

Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture

An Agrarian Reading of the Bible

ELLEN F. DAVIS
Duke Divinity School

Foreword by Wendell Berry

 **CAMBRIDGE**
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521732239

© Ellen F. Davis 2009

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2009
Reprinted 2009, 2010

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Davis, Ellen F.
Scripture, culture, and agriculture : an agrarian reading of the Bible /
Ellen F. Davis.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-0-521-51834-5 (hardcover : alk. paper) – ISBN 978-0-521-73223-9 (pbk. : alk.
paper)

1. Land use – Biblical teaching. 2. Agricultural conservation – Biblical teaching.
3. Bible. O.T. – Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Title.

BS1199.L28D39 2009
261.8'8–dc22 2008027119

ISBN 978-0-521-51834-5 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-73223-9 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of
URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and
does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or
appropriate.

*For Dwayne, Ellie, Raphael, Luca, Ezra, Isaac, Paiter, and Nicolaas,
with thanks and thanksgiving.*



2) great inheritance on which his life depends."³⁹ The second fact with which the prophets confront us is this: Like every other member of this covenanted unity, we humans occupy a place that is delimited by *tôrôt*, divine teachings, and when we violate the prescribed limits, the consequences are inevitably disastrous, for ourselves, for "all flesh," and for the earth, the fertile soil itself.

In her poem-prayer "A Short Testament," Anne Porter articulates the sensibility to which the prophet-poets Isaiah and Jeremiah direct us, an active apprehension of moral failure that reaches to every corner of God's "wide creation":

Whatever harm I may have done
In all my life in all your wide creation
If I cannot repair it
I beg you to repair it,
.....

And where there are lives I may have withered around me,
Or lives of strangers far or near
That I've destroyed in blind complicity,
And if I cannot find them
Or have no way to serve them,

Remember them. I beg you to remember them

When winter is over
And all your unimaginable promises
Burst into song on death's bare branches.⁴⁰

In this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate that the biblical writers give us language, verbal images, to see what we are doing and the likely consequences. The next chapter engages the modern agrarian writers more directly, with the aim of showing how and why their sensibilities illumine the biblical text and guide us in bringing its insights to bear on our current practices of land use.



Reading the Bible Through Agrarian Eyes

Rabbi 'Aḥai ben Josiah says:

He who purchases grain in the market place, to what may he be likened?
To an infant whose mother died; although he is taken from door to door
to other wet nurses, he is not satisfied.

He who buys bread in the market place, what is he like? He is as good as
dead and buried.

He who eats of his own is like an infant raised at its mother's breast.¹

At the beginning of the creation of the world, the Holy One, blessed be he,
began with planting first.

For it is written:

"And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden"

(Gen. 2:8)

You too when you enter the land shall engage in nothing but planting.
Therefore it is written:

"And when ye shall come into the land, ye shall have planted . . ."

(Lev. 19:23).²

Though he works and worries, the farmer
never reaches down to where the seed turns
into summer. The earth *grants*.

(Rainer Maria Rilke)³

ETHICS AND EXEGESIS

The first essay in this volume suggests that the contemporary agrarian writers may help us re-member a way of life that honors the wholeness of creation.

Now I want to make a stronger and therefore riskier claim: Reading the work of the contemporary agrarians can make us better readers of Scripture. The exegetical project begun in these essays is developing as a conversation between critical biblical study and contemporary agrarian thinking, and the one is as indispensable to it as the other. I am learning to read the Bible through agrarian eyes, helped by the now rapidly expanding body of agrarian writings, some of them literature of the highest quality. I am helped also by my students; since we live in a region of the country that is (or has recently been) semirural, some of them have much more direct knowledge of the land and its care than I do. Yet, this is slow work. If agrarianism were a technique of literary criticism, even a hermeneutic, I might more quickly become adept. But it is a mind-set, a whole set of understandings, commitments, and practices that focus on the most basic of all cultural acts – eating – and ramify into virtually every other aspect of public and private life. Agrarianism is aptly described as “a cultural contract fashioned to work in a specific time and place.”⁴

The essential understanding that informs the agrarian mind-set, in multiple cultures from ancient times to the present, is that agriculture has an ineluctably ethical dimension. Our largest and most indispensable industry, food production entails at every stage judgments and practices that bear directly on the health of the earth and living creatures, on the emotional, economic, and physical well-being of families and communities, and ultimately on their survival. Therefore, sound agricultural practice depends upon knowledge that is at one and the same time chemical and biological, economic, cultural, philosophical, and (following the understanding of most farmers in most places and times) religious. Agriculture involves questions of value and therefore of moral choice, whether or not we care to admit it.

The biblical writers share that understanding of agriculture and of eating itself, as the essays that follow demonstrate. To use contemporary religious language, they have a “theological ethic” that embraces those crucial areas of cultural activity. Precisely for that reason, their mind-set differs from that of most contemporary readers of the Bible, although there are a few noteworthy exceptions. Orthodox Jews have a theological ethic of eating, and in some quarters that has come to include ecologically responsible eating. The Amish, many of whom earn their livelihood from farming, might constitute the fullest exception: As a community, they have retained a recognition, once widespread, of the ethical and theological significance of agriculture.

