

BIBLICAL MANDATE FOR ECOLOGICAL STEWARDSHIP

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Abstract

The paper entitled “Biblical Mandate for Ecological Stewardship” seeks to explore the Biblical canon that implores the protection of the natural and physical world. The Bible, as the inspired Word of God, deals primarily with the relationship between God and mankind and the way to salvation and life eternal. However, the Bible also presents tenets that entreat the protection of the natural and physical world in a holistic manner. Relationships must be seen in terms of responsibilities as well as privileges. Once responsible relationships are fulfilled, a major part of our environmental crisis will be corrected efficiently. There are many references in the Bible to the wonder and importance of the biophysical world that we today generally refer to as the ‘environment.’ These references, although written centuries ago, retain their relevance and point to the heart of many current environmental concerns. Christians

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should not negate their responsibility towards caring for the environment but should hold themselves accountable as trusted stewards of God's creation.

Key Words: Biblical mandate, intrinsic value, ecological stewardship, attitude of 'enough,' ecofriendly personality, deep faith

When you are walking alone, listen to the sermon preached to you by the flowers, the trees, the shrubs, the sky, and the whole world. Notice how they preach to you a sermon full of love, of praise of God, and how they invite you to glorify the sublimity of that sovereign Artist who has given them being -Paul of the Cross.¹

Globally, there has been increasing attention to ecological stewardship since the publication of the encyclical "Laudato Si',²" yet it has not received adequate conceptual attention for different reasons. Human beings are alienated from nature not by modern technology but by a technological way of thinking and treating the natural world as mere objects. Our seemingly compulsive need to control the natural world has driven us to the edge of disaster and alienation, for we have lost our connection towards the earth. To reconnect with the natural world the position of the caretaker is to be understood deeply. First, the paper "Biblical Mandate for Ecological Stewardship" defines stewardship and the qualities of a steward in the context of the Bible. Next, the protection, care for, or responsible use of the environment is discussed in the framework of ecological stewardship. Furthermore, it converses about the decrees or rules prescribed in the Bible to take up the role of an ecological steward. Finally, it exchanges views on the possibility of being a good ecological steward in practicality. Ultimately, the author's aim is to ensure the Biblical understanding of tenets that entreat the protection of the natural and physical world in the framework of ecological stewardship in a holistic manner.

At first glance, one might ask what an old religious document like the Bible could have to say about modern ecological issues or crises. The modern crisis consists of two characters according to the Chinese expression as stated in Al Gore's *Earth in the Balance*. "The first is a symbol for danger; the second is the symbol for opportunity. And this

¹ Paul of the Cross is the founder of the Congregation of the Passion in 1720. He was known as one of the most popular preachers of his day. Died in 1775 and was canonized in 1867. Over 2000 of his letters and several short writings have survived.

² *Laudato Si'*. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html Accessed 23 February 2024.

is our opportunity to rise to meet this crisis successfully, to see the truth of our circumstances, and to chart our own course for the better world"³ (xix). The Bible could give a solution to contemporary problems. In the Bible St. Paul, in the letter of Timothy says, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness; So that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The prophet Isaiah proclaims, "Seek and read from the book of the lord: For the mouth of the Lord has commanded, and his spirit has gathered them" (Isaiah 34:16). Therefore, the Bible is inspired by God and His spirit has gathered them. So, the biblical word is not a mere sound or breath but an aspect of the continuous and continuing power of the divine reality which goes on revealing itself to us even today. *The Earth Bible Commentary series*,⁴ edited by Norman C. Habel, provides ecological readings of Biblical texts. Thus, one who reads the Bible sincerely will be able to sense the existence of God and his goodness in the human as well as nonhuman world.

