

AN ECO-THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

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Introduction to the Problem

Across the globe, the discussion surrounding humankind's treatment of the natural world has received increasing concern and attention.¹ Scientific consensus is clear as to the reality of anthropogenic climate change,² and that an urgent response is required.³ In conjunction with a growing body of scholarship regarding eco-theological hermeneutics, the Christian community is amongst those who are taking action.⁴

Whilst this may be considered a step in the right direction, it is apparent that in isolation, an eco-theological hermeneutic is insufficient. The impact of climate change is not only detrimental to the natural world but has a devastating impact on human communities. Furthermore, as its causes derive from anthropological activity, climate change itself presents to be an issue of both environmental and social injustice. In light of this, a hermeneutic that encompasses both ecology and social justice is essential for Christians engaging in a Biblical response to this ecological crisis.

It has been concluded that the change in climate is a result of sustained human activities.⁵ Such activity includes but is not exclusive to the rise of heavy industry, increasing livestock production, intensive farming, air travel and fast fashion⁶ which, in turn, increased levels of harmful gas emissions and energy generation to meet the growth in demand for these goods and services. This growth in demand and supply has been made possible by globalization and the economic system of capitalism, which has enabled the phenomena of consumerism to flourish.⁷

Paul Mills notes the issue of impersonality of relationships is a key one in a capitalist economy, because the sole social responsibility is to maximize profits.⁸ This inspires a significant division of wealth.⁹ Without regulation the free market drives a profit seeking mentality, by which the powerful

¹For a recent example see "Greta Thunberg," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/greta-thunberg>.

²John T. Hard, *Climate Change: Causes, Effects and Solutions* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), ix.

³David G. Horrell, "A New Perspective on Paul? Rereading Paul in a Time of Ecological Crisis," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33.1 (2010), 7.

⁴Dare, Ben. "Foundations of 'Ecological Reformation': A Critical Study of Jürgen Moltmann's Contributions towards a 'New Theological Architecture' for Environment Care" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cardiff, 2012), 1.

⁵Hard, *Climate Change*, xi.

⁶Geico Muller-Fahrenholz, "The Jubilee: Time Ceilings for the Growth of Money?" *In The Jubilee Challenge: Utopia or Possibility? Jewish and Christian Insights* (ed. Hans Ucko; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 5.

⁷For more on the rise consumerism see Valerio, Ruth, *Just Living: Faith and Community in an Age of Consumerism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2016)

⁸Roy McCloughy., and Andy Hartropp, *Debt*. (United Kingdom: Grove Books, 1988), 22.

⁹Paul Mills, "The Economy," in *Jubilee Manifesto* (eds. Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 219.

accumulate profit at the expense of the poor.¹⁰ Responsibility for environmental and welfare consciousness is left to individual companies.¹¹ Accordingly, without rapid and significant intervention, environmental degradation and harm to human communities will continue on its current trajectory.

With the escalation of global emissions, the extent of harmful greenhouse gasses trapped in the earth's atmosphere has intensified to warm the planet to unnatural levels.¹² Unable to adapt, multiple species have already become extinct, and we continue to face rapid rates of extinction among vulnerable species.¹³ This disruption to the natural order has devastating repercussions on human communities.¹⁴ The rise in sea levels from melting ice caps has provoked flooding in lowland areas, and the disruption to weather patterns has adverse implications for agricultural work. The majority of those who experience these ordeals are those at the lowest end of the global socio-economic scale.¹⁵ These communities rely on the land for survival, but as the land changes, these people have no means to adapt and are driven into poverty.¹⁶

A Biblical Response

For Christians, theology and the interpretation of Scripture carries influence when shaping a response to the ecological crisis.¹⁷ As we have noted, the world is dominated by an socio-economic system that is a catalyst for climate change and its devastating repercussions.¹⁸ To engender a Biblical response to this issue, a hermeneutic must be implemented that encompasses both ecology and social justice. However, prior to developing a conjoined approach, it is appropriate to consider historical and existing Christian narratives towards the environment and social injustice.

