

The vision of community that God presented extended  
beyond the human family to include the land itself  
and those creatures, wild and domestic,  
who shared this land with God's people

---

## BIBLICAL ROOTS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

By Richard Cartwright Austin

### THE ERA OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

WE HAVE COME TO THE END OF THE ERA dominated by Cold War, forty-three years from 1945 to 1988, during which the fear of nuclear confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union always remained at the top of the political agenda. As East-West tensions ease, we are discovering that environmental pollution now poses the greatest threat to human welfare, to natural life, and to the continuance of this planet as the only habitable place known to us in the universe. The era of Cold War is yielding to the era of Environmental Crisis.

We are already feeling the heat as the gasses from smokestacks spread a carbon dioxide shield that traps radiation from the sun, creating a "greenhouse effect." Droughts are more likely to spread across the land, while oceans may rise to flood coastal areas. Other pollutants have opened holes in the ozone layer above the South Pole. As a result, increased ultraviolet radiation may begin to kill the microscopic sea life at the base of the food chains in cold ocean waters. As ozone depletes further, genetic mutations may spread among lower forms of life, while fair-skinned humans suffer more skin cancer.

Acid and toxic rains have severely damaged the forests of Europe, and they are now affecting North American lakes and

forests from Newfoundland as far south as the Great Smokey Mountains. The tropical rain forests of the world are being cut so rapidly that they may all be gone in a generation, and with them 40 percent of all the species of life upon the earth today will perish. Earthly life has not endured such a cataclysm since the one that extinguished the dinosaurs.

We deplete the earth's resources at alarming rates. Two oil crises in the past twenty years should have taught us that we must conserve, but we do not do so. Not only does our profligacy create temptation for ambitious dictators in Iraq and elsewhere, but our wastefulness leaves us with few alternatives other than military ones. We are a nation of oil junkies, and we will fight for our fix.

Meanwhile, our chemical wastes, nuclear wastes, and garbage wander the earth looking for somebody foolish enough to take them, while those stored closer to home poison ground waters and foul streams. Highways, shopping centers, and sub-divisions cover the landscape, gradually paving over the natural life and beauty.

The population of the world grows at alarming rates, particularly in the poorest countries where people's only hope for social security is children who might take care of them when they are sick or elderly. As the food runs low in these countries, millions of desperate people stream toward the prosperous nations and wade the Rio Grande rivers of the world to find their way to us. All of these problems will come home to roost here, of course, because the United States is not only the richest country in the world, it is also the largest consumer of natural resources and the largest polluter in the world.

The environmental crisis is so complex, and it is growing so rapidly, that it will challenge every aspect of our society: our religious beliefs, our political institutions, our economic practices, and our cultural attitudes.

---

*RICHARD CARTWRIGHT AUSTIN is a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) with a special vocation in environmental theology. He lives on a Chestnut Ridge farm in southwest Virginia where he grows raspberries, peppers, and makes maple syrup using organic methods. He has a M. Div. from Union Seminary, New York, and an S.T.D. from San Francisco Theological Seminary. This paper was delivered at the Sunstone Symposium XII in Salt Lake City and is adapted from his book Hope for the Land: Nature in the Bible.<sup>1</sup>*

## THE LIBERATION OF NATURE AND THE IMAGE OF GOD

REMEMBER, if you will, that when a “doctor of the law” told Jesus, “‘Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.’” Jesus replied, “foxes have their holes, and birds their roosts; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:19-20, Revised English Bible). Here, as frequently, Jesus identified himself with the dispossessed. He warned this establishment admirer not to expect comfort in his company until things are put right in God’s kingdom. Until then, Jesus and those who traveled with him would share the lot of the homeless.

In biblical history this theme of dispossession and repossession appears primarily in relation to the “promised land.” The ancient Hebrews who remembered slavery wanted to live on the land in freedom. They dreamed of “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8, King James Version); that is, a watered land with grass and flowers where a

family could gather surplus honey from beehives and graze a small private flock of sheep or goats for meat and milk. The vision of community that God presented, however, extended beyond the human family to include the land itself and those creatures, wild and domestic, who shared this land with God’s people. The biblical vision is rooted in the knowledge of oppression and contains memories of human bondage, abused creatures, and damaged landscapes. Thus it speaks to the modern environmental crisis.

