

# **“In The Beginning. . . . .”**

*(Ecological considerations in the  
Creation Narratives : Gen. 1-3)*

## **Introduction**

The opening chapters of the Bible, far from being a historical narrative, is “now almost universally recognized as primarily a profession of faith, a poetic affirmation of Israel’s religious convictions”.<sup>1</sup> The sole aim of these chapters is to portray the absolute sovereignty of God over the created universe—living and non-living—in a language both sublime and majestic, picturesque and poetic.

While the Priestly account (P) (1:1-2:4a) is sober, lofty, ordered and stereotyped, the Yahwistic narrative (J), (2:4b-3:24) is more vivid, picturesque and abounding in anthropomorphisms. Both the narratives of creation attest to the basic tenet of Israel that God is the sole master of all that exists; that he created the human beings to be partners in his own sovereignty over the created universe (1:26-28) and be sharers of his own life (2:7). While in the Priestly narrative there is a certain solemnity as humans are introduced at the final stage in an ascending order and as a fitting climax to all of created realities—heavenly, earthly, non-living, living, vegetative and animal, in the Yahwistic story however, humans are placed first, in a descending order followed by vegetation, animals, birds etc. In both narratives not only human beings are given the honour, the dignity and the supremacy in the order of creation, but also they are intimately related to and integrated into this order. Human beings themselves are such because of God (Gen. 1:26-27; Ps. 8:5). They are “living icons” of God and

1. Maher, M; *Genesis*; M. Glazier, Inc. Wilmington, Delaware, 1987, p. 19; Westermann, C., *Genesis 1-11*; SPCK, London, 1984, pp. 64-69.

hence stewards over the world of God; they are "handi-works" of God (Gen. 2:7) and hence servants and worshippers of God.<sup>2</sup>

While the former entails a challenging responsibility, the latter endows an awe-inspiring dignity and both are intrinsically inseparable.<sup>3</sup>

The scope of this paper is to identify and situate the role of the human beings in their relationship to the created universe; in other words, to explore the ecological responsibility of the human beings with respect to the whole of non-human creation and thus to point out the avenues which will help to build up a spirituality most needed for our times, especially in the Third World.

Enough harm has been done to nature and living beings in the Developed countries under the pretension of human progress. An unbridled thirst for vulgar exhibitionism and self-destructive consumerism which have eroded the nations of the Western hemisphere are spreading their vicious and venomous tentacles into nations of the East, where especially in India, until now nature is venerated as '*Shakti*', the mother goddess. It is in this context that this paper is timely and needed not only for those who believe the Bible as the Word of God, but also for those who would like to know what the Christian Scriptures have to say with regard to the origin and the scope of creatures and the responsibility of human beings towards them.

### **Eco-spirituality in the Priestly Narrative (Gen. 1:1-2:4a)**

The sole aim of the P. narrative is to portray the sovereignty of God over the whole of creation. The author does this by contrasting primordial chaos ("*Tohu wa bohu*")

2. Wolff, H. W., *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, SCM, London, 1974, p. 227.
3. Westermann, C.; *Genesis 1: A Practical commentary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987, p. 10-11.

or formless wasteland to a well-ordered universe. What was chaotic and dreadful, what was primeval waste has become a habitable universe by God's mighty word. What is presented here in the first 2 verses of Genesis then is not "a theory but a credo, a credo untinged by the least hint of speculation",<sup>4</sup> that God is the skillful architect who fashioned the cosmos out of chaos by bringing out order from the primitive disorder.

The fact that the order of the universe is willed by God and that he is opposed to chaos and disorder is itself an invitation as well as a challenge for all humans to work for the protection and promotion of this order and harmony in the existing universe. Hence in the very first verses of Genesis the human beings are called to participate in and continue the creative activity of God as cocreators in so far as they do not disturb, desecrate and destroy the harmony that exists in nature and in all the created realities. If the first act of creation is the starting point of putting things in order, the rest of it too proceeds in order, from the inanimate things to living beings (vegetation, animals etc.) and finally, to the creation of human beings who are a little less than God himself (Ps. 8:5).

