Introduction

If you listen willingly,
the good of the land you shall eat.

(Isa. 1:19)

And God will turn no one away
who knows how to eat.

(Raewynne Whiteley)

Agrarianism is a way of thinking and ordering life in community that is based on the health of the land and of living creatures.[1] Often out of step with the prevailing values of wealth, technology, and political and military domination, the mind-set and practices that constitute agrarianism have been marginalized by the powerful within most "history-making" cultures across time, including that of ancient Israel. Yet, agrarianism is the way of thinking predominant among the biblical writers, who very often do not represent the interests of the powerful. The sheer pervasiveness of their appreciation and concern for the health of the land is the single most important point of this study.

This volume explores the agrarian mind-set of the biblical writers by bringing Israel's Scriptures into sustained conversation with the works of contemporary agrarian writers – most consistently, those of farmer, poet, essayist, and fiction writer Wendell Berry. Over the last three generations, agrarian thought and values have been given their fullest articulation in the nearly three millennia of agrarian writing; it is now clear that this is a comprehensive way of viewing the world and the human place in it.[2] The rapidly growing body of literature is a response to the global dominance of corporation-controlled agriculture. It discloses the illogic and danger of the practice, now routine in industrialized culture, of allowing food production – the largest and

most essential of all human industries – to be managed by "specialists" and ignored by the rest of us. Yet ironically, agriculture has become more worthy of widespread attention than it ever was, and for tragic reasons. According to the 2005 United Nations–sponsored Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, agriculture as currently practiced may constitute the "largest threat to biodiversity and ecosystem function of any single human activity."[3] Worldwide, it is also a major threat to economic and political democracy; sociologist and political scientist James Scott compares the functioning of industrial agriculture to that of a "totalizing state."[4]

My interest in the global crisis of agriculture comes as a direct result of my normal professional activity of reading and interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures. Some fifteen years ago, I began using biblical interpretation as a way of informing my understanding of the ecological crisis. A confirmed urbanite, I had never been curious, let alone knowledgeable, about farming until, through my study, I first noticed and then gradually acquired something of the biblical writers' own abiding interest in land care. In contrast to ourselves, they belonged to a culture that recognized land care as the life-and-death matter it unquestionably is. Thus, they can provide a vantage point from which to view and develop a nuanced critique of our current cultural practices regarding land use and food production.

In attending to issues of *land care* in Israel's Scriptures, I am to some degree shifting the terms common to biblical scholarship and contemporary theology, which have given more attention to *possession of land* as a national territory. The biblical writers themselves consistently regard the two matters as related; land tenure is conditional upon proper use and care of land in community. However, shifting the focus to the latter brings into view aspects of well-worked texts that have previously received scant attention, such as the pronounced emphasis on seeds in Genesis 1. Things that the biblical writers must themselves have intended as important conveyors of meaning become intelligible when the Bible is read from an agrarian perspective. The range of texts treated in these chapters – selected from Torah, Former and Latter Prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, and the Song of Songs – indicates how widely agrarian concerns are shared among the various writers, strands, and periods of biblical tradition. Numerous (probably countless) other passages could be adduced to support these arguments and add new insights. The very pervasiveness of agrarian thinking in the Bible challenges the common assumption that those who composed or edited the writings were members of an urban elite whose perspectives "distort or ignore the everyday reality of [villagers'] lives."[5] If the sharp urban/rural dichotomy that now characterizes the

industrialized West existed at all in Israel, it was only late, in the Hellenistic period. Certainly the Bible attests to ongoing tensions between city and countryside, but there was also deep interpenetration, as my final chapter shows. An urban world completely uninvolved in and ignorant of agriculture is a quite new phenomenon, and necessarily a transitory one.