The Hebrew understanding of land is unique. In Egypt those who were to become Hebrews had been reduced to forced labor: working lands, mines, and manufactures owned by the pharaoh. Meanwhile, peasants in Canaan labored under a feudal system where ownership resided in a nearby prince and through him, perhaps, in a distant king. Oppressive landlords forced their tenants to abuse the earth in order to squeeze from it every last bushel of produce, while warlords—even in those days—scorched the earth and poisoned streams and wells in order to debilitate their enemies. However, at Sinai the Lord offered Hebrews a covenant which would help them escape from the politics of power. Priests were seen to be

exempt from feudal politics, so God lifted this new people above power politics by calling them a kingdom of priests, while the landscape they were destined to inhabit would also be called *holy*, removed from the traditional patterns of human ownership, and brought into the realm of ethical decision: “For the land belongs to me,” this God declared, “and you are only strangers and guests of mine” (Leviticus 25:23, New Jerusalem Bible).

When the Hebrews invaded Transjordan, and then Palestine, they invited oppressed peasants to rise up in the name of Yahweh, and so swelled their ranks. When they divided the liberated landscape among the tribes, and then among families within tribes, each family accepted its share not from a political authority but from God. Rights of tenancy became a sacred, religious concern, to be protected from politics and economic manipulation.

Thus the land was drawn within the circle of ethical reflection at the heart of the Hebrew covenant. Since the promised land was an

object of ethical concern, human obligations to the land and to other creatures who lived there could be prescribed. The Hebrews struggled to appreciate what it meant to serve a God who was not a tribal deity limited to a particular landscape: “The whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5, 6, New Revised Standard Version). At the same time they tried to appreciate the claims of the animals, domestic and wild, who shared the land with them, as well as the rights of the ground itself. All these were part of the covenant community.

In my writings I call the Bible’s vision a *biblical ecology*. This biblical ecology differs from the modern ecological understanding in two ways. First, it includes a sense of God’s purpose. The Bible portrays nature not as an autonomous system but as a moral one, whose health and integrity stem from an intimate relationship with God. Second, in the Bible the moral engagement between nature and humanity is critical to both parties. Nature’s vulnerability to human influence is not simply an accident of evolutionary history; rather, it has been God’s intention from the beginning, because despite the grave risks, mutual vulnerability opens potential benefits to all.



The biblical vision is rooted in the knowledge of oppression and contains memories of human bondage, abused creatures, and damaged landscapes. Thus it speaks to the modern environmental crisis.

Now that human impact upon earthly life has become so pervasive, modern society is struggling to understand the need to limit our impact so that natural systems are not destroyed. The environmental movement has encouraged nations to screen some areas, such as parks and wildernesses, from human degradation, and to curtail the pollution of basic environmental systems, such as air, rivers, oceans, and groundwaters, that touch all life. Many environmentalists assume that while humanity could *not* survive without healthy natural systems, the rest of nature could get along quite well without humanity. The environmental movement has alerted us to the need to disengage from nature and pull back, but it has difficulty developing positive visions of desirable relationships between human culture and nature. I believe that biblical ecology's most significant contribution can be a positive moral vision of human relations with nature.

Genesis, chapter 2, suggests that God formed humanity to be a caretaker for the earth, while Genesis, chapter 1, suggests a human vocation to bear "the image of God" to nature. The words *image* and *likeness* are closely associated with God's charge to establish "dominion" over life on the earth. The image was something to be seen by other creatures, warning of the divine authority behind human administration of nature. The Priestly writers were probably familiar with the practice of imperial agents to erect images of the king whose authority they bore. The Bible uses this imperial language to suggest that no creature, seeing men and women, should doubt that we bear authority from God.

It would be foolish, however, for us field representatives of God's dominion to imagine that our authority is our own. We will be secure in our position only so long as we do *God's* will. As soon as the first man and woman in Genesis received their awesome commission, God gave them field instructions. People could eat the plants, but not all of them, for the fruit of the earth must be shared with all the multitude of animals God had formed (Genesis 1:29-30). The dominion that humans were instructed to establish was God's; they received no authority to exhaust the earth's life for exclusively human ends.

