

## Ecological Notes from the Old Testament

The 1970s bid well to become the decade of ecological and environmental concern. The opening year of the decade offered ample evidence that the nation and the world are becoming obsessed with the problem that concerns all: how to preserve the earth's natural resources. The dangers of DDT, mercury, oil, nuclear radiation are being recognized by industry and government throughout the Americas, Eurasia, and Africa. The craving for pure water, clean air, and good soil is common to all the peoples of the "civilized" world. And there is evidence that the longing for rivers and lakes, forests and fields, mountains and skies that are free from man-made pollutants will intensify as the decade advances. State and local communities are resolved to resist with greater tenacity the march of industrial progress which threatens to deplete more and more of their natural beauty.<sup>1</sup>

The Sacred Scriptures, especially the Old Testament, have some significant references to ecology and environment which may be useful in arriving at solutions for our contemporary problems. Throughout the Old Testament, man is given such a position of authority over the entire natural world that one might almost be inclined to say that there is a tendency to underestimate the importance of the earth's natural resources. For example, God made man in his own image and likeness, so that he might rule the fish and the birds, the cattle and wild animals, and all the reptiles (cf Ps 8: 5-8). But men took advantage of their divine-like status and exploited their unique position. They made themselves selfish lords over the entire creature world. They set out to extract from it everything that would benefit them. God gave them light (Ps 118: 27; 36: 9). But men have so abused this gift of God that the light is all but shut out, and men are constrained to walk

through a valley that is as dark as death itself (cf Ps 23: 4). God gave men the pure sky (Ps 19: 1). But men have so saturated the atmosphere with their putrid gaseous products that the earth is practically enveloped by a vast blanket of smog. God gave men the oceans, with their great whales and other varieties of marine life (Ps 104: 25–26). But men have so exploited and polluted the seas that many varieties of sea life are in danger of becoming extinct. At creation, God filled the earth with beautiful sounds when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy (Job 38: 7). But men filled the earth with a cacophony of jets, SSTs, and industrial din and reduced it to a screeching pandemonium.<sup>2</sup>

As a sampling of what the Old Testament has to say concerning ecology, the present study will survey the Psalter, the Deuteronomic Corpus, Wisdom Literature, and some of the Prophets, with an eye on environment. Both parts of the paper will have to do with relationships, first the relationship between Yahweh and the earth, then the relationship between the people and the land. In the brief conclusion, attention will be called to the need for action in all areas of ecological concern.

#### YAHWEH AND THE EARTH, OR GOD'S GIFT TO MAN

That the universe belongs to God is a basic affirmation of the Old Testament. In a number of poetic sections, Yahweh himself makes this claim. He asks Job, for example, in the whirlwind vision, whether Job was there when Yahweh laid the foundation of the earth (Job 38: 4). In the same vision, Yahweh asks Job caustically who it was that shut in the sea with doors when it burst forth out of the womb, who it was that made clouds the garments of the sea, and who wrapped the sea with thick darkness as its swaddling band (Job 38: 8–9). In a prophetic Psalm that takes issue with sacrificial rites, Yahweh makes the blunt claim that every beast of the forest belongs to him, also the cattle on a thousand hills; He is familiar with all the birds of the air, and everything that moves out in the field belongs to him (Ps 50: 10–11).

#### THE UNIVERSE IS GOD'S

In one form of response, man acknowledges reverently that the universe is, indeed, God's own. The psalmist addresses Yahweh, and affirms that the heavens belong to him, the earth also is his, everything in the world is His, because he has founded the universe (Ps 89: 11). Both the prelude and the postlude of Psalm 8 echo the praises of Yahweh: "Oh Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is Thy name in all the earth!" (Ps 8: 1, 9). One poet acknowledges Yahweh's lordship in the brief comment that with him is found the fountain of life (Ps 36: 9).