In successive stages after the creation of each reality God himself evaluates his "handiwork" (Ps. 8:3; 19:1) and cries out in approval and admiration. Like a refined artist who looks at his exquisite work, and cries out with exuberant Joy; "it is good, it is really good", so does God. The narrative says: "And God saw, how good it was" or variably "And God saw, that it was very good". This approval formula is repeated 7 times in the narrative (cf. 1:4.10.12.18.21.25.31) to show that all the artefacts created by the Great Architect are really good and only good. The Hebrew

4. Speiser, E. A., *Genesis*, Anchor Bible, New York, 1964; p. 8. Note that the philosophical theory of "creatio ex nihilo" is not the aim of the author. What he wants to affirm is that everything created comes from the "fiat" of God.

word "tob" has a number of nuances : "pleasant, agreeable, delightful, beautiful, useful, efficient, kind, gentle, morally good etc. Yes, "God is preeminently the one who is good, and his goodness is reflected in his works".<sup>5</sup>

If God the Architect evaluates and judges his works and the graded harmony that exists among them as good, this very approval by God is an invitation by God that we admire, praise and glorify the creator in and through all the created realities (Job. 38:7), recognizing the fact that "The creation does not venerate the creator through itself directly, but it is through me that the heavens declare the glory of God, through me the moon offers him homage, through me the stars ascribe glory to him, through me the waters, rain and dew, with the whole of creation, worship and glorify him",<sup>6</sup> and in that way making the whole of creation as the altar in which the eucharist of thanksgiving is continually offered to God.<sup>7</sup> It is at the same time a command given by God that we respect, regard, preserve, protect and foster this harmony that God himself has instilled into nature and pride ourselves in being eco-defenders, eco-promoters and eco-lovers, an obligation we owe to the Creator himself.

Now, the creation of the human race is put in the context of relationships with God and all the creatures. The relationship of the humans with God ("in our image, after our likeness") is a summons to them that as vicegerents of

5. Wenham G. J., *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1, Waco, Texas, 1987, p. 18; Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, pp. 112-113; Maher, op. cit., p. 22; Luke, K., *Genesis 1-3; An exposition*; Alwaye, India, 1980; p. 27.
6. Harakas, S. S., "*The Integrity of creation : Ethical Issues*" in Justice, Peace and the Integrity of creation; Limouris, G. (ed.) WCC, Geneva, 1990, p. 7-54.
7. Teilhard de Chardin, P., *Hymn of the Universe*, London, 1965, p. 20; Limouris, op. cit. p. 15; Moltmann, J., *God in creation, An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, SCM, London, 1989, pp. 69-71.

God they function as God and in the place of God in having a claim of sovereignty over the creatures. The relationship of the humans with the created realities is both a call and a challenge that as responsible partners with God they imitate him in their way of dealing with the creatures. "Thus man's creation has a retroactive significance for all non-human creatures; it gives them a new relation to God".<sup>8</sup>

This relationship of God or his Vice-gerents, namely, the human beings to creatures is denoted by the term "*dominion*" (1:26.28). This is the unique destiny as well as dignity of human beings that they maintain order in God's good creation, to be partners with God in the ongoing development of the created universe.<sup>9</sup>

The Hebrew root "*radah*" for "*dominion*" means "to rule, to dominate, to exercise power". It is variously used in the context of *crushing* the grapes by the wine press (Joel 4:13), of *imposing* punishment on some one (Lam. 1:13), of suppression, *oppression* (Lev. 25:53; Is. 14:6) etc. Besides, it serves to express in court language the royal ideology of ruling over one's foes and enemies (cf. Pss. 110:2; 72:8; Is. 14:6; Ez 34:4 etc.).

Similarly the term "*subdue*" (1:28), (in Hebrew "*kabas*") is used to express various ideas as "to tread down, to press, to rape" (cf. Est. 7:8; Mic. 7:19), to reduce some one to the status of a slave (Neh. 5:5; 2 Chr. 28:10) or to bring nations under subjugation (2 Sam. 8:11).<sup>10</sup>

Although one may notice in the use of these terms an aggressive, authoritarian and autocratic attitude towards and a certain manipulation of the material world by the humans, yet since the humans are expected to act on God's

8. Von Rad, G., *Genesis*, OTL, SCM, London, 1963, p. 58.

9. Maher, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

10. Luke, K., op. cit., pp. 43-46.; Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, pp. 158-159.

behalf and as his image and likeness, the terms "*dominion*" and "*subduing*" (1:28) can permit "no license for the unbridled exploitation and subjugation of nature".<sup>11</sup> It is "not a dominion of caprice or exploitation, but one of justice and benevolence"<sup>12</sup> patterned on God's own benevolent justice.

