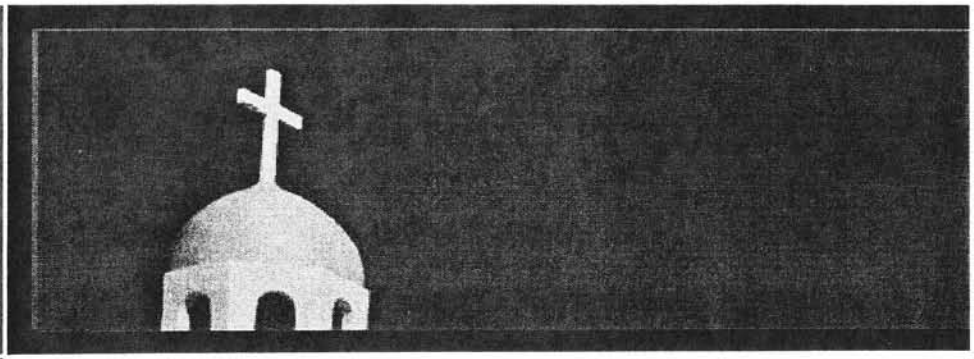

Christianity Essay

Reverence for Life and Environmental Ethics In Biblical Law and Covenant

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The compassion of man is for his neighbor,
but the compassion of the Lord is for all living beings.
Sir 18:13

Introduction

The Bible is generally recognized as the foundation and point of departure for later Jewish and Christian religious and moral understandings. Both conservative and liberal schools within these traditions have tended to assume that biblical religion has to do only with humankind.[2] Much of Western secular philosophy likewise has been preoccupied exclusively with the human situation.[3] Many theologians and ethicists have traced attitudes toward the environment back to biblical sources. Several excellent studies have emerged from this scholarship.[4] None, however, have thus far focused their analysis on biblical laws and covenants.

Biblical laws are thought to refer solely to Israel's relationship with God (YHWH/Yahweh)[5] and the structuring of relationships within the Israelite community. The term "covenant" generally refers to those reported occasions in biblical times when God designated Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants, as God's[6] people and laid upon them certain obligations, typically in the form of laws. Yet a great many biblical laws refer to treatment of animals, the land, trees, and vegetation. Two major biblical covenants embrace not only the people of Israel, but other people and living creatures.

This article examines covenants and biblical laws regarding human relations with the earth and its various life-forms. Biblical texts include differing, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives and understandings on these issues. Yet biblical laws and covenants show much greater concern for the well-being of "the environment" and of all living things than either proponents or critics of Judaism or Christianity have generally recognized. Many other biblical texts are relevant to the subject of this article; some of these are noted here as background texts.[7]

The results of this study are to set out thematically, beginning with the primordial

commandments to early humankind in the first chapters of Genesis (Part I). This section is followed by an account of the story of the Ark and the Flood, and the subsequent remarkable covenant between God and "every living creature" articulated in Genesis chapter nine (Part II). After this is a brief introduction to the major biblical law codes (Part III). Part IV reviews biblical laws relating to animal sacrifices. Laws that specifically indicate concern for humane treatment of animals are considered in Part V. Part VI examines certain laws distinguishing and affirming the significance of various animal species. Part VII considers the "land ethic" implicit in several biblical laws. Part VIII concerns laws relating to trees and other vegetation. Finally, Part IX focuses on the prophet Hosea's promise that in the coming or messianic age God will establish a new covenant with all living creatures.

Part I
The Primordial Commandments to "Be Fruitful and Multiply"; To "Fill and Subdue the Earth"; to have "Dominion" over other Creatures; and to Refrain from Eating their "Life"

Most biblical laws found in the books of Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy are said to have been mediated by Moses to the Israelites during their sojourn in the Sinai peninsula. Several other laws, commands, or instructions however, appear in the book of Genesis, particularly in the first nine chapters. These laws, commands, and instructions were meant to guide and direct the behavior of all animate beings (human and nonhuman).