Growing into an agrarian mind-set or ethic is challenging, not only for me personally, but also for our society as a whole, including many or most of our agricultural “professionals.” Currently, there are active in our culture

two opposing agricultural ethics, and the one dominant among scientists and industrial-scale food producers is what botanist and plant pathologist Robert Zimdahl calls the “productionist ethic.” He identifies its sole imperative thus:

... to produce as much as possible, regardless of the ecological costs and perhaps even if it is not profitable to the producer... The experts who conduct agricultural research and those who apply the resultant technology to produce food have not paid much attention to the long-term ecological and social effects of the enterprise because the immediate utilitarian benefit of production has been so apparent.⁵

The chief value operative in our industrial food system is monetary, and it is measured by the profit margins of large corporations. The productionist ethic has prevailed thus far with the North American public because its short-term benefit is food that is cheap at the supermarket. However, that food is purchased at the high cost of enormous ecological damage. Zimdahl details various interrelated forms of damage that can be traced substantially, if not wholly, to agriculture.⁶ They include:

- *Depletion of water resources* by irrigation, along with *waterlogging and salinization of soil* through overirrigation. Agriculture consumes 70 percent of the water used by humans, yet the millennia-long history of agriculture shows that irrigation practices eventually result in irretrievable damage: “No irrigation dependent society, with the possible exception of Egypt, has survived.”
- *Desertification and soil erosion*, both results of the removal of forest and moisture- and soil-retaining plant cover. Seventy percent of the world’s drylands may now be threatened by desertification. Perhaps one-third of all topsoil in the United States has already been lost, and erosion rates greatly outpace the soil replacement rate — under agricultural conditions, about one inch every 500 years.
- *Fertilizer and pesticide contamination* of water sources (from local streams to the Gulf of Mexico), food, and animal feed; atmospheric contamination by ammonia and methane. Most of the 220,000 deaths that result from pesticide pollution each year occur in the developing world.

Ecological damage is correlated with and compounded by social costs: the steady and widespread deterioration of rural communities around the world, and the unsustainable swelling of cities, especially in South Asia and Africa, due to the influx of farmers who have lost their land and livelihood. The productionist ethic assumes that humans, armed with technology, can control

natural systems and direct them to our ends. In other words, it assumes that science and technology are both limitlessly powerful and benign – although ordinary reason would judge that combination to be unlikely.

The productionist ethic is a way of thinking aimed solely at maximizing short-term profit for the relative few. It contrasts completely with the “land ethic” set forth by Aldo Leopold in an essay, written in the mid-twentieth century, that remains seminal for ecological and agrarian thinking. The land ethic expresses itself in patterns of thought and life directed toward the long-term health (sustainability) of the “land community.” *Homo sapiens* belongs, as “plain member and citizen,”⁷ to a community consisting of soil, water, air, and animate creatures ranging from the microbial to the mammal; the lives of all these are intertwined in countless complex ways, most of them still unknown. Leopold identifies the one great change we must make in order to be responsible citizens: “[Q]uit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem. Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”⁸

Leopold, a forester and professor of agricultural economics and game management (University of Wisconsin), has the sensibility of a naturalist; he combines the scientist’s precise awareness of the operation of natural systems with the poet’s esthetic sensitivity to wholeness and beauty, including beauty that is being lost or (more commonly now) actively destroyed. “We are remodeling the Alhambra with a steam-shovel, and we are proud of our yardage. We shall hardly relinquish the shovel, which after all has many good points, but we are in need of gentler and more objective criteria for its successful use.”⁹ Such a sensibility and voice is even more indispensable to the ethical conversation now than it was sixty years ago. Leopold himself was a naturalist utterly unlike the (eighteenth-century) stereotype of an assiduous hobbyist writing for the edification of the “gentle” class. The contemporary naturalist, Barry Lopez suggests, serves as “a kind of emissary . . . , working to reestablish good relations with all the biological components humanity has excluded from its moral universe.” Therefore, she cannot afford to be economically naïve or politically apathetic; “a politics with no biology, or a politics without field biology . . . is a vision of the gates of Hell.”¹⁰

Neither Lopez nor Leopold expresses a religious sensibility, and certainly not a biblical one. Leopold objects to what he takes to be the Bible’s view of unlimited human privilege,¹¹ and Lopez seeks “to keep the issue of spirituality

free of religious commentary.”¹² Yet their understanding that humans are bound to the earth in an integrity that is biological, moral, and “spiritual,” as well as political and economic, is not so alien to the biblical worldview as they themselves might suppose. Evidence of such an awareness appears with particular density in the poetic writings of the Bible. Psalm 85, a liturgical poem that modern readers might otherwise take to be merely fanciful, offers an example:

You showed favor, YHWH, to your land;
you turned the fortune of Jacob.
You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you covered all their sin.

.....
Show us, YHWH, your faithful action [*hesed*];
and grant us your salvation.
I will listen for what God might say –
YHWH, for he speaks *shalom*
to his people and to his faithful ones,
that they may not return to folly.
Yes, [YHWH’s] salvation is close to those who fear him,
so glory may dwell in our land.
Faithful action [*hesed*] and truth meet each other;
righteousness and *shalom* kiss.
Truth springs up from the earth
and righteousness peers down from heaven.
Indeed, YHWH will give what is good
and our land will give its yield.
Righteousness goes before him,
that he may set his steps on the way. (Ps. 85:2–3, 8–14 (1–2, 7–13 Eng.))