Christian theology has generally followed the lead of Paul,

who affirmed that Christ, the new Adam, manifested the image of God fully, and that believers would exhibit the image as they conformed to Christ's character. When we recognize the image of God in Christ, who "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:7, RSV), it is easier to separate the core of truth from the imperial language of dominion. Jesus urged that we cease our fretful exploitation of the earth and, instead,

*notice* our surroundings:

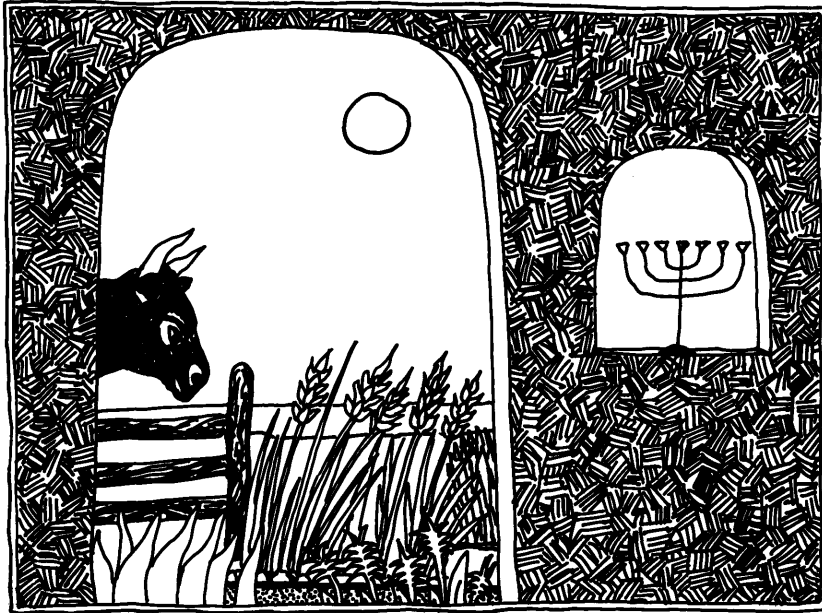
I tell you not to be anxious about food and drink to keep you alive and about clothes to cover your body. Surely life is more than food, the body more than clothes. Look at the birds in the sky. . . . Consider how the lilies grow in the fields; they do not work, they do not spin; yet, I tell you, even Solomon in all his splendor was not attired like one of them. If that is how God clothes the grass in the fields, which is

here today and tomorrow is thrown on the stove, will he not all the more clothe you? How little faith you have! . . . Set your mind on God's kingdom and his justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well. So do not be anxious. . . . (Matthew 6:25-34, REB)

If we have faith in this God, we will notice the world around us, love it, and take care of it.

#### SABBATH ETHICS

**F**AITH in the Lord requires us to abandon the exploitation of others and to cultivate moral relationships instead. The laws in the Bible are attempts to convey such moral relationships. In the Old Testament there are two distinct currents of legal interpretation flowing from the Ten Commandments. One applies the commandments with additional lists of prohibitions, and often with severe penalties; this current can be legalistic and repressive. Another current, however, develops ethical reflection from the fourth commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8, KJV). This results in positive injunctions similar to modern affirmations



ROYDEN CARD

Hebrew Sabbath laws conferred rights upon the whole covenant landscape and the various plants and creatures within it, not just upon its human citizens.

of civil rights. Indeed, Hebrew Sabbath laws reached more broadly than modern civil codes, because they conferred rights upon the whole covenant landscape and the various plants and creatures within it, not just upon its human citizens. Through their Sabbath reflection, the Hebrews discovered design in the relations between the Lord, humanity, and nature which became an inspired architecture for justice—a biblical ecology.

Directly following the Ten Commandments in the book of Exodus is the “Covenant Code,” believed to be one of the oldest collections of law from the Hebrew settlement of Canaan.<sup>2</sup> Several verses in this collection spell out what the Sabbath cycles of days and years should mean for social relationships and also for environmental relationships.

For six years you may sow your land and gather its produce; but in the seventh year you must let it lie fallow and leave it alone. Let it provide food for the poor of your people, and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You are to do likewise with your vineyard and your olive grove.