An apprehension of God's intention for the relationship between humankind and nature indicates how the environment ought to be treated. Christians must contemplate the voice of Scripture regarding the treatment of the natural world, not only because of its urgent contemporary relevance, but also because of accusations of the Bible's culpability in generating the attitudes that have led to this crisis.¹⁹

The discussion regarding Scripture, Christian tradition, and contemporary environmental attitudes has been hugely influenced by Lynn White's article 'The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis.' White

¹⁰Padilla, "The Relevance of Jubilee in Today's World," 24.

¹¹For further information see "Do Businesses Have a Responsibility to Protect the Environment?" Rosie Anderson: DeltaNet International, <https://www.delta-net.com/health-and-safety/environmental-awareness/faqs/do-businesses-have-a-responsibility-to-protect-the-environment>.

¹²"Report of the Secretary- General on the 2019 Climate Action Summit and The Way Forward in 2020," Climate Action Summit 2019, https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/assets/pdf/cas_report_11_dec.pdf.

¹³"The Emergency," Extinction Rebellion, <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/the-emergency/>.

¹⁴"The Emergency," <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/the-emergency/>.

¹⁵"How Social Justice and Environmental Justice are Intrinsicly Interconnected," Hansel Haley: Pachamama Alliance, <https://blog.pachamama.org/how-social-justice-and-environmental-justice-are-intrinsicly-interconnected>.

¹⁶"The Emergency," Extinction Rebellion, <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/the-emergency/>.

¹⁷For further reading on theology facilitating an ecological revolution see Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (London: SCM, 1999), 21-22, 224.

¹⁸"The Emergency," Extinction Rebellion, <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/the-emergency/>.

¹⁹Horrell, "A New Perspective on Paul?," 7.

argues that the dominant Christian worldview, rooted in the creation narrative, holds the notion that it was God's will that humanity exploit nature to serve themselves.²⁰ As such, Christianity is the "most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen."²¹

However, a more extensive examination of theological tradition demonstrates that White may not fully grasp the complexities of the issue. Richard Bauckham explains that during the pre-modern period, "the dominant theological tradition ... did articulate a strongly anthropocentric view of the human dominion," but that this was largely as a result of imposing on the Biblical texts an understanding of the human relationship to nature that were of Greek philosophical rather than Biblical origin.²² Likewise, the Medieval posture towards the concept of dominion in Genesis 1:28 considered the world to be created for human use.²³

Nonetheless, this understanding is vastly different from the perception current human perception of dominion over nature, which is closely related to the rise of the technology.²⁴ The freedom and powers granted through the advancement of technology have expedited the development of an attitude that humanity is equated with sovereignty and, essentially, divinity. It is not the creation narratives, as White suggests, that are to blame for attitudes resulting in the climate crisis. Rather, technological advancement fosters the false belief that humankind is able to use and abuse the planet without ramifications.

In light of this deeply concerning narrative, attempts have been made by the Christian community to demonstrate that the Bible can offer profound ecological wisdom.²⁵ An increasing effort has been contrived to interpret Scripture with an eco-theological hermeneutic that encompasses a greater excerpt of Scripture than the traditional chapters in Genesis.²⁶ This is usefully demonstrated in the work of Francis Watson, who explains two contrasting modes of Biblical interpretation regarding the environment. He identifies these as readings of recovery and resistance.²⁷

Recovery/Resistance Reading

Readings of recovery emphasize that the Bible supports care for creation. They articulate how Biblical resources provide a basis for an positive environmental ethic,²⁸ while an anthropocentric ethnic arises because of the distortions of various interpreters who obscure the positive meaning of the original.²⁹ An

²⁰Lynn White Jr, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967), 1205-6.

²¹White Jr, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," 1205-6.

²²Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom*, 141.

²³Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom* 141.

²⁴Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom* 141.

²⁵Ernst M. Conrade, "Towards an Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics: A Review Essay on the Earth Bible Project," *Scriptura* 85 (2004), 126.

²⁶David G Horrell, Cheryl Hunt and Christopher Southgate, "Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics: A Typology of Hermeneutical Stances," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 21 (2008), 219.

²⁷Francis Watson, "Strategies of Recovery and Resistance. Hermeneutical Reflections on Genesis 1-3 and it's Pauline Reception," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 45 (1992), 82.

²⁸Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn; The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 7.

