



## Interpreting Jewish Environmental Texts

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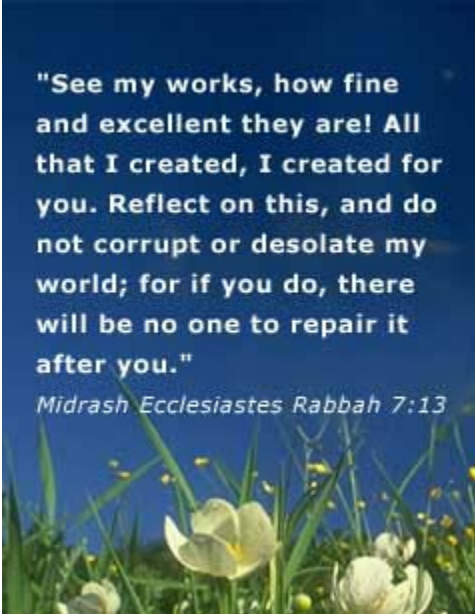
by Rabbi Lawrence Troster

When we study the Bible, we sometimes come upon texts which initially may seem at odds with Jewish environmental values. At these moments, we should remember that most of us read the Bible in translation and every translation is an interpretation, and not all Biblical texts have a simple meaning. The original meaning or context may have been lost and neither traditional nor modern commentary is able to come up with a definitive solution. Secondly, we may be reacting to something which was quite normal when the text was written but which offends our modern sensibility. When this happens, we should remember that the Bible is not a single book with a single point of view but rather literature written over a long period of time from many different perspectives.

Some critics point to Genesis 1:28 (God blessed them [the first humans] and said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.") to show that the Bible or Judaism supports unrestricted use of the natural world. We must explain that this doesn't represent all of Biblical thought on the relationship between God, humanity and creation, and that it certainly doesn't represent what Judaism believes.

Psalm 115:16 says "The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He gave over to humanity." On the surface, this is not a supportive environmental text. And sometimes anti-environmental religious people quote it as a basis for the total human use of creation.

But that is not how we need to understand it. Abraham ibn Ezra, a 12th century Bible commentator wrote, "The ignorant have compared humanity's rule over the earth with God's rule over the heavens. This is not right, for God rules over everything. The meaning of *but the earth He gave over to humanity* is that humanity is God's officer [or steward -- *pakeed*] over the earth and must do everything according to God's word." In other words, humanity is not free to do what it wants with God's creation. We are here to act as the stewards of creation on God's behalf and that means taking care of it, not wasting or abusing it.



"See my works, how fine and excellent they are! All that I created, I created for you. Reflect on this, and do not corrupt or desolate my world; for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you."

*Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13*

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