For six days you may do your work, but on the seventh day abstain from work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and your home-born slave and the alien may refresh themselves. (Exodus 23:10-12, REB)

This brief passage is remarkable for its breadth of moral concern. Sabbath law forestalled the vice most characteristic of agriculture: the temptation to turn work into perpetual drudgery. It gave rights to servants, children, and strangers, and it provided rest for domestic animals. The law provided the land itself with fallow time for renewal, and it gave the landless poor access to food. It even upheld a place for wild animals within the agricultural domain.

Sabbath law gave rights to the land itself, most particularly the right to periodic rest so it might recover itself and, for a brief time, be free to bear the fruit of its own choosing. Land could be used, but it must be not enslaved, for land was a partner within the covenant community. It had rights to its own life, and it also had the duty to support the whole community, particularly the poor and needy. Indeed, land-

owners were warned that if they neglected to give rest to the land, then God would remove them from it:

I shall scatter you among the heathen, pursue you with the drawn sword; your land will be desert and your cities heaps of rubble. Then, all the time that it lies desolate, while you are in exile among your enemies, your land shall enjoy its sabbaths to the full. All the

time of its desolation it will have the sabbath rest which it did not have when you were living there. (Leviticus 26:33-35, REB)

Next to the land itself, domestic animals were the most important agricultural resource. When Jesus taught, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27, NRSV), he generalized from an ancient provision of the Covenant Code concerning domestic animals and their owners. Exodus reads:

Should you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey straying, you must take it

back to him. Should you see the donkey of someone who hates you lying helpless under its load, however unwilling you may be to help, you must lend a hand with it. (Exodus 23:4-5, REB)

Was this an obligation to help the animal because of its covenant status, or an obligation to help even one's enemy because livestock was so vital to human welfare? I believe both of these moral concerns joined to create an imperative strong enough to transcend the anger in a personal dispute. Domestic animals certainly had covenant rights, such as their right to Sabbath rest. On my farm, I mow hay with workhorses and I know that the work animal's practice of nibbling is annoying to the farmer, but Deuteronomy gives the animal that right: “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain” (Deuteronomy 25:4, NRSV). The same book forbids yoking an ox and an ass together to the plow; such a cruel mismatch would overwork the one and frustrate them both.

No doubt Hebrew farmers tried to keep wild animals away from their standing crops, but nevertheless wild creatures held an acknowledged right to glean agricultural leavings. Other laws, too, recognized rights for wild species within cultivated



ROYDEN CARD

In Christ, redemption is ecological. The health of one relates to the health of all. We are not rescued *from* others but redeemed *for* others. Humanity and other species are created to nurture each other.

regions. Specific regulations, for example, limited the harvesting of birds. Intuitively, Hebrews came to associate protection of birds with maintenance of a productive agricultural environment. One law in Deuteronomy decreed:

When you come upon a bird's nest by the road, in a tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs in it and the mother-bird on the nest, do not take both mother and young. Let the mother bird go free, and take only the young; then you will prosper and enjoy long life. (Deuteronomy 22: 6-7, REB)

Fruit trees received special recognition and protection, since each fruit or olive tree was an important addition to the Hebrew agricultural community. A law from Leviticus required that trees were to be brought into the covenant fellowship ceremoniously, much as children or converts were. For three years after planting, any early fruit should not be eaten. Fruit from the fourth year should be removed (in explicit analogy with circumcision of the male foreskin) and offered to the Lord "in a feast of praise" (Leviticus 19:24, JB). Then, in the fifth year, the fruit from this new member of the community might be enjoyed. Fruit trees outside the covenant community, whether wild or cultivated, also merited protection. In this instance it is Deuteronomy which anticipates Jesus' commandment to love one's enemies:

If, when attacking a town, you have to besiege it for a long time before you capture it, you must not destroy its trees by taking an axe to them: eat their fruit but do not cut them down. Is the tree in the fields human that you should besiege it too? Any trees, however, which you know are not fruit trees, you may mutilate and cut down and use to build siege-works against the hostile town until it falls. (Deuteronomy 20:19-20, JB)

This commandment, ascribed to Moses, limited the impact of warfare upon nature. The "scorched earth" practices of Canaanite kings were rejected. In light of this biblical insistence that we shelter the natural world from warfare, modern "scorched earth" warfare—Sherman's march from Atlanta to the sea, or the napalm bombing of Vietnam, to say nothing of

atomic warfare—is also unjustifiable and appalling.