In another type of response, men acknowledge to one another and to their fellow creatures that the earth belongs to Yahweh. Through countless generations men have been saying to one another, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein" (Ps 24: 1; 50: 12). Music lovers are fond of hearing Haydn's creation motif echo in their ears, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth His handiwork" (Ps 19: 1). In a spirit of loyalty and devotion, Deuteronomy has Moses remind his people that the heaven of heavens belongs to Yahweh their God, along with the earth and all that is in it (Deut 10: 14). In the only passage in the Joban dialogue (i.e., chs. 3–31) which uses the name Yahweh, Job urges his friends to turn to the beasts and the birds, to the plants and the fish for an acknowledgment that it is the hand of Yahweh which has given life and breath to every living thing (Job 12: 7–10). The above examples show that, for the Old Testament, it is widely assumed and generally recognized that the universe with all its resources belongs to Yahweh.

#### GOD ENTRUSTED THE CARE OF THE UNIVERSE TO MAN

What does the poet mean when he observes that the heavens belong to Yahweh, but that he has turned over the earth to the sons of men (Ps 115: 16)? A literalist might be inclined to argue that this text speaks against the space efforts of the USSR and the USA, because the heavens are Yahweh's area of control and man has no business there. But it must be noted that this psalmist shared the world view of his day—namely, that Yahweh resides in the heavens, living men inhabit the earth, and dead men find their place of residence in Sheol. The text is intended to say simply that while Yahweh resides in the heavens, the earth with its resources is his gift to men to be administered responsibly by them. Such a turning over of the earth to the sons of men is also implicit in the priestly concept of the image of God in Gen 1: 26 as well as in the truck garden ecology of the Yahwist in Gen 2: 8, 15.<sup>3</sup>

The picture of man as God's viceroy on earth has been taken up especially in a number of creation hymns in the Psalter. In his amazement that Yahweh pays any attention to man and that he cares about him at all, the author of Psalm 8 can say: "Yet Thou hast made him little less than God . . . Thou hast given him dominion over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea" (Ps 8: 4–8). In another creation tribute, the Song of the Seven Wonders, the poet praises his God for putting at man's disposal the sky, the earth, the water, the produce, the sun and moon, and the sea; above all, Yahweh has bestowed upon man the gift of

life itself (Ps 104: 1-30). In typical Gunkelian terms, the earth is like one vast farmyard, over which Farmer Yahweh presides: when Yahweh exhales, the entire creature world, including man, comes to life (Ps 104: 30); when Yahweh inhales, all creatures breathe their last and return to the dust whence they came (Ps 104: 29).

Yahweh not only turned the earth over to man, he also made, and still makes, rich provision for man's well-being on the earth. He continually visits the earth, and greatly enriches it, crowning each year with his wonderful bounty (Ps 65: 9-11). He gives directions to the skies above, and opens the doors of heaven as a blessing for man (Ps 78: 23). Like the great river at the end of time, the rivers and streams on the earth are there to gladden the people of God (Ps 46: 4). Even such a gift as sound, sustaining sleep comes from God as regularly as day and night (Ps 3: 5; 4: 8). In the light of such assurances, man should, indeed, be inclined to say, "God is in His heaven, all must be well among the sons of men on earth!"

#### MAN DESPOILED THE UNIVERSE

If, as Elihu argued, "God teaches us (men) more than the beasts of the earth, and makes us wiser than the birds of the air" (Job 35: 11), then one might be justified in affirming with the closing sentence of the last paragraph that all ought to be well with man on earth. Unfortunately, however, such optimism is unwarranted. One of the poets is quick to point out the mess that man has made of God's earth. He observes, "But man who is of the earth strikes terror in it" (Ps 10: 18). Those words summarize all that the Old Testament has to say about the ecological abuses of homo sapiens. One can find many similar references to the corruption of men whose portion in life is of the world (Ps 17: 14). The wisdom poet of Ps 14: 1 calls them impious fools who are incapable of doing any good. The many outbreaks of man-made terror on earth moved the pious poets to raise their voices in righteous lament. When the foundations of society (and these include its ecological conscience) are destroyed, what are the righteous to do (Ps 11: 3)? The righteous protest that help is needed, because the godly are gone, the faithful have disappeared (Ps 12: 1). There are cries of distress out in the streets (Ps 144: 14). In Deborah's day, terror inflicted by men was so bad on the earth that caravans had stopped functioning, travelers had taken to byways, and the peasantry had ceased (Judg 5: 6, 7). What timely tips for exposing the terror that is man in its modern form!