St. Francis of Assisi, though he belongs to the thirteenth century, even today he could be considered an exceptional ecological steward. According to his view, one's responsibility as steward is understood in terms of the relationships we have with God and to a great degree, the concern and care we have for God's creation and all God's creatures. Pope John Paul II on the World Day of Peace in 1990 wrote of St. Francis of Assisi as a friend of the poor who was loved by God's creatures. He says:

Saint Francis invited all of creation – animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon – to give honour and praise to the Lord. The poor man of Assisi gives us striking witness that when we are at peace with God we are better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples.⁵

To be a steward, one needs to be at peace with God, himself, others and the creation. Viewed through the lens of Scripture, the ecological

³ Gore, Al. "Foreword: The Coming Environment Decade." *Earth in the Balance*. UK: Earthscan publication, 2007, p.g. xix. https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Earth_in_the_Balance/FYfcAAA AQBAJ?hl Accessed 23 February 2024.

⁴ Norman C. Habel, *The Earth Bible Commentary series*. 2020. https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Hebrews_An_Earth_Bible_Commentary/BLDUDwAAQBAJ?hl Accessed 23 February 2024.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, "23rd World Day of Peace Message." 1 January 1990. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html Accessed 23 February 2024.

crisis is best understood as creation in crisis. The crisis we face is to do with the overuse, or even misuse of our God given resources. The biblical understanding of Stewardship is an important theme that can help in dealing with the crisis or challenges the planet earth is facing today: like, unending wars and conflict, no peace neither with God nor with all creation, global environmental destruction, threatening global climate stability etc. According to Douglas Hall, “the steward is one who has been given the responsibility for the management and service of something belonging to another, and his office presupposes a particular kind of trust on the part of the owner or master.”⁶

‘Steward’ the term in the biblical context refers to an overseer who is responsible for the goods and property of another. The position of steward is of great accountability and authority that requires care and continued supervision. Stewards should be skillful, considerate, and fruitful in their management of the master’s property. The unjust steward in the parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-13) mentioned in the gospel was one who took advantage of his position for his own selfish ends. In a larger context, all of us without any exception of positions we take or state to which we belong, are entrusted by God to be stewards.

Today, the idea of stewardship has been applied in its most original and fundamental meaning to refer to our human responsibility to care for the Earth that belongs to God the Father. God’s love is the fundamental moving force in all created things. When stewardship relates to the care for creation then it is called ecological Stewardship. The first ecological stewards were Adam and Eve. They were the first man and woman on Earth created by God. God put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to care for and nurture the land. It is known from the book of Genesis how God, Adam and Eve were in Paradise. All lived together. There is no separation, no discrimination, no fear of attack. It encapsulates the interconnectivity of a triadic relationship – with God-with humanity and with the earth itself– and it is recognised and celebrated in the Bible. Prophet Isaiah prophesied this harmony in chapter 11: verse 6: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them.” Furthermore, in the Gospel of St. Mark, Chapter 1, verses 12 and 13, the interconnection is focused.

⁶ Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: a Biblical symbol come of Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), p.g. 32. https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/The_Steward/0SFLAWAAQBAJ?hl Accessed 23 February 2024.

Jesus was in the wilderness, was friendly with wild animals in the forty days of fasting and restored the lost ecological balance when he was to start his mission.

From the beginning of the Bible to the end, it reveals ecological and environmental concerns. When we read scripture with fresh eyes, the love of God for all creation is proclaimed; the need to deal justly with humans and the rest of creation are intertwined responsibilities. In *Responsible Stewardship of God's Creation*, it is stated thus:

The Word of God starts with the glorious account of God's creation. God promised the best of created things to the people he made to be his own. The prophets looked forward to a renewed creation, the new heavens and the new earth. Jesus displayed a very positive attitude to all that was around him. Paul spoke about creation groaning for redemption, just as much as human beings groan for theirs. The final book, Revelation, concludes with a glowing description of the new heavens and the new earth, a glorious continuity of what God has already done for the world. And all this calls for an active engagement in protecting the environment, as responsible stewards of God's creation.⁷

To be an eligible ecological steward, one needs to take into account the decrees or rules prescribed in the Bible to take up this role. Firstly he/she would recognise the intrinsic value of the earth. The person connected to this natural world knows that God is his creator and also the creator of the universe and finds the goodness of God in all as in the book of Genesis; chapter 1: verse 31. "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." It is the ultimate goodness of God can create something that is good. When creation is seen in its relationship to God it has worth in itself. Bible openly declares through this verse that every living organism in this world has its own inherent worth (specialness) even without being connected to human beings. Humans must accept responsibility to ensure the sustainable future of all creation.

