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# The Original Ecocide: How Genesis 1–4 Illuminate an Anthropocene Age

## ABSTRACT

*Genesis 1–4 reveal humanity’s break from the natural world, the Earth, as embodied in the Garden of Eden and the exile to the East. This legendary account of power and punishment—the story of the first humans, the first sin, and the first murder—has long been used to explain and promote the dominance of ruling humans (predominantly male) over the bodies of women, subordinates, and the Earth. These first four chapters of the Bible juxtapose environmental stewardship and ecocide, as well as human relationships and fratricide. The unremitting dominion of humans over the Earth has brought the whole of creation to an ecological crossroads. In light of the global epidemic of ecocide and the transition into the Anthropocene Age, human impact on Earth is so significant that it is global and in many ways irreversible. Perhaps now more than ever the “cursed” relationship of human beings to the Earth does not feel like a mythic echo or a metaphor.*

*Contemporary interpretations of ecocide help identify the original ecocide of Genesis, thus contextualizing the ecological crises of today. Using feminist and ecofeminist biblical criticisms, the problematic absence of the Earth’s voice and the misogyny woven into Genesis are also challenged to better understand the ecological message of the origin story. By re-engaging the Abrahamic stories of humanity, there is hope to heal our understanding of the human species in relationship our miraculous blue-green planet, as well as one another, if not also prevent further damage to the Earth’s living systems.*

*Keywords: judeo-christian, sacred text, genesis, exile, violence*

## More than Myth

“ ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,  
and have eaten of the tree  
about which I commanded you,  
‘You shall not eat of it,’  
cursed is the ground because of you;  
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;  
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;  
and you shall eat the plants of the field.’ ”<sup>1</sup>

Genesis 1–4 reveal humanity’s break from the natural world, the Earth, as embodied in the Garden of Eden and the exile to the East. This legendary account of power and punishment—the story of the first humans, the first sin, and the first murder—has long been used to explain and promote the dominance of ruling humans (predominantly male) over the bodies of women, subordinates, and the Earth. These first four chapters of the Bible juxtapose environmental stewardship and ecocide, as well as family and fratricide. The unremitting dominion of humans over the Earth has brought the planet, the creation, to an ecological crossroads. As was published by the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, human dominance over the Earth’s body has affected at least 83% of the planet’s viable land surface,<sup>2</sup> altering ecosystems and geochemistry. From the “dome”<sup>3</sup> of the atmosphere to the “waters”<sup>4</sup> supporting all life, a global epidemic of ecocide marks a new epoch, the Anthropocene, where human impact on Earth is so significant that it is global and in many ways irreversible. Perhaps now more than ever the “cursed” relationship of human beings to the Earth does not feel like a mythic echo or a metaphor.

Contemporary interpretations of ecocide help to identify the original ecocide of Genesis, which in turn contextualizes the ecological crises of today. Harnessing feminist and ecofeminist biblical criticism, the problematic absence of the Earth’s voice and the misogyny woven into the ecocide of Genesis are confronted. Today, re-engaging the Abrahamic origin stories—of Creation, the Punishment, and the Beginnings of Civilization—can help heal

our understanding of the human species in relationship to one another and our miraculous blue-green planet, if not also prevent further damage to the Earth's living systems.

## The First Ecocide

Ecocide is defined by the "loss or damage to, or destruction of ecosystem(s) of a given territory(ies), such that peaceful enjoyment by the inhabitants has been or will be severely diminished."<sup>5</sup> Much of what has occurred in human "advancement"—in transportation, agriculture, industry, electricity, as well as commercial and residential sectors—has indeed caused irrevocable damage to the Earth's body.<sup>6</sup> The recognition of damage, and its criminality, is relatively new in comparison to the mindset behind ecological disregard. Interestingly enough, the crime of ecocide has been sitting in Judeo-Christian scripture for thousands of years, beckoning humanity to listen to its warning.

So what is the crime of ecocide in Genesis? Biblical scholar and ecofeminist Brigitte Kahl frames the original ecocide as the moment the first woman, Eve, "transgresses the borderline protecting the *one* tree."<sup>7</sup> In Genesis 3, the consumption of the forbidden fruit separates humans from creation, from Earth. This moment has become a major linchpin in centuries-long persecution and subjugation of women, blaming the female-bodied for the "fall of man." However, focusing on the gender of the human who first challenged the creation's order has distracted from the crime of ecocide itself.