The reign of terror caused by human corruption was bound to have a destructive effect upon all nature. When the psalmist, for example, speaks of the wearing out of the heavens and the earth like a garment (Ps 102: 26), that may be applied, at least in part, to what earthy man has done to

the heavens and the earth. Yahweh created the "great wide teeming sea" (Ps 104: 25), but what happened when some of the corrupt terror-striking men went down to the sea in ships doing their business (Ps 107: 23)? Yahweh formed Leviathan to sport in the great wide sea or for Yahweh to play with as his beach ball (Ps 104: 26). But what happened to Leviathan and the sea monsters? Recent reports speak of a fearful decline in the whale population of the world's oceans, the results of decades of overfishing. Although the International Whaling Commission set annual quotas of whales for its twelve member nations, the established quotas are too large—and, even so, are scarcely enforced. Fortunately, our own Interior Department has prohibited the import into the United States of oil from any of the chiefly threatened species of whales. Since the United States uses a quarter of the world production of whale oil, the restriction may help to alleviate the problem, and whales may begin to increase.<sup>4</sup> Recently, something like a million gallons of fuel oil were spewed into the waters of San Francisco Bay as the result of a collision of two tankers in the area of the Golden Gate Bridge, spelling fearful disaster for marine life. During the same week, New Haven's harbor, on the east coast, was contaminated by a lesser dose of lethal diesel oil.<sup>5</sup>

There were still great stands of cedar for Yahweh's voice to shatter in Lebanon at the time of the Thunder Psalm (29: 5). But where have all the cedars gone? Destruction-dealing people had to be asked whether the trees were men, that they were being besieged (Deut 20: 19)? Ephraim and Manasseh were bidden to clear the forested hill country of Palestine and thus to deforest it (Josh 17: 15, 18). At the time of the Covenant Code, men grasping to exploit nature had to be forbidden to stew the flesh of a kid in its own mother's milk (Ex 23: 19; cf Deut 14: 21). It was also ruled that either the mother bird sitting on eggs or the baby birds that she had hatched needed to be released, so that grasping humanity might not take both mother and young (Deut 22: 6-7). By the very command of Yahweh, the invading Hebrews hamstringed the horses of the enemy at Merom, cruel and inhumane as that was (Josh 11: 6, 9). Because of human abuses, the sheep may long in vain for the green pastures and the still waters, with which the shepherd renews their lives (Ps 23: 2). At the time of the Thunder Psalm, there were still enough deer in Palestine for them to be intimidated by the thunderstorm (Ps 29: 9). But what has happened to all the panting hinds?

Terror strikes at its worst when man becomes inhumane toward man himself. Sensitive souls are still shocked that, by the command of Yahweh himself, the men, women, and children of Sihon and Og east of Jordan were destroyed at the hands of the invading Hebrews (Deut 2: 34-35; 3:

6-7). Similar examples of the practice of *hērem* occur at various points in Israel's early history. The peace-loving poet of Ps 120: 4-7 could cry out that when he favors peace, the opponents are for war; he is even constrained to compare their sharp tongues to the broom tree that burns with such intensive fire. Was man ever more alienated from his fellows than that poet who cried out in deep dejection, "I have passed out of mind like one who is dead" (Ps 31: 12), or than that most lonely of all souls in the psalter, who said, "No man cared for my soul" (Ps 142: 4)? Job charged his brethren with being as treacherous as a torrent bed, as freshets that pass away (Job 6: 15; cf Jer 15: 18). In the presence of his friends, Job also insisted that anyone who denies kindness to a friend has actually given up the fear of God (Job 6: 14). When Jael violated the basic code of desert hospitality by pinning Sisera's head to the ground within the sacred precincts of her own tent (Judg 4: 21), it is small wonder that the Deuteronomic historian would say of the times before the monarchy that "everyone did as he pleased" (Judg 17: 6). The sensitive ecologist has a question to raise even about nature's cruelty to nature. When the lion's pray for prey in Ps 104: 21, one certainly must ask whether the terror-stricken victims of the lion are not subjected to great suffering? The biological scientists may counter that only the fittest survive, but that still does not justify the suffering that is caused when nature terrorizes nature.