²⁹Horrell, Hunt and Southgate, "Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics," 219.

eco-theological reading of recovery avoids the sanctioning of exploitative human action over created order. It demonstrates the notion of goodness regarding the whole of creation, and conveys an image of redemption which encompasses the natural world as well as humankind.³⁰

This stance considers multiple texts across Scripture that indicate a vision in which all of creation participates in the reconciling work of God in Christ.³¹ The Apostle Paul in particular writes with the understanding that the natural world and humankind are bound and suffer together (literally, they are “groaning together” in Rom 8:22),³² demonstrating an implied ecological concern and the inseparable relationship between humankind and the natural world. Despite intrinsic or instrumental perceptions of the environment, Scripture does not provide a justification for its exploitation.

Although this reading of Scripture is convincing, it is not universally adopted within the Church. Hence, Watson labels those who interpret Scripture otherwise as readers of resistance.³³ They resist the assertion that the Biblical text offers a positive original beneath the subsequent layers of distorted interpretation. Rather, the original is seen as the cause of oppression which must be exposed and resisted.³⁴

Fundamentalist believers are customarily readers of resistance. Constance Cumbey and Dave Hunt³⁵ attempt to defend this position with the appeal that “any attempt at environmental stewardship - even any use of terms like “ecological” and “holistic” - is part of the [New Age] plot.”³⁶ They perceive any Christian discussion of global awareness as evidence of New Age influence, deeming it to develop from satanic tyranny.³⁷ Fortunately, this type of direct criticism on environmental care is becoming more exceptional as concession is expanding.³⁸ Tony Campolo, a self-described pre-millennialist, advocates the practice of a Christian concern for the natural world, as long as it avoids any form of nature-worship.³⁹ This stance is justified because regardless of one’s eschatological views, the consequences of climate change on the environment and human communities are tangible and imminent. For this reason, a hermeneutic that accommodates more than just the environment is necessary to encompass the spectrum of Christian attitudes towards the natural world.

³⁰Horrell, Hunt and Southgate, “Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics,” 222.

³¹McDonagh, *The Greening of the Church*, 162-64.

³²Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology. Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Longman and Todd Ltd, 2010), 96.

³³Horrell, Hunt and Southgate, “Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics,” 225.

³⁴Watson, “Strategies of Recovery and Resistance,” 81.

³⁵See Constance E. Cumbey, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarianism* (LA: Huntington House, 1983), 162-69; Dave Hunt, *Peace Prosperity and the Coming Holocaust: The New Age Movement in Prophecy* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1983).

³⁶Loren Wilkinson, “New Age, New Consciousness, and the New Creation.” in *Tending the Garden* (ed. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 25.

³⁷Wilkinson, “New Age, New Consciousness,” 24.

³⁸Horrell, Hunt and Southgate, “Appeals to the Bible in Ecotheology and Environmental Ethics,” 228.

³⁹Tony Campolo, *How to Rescue the Earth without Worshipping Nature: A Christian's Call to Save Creation* (Milton Keynes: Word, 1992), 94-96.

The Insufficiency of an Isolated Eco-Theological Hermeneutic

Perceiving the natural environment as an isolated phenomenon, without addressing the social consequences of its exploitation, is devoid of meaning due to the inseparability between humankind and the natural world. As treatment of one reverberates in the other, it is necessary to implement a hermeneutic which considers both the environment and human communities. Hansel Haley observes how “Justice reading for our planet and justice for all people are two profound conversations that are happening simultaneously but often in different rooms.”⁴⁰ This is an injustice in itself as the environmental crisis is not a singular problem, but remains part of a much deeper social crisis.⁴¹

A Social Justice Hermeneutic

Social justice is a complex principle that is predominantly concerned with the relationships within a community.⁴² To have an understanding of social justice is to recognize that not everything in society is fair or just, but should and can be. Actively advocating this premise is to seek, as Robert Rawls describes, “justice as fairness.”⁴³

However, to read Scripture with a social justice hermeneutic is not as simple. Biblical justice must be based on the text within its theological, literary and historical context. “Justice” is a possible translation of the Hebrew word *sedeq* and the Greek word *dikaionune*. However, this translation never refers to social justice in economic terms, two principles that are often advocated when considering a fairer society.⁴⁴ Instead, these terms refer to moral uprightness, or righteousness, which should be understood as meaning right relationships. To be righteous is to be in right relationship with God, with others, with ourselves, and with creation.⁴⁵ Therefore, the intent of reading Scripture through a social justice hermeneutic is to pursue an attitude and lifestyle of holistic right relations.