Kahl denotes that the later fratricide in Genesis 4, Abel's murder by Cain's hands, also gives way to ecocide, furthering the enmity between the Earth and humans.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, violence between humans harms more than just humans. Human civilization, as told in Genesis 4, was born of the line of Cain.<sup>9</sup> And although there is much beauty that comes with civilization, there is also destruction and death. Violence begets violence is one of the first messages from civilization in Genesis: "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, surely Lamech seventy-sevenfold."<sup>10</sup> The spread of human civilization, and the violence

that comes part and parcel with it, affects many species, many ecosystems. It threatens creation altogether.

In the Bible, ecocide is a matter of disobedience. When humans desire the knowledge (or power) of God, harm is caused to the creation. When humans commit acts of violence out of hubris and spite, harm is caused to the creation. Human action continues to cause rifts between members of our species, other species, and the Earth. Nevertheless, there is more to draw from these ancient texts to help us understand ecocide in the Anthropocene Age.

## The Juxtapositions of Genesis

“In the beginning”, humans are created in the image of God. In Genesis 2, humans are helpers within God’s creation. In the following chapters, they prove themselves also capable of violence against the Earth-body and familial-human body. According to Genesis 1, humans are to be dominant over the Earth and its creatures. However, in Genesis 3 and 4, humans are also cursed from the Earth. The events of these first four chapters document a complex, polarized relationship between humans and the Earth.

Humans do not exist in an intellectual vacuum of rationality alone, but rather in a continual state of relationality. The first few chapters of the Old Testament serve to explain homo sapiens’ relationship to the Divine, each other, and their environment, particularly outlining the relationships between God and humans, men and women, and humans and the Earth. The origin story of Genesis is one of the persisting bedrocks of human hierarchy, known well as the patriarchy. This entitled men to the ownership of women, “subordinate” beings (including other humans), land and its resources for millennia.

Although humans have challenged these norms in the last few hundred years with regards to gender equality, reproductive rights, and slavery, Earth and her resources are still pillaged and polluted in the names of power and profit. Genesis 1 states that human beings are to have dominion over the creatures of the Earth—“let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of

the earth.”<sup>11</sup> Genesis 2 (also known as “Another Account of Creation”)<sup>12</sup> frames humans as environmental stewards—“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.”<sup>13</sup> Then, Genesis 3 ruptures human connection with the Earth, naming humans as neither rulers or stewards, cursing the ground from humankind.<sup>14</sup> This break continues into the violent events of Genesis 4, where Cain slays his brother Abel out of jealousy.<sup>15</sup> Genesis certainly provides a conflicting outline for people to navigate shared existence, and yet, thousands of years later, these themes are still so relevant today.

The way humans orient themselves in the world has changed over time. Scientific discoveries and theories have abetted in change, such as Copernican heliocentrism, relativity, and evolution. These new understandings modify how people orient themselves in the world. Adapting to new understandings, the very ancient pieces of humanity’s stories—the stories of human origins on Earth—are read with fresh eyes. What makes sacred texts perennial is their thematic applicability across time. Yet, they cannot be read literally through all ages. Theologians and historians are tasked to engage them dialectically, opening doors to problem solving, and even influencing the evolution of contemporary life.

## The Wound of Exile

The Biblical account of the first humans tells that humanity lives in a protracted state of exile, rejection, and loss. From a psychological perspective, a person or society’s sense of exclusion might result in abuse. If a human child experiences neglect in the first few years of her or his life, the ability to feel empathy is jeopardized.<sup>16</sup> What might this mean if a vast majority of humans function under the assumption that they not only are separate but unwelcome in their environment? In more elegiac terms, what might it mean to be separate from the Earth?

A psycho-spiritual wound between humanity and the Earth’s systems has resulted in the greatest ecological damage caused by a single species. As with any trauma, revisiting the site or memory of wounding is tantamount to

healing, and must be done with great care. Clergy, scholars and laypeople can and should reengage Genesis in the context of the Anthropocene, with hopes to help better understand the wound.