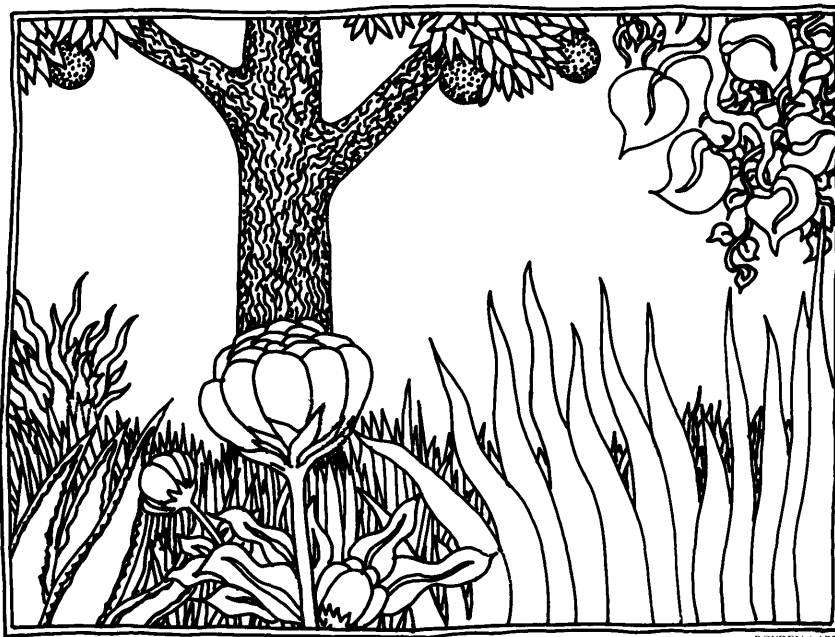
#### CREATION IS WAITING FOR CHRISTIANS

**E**VEN though the early Christian movement spread beyond the ancient holy land and lost touch with the Hebrew ethics that grew from the bond with this particular landscape, the Apostle Paul continued to teach that redemption applies to the whole earth. Jesus Christ has inaugurated a new creation within which human relationships with nature are redeemable. Paul argued that for Christians all foods are clean, including foods once prohibited by Hebrew dietary laws as well as those marketplace foods that, in the Roman world, were routinely blessed in pagan ceremonies. Christ had affirmed the integrity of all God's creations and provided the basis for wholesome relationships among all things. So Paul wrote:

Well, then, about eating food sacrificed to idols . . . even if there were things called gods, either in the sky or on earth—where there certainly seem to be "gods" and "lords" in plenty—still for us there is one God . . . from whom all things come and for whom we exist; and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come and through whom we exist. (1 Corinthians 8:4-6, JB alt.)

Once we know Christ, Paul affirmed, we can never again imagine that God is remote from this world, never again conclude that anything earthly is beyond God's redeeming power. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul explained that Christ's *passion* as the suffering servant of all was not a departure from the character of God but the clearest revelation that he was God indeed.<sup>3</sup> Christ's humility is sufficient to inspire every creature—if Christians will also give similar witness.

Let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ Jesus. He was in the form of God; yet he laid no claim to equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the form of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, sharing the human lot, he humbled himself, and was



ROYDEN CARD

These creatures were not automatons programmed to a narrow track of life. God instilled in them the breath of life, the capacity to live from within themselves. They too could be creative.

obedient, even to the point of death, death on a cross! Therefore God raised him to the heights and bestowed on him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow—in heaven, on earth, and in the depths—and every tongue acclaim, “Jesus Christ is Lord,” to the glory of God. (Philippians 2:5-11, NEB, alt.)

The letters to Colossians and to Ephesians make this cosmic understanding of Christ’s redemption explicit: “Through him God chose . . . to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven” (Colossians 1:20, NEB); “that the universe, all in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ” (Ephesians 1:10, NEB). Christ did not come to rescue a handful of believers from this world. He came to renew creation, to restore humanity and nature to full communion with God, and to bring all creatures into just and compassionate relationships with each other through the inspiration of his own humble sacrifice.