In the light of man's abuse of the heritage entrusted to him by God, it is understandable that Pascal describes man as a chaoslike monster, because this greatest of God's creatures cannot overcome evil within himself. Man's lordship over nature has so deteriorated that he has become little more than a ruthless tyrant. Being like God is only a small step from aspiring to be God and thus upsetting the entire creator-creature relationship between God and the earth. In his relationship to nature, man is, indeed, as powerful as God himself; but in his own microcosm, he falls far short of demeaning himself as God does.<sup>6</sup>

#### THE PEOPLE AND THE LAND, OR YAHWEH'S GIFT TO ISRAEL

Although earth and land are not distinguishable in the Hebrew word *'eres*, there is ample reason to point out the distinction between them theologically and ecologically. Even as God entrusted his earth to mankind so that man might be his caretaker, so the land of promise was Yahweh's gift to his people Israel as far back as the original promise to Abraham in Gen 12. The land plays an important role in Israel's ancient narrative sources, but it comes into full flower and prominence in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic History. It is there that the basic ecological concern for the land is to be sought. As above, we shall therefore occupy ourselves, first, with

Yahweh's gift of the land to his people, then, with his exhortation to the people not to forget him when they have settled in the land, and, finally, with his urgent exhortation to them to take care of the land which will be in their charge.

#### YAHWEH GAVE ISRAEL THE LAND OF PROMISE

In the opening chapter of Deuteronomy, Yahweh took up the ancient promise given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and bade his people to receive their inheritance. He set the land before them; they were to go in and take it: both the hill country and the Arabah, the Negeb as well as the sea coast (Deut 1: 6-8). This was the land described elsewhere in the Old Testament as extending from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south or, in its wider dimensions, the land stretching from the River Euphrates to the Wadi Arish on the Egyptian border. Poets and Prophets were fond of comparing this land to a luxurious grapevine or to a choice vineyard. The psalmist, for instance, paid tribute to Yahweh, who brought a grapevine out of Egypt, made it take deep root and fill the land of promise, its branches extending all the way to the sea and the river (Ps 80: 8-11). Isaiah included in his message an ancient love song concerning Yahweh and his vineyard. Yahweh planted his vineyard on a verdant hill, cultivated it, and cleared it of all foreign objects. He planted only choice vines in it, and built a watchtower in its midst. He even carved out a wine vat for the processing of the grapes (Is 5: 1-2).

The gift of the land was accompanied by Yahweh's promise to make ample provision for his people's well-being. Deuteronomy made much of the fact that in Egypt, the Israelites watered the ground with their feet (as one can still readily see it done on the banks of the Nile today), but in Canaan, the land of Yahweh's people was able to drink water by the rain of heaven (Deut 11: 10, 11). During historical times, the climatic conditions of Palestine did not change. Yahweh continued to give the early and the late rains, and the staple products remained the same: corn, wine, and oil (Deut 11: 14). When the land, for example, became weary, Yahweh refreshed it with rain (Ps 68: 9). Even as Yahweh had been favorable to his land in the past (Ps 85: 1), so he would continue to give what was good, and the land would yield its increase for his people (Ps 85: 12). Who, if not Yahweh, could tilt the water skins of the heavens for the benefit of the land (Job 38: 37)? Even as the sea fled, the Jordan turned back, Sinai skipped, and the rock became a water pool for Israel's benefit (Ps 114), so the seas and rivers, the mountains and the rocks would continue to respond to the God of Jacob and bring blessing to his people.