Biblical Justice

Biblical social justice is a concept often said to be “biased in favour of the disadvantaged.”⁴⁶ Yet, a closer examination of Scripture reveals that this claim is not as simple as it appears on the surface. For example, Leviticus 19:15 states, “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.” In this instance, showing favor to the poor is described as a perversion of justice. Even Luke 4, a passage that has been described as Jesus’ manifesto for the

⁴⁰“How Social Justice and Environmental Justice are Inherently Interconnected,” Hansel Haley: Pachamama Alliance, <https://blog.pachamama.org/how-social-justice-and-environmental-justice-are-inherently-interconnected>.

⁴¹Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle, Nature, Man and Technology* (Wisconsin, Knopf, 1971), Xxi.

⁴²For further reading see David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁴³John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 60.

⁴⁴“Justice and The Bible,” Andrew S. Kulikovsky: Summit Australia Conference, <http://www.kulikovskyonline.net/hermeneutics/JusticeAndBible.pdf>.

⁴⁵“What do we mean by Justice?” Just Love, <https://justloveuk.com/about-us/what-do-we-mean-by-justice>.

⁴⁶“Justice and The Bible,” Andrew S. Kulikovsky: Summit Australia Conference, <http://www.kulikovskyonline.net/hermeneutics/JusticeAndBible.pdf>.

“good news for the poor, the blind and the captives,” is contestable.⁴⁷ This passage is identified as a quotation of a Messianic prophecy from Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6. The Messiah is to proclaim the good news to the poor, but that this is salvation, not any form of social justice. But “the “poor” are the spiritually poor, Kulikovsky writes. The “blind” are the spiritually blind. The “captives” are those that are spiritually captive.”⁴⁸ Indeed, it would be heresy to state that God’s love for people varies in proportion to their wealth and social class.⁴⁹ This suggests that justice principles surrounding wealth and poverty are actually Biblically unfounded, as the passages concern spiritual, not physical prosperity.

Biblical social justice has also been understood to support economic redistribution.⁵⁰ According to Ronald J. Sider, 2 Corinthians 8:13-15 can be summarized as “the goal is equality” (NIV).⁵¹ However Kulikovsky rightly identifies justice as a separate concept to grace, mercy and love.⁵² In 2 Corinthians Paul encourages people to give aid to the church in Jerusalem church as a gift out of their own discretion (2 Cor 8:7-12). Thus, Sider is apparently confusing compassion with justice. According to the Bible, assisting the poor and needy is a characteristic of the righteous. Christians should show compassion to the poor, not because God has commanded it, but because all depend on God’s own compassion. Kulikovsky concludes that Christian socialists do not distinguish between the different meanings of justice presented in Scripture, but assume that all references to justice refers to distributive social justice.⁵³

Kulikovsky’s conclusion appears in danger of accepting large wealth disparities and fails to consider relationships between individuals and communities. Detaching justice from grace, mercy and love is an unsound assertion as these are *all* characteristics of God. Biblical principles of justice cannot be divorced from the self-giving love of God. As those made in the *imago Dei* (Genesis 1:27), humanity is designed to pursue right and loving relationships with all things. Therefore, reading the Bible through a social justice hermeneutic is to interpret it in such a way that it demonstrates God’s love and mercy throughout the world. Langmead helpfully concludes, “Justice is fairness embedded in the structures of society. Biblical justice goes further than strict justice, and is imbued with grace, mercy and forgiveness. It is structural love.”⁵⁴

For this reason, Biblical social justice should be considered as the pursuit of this “structural love.” Society should be shaped by love, mercy and right relationships, which encompasses both economic and ecological structures. Although Kulikovsky highlights that Scripture does not advocate economic

⁴⁷“Ten Reasons Why Justice is Essential to the Gospel,” Ross Langmead: Ethics Daily, <https://ethicsdaily.com/ten-reasons-why-justice-is-essential-to-the-gospel-cms-5110/?print=pdf>.

⁴⁸“Justice and The Bible,” Andrew S. Kulikovsky: Summit Australia Conference, <http://www.kulikovskyonline.net/hermeneutics/JusticeAndBible.pdf>.