“And the Lord, ‘What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.’ ”<sup>17</sup>

When God declares “you are cursed from the ground” to Cain, this is not to say that the Earth willfully rejects us. This is a curse put forth by a patriarch God. The swallowing of Abel’s blood by the Earth caused the act of crying. Abel’s blood, his life force, is connected to Earth. Upon entering Earth through violence, his blood cries out to God. In the Judeo-Christian origin story, the Earth does not cry, the Earth is rather a vessel for the grief and loss of a life. Yet, what if the Earth grieves the loss of her human children after the first murder? Nowhere in the text does the Earth have a say in the relationship to the creatures of creation, especially humans. The agency of Earth is superseded by God and human action.

If one is to take the first four chapters of Genesis as prescriptive, definitive, and fixed, then it may seem as though humans’ relationship to Earth is doomed. However, those first chapters of Genesis are carrying important messages. Genesis 2 explains that humans have an incredible stake in the care of the world, as they were given a great responsibility to be caretakers of the garden. Genesis 3 and 4 demonstrate that human action makes an impact on humanity and the Earth. Genesis 4 tells us that violence can cause great damage, rippling for generations (“If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold”<sup>18</sup>), further harming humans’ relationship to the Earth.

What Genesis 3 and 4 help to explain is that when human beings gained awareness of “good and evil,” they lost a sacred connection to the creation. Something in human consciousness, a wanting, shifted, leading us to today’s

ecological crises. This shift in the human psyche is mythologized in Genesis. At the root of our exile is the grief of having been in relationship with nature and then being cursed from it. The Genesis story is not itself the root of our Anthropocene ecological predicament, but it is an expression of *the root of our exile*.

## “She gave me fruit . . . and I ate”

“To the woman he said,  
‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;  
in pain you shall bring forth children,  
yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’ ”<sup>19</sup>

It is awfully convenient to frame this shift in consciousness as the result of a woman’s act and temptation.<sup>20</sup> The association of Earth with femaleness is no coincidence. Seen as receptive and reproductive bodies, the Earth and women are not given autonomy. The pain inflicted upon woman is the precursor to the pain of exile.

It is important to note that the treatment of women’s bodies is bound up in the dominion over *all reproductive bodies*. The curse on woman’s reproductive body comes before the curse on the Earth’s reproductive body in relation to humanity. One might argue that the fervent attempts to control both women and the Earth are linked to a warped attempt at returning to a pre-exilic (and idyllic) state, where life (food and offspring) came forth with ease, and the fruits of the garden were the human’s birthright.

The narrative of Genesis puts the fault and toil of reproduction on the female body, thus destroying the human relationship with reproduction altogether. This expands beyond humans in the violent attempts at mastery over the Earth’s reproductive forces. The prerequisite of suffering to bring forth life in Genesis 3 justifies human attempts at manipulating, oppressing, and extracting resources from reproductive bodies. Bodies that perform the physical act of bringing forth children and food, as well as the functionality of complex ecosystems, have arguably been subdued and controlled through “justifying” messages in Genesis.

Still, in spite of anthropomorphism and misogyny, there is hope yet to find unscathed sacred femininity, as well as androgyny, in Genesis. Looking at the Earth in Genesis, the word for earth in Hebrew is *eretz*, a female noun.<sup>21</sup> Biblical scholar David Carr writes in his book *The Erotic Word*, “Even Genesis 1, so focused on the creation of all things by one God, deviates to have the earth—not God directly—bring forth plants and animals. . . . God does not create alone but through connections with another part of creation—the earth.”<sup>22</sup> Through interconnection and collaboration comes life—the poetry of biology. Perhaps this is why Genesis 2 depicts the collaborative relationship between woman and man, before subordination and exile. In Genesis 1, God created humans in the divine image, “male and female he created them.”<sup>23</sup> Feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible explicates that the Hebrew word for the first human, “*adham*,” is genderless prior to the creation of woman—“one creature incorporating two sexes.”<sup>24</sup> “[*Adham*” is an ambiguous term for humankind in Trible’s exegesis. Sharing in Trible’s interpretation, we can see past the shaming of “woman” and look deeper into the ecological ramifications of human action in the origin story. By destabilizing the focus on gender hierarchy, an organic intent to which humans could strive to return reveals itself.

## Limits of Law

After the “fall of man”, the fundamentals of human law—the laws of patriarchy—are put in place. They are anthropocentric, hierarchical and ecocidal. It is a patriarch God and the sub-patriarch man that create a world of tiered order. This world order is framed by law. Nonetheless, even the finality of the law is subject to adaptation, driven by the moral imperatives of a given time. In an age of nearly 7.5 billion human inhabitants on Earth, with increased demand and competition for natural resources, the rights of the Earth-body are dire. It is time to unmute the voice of Earth. Humans must step in as stewards once more to protect creation from human violence and destruction.