It is an attitude patterned on the model of ancient kings of the Orient and of the shepherd-kings of Israel whose basic concern was the welfare of their subjects, especially the poor, the weak, the oppressed and the marginalized (cf. Pss. 72:12-14; 99:4; 116:15 etc). The human beings are therefore invited as well as commissioned to reign over created realities in a manner that befits the image-bearers of such a benevolent ruler. They must treat the creatures in the same way as the merciful and sympathetic God does.

Attention must also be paid to the fact that the "*dominion*" is to be exercised only over animals, namely the living beings. They are not merely subject to human beings but must be treated as companions (cf. 2:18-20) to live with. This is the reason why Noah the righteous and blameless man who "walked with God" (6:9), is also portrayed as an arch-conservationist who built an ark in order to protect and preserve for the future all kinds of life from being devastated by the flood-<sup>13</sup> a man most qualified to be in partnership with and a patron of SPCA, the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals!!

But the fact that only the animals come under this benevolent disposition of the humans does not exclude vegetation and the non-living beings. Although "*dominion*" can be exercised only with regard to living beings, yet the

11. Wenham, op. cit., p. 33; Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*; p. 159.

12. Maher, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

13. Wenham, op. cit., p. 33; Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, p. 164.

rest of creation including the earth (cf. 1:26b) is not outside the bounds of this "*dominion*". A markedly personal attitude in dealing with regard to the living beings (cf. Ps. 23; Jo. 10) must also characterize their dealings with the non-living (vegetative and material realities) since the earth too is subject to the humans.<sup>14</sup>

Moltmann speaks of the community of all creation with God as head in which the humans are expected to have a relationship of sympathy and participation, delight and accompaniment with all creatures. In this great community the leadership role of God is not exercised through unqualified authoritarianism and domination, but through the benevolent "*dominion*" understood in terms of the shepherd-king (cf. Ez. 34; Jer 3:15) namely, through compassion, concern and caring for each of the creatures, so much so, as the psalmist says, 'these all look to thee to give them their food in due season' (Ps. 104, esp. v. 27).<sup>15</sup>

No one has recaptured the characteristics of this shepherd-king dominion better than the author of Ps. 23, a psalm of matchless beauty and profound simplicity. The span of life of the sheep from womb to tomb is under the guardianship of the caring shepherd and the hospitality of the gracious oriental host. The grassy meadows, the restful and secure waters, the safe guidance, the generous table, the festive oil etc. are all signs and expressions of the "*dominion*" of the shepherd-king!

When humans are given "*dominion*" over the creatures they are only invited, as Vice-gerents to imitate and follow this shepherd-leader and this shepherd-king. Nay, they are challenged for a more daring act of commitment to the creatures, that of laying down their lives for the defence of creatures after the model of the "shoot from Jesse"

14. Westermann; *Genesis 1-11*, p. 159

15. Moltmann, op. cit., p. 14; Raja, S.J., *Wisdom Psalms and Environmental Concerns* in VJTR, Vol. 57 (1993) p. 205

(Jer. 23:5), the Son of David the shepherd, namely Jesus himself (cf. Jo. 10:11-14).

Would that the day dawns when all the creatures are able to sing Ps. 23 with a slight change, with one voice: "The humans are our shepherds; nothing shall we want ..we shall dwell in the houses of the humans for ever!! Note also Is. 11:6-9 where true 'Shalom' is expressed in the harmony that exists between humans and animals and animals among themselves. When this happens, "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God".

### **Eco-spirituality in the Yahwistic Narrative: (Gen. 2:4b-3:24)**

As in the Priestly Narrative, so also in the Yahwistic narrative the creation of the humans is put in relationship to the creatures but in a reverse order. We may notice here the parallelism between 1:28-30 (P) and 2:8-9 (J) in so far as both the pericopes deal with the provision for sustenance of creatures by God the Great Provider. A further examination of these two texts may lead us to surmise that God intended only vegetarian diet for his creatures, the animals and the humans.<sup>16</sup> Only after the fall does one hear of eating meat (Gen. 9:3-4)! Anyhow, this is only implied, not explicitly commanded!