A. On Being Fruitful, Multiplying, Filling and Subduing the Earth, and Having Dominion

Near the end of the "P" or Priestly[8] creation story (Gen 1:1–2:4a), the first man and woman were "blessed" by God and ordered (or authorized) to "[b]e fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it," and to have "dominion" over other living creatures (Gen 1:26–28).[9] In recent years, many morally serious commentators have suggested that Judaism and Christianity are to be blamed for the contemporary environmental crisis because religious and nonreligious people throughout the world in the ensuing centuries have allowed themselves to be misguided by these and other biblical mandates.[10] This kind of complaint fails to take seriously the biblical context in which the primordial pair were so instructed.[11] According to Gen 1:26–28, only the aboriginal man and woman were authorized to subdue the earth and have dominion. Moreover, everything in Genesis 1 preceded the time of the great flood (Genesis 6–9), after which the whole structure of relations among humans, other creatures, and God was altered radically. It is quite possible that these commands were understood to have applied only to conditions during that antediluvian era. Curiously, both critics and proponents of biblical perspectives sometimes seem unaware that the Bible continues beyond Gen 1:28, and has considerably more to say about environmental issues.[12]

A great deal of scholarly attention has been devoted to interpreting Gen 1:26–28. These verses appear to have instructed the first human couple to "subdue" the earth and "have dominion over" other creatures. Some interpretations emphasize human stewardship or responsibility for tending the garden and caring for the well-being of other creatures; others read these verses as legitimating exploitation of the earth's resources and other life-forms for human benefit.[13] However one interprets these texts, many other biblical laws call on humans to respect the earth and care positively for the well-being of other creatures. Major biblical covenants leave no doubt that God was understood to be concerned with the well-being of all life-forms.[14]

The Genesis story relates that before the flood, humanity had already had multiplied (Gen 6:1); and "filled [the earth] with violence" (Gen 6:11).[15] Perhaps the narrator understood that such violence derived, at least in part, from humans abusing their authority to subdue and dominate the created order. As a result of the flood, the human population was reduced to a small group consisting of Noah and his immediate family. After the flood, God instructed this inchoate human community to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen 9:1, 7). It is important to note that this passage does not provide instructions for the subduing of the earth or for human extension of dominion over other creatures. What is unclear is whether or not the P tradition understood that the ancient commands to "subdue" and to have "dominion" were meant to apply in the era following the flood.[16] Moreover, numerous biblical texts recognize that in postdiluvian times, humankind's domination over other creatures was qualified or limited.[17]

Furthermore, biblical tradition typically maintains that it is God who has dominion over both history and all creation.[18] As the Genesis narrative stands, humans only had authority to subdue the earth and hold dominion over other living things during the primordial period before the flood.

After the flood, Noah and his sons were again commanded to be "fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen 9:1, 7), but this time the "commandment" was addressed Noah and his family in the context of the situation immediately after a flood that had decimated all other life on earth. The commandment was intended to reestabilish populations of human and nonhuman life on earth. It was not presented as an ordinance or prescription binding upon all humanity in later eras. Nor is it repeated, or even alluded to, in later biblical traditions or periods. According to Gen 9:19, the whole earth had already been "peopled" by Noah's descendants, at least by the time the story was written. It can be inferred that the early Genesis narrators understood that, so far as human populations were concerned, the command to be fruitful and multiply given to Noah and his sons had been fulfilled as early as the era described in Gen 10:1–32, which reports that Noah's sons' families had "spread abroad on the earth after the flood."

Humans were not the only beings instructed to "be fruitful and multiply" in primordial times. All kinds of sea creatures and birds had been so commanded the "day" they were created (Gen 1:20–22). Sea creatures were not again ordered to "be fruitful and multiply" after the flood. The flood, of course, would not have affected sea species.[19] But after the flood, as the story is told, God declared that all creatures of the land and air—"all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth"—were to "breed abundantly" and "be fruitful and multiply upon the earth" (Gen 8:17). Implicitly stated, all these postdiluvian families of air-breathing creatures were intended to enjoy life and space in the world, and perpetuate their respective species—so long as the earth endured.[20] None of these texts calls upon humans or other species to keep on being fruitful and multiplying up to the brink of ecological catastrophe, whether in the form of Malthusian over-crowding, or population collapse. From the standpoint of the biblical writers who set down these "commandments," they had already been fulfilled. By the the time of the Psalmist, all creatures had been fruitful and multiplied.[21]

B. After Vegetarianism: Respecting the Life of Other Creatures

Before the flood, humans, birds, and other land creatures had been vegetarians (Gen 1:29–30). After the flood, however, the era of human vegetarianism ended. The initial harmony between humans and other creatures obtained in the Garden of Eden and on board the ark, came to an end. Now other creatures—the beasts of the earth, birds of the air, creeping things on the ground, and fish of the sea—had reason to fear and dread humankind (Gen 9:1–3). Some humans would become hunters[22] and fishers.[23]

