

Abstract

The Image of God and Our Vocation of the Soil

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The Anthropocene represents the sum of anthropogenic impact upon the planet, from climate change and ocean acidification to the threat of mass extinctions – including the pollinators of our food, land use changes for agriculture, and the disruption of key natural cycles of phosphorus and nitrogen due to the misapplication of fertilizers. Agriculture plays a key role in the Anthropocene, at both the production and consumption end. Raj Patel and Jason Moore see cheap food as one of the key elements in the rise of capitalism. This rise in turn produced the Great Acceleration of the global economy in the 1950s, which marks the beginning of the Anthropocene.

Ellen Davis identifies the present crisis as the result of humans being fully habituated to industrial culture. The solution according to Davis is to become fully human. This full humanity is achieved by recognizing the agrarian nature of the bible, and that God's work as cultivator and caretaker provides the model for our behavior.

This paper explores a theology of the Imago Dei and our vocation of the soil by examining the agricultural themes in the two creation accounts. This theology is then applied to

the human vocation in the Anthropocene in two ways. Firstly, from the Priestly creation account, the earth is sacred space, a temple in macrocosm as Jon Levenson identifies it. In it, Elohim the creator God makes provision for human and more than human alike. Humans seek their food in agricultural activity. The seventh day of creation is declared as holy, providing an aetiological account of the Sabbath and the rest that the land is to enjoy from human agricultural activity. To bear the divine image to the rest of creation involves self-limiting our impacts upon it.

In the Garden story, the human pair represent royal humanity exercising wise rule in the land. The Garden represents the Tabernacle, again identifying working the soil as a holy vocation. Davis concludes that the human pair were to work for the soil, serving its needs. The parallels with the Tabernacle indicate that this royal/cultic role allows creation to be what it was intended to be, i.e., praising its creator in a manner specific to its nature.

The identification of the image of God in humans as associated with tending the soil to provide for our own needs but without sacrificing it or the needs of other creatures implies the Hebrew Bible sees humans as fundamentally agrarian. We are to be connected to the soil. While not advocating a return to a fully agrarian society, much less the “blood and soil” ideologies of right-wing extremism, a connection to soil literally grounds humanity, acknowledging our own finitude in the context of the finite resources of the soil. I suggest that all humans should at some time and in some manner become involved in the activity of growing food. In tending plant and soil, we learn our utter reliance on divine provision through natural process and bring our busy existence back to the timescales of these processes. Such practices are

designed to encourage a slower, more reflective mode of thinking about our responsibilities to all of creation.