SCRIPTURE, CULTURE, AND AGRICULTURE

This book examines the theology and ethics of land use, especially the practices of modern industrialized agriculture, in light of critical biblical exegesis. Nine interrelated essays explore the biblical writers' pervasive concern for the care of arable land against the background of the geography, social structures, and religious thought of ancient Israel. This approach consistently brings out neglected aspects of texts, both poetry and prose, that are central to Jewish and Christian traditions. Rather than seeking solutions from the past, Ellen F. Davis creates a conversation between ancient texts and contemporary agrarian writers; thus she provides a fresh perspective from which to view the destructive practices and assumptions that now dominate the global food economy. The biblical exegesis is wide-ranging and sophisticated; the language is literate and accessible to a broad audience.

Ellen F. Davis is Professor of Bible and Practical Theology at Duke Divinity School. She has previously taught at Union Theological Seminary, Yale Divinity School, and Virginia Theological Seminary. She is the author of eight books, including *Wondrous Depth: Old Testament Preaching* (2005) and *Getting Involved with God* (2001). A lay Episcopalian, Davis is a member of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Building Bridges Seminar.

Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture

An Agrarian Reading of the Bible

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Foreword by Wendell Berry

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

Contents

Foreword

This book will be welcomed gladly by readers interested in the Bible's sense of our economic life and our ecological responsibilities. Reading it is a pleasure and a help. Ellen Davis's premise is that "the message of the earliest prophetic writers of the Bible was distinctly 'agrarian.'" Her supporting argument is learned, perceptive, meticulously detailed, and, to my mind, utterly convincing. Professor Davis, moreover, offers her book as a part of the present and ongoing "agrarian conversation" among some writers, some scientists, and the multitude of patriotic citizens now working to build or rebuild local economies of food and farming.

The human situation, as understood by both biblical agrarians and contemporary ones, is about as follows. We are, howbeit only in part, earthly creatures. We have been given the earth to live, not on, but with and from, and only on the condition that we care properly for it. We did not make it, and we know little about it. In fact, we don't, and will never, know enough about it to make our survival sure or our lives carefree. Our relation to our land will always remain, to a significant extent, mysterious. Therefore, our use of it must be determined more by reverence and humility, by local memory and affection, than by the knowledge that we now call "objective" or "scientific." Above all, we must not damage it permanently or compromise its natural means of sustaining itself. The best farmers have always accepted this situation as a given, and they have honored the issues of propriety and scale that it urgently raises.

By recognizing our inescapable dependence and our finally insurmountable ignorance, we open the subject of agriculture (as, I think, all other subjects) to questions of every kind. This book seems to have begun with Professor Davis's realization that

> 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.

If, on the contrary, we choose to ignore our dependence and our ignorance, as the agri-industrialists conventionally do, then we specialize the subject of agriculture and close it to all questions except those having to do with its profitability to the agri-industrial corporations.

Professor Davis assumes also the obviousness of the colonization of rural landscapes and communities everywhere by the global economy that has now replaced similarly colonializing national economies. In this she is in agreement with many contemporary agrarians all over the world. Furthermore – and this is one of the indispensable gifts of her book – she sees the similarity between this modern corporate colonialism and that of the ancient empires. She sees as well, and even more indispensably, the necessity and possibility of local resistance by means of local religion, local knowledge, and local language.

An agrarian reading of the Bible thus forces the de-specialization of one's thoughts about agriculture. With equal force it de-specializes one's thoughts about religion. It does this simply by seeing that the Bible is not a book only about "spirituality" or getting to Heaven, but is also a practical book about the good use of land and creatures as a religious practice, and about the abuse of land and creatures as a kind of blasphemy.

Any alert person will be aware that the Bible can be used as something to be seen with, a badge of social identity; or that it can be idolized as a source of complete and invariable truth, as if it were itself the very presence of God; or that it can be diminished to an import merely "spiritual"; or that it can be used fragmentarily to justify several varieties of meanness. These misuses are precisely corrected by a reading such as this one, not just because it is profusely informed by knowledge, but because it is, above all, exuberantly intelligent.

The Bible, as Professor Davis reads it, is a book about religion; it is a holy book, properly so-called. But she reads it also as a book dealing exactingly with the story of a gift. According to this story, the descendants of Israel were given, not a land, but the use of a land, along with precise instructions for its good care. They could keep the land only upon the condition of their obedience. By their disobedience they were estranged from the land and the covenant

by which they received it, and were removed into exile. What we have, then, is a story and a discourse about the connection of a people to a place. This connection is at once urgently religious and urgently practical. It is urgently religous because the land is understood, never as a human "property," but as a part of an infinitely complex creation, both natural and divine, belonging to God. It is urgently practical because of the strict conditions of gratitude and care enjoined upon its users.

The Bible is not an easy book to read. It is often hard – if not, when it apparently contradicts itself, impossible – to understand. It customarily requires almost too much of us. Its estimate of human nature is hardly a comfort. And it leads us repeatedly into the temptation to use it selectively to excuse our ignorance, to justify our wishes, or to condemn people unlike ourselves.