This poem-prayer seems to reflect some disruption in the social and also the natural order. “[God’s] people” have endured severe but unspecified suffering; likely military defeat followed by exile and vassalage. Another possibility is prolonged drought, the most common form of “natural” disaster in Israel – although to the biblical writers it represents a rupture in Israel’s relationship with God (see 1 Kgs. 17:1; Jeremiah 14). In any case, the poet seeks and envisions healing, on terms that have certain points of connection with the kind of contemporary land ethic we have considered. What Leopold calls “the land community,” the biblical writers call “heaven and earth.” Here they appear in perfect harmony; the original wholeness (*shalom*) of creation is reestablished within the historical order. Underlying this picture are several related

↑
* assumptions: that humans and land exist in a biotic unity before God, that their unity has identifiable moral dimensions (faithful action, truth, righteousness), that the moral restoration of God's people elicits God's gracious response in the form of agricultural productivity, and further (as suggested by the final purpose clause), that human righteousness is the one condition that invites and even makes possible God's continued presence in the land. Those might be identified as the basic elements of the Bible's distinctly *theological* land ethic.

Every writer who has a land ethic – Leopold, Lopez, and the psalmist included – also has a specific territory. Writing that is genuinely agrarian can come only from a relationship with a place deep enough to shape the minds of writer and readers. My own mind and habits of biblical interpretation are being reshaped as I learn to take account of the biblical writers' abiding awareness of their place; I now see things I previously read past, even in very familiar texts. The effect is to make my readings more *material*. I notice how carefully the biblical writers attend to the physical means of human existence, the chief of those being arable land. I notice also how often the text – in its narrative detail or legal prescriptions, in the metaphors chosen by its poets – reflects the particularities of place. “All enduring literature is local,” says the American Midwestern writer Scott Russell Sanders – “rooted in place, in landscape or cityscape, in particular ways of speech and climates of mind.”¹³

* Certainly the Scriptures of ancient Israel know where they come from. They reflect the narrow and precariously balanced ecological niche that is the hill country of ancient Judah and Samaria – “a strip of land between two seas,” as they say, with water to the west and relatively barren wilderness to the east. The Israelite farmers knew that they survived in that steep and semiarid land by the grace of God and their own wise practices. And it was no small part of Israelite wisdom to recognize that, unlike their neighbors – the Philistines on the fertile plain of Sharon, the Egyptians and Babylonians ranged along the banks and canals of their great rivers – they had only the slightest margin for negligence, ignorance, or error. The Bible as we have it could not have been written beside the irrigation canals of Babylon, or the perennially flooding Nile, any more than it could have emerged from the vast fertile plains of the North American continent. For revelation addresses the necessities of a place as well as a people. Therefore, ancient Israel's Scripture bespeaks throughout an awareness of belonging to a place that is at once extremely fragile and infinitely precious. Fragility belongs essentially to the character of this land and may even contribute to its value. Seasonal aridity and periodic drought, a thin layer of topsoil, susceptibility to erosion – these mark the land of Canaan

as a place under the immediate, particular care of God. Thus Moses instructs the Israelites in the wilderness:

For the land into which you are entering to take possession of it – it is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come out, where you would sow your seed and water with your foot, like a vegetable garden. The land to which you are passing over [the Jordan] to possess it is a land of mountains and valleys. By the measure of the rain from the heavens it drinks water [or: you will drink water]. It is a land which YHWH your God looks after; always the eyes of YHWH your God are on it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year (Deut. 11:10–12).

This is a brilliant piece of agrarian rhetoric. The authorial voice of Deuteronomy is that of a skilled preacher, here urging the Israelites to reimagine their land as blessed precisely in the fragility that necessitates and therefore guarantees God's unwavering attention. Thus indirectly the Deuteronomic preacher commands the people's caring attention to their land, and that is the basic aim of all agrarian writing. Scott Sanders observes: “What most needs our attention now . . . is the great community of land – air and water and soil and rock, along with all the creatures, human and otherwise, that share the place. We need to imagine the country anew . . . as our present and future home, a dwelling place to be cared for on behalf of all beings for all time.”¹⁴ I believe that the Bible is much more able to promote that sort of imagining than we in this generation have recognized, for the simple reason that agrarianism is the mind-set native to many if not most of the biblical writers themselves. At the same time, if we who read the Bible, each in our own place, stretch our minds to reimagine the land we know as a home to be cherished, that effort will make us better readers of Scripture.

For ethics informs exegesis, at least as much as the other way around. In his study of New Testament ethics, Richard Hays distinguishes four “critical operations” that overlap and interpenetrate one another: (1) exegesis, (2) reading in canonical context, (3) drawing the connection with the contemporary situation, and (4) “living the text.” “The first thing we must do,” he says, “. . . is to explicate in detail the messages of the individual writings in the canon. . . .”¹⁵ But my point here is that it is not always possible to do good exegesis as a first step. Sometimes important aspects of the text are not visible to an interpreter – or a whole generation of interpreters – until there has been a reordering of our minds and even our lives, until certain gaps have been supplied in the sphere of our “active apprehension.”¹⁶ To put that in theological language, sin – lack of proper knowledge and love of God and neighbor – impedes exegesis.

These essays explore how multiple strands of the Hebrew Scriptures articulate a clear message about respect and care for the land and conversely about its destruction, and further, how that message, heard in our present context, may be crucial to ensuring the continued habitability of the earth. No generation before us needed to hear it as much as we do, because ours is the first society that has presumed to style itself as “post-agricultural.” At the end of the millennium, Steven Blank, an economist in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of California, Davis, announced – in a publication called *The Futurist* – that “American agriculture is heading for the last roundup,” and that Americans must learn to let go of a “lifestyle choice” that is becoming prohibitively expensive. “In the long run, this means becoming citizens of the world, dependent on others for food commodities while Americans produce the marvels and the know-how for the future.”¹⁷ Blank’s blithe assumption that food can be grown anywhere – “The whole world can do it”¹⁸ – and transported long distances to wherever (wealthy) people wish to eat it suggests a lack of prescience about peak oil, not to mention terrorist and climatic threats to regional food security. It is now becoming evident to many that our current practices of moving food around the world have a short future; that lifestyle choice will soon be prohibitively expensive. Moreover, it should be sobering for readers of the Bible to recognize that the tacitly accepted cultural presumption that agriculture has no essential place in the American “portfolio” separates us completely from the agrarian mind-set of the biblical writers and thus renders us incapable of seeking their guidance with respect to a matter that is vital to human health and survival in every place. That incapacity is a moral failing for which future generations will surely hold us accountable.