This is a theology of creation culminating in the theology of wonder and amusement. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola titled "The Contemplatio" or "The Contemplation to Obtain Love"⁸ is a mediation that consists of four parts. The first of these is gratitude to

⁷ Ken Gnanakan, *Responsible Stewardship of God's Creation*. Edited by Thomas K. Johnson, 2014, p.g. 17. <https://www.academia.edu/37033054/> Accessed 23 February 2024.

⁸ Marina Berzins McCoy, "Contemplation to Attain the Love of God." Loyola Press. <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com>. Accessed 23 February 2024.

God for all that God gives, the second is to see how God dwells in everyone and everything and the third is to see how God continues to labour in things, and persons preserving and sustaining. Since God loves the world and all in it unconditionally, He does not leave the world to its own design but constantly labours in the world. Our response then to God's creation must be that of awe and reverence, much like the Psalmist who is able to see and experience God's presence in the whole creation as in Psalm 8. And the fourth part is to see how God becomes present in the gifts that God gives. Here comes the realisation that we become one with God, who is "Father of all, who is above all, and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:6). Self-giving of God to His Creatures was so profound resulting in a cosmic communion and fellowship. Earth is the garden, which has the footprints of its creator in every part. It is so because the Bible proclaims that God is our father, creator and provider. We all are children of God.

Secondly, we are called to be responsible stewards to "till and keep the earth" as it's seen in the book of Genesis chapter 2, verse 15. Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si'*⁹ that "Tilling' refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while 'keeping' means caring, protecting, and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature" (LS. 67). When Genesis, chapter 1:28, 29 was interpreted to mean "to subdue and have dominion" over creation, Gen 2:15 tells us "to serve and guard it." This world does not belong to us to use for our own selfish ends. Thus, the verse "have dominion" and "subdue" is to be read together with 'stewardship', "till it and keep it" as in Gen 2:15. "Have dominion' is the exercising of kingship in the image of Christ that implies service, sacrifice, and covenantal relationship.

The next tenant is the observation of Sabbath laws. In the biblical narrative, seen in (Gen 2:2-3) God establishes the Sabbath as a day of rest at the creation of the world thus, the very order of creation entails observing rest and restricting productive human work. Later commentary in Leviticus on the Sabbath laws makes clear that the rest is for land and animals as well as for humans: God in Leviticus chapter 25:23- 24 says "...the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you

⁹ Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si': On care for our common home*. 24 May 2015. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. Accessed 23 February 2024.

must provide for the redemption of the land.” Beyond just one day’s rest in seven, Sabbath rest is intended in agricultural land one year of every seven – and after seven sevens, each 50th year is to be a jubilee year. So, the land should be left uncultivated in a Sabbath or Jubilee year, and be respected.

These prescriptions are an important part of God’s covenant with the people – they prescribe a just and fruitful land economy – and if humans obey these restrictions, they will prosper, as will the land as seen in Leviticus 26: 2-5. But if they disobey, their soil will not yield crops, nor trees will yield fruit (Lev 26:20), and if the people continue to ignore God’s commands, they will be exiled and the land will be laid waste (Lev 26:33). This is the experience of people nowadays in many places. So ecological stewards should remember and observe the Sabbath Laws, which allow man, animals and land to rest and to have the time that they need to renew themselves.

The Catechism of Catholic Church,¹⁰ while explaining the Ten Commandments, pointed out that the seventh commandment “Thou shall not steal” (Deuteronomy 5:19) brings in the need for preservation of the wealth of natural resources. The grabbing of natural resources is equalled to the crime of stealing from future generations. This commandment prohibits taking others property and goods and commands respect for the earthly goods. They must be shared equitably, in accordance with justice and charity.