Nevertheless, human beings were to respect the "life" of "every living thing" that they killed for food. The "life" of each creature was thought to be contained in or identified with its blood (Gen 9:4). Humans were permitted to eat the flesh of other creatures but were not permitted to consume their blood (Gen 9:3–4). The context suggests that this prohibition was meant to apply to fish as well as to other life-forms. This limitation expresses a kind of reverence for life.[24] Other creatures might be killed and eaten as food, but their "life" must not be destroyed.[25] It may have been understood that an animal's life/blood would be preserved by being returned to the ground. Similar provisions appear in later Israelite or Jewish laws governing the slaughter of animals for food.[26] Unlike these later laws regarding the guidance of Israel or the Jewish people, the Gen 9:4 prohibition against eating flesh with its life or blood was intended for all the descendants of Noah, that is, all humankind, whatever their nationality.[27] This understanding may have been in the minds of those early Jewish Christian leaders who agreed that gentile converts to Christianity were not to eat blood or the meat of animals that had been strangled.[28]

Part II
Noah, the Ark, and the Animals: The P Covenant "with every living creature"

The story of Noah and the Ark, as such, is neither law nor covenant. It is the context for, and is closely interwoven with, the account of God's subsequent covenant with all living beings and their progeny. It also provides significant insight into the biblical understanding and affirmation of the value of all other life-forms.

A. The Original Endangered Species Act: Noah, the Ark, and the Animals

Before the great flood, according to P tradition, God instructed Noah to build a large ship[29] and bring on board: "[o]f the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every sort . . . [in order] to keep them alive."[30] This was to be done so that all these species might be spared, and later emerge from the ark in order "that they might breed abundantly upon the earth, and be fruitful and multiply upon the earth" (Gen 8:17).[31] In effect, Noah's ark project was undertaken in order to preserve biological diversity.[32]

After the flood, Noah offers God sacrifices "of every clean animal and of every clean bird" (Gen 8:20). In the earlier "J" account,[33] God instructed Noah to take seven pairs of clean animals and seven pairs of birds "to keep their kind alive upon the face of the earth" in the era that would follow the flood (Gen 7:1–3). Thus, these species would not be threatened with extinction when Noah later sacrificed some of each.

God then declares that God will never again curse the ground or destroy every living creature because of humanity (Gen 8:21). Here the J tradition is delivered in the form of a promise that parallels the P covenant that follows. This J promise (or covenant) is unqualified: God will never again destroy every living creature, and so long as earth remains, the cycles of nature will continue (Gen 8:22).[34] The P narrative that follows in Genesis 9 then reports God's resolution to never again to destroy "all flesh" or the earth by flood waters (Gen 9:11, 15).

B. Gen 9:8–17: The P Covenant with Every Living Creature of All Flesh

In this context, the P tradition refers five times to the covenant God made with all creatures that had been with Noah on the ark.[35] These creatures included all known life-forms (other than sea creatures, which would not have needed the ark in order to survive the great flood).[36] This was the first and most explicitly inclusive of all the biblical covenants. It was first in the sense that in the completed biblical narrative, it comes before all accounts of covenants made with Abraham and his descendants, and it was the most inclusive account because of its extension to all living beings.[37]

The terms of these several references to this covenant leave no doubt as to its inclusiveness. It was made "with every living creature . . . the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth . . . as many as came out of the ark" (Gen 9:9–10). According to Gen 9:12, this covenant is between God, Noah, Noah's sons, "and every living creature . . . for all future generations." In Gen 9:15, God speaks of a "covenant which is between me [God] and you and every living creature of all flesh," while Gen 9:16 refers to "the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth."[38] Finally in Gen 9:17, God again points to "the covenant which I have established between me and all flesh that is upon the earth."

These repetitions of this covenant and its terms were clearly intended to emphasize its inclusion not only of humans, but also of "every living creature of all flesh."[39] Significantly, in these formulations, the covenant is said to be made by God with Noah and every living creature. The importance of each individual living creature is thereby emphasized.[40] This covenant implies that all life-forms were meant to have their places or spaces upon the earth.[41] The time frame was not limited to the period immediately after the flood; instead, it was to continue in effect "for all future generations."

It is striking that in each of the five formulations, the covenantal language is unconditional. This covenant did not call on humans or other creatures to do anything in particular. Instead, humans and other creatures were merely expected to continue in existence, from generation to generation, as the kinds of beings they had been created to be. According to the P creation narrative God had pronounced the creation to be "good," indeed, "very good" (Gen 1:20–31).[42] The clear implication of this covenant is that all life-forms and living beings were valued by God and that human participants in the covenant should therefore affirm their value as well. Thus this covenant could be seen as the foundation for later biblical laws mandating humans' concern for animal well-being.