THE PRIMACY OF THE LAND

In the rest of this essay, I highlight four aspects of contemporary agrarian thinking that touch and illumine central elements of biblical thought about land care. The first of these is the principle that “the land comes first,”¹⁹ in a sense that is more than geological. About a dozen years ago, early in my attempts to teach on the subject of biblical theology and land use, I was reading the shelves in the soil science section of Yale’s undergraduate library, hoping to get a broad and manageably shallow overview of how scientists view land and its fertility. One title in particular caught my eye: *Meeting the Expectations of the Land*. Thinking, “Whoever came up with that title understands how the Bible thinks about land,” I pulled it off the shelf. That collection of agrarian essays, edited by Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, and Bruce Colman,

was my first introduction to a fundamentally different way of viewing land in contemporary settings.

“Meeting the expectations of the land” – agrarians know the land, not as an inert object, but as a fellow creature that can justly expect something from us whose lives depend on it. If my instinctive response to this notion was one of recognition, that is because a fundament of biblical anthropology, as set forth in the first chapters of Genesis, is that there is a kinship between humans and the earth: “And YHWH God formed the human being [’*ādām*], dust from the fertile soil [’*ādāmā*]” (Gen. 2:7). Although the wordplay is captured surprisingly well by the English pun “human from humus,” the Hebrew is more fully descriptive of their family resemblance. Both words are related to ’*ādōm*, “ruddy”; in the Levant, brownish red is the skin tone of both the people and the earth. *Terra rossa*, “red earth,” is the geological term for the thin but rich loam covering the hill country where the early Israelites settled. Thus ’*ādām* from ’*ādāmā* is localized language; it evokes the specific relationship between a people and their particular place.

To my mind, the most suggestive expression of the primacy of the earth appears a few verses after that pun, in the first Yahwistic statement about human vocation: “And YHWH God took the human and set him in the garden of Eden *lē’obēdāh ulēšomērāh*” (Gen. 2:15). I leave those words untranslated for a moment, because any translation dissolves the meaningful ambiguity in both verbal phrases. A common translation is “to till it and tend it” (NJPS), but that implies that the terms are horticultural and agricultural, and they are not. ‘*b-d* is the ordinary verb equivalent to English “work,” and it normally means to *work for* someone, divine or human, as a servant, slave, or worshiper. Much less frequently, ‘*b-d* denotes *work done on or with* some material, and in all cases but one, that material is soil (e.g., Gen. 2:5; 3:23; 4:2). In view of those nearby references to working the soil, one may certainly translate here “to work it.” But the wider usage of the verb suggests that it is legitimate also to view the human task as *working for* the garden soil, serving its needs. Even the connotation of worship (cautiously applied) may inform our understanding. While biblical religion clearly forbids divinization of the earth, one might recall that the English word “worship” originally meant “to acknowledge worth.” In that sense, the Hebrew wordplay translates well into English. The soil is worthy of our service.

In a study of Genesis 2–11 – perhaps the first full study of a biblical text to have been undertaken from an agrarian perspective – Theodore Hiebert often translates the verb ‘*b-d* thus, as “serve.” Extrapolating from that understanding, however, he goes too far in asserting that for the Yahwistic writer, “the land is a sovereign to be served.”²⁰ As is clear from the rest of the Primeval

History, including and especially the account of the flood, the creator God alone is sovereign in heaven and on earth. Although there is some truth to Hiebert's claim that "[c]ultivation was an act of service to that which held absolute power over one's survival and destiny,"²¹ the early history of humankind acknowledges power, potential for doing good and inflicting harm, on both sides of the relationship between humans and the fertile soil. When humans violate the terms of what is in fact a three-way relationship – among themselves, the fertile earth, and God – then the soil suffers degradation; it is "accursed on [their] behalf" (Gen. 3:17). The fertile earth withholds its strength (4:12), and farmers, beginning with Cain, suffer the consequences. A contemporary prayer delineates accurately the biblical understanding that our intended service to the land is a holy obligation precisely because it is part of our service to God: "Give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory. . . ." ²²

Since the first of the two verbs in Genesis 2:15 *can* be applied to working the soil, it is the second verb that confirms the ambiguity of the whole phrase; *š-m-r* does not elsewhere refer to land care.²³ A common translation is "keep" – for example, a flock (1 Sam. 17:20), or a household (2 Sam. 15:16), or a brother (Gen. 4:9). But frequently the verb translates "observe," with a variety of nuances, several of which may be apt here: to acquire wisdom by observation of the workings of the world (Ps. 107:43; Isa. 42:20), to abide by moral guidelines or the dictates of justice (Hos. 12:7 [6 Eng.]; Isa. 56:1) or even the rhythms of nature (Jer. 8:7), and – the sense that applies in the majority of instances of the verb – to observe the ordinances of God: "Yes, my Sabbaths you shall keep!" (Exod. 31:13).