Of special ecological significance are the scattered references to winter precipitation. The psalmist rejoiced that Yahweh provided snow like wool, spread out hoarfrost like ashes, tossed out ice like morsels (Ps 147: 16, 17). In Elihu's classic "Lord of the Seasons" speech, Yahweh gave orders to the snow to drop gently to the earth; it was the breath of God whereby ice was given and whereby the wide-open waters were frozen over (Job 37: 6, 10). It should be noted in this connection that snow has always been the "poor man's fertilizer," because during and after snowfall it is possible for the nitrogen which it brings to soak into the ground slowly. On the other hand, Yahweh told Job in the whirlwind vision that he had reserved the snow and the hail for the time of trouble, for the day of battle and war (Job 38: 22-23). The ancient Song of Moses paid tribute to Yahweh because he gave his people curds and milk, the finest wheat, together with the blood of the grape (Deut 32: 14). It is significant that the only exception among the recipients of land grants were the Levitical priests; they were charged not to take possession of any portion of ground, because Yahweh himself was their inheritance (Deut 18: 1-2).

Yahweh's directive to his people to go in and take the land was underwritten by the guarantee that he would drive out the indigenous population of Canaan. Historically, Israel's Lord did break down the opposition of the Canaanites, but scholarship continues to wrestle with the question of whether there was an infiltration, an uprising from within, a gradual or a sudden take-over of the land. According to the suddenly completed conquest tradition, the land lay subdued at an early date (Josh 18: 1). Yahweh gave rest to Israel from all her enemies (Josh 23: 1). But on the basis of the differing tradition in Judges, one might ask whether it was not the seven nations who had rest from Israel. This record states specifically that the Canaanites persisted in occupying the plain of Jezreel. When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not utterly drive them out (Judg 1: 19, 21, 28-33). The full realization of the gift of the land took place somewhere between an initially successful thrust and a subsequent gradual elimination of continuing opposition until the very time of the monarchy.

#### YAHWEH EXHORTED HIS PEOPLE NOT TO FORGET HIM

Successive warnings against forgetfulness were given in the early chapters of Deuteronomy. When the people had all that they needed of food and drink in the land, they were to beware lest they forget Yahweh their God (Deut 6: 10-12). After all their physical needs had been met, after they had taken up residence in the fine homes that they had built, after their flocks and herds had increased, they were to take care lest their hearts become lifted up and they forget Yahweh their God (Deut 8: 11-14). The words of Yahweh

which his people were to lay up in their hearts, bind on their hands, and write on their doorposts—these words referred primarily to the people's obedience to all Yahweh's directives (Deut 11: 18-19). But they might also be applied to the manner in which Israel used the gifts of the land that Yahweh had bestowed upon her.

There are some examples which indicate that the people took Yahweh's warning seriously and remembered it. For instance, at the conclusion of Israel's most ancient credo (Deut 26: 5-10), the individual Israelite who had brought his gift to Yahweh was bidden to say, "And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which Thou, Oh Lord, hast given me" (Deut 26: 10). Many a pious Israelite must have spoken these words and thus indicated his remembrance of Yahweh's exhortation. Many an Israelite must also have joined in the psalmist's affirmation that he would call to mind the deeds of Yahweh, that he would remember his wonders of old, that he would meditate on all Yahweh's work and muse on his mighty deeds (Ps 77: 11-12). But the great majority did succumb to forgetfulness, as the Old Testament clearly indicates. Their response is described most poignantly in the Song of Moses. Jeshurun, who should have shown his "straightness" by remembering, rather, waxed fat and kicked because he was so filled with the abundance of honey, oil, curds, wheat, and grapes provided by Yahweh (Deut 32: 13-15). Is there a lesson to be learned here—namely, that environmental abuses are often the worst in the most prosperous countries? In one of his great outbursts on the problem of theodicy, Job saw the wicked flourishing so contentedly in their families, in their farmyards, on their feast days, that they thought they could do without God. Job summarized their attitude in the rhetorical question, "Behold, is not their prosperity in their hand" (Job 21: 16)? The psalmist too begged to be delivered from men "whose portion is of this world." He gave assent to their being filled, but his satisfaction would be found in seeing Yahweh's face (Ps 17: 14-15).