⁴⁹Ronald Nash, “Socialism, Capitalism and the Bible” *Imprimis* 14.7 (1985), 4.

⁵⁰Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), 78.

⁵¹Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 78.

⁵²“Justice and The Bible,” Andrew S. Kulikovsky: Summit Australia Conference, <http://www.kulikovskyonline.net/hermeneutics/JusticeAndBible.pdf>.

⁵³“Justice and The Bible,” Andrew S. Kulikovsky: Summit Australia Conference, <http://www.kulikovskyonline.net/hermeneutics/JusticeAndBible.pdf>.

⁵⁴“Ten Reasons,” Ross Langmead: Ethics Daily, <https://ethicsdaily.com/ten-reasons-why-justice-is-essential-to-the-gospel-cms-5110/?print=pdf>.

redistribution in the way socialists understand, it may be that regulation and redistribution is the way to demonstrate love in a suffering community.⁵⁵ As previously discussed, the pursuit of unlimited economic growth, profit maximization and consumerism results in heightening inequality and environmental destruction. Without intervention, the current system cannot co-exist with the notion of “structural love.”

The British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) understands social justice to be a practice which commits to equity whilst requiring a systemic change.⁵⁶ Although designed as a teaching resource guide, the BCTF understanding is useful in assisting a reading of scripture through a social justice hermeneutic. The concept it invokes develops an understanding of right relationships. It exposes the control the elite has at the expense of the vulnerable, which must be addressed to ensure social justice. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of self-reflection and the need to examine how an individual’s position in society may impact their values, and consequently their actions. The BCTF outlines four essential interconnecting principles which are crucial for implementing and understanding social justice. These are as follows:

Access

This is the gateway to inclusion and participation. This principle may hinder or enable individuals to take part. Restricted societies close opportunities to particular individuals so not all are given an equal chance.

Agency

Individuals know their rights and are empowered to assert them. They have the capacity and ability to voice concerns and act on them to create change for the better. Learning to think critically is a key strategy to develop agency.

Advocacy

This is a deliberate process of influencing outcomes so that change can occur, typically on behalf of others. It involves an awareness of what is happening and the ability to analyze the situation and devote an action plan of how to change. They include a purpose, a message and a way to express the message.

Solidarity Action

This refers to working with others for the collective betterment. It requires the recognition of injustice and how to navigate one’s social location of power and privilege to work across differences and find

⁵⁵“Justice and The Bible,” Andrew S. Kulikovsky: Summit Australia Conference, <http://www.kulikovskyonline.net/hermeneutics/JusticeAndBible.pdf>.

⁵⁶“A Social Justice Lens Checklist,” BCTF, <https://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/SocialJustice/Publications/SJLens.pdf> .

common ground to achieve equity. It requires coalition building within a group and networking with other groups.⁵⁷

These principles usefully categorize elements of what it means for individuals and communities to be in right relationships with each other. It exhibits “structural love”⁵⁸ in practice as it gives value to all. To participate or ignore the injustices that befall the world is to be disobedient to the will of God. Therefore, in light of climate change, Scripture must be read both with concern for the natural world, but also the consequences it has on the global community. For this reason, an eco-theological hermeneutic and a social justice hermeneutic must be used in conjunction when considering a Christian response to climate change. In support of this collaboration, Michael Northcott argues that the environmental crisis is connected with the human crises of morality, and that the demise of economic justice in the global order is directly related to environmental breakdown. It will be impossible for modern society to reorientate itself to the biological limitations of the planet without a related quest for justice.⁵⁹

Leviticus 25 and The Jubilee Year

Leviticus 25 are crucial instructions in Scripture that demonstrate principles of both stewardship and justice,⁶⁰ the proper treatment of the land and of the people. These commandments reveal God’s concern for the natural world as well as those at lowest end of the socio-economic scale in society.

Overview

An over-arching theme of Leviticus 25 is the emphasis on the importance of caring for natural resources and as identified by Padilla, an “economics of care.”⁶¹ Leviticus 25 contains a set of commandments, given to Moses from God. They were to be presented to the Israelites upon entering the promised land (25:2). These commandments were to be implemented during the “Year of Jubilee,” or the fiftieth year, occurring after seven Sabbath years (25:8). The text can be divided into four main areas of concern. First, allowing the land to lie fallow (25:8-22). Second, the redemption of property (25:23-34). Third, the offering of loans (35-38), and finally the treatment of slaves (25:39-55).