If we require obeying the seventh commandment of God “Thou shall not steal” we should develop the attitude of ‘enough,’ and be happy with little. Bill Mckibben in the book *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age*¹¹ suggests that we need to bring back the concept of “enough.” The Bible proposes a model of development marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. In the book of Exodus, chapter 16: verses 1-21 we read the theme of ‘enough’ from the story of God’s gift of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness. Food in the form of manna arrived like dew on the grass every morning and was enough for the day. If people tried to gather more than enough and accumulate it, it would spoil and go to waste. So, God’s gift was

¹⁰ “Ten Commandments.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text promulgated by Pope John Paul II*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997. <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p3s2.htm#:~:text=> Accessed 23 February 2024.

¹¹ Bill Mckibben. *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age*. 2003. Reviewed by David W. Gill. <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2019/04/McKibbenB>. Accessed 23 February 2024.

wrapped up in the condition of 'enough' which helps to develop an attitude of sufficiency and sharing. This same idea is later seen in the Lord's Prayer: "give us this day our daily bread" (Lk 11:3). This implies that we need just enough bread, to sustain and enjoy this day to its full.

On the contrary, our current system of consumerism, the global market and the supermarket culture for example, make humans feel insecure and unstable unless and until we have everything. In reality, having all we need is impossible. So, when we see things in abundance in the market, we become pretentious as well as "self-centred and self-enclosed"¹² as stated in *Laudato Si'* (204). This commercial attitude really encourages not communion and sharing but competition and greed.

In this context, Jesus challenges us to love God above all and our neighbours as ourselves (Mk.12:29-31). Our love for one another and our care for the earth are intimately bound together according to Pope Francis's *Laudate Deum*¹³ in (#3). God appointed us to bear His image (Gen 1:27) and entrusted this world to our care (Gen 2:15). So, caring for God's creation (Our Common Home) is one of the most fundamental things we are called to do, to obey His commandment of Love.

In the same way, to be an eligible ecological steward, Resurrected Christ commanded every one of us to proclaim the good news to the world. In Mark; chapter 16, verse 15, the Lord asserts: "And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.'" We all are evangelists. We need to preach the gospel to every creature. It is to human beings as well as to every creature in the world. St. Paul could be seen as the model. St. Paul in the letter to Romans; chapter 10 and verse 18 says: "Their sound has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world." In Colossians 1:23, St. Paul says: "This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant." The same view is shared in the book of Isaiah 11:9: "The earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."

¹² *Laudato Si'* (#204).

¹³ Pope Francis's Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum* No 3. https://www.vatican.va/content/Francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html, Accessed 23 February 2024.

It is time to question ourselves about the need to preach the gospel to creation. Like human beings, creation is waiting for the day of redemption. St. Paul's letter to Romans chapter 8, verses 19-23 comments:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

After the sin of the first man, Adam, death, destruction, and suffering entered the world and the creation is in bondage. The creation is groaning like a woman in labour, it is in pain, agonising, waiting for the day of freedom, the day when Glory comes, waiting for the second coming of Christ to be transformed into "The New Heaven and the New Earth" (21:1) as declared in the book of Revelation. So, the good news should reach the whole world.

The preaching of the gospel to mankind as well as creatures was literally followed by many saints. Especially St. Francis of Assisi, who is also called to be Second Christ entered into the original innocence through grace after conversion, Francis made birds the first targets of his ministry and preached the gospel because he recognised them as fellow creatures and understood that all of creation had been redeemed through Christ's death and resurrection. In the same way St. Francis of Assisi preached to the Wolf of Gubbio when it began terrorising its inhabitants. He said "Come here, Brother Wolf. I command you on behalf of Christ that you do no harm to me or to anyone."¹⁴ And the Brother Wolf obediently went with him, like a lamb for meekness and all the citizens marvelled greatly.