Agrarian reading is not a distinct method but rather a *perspective* for exegesis; it is *theōria* – literally, a way of viewing our world and the texts' representation of it. Bringing to bear a perspective unfamiliar to most biblical scholars (who are themselves in most cases "members of an urban elite") means asking a question rarely posed in the scholarly literature: How do these texts view the relationship between humans (or Israelites in particular) and the material sources of life as an essential aspect of living in the presence of God? If the question is unusual, the methods used to answer it are not. On the whole, this study will follow procedures that are standard for professional exegesis: paying close attention to rhythm, diction, and the poetics of a text; reading it within the larger literary context and, to whatever extent is possible, in light of the particular historical, social, and even geographical conditions related to its composition and promulgation.

The most pertinent social condition is that from the eighth century B.C.E. on – that is, from the time when the prophetic movement was firmly established in Israel's religious tradition – the economics of food production was a matter contested between the crown and its agents, on the one hand, and the bulk of the population, on the other. The biblical writers were located at the heart of the contest, held there by a conviction and a calling that was wholly theocentric. The methodological consideration that is crucial for exegesis undertaken from an agrarian perspective is that the biblical writers were theologians, but not theological idealists. On the contrary, their theological understanding led them directly into confrontation with the economic and political systems dominant in their society.

Contemporary theological exegetes are therefore under pressure from the text to read with a similar sensitivity to the dynamics of large social systems and how these affect local communities, both ancient and contemporary. For me as a biblical scholar, engaging questions of contemporary social analysis means consciously working as an amateur, going outside my area of professional expertise for the sake of love. Augustine's famous interpretive principle of *caritas* may provide a theological warrant for such a move: reading the biblical text in a way that conduces to knowledge and love of God and neighbor is the touchstone for accurate interpretation.[6] In our present intellectual environment, Wendell Berry advocates amateurism as a corrective to the

tendency toward overspecialization and abstraction that afflicts all disciplines. He suggests

> widening the context of all intellectual work and of teaching – perhaps to the width of the local landscape. . . . To bring local landscapes within what Wes Jackson calls "the boundary of consideration," professional people of all sorts will have to feel the emotions and take the risks of amateurism. They will have to get out of their "fields," so to speak, and into the watershed, the ecosystem, and the community; and they will have to be actuated by affection.[7]

As Berry and Jackson both acknowledge, the dimensions of the local landscape are not only physical but also economic, political, and cultural. It is just because all those dimensions were inextricably entwined with Israel's religion that the move beyond a *specialized* view of the biblical text and its bearing on our present situation does not entail a move away from its *historical* meaning. Rather, a penetrating reading of the text in its full social context should guide us both in identifying fundamental causes of inequity in our own economic and political systems and in discovering more just possibilities.[8]

Our own social world is clearly discontinuous with that of ancient Israel in multiple ways: economic organization under the domination of multinational corporations rather than under kings and empires, the extent of our technological domination of natural systems and the corresponding extent of their degradation (even though the ancients themselves experienced significant ecological degradation), the size of the human population, and the growing predominance of cities worldwide. Writing about the Bible as a resource for economic ethics, Norman Gottwald aptly observes: "So, we are left with the logically perplexing but morally empowering paradox that the Bible is both grossly irrelevant in direct application to current economic problems and incredibly relevant in *vision and principle* for grasping opportunities and obligations to make the whole earth and its bounty serve the welfare of the whole human family."[9]

What the Bible can offer us are "vision and principle," not solutions from the past. An agrarian reading of the Bible is not an exercise in nostalgia, although it is in significant part a work of memory, of imagination anchored (not mired) in the past. Agrarian *theōria* looks forward to a potentially healing future; it is informed by modern science and also by traditional patterns of thought and value, even practices that have endured through centuries and millennia – if now only among a remnant – and may yet be adapted to meet present and future exigencies.