⁵⁷“A Social Justice Lens Checklist,” BCTF, <https://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/SocialJustice/Publications/SJLens.pdf> .

⁵⁸“Ten Reasons,” Ross Langmead: Ethics Daily, <https://ethicsdaily.com/ten-reasons-why-justice-is-essential-to-the-gospel-cms-5110/?print=pdf>.

⁵⁹Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xiii.

⁶⁰Elfed Godding, “The Nazareth Manifesto – A Consideration, From an Evangelical Perspective, of the Economic Implications for the Church of the Good News of Luke 4:18-19 Seen as Christ’s Fulfilment of the Year of Jubilee” (MA diss., Nazarene Theological College, 1998), 15.

⁶¹Padilla, “The Relevance of the Jubilee in Today’s World: Leviticus 25,” 15.

Application

There are some ambiguities surrounding the literal practice of the Jubilee year⁶² partially because there are only a few references to the Jubilee in the Old Testament (Lev 27:16-25 and Num 36:4).⁶³ In fact, it may have even proved counter-productive, Hartley notes, in that the exact implementation of this legislation would have resulted in economic hardship, and it was instead perceived to be a utopian ideal.⁶⁴ Therefore, according to Gary Millar, a deeper analysis is necessary to understand the intentions of the Jubilee year.⁶⁵ An awareness of the purpose and values of Leviticus 25 will provide the foundation for how the Jubilee may inform us about social justice principles and environmental concerns in the modern world. For Padilla, this may be conducted through discussion of the Jubilee in light of contemporary issues, whilst maintaining a wide view of Biblical revelation.⁶⁶

Allowing the Land to Lie Fallow (25:1-23)

Leviticus 25:1-23 commands that the Israelites must let the land lie fallow on a periodic basis. The land was “not just to be taken and occupied,”⁶⁷ but to be a reflection of the underlying theology of creation and rest.⁶⁸ God’s original intentions for creation are outlined in the Genesis narrative. Genesis 2:15 states “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (NIV). Genesis 2:2-3 records how God labored for six days and rested on the seventh. Nature and humanity, as created in Gods image; have been designed to follow this rhythm of work and rest.⁶⁹

Redemption of the Land (25:23-34)

During the year of the Jubilee, Leviticus 25:23-34 commands that each tribe was to redeem the land it was initially gifted to by God (Numbers 26). This was a reminder that the land belonged to God and that the Israelite nation was simply his tenants operating under a leasehold market.⁷⁰ Theoretically, the principle of redemption would ensure a generational “economic clean slate”⁷¹ by preventing the accumulation of land by a wealthy few.⁷²

⁶²John E. Hartley, *Leviticus: Word Biblical Commentary* (Texas: Word Books, 1992), 427.

⁶³Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 298.

⁶⁴Hartley, *Leviticus: Word Biblical Commentary*, 428.

⁶⁵Gary J. Millar, *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), 18-19.

⁶⁶Padilla, “The Relevance of the Jubilee in Today’s World,” 14.

⁶⁷Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1977), 47-48.

⁶⁸Lazonby, “Applying the Jubilee to Contemporary Socio-Economic and Environmental Issues,” 37.

⁶⁹Dorothy C. Bass, “Keeping Sabbath: Reviving a Christian Practice,” *The Christian Century* 114 (1997), 13.

⁷⁰Mills, Paul. “Finance,” in *Jubilee Manifesto* (ed. Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 221.

⁷¹Mills, “The Economy,” 222.

⁷²Christopher J H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006), 295.