So it may be that the human is charged to "keep" the garden and at the same time to "observe" it, to learn from it and respect the limits that pertain to it. Indeed, keeping the ordinances of God is the sole condition on which Israel may retain its hold on the God-given – or better, God-entrusted – land of Canaan. Thus Moses instructs the Israelites just on the eve of their entry into the land: "And you shall keep [*wššāmartā*] his statutes and his commandments which I am commanding you this day, so it may be good for you and for your children after you, in order that you may live a long time on the fertile soil [*'ādāmā*] that YHWH your God is giving to you, for all time" (Deut. 4:40). This instruction to keep the garden might then point toward the obligation to keep *torah*, the totality of divine teaching that directs Israel's life with God, in and on the land.

"And YHWH God took the human and set him in the garden of Eden to work and serve it, to preserve and observe it." Even in this (fleeting) narrative

moment of life under ideal conditions, the human does not take priority over the land. Adam comes to Eden as a protector, answerable for the well-being of the precious thing that he did not make; he is to be an observer, mindful of limits that are built into the created order as both inescapable and fitting. The biblical writer does not subscribe to the fantasy that our society has embraced as an ideal – that human ingenuity runs up against physical limits only in order to overcome them. Rather, the ambiguous verbs suggest a different orientation to reality. The land instantiates limits that God has set; we encounter it as a fellow creature to be respected and even revered.

Notably, the Yahwistic writer begins the second part of the composite creation account²⁴ by establishing the fact that the land's existence as an integrated "natural system" predated humankind: "On the day that YHWH God made earth and heaven, and before there was any shrub of the field on the earth, or any grain of the field had sprouted (for YHWH had not yet brought rain upon the earth, and there was no human to work/serve the fertile soil), then a mist would rise up from the earth and water the whole surface of the fertile soil" (Gen. 2:4b–6). This look back to the beginning is recognizably that of an Israelite, whose social world was dominated and indeed made possible by a mixed agricultural economy of rain-fed crops ("the grain of the field") and small animal husbandry, sheep and goats pastured on the "shrubs of the field."²⁵ The effect is that hearers of the creation story were reminded not so much of how things might have been in a bygone age, but of the particular features of their distinctive social and ecological niche and of the blessings and responsibilities that pertained to it. (A different account of the time before humans and culture indeed was told in Mesopotamia, where great rivers and irrigation canals, not rain, enabled the rise of agricultural empires.)²⁶ Natural systems may have been transformed by human presence and agency, but that does not mean that humans could (or ever can) control these systems. Rather, we are included within them; our life depends entirely upon their continued integrity. If we are wise, then, we will recognize that the land rightly "expects something from us." Wendell Berry's fictional character Wheeler Catlett makes that assertion and continues the thought: "The line of succession, the true line, is the membership of people who know it does."²⁷ Wheeler, the lawyer for the farming community in Berry's (semiautobiographical) world of Hargrave and Port William, Kentucky, is speaking of the line of those who properly belong to the land, whose care of the land makes them worthy to inherit it – that is, to hold it in trust for the next generation.

The Bible has a story that exemplifies the line of succession that can be secured by land care. It is the story of Noah, that "righteous man [who]

was distinguished for integrity in his age" (*'iš šaddīq tāmīm hāyā bēdōrōtāyw*, Gen. 6:9; cf. 7:1). At his birth, Noah's father Lamekh declares: "This one will bring us relief" from the long-accursed condition of the soil (5:29; cf. 3:17). That destiny is fulfilled, but only after the flood has washed away the human-initiated "ruination" of the earth (6:11–13), when God has restored the steady cycle of "seedtime and harvest" (8:22) and through Noah initiated the covenant "with all flesh on the earth" (9:17). At that point, Noah the righteous man receives a new "heroic epithet," complementary to the first: "And Noah got started [as] *'iš hā'ādāmā* [a man of the fertile soil], and he planted a vineyard" (9:20).²⁸ Norman Wirzba aptly comments:

There is an integrity to creation that depends on humans seeing themselves as properly placed within a network of creation and God. The drama shows us that neither God nor the creation itself can tolerate violence, manipulation, or shame. Instead of the hubris that characterized Adam and his descendents, Noah stands out as a beacon of the humbled *adam* who is faithful to the needs of *adamah*.²⁹

The verbs *'-b-d* and *š-m-r* imply a humble recognition of the land's primacy and its needs. The latter suggests also an element of vulnerability; anything that humans are charged to preserve, they are also capable of neglecting or violating. So the two elements of the human vocation stand in some tension as well as in complementary relation; each verb leads us back to the other. In order to live, we are obliged to "work" the land (*lē'obēdāh*) – manage it and take from it. In order to "live a long time" on it, we are equally obliged to "preserve it" (*lēšomērāh*). Limiting our take, we must submit our minds, our skills, and our strength to serving its needs – the second sense of *'-b-d*. Of the tension inherent in the biblical statement, Evan Eisenberg observes:

There is no escaping the need to manage nature. The best we can do is to observe the following rule: So manage nature as to minimize the need to manage nature. . . .

We are destined to work our way across the globe, turning Eden into something else. And we are destined – in our better moments – to protect Eden against our own work. The command to protect puts upper limits on the scope of our work and lower limits on its quality. In other words, we must not try to manage too much of the world, but what we do manage – our cities, our factories, our farms – we must manage well.³⁰

Wes Jackson's Natural Systems Agriculture epitomizes a style of management that begins with recognition of the land's primacy. An evolutionary

biologist and plant breeder, Jackson and his colleagues at The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, look to nature as "model, measure, and mentor,"³¹ allowing imagination and action to be limited and guided by the way the world itself works. While most farmers and scientists take contemporary problems and achievements as their starting point, Jackson began thirty years ago to reorient his thinking, to focus on the problem of agriculture, rather than problems in agriculture. In effect, he went behind ten thousand years of farming practice based on the domestication and cultivation of annuals. He is creating a new model based on what he observed in the tall-grass prairie: Perennial grasses and flowers, growing in mixtures, reproduce abundantly year after year, even as they build and maintain rich soils without erosion and fend off pests and disease. By contrast, annual crops grown nearby – maize, sorghum, wheat, sunflowers, and soy – require inputs of pesticides, herbicides, or fertilizers. Thus they make heavy use of fossil fuels, both directly (for farm machinery) and indirectly (for processing of the chemical inputs).