Good biblical exegesis should yield some measure of realistic hope, however chastened, because the Bible itself consistently nourishes such hope. To compare great things to small, the prophet Ezekiel is my model for the kind of work attempted here: a style of exegesis that brings forth the full critical potential of Israel's scriptural tradition, which is part of its revelatory power, and at the same time generates fresh vision. Ezekiel was the only biblical writer to reinterpret virtually the whole religious tradition up to his time; and, significantly for us, he did it in a situation of unprecedented disaster, with the fall of Jerusalem and of the Davidic monarchy first a looming threat, and then a bitter reality. Ezekiel reread the theological tradition in order to make sense of events that were literally unthinkable, in terms of Israel's regnant theology. He charted those horrific events on the map of faith and thus opened a way forward. To him and through him, God granted a vision of life on the far side of disaster for the people and the land of Israel.

I am not a prophet and have received no such vision. Nonetheless, working on this book has given me reasons to be hopeful, if not yet optimistic. I have discovered how deep are the resources in the biblical tradition for addressing the problems we face, and further, how much good work is now being done to slow destruction, cultivate new habits of mind, and clear some paths into a wiser future. Certainly, one thing I have learned in the course of writing is that a wide-ranging conversation is indispensable, both because it is encouraging and because it yields insight. This book was conceived and advanced through many conversations, first with my students, some of whom have deep experience of land care, and later with farmers, agrarian writers, and theologians – these being different ways of naming some of the same people.

The book is intended to further such conversation, and so it is written for an audience that includes, but extends beyond, those with formal training in biblical studies. Wherever I use technical language, I try to make it plain to the nonspecialist. Those without such training should be fairly warned that the texts themselves often demand patient attention to their verbal particularities. Biblical literature is altogether complex, and some texts treated here stand at the very highest level of its complexity – namely, Leviticus, Hosea, and the Song of Songs. Yet for all their literary and theological sophistication, these books are not specialized in their concerns. Rather, they speak, obliquely at times but never abstractly, of the situations and concerns of ordinary people – that is, of people who are not rich and who have to eat.

The book is composed of a series of closely related essays; the first six of them were delivered at the University of Cambridge as the Hulsean Lectures for 2005–06. The essay format is the one I find most useful for teaching, and so

I have made the argument within each chapter relatively complete. Chapters 1 and 2 are foundational for all those that follow; the other essays build upon each other to some extent, but they need not be read in sequence. The first chapter introduces the project of reading the Bible through agrarian eyes by focusing on Isaiah's and Jeremiah's visions of the unmaking of the created order through human sinfulness. It establishes the agrarian perspective as it is now, early in the twenty-first century: a sober yet not hopeless reckoning with the present widespread destruction of the material sources of life, and therefore, a reckoning with the real possibility of disaster on a massive scale. The second chapter considers specific points of connection between biblical thought and the new agrarians – that is, precisely how and why agrarian thinking, brought to bear on biblical texts, yields exegetical fruit.

The remaining chapters are devoted to close readings of texts in both their historical context and that of contemporary situations and problems. Chapters 3 through 5 focus on single texts from the Priestly tradition, whose tradents (writer-editors) were likely responsible for giving shape to Torah in its present form. Strategically placed within the biblical story (for instance, as its opening chapter), these seminal texts confirm the centrality of the agrarian mind-set to biblical tradition. Genesis 1 shows the God-given biodiversity of the earth and the human role in maintaining it (Chapter 3). The manna story in Exodus 16, the first account of the people Israel living in political freedom, introduces the vital subject of the economics of eating (Chapter 4). The culture of eating and land care are central to the book of Leviticus, which constitutes the core of the vast body of the Priestly literature and therefore of Torah altogether (Chapter 5). Chapter 7 treats the earliest prophetic books, Amos and Hosea; not coincidentally, these first "writing prophets" may also be the first agrarian writers in history.

Each of the other chapters uses two or more texts to illumine crucial aspects of agrarian thinking as it manifests itself in both biblical and contemporary contexts: the economic centrality of the local economy, summed up in the Deuteronomic concept of *naḥălâ* (Chapter 6); the character of good work, which reflects the divine ordering of the world and contributes to the maintenance of that order, versus "sloth," the traditional term for behavior and activity (!) that fails to do so (Chapter 8); and urban agrarianism, which is the integration of the city within its geographical region, to the benefit of both (Chapter 9).