Clearly this was not an anthropocentric[43] covenant, rather it was made with and for the benefit of all kinds of living creatures. It does not suggest any warrant for humans to exploit or destroy other species.[44] It was a long-term covenant sealed

with the sign of the rainbow (Gen 9:12–17) that was intended to remain operative throughout history. God would continue to care for all living creatures throughout all time. Later traditions affirm God's care for all kinds of living creature.[45] Other biblical texts anticipate that at the end of history, in the future or Messianic age, God would make operative a new covenant under which all creatures would dwell together in peace.[46]

Part III
Biblical Law Codes: An Overview

A law code may be defined as a collection of operative laws at any given time in a particular social system. New laws are promulgated and court decisions add new "constructions" or interpretations of laws that may be formally repealed or tacitly abandoned. In most societies, new law codes are periodically prepared in order to collect and organize laws deemed operative and/or to replace outdated laws. It is not surprising to find several law codes embedded in biblical tradition that draw upon and/or recount several centuries of Israelite, Judahite, and Jewish experience. When biblical codes are presented, all purport to be versions of the laws given by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai (or Mt. Horeb) that were later transmitted by Moses to Israel during the several decades that the Israelites were wandering around the Sinai peninsula.

A. The Earliest Codes: The Ritual Decalogue, the Covenant Code, and the Deuteronomic Code
The earliest of these collections of law codes, the "Ritual Decalogue" (RD), is contained in Exod 34:11–28. Several of its provisions appear in later codes. The first comprehensive collection of these provisions, the Covenant Code (CC), also known as the Book of the Covenant, is found in Exod 20:1–23:33, and is thought to date from the twelfth to the eleventh centuries BCE.

Many of the laws set out in the Covenant Code were incorporated later into the Deuteronomic Code (D), presented in Deut 5:1–21; 12:1–26:15. The Deuteronomic Code may have been written down only a century or so after the Covenant Code. However, a number of the provisions found in Deuteronomy 12–19 were probably added subsequently in connection with the Deuteronomic Reform, a major institutional innovation carried out late in the seventh century BCE. This innovation established Jerusalem as the only place where God could be worshiped with sacrificial offerings, and it called for the closing of all other shrines.[47] Deuteronomy 6–11 consists of a series of exhortations, some probably of ancient origin, that attest to the critical importance of keeping the laws set forth in the chapters that followed.

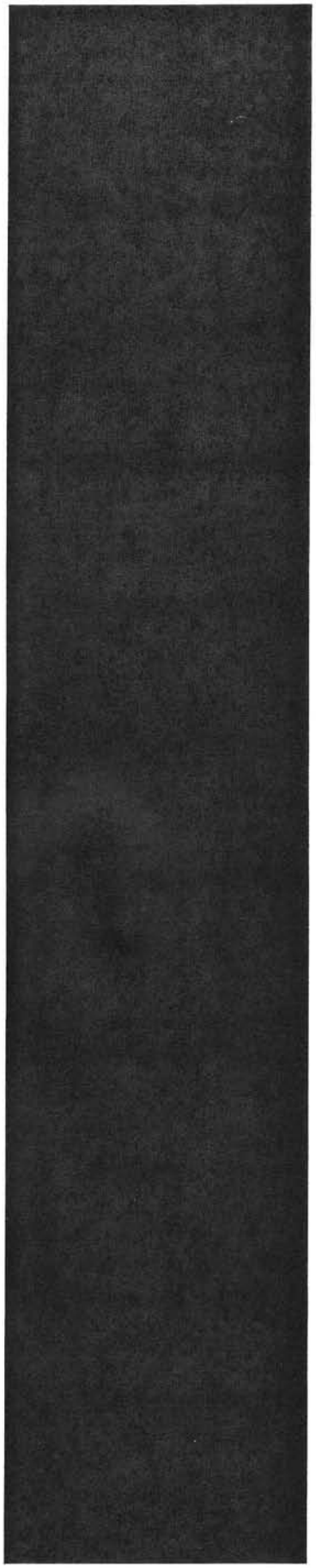
B. The Later Codes: The Holiness Code, and The Priestly Code
The next codification dates from the middle of the seventh century BCE. This "Holiness Code" (H), found in Leviticus 18–26,[48] does not require that sacrificial worship take place only in Jerusalem; and it twice refers to plural "sanctuaries" (Lev 21:23; 26:31). It therefore may be dated prior to the Deuteronomic Reform. Parts of it, however, may have been edited or revised by P, or the Priestly editors, who refer twice to the "tent of meeting,"[49] a characteristic P term signifying what could be considered a portable prototype of the later Jerusalem temple. Ritual purity, sexual propriety, and social welfare are leading concerns of H.