Living on and learning from the tall-grass prairie, the researchers at The Land Institute are developing a new agriculture based on perennial grains grown in polyculture. "With their roots commonly exceeding depths of two meters, perennial plant communities are critical regulators of ecosystem functions, such as water management and carbon and nitrogen cycling." In addition to requiring less fossil fuel inputs, perennial crops sequester 50 percent more carbon than do annuals. Thus they "lower the amount of carbon dioxide in the air while improving the soil's fertility."³² The Land Institute scientists do not imagine that the particular agricultural practices suited to the North American prairie could be utilized everywhere. The importance of the model they offer to agriculturalists lies in their twin principles of local adaptation and learning from natural systems. To biblical interpreters, they may provide the best exemplar currently available of what it might mean for this generation to work the garden and serve it, to observe and thus to preserve it.

WISDOM AND INFORMED IGNORANCE

A second element of contemporary agrarianism that may be correlated with a biblical mind-set is the forthright embrace of ignorance: "Since we're billions of times more ignorant than knowledgeable, why not go with our long suit and have an ignorance-based worldview?"³³ Wes Jackson has long asserted that the ecological crisis is the result of "a knowledge-based worldview founded on the assumption that we can accumulate enough knowledge to bend nature pliantly and to run the world." The alternative he proposes is "regarding

informed ignorance as an apt description of the human condition and the appropriate result of a good education."³⁴

Likewise, botanist and plant pathologist Robert Zimdahl describes his own professional education as growth into an appropriate ignorance:

I recall learning as a student that metaphorically speaking science was able to shine light on human problems and solve them. . . . However, we also learned that as the area of light grew, the area of darkness surrounding it grew more. It seemed incongruous, but as our knowledge grew, our ignorance grew even more. But, that is how the world works. We learn through education what we don't know.³⁵

Jackson and Zimdahl have both devoted a lifetime to scientific study, and they share a concern to "expand the realm of enquiry about agriculture."³⁶ If they share also the understanding that ignorance is not finally a fixable problem, or even a problem at all, that is not because they repudiate the value of scientific knowledge. What they do reject is the modern conceit that human behavior is invariably ameliorated by more knowledge: If we knew for certain that some of our behaviors were wrong, we would stop them. Thus, they share the biblical writers' view that what underlies moral failure is not simple ignorance but rather *sin* (a word that Jackson at least is willing to use): a culpable pride, a destructive lack of humility.

The idea that moral and spiritual health begins with the willingness to be "void of self-wisdom"³⁷ is especially strong in the thought of the biblical sages:

Trust to YHWH with your whole heart
and do not rely on your own understanding.
In all your ways know him;
it is he who will keep your paths straight.
Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear YHWH and turn away from evil. (Prov. 3:5-7)

As with the agrarians, the biblical writers' willingness to accept and even highlight ignorance as basic to the human condition reflects, not laziness or despair, but their confidence that there is a wisdom worked into the very fabric of things:

YHWH by wisdom founded the earth;
he established the heavens with understanding.
By his knowledge the deeps were cleaved,
and the clouds dripped dew.

My child, do not let these depart from your eyes;
hold onto discernment and astuteness,
and they will be life to your soul
and grace to your neck.
Then you will walk safely on your way,
And your foot will not stumble. (Prov. 3:19-23)

The willingness to be ignorant in this deepest sense is what the biblical writers call "the fear of YHWH." It is "the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 1:7), for its essence is the rejection of arrogance and intellectual dishonesty:

The fear of YHWH is hatred of evil:
pride and arrogance and an evil way,
and a mouth [speaking] inversions I hate. (Prov. 8:13)

The fear of YHWH leads to a critical appreciation of both the world and ourselves; it is the necessary condition for reading the world accurately, speaking truthfully about it, and acting out of humility. Something of the practical content of the fear of YHWH is expressed in this characterization of wisdom, written by contemporary theologians: "[W]isdom is about trying to integrate knowledge, understanding, critical questioning and good judgement with a view to *the flourishing of human life and the whole of creation*. Theological wisdom attempts all that before God, alert to God, and in line with the purposes of God."³⁸

For an agrarian reading of the Bible, it is instructive that the sages treat agriculture as a primary realm in which God's wisdom is needed and utilized by humanity. Proverbs includes various instructions for farmers (e.g., 24:27; 27:23-27); moreover, the bad farmer is for the sages the epitome of *'asûl*, "sloth," the destructive quality that constitutes the antithesis of wisdom (24:30-34).³⁹ However, the most direct picture of the good farmer drawing upon God's wisdom comes from Isaiah:

Does the plowman plow all day in order to seed,
open and harrow his soil?
Does he not, if he has leveled its surface,
then scatter black cumin and broadcast cumin,
and put wheat in rows,
barley in strips,⁴⁰
and spelt in its own section?
He instructs him in the right way;
his God teaches him. (Isa. 28:24-26, cf. v. 29)