Finally, two notes on the use of these essays. First, they constitute only the opening of a conversation, a kind of mutual introduction between the biblical writers and their scholarly interpreters on the one hand, and the contemporary agrarian writers on the other. Readers who wish to continue

the conversation will, according to their differing backgrounds, need to read more in one body of literature or the other. They may also wish to follow new scientific developments that bear on agriculture and food production. This is not my own area of expertise, but I point toward sources of scientific data that I judge to be responsible. I write in a North American context, as do many or most of the contemporary agrarians. Yet all the social and economic issues treated here ramify around the globe; readers on other continents can recognize their manifestations, sometimes in egregious forms. My travels (to Europe, South Asia, and East Africa) while writing this book indicate that growing numbers of people in every place are aware of these issues and are beginning to work on them.

Second, these essays treat almost exclusively the part of the Bible that Jews and Christians hold in common, and I intend them to be helpful to both communities. Although I am a Christian, I give little attention to the New Testament, for the simple reason that others are better qualified to do the detailed exegetical work required. An agrarian reading of the New Testament is possible and necessary. Granted, the theme of land care is less pronounced there, likely because many of the writers expected an imminent end of the world as we know it. Yet at the same time, they asserted the inestimable value of the "groaning" creation that God will redeem from hostile domination (Rom. 8:18–25) and powerful destroyers (Rev. 11:16–18), and will ultimately renew (Rev. 21:1, 5).[10] Any such reading of the New Testament will need to begin with an awareness of the agrarian perspective that dominates Israel's Scriptures, which are as indispensable for modern Christians as they were for the New Testament writers. Only a thorough understanding of how Israel represents the human place in the created order can enable Christians to delineate a responsible vision of what participation in the renewal of creation might mean. I hope this book may contribute to that work, the most essential theological task of this generation.

1

Rupture and Re-membering

> [T]he catastrophe now threatening us is unprecedented – and we often confuse the unprecedented with the improbable.
>
> (Al Gore)[1]

OPENING OUR EYES

As an Old Testament scholar, I come naturally (at least, by second nature) to a respect for land and a concern that it be "kindly used,"[2] so that it may continue to be used from generation to generation: for the Hebrew Scriptures are land-centered in their theological perspective. Rarely does one read through two or three successive chapters without seeing some reference to the land or to Zion, the city that is ideologically speaking the source of its fertility. Beginning with the first chapter of Genesis, there is no extensive exploration of the relationship between God and humanity that does not factor the land and its fertility into that relationship. Overall, from a biblical perspective, the sustained fertility and habitability of the earth, or more particularly of the land of Israel, is the best index of the health of the covenant relationship. When humanity, or the people Israel, is disobedient, thorns and briars abound (Gen. 3:17–19); rain is withheld (Deut. 11:11–17; 28:24); the land languishes and mourns (Isa. 16:8; 33:9; Hos. 4:3). Conversely, the most extravagant poetic images of loveliness – in the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Song of Songs – all show a land lush with growth, together with a people living in (or restored to) righteousness and full intimacy with God. "Truth [or: faithfulness, *'ĕmet*] springs up from the earth [*'ereṣ*,]" (Ps. 85:12 [11 Eng.]). The Hebrew word *'ereṣ*, may refer to ground, to a national territory, to the land of Israel, or to what we would call the planet Earth, and (as we shall see here) it is not always possible to be certain whether a given biblical writer intends a wider or narrower reference, or both. So our starting point is the Hebrew Scriptures' pervasive interest in land, not only

as national territory, but also, and more fundamentally, its interest in land as fertile, and further, in the primary human vocation to maintain its fertility (Gen. 2:15).

