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# FORWARD TO THE GARDEN OF EDEN<sup>1</sup>

*Elmer A Martens*

*“Essential to the  
“Day of the  
Lord” and the  
“Kingdom of  
God” is trans-  
formation—also  
of nature.*

For centuries, millennia, farmers have worked the soil. Then as forests were cleared and land was put into food production, erosion became a problem. Other problems were to follow, especially with the coming of modern technology: salinization, acid rain, and water pollution. Questions are being raised not only about land but about dangers to the whole physical environment, including deterioration of the ozone layer and the potentially disastrous greenhouse effect.<sup>2</sup>

Considering all that is happening to the soil and to the entire physical environment, it is imperative for Christian people to look again at Scripture to learn how God sees creation and how human beings are meant to live within their creation/environment.<sup>3</sup> In discussing environmental issues from the biblical perspective, it is customary to begin with Genesis 1 and 2, but there are advantages to beginning with the “end.” If we understand what God intends ultimately to bring about for planet earth and its people, we are in a better position to learn how we may be aligned with that intention. This essay departs from the customary stress on stewardship as a way of relating humankind to the environment.

## *Day of the Lord*

The prophets paint a picture of how things will be when God’s purpose in the world is

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realized. A favorite expression for this state of affairs is “Day of the Lord.” This “day” will be dominated majestically by the Lord God. It will be his day! While it is true that God is eternally in control of the world, this “day” will be one where his righteous rule will be fully disclosed and realized. God himself will be center stage. He will fill the screen. It will be a day, as one scholar has put it, “monopolized by Yahweh.” The “day” is not only for the end of time. Still, the “day” is a description of how things will ultimately end; a final act in the world’s drama will be a restoration of the world to its original intent.

Since the time of Adam and Eve, evil has strutted on the world’s stage and made foul what God intended to be good. But evil will be brought under control through God’s judgment (a facet of the action on the Day of the Lord) and the ideal, God-intended world will come into being. That world is one characterized by transformation, shalom, and compassion.

### *Transformation*

We can learn from Ezekiel what the vision for the future entails. The current scene is largely one of persons with stony hearts. In the time of transformation, people will have a new heart, one of flesh, and be governed by a new spirit. But more, human society will be altered. Israel, but the nations also, will honor and worship the Lord. Social dynamics will take a new turn — not for the worse, but always for the good. And the physical environment — nature — will be transformed too. The land, once wasted, will be “like the garden of Eden” (Ezek. 36:22-38).

The promise that nature will be transformed is customarily treated as a footnote because the personal and societal dimensions of the transformation are so stunning and so critical to life generally. We as human beings have an understandable interest in what will happen to us. But we are not alone on God’s planet earth. About us is the physical environment made up of animate creatures as well as rocks, trees, soil, and atmosphere. And these items are not only stage props in order to make for us a liveable world. They have large value in themselves (Ps. 104).

Because the environment is of intrinsic value and not only for the sake of human beings, it figures prominently in texts about the Day of the Lord. Hosea announces a “day” in which God will “answer the heavens” and they in turn will “answer the earth.” That is, God will touch the heavens so they will yield their moisture and provide ideal conditions for the earth. The earth will respond as it was meant to, with the production of grain, wine, and oil (Hosea 2:21-22). As the chart shows, the themes in this section are parallel, with Stanza “B” saying “more” than Stanza A in that the sweep is larger. The linkage between environment and spirituality is noteworthy (cf. Hosea 4:1-3).

Stanza A (Hos. 2:16-20)	Stanza B (Hos. 2:21-23)
A focus on the earth (v. 18)	A focus on the cosmos (v.21)
Harmony among earth's creatures	Harmony between heaven & earth
Outcome: security	Outcome: abundant production
A reversal, a single metaphor	A reversal, multiple metaphors
Response: You are my husband.	Response: You are my God.