Redemption of People (25:35-55)

Leviticus 25:35-38 discourses the redemption of people from their debt. This is followed by verses 39-55 which consider release and redemption from slavery. In the Ancient Near East when individuals and communities fell into financial difficulty, people being unable to recover on their own resulted in debt and slavery. Therefore, the Jubilee commanded that loans were to be offered to the poor but without interest. Likewise, as a nation, the Israelites had already experienced freedom from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12:31-33). However, this liberty was not an end in itself, therefore God commanded freedom was to be further granted during this year.⁷³

Ecological and Social Justice Implications

Access

The principle of access is evident throughout Leviticus 25. The existence of this commandment demonstrates the recognition that with time, opportunities available to an individual or communities do change. Power and wealth are likely to be accumulated by some, and lost by others, in a movement caused by variety of factors, including birthright, health, natural disaster, exploitation and work-ethic. The Jubilee demonstrates principles that attempt to halt the growth of structural inequalities that arise from these factors. The time period between each Jubilee year suggests a generational reset. The land is redeemed in order that all God's people have access to property and land at least once in their lifetime. Furthermore, the land was to be given a year rest, thus receiving protection from total exploitation.

However, as previously discussed, our world is shaped by an economic system which continuously heightens the gap between the rich and the poor. The world's poorest nations sell portions of their land to foreign countries and corporations as they are in desperate need of finances. They often do not reap any benefit as foreign employees can be imported, and taxes strategically shifted elsewhere. These nations are unable to recover their land and consequently future generations are left impoverished, whilst foreign countries reap the benefits.⁷⁴ Likewise, non-renewable resources are being depleted and species becoming extinct as the level extraction surpasses replenishment.⁷⁵ Therefore, present and future generations are not being given equal access to opportunities.

This passage presents the value of halting excessive wealth accumulation and advocates environmental sustainability in light of the principle of access. The implications of following Jubilee in the contemporary world would be to enforce strict regulation on the capitalist system. This would be done to limit the gap between the highest and lowest earner in an organization. Furthermore, strict environmental regulation would be necessary to prevent the destruction of natural habitats.

Agency

The Jubilee demonstrates the principle of agency as its commandments give people a means for change. God gives the right to redeem their freedom and their land - gives them the opportunity to transform their lives. Indeed, the Jubilee also offers an opportunity for people to think critically and

⁷³Padilla, "The Relevance of the Jubilee in Today's World," 25.

⁷⁴Lazonby, "Applying the Jubilee to Contemporary Socio-Economic and Environmental Issues," 30-48.

⁷⁵"How Many Species Are We Losing?" WWF, https://wwf.panda.org/our_work/biodiversity/biodiversity/.

provide the means to support themselves. It does not simply advocate the eradication of slavery and poverty through a pay-out. Instead, they have the opportunity to regain land to work in ways they may not have previously been able to. This is done in a safe environment as the whole Israelite community was expected to follow this command. It provided the means for individuals and communities to get out of poverty if they have found themselves to be oppressed. This will require hard work and creativity to prevent falling back into an impoverished position. Although poverty may re-arise if people refuse to work hard, the frequency of the Jubilee prevents future generations from being penalized by the actions of their ancestors.

In the contemporary world, many find themselves stuck in cycles of structural poverty and have no means to change their situation.⁷⁶ Although many nations implement a social security system for those in financially difficult positions, this has not prevented the existence of relative poverty.⁷⁷ Furthermore, social security systems are not available globally and many live in situations of extreme poverty. Structural cycles of poverty are very difficult to break for individuals and communities who live in regions of conflict, have insufficient education, or lack employment opportunities⁷⁸.

Leviticus 25 values the development of communities where people have agency, to establish higher standards of living for themselves through creativity and hard work. This requires a system consisting of more than just a basic social security as this offers little for critical thinking. Therefore, universal standards of education and mentorship should be offered. This would widen employment opportunities, but also enable individuals to think critically and challenge further unjust systems. Agency also advocates peace, as education and employment can be affected by conflict. The safety of individuals and communities must therefore also be prioritized.

Advocacy

Leviticus 25 demonstrates the principle of advocacy in a similar way to agency. The commandments recognize that structural inequalities arise in society, and that regulation is required to prevent these from deepening. God is the ultimate advocate of the people and gives these laws to protect both them and the natural world. God is the leader of the people and through his commandments, he directs them toward the best possible society. This is a society shaped by concern for the wellbeing of the human community and the environment through the implementation of rhythms of restoration.

At present, many organizations and charities attempt to advocate for both social justice causes and the environment. These include attempts to improve global standards of living and protection of the natural world. However, their voices and influence are often drowned out in comparison to global corporations, who have both finance and power. A rhythm of rest is no friend of capitalism as it disrupts the goal of profit maximization.

