" (34:9-15).

During Israel's future salvation, however, "the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing" (35:1-2). The environment deteriorates when people sin; nature is often God's tool of reward and punishment. Nature's beneficence depends on human morality. Humans' dominion over nature, then, is strictly conditioned on their moral fitness. Humans who sin bestialize the divine image and diminish their authority over nature (Gen 9:7). The full meaning of "dominion" emerges later in Genesis in the story of the Great Flood.

In Genesis 6, God grieves over the immense wickedness of humans, initiating the onslaught of an ecological disaster of worldwide proportions. Only Noah and his family were faithful and thus exempted from the Great Flood that destroyed all other humans, "together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air" (v. 7). Noah followed God's instruction to build an ark and bring "two of every kind . . . to keep them alive" (v. 20). This action exemplified the true meaning of "having dominion"—to affirm morality and to care and save the other living creatures.

After the Flood, God indicated that from this time forward, a reckoning will be required from humans and from every beast alike (Gen 9:1-4). Then God established a covenant with Noah's family, their descendants, and all living creatures (vv. 9-11) that is symbolized by God's "bow in the clouds" (v. 13). The story of Noah and the Flood illustrates that human offenses potentially threaten the rest of creation. "Dominion," enacted by a representative of God in Noahic covenant partnership, clearly ruled out anthropocentrism or the exploitation of nonhuman nature. Today, with every "bow in the clouds," we too are invited to recall this Noahic covenant that God made with the earth and all of its inhabitants.

Genesis 1:28 also includes God's command that humans "fill the earth and subdue it." The Hebrew term for "subdue" (Hebrew = *kabas*) means "to bring into bondage." However, according to biblical scholar James Barr, and in light of the use of the term throughout the Bible, "subdue"

simply means to inhabit the land that God has given as a gift, transforming it into a home where God can be worshiped.<sup>28</sup> Subduing the earth cannot be equated with a license to exploit nonhuman creation. In fact, the premeditated decimation of nature is uniquely God's prerogative, not that of humans (Ps 29:5-6, 9; Zech 11:1-3; and Hab 3:5-8). Human arrogance against nature is actually considered blasphemous against God (2 Kgs 19:23-24; Isa 9:9-11; 10:13-19; 14:24; Hab 2:17; Judg 6:3-6; Ezek 29:3-59). Humans indirectly bring about environmental destruction as an outcome of sin, so to do so directly is foolish arrogance. In the Hebrew Testament, crimes against God are also crimes against the natural landscape in which they were committed (Gen 4:10; Lev 18:25; Ezek 12:19; Hos 1:1-3). Reciprocal justice governs human-nature relationships. All moral and immoral deeds have a positive or a negative impact on the land in which they are perpetrated, and the land responds accordingly. Humans do not commit evil in isolation or without effects on the entire community. The masses suffer for the crimes of a few. This reality places a heavy weight on individuals to act responsibly and morally. "The entire Torah could be considered as a guidebook for environmental maintenance. The belief that all human offenses potentially imperil nature is the Bible's strongest statement about human domination over the environment."<sup>29</sup>

In summary, Genesis 1 confesses belief in a God who creates, bringing order out of chaos in a nonviolent manner. In this context, the commission given by God to humankind, made in God's image, is to protect the balance of life that God's ordering word has built into the earth, and to promote the continuation of all species having a place in that delicate balance.

## Creation and Redemption beyond Genesis

### *Second Isaiah*

The place that most clearly connects the themes of creation and redemption is the second part of the book of Isaiah, known as Second

<sup>28</sup> James Barr, "Man and Nature: The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament," in *Ecology and Religion in History*, ed. David and Ellen Spring (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 63-64.

<sup>29</sup> Jeanne Kay, "Concepts of Nature in the Hebrew Bible," 36.

Isaiah (chaps. 40–50). This text was composed at about the same time as Genesis 1. The context of its writing is that the author is directed by God to "speak tenderly to Jerusalem [because] her service [as an exile in Babylon] is at an end" (Isa 40:1). Here we have some reflections on the theological significance of the end of Israel's exile and the new exodus to the Promised Land. The prophet links God's redemption of Israel and God's re-creation of the earth. An important Hebrew word that shows this connection is *bara*. This word is used frequently in the creation stories of Genesis and also in Second Isaiah. It means "making full" or literally "fattening" in a way that only God can perform. "The same word is used for the original creation as for God establishing his loving kindness toward Israel."<sup>30</sup> Both actions are very personal and responsible acts of God.