The last and most recent law code is commonly characterized as the Priestly Code (PC). It is thought to have been written during the late sixth or fifth century BCE, under the auspices of priests serving at the Jerusalem temple. It is so named because its provisions typically refer to sacrificial offerings and other procedures and ceremonies in which priests figure prominently. It is the most extensive of the codes and includes all laws contained in Exod 24:1 through Num 36:13, except those found in the RD and the H.[50]

Laws relating to reverence for life and/or environmental ethics are found in all of these biblical codes, including the RD. Occasionally it is possible to trace certain developments or changes in specific laws where earlier versions were modified or abandoned and new ones added.

Part IV
Sacrificial Laws: Animal Sacrifices

It may seem odd to include texts calling for animal sacrifices in a study of



reverence for life and environmental ethics in biblical law,[51] yet such texts constitute a substantial portion of biblical law and therefore reveal ongoing attitudes toward the animals that were to be sacrificed. Somewhat surprisingly, many of these laws underscore the importance of animal life. Both implicitly and explicitly, several affirm that animals belong to and are given by God who values them highly. That animals might be sacrificed instead of humans likewise indicates a sense of their worth, as if animal life is somehow equivalent to that of human life. Respect or reverence for the life of sacrificed (or slaughtered) animals comes to expression explicitly in laws governing disposal of their blood.

A. Consecration of the Firstborn: One of the Earliest Laws

The demand that firstborn sons and domestic animals be sacrificed or consecrated to God appears in all of the codes except H. Several of the laws make provisions for redeeming the firstborn and, in some instances, firstborn sons may be redeemed by offering an animal.

1. The Ritual Decalogue

Exod 34:19–20 sets out the rationale for offering firstborn sons and animals: "All that opens the womb is mine," says God.[52] Although the manner in which firstborn sons were to be redeemed is not stated, firstborn asses' colts may be redeemed through the offering of a lamb.

The underlying thought seems to have been that because domestic animals come from, and therefore belong to God, their firstborn should be returned to God either in the form of a sacrificial offering, as in the case of a "clean" animal, or if an "unclean" animal, by killing it, unless it was redeemed by offering another animal instead. Any sense that humans owned their domestic animals was strictly qualified by recognition that God was entitled to the firstborns.

2. The Covenant Code

Exod 22:29b–30 required that firstborn sons, as well as firstborn oxen and sheep, be "given" to God. The redemption process for the firstborn sons, however, is ambigious in this passage. The story of Abraham's substitution of a ram for his firstborn son Isaac, may have been told in order to allow, or perhaps to require, that the sacrifice of an animal take place instead of the firstborn son (Gen 22:1–14).[53] Before God, it seems, the ram was valued as much as the son. The requirement to sacrifice firstborn sons, oxen, and sheep, implies that both human and animal offspring were understood to have had their common origin and value in relation to God—the one who not only created the first humans and animals, but who also endows them with fertility in order to ensure the continual procreative aspects of each of their species.

Exod 22:29b–30 also reveals a kind of humane concern for animals. For example, the new firstborn bull calves and male lambs were to remain with their mothers seven days before being sacrificed on the eighth day. Thus both mother and newborn would have these few days together. Similar kinds of sensitivity to the interests or feelings of young animals and their mothers may also be seen in other biblical laws, for example, Lev 22:27, which extends the seven-day requirement to all newborn bull-calves, lambs, and kids.[54]

3. Deuteronomic Reform Provisions

According to Deut 15:19–20, all firstborn male sheep, oxen, and firstborn males from other "herd[s]" and "flock[s]," were to be sacrificed and eaten "before YHWH" at the central shrine. The CC had not distinguished between blemished and unblemished animals, but the Deuteronomic version says that blemished firstborns should not be sacrificed to YHWH.[55] Blemished firstborns, however, might be slaughtered locally and eaten (Deut 15:21–22); but as with the secular slaughter provision in Deut 12:15–28, the animals' blood must not be consumed. Rather, the blood is to be poured out on the ground (Deut 15:23) in order that the animals' life may be preserved.[56]

4. The Priestly Code

The Priestly Code is largely concerned with sacrificial offerings. A number of PC laws relate to firstborns, both human and animal. Several such laws exempt Israelite firstborns and provide alternatives to sacrificing firstborn animals.

Exod 13:1–2, 11–15: Consecration of Firstborn Israelites and their Cattle to God.[57] Exod 13:1–2 reads: "YHWH said to Moses, 'Consecrate to me all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and beast, is mine.'" The term,"consecrate," may mean to sacrifice or it may mean to set aside as holy. Nevertheless, the language is species and gender-inclusive: "all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb." Exod 13:11–12a likewise uses inclusive language: "You shall set apart to YHWH all that