Another Franciscan saint, St. Antony of Padua, after his rejection of preaching by a group of heretics in Rimini, inspired by Lord, he

¹⁴ *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*. "The Little Flowers of Saint Francis." Edited by Regis J. Armstrong et.al., 2001, pg 602. https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Francis_of_Assisi_The_Prophet_Early_Docu/J-geLPmduL4C?hl Accessed 23 February 2024.

preached to the fish¹⁵ the good news. And we know the incident of the donkey, ignoring its own extreme hunger, going before the Eucharist, and kneeling down to adore the Blessed Sacrament when St. Antony preached the goodness of God as stated in the book *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*.¹⁶

Despite the rigours of the contemporary world, there are people today who not only live closely with nature as responsible stewards but also have practiced interconnectedness inspired by the Bible who have been studied by the author in 2020. An outstanding individual Sr. Prasanna Devi, the first Catholic hermit nun of the Syro-Malabar tradition lived comfortably deep inside a Girnar forest, in Gujarat for forty years in the company of wild animals, birds and human beings and in complete connection with God. She shared in an interview: “Today I am eighty-six year old living in a new residence on the campus of St. Ann’s Catholic Church in Junagadh, a town in Gujarat. I miss all the plants, birds, animals, and especially the mongoose who were my companions for almost forty years. So, when you are close to God you become close to all His creation.” (Transcript¹⁷) She died on February 27, 2023 aged 89. She is a great personality who left us at a loss after she is gone.

Dr. Gigi K. Joseph, Assistant Professor of Nirmala College, Muvattupuzha, undertook a study on the life of a chimpanzee for his Ph.D. thesis and stayed in the Silent Valley in Palakkad for eight years; After completing his research, due to his love and passion for the natural world he moved to the Nilambur forest which is near the Silent Valley and lived there for ten more years. There he received wisdom which he claims that worldly knowledge didn’t give him. He said, “Nature is our teacher, the most wonderful teacher. One should have

¹⁵ “The Little Flowers of Saint Francis of Assisi, Rendered into English verse by James Rhoades. pg. 219 https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/The_Little_Flowers_of_St_Francis_of_Assi/_UwyAQAAMAAJ?hl Accessed 23 February 2024.

¹⁶ “The Little Flowers of Saint Francis pg. 215 https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/The_Little_Flowers_of_St_Francis_of_Assi/_UwyAQAAMAAJ?hl Accessed 23 February 2024.

¹⁷ Transcript of Interview with Sr. Prasanna Devi, conducted on 29 February 2020. See P J Alphonsa, “Thesis” titled *Consider the Lilies of the Field: A study of ecomysticism in select poems of St. Hadewijch, St. Louise de Montfort and St. Therese of Lisieux* submitted to the University of Madras in partial fulfilment of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in July 2020.

the time and mind to be with this teacher. If we observe nature silently, it opens up the world of knowledge.” (Transcript¹⁸)

Kochuthresia (Ethooma) is another remarkable person who lived in Pothupaara for forty-two years. She shares her experience, “I used to be surrounded by animals and they were like my guardians protecting me and taking care of me. There was full time entertainment for me and I enjoyed every moment I spent with them” (Transcript¹⁹). She is a woman who lived in the midst of cobras, elephants, tigers, monkeys, panthers, birds, etc. very happily with full contentment and joy and found those animals, birds and plants as her guardian exchanging the role of stewardship.

Conclusion

God as Creator owns the universe and everything in it. God’s ownership of the world is based on His creative actions. His ownership is cosmic as seen in the Psalms (89:11). God’s creation is in constant need of His care and concern in order to function harmoniously. From God’s perspective humans are stewards of the natural world. God appointed people as stewards of the world. The Creator is also the Sustainer of the world. God’s constant presence in the world makes room for humans to participate with Him in the administration and preservation of His creation as an ecological steward (Genesis 2:15). Cardinal Peter Turkson, the President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace asserts: “We received the earth as a garden from the hands of the Creator, let us not pass it on to those who come after us, as wilderness, a desert! ²⁰ Nature, however, does not make claims or offer reasons to justify its claims. But it is capable of receiving and returning love like the human world. Let’s be responsible ecological stewards! Let’s be bridges and bridge builders of our planet Earth.

¹⁸ Transcript of Interview with Dr. Gigi K. Joseph, conducted on 5 February 2020, see Ph.D Thesis 2020.

¹⁹ Transcript of Interview with Kochuthresia (Ethooma) conducted on 4 February 2020. see Ph.D Thesis 2020.

²⁰ See Cardinal Turkson on “Climate Change and its effects on Human Development.” <https://www.caritas.org/2015/05> Accessed 23 February 2024.