God leads the Israelites through the wilderness to a new occupation of the Promised Land, a kind of redemption that is God's gift. During this new exodus, valleys are filled in and mountains leveled so that the glory of God can be revealed anew (Isa 40:4-5). The new creation is also God's gift. Echoing Genesis 1, Second Isaiah encourages a depressed and impoverished Israel to trust in God: "For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): I am the LORD, and there is no other" (45:18). The word "chaos" (Hebrew = *tohu*) is a clear reference to the origins of creation, when the earth was "a formless void" and without God's ordering (Gen 1:2). For Second Isaiah, God continues to call order out of chaos through his caring involvement with all creatures, sustaining them and their survival. God invites: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other" (Isa 45:22). Clearly, in Second Isaiah *creation and redemption are complementary* in the deepest sense of the word.

### *The Prophets: Hosea and Jeremiah*

The connection between creation and redemption is sometimes made in a negative way in the Hebrew Testament. Two examples of this are found in the preexilic writings of Hosea and Jeremiah. The first instance in Hosea recalls the Noahic covenant: "On that day I will answer, says the LORD, I will answer the heavens and they shall answer the earth; and

<sup>30</sup> Susan Power Bratton, "Christian Ecotheology and the Hebrew Scriptures," 53.

the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer" (2:21-22). Here even the animals were given commandments by God (Hebrew = *mitzvot*) in Gen 1:22 and 8:17. But later, Hosea points out, because the people sinned, violating the covenant, God has a legal suit against Israel: "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" (4:3). A century later Jeremiah proclaims the extension of the covenant to the earth: "Give them this charge for their masters: Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: This is what you shall say to your masters: It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the people and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever I please" (27:4-5). The people suffer because they have failed to honor the sacred Noahic covenant relationship, and thus the land also suffers. Jeremiah calls for a "mournful dirge" on behalf of the despoiled land and all that dwell on it: "Shall I not punish them for these things? says the LORD; and shall I not bring retribution on a nation such as this? Take up weeping and wailing for the mountains, and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness, because they are laid waste so that no one passes through, and the lowing of cattle is not heard; both the birds of the air and the animals have fled and are gone" (Jer 9:9-10). Jeremiah maintains the people have brought this ecological crisis upon themselves by their own life choices, and thus a lament is required (8:4-10:25).

Israel's infidelity and failure resulted in defeat by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (Jer 27:5-6). Yet hope remained. What God created and what has been reduced to chaos by sin, Jeremiah suggests, can be re-created. He announced a time of a new creation is coming, when Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom will collapse (27:7), ending Israel's long period of exile (25:11-12; 29:10; 28:1).

### *The Psalms*

God as the Creator and the natural world as the occasion of praise of God are common themes in the Psalms. Psalm 104, commonly known as the "Franciscan Psalm" because it closely resembles St. Francis's "Canticle of the Creatures," recalls the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2, honoring God the Creator. The psalmist responds with wonder and awe to the beauty of creation (vv. 24-34) in some detail: God's splendor in the heavens (vv. 1-4), how the chaotic waters were tamed to fertilize and feed the world (vv. 5-18), and how primordial night was transformed

into a gentle time of refreshment (vv. 19-23). Then the *rûah*, the Spirit, of God again appears: "When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground" (vv. 29-30).

These verses presuppose that God always creates in the Spirit. The Spirit is poured out on everything that exists, preserving and renewing it. In the Hebrew language, *rûah* (spirit/breath) is feminine, so the divine life in creation can be thought of not only in masculine images but also in feminine ones. Psalm 104 ends with hope: "Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD!" (v. 35).

Psalm 146 speaks most clearly of the one and the same God who is the Creator and the Redeemer of all. There is no other source of salvation (v. 3) than God the Creator, the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them (v. 6). It is this same God who "executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin" (vv.7-9). In each activity, God responds to the creatures most in need, offering them the freedom of a redeemed life.

In the Wisdom literature, we find the themes of creation and redemption united in wisdom (*Hôkma* in Hebrew and *Sophia* in Greek, both feminine nouns). Today Scripture scholars understand that "wisdom theology is creation theology." Wisdom represents the human effort to relate to creation as God has intended. The theme of redemption is closely intertwined with creation because people always struggle with the forces of chaos in their lives.