#### YAHWEH URGED HIS PEOPLE TO TAKE CARE OF THE LAND

It is again a chapter in Deuteronomy that pinpoints the basic idea. Yahweh said to his people, "Take care that the land be able to support you, when your days and your children's days are multiplied" (Deut 11: 16-21). The words "take care" call to mind Yahweh's directive to man in the garden that he should "till it and keep it" (Gen 2: 15). These words are also a reminder of the work, sweat, and hard toil which came to be associated with man's cultivation of the soil (Gen 3: 17-19). Moreover, in the Song of the Vineyard, Yahweh took great pains with his grapevine; the fact that

it yielded bad grapes instead of good grapes indicates that Israel failed to do her part in taking care of the land (Is 5: 2).

The words "take care," however, must also be understood in the light of another poet's plea that the work of our hands may be established by Yahweh's favor (Ps 90: 17). And therein lies a lesson for contemporary man and his ecological concerns. It may be difficult to take care of the land so that it may be able to support us, but we do have the Lord's promise that he will bless the efforts of our hands. The question is: Are we preserving the pleasant places into which the lines have fallen for us? Are we cherishing the goodly heritage that is ours (Ps 16: 6)? Even if many ecological foundations appear to be in the process of being destroyed (Ps 11: 3), even if those who care about preserving a good environment be few (Ps 12: 1), the few have often carried the day, even at the expense of being frowned upon and laughed at by the great mass of their contemporaries. There might even be some basis for answering the question of Ps 15: "Who shall dwell on Thy holy hill?" with such a quasi-ethical and highly ecological requirement as, "He who takes proper care of the land, he who preserves the atmosphere, the rivers, and the seas from pollution and contamination and thereby shows his devotion and obedience to Yahweh."

The words "that the land be able to support you" raise the question of pollution and related problems in the Old Testament. One of the earliest examples of pollution recorded in the biblical tradition was the action of Moses performed by divine directive when he turned the waters of the Nile into blood so that the fish died (Ex 7: 20-21). It is historically attested that the land of Egypt is unable to support its inhabitants if the waters of the Nile fail. The Mosaic disturbance of the lifeline of Egypt has its modern counterpart in the recently dedicated high dam at Assuan in Egypt. It must of course be granted that the dam eliminates the age-old phenomenon of high and low waters with which Egypt's fortunes rose and fell. But such elimination also introduced some serious ecological problems. Backed up behind the Assuan Dam are huge quantities of rich silt that used to provide nourishment for marine life not only in the lower Nile but even in the Mediterranean itself. Without the annual spill-over of such alluvial silt on their land, the farmers down river are forced to use costly and sometimes questionable chemical fertilizers. Upstream too, complications have set in. Above the dam, Lake Nasser has been infested by parasite-carrying snails that constitute a serious health threat to Egypt's population. The balance of nature is being seriously jeopardized by the dam in yet another way. With the dam causing lower freshwater levels near the sea, the briny seawater is moving more and more upstream, not only affecting marine life but also depriving the river of its irrigation potential. Granted, Egypt

may no longer experience its circle of seven fat and seven lean years (Gen 41: 25-31), but it remains to be seen whether the land of the Nile will still be the bread basket which was a haven for Palestinians ever since patriarchal days (Gen 12: 10; 42: 1-3).<sup>7</sup>

According to the biblical account, Moses never had an opportunity to contaminate the streams of the Holy Land. Could he be charged with pollution, however, when he cast the dust from the golden calf into the brook (Deut 9: 21)? The ancient inhabitants of Jericho feared that their land would be unable to support them. Complainingly, they said to Elisha, "The situation of this city is pleasant . . . but the water is polluted and the soil is unproductive" (2 Kings 2: 19). Their complaint finds its counterpart in many a community today. Job denied that he ever abused the soil, stating under oath, "If my land has cried out against me, and its furrows have wept together; if I have eaten its yield without payment . . . let thorns grow instead of wheat" (Job 31: 38-40). Job also recognized that overflowing rivers have a way of washing away the rich soil of the earth (Job 14: 19). In his effort to establish Job's guilt, friend Bildad asserted that one does not expect papyrus to grow where there is no marsh and that neither does one expect reeds to flourish if there is no water (Job 8: 11).