Isaiah also focuses on the physical environment. He speaks eloquently of a wilderness blooming like a rose (Isa. 35:2). Similarly Joel waxes eloquent about the transformed time. In an oracle addressed to the land the Lord says,

“Be not afraid, O land; be glad and rejoice.  
Be not afraid, O wild animals,  
for the open pastures are becoming green.  
The trees are bearing their fruit;  
the fig tree and the vine yield their riches”.

(Joel 2:21-22)

Nature is a reality in its own right. While nature is most often viewed in connection with human beings, it need not be. Nature was called into being not alone for the benefit of human beings; it was God's handiwork and joy, quite apart from the question of utility for humans.

### *Shalom*

The transformation results in a new scene, one characterized by shalom. Individuals are at peace with God and themselves (Joel 2:32). Human society, ceasing from the conflicts that now characterize it, will function in harmony. Isaiah depicts all the nations coming to learn the law of God from Israel (Isa 2:1-4). And when they do, “they shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” But that future time of shalom includes a physical environment enjoying conditions favorable to shalom.

Shalom, as often remarked, is more than the absence of conflict. It denotes wholeness, integration, freedom from fear, and security.<sup>4</sup> One of the stated features of the Day of Yahweh is a shalom situation for animals. The idyllic scene is graphically presented by Isaiah:

“The wolf will live with the lamb,  
the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;  
and a little child will lead them.  
The cow will feed with the bear,  
their young will lie down together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox...

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain". (Isa. 11:6-9)

That last line functions as a refrain for Isaiah (cf. 65:25). Violence, the destroyer of shalom, shall be no more. The carnivorous animals will have a transformed appetite. Ravenous beasts will not be a threat to anyone walking (Isa. 35-9). God will make a covenant involving humans and animals (Hosea 2:18). The "fear and dread" brought upon animals by human beings will be removed (cf. Gen. 9:2). Judgment will fall on evil and the perpetration of violence, and genuine, peaceful coexistence will be a reality.

The violence which will cease is a violence brought on by human beings, which accounts in part for the disasters in the physical world. Humans cause spoilage in the environment. Using the form of a lawsuit, God makes allegations against Israel. There is killing and stealing. "They break all restraint, with bloodshed after bloodshed" (Hos. 4:2). With this crisp sketch of violence comes the notation of the consequence: "Therefore the land will mourn; and everyone who dwells there will waste away with the beast of the field and the birds of the air; even the fish of the sea will be taken away" (Hos. 4:3). Environmental degradation is decisively linked with human immorality.<sup>5</sup> In part, the ruthless treatment of the environment arises out of greed. Ezekiel can describe a transformed creation, but he does so in the context of changed persons and a renewed society.

### *Compassion*

But the day of the Lord is precisely this: a day of God! The pleasant scene of shalom in society and creation is not one expected to emerge out of an evolutionary process. No, God's intervention is essential. Key to that intervention is God's righteousness whereby he brings to judgment all that is evil and destructive. One characteristic of that righteousness is compassion.

Hosea 2 depicts the coming day as one in which God will make a covenant with the beasts of the field, with the birds of the air, and with the creeping things of the earth (2:18 [20]). At the same time God will betroth Israel to himself forever. That bridal engagement, as well as his covenant with nature's creatures, will be "in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness (*hesed*) and compassion (*yaham*) (2:19 [21]). While emphasis on righteousness and justice has frequently been discussed as a springboard for Yahweh's actions, Yahweh's compassion has received less attention. But the time of transformation will be prompted by Yahweh's compassion on the physical world.

Such a conclusion about God's compassion accords with the way God's relationship to the world of nature is presented in Old Testament stories, laws, and poetry.<sup>6</sup> The story of Jonah ends with the question: "And should I not pity Nineveh in which there are 120,000 persons, and also much livestock?" (Jon. 4:11). It has been properly contended that the final question is a clue to the message of the entire book, which is that God's concern extends beyond the particular people, Israel, to other of the world's people such as Assyria. But with the final words, "and much livestock," a twist is introduced. In the preceding dialogue the conversation between God and Jonah has centered on the word "pity," which in Hebrew is a word associated with eyes overflowing with tears. Divine compassion extends to the animal world. God cares for the cows of Nineveh. Jesus made the same point when he declared that God cares for the sparrows in Jerusalem.