A wise farmer varies his work, observing the different moments of the agricultural task. These lines may also imply that the farmer matches his actions to the particular features of his own land – a necessity for all good farming, and particularly in the highly diverse uplands of Canaan, which can be worked successfully only in patches and small lots. A concern for scale in all uses of technology, for choosing a scale small enough so that the work matches the place, is for the contemporary agrarians one of the marks of wisdom. Conversely, “[w]e identify arrogant ignorance by its willingness to work on too big a scale, and thus to put too much at risk.”⁴¹

If we can see God’s wise foundational work shaping our world, then we are ready to dispense with the false distinction between “practical work” on the one hand and “spiritual work” or “religious service” on the other, and likewise with the separation between scientific knowledge and practical wisdom. All our mental and physical activity should be directed toward shaping human life and (inescapably) the earth we must manage in order to survive, in accordance with the divine wisdom manifested in natural systems. With a poetic concision and a perspective that align his thought with that of the biblical sages, poet and farmer Wendell Berry confesses a wise ignorance and, at the same time, a clear sense of our common human vocation to serve the earth:

... I am slowly falling
into the fund of things. And yet to serve the earth,
not knowing what I serve, gives a wideness
and a delight to the air, and my days
do not wholly pass. It is the mind’s service. . . .⁴²

A MODEST MATERIALISM

A third point of connection between modern agrarianism and biblical thinking is so pervasive and fundamental to both that it might seem hardly necessary to mention – namely, their exacting concern with the *materiality* of human existence. The agrarians pose the question overtly: How can we meet our material needs, in the present and for the indefinite future, without inflicting damage? The biblical writers are likewise concerned with ordering material existence in ways that are consonant with God’s will and the design of the world. So they are all in a sense materialists: They prefer to write in concrete and specific terms rather than abstractions.⁴³ But they are *modest* materialists. They do not claim that what we humans can (or theoretically, ever could) see or touch or make is exhaustive of what *is*, nor even that it constitutes

the larger or more important part of what is. They simply insist, and model by example, that we “owe a certain courtesy to Reality, and that this courtesy can be enacted only by humility, reverence, propriety of scale, and good workmanship.”⁴⁴

Yet if it sounds altogether odd to call the biblical writers and the new agrarians “materialists,” that is because our society is characterized by materialism of a very different sort. Our materialism extends beyond our addiction to the acquisition and eventual disposal of vast quantities of unnecessary stuff. We are materialistic in a second, more abstract sense. A generation ago, E. F. Schumacher spoke of industrial society’s unquestioning acceptance of the presuppositions and illusions of “materialistic scientism.”⁴⁵ Among the most powerful and probably the most dangerous of its illusions is the idea that “science can solve all problems” – even though it is common experience that the efficient solution of an individual problem generates a host of new ones.⁴⁶ That sort of trust in the omnipotence of science is of course a kind of faith stance, albeit a wobbly one.⁴⁷ If it were to be found in a premodern society, we would unhesitatingly label as “magical” a kind of thinking that presumes to guarantee certain physical results and yet bears such a tenuous relation to empirical reality. For, despite its ostensible grounding in science, this form of materialism is strangely oblivious to what may be the most readily observable and nonnegotiable characteristic of our material world, namely, finitude. Those who work consciously and intelligently within material reality (as though we could work elsewhere!) are continually confronted with limits of time, space, matter, and energy. Writing some thirty years after Schumacher, Barbara Kingsolver gives an updated report on the status of the illusion:

Most of our populace and all our leaders are participating in a mass hallucinatory fantasy in which the megatons of waste we dump in our rivers and bays are not poisoning the water, the hydrocarbons we pump into the air are not changing the climate, overfishing is not depleting the oceans, fossil fuels will never run out, wars that kill masses of civilians are an appropriate way to keep our hands on what’s left, we are not desperately overdrawn at the environmental bank, and *really*, the kids are all right.⁴⁸

Within the first few pages of the Bible, we find a mocking exposé of an attitude very similar to our scientific materialism: the ambition and perverse confidence that led the people “on the plain of Shinar” (central Mesopotamia) to build “a city, and a tower with its head in the sky.” “Let’s make a name for ourselves, so we won’t be scattered over the face of the earth!” (Gen. 11:4). City-builders all clumped together, resisting dispersion, with their inflated

imaginings in the clouds – this is a caricature of what the Israelites saw in the technologically dominant culture of their age, the great riparian civilization to the east. Beginning already in the fourth millennium B.C.E., aggressive channeling of the Tigris and the Euphrates produced an agricultural system of unprecedented productivity, which in turn produced a burst of population. The surplus of food and labor enabled the construction of immense walled cities – most notably, in biblical times, Nineveh and Babylon – each with a ziggurat dominating the skyline. Yet centuries of heavy irrigation exacted their environmental price, in the form of a rising water table, salinization of the soil, erosion, and silting. As Aldo Leopold observes, the violence of humanly induced land transformation varies in proportion to population density; “a dense population requires a more violent conversion.”⁴⁹ The Israelite caricature perhaps reflects the historical fact that over the millennia, the cities in the lower part of the plain suffered eclipse. Gradually and repeatedly, when the “breadbasket” for each city became unproductive, the center of power moved upstream to a less damaged region.⁵⁰ A large section of the once-Fertile Crescent remains salt fields to this day.