In Christ, redemption is ecological. The health of one relates to the health of all. We are not rescued *from* others but redeemed *for* others. Christians need not imagine, like some radical environmentalists do, that nature would be improved if humanity would just go away and let nature alone; though we should understand that nature is in peril until humanity repents of pollution. Nor need we conclude that our true home is in some other place without the beautiful plants and animals, birds and insects, who share this planet with us. The “world” we are asked to shun is the culture of injustice, not environmental relationships. Humanity and other species are created to nurture each other. Apart from the earth there is no salvation. Those who work for the renewal of God’s covenant and the building of Jesus’ kingdom must engage with the landed, the landless, and also the landscape. Our future, and the future of all who share this earth with us, are joined.

#### THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

**I**N conclusion I want to circle back to Genesis, chapter 1, the creation of the world—the most beautiful poem of creativity I know.

The story opens with a vision of a watery emptiness: “the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep, with a divine wind sweeping over the waters” (Genesis 1:2, NJB). The Lord had no competitor and met no resistance from the elements. God inaugurated creation decisively, using powerful words. “And God said, Let there be light; and there was light. And God saw the light, and that it was good” (1:3-4, KJV). Again and again, day by day, God spoke and it happened, God fashioned and it stood.

Very soon on the third day the newly formed earth began to express itself in response to God’s creative intention. “God said, ‘Let the earth produce vegetation’. . . the various kinds of seed-bearing plants and the fruit trees with seed inside, each corresponding to its own species. God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:11-12, NJB). In this creative relationship there was no jealousy or tension between God and the earth. Again and again, day after day, God surveyed the work and saw how good

it was. God was self-giving and creation was beautiful.

As the narrative unfolded one day following another, God felt increasing delight in how many things came to life. On the fifth day God created multitudes of birds to “fly above the earth across the vault of the heavens,” as well as fish and sea creatures to “swarm in the water” (Genesis 1:20,21 REB). God addressed them directly: God’s first commandment was a word of blessing and encouragement spoken to fish and birds. “Be fruitful and increase; fill the water of the sea; and let the birds increase on the land” (1:22, REB). This text, like others in the Bible, presumes that God could communicate with all creatures and they could answer. The relationships between God and living creatures were not mechanical and manipulative but intimate and responsive. Though humanity would later receive important rights and duties in relation to other forms of life, it was God who had the most intimate relationship with both plants and animals.

God’s delight in natural diversity shines through the stately repetitions of this story. “God made the wild animals in their own species, and cattle in theirs, and every creature that crawls along the earth in its own species. God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:25, NJB). These creatures were not automatons programmed to a narrow track of life, nor were they puppets dangling from God’s fingers. God instilled in them the breath of life, the capacity to live from within themselves, however critical their dependence upon their environment. They, too, could be creative.

This God differs from our anxious expectations. God did not fashion a spectacular display of objects to confirm the prowess of their Creator, nor a merely decorative backdrop for the human drama. This God created an earth, lively and life-giving, overflowing with diverse creatures. And at the end of the story there is that amazing grace: God rested.

God saw everything that God had made, and indeed it was very good. Evening came, and morning came, a sixth day. Thus the heaven and earth were completed with all their mighty throng. On the sixth day God completed all the work, and on the seventh day God rested from all the work. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on that day God had rested after all the work of creating. (Genesis 1:31-2:3; author adapting NEB and JB)

This God is creative. And God’s rest invites us to be creative as well. We may respond, and God is not too busy to listen, to notice us, to admire our work, to accept our offerings. ☞

#### NOTES

1. Richard Cartwright Austin has authored a four-book series, *Environmental Theology*, published by Creekside Press, Box 331, Abingdon VA 24210. In addition to *Hope for the Land: Nature in the Bible*, the series includes *Baptized Into the Wilderness: A Christian Perspective on John Muir*, *Beauty of the Lord: Awakening the Senses*, and *Environmental Theology and Personal Ethics*.

2. Martin Noth, *Exodus, A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 173-175. The name is suggested by the reference in Exodus 24:7.

3. John Gibbs observes that “only by taking ‘the form of a servant’ was Jesus ‘in the form of God.’” See John G. Gibbs, “Pauline Cosmic Christology and Ecological Crisis,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1971, 473.