With the psalmist, contemporary man is recognizing more and more how the panting of the hart after the water brooks is being intensified by the rapid disappearance of clear-flowing streams (Ps 42: 1). Jeremiah may have been certain that the cold-flowing streams from the mountains would not run dry (Jer 18: 14). But he did not consider what men might do to stop such a flow. He could not yet know what Wisdom's Song in Job has to say about men mining silver, gold, iron, and copper, about their opening subterranean shafts and putting an end to darkness, about their overturning mountains by the roots and binding up streams to stop the trickle (Job 28: 1-4; 9, 11). Dams that stop the natural flow of water can hurt nature just as strip mines that efface the beauty of the countryside and superhighways that cut a standard swath through mountains and valleys (Is 40: 4) with little, if any, concern for nature's loveliness that is destroyed. Our president's ecological proposals of mid-February, 1971, recognized that man has not known the way to environmental wisdom (Job 28: 12-13) and therefore needs something like the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to arouse his ecological conscience. The president sought to put teeth into the EPA's program by giving it authority to levy fines of \$25,000 to \$50,000 a day against industries that pollute the nation's waterways.<sup>8</sup> That sounds very much like the sanctions imposed upon a recalcitrant Israel in Deut 28.

The entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament as outlined, for example, in Lev 1-7 could be subject to question on ecological grounds. A modern

environmentalist would not only think of the huge numbers of animals that needed to be slaughtered for these sacrifices but would also have reservations about the many sacrificial fires that would add seriously to the pollution of the air. On the other hand, there may be some ecological merit in the fact that Israel was bidden to pour gazelle's blood on the ground like water (Deut 12: 15-16; 15: 23). The Old Testament recognized that blood is life, and the Hebrews had ritual reasons for disposing of it. But today it is being recognized more and more that blood meal qualifies as a contributor to the soil. As a good fertilizer, it puts new life into the earth. Job did not want the earth to cover his blood, because he felt the blood would testify to his innocence (Job 16: 18); but may we not acknowledge today that covering blood with earth may be a direct benefit to the earth?

Like blood, excrement is a long-established medium for making the land able to support its population. Sanitation may not have been the only reason for the regulation in Deut 23: 13, "When you squat outside, you shall scrape a hole with it [a trowel] and then turn and cover your excrement" (NEB). The ground also needed such fertilization. It appears that more modern plumbing facilities may have been known to ancient Moab. While the servants of King Eglon of Moab were waiting for him, they thought he was relieving himself in the cool of the closet (Judg 3: 24 NEB). In our cities, a few sewage disposal plants are doing a creditable job today of treating human excrement before it is reused as fertilizer. But far more remains to be done. Anyone who has worked on an archeological mound in Palestine will recall the agony and distress that are caused when untreated human excrement is used for fertilization or simply deposited on the side of the mound. The multiplicity of germ-carrying flies and the frequent bouts with dysentery caused by contaminated food and/or water have brought no end of discomfort to workers and travelers in the Near East. Finally, it should not be forgotten that one psalmist even wished that the corpses of his enemies would become fertilizer for the earth because of their aggressive behavior (Ps 83: 10).