### *The Wisdom Literature*

Another important set of texts about the environment and creation is the Wisdom literature.<sup>31</sup> Wisdom literature includes the biblical books of Job, Sirach, Proverbs, and Wisdom. Today we usually think of wisdom as an accumulation of insights people create or gather through experiences

<sup>31</sup> For a good basic discussion of Wisdom literature, see John H. Hayes, *Introduction to the Bible*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), chap. 14.

over a lifetime. But the Israelites thought of wisdom as a separate creation of God, something that guided the cosmos as well as humans. The way people gained access to wisdom was through “fear of the Lord”—deep reverence and respect for God. Wisdom is the key to understanding the universe, but it is also the way of proper action and the moral life before God. According to Scripture scholar Gerhard von Rad, a characteristic of the Wisdom literature is “the determined effort to relate the phenomenon of the world, of ‘nature’ with its secrets of creation, to the saving revelation addressed to man.”<sup>32</sup> Throughout the book of Proverbs the teacher consistently links the themes of creation and redemption in profound and penetrating ways. For example, in Proverbs 3, the teacher asserts, “The LORD by wisdom founded the earth” (v. 19).

Wisdom is personified as a woman in the first nine chapters of Proverbs, with strong suggestions of divinity.<sup>33</sup> In the Greek language, Wisdom is Sophia. Sophia is she who is the giver of life (Prov 4:23). In Proverbs 8, Sophia describes her character and works: “Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth” (v. 23). Sophia presents herself as existing before the rest of creation and as the very first of God’s creative works, and not of the ordinary created order (vv. 22-26). She explains: “The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth—when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world’s first bits of soil” (vv. 27-30).

Sophia is a creature of God and also a cocreator with God. She is involved in the activity of creation as a designer and master craftswoman: “When he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always” (vv. 29-30). Sophia is the model or exemplar of God’s works. She is also the one who executes the creative activity of God—through her, creation happens, and she takes delight

<sup>32</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 449.

<sup>33</sup> See Roger N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs: The Concept of Wisdom in Proverbs 1–9* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1965). Also see Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life* (New York: Doubleday; The Anchor Bible Reference Library, 1990).

in creation. Sophia sustains the order of creation by opposing evil for the sake of justice (v. 13). Lady Wisdom, Sophia, invites her followers to listen to her and obey her directives. Those who follow them find life, but those who neglect her ways die (vv. 35-36).

## Gleanings from Hebrew Testament Texts

The overriding viewpoint of the Hebrew Testament is that of choosing life over death.<sup>34</sup> As we have indicated, to "choose life" meant to keep God's commands (Hebrew = *mitzvot*). If one fulfilled the commandments, then one would have the means to produce or find food and enough to eat; protection from the extremes of weather; freedom from life-threatening dangers; sufficient capacity for human, animal, and plant reproduction; and sufficient shelter. All of this security would be accounted for as the work of God the Creator and the spiritual force (*rûah*) within all living beings. Choosing life would be continued through the capacity to have a sufficient livelihood to pass on to future generations. Today we might well call this a life based on sustainability.

Humans share the *nefesh chayah* and the *rûah* with all animate life. Jeanne Kay explains the implications of this:

Judaism's belief in nature dependent on a single Creator God is therefore a belief in the fundamental unity of nature, rather than in its fragmentation under different powers as depicted in some forms of pantheism [worship of the objects of nature—plants, animals, rocks, rivers, etc.]. There is no textual or archaeological evidence that ancient Jews believed that God commanded humanity to deplete the environment to such an extent that its life-supporting capabilities deteriorate. In contrast, a life-sustaining environment, with sufficient rainfall and fertile soil, is considered among the most desirable of God's gifts. It is a principal reward for the demands of a Jewish life (Deut 11:14-17).<sup>35</sup>

The Hebrew Testament, including the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 and related texts, clearly shows that creation and redemption are intimately related and that there is a genuine kinship between humans and

<sup>34</sup> See Jeanne Kay, "Concepts of Nature in the Hebrew Bible," 39. Also see Deut 30:15-20.

<sup>35</sup> Jeanne Kay, "Concepts of Nature in the Hebrew Bible," 41.

all other creatures of God. Throughout salvation history, the God whose creative love overflows in creation also redeems, continuing to bring order out of the chaos caused by sin—all the work of a loving God.

Long before Ernest Haeckel first defined the science of ecology in 1866, the Bible presented humans and earth's other life forms as interconnected and interdependent, on religious grounds. Humans are distinct among creatures, but they are *also* profoundly *related* to all creatures. This is what St. Francis and St. Clare knew so well, exemplified with their lives, and passed on to us. St. Francis called all the animals "brother" or "sister," and we read in his story how even the wild animals came running to him as their friend and companion. And St. Clare taught that we must respect all the creatures—whether a person, a tree, or a paper wasp—because they all are made and loved by God.