In recent years, I have come to believe that anyone who wishes to understand Israel's Scripture deeply would do well to learn more about the ecological crisis, and especially about its agricultural dimensions. At the same time, Jews and Christians who wish to understand the depth of the crisis would do well to ponder it in light of Israel's Scripture. The mutually informative relation between ecological awareness and biblical study rests not only on the land-centeredness of the Bible but also on the nature of the ecological crisis, which is principally moral and theological rather than technological. That is, the problem does not stem in the first instance from technological errors or omissions that can be rectified by further technological applications. It is a moral and even theological crisis because it is occasioned in large part by our adulation and arrogant use of scientific technology, so that we make applications without rigorous critical regard for questions of compatibility with natural systems, of the integrity of the world that God has made.

Philosopher Norman Wirzba poses well the problem of our current technological practice in the information age, which, as he aptly observes, is "a technique of falsification" to the extent that it has

> *reduced* our ability to truly know the world. Information is often superficial since it appears in decontextualized, easily digestible bytes. The medium that increases our access to knowledge thus at the same time decreases our grasp of the world's significance. Moreover, on the level of consciousness we see the gradual diminishing of powers of attention. . . .
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> It is, perhaps, the very superficiality of our knowing that best explains the irony that today we have more information about how the natural world functions than ever before, yet also are guilty of its most widespread destruction. . . . Should not the effect of our knowing lead to understanding, appreciation, affection, and care? Should it not train our minds into the sympathetic faculty that better (more honestly) places itself into alignment with its object?[3]

The present generation is embroiled in a crisis that is, in material terms, the most far-reaching crisis in humanity's life with God; it concerns us precisely as *creatures* – the only terrestrial creatures, so far as we know, who are susceptible to moral failure. The crisis has its roots in our moral lives, yet it now touches and probably affects every aspect of our physical existence and possibly that of every creature in the biosphere. Such an understanding of the current crisis is congruent with the biblical understanding of the world, in which the physical,

moral, and spiritual orders fully interpenetrate one another – in contrast to the modern superstition that these are separable categories.

Yet because communities of Jews, Christians, and also Muslims remain slow to reckon on such terms with the now far-advanced mistreatment of the fertile earth, I begin by considering how the Bible may open our eyes to recognize that land care is an area in which theologically informed moral discernment is needed. To anticipate my argument, I shall treat our lack of recognition as a failure of the religious imagination, an inability to imagine that this world could be significantly different, for better or for much worse, than we and every human generation before us have experienced it. It should concern us that "secular" intellectuals and activists are on the whole ahead of religious leaders, including theologians, in articulating the dimensions of both our unprecedented situation and our urgent responsibility. Speaking to a group of soil scientists, Stanford terrestrial ecologist Peter Vitousek recently said that now for the first time the human species as a whole must find the will to make a drastic change in our behavior – and to make it in this generation – in order that life on our planet may continue to be viable and to some degree lovely.[4] A statement that radical from a theologian is still a rarity, even though drastic reorientation of human thought and behavior would seem to be directly in our line of work. To our traditions belong the texts that perhaps in all world literature speak most directly to the human will to change. The books of the Hebrew Prophets are in my judgment the single best biblical resource for awakening us to our situation, for they consistently speak of, and to, the faculty they call *lēb*, "heart" – which is, in biblical physiology, the organ of perception and response.

The Prophets instruct our weak religious imagination by means of "visual enhancement"; they enable us to see the present moment of history in divine perspective. The oldest Hebrew word for "prophet" is *ḥōzeh*, "seer." Prophets see the world as God sees it, with a wide-angle lens, so that the whole stretch, from creation to the end of days, is visible at once. Listen to Jeremiah:

> I have seen the earth, and here, [it is] wildness and waste [*tōhû wābōhû*];
> and [I look] to the heavens – and their light is gone.
> I have seen the mountains, and here, they are wavering,
> and all the hills palpitate.
> I have seen, and here, there is no human being,
> and all the birds of the heavens have fled.
> I have seen, and here, the garden-land is now the wasteland,
> and all its cities are pulled down,
> because of YHWH,[5] because of his hot anger. (Jer. 4:23–26)