⁷⁶Leonard Beeghley, "Individual and Structural Explanations of Poverty," *Population Research and Policy Review* 7.3 (1988), 201-202.

⁷⁷For example, the UK has a social security system yet relative poverty is still prevalent. See "UK Poverty 2019/2020." Joseph Rowntree Foundation. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2019-20>.

⁷⁸Collier, *The Bottom Billion*, 27-29.

The Jubilee calls for a system that prioritizes a rhythm of rest, for both the laborer and the land.⁷⁹ A global vision advocating for a system that does not continuously exploit the natural world is essential to achieving social and ecological justice. It must be understood that the land was not, and has never been intended to be totally at the disposal of humanity.⁸⁰ Michael Guebert suggests that these principles could be implemented by pursuing sustainable economic growth, and shifting agricultural and industrial practices to ones which do not damage the environment.⁸¹

Solidarity Action

The principle of solidarity action is essential for the effectiveness of the Jubilee. The benefits of following this command for the human community and the environment would only be experienced if they were adhered to by all. For the Israelite nation, following the laws of God was an imperative, therefore the community shared a common vision. This stance ensures that the whole community and the natural world are valued and protected from exploitation.

In contrast, the economic system of capitalism is hierarchical and individualistic. Without a fair redistribution of profits, wealth is accumulated at the top. Left unregulated, capitalism leaves no room for environmental concern, as this would disrupt profit maximization. It must, therefore, be recognized that climate change is part of a deeper moral crisis.⁸² Regarding a widening concern for the global community, Northcott writes, “without this, the kind of shift in civilisational that the natural world is crying out for will not be seen.”⁸³ As the state of the world demonstrates, when economic growth and profit maximization is prioritized, the wellbeing of communities and the environment diminish.

The principle of solitary action in Leviticus 25 is perhaps the most challenging value the passage presents. It stands in complete contrast to the economic system that shapes the world and requires a complete moral shift. However, it is only with a global change in mindset that true change can take place. The Jubilee fundamentally demands that the wellbeing of the whole community must be prioritized over economic growth. This in turn protects the natural world as exploitation of the environment is recognized as being unsustainable and unjust. Langmead was correct in stating that Biblical justice “is structural love.”⁸⁴

Conclusion

As the world finds itself in a climate crisis, the finger of blame can easily be pointed towards the economic systems of this world. Capitalism and consumerism have led to extreme social injustice and environmental degradation. Therefore, as Christians seeking to formulate a Biblical response, we must

⁷⁹Bass, “Keeping Sabbath,” 13.

⁸⁰Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift*, 64.

⁸¹Michael Guebert, “Water for Life: Global Fresh Water Resources,” in *Keeping God’s Earth* (ed. Noah J. Toly and Daniel I. Block; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 147-148.

⁸²Pope John Paul II. “The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility.” in *This Sacred Earth, Religion, Nature, Environment* (ed. Roger Gottlieb; New York: Routledge, 2004), 183.

⁸³Michael S. Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008), 13.

⁸⁴“Ten Reasons” Ross Langmead: Ethics Daily, <https://ethicsdaily.com/ten-reasons-why-justice-is-essential-to-the-gospel-cms-5110/?print=pdf>.

read Scripture through both an ecological and social justice hermeneutic. This work has demonstrated that as humankind and the natural world are inseparable, a concern for social justice inevitably leads to a concern for the natural world. Furthermore, following a closer examination of Leviticus 25, conclusions were reached regarding a Biblical response to the current economic system. The values of the Jubilee stand in direct contrast to unregulated capitalism. Economic growth and profit maximization are not compatible alongside principles of social justice and environmental concern. In order to care for our global neighbors and creation, systematic changes are essential. Dismantling the growth in inequality between the rich and poor, advocating universal education and world peace are all imperative. However, the most important, and perhaps the most difficult change that is needed, is not of economics and regulations, but of concern and love for our neighbor. Until our world is shaped by this “structural love,”⁸⁵ the moral and environmental state of our world will continue to suffer.

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⁸⁵“Ten Reasons,” Ross Langmead: Ethics Daily, <https://ethicsdaily.com/ten-reasons-why-justice-is-essential-to-the-gospel-cms-5110/?print=pdf>.

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