God's laws mention a divine compassion for the world of birds as well as the world of animals. When persons come upon a bird's nest, the mother bird is not to be taken. The reproduction of the species is safeguarded (Deut. 22:6-7). Jewish rabbis noted that this command about the mother bird is one of two, obedience to which carries a promise of long life. The other is honor of parents (Exod. 20:12). The ox who threshes is to be given nourishment (Deut. 25:4). Not to be dismissed as an add-on, but quite expressive of God's compassion is the Sabbath law which calls for owners of domestic animals to ensure that working animals get the day off (Deut. 5:14). There is even a law not to ignore a donkey or ox which has fallen in the road: "help him get it to its feet" (Deut. 22:4). Similarly the Psalms declare that God's compassion is over all that he has made (Ps. 145:9), a compassion that is expressed in God's direct care for trees and animals (Ps. 104:14-16). Meister Eckhart, a medieval mystic, said, "The first outburst of everything God does is compassion."<sup>7</sup>

When from these Scriptures we come to Gen. 2:15, it is quickly clear that to till the earth is not only to make it productive, or even merely to preserve it. The Hebrew word *samar*, translated "keep" means "to preserve" but also "to watch out for." Beyond maintenance, lest nature be depleted, the mandate is to watch out for nature, to tend it, and to do so in the way God does, namely with compassion.

The Day of the Lord will be ushered in as God comes fully on the scene and in righteousness and justice deals decisively with evil and then in lovingkindness and compassion restores shalom to individuals, to the entire human society and to the world of nature. God will rule, and a new order will prevail. That which the Old Testament calls "The Day of the Lord," the New Testament calls "The Kingdom of God." It will not be a surprise then, to find that in the New Testament also, the Kingdom of God

is not to be understood apart from transformation, shalom, and compassion. All three impinge on the question of creation/environment.

### *The Kingdom of God*

Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:15). He pointed to God's rule. Luke, the historian, captures this focus in the book of Acts. The opening verses raise the topic of the Kingdom of God (1:6). In the final chapter Paul is reported expounding about the Kingdom of God (Acts 28:23-31). The early church encapsulated the Christian message in Kingdom of God terminology. Like the Day of the Lord, the Kingdom of God was associated with transformation, shalom, and compassion.

#### *Transformation*

The term Kingdom of God pointed to a reality different from the present. The news about the rule of a righteous King meant transformation. John, the revelator, announced a time when the kingdoms of this world would become the Kingdom of our God. Like the Day of the Lord, with which it is really to be equated, the Kingdom will not be ushered in apart from great convulsions, even cosmic convulsions as God in his wrath judges evil (Rev. 6:17). In another pictorial, Babylon, representative of the world's evil system, will be toppled (Rev. 18-19). The transformed time is one in which Babylon, signifying evil, is replaced in Jerusalem, signifying the cleansed and holy. The orientation of the Book of Revelation is future.

But, as Bible readers know, the Kingdom of God became present with Jesus and so is not to be conceptualized as future only. Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is among you." He, as the ruling figure, was inaugurating the Kingdom of God with his ministry. Like the Day of the Lord, of which the prophets spoke, the Kingdom of God was near. In fact, it was "here," present. The coming of Jesus in the flesh represented the "day" when God was on the scene. It was a time, somewhat like a film preview, when the world got a glimpse of "the day monopolized by Yahweh."