The Israelites, in contrast to their materially more fortunate neighbors, never had enough water or arable land to waste. They managed to establish themselves in the steep, rocky hill country because it was the only part of the land of Canaan that nobody else wanted. They survived as farmers by becoming intimate with their land, by learning to meet its expectations and its needs, and by passing on their knowledge, with each generation serving as the human “seed stock” indispensable for the well-being of the next. Probably that is why they developed agrarian insight, and therefore they could see that the Babel-onians’ folly lay in taking their minds off the ground, neglecting the well-being of the soil. Laboring on a city with its sky-scraping tower, they fancied that they could avoid “scattering over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:4). The Tower of Babel story captures what may be the essence of all technologically induced disaster: the illusion that our cleverness will somehow deliver us from the need to observe the normative form of materialism that sustains life.

The heavens are YHWH’s heavens,
but the earth he has given to human beings. (Ps. 115:16)

The tower builders aspire to be exceptional – “Let’s make a name for ourselves” – by pursuing an alternative “lifestyle” disconnected from the earth. In the story, God shatters that illusion with one quick divine visitation, although in real time it may take generations, centuries, even millennia for the disaster to complete itself. By the grace of God, the biblical story

might yet enable us to recognize ourselves in that tragic historical process somewhere short of the end. Thus it gives us a reason and a chance to do justice in the ordering of our material lives, to practice the “elaborate courtesy,” as Berry calls it, that the well-being of all creatures, ourselves included, demands.⁵¹

VALUE BEYOND PRICE

A fourth and final point of congruence between the contemporary agrarians and the biblical writers concerns the way they assign value to land. As a native Californian, I am acutely aware that real estate has a price, and it is a high one. To be overly dramatic, I am an exile; I could never afford to own property on the small island in the San Francisco Bay on which I grew up. So the agrarian principle most deeply challenging of my personal experience is this: In any economy with a long-term future, the price of land is not an essential matter. Indeed, any culture or people with a long-term future must understand that the value of land is not monetary; as Berry’s character Wheeler Catlett observes: “[W]hen you quit living in the price and start living in the place, you’re in a different line of succession.”⁵²

It is noteworthy (if too little noted) that in ancient Israel agricultural land seems to have been literally invaluable. There is no record, biblical or inscriptional, of an Israelite voluntarily selling land on the open market,⁵³ because – in contrast to their neighbors in Egypt and Mesopotamia – Israelites seem to have had no concept of arable land (*’ādāmā*) as a commodity, to be bought and sold freely. Whereas Leviticus (25:29–30) allows for sale of houses within the city wall (these would have been essentially landless houses, jammed one against the other), the fertile soil cannot be handled thus, as “private property.” Rather, a piece of land is the possession of a family, to be held as a trust and transmitted from generation to generation.⁵⁴ Although the rights to land use may temporarily be sold to pay off debts, the land reverts to the original family unit every fiftieth year (Lev. 25:31). There is to be no permanently landless underclass in Israel.

Where does a people – any people, ancient or modern – find the courage to resist the cultural norm to value land as a source of ready cash? Wendell Berry’s answer, though not made with reference to the Bible, is strikingly apt to that context:

Agrarians value land because somewhere back in the history of their consciousness is the memory of being landless. . . . If you have no land you have nothing: no food, no shelter, no warmth, no freedom, no life. If we

remember this, we know that all economies begin to lie as soon as they assign a fixed value to land. People who have been landless know that the land is invaluable; it is worth everything. . . . Whatever the market may say, the worth of the land is what it always was: It is worth what food, clothing, shelter, and freedom are worth; it is worth what life is worth.⁵⁵

The memory of being landless is central to the biblical story and therefore should be common to every Israelite. The Deuteronomic preacher's rhetoric makes the experience of land deprivation immediate and personal, as each Israelite farmer recites "before YHWH": "My father was a stray Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there . . . , and the Egyptians treated *us* badly . . . , and *we* cried out to YHWH . . . and he brought *us* to this place, . . . a land oozing⁵⁶ with milk and honey. And now, here, I have brought the first fruit of the fertile soil [*'ādāmā*] that you gave to *me*, YHWH . . ." (Deut. 26:5–10). The voices we hear in the Old Testament bespeak throughout an agrarian mindfulness that land – this particular land, my land, our land – is inseparable from self "before God." Land is the earnest of the covenant, the tangible sign and consequence of God's commitment to the people Israel.

Implicit in that recitation is a claim on both God and land that is intensely personal yet not private. In his indispensable study of Israel's land theology, Christopher Wright suggests that the covenant is properly conceived as a triangulated relationship among Israel, the land, and YHWH, "all three having the family as the basic focal point at which the conjunction of the three realms issued in ethical responsibilities and imperatives. . . ." ⁵⁷ That sentence could almost come from one of Wendell Berry's essays, in which the claims of family, community, land, and human decency are treated as the ordinary and, therefore, essential manifestations of God's claim in human life. Unless that whole indissoluble web of relationships is kept in view, even a text as familiar as the Fifth Commandment is enigmatic precisely in its specificity: "Honor your father and your mother, *so that your days may be long on the fertile soil* [*'ādāmā*] that YHWH your God is giving you" (Exod. 20:12, cf. Deut. 5:16). Wright observes: "Because of its explicit links with the land traditions, the relationship between God and Israel was thoroughly 'earthed' in the socio-economic facts of life – shaping and being shaped by them, and at times threatened by developments in that realm."⁵⁸ He is speaking of the Iron Age, of course. But Berry and the other new agrarians might well say that the manifold crises of contemporary agriculture and industrial culture realize

such threats in our own socioeconomic situation; they show us what the unraveling of the web of covenant relationships looks like "on the ground." The chapters that follow offer an agrarian (re)reading of foundational biblical texts, with the aim of discovering in them clues as to how we may contribute to the reweaving of that fragile web.