The relationship of the humans to the earth is expressed by the Yahwist through a play on words "adam" = humans and "adamah" = dust. By the fact that the human beings were created from the soil, the author conveys the idea that both the humans and the earth are basically related to each other and conjoined to each other, and that it is the earth-mother who gives existence and meaning to the humans. Besides, humans have also a duty to "till the ground" so that "soil and people are associated with each other in

16. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, pp. 207-208; Maher, op. cit., 30-31; Wenham, op. cit., 62

agricultural life in such a way that each is determined by this mutual association".<sup>17</sup>

Two distinct works of God are now mentioned with regard to the vegetation, namely: "he planted a garden" (2:8) and "he made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food" (2:9). Both works together tell us that God as the planter as well as the grower is their owner too and this fact also demands responsibility and care on the part of the humans in the use of all verdant nature. Wanton, indiscriminate and selfish abuse of the greeneries amounts to a "sin" against God himself, "who made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food".

The narrative speaks then of God's sollicitude and care for man so far as "he put the man whom he had formed" in the garden (2:8-15) with the avowed purpose that he must "till it and keep it" (2:15; cf. also 2:5; 3:17, 23; 4:2).

Humans are expected not merely to till the earth and cultivate it but guard it, watch over it, preserve it and protect it from all damage and destruction and decimation.

The earth belongs to YHWH. Humans are only guardians and trustees of the earth and they are called to a state of service to prove themselves in a realm that is not their own possession. It is a "ministry of praise" which is called for as "an obligation to this God and this God's creation". Human beings must be "authors of life and not proliferators of death".<sup>18</sup>

17. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, p. 199

18. Craghan J. F., *Psalms: Prayers for the Ups and Downs and In-Betweens of Life*, Wilmington, Glazier (1985) pp. 29-30; Von Rad, op. cit., p. 78; Luke, op. cit., p. 85; Raja, R. J., "Eco-spirituality in the Psalms" in VJTR, Vol. 53 (1989) p. 644.

There is a subtle interplay here of both a secular and a religious sense in the use of the two words "tilling and keeping".

The Hebrew word "*abad*" is often used in the sense of cultivating the soil as here (cf. 2:5; 3:23; 4:2 etc); and it takes on also a religious meaning, namely, serving God (cf. Dt. 4:19). In the same way, the term "*samer*" is used in a profane sense to denote guarding, protecting, keeping, caring for, looking after etc (cf. Gen. 4:9; 30:31) and at the same time, in legal texts, to mean observance of religious commands, ordinances and duties (cf. Gen. 17:9; Lev. 18:5). The juxtaposition of these two terms both here and in the priestly discipline in Leviticus (cf. Lev. 3:7-8; 8:26; 18:5-6) leads us to think of the interplay of two motifs, that of Eden and the tabernacle, of work and cult.<sup>19</sup> Agriculture as well as cult (from the Latin root '*colere*') form an inseparable pair in the constitution of human beings. Work as cult becomes a sacred mandate from God and is intrinsic to human nature. It is not as though that the humans are created to work in order to relieve the gods from being overworked or tired or that work is given as a punishment, as it is portrayed in Enuma Elish (E.E. 6:33-36) or in Atrahasis (A.I. 190-197), in the Babylonian, Sumerian or Akkadian myths. Work is thus demythologized and assumes an independent significance as a determining factor in the creation of human persons.<sup>20</sup> Work is cult indeed!

By "*tilling the earth and guarding it*" the humans fulfil the commission received from God at their very creation. Tilling the soil alone is meaningless without watching what is sown or planted grow, by manuring, watering, weeding, guarding, pruning etc. The rich potentialities of the soil

19. Wenham, *op. cit.*, p. 67. One can see here the relation between the two words; cult and cultivation or cultivation which is cult and viceversa.

20. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, pp. 229-232; Wenham *op. cit.*, p. 67.

must be exploited and channelized for the good of all humankind. Thus "spoliation and exploitation of the earth and its productivity show disrespect for the creator's commission, and must in the end operate to the detriment of humanity. When humanity fouls and pollutes the earth that has been put in its charge, it destroys the environment that God has entrusted it to watch over".<sup>21</sup>

The accelerating speed with which a monumental environmental holocaust is taking place in every part of the globe is thoughtless. The gigantic proportions with which indiscriminate destruction of nature and created realities are speeding on in the name of progress is scandalous. The alarming rate with which artificial needs are created by the annihilation of created realities is atrocious and condemnable. The pollution of the air we breathe, the poisoning of the water we drink, the destroying and killing of both animals and the various species of vegetation are, to say the least, sinful and unforgivable.