The difficulty of reading is much helped by Professor Davis's steadfast understanding of the Israelites as a people explicitly entrusted with what we would now call ecological responsibilities and with explicit instructions for meeting them. But at the same time her clarification of the practical significance of her texts burdens and darkens the reader's sense of moral difficulty. This, I think, will be especially true for American readers.

The more an American reader thinks about the Israelite religion as a *local* practice honoring both God and the land, the more that reader will be aware of the ironies of our own religion and history, and of their present clamor for resolution. We Americans readily saw the parallel between the Israelites' entrance into the land of Canaan and our own westward expansion. We adopted the simple nationalism of the old story along with its "promised land" idea of ownership prior to settlement – we called it "manifest destiny." But we conveniently ignored the elaborate agrarianism and ecological stewardship implicit in that story's insistence upon the land's sanctity. The result, still continuing, has been desecration and destruction of the land, as well as the destruction, dispossession, and exile of the American Indians who, like the Israelites and unlike most white Americans, believed the land was holy.

Of course there are, and always have been, exceptional post-Columbian Americans who have wished for and have attempted a beneficent settlement of this country, who have tried to use the land and other creatures with care, and to be neighborly to their neighbors. But the dominant theme of our history so far has been opposite to beneficent settlement or responsible stewardship. It has been a thoughtless, heartless, greedy plunge into what apparently is still considered an inexhaustible plenty.

The irony and absurdity are not fully apparent except in the context of our claim to be a "Christian nation." What we mainly have, as Ellen Davis shows,

is a "Christian religion" not rooted in any landscape, without a remnant or promise of a local ecological practice, and without any working concept of the sanctity of what it continues to call "creation." American Christians, thinking of the Holy Land as a place most of them have never seen and will never see, have made for themselves a religion that is alien to their land and therefore to their own lives.

From an ecological and agrarian point of view, the most urgent problem of agriculture, as of the human economy as a whole, is that of local adaptation – that is to say, of making a beneficent and conserving fit between work and place. As Professor Davis shows, this problem is paramount also from the point of view of the Bible. From an agrarian point of view, the Exodus was a movement from the flat, easily tillable land of Egypt to "the narrow and precariously balanced ecological niche that is the hill country of ancient Judah and Samaria." The people of Israel had to re-make their economic life to conform to a landscape that allowed "only the slightest margin for negligence, ignorance, or error."

Local adaptation, then, is authentically a scriptural issue and so an issue of religion. It is also the issue most catastrophically ignored in the economic colonization of American landscapes and in the industrialization of agriculture. Now in the presence of much destruction, we must ask the questions that this book makes obvious: Was not the original and originating catastrophe the reduction of religion to spirituality, and to various schemes designed exclusively to save the (disembodied) soul? Could we have destroyed so much of the material creation without first learning to see it as an economic "resource" devoid of religious significance? Could we have developed a reductionist science subserving economic violence without first developing a reductionist religion? What would America be now if we white people had managed to bring with us, not just a Holy Land spirituality, but also the elaborate land ethic, land reverence, and agrarian practice meant to safeguard the holiness of the land?

The poet Kathleen Raine, who is quoted twice in this book, first helped me to think of the damage inherent in the Christian attribution of holiness exclusively to the Holy Land. In 1993 she wrote in a letter that, as the Irish poets Yeats and Æ (George William Russell) had seen, "the holy places of the Bible . . . to the Jews are real places on earth" whereas "to the Christians the Holy Land is remote . . . The holy land should be the place we live on . . . " And in another letter she quoted Yeats: "Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill?" In thinking of this, I have remembered also that Harlan Hubbard, when a local church asked him for a painting of the Jordan, made them a painting of their own river, the

Ohio. If we who live in its watershed saw that river as he saw it, would it now be so shamefully polluted? Would we be strip-mining its headwaters?

It seems that if we follow the agrarian conversation through ecology to the need for a locally adapted land economy, then we are obliged to go on to the need for locally adapted religion. This implies no violence to religion. As agrarian principles, by remaining intact, preside over the local adaptation of agriculture, so religious principles, by remaining intact, would preside over the local adaptation of religious practice. For this the Bible gives an authorization that, in turn, gives authority to Professor Davis's argument. The Holy Land did not become holy by a divine prejudice in its favor; it is holy just because it is a part of all the world, which is a divine creation.

The good work accomplished by this book is to show forcefully and persuasively that the same principle applies to every land, and to every place in every land. And thus it exposes the falsehood of the idea that our ecological destructiveness is blameable directly on the Bible. It is blameable instead, and only within limits, on a misunderstanding and misuse of the Bible. The fault, clearly, is in the way the Bible has been *applied*. Applied religion, without a local orientation and a local practice, can be as irresponsible, as dangerous, and as sloppy as modern science similarly applied.

Wendell Berry

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The cover design features Diane Palley's papercut of the Tree of Life. Palley uses a traditional artistic medium to express with striking beauty the vision of a flourishing "land community" that lies at the heart of this book and of Israel's Scriptures themselves. I am grateful for her permission to use it.

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Durham, North Carolina

Abbreviations

Scripture translations not otherwise identified are the author's own.

*Bible versions quoted or referenced**

NEB	New English Bible
NJPS	*Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text*
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version

* There is only one verse quoted in full from a standard translation (the NRSV).