Yahweh's directive in Deut 11: 21 calls for care of the land "when your days and your children's days are multiplied." That involves not only greater longevity for the Israelites but also an increase in their population. It also raises the question of the relationship of population control and limited parenthood to matters of environmental concern today. Our conservationists are telling us that more fertile soil and better water distribution are only part of the solution of our ecological problems. The other part must be a sharp reduction in the rate of growth of the world's population. In the past, however, such population control has run into considerable opposition from churches which based their objections on certain texts

of Scripture. Ecclesiastical opponents of planned parenthood have pointed to the statement in Ps 127: 3 that "sons are an heritage of the Lord," to the divine directive in Gen 1: 28 "to be fruitful and multiply," and to the death penalty for Onan because "he spilled the semen on the ground," Gen 38: 9-10, to show that manipulation of the birth process is contrary to the Scriptures. It is therefore to be welcomed that recently the voices of the church, with some exceptions, have been less vehement in their opposition. It is being recognized more and more that the Scriptures simply do not have anything to say about limiting the number of births in the human race.

What is to be done to stop the despoiling of God's good earth and to make sure that proper care will be taken of its resources? The federal government's program, as outlined by the president in February, 1971, is certainly a major step in the right direction. Special taxes are to be sought on such pollutants as coal smoke and the exhaust fumes from leaded gasoline. Federal outlays running into ten figures are deemed necessary to bring a halt to water pollution by municipal waste-processing plants. A national policy for the most effective use of our country's land resources is being established, but it will need to be implemented by effective action on the part of individual states. Pesticides will be more rigidly controlled than ever before. A great number of bills involving ecological sins have been submitted to the congress for action. So there are hopes that our goodly heritage may yet be preserved.<sup>9</sup>

But other nations must also become involved in similar programs, as many of them are. And, above all, individual action is also called for. That is what the above tips in biblical ecology are intended to achieve. It will therefore be well if these directives drop down upon contemporary humanity as the gentle rain falls upon the tender grass (Deut 32: 2). If a man has no good apart from God, if he keeps the Lord always before him, then he will want to act responsibly to preserve the good earth that God has entrusted to him (Ps 16: 2, 8). He will get busy preserving the earth's rivers, lest the Lord turn them into deserts because of man's misuse of them (Ps 107: 33-34). Although his portion in life may not be of this world, it is up to him while he is in it to help preserve that world, so that the next generation may have a goodly heritage in it (Ps 17: 14; 16: 6). He still has time to look after the vineyard that has been entrusted to him. If he does not, he will be responsible for its being trampled down and made a wasteland (Is 5: 5-6).

Moreover, the Lord will summon him as he once summoned Job: "I will question you, and you declare to me!" (Job 38: 3; 40: 7). "What have you done with the Garden that I turned over to you?" (Gen 3: 13). "I gave you a good earth! What have you made of it? I brought order out of chaos for you! Why have you brought the good earth back to the brink

of chaos? I gave you the birds and the fish, the cedars and the lilies! But where has all of nature gone? I made you my stewards, I entrusted all of creation to you! You exploited my property, you used up the rich resources, you wasted all that I gave you! Give an account of your stewardship!" (Lk 16: 2).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Time Atlantic Edition* (Amsterdam, Netherlands) 97: 1 (Jan. 4, 1971) 34-35.

<sup>2</sup> May, Edward C. *That Thy Saving Health May Be Known among All Nations*. Chicago, Wheatridge Foundation, 1967, pp. 13-15.

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed treatment of this theme, see the author's article "Man, the Steward of Creation. The Biblical Concept of the Image of God," *St. Louis University Magazine* 43: 1 (Spring, 1970) 43-48.

<sup>4</sup> *Newsweek Atlantic Edition* (London) 77: 4 (Jan 25, 1971), 54-55.

<sup>5</sup> *Newsweek*, 76: 5 (Feb. 1, 1971) 40.

<sup>6</sup> Terrien, Samuel. *The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today*. Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1952, pp. 48-49.

<sup>7</sup> *Time* 97: 4 (Jan. 25, 1971) 27. *Newsweek* 72: 4 (Jan. 25, 1971) 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> *Time* 97: 8 (Feb. 22, 1971) 48.

<sup>9</sup> *Newsweek* 72: 8 (Feb. 22, 1971) 40.