In our next chapter, we will examine the Christian Scriptures, the New Testament, focusing on the theme of creation and the "new creation." We will see how the promises God made to the people of Israel are fulfilled in Jesus, the "Wisdom of God." Jesus' life and ministry are full of rich references to creation. We will examine how the Wisdom Woman of the Hebrew Testament and the parables, proverbs, and prayers of Jesus all play a part in the Christian understanding of the environment and ecological ethics.

### **From the Writings of St. Francis**

*Francis of Assisi, "The Admonitions VII:  
Let Good Action Follow Knowledge"*<sup>36</sup>

The apostle says, *the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.*

Those people are put to death by the letter who only wish to know the words alone, that they might be esteemed the wiser than others and be able to acquire great riches to give to their relatives and friends.

And those religious are put to death by the letter who are not willing to follow the spirit of the divine letter but, instead, wish only to know the words and to interpret them for others.

<sup>36</sup> Francis of Assisi, "The Undated Writings—The Admonitions," VII, in FAED, vol. I, *The Saint*, 132.

And those people who are brought to life by the spirit of the divine letter who do not attribute every letter they know, or wish to know, to the body, but by word and example, return them to the most high Lord God to Whom every good belongs.

## **Reflection and Application**

The "Admonitions" are a collection of the teachings of St. Francis that were given to guide Christians who were trying to live their lives according to the Good News of Jesus. In this section, St. Francis emphasized the best motivation for Christians studying the Sacred Scriptures and what our response to their messages needs to be.

He quotes St. Paul the apostle (2 Cor 3:6) and stresses that Christians should not merely be concerned with "the letter" of the Sacred Scriptures—that is, learning facts and information *about* the biblical texts or priding themselves on how many Bible passages they can memorize and recite back to prove their point in a debate or argument with relatives or friends. To use the Sacred Scriptures in those ways would be to abuse them, taking away their "spirit." The Scriptures are not intended to be instruments for boosting our egos or drawing attention to ourselves. Doing such things makes it impossible for us or anyone else to whom we might speak to hear God's voice in the texts—"The letter kills."

Instead, St. Francis cautions, we need to live out in our daily lives what we learn when we study the Scriptures. As we have seen, the Scriptures show us a God who lovingly and generously created a good and beautiful universe for us and all of our sisters and brothers. We need to read the Bible, to reflect and pray about what touches our heart as we read the sacred texts. Then, with the help of God's grace, we will be able to make the changes necessary to form our lives, "following in the footprints of Jesus." We must love and care for creation as God the Creator loves and cares for us.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. When did you first learn to regard the Bible or Sacred Scriptures differently from how you regarded other books? Compare your experience with that of St. Francis.
2. Have you ever heard a homily on the doctrine of creation? What do you remember from it? Did the preacher connect the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of redemption?
3. What kind of a relationship among humans, animals, plants, and other natural elements such as rivers, lakes, rocks, hills, or plains is given to us in the Hebrew Testament creation texts? Explain how you understand these relationships.
4. What influence might the Hebrew Testament creation texts have on how you think about “natural resources,” on what you buy, or on how you invest your money?
5. When growing up, what did you learn about the doctrine of creation, especially the phrases “have dominion” and “subdue the earth”? How did that learning affect your daily life?

## Suggestions for Action

1. Read and compare the Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 creation stories.
2. Go to your favorite outdoor place or observe your favorite plant, animal, or daytime or nighttime sky or earth element. Then write your own psalm telling its “creation story” and giving praise and thanks to God.
3. Read Psalm 104. Then sit quietly for a while and bask in God’s generosity. In gratitude, praise God for the gift of your life within such a marvelous creation.
4. Use cloth shopping bags to save trees and reduce pollution of land and waterways with plastics that endanger all kinds of wild animals who become entangled in them or mistake them for food.
5. Replace paper napkins, towels, cups, plasticware, and plates with cloth and/or with reusable or biodegradable items.

6. Buying daily coffee in paper cups generates about 22.27 pounds of waste per person per year. Use a refillable coffee mug in the office or on the go.
7. Check out the Franciscan Action Network web site and see how you can participate in caring for the earth at <http://www.franciscanaction.org>.

## Prayer

Most high, all-powerful, and good Lord,  
Thank you for the wondrous and beautiful creation you have so generously given us! And thank you for the Sacred Scriptures that tell the stories of your great love for us and for all of your creatures. We are grateful for your invitation to live together as sisters and brothers, caring for one another, just as you care for us. Give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and a voice to speak of your marvelous works! Help us to change our ways so that we might walk more closely in the footprints of Jesus. Amen.

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