The command "*to till the earth and guard it*" demands from us a "responsibility as custodians of the world which is God's gift. We must indeed develop the world and we must use all the discoveries of science and technology in doing so. We cannot, however, use the world just for our own profit and convenience. We must "*keep*" the earth, and prudently conserve its riches, we must avoid exploitation and waste which are simply a desecration of what God has placed at our disposal".<sup>22</sup>

What is said here of the earth applies naturally to all the living creatures. The Lord who formed the humans "out of the dust" (2:7) has also made "out of the ground" (2:19) all the beasts and the birds and all vegetation (2:9).

21. Westermann, *A Practical commentary*, p. 19; Maher, op. cit., p. 37.

22. Maher, op. cit., p. 38.

Thus more than a rupture and a break, there seems to exist a certain similarity and continuity and a commonality in origin among the humans and all the living beings. This again is an invitation to the humans not to treat them as enemies and conquer, destroy and decimate but to tender, nurture and take care of them. Although the animals are presented here as helpers fit for man (2:18), yet it is the man himself who decides against them. They are not worthy helpers in the ultimate sense which God sought and planned for him. Hence it is said again that "there was not found a helper fit for him" (2:20).

But the fact that he gives names to them brings out the positive role which the animals play in the life of the humans and vice versa. The act of naming them does endow certain authority for the humans over them. But it also may mean that he is putting in order the living world in which he has been placed. "By naming the animals the man opens up, determines and orders his world and incorporates them into his life".<sup>23</sup>

Thus the J narrative presents all the creatures in their interrelatedness. It is integral to the creation of the human beings that they are placed in relationship to all the living creatures in so far as all of them are from the dust (2:7) or from the ground (2:9-19). Mother earth is the ground of our being; to Mother earth we shall all return. May this Mother earth then constantly remind us humans of our rights and duties towards the earth where all created realities find a home and a hearth an "oikos" from which comes the term ecology.

We may not close our study on the Creation Narratives without a brief reference to the Noachic covenant in ch. 9 of Genesis. It is only in relation to ch. 9 that chs. 1-2 ac-

23. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, pp. 228-229; Von Rad, op. cit., p. 81; Bruce Vauter, *On Genesis : A New Reading.*, Doubleday Inc.; New York, 1977, p. 74.

quire their full meaning. The words "This is the sign of the covenant which I make between *me* and *you* and *every living creature* that is with you" (9:12) express the significance of the words "fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over..." (1:28). The covenant brings about a community of all the living creatures with the humans and with God. Human beings are no more Lords over the creatures but it is God who is the supreme Lord over both. It is in this harmonious relationship of the humans with the creatures that the sole mastery of God over everything and everyone is acknowledged and accepted. It is in preserving and promoting this interrelatedness among all creatures that the humans reflect the image and likeness of God himself. This is biblical wisdom, this is ecological wisdom, this is true wisdom with regard to God, world and the humans.

### Conclusion

As seen above, the two Creation Narratives are a constant reminder to us of the fact that we humans are *masters*, *brothers/sisters* and *servants* of the whole of the cosmos, the living and non-living beings.

We are *masters* in the sense that we should exercise a benevolent "dominion" over them as shepherd-leaders. It becomes our bounden duty to display our prophetic role in the defence of all creatures. It is but an expression of our commitment to justice that we avoid both an uncritical despotism and an unthoughtful indifferentism in our attitude towards the creatures. On the contrary, our approach to all created realities must be one of concern, care and solicitude.

We are called to be *brothers/sisters* of nature since we are united to nature in our origin from the same "Mother-earth" as well as the same "Father-God". As members of the same great family of God on this earth we humans must reach out in love towards all the other members of this family, namely the whole of cosmos, in the footsteps of

Francis of Assisi, who included in the list of his family members all the living and non-living creation.

Lastly, it is our duty to become *servants* of all creation in so far as like guardians and trustees, we look after the welfare and prosperity of the things and the beings entrusted to our care. As responsible stewards we shall take pride in serving all the voiceless creatures (matter, vegetation etc.) as well as the voiced ones (the animal kingdom, birds, fish etc.). It is in serving them we also serve the creator of all these.

Thus the call to be *masters, brothers / sisters* and *servants* to all the created realities is not only an invitation, but also a challenge! The Creation Narratives in Genesis are a reminder to us that the earth is our home since it is 'His home'. The inner secret of creation is the indwelling of God which calls for the formation and celebration of the ideal of a loving community of all the species of creation-living and non-living. If "option for the poor" is a must, "option for life" becomes an absolute must!

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