On a personal level Jesus spoke of being born again as requisite to entry into the Kingdom of God (John 3:3; cf. 4:1-26). But Jesus had more in mind than the transformation of single persons. He opened his "Sermon on the Mount" with an allusion to the kingdom and traced out a radically different ethic as appropriate to life in the kingdom. As he said later, his society was not a kingdom of this world; but the church, a transformed society.

On the level of nature and physical environment, the New Testament, while not expansive, is not silent. There is more than a hint that the coming

of the kingdom will bring a change in the natural order. Jesus restrained the storm, which was about to bring havoc on the Sea of Galilee, by saying: "Peace, be still" (Mark 4:35-41). The productivity of a future time was signalled by the transformation of water into wine at the wedding of Canaan (John 2:1-12). It was a sign, a clue, of not only who Jesus was, but of things to come. The Bible's final chapter depicts a river totally free from pollution. It is a pure, unadulterated river, clear as crystal. The tree of life is there yielding its fruit every month. The revamping of the natural order will be so drastic that in the future time of transformation night and darkness will not exist (Rev. 22:1-5).

### *Shalom*

Shalom, in the sense of wholeness, as well as peace and freedom from conflict, is unquestionably dominant in the Kingdom of God. The King of that Kingdom is a Prince of Peace (Is. 9:6). The incarnation of Jesus was a harbinger of peace, as the heavenly host at Christ's birth announced (Luke 2:14). The ministry of Jesus was a peace-bringing ministry.<sup>8</sup> Jesus restored men and women to wholeness physically (Mk. 10:46-52), emotionally (Mk. 9:14-29), and spiritually (Matt. 11:28). On a societal level also, the work of Jesus was peace-oriented. As Paul explained, the new society, the church, is the place where walls of hostility and division come tumbling down (Eph. 2:14-15). A harmonious society is the end-result of Christ's redeeming work. Gordon Zerbe observes, "To express this new social reality in the coming kingdom, the New Testament frequently uses the image of the banquet, a harmonious table fellowship where all are satisfied."<sup>9</sup>

But beyond the effects of Christ's redemption on individual persons or on society are the shalom-bringing results in the physical world. Paul explains that Jesus is the reconciler of all things in heaven and on earth (Col. 1:19-20). Such a statement presupposes cosmic havoc which, through Christ, will be brought under control and into a state of shalom. The word "reconcile" is used for human beings, of course, but now all things are envisioned as reconciled. The power of the resurrection has its effect not only on humanity but also on the cosmos. To hold, therefore, that transformation is for individuals and society is too limited an explanation of Christ's work. His death on the cross and his resurrection has an impact for good upon "things in heaven and on the earth." Christ's resurrection entitles him to rule over the entire universe (1 Cor. 15:24-28). That nature is not outside Christ's redemptive work is made clear by Paul when he explains that currently nonhuman creation groans to be released from the harm done it (Rom. 8:19). Sin is so wide-ranging in its damage that nature too has been corrupted because of it. Christ's work undoes the hold which

“futility” has on nature. In fact, in order to bring shalom, God destroys “those who destroy the earth” (Rev. 11:18). It soon follows that if believers are aligned with God they will be God’s partners in bringing redemptive effects, not only to individuals and to society, but to nature.

### *Compassion*

If we ask by what is the restoration and renewal of the Kingdom driven, the answer will need to take into account royal compassion. King Jesus, as presented in the gospels, is not infatuated with power, though his miracles testify eloquently to that power. The Incarnate God moved on the human stage with divine compassion. When he saw the multitude, he was moved with compassion (Matt. 9:36). The parable of the Good Samaritan is a parable about compassion (Luke 10:25-37). To the broken people in this world Jesus extended compassion. Over entire societies he yearned with deep compassion: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often I have longed to gather your children together...but you were not willing” (Matt. 23:27).