Kahl challenges humans to “recultivate” a “non-ecocidal” and “non-imperial” reading of the primeval biblical narratives, implying that there are

counter-readings to the dominant, anthropocentric interpretations.<sup>25</sup> As people are left to reimagine and move into a future where human action has irreparably changed the Earth and its systems, they look back at Genesis and are called to see it differently. It now calls for *change*.

Much of the human world still lives under societies informed heavily by the mores of Abrahamic traditions. Currently, “Crimes Against Peace” (as stated in the Rome Statute) are divided into four categories; the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression.<sup>26</sup> The crime of ecocide is not a category. The Bible criminalizes forms of violence between human beings, though justice for the Earth is written nowhere. The Earth is voiceless, and her sworn protectors have no accountability. In Genesis, violence against Earth is documented as the aftermath of fratricide and genocide. It is the afterthought-curse, the result of disobeying God’s law. The fact that harm done to the Earth not universally recognized and criminalized in secular, international law indicates that the anthropomorphic, Earth-silencing message of Genesis still permeates governance today.

On the other hand, Genesis 4 makes it quite clear that a crime against humanity—the murder of Abel—is in fact a crime against creation. Perhaps the further rupture between humanity and the Earth upon Abel’s death is indicative of how violence breeds violence, between bodies of the same species as well as within ecosystems and geosystems. It too can be interpreted in the inverse, where crimes against the Earth are crimes against humanity. Indeed, harming the Earth’s body leaves the human species in a lonely, fearsome world of unknowns. Giant garbage islands drift in the oceans, glaciers melt and crack, and CO<sup>2</sup> levels rise, while droughts, floods and other extreme weather events increase around the world, and in many places wholly unprepared for such drastic changes.<sup>27</sup> How are we to exist in a world rapidly losing biodiversity, clean water, and the overall ability to sustain a booming population of humans? Imaginably, to begin to address the colossal question(s) of how humanity should proceed, these crimes of ecocide should be recognized as intertwined with the other crimes against peace, as they are in Genesis.

# Hope, Humans, and Holy Earth

“ . . . then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, the events of Genesis 3 and 4 cannot negate the messages of preceding chapters. Scripture knows not the bounds of chronology. Humans can still be the keepers. Humans were and are still connected to creation. Humans will always be from from the ground, the Earth.

If humans are to heal their relationship to the Earth, what sacred texts such as Genesis say about human origins must be considered. Some might argue this is futile, as science and secularity are seemingly paving the way into the future. Yet, ideologies do not die easily. The world still holds on to an anthropomorphic dogma, whether it be explicitly religious or not.

To take healing action requires healing the psyche. How we view humanity in relation to the Earth is vital to creating new laws that protect against ecocide. We cannot feasibly change policy and systems if we cannot reframe our understanding the human’s role in creation, or in secular terms, on Earth. Focusing on stewardship over dominion is an ethical shift that humans must take to care for the future of all life. Otherwise, humankind will drill and lay waste to the waters and the land until there is nothing else to dig up, taste, or trade.

God said creation was “good.”<sup>29</sup> Human beings are both of creation and its caretakers. Patriarchal desire for power and dominion does not have to be the final word for the species. Humans do not have to be in opposition to the Holy Earth. The aforementioned psycho-spiritual wound can be looked at through these early Abrahamic texts. Genesis shows what human qualities and drives ultimately cause ecocide, along with the scores of violence against women, marginalized peoples, and other species. Nevertheless, the future is often illuminated by the wisdom of the past.

What makes Genesis 1–4 a relevant text in a time of ecological crisis is the dramatic loss and exile from the Earth, and presumably from each other.

Having now witnessed the global threat of climate change and ecological degradation, Genesis appeals to a holistic discussion of human action and human nature. If humanity is to still see itself as a reflection of the image of God, a God that cared to create life, humans must work to move beyond their transgressions to then break cycles of harm and destruction. This is the ethical labor of an Anthropocene Age. Otherwise, humanity might continue to blindly operate out of an old paradigm, forever thinking itself inherently and permanently separate from the complex ecologies of creation.

Perhaps, despite everything humans have done, and all the work ahead, there is hope for finding the voice of the Earth, forgiveness, and restoration.

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## NOTES

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