No so directly stated, but to be inferred, is Christ’s stance of compassion toward non-human creation. He had an eye for lilies in the field, for grass, and for birds (Matt. 6:26-30). He declared the Father’s (and his own) knowledge about the destiny of single sparrows (Matt. 10:29), and might we say, entire species? A Christian’s assurance of God’s provision derives from God’s compassionate care over sparrows, that which we describe as nature or the cosmic order. The argument of Jesus is not that since God is compassionate with human beings, he will also be compassionate with nature. The argument is the reverse. God’s care-giving to lilies and sparrows is reason to believe that God will extend compassion to his children, who are of greater worth than sparrows (Matt. 10:31). When Jesus was challenged about healing on the Sabbath, he invoked the law about hurting animals and asked about sheep in the ditch (Matt. 12:11). His argument was that if compassion is extended to beasts, should it not be extended to human cripples?

Research into the “Day of the Lord” in the Old Testament and the “Kingdom of God” in the New Testament has shown that God’s interest extends to the world of nature as well as to individuals and societies. From both Testaments we learn that essential to these topics is a transformation of the current chaos and violence to shalom. That change results from God’s intervention, which is born out of compassion. When God’s salvation plan reaches fulfillment, it will include a transformation of the earth, a return to the garden of Eden. But it must be emphasized that the Kingdom of God, while clearly future, has already broken into history with Jesus and that what will be, is in Christ already underway. Believers are

co-workers with him working toward shalom and doing so with compassion.

Will violence depart from the deep seas, where fish have myriad ways to both escape predators and to lure their own prey? Will the terror of the hunted and the hunter depart from the forests and fields, where sudden death is the norm and where even ants enslave each other? Or, more to our point, can this earth of ours survive our own violent and careless attacks upon it?

This essay argues that the answer to the questions above is given in view of God's intention for the earth. He will yet transform it and bring wholesale shalom. Christ's redemption will include the redemption of the material creation. This hope gives directives to Christians about environmental matters. The connection between the old creation and the new creation provides the argument for Christians to be active in the preservation and the enhancement of the natural environment. In so doing they build bridgeheads, witnessing to God's final shalom for all living and non-living things.

Unquestionably the good news of the gospel for persons individually and for society is of highest importance. If as believers we work in the interests of God's plan to redeem persons and peoples, must we not also, if we believe in the full gospel, work toward the transfiguration of nature? There are people everywhere who are suggesting how this might be done. This essay argues from Scripture that it must be done.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This essay is a slightly abridged version of a think piece requested by the Mennonite Brethren Peace Education Committee (U.S.A.) in preparation for formulating an official "position paper" on the environment.

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of the issues from a Christian viewpoint, see Donald A. Hay, "Christians and the Global Greenhouse", *Tyndale Bulletin*, 41.1 (1990): 109-127.

<sup>3</sup>In popular literature the critical term is "environment" (e.g. O.H. Steck, *World and Environment*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1980). In other Christian literature the term is often "creation" (e.g. Calvin Redekop, "Toward a Mennonite Theology and Ethic of Creation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 60 (1986): 387-403. Since creation means more than the physical world, its resources and its creatures, the term "environment" or "nature" will be primarily used here.

<sup>4</sup>Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice and Peace* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup>Calvin B. DeWitt, "Seven Degradations of Creation," in *The Environment and the Christian*. Calvin B. DeWitt, ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), pp. 13-23.

<sup>6</sup>The element of Yahweh's compassion as important for a Christian's approach to environment is explored in greater detail by the writer in "Yahweh's Compassion and Ecotheology" ZAW forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in M. Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) p. 56.

<sup>8</sup>William Klassen, *Love of Enemy: The Way of Peace* (Fortress, 1984).

<sup>9</sup>Gordon Zerbe, "The Kingdom of God and Stewardship of Creation," in *The Environment and the Christian*, pp. 73-92, citing p. 80. The writer gratefully acknowledges his debt to Gordon Zerbe in offering a "Kingdom Perspective" on the subject of the environment. See also "Ecology and Eschatology" by Francis Bridger, *Tyndale Bulletin* 41